A syntactic re-analysis of double modals in Southern United States English

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1 Introduction

• One modal per TP in Standard English

(1) a. I might go to the store.
   b. *I may might go to the store.

• Apparent contradiction to this constraint in Southern United States English (SUSE) double modal constructions

(2) a. I might could go to the store.
   b. You might should eat before you go.
   c. John may could get a little work done.

• Previous analyses of the double modal’s structure haven’t been able to account for the behavior of double modals in question and with negation
• I propose viewing the 1st modal as the head of an MP merged above TP and then I treat the 2nd modal as a normal modal, ultimately located in T

2 Double Modal Form and Distribution


(3) Might can
    Might could
    Might should
    Might will
    Might would

    Must can
    Must could
    May can
    May could
    May will
    May should

• Asymmetry between the two modals
  o 1st place modals only might, must, and may

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\(^1\) Might oughta, could oughta, should oughta, and would oughta are often mentioned as examples of double modals. However, I do not analyze oughta as a modal but as a VP with a TP complement. Arguments for this non-modal view of oughta are that it does not invert in question as the other double modal forms do. Additionally, because oughta is always the ‘third modal’ of what have been called triple modals (e.g., I might should oughta take these out of the oven before they burn), I argue that these constructions are actually only double modals.
• all epistemic
  ○ 2nd place modals more diverse

2.1 Double Modal Questions

• Second modal inverts with subject
• First modal cannot invert with subject
• Evidence for placing 2nd modal in T

(4) a. You might could go to the store for me.
   b. Could you might go to the store for me?
   c. *Might you could go to the store for me?

2.2 Double Modal Negation

• Neg allowed after 2nd modal
• Neg allowed between the two modals
• Neg never allowed left of the 1st modal

(5) a. I might could not go to the store
   b. I might not could go to the store
   c. *I not might could go to the store

• Problematic for an adverbial analysis (Labov 1972)
  ○ If 1st modal is an adverbial, why would the 2nd modal allow negation to its left?
  ○ (6a) compared with (6b)

(6) a. *I really not could go the to store
   b. I might not could go to the store

3 Previous Analyses

3.1 Single lexical item—Di Paolo (1989)

• Modals can be separated (by negation, adverbs, stranded quantifiers)
• Can’t explain raising of second modal in question

3.2 Co-heads under T—Boertien (1986)

• Modals can be separated (by negation, adverbs, stranded quantifiers)
• Difficult to explain raising of second modal in question

3.3 T-bar Adjunction—Battistella (1991, 1995)

• Proposes that 1st modal is a head of a Modal Phrase (MP)
• MP is adjoined to T-bar
• Theoretical Problems
  o Adjunction at X-bar (Johnson 1991, Chomsky 1995)
• Problems with Negation Data
  o NegP would have to be located between two T-bars

(8) a. I might not could do that
b. 

4 Merged MP Analysis

• Assumes that the 2nd modal is a true modal and is ultimately located in T and receives all the tense features associated with this position
  o Allowing 2nd modal raising in questions
• Assumes that the 1st modal is a functional head of an MP merged above TP and has no tense features
• Proposes a μD feature and an EPP feature on M that will raise the subject to Spec-MP to obtain the observed word order
5 1\textsuperscript{st} Modal’s Lack of Tense

- For the Merged MP analysis to get off the ground it is crucial that the 1\textsuperscript{st} modal doesn’t have tense
- This can be seen from the 1\textsuperscript{st} modal’s behavior in Sequence of Tense constructions

5.1 Sequence of Tense Effects

- Matrix clause and embedded clauses both in past tense yield two possible readings (Enç 1987 and Stowell 1995)
  - Shifted: the evaluation time for the embedded clause is shifted to a time before the evaluation time of the matrix clause
  - Simultaneous: the embedded clause has the same evaluation time as the matrix clause

(10) a. John said that Bill was sick. (ambiguous)
    b. John said, “Bill was sick” (shifted)
    c. John said, “Bill is sick” (simultaneous)

- Present yields unambiguous shifted reading

(11) a. John said that Bill is sick. (unambiguous)
    b. John said, “Bill is sick.”
    c. #John said, “Bill was sick.”

5.2 Sequence of Tense with Modals

- Past forms (e.g., might and could) provide an ambiguous reading
- Present forms (e.g., may and can) provide an unambiguous reading

(12) a. John said it might snow. (ambiguous)
    b. John said it could snow. (ambiguous)
5.3 Sot with double modals

- ‘Tense matched’ double modals behave as expected

(14) a. John said it might could snow. (ambiguous)
    b. John said it may can snow. (only relative to now)

- ‘Tense mixed’ double modals only follow the expectation from the tense of the 2nd modal
- The apparent tense of the 1st modal does not affect the readings
- Evidence for 1st modal’s lack of tense

(15) a. John said it may could snow. (ambiguous)
    b. John said it might can snow. (only relative to now)

6 Double Modals and Stranded Quantifiers

- Stranded quantifiers are evidence for movement through a Spec position
- All can be stranded between the two modals
  i. Evidence that there is a Spec position above 2nd modal
  ii. Since 2nd modal is in T, evidence for another Spec position above TP

(16) We (all) might (all) could (all) go to the store.

7 Merged MP Analysis of Questions

- Second modals raise in questions
  i. Placing the 2nd modal in T allows for this analysis

(17) a. You might could go to the store.
    b. Could you might go to the store.

- Head Movement Constraint (Travis 1984)
  i. Head movement may not skip intermediate heads
- For the 2nd modal in T to raise to C in questions, the 1st modal in M must have been skipped over
- Following Probe/Goal feature checking movement system (Chomsky 2000)
  i. C is probing for a Goal with Tense features (Pesetsky and Torrego 2001; Zwart 1996)
  ii. Since 1st modal in M lacks tense, it is not an active goal and is skipped over for the 2nd modal in T
- HMC reanalysis to: Head movement may not skip Active heads
References