A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO BELIEF MODALITY IN ENGLISH – THEORY AND SAMPLE EXERCISES TO BE USED IN CLASS

Adriana LAZĂR
Universitatea din Piteşti

Abstract: *Modals fall into two major semantic categories: the action modality and the belief modality. Since most modals are used in either modality, clauses containing them may be systematically ambiguous unless the context disambiguates them. Both modalities deal with notions of permissibility and obligation.*

The belief modality involves the strength of the speaker's belief in the likelihood of some situation. Some modals indicate various degrees of obligation on the speaker to believe or disbelieve; others simply specify whether belief is permissible or not permissible. A negative occurring immediately after a modal usually negates what follows but does not negate the modal. The part of the clause that a negative negates is the scope of that negative.

Two time references are involved for clauses with modals: the time at which the modal notion applies, typically the time of the utterance, and the time of the situation to which the modal applies, typically a time later than the time of utterance. For a modal to apply to a situation prior to the time reference of the modal, perfect aspect is used. In the action modality, the combinations should have and could have are often used as counterfactuals, that is, they imply that the action did not occur.

Semantic notions such as permissibility and obligation are useful for providing an account of how meaning is organized within words such as the modals under discussion.

Keywords: *modals, action modality, belief modality, permissibility,obligation*

Modals used in the belief modality express the speaker's belief about the likelihood of some situation, whether past, present, or future. Consider these examples with *must:*

I don't see Mary here. She must have left early.
Look at all those reporters around Jenny. She must be very important.
Jan's article didn't appear in this month's magazine. It must be appearing in next month's issue. (Compare: **It must appear in next month's issue.)*

The speaker is indicating obligation, but a different kind of obligation, the obligation to *believe* that something is or is not the case. In the first example, the speaker indicates his belief about a past situation. He believes now that she left early. Had he seen her leave, he would have been sure enough to say, *She left early*, but instead, his conclusion is based on *inference.* The fact that he doesn't see her obliges him to believe that she left early. The second example reports the speaker's belief about an ongoing situation, which, again, is inferred from evidence. The speaker doesn't *know* that Jenny is important or he would not have needed the modal. The third example involves an inference about a future situation. Notice that it is acceptable only when progressive aspect is used. The progressive aspect indicates what was described in Chapter 17 as "a present plan for future action." Apparently, *must* cannot refer to future time unless it is accompanied by progressive aspect. In the belief modality *must* requires progressive aspect to refer to future time. That is why the fourth example is asterisked.

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)

Now see what happens to the examples if *may is* substituted for *must*:
I don't see Mary here. She may have left early.
Look at all those reporters around Jenny. She may be very important.
Jan's article didn't appear in this month's New Yorker. *It may be appearing in next month's issue.* (Or: *It may appear in next month's issue.)*

With *must* the examples indicate what the speaker felt *obliged* to believe, but with *may* they indicate what the speaker felt it was *permissible* to believe. Again, the speaker's conclusions are based on inference from evidence, but the evidence isn't strong enough to *oblige* him to believe that Mary left early or that Jenny is very important or that Jan's article is going to appear in the next month's issue. It is strong enough to *permit* these inferences. Approximations to the *must* and *may* sentences in the first example of each set would be these:
Certain evidence obliges the speaker to believe that Mary left early.
Certain evidence permits the speaker to believe that Mary left early.[8]

The core modal *will,* as used in the belief modality, has often been described as a "future tense marker." *Will* is certainly used to make clauses refer to future time and it frequently occurs with future time adverbs:
Our family will be at the railway station tomorrow.
Andrew will be presenting his novel in Bucharest next week.

But we can cancel out this future time reference sense by substituting other forms for the future time adverbs:
Our family will be at the railway station right now.
Andrew will be presenting his novel in Bucharest at this very moment.

What, then, is the real function of *will?* One way to determine this is to compare examples like the last set with sentences having no modal:
Our family are at the railway station right now.
Andrew is presenting his novel in Bucharest at this very moment.

While the present tense sentences assert their propositional content as facts, in the *will* sentences the speaker is a little more cautious and the content is presented as *inference.* The inference is about the situation now or, in the sentences with future time adverbs, about the future. Inferences about the future can be called *predictions.*

Further evidence as to the basic function of *will* comes from a comparison with *must:*
Our family will be at the railway station right now.
Our family must be at the railway station right now.
Andrew will be presenting his novel in Bucharest at this very moment.
Andrew must be presenting his novel in Bucharest at this very moment.

The *will* sentences and the *must* sentences both represent inferences about the family's presence at the airport and Andrew's novel presenting. In fact, they are essentially synonymous. Thus the basic function of *will* is similar to that of *must.* There are, however, subtle differences: The *must* sentences imply that the speaker has *reason* to believe in the truth of the propositional content; the *will* sentences do not carry such an implication. Because they therefore indicate that the speaker is acting in an authoritarian fashion, *will* comes across over as stronger than *must.*

As in the action modality, the periphrastic modal *be going to* is a near-paraphrase of *will.* But look at the following sentences:
Our family are going to be at the railway station right now.
Andrew is going to be presenting his novel in Bucharest at this very moment.

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)

While they are grammatical, it's hard to imagine the circumstances in which they would be uttered. Indeed, we would probably interpret the first example as expressing the action modality. The speaker has made sure that the police will be at the airport. The second is somewhat more easily interpreted as a belief modality utterance, but its likely context is still hard to determine. The reason is that *be going to* in its belief modality sense focuses on the present time if the *be* is in the present tense. The situation at the present time provides indications as to what will happen:
Roger has been delivering too many lectures. He is going to lose his voice if he doesn't rest it more.
The baby's temperature has dropped. He's going to be all right.

Other Obligation Modals: *have to, should, and ought to*

The periphrastic modal *have to* can be used in the belief modality, but this use is comparatively rare, being limited to situations in which speakers are asserting their belief very emphatically. The difference between the following two examples is clear:
Look over there! That must be John Smith.
Look over there! That (just) HAS to be John Smith.

Note that in such constructions, the *have* receives emphatic stress.

Compared to *must* and *have to,* which express a strong obligation for the speaker to believe that the propositional content of the clause is true, the modals *should* and *ought to* indicate a much weaker obligation. Supposing you and Annie were watching a bad performance of the first act of a stage play. You might try to cheer her up by saying one of these two belief modality sentences:
The second act should be more exciting, Annie.
The second act ought to be more exciting, Annie.

You are indicating to Albert a weaker degree of belief as to the likelihood of a more exciting second act.

The implication that there is a cause for the belief expressed is present for *have to, should,* and *ought to*. In the last two examples, it is probably some experience as to what often happens in such performances or knowledge of the plot of the play.

Now compare the last example with a sentence using *will.* Someone who says, *That will be my suitcase,* is talking as if she has no evidence to support her belief.

Other Permission Modals: *might, could*

Although our examples of permissibility in the belief modality have used *may,* two other modals, *might* and *could,* are at least as frequently used to indicate beliefs the speaker feels are permissible for him or her. We'll repeat the examples, replacing *may* with the other two modals:
I don't see Mary here. She might/could have left early.
Look at all those reporters around Jenny. She might/could be very important.
Jan's article didn't appear in this month's magazine. It might/could be appearing in next month's issue. (Or: *It might/could appear in next month's issue.)*

The three modals differ in strength, *might* being more tentative than *may,* and *could* more tentative than *might.*

The other permissibility modal, *can,* is not used for the belief modality in affirmative statements:
*I don't see Mary here. *She can have left early.*

However, as we'll see, it is used in negatives and interrogatives.

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)

Negatives and Interrogatives

Belief *must* and *may* occur in negative clauses:

She must not have seen the exhibition.

She may not have seen the exhibition.

However, speakers are more likely to use *can't* in such clauses:

She can't have seen the exhibition.

In conversation especially, speakers can avoid using any modals to communicate probability, using instead predicates like *be sure* and *believe,* or sentence adverbs like *perhaps* and *presumably:*

I'm not sure she saw the exhibition.

I don't believe you like that shirt, do you?

Perhaps they don't like pineapple on their spaghetti.

Presumably they didn't meet him at the Court.

The subject of a predicate like *be sure* or *believe* has to be first person if the clause is to be a true counterpart to clauses with belief modals, since such clauses are used to communicate speaker beliefs.

This may be why *must* and *may* don't occur in interrogatives, since it seems strange to ask someone else what you, the speaker, believe about a situation. The following examples are not interpreted as being in the belief modality: **Must she be fat? *May she be fat?* although, of course, they can be given an action modality interpretation, for example, one in which a casting director is asking a playwright about a character in the play.

However, there are other core modals, notably *can, could,* and *might,* that can be used to ask about the *addressees* belief concerning a situation. Here are examples in descending order of strength:

Can Charley be too bored already?

Could/couldn't Charley be too bored already?

Might/mightn't Charley be too bored already?

Notice that belief modality *can't* isn't used in negative questions.

There are other rather subtle differences among them, subtleties depending on the context in which the sentence is uttered. For instance, the example with *can* might be used to express the speaker's skepticism about Charley's boredom, just like its counterpart with *possible:*

Is it possible that Charley is too bored already?

Time Reference

With modals, two time references are involved: the time of the speaker's belief about a situation and the time of the situation itself. So, in the sentence *Our daughter may take the exam next week,* the time of the possible operation is in the future, next week, but the time reference of the speaker's belief about the time of the operation is now, the present. Since the periphrastic modals can be marked for tense, it might seem easy to use them to refer to a past or present inference or belief. For instance, the periphrastic modals *be going to* and *be bound to* have the present tense forms *is/are going to* and *is/are bound to* and the past tense forms *was/were going to* and *was/were bound to*. But the past tense form in the belief modality does not necessarily refer to a past inference or belief.

Consider the following examples:

The 2005 the film was going to be very successful. Already the cinema chains had placed huge orders.

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)

The new policies were bound to be unpopular.

These sentences are ambiguous between present belief and past belief, even though past situations, the film's success and the unpopularity of the new policies are referred to. Insertion of the adverb *obviously* before *going to* and *bound to* makes the belief a past belief and not necessarily a belief of the speaker. If, instead, we insert *I see now that* at the beginning of each example, the reference is to a present belief.

In the belief modality, the core modals, which cannot be marked for past or present tense, always designate the speaker's belief at the time of the utterance. Unlike action modals, belief modals are used to make an inference now about something that was the case *prior to now.* This is done by using the perfect aspect form after the modal. Here are past time counterparts for most of the modal sentences we looked at earlier:

It HAD to have been raining outside then.
It would have been raining outside then.
It must have been raining outside then.
It should have been raining outside then.
It could have been raining outside then.
It ought to have been raining outside then.
It may have been raining outside then.
It might have been raining outside then.

Note that the examples with *should* and *ought to* are normally *counterfactual* sentences, that is, they indicate that it was not in fact raining then. The combination *would have is* also counterfactual if it is part of a conditional construction, as in these sentences:

(If we had known), we would have come to the concert.
The President would have served another term if he had not been assassinated.

Conclusion

The basic semantic notions used in this account of the English modals are a relatively small set: permissibility, obligation, negation, cause, act, and belief. We pointed out that, in combinations with the negative, permissibility sentences can be logically equivalent to obligation sentences. This equivalency was shown to explain why *may not* and *must not* sentences are essentially paraphrases in the action modality.

Sample Exercises

1. Explain the ambiguity of each of these examples:
Joanne may not leave the house on Wednesdays.
Joanne must not leave the house on Wednesdays.
2. Explain the belief modality senses of the following sentences:
a. Shelley must have left that house by five o'clock.
b. Could Jessica carry that chair?
c. The governor can't be doing favors for those men.
3. Make up two sentences in which modals are used counterfactually. Then explain briefly the situation in which each would be understood counterfactually and describe any other possible interpretations of your sentences.
4. The belief modality modals, whether core or periphrastic, can be arranged into two groups according to whether belief obligation or permissibility is involved. Think of four situations in which these modals could be used to advise, to warn, or to carry out some other speech act. The situations could occur, for example, in a court room, at a building site, at a local government meeting, or in a classroom. Write several sentences for each, using different modals from both groups.

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)

Bibliography

Alexander, L. G., *Longman English Grammar*, Longman, London, 1988
Budai, László, Gramatica engleză, Teora, Bucureşti, 1997
Whitehall, H, *Structural Essentials of English*, London, 1967

BDD-A5591 © 2007 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:03 UTC)