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Double Modals in Scots: A Speaker's Choice Hypothesis

Cameron Morin

This paper provides a summary of the sparse literature on the synchrony and diachrony of double modals in dialects of British English, especially varieties of Borders Scots. Double modals are understudied syntactic constructions because they are rare, difficult to describe, and socially restricted. Using the results of recent fieldwork-based acceptability judgment tasks carried out in Hawick, Scotland, this paper examines whether the theoretical literature available on the structure of double modals in dialects of American English can be applied to British English and Scots. I then propose a Speaker's Choice hypothesis whereby double modals can be flexibly analysed as a true modal in first or second position and a recategorized idiosyncratic adverb in the remaining slot of the construction.

1 Introduction

Multiple Modals (MMs) occur in a variety of European languages, some of which license them quite straightforwardly (e.g. French *Il doit pouvoir venir*, 'He should be able to come'; Dutch *Dat zou moeten kunnen*, 'that would have to be possible'; German *Ich muss einschlafen können*, 'I must be able to fall asleep'). In English-speaking countries however, MMs (*I **willcan** help you, he **might could** do that*) are significantly more unusual and often perceived as idiosyncratic, if not grammatically incorrect. Of all the phenomena categorized as MMs, Double Modals (DMs) are the most frequent: they have been studied most extensively in South Midland and Southern American dialects, but they also occur to a lesser extent in some varieties of Scots and Scottish English, as well as Scots-influenced linguistic pockets in Northern England and Ulster, despite an evident lack of collected data. DMs have not garnered much research over the decades, although they raise important theoretical questions, for instance in terms of their syntactic structure; in particular, the literature dealing with Scottish DMs is very sparse. This study offers, first and foremost, an updated picture of DMs in Modern Scots; its second objective is the presentation of a new hypothesis regarding their syntactic implications (a Speaker's Choice), based on a substantial amount of judgment data elicited in January 2018 from 60 respondents in Hawick, considered a typical location for DMs since Brown's account (1991). Generally, theoretical accounts of DMs lack authentic samples of the latter and may be completed by the contextual insight provided by a sociolinguistic, esp. folk-linguistic approach.

2 MMs and DMs in Non-standard Varieties of English, esp. Scots

2.1 Regions and Dialects Where MMs Have Been Attested or Claimed to Occur

As the term suggests, MMs are constructs involving the combination of at least two ‘modal auxiliaries’ despite it being unlicensed by the syntax of Standard English. Before becoming a dedicated topic in dialectology, MMs were recorded in rare anecdotes and side-comments of projects dealing with other issues. From these kinds of remarks (e.g. McMordie 1897), it is believed that DMs occur to some extent in Northern Ireland, probably its Ulster-Scots speaking regions, that is the counties of Antrim, Down and (London)Derry (Maguire 2012: 54). There is a clear lack of research on DMs in Northern Ireland, despite a couple of available accounts: in particular, Corrigan (2011) suggests that they may at least be part of the passive competence of speakers, based on acceptability judgments analysed by Hickey (2007).

Linguistic research specifically focusing on MMs was initiated in the 1970s and was almost exclusively carried out in the United States, especially the following South Midland and Southern American dialects: North and South Carolina (Butters 1973; Coleman 1975); West Virginia (Wolfram & Christian 1976); Texas (DiPaolo et al. 1979; Boertien 1979); Alabama (Feagin 1979); Tennessee (recently studied in Brandstetter 2003; Hasty 2012). Exceptions include Western states such as Utah (DiPaolo 1989) and African-American English in New York (Labov et al. 1968). The most prominent analyses of MMs are based on this literature. The most typical forms have been compiled by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (1a–g):

(1)

- a. I don’t think I have any grants you **might could** apply for.
- b. We **might can** go up there next Saturday.
- c. I **may could** at Finger’s.
- d. You know, if you drank a half a drink, you **might oughta** go home and sleep it off.
- e. This thing here I **might should** turn over to Ann.
- f. How is it no one **might not would** notice that but Anne?
- g. Well, once we get under way, it **shouldn’t oughta** take us very long.

Given the linguistic proximity between the dialects of the Scottish Lowlands and the northernmost regions of England (Maguire 2012: 65–68), it is not so surprising that MMs should occur there as well. According to Beale (2004: 127–128), there is a rare and recessive set of DMs, more restricted than in Scots, in Northumberland and urban areas of Tyneside (2a–d):

(2)

- a. I can’t play on a Friday. I work late. I **might could** get it changed, though.
- b. The girls usually make me some (toasted sandwiches) but they **musn’t could** have made any today.
- c. He **wouldn’t could’ve** worked, even if you had asked him. (Tyneside)
- d. A good machine clipper **would could** do it in half a day. (Northumberland)

Specific research on the topic of MMs in Scotland was initiated by Keith Brown’s analysis of DMs in Hawick (1990). Following this study, the region most worked on with respect to MMs was the Scottish Borders. Scarce occurrences of DMs have been observed in Glasgow (Cheshire et al. 1993: 84), but overall they seem to be absent from most varieties of Urban Scots in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee (the results of the recently published Scots Syntax Atlas (Smith et al. 2019) partly confirm this). The Northeastern regions of the Lowlands remain to be properly scanned for the presence of MMs; the same holds for Insular

Scots e.g. in Orkney and Shetland, although it seems improbable that there be any frequent DM usage in these areas: there are no occurrences, for instance, in the corpus of Shetland Scots compiled by Jennifer Smith at the Angus McIntosh Centre for Historical Linguistics (AMC, Edinburgh). The most typical DMs in varieties of Scots are provided by Miller (2004: 53–54) (3a–g):

(3)

- a. He'll **can** help us the morn.
- b. They **might could** be working in the shop.
- c. She **might can** get away early.
- d. Wi his sair foot he **would never could** climb yon stairs.
- e. You **might would** like to come with us.
- f. You **might should** claim your expenses.
- g. He **might could** do it.

The central region where Scottish DMs are attested and studied is the Borders. Their most complete mapping was done by Bour (2014) in Galashiels, Hawick, Kelso, Jedburgh, Selkirk, Peebles, Eyemouth, Duns and Berwick-Upon-Tweed. The linguistic micro-variation between these locations justify the label 'Border Scots' but also more specifically 'Hawick Scots', 'Galashiel Scots', etc. The Scots Syntax Atlas (2019) also shows that the Borders is where Scottish DMs are most accepted by speakers.

The following section provides an overview of diachronic studies in MMs and DMs in particular.

2.2 Diachronic Perspectives on the Origins of DMs

While Nagle underlines that 'the existence of DMs in both Scottish and American Southern vernacular suggests that they have a common origin' (1997: 1514), Bour argues that some 'exotic multiple modals' were imported from the United States to Scotland in the past few decades (2015: 35–36). The fact is that diachronic studies of DMs are even scarcer than synchronic ones (Novich 2016: 4).

One hypothesis is that DMs may have arisen during the transitions from Old English (OE) to Middle and Modern English, especially during the formation of the modal system as we know it today. Modals as morphosyntactic constituents were not present from the very first stages of the English language. Fischer (2004) shows that at the starting point of the 'modality cycle', some of the forms that we now recognise as modals occurred in fact as lexical verbs. Although the transition of the core modals from full-verb to auxiliary status was first posited as a relatively punctual 'radical re-analysis' (Lightfoot 1974, 1979), many subsequent works have argued that it was in fact a gradual series of categorial changes. Fennell (1993) agreeing with Kemenade (1989) adopts the view that this allowed for two types of modal constructions: one in which the modal verb (primarily deontic) behaved more like a full verb 'in that it could take a full range of complements and inflections', and one in which a restricted group of epistemic modals functioned as 'true auxiliary elements' (432). However, evidence for this as the origin of DMs seems sparse: Nagle (1995) points out that the only known dm combination in Middle English fitting the description is *shall* + other modal type, which does not occur in any recent record of Northern English or Scots dialects: (4a–e cited in Denison 2000: 115)

(4)

a. c1180 *Orm.* 2958

... þatt I **shall cunnenn** cwemenn Godd ...
that I shall have-ability(inf) please(inf) God
'... that I shall have the ability to please God'

b. c1450 *Pilgr. Im(Cmb)* 1.467

And whan ye wole go withoute me
and when you will go without me [*sc.* Reason]
'and when you wish to go without me
ye **shul wel mown** avaunte yow
you shall well be-able-to be-boastful
you shall certainly be able to be boastful'

c. c1463 *Paston* 66.16

... and wythowte I knowe þe serteynté ...
and unless I know the truth
I **chal** not **conne** answer hym.
I shall not be-able-to answer him.

d. c1483(?a1480) Caxton, *Dialogues* 3.37

Who this booke **shall wylle** lerne ...
he-who this book shall wish learn ...
'He who wishes to master this book ...'

e. 1532 Cranmer *Let.* in *Misc. Writ.* (Parker Soc.) ii.233

I fear that the emperor will depart thence, before my letters **shall may** come unto your grace's hands.

An alternative approach suggests that DMs may have been borrowed from Scandinavian, as indeed 'probably because the modal verbs retain their status as full verbs, MM constructions are more common in Scandinavian than in English' (Fennell 1993: 433). This is backed up by the fact that 'the first attestations [of DM constructions of the *shall* + other modal type] are from late OE, making them contemporary with Viking contact' (Fennell 1993: 433). This seems consistent with the situation of the spread of OE in Britain by that time (approx. 1100): the Northern and Eastern varieties of 'Anglo-Scandinavian' were imported into the South of Scotland around the 12th century with the growth of the Norman-inspired burghs and the infestment of the Norman nobles under the reign of David I, King of Scots. Anglo-Scandinavian, or 'Inglis', gradually spread in the Lowlands until it was the predominant written and spoken language there by the 1400s, and was termed 'Scots' by transference of the originally Celtic name to the dominant language. Known borrowings from Scandinavian into Inglis appear to be primarily phonological and lexical (Maguire 2012: 12–13); however, it remains to be examined whether DMs were also included in these borrowings, which would neatly overlap with contemporary occurrence patterns in Northern England and Lowland Scotland.

Both approaches rely on the assumption that DMs are of British origin. The existence of rare DM combinations in Northern Ireland can reasonably be believed to originate from Scots. In the second half of the 16th century, most of Ireland was firmly under the control of the

English and Scottish crowns, which allowed the ‘Plantation of Ulster’: as part of the consolidation of British power in Ireland, tens of thousands of (mainly Protestant) English and Scottish ‘planters’ settled there. Owing to their geographical proximity, Scottish settlers were most common in the counties of Antrim and Down. They brought their native Scots dialects with them, which became a variety known as ‘Ulster Scots’. It thus seems quite logical that DMs in these dialects should inherit from Lowland Scots (Corrigan 2011: 45).

Montgomery & Nagle (1994) defend the thesis of transatlantic inheritance of DMs from Scots to Southern American English, based on cultural evidence, namely the significant immigration of over 250,000 speakers of (Ulster) Scots from Ireland to North America sixty years before the American revolution, and other similar human migrations in subsequent years. Not much is known of how DMs came to be used in the South rather than the North; for now, an account combining cultural inheritance with independent evolution after being first introduced in the areas concerned is probably the most convincing.

2.3 Triple, Quadruple and Mixed mms in Scots

MMs do not include DMs only and cover a range of other phenomena, which are worth mentioning although not directly tackled by this study. Triple modals (TM) are sequences of not two but three modals in one tensed clause. They are reported to be significantly rarer than DMs.

(5) The lad **may might can** muck the byre [‘take dung out of the cow-house’] (Bour 2014: 81)

Rarer still and possibly extinct are Quadruple Modals (QM).

(6) He **may might must can** do it for you. (adapted from Bour 2015: 16)

According to Bour (2014), TMs and QMs follow a strict pattern according to which all and every modal preceding the last constituent in the sequence are *de facto* epistemic in meaning, and only the last constituent conveys (and has to convey) a root sense.

A broader and allegedly more frequent range of phenomena analysed by Bour is that of ‘mixed multiple modals’ (MMMs). This label focuses less on the number of modals in the sequence than on their nature. MMMs combine one or more central modal(s) with one or more peripheral or semi-modal(s). They are sometimes described as ‘hybrid’. Below are presented in turn examples of a mixed DM, a mixed TM and a mixed QM:

(7)

a. You **have to can** drive a car to get that job. (Bour 2014: 38)

b. One of our goals **might should ought to** take her home. (Bour 2014: 79)

c. He **might can used to could** run the marathon. (adapted from Bour 2015: 16 and Fennell 1993)

The phenomena described in this section are so recessive (esp. TMs and QMs) that they might be close to extinction (no examples collected in our study); however, once DMs are better covered, further research to examine them is to be encouraged.

3 A Folk-Linguistic Approach

The major methodological problem encountered when conducting research on MMs is the lack of data found in traditional repositories, despite the compilation of a maximally comprehensive set of present-day Scots and Scottish English corpora (AMC, Edinburgh). Of all the DMs attested in the literature prior to this study, none occurred except *will* **can* a couple of times. And even then, upon closer examination, their discursive contexts did not give any reliable picture of what contemporary recognition and usage of DMs could be, as in each case the speaker was either a writer of fiction or a language activist deliberately recreating an idealised version of ‘Broad Scots’.

To compensate this absence of data, we made use of a more qualitative method known as judgment elicitation, grounded in a ‘folk linguistic’ perspective (Hoenigswald 1966; Niedzielski & Preston 2000). The data produced provides advantages as long as appropriate precautions are taken, notably in terms of the subjectivity or vagueness of the speaker’s judgment (it has been argued for example that intuition cannot completely replace empirical occurrence, Labov 1996).

For this study, a field survey was organised to distribute a questionnaire, following the guidelines of Johnstone (2000) and Calvet & Dumont (1999), essentially made up of closed and semi-closed questions. It was conceived to be completed in an average of 15 minutes, running through five main tasks, the target information of each being:

1. **(0)** Knowledge of the age, sex, activity and living area of the subject,
2. **(1)** Knowledge of how the subject represents the geography of their language variety
3. **(2)** Recognition and claimed usage of typical DM structures,
4. **(3)** Syntactic manipulation of DM structures into negatives and questions,
5. **(4)** Pragmatic and sociolinguistic information about the speaker’s usage of DMs,
6. **(5)** Speaker’s recognition and claimed usage of all DMs attested previously in the literature (esp. Bour 2014).

The following sections focus on all tasks except (4), which looks at different issues not immediately related to syntax. A crucial principle throughout this experiment was *authenticity*, in the sense that the respondent was told to produce data as spontaneously as possible. If DMs were perceived as odd or even unacceptable, it was explicitly indicated that they could write alternative structures or nothing at all if they so wished. They also had the possibility of adding comments e.g “I never use this”, “I’ve heard this but it’s bad grammar to me”, etc. Every effort was deployed for the speaker to feel at ease and in satisfactory conditions of natural data production.

The survey was carried out in January 2018 in Hawick, the second biggest town in the Borders after Galashiels, detected as a central location for MMs by Brown (1991) and Bour (2014). 60 respondents completed the questionnaire, four of which did so on an online version of the form.

4 Results

4.1 Demographics, Professional Backgrounds and Dialectal Areas (Task 0)

Diagram 8.1 cross-examines the respondents' age and gender. The age average of the participants was 42 years old. The significant number of 15–25 year-old respondents was achieved with the help of Hawick High School (HHS) which had a full class of nineteen 14–15 year-old pupils complete the questionnaire: the majority of forms completed from other stacks were done so by 25+ year old respondents. A significant majority of respondents were women; as Bour notes (2014: 28), generally more women than men take part in such surveys and display more interest in their content, although it is difficult to uncover a straightforward set of causes for this contrast. The predominance of female respondents is especially apparent in the 14–25, 26–45 and 61+ age groups, whereas there is a very slight majority of male respondents in the 46–60 age group.

In keeping with our desire for authenticity (Section 3), it was repeatedly indicated that the questionnaire was neither a kind of grammar exam, nor a compulsory set of tasks.

Diagram 8.1 Distribution of respondents' sex per age group (y axis = number of individuals; x axis = age group in years)

Diagram 8.2 showcases the type of employment or activity of the speakers. The majority of students is explained by the large group of respondents surveyed at HHS. Amongst adults, the three main areas of activities were local shops and businesses, education and local institutions, and a significant number of respondents indicated that they were retired.

Diagram 8.2 Distribution of respondents' types of activity (figure = number of individuals)

Diagram 8.3 shows the proportions for the place of activity, birthplace and perceived regional dialect of each speaker. A vast majority of respondents indicated that their place of activity was Hawick. The data for the third item was collected via a different sub-task from the first two. The respondent had a blank map of Scotland in front of them and had to circle what they considered the area their language variety was spoken in. The smaller the circle was, the closer the dialect was assumed to be related to a specific town. A majority of respondents perceived their dialect as 'Borders Scots', but a significant number were more precise in indicating they spoke 'Hawick Scots'. This not only suggests that speakers acknowledge specific regional varieties of Scots, but also that some of those are specifically connected to small centres of a few thousand inhabitants at most.

Diagram 8.3 Distribution of respondents' regional origins and dialects (y axis = number of individuals)

4.2 Recognition and Claimed Use of dm Structures (Tasks 1 & 5)

Task 1 faced the respondent with a sample utterance excerpted from the literature containing a dm structure. Six utterances in total were presented:

(8)

- a. You'll **can** enjoy your holidays now, I'm sure.
- b. Wi his sair fit he **would never could** climb the stairs.
- c. You **may should** check this before making any decision.
- d. He **might no could** do it, but he'll try.
- e. He **mustn't could've** done that!
- f. He **should can** go if he finishes early.

For each utterance, three sub-tasks were featured: a closed question as to whether the speaker recognised the form or not (in written or in oral form), then a semi-closed question concerning the frequency of usage ranging from 'Daily' to 'Often', 'Sometimes', 'Rarely' and 'Never'; and finally a more open question asking for the speaker's preferred alternative if they had never heard or used the structure in question.

Task 5 added to the substantial data collected in Task 1 by asking for the same type of information on a wider range of decontextualised forms, comprising all DM structures attested by the literature to occur in Scots.

Both tasks produced large amounts of data from which a tentative typology was inferred, with three categories according to the frequency of recognition and claimed usage:

(i) Often Used (OU) DMs (60+ % of claimed usage from Rarely to Daily): *might can* (86,21%), *might no can* (82,45%), *will can* (77,19%), *willnae can* (72,72%), *should can* (70,18 %), *might could* (65,52 %), *might no could* (63,8 %).

(ii) Sometimes Used (SU) DMs (40–60%): *wouldnae could* (59,65%), *will no can* (57,14 %), *may no can* (53,57 %), *mustn't could* (46,42 %), *wouldn't could* (43,45 %), *would could* (40 %).

(iii) Rarely Used (ru) and Never Used (nu) dms (0–40%): *must no could* (36,85%), *should could* (35,71%), *may should* (34,55%), *will might* (33,93 %), *may not could* (31,48 %), *must wouldn't* (18,52 %), *might couldn't* (14,29 %).

Despite the widespread agreement in the literature that DMs are rare and recessive, Hawick DMs still seem present and active in speech, based on claimed usage. However, not everyone seems equally aware of it, and a number of speakers don't recognise nor use them.

Nonetheless, DMs seem to be a persistent feature of Hawick Scots, notably among younger speakers. The survey suggests that DMs have been undergoing complex changes over the years. A case in point is the increase in claimed use of new DMs like *may could* and *may should* in the space of a decade when previous research did not attest these forms. They may be imports from American dialects in which the forms exist (Bour 2014: 249), although this remains to be confirmed, keeping in mind that a notable change in spoken and written usage since the early 80s throughout the United Kingdom is the use of *may* instead of *might*. The fact that younger speakers consistently recognise and claim usage of these forms, regardless

of their views on what is grammatical or socially acceptable, suggests that DMs in Scots are not endangered or extinct dialect features.

The data and judgments elicited in Task 3 will be presented in the next section as provisional support for the main hypothesis of this study and its arguments.

5 Syntactic Implications of dms Re-evaluated with Respect to the Scots System

At first sight, DMs pose a problem for the Chomskyan generative rule that in English, one and only one verb per clause may bear tense, and since an auxiliary has the effect of carrying tense by becoming the head of the highest, finite VP, it follows that it cannot iterate in a clause. Rather than postulating the actual occurrence of two modals, which seems far-fetched, the issue is to reach an accurate description of DM syntax in keeping with standard modal syntax. The vast majority of accounts dealing with this issue in the literature are grounded on the American DM systems. We will see that such a picture is skewed, and that the syntactic behaviour of the Scottish DM system warrants a close re-examination of the problem.

5.1 An Adverb and a True Modal: Battistella (1995)

Battistella (1995) tackles the question of DM syntax in American systems. According to him, a ‘double modal’ is in fact an idiosyncratic sequence of an adverb and a ‘true’ modal. He grounds his argument in the Core Grammar framework of Chomsky & Lasnik (1977) which postulates that Universal Grammar is ‘a small core set of general principles subject to a restricted degree of variation’ (Battistella 1995: 19). From this he distinguishes a periphery that empirically occurs in various grammars, and the dm construction would then emerge from an extension of the mechanism in English that licenses adverbs to some morphosyntactic constituents of the traditional system of modal auxiliaries.

Battistella’s arguments include three diagnostics which were run by this same study in Task 3 of the questionnaire. The respondent was asked, if he could and wanted, to turn each of the original six sample utterances mentioned previously into a negative (or a positive if it was a negative to start with), an interrogative, and a question-tag (of the type *You did do it, didn’t you?*). Battistella supports the following syntactic manipulations for *might could*, attested in the literature:

(9)

- a. You **might couldn’t** tell me where the administration building is.
- b. **Could you might** tell me where it is?
- c. You might could tell me, **couldn’t you?**

The ‘tense affix’ which is inverted, negated or postposed would point towards the ‘true’ modal.

There are several objections to be made when looking at the Scots system, anticipated in fact by Battistella: ‘DMs in Scots, which have somewhat different syntactic properties, may be a different sort of construction entirely and treated by a distinct mechanism’ (1995: 30). Firstly, the speakers of Hawick who produced an interrogative DM for *might could* show that both *could X might* and *might X could* are acceptable; the fact that most respondents produced *could* in tag-position can be taken as support for Battistella’s analysis. But application of these diagnostics on other sequences reveals that the true modal in *will can* would be the first

one *will* (*will you can? You will can, won't you?*); *would* would be the true modal in *would could* (*Would he could? + slight edge of wouldn't he* (13 respondents) over *couldn't he* (10 respondents)); and *should* would be the true modal in *should can* (*Should he can? He should can, shouldn't he?*). Moreover, Battistella notes inconsistencies even in American DM negation patterns, i.e. sometimes the first constituent and not the second bears negation.

Battistella argues that the first modal of a dm is 'a defective modal form which modifies the head modal *could*—an adverbial rather than an adverb' (1995: 27), a kind of adverbial hybrid enabled by Head Feature Licensing (Travis 1988) creating a sub-type of adverb of its own within the class of IP adverbs which is speaker-oriented rather than subject-oriented. This insight is precious for the following sections.

5.2 Other Useful Accounts of American DM Syntax with Their Strengths and Weaknesses with Respect to the Situation in Modern Scots

Nagle (1997) agrees with Battistella's diagnostic patterns, and goes further by positing a second intermediate projection I' that would account for the ambiguity between the first and second M of IP as carriers of tense and likely candidates for negation. This is shown in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1
Syntactic structure of *might could* (Nagle 1997: 1521)

At the top we have IP, which is at sentence-level (S) and is the maximal projection (I''). Then a first intermediary projection I' interprets the first modal as [tense] because of its ability to be negated. Then a second intermediary projection occurs to show the interaction between the second modal, which is both the head I and the true carrier of tense (because of its ability to be negated *and* inverted) and the non-finite VP that follows (which is underspecified here as there are a near-infinity of possibilities).

But not only does this schema assume that I bears the true tense of the sentence on the sole evidence of inversion in questions (which appears to be contradicted by data in Scots, see

5.1); it consequently does not really solve the problem shown earlier that the presence of two ‘true’ modals would pose.

Elsman & Dubinsky (2009) propose a different description contending that both modals can be ‘analysed as true modals, behaving exactly as they would in a single modal construction’ and that ‘they are, at the same time, syntactically distinct, (...) the properties of the dm construction [resulting] from the interactions between these two modal types’ (75). This hypothesis is interesting as a continuation of Nagle (1997) and is one of the more convincing accounts in the current literature, notwithstanding its theoretical stance and apparatus. Our own account picks up on this insight, whilst differing from it in several ways.

5.3 A New Hypothesis for the Syntax of DMs in Scots: A Context-Dependent Speaker’s Choice

The syntactic analysis of DMs in Scots cannot be done without taking into account some semantic and pragmatic parameters relating to context. The near-entirety of available research on the topic is context-free; it analyses DMs as part of sentences, and not utterances. It makes use of questions and tag formation as abstract manipulations without really acknowledging that they may be operations made by a speaker with a communicative intention. Elsman & Dubinsky (2009) provide the interesting insight that both modals in these constructions may have the properties of true modals, but despite its efforts it does not escape the one clause-one tense marker rule that so many authors have cited as a crucial problem.

Our hypothesis is that in each and every specific context where a DM is produced, the speaker has the choice between two potentially true modals; they may select one as the realised true modal, and recategorise the other as an idiosyncratic adverb along the lines defined by Battistella. It is a subtle choice which is implicit in simple, assertive utterances, but explicit when manipulations such as those in the questionnaire are made.

(10)

- a. He will can go tomorrow, **won’t he?**
- b. He will can go tomorrow, **can’t he?**

Both utterances are apparently the same in their main clause, but the tag shows which of the modals is chosen as the true one. The speaker either has the intention of focusing on ‘futuraity’ with *will* or ‘ability’ with *can*. The other modal then becomes an adverbial hybrid, which would be glossed as an epistemic adverb *surely* or *certainly* for *will*, or a ‘root adverb’ such as *possibly* or *easily* for *can*.

(11)

- a. **Could** he might go?
- b. **Might** he could go?

Here again, the speaker would choose to focus on (un)certainity with *might* or ability with *could*. The item left aside becomes the hybrid. This kind of detail is impossible to determine by looking at a context-free sentence which would be virtually the same every time, i.e. *He might could go*. Regardless of how frequent inverted and tag DMs actually are (they appear to be significantly rarer than assertive DMs), multiplying spontaneous elicitation of those types is expected to help confirm what we presently coin as ‘Speaker’s Choice hypothesis’.

Such an account has the advantage of not only explaining the very tangible cases of ambiguity collected in the questionnaire in Hawick, but also accommodating cases where a true modal has a definite or frequent ‘edge’ over the other; it could point out to DMs that are in a sense ‘conventionalised’ or at least presets for a typical context they would be used in. For instance, if the true modal in *may should* is *should*, as our data seems to indicate, it is maybe because this DM is a preset for contexts in which the question of ‘obligation’ is central to the communicative interaction, and the question of ‘(un)certainty’ is secondary and yields the modal *may* as an adverbial hybrid.

This hypothesis could be developed as a new, more convincing and more realistic account of the syntactic structure of DMs, that retains the unique interplay of true modals suggested by Elisman & Dubinsky while accommodating it to the syntax of Standard English and reducing the amount of postulated derivations.

6 Conclusion

Rather than being extinct, DMs still seem to be active morphosyntactic features of Borders Scots. For years, these constructions were left on the side by contrast with American DMs, to which the bulk of the literature on MMs was dedicated. This article is a defence for a new, specific linguistic enquiry on MMs in Scotland. Its aim was to provide an updated general picture thereof through the case study of DMs. Their formal and functional implications need to be fully examined before moving on to TMs, QMs, and MMMs. By doing so, we hope to enable the elaboration of a new, unified theory of MMs in English, instead of considering the American and Scots systems as separate.

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