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ON THE SEMANTIC ASPECT OF THE ENGLISH SEMI-MODALS

Modality has been traditionally defined as the grammaticalization of the speaker's opinions and attitudes (Palmer 1979/1990:1-2; Vihla 1999:17-19).

Discussion on English modality has concentrated on the modal verbs, since they constitute the only coherent class of expressions which can be identified with the help of distinctive morpho-syntactic characteristics, i.e. the NICE properties (see Palmer 1974/1988:16-25; Quirk et al. 1985:121-128; Gotti et al. 2002:25). There is, however, some gradience, and only the central modals share all the formal features. Semi-modals include marginal modals, which fulfill some of the criteria, and modal idioms, i.e. multi-word verbs, which semantically resemble the central modals but hardly share any of their formal features. So there is cline between the central modals and the other verbal expressions of modality. This cline is not only formal but also semantic.

Grammarians are not in general agreement on what items should be included among the English modal auxiliaries. In the classification put forward by C.C. Fries (1940:173), the following verbs are treated as modals: *may, might, can, could, should, ought to* and *must*. These are distinguished from the other "function words" (i.e. auxiliaries) on a strictly semantic basis. Fries made the following statement: "As function words, whatever meanings these old verbs now express seem to have to do with various attitudes toward 'action' or 'state' expressed by the verb to which they are attached. These function words can therefore, with some justification, be called **'**modal auxiliaries**'"** (1940:167). According to Fries classification then forms such as *will* and *shall* (also *dare* and *need*) are dismissed as non-modal verbs. At most they enjoy the status of mere auxiliaries of the future tense along with constructions such as *be + to + infinitive, be + about + infinitive,* and *be + going + to + infinitive*.

Shall and *will,* however, are regarded as modal verbs by Barbara Strang (1963:139). For Strang the term "modal" is applied to the following items : *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might*, and *must*. They differ from the other 'closed system' items (which Strang labels 'non – modal operators') in their having *"… a different and a narrower function, which may be summarized as that of indicating mood".*

In Strang's classification both the modal and non – modal operators, together forming the closed system of verbal forms are characterized by the following bundle of features: a. There is no possibility of adding to the catalogue; b. They are items complemented by a non – finite part of a lexical verb in the formation of a verb phrase; c. They form questions by simple inversion; d. They form negatives by addition of not; e. They do not form conjugations in the ordinary sense, and the modal auxiliaries do not have the inflection which ordinarily distinguishes third person singular from the rest.

K. Schibsbye, W. Diver, M. Ehrman (1966:76) add to this number three more items, namely "*need, dare* and *used to*". Sometimes the constructions "*have to*; *be able to*" are also listed as modal auxiliaries.

By contrast, Boyd and Throne's classification (1969:57-74) relies entirely on meaning. They propose treating the following forms as modal: "*will, shall, should, ought to, must, may, might, can,* and *could*".

On the other hand, Twaddel, Palmer, and Ehrman base their classification on purely formal (syntactic) criteria and in this way arrive at exactly the same number of modal verbs. Following these grammarians, those verbal forms which display the following set of characteristics: a. They invariably appear in the first position of the verb phrase; b. In contrast to the auxiliaries: *be, have*, and *do,* they do not require the subject – verb agreement morpheme – s; c. They invert with the subject in interrogation; d. They may be directly

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negated by not. The first and the fourth characteristics serve to set off the modals from the auxiliaries *be, have* and *do,* which may occupy both the first position (in case the verb phrase contains no modal verb) as well as the second position of the verb phrase.

I can mention, amongst others, the following classification. Thomson and Martinet (1968:135-143) distinguish between modal auxiliaries (*can, could, may, might, must, ought, will, would, shall* and *should*) and semi-modals (*need, dare* and *used*). Freebon (1987:75) talks about modals (the same verbs as Thomson and Martinet plus *used to* and *had better)* and semi-auxiliaries (*have to, be to, be about to, be bound to, be going to, etc.)* Parrot (2000:219-239) divides modals into two groups: pure modals (the same verbs as Thomson and Martinet except *ought*, plus *need* and *dare)* and semi-modal verbs (*ought to, had better, have (got) to and be able to*). Biber et al. (1999:489ff), Hargevik, Svartvik, and Svartvik and Wright – classify *dare, need, used to, and ought to* as marginal modals. As can be seen, there are significant variations in the classifications used in relation to both the grammatical requirements and semantic criteria.

The analysis of the modal verbs provided in traditional grammar books is deficient in one major respect, namely, it tends to describe them in terms of meanings which often turn out to be explainable by something in the surrounding context. In brief, in their treatment of the modals traditional grammarians usually provide little more than a list of modals each with a list of meanings and they display even less interest in trying to relate a systematic treatment of their semantics to the concrete facts of their syntax.

It is a generally known fact that the central problem of a semantic investigation of any kind is directly connected with the achievement of two objectives: a. The correct division of the meaning of a portion of the linguistic text among its constituent parts, and b. The assignment of the particular components of the meaning of the portion of the text to the particular constituents regarded as their sole exponents. It is clear that traditional semantic analyses never really come close to attaining either of the two goals. The tendency towards burdening textual elements with meanings having nothing directly to do with them might be, of course, explained by the general conviction among traditional grammarians that every linguistic form must necessarily posses a great many meanings.

Researchers increasingly believe that many of the semi-modals are showing signs of more modal behavior, i.e. grammaticalization. This behavior is still poorly investigated (Facchinetti et al. 2003; Krug 2000:4). The subject of this paper, i.e. *need to*, is one of these emerging modals. It is formally a full verb, but it is usually, quite misleadingly, discussed together with *need,* a central modal. These two forms also differ in meaning. Hence, they are considered to be two distinct modal markers in this study.

The aim of this investigation is to present a detailed semantic analysis of *need to,* a semi-modal of obligation and necessity. In previous studies *need to* has been grouped together with modal *need,* and their origins as modal marker have been traced to Middle English, but there have been few studies concerning their inter-twined history or their present-day usage. Especially the semantics of *need to* has been ignored, and its various meanings/uses have not been systematically explored. The more common modals of obligation and necessity, i.e. *must, should* and *have to,* have always received much more attention.

Modal *need* and especially semi –modal *need to* have received least attention of the modals of obligation and necessity. This might have to do with their rarity compared to the other modals of obligation and necessity, but also with the fact that their semantics have not been easy to deal with, as obligation is prototypically felt to come from a source external to the agent and these two markers have assumed to express internally motivated obligation. In much of the previous research, *need* and *need to* have been grouped together. Hence the following sections include a discussion of modal *need* as well.

Evolution of NEED

The word *need* comes from the Old English verb "neodian" and noun "nead" (The Oxford English Dictionary 1989 (OED)). As Warner informs us, *need is a regular, i.e.* lexical

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verb in Old and Middle English. Having been impersonal in OE (Visser 1969:§1345), it is used in various personal and impersonal constructions in ME, and "in the sixteenth century it starts to show modal characteristics" (Warner 1993:203). This is in line with Barber's analysis (1997:178), who cities the first clear OED example of auxiliary *need* from 1538. However, Fischer (1992:405), quoting Visser (1963-73: § 1346), maintains that modal characteristics were already present in the late 14 th century. The use of personal *need* with an infinitive increased at least partly because of the loss of THARF ('need') in the 15 th century. Just like the utterances with THARF, instances with *need* were mostly negative [1]. In these constructions *need* developed the irregular form *need* in 3 rd person singular of the present tense in place of *needs* or *needeth.* The irregular form *need* became common in the 16 th century, and it was, in fact, favored by Shakespeare (Warner 1993:203). I checked the use of *need (to)* in Shakespeare. It is quite remarkable that in his usage – i.e. at the end of the century which Warner and Barber identify as showing incipient modal behavior –modal constructions by far outnumber main verb constructions: the ration of plain to marked infinitives is approximately eight to one (Krug 2000:202).

The trend since Shakespeare has certainly changed direction, as the main verb construction is the most common one nowadays. The use of *need to* in mainly positive contexts is also a novelty. These changes have not been adequately documented.

To conclude, *need* takes a nominal complement in the vast majority of cases and thus clearly has the status of a lexical verb in PDE. When followed by an infinitival complement, *need* more and more seems to prefer the to-infinitive above the bare infinitive. Whereas the situation in American English has remained rather stable, a shift from modal to catenative [2] usage can be noted in British English over the past 30 years. In this way, British English seems to have caught up with the American variant so that *need* roughly shows the same proportions as to distribution in both varieties of English.

Syntactic considerations

In modern usage, modal *need* appears in non-assertive contexts, otherwise it is very rare (the OED; Quirk et al. 1985:138; Mindt 1995:126). In contrast, semi-modal *need to* can always be used. Table 1 describes the various uses.

Table 1. Uses of the modal and the main verb construction.

	Modal	**Main Verb**
Positive	-	He **needed to** escape.
Negative	He **needn't** escape.	He **doesn't need to** escape.
Interrogative	**Need** we escape?	**Do** we **need to** escape?
Neg.-interrogative	**Needn't** he escape?	**Doesn't** he **need to** escape?

In non-assertive contexts, the ongoing trend towards main verb constructions has been detected in some recent corpus-based studies. Biber et al. (1999:163) still finds modal *need* the predominant choice in the written registers of their LSWE corpus (The Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus) but the main verb construction is the more common type in conversation and the only option in American conversation. Krug (2000:202-203) detects a similar recent shift in spoken British English based on the British National Corpus (BNC); modal *need,* typically in the contracted form *needn't*, is becoming rare.

Further support has been found by Leech (2003) and Smith (2003) in four matching written corpora, namely the British LOB (The Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus of British English and FLOB (The Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English) and the American Brown and Frown [3]. In thirty years, modal *need* has decreased in number in both Britain and America, though it is used more in Britain. On the other hand, the use of *need to* has increased a great deal especially in Britain: it is more common in FLOB than in Frown (cf. Taeymans 2004:223). However, as Smith (2003) points out, the rise of *need to* is not only due

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to its increasing use in non-assertive contexts instead of modal *need;* the largest increase has take place in affirmative contexts where it might compete with *must* and *have to.* This question will be further discussed in the next section.

Semantic considerations

The theoretical framework for the empirical part has been mainly provided by Jennifer Coates's work *The Semantics of Modal Auxiliaries*. She applies the fuzzy set theory to the traditional concepts of root and epistemic meaning and divides the semantic fields into the core, the skirt and the periphery. In analyzing examples she uses parameters that arise from the context and co-text (1983:36). These parameters can be used to distinguish the various meanings/uses of *need to* as well, though with some limitations. The traditional analysis leaves out the instances where *need to* expresses internally motivated compulsion. Some recent cross- linguistic studies provide insights into the rearrangement of the non-epistemic field (cf. Bybee at al. 1994:177); van der Auwera and Plungian (1998).

I shall first consider *need to* in affirmative contexts and compare it to its likely rivals, and then in non-assertive contexts with modal *need.*

Linguists agree on the basic differences between *must*, *have to* and *need to* (e.g. Leech 1971/1981:96; Palmer 1979/1990:129, Perkins (1983):62-63, Quirk et al. 1985:225; Smith 2003:259). The utterances with *must* imply that the speaker is advocating a certain behavior. *Have to* is considered to be more impersonal and lack the implication that the speaker is in authority. This can be noticed well in an example with a first person subject: *I'm afraid I have to go now. Have to* implies here obligation by external forces, e.g. the speaker might have another appointment. In contrast, *must* here instead of *have to* would imply self-obligation, i.e. the speaker would be appealing to his/her own sense of duty. *Need to,* on the other hand, is said to express internal compulsion If *I need to go now,* I feel a compulsion which is felt to originate within myself. Such compulsions, even if the subject is first person, I, are objectives, since the speaker has no conscious control over them.

If the basic meaning of *need to* denies the speaker's involvement, the question whether there are utterances which can be interpreted as personal directives is disputable. Linguists who mention this point suggest that *need to* can pragmatically acquire the force of an imposed obligation. Leech (1971/1981:96) points out that there is certainly a difference in the quality of the constraint in the following sentences:

(1) a. You **must** get a hair-cut.
b.You **need to** get a hair-cut.

In the first example (1a) with *must* the speaker is clearly exerting his/her authority over the addressee. In the second example (2b) with *need to,* the speaker is primarily pointing out the constraint that the addressee's own situation imposes on him/her: it is for his/her own sake that a hair-cut is needed, since his/her hair might be too long. The situation is, however, quite different, if there is a clear authority structure between the speaker and the addressee. Perkins (1983:62-63) points out that if the above utterances with *need to* was said by a sergeant –major to a private, it would certainly be understood as an order. In such instances the directive element is provided by the context or the context of the utterance rather than the basic/lexical meaning of *need to.*

As mentioned before, Smith (2003:260-264) has found instances of the imposed obligation meaning. By using *need to* instead of *must,* the writer can downplay his/her own authority and claim that the action is recommended for the doer's own sake. The grammatical subject is typically first person plural or passivised third person, so the instances report the need for action in a rather vague way. But the pragmatic interpretation is still inferable. Smith concludes that especially corpora of speech should be studied to illuminate this point.

As regards the distinction between *need* and *need to,* many sources simply point out that the two markers are almost synonymous or that in non-assertive contexts differences tend to be neutralized. The few who have discussed it more have detected an opposition between external vs. internal sources of *need,* which resembles the distinction between *need to* and the

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other modals of obligation in affirmative contexts. For instance, Perkins (1983:63) uses examples where needn't is clearly the negative counterpart of *must* – the speaker is trying to exert his/her authority over the addressee – whereas *don't need to* simply expresses the constraint the speaker thinks the addressee is feeling. Consider, for example, you **needn't** go to the toilet if you **don't need to**. I have found only one corpus-based study, i.e. by Duffley (1994) [4], that has discussed the semantics of *need* and *need to,* and even he has concentrated on modal *need.* He thinks that the subjective/objective distinction is prevalent but that it is not enough to describe the differences between *need* and *need to.* He would rather talk about the distinction in terms of non-real vs. real. Modal *need* focuses on "whether the conditions leading to the constitution of a real need are fulfilled" (1994:225). Full verb *need to* "evokes a need in and for itself, whether the need stems from the internal dispositions of the subject (2a) or is imposed on the latter by external circumstances (2b)". Consider his examples:

(2) a. I ***need to*** get some fresh air.
b. The slums ***need to*** be replaced by good housing.

Duffley does not attempt a quantitative analysis, and in the case of *need to* the semantic analysis is only suggestive. Besides, as the written corpora are from the 1960s, the instances of *need to* were not numerous.

Anyhow, there is certainly a gap in the research concerning the semantics of *need to*: it has not been studied in detail by corpus-based methods.

To conclude, I will briefly touch upon the contexts in which *need* is used. It was pointed out by Quirk et al that modal *need* is restricted to non-assertive contexts, while there seem to be no restrictions on the usage of the catenative and lexical variants (1985:138). Although Quirk defines non-assertive contexts as "mainly negative and interrogative sentences" (1985:138), non-assertive contexts are broader than that and also cover e.g. conditional and comparative clauses, clauses containing only or the semi-negative adverbs hardly and scarcely, etc.

Because of the restriction to non-assertive contexts, modal *need* has often been referred to as negative polarity auxiliary (Wouden:1996).

The question is, of course, how did modal *need* acquire polarity sensitive behavior? Why did it develop this polarity sensitive behavior?

Well, following the unidirectional hypothesis, words can acquire polarity sensitively and become thus more restricted in their usage, but cannot lose it. If we look at the history of *need,* this statement seems to hold.

In his article on the auxiliary *need*, Jacobsson makes a few very nice suggestions as to why *need* –originally an impersonal verb – was pressed into the role of a modal verb expressing necessity in the course of the ME period. He claims that it did so because the modal *must* was able to express necessity, but could not express absence of necessity (*it is not necessary that).* To fill this gap, *need* was called upon, and so it developed modal characteristics in analogy to the other modals. Because of this vacuum for absence of necessity, it seems reasonably to assume that *need* especially occurred in negative sentences and that it became gradually associated with negation. The auxiliary use of *need* was never extended to truly affirmative sentences probably for the simple reason that the language could probably do without it (Jakobsson 1974: 62-63).

In the beginning of this paper, however, I have mentioned that modal *need* is becoming increasingly rare. This may well be due to the fact that its competitor *need+ to infinitive* seems to be gaining ground at the expense of the auxiliary; it expresses more or less the same notion of necessity in negative sentences, but is free to appear in positive affirmative constructions. Therefore, it may well push modal *need* further into the corner. Although further diachronic research is needed, the above described development seems to be in line with Heine's observation (1995:46) – he found for German modals that the most conservative behavior is encountered if the modal occurs in interrogative rather than declarative utterances and if the modal occurs in negative rather than affirmative utterances.

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Finally, since *need to* so often appears in affirmative contexts where the obligation interpretation is inferable, it obviously competes with *must* and *have to.* However, it seems to offer a more polite way of obliging than *must,* as it gives the impression that the speaker is appealing to the assumed needs of the addressee. In non-assertive contexts, *need to* differs from *need* in the same way. These two modality markers have clearly different semantic profiles. *Need* seems to be one of the negative counterparts of *must* in both root and epistemic meaning: its decline may be linked to similar uses and meaning with *must.* In contrast, *need to* clearly resembles the other semi-modal *have to* with a different kind of subjective meaning in root instances and still only a few epistemic instances. Hence, I fully agree with Krug (2000; 2001) that there is a group of emerging modals appearing.

I consider the present paper only as an initial study of the semantics of *need to.* The wider context of its semantic variation, both from a diachronic and a synchronic viewpoint, needs to be explored.

NOTES

[1] Nagle (1989) suggests that the link between negation and modal marking might be due to the wide use of the subjunctive in subordinate clauses after negative verbs and negation in higher clauses in Old English. This might well explain the modal-like syntax for *dare, need,* and *ought* in non-affirmative contexts.

[2] Most grammars distinguish between 3 types of *dare* and *need*, i.e. modal, blend and lexical verbs. Mindt considers *dare* and *need* followed by a *to*-infinitival complement to be catenative verbs (Mindt: 1995).

[3] The other matching ICAME corpora include The Brown University Corpus of American English (Brown) from 1961 and its thirty year younger counterpart The Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English (Frown) from 1991), The Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English from 1978, The Australian Corpus of English from 1986 and the Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English from the late 1980s.

[4] Duffley has based his article on the examination of *dare* and *need* in the Brown University (American) and LOB (British) and Strathy (Canadian) corpora of English, supplemented by examples from other sources. The only information provided for the Strathy Corpus is the following: Strathy Corpus of Canadian English, Strathy Language Unit. Kingston: Department of English, Queen's University.

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ABSTRACT
The set of English modal verbs is widely recognized to communicate two broad clusters of meanings: epistemic and root modal meanings. A number of researches have claimed that root meanings are acquired earlier than epistemic ones; this claim has subsequently been employed in the linguistics literature as an argument for the position that English modal verbs are polysemous (Sweetser, 1990).
This paper explores the various meanings and uses of one of the English semi-modals: NEED TO. Previous corpus-based studies indicate that its overall usage has increased, but there is clearly a gap in research on its semantics. Based on the findings of research conducted in this field, I will try to demonstrate that NEED TO covers all the possible meanings/uses, both root and epistemic, of a modal of obligation and necessity. I decided to investigate in this paper the evolution, current status and future developments of this verb as well.

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