

Why do we have to do this?

A semantic-pragmatic analysis of 1st person forms of Spanish deontic verbs

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Deontic modality in Spanish can be expressed with various linguistic categories, such as particles, adverbs and verbs. This study deals with deontic verbs, focusing specifically on the semantics and pragmatics of uses with first person subjects. Research on deontic verbs has so far privileged occurrences in 2nd or 3rd person, and general semantic analyses of deontic verbs often (implicitly) assume the presence of a 2nd or 3rd person. This is coherent with the internal logic of deontic verbs having an effect on someone other than the speaker. Yet, there are good reasons to also study the first person uses of deontic verbs. Assuming that deontic verbs have a modal source (“the entity responsible for making the assessment encoded by the modal expression”) and a modal agent (“the person expected to carry out the action”) (Verstraete 2005: 1409-1410), these can generally be assigned to separate participants. First person forms, however, may serve both as modal source and agent (of the same modal expression). In this study, I will investigate the semantics and pragmatic effects of the partial coincidence of modal source and modal agent.

With first person plural forms, there is often a referential split of the first person category into a source and an agent, e.g. *Tenemos que estar atentos y les agradezco que, cuando se produzca algún fallo, sean ustedes los que lo denuncien* (We have to pay attention and I thank you for being the ones that report an error when there is one.). In some cases, these uses can be linked to (im)politeness phenomena, as in the example above where the speaker first appears to include herself in the category of modal agents and then again excludes herself. For the 1st person singular, a similar split into a source and an agent is possible only insofar as the referent can be assigned different roles. In such cases, the speaker often engages in ‘self-monitoring’ e.g. *Otra vez me he excedido, tengo que aprender a controlar mejor mis tiempos* (Once again, I have exceeded the timing, I have to learn to better control my timing). The split is thus a matter of conceptual representation, rather than of extralinguistic reference.

I will illustrate and analyse such cases of coincidence of modal source and agent for a set of Spanish deontic verbs, using the *Corpus del español* (Mark Davies). The sample includes verbs expressing obligation (*tener que, haber de, deber, obligar*), permission (*dejar, permitir, admitir*) and prohibition (*prohibir, impedir*). I will pay special attention to the interaction with adjuncts specifying person reference and/or the assignation of the modal source and agent roles.

In addition, I will examine the rhetorical exploitation of these uses in a particular type of discourse, i.e. speeches of Spanish foreign affairs ministers. I will show that the singular-plural alternation and the split between modal source and agent can be used as a rhetorical device, both towards peers (in parliamentary interventions) and towards outsiders (in press interviews).