

Towards a unified theory of multiple modals in English

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Background

- PhD project defended at the University of Paris in June 2019 for a 3-year contract
- Continuation – with major changes – of an MSc dissertation about double modals (DMs) in Borders Scots.
- Project officially starts in September 2019: still in its early stages, i.e. narrowing down the main **questions** and the **methods** to answer them (so feedback is more than welcome !)

Multiple modals (MMs) in dialects of English

- MMs have been most carefully recorded in **Southern & Southeastern States** of the US (Texas, Tennessee, Alabama); a provisional map of their distribution is available at the **Yale Grammatical Diversity Group (GDP)**.
- MMs also seem to occur to a lesser extent in the **Scottish Borders (Brown 1991)**, forming their own sets of specific forms. The results of the Scots Syntax Atlas (**SCOSYA**) due later this year may help us know more about their distribution in Scotland more widely.
- They might occur to a lesser extent still in **Northern England (Beal 2004)** and seem to be at least acceptable in **Ulster Scots (Corrigan 2011)**.

Some examples

- Rather **rare**, **oral**, and **basilectal** features in each of the varieties:
 - *You'll **can** enjoy your holiday now, I'm sure.* (Scots, **Angus McIntosh Corpora – AMC**)
 - *He **might could** be working in the shop.* (Scots, **Miller 2004**)
 - *It **shouldn't oughta** take us very long.* (Texas; **Yale GDP**)
 - *What kind of proposal **would** John **might** agree to?* (Tennessee; **Yale GDP**)
 - Triple modals (rare, but warrant the label MM nevertheless): ***might should ought to*** (US), ***may might can, might will can***; + semi-modal combinations (***have to can, used to could***)
- Probably most frequent and productive in **American English (AmE)**, as reflected by their appearance in pop culture (comics, literature by Truman Capote, dialogue in the TV series *Breaking Bad* set in New Mexico, etc)

Two (big) cross-dialectal questions about
MMs:

⇒ **What are they?** (synchrony)

⇒ **Where do they come from?** (diachrony)

Early research on MMs

- At least 80% of studies on MMs have been exclusively focused on **AmE**.
- All theoretical accounts have stemmed from mainstream **generative** frameworks which sought to determine where the so-called **true modal** was with respect to the **spurious modal** (as well as the true nature of this spurious modal), on the basis of **inversion** and **negation**.
 - E.g. since *might could* becomes *might couldn't* or *could you might*, this suggests a sequence of idiosyncratic adverb + modal (**Battistella 1995**).
- But none of these accounts is completely satisfactory, especially across dialects. The better ones include various additions of projections and tree features that make the analysis cumbersome. The syntax of MMs seems particularly **flexible** and hard to pin down. Moreover, inversion is not the best test to explore this question because it's much rarer than declarative MMs, at least in Scots.

Suggestive evidence from my MSc fieldwork

- Provisional pilot study in Hawick (January 2018), a central location in the Borders known for its dialect, and allegedly its DMs (**Brown 1991**). Questionnaires given to 60 respondents.
- Based on acceptability tasks, DMs are accepted and allegedly used with varying degrees of prototypicality (***will can*** and ***might could*** are the main representatives; aware speakers talk about « using *might coulds* »).
- Negation and inversion tasks suggest that often, both modal elements can be defined as true (e.g equal production rates of *might X could*, *could X might*, *might no could* and *might couldn't*). But this is only **tentative** evidence due to increase in rarity of inverted DMs + my elicitation method was a bit roughly sketched.
- All of this led to a trans-dialectal **speaker's choice** hypothesis (true modal selection and recategorisation of idiosyncratic adverb), which I have gradually left on the side because of my dissatisfaction with the framework. But the findings might be convertible to new perspectives.

A new inquiry on MMs in English

- Framework which may be more fruitful and which hasn't been tried yet: **Construction Grammar (CxG)**
- The constructionist notions of **frequency** and (high or low) **schematicity** may help draw a more faithful picture of the features at hand and allow for better **cross-dialectal comparison**.
- CxG lets us shift away a bit from issues of constituency, certainly from derivational problems in previous research.
- I'd like to start out with a more cognitively-oriented model such as **CCG** (Boas 2013) also reliant on a **usage-based** approach (Bybee 2013). But the results could later be translated in more formal terms, for instance with **SBCG** (Michaelis 2013) (maybe after the PhD).

A new inquiry on MMs in English

- Objective: to find out if we can locate MMs as **sub-networks** of constructions within **sub-networks** of English (**Ostman & Trousdale 2013**) in the 4 varieties concerned. The way of representing these could be **semasiological** (classic formal networks) or **onomasiological** (starting with semantic maps) – or both combined?
- Their comparison could reveal differences (e.g more schematicity and productivity in AmE?) as well as commonalities (an **epistemic-to-root** constraint; variants of an essentially **sociolinguistic** nature through assessments of synonymy with the standard variants).
Other important concepts: **exemplars** and **prototypes** (e.g *might could* for all varieties; *will can* for Scotland, etc)
- This could contribute to the tricky task of **modeling modality in CxG** (**Cappelle & Depraetere 2016**) and representing it.

What methods?

- Key concept due to empirical challenges of investigating MMs: **method triangulation**. Main reference [Krug & Schlüter 2013](#).
- **Corpus data** is sparse (especially for BrE), but not completely absent given the survival of dialects as Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) – MMs appear on Twitter and on the web through the TenTen corpus. Basic statistical analysis for **type & token frequency**, as well as **collocations**, may be possible.
- Montgomery & Reed's MultiMo database records the majority of observed & elicited constructions available in the literature. This could be statistically analysed too.
- Personal contribution: **specific fieldwork experiments in the 4 areas concerned**.

What fieldwork methods?

- Ideally 3 weeks - 1 month per area if time & money allow it, in order to establish **semi-participant observation**. 1-week pilot study planned in August 2020.
 - Issue of pinpointing 4 locations that are representative of their regional variety – may be more difficult for AmE than BrE.
- Data would include **qualitative** (recorded interviews) and **quantitative** types (short questionnaires embedded in the interviews). Similarly, mix of **structured** (judgments) and **less structured** components (comments on the dialect).
- The sampling method remains to be determined, although the central respondent profile would be a **speaker of the dialect** concerned. A heuristic approach might be the easiest way. The methods of the **SCOSYA** could provide up-to-date guidelines.
- Statistical analyses of the results, and subsequent cross-examination with the other types of data collected beforehand.

Summary of this part

- This first aim is to propose a **unified constructionist synchronic account** of multiple modals in dialects of English.
- And I would like to complete this with...

Part 2 – a new diachronic inquiry

- i.e, to know more about where MMs come from.
- This adds quite a bit of workload to the project, but I would like to do as much as possible and open up perspectives for postdoctoral work.
- One of the questions in the background: **are the MM networks diachronically related?** ([Montgomery & Nagle 1994](#)) In Britain, this seems to be the case (from Northern English / Southern Scots to Ulster Scots-speaking regions), for the US it is less clear.
- Why the South? And why the marked difference in token & type frequency with Britain? Do American MMs have their own, **synchronic origin**? Not sure ([Fennell 1993](#) argues for a British source).

Part 2 – a new diachronic inquiry

- The biggest question and the one I'd like to focus on first: **tracking British MMs back to their origin**. CxG offers particularly interesting tools to do that, such as the notion of **constructional change** (Fried 2013; Traugott & Trousdale 2013).
- There are currently two competing hypotheses and they seem equally reasonable from the feedback I've had so far: **internal syntactic change** vs **external syntactic borrowing** (Nagle 1995)
- **Internal syntactic change**: MMs (esp. DMs) may come from transitional stages in the history of English when the modals grammaticalised. Contemporary MMs might be syntactic « time capsules » of **different rates** of grammaticalisation (e.g *can/could*, which is consistently second in the sequences, was one of the last to grammaticalise).

Part 2 – a new diachronic inquiry

- **External syntactic borrowing:** MMs may have been imported from Scandinavia during the contact stage of **Anglo-Scandinavian** c. 12th century, which later became Scots & Northern English varieties separated from SBE.
- Suggested by the existence of **modal stacking** in Scandinavian languages, such as Danish. Interesting to note that other Germanic languages license modal stacking in their standards (e.g German & Dutch).
- This would also explain the specific distribution of MMs in Britain; they would have then spread to Ireland during the Plantations of Ulster, and possibly to the US after that.
- Midway alternative between the two perspectives: **contact-induced grammaticalisation**? Can't say for sure if this is plausible, but could be interesting.

Part 2 – what methods?

- Along with as much historical corpus data as possible (corpora to be determined), CxG is a fitting model to do **construction-based historical comparative reconstruction** for syntax ([Barðdal 2013](#)), since syntax is assumed to be made of abstract constructions.
- **Reconstruction applied to hypothesis 1:** inferring a plausible MM construction by comparing the modals and their rate of grammaticalisation through time, especially in the relevant regions.
- **Reconstruction applied to hypothesis 2:** establishing syntactic cognates for the languages/language varieties concerned and seeing if this allows for imported MM constructions.
- More fine-grained notions of areality in modality found in contemporary study of [Hansen & Ansaldo 2018](#).

Summary of part 2

- The objective of this second and last part of the project is to complete the **unified synchronic account** with a (possibly unified as well) **diachronic constructionist account**, or at least the sketch of one to be taken up in future studies.

Thank you for your attention !

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