A NOTE ON A POTENTIAL TEXTUAL FEATURE OF PUTATIVE *SHOULD*

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This paper goes back to an observation noted in a study of modal verbs (Nehls, 1986, 152)[1] concerning the so-called putative *should* (Quirk et al., 1985, 234–35) which alternates with the indicative in instances like (1):

(1) a. It is regrettable that such books should be printed.
     b. It is regrettable that such books are printed.

This use of *should* is to be distinguished from another use also treated as putative (Quirk et al., *ibid*.), viz. instances of alternation with the subjunctive, as in (2).

(2) a. It is appropriate that this tax should be abolished.
     b. It is appropriate that this tax be abolished.

The difference between the two uses appears to be due to the different semantics of the verb in the superordinate clause: while in (1) the verb expresses emotive, attitudinal or modal evaluation, in (2) the *that*-clause is controlled by a directive expression (request, command, recommendation, suggestion, intention and the like). In both cases the controlling expression in the superordinate clause (besides verbs also adjectives and nouns functioning as complements of copular verbs) and the verb form in the dependent clause display semantic concord similar to what Mathesius called negative concord with respect to multiple negation (Mathesius, 1937; in Huddleston and Pullum [2002, 179] this feature is referred to as modal harmony).

The following notes concern only the first of these two uses, illustrated by ex. (1). In Nehls's study (Nehls, 1986, 152) this use of *should* is characterized as an indicator of context dependence of the content being expressed: the proposition in the dependent clause is presented as given, known, mentioned before; on the other hand, the use of the indicative in the dependent clause induces context independent reading of the content being expressed. This observation is presumably connected with the fact that the alternation *should* / indicative is primarily encountered in content clauses in the function of subject, whose extraposition is almost a matter of course irrespective of their context dependence or independence (cf. Biber et al., 1999, 674, "*That*-clauses in subject position are rare in all registers.") If putative *should* can indeed be ascribed this function, English has an explicit device for indicating the distribution of communicative dynamism in sentences with an extraposed subject (mostly a *that*-clause, less often other types of content clauses), i.e.

the functional sentence perspective (FSP, cf. Firbas, 1992) of the whole sentence, viz. the communicative field constituted by the superordinate and the subordinate clause.

Considering this point in the light of some dozens of examples, we find at least partial support for the suggested textual function of *should*.

(3) She gets excited like that from time to time. It's unfortunate it should happen (it has happened) today.

(4) Poor young man! I can't but pity him, though I perfectly appreciate how provoking it is for us all that he should have been born (that he was born).

(5) It was incredible luck, too, that the play should have come (came) into my life just when I had rejected a hundred scripts.

Since the *that*-clause constitutes a communicative subfield with an FSP structure of its own, within this subfield, besides the context-dependent part, there is a novel element operating as the rheme: in ex. (3) two temporal adverbials (*from time to time x today*) are brought into contrast, in ex. (4) existence contrasts with coming into existence (birth), and in ex. (4) the least context-dependent element *into my life* is specified by a clause containing new information. The relatively short context-independent parts of the *it*-clauses in exx. (3) and (4) suggest only one intonation centre (sentence stress, nuclear tone) on the evaluating adjective implementing the subject complement, which constitutes the rheme of the higher communicative field formed by the *it*- and *that*-clause as a whole.

Rare instances with a *that*-clause in initial position can be regarded as marked insofar as they appear to be due to specific contextual conditions. In ex. (6) final position of the *that*-clause, though not affecting the FSP structure, would result in a sequence of two almost identical clauses. In addition, the only context-independent element, the rheme (*worried*), would appear in the initial part before a longer thematic section.

(6) "You are giving too many lessons." That she should have to give lessons worried him.

In ex. (7) the initial position of the *that*-clause ensures rhematic interpretation of a short rhematic element, again constituted by the verb (*unnerved*), while extraposition would result in a different FSP structure. Compare (7) a. and b.

(7) a. That such a thought, compounded of fear and unfounded longing, should come into his mind at this moment unnerved him.
b. It unnerved him that such a thought, compounded of fear and unfounded longing, should come into his mind at this moment,

Examples (8) and (9) are similar: final position of the *that*-clause would obscure the FSP structure.

(8) Recent studies ... have ... shown a disconcerting tendency for natural rules to be replaced by "crazy" rules. Why this should be the case is not clear.[2]

(9) This occurrence (stress on the first member) is often used to test whether a word is lexical or a true compound. *Toothbrush, basketball,* and *mailbox* are lexical. Why *chocolate cake* and *cherry pie* should still have stress on the second part is puzzling.[2]

In ex. (10) the initial subject clause is not only context-dependent, but its extra-position is blocked by the *that*-clause postmodifying the object of the superordinate verb.

(10) That Simone should choose to die so dramatically evoked only surprise that her sister had found the necessary courage.

As in other instances, *should* in initial context-dependent subject clauses is found to alternate with the indicative. In this case the initial position may be the only indicator of the givenness of the subject *that*-clause.

(11) a. That memory is a cognitive process related to language learning is clear in this summary of Neisser's position.[2]
b. In this summary of Neisser's position it is clear that memory is a cognitive process related to language learning.

Here the initial position of the *that*-clause is apparently connected with the fact that the sentence contains only one context-independent element, the adjectival complement of the verb (*is clear*). Since the context-dependence of the subordinate clause lacks overt indication of givenness within the clause itself, its content might not be interpreted as given. The intonation centre on *clear*, which would resolve the interplay of linearity, semantic structure and context-dependence in speech, is in written language only a concomitant feature of an FSP structure determined by the interplay of the other FSP means (cf. Firbas, 1999, 147–48). It is to be noted that replacement of the indicative by *should* (+ infinitive) is here inapplicable. A tentative explanation thereof may be sought in the undesirability of any shade of "putative" meaning in a clause whose content is presented as a plain fact. This suggests that even where *should* may be regarded as a textual device, its overall function remains complex in that it still involves some shade of modal meaning, however weakened.

In grammars of English the difference between the indicative and putative *should*, if commented upon at all, is subsumed under the use of the term "putative" (Quirk et al., 1985, 1014): "The modal auxiliary *should* is used extensively (esp. in BrE) in *that*-clauses to convey the notion of a 'putative' situation, which is recognized as possibly existing or coming into existence. Contrast

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I'm surprised that he should feel lonely. [1]

I'm surprised that he feels lonely. [2]

While [1] questions the loneliness, [2] accepts it as true. Here, as often, the difference is mainly one of nuance, since the factual bias of the matrix clause overrides the doubt otherwise implicit in the *should*-construction."

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 187) describe *should* in this construction as a use "with little discernible modal meaning of its own", occurring primarily with predicative lexemes indicating surprise or evaluation (*odd, remarkable, surprising, good, bad, a pity*, etc.) (p. 188). "The *should* clause can generally be replaced by an unmodalised one: *It's surprising that he should be / was so late.* (*ibid.*)

Nonfactivity of the content of the *that*-clause is in Quirk et al. (1985, 1014) primarily illustrated by examples in which *should* alternates with the subjunctive, cf. exx. [i] and [ii]:

I prefer that she should drive / that she drive [i][3]

I'm anxious that I shouldn't be / not be in the way [ii]

In examples falling within the group under discussion, cf. exx. [iii] and [iv], the nonrealization of the action of the dependent clause is due to its reference to the future. As the action is only assumed to take place, it cannot be presupposed, and hence presented as given.

It is unthinkable that they should deny my request. [iii]

It worries me that their children should travel alone. [iv]

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 188) point out that in examples of this kind, which involve a potential future situation whose actualisation is unthinkable, an unmodalised form is not possible, but an infinitival construction is, especially with a modalised main clause: *It is unthinkable that she should give up without a fight. / It would be unthinkable for her to give up without a fight.*

The *should* clause in examples illustrating an unactualised action appears to be context independent, i.e. it constitutes the rheme. Remarkably, in exx. [i] and [ii] it has not the function of subject but that of a verbal or adjectival complement. According to the list of expressions that occur with putative *should* or the indicative the least numerous group comprises verbs (*regret, marvel, rejoice, wonder*; Quirk et al., 1985, 1183). Much more numerous are adjectives (*proud, glad, sad, sorry, happy, thankful, angry, amazed, annoyed, astonished, disappointed, pleased, upset*, etc.) and constructions with extraposed subject (*strange, awkward, curious, odd, extraordinary, fortunate, irrational, silly, sad, admirable, deplorable, inconceivable, remarkable, understandable* and *-ing* participles of the verbs adduced above:

upsetting, disappointing, embarrassing etc. (Quirk et al., 1985, 1223–24). In the case of adjectival and verbal complementation the position of the dependent *that*-clause after its governing expression is in accordance with its syntactic function, which generally blocks initial placement where the clause is context dependent.

As shown by ex. (11) and the following examples, the potential textual function of *should* appears to represent a tendency rather than a regular use. Besides *should*, context-dependent *that*-clauses also display the indicative. Whereas in ex. (11) the context-dependence of the *that*-clause is indicated by its initial position, in the following examples there is no such indication insofar as the *that*-clauses occur finally. In the absence of *should*, the only means showing context dependence is the context alone. In the case of the controlling adjective *odd*, the indicative was registered more frequently than *should*, but in some instances the degree of context-dependence may be questioned. In any case, the number of the examples is too small to allow drawing more general conclusions. Compare the following examples:

(12) a. It's odd, isn't it, that she bothered to tell us that?
   b. It's odd, isn't it, that it's a relief just speaking of him to you.
   c. It's odd that my fingers occasionally shake, but not when I am doing calligraphy.
   d. What's odd is that we found no invitations, no evidence she had friends.

(13) a. Only think of our happening to meet him. It was quite a chance … that he had not gone round by Randalls. … So very odd we should happen to meet.
   b. I remember thinking it odd that she should be so vehement all of a sudden when she didn't even know the man.

Considering context dependence of the *that*-clauses in these examples, we find that both the examples listed under (12) and those in (13) show the same picture: (12) a., b. and (13) a. are clear-cut instances of context-dependence, whereas exx. (12) c., d. and (13) b. display indicators of rhematic function. In ex. (12) c. the *that*-clause contains, besides the context dependent part, novel information in the contrasting adversative section (*but not when I am doing calligraphy*). In ex. (12) d. the rhematic function of the *that*-clause is indicated by the pseudo-cleft construction, a specific syntactic device serving to achieve the order theme – transition – rheme (cf. Dušková, 1999, Part 2, Chapter 37). A similar picture appears in (13) b., which contains *should*, but at the same time the focaliser *even*, which assigns the intonation centre to the verb (*know*).

Other controlling expressions found in the collected examples are *wonder, cruel, sorry, fortunate, glad, strange, surprising*, again both with *should* and the indicative, though not after identical controllers.

(14) a. I am glad you think so.

    b. it is surprising that ... Muriel hadn't noticed that one light.

    c. It is strange that Agnes Arbuthnot didn't have it destroyed.

(15) a. It's cruel that all his hopes should come to this.

    b. I can see that it is distressing for you to find him here and I am sorry it should have happened.

The context dependence of the *that*-clauses in all these instances being clearly indicated, the use of textual *should* appears to be optional. Yet however marginal, it is worth considering, even if constituting only one component of a complex function involving grammar, semantics and discourse.

Notes

[1] Nehls here quotes from F. Behre's *Meditative-Polemic 'Should' in Modern English 'That'-Clauses* (*Gothenburg Studies in English* 4, Stockholm, 1955, pp. 177 ff.).

[2] For examples with this superscript I am indebted to Vladislav Smolka (2007).

[3] These examples are not numbered in the passage quoted; the numbering in square brackets has been added to facilitate reference.

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Libuše Dušková: A NOTE ON A POTENTIAL TEXTUAL FEATURE OF PUTATIVE *SHOULD*

The paper deals with the use of putative *should* which alternates with the indicative in nominal *that*-clauses functioning as the subject. These clauses mostly occur in extraposition irrespective of their new or given content. The paper raises the question whether this use of *should* can be considered a device of indicating the function of the *that*-clause in the information structure of the whole sentence.