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What needs to be done: Spanish haber-que constructions across oral and written media discourse

Abstract:

The Spanish verb haber (‘have’) is used in presentative constructions roughly equivalent to those with English there be, but where — in the standard norm and many varieties — the verb does not agree with a subject (Gómez Molina 2013). When this so-called impersonal haber is followed by the particle que and an infinitive, a deontic modal construction results, e.g. Hay que ordenar la habitación (‘One has to tidy up the room’ / ‘The room has to be tidied up’). This construction merges two discursive-cognitive meanings, namely deonticity — there is an indication that something needs to be done or experienced — and objectivity — the absence of a syntactic subject avoids the focusing of attention on any participant, turning the utterance into an apparently universal imperative rather than a personal command. It can thus be understood as a case of syntactic choice whereby certain contextual meanings are constructed (Aijón Oliva & Serrano 2013).

This study will present a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the use of haber-que constructions in the Corpus de Lenguaje de los Medios de Comunicación de Salamanca (MEDIASA), comprising both written-press and radio texts from a Peninsular town (Aijón Oliva 2006). Starting from the qualitative observation of the examples, four basic pragmatic meanings of the construction will be distinguished, namely ‘necessity’, ‘obligation’, ‘evidentiality’ and ‘intensification’, each of them being more pragmatised than the preceding one, thus farther from the literal indication that ‘something needs to be done’. The different meanings are all contextual interpretations of the inherent cognitive meaning of the construction — i.e. ‘deonticity + objectivity’ — that are favored by specific co-occurring discursive features including verb semantics, verbal tense and sentence polarity.

We will subsequently analyze the quantitative patterning of these four meanings across the written-press and radio sections of the corpus. It will be shown that ‘obligation’ is strongly associated with radio discourse, while ‘necessity’ and ‘evidentiality’ are comparatively dominant in the press, all of which can be explained by considering the interactional conditions set up by the different textual genres included in each section. As regards ‘intensification’, the total token number is rather low, probably due to the consideration of intensifying expressions such as hay que ver (lit. ‘there has to see’) or lo que hay que aguantar (lit. ‘what there has to bear’) as colloquial features (Gómez Torrego 1999), thus scarcely adequate for public discourse. All in all, the quantitative patterning of haber-que constructions across media discourse illustrates the unequal contextual distribution of syntactic constructions and the discursive and cognitive meanings associated with them.
References:


