

# Variety-specific coding practices within a shared system: Modal verbs expressing strong obligation in Scottish, Southern British and American English

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This paper focuses on modal verbs of strong obligation in Scottish Standard English (SSE), American English (AmE) and (Southern) British English (BrE). In the latter two varieties, the system of modal and semi-modal verbs has been in flux at least since the middle of the twentieth century (Leech 2003; Smith 2003; Millar 2009). Many developments are explicable as ‘modal decline’ (Leech et al. 2009), i.e. a decrease in the frequencies of core modals partly compensated by an increase in the frequencies of semi-modals. From an onomasiological perspective focused on strong-obligation modality, such developments can be interpreted as changing coding practices for this particular semantic category, namely an increased relative frequency of the verbal predicates *need to* and *have to*, and a concomitant decrease in the frequency of *must* (cf. Millar 2009: 204, 208–209). For Scots (and Scottish English), Miller (2008: 305) makes even stronger claims to the effect that obligation is expressed by the verbs *have to* and *need to*, while *must* hardly expresses strong obligation (ex. 1) but is reserved for the expression of epistemic modality (ex. 2; also cf. Miller & Brown 1982; Millar 2009: 204; Kirk 1987).

- (1) Scotland’s mountains and wild lands are one of our greatest treasures and **must** be protected. (deontic/obligation; ICE-SCO:rep-062)
- (2) I keep thinking about the other tenants in the building and how they **must** be feeling. (epistemic; ICE-SCO:rep-056)

Due to the nature of their data, it is uncertain how results from Miller & Brown (1982), Kirk (1987), Miller (2008) and Millar (2009) can be generalized to SSE. This is what we put to the test in our contribution.

We focus on current SSE usage, comparing new corpus material from ten written genres in the Scottish component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-SCO; cf. Schützler, Gut & Fuchs 2017) to corresponding texts from ICE-GB and ICE-USA. The verbs included are *must*, *have to*, *need to*, (*have*) *got to*, and *need* (cf. Smith 2003). While the main focus is on inter-varietal differences, we also include subject (1st, 2nd and 3rd person) and tense (past, present, future) as predictor variables in the statistical models. We proceed in two steps. First, we inspect the general text frequency of (semi-)modal constructions expressing strong obligation by means of a negative binomial regression model. Second, we investigate which verbs are selected within this semantic domain by means of a multinomial regression model.

We find that modal-verb constructions of strong obligation are most frequent with third-person subjects and least likely with second-person subjects. While this pattern is shared by all three varieties, SSE stands out in exhibiting a particularly high frequency of strong obligation with first-person subjects. We draw on democratisation theory (cf. Farrelly & Seoane 2012; Millar 2009) to account for these findings. In BrE and SSE *have to* and *need to* compensate for the avoidance of *must* in combination with second-person subjects, while AmE uses only *have to* for this end. Furthermore, our data show that *need to* is generally much more frequent in SSE.

Based on our data, we find that none of the modal constructions in SSE are extreme in that they would be unacceptable (or even salient) in other standard varieties (cf. Miller 2008 for comments on Scots). However, we argue that while there is of course a shared system of modal verbs of strong obligation, precise patterns of use differ considerably between SSE, BrE and AmE. The Scottish variety seems to stand out in various respects and is more than “Standard English spoken with a Scottish accent” (Stuart-Smith 2008: 48).

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