

On the origin of the modal verb *need*¹

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The English modals are a classical problem for students of English. Mackenzie (1997), too, devotes a full chapter to them, and he points out that present-day English *need* is in some respects rather like present-day Dutch *hoeven* (Mackenzie 1997: 81). Etymologically, of course, *need* and *hoeven* are quite different. This paper attempts to shed some light on the early history of the English verb.

1. Introduction

The present-day English verb *need* has attracted a lot of attention, especially because *need* comes in two versions, (i) a full verb with a third person indicative present *-s*, *do* for negatives and questions, and a *to* infinitive, and (ii) an auxiliary, without the *-s*, without *do*, without infinitival *to*, and also without a positive affirmative use.

- (1) a. Does he need to see this?
b. He does not need to see this.
c. He needs to see this.
- (2) a. Need he see this?
b. He need not see this.
c. *He need see this.

Studies hail from the partially overlapping fields of English modals (Duffley 1994) or modals in general (van der Auwera 2001), grammaticalization theory (Taeymans 2004), and negative polarity semantics (Van der Wouden 2001).

In this paper we turn to the origin and the early development of this verb. We will see that there are puzzles there too, and that some are relevant for understanding the

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fact that Visser and the BTD each supply only two Old English examples and the OED just one (which is furthermore identical with one of the BTD examples) points in the same direction. The MED further states that impersonal *neodian* was late OE, a view also found in Van der Gaaf (1904: 20). As a partial check of both the rarity and the lateness of impersonal *neodian*, we investigated the OE part of the Helsinki corpus (1991). On a total of 47 relevant uses, there was not a single example of an impersonal *neodian* or *neadian*. This result accords well with the claims about the rare and late appearance of the impersonal use, though given the size the corpus, it cannot prove them.

What we do find — in all of the 47 cases (see also Loureiro Porto 2002, 2003) — is a personal verb meaning ‘compel’, illustrated in (5) with a Bede example.

- (5) Eft se papa nedde
 afterwards DEF.NOM.M.SG pope.NOM.SG compel.IND.PTR.3SG
 þone abbud Adrianus þæt he
 DEF.ACC.M.SG abbot.ACC.SG Adrianus that 3.NOM.M.SG
 biscophade onfenge
 office.of.bishop.ACC.SG take.up.SUBJ.PTR.3SG
 ‘Afterwards the pope forced the abbot Adrianus to take up the
 office of bishop.’

Is this *nedde* form also a form of the same *neodian* or *neadian* verb? This is not that clear and the literature suggests three points of view:

- (6) a. According to the OED, supported also by the MED, the ‘compel’ and the ‘it is necessary’ verb are not the same. Whereas the ‘it is necessary’ verb would be *neodian*, the ‘compel’ verb would be *neadian* or *niedan*, *nidan*, *nydan* and *nedan*.
- b. The lemmas in the BTD, followed by Clark Hall, imply a partial identity. *neodian* would again be the ‘it is necessary’ verb, *nidan* and *nydan* are listed for ‘compel’, but *neadian* would be possible with both uses. Curiously, the two examples listed for the *neadian* meaning ‘it is necessary’ have *neod-* forms, and in this way, the BTD treatment could also be put under (6.a).
- c. According to Van der Gaaf (1904: 20-21), Molencki (2002), and implicitly also Loureiro Porto (2002, 2003), there is only one verb. It is attested with various forms and it has both the ‘compel’ and the ‘it is necessary’ use.

None of the analyses mentioned is accompanied by any discussion. Presumably, all authors faced a fairly high degree of formal and orthographic variation, with manifestations for no less than five (infinitival) forms, i.e., *neodian*, *neadian*, *niedan*, *nidan* and *nydan*. This variation is not random: it may well be due to there having been two ancient roots, *neod-* and *nead-*, and for the verbs, umlaut produced some further

variation. Then there might have been additional temporal, dialectal, idiolectal, and scribal variation. Our issue here is merely to question whether there was a discriminatory role for semantics. Did the forms go for a division of labour according to whether the sense was ‘compel’ rather than ‘it is necessary’. There is no way to definitely settle this issue here: there simply isn’t enough information in the example set coming from the Helsinki corpus, the dictionaries and some specialized studies. Still, circumstantial evidence makes us inclined to accept the correctness of the analysis in (6c).

First, there is a remarkable difference in the way the dictionaries treat the relevant verbal forms vs. the associated nominal ones. The clearest expression of the hypothesis that the personal and the impersonal use have their own verb is found in the OED. The OED further claims that the impersonal verb (*neodian*) is based on a noun *neod*, and the personal one (*neadian*) on a noun *nead*. However, one will look in vain for two nominal *need* lemmas. There is only one, but it has a panoply of both meanings, ‘compulsion, force, necessity, need’, and forms, *nead*, *neod*, *nied*, *nid*, *nyd* and *ned*. If there is only one *need* noun, why should there then be two *need* verbs? At least, the inconsistency makes the analysis of the verbs suspicious and perhaps the lexicographers have been misled by the fact that the difference between the ‘compulsion’ and ‘necessity’ uses is bound to be more visible in the syntax (valency patterning) of the verbs than in that of the nouns. Nevertheless, a one noun – two verbs analysis is possible. We could be dealing with a polysemous noun associated with two formally similar but not quite identical verbs, with similar but not quite identical uses. The treatment in the BTD and Clark Hall is also suspicious, though there is no true inconsistency now: both the impersonal and the personal verb are associated with one noun. But even for the BTD and Clark Hall the fact remains that the lexicographers treat the verbs and their related nouns in a different way: two lemmas for the verbs and only one for the nouns, even when there is a form (*neadian*) that is taken to be polyfunctional. This disparity even holds for the MED: it confronts the one lemma of a noun lemmatized as *nede* with the two lemmas of two verbs lemmatized as *neden*.

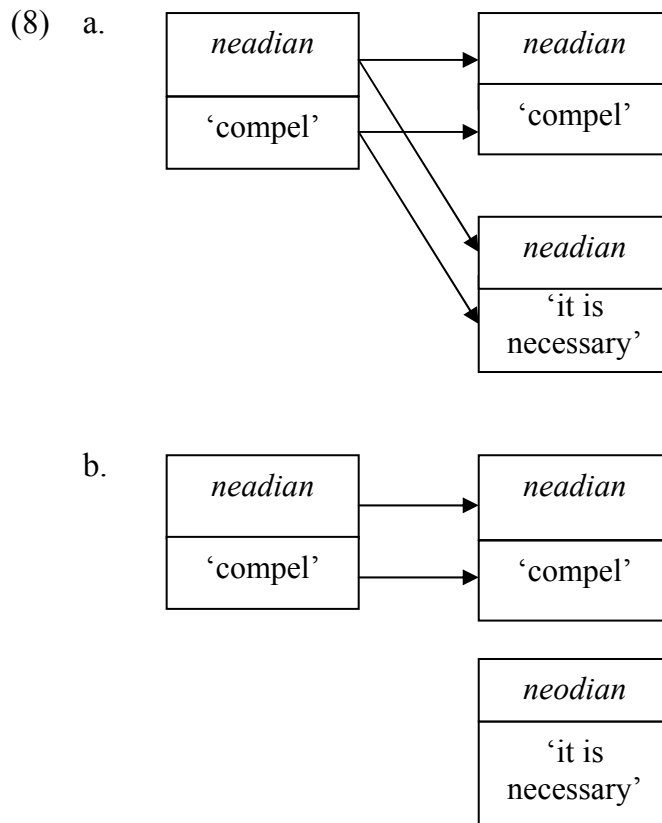
Second, it is noteworthy that for OE the ‘it is necessary’ use is both rare and late. Surely, when a verb might be around already and one faces a new and infrequent use, one’s first hypothesis should be that it is a development of this verb’s earlier use. In fact, a scenario developing the ‘it is necessary’ use from the ‘compel’ use seems possible. Consider the ME example in (7).

- (7) it nedis to hym to do many gud werkis
(Visser 1969: 1425)

It is offered as an example of impersonal ‘it is necessary’. It differs from example (4) in that the *need* verb is construed with a clausal complement, more particularly, an infinitive. Suppose that the type with the clausal complement is older than the one without. This hypothesis cannot be verified in the Old English Helsinki corpus, as it does not have examples for either, but the oldest impersonal example cited in the OED (also found in Van der Gaaf 1904: 20) is dated at c960, with the oldest example of type (4) at 1362.

What now prevents one from taking *nedis* of the “impersonal use” in (7) as a form of the “personal” use, the ‘compel’ use (which definitely was around until late ME — see the entries in the OED and the MED, and the 30 instances in the ME part of the Helsinki corpus), and to derive the impersonal effect from the fact that the verb has an impersonal subject? From this perspective the appropriate gloss would be ‘it compels him to do many good works’. From a semantic perspective, therefore, it is possible to view the ‘it is necessary’ use as deriving from the ‘compel’ use. Note that it is not denied that the polysemy of the noun triggered or facilitated such development. Also, the possibility of a semantic derivation still does not prove that it really happened this way. This semantic derivability is also compatible with a scenario in which the impersonal use was not a direct development of the personal use, but rather a new derivation of the noun, as Van der Gaaf (1904: 20) suggested. The semantic derivability is still relevant here. What we would then claim is that once the polyfunctional *need* verb with both ‘compel’ and ‘it is necessary’ uses is in place, it is easy to interpret to latter as a use of the former.

The two scenarios are represented in (8). (8a) starts off with forms that first only have a ‘compel’ use that later give rise to an ‘it is necessary’ use, all while continuing the ‘compel’ use. For simplicity’s sake we represent the forms with only *neadian*. (8b) also starts off with the ‘compel’ forms but in this case they are later joined by ‘it is necessary’ forms. We use *neadian* for ‘compel’ and *neodian* for ‘it is necessary’.



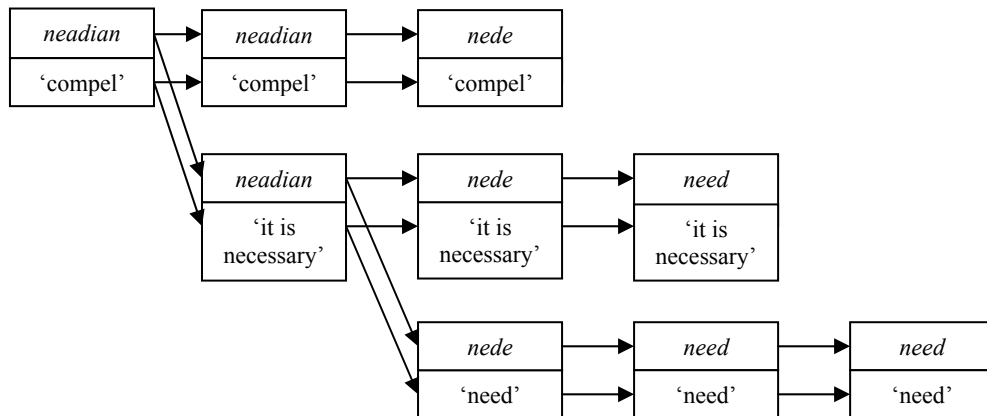
As to the later history, in ME the question whether or not the two senses are to be

paired with different forms does not exist. All the forms end up as *neoden*, *neden*, *nede* or *neede*. The ME impersonal ‘it is necessary’ use will also spawn the modern personal ‘need’ use. By the end of the ME period, the ‘compel’ use will disappear — the latest attestation in the OED is 1496. The impersonal use will also disappear, but only in the Modern period. For the subpattern of an impersonal *need* with only a dative of person, for instance, the OED gives sentence (9) from 1691 as the last example.

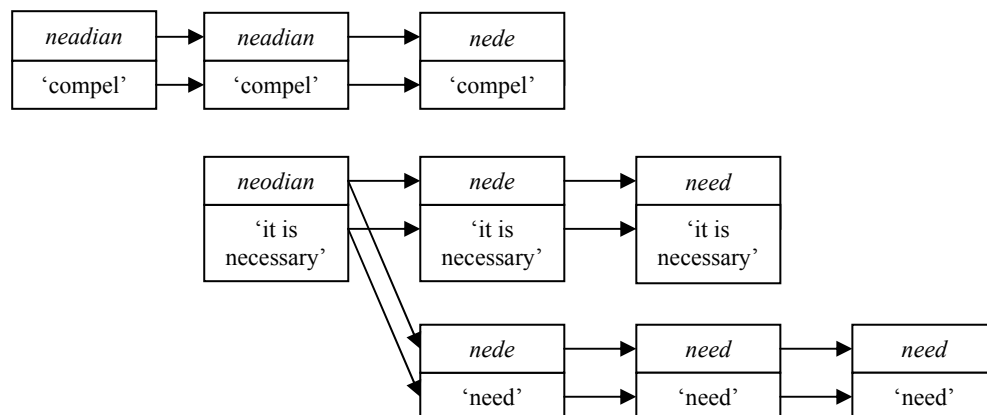
(9) What need us some Instances abroad.

In (10) we complete the two scenarios sketched in (8). It goes without saying that the schema is a simplification. It does not, for instance, describe the split between auxiliary and full verb.

(10) a.



b.



Note that ME will have two personal uses, the new ‘need’ and the old ‘compel’. Whether one treats the *need* verb as homonymous or polysemous, it is clear that their coexistence could damage communication. Consider (11).

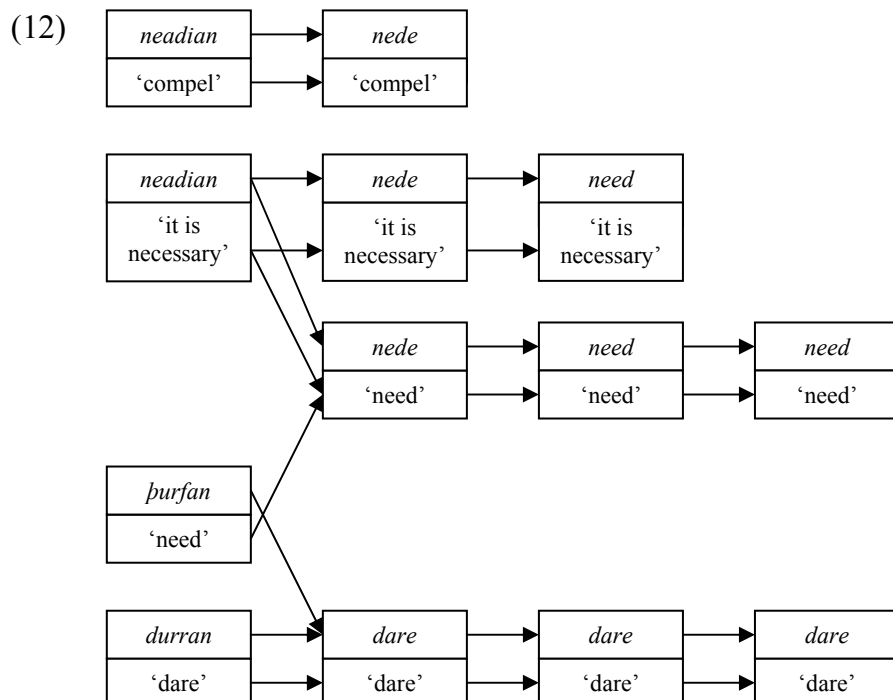
(11) I needed him.

Its ME wording allowed both the ‘I forced him’ use and the modern ‘I needed him’ use. Apparently, the forces promoting the new use were stronger than the ones keeping the old one, probably because the new construction arose in a grand personalization reanalysis, affecting a large number of verbs. In any case, both under analysis (10a) and (10b) one can say that modern personal *need* replaced two earlier constructions: an impersonal ‘it is necessary’ *need* and a personal ‘compel’ *need*. Yet one could also say that the old *need* verbs did not disappear completely. The new *need* is a personal verb, just like the old *need*: it shares much of its syntax. With respect to meaning, however, the new *need* is more like the impersonal *need*.

3. Another double replacement

In section 2 we looked at the replacement of *need* verbs by other *need* verbs. The change primarily concerned the meaning and the syntax of the verbs. In this section we will have a look at the way the modern personal *need* replaced a personal *þurfan* verb.

A good part of the story is well known. Thus Visser (1969: 1423) points out that the OE counterpart to modern personal *need* was the OE preterite present *þurfan*. In the ME period this verb became homonymous with the descendant of another OE preterite present, viz. *durran* ‘dare’. By the end of the 15th century, the homonymy had disappeared: the resultant form survived with the ‘dare’ meaning, while the meaning of *þurfan* was taken over by *need*. *Dare* ‘dare’ survives up to this day, and, surprisingly, it can function both as an auxiliary and as a main verb, not unlike *need*. In (12) we repeat the part of the scenarios of (10) that is common to both the a. and the b. version, and we add the replacement story concerning *þurfan* and *durran*.



The homonymy appeared in (the) other Germanic languages as well. In German, the winning form *dürfen* continues the ‘need’ meaning, and it seems that Dutch continues both: there is both a *derven* ‘need’ and a *durven* ‘dare’. Why is it that the English homonymy was settled in favour of the ‘dare’ meaning? In search for an answer, we will stumble on yet another replacement.

Like the modern auxiliary *need*, OE *þurfan* seems to have been a negative polarity item (Visser 1969: 1423-4). This begs the question of how OE expressed ‘need’ in a positive affirmative sentence, i.e., the equivalents to modern (1c)? As Visser (1969: 1430-1431) points out, we find constructions with *be* or *have*, of the type *it is (him) need to go* and *he has/had need to go*. Visser supplies examples with the noun *neod* ‘need’, but as the OE part of the Helsinki corpus will show and as has been pointed out by Molencki (2002: 375-378), the *neod* pattern alternated with patterns involving the noun *þearf* ‘need’ and even a complex noun *nedþearf* ‘need’. Schematically:

- (13) a. Him is þearf þæt ...
 b. Him is nedþearf þæt ...
 c. Him is ned þæt
 ‘He needs ...’

These constructions were not restricted to positive affirmative sentences. One should consider them neutral with respect to polarity.

The finer details of the alternation remain to be studied, but this much seems clear. Already in Old English and thus before the ancestor of the verb *need* replaced the verb *þurfan*, a *neod* etymon was in alternation with a *þearf* etymon in the nominal domain, and here the two even combined. It seems plausible to assume that this facilitated the later association and eventual replacement in the verbal domain. It is also clear that the early nominal constructions with a *need* noun with *be* or *have* either did not survive to the present day or have become marginal, and that at least one of the replacements is the modern verb *need*, this time in its full verb form.

In sum, modern *need* replaced a negatively polar *þurfan* and a set of polarity neutral nominal constructions. Modern *need* inherits features of both, though. The auxiliary *need* is a polarity negative *need* and the full verb is polarity neutral.

4. Conclusion

We have argued that the present-day English verb *need* replaces at least four earlier constructions: (i) a personal *need* verb meaning ‘compel’, (ii) and impersonal *need* verb meaning ‘it is necessary’, (iii) a non-*need* verb meaning ‘need’ in negative polarity contexts and (iv) a set of polarity neutral nominal constructions meaning ‘need’.

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