

# This might could work

A Construction Grammar approach to English double modals

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March 9, 2017

# Outline

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Introduction

Mood and Modal Verbs in English

    Single Modal Constructions (SMCs)

    Double Modal Constructions (DMCs)

Construction Grammar (CxG)

Data

Analysis

# Introduction

We might should talk about this.

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- Double Modal Constructions (DMCs) present a problem for generative grammar
- Construction Grammar (CxG) provides a framework into which DMCs seem to fit
- Data from the Corpus of Contemporary America English (COCA)
- Provides evidence that a CxG analysis can explain declarative double modals

# Mood and modal verbs

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- Mood
  - Speaker's perception of an event
  - Can be expressed through verbal inflection or modal verbs
- Core modal verbs in English (modified from Hermerén 1978)

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will	would
can	could
may	might
shall	should
must	
ought (to)	

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- Express “a relation of the event to reality” (Bouma 1973)

# Single modal constructions

## Examples

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- (1) a. You should call your mother every week.  
b. You call your mother every week.
- (2) a. He can go to the store on East Cameron after dinner.  
b. He goes to the store on East Cameron after dinner.

# Single modal constructions

The semantics of modal verbs: deontic and epistemic

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- Deontic (root) modals
  - Express the subject's relation to the predicate
  - Modify the proposition
  - Express ability, volition, permission, suggestion, or obligation
- Epistemic modals
  - Express the speaker's certainty about the proposition as a whole
  - Operate on the entire proposition rather than relating subject to predicate
  - Do not modify the proposition

# Single modal constructions

Deontic vs. epistemic: examples with polysemy

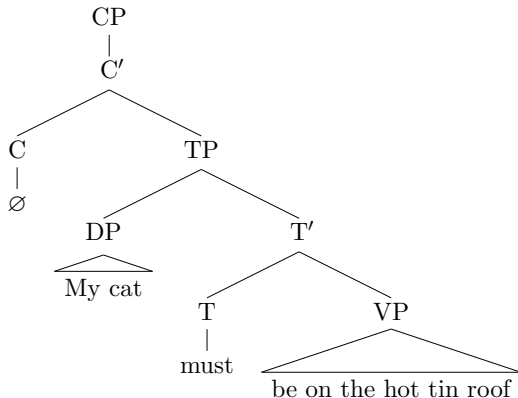
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- (3) He must be halfway to West Covina by now.  
'It is almost certain that he is halfway to West Covina by now.'
- (4) You must go to the store before you eat your supper.  
'You are required to go to the store before eating.'

# Single modal constructions

## Analysis in Generative Grammar

- Modals have conventionally occupied the T node in syntax trees since the 1960s (Nagle 2003: 355)





# Double modal constructions

## Analysis in Generative Grammar

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- The co-occurrence of two modal verbs within the same phrase.
  - (5) I might could get you a discount.
- Issue: Phrasal heads should not iterate. (Jackendoff 1977)
- Multiple Generative Grammar analyses
- Elsmann and Dubinsky (2009) provides a fairly robust account
  - Epistemic modal as the head of a polarity phrase following the (deontic) verb that left-adjoins the deontic modal before moving to T.

# Double modal constructions

Analysis in Generative Grammar

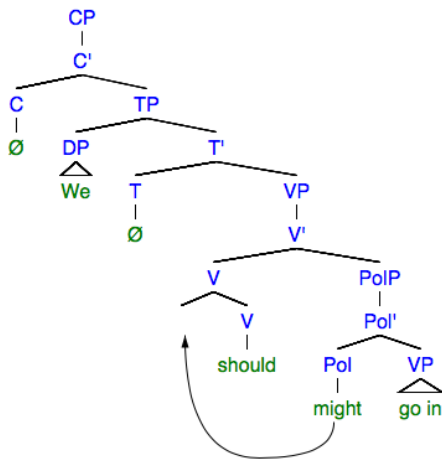


Figure 1: After Elsman and Dubinsky (2009)

# Double modal constructions

## Analysis in Generative Grammar

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- Issues
  - Requires unmotivated left-adjunction that violates LAST RESORT.
  - Requires a second structure for negative phrases that switches the order of the modals at d-structure.
  - Cannot adequately account for relative frequencies of different DMCs.
- CxG provides an alternate approach.

# Construction Grammar

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- Generative Grammar: lexicon run through phrase structure rules and transformational rules to output a grammatical sentence.
- CxG: *construct-i-con* consists of form-meaning pairs known as constructions.
- Goldberg (2006): Constructions unpredictable in form or function
  - DMCs are unpredictable in form
    - ▶ Unexpected syntactic structure
  - DMCs are unpredictable in function
    - ▶ Non-compositionality of meaning

# Construction Grammar

## Constructing a DOUBLE MODAL CONSTRUCTION within CxG

- Canonically an epistemic-deontic pairing
- Epistemic modal
  - The less polysemous the modal, the less processing to disambiguate
  - Sweetser (1990): Every modal but *might* retains a deontic meaning
  - The more prominent the epistemic usage, the more common its usage should be in the first position of DMCS
    - ▶ *May* is increasingly epistemic



Figure 2: Google ngram of *May I go?* vs. *Can I go?*

# Construction Grammar

## Constructing a DOUBLE MODAL CONSTRUCTION within CxG

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- Deontic modal
  - Must have a primarily deontic reading
- Double Modal Construction
  - Should have a meaning not already occupied by a SMC

# Methodology

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- Difficult to find written instances of DMCs
- Used in informal contexts
- Politeness marker
  - Used to decrease certainty (*might could* carries less force than *could*)
- COCA returned 112 DMC tokens
  - Easy to search with wildcards for modal verbs

# Data

## Examples

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- (6) And I felt like I might could help contribute to that.
- (7) You shouldn't ought to have touched me.
- (8) If your preacher has more cars than Donald Trump, you might should shop around for a new church.



# Data

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Type	# of DMCs
Fiction	70
Spoken	35
News	4
Academic	3
Magazines	0

Table 1: COCA DMCs by text type

DMC	Count
might could	60
might ought to	9
might can	7
shouldn't ought to	7
might should	3
may could	3

Table 2: COCA DMCs by frequency

# Analysis

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- Nearly all DMCs found in colloquial contexts
  - Fiction, usually as a quote in a narrative based in the South or rural America
  - Spoken
- *Might* and *may* dominate the epistemic position
- *Might could* dominates the data
  - The most readily accepted of the DMCs in preliminary grammaticality judgment tasks
- Semantic analysis provides a reason for the prevalence of *might could*

# Analysis

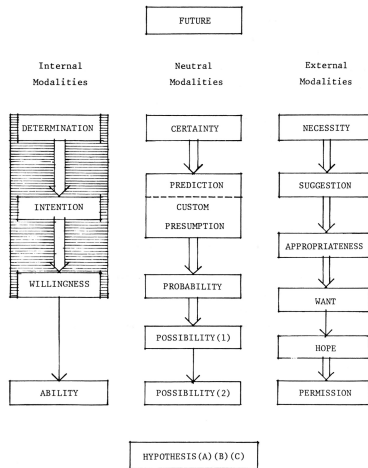


Figure 3: From Hermerén (1978)

# Analysis

## *Might could*

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- *Might* is the most monosemous epistemic, and *could* sits at the lowest end of the scale of Internal Modalities (ability).
- The combination of the two fills a lacuna at the bottom of the internal modality scale
  - Further reduces the force of the statement
  - Extra politeness, deference, uncertainty

# Conclusions

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- DMCS are unpredictable syntactically
- DMCS are subject to semantic restrictions
- DMCS are well-suited for CxG analysis
- Examining the syntax and semantics of DMCS together motivates limits on DMC pairs and their distribution
  - DMCS are canonically an epistemic-deontic pairing
  - prevalence of epistemic reading of modals determines suitability for epistemic usage in DMCS
  - semantic lacunae can explain prevalence of deontic modal
  - Dominance of *might could* explained

# Conclusions

## Next steps

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- Look at how constructions interact with negation and questions
- Further analyze other DMCs and their distributions
- Cross-geographic study of DMC acceptance

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