

The use of ‘ocupar’ as a deontic modal verb in Mexican Spanish

In Standard Spanish, *ocupar* is a highly polysemous verb. Most of the meanings listed in dictionaries are related to either spatial occupancy ([[ocupar_{spt}]]) or occupation in terms of work ([[ocupar_w]]).

However, in Mexican varieties of Spanish, as well as in some Central American varieties, *ocupar* is also frequently used as a deontic modal verb—expressing obligation ([[ocupar_{deo}]]), which allows both nominal (1a) and verbal or sentential (1b) complements. This meaning, as well as its geographical extent, is contained in the *Diccionario de americanismos* [DA] (ASALE, 2010), where it is explicitly defined as a synonym of *necesitar* (‘to need’). Despite this meaning being widespread (as it will be shown below), little to nothing has been said on this issue by linguists.

(1)

- a) *No necesito amor, lo único q(ue) **ocupo** ahorita es un elote con mucho chile.* [Twitter; Monterrey-based user]
‘I don’t need love, the only thing I need right now is spicy corn on the cob.’
- b) ***Ocupo** que me respondas esta pregunta.* [Twitter; Guadalajara-based user]
‘I need you to answer this question (for me).’

Also pointed out by the DA is the fact that this meaning is most commonly observed in colloquial registers and in orality. Similarly, this use of the verb has been often linked to provincial varieties; Moreno de Alba (1987), for instance, associated it with the Nayarit dialect.

A frequency distribution analysis was conducted in order to assess the extent of use of modal *ocupar* in comparison to other meanings. Social media text was selected for this study due to its similarities with oral colloquial speech, and the fact that it allows for an unobtrusive analysis at the level of social interactions (Androutsopoulos, 2006; Salganik, 2017).

Geo-localized tweets containing an instance of the lemma *ocupar* (excluding *ocupado/a*) were scraped and classified according to the type of complement controlled by the verb (either an NP or VP/CP). Subsequently, each item was manually annotated depending on the sense of *ocupar* (spatial, obligation, etc.).

Table 1 below shows that the use of *ocupar* as a modal verb is fairly common in all the three varieties studied, although to varying extents. In Guadalajara and Monterrey, this sense is the most frequent one; particularly in the latter dialect, where it accounts for over the 80% of the of the instances of the verb. In Mexico City, in contrast, the senses of *ocupar* are more evenly distributed.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the senses/uses of *ocupar*

		Guadalajara		Mexico City		Monterrey	
Meaning	Comp	N		N		N	
Spatial occupation	NP	74 (14,2%)		498 (26,57%)		135 (6,62%)	
Work position (e.g., an office)	NP	57 (10,94%)		236 (12,59%)		47(2,31%)	
Occupation (<i>ocupar a</i>)	NP	11 (2,11%)		34 (1,81%)		7 (0,34%)	
	VP/CP					2 (0,1%)	
Occupation (<i>ocuparse de</i>)	NP	28 (5,37%)		122 (6,51%)		46 (2,26%)	
	VP/CP			2 (0,11%)		1 (0,05%)	
Usage	NP	20 (3,84%)		292 (15,59%)		26 (1,28%)	
Deontic necessity	NP	186 (38%)		365 (19,48%)		1248 (61,21%)	
(obligation)	VP/CP	51 (9,79%)	48,56%	88 (4,7%)	26,69%	381 (18,69%)	80,73%
	?	4 (0,77%)		47 (2,51%)		17 (0,83%)	
Ambiguous		90		190		129 (6,33%)	
Total		521		1874		2039	

Looking at the origin of $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{deo}}]]$, the hypothesis here presented is that it derives from another novel meaning, namely $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$, as in (2). This meaning, according to the DA, occurs not only in Mexican and Central America, but also in South American varieties. $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$, in turn, seems to have derived from the more “traditional” $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{spt}}]]$ and $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{w}}]]$ meanings. Since $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$ only allows nominal complements, it is reasonable to believe that $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{deo}}]]$ did so as well at first; VP/CP complements would have then appeared at a later stage. This is supported by the data in Table 1, which shows that in all varieties deontic *ocupar* occurs more often with NP complements.

(2)

@USER *creo (que) es un amarrador de alambre de los que **ocupan** los maestros albañiles.* [Twitter; Mexico City-based user]
 ‘@USER I think it is one of those rebar tying tools that construction workers use.’

Both $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{deo}}]]$ and $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$, in fact, are the products of semantic reanalysis. According to Heine (2002) and Diewald (2002; 2006), semantic reanalysis occurs in specific sentential contexts where the use of the relevant expressions is ambiguous between the former and the novel meanings. For Heine (ibid.), semantic reanalysis in these *bridging contexts* is prompted by metaphoric and metonymic interpretations. Presumably, the bridging contexts in the case of *ocupar* are of the kind of the examples in (3).

(3)

- a) *En la pintura 50 se representa un niño de 4 años a quien **ocupan** sus padres en cosas fáciles para irlo imponiendo al trabajo.* [CORDE: Clavijero, 1780]
 ‘Painting 50 depicts a 4 year-old child whose parents employ in easy tasks to get him used to work.’
 $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{w}}]] \rightarrow [[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$
- b) *Porque para ese momento estaba tan gordo que **ocupaba** dos (lugares/asientos)* [Twitter; Mexico City-based user]
 ‘Because at that time [pro_i] was so fat that [pro_i] occupied/used two (seats).’
 $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{spt}}]] \rightarrow [[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$
- c) *Una vergüenza, en lugar de abrir debate, exhiban dónde posicionaron laboralmente a quienes **ocupaban** esos triciclos para llevar un alimento a su familia. [...]* [Twitter; Mexico City-based user]
 ‘Such a shame; instead of debating, tell us where those people who used/needed those tricycles to feed their families where relocated.’
 $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]] \approx [[\text{ocupar}_{\text{deo}}]]$

Hence, to the extent that usage implies that the object is within the sphere of influence of the subject, the deontic meaning might have arisen from $[[\text{ocupar}_{\text{use}}]]$ through the recurrent and well-known POSSESSION > OBLIGATION path (Heine & Kuteva, 2002: 243-245). A similar case can be observed in earlier stages of Spanish in the semantic shift of *tener(e)*, shifting its meaning from hold to possession to obligation. Since modality is a grammatical feature, this case is thus to be regarded as an instance of grammaticalization in process (Traugott, 2011).

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