

# A LOGICAL APPROACH TO MODAL VERBS 5. *WOULD*

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## *Abstract*

The present article aims at a possible logical approach to discussing the modal auxiliary verb *would*, including its importance in the English verb and tense system. Being one of the central modal verbs, we argue that *would* is the remote pair of *will*, including temporal, psychological, tentative and social remoteness, primarily based on the ideas developed by Michael Lewis (1986). Thus we support the idea that the core meaning of *would* is connected to the concept of *remote inevitability*, which comes to complete Palmer's distribution of modal verbs, expressing epistemic, deontic and dynamic meanings.

Uses of *would* include both an auxiliary and various modal meanings, its presentation relying on authoritative sources published for international (English), Hungarian and Romanian students. Possible issues of teaching *would* are also dealt with, supported by data from a popular TV series containing modal verbs. The conclusion discusses the importance and relativity of number of occurrences, trying to offer a possible teaching option for modals stemming from practice.

**Keywords:** modality, future auxiliary, inevitability, remoteness, teaching modal verbs.

## Introduction

In a strict sense, *modality* is a semantic term dealing with non-factual situations, covering two major areas:

- *deontic*, referring to 'human' control over a particular situation, associated with *obligation*, *permission*, *intention*, and the marginal *ability*;
- *epistemic* judgements expressing the speakers' opinion (Palmer, 1990, p. 2), attitudes (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 80), probability, predictability (Greene & Zdrenghea, 2000, p. 29), or likelihood (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 219). referring to factuality (i.e. the truth value of utterances: *certainty*, *probability*, *possibility*);

The shortest possible definition is that modality deals with a "personal interpretation" of the *non-factual and non-temporal* elements of things, actions or events (Aarts, 2011, p. 275), and there are various grammatical options to express them (cf. Gălăţeanu & Comişel, 1982, p. 59; Magyarics, 1997, p. 209; Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 638):

- *mood* (cf. *Subjunctive Mood*);
- *inflection or conjugation* (not characteristic to English);
- *intonation*;
- *lexical units*, such as nouns (*demand*, *intention*, *suggestion*), adjectives (*certain*, *inevitable*, *likely*), adverbs (*allegedly*, *certainly*, *perhaps*), or verbs (*appear*, *decide*, *guess*, *imagine*);
- *hedges* (Aarts, 2011, p. 311), that is phrases turning factual to non-factual by blurring the truth-value of statements by dodging facts, disperse doubt, etc.:

*You know, Mr. Castle is a **sort of** agent.* (~ not really)

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*Whenever in trouble, Shrek would **kind of** rescue Fiona.*

Although the underlying part of the modality iceberg reveals an immense richness of options contributing to a colourful modal palette, the tip of the modality iceberg is represented by the *modal* verbs, which are most readily associated with the English modality.

At morphosyntactic level, modal verbs form the most intricate modal system, pervading large areas of grammar, such as:

- *tenses, particularly those reflecting future time* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 54), *as there is no factual information is available about the future*;
- *subjunctive structures* (e.g. *Would to God...*);
- *conditional sentences* (e.g. *I would buy it if ...*);
- *hypothetical constructions* (e.g. *I wish you wouldn't complain!*)

A well-summarized definition of modality reveals that it “refers to a speaker’s or a writer’s attitude towards, or point of view about, a state of the world. ... modals are used to say whether something is real or true, or whether it is the subject of speculation rather than definite knowledge” (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 638).

### **Describing WOULD**

We assume that *would* is a central modal verb, thus it fulfils the criteria of having a single form for all persons and numbers, whatever the time reference, violating the rule of “concord” between the subject and predicate (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 149) and it also takes over major auxiliary functions (cf. the NICE properties in Huddleston, 1976, p. 333).

It is followed – almost exclusively – by either the short (bare) infinitive (I. verb form) or a perfect infinitive construction (*have* + III. verb form): *would sing, would have arrived*, except for semi-modal idiomatic phrases *would rather, would sooner, would better*).

As we would like to describe *would*, it is worth remembering that modals are not ‘designed’ to express temporal relationships only. Authoritative grammars state that – grammatically speaking – English has no future tense (e.g. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 208; Thomson & Martinet, 1986, p. 187; Quirk et al., 1985, p. 213; Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 405), this is often neglected, as native speakers have no problems with that, while non-native speakers wishing to improve their knowledge find the discrepancy between *time* and *tense* disturbing. After all, Palmer observes that “philosophers have for a long time debated whether the future can ever be regarded as factual, since we can never know what is going to happen.” (1990, p. 12). Needless to say that *would* is considered the remote pair of *will*, which is why we have mentioned this issue.

The most logical explanation we have found so far is that each and every modal verb “is fundamentally grounded in the moment of speaking, at the point of Now” (Lewis 1986: 102), so the concept of ‘remoteness’ describes the relationship between the pairs, understood on multiple levels:

- *temporal remoteness: will* present / future’ *would* ‘future-in-the-past’;

- *tentative, conditional, hypothetical remoteness*: *If you will show me...*; *If you would just show me...*);

- *social remoteness, politeness* (*Will you help me...? Would you tell me...?*)

*Would* – similarly to *will* – is another highly frequent modal verb (“whimperative”, cf. (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 25), having a multitude of uses. It basically “introduces an element of psychological remoteness into what the speaker is saying”, being the remote pair of *will* (Lewis, 1986, p. 73), thus *would* combines *inevitability* associated with *will* and *remoteness* at the same time. Certain forms of *would* should be mentioned before various meanings are discussed:

- the affirmative *would* has either present tentative or past reference, based on the context:

*John would meet the neighbours once a week.* (~ When he lived in the area.)

*John would meet the neighbours once a week.* (~ If he were at home for long.)

- a definite past context is possible with *would* + *have* + III. verb form:

*Jane would have listened to the colonel.*

- the negative form (*wouldn't*) is associated with both *power* and *volition* (similar to *won't*), expressing *refusal, obstinacy, determination*, being valid for both the animate and the inanimate:

*Jane wouldn't listen to the colonel.*

*Jane wouldn't tell us the truth.*

*The smoke wouldn't come out of the chimney, filling the room.*

*Google Chrome wouldn't open, so I have to reinstall it.*

- alternative constructions are *refuse to* and *be unwilling to* (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 249):

*I guess Jane will refuse to tell us the truth.*

*Jane was unwilling to tell us the truth.*

- the interrogative form typically expresses tentative politeness:

*Would you do me a favour?*

Subsequent sections deal with major uses of *would*.

### Auxiliary to express ‘future-in-the-past’

*Would* structures often express that they are “true in certain circumstances, not those currently prevailing” (Lewis, 1986, p. 123) or “based on circumstantial knowledge” (Aarts, 2011, p. 282), signalling that *would* must be discussed as a conditional and hypothetical marker.

Yet, grammar books refer to a specific shift from *will* to *would* as ‘Future-in-the-Past’, which actually means that four future tenses (*Future Simple, Future Continuous, Future Perfect Simple* and *Future Perfect Continuous*) have reported speech versions, where *would* is considered to be the auxiliary (Bădescu, 1984, p. 434) as the past “replacement” of *will* (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245), or the “preterite for *will*” (Leviţchi, 1971, p. 153):

*The colonel announced that John Doe would return from Burma in 2118.*

*It was known that John Doe would be relaxing next Sunday.*

The colonel *said* that he **would have grown** a beard by then.

The HQ *estimated* that by 2018 John Doe **would** have been fighting in the jungle **for 9 years**.

The fact that *would* is associated with past time, is also strengthened by being an alternative to *used to* for frequent past actions (cf. ‘frequentative’ *would*); while *used to* expresses habitual past actions difficult to imagine to be repeated in the present or future due to a radical change of circumstances (death, different environment, etc.), *would* – being a remote modal form – is associated with nostalgia or longing (Lewis, 1986, p. 121), expressing psychological remoteness from frequent past events (which are not necessarily distant in time), without the air of finality of *used to*:

*When he was young, the colonel **used to** take part in dangerous deployments.*

*When he was young, the colonel **would** spend little time with his family.*

### Prediction

*Would* is associated with evidence-based *predictions, conclusions* (Aarts, 2011, pp. 282–286), *presupposition*, ‘educated’ *guesses*, which is similar to logical predictions of *will* or *must*; depending on the circumstances, this may be a vague opinion or certainty (even if “nothing about the future is totally certain” (Lewis, 1986, p. 118):

*Don’t ask the colonel about Jane’s whereabouts as he **wouldn’t know** the answer.*

*I think John **would be able** to speak fluent Chinese in ten years.*

*Indeed, that **would be nice**.*

Psychological remoteness is visible by comparing the meaning of the following statements (cf. Lewis, 1986, p. 121):

*I **am** surprised.* (present fact)

*I **have never expected** it.* (present result)

*I **will be surprised** if he shows up.* (modal and future remoteness from factual)

*I **would be surprised**.* (modal and psychological remoteness)

*I **would never have expected** it.* (modal and psychological remoteness)

The stressed negative form has evolved into a stock phrase expressing high certainty and denying responsibility or knowledge:

*I **wouldn’t know**.* (~ I am absolutely sure I have no clue about it.)

However, *would*-predictions are weaker than those with *will* (Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), and they may be considered elliptical conditional sentences (cf. Aarts, 2011, pp. 282–286):

*“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” That **would be Benjamin Franklin**.*

*I **wouldn’t be surprised** (if that was / were Benjamin Franklin).*

Past unfulfilled assumptions may be formulated with *would have* + III. verb form (Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), which may well be an elliptical conditional sentence (cf. the *conditionality* of *would* described below):

*Your presence **would have helped**, probably.*

*The colonel **would have known** how to send air support to John Doe (if he had asked to).*

The ‘frequentative’ *would* may not be regarded as having special modal meanings (much more connected to Past Simple), yet it may be connected to past predictability, stemming from repeated events, habits or routines in an elevated style:

*When in Rio, he **would** just **watch** the samba dancers.*

If the habit or characteristic behaviour is associated with negative feelings, such as *anger, annoyance, criticism, “feeling of exasperation”* (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 229), *grumble, irritation, etc.*, *would* is also used in an idiomatic reply; in this respect, *would* is ‘in line’ with other modal verbs (*could, might* or *should*), knowing that these strong feelings may be fake, turning to *irony* or *humour*:

*Jane shot three more thugs. Oh, she **would!*** (~ I might / could have predicted it.)

*John ‘will sharpen the knife again. Oh no, he **wouldn’t!*** (~ I should have known it.)

### Volition and power

*Volition* and *power* are typically connected with the following uses of *would*:

- although highly subjective, dynamic volition may be labelled as ‘weak’, ‘intermediate’ or ‘strong’ willingness (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245; Foley & Hall, 2012, p. 152), associated with future-in-the-past cases:

*John promised Jane that he **would fix** the leaking roof the following week.*

*John replied that he **would accept** the new mission.* (~ He was willing to accept it.)

- ‘strong’ volition is mixed with *power*, expressing *insistence, obstinacy*, when the stressed *would* is used and no contracted form (?*d*) is possible:

*Whatever you do, John Doe ‘**would** sign up for another mission.*

- very serious *promise* to do something similarly to *will*, (Budai, 2007, p. 201):

*And I **would do** anything for love*

*I’**d** run right into hell and back*

*I **would do** anything for love*

*I’**d** never lie to you and that’s a fact* (Meatloaf)

- *advice, recommendation* may take the form of *volition* or *refusal* (Preda, 1962, p. 318):

*‘I’**d** buy that for a dollar.’<sup>2</sup>*

*I **wouldn’t trust** anyone in the jungle (if I were you.)*

- *habits, repeated actions* (present reference) may result in *annoyance*:

*He **would** (just) **sit** and **drink** his beer in that corner of the pub.*

- *power* is more ‘visible’ when the *annoyance* or *irritation* takes the form of a question tag with *would* (cf. tags with *will*); in effect, the imperative combined with *would* is a hidden *threat*:

*Stop lying to me, **would** you?*

*Listen to me more carefully, **would** you?*

- *requests* for permission are formulated with *would*:

***Would** you let me in?*

***Would** you mind if I brought my fiancée to the party?*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://deadspin.com/i-wouldnt-buy-this-for-a-dollar-robocop-reviewed-1520545447>, 09.03.2017.

- *orders, commands* are also possible with *would*, even if it is generally used for polite requests; this sense is connected to hypothetical and subjunctive constructions and is “softer” (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245) than formulated with *will*; it is in fact a semi-modal expression:

*You would better stay out of this.*

- *offer, invitation, desire or asking for preference* is politer with *would*, as it is “the tentative form of *will*” (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 247), leading to hypothetical constructions; there are even tentative intensifiers, such as *by any chance, I suppose, of course* (Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 246):

*Would you like to join us for dinner (by any chance)?*

*I would love to.*

*Shrek would prefer to stay out of trouble.*

- a possible alternative for *preference* or *invitation* is *would care*, a much less polite alternative to *preference* is *want* (Zdrengea & Greere, 1999, p. 266):

*Would you care for a different approach?*

*Do you want to join us?*

- *would*-requests are politer and less authoritative than formulated with *will*; still, it may sound polite in a particular situation, but distancing as well:

*Would you consider this option as well? (in school)*

*Would you (be so kind and) excuse me, (please)? (in a business relationship)*

*I wouldn't refuse a dry Martini... (hidden request, modest wish)*

- *would* is the standard way of formal addressing to people (“complete strangers”, as described by Gălăţeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 251), including the contracted version:

*I'd need a hand here.*

- hedging (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 652) may be interpreted as a polite solution (compared to directness), and it can be well exemplified with *would* followed by specific verbs (*advise, imagine, recommend, say, suggest, think*), expressing the above-mentioned speech acts in a less direct way:

*I would say that paying a visit to her is the best option. (But it's your call.)*

### Conditionality and hypotheticality

Although English has no ‘conditional tense’ and specific ‘conditional markers’, *would* is indispensable in conditional sentences combined with temporal, psychological (tentative) or social remoteness.

Compared to *will*, *would* expresses a remote *likelihood* or *probability*, leading to *hypothetical inevitability* expressing that these conditions are “true in certain circumstances, not those currently prevailing” (Lewis, 1986, p. 121) in the main clauses (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 234) and forming the type II and type III conditional sentences:

- when followed by a I. verb form, it refers to present / future conditions:

*Jane would fire if she had to.*

- however, there are many situations “where a conditional sense is understood but not stated” (Vince, 2009, p. 67):

Jane **wouldn't agree** with it. (if you asked her)

• while combined with *have* + III. verb form, it refers to past (unfulfilled) conditions:

Jane **would have fired** if she had been forced to.

• “explicit” condition is expressed with a specific structure (Lewis, 1986, p. 122):

**I would expect so.**

• tentative (very polite or over-polite) *requests* (Palmer, 1990, p. 158), modest *wishes*, *suggestions*, *offers* combine *would* and *if* in the same clause:

**If you would wait a moment please, the manager will be at your service.**

**If you would like to have a go, here's the key of the Porsche.**

• *would* combined with *if* may also express *resignation*, *acceptance* (Bălan et al., 2003, p. 178):

**If the Does would insist on that, let them go.**

*Volition* expressed with *would* (*wishes*, *hopes*) is also connected to hypothetical or analytical subjunctive constructions:

a) (modest) *wishes*, *intentions* (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 245) or *preference* may be expressed with *would like*:

**I would like to be a millionaire.**

**Would you like to be a princess?**

**What would you have me do?** (cf. Bădescu, 1984, p. 312: ~ What would you like me to do?)

b) modest wishes may be interpreted as personal desires leading to commands in a polite coating:

**I would like you to do me a favour.**

**The colonel wouldn't like to see any soldier left behind.**

**I would like a dry Martini, please.**

c) emphasised wishes or reproaches in hypothetical and subjunctive constructions, implying *if only*, *wish* or even inversion:

**I wish the colonel would stop sending the Does into suicide missions!**

**If only Jane would return home happily!**

**Look at is as I would, I could not see the difference.** (cf. Bădescu, 1984, p. 312:~ however much)

**Would to God they were alive!**

d) further possibilities to express wishes with *would* are part of specific constructions (*would better*, *would rather*, *would sooner*) and must be dealt with separately.

## Teaching WOULD

Teaching modal verbs is an eternal challenge, and our alternative is to dedicate a little time for modal verbs within each grammar sections (verbs, tenses, conditional and hypothetical constructions, as well as passive voice and reported speech), and it may even take the form of ‘practice first, theory later’ by making use of multimedia samples.

As TV series are highly popular (cf. *Game of Thrones*), learners may be motivated to collect themselves sample sentences with *would* (by this stage they should know that modal meanings derive from sentences, not isolated instances. Our example is *Castle*<sup>3</sup>, having 8 seasons with 173 episodes (combined) of at least 40 minutes' length each; that is 6,920 minutes, or more than 115 hours. It may be shocking to realize that the first season of 10 episodes alone contains a multitude of modaluses, detailed in the table below:

MODAL	NR.	%	MODAL	NR.	%		
<i>can</i>	226	18.56	<b>'ll</b>	103	182	8.46	<b>14.94</b>
<i>could</i>	128	10.51	<b>will(ing)</b>	65		5.34	
<i>be able to</i>	11	0.90	<b>won't</b>	14		1.15	
<i>capable</i>	1	0.08	<b>'d</b>	107	310	8.78	25.45
<i>manage</i>	7	0.57	<b>would</b>	203		16.67	
<i>succeed</i>	1	0.08	<b>shall</b>	1		0.08	
<i>may</i>	18	1.48	<b>should</b>	54		4.43	
<i>might</i>	39	3.20	<b>ought to</b>	2		0.16	
<i>allow</i>	1	0.08	<b>need*</b>	104		8.54	
<i>permission</i>	3	0.25	<b>dare*</b>	5		0.41	
<i>must</i>	34	2.79	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1218</b>		<b>100</b>	
<i>have/has/had to</i>	91	7.47					

Table 1. Modal occurrences in *Castle*, Season 1

The table clearly shows that *would* and its abbreviated form is the most frequent of all modal verbs, being one of the most popular modals according to a recent research as well (Aarts 2011, p. 280), listing *would*, *'d* and *wouldn't* in the top frequent batch of modal verbs:

/million words	Spoken	Written	Total	Combined
<b>would</b>	<b>2,581</b>	<b>2,533</b>	<b>5,114</b>	<b>6,572</b>
<b>'d</b>	<b>795</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>977</b>	
<b>wouldn't</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>481</b>	
<i>will</i>	1,883	3,284	5,167	7,289
<b>'ll</b>	1,449	361	1,810	
<i>won't</i>	232	80	312	
<i>can</i>	2,652	2,533	5,185	6,595
<i>can't</i>	792	222	1,014	
<i>cannot</i>	80	316	396	

Table 2. Modal frequency (Aarts 2011:280)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219024/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219024/?ref=fn_al_tt_1), 26.02.2017.

Collecting samples from *Castle* may be based on various criteria: past reference, expressing *prediction*, being part of a conditional or hypothetical clause, which inevitably brings into picture the importance of translation:

*A little lipstick **wouldn't hurt**.* (polite or ironical remark)

*Do you know what he **would've been doing** in the park?* (most rare perfect continuous form, conditional meaning)

*He's not the only one that **wouldberuined**.* (passive voice)

*I **would** just **appreciate** it if you *wouldn't share it*.* (tentative suggestion, request, command)

*I **wouldsay** don't wait up.* (polite hedging suggestion)

*I **would've retired** him.*(past reference, part of a conditional)

*I **wouldn'tneed** an alibi for that, **would** I?* (question tag)

*It **would've been** impossible.*(past reference, elliptical conditional or hypothetical)

*Otherwise, it **wouldn'tbe** a tragedy.* (negative form)

*So if this kid is dragged, *wouldn't there be more of a blood trail?** (negative interrogative form)

*The doorman **said** she'd **have** a red vest on.* (future-in-the-past)

*We **thought** he'd **do** great things.* (future-in-the-past)

*Well, if it was, looks like I'd **be winning**.* (rare, continuous form)

***Whywould** a psychotic fan pick those?* (expressing surprise, indignation, etc.)

***Would** get you whatever you wanted.*(subjunctive wish, special construction)

## Conclusions

We tend to think that Jakobson's famous statement is still valid: "Languages differ not in terms of what they can express, but in terms of what they must express." Once accepted *will* as a future auxiliary (especially the abbreviated form), *would* is also mentioned as a future auxiliary, being the remote pair of *will*, being used to express future-in-the-past.

Various uses of *would* convince us that the concepts of *inevitability* and *remoteness* perfectly mingle in its core meaning, yet different shades of meaning are also possible, such as *prediction*, *volition*, *power*, often involving (hidden) tentative meanings as well, taking the form of mostly conditional sentences (type II and III).

While we do not claim too much novelty to the discussion of *would*, we have found it interesting that the concept of *remoteness* described by Lewis as early as 1986 has not become a widely celebrated finding, so we would like to offer this perspective through the prism of *would*, following a hopefully logical path.

It has also become clear that sheer theory without supporting practice is in vain; more than that, we highly recommend the involvement of modern tools in teaching modal verbs, which should be completed – for non-native speakers – with translation activities as well: depending on the level, English may be the source language first, then translation into English should be also practised. While authoritative publications from native speakers describe issues extremely well, they typically lack why and how certain aspects are less accessible for non-native speakers; in our case the presentation of *would* is

extended to reputable Hungarian and Romanian publications, trying to summarize all relevant insights into the intricacy of *would*, which is also discussed from the perspective of teaching it.

A final remark is that frequency of use should be considered for various levels (e.g. higher frequency use first for beginners), while translators and interpreters must know even rarely used shades of meaning, which constitutes a real challenge in case of modal verbs, including *would*.

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