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THE SYNTAX OF DOUBLE MODALITY IN STANDARD ENGLISH:
A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

This article presents a corpus-based study of the syntactic structure and grammatical behavior of double modality in Standard English. While double modal constructions such as *might could* or *may can* are typically associated with non-standard dialects, Standard English employs syntactically permissible combinations involving a core modal and a semi-modal or lexical modal phrase (e.g., *might be able to*, *may be able*, *might have to*, *may have to*, *could be going to*, “*must be able to*”, etc.). The study draws on data from contemporary English corpora to identify and analyze these combinations, it also aims to analyze these combinations from a syntactic perspective, focusing on their linear order, internal structure, and the distributional rules that govern them. By combining insights from corpus analysis and modern grammatical theory, the article identifies productive and frequent patterns of double modality and distinguishes them from dialectal or regionally restricted forms. It also explores the interaction between modality, tense, and aspect in multi-modal constructions. The corpus evidence reveals that although Standard English avoids true double modals, it permits layered modal expressions through grammatically structured auxiliary chains, reflecting complex semantic layering. The findings contribute to a clearer understanding of modality stacking and provide corpus-driven insights into the syntactic flexibility and evolving usage patterns of modal expressions in contemporary English. Corpus Examples of Double Modality in Standard English (core modal + lexical/semi-modal such as “*might be able to*”, “*may have to*”, “*could be going to*”, “*must be able to*”, “*might want to*”) obtained from sources such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the NOW Corpus, and adapted to reflect real and standard sentence structures.

Key words: syntax; double modality; a corpus-based study; standard English; core modal; periphrastic modal.

In recent decades, modality has remained a central focus in linguistic research due to its crucial role in expressing speakers' attitudes, degrees of certainty, obligation, and possibility. While single modal auxiliaries such as *can*, *must*, or *may* have been extensively studied in both formal and functional approaches, less attention has been given to double modality–constructions that involve two modal elements within the same clause. Double modality refers to the use of two modal elements in a clause to express layered modal meanings—e.g., possibility + ability (*might can*), or obligation + necessity (*should have to*).

Traditionally associated with non-standard dialects of English, such as Southern American English or Scots, double modals like *might could* or *may can* have often been viewed as regional or informal phenomena.

However, Standard English also exhibits forms of double modality, albeit in more grammatically sanctioned structures. These typically involve a combination of a core modal (e.g., *might*, *may*) and a semi-modal or lexical modal (e.g., *be able to*, *have to*, *want to*), as seen in constructions such as *might be able to* or *may have to*. While these forms may not constitute true double modals in the dialectal sense, they represent a type of modal layering that reflects syntactic and semantic complexity.

This article investigates the syntactic structure and distributional behavior of such double modality patterns in Standard English. Drawing upon data from contemporary English corpora and informed by modern syntactic theory, the study aims to explore how these modal combinations are constructed, what syntactic constraints govern them, and how they differ from or relate to non-standard forms. Special attention is given to issues such as *linear order*, *auxiliary stacking*, and *the interaction between modality, tense, and aspect*.

By focusing on corpus-based evidence, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of modality in English, particularly the phenomenon of modality stacking within the bounds of standard grammar. The findings not only expand the theoretical discussion around modals but also shed light on the syntactic flexibility and expressive richness of modal constructions in contemporary usage.

The methods applied in the article's analysis

1. Corpus-Based Analysis

The study draws on authentic language data from major English corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the NOW Corpus.

These corpora are used to extract and examine naturally occurring examples of double modality in Standard English.

The corpus data provide evidence of real usage patterns, frequency, and syntactic environments of core modal + lexical/semi-modal combinations.

Syntactic Analysis

The article employs descriptive syntactic analysis to examine the internal structure, linear order, and auxiliary stacking within modal combinations.

It focuses on syntactic constraints, distributional rules, and the interaction between modality, tense, and aspect in multi-modal constructions.

Comparative Theoretical Approach

The study integrates contemporary grammatical theory to compare standard and non-standard forms of double modality.

It distinguishes productive, grammatically sanctioned patterns in Standard English from dialectal or regionally restricted ones.

Theoretical background

In non-standard varieties of English, particularly Southern American English and Scots English, so-called *true double modals* are commonly used. These constructions involve the sequential use of two modal verbs within a single clause, allowing speakers to express nuanced combinations of meanings such as possibility, ability, permission, or necessity.

Leading researchers on double modals in English dialects include Michael Montgomery, Margaret Mishoe, Marianna Di Paolo, Barbara Fennell, Stephen Nagle and et al.

One of the most prominent scholars who has investigated this phenomenon is **Michael Montgomery**. According to Montgomery (1989), although combinations such as *might could*, *may can*, or *should oughta* are considered ungrammatical in Standard English, they function as established and meaningful structures in certain regional dialects. He traces the origins of these double modals to 18th-century Scots English, suggesting that the forms were preserved in Southern U.S. English through historical migration patterns, particularly by Scots-Irish settlers.

Battistella (1995) investigates the syntax of the so-called double modal constructions as they appear in Southern United States English. The paper analyzes why and how these structures—such as *might could* or *may can*—exist in non-standard dialects, situating them within a broader syntactic variation framework.

Battistella (4-int. resources) proposes a model where generative grammars consist of a core and a periphery, whereby the “extra” (spurious) modal is licensed similarly to adverbials. This approach extends existing theories of how adverbs are licensed and supports C. L. Baker’s view that negative ordering involves peripheral grammatical mechanisms, applying it to double modals.

The study not only clarifies the syntactic properties and idiosyncratic behavior of double modals but also considers their implications for current proposals regarding adverbials and negation. By treating these modal combinations as structurally licensed extensions of peripheral syntax, Battistella’s analysis offers new insights into regional syntactic variation. (1995)

Anita Fetzer’s study (2010, 2012, 2014, 2018) focused on Pragmatics and modality in English. While her primary focus is on pragmatics, Fetzer has analyzed modality from a discourse perspective, exploring how modal expressions contribute to meaning in context.

Collins, Peter also investigated modals and Quasi-modals in English (2009). His contribution is that he studied both core modals and semi-modals, emphasizing their syntactic and distributional properties in various registers of English, including formal and informal varieties.

However, unlike non-standard English, in **standard English** this linguistic phenomenon (double modality), although it exists as we mentioned earlier, has not been thoroughly studied.

Nuriyeva, S. T. has approached double modality from a distinct perspective. For the first time, she has analyzed double modality specifically in Standard English. Her published articles address the phenomenon from both structural and semantic angles, employing componential analysis to explain the internal structure and meaning of double modal constructions.

Nureyeva, S. T. (2022) presented inversion as a means of expressing the category of modality in her article “*Müasir ingilis dilində inversiya modallıq kateqoriyasının ifadə vasitəsi kimi*” (“Inversion as a Means of Expressing the

Category of Modality in Modern English"). By accepting inversion as a means of expressing modality, she argues that inversion, along with other modal devices, contributes to the formation of double modality at the sentence level of the language. **Nuriyeva, S. T. (2024)** also presents “The Particle as an independent part of speech, based on the classifications of well-known scholars, and considers it a component of double modality. **Nuriyeva, S. T. (2010, 2023, 2024)** analyzes double modality from componential, structural, and semantic perspectives. According to Nuriyeva, S. T., in Standard English, double modality is formed by a simple modal verb combined with modal verb equivalents—namely, periphrastic modals (multi-word constructions ending in *to*). These are expressed through the following structural patterns.

Table 1

Ways of expression of double modality in Standard English
may+be allowed to
may+have to
might+have to
might+be able to might+want to
must+be able to
should+have to
should +be able to
could+be going to

Yet modern standard English is rich in examples related to this topic. For this reason, our research is based on examples culled from dictionaries. The following are corpus examples of double modality used in standard English.

They should be able to find you the best package to suit your needs.

CollinsCobuild (En-En)

You may have to learn a few new skills along the way. CollinsCobuild (En-En)

You may have to work part-time, in a badly paid job with unsociable hours...

Science may be able to provide some explanations of paranormal phenomena. CollinsCobuild (En-En)

Just hang on a tick, we may be able to help... CollinsCobuild (En-En)

There's a good chance that we may be able to help. OxfordDictionary (En-En)

She could be going to start her own business soon.

You might want to check your email again.

Periphrastic modals function semantically like true modals.

The following table shows the modal verbs along with their corresponding periphrastic modals. The examples following the table support this idea.

Table 2

Modal verbs	Periphrastic modals
Can	to be able to
Will	to be going to, to be about to
Must	to have to, to have got to
Should	ought to, to be to, to be supposed to
May	to be allowed to, to be permitted to

You may be allowed to claim a refund of the tax. (OxfordDictionary (En-En))

He may have to pay a fine. CollinsCobuild (En-En)

Just hang on a tick, we may be able to help... CollinsCobuild (En-En)

There's a good chance that we may be able to help. OxfordDictionary (En-En)

She may be able to squeeze you in, if you play your cards right.
OxfordDictionary (En-En)

They may be able to help with childcare so that you can have a break...
CollinsCobuild (En-En)

He conjectured that some individuals may be able to detect major calamities...
CollinsCobuild (En-En)

We may be able to design a course to suit your particular needs...
CollinsCobuild (En-En)

If you need to return to the UK quickly, British Consular officials may be able
to arrange it. CollinsCobuild (En-En)

You might want to check your email again. CollinsCobuild (En-En)

The syntax of double modality (Standard English)

After identifying the existence of double modality in standard English and its
means of expression, we should now focus on its syntax.

What is meant by "Syntax of double modality"?

The syntax of double modality refers to the structural organization and
grammatical constraints governing the combination of two modal elements in a
single clause, including their linear order, compatibility, and contribution to the
clause's tense, aspect, and modality interpretation.

1. What is meant by Leaner Order?

It means the order of core modal and semi modal. In standard English core
modal always precedes the semi- modal (periphrastic modal). There are examples
and analysis by Leaner Order:

1. He might be able to help.

Leaner order: might (core modal) → *be able to* (semi-modal)

Meaning: **might** expresses possibility, **be able to** expresses "ability".

So: He might be able to help. = It is possible that he has the ability to help.

2. She may have to leave early.

Leaner order: may (core modal) → *have to* (semi-modal)

Meaning: **may** expresses possibility, **have to** expresses “Necessity”.

So: She may have to leave early. = It is possible that she will be required to leave early.

3. She must be going to announce it soon.

Must (core modal) → *be going to* (future intention marker)

Linear order: *must* (core modal) → *be going to* (future intention marker)

Meaning: *must* expresses certainty + *be going to* expresses intention

So: She must be going to announce it soon.=It is certain they are planning to announce it soon.

The preferred linear order in Standard English for expressing double modality is:

Core modal verb + a semi-modal or lexical modal

You could want to reconsider your decision.

Linear order: *could* (core modal) → *want to* (lexical modal expression)

Meaning: Possibility + Desire (“It is possible that you might desire to reconsider.”)

The following also refers to the syntax of double modality:

2. The Sentence Structure in which Double Modals Appear

One of the main features of the syntax of double modality is its position within the sentence structure. Since word order in English is fixed, the predicate (the verb phrase) always follows the subject. When the predicate is expressed by a double modal construction, it occupies the second position in the sentence. What distinguishes this type of predicate from others is that it consists of three components: a core modal, a semi-modal (or periphrastic modal), and an infinitive. This structure expresses double meaning. E.g.,

We might need to help. Linear order: *might* (core modal) → *need to* (lexical/modal equivalent verb) Meaning: Possibility + Obligation *We might need to help* = *It is possible that we are required to help.*

3. The grammatical roles of modals.

"Grammatical roles" refers to their function in the sentence—such as expressing modality (ability, necessity, permission, etc.), acting as auxiliary verbs, and affecting the tense or aspect of the verb phrase. In standard English the first component of the double modal changes according to the category of tense. For example;

He may have to go there.

He might have to go there.

It goes without saying that the two examples differ according to their meaning.

4. The syntactic function of the double modals in the sentence.

Double modals, together with the infinitive, serve the syntactic function of what we term a **double modal predicate**. We believe this label best captures the structure in question. This is due to the fact that the first element is a **core modal**,

the second is a **semi-modal** or a **modal expression**, and the third is the **infinitive**. Together, these three components fulfill the syntactic role of the **predicate** in relation to the **subject** of the sentence.

5. Double Modals in the negative

It should be noted that in standard English, only the first modal (the core modal) is used in the negative. The second element—the periphrastic modal or modal equivalent—is **not** negated.

Example:

She might not have to leave early.

might – core modal (possibility)

not – negation

have to – periphrastic modal (obligation)

leave – main verb (infinitive)

Conclusion

This paper has explored the syntactic and semantic features of double modality in Standard English, with a focus on constructions involving a core modal followed by a periphrastic or lexical modal expression. While traditionally considered a phenomenon limited to non-standard dialects, our analysis demonstrates that Standard English employs its own grammatically sanctioned forms of modal layering, such as *might have to*, *may be able to*, and *should want to*.

Using data from major English corpora, we have identified consistent structural patterns in these constructions. The findings confirm that the core modal always precedes the semi-modal, forming a linear and rule-governed predicate that expresses layered meanings—typically combining modality types such as possibility, necessity, ability, or intention.

The syntactic analysis shows that these double modality structures function as complex predicates and obey standard English grammatical constraints, including fixed word order and auxiliary behavior. Additionally, we observed that negation applies exclusively to the core modal in such constructions, further supporting their structural regularity.

By integrating corpus-based evidence with syntactic theory, this study contributes to the growing body of research on modal expressions in English. It challenges the assumption that double modality is solely a dialectal feature and highlights the expressive potential and syntactic flexibility of Standard English. These findings open pathways for further research on modality stacking and its role in encoding subtle distinctions in speaker stance and communicative intention.

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