



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 13 | Issue 1

Article 22

3-27-1987

The Influence of Social Status on the Choice of Should, Ought to, Be to, and Be supposed to

Rushen Shi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Shi, Rushen (1987) "The Influence of Social Status on the Choice of Should, Ought to, Be to, and Be supposed to," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol13/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Influence of Social Status on the Choice of should, Ought to, Be to and Be supposed to

Rushen Shi, Brigham Young University

Introduction

Modal auxiliaries are one of the most problematic issues in ESL/EFL teaching and learning not only because of their forms, but also because of their semantic complexity. Should, ought to, be to and be supposed to are included in the modal auxiliaries and paraphrastic modals described in the Grammar Book by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. These four expressions are considered by most grammar books to be semantically identical in expressing obligation and expectation, but non-interchangeable in actual use. Ought to and be to are said to be stronger expressions than should and be supposed to. It appears that certain social constituents such as the social relationship between the speaker and the listener, i.e., the social status which determines whether the speaker is in an authoritative position over the listener, might be a factor affecting the choice of these expressions. However this idea had not been examined carefully through empirical research. Therefore my question for this paper is: Is there a difference in how should, ought to, be to and be supposed to are used, and is that difference because of social status?

Review of Literature

During the last two decades or so linguists have taken a lot of interests in English modals. The majority of these linguists have emphasized the semantic rather than the syntactic aspect of the modals. With regard to should, ought to, be to, be supposed to several writers focus on the common semantic features they share.

Frank described (1972) in Modern English that should and ought to both express obligation, e.g.,
You should (ought to) do your homework everyday (p.98).
be to and be supposed to have the same meaning of "be

required to" as in:

You are supposed to (ought to) do your homework ink (p.107).

It appears that they share the same meaning with should and ought to. Hornby expressed (1974) the same point of view that should and ought to indicate duty or obligation. Be to shows the same meaning of duty in:

I am to inform you that... (p.68)

Hornby gave the following example to show that be supposed to can be considered to indicate duty or obligation:

Is the housekeeper supposed to clean the outside of the window or only inside (p.885)?

Similarly, Evans and Evans stated (1957) that should carries the meaning of ought to expressing "what is morally binding, what is expedient (p.448)," (p.448) e.g.,

He should return the money.= He ought to return the money (p.448).

In A Grammar of Contemporary English (1980) Quirk et al. simply regards ought to and should exactly the same in expressing obligation, and so does Crowell in Index to Modern English (1964). Crowell gave two examples to demonstrate their similarity:

He ought to help his mother with her chores.
He should help his mother with her chores (p.243)

Palmer in his Modality and English Modals (1979) also described should and ought to as largely interchangeable. This view was also shared by Leech in his A Communicative Grammar of English (1975).

House and Harman, however, suggested (1936) that ought to is a stronger expression of obligation than should. "Should is similar to must and ought, but does not express the compulsion which must denotes, nor the moral obligation or duty of ought." "Should is frequently used to express obligation modestly or politely." Perrin indicated (1968) in An Index to English that should as an auxiliary expresses a mild sense of obligation, weaker than ought to. In A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English by Hornby (1961) should was described as not so strong as ought. Thus it can be seen there is some disagreement among different grammarians.

Roberts said (1954) that, in most constructions, ought to is nearly the equivalent of should, but ought to is used as must except that it shows weaker force. In A Practical English Grammar (1968) by English Language Services, Inc. the same idea was expressed.

We can assume, therefore, that ought to as a stronger expression than should is expressed by both books.

Be to is considered as an equivalent of should by some linguists such as some of those mentioned above, but a stronger and more formal expression than should and ought to by other linguists. It is so strong and formal that it actually expresses an implication of a command or order rather than simply an obligation. Hornby gave the following examples to illustrate the meaning of command:

You are always to knock before you enter my room.

You are to write your name at the top of each sheet of paper.

Entries are to be sent in so that they reach the Registration before May the third. (p.37)

In A Communicative Grammar of English (1975) by Leech examples are given to show that be to can refer to a command given by the speaker, or by some official authority:

You are to return to Germany.

You are to stay until I return. (p.145)

Palmer also noted (1979) that be to is used to report a command, e.g.,

You are to come tomorrow (p.147).

Perkins pointed out in Modal Expressions in English (1983) that be to denotes ordering or commanding as in: "You are to marry him within the next six months (p.69)," which is possibly said by a father.

The above study indicates that some linguists agree on the interchangeability of these four expressions, whereas others do not. Ought to and be to are considered to be stronger, and be to is considered to be more formal by these linguists. It is hypothesized, therefore, that the choice of ought to and be to is affected by the authoritative social status of the speaker over the listener's, and that should and be supposed to are not influenced by the social status. The research is conducted to test this hypothesis.

It should be mentioned here that should, ought to, be to and be supposed to do carry other distinctions semantically which will not be covered in the survey.

Research Design and Method

In order to examine the hypothesis a survey of native speakers was conducted. Different situations were designed on the basis of social relationship

between the speaker and listener. Before the design of the situations a pilot study was done to obtain preliminary information for the final survey.

Therefore there were two steps for the research:

- 1) a pilot study
- 2) a survey (questionnaire)

A survey was chosen rather than just having the native speakers try to explain the differences because native speakers seldom think of grammar as they speak. They produce the language naturally and in a socially acceptable manner even though for the most part they are unable to discuss the grammar.

For the pilot study ten native English speakers were asked respectively and randomly on campus to give four sentences using should, ought to, be to and be supposed to expressing obligation together with the situations for the sentences they gave. Then the four expressions were ordered by counting up the number of authoritative cases that appears in the sentences. This made it possible, firstly, to see whether there is an initial reason to believe the hypothesis about authority and, secondly, to get some actual situations which native speakers think would occur with these sentences. Here I will list as an example what one of the subjects produced:

You should do your homework before class.

(teacher to student)

You ought to do the dishes.

(wife to husband after dinner)

You are supposed to wash your hands before eating.

(mother to child)

You are to prepare the salad, set the table and serve the customers.

(boss to waitress)

After the survey the situations were examined to see how many of them had somebody with authority speaking the sentence. This produced the following data:

Table 1. Percent of Situations with the Speakers in Authority

<u>be to</u>	10	100%	
<u>should</u>	8	80%	
<u>be supposed to</u>	5	50%	
<u>ought to</u>	3	30%	

The data indicate that 10 sentences for be to given by the 10 people are all based on situations in which the speakers are in an authoritative position, which means that this expression is used most authoritatively. Should displayed 80% authoritative cases. Be supposed to can be used either authoritatively or non-authoritatively. For ought to only 3 people gave their sentences in authoritative cases.

The result of the pilot study supports my previous hypothesis partly that be to is affected by the speaker's authoritative social status over the listener's, but it claims that should is used more authoritatively than ought to.

Then a survey questionnaire on the basis of the pilot study was designed for further examination. Twenty people were chosen as subjects to give their answers. They were chosen randomly in church, in a ward for young adults in Provo, Utah. There are four items in the questionnaire, the first two of which were based on situations where the speakers are in authority over the listeners and the other two are based on situations where the speakers are not in authority over the listeners. Subjects were able to say whether they would fill in the blank with be to (letter a), should (letter b), ought to (letter c), or be supposed to (letter d) in different situations.

The Questionnaire

Check one answer (or answers) for each item. If you think there is more than one answer suitable, check more than one answer.

1. Suppose you are an army officer. One day you are speaking to your soldiers, "You _____ wait for my command and then start firing."

a) are to	b) should
c) ought to	d) are supposed to

2. Suppose you are the chairman of a department in a university. There are some foreign students in your department. They are all required to take at least 9 credit hours each semester according to the U.S. immigration law. One day you are telling this to them, "You _____ take at least 9 credit hours

choice of should and be supposed to is not affected by the social status of either the speaker or the listener. The data also disagree with what was previously hypothesized: that the choice of ought to is affected by the authoritative social status of the speaker. On the contrary, the survey has just proved that the choice of ought to is not affected by the social status.

The findings of this study can be applied in ESL/EFL teaching. The teacher can introduce to the students the influence of social status on the choice of these expressions which will help the students gain a better understanding of English modals as well as get their meanings across in a more socially acceptable manner. I suggest that the better way to teach the use of these modal expressions is to present them in contextualized situations. Hopefully this method should work well to improve the communicative competence of the students.

However I have realized that this study is far from complete for the reason that social constituents are much more complicated than what I have assumed. There are other factors that need to be taken into account with respect to the use of the four modal auxiliaries discussed such as age, sex, occupation, atmosphere, etc.. Further study should focus on these constituents and the relationship among them and how they affect the choice of the four modal auxiliaries.

References

- Crowell, Thomas Lee, Jr.. 1961. Index to modern English. New York: McGraw-Hall Book Company.
- English Language Services, Inc.. 1968. A practical English grammar. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Evans, Bergen and Cornelia Evans. 1957. A dictionary of contemporary American English. New York: Random House.
- Frank, Marcella. 1972. Modern English. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Hornby, A. S. 1961. A guide to patterns and usage in English. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hornby, A. S. 1974. Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English. London: Longman Group Limited.

- House, Homer Clyde and Susan Emolyn Harman. 1936. Descriptive English grammar. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Leech, Geoffrey and Jan Svartvik. 1975. A communicative grammar of English. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Palmer, F. R. 1979. Modality and the English modals. London, New York: Longman Group Limited.
- Perkins, Michael R. 1983. Modal expressions in English. London: Frances Pinter (Publisher) Limited.
- Perrin, Porter G. 1968. An index to English. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik. 1980. A grammar of contemporary English. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Roberts, Paul. 1968. Modern grammar. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Roberts, Paul. 1954. Understanding grammar. New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Stageberg, Norman C. 1966. An introductory English grammar. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.