

Uno tiene que vs. Se tiene que: what deontic constructions can tell us about the meaning of impersonal constructions

Barbara De Cock

This paper will focus on impersonal deontic constructions in Spanish, i.e. constructions with an impersonal subject or a depersonalizing verb that express obligation, permission or prohibition, using verbs like *obligar* ‘to oblige’ or *tener que* ‘to have to’. On the basis of corpus evidence (drawn from CREA and Davies), I will show that the two basic types of impersonal constructions, with *uno* and with *se*, behave differently with specific subcategories of deontic verbs. I will argue that this distribution can be explained in terms of differences in performativity encoded by the deontic verbs. I will use this analysis to explore semantic differences between the two types of impersonal constructions.

The impersonal constructions with *uno* and *se* have often been described in terms of the parameter of speaker inclusion (see Jensen 2002 for a short overview). On the basis of the use of deontic verbs in these constructions, I will argue that a slightly different parameter is at issue. What is interesting about deontic verbs in impersonal constructions is that they show a very peculiar distribution. Constructions with *uno* are extremely rare with *obligar* (*Uno obliga a los personajes*. ‘One obliges the characters’.), for instance, but rather frequent with *tener que* (*Uno tiene que seguir ciertos consejos*. ‘One has to follow certain advice.’). The constructions with *se*, by contrast, show similar frequencies for both *obligar* (*Se obliga a ir a la guerra*. ‘There is an obligation to go to war.’) and *tener que* (*¿Por qué se tiene que avanzar más rápido?* ‘Why does one have to move on quicker?’).

This peculiar distribution of deontic verbs is relevant for the analysis of the meaning of impersonal constructions because it coincides with a fundamental semantic distinction in the deontic domain. I will show that the class of deontic verbs that are infrequent with the *uno*-construction are exactly the verbs that in other contexts can be used performatively, while those that are frequent in the *uno*-construction are those that cannot be used performatively. *Obligar*, for instance, can be used performatively as in *Te obligo a venir a casa*. ‘I oblige you to come home.’, while *tener que* cannot be used performatively, e.g. *Tienes que venir a casa*. ‘You have to come home’.

This suggests that the difference between the *uno*-construction and the *se*-construction is not (only) related to speaker inclusion but rather to performativity. With the *uno*-construction, one typically reports on obligation, permission and prohibition.

References

- CREA. Corpus de referencia del español actual. <<http://www.rae.es>>
Davies, Mark. Corpus del español. <<http://www.corpusdelespanol.org>>
Jensen, Mikkel Hollænder. 2002. La referencia en algunas expresiones impersonales - diferentes lecturas de *Uno* y la segunda persona del singular. *Romansk Forum* - XV Skandinaviske Romanistkongress. 127-38.