The Meanings and Use of ‘be to’

The purpose of this study is to clarify the inherent quality of ‘be to’. ‘Be to’ has been treated as a modal expression with various meanings including planned future, arrangement, obligation, duty and possibility. In contrast to the ample explanation of meanings, the grammatical features are not sufficiently explained and the nature of ‘be to’ remains ambiguous. Japanese students are forced to learn the meanings by rote without reasonable grammatical explanation. In order to properly consider ‘be to’, syntactic and semantic analyses based on real discourse is crucial.

In this paper I therefore attempt to explore the meaning and function of ‘be to’ based on sentences used in movie scripts. Since highly polished scripts use phrases and expressions efficiently, the function of ‘be to’ can be seen in movies more clearly and vividly than in our daily conversation.

Syntactically, ‘be to’ has been treated in two different ways. Several previous studies regard ‘be to’ a lexical unit that carries modality. An alternative approach takes ‘be to’ as two individual elements: ‘be’ and ‘to’, where ‘be’ is considered as a modal or quasi-modal auxiliary. Regarding the two main approaches, I support that which takes ‘be’ and ‘to’ as individual elements, because the insertion of an adverbial phrase between ‘be’ and ‘to’ is seen in several examples from the movie scripts. I also assume that ‘be’ in ‘be to’ is an auxiliary verb, because ‘be’ satisfies all the auxiliary properties such as primary verb negation, subject-auxiliary inversion, negative forms and so on. On the other hand, only one facet can be shown as modal: that is ‘be to’ cannot be non-finite. Other modal properties such as ‘taking a bare infinitive’ and ‘no subject-verb agreement’ are not shared by ‘be’ in ‘be to’.

Semantically, ‘be to’ is treated as a polysemous expression. However, the definitions
of various meanings are not clear, and the imprecision of the terms causes confusion and prevents us from understanding the real function of 'be to' in a sentence or in a discourse. How to understand the meaning of a 'be to' sentence is entrusted to our sense of values. In order to clarify various meanings, they are sorted into two main groups – those to show 'futurity', and those to indicate 'obligation'. The possibility of exchanging sentences between two groups is shown and the common property of both groups can be seen. Thus, it seems reasonable to claim that 'be to' has an essential meaning. That is 'an event which a subject carries out, and it seems that the situation is under outside influence'. The variety of different meanings is the result of utterance interpretation in discourse, rather than being an inherent property of 'be to'. So, the key to comprehending 'be to' sentences is the hearers' interpretations of speakers' utterances.

The basic meaning of 'be to' sentences is to express the subject's personal situation, without the speaker's emotion. This makes it possible to hide the speaker's real feelings, emotions or judgements. In some cases, sentences with 'be to' seem to express an order or an obligation, although this is not always the case. There sometimes seems to be some kind of authority behind the speakers, and hearers feel that this power influences the situation.

In summary, there is a tendency to use 'be to' when speakers need not or do not want to show their feelings. This tendency is an important point in interpreting the sentences with 'be to'. When speakers fully understand these discourse functions, they can use the expression to control the situation. It is usually difficult for hearers to refuse the execution of the event, because they believe that the situations expressed by speakers are unchangeable in terms of rules or prescriptive social norms. From the standpoint of hearers, the real feelings or emotions of speakers, which speakers try to hide, can be determined from their utterances.

As we see through this study, 'be to' is such an interesting and complicated expression that a careful interpretation is required to comprehend the real intention of speakers.