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Verbal Periphrases in the Expression of Obligation in Colombian Spanish: A Study of Modal Semantic

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of Spanish to non-native speakers in immersion settings requires instructors who not only master the “standard” form of the language but are also familiar with the specific linguistic features of the region. Although Colombian Spanish has been widely studied, no analyses were found concerning the use of periphrastic constructions expressing obligation. This study aims to describe the use of verbal periphrases to express obligation in the Colombian variety of Spanish spoken in Bucaramanga. Adopting an onomasiological approach to the study of the relevant modal semantic category, the study identifies corpus instances in which obligation is expressed and the periphrastic constructions used. An oral language corpus was created, and a mediated survey was conducted to examine Colombians’ perceptions of the degree of obligation conveyed by different verbal periphrases. The results indicate that the phrase *me toca* + infinitive is perceived by respondents as conveying the highest degree of obligation, while *deber* + infinitive is perceived as expressing the lowest. It was also observed that *deber* + infinitive and *tener que* + infinitive are regarded as expressing the same degree of obligation. The study concludes that, in addition to the well-known periphrases *tener que* + infinitive, *haber que* + infinitive, and *deber* + infinitive, the periphrasis *tocar* + infinitive is also used—both in personal and impersonal forms—in 13% of the contextual fragments identified. An interesting finding is the use of the verb *tocar* without an accompanying infinitive.

Keywords: Obligation; Onomasiological Approach; Verbal Periphrasis

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 8 May 2025 | Revised: 3 June 2025 | Accepted: 10 June 2025 | Published Online: 15 September 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i9.9918>

CITATION

Montero Cádiz, M.M., Curbeira Cancela, A., Cruz Duarte, J.D., 2025. Verbal Periphrases in the Expression of Obligation in Colombian Spanish: A Study of Modal Semantic. Forum for Linguistic Studies. 7(9): 817–829. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i9.9918>

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1. Introduction

The teaching of Spanish to non-native speakers has gained increasing importance both globally and in Colombia^[1]. This phenomenon has concurrently driven advances in research related to the Spanish language and its regional varieties^[2]. Díaz López^[3] acknowledges that there is ongoing debate about whether it is appropriate and effective to teach and assess a standard variety of Spanish or to embrace the teaching of its various regional forms. According to Moreno Fernández^[4], the model of Spanish should be formal and should distinguish between common and frequent elements in order to facilitate the acquisition of the most appropriate uses for most communicative situations.

To teach Spanish in immersion settings, it must be understood that only specific modalities are spoken, rather than languages as abstract entities^[4]. Several factors come into play: on the one hand, if the teacher is Colombian, it is unlikely that they can detach entirely from their native regional speech; furthermore, the student, upon leaving the classroom, will interact with the local population. On the other hand, the student may not necessarily be interested in learning a specific variety of Spanish, but rather Spanish in general. All of this necessitates the teaching of both “standard” Spanish and the region’s particular linguistic features.

Linguistic research contributes to enhancing the language competence of Spanish teachers for non-native speakers by allowing them to deepen their understanding of the linguistic features of the variety they speak—whether phonetic, lexical, grammatical, sociocultural, and so forth.

Colombian institutions that teach Spanish as a foreign or second language recognize the relevance of using the Colombian variety in the classroom. Focusing on the Colombian variety ensures that educational practices align with the contexts in which they take place, as students learn dialectal forms that are actually used in their surroundings^[5].

Numerous studies have been conducted on the Colombian variety of Spanish at all linguistic levels^[6]; however, the literature review revealed no research specifically focused on the expression of obligation or on obligative infinitive periphrases. The purpose of this study is to de-

scribe the use of verbal periphrases to express obligation in the Colombian variety of Spanish spoken in Bucaramanga.

1.1. On the Modal Semantic Nature of the Expression of Obligation in Discourse

The study of the expression of obligation as a modal semantic phenomenon requires situating its essence within the system of modal semantic categories, which constitutes the object of study and research of the Group for Semantic Studies and Discourse Analysis (GESyD) at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Universidad de la Habana. First, it is necessary to define the key terms used in the development of theoretical studies and the application of their results to practical analysis in lexical and discourse research.

A semantic category is defined as the set of stable and invariable semantic features present in the semantic structure of elements across different levels of the language. These features serve as the basis for structuring lexical, semantic, conceptual, and semantic-functional fields^[7].

Modality is defined as a semantic-functional category characterized by the use of linguistic resources from various levels of the language to express interactive (illocutionary, perlocutionary), subjective-psychological (axiological and attributive), and referential content. These expressions reflect both the speaker’s attitude toward what is being said and the listener’s perception of what is received^[8].

Semantic modality is understood as a supracategory subordinate to the dictum, reflecting the psychological positions and attitudes assumed and expressed by the enunciating subjects. These attitudes are embedded in both the units of the language system and the discourse^[8].

The establishment of modal semantic categories has been made possible through the conception of the dimensional structure of meaning and sense^[9]. This structure is conceived as comprising a pragmatic dimension, in which modal and illocutionary aspects as well as diasystemic markers are analyzed; a referential dimension, which integrates the characteristic features of the referent being discussed; and a constructive-grammatical dimension, which encompasses the structural features (paradigmatic and syntagmatic) of linguistic units.

For GESyD’s research purposes, a dimension is defined as each fundamental semantic magnitude of the content of lexical and discursive units. These magnitudes are

delimited by sets of types, classes, attributes, and features inherent to meaning^[10].

The dimensions of lexical and discursive meaning were defined by A. M. Galbán Pozo^[11,12] as follows:

- Modal dimension: a magnitude that reflects the noetic features related to the psychological stance assumed toward what is being said in discourse, materialized through the language that serves as its material and semantic support for conveying subjectivity in socialized communicative activity.
- Illocutionary dimension: a magnitude that reflects the features conveying the intentional and interactive content of speech acts.
- Referential dimension: a magnitude encompassing the features of referents (whether real or imagined) considered by the agents of speech, characterized by a set of feature groups: constitutive, relational, domain-specific, and taxonomical.
- Constructive-grammatical dimension: a magnitude that, based on semantic features, accounts for the syntactic and morphological rules involved in the formulation of utterances.

For the purposes of studying the expression of obligation, emphasis will be placed on the relevant modal semantic category from its volitional-actional perspective, within which obligation is situated among its opposing and contradictory values. To this end, the definition of this category provided by Galbán Pozo^[11, 12] is cited. In her analysis, the author established two perspectives that differ from the one originally proposed by Caballero^[9].

Interest: A modal semantic category that expresses the subjective stance toward what is said, revealing how objects and phenomena of reality either provoke or fail to provoke focused attention, emotional inclination toward the object, and/or serve as a stimulus for the execution of a conscious act. Two perspectives have been distinguished: the first, based on the opposition of contraries *interest* vs. *obligation* (referred to as the volitional-actional perspective), and the second, the attentional perspective, based on the opposition *interest* vs. *disinterest*^[11,12].

The relationships and progression of the values within the modal semantic category of *interest* from the volitional-actional perspective were represented by Galbán Pozo^[11] in a semantic trapezoid (**Figure 1**):

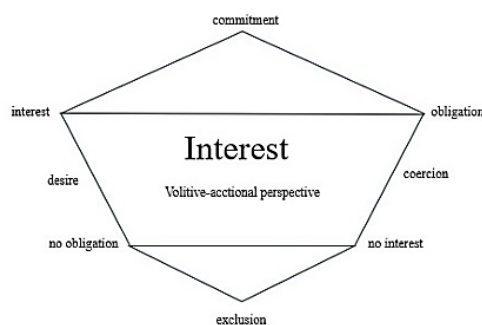


Figure 1. Semantic Trapezoid (Galbán Pozo^[11]).

A compromise between the modal opposites *interest* and *obligation* leads to a progression toward *commitment*. In this case, what is expressed indicates the presence of both interest and obligation: the speaker sees themselves as committed to carrying out the action. It is an obligation accompanied by the desire to fulfill it, a sense of wanting to “do the right thing.” Consider, for instance, the case of a marital commitment.

The volitional perspective of interest reveals that when there is interest in doing something but no obligation, *desire* is expressed: *I don’t have to, but I want to do it. I’m not*

forcing you—you’ll do it if you want to, if you feel like it.

On the other hand, the progression from the opposite *obligation* to the contradictory *lack of interest* leads to the expression of *coercion*, which goes beyond mere obligation, as it implies the threat of consequences for refusing to carry out an action. *The landlord has coerced him into vacating the apartment within a month.*

The relationship between the contradictory terms *obligation* and *lack of interest* has, in discourse analysis, revealed the expression of *duty*, which is associated with a demand that may be imposed by morality, the law, or an

authority—and which, in our view, may also reflect personal convictions. *I have a social duty to teach others how to think.*

Although dictionaries list *deber* as a synonym of *tener* (in the sense of “requirement established by law, morality, or authority”), it is clear that *deber* carries certain modal semantic connotations that differ from those of obligation. *I wouldn’t want to, but I must do it.*

If the progression occurs between the two contradictories: *no obligation* and *no interest*, discourse excludes the possibility of action. That is, it expresses a rejection of the very possibility of carrying out the action. *There is nothing and no one that could make me betray my principles.*

The application of this modal semantic framework to the study of the expression of obligation, conducted using a discourse corpus of the Colombian variety of Spanish, should reveal a wide range of discursive means and resources that reflect the expression of obligation and its various trajectories.

1.2. Obligation-Expressing Verbal Periphrases

Speakers have a variety of resources at their disposal to express obligation, including verbal periphrases. These are syntactic structures in which an auxiliary verb modifies a main or full verb that appears in a non-personal form (i.e., infinitive, gerund, or participle), without resulting in two separate predications^[13]. They may also be defined as combinations of two or more verbs that syntactically form a single predicate nucleus. In such verbal constructions, the main or dependent verb must be in a non-personal form: infinitive, gerund, or participle. The other verb (or verbs) functions solely as an auxiliary and may be conjugated in all or some verb forms^[14].

Gili y Gaya^[15] notes that a preposition or the particle *que* is inserted between the auxiliary verb and the infinitive. According to the *Nueva gramática*^[13], these verbal periphrases can be classified based on the semantic contribution of the auxiliary verb into modal and tempo-aspectual periphrases. The former, which are the focus of this study, convey various types of modal information, such as ability, possibility, probability, necessity, and obligation. Examples of modal periphrases include *deber + infinitive*, *deber de + infinitive*, *tener que + infinitive*, and *poder + infinitive*. This study will focus exclusively on those that

express obligation. The analysis will characterize infinitive periphrases, particularly those with a modal function.

Verbal phrases composed of an auxiliary verb and an infinitive generally convey a sense of action projected toward the future, measured from the tense of the auxiliary verb rather than from the present moment of speech, even though the overall verbal concept may be present, past, or future, respectively^[15].

The *Real Academia Española (RAE)*^[13] distinguishes between two types of modal periphrases: those that express radical or personal modality, and those that express epistemic, impersonal, or propositional modality.

According to Gili Gaya^[15], obligative expressions have long been present in Spanish grammar. Under the label of *periphrastic or obligative conjugation*, academic grammar traditionally included the verbal phrase *haber de + infinitive*. Today, the following structures are commonly used to express obligation: *haber de + infinitive*, *haber que + infinitive*, and *tener que + infinitive*. The *Nueva gramática* (2010) also includes *deber + infinitive* as a modal verbal periphrasis with an infinitive. This is the criterion adopted in the present analysis.

The *Nueva gramática* explains the meaning conveyed by each periphrasis^[13]:

- “*Deber + infinitive*”: Expresses advice or obligation, although the use of “*deber + infinitive*” to express conjecture—rather than “*deber de + infinitive*”—is widespread, even among prestigious writers.
- “*Tener que + infinitive*”: In its radical or personal use, it denotes obligation, similar to “*deber + infinitive*”, and commonly reflects an inescapable external necessity or one imposed by circumstances, which the individual cannot avoid. The obligation expressed by “*deber + infinitive*” aligns with what is typically desirable or with accepted norms that impose it. This correspondence does not match the concept of obligatoriness conveyed by “*tener que + infinitive*”.
- “*Haber de + infinitive*” admits both radical and epistemic uses. In its strictest application, it expresses an obligation.
- “*Haber que + infinitive*” also conveys obligation. In certain contexts, rather than denoting strict obligation, the periphrasis suggests that the speaker accepts the expressed situation as unavoidable.

- The periphrasis formed with the verb *tocar* as an auxiliary followed by an infinitive, in both its personal and impersonal forms, is present in the oral speech in Colombia, as evidenced by the findings of this study.

2. Materials and Methods

This research is qualitative, as this approach is appropriate for examining situations and for identifying, detailing, understanding, and interpreting phenomena within a specific context. This framework allows for the study of the object, its condition, and its evolution. An onomasiological approach was followed, and the investigation was conducted using an oral language corpus specifically compiled for the study. Onomasiology is the branch of linguistics concerned with identifying the signifiers that correspond to a given meaning. According to Baldinger^[16], “semasiology considers the word in isolation as it develops its meaning, whereas onomasiology explores the designations of a specific concept—that is, a multiplicity of expressions that form a set” (p. 250).

The ultimate purpose of any language system is communication. According to Lamíquiz^[17], responding to a

stimulus requires the speaker to make decisions. First, the speaker positions themselves within the realm of meaning and selects what they wish to communicate. Next, they move into the functional domain of language to determine the appropriate mode of expression and choose from among the strategies offered by the language. Finally, they select the specific form in which to express their message and utilize phonetic and acoustic elements to convey it correctly and sequentially.

The listener faces a different challenge when receiving the message: interpretation. After perceiving the sounds, the listener must identify the phonological function used by the speaker. Then, they must comprehend the morpho-syntactic structure of the message. Finally, the listener infers the meaning by analyzing the corresponding lexical-semantic infrastructure^[17].

There is a dynamic interaction between speaker and listener, a bidirectional process: the speaker’s path of selection, or onomasiological route, and the listener’s path of interpretation, or semasiological route^[18]. This can be represented graphically in relation to what has been outlined in the previous sections: First, the onomasiological path in the speaker’s selection (**Figure 2**):

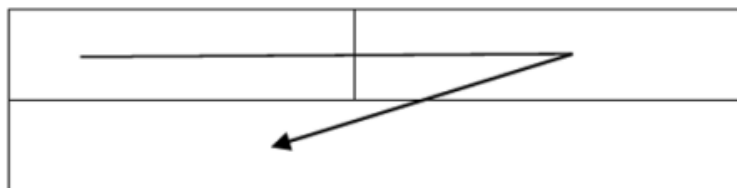


Figure 2. Onomasiological Path (Lamíquiz^[17]).

Second, the semasiological path in the listener’s interpretation (**Figure 3**).

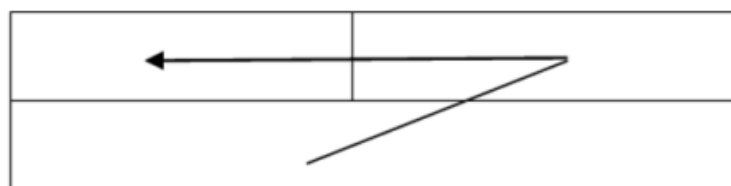


Figure 3. Semasiological Path (Lamíquiz^[17]).

However, “there is no one-to-one correspondence between the form of expression and the form of content; we

may find multiple formal structures for a single content, and vice versa. Hence, the expressive richness of language”^[19].

2.1. On the Corpus

According to Bernal Chávez and Díaz Romero ^[6], the research team from the Corpus Linguistics Division of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo (LICC) is developing a digital oral corpus that includes recordings from the ALEC (Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Colombia) project, recordings of educated speech from Santa Fe de Bogotá in the 20th century, and samples of contemporary spoken Spanish in Bogotá. Additionally, work is underway on the macroproject *Un ALEC para*, which will generate a Geographic Information System (GIS) and a website featuring a digital version of the ALEC.

Since no oral language corpus was available for the department of Santander, one was created using informants from the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga (Bucaramanga, Floridablanca, Girón, and Piedecuesta). The decision was made to focus on spoken language, as it presents distinctive features not found in written language. For example, it exhibits greater unpredictability and spontaneity. Participants do not know exactly what text they will produce, even if it is minimally prepared in advance. Interaction generates the text. Spoken discourse is more attentive to the recipient, which leads to the use of numerous linguistic elements that refer directly to the listener. One can observe the use of discourse markers or pragmatic parti-

cles whose functions operate exclusively in spoken texts, as well as the frequent presence of additive and inferential connectors, discourse organizers, transitions, bridging, or topic-shifting particles. At the morphosyntactic level, abbreviations are common, as are the use of diminutives, augmentatives, and pejoratives, among others. Syntax tends to be fragmented and disjointed; incomplete sentences are frequent from a grammatical standpoint, though not from a pragmatic one. At the lexical level, lexical density is low (with repetitions, paraphrasing, and redundancies) (Centro Virtual Cervantes) ^[20].

A total of 42 unstructured interviews were recorded and transcribed, involving professionals from the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga, selected at random. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min. The corpus was not created for phonetic analysis, but rather to provide transcriptions of spoken language that would enable the analysis of grammatical categories, the extraction of frequency indices, among other purposes, and to carry out various types of linguistic analysis, including sociolinguistic, discourse-based, etc. The recordings were conducted in natural settings to ensure that the samples were as spontaneous as possible, within the limits inherent to this type of interview (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Participant Distribution by Age and Gender.

Age Group	Women	Men
22–39	15	10
40–59	7	8
60 or older	0	2
Total	22	20

2.2. Methodology

The methodology employed was based on a prior framework developed to analyze anteriority relative to the moment of speech and its forms of expression in Cuban Spanish. This earlier study also followed an onomasiological approach and was based on an oral language corpus ^[21].

1. It was determined that the source would be an oral language corpus from the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga, composed of 42 open-ended interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Efforts were

made to ensure that participants' responses were as spontaneous as possible.

2. The sample was established as 100% of the interviews.
3. The unit of analysis was defined. In the initial evaluation, it was observed that, in most cases, a simple verbal periphrasis was sufficient; however, in other instances, a longer fragment was necessary, as the core expression of obligation was complemented by contextual elements. No a priori coding schemes were created to indicate the different forms used to

express obligation.

The software ATLAS.ti 22 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Bergmannstraße 68, 10961 Berlin, Germany) was used in the project. This software is a set of tools for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphic, and video data. The central workspace in ATLAS.ti is the hermeneutic unit, which organizes all primary documents for a given project. Primary documents correspond to the textual, graphic, audio, and video materials analyzed. A hermeneutic unit was created, and the oral language corpus from Bucaramanga was added as the primary document. Subsequently, segments in which obligation was expressed were marked, and corresponding codes were either created or selected from an evolving list of identified codes.

The following codes were established to categorize the different forms used to express obligation that appeared in the text:

- with *tener que* + infinitive
- with impersonal *haber que* + infinitive
- expression of obligation with *deber* + infinitive
- with *tocar* + infinitive (personal)
- with *tocar* + infinitive (impersonal)
- with *tocar* and the infinitive implied
- with *deber de* + infinitive
- with *tener que* without the infinitive
- expression of possibility with *deber* + infinitive

4. Once the coding process was completed, tabulation and frequency analysis were carried out.

5. Finally, the expression of obligation was characterized based on the structures used.

It is important to note that the coding process was reviewed by two researchers, who discussed subjects such as the proper assignation of categories, reaching agreements before consolidating the coding system in ATLAS.ti.

3. Results

In the Colombian variety of spoken Spanish, the periphrases *tener que* + infinitive, *haber* (impersonal) + infinitive, and *deber* + infinitive are commonly used. Other expressions are also present in this variety of Spanish, such as enclitic pronoun + *obligar* (verb form) + *a* + infinitive

and *tener* (verb form) *la obligación de* + infinitive. In addition to these well-known forms, the periphrases formed with *tocar* + infinitive (in both personal and impersonal forms) are also used. For example: “...no podía estudiar o llegaba muy tarde, y me tocaba madrugar mucho...” (“... I couldn’t study or I’d arrive very late, and I had to get up very early...”).

The RAE Dictionary ^[22] includes the following definition of the verb *tocar*: ‘to be someone’s responsibility or obligation’, and the *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* ^[23], in its second definition of the verb, states: “When it means ‘to be an obligation’ or ‘to correspond,’ it is intransitive; the person complement is indirect...” (Real Academia Española; Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española) ^[22,23], The *Diccionario de colombianismos* ^[24], notes that “*tocar/toca*” indicates that something must inevitably be fulfilled. Francisco Celis Albán’s *Diccionario de colombiano actual* ^[25], states that the expression *toca* implies the “mandatory fulfilment” of a certain action.

Several dictionaries were consulted, and none include the use of the verb *tocar* to express obligation. Among them were the *Diccionario de hablas populares de Antioquia*, *Lexicón de fraseología del español de Colombia*, *Bogotálogo* ^[26], *Un extraño diccionario: El castellano en las gentes de Quindío, especialmente en lo relacionado con el café*, and *Contribución al vocabulario de colombianismos*. Unsurprisingly, dictionaries like the *Diccionario del español de México* and the *Diccionario Argentino* also lack an entry under *tocar* including this connotation of the verb. As far as we have been able to determine, this use of the verb *tocar* is very specific to the Colombian variety of Spanish.

As part of the project of the *Atlas Lingüístico de Colombia*, the work *El español hablado en Santander* ^[27], was published, which is divided into chapters such as Phonetics and Phonology, Morphosyntax, and Vocabulary. This book makes no reference to the use of the verb *tocar* to express obligation.

It is evident that expressions constructed with *tener que* + infinitive are common in the Colombian variety of Spanish. However, this is absent from most Colombian and Pan-Hispanic dictionaries. In the future, lexicographers should include an entry under the verb *tocar*, explaining this particular use of the verb. For example, dictionaries

could include the following definition of the verb *tocar*: “*tr. Denota la obligación de hacer aquello que expresa una cláusula posterior introducida por que.*”

By processing the information using ATLAS.ti, a total of 276 instances were identified in which various types of periphrasis were used to express obligation.

3.1. Expression of Obligation with Personal Forms

In 48.6% of the instances, the periphrasis “*tener que + infinitive*” was used. For example:

- *Tengo que cumplir una meta de mil millones mensuales en aprobaciones, y desembolsar cuatrocientos millones: todos los meses es igual. (I have to meet a monthly goal of one billion in approvals and disburse four hundred million: every month it's the same.)*
- *...entonces se dificulta el trabajo, de pronto, que uno le tenga que decir: mira tú estás mal en esto, corríjela, mira está fallando... (...then the work gets complicated, suddenly, you have to say: look, you're wrong about this, correct it, look, you're making a mistake...)*

In 24% of the instances, “*deber + infinitive*” was used. For example:

- *...yo creo que a los niños se les debe enseñar el respeto, se les debe enseñar a colaborar sin esperar nada a cambio. Yo creo que eso es fundamental en la educación de un niño... (...I believe children should be taught respect, they should be taught to help without expecting anything in return. I believe that's fundamental in a child's education...)*
- *...siempre me ha gustado la academia y pues en el sector oficial y también en el privado si uno quiere mejorar su salario debe prepararse cada día más... (...I've always liked academia and, well, in both the public and private sectors, if one wants to improve their salary, one must prepare more each day...)*
- *Pues sí, o sea a nosotros nos paga el estado, en este caso a través de la alcaldía; pero como le decía hace rato considero que no estamos bien remunerados, o sea, que el sueldo de nosotros debería ser mejor y acorde a lo que nosotros hacemos. (Well yes, I mean, we're paid by the state, in this case through the city*

hall; but as I mentioned earlier, I think we're not well compensated, I mean, our salary should be better and aligned with what we do.)

Instances were also found in which *deber + infinitive* was used instead of *deber de + infinitive*, and vice versa. On this matter, Gili y Gaya (p. 113) ^[12] notes that the verbal phrase with “*deber de*” indicates supposition, conjecture, or belief. This is corroborated by the Real Academia, which states that it conveys a conjecture by the speaker, the expression of an inferred probability. Gili y Gaya explains that *deber + infinitive* expresses obligation, a view shared by the Real Academia, which also adds that the use of *deber + infinitive* to express conjecture is widespread, even among prestigious writers.

In 12.6% of the instances, *tocar + infinitive* was used with complementary forms of personal pronouns (proclitic). For example:

- *Ahorita sí nos toca aprender algunas técnicas para exigirles a ellos disciplina, porque es que sin disciplina no se puede hacer nada. (Right now, we have to learn some techniques to demand discipline from them, because without discipline nothing can be done.)*
- *Me tocaba caminar para buscar al central, la que va del Socorro a Bogotá, y caminaba como media hora. (I had to walk to reach the main road, the one that goes from Socorro to Bogotá, and I would walk for about half an hour.)*
- *Se me terminó el contrato... me tocó seguir buscando trabajo y tuve la suerte de conseguir nuevamente trabajo, también por contactos en la política. (My contract ended... I had to keep looking for a job and was lucky to find one again, also thanks to political connections.)*

3.2. Expression of Obligation with Impersonal Forms

In 13.65% of the instances, *haber + infinitive* was used. For example:

- *Generalmente siempre tengo algo que hacer, generalmente estamos metidos en contratos y hay que hacer algo: hay que hacer un plano, hay que hacer unos cálculos, de lo contrario consultando páginas web porque*

todas las contrataciones ahora es por página web... (I usually always have something to do, we're generally involved in contracts and something must be done: a blueprint, some calculations—otherwise, we're browsing websites because all contracts now go through the web...)

In 4.4%, *tocar* + infinitive was used. For example:

- Ese contrato tenía que ir firmado; luego de ser elaborado, tocaba pasarlo a que lo firmara el contratista, a que lo firmara el alcalde. Diría yo que la atención al público, que es muy difícil de manejar, pero tampoco es que no se pueda; toca tener la paciencia, porque hay público que es muy difícil de manejar. (That contract had to be signed; after it was prepared, it had to be sent for the contractor and then the mayor to sign it. I'd say that public service is very difficult to handle, but it's not impossible; one has to be patient because some people are very hard to deal with.)
- hay padres de familia que son como muy, que no toleran nada debido a que no tiene el tiempo, y entonces quieren todo ya; pero toca saber cómo, sí, llevarlos y atenderlos de la mejor manera. (There are parents who are very demanding and intolerant because they don't have the time, and then they want everything immediately; but you have to know how to, yes, handle and assist them in the best way possible. There are always difficulties, but everything is manageable.).

A peculiar feature—absent in the use of other periphrases—that is observed with the verb *tocar* is the omission of the infinitive, which the listener must infer, as in the following cases:

- ...son mujeres que les toca siempre pesado igual que a uno, y es una carrera que te tiene que gustar para que la estudies; de resto no la recomendaría, porque he conocido gente que se ha estrellado... (...they're women who always have it tough just like the rest of us, and it's a career you really have to like to study; otherwise, I wouldn't recommend it, because I've known people who've crashed).
- No, no, tocaba taxi. Mi mamá vivía cerca de donde nosotros vivíamos, y la verdad es que después me iba al trabajo en bus y volvía nuevamente y en taxi. (No, no, taxi was the only option. My mom lived near where

we lived, and honestly, after that I'd go to work by bus and come back again by taxi.)

- ...entonces a veces le toca a uno contacto telefónico con los rectores para iniciar ese proceso de traslado. (...so sometimes you end up having to contact the principals by phone to begin that transfer process.)

The use of the indefinite pronoun *uno* in predicates expressing experiences of the speaker that could apply to others can also be identified as a case of semantic impersonality by generalization or indeterminacy. These are often equivalent to impersonal constructions with *se*, as in:

- Cuando uno tiene que trabajar en obra, tiene que tener una interacción con todo el personal. (When you have to work on a construction site, you need to interact with all the staff.)
- Así el niño fuera el más indisciplinado, a uno le tocaba decirle, no, el niño se porta regular, (Even if the child was the most undisciplined, you had to say, no, the child behaves kind of badly.)

The periphrasis “*tocar* + infinitive” appears in 24% of the corpus citations. The verb *tocar* appears only once in the corpus expressing the idea of “falling to” or “becoming someone's lot”: “Pero si lo van a estudiar, una carrera por descarte no. ¿Sí? O porque fue lo que me tocó (But if they're going to study it, it shouldn't be a fallback career, right? Or just because it was what I ended up with). It appears only once expressing “to correspond”: *Uno tiene que estudiar una carrera por convicción... You have to study a degree out of conviction...* The analysis of the oral language corpus from Bucaramanga revealed that, in addition to the infinitive periphrases commonly used across Spanish varieties to express obligation, this region also employs periphrases formed with “*tocar* + infinitive”, whether with the auxiliary functioning as an impersonal verb or in personal form. These periphrases, which are used in other regions of Colombia not covered by this study, represent a distinctive feature in comparison to other Spanish varieties.

The following Sankey diagram (**Figure 4**) illustrates the frequency with which the different periphrases appear and highlights the predominance of “*tener que* + infinitive.”

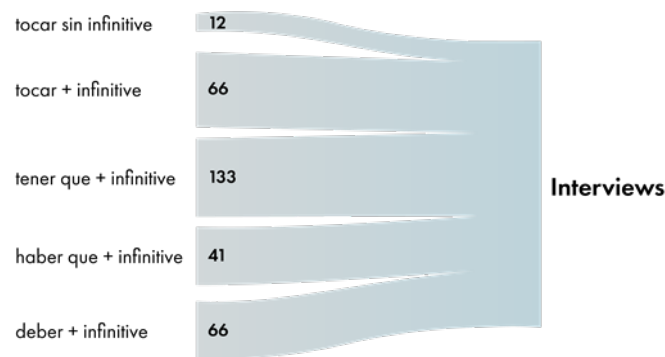


Figure 4. Frequencies of Obligation-Expressing Verbal Periphrases.

4. Discussion

The results obtained reveal a particular expressive richness in the Colombian variety of Spanish, specifically in Bucaramanga, regarding the linguistic expression of obligation. Although classical periphrastic constructions such as *tener que* + infinitive, *deber* + infinitive, and *haber que* + infinitive are widely used in “standard” Spanish ^[28], the finding of the extended use of *tocar* + infinitive (and *tocar* used in the absence of an explicitly stated infinitive) confirms the hypothesis of a regional specificity in the construction of the modal meaning of obligation.

This result is consistent with the semantic approaches to interest and obligation proposed by Galbán Pozo ^[12], insofar as linguistic choices reveal attitudinal nuances of the speaker toward the action: *me tocaba madrugar* communicates not only an external obligation but also a subjective resignation to the inevitability of the act. In this regard, the discourse reflects not only objective modality but also a psychological and affective stance of the speaker, as noted by Curbeira Cancela ^[8] and Caballero Díaz ^[28].

The periphrastic form *tocar* + infinitive, in both its personal and impersonal uses, appears with a frequency close to that of *deber* + infinitive, suggesting that this construction occupies a significant place in the modal repertoire of speakers from Bucaramanga. Interestingly, unlike *deber* + infinitive, which occasionally presents epistemic ambiguity ^[13], *tocar* + infinitive more consistently retains its value of obligatoriness, which grants it a direct and specific communicative function.

Another noteworthy aspect is the omission of the in-

finitive in some constructions with *tocar*, which points to a linguistic economy based on shared understanding within the communicative context ^[17]. This phenomenon demands a more intense semasiological activation from the listener, who must infer the implicit content, thereby reinforcing the idea of a close interdependence between expressive selection (onomasiology) and interpretation (semasiology), as proposed by Pottier ^[18] and Hoyos et al. ^[19].

The scarce lexicographic documentation of the use of *tocar* as an expression of obligation in Colombia, despite its active presence in spoken language, suggests a gap between the living language and its academic codification. This opens a significant line of research for future revisions of dictionaries of Colombian and Latin American Spanish ^[6,29].

In sum, this study contributes not only to the understanding of the periphrastic system of Colombian Spanish, but also highlights the need to give greater consideration to regional expressions in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language, as pointed out by Díaz López ^[3] and García, García, and Buitrago ^[5]. Recognizing and teaching these forms involves not only describing them linguistically but also understanding the social and semantic attitudes that underpin them.

5. Conclusions

The teaching of Spanish to non-native speakers in Colombia requires mastery not only of the features of “standard” Spanish but also of the particularities of the regional variety spoken by the instructor. Advances in research

aimed at characterizing the Colombian variety of Spanish could provide educators with the tools and strategies that they need. Accordingly, the purpose of the study underpinning this article was to describe the expression of obligation in spoken language in Bucaramanga.

In Colombia, in addition to the commonly used periphrases *haber que* + infinitive, *tener que* + infinitive, and *deber* + infinitive, constructions with *tocar* as an auxiliary verb are also employed. However, no prior research documenting this usage was found.

The study followed an onomasiological approach. The source was an oral corpus consisting of 42 unstructured interviews with professionals from the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga, each lasting approximately thirty minutes, which were recorded and transcribed.

The software ATLAS.ti was used to analyze the data. A hermeneutic unit was created, with the previously mentioned corpus as the primary document. Segments in which obligation was expressed were identified and coded according to the structures used.

As a result, it was found that, in addition to the forms *tener que* + infinitive, *deber* + infinitive, and *haber* (impersonal) *que* + infinitive, the periphrasis *tocar* + infinitive—in both personal and impersonal forms—is used in the Colombian variety of Spanish.

The generic use of the indefinite article *uno* was also identified in predicates describing the speaker's experiences, which may be generalized to others.

A distinctive feature was noted in the use of the verb *tocar* (in its conjugated form) without an explicit infinitive; in such cases, the infinitive is inferred from the context.

Through the corpus analysis, it was not possible to determine the nuances conveyed when expressing obligation with one periphrasis versus another.

It is also recommended that this line of research be continued using oral language corpora from media sources and written language corpora.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.C.C., M.M.M.C., and J.D.C.D.; methodology, M.M.M.C.; data curation, M.M.M.C.; discussion and conclusions, M.M.M.C., A.C.C., and J.D.C.D.; project administration, M.M.M.C.. All authors have read

and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research has been funded by the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia.

Project Code: INV1685.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. This study was based on the study of a corpus of oral interviews that were conducted anonymously.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. The consent procedure complied with the institutional and ethical guidelines applicable at the time of the research.

Data Availability Statement

The data used for the study are available from the correspondence author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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