The category Modal: a moving target?

Alison Cort and David Denison

alison.b.cort@student.manchester.ac.uk
david.denison@manchester.ac.uk

Organisation of paper

- Three different ways of looking at English modal category:
  - Simplistic, black-and-white picture
  - Subtler, shaded picture
  - New way that we propose to investigate
- Diachronic change in modals
- Significance for other categories
- Categories as epiphenomena?

Modal verbs for 1st-year students

- Peculiar kind of auxiliary verb
- Peculiarities are morphosyntactic (e.g. no 3 singular - s) and semantic (e.g. general meanings to do with modality)
- Or define by stipulation: will/would, shall/should, can/could, may/might, must (± ought)

(1) The Daily Mail

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Morphology

- No 3 singular present - s
- No untensed forms
- Irregular or absent present~past alternation

Syntax

- Always first verb (because tensed)
- Followed by plain stem
- Is an operator (= satisfies NICE properties)
- He can’t swim. Can he swim? He can swim.
- Past tense can be first verb of apodosis of unreal conditional
- If I had known it would be so sunny, I would/might have worn shorts.
Semantics

- Meaning concerned with possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, ...
- Can have epistemic, deontic or dynamic meanings
- Meaning relation between present and past tense is highly irregular, e.g. past tense can appear in main clause without necessarily having past time reference

Diachrony

- Before 1600:
- After 1600:

(2) The Guardian
**Synchrony**

- Modal is a prototype category rather than an Aristotelian one (perhaps like other categories)
- There are prototypical modals: will/would, shall/should, can/could, may/might, must
- There are items which don’t satisfy all the criteria but which meet enough of them to justify placing in outer margins of category: ought to, is to, ...

**Inter-category gradience?**

- Does Modal have a clear category boundary (cf. Aarts 2004) or does it shade off imperceptibly into other categories, e.g. V?
- Does every instance of a word belong to one and only one category?
Diachrony: the category

- The category Modal evolved over many hundreds of years, possibly becoming a basic level category in a rapid burst of change in late 16th century (Warner 1990), and taking part in further reorganisation of auxiliary system towards end of 18th century (Warner 1993).
- Category continues to become more sharply delineated (cf. Rosch 1978, 1988).

Diachrony: the members

- Since 1600 there have been many changes in individual items, including marginal modals, e.g.
  - ‘modal be’ loses untensed forms after Austen
  - ‘modal have’ gains epistemic use in mid-20th c.
  - had better → ‘d better → better

- Increasing power of prototype as target that attracts new members by accretion

(3) “Atomic Theory”

Synchrony

- What is/are the prototypical modal(s)?

Candidates for prototype

- must × – no past tense, can’t appear in apodosis of unreal conditional for most speakers
- may/might × – obsolescent, no longer treated as present~past pair, *mayn’t, *mightn’t
### Candidates for prototype

- Shall × - obsolescent except in 1st person interrogative
- Will/ would × - lacks typical semantics, would rather + finite clause
- Can/ could × - retains some present–past normality, epistemic meanings limited

### Cluster conditions

- There is no wholly satisfactory prototypical modal
- In absence of actual prototype, can still talk of cluster conditions
- Members of a category don’t necessarily satisfy all the conditions – just ‘enough’ of them (Jackendoff 2002)

### Morphological tests

- No 3 singular present - s: only modals (or verbs which lack 3 sg present altogether, such as beware, try and)
- No untensed forms: also dummy do
- Irregular or absent present–past alternation: not unique

### Syntactic tests

- Always first verb (because tensed): also do
- Followed by plain stem: also come, go, try and, help, let’s
- Is an operator (= satisfies NICE properties): also be, some have do
- Past tense can be first verb of apodosis of unreal conditional: only modals, perhaps too strict

### Semantic tests

- Meaning concerned with possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, ... : modals and be supposed to, etc.
- Can have epistemic, deontic or dynamic meanings: ??
- Meaning relation between present and past tense is highly irregular, e.g. past tense can appear in main clause without necessarily having past time reference: only modals
What is a modal?

- This battery of tests is not actually very successful at picking out (what scholars traditionally think of as) modals
- One possible interpretation is that the ‘centre’ of the modal category is not (any longer) where we thought it was

Diachrony

- Not all changes involve attraction towards the ‘prototype’.  
  - Loss of contracted negation with may, ?might, ?shan’t.
  - Loss of contracted negation with ought, used
  - Better develops frequent use without subject (Better shut the door), which is very rare with modals
  - Will confined to purely temporal meanings

- So recent history of modals is not an uninterrupted, unidirectional progress towards purer and purer modalhood
- Rather, the nature of the modal category – a.k.a. the modals themselves – may be subtly changing
- Evidence includes the documented decline in frequency of the ‘central’ modals and growth in use of some ‘marginal’ modals (Leech 2003)

Multiple developments?

- If speakers start to apply modal-like patterns to items which were originally not modals, and which retain many non-modal characteristics, then such items are to that extent perceived as modals – but their other characteristics then skew the overall perception of the category, and of the superordinate category Auxiliary

- The category Modal is developing in several directions at once:
  - Anything involving be brings in inflection
  - Items which are untensed (to, let’s)
  - Development of invariance as most salient characteristic of auxiliaries (‘ve, try and, etc.)
Other categories

- Determiner too is only motivated in the recent history of English (and maybe not even then: Spinillo 2004). It must be changing.
- Larger, open-ended categories like N, V will change only imperceptibly when a single member changes, but even they change over time: the definitional properties of N in Old English are not the same as those in PDE.

Categories as epiphenomenal

- Linguistic description which takes categories as (a) fixed and (b) central to the analysis may therefore be misguided.
- This can be taken as an argument in favour of a Construction Grammar approach.

References

- Cort, Alison. in progress. Recent and current change in the modal verb. University of Manchester PhD dissertation.