An Analysis of the Grammatical and Pragmatic Values of \textit{Seem} in the C19th Section of the Corpus of English Philosophy Texts

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Abstract

This paper examines the functions of seem in the \textit{Corpus of English Philosophy Texts} (CEPhiT), a sub-corpus of the \textit{Coruña Corpus}. The study focuses on the several meanings of this verb with respect to the contexts in which it is embedded. This includes the analysis of the linguistic context, which might have some effect on this verb selection in comparison with other semantically related forms, such as appear. My objective is to describe the manifestations of seem, and, as a result, a categorisation of seem units in the text is presented in accordance with Aijmer's (2009) classification of the values of seem. This analysis also seeks to contribute to studies dealing with the description of grammaticalization processes concerning this verb. In many ways, the values of seem are related to those of modal verbs, as pointed out in Aijmer (2009). I depart from this modal meaning of seem. In my description of seem samples in CEPhiT, we will follow Aijmer (2009), de Haan (2007) and Cornillie (2007), among others, to demonstrate the evidential, rather than epistemic, meaning of this verbal form.

Keywords: evidentiality; epistemic modality; stance; philosophy; pragmatics

1. Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of the functions of seem in the nineteenth-century section of the Corpus of English Philosophy Texts (CEPhiT), one of the sub-corpora of the Coruña Corpus. I analyse occurrences of seem, describing the verb’s taxonomy in accordance with Aijmer's (2009) classification of the evidential system. In many ways, the values of seem are related to those of modal verbs (Aijmer 2009). However, I will depart significantly from this
modal sense of seem, and in my description of examples from CEPhiT I will follow Aijmer (2009), de Haan (2007) and Cornillie (2007a), among others, in showing the evidential, rather than the epistemic, meaning of this verbal form.

The structure of the paper is, as follows. First I describe the meanings of seem. Then I present a brief discussion of the relationship between evidentiality and epistemic modality. In this point, I will show my understanding of these two concepts, and the way in which I apply them to the study of seem. After, I present the corpus and, also, the methodology of study. Finally, I offer the results of the analysis of the corpus, and the conclusions.

2. The meanings of seem

Aijmer (2009) provides one of the most comprehensive recent studies of seem, focussing on translation in order to disambiguate the meaning of this verbal form. She defines seem as a perception verb related to other perception verbs, such as see, sound, and feel, but showing "a vaguer meaning" and with additional meanings closer to evidential verbs of cognition, i.e. think (Aijmer, 2009: 72). The entry for seem, v. in the OED gives the following meanings (with examples taken from the same source; thorns in these excerpts have been replaced by <th>):

1. To be suitable to, befit, beseeem. Often with adv., well, best, fair, etc.
   1) It semes a kynge to haue discrescioun (c1400 Secreta Secret.); 'It is suitable for a king to show discretion'.
   2. refl. and intr. To vouchsafe, deign.
   2) I prai leuedi if thou wald seme, To tak this littel werc to quem (a1300 Cursor Mundi); 'I pray Lady you would deign to accept this little work'.
   3. With n., adj., or phr. as compl.: to appear to be, to be apparently.
   3) A silly rogue, but one that would seem a gentleman (1667 S. Pepys Diary).
   4. With infinitive: To appear to be or to do something.
   4) Fair creature! Thou dost seem to be Some wandering spirit of the sea (1812 J. Wilson Isle of Palms).
   5. a. trans. To think, deem, imagine.
   5) Somehow I can't seem to get warm (1969 M. Pugh Last Place Left).
   9. b. To think fit. Obs.

2) They can because they seeme they can (1627 G. Hakewill Apol.).
   6. b. To think fit. Obs.

3) And Beneath your threshold, bury me a Loade-stone To draw in Gallants, that weare spurres: The rest, They'll seeme to follow (1612 B. Jonson Alchemist).

Nakamura (2010) provides an additional meaning of seem as 'pretend', which is yet to be recorded in the OED. His definition, confirmed by earlier scholars such as Schmidt (1875 [1971]), reads: †To feign an action, character or the like; make oneself seem (to do or to be); assume an air; pretend. Obs. rare. exc. dial.? Now U.S. (Nakamura, 2010: 231). This meaning has not survived in standard British English, but apparently has in American English. The following examples illustrate Nakamura's finding (emphasis as in the original):

4) So home and read to my wife a Fable or two in Ogleby's Aesop; and so to supper and then to prayers and to bed – my wife this evening discoursing of making clothes for the country; which I seem against, pleading lack of money, but I am glad of it in some respects, because of getting her out of the way from this fellow, and my own liberty to look after my business more then of late I have done (1663 Pepys, Diary, IV 158 in Nakamura, 2010: 226).
3. Evidentiality

Evidentiality is defined as the coding of the author's source or mode of knowledge. In many respects, the source of knowledge is associated with the concept of certainty, in terms of degree. In this sense evidentiality is strongly related to epistemic modality. Epistemic modality is defined as "the evaluation of chances that a certain hypothetical state of affairs under consideration (or some aspect of it) will occur, is occurring or has occurred in a possible world" (Nuyts, 2001: 21). This relationship is clearly based on the apparent connection between the evaluation of the propositional truth depending on the type of evidence at hand (Stukker, Sanders and Verhagen, 2009). Evidence can be obtained in three possible ways: first hand (visual and other sensory means), hearsay information, and inference (Willet, 1988). Depending on the type of evidence claimed to be followed, information is evaluated in terms of reliability.

Cornillie (2009) claims that the confusion concerning overlapping between epistemic modality and evidentiality is due to the association of the mode/source of knowledge with other concepts related to propositional truth-values, namely authorial commitment, degrees of certainty, and truth. He thinks that the mode of knowing does not necessarily entail any of these meanings. In his own words, evidentiality "refers to the reasoning processes that lead to a proposition", while epistemic modality "evaluates the likelihood that this proposition is true" (2009: 47).

In my analysis of seem-devices, I shall maintain evidentiality as a separate domain from epistemic modality. Evidential devices are those, which report on the speaker's source of knowledge in the presentation of claims, including inferential information, while epistemic devices report on the speaker's evaluation of the propositions, these devices hedging in respect of degrees of certainty.

4. Data description and methodology

The data analysed have been drawn from the nineteenth-century section of CEPhIT, and amount to 201,107 words in total. The corpus was initially analysed using the Coruña Corpus Tools software, searching for all possible cases and patterns of the form seem. However, I have combined computer and manual analyses. Whereas the former is used to detect and count variation, the latter allows me to consider context in the interpretation and categorisation of the forms under scrutiny. All data are normalised to 10,000.

I will now describe the syntactic distribution of seem. Following Aijmer (2009), this verbal form can occur with or without experiencers, as in She seems to have solved the puzzle and It seems that it won't rain today. The syntactic variability of the seem–structures has frequently been acknowledged, as shown by its "large number of collocations", as observed by Johansson (2007: 118). Aijmer (2009: 72) offers a very detailed description of the seem-patterns, although she claims that the richness of seem-collocations is not seen when the verb occurs with an experiencer. Aijmer's classification is shown in Table 1, with her examples:

| Structure                      | Example                    |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1    seem + that- clause       | It seems that it is raining. |
| 2    seem + as if (like)       | It seems as if it is raining. |
| 3    seem + like noun phrase   | It seems like a fool.       |
| 4    seem + infinitive         | It seems to be raining.     |
| 5    seem + adjective (participle) | He seems agitated.        |
| 6    seem + adjective + that-clause | It seems possible that it will be raining. |
| 7    parenthetical seem        | It is raining it seems.     |
5. Results and discussion

Our material from CEPhiT yielded 101 occurrences of all variables of *seem*. Of these 89 cases were of the present singular *seem*, as in *The earliest scientific conception of law seems to have been connected with astronomy* (Slack, 1860), and 12 cases were in the past, as in Mill (1845), *as will appear directly, habitually uses it in the second sense, and seemed to think that Hamilton did the same*. Figure 1 illustrates the occurrences of *seem* in the corpus; this is not a diachronic representation of this verb in the nineteenth century, and is intended only to show each author's usage. As can be seen, five of the texts present very few cases of *seem*, while the rest of the texts present roughly even figures:

![Figure 1. Occurrences of seem per text.](image)

These *seem*-types distribute into the meanings shown in Figure 2, below. The most frequent pattern is the evidential *seem to*, followed by a bare infinitive, the copular *seem*, and then the so-called subjective *seem* and *it seems + adjectives*.

![Figure 2. Types of seem.](image)

Evidential *seem to* outnumbers all other *seem*-constructions. For Aijmer (2009: 75) it is used "as a conversational hedge softening the assertion". Clearly, for Aijmer this structure is comparable to epistemic modals in that both can assume the role of hedges. Example (9) is taken from the corpus:

*Seem* to
9) Some degree of pleasure or pain seems to accompany all our sensations and internal feelings (Belsham, 1801). Copular seem is the second most frequent type of seem in our corpus, the following being examples:

10) The effect of impulse, in producing motion, we know by constant experience; and, as the motion, which it produces, in a particular direction, seems analogous to the motion of the stone in its particular direction, we conceive, that the motion of a stone, in its fall to the earth, is rendered more intelligible, by the imagined intervention of some impelling body (Brown, 1820).

Now I focus on what Aijmer (2009: 82) refers to as subjective it seems to + pronoun. The pronoun functions as the experiencer, contributing the subjective view to the proposition following the evidential matrix:

11) It seems to me, however, that if the earth turned in one place it would resemble a Catherine wheel (Phillips, 1824).

The pattern seem as if appears only once in the corpus, as shown below:

12) The general principle of division of labour is so applied that the regenerate and unregenerate classes can never mingle, and the evils described by modern writers as flowing from industrial division of labour are not counteracted. It seems as if Plato had found by psychological analysis a principle of division of faculties which he transferred to politics and society, with too great a faith in the exactness of the analogy (Bonar, 1893).

The following example presents the only case of the pattern it seems that in the corpus:

13) It seems, therefore, that the solar vortex may be likened to a sort of wedge, whose edge is the breadth of the sun, while the distant parts expand, and widen in space, and viewed vertically, would be like a fan (Phillips, 1824).

There is one occurrence of parenthetical seem in our corpus. This single example coincides with the pattern it seems that, although it has a rhetorical force not present in the seem-that pattern.

14) Then it seems you reduce, or would reduce, all phenomena to your own principles of material action, and equal re-action, visible or invisible (Phillips, 1824).

6. Conclusion

The present paper has evaluated the status of the verb seem in the CEPhiT corpus. A number of important issues concerning the use of this controversial form in the history of English have been revealed. It is controversial because seem appears to function as a modal verb affecting the meaning of the following proposition, as suggested by Aijmer (2009) and others. Departing from these studies, I have shown that seem in CEPhiT serves both as a copular verb and as an evidential. The former is used on the basis of a comparison, while the latter follows from the authorial intention to indicate the way in which information is acquired.

Epistemic meaning cannot be safely attested in all the examples, unless a change in the apparent meaning of the utterances is intended. It is true, though, that I have identified some contexts in which epistemic meaning appears to creep in, and in such cases the function of seem would be that of a hedging device to indicate lack of commitment. The presence of subjectifiers, i.e. to me, with seem has also been referred to in the literature as potentially indicating uncertainty. However, this epistemic sense has proved difficult to substantiate in the light of the contextual evidences analysed here, especially the textual context, and so I have opted for the evidential analysis of the following patterns: seem to, it seems to, subjective it seems to, and it seems as if/that.

Finally, I have not been able to identify seem forms meaning 'to pretend' following Nakamura's (2010) definition. This would confirm his claim that this meaning was in decline in the years leading up to 1900 in British English.
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