Discourse as a Disambiguating Tool in the Teaching of Modals to EFL Students [1]

Pilar Alonso Rodríguez
Universidad de Salamanca

This paper shows that the traditional approach to the teaching of modals in the EFL classroom employs a double classifying criterion (grammatical and semantic) which does not cover the actual usage of modals in real discourse production and causes problems in the learning process. It contends that modal values such as obligation, permission, certainty, etc. are not only functions of their semantic content but also exponents of their pragmatic illocutionary force which can only be appreciated when authentic utterances are considered. Through the analysis of experimental data, the article demonstrates that the sentential context that usually accompanies the discussion and presentation of modals is insufficient to reach a sufficiently stable interpretation of their meaning even by native speakers of English, and proposes the study of modals in a fully developed discourse environment as a way to disambiguate their semantic indeterminacy and to favour a more natural and fluent learning process.

Este artículo muestra cómo el enfoque tradicional en la enseñanza de los verbos modales ingleses en el aula de EFL emplea un criterio de clasificación doble (gramático y semántico) que no responde al verdadero uso de los verbos modales en el discurso auténtico y además causa problemas en el proceso de aprendizaje. Se argumenta que valores modales como obligación, permiso, certeza, etc. no son exclusivamente funciones del contenido semántico sino que también son exponentes de la fuerza pragmática ilocutiva de los verbos modales, la cual sólo puede apreciarse al considerar enunciados auténticos. A través del análisis de los datos obtenidos, el artículo demuestra que el

contexto oracional que normalmente acompaña a la
presentación de los verbos modales es insuficiente para
alcanzar una interpretación suficientemente estable de
su significado, incluso para los hablantes nativos de
inglés, y propugna el estudio de estos verbos en un
contexto discursivo como recurso para desambiguar su
indeterminación semántica y a la vez favorecer un
proceso de aprendizaje más natural y fluido.

Key words: *modal verbs, grammatical,
semantic/pragmatic interface, learning process, te aching criteria.*

Palabras clave: *verbos modales, interacción gramatical,
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1. SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The grammatical/semantic interface

English modals are a highly complex linguistic category, for they
are of an irregular but simple grammatical status, and their semantic
richness makes it extremely difficult for learners of English as a foreign
language to develop fluency in their use. The problem may not be with
modal verbs themselves but with the circumstances that concur in the
teaching-learning process and also with the interest that their
functional complexity holds for those involved in their instruction.
Grammatically, modals may be neatly presented and taught as a fully
recognisable sub-set category of auxiliary verbal forms according to the
classifying criteria set up by the morphologically closed class of words
they conform, on the basis of their broadly shared auxiliary non-
inflected behaviour. Thus, differences in their grammatical cotextual
requirements (mainly the absence or presence of "infinitival to" with
which most modals act in complementary distribution) often results in
a subdivision which allow a distinction to be made between what is
frequently called "classical modals" *(may, might, must, can, could, shall,
should, will, would)* and "peripheral or semi-modals" *(have to, had to, ought
to, had better, used to, dare, need…)*, although more recently a new and
fully recognisable category has been added to these two sets, that is

what Krug (2000) terms "emerging modals" *(going to / gonna, have got to / gotta, want to / wanna)*.

However, once the subject of surface formal description is covered, identifying the function and use of modal verbs in English becomes an arduous task because what is generally presented and dealt with as grammatical proves in fact to be mostly semantic. As Hoye points out, this is mainly due to the fact that "linguistic research still tends to dwell on the semantic rather than the syntactic aspects of modals, as it is primarily in the domain of meaning that firm and often conflicting theoretical positions have been taken" (1997: 18). Furthermore, these theoretical positions have put the emphasis on the philosophical and logic approaches to modality, which makes the discussion on the function and meaning of modals rather abstract and elevated, even difficult to apply when the aim is teaching foreigners to integrate modal verbs in their discourse production as naturally as possible.

When modals are tackled in the EFL classroom, usually following the design of most textbooks, they are treated as a grammatical category and their form and function are presented on a pair with, let's say, the form and function of other auxiliaries (e.g., *be* for the construction of the passive voice, or progressive aspect; *have* for the construction of perfective aspect, etc.). However, the criteria used to classify and introduce them is not based on their grammatical behaviour but on their semantic capacity to express notions such as *possibility, certainty, obligation, necessity, permission, prohibition,* and so on, an issue that adds confusion to the already complex scenario.

Presumably, the only grammatical category modals may represent is that of mood; and, as a matter of fact, practically all theoretical approaches consider modals as realizations in English of the non-factual or irealis verbal moods (i.e. subjunctive and conditional) in opposition to the factual or realis (i.e. indicative and imperative). Palmer (2001, 2003) has called attention to the difficulties that thinking about a non-inflected system of modality in terms of an equivalent of the grammatical category of mood creates. In his analysis, he distinguishes between the superordinate grammatical category of modality and the notions of mood and modal system, the

latter of which he considers mutually exclusive grammatical
subcategories of modality. Following this distribution, Palmer affirms
that "modern English has a modal system, but no mood" (2003: 4).
He describes mood as a doubly binary system based on the opposition
between indicative/subjunctive and realis/irealis. However, drawing on
evidence from different languages (e.g. Spanish), he does not regard
this double set of categories (indicative/subjunctive, realis/irealis) as
totally alternative. Palmer contends that the realis/irealis systems of
modality are not constrained by the structural conditions of
inflectional mood: "Unlike the indicative/subjunctive system,
realis/irealis systems do not usually occur together with tense systems.
In general past and present are marked as realis, future as irealis"
(2001: 5), and links the two notions to a proposition being asserted or
non-asserted respectively.

Palmer emphasizes the fact that modal systems, like that of
English, are not binary; they usually consist of a set of analytical modal
forms whose presence or absence in the sentence marks the utterance
as modal (irealis) or non-modal (realis). This becomes evident when
we consider the wide options offered by modality in English as
reflected in Quirk et al.'s (1985: 137) representation of the modal
verbs continuum:

(a) CENTRAL MODALS: can, could, may, might, shall, should,
    will/'ll, would/'d, must
(b) MARGINAL MODALS: dare, need, ought to, used to
(c) MODAL IDIOMS: had better, would rather/sooner, BE to,
    HAVE got to, etc.
(d) SEMI-AUXILIARIES: HAVE to, BE about to, BE able to,
    BE bound to, BE going to, BE obliged to, BE supposed to,
    BE willing to, etc.
(e) CATENATIVES: APPEAR to, HAPPEN to, SEEM to, GET
    + -ed participle, KEEP + -ing participle, etc
(f) MAIN VERB + non finite clause: HOPE + to-infinitive,
    BEGIN + -ing participle, etc

If we focus on the grammatical behaviour of central modal
verbs, it must be agreed that it is fairly easy to describe, as Palmer
(2003: 3) shows:

(I) the modal verbs have all the characteristics of auxiliaries – their use in negation inversion, "code" and emphatic affirmation […];

(II) they have no third person –s form – no **cans*, **mays*, etc.;

(III) they cannot co-occur in standard English […] – no **may can* etc;

and therefore they can be taught and learned without much difficulty. But when their values and use come into play, modal auxiliary verbs in English exceed the boundaries of grammatical classification and require teachers and learners to enter the much more complex field of "modality". Palmer (2003: 7) identifies three types of modality in the English modal system: epistemic, deontic and dynamic. He says that "epistemic modality is concerned solely with the speaker's attitude to status of the proposition", "deontic modality is directive in that the event is controlled by circumstances external to the subject of the sentence" and in "dynamic modality the control is internal to the subject." He illustrates each of these categories as follows:

Epistemic: They may be in the office. – They must be in the office.

Deontic: They may/can come in now. – They must come in now.

Dynamic: They can run very fast. – I will help you.

Palmer explains that in the examples provided to illustrate epistemic modality "the speaker makes the judgements that it is *possible* or *necessary* (necessarily the case that) that they are in the office"; in those offered to show deontic modality "*permission* is given with *MAY* […] and an *obligation* is laid with *MUST.*" Finally, he explains that in dynamic modality what we have "is the subject's *ability* to run fast with *CAN* and the speaker's *willingness* to help with *WILL*" (2003: 7 our italics). It is a fact, however, that presenting these uses of modals in a typically minimum sentential context, as Palmer does, almost invariably forces the receiver (the learner, in this case) to infer the meaning that modals bring into the utterances by making use of their

own interpretative clues. If they were inserted in a wider and more precise real context, there would probably be other possible interpretations for these utterances whose concern would not only be semantic, as they would also present strong pragmatic implications.

The semantic/pragmatic interface.

Ferrer Mora (1999: 4) defines modality as the speaker's subjective attitude with regard to meaning and warns that the semantic level (which may identify the mood of a sentence as declarative, interrogative, imperative, exhortative, etc.) tends to be confused with the pragmatic level as the values they convey, often identified with the meaning of modality, also have strong illocutionary force (e.g. exhortatives which express petition, command, warning, advice, etc.). Thus, Ferrer Mora goes beyond the grammatical/semantic interface we have been considering so far and focuses on the semantic/pragmatic values of sentential or enunciative modality. From his perspective, we may contend that the values which characterize English modals, and which are commonly presented and taught in the EFL class within a grammatical frame as realizations of sense or mood, are not only functions of their semantic content, understood in a broad sense (not necessarily propositional), but are also exponents of their illocutionary dimension.

A similar position is found in Hoye's approach to modality when he moves the concept away from the classic duality of subjective attitude perspective versus objective propositional content towards the much more realistic framework of language use (1997: 53-67). He studies the illocutionary force of utterances, following mostly Austin's theory of speech acts (1975), and associates the semantic values of modals with the discourse functions they help to realise. Hoye specifies that modals also occur in assertive descriptive language to express from the speaker's point of view "how things are, as he perceives them" (1997: 55). To illustrate this point, he uses examples from different corpora:

1. This vessel is decorated with masks, projecting spiked triangles, and reticulated rectangles which *might* possibly represent fishing nets.

2. No doubt Mr. Tellaby *will* want a full statement from you in due course.

3. I *shall* certainly apologize to the Chairman, Captain. (our italics)

Hoye claims that in utterance 1 the use of a modal verb as part of a descriptive statement to introduce a subjective impression is not essentially different from other discourse actions where values more traditionally corresponding to modality and modal forms, such as prediction or promise, are instantiated. This is what happens, for example, in sentences 2 and 3 above, which he associates with the values of prediction and promise respectively. Hoye concludes that "assertions, predictions, promises represent instances of language as action; they are pragmatic categories which indicate how the different semantic classes of utterance are actually used" (1997:55), and calls attention to the fact that in cases of ambiguity the connection between modals and what he calls their "adverbial satellites" (i.e. those specific adverbs that have a tendency to collocate with certain modals, such as *possibly* in 1, *no doubt* in 2 and *certainly* in 3) "may determine status" (1997:83). The categories which Hoye projects onto the performance of speech acts, with or without the help of modality-associated adverbs, are basically the same categories that grammars use to classify modals; however, and despite this apparently general theoretical agreement, there seems to be a problem in the identification of some of these values, even for native speakers of English, when they are presented in decontextualized sentences.

2. DISAMBIGUATING MODALS IN A SENTENTIAL ENVIRONMENT

The research that serves as basis for this paper is a sequel of that conducted for an earlier research project which focused on the cognitive organization of modal verbs in English. In that initial project and in this follow-up, we conducted an experiment among native and non-native speakers of English in order to test their capacity to recognize the values of modal verbs in a sentential context-free environment as they are standardly described and dealt with in

grammar books (cf. Alonso and Sánchez 2005; Sánchez and Alonso forthcoming). For that purpose, all subjects were given a list of twenty sentences, each of them containing a modal and were asked to identify the meaning of each modal in each of the sentences by choosing from among five different options which were offered to them. All sentences were chosen from the examples used by Leech and Svartvick in their *A Communicative Grammar of English* (1975) to illustrate the different semantic values they attribute to modal verbs; the selection primed those sentences whose modal functions could be considered central once the degree of representation conceded to them in the different sections of the grammar had been estimated. The semantic values that resulted from this selection were: *obligation, possibility, certainty, probability, ability, permission, suggestion, offer, request, advice, volition, promise, prediction*; and the verbal forms included (some with more than one semantic value) were: *be able to, can, could, had better, had to, have to, have got to, may, might, must, need, ought to, shall, should, will, would, would rather*. We will not go into the results obtained from this research in detail, as these have been published elsewhere, but we want to mention some aspects that we find significant and relevant to the argumentation we wish to pursue here. For example, one of the few cases in which there was a significantly high level of error among the native speakers of English who participated in the experiment was the sentence below, which contained the modal form *will*:

4. John will have arrived by now.

Leech and Svartvick (1975:131) use this sentence as an example of the modal value of *prediction;* but only 53,3% of all subjects in the group of native speakers of English chose "prediction" out of the five possible meanings presented to them, which were *ability, certainty, request* and *advice.* As a second step in this search for modal values identification, we ran the same test with a similar group of subjects (21 native speakers of English), this time using example *2* above, to which Hoye also attaches the value of prediction:

No doubt Mr. Tellaby will want a full statement from you in due course.

The subjects were given exactly the same options to choose

from, i.e. *ability, certainty, prediction, request* and *advice*. The results were quite drastically different this time: only 9,52% of the total chose *prediction* as the preferred option. 66,6% opted for *certainty*; 19,04% decided on *request* and 4,76% on *advice*. As a matter of fact *ability* was the only option that was not contemplated at all. That is, *prediction*, which is the value the sentence is supposed to illustrate, came third in the ranking after *certainty* and *request*. This seems to confirm Brazil's idea that "some of the conventions concerning the use of specific modals seem not to be agreed among users" (1995: 118).

There are a few reflections which can be made in relation to these data:

It seems reasonable to state that the semantic status of modals is rather unstable as they seem to be prone to different readings and different interpretations when devoid of a context.

Equally important is the influence that the cotext has in the process of interpretation, as it is unquestionable that the presence of *no doubt* at the beginning of the sentence must have influenced somehow the high perception of *certainty* as the core meaning of one of the utterances. In fact, an analysis of the cotextual components of utterances such as those found in 2 and 3 above show that there are other elements in the wording and realization of the sentences (including for instance lexical choices, tone and intonation patterns), which help to identify the modal verbs involved as conveyors of some sort of subjective meaning, be it prediction, certainty, request or promise (e.g. "no doubt", "in due course" in 2; and "certainly", "apologize", "Chairman", "Captain" in 3).

We should draw attention to the import that a pragmatic interpretation must have had in the reading of example 5, as a fairly considerable number of subjects (23,8%) moved beyond modal meaning and interpreted the utterance as expressing a performative speech act of *request* and even *advice*.

It seems of interest to note that the presence of the adverbial *no doubt* in utterance 2 did not in fact have the supposedly expected effect of reinforcing the value of prediction theoretically assigned to the modal, as it instead promoted a general understanding of the utterance as an expression of certainty. In this sense, our findings seem

to agree with Hoye's assertion that adverbs may help resolve the indeterminacy of modals (1997: 83), but it should be added as well that more often than not their weight in the utterance may even surpass pragmatically the semantics of the modal form.

Thus, variability in the interpretation of modals and the dependence of their meaning and values on external factors both cotextual and contextual are key issues that should be taken into account during the teaching-learning process of EFL. This degree of flexibility and subjectivity in the actual contextualized interpretation of modals can be illustrated with an example from David Leavitt's short story "Territory" included in his collection *Family Dancing* (1986: 6):

> 5.
> "Neil! Did you call the airport to make sure the plane's coming in on time?"
> "Yes," he shouts to her. "It is."
> "Good. Well, I'll have dinner ready when you get back."
> "Mom—"
> "What?" The word comes out in a weary wail that is more of an answer than a question.
> "What's wrong?" He says forgetting his original question.
> "Nothing's wrong," she declares in a tone that indicates that everything is wrong. "The dogs have to be fed, dinner has to be made, and I've got people here. Nothing's wrong."
> "I hope things *will* be as comfortable as possible when Wayne gets here."
> *"Is that a request or a threat?"*
> "Mom—". (our italics)

We can conclude from this evidence that part of the problem learners seem to have in their acquisition of competence in this particular area of English language learning may be concerned not only with their (in)capacity to know and detect the semantic content of modals as they are currently taught, but also with the high amount of indeterminacy and flexibility that these verbal forms present in their actual pragmatic use in real discourse samples and with the degree of subjectivity that this flexibility brings into the interpretative process.

We can say, therefore, that doubts about the meaning and use of modals is not a question of good knowledge of the language and high fluency. This leads us to state that a strong linguistic cotext, and whenever possible a well-defined situational context, should be considered a must in the classroom in order to guarantee a minimum degree of stability during the teaching process. As a matter of fact, sentences devoid of a context may sound strange even to native English speakers, as one of the subjects in our experiment demonstrated: when, faced with Hoye's example (the source was not stated in the handout), s/he wrote the following comment below his/her doubtful choice between certainty and request (s/he had first circled one, then the other). S/he said: "This sentence is very awkward. A native English speaking person would not write the sentence in this way", taking for granted, we presume, that the sentence had been prepared by one of the non-native English speaking instructors. His/her appreciation allows us to emphasize, however, the oddity that decontextualized sentences may present even for native speakers of English and stands in favour of instances of real discourse inserted in environments larger than the sentence. This would ensure not only a solid semantic and grammatical discussion of language use but also lead to better comprehension of the aspects subject to study.

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