

Report on the PhD thesis, **Polyfunctionality and the Ongoing History of English Modals**,
by Dagmar Machova

Opponent: Joseph Embley Emonds, February 4, 2016

This thesis is a thorough empirical study of the properties of modal verbs in current English German and Chinese. Although the title rightly indicates that detailed analysis focuses on the English modals, the insightful treatments of that data from other languages, in particular from German and Chinese in Chapters 3, 8 and 9 strengthen the author's claims about the basic nature of modal verbs. The thesis thoroughly examines the theoretical treatments that these classes of verbs have received in both the grammatical and semantic literature, and uses these terms to formulate a novel and intriguing hypothesis to characterize them, based on a quite particular and arguably universally valid concept of 'polyfunctionality' (Chapters 2 and 6). A second dimension of the thesis is its emphasis on the recent and ongoing diachronic development of especially the 'marginal mods' (chapter 7), which for the first time here can be understood as an area whose study that reveals the theoretical treatment of modals, rather than just a repository of exceptions and curiosities.

The original hypothesis of the author's characterization of modal verbs is her claim that they are to be defined in terms of they are to be defined in terms not just of meaning, but of in terms of a certain type of duality of meaning, which she labels polyfunctionality (section 2.7). According to her, modal verbs do not contribute to describing an event, i.e. its participants, its aspect, its property of being an action or a state, its manner of unfolding, etc. Rather, they express, as described in the formal semantic literature, amply cited in sections 2.1 and 2.4, the non-factual possibility or necessity of an event. Moreover, and crucially, when an item can express the possibility/ necessity of an event either simply in terms of its truth (an epistemic reading) or as being in conformity with some understood external standard (a root or deontic meaning), then the item is modal. If it is furthermore a verbal item, then it is a modal verb. Thus, the author claims that the semantics of being 'modal' does not consist of expressing some specific meaning, nor in being simply ambiguous. To qualify as a central modal, an item must ambiguous in this specific way. As the author argues (Chapters 6 and 7), it then follows that English *must*, *can*, *may*, *should*, *need (not)*, and less obviously will be central modals, while *dare*, *shall*, *gonna* and *wanna* are not, since the latter are not ambiguous.

The author thus finds a defining property of modals and modal expressions that clarifies the vague foundations of previous treatments, including earlier studies with interesting semantic and syntactic results. She then builds on this definition by associating two other cross linguistic properties with modal elements, namely (i) their lack of (at least full) morphological agreement with subjects, and (ii) their tendency to leave the part of speech category verb. She shows the importance of this latter property in Modern English with many arguments and paradigms (Chapter 4), but it is also a key factor in the later discussion of the syntax of Chinese modal elements.

The thesis then uses these two properties to show how certain frequent verbal idioms in English seem to be diachronically developing toward full modal (non-verbal) status. This approach allows the author to put some order into what most current grammarians, formal or otherwise, treat as a formless slough of irregularity, namely the syntax of 'marginal modals.' She shows for example how the 'modal idioms' *had better* and *gotta* are losing any sign of verbal agreement, especially in more innovative non-standard grammar, and that *better* even begins to invert and precede sentence negation, behaviors of central modals. There may be some overstatement (i.e. going beyond what current corpus based data fully support) in the treatments of *gonna* and *wanna*, but to my ear even examples such as *you wanna not do that*

and *that guy gonna help you for sure* do not sound outlandish, but just extreme cases of non-standard and stigmatized usage, which as the author explains are perhaps pointers to what English grammar is currently heading.

The analytic tools used by the author to synthesize the varied and murky data of semi-modals are the carefully worked out formal representations in Figures 12-14 of Chapter 6. As in much current syntax, clausal domains are subdivided into a series of ‘functional heads’, each of which has a phrasal specifier to its left and a phrasal complement to its right, which in fact contains the rest of the material in the clause.

The author then relates the various classes of modal items to specific functional heads, including those with defective paradigms. One promising proposal of the author, which merits and also needs further investigation, is the suggestion that deontic modals are inserted in trees in the currently much discussed ‘little v’ position. That is, the author argues that deontic modals are not lexical verbs (V) but functional category items, and yet are more closely associated with the verbal projection than with the purely grammatical T (Tense) projection. This position for deontic modals may explain why they are incompatible with the English perfect auxiliary *have*, which is also generally considered to enter trees in the small v position. **Mary must have worked yesterday = She was obliged to work yesterday.*)

The highly suggestive proposals in the thesis for how modal elements develop diachronically are nonetheless left in somewhat incomplete form, even given the considerable difficulties with the data. At the theoretical level, more could be said about trying to understand why German has not developed like late Middle English did, and about why certain modal idioms are so resistant to dropping number agreement, even in irregular forms (**Mary want do that.*)

ORGANIZATION AND EXPOSITION IN ENGLISH. The organization and logic of exposition throughout the entire dissertation is exemplary. The coherence suggested by the sequencing of items in the Table of Contents is borne out in the presentation of individual sections. The clarity is especially to be appreciated in Chapter 10, which reviews the literature on modality and modal elements in Chinese, since the sources themselves seem to cover materials in ways that are hard to compare and synthesize, due largely to the fact that no standard approach to Chinese seems to unify the many different traditional and current studies of its modal elements.

The level of technical and academic vocabulary throughout the work is well suited to the topics covered, and appropriate throughout. The number of grammatical errors seems to be fewer than would be found in the prose of a careful native speaker.

BIBLIOGRAPHY, FORMATTING. The references chosen are representative and complete in their coverage, relevant, and fully current; for example, section 2.4 is exemplary. They are especially to be praised for their coverage of a quite disparate range of languages whose modal elements have been chosen as presenting quite different grammatical systems. There is a good balance between references with non-formalized discussions and those in more recent formalized syntax and semantics. The references are presented throughout in the standard formatting used in current linguistic analyses, and are free of any obvious errors.

FINAL MARK. There is no doubt in my mind that the thorough research and argumentation and the original hypotheses in this thesis are of doctoral quality, in both their content and their form. I therefore give the thesis a high pass mark and recommend that the thesis be defended.

QUESTIONS FOR THE DEFENSE:

1. Your characterization of central modal items in English involves three criteria: syntactic, semantic, and morphological. Are there aspects of present-day Chinese and German which make them less amenable to the same full treatment that you provided for English modals? What are these aspects not shared by English? Exemplify the answer referring to contrasting grammatical patterns in the three languages.
2. Deontic modality seems more difficult to define and analyze than epistemic modality. Try to characterize in some general way what deontic modality has in common, independently of individual lexical items. Discuss with examples whether English present subjunctives exhibit both types of modality, or instead seem limited to one of the two types.

Signature:

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