

THE FUNCTIONAL-SEMANTIC FEATURES OF MODAL VERBS IN BRITISH ENGLISH: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF THE BRITISH NATIONAL CORPUS

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Abstract. *Modal verbs constitute an important part of the English grammatical system because they express such meanings as ability, possibility, probability, obligation, permission, prediction and willingness. Their interpretation depends not only on their grammatical form but also on the communicative context in which they occur. The present study examines the functional-semantic features of English modal verbs from a corpus-based perspective, with particular emphasis on the British National Corpus (BNC). The study focuses on the central modal verbs can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would. The BNC is treated as the principal source of linguistic evidence because it contains a broad range of written and spoken British English. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is used as a supplementary comparative source in order to identify selected differences between British and American English. The analysis demonstrates the importance of corpus evidence for distinguishing between the formal grammatical category of modality and its context-dependent pragmatic and semantic functions. Particular attention is paid to the distribution of modal meanings across written and spoken registers and to the relationship between modal forms and communicative purposes. The study contributes to corpus-based descriptions of contemporary British English and demonstrates the usefulness of BNC data for functional-semantic analysis.*

Keywords: *corpus linguistics, British National Corpus, modal verbs, modality, functional semantics, British English, COCA, corpus-based analysis.*

Introduction

Modality is one of the central areas of English grammar because speakers use modal expressions to indicate their attitude towards the possibility, necessity, desirability or likelihood of an event. Unlike ordinary lexical verbs, modal verbs do not simply describe an action or state.

They frequently indicate how a speaker evaluates a proposition or presents a situation to another participant in communication.

The functional interpretation of modal verbs is particularly important because one modal form may express more than one meaning. For example, can may indicate ability, possibility or permission, while must can express obligation or a strong inference. Similarly, would may occur in conditional constructions, polite requests, hypothetical situations and descriptions of habitual behaviour. Consequently, modal verbs cannot always be adequately described through isolated dictionary definitions.

Corpus linguistics provides an opportunity to investigate modal verbs in naturally occurring language. Instead of relying exclusively on invented examples, corpus-based research examines authentic instances and considers their distribution across different genres and communicative contexts. The British National Corpus is especially valuable for this purpose. The BNC is a large collection of written and spoken British English containing approximately 100 million words. Its material represents a wide range of genres, including newspapers, academic writing, fiction, letters, conversations and other forms of language use.

The aim of this study is to examine the functional-semantic behaviour of central modal verbs in British English, giving primary attention to evidence from the BNC. COCA is incorporated only as a supplementary corpus in order to provide a point of comparison with American English.

1. Theoretical Background

In traditional English grammar, modal verbs are generally associated with a restricted grammatical class. They are followed by the base form of another verb and have a number of syntactic characteristics that distinguish them from lexical verbs. However, from a functional perspective, their importance goes beyond their formal properties.

Modality may broadly be divided into different semantic domains. One important distinction is between epistemic modality and deontic modality. Epistemic modality concerns the speaker's assessment of the likelihood or probability of a proposition. For example:

She may be at home.

Here, *may* expresses possibility.

Deontic modality, by contrast, concerns obligation, permission or requirements:

You must submit the form today.

In this example, *must* expresses obligation.

Another important area is dynamic modality, which is frequently associated with ability, willingness or circumstances affecting an event:

She can speak three languages.

Here, *can* expresses ability.

These distinctions demonstrate why contextual analysis is necessary. The same modal form can have different semantic functions depending on its surrounding linguistic and communicative environment.

2. The British National Corpus as the Main Research Source

The BNC is particularly appropriate for the present study because it was designed to represent a broad cross-section of British English. The corpus contains both written and spoken material, with approximately 90% written and 10% spoken language. Its written component includes newspapers, specialist periodicals, academic books, fiction and other texts, whereas the spoken component contains transcribed conversations and speech from different contexts.

The XML edition contains 96,986,707 orthographic words and is annotated for part-of-speech information and other linguistic properties. Such annotation makes it possible to investigate not only the occurrence of individual modal verbs but also their grammatical environments.

For the present research, the following central modal verbs are selected:

can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would.

The investigation focuses on three dimensions:

the functional-semantic meanings of the modal verbs;

their use in written and spoken contexts;

selected similarities and differences between British and American English.

3. Functional-Semantic Analysis of Modal Verbs

3.1. CAN and COULD

Can is commonly associated with ability:

She can speak French.

However, corpus evidence demonstrates that can is not restricted to this meaning. It can also express possibility:

Accidents can happen at any time.

In addition, can may express permission:

You can leave now.

Could frequently functions as the past or conditional counterpart of can, but its semantic range is wider. It may express past ability, tentative possibility or polite requests:

Could you help me?

From a functional perspective, the distinction between can and could is therefore not simply temporal. The choice may also reflect the speaker's degree of certainty, politeness or hypothetical distance.

3.2. MAY and MIGHT

May and might are particularly important in the expression of epistemic possibility:

It may be difficult to find a solution.

Might often presents possibility in a more tentative or hypothetical manner:

It might rain later.

The interpretation of these forms depends strongly on context. In formal written language, may can also be used to indicate permission or institutional possibility. Corpus-based investigation is therefore useful for identifying which semantic functions are associated with particular registers.

Previous corpus research has demonstrated that modal verbs can be investigated through frequency, distribution and sociolinguistic variation. Baker and Heritage, for example, used BNC data to investigate variation in the use of may and demonstrated how corpus methodology can be applied to modal meaning and variation.

3.3. MUST

The modal must is strongly associated with necessity and obligation:

Students must follow the rules.

However, must can also have an epistemic meaning:

She must be tired.

The first example represents deontic modality, while the second expresses a strong inference. This contrast illustrates the importance of functional-semantic analysis: identical grammatical forms can represent different types of modality.

3.4. SHOULD

Should commonly expresses recommendation, expectation or weaker obligation:

You should see a doctor.

It may also indicate expectation:

The train should arrive soon.

Consequently, should often occupies an intermediate position between direct obligation and prediction.

3.5. WILL and WOULD

Will is frequently associated with prediction and future reference:

The results will be available tomorrow.

It can also express willingness:

I will help you.

Would has a particularly broad functional range. It occurs in conditional structures, polite requests, hypothetical statements and descriptions of repeated behaviour:

Would you like some coffee?

The multifunctionality of would makes it an especially interesting item for corpus research.

4. Written and Spoken British English

One of the major advantages of the BNC is its inclusion of both written and spoken language. This makes it possible to examine how modal expressions operate in different communicative environments.

Spoken interaction tends to involve interpersonal negotiation, politeness, uncertainty and immediate responses. Consequently, modal verbs can perform important pragmatic functions in conversation. Written academic and institutional texts, on the other hand, frequently require careful expression of probability, necessity and cautious argumentation.

This does not mean that individual modal verbs belong exclusively to one register.

Rather, their preferred functions may change according to genre and communicative purpose. Corpus-based research can reveal these patterns more systematically than isolated examples.

5. Comparison with COCA

The Corpus of Contemporary American English is used in this study as a supplementary comparative source. COCA contains more than one billion words from 1990 to 2019 and covers a wide range of genres, including spoken language, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic writing and web-based material.

The comparison with COCA should not replace the BNC analysis. Instead, it can help determine whether a functional pattern observed in British English also occurs in American English.

For example, modal verbs such as can, could, may, might, must, should, will and would are common to both varieties. Nevertheless, differences may emerge in register distribution, preferred constructions and pragmatic tendencies. Such differences should be interpreted cautiously because the two corpora differ in their design, period and linguistic variety.

6. Discussion

The corpus-based approach demonstrates that modal verbs should be understood as multifunctional grammatical resources rather than as one-to-one equivalents of simple meanings.

Their semantic interpretation is influenced by the surrounding verb phrase, subject, genre, communicative situation and discourse purpose.

The BNC is particularly useful because its combination of written and spoken British English enables researchers to move beyond prescriptive descriptions. The corpus provides evidence of how speakers and writers actually use modal forms.

The study also confirms the methodological value of distinguishing between form and function.

For example, identifying every occurrence of *must* as “obligation” would overlook its epistemic use. Similarly, treating *could* merely as the past form of *can* would fail to account for its functions in polite requests and hypothetical contexts.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the functional-semantic features of central English modal verbs with primary reference to the British National Corpus. The analysis demonstrates that modal verbs perform a broad range of semantic and pragmatic functions, including ability, possibility, permission, obligation, prediction, expectation and willingness.

The BNC is especially appropriate for such research because it provides extensive written and spoken evidence from British English. Its linguistic annotation and genre diversity make it possible to examine modal verbs in authentic contexts. COCA can supplement this analysis by providing a comparative perspective on American English.

The main theoretical implication of the study is that modal meaning should be analysed contextually. A single modal form may express several meanings, and the identification of those meanings requires attention to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic context. A corpus-based approach therefore provides a more empirically grounded account of modality than isolated examples alone.

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