

## IT WILL/MUST/MAY BE A MODAL AUXILIARY

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**Abstract:** *The English modal verb system has proved to be a difficult linguistic concept even for advanced EFL students. Their comprehension/usage problems may be of purely morpho-syntactic and semantic nature or may also involve sociolinguistic dimensions. The paper examines the question of polysemy, sociolinguistic factors and the role of ELT models.*

**Keywords:** *applied linguistics, CEFR, ELT, modal auxiliaries, theoretical linguistics*

### 1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the system of English modal verbs is a difficult concept for many EFL students regardless of their level of proficiency. There may be several causes that give rise to comprehension/usage problems, but perhaps the most persisting one involves the sociolinguistic dimension of modality. This problem is well-described by Leech (2004:72):

[m]any pages, chapters, books have been written about the modal auxiliary verbs in English. One thing that makes it difficult to account for the use of these words [...] is that their meaning has both a logical (semantic) and practical (pragmatic) element. We can talk about them in terms of such logical notions as 'permission' or 'necessity', but this done, we still have to consider ways in which these notions become remoulded by the social and psychological influences of everyday communication [...] factors such as [...] politeness, tact and irony.

It needs to be stressed that the role of the context and other sociolinguistic factors within the (English) modal system has been thoroughly investigated from a theoretical perspective in recent decades. In fact, it is nowadays almost impossible to find a theoretical model examining modal auxiliaries that does not take the context and the sociolinguistic factors into consideration. Yet, it seems that modern applied models, including ELT models, do not follow this trend, but rather resort to more traditional theoretical models in which the sociolinguistic factors are not regarded as significant.

We believe that this approach is one of the most dominant factors that contribute to EFL learners' comprehension/usage problems with the English modal verb system. To confirm the claim, the paper presents the treatment of (English) modal verbs in formal approaches (section 2), and then compares it with those employed in the ELT applied models (section 3). Section 4 concludes the paper.

## **2. Theoretical Approaches**

### **2.1. Basic Tenets**

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by structural linguistics, whose primary aim was to abstract language as a system from its spoken and written use in order to first identify linguistic elements, and then to classify them into a definite set of linguistic categories. The basic principle behind structuralism was that language is represented by an indefinite set of grammatical structures which can be split into different building blocks (e.g. phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses, etc.), and joined together by a finite set of grammatical rules (e.g. word-formation rules). In such a framework, sociolinguistic concepts such as context and the social position of the user were almost non-existent.

The 1950s saw a shift in perspective that moved away from the notions of formalism and structuralism. Although the tradition of formalism and the pure structural approach were preserved in some schools (e.g. Chomskian theoretical approaches), other schools tried to expand their research into other, at that time not purely linguistic, realms, including contextual and sociolinguistic dimensions. Halliday's Functional Grammar, for example, primarily builds on the function of language, and identifies three functions, the so-called metafunctions of language: (i) ideational metafunction (the linguistic representation of ideas/concepts), (ii) interpersonal metafunction (the function of language with regard to users' personal and social relationships), and (iii) textual metafunction (the function of language with regard to context). (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). According to the Functional Grammar perspective, every linguistic expression is never construed *per se*, but it always needs to fulfil the three metafunctions. All three metafunctions co-exist in any linguistic expression, but any one of the metafunctions can play a dominant role in a given context/text type. Thus, the same linguistic expression can obtain different interpretations, depending on which metafunction is more dominant in a given context/text type. Halliday's concept is further developed by S. Dik (1997), whose main objective is to focus on the relationship between the instrumentality of language (i.e. language as an instrument of human interaction) and the effect of the linguistic expression within a given social interaction. Cognitive linguistics, another school that rejects the structuralist and generativist claims that the linguistic faculty is autonomous, argues that grammar should be

understood in terms of conceptualisation, and that our knowledge of language is not an innate human property, but arises from our linguistic experience/exposure, or, in plain words, from language in use (Croft and Cruse 2004). Thus, dominant modern models, with the exception of structuralism and its offshoot theories, pay special attention to the contextual and interpersonal function of language. To illustrate these notions with regard to the usage of English modal verbs, let us now examine diagram (1). It represents the correlation between three most important functions/concepts acknowledged by the contemporary theoretic linguistic schools. The use of neutral terms is intentional, since the paper does not want to advocate any particular linguistic theory.

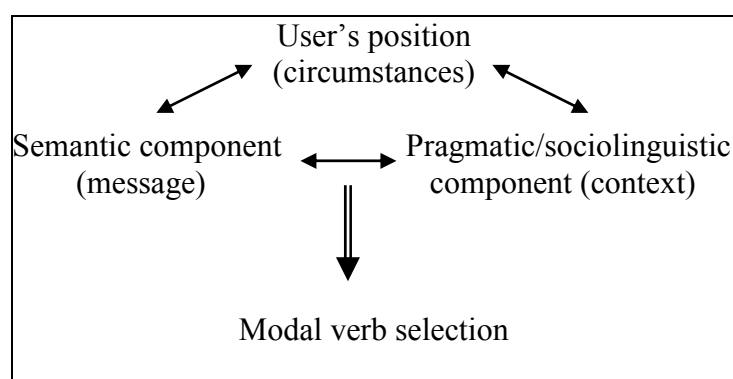


Diagram 1: Correlations between different linguistic functions with reference to the modal verb selection.

Let us exemplify the interdependencies presented in diagram 1 by addressing the differences between utterances (1).

- (1) During a board meeting:
- a) It may be clear to everyone that this plan won't work.
  - b) It must be clear to everyone that this plan won't work.

In the given situation (i.e. during a board meeting), the core message of the utterances in (1) is almost identical: it expresses a degree of obligation imposed by the speaker on the addressee(s). Yet, we may assume that the social position (pragmatic/sociolinguistic component) or the circumstances are not identical. (1a) is typically produced by a person who is institutionally inferior, whereas (1b) can be produced only if the speaker is socially either superior or equal in rank. This fact is directly reflected in the selection of the modal verbs. *May*, often referred to as a tentative or face-saving modal verb of obligation, is selected by users of inferior social rank, whereas *must*, the modal verb denoting strong and direct obligation, is typically selected in cases

in which the user is socially superior or equal in rank. In a reverse situation, the selection of the modal verb *may* would be considered too weak, and *must* too strong, even offensive.

## 2.2. Modal Verbs and Theoretical Approaches

Two different approaches to English modal verbs can be found within the contemporary descriptive theoretical frameworks. The first, I will call it the polysemous approach, argues that since there are many different independent meanings of modal verbs, they should be analysed as polysemous items. The main aim of this approach (cf. Lyons 1977, Palmer 1991, Bybee and Fleischman 1995, Huddleston and Pullum 2002 among others) is to identify as many discrete meanings of an individual modal verb as possible. This strategy can be best observed in (2), where isolated sentences illustrate various (modal) meanings of *will*. The list is far from exhaustive, since it excludes its (pure) temporal meanings:

- (2) a) This will be the man you're looking for. → supposition
- b) You will remain where you are! → command
- c) I'll write tomorrow. → promise
- d) Parents tell their children they'll stop their pocket money. → threat
- e) You cannot find a publisher who will take it. → volition
- f) Some drugs will improve the condition. → power
- g) A: "I can't breathe." → insistence  
B: "Well, if you will smoke like that, what can you expect?"
- h) Accidents will happen. → characteristic situation
- i) She will sit for hours watching TV. → habits
- j) Oil will float on water. → inference

The monosemous approach to English modal verbs (cf. Haegeman 1983, Klinge 1993, Groefsema 1995, Papafragou 2000 among others) claims that each modal verb has one core meaning, which is then modified by the context and other sociolinguistic factors. The aim of the monosemous approach is to identify the core meanings of the modal verbs, the so-called modal indeterminates, and determine the sociolinguistic factors that affect the interpretation of a modal indeterminate. Comparing the two approaches, we can easily establish the direct link with the theoretical approaches presented in 2.1: the polysemous approach is reminiscent of the structuralistic tradition, whereas the monosemous approach is closer to functional and cognitive theories.

## 3. Applied Linguistic Approaches

### 3.1. Basic Tenets

The principal role of applied linguistic models is to put the findings of the theoretical linguistics into practice. It is used to solve a wide spectrum of everyday language related problems, including fields such as sociology, computer science, anthropology and pedagogy. Since the focus of the paper is the use of the English modal verbs by ELT students, special attention will be paid to the ELT applied models.

Stemming from the deep-rooted structuralist tradition, LT models in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century adopted a similar approach to language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 2001:50-71). The commonly held belief was that the prerequisite for a good command of a foreign language was a good knowledge of the target language grammatical system. Grammar was seen as a definite set of grammatical structures that can be learnt by recognizing the building blocks of the language in question, and combining them linearly by applying various grammatical rules. This concept advocated the use of charted diagrams to explain the grammatical system of the foreign language. Such diagrams have persisted to the present day, as shown by diagram 2:

### Question forms

Word order

The usual word order for questions is as follows.

Question word	(Auxiliary) verb	Subject	
—	Was	she	tired?
—	Have	they	arrived?
What	does	'collocation'	mean?
Who	are	you	meeting?
When	did	he	arrive?

Kay & Jones (2009: 126)

Diagram 2: Grammar diagram following the structuralist tradition.

Late 1960s saw an emergence of a new approach to the language teaching, the so-called Communicative Language Teaching (henceforth: CLT). CLT was strongly influenced by the contemporary developments in theoretical linguistics, in particular, in the field of functional grammar. It is, therefore, not surprising that CLT lays a strong emphasis on the functional and communicative definition of language. The approach aims at making communicative competence the goal of language teaching as well as developing procedures for the teaching of the four language skills (Richards and Rodgers 2001:155). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001:156), the most distinctive features of the CLT pertaining to the grammatical issues are the following:

- (i) meaning is paramount;
- (ii) contextualisation is a basic premise;

- (iii) the target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate;
- (iv) any device that helps the learners is accepted;
- (v) accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context.

So, what CLT basically proposes is that language teaching and learning should be contextualized and meaningful; therefore, there must be a clear-cut connection between the form (i.e. structure) and the meaning. This perspective is neither controversial nor radical and is, in fact, in accordance with the parallel development in theoretical linguistics. At the same time, CLT does not claim that methods advocated before CLT are useless. Littlewood (1991:9-10), for example, points out that “we are still too ignorant about the basic processes of language learning to be able to state dogmatically what can and cannot contribute to them. Structural practice may still be a useful tool[.]” CLT’s standpoint towards linguistic forms, namely that each linguistic form must be contextually meaningful and purposeful, however, has often been misunderstood, and it has been interpreted in sense of eliminating the concept of the linguistic form *per se*. As a consequence, the term grammar with all its metalanguage has almost become a taboo word. This movement can be easily observed in present-day textbooks. For instance, grammar sections are turned into euphemistic Language or English in Use sections, participles and gerunds are referred to as *-ing* forms, syntactic units are called word groups, etc. But what CLT really calls for is the fact that any grammatical structure must be treated contextually with the emphasis on its communicative function. Other than that, anything is acceptable, providing it helps the learners.

### **3.2. Modal Verbs and Applied (ELT) Approach**

For the purposes of the analysis, several contemporary English intermediate textbooks and practice books commonly used in teaching English in Slovenia have been examined, including Soars and Soars (2009), Kay and Jones (2009) and Murphy (1994). The analysis shows that in all cases the modal verbs are treated similarly, and it identifies at least four common points:

- (i) modals are strictly analysed as polysemous items (cf. 2.2);
- (ii) the main focus is on the semantic component (cf. diagram 1);
- (iii) the explanations are supported by examples *in vacuo*, so the learners are not provided with a sufficient contextualised input (cf.: examples (2));
- (iv) the sociolinguistic component is neglected or reduced to a minimum (cf. diagram 1, and example (1)).

The question of modal verbs as polysemous items is dealt with in two ways. The dominant approach is to group modal verbs according to meaning, and then to explain the differences in meanings between the modal verbs, as in (3). The second possibility, which is slightly less typical, is the listing of different distinctive meanings of a modal verb, as in (4).

(3) Obligation: *should*, *ought to*, and *must*

Use

*Should* and *ought to* express mild obligation, suggestion, or advice. *You're always asking me for money, I think you **should** spend less.*

*You **ought to** be more careful with your money.*

*Must*, like *have to*, expresses strong obligation. *Must* can express an obligation that involves the speaker's opinion. It's personal.

*I **must** get my hair cut.*

(adapted from Soars and Soars 2009:137)

(4) *Have to*

Use

*Have to* expresses strong obligation.

*You **have to** work hard if you want to succeed.*

*Have to* expresses a general obligation.

*Children **have to** go to school until they are 16.*

(adapted from Soars & Soars 2009:137)

In addition, it is often the case that one meaning of the modal verb is emphasised, whereas other meanings are treated at a later stage and/or with less attention, for example, the deontic meanings of *must* and *should* are much more emphasised than their epistemic use. Occasionally, special attention is also paid to register variation, for example, claims that *might* is more formal and polite, whereas *may* is less formal and spoken/colloquial.

A direct result of such an approach is the learners' distorted perception of the English modal system. In particular, rather than acquiring the concept presented in diagram 1, which reflects the real-life usage of modal verbs, the learners build a simplified version (diagram 2), which can be directly linked to textbook descriptions such as those in (3) and (4). In such a model, the contextual and sociolinguistic functions are almost completely neglected.

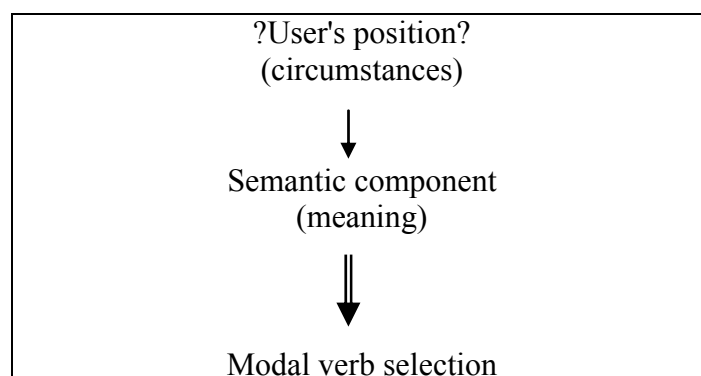


Diagram 2: Simplified model of the modal verb selection.

To show the insufficiency of the simplified selection of modal verbs, let us examine sentences in (5):

- (5) a) You may want to rewrite your essay.
- b) In your next argumentation, you should include more facts.

The interpretation of expressions such as (5a) strongly depends on the awareness of its contextual and sociolinguistic function. When the modal verb *may* is followed by a lexical verb such as *want* or *wish*, the combination is understood in the deontic rather than in the epistemic sense. We must first point out that since deontic modality pertains to social relations such as permission, obligation, and prohibition, special attention must be paid to the social position of the deontic source (i.e. the authority that imposes the modal notions). There are basically three options: the deontic source and the addressee(s) may be equal in rank (e.g. schoolmates), the deontic source may be superior in rank (e.g. teacher-student relation) or the deontic source may be inferior in rank (e.g. junior-senior partner). The selection of any deontic modal verb strongly depends on the position of the deontic source. Combinations such as *may want* are typically produced in environments in which the deontic source is socially superior to the addressee(s). In (5a), the speaker wants the addressee(s) to perform the action required (i.e. rewriting the essay), but at the same time wants to avoid explicitly imposing an obligation on the addressee(s) as would be achieved by using a more straightforward modal verb, for example *must* or *have to*. Thus, we can say that *may* in (5a) functions as a face-saving expression, giving the addressee(s) a false impression of optionality.

Now, let us return to EFL learners who may be unaware of these implications, mostly due to the distorted understanding of the modal verb use stemming from overgeneralisations provided by various textbooks (cf.: (3-4) and diagram 2). In their decoding process, we may assume that students will mainly focus on the semantic component, i.e. the meaning of the modal



verb *might*, which grammatical overgeneralisations typically associate with epistemic and tentative dimensions. Consequently, *might want* is interpreted in the sense of tentative possibility, i.e. the speaker gives the addressee(s) an open choice whether they want to carry out the activity or not. In this case, the addressees do not necessarily perform the required action, and thus the communicative function of (5a) is not fulfilled.

Let us now turn to (5b), in which *should* is used in its deontic sense. (5b) may be completely acceptable, if the participants are of equal social rank or if the deontic source is superior in rank; however, if the deontic source is inferior, then the acceptability of (5b) becomes contextually questionable. It is interesting that textbooks do place some emphasis on register variation (formal, informal, colloquial), and on regional variation (e.g. British vs. American English), but little or no attention is paid to the social position or rank of the user, so they typically assume that the participants are of the equal social position. In English culture, where the social dimension still plays a vital role, these notions are directly reflected in practical language use; therefore, it is surprising that this sociolinguistic feature is not emphasised more in present day ELT textbooks.

#### 4. Conclusion

A question may arise whether it is really necessary to explore the system of English modal verbs in a greater detail for EFL purposes. We must admit that present day textbooks do cover the basic concepts, and EFL learners do acquire a satisfactory command of the subject matter. The problems may arise when the use is contextually/sociolinguistically specific, as exemplified in (1) and (5), and discussed at greater length by Westney (1994) and references therein. The answer to the posed question may be easily found within the *Common European Framework of Reference* (henceforth: CEFR). Descriptors for B2 level (Independent User, (upper)-intermediate level) state among others:

- (i) Can understand recordings in standard dialect likely to be encountered in social, professional or academic life and identify speaker viewpoints and attitudes as well as the information content. (CEFR:68)
- (ii) Can communicate [...] with good grammatical control [...], adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances. (CEFR:74)
- (iii) Can engage in extended conversation on most general topics in a clearly participatory fashion, even in a noisy environment. Can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker. Can convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences. (CEFR:76)

Here we can observe that the basic concepts of the English modal verb system are not enough, since even at the (upper)-intermediate stage it is required that the users be comfortable in the original target language environment. Thus, a user having problems with either decoding or encoding modal messages in natural i.e. unadapted environments cannot be described as a competent B2 user. Consequently, any progress to higher levels is hindered.

To conclude, ELT applied models should pay more attention to the social and pragmatic function of modal auxiliaries. There should be a well-designed balance between the purely linguistic and contextual/pragmatic components. Grammatical simplifications for language-learning purposes thus need to focus even more on the sociolinguistic function of modal auxiliaries.

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