

# Reportative evidentials and modal subordination

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## Abstract

Modal subordination is the phenomenon whereby a proposition in the scope of a modal expression is semantically subordinated to a proposition in the scope of another modal expression in a preceding sentence. This paper discusses to what extent reportative evidentials participate in modal subordination by describing and analyzing the modal subordination behavior of the German modal verb *sollen* in its reportative use. In doing so it contributes, indirectly, to the ongoing discussion in the literature on whether evidentials are a subcategory of epistemic modals, providing further evidence for the position that not all evidentials have an epistemic meaning component. It is shown that reportative *sollen* licenses modal subordination in first position, but can itself not be subordinated. This is explained by analyzing it as taking an informational rather than a realistic modal base (which is what epistemic modals combine with). While *sollen* cannot be subordinated, it nevertheless licenses inter-sentential anaphoric dependencies for anaphora in its scope when it occurs in second position, a property that is usually taken to be evidence for modal subordination. The paper puts forth the hypothesis that this is made possible by *sollen* being interpreted in coordination with the first modal, instead of subordination.

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## 1. Introduction

Modal subordination is the phenomenon whereby a proposition in the scope of a modal expression is semantically subordinated to a proposition in the scope of another modal expression in a preceding sentence (Roberts, 1987, 1989, 1996). This is best illustrated with examples involving anaphoric dependencies between expressions in the scope of the two modals. For example, the first sentence in (1b) and (1c) contains the non-specific, *de dicto*, indefinite *an alien* which is in the scope of the epistemic modal *might*.<sup>1</sup> The pronoun *he* in the second sentence can be co-referential with this indefinite NP when *he* is also in the scope of a modal, as in (1b), but not when *he* is not in the scope of a modal, (1c).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant modals are highlighted in bold face and the relevant indefinites and anaphora in italics. ‘#’ is used to indicate the infelicity of continuing the first sentence with the second. There is nothing infelicitous about the second sentence itself.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts’s (1989) original example is (i). It is, however, difficult to formulate a non-modal counterpart due to the fact that English future markers (*will*, *gonna*) are modal as well (Klecha, 2011). Thus, (ii) is (marginally) acceptable to some speakers, and does therefore not conclusively show the required contrast.

(i) A thief might break into the house. He would take the silver.

(ii) A thief might break into the house. ?He will take the silver.

- (1) a. Context: A cow has inexplicably disappeared from a field and people are speculating as to what happened.  
 b. *An alien might* have abducted the cow. *He might* have eaten it.  
 c. *An alien might* have abducted the cow. # *He* ate it.

The proposition expressed by the second sentence,  $p_2$ , is subordinated to the one expressed in the first sentence,  $p_1$ , in the sense that the possibility of  $p_2$  is conditionally dependent on the truth of  $p_1$ .<sup>3</sup> This conditional dependency can be made overt by the paraphrase of (1b) in (2).

- (2) An alien might have abducted the cow. **If an alien abducted the cow**, he might have eaten it.

The anaphoric dependency is licensed because, in Roberts's words, "the speaker first establishes a set of worlds (possibly not including the actual world) in which some individual  $a$  is said to exist. So long as we continue to talk about these worlds, we may continue to assume  $a$ 's existence and to refer anaphorically to the discourse referent with which  $a$  was originally introduced into the conversation" (Roberts, 1989: 708).

As will be discussed in section 2, one central question in the literature is whether evidentials are a type of modal, in particular, whether they are epistemic modals. If evidentials are modals, then we would expect them to participate in modal subordination. This paper addresses this question by describing and analyzing the modal subordination behavior of the German modal verb *sollen* in its reportative use,<sup>4</sup> referred to in the following as *sollen<sub>R</sub>*.<sup>5</sup>

As (3a,b) show, *sollen<sub>R</sub>* licences modal subordination when it occurs in first position.<sup>6</sup> The conditional in (3c) makes the conditional dependency of  $p_2$  on  $p_1$  explicit.

- (3) a. *Ein Außerirdischer soll* die Kuh entführt haben. *Er könnte* sie gegessen haben.  
 'An alien reportedly abducted the cow. He might have eaten it.'  
 b. *Ein Außerirdischer soll* die Kuh entführt haben. # *Er* hat sie gegessen.  
 'An alien reportedly abducted the cow. # He ate it.'  
 c. An alien reportedly abducted the cow. **If an alien abducted the cow**, he might have eaten it.<sup>7</sup>

However, unlike epistemic and deontic modals, *sollen<sub>R</sub>* cannot be subordinated. While it can occur in second position and then licenses an anaphoric link, (4a), it is not subordinated to the first modal in the sense that  $p_2$  in its scope is conditionally dependent on  $p_1$ . That is, the conditional in (4b) is not a paraphrase of (4a).

- (4) a. *Ein Außerirdischer könnte* die Kuh entführt haben. *Er soll* sie gegessen haben.  
 'An alien might have abducted the cow. He reportedly ate it.'  
 b. An alien might have abducted the cow. # **If an alien abducted the cow**, he reportedly ate it.

This paper accounts for the observation that *sollen<sub>R</sub>* can license modal subordination in first position but can itself not be subordinated by analyzing it as a modal that takes an informational modal base (Ehrich, 2001; Faller, 2011; Kratzer, 2012), rather than an epistemic one. Section 2 argues that *sollen<sub>R</sub>* is not an epistemic modal. Nevertheless, as shown in section 3, it licenses modal subordination sequences and should therefore be analyzed as a modal or intensional operator of some kind. Section 4 presents a non-epistemic modal analysis of *sollen<sub>R</sub>* making use of Kratzer's (2012) notion of informational background. Section 5 looks at *sollen<sub>R</sub>* in second position and at constraints on its interpretation and argues that when *sollen<sub>R</sub>* occurs in this position, it is not subordinated. The question of why it nevertheless licences

<sup>3</sup> For ease of exposition, I will in the following refer to the modal in the first/second sentence as the first/second modal, and say that it occurs in first/second position. I use  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  to refer to the propositions in their scope.

<sup>4</sup> *Sollen* can also be used deontically. The reportative interpretation only arises with present tense forms (Wiemer, 2010:81). German has two further grammatical strategies for expressing reportative evidentiality, namely the modal verb *wollen* and the so-called reportive subjunctive. For a discussion of these and how they differ from each other and *sollen<sub>R</sub>*, I refer the reader to Diewald (1999).

<sup>5</sup> With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this abbreviation.

<sup>6</sup> The reason for choosing the outlandish example of alien abduction is that the past version of the standard thief-example with *sollen<sub>R</sub>* is easily compatible with a *de re* interpretation of the indefinite NP, as shown by example (5) in section 2. Since the first sentence in (5) asserts that there was a theft, the existence of a thief follows, and they can therefore later be referred to without a modal. The examples in (1)–(3) assume the disappearance of a cow, but are not committed to the existence of an alien. I am being presumptuous in assuming that aliens are gendered and that this particular hypothetical one is male. Since *Kuh* is feminine in German, this makes the desired anaphoric dependency easier to see.

<sup>7</sup> I present the conditional paraphrases only in English and not also in German for reasons of space. The German version would not add anything to the point I am making.

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