

Modelling modal meaning: Old Swedish expressions of permission and obligation

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The semantics of the modal concepts of permission and obligation are notoriously difficult to define, and this is true *a fortiori* of historical languages. Following Nuyts et al. (2009: 18, 24) we distinguish between **deontic uses**, which express “an assessment of the degree of moral acceptability of the SoA” [State of Affairs] and **directive uses**, where “the agent participant in the SoA is instructed (...) to do what is involved in the SoA”. This paper presents a multidimensional analysis of deontic expressions in the Revelations of Saint Birgitta (ca. 1303-1373), one of the most important literary figures in medieval Sweden (Wollin 1991). By the very nature of its contents (directions for leading a devout life and instructions to the clergy) her revelations offer a rich variety of deontic and directive expressions. First of all, they feature three modal verbs to express permission or obligation: *aegha* (< PGmc. **aigan* ‘to have, own’), *ma* (< **maghan* ‘to have power, to be able to’) and *skula* (< PGmc. **skulan* ‘to owe’), as illustrated in (1-3).

- (1) *thy aeghir pafwin at varkunna kirkionne oc klærkdomenom* [Bir IV: 33]
therefore AEGHA pope-DEF to show.mercy church-DEF and clergy-DEF
‘therefore, the pope must show compassion with the church and clergy’
- (2) *mædh huxsins oc licamans ødhmiukt*
with spirit-GEN-DEF-GEN and body.GEN-DEF-GEN humility
ma mannin ingaa ginom himelin
MA man-DEF enter through heaven [Bir IV: 58]
‘with humility of spirit and body a man may enter the kingdom of heaven’
- (3) *Thw skalt ælskæ gudh owir al thingh* [Bir IV: 7]
You SKULA love God above all things
‘You shall love God above all else’

These three modal verbs not only compete with each other, but with other constructions as well. In directive contexts, for example, we also find the imperative for direct instructions, as in (4), or a present subjunctive form of the verb for indirect constructions, as in (5).

- (4) *Ælska gudh aff allo hierta* [Bir IV: 38]
Love-IMP God of all heart
‘Love God with all your heart’
- (5) *Vakte ok æmuæl predicaren at han gange ey j vatnit vtan til knæn*
take.care-SUBJ even so preacher-DEF that he go-SUBJ not into water unless to knees
‘Nonetheless the preacher should take care not to go deeper into the water than to his knees’ [Bir IV: 127]

Adopting an onomasiological approach, we address the question of which factors determine the choice between these five expressions of permission and obligation. To answer our RQ, we not only consider contextual factors, but the potential role of register as well (cf. Neumann 2014). More in particular, we will consider the social role relationship (SRR) between addressor and addressee in Birgitta’s revelations (e.g. Maria speaking to Birgitta (SRR = ‘down’) or Birgitta speaking to Jesus (SRR = ‘up’)). Drawing data from a dedicated corpus of Book IV of Birgitta’s revelations (ca. 71,000 tokens) which has been lemmatised and annotated for part-of-speech, speaker / addressee and social role relationship, we will fit a conditional inference tree (Levshina 2015: 291ff.), using the following categorical predictors: subject type (human / animate / inanimate), voice (active / passive), negation (yes / no), modal type (deontic / direct instructive / indirect instructive) and SRR (up / down). To further refine the semantic distinctions between the three modal verbs, we will perform a distinctive collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), which can be used to identify which (groups of) main verbs that have a specific preference for one of the three modals.

Keywords: modality, competition, register, Old Swedish

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