

## A Brief Discussion of Meanings of Modal Verbs

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**Abstract:** Modality is a cross-linguistic grammatical category concerning the state of propositions that describe practices. Modality can be reached in different ways, in which the modal verbs are quite important and most languages. Thus, this study focuses on the meaning of different modal verbs: *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall* and *should*. Besides, many examples are provided to illustrate the context meaning and the differences between relative modal verbs. There are three parts in this study. The first chapter is the introduction of modality and modal verbs. The second part illustrates the modal verbs respectively and the third chapter is the conclusion.

### 1. Introduction

Modality shows the subjective attitude of the speaker towards the content of the sentence. It can be seen as the speaker's cognitive, emotional and volitional attitude towards a state or proposition. The way in which mood is expressed varies from language to language. Modality is expressed in a variety of ways, with the morphological, lexical, syntactic or intonation forms, and these are not mutually exclusive. In most languages, modality is considered to be an open system and can be expressed in various ways. There is no denying that modal verbs play a predominant part in the modality system. The study of modal verbs in traditional grammar is often confined to their simple lexical and syntactic use, without reference to the modal meaning. While differences in the modal meaning of modal verbs often affect their grammatical function, and at the same time, different grammatical forms can also affect the expression of the modal meaning of modal verbs.

Von Wright (1951: 1-2) named the three types of modality 'epistemic', 'deontic' and 'dynamic'. This paper will illustrate the meanings of separate modal verbs: *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall* and *should*, respectively, in descriptive examples from the perspective of different types. The purpose is to discuss the meanings of the modal verbs in different situations.

### 2. Meanings of modal verbs

The literature shows that the English modal verbs *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall* and *should* have evolved from real verbs that mean want to or know how to and have the power to carry out a practice. The modal verbs are usually placed before the verb in the sentence, and together with the verb they indicate want to do, know how to do, have the power to do, etc.

Firstly, Palmer (1988) divides the modal verbs into epistemic modal and non-epistemic modal. The epistemic modal shows the speaker's view and attitude towards the utterances, the core meaning is "possibility" and "necessity". Accordingly, Palmer (1988) divides the modal verb into "possibility" and "necessity". At the same time, based on the diversity and plurality of meaning, he divides the modal verbs into three categories: epistemic modality, dynamic modality and deontic modality.

Epistemic modality refers to the speaker's attitude towards the truth value or the authenticity of the proposition, it can be used to show uncertainty or the inference from the generally known knowledge. For example, in the sentence 'My mum may be in her office', *may* shows the uncertainty, which is the usage of epistemic modality.

Deontic modality talks about the possibility of an uncertain utterance becoming real. Deontic modality usually conveys the speaker's order, forbidden, permission and obligation.

## 2.1 May

In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, there are seven meanings functioning as modal verbs. The first explanation, “(used to show possibility) to be perhaps likely to”, belongs to the the dynamic modality in Palmer’s category. The second meaning is “to have permission to, be allowed to”, it goes to the deontic modality part. Thus, the dynamic and deontic meaning are the origin meaning of *may*. Please refer to the following suggestions:

[1] *May* I make a suggestion?

Firstly, the most obvious function is to ask for permission. Palmer (1990: 77) defined this function of *may* as ‘interrogation’. Meanwhile, the purpose of the speaker is to get an answer of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Imagine a child in the kinder garden, when he wants to go to the bathroom while others are having a lesson, he should ask the teacher:

(1) May I go to the bathroom?

He is hoping the teacher to give him permission.

Secondly, *may* carries the meaning of dissatisfaction. When one wants to *make a suggestion*, it can be inferred that the speaker is *not very happy* about what has been talked about previously. Another example is like:

(2) May I change the channel?

The reason of the speaker wanted to change the channel probably was he was not satisfied with the contents showing on TV. Though, the dissatisfied usage is not true in all cases. If I say “May I borrow some money?”, then I’m clearly not dissatisfied.

Thirdly, *may* here has the function of interfering politely and attract others’ attention. The addresser intended to make the person around him stop talking so that the speaker was able to state himself deliberately. A familiar example is:

(3) May I have your attention, please?

The audiences were not only expected to give permission, but also, they were supposed to stop everything to listen to the speaker.

[2] It *may* rain tomorrow.

When the epistemic *may* related with a possibility of the future, Leech (2004: 76) stated that ‘*May* in this sense, as well as in the ‘permission’ sense below, usually indicates a future event when it combines with an ‘event verb’: *may lose, may go, may become, etc*’. Obviously, the ‘event verb’ in the example sentence is *may rain*. Thus, the sentence broods a forecast that tomorrow will be raining.

However, if the emphasis of tone in this sentence is put on *may*, not on *rain*, the meaning might be quite different. The addresser thought tomorrow would rain perhaps just because he saw the black clouds in the sky. Moreover, the hidden meaning was: I didn’t know whether it would rain or not exactly. Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002: 182) stated that ‘If I knew that it was true, I would normally be expected to use the unmodalised form- *He’s ill*, say, rather than the much weaker *He may be ill*.’ Thus, the epistemic *may* means unsure about the coming event.

Meanwhile, the epistemic *may* also means prevention or putting forward another plan. The supposing situation is that a family was going to have a trip on weekend, but when Dad said: *It may rain tomorrow*, the undertone was: *Don’t go out tomorrow*.

## 2.2 Might

[3] He *might* be in his office.

Formally, *might* is the past tense of *may*. Just as *may*, *might* also offers a possibility in the future. Thus this sentence can be changed into *He may be in his office* or *it may be that he is in his office*. Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002: 200) point out that ‘the preterite introduces a rather vague element of tentativeness, diffidence, extra politeness, or the like’. The *might* here corresponds to the usage of ‘tentativeness’ and ‘diffidence’. The addresser gave a weak possibility of the character’s location. Naturally, the degree of tone is much weaker than *may* and the manner of speaking is more polite.

Secondly, *might* in the example is used to describe another possibility besides what people can

think of. The situation could be laid on a couple's quarreling about the reason why the son couldn't be connected with. The father thought the reason was the son must be sleeping. By contrast, the mother suggested another possibility that was: *he might be in his office*. Even, as though he was sleeping, he was not; he might be in his office. A similar example goes like:

(4) He might be ill.

It implicated that he wasn't working hard not because he was being lazy; the real reason was he was ill.

[4] You *might* want to read the instructions first.

Basically, *might* delivers a suggestion by the addresser. Such as: When the addressee didn't know how to begin a paper, the professor said that reading the instructions first was a good idea.

Another special function of *might* is criticizing and it cares more about the present rather than the past. Just like Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002: 202) explained the sentence of 'You *might* take your feet off the sofa', 'the implicature is that your feet shouldn't be on the sofa.' Similarly, the implicature of the example above is that you should have read the instructions first before you began the paper. While, depending on who utters a sentence like this, it could actually be quite rude.

### 2.3 Can

There are more than 10 meanings of *can* in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Among which, 4 of them show the modality: 2 dynamic modalities, 1 deontic modality and 1 epistemic modality.

[5] You *can* come in now.

The deontic *can* here gives permission. Ehrman (1966: 12) pointed out that the basic meaning of *can* is 'there is no obstruction to the action of the lexical verb'. Then the sentence can be changed into *You are allowed to come in now*, or *It is possible for you to come in now*, which implies that I am ready to see you and you don't have to wait outside or go back in vain, though 'possibility' is different from 'permission' here. An exact example goes like mother's words:

(5) If you have finished your homework, you can go out to play.

The mother gave the permission to play outside to the kid.

[6] You *can* leave me out of this.

It is better to discuss the *can* here together with example [5]. '*Can* is often used not simply to say what one can do or what is possible, but actually to suggest, by implication, that what is possible will, or should, be implemented' (Palmer 1990: 86). The *can* in these two examples both carry the meaning of suggestion and implication. The example is a very strong request or suggestion on the part of the speaker not be involved. We can understand sentence [5] as: It is too cold outside, why not come in now? Similarly, example [6] means *please let me be alone here*. Therefore, *can* suggests the action taken by the addressee.

Furthermore, when we extend the meaning of suggestion, *can* can be interpreted as 'give an instruction often of a brusque or impolite kind' (Palmer 1987: 110). Leech (2004: 74) gave the scene that a coach was training his team: '*Mike and Willy, you can be standing over there*'. The action was expected to be performed by the addressee and *can* was a kind of impolite instruction or gentle order. Thus the example in [6] can be interpreted as: 'I am really tired of all of your trivia, please get away from me'.

### 2.4 Could

[7] We *could* eat pizza tonight.

Firstly, the deontic *could* is used to indicate tentativeness or politeness. The sentence might be said by a diabetic patient who wanted to eat pizza, which he shouldn't. Though this is a rather complex discourse situation, we may infer that he said it because he was begging for it and he had no idea if he would be allowed.

Secondly, *could* shows a possibility or a hypothetical condition in the future. Such as:

(6) If we could help, we would.

In this sense, the example sentence means all preparations are getting ready; it is possible for us

to eat pizza tonight.

[8] John *could* speak three languages.

*Could* indicates the ability in the past. Maybe 5 years ago, John was able to speak three languages, but unfortunately, he can't do it now. Thus the *could* here equals to *was able to do*.

Also, *could* may carry the emotion of pity towards an unsuccessful event.

(7) I could run faster.

(8) It could be better.

These two sentences imply that *I didn't run faster* and *It didn't get better*. Thus the *could* in example [8] may mean If John studied hard, he could speak three languages.

## 2.5 Will

Deontic modality is the basic usage of a modal *will*. Firstly, when it is used in active voice, the subject of the sentence is also the performer of the action. Secondly, speaker can use *will* to request or order the listener to practice something. Thirdly, for the speaker's order, it could be based on social rules of rules of life.

[9] We *will* send you a prospectus.

In the first place, *will* shows an intention. Leech said that it is 'concerned with 'volition', which often combines with *will*'s future implication of prediction' (2004: 87). Similar examples are:

(9) We will do our best

(10) She will go on his way.

At the same time the speaker of example [9] showed an intention to send the addresser a prospectus, he also implied his *determination* and *insistence* that sending a prospectus was the event that he must do.

Thirdly, with a very weak volition, *sending you a prospectus* can be what was going to happen in the next stage. It is a kind of pattern or habit, as natural as *sun will rise tomorrow*.

[10] They *will* be in Moscow by now.

*Will* always refers to the future. However, 'the speaker makes a 'forecast about the present', base on previous experience, concerning an event not directly observable' (Leech 2004: 126). If we treat the 'in Moscow' as a conclusion, the conclusion was based on the knowing of the character or the evidence the speaker can observe directly. Thus the epistemic *will* illustrates the assertive assumption to the present.

## 2.6 Would

[11] She said that they *would* reply soon.

Besides *would* is changed from *will* for grammar reasons. '*Would* is clearly the tentative form of *will*' (Palmer 1990: 58). *Would* describes a scene that people on a past time point considered an event that was going to happen or supposed to be happening. Examples are:

(11) She said she would turn up.

(12) He told me he would be free tonight.

Secondly, similar with *will*, *would* carries a strong volition. And this usage is always used in indirect speech. For example:

(13) I said I would do my best.

The sentence contains a strong belief and no matter how hard it would be, the speaker would try his best.

[12] They *would* say that, wouldn't they?

*Would* indicates a habitual action, may be not a very strong one, here. It shows that the event is used to happen and means *always*. In this sentence, the speaker implies what they would say according to the words said by them before. From my point of view, *would* contains strong emotion of expectation or criticism. Such as:

(14) She would be late for the date sometimes.

The speaker showed the dissatisfaction towards the character.

## 2.7 Shall

[13] We *shall* send you an invoice within a week.

The most basic meaning is intention with volition. It implies an inevitable event in the future. For example, if *I will leave* means I am going to leave, then *I shall leave* has the meaning of nothing can prevent me from leaving. Thus the *shall* in example [13] shows the volition of the addresser. Though this distinction between *shall* and *will* is fading.

Furthermore, Palmer stated that (1987: 140) ‘With *shall* the speaker gives an undertaking, guarantees that an action will take place. It can thus be described as making a promise or a threat.’ With the first person subject, *shall* is like a speaker’s guarantee. Sentence (15) is more like a guarantee than a will.

(15) I shall write to you at the end of the month.

[14] Employees *shall* retire at 65.

*Shall* is used to show rules and regulations here (Leech 2004: 88). He points out that it carries the meaning of *must*. It applies this example sentence, *which means that employees must retire at 65*. Proper examples can be:

(16) Candidates shall remain in their seats until all the papers have been collected.

## 2.8 Should

As a modal verb, *should* usually is used as deontic modality. Generally, it has the following characteristics: 1) When used in the active voice, the subject of the sentence is the performer of the action and the subject is mainly the second person. 2) The speaker believes that the addressee has a duty or significance to do something. 3) The duty or the significance can be moral or legal.

[15] You should read this book.

Leech (2004: 100-101) provides the idea that *should* is a ‘weakened obligation’, ‘*should* has the same kind of meaning as *must*, except that it expresses not confidence, but rather lack of full confidence’. The tone is weakened by *should*. When this theory applies to example [15], the speaker’s undertone is *You must read this book but I don’t know whether you will or not*.

*Should* implies the meaning of duty or obligation. Examples are:

(17) He should study hard and

(18) You should do as he says.

However, this deontic *should* often ‘imply that the event will not take place’ (Palmer 1987: 132). Thus the undertone in example [15] is *You don’t read enough*. Also, it could mean ‘it is your interest to read this book’.

[16] It’s desirable that you *should* attend the class.

Palmer (1987:134) said that ‘*Should* is often used in subordinate clauses after expressions of surprise and similar feelings’, and the *should* in this sense is called ‘Evaluative’ *should*. It may tell the emotion of the speaker, glad, surprise, pity or worry. A further accurate example goes like:

(19) It is absurd that such things should happen to a family like theirs.

This sentence carried the surprise of the addresser. Thus, example [16] means: we are so *glad* and *surprise* if you can attend the class.

## 3. Conclusion

Modal verbs have always been the study focus of linguistics. However, despite the fruitful achievements, modal verbs are still difficult for second language learners. The difficulty lies on the ambiguity of meanings and the borders as well. For example, both *may* and *can* could express the deontic modality with minor differences, which is hard for second language learners to feel and use. Thus, it is vital to study the category and meanings of these modal verbs.

This paper discussed the basic meanings of some modal verbs through examples from the perspective of deontic modality and epistemic modality from which we can draw the conclusion that each modal verb carries multiple functions and meanings. Moreover, they can be quite unique in different situations. Therefore, ‘rather than looking at individual modal items and the meanings

they encode in isolation' (Palmer 2003: Preface x), more efforts should be paid in knowing the speaker and situation. Hopefully, this paper may provide some reference for the modal study and help the second language learner get a better known of different modal verbs.

## References

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