

Revisiting *be supposed to* from a diachronic construction grammar perspective

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After receiving passing mention in some of the earlier work in grammaticalization (Bybee 1985; Traugott 1989) and in work on modality (Westney 1995; Van der Auwera & Plungian 1998), *be supposed to* more recently became the dedicated focus of a number of corpus and frequency-based diachronic studies (Ziegeler 2003; Visconti 2004; Mair 2004; Berkenfield 2006; Moore 2007) which all start from the premise that the deontic or ‘expect’ meaning of the pattern is a grammaticalization of its ‘belief’ meaning. In other words, none of these studies pays much heed to the footnote in Traugott (1989) that the verb *suppose* used to have an ‘expect’ meaning and that consequently there is no need to posit the deontic construction to be a grammaticalization of a passive or evidential construction. All of these studies interpret the Late Modern English rise in the frequency of the deontic construction and the concomitant drop in the frequency of the evidential construction as evidence for the grammaticalization of an older construction into a newer one. All of them also consider *be supposed to* in isolation. If, on the other hand, the pattern is considered from a construction grammatical perspective as only one of many possible “substantive” realizations of a small handful of “schematic” so-called “nominative and infinitive” (or “NCI”) constructions, the observed frequency changes can receive a wholly different interpretation, for the fall in the frequency of evidential *be supposed to* is completely in line with a general decrease in the frequency of a schematic evidential NCI construction, as revealed by an investigation of the twenty most frequent NCI patterns in the Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (*be expected to*, *be said to*, *be supposed to*, *be thought to*, *be found to*, etc.). Considering *be supposed to* within such a wider diachronic construction grammatical perspective (cf. Noël 2007) will also show up remarkable resemblances with the *be expected to* pattern, which can also be the realization of both an evidential and a deontic construction, but which can hardly be argued not to have had an ‘expect’ meaning to start with.

References

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