This cumulative dissertation is the first systematic study of semi-modal NEED TO and its semantic variation in Present-day British English. This topic is particularly relevant today, since the use of semi-modals, e.g., HAVE TO, HAVE (GOT) TO and NEED TO has increased in the field of obligation and necessity, while the frequencies of core modals such as MUST and NEED have decreased. The link of modal change with the process of democratization, and the way the semi-modals offer a less authoritarian way of obliging, present an interesting background for a corpus-based sociolinguistic study.

The primary material of the five studies in this thesis is drawn from mainly spoken corpora from the 1950s to the 1990s. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are applied in data retrieval and the empirical analyses. The chosen corpora enable the exploration of NEED TO across variables such as real time, medium, the speaker variables of age, gender and social class, and a number of spoken registers. For comparison, Article 5 studies NEED TO and six other modals as variants of deontic obligation.

The findings on the semantic variation indicate that the functions of NEED TO increasingly resemble those of core modals: the directive obligation uses cover most of the instances, and NEED TO is in the process of developing epistemic meaning. However, the original inherent necessity sense is still frequent. NEED TO shows clear social stratification. It is strongly favoured by the younger age groups, and they also use the newer semantic functions more. It is slightly more frequent among men in general, but in certain relevant speaker groups, e.g., among young adults, women have a lead. The upper middle class leads in its use. NEED TO is clearly undergoing change, but Labovian concepts cannot be applied in a rigid way. A finding that stands out is that register variation plays a decisive role. NEED TO is significantly more frequent in spoken public contexts as opposed to private contexts. Both the persuasive nature of a register and its high degree of interactivity increase the use of NEED TO. The basic inherent meaning relates to the strategic value of NEED TO in a deontic situation by softening an imposed obligation as being in the addressee’s best interest. Indeed, NEED TO has found a niche in the face-to-face conversations where it is necessary to negotiate power and also to oblige the addressee in the least face-threatening manner.