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Angelina Sophiadi[1]
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Anastasios Tsangalidis[2]
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

EXPRESSIONS OF OBLIGATION DURING THE PANDEMIC: A COMPARABLE CORPUS

The initial research endeavour for this paper was to compile a comparable corpus employing political discourse data from Greek and English. The unfortunate outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the way politicians addressed their people to persuade them to abide by the safety regulations involving social distancing narrowed down the scope of the study. As per the title of this article, what follows is an examination of the expressions of obligation employed by the Greek and the British Prime Ministers (PMs) when they addressed the public during the first year of the pandemic. The use of modal verbs was the focus in both languages, however, the use of the first-person plural by both PMs is also discussed as it was widely employed to enhance the strength of the obligation. Finally, the use of the future tense is investigated within the corpus with the aim to see how it operates pragmatically in conjunction with the obligations/prohibitions expressed by the PMs.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, modality, political discourse, pragmatics

1. INTRODUCTION OF THE CONTEXT

From March 2020 our lives have been reshaped, our daily habits and our social behaviour have changed, and so has our language; new words have emerged, others have taken on another meaning, and language in itself has played a "key role in […] making sense of life in the context of Covid-19" (Mahlberg & Brookes 2021: 441). We have been bombarded with sometimes valid information, and our everyday language was suddenly enriched with medical terminology and words

[1] asofiadi@enl.auth.gr
[2] atsangal@enl.auth.gr

we hadn't used in our life before. Public health campaigns but also political leaders around the world, and online, had "saturated public consciousness, inflecting even the most mundane decisions and social interactions" (Brookes & Hunt 2021: 3). In terms of linguistics this was important because it constituted, a once in a lifetime chance, hopefully, to observe and investigate actual, live language change. What is interesting is that after the word COVID-19 was coined in February 2020, it only needed a little more than a month to become a dictionary entry[3]. From dictionary entries to various discourses emerging because of the pandemic and to even conspiracy theories on the social media, a surge of and a need for linguistic research emerged on or around the pandemic situation.

The Covid-19 pandemic is the temporal context of our research, which aims to investigate mainly modal verbs expressing obligation and prohibition, both in Greek and English, specifically employed by the Greek and the British PMs only when they addressed the public, regarding the pandemic situation, during the first year of its outbreak.

The extent to which the PMs were involved in addressing the public themselves and the role modality played in the discourse techniques they employed to successfully express the obligatory urgency of these regulations, were among the initial questions. These combined with the fact that the central modal verbs expressing strong obligation – *must* and *πρέπει* – are quite strong, in terms of pragmatics, raised the question as to whether they would be employed throughout, and if so, whether their force would be somehow mitigated. Also, bearing in mind that there is general declining trend, as will be discussed below, and that the two verbs in question also have non-deontic semantic potential, which is also diminishing, investigating their frequency within this context gives insight as to how language and its users operate in such times of crisis.

2. ORGANISING THE CONTEXT

This type of research is multidisciplinary, involving political discourse, pragmatics and semantics, as well as corpus linguistics, subsequently demanding thorough analysis and elaboration. There are, however, some points that should be briefly mentioned and will facilitate the attempt to explain the findings.

2.1. Political Discourse

The definition and delimitation of political discourse is quite challenging as it cannot really "escape the definition of politics itself" (Van Dijk 1998: 15). It is a complicated domain and there are many angles from which one can observe political discourse. It is not a genre but rather "a class of genres defined by the

[3] It actually took 34 days and it was an unprecedented event, as described by Sokolowski, editor at large at Meriam-Webster (Herwick 2021).

social domain" (Van Dijk 2002: 212), potentially involving anyone employing language for a political purpose in a political context. However, for the sake of the completion of this paper, let's pretend to dehaze a bit this fuzzy domain and focus only on the discourse of the politicians.

The element of representativeness, which is prevalent to the organization of the Western Polity (Polymeneas 2018: 89) is also relevant to our study, because PMs, politicians in general are elected to represent, to a great extent, the public and this element has a magnifying effect when the discourse employed involves the imposition of obligations.

In the context of the pandemic, which affected all societies globally, political discourse took on another role. Politicians weren't there to give scientific information about the situation, but rather to employ their power as leaders to introduce and impose strict safety regulations.

2.2. Some Notes on Modality

This new role taken by political discourse employed by politicians regarding the pandemic, has modality written all over, because within this frame there are elements that intertwine to produce a discourse that will impose the obligations / prohibitions.

Modality just like political discourse is again a fuzzy domain in terms of definition and classification, and ambiguity (Kratzer 1981: 41; Depraetere & Reed 2006: 272; Palmer 2001). It's a manifold notional category leading to a "diverse assortment of classifications[4]" in the literature, as Depraetere and Reed (2006: 277) point out. Also, there are many grammatical categories in both languages that may carry all types of modality and this widens the spectrum. To narrow it down, our starting point was focused on the prototypical modal verbs expressing deontic modality, namely *must* and *πρέπει*. Deontic modality indicates "the degree of moral desirability of the state of affairs expressed in the utterance, typically, but not necessarily[5], on behalf of the speaker" (Nuyts 2006: 4). These elements of deontic modality are not just expressions, but they have a performative illocutionary force enabling the speaker to "intervene in the world" (Veloudis 2010: 49). Also, deontic modals can be directives in the sense that the speaker actually tries to get the addressee to do something by laying the obligation and this adds to their pragmatic weight.

[4] Classifying modality constitutes a very long discussion. For more information on different classifications of modal meaning see Depraetere and Reed (2006: 277 – 280).

[5] The fact that the expression of moral derirability of what is to be uttered is not necessarily on behalf of the speaker is discussed in the findings section when the extensive use of the first-person plural collocates with the deontic modals under investigation in this paper.

3. COMPILING AND INTERROGATING THE CORPUS

Bearing all the above into consideration, the only way to go for this research was employing corpora. And there are many reasons for that. Corpus linguistics is a very valuable methodological tool, offering straightforward results which are readily and objectively verifiable (McEnery & Wilson 2001: 15). Also, it's relatively easy to compile a corpus, since almost everything is now digitized and can be found online. Apart from that, processing the data is facilitated through various processing tools that are also available online and for free[6]. Last, but not least, using corpora in a study facilitates the research in the sense that once a corpus is compiled and processed, one has access to real language in use; having access to the collocations in a corpus, offers further linguistic insight to the context. This can be particularly helpful when one's research includes modality, as the interpretation of modal verbs is seen as context dependent (Kratzer 1981: 42).

There are many different types of corpora, but for our research we compiled a comparable corpus, which basically consists of sub-corpora for which the same sampling method was applied. This means having the same sampling period, belonging to the same genre of the same domain, and having the same proportions of texts (McEnery & Xiao 2007: 20–21).

3.1. The Corpus

This was achieved, as seen in the table below. Our comparable corpus contains approximately 30.000 word tokens, almost equally allocated in the two sub-corpora. It consists of speeches or spoken statements given by the Greek and British PMs, addressing the public regarding exclusively the pandemic, from March 2020 to December of the same year.

In the case of the Greek PM, there wasn't really an abundance of statements to randomly choose from, as he only addressed the public 11 times during this time frame. These speeches constitute 8,9% of the overall 123 public statements on Covid-19 in Greece during this time frame[7] and it is also worth noting that he made very few, if any statements during the summer of 2020. On the other hand, the British PM had a more dominant presence in the public statements regarding the pandemic, as he addressed the public 34 times during the first year, constituting 37% of the overall public statements. In the case of Johnson, the

[6] AntConC, the software employed for the compiling and the processing of our corpus, can be found online, along with other software tools developed by Lawrence Anthony at https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/

[7] The majority of statements, 112 to be precise, regarding the pandemic situation and the preventative measures were given by a group of representatives from the Civil Protection Ministry, the Ministry of Health and Sotiris Tsiodras, who was the government's communication liaison for the Covid-19 crisis during the first months, having addressed the public more than 67 times.

speeches to be included in the corpus were randomly chosen abiding by the same time frame.

Sub-Corpus	**Word tokens**	**Speeches from March to December 2020**
British PM Johnson	15207	12
Greek PM Mitsotakis	13859	11

Table 1. The Corpus

3.2. Findings – Modal Verbs

The raw and the normalized values of the instances of must and *πρέπει* are seen in Table 2 below. The Greek PM Corpus has a higher value of *πρέπει* than the instances of *must* in the British one do. Note also that the deontic readings are very high compared to the epistemic or the pseudo deontic ones[8], which were very few or non-existent.

Corpus	**British PM**	**Greek PM**
n= **must/πρέπει**	47	61
Of which negated	5	8
Normalized value	**3.1‰**	**4.4‰**
% of deontic use	89.4%	96.8%
% of pseudo-deontic	10.6% (5)	0%
% of epistemic use	0%	3.2% (2)
n= **have to**	13	

Table 2. Instances of *must* & *πρέπει* in the corpus.

It was dictated by common sense that in a situation like this, the modal verbs expressing strong obligation would be present more often than not, even though

[8] The case of pseudo-deontic *πρέπει* as a filler and pragmatic marker in political discourse is discussed in Sophiadi and Tsangalidis (2021). *Must* and *πρέπει* are consistently used as conventionalized fillers, not to express obligation or epistemic modality of any kind; they do, however, carry a pragmatic load having a "manipulative potential" (Furko 2017: 2), since they are "spontaneously recognized" (Angermuller 2014: 60) rather than interpreted.

they might constitute a face threatening act as described by Brown and Levinson (1987: 275). Common sense is verified through the results of this study. Although in general, a downward trend is observed in the frequency of modal verbs, the sample we got from the first year of the pandemic indicates an interruption in this dwindling trend as we have higher values than the ones observed in other studies. And this is obvious in both languages.

More specifically, there is a declining tendency in the Greek *πρέπει*, observed in the HNC, the Hellenic National Corpus, having a frequency of 1.13‰ for the years 2021-2022 whereas in 2018-2019 the frequency of *πρέπει* was 2.22‰[9]. Diachronic research in political discourse again indicates once again a downward trend in the frequency of *πρέπει* from 1989 to 2019, 3.4‰ to 2.5‰ (Sophiadi & Tsangalidis 2021: 1192). Again, the value of *πρέπει* was lower than the one we have for 2020, from the Greek sub-corpus we compiled.

The same goes for English where much research has been done on modality and how it evolves diachronically. There have been diachronic studies over the years investigating English modal verbs (Bowie, Wallis & Aarts 2013: 76–77, Leech 2003: 234–235, Leech 2011: 551), indicating a substantial decline in their frequency. Additionally, another corpus-based study conducted by Lewis in 2015, also involving a diachronic comparable corpus of French and English political discourse (1997-2002) gives a frequency value of 1.81‰ (2015: 162) for *must*, indicating once again that there is indeed an observable increase in its frequency in our corpus.

Apart from the anticipated difference in the frequency of deontic modality in our corpus, there are also some other points to consider. The fact that their temporal location is in the present/future indicates again that it doesn't just "report the existence of an obligation but also to issue a directive" (Sophiadi & Tsangalidis 2021: 1189). This constitutes a "directive" illocutionary force, namely an attempt by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (Levinson 1983: 240). In other words, it is a "face threatening act", threatening the hearer's negative face, namely "the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 13).

However, both Prime Ministers seem to employ strategies to mitigate this force and redress this act. This mitigation attempt may be explained by what Leech called a democratization trend (2003: 237). A political actor, a political leader, in our case, seems hesitant to make claims to authority and power even in extreme situations like these. One of the ways they achieved that was by using the actual verbs expressing obligation/prohibition on the one hand, but not laying out specific obligations on the other. In other words, they opted for general

[9] These trends were observed by using the HNC online and selecting the above-mentioned time frames. For more information on the HNC and other corpora in Greek see Sophiadi (2017).

obligations/prohibitions when *must*/*πρέπει* were involved as observed in the examples below.

1. *We **must** keep reducing the incidence of this disease. We **must** keep that R down below 1. And that means we **must** remember the basics. Wash our hands, keep social distance, isolate if you have symptoms – and get a test.*

2. *But until we do, we **must** rely on our willingness to look out for each other, to protect each other.*

3. *Στο επόμενο δίμηνο ο κίνδυνος θα γιγαντώνεται. Γι' αυτό και θα ακολουθήσουν νέοι περιορισμοί. Και **πρέπει** όλοι να δείξουμε πειθαρχία. [within the next two months the danger will grow. That's why new restrictions will follow. And we **must** all show discipline]*

4. *Αλλά και να μεταφέρω το μήνυμα ότι αυτή την κρίση **πρέπει** να την περάσουμε ενωμένοι και με το κόστος μοιρασμένο δίκαια στην κοινωνία […And convey the message that we **must** get through this crisis together, with the cost fairly divided within society]*

Table 3. Examples of *must/πρέπει* from the corpus

Another point that should be discussed about the findings on the modal verbs in question is the fact that most of the instances were deontic and there were few or no epistemic uses. This seems to agree with the general trend observed in the literature, the trend of moving toward monosemy or away from epistemic meaning (Leech 2003: 235).

One last thing worth mentioning that can be seen as a strategy to mitigate the expression of obligation/prohibition is the overall use of the first-person plural as a subject and more particularly, as a subject/agent/potential agent of *must*/*πρέπει*. The table below indicates a high frequency in the British PM corpus, making *we* the fourth most frequent word, and the number of instances of the first-person plural being the subject of the verb in the Greek PM corpus is even higher.

Corpus	**British PM**	**Greek PM**
First-person **plural** as Verb Subject	459	864
First-person **plural** & ***must/πρέπει***	**32/47** **68%**	**18/61** **29.5%**
First person **singular** & ***must/ πρέπει***	6/47	1/61

Table 4. First-person plural in the corpus

The almost double number of first-person plural instances in the Greek PM corpus can be explained by the fact that there is no infinitive in Modern Greek, so all verb forms are marked for person. However, the numbers are quite high, and the first-person plural is used extensively in political discourse, "to induce interpreters to conceptualize group identity, coalitions […] either as insiders or outsiders" employing its deictic function (Chilton 2004: 56). By using the inclusive first-person plural and by claiming common ground and cooperation in this imposing situation, redressive action is employed to mitigate the FTA of the obligation (Brown & Levinson 1987: 102). In other words, since *we* obviously collocates with *must* within the context set for this research, it can be used as a rhetorical tool to mitigate and to legitimize the obligation, operating in other words as a politeness strategy.

Apart from expressing solidarity and the unity of the people, the inclusive first-person plural also possesses *relational* modality in the sense that it highlights the user as the one having "the authority to speak for others" (Fairclough, 1998: 106). This legitimization of the (moral, even,) obligation expressed by *must/πρέπει* and the fact that the use of first-person plural may be inclusive or may leave the door open for inclusion, splits the weight of the obligation and shifts its source to the public as well. In other words, even in cases where it is inclusive or even if it is purposefully used to create ambiguity as to whom it includes or excludes, it seems to be the preferable person for both PMs in our corpus.

3.3. The Future Tense, *Should* and the Present Indicative

A high frequency was also observed in the use of the future tense, *will* and *θα*. This was anticipated, as language of the politicians was involved in this research. As seen in the table below, there is a significant number of instances in both sub-corpora, and again the Greek PM corpus had more: in the British PM corpus *will* is the 9th most frequent word, whereas *θα* holds the 4th place in the frequency list of the Greek PM corpus.

Corpus	**British PM**	**Greek PM**
=n **will/θα**	188	300
Normalized value	12.36‰	21.6‰
Will/θα to introduce specific measures	41	45
%	21.8%	15%
First person **plural** & will /θα	66/188	48/300

Table 5. The future tense in the corpus

The future tense holds the power of prediction; politicians have this "socially ratified power", among others, to make predictions about the future in terms of which, orders or warnings, "injunctions about what people must do or must not do now can be legitimized" (Fairclough 2003: 167). In this sense, both PMs employ this power to introduce obligations, safety measures but also to provide optimistic predictions about the future or even make promises, using also their power of inclusion as we have already discussed, mainly through the use of the first-person plural.

Apart from the future tense, instances of *should* were also investigated in the British PM corpus. *Should* was used but it was almost 50% less frequent than *must*. *Should* constitutes an expression of milder obligation, and probably because of this it seemed to be Johnson's preference when the obligation was specific. Moreover, it seemed to collocate more with *you* and *they* as subjects, rather than *we*. It was used to introduce or highlight certain specific safety regulations, as you can see in the examples.

	British PM	
=n **should**	29	***That means you should: stay 2 metres apart and if you can't do that then keep 1 metre apart with mitigations***
1st person plural	5 (17%)	
2nd person	8 (27.5%)	
3rd person (*they*, or referring to groups of people)	6 (20.6%)	***And of course they should do so in a way that is COVID-Secure, keeping customers and staff safe.***
Other/abstract	10 (34.9%)	

Table 6. The use of should in the British PM Corpus

The present indicative sentences in the Greek PM Corpus could not be overlooked in this study, because the initial motto of the government campaign to encourage people to practice social distancing was *Μένουμε Σπίτι* (we stay at home). This sentence, having the first-person plural as subject, saturated the Greek consciousness throughout the first year of the pandemic, but similar structures were also present in the corpus as well. This is worth mentioning because it is not just descriptive but can be seen as quite prescriptive: a strong obligation in other words intervening in the world, changing reality in a way. In terms of politeness, Brown and Levinson have similar examples, usually in the context of laying obligations to children (1987: 207), whereby the weight of the face threatening obligation is mitigatedthrough negative politeness by presenting it off record, as a general rule.

Greek PM – Instances of the Present Indicative in the first person plural inclusive
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Τηρούμε *σχολαστικά τα μέτρα ατομικής υγιεινής. Δεν* ***κάνουμε*** *χειραψίες.* ***Κρατάμε*** *αποστάσεις.* ***Φροντίζουμε*** *ιδιαίτερα τους ευάλωτους συμπολίτες μας.*

Table 7. The Present Indicative in the Greek PM Corpus

4. CONCLUSION - FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As anticipated due to the severity of the situation and contrary to the trends observed in larger studies, the use of the deontic modal verbs *must/πρέπει* has indeed a higher frequency. So, their use as a means to express obligation or prohibition is evident, however it is not prevalent, strong obligation that is, because it does employ strategies that mitigate the weight of this face threatening act, like the use of the first person plural. Other strategies were also involved in articulating the obligations set by the Prime Ministers, like the use of the future tense, the present indicative for the Greek PM Corpus and the use of the milder modal *should* for the British one.

These findings to some extent validate common sense. However, what is also important is to keep in mind that this is not spontaneous discourse. It is pre-planned and obviously those who were involved in outlining these speeches, took many things into consideration, the most important of which being to successfully set the obligation to persuade the millions of people watching to abide by the regulations. This is obviously a multidisciplinary issue and research involving many different domains that demands more research.

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Αγγελίνα Σοφιάδη
Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης

Αναστάσιος Τσαγγαλίδης
Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης

ΕΚΦΡΑΣΕΙΣ ΥΠΟΧΡΕΩΣΗΣ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗ ΔΙΑΡΚΕΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΝΔΗΜΙΑΣ: ΕΝΑ ΣΥΓΚΡΙΣΙΜΟ ΣΩΜΑ ΚΕΙΜΕΝΩΝ

Περίληψη

Ο σκοπός αυτής της μελέτης είναι να ερευνήσει πτυχές της τροπικότητας και πιο συγκεκριμένα τις εκφράσεις υποχρέωσης όπως εκδηλώθηκαν μέσα από τους λόγους των πολιτικών αρχηγών του Η.Β. και της Ελλάδας κατά την πρώτη χρονιά της πανδημίας. Οι λόγοι των πρωθυπουργών με τους οποίους απευθύνονταν αποκλειστικά στον λαό και αποκλειστικά για την εξέλιξη της πανδημίας και τα μέτρα προστασίας από αυτήν συλλέχθηκαν προκειμένου να δημιουργηθεί ένα συγκρίσιμο σώμα κειμένων. Μέσα από αυτό ανιχνεύονται οι γλωσσικές προτιμήσεις των δύο πρωθυπουργών αναφορικά με την έκφραση της υποχρέωσης, και εξετάζονται τεχνικές με τις οποίες επιτυγχάνεται

είτε η ενίσχυση είτε η μείωση της δύναμης της (απειλητικής για το πρόσωπο) δεοντικής πράξης. Εξετάζονται κυρίως τα τροπικά ρήματα που χρησιμοποιούνται από τους δύο πρωθυπουργούς, καθώς και η χρήση του μέλλοντα για την παρουσίαση νέων μέτρων προστασίας. Επίσης συζητείται η χρήση του πρώτου πληθυντικού προσώπου μέσα στο πλαίσιο της έκφρασης της υποχρέωσης.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: πολιτικός λόγος, σώματα κειμένων, τροπικότητα, πραγματολογία