HART, David (ed.), *English Modality in Context. Diachronic Perspectives*, Peter Lang, Bern etc. 2003, pp. 261, ISBN 3-039-10-046-7, sFr 70.

This volume (like its companions Hart/Lima 2000 and Gotti *et al*. 2002)[1] is the product of a research project on "variation in linguistic modality in lME and eME" and consists of four contributions from the research team and three outside contributions. The opening overview by Olga Fischer (reprinted from Hart/Lima 2000) questions Lightfoot's idea of a radical syntactic reanalysis of English modal verbs in the sixteenth century by stressing the cyclical and gradual nature of change in modal elements (through bleaching and compensating reinforcement by new elements) as well as the importance of the pragmatic and semantic context for the study of the evolution of meaning. As for the timing of change, modals were already exceptional in OE and continued to lose full-verb features in ME, this happening at different speeds with different modals.

All of the studies explore details of this uneven loss of full-verb features and of changes in use, with attention to pragmatic contexts. Debra Ziegler looks at the semi-modal 'be supposed to' in OED citations from 1400 onwards. Semantic evolution (from 'belief' to 'obligation' meanings) probably occurred via re-analysis in ambiguous contexts (indeed, she talks of "unequivocal ambiguity") where the verb is used with human subjects and dynamic verbal complements. Here (*pace* Traugott 1989) epistemic meanings come before deontic meanings.

Rafał Molencki (in a study that complements Lima in Gotti *et al*. 2002) examines the evolution of epistemic MUST, using material from the OED, MED, Visser and the Helsinki Corpus. Deontic *must needs* (the second element added for disambiguation) becomes common from the fourteenth century onwards, and from the end of the century epistemic uses were inferred from the adverb (especially with static *be* as the verbal complement); then about 1600 epistemic *must* starts to appear by itself.

Arja Nurmi uses the Corpus of Early English Correspondence to throw light on the sociolinguistic variation in the use of WILL/WOULD and SHALL/SHOULD in the sixteenth century. The overall trend is that observed by Gotti (in Gotti *et al*. 2002) of a decline in the frequency of SHALL and rise in WILL (with the latter becoming more frequent around the 1560s and 70s). The change seems to have taken place from below, with women writers and family letters forerunners of an increased use of WILL (data for 1/2/3 person subjects taken together). In the first person, *I shall* is originally dominant but is overtaken by *I will* as the most frequent form c.1580.

---

[1] HART, David / LIMA, Maria (eds.), 2002, *Modality in late Middle English: Semantic Shifts and Pragmatic Interpretations*, Napoli, CUEN; GOTTI, Maurizio et al., 2002, *Variation in Central Modals. A Repertoire of Forms and Types of Usage in Middle English and Early Modern English*, Bern etc., Peter Lang.

Maurizio Gotti makes a complementary study of frequencies and uses of SHALL and WILL in the 17th century (using the Helsinki Corpus) and compares the results with the uses recorded in contemporary grammars. He finds that *I shall* is more common in private letters, *I will* in official letters (*pace* Kytö 1991). For the other persons, *you will* and *he will* are the dominant forms at both levels of formality. Full comparison of this contribution with the preceding one is not possible because of the different analyses made: perhaps Nurmi could be persuaded to re-elaborate her data in a future study to make them comparable with Gotti's, in particular if she could relate her social parameters with uses for 1st, 2nd and 3rd person subjects.

Gabriella Mazzon examines deontic and epistemic 'marginal modals' and lexical modality in official texts (c.1380-1480). Following Traugott, she emphasizes semantic evolution through re-ananlysis of ambiguous uses, though she too, like Ziegler, finds examples of deontic meanings derived from epistemic ones. She proposes as a methodological approach the identification and study of all the expressions associated with single linguistic acts and exemplifies this with an inventory and discussion of the various expressions of 'Ordering' in her corpus.

Marina Dossena looks at SHOULD and WOULD in lME and eModE and in roughly contemporaneous OSc in Helsinki corpora. Northern spellings are overtaken by the standard southern forms in Scottish texts about 1560-70 with tradition-oriented historical texts and trial records retaining Scots forms a little longer. The author notes a typical 'would been' (etc.) past form and notes its frequency (increasing over time perhaps as a flag of identity) especially in the negative 'wouldna been', which makes one wonder if the form *could have* originated from a possible 'wouldna a' been' (an idea mentioned in the conclusions, p. 216). In the second section the author goes on to look at the uses of the two modals, fitting them into a model of early modern discourse characterized by greater 'politeness' and the use of distancing forms to soften deontic speech acts and to add epistemic relativity to expressions of opinion.

The volume ends with an analysis by Vanda Polese of frequencies and typical uses of SHALL, SHOULD and MUST in the first English translation of More's *Utopia* (1551). She reviews the various uses for the three modals found in the text, which are typically evolving and pragmatically and contextually defined. In this last respect the author emphasizes the importance of many sentence elements as carriers of modality, with adverbs as especially important.

The various studies make an interesting contribution to the history of modality in English. They all emphasize a gradual and context-driven process of continual evolution (therefore no sixteenth-century 'big bang' à la Lightfoot); and make useful contributions to this history (questioning the inevitable precedence of deontic over epistemic meanings in evolution, for instance), with much attention to details – though whether God or the devil is to be found there I leave it for others to decide.

[Richard Dury]