

# The grammaticalization of the preterite-present verb AGAN

Céline Roméro  
Université de Toulon  
celromero@yahoo.com

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to try and explain, on syntactic and semantic grounds, the grammaticalization of the semi-modal *ought to* in Old and Middle English (hence OE and ME), i.e. how this lexical item has become a grammatical one <sup>1</sup>.

## 1 Introduction

In OE, *agan* means "possess", but in Contemporary English (CE) it now means "owe, should". *Agan* belongs to the class of preterite-present verbs: broadly speaking, they have a past form, but a present meaning (see Campbell (1959) for further details). The ME form comes from the past form *ahte* in OE.

In the first section, we shall deal with OE data, mainly focusing on the syntax of *agan*. In the second section, ME data will be analyzed, making a parallel with the preceding section. Finally, in the third section, we shall focus on grammaticalization, going back and forth the OE and ME periods.

## 2 *Agan* in Old English

### 2.1 The distribution of *agan*

*Agan* <sup>2</sup> can be found in different structures:

It can function as a *lexical* verb and then it takes a DP object,

- (1) Dryhten hælend, þu            þe            *ahst*            doma            gewæld.  
Lord      Christ,    NOM-you    NOM-who    IND.PRES-owns    GEN-justice    ACC-power.  
*Lord Christ, who owns the power of justice.* (cocynew <sup>3</sup>,86.723. 623)

It can be passivized <sup>4</sup>,

- (2) Ða    cwæð            se    cyningc            to his            mannum    siððan Apollonius  
Then    PRET-said    the    NOM-king    to    DAT-his    DAT-men    when    NOM-Apollonius  
*agan*                    wæs...  
P.PART-had    IND.PRES-was...  
*Then the king said to his men when he had had control over Apollonius...* (ApolT, ApT:14.1.250)

or it can be an infinitive and follow another preterite-present,

- (3) Ac se ðe þa ecan **agan** wille soðan  
 But the NOM-one ACC-the ACC-eternal obtain PRES-will ACC-true  
 gesælða.  
 ACC-blessing.  
*But who will obtain the eternal true blessing.* (comeboe,161.7.23. 52)

It can have the same structure as the auxiliary verb BEON/WESAN "be" <sup>5</sup>; it is then followed by a past participle,

- (4) ... se þe **ah** lifes wyn gebiden in burgum.  
 ... ACC-who IND.PRES-ought GEN-life ACC-gain P.PART. in DAT-town.  
 ...*who ought to ask in town the gain of life.* (coexeter,144.27.133)
- (5) hi **agon** on agenan hwilan mid earfedan  
 NOM-they IND.PRES-ought during DAT-proper DAT-time by DAT-suffering  
 gewunnen.  
 P.PART-remained.  
*they ought to remain in suffering for their own time.* (WHom, WHom\_20.2:51.1425)

What is striking concerning this verb is that we have not found examples displaying the structure AGAN + *infinitive* (which can be found with all the other preterite-presents) in Taylor, Warner, Pintzuk & Beths (2003) and Pintzuk & Leendert (2001). Meanwhile we did find examples of the structure AGAN + *to* + *infinitive*,

- (6) & betæhte him æl þæt he **ahte** TO bewitenne.  
 & PRET-delivered DAT-him all that NOM-he PRET-ought TO DAT-keep.  
 & *delivered to him all that he ought to keep.* (Heptateuch,Gen:39.4. 1564)

### 3 *Agan* in Middle English

At the ME period, it is commonly assume that morphology gets poorer, i.e. a great number of flexions tend to be blurred, or dropped, leaving the words bare. Because of this morphological impoverishment, grammar (and syntax) has to readjust, entailing changes of parameters, hence status of some items.

#### 3.1 The distribution of *agen*

We now find *two forms* for AGEN: the present form **owe** and the past form **ahte**, both being used either as a lexical or a modal verb.

As a lexical verb, *agen* can be found as a transitive verb,

- (7) ... þet hit er **ahte**.  
 ... that OBJ-it already PRET-possessed.  
 ... *that (he) already owned it.* (CMLAMBX1,31.377)
- (8) ... the love that men to hym **owen**.  
 ... the love that SUBJ-men to OBJ-him PRES-owe.  
 ... *the love that men owe him.* (CMCTPARS,313.C2.1087)

As a modal verb, *agen* is found in two types of structures: modal + infinitive (unlike the OE *agan*) and modal + *to* + infinitive <sup>6</sup>

- (9) ... þt each mon **ahte** hersumin & herien in eorðe.  
 ... that each SUBJ-one ought obey & praise on earth.  
*... that each one ought to obey & praise on earth.* (CMKATH,23. 75)
- (10) þus **ahte** ech of us him seluen TO cnowen.  
 thus ought each of SUBJ-us him OBJ-self TO know.  
*thus, each of us ought to know himself.* (CMTRINIT,123.1649)
- (11) [Arthure] **owen** al þe worlde TO deme.  
 [SUBJ-Arthur] PRES-ought all the OBJ-world TO deem.  
*Arthur ought to deem all the world.* (CMBRUT3,81.2468)
- (12) first, we **owen** vndirstonde it bi the lettre.  
 first, SUBJ-we ought understand OBJ-it by the letter.  
*we first ought to understand it word by word.* (CMPURVEY,I,52. 2123)

## 4 Syntax and grammaticalization

Let us now turn to the syntax of *agan/agen* in OE and ME. In all the examples we parsed, we found two types of uses : a lexical and a modal use.

### 4.1 Old English syntax of *agan*

In examples (1) to (4), *agan* is a lexical verb. It is then a V within a vP <sup>7</sup>; in (6), it is a control verb. In Roméro (2005), we have shown that the syntax of the preterite-presents and the syntax of TO in infinitivals were quite similar.

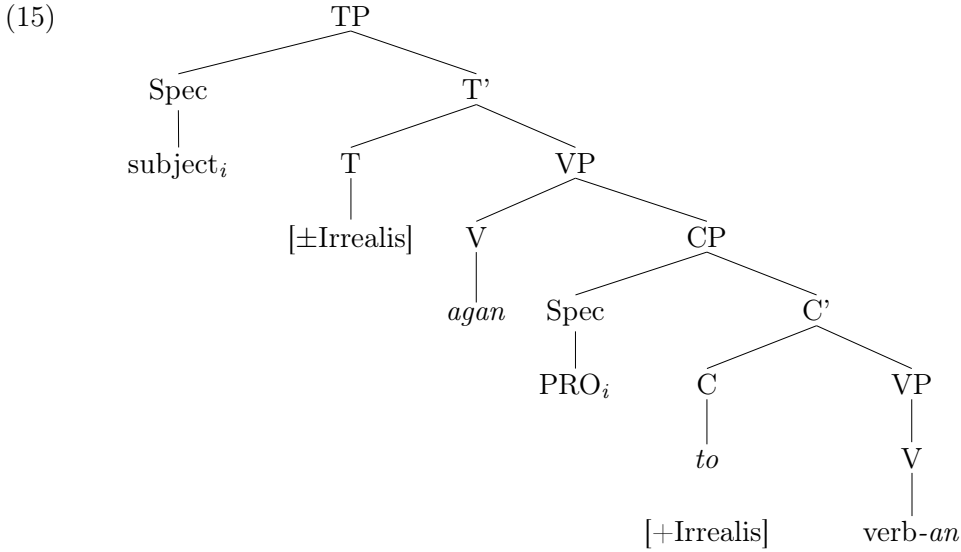
Let us have a look at the following examples, where  $\emptyset$  indicates an ellipsis of the verb:

- (13) Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan worolde lifes;  
 GEN-Us NOM-every PRES-must ACC-end wait GEN-world GEN-life;  
 se þe **mote** domes ær deaþe  $\emptyset$ .  
 NOM-who that PRES-has to GEN-judgment before DAT-death  $\emptyset$ .  
*Everyone of us must wait for the end of life of the world, and before death, one has to wait for the judgment.* (cobeowul,43. 1386.1148)
- (14) willaþ þæt gewrecaþ gif we maega, þeah we  
 FUT-will ACC-that avenge if NOM-we PRES-can, yet NOM-we  
 beotiaþ TO  $\emptyset$ .  
 PRES-pride ourselves to  $\emptyset$ .  
*(we) will avenge it if we can, yet we pride ourselves on doing it.* (BlHom,  
 HomS\_10\_[BlHom\_3]:127.446)

According to those examples (two among many others), the preterite-present verb *mote* ("must, have to") and *TO* seem to have the same behaviour concerning ellipsis. *Mote* (i.e. a special kind of v) heads a TP, and *to* (i.e. a C) heads a TP).

But, in that respect, *agan* does not behave like the other preterite-presents: it is the only one to be structured with TO.

This leads us to question the syntactical status of *agan* in OE. From examples (1) to (6), *agan* is a lexical verb. But the structure of (6) is interesting since *agan* is followed by TO: here we assume it is a control verb, hence the following structure,



We also assume that when *agan* is followed by a bare infinitive, it has a different grammatical status: it has become a semi-lexical verb (what we called  $v_{Modal}$  in Roméro (2005)), what example (13) seems to indicate for preterite-present verbs.

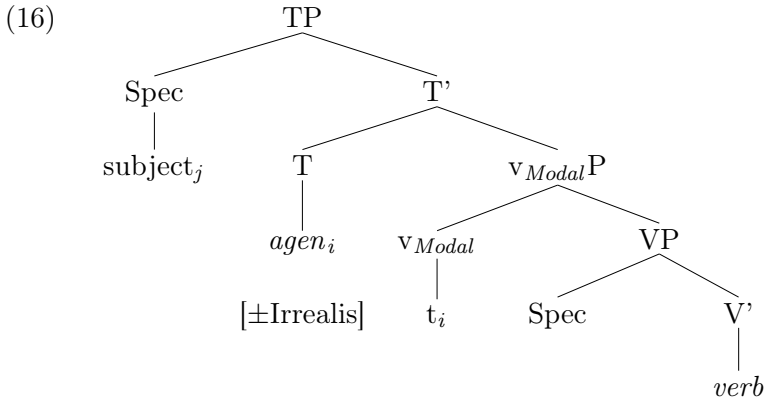
So, in OE, we can find *agan* either as V followed by a TP, or as a control verb when used with TO, i.e. followed by CP. Let us now have a look at ME syntax of *agen*.

## 4.2 Middle English syntax of *agen*

Unlike OE, ME *agen* can be found both in **AGEN** + *bare infinitive* or **AGEN** + *to* + *infinitive* structures, and strikingly enough, we find more examples of **OWE(N)** + *to* + *infinitive* than **AHTE** + *to* + *infinitive*. If we just follow our analysis, *agen* is a control verb in the structure **AGEN** + *to* + *infinitive*, and semi-lexical in **AGEN** + *bare infinitive* <sup>8</sup>.

So (10) and (11) still display control verbs, but not (9) and (12). The changing point lies in (12): in OE *agan* was not found with bare infinitives, it was only a control verb. We assume this is due to the grammaticalization of *agen* (and generally speaking of all the preterite-presents class), as well as the reanalysis of TO <sup>9</sup> (and what Dekeyser calls the "HABERE/DEBERE interface").

Syntactically, we thus have in ME, two competing structures for *agen*: the "control" structure, which is identical with (15), and a "grammaticalized" one, which is as follows,



### 4.3 What about grammaticalization?

Grammaticalization is the process in which a lexical item becomes a grammatical one. With respect to *agen*, this is, as Dekeyser (1998) says, a "braintwister": in CE, *ought* does not have a past meaning anymore, but more an irrealis one (a conditional), and it is considered as a "semi-modal": grammaticalization seems to have not been completed. And we must add that it always functions with TO, which was reanalyzed because of the loss of the infinitive morphology<sup>10</sup>. Strikingly enough, at the same period, we have not found examples of *dare* + *to* + *infinitive*, nor *þurven* "need" + *to* + *infinitive*<sup>11</sup>.

Moreover, we have two forms of *agen*: present *owe(n)* and past *ahte*<sup>12</sup>. In our corpus (Kroch & Taylor (2000)), we have found 20 examples of *OWE(N)* + *to* + *infinitive*, but only 7 with *AHTE*. Yet, only the latter became a grammatical item. We shall see in the next section that the choice of *ahte* over *owe* seem to be due to the meaning of the morphological form<sup>13</sup>. On semantic ground, by the end of the ME period, *owe* "own, possess" is to be used more as a lexical verb, and *ahte* "ought, obligation" as a modal one (see Dekeyser (1998) for more details).

So we have two processes at work for what is to become the modal periphrasis *ought to*: the reanalysis of TO into a TO<sub>(Irrealis)</sub> (now followed by a bare infinitive) and of *AHTE* as an irrealis item, with an obligation meaning.

### 4.4 Grammaticalization and tense

In the following examples, we give illustrations of 'past' forms of modals which have conditional meanings. Some are already grammaticalized (examples (17) and (18)), some on their way to grammaticalization (examples (19) and (20)).

- (17) 'Though I            wiste            that neither God            ne man            ne **sholde**  
 "Though SUBJ-I PRES-know that neither SUBJ-God nor SUBJ-man not should  
 nevere knowe it,            yet **wolde** I            have desdayn for to do synne.  
 never know OBJ-it, yet would SUBJ-I have disdain to            do OBJ-sin".  
*'Though I am aware that neither man or God should never know it, yet I would scorn  
 sin.'* (CMCTPARS,290.C2.94)
- (18) The year            of oure Lord 1391, the 12 day of March at midday, I            **wolde**  
 The SUBJ-year of our    Lord 1391, the 12 day of March at midday, SUBJ-I would  
 knowe the degre            of the sonne.  
 know the OBJ-degree of the sun.  
*On March 12th in the year of our Lord 1391, I would know the degree of the sun.*  
 (CMASTRO,669.C1.189)
- (19) but, certes,    he            **sholde** suffren it            in pacience as wel as he  
 but, certainly, SUBJ-he should suffer OBJ-it in patience as well as SUBJ-he  
 abideth            the deeth            of his owene propre persone.  
 PRES-awaits the OBJ-death of his own    proper person.  
*But he should certainly endure it with patience, as well as he awaits his very own  
 death.* (CMCTMELI,217.C1b.20)
- (20) for ase ofte    ase 3e            þrefter    breken            eni of ham,            hit  
 for as    often as    SUBJ-you thereafter PRES-break any of OBJ-them, SUBJ-it  
**walde** to swiðe hurten ower heorte            ant maken ou            swa  
 would too greatly hurt    your OBJ-heart and make SUBJ-you so  
 offered            þet 3e            **muhten** sone, as God            forbeode,            fallen  
 P.PART-offered that SUBJ-you might            soon, as SUBJ-God PRET-forbade, fall

i desesperance...  
in despair...

*for, as often as you break any of them this way, it would too greatly hurt your heart and make you so offered that you might soon be desperate, which God forbade...* (CMAN-CRIW,I.46.65)

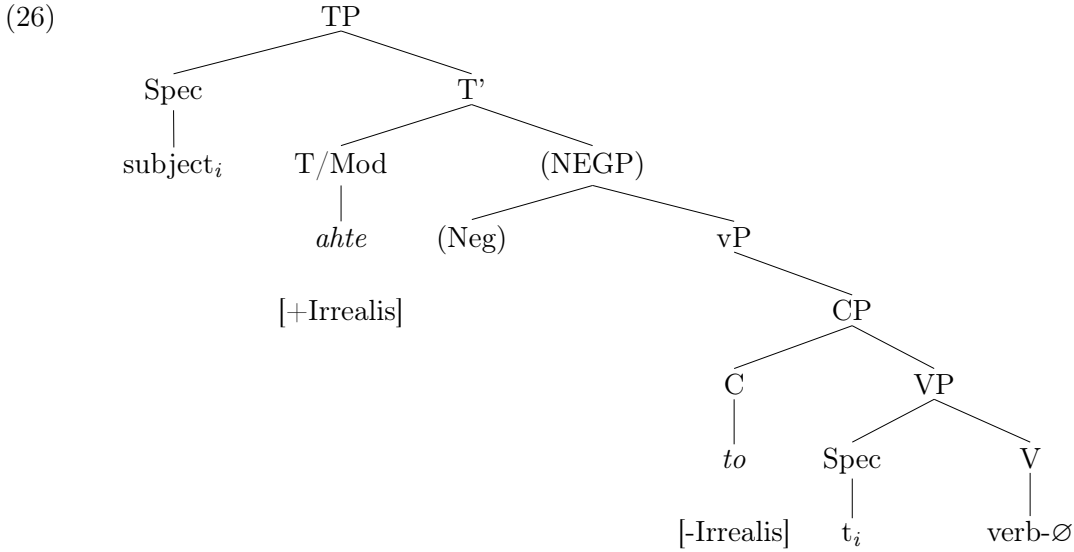
Let us now turn to *agen*. The situation is somewhat different: there are more examples with *OWE (FOR)TO* (morphological present form) than with *AHTE TO* (morphological past subjunctive form).

- (21) þogh 3e mow wyth glosyng wordys desayve me and say 3e  
although SUBJ-you may with glosing words deceive OBJ-me and say SUBJ-you  
ben yn full charyte as 3e **owen** FORTO be, ...  
PRES-are in full charity as SUBJ-you ought to be, ...  
*although you may deceive me with glosing words and say you are indulgent as you ought to/should be, ...* (CMMIRK,130.3483)
- (22) and heruth God seruyce as cristen men **owen** FORTO do;  
and IMP-hear God OBJ-service as christian SUBJ-men ought to do;  
*and hear God service as Christian men ought to;* (CMMIRK,138. 3674)
- (23) & [þe eorl] benam him al ðat he **ahte** TO hauen.  
& [the SUBJ-earl] PRET-took OBJ-him all that SUBJ-he ought to have.  
*The earl took from him all that he should have had.* (CMPETERB, 58.529)
- (24) When ye wyl aske any þing at a ryche man in erthtt, ye  
When SUBJ-you will aske any OBJ-thing to a rich man on earth, SUBJ-you  
aske ful mekelike yure erande wyd mekil mare deuociun **ahte**  
PRES-ask full much your OBJ-request with lot more devotion ought  
ye þanne AT pray to god, of whaim þat al 3ude cumis.  
SUBJ-you then to pray to God, of whom that all OBJ-good PRES-comes.  
*When you ask anything to a rich man, you will fully ask your request with much more devotion, should you then pray to God, from whom all good comes.* (CMBEN-RUL,19.667)

When *owe* is used, TO has been reanalyzed ((21), (22) and (24)), whereas when it is *ahte*, TO has not yet but the modal has (23).

What does this syntactically mean? The modal is no more generated in V, but in Mod/T: it no more has a past meaning, nor is it a lexical item since it functions as a [+irrealis] head, i.e. a subjunctive, and it weakens so that it cannot move to T anymore<sup>14</sup>. Hence it is no longer a control verb, but a raising one. By the end of the ME period, the syntax of *agen* would thus be,

- (25)  $TP [_{Spec} Subject_i [T \text{ ahte } [(Neg) [TP [T \text{ to } [VP [_{Spec} t_i [V \text{ verb } ] ]]]]]]$ , that is,



which is different from (15).

## 5 Conclusion

With the loss of the infinitive morphology, we showed that the reanalysis of TO went along the one of *agen* and specially *ahte*. We also underlined that the meaning shift of *ahte*, from "past" to "conditional", or broadly speaking to *irrealis*, was partly responsible for its grammaticalization. Semantically, *agan/agen* no longer means "possess" but "obligation". As for syntax, *ought*, a control verb in OE, turned into a raising verb generated under T and taking a TO-complement (like "seem" or "appear") by the end of the ME period.

Yet, dealing with the grammaticalization of such a verb is not that easy since the very process is still obscure, and Contemporary English displays the two "layers" of *agan*: the lexical verb 'own/owe' and the semi-modal "ought to" <sup>15</sup>. For reasons of space, we did not investigate the root/epistemic interface.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Johan van der Auwera, Jean-Louis Duchet and my supervisor Jacqueline Guéron for their useful comments and help, and Christoph Eylich for solving my L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X problems.

<sup>2</sup>The full paradigm for *agan* is: Ind.Pres 1,3 Sg *ag*, *ah*, 2 Sg *ahst*, Pl. *agon*; Subjunctive Sg *age*; Imperative *age*; Pret *ahte*; P.Part. *agen/agan*.

<sup>3</sup>The sources of the quotations are the following; for OE: ApolT *Apollonius of Tyra*, BIHom *The Blinking Homilies*, cobeowul *Beowulf*, cocynnew *The Fate of the Apostles*, coexeter *The Wanderer*, comeboe *The Meters of Boethius*, Heptateuch *The Heptateuch*, WHom *Wulfstan's Homilies*; for ME: CMANCRIW *Ancrene Riwe*, CMASTRO *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, CMBENRUL *The Northern Prose Rule of St Benet*, CMBRUT *The Brut or The Chronicle of England*, CMCTMELI *The Tale of Melibee*, CMCTPARS *The Parson's Tale*, CMKATH *St Katherine*, CMLAMBX1 *The Lambeth Homilies*, CMMIRK *Mirk's Festial*, CMPETERB *The Peterborough Chronicle*, CMPURVEY *Purvey's General Prologue to the Bible*, CMTRINIT *Trinity Homilies*

<sup>4</sup>The form of the past participle can be identical with the infinitive.

<sup>5</sup>We give examples of the same structure with WESAN:

- (27) An Antiochia      þare      ceastre      wæs      sum      cyninge  
In    DAT-Antioche    DAT-this    DAT-town    IND.PRET-was    NOM-some    NOM-king  
Antiochus      gehaten.  
NOM-Antiochus    P.PART-called.

*The town of Antiocha was called after some king Antiochus.* (ApolT,ApT:1.1.3)

- (28) æfter þæs      cyninges      naman      wæs      seo      ceaster      Antiochia  
after    GEN-the    GEN-king    name    IND.PRET-was    NOM-the    NOM-town    Antiocha  
geciged.  
P.PART-named.

*That was after the king's name that the town was called Antiocha.* (ApolT,ApT: 1.1.4)

<sup>6</sup>It is noteworthy that out of 30 examples of the verb *agen*, we only find 9 occurrences of *ahte*, which is to become the one used in Contemporary English, and only six of them display the structure *ahte* + *to* + *infinitive* (two with no *-en* ending, and four with the *-en* ending of infinitive forms). So, we have mainly found examples of *owe(n)* + *to* + *infinitive*, *owe* meaning 'ought'.

All the examples displaying *ahte* date from the 12th-13th c., as for the examples using *owe*, they date from the 13th up to the 15th century: *owe* is the latest, yet it is to be supplanted by *ahte* (we assume this is due to the standardization of all the modal past forms during the middle and late period of ME: *ought*, *could*, *might*, *would*, *should* and *must* have a past form but a 'present' meaning).

<sup>7</sup>Our theoretical framework is minimalism and the theory of phases, Chomsky (1995; 1999).

<sup>8</sup>We have encountered examples where we could find constituents in between *agen* and the bare infinitive, but no examples with the second infinitive structure.

<sup>9</sup>Roberts & Roussou (2003) argued that TO changes meaning from purposive/directional prepositional content to a "bleached" meaning as an *irrealis marker* (our emphasis).

<sup>10</sup>The *-an/-en* endings in OE and ME means that infinitives are subjunctive-marked.

<sup>11</sup>But we have found, from the middle of the ME period, examples of the lexical verb *neden* "need" which replaced the preterite-present *þurven*. For the same structure we thus have two verbs *agen* and *neden* which both semi-grammaticalized.

<sup>12</sup>More precisely, it is a past subjunctive form.

<sup>13</sup>All the Contemporary English modals come from ME past subjunctive forms.

<sup>14</sup>In the late ME period, English is not a V2 language anymore (except for a small number of sentences).

<sup>15</sup>We shall find the same process with "need" and "dare".