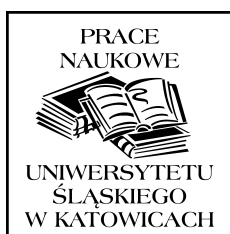


# Expressing obligation in Old English

Constructions with pre-modal  
and lexical verbs



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Jerzy Nykiel

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Constructions with pre-modal  
and lexical verbs

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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# Introduction

## 1.1. Aims of the study

The present monograph is a study of the system of obligation expression in Old English with a proviso that the focus is on verbs only. As such it aims to contribute to the vastness of literature devoted to modality. Situated as it is in the center of interests of legions of contemporary linguists, modality has been extensively studied as a notional category with reference to English (for example, PALMER 1974, 1979, 2001; LYONS 1977; HERMERÉN 1978; COATES 1983; PERKINS 1983; NUYTS 1994; WESTNEY 1995; HOYE 1997, contributions in FACCHINETTI, KRUG and PALMER, eds., 2003), from a historical perspective (for example, BYBEE, PERKINS and PAGLIUCA 1994, articles in HART, ed., 2003; TRAUOGOTT and DASHER 2005), as well as from a contrastive viewpoint (for example, MATTHEWS 1991; SALKIE 1996; DE HAAN 1997; ČERMÁK and KLÉGR 2004, papers in FACCHINETTI and PALMER 2004; WÄRNSBY 2006). There is also no shortage of studies that cut across these categories, e.g. papers in KAKIETEK, ed. (1991), van der AUWERA and PLUNGIAN (1998). In light of the proliferation of contributions to the field, while approaching the topic of modality I can hear the words of PERKINS (1983: 4) issue a warning that “doing research on modality is similar to trying to move in an overcrowded room without treading on anyone else’s feet.” Today, over twenty years after Perkins’s study, despite even more feet taking up whatever is left of the free space left in the room, I consider the effort worthwhile since, as we learn from LASS (1997: 278), “extensive talk about something is no guarantee we understand it.”

One of the preliminary queries that needs to be raised is what kind of obligation is meant in the title of this study, which will help specify the focal semantic area to be investigated. A check of OED turns up the fact that the word “obligation” (Latin *obligatio* ‘an engaging or pledging, a binding



agreement or bond,' derived from *obligare* 'to bind or tie around, bind up, bind by an oath, promise or a moral or legal tie.' *Obligare* itself is a prefixed form: *ob* 'towards' + *ligare* 'to tie, bind,' *ligare* going back to PIE *leig-* 'to bind' (cf. OED 1989 and WATKINS, ed. 2000)) has a number of meanings in Present-Day English, the most important of which seem to be 1) "an agreement whereby one person is bound to another," 2) "moral or legal constraint, or constraining force or influence," 3) "an action, or an act, to which one is morally or legally obliged." It is fair to say that a context of obligation in every day use of English depicts a situation in which somebody, who is sometimes referred to as an obligee, finds his or her actions influenced by a usually unpleasant constraint originating in a source outside of the obligee. When transferred to the plane of modal theories, the situation construed as shown is describable in terms of deontic necessity (see LYONS 1977; PALMER 2001). True as it is that deontic necessity provides a springboard for the present exposition, it is not the sole object of the following discussion. Even a superficial overview of deontic necessity makes it reasonable to extend the discussion so that it would also cover a scenario in which the constraint comes from the obligee himself or herself, that is, the meanings of participant-internal necessity (cf. van der AUWERA and PLUNGIAN 1998) as well as permission and prohibition. The inclusion of participant-internal necessity stems from the semantic affinity between deontic necessity and participant-internal necessity in that they differ in the location of the source of the constraint only. As for permission and prohibition, these two notions can be placed in a broader context alongside deontic necessity by showing that prohibition is by and large synonymous with deontic necessity when the latter occurs with negated proposition (cf. LYONS 1977; DE HAAN 1997). It should then be borne in mind that the term "obligation" as used in the title is a catch-all label which centrally stands for deontic necessity but which also embraces the related meanings such as participant-internal necessity, prohibition and permission.

Central to the thesis of this study is the fact that in Present-Day English studies of obligation coincide with and focus on the study of the modal verbs. It appears that talking about the modals as a vehicle for obligation is indispensable when talking about obligation in Present-Day English, which works such as JACOBSSON (1978), NEY (1978), PALMER (1979, 1986), MYHILL (1996, 1997) and others stand to prove. Even if some other exponents of "obligation" are analyzed, they are usually shown to play a secondary role and to be somewhat less attractive. Part of the reason why linguists tend to be much taken with studying the PDE modals is that they bring along the attractive lure of the morphosyntactic peculiarities with them, the roots of which can be sought in the past. The morphosyntactic features of the modals together with their semantic characteristics lead PERKINS (1983) and WESTNEY (1995) to argue that the modals are unmarked, other modal expressions being

marked. The unmarked status of the modals in the area of semantics translates into “their essentially vague or minimally specified meanings” (WESTNEY 1995: 214).

Given the above considerations, I intend to seek tokens of obligation among the OE predecessors of the PDE modals, the so-called pre-modals. The task looks promising and challenging as it, among other things, involves juxtaposing well established and frequent items such as *sceal* with brand-new additions to the pre-modals of obligation such as *agan*. Inspired by the bias cherished by the researchers of Present-Day English, I devote most of space available to the pre-modals, yet I consider the obligation carried by OE lexical verbs in its own right as well.

An overarching aim is to elucidate the types and shades of the meaning of obligation as expressed by the two kinds of OE verbs and traceable to OE texts. The semantics of the pre-modals in this study is viewed essentially diachronically. In scrutinizing a sample of the corpus occurrences of a pre-modal, I take the meanings of the verb to be a reflection of a process of semantic change rather than a synchronic state. Such an outlook has the advantage of providing a more in-depth insight into, for example, the differences between the obligation of *sceal*, *agan*, and other pre-modals. In the case of the lexical verbs, the approach is less detailed and hence largely synchronic, which should not, however, preclude me from verifying the tenability of the bias in favor of the pre-modals in Old English.

## 1.2. The layout of the study

Five chapters converge to make up the body of this monograph. Chapter 2 lays down the theoretical grid, introduces the terminology to be utilized throughout the ensuing chapters and designates the pre-modals as the focal object of the study. I begin with delineating the semantic notion of modality in section 2.1 and show how it can be realized in a language in section 2.2. With the focal realization of modality being the verb, in 2.3 I proceed to fish out theories of modal meanings relevant for the further research. This section also sets out the methodological guidelines for data analysis, which combine elements of cognitive and functional theories. Sections 2.4 through 2.5.3 are where the problem of the semantic change in modal meanings appears on the scene. In 2.6 the semantic change is joined by syntax in the issue of grammaticalization as vital for the modal verbs in English. Starting with section 2.7 I delve into Old English so as to include consideration of the types of OE verbs. With the class of the pre-modals being highlighted, section 2.7.1 takes up the theme of the

controversial syntactic status of the pre-modals in Old English and the later periods.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute a research part of the present study. The former undertakes a corpus analysis of five pre-modals whose meanings center on the expression of obligation-related notions: *agan*, *þearf*, *sceal*, *mot*, and *mæg*, each verb being discussed in a separate section. Eleven lexical verbs, which split into two groups, that is, verbs of necessity and verbs of permission, take prominence in Chapter 4. The results of the research are assembled in Chapter 5 and illustrated by showing the meanings of the pre-modals and the lexical verbs on the continuum of deontic modality. Inevitably, the obligative semantics of the pre-modals and the relevant lexical verbs is also analyzed from a comparative perspective.

The approach to data retrieval adopted in the present research is a corpus-based one. I make use of two corpora of Old English texts: the Old English part of the Helsinki Corpus and the Dictionary of Old English Corpus (DOE). With each verb I look into a sample of examples made available by the searching and concordancing program Wordsmith Tools. The details of the codification of examples retrieved from both corpora are elaborated on at the beginning of Chapter 3.

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# Wyrażanie przymusu w języku staroangielskim

## Konstrukcje z czasownikami premodalnymi i leksykalnymi

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszej monografii jest charakterystyka przymusu wyrażanego za pomocą czasowników dostępnych w tekstach staroangielskich. Zagadnienie to naturalnie wpisuje się w rozważania na temat modalności, jej semantycznej natury i urzeczywistnienia w języku. Punktem wyjścia jest lokalizacja przymusu w teoriach modalności, wyodrębnienie czasowników będących przedmiotem badań oraz sprecyzowanie miarodajnej metody pozwalającej na porównanie przymusu charakterystycznego dla każdego z czasowników.

Pojęcie przymusu, a raczej szersze pojęcie konieczności, którego przymus jest integralną częścią, staje się obok możliwości, fundamentem koncepcji modalności LYONSA (1977). Wyodrębnienie przymusu w tym i innych ujęciach modalności sprowadza się do przyjrzenia się konieczności nieepistemicznej, która obejmuje konieczność zewnętrzną, konieczność wewnętrzną, a także pozwolenie/zakaz. Pozwolenie/zakaz, choć formalnie przynależą do możliwości nieepistemicznej, są także w centrum mojego zainteresowania dzięki pozostaniu w logicznej zależności z koniecznością. Stojąc na stanowisku, iż konieczność, podobnie jak inne znaczenia modalne, realizuje się przede wszystkim w znaczeniu czasowników, w dalszej części pracy koncentruję się na dwóch grupach czasowników staroangielskich: pięciu czasownikach premodalnych i jedenastu czasownikach leksykalnych. Znacznie większy nacisk położony jest na analizę znaczeń czasowników pre-modalnych, które — morfologicznie zaklasyfikowane jako czasowniki przeszło-teraźniejsze — są załącznikiem systemu modalnego w późniejszym angielskim w rozumieniu PALMERA (2003).

Przystępując do badań znaczeń wyodrębnionych czasowników, przyjmuję następujące założenie: znaczenia modalne tworzą zbiory nieostre (zob. COATES 1983), co oznacza, iż w danym wypadku znaczenie czasownika może mieć cechy desygnujące go bliżej centrum zbioru bądź bliżej peryferii zbioru. Centrum znaczenia konieczności daje się określić przez zbiór cech, m.in. siłę nacisku wywieranego przez antagonistę (źródło nacisku) na agonistę (osobę poddaną naciskowi) (zob. TALMY 2000), stopień subiektywności znaczenia, określenie czy w danym przypadku mamy do czynienia z kontekstem performatywnym czy też nie.

Stosując wskazane parametry w części badawczej, dochodzę do wniosku, że system wyrażania przymusu za pomocą czasowników premodalnych dopiero się wykształca. Spośród pięciu czasowników premodalnych, jedynie *sceal* ze względu na konsekwencję używany jest performatywnie, subiektywnie, wyrażając znaczną siłę nacisku wygenerowaną przez antagonistę. Podobnie jak w wypadku pozostałych czasowników premodalnych, przykłady użycia *sceal* ze znaczeniem konieczności zewnętrznej tworzą continuum rozciągające się od centrum do peryferii. Dwa czasowniki, *agan* i *mot* wykazują cechy świadczące o początkowym etapie funkcjonowania ze znaczeniem konieczności zewnętrznej: sporadycznie pojawiają się w kontekstach performatywnych i w zależności od konkretnego przypadku, wykazują znaczne wahania pomiędzy słabszą a mocniejszą siłą nacisku.

Podstawową różnicą w użyciu czasowników premodalnych i leksykalnych jest większa precyzja konieczności czasowników leksykalnych, które również częściej wyrażają konieczność narzuconą przez zindywidualizowanego raczej niż zinstytucjonalizowanego antagonistę.

Część badawcza niniejszej pracy opiera się na badaniu tekstów staroangielskich zebranych w korpusach elektronicznych. Wykorzystane zostały dwa różne korpusy tekstów: The Old English Part of The Helsinki Corpus i The Dictionary of Old English Corpus.

# L'expression de l'obligation dans le vieil anglais

## Les constructions avec des verbes pré-modaux et lexicaux

R é s u m é

Le but de cette monographie est de tracer la caractéristique de l'obligation, exprimée à l'aide des verbes présents dans des textes en vieil anglais. La question s'inscrit naturellement dans la réflexion sur la modalité, sa nature sémantique et sa réalisation dans la langue. La localisation de l'obligation dans des théories de modalité, la distinction des verbes — objets de recherche et la détermination d'une méthode objective qui permet la comparaison de l'obligation typique pour chaque verbe sont le point de départ de cette étude.

La notion d'obligation ou plutôt celle de nécessité dont l'obligation est une partie intégrale, devient, en plus de la possibilité, le fondement de la conception de modalité de LYONS (1977). La distinction de l'obligation dans cet aspect de modalité, ainsi que dans les autres, se résume à aborder la nécessité non-épistémique, qui englobe la nécessité externe, la nécessité interne et aussi la permission / l'interdiction. La permission / l'interdiction, bien qu'elles appartiennent formellement à la possibilité non-épistémique, se trouvent-elles aussi dans le domaine de nos recherches car elles restent dans une relation logique avec la nécessité. En pensant que la nécessité, tout comme d'autres significations modales se réalise avant tout dans le sens du verbe, nous nous concentrons sur deux groupes de verbes du vieil anglais : cinq verbes pré-modaux et onze verbes lexicaux. Nous posons un accent plus grand sur l'analyse de significations des verbes pré-modaux qui, morphologiquement classés comme verbes perfecto-présents, sont un ferment du système modal dans l'anglais moderne d'après PALMER (2003).

En abordant l'étude de significations des verbes choisis j'adopte le raisonnement suivant : les significations modales forment des ensembles flous (voir COATES 1983) ce qui veut dire que dans un cas concret la signification du verbe peut avoir des caractéristiques qui le placent soit près du noyau de l'ensemble, soit sur sa périphérie. Le noyau de la signification de la nécessité se laisse définir par un ensemble de traits caractéristiques, entre autres la force de pression exercée par l'antagoniste (source de pression) sur l'agoniste (personne sur laquelle la pression est exercée) (voir TALMY 2000), le degré de subjectivité de la signification, la détermination si dans un cas précis il s'agit d'un contexte performatif ou non.

En appliquant ces paramètres dans la partie analytique, nous arrivons à la conclusion que le système d'expression de l'obligation à l'aide des verbes pré-modaux s'esquisse à peine. Parmi cinq verbes pré-modaux, seul *sceal* est utilisé avec une certaine conséquence de manière performative, subjective, en exprimant une grande pression exercée par le protagoniste. Tout comme dans le cas d'autres verbes pré-modaux, les exemples d'utilisation de *sceal* avec la signification de nécessité extérieure forment un continuum étendu du noyau aux périphéries. Deux verbes : *agan* et *mot* manifestent des traits qui suggèrent une première étape de fonctionnement avec la signification de nécessité extérieure : ils apparaissent sporadiquement dans des contextes performatifs et, selon le cas, affirment des fluctuations importantes entre la force de pression.

La différence première dans l'emploi des verbes pré-modaux et lexicaux est la précision plus grande de la nécessité des verbes lexicaux, qui expriment aussi plus souvent la nécessité imposée par un antagoniste plutôt individualisé qu'institutionnalisé.

La partie analytique de l'étude s'appuie sur l'examen des textes en vieil anglais, regroupés dans des corpus électroniques. Nous avons appliqué deux corpus de textes différents : The Old English Part of the Helsinki Corpus et The Dictionary of Old English Corpus.



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