I might not would say that:
A sociolinguistic study of double modal acceptance

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Introduction

a) I **might could** go to the store.
b) You **might should** eat before you go.
c) You **might oughta** get your coat.
d) Those ducks **must not can** feel cold.
e) I **might should oughta** take these out of the oven.
Review of the Literature

• Few studies of the social distribution of DM within and across communities

• Focus on Syntax
  – Small sample sizes (4-5 respondents)
    • Pampel (1975) and Boertien (1986)
  – Homogeneous samples (all college students)
    • Coleman (1975) and Butters (1973)

• Little geographic coverage
  – Alabama, North Carolina, and Texas
  – Nothing of the Mid South
Feagin 1979—Alabama

• Constraints
  – Can only tell when a DM has occurred
  – Unable to provide usage percentages

• Distribution
  – Used by all social classes
  – Lower class used DMs more than upper class in interviews

• Social Evaluation
  – No social evaluation in Anniston, AL
Goal of Present Study

• To determine what social factors (age, gender, education), if any constrain informants’ acceptance of DMs in Tennessee
  – Using acceptability judgments rather than production data
Methodology

• Traditional sociolinguistic methods
  – Designed for phonological variables
    • High frequency
    • Easy to recognize when a variant has or has not occurred

• The double modal resists these methods
  – Low frequency, syntactic variable
    • Feagin (1979) only finds 98 tokens in 5 years of field work
Methodology

• Difficulty in determining the envelope of variation
  – No clear form with which it varies
  – Lack semantic equivalence

a) I **might** go to the store.
b) I **could** go to the store.
c) I **might could** go to the store.
Methodology

• Oral acceptability judgment tests of 12 double modal sentences
  – Intermingled with 24 other sentences not containing DM (some grammatical, some not)
• Conducted by a native speaker of the local dialect
Stimuli

a. I think I **may can** come tonight, if I can find something to wear.

b. If it weren't so hot, I **may could** get a little work done.

c. I **might can** ask my boss for the day off on Friday.

d. Well, I **might could** pick some up from the store if you really need them.

e. Since Bill won't, I guess I **might could** give you a ride home.

f. If you want, you **might could** make some sweet tea.

g. I **might should oughta** take these out of the oven before they burn.

h. You **might should** eat before you go to work.

i. If I were you, I **might would** try digging over by that creek.

j. If it rains, you **might would** want to have that umbrella with you.

k. It's cold outside, so you **might oughta** take your coat.

l. Those ducks **must not can** feel cold.
Speech Community

- Northeast Tennessee—Tri-Cities
  - Kingsport (44,473), Johnson City (61,990), and Bristol (25,817)
  - All cities within 25 miles of each other
## Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old (60+)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (30-59)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young (19-29)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents

• Education
  – College (n 17)—had graduate from college or grad school
  – No College (n13)—had been to trade school, graduated high school, or dropped out of high school
## Percentage Acceptance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface Form Percentage</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>might oughta</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>19/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might should</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>19/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might can</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>16/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might could</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>39/90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may can</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>11/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might would</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>21/60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may could</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>8/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might should oughta</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>6/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>must can</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>4/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Acceptance</strong></td>
<td><strong>44.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>106/240</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Varbrul Analysis

• DM acceptance as a binary dependent variable (1=accept, 0=reject)

• 1 linguistic independent variable:
  – Surface form of the DM
    • might should, might can, might could, may can, might would

• 3 social independent variables:
  – Age (Young 19-29, Middle 30-59, Old 60+)
  – Gender (Male, Female)
  – Education (College, No College)
Age

Factor Weight

Old  Middle  Young
Education and Gender

![Bar chart showing factor weights for different gender and college attendance categories.

Factor Weight

- male + no col
- female + no col
- male + col
- female + col

The chart indicates higher factor weights for male + no col and female + no col compared to male + col and female + col.]
Age and Education

% Acceptance

Old | Middle | Young
---|---|---
College | No College | College  
Old | Middle | Young
---|---|---
College | No College | College

17
Age and Gender

% Acceptance

- Male
- Female

Old
Middle
Young
Social Evaluation

• DM acceptance
  – Correlated with lack of higher education
  – Not correlated with being female

• Pattern suggestive of a low prestige evaluation (c.f. Labov 1990)
  – (ing)—Trudgill (1974)
  – negative concord—Wolfram (1969)
  – (r)—Labov (1966)
Age Differences

• Conservative Middle Age (Chambers 2003)
  – Very low acceptance of DMs
  – Well established in their careers
  – Actively gathering cultural and linguistic capital

• Old Age
  – More acceptant of DMs
  – Retired
  – More comfortable with their social position
The Young

• Why the most acceptant of DMs:
  – Change in progress?
  – Age grading

• May have a more positive view of DM
  – Young not that young (19-29)
  – Lack of social differences (education and gender)

• More to come...
  – Language Attitude Study
Thank You

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