A Note on *Ought* and OUGHT in English

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1. Introduction

Von Fintel and Iatridou (2008, 121) show that 'weak necessity' in Greek is expressed by "a strong necessity modal meaning 'must' augmented by counterfactual morphology". On page 124, they explicitly take English to express such weak necessity otherwise, through a "dedicated lexical item" *ought*. In this paper, I will argue that English is syntactically more like Greek than it appears at first glance to be.

On page 117, von Fintel and Iatridou (2008) call English *should* a near-equivalent of *ought*, while noting (in their footnote 2) that there are differences between *ought* and *should*, as in their (i), reproduced here:

  (1) It's strange that he should/*ought to do that.

To my ear (1) with *ought to* is not strictly impossible, but what is clear is that they are correct to point out that there is a natural non-weak-necessity reading of (1) with *should* that is sharply unavailable with *ought to*. A similar example with *should* would be:

  (2) That he should have said that in public is unbelievable.

The relevant non-weak-necessity reading of (1) and (2) remains available if we replace *should* by *would*:

  (3) It's strange that he would do that.
  (4) That he would have said that in public is unbelievable.

In this paper, I would like to deny that *should* is ever a weak necessity modal, even in sentences like:

  (5) We should work harder.

I will take *should* to be closer to *would* than it is to *ought*.

2. Anti-homophony

One factor in denying to *should* any intrinsic weak necessity sense is that doing so avoids having to speak of what would be a curious ambiguity between a weak necessity *should* and the *should* of the non-weak-necessity reading of (1) and (2). Such an ambiguity would go against the anti-homophony conjecture/heuristic put forth by Johns (1992, 84), Embick (2003, 156) and Kayne (2019a, 137), which I take to be a step in the desirable direction of restricting the space of possible analyses available to the linguist.

3. Proposal

Sentences with *should* that appear to express weak necessity such as (5) must then draw their weak necessity interpretation in part from some element other than *should*. I therefore take sentences like (5) to be able to express weak necessity only by having in

them a silent counterpart of *ought*, which I will write as OUGHT, using capital letters to indicate silence. In other words, (5) is to be thought of as:[1]

   (6) we should OUGHT work harder

   The proposal in (6) brings English very close to Greek. The counterfactual morphology that is one key ingredient of weak necessity in Greek corresponds to English *should*. The strong necessity modal that is the other key ingredient in Greek corresponds in (6) to OUGHT. The overall weak necessity interpretation of (5)/(6) comes, much as in von Fintel and Iatridou (2008), from the cooccurrence/interaction of *should* and OUGHT.

   The plausibility of the proposal in (6), which amounts to taking *ought*/OUGHT to be a strong necessity modal, is enhanced by Curme's (1931, 414; 1935, 254) observation of the existence of non-standard examples like:

   (7) He shouldn't ought to do it.
   (8) You shouldn't ought to have done it.
   (9) You shouldn't have ought to have done it.

In fact, Curme (1931, 398) himself comes close to suggesting (6) when he says that *ought* is "literally, *should owe*".

4. SHOULD

   Against the background of (7)-(9) and the proposal in (6), a question arises as to the status of sentences like:

   (10) He ought to do it.

If *ought* is, as (6) suggests, a strong necessity modal, how is it that the overall interpretation of (10) is one of weak necessity? The natural answer, from the present perspective, is that (10) is to be understood as containing a silent SHOULD, as in:[2]

   (11) he SHOULD ought to do it

with (10)/(11) again matching Greek, insofar as there is in English an element corresponding to the counterfactual morphology of Greek, namely SHOULD, along with an element, *ought*, that matches the strong necessity modal of Greek.

5. *Ought* and *must*

   Taking OUGHT in (6) and *ought* in (10)/(11) to be a strong necessity modal leads to questions concerning differences between *ought* and *must*. It may (or may not) be that they are perfect synonyms that appear not to be only because *ought*/OUGHT has the property that it must cooccur with *should*/SHOULD (or with *had*, as in the next section),

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[1]Why exactly overt *should* wins out over silent OUGHT here with respect to *to*:
   i) *We should to work harder.
needs to be elucidated, in the context of a general understanding of *to* vs. TO. For relevant discussion of English, see Pollock (1994), and of Icelandic (which shows a complementizer-like element with modals more widely than does English), Thráinsson (2007, 422).

[2]Cf. the proposals for silent present subjunctive SHOULD in Emonds (2000, 299n, 336n) and Roberts (1985, note 12).

whereas *must* cannot cooccur with any of those elements.[3] (Put another way, *ought*, unlike *must*, cannot be directly associated with Tense.)

6. A variant proposal
      Curme (1935, 254) also mentions:
   (12) He hadn't ought to do it.
And Fodor and Smith (1978, 63) give:[4]
   (13) You had oughtta go now.
Wood (2011) in fact proposes that sentences like:[5]
   (14) You ought to leave right now.
should be analyzed as containing a silent HAD:
   (15) you HAD ought to...
      It might be that (11) and (15) are competing proposals. But it also might be the case that both are available, depending on the variety of English. Both would match Greek, with Greek counterfactual morphology now being matched by either SHOULD or HAD.[6]

7. Inversion and negation
      If it is correct to take *ought*/OUGHT never to be directly associated with Tense, one is led to wonder about the acceptability in some varieties of English of:
   (16) Ought we leave so soon?
   (17) You oughtn't leave so soon.
in which *ought* appears to have raised past the subject or past *n't* in a way familiar from the behavior of modals that are in fact directly associated with Tense, e.g.:
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[3]There may well in turn be a close link to the following well-known difference (cf. note 1):
   i) You ought to leave early.
   ii) You must (*to) leave early.
and/or to the fact that they differ in:
   iii) I must have misunderstood.
   iv) I ought to have misunderstood.
with (iii) having an epistemic interpretation unavailable to (iv). (This is so despite *ought* allowing a certain kind of epistemic reading in other cases, as discussed by von Fintel and Iatridou (2008).)
[4]Cf. also Jespersen (1961, Part IV, 9.8(3). In addition, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ought says "*Hadn't ought* is a common spoken form in the Northern dialect area. It is sometimes condemned in usage guides and is uncommon in educated speech except of the most informal variety. *Didn't ought* and *shouldn't ought* are considered nonstandard." (On *didn't ought*, see below.)
[5]Cf. Wood's proposal taking:
   i) You better leave.
to be as in:
   ii) you HAD better leave
For related discussion, v. Wood (2013).
[6]The *had* of this section is what Fodor and Smith (1978, 64) call modal *had* (which has the property that it does not alternate with *have*).

(18) Could we leave now?

(19) You can't leave yet.

I will not try to decide here between a view that takes *ought* in (16) and (17) to have skipped over SHOULD or HAD, in apparent violation of Travis's (1984, 131) Head Movement Constraint, and a view that takes (16) and (17) not to involve head movement at all,[7] but rather to involve the (remnant) movement of SHOULD/HAD and *ought* together, in a way that might link up to Johnson (1988, 160) on non-standard sentences like:[8]

(20) Shouldn't have Pam remembered her name?

and/or to Nilsen's (2003) adverb-based argument that Norwegian V-2 is not (always) head movement.

8. *Do*-support

Somewhat similar to the questions raised in the previous section are those raised by the existence of varieties of English in which *ought* is compatible with *do*-support, as in (example from Pullum and Wilson (1977, 757)):[9]

(21) You didn't ought to do that.

Although Jespersen (1970, Part V, 25.8₇) has two examples with *don't ought*, my impression is that *didn't ought* is more widely attested, and is to my ear, even though marginal, quite a bit less marginal than *don't ought*. If solid, this asymmetry would recall the *hadn't ought* of section 6, which seems not to be paralleled by any **haven't ought*, and would suggest that the *did* of *didn't ought* is modal-like,[10] in a sense to be determined, and able, in the relevant dialects, to play the role of *should* or *had*.

9. Greek and now English as a window on the language faculty

If the proposals in (11) and (15) are on the right track, English is essentially like Greek in its expression of weak necessity. In both languages (and in others discussed by von Fintel and Iatridou (2008)), sentences conveying weak necessity show both a strong necessity modal and either counterfactual/conditional morphology (Greek) or the arguably quite parallel *should*/SHOULD or *had*/HAD (English). This leads in turn to the following proposal:

(22) All languages must express weak necessity in the manner of Greek and English. Put another way:[11]

(23) No language can express weak necessity via a single "dedicated lexical item".

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[7]For a proposed reinterpretation of Pollock (1989) (and more) in non-head movement terms, v. Jayaseelan (2010).

[8]Possibly, the *have* in this kind of example is really *of*, as in Kayne (1997). In that vein, note the contrast:

i) ?You shouldn't of ought to have said that.

ii) *You shouldn't of ought to say that.

[9]Such examples are also mentioned in Trudgill and Hannah (1994, 62), Huddleston (2002, 109n), Quirk et al. (1985, 140) and Jespersen (1961, 9.5(6)).

[10]With potentially interesting implications for our understanding of *do*-support.

[11]Contrary to what von Fintel and Iatridou (2008, 124) thought about English *ought*.

We can now ask what would lead the language faculty to respect (22)/(23). A possible answer is given by the following Principle of Decompositionality:[12]

(24) UG imposes a maximum of one interpretable syntactic feature per lexical item. In essence, the idea is that lexical items (in particular on the functional side of the lexicon) cannot be complex. (Put another way, a single node cannot be associated with two or more interpretable features.) In the case at hand, 'weak necessity' is too complex a notion to be 'shoehorned' into one lexical item/one node. In which case, the language faculty requires that weak necessity be expressed by (at least) two separate elements.[13]

10. Back to *must*

On the assumption that *must* can express strong necessity by itself, it follows from (22)/(23) that *must* is not 'too complex', i.e. that *must* is not associated with more than one interpretable syntactic feature. If so, then the term 'strong necessity' is misleading, insofar as it gives the impression that *must* is associated both with necessity and with 'strength'. We could avoid this sort of confusion, by dropping 'strong', leaving *must* as just 'necessity'.[14]

11. Conclusion

The interpretation of certain modal sentences rests on the presence within them of certain silent modal elements. In this paper, I have argued that sentences like the following fall under this description:

(25) You should work harder. (with silent OUGHT)
(26) You ought to work harder. (with silent SHOULD or HAD)

In this respect, the present paper is close to an earlier proposal of mine that took:

(27) You are to be back by midnight.

to necessarily contain a silent passive modal participle.[15]

The language faculty imposes the presence of these silent elements via a Principle of Decompositionality that prohibits multiple interpretable syntactic features on a single node.

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[12]Cf. Kayne (2005a, Appendix).
[13]On 'at least' here, cf. cf. Iatridou's (2000) argument that counterfactual morphology is itself decomposable.
[14]Whatever kind of complexity is associated with the notion of 'necessity' itself must not involve multiple interpretable syntactic features, if Decompositionality is on the right track.
[15]Cf. Kayne (2014) on SUPPOSED/MEANT/EXPECTED.

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