

The category Modal: a moving target?

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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?

(1) *The Daily Mail*

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*)

Morphology

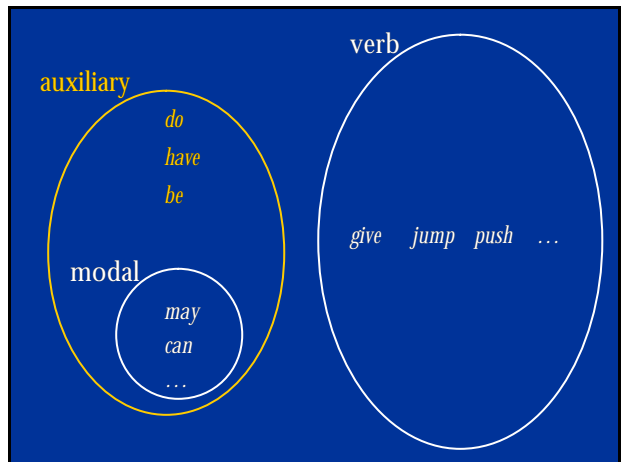
- No 3 singular present -s
- No untensed forms
- Irregular or absent present~past alternation

Syntax

- Always first verb (because tensed)
- Followed by plain stem
- Is an operator (= satisfies NICE properties)
He can't swim. Can he swim?
*...and she can too. She **can** swim.*
- Past tense can be first verb of apodosis of unreal conditional
If I had known it would be so sunny,
I could/would/should/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:

verb

give jump push do
have be may can ...

Diachrony

- After 1600:

auxiliary

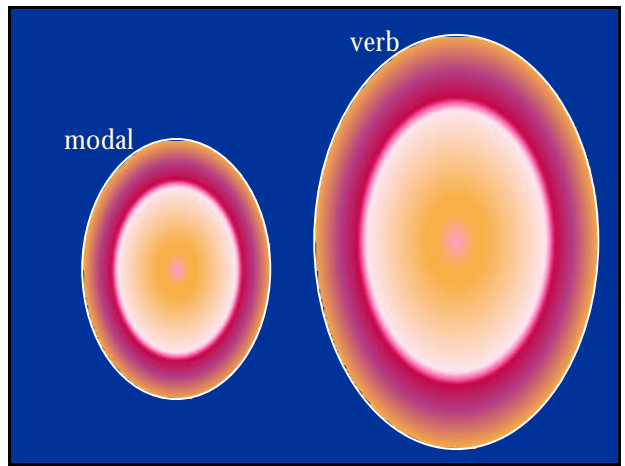
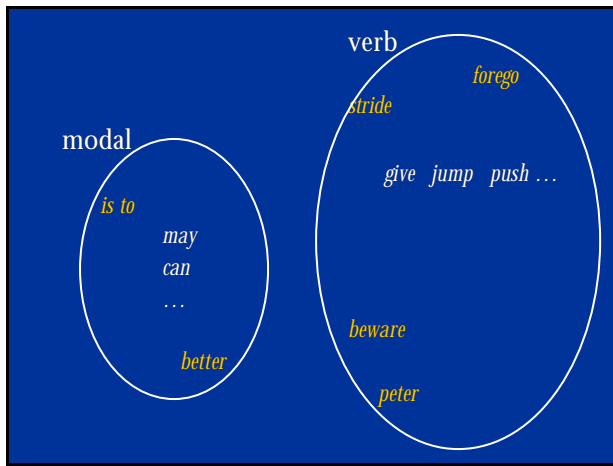
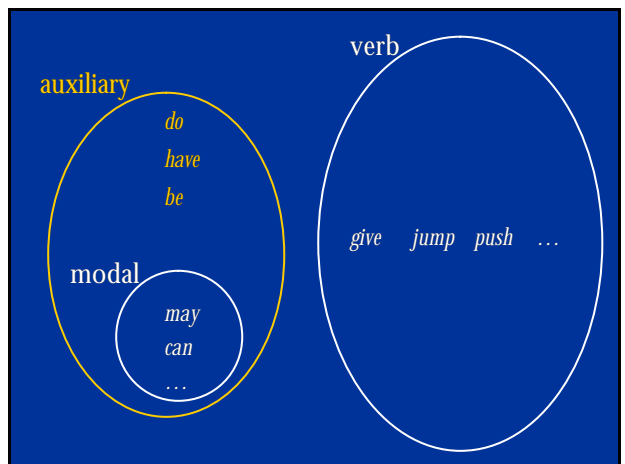
verb

modal

(2) *The Guardian*

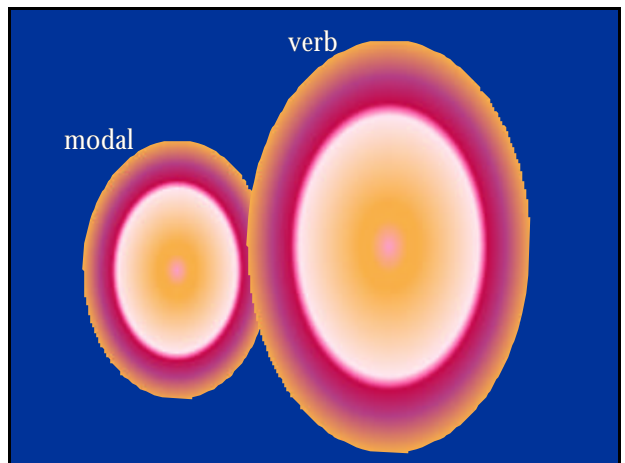
Synchrony

- 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*, ?**mighn'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)

- How well do the criteria for modal membership discriminate modals from non-modals?

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

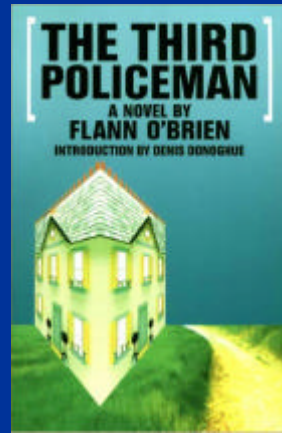
- Always first verb (because tensed): also do
- Followed by plain stem: also come, go, try and, help, let's
- Is an operator (= satisfies NICE properties): also be, some have, do
- Past tense can be first verb of apodosis of unreal conditional: only modals, perhaps too strict

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)

- 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

Multiple developments?

- 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

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