

The Historical Formation of English Auxiliary *Ought to* – with special reference to Late OE and Early ME

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Summary

This paper deals with the semantic and syntactic history of MnE *ought to* (‘*āgan* + *to*-infinitive’ construction) from LOE (examples collected by Callaway 1913 and Ono 1989) to EME (*LambHom*, *TrinHom* and Lazamon’s *Brut*). The change of the structure from ‘[*āgan*] + [*to*-infinitive]’ (*āgan* as a main verb) to ‘[*āgan to*] + [infinitive]’ (*āgan* as a part of an auxiliary) is considered to be due to (1) the ambiguity (sometimes with the collocation with the phrase denoting propriety as a supporter of denoting obligation) and (2) the change of the value of the infinitival *to* in LOE.

1. Introduction

Modern English (henceforth MnE) modal auxiliary *ought to* takes *to* in its infinitival complement, which is a syntactic characteristic distinct from other modal auxiliaries.

(1) John *ought to* / *should* / *must* / *can* / *will* attend the class.

According to Quirk *et al* (1985: 139, 908-909), however, *ought* sometimes takes bare infinitive in familiar style of nonassertive contexts¹ (p. 139) and in ellipsis (pp. 139, 908-909). Still we may consider *ought* as taking *to* as usual. This fact tells us that *to* has been an infinitival sign, when we consider that *to* is optional according to the context. Syntactically some scholars do not give close attention to the properties of *to* of this auxiliary but regard *ought to* as an unit of an auxiliary².

Semantically MnE *ought to* expresses the notion of obligation, i.e. ‘it is proper for someone to do something’, with *should* and *must*. *Ought to* is said to be synonymous particularly with *should* in its sense. Quirk *et al* (1985: 220, 227) describe the contrast of the meaning of *must* vs. *ought to* / *should*, but not the semantic contrast of *ought to* vs. *should*: “[*s*]hould and *ought to* ... are more or less interchangeable with the meaning of ‘obligation’ and ‘tentative inference’” (p. 220) and “*should* is more frequent than *ought to*” (p. 227). According to Schibsbye (1970²: 83, s.v. 1.8.7) “[i]n content *ought* approximates to *should* ..., but is more emphatic”, with no other information about the semantic distinction of *ought* and *should*. Nor gives Palmer (1990²: 25, 122) clear semantic distinction between the two. Here we should consider that *ought to* and *should* are almost synonymous in their sense and they are somewhat interchangeable with each other.

¹ “Nonassertive contexts” could be interpreted rather roughly as negative and interrogative contexts, not clauses, with negative import.

² Ogura (1996: 160) takes MnE *ought to* as the combination of OE *āgan* and *to*-infinitive from the blend of ‘*habban* + *to*-infinitive’ and ‘*sculan* + infinitive’. It is understandable that MnE *have to* and *ought to* are alike in their meaning and history in that both OE *habban* and *āgan* originally express possession and their objects are ambiguous (see Ono 1989). For the formation of MnE semi-auxiliary *have to*, see Ukaji (2005).

Thus syntactic and semantic behavior of MnE *ought to* is peculiar enough to take *to* syntactically, and in semantics, it is synonymous with *should* or *must*. As can be inferred, the peculiarity may partly lie in its history. It is worth examining how the relationship of *ought* and its concomitant *to* have been, with respect to the older usage. Here I call *to* as ‘concomitant’ because *to* is optional according to MnE context where *ought to* appears, as for the remark by Quirk *et al.* In this paper I will examine the historical state of *ought to*. In the examples cited, italics are mine unless otherwise noted. The short titles of OE texts are based on the abbreviation of *The Dictionary of Old English, Web Corpus*.

OED gives us some preliminary information that the transitional period between LOE and EME (10th – 13th century) is the crucial stage of the history of *ought to*. According to *OED*, OE *āgan* with *to*-infinitive appears first as *āgan to geldanne*, ‘to have to pay’ (s.v. *owe* 2.a.) and *āhte to geldanne*, ‘had to pay’ (s.v. *ought* † 2.a.), both of which appear with the first example dating c950 in the translation of Latin *debere* or *debebat*, which has become MnE *owe*. For the usage as ‘ought to’, not ‘to owe’, “[t]he most frequent use throughout” (s.v. *OED* *ought* 5.b.) dates c1175³ with infinitive other than *geldanne*. From this survey what is postulated as my ultimate aim of this study is how OE *āgan* behaved as in the usage with *to*-infinitive in LOE and EME.

2. Usage of OE *āgan*

As I have already introduced in Kaita (2007), OE *āgan* has largely three usages:

- (2) a. Main verb ‘to have, possess’, with noun object, obsolete in MnE.
- b. Main verb ‘to have, possess’ or auxiliary, with infinitival complement.
 - (i) with *to geldanne*, the ancestor of MnE *owe* (Cf. *OED* s.v. *owe* 2.a. and *ought* † 2.a.)
 - (ii) with *to*-infinitive, the ancestor of MnE *ought to* (Cf. *OED* s.v. *ought* 5.b.)
- c. (Seemingly) perfect auxiliary with past participle, as in MnE perfect form ‘*have* + p.p.’, obsolete in MnE. (not mentioned as irrelevant in this paper)

I owe the classification (2) to Ono (1969: 23). He describes the distinction of the meaning of *āgan* (MnE *owe* and *ought*). The diachronic semantic change is illustrated in the Table, which I made in addition to Ono (1969: 23), though the danger of oversimplification of meaning is inevitable, as Ono puts it. In the Table “(*)” indicates, according to Ono, that the meaning is rare in OE *āgan* (p. 23). The Table deals with the meaning of each word or phrase as a unit, so that the value of *āgan* in combination with *to*-infinitive (see the boldface), i.e. whether *āgan* retains the meaning ‘to have’ or not, is not described sufficiently.

³ s.v. *ought* 5.b. (a) α. : c1175 *Lamb. Hom. 5* *Bes we ahte[n] to beon þe edmoddre*. ‘Thus we ought to be more humble.’

Table: The Semantic Change of OE *āgan* (to MnE)

	(2a) ‘to have’	(2b) (i) ‘to have to pay’	(2b) (ii) ‘to be obliged’
OE <i>āgnian</i>	*	-	-
↓ (Descending directly)			
MnE <i>own</i>	*	-	-

OE <i>āgan</i>	*	(*)	(*)
<i>āgan to geldanne</i>	-	*	-
<i>āgan to-infinitive</i>	*	-	*
(OED lacks the examples showing the transition from <i>āgan to geldanne</i> to <i>āgan / ahte</i> (c950-12C)).			
↓			
EME <i>āgan / ahte</i>	-	*	-
MnE <i>owe</i>	-	*	-
↓			
EME <i>āgan / ahte to</i>	-	-	*
MnE <i>ought to</i>	-	-	*

Legend: *: The meaning exists. - : The meaning does not exist.

The usage (2a) is seen throughout OE, while another preterite-present verbs *sculan* (MnE *shall* and *should*) ‘must’ and *mōtan* (MnE *must*) ‘to be allowed to’ take the bare infinitive. An OE verse text *Genesis B* (lines 421b-424a) shows typical uses of each of the three. The sense of possession is shared with OE *āgnian* ‘to own’, MnE *own*. Ogura (1996: 85) tells the dialectal choice of these two synonyms as “Northumbrian *agnian* and Mercian *agan* correspond to West Saxon *habban*”.

For the usage (2b) Ono (1989: 68-75) found LOE examples of ‘*āgan* + *to-infinitive*’ construction (quoted from *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, where the construction is allegedly found in prose texts and glosses, but not in poetry), in which 32 examples of Callaway (1913: 80-81) are included. I distinguish the usage (i) from (ii), where (i) has become MnE *owe* (without infinitival complement) and (ii) has become MnE auxiliary *ought* (with infinitival complement). We further examine the usage (2b).

3. ‘*Āgan* + *to-infinitive*’ construction in LOE

For (2b) (i) we should remark that *ahte to geldanne* ‘had to pay’ in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (Lk 7.41) (Latin: *debebat*) corresponds to *sceolde* ‘owed’ (*WS*) and more remarkably to OHG *solta* ‘owed’ (*Tatian* 138.9). The structure of *āgan to geldanne* can be ‘[*āgan*] + [*to geldanne*]’, meaning ‘to have OBJECT (e.g. five hundred pennies) that should be paid’. This phrase seems to result in the sense of obligation.

The main problem in the LOE ‘*āgan* + *to-infinitive*’ construction (2b) is the ambiguity of whether the object belongs to *āgan* or to the (inflected) infinitive, introduced in Ono (1989: 62-63,

77) as “[a]gan + infinitive is ambiguous, when the verb combined with *agan* is transitive and has its own object, which can also be governed by *agan*” (p. 77). This ambiguity comes from the possibility of *āgan* as having the possessive sense as in (3) (described as *Laws* 30, *Ælfred*, Intr., c. 12^a by Callaway 1913: 81, cited by Ono 1989: 67) with corresponding Latin part (4), also cited by Ono (*Vulgate* used by Alfred) with Callaway’s example, allegedly quoted from Liebermann⁴.

(3) Ðeah hwa gebycgge his dohtor on þeowenne, ne sie hio ealles swa ðeowu swa oðru mennenu: *nage* he hie ut on elðeodig folc *to bebycgganne*.

(*LawÆfEl* 12.1) (from Ono 1989: 72; italics his)

‘Although one sells his daughter to foreigners, she is not entirely as the same slave as other male: he does not have her to sell onto foreign folk’

(4) Si quis uendiderit filiam suam in famulam, non egredietur sicut ancillę exire consueuerunt. Si displicuerit oculis domini sui cui tradita fuerat, dimittet eam; populo autem alieno *uendendi non habebit potestatem*, si spreuerit eam.

(*Exodus* 21.7-8) (from Ono 1989: 67; italics his)

Mitchell (1969: 375) does not consider (3) to “belong to the late tenth or to the eleventh century” but “*āgan* once again has the sense of possession” and Ono considers that “there seems to be room for reconsideration”, whose reading is “[t]hough it is not impossible to take *hie* in this example as the object of *nage* (‘jussive subjunctive’), itself implying prohibition, it will be more natural to take it as the object of *to bebycgganne*, which, combined with *nage*, corresponds to *uendendi non habebit potestatem*. There seems to be nothing in the context that prevents us from taking *nage to bebycgganne* to be the equivalent of *ought not to sell*, and we cannot exclude the possibility that *agan* + infinitive had the sense ‘to have it as a duty’ already in the last ninth century.” (Ono 1989: 67; italics his). The Latin part reads ‘do not have the power of selling’. And in the edition of Crawford (ed.) (1969), the part corresponding to *nage ... to bebycgganne* is *ne mot: ne mot he hi fremdum folce syllan* ‘he is not allowed to sell her to foreign folk’. In *nage ... to bebycgganne* ‘do not have (her) to sell’, the interpretation can be ‘do not have (her) to sell’ = ‘do not have the right to sell’ = ‘should not sell’, the reading of which is supported by *ne mot ... syllan* ‘not allowed to sell’ = ‘must not sell’.

When we observe the examples by Ono, though not pointed out by him, the ‘*āgan* + *to*-infinitive’ construction sometimes collocates with words or phrases relating to propriety notion. Here the ‘collocation’ means that some words co-occur with this construction. They are adverbial phrases *mid rihte*⁵ and *rihtlice* ‘righteously’, seeming to function as appending the notion of obligation to this construction. The sense of the contexts may be ‘you righteously have

⁴ According to Ono’s footnote (no. 3) on p. 78, the text is from F. Liebermann (ed.), *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (Halle, 1903-16; rpt. Aalen, 1960), i, p. 30. And according to the footnote (no. 4), “[i]n his Wörterbuch, Liebermann cites this example s.v. *nagan*, 4) *vor to m inf b) nicht dürfen, kein Recht haben zu*”. Liebermann seems to interpret as prohibition.

⁵ Cf. NHG adverbial phrase *mit Recht* ‘righteously’.

something to do' or 'it is proper for someone to do something'.

- (5) Forðam *nah* ænig man mid rihte *to fullianne* hæþenne man,
 (*HomU* 24 (Nap 25) 5) (from Ono 1989: 70; italics his)
 'Therefore anyone ought not to satisfy heathen man righteously,'

These phrases do not only occur with such ambiguous constructions, but are often seen in the '*āgan* + *to*-infinitive' construction. Also note that *mit rihte* collocates with *sculan* in *GenB* (line 424a). Therefore these phrases could be compatible with the context for obligation.

On the other hand, it seems possible to give the '*āgan* + *to*-infinitive' construction the reading 'ought to' even at LOE. As Ono (1989: 77) points out, there is no ambiguity if the inflected infinitive is an intransitive verb⁶. And I find that if the infinitive is a verb of possession such as *habban*, the ambiguity can be avoided, as found in Ono's examples.

- (6) *Nah* naðer *to farenne* ne Wilisc man Ænglisc land ne Ænglisc on Wylisc ðe ma, butan
 gesettan landmen, (*LawDuns* 6) (from Ono 1989: 73; italics his)
 'Foreign man ought not to go to the English land nor ought English (man) to go to the
 foreign (land) the more, except for settled native ones,'
- (7) & ic nelle geþafian þ̅ him anig man fram hande teo anig þare gerihte þes þe he mid rihte
to habbene ah (*Ch* 1096 (Harm 43) 6) (from Ono 1989: 73; italics his)
 'And I do not wish to endure that any man deprives his hand of any of the right that he
 righteously ought to have'

The example (7) collocates with *mid rihte*, telling that the sense of obligation is specified by the adverbials.

When we see the value of *to* itself, according to Fries (1940: 130-131) and Lightfoot (1979: 108, 190), the infinitive with and without *to* was at the stage of conflict from LOE and EME. Lightfoot describes this conflict as "a titanic struggle between the *to* and *to*-less infinitives raging during the late OE and early ME period, with *to* eventually winning out in most places" (p. 108). Mustanoja (1960: 514) also gives the account on *to* that "[t]he *to* accompanying the infinitive loses its prepositional force and becomes a mere sign of the infinitive. This development begins early and is completed in the course of the 13th century".

In '*āgan* + *to*-infinitive' construction in LOE, the examples without *to* are rare (see Ono 1989: 77-78). The infinitive refers to the action that is supposed to be done in the future. That is, the infinitival *to* retains its original future notion with the *-enne* ending of the infinitive. The construction of *āgan* with bare infinitive is found in the 12th century according to *OED*, but some of the examples of Callaway and Ono show the occurrence of bare infinitive in second or subsequent conjunct(s) in coordinate constructions.

⁶ Ukaji (2005: 64) also refers to the intransitive verb in the history of *have to*.

- (8) Ac man *ah* cyrican and haligdom *to secanne* and þære hine georne inne *to gebiddanne* and mid eadmodnysse *hlystan*, (*HomU* 46 (Nap 57) 91) (from Ono 1989: 70; italics his)

‘But one ought to seek church and sanctuary and there to entreat him inside earnestly and to obey with humility,’

On the other hand some examples have *to* occurring at the subsequent conjuncts (e.g. *HomS* 37 46: *agan to gefyllanne* and *to gehealdenne*), so that *to* has become mere infinitival sign within the LOE period in this construction.

4. ‘*Āgan + to*-infinitive’ construction in EME

In EME I chose the examples in the 13th century of (1) prose: five corresponding pairs of select homilies of *LambHom* (MS. Lambeth Palace 487) and *TrinHom* (MS. Trinity College Cambridge B.14.52) and (2) verse: two MSS of MS. Cotton Caligula A. ix and MS. Cotton Otho C. xiii in Lazamon’s *Brut*. They enable us to compare the use of words in similar contexts. In these texts infinitival *to* seems to function as a mere optional infinitival sign in the construction. As far as I have consulted, *āgan* with bare infinitive or infinitives not ending with *-enne* are found in these texts.

- (9) *LambHom* XIII (137.13-17)

On feorðe wise mon sulleð his elmesse. þenne he heo zefeð swulche monne þe he *ahte* mid rihte *helpe* to fodneðe and to scrude bi his bi-haze. also deð monimon ðe zefeð his elmesse feader oðer moder broðer oðer suster oðer oðre swa isibbe ðe he ne mei mid rihte wiðteon.

‘In the fourth way one sells his alms when he gives them to such people as he righteously ought to help for food and for clothing on his behalf, as many a man does who gives his alms to father or mother, brother or sister or others so related, whom he righteously cannot withhold.’

- TrinHom* XXVI (157.31-159.1)

On þe feorðe wise man silleð his almes þenne he zifeð swiche men þe he *azhte* mid rihte *to helpe*: to feden. and to shruden. Also þe man doð. þe zifeð his almes fader. oðer moder. suster. oðer broðer. oðer oðre swo sibbe: þat he *aghte* mid rihte *to helpen* to feden. and to shruden.

‘In the fourth way one sells his alms when he gives to such people as he righteously ought to help to feed and to clothe, as one does who gives his alms to father or mother, sister or brother or others so related, whom he righteously ought to help to feed and to clothe.’

- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| (10) | <p>Caligula</p> <p>And þeos weoren mine ælderen?
mine aððele uore-genglen.
and <i>ahten</i> alle þa leoden?
þa into Rome leien.
and þurh swuche dome?
ich <i>ahte to bizeten</i> Rome.</p> | <p>Otho</p> <p>And alle þeos weren min eldre?
of wan we beoþ i-spronge.
and <i>adde</i> alle þe londes?
þat into Rome leie.
and þorh soche domes?
ich <i>hahte ohni</i> Rome. (Brut 25081-86)</p> |
|------|--|---|
- C: ‘And these were my elders, my noble progenitors and possessed all the lands that lay in Rome. And through such power I ought to govern Rome.’
- O: ‘And all of these were my elders of whom we are sprung and (they) possessed all the lands that lay in Rome. And through such power I ought to possess Rome.’

In OE *āgan* is synonymous with *āgnian*. In *Brut* they are distinct. In the line 25083 *ahten* / *adde* means ‘possessed’ and *ahte to bizeten* / *hahte ohni* (line 25086) means ‘ought to govern / ought to possess’, showing the habitat segregation of the sense of ‘to possess’ and ‘ought to’.

Another noteworthy remark on *Brut* is that *āgan (to)* and *sculan / mōtan*, and *sculan* and *mōtan* correspond between two MSS. The ‘*āgan* + (*to*)-infinitive’ can denote the sense of obligation in the transitional period between LOE and EME (for the contexts, see Kaita 2007: 48-50), although Ono (1989: 54) concludes that “the auxiliary *ought*, in form as well as in function, was nearly established in the day of Malory”.

5. Conclusion

I have looked at the semantic and syntactic history of MnE *ought to* from LOE to EME. The sense originates from the use of OE *āgan* ‘to have, possess’ with *to*-infinitive. Along with the following process a restructuring from ‘[*āgan*] + [*to*-infinitive]’ to ‘[*āgan to*] + [infinitive]’ seems to have occurred as early as in the LOE period.

In LOE the original construction of *āgan* with *to*-infinitive is in the usage of a full verb, with the structure ‘[*āgan*] + [*to*-infinitive]’, where *āgan* takes an object, and the object is associated with the phrase [*to*-infinitive], which implies future obligation. According to *OED* the usage first occurs as *āgan to geldanne* in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (c950, for rendering Latin *debere*), meaning ‘to have something (e.g. money) that should be paid’. *OED* gives no example showing the transition from *āgan to geldanne* to single *owe* (first appearing at the 12th century) for about two hundred years. Callaway (1913) and Ono (1989), however, show that other infinitives co-occur with the ‘*āgan* + *to*-infinitive’ construction in LOE. In the structure of ‘[*āgan*] + [*to*-infinitive]’ and when the infinitive is transitive, the object may belong either to *āgan* or to the infinitive, which Ono (1989) terms as “ambiguity”. On the other hand, however, the infinitive can be (1) intransitive verb or (2) transitive verb meaning ‘to have, possess’. When these two kinds of infinitives occur with the construction, the reading ‘to have something that should be done’ is invalid. Instead, I am forced to adopt the interpretation of ‘ought to’ even in the LOE period.

Also I have examined the status of infinitival *to*, from its function denoting future with

infinitival ending (-enne) to an infinitival sign with leveled ending. The occurrence of bare infinitive is limited in second or subsequent conjunct(s) in coordinate constructions. On the other hand some examples have *to* at the subsequent conjuncts, so that *to* has become mere infinitival sign within LOE period in the construction. The change of the function of *to* would have triggered *āgan (to)* to be parallel to other auxiliaries (e.g. *sculan*). Therefore, in LOE, the sense ‘to have something that should be done’ and ‘ought to’ were in conflict. Sometimes the collocation with an adverbial phrase expressing propriety *mid rihte* or *rihtlice* appends the reading of ‘ought to’.

In EME the infinitival *to* has already become optional and the infinitival ending is leveled. In the examples bare infinitive occurs in single infinitival complement. The structure would be [*āgan (to)*] + [infinitive]. *Āgan* can singly behave as an auxiliary without *to*. Therefore the sense of ‘ought to’ is considered to become more stable in this period.

In later stages, though I have not given any consideration, syntactically *āgan* takes *to*-infinitive because *to* has been syntactically prevalent from early periods. The formation of the sense of MnE auxiliary *ought to* is considered to be based on (1) the ambiguity (with the sense of obligation sometimes supported by collocation) and (2) the change of the value of the infinitival *to* in LOE.

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