SUPPLEMENTARY READING: MORE ABOUT MODALITY

Introduction

You have probably realized by now that far from being a neat set of simple rules ordained by God or Dr Samuel Johnson, English grammar is a research area full of unsolved problems, to some of which you personally may be well on the way to finding a solution. We wish you luck in this worthwhile enterprise, but meanwhile we urge you to learn to live with a sense of insecurity. And of all the slippery areas in grammar, one of the most fraught and yet centrally important is modality. This topic has taken up many hours of study and many litres of midnight oil at the expense of philosophers, semanticists and grammarians over many years and yet, in spite of considerable insight gained, it remains a difficult area for analysis. Nevertheless, people who speak the language use it all the time without any observable difficulty. That is the nature of language. It is a little like breathing in that respect.

In FAE3, we say very little about modals and so we will take this opportunity to mention a few points here. To keep it simple for a moment, modality is to do with the expression of probability and obligation. Perhaps (!) its primary expression is in modal verbs (e.g. *may*, *can*, *must*), but it can also involve adverbs (e.g. *probably*, *possibly*, *certainly*, *perhaps*), adjectives (e.g. *probable*, *possible*, *certain*), nouns (e.g. *probability*, *possibility*, *certainty*), as well as other expressions. We shall focus here mainly on modal verbs, but also mention other forms.

Modal verbs: morphology and syntax

Modal verbs are a fairly distinct class in that they differ morphologically from other verbs. They are not marked for person or number to signal agreement (concord) with their subject. So they do not add */s/* in the third person singular as most other finite verbs do in the present tense. They make up a fairly small and moderately well-defined closed set (but there are some fuzzy edges here as we shall see.) The basic list of modal verbs is as follows (but there are others to be mentioned later):
It is debatable whether or not modals have tense. Some grammarians see *could* as the past tense of *can, might as the past tense of may, should of shall, would of will. We have usually found students reluctant to buy this argument, and the reason they give is that the meanings are not consistent with the past/present relationship that we see in other verbs such as *kick/kicked, sit/sat, write/wrote*. Obviously, there is a semantic link between the members of each of these pairs of modals, and certainly they are historically related as present and past forms, but in many ways it is easier to see them now as distinct forms with subtly different meanings. But we won’t take this any further. You are free to choose.

This lack of marking for number and person (and arguably tense) is particularly anomalous in that modal verbs function as operators in the verbal group (see *Functional Analysis of English*, Chapter 2), as do finite forms of *have, be and do*, and one of the operator’s tasks is to reflect tense and person (insofar as the eroded inflection system of English continues to do so). So in the table below, we see that the third person singular present tense (with *he, she, it*, and singular nominals) is reflected by a verb stem with *s* added to it, and the verbs with other persons (*I, you, we, they*, plural nominals) are not. But in the case of the core modal verbs there is no variation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-modal verbs</th>
<th></th>
<th>Modal verbs</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not third person singular</strong></td>
<td><strong>Third person singular</strong></td>
<td><strong>Not third person singular</strong></td>
<td><strong>Third person singular</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They write a lot of letters.</td>
<td>She writes a lot of letters.</td>
<td>They can knit and crochet.</td>
<td>Charlie can knit and crochet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I waste too much time.</td>
<td>My brother wastes too much time.</td>
<td>I might complain.</td>
<td>The senator might complain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some girls hate shopping.</td>
<td>My neighbour hates shopping.</td>
<td>The bankers must pay up.</td>
<td>This banker must pay up.</td>
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</table>

We mentioned additional verbs which might be classed as modals. These include: *ought* (+ to infinitive), *have* (+ to infinitive), *have got* (+ to infinitive), *need, be able* (+ to infinitive). *Dare* is also often included. These resemble modals primarily in their (semantic) meaning: in colouring a proposition or a proposal with a sense of a degree of obligation or probability. But they differ from them morphosyntactically in that they form *verbal group complexes* (with two lexical verbs such as we find in *begin to go*) rather than *verbal groups* (operator +
lexical verb, like \textit{can go}, \textit{should have gone}). \textit{Ought} is the closest to a core modal verb in that it does not inflect for person and number; it has only the one form. It differs in that it requires a to-infinitive rather than a bare infinitive. \textit{Need} is sometimes like a typical modal in that it can form negatives or interrogatives without recourse to \textit{do}:\

\begin{quote}
\textit{He need not go;}  \\
\textit{You needn’t go;}  \\
\textit{Need you go so early?}
\end{quote}

But it can also form them with \textit{do} (but the infinitive then requires \textit{to}):\

\begin{quote}
\textit{You don’t need to go;}  \\
\textit{Do you need to go?}
\end{quote}

If we ignore meaning and think only of morphology and syntax, we might almost say there are two lexical items: modal-type \textit{need} and non-modal-type \textit{need}. When \textit{need} is modal, there is no /s/ inflection in the third person singular present tense, but in its non-modal manifestation it does add an /s/ and use do-support:

\begin{quote}
\textit{He needs help;}  \\
\textit{He doesn’t need to go.}
\end{quote}

Another quirk is that in contemporary English, the modal form (\textit{need go}) does not normally appear in the positive affirmative; we find \textit{You need to go} rather than *\textit{You need go}. \textit{Have} and \textit{have got} also require a to-infinitive when used in this sense, but they are fully inflected: \textit{have}, \textit{has}, \textit{had}. (See the FAE online Supplementary Reading: More Fun with Finites for more on \textit{have} and \textit{have got}.) The same is true of \textit{be able}, which is clearly originally a copular verb plus an adjective fossilized into something which is often viewed as a verb (e.g. being listed along with other modals in grammar books) but which is not very different from combinations such as \textit{be} + \textit{willing/ready/eager/reluctant}. And, of course, these expressions can also be used to express modality though they do not usually get listed as modal verbs.

Modals have some other quirks, which they do not all share. For example, the formation of negatives is inconsistent across the set. \textit{Can} is the only verb in English which adds
uncontracted not to make up a single word: cannot. This is an oddity of orthography and is fairly trivial, but it seems typical of the quirkiness of modals. Of course, can also has a contracted form can’t, which is more consistent with all other verbs. But although may does have a contracted negative mayn’t (which can be found in many texts, including IFG), it seems to us that many contemporary speakers of English tend to avoid this contraction. It seems to us that we have rarely heard it used (though such impressions are not reliable as evidence, of course). It may be dying out as a common spoken form, if it ever was one. There are similar difficulties with ought and may in the negative and also interrogative. Variations of this kind sometimes reflect an ongoing language change: an instability in the forms.

Dare is very odd. It is doubtful whether it shares much semantically with the modals, but it may be included because it sometimes behaves like a core modal: I daren’t go; I dare not go; I dare say; Dare you do it? But it also behaves like a non-modal, calling in do as operator with a to-infinitive: I don’t dare to go; Do I dare to eat a peach?

Types of modality
We mentioned the two broad areas of modality: probability and obligation. These have traditionally been treated respectively under the headings of epistemic and deontic modality: epistemic from the Greek word for knowledge and deontic from the Greek for ‘being right’ in the sense of ‘doing the right thing’ or ‘duty’. For no doubt very good reasons which are not known to us, Halliday prefers to use the labels modalization and modulation. Possibly, this is because his categories do not neatly overlap with the epistemic/deontic dichotomy, but having terms as similar as modality, modalization and modulation doesn’t make it easier for students.

Clearly, probability and obligation do not sum up the whole picture because they feature as sub-types of the two larger types: modalization and modulation. Taking only a key section of the MODALITY network, the system can be represented as in the figure below:
But see *IFG* (Section 4.5.2) for the fuller network relating modality to polarity (i.e. positive and negative) and other features.

Halliday illustrates the two sub-types of modalization (probability and usuality) and the two sub-types of modulation (obligation and inclination) as follows (*IFG* section 4.5.2):

- **probability**: There can’t be many candlestick makers left.
- **usuality**: It’ll change right there in front of your eyes.
- **obligation**: The roads should pay for themselves, like the railways.
- **inclination**: voters won’t pay taxes any more.

You can see that the type of modality is not uniquely identifiable with a particular modal verb. In the examples below, *will* occurs in instances of both usuality and inclination. In the following examples, *will* illustrates all four types of modality. (*Will* is more than a marker of futurity and is classed as a modal verb.) Of course, out of context it is often impossible to pin down the modality regardless of which verb is used.

- **probability**: He will obviously see and know of the good points.
- **usuality**: Another is Padfoot, a creature with long, smooth hair who will creep unheard alongside a traveller, then suddenly rattle a chain.
- **obligation**: You will sit down and you will remain silent.
- **inclination**: Where the Training Agency is involved, it will ensure that quality is maintained and it will not fund compacts which fall short of the mark.

**Alternatives to modal verbs**

As we mentioned, word classes other than verbs can realize modality. *He is probably there*
is agnate with *He may be there/He could be there/He will be there*. Some other parallels follow:

- People could have seen them: Perhaps people had seen them. (probability)
- He would meet her at six o’clock: He usually met her at six o’clock. (usuality)
- You must do this: You are obliged to do this. (obligation)
- They can distinguish between two sounds: They are able to distinguish between two sounds. (inclination)

**NOTE:** Halliday includes ‘ability’ with *inclination*: ‘not obligation but readiness’ (*IFG*: Section 8.5.2).

**Grammatical metaphor**

As you know, when a process is nominalized, we have what Halliday calls grammatical metaphor. Many of these alternatives to modal verbs fall into this category. Once a process is nominalized it is available for premodification with an adjective as Epithet. So we can express modality in the adjective: *the possible invasion, the probable collapse, an unlikely decision.*

The italicized Subject of the clause below is such a nominal group:

- *The possible scrapping of the Lea River Park walkway* suggests that petty politics, not community, is the driving force.

The actual nominal group (above) is agnate with the invented data (below), though, since the Actor is unspecified, we have assumed one:

- [The authorities?] might scrap the Lea River Park walkway
- Perhaps [the authorities?] will scrap the Lea River Park walkway

Or the modality itself can be expressed as a noun:

- *the probability* that the walkway will be scrapped;
- *the likelihood of* success;
- *an outside chance* that I’ll be filming in Bogotá; etc.

Modality can also be conveyed in what have been referred to as ‘pseudo-clauses’ (Eggins: 182). Though Eggins (1994/2004) concedes that these are clauses grammatically, their function is more like that of a modal Adjunct. Examples of this are *I think, I guess, I reckon, I*
suppose, etc. when they are being used not with their full force as projecting clauses but rather as a way of expressing modality; hence these are yet another example of grammatical metaphor.

- His running commentary was oft-repeated, I guess.
- The teachers, I suppose, are very good.
- I think they’ll be back soon.

In such cases, the tag will reflect the verb and Subject in the main proposition and not those in the projecting clause. For example: a regular projection involving I think would have the tag don’t I?:

- I think he is a great artist, don’t I?

whereas a modal expression would have a tag based on the other verb and Subject:

- I think he’s a great artist, isn’t he?

Another kind of modalized clause is illustrated by the following:

- *It is certain* that the new assistant coach Gerry Murphy will improve the quality of Ireland’s back play.
- *It is likely* that US viewers will discover the identity of Laura’s killer at the end of May.
- *It is unusual* for Norwegian Rottweiler owners to have large kennels.
- *What is unusual* is for a number of neighbouring schools to pull together.

The examples above involve expressing the proposition as an embedded clause (see *FAE* Chapter 8), usually (not always) in a postposed Subject structure with *It* as place-holder. The author could also have said, for example:

- For Norwegian Rottweiler owners to have large kennels is unusual.

Not infrequently, modality is doubled up – or more – by including more than one kind of modal realization for one process:
- *I suppose perhaps* they *might* arrive early. (Probability)
- *She would normally* rest *every afternoon.* (Usuality)
- *It is essential* that you *must* leave now. (Obligation)
- *I will gladly* help out. (Inclination)

As we said at the outset, modality is complicated. We have considered a number of aspects here. You can find more information in *IFG* (Sections 4.3.2.1; 4.5.2; 10.3). For a non-systemic but very detailed account, see Palmer 1979.

**References**