



Morphological and Syntactic Features of the Modal Verbs in English/BY

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR: HASHIM SA'DOON SALEEM

UNIVERSITY OF MOSUL / COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Abstract

The current research is devoted to tackle full information about morphological and syntactic features of the English modals with reference to different modal forms. Modal forms are posed here whether in contracted or uncontracted shape, in negative or affirmative forms.

The reason behind selecting this topic is that the writer of the research has noticed a great deal of errors made by learners even by those in advanced stages. Most of these are overlooked by many learners sometimes on purpose, but in most cases unintentionally due to lack of mastery on the features presented in the body of the research. The knowledge given in the research may be considered as a ready-made recipe for those who endeavor to develop their English and have the ambition to speak better language.

By the way, most English grammarians agree on the fact that modals, besides, verb tenses are distinguished as the most difficult subjects in the English grammar. The problems, however, faced by learners in this area have driven the researcher to put this linguistic issue under investigation.



Section One

Introduction

1.1 The problem

There seems to be certain difficulty in the learning of English modals which arises whenever and wherever English as a foreign language is taught and studied. Experience in teaching English as a foreign language reveals that Iraqi learners often face difficulties in the learning of modal morphology and syntax which sharply differ from the lexical verbs in many features. Learners may ignore the morphological and syntactic features in their daily communication whether in spoken or written English. Sometimes they may misuse these aspects due to the overlap between modals and lexical verbs. The differences between the two types of verbs are clearly stated in section two of the research.

The researcher's duty is to detect the problematic points facing college Iraqi learners of English in this area.

1.2 Definition of Terms

Modals

Modals are a group of words which modify the meaning of the verb phrase, adding to it a variety of shaded meanings such as capability, possibility, futurity, permission, volition, probability, etc.

Morphology

Morphology is the study of form and structure of words, i.e., this subject usually deals with the internal structure of word-formation. Hence, morphology of



different languages are studied and tackled differently, especially if they are of remote and different origin.

Syntax

Syntax usually refers to grammar, structure, and order of different grammatical elements in a language statement. Randomly, syntax is used in the meaning of grammar in most features or it resembles the term of grammar in many qualities. Different languages have and use different syntax.

Standard English

Standard English is that variety of English which is understood by English-speaking people and used and spoken by the educated people in the Southern Britain. It is taught also to non-native speakers learning English. However, it is chosen in this research because it is the type of English taught in Iraq.

1.3 The hypotheses

The degree of difficulty an Iraqi learner of English faces when using modals in spoken and written sentences depends largely on the complication of morphological and syntactic features of modals which constitute a unified category of words in English. However, it is proposed that:

1. these features represent a big barrier against easy learning and consequently using modals in English is a problem for the Iraqi learners.
2. modals that are sharply different in their characteristics from lexical verbs, and in several aspects from auxiliaries may add more difficulties in learning and mastering the topic under study.



3. modals are a special category of words in English, i.e., they are inserted under one unified grammatical subject whereas these words in Arabic are expressed differently; they are translated by various scattered utterances from different grammatical Arabic topics, in other words, the Arabic modal counterparts are distributed here and there in a number of grammatical subjects in the literature. The differences between the two languages upgrade the difficulties which are expected to be great and, for this reason, fast learning is often impeded as a result.

1.4 Procedures

The procedures to be pursued in this research can briefly be presented as follows:

1. presentation of the available material in relation to morphological features of modals about which the investigator believes that nothing left behind.
2. presentation of the available material related to the syntactic features of modal words and giving details on their unique aspects which are adequately covered in the next section.
3. exposure of modal forms material is presented in this research as well which is relatively rare and short in the literature.

1.5 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to:

1. write down all morphological aspects and how they are handled in spoken and written language, besides, how they are taught to Iraqi learners.
2. uncover every information item concerning the syntactic features of modal verbs and make these features easier understand and use by learners in Iraq.



3. determine the points of difficulty which may face Iraqi learners because the morphological and syntactic rules of modal words totally differ from those rules of the ordinary words.

1.6 Value of the Research

The research involves two values: theoretical and practical. Its theoretical value is to show the importance of the morphological and syntactic modal features in learning English as a foreign language.

Practically, the information posed in this research is useful to teachers, besides, the text-book writers. Grouping all features of morphology, syntax and form of modals makes the task of teaching and learning easier on the part of teachers since the material here is collected from so many books. So the research deserves the effort and helps lessening the difficulties faced by learners and even by teachers of English in high schools.

1.7 Limitation of the Research

This research is intended to put into consideration the following English modal verbs: can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should and must.

In addition, the research is presenting adequate information on morphological, syntactic and form features of modals. These features imply, for example, interrogative, negative, emphatic verb phrases beginning with modals and many other aspects that are thoroughly explained in the next section.

The research is limited to morphological, syntactic and form modal features in the standard English which is used on TV channels and spoken by the educated people. Other varieties of English are overlooked in this research since they are not often taught in the schools and colleges of Iraq.



Section Two

2.1 The Modals in the Perspective of Different Grammar Schools

The subject “modals” is highly needed in the process of teaching and learning since it occupies large spectrum in our daily communication. The material on morphological and syntactic characteristics of modals (included modal forms) are collected from a great deal of books which belong to either traditional, structural, and transformational theory since these are the basic approaches. Each theory has a special method and philosophy in explaining the grammatical matters, but all agree that modals are of a vital and difficult theme among the grammatical subjects. The three theories pose adequate material on modality of modals with ample details. The presentation of the subject in this research is comprehensively plotted from all its sides.

Traditional theorists use the term “defected verbs” (sometimes “helping verbs”) to describe the duty of modals under the pretext that the verb phrase in the sentence is incomplete unless a full verb exists. Structuralists make the same mistake that is committed by the traditionalists by considering modals as “auxiliaries”, in that they regard modals equal to verb to be , verb to have and the dummy auxiliary to do.

Modals have got the semantic duty of full verbs, despite the surface structure differences in many features with full verbs. The verb phrase, indeed, is always coloured with added meaning when a modal exists in the sentence. The other auxiliaries, verb to be , verb to have and the surface structure auxiliary to do add only the idea of time whereas modals, on the other hand, carry the idea of time and that of shaded meanings, such as possibility, permission, ability, capability, willingness, intention, insistence etc. the notion that modals are



main verbs is taken from the most up-to-date theory, viz, Transformational Generative Grammar.

2.2 Review of Modal Characteristics

After having a profound look at the subject of the research in a plenty of grammar books, two kinds of characteristics can be distinguished: those special characteristics of modals and characteristics shared with other auxiliaries. The modal characteristics are dealt with under three main subheadings: morphological characteristics, syntactic characteristics, and modal forms.

2.2.1 Morphological Characteristics

Modals are known and distinguished by certain morphological aspects which make grammarians and scholars of English consider those utterances classified as a special grammatical category.

1. the (-s) marker of the third person singular is dropped in case of using a modal, i.e., it has only one form in the present regardless of the subject used. However, ordinary verbs and even auxiliaries else than modals require the bound morpheme (-s) when the subject is in the third person singular. In his presentation of “Diversity in Language as Seen from a Consideration of Modality and Mood in English”, Halliday (1970:330) indicates:

“The absence of (-s) relates to the fact that these forms are not present but tenseless, like the corresponding forms of the non-finite verb: can go is like to go, going not like goes in this respect. Can go in the sense is able to go is present tense, so that the absence of the (-s) is here unmotivated, (it is noticeable that is to, which occurs as quasi-modal not as ‘true’ modal does not have the form of a present verb).”



the concept of tenseless modals due to the absence of the (-s) marker is insignificant because the modals are viewed as a tense carrier according to a lot of modern grammarians' philosophy, especially, Noam Chomesky in his past writings which represent the body of the transformational generative theory. The contrast between the verb phrase can go and the to-infinitive to go is not acceptable and a groundless claim since the verb phrase including a modal denotes two meanings: the idea of time, besides, that idea of action whereas to-infinitives usually carry the idea of time only. The lack of (-s) marker of the third person singular in the present is not an important reason to avoid treating modals as full verbs because modals imply integrating qualities of full verbs.

The automatic or the spontaneous deletion of the (-s) marker of the third person singular in the present is asserted in the sentence below:

1. That worker may attend the gathering tomorrow.
2. They do not occur as non-finites whether the infinitive or the participle forms. Modals, however, are not used in the progressive or in passive forms. Wrong forms of models are cited below with the selected modal must:

Modal verb

*to must

* is musting

*has musted

3. the shortened negative particle (n't) is usually attached to the modal when the negated meaning of modality is desired. The auxiliary do and its forms are used with full verbs, however, as illustrated below.

2. a. We can't drive safely.



*b. We driven't safely.

4. Nominal derivations are usually not obtained from the modals, as in:

3. *Ali's can-ity or can-ness became huge.

Jenkins (1972:13:4) demonstrates that "... canity or can-ness is ill-formed and cannot be ascribed to any obvious semantic constraint since we have ability." Ability is used to compensate for *can-ity or *can-ness according to Jenkins's thought though ability has got a clearly independent entity which is not a derivation taken from can. A few exceptions can be met in the language, however. The following examples include nominals of certain modals:

4. a. He has a strong will to fight.

b. Making a research every year is a must for most teachers in our college.

The nominals in the above examples are semantically marginal, i.e., they include only little similarity in meaning with their modal cognates.

5. Modals are uninflected words but only for tense. They have only two forms: present and past.

Modal: can, may, will, shall, must

Present: can, may, will, shall, must

Past: could, might, would, should, -----



The past modals are formed by an added ending and a vowel change. Historically, must does not have a past form in English. So, a sentence including must can be made in the past by using had to instead, e.g.

5. a. Zeki must attend the seminar now.

b. Zeki had to attend the seminar then.

A full verb, however, owns three, four or five forms.

2.2.2 Syntactic Characteristics

1. “Emphatic affirmation” can be realized through stressed modals; in this case, introducing do forms in the verb phrase is not required, as shown below:

6. a. He 'can ride a bicycle. (you are wrong to think that he cannot.)

b. * He do can ride a bicycle. (you are wrong to think that he cannot.)

Do forms, however, are used before full verbs to show emphasis, e.g.

See Palmer (1974:24-5)

7. They did have a picnic yesterday. (you are wrong to think they did not)

2. Modal negation is realized by inserting not (n't) immediately following it. Unlike the ordinary verbs, the surface structure auxiliary do and its different forms should not be used before modals to achieve negation, e.g.

8. You shall not (shan't) stay here.

9. You did not (didn't) watch that horrible scene.



3. In interrogation, the modal is placed before the subject with no need to use the auxiliary do and its forms, as in:

10. Might she participate in the final exam?

By joining points (2) and (3), a negative and interrogative sentence is created. So the modal is the first element in the discontinued verb phrase. Do forms are not used in the presence of modals whereas full verbs need introducing the auxiliary do and its forms, as cited below:

11. Can't they manage a long run?

12. Doesn't he do it better?

A word-order statement is made a question without placing the modal before the subject; in this case, rising intonation is needed like

13. She can swim | faster? ↗
14. They will travel a | broad? ↗

4. A modal cannot be followed by another modal in a single verb phrase. Hence, modals can co-occur with the other auxiliaries, viz, be and have; the verbal element following the modal suggests its uninflected form, e.g.

15. They could $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} speak \\ *spoke \\ *spoken \\ *speaking \end{array} \right\}$ good English.

16. They could $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} have \\ *has \\ *had \\ *having \end{array} \right\}$ studied harder.



17. They could $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} be \\ *being \\ *been \\ *was \\ *is \end{array} \right\}$ eating more.

Halliday(1970;330) stresses the fact that “Sometimes a speaker does produce a combination of verbal modals such as “he might ought to be here” which means “perhaps he ought to be here” ; but in such cases the second of the pair appears always to be a quasi-modal. ” Such examples are rarely met with in English. Moreover, they do not represent the normal use of modals. Using a pair of modals in a single verb phrase is non-existent in the standard English.

5. A modal is positioned as the first (finite) element in the verb phrase, regardless of how much the verb phrase is enlarged, as cited in:

18. a. She may have learnt several subjects at a time.

*b. She have may learnt several subjects at a time.

A modal does not formulate a full verb phrase by itself; the remainder of the verb phrase is either overtly expressed or implicitly involved and understood from the context, e.g.

19. a. He can speak quietly.

b. Can he speak quietly? Yes, he can. (“speak” is implied.)

6. The main verb in its simple form (including be and have) is usually put after the modal verbs as a complementary part of the verb phrase. Used and ought are excluded after each of which the to-infinitive is always used, e.g.



26. *Can this load rapidly, Ali.

10. No need to introduce the surface structure auxiliary do and its forms as pro-forms, instead modals are used to perform this linguistic duty like

27. Ali can score another goal in the match, so can Ahmed.

(i.e. and Ahmed can score another goal in the match.)

The Modal form stands for the rest of the sentence in the above examples.

2.2.3 Modal Forms

The table set below shows the classification of modal forms in English. The modals included in the following table are only those mentioned in the previous section in the subtitle 1.7 Limitation of the Research.

Full Forms			Reduced Forms	
Positive	Unshortened negative	Shortened negative	Initial Forms negative	End Forms positive
Shall	shall not		shan't	
Will	will not		won't	'll
should	should not	shouldn't		
would	would not	wouldn't		'd
Can	cannot, can not		can't	
could	could not	couldn't		
may	may not	mayn't		
might	might not	mighn't		
must	must not	mustn't		



2.2.3.1 Complete Forms and Shortened Forms

Two kinds of forms in relation to modals are available in the English grammar, viz, complete forms and shortened forms. The modal by itself uncontracted and unchanged represents the former which occurs singly, such as (can, may) or when the contracted negator n't is joined to them like (can't, couldn't). Shortened forms are those forms which are contractions of complete forms. If the beginning part of the modal remains unremoved, that part is called initial form such as won't in which the last part is deleted; but if the first part is omitted, in that case we may obtain end forms as 'll.

2.2.3.2 Unshortened Negative and Shortened Negative

A modal is negated by the negative particle not (n't is the contraction). The negative particle is used separately when it is unshortened, but joined to the modal when used as a contracted form, e.g., could not and will not. Couldn't and shouldn't are examples of merged n't with modals. We may have two possibilities when the uncontracted particle not is used with can; it is either employed separately or merged with it. If negation is marked twice, the first negator should be shortened and attached to the modal while the second is used separately in the full form though marking negation twice is rarely heard by native speaker of English.

2.2.3.3 'll and 'd as End Forms

These two contracted forms are still a matter of dispute among grammarians whether 'll should be enlarged to shall or will and whether 'd (remember that 'd is sometimes contracted for had) acts in place of would or



should. Historically, 'll and 'd were used in association with will and would respectively. Hence, Strang (1968:169) refers that "... there are many sentences in which affirmative 'll is 'tagged' with shall _ I'll do it right away, shall I? " If we resort to the sense of logic, we reach the conclusion that 'll is a reduced form belonging to shall as well. 'll is not used instead of will in the example given below:

28. The hotel will be empty of guests.

The end form of will usually exists with any one of the pronouns: I, you, he, she, we, they and who (it is excluded here). End forms 'll and 'd can be used only in combination with personal pronouns. Since these are positive contracted forms, they do not have negative contracted forms.

2.2.3.4 Rare Use of Certain Forms

— Shan't and mustn't are of limited use among most native speakers of English; shan't is noted in limited currency of use, specially, by American speakers of English though it's easily comprehended. Joos (1964:200) states that shan't is no longer in use, whereas Leech (1971:89) reaches a conclusion that shan't does not exist in American English.

“Mayn't is restricted to BE, where it is rare,” Quirk, et al (1972:62) propose. Joos (ibid) confirms that mayn't is definitely not found in English, while Leech in his book “Meaning and the English Verb” believes that this form is existent only in expressing the permission sense in the language. As for mightn't, it is not commonly resorted to by native speakers of American English whereas it still has effective dominance of use in British English.



2.3 Conclusion

Mind statistics on morphological and syntactic characteristics of modal verbs denotes that these characteristics are so many in the language and learners in Iraq may face problems in keeping them all in mind whether in speech or in writing. Some characteristics may be remembered in every day communication but mastering all seems difficult and beyond simplicity, especially, in the first years of learning English as a foreign language. Controlling the morphological and syntactic characteristics of modals demands hard work and a lot of efforts in reading and revising the body of this research. A learner should attempt to use modals automatically on his own or when he finds himself in a group of other learners. Practice and training are unavoidable to make these characteristics present in mind firmly.

Learners may make mistakes when dealing with the modal verbs, e.g. they may insert the third person singular (-s) at the end of a modal when a third person singular pronoun or its equivalent noun is used as a subject of a sentence. Moreover, the main verb following a modal may mistakenly be inflected for (-s), (-ing) or (-ed) due to the weak performance on the part of learners in this area. The simple form of the verb, however, should be placed following a modal.

The problems mentioned previously are few though the topic under study implies many other ones which are left for the reader to detect through simple thinking. Therefore, the collected material on modals (concerning morphology, syntax and modal forms) is put under logical analysis and ample comments are made on the part of the researcher. The readers of the research may



attempt to uncover the misuses and errors made in English as well. If the research is studied hard, learners, and especially teachers, may spot more problems in this area. Moreover, solutions to these problems may be supplied to reduce the difficulties faced in the process of teaching and learning. For this purpose, the research may offer a proper opportunity to help teachers and learners contribute in finding successful answers for many problems arising throughout reading it.

Exposing a new thought on the subject-matter of the research leads to an important reason behind the hardships encountered by the learners in this area. So the researcher asserts with high rate of certainty that the two languages, English and Arabic, belong to different linguistic systems and unrelated origin. Therefore, the morphological, syntactic and modal forms are treated differently in Arabic. Difficulties in learning on the part of learners in Iraq are expected to be great due to these big differences between the two languages.

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المستخلص

البحث الحالي مكرس لتناول المعلومات الوافية فيما يتعلق بالميزات الصرفية والنحوية للأفعال الإنكليزية الدالة على الحالة مع الإشارة الى اشكال هذه الأفعال بمختلف المواقع. تقدم اغلب الاشكال بصيغتها التامة والمختصرة، وكذلك في حالة النقي والاثبات. السبب وراء اختيار هذا الموضوع للبحث هو ان كاتبه قد لاحظ الأخطاء الجسيمة من قبل المتعلمين في المراحل الاولى وحتى من هؤلاء المتعلمين في المراحل المتقدمة. تغفل اغلب هذه المميزات لدى المتعلمين في أحيان قليلة عمدا، ولكن في اغلب الحالات بشكل غير متعمد بسبب النقص الحاصل في السيطرة على هذه المميزات المقدمة في متن البحث. قد تعتبر المعرفة المعطاة في البحث وصفة جاهزة لكل هؤلاء الذين يسعون في تطوير انكليزيتهم ولديهم الطموح في تكلم اللغة بطريقة أفضل.

بالمناسبة ان اغلب النحويين الإنكليز يتفقون على حقيقة ان الأفعال الدالة على الحالة بالإضافة الى موضوع الصيغ الزمنية للفعل تنفرد على انها المواضيع الأصعب في النحو الإنكليزي. المشكلات التي تواجه المتعلمين في موضوع البحث قد قادت الباحث في ان يضع هذا الموضوع قيد الدراسة والتقصي، وبهذه الطريقة يكون الباحث قد وضع مادة البحث في خدمة المتعلمين والمعلمين.