
The epistemic auxiliary lär in modern Swedish signifies hearsay or probability (of future events). As an auxiliary it was used at least from the end of the 15th c. to indicate future and/or probability. The first instances of the hearsay meaning date from the end of the 18th c. In some dialects the auxiliary can also indicate obligation, but it is uncertain how old this meaning is. The auxiliary has two hypothetical sources of origin: lär(er) ‘learns, teaches’, and läter ‘sounds, lets, sees to it that’. Both alternatives are plausible, phonetically and morphologically. Läter is not as attractive as an explanation, however, since it presupposes a morphological reanalysis, whereby the present suffix r becomes part of the verbal stem. Semantically both hypotheses face differences. In this article it is assumed that future/probability is the basic meaning of the auxiliary, and an attempt is made to derive it from one of the source verbs and explain the other meanings as further developments of it. A suggestion put forth is that a pragmatic reanalysis of the ingressive aspect of either lär(er) or läter has taken place. Such an analysis is not without its difficulties, but the most plausible path leads from läter ‘sees to it that’ to lär ‘future’ (and as a consequence: ‘probability’). To conclude: the etymology is still unsettled: lärer is the better source morphologically, but semantically läter yields a better basis for the attested early meanings of the auxiliary.

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