

A shift in deontic modals in Mexican Spanish: “*Ocupo, quiero, necesito ir al cine*”

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Research that examines diachronic change and modality reveals that modal verbs follow certain universal paths of development, a process known as grammaticalization (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994; Bybee & Fleischman, 1995; Cornillie, 2007). Much of the work that has focused on the grammaticalization of these modals thus far has indicated that deontic modals come from a limited number of sources (e.g., Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994; Bybee & Fleischman, 1995). However, recent research on deontic modals in Romance languages uncovers two additional common lexical sources for deontic verbs (i.e., Cornillie, De Mulder, Van Hecke, and Vermandere, 2009). One of these sources refers to verbs meaning ‘to fit into or take up space’. Cornillie et al. (2009) illustrate the path with the verb *caber* ‘to fit into a space’, which has begun to occur in contexts where it has a reading of necessity. The present study looks at another example of a verb meaning ‘to take up space’ in Mexican Spanish, the verb *ocupar*.

This study is the first to identify the evolution of the Mexican verb *ocupar* from a verb meaning ‘to occupy or take up space’ to a verb that expresses necessity and obligation. Using Twitter as the corpus, this paper compares the use of *ocupar* (1) with the verb *necesitar* ‘to need’ (2) in Mexican Spanish with the aim of uncovering the semantic differences between these two deontic modals.

Using a database of 1578 tokens, data were analyzed using Rbrul (Johnson, 2009). The factors examined include: type of complement, grammatical person, region, and polarity. The results indicate that change is indeed taking place in the modal system of Mexican Spanish. For example, within the factor group type of complement we see that animate noun complements favor the use of *ocupar* while inanimate nouns and infinitives strongly disfavor the use of *ocupar*. However, looking at the data in more detail shows that 45% of the occurrences of infinitival verbs with *ocupar* are dynamic verbs, which, according to research on modal verbs, are associated with strong deonticity. This is in comparison to 40% of the infinitival verbs that occur with *necesitar*. So, although, infinitival verbs still disfavor *ocupar* (.39) there is a trend indicating that *necesitar* may be losing territory to this new deontic modal.

The results also infer that 1st and 2nd person singular favor *ocupar*. Coates (1983) finds that deontic verbs display the strongest obligation when they occur in 2nd person, followed by 1st person, and finally 3rd person. Considering that *ocupar* is already the favored verb in 1st and 2nd person, grammatical person may be a point of entry for this new deontic modal.

Overall, through the desemanticization of *ocupar*, the tendency of this verb to occur with dynamic verbs, and its movement into contexts commonly associated with strong deonticity (2nd grammatical person), it appears that the Mexican modal system, like modal systems in other languages (e.g. Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2007), may be undergoing longitudinal renewal. That is, *ocupar* may eventually take over the territory of *necesitar*.

Examples:

- (1) Para mi siguiente acto ocupo que seas mi novia. (_Didinho_, www.twitter.com)
- (2) Necesito a todas mis amigas en la misma ciudad. (Yuya, www.twitter.com)

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