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Variable Force Modality of "Motan" in *Beowulf*

Throughout the history of the English language, the verb from which modern "must" derives has spanned a wide range of meanings. Klaeber defines Old English motan as "may, have opportunity, be allowed", all of which are quite different from the modern "must".[1] To explain the patterns of usage of motan in ninth-century Old English, Igor Yanovich convincingly proposes that the verb really had only one sense somewhere between "may" and "must", and that its range of translations arises from the fact that this meaning is hard to express in modern English. Yanovich's analysis, however, was limited to the ninth-century corpus of Alfredian texts, so he did not discuss whether the semantics of the verb, which had already mutated dramatically by Chaucer, remained the same in other Old English works. *Beowulf* is a good Old English text in which to examine the usage of motan for several reasons. Firstly, it is quite long, so there are many occurrences of what is a remarkably infrequent modal verb. In addition, it has several unclear passages containing motan, so any insight about the verb's general meaning in the language of the poem could help explain these sections. Finally, the dating of *Beowulf* is hotly contested. Thus, placing the poem's use of motan within a timeline of development could offer clues about when the poem was composed. After examining many occurrences of motan within *Beowulf*, it is clear that the usage of motan fits the schema observed by Yanovich in Alfredian Old English. Moreover, Yanovich's semantics for motan offer insight about how we should interpret several of the notoriously unclear passages in *Beowulf*.

According to Yanovich, the varying translations for motan in the corpus of Alfredian texts can be explained by the fact that it had a complex modal semantics combining possibility and necessity. Motivated by

[1] Klaeber *et al.*, page 415

observations in several Old English commentaries, Yanovich argues that the verb has a base assertion of possibility. In addition, two presuppositional conditions must be met by the main verb taken by motan for its usage to be allowable in some context. The desired necessity reading of motan, though not strictly part of the verb's meaning, is logically implied by combination of these contextual presuppositions with the verb's denotation of possibility. Informally, the first presupposition, which I will call **possibility-necessity duality**, says that, if the event of the main verb taken by motan can happen, then it must happen, but if it's possible that it won't happen, then it must not happen. For example, in the following sentence from the Alfredian corpus, it is contextually true that, if it *is possible* for the speaker to do so, they *will necessarily* test the resolution of the person to whom they are talking: "Mot ic nu cunnian hwon þin fæstrædnesse þæt ic þanon ongiton mæge hwonan ic þin tilian scyle and hu?"[2]

On the other hand, Yanovich's second presupposition, **deontic-circumstantial duality**, requires that, if the event of the main verb *is allowed*, then it *is possible* given the facts of the world. This is also met in the context of the former Old English sentence, since the speaker presumably has the physical ability to test the listener if they are permitted to do so. Importantly, this second presupposition must only be met when the verb is used with a deontic modal base (i.e. to mean "is allowed"), which will be explained in the next paragraph.

Aside from these two presuppositional conditions, the assertion of motan is always one of possibility, and can take either a deontic or circumstantial modal base. In other words, motan's denotation always asserts either that the main verb's action takes place in some hypothetical world that is allowed to transpire (with a deontic base), or that the action can take place in a hypothetical world that is circumstantially possible (with a circumstantial base). For example, consider the following usage of motan with a circumstantial modal base: "Æfter ðæm wope hi gewyrceað ðæt hi moton eft wepan."[3] We know (by the denotation of motan) that it is *possible* that the unspecified subject of the sentence weeps again. Combined with possibility-necessity duality,

[2] *Bo*:5.12.12, as it appears in Yanovich's draft
[3] *CP*:54.421.14, as it appears in Yanovich's draft

this implies that the event of renewed weeping is not just *possible*, but *necessary*. We can get the same necessity entailment from a deontic usage of motan; for example in this aforementioned sentence: "Mot ic nu cunnian hwon þin fæstrædnesse þæt ic þanon ongiton mæge hwonan ic þin tilian scyle and hu?"[4] By the denotation of motan, the speaker is asking if they *are allowed* to test the listener. By deontic-circumstantial duality, we see that, if such a request *is allowed*, it must be circumstantially *possible*. Therefore, by possibility-necessity duality, assuming the listener affirms the request, we can deduce that it must *necessarily* be that the speaker tests the listener. In such a way, Yanovich's formalism elegantly explains the hybrid modal force and restricted usage of motan in Alfredian Old English.

All the occurrences of motan in *Beowulf* that I examined follow the patterns observed in the Alfredian corpus; in other words, the context surrounding most usages satisfies the two presuppositions identified by Yanovich. For example, the narrator uses motan with a circumstantial base to describe how Day-Raven, a hero of the Hugas, was not able to return home alive from combat against Beowulf:

> Nalles he ða frætwe Frescyning[e]
> breastweorðunge bringan moste,
> ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde.[5]

Possibility-necessity duality is satisfied in the context of this passage because, if Day-Raven *can* bring his shield home from battle (i.e. prevail in combat), one can assume he *will* necessarily want to do so. Since the modal base of motan in this context is circumstantial (and not deontic), deontic-circumstantial duality is not relevant. Therefore, the usage fits Yanovich's schema, and it is possible to get the desired hybrid force reading.

The *Beowulf* poet also uses motan with a deontic base throughout the poem. While discussing the pagan practices of the Danes, the narrator uses a deontic-based motan in a homiletic remark about those people who are allowed to seek God after death:

> Wel bið þæm ðe mot
> æfter deaðdæge drihten secean

[4] *Bo*:5.12.12, as it appears in Yanovich's draft
[5] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 2503-2505

ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.[6]

Here, both presuppositions are satisfied: if one *is able* to reach Heaven, then presumably one *will* (possibility-necessity duality), and if God *allows* someone to go to Heaven, then that person *is able* to go (deontic-circumstantial duality). Because these conditions are met, the usage of motan captures the hybrid modal force implicit in the thought being expressed.

As with other modal verbs in Old and modern English, often the exact modal base of motan (deontic or circumstantial) is ambiguous in a particular context. In the following passage about Beowulf's honor, "moste" might be interpreted as either deontic (i.e. "allowed to [by God]") or circumstantial (i.e. "had the opportunity to"):

Swa he manna wæs
wigend weorðfullost wide geond eorðan
þenden he burhwelan brucan moste.[7]

Notably, the usage still fits Yanovich's guidelines either way. It is reasonable to assume that, if one *has the opportunity* to do so, they *will* enjoy life. Similarly, if one *is allowed* by God to enjoy life, then one *is able* to. Therefore, both possibility-necessity duality and deontic-circumstantial duality can be satisfied.

Another way to see how Yanovich's system captures the usage of motan in *Beowulf* is to look at the contexts where other modals are used instead of motan. For example, in his introduction to the Danish coast guard, Beowulf describes his desire to offer assistance to Hygelac with the verb magan:

Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg
þurh rumne sefan ræd gelæran
hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ.[8]

In this example, possibility-necessity duality does not hold because Beowulf, being the humble hero that he is, does not presume that Hrothgar *must* necessarily listen to his advice even though he *can* give it. Another

[6] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 186-188
[7] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 3098-3100
[8] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 277-279

example of a context where motan is unlicensed occurs when the poet describes the defensive strength of Beowulf's helmet as he dives through the mere to meet Grendel's mother:

..þæt hine syðþan no
brond ne beadomecas bitan ne meahton.[9]

This example also cannot satisfy Yanovich's possibility-necessity duality, since, even if a mace *can* break through a helmet, there is no reason why it *must* necessarily do so. Rather, both outcomes are possible depending on the skill of the warriors who are fighting. Therefore, it would not make sense for the poet to use motan instead of magan.

Yanovich's semantics for motan offer insight into the meaning of a notoriously unclear passage about Grendel's inability to approach a throne, which is either Hroðgar's or God's. After describing Grendel's unwelcome attacks on Heorot, the *Beowulf* poet recounts:

No he þone gifstol gretan moste,
maþðum for metode, ne his myne wisse.[10]

Klaeber remarks that this is "a perplexing passage" because, among other complications, it is unclear "whether moste means 'was permitted to' or 'had to'."[11] The note elaborates that taking the assertion of the verb as deontic possibility (i.e. "was permitted to") would force "for metode" to mean "by God", which favors a particular interpretation of the passage. The sentence becomes a remark that God is forbidding Grendel from approaching Hrothgar's throne, either as a thane, since he is an outcast in the eyes of God, or as an attacker, because God does not will that he kill Hrothgar.

Yanovich's hybrid semantics necessarily give motan a base assertion of deontic possibility, so they would still support this reading. But is the usage of motan, as opposed to another modal like magan, licensed presuppositionally in this context? If we assume motan has a deontic modal base in this passage (which the

[9] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 1453-1454
[10] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 168-169
[11] Klaeber *et al.*, page 126

invocation of the divine justifies), then both of Yanovich's presuppositions need to be satisfied for usage of the hybrid-force modal to be valid. Deontic-circumstantial duality is clearly met because, if God allows that something can happen, then, from a Christian point of view, it is circumstantially possible by the facts of the world.

There is much more to say about whether this context supports possibility-necessity duality. One can consider which of the two possible interpretations of gretan in this passage (either "attack" or "approach as a thane") is more strongly licensed by possibility-necessity duality. Assuming Yanovich's semantics for motan are accurate, then this might give us an idea about which interpretation is more likely (or, if both are possible). If gretan has the sense of "attack" in this passage, then possibility-necessity duality is satisfied by the reader's knowledge of Grendel's inimical nature. That is, given Grendel's role as the "atol aglæca" plaguing Heorot,[12] he would *necessarily* attack Hrothgar's throne if it were *possible* for him to do so. If, on the other hand, gretan has the sense of "approach as a thane", then possibility-necessity duality can still be satisfied, although perhaps more weakly than with the former reading. Such an argument invokes the human desire for communal acceptance. The contextual assumption satisfying the presupposition would be as follows: if it were *possible* for someone in Grendel's position to be accepted by mankind (i.e. God had not exiled them), then that person would *necessarily* choose to do so.

One lone occurrence of motan in *Beowulf* seems, at first, very hard to fit into Yanovich's presuppositional framework. After Beowulf's death, Wiglaf describes the dire times that await the Geatish people as a result of his fellow warriors' inability to assist their king in combat:

> Londrihtnes mot
> þære mægburge monna æghwylc
> idel hweorfan; syððan æðelingas
> feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
> domleasan dæd.[13]

[12] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, line 732
[13] *Klaeber's Beowulf*, lines 2886-2890

Liuzza renders this as follows: "Empty-handed / *will* you go, every man, among your tribe, / stripped of land-rights, when noblemen learn / far and wide of your flight, / your inglorious deed."[14] The issue here is that the desired modal force for "mot" is not hybrid, but, as Liuzza translates, strictly one of necessity. In other words, the fact that Geats must soon experience the loss of their kingdom seems to be the assertion of the sentence itself. Unlike other occurrences of motan that invoke the human desire to live or reach the afterlife, there is no immediate reason to presuppose that, if it is possible that the Geats suffer nationless, then they must necessarily choose or be given that fate.

On the other hand, it is possible to construct an alternative interpretation of the sentence that fits the presuppositional semantics of motan. Crucial to this is the reference to nobleman eager for expansion within the immediate context: perhaps Wiglaf is invoking the fact that an opportunistic nobleman *will* take over Geatland if it *can* be taken over because of political instability. This conditional satisfies possibility-necessity duality, which licenses a valid circumstantial-base usage of motan. The assertion of the sentence, under this interpretation, becomes the fact that the Geatish nation is vulnerable to foreign conquest (i.e. that it *can* be conquered). Combined with possibility-necessity duality, we get the implication that such a conquest *will* take place. This interpretation of a troubling passage seems plausible within the context of the story, and would help to explain what is otherwise an anomalous usage of motan by the *Beowulf* poet.

After reviewing the passages in which motan appears in Beowulf, its usage in the poem appears to be the same as in Alfredian texts. Furthermore, Yanovich's presuppositional semantics for motan give clues about how to interpret some of the problematic occurrences of the verb, such as in Wiglaf's speech after Beowulf's death. Still, without greater understanding of the development of motan during the Old English period, it is hard to say whether this similarity suggests *Beowulf* is contemporaneous to the Alfredian corpus, or whether the usage of the verb just remained the same for a long period of time. Perhaps future insight on this could provide a source of historical linguistic evidence for determining *Beowulf*'s time of composition.

[14] Liuzza, lines 2886-2890

References

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