A LOGICAL APPROACH TO MODAL VERBS. MAY AND MIGHT

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Abstract: The article aims at a logical approach to discussing may and might, organized around the core meaning of 'possibility'. We argue that the concept of 'remoteness' proposed by Michael Lewis in 1986 may simplify enough the explanation regarding the relationship between may and might, while their presentation relies on authoritative sources published for international (non-native) students. The conclusion discusses both the importance and relativity of number of occurrences in a popular TV series, trying to offer a possible teaching option for modals stemming from frequency.

Keywords: modality, speech acts, remoteness, frequency, teaching modal verbs.

Introduction

The English modal verbs represent a special class of auxiliary verbs, which are notoriously difficult to describe non-native language learners. We have argued (Imre, 2008, pp. 8–11) that – functionally viewed – we may distinguish four types of verbs: *strong* (strong enough to formulate the interrogative and negative forms by themselves: *am, are, is, was, were*); *auxiliary* (verb helping to formulate the interrogative and negative forms: *do, does, did, have has, had, am, are, is, was, were*); *modal* verbs(special auxiliaries) and *weak* verbs (verbs not listed in the previous categories).

When formulating tenses, the possible combination of these verbs is highly important, as the function of these verbs establishes a rather fixed possibility of combining them:

- strong verbs typically form alone the tense in affirmative, interrogative and negative; the only exception is when they are headed by a modal verb;
- weak verbs (other names: *full, lexical,* etc.) may be 'alone' only in affirmative (present simple and past simple); in other cases they are headed by an auxiliary or modal verb;
- a maximum of three auxiliary verbs in a string (perfective, continuous and passive) may follow each other, completed with a weak verb;
- when modal auxiliaries are included, they always precede any other verb: "modal auxiliaries occur in the first place in the verb phrase" and no co-occurrence is possible among them and (Lewis, 1986, p. 100); thus the maximum number of verbs is five, although hardly ever do speakers use more than four:

*John Doe **may have been killed** in the jungle.*

Descriptions of modal verbs abound in demonstrating that they are "problematic", "complicated" and "messy" (Palmer, 1990, p. 49), which is why they are usually dedicated a separate chapter in grammar books. However, we agree with Lewis (1986, p. 7) in stating that the "basic structure of the English verb is not particularly complicated" and is not "full of exceptions".

Modals may express the speaker's "personal judgment of the non-temporal features of an action" (Lewis, 1986, p. 138) or the "attitude of the speaker" (Palmer, 1990, p. 2) in the form of

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specific *concepts* (possibility, necessity, politeness, etc.); thus an initial formal division is necessary (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, pp. 3–6);(Swan, 2005, pp. 325–327), leading to the following categories:

1. *central* or *core* modals: *can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must*;
2. *marginal, peripheral, quasi*-or *semi-modals*: *dare, need, ought to, used to*; *have to* and *be to* may be listed here;
3. *semi-auxiliary* (*modal*) verbs and constructions are formally "outside the [modal] system" (Palmer, 1990, p. 3), such as *be able to* or *be going to*;
4. *modal* idioms: *had better, would rather, would sooner, have got to, could possibly, may well* (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 137);
5. *catenative*constructions: *appear to, come to, fail to, manage to, seem to, tend to*, etc.

However, in the present article we deal with *may*and *might*, so we focus on central modal features:

1. modals are defective (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1980, p. 70) as they take no *–s* in the third person singular (present tenses), violating the rule of "concord" between the subject and predicate (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 149) and non-finite forms, and they cannot be used in imperative mood (Bădescu, 1984, p. 383);
2. modals take over certain auxiliary functions as well (cf. Huddleston's NICE properties, 1976, p. 333), such as forming the interrogative, negative or question tag, thus we can refer to them as 'operators' (Lewis, 1986, pp. 57–58);
3. modals are used in elliptical structures (weak verbs following them may be ellipted to avoid repetition), emphatic structures, question tags and short answers.
4. modals are always followed by I. verb form (short / bare infinitive); the time reference of modals is 'now', more precisely when the speaker's utterance is voiced, paraphrased as "in the present circumstances, my judgment is that it is possible / necessary / desirable that …" (Lewis, 1986, p. 102), so their meaning is context-based, which is at least the length of an entire clause or sentence, if not a paragraph; as not all modals have remote pairs it may be concluded that modals are not 'designed' to express only temporal relationships.
5. in case the modal verb is followed by *have* and a III. verb form (perfective construction), it has a past reference: *John **might have told** Jane about his plan earlier.*

As categories tend to be fuzzy in the majority of cases (cf. Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory), even central modals lack minor features. For instance, *can* has no perfective construction in the affirmative, while *may* is not used in present negative constructions, or *must* has no distinctive 'past' form.

After having separated modal verbs from non-modal ones formally, their meanings must be also dealt with. It is also clear that *objectivity* and *subjectivity* must be included in the explanations, together with 'basic' meaning and meaning deriving from the 'context'. Thus rather subjective categories, such as *politeness* may be discussed in terms of degrees instead of absolute rules, offering the chance to compare, for instance, *can, could, may* and *might*. Some might accept *can* as perfectly polite (possibly completed with *please*), while others would prefer *could, may* or even *might.*

As a full and systematic approach is near-impossible, we will try to follow a 'personalized' approach and discuss *may*and *might* in pairs, as modals represent "one of the most complicated problems of the English verb" (Lewis, 1986, p. 99).

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Modality and speech acts

Modality is a semantic term taken form logic (Murvai, 2001), dealing with judgements originating from the speakers' opinion and "attitudes" (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 80) or the "speaker's assessment of probability and predictability" (Greere & Zdrenghea, 2000, p. 29), referring to (non-)factuality (truth value of utterances: certainty, probability, possibility) or reflecting "the speakers' judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 219); the other option is 'human' control over the situation (obligation, permission, intention, and the marginal ability).

These are readily expressed by modal verbs, although other verbs (*hope*), nouns (*suggestion*), adverbs *(perhaps*) and adjectives (*able*) also contribute to the full palette of modality. The shortest possible definition is that modality deals with *non-factual* or *not actualized* things, actions or events (Aarts, 2011, p. 275), while a well-summarized definition is that modality "refers to a speaker's or a writer's attitude towards, or point of view about, a state of the world. In particular, 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).

Although there are many types of modality (e.g. *alethic, buletic, axiological, temporal, rational, existential* or *dynamic*), *may*and *might* are basically associated with:

- *epistemic* possibility is "concerned with knowledge and / or inference based on some evidence" or drawing conclusions (Aarts, 2011, p. 276); as such, it is often arbitrary, subjective, referring to the *possibility, prediction* or *necessity* of the situation; "something is or is not the case" (Palmer, 1990, p. 50);
- *deontic* obligation is connected to necessity, permission or prohibition, "getting people to do things or (not) allowing them to do things" (Aarts, 2011, p. 276) or "what is required or permitted" either by authority or judgement (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005, p. 54), supposing that there is "some kind of human control over the situation" (Greenbaum, 1996, p. 80);

We have also collected concepts of *possibility*, ranging from near-factual ('this is the case') to close to non-factual ('this is not the case') ones:

inability lack of ability	impossibility lack of possibility		unnecessary lack of necessity
opportunity **ability** choice	**POSSIBILITY**		
	speculation suspicion doubt hesitation uncertainty	likelihood belief, conjecture supposition educated guess confidence presumption inevitability	**logical necessity** probability assumption inference deduction prediction conclusion certainty

Table 1. Possibility, ability, necessity

Although the degrees are subjective (e.g. *near-impossibility / uncertainty – probability – certainty*), these concepts are typically associated with possibility. Modal verbs are often arranged on a scale of possibility (or synonymous terms, such as *likelihood*): *must, can't, could, may, might* (cf. O'Connell, 1999, pp. 142–144).

Remoteness (cf. Lewis, 1986, p. 102) highly simplifies the way modal verbs should be discussed, as it *can – could, may – might, will – would, shall – should* are 'basic' and 'remote'

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pairs. In this respect, the concept of 'remoteness' describes the relationship between the pairs, understood on multiple levels:

- remote in time: *may* 'present / future' *might* 'past'; when either *may* or *might* is followed by the perfective *have*+ III. verb form, the context is past;
- remote in possibility / from facts: *tentative, conditional, hypothetical* constructions (*If I may…*; *If you might show me…*);
- remote in volition / emotion: *insistence ('will) – indifference (could as well)*;
- remote in relationship: *politeness* (*May I suggest…?Might I suggest…?*)

Meanings of MAY and MIGHT

May and *might* – contrary to *can* and *could* – are primarily used to express subjective, epistemic *possibility* (Lewis, 1986, p. 126), yet it is knowledge-based supposition, with certain evidence for assumptions (Aarts, 2011, p. 294); this is why *can* and *could* refer to a perceived existence of a possibility, while *may* and *might* are used to express the speaker's volitional involvement "in the creation of a possibility" (Lewis, 1986, p. 113); overall, *might* expresses a higher degree of uncertainty.

Epistemic possibility

May expresses ***epistemic, real possibility,*** while *can* refers to more "remote" and "theoretical" possibility (Aarts, 2011, p. 295). This type of possibility may be connected to (hidden) logical deduction, similarly to *could,* although doubt, reasoning should be accounted for; thus *may* reflects the "speaker's assessment of possibility", and there are chances to fail (Lewis, 1986, p. 114). *Might* is the remote pair of *may*; this remoteness extends to time (expressing the 'past' of *may*), society (politer or over-polite version) but there is a psychological remoteness as well (conditional, hypothetical, tentative); as such, it is less typical for formal, official style.

The possibility of *may*and *might* is exemplified below:

*You **may be** right.* (I don't know it better.)

*He **maybe** very busy, not having visited us for a month.*

*You **might be** lucky this time.* (although highly improbable after the first eight attempts.)

The interrogative form may refer to extended possibility deriving from curiosity ((Preda, 1962, p. 325):

(I wonder…) *What **may happen** next?*

It is also tempting to refer to *may* as expressing 50% possibility (and *might* 30% chance, cf. Swan, 2005, pp. 338–44), but – similarly to *can* and *could* –, the scale is much more extended (Budai, 2007, p. 190), and remote (weaker) possibility is associated with *might*:

*Weather conditions **may look** normal.*

*During a safari people **may spot** a white rhinoceros.*

*You **might (not) meet** the Does, after all.*

*If you asked her about the mission, she **might** overreact it.* (present possibility)

We can mention general possibility (occasional, tentative), which refers to formal contexts (procedures, instructions, effects), when *may* is favoured over *can* (Hewings, 1999, p. 40):

*Overdose **may** lead to undesired effects.* (vague enough to sound threatening…)

A more tentative possibility is expressed by *might*:

*John and Jane Doe **might well cause** a riot.*

*John and Jane Doe **might well have caused** a riot if they had killed the leader.*

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The possibility may also stem from lack of obstacle (Preda, 1962, p. 325), or "sporadic" possibility (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 225):

*One day we **may bump into** each other.*

*John **might be** grumpy from time to time, but you can still trust him*.

Alternative constructions referring to this meaning may be formed with verbs such as *fancy, imagine, suppose, guess, think.*The combination of *may*or *might* with *I / We hope…* expresses a more official tone (compared to *will, would*):

***I hope** Mr. Doe **may** soon **return** to the battlefield.*

***We hope** that the Does **might return** home unharmed.*

All these cases may be viewed associated with 'general truths' (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 645).

The negative form (*may not*) followed by I. verb form means that "it is possible that something does not happen" (Bălan et al., 2003, p. 106), while *may /might have* + III. verb form refers to the past (logical deduction):

*John **may not return** home without a scratch...*

*She **may not have told** me the truth.* (We cannot exclude this possibility.)

*John's chopper **may not have crashed**.* (But we are not sure.)

It is important to note the difference in meaning compared to *might*:

*John's chopper **might have crashed** in the terrible weather.* (But fortunately it didn't.)

*John's chopper **might have crashed**. He should have reported an hour ago.*

(Although I truly doubt it; yet, for the time being, I have no better clue.)

It is important to note the difference in meaning between *may* and *can*(Zdrenghea & Greere, 1999, p. 258):

*Jane **can become** a four-star general*.(in theory this is possible)

*Jane **may become** a four-star general.*(this is a possibility 'under way', but also speculation)

Probability is a similar term to *possibility*, expressing chances that something is true or it will happen (Swan, 1984, p. 66; Nelson, 2010, pp. 68–9).

Deontic possibility

The other major use of *may*and *might* is connected to ***deontic possibility*** (mostly ***permission***),which is less common than *can*, as it sounds more formal (with an air of authority) and it is overly polite. In this sense, *may* is suitable to ask for and grant mostly official and authoritative permission (formal style), being even more polite than *could*:

***May** I **leave** the room? Yes, you **may**.*

*Visitors **may enter** the building at regular intervals.*

These may turn to an offer or a very polite ask for attention and personal remark (Budai, 2007, p. 193), but even to compliment or criticism (Bădescu, 1984, p. 421), but when felt over-polite, it may have an ironical or funny overtone:

***May** I **walk** you around the building?*

***If I may**, I can explain to you the whole situation.*

***If I may say so** Mrs. Doe, you look charming today.*

*I would like to give you a test paper, **if I may**.*

However, interrogation with *may* can be considered "courtesy", as the addressee cannot withhold it (Palmer, 1990, p. 78), which has been described as violating 'sincerity' (Fillmore, 1975, p.

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231). Sometimes collaboration is expected even if the form is an overly polite request (Palmer, 1990, p. 78; Aarts, 2011, p. 296):

***May** I **have** my say about the incident, please?* (referring to both permission and possibility)

Asking for permission (requests) with highly improbable positive answer (expecting refusal) are typically expressed with *might*:

***Might** I **have** a day off, **please**?*

However, a request with *might* may result in humorous, ironic or sarcastic effect:

***Might** I **see** your homework?* (teacher to pupil)

Most modest requests are made with *might* combined with *if*:

***If** I **might** (have the chance to) see Jane again, I would definitely pop the question.*

***If** I **might,** I would gladly accompany her to the ball.*

Might may express a more persuasive, explicit request than *could*, associated with dissatisfaction, insistence, reproach (Budai, 2007, p. 195) or annoyance in case of failure to perform an action (Vince, 2009, p. 73), with a strong stress on the words preceded by an apostrophe:

*You **might listen** to me, you know, for a change.*

*You '**might have 'warned** me that talking to the guerrilla leader means jail!*

We can also formulate mild, casual commands (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 228) or friendly suggestions, especially combined with *like* or *want* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 647):

*We **might focus** on the next modal verb from now on, don't you think?*

*You **might like** to check the correct answers, printed on the other side of the paper.*

Denying permission is obviously possible with the negative form (Bădescu, 1984, p. 421), which may refer to lack of permission or polite interdiction (Preda, 1962, p. 324). They may be:

- impersonal signs and legal notices:

*You **may not leave** the premises with library books.*

*Visitors **may not smoke** on the premises.*

(No smoking is allowed on the premises. → No smoking)

- rules and regulation expressing prohibition in a highly formal style (Palmer, 1990, p. 103):

*Students **may not be late**. Passengers **may not talk** to the driver.*

Although strong enough to express prohibition,*may not* is not as categorical as *must not* (*mustn't*), when the interdiction stems from external necessity (Preda, 1962, p. 324) or authority (Levițchi, 1971, p. 154):

*You **mustn't leave** the room.You **can't leave** the room.*

In case permission is granted, it may extend to a mild suggestion, which is more tentative with *might* (Palmer, 1990, p. 186):

*You **may start** working now.*

*I think you **may help** me a little now.*

*You **might want** to reconsider your statement.*

*I think swimming pigs in the Bahamas **might offer** some joy…*

When *may* is used for very polite expressions, it may turn humorous, ironic, sarcastic (or threatening):

***May** I **ask** you to where you have been all day long?* (father to a twelve-year-old son)

A special form of permission is associated with *concession*(Vișan, 1992, p. 49):

*However fit Jane **may seem**, she is a frail person.*

*Whatever you **may say**, I still trust that candidate.*

There are even concessive idiomatic structures with *may*and *might,* associated with resignation:

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*Come what **may.** Be that as it **may.***

Concession may turn to indifference, dissent, or objection (Magyarics, 1997, p. 242) or even unpleasant alternatives (Zdrenghea & Greere, 1999, p. 253) with the help of stock phrases containing *may* or *might*:

***Try as you may**, you still won't be able to translate this sentence.*
*We **may (just) as well** stop here and have a break.*
***Try as he might**, Jane won't ever marry Jake.*
***Try as he might**, Jake will still remain the runner-up.*
***We might as well** stop firing as no trees are left.*
*You **might (just) as well call** your lawyer.*
*John **might (just) as well have been sent** to Cambodia.*

A possible antonym of indifference, irritation may stem from someone's typical behaviour or action resulting in "trouble" (Budai, 2007, p. 196) is associated with *might*:

*John **might have guessed** what was so urgent to the colonel at dawn.*
*I **might have known** what was to happen.*

A very important distinction between possibility / probability and permission is highlighted by stress (Preda, 1962, p. 325):

*The prisoner '**may speak**.* (probability)
*The prisoner **may 'speak**.* (permission)

Continuous forms are also possible:

*The TV is on, so John **may be waiting** for the news.*
*Jane looks tired. She **may have been thinking** about taking a longer break.*
*Jane **might be sitting** in the shadow of that tree.*
*John **might have been booby-trapping** the area since last night.*

Passive constructions with *may* can be associated with:

- concession and warning: *John **may** be hurt, but the knife is in his hand.*
- past possibility: *Jane's forearm **may have been hurt** by a branch.*
- ability(Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 219): *Good reasons **may be** easily **found** to return to the base camp urgently.*

The 'remote' form of *may*is *might*, which may be used in reported speech, expressing temporal remoteness, unfulfilled possibility or psychological remoteness (hypothetical, highly improbable wishes):

*You **may stay** overnight.*
*She said that I **might stay** overnight.*
*Jane **might not have known** why the colonel relocated her.*
*You **might have met**the them if you had been in Fort Knox yesterday.* (~ could)
*If you had asked her about the mission in time, she **might have accepted** it.*
*John wishes Jane **mightreturn** from the mission unharmed.*
*I **thought** I **mightsolve** the case alone, but the colonel refused the suggestion.*

Magical MAY

Fillmore mentions that may has a "magical" function (1975, p. 224), which in subsequent descriptions turns to less expressive "formulaic" or 'subjunctive" (Aarts, 2011, p. 296), referring to wishes, hopes (Magyarics, 1997, p. 242; Bădescu, 1984, p. 422) or even formal curses (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 645), in which case may arguably gains an auxiliary function:

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***May** all your dreams **come**true.*
***May** Jane **live** happily with John!*
***May** the best **win**!* (stock phrase)
***May** you **be happy**!*
***May** you **get** what you deserve!*

As the examples show, this case is also connected to *inversion*, as *may*precedes the subject. Thus it may be considered as the substitute for *I wish*.

Substitutes for MAY and MIGHT

There are possible substitutes for *may*(Magyarics, 1997, p. 237), such as verbs (*let, permit*), adverbs (*perhaps, maybe, likely, possibly*) or modal paraphrases (*be allowed / permitted to*)*:*

*You **may leave** now.*
*He **was let to go**.* (passive)
*You **are permitted to leave.***
*John **is not permitted to reveal** anything about any mission.*

Similarly to *be able to*, modal paraphrases may be used to express past, present and future reference clearer, and they are typically restricted to single, specific cases, unlike their modal equivalents; they are preferred in negative structures (Budai, 2007, p. 196); on a larger scale, they can substitute modal verbsexpressing ask for or granting permission (*may, might, can, could*) in a more authoritative way (Zdrenghea & Greere, 1999, p. 254):

***Are you allowed to** chew gum during the class?*
*The Does **were (not) allowed to** cause collateral damage.*
*It **is not permitted to** leave anyone behind.*
***Is Jane permitted to** quit the mission?*
*Jane **won't be permitted to** quit under any circumstances.*
*Passengers **are not allowed to** be rude.*

As possibility in interrogative is not typical with *may*, alternative constructions are used (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 221):

***Do you think** Jane will return home safe and sound?*
***Is it likely for** John to pop the question this weekend?*

Teaching MAY and MIGHT

Teaching modal verbs is an eternal challenge, and there are at least three options to discuss them: theory (modal verbs one by one), concepts (with exemplifying modal verbs), or practice (examples with modal verbs).

In order to apply Lewis' concept of *remoteness* regarding modal auxiliary pairs, we tend to think that first we should offer examples to contradict the deeply rooted concept of modal verbs as pairs of present and past, enabling learners to realize that *may* is not 'automatically' present and *might* is not 'automatically' past. Authentic examples may be found anywhere, but our choice is videos, which may be motivating enough to watch and check modal verb occurrences and frequency. One of our favourites is *Castle*[1], 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

[1]http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219024/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1, 26.02.2017.

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surprising that the first season alone contains more than 1,200 modal verbs and alternative constructions, listed below:

MODAL	**NR.**	**%**	**MODAL**	**NR.**		**%**	
CAN	226	18.56	'll	103		8.46	
COULD	128	10.51	WILL(ING)	65	182	5.34	14.94
be able to	11	0.90	WON'T	14		1.15	
capable	1	0.08	'd	107		8.78	
manage	7	0.57	WOULD	203	310	16.67	25.45
succeed	1	0.08	SHALL	1		0.08	
MAY	**18**	**1.48**	SHOULD	54		4.43	
MIGHT	**39**	**3.20**	ought to	2		0.16	
allow	1	0.08	need*	104		8.54	
permission	3	0.25	dare*	5		0.41	
MUST	34	2.79	**TOTAL**	**1218**		**100**	
have/has/had to	91	7.47					

Table 2. Modal occurrences in Castle

Although, the first season is a meagre 5.78% of the entire series, it clearly shows the importance of *can* and *could* (29% combined), partially to the detriment of *may*and *might* (5% combined), signalling to the importance of frequency. The importance of choice may be connected to the number of occurrences, especially when studying a foreign language at different levels.

It is clear that the higher the frequency, the more situations are possible for a particular modal verb to be used, but non-modal factors still have to be considered. *Will*, for instance, is a suitable modal to function as the future *operator*, a term which may be applied, by and large, to the majority of auxiliaries and modals, involved in forming the negation and interrogation, although 'imported' from logic).

As for the frequency of *may*, we have counted 13 affirmative instances: 8 referring to present, 7 of them expressing possibility and only one deontic meaning (although polite):

I may need you to cosign the loan.

Further 4 cases expressed past with a simple perfective construction and there was one example with continuous perfective construction, and only one passive construction:

*I **may have said** something.*

*He **may have been making** payoffs through the campaign.*

*We believe the Spolanos **may have been involved**.*

There were 3 negative constructions with *may*, while there was 1 echo question (repeated twice):

*Theresa **may not be** my favourite person.*

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*"**May have been**"? "**May have been**"?!*

Out of 39 *might* instances 37 were in affirmative, referring to both present and past (reported speech):

*It **might be** true.*

*I just **thought** it **might spark** something.*

We could also find 6 affirmative, simple perfective cases, 1 continuous (indirect interrogative) and 1 continuous perfective case:

*She **might have got** it from the stall where Jamal works.*

*And whoever murdered **him might be looking** for your witness?*

*Can you think of anyone she **might've been meeting**?*

There were 2 negative instances, a present and a past (passive) one:

*It **might not make** sense.*

*Her body **might not have been kept** as close as …*

These findings may serve as a guide, and the higher the study level the less frequent cases may be presented. A further interesting challenge might be for learners to find a set of quotes and proverbs with *may* and *might* from various sources (literature, press, films, etc.):

*We know what we are, but know not what we **may be**.* (William Shakespeare)

Nevertheless, the target audience must be considered, as – for instance – language exam students have different needs compared to translation and interpretation students, who are supposed to reach a near-native level.

Conclusions

As countless books and articles have been written on modality, we cannot claim that the present article brings too much novelty to the issue of modality and modal verbs. Still, the way we approach them tries to offer a wider perspective for *may*and *might*, and hopefully a more logical one. Although the references come from authoritative native speaker authors (Cambridge and Oxford publications), they still lack an important feature: why and how these modal verbs represent a problematic category for specific non-native speakers. This is why we checked important Hungarian, Romanian and Polish publications, trying to summarize all relevant information regarding these modals.

We agree with Lewis that neither an over-simplification of the problem nor offering minor examples is the best solution, so we tried to succinctly collect uses of these modals and arrange them with the central organizing concept of remoteness. This way – we tend to think – that *may* and *might* may be described in a logical pair with the concepts of *epistemic* and *deontic possibility*, noting the *magical* function of *may* and further possible substitutes for *may* and *might.*

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