

The “Nonpast” Features of the English Modals

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Abstract

English modals can be inflected by a contextual feature called “nonpast,” which denotes the present and the future time. This linguistic feature can co-occur with other contextual features in English such as *perfective*, *progressive*, *generic*, and *non-generic*. However, when a modal is used in a sentence, it does not only express the meaning of time, and the completion or continuity of an action. Nor does it simply show whether an action is generic or non-generic. There are other contextual meanings which are interpretable in English modals. Such meanings as *speculative*, *permissive*, *requisitive*, *predictive*, *intentional*, *promissory*, and *communitary* are contextually located in sentences with modals. In this paper, these “nonpast” features are discussed with examples to show what meanings they can convey in particular contexts and how meanings can be changed when they co-exist with other inflectional units.

Introduction

English verbs have many different meanings, both lexically and semantically. As a lexical unit, a verb possesses particular inherent features such as *state*, *action*, *experiential*, and *benefactive*. In a

sentence, a verb, in addition to its own inherent features, is inflected by contextual features which identify the meaning(s) of a lexical unit as it appears in a sentence. Chafe (1975) states that the verb, in a sense, is the sentence: whatever affects the verb affects the sentence as a whole. As a result, contextual features of the verb also affect the central meaning of a sentence and, in other words, the inflection of a verb can be considered as the inflection of a sentence as well.

“Nonpast” is a contextual feature that co-occurs with any other contextual features which do not convey the meaning of “past” but express the present and the future time. “Nonpast” is a common feature found in English modal verbs. Aside from “time,” other meanings can also be conveyed through this particular feature.

This article aims to discuss how this “nonpast” feature was derived, and which inflectional units involving English modal verbs have the “nonpast” feature and what they mean. However, only a sample of some common inflectional units will be discussed in this paper.

The Derivation of “Nonpast”

“Nonpast,” by its name, denotes its relation to tense, which is treated by many grammarians as a category realized by verb inflection. Unlike traditional grammarians, linguists assert that English can be expressed mainly in two tenses—the present and the past. This is simply because morphologically, the English verb has no future form and can be inflected merely by the present and the past forms. Future, in other words, is not regarded as a formal category; certain grammatical constructions are capable of expressing the semantic category of the future time. The meanings of the future time, in fact, can be conveyed in the surface structure in the form of the present or the past tense, and primarily by the use of “modals.” The distinction between “present” and “past” is in that the present is the most general category and is treated as the unmarked tense, as it is normally realized by the base or uninflected form of the verb. In terms of meaning, these two categories are different mainly in that “present” generally refers to the present time and the time after “present,” whereas “past” chiefly refers to the past time, including the future in the past. In addition to these features, which express the

concept of time, other contextual features such as *perfective*, *progressive*, *generic*, and *anticipative* can be detected in English verbs. *Perfective* and *progressive* are also contextual features of the verb which may co-occur with tenses. Comrie (1978) points out that English marks both tense, the location of an event in time, and aspect, "ways of viewing the temporal constituency of a situation." These features can identify different meanings of verbs, as well as entire sentences, and co-occur with the contextual features concerning time—either "present" or "past." That is, their meanings are to be expressed in a particular extent of time. Any contextual feature, thus, can be added to a verb with the inflection of either "present" or "past," depending on the time being referred to. It is only when a situation refers to the past time that "past" is marked as a contextual feature. All other contextual features which express the present and the future time, and not the past time, are generally called "nonpast."

Modal Verbs and Their Contextual Meanings

Chafe (1975) introduced some inflectional units or contextual features of the verb. For instance, "generic" is marked to a verb in a situation which expresses the meaning of timeless propensity. "Perfective," which refers to the duration between a point of time and another prior to it, is marked to show the completion or duration expressed by a verb. "Progressive" is inflected to indicate that an event or a series of events are continuous over a period of time. All these inflectional units can be termed as "nonpast" and convey different meanings of verbs with respect to the time concerned.

In English, modals can also be said to have "nonpast" features. They usually express "present" or "future" meanings. In addition, they can be "generic" or "non-generic." A further study of the English modals reveals that modal auxiliaries have other contextual meanings that relate to "nonpast." The inflectional units that are assigned to the English modals reveal the lexical meanings of those modals, e.g. possibility, probability, permission, request, prediction, volition, promise, advice, threat, warning, obligation, and necessity (Leech, 1978; Palmer, 1986, 1990; Quirk et al., 1985; Swan, 1995). In this paper, only some common

contextual meanings of modals will be introduced and explicated with reference to Chafe's theory and his semantic approach. The author coined the terms to be used as inflectional units for modals, which include:

1. Speculative
2. Permissive
3. Requisitive
4. Predictive
5. Intentional
6. Promissory
7. Comminatory

Speculative

“Speculative” is an inflectional unit which is added to a verb that denotes the epistemic possibility of the event or situation. The modals in this group are termed “epistemic,” which is concerned with the speaker’s judgement of the truth of the proposition embedded in the statement (Palmer, 1990). The speaker of “speculative” makes a judgment basically from evidence or known facts, and speculates that a given proposition will be or become true, or that something may possibly happen. Formally, the meaning of “speculative” is expressed by the use of the modal *may*, as in

- (a) He may teach.
- (b) He may open the door.
- (c) The door may open.
- (d) The door may be open.
- (e) The street may be wide.
- (f) He may leave tomorrow.

From the examples above, “speculative” indicates events involving either the present or the future. The future is most apparently expressed in (f) and confirmed by the existence of the temporal adverbial “tomorrow.” Sentence (f) can be interpreted as ‘It is possible that he will leave tomorrow.’ The future or the present can be interpreted in sentences (a), (b), and (c) in which the verbs are *action* verbs, but

sentences (d) and (e) which contain *state* verbs and convey only the meaning of the present.

The occurrence of the “generic” in a “speculative” sentence is possible. The example sentences above, for instance, can be interpreted as either generic or non-generic. The verbs in sentences (a), (b), (c), and (e) can additionally be inflected as “generic” while those in (d) and (f) can be inflected as “non-generic.” In sentences (a) and (b), the verbs cannot involve a single specific act of *teaching* and *opening the door*, respectively. Sentence (a) probably means ‘It is possible that he works as a teacher,’ and sentence (b) probably means ‘It is possible that he works as a doorman.’ In sentence (c), the inchoative process verb *open* can be interpreted only as “generic.” In sentence (e), the word *wide* is “state” and “relative,” thus doubtlessly interpreted as “generic.” Contrary to sentence (e), sentence (d) contains a *state* but *nonrelative* verb (*open*), so another possible inflection is “nongeneric.” Finally, in sentence (f), the verb *leave* denotes the temporariness of the action and, with the presence of the adverbial “tomorrow,” can be inflected as “non-generic.” It is obvious that the presence of a *temporal* adverbial is very influential to the “genericness” of a verb. For example, if “tomorrow” is added to sentences (a) and (b), the only possible inflection will be, of course, “non-generic.”

Furthermore, the co-occurrence of “progressive” and “speculative” is possible when the “nonpast” meaning is conveyed. For example,

- (a) He may be teaching.
- (b) He may have been teaching.

The presence of “progressive” denotes the continuity of an event. Sentence (a) above can be interpreted as ‘It is possible that he is teaching.’ The sentence can be marked either “generic” or “non-generic.” In other words, it can mean ‘He is teaching these days’ (generic) or ‘He is teaching at the moment’ (non-generic).

In addition, sentence (b) shows that “progressive” can co-occur with “perfective” to express the “nonpast” meaning, as well as the “past” meaning. Thus, the meaning of the sentence could be ‘It is possible that he has been teaching’ (either “generic” or “non-generic”) or ‘It is possible that he was teaching’ (either “generic” or “non-generic”).

In summary, “speculative” is an inflectional unit that can co-occur with many other inflectional units to convey the “nonpast” meaning.

Permissive

“Permissive” is another “nonpast” contextual feature of the verb. It is inflected to a verb which conveys the meaning of permission. This meaning can be expressed by the use of modals such as “may” and “can.” Examples of sentences with “permissive” are:

- (a) You may teach.
- (b) You may use my phone.
- (c) You can leave the table now.

The verbs in the sentences above can be inflected as “permissive.” Normally, “may,” which is used deontically in permissive sense is a formal variant of “can.” “May” and “can” in these examples illustrate deontic modality, which is concerned with “influencing actions, states, or events” (Palmer, 1990). Through this type of modality, speech acts are performed—doing things with words. In the above examples, the speaker declares that the subjective noun of the sentence is permitted to do something. Sentence (a) can then be interpreted as ‘You are permitted to teach.’ Sentence (b) means ‘You are permitted to use my phone,’ and sentence (c) means ‘You are permitted to leave the table now.’ The meaning of “generic” is also present in sentences (a) and (b). That is, the subject in sentence (a) is permitted to either to perform a specific act of *teaching* or to practice as a teacher. In sentence (b), the subject is permitted to use the speaker’s phone immediately or anytime he would like to. Nevertheless, the “generic” cannot be added to sentence (c) and therefore it can be interpreted only in a non-generic sense.

Although permission is usually given by the speaker to the listener and the pronoun “you” is most commonly used as the subject of such a sentence, other pronouns or subjective nouns can also be used as in

- (a) He may borrow my bicycle.
- (b) Visitors may reclaim necessary travel expenses up to a limit of \$30.

From the examples above, it is noticeable that only the animate subject can correspond to a “permissive” verb. The verb inflected as “permissive” is to be “nonstate” so that the following sentences are illegitimate.

- (a) *You may be happy.
- (b) *He may remember his past.

Besides, the co-occurrence of “perfective” and “progressive” is not possible with “permissive.” The subsequent sentences, then, are exempted from the “permissive” meaning.

- (a) *You may have taught.
- (b) *You may have left.
- (c) *You may be teaching.
- (d) *You may be leaving now.

To conclude, the “permissive” contextual feature is available mainly to a verb which is nonperfective, nonprogressive, and nonspeculative.

Requisitive

Another “nonpast” feature introduced here is “requisitive.” “Requisitive” marks the verb, as well as the whole sentence, which shows the speaker’s request. This contextual feature can be found in a sentence with or without a modal. Examples of “requisitive” sentences are:

- (a) Can you sing?
- (b) You can do the shopping (and I’ll do the cooking).
- (c) You are to be back in time for dinner.

“Requisitive” is conveyed in the form of a question in sentence (a). The speaker requests that the listener sing. The “generic” and “non-generic” can be additionally inflected in sentence (a). Then, its meaning can be ‘Please sing now’ (involving a single act) or ‘Please work as a singer’ although the latter is unusual. On the other hand, sentences (b)

and (c) are excluded from the “generic” sense since the verbs refer only to specific acts. The subject of a “requisitive” sentence is usually “you,” who is asked by the speaker to do something. This feature cannot be inflected to some *state* verbs and *experiential* verbs, as in

- (a) *Can you be sick?
- (b) *You can remember your past.
- (c) *Please know the answer.

The above sentences cannot express the meaning of “requisitive.” Also, the presence of “perfective” and “progressive” is not relevant to “requisitive.” The following sentences, then, are excluded from “requisitive.”

- (a) *Can you have sung?
- (b) *You can have done the shopping.
- (c) *Can you be singing?
- (d) *You can be doing the shopping.

In conclusion, the “requisitive” inflectional unit is not available to a verb which is perfective, progressive, or permissive.

Predictive

Another “nonpast” feature in English is “predictive.” The term “predictive” explicitly indicates its close relation to the future time. Normally, “predictive” is morphologically marked by the use of “will” or “be going to.” The event or situation is predicted in the speaker’s point of view. In a predictive sentence, the speaker makes a forecast about what will probably happen in the future. Examples of predictive sentences are:

- (a) He will teach.
- (b) He is going to teach.

In the above sentences, the verbs are inflected as “predictive” since it is predictable that the actions will be performed. The meanings of

these two sentences are identical ('I predict that he will/is going to teach.'). However, both sentences are ambiguous with respect to genericness. They can be interpreted as 'I predict that he will/is going to perform a single specific act of *teaching* or practice as a teacher.'

The presence of "perfective" and "progressive" is possible in a predictive sentence. Take the following sentences as examples:

- (a) He will have taught.
- (b) He will be teaching.
- (c) He will have been teaching.

In sentence (a), the "perfective" denotes the completion of the action. It is predicted that the action will have been completed prior to another point of future time being referred to. In sentence (b), the "progressive" indicates the duration or the continuity of the action that is predicted to be in the process of being performed in the future. In sentence (c), the simultaneous presence of both "perfective" and "progressive" indicates that the action which will be performed at a point of time in the future will have begun earlier and spread over the period of time and will still be continuing with respect to the future time being referred to. These three sentences, again, can be interpreted in either "generic" or "non-generic" sense.

"Will," however, can convey the "present" meaning or show the prediction of a present event. As an illustration, in 'By now he will be eating dinner,' the speaker makes a forecast about the present (insofar as such a thing is possible) concerning an event not directly observable. The sentence can then be interpreted as 'I guess that he is eating dinner now.' Another instance is 'That will be the milkman,' whose speaker predicts the identity of someone he cannot at the moment see (perhaps after hearing the doorbell ring).

A *state* verb is also relevant to the meaning of "predictive," as in

- (a) He will be sick (he has been walking in the rain).
- (b) He will pass the test (he has been studying very hard).

Nevertheless, the "perfective" can be added to the verbs in the above sentences, but the "progressive" cannot. This is apparently because the "progressive" normally is not available to a *state* verb.

An *ambient* verb can as well be inflected as “predictive,” as in

- (a) It will rain.
- (b) It will be raining.
- (c) It is going to snow.
- (d) It is going to be snowing.
- (e) It will/is going to be hot.

The above sentences reflect the speaker’s forecast about the weather changes in the surroundings of or out of his neighborhood.

To summarize, “predictive” is available to a verb which is *state* or *nonstate*, perfective, progressive (only for a *nonstate* verb), and nonintentional (which will be discussed next).

Intentional

“Intentional” is a “nonpast” feature added to a verb which deontically denotes the subject’s intention of doing something in the future. “Intentional,” like “predictive,” can be expressed by the combination between the modals “will” or “be going to” and a verb, but it is more concerned with the subject’s part than the narrator’s. In other words, “intentional” shows the subject’s personal willingness rather than the narrator’s prediction or assumption. The subject of an “intentional” verb must be “human” or at least animate. Some sample sentences with “intentional” verbs are:

- (a) He will teach.
- (b) He is going to teach.

The meaning of these two sentences is ‘He intends to teach.’ They denote that what will be done is mainly based on “his” intention. However, both sentences are ambiguous in terms of genericness. The verb “teach” can be interpreted as either “generic” or “non-generic.” In the generic sense, the sentences mean ‘He intends to practice as a teacher,’ whereas in the non-generic sense, they mean ‘He intends to perform a single specific act of *teaching*.’

Unlike “predictive,” “intentional” is not available to a verb which is simultaneously inflected as “perfective” and “progressive.” Hence, sentences (a) and (b) below do not convey the meaning of “intention.”

- (a) *He will/is going to have taught.
- (b) *He will/is going to have been teaching.

Besides, an *ambient* verb with “will” or “be going to” can never be marked as “intentional.”

In summary, “intentional” is excluded from a verb which is “perfective” or both “perfective” and “progressive” or “predictive” or “ambient.”

Promissory

The “promissory” is a “nonpast” feature very close to “intentional.” A promise, in fact, is a subtype of intention since it basically indicates what the subject intends to do, but the intention is confirmed by the subject on behalf of the listener’s relief or benefit. The subject of a “promissory” verb must be “human” only. Since “promissory” belongs to the “intentional” class, it is suggested that the “promissory” must always co-occur with the “intentional.” Usually, “promissory” is added to a verb combined with the modals “will” or “shall.” A “promissory” verb can go with a person subject who makes a promise himself (a first-person pronoun) or who states or restates another person’s promise. Some sample sentences with “promissory” verbs are:

- (a) I will sing.
- (b) He will sing.

The above sentences are synonymous: the subject promises to sing. The action of *singing* will be performed in the future. The verb “sing” in these two sentences has, ambiguously, either the “generic” or “non-generic” meaning. That is, the subjects of both sentences promise either to work as a singer or perform a specific act of *singing*.

As a type of “intentional,” “promissory” does not co-occur with “perfective” or “progressive.” Therefore, ‘I (or He) will have sung’ and ‘I (or He) will be singing’ are not marked by “promissory.”

In summary, a “promissory” verb can be *nonstate* or *state* (except for *ambient*) but must not be perfective, progressive, or predictive.

Comminatory

The last “nonpast” feature to be introduced in this paper is “comminatory.” Like “promissory,” “comminatory” is considered a type of intention. A “comminatory” verb expresses a warning or a threat. A verb inflected with this contextual feature implies that an immediate action will likely be taken under a certain condition after the warning or threat. This meaning is usually expressed by the use of “will” or “be going to” combined with a verb. This type of verb, like a “promissory” one, requires a “human” subject. Though a “comminatory” verb can be interpreted as “generic,” as in ‘I will be unkind,’ the “non-generic” meaning seems to be more common. For example:

- (a) I will hit you if you do that again.
- (b) He is going to suffer for this.
- (c) We will stop your pocket money if you don’t behave.

In sentence (a), the speaker threatens to hit the listener if he does something displeasing again. In sentence (b), the speaker threatens that some action will be taken against the subject who deserves suffering. In sentence (c), the speaker threatens to cut off the listener’s pocket money if he does not behave.

Like “promissory,” “comminatory” cannot co-occur with “perfective” and “progressive” meanings. Consequently, the following sentences cannot be inflected as “comminatory”:

- (a) *I will have hit you if...
- (b) *I will be hitting you if...
- (c) *He is going to have suffered from this.
- (d) *He is going to be suffering for this.

As a rule, “comminatory” is available to a verb which is *state* or *nonstate*, nonperfective, nonprogressive, and nonpromissory. The

“comminatory” feature cannot co-occur with the “promissory” feature, but as a type of intention, it must always be present with intention.

Conclusion

Most English modals have specific contextual meanings related to the “nonpast” time. However, other inflectional units involving modals are also worth examining. With the approach described throughout this paper, one can observe and make linguistic generalizations about the meanings of the English modals. A further investigation into all other inflectional units will be useful for the thorough understanding and effective instruction of the English modals.

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