

Modals and Semi-Modals

VI. The unruly modals and semi-modals

The **modals** (*can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must*) and **semi-modals** (*gonna, hafta, wanna, gotta, oughta, sposta, be able to, let's* and a few newcomers like *better*) offer the speaker many ways to assess the possibility, likelihood, desirability, etc. of events that usually haven't happened yet. Once again, immediate and remote are a main pair of opposites. Once the pairs of true modals—*can/could, shall/should, will/would* and *may/might*—were all immediate and remote (and they still are to some extent in British usage), but Americans have dropped *shall* almost altogether from speech, so *should* can be either immediate or remote as in the two sentences below.

We women should respect men more. (a cooperative suggestion)

My consultants told me I should respect men more.

The remaining remote modals—*would, could* and *might*—can express all three remote meanings.

past: *I thought we would go to Paris this spring.*

imaginal: *We'd go if we had the money.*
social remote: *Who started this talk about Paris anyway?*
That would be me.

A new pair of opposites appears with the modals: **intrinsic** and **extrinsic**. Each modal has core meaning, but this meaning is greatly modified by whether it arises from the speaker or from the outside world. For example, *should*, which Eli Siegel described in his 1945 *Definitions and Comment* as "a word that says something is incomplete, and is better complete" has its core meaning in both sentences below, but the first is intrinsic, and the second is extrinsic.

We women should respect men more.

The roast should be done by now. (a supposition based on the expected roasting time)

All modals have these two possibilities. Oprah Winfrey says to a guest—

You must have great luggage.

Is she giving advice to a new flight attendant? No. We RARELY look a person straight in the eye and say, "You must..." or if we do, it's from what we consider a superior vantage point. But our textbooks can't seem to give up the intrinsic (personal obligation) sense of *must* as its primary use: *You must do your homework, You must pay your taxes, etc.* Oprah is *inferring*. Her guest has just said that her husband's job has had them move four times already in their short marriage. It's the *extrinsic* meaning of *must*, and our students recognize this one.

Lend you \$100? You must be kidding.

You must be Hannah. Peter told me about you.

This must be the place. It's the right address.

Do you have to teach intrinsic and extrinsic to students? Probably not. Do you need to know it yourself? Yes, because students hear the difference, whether you attach labels and definitions or not.

The next ten pages are a condensation of the conclusions of my study of the English modals in a sample of American talk. The language comes from early 90s TV talk shows, which came to be known as the Newman Corpus after Dr. Michael Newman, who gathered the material. I hope you will forgive the roughness of this section.

VI.a. Modal Frequencies

Modals cluster into five meaning groups. Each group of percentages below equals 100% for that group of tokens in the Newman Corpus.

obligation and conclusion

have to (64%), need to (18%), have got to (13%), must (5%)

rightness

should (73%), ought to (15%), be supposed to (10%), 'd better (2%)

prediction, intention and expectation

will (40%), be going to (32%), want to (27%), be willing to (1%)

imaginal

would, including would like to and would rather, (76%), could (24%)

possibility and probability

can (56%), could (26%), may (7%), might (5%), be able to (5%), get to (1%)

And here are representative tokens ranked in order of frequency.

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|--|---|
| 1. expectation <i>be going to</i> | <i>You're not going to like this, James.</i> |
| 2. imaginal <i>would</i> | <i>I would argue for anybody.</i> |
| 3. core possibility <i>can</i> | <i>You can't wear furniture...</i> |
| 4. core <i>have to</i> | <i>And he said, "I have to go to school, Mom."</i> |
| 5. prediction <i>will</i> | <i>The market will find the thing if it is worthwhile.</i> |
| 6. assurance <i>will</i> | <i>I'll be right there!</i> |
| 7. imaginal <i>could</i> | <i>It could happen to anybody.</i> |
| 8. past-of-can <i>could</i> | <i>Once I took his case, I couldn't take her case.</i> |
| 9. advice/opinion <i>should</i> | <i>I think he should be expelled from the House of Representatives.</i> |
| 10. potential <i>can</i> | <i>I think the average person can have a tremendous impact.</i> |
| 11. suggestion <i>need to</i> | <i>I think we need to break down certain stereotypes.</i> |
| 12. past habitual <i>would</i> | <i>He would call me up and he'd say, you know, "We need to talk."</i> |
| 13. intention <i>be going to</i> | <i>I'm going to give you some advice right now.</i> |
| 14. actualized <i>can</i> | <i>I'm sorry. I just can't hear you.</i> |
| 15. extrinsic <i>may</i> | <i>For every hundred men there may be what, twenty women?</i> |
| 16. <i>be able to (non-finite can)</i> | <i>But he shouldn't be able to get away with that.</i> |
| 17. obligation <i>have got to</i> | <i>You've got to ask yourself, Is God in this church?</i> |
| 18. prediction <i>will</i> | <i>A lot of people will talk about making mistakes.</i> |
| 19. permission <i>can</i> | <i>And you still might take the case, right?</i> |
| 20. extrinsic <i>might</i> | <i>OK, you can have the visitation rights.</i> |
| 21. advice/opinion <i>ought to</i> | <i>I think it ought to be harder for people to get married than divorced.</i> |
| 22. willingness <i>will</i> | <i>I won't testify.</i> |
| 23. <i>be supposed to</i> | <i>You know, there's supposed to be two sides to everything.</i> |
| 24. <i>be willing to</i> | <i>They're willing to apply it across-the-board.</i> |
| 25. existential <i>can</i> | <i>Now, there can be two people with a sore throat.</i> |
| 26. extrinsic <i>must</i> | <i>You must be upset that Sting got the rain forests.</i> |
| 27. core <i>must</i> | <i>I mean, people must do with their money what they wish.</i> |

VI.b. Modals put together self and world

How much and what kind of meaning do the modals draw from context?
The answer is *Nearly all*. Modals have a tofu quality: they contribute a small core of meaning to a situation and absorb the remainder from context. The small core of meaning comes from the speaker; it is the "self" aspect of meaning; "world" is both the event spoken of and all the external forces affecting the event. Using a single event, *get a free meal*, I'll try to show how core meaning and context, self and world, work together in each of the modals.

can
First *can*, the "green light" among the modals. The core meaning is possibility. Two persons, very hungry, enter a church. The man says, "Why are we here?" The woman answers, "You can get a free meal" using *you* impersonal. The event is not time-oriented except to the extent that it is not marked for past time. But suppose a church worker looks at one person's ID and gives that individual permission with stress on a singular *you*: *You can get a free meal*; the other person doesn't eat. Or what if the worker simply points down a hall and says to the two people, "You can get a free meal."? Is this the impersonal *you* again or *you* plural? Is it permission or possibility? And what if the woman says to the man, "You're more aggressive than I am. You can get a free meal."? She's introducing an element of ability, or, at least, what she thinks is her partner's ability. *Can* accommodates all these variations and more. It doesn't work with *get a free meal*, but when the two people see the fabulous spread available to them, one says, "This can't be real!" It's the existential *can*.

be going to
Second, *be going to*, the highest ranking semi-modal in the Newman Corpus. *I'm going to get a free meal*. Prefaced by a sentence like *I can't just sit around feeling hungry*, the event is a statement of intention. In contrast, a statement like *Look at this coupon I found! I'm going to get a free meal!* suggests expectation. The difference between these two meanings of *be going to* is the greater emphasis on "world" in the second: something is going to come to me. Often, one person's intention is another person's expectation, and *be going to* is regularly an intention in first person and an expectation in third person.

have to
Third, *have to*, which Newman Corpus findings suggest is the main obligation modal in American English speech. First- and second-person subjects are equally frequent. *You* may be personal or impersonal. The two hungry people ask, "But how are we supposed to eat without money?", and the answer is *You have to get a free meal*. Getting the free meal is a necessity imposed by hunger and bad economics, but the utterance can also be read as an obligation falling upon an agent, either the persons

spoken to or hungry people in general. With a change to first person, "self" is both speaker and subject, the verb sounds dynamic, and the time reference is likely to be future: *We have to get a free meal.*

If the speaker is in a line, and she and her friend are handed plates, knives and forks, she might say, "We have to be getting a free meal," which distinguishes the extrinsic reading of *have to* because it's what she concludes from what's going on around her. She could also say, "*We must be getting a free meal.*" But she is not likely to say, "We must get a free meal." As discussed earlier, Americans just don't use obligation *must* unless there's a particular superiority or authority involved.

Next will, the modal with the greatest potential for expression of self over world. *Will* expresses speaker confidence. With most first-person subjects, assurances like *I'll get a free meal* (or, perhaps, *I'll get us a free meal*) place responsibility for the realization of an event squarely on the speaker. World enters the picture as a condition in a sentence like *We'll get a free meal if we can get to the center before it closes.* This condition or contingency is often implied: One person says, "Why should I go to the center?" The other says, "You'll get a free meal." Or the utterance becomes a prediction when the subject changes to third person: *Don't worry about Bob. He'll get a free meal somehow.* The speaker is still very much involved; it is her view of Bob's capability or the world coming through for him, but she's expressing confidence that someone else can realize the event. There is another more cynical third-person prediction with *will*, as in *Look at these homeless people. They'll line up, get a free meal and just come back again the next day.*

May is the modal with the greatest potential for expression of world over self. Yes, there is the permission *may* found in our textbooks, but the majority of *may* examples are extrinsic. Our hard-pressed couple sees a Meals on Wheels truck parked outside a center, and one says, "We may get a free meal." It's a simple maybe, very much in the world's hands.

Another speaker can assess an event in process or already realized. Look at these three examples, spoken by an observer of a poorly dressed person inside or emerging from an expensive restaurant: *He may get a free meal* (regularly), *He may be getting a free meal* (now or regularly), *He may have gotten a free meal* (in the past or any time up to now). Because these examples are extrinsic, the event is something actually going on, but the *inference* is going on inside the mind of the speaker, and that's what the modality deals with. The speaker is saying, "I can't say for sure, but it looks to me like...."

Another use of *may* is as a concessive, as in *It may not be a free meal, but it's darned inexpensive* or *He may get a free meal, but he works hard for it.*

The event in the concessive statement is a fact, but its implication is that the speaker makes it *sound* unreal for the sake of making a point.

Should most frequently represents cooperative suggestion: *Look, it's no use just sitting around talking about the fact that we have no money. We should get a free meal.* But it is also useful to complain. A waiter hits a customer in the head with a tray he is carrying and the customer says to her date, "We should get a free meal!" Both of these uses carry core meaning, the emphasis on self. But there is also the more calculated assessment of likelihood: *If we get to the center before 7:00, we should get a free meal.*

And what if the possibility of the free meal is more remote? *If we got to the center before 7:00, we would get a free meal. We could get a free meal. We might get a free meal.* All three of these are so much less likely than the sentences using the immediate modals *can, will, may* and *should*.

VI.c. How should we teach modals?

Findings of this study point to modal uses that are rarely or minimally represented in ESOL texts. At the same time, they do not back up the widespread textbook emphasis on modals as part of particular tenses, as located on a "scale of probability," or, taken individually, as typically "the *can* of ability," "the *must* of obligation," "the *may* of permission," "the *shall* and *will* of futurity." Teachers can certainly use such information to modify their approach to the modals, but first there are more general changes teachers should consider, such as the place of the speaker, the role of grammar in teaching the modals and how the modals fit into the larger picture of the English verb phrase. These are some of the emphases the findings of this study support:

- **the centrality of the speaker** in all utterances, especially with regard to modal use;
- **grammar as choice**—the fact that native speaker choices are motivated and that there are no "exceptions to the rules"; rather, that any rule must take into account marginal or uncommon uses;
- **the two-tense verb system** governed grammatically by auxiliaries and unified notionally and functionally in all finite verb phrases;
- the introduction, at least for ESOL teachers and possibly for advanced learners, of the idea of **the remote**, especially as expressed through *would* and *want to* to remove the speaker temporally or factively from an event (as in *I wish he would...*, *I would assume... I wanted to ask...*);

- the **x-words**, or first auxiliaries, as a coherent family of operators and, as a teaching device, the idea of the **hidden x-words** *do, does* and *did*;
- modality as representing **the speaker's way of seeing herself in relation to the outside world**.

In lesson preparations and in the classroom, a teacher might give fresh thought to the following:

- a greater emphasis on **context** and an avoidance of single-sentence examples; the use, instead, of **prototypical examples**, emphasizing social and cognitive interaction with persons and information;
- the granting of full status to **semi-modals** like *have to, going to* and *want to*, including their motivated pronunciation /gənə/, /hæftə/ and /wanə/;
- the caveat that *shall* rarely appears in spoken American English;
- the placement of *be going to*, representing **intention** in first person and **expectation** in third person, as the closest thing spoken English has to a "future";
- the teaching of *will* from the standpoint of speaker **confidence** or **commitment**, including the understanding that the speaker has in mind a presupposition and expects the listener to sense what it is through her use of *will*;
- the placement of *have to* as the primary means of expressing speaker obligation;
- the grouping of *may, might* and *must* as modals of **inference**;
- with *can*, the shifting of emphasis from ability to wide **possibility** and specific **potential**;
- the promotion of the **imaginal**, as in *I wouldn't like to live there*, over the conditional, which is never more than an appendage to the imaginal, and the assertion that the former can occur without the latter.

Discussing whether the ESOL teacher's obligation is to present language in "authentic native-speaker contexts," Widdowson (1998) asserts that the classroom cannot duplicate the original context; it is a *new* context, and the teacher must localize meaning—and not semantic meaning, not "the meaning of sentences," but rather, the meaning of *people*, or realistic meaning in context. What we want in the classroom, he claims, is "pedagogical artifice," language samples that are appropriate rather than entirely "authentic" and provide a semantic resource

for learners.

I believe it is possible to take the best modal examples found in this study and localize them, i.e. maintain their semantic, syntactic and phonological features while introducing them in classroom contexts that arise naturally. The “artifice” involved would be the practice and extensions, and probably timing, as the teacher is not likely just to “wait for something to come up.”

I teach ESOL beginning, intermediate and advanced students. A useful classroom question for beginners is *Can I say _____?*, which is a good starting point for modals and includes their ability, as x-words, to invert to form a yes-no question. Students seem to have no difficulty extending this example of a gradient between permission and possibility to true permission in *Teacher, can I leave class early today? Can I bring my child to school?* Here are some modal meanings that can be introduced in beginning classes:

permission or approval <i>can</i> :	<i>Teacher, can I say, “I went to my house”?</i> <i>You can finish tomorrow.</i>
obstacle <i>can</i> (i.e. <i>can't</i>)	<i>I can't find my pencil.</i> <i>I can't hear you!</i>
shared possibility <i>can</i> :	<i>We can work it out.</i>
expectation <i>going to</i> :	<i>We're going to have a test (on) Monday.</i>
intention <i>going to</i> :	<i>I'm going to be absent on Wednesday.</i>
root obligation <i>have to</i> :	<i>I have to go to the doctor.</i>
requests with <i>want to</i> and <i>would like to</i>	<i>Do you want to read?</i> <i>Would you read, please?</i> <i>Would you like to read?</i>

My lower level classes are learning X-Word Grammar: the richness and economy of basic English syntax and the remarkable consistency of the 20 x-words, three main verb forms and two-tenses of the English verb phrase. I do not introduce the modals as a group. I introduce them one at a time, in context and, with the exception of *couldn't*, which students need for writing narrative, not in writing but in speech.

At all levels the emphasis should be on the modals in speech. The more interactive the language, the more we need modals; and the more invested we are in what we are saying, the wider the variety of modals

we use.

Intermediate and advanced ESOL students show marked interest in modal meanings and especially in semi-modals, both their meanings and their pronunciation: /g@n@/, /wan@/, /h{ft@/, /gat@/ and /lEmi/. Over the past year and a half, as I have cautiously introduced the concepts of remote and imaginal, I have been greatly encouraged by students' response. In the context of functions of American English and with the help of chants and pop songs, students seem willing at least to accept native speakers' pronunciation and use of modals and semi-modals, even where such use differs notably from generalizations presented in their grammar books.

Here are some of the functions, songs and chants that are appropriate to intermediate listening, speaking and pronunciation classes. The suggestion to teachers is to try to avoid explanations but instead, to provide **hooks**: memorable examples that typify core modal meanings.

FUNCTIONS	INTERMEDIATE CHANTS	ADVANCED CHANTS OR SONGS
promising and assurance	<i>Don't worry, I'll Do It.</i>	<i>I'll Get It. Oh No, I'll Get It</i> The Beatles, <i>Can't Buy Me Love</i> (featuring <i>will</i>)
anticipating	<i>I Hope Jack'll Be There</i> <i>I Hope He Won't Be</i> <i>Homesick</i> <i>Are You Going to Go with Joe?</i> <i>Hurry Up, Kate!</i> (featuring <i>gonna</i>)	<i>We're Going to Miss You</i> <i>Do You Think It's Going to Rain?</i> <i>What Are You Going to Do?</i>
suggesting and giving advice	<i>Let's Try</i> <i>Let's Go Out</i> <i>What Do You Want to Do?</i> <i>Your Cold Is Getting Worse</i> (<i>You ought to see the nurse.</i>) <i>You Ought to Call Your Mother</i> <i>What Should I Do?</i>	<i>Let's Have Lunch</i> <i>Let's Make a Date</i> Tina Turner, <i>Better Be Good to Me</i>
ordering		<i>What Are You Going to Have?</i> <i>I'd Like a Sandwich</i>
inviting, accepting,	<i>Can You Come Over?</i> <i>We're Having a Party</i>	

refusing

Would You Like to Go to the Movies Tonight?

regretting and
criticizing

I'm Sorry...I Shouldn't Have Done It

Marvin Gaye, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*

I Can't Stay, Gotta Go

I Can't Do It

Can't You Stay for a While?

I Give Up

We've Gotta Get Going

(featuring *couldn't*)

When Do We Have to Be Back?

I'm Afraid I Won't

Be Able to Go

Why Don't You Buy It?

I Can't Afford It

obligations and
difficulties

What Are We Supposed to Do?

The Beatles, *We Can Work It Out*

The Rolling Stones, *You Can't Always Get*

What You Want

inference

This Can't Be Right