THE POLYSEMY OF DEVOIR: A CONTRASTIVE AND DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The French verb devoir has a lexical value (referring to the notion of debt) and several modal values. Among the latter, the epistemic value is looked at as being essentially pragmatic insofar as devoir is supposed to code a form of inference. The analysis proposed below will assign a pragmatic value to this verb for the whole series of its modal values. We shall posit that devoir indeed codes a form of evidentiality, but we shall not associate it with an inference. Devoir\(^1\) indicates that the speaker has motivated his/her utterance by making it depend on a source that coincides with one of the three parameters involved in the classical logical reasoning: the major premise, the minor premise and the conclusion.

Our analysis will not join either of the two main explanations traditionally given to the meaning of devoir. First, we do not conceive of devoir as encoding an indication related to epistemic modality, implying a quantification of the worlds where the proposition is true (as probablement or peut-être would do). Second, we do not consider devoir as encoding a form of inference either. In other words, we do not assume that devoir indicates that the information conveyed by the

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\(^1\) Our analysis deals mainly with the present indicative use of devoir.
speaker should be understood as the result of a calculation. We associate the notion of inference to a general interpreting principle not coded in French; this very principle allows the listener to understand the origins of any utterance.

Data provided by Romanian will particularly highlight the functioning of *devoir* as a modal. On the one hand, we shall see that the French modal *devoir* has no equivalent in Romanian. On the other hand, we shall notice that this language has a structure named “presumptive” (made up of *o fi* + gerund or past participle) which can be associated with a conventional indication of absence of source. The various Romanian counterparts of the modal *devoir* will provide us with precious information leading to a better understanding of the way in which the modal values of the French verb came into being.

We shall start by commenting upon the different nuances conveyed by *devoir*. Then we shall justify the difference that we posit between the type of evidentiality coded by *devoir* and the other pragmatic values generally associated with it, i.e., inference and epistemic modality. In Sections 4 and 5 we shall describe the particularities of the Romanian evidential system taking as a basis the structure encoding the presumptive and the counterparts of *devoir*. Finally, in order to establish a link between the different modal values of *devoir* and its original lexical meaning, we shall adopt a diachronic perspective, by looking at the values that its Latin counterpart seems able to convey.

2. THE DIFFERENT VALUES OF DEVOIR

We take as a starting point the fact that one and the same occurrence of *devoir* may easily assume one or another value among those traditionally associated with it if we change the contextual parameters:

1. Paul doit dormir.

   If the speaker sees Paul awake, *devoir* has a deontic value (*Paul must sleep*). If the speaker does not see Paul and someone is looking for the latter, *devoir* has an epistemic value (*Paul must be sleeping*).

2. Le bébé doit consommer au minimum 500 ml de lait chaque jour. (sante-medecine. commentcamarche.net/contents/bebe/11_comment-effectuer-la-diversification-alimentaire. php3)

   If the utterance is interpreted as being generic, *devoir* takes an anankastic\(^2\) value (*A baby must eat at least 500 ml of milk a day* in a context where this is a condition for his/her health); if the speaker

\(^2\)This value appears in Conte (1995) and Kronning (1996).