
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MODALS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Auxiliaries can be divided into two groups from the point of syntax and semantics:

1) The auxiliaries that combine with lexical words in the expression of "aspect" and/or "tense" are called "primary auxiliaries". "Be", "have" and "do" are primary ones.

2) Those that combine with lexical verbs to indicate "modality" are referred to as secondary auxiliaries. Secondary auxiliaries are also called "modals" since they are used to express "modality". To express modality, instead of a modal verb, multiword forms can be used.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1983) use the term, "Periphrastic modals" for these multiword forms which function semantically much like true modals:

Modals

can (ability)
will (predictive)
must (obligation)
should/ought to
would (past habit)
may (permission)

Periphrastic Modals

be able to
be going to, be about to
have to, have got to, be obligated to
be to, be supposed to
used to
be permitted to

Modals and their periphrastic counterparts cannot be used interchangeably. Although a periphrastic modal may share the same literal meaning with a modal auxiliary, it cannot fulfil the same social interactional function that a modal does. I remember a learner of English using a periphrastic modal instead of a modal auxiliary. Instead of saying, "Could you speak a little bit louder", he said, "Is it possible for you to speak a little bit louder?"

Can you guess what the lecturer's answer was?

- Yes, it is possible.

"Is it possible for you to speak a little bit louder?" may have the same literal meaning as "Could you speak a little bit louder?". But it cannot be used to fulfil the social interactional function as its modal counterpart does.

Here is another example:

"Will you do it for me?" can be paraphrased as "Are you willing to do it for me?" or "Are you going to do it for me?" But neither of these can be used to make a request.

Periphrastic modals can be used to explain the meanings of modals but we must be careful when we do so.

We have pointed out that modals are used to express "modality". What is modality?

Broughten (1990:161) defines modality as follows:

"Modality is a range of attitudes we express towards the main situation or event of a sentence-possibility, permission, ability, likelihood, obligation and hypothesis among others. All modal verbs have more than one meaning: Some can express near synonyms, like "ought to" and "should;" others can stand as antonyms, like "must" and "needn't." The field of modality, therefore is both complex and rich in ways of expressing a range of communicative functions."

Quirk et al (1985) define modality as follows:

"Modality may be defined as the manner in which the main situation or event of a sentence is expressed."

qualified so as to reflect the speaker's judgement of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true."

Modality is expressed differently in different languages. For the expression of modality, English employs the words called modals. Learners of English have difficulty with the use of modals. Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1983) point out why learners of English have difficulty:

"Modality is expressed differently in different languages. Not all languages have modal auxiliaries; in those which do not, regular verbs or adverbs are used to perform the functions that modals have in English. For example, in Turkish modality is generally expressed by the suffixes attached to the verbs. In some cases verbs or adverbs are used for this purpose.

Now let's examine the general properties of the modal auxiliaries in English.

The basic syntactic properties of the modals can be summarized as follows:

1) They never take the "-ing present participle" or the "-en past participle" form. They never take the "third person present tense -s form."

2) A modal cannot be used after a primary auxiliary or after another modal. So in a sentence we can have one modal. Some times speakers of English may wish to express more than one modality in the same clause. They easily find a way to express more than one modal meaning.

Example: The students of the Music department are going to have to be able to play three different instruments.

a) be going to: prediction

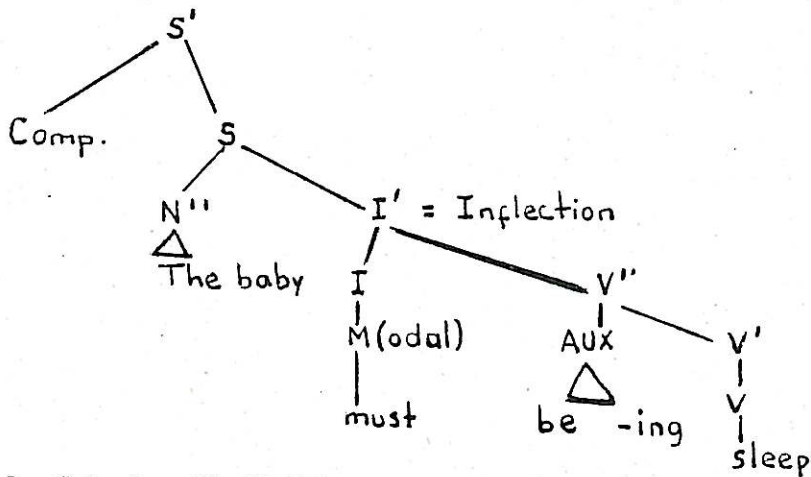
b) have to : obligation

c) be able to : ability (Here Periphrastic modals are used.)

3) They never have the "-to infinitive" form.

4) A modal requires the use of the bare infinitive form of the following verb

To understand its syntactic role in the sentence, let's make use of Chomsky's approach to syntax and show it in a tree diagram:



In a finite clause like this, "I" must be filled by either tense or a modal. So a modal auxiliary occupies the same position as "tense". But they never exist together in a sentence. Then the two basic constituents of a sentence are 'Noun Phrase', which functions as the subject of the sentence and "Inflection". The head of INFLECTION is either tense or a modal or the infinitive marker "to" in a non-finite clause.

Let's examine the modals with regard to the epistemic versus non-epistemic distinction, orientation, passivization, negation, past time reference:

A) MODAL MEANING: With regard to the modal meaning, modals fall into two groups: EPISTEMIC/NON-EPISTEMIC (Palmer F.R, 1965)

- 1) Epistemic Modals involve some kind of human judgement of events and express the meanings such as possibility, probability, deduction, prediction,
- 2) Non-epistemic Modal involve some kind of human control over events and express the meaning such as obligation, willingness, ability, permission.

A modal can be both non-epistemic and epistemic depending on the meaning it carries. For example, "can" is non-epistemic when it expresses "ability," but epistemic when it shows "possibility". In the same way, "may" is non-epistemic when it has the "permission" meaning, but it is epistemic, when it has the "possibility" meaning. Obligation "must" is non-epistemic, but deduction "must" is epistemic.

This distinction proves useful in the interpretation of ambiguous sentences.

For example:

"He should have seen it." If "should" has obligation meaning as a non-epistemic modal, it means that the obligation was not fulfilled. But if "should" has the meaning of probability, it is interpreted as "He probably saw it." When it is non-epistemic, the implication is negative; when it is epistemic, the implication is positive. Now we can make a generalization as follows: If a modal is epistemic, the "modal + have + past participle" form indicates "REAL PAST".

With non-epistemic modals, past time can be indicated by a past modal form when the sentence is negative. "He couldn't catch the bus."

As we will see later, there is no restriction as to the "PASSIVIZATION" with epistemic modals as long as the other requirements of "passivization" are met. But with non-epistemic modals the case is different: With some non-epistemic modals, "passivization is possible" but with the others it is not.

B) ORIENTATION:

Non-epistemic modals can be either "subject-oriented" or "discourse oriented" as they involve some kind of human control over states or events. But epistemic modals are independent of the distinction between subject and discourse orientation as they do not involve human control, though they do involve human judgement of states or events.

Let's see subject and discourse oriented modals.

SUBJECT ORIENTED

Volitional "will"

Permission "can"

Obligation "must"

daren't

DISCOURSE ORIENTED

volitional "shall"

permission "may"

obligation "ought to"

needn't

The meaning of a subject oriented modal relates to the subject of the sentence. When we say, "He is very strong, he can lift that heavy table.", we imply that the subject "he" has the ability to lift the table. So "ability" relates to the subject. In the same way we can say that "obligation" expressed by "OUGHT TO" relates to the subject in the sentence, "He ought to study hard" (It's his duty to do so).

If the meaning of the modal does not relate to the subject but does relate to one of the participants of "discourse," the modal in question is discourse oriented. The meaning of a discourse oriented modal relates to the speaker in affirmative sentences, but to the hearer in interrogative sentences.

When "MAY" has the meaning of permission in a sentence such as "He may go." the speaker has the authority to give permission. But in the question, "May I go?" the speaker asks the hearer to give him the permission to go. In this case the hearer has the authority or he accepts the authority of the LISTENER. This distinction enables us to understand when passivization is possible and when it is not. Passivization is restricted, if the basic meaning the sentence changes. When an active sentence is converted into passive, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence. Subject oriented modals do not allow passivization. If a sentence with a subject oriented modal is changed into passive, the meaning of the modal doesn't remain the same.

For example: Let's passivize the sentence, "He can lift it" (He is very strong). "It can be lifted". "Can" in the sentence, "He can lift it." has "ability" meaning. (At least let's suppose that it has "ability meaning.". Its syntactic passive counterpart "It can be lifted" doesn't carry "ability meaning". In this case passivization is not possible. "Can" in the above sentence may have the possibility meaning. Then the sentence "He can lift it" with the meaning "HE'S ABLE TO LIFT" has no passive counterpart.

Although a sentence with a subject oriented modal cannot be passivized, a sentence with a non-epistemic discourse oriented modal can be put into passive as long as the other requirements of passivization are met. Example:

Someone must do it (obligation).= It must be done (obligation).

A discourse oriented modal is not marked for past time. Example:

"You must do it." The possible paraphrase of the sentence is: "I oblige you to do it." Or "You may do" has a possible interpretations as "I permit you to do it." Since we cannot give permission for the fulfilment of a past action, it is easy to account for the absence of a discourse oriented modal that is marked for past time. It's possible to express "past obligation" or "past permission" by means of the periphrastic modals:

I PERMITTED HIM TO GO. I OBLIGED HIM TO GO.

HE HAD TO GO.

Now let's consider modals with regard to NEGATION.

C. NEGATION:

The word "NOT" can negate either the modal or the main verb in a sentence. In some cases, we can see two "nots"; the first negating the modal, the second one negating the main verb in a sentence such as SHE CAN'T NOT SAY IT.

Let's see how this happens:

" I INTEND TO GO" This sentence can be negated in three different ways.

1) I DON'T INTEND TO. In this case, "not" negates the finite verb

"INTEND".

2. I INTEND NOT TO GO. Here, "NOT" negates the non-finite verb "go".

It's possible to use "not" twice in the above sentence.

3) I DON'T INTEND TO GO.

In this sentence, both verbs are negated. The same thing can be true of some modal auxiliaries.

When a sentence contains the epistemic "WILL", "MUST", "MAY", "SHOULD" or "OUGHT TO", "not" negates the main verb, not the modal.

3.) THEY MAY NOT BE IN SCHOOL.= IT'S POSSIBLE THAT THEY ARE NOT IN SCHOOL.

4) THEY WON'T BE IN SCHOOL.=IT IS CERTAIN THAT THEY ARE IN SCHOOL.

5) THEY WON'T BE IN SCHOOL.=IT IS CERTAIN THAT THEY ARE NOT IN SCHOOL.

6) THEY SHOULD/UGHT TO BE IN SCHOOL.= THEY ARE EXPECTED NOT TO BE IN SCHOOL

To negate the possibility or certainty, "CAN NOT" or "NEED NOT" must be used. Examples:

7) THEY CAN'T BE IN SCHOOL.= IT IS IMPOSSIBLE THAT THEY ARE IN SCHOOL.

8) THEY NEEDN'T BE IN SCHOOL.= IT IS NOT CERTAIN THAT THEY ARE IN SCHOOL.

When a sentence contains "can", the word "NOT" always negates the modal.

9) I CAN NOT CARRY IT. As we have pointed above, "NOT" negates "CAN",but not "CARRY". So this sentence can be paraphrased as:

I AM NOT ABLE TO CARRY IT.

In the same way, when a sentence contains "CAN" in the sense of "PERMISSION", "not" negates "CAN" as follows:

YOU CAN'T COME HOME LATE.= YOU ARE NOT PERMITTED TO COME HOME LATE.

When "MUST" or "OUGHT TO" is used in the sense of obligation, or "WILL" in the sense of "INSISTENCE", the main verb is negated.

10) HE MUST DO IT.= I OBLIGE HIM TO DO IT.

11) HE MUST NOT DO IT.= I OBLIGE HIM NOT TO DO IT.

13) HE DOESN'T HAVE TO DO IT.= HE IS NOT OBLIGED TO DO IT.

14) HE NEEDN'T DO IT.= I DON'T OBLIGE HIM TO DO IT.

When we examine above examples, we can see that "MUST" is never negated by "not." If we want to negate the obligation meaning, we must use "DON'T/DOESN'T HAVE TO" or "NEEDN'T."

Now, let's paraphrase the sentence, "SHE CAN'T NOT SAY". It is not possible for her not to say it. (She can't help saying it.)

In some cases "NOT" can negate either the modal or the main verb. Palmer: 1974:132):

15) "YOU MAY NOT DO IT". can be interpreted as I DON'T PERMIT YOU TO DO IT.

16)) "YOU MAY NOT DO IT". can be interpreted as I DON'T PERMIT YOU NOT TO DO IT.

When permission "MAY" is to be negated "NOT" must be stressed.

CONCLUSION:

1) The modal auxiliaries are either epistemic or non-epistemic depending on the type of meaning they express.

2) The non-epistemic modals can be subject or discourse oriented.

3) Subject oriented modals do not generally allow passivization. The others can be passivized.

4) Subject oriented modals can be marked for past time.

5) Discourse oriented modals are not normally marked for past time. To indicate past time, periphrastic modals can be used.

6) When a modal is epistemic, we do not ask about its orientation.

7) Epistemic modals or their historical past forms with "have" and a verb in the past participle form show REAL PAST.

8) The negate marker "NOT" negates either the modal or the main verb in a sentence. In exceptional cases, both can be negated.

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