

External Examiner's report on:

Dagmar Machová's PhD thesis 'Polyfunctionality and the Ongoing History of English Modals'

Mark Newson 23rd January 2016-01-23

This dissertation offers a thorough introduction to and analysis of modal elements, mostly in English, but also in a number of other languages. German and Chinese, in particular, are treated in a chapter each. The first three chapters offer a detailed introduction to the area, including a cross-linguistic comparison (chapter 3) of modals in seven languages from four distinct language families, the point of which is to show variation and similarities in the modal elements found in these languages. This is followed by five chapters, which form the core of the dissertation, on various English modals, from central modals (*can*, *will*, *must*, etc.) to marginal ones (*dare*, *need*, etc.). Other elements, which are not as regularly treated as modals (e.g. *gotta* and *gonna*) are also discussed in some detail.

The main thesis that the dissertation explores has two separate parts:

- i) modals are not to be defined in terms of possessing a modal meaning, nor in terms of specific syntactic properties, but in terms of having a polyfunctional interpretation – that is, being capable of expressing both epistemic and root modality.
- ii) The semantic feature of polyfunctionality determines modal syntax.

The first of these addresses the real problem that there is very little agreement amongst linguists about how to define and identify modals. As the dissertation points out, it is not only between various approaches but within individual ones too that this problem arises. Moreover, variation between languages exasperates the problem, as what might be identified as a modal in one language, based on one set of criteria, may not be in another – either because the element does not behave as other modals do in that language, or because the criteria for modal identification seem to differ from language to language. I wholeheartedly agree with the dissertation that this problem is severe and in urgent need of addressing if we are to come to an understanding of modals. According to i), the dissertation contends that if we consider the ability of elements to express more than one modal meaning, an ability which is very prevalent in many of the world's languages, then we can better come to a consistent and perhaps universal view of what constitutes being a modal.

The second part of the thesis addresses a more theoretical issue. Many syntacticians, especially those of a more theoretical persuasion, have taken the point of view that it is syntactic properties that lead to an element becoming a modal in a language. This point of view is often taken in discussing the development of modals as a separate category in English. However, consistent with i), the dissertation attempts to argue that it is the semantic feature of polyfunctionality which gives rise to elements attaining syntactic properties which distinguish them from other categories. In evaluating the dissertation, I will consider the success to which it argues in support of these proposals.

I should say from the start that I think that the dissertation does a good job on the whole of presenting and supporting its central thesis. However, for the sake of space I will not spend time outlining the positive aspects but instead will concentrate on more critical remarks – even though this may give a rather negative impression, which does not accurately reflect my general opinion.

The dissertation complains about other approaches that they are inconsistent in application of criteria to identify modals, and proposes polyfunctionality as a more consistent one. However, at times the dissertation itself is inconsistent in the application of this criterion. For example on page 123 we have the following text (my emphasis):

Another group of **modals** is formed by *ought*, *need* and *dare*. ... they are either polyfunctional, but historically agreeing (*need*), or they are diachronically non-agreeing, but **monofunctional** (*dare* and *ought*).

Clearly, if *dare* and *ought* are monofunctional, they should not be included in the identified 'group of modals' by definition.

This leads to a second kind of inconsistency, which is more serious than the above. It is claimed that some modals are not polyfunctional because their use to express a certain modality is either weak or in decline. For example, on page 91 it is claimed that *ought* is to be considered [-POLYF] because its epistemic usage is 'weak' (though personally, I find epistemic *ought* not problematic: 'that ought to do it' is not something I would balk at). But whether or not *ought* is polyfunctional is not my point. My problem is that the dissertation claims other elements to be polyfunctional on the basis of equally weak (or even weaker, in my opinion) examples. On page 102 *had better* is claimed to be polyfunctional on the basis that it is used epistemically in instances such as: 'the weather had better be good'. Why this is considered to be epistemic escapes me. It certainly doesn't have the same futurity or epistemic necessity reading that other modals have: 'the weather will should/ought to good'. Instead, to me, it expresses the demand that in some world strongly preferred on some normative conditions, the weather will be good. Thus it is more deontic than epistemic. If this construction does have an epistemic reading, it is not straightforward and therefore should be put into the same 'problematic' camp as cases like *ought* , which are considered [-POLYF]. There are numerous examples throughout the dissertation where elements are considered to be polyfunctional or not on the basis of questionable claims. It seems, then, that the dissertation does not fully escape the inconsistency that it accuses other approaches of suffering from.

Turning now to the more theoretical aspects of the dissertation, I am a little puzzled as to why Pollock's view of the articulated IP is adopted. The dissertation itself points out that this has been criticised and better suggestions made: specifically that AgrP sits above TP. There was no argument given for why we should ignore the standard objections of having TP above AgrP and so it appears that the decision was made solely on the basis that it suited the purposes of the analysis.

The adoption of the articulated IP analysis was supposed to help account for why certain elements behave syntactically as they do: the higher up the structure they are generated, the more modal properties they will display. Unfortunately it doesn't quite work like this and there are some inconsistencies which cast doubt on the usefulness of the adopted structure in accounting for the observations. Certain elements are said to be generated in different positions, and yet they have pretty much the same syntactic behaviours. For example modals *dare* and *need* are generated in T and Agr respectively, and yet I see very little difference in their syntactic behaviours to justify this analysis. At the same time, different elements are claimed to be generated in the same positions, though they differ in their syntactic behaviours: *gonna* , *gotta* and *wanna* are, like *need* , generated in Agr, though none of these have any of the properties that *need* displays.

While remaining unconvinced by the claim that semantics precedes syntax in the development of modals, I am not wholly unsympathetic to the idea. However, I do think that it leads to a rather large problem, which is very much highlighted by the diagram on page 72. The immediate question which springs to mind in seeing this diagram is 'why?'. It is clear, however, that we have no chance of answering this question for the simple reason that we lack any semantic theory which might provide the basis for such an answer. Therefore the claim that semantic changes lead to syntactic changes is bereft of any explanatory content. It may well be correct, but presently we have a better chance of learning more by following the opposite claim.

Although interesting, the chapters on German and Chinese were obviously less convincing than those on English, mainly because these languages lack the syntactic phenomena on which we can distinguish modals from other elements. I wonder whether it might have been better to have had one chapter which looked more briefly at a larger set of languages (similar to what was done in chapter 3 – but, following the chapters on English, a

more informed discussion would have been possible), instead of having detailed chapters on the two selected languages.

I would like to repeat that the above critical remarks should not be taken to reflect the entirety of my opinion of the dissertation. My impressions were mostly good and I hope that if the concerns I list above can be addressed, then an even more impressive work can follow if the candidate should wish take the work further after gaining her PhD.

EVALUATION

The dissertation was very well written, both in terms of language use and organisation. Though I list a number of errors below, these were very minor and did not disrupt the clarity of the work. The arguments were clearly presented and led to appropriate conclusions and the literature referred to was appropriate and adequate for work at this level. Formatting was error free. I have no reservations in claiming that the dissertation attains the required pass level and may therefore proceed to the defence.

QUESTIONS FOR THE DEFENCE

1) The dissertation adopts the fairly common decision to divide modalities into two: epistemic and root. However, I agree with Palmer that Deontic and Dynamic modalities show enough syntactic differences to warrant separate treatment. What would happen to the analysis presented in the dissertation if Palmer's advice were to be taken? Would it constitute an improvement, or would it be harmful for its claims?

2) The dissertation claims that, as German modals behave syntactically like verbs, they should be analysed as generated in the same position, within vP. However, vP is usually taken to be the domain of argument structure and modals are not lexical predicates and are therefore not particularly good candidates for this point of insertion. Would it really affect the analysis if German modals were analysed, like English modals, as being generated in the functional structure above vP? Could there possibly be any advantages to assuming this?



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