Part 1: **Epistemicity and context: different approaches to situated analysis of epistemic expressions**

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2 To understand in interaction: the rise of epistemic and evidential constructions based on *capire* in spoken Italian

Abstract: This study explores the use of the verb *capire* 'to understand' in spoken Italian, focusing on its epistemic and evidential constructions. Using data from the KIParla corpus, the research investigates the discourse functions of *capire* beyond its lexical meaning. The analysis reveals how the verbalization of ongoing understanding in linguistic interaction is often motivated by goals connected to the success of the communication flow, such as backchanneling and attention-getting, but also to the management of shared knowledge during conversation, such as hedging, arguing, or communicating surprise. The study also examines the sociolinguistic variation in the use of constructions based on *capire*, showing that the possibility to explicitly mention the process of understanding is closely dependent on the symmetric vs. asymmetric relation between the interlocutors, the register, and the goal of the interaction.

Keywords: interactional epistemicity, shared understanding, sociolinguistic variation, spoken Italian, emerging constructions

2.1 Introduction: the explicit marking of comprehension in interaction

Comprehension is an essential element of human communication, inherently present in every interaction between speakers. Comprehension occurs even if interlocutors do not explicitly refer to it: the continuous flow of communication is in itself a sign that the message has been received and understood. It is indeed typically more urgent to mention the problems that occur in understanding and overtly signal *mis*-understandings, because they can stop the communication flow, as shown by universal patterns attested across languages with respect to so-called other-initiated repair strategies (Dingemanse et al. 2015).

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The assumption that comprehension occurs unless otherwise indicated aligns with a broader principle in pragmatics: what is frequent, normal, and taken for granted often remains unexpressed in conversation. In addition to the Quantity maxim by Grice (1975), we know by Levinson's heuristics (2000; cf. also Horn 1984) that speakers tend to minimize verbal output, trusting that listeners will infer typical and recurrent meanings from context. Conversely, when a speaker does use a more marked form or makes a typical situation explicit, it indicates that something unusual, or additional, is at play. Recent studies provide empirical evidence for the fact that predictable information tends to be omitted in spoken language (cf. Fedorenko, Piantadosi and Gibson 2012; Gibson et al. 2019).

Given its predictability, ongoing comprehension by interacting speakers is a good example of the general economic principle just described, therefore we expect that reference to speech act participants (i.e., 1st and 2nd person) understanding is typically left implicit in spoken interaction, unless it is challenged, problematic or atypical for some reasons. Our hypothesis is that, when speakers choose to verbalize the ongoing process of understanding, they are likely to be signaling something about the interaction itself, indicating concern about potential misunderstanding or managing the social dynamics of the conversation. The verbalization of comprehension might also be employed to draw attention to the communicative process, to ensure mutual understanding, or to emphasize the speaker's involvement in the conversation.

The act of explicitly verbalizing ongoing comprehension or misunderstanding is likely to have significant implications at the epistemic and evidential level. As argued by Grzech, Schultze-Berndt and Bergqvist (2020:282; cf. also Pietrandrea 2018:194–195), the concept of epistemicity refers to the linguistic encoding of *knowledge*, including those aspects that are connected to the context of ongoing interaction (e.g. mutual expectations and attention). When interacting, speakers need to signal their level of certainty about what is being communicated and how accessible the supporting evidence is for the interlocutors, whether the evidence is perceptual or inferential. Consequently, the relationship between speaker and listener and, even more, their interaction is crucial in building the epistemicity domain, especially as far as the negotiation and co-construction of shared knowledge is concerned.

Successful comprehension between interlocutors indeed enhances epistemic certainty, meant as confidence in the truth or correctness of the information exchanged (cf. Nuyts 2001; Kärkkäinen 2003), and reinforces the inferential evidence that supports the ongoing conversation. Conversely, a failure to understand the interlocutor's message diminishes epistemic certainty and weakens the inferential support, potentially undermining and disrupting the shared foundation of the interaction (cf. Lindström, Maschler and Pekarek Doehler 2016). As argued

by Cappelli (2007), cognitive verbs activate in the listener a search in memory for information that may confirm or refute the speaker's conclusion, prompting the listener to seek new evidence and engage in a verification process by comparing contextual and inferential information with the speaker's point of view.

This study aims to analyze when and why speech act participants (SAP) in conversation explicitly refer to ongoing comprehension, starting from the hypothesis that they are likely to do it for reasons that go beyond mere reference to the process itself, embracing interactional, epistemic, and evidential goals (cf. also Rhee 2001). Based on the analysis of the KIParla Corpus (Mauri et al. 2019), we will consider the case of spoken Italian, by analyzing the occurrences of the verb *capire* 'to understand' that are used with discourse functions that exceed lexical reference[1] to comprehension, as in examples (1) and (2).

(1) KIParla Corpus, PTB019

TOR009:	*ecco*	*[com-*	*com'*	*era,*	*il*	*rapporto*	*con*	*e::h]*
	well	how	how	was	DEF	relationship	with	eh
	'Well, how was the relationship with'							
TOI071:	*[perchè*	*noi,*	*abbiamo:::*	*usu]rpato,*	***va'***			***a***
	because	we	AUX:1PL	usurped	**GO.IMP.2SG**			**to**
	capire,	*il*	*loro:::*	*e:::h*	*la*	*loro*	*città*	
	understand	DEF	their	eh	DEF	their	city	
	'because we usurped, **go figure** their eh eh, their city'							

The construction *va a capire* (lit. 'go to understand') in (1) is used to signal the speaker's perplexity and doubt regarding what she is saying, with an epistemic meaning close to 'who knows', 'go figure'. A different construction can be observed in (2), where the impersonal form *si capisce* (lit. 'one understands') is employed with an evidential function denoting obviousness and inferential evidence accessible to anybody, meaning 'of course, it is evident':

1 An example of *capire* employed solely in its lexical meaning is the following:

(i) KIParla, TOA3008

TO052: *però poi lui nella mail ha det[to,]*
'however in the email he said'

TO048: *[e]h* ***non ho capito*** *la frase della mail*
'eh I **haven't understood** the sentence in the email'

(2) KIParla Corpus, PTB003
TOI018: *perché prima di partire, m' avevano fatto* un'
because before of leave 1SG.OBL AUX:IMPF:3PL done INDEF
iniezione di calmante. e ***si capisce*** *e:h*
injection of sedative and **IMPERS** **understand:3SG** eh
[si *era calmato], finché sono arrivata lì*
IMPERS AUX.IMPF:3SG calmed until AUX.1SG arrived there
non aveva più male
NEG have:IMPF:3SG anymore pain
'Because before leaving they gave me a sedative injection and, **of course**, eh it calmed down [the pain], until I arrived there I didn't have pain anymore'

This study aims to identify the functions conveyed by *capire* in spoken interaction beyond its literal meaning, with a focus on epistemicity, and to examine their distribution across various types of communicative interactions, adopting a sociolinguistic perspective. After providing the details of the dataset and the methodology adopted (Section 2.2), we discuss the attested discourse functions of *capire,* highlighting the emergence of dedicated constructions. We will start by interactional functions, such as backchannel and attention-getting (Section 2.3.2) and then move to functions connected to the epistemicity domain, such as hedging, argumentation, and mirativity (Section 2.3.3). In Section 2.4 we will provide a unitary account of the non-lexical uses of *capire*, highlighting their close connection to the symmetric vs. asymmetric relationship existing between SAP, the speech situation and the interaction goals. Some conclusions follow in Section 2.5.

2.2 Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from the KIParla corpus (Mauri et al. 2019), which is a recently built resource for the study of spoken Italian.

The corpus consists of 4 modules (KIP, ParlaTO, and KIPasti) and contains 2,326,171 tokens. One of the main characteristics of the resource is its incremental modularity, in that it is made up of single modules that have an internal structure and can be added over time. For this paper, we focused on two modules (KIP and ParlaTO, 1,125,996 tokens) because the others had not been released when we started our study.

The KIP module contains data collected between 2016 and 2019 (121 interactions, 69:23:08 hours of recording) in Bologna and Turin. It is domain-specific, in

that it includes different types of interactions within the academic setting, involving university professors and students, that is to say, speakers with higher educational achievements. It was designed to portray register variation and includes lessons, office hours and exams, and interactions involving only students, such as semi-structured interviews and free conversations.

ParlaTO module is a collection of semi-structured interviews (67 interactions, 48:51:14 hours of recording) recorded in Turin between 2018 and 2020. The interactions involve speakers belonging to different age ranges (from 16 to over 85 years old) and with diverse educational achievements (from elementary school diploma to PhD).

All the recordings included in the KIParla corpus have been transcribed adopting a simplified version of the Jefferson (2004) conventions used in conversational analysis. The symbols employed in the examples are listed at the end of the paper.

The two selected modules thus contain five kinds of interaction (i.e. free conversations, semi-structured interviews, office hours, lessons and exams) and they allowed us to investigate if the behavior of *capire* changes in different communicative settings. We decided to classify the interactions according to their formality (formal vs. informal), selecting as a determining parameter the kind of relation between the speakers: if the relation is symmetric, then the interaction is considered to be informal (free conversations and semi-structured interviews, 786,244 tokens); if the relation is asymmetric, then the interaction is classified as formal (office hours, lessons, exams, 339,752 tokens).

We extracted from the corpus all the inflected occurrences of *capire* and we manually coded them according to a series of linguistic parameter. First of all, we considered if the verb was employed with or without an additional discourse function. We also took into account some morphological features of the verb (i.e. tense, mood, person), its position in the utterance and the co-occurrence with relevant discourse markers or interjections.

All the selected parameters and their values are listed below.

(1) Function:
   a. No additional discourse function;
   b. Discourse function;
(2) Tense: Present, past, future, none;
(3) Mood: conditional, gerund, imperative, indicative, infinitive, participle, subjunctive
(4) Person: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, impersonal, other (i.e. cases in which the verb does not have a person marker);
(5) Position in the utterance: initial, final, internal, free-standing;
(6) Co-occurrence with discourse markers or interjections: yes, no;
(7) Age range of the speaker: under 30; 31–60, over 60;

(8) Kind of interaction: free conversation, semi-structured interview, office hour, lesson, exam;
(9) Formality of the interaction: formal, informal.

We extracted 1,534 total occurrences of the lemma *capire* and in the next section their distributions according to their linguistic and extra-linguistic characteristics will be discussed. Given the main aim of this paper, we will focus specifically on occurrences in which *capire* is employed with a discourse function.

2.3 Data analysis: the discourse functions of *capire*

This section presents a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the occurrences of ca*pire* in the corpus, with a focus on its discourse-pragmatic functions. We begin with a general overview of the distribution of *capire* across grammatical persons and functions (Section 2.3.1), in order to distinguish its lexical uses from those that serve discourse-related goals. We then turn to the analysis of specific discourse functions. Section 2.3.2 discusses functions related to interactional management, such as backchanneling, contrastive backchanneling, and attention-getting. Section 2.3.3 focuses on functions more closely connected to the epistemicity domain, including hedging, argumentation, and mirativity. Finally, Section 2.3.4 provides a summary of the findings, highlighting cross-functional patterns and the morphosyntactic strategies associated with each discourse use.

2.3.1 Preliminary remarks: *capire* beyond its lexical meaning

The main dataset consists of 1,534 occurrences; 636 of them are employed with a function going beyond lexical reference to comprehension. This means that 41% of the occurrences of *capire* are used to achieve discourse goals. As shown in Table 1, the greatest majority of these refer to SAP (1st and 2nd persons), are impersonal (as in example (2)) or consist of the simple past participle *capito* ('other' in the table), which derives from the ellipsis of the 2nd person auxiliary in the form *hai capito* ('you have understood'). On the contrary, 3rd person occurrences systematically correlate with lexical uses (97.5% of the occurrences, Table 1).

Table 1: Absolute and relative frequences of the lemma *capire* in the corpus in relation to person agreement and function.

Person Function	*1°*	*2°*	*3°*	*Impers.*	*Other*	TOT.
No discourse function	300 (47.4%)	87 (58.0%)	199 (97.5%)	0 (0%)	312 (57.6%)	898 (58.5%)
Discourse function	333 (52.6%)	63 (42.0%)	5 (2.5%)	5 (100%)	230 (42.4%)	636 (41.5%)
TOT.	633	150	204	5	542	1.534

These data show strong evidence of the fact that reference to ongoing comprehension as experienced by the interactants, expressed by 1st and 2nd person uses of *capire*, plays a different role in conversation than reference to comprehension as such, as typically described for 3rd persons.[2] For this reason, in the remainder of this paper, we will focus on reference to ongoing comprehension, considering the 636 occurrences for which additional discourse functions were observed beyond to the lexical meaning of understanding.

The examination of the occurrences of *capire* for which some additional discourse function is observed led us to identify six goals, for which speakers explicitly mention ongoing mutual comprehension. Thus, adopting a bottom-up approach we annotated the discourse/pragmatic value of each occurrence whose meaning went beyond the mere lexical value of the verb *capire*. As will become clear, together with an expected high frequency of backchanneling, closer to the lexical value (47.8%), we identified also an unexpected diversity in the number of further functions performed by *capire*, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Discourse functions of *capire*.

Function	Frequency (absolute and relative)
Backchannel	304 (47.8%)
Attention-getting	163 (25.6%)
Argumentation	77 (12.1%)
Contrastive backchannel	49 (7.7%)
Mirativity	27 (4.2%)
Hedging	16 (2.5%)
TOT.	636

2 A chi square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the presence of additional discourse functions and person agreement on *capire*. The results showed an extremely significant association between the variables. The chi square value is 167.31, $p < 0.00001$.

In Section 2.3.2 we will describe backchanneling, contrastive backchanneling, and attention-getting, which are closely connected to the management of the interaction, in that they mention mutual understanding as a tool to check for reciprocal attention and for the successful flow of communication, at least as their main function. Section 2.3.3 will be devoted to the discussion of functions that are instead closer to the epistemicity domain, such as hedging, argumentation, and mirativity. Section 2.3.4 will provide a summary, and a unified picture of the strategies attested to convey non-lexical functions of *capire.*

For each of the functions that will be discussed, we will provide at least one example from the corpus, and information regarding the morphosyntactic properties of the relevant constructions. Their distribution across different types of interactions will be discussed in Section 2.4.

2.3.2 Interactional functions

Section 2.3.2 focuses on the interactional uses of *capire*, that is, those functions in which explicit reference to understanding contributes to the management of the interaction. These include backchanneling (2.3.2.1), contrastive backchanneling (2.3.2.2), and attention-getting (2.3.2.3). Each of these functions relies on the activation of shared comprehension between speaker and hearer, but they differ in their communicative goals, pragmatic effects, and morphosyntactic realizations. The following sub-sections examine each of these uses in turn, providing examples and discussing their distribution.

2.3.2.1 Backchanneling

Capire is commonly used as a backchannel marker in communication. Backchannels are short contributions produced by the hearer during a conversation. These contributions are characterized, on one hand, by their brevity, limited to a few syllables, and on the other hand, by their function of not competing for the turn to speak; that is, a backchannel does not aim to take the speaking turn but rather to show attention and encourage the interlocutor to continue speaking (cf. Gardner, 2001).

The purposes of backchanneling include interaction management and functions related to the message being conveyed. Interaction management refers to maintaining a smooth and continuous conversational flow, for example, when a listener uses a response signal to indicate that they are actively listening to what is being said, i.e., that they are not distracted. The functions connected with the main message, on the other hand, concern resolving issues of comprehension and

intersubjectivity: a short signal can be used by the listener to indicate that they have not only heard but also understood what has been said (Allwood, Nivre and Alsén 1992).

Example (3) provides an instance of *ho capito*, lit. 'I have understood', employed to provide a backchannel:

(3) KIParla Corpus, TOD2001

TO099:	*e*	*da*	*quanto*	*tempo*	*ci*	*vivi?*
	and	from	how.much	time	LOC	live:2SG
	'And how long have you lived there?'					
TO082:	*sono*	*lì*	*da::*	*marzo*	*inizio*	*marzo.*
	be.1SG	there	from	March	beginning	March
	'I have been there since March, the beginning of March.'					
TO099:	*mhmh.*	***ho***	***capito.***			
	mhmh	**AUX:1SG**	**understood**			
	'Mhmh. **I see.**'					

In this context, the verb *capire* is used to indicate that the comprehension phase has been successfully completed or, alternatively, to confirm the active participation of the interlocutor in the communicative process. As a backchannel, *capire* serves to provide feedback on the successful comprehension of the message or to confirm the interlocutor's engagement in the communication process, and for this reason it is often accompanied by paraverbal signals such as *mhmh*, as in (3). As shown in Table 3, it is mainly associated to the 1st person, present perfect construction *ho capito* 'I have understood', also attested as *capito* with the ellipsis of the auxiliary, in isolation, i.e., not followed by any complement. Furthermore, backchanneling *capire* is typically associated with a positive polarity and frequently occupies the whole turn in a dialogue.

Table 3: Strategies attested with a backchannel function.

Strategy		Frequency (absolute and relative)
Ho capito 'I have understood'	[1st person, PST]	237 (78.0%)
Capito 'Understood'	[past participle]	44 (14.5%)
Capisco 'I understand'	[1st person, PRS]	13 (4.3%)
Non ho capito 'I have not understood'	[1st person, NEG, PST]	8 (2.6%)
Ho capito bene 'I have understood correctly'	[1st person, PST]	1 (0.3%)
Ho capito che 'I have understood that'	[1st person, PST]	1 (0.3%)
TOT.		304

2.3.2.2 Contrastive backchanneling

In some cases, *capire* is used not only to signal attentive listening and understanding, but also to prepare the ground for the expression of disagreement or correction. These uses often begin with a recognizably backchannel-like construction, such as *ho capito*, and are then followed by a contrastive element (typically *ma* 'but' or *però* 'however'), which introduces a divergent stance. While such uses may appear to differ from the classic definition of backchannels as short, non-turn-seizing contributions, they still retain a key interactional property of backchanneling: the display of affiliation and alignment with the speaker's contribution. We therefore adopt the term *contrastive backchannel* to capture this hybrid function. The initial *capire*-based move continues to serve an affiliative, face-sensitive role by acknowledging the interlocutor's message before the speaker transitions into a potentially face-threatening act. As such, these constructions exemplify a strategic use of backchannel forms within a broader turn, combining interactional alignment with counter-argumentative dissociation, as in (4):

(4) KIParla Corpus, BOA1018

BO085:	*non*	*mi*	*hanno*	*detto*	*[che*	*potevo*		*f]arlo*	*al*
	NEG	1SG.OBL	AUX:3PL	said	that	can:IMPF:1SG		do:it	to.DEF
	[terzo	*anno]*							
	third	year							
	'They didn't tell me I could do it during my third year'								
BO082:	*sì.*	***[ho***	***capito]***	***ma***	*eh*	*no*	*allora*	*cioè,*	
	yes	**AUX:1SG**	**understood**	**but**	eh	no	so	I.mean	
	lei	*fa*	*parecchia*	*confusione*					
	she	do:3SG	much	confusion					
	'Yes. **I see but** eh no well, I mean, you are mixing things up'								

The speaker's goal here is mainly to introduce a dissent rather than to provide feedback on the communication flow. Successful comprehension is conveyed as a preliminary step before presenting an objection, functioning as a positive politeness strategy that reinforces the interlocutor's need to feel appreciated and understood, ultimately softening the blow (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Despite demonstrating understanding, the speaker does not agree. As Brown and Levinson (1987) argue, positive politeness strategies aim to mitigate potential offense by emphasizing friendliness – for instance, by juxtaposing criticism with compliments or, as in this case, by ensuring the interlocutor feels understood just before expressing disagreement. As

shown in Table 4, contrastive backchanneling is mainly associated to the 1st person, present perfect construction *ho capito* 'I have understood', followed by *ma* or *però* 'but' in 33 out of 49 cases. Despite being mainly positive in polarity, the construction is frequently followed by a counterargument.

Table 4: Strategies attested with a contrastive backchannel function.

Strategy		Frequency (absolute and relative)
Ho capito 'I have understood'	[1st person, PST]	42 (85.8%)
Capito 'Understood'	[past participle]	5 (10.2%)
Capisco 'I understand'	[1st person, PRS]	1 (2.0%)
Non hai capito 'You have not understood'	[2nd person, PST]	1 (2.0%)
TOT.		49

2.3.2.3 Attention-Getting

An important element of effective communication is the ability to maintain the listener's attention, keeping the channel open (Erman 2001; Lo Baido 2024). Speakers use attention-getting moves when they believe they are not being listened to or when they feel the need to emphasize a part of the utterance to ensure correct understanding of the message, in search of joint attentional focus (Breban 2010; Carlier and De Mulder 2010). These moves can be physical, such as touching someone's arm or waving a hand in front of the listener's eyes, or linguistic, which are less threatening to the listener's face than the former (Romero Trillo 1997). The verbalization of ongoing understanding can have the goal of ensuring and verifying the engagement of the listener (Lo Baido 2024).

In the attention-getting function, the verb *capire* is used to keep the interlocutor involved in the conversation, ensuring that the comprehension process is occurring correctly. This is often achieved through the use of an interrogative form, as in the question *hai capito?* 'have you understood?'. This inquiry serves to check the flow of comprehension and to confirm that the listener is following the conversation, thus going beyond the lexical meaning of *capire* and acquiring a purely interactional function, namely to keep the addressee's involvement.

Example (5) shows the use of *capito?* (lit. 'understood?') to ask for confirmation not on the actual content, or at least not only on that, but mainly on the interlocutor's mental presence.

(5) KIParla Corpus, BOD2014
BO113: *son sempre quei metodi un po' che devi*
be:3PL always those methods INDEF little that must:2SG
trovare qualcuno: che poi lavori sotto di
find somebody that then work:SUBJ.3SG under of
te. ***ca[pito]?***
you **understood**
'It is always about those methods in which you have to find somebody working under you. **You see?**'
BO115: [*mh*].
'Mh.'

By questioning the effective functioning of the comprehension flow, speakers trigger some active response by the interlocutors, who are thus led to engage in the conversation. This is why the interrogative form is characteristic of attention-getting function. As shown in Table 5, the interrogative past participle *capito?*, deriving from the 2nd person past perfect *hai capito?* 'have you understood?', is the most frequent strategy. We occasionally also find present forms, but always inflected for 2nd person, thus conveying an appeal to the interlocutor. Attention-getting *capire* is always attested with a positive polarity, in utterance-final position, and is frequently followed by a backchannel marker such as *mh*, as in (5).

Table 5: Strategies attested with an attention-getting function.

Strategy		Frequency (absolute and relative)
Capito? 'Understood?'	[past participle, INT]	123 (75.5%)
Hai capito? 'Have you understood?'	[2nd person, PST, INT]	19 (11.7%)
Capisci? 'Do you understand?'	[2nd person SG, PRS, INT]	14 (8.6%)
Capite? 'Do you understand'	[2nd person PL, PRS, INT]	7 (4.3%)
TOT.		163

2.3.3 Functions connected to the epistemicity domain

This section turns to a group of uses in which *capire* serves not to manage the flow of interaction directly, but to position the speaker in relation to knowledge: its accessibility, reliability, and degree of surprise. We refer to this as the epistemicity domain, namely the speaker's orientation toward the epistemic status of

what is being said: whether it is tentative, inferential, widely shared, or unexpected. In these contexts, reference to comprehension becomes a metadiscursive tool for expressing uncertainty, invoking shared understanding as evidential support, or dramatizing surprise in the face of new or counter-expectational information.

In these cases, *capire* no longer points to comprehension as an internal cognitive state, nor as a display of attention, but becomes a pragmatic resource through which speakers shape how their utterances are interpreted in terms of evidence, commitment, or emotional alignment. This shift is particularly relevant in spoken interaction, where epistemic stances are constantly negotiated in real time, and where reference to understanding can serve as a hedge, a warrant, or even a reaction.

The uses of *capire* examined in this section contribute to the dynamic construction of epistemic asymmetries and intersubjective alignment. The three discourse functions that we identified, i.e., hedging, argumentation, and mirativity, are grouped together because they all mobilize the semantic domain of understanding to index epistemic meanings. Hedging constructions involve a downscaling of epistemic authority or a mitigation of illocutionary force, through expressions that frame understanding as incomplete, uncertain, or potentially erroneous. Argumentative uses appeal to shared inferential access or common ground between interlocutors, with *capire*-based expressions functioning as evidential anchors for asserting or reinforcing a claim. Finally, mirative constructions foreground the speaker's surprise, disbelief, or cognitive misalignment, presenting understanding as effortful or disrupted in the face of unexpected content.

In the sub-sections that follow, we examine how each of these functions is realized through morphosyntactically distinct constructions (often conventionalized and person-specific) and how these constructions contribute to the projection of stance and speaker alignment. In doing so, we situate *capire* within broader typologies of epistemic marking in interaction and explore its role as a grammatical and discursive resource in the real-time negotiation of knowledge.

2.3.3.1 Hedging

According to Fraser (2010), hedging is a strategy through which a speaker, using specific linguistic devices, can signal a lack of commitment both to the exact meaning of an expression and to the strength of the speech act being performed. In the first case, the use of expressions conveying approximation to the intended meaning (e.g. *sort of, like,* etc.) affects the truth condition of a proposition (propositional

hedging), while in the second case, the use of "shields"[3] modulates the degree and type of the speaker's commitment (speech act hedging). Hedging is quite common in spoken interaction and indicates a lower degree of commitment with respect to the precision or accuracy of what is being said. Hedging is often employed as a politeness strategy, to avoid presenting statements as absolute or definitive truths, minimizing face-threatening acts and mitigating imposition.

Reference to ongoing comprehension can be used as a hedging strategy, enabling speakers to convey uncertainty about their understanding or to mitigate their level of commitment to a statement. We find four types of constructions in which *capire* is used with this function, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Constructions attested with a hedging function.

Strategy		**Frequency (absolute and relative)**
Hypothetical construction e.g. *se ho capito (bene)* 'if I have understood (right)'	[1st person]	7 (43.8%)
Evidential construction e.g. *da quello che ho capito*] 'from what I have understood'	[1st person]	5 (31.3%)
Restrictive final construction e.g. *solo per capire* 'just to understand'	[infinitive]	2 (12.5%)
Goal-oriented motion construction e.g. *va' a capire* lit. 'go to understand'	[infinitive]	2 (12.5%)
TOT.		16

First of all, we find hypothetical constructions in both positive and negative polarity, such as [*se capire*_1st person *(bene)*] 'if I/we understood it correctly', as in example (6), or [*se* NEG *capire*_1st person *(male)*] 'if I/we did not understand it wrong'. In these cases, the speaker expresses hesitation and doubt regarding the accuracy of their comprehension. Hedging is thus achieved by casting doubt on the success of the understanding process, which does not necessarily need to be ongoing but may also refer to some previous communication that the speaker might have misunderstood. By employing hypothetical constructions, speakers communicate their awareness of potential misinterpretations or inaccuracies in their understanding, thereby expressing some degree of skepticism.

3 According to Caffi's (1999) definition, "shields" are linguistic devices that allow speakers to distance themselves from the propositional content of their utterances, effectively shifting responsibility or commitment away from themselves.

(6) KIParla Corpus, PTA017

TOR006: *quindi cioè mh= diciamo che a te piace: vivere*
so I.mean mh let's.say that to you like:3SG live
*un po' **se ho capito bene:** eh in*
INDEF little **if AUX.1SG understood well** eh in
mezzo al verde diciamo cioè (.) dove ci
middle to.DEF green let's.say I.mean where LOC
sia la natura.
be.SUBJ:3SG DEF nature
'So I mean mh we could say that you like living a bit **if I understand correctly** eh in the open, let's say. I mean where there's nature.'

We also observe a hedging function in the use of evidential constructions, such as [*da quello che capire*_1st person] 'from what I/we understood', in which the speaker's understanding is presented as the sole source and evidence for their argument, as in example (7). Restricting the foundations of their commitment to a previous inferential process of understanding – thus excluding additional external, objective sources in support – results in weaking the speaker's certainty about the validity of they are uttering.

(7) KIParla Corpus, TOC1003

TO033: *allora le cose sono queste, (.) cioè se:::: cioè*
so DEF things are these I.mean if I.mean
***da quello che ho capito** era*
from that which AUX.1SG understood be.IMPF:3SG
proprio un ultimatum entro lunedì, in cui lei
really INDEF ultimatum by Monday in which she
doveva decidere sì se impegnarsi con
must:IMPF:3SG decide yes whether commit:REFL with
'sta roba
this stuff
'so, this is how things are, I mean, if, I mean, **from what I understood,** there was really an ultimatum by Monday, where she had to decide yes, whether to commit to this thing'

Restrictive final constructions, such as [*solo/giusto per capire*] 'only/just to understand', constitute another type of construction through which reference to comprehension is aimed at hedging. In such cases, the speaker presents the very process of understanding as the speaker's sole aim, as opposed to any subsequent actions or implications, thus minimizing the potential face-threatening component of their

act. In example (8) we observe this strategy employed by a professor during an exam, minimizing the face-threatening potential of interrupting the student in the middle of a turn, as revealed by the overlaps.

(8) KIParla Corpus, TOC1007
TO023: *infatti bisogna [dire che mh,]*
indeed it.needs say that mh
'Indeed, it must be said that mh'
TO024: *[posso in]terromper[la]* ***solo per capire?***
may:1SG interrupt:it **just to understand**
Can I interrupt you **just to understand**?
TO023: *[sì.]*
'Yes.'
TO024: *e:::h= m:h diritto arcaico (.) allora, e::h= il= periodo*
eh mh law arcaic so eh DEF period
diciamo imperiale classico, quando inizia
let's.say imperial classic when begin:3SG
'Uh, mh, archaic law. So, uh, the, uh, let's say classical imperial period, when does it start?'

Finally, we found two occurrences of the goal-oriented motion construction [*va' a capire*], lit. 'go to understand', employed with the meaning of 'who knows, go figure', as in examples (1) and (9). In these cases, the understanding process is presented as something that is yet to begin and is highly uncertain, thus conveying the speaker's doubtful epistemic stance. In example (9) it reinforces the expression *chissà* 'who knows', uttered by the interlocutor.

(9) KIParla Corpus, PTD006
TOR004: *[chissà che] cacchio ha visto,*
who.knows that heck AUX.3SG seen
'Who knows what the heck (s)he saw'
TOI055: *e:h v-* ***va a capire***
eh **go.IMP.2SG to understand**
'Uh, **good luck figuring it out**.'

The frequencies of the different strategies employed to express a hedging function are shown in Table 6.[4] Since this function is only expressed through constructions

4 We reported in square brackets the one characteristic that was shared among all the occurrences.

that are conventionalized to some extent, in the table we have included the constructions rather than the individual forms.

2.3.3.2 Argumentative

Reference to ongoing comprehension may serve to support the speaker's argumentation, by emphasizing that the evidence lies within the common ground shared by speaker and addressee (cf. Clark 1997), indicating that both parties have inferential access to some common knowledge. Making an overt appeal to shared understanding between speaker and addressee is thus employed as a strategy to reinforce the credibility of the speaker's statement.

If we consider example (10), we observe that *per capirci* (lit. 'to understand each other') underlines that what is being said must be processed as evidence in support of the speaker's argument, and this evidence lies in the common ground. The best English translation for *per capirci* in this context is indeed 'you know what I mean'.

(10) KIParla Corpus, BOD1010

BO103:	*coltrane*	*cerca*	*dei*	*bassisti,*	*con*	*un*	
	Coltrane	look.for:3SG	INDEF	bass-players	with	INDEF	
	suono	*grande,*	*pieno*	*e*	*profondo*	*non*	*gli*	*serve*
	sound	big	full	and	deep	NEG	3SG.OBL	serve:3SG
	scott	*lafaro,*	***per***	***capirci.***	*ma*	*neanche*	*paul*	
	Scott	Lafaro	**to**	**understand:us**	but	not.even	Paul	
	chambers							
	Chambers							

'Coltrane looks for bass players with a great, full and deep sound.
He doesn't need **like** Scott Lafaro, **you know what I mean**
But not even Paul Chambers.'

'Coltrane looks for bass players with great, full and deep sound' is the speaker's position and 'Coltrane does not need Scott Lafaro' is added as an argument provided in support, chosen from the common ground. The addressee thus shares enough common ground with the speaker to process this information as further evidence for their position. The strategy exemplified in (10) shows an instance of a conventionalized final construction, that depicts mutual understanding as the goal of the argument just added, thus explicitly stating that it should be sufficiently accessible for both interlocutors to constitute shared evidence.

As shown in Table 7, the final construction *per capirci* is not the most frequent strategy based on *capire* attested to support argumentation. The past participle *capito* 'understood' (also attested in its truncated form *capi'*), both in declarative and interrogative forms, indeed constitutes 62% of the argumentative uses of *capire* and is employed as a discourse marker. In example (11) the speaker's position is that 'Southern culture is more macho' and further evidence is introduced by *capi'*, which relies on shared knowledge and can be translated as 'you know' in this context. It is frequently used at the beginning or in the middle of an utterance, and the argument is normally presented as an example of some general statement.

(11) KIParla Corpus, BOA3007

BO072: *una cosa che mi dà fastidio del*
INDEF thing that 1SG.OBL give:3SG annoyance of:DEF
dialetto lombardo del dialetto lombardo è che
dialect Lombard of.DEF dialect Lombard is that
dite sempre
say:2PL always
'One thing that annoys me about Lombard, the Lombard dialect, is that you always say "figa" (lit. pussy)'

BO071: *perché vi dà fastidio?*
why 2PL.OBL give:3SG annoyance
'Why does it bother you?'
[. . .]

BO072: *e::h la cultura meridionale è più machista*
eh DEF culture southern is more chauvinist
capi' *si dice minchia*
under[stood] IMPERS say:3SG dick
'uh, Southern culture is more chauvinistic, **you know,** we say "minchia" (lit. dick)'

Table 7: Strategies attested with an argumentative function.

Strategy		**Frequency (absolute and relative)**
Capito 'Understood'	[past participle]	48 (62.3%)
Reciprocal final construction e.g. *per capirci* 'to understand each other'	[infinitive]	11 (14.3%)
Hai capito (che) 'You have understood'	[2nd person, PST]	6 (7.8%)
Impersonal construction e.g. *si capisce* ' one understands'	[impersonal, PRS]	5 (6.5%)

Table 7 (continued)

Strategy		Frequency (absolute and relative)
Capisci (che) 'You understand (that)'	[2nd person, PRS]	5 (6.5%)
L'avrete già capito 'you'll have already understood'	[2nd person, FUT]	2 (2.6%)
TOT.		77

We also find 2nd person forms, like *capisci* 'you understand', *hai capito* 'you have understood' and *l'avrete già capito* 'you'll have already understood', to directly refer to the hearer's understanding as evidence supporting the argumentation. In 5 out of 77 occurrences, we observe the use of the impersonal construction *si capisce* 'one understands', which demotes the speech act participants from the scene and indicates that comprehension is widely achieved by anybody. Shared understanding, beyond a specific SAP, is referred to as the inferential source of evidence for what is being said, highlighting the speaker's argument as being obvious (cf. enimitive, Panov 2020) and requiring no further elaboration. *Si capisce* in these cases can be translated as 'you know'.

(12) KIParla Corpus, PTB002
TOI017: *d'* *inverno* *era* *triste* *andare* *a* *lavorare*
of winter be.IMPF:3SG sad go to work
si ***capisce*** *e* *poi* *mi* *venne*
IMPERS **understand:3SG** and then 1SG.OBL come:PST:3SG
in *mente:* *compro* *la* *macchina*
in mind buy DEF car
'In winter, it was sad to go to work, **you know**
And then it came to my mind
I will buy a car.'

In all these cases, speakers not only present their argument but also signal to the listener that their statement is backed by shared evidence.

2.3.3.3 Mirativity

The term mirativity refers to the "grammatical marking of unexpected information" (DeLancey 1997), or in other words, to the "unprepared mind of the speaker,

unexpected information, and the consequent surprise" (Aikhenvald 2004:209). Mirativity markers can also convey nuances of discovery, sudden revelation or realization, counter-expectation, and novelty for SAP. Explicit reference to ongoing comprehension can be aimed at expressing the speaker's surprise or incredulity, particularly in reaction to unexpected information. The content being expressed is indeed fictitiously presented as being so unforeseen that it may cause comprehension issues. Let us consider example (13):

(13) KIParla Corpus, TOD2014

TO071: *e quindi è rimasta vuota* ***fammi capi'***
and so AUX.3SG remained empty **let:me under(stand)**
occupa[ta: per vent' anni da due pers]one,
occupied for twenty years by two persons
'And so it has been empty, **let me understand,** occupied for twenty years by two people?'

TO060: *[sì adesso è rimasta vuot(o)].*
yes now AUX.3SG remained empty
'Yes, not it is empty.'

The causative construction *fammi capire* (lit. 'let me understand') is conventionalized for the expression of some surprise, as if the speaker could not fully comprehend an unexpected situation and asks the interlocutor to make them understand. Another example can be found in (14), where two constructions involving *capire* are used to express the speaker's astonishment for the series of absurd events taking place in a tv series. First, the construction *non puoi capire* (lit. 'you cannot understand') conveys the surprise for the fact that two 'cousins, siblings. . .' slept together: the speaker feels this as absurd and conveys her reaction by predicating the impossibility (*non puoi* 'you cannot') for the listener to understand such unlikely events. Interestingly, both *fammi capire* 'let me understand' in (13) and *non puoi capire* 'you cannot understand' in (14) refer to the effort that a surprising and unexpected situation requires to be understood, both for the speaker and for the hearer.

Example (14) then continues with speaker TO089 providing more details on what will happen in the last episode, which is felt as unbelievable: the rhetorical, emphatic question *capisci?* 'do you understand?' is used as an appeal to the hearer's capacity to understand the absurdity of the event.

(14) KIParla Corpus, TOA3012

TO089: *perché ora john snow ha trombato*
because now John Snow AUX.3SG slept
con *daenerys*
with Daenerys
'Because now Jon Snow slept with Daenerys'

TO090: *[io non l' ho mai] seguita, quindi mi*
I NEG it AUX.1SG never followed so 1SG.OBL
dispiace proprio]
regret:3SG really
'I have never really followed it, so I am really sorry.'

TO089: ***[non puoi capire]*** *sono cugini, fratelli,*
NEG can:2SG understand be.1SG cousins brothers
non ho capito cosa *sono*]
NEG AUX.1SG *capito* what be.3PL
'You wouldn't believe it (lit. you cannot understand) they're like cousins, siblings. . . I don't even know what they are!'
[. . .]

TO085: *sono fratelli?*
be.3PL brothers
'Are they siblings?'

TO089: *no cugini. (.) no non lo so*
no cousins no NEG it know:1SG
'No, cousins. No, I don't know.'

TO085: *cugini? però dello stesso sangue*
cousins however of:DEF same blood
'Cousins?
But still the same blood.'

TO089: *e trombano nell' ultimo episodio*
and sleep.together:3PL in:DEF last episode
'And they sleep together, in the last episode.'

TO090: *eh se me spoileri già*
eh if 1SG.OBL spoil.2SG already
'Eh, if you are spoiling it already'

TO089: *[cioè* ***capi]sci?***
I.mean **understand:2SG**
'I mean, **come on!** (lit. do you understand?)'

TO089: e *se mai la volessi*
and *if never it* want:SUBJ:2SG
'In case I ever wanted. . .'

TO090: *no* *più* *che* *altro* *john* *snow* *futuro* *re*
no more than other John Snow future king
del *regno*
of:DEF kingdom
'No, but the real thing is, John Snow is the future king of the realm.'

The mirative function is associated to a number of different strategies involving *capire*, as shown in Table 8. Firstly, it is characterized by the use of both first and second person forms, pointing to the fact that surprise causes understanding issues both for the speaker and the listener. Furthermore, it encompasses a range of tenses, including present, present perfect, and past participle forms. Additionally, the function exhibits both positive and negative polarity, and is often found in exclamative contexts with an emphatic intonational pattern.

Table 8: Strategies attested with a mirative function.

Strategy		**Frequency (absolute and relative)**
Capito?! 'Understood?!'	[past participle, EXCL]	7 (31.8%)
Hai capito?! 'Have you understood?!'	[2nd person, PST, EXCL]	5 (22.7%)
Causative construction e.g. *fammi capire* 'Let me understand'	[2nd and 1st person]	4 (18.2%)
Capisci?! 'Do you understand?'	[2nd person, PRS, EXCL]	3 (13.6%)
Non ho capito 'I did not understand'	[1st person, NEG, PST]	1 (4.5%)
Negative ability construction *Non puoi capire* 'you cannot understand'	[2nd person, NEG_ABILITY]	1 (4.5%)
Ho capito 'I understood'	[1st person, PST]	1 (4.5%)
TOT.		22

2.3.4 A summary

Table 9 provides a summary of the strategies attested for the six functions identified in this study. Together with forms like the past participle *capito* ('understood'), and the 2nd person past form *hai capito* ('you have understood'), which are attested for several discourse functions (cf. also Lo Baido 2024), we find constructions that are specialized for a specific function, especially within the epistemicity domain. The exclamative form is furthermore typical of mirative contexts, while interrogative form is found in attention-getting uses.

The data discussed in Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 show that interactional functions are more directly connected to SAP, since the three functions identified systematically correlate with 1st and 2nd person reference. In particular, we observe that backchannel functions (neutral and contrastive) are conveyed by *capire* mainly inflected for 1st person in the present or past perfect tense, as a consequence of a clearly speaker-*anchored* function. By speaker-*anchored* we mean that backchannel functions rely on the communication of the speaker's understanding of the exchange, i.e., whether the speaker is aligned with the addressee on the content being conveyed. On the other hand, attention-getting is clearly an addressee-*anchored* function, as shown by the systematic correlation to 2nd person forms, mainly attested in the elliptic, interrogative form *capito*. This function indeed involves questioning the addressee's understanding of what is being communicated.

Table 9: Strategies based on *capire* attested for the six discourse functions identified in Section 2.3.

	INTERACTIONAL FUNCTIONS			**EPISTEMICITY-related FUNCTIONS**		
	backchannel	**contrastive backchannel**	**attention-getting**	**argum-entative**	**mirative**	**hedging**
[1st person, PST]	----------	----------			----------	
[1st person, PRS]	----------	----------				
[past participle]	----------	----------	-------INT----	----------	----EXCL---	
[2nd person, PST]		--------NEG-----	-------INT----	----------	----EXCL---	
[2nd person, PRS]			-------INT----	----------	----EXCL---	
[2nd person, FUT]				----------		
Impersonal construction				----------		
Reciprocal final construction				----------		
Causative construction					----------	
Negative ability construction					----------	
Hypothetical construction						----------

Table 9 (continued)

	INTERACTIONAL FUNCTIONS			EPISTEMICITY-related FUNCTIONS		
	backchannel	**contrastive backchannel**	**attention-getting**	**argum-entative**	**mirative**	**hedging**
Evidential construction						----------
Restrictive final construction						----------
Goal-oriented motion construction						----------

The distinction between speaker- vs. addressee-anchoring can also be observed in functions connected to the epistemicity domain, although it emerges in a less direct and systematic way. This is primarily due to the inherently intersubjective nature of epistemic expressions, that is, their dependence not only on the speaker's internal epistemic state, but also on the interlocutor's presumed access to, or alignment with, the knowledge being expressed. In contrast to interactional functions, which tend to be clearly anchored in one SAP (either the speaker *ho capito* or the addressee *capito?*), epistemicity-related functions often index a stance that is co-constructed between participants, rather than being attributable to a single epistemic source. Rather than simply stating what is known or understood, these functions project a relationship between knowledge and interactional roles, distributing epistemic authority across speaker and addressee.

Hedging, argumentation, and mirativity indeed involve a wider range of conventionalized constructions than backchanneling and attention-getting. Hedging shows a correlation with hypothetical (e.g., *se ho capito (bene)* 'if I understood it right', *se non ho capito male* 'if I didn't misunderstand') and evidential constructions (e.g., *da quello che ho capito* 'from what I understood') involving 1st person forms, which shed doubt on the speaker's comprehension and thereby mitigate the assertiveness of the utterance. Also the restrictive final construction *solo per capire* 'just to understand' is speaker-*anchored*, even though the verb form is in the infinitive, because in this construction it is the speaker's understanding that is framed as the only communicative goal. The goal-oriented motion construction *va' a capire* (lit. 'go to understand') is more complex: although derived from a 2nd person imperative form, thus formally referring to the addressee's understanding, it has become highly conventionalized and now typically conveys the speaker's distancing from the epistemic content, marking understanding as elusive or inaccessible.

Mirativity and argumentation share many strategies with the attention-getting function. Mirativity is mainly associated with 2nd person forms, but we also find 1st person uses and, more interestingly, the causative construction *fammi capire* 'let me understand', which simultaneously references both interlocutors: it indexes the speaker's difficulty in processing new information while appealing to the addressee's support in achieving comprehension. For argumentation, we find 2nd person forms (including elliptic past participles) and a reciprocal final construction (*per capirci* 'to understand each other'), which explicitly foregrounds mutual understanding as the pragmatic goal. This contrasts with the restrictive final construction attested for hedging (*solo per capire*), which isolates the speaker's understanding as the sole concern. Interestingly, among the strategies attested for argumentation, we also find the impersonal construction *si capisce*, which reinforces the speaker's stance by framing comprehension as universally accessible, thus projecting the epistemic content as grounded in general shared knowledge.

Whereas hedging can be argued to be more straightforwardly speaker-*anchored*, since the comprehension being placed under negotiation is clearly that of the speaker, mirative and argumentative functions display a more fluid distribution of anchoring. In these cases, reference to understanding may be anchored in either the speaker or the addressee, or both, though there is often a preference for the latter, particularly in 2nd person and elliptical forms. It is actually plausible that mirative and argumentative uses of *(hai) capito* and *capisci* represent further developments of the strategies originally employed for attention-getting, which lose their interrogative illocutionary force and acquire either an exclamative or evidential interpretation.

If we consider also other morphosyntactic features, we observe that both present and present perfect tenses are attested, with only a minority of simple past forms. This pattern supports the interpretation that reference for SAP comprehension (1st and 2nd person) typically concerns *ongoing* or *just-completed* phases of the interaction, that is, the immediate processing and interpretation of discourse in real time.

2.4 Communicating understanding to manage interactional knowledge

The study of the Italian verb *capire* reveals a wide range of functions beyond its basic lexical meaning 'to understand' in spoken Italian, confirming that explicit reference to ongoing comprehension is likely to be aimed at more intersubjective

goals, closely connected to the management of the interaction and the communication of the speaker's stance. These functions do not occur equally in any type of interaction but vary according to the overall interaction goal, the relationship between speakers, and the formality of the setting. In this section, we aim to focus on the discourse functions of *capire* in different communicative contexts, shedding light on its frequency and function in various types of interactions. In 2.4.1 we will focus on how *capire*-based constructions are employed in different interaction types, while Section 2.4.2 examines how the overall interactional goal and the SAP relationship influence the emergence of specific discourse functions of *capire.*

2.4.1 Discourse functions of *capire* across different interaction types

First of all, let us consider the distribution of the different functions of *capire* in informal (i.e. free conversations and semi-structured interviews) and formal interactions (lessons, hoffice hours and exams), reported in Table 10.

Table 10: Discourse functions across registers.

	Informal interactions (786,244 tokens)	**Formal interactions (339,752 tokens)**
Argumentation	66 (12.5%)	11 (10.4%)
Attention getting	144 (27.2%)	19 (17.9%)
Backchannel	239 (45.1%)	65 (61.3%)
Contrastive backchannel	46 (8.7%)	3 (2.8%)
Hedging	10 (1.9%)	6 (5,7%)
Mirativity	25 (4.7%)	2 (1.9%)
TOT.	530	106

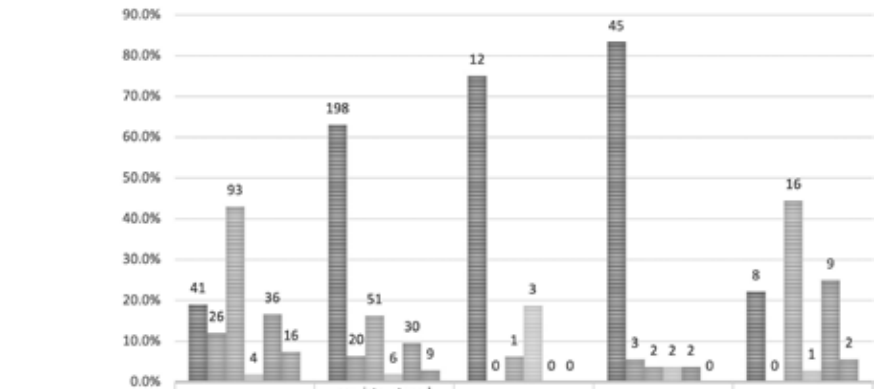
The first thing that can be noted is that the absolute values are by far higher in informal interactions. We can affirm that discourse functions are more frequent in informal interactions than in the formal ones,[5] taking into account the normalized frequencies that are respectively 0.9 and 0.3.[6]

5 The chi square value is 18.715, the p value is 0.00217175 and thus the distribution is significant at $p < 0.01$.

6 (number of occurrences per register / number of tokens per register)*1000

What is more striking is that the distribution of the functions in the two registers is quite homogeneous. The most frequent discourse values with which *capire* is employed are *backchannel, attention-getting* and *argumentation* in both cases; there are minor differences in the frequencies of the less attested functions (whose percentages are always below 10%), i.e. *contrastive backchannel* (8.7% vs. 2.8%), *mirativity* (4.7% vs. 1.9%) and *hedging* (1.9% vs. 5.7%).

It is important to stress the fact that this homogeneity does not imply that uses of *capire* do not change in different contexts. In fact, some interesting observations can be made by disaggregating the registers and taking into account the values of *capire* in the five scrutinized communicative settings, as reported in Figure 1.



	free conversation	semistructured interviews	exams	office hours	lessons
backchannel	19.0%	63.1%	75.0%	83.3%	22.2%
contrastive backchannel	12.0%	6.4%	0.0%	5.6%	0.0%
attention-getting	43.1%	16.2%	6.3%	3.7%	44.4%
hedging	1.9%	1.9%	18.8%	3.7%	2.8%
argumentation	16.7%	9.6%	0.0%	3.7%	25.0%
mirativity	7.4%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%

Figure 1: Relative frequencies of the interactional and epistemicity functions of *capire* across different types of interactions.

Figure 1 shows the relative frequencies of the discourse functions of *capire* across the five interaction types: including free conversations, semi-structured interviews, exams, office hours, and lessons. The figure highlights distinct patterns in the use of *capire* based on the nature and context of the interaction, suggesting that the functions of *capire* are closely tied to the interactional goals and the dynamics of each setting.

In *free conversation* attention-getting (43%) is the most prevalent function of *capire*, revealing the speakers' need to actively manage engagement and ensure mutual attentiveness. By using phrases like *capito?* ('understood?'), speakers explicitly

refer to ongoing comprehension to check the addressee's involvement and keep the interaction aligned. This frequent use reflects the conversational need to constantly monitor and secure the listener's focus, particularly in informal settings where the dialogue is fluid, topics easily change and participant roles are more symmetric. Backchanneling (19%) and argumentation (17%) have similar frequencies in free conversation. Backchannel is likely to support the interaction by providing real-time feedback and allows participants to signal their understanding without interrupting the speaker, thus maintaining the conversational flow. Argumentation, on the other hand, is employed to build or reinforce shared knowledge within the conversation. Through argumentative uses like *per capirci* ('you know what I mean'), speakers make comprehension explicit to make their points stronger or align their perspectives with the listener. This function is crucial in informal settings where the negotiation of ideas and viewpoints is common, and explicit references to understanding help ensure that all parties are on the same wavelength. For the same reasons, we find a significant frequency also of contrastive backchanneling (12%), where reference to ongoing comprehension is employed to manage disagreement or divergence in conversation. Free conversation is indeed the context in which contrastive backchanneling is more frequent because participants are free to express differences, and explicit reference to understanding serves as a polite preface to disagreement. Mirativity (7%) and hedging (2%) are less frequent.

If we consider *semi-structured interviews*, backchanneling (63%) is the dominant function, signaling active listening and ongoing comprehension. In the context of interviews, backchanneling with *capire* (e.g., *ho capito* 'I have understood') reassures the interviewee that their message is being received and understood, which is crucial for maintaining the structured exchange typical of interviews. Explicitly referring to understanding in this way helps sustain the interaction, allowing the conversation to progress smoothly by confirming comprehension at each step. Attention-getting (16%) is another important function of *capire* in interviews, where longer turns may require maintaining the listener's focus. In interviews, argumentative uses (10%) are likely to help establish common ground between the interviewer and interviewee. Contrastive backchanneling (6%), mirativity (3%), and hedging (2%) are less frequent, but still attested.

Moving now to formal contexts, let us start from *exams:* backchanneling (75%) is the predominant function. In this context, *capire* is often used by examiners or examinees to signal understanding and keep the interaction moving smoothly. The high occurrence of backchanneling reflects the formal, turn-taking nature of exams, where students are expected to listen attentively and respond appropriately. Hedging (19%) also plays a notable role in exams. This function allows examinees to express uncertainty or to cautiously frame their responses, which is common when they are unsure of an answer or wish to soften their statements.

For example, a student might use *se ho capito bene* ('if I understand correctly') to tentatively engage with a question, reflecting the high-stakes environment where precision and careful articulation of responses are valued. Hedging helps students navigate the pressure of exams by providing a way to acknowledge potential misunderstandings without committing fully to a particular interpretation. Attention-getting (6%) is less frequent in exams, probably due to their structured nature, where students are generally expected to maintain attention throughout. Argumentation, mirativity, and contrastive backchanneling are not present in exams, which is consistent with the formal and evaluative nature of this setting.

Taking into account *office hours*, we can see that backchanneling is much more frequent than the other functions, accounting for 83% of the occurrences. This high prevalence of backchanneling reflects the interactive nature of office hours, where students often use *capire* to signal active listening and comprehension to the professor without interrupting the flow of explanation. In a setting that focuses on personalized guidance and clarification, backchannel markers like *ho capito* ('I have understood') are crucial for maintaining a smooth dialogue and showing engagement with the ongoing discussion. The prominence of backchanneling can be attributed to the expectation in office hours that students continuously confirm their understanding as the professor provides explanations. Contrastive backchanneling (6%) is instead often uttered by professors, acknowledging understanding in order to advance some objections. Hedging, argumentation, and attention-getting functions are much less frequent in office hours compared to backchanneling. The relative scarcity of attention-getting uses (e.g., *capito?* 'understood?', 4%) can be due to the fact that students cannot challenge the professor's attention, given their asymmetric relation. Mirativity is not attested and argumentation is rare (4%), which aligns with the formal and respectful tone of office hours. In these settings, openly challenging the professor's ongoing comprehension (*capito?* 'did you understand?') and statements (*ho capito ma. . .* 'I understand but. . .') or expressing surprise (*fammi capire* 'let me understand') is less likely due to the power dynamics and consequent politeness reasons, since students are unlikely to threaten the professor's face. In office hours, the emphasis is placed more on listening and confirming comprehension rather than on negotiation or epistemic management, which are more prevalent in other formal contexts like exams or lessons.

If we consider *lessons*, we observe that the most frequent function is attention-getting (44%), reflecting the teacher's need to maintain students' focus and engagement. Teachers often use expressions like *capito?* ('understood?') to ensure that students are following along and to actively involve them in the learning process. This frequent use underscores the importance of monitoring comprehension in real time, which is critical in educational settings where understanding is the primary goal. Argumentation (25%) is also a prominent function in lessons. This suggests that teach-

ers frequently use *capire* to reinforce or clarify points, helping students connect new information with existing knowledge. Backchanneling (22%) in lessons is less frequent than in other types of interaction, but it is still present and reveals interactive feedback, even in a predominantly teacher-led environment. Mirativity (6%) is less frequent but still relevant in lessons. It allows teachers to express surprise or emphasize unexpected information, to highlight notable points during instruction. Contrastive backchanneling is absent in lessons, which aligns with the formal and hierarchical nature of this setting. Direct challenges or counterarguments are not typical in classroom discourse, where the focus is more on knowledge transmission than on negotiating or contesting ideas.

2.4.2 A closer look: interaction goal and SAP relation

Let us now take one step back and return to the functions of *capire* in order to explain why they are more (or less) frequent in particular kinds of interaction that share some characteristics that go beyond the distinction between formality and informality.

If we consider the types of interactions in which backchannel is attested, we observe that it is more frequent in contexts (i) which have the exchange of information as their main goal, (ii) are dialogical, and (iii) in which speakers have more fixed roles (i.e. semi-structured interviews, exams and office hours). Especially office hours and exams are interactions that can be classified as *transactional*, in that participants "in a sense suspend their individuality in order to act out the rights and obligations of relevant statuses" (Gumperz 1964:149). Considering our data, we can say that these are the cases in which speakers have a stronger need to signal the active process of listening and understanding.

Attention-getting and *argumentative* reference to comprehension are more frequent in free conversations and in lessons. Free conversations are spontaneous interactions within peer group involving students; there is symmetricity among the speakers, and they act as individuals and not according to their role/status. For this reason, in this context, attention-getting is less face-threatening, in that speakers feel free to explicitly request the attention of the addressees. It is not surprising that these are the context in which also the argumentative value is more frequent; given that SAP are friends, classmates and/or flat mates, they can easily access shared knowledge for the sake of their argumentation.

It is interesting to note that these two functions are frequently attested even in a radically different kind of context, i.e. lessons. However, the presence of attention-getting *capire* can be easily explained considering the aim of this specific type of interaction, closely dependent on the actual attention that students pay to what is being taught, and also to the turn length. Lessons are indeed mainly monologic

and typically consists of long turns, which can lead more easily to a loss of attention. If we take into account the argumentative value, it is clear that lessons are inherently highly argumentative and prone to trigger the use of devices that can make the argumentation more solid.

The remaining functions are rarer, but it is still possible to make some remarks considering their context of use.

Contrastive backchannel is mainly employed in dialogical interactions, particularly those characterized by a symmetric relation between speakers, who engage in some argumentation. These are the types of interaction where a more informal register is used, as in free conversations and semi-structured interviews. This function is indeed not attested in lessons and exams. Example (4) is one of the three occurrences attested during office hours, where a more formal register is typically employed, and the speaker uttering *ho capito ma* is a professor. *Mirativity* shows a similar distribution: it is more commonly observed in dialogical contexts where the speakers share a symmetric relation, except for lessons, where it is likely used to catch the audience's attention.

Finally, the variety of constructions involving *capire* to *hedge* the speaker's commitment reflects the interlocutors' acknowledgment of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the process of understanding, as well as the limitations of their own knowledge and the potential variability in interpretation. It is important to note that, despite the variety of strategies employed, occurrences of hedging are relatively infrequent across all types of interaction when compared to interactional functions such as backchanneling and attention-getting, as shown in Figure 1.

2.5 Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth analysis of the verb ca*pire* in spoken Italian, with a particular focus on its non-lexical uses in interaction. Building on data from the KIParla corpus, we have shown that *capire*-based constructions go far beyond their literal semantic value of 'understanding' and fulfill a range of discourse-pragmatic functions. These include interactional uses such as backchanneling, contrastive backchanneling, and attention-getting, as well as epistemic uses such as hedging, argumentation, and mirativity.

While these functions differ in their surface realization and pragmatic goals, they share a core feature: the explicit marking of ongoing or assumed comprehension, which is deployed to manage not only the flow of communication but also the negotiation of knowledge and stance between interlocutors. In this sense, *capire* becomes a powerful epistemic and evidential resource, indexing the speaker's

degree of certainty, the inferred or shared nature of information, or their reaction to unexpected content.

The study has shown that *capire* is used to dynamically calibrate the epistemic relation between speaker and addressee. Hedging constructions foreground a reduced epistemic commitment, by signaling uncertainty or caution in the attribution of knowledge. Argumentative uses exploit the notion of mutual comprehension as an evidential anchor, grounding claims in what is assumed to be inferable or obvious to both participants. Mirative uses, in turn, dramatize comprehension as effortful or implausible, marking epistemic misalignment between the interlocutors. Through these functions, the speaker's stance toward knowledge is made observable and available for negotiation in real time.

Moreover, the study suggests that the domain of epistemicity cannot be fully understood without accounting for its intersubjective dimension: understanding is not just a mental state, but a socially constructed condition. The speaker's reference to their own or the addressee's comprehension serves as a metapragmatic comment on how information is being processed and whether the interlocutors mental states are aligned, projecting expectations about mutual attentiveness and inferential accessibility. This aligns with recent approaches to epistemicity that emphasize the inherently dialogic and relational nature of epistemic management in discourse.

Specific aspects of the interaction, including the symmetry of the relationship between SAP, the presence of fixed roles, the aim of the interaction, and the level of dialogicity, have been shown to favor specific functions. In particular, reference to the comprehension process is more likely to emerge in conversations characterized by symmetric relations between SAP or when the speaker occupies a higher position of authority, such as a professor addressing students.

This study invites a rethinking of how mental verbs, particularly verbs of comprehension, function in interaction across languages. The Italian data show that *capire* has developed a range of conventionalized discourse uses that extend well beyond its core lexical meaning, functioning as an epistemic operator sensitive to person, polarity, mood, and sequential positioning. These observations raise important questions for cross-linguistic research: to what extent do other languages similarly recruit verbs of understanding to manage stance, signal evidential source, or negotiate epistemic asymmetries in real time? And how do such uses interact with language-specific morphosyntactic resources and pragmatic norms?

By documenting the interactional trajectories of *capire*, this paper lays the ground for future comparative research on the epistemic extensions of mental verbs, with particular attention to how culturally and interactionally embedded dynamics shape their discourse functions. By analyzing how a verb like *capire* is used in interaction, we gain insight not only into how speakers display understand-

ing, but into how understanding itself becomes a structured, strategic, and socially distributed achievement.

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Abbreviations

Interlinear glosses:

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
AUX	auxiliary
DEF	definitive
FUT	future
IMP	imperative
IMPERS	impersonal
IMPF	imperfective
INDEF	indefinitive
INT	interrogative
LOC	locative
NEG	negation
OBL	oblique
PL	plural
PRS	present
PST	past
REFL	reflexive
SG	singular
SUBJ	subjunctive

Transcription conventions:

[word]	speech overlaps
wo:::rd	prolonged sound
wo-	interrupted word
WORD	syllables or words louder than surrounding speech
(wo)rd	uncertain syllables or words
(.)	micropause
,	slight rising intonation
?	sharp rising intonation
.	final falling intonation

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