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

An auxiliary verb in English grammar has a functional or grammatical significance in the clause in which it is written in order to express tense, tense, aspect, mode of expression, voice, emphasis etc. Auxiliary verbs are usually associated with a principal verb. The principal verb contains the principal semanthetic content of the clause. Auxiliary verbs are traditionally classified as two subsidiary verbs; primary auxiliary verbs and modal auxiliary verbs. In a verb phrase they all precede the main verb. A primary auxiliary verb is a verb that can be used as a principal word in the clause "be, have and do" and that can then conjugate to reflect plurality and thus tense. Moreover, primaries can be inflected for a past time (is ,was, are, were~ , do , did ,have , had). In order to form the progressive aspect of a lexical verb and the passive voice of an active provision, the primary auxiliary "be" is used. "have" serves as a lexical verb 's perfect aspect. When there is no other auxiliary present in the verb phrase, the most important use of primary auxiliary "do" is to help form negative, questioning clauses.

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The other auxiliary verb group comprises what is known as modal auxiliary verbs (can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might). There are two main types of meaning for modal auxiliaries. The first concerns knowledge (the technical term epistemic for this type is frequently used). In this category, the typical meanings are opportunity, probability and logical necessity. The second primary type of meaning of modalities is related to various types of event control, status, etc. Technically, this type is called deontic. In this category, typical meanings include permission and obligation. 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 main inflection indicates when an action or event, such as past, present or future, is taking place. This paper therefore tends to show that time references in modal verbs are abnormal since they do not receive tense inflection and are also defective.

II.   Modality and Modal Verbs

Modality was widely addressed and given a lot of attention by scholars from diverse disciplines, namely philosophy, discussion analysis and linguistics in English and in other languages. Despite its long existence, the concept of modality is still not fully agreed in several language schools. The modality will be focused on the language approach used for this paper. The modality is laid down as the speaker 's judgment on the "requirements" and the "competences" of the subjects according to Huddleston and Pullum et al . (2002: 173). Quirk et al. (1985:219) also asserts that "in general, the modality is defined as the way in which a clause 's meaning is defined to reflect the judgment by the speaker that its proposal is true" (1985:219).Palmer (2001:) also claims that modality is the speaker's subjective view of the issue. By Halliday (1970:) modality is viewed as the way in which the speaker can interfere in the speaking incident and take a view. Palmer's modality was called "interpersonal function" (1987:25). The interpersonal function underlines the interactive connection between the speaker and the speaker, according to Halliday's (1994) theory of various language functions.

As stated by Collins (2009: 11), all the definitions proposed to date accept that modality consists of several semanticconcepts such as: possibility, necessity, ability, obligation, allowance and hypothesis. These concepts can be expressed in a number of ways. Such notions can be expressed through verbal and non-verbal forms. The modality is called mood and complements mood in the construction of interpersonal significances. It communicates the participation of the speaker or writer in a particular speech's proposing content. These concepts can be expressed in a number of ways. Such notions can be expressed through verbal and non-verbal forms.

Modality can be demonstrated in clauses through certain types of syntactic structures. It may be expressed by certain types of lexical verb, by adjectives, adverbs and certain nominations. Fowler(1985:73) provides a short list of these modal categories.

They are :

(i) Shall, may, must, as modal auxiliary verbs.

(ii) Probably, certainly, regrettably etc. as sentence adverbs

(iii) Necessary, certain, unfortunate as adjectives.

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

The researcher is concerned only with the central modal auxiliaries in this paper, namely can, could, shall, should, may, might, will and would.

III.   Modal Auxiliary Verbs

A modal verb is a kind of auxiliary verb which is usually used to express thoughts like possibility, necessity and permissionwith a different verb. A modal verb precedes a principal verb in order to change the meaning and give the function of that central verb. Modal verbal forms have a wide variety of semantical connotations and functions. Two main meaning types are associated with modal verbs. The first type is the technically known epistemic knowledge. In this category, typical meanings include possibility, probability / probability and logical necessity. The second type of meaning of the modals is linked to different types of events control, states etc. In this category, the typical meanings are obligations and authorisations. Technically, this kind of modal meaning is called deontic(Downing and Locke1992: 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) , The following features are present in the modal auxiliary verb:

(a)   (mustn't can't,). Direct negative,

(b)   (must I? can I ?) Inversion without DO

(c)   (Sam can swim and so can Tom). 'Code'

(d)   (Sara COULD solve the problem). Emphasis

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

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

(g)   (may will). No co-occurrence

IV.   Time ,Tense and Time Reference

Time is a universal, unlinguistic concept in its three divisions – present and future (Quirk &Greenbaum 1973:40) . Quirk et al. (1985:175) state that "time can be understood as a line (theoretically, of infinite length) on which the present moment is situated, as a constantly moving point. Anything ahead of the present moment is in the future time, and everything behind it is in the past." Tense refers to the timeliness of an action. It indicates whether the action is in the past or in the present. Tense can be identified through verb inflections. That is, in English, verb tense is usually indicated by the verb's grammatical form. English only contains two tenses. They are present tense, and past tense. As their names indicate, the past is used to discuss past actions and events, while the present is used to talk about current actions and events. The future is not regarded as a separate tense because no verb inflexions are involved. In order to express the future, English uses certain grammatical constructions. For the future, the modal aids or semi-auxiliaries or simple present or present progressive forms are employed. (ibid: 213).

Time means when the action takes place, like the past, the present and the future. This is a temporal concept in the way people see time and reality. In a complex verb-phrase with an auxiliary verb in front of the main verb, the auxiliary verb shows 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) indicate the action time 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. The following sentences can explain the abnormalities of the time reference in the use of modal verb:

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.

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 stated previously, the use of modal verbs has no standard time reference. Quirk et al. (1985: 128) asserts that not only present, but also previous forms of modal auxiliaries (often with hypothesis or tentative significance) can be used to refer to the present and future times:

 I think she may / might travel next May.

Will / would they call her tomorrow?

In indirect language, modal auxiliaries that do not have distinct past forms , for example need, ought, must, they can also be used to refer to the past.. [… 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 good mechanics <u>can</u> make some damages.

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

(c) If Bell <u>can</u> pass his driving test next week, he will able to drive more often in the town.

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 could run 100 metres in 11 seconds.

(b) Could I use your telephone?

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

(d) If it stopped raining, we could go out.

(e) There could 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.

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 the future reference with a possibility or ability meaning. Could in sentence (e) refers to a future time with a possibility meaning.

MAY

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

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

(b) I'm not sure where to go for my holidays but I may 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) She told him that he <u>might</u> be able to solve that problem. Quirk et al. (1985:1031)

(b) she wonders if she <u>might</u> add some sugar. (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 in:

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

(b) <u>Shall</u> I send the email to you? Quirk et al. (1985:230)

(c) The salesperson <u>shall</u> keep the gear 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 clean the board? She asked me if she should clean the board. Quirk et al. (1985:231)

(b) she should act as he says. Quirk(1973: 55)

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

In sentence (a), should is used as an analogue of shall only in reportedspeech, 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 the future time reference with a meaning of probability.

WILL

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

(a) They will be here in half an hour. Quirk et al. (1985:212)

(b) That'll be the doctor. [on hearing the bell ring] (ibid : 228)

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

In sentence (a) the modal verb will 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 must.

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 would lend Ann some money. Murphy (1987: 78)

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

(c) <u>Would </u>you carry this box for me? 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 first sentence 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 doesn't have past tense (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 Bells must have a lot of cars.   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 noticed from the above illustrative examples, must which has no past form nor it can be inflected to demonstrate present or future tense can be used refer to past, present and the future time.

In the first sentence, must refer to 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. Their difficulty lies in that they are unlike the other verbs in English verb system in terms of

time relation expressed in the verb phrase. The time reference of an event or action is usually clarified 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, the past form of a modal verb can refers to the past, the present and the future time.

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