

Understanding Putative *Should*: A Semantic Approach

Chuncan Feng

School of Applied Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

Abstract—Chinese learners of English have much difficulty in understanding putative *should*. This article attempts to find out the cause of this difficulty. It makes a semantic study of sentences with putative *should* used in *that*-clauses, discusses five distinctions between them, and presents a corpus-assisted study of the semantic constraint of factuality accompanying the emotive *should*. It finds that the learning difficulty results from the fuzzy nature of the term ‘putative *should*’, which fails to adequately describe and explain the five differences. It argues that the teaching and learning of putative *should* should focus on understanding its two distinct uses, the suasive *should* and the emotive *should*, in nominal *that*-clauses. The suasive *should* denotes obligation, applies to something yet to come, and goes with suasive key words in sentences in whose *that*-clauses the present subjunctive can be used instead. The emotive *should* denotes surprise, applies to a personal, psychological, subjective fact, and goes with an emotive element, linguistic or extralinguistic, in sentences in whose *that*-clauses the indicative can be used instead but the present subjunctive cannot. The emotive element can take the form of an emotive word, a negative expression, or even the tone of voice.

Index Terms—putative *should*, suasive use, emotive use, subjunctive

I. INTRODUCTION

‘Putative *should*’ conveys the notion of a putative situation, which is recognized as possibly existing or coming into existence (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 234,1014; Chalker & Weiner, 2001, p. 325). It is a popular grammatical term used extensively to explain the *should* in sentences like (1) and (2):

- (1) It is *essential* that the ban *should* be lifted tomorrow.
- (2) It is *strange* that Mary *should* be so late.

Chinese learners of English often have much difficulty in mastering it and distinguishing such sentences.

The three research questions of this article are as follows:

- (a) What makes putative *should* difficult for Chinese learners?
- (b) Does this term describe and explain adequately the *should* in sentences like (1) and (2)?
- (c) If it does not, what term can be used instead?

By saying *describe and explain adequately* in (b), we are applying the two criteria proposed by N. Chomsky to justify a language grammar in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965, pp. 24-27), namely *descriptive adequacy* and *explanatory adequacy*, to the evaluation of a technical term. We mean that a good technical term should be both descriptively and explanatorily adequate. It should offer an adequate description of and an adequate explanation for the intuition of the native speaker about a particular kind of linguistic phenomenon.

To answer these three research questions, this article will make a semantic study of such sentences as (1) and (2), bring to light five distinctions between them, and present a corpus-assisted study of the semantic constraint of the emotive *should* in the hope of enhancing understanding of its two distinct uses, the suasive *should* and the emotive *should*, in relevant *that*-clauses.

II. CURRENT DESCRIPTION OF PUTATIVE *SHOULD*

Little adequate practical description could be found on the replaceability of putative *should* by the present subjunctive and the indicative in current English dictionaries and grammar books. They frequently rest content either with listing examples like (1) and (2) without any further explanation, or with labelling the *should* in their examples as ‘putative *should*’, a practice that may well lead readers to a wrong conclusion that (1) and (2) could each use either the present subjunctive or the relevant indicative instead.

Take *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) and *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (OALD) for example. They are two of the most popular dictionaries with Chinese learners of English. After saying that *should* can be used in British English in a clause beginning with *that* after particular adjectives and verbs, the latest online version of LDOCE gives the following three examples¹, leaving readers to themselves as to what these particular adjectives and verbs are:

¹ ‘Should’. (2021). In *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*. Retrieved on December 10, 2021 from <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/should>.

- (3) It's *strange* that you *should* say that.
 (4) It is *essential* that he *should* have a fair trial.
 (5) The residents *demand*ed that there *should* be an official inquiry.

Listing these three sentences alone will only add confusion to readers because, as we will explain later, not only the *should* in them is used in different senses, but *strange* in (3) is quite different in semantic nature from *essential* in (4) and *demand* in (5) as well.

OALD's extended 4th edition says that *should* can be used in a *that*-clause after the adjectives *anxious*, *sorry*, *concerned*, *happy*, and *delighted*² (1997, p. 1396). Its latest, 10th edition says that *should* can be used after *that* after many adjectives that describe feelings, such as *anxious* and *astonishing*³. However, the lists of adjectives and examples given by OALD are confusing in that, as we will explain later, *sorry*, *astonishing*, and *delighted* are similar to one another in semantic nature but is quite different from *anxious* in syntactic use.

Grammar books are frequently misleading as well. They often present a confusing list of key words that can go with the present subjunctive *that*-clause. For example, Quirk et al (1985, pp. 1223-1224) include *natural* and *impossible*, and Chalker (1984, p. 128) includes *unthinkable*, in their list of adjectives that can take a *that*-clause with either the present subjunctive or putative *should*. Such lists will definitely lead readers to a wrong conclusion that such adjectives as *likely*, *unlikely*, *unimaginable*, *improbable*, *inconceivable*, and *incomprehensible* are similar to adjectives like *anxious* in semantic nature and syntactic use.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Differences

(1) and (2) are two totally different kinds of sentences semantically in the following five respects.

First, the key words in their main clauses are semantically different. The key word in (1) and (4), *essential*, is in Quirk et al.'s words 'suasive' (1985, p. 1180). Suasive key words are intrinsically words of *wanting* in that they denote a sense of *wanting someone to do something* or *wanting something to be done by someone*. The key word in (2) and (3), *strange*, is emotive. Emotive key words express various personal emotional reactions.

Suasive or emotive, a key word may be an adjective, noun or verb. *Essential* and *anxious* are suasive adjectives. *Sorry*, *strange*, *astonishing* and *delighted* are emotive adjectives. *Demand* in (5) is a suasive verb. *Miracle* in (6) is an emotive noun:

- (6) It's a *miracle* that rice *should* grow here.

Second, their *that*-clauses are semantically different. The *that*-clause in (1) is presented as an idea at the MOS (i.e. moment of speech). It is something theoretical and future, something yet to come or to be done. We can understand from (1) that the ban, still in effect now, is yet to be lifted. The *that*-clause in (2) is presented as a fact at the MOS. It is something already in existence or taking place (see 'Factuality' for more on *fact* vs. *idea*). We can understand from (2) that Mary is very late, which the speaker finds very strange. (6) suggests that rice grows here, a fact that the speaker finds both surprising and unexpected.

Third, the modal verb *should* does not mean the same in (1) and (2). In (1) it is suasive in meaning and denotes *obligation*⁴. We can conclude that the speaker thinks at the MOS that the ban *ought to* be lifted tomorrow. Or else the speaker wouldn't have said (1). In (2) it is emotive in meaning and denotes *surprise* on the part of the speaker. We cannot conclude that the speaker thinks at the MOS that Mary *ought to* be so late.

Unfortunately, this emotive lexical meaning, *surprise*, of putative *should* has not yet been separately identified in many contemporary English dictionaries. For example, OALD did not mention the emotive factor of *should* explicitly until its release of the seventh edition⁵, which states that it is 'used after *that* after many adjectives that describe feelings'. In spite of the presence of the vague word *feelings*, it still fails to pinpoint the sense of *surprise*.

*Oxford English Dictionary*⁶ (OED), the only dictionary we have found so far that pinpoints both the emotive use of putative *should* and the factual nature of its *that*-clause, explains that the emotive *should* is found 'in a noun-clause (normally introduced by *that*)' 'in expressions of surprise or its absence, approval or disapproval, of present or past fact'.

Fourth, not both *that*-clauses can take the present subjunctive. It is acceptable to use the present subjunctive instead in (1) but not in (2). In other words, *should* can be omitted before *be* in (1) but not in (2). While (7) is still good English, (8) is not:

- (7) It is *essential* that the ban *be* lifted tomorrow.
 (8) * It is *strange* that Mary *be* so late.

Quirk et al give a confusing explanation that 'putative *should* + infinitive' is often equivalent to the present subjunctive (1985, p. 234). Michael Swan is among the very few who have explicitly pointed out that 'subjunctives

² 'Should'. (1997). *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (4th ed). The Commercial Press & Oxford University Press.

³ 'Should'. (2021). In *OALD Online*. Retrieved on December 10, 2021 from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/should?q=should>.

⁴ Cf. Quirk et al. 1985, p. 1015 note [c]; Leech, 1971, p. 109 note d.

⁵ 'Should'. (2009). In *OALD Online*. Retrieved on April 18, 2010 from http://www.oup.com/oald-bin/web_getald7index1a.pl.

⁶ Simpson, J.A. (2002). *Oxford English Dictionary: Single User Windows Version* (CD-ROM). Oxford University Press.

cannot be used' (2005, p. 513; 2017, section 24, entry 264) in sentences like (8).

Note that there seems to be a remarkable difference between American English and British English in the omission of *should* in (1). In American English, 'no modals or auxiliaries may be used' (Aronson, 1984, p. 76) in the *that*-clause of (7), and using *should* in it is 'less common and may actually strike some people as strange to the point of being foreign' (Kahn, 1985, p. 55), and is considered an 'error' because this *should* is 'a superfluous word' (Lovinger, 2002, p. 400). In British English, where the subjunctive is generally considered formal and rather legalistic in style, '*should* + infinitive' is more often used instead (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 157, 235, 1013; Peters, 2004, p. 498, pp. 520-521). And apart from *should*, some other modals are also possible in British English:

- (9) He *demand*s that I *shall* tell him everything.
- (10) Father's *order*s are that you *must* be home by 10 o'clock.
- (11) She *petition*ed the king that her father *might* be pardoned.

To put this difference another way, American English would prefer (7) to (1) to the degree that TOEFL grammar, as in Aronson (1984, p. 76), treats (1) as incorrect, and British English would prefer (1) to (7), with (7), (9), (10) and (11) being equally correct.

Fifth, not both *that*-clauses can take the indicative. Using the indicative instead in the *that*-clause of (1), as in (12), is generally considered especially British English:

- (12) I *recomm*end that you *do not* disobey your officers.

Acceptable as it is in British English, some people may still consider (12) colloquial, restricted and only marginally acceptable (Quirk et al. 1985, p. 1223). In American English, the indicative in (12) may sound extremely unusual (Kahn, 1985, p. 55), not generally accepted (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1180) and practically considered wrong (Aronson, 1984, p. 76; Lim & Kurtin, 1982, p. 79). Garner (2003, p. 756) calls the indicative in (12) 'slippage' and Lovinger (2002, pp. 399-400) calls such use 'mistakes'.

With (2), however, the indicative in the *that*-clause is a very common alternative to putative *should*, as in (13):

- (13) It is *strange* that Mary *is* so late.

There is no significant difference in meaning between (2) and (13) in many cases (Leech, 1971, pp. 108-109; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1974, p. 340).

There does exist a subtle difference of nuance, however, between the indicative (13) and the emotive putative (2). The indicative treats what is said in the *that*-clause as a plain, straight, known, or established fact. Any emotional reaction involved (surprise, regret, wonder, or whatever) is conveyed by the key verb, noun, or adjective in the main clause. In (13), only the key adjective, *strange*, expresses the speaker's surprise at Mary's being late. On the other hand, the presence of the emotive *should* adds extra force to the emotional reaction expressed in the main clause by conveying a sense of surprise and hinting that, judged from common sense, experience, morality, the usual way that something happens or is done, etc, there is an obligation, so to speak, for what is said in the *that*-clause to be otherwise. In (2), both *strange* and *should* combine to express the speaker's surprise at Mary's being late.

B. Factuality

Emotive *should* in sentences like (2) highlights what is said in the *that*-clause as a surprising fact that one is not expected to guess. This is not to say, however, that what is said in the *that*-clause in such sentences is itself necessarily a plain, straight, known, or established fact in its usual sense. It is only to be taken for an assumed or presumed fact. It is what the speaker assumes or presumes to be a fact. Such a fact is a psychological, subjective one, whose factuality may well vary from person to person:

- (14) A: It is *strange* that John *should* have left without saying goodbye.

B: Well, he does sometimes act quite unsociably when he is in one of his moods.

(15) 'It is a *pity* that you *should* go back to work so soon,' he said half to himself. 'You are only just better; and it is easy to lose what one has gained.' (Harraden, 1893)

(16) 'In that case,' she went on, 'it is a *pity* that you *should* leave New York. However, I shall be delighted to have you with us. I understand, the difficulty is in closing.' (Grove, 1927)

- (17) A: I'm *surprised* that Jack *should* have felt lonely when he was in California.

B: Well, he wasn't really lonely. He was only a bit nostalgic.

In (14), it may be regarded as a fact in its usual sense that John left without saying goodbye, a fact which speaker A finds strange but speaker B does not. In (15) the presumed fact that *you* (*Bernardine*) are going back to work soon is something that is yet to come but is accepted as true by *him* (*Robert Allitsen*) at the MOS. In (16) the presumed fact that *you* (*Mister Branden*) are leaving New York is something future but is again accepted as true by *her* (*Mrs. McMurchy*). In (17), the presumed fact in the eyes of speaker A that Jack felt lonely when he was in California is not accepted as true by speaker B.

C. Semantic Constraint of Emotive *should* on Key Words

What makes a presumed fact surprising, thereby justifying the presence of the emotive *should* in the above-mentioned *that*-clauses? The answer is whatever can render an utterance emotive!

Emotive nouns, verbs and adjectives can evidently do that because of their intrinsic emotive denotations. But opinions sometimes vary on words indicating likelihood, possibility, probability, credibility, comprehensibility, etc.

(especially those indicating unlikelihood, incomprehensibility, and incredibility), and words indicating what is usual, natural, or normal (especially those indicating what is not usual, natural, or normal). We find that they can also make a presumed fact surprising. They are emotive, or at least not suasive, in their actual present-day use. The reason may well be purely psychological: people tend to appear much surprised, dismayed, etc. when they encounter something unexpected or beyond their imagination or understanding.

Take *unthinkable* for example. We searched the British National Corpus (BNC) for <*w* *AJO*>*unthinkable* <*w* *CJT*>*that* and found, as Table 1 shows, that none of its 33 sentences is present subjunctive. From the absence of the present subjunctive and the presence of the various modal structures, especially the modal perfective structures, we can safely conclude that the adjective *unthinkable* is not suasive in current use:

(18) We regard it as almost *unthinkable* that Parliament *should* have authorised the Serious Fraud Office to continue the exercise of inquisitorial powers against the accused not merely after he had been charged but also (as Mr. Pleming accepts and asserts) throughout his trial. (BNC. FBW. 310⁷)

TABLE 1
Unthinkable That in BNC

Verb patterns in the <i>that</i> -clause	Occurrences
Present subjunctive	0
<i>Should</i> do	16
<i>Would</i> etc. have done	4
<i>can</i> etc. do	13
Indicative	0
Total occurrences in BNC	33

In (18), we can clearly feel that Parliament had done something much unexpected and surprising.

We had also searched the OED Corpus of Historical English once available at Prof. Mark Davies' personal website <http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal/> for *unthinkable that* long before, and found only two instances, neither of which suggests *unthinkable* has any suasive overtones:

TABLE 2
UNTHINKABLE THAT IN OED CORPUS OF HISTORICAL ENGLISH

1993	Warhammer 40,000: Space Mar...	Unthinkable that this anomaly might be due to a misspeaking of the orthodox surgical liturgy!
1998	Radical Pragmatism vi. 140	Teilhard felt it to be unthinkable that the hope for the future of noogenesis would be unfulfilled.

Some verbs, such as *believe*, *imagine*, *know*, *think*, and *understand*, are neither suasive nor emotive in themselves, but when used in the negative, they may carry similar emotive overtones to those of *unthinkable* and become emotive verbs:

(19) We *didn't expect* that she *should* come so early.

(20) I *don't think* that he *should* say so.

(21) We *never thought* that she *should* be the brave girl we have heard so much about.

The reason for their emotive connotations is still that people tend to appear much surprised, dismayed, etc. when they encounter something unexpected or beyond their imagination or understanding.

Even the tone of voice (or the more general term *context*) alone can also evoke a sense of surprise. Without any emotive key word discussed so far, the emotive *should*, not the suasive *should*, is found in the following exclamatory *that*-clauses⁸:

(22) Oh, that I *should* see a child of mine arrested for selling drugs!

(23) To think that I *should* ever do such a thing!

D. Leech and Others' Opinions on Semantic Constraint

Leech (1971, p. 109) points out that it would not be possible to say (24) and that (25) should be said instead:

(24) The fact that man *should* destroy his environment worries us deeply.

(25) The idea that man *should* destroy his environment worries us deeply.

He and quite a few other scholars argue that in (24) the use of the word *fact*, which indicates the *that*-clause is a fact, is semantically incongruous with the use of the word *should*, which indicates the *that*-clause is not a fact – according to them, putative *should*, suasive or emotive, invariably conveys that what is said in the *that*-clause is presented not as a *fact*, but as an *idea* (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 234, 1014; Ek & Robat, 1984, p. 276). Their argument might have hit the wrong note in the use of emotive *should*, and is highly implausible in the following two aspects.

⁷ FBW is the text id; 310 is the sentence number.

⁸ This use of the emotive *should* is often considered idiomatic in such exclamatory *that*-clauses in that the indicative cannot be used instead. It is similarly used, idiomatically, with questions and statements involving *wh*-words, to express surprise:

How should I know?

Why should he think that?

I turned round on the bus and who should be sitting behind me but my ex-wife.

On the one hand, it keeps too much to the letter of the lexical, literal difference between *fact* and *idea*, and fails to recognize that, as explained in ‘Factuality’ above, the emotive *should* applies to a psychological, subjective fact on the part of the speaker. Such a presumed fact may finally turn out to be a hard fact, and it also may not. Whether or not it turns out to be a hard fact does not play a decisive role in the use of the emotive *should*.

On the other hand, it fails to recognize that what makes the emotive *should* possible is the presence of an emotive element in the sentence. As explained in ‘Semantic Constraint of Emotive *Should* on Key Words’ above, this emotive element may take the form of an emotive key word in one way or another, or even of the tone of voice. It conveys a personal emotional reaction and intrinsically needs, if need be, a *that*-clause that is psychologically or subjectively factual on the part of the speaker. When people make an emotional reaction, they are reacting to what they see, feel, etc., what they assume or presume to be a fact. In both (24) and (25), what justifies the use of emotive *should* is the emotive verb *worry*. In (25), it is not the noun *idea* that justifies the emotive *should*.

Our corpus findings based on the BNC also show that (24) is just as acceptable. We searched for <*w* *ATO*>*the* <*w* *NNI*>*fact* <*w* *CJT*>*that*, with *should* on its right. Of all the 288 hits, 17 involve a *that*-clause with the emotive *should* (see Table 3 below). The fact that 16 of them are written English reminds us that the co-occurrence of *fact* and the emotive *should* is good English. In three of them, there is not even any emotive key word (EKW) available: the tone of voice, or the context, functions as the emotive element:

(26) First is the fact that the same person should be so highly regarded by one English department while being accused of engaging in ‘discredited intellectual enquiry’ in another; second is the fact that the failure to offer a tenured post to an English teacher at Cambridge should provide the occasion for such unparalleled radio, television, and newspaper coverage of English studies. (BNC. EWR. 1316)

(27) The fact that Opposition Members should regret the fact that my right hon. Friend is in Rome, shows how little attention they pay to defence and NATO matters. (BNC. HHV. 932)

(28) She guessed he was probably still staring after her, but she didn't care then about anything but the fact that he should have such a low opinion of her. (BNC. JY1. 1648)

TABLE 3
FACT WITH EMOTIV SHOULD IN BNC

Text ID	SN	EKW	Medium	Domain	Genre	Spoken
ANR	498	strike	BK	WOA	BIOG	FALSE
CE7	244	outraged	BK	WOA	NONA	FALSE
B1T	85	irony	BK	SOS	NONA	FALSE
B23	2104	hard	BK	SOS	NONA	FALSE
EWR	1316	/	BK	SOS	NONA	FALSE
H9F	415	surprising	BK	SOS	ACAD	FALSE
H9F	700	surprising	BK	SOS	ACAD	FALSE
HXG	939	surprising	BK	SOS	ACAD	FALSE
EF0	1210	remarkable	BK	BET	RELI	FALSE
H0A	1695	worry	BK	WRL	BIOG	FALSE
JY1	1648	/	BK	IMA	FICT	FALSE
JY5	968	resent	BK	IMA	FICT	FALSE
HHV	932	/	MP	WOA	HANS	FALSE
CC9	69	joy	MU	BET	MWRI	FALSE
CKL	581	irony	PE	WRL	LORE	FALSE
J39	503	deplore	PE	APS	MWRI	FALSE
HDU	268	irony		BIZ	SPEE	TRUE

Notes:

SN= Sentence No.; EKW=Emotive key word; BK=Book; MU=Miscellaneous unpublished; MP=Miscellaneous published; PE=Periodicals; False=Written English; True=Spoken English

IV. CONCLUSION

Where putative *should* used in *that*-clauses is concerned, Chinese learners' difficulty in mastering it lies in their failure to understand that there are two distinct uses of putative *should* and that there are five differences between such sentences as (1) and (2) in meaning and use. The term ‘putative *should*’ fails to adequately describe and explain those differences between them, which learners of English should know if they wish to master them. Putative *should* falls into two distinct uses, the suasive *should* as in (1) and the emotive *should* as in (2), in nominal *that*-clauses. The suasive *should* denotes obligation, applies to something yet to come, and goes with suasive key words in main clauses, in whose subordinate *that*-clauses the present subjunctive can be used instead. The emotive *should* denotes surprise, applies to a

psychological, subjective fact, and goes with an emotive element, either linguistic or extralinguistic, in main clauses, in whose subordinate *that*-clauses the indicative can be used instead but the present subjunctive cannot (but cf. note 8). The emotive element can take the form of an emotive word, a negative expression, or even the tone of voice. Therefore, we suggest that, in teaching and learning sentences like (1) and (2), the terms ‘suasive *should*’ and ‘emotive *should*’ be used instead of the term ‘putative *should*’.

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Chuncan Feng received a B.A. in English from Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua City, Zhejiang Province, China in 1988. He is currently an associate professor at Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province, China. His research interests include English grammar and usage, corpus linguistics, and teaching and learning English as a foreign language.