

Double modal syntactic patterns as single modal interactions

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Double modal (DM) structures such as *I might could get it for you* are employed by speakers of Southern American and African American English. These structures challenge traditional analyses of English modal structure as they appear to counter-exemplify the standard accounts which typically (i) allow only one tensed element per clause and (ii) locate modal auxiliaries only in the tensed position.

Previous analyses have attempted to account for these structures by treating DMs as single lexical units (Di Paolo 1989), or by reclassifying one of the two modals in a DM as a “non-modal”; e.g. (i) a “modal determiner” (Turner 1981), (ii) an adverbial adjunct (Battistella 1995), or (iii) a bare infinitive verb (Marrano 1998; Van Gelderen 2003). Di Paolo’s lexicalist analysis is contraindicated by the separability of the constituent modals (1b, 2b, 3b-c, 4), while the others are contradicted by the tense-like behavior exhibited by both modals (1-3). These previous analyses of DM constructions suffer from the underlying assumption that all modal constructions contain no more than one true modal element, and therefore that DM structures involve either a compound single modal or some additional element that is not a true modal.

This paper argues that both modals in the DM construction are true modals, behaving exactly as they would in a single modal construction. They are, at the same time, syntactically distinct, and the properties of the DM construction result from the interactions between these two modal types. Based in part on facts presented in McDowell 1987, we claim that *might*, *may*, and *must* (in their epistemic readings) are sentential polarity operators (P-modals). P-modals resemble sentential negation in that they head a POLP (Cormack and Smith 2002) and must raise at LF to have scope over the proposition. Unlike negation, they may also bear Tense (in which case they move to T at LF just like non-AUX verbs). V-modals (i.e. all other modals) head VP and behave as AUX verbs, moving to T overtly when they bear Tense.

The insertion of a P-modal and a V-modal into the same clause allows for the possibility of two structures. In (5), the P-modal is inserted higher than the V-modal. In (6a), the V-modal is higher. As in any Standard English clause, only the highest potential tense bearing head is tensed. In (5), the P-modal *might* is tensed, and moves at LF (first to T to check [tense] and then to the left periphery where it can take sentential scope). Here the V-modal *could* remains *in situ*, since it is untensed and can be interpreted in VP. In (6a,b), the V-modal *could* is tensed, and moves to T overtly, like any tensed AUX verb. However, in order for the P-modal to get sentential scope at LF, it must first adjoin to the V-modal, producing the constituent [might [could]] shown in (6b). This is due to the fact that if *could* were to move to T on its own, then *might* would be stranded inside VP at LF and the derivation would crash.

The adjunction of a P-modal to a V-modal as in (6) explains the data paradigms in (1a,b) and (2a,b). The (a) cases involve the V-modal alone as the head of the adjunction structure. In (1a) the V-modal *should* moves to C, stranding *might*. In (2a), the V-modal *could* carries the aspectual affix *-a*. In the (b) cases, the entire adjunction structure functions as a verbal complex. In (1b) it moves as a unit to C, and in (2b), the aspectual affix *-a* appears on both constituents of the adjunction structure. Because P-modals do not move independently at PF, they cannot undergo SAI (1c) or move to ASP (2c), making these structures ill-formed. The paradigm in (3a,b) results from the interaction of sentential negation in a manner similar to (2a,b). As before, either the V-modal head in (3a) or the entire adjunction structure in (3b) interacts with negation as it passes through the POLP headed by NEG. In contrast, (3c) and (4) are generated from the structure in (5), in which no adjunction occurs. It is this structure which allows the insertion of intervening constituents, such as negation and adverbial adjuncts.

- (1) Inversion: a. Should we might cancel the trip? [Mishoe 1991]
 b. Might can you do this later? [Boertien 1986]
 c. *Might you could ... ?
- (2) Aspect: a. I think I might could_a done a lot better. [Mishoe 1991]
 b. He might_a should've gotten home by now. [Di Paolo 1989]
 c. *You might_a should done that.
- (3) Negation: a. I was afraid you might couldn't find it. [Di Paolo 1989]
 b. He might not couldn't refuse.
 c. I might not could understand you.
- (4) Adverbs: [They] might possibly could be flowers. [Di Paolo 1989]
- (5) [TP he [POLP might [VP could [VP leave]]]]
- (6) a. ... [VP could [POLP might [VP leave]]] (partial derivation, continued in (6b))
 b. [TP he [might₁ [could]]₂ [VP t₂ [POLP t₁ [VP leave]]]]

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