Nel as a discourse marker of negation in Mexico

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NEL AS A DISCOURSE MARKER OF NEGATION IN MEXICO

ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the use of the discourse marker *nel* as a negation throughout the country of Mexico. This particle is only used in that country and in the region of Central America and has been, up to this point, frequently overlooked in the literature, with very few exceptions, therefore there is a general lack of knowledge about its specific usage. Thanks to a survey sent to participants all over the country (N=177), in which they had to evaluate how natural some sentences that included *nel* were, and write down their own reflections about the word, we now have data about this unique discourse marker and its demographic use. Results show that *nel* is widely recognized in all regions of the country and by people of different age ranges, and, while it is highly accepted, some speakers mention its use is restricted to specific contexts.

NEL COMO MARCADOR DISCURSIVO DE NEGACIÓN EN MÉXICO

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza el uso del marcador discursivo *nel* como negación en todo el país de México. Esta partícula solo se utiliza en dicho país y en la región de Centroamérica y hasta el momento ha sido frecuentemente ignorada en la literatura, con muy pocas excepciones, por lo que existe un desconocimiento general sobre sus usos específicos. Gracias a una encuesta enviada a participantes de todo el país (N=177), en la que debían evaluar la naturalidad de algunas oraciones que incluían *nel* y escribir sus propias reflexiones sobre la palabra, ahora contamos con datos sobre este marcador discursivo único y su uso demográfico. Los resultados muestran que *nel* es ampliamente reconocido en todas las regiones del país y por personas de diferentes franjas de edad, y, mientras recibe una alta aceptación, algunos hablantes mencionan su uso restringido a contextos específicos.

NEL COMME MARQUEUR DISCURSIF DE NÉGATION AU MEXIQUE

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article analyse l'utilisation du marqueur discursif *nel* comme négation dans tout le pays du Mexique. Cette particule n'est utilisée que dans cepays et dans la région de l'Amérique Centrale et a jusqu'à présent été fréquemment négligée dans la littérature, à quelques exceptions près. Il existe donc un manque général de connaissances sur son utilisation spécifique. Grâce à une enquête envoyée aux participants dans tout le pays (N=177), dans laquelle ils devaient évaluer le caractère naturel de certaines phrases contenant nel et écrire leurs propres réflexions sur le mot, maintenant nous avons des données sur ce marqueur discursif unique et son utilisation démographique. Les résultats montrent que *nel* est largement reconnu dans toutes les régions du pays et par des personnes de différentes tranches d'âge, et, bien qu'il soit hautement accepté, certains intervenants mentionnent que son utilisation est limitée à des contextes spécifiques.

KEYWORDS: discourse markers; negation; discourse analysis; Mexican dialect; Spanish varieties.

PALABRAS CLAVE: marcadores del discurso; negación; análisis del discurso; dialecto mexicano; variedades del español.

MOTS-CLÉS : marqueurs de discours; négation; analyse du discours; dialecte mexicain; variétés de l'espagnol.

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. *Nel* in the literature. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Discussion. 6. Conclusions.

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SOMMAIRE : 1. Introduction. 2. *Nel* dans la littérature. 3. Méthodologie. 4. Résultats. 5. Discussion. 6. Conclusions

1. Introduction

The field of discourse markers in Spanish seems to be extremely stablished at this point. The quantity of literature has grown exponentially since the seminal chapter by Martín Zorraquino and Portolés (1999). The focus of these works varies considerably. Some of the tendencies of the last decade include the analysis of only one marker, for example Vande Casteele and Fuentes Rodríguez about *pues* (2019), a group of discourse markers with a similar function, as in Murillo Ornat (2016) studying the function of rephrasing, the study of these markers in the context of Spanish as a Second Language, like in Pascual-Escagedo (2015), or even a combination of markers in two different languages, as in Flores-Ferrán (2014), studying Spanish-English bilingualism.

While Schiffrin defined discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements which brackets units of talk" (1987: 32), there is some discussion about what is to be included in this group (Portolés, 1998, Martín Zorraquino, 2011). It is generally agreed that these elements are generally grammaticalized (Trillo, 2006, Ruiz Gurillo, 2010) to a certain degree and are often monoverbal. In this work, we follow a wider perspective and consider markers that are still in the process of grammaticalization, many of them pluriverbal ones, as part of this group. However, the particle that will be discussed in depth, *nel*, consists of only one word, used as an

adverb of negation. Still, as it will be explained in the next section, it is often ignored in research studies. The reason why this specific expression is overlooked could be related to the fact that it is used almost exclusively in Mexico and Central America. While many Peninsular discourse markers are often registered and studied in the literature, Latin American expressions don't follow the same pattern, as stated in Holgado Lage (2024: 127) "some regional expressions might have been missing and not registered in the literature, especially since many of the works on agreement and disagreement are written by authors from the Peninsular Spanish region."

The pragmatic function of disagreement has been gathering attention in studies like Herrero Moreno (2002, 2004) or, more recently, Urbaniak (2024), with a focus on informal Spanish. This function has been broadly described as "actos de habla en los que se manifiesta el desacuerdo de un interlocutor B con distintos aspectos de un enunciado previo correspondiente a un interlocutor A" (Herrero Moreno, 2002: 222). Nonetheless, the wide functions of agreement and disagreement have been generally ignored in the studies about discourse markers, specifically from a pan-Hispanic point of view, as Porroche Ballesteros mentions (2011: 159): "In the Spanish discursive markers classifications it is not usual to take into account the notions of agreement and disagreement."

This is especially true for the disagreement function, since there are a higher number of works, including that author's, that focus on agreement, for instance Cantamutto and Fainstein (2019) or Holgado Lage and Serrano Reyes (2020). Also, in Martín Zorraquino and Portolés (1999) and the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (Instituto Cervantes, 2006-07), some discourse markers of agreement are included, *bueno, bien, vale, de acuerdo, conforme, cabalmente, definitivamente, okey* and *venga* in the first one, and *claro* and *por supuesto* in the last one, although not formally referred to as particles of agreement in either source. However, there are no markers of disagreement in those lists. Some exceptions to this rule can be found in Calsamiglia Blancafort and Tusón Valls (1999: 239), where they grouped markers of disagreement under a group called "marcadores de desacuerdo," in which they include an extensive list of expressions, or in Brenes Peña (2015), where a list is included of what she calls "modal units" of disagreement that she found while researching:

> Tan solo en nuestro material empírico hemos podido observar las expresiones *no, ni nada, en lo más mínimo, de ningún modo, de eso nada, nada de eso, ni hablar, ni soñarlo, ni pensarlo, ¡qué va!, ¡qué barbaridad!, ¡no tienes ni idea!, ¡mentira!, ¡anda!, ¡anda ya!, ¡hombre!, ¡por favor!, ¡ja!, ¡¿pero qué dices?!, ¿qué estás diciendo?, ¡no me hagas reír!, ¡venga!, ¡venga ya!, ¡por Dios!, ¡tararí!, en absoluto, para nada, al contrario* o *ni mucho menos*.

Many of the markers on this list are prototypical from Peninsular Spanish, as seen in Holgado Lage (2024), thus continuing the trend in which Pan-Hispanic markers are often ignored. Urbaniak (2022), focusing on colloquial Spanish, analyzes markers like *qué va, sí que, ya pero/sí pero, pero bueno, yo qué sé* and *mm* in some corpora of peninsular Spanish. Something very similar occurs with Manero, Amigot and Olza (2023), while focusing on phraseological units of negation. Their list includes many prototypical discourse markers of negation from peninsular Spanish: *de eso nada, de ninguna manera, los cojones, tócate los cojones, qué cojones, ni hablar, ni pensarlo, ni lo sueñes, para nada* and *(y) una mierda*. While these studies, many of them intersecting with the field of corpus linguistics, are important for the study of discourse markers, they amplify the necessity of expanding our view to include more Pan-Hispanic expressions.

Some works can also be found, like the present one, with a focus on a specific marker of negation. For example, Schwenter (2003) analyzes the particles *no* and *tampoco*, and the non-canonical use of *tampoco* that does not include a particle of negation before. Briz (2007) also studies *no*, specifically the function of concession before a recrimination. Another work on *no* by Moyer (2000: 488), describes why this particle should be included in the list of discourse markers:

> The discourse particle *no* has a wider scope than an immediate categorial or phrasal constituent which is negated. It marks off larger stretches of talk which serve to distinguish utterances and turns. It is an important conversation structuring device; in addition, it can communicate several discourse meanings enabling bilinguals to negotiate their orientation to each other's talk.

The same could be said to justify the inclusion of *nel* in the realm of discourse markers of negation. Although focusing on the English language, Lee-Goldman (2011) writes about the importance of *no* as a discourse marker, and what little attention it has received in comparison with the agreement counterpart, *yeah*,

a trend that can be noticed as well in the literature in Spanish. To finish with other studies on discourse markers of negation, Pérez-Salazar focuses on phraseology units that follow a pattern that begin with the word *ni*, studying them diachronically. In one of her works (Pérez-Salazar, 2009), the focal point is in *ni hablar*, *ni pensar*, *ni soñar*, and in a more recent one (Pérez-Salazar, 2017), she uses *ni por lumbre* and some similar ones as models for rejection and negation in Spanish from a diachronic perspective. *Ni* expressions seemed to have received more attention than other markers of negation (Holgado Lage, 2021). In the sources reviewed, *nel* only appears in Holgado Lage (2024: 131), as an alternative expression provided by some of the participants of a survey on discourse markers of negation in which it was not originally included.

This study examines the discourse marker *nel* in its function of expressing disagreement in Mexico, where it is widely used. To this end, the vitality of this marker will first be explored through its presence in corpora and dictionaries, where it is sporadically recorded, followed by an analysis of data obtained from a survey conducted across the country. As detailed in the methodology section, participants (N=177) evaluated sentences containing the expression *nel* and reflected on their own perceptions of the term. The findings offer valuable insights into both the usage of *nel* and its perception among speakers in Mexico.

Before addressing the status of this particular particle, it is necessary to provide a brief pragmatic description based on a review of examples drawn from corpora and supported by the survey results, especially considering that *nel* has not yet been the subject of in-depth scholarly analysis. It functions as a discourse marker of disagreement with syntactic autonomy. It is predominantly used in informal registers, although certain examples suggest that it may also appear in formal discourse. Given that discourse markers of disagreement exhibit graduality (Herrero Moreno, 2002: 228), it is important to highlight that *nel* generally conveys emphatic rejection, with variants such as *nel pastel* employed to soften the tone. While primarily found in dialogic exchanges, *nel* may also surface in monologic contexts, particularly when speakers report or allude to prior interactions.

The precise origin of *nel* remains unclear; however, its phonetic similarity to the prototypical negation marker *no* suggests that it may have emerged as a variation, later becoming conventionalized in Mexico and parts of Central America as an informal marker of rejection. Phonetic variants such as *nel pastel* and *nelson* show that it is not just a synonym of *no*. From a prosodic standpoint, the vowel in *nel* may be elongated to convey greater emphasis. Additionally, *nel* frequently follows other discourse markers such as *pero* and *pues*, and it can appear in reduplicated forms for intensification. It is slightly less used than other Mexican formulas of disagreement, like *ni madres* (Holgado Lage, 2024), however, it shows a lot of vitality, and it has been used at least since the 1970s.

Having briefly outlined the pragmatic characteristics of *nel*, the following section will examine the extent to which this marker has been addressed in existing literature.

2. *Nel* in the literature

While *nel* has been generally overlooked, same as many other discourse markers prototypical of Latin America (Holgado Lage, 2024), it is not completely invisible. For instance, in the *Diccionario de Americanismos* (Asociación de Academias de la Lengua, 2010), it appears with the synonimical definition "No, nada, de ninguna manera." It also includes the regional information that it is prototypical of Mexico and used among the youth in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and rarely used in Peru. It also provides some variants of the expression: *nel pastel* and *nelson*. In our survey, participants were asked about *nel pastel* since it seems to be more common than *nelson* (Holgado Lage, 2024).

In the *Diccionario de Mexicanismos* (Academia Mexicana de la Lengua, 2022: 519), it is registered, and it even offers an example of use: "No: '-¿Vamos a cenar tacos? -Nel, no tengo ganas.'" It also includes *nel pastel*, while there is no mention of *nelson*. The example given resembles the first context provided in the survey, a negation following a question. It also appears in the *Diccionario del Español de México* (Colegio de México, 2024), under the tag *popular*. Just as the previous one, first it gives the word *no* as a synonym, and then a few examples of use: "No: 'Dijeron que iban a venir, pero *nel*, jalaron para otro lado', '*Nel*, maestro, esa onda no me pasa', 'Y tú que dijiste, ya me fregué a ese tarugo, pues *nel pastel*.'" It is relevant to notice that, while *nel* can frequently be substituted by *no*, they are not equivalent, as it has been mentioned before, since *nel* operates at the discourse level and *no* is used, as an adverb, in a wider variety of contexts, many times at the sentence level. The expression does not appear at all in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (Real Academia Española, 2023).

A search was conducted in some of the best-known corpora of Spanish. The CREA (Real Academia Española) offers 69 concordances for *nel*. However, when eliminating the texts in Italian, the archaic ones, or the ones referring to the first name or last name of a person, only 26 concordances are left, all from Mexico, as seen in the following examples[1]:

(1) — Pues nel, gran maese del conecte ruso. Ahorita estoy chupando para apagar la sed y las penas[2].
(2) y ahora resulta que con la competencia ¿vamos a estar peor? Nop. Nel. Niguas. Viva la competencia[3].
(3) Güili, con sus mechones blondos les dijo nel, nel, nel, ya arránquense[4].

The annotated version of the corpus, however, still marks them as *extranjerismo* (foreign word) instead of an adverb, even in the cases from Mexico in which it works as a disagreement marker, probably because of the higher number of results in Italian.

In the CORPES (Real Academia Española), there is a total of 113 concordances, however, it is also necessary to look closely to see which ones contain the discourse marker of negation. As with the previous corpus, there were a high number of Italian results and names of people, plus the transcription of a combination of en+el in oral speech. In the end, there were 43 results in which it was indeed the expression, 5 from Guatemala, 1 from El Salvador, 2 from Nicaragua and the other 35 from Mexico, like the following examples:

(4) ¿Le vas a seguir el rollo? Nel, sólo quiero comentarle algo de serranos[5].
(5) me pidieron componer una rola para 97.7, que saliera entre Alejandra Guzmán y Thalía: ahí dije nel, me voy[6].

The corpus AMERESCO (Albelda and Estellés, 2019), which registers the colloquial language of America and Spain, only produced four results of *nel*, all of them in Mexico City. In the PRESEEA (PRESEEA, 2014-), we did not obtain any concordances. Finally, after a quick search in a corpus specific from the Mexican dialects, the CEMC (Colegio de México, 2022), there were 47 concordances in which the word was used as a discourse marker, including five instances of elongating the vowel, transcribed as /neeel/. This is the corpus in which the highest number of results was obtained, which is reasonable since it's a prototypical expression from Mexico:

(6) Yo creo que cincuenta mil eran los únicos que no estaban pasados, H – Neeel, maestro, si acaso unos mil[7].
(7) Sólo quiero tener tres chavos a lo sumo y luego me operaría para ya nel pastel[8].

The original sources for these examples prove how *nel* has enjoyed vitality in the country of Mexico at least since the early 70s. While these results show that there is clearly an extensive use of this expression throughout the country of Mexico, there is not a deep study of this discourse marker and its contexts of use, especially in the current time, which is why the survey described in the next section was designed.

3. Methodology

After reviewing the previous literature on discourse markers and the dictionaries and corpora that include examples of *nel*, it was clear that this is a widely used expression often ignored, and that it was necessary to gather some data about its use. Some of the research questions that we wanted to answer were: Is it used

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[1] The original source from all the examples will be included as they appear in the corpus, since the year and the type of text is pertinent to better understand the spam and use of this discourse marker.
[2] María, Gerardo: *Fábrica de conciencias descompuestas*. México D.F.: Joaquín Mortiz, 1985.
[3] "Competencia sin Adelantos Tecnológicos". Excélsior. México D.F.: excelsior.com.mx, 2000-07-20.
[4] Martín del Campo, David: *Las rojas son las carreteras*. México D.F.: Joaquín Mortiz, 1976.
[5] Mendoza, Élmer: *El amante de Janis Joplin*. Barcelona: Tusquets, 2001.
[6] Peñaloza, Patricia: «El compositor guatemalteco tocará en El Hábito hoy y el miércoles 29 de noviembre. "Yo no hago rolas para ver cuál pega; no me interesa ir con la moda": Fratta». *La Jornada*. México D. F.: jornada.unam.mx, 2001-11-21.
[7] 1971. Departamento de Difusión Cultural de la Casa de la Cultura. Informe sobre el Festival de Avándaro.
[8] 1972. Anónimo. *Piedra rodante*.

everywhere in Mexico? Is there a particular region that uses it more frequently? Does a gender use it more than the other? Is it more common among young people or older people? Is it used mostly in informal contexts, or can it be used in other contexts? Is it a curt disagreement or a gentle one? How do speakers feel about this expression?

In order to answer these questions and learn more about this expression, an online questionnaire was designed (IRB protocol #16425[9]) with two parts. In the first one, the participants (N=177) had to evaluate some sentences from 1 (it does not sound natural at all) to 5 (it sounds very natural). The sentences were modeled after some examples found in the CORPES (Real Academia Española), slightly altered so that a short sentence was sufficient to understand the context[10]. There were five sentences with *nel* and *nel pastel* in different contexts of use, and a few distractors so that the participants did not focus on *nel*. In Figure 1 a screenshot is included with some examples from this section of the survey.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the first part of the survey

Each one of the five questions had a slightly different structure. The first one was an answer to a question, as seen in Figure 1, the second one was an answer to a statement, also appearing in the screenshot. The third one was a negation in the monologue with *nel pastel*[11], the fourth one was after the marker *pues*[12], a common

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[10] We relied on the help of a native speaker of the Mexican variety, Dr. Nadia Cervantes, to make sure the edited sentences worked for the purpose of the survey.
[11] The sentence in the survey was: "La comida va a ser en casa, porque en el restaurante, nel pastel."
[12] The sentence in the survey was: "Los policías inspeccionaron y pues nel, no eran ellos."

combination with other markers of negation like *pues no* or *pues nada* (Vande Casteele and Fuentes Rodríguez, 2019: 212), and the last one was after the conjunction *pero*[13].

The second part included a personal reflection on the use of the expression and the connotations of the word, as shown in Figure 2. In this section, logically, the survey was more explicit about the object of our research since we wanted to acknowledge how this expression is perceived in Mexico, so the goal was no longer to elicit a natural response in the participant. The respondents were asked in what contexts these expressions are most used (informal, formal or both) and the type of negation that *nel* is (curt, gentle or can be both). There was also an inquiry about the variant *nel pastel*. It is known that *nel* is a negation expression used at the discursive level, the objective was to understand if the speakers feel it's effusive or friendly. Finally, there was an open-ended question about the use of this expression, in which they could reflect on the kind of person they associate with the use of *nel*. The goal was to be able to compare their responses with the results from the first part of the survey to see the consistency between both sections.

Figure 2: Screenshot from the second part of the survey

The survey was opened to participants from Central America, however, our target for this study was to learn more about the use of the expression in the country of Mexico, where it is more prevalent. The Mexican participants were organized by dialect, following the map (Lope Blanch, 2009: 89) shown in Figure 3, combining their answers in bigger regions: Norte and Occidente, Yucatan, Altiplano Central and Ciudad de México

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[13] The sentence in the survey was: "La gente dice que me aprovecho de ellos, pero nel."

(CDMX), Altiplano Oaxaqueño, and the Coastal regions (including Guerrero, Oaxaca, Veracruz) with Tabasco and Chiapas.

Figure 3: Mexican varieties (Lope Blanch, 2009: 89)

The survey was sent to our contacts[14] in several parts of Mexico and participants completed it in the first few months of 2024. However, because there were no online responses from the region of Yucatan, the field-work was concluded in person during Summer 2024. By the time the research was completed, the participants were distributed by region as shown in Table 1. Except for the coastal areas, which had a smaller sample, the results display a very balanced group of participants for each part of Mexico, as shown in the last column. Seven people from Central America also completed the survey, however, they will be excluded from the regional analysis since it's such a small pool, with the idea of continuing the research in that area in the future:

Region	Number of participants	Percentage of total
Altiplano Central and CDMX	44	24.86%
Altiplano Oaxaqueño	33	18.64%
Norte and Occidente	35	19.77%
Costa, Tabasco and Chiapas	18	10.17%
Yucatán	40	22.60%
Other countries in Central America	7	3.96%
Total	177	100%

Table 1: Distribution of participants

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4. Results

It is important to analyze the results from this survey from several perspectives. First, we will focus on the results provided when organizing the participants by each demographic group: region, gender and age. Then, we will study the perceptions of the speakers about the use of the expression: contexts, type of negation and people who use it. For this last part, we will include and organize some quantitative data. In the discussion section, we will analyze our findings, answer our original research questions and reach some important conclusions about the use of *nel* and its variant *nel pastel* in Mexico.
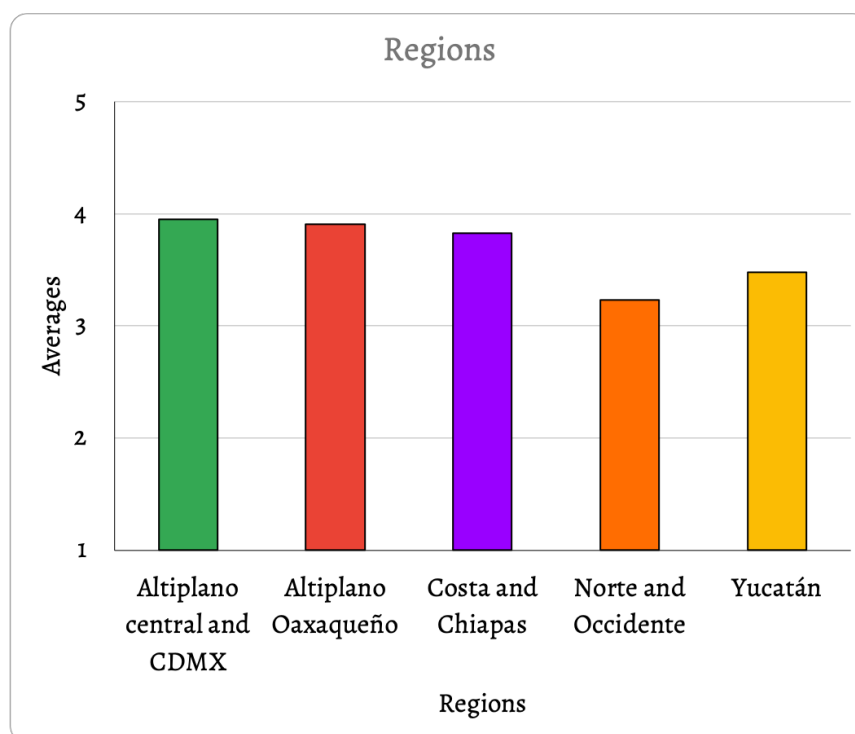
4.1 Results by region

When looking at the different regions, there are some slight differences between regions. As previously mentioned, the respondents from Central America are not included in this specific section, as it was a very small sample. In Table 2 we can see the average value given to each of the sentences with *nel* in the survey. In every region, the example that included *nel pastel* was the context with the lowest value, and an average of 3.3, as seen in the last row, and the first context, *nel* after a question, the one with the highest value, and an average of 3.99. The other three contexts ended up with extremely similar averages throughout every region, *nel* after a statement had a 3.73, *pues nel* a 3.71 and *pero nel* 3.68.

Regions	*Nel* after question	*Nel* after statement	*Nel pastel*	*Pues nel*	*Pero nel*	**Averages by region**
Altiplano central and CDMX	4.34	4.2	3.43	3.93	3.88	**3.95**
Altiplano Oaxaqueño	4.33	3.81	3.39	4.15	3.87	**3.91**
Costa and Chiapas	4	3.77	3.5	3.88	4	**3.83**
Norte and Occidente	3.48	3.37	2.88	3.22	3.2	**3.23**
Yucatán	3.8	3.52	3.3	3.35	3.45	**3.48**
Averages by context	**3.99**	**3.73**	**3.3**	**3.71**	**3.68**	**3.68**

Table 2: Value given to contexts by region

In Graph 1, the average of the values provided by every region is included, that is, the last column of Table 2 is visually shown below. The region that overall gave the lowest value was Norte and Occidente, with an average of 3.23, and the one with the highest was the center of the country, including Ciudad de Mexico, with a 3.95 average. As a reminder, the highest possible value was 5, and the lowest was 1. In any case, the differences are not too great, with every region providing an average of between 3 and 4.

Graph 1: Average values by region
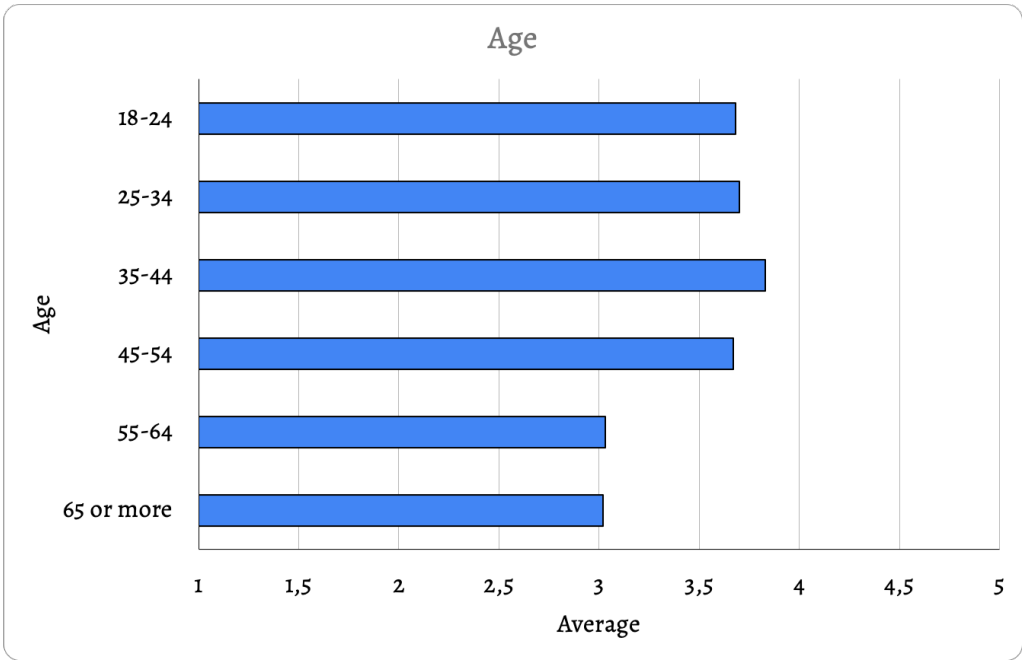
4.2 Results by age and gender

When observing the age of the participants and the average value they provided for the sentences, it is evident that the age groups with the highest acceptance of the expressions are all the ones under 55, especially 35-44, with an average of 3.83, followed by 25-34, with an average of 3.7, 18-24 with 3.68 and 45-34, with 3.67. Every one of these age groups provided values with similar averages. In the two oldest groups, there seems to be a resistance to accepting these sentences as natural, with a 3.03 average in the 55-64 group and 3.02 in the group of respondents 65 and older. It is important to notice, however, that only 17 participants in total were above the age of 55, which is 9.6% of the total, a smaller sample, since most of the respondents were in the rest of the age groups, as seen in Table 3. This imbalance makes it slightly harder to determine exactly how the older groups feel about the marker, considering it was popularized after the 70s, as pointed out in the results.

Age ranges	Number of participants	Averages	Percentage of participants
18-24	51	3.68	28.81%
25-34	30	3.7	16.95%
35-44	53	3.83	29.94%
45-54	26	3.67	14.7%
55-64	7	3.03	3.95%
+65	10	3.02	5.65%
Total	**177**	**3.66**[15]	**100%**

Table 3: Distribution by age

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[15] This total average is slightly lower than the one seen in Table 2 because we included all the participants, while in 4.1 we excluded the group of other countries in Central America since it was a very reduced number.

The third column is also visually represented in Graph 2, to emphasize the difference between the first four groups and the last two:

Age
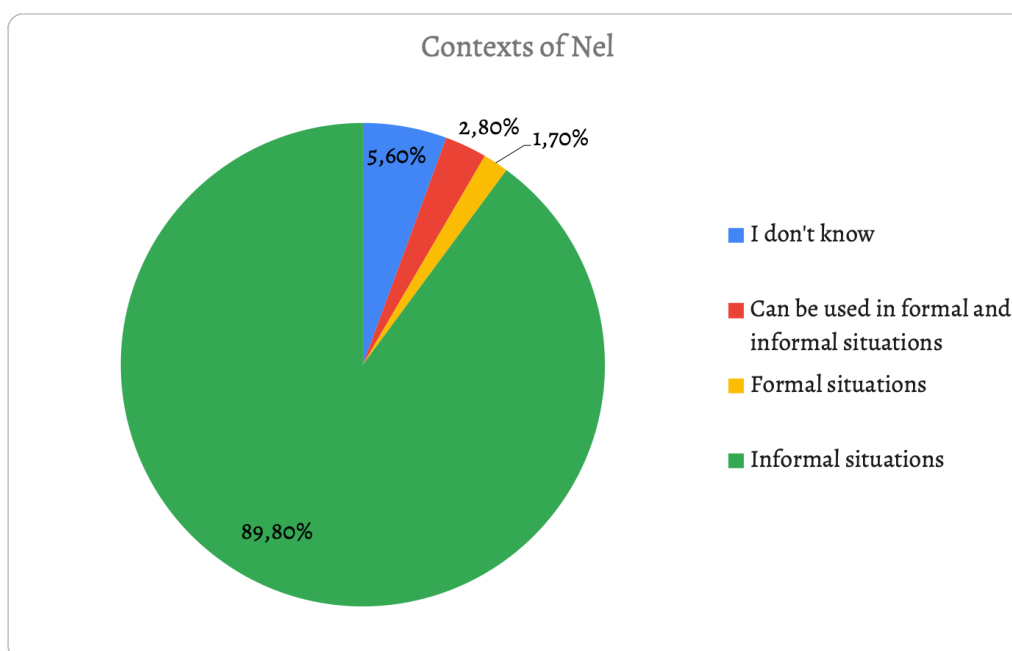

Graph 2: Average values by age

Regarding the results by gender, men tend to give a higher value to these expressions, 3.84, while women are a little more reticent, at 3.49, as shown in Table 4. There were three participants that marked the option of "other" for gender, however, since it was such a small sample it will not be included in the analysis.

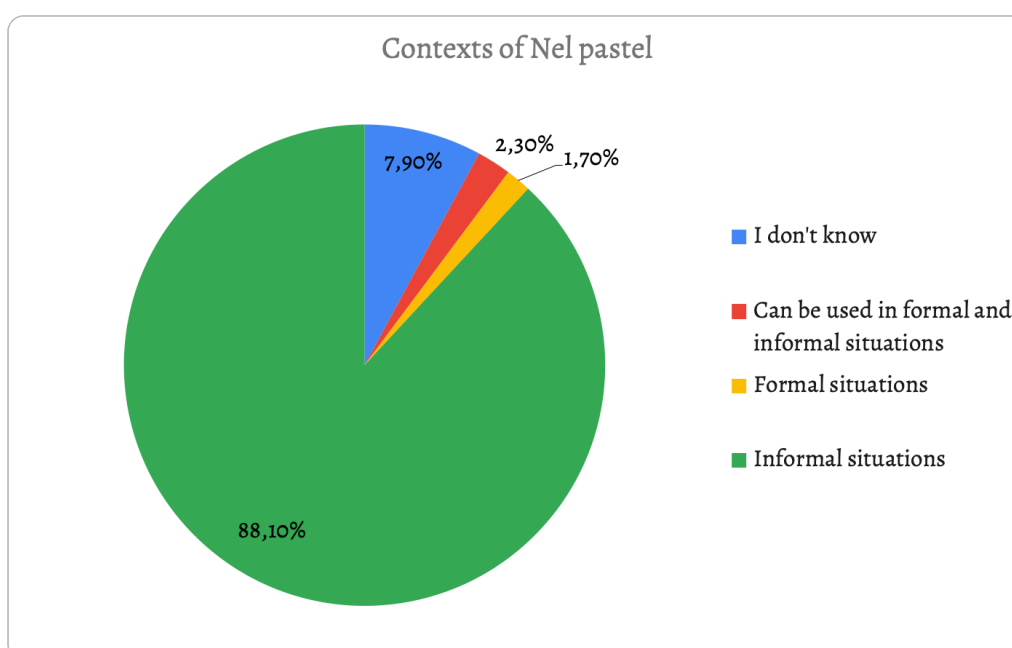| Gender	Number of participants	Averages
Masculine	77	3.49
Feminine	97	3.84

Table 4: Gender of participants

4.3 Contexts of use

In the second part of the survey, one of the questions for the participants was the types of contexts in which the expressions *nel* and *nel pastel* are used. As pictured in Graph 3 and Graph 4, the overwhelming majority, almost 90% of them indicated that it is used only in informal situations. A small percentage did not know (5.6% for *nel* and 7.9% for *nel pastel*), and the rest marked the answer for both formal and informal situations (2.8% in *nel* and 2.3% in *nel pastel*), or just formal situations (1.7% in both cases).

Contexts of Nel

- I don't know
- Can be used in formal and informal situations
- Formal situations
- Informal situations

5,60% 2,80% 1,70%

89,80%

Graph 3: Contexts of *nel*

Contexts of Nel pastel

- I don't know
- Can be used in formal and informal situations
- Formal situations
- Informal situations

7,90% 2,30% 1,70%

88,10%

Graph 4: Contexts of *nel pastel*

4.4 Type of negation

Another question in this section of the survey was related to the kind of negation that *nel* is, and *nel pastel*. The participants had to decide if they feel it is an effusive negation, that could feel curt to the listener, or a gentle and amicable one. In this situation, the responses were very different for the two expressions. For *nel*, almost half of the responses stated that it can be either a gentle or curt negation depending on context, 30.5% that it was just friendly, and 18.6% that it was just curt. However, with *nel pastel*, 62% responded that it is a friendly negation, 20% that it can be both, and only 9% that it's a strong negation. The results are visually shown in Graph 5 and Graph 6.
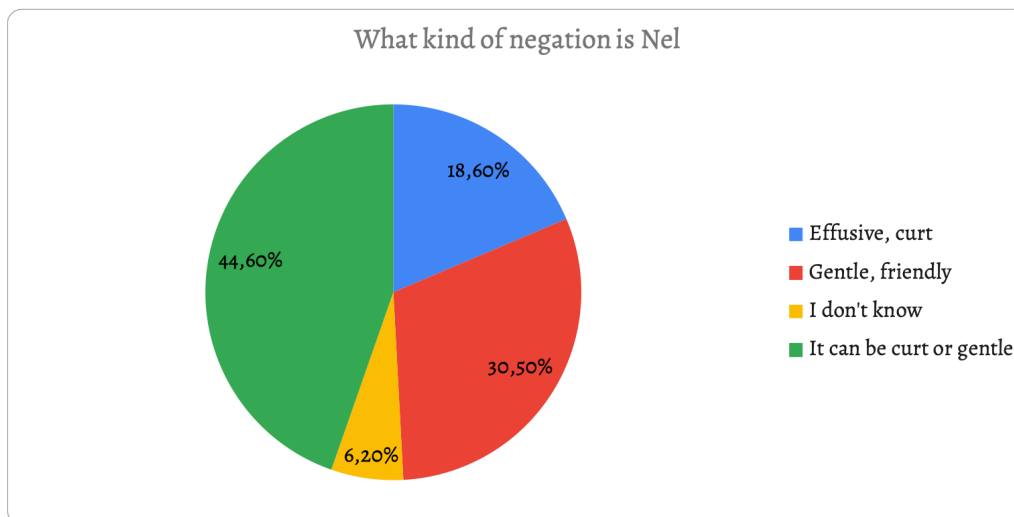
Graph 5: Type of negation of *nel*
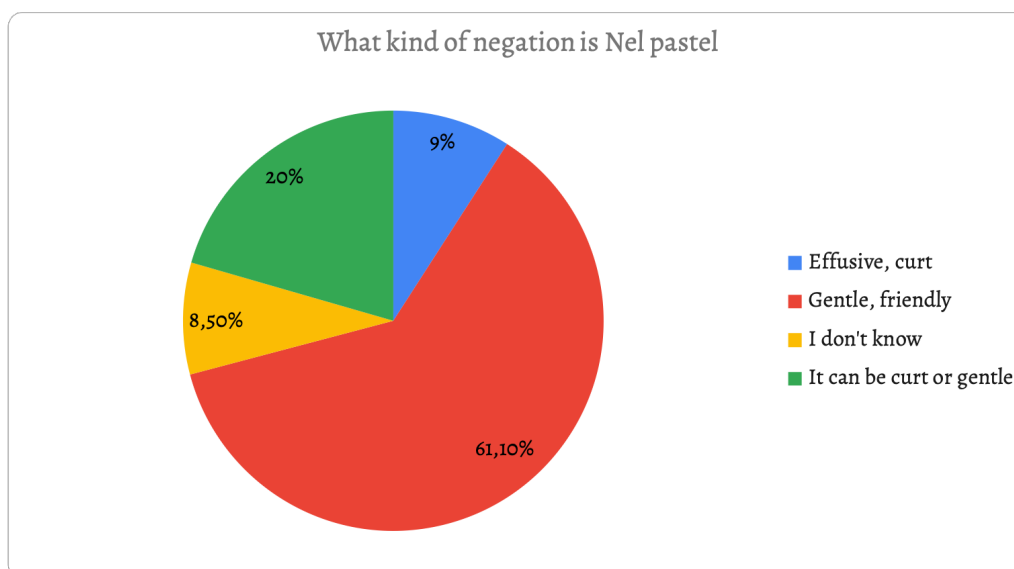
Graph 6: Type of negation of *nel pastel*

4.5 People associated with the expressions

The last question of the questionnaire asked if there was a particular type of person associated with the use of the expression. While half the participants said that there was no type of person associated with the use of *nel* (50.6%) and *nel pastel* (52%), it is important to review the open-ended answers provided in the respondents when they did not choose that option, especially the answers that were repeated several times. Some of the surveys mention the age of the users of the expression, saying they are "young," "teenagers," or "children," although there are some mentions about also being used by middle aged people since it was very trendy in the past, a few answers that highlighted its popularity in the 70s, 80s and 90s. Some mentioned the informality of the expression, saying that it is used exclusively with "friends" and "family." Other included geographical information, mostly referring to its use in Mexico City or urban areas and neighborhoods[16]. Also, some answers referred to the gender distribution, how it is more often used by men than women. Finally, there were some

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[16] There were a couple of mentions of the expression being part of *caló*, but a quick search in Aguilar Melantzon (1989) did not show this word as a typical from this dialect, although it is possible that nel was part of this variety in a different region or at a different time.

socioeconomic mentions[17], stating that there is a common use of this expression in the lower classes and uneducated groups. In Table 5 there is a summary of the most repeated answers for both *nel* and *nel pastel*[18].

Responses to: what kind of people do you associate these expressions with?	Number of participants that mention it with *Nel*	Number of participants that mention it with *Nel pastel*
Young/teenagers/children	29	27
Use with friends and family	19	20
Geographic region: CDMX	14	10
Time period: 70s, 80s and 90s	5	11
Urban (neighborhood)	12	10
Lower class/uneducated	18	17
Gender (men)	3	0

Table 5: Type of people associated with the use of these expressions

5. Discussion

After reviewing the data, we found some expected results, and some unexpected ones. The first context of the survey, *nel* after a question, was evaluated with the highest number (3.99 over 5), which coincides with the examples most often seen in the corpora and the dictionaries. The variation *nel pastel* had lowest values overall (3.3), which also was expected as there were more instances of the one-word negation in the sources. The other three had values between those two, around 3.70 over 5. This means that the expression is widely used and accepted by the participants. As a point of comparison, in a similar study with other negation markers (Holgado Lage, 2024: 130-131), participants from Mexico evaluated *ni madres* with a 3.63 and *no mames* with a 3.27, ant they are two of the most prototypical negation markers in the country. Therefore, it can be concluded that *nel* is also a prototypical Mexican marker. When analyzing these results by region, we found that the center of the country and Mexico City was the region that gave these markers the highest values, 3.95, which concurs with what the participants said towards the end of the survey when they were asked for the people associated with the use of the marker. The Northern section of the country provided the lowest value, 3.23, however, since all the regions were in a similar range, the expression seems to be used throughout the Mexican territory.

Age and gender offered some slight differences. For age, it appears mostly every age group uses the expressions at the same level (with values between 3.67 and 3.83), except for the two oldest ranges, 55-64 and +65, in which they had lower values (3.03 and 3.02 respectively), which contradicts what many participants feel about the expressions and how they are used mostly by younger speakers. The number of participants in the older age groups was, however, significantly lower than in the younger and middle age ones, which makes sense considering it was an online survey and younger people are usually more apt with technology. As for gender, male respondents accepted the sentences with a higher value (3.84) than females (3.49).

When reviewing the section of the survey in which participants were asked to share their thoughts about *nel* and *nel pastel*, the overwhelming majority (89.8% for *nel* and 88% for *nel pastel*) responded that they are used primarily in informal contexts. This matches the data from the open-ended answers, in which several respondents described using this expression with friends and family. For *nel*, 2.8% of the surveys showed that it can be used in both informal and formal contexts and 1.7% only in formal contexts. The numbers for *nel pastel* are 2.3% and 1.3% respectively, therefore, this is considered a very informal negation. There was less of an agreement in the section about the type of negation that *nel* and *nel pastel* are. When asked if it was a curt

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[17] The socioeconomic level was not included in the demographic section of the survey since it seemed like it was used in every socio-economic stratus.

[18] Some participants mentioned two or more factors in their answers so they might be included in two different rows.

negation or a friendly one, the respondents were unclear about *nel*, with 30.5% saying it's friendly, 18.6% that it's effusive or curt, and 44.6% that it can be both. The intensity of the negation is probably dependent on context and intonation, and the results show the flexibility and adaptability of the marker. However, for *nel pastel*, 62% of respondents said it is friendly, 20.3% agreed that it can be both, and only 9% said it is a curt negation. It seems like this variant is used mostly in friendly situations.

One of the most diverse pool of answers came from the open-ended question about the type of person that participants associated with the use of these expressions. While some of the results were expected, especially after reviewing the quantitative data, for example that it is more used in the center of the country, among men or in informal situations, some answers were unexpected. A good number of participants mentioned that mostly young people use the expressions, however, the data shows that it is equally accepted by all age groups until the age of 55. Furthermore, some people mentioned that the expressions are outdated and were used in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, which could make sense for the middle-aged respondents who gave the sentences a high evaluation. However, it doesn't explain why young people, even the 18-24 group, use them at the same level. The most surprising answer was that a good number of respondents (18 for *nel* and 17 for *nel pastel*) connected them to lower socioeconomic class or lower education levels. There was no indication in the examples from the corpora or the dictionaries that there was any degree of stigmatization of these expressions, so it is interesting to note that the participants would have that perception, even after generally accepting its use in the previous section of the survey. Unfortunately, there was no demographic question about socioeconomic status or education level in the survey. In retrospect, it could have been an interesting piece of data to see if there is a correlation between higher evaluations and lower social class and it should be included as a goal for future research about this marker.

6. Conclusions

The aim to this study is to offer some insight into the extension of use of the negation marker *nel*, prototypical of Mexican Spanish, and its variant *nel pastel*, which appear in some sources, mostly dictionaries of the Mexican variety and corpora that include samples from Mexico. However, we found that it was mostly excluded from any literature about discourse markers, including works on disagreement or negation. Therefore, the way it is used, regarded or distributed along the Mexican territory was not registered or analyzed.

Due to the impossibility of conducting sociolinguist interviews that would produce this item, and with the goal of filling this research gap, an online survey was produced and sent to speakers of Mexican Spanish. After several months, it was completed by 177 participants from all regions. In the questionnaire, participants would evaluate some sentences with *nel* in different contexts (and also some sentences that had distractors), and then answered some specific questions about how they perceive this expression of negation. The fieldwork was conducted in the first few months of 2024.

After looking at the results, it seems clear that this expression currently enjoys a vitality in Mexico. According to the responses in the survey, it started becoming popular in the 1970s or 1980s, which would explain why it appears in corpora and dictionaries, but not why it has been overlooked in studies of discourse markers, since the values provided by the participants indicate that it is still popular and heard frequently, especially in the center of the country and around Mexico City, although it is definitely also accepted in the other regions. It also seems like men use it more often than women and that younger and middle-aged speakers (up to 55) use it in an equal form, which indicates a stability in the use of the marker. When reflecting about the expression, the participants agree that it's mostly used in informal contexts, however, the degree of strength of the negation varies, *nel* can be used in a friendly or more curt way, while *nel pastel* is almost always friendly.

Participants were encouraged to respond to an open-ended question about the type of person associated with the use of this expression. In retrospect, this was a good choice since some of the answers that many speakers agree on were unexpected and we would not have anticipated them. While about half of them marked the option that there was no specific type of person associated with the expression, the other half provided a variety of answers, some of them redundant with what we had seen before, like the informality of *nel* or how it is used more often in the area around Mexico City. Many of them said that it is used mostly by younger speakers, with is inconsistent with the previous data seen in the survey, and a decent number of answers pointed towards the use of these expressions by members of the lower socio-economic classes or with lower

education achievements. Nothing in the previous research or in the examples from the corpora or dictionary pointed towards a lower-socioeconomic use of the particle.

Discourse markers to express the functions of agreement and disagreement are especially abundant in the Spanish language, and the ones used more frequently in Latin American countries are often overlooked and understudied. It is necessary to continue the study of discourse markers, especially from a Pan-Hispanic point of view, to register and analyze these expressions, current proof of the vast richness of the Spanish language.

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