

Source and strength of modality: An empirical study of root *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* in Present-day British English

An Verhulst^{a,*}, Ilse Depraetere^b, Liesbet Heyvaert^c

^a Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, Belgium

^b Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille 3, UMR 8163 STL, France

^c Research unit 'Functional and cognitive linguistics: grammar and typology', University of Leuven, Belgium

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Abstract

The parameters of source and strength are often presented as crucial for the semantic profile of modal verbs expressing root necessity such as 'should', 'ought to' and 'be supposed to'. Their role, however, is hard to assess because of the lack of clear definitions. This article offers a new perspective on the nature of subjectivity and strength that is grounded in detailed, qualitative corpus analysis of sentences with 'should', 'ought to' and 'be supposed to'. It operationalises and refines both parameters and applies them to an extensive corpus of 1200 Present-day English sentences with 'should', 'ought to' and 'be supposed to', which results in an updated and more accurate picture of the meaning distinctions between them. More generally, the study shows that an accurate interpretation of modal meanings is to a large extent dependent on the discourse context, and that a detailed corpus analysis is required to understand the complexity of the parameters interacting in the establishment of modal meanings in context.

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1. Introduction

This article offers an analysis of *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* when they express root necessity meanings, that is, when they refer to the factors that influence the actualisation of a situation that is said to be necessary (cf. e.g. Depraetere and Reed, 2006:274; Verhulst, 2012:66), as in (1)–(3).

- (1) To apply for this card, applications **should** be made to the Director of Recreation. (BNC HJB 271, root necessity, regulation)
- (2) The whole business of convergence raises the intriguing question of who **ought to** regulate this burgeoning new industry. (BNCHMK 27, root necessity, circumstantial)
- (3) About quarter to eight he shoots through to the other room and finds Dick and Joy Hardy there, they **were supposed to** be picking Gwen up and bringing her round. (BNC GUD 845, root necessity, circumstantial)

Example (1) expresses that there is a regulation stipulating that it is necessary for you to contact the Director of Recreation if you wish to obtain a recreational card. Example (2) expresses that particular circumstances (economic globalization)

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 485251663.

E-mail addresses: an.verhulst@ua.ac.be, verhulstan@gmail.com (A. Verhulst).

require new regulations.¹ In example (3) the circumstances concern a specific past arrangement in which Dick and Joy were required to pick up Gwen.

We have chosen to focus on *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* because they both refer to a necessity that is less pressing than that expressed by *must* and *have to*. As Huddleston (2002:186) puts it, they express ‘medium strength modality’. However, while there seems to be a consensus on the feature of ‘inherent strength’ they share compared to ‘inherently strong modals’ like *must* and *have to*, there is no unanimous view on what distinguishes them. The difference in effect between the modal verbs *should* and *ought to* (when they express root necessity, as in (1)–(3)) has often been analysed in contradictory ways: for instance, they are both classified as subjective by Huddleston (2002:186) and Collins (1991:377), but Declerck (1991:377) and Larreya and Rivière (2005:115) claim that *ought to* is more objective than *should*.

Ought to has been considered to be stronger (Westney, 1995:168) but also weaker (Sweetser, 1990:53) than *should*. When compared to *must*, *should* and *ought to* have been argued to express virtually identical root necessity meanings such as advice or moral suggestions (see, among others, Coates, 1983:81; Myhill, 1995:162, 174; Høye, 1997:110; Palmer, 2001:73; Huddleston, 2002:207; Smith, 2003:242; Biber et al., 2006:205). Interestingly, the semi-auxiliary² *be supposed to* is regularly mentioned in the margin of studies of root necessity, but its semantics likewise remains unclear. With respect to the strength of the modal claim it makes, Altman (1986:83), for instance, observes that it is weaker than that of *should*, whereas according to Biber et al. (2006) it is stronger than *should*.

In this paper, we argue that the lack of unanimity on the semantic profile of the modal verbs *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* is due to the fact that the parameters that have thus far been used to describe them are insufficiently or inaccurately defined: notions such as ‘source’, ‘subjectivity’ and ‘strength’, which are typically resorted to in the discussion of root necessity, are in need of clarification. At the same time, we show that detailed qualitative analysis of corpus data is needed to test the value of these parameters and move beyond existing contradictory claims³. In Section 1 we present a critical discussion of the ways in which the notions ‘source’ and ‘subjectivity’ have been used to characterise root necessity meanings. We suggest alternative definitions and show that, when applied to a corpus, these help capture subtleties of the root necessity meanings of *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* that had hitherto gone unnoticed. In Section 2 we consider the notion of strength more closely and present an alternative definition aiming to make the notion operational in the discussion of root modality. Our analysis is based on a set of 1200 examples of root *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* from the British National Corpus. In addition to revealing the specifics of each modal verb, the corpus analysis brings to the fore the importance of integrating the discourse context in the analysis of modal auxiliaries, and it allows us to identify the relative importance of each parameter for distinguishing the root necessity modals under investigation from one another. Section 3 draws some conclusions and sketches possible pathways for further analysis.

2. Source, subjectivity and strength

2.1. Parameter 1: source

In order to pin down usage contexts of necessity modals, researchers have looked at the (differences in) sources that the necessities result from. If it is the speaker who is the source, that is, if it is the speaker who wants the situation to be

¹ We prefer the term ‘root’ to ‘nonepistemic’ necessity because the latter term fails to give a positive characterisation of the element of meaning that unites the relevant uses. The term ‘root’ reflects the fact that root modality is more ‘basic’ than epistemic modality in that epistemic modal meanings have historically developed from nonepistemic ones (cf. e.g. Nordlinger and Closs-Traugott, 1997). While ‘deontic necessity’ is sometimes used as a synonym of non-epistemic necessity (cf. e.g. Bache and Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997), it is often reserved for root necessity meanings which have the illocutionary force of an order, as in ‘You should tell your parents’ (vs. non-deontic necessity: ‘The books should be returned after two weeks.’) (cf. e.g. Huddleston, 2002). We have therefore chosen to use the more neutral and more encompassing concept, ‘root necessity’, which covers any necessity meaning that is nonepistemic.

² *Be supposed to* has not generally been recognised as having full auxiliary status and has been called a ‘periphrastic’ or ‘semi-/pseudo-auxiliary’. For a good discussion of the auxiliary status of *be supposed to*, see Westney (1995: 14–35). Henceforth we will talk about *should*, *ought to* and *be supposed to* as modal verbs, and will ignore the difference in auxiliary status between *should* and *ought to* on the one hand, and *be supposed to* on the other.

³ Classification of corpus data, especially when working with semantic and pragmatic parameters of the kind we are, is challenging. However, working intensively with the sample at hand has gradually enabled us to fine-tune the parameters so that in the end, we always managed to classify examples: (1) We thereby took great care to examine the wider context of the BNC examples, taking into account not only the detailed background information provided by BNC (concerning, for instance, the precise source of the data, the nature of the speaker-hearer relation involved and the topic of discussion), but also the actual discourse context; (2) in all, we processed the BNC data three times, with intervals of several months between the different rounds of analysis; (3) to accommodate hybrid or in-between cases, we complemented existing binary descriptions such as weak vs. strong necessity and introduced new categories like ‘intermediate strength’.

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