A LOGICAL APPROACH TO MODAL VERBS 5. WOULD

Attila IMRE¹

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* the remote pair of *will*, including temporal, psychological, tentqative 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 *remoteinevitability*, which comes to complete Palmer's distribution of modal verbs, expressing epistemic, deontic and dynamic meanings.

Uses of wouldnclude 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 wouldare 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 (Greere & 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. Gălățeanu & Comișel, 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)

¹ Associate Professor PhD., Faculty of Technical and Human Sciences in Tîrgu Mureş, Sapientia University of Cluj-Napoca

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 thatit "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*(Gălățeanu-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 Doewould be relaxing next Sunday.

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

The HQ estimated that by 2018John Doewould 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'tknow the answer.

I think John wouldbeable 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 (Gălățeanu-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.'2

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?

² 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" (Gălățeanu-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" (Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, 1995, p. 247), leading to hypothetical constructions; there are even tentative intensifiers, such as by any chance, I suppose, of course(Gălățeanu-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* (Zdrenghea & 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 Gălățeanu-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 [ane 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 motived 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 *Castle³*, 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.		%	
can	226	18.56	111	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	310	8.78	25.45
manage	7	0.57	would	203	310	16.67	23.43
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	IOIAL	1210		100	

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	
would	2,581	2,533	5,114	6,572	
'd	795	182	977		
wouldn't	394	87	481		
will	1,883	3,284	5,167	7,289	
'!!	1,449	361	1,810		
won't	232	80	312		
can	2,652	2,533	5,185	6,595	
can't	792	222	1,014		
cannot	80	316	396		

Table 2. Modal frequency (Aarts 2011:280)

-

³ 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 accesible 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 interpretersmust know even rarely used shades of meaning, which constitues a real challenge in case of modal verbs, including *would*.

References

Aarts, B. (2011). Oxford Modern English Grammar (1st ed.). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Bădescu, A. L. (1984). *Gramatica limbii engleze*. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.

Bălan, R., Carianopol, M., Coşer, C., Focşeneanu, V., Stan, V., & Vulcănescu, R. (2003). English My Love. Student's Book. 9th grade. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

Budai, L. (2007). Élő angol nyelvtan. Rendszeres kontrasztív grammatika sok példával. Budapest: Osiris.

Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide. Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, M., & Hall, D. (2012). My Grammar Lab. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman.

Gălățeanu, G., & Comișel, E. (1982). *Gramatica limbii engleze pentru uz școlar*. București: Editura didactică și pedagogică.

Gălățeanu-Fârnoagă, G. (1995). Sinteze de gramatica engleză: Exerciții și teste de evaluare. București: Cruso.

Greenbaum, S. (1996). The Oxford English Grammar (1sted.). London: Clarendon Press.

Greere, A. L., & Zdrenghea, M. M. (2000). A Guide to the Use of English Modals and Modal Expressions. Cluj-Napoca: Clusium.

Huddleston, R. (1976). Some theoretical issues in the description of the English verb. *Lingua*, 40(4), 331–383. https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-3841(76)90084-X.

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Levițchi, L. (1971). Gramatica limbii engleze. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

Lewis, M. (1986). The English Verb: An Exploration of Structure and Meaning. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Magyarics, P. (1997). Gyakorlati angol nyelvtan (2nded.). Budapest: Akkord & Panem.

Palmer, F. R. (1990). Modality and the English Modals. London and New York: Longman.

Preda, I. A. (1962). *Verbul I. Clasificări*. In C. G. Sandulescu & L. Vianu (Eds.) *Gramatica limbii engleze* (1sted.), Vol. 4. București: Universitatea din București, pp. 265–380.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (2nded.). London; New York: Pearson Longman.

Thomson, A. J., & Martinet, A. V. (1986). A Practical English Grammar (4thed.). Oxford:

Oxford University Press.

Vince, M. (2009). Advanced Language Practice: Student Book Pack with Key (4th ed.). Oxford: Macmillan Education.

Wierzbicka, A. (2006). English. Meaning and Culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Zdrenghea, M. M., & Greere, A. L. (1999). A Practical English Grammar. Cluj-Napoca: Clusium.