

# *Are must and ought two historical present tenses?*

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## ABSTRACT

Proper modals coming down from Old English have attracted the attention of many linguists and the study of the most outstanding features of these verbs has been a matter of research in historical linguistics. Concerning these verbs, modern English grammars state that though every form is unique to express some specific meanings, there are cases where some items can function as the past forms of others without modifying the basic meaning of modality. In fact, *could*, *might*, *would* and *should* are still spoken of as the past tenses of *can*, *may*, *will* and *shall*, respectively. Only two verbs pertaining to the same class lack the corresponding past tenses. This is the case of *must* and *ought*. The new hypothesis posited in this paper about the origin of these two verbal forms will better explain their present meaning and the non-existence of past tense forms in today's English.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

English has the possibility to express modality by means of a set of verbs. In spite of historical losses, the list of these verbs in Present day English coming down from old times is still rather varied, and, curiously enough, only they could be termed as proper modals. Others, like *used to*, *dare*, and *need* can function as such, but they are rather marginal in some

aspects as modern grammars point out (Quirk et al. 1985:236, Alexander 1988:207).

Proper modals, or central modals in Quirk's terms (1985:137), coming down from OE have attracted the attention of many linguists (Palmer 1965, Leech 1971) and the study of the most outstanding features of these verbs has been a matter of research in historical linguistics. Visser (1973) and Lightfoot (1979) have dealt mainly with the development of their modern syntax, Shepherd (1982) and Goossens (1982) with the development of their modern meanings.

Concerning proper or central modals, modern English grammars (Leech & Svartvik 1975, Quirk et al. 1985, Alexander 1988) state that though every verbal form is unique to express some specific meanings, there are cases where some items can function as the past forms of others without modifying the basic meaning of modality. In fact, *could*, *might*, *would* and *should* are stillspoken of as the past tenses of *can*, *may*, *will* and *shall*, respectively. Only two verbs pertaining to the same class lack the corresponding past tense. This is the case of *must* and *ought*.

The traditional way of presenting these verbs in relation to time is the following:

Present	Past
can	could
may	might
will	would
shall	should

There exist no doubts that *can*, *may*, *will*, and *shall* are historical present tenses and that *could*, *might*, *would* and *should* are also historical past tenses. Forms rather similar to the modern ones can be found in Old English:

Present	Past
ic cann	ic cupe
ic maeg	ic mihte
ic wille	ic wolde
ic sceal	ic sceolde

1. However, the history of *must* and *ought* is not so clear. The *OED*, Sweet (1891:423) and Jespersen (1961: 121-2) state that both *must* and *ought* come respectively from *mōste* and *āhte*, the past tenses of *\*mōtan* and *āgan*, which by degrees took on the function of a present.

As there is neither phonetic obstacle nor morphosyntactic impossibility, I would willingly corroborate this alleged origin if I had not taken into account other historical data.

It is clear that the forms of the past tense of these verbs in OE were rather similar to the modern ones (see Table 1).

Table 1

Old english		Pe english
Past Tense	Present Tense	
ic moste      ahte		
bu mostest    ahtest		
he moste      ahte	bu most aht-aht	must/ought
hie moston    ahton		

But, it is also clear that the second person singular of the present tense of these two verbs in Old English (*thu mōst*, *thu āhst* or *āht*) looks very much like the past tense forms (Table 1).

My hypothesis is that OE 2nd person present forms *thu mōst* «you are allowed» and *thu āht* «you possess», given the degree of cohesion between root and morpheme they had in Old English<sup>1</sup>, were taken as a whole, apprehended as if they were roots, and hence they were transferred to the rest of the persons in the following period. Consequently, two new verbs should be expected to stem from both OE present tense of *\*mōtan* and *āgan*, which is what really seems to have happened in Middle English.

2. Paying close attention to the multifarious data of the *OED*, it seems as if the present indicative of OE *\*mōtan* would have given way to two new verbs in Middle English: A) from OE 2nd person singular we find ME *most* and B) from the rest of the persons we find ME *mote*.

A) ME *mote*, mainly used in the present (1, 2) but also in the past (3), kept the Old English deontic meaning of permission and probably developed the epistemic meaning of possibility, as it could be seen in the following examples:

- (1) 1200 Ormin: *gif thu [...] geornesst tatt tu mote sket Uppcumenn inn till heoffne.*  
(If thou yearn for that thou may quickly go up to heaven.)
- (2) 1390 Gower, *Conf. l. 6*: *God grante I mot it wel achieve.* (May God grant me I may achieve it well.)
- (3) c 1440 *Alphabet of Tales* 93: *He was so strang in his selfe that he mott withstond any temptacion of the devull.*  
(He was so strong in himself that he might withstand any temptation of the devil.)

It can be understood rather easily why there is no survival of this verb in PE; its existence would have been rather superfluous on account of the total synonymy with *may*, *might* and *could*, and as Harris (1987: 184) points out a marked semantic overlap is not normally conducive to the survival of any linguistic item.

B) ME *most* reinforces the expression of necessity and obligation, a kind of modality which was not unknown in OE but it was not so frequent as that of permission. This expansion of meaning seems quite logical and I think that the meaning especially conveyed by the second person singular present («you are allowed» denoting the authority of the speaker and consequently deriving from the automatic meaning of «you must») greatly helped the development of the new meaning of this verb. Therefore, it is not surprising to find early Middle English examples in 2nd person singular present which plainly show the deontic meaning of obligation:

- (4) 1225 *Ancr.R.* 102: *Cheos nu thu on of theos two; vor thet other thu most leten.*  
(Choose now one of these two, for thou must leave the other.)

Many other ME examples can be adduced as a proof that *most* was taken as an independent modal verb capable of expressing obligation mainly in the present (5, 6, 7) but also in the past (8):

- (5) 1300 *Cursor M.* 5018: *Yee most [Gött. must] yow hast on your fare.*  
(You must make haste in your journey.)  
(6) 1300 *K. Horn* (Laud MS.) 1254: *Reymyld, qwad horn, ich moste wende to the wodes hende.*  
(Rymenhild, said Horn, I must go to the wood's end.)  
(7) 1386 Chaucer, *Wife's Prol.* 440: *Oon of vs two moste bowen doutelees And sith a man is moore resonable Than wooman is, ye moste ben suffrable.*  
(Doubtless, one of us two must bow and since a man is more reasonable than a woman, you must be merciful.)  
(8) 1390 Gower, *Conf. I.* 119: *The day was wonder hot withalle, And such a thurst was on him falle, That he moste owther deie or drinke.*  
(The day was very hot withal, and such thirst fell upon him that he had to either die or drink.)

3. In the same way as happened with OE *\*mōtan*, it seems that in ME two independent verbs stemmed from the present of OE *āgan*: the corresponding forms of PE: *to owe* and *ought to*.

Some ME verbal forms coming down from OE *āgan* kept the meaning of possession they had in OE, but developed besides the meaning of 'duty'. The first traces of this meaning can be found 10th century Northumbrian texts, the glosses on the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. The Latin word *debes* from the *Vulgate*

is translated by means of a periphrastic construction *aht* (2nd person present of *āgan*)+infinitive (9, 10):

- (9) 950 *Lindisf. Gosp. Matt. XVIII. 28: geld that thu aht to geldanne.*  
(Money that thou hast to pay.)
- (10) \_\_\_\_\_ Luke XVI. 5: *Huu micel aht thu to geldanne hlaferde minum?*  
(How much do thou have to pay to my lord?)
- (11) \_\_\_\_\_ Luke XVI. 7: *Huu feolo aht thu to?*  
(How much do thou owe to?)

Taking into account most ME texts quoted in the *OED*, it appears (although there is much overlapping) that the meaning of «being under obligation to pay or render» is more frequently and clearly conveyed by means of ME corresponding forms of PE *owe* (12 *ogeth*, 13 *ah*, 14 *ogen*, 15 *owist*, etc.). Despite the diversity of ME forms, historically, all of them could be said to derive from an OE present tense *t*-less stem which functions as a full lexical verb:

- (12) 1175 *Cott. Hom. 235: Ure king we ogeth uurthmint, hur sceappend al that we bieth.*  
(We owe honour to our King, Creator of all that we are.)
- (13) 1200 *Ormin 16529: and giff thu litell dost forr Godd, Godd ah the litell mede.*  
(And if thou dost little for God, God owes thee little reward.)
- (14) 1258 *Proclam. Hen. III, l.4: We hoaten alle vre treowe in the treowthe that heo vs ogen.*  
(We command our true (subjects) in the faith that they owe to us.)
- (15) 1382 *Wycliff, Luke XVI.5: He seide to the firste, Hou moche owist thou to my lord?*  
(He said to the first, how much dost thou owe to my lord.)

On the other hand, from very early too in Middle English the most frequent use of what could be called a *t*-stem, deriving from 2nd person singular present as we have posited, is to serve as a modal verb to express duty in the present time (16, 17, 18, 19, 20). The following infinitive could be either with *to* (16, 17, 20) or without *to* (18, 19):

- (16) 1175 *Lamb. Hom. 5: thes we ahte(n) to beon the edmoddre.*  
(We ought to be more humble.)
- (17) 1200 *Moral Ode 129: thet achten we to leuen wel.*  
(That we ought to live well.)
- (18) 1297 *R. Glouc. 9281: Ich thonke gou as ich wel ahte do.*  
(I thank you as I well ought to do.)
- (19) 1300 *Cursor M. 267: Cursur o werld man aghit call.*  
(Cursor of the world ought to be called.)
- (20) 1307 *Elegy Edw. I, II: Al Englonde ahte forte knowe.*  
(All England ought to know.)

The fact that this *t*-form was felt as a stem is seen in late Middle English creations (*oughtiden*) where a *d*-morpheme was added to express past time:

- (21) 1449 Pecock, *Repr.: Summe symple persooones hadden thilk opinioun tho iij seid persooones ougtiden to be slayn.*  
 (Some simple people had such an opinion that the three aforesaid persons ought to be killed.)

Considering now the first recorded examples in the history of English (Texts 9-11) in which a *t*-verbal form of *āgan* [2nd person singular present *aht* followed by an inflected infinitive (9, 10)] renders lexically the idea of duty, we can infer that the *t*-form *could have been apprehended with this meaning, via 2nd person, and hence ready to be taken as an independent modal verb adding the meaning of duty to the following infinitive.*

4. In conclusion, this new interpretation of the origin of *must* and *ought* coming down from OE 2nd person present tense (*bu most* and *bu aht*, respectively) will contribute to explain the present meaning of the modern forms. The anomaly of *must* and *ought*, felt to be present forms, but at the same time ending in a dental consonant, should have been a serious obstacle at some point in history which prevented the creation of a distinctive past tense form. Given the tendency of English to assimilate final clusters of dental consonants in earlier times, possible past tense creations like *\*most(e)d(e)* and *\*ought(e)d(e)* would have surely become *\*most(t)* and *\*ought(t)*, forms which would have coincided morphologically with those used for the present. This peculiarity could explain the reason why *must* and *ought* have lacked a past tense form since modern times.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Agan* and *\*motan* belong to a class of verbs known in OE as the preterite-present verbs. Originally they were strong verbs whose past tense acquired a present meaning and consequently they developed a new past tense with a dental formative element. The origin of most of these verbs can quite easily be inferred from the different root vowel they show in the singular and the plural of the present tense in Old English. However, their 2nd person singular is not the historical one. It has the same vowel as that which appears in the 1st and 3rd person, which is anomalous, and besides the *st*-morpheme is added to the root. This morpheme (still productive in Old English to indicate 2nd person present of weak and strong verbs or 2nd person past of only weak verbs) should have been apprehended as part of the verbal root in the case of some preterite-present verbs (*bu dearest*, *bu most*, *bu wast*), which would explain the anomalous presence of *-s* (*dorste*, *moste*, *wiste*) in the new past tense OE creations.

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