The Modals as Pragmatic Softening Devices: Evidence From Late Modern English Grammar and Manner Books

Hiroshi Obara

Freelance, Tokyo, Japan

In this research, the author considers the evidence provided by a corpus of Late Modern English grammars for our understanding of the development of the modals as politeness markers. It is possible to see how the modals and their accompanied senses are explained in an official (and often either prescriptive or proscriptive) perspective. This is another aspect which cannot be ascertained from the usage based on corpora which seem to be popular as sources of evidence in historical pragmatics. In this sense, this research brings some novel perspective to this aspect of academic study. It is possible to notice that the significations involves concept or senses which extend across a semantic—pragmatic domain which includes politeness. We can see that certain softening senses are key elements to mark polite usage. The main data used come from the descriptions of the modal auxiliary verb in a corpus of grammar books from the period. Usage and manner books are also consulted as a secondary resource. The manner book in particular is quite helpful for our understanding of how linguistic politeness was regarded at the time. Such texts also help us to find a certain network of senses which are related to polite expressions.

Keywords: modals, network of senses, historical development, politeness expression

Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say that, in Japan, the English modals are taught as if they are almost equal to the terms of respect (as cited in Horiguchi, 2001). However, it is also true that often the modals are not regarded as the expression of politeness when the terms are being used to translate polite expressions from Japanese into English. This paper aims at investigating the emergence of the relationship between politeness and the use of the modal auxiliary verb in late Modern English. First, examples of data from the period are introduced. Second, a possible network structure in terms of the relation between modal senses is suggested. Then, an advanced network model is proposed to clarify the mechanism of the conceptualization of politeness with the modal auxiliary verb. The author begins with a discussion of data from 48 grammar books he consulted.

Data and Method

Each modal auxiliary verb is often analysed extensively by LmodE grammarians. Some examples of definitions of the meanings of the modals from the grammar books are provided in Examples (1)-(3).

Example (1) *Will*: purpose, foretell (first person); *Shall*: foretell (second, third persons), threaten,

command; *Can, Could*: power, ability; *Would*: will, inclination; *Should*: future event, duty; *Must*: necessity. (Meilan, 1803, pp. 59, 61, 62)

Example (2) *Will, Shall*: future (different nuances depending on persons); *May, Might*: liberty with some doubt, wish (*may*), permission, advice, elegantly soften a question; *Can, Could*: ability; *Must*: indispensable necessity. (Angus, 1812, pp. 68, 70)

Example (3) *Will*: volition (internal, predictive + promissive); *Shall*: future destination (external, predictive only); *May*: permissive, power (external); *Can*: potential, power (internal); *Must*: necessity. (Latham, 1841, pp. 486-487)

While each modal has its own set of meanings, some of these overlap with those of the other modal auxiliaries, even if they are not completely synonymous. As a detailed description with regard to the senses which can be expressed by the modal auxiliary verb, Fell's work *An Essay Towards an English Grammar* (1784) stands out. His description of *could* is given as Example (4). We can clearly see how Fell believed that the uses could be differentiated depending on contexts and circumstances:

Example (4) *Could* (as the past tense of *can*, in the indicative mode)

But *could* is also used in a peculiar and hypothetical sense, without any regular respect to time:

After conditional terms, denoted hypothetical or conditional power:

I were but little happy, if I *could* say how much.

Could is often used to denote the possible consequence of some conditional event:

But you, my brace of Lords, were I so minded, I here *could* pluck his highness' frown upon you.

Could, placed after terms of wishing, denotes an hypothetical possibility:

O! That it *could* be proved, that some night-tripping fairy had exchanged;—Oh! *Could* our mourning ease thy misery; I wish, I *could* know that to be, just as thou informest me; I with I *could* depart from my own body; I would I *could* see that happy day.

Could is sometimes used in a sense so entirely hypothetical, that it only imitates what would be the bias of the mind, were there a possibility of the thing:

Now *could* I wish to ascend the chariot of Triptolemus; now *could* I desire to yoke the dragons of Medea; now *could* I wish to take wings to be waved, either thine Perseus, or thine, O Dædalus!

Could, is used to imitate both present power, and a strong inclination, with an ellipsis of some condition:

Although I *could* tell thee as a friend, I *could* be sad, and sad indeed; he *could* never come better, he shall come in; I *could* tell you more news too; Marcellus and Flavius are put to silence. (as cited in Fell, 1784, pp. 174-176)

The senses which are described here are those often associated with modality, such as hypotheticality, conditionality, and possibility. Moreover, while the different modal senses overlap with each other, it is the subtle conditions of use which allow us to distinguish and differentiate each possible utterance. The descriptions of the modal auxiliary verb in some of the grammar books tell of the similarity and variety of the modal sense.

Furthermore, there are examples available which seem to suggest the traces of a semantic—pragmatic change associated with the interpretation of the modal auxiliary verb. Consider the following series of citations which were extracted from Sweet (1903), see Examples (5)-(6):

Example (5) Under conditional we include all combinations of *would* and *should* with infinitives which are not clearly futures, even when their functions are not really conditional. But as they all agree in being moods rather than tenses, the absolute practical necessity of separating the mood- from the tense—functions of these periphrases makes it all the more desirable to avoid further subdivision. (Sweet, 1903, p. 111)

Example (6) In such a phrase as *you should not make personal remarks* the preterit *should* is substituted for the present *shall* in order to soften down the imperativeness of *you shall not make*. Here there is no conditional meaning; the *should* keeps its original meaning, and is not even an auxiliary.

In the following examples we can also observe the original meaning of *shall*, but softened down so that the *shall* becomes a pure auxiliary: *why should you suspect him? Is there anyone with him? No; who should there be? As I went down the street, who should I meet but our friend himself!* We can still see the influence of the original meaning in the first example (“what obliges you to suspect me?”), further softened down in the second, till in the last *should meet* becomes simply a periphrastic preterit. (Sweet, 1903, p. 114)

These mainly discuss the issue of the interpretation or use of the modal auxiliary verb *shall*. Example (5) shows a functional transition: from a tense-based to a mood-based one. This move represents the evolution of the primary senses from futurity to periphrasis. The first of the examples in Example (6) indicates a similar change between past and polite (softening) uses because this can be taken as the transition from tense to mood (modality). Moreover, it is also possible to notice that the original meaning of the modal auxiliary verb concerns obligation. Sweet suggests a diachronic sequence of the conceptualisation in terms of the modal auxiliary verb *shall*: (1) obligation; (2) futurity; and (3) periphrasis (and subsequently to a politeness marker). Such a historical transition can also be confirmed from Examples (7)-(10).

Example (7) “*Should*: denoting time; implies doubt; politely marks the event as involuntary or accidental”. (as cited in White, 1761, p. 231)

Example (8) “Sometimes that form of the auxiliary verbs *shall*, *will*, and *&c.* which is generally conditional, is elegantly used to express a very slight assertion, with a modest diffidence. ‘I *should* think it *would* be proper to give up the point:’ that is, ‘I am rather inclined to think’”. (Murray, 1808, pp. 136-137)

Example (9) *May* is elegantly used in asking a question, to soften the boldness of an inquiry: “How old may you be?” (Angus, 1812, p. 70)

Example (10) “‘I *shall*’ and generally to contain a tinge of volition....there is a general impression that ‘I *shall*’ is explicit and self-asserting—hence more modest—than “‘I *will*’. The distinction is not grammar but of politeness”. (as cited in Ramsay, 1892, p. 391)

Given the time frame involved (White’s grammar was published in 1761, and Sweet’s in 1903), we can notice that such several meanings can of course co-exist as layers of meaning, synchronically. What makes the

interpretations of the application of the modal auxiliary verb different depends on contexts and situations. The author explains this pattern of variation and change with a network model.

An Earlier Network Model for Modal Verb Usage (Coates, 1983)

As the descriptions above suggest, more than one modal sense can co-exist simultaneously in a single expression which involves a modal auxiliary verb. The model provided by Coates (1983, p. 170) showed the importance of such multiple meanings by invoking a categorisation of overlapped senses.

Figure 1. Overlap, interference.

Figure 2. Fuzzy set diagram of *Will*.

The dotted line represents the peripheral boundary of the range of senses of a single modal auxiliary verb. On the one hand, there are parts where only single senses exist. On the other, there are also parts where a number of senses overlap. For instance, in Figure 1, the degree of the strength of the impression of each meaning is the strongest in the core, and the degree gradually weakens as you move from the core to the periphery. The fuzzy condition is also applied to the area where senses overlap (see Figure 2). Such a semantic-pragmatic involvement is coherent with the idea of the “layering”, which was proposed by Hopper (1991).

Application of a Network Model

However, there is still room to reconsider some issues. In adopting a revised network model, the nature of the links between senses is to be considered.

In this model, the author divides pragmatic meanings into two subgroups. One is “textual-pragmatic”, and the other is “social-interactional”. By “textual-pragmatic”, he means senses which are associated with the larger linguistic context in which the modal verb appears. By “social-pragmatic”, he means senses whose recognition depends on knowledge of the interpersonal and communicative context, beyond the domain of mere lexical and literal sources. On the other hand, the author uses “semantic” here as the meanings which are lodged in the single modal forms themselves as their fundamental core meanings: (1) semantic network. For example: volition (*will*),

obligation (*shall*), liberty (*may*), power (*can*), and necessity (*must*); (2) textual-pragmatic network. For example: conditional, hypothetical, and unreal; and (3) social-interactional network. For example: polite, modest, gentle, elegant, and harsh.

Although the examples introduced are limited and on a small scale, it is possible to confirm the mutual connections between the three groups. This leads us to make the Figure 3 analysis.

Figure 3. Mutual linking.

The image should be changed to show that all the senses involved are more closely gathered to reflect the reality in which there is no border separating the networks. To reflect these points, Figure 4 is provided as an example.

The three networks are overlapped in this picture. The four senses in the semantic category are placed inside. The dotted black lines represent the links which show their internal mutual relations. The four senses of the social-interactional category which are in the periphery extend their internal mutual connections as the dotted blue lines show. There are also four senses which are located in-between the semantic and the social-interactional senses. They are of a textual-pragmatic kind and are connected in their own mutual network. The dotted red lines indicate the internal connections. Then as the historical evolution of the modals suggests, inter-categorical links between the semantic and the textual-pragmatic, and the textual-pragmatic and the social-interactional are established. The thin dotted green lines mark this.

Figure 4. An expanse of a combined network.

When the conditions of the Examples (11)-(12) are applied to this modelling, the following network appears for the various senses associated with *might*. Remember, the concepts which are raised here are clearly related to politeness.

Example (11) *Might* expresses the same possibility or liberty under a condition, which defeats the effect; In the present tense, it is always conditional; in the past tense, it is either absolute or conditional. (Webster, 1784, p. 30)

Example (12) The combination *might* + infinitive in independent sentences is used to soften a request by making it more indirect, as in might I ask...?/might I be allowed to ask...? = “may I ask”. (Sweet, 1903, p. 116)

To recognise and clarify that this is merely a single, instantaneous instance of one part of the network of the combinations of the senses, Figure 5 may be useful to refer to. The shaded senses and links mark dormant portions of the potential senses. Basically, the senses involved can be as numerous as an individual can recognise. Consequently, the links and the network patterns which connect senses to each other can almost be limitless.

Politeness in English, at least with the modal auxiliary verb, may emerge from a variety of options in such network patterns. At the same time, the polite sense is just one of a number of meanings which can be expressed with the modals. The relationship between politeness and the modal auxiliary verb is not absolute and exclusive. This is quite a different point from the situation of the terms of respect in Japanese, where linguistic forms are more closely connected to particular senses of politeness, such as “respect” and “humility”.

Figure 5. Comparative picture of active—dormant senses and links in a network.

Conclusions

In this talk, the author has considered some data from the LModE grammarians, and proposed a network model to account for the emergence of a recognised “polite” use. While the modals are just part of the linguistic means of polite expression in English, it is possible to note that the polite applications themselves are just parts of

a variety of modal interpretations. The polite options involve various network patterns: what is interesting is that such a use or recognition of the modal auxiliary verb can be the result of a historical developmental transition of the interpretation of the modals. Politeness in English is flexibly connected to a variety of related concepts or senses which create distinct network associations. In such circumstance concepts like “softening” and “indirectness” seem to be widely applicable. The modal auxiliary verb take a role as a representative of the concepts, not absolutely and exclusively but optionally. In addition, it may be said that the derivative or social interactional concepts such as “gentle” and “elegant” were also influential as markers of politeness during the LModE period, since such terms can often be found in the manner and usages books, which the author also used for his doctoral research, but has not had time to address here.

References

- Angus, W. (1812). *A new system of English grammar*. Glasgow: Brash and Reid.
- Beal, J. C. (2004). *English in modern times 1700-1945*. London: Arnold.
- Coates, J. (1983). *The semantics of the modal auxiliaries*. London: Croom Helm.
- Fell, J. (1784). *An essay towards an English grammar*. Menston: The Scholar Press.
- Görlach, M. (1999). *English in Nineteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Görlach, M. (2001). *Eighteenth-Century English*. Heidelberg: C. Winter.
- Hart, D. (Ed.). (2003). *English modality in context*. Bern: Peter Lang
- Heine, B. (1993). *Auxiliaries, cognitive forces and grammaticalization*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hopper, P. J. (1991). *On some principles of grammaticalization* (pp. 17-35). In E. Traugott, & B. Heine (Eds.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization* (Vol. 1). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Horiguchi, S. (Ed.). (2001). *Total English* (2nd ed.). Tokyo: Gakko Tosho.
- Latham, R. G. (1841). *The English language*. London: Samuel Bentley
- Meilan, M. A. (1803). *An introduction to the English language* (Vol. 1). London: W. Wilson.
- Michael, I. (1970). *English grammatical categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, M. (1994). *Manners, morals and class in England, 1774-1858*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Murray, L. (1808). *An English grammar* (Vol. 1). York: Thomas Wilson & Son.
- Ramsay, S. (1892). *The English language and English grammar*. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Sweet, H. (1903). *A new English grammar* (Vol. 2). Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Traugott, E. C. (1989). On the rise of epistemic meaning in English: An example of subjectification in semantic change. *Language*, 65(1).
- Traugott, E. C., & Heine, B. (Eds.). (1991). *Approaches to grammaticalization* (Vols. 1-2). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Watts, R. J., & Trudgill, P. (2002). *Alternative histories of English*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Watts, R. J. (2002). From polite language to educated language. In R. Watt, & P. Trudgill (Eds.), *Alternative histories of English* (pp. 155-172). London: Routledge.
- Webster, N. (1784). *A grammatical institute of the English language part II*. Menston: The Scholar Press.
- White, J. (1761). *The English verb*. Menston: The Scholar Press.
- Ziegeler, D. (2003). On the generic origin of modality in English. In D. Hart (Ed.), *English modality in context* (pp. 33-69). Bern: Peter Lang.