

Morphology-based explanation of modal auxiliary syntax

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This paper addresses restrictions on modal auxiliary combinations, especially double modal constructions in present-day English, as a matter of morphology. The proposal is that a morphology-based approach is an interesting and promising one as it seems to offer an explanation which will account for not only the English-internal facts, but also for cross-linguistic syntactic differences between English and other Germanic languages in this area.

Over a period of roughly five-six centuries the modal auxiliaries in English have developed into grammaticalized verbs which are syntactically more restricted than their cognate relatives in the other Germanic languages. In particular, a modal + modal combination is not acceptable in present-day English, e.g.:

Eng. (Standard): *I'll can do that tomorrow.

However, it is well known that double modal constructions do occur in certain varieties, as in parts of Northern Ireland, Scotland, as well as the southern US, e.g.:

Eng. (Ulster&Scotland): A'll can dae that themorra. (Robinson 1997: 174)

These are remnants of structures which used to be standard up until the end of Middle English times / the beginning of Early Modern English. Since then double modal constructions have faded away in standard forms of English. This is part of a wider pattern where the unacceptability of double modals is a special case of the generalization that a modal cannot follow another auxiliary in present-day standard usage. The only position accepted is that of the finite verb.

The question that this gives rise to is what exactly has happened in this area of the English verb system. Restrictions on the morphosyntactic potential of the modals have developed relatively recently in such a way that the modals now form a regularized subsystem. I intend to propose that this regularized subsystem is understandable if we consider the process of grammaticalization that these lexical items have been undergoing in Modern English. More precisely, there are reasons to claim that the modals in present-day English are now in a process of establishing themselves as verbs which are inherently non-indicative in mood.

This is formalized as a feature specification in the lexicon representation of the modals as {MOOD:[- indicative]}. It follows from this inherent feature specification that the modals are also inherently finite, as mood is one inflectional category of finite verbs. This proposal seems to open up certain interesting explanatory ideas, for instance with respect to tense - time mismatch with preterite forms of the English modals. This process of grammaticalizing the English modals as non-indicative verbs is ongoing, affecting most varieties of present-day English. It is linguistically unique in comparison with the other Germanic languages, where there is hardly any strong evidence of parallel processes affecting the cognate modal verbs.

It seems that the key to an adequate account of these cross-linguistic observations should be sought in morphology – in the grammaticalization of mood as a parameter of finiteness in present-day English.