Damir Kalogjera

"Practical Statements" on the English Modals and Current Research*

A Preliminary Outline

Two directions in current research on the English modals can be envisaged, the first, aiming at the analysis of the observable on the basis of the data either collected from the corpora or elicited, the second, aiming at establishing their status in the deep structure or establishing their semantic representation. Both the directions have their specific impact on "practical" statements on the modals.

1.0. The description of English usage remains a legitimate interest of scholars in linguistics and social sciences in spite of a certain loss in prestige of this kind of work lately, after its heyday in the forties and fifties. The main stream of linguistic thinking has distanced itself from the description and classification of the observable in language and has turned its efforts towards the application of abstract models on natural languages, has set itself very ambitious aims presumably achievable by building up elaborate constructs, and has been very emphatically adverse to data-collecting, the time--honoured way of dealing with usage.

2.0. Written texts have been the basis of statements about grammatical problems and topics, including the modals, in the scholarly grammars of this century, but without special consideration on how to exploit those sources regarding their time-span and stylistic level.

---

* The term "practical statement on usage" covers those works which are neither teaching grammars nor direct research reports. They are reference books for the use of linguists, sociologists, psychologists, language therapists etc. Such books presumably mediate between the reseacher and various "consumers".

2.1. New linguistic doctrines have traditionally had an impact on the more practically oriented grammatical statements and this influence became particularly noticeable in the late twenties, thirties, forties and early fifties. These, of course were the years when the mainstream linguistics was dominated by the American brand of structuralism (at least among the English language scholars) and some of its principles and tenets were applied in such practical statements or in research leading to such statements (Fries 1925, Fries 1940, Fries, 1952). Thus the principle of synchronism in the study of language was strictly observed, which, translated into research practice, meant that the sources of material for analysis were supposed to cover a short span of time and to avoid mixing, say, Shakespeare's usage with that of present-day authors. Detailed and systematic study of the state of language brought about a better understandig and an awarness of different styles in language, and a reinterpretation of the concept of "good English".

2.2. Doubts about the possibility of a "scientific" treatment of meaning in linguistic analysis, very much emphasised at the time, put the study of the forms of language at the expense of meaning, into the forefront, in the treatment of various grammatical topics including the modals (cf. Fries 1925; Twaddell 1960; B. Strang 1962;) which was beneficial in making clear how far one can go in the discussion by separating the two concepts. In the case of the modals, althongh they became thorougly studied within the surface structure phrase, their versalite semantics, however, was neglected to a great degree.

2.3. A verifiable discovery procedure and an equally object-tive approach to an unknown language and to one's mother tongue was transferred to the investigation of English usage so that great importance was laid on collected corpora of written and spoken language, carefully defined with regard to their time-span, stylistic and statistical characteristics, as the basis for the formulation of the rules of language (cf. Quirk 1960). The application of the computer in dealing with the mass of material made this kind of research more manageable (cf. W. N. Francis 1964).

2.4. Another technique for the investigation of usage which has been used in the work on exotic languages and in dia-lectology is *elicitation* which has been planned to supplement the corpus once it became clear that it could not contain all the features necessary for a thorough description of usage. An increase in interest for this technique could, perhaps, be

216

attributed to the early Chomskyan concept of grammaticality. Whatever its sources, elicitation technique combined with the corpus has made real contribution towards the specification of certain phenomena in the usage of the modals which had been noticed earlier but never thoroughly investigated on language material owing to the paucity of examples which occur in any corpus. The methods of elicitation have been developed to a high degree of sophistication in connection with the Survey of English Usage at University College London and these would seem to have had a most useful application in the areas of usage where opinion is divided as to the ill--formedness and well-formedness of a certain use. That such problems in the use of the English modals are connected with practically every single modal verb did not escape the attention of the important grammarians of the first half of this century, who supported their statements with quotations from texts in the usual manner. They paid attention to the traditional controversy over *shall* and *will* in connection with the first person, including the question of how *shall* is shifted in the indirect speech with the changed subject. There was also an interest in the problems of classification of *dare, need, ought to* owing to their marginality as both auxiliaries and full verbs with regard to their morphology and syntax. By the introduction of new tecniques in investigation based on current linguistic thinking or adaptations of it, namely, by sistematically collecting the language material and investigating native speakers' responses, the factual side of these problematic uses has become clearer, as it were, under a magnifying glass offered by the mass of examples, by their relative frequencies etc. so that the interpretation of findings rests on a firmer and more objective basis.

3.0. Structuralist ideas as reinterpreted and applied to practical grammatical statements have brought new attitudes towards usage, a special interest in some of its aspects and, as a result, new types of gramatical statements based on it. As an illustration of such a practical statement about auxiliaries, including the modals, one could mention the small book by Twaddell (Twaddell 1960) where the whole area of the modals has been covered in a very short space as a result of, not exactly neglecting, but reducing the treatment of their meaning to the most essential. Closer attention paid to the formal side of these verbs made the definition of the modals based on their form one of the central issues and with it the delimitation of the modals from other formally similar

verbs. Along these lines the term »decaying modals« emerged for *ought to, dare* and *need* as well as the term »catenative verbs« comprising such decaying modals in the full verb form, then, full verbs which acquired »a formulaic function« like *get+participle, keep (on)+ —ing, want to, have to, used to* etc. The modals from the perspective of such a treament look haphazardly organised in earlier statements simply because the earlier approach took meaning and form as its basis, while the presentation here is guided solely by the form. When the most complex feature of the modals i. e. their meaning is kept in the background, they obtain a sharper formal outline which practically speaking may be very useful. The structure of the verb phrase comes to the fore, with the modal always in the leftmost place, and all the numerous possible combinations of the modals with the forms of the auxiliaries and the main verb, some of them only potentially used (e. g. He could have been being examined, Palmer 1965), stand out more clearly.

3.1. In spite of the great economy of statement, Twaddell incorporated in his description practically all the issues connected with the unsetled or divided usage of the modals so that the follwing quotation look like a programme for empirical morphosyntactic and statistical research which was concurrently going on, or was to take place subsequently: "the minor class is defective in varying degrees for various speakers today, some of the unpaired modals are passing into the category of catenatives (with following 'to') and their former semantic functions are increasingly taken over by other modals or catenatives either wholly or partly via suppletion" (Twaddell 1960, p. 5).

3.2. All the points that Twaddell raises have been investigated in detail by researchers linked in some way with the Survey of English Usage at University College London, who have asked questions like how regular is the defectivness of this "minor group" (need, ought, dare, etc.) in connection with their grammatical surrouding i. e. what exactly in their grammatical context may trigger off the auxiliary or the full verb pattern, and whether any tendencies could be envisaged concerning future developmnts. The investigations were conducted either on the corpus of written or recorded material or on the material obtained by some type of elicitation from informants.

3.3. Within that frame of reference Quirk and Duckworth (Quirk and Duckworth 1961) examined the usage of informants

218

concerning *dared not* and *did not dare* and out of the somewhat complicated picture of usage obtained they concluded that in the negative sentences with the past *dare* periphrasis seems to be on the increase when the results are compared with those of Mulder (Mulder 1937). However, the tendency towards regulirising one grammatical feature on the line of the full verb pattern, was not followed in their material by the regular appearance of the preposition *to* which is often omitted with the resulting "mixed" constructions *did not dare*. The results were rather unexpected and the authors refrained from any kind of prediction as to the future developments.

3.4. The investigation of *dare* and *need* on American English material (Svartvik 1968) shows that *need* is the more regular of the two in making a straight complete selection of either the auxiliary or full verb paradigm in the negative sentences (positive/negative sentence types being an important factor in conditioning the choice of the two possibilities, Svartvik 1968 p. 140) while *dare* shows comparatively more combinations, that is, mixed combinations beloging to both possible patterns.

3.5. The most recent investigation on English informants' responses concerning the use of *ought* (Svartvik and Wright 1975, forthcoming) in non-assertive context has enabled the researchers not only to register present — day tendencies in the use of this verb but also to advance certain hypotheses regarding its historical and social status. They have found that *ought* appears very frequently in the auxiliary type construction dropping *to* i. e. followed by the bare infintive which they interpret as a regulirization bringing this verb in line with the central modals followed by the inifitive without *to*. Elicitation tests in which informants were asked to turn statements into questions or into the negative have shown a high frequecy of the rejection of *ought* and its replacement by various modals but most frequently by *should*. As a matter of fact, this suppletion has been mentioned in the literature (cf. Twaddell 1960 p. 12) but its high frequency among school children (teenagers acted as informants) led the authors to hypothesise informants' unfamiliarity with this verb as a result of its gradual disappearance from the language. To this should be added that there were fewer rejections of *ouyht* by informants from a shool requiring higher academic ability which suggests that the use of *ought* may be linked to a social dialect. (cf Erman 1966 on *shall*). Both assumptions require further corroboration, but they show the possibilities of the time-consuming research on one detail in a mass of data.

As a welcome supplement to the above investigation are the results of similar elicitation experiments in American English (Greenbaum 1974) concerning the substitution of *ought* with *should* in non-assertive contexts and the frequency of to-less *ought,* which point largely to the same tendency as in British English.

3.6. Contributions about the modals based on usage material along the lines of the above mentioned studies have been considerable in number all of them aiming at the unsettled usage and trying to produce objective results (Quirk and Svartvik 1966; Langendoen 1970; Kalogjera 1967 etc.).

The findings of most of these studies cannot be taken as definite partly owing to the fact that conclusions had to be made on a comparatively small number of examples, and the elicitation experiments have been conducted in an artificial situation. Nevertheless recent "practical" statements have made use of them as these findings give at least some guidance and indicate a real step forward compared to individual and possibly idiosyncratic guess-work. One could say that the paradigms of the modals emerging from these findings give an appearance of discontinuity, with slots in negated and inverted structures filled by other modals, which is totally different from what one may gather by reading e. g. various earlier teaching grammars of English.

3.7. References to the above investigations can be found in a number of "practical" statements, notably, in Strang 1968, (p. 148 etc.) and, naturally, in Quirk et al. 1973, and comparing the research results with the passages prepared for "consumption" one could profitably study the process of the "filtering" of available information from one level to the other. The complex situation with *dare* and *need* has been summed up as fallows: "The modal verb construction is restricted to non-assertive contexts .... ie mainly interrogative and negative sentences, whereas the lexical verb construction can always be used and is in fact more common (Quirk et al. 1973. p. 83)". The tendency towards using periphrasis but omitting *to* which showed up in the experiments with *dare* is also mentioned in a note: "Blends between two constructions occur and seem to be widely acceptable in the case of DARE: We do not dare speak" (Quirk et al. 1973, p. 83). As concerning *ought* the information that the construction with the bare infinitive seems to be on the increase in British English may not have been available and thus the occurrence of that construction is attributed to American English. However, the substitution of *ought* with *should* in negative statements and questions has been registered (Quirk et al. 1973, p. 82).

3.8. The above examples are meant to illustrate briefly, how linguistic thinking, and in this particular case linguistic thinking connected with structuralism, reinterpreted to suit research on usage, reach practical grammatical statements and contribute to their precision. This also suggests that scholarly statements on usage practically oriented are directly or indirectly linked to the theoretical linguistic climate of their time, but restrictedly so as only some of the current principles and tenets of linguistics are actually applicable at that level. Structural linguistics with its inductive approach to language analysis had quite a lot to offer in this respect.

4.0. The directions in the research on the modals have been substantially changed under the influence of the generative view of language. The brief and economical decriptions of the possible combinations of the modals and other auxiliaries within the surface structure of the verbal phrase gave way to highly involved accounts of their semantic potential aiming at comprehensive underlying semantic representation. To that effect researchers assume that "the meaning of the verb can be decomposed into a structured set of semantic units" and that "the semantic structure of underlying sentences ... are mapped onto surface structures by means of transformations" (Antinucci an Parisi 1971, p. 285).

Concepts developed by philosophers of language have been borrowed in a study of the semantics of the modals by Boyd and Thorne (Boyd and Thorne 1969) who implemented the notions of "performative verbs", "illocutionary force" and "speech act" (after J. L. Austin) to explain the function of these verbs. According to them the modals are looked upon as signals of the kind of speech act. *He lives in Edinburgh* is a statement, and its illocutionary force i. e. the kind of speech act it represents, is implicit as the performative verb *I state* may be postulated to precede the utterance. *He will live in Edinburgh* is not a statement but a different speech act called prediction. The difference between the two speech acts is indicated by *will*.

4.1. The notion of illocutionary force may help explain logically the absence of certain modal sentences in certain contexts. *He shall go*, according to this analysis, may be approximately paraphrasable by *I guarantee his going, I commit myself to bring about his going, I make myself responsible for his going* and that shows that *He shall go* and the periphrases have in common the "illocutionary force" of *shall* that of being a demand the speaker makes of himself. Such analysis of *shall* would then account for the absence of past tense of shall in

sentences like *He shall go* with a logical explanation that one cannot make damands about events in the past. Similary, while sentences like Nitric *acid dissolves zink* and *Nitric acid will dissolve zink* are normal and acceptable, *Nitric acid shall dissolve zink* is anomalous because "One can state the operation of the natural law or one can forecast it but it is strange personally to guarantee it, to make a demad upon oneself" (Boyd and Thome 1969, p. 65).

4.2. Some characteristics of the modals which have always been duly registered by dictionaries and grammars as minor points, have now received special attention. The ambiguity of sentences containing the modals like *He may go* has become interesting for the reason that the semantic representation of such sentences, which linguists have had primarily in mind, should indicate the verb's polysemy. Now, whatever the success of researchers in establishing such semantic representations there is no doubt that our knowledge of the semantic potential of individual modals has increased thanks to their dilligent inventivness in producing evidence for their argument. The examples serving as their evidence show how far the meaning of a modal may be "stretched" before becoming totally unacceptable. The interest linguists have shown in the polysemy of the modals, in their passivisation and its semantic outcome, their negation, double megation etc. has greatly contributed or will contribute towards producing comprehensive practical statements on these verbs in spite of the fact that their aim was different i. e. producing acceptable semantic representation.

4.3. An important contribution towards the systematic description of the difference in the meaning of quasi-synonymous modals and their periphrases came from the study of these verbs in context within the so called pragmatic approach (R. Lakoff 1972 a, 1972 b), which takes into consideration besides the purely syntactic environement, "the context of the utterance, the assumptions that are shared by speaker and addressee, whether or not previously given linguistic expression in the discourse; the social situation assumed by participants in the discourse; the impression the speaker wants to make on the addressee; and so on" (R. Lakoff, 1972b.). The distinction between e. g. *should* and *must* in contexts like: *John should be easy to talk to* and *John must be easy to talk to* although paraphrasable by the same third sentence *John is probably easy to talk to, consists* according to this interpretation in the fact that should points to verifiability in the future while *must* suggests likelihood based on present conjecture. The view that

222

periphrasis of a modal is its perfect synonym and that the former is used to fill syntactic gaps has been called into question and pairs like *may — allowed to, will — is to, must- have to, should — supposed to* have been shown to be distinct suggesting different attitude of the speaker. Is has also been pointed out that there is a preferable reference by some modals to present time, by some to the future, while some are ambiguous in this respect. Pragmatic orientated research has tackled other differences in the meanings of the modals in connection with the social context comparable to honorifics in some other languages, subtle differences involving the presence or deletion of *can* etc. (Lakoff, 1972 a).

4.4. The question whether we are heading back to the pre--structulist semantic analysis of the modals, attacked by the followers of Bloomfield (Fries 1925) for their alleged reading into the modals meanings they do not have, may, with some reservations, be answered in the negative. Corroboration tends to be firmer now by making use of the well-known technique of comparison of acceptable and unacceptable sentences. As an example we may take the relationship between *must* and *have to,* rather well known in the literature but here somewhat reinterpreted from the pragmatic point of view. Larkin, as reported by Lakoff (Lakoff 1972 a) quotes two sentences:
  * My girl must be home by midnight — I think it's idiotic.
    My girl has to be home by midnight — I think it's idiotic.
the first being apparently unacceptable because by using *must* the speaker takes responsibility for the obligation expressed by the modal and logically should not consider it idiotic. With *have* to however the speaker merely reports the fact he happens to be in disagreement with. A consistent application of such technique sefeguards against idiosyncratic interpretations of semantic subtleties communicated by the modals, although a non-native speaker may wonder in some cases what kind of result an objective elicitation test administered to groups of native speakers would show.

5.0 With the change of scholarly climate the focus of interest in research on the modals, as we have seen, has shifted from their formal grammatical features towards their very complex meaning which is, however, studied in close relation to syntax. As it usually happens, selected themes of this new trend have reached practical statements on usage and though it is not our purpose to give a full survey of them we shall consider a few examples.

5.1. Practical statements on the modals in the tradition of European scholarly grammars produced recently carry a definite stamp of the present-day linguistic thinking. Although

the work on *A Grammar of Contemporary English* by Quirk
et al. started before the status of linguistic approach usually
connecteted with the generative grammar became fully establish-
ed, it shows, generally speaking, considerable preoccupation
with the linguistic insight certain grammatical features may
offer. We have mentioned that in that book the formal facts of
usage are presented according to the latest research results,
and this is also true of the complex semantics of the modals
given from the point of view of statement, negation and
question, admittedly, very briefly.

5.2. An attempt at a purely semantic approach has been under-
taken by Leech in his book *Meaning and the English Verb*
where his aim was to explain systematically "the semantics of
the English finite verbal phrase in a way uncumbered by
discussions of syntax and morphology" (p. V). Very subtle dis-
tinctions between presumably synonymous or quasi-synony-
mous modals are given here like e. g. the "factual" and
"theoretical" necessity illustrated by sentences like: *Someone
must be telling lies* and *Someone has (got) to be telling lies*
where the first is interpreted as the epistemic modal and con-
sequently voices mere suspicion while the second retains the
non-epistemic interpretation of the modal and souds like an
accusation. The book registers many similar contrasts but
within the area of interest of a non-specialist.

5.3. The influence of the new climate in linguistic scholarship
and the way current ideas penetrate into practical statements
may be profitably followed when two editions of Palmer's
book on the English verb (Palmer, 1965, and Palmer, 1974) are
compared. Palmer's work on the verb (as much as Quirk's)
has been under the influence of both the two major directions
in linguistics, American pre-Chomskyan structuralism, more
prominent in the first edition, and later developments, evident
in the second, but this is not to be understood as slavishly
following either. The list of changes and innovations in the
2nd edition could be a long one, however, as an illustration a
few points will suffice.

5.3.1. The most conspicuous innovation regarding the treatment
of the modals is that these verbs are now assigned a special
chapter under the title Modals. Earlier they were classified
as Secondary Auxiliaries since they satisfy the four formal
criteria in order to belong to the group (negation, inversion,
code and emphatic affirmation). The change can only be at-
tributed to a deeper interest in their semantics which clearly
separates them from the other auxiliaries. This can also explain
the fact that the problematic verb *used to* which was,

224

reluctantly, placed with the modals (Palmer 1965, p. 15) has now been relegated among quasi-auxiliaries as its semantic characteristics are certainly different from those of the other modals (Palmer 1974 p, p. 162).

5.3.2. Another innovation is the operational use of the concepts of the *epistemic* and *non-epistemic* modals as illustrated in the sentences *He couldn't be there yesterday* (non-epistemic) and *He cant' have run yesterday* (epistemic). The concepts are usefully employed in connection with the past tense of the modals, the non-epistemic ones marking the very modals for past tense, and epistemic (with exceptions) marking the full verb for the purpose, as evident from the foregoing examples.

5.3.3. Newly introduced is also the contrast of subject and discourse oriented modals as in the sentences *John will come tomorrow* and *John shall come tomorrow*. (In the former the subject participates in the action denoted by the main verb and in the second the speaker is involved.) The contrast can be usefully employed in connection with the possibility of the passivisation of the modals as the discourse oriented ones more readily allow of the process. In the first edition epistemic modals were treated, less extensively, as auxiliaries denoting *logical conclusion,* and the subject and discourse oriented contrast had not been introduced.

5.3.4. Finally, a minor issue is the treatment of the technical term *use* which is, admittedly, found in both editions in e. g. describing various meanings of *will* or other verbs, except, it seems, that it figures more prominently in the first where it is defined as a term including both formal and semantic features (Palmer 1960, p. 60). At that moment it may have seemed a convenient way of avoiding the much compromised term *meaning.* The fact that the term *use* can be found in the index of the first edition but is absent from the index of the second can be hardly attributed to a chance.

6.0. Practical statements on the English modals, as we have seen, have become enriched in a selective way by the current research directed by the general interest in linguistic problems treated recent by. One could venture to say that the picture of the use of the English modals has been further clarified through both new information and new insight since the epochal statement by Jespersen.

References

Boyd J. C. and Thorne J. P. (1969) "The semantics of modal verbs", JL 5
Fries, C. C. (1925) "The Periphrastic Future with Shall and Will", PMLA XL.
Fries, C. C. (1940) *American English Grammar,* Appleton-Century-Crofts, N. Y.
Fries, C. C. (1952) *The Structure of English,* Harcourt, Brace and World N. Y.
Francis, W. N. (1964) *Manual of Information to Accompany A Standard Sample of Present-Day Edited American English for Use with Digital Computers,* Brown University, Rhode Island.
Greenbaum, S. (1974) "Problems in the Negation of Modals", Mod. Språk LXVIII No 3.
Ehrman, M. (1966) *The Meaning of the Modals in Modern English,* Mouton.
Kalogjera, D. (1967) "Register Variation with Regard to the Auxiliary Shall", SRAZ 23.
Lakoff, R. (1972)a "Language in Context", Lg. Vol. 48, No 4.
Lakoff, R. (1972)b *"The Pragmatics of Modality", Eighth Regional Meeting CLS.*
Leech, G. N. (1971) *Meaning and the English Verb,* Longmans.
Langendoen, D. T. (1970) "The Walrus and the Alligator", *Essentials of English Grammar,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Mulder, G. (1937) "Dare", *Neophilologus,* Vol. 22.
Quirk, R. (1960) "Towards a Survey of English Usage", TPS.
Quirk, R. and Duckworth, A. (1961) *"Co-Existing Negative Preterite Forms of Dare", Language and Society,* Essays presented to A. Jensen, Copenhagen.
Quirk, R. and Svartvik J. (1966) *Investigating Linguistic Acceptability,* Mouton.
Quirk, R. (1972) "Linguistics, Usage and the User" *The English Language and Images of Matter,* OUP.
Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik (1973) *A Grammar of Contemporary English,* Longmans.
Svartvik, J. (1968) "Plotting Divided Usage with Dare and Need", *Studia Neophilologica,* Vol. 40, No 1.
Svartvik J. and David Wright (1975) "The Use of Ought in Teenage English", (forthcoming).
Strang, B. (1968) *Modern English Structure,* Arnold.
Twaddell, F. (1960) *The English Verb Auxiliaries,* Brown University Press.
Palmer, F. (1965) *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb,* Longmans.
Palmer, F. (1974) *The English Verb,* Longmans.
Antinucci F. and Parisi D. (1971) "On English Modal Verbs", 7th Regional Meeting CLS.