

The Semantics of Modal Auxiliaries—focusing on *may*

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Introduction

One can express events in a variety of ways in communicating with each other whether what is being expressed are facts or not. If they are not facts or not certain, one often avoids an assertive expression by using auxiliaries. The reason why one can make an indirect expression through auxiliaries is because they have polysemy. In other words, auxiliaries have modality, and such auxiliaries have been called modal auxiliaries.

According to Palmer (2001)¹, modality is the status of the proposition that describes the event. He classified modality into two types: ‘root modality’ and ‘epistemic modality’. The former mainly relates to an outward force influencing a speaker, i.e. obligation, permission, possibility and so on, while the latter mainly relates to the speaker’s inwardness, or his or her judgment, intention, desire and so on. Let us look at the following sentence:

(1) The picture here *must* be a Chagall.

This sentence is ambiguous and is interpreted in two ways. One means (i) necessity — it is *necessary* that the picture to be hung here be a Chagall, and the other means (ii) possibility — it is *possible* that the picture hanging here is a Chagall. The difference between the former and the latter is whether the picture is actually on the wall or not. If the picture has not been on the wall yet, the interpretation is applied to (i). On the other hand, if the picture has been already on the wall, the interpretation is applied to (ii). This polysemy indicates that each meaning of modal auxiliaries is determined by various situations and how the speaker grasps them.

Von Wright (1951)² classified modality into five types—alethic, epistemic, deontic, existential and dynamic modality. Alethic modality is related to necessity or possibility, epistemic is related to certainty, deontic to obligation or permission, existential to existence, and dynamic to ability or disposition of subject.

Palmer’s and Von Wright’s types of classification clearly indicate that modality presents complexity in English sentences or discourses, and modal auxiliaries which

¹ Palmer, F. R. *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

² Von Wright, G. H. *An Essay in Modal Logic*, North Holland: Amsterdam, 1951.

contain modality are also complicated. In other words, as we have mentioned, modal auxiliaries have polysemy because of their modality.

Modality interacts with speech act, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, and modal auxiliaries, which means that modality is connected with many linguistic issues. This paper aims to make clear what polysemic features modal auxiliaries have and what influences modality produces on English sentences, and in particular focuses on modal auxiliaries in English, especially *may*.

The relationships between modality and polysemy of modal auxiliaries

Modality is also related to mood. Grammatically, mood is generally recognized as indicative mood, subjunctive mood, and imperative mood. Indicative is mood which presents the matter as a fact as follows (2):

(2) John is a student.

Furthermore, there is a case where indicative does not express a fact but as if it were a fact as in (3):

(3) Two and two make five.

This sentence is not a fact mathematically but this is a grammatically correct sentence indicated by indicative mood.

Subjunctive is a mood which does not mention a fact but a conception, i.e. subjunctive is used when one mentions the matter of a thing which the speaker conceives of as a situation in a hypothetical world. Let us look at the following example:

(4) If I were you, I would learn English.

In this sentence, we would find that naturally *I* am not *you*. Therefore, this sentence expresses a speaker's conception that *I* would learn English in terms of *you*.

Imperative is a mood which expresses the order or the request as in the following sentence:

(5) Don't touch anything.

As we have mentioned, modality is related to mood because mood adds psychological attitude to the substance of the sentence by changing the word-form of a verb phrase.

We have learned the meaning of *may* as permission and possibility. Let us look at the following examples (6) and (7):

(6) You *may* smoke in this room.

(7) His story *may* be true.

These sentences could be paraphrased as the following examples (8) and (9).

(8) You are permitted to smoke in this room.

(9) It is possible that his story is true.

These paraphrases make it clear that *may* has a variety of interpretation. Based on Palmer's analysis (2001)³, *may* in (6) is root modality, and *may* in (7) is epistemic modality. On the other hand, some analysts suggest that modality should not be classified into two types, but should be unified as one category.

Some analysis of *may*

Sweetser (1990)⁴ mentions that “there is strong historical, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic evidence for viewing the epistemic use of modals as an extension of a more basic root meaning, rather than viewing the root sense as an extension of the epistemic one, or both as sub-sets of some more general superordinate sense”. In addition to this, Sweetser (1990)⁵ suggest that “the polysemy of the modal auxiliaries may lie rather in the presence or absence of a metaphorical mapping than in the presence or absence of a single feature making the sense more specific.”

Talmy (1988)⁶ suggested that “the semantics of root modality is best understood in terms of force dynamics, which is in terms of our linguistic treatment of forces and barriers in general.”

Let us analyze the meaning of *may* on the basis of their ideas. According to Sweetser's definition (1990)⁷ the meaning of *may* is that there is nothing to obstruct in accomplishing the event which the speaker uttered. In general, when we utter something, the statement is based on the presupposition which is determined by a particular situation, and such situation gives an influence on the speaker, and as a result, we can perform the things. Let us look at the following example:

(10) John *may* open the window.

In this sentence, for example, the presupposition is that *John* is in the room which has the window, or that *John* seems to find it hot. It is possible that *John* opens the window when permission is given. That is, the obstruction to *John* has been removed by permission which *may* expresses in this situation. Let us examine the following example:

³ Palmer, F. R. *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁴ Sweetser, E. *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁵ Sweetser, E. *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁶ Talmy, L. *Force Dynamics in Language and Cognition*. Cognitive Science 2, 1988.

⁷ Sweetser, E. *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

(11) You *may* sit down or stand, just as you wish. (LDCE)⁸

The presupposition in this situation, for example, is that *you* remained standing when *you* entered the room like a reception room or another person's house. It is possible for the agent *you* to choose standing or sitting down once gaining permission. Next, let us look at the example below:

(12) Visitors *may* reclaim necessary travel expenses up to a limit of £ 50. (Quirk *et al.*)⁹

For instance, the presupposition in this sentence is that it is possible for visitors to seek repayment when they are in an exchange counter. Given permission, the agents are able to reclaim travel expenses.

These three examples like (10), (11) and (12) show clearly that the meaning of *may* as root modality indicates that there are no obstructions to accomplishing the proposition with permission from the speaker or the situation. Interestingly, this analysis of Sweetser (1990) and of Talmy (1988) leads to the idea that things are two sides of the same coin as for the relation between permission and obstruction, especially for *may*.

Indeed, we would be able to find that modality which *may* expresses that there is no obstruction to accomplish the proposition in particular situations. Sweetser (1990)¹⁰ insisted that her analysis could be applied to epistemic *may*. We need to examine whether we are able to apply her analysis to epistemic *may* or not. Sweetser (1990) investigates the meaning of epistemic *may* giving the following example.

(13) John *may* be there.

She interprets that "I am not barred from *my* premises from the conclusion that *he* is there."¹¹ One significant thing we should consider is the speaker's cognition because we could naturally find that there are no other kinds of obstruction or forces in the epistemic or hypothetical world. Let us consider the following example:

(14) I *may* be late, so don't wait for me. (LDCE)¹²

Based on Sweetser's insistence, this sentence can be interpreted thus *I* request that

⁸ Mayor, Michael. et al. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Peason, 1978.

⁹ Quirk Randolph. et al. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman, 1985.

¹⁰ Sweetser, E. *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

¹¹ Sweetser, E. *From Etymology to Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

¹² Mayor, Michael. et al. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Peason, 1978.

you do not wait for *me* because there is possibility that *I* will be late in *my* cognition. It could be recognized that the proposition is determined by cognition in the speaker's mind. If *I* am confident that *I* will not be late, *I* am able to say that *I* want *you* to wait for *me*.

Let us move on to the following example:

(15) We may never succeed. (Quirk *et al.*)¹³

This sentence could be paraphrased 'It is possible that we will never succeed.' If *we* believe our success or have confidence in *our* judgment, *we* are sure that *we* will be successful in this situation. That is, as the proposition in this sentence is also decided by intention of *we*.

We have considered that the modality of *may* should be unified based on Sweetser's analysis (1990) without classifying like Palmer (2001) or von Wright (1951). Her superior point is to grasp modality with a conception as force dynamics, and this idea gives us a solution that presupposition exerts profoundly influence. We could make clear that there is no obstruction to accomplish the proposition in the root *may*. However, it is not easy for us to find out the force for the speaker's cognition in epistemic *may* without specific contents. Therefore, we should consider how *may* functions in a larger context.

(16) Fukushima was not just an epic natural disaster in a nation long conditioned to frequent betrayals by land and sea. It was a also a manmade crisis, born of political hubris, corporate dereliction and an instinct to obscure Japan's ugliest elements that remains unchanged to this day. The Japanese, as a people, *may* bow before the temple of precision, fetishizing detail and safety. (*TIME*, 2014)

This is a part of the nuclear problems in Fukushima of which the author thinks. Fukushima had serious damage caused by the earthquake. The author thinks that this crisis is a problem not only for people in Fukushima but also for people all around Japan. The author also thinks that the problem is related to a national trait of the Japanese. Judging from these contexts, we could give a guess that the meaning of *may* is close to *should* in this sentence because the author tried to prevent this article from being subjective as much subjective as possible, or because the author tried to ask the readers a question in order to make a solution of this problem through this article. In either case, we could find that the meaning of this *may* plays a role of refraining from the author stating subjective opinions in this context.

¹³ Quirk, Randolph. *et al.* *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman, 1985.

The function of *might*

Let us turn to the meaning of *might*. *Might* has a function as a distal form of *may*. “*Might* can be used as a somewhat more tentative alternative to *may*.” (Quirk *et al.*)¹⁴ *Might* does not express the meaning of past except for sequence of tenses. Let us look at the following example:

(17) He *might* get there in time, but I can't be sure. (OALD)¹⁵

As we have already mentioned, *might* is distal form of *may*. Therefore, this is subjunctive mood. One uses distal form like *might* when one would like to express the mental distance to proposition. The speaker is wondering if he gets there in time in this sentence, which featured by changing the word form. We suppose that the speaker cannot meet *him* in time.

(18) *Might* I ask how old you are? (LDCE)¹⁶

The speaker asks how old *you* are on the assumption that *you* do not readily tell *me* *your* age. Therefore, the meaning of requesting the permission has weakened. Instead, we often use *may* when we expect *yes* in reply.

As we have mentioned, *might* is used when the speaker has less confidence or mention uncertain proposition not close to being true, however, there are some cases where it is difficult to find out the meaning of *might* in a sentence as well as *may*. Specifically let us look at *might* in the following context.

(19) Blore was gazing down into the water.

He said:

‘Nobody could have clambered down here, I suppose?’

Armstrong shook his head.

‘I doubt it. It's pretty sheer. And where could he hide?’

Blore said:

There *might* be hole in a cliff. If we had a boat now, we could row round the island.’ (Christie, A. *And Then There Were None*, 1939)

This scene describes the talk between Blore and Armstrong after they looked around the island. Looking at the cliff, Blore naturally noticed that none could clamber down in such a steep cliff. Blore thought that nobody could escape from here though he said that

¹⁴ Quirk, Randolph. *et al.* *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman, 1985.

¹⁵ Joanna, Turnbull. *et al.* *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.

¹⁶ Mayor Michael. *et al.* *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Peason, 1978

there *might* be hole. Blore is hesitating to declare a possibility that there is a hole. Therefore, this *might* expresses the suspiciousness of the speaker for the proposition.

Conclusion

As we have already mentioned, *may* has the function that it removes obstruction in the proposition. That is, the meaning of *may* and obstruction in the proposition are two sides of the same coin. In physical world, we could concretely find the obstruction in a variety of particular situations. However, it is not easy that we make sure the obstruction in hypothetical or epistemic world because the obstruction in it is caused by our mind.

May often also expresses the meanings ‘*should*’ as seen in (16). We would recognize that *may* supports the meaning of other modal auxiliaries in order not to be subjective or in order to soften the speaker’s insistence.

Might is not only past form but also a distal form of *may*. As noticed in (18), it supposes to express the mental distance for the proposition by changing word form in subjunctive mood and it produces less possibility or more politeness than *may*.

In conclusion, *may* and *might* are one of the means to indicate mental expression.

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