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Past Form of Modals in Non-Past Contexts: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

There has long been a misconception among second-language (L2) users that past forms (V+ed) only appear in past contexts indicating events that occur in the past. However, when authentic texts are analysed, one encounters a considerable use of past forms (V+ed) in non-past contexts. This study seeks to examine the occurrence of past forms in non-past contexts (which may eventually give different contextual messages) and to postulate an invariant meaning for this past form. Ten journalistic articles from *The Economist* were analysed. Modals were categorized according to the immediacy function they were performing. The study shows that past form in English does not only indicate past events but also conveys other contextual messages when it appears in non-past contexts. It was also discovered that there is only one invariant meaning for the past form used in non-past contexts.

Keywords: Modal; Past form; Non-Past Context; Contextual Messages; Invariant Meaning

1. Introduction

Second-language (L2) users often perceive past form of modals (V + ed) as indicative of past events. Such an assumption/understanding hinders creative use of language, on the one hand, and makes it hard for them to understand the messages conveyed, on the other.

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It has often been said that modals help convey various messages. Bybee (1995) proposed the idea that modals are used "to express desire, obligation, necessity, intention or ability" (p.505). Hacquard & Wellwood (2012) claimed that the two epistemic modals *may* and *must* convey different degrees of certainty as in (1) and (2) below:

(1) John *may* be the murderer.
(2) John *must* be the murderer.

It is presumed that *may* in Example 1 expresses a lower degree of certainty while *must* (in Example 2) conveys a higher degree of certainty.

Ward, Birner & Kaplan (2004) provide a different explanation with respect to modal *would* :
(3)
A : Who's that British woman over there?
B1 : That *would* be J.K. Rowling.
B2: That's J.K. Rowling
B3: That should be J.K. Rowling.
B4: That must be J.K. Rowling.

It was claimed that the level of confidence of the Speaker B1 is lower than in B2 (the indicative *is* is used). However, the confidence level in B2 is seen to be higher than in B3 and B4 with the use of modal *should* and *must* respectively.

Bybee (1995) similarly supported idea that modal verbs do not show any sign of completion of the actions and in fact, these modal verbs were seen to have shared the same semantic property. According to Bybee (1995), the hypothetical and the present uses of Past Modals are similar in semantic content.

Huffman (1989) as cited in Govindasamy (2002) proposed a model that combines all the modals together. It is called the 'Probability System' model. In this model, all modals are seen as related to one another in terms of their values and thus, forming a system.

Table 1: Huffman's Probability model (Huffman, 1989: 7 as cited in Govindasamy, 2002)

Probability (of an event taking place)	past	non-past
High probability 100%	Did	Do / did
98%	Would	Will
		Would
75%	Must	Must
	Should	Shall
		Should
50%	Might	May
		Might
25%	Could	Can
Low probability		Could
1%		