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Spanish idiomatic constructions with temporal meaning: a corpus study of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*]

1 Introduction

The present study forms part of the research project FFI2013-45769 *Combinaciones fraseológicas del alemán de estructura [PREP. + SUBS.]: patrones sintagmáticos, descripción lexicográfica y correspondencias en español*, in which we investigate idiomatic units, taking an essentially pragmatic and inductive approach, the analysis deriving from corpus observation and evaluation, with particular attention to the frequency of occurrence and behaviour of linguistic units in context.

In this sense, the study reflects the kind of models based on use, as developed in Construction Grammar. In Goldberg's (2013: 27) words, "these models are based on the idea that knowledge of language consists of a network of form-function correspondences at varying levels of specificity" (see, among others, Langacker 1988; Goldberg 2006; Bybee 2006, 2013). These correlations of form and function, or constructions, emerge as combinations of creativity and repetition, and their analysis requires the examination of a large corpora which represent the natural use of the language in question. Goldberg (2006) characterises them as follows:

Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency. (Goldberg 2006: 5)

From this perspective, the constructions exhibit great variability, both in size and in complexity: morphemes, simple and compound words, clauses, and of course phrases can all be constructions in this sense. This in turn means that "la gramática y el léxico forman más bien un continuum que dos componentes autónomos o aislados entre sí" ('the grammar and the lexicon form more of a continuum than two autonomous or mutually isolated components')¹ (González-García 2012).

Within this framework, then, my aim is to provide as detailed a description as possible of the constructional idiom involving the noun *hora(s)* ('time',

¹ This and all other translations my own.

‘hour’): [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*]² and will include setting out the contextual variants of content (section 2), an analysis of contexts of use, arising specifically from their co-appearance with other lexical elements (section 3), an assessment of their degree of internal fixation through possible patterns of lexical extension (section 4.1) and formal variants (section 4.2). Finally, in order to offer a more complete vision of these, I will expand the focus to other combinations with similar forms and meanings: [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *altura(s)*] and *a buenas horas* (section 5).

For this study I have used data drawn from the corpus eseuTenTen11 (Sketch Engine) and, secondarily, from the Spanish subcorpus of CORPES XXI. I have also occasionally consulted two further academic corpora: CORDE and CREA. The majority of examples used, which have been normalised for spelling, are from eseuTenTen11, and are identified by the *token* number; those from academic corpora are accompanied by citations of author and work.

2 Contextual variants (CV)

In general, we can say that [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*] is a constructional idiom with a temporal value, with various instances that have a medium degree of lexicalisation and whose basic meaning can be paraphrased as ‘now, at this moment’. A reading of examples extracted from the corpora allows us to refine this description, in that we can identify distinct semantic values in different contexts; specifically, three contextual variants (henceforth, CV) are detected, the first of which constitutes the basic meaning³ of the unit:

- i. CV 1: Temporal value indicating a period of time that coincides with another which serves as a reference for it.
- ii. CV 2: Temporal value indicating a period of time that coincides with another which serves as a reference for it, and that is seen inserted within a process or event.

² In Goldberg’s (2006: 215) words, constructional idioms are “partially lexically filled phrasal patterns”. For other corpus studies conducted within the scope of the project, see López Meirama (2016, 2017, 2019), Mellado Blanco & Mansilla Pérez (2016), and Mellado Blanco & López Meirama (2017).

³ In Cognitive Grammar, polysemic words are considered to be complex categories or, in Lakoff’s (1987) terms, radial categories, which include a constellation of meanings organised around a central or prototypical element through various cognitive mechanisms, of which metaphor and metonymy stand out (see, amongst others, Cuenca & Hilferty 1999: ch. 5; Evans & Green 2006: chs. 8 to 10; Valenzuela et al. 2012: 62–65; Tay 2014).

iii. CV 3: Temporal and modal value that signals a period of time as a surprising and/or inadequate moment of the day, almost always late.

CV1. First we account for a series of examples in which the construction carries a meaning that we can qualify as compositional, given that *a* expresses temporal localisation,⁴ *horas* signals a ‘moment, or specific point of time’ (DEA, s.v. *hora*), and the demonstrative carries a referential value, be it deictic or anaphoric. This meaning is the only one provided by those few dictionaries that mention the idiom, such as the DFE, which lists it under the form *a estas horas* and defines as ‘in these moments’.⁵

The value of *estas* (‘these’) is deictic, in that it signals the time ‘in which he or she who speaks is found’ (DLE, s.v. *este*), in such a way that *a estas horas* designates a coincidental temporal period, at that moment or within the same timeframe as the utterance. This temporal period is used to locate an event different from the speech act, one that can be different, from the spatial point of view, because it takes place elsewhere (1), or (also being temporal), normally because it took place in the past (2) or, sometimes, because it will take place in the future (3):

(1) La Comunidad de Madrid ha activado el nivel I del Plan de Inclemencias invernales ante la tormenta de nieve que afecta *a estas horas* principalmente a la zona noroeste de la región. (1326866462)

‘The Community of Madrid has activated level I of the Winter Inclemency Plan faced with the snowstorm that affects mainly the northwestern part of the region *at this time*.’

⁴ See meaning 6 of the DLE, followed by examples: ‘Specifies the place or time in which something happens’. *Le cogieron a la puerta. Firmaré a la noche* (‘They grabbed him at the door. I will sign at night.’) (DLE, s.v. *a*). However, the use of the preposition *a* in this construction constitutes, to some extent, a singularity, given that Spanish prefers to select other prepositions in the combination with a demonstrative plus a temporal noun: *desde este momento* (‘from this moment’), *por esos días* (‘at that time’), *en aquellos meses* (‘in/during those months’) / **a este momento* (‘at this moment’), **a esos días* (‘at those days’), **a aquellos meses* (‘at those months’). I will explore this question in more detail in section 4.

⁵ Moliner is an exception to this general tendency: the DUE also provides a second meaning of *a estas horas*, which it defines and exemplifies as follows: ‘Manner to refer to the moment at which something which should already have occurred has still not happened’: *A estas horas, todavía no sé si me voy o me quedo* (‘Right now, I still don’t know whether to go or stay’) (DUE, s.v. *hora*). As we will see, this meaning approximates to the second variant identified in the current study.

(2) *A estas horas* empecé, hace 38 años, a decir: este dolorcito me está fastidiando. Y 13 horas después nació Leonor. (1240327467)

‘At this time, 38 years ago, I began to say: this little pain is bothering me. And 13 hours later Leonor was born.’

(3) Mañana *a estas horas* se dará el pistoletazo de salida a la 65 edición del Festival de Venecia. (1619192319)

‘Tomorrow *at this time* the 65th edition of the Venice Film Festival will kick off.’

In other cases *a estas horas* is used in generalising structures, in order to refer to an activity that habitually takes place at a time of the day which coincides with that of the communication:

(4) *A estas horas* la gente mayor ve el novelón. (1052093859)

‘At this time older people watch the soap opera.’

Esas (‘those’)⁶ is used far more with an anaphoric value, signalling a period of time already alluded to in the text:

(5) Celebre las reuniones cerca de las 8 de la mañana: ¿se ha fijado en lo poco que suena el teléfono *a esas horas*? (1665621297)

‘Hold the meetings at around 8 in the morning: Have you noticed how little the phone rings *at that time*?’

Example (6a) illustrates another use which is quite frequent with *a esas horas*: retrospective deixis (NGLE 2009: 1283). This type of deixis is that which we find in practically all the instances of *a aquellas* (‘those’) *horas* (6b):⁷

⁶ Both *esas* and *aquellas* translate as *those*. “Spanish differs from French, German and English in having two words for ‘that’, depending on the distance in time or space between the speaker and the object referred to” (But & Benjamin 2000: 82).

⁷ Fernández Ramírez (1951 [1987]: 112) indicates that “en el señalamiento a los objetos ausentes, la mención con el demostrativo *aquel* tiene en general el carácter de mención remota” (‘in signalling the absent objects, the form of mentioning with the demonstrative *aquel* (‘that’) has in general the character of a remote mentioning’).

(6) a. Patrullaban por la calle Resurrección cuando vieron salir a dos personas de un restaurante chino que *a esas horas* permanecía cerrado. (1980935621)

‘They were patrolling Resurrection Street when they saw two people leave a Chinese restaurant that was closed *at the time*.’

b. Siempre me acordaré de ese 6 de mayo. Solo pude ver la primera parte del partido porque *a aquellas horas* me estaban haciendo una resonancia magnética por un problema de rodillas. (767071286)

‘I will always remember that 6th of May. I could only see the first part of the match because I was having an MRI *at the time* due to a knee problem.’

CV2. Second, we observe that, in some contexts, part of the compositonality has been lost, in the sense that the period of time is not framed within the day, but rather is a matter of a period, more or less extensive, which coincides with the moment of speech. This variant is found basically in combination with *estas*:

(7) a. Si desde su “descubrimiento”, a principios de este siglo, [. . .] se hubiera empezado a trabajar en su zona de dunas, *a estas horas*, Vigo contaría con una de las más hermosas playas de veraneo de España. (292193515)

‘If since its “discovery” at the beginning of this century [. . .], work had begun in its area of dunes, Vigo would *now* have one of the most beautiful summer beaches in Spain.’

b. Yo solo digo que, si lo de Perejil nos llega a pillar con Zapatero en la Moncloa, *a estas horas* ya tendríamos a los marroquíes instalados en Ciudad Real. (808948065)

‘I’m just saying that, if the Perejil incident catches us with Zapatero in the Moncloa, we’d have the Moroccans installed in Ciudad Real *by now*.’

Examples such as those in (7), in which the localisation is done within the frame of a process or event that develops over time, the meaning of *a estas horas* comes close to that of *a estas alturas*, a construction that dictionaries list as an adverbial phrase (DFDEA: ‘in these circumstances’; Bosque 2006: ‘in this moment, at this stage’; both definitions, *s.v. altura*). I will return to this question in section 5.

CV3. Third, and finally, uses are detected that imply a valuation of the temporal period denoted, one that tends to be presented as surprising and/or inadequate;

in the latter case, this is almost always by being late (only on a few occasions by being premature or early):⁸

(8) a. Lo primero que pensé fue: ¡hay que tener valor para pasear al perro *a estas horas* y con este calor! (1328030383)

‘The first thing I thought was: you have to be brave to walk the dog *right now* and in this heat!’

b. ¿Qué hacen chicas de 9, 10 y 17 años un día de diario que al día siguiente hay clases por la calle a las doce de la noche y a comprar, qué tienda está abierta *a esas horas*? (1316766715)

‘What are 9, 10 and 17 year-old girls doing on a weekday, when the next day there’s school, out on the street at midnight and going shopping, which store is open *at this time*?’

c. ¿A qué velocidad iban estos niñatos *a aquellas horas*? ¿Qué se habían metido en el cuerpo? Lo único cierto es que tres inocentes murieron y aquí no pasa nada de nada. (2015736463)

‘How fast were those spoilt brats going *at the time*? What had they got in their systems? The only thing for sure is that three innocent people died and here nothing comes of it.’

Extension in the direction of this variant from the basic meaning (CV1) can be explained if we take into account the contrastive value that García Fajardo (2006) gives to the demonstratives: she claims that “el demostrativo contiene una instrucción que contrasta lo referido con otras entidades de la misma naturaleza, a partir de una relación de distancia con la enunciación” (‘the demonstrative contains an instruction that contrasts what is referred to with other entities of the same nature, from a relation of distance with the statement’) (García Fajardo 2006: 181). From this point of view, when a concept is delimited through a demonstrative, not only is a relative distance established to the statement, but also a boundary is set which distinguishes the objects referred to from all those which remain outside the reference (cfr.: *Sin la mesa los humanos no habríamos dignificado la comida* (‘Without the table we humans would not have dignified the food’), compared to *Sin esa mesa los humanos no habríamos dignificado la comida* (‘Without that

⁸ General dictionaries have an echo of this meaning (DLE: pl. ‘unexpected, uncustomary or inopportune time’; DEA: ‘sometimes [used] in plural with the singular sense; in such cases it tends to designate a late or uncustomary moment’; both definitions, s.v. *hora*).

table we humans would not have dignified the food'), an affirmation which provokes the question *¿Cuál (tipo de) mesa?* ('What (type of) table?'), Apud García Fajardo 2006: 182). The contrastive value favours the emphatic use, often associated, in the case of demonstratives, with pejorative or ironic connotations. Generally, in grammar this value is identified when the demonstrative occupies a post-nominal position (see, amongst others, Alcina Franch & Blecua 1975: 626; Alarcos Llorach 1994: 90; Macías Villalobos 1997: 109; Jiménez Juliá 2006: 168; NGLE 2009: 1302–1303).

However, in the case of this third variant, that is, when the inadequacy of the moment is noted, a modal sense is added to the temporal value, equivalent to what grammars indicate with respect to *pronto* ('early') and *tarde* ('late').⁹ This explains the coordinations that we observe in (8a) and in (9), these not detected in the other variants.

(9) a. *A estas horas y sin siesta* no soy persona. (1900807017)

'Right now, and without a siesta, I'm not a person.'

b. Los belgas son siempre una gran apuesta para cualquier festival, pero sin duda nos quedamos con ganas de mucho más. ¡No nos pueden mandar para casa *a esas horas y con ese subidón!* (407972436)

'The Belgians are always a good bet for any festival, but without a doubt we're left wanting much more. They can't send us home *now and on this high!*'

This variant is characteristic of a direct style of speech, as the corpora analysed here show. In CORPES XXI, which contains a high percentage of fictional texts, occurrences are found above all in fragments of assumed or fabricated orality; in eseuTenTen11 the variant occurs very frequently in blogs, normally in those where the authors narrate their own activities and share with readers their thoughts on certain themes.

⁹ NGLE (2009: 2323): "Los adverbios *pronto* y *tarde* incorporan a menudo –aunque no siempre– un rasgo MODAL, puesto que designan cierto tiempo que se interpreta de manera relativa a las expectativas del hablante" ('The adverbs *pronto* and *tarde* often –although not always– incorporate a MODAL feature, give that they denote a certain time which is interpreted in a way relative to the expectations of the speaker').

3 Contexts of use

One of the most significant aspects of the analysis of the usual combinations of words, as explored in the project mentioned in the Introduction, is that of preferences in the lexical combinations of these, which not only allows us to identify possible collocations, but can also be an indication of specialisation in one or more text types, modalities of utterance, pragmatic contexts, etc. In this respect, I have noted that certain words co-occurring with the construction that interests us here point to a possible specialisation of the variants in different text types in the corpora.

CV1 is found in a great variety of contexts, although the diversity is clearer in CORPES XXI than in eseutTenTen11, where the construction is especially frequent in journalistic texts, above all in news about the stock market and the economy, traffic, the weather, etc. In addition to company names, initials and even numbers of the IBEX Stock Exchange in the lexical co-occurrence provided by Sketch Engine, of particular note are adjectives like *agresivo* ('aggressive') and *alcista* ('bullish'); nouns such as *circulación* ('circulation'), *controlador* ('controller'), *ganancias* ('profits'), *incendio* ('fire'), *niebla* ('mist'), *nieve* ('snow'), *normalidad* ('normality'), *pronóstico* ('forecast'), *resaca* ('hangover') and *tormenta* ('storm'), and verbs like *caer* ('fall'), *condicionar* ('condition'), *dimitir* ('resign'), *discutir* ('argue'), *llover* ('rain'), *perder* ('lose'), *registrar* ('register'), *subir* ('raise') and *votar* ('vote'). CV2 is also found in similar contexts, although most abundantly in journalistic texts of a political nature, in which the process or event which acts as a temporal frame in which the construction is inserted tend to pertain to a legislature, a pact, an agreement, etc.

CV3, however, is found very frequently in eseutTenTen11 in blogs, normally those in which authors talk about themselves and their activities. Notable here are adjectives and nouns that indicate the state in which speakers find themselves, such as *cansado* ('tired'), *despierto* ('awake'), *dormido* ('asleep'), *levantado* ('arisen'), *hambre* ('hunger') and *resaca* ('hangover'), and verbs which place them in the sphere of communication, like *contestar* ('reply'), *escribir* ('write'), *explicar* ('explain'), *leer* ('read') and *llamar* ('call'). However, caution should be taken with this information, given the limitations of this corpus in terms of text types. A search of CORPES XXI, by contrast, provides far greater textual variability, and even normalised frequencies of occurrences in news and reports here are much lower than in magazines and works of fiction, among which we note works for the theatre in particular, a form of text in which assumed or fabricated orality is found. As a consequence, perhaps the only thing which we can affirm with any degree of certainty is that CV3 is characteristic of texts presenting direct discourse in some form.

Continuing with a strictly lexical analysis, it is notable that no combinatorial preferences are perceived, except those cases, which might be expected, of words which are in one way or another associated with specific moments of the day. For example, adjectives such as *cansado* ('tired'), *despierto* ('awake'), *dormido* ('asleep') and *levantado* ('arisen'); nouns like *curro* ('living', 'job'), *despertador* ('alarm clock'), *hambre* ('hunger') and *siesta* ('siesta'), and verbs like *cenar* ('dine'), *currar* ('work'), *desayunar* ('breakfast'), *descansar* ('rest'), *despertar* ('awaken'), *dormir* ('sleep') and *salivar* ('salivate', in the sense of 'to show appetite') co-occur with reasonable frequency with the construction. However, adverbs are in fact the most revealing here.

On the one hand, the three variants are seen to combine with aspectual adverbs which indicate the current stage of an event, such as *aún* ('still, yet'), *todavía* ('still, yet') and *ya* ('already'):

(10) a. Por lo visto, conocía bien la zona y terminamos tomando café (café yo, ella un té con leche) en uno de los bares que no habían cerrado *aún a aquellas horas*. (2238236022)

'Apparently, she knew the area well and we ended up drinking coffee (I had coffee, she a tea with milk) in one of the bars that had not *yet* closed *at that time*.'

b. Ese mismo día [...] se daba cuenta de la presentación del Expediente de Regulación de Empleo en SEAT [...]. *Todavía, a esas horas*, no se habían disparado con estruendo las alarmas alemanas. (170832948)

'That same day [...] the presentation of the Expediente de Regulación de Empleo at SEAT took place [...]. *At that time*, the roar of the German alarms had *still* not been triggered.'

c. ¿Cuál sería la reacción de los EEUU si sus soldados prisioneros hubiesen sufrido un trato parecido? Seguramente *a estas horas* habrían *ya* utilizado su aplastante capacidad de fuego en algún bombardeo punitivo. (203525537)

'What would be the reaction of the U.S. if its prisoner soldiers had suffered similar treatment? Surely *by now* they would *already* have used their crushing firepower in some punitive bombardment.'

The presence of adverbs of this kind in a broad predication clearly involves the described situation being conceived as, or framed within, a succession of states or periods. Thus, more than a few combinations are found with the verbs *contin-*

uar ('continue'), *permanecer* ('remain') and *seguir* ('continue'), as well as with the respective continuative periphrasis; in relation to this, we should note that the most abundant hits here are those corresponding to CV2, in which, as we have already mentioned, *a estas horas* carries a meaning similar to that of *a estas alturas* (10b, 10c).

Epistemic modal adverbs are also notable, having been found in combination basically with CV1 and CV2: *probablemente* ('probably'), *posiblemente* ('possibly'), *seguramente* ('surely'), *(casi) seguro* ('almost') 'sure'), *tal vez* ('perhaps'), *puede que* ('it might be that'):¹⁰

(11) a. Mi más sincero pésame a los familiares que *seguramente a estas horas* estarán en estado de shock. (3561606)

'My sincerest condolences to the family members who will *surely* be in a state of shock *at this time*.'

b. Si al europeo del siglo XV le hubiera sido igual tomar sus alimentos de una manera u otra, *quizás a estas horas* no se hubiese descubierto aún el Nuevo Mundo. (808186393)

'If it had been the same for Europe in the 15th century to eat its food in one way or another, *perhaps by now* the New World would still not have been discovered.'

c. *Puede que a estas horas* esté aterrizando en Vitoria otro avión procedente de Namibia. (2028471609)

'*It may be that* another aircraft from Namibia is landing in Vitoria *at this time*.'

In example (11b), as in (7a) and (7b), *a estas horas* is inserted in the hypothetical period, in a conditional structure. Here, logic leads us to think that when the event takes place somewhere different from that of the utterance (see example [1]) or if it is after this (example [3]), it is probable that it is presented as a hypothesis or, more generally, as something that is situated in unreality. Indeed, many hits illustrate the preference for the use of *a estas horas* in non-factual or unreal modal contexts:

i. A syntactic context of hypothesis is, as we have said, the conditional structure; in the corpora there are quite a lot of cases of this construction. In (11b) we also see that the hypothetical period combines with negative polarity

10 With respect to *puede que*, see Rodríguez Espiñeira & López Meirama (2008).

(that which “does not exist” here is also unreal). Numerous examples are found that combine a conditional structure and negative polarity.

- ii. Examples (11b) and (11c) illustrate the use of the subjunctive, and (11a) the use of a future of an epistemic nature. The analysis of the examples of *a estas horas* in Sketch Engine reveals a very marked preference for a combination with forms of the subjunctive and, especially, with the future and the conditional indicative, almost always with this value of conjecture. Examples of the use of the conditional are (7a) and (7b).
- iii. Another of the combinatory preferences detected is that of verbs of thought and judgement, such as *creer* (‘believe’), *desconocer* (‘be ignorant of’), *imaginar* (‘imagine’), *pensar* (‘think’, with the sense of ‘believe, have an opinion’), *suponer* (‘suppose’), *saber* (‘know’) and *temerse* (‘fear’), which normally appear as introductory predicates of clauses that contain the construction: *suponer que...* (‘suppose that...’), *creer que...* (‘believe that...’), *pensar que...* (‘think that...’). Along with these we also find some verbs of intention or hope: *confiar en que...* (‘trust that...’), *esperar que...* (‘hope that...’). An example here is (12):

(12) *Supongo que a estas horas* estarás tomando un heladito en la playa... qué suerte tienen algunos jeje... (2437243)

‘*I suppose that around about now* you will be eating an ice-cream on the beach... what luck some people have haha’

- iv. Also found are cases in which the predicate that includes *a estas horas* is the subject of an attributive clause with an epistemic value, of the type *parece que...* (‘it appears that...’), *es de suponer que...* (‘it is supposed that...’), *es posible/imposible/probable que...* (‘it is possible/impossible/probable that...’), as can be seen in (13):

(13) a. *Parece que a estas horas* los rebeldes en Libia están a 50 Kilómetros de Trípoli. (1214348573)

‘*It seems that* the rebels in Libya are *now* 50 kilometers from Tripoli.’

b. Ha salido de Salamanca hacia la frontera de Portugal y *es posible que a estas horas* ya esté volando hacia Latinoamérica o París, donde tiene apoyo. (2117939651)

‘*He has left* Salamanca for the Portuguese border and *it is possible that by now* he’s already flying to Latin America or Paris, where he has support.

v. Finally, we might note the combination of *a estas horas* with epistemic modal periphrasis, particularly *deber de* ('ought to') and *poder* ('can', 'be able to') plus infinitive:

(14) a. Ya han salido todos para España y *a estas horas deben estar* en algún lugar sobre el océano.¹¹ (1855307493)

'All of them have already left for Spain and *should now be* somewhere over the ocean.'

b. Víctor explica que *a estas horas podría producirse* un accidente puesto que las aceras para los peatones no son suficientemente anchas para caminar. (352281713)

'Victor explains that an accident *could happen at this time* because the sidewalks for pedestrians are not wide enough to walk.'

It is not infrequent to find various of these resources in the same sequence:

(15) *Probablemente* sea mucho mejor no *pensar* qué *estaría pasando a estas horas* –mediodía del jueves– *si* el Gobierno no hubiera logrado la aprobación de su decreto-ley de recortes presupuestarios. (178899716)

'It is *probably* much better not to *think about* what *would be happening now* – midday on Thursday – *if* the Government had not achieved the approval of its decree-law on budget cuts.'

This tendency to use variants CV1 and CV2 in contexts of a hypothetical sense is very marked with the demonstrative *estas*, in contrast to *esas* and *aquellas*. The corpora data indeed illustrate this: among the collocates with the highest indexes of occurrence of *a esas horas* and *a aquellas horas* we do not find epistemic modal adverbs, verbs of thought and opinion, or auxiliaries of epistemic modal periphrases; the verbal forms found in greatest abundance are past forms in the indicative (above all the imperfect) and there are hardly any forms of the subjunctive or the future and conditional with a conjectural value. The explanation for this difference can be found, as is evident, in the use of one or another demonstrative: conjecture tends not to be retrospective.

On the other hand, we also note a clear preference for the use of the construction in the interrogative mode,¹² in this case with variant CV3. Specifically, it

¹¹ Many examples, like this one, without the preceptive preposition *de*.

¹² More notable in CORPES XXI than in eseutTenTen11.

tends to involve rhetorical questions close to exclamations, which show annoyance or anger, provoked exactly by the ungodly hour, or (less frequently) surprise, provoked by the unexpected nature of this. In the following example, alongside examples (8b) and (8c) above, we can see that in this case there is no difference in the use of one demonstrative or another:

(16) Pero si son las cuatro de la mañana, ¿quién puede llamar *a estas horas*?
(3924638)

‘But if it’s four o’clock in the morning, who can be calling *at this time*?’

4 Degree of internal fixation

As we have seen, the basic meaning (CV1) of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*] is highly compositional;¹³ however, the degree of lexicalisation of the construction is not only determined by its compositionality, this understood in terms of its meaning, but also its greater or lesser formal rigidity. In this section we will analyse the degree of internal fixation of the construction, beginning with a brief review of its components.

First we will consider the preposition, in order to see if the combination of *a* plus a noun phrase (NP) composed of a demonstrative and the noun *hora* is particularly frequent or not. For this, we extracted data from eseuTenTen11, comparing the normalised frequencies of the six most frequently used prepositions in Spanish (*a*, *con*, *de*, *en*, *para* and *por*) ('to', 'with', 'of'/'from', 'in'/'on', 'for'/'in order to', and 'by'/'for'/'through') with absolute frequencies of the prepositional phrases with a demonstrative and *hora*.¹⁴

As can be seen in Table 1, the findings here are sufficiently clear, in that the frequency of use of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*] is notably greater than the other combinations, and contrasts with the general use of the most habitual prepositions, in particular *de* ('of', 'from') and *en* ('in', 'on'). Indeed, we can confirm that the only constructional idiom with the form of a prepositional phrase (PP) in which the term is formed by a demonstrative and the noun *hora* is the very form which interests us in the current study.

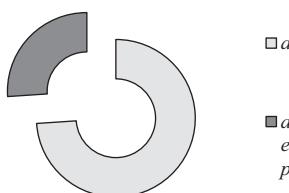
13 As Boers (2014: 188) observes, “Cognitive Linguists [...] have pointed out that not all idioms are by definition non-decomposable or opaque”.

14 In the case of prepositions, I have preferred to use normalised frequency counts (cases per million words), because absolute counts are excessively high and hinder the clear visualisation of differences. For the same reason, I have rounded up to whole numbers.

Table 1: Frequency of use of prepositions and the construction [PREP DET_{dem.} *hora(s)*].

Preposition	Normalised frequency of the preposition	Absolute frequency of [PREP DET _{dem.} <i>hora(s)</i>]
<i>A</i>	17,543	9,846
<i>Con</i>	8,521	27
<i>De</i>	63,606	1,137
<i>En</i>	24,445	1,394
<i>Para</i>	7,416	180
<i>Por</i>	8,793	142

Regarding the other prepositions, there are some with meanings that are not very compatible with that of the temporal noun *hora*, and for this reason no hits were found of the corresponding combination (*ante*, *bajo*, *contra*, *según*, *vía*. . .) ('before', 'below', 'against', 'according to', 'via'. . .); in other cases, the combination is made with lexicalised segments, as happens with *tras* ('along', 'over the course of') (*tras estas horas bajas*, *tras esas horas muertas*) ('over the course of these down-time hours', 'during these dead hours'/'dead time'), or it is seen that many examples are correlative structures, that is, they correspond to another type of construction, such as in the cases of *desde* ('from', 'since') and *entre* ('between'), this above all in combinations with the noun in the singular: *desde esta hora hasta las dos de la tarde* ('from now until two in the afternoon'), *entre esa hora y las cinco* ('from that time until five'). Hits are found with other prepositions, in addition to those included in Table 1: *durante* ('during'), *hasta* ('until'), *sobre* ('about') and, with very few examples, *hacia* ('towards').¹⁵ Figure 1 illustrates visually the frequencies of combinations with the preposition *a* compared to all the other combinations.

**Figure 1:** Frequencies of [PREP DET_{dem.} *hora(s)*] in eseuTenTen11.

¹⁵ I have discarded the scant number of hits of *sin esas horas* ('without those times/hours'), given that in none of these do we find a combination of temporal meaning.

Second, if we focus on the noun, we can see that there is no *slot* in the construction, given that it is not possible to substitute *hora(s)* by another noun, even one of similar meaning: the corpora consulted provided no evidence of the existence of combinations of the type **a estos meses* ('at those months'), **a estos días* ('at those days'), **a estos minutos* ('at those minutes'), etc., with the same values as those identified in the case of *a estas horas*; in general, such segments tend to be combinations of NP and a bound preposition, as in the examples in (17):¹⁶

(17) a. Espero seguir con la línea ascendente y *llegar a* estos meses finales del año con buenas sensaciones. (1613827812)
 'I hope to continue with the rising line and *to arrive at* these final months of the year with good sensations.'

b. El Atlético *sobrevivió a* esos minutos, también porque el delantero noruego desperdició una ocasión inmejorable a dos metros de la línea de gol. (1983853073)
 'Atletico *survived* those minutes, also because the Norwegian striker wasted an unparalleled chance two metres from the goal line.'

Cases exist in which temporal nouns are used in structures with the value established here as CV1, this not in combination with *a*, but rather with the prepositions *en* and *por*, or with the prepositional phrase *en torno a* ('around', 'about', 'on'):

(18) a. Pero en tales ocasiones Hitler nunca manifestaba en voz alta su entusiasmo. Escatimaba las grandes palabras. Quizá *en aquellos momentos* se sintiera sobre cogido por cierto temeroso respeto. (17888311)
 'But on such occasions Hitler never expressed his enthusiasm aloud. He skimped on great words. Perhaps *in those moments* he was overwhelmed by a certain fearful respect.'

¹⁶ Some (very few) of the examples of *a estos/esos/aquellos años* ('these/those/those years') are cases of a non-bound preposition. They correspond to a construction of a predicative sense, with the meaning 'at this (advanced) age': *Uno a estos años, pasa de niñatos* ('At this age, one stops caring about spoilt brats') (1594269323); *Si hubiera seguido escribiendo a esos años, me hubiera convertido en un perro verde* ('Had I continued writing at that age, I would have become a weirdo (green dog)') (461790770).

b. *Por esos años*, Alfonsín efectuó varios viajes a Europa y Estados Unidos en busca de apoyo para el restablecimiento de la democracia en Argentina. (112335153)

‘*Over those years*, Alfonsín made several trips to Europe and the United States in search of support for the re-establishment of democracy in Argentina.’

c. *En torno a estos días* vienen celebrándose tradicionalmente las fiestas de los solteros y solteras de la localidad. (377953819)

‘*Around this time of the year* the feast days for unmarried men and women are traditionally celebrated in the locality.’

Third, the presence of the demonstrative indicates of a medium degree of internal fixation; we need only comment here that the relative frequencies of the three forms are similar to those of the three demonstratives in CORPES XXI, even though *a estas horas* presents a somewhat more intense use: for each occurrence of *a aquellas horas* we find 3 of *a esas horas* and 5.3 of *a estas horas*, and for each occurrence of the demonstrative *aquel* (as a lemma) we find 3.3 of *ese* and 4.1 of *este*.¹⁷

The preceding discussion has shown that [*a DET_{demonstrative} hora(s)*] is to some extent an unusual and non-predictable pattern, in the sense that the use of this syntactic template would not be expected as a means of expressing the basic temporal meaning of the construction, something which is itself indicative of idiomaticity.¹⁸ Yet we can observe further features of fixation, as will be seen in the following section.

4.1 Patterns of lexical extension

As Wulff (2008: 1) notes, “the perceived idiomticity of a construction tends to correlate highly with the acceptability of modified variants of that construction”.

¹⁷ The textual variability of CORPES XXI, in contrast to eseutTenTen11, as mentioned, renders this corpus ideal for illustrating preferences of use; in any case, in eseutTenTen11 the presence of *a aquellas horas* is practically anecdotal (45 hits, compared to 2,013 of *a esas horas* and 3,259 of *a estas horas*).

¹⁸ Only to a certain extent, given that the indication of a specific time of day is made in Spanish through the preposition *a*: *a las cuatro* ('at four o'clock'), *a medianoche* ('at midnight').

In terms of the current study, we find that the noun *horas* sometimes appears in a modified form in the corpora.

i. By a relative clause.

This is seen in a very small number of cases, but they do illustrate that variability is possible. It is also found in the different contextual variants, although with a different value: in the first two CVs it serves to specify the temporal period (19a), whereas in CV3 it is used to reinforce the opinion of the speaker as to the inopportune nature of the moment (19b):

(19) a. Apenas he podido seguir las [las elecciones], así que me atengo a hacer un breve repaso de lo que cuentan [los blogs] *a estas horas que ya ha finalizado el escrutinio de votos.* (2069829632)

‘I’ve barely been able to follow [the elections], so I just want to take a brief look at what [the blogs] have to say *now that the vote count is over.*’

b. ¡Vaya nivel de blog! y yo perdiéndome la interesantísima conversación entre los dos “figuras” por estar durmiendo *a esas horas en que sólo duermen los bebés.* (989328355)

‘A blog of this kind! and me missing the very interesting conversation between the two “figures” by being asleep *at a time when only babies sleep.*’

ii. By a prepositional phrase.

Occurrence in this case is found to be 10% of all hits, a significant level. The PP is always introduced by the preposition *de* and indicates the period in which the hours or times are inserted, normally a part of the day: *de la noche* (‘of the night’), *de la mañana* (‘of the morning’), *de la tarde* (‘of the afternoon’), *de la madrugada* (‘of the early morning’), *del mediodía* (‘of midday’), sometimes signalled through an activity: *a estas horas del desayuno* (‘at these breakfast hours/time’), *de sobremesa* (‘of the post-meal conversation’), *de sueño* (‘of sleep’); *a esas horas de la siesta* (‘at siesta time’).

A reading of the examples here suggests that the modification of the PP is found more in CV3, above all with *de la noche* (‘of the night’) and *de la madrugada* (‘of the early morning’). It is also observed in this case that the PP serves above all as a means of reinforcing the modal value, not so much as a specified modifier, the meaning of which is construed through the context:

(20) a. ¿Qué otra cosa se puede hacer cuando uno está despierto, y solo, *a estas horas de la madrugada?* (1036807902)

‘What else can one do when one is awake, and alone, *now, at this time in the early morning?*’

b. Al mirar a toda la familia Torresano, junto con María y su hijita Rosa, los hace entrar al patio de su casa y les pregunta qué les sucede para venir *a esas horas de la noche.* (975331)

‘On looking the entire Torresano family, along with Maria and her little daughter Rosa, he brings them into the courtyard of his house and asks them what has happened to them that they come *at this time of night.*’

Sometimes the PP indicates an activity that develops over the course of a specific period of time; such cases are unequivocally CV2: *a estas horas de evolución del caso* (‘at this point in the development of the case’), *del festival* (‘in the festival’), *de la fiesta* (‘in the party’), *de la partida* (‘in the game’), *del debate* (‘in the debate’). The expression *a estas horas de la película* (lit. “at this time in the movie”, meaning ‘at these heights/at this point in the proceedings’) stands out here; it is a calque of the phrase *a estas alturas de la película* (lit. “at these heights of the movie”, meaning, again, ‘at these heights/at this point in the proceedings’) and serves as proof of the equivalence between the two in such contexts. In this respect, eseUTenTen11 provides only one example (21a), but a search of Google yields more (21b):

(21) a. Que Hollywood es una fábrica de hacer dinero es algo que seguramente nadie dude *a estas horas de la película.* (255180461)

‘That Hollywood is a money-making factory is something that *by now* no one would doubt.’

b. Resulta esperpéntico que *a estas horas de la película* haya gente en Cataluña que considere a ERC un partido de izquierdas...
<https://www.intensedebate.com/profiles/reporterosreportados>, 30/09/2016.

‘It is grotesque that *at this stage* there are *still* people in Catalonia who consider ERC a left-wing party...’

On very few occasions the PP functions as a qualifying or evaluative adjunct, and always does so with CV3, again as modal reinforcement (with this, emphasis is placed on how inadequate the time is):¹⁹

(22) a. Pronto entramos en Burguete, el antiguo burgo de Roncesvalles, paseando por su calle principal [. . .] encontramos otro milagro, un bar abierto *a estas horas de dios*, debe ser como el Pisto de nuestro pueblo. (137518428)

‘Soon we entered Burguete, the old village of Roncesvalles, walking along its main street [. . .] we found another miracle, a bar open *at this late hour*, it must be like the Pisto bar of our village.’

b. Antes de las 8 ya estoy en el gym, *a estas horas de maruja-curranta* solo hay 3 clases buenas. (1322701509)

‘Before 8 o’clock I’m already in the gym, *at this ungodly hour* (lit. the time of a working housewife) there are only 3 good classes.’

iii. By an adjective.

Some cases of modification by adjective are detected, be it pre- or post-modification, almost always to qualify them as inadequate or, at least, as unpredictable (*intempestivas* (‘untimely’), *inhumanas* (‘inhuman’), *infrecuentes* (‘infrequent’)):

(23) a. D. Carlos, leo su comentario *a estas horas inhumanas* pero no me resisto a escribir algunas líneas. (757953448)

‘D. Carlos, I read your comment *at this inhuman hour* but I can’t resist writing a few lines.’

b. Desde finales de los noventa y hasta hace pocos años retransmitía junto a Antoni Daimiel, otro periodista de gran prestigio, los partidos de madrugada. . . y *a esas intempestivas horas* forjó su leyenda. (687057078)

‘From the end of the nineties and until a few years ago, he broadcast together with Antoni Daimiel, another very well-respected journalist, the early morning matches. . . and *at these inopportune/ungodly hours* he became a legend.’

¹⁹ Achieving intensity through redundancy is a typical feature of evaluative language; in this respect, Hunston (2011: 3) claims that “evaluation is frequently expressed cumulatively and implicitly”.

Sometimes, this is in the extreme (*tardías* ('late'), *tempranas* ('early')):

(24) a. Luego el creciente estruendo, parecido al de un terremoto, conmovió las entrañas de muchos de los que *a esas horas tardías de la noche* aún no habían vuelto a sus casas. (870806002)

'Then the growing roar, similar to that of an earthquake, shook the bowels of many of those who had not returned to their homes *at that late hour of the night*.'

b. *A estas tempranas horas* la suave luz se difumina entre los diferentes valles, los incipientes rayos de sol se cuelan a través de estas sierras y algunos de ellos consiguen acertar sobre los carenados de nuestras motos. (718182334)

'*At these early hours* the soft light is diffused between the various valleys, the incipient rays of sun filter through these mountain ridges, some of which manage to hit the bodywork of our motorcycles.'

(24a) illustrates the possibility of a combination of two modifications. Such a possibility is relatively frequent, above all with the preposed adjective *altas* ('high'); this case might represent a blending of the constructions *a estas horas* and *a altas horas (de la noche)* ('at a late hour (of the night)'), *la madrugada* ('the early morning')):

(25) Ha sido un placer encontrar *a estas altas horas de la noche* tan buena conversación. (1952643276)

'It has been a pleasure to find such good conversation *at this late hour of the night*.'

Finally, some cases involve the adjective *mismo*. It carries an emphatic value, and is only used with CV1:

(26) Ni por un instante me planteé lo que mi mujer estaría haciendo *a esas mismas horas*. (416567578)

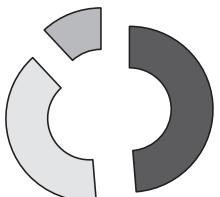
Not for a moment did I think about what my wife would be doing *at that same moment*.'

4.2 Formal variants

Thus far I have limited the discussion to the combination of the preposition *a* plus *este/ese/aquel* ('this, that, that (over there)') and the noun *hora* in plural. This section will focus on the singular forms (4.2.1) and combinations with other demonstratives (4.2.2).

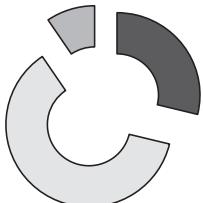
4.2.1 A esta/esa/ aquella hora

An initial difference found in the use of the singular in contrast to the plural has to do with the different percentage weights of the demonstratives *este* and *ese*, as can be seen in figures 2 and 3, based on data from the Spanish part of CORPES XXI:²⁰



- a estas horas
- a esas horas
- a aquellas horas

Figure 2: Occurrence of the dem. plural.



- a esta hora
- a esa hora
- a aquella hora

Figure 3: Occurrence of the dem. singular.

These data are related to the contexts of use of the three forms, which I will briefly deal with in what follows.

One of the differences in the use of number with temporal nouns is that the plural denotes a period of time which is not fixed or delimited: *Estuve una hora en la biblioteca/Estuve (unas) horas en la biblioteca* ('I was an hour in the library was (some) hours/time in the library'). We could think of this as motivating the differ-

²⁰ See footnote 17. In eseuTenTen11 the occurrence of the forms in the singular indicate the same tendency: 1,489 hits of *a esta hora*; 2,994 of *a esa hora* and 46 of *a aquella hora*.

ences in the use of the singular and plural forms, above all when we consider the following examples:

(27) a. Estuvieron evolucionando hasta las 16.55, *a esta hora* volvieron a romper el fuego las piezas de artillería, disparando sobre el mismo objetivo hasta bien cerrada la noche. (117297630)

‘They were developing until 16.55, at which time the artillery pieces once again broke fire, firing on the same objective until well into the night.’

b. El ticket que reservé ponía que el tren salía a las 9.53, y exactamente a esa hora el tren empezó a salir de la estación. (1263376718)

‘The ticket I booked said that the train left at 9.53, and at exactly that time the train began to leave the station.’

Perhaps these examples justify the greater frequency of *a esa hora* in relation to *a esta hora*, in that we know that the demonstrative *ese* is specialised in terms of anaphoric deixis, as seen in the examples in (27).

However, cases are also found of singular forms in contexts of use which are similar or identical to those of the plural, and thus in which the choice of number can only be due to stylistic or expressive reasons (in eseuTenTen11, e.g., news about the Stock Exchange, traffic, the weather, etc.). Cfr. (28a) with (28b), and (29a) with (29b):

(28) a. Tras el desplome de la semana pasada, el Ibex 35 ha arrancado en verde [...] *A esta hora*, BBVA y Santander encabezan dos de las subidas más fuertes, con un 2,14% y un 1,98% respectivamente. (383907797)

‘After last week’s slump, the Ibex 35 has opened in green [...] *Right now*, BBVA and Santander lead two of the strongest rises, with 2.14% and 1.98% respectively.’

b. En este contexto, estos analistas reiteran su recomendación de comprar con un precio objetivo de 3,60 euros. *A estas horas*, Iberia sube un 1,28%, hasta los 2,70 euros. (393916071)

‘In this context, these analysts reiterate their recommendation to buy with a target price of EUR 3.60. *At the moment* Iberia is gaining, from 1.28% to 2.70 euros.’

(29) a. Las celebraciones por la caída de Mubarak están provocando atascos por toda la capital de Egipto. Los puentes sobre el Nilo están colapsados *a esta hora*, informa desde El Cairo Mikel Ayestaran. (1096270438)

‘Celebrations for the fall of Mubarak are causing traffic jams throughout Egypt’s capital. The bridges over the Nile are *currently* blocked, Mikel Ayestaran reports from Cairo.’

b. El duelo de los seguidores de Hizbulá está siendo contenido y se concentra *a estas horas* en el Hospital al Rasul al Aazam de Beirut, adonde llegó el cadáver del líder islamista. (5202463)

‘The duel of Hezbollah’s followers is being contained and is *currently* concentrated in Rasul al Aazam Hospital in Beirut, where the body of the Islamist leader arrived.’

Yet what is notable about the use of the singular is that it is limited to CV1: I have found no examples of forms in the singular with the other two variants, which is an indication of the lesser degree of compositionality and the greater degree of fixation that the construction exhibits in these variants in contrast to CV1.

4.2.2 *A tales horas*

The qualitative *tal* (‘such’) is a demonstrative characterised, according to Rigau (1999: 329), by a deictic value that “generalmente se inscribe en el discurso y no en las coordenadas espacio-temporales del acto de enunciación” (‘is generally inscribed in the discourse and not in the spatio-temporal coordinates of the speech act’). As the NGLE (2009: 1326) indicates, it had great vitality in classical Spanish, but is used little in contemporary European Spanish. In this respect, the Corpus Diacrónico del Español (CORDE) attests that *a estas horas* has existed alongside *a tales horas*²¹ for centuries (from at least the 17th century),²² in a strict relation of equivalence (in the three contextual variants detected). Perhaps for this reason *a tales horas*, which always had a more limited use than its equivalent, progressively lost ground in favour of *a estas horas*, until the currently point at which the Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA) contains only nine

²¹ In singular it is also used to refer to non-specified hours or times: *Lo mejor que puedes hacer es decirle: “esperadme a tal hora en la terraza que yo llego”* (‘The best you can do is tell him: “wait for me *at such and such a time* on the terrace until I get there’) (56673583).

²² There are cases of *a estas horas* prior to the 17th century.

cases (in contrast to 582 of *a estas horas*, 309 of *a esas horas*, and 90 of *a aquellas horas*), and the Spanish part of CORPES XXI there are only five, all in works of fiction, suggesting perhaps that its presence in these texts is in fact an (archaic) stylistic feature. It is also of note that all five cases correspond to CV3:

(30) ¡Por Dios!, cómo se te ha ocurrido la brillante idea de levantarte *a tales horas*, no puedes ni pensar. (Marina Mayoral: *Deseos*)

‘For God’s sake, how did you come up with the brilliant idea of getting up *at such an hour* that you can’t even think.’

5 Other units of the same conceptual domain

In this section we will see that, in CV2 and CV3, the construction which is the focus of our current analysis coexists with other idiomatic units, equivalent in their meaning and similar in their form. For reasons of space, only the two most relevant will be analysed here.

5.1 [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *altura(s)*]

In both the Spanish subcorpus of CORPES XXI and eseutTenTen11, instances in the plural of this construction occur with greater frequency than those of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*]: 993 and 21,914 hits, respectively, of *a estas alturas*; 194 and 835 of *a esas alturas*, and 70 and 29 of *a aquellas alturas*. As we can see from these data, the high frequency of the form with *estas* is especially notable, which can be interpreted as an indication of fixation. The same can be said of the fact that the number of hits in the singular is radically less (25 hits CORPES XXI and 1,095 in eseutTenTen11 of *a esta altura*; 33 and 478 of *a esa altura*; 2 and 10 of *a aquella altura*), in addition to the fact that it is normally used in a locative sense, as can be seen in (31):

(31) a. En otra cúspide que queda en el lado sur del valle, se ve la torre roja y blanca de un repetidor. El valle entero está nevado. *A esta altura* la nieve está impoluta. (Javier Calvo: *El jardín colgante*)

‘On another cusp on the south side of the valley, you see the red and white tower of a repeater. The entire valley is snow-covered. *Up here* the snow is pristine.’

b. Entonces lo sentí, ahí, en ese momento, *a esa altura del Paseo del Prado*.
(70017593)

‘Then I felt it, there, at that moment, *on that part of the Paseo del Prado*.’

A brief look at both corpora allows us to see that in this construction the noun *altura* tends to have an event as a frame (*a estas alturas de la reunión*, ‘at this stage in the meeting’), *el partido* (‘the match’), *la legislatura* (‘the legislature’), *el embarazo* (‘the pregnancy’), *la guerra* (‘the war’) . . .), although it can also have a temporal frame (*a estas alturas del año* (‘at this stage of the year’), *de la vida* (‘of life’), *de la jornada* . . . (‘of the day’)). In any case, *altura* marks a stage or level, in such a way that the construction denotes something like a limit (see DLE: ‘when things have arrived at this point’, s.v. *altura*), which often means that it establishes an inference in relation to what happens at this limit or stage; thus, [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *altura(s)*] is often used, particularly in the plural, in contexts of epistemic (and sometimes deontic) modality, frequently in combination with negative polarity. The following example illustrates quite a common construction with this segment, the conditional or hypothetical, similar to what we saw in (7):

(32) Si no llega a ser por el agente de tráfico ni siquiera habríamos dado con la familia Meres *a estas alturas*. (José María Guelbenzu: *El hermano pequeño*)

‘Had it not been for the traffic officer, we wouldn’t even have found the Meres family *by now*.’

Naturally, there are contexts in which the two constructions are not interchangeable; for example, when the temporal frame, expressed through a complement with *de*, signals a period incompatible with *horas*: *a estas alturas de 2009* (at this stage of 2009), *de la temporada* (of the season), *de la vida en pareja* (of the life of the couple), *de la conversación* (of the conversation), etc.:

(33) Jugar a las cinco y media *a estas alturas de año* es inhumano. (1347589073)
‘Playing at five thirty *at this time of the year* is inhuman.’

On the other hand, an examination of the lexical co-occurrence of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *altura(s)*] reveals a preference for the combination with words –above all adjectives– that express a negative meaning, as with *vergonzoso* (‘shameful’), *absurdo* (‘absurd’), *engañoso* (‘trick’), *difícil* (‘difficult’), *ridículo* (‘ridiculous’), *innecesario* (‘unnecessary’), *vergüenza* (‘shame’, ‘embarrassment’) and *preocupante* (‘worrying’) (34a); surprise, as with *sorprender* (‘surprise’), *sorprendente* (‘surprising’), *extrañar* (‘surprise’, ‘shock’), *extraño* (‘strange’), *inconcebible* (‘inconceivable’), *increíble*

(‘incredible’), *impensable* (‘unthinkable’) and *incomprendible* (‘incomprehensible’) (34b); or with what is evident, as with *obvio* (‘obvious’), *obviedad* (‘truism’, ‘banality’), *incuestionable* (‘unquestionable’) and *innegable* (‘undeniable’) (34c):

(34) a. Me parece *vergonzoso* que *a estas alturas* haya todavía en fosas comunes y cunetas unos 130.000 restos de víctimas. (792109474)

‘I find it *shameful* that *right now* there are still some 130,000 remains of victims in mass graves and ditches.’

b. Es *increíble* que *a estas alturas* pueda haber polémica alguna por el uniforme o el atuendo de una mujer. (1041246379)

‘It is *incredible* that there can *still* be any controversy over a woman’s uniform or attire.’

c. A *estas alturas* resulta *obvio* que la estrategia de la escudería italiana de marcar estrechamente al australiano Mark Webber fue un gravísimo error. (1999321)

‘By now it is *clear* that the Italian team’s strategy of closely marking the Australian Mark Webber was a serious mistake.’

The examples in (34) show that [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *altura(s)*] is a more pragmatically marked construction than [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*], in the sense that it is used, with more significant frequency than the latter, in contexts where the speaker makes a valuation, one which tends to be negative. It is probable that this influences its frequency of use, which is far higher than the construction with *horas*, and its specialization with this sense in instances in the plural, in contrast to the polysemy of [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*], a construction in which, also, CV2 is in the minority. In any case, it would be enlightening to explore this issue in greater depth, something which must be left for another study.

5.2 *A buenas horas*

The combination of the preposition *a* plus the noun *horas* to denote an inappropriate moment in the day, almost always late (CV3), allows for the presence of different adjuncts of the demonstrative, as seen in (35):

(35) a. Por fin llueve, pero *¡a qué horas!* (2030394294)

‘Finally it’s raining, but *it’s come so late!*’

b. La verdad que me gusta mucho verte aunque el programa se celebra *a unas horas*. . . que a ver si lo ponen antes porque un programa tan interesante como el tuyo se tendría que dar a una hora más adecuada. (981362812)

‘The truth is that I really like to see you even though the program is held *at such a time*. . . let’s see if they put it on earlier, because a program as interesting as yours would have to be given at a more appropriate time slot.’

c. *A buenas horas* veo este blog, dicen que más vale tarde que nunca. . . (1008475654)

‘I’m looking at this blog *late*, they say it’s better late than never. . .’

These three examples, taken from eseuTenTen11, are fragments of blogs, a context of use which also provides, as we have seen, the main bulk of the cases of *a estas horas* in CV3. Hence, (35a) and (35b) constitute quite unusual examples of the respective combinations, which are almost never used with this meaning (cfr: *Decida a qué horas prefiere que se realicen las llamadas* (‘Decide at what times you prefer that the calls be made’); *Los episodios se repiten todos los días a unas horas fijas* (‘The episodes are repeated every day *at fixed times*’); *Vive a unas horas de Tijuana* (‘He lives *at a few hours’ distance* from Tijuana’). For this reason, I will limit the analysis to the combination illustrated in (35c).

In general, Spanish dictionaries list *a buena(s) hora(s)* along with *A buenas horas, mangas verdes* (lit. “too late, green sleeves”, meaning, ‘too little, too late’), noting that both are used ‘to indicate that something is useless because it arrives or occurs late’ (Clave 2006, s.v. *hora*). García-Page Sánchez (2008: 35) includes *¡A buenas horas, mangas verdes!* as an example of a idiom “que reúne caracteres propios del refrán” (‘that includes typical features of the refrain’) and categorises it as an idiomatic sentence. In his opinion it is, in particular, a syntactically incomplete pragmatic formula (in that it lacks a verb), with exclamative modality and a “binominal structure” (2008: 162). The corpora reveal that the combination *a buenas horas* is of more frequent use than the binomial one in eseuTenTen11, at a ratio of 1.3:1, and in CORPES XXI at 3:1.²³

²³ It also reveals that the form in the singular, although on occasions used with the meaning indicated in Clave (2006) (e.g.: *Menudo ojito tiene la niña, a buena hora se da cuenta de que no es el [perro] guardián* (‘What a keen eye the girl has, she realizes *too late* that it is not the guard [dog]’) [372507646]), tends to be used with a more direct sense (e.g.: *La idea es quedar a buena*

Be this as it may, *a buenas horas* presents some distributional properties that bring it close the pragmatic formula *¡A buenas horas, mangas verdes!*, with which it shares certain characteristics: for example, its use in exclamative clauses (36a) or as an independent sentence (36b) is not infrequent:

(36) a. Patética es la cínica e hipócrita postura del PP al reivindicar “la libre determinación de los pueblos”. *¡A buenas horas se apunta la derecha a estos principios!* (790137934)

‘The cynical and hypocritical position of the PP is pathetic, in demanding “the self-determination of peoples”. *A bit late for* the right wing to be aiming at such principles!’

b. Ahora han declarado, a modo de arrepentimiento, que si hubieran sabido cuál iba a ser la respuesta no habrían secuestrado a los dos soldados israelíes. *A buenas horas.* (201444597)

‘Now they have stated, in repentance, that if they had known what the answer would be, they would not have kidnapped the two Israeli soldiers. *It's a bit late for that.*’

Example (36a) also serves to illustrate the frequency with which *a buenas horas* is used as the topic of a topicalized construction.

All of the above shows that *a buenas horas* tends to appear syntactically in a marked way, which is related to its pragmatic value: the speaker makes use of irony –through the adjective *buenas*– to indicate that something or someone arrives too late, in a message that is always charged with an element of censure or reproach. Once again, then, this is an idiomatic unit which is pragmatically more marked than [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*].

However, the meaning of the two units are relatively divergent: first, because *a buenas horas* always indicates a late period, unlike *a estas horas*, which can also indicate an unusually early one; second, because the temporal restriction in the scope of the day that operates with *a estas horas* is almost never observed in the case of *a buenas horas* (see the examples in [36]); third, because the latter carries a second meaning, one which it does not share with *a estas horas*: it is often used to reinforce negation, with the sense of ‘never’, ‘in no way’. This occurs, above all, in combination with the imperfect indicative (37a), and can also take the conditional or the present indicative (37b).

hora para tapear, sobre las 11,30-12,30 (‘The idea is to meet *early* to have some tapas, at around 11.30-12.30’) [245315623]), for which reason I will not include it in the analysis.

(37) a. *¡A buenas horas iba a tolerar el PP una disidencia tan notoria y constante!* (98752672)

‘*In no way* was the PP going to tolerate such notorious and constant dissent!’

b. A pesar de todo, esto parece a veces un capricho de niño malcriado. *¡A buenas horas* hago yo otra cocina para no molestar al niño Hikikomori! (552698035)

‘In spite of everything, this sometimes seems like the whim of a spoiled child. *In no way* do I cook anything else so as not to bother the child Hikikomori!’

6 Summary and conclusions

From all that we have seen, we can conclude that the constructional idiom [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*] presents the following characteristics:

It has a medium degree of fixation, in that it accepts modification of the noun, above all through a PP with *de* that serves as a frame (*a estas horas de la noche* ('at this time of night'), *de la mañana* ('of the morning'), *de la tarde* ('of the afternoon')...) or, less often, as an evaluative adjective (*intempestivas* ('ungodly'), *infrecuentes* ('infrequent'), *tardías* ('late'), *tempranas* ('early')...), and presents different instances, with variation in the demonstrative or in number.

In terms of its meaning, the corpora provide evidence of the existence of three contextual variants, the first of which constitutes the basic value of the unit:

1. In the greater part of its contexts, [*a* DET_{demonstrative} *hora(s)*] has a strictly temporal value (CV1). This value is compositional, which is seen in the differences leading to the use of different number or different demonstratives. In any case, *a estas horas* stands out, both in terms of frequency compared to all the others, and because of its preferential appearance in modal contexts of unreality.
2. In a reduced number of contexts the plural forms are used with a value equivalent to that of *a estas alturas* (CV2); this also involves a temporal meaning, although a reading of the examples reveals that it only appears in non-factual or unreal modal contexts (above all, epistemic ones and those with negative polarity). In this case, the preference for the form *a estas horas* is even more marked than in the previous form.

3. In direct discourse the use of the plural forms with a temporal and also modal value (CV3) is characteristic, in that the speaker makes use of the construction to express his or her opinion regarding the inadequate or unusual period of time denoted, and for this reason it is found frequently in rhetorical questions used as a reproach. This is the only value in which the form *a tales horas* seems to survive, currently relegated to what is probably an archaic stylistic use.

It appears, then, that the construction is on a path towards fixation, from a strictly temporal use towards one which is temporal and modal, and is exclusive to plurals. We also find this same value in other combinations of the preposition *a* and the noun *horas* in its plural form, notable here being *a buenas horas*.

Indeed, and although hardly touched upon here, it appears feasible to speak of a network of interrelated idiomatic units, in form and also in meaning.²⁴ In relation to the latter, both shared and divergent zones are identified, hence the boundaries established between them are never precise. In examples such as the following, we can observe the convergence of the senses:

(38) a. En la línea de la pregunta anterior, y a fin de no ser reiterativo ya *a estas horas y a estas alturas de Pleno*, yo solo quiero saber una cosa.
(929114680)

‘On the lines of the previous question, and in order not to be repetitive *now* and *at this point in the Plenary Session*, I only want to know one thing.’

b. No sé si sabes que Adolfo y Araceli se separan. *¡A estas alturas! A buenas horas mangas verdes...* (Ángeles Valdés-Bango: «14. Cada persona es un mundo». *Nada sucedía como lo había imaginado y otras certezas.*)

‘I don’t know if you know that Adolfo and Araceli are separated. *At this point in the proceedings! Too little too late...*’

This is an issue that must remain for a larger-scale study, as indeed must the analysis of other structures, such as the emphatic interrogative *¿Qué horas son estas?*

²⁴ As Van de Velde (2014) notes, the network of constructions or *constructicon* (Goldberg 2003) is not only structured vertically but also horizontally: “rather than just forming a hierarchical structure, constructions can also be related to each other on what could be called the horizontal Axis. What I have in mind here is a network where the form-function relation of a particular construction may be partly motivated in relation to its neighbours” (2014: 147).

(39) Una noche ella se levanta a tomar agua, y se encuentra al marido con la rana encima de un libro de cocina. La señora pregunta: «¿Cariño, qué hace la rana encima del libro de cocina?, y además ¿qué horas son estas?». (1907103605)

‘One night she gets up to drink some water, and finds the husband with the frog on top of a cookbook. The lady asks, “Darling, what is the frog doing on top of the cookbook, and besides, *what time do you call this?*”’

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