

Ya verás: The fossilization of the future in Mexican Spanish

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In many languages, the question of so-called future tenses is complex. While future tenses are often understood to encode simply that something will happen at some point after the moment of speech, other uses have also been noted, some of which suggest that some "future" markers are not really tense markers at all, but rather modal or epistemic markers. In Modern Spanish, there exist two future forms: one older, synthetic form (e.g. *cantaré*), and one newer, analytic form (e.g. *voy a cantar*). This paper will investigate a basic yet still empirically unanswered question: what are the functions of the first form, the synthetic future? Like other future forms cross-linguistically, this form is not simply a tense marker, though it is used temporally, as in (1).

- (1) "...y cuando se casen tus hermanas, ¿qué?" "Ellas se tendrán que amoldarse al hombre."
(UNAM 1971:167)
"...and when your sisters get married, then what?" "They'll have to mold themselves to the man."

In fact, for American Spanish, some have proposed the modal function, as in (2), as its principal meaning (Westmoreland 1997:375-376, 388; Kitova 1986:413; Baena 1996:107).

- (2) Ahorita, ¿qué horas serán? (UNAM 1976:169)
'Right now, what time could it be?'

The data for this study were extracted from electronic versions of the 172,699-word *El habla popular de la Ciudad de México* (UNAM 1976) and the 167,083-word *El habla de la Ciudad de México* (UNAM 1971). All occurrences of the synthetic future were extracted from each corpus, yielding a total of 333 tokens. In terms of frequency, there is no evidence for the primacy of the modal use over the temporal use or vice versa: both meanings are used at about the same rate. There are, however, modal shades to some—though certainly not all—temporal uses, which may in part account for the claim that the modal use is the most basic.

In looking at the distributional patterns of the synthetic future, I will show that its use is more common among educated speakers, who tend to use the form temporally, in contrast to working-class speakers, who tend to use it modally. The modal use, which has been expanding its relative frequency since before the twelfth century (c.f. Kitova 1986), may continue to grow in popularity at the expense of the temporal use. Simultaneously, fossilization of the synthetic future is evident in various sites. While the sites that others have proposed for fossilization, such as in the apodosis of if-clauses (Moreno de Alba 1978:89), are not highly frequent in these data, 20% of all uses appear in fixed expressions and nearly half appear with the same three verbs: *ser*, *decir*, and *ver*. It is suggested that the synthetic future form does in fact seem to be fossilizing, though this process is perhaps further along in the temporal use than in the modal use, which still seems to maintain quite a bit of its productivity. This is evidence that the synthetic future, particularly as a tense marker, may eventually drop out of use in American Spanish.

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