Modal verbs in English and Irish

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1 Introduction

The present contribution is concerned with an area of grammar – that of modal verbs – which has shown and still shows a degree of variation across different forms of the English language. Modals are a subset of verbs which carry out specific functions in grammar (Palmer 1986, Depraetere and Reed 2006, Depraetere and Verhulst 2006; Leech 2003) and whose forms reflect an older state of the language which is fragmentary and incomplete today and has been for some considerable length of time, although more conservative Germanic languages, mainly German, still have a paradigmatically regular set of modals.

Formally, many of the English modals are derived from a group of verbs, called preterite-present verbs, which in the Germanic languages are distinguishable by the use of a preterite in the present tense (on the historical background to modals, see Krug 2000). To this group belong verbs such as should, would, ought, might, must which do not take a present-tense inflectional -s given their origin as strong-verb preterites.

In the ensuing sections both the formal and the functional aspects of modal verbs will be considered with specific reference to the manner in which these verbs appear in the English language in Ireland. The possible influence of the Irish language on the form and function of modals in Irish English is also a central concern, given that the majority of the Irish population owe their English to a shift from Irish which took place in the not too distant past, chiefly in the nineteenth century (Hickey 2007: 120-6).

2 Lexical and auxiliary verbs

In English verbs can be divided into different categories and subcategories which depend on formal characteristics. There is first a binary division into lexical and auxiliary and after that the latter category can be subdivided into modal and non-modal as follows:

(1) Verbs
   /\                  
  /     \              
Lexical  Auxiliary
  /\                    
  Modal  Non-Modal
There are certain formal properties which help to classify verbs as belonging to either one major category or the other. In terms of quantity, lexical verbs are default in English with the auxiliaries forming a small, closed class which occur frequently. The formal characteristics which can delimit auxiliary from lexical verbs are as follows.

(2) Delimiting properties of auxiliary verbs vis à vis lexical verbs

(i) can be negated directly

   She can’t sing.

(ii) undergo inversion for questions

   Can she sing?

(iii) appear in elliptical structures (e.g. responsives)

   Can she sing? She can.

(iv) are frequently stressed

   You MUST keep to the rules.

(v) can be followed by a bare infinitive (without to)

   She can sing well.

There are other formal properties of the subclass of modal auxiliaries which could be mentioned here: they do not take an inflectional -s in the third person singular of the present tense and they do not have non-finite forms, i.e. there is no infinitive, present participle or past participle.

For the properties listed under (i) to (iv) in (2) lexical verbs require the use of do. The functions of do with these verbs form the well-known NICE (Negation, Interrogative, Coding, Emphasis) properties.

(3) NICE properties of lexical verbs

   Negation \hspace{1cm} \textit{She does not like singing}
   
   Interrogative \hspace{1cm} \textit{Does she sing at home?}
   
   Coding \hspace{1cm} \textit{She likes singing and her sister \underline{does} too.}
   
   Emphasis \hspace{1cm} \textit{She \underline{DOES} like singing.}

The non-modal auxiliary verbs of English are be and have. The former is now used in standard English for indicating a state resulting from a process verb, e.g. \textit{He is finished now}. Elsewhere the auxiliary have is always found, e.g. \textit{He has finished the work}. The distinction between state and process has a formal dimension to it in standard English. Where a direct object is present after the verb, only a process interpretation is possible and hence the use of be is excluded: *\textit{He is finished the work now}. Furthermore, verbs of motion now take have as an auxiliary, although they previously took be, e.g. \textit{He has come}. This is also true of verbs which indicate a change in state, e.g. \textit{The wood has darkened}. More conservative Germanic languages, above all German, still take be (= German sein) as auxiliary in such cases, e.g. \textit{Er ist gekommen} ‘He has come’, \textit{Das Holz ist nachgedunkelt} ‘The wood has darkened’.

In Irish English the more conservative usage is still found, i.e. verbs of state or motion can be found with be, e.g. \textit{He is come over for a while}; \textit{He is finished the work now}. There may well have been supportive transfer for this from Irish:
here the verb tá ‘be’ is used for periphrastic tenses with a non-finite form of the verb known in Irish as the ‘verbal adjective’ (Irish: aideacht briathartha, Christian Brothers 1960: 263-7).

3 Modality

According to the *Oxford Reference Grammar* modality is a grammatical category that deals with two types of judgement:

(a) those referring to the factuality of what is said (its certainty, probability, or possibility)
(b) those referring to human control over the situation (ability, permission, intention, obligation).

... These judgements are grammaticalised through the modal auxiliaries and marginal auxiliaries can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must, ought to ... The same auxiliaries are used for the two types of judgements.'

Greenbaum and Weiner (2000: 68)

The binary division of modality into (i) relative factuality and (ii) human control corresponds to another division which has it origins in logic, viz. epistemic and deontic modality. In general, one can say that this binary division applies across languages and the division applies to both English and Irish. An additional aspect of modality in both languages is that they can both use one and the same form to express either kind of modality. Here it is the context which determines which interpretation is appropriate.

(4) (i) **deontic modality**
*You must be in time for work.*

(ii) **epistemic modality**
*You must be Irish with your accent.*

It is clear that (i) expresses obligation on the part of the addressee and such obligation is expressed by the speaker in the conversation or is conveyed to the addressee in written form. The second type in (4) has to do with probability and can be paraphrased as ‘it is most likely the case that ...’.

The first type of modality, the deontic kind dealing with relative factuality, is commonly found with future reference, *She may be allowed to finish*. Indeed when the reference is to a past point in time, it is normal to express it via another verb, e.g. *She was able to finish her studies*. Other modals show this preference for future time or irrealis reference (Larreya 2003), e.g. *She should finish her studies*. Past reference modals often show the option of two possible interpretations just as *must* does in (4) above (see the comprehensive treatment of this complex in Collins 2009: 33-81).

(5) *She should have finished her studies (for her parent’s sake).* **deontic**

*She should have finished her studies (by now).* **epistemic**
Such modality would seem to be a central feature of semantic systems in general and receive formal expression, even in cases where this is not already available. Thus Migge (2006: 56f.) sees potential (a cover term for ability and possibility together, on possibility alone, see Migge and Winford 2009) and necessity as the two basic subsystems of modality and discusses their emergence in the creoles of Suriname in the light of their semantic primacy.

Other modals show a similar division of interpretation, but depending solely on tense. For instance, *would* has an habitual meaning in the past tense, e.g. *He would take the dog walking every morning.*

The form of modals can vary across certain grammatical categories. For example, the modal *must* is used to express deontic modality, as in *You must come tomorrow,* but in the negative *need* is used instead, i.e. *You needn’t come tomorrow.* Standard English also has a switch for the negation of epistemic modality.

\[(6)\]
\[\begin{align*}
\text{She must be French.} & \quad \text{‘It is probable that she is French.’} \\
\text{She can’t be French.} & \quad \text{‘It is improbable that she is French.’}
\end{align*}\]

Furthermore, modals are often used to convey subjective senses whereas their basic semantic equivalents are usually used in more objective statements, contrast *You could help your mother with the housework* (subjective assessment) and *They are able to assist him* (objective statement).

### 4 Modals in Irish

From the above brief sketch of modality in English it is apparent that it is expressed by a number of means with variation across tense and polarity and with formal ambiguity which is resolved by contextualised interpretation.

Looking at Irish one can see that it does not have a group of formally identifiable modal verbs (Ó Siadhail 1989: 287-293). There are no preterite-present verbs. Instead Irish uses a variety of lexicalised phrases or lexicalised non-modal verbs. For example, the verb *caith* means ‘wear, throw, consume’, but the future *caithfidh* is used to express deontic modality (obligation), see McQuillan (1999).

Irish also has a productive conditional tense and subjunctive mood (McQuillan 1995), as well as a small number of defective verbs and a specifically Irish use of prepositional pronouns (Christian Brothers 1960: 138f.) to express semantic relations in sentences, often with senses which involve modality. Examples of these will be given below.

The upshot of this is that where English has single-word verbs, Irish often has complex verbs followed by non-finite verb phrases which are the equivalent of the infinitival complement of English.

\[(7)\]
\[\begin{align*}
\text{English} & \quad \text{Irish} \\
\text{can} & \quad \text{bheith in ann} + \text{non-finite verb phrase} \\
\text{may} & \quad \text{b'fhéidir} + \text{non-finite/finite verb phrase} \\
\text{should} & \quad \text{ba chóir go} + \text{finite verb phrase}
\end{align*}\]
Frequently, modality is expressed using structures which are equivalents not of modal verbs in English but of lexicalised verbs which may be semantically connected with the notion of modality. For instance, there is a verb phrase *is dòigh liom*... which means ‘I suppose that’ which can be used to express epistemic modality as in:

(8)  

*Is dòigh liom gur siadsan a gcuid gasúir.*  

[is likelihood with-me that they-EMPH his share children-GEN_PL]  

‘I suppose they are his children.’, i.e. ‘They must be his children.’

The following classification is by semantic categories as these exist in both Irish and English. The forms of modal expressions in Irish are commented on in each section. The literal meaning is given in square brackets after sample sentences. Certain grammatical categories are abbreviated here, namely the following: (i) COMP = ‘complementiser’, a participle which precedes the following, (ii) VN = ‘verbal noun’, a non-finite form of the verb which is often the equivalent of the infinitive or present participle in English, (iii) REL = ‘relative form of the verb’; (iv) SUBJ = subjunctive; (v) COND = conditional; (vi) INTERROG = interrogative.

**Possibility**

As a constituent of modality, possibility is frequently expressed in Irish via the conditional tense which exists in a separate form for all verbs.

(9)  

*Bhéinn in ann teacht, dá mbeadh an carr agam.*  

[be-COND 1SG in in-it come-VN if be-COND the car at-me]  

‘I would be able to come if I had the car.’

*Bheadh sé in ann linn a chuanamh.* ‘He could help us.’  

[be-COND he in in-it with-us COMP help-VN]

*Rachainn thar lear dá mbeadh an t-airgead agam.*  

[go-COND over sea if be-COND the money at-me]  

‘I would go abroad if I had the money.’

There are further ways to express possibility. The word *móide* (a contraction of the comparative of *mór* ‘big’ – *mó* – and *de* ‘of’) is used to express likelihood. The form only occurs in negative expressions. Another means of expressing possibility is to precede a verbal noun by the preposition *le* ‘with’ which in a verb phrase with *tá* ‘is’ then expresses this notion.

(10)  

*Ní móide go bhfuil si ag teacht.* ‘It is unlikely that she will come.’  

[not more that is-REL she at come-VN]  

*Tá sé le feiceáil.* ‘It can be seen.’  

[is it with see-VN]
Eventuality

The expression of eventuality (a possible event or outcome) is common in English with the modal *might*, e.g. *He might be here this afternoon*. In Irish a common way of expressing the same notion is via the word *féidir* (with the approximate meaning of ‘possible’) which can only occur together with a form of the copula. Eventuality can be expressed via noun phrases in a similar fashion as in English (see the third sample sentence below).

(11)  
*B’fhéidir go dtiocfadh sé amárach.* ‘He might come tomorrow.’
[be-COND-able that come-COND he tomorrow]
*B’fhéidir gur fíor é.* ‘It may be true.’
[be-COND-able that-is true it]
*Tá seans beag ann go dtiocfadh sé.*
[is chance small in-it that come-COND he]
There is little chance that he will come.

Generalisations

Statements of a general nature can be made in English with *can* or *may*, e.g. *That type of thing can happen at any time; Difficulties of this sort may crop up.* In Irish equivalent constructions are often formed with *féidir*, but this time with the copula in the present.

(12)  
*Is féidir leis an sórt sin rud tarlú am ar bith.*
[is able with-it the sort that thing happen-VN time at all]
‘That type of thing can happen at any time.’

Obligation

The requirement or demand that someone do something is expressed in English with *must* in its deontic sense. In Irish there are a number of options here. The opaque word *foláir* is found in negated sentences with the positive sense of *must* (see the first example below). Another option is a construction which uses the word *éigean* ‘compulsion, obligation’ and a prepositional pronoun – *de* + personal pronoun – which expresses relevance to an individual. This structure can occur in the past tense (see the third example below) and hence is an equivalent to *had to* + infinitive in English.

(13)  
*Ní foláir dhuit bheith cúramach.* ‘You must be careful.’
[not FOLAIR to-you be careful]
*Déan é más éigean dhuit.* ‘Do it if you must.’
[do it if compulsion to-you]
*B’éigean dúinn cinneadh a dhéanamh.*
[was compulsion to-us decision COMP make-VN]
‘We had to make a decision.’

But perhaps the most common means of expressing obligation is to use the verb *caith* which is a normal lexical verb meaning ‘wear’, ‘consume’, ‘spend’ or
'throw'. However, when used in the future tense and followed by a verb phrase as complement, its meaning is that of deontic must in English.

(14) Caithfidh muid cáin a íoc. ‘We have to pay tax.’
    [spend-FUTURE we tax COMP pay]

    Caithfidh tú dul abhaile ar ball. ‘You must go home soon.’
    [spend-FUTURE you go-VN on soon]

The adjectives ceart ‘right, correct’ and cóir ‘just, fitting’ can also be used to express obligation. They are preceded by a form of the copula, frequently the subjunctive, especially when referring to a possible state in the future.

(15) Ba cheart go mbeadh go leor ann. ‘There should be enough there.’
    [is-COND right that be-COND enough in-it]

    Níor cheart é a dhéanamh. ‘It shouldn’t be done.’
    [not-is right it COMP do-VN]

    Ba chóir dhuit dul amach. ‘You should go out.’
    [is-COND fitting to-you go-VN out]

    Mar ba chóir a dhéanamh. ‘As should be done.’
    [as be-COND fitting COMP do-VN]

It should also be mentioned that the prepositional pronouns of Irish can also be used to express modality. In the present context one can quote the instance of ar ‘on’ which when combined with a personal pronoun can be used to express obligation.

(16) Tá air dul chuici. ‘He has to go to her.’
    [is on-him go-VN to-her]

    Bheadh ort teach a cheannach. ‘You would have to buy a house.’
    [would-be on-you house COMP buy-VN]

Lastly, there is a construction which makes us of a negative sentence with mór ‘big’ and the synthetic form of de + personal pronoun, again to express obligation.

(17) Ní mór dhuit bheith gairmiúil. ‘You have to be professional.’
    [not big to-you be-VN professional]

**Relative factuality**

Epistemic modality expresses that something is probably the case or not, depending on the polarity of a sentence. The verb caith in Irish has just been mentioned as a common equivalent to deontic must in English. It is also found in epistemic senses in Irish as well. It cannot be excluded that the epistemic uses of Irish caith arose under the influence of English epistemic must.

(18) Caithfidh sé bheith ina Fhrancach. ‘He must be French.’
    [spend-FUTURE he be-VN in-his Frenchman]
The negative construction with *foláir* (an opaque word denoting necessity, see above) is also found in Irish in epistemic senses.

(19) *Ní foláir nó go bhfuil tú tuirseach.* ‘You must be tired.’
[not FOLAIR but that are-REL you tired]

The verb phrase *is dóigh liom go...* ‘I suppose that ...’, mentioned above, is also commonly found as an equivalent to epistemic *must* in English.

(20) *Is dóigh liom go rinne tú an-iarracht.* ‘You must have tried very hard.’
[is opinion with-me that did you great-attempt]

**Permission**

Typical means of expressing permission in English are with the modal *may*, *can* or by using the analytic conditional with *would* + lexical verb. In Irish the synchronically opaque form *miste* (originally a synthetic form of *measa* ‘worse’ + *de* ‘of’) with a non-finite verbal complement conveys the sense of *may*.

(21) *An miste dom dul amach? Ní miste.* ‘May/can I go out? You may/can.’
[INTERROG MISTE to-me go-VN out]

*Ar mhiste leat a rá liom?* ‘Would you mind telling me?’
[INTERROG-COND MISTE with-you COMP tell-VN with-me]

The Irish word for permission is *cead* and this of course can occur in a question requesting permission:

(22) *An bhfuil cead agam dul amach?* ‘May I go out?’
[INTERROG is-REL permission at-me go-VN out]

**Ability**

The modal *can* and the group verb *be able to* are common means of expressing ability in English. Added to this is the analytic conditional formed by *could* + lexical verb. Irish has a verb *féad* which has a full paradigm of forms and which can be used to denote ability, either conditional or factual.

(23) *Féadaím snámh.* ‘I can swim.’
[can-I swim-VN]

*D’fhéadtá é sin a dhéanamh.* ‘You could do that.’
[could it that COMP do-VN]

An idiomatic means of expressing ability is formed with the verb *tar* ‘come’ and *le* ‘with’ as a synthetic prepositional pronoun.

(24) *Ni thig liom cur suas leis.* ‘I can’t stand it.’
[not come with-me put-VN up with-it]

*Thiocfadh linn é seo a athrú.* ‘We could change that.’
However, a lexicalised phrase involving the third person singular prepositional pronoun deriving from *in* ‘in’ – *ann* ‘in-it’ – is perhaps the most common means of expressing ability in Irish.

(25)  
*Tá sé in ann a léamh.* ‘He can read.’  
*be-COND he in in-it COMP read-VN*

*Bheadh sé in ann leabhar a scriobh.* ‘He could write a book.’  
*[be-COND he in in-it book COMP write-VN]*

The word *able* exists in Irish as an early loan word – *áblta* – and can form a similar construction to English with a non-finite verbal complement.

(26)  
*Tá mé áblta córcarach* ‘I am able to cook.’  
*is me able cook-VN*

**Optative**

Finally one could mention a modal which avails of the subjunctive which is formally marked in Irish. This is the optative which is used to express a wish and is equally common in positive and negative sentences.

(27)  
*Go dté tú slán.* ‘May you fare well.’  
*[that go-SUBJ you safely]*

*Nár fhille siad riamh!* ‘May they never return!’  
*[not return-SUBJ they ever]*

*Nár fhéicimid aríst iad!* ‘May we never seen them again!’  
*[not see-we-SUBJ again them]*

**4 Conclusion: modals in Irish English**

The term ‘Irish English’ is a cover term for varieties of English spoken on the island of Ireland. This blanket term is naturally in need of further differentiation, not least when discussing forms of English in the north of Ireland. The distinction between English as spoken in Ulster (the most northerly province) and English in the rest of the country is the major binary division of the English language in Ireland.

In the area of modals this division is also relevant. In general one can maintain that the distribution of modal usage is fairly uniform across Ireland and can be regarded as indicative of the linguistic area (Hickey 1999) which encompasses the entire island. However, there are a few specific forms which are only found in Ulster, e.g. the variant *maun* [mən] of the verb *must* (Corrigan 2000). In addition there was, but probably is not anymore, a usage of double modals (Fennell and Butters 1996) which is reminiscent of that in Scotland and in varieties of American English which represent a continuation of eighteenth century Ulster-Scots input, especially Appalachian English (Montgomery and Nagle 1994;
Montgomery 2001: 148, Nagle 2003). Both these usages can be taken to derive historically from the Scots settlers in Ulster and are unknown in the rest of Ireland.

The scrutiny of Irish modals and the comparison of them with those of English shows that there is little formal correspondence between the two languages and it is probably for this reason that the area has not been highlighted in grammatical overviews (Filppula 2004). In Irish, modality is expressed either by a combination of tá ‘be’ + prepositional pronoun or by non-productive structures, frequently a defective verb or a lexicalised verb phrase as was shown, for example, with B’fhéidir go ... ‘It might be that ...’.

The lack of equivalence in form meant that in during the language shift (Hickey 2007: 121-6) there was little likelihood of structural transfer occurring (Filppula 2001, 2003) and indeed both the diachronic attestations and the synchronic situation give no indication of transfer of modal structures from Irish to Irish English.

Instead what one finds is a generalisation of basic modal patterns in emerging Irish English. In particular the patterns of positive modal usage were transferred to the negative by analogical extension. This can be seen with epistemic must which regularly negates as mustn’t. This kind of generalisation established itself not only in Irish English but in Scottish English as well (Filppula 1997, 2006) where it can be taken to have its main origin in the language shift from Scottish Gaelic to English. Furthermore, this feature – negative epistemic must – is known to have travelled with Irish emigrants, e.g. to the Newcastle region of north-east England (Beal 1993: 197; 2004: 126, Hickey 2007: 394f.) and to Australia (Collins and Peters 2004, Hickey 2007: 394f.), so that it probably established itself at the latest in the first half of the nineteenth century and thus can be interpreted as a feature arising during the historical shift (Filppula 1990, 1999) from Irish to English in Ireland.

References


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Keywords for index:

modals
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  in Irish
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    lack of equivalence
    generalisation of base pattern
modality
  deontic
  epistemic
  possibility
  eventuality
  obligation
  permission
  optative