

A radically usage-based account of the development of the English “epistemic” *be bound to* construction

It has long been recognized by grammarians that present-day English has two modal *be bound to* constructions, the most common one an “epistemic” one, illustrated in (1), and a less frequent deontic one, illustrated in (2).

- (1) “The point is, if we are approached, as I think we **are bound to** be, then what should our response be?”
- (2) “Because of the agreement with the host country, we **are bound to** follow the local laws,” said U.N. spokeswoman Hua Jiang.

It may be a matter of debate whether the more frequent construction is truly epistemic or “merely” a case of what van der Auwera and Plungian (1998) have termed “participant-external necessity”, but diachronic corpus data unmistakably reveal that it appeared much later than the deontic construction. The semasiological evolution of the form *be bound to* consequently resembles the “path” Bybee *et al.* (1994: 200) suggest for *should*. However, though such semasiological paths are valid explananda for historical linguistics, they should not be taken to be cognitively realistic narratives either of what happened to specific constructions or of how specific constructions came about. There may in fact not be a straight path from deontic to “epistemic” *be bound to*, particularly from a usage-based diachronic construction grammar perspective (cf. Barðdal & Gildea 2015).

A “radically” usage-based model of language change is one that consistently separates experientially acquired individual linguistic knowledge from what is traditionally conceived of as the conventional synchronic language system, as a prerequisite to be able to account for constructional innovation in a cognitively plausible way. Comparing two explicitly usage-based models of morphosyntactic/constructional change, Fischer (2007) and Traugott and Trousdale (2013), the former is the more radical one in this sense in that it attributes innovations to analogy with constructions already present in the speaker-listener’s grammar, whereas the latter inherently entangles internal and external systems through its insistence on pragmatics-induced reanalysis as the primary mechanism of change. Taking its cue from the Fischer model, this paper explores the likelihood of a number of possible analogical sources for epistemic *be bound to* by connecting diachronically arranged usage data for epistemic *be bound to* with data for formally and functionally similar as well as superficially identical but semantically dissimilar constructions collected from a diachronic corpus and two text archives.

References

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