

# The Rise of Modal Meanings in Early Modern English: the Case of the Semiauxiliary Verb BE *supposed to*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse and illustrate the emergence of epistemic and deontic modal meanings in the semi-auxiliary verb BE *supposed to*, which can be traced back to the Early Modern English period (EModE). This study is divided into two major sections. The first one sets out the most relevant semantic characteristics which this semi-auxiliary exhibits in present-day English, where it can convey the modal notions of obligation, unfulfilled obligation, prohibition and logical necessity. The second section offers the data resulting from the analysis of the meanings expressed by this construction in EModE. This examination involves several computerised corpora of historical texts, namely the *Helsinki Corpus*, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler* and the *Lampeter Corpus*, which comprise a total of c. 1.6 million words for the EModE period. The most important conclusion that has been drawn from this search is that the semi-auxiliary is used to express modal meanings not earlier than the second half of the 17th century. Additionally, the corpora also show that the epistemic uses of the construction are attested earlier than the deontic ones.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses the rise of modal meanings in the Early Modern English period (henceforth EModE), more specifically the case of BE *supposed to*, one member of the set of the so-called “semi-auxiliary verbs” (cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985:143). Firstly, in section 2 of this article I examine the

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most salient semantic properties of BE *supposed to* in present-day English (PE). Then, in section 3, I offer the data resulting from the semantic analysis of this verb in the EModE part of several computerised corpora of historical texts, namely the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts: Diachronic and Dialectal (HC)*, the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler (CEECS)* and the *Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English Tracts (LC)*. The purpose of this search is to discover the historical moment at which the semi-auxiliary BE *supposed to* began to exhibit the modal meanings which are characteristic of its current semantic content. Finally, section 4 summarises the main conclusions of this study.

## 2. THE SEMANTICS OF BE *SUPPOSED TO* IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

The central verb of this paper, BE *supposed to*, belongs to a group of 14 semi-auxiliaries which are formed by the introductory auxiliary BE, a lexical item (e.g. *obliged, supposed*, etc.) and the particle *to* (plus HAVE *to*). They are followed by a full verb in the infinitive. Semi-auxiliaries can be grouped together by virtue of one semantic aspect, namely the fact that they can all express modal meanings, and so they can be used to convey notions such as probability, necessity, obligation, etc.

The semi-auxiliary BE *supposed to* can express up to four different modal notions depending on the context: obligation, unfulfilled obligation, prohibition and logical necessity. The first three correspond to the type of modality traditionally known as *deontic*, whereas the latter can be referred to as *epistemic*. E.g.

- (1) *The students **are supposed to** bring the dictionaries with them.* (Obligation)
- (2) *He **was supposed to** come to the meeting last Wednesday, but we didn't see him.* (Unfulfilled obligation)
- (3) *You're **not supposed to** smoke in this room.* (Prohibition)
- (4) *The novel **is supposed to** be published next month.* (Logical necessity)

In the rest of this section I will focus my attention on the question whether BE *supposed to* fulfils a group of five tests which have been proposed by Westney (1995:27ff.) in order to obtain a thorough semantic description of semi-auxiliary status. Consider:

(i) Lack of subject-auxiliary restrictions. This test (originally devised for auxiliary verbs) serves to prove that most semi-auxiliaries are not semantically dependent on their subjects in so far as they can take either animate or inanimate subjects. BE *supposed to*, specifically, satisfies this criterion only when it has an epistemic value. Witness:

(5) *The man/The bus is **supposed to** be here at five.*

(ii) Voice neutrality. Semi-auxiliary verbs also prove to be semantically independent of the subject in that they can be used in either active or passive sentences without any change of meaning. BE *supposed to*, like most semi-auxiliaries, adjusts to this test, but only when it conveys epistemic meaning. Consider, for instance:

(6) *Thousands of people **are supposed to** meet the president. = The **president is supposed to** be met by thousands of people.*

(iii) Idiomatic status. This test serves to check that semi-auxiliaries convey idiomatic meanings, *i.e.*, that the lexical item taking part in their structure (*e.g.* *supposed*) expresses a meaning which is different from the one it has in other contexts. In the case of BE *supposed to*, it is apparent that its deontic senses are absent in the meaning of *supposed* as the past participle of the full verb SUPPOSE in other contexts: “believed, alleged”, etc. As for the epistemic sense of necessity, it is connected with the notion of “what is believed/alleged” (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002:208). Yet, in general terms, the semi-auxiliary fulfils the test of idiomatic status.

(iv) Modal meaning. This criterion applies to all of the semi-auxiliaries, including BE *supposed to*, because they convey modal meanings.

(v) Epistemic/non-epistemic alternation. One feature that characterises the behaviour of some semi-auxiliaries is that they exhibit both epistemic and non-epistemic meanings. This is also the case with BE *supposed to*, as mentioned above.

To sum up, after applying the five tests of semantic behaviour raised by Westney (1995:27ff.), it can be concluded that BE *supposed to* fulfils all of them. Therefore, this semi-auxiliary displays the main semantic features characteristic of its verb class and acts as a prototypical semi-auxiliary from the perspective of meaning.

### 3. A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF BE SUPPOSED TO IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

The semantic study of BE SUPPOSED *to* in EModE was mainly carried out in the three diachronic corpora mentioned in the introduction, the *HC*, the *CEECs* and the *LC*. These tools offered a wide range of writings dating back to EModE (years 1500 to 1710, following the division proposed in the *HC*) and a total number of c. 1.6 million words for this historical stage. The analysis of the texts comprised all the instances of the verb SUPPOSE and its derived participial adjectives because it seemed necessary to know the use, meaning and distribution of SUPPOSE as a lexical verb in order to find out the factors that brought about the rise of the semi-auxiliary BE SUPPOSED *to*.

The verb SUPPOSE is a French loanword which appears in English in the Middle English period according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*). As for EModE, SUPPOSE is recorded on 512 occasions in the corpus of this study. The morphological and syntactic analysis of these examples reveals that there are 41 constructions formally similar to the PE semi-auxiliary, most of them occurring towards the end of the period. Example (7) below is one illustrative case:

- (7) *And as to the disagreement, it was not in the charge it self, nor the matter alledged against Sir John Fenwick, but it was only in some small circumstances, in which men might vary who had heard the Deposition but once; and so, are not like a Witness to a fact, that he has seen or known, which he is supposed to reflect oft upon; (LC, 1697, Anon., A Letter to a Friend, in Vindication of the Proceedings against Sir John Fenwick [...])*

In (7) we find the sequence of elements that is characteristic of the semi-auxiliary verb in PE: BE + SUPPOSED + *to* + infinitive. Therefore, examples such as this one were taken as possible candidates for semi-auxiliary status. The semantic analysis of these cases provided, then, the key to determine whether they are true semi-auxiliaries.

After analysing the meanings expressed by these BE SUPPOSED *to* constructions, I concluded that eight of them may convey epistemic notions of logical necessity, as is the case with BE *supposed to* in PE. In (7), for instance, the writer says that, if someone witnesses an important fact, we logically deduce that he would normally reflect on what he has seen; this is what should happen in logical circumstances. Number (8) below provides further evidence. It indicates that scientific research leads scientists to deduce

that the earth should, by logical necessity, have a round form. The writer does not imply that he is absolutely certain about the fact he discusses, but his knowledge leads him to infer that what he says should be true:

- (8) *However, it bee certain, that the Artificial Globe (as the Natural is supposed to bee is of a Form precisely round, and may bee drawn upon all over with Great Circles Meridionally, (LC, 1649, John Gregorie, The Description and Use of the Terrestrial Globe)*

I also came across one case of BE *SUPPOSED to* with the deontic meaning of obligation, another of the values of the PE semi-auxiliary. In this case BE *SUPPOSED to* admits a deontic interpretation because the fragment deals with a rule whereby bishops are obliged to disposes other bishops of office. Consider (9) below:

- (9) *This Principle will secure Religion from depending on the Will of a Governour no less than that of our Adversaries, who would have Bishops to be Deprivable [= subject to dispossession] onely by Bishops. That likewise may have its ill Consequences, for what if those Bishops, who are suppos'd to Deprive [= divest or dispossess of office] another, should themselves be Heretical, or no true Friends of the Church? This Rule is still to be observ'd, that neither the Civil nor the Ecclesiastical Power may so usurp upon one another [...] (LC, 1692, Humphry Hody, A Letter from Mr. Humphrey Hody [...])*

In what follows I will examine the way in which these nine examples respond to the semantic criteria proposed by Westney (1995:27ff.) to identify semi-auxiliary status (cf. points (i) to (v) in section 2). The aim of this analysis is to find out whether the nine instances fulfil all the requirements to be considered as semi-auxiliary verbs.

(i) Lack of subject-auxiliary restrictions. As regards the eight instances from the corpus with epistemic BE *SUPPOSED to*, two of them have animate subjects, namely *he* (cf. example (7) above) and a *Physician*, as appears in example (10) below:

- (10) *If therefore a Physician is suppos'd to have learnt, whatever has been observ'd, of the different affections and disorders [...] you will not oppose him a Rival, who has not had a Philosophical Education, (LC, 1701, Anon., The Present State of Physick & Surgery in London [...])*

The rest of these instances contain inanimate subjects: *the Natural [Globe]* (cf. example (8) above), *the Periods of the Lives of many Quadrupeds and Birds, they [the Earth and Water], no Line, these Circles and what*. Consider:

- (11) *You may make an Estimate, to what proportion Animal Life is capable of being prolong'd, by observing that the Periods of the Lives of many Quadrupeds and Birds **are supposed to** be distinctly known.* (LC, 1701, Anon., *The Present State of Physick & Surgery in London* [...])
- (12) *THE Terrestrial or Earthlie Globe is an artificial Representation of the Earth and Water under that form and figure of Roundness which they **are supposed to** have,* (LC, 1649, John Gregorie, *The Description and Use of the Terrestrial Globe*)
- (13) *The Great Circles without the Globe are two; the Meridian and the Horizon: the one of Brass, the other of Wood. Circles indeed they are not so properly called; for, in the rigorous sens, no Line **is supposed to** have anie breadth, as both these have:* (LC, 1649, ...)
- (14) *the Astronomers imagin Circles drawn [...] so dividing the Degrees of the Horizon as to mark out the Site of the Stars from this or that Coast of the World. And becaus these Circles **are supposed to** be drawn through the Semt, or Semith Alros, that is The Point over the Head, or Vertical Point, The Arabians called them Alsemuth, we cal them stil Azimuths.* (LC, 1649, ...)
- (15) *I would have pronounced him not Guilty, and been starv'd to Death before I would have consented to a contrary Veredict, Because the words in themselves are not Criminal, nor reflecting upon any particulars, and as for what **is supposed to** be laid in the Indictment or Information, that they were published or spoken to scandalize the Government and the Administration of Justice, or to bring the same into Contempt, nothing of that appears.* (LC, 1680, John Hawles, *The English-mans Right* [...])

Consequently, the alternation between animate and inanimate subjects with epistemic BE SUPPOSED *to* in the historical examples confirms their semi-auxiliary status according to Westney's (1995) first criterion. As for the example with deontic BE SUPPOSED *to* (number (9) above), its subject is animate: *who* [those Bishops]. This is also the case with the PE verb, since deontic BE SUPPOSED *to* can only take animate subjects. Overall, then, criterion number (i) is fulfilled in the corpus.

(ii) Voice neutrality. The corpus does not offer cases illustrating this test.

(iii) Idiomatic status. Example (9), with a deontic meaning, shows that *suppos'd* develops idiomatic senses in this context, since its meaning

here is radically different from the one usually conveyed by the lexical verb SUPPOSE. As for the eight examples with epistemic BE SUPPOSED *to*, the idiomatic status of SUPPOSED is not clear, which is also the case in PE.

(iv) Modal meaning. This test is fulfilled because, as already mentioned, there are nine BE SUPPOSED *to* structures with modal meaning in my corpus.

(v) Epistemic/non-epistemic alternation. The alternation between the examples with an epistemic meaning, such as (7) or (8), and the one with a deontic meaning, number (9), indicates that BE SUPPOSED *to* displayed this feature in EModE, as in PE.

To sum up, these nine corpus instances of BE SUPPOSED *to* express modal meanings and, moreover, illustrate some additional semantic criteria characteristic of the PE semi-auxiliary, such as those described by Westney (1995). As a consequence, they can be said to constitute plausible cases of semi-auxiliary verbs. Given this state of affairs, Table 1 shows a summary of the presence of the semi-auxiliary in my corpus:

| Structure                        | Modality  | EModE1 <sup>2</sup> | EModE2 | EModE3     |
|----------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|--------|------------|
| BE SUPPOSED <i>to</i> infinitive | epistemic | -                   | -      | 8          |
| BE SUPPOSED <i>to</i> infinitive | deontic   | -                   | -      | 1          |
| Total <sup>3</sup>               |           | -                   | -      | 9 (2.27 %) |

Table 1: Use of the semi-auxiliary *BE SUPPOSED to* in my corpus for EModE.

The eight instances of epistemic BE SUPPOSED *to* in this table date back to 1649, 1680, 1697 and 1701, while the example with deontic BE SUPPOSED *to* occurs in a text from 1692. In other words, these incipient cases of BE SUPPOSED *to* emerge in the second half of the 17th century. Thus, these data are in keeping with the findings of linguists such as Biber *et al.* (1998:206; 1999:487) or Mair (forthcoming), who claim that the first uses of the semi-auxiliary appeared between 1650 and 1800.

<sup>2</sup> Following the *HC*, EModE is divided into three subperiods: EModE1 (1500-1570), EModE2 (1570-1640), and EModE3 (1640-1710).

<sup>3</sup> The “Total” row in the table includes two figures: first, the total number of constructions similar to the semi-auxiliary in each period and, second, the percentage of such constructions within the total number of verbs, which appears in brackets.

Another important finding in this study was that the epistemic uses of BE SUPPOSED *to* are attested earlier than the deontic ones. The former can be traced back to 1649, whereas the latter appear by 1692. In this sense, these data contravene the general tendency of verbs to develop deontic meanings earlier than epistemic ones, and serve to confirm the findings provided by scholars such as Mair (forthcoming).

Finally, as regards the presence of the full verb SUPPOSE in EModE, I found that it frequently occurs with the meaning of “to infer hypothetically, to incline to think” (cf. *OED*, sv *suppose* v. 8.d) towards the end of EModE (52 examples in the EModE3 subperiod). The verb often appears in passive structures of the type BE + SUPPOSED + *to* + infinitive with this semantic value. From a syntactic perspective, these structures display a series of elements similar to those of the semi-auxiliary BE SUPPOSED *to*. From a semantic perspective, these lexical values of the verb SUPPOSE are quite close in meaning to the epistemic values of the semi-auxiliary (cf. Mair, forthcoming). Therefore, I found reasons to believe that the epistemic uses of the semi-auxiliary have their origin in some passive uses of the lexical verb SUPPOSE. The similarity existing between the semi-auxiliary and the passive construction in both syntax and semantics, as well as their chronological distribution, seem to support this argument.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the preceding discussion about BE *supposed to* in EModE. One of them is that nine out of the 512 occurrences of SUPPOSE constitute cases of the semi-auxiliary verb BE *supposed to* in the three corpora selected. Eight of them exhibit the epistemic modal meaning of logical necessity, while one conveys the deontic meaning of obligation, both senses characteristic of the semi-auxiliary in PE. These incipient instantiations of BE *supposed to* date back to the second half of the 17th century and their epistemic values appear earlier than the deontic ones. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that these epistemic uses of the semi-auxiliary seem to have their origin in some frequent uses of the full verb SUPPOSE in the passive voice.



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