

The Semantics of *Should* Revisited*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the polysemous nature of the English auxiliary *should* and argues that its core function is to show the discrepancy between the speaker's observation of a fact and his/her expectation. The literature on this issue has traditionally supposed a dichotomy in auxiliaries, i.e., the root and the epistemic use, and has argued that *should* expresses the speaker's strong feelings, as in "the emotive *should*" (cf. Aijmer 1972). However, this line of thought falls short in that few studies have treated the phenomena holistically. In addition, being an auxiliary, *should* might naturally express the subject's feelings, however no satisfactory analysis has explained why *should* is apt to express the speaker's "strong" feelings. We will see that the core meaning of *should* is to show that the speaker's observation is inconsistent with his or her expectation, and hence, *should* expresses a strong desire and functions as a suggestion.

1. Introduction

Auxiliaries are one of the vocabulary items that Japanese learners of English have difficulty mastering. Even advanced learners experience trouble in deciding if they are to use *should*, *ought to*, or *must*, which, according to the notion of iconicity (Bolinger 1977), must have different meanings.

Genius, one of the most popular English-Japanese dictionaries for Japanese high school students, lists 11 meanings of *should* and uses two full pages to explain the word. This fact alone demonstrates how difficult it is for Japanese learners of English to fully comprehend the word. However, the difficulty is not just that *should* is hard to translate into Japanese; not only Japanese speakers, but also English speakers seem to have a hard time fully understanding the word. OALD¹ lists 13 meanings of *should*, and *Cobuild*, 12 meanings. Given the large number of meanings, it is no wonder that Japanese learners of English find it challenging to fully apprehend the usage of the

* The content of this paper is based on the instruction I gave to my former undergraduate student in writing her B.A. thesis (Mishima 2013). Also, it is a revised version of Hanazaki (2013).

1. OALD = Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary

word.

The following in (1) are the meanings *Cobuild* lists:

- (1) The meanings of *should* according to *Cobuild*
 - 1 You use *should* when you are saying what would be the right thing to do or the right state for something to be in. *I should exercise more.*
 - 2 You use *should* to give someone an order to do something, or to report an official order. *All visitors should register with the British Embassy.*
 - 3 If you say that something should have happened, you mean that it did not happen, but you wish it had. *I should have gone this morning, but I was feeling a bit ill.*
 - 4 You use *should* when you are saying that something is probably the case or will probably happen in the way you are describing. *You should have no problems with reading this language.*
 - 5 You use *should* in questions when you are asking someone for advice, permission, or information. *What should I do?*
 - 6 You say “I should,” usually with the expression “if I were you” when you are giving someone advice by telling him/her what you would do if you were in his/her position. *I should look out if I were you!*
 - 7 You use *should* in conditional clauses when you are talking about things that might happen. *If you should be fired, your health and pension benefits will not be automatically cut off.*
 - 8 You use *should* in “that” clauses after certain verbs, nouns, and adjectives when you are talking about a future event or situation. *He raised his glass and indicated that I should do the same.*
 - 9 You use *should* in expressions, such as “I should think” and “I should imagine” to indicate that you think something is true but you are not sure. <Vagueness> *I should think it's going to rain soon.*
 - 10 You use *should* in expressions such as “I should like” to show politeness when you are saying what you want to do or when you are requisitioning or offering something. *I should be happy if you would bring them this evening.*
 - 11 You use *should* in expressions such as “You should have seen us” to emphasize how funny, shocking, or impressive something that you experienced was. <Emphasis> *You should have heard him last night!*
 - 12 You use *should* in question structures that are followed by “but” to emphasize how surprising or shocking a particular event was. *I'm making these plans and who should I meet but this blonde guy and John.*

There must be several reasons *should* is difficult to comprehend entirely, but we can list at least the following three: (A) It is highly polysemous, which is clear from the number of meanings

each dictionary lists; (B) these meanings that make up the polysemy of *should*, at first glance, seem unrelated if not contradictory; the *should* in *All visitors should register at the British Embassy* ((1)-2 above) implies that the event of *visitors registering* is expected to happen, while the *should* in what is close to subjunctives in meaning, or what the Japanese grammar books call “MAN-ICHI-no *Should*” [the *should* expressing a rare possibility for showing politeness] (cf. Watanuki and Petersen 2006: 99) as in *If you should run into difficulties, please tell us as soon as possible* (ibid.: 99), the event is not expected or at least the speaker shows that he/she is not expecting that to happen for politeness reasons;² hence, they seem to imply quite the opposite meaning; (C) the polysemous meanings seem to be decided not by semantics but by the grammatical environment in which they are used; for example, the *should* in ((1)-12) is used in a “question structure,” and that in ((1)-8) appears only in *that*-clauses.

This paper attempts to define the meaning of *should* and to provide a holistic explanation of the word, which will be helpful to Japanese learners of English.

2. Previous Studies

This chapter reviews how *should* is treated in dictionaries (2.1.), the English textbooks used in Japanese high schools (2.2.), and linguistic literature (2.3.).

2.1. *Should* in Dictionaries

As we saw in Chapter 1, many dictionaries list more than ten meanings for the word *should*, (we have seen in Chapter 1 that not only English-Japanese dictionaries but also English-English Dictionaries list more than 10 meanings; *Genius English Japanese Dictionary* lists 11, *OALD* 13, and *Cobuild* 12) and those meanings include those that are defined by grammatical features. The list of meanings should be useful in deciding which meaning is intended, for example, when translating, but it is less useful in learning what *should* means when simply studying the word itself.

2.2. *Should* in Textbooks

This section will review how *should* is taken up in the most commonly used seven textbooks and complementary textbooks in Japan for the first year high school students approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education for the academic year 2014. The textbooks reviewed were *Big Dipper English Expression I*, *Crown English Communication I*, *Crown English Expression I*, *New Favorite English Expression I*, and *Unicorn English Writing*. The complementary textbooks reviewed were *—est English Grammar* and *Best Avenue to English Grammar; Usage & Structure*. The survey reveals that some textbooks do not teach *should* at all, and those that do only teach the

2. *Should* is also used in subjunctive as in *If I should lose you, the stars would fall from the sky*. (Watanuki and Petersen 2006: 200). The sentence cited here is not in a subjunctive mood but only close to its meaning, hence we must treat this as one of the polysemous meanings of *should*. We will call this meaning as “MAN-ICHI-no should” [rare possibility] henceforth.

most easily understood usage, i.e., the usage that indicates the event is natural (TOZEN). In other words, no textbooks examined in this research show the polysemous structure of *should*.

Crown, the most used textbook, has two textbooks to it and neither of them teaches *should* in the section on auxiliary verbs. The other textbooks that take up the word provide only one meaning: *New Favorite* teaches that “should = TOZEN” (it comes naturally); *Big Dipper* that “should = ~SURU TO YOI, SUBEKI” (it is recommended, it is better to do it); and *Unicorn* that “should = BEKI” (you had better do it).

The complementary textbooks show a similar trait. For example, *Best Avenue* picks up *should* in contrast with *ought to* and explains that they have a “similar meaning, and they indicate that it is natural for the event to happen” (*Best Avenue*: 114).

In summary, we can say that Japanese first year high school students do not learn the “rather difficult” usages of *should*, nor the polysemous structure of the word.

2.3. *Should* in Linguistic Literature

2.3.1. Aijmer (1972)

Aijmer (1972) is one of the first studies to recognize what she calls “emotive *should*” among the many usages of *should*. She gives (2), shown below, as an example of this usage. She further argues that “emotive *should*” has the two conditions listed in (3):

- (2) It is surprising that you should not have met him before.
- (3) The two conditions that “emotive should” must meet
 - (a) It must be contained in subjective sentences.
 - (b) The situation cannot be judged: It is concerned with the subject’s previous desires or belief. (Aijmer 1972: 68)

Her description of “emotive *should*” is very interesting. It is undeniable that *should* is often used to indicate the subject’s feelings; many usages suggest the strong feelings of the speaker. However, Aijmer’s two conditions are not restricted to the *should*’s that indicate the speaker’s subjective feelings. For example, the most “prototypical” *should*, which is not listed as “emotive,” such as the one in (4), also meets the two conditions.

- (4) You should apologize. (“should” in *Genius*)

(4) indicates the speaker’s feeling (3a), and one cannot judge the situation (3b).

Overall, we can say that Aijmer’s indication of “emotive *should*” must be accredited, but most usages of *should* involve some emotions of the speaker, hence the need for examining *all* the usages and also the need to show why most usages indicate the “strong” feelings of the speaker. As a matter of fact, *should* is an auxiliary, i.e., a grammatical item that indicates modality, so it is natural for it to express the speaker’s emotions. We need to look more closely at all usages of

should to identify a unique meaning that accounts for the fact that the word often expresses the strong feelings of the speaker.

2.3.2. Sweetser (1990)

Sweetser (1990) is one of the most often quoted studies on auxiliaries. In her book, Sweetser recognizes that auxiliaries have “root usages” and “epistemic usages,” as many studies in the literature suggest. She defines the two usages as in (5):

- (5) The definition of root and epistemic usages of auxiliaries
 The root usage denotes real-world obligation, permission, or ability.
 The epistemic use denotes necessity, probability, or possibility in reasoning.
 (Sweetser 1990: 49)

The same kind of analysis, i.e., recognizing two usages of auxiliaries, is found in many previous studies: e.g., Coates (1983), Huddleston (1984), Kratzer (1991), Klinge (1993), and Groefsema (1995).³

There is no doubt that many English auxiliaries have both root and epistemic usages. However, some usages are difficult to distinguish as either a root usage or epistemic usage, such as (6):

- (6) We hid behind the trees lest they should see us. (“should” in *Genius*)

In (6), we can regard *should* as a root usage in that it refers to their “ability” to see us, but also as an epistemic use in that it refers to the “possibility” of them seeing us.

In summary, there is a need to explain the word *should* not by the dichotomy of root usage and epistemic usage, but holistically.

2.3.3. Ando (2005)

Many Japanese scholars argue that there are two usages to the English auxiliaries. Let us review Ando (2005) as one such study. Ando gives (7) as an example of root usage, and (8) as an example of epistemic usage:

- (7) He promised that we should have our reward.
 (8) He said that they should be here by ten o'clock. (Ando 2005: 320)

However, like many other studies on *should*, Ando’s investigation deals only with the most

3. Some studies call the two usages by other names, such as deontic and epistemic. Whatever the names used, many studies recognize two usages of auxiliaries.

prototypical usages that indicate what he calls “TOZEN” [naturalness] leaving other usages such as “MAN-ICHI=no should” [rare possibility], as in *If you should run into difficulties, please tell us as soon as possible* (Watanuki and Petersen 2006: 99); hence, we cannot say that his study is comprehensive.

2.4. Summary of the Previous Studies

This chapter has reviewed how *should* is treated in dictionaries, textbooks, and linguistic studies. We have seen that 1) although, as many dictionaries have shown, *should* has many meanings, the polysemous nature of the word is never taught in first year high school classrooms in Japan, and 2) even though it is recognized that *should* is apt to express the speaker’s feelings, the whole phenomenon of *should*, including why it is likely to express the “strong” feelings of the speaker, is left unexplained. Moreover, arguing that *should* expresses the speaker’s feelings is shorthanded because, in the first place, *should* is a modality, which expresses speaker’s feelings.

Beginning in Chapter 3, we will try to explain the whole phenomenon of *should* and to answer why *should* is apt to express the speaker’s feelings.

3. The Semantics of *Should*: A Comprehensive Analysis⁴

This chapter argues for a semantics that comprehensively explains the usages of *should*. We will argue that *should* functions to indicate that there is a discrepancy between the speaker’s “observation” of the world and his or her previous “expectation.” This core meaning can explain why *should* has the meaning of “TOZEN” [naturalness] as well as why it can indicate “MAN-ICHI” [a rare possibility]. Further, the core meaning can explain why *should* is apt to express the speaker’s strong feelings, including surprise. Namely, because *should* indicates that the speaker’s observation and his/her expectations differ, he/she can suggest something or indicate a rare possibility. Also, *should* is used when the speaker’s expectation is not unfolding, so that it expresses the speaker’s strong feelings, including surprise. What we argue here is that concluding that *should* expresses “emotion” is not adequate, and the usage of *should* to express the speaker’s strong feelings is a function derived from its core meaning, i.e., showing a discrepancy between one’s observation and expectation.

3.1. A Comparison with a Synonym: Comparison with *Must*

Let us, firstly, try to analyze the unique meaning of *should* through a comparison with *must*. The two words are very similar in meaning; both indicate that the speaker thinks it is natural for the event to happen, and he/she uses the auxiliary to suggest that the listener allow it to happen. In addition, both words can mean supposition. We will see that they differ, however, in that *should*

4. Mishima (2013) argues that the core meaning of *should* is “prompt.” This paper argues that *should* prompting the listener to do something is one of the meanings “derived” from its core meaning.

implies the event is not taking place, while *must* does not have this implication.

Let us start by looking at the usage that indicates naturalness/suggestion. Consider (9) and (10):

- (9) (Mother scolding her child, who is playing, not studying)
 You should study. / #You must study.⁵
- (10) (A school principle addressing students at a ceremony)
 #Students should study. / Students must study.

In comparison, *should* is used more when the speaker is scolding someone who is not studying, and *must* is used more when addressing someone who IS studying.⁶ Hence, we can support our argument, i.e., *should* is used when the expectation contradicts with the observation.

Data from COCA supports this fact. The word *now* is used with both *should* and *must*, but when used with *should*, it mostly appears in the phrase *right now*. By using *right now*, the speaker orders the addressee to do something right away when the addressee is not doing it. In other words, *should* is used in a situation that contradicts the speaker's expectation.

The same difference between *should* and *must* can be found in their supposition usages. Let us look at (11) and (11'), which is artificially created for the comparison of *must* and *should*:

- (11) It must be so good now to have your braces off, isn't it? (COCA)⁷
- (11') It should be so good (?now) to have your braces off.

The comparison shows that *must* is used when the speaker makes a supposition about the present situation; (11) is addressed to the listener who feels "so good" himself at the moment, so it cannot contradict any expectation of the speaker. In other words, *must* can be used as a supposition that does not necessarily contradict the expectation. On the other hand, (11') is likely to be addressed to someone who has braces on at the moment; that is, *should* is used when the supposition contradicts the observation.

This quick comparison tells that *should*, different from *must*, is used when the expectation is in contradiction with the expectation, and hence, it supports our argument.

3.2. Analyzing the 12 Meanings in *Cobuild*

This section examines the 12 meanings of *should* listed in *Cobuild* and explains that the core meaning proposed here can explain *all* usages.

- (1-1) I should exercise more.

5. # indicates that the sentence is not ungrammatical, but less acceptable.

6. The judgment is based on the interview to five native speakers.

7. COCA = Corpus of Contemporary American English

The speaker in (1-1) “observes” that he/she is not exercising, but “expects” to exercise more.

(1-2) All visitors should register with the British Embassy.

Rules are usually directed to those who do not keep them. In (1-2), it is directed to those who do not register, and of course, it is expected that everybody register, hence the discrepancy between the observation and expectation.

(1-3) I should have gone this morning, but I was feeling a bit ill.

The discrepancy between the observation and expectation is obvious in (1-3). In actuality, the speaker did not go, but had expected to go.

(1-4) You should have no problem in reading this language.

In (1-4), the language seems difficult to read, but the speaker expects the addressee to have no problem in reading it.

(1-5) What should I do?

In sentences such as (1-5), when one person asks another for advice, he/she “observes” the actuality as having no way out but “expects” the addressee to know the way out; the “observation” of the speaker is negative, while the “expectation” of the addressee⁸ is positive, hence, the discrepancy.

(1-6) I should look out if I were you!

Cobuild's definition of the meaning of *should* explains (1-6): *You say “I should” ... when you are giving someone advice by telling them what you would do if you were in their position.* In this case, I “observe” that you are not *looking out* and “expect” that *you look out*.

(1-7) If you should be fired, your health and pension benefits will not be automatically cut off.

The meaning in (1-7) is used only in conditional clauses, which suggest that the event is not unfolding in real life, but the speaker expects that maybe the event will happen.

8. An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that while this thesis has argued that *should* expresses the discrepancy between *speaker's* observation and his/her expectation, the explanation of (1-5) contradicts with the argument in that this explanation talks about “*addressee's*” expectation. However since (1-5) is a question, it asks the “*addressee's*” expectation.

(1-8) He raised his glass and indicated that I should do the same.

In (1-8), the speaker is not doing “the same thing” right now, but “he” is expecting the speaker to “do the same.”

(1-9) I should think it’s going to rain soon.

In this sentence, the speaker is observing him/herself that he/she must think it is going to rain maybe from the look of the sky, but his/her expectation is different from the “observation”

(1-10) I should be happy if you would bring them this evening.

Sentence (1-10) is more polite than saying “I will be happy if you would bring them this evening” because the sentence with *should* implies that “I” am observing the actuality that you will not bring them, although I am expecting that you would. In other words, the speaker is expressing that he/she understands the listener may not bring them, which contradicts the speaker’s want, so that it is easier for the listener to decline the wish of the speaker, hence polite.

(1-11) You should have heard him last night!

The usage in (1-11) is obvious enough that it requires little explanation; you did not hear him in actuality, but I expected that you would hear him last night.

(1-12) I am making these plans and who should I meet but this blonde guy and John.

The usage in (1-12) is used “to emphasize how surprising or shocking a particular event was.” This means that the speaker uses this sentence to emphasize that the actual event contradicted the expectation of the speaker.

3.3. Summary of Chapter 3, the Analysis

This chapter has examined *all* the usages of *should* in *Cobuild* and described that *all* usages can be explained by the suggested core meaning of *should*, i.e., the discrepancy between the speaker’s observation and expectation. In this analysis, we can say that Aijmer’s (1972) “emotive *should*” is a function that has derived from the core meaning.

4. Support for the Argument

This chapter will support the validity of the suggested core meaning of *should*, i.e., the discrepancy between the speaker’s observation and expectation, from four perspectives.

4.1. Support from COCA: The Most Frequent Words/Phrases that Follow *Should*

Mishima (2013) identified which words/phrases most frequently follow *should*. The results are shown in Table 1.

Should [v*] [j*]	
Should be able	3386
Should be aware	518
Should be available	413
Should be ashamed	296
Should be concerned	283

Table 1. The Top Five Words/Phrases that Follow *Should*

As we can see, *be able to* is by far the most frequent phrase that follows *should*. (12) is an example of such sentences:

- (12) If people love each other and they're happy, they should be able to be together. (COCA)

According to COCA, (12) is uttered in a consulting session in a TV show on ABC. The guest explains that a couple he knows cannot live together and gives his opinion that they should be together if they love each other. It is obvious that the speaker uses *should* to state his opinion about the actual situation, which contradicts his expectation.

This analysis supports our argument that *should* is used when there is inconsistency between the speaker's observation and expectation.

4.2. Support from OED⁹

Should was originally the past tense form of *shall*. OED gives the following definition of *shall*:

- (13) In the second and third persons, expressing the speaker's determination to bring about (or negative, to prevent) some actions, event, or state of things in the future, or (occasionally) to refrain from hindering what is otherwise certain to take place, or is intended by another person. ("shall" in OED)

OED describes that *shall* is used to express the first person's will in second and third person sentences, which is very close to our argument here; hence, the original meaning of *shall* supports our argument.¹⁰

9. OED = Oxford English Dictionary

4.3. Support from Homology: Negative Questions

We have argued that the core meaning of *should* is to show the discrepancy between an observation and expectation. Hanazaki (2007) argued that Negative Questions can function quite similarly.

Negative questions can be more polite than simple questions in Japanese, but ruder in English. In the literature, it is often argued that English speakers expect positively (e.g., *He will open the window* in *Won't you open the window*), while Japanese speakers try to be polite by superficially telling the listener that they expect negatively (*He will not open the window*), so that it is easier for the listener to decline the wish (cf. Adachi 1999).

However, this analysis does not explain (14):

- | | | | | | |
|------|------------|---------------------------|----|------------|--------------------------|
| (14) | <i>Asu</i> | <i>ame furu-nai-kana?</i> | >? | <i>Asu</i> | <i>ame furu-kana?</i> |
| | tomorrow | rain fall-NEG-Q | | tomorrow | rain fall-Q |
| | (lit.) | 'Won't it rain tomorrow? | | | 'Will it rain tomorrow?' |

As we can see in (14), negative questions are not always more polite than the simple questions.

Hanazaki (2007), following Hanks (1996), argued that a negative question is a grammatical construction that shows the discrepancy between the Observation and Expectation.

By arguing so, we can explain negative questions such as (15). In this case, the speaker knows that the listener has the book. He, the speaker, utters the sentence to show that while he does not observe the book at the moment, he expects that she, the addressee, has the book.

- (15) (Referring to the book that the speakers were looking at several minutes ago)
Don't you have that book?

This phenomenon of the negative question is homological to our argument on *should*. This fact shows that English quite rampantly show a discrepancy between the speaker's observation and expectation.

5. Summary

Should is a highly polysemous word, and, at first glance, it may seem impossible to converge the various meanings into one. Also, it seems that the various meanings are defined by grammatical features. For these reasons, in English classrooms, the polysemous nature of *should* is never taught; instead, students usually learn that the meaning of *should* is "TOZEN" [naturalness], "suggestion", or "supposition."

This paper has argued that all the meanings of *should* are derived from its core meaning,

10. This argumentation is thanks to Associate Prof. Tsukusu Ito, Shinshu University.

which is that there is a discrepancy between the speaker's observation and expectation.

This explanation based on the core meaning should help English learners to fully comprehend the word. We can expect that teaching the meaning of English words based on their core meanings is more useful than making students memorize a list of meanings. The usefulness of such pedagogy must wait for another study, but it "should" be obvious that concepts that are understood are learned better than those that are simply memorized.

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