Double Modals as Single Lexical Items

In American English.

An important problem faced by modern studies of the American English auxiliary verbs is preventing the iteration of modals as in sentence :

1. I *could must* do that.

In general, there have been two main approaches for ruling out such sequences of modals: the Phrase-Structure (P-S) rule approach based on the Auxiliary analysis which relies on P-S rules containing only one modal per surface clause; and the subcategorization approach as a part of the Main Verb analysis , which assumes that modals are finite forms and are subcategorized for stem forms. One problem that both types of analyses face is that there are large numbers of English speakers in the USA, most notably in the South Midland and Southern United States, who regularly use double modals (D-M).

2.I don’t think I have any grants you *might could* apply for.

3.We *might can* go up there next Sunday.

4.I *may could* at Finger’s.

5.You know, if you drank a half a drink,you *might oughta* go ho-

me and sleep it off.

6.This thing here I *might should* turn over to Ann.

7.How is it no one *might not would* notice that but Ann?

8.Well, once we get under way, it *shouldn’t oughta* take us very long.

Allowing for double modals might seem to be a simple matter of relaxing the restrictions on the iteration of modals. Thus, for these dialects , the Auxiliary analysis would have an alternative P-S rule allowing two or more modals, and the Main Verb analysis would allow modals to have stem forms.However, such simple solutions are not adequate when assessed against data collected in Texas from DM speakers.

This data as a whole indicates that merely relaxing the restrictions of either the P-S analysis or the subcategorization analysis will not adequately account for the speakers’ intuitions about or production of DM’s.In fact, weakening the restrictions of either of these two analyses would do little more than generate unrestricted sequences of modals. Such a consequence is problematic since the Texas data indicates that DM dialects have significant syntactic and semantic restrictions.

While being regional, double modals are quite important phenome-non. A large percentage of the U.S. population uses them. Almost every native speaker of the Southern Midland and Southern dialect areas uses at least one DM at least occasionally.

Also, there are two facts suggesting that the underlying structures of single and double modal dialects are very similar.First, from the viewpoint of structural dialectology, DM’s are intelligible to speakers of single modal dialects, so the structure of DM dialects must be compatible with those of single modal dialects. Second, some Northerners who migrate to Texas begin to use DM’s within a year of their arrival, showing that Northern English can easily accommodate DM’s.

*SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS*

Both the unconstrained phrase-structure and subcategorization analyses predict that all combinations of DM’s are acceptable. There are the nine modals, *can, could, may, might, should, will, would, ought to,* *must*, and the quasi-modals, *better* (as in *had better, ‘d better*), *need, supposed to, used to,* attested in DM’s, and according to analysis, there are 156 possible combinations with them.

Here are the most common:

*may could might would might supposed to*

*may can might better might’ve used to*

*may will might had better may need to*

*may should can might better can*

*may supposed to used to could might woulda*

*should oughta musta coulda had oughta*

*might could would better*

*might oughta could might*

*might can oughta could*

*might should may used to*

In general, the DM combinations are strictly ordered.

e.g: *may can*, but not *can may*.

The exceptions to this are *could might , can might*. Typically,the first modal is *may* or *might* .

There is generally one sense (or sometimes two related senses) that is (are) preferred for each DM while other senses are generally rejected or treated indifferently. In the case of *might could* - “ability”. The “possibility” is ranked low, and the “permission” sense is somewhere in between.

Thus, Double Modals could be semantically described as follows:

*Might could*

“ability”: Noone could tell if he was dealing with them or not, but Bill

*might could*  tell the case of his arrival.

“permission’: She is a very polite three-year-old.Yesterday she asked

If she *might could* write on the walls.

“possibility”: There *might could* be water in that old well.

*Might should*

“obligation”: They are just realized that they forgot to send an invitation

to John. “We *might should*’ve invited John."

“obligation/suggestion”: You *might should* turn this to Ann.

“logical possibility”: Jim usually gets home at about 5:30, but it is 6:00

And he is not at home yet.He  *might should* be

home by now.

*Might oughta*

“obligation”: We *might oughta* invite him to our party.

“obligation/suggestion”: You *might not oughta* call him.

“logical possibility”: It is four o’clock and Mary just put a pie in the

oven. The pie  *might oughta*  be done by five.

*Might would*

“hypothetical”: I *might would* havedone it if he would tell me to.

“prediction”: I asked him if he *might would* have it ready by one

o’clock.

“habitual”: John is recalling his childhood:”On Sundays we *might*

*would*  visit our grandparents.

*PREFERENCES FOR SENSES OF DOUBLE MODALS*

Due the individuals’ will the second part of a double modal may vary ,therefore, the whole modal construction changes its meaning. That is because some senses are preferred over others in a second modal. Furthermore the data indicate that there is no simple generalization that can be made concerning which senses are the most acceptable. For instance, although the root senses are preferred over the epistemic one for *might* *could* and  *might oughta* (the “obligation” and “obligation/suggestion”from the one part and the “logical possibility” from the other) this generalization does not hold for *might could* or *might would*.

In the case of *might could* , “ability” , a root sense, is more acceptable than “permission”,another root sense, and “possibility”, an epistemic sense. Finally, for *might would* “hypothetical”, the most epistemic sense , is somewhat preferred over “prediction” and definitely preferred over “habitual” , the most root-like sense. Because of this situation , se-mantis relations must be stated separately for each Double Modal.

The DM’s syntactic and semantic properties analysis shows that Double Modals have restrictions in their syntax and meanings that the corresponding single modals may not have. Furthermore , the restrictions are idiosyncratic: a rule that applies to one DM may not be applicable to another one. Thus , a syntactic solution of the DM problem is unlikely because DMs don’t behave as simple combinations of their component parts as would be expected if they were syntactically combined.

*THE TENSE IN DOUBLE MODAL CONSTRUCTIONS*

The tense specification for single modals in present-day English is somewhat unclear. On the one hand , there are some contexts where only the past-tense forms of some of the models are acceptable for most speakers of American English , as in the following dialogue:

* Why did he lose the all-around athlete contest last month?
* Well , he was excellent in everything else , but he *can’t/couldn’t* swim across the river that day.

Although some speakers will also find this difference for *might* as opposed to *may* , or , will accept *may* in this context :

I am not sure what the problem was. But he *may/might* have had too much to eat before the race. The behaviour of *may* and *might* is not unusual for the present-day modals , which (except for *can* and *will* ) can usually be used in past tense contexts , or in present , future , or timeless action ones :

She *might* have eaten that last piece of cake.

You *would* have been just as angry.

George *could* have been more polite around his mother.

That woman *may* have been his mother-in-law.

It *could* be ready by 6 o’clock.

You *should* visit Rome in the spring.

In spite of the fact that some past contexts freely allow both past and present forms of the modals , there are other contexts which are more acceptable with past than with present :

I talked to Jim just before he left for Dallas last week.

A : He thought that he *could* get there in time.

B : He thought that he *can* get there in time.

As to Double Modals , their problem is more difficult. They could be conventionally subdivided the two groups : Tense-mixed and Tense-matched ones . The first group comprises DMs whose first and second parts are specified differently for tense :

e.g. *may could*

instead of having the same tense specification as it is in the second gro-

up :

e.g : *may can*

Although the present as well as the past forms of the modals seem to be acceptable , Tense-matched forms should be more acceptable than Tense-mixed ones if both modals are sensitive to tense specification.

While comparing the two DMs from diverse tense-groups , *may could* and *may can,*  in a past context , the Tense-mixed DM could be found more acceptable than the Tense-matched one . That is probably because *may could* has at least some past-tense marking . However , this formisn’t as acceptable as it is found to be in situations in which the contextdoesn’t restrict the action to the past . If the action is limited to the past,it is more common to use both modals in the same (here past) tenseunderlying this way the certainty of the past :

e.g : *may could - might could*

e.g : It scared him because he *might can* have died.

It scared him because he *might coulda* died. (more preferable variant)

So , it is specific for DMs to change their tense according to the con- text , though tending to the Tense-matched form indicating both modals are sensitive to tense specifications .

*LEXICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DOUBLE MODALS*

Double Modals are syntactically constructed sequences of single modals . Thus , they should be analyzed as two-word lexical items , like compound nouns , Verb + Particle constructions , Verb + Adjective const-ructions , or idioms . At first the DMs may seem a violation of the rule of non-iteration in the Auxiliary verbs usage , but that is not so . While deriving from the single modals , the DMs still form a specific lexico-grammatical part of the language and have their own characteristics .

The best way to show that the lexicon is the proper grammatical component for dealing with the particularities inherent in DMs is to develop an analogy between multiword lexical items and DMs. For all that they have at least three types of properties in common :

1. Non-productivity

2. A combination of both unit-like and non-unit-like behaviour

3. Syntactic and semantic irregularities

These properties are common just in sets of related lexical (not syntactic) constructions . Each of them will be discussed in general and then applied in particular to DMs .

1.NON-PRODUCTIVITY

A clear-cut example of the non-productive multiword lexical construct- ructions are the English Verb-Adjective ones . These lexical units have their steady shape , so they can’t be altered or reformed by will .

e.g : *to hammer flat , to wipe clean ,* etc.

In spite that having an analogous lexical form , constructions of this type shouldn’tbe confused with the simple combinations of verbs and adjectives such as *to hammer round ( well , strongly ,…)* or  *to wipe* *immaculate (thoroughly , softly)* .

e.g : Margaret  *hammered* it  *flat* .

Margaret  *hammered* it well .

Mary *wiped* it *clean* .

Mary *wiped* it immaculate .

The Verb-Adjective constructions are not syntactically constructed, that,s they are non-productive . Otherwise , any adjective should be able to follow any verb , that is absolutely unacceptable for non-productive-ness .

DMs are non-productive , too . It is clearly seen in that not all possible DMs are recognized by all DM users . This applies both to individual differences among speakers in a speech community and different ces among speech communities . Thus , it is normal when many persons who rejected  *might would* accept *might could*. It means that some DMs are far more common than others .

DM speakers from different regions may have different DMs in their repertoire , but all DM speakers have a certain set of DMs . If DMs were not non-productive , that’s syntactically constructed, all the people who use them would produce the same set of them . Instead , the speakers apparently have learned or prefer just particular DMs . In this item learning DMs is equivalent to learning vocabulary .

2. UNIT-LIKE AND NON-UNIT-LIKE BEHAVIOUR

A second characteristic of multiword lexical constructions is that they can exhibit a combination of unit-like and non-unit-like behaviour . It means that syntactic and morphological rules sometimes treat these lexical items as one word and sometimes as more than one .

Verb-Particle constructions are good examples of this phenomenon:*to make up , to get over , to calm down , to switch on ,* etc. In spite of ot- her evidence (especially semantic evidence) that they would be treated as lexical items , the well known rule of Particle Shift allows the components of Verb-Particle constructions to be nonadjacent in surface structure :

e.g : Please , *wake* me *up* earlier tomorrow .

He will certainly *get* all this obstacles *over* .

*Switch* the light *down* !

Furthermore , at least one adverb , *right* , can also interrupt the compo-

nents of some Verb-Particle constructions :

e.g : She came *right*  back .

As soon as we got the computer started , it broke  *right* down

Morphologically , Verb-Particle constructions often have idiosyncra-

tic characteristics . Although tense morphemes attach to the Verb ,

e.g : It pick*ed* up the door .

and the nominalizing morpheme -*er* can attach to both elements ;

e.g : garage door pick*er* upp*er*

Other multiword lexical items are also sometimes treated as units by the morphology : *Smith and Wessoned* (shot) .

On the contrary , Verb-Adjective constructions never act as a unit as far as morphology is concerned . The adjectives can take comparative clauses and the accompanying morphology while the verbs take the appropriate verbal morphemes :

e.g : Mary hammer*ed* it flatt*er* than ever today .

He wip*ed* it clean*er* than I thought .

He shot it dead*er* than a doornail .

DMs , in their turn , behave similarly to most multiword lexical items : sometimes they act as units and sometimes they do not . For example , Adverb placement can follow the DM indicating that they are acting as a unit :

e.g : I *might could* sublegally get it for you .

or interrupt DM indicating that they can act like separate words :

e.g : I *might* just *couldn’t* see it .

If we had known , we  *may* still  *could* have done it .

Another syntactic rule that can treat DMs as separate words is the Non-Productive Auxiliary Inversion . Questions built according to this rule may contain a DM component where only the second modal is inverted :

e.g : Could you *might* find you a seat somewhere ?

However , there are cases when all three possible types of inversion second modal only , first modal only , and both modals as a unit – are present :

e.g : *Might should* we have invited Jim ?

In general , the type of inversion depends to a great extent on the particular DM involved . Here are most preferable variants of the DM question constructions :

for *might could* *Could* + Subject + *might* ? (81 %)

for *might should* *Might* *should* + Subject ? (55 %)

for *might oughta* *Might* + Subject + *oughta* ? (58 %)

the most acceptable inversion type for *might would* is :

*Would* + Subject + *might* ? (63,6 %)

Negative placement can also either treat DMs as a unit , producing end negation ( type 1) :

e.g : I was afraid you *might couldn’t* find it .

or as separate elements producing medial negation ( type 2 ) :

e.g : The mother *might should not* put a blanket over her baby .

I don’t hear too well . I think maybe I better put it on or I *might not* *could* understand you .

Different DMs show differential preference for these two types of negation . The preference for might could and might oughta is medial negation . In the responses containing the negation of these two DMs , the overwhelming majority of users preferred to say *might not could* and *might not oughta* , respectively . On the other hand , people who accepted sentences containing negated *might should* or *might would* preferred end negation : *might should not/n’t* and *might would not/n’t.*

In spite that end position is clearly preferred for DM responses with the Past tense or irrealis *have* , some individuals accepted medial placement . Furthermore , for a small number of DM speakers , both negation and *have* can iterate within a DM so that they can appear in both medial and end position simultaneously :

e.g : He *might not couldn’t* be at home now .

He *mighta should have* gotten home by now .

Another rule involving morphology and DMs is tense concord , as discussed above . Other indications that tense treats DMs as units is that the verbal elements following the DM are almost never marked for tense , nor does have ever appear in quality of such following verbs. In other words , tense and have can iterate in this regional variety of English , but only within the DM , becoming this way quite complicate for a syntactic treatment of DMs .

3. SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC IRREGULARITIES

The third characteristic of multiword lexical items is that of semantic and syntactic irregularities . Multiword lexical constructions such as idioms and compound words have quite an unpredictable nature of their semantics , so the most available and traditional means in their study is the lexicon . For example , throw cold water and blackboard exhibit such semantic peculiarities ;

He is always *throwing cold water* on my ideas .

I prefer the green *blackboards .*

Until recently the word blackboard had only the compound type of semantics . This type of semantics has a trend to restrict the full range of this compound word’s meaning . That is , a blackboard was a black-coloured board used as a chalkboard , not just any black-coloured board . Now , however , since blackboard can also refer to a green chalkboard , the word begins to acquire the idiom-type , so-called noncompositional semantics.

Individual DMs have many similar traits with multiword lexical constructions in specific restrictions on their semantics . These restrictions , even if they show some systemacity , are usually referred to the lexicon .

Multiword lexical combinations typically exhibit syntactic irregulari- Ties as well . For example , idioms are usually not as syntactically flexible as their literal forms :

Her father *laid the law down* when she came home late .

He *blew* some *steam off* after he got home .

DMs also have some specific syntactic properties , some of which were already discussed . One point that hasn’t been made is that positive declarative DMs are more acceptable to a greater percentage of the population than negated or inverted DMs are .

*CONCLUSION*

In spite of being exclusively regional phenomenon , Double Modals are significant and commonly acknowledged realia of Modern American English . Like the other multiword modals (such as *would rather*) they are taking their own function in human communication processes.

As to multiword modals’ attribution , they serve as necessary , basic expressions for all dialects of English . Thus , all dialects of English , both “double modal” and “single modal” ones , have such a set of expressions , and they do not differ qualitatively . The difference is quantitative one : Double Modal dialects have more of these multiword modals. There is also no doubt that Double Modals have many common properties with other multiword lexical constructions . Furthermore , being lexical items they contribute to simplify the syntax of the Auxiliary system of the English language .

In general , it could be wrong to consider Double Modals as any kind of gram-mar distortion . Their grammatical form is steady and scientifically recognized .As to their stylistical definition , they could be rather attributed to Regional Colloquialisms than to Slang . Also, while dealing with them special linguistic approach is necessary and the context should be taken into account .