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## La Formule au Moyen Âge



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# La Formule au Moyen Âge

Sous la direction  
d'Elise LOUVIOT



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# The Construction *is/bið to*: A Syntactic Formula to Express Prescription and Earmarking

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*Cet article propose une analyse grammaticale, sémantique et diachronique de la construction is/bið to en vieil-anglais, à partir du corpus de prose York-Toronto-Helsinki corpus of Old English Prose. Une compréhension fine de la syntaxe de cette formule permet d'apprécier la souplesse syntagmatique qu'elle autorise. Les différents sens de is/bið to mis en évidence apparaissent liés, ce qui nous conduit à proposer un scénario diachronique pour leur développement, où l'on voit que le sens déontique, prescriptif, dérive de premiers emplois radicaux (véhiculant ce que j'ai appelé l'usage destiné), tout en étant influencé par son recours très fréquent dans des traductions de textes latins. L'importance de cette influence se mesure également à travers l'émergence tardive d'un nouvel emploi de is/bið to, initialement utilisé afin de rendre le futur périphrastique du latin.*

## Introduction

The *is/bið to* construction is the Old English structure from which the modern *is to* construction<sup>1</sup> is historically derived. It is illustrated by contemporary utterances like *No one is to blame* or *They are to meet at 2 p.m. tomorrow*. As a construction, it is a pattern of linguistic forms co-occurring with some

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of its uses see e.g., Geoffrey Leech, *Meaning of the English Verb*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1987 [1971]) or Olivier Simonin, 'Relatives infinitives et constructions apparentées', Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne, 2007, pp. 112-113, available at: <<http://www.theses.paris4.sorbonne.fr/simonin/paris4/2007/simonin/html/index-frames.html>> (last visited on 01/03/11).

degree of fixity to express a given meaning – root modal prescription in this instance. I rely on Goldberg's definition of constructions<sup>2</sup>, which can accommodate syntactic formulae as abstract linguistic patterns conveying constant meaning:

LEARNED PAIRINGS OF FORM WITH SEMANTIC OR DISCOURSE FUNCTION, including morphemes or words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns.<sup>3</sup>

The formal aspect of the construction minimally includes the following: *is/bið to* + (inflected) INFINITIVE + SUBJECT

*Is/bið to* is always conjugated (the form of the verb is finite) and a dative complement sometimes precedes it. In semantic terms, the construction most often denotes root modality: a necessity or obligation is reported, which does not originate from the speaker. Yet when the speaker obviously endorses it, the discourse function of the construction can be (and often is) exhortative; it is then not just used to state a prescription. *Prescription* is taken in a broad sense so as to include religious, societal and other norms alongside epistemological instructions (beliefs to be held).

Many previous accounts perhaps take too much for granted because this construction is clearly akin to its present-day reflex. Even Mitchell<sup>4</sup> simply notes that *is/bið to* could be used in conjunction with infinitives<sup>5</sup> to express necessity or obligation, without providing a precise semantic characterization or contrasting the construction with others, or committing himself to a definite grammatical analysis (what I call *SUBJECT* is labelled *subject/object*). The more detailed and systematic corpus-based account proposed in this paper is meant to fill the gap.

Drawing on the *York-Toronto-Helsinki Corpus of Parsed Old English Prose* (YCOE for short), as well as a few other sources, to substantiate some of my claims, I investigate the syntax, function and evolution of this particular construction throughout the Old English period. The choice of a prose corpus is justified on the grounds that it exemplifies uses that mirror more closely everyday usage than poetry, and ensures more accuracy when tracing the emergence of new uses. I start with a grammatical analysis of the construction (1), proceed to a semantic account with some diachronic considerations (2), and lastly tackle the question of a potential Latin influence on its development (3).

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<sup>2</sup> Adele E. Goldberg, *Constructions at Work: the Nature of Generalization in Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> The subject can occur before the conjugated form of *beon/wesan*, but this is rather infrequent.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols. (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1985), I, pp. 394-396.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell remarks that when two infinitives follow *is/bið*, the second can be a bare infinitive (p. 394).

## 1 Grammatical description of the construction

In this section I introduce the *is/bið to* deontic construction and its main syntactic variants, beginning with the optional presence of a dative complement and the grammatical classification of its subject constituents (1.1). I then consider the alternation between *wesan* and *beon* (*is/bið*) and their various forms in this construction (1.2), before returning to cases in which the subject is a cataphoric pronoun followed by an extraposed constituent (1.3).

### 1.1 Complements and subjects

Let's start with a typical occurrence of the *is/bið to* construction:

1. Us is to smeagenne þæt word þe he cwæð  
*We have to ponder the words he said.*  
(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I, 254.3)<sup>6</sup>

This occurrence instantiates the relevant syntactic pattern: *is* is a finite form of *wesan* followed by a *to*-infinitive (that is – to be precise – *to* and the inflected form of the infinitive, which typically ends in *-enne*) and the nominative subject *þæt word þe he cwæð*. Furthermore, the nominative noun phrase (NP) is also understood as the implicit object of the infinitive – it designates the same entity as the one that would have been associated with the verb *smeagan* had it had an object ('words'). This holds true for all the subjects of the *is/bið to* construction.

The initial dative NP, *us*, indicates who is under the obligation mentioned. Its presence is optional though, as two other examples by Ælfric show:

2. Is eac to gehyrenne hu ða leoda wunnon ymbe ðæs halgan lic him betwýnan þearle  
*It must also be heard how valiantly the people fought, around the holy body (between them).*  
(cocathom2, +ACHom\_II\_39.1: 297.314.6769)<sup>7</sup>
3. Is eac to witene ðæt sume gedwolmen wæron ðe woldon awurpan ðealdan æ  
*It must also be known that there were heretics that wanted to overthrow the old law.*  
(coprefgen, +AGenPref: 101.69)

Whoever the obligation bears on is readily retrieved from the context, though it may be difficult to give a precise and definite answer when obligation has a generic scope, as in (2) and (3). Quite typically, the audience or men in

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Mitchell, p. 395.

<sup>7</sup> All the occurrences with a reference starting with *co* are from the YCOE. All the text references from YCOE to be found in the paper may be found at the end of this paper.



general are meant. Note that the same ambiguity does arise with dative *Us* in (1). Concerning optional dative complements, Visser writes that the *is/bið to* construction is most often found without them in Old English as well as in Middle English,<sup>8</sup> whereas Mustanoja expresses an opinion to the contrary.<sup>9</sup> The texts not translated from Latin in YCOE show an overall bias towards the occurrence of the construction without any dative complement (51 occurrences out of 86 lack dative complements – i.e. 40.7% occur with them), while the bias for texts translated from the Latin is even more significant and conspicuous (out of the 39 first occurrences in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, for instance, only 6 are found with a dative complement, amounting to 15%).

Returning to (2) and (3), those utterances show that the subjects that occur in the *is/bið to* construction are not necessarily NPs with determiners clearly marked as nominative. The subject of (2) is a *wh*-clause (*hu ða leoda wunnon...*) that can be parsed as an NP since it is a free relative clause (without any antecedent). Similarly the subject of (3) is a *that* clause (*ðæt sume gedwolmen wæron*), which formal linguists do not parse as an NP.<sup>10</sup>

Now, if a construction includes a subject and the copular verb (*beon/wesan*), one needs to address the question of whether or not the verb has a complement and what its nature is. Unless taken in its purely existential sense, the copula licenses two arguments. I therefore analyse the *to*-infinitival clause in this construction as the second argument of *beon/wesan*, i.e. its complement.

## 1.2 *Beon/wesan*

The distinction between *beon* and *wesan* is only made in the present tense. The preterite paradigm does not allow for any such alternation, and only *wesan* forms can be used. *Beon* forms can occur, but they are fairly uncommon. The general rule is that *beon* forms appear when they have a future sense or indicate a gnomic present.<sup>11</sup> This applies fully to the *beon/wesan to* construction.

4. Ne nan preost þurh dysig ne drynce ungemetelice ne nænne mann ne neadige to mycclum drynce. Forþan þe he sceall beon gearo gif cild *bið* to fulligenne oððe man to husligenne þæt he hæbbe his gewitt.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick T. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language. Part III: Syntactical units with two verbs*, first half (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p. 1457.

<sup>9</sup> Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax. Part I: Parts of Speech*, Mémoires de la société néophilologique de Helsinki 23 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1960), p. 520.

<sup>10</sup> Peter H. Matthews, *Syntactic Relations: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 39-49.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g., Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 383.

*No priest should drink immoderately through foolishness, nor should any man compel him to much drinking, for he must be ready in case a child is to be baptised or a man to receive the Host, so that he has his whole mind.*  
(colwsigeXa, +ALet\_1\_[Wulfsige\_Xa]: 74.89)

*Bið* is used here because the present is gnomic, since it refers to situations that are always likely to happen.

The verb *beon/wesan* needs to be tense-marked when used in conjunction with a *to*-infinitive. It can be conjugated in the subjunctive mood (5) and in the preterite (6):

5. And smeage gelome hwæt him sy to donne and hwæt to forego after Godes rihte.  
*And [they] often pondered what they were to do and what to forgo according to God's law.*  
(coinspolX, WPol\_2.1.1\_[Jost]: 19.27)

6. Hi þa heora bicop rædes befrunon hwæt him be þam to donne wære.  
*They sought their bishop's advice concerning what they were to do about that.*  
(cocathom1, +ACHom\_I\_34: 466.20.6695)

Yet there is another constraint bearing on the construction, as it is incompatible with the imperative mood. This is presumably explained by the observation that it already conveys an almost identical illocutionary force.

### 1.3 Cataphoric pronouns as subjects

Subjects can also be dummy elements whose function is to replace a logical, extraposed subject.

7. *Hit* is to gelyfenne þæt Drihten mihte on anre tide dæges geseon ealles þises middangeardes wynsumnessa, ge on golde ge on deorwyrþum hræglum.  
*It is to be believed that the Lord was able to see, during the space of one day, all the delights in this world, whether in gold or in costly raiment.*  
(coblick, HomS\_10\_[BIHom\_3]: 31.67.406)

The personal pronoun *hit* is the grammatical subject. Its function is to make it possible for the logical subject (*þæt Drihten mihte on anre tide dæges geseon...*) to be extraposed. Demonstrative pronouns can also be used to the same effect:

8. Ac *Þæt* us is to geþencenne þæt ure Drihten æfter þam fulwihte fæste...  
*But we have to keep in mind that our lord fasted after being baptised.*  
(coblick, HomS\_10\_[BIHom\_3]: 27.26.377)

An alternative account of these constructions including extraposed constituents posits that their grammatical subject is a cataphoric pronoun, pointing

toward or somehow heralding the logical, extraposed subject<sup>12</sup>. *Þæt* is not the only demonstrative that can be used in this context instead of *Hit*. The deictic *Ðis* is found as well:

9. Ðis is to smeagenne hwi sy mare blis be gecyrredum synfullum þonne be uncildigum rihtwisum.

*It [lit. this] is to be thought over why there is more sport for the inconstant and sinful than for the innocent and righteous.*

(cocathom1, +ACHom\_I, 24: 372.48.4698)

Extrapositions are normally restricted to cases in which the logical, extraposed subject is clausal – whether it is a *that*-clause, as in (7) or (8), or a free relative as in (9). YCOE contains some exceptions however, such as (10):

10. Ac God hi het syðþan Sarra þæt is ealdor þæt heo nære synderlice hire hiredes ealdor geciged ac forðrihte ealdor þæt is to understandenne ealra gelyfedra wifa moder.

*But God called her Sarra, which is leader, so that she was not simply named the leader of her household but the direct leader – that is to say [lit. understand] the mother of all living women.*

(cocathom1, +ACHom\_I, 6: 225.36.1083)

*Þæt is to understandenne...* is a set phrase, reminiscent of and very probably related to the present-day *That is to say...* The literal meaning of the construction in (10) is: ‘*the mother of all living women is to be understood*’ or, without the archaic use of *is to*: ‘*one/you must understand the mother of all living women*’.

It remains something of a mystery why it was felt necessary to resort to cataphoric pronouns and extrapositions with *is/bið to*. I speculated<sup>13</sup> that this probably had to do with the incipient rigidification of word order and the resulting structural pressure towards having subjects before verbs. Yet it seems that the acceptability of cataphoric pronouns dates back to earlier than expected. The two examples from the Blickling homilies suggest that cataphoric pronouns may have already been attested with *is/bið to* in King Alfred’s time. Although this does not fully invalidate the rigidification account (rigidification being an ongoing process throughout the history of English), the latter is partial at best. My educated guess would now be that demonstrative pronouns were probably initially used to emphasise the state of affairs that they point to, and that the *þæt* clause also refers to, thereby contributing to focalizing the clause and its content, which is always discourse-new. *Hit*, on the other hand, seems to appear (around the same time) as a mere variant of the construction

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of *it* in extrapositions see Pierre Cotte, *L’explication grammaticale de textes anglais*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998 [1996]), pp. 206-207.

<sup>13</sup> Olivier Simonin, ‘Relatives infinitives et constructions apparentées’, pp. 551-552.

with no cataphoric pronoun, in conditions that are free to a large extent. Why various cataphoric pronouns could be used and what were the fine-grained semantic differences between them in conjunction with *is/bið to* would require more substantial data to draw any firm conclusions.

## 2 Meaning and competing patterns

This section provides a semantic account of the construction (2.1), explores its meaning further by contrasting it with *habban to* + (inflected) INFINITIVE (2.2), discussing predicative *to*-infinitives that do not express prescription (2.3), and proposes a semantic and diachronic connection between those infinitives and the *is/bið to* deontic construction (2.4).

### 2.1 Obligation and necessity

In semantic terms, *is/bið to* is characteristically used to impart a deontic prescription, as in (1) and (9). It is then often coupled with an exhortative function when the speaker endorses the obligation. The instructions to ponder over religious quotations or problems evoked by Ælfric directly reflect what men or believers ought to do. Though he urges his fellow men to do so, his injunction comes at a second remove, and is justified by higher authority, or what it is fitting to do – the former implying the latter. Correlatively, the construction is also used when what should be done in a particular circumstance is at stake (5), as when laymen defer to a well-established authority to obtain instructions (6). It then appears that the deontic meaning of *is/bið to* is close to today's *ought to* and *should*, as it indicates what it is fitting or appropriate to do, though presumably with a much stronger sense of obligation.

This account equally applies when the inflected infinitive is *gehyrenne* (2), *witenne* (3), *gelyfenne* (7), or *understandenne* (10), i.e. when the infinitive verb implies comprehension, belief or acquired knowledge. Yet the root modality can often be construed as having a dynamic component and expressing necessity. No possibility is deemed available except understanding or believing in the way envisaged, to take up the last two examples. There is no other choice but the one prescribed. The order of things is such that there is no alternative and, as a result, it is not clear that deontic obligation remains the primary modal meaning.

### 2.2 *Habban to*

According to Mitchell,<sup>14</sup> *habban* could not be used to denote obligation or necessity in conjunction with *to*-infinitive clauses as complements. Rather, he analyses NPs in sequences *habban* + NP + *to*-infinitives as objects of *habban*

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Mitchell, 401-402.

which is taken in its primary sense, ‘possess’, ‘own’. Denison<sup>15</sup> rightly points out that only by assuming that the NP pertains to the *to*-infinitive is it possible to interpret the construction as conveying obligation.

The corpus contains a rare counter-example to Mitchell’s claim, in which the NP cannot be argued to relate to *habban* directly and a strong sense of necessity is present:

11. Anes dages færelð þu hæfst to siðigenne.  
*You have to arrange for [lit. travel] a day’s journey.*  
(cocathom2, +ACHom\_II\_22: 195.176.4331)

The context is the following: Saint Fursey, having been taken to Heaven, enters into a discussion with priests, after angels have warned him that he must return to the temporal world. The priests remind him of the relevant obligation in (11) with a direct speech utterance. Of course, one can argue that the modal meaning of *habban to* pertains to necessity rather than obligation, and so to dynamic and not deontic modality. Under this reading, the priests take for granted the fact that Fursey will return, which will necessarily be the case by divine decree. This is consonant with Sweetser’s general view of modals historically evolving from dynamic to deontic modality<sup>16</sup> (i.e. non-epistemic necessity to obligation as far as *habban to* is concerned), as this early example of the modal construction is compatible with a dynamic necessity construal. In addition, the deontic reading of (11) is also inferred from the fact that the speakers are construed as ratifying the obligation conveyed by the angels to Saint Fursey, to whom the priests seem to reiterate the deontic constraint as they address him as *þu*.

Yet, whatever the interpretation one favours, why the competing *is/bið to* construction was not used remains an issue. Why does one fail to find, instead of (11), *þe is to siðigenne anes dages færelð*? I can only put forward conjectures, not knowing whether the alternative would have been grammatical: perhaps (11) does not easily fall under the concept of prescription, or exhortative implications had to be cancelled, or the role of the addressee had to be highlighted as having the obligation or being bound to leave. It should be borne in mind that offering a fine-grained analysis for the constructions under examination is rendered difficult by the paucity of the data and the lack of informants from whom acceptability judgements could be elicited.

Virtually all the occurrences where *habban* is used with a *to*-infinitive convey a meaning of possibility (capacity). (12) is typical in this respect:

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<sup>15</sup> David Denison, *English Historical Syntax: Verbal Constructions* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 316-317.

<sup>16</sup> Eve Sweetser, *From Etymology to Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

12. Ða næfde Martinus nan ðing to syllelne þam nacedan ðearfan þe ðær swa ðearle hrymde buton his gewædum þe he wel behofode.  
*Then Martin did not have anything to give to the naked pauper that suffered so cruelly from the cold, except his garments that he needed quite.*  
(cocathom2, +ACHom\_II, 39.1: 289.29.6534)

Quite clearly, what is meant is Martin could not give anything to the pauper except his clothes; the *to*-infinitive is a relative clause.

In sum, although one occurrence of *habban to* meaning obligation or necessity (in late OE) has been found in YCOE, the construction is an unlikely competitor to *is/bið to*. More serious candidates would have been *sculan* and *motan*, at least in terms of frequency. They could also convey root necessity/obligation, but in a more subjective fashion. In particular, speakers could be deontic sources and directly issue obligations without invoking a higher-order prescription. Yet to avoid being taken too far afield, let us leave modal verbs now.

### 2.3 Predicative *to*-infinitives and earmarking

Predicative *to*-infinitives had been in use since the dawn of Old English not to convey prescription, but to indicate what a subject referent has been earmarked for:

13. Ðonne is ðes londes ðe ic higum selle, XVI gioc ærðe londes & medwe all on æce ærfe to brucanne ge mine dei ge æfter swæ to ationne swæ me mest red & liofast sie.  
*Of this land I that I bequest to him/them, (there) are XVI “yokes” of field and meadow to enjoy during my day and also to dispose of afterwards, as it pleases me most.*  
(codocu2, Ch\_1510\_[Rob\_6]: 20.11)

The land in question is earmarked for a given use: it is to be disposed of by someone else. The *to*-infinitive is a predicative complement with an adverbial purposive meaning tinged with a sense of possibility, as the land is bequeathed so that the future owner *can/will be able to* enjoy it and dispose of it. This is one of the oldest occurrences in YCOE. The written document dates back to 850-950 (period 2 for Old English in the Helsinki corpus), but the composition of the text itself is prior to 850 (period 1). This leads me to entertain a strong suspicion that such predicative *to*-infinitives are already found at the very beginning of Old English.

Similar infinitives, occurring adverbially with verbs other than *beon/wesan*, were current and even frequent in comparison.

14. ...& betæhte him eall þæt he ahte to bewitanne.  
*And he made over to him all that he possessed for him to administer.*  
(cogenesiC, Gen\_[Ker]: 39.4.149)



Perhaps the infinitive in (14) could have been more explicitly translated ‘so that he would (be able to) administer what he possessed.’ The notion of earmarking is also fully relevant to account for the meaning of the infinitive.<sup>17</sup>

Yet only when the *to*-infinitive is predicative can the root modality expressed through earmarking pertain to necessity, and not to possibility:

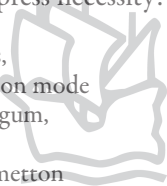
15. Gēpencean we eac gif oþer nyten wære to haligenne & geteod to þon ecan  
life þonne onfenge he heora hiwe  
*Let us think too that if other animals were to be saved, and lifted to eternal life, then  
he would have taken on their form.*  
(coblick, HomS\_10\_[BHHom\_3]: 29.34.381)

That God may have earmarked animals to be saved is considered for the sake of argument, only to be rejected afterwards. If that had been true, animals would then have fallen under the dynamic necessity that can be paraphrased ‘if animals had to be saved.’ This illustrates how earmarking can lead to root, dynamic necessity interpretations of the construction. Furthermore, earmarking can be understood as referring to the natural order of things, from which necessity stems:

16. Be þam we forhtiað fela to sprecenne for þan ðe Gode anum is to gewitenne  
hu heora ungesewenlice gecynd buton ælcere besmitennysse oððe wanunge on  
ecere hluttornysse þurhwunað.  
*Concerning that we fear to speak much, because God alone is (meant) to know how  
their invisible nature without any defilement or injury in eternal purity remains.*  
(cocathom1,+ACHom\_I,\_36: 486.19.7146)

The following excerpt from *Beowulf* argues in favour of a very early use of predicative *to*-infinitives to express necessity:

17. [...] Denum eallum wæs,  
winum Scyldinga weorce<sup>18</sup> on mode  
to geðolianne, ðegne monegum,  
[...] syðan Æscheres  
on þam holmclife hefelan metton



<sup>17</sup> I refer the reader to my 2011 account of such infinitives in Present-Day English, where I introduce the notion of earmarking and propose an in-depth analysis of such ‘weakened’ purposive clauses: Olivier Simonin, ‘Adverbial and relative infinitives’, *Journal of English Linguistics* (to be published).

<sup>18</sup> As Scragg points out, *weorce* is in the instrumental case: see Donald G. Scragg, ‘The nature of Old English verse’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, edited by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55-70, p. 64. In my conception however, it is overtly marked as the instrumental complement of the infinitive *to geðolianne* (presumably for alliterative purposes, as the sounds at the beginning of the syllables *Scy-* and *-ce* are similar), but is still the grammatical subject of *wes*.

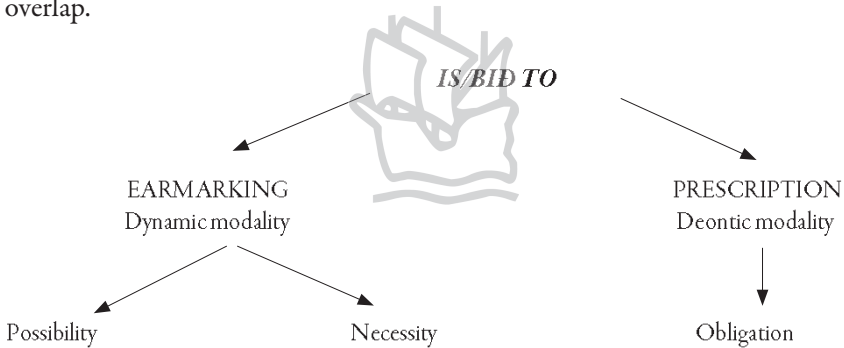
*For all the Danes, for the friends of the Scyldings,  
 For many a thegn, there was much suffering  
 To be endured in the mind  
 When they met with, on the cliff beside the water,  
 The head of Æschere.  
 (Beowulf 1417-1421)<sup>19</sup>*

The Danes who saw Æschere’s head had no choice but to sustain mental pain. There was suffering for them, and it had to or was bound to be endured as a result. In this example, necessity does not seem to be too remote from deontic obligation.

## 2.4 Prescription and earmarking

The notion of earmarking can in fact be extended to cover prescription and account for occurrences like (1), which convey deontic modality and a particular brand of earmarking. (1) might have been translated ‘*We are meant to ponder the words he said*’. However, for descriptive purposes, it is important to keep the two notions separate. I will keep the term *prescription* for deontic obligation.

Considering the semantic propinquity of the two *beon/wesan to* constructions expressing prescription or earmarking, I hypothesize in the light of the available data that they are related and, more precisely, that the prescription construction is historically derived from the earmarking one. The division line between them may be fuzzy at times, as a sense of necessity is liable to appear with the former, or a nuance of obligation with the latter. The *is/bid to* construction is best regarded as a polysemic unit the meanings of which may partly overlap.



<sup>19</sup> George Jack, *Beowulf: A Student’s Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 112-114.



More interestingly, YCOE contains a few examples where there seem to be a genuine ambiguity or some overlap between the two interpretations:

18. Gif feorcund mon oððe fremde butan wege geond wudu gonge & ne hrieme ne horn blawe, for ðeof he bið to profianne: oððe to sleanne oððe to aliesanne.  
*If a strange or foreign man goes from the road and through the wood, without shouting or blowing his horn, he is to be deemed a thief/criminal, either to slay or to let free.*  
(colawine, LawIne: 20.52)

The man must be regarded as a criminal – no other choices are available – or the law is understood as prescribing that he be deemed as such. Both the (dynamic) necessity-reading and the (deontic) obligation-reading are acceptable for the *beon/wesan to* construction in (18), for which the usual distinction is blurred. Such occurrences might have provided a bridging context<sup>20</sup> between earmarking and prescription for the construction, enabling it to expand the range of contexts in which it could be found.

### 3 Influence of Latin

Through a discussion of religious writings and translations from Latin, I show that Latin had a substantial influence on the development of the *is/bið to* construction expressing prescription (3.1). I then address the issue of whether *is/bið to* was resorted to as a conventional manner of rendering some Latin structures or whether it was genuinely idiomatic (3.2), before commenting on the rise of a new, related employment through a linguistic calque (3.3).

#### 3.1 Deontic meaning and the influence of genre

Depending on the genre in question, *is/bið to* comes up more or less frequently. There is a conspicuous general bias towards the occurrence of the construction in religious writings and homilies. This is not surprising since it is particularly well suited to the prescriptive style characteristic of the genre, replete with exhortative speech acts for which the construction is employed as a recurrent formula.

Yet more strikingly, translations from the Latin exhibit a significant number of *is/bið to* occurrences. The following table indicates the number of hits out of the total of infinitival clauses (or phrases: IPs) found in YCOE religious texts or excerpts with a sufficient length for them to be significant.

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<sup>20</sup> Bernd Heine, 'On the role of context in grammaticalization,' in *New Reflections on Grammaticalization*, edited by Ilse Wischer and Gabriele Diewald (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 83-102.

Text	Translation	Hits (/IPs)	%
Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	Yes	71/4923	1.44
Gregory's <i>Cura Pastoralis</i>	Yes	327/3400	9.62
<i>Blickling Homilies</i>	No	27/3050	0.89
Ælfric's <i>Catholic Homilies</i>	No	42/15776	0.27
Wulfstan's <i>Homilies</i>	No	5/1889	0.26

Even in the Old English version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the percentage of *to*-infinitives used in conjunction with *is/bið* is more than 1.5 times higher than for the *Blickling Homilies*, which has the highest occurrence rate for a work not translated from the Latin. This overrepresentation of the construction in translations suggests a possible influence of Latin on its development.

Assuming that the earmarking sense of *is/bið to* is indigenous to Old English and was in all probability also found in Germanic,<sup>21</sup> it is likely that Latin translations had an influence on the development of its deontic reading. Indeed, Latin had a so-called gerundive construction that specifically meant prescription (obligation/necessity) which was formed with *esse* + *-ndus* VERBAL ADJECTIVE.<sup>22</sup> Klöpzig<sup>23</sup> finds that *is/bið to* is overwhelmingly used to translate *esse* + *-ndus* VERBAL ADJECTIVE. This shows that the native construction was felt to be fully compatible with the obligation meaning of the Latin verbal adjective.

A Latin influence on the development of the deontic uses of the construction is highly probable, whether it contributed to its initial rise or not. Conceivably, the semantic continuity between the notions of earmarking and prescription may be sufficient in itself to account for an initial stage when *is/bið to* started to express deontic prescription unambiguously. At any rate, its sheer repetition with this meaning in translations from Latin texts (quotations from which would have peppered sermons) must at least have contributed to an overall frequency increase in everyday usage.

### 3.2 A closer look at translations from Latin

A note of caution should be sounded here. In translations, *is/bið to* would sometimes appear while the Latin text did not contain *esse* + VERBAL ADJECTIVE (or any other gerundive or participial form). Here are two examples taken

<sup>21</sup> As well as modern reflexes in other Germanic languages: see Olga Fischer, 'The rise of the passive infinitive in English,' in *Historical English Syntax*, edited by Dieter Katovsky (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991), 141-188, pp. 149-150.

<sup>22</sup> Simone Deléani and Jean-Marie Vermander, *Initiation à la langue latine et à son système*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: SEDES, 2003 [1975]), pp. 226-227, 262.

<sup>23</sup> Walther Klöpzig, 'Der Ursprung der "to be to" konstruktion,' *Englisch Studien* 56 (1922), 378-389, quoted by Olga Fischer, p. 149.

from an Old English translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, which I have chosen to compare with their Latin original<sup>24</sup>:

19. Ecce itque homo est, ut ita dixerim, captivus et liber:  
Ono se mon bið, Ðæt Ðe swa to cweðenne sy, æghwæðer ge gehæfted ge freo:  
*Well then man is, so to speak, both captive and free.*  
(cobede, Bede\_1: 16.88.23.813)

20. Et quid est aliud contra famem alimenta...  
Ond hwæt elles is to secenne wið Ðæm hungre nemne ondlifen...  
*And what else is to be sought for against hunger than food...?*  
(cobede, Bede\_1: 16.78.23.723)

This suggests that, by the time of King Alfred, *is/bið to* was used quite idiomatically to express obligation, in translated just as in non-translated works. Yet the construction was sometimes resorted to so as to translate Latin structures quite slavishly. As Olga Fischer writes:<sup>25</sup>

When the subject of *be* is not the object of the infinitive... the construction occurs only rarely in Old English, and is in all cases a translation of the Latin periphrastic future (*esse + urus*) or (occasionally) the gerundial construction with *ad*.

### 3.3 Future reference and predestination

Late in the Old English period, *is/bið to* could be used to refer to future time idiomatically, albeit it carried strong undertones of predestination.<sup>26</sup> The grammatical subject of *is/bið* is then never to be understood as the implicit object of the *to*-infinitive. The first occurrences of *is/bið to* in this sense appear in translations from Latin<sup>27</sup> as an equivalent to the periphrastic future in *esse + (turus/-surus)* FUTURE PARTICIPLE. (21) illustrates this new development:

21. Ic bidde Ðe, Drihten, send Ðone Ðe ðu to sendene eart  
*I pray you, Lord [i.e. God], send the one that you are to send by your own decree.*  
(*Exodus* 4.13)<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For those two examples taken from Bede, the first lines in Latin are from Colgrave & Mynors's edition: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Bertram Colgrave and Roger A. B. Mynors (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1969). The Present-Day English translation is from Miller: Thomas Miller, *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, volume 1, Early English Text Society, Original Series 95 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959 [1890]).

<sup>25</sup> Olga Fischer, p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> See W. van der Gaaf, 'Beon and Habban connected with an inflected infinitive,' *English Studies* 13 (1931), 176-188; Frederick T. Visser, p. 1452.

<sup>27</sup> See: Morgan Callaway, *The Infinitive in Anglo-Saxon* (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1913); W. van der Gaaf, p. 176; Olga Fischer, p. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in: Bruce Mitchell, p. 399.

(22) shows that by the end of the Old English period, the traditional syntactic pattern with a grammatical subject coreferential with the implicit object of the infinitive was also used in the same sense:

22. Eall ðis wæs God mid to gremienne & þas arme leode mid to tregienne  
*All this was bound to enrage God and trouble the poor nation*  
(cochronE, ChronE\_[Plummer]: 1104.26.3410)

I have chosen to reinforce the meaning of predestination in both translations, fleshing it out by adding *by your own decree* for (21) and *bound* for (22). Such modal colouring is absent from the Latin construction, yet it makes sense when seen in the light of other uses of *is/bið to*. In particular, predestination is congruent with the notion of earmarking: fate preordains a given outcome which will necessarily happen. Incidentally, one could perhaps argue that (21) and (22) could be accounted for drawing solely on the concept of necessity. In any event, the fact that *is/bið to* regularly conveyed necessity and obligation gave an interesting semantic twist to the futurity that it came to communicate.

## Conclusion

*Is/bið to* was not confined to the expression of deontic prescription in Old English. The range of its meaning extended to dynamic modality as well, covering both possibility and necessity in so far as these arise from earmarking, which has been argued to be the original sense of the construction. Fairly late in Old English, *is/bið to* acquired an additional futurity meaning, though seriously tinged with undertones of necessity and a sense of preordained destiny.

Later developments are fairly well known and easier to trace, though they fall beyond the scope of this paper. In short, with the rise of passive infinitives (i.e. *be* + PAST PARTICIPLE) and of *is/bið to* occurrences with subjects that were understood as the implicit subjects of the *to*-infinitives (*the week to come*), alongside the ongoing loss of case-marking and the concomitant rigidification of word-order, the syntactic pattern SUBJECT + *be to* + INFINITIVE came to be seen as the normal one for the construction. As a result, initial dative complements were eventually reanalysed as subjects in the construction (e.g. *We are to do these things*). The meaning of the construction evolved as well. Perhaps the most telling illustration is that the undertones of predestination underpinning future reference slowly gave way to a weaker sense of pre-arrangement. Yet in spite of all these changes, it is noteworthy that the initial finiteness constraint bearing on the copular verb has been maintained: *be* must be conjugated in today's construction, which testifies to the resilience of the constraint and the historical memory that constructions may retain.

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