Modal Auxiliaries and Abnormality of Time Reference

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Abstract

The verb phrase is the primary grammatical element where time distinctions are expressed. The time at which an action or event took or takes place is usually indicated by the tense of the verb used, that is, the verb is conjugated according to time. Verb tense is then the indicator of time . In other words, it is the form of the verb that refers to the time of an action or event. The case is different with modal auxiliary verbs in that they do not usually conjugate to show tense and some are defective. Hence, the present study fundamentally tends to shed light on the abnormality of time reference in the use of English modal auxiliary verbs. The concepts of modality, modal verb, time and tense are examined. A collection of example sentences will be discussed as the data for the purpose of showing the time a given modal verb refers to. The study ends up with some concluding remarks to show the abnormality of time reference.

Keywords: modality, modal auxiliary verbs, time reference

I.   Introduction

In English grammar, an auxiliary verb is a verb that adds functional or grammatical meaning to the clause in which it appears, so as to express tense, aspect, modality, voice, emphasis, etc. Auxiliary verbs usually accompany a main verb. The main verb provides the main semantic content of the clause**.** Traditionally, auxiliary verbs are divided into two subclasses; primary auxiliary verbs and modal auxiliary verbs. They all precede the main verb in a verb phrase. A primary auxiliary verb is a verb such as " **be , have and do** " each can be used as a main verb in a clause and each is able to conjugate to reflect plurality and tense as a result. In addition, primaries can be inflected for past tense (*is ~ was, are were , have ~ had, do ~ did*). The primary auxiliary "be" is used to form the progressive aspect of a lexical verb and to form the passive voice of an active clause. "have" is used to form the perfect aspect of a lexical verb. The most important use of the primary auxiliary "do" is to help form negative and interrogative clauses when no

other auxiliary is present in the verb phrase. The other group of auxiliary verbs includes what is called modal auxiliary verbs(*will, would, can , could, shall, should, may, might*). Modal auxiliaries carry two main types of meaning. The first is knowledge-related (the technical term epistemic is often used for this type). Typical meanings in this category include possibility, likelihood probability and logical necessity. The second main type of meaning of the modals is related to different kinds of control of events, states, etc. that someone or something may have. This type is technically termed as deontic. Typical meanings in this category include obligation and permission. What differentiates the primary auxiliary verbs from the modal auxiliary ones is that the primary auxiliary verbs agree with subject of the clause in which they appear, that is, there is subject verb concord in number and it is the primary verb that carries the tense inflection for the entire verb phrase, while the main verb conveys the semantic content. Primaries have an –s forms, but it is irregular *(is, has, does)*, while modals do not. Primaries have non-finite forms *(to be , being, been*), while modals do not. Crystal (2003:   ). Since primaries are inflected for tense and modals are not, there is a clear time reference in the verb phrase with a primary verb. The primary inflection indicates when an action or event takes place, such as past, present, or future. Therefore, The present paper fundamentally tends to show that there is abnormality of time reference in the use of modal verbs because they receive no tense inflection and they are defective too.

II.   Modality and Modal Verbs

Modality in English and in other languages has been approached widely and given much attention by scholars from various disciplines, namely philosophy, discourse analysis and linguistics. The definition of modality has not yet been fully agreed upon in various linguistic schools despite its long existence. For the purpose of the present paper, modality will be focused on using a linguistic approach. According to Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002: 173) modality is defined as the speaker's verdict about the "necessity" and "possibility" of subjects. Likewise, Quirk et al. (1985:219) assert that " At its general, *modality* may be defined as the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as reflect the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true." Similarly, Palmer (2001:   ) claims that modality is the subjective opinion of the speaker towards the topic. By Halliday (1970:) modality is regarded as the way that makes it possible for the speaker to interfere and take up a viewpoint in the speaking incident. In modality, this has been termed as " interpersonal function" by Palmer (1987:25). According to the theory of various language functions proposed by Halliday (1994), interpersonal function highlights the interactive connection between the speaker and addressee's attitudes and conduct more than other function. As Collins (2009: 11) states, so far, all the suggested definitions accept that modality consists of various semantic notions such as : possibility, necessity, ability, obligation, permission and hypotheticality. These notions can be expressed through a variety of means. Verbal and non-verbal forms can be used to express such notions. Modality is said to be expressed through mood and it complements mood in the construction of interpersonal meanings. It conveys the speaker's or writer's involvement in the propositional content of a given utterance. These notions can be expressed through a variety of means. Verbal and non-verbal forms can be used to express such notions.

Modality can be demonstrated in clauses through certain types of syntactic structures. It can be manifested through certain types of lexical verbs, through adjectives , adverbs and certain nominalizations. Fowler(1985:73) provides a brief list to illustrate these categories of modals. They are :

(i) modal auxiliary verbs such as shall, may, must, etc.

(ii) sentence adverbs such as probably, certainly, regrettably etc.

(iii) adjectives such as necessary, certain, unfortunate etc.

(iv) some lexical verbs and nominalizations such as permit, predict, prove, obligation, likelihood, desirability, authority, etc.

In this paper the researcher will be concerned only with the central modal auxiliaries ,namely *can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must.*

III.   Modal Auxiliary Verbs

A modal verb is a kind of auxiliary verb that is usually used with another verb to express ideas such as possibility, necessity and permission. A modal verb precedes a main verb to modify the meaning and give information about the function of that main verb. Modal verbs have simple forms but a wide variety of semantic connotations and communicative functions. Modal verbs carry two main types of meaning. The first type is knowledge-related, technically termed **epistemic**. Typical meanings in this category includes possibility**,** likelihood/probability and logical necessity. The second type of meaning of the modals is related to different kinds of control of events, states, etc. that someone or something may have. Typical meanings in this category include obligation and permission. This type of modal meaning is technically referred to as **deontic**.

Downing and Locke(1992: 332).

As the present paper is concerned with a an aspect of syntactic and morphological behaviour of modal verbs, some syntactic and morphological characteristics of modal verbs are to be stated . As stated in Coates(1983: 4) , a modal auxiliary verb has the following characteristics:

(a)   Takes negation directly (*can't, mustn't*).

(b)   Takes inversion without DO (*can I ?, must I ?)*

(c)   'Code' (*John can swim and so can Bill*).

(d)   Emphasis (*Ann COULD solve the problem*).

(e)　　　　No –s form for third person singular (*cans, *musts).

(f)　　　　No non-finite forms (*to can, *musting).

(g)　　　　No co-occurrence (*may will).

IV.　　Time ,Tense and Time Reference

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:40) state that " Time is a universal, non-linguitic concept with three divisions: past ,present and future… ." .　　　Quirk et al.(1985:175) declare that " …, time can be thought of as a line (theoretically, of infinite length) on which is located, as a continuously moving point, the present moment. Anything ahead of the present moment is in the future time, and anything behind it is in the past". Tense refers to the location of an action in time. It indicates whether the action is in the present or the past. Tense can be identified by the inflections of the verb. That is to say, verb tense in English is usually indicated by the grammatical form of the verb. There are only two tenses in English. They are past tense and present tense. As their names suggest, past tense is used to talk about actions and events in the past whereas present tense is used talk about the actions and events in the present. Future is not considered as a separate tense since it does not involve any inflections of the verb. English uses certain grammatical constructions to express the future time. Future time is rendered by means of modal auxiliaries, by semi-auxiliaries, or by the simple present or present progressive forms. (ibid: 213).

Time reference refers to when the action takes place, such as past, present, or future**.** This is a temporal concept in how human beings look at time and reality. In a complex verb phrase containing a an auxiliary verb before the main one, it is the auxiliary verb that indicates the time and usually agrees with the subject. For example ,

(a) I *have* washed my car. Present time

(b) We *were* taken to a big room. Past time

But,

(c) I *could* meet you next week.

Sentences (a) and (b) clearly indicate the time of the action by means of the auxiliary verb forms (have ~ present, were ~ past). In sentence (c), though the modal auxiliary verb (could) is in its past form, it refers to a future time. Moreover, a present form of a modal verb can have a variety of time reference. This abnormality of time reference in the use of modal verbs can be more clarified in the following sentences:

a. He may be going there tomorrow.

b. He may be going there now.

c. He may have been there yesterday.

d. He may go there.

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Of these, sentence (a) may be said to have future time reference, sentence (b) to have present time reference, and sentence (c) to have past time reference. With sentence (d) there is an ambiguity. Interpreted as if it contained the word <u>sometime</u>, it can only refer to an action in the future; interpreted as if it contained the word <u>often</u> or <u>sometimes</u>, the time reference is indefinite and the action has to be understood as being frequentative.

V.   Discussion

As has already been stated that there is no normal time reference in the use of modal verbs. Quirk et al. (1985: 128) state that " Not only the present forms, but the past forms of modal auxiliaries can be used to refer to present and future time (often with hypothetical or tentative meaning) :"

I think he may / might retire next May.

Will / would you phone him tomorrow?

Also modal auxiliaries which do not have a distinct past forms (e.g. must, need, ought) can be used to refer to the past in indirect speech: I told him he *must* be home early. ['… had to be… '] (ibid).

To prove the statement of the paper, the data involved in this paper is a collection of sentences in each of which one modal verb appears to have more than one time reference.

CAN

The present form of the modal *can* can have a variety of time reference as in the following sentences:

(a) Even expert drivers <u>can</u> make mistakes.

(b) You <u>can</u> borrow my typewriter tomorrow.

(c) If you <u>can</u> pass your driving test next month, you will able to visit us more often during the summer.

In sentence (a), the modal verb *can* has a present time reference with a possibility meaning.

In sentence (b), the modal verb *can* has a future time reference with a permission meaning.

In sentence (c) the modal verb *can* has a future time reference with an ability meaning. (ibid: 222-223)

COULD

The past form of can (could) can also have different time references as in :

(a) When Tom was 16, he <u>could</u> run 100 metres in 11 seconds.

(b) <u>Could</u> I use your telephone?

(c) What shall we do this evening? We <u>could</u> go to the cinema.

(d) If it stopped raining, we <u>could</u> go out.

(e) There <u>could</u> be another rise in the price of petrol soon. Murphy (1987: 52,54,72)

In each of the above sentences, the modal past form *could* has a specific time reference.

The *could* in sentence (a) is the past form can with past ability meaning. *Could* in sentence (b) has a present or future time reference with permission meaning. *Could* in sentence (c) has a present time reference with possibility meaning. *Could* in sentence (d) has a future time reference with a possibility or ability meaning. *Could* in sentence (e) refers to a future time with a possibility meaning.

MAY

The present form of the modal verb *may* can refer to present or future happenings with its usual meanings of giving permission and possibility.

(a) You <u>may</u> borrow my car if you like.   Quirk & Greenbaum (1973: 53)

(b) I'm not sure where to go for my holidays but I <u>may</u> go to Italy. Murphy (1987: 60)

In sentence (a) the modal verb *may* has a present and future time reference with a permission meaning. In sentence (b) the same modal verb has a future time reference with a possibility meaning.

MIGHT

Might is the past form of *may* ; it can refer to the past, present as well as future time.

(a) He told her that she <u>might</u> be able to answer that question. Quirk et al. (1985:1031)

(b) I wonder if I <u>might</u> borrow some coffee. (ibid: 233)

(c) The whether forecast is not very good. It <u>might</u> rain this afternoon. Murphy (1987: 60)

In its past form, the modal verb *might* has a specific time reference in each of the above instances. In sentence (a) *might* refers to the past in reported speech with a possibility meaning. In sentence (b) it has a present time reference with tentative permission in polite request. In sentence (c) *might* has a future time reference with the meaning of possibility.

SHALL

Most commonly, the modal *shall* is used to show that something will take place or happen in the future, but it can have a time reference other than that of future as is shown in the following examples.

(a) I <u>shall</u> be twenty-one on Thursday.   Eckersley and Eckersley (1960: 162)

(b) <u>Shall</u> we deliver the goods to your home address? Quirk et al. (1985:230)

(c) The vendor <u>shall</u> maintain the equipment in good repair. ibid.

In sentence (a) the modal verb *shall* has a future time reference. In sentence (b) *shall* has a present time reference with the meaning of making offers. In sentence (c) *shall* has a present time reference with meaning of obligation in legal or quasi-legal discourse. In this sense, *shall* is often found in legal language which imposes a law or regulation.

SHOULD

(a) Shall I open the window? She asked me if she <u>should</u> open a window. Quirk et al. (1985:231)

(b) You <u>should</u> do as he says. Quirk(1973: 55)

(c) She's been studying very hard, so she <u>should</u> pass her examination. Murphy (1987: 70)

In sentence (a), *should* is used as an analogue of *shall* only in reported speech, so it has a past time reference. In sentence (b) the *should* has a present time reference with its usual meaning of obligation. In sentence (c) the same modal *should* has a future time reference with the meaning of probability.

WILL

The most common use of the modal verb *will* is to refer to futurity. It can have a time reference other than that of future as in the following examples:

(a) He <u>will</u> be here in half an hour. Quirk et al. (1985:212)

(b) That<u>'ll</u> be the postman. [on hearing the doorbell ring] (ibid : 228)

(c) He <u>will</u> talk for ours, if you let him. (ibid :228)

In sentence (a) the modal verb <u>will</u> has a future time reference with its usual meaning of prediction. In sentences (b) and (c) the same modal has a present time reference with meanings of logical necessity similar to <u>must</u>.

WOULD

The modal *would* can be the past form of *will* in reported speech with a past time reference. It can also have other time references as is shown in the following examples:

(a) Tom: I'll lend you some money, Ann. Tom said that he <u>would</u> lend Ann some money. Murphy (1987: 78)

(b) I wish it <u>would</u> stop raining. (ibid)

(c) <u>Would</u> you please help me to address these letters? Quirk et al. (1985:229)

(d) I <u>would</u> talk to the doctor if I were you. Longman Exams Dictionary (2006:1779)

The modal *would* in sentence (a) refers to past time as it is the past form of will in reported speech. In the subsequent examples, *would* has a present time reference with the meaning of complaining about a present situation, making a polite request and giving advice.

MUST

The modal auxiliary does not have a distinct past form. Must has no past tense form (historically, it is

itself a past tense form). It can be used in indirect speech where the context is past. In addition, epistemic *must* can refer to states and activities in the past, present and future.

 (a) The smiths must have a lot of money.   Quirk et al. (1985:224)

 (b) John <u>must</u> be coming home tomorrow. Palmer (1987: 123)

(c) He <u>must</u> be in his office. He said he <u>must</u> be in his office. (ibid:124)

(d) 'She must have been such a pain in the neck… ' Coates (1983 : 44)

As can be seen from the above illustrative examples, the modal verb *must* which has no past form nor it can be inflected to demonstrate present or future tense can refer to past, present and future time.

In sentence (a) *must* has a present time reference with its usual meaning of logical necessity. In sentence (b) *must* has a future time reference with meaning of epistemic meaning. In sentence (c) *must* has past time reference in the reported speech clause. In sentence (d) *must* has a past reference time . It has a past time reference usually with such a construction as [must + have+ pp] .

VI.   Concluding Remarks

Being a category of English auxiliary verbs, modal verbs are the most problematic for both readers and students of English as a foreign language. Their difficulty lies in that they are unlike other verbs in the English verb system in terms of time relation expressed in the verb phrase. The time reference of an action or event is usually indicated by the form of the verb, that is, the verb is inflected to locate a situation in time, past, present or future, but modal verbs are defective. They receive no inflection to show the time of a situation. Moreover, a given form of a modal verb, a present or past counterpart, does not necessarily coincide with time reference as has been stated in section of discussion . For example, a past form of a modal verb can refer to past, present and future time.

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