ON THE AUXILIARY STATUS OF *DARE* IN OLD ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

OE *durran* 'dare' belongs to a group of the so-called preterite-present verbs which developed weak past tense forms replacing the originally strong forms throughout the paradigm. The present study hypothesizes that the potential sources of this development are related to the decay of the subjunctive mood in Old English. Further, this corpus-based study analyses the status of DARE in Old English, with the findings showing that the verb displayed both lexical and auxiliary verb characteristics. These results are juxtaposed and compared with the verb's developments in Middle English. The databases examined are the corpus of *The Dictionary of Old English in Electronic Form (A-G)* and the *Innsbruck Computer Archive of Machine-Readable English Texts*. In both cases, a search of potential forms was performed on all the files of the corpora, the raw results were then analysed in order to eliminate irrelevant instances (adjectives, nouns, foreign words, etc.). The relevant forms were examined with the aim to check the properties of DARE as a lexical and an auxiliary verb, and compare the findings with Molencki's (2002, 2005) observations.

Keywords: preterite-present verbs, *durran*, auxiliary status

1. Introduction

OE *durran* 'dare' belongs to a group of the so-called preterite-present verbs which developed weak past tense forms replacing the originally strong forms throughout the paradigm. Hogg & Fulk (2011: 299) comment briefly that preterite-present verbs "for semantic reasons developed in such a way that their preterites came to be used in present contexts and thus came to be regarded as present forms".

Bryant (1944: 259) suggests that a similar process is observable in Present-Day English, as she claims that forms such as *had*, *were*, *would*, etc. should be regarded "not as pasts of *have*, *am*, *will*, etc., but as invariable preterite-

presents, frequently but not always of a subjunctive nature". Following this suggestion, it is, perhaps, reasonable to assume that, first, the old past tense forms of the preterite-presents started to express the subjunctive mood in present (non-factual) contexts and then they came to be regarded as present (factual) forms. The first part of such a hypothesis fits neatly with Fischer's observation that "in Middle English we see a very rapid increase … in the use of modals where Old English had the subjunctive" (Fischer 1992: 250), and some preterite-presents, including DARE, developed into modals. Although (or due to the fact that)[1] the subjunctive began to disappear, Middle English had means to express "such properties as unreality, potentiality, exhortation, wishes, desires, requests, commands, prohibitions, hypotheses, conjectures and doubts" (Traugott 1992: 239), for example, through the old past forms of some preterite-present verbs inherited from Old English.

It is worth highlighting that modern inflected languages that have the subjunctive allow using the past form of a verb as the base for the subjunctive in the present context, cf. Polish **Poszła**bym dziś do kina 'I would go to the cinema today' or German Ich **ginge** heute ins Kino 'I would go to the cinema today' or even English If I **were** you now, … In the sentences above the elements in bold are past forms (in terms of morphology), while the context is present.

It is possible to assume that a similar situation took place in the course of the history of English, except that the forms of the preterite subjunctive in the present context and the forms of the preterite indicative started to overlap[2]. This would show, perhaps, a more general tendency of English to simplify in mood, as differences between the imperative and the subjunctive also started to disappear[3], cf.:

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[1]   As pointed out by Fischer (1992: 262), "on the one hand, the gradual erosion of verbal inflections made it necessary to replace the subjunctive by something more transparent, on the other, the use of periphrastic constructions at a fairly early stage was itself responsible for the disappearance of the subjunctive". Thus, most probably, it was a push-and-pull process.

[2]   This hypothesis is not groundless, since some forms of the singular preterite indicative regularly overlapped with the singular past subjunctive. In strong verbs, the form of 2 sg. pret. ind. and all persons sg. subj. were the same. In weak verbs, the form of 1, 3 sg. pret. ind. and all persons sg. subj. were also the same. These forms had the ending -e. The plural past subjunctive had, for all persons, the ending -en. Canon (2010: 13), discussing the preterite subjunctive, observes that "verb forms in the subjunctive are, to use generative terminology, the surface markers of modality. However, as the distinction between indicative and subjunctive form blurred, speakers looked for alternative surface markers indicating mood. The modal auxiliary verbs filled the void".

[3]   Note that initially the subjunctive had a variety of uses, including requests, commands and prohibitions (see the quote above, i.e., Traugott 1992: 239).

> Because the imperative and subjunctive contrast morphologically, we must assume that there was a difference in meaning, at least in early OE times, between more and less directive, more and less wishful utterances. By the time of Alfredian OE **this difference was losing ground in many registers**; nevertheless, the subjunctive continued to be preferred in monastic and legal regulations; charms, medical prescriptions and similar generalised instructions are normally in the subjunctive.
>
> (Traugott 1992: 185, emphasis mine)

Also, it is reasonable to assume that subjunctive forms began to die out for pragmatic reasons. Perhaps, they became too vague or not strong enough to convey the speaker's meaning and the past tense forms served this purpose better.

However, using such past tense forms in present contexts could lead to a subsequent lack of transparency, especially if the hypothesis about the overlapping of the past subjunctive and past indicative is taken into consideration. In other words, one past tense form (in terms of morphology) could convey factual meanings in past contexts or (non-)factual meanings in present contexts[4]. If this is what happened, then developing new weak past tense forms for past contexts would be one of the remedy strategies.

Whatever the speculations about the source(s) of change, "the preterite-present forms look rather irregular, both in their (new) present and past tense morphologies, and cannot easily be classified in a homogenous fashion. The other difficulty they present us with is the confusion which arises between morphological form and morphological content" (Hogg 2002: 64). In other words, there is an ambiguous confusion between preterite-present and modal verbs, since not all preterite-presents are ancestors of contemporary modals, and not all modals originated as preterite-presents. Verbs that belonged to the preterite-present category which did not become modals "either dropped out of the language altogether or were assimilated to another more regular class of verbs" (Lightfoot 2009: 30). The confusion between the two categories is further increased by the fact that some preterite-present verbs displayed modal syntactic features, while others showed only semantic similarities.

Members of the preterite-present category differed from ordinary verbs as well. In particular, already in Old English, they lacked the inflectional suffix marking of the third person singular (the feature also present in the Present-Day English modals). Also, the non-finite forms of some such verbs were not attested in Old English (the case of DARE).

There are significant differences between the fates of DARE and those of other modals originating from the preterite-present class, like MAY, CAN etc. For instance, Beths (1999: 1071) writes that "in line with other modals, auxiliary *dare*

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4   For an illustration see Appendix.

is reinterpreted as a functional element. As opposed to the other modals, however, its lexical counterpart is not discarded but is reinforced". Thus, even today the verb shows characteristics of both an auxiliary and a main verb.

Although the split development is apparent in Present-Day English, the accounts of its beginning and its nature differ. For example, it has been assumed that DARE shows the evolution from the lexical to functional element (Lightfoot 1979, Warner 1993, Taeymans 2004). Starting as a main verb and being later reanalysed would place DARE closer to 'core' modals, however, it has also been suggested that, since in Old English the verb lacked non-finite forms (MED, Visser 1963-1973: §1355, Warner 1993: 202, Beths 1999: 1089) and rarely took nominal complements, it "might not have been used as a lexical verb at all in OE" (Beths 1999: 1087). If this is the case, DARE would count as a counterexample to the basic assumption "that grammaticalization always and only involves a unidirectional process from lexical to functional status" (Beths 1999: 1071). Similarly, Denison (1990: 161) and Molencki (2002: 369) opt for assigning DARE the role of an auxiliary already in Old English. Such claims are not groundless as there is evidence that some periphrastic constructions, such as modal auxiliaries, appeared already in Late Old English (cf. Traugott 1992: 186-200, Warner 1993: 2). Also, it has been suggested that the lack of consistency in the behaviour of modals occurs due to the coexistence of the old and the new forms, i.e., that the verb continues to exist as a lexical item, while its form that has undergone grammaticalisation becomes a functional element (cf. Harris & Campbell 1995: 178, Hopper 1991: 24).

The aim of the present study is to check if DARE shows characteristics of a main verb and/or an auxiliary in the corpus of *The Dictionary of Old English in Electronic Form (A-G)* (henceforth *DOE*). Because my study is concerned with the forms of one verb only (and not with identical forms of adjectives, nouns, foreign words, etc.), the relevant data extracted from *DOE* shall be referred to as the subcorpus.

2. Impersonal constructions

In the history of English there were some colligations of certain finite and non-finite verbs, which Denison (1990: 139) calls "auxiliary verbs" or "modals", and "impersonal verbs", respectively. Traugott (1992: 195) adds that "stronger evidence [in favour of the auxiliary status of verbs] is provided by the fact that if they occur with a verb that demonstrates 'impersonal' syntax … , the pre-modals share all the properties of that verb, rather than being 'personal', that is, they do not appear to have a subject of their own". Impersonal constructions with DARE can be illustrated with the following examples found in the subcorpus, where (2) has also been provided by Denison (1990: 148):

(1)   His magas þa and necheburas wurdon þearle þurh ða dæde ablicgede.
        and heora nan ne **dorste** þam fearre genealæcan
        (ÆCHom I, 34, *Dedicatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis*: Text from Cle-
        moes 1955-1956: 503-519)

(2)   … be þam ne **dorste** us nan wen beon geðuht, þæt hit ne mihte beon
        dælnimend þæs heofonlican wuldres
        (GDPref 1, Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Preface and Book 3: Hecht
        1900-1907: 179-259)

As DARE could appear in impersonal constructions, the sentences above show
that the verb was not only a lexical verb, and point to its certain auxiliary-like
status. However, as observed by Molencki (2002: 370), the verb was rarely used
in impersonal constructions and "most of the impersonal examples come from
poetic texts, which means that the structure may already have been perceived as
archaic".

3. Modal-like uses

The examples presented below illustrate the modal-like uses of DARE, similar to
those found in Present-Day English, and provide further arguments in favour of
the auxiliary status of the verb. The following sentences show that DARE could
share its infinitival complement with another modal, in both affirmative and nega-
tive clauses, examples (3) and (4), respectively. Sharing complements was not
possible between a lexical and a modal verb. Item (5) exemplifies that DARE
could be embedded together with a modal in the structure *neither...nor*, cf.:

(3)   … þæt he eac gan **dyrre** & **mæge**.
        (Lch I (Herb), Pseudo-Apuleius: *Herbarium*: de Vriend 1984: 30-233)

(4)   … þe he to bote gebigan ne **mæge** oððe ne **durre** for worldafole
        (WCan 1.1.1, 'Canons of Edgar' (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College,
        MS. 201): Fowler 1972: 2-18)

(5)   … þæt he ne **mihte** ne ne **dorste** to þon gedyrstlæcan
        (Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book 2: Hecht 1900-1907: 96-178)

Similarly, to the present-day use of modals, DARE could be followed by the
passive. This feature is presented under (6) and (7):

(6)   Ac swa þeah he ne **dorste beon** beforan him upp **arǽred** of þǽre
         eorðan.
         (GD 2 (C), Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book 2: Hecht 1900-1907:
         96-178)

(7)   … and ofer þis wit ne **dorston bion** ut **gangende**
         (LS 35 *Vitae Patrum*: Assmann 1889: 195-207)

Also, as observed by Molencki (2002), DARE was most commonly comple-
mented by the simple infinitive, either closely preceding (8), or following it (9),
or in the brace construction (10):

(8)   … and hi gewemman ne **dorston**
         (AELS *Saint Agnes*: Skeat 1881-1900, I: 170-194)

(9)   … se halga papa and se biscop **dorston** swerian mænne að
         (HomU 35.1, Napier 1883, no. 43: 'Sunnandæges spell' (Cambridge,
         Corpus Christi College, MS. 419 and 421, pp. 1, 2): Napier 1883: 205-
         215)

(10)   … ondrædað him sumra monna unðonc, ne **durron** forðon ryht freolice
         læran & unforwandodlice sprecan
         (CP, Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*: Sweet 1871: 24-467)

However, the data in the subcorpus also contain examples of DARE followed
by *to*. One of such instances is presented in (5), which makes an interesting
contrast with DARE followed by the same verb, *gedyrstlæcan*, without the pre-
ceding *to*; cf. (11):

(11)   … hu he **dorste** geþristlæcean
         (GD 1 (H), Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book 1: Hecht 1900-1907,
         11: 14-90)

Similarly, (12) – (13) show contexts similar to the ones in (1) and (9), respec-
tively, the difference being the presence of *to* between DARE and the following
verb, i.e. *genealæcean* and *swerian*, respectively:

(12)   … þa ne **dorste** he him **to** genealæcean
         (GD 2 (H), Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book 2: Hecht 1900-1907:
         96-174)

(13)   … swa hi **durran to** swerian.
        (LawNorthu, *Norðhymbra preosta lagu*: Liebermann 1903-1916, I: 380-
        385)

Also see (14), where *teonan don* 'to inflict pain, do wrong' seems to be a pe-
riphrastic (more emphatic) variant of the simple verb (cf. Rissanen 1991: 336),
and (15) with *geteon* 'to appropriate':

(14)   … þætte yfle men ne **dorston** nanwyht **to** teonan don for hyra egsan
        (HomS 1, *Christmas*: Scragg 1992: 111-121)

(15)   Hu mæg oððe hu **dear** ænig læwede man him **to** geteon þurh riccetere
        cristes wican? (ÆCHom II, 45, *Dedicatio ecclesiae*: Godden 1979: 335-
        345)

Such examples show a dual character of DARE. The fact that the verb appears
in a close neighbourhood of the infinitive and that it tends not to appear without
it is a more modal-like characteristics, but the pattern *to + infinitive* is more
typical of lexical verbs. However, it is worth mentioning that there is a differ-
ence between lexical verbs and preterite-presents. With lexical verbs, the infini-
tive after *to* in the *to + infinitive* complements was always the inflected infini-
tive. "The *tō + inflected infinitive* construction is very common, and is used to
express meanings of, for example, necessity, purpose and completion" (Hogg
2002: 84). While the infinitive accompanying the majority of preterite-presents,
including DARE, was the simple (uninflected) infinitive (Mitchell 1985: §996).
The examples presented above illustrate that the infinitive complementing
DARE could be preceded by *to*, but even then it was uninflected[5].

4. Semantic factors

Molencki (2002: 369) observes that except for a few isolated examples from
poetry, DARE was syntactically restricted to non-assertive contexts, i.e., nega-
tive, interrogative and conditional, while the affirmative context usually con-
tained the weak verb *gedyrstigan*. No instances of *gedyrstigan* are found in my
subcorpus, but there are instances of affirmative DARE in the vicinity of the
adjective *dyrstig* and the noun *dyrstignysse*:

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[5]   Molencki (2002: 368) analyses the infinitive following another preterite-present verb
       þearf 'need' in *Gif hit sie winter **ne þearft** þu þone wermod **to don*** (Laece 2.3.4) as "an
       interesting example of a complex (inflected) infinitive, whose ending appears to have
       been reduced (*to don* for *to donne*)". However, as the sentences under (5), (12), (13) and
       (15) have the uninflected infinitive, I assume that the infinitive in (14) is also simple.

(16)   … ne eom ic na swa **dyrstig** þæt ic **durre** tobrecan drihtnes gesetnysse
         (ÆHom 27, *Addition to Catholic Homilies* II no. 33: Dominica XII post
         Pentecosten: Pope 1967-1968 II: 762-769)

(17)   Mid hwylcere **dyrstignysse dearst** þu underfon þæt halige husel æfter
         swylcere dæde? (ÆHom 27, *Addition to Catholic Homilies* II no. 33:
         Dominica XII post Pentecosten: Pope 1967-1968 II: 762-769)

Also, examples quoted under (5) and (11) show DARE in the neighbourhood of
a semantically equivalent verb, which can be interpreted in terms of semantic
bleaching. Beths (1999: 1081) argues that "[t]he occurrence with infinitives of
semantically equivalent main verbs is characteristic of verbs undergoing gram-
maticalization and is an indication of the bleaching of the (lexical) meaning of
the verb". A similar claim may concern the example in (18) which shows
DARE followed by a semantically equivalent verbal phrase:

(18)   … for ðon ðe ðu **dorstest** þus **dyrstelice sprecan**
         (ÆHom 24, *Addition to Catholic homilies* II no. 20: *Sanctorum Alexan-
         dri* ... : Pope 1967-1968, II, 737-746)

Molencki (2002: 371) observes that the usual Latin translations of DARE
were *audere* and *praesumere* 'to have the courage or impudence to do some-
thing' or, if negated, *timere* 'to fear' and Mitchell (1985: §2034) observes that
"the semantic environment of *fear*, is a typical subjunctive environment",
however, the forms of DARE quoted below are not in the subjunctive forms,
which perhaps indicates the decay of the subjunctive in progress. Also Beths
(1999: 1082) states that "as for the independent meaning of **durran* itself, this
is conveyed most clearly in an environment in which there is a sense of fear
present. The interaction [of DARE] with negation is required, because it
seems that the meaning of *fear* is equivalent to *not dare*". The data in my sub-
corpus confirm such claims, e.g., in (19), which could be rendered as 'Aaron
and the people of Israel saw that Moses was glorified, and didn't dare (=
feared) to come near to him', DARE has a lexical function and conveys the
notion of fear, cf.:

(19)   Aaron & Israhela folc gesawon þæt Moyses wæs gehyrned, & ne **dors-
         ton** him neah cuman.
         (Exodus (London, British Library, MS. Cotton Claudius B.IV): Craw-
         ford 1922: 212-285)

Having said that, a particularly interesting example is under (20), where DARE appears with semantically related expressions such as *dirstig mod* 'daring mind' and in the context of fear, i.e., the verb *ondrædan* 'to dread' and the nominal phrase *cyninges irre* 'king's wrath':

(20)   Hwa wæs æfre swa **dirstiges modes** þæt **dorste** cynges dohtor gewæmman ær ðam dæge hyre brydgifta and him ne **ondrede** þæs **cyninges irre**?
        (ApT, *Apollonius of Tyre*: Goolden 1958: 2-42)

DARE could express necessity and obligation, which is mainly (though not exclusively) a property of auxiliaries. This is illustrated in (21), which could be rendered as 'and he dare not (may not), neither because of his wife nor of his child/daughters, excuse himself'.

(21)   … and he for his wife ne for his wenclum ne **dearr** hine sylfne beladian
        (ÆAdmon 1, *Admonitio ad filium spiritualem*: Norman 1848: 32-56)

Like the morpho-syntactic analysis above, the semantic one also provides arguments for a split development.

5. Further development in Middle English

My research on the development of DARE in Middle English has been based on the corpus of the *Innsbruck Computer Archive of Machine-Readable English Texts* (henceforth *ICAMET*). The study revealed that the verb indeed reinforced most of the old and introduced new lexical and functional characteristics. The lexical development may be deduced from the following premises: (a) there is only one instance of DARE in an impersonal construction and (b) the verb developed past participle forms (Tomaszewska 2012: 312). Moreover, while it was typical of modals to develop non-finite forms in Middle English and drop them at the end of the period (Beths 1999: 1094), which indicates a reduction of lexical uses, the use of DARE as a lexical verb was increasing (Visser: 1963-1973: §1355, Beths: 1999: 1089, 1094). Also, I have found one example of the 3 sg. present -*s* (though no -*th*), which indicates a development towards a full verb, cf.:

(22)   … ffor ther **dares** noo man here aventer ynto Flaunders
        (*The Cely letters 1472-1488*, 239/23)

While Visser (1963-1973: §1362) states that "not until the beginning of the sixteenth century did the tendency to incorporate the verb *dare* into the class of 'full' verbs manifest itself by the appearance in writing of a new form ending in *-th*, *-s*", the example dates back to the end of the 15th century.

In *ICAMET* the verb DARE is always accompanied by a bare infinitive (and in Middle English in general, cf. Fischer 1992: 405), while most full verbs underwent the process of adopting the *to*-infinitive in the Middle English period. Except for the lack of *to + infinitive* complements, which points to a modal-like use, new functional characteristics of DARE appeared. It started to (a) combine with the auxiliary of the perfect and the passive (Tomaszewska 2012: 313), (b) govern other modals as a sequence of two modals was still possible in Middle English (Tomaszewska 2012: 314), and (c) fulfill the Present-Day English "requirement that the first verb of the main clause (apodosis) [in unreal conditionals] should be a modal in the past tense" (Denison 1993: 293, 312), cf.:

(23)   yf he had you as he hathe Rycharde / He **durste** well hange yourselfe
          and all vs. (*Historie of the foure sonnes of Aymon*, 483/26)

Also, the morphology of the verb provides arguments that it did not behave like a full lexical verb. Visser (1963-1973: §1362) states that "in Middle English the OE form of *dare* for the 3 sg. (*dear*) remains in use under the forms *dar*, *der*, *dare*", which is confirmed by the data in the subcorpus:

(24)   … þenne ne **dear** he nawt eft do þet ilke
          (*Ancrene riwle*, 168/6)

(25)   … so that no man **dar** confesse it ne biknowen it.
          (*Boethius de consolatione philosphie*, 124/53)

(26)   & wel ha **der** hopien to beo kempe ouer mon, þe ouercom engel
          (*Hali meidenhad*, 60/635)

(27)   … for he fereth you somoche that he **dare** not abyde you
          (*Historie of the foure sonnes of Aymon*, 417/16)

Hand-in-hand with the variety of forms accompanying the same grammatical person goes the lack of a regular verb morphology (the same form occurs with different persons, cf. Tomaszewska 2012: 310-311). These characteristics are neither text-specific nor dialect-specific in the corpus and show that DARE did not display the regularities that could be expected of a full verb.

Semantically, the verb could still convey the notions of obligation and necessity and developed new senses. For example, Molencki (2005) distinguishes the sense 'to be able to do something'. The data in *ICAMET* seem to confirm his proposition, cf.:

(28)   There was none that **durst** be sorry therefor, and if ye had seen Reynart
         how personably he went with his male and psalter on his shoulder, and
         the shoes on his feet, ye should have laughed
         (*The history of Reynard the Fox*, 89)

(29)   I **dar** wel now suffren al the assautes of Fortune
         (*De consolatio philosophie*, book III, prose I, 9)

Continuing from Old English, DARE was restricted to non-assertive contexts and involved the notion of fear in the immediate environment, cf.:

(30)   Ne **dear** ic nu **for godes ege** soðes gesweogian
         (WHom 41.20) (quoted after Beths 1999: 1082; underscore mine)

(31)   … ne **dar for ferlac** sturien toward sunne
         (*The English text of the Ancrene riwle*, 10/23)

(32)   … þat ich ne mai for sheome þar of speoken. ne ne **dar for drede**.
         (*The English text of the Ancrene riwle*, 59/4)

(33)   Euylle was to hym whan he **durste** soo **threten** me
         (*Historie of the foure sonnes of Aymon*, 27/2)

6. Conclusions

The present study has shown that DARE displayed characteristics of both an auxiliary and a lexical verb already in Old English. The evidence for the auxiliary-like behaviour included the presence of the verb in impersonal constructions, in clauses (both affirmative and negative) in which DARE co-occurred with another modal and shared the infinitival complement with it. The verb showed a similar behaviour in the construction *neither... nor*. Moreover, it could be followed by the passive. The examination of the verb's complementation showed further that DARE tended not to appear without the infinitive and that, most commonly, its infinitive was in a close neighbourhood. Also, the fact that the infinitival complement could be semantically equivalent to DARE may be a mark of semantic bleaching and suggests acquiring more functional properties.

In terms of semantics, the verb could express necessity and obligation, similarly to Present-Day English modal auxiliaries. Additionally, DARE could convey the notion of fear and occasionally took the *to + infinitive* complement, which are arguments in favour of lexical uses of the verb.

In Middle English, the verb obtained new auxiliary characteristics. It appeared only with simple infinitives without *to*, combined with the auxiliary of the perfect and the passive, was present in the positions occupied by modals in conditional clauses, governed other modals, and showed irregular verb morphology. In terms of semantics, it still could express necessity and obligation. It has been shown, however, that DARE also reinforced its lexical properties in Middle English. It rarely appeared in impersonal constructions (only one instance found), developed past participle forms and the 3 sg. pres. ind. -*s*.

In Old English, the verb displayed characteristics of a modal and a lexical verb, while in Middle English, DARE lost some of its old characteristics and acquired new features, but still showed a split development. It seems, thus, that the verb initiated its ambiguous development in Old English and has been ambiguous since that time. Taeymans (2004: 102) states that in Present-Day English DARE can behave like a full verb, a modal or a blend of the two, and indicates that "the blending of properties from more than one class is not unusual: it is indicative of forms in the process of being re-assigned to a different category".

APPENDIX

That a past tense form (in terms of morphology) could convey factual meanings in past contexts or (non-)factual meanings in present contexts may be illustrated by means of *could*, which is the past form of *can*, e.g., ***I could*** *read when I was five* (past, factual), but also the present form (in terms of semantics) in hypothetical contexts, e.g., ***I could*** *read it (now) but I don't want to* (present, non-factual), and the present form (in terms of semantics) in factual contexts. This third option is less straightforward, but the *Macmillan Dictionary online* gives an example when *could* is used for saying that something is possible or that it may happen, e.g., *We **could** still win – the game isn't over yet* (the entry *could*).

Further examples are provided by the *British English Cambridge Dictionary Online* which informs that *could* is a more polite form of *can* when asking for permission or when asking someone to provide something/do something (the entries *could, permission* and *could request*, respectively). In other words, *could* is a more polite equivalent to *can*, which is a present form in these contexts. Also, the form *could* is used to express possibility, e.g., *She **could** arrive anytime now* (the entry *could, possibility*). Although *BECD* adds that this use occurs especially when the possibility is slight or uncertain, *MD* states that *could* is used to say that something **is** possible, which does not necessarily imply that the possibility is hypothetical.

Moreover, both MD and BECD highlight the use of could + always for making suggestions, e.g., *You **could always** call Susie and see if she will babysit* (BECD, the entry *could, suggestion*), *You **could always** sell the cottage if you need some extra cash* (MD, the entry *could*). In both sentences the context for could is present and factual. The potentiality or a subjunctive nature of some of these present factual uses seems to result from the semantics of the verb and not the form alone. In fact, it has been suggested that verbs like *could* should be regarded as "independent timeless invariable verbs" (Bryant 1944: 260). According to Bryant (1944: 260), the alternation between *can* and *could* has nothing to do with the present and past time, as the real distinction is between "the actual and the tentative, the convinced and the cautious". What matters is the speaker's attitude toward what is being said and toward the addressee. "If this attitude is cautious and tentative, the past tense is naturally employed; if actual and positive, the present" (Bryant 1944: 260). What follows is that the choice of the form is motivated not only semantically but also pragmatically. This could also be the case already in Old English.

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MD = Macmillan Dictionary online – http://www.macmillan.pl

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