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No Can Do Modal Verbs

Summary

The paper presents the systems of modal verbs in Slovene and English, and it focuses on comprehension and usage problems that advanced students of English may have when dealing with modal verb constructions. The paper identifies the key factors that give rise to various problems, such as *in-vacuo* vs. in-context treatment of modal verbs and absolute vs. relative temporal relations. It is argued that most students fail to fully understand contextualised modal verb constructions mostly due to the polysemy of modal verbs as well as their relative tense value. This is particularly the case when a (narrative) text containing modal verb constructions has a past time reference, and combines different narrative techniques.

Key words: modal verbs, polysemy, time reference, tense, context, narrative techniques, translation

Križi in težave z naklonskimi glagoli

Povzetek

Članek obravnava sistem naklonskih glagolov v slovenščini in angleščini s posebnim poudarkom na težavah slovenskih govorcev pri razumevanju in rabi angleških naklonskih glagolov. Prispevek izpostavlja tiste dejavnike, ki v največji meri botrujejo nastanku težav, kot sta, na primer, razlika med naklonskimi glagoli, rabljenimi brez sobesedila ali s sobesedilom, ter razlika med absolutnimi in relativnimi slovničnimi časi. Dodatne težave pri razumevanju in rabi naklonskih glagolov v sobesedilu povzročata slovenskim govorcem tudi večpomenskost angleških naklonskih glagolov in njihova relativna časovna vrednost, še posebno kadar je referenčna točka besedila v pretekliku in besedilo vsebuje različne pripovedne postopke.

Ključne besede: naklonski glagoli, večpomenskost, časovna referenčna točka, slovnični čas, sobesedilo, pripovedni postopki, prevajanje

No Can Do Modal Verbs

1. Introduction

The paper deals with the relative difference between the systems of modal verbs (henceforth: modals) in Slovene and English with special attention being paid to comprehension and usage problems of advanced students of English. To identify various factors giving rise to different comprehension / usage problems, a special study has been conducted among 150 Slovene students of English at the Faculty of Arts. Drawing on the findings of the research, the paper identifies and discusses some of the most problematic issues, including: (i) the comparative weak system of modals in Slovene compared to English, (ii) the problem of polysemy and English modals, (iii) the problem of *in-vacuo* vs. in-context treatment and (iv) the absolute vs. relative temporal properties of modals.

The findings also point out that most difficult seem to be those cases in which polysemous modals appear in longer narrative texts where the narrator uses different narrative techniques or perspectives that give rise to a relative temporal interpretation within the established temporal domain.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 compares Slovene and English systems of modals and addresses the question of polysemy as well as *in-vacuo* vs. in-context treatment of English modals. Section 3 discusses the differences between the tense systems of English and Slovene with special focus on non-finite verbal forms and modal verb constructions. Section 4 discusses the problems of interpreting modal verbs in a narrative and presents some of the findings of the research. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Modal Verb System - English vs. Slovene

One of the more difficult segments of English grammar for Slovene learners is the system of modals. There are many reasons for this situation, but perhaps the most important one is the relatively weak array of Slovene modals which are frequently replaced by modal adverbials or modal frameworks, as shown below:¹

| Slovene modals | typical substitutes |
|--|----------------------------------|
| (z)moči (=can → ability, also possibility) | <i>mogoče biti, lahko (biti)</i> |
| <i>morati</i> (=must / have (got) to) | <i>potrebno biti</i> |
| <i>smeti</i> (=can / may → permission) | <i>lahko</i> |

Table 1: The list of Slovene modals and their typical substitutes.

By far the commonest is *morati*, denoting obligation, and the least used is *moči*, when denoting possibility. One of the factors contributing to this situation is that both verbs conjugate almost

¹ The list includes proper modal auxiliaries and excludes full lexical verbs with modal meaning, for example, *hoteti*, *želeti* (cf.: want in English). Cf. Toporišič (2000, 353).

identically for the present, the only difference being one vowel: *-e* in the case of *moči*, and *-a* in the case *morati* (1a). Hence, many native speakers, regardless of their social / professional stratum, find sentence (1b) ambiguous, allowing both (1c) and (1d) readings.

(1)

a)

| | <i>moči</i> | <i>morati</i> |
|------|--------------|---------------|
| 1/sg | <i>morem</i> | <i>moram</i> |
| 2/sg | <i>moreš</i> | <i>moraš</i> |
| 3/sg | <i>more</i> | <i>mora</i> |

b) *To moremo razložiti.*

c) ✓ ‘We can explain this.’

d) * ‘We must explain this.’

Taking into account the relative simplicity of the Slovene modal verb system and the tendencies for further simplifications, one can only imagine the frustrations of a Slovene learner when confronted with any slightly richer system of modals.

2.1 Polysemy of English Modals

The problem of polysemy is usually presented in various reference books (cf. Biber 1999; Leech 2004; Lewis 1986; Palmer 1987; Quirk et al. 1999; Swan 2005 a.o.) in the form of bulleted descriptions accompanied by contextless examples. Sometimes, the description also includes information on possible semantic overlaps with other modals. This strategy can be observed in sentences (2-11) illustrating various (modal) meanings of *will*. The list is far from being exhaustive since it excludes its (pure) temporal as well as conditional meanings.

- (2) *This will be the man you're looking for.* → supposition (partial overlap with *must*)
- (3) *You will remain where you are!* → command (overlap with *must*)
- (4) *I'll write tomorrow.* → promise
- (5) *Parents often treat their children by saying they'll stop their pocket money.* → threat
- (6) *You cannot find a publisher who will take it.* → volition
- (7) *Some drugs will improve the condition.* → power (partial overlap with *can*)
- (8) A: “I can't breathe.”
B: “Well, if you will go on smoking like that, what can you expect?” → insistence
- (9) *Accidents will happen.* → characteristic behaviour / situation (overlap with *can*)
- (10) *She will sit for hours watching TV.* → habits / repetitions (overlap with *used to*)

(11) *Oil will float on water.* → inference (overlap with *the state present*)

(12) *The auditorium will seat 500.* → disposition (overlap with *can*)

Frequently, the problem of polysemy is treated in terms of semantic division into (i) epistemic and (ii) root modality. The former denotes different degrees of a speaker's knowledge about the world, for example, deductions, judgements, opinions, while the latter deals with all other modal meanings. A more refined classification divides root modality into deontic modality (marking the speaker's attitude towards social factors such as obligation and permission) and dynamic modality (comprising of the remaining meanings such as ability and volition).² According to this classification, example (2) involves epistemic modality, example (3) deontic modality and example (6) dynamic modality.

Now consider example (13). The modal involved may trigger different interpretations. Let's start with the epistemic reading: drawing on the facts already known, it is reasonable for the speaker to expect that in any situation imaginable, boys (will) display typical boyish / male behaviour. This logical conclusion, however, brings in the notion of subject-oriented modality (dynamic reading), implying volition or determination on the part of the subject, in this case *the boys*. In a right context, however, (i.e. a father in a desperate attempt to make his son quit advanced embroidery classes) a deontic reading of a command should not be ruled out.

(13) *Boys will be boys.*

One may believe that analysing sentences in context may ameliorate the situation, yet this is only partially the case. Consider these examples (14)-(16), which contain the same modal construction *could have danced* with some co-text.

(14) *Don't ask me what she did yesterday evening. For all I know, she could have danced all night long.*

(15) *If you had asked her, she could have danced with you. Instead, she went to the ball with George.*

(16) *She was full of energy yesterday at the ball. She could have danced all night long.*

Examples (14) and (15) differ in the type of possibility: while the first example denotes an open possibility, i.e. the speaker does not know whether the event in question did or did not take place in reality, the second example refers only the theoretical / hypothetical possibility excluding the open interpretation of possibility due to the conditional context. Sentence (16) is intriguing since it enriches the epistemic reading by introducing the dynamic dimension of ability which must be understood as potential ability at a specific circumstance / time. In other words, if the subject in (16) had the ability to dance, hence making the event of dancing possible at a specific circumstance / time, this ability was not used. Along these lines, sentence (16) should be analysed as a mixed epistemic / dynamic type, marking the boundary between

² For a detailed description of the classification, see Palmer (1987) and Quirk et al. (1999) a.o.

the pure epistemic *can* (such as (14)), and the pure dynamic *can* (such as (17)), if we allow ourselves the luxury of calling them pure modal meanings.

- (17) a) *When she was a young girl, she **could dance** all night long.*
 b) *She **was able to** dance all night long.*

Examples (17) appear to be a perpetual problem. They may all belong to the same category of the dynamic meaning of ability, but they both introduce a different notion, or even better, a different perception of ability. (17a) denotes a permanent possession of ability in the past with no explicit reference to the actual performance itself, which links it, to some extent, to example (16). The crucial difference between (16) and (17a), though, lies in the fact that while (16) excludes the possibility of the ability being used, (17a) simply makes no direct reference to the actual performance. (17b), on the other hand, describes a past ability with special reference to the actual performance.

- (18) *In those days, one **could dance** all night long.*

Even though sentence (18) shares the same modal construction with (17a), it should not be analysed in the same fashion. It carries the meaning of a possibility – similar to examples (14) and (15) – but it is no longer a present evaluation of a past situation, it is a description of a past possibility. Thus, strictly speaking, it can no longer be analysed as an epistemic evaluation.³

To wind up, the explanation for the complexity of modals is, perhaps, best captured by Leech (1987, 72), who points out that “[o]ne thing that can make it difficult to account for [modals] is that their meaning has both a logical (semantic) and a practical (pragmatic) element. We can talk about them in terms of such logical notions as ‘permission’ and ‘necessity’ but, this done, we still have to consider ways in which these notions become remoulded by the social and psychological influences of everyday communication between human being: factors such as motivation, condescension, politeness, tact and irony.”

As a practical piece of advice to advanced learners of English we can only transmit Leech’s (op. cit., 73) proposal that “the distinctions between the meanings are not so clear-cut as their separation in the lists [like (2) - (12)] suggests. It is often better to think of contrasts of meaning as scales of similarity and difference.” Therefore, any learner should move from matching instances of modals with the isolated descriptors containing examples *in-vacuo* (cf.: (2) - (12)) to a more productive analysis of comparing and contrasting (as in (16) - (18)). This should be even more the case with students whose mother tongue differs greatly from English with regard to their modal verb systems.

To illustrate how this goal can be achieved, section 4 presents an exercise that can be used to stimulate students to discuss modals in terms of comparing and contrasting.

³ “The modality [...] cannot normally be marked as past and there is a simple reason for this: by using an epistemic modal the speaker makes a (performative and so present time) judgement.” Palmer (1987, 99)

3. Modal Verbs and Tense

Another typical (over)simplification of many reference books is that an epistemic modal verb, when followed by the present infinitive, refers to the present or the future (19a), and an epistemic modal followed by the perfect infinitive denotes the past (19b).⁴

- (19) a) *An accident **can / could happen.***
b) *An accident **can / could have happened.***

Even though some authors warn users against such oversimplifications, and point out that any perfect construction should be interpreted as carrying relative not absolute tense value⁵ (for details see section 3.1 below), it is the case that direct present / past distinction is (too) strongly rooted in the minds of Slovene learners of English, and it leads to many comprehension and usage problems. In what follows, we will shed some light on the difficulties Slovene learner face when evaluating the tense dimension of the English modals.

3.1 Temporal Domains in English and Slovene

Tense is understood as a verbal grammatical category that indicates the time of an event in relation to the time of the utterance (i.e. the temporal zero-point). The described relation may be absolute or relative. In the case of the former a tense directly relates the event to the temporal zero-point, thus establishing the past, the present and the future domain. In the case of the latter, a tense relates an event not to the temporal zero-point but to another event.

To illustrate, consider example (20). The past tense *knew* is analysed as absolute since it directly relates the event to the temporal zero-point. *Had been tricked* and *would break up*, on the other hand, are relative tenses, relating the events to the absolute tense *knew* and not to the temporal zero-point.

- (20) *Deep down, Peter **knew** that he **had been tricked** into marrying Milly and that the marriage **would inevitably break up.***

According to Declerck (1991), a temporal domain is a set of events that share the same central time of orientation. The role of the central time of orientation is twofold. First, it directly relates the event to the temporal zero-point, and second, it binds all other (relative) events within the same domain. Relative events can, in theory, denote three intra-domain relations: (i) anteriority, (ii) simultaneity and (iii) posteriority. Re-analysing (20), we can state then that *knew* establishes the central time of orientation to which the two events *had been tricked* (anteriority) and *would break up* (posteriority) are bound.

⁴ For example, Swan (2005, 339) states that “[t]o say that it is possible that something happened or was true in the past, we can use **may/might have + past participle.**” Similar explanations can be found for the epistemic *can* (op. cit., 99) and *must* (op. cit., 334).

⁵ Quirk et al. (1999, 190), for instance, claim that “the perfective indicates anterior time; ie time preceding whatever time orientation is signalled by the tense or by other elements of the sentence or its context.”

Perhaps the most significant difference between the English and Slovene tense systems is that while in English there is a (tense form) difference between absolute / relative relations, in Slovene the difference between the absolute and relative tense is only in meaning since there are no special relative tense forms, i.e. any tense form can be used in an absolute or relative sense. Thus, the present tense denotes both present (absolute) and simultaneity (relative) – compare Slovene translations (22) of English examples (21). Hence, it is not difficult to expect many student problems arising from their failing to distinguish absolute from relative relations.

(21) Past temporal domain:

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) <i>I thought that she was miserable.</i> | → simultaneity (S) / past tense |
| b) <i>I thought that she had been miserable.</i> | → anteriority (A) / past perfect tense |
| c) <i>I thought that she would be miserable.</i> | → posteriority (P) / conditional tense |

Present temporal domain:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| d) <i>I think she is miserable.</i> | → simultaneity (S) / present tense |
| e) <i>I think that she was miserable.</i> | → anteriority (A) / past tense |
| f) <i>I think that she will be miserable.</i> | → posteriority (P) / future tense |

(22) Past temporal domain:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| a) <i>Mislil sem, da je nesrečna.</i> | → simultaneity (S) / present tense |
| b) <i>Mislil sem, da je bila nesrečna.</i> | → anteriority (A) / past tense |
| c) <i>Mislil sem, da bo nesrečna.</i> | → posteriority (P) / future tense |

Present temporal domain:

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| d) <i>Mislim, da je nesrečna.</i> | → simultaneity (S) / present tense |
| e) <i>Mislim, da je bila nesrečna.</i> | → anteriority (A) / past tense |
| f) <i>Mislim, da bo nesrečna.</i> | → posteriority (P) / future tense |

Within the system of English verbs, there is another area that calls for further investigation. The division into finite and non-finite verbal forms does not pertain only to the agreement system but also to the category of tense. While finite forms can be absolute, relative, or both, the non-finite verbal forms are always relative, i.e. they cannot establish their own temporal domain, and can express temporal relations within an already established temporal domain.

(23) Finite:

- | |
|--|
| a) <i>She said she felt tired.</i> |
| → <i>said</i> : Past Indefinite – absolute |
| → <i>felt</i> : Past Indefinite – relative |

Non-finite:

b) *She seems **to have been offended** and she seems **to be crying**.*

→ *seems*: Present Indefinite – absolute

→ *to have been offended*: Perfect Infinitive – relative (anteriority)

→ *to be crying*: Present Infinitive – relative (simultaneity)

c) *She seemed **to have been offended** and she seemed **to be crying**.*

→ *seemed*: Present Indefinite – absolute

→ *to have been offended*: Perfect Infinitive – relative (anteriority)

→ *to be crying*: Present Infinitive – relative (simultaneity)

The two non-finite forms in (23b,c) perform exactly the same function within the established temporal domain: the perfect infinitive denotes anteriority, and the present infinitive simultaneity. Their final temporal interpretation now depends on the interpretation of the absolute tense, the central time of orientation. In (23b), this is the absolute present tense, establishing the present temporal domain. Consequently, the perfect infinitive is interpreted as denoting the *past-in-the-present* and the present infinitive denoting the *present*. Corresponding finite forms of the two infinitives are the present perfect for the perfect infinitive and the present tense for the present infinitive:

(24) *It seems that she **has been offended** and that she **is crying**.*

The Past Tense *seems* (21c) establishes the past temporal domain, and therefore the perfect infinitive is interpreted as the *past-in-the-past* and the present infinitive as the *past*. Again, in terms of finite forms, the perfect infinitive corresponds to the past perfect tense and the present infinitive to the past tense:

(25) *It seemed that she **had been offended** and that she **was crying**.*

Since the notion of a pure relative relation cannot be found in Slovene, some learners may find it difficult to understand the relative value of the non-finite. Quite frequently, this notion of relative tense is interpreted as absolute, and this neatly takes us back to examples (19) – repeated here as (26) – and the problem mentioned therein.

(26) a) *An accident **can / could happen**.* → present

b) *An accident **can / could have happened**.* → past

When used in isolation, (26a) refers to the present and (26b) to the past. At this point a question arises as to what enables this interpretation. The verbal form following the epistemic modal is the infinitive, so its temporal value should be relative. If relative, then it should require a temporal anchor, the central time of orientation. The answer lies in the nature of (epistemic) modals. It is the case that the speaker can only make a judgment or pass an evaluation in the present, at the temporal zero-point, which makes sentences with epistemic modals verbs similar to performatives, where the event and the act of speech are simultaneous simply because they are the one and the same thing.

Along these lines, the analysis of examples (26) should be very similar to that in (23):

- (27) a) → *can / could happen*: Present Infinitive – relative (simultaneity / posteriority);
 → central time of orientation: the temporal zero-point
- b) → *can / could have happened*: Perfect Infinitive – relative (anteriority);
 → central time of orientation: the temporal zero-point

This analysis straightforwardly answers why an infinitive following an epistemic modal verb does not display the tense shift or the sequence of tenses (28): backshifting the present infinitive into the perfect infinitive would affect the temporal relations within the temporal domain, thus changing the interpretation of the sentence.

- (28) a) *She **said** that an accident can / could **happen** (then / the following day).*
- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| ↓ | ↓ |
| central time of orientation | simultaneity / posteriority (i.e. at the same time as <i>said</i> , reporting the performative in (27a)) |
- b) #*She **said** that an accident can / could **have happened** (then / the following day).*
- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| ↓ | ↓ |
| central time of orientation | anteriority (i.e. prior to the time of <i>said</i> , not reporting of the performative in (27a)) |

It has to be said with some regret that there is not a negligible number of advanced students who believe (28b) is the only correct version of reporting sentence (26a).

4. Understanding Modal Verbs in Narrative Texts

The issues addressed in the previous section bring us to the ultimate problem: modals in context. It often happens that students have major problems understanding both the usage as well as the different semantic implications of modals. To highlight the problems, this section addresses two issues: first, the possible frame of the analysis, and second, the analysis of a text that has been analysed with advanced students in seminar classes.

4.1 Theoretical Frame

Leech and Short (1981, 318-48) claim that in a narrative, there are several ways of presenting speech and thought that a writer may resort to. According to the authors (*ibid.*) there are at least five different possibilities, exemplified in (29):

- (i) narrative report of speech / thought (NRSA / NRTA),
- (ii) indirect speech / thought (IS / IT),

- (iii) free indirect speech / thought (FIS / FIT),
- (iv) direct speech / thought (DS / DT),
- (v) free direct speech / thought (FDS / FDT).

(29)

- | | |
|--|---|
| a) <i>He promised to return.</i> NRSA | f) <i>He wondered about her love for him.</i> NRTA |
| b) <i>He said that he would return.</i> IS | g) <i>He wondered if she still loved him.</i> IT |
| c) <i>He would return.</i> FIS | h) <i>Did she still love him?</i> FIT |
| d) <i>He said, 'I will return.'</i> DS | i) <i>He wondered, 'Does she still love me?'</i> DT |
| e) <i>I will return.</i> FDS | j) <i>Does she still love me?</i> FT |

Free indirect speech / thought is a freer version of the relatively strict form of the indirect speech / thought. In most cases, it lacks a reporting clause, whereas the deictic changes, i.e. tense, place and person, apply. It is noteworthy that the tense and person selection has to be appropriate to the form of narration in which FIS / FIT occurs: if the narrative is in the past, then we get the past time sphere selection, if the narrative is in the present, then the present time sphere selection occurs.

From the perspective of a Slovene student the most problematic area is (F)IS / (F)IT and DS / DT. The reason is obvious: since Slovene does not have special relative tenses within any possible temporal domain (i.e. absolute and relative tenses always coincide regardless of the established temporal domain, see section 3 and examples therein), there is no difference between (F)IS / (F)IT and DS / DT tensewise. As a consequence, it is commonly believed that any verbal form like (26a) must be interpreted as the present / future, and any verbal form like (26b) must be interpreted as the past regardless of the context. In particular, in the case of (F)IS / (F)IT with the past time reference the notion of the past vs. present is understood too absolutely, mostly by learners' ignoring the relative tense value of the infinitive.

4.2 Text Analysis

To highlight the problematic comprehension / usage areas, I will use text (30), which has been analysed by approximately 150 students of English during my seminar classes for three consecutive years. The text is interesting since it combines two perspectives, that of the narrator and that of the character. The latter is presented in extract (30) in a form of FIT and has been underlined for the purposes of the analysis. The boldfaced elements are those modals that have given rise to major analysis / usage problems.

(30)

*Sussex Street formed one side of Gloucester Square. It was far from brightly lit. No doubt the elite residents objected to chemical lighting on tall concrete stilts. That was for the poor, that was for council estates. Jeremy walked alongside the railings in the centre of the square until he came to a gate. Of course it was locked, it **would be**, and all the residents had keys. Choosing a corner the least overlooked by the windows in the tall terraces, he laid his raincoat over the spikes on top of the railings and climbed over.*

*Bushes and trees inside, a path going round a grassy area. These squares were all the same. Probably there was a seat. His eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, he walked along the path, found a seat and sat down. An icy chill from stone crept up through his buttocks and his back, making him shiver. It was almost pain. The pleasure of being there overcame it. It was extremely unlikely that anyone **would come** into this garden now. Only in these quiet squares, under the trees in the scentless soundless dark, **could** he ever **feel** truly alone and at peace.*

*His thoughts turned to the keyring and the lighter. He **could** just **send** them to the Police. That was what a lesser man **would do**. Wearing fine latex gloves, he **could wipe** them clean, **[could] drop** them into a new hitherto untouched padded bag, **[could] do** the label on the computer, and **[could] send** them to Paddington Green Police Station. Once it **would have been** easy. Not now, with all these methods of detection. These days they **could** probably **tell** where the padded bag had been bought, what sort of gloves had been worn and certainly through which post office it had been dispatched. Not the computer yet, though. As a computer consultant, Jeremy spent a good part of his time working towards the discovery of a method whereby forensics could isolate individual IT systems and thence the individual hand that had used them. A fortune awaited the inventor, if invented it **could** be. It would hardly do for him now to discover it. Still, he **wouldn't** send the objects to the Police, he **wouldn't** put them in other antique shops. Of course, he **could** drop them down a drain or even, without fear of detection into a rubbish can. But this failed to satisfy something artistic in him – or was obviously less risky.*

Ruth Rendell (2004, 129-31)

The temporal domain of (30) is the past, established by the two absolute past tense forms, *formed* and *was* (line 1). Consequently, all relative tense forms are (in)directly bound to the absolute past tense, valuing them as the past. For example, *would be* (line 4) and *could feel* (line 13) are thus interpreted as Past – simultaneity and *would have been* (line 18) as Past – anteriority. The problem students face at this point is that they expect only latter occurrences of modals in the past temporal domain and not the former (in accordance with the overgeneralisation in (26)). There are some that notice that the text has the past time reference, so they analyse all modals as pertaining to the past sphere, yet for those, overgeneralisation (26) sets another trap: the semantic interpretation of the modals. (26) exemplifies a common belief that an epistemic modal followed by the present infinitive refers to the present temporal domain, and when followed by the perfect infinitive, it refers to the past temporal domain (see section 3.1). As a result, many epistemic modals are interpreted as something else, mostly as dynamic meanings of volition and determination. This is even the case with modals, where the epistemic meaning is strengthened by an epistemic adverbial as in *of course it would be* (line 4) or an epistemic frame as in *it was [...] unlikely that anyone would come* (line 11). In table 2, we present some of the problematic modals from text (30), focussing on typical students' interpretations and contextually possible but unobserved interpretations.

| modal | line | common interpretations | unobserved interpretations |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| would be | 4 | dynamic: typical situation | epistemic: logical conclusion |
| would come | 11 | dynamic: refusal | epistemic: improbability |
| could feel | 13 | dynamic: ability | FIT dynamic: ability (cf.: (17)), slightly demodalised because followed by the verb of perception <i>feel</i> ; also combined with epistemic: possibility |
| could send | 14 | dynamic: ability | FIT epistemic: possibility / speculation |
| would do | 15 | dynamic: volition, determination | epistemic: logical conclusion / expectation |
| could wipe, drop, send | 15 - 17 | dynamic: ability | same as <i>could send</i> |
| could tell | 19 | dynamic: ability | same as <i>could send</i> epistemic meaning strengthened by <i>probably</i> |

Table 2: The text analysis.

As a comprehension / usage check question, students were asked to paraphrase the sentence *probably there was a seat* using a modal instead of the adverbial. The vast majority of students provided the answer *there may have been a seat* (line 8) which is in accordance with generalisation (26). What they failed to notice is that the sentence in question is a free version of the direct thought of the character rather than a present evaluation of a past situation by the narrator. Therefore, the correct paraphrase is *there might be a seat*, the derivation of which is presented in (31).

(31)

| FT | IT | FIT |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| “Probably there is a seat.” | Jeremy thought that probably there was a seat. | Probably there was a seat. |
| “There may be a seat.” | Jeremy thought that there might be a seat. | There might be a seat. |

To check their comprehension / usage from a reverse perspective, students were asked to paraphrase the sentence *once it would have been easy* (lines 17-18), using a modal adverbial, and thus replacing the non-finite lexical verb by a finite tense form. Again the typical answer was *once it probably was easy*, which would be correct if it were written from the narrator’s perspective. However, since the sentence belongs to FIT, the correct paraphrase should be *once it had probably been easy*. Its derivation can, thus, be explained in the same fashion as (31):

(32)

| FT | IT | FIT |
|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| “Once it would have been easy.” | Jeremy thought that once it would have been easy. | Once it would have been easy. |
| “Once it was probably easy.” | Jeremy thought that once it had probably been easy. | Once it had probably been easy. |

5. Conclusion.

The paper has addressed some typical comprehension and usage problems of English modals by advanced Slovene students of English. The conclusions are drawn from an empirical study conducted among university students of English. It seems that the problems stem from four different, yet closely interrelated, areas: (i) the (in)compatibility of Slovene and English modal verb systems, (ii) the problem of polysemy and the influence of context, (iii) absolute vs. relative temporal properties of modals and (iv) the narrative structure of a text. The findings of the research suggest that students at the advanced level should be encouraged to make a move from analysing modal *in-vacuo* to analysing them in context by contrasting and comparing. In particular, special emphasis should be laid to the structure of a (narrative) text containing modals, such as the use of different narrative techniques and perspectives.

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