
MODAL VERBS IN THE INTERLANGUAGE OF MACEDONIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: The study presented in this paper is a part of my research “Modal verbs in the interlanguage of Macedonian learners of English” which has a significant role in formulating speech acts and communication in general. Modal verbs are incredibly versatile and are used for several different functions in the English language. This is why they are absolutely essential for Macedonian learners of English. People use them to show if they believe something is certain, possible or impossible, talk about ability, make requests, offers, to express prohibition, permission or obligation. We pose two research questions: 1. Do the Macedonian learners of English significantly overuse modal verbs both in speaking and writing? 2. How Macedonian learners differ from native English speakers in the use of modal verbs? The participants of this study were 76 students of English at the Department of English language and literature, Goce Delchev University, Shtip. 28 of the participants were male and 48 were female. Their age ranged from 19 to 25. All participants learnt English for at least five years in primary school and four years at high school. After high school, they enrolled in English philology at the English department. Very few of the students had been to an English speaking country and had had a chance to learn English in an informal environment: seven had been on Work and travel for two to six months in the USA and one of them has been part of student exchange program in the USA for ten months. All students sat the Quick Placement Test and their proficiency level in English was determined. A few topics were selected: problems with dogs in our cities, living and working abroad, tattoos and piercing, the healthy amount of time to spend with the person you’re dating, and talking on the phone while sharing time with friends. The results showed that Macedonian learners of English overuse just a few modal verbs such as *should*, *will*, *have to* and *could*. This study found some important differences in the ways Macedonian learners of English and native speakers use modal verbs in research articles, differences in degree of use and the purpose and functions for which they are used for. The aim of this research is to facilitate the proper usage of modal verbs and it gives evidence about how Macedonian students use English modal verbs for their communicative purposes.

Keywords: Modal verbs, speech acts, research, functions

1. INTRODUCTION

The study presented in this paper is a part of my research “Modal verbs in the interlanguage of Macedonian learners of English” which has a significant role in formulating speech acts and communication in general. This project was partly motivated by the small number of studies of this type as well as by the growing need for development of new research methods. The use of modal verbs is one of the most problematic areas of English grammar. Modal verbs have more than one meaning, and there is a wide range of ways to use them. Modal verbs, as a key means to express modality, substantiate their users’ attitudes to the propositions or events being described in the utterances, and thus the use of these words could be viewed as a facet of pragmatic competence (Leech, 1983). In compliance with the above, the objectives of the project are as follows: 1. To facilitate the proper usage of modal verbs; 2. To enable Macedonian learners to communicate appropriately in the target language; 3. To widen students’ range of communication. Saeed (2003: 135) argues that modality is a cover term for devices which allow speakers to express varying degrees of commitment to, or belief in, a proposition. He also claims that modality is one important semantic category which operates at the sentence level.

This study focuses on modal verbs. Modal verbs are very common in spoken and written language. People use them to show if they believe something is certain, possible or impossible, talk about ability, make requests, offers, to express prohibition, permission or obligation. Kreidler (1998: 301) notes that modality is the expression of necessity, possibility and probability, and is frequently expressed through modal verbs. According to him, the modal verbs include: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *must*, *should*, *ought*, *need*, *have to*, *have got to*. Semanticists seem to divide the types of modality differently. However, Cruse (2004), Saeed (2003), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), and Kreidler (1998) are of the same opinion that modality is classified into two broad types: deontic modality and epistemic modality. The former deals with obligation and the latter is about probability. According to Kreidler (1998: 241), deontic modality is the necessity of a person to do or not to do in a certain way. It shows the speaker’s desire for the proposition expressed by the utterance. According to Saeed (2003: 136), deontic modals may convey two kinds of social knowledge, i.e. obligation (*I must phone him*) and permission (*You can have these books for free*). Kreidler (1998: 241) notes that epistemic modality deals with the possibility (*He may be in his*

office), probability (*Ask mother. She might know*) or impossibility of a certain proposition (*Is she serious? No, she can't be that serious*).

Halliday and Hasan (1989) divided modal verbs in terms of their pragmatic values. High value modals include *must*, *ought to*, *need*, and *have to*; intermediate value modals include *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*; and low value modals include *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*. Different groups of modality are related with different politeness degree of the speech. Modal verbs of high value indicate an impolite speech, which is liable to cause the reader/listener's disfavor, whereas low value modals suggest a most polite use of language

The study of modality in the English language is regarded as the most persistent and fascinating area of philosophical and linguistic inquiry (Hoye, 1997). According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), modality is "the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as to reflect the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of the proposition of the sentence being true". Modals are general statements that represent the notion of the mind or events that may or may not take place in the future and reflect the speakers' attitude about what he/she says (Palmer, 2001).

We pose two research questions: 1. Do the Macedonian learners of English significantly overuse modal verbs both in speaking and writing? 2. How Macedonian learners differ from native English speakers in the use of modal verbs?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants in this study were 76 students of English enrolled at the Department of English language and literature, Goce Delchev University-Shtip, North Macedonia. 28 of the participants were male and 48 were female. Their age ranged from 19 to 25. All participants learnt English for at least five years in primary school and four years at high school. After high school, they enrolled in English philology. Very few of the students had been to an English speaking country and had had a chance to learn English in an informal environment: seven had been on Work and travel for two to six months in the USA and one of them has been part of student exchange program in the USA for ten months. All students sat the Quick Placement Test and their proficiency level in English was determined. Students with B1 level and above were chosen to participate in the study.

For the purpose of this research, we collected a small corpus of conversations produced by the participants. We refer to it as Macedonian Learner Corpus (MLC). All of the students participated with a colleague whom they also considered a friend. We consider the conversations semi-spontaneous because they were collected in an experimental environment, but the respondents were not aware of what was being observed in their speech. They were asked to freely participate in the conversation (as if they were out for coffee with a friend) and share their views and ideas.

Usually there was some hesitation at the beginning, but the students soon became involved in the conversation and became very spontaneous.

Five topics were selected:

1. problems with stray dogs in our cities
2. living and working abroad
3. body piercings and tattoos
4. the healthy amount of time to spend with the person you're dating
5. talking on the phone while out with friends

The students chose three of them to discuss during their session. The conversations were then transcribed and analyzed. In our processing of these corpora we give the total representation of all modal verbs individually (under the category 'all') because modal verbs are more common in spoken language, and less common in written language.

3. RESULTS

The research was being done over the course of 2 weeks, during which the data was constantly being analyzed.

There were many interesting things to note in the process, especially when it comes to the correlation between the usage of the modal verbs and the topic that was being selected by the students, because this is a very good way to acknowledge the psychological aspect in choosing the words we are subconsciously choosing while discussing a given topic.

As I mentioned before, all the students had the opportunity to freely choose what they were going to talk about, and considering the fact that most of the topics involved a certain degree of personal involvement and opinion sharing, the more opinionated students were less likely to use modal verbs, as opposed to the students who did not really have a strong opinion on the topic, or, in a different scenario, who felt in a way intimidated by the facts or opinions provided by the other speaker.

For example, the **first topic** (problems with stray dogs in our cities) was the topic that ranked highest when it comes to modal verbs usage. The most common modal verb used in this topic was the word 'should', and I can go back to the psychological grounds for using this modal verb in this context – the one that excludes the individual from all responsibilities - because most students, based on the context of the conversations, considered this a governmental issue and felt like something needs to be done by someone, but not themselves. For every 3-minute conversation about this topic, the students said the word 'should' an average of 14 times (both students, not each). The second most commonly used modal verb in this topic was 'must'.

The modal verb 'will' was most frequently used in the **second topic** (living and working abroad), in which the students mostly conversed about their future plans and ideas of moving and working abroad, even though the initial idea of the topic was more concentrated on their past experiences, which could serve as a trigger to test the usage and command of the past tense of the modal verbs, however, the students decided to take the conversation into a different direction, which resulted in an excessive use of the word 'will'. For most native English speakers, the word 'will' has a stronger meaning than the word 'would' and when people use 'will' it means that something is more certain and the chance of it happening are greater than they would be if you were to use 'would', for example.

However, this was not the case in my research. Most of the students constantly used 'will', even when they were talking about uncertain things, such as the house they would be living in once they move abroad, which is just something they imagined for the sake of the conversation and it is far from being an actual fact or plan. An estimate of 38% of the students' sentences began with 'I will ...', as opposed to only 5% with 'I would'.

In my opinion, that is due to the fact that the future tense in our Macedonian language is way simpler than the future tense (or, rather, tenses) in the English language, and as I mentioned above, not a great number of the students have visited some English-speaking countries, which might be the main reason they were not exactly ready at this point to differentiate between the proper usage of the modal verbs 'will' and 'would'.

The modal verbs representing a possibility were mostly used in the **third topic** (body piercings and tattoos). The students mostly steered the conversation towards whether or not they are in favor of body piercings and tattoos, so some of the most frequent sentences noted on this topics were 'I might...' or 'I could', which ended up serving the purpose I was trying to accomplish with the second topic, but failed.

However, there was another thing I noticed about the usage of structures pointing towards a possibility in the future. An estimate of 70% of the students who decided to talk about this topic used a sentence structure representing a certain possibility as follows: 'Maybe I will' – for sentences where there should have used 'I might', which is yet another example pointing towards the fact that the future tense is psychologically interpreted in a different manner for natives of the English language as opposed to non-natives, or Macedonians, in this particular case.

The **fourth topic** (the healthy amount of time to spend with the person you're dating) was the most commonly chosen one for having a conversation among the students. The most frequently used modal verbs in this topic were the modal verbs representing advice or obligation, and this came both from the students who were involved in a romantic relationship with a partner, as well as from the ones who were not in a relationship. 86% of all the modal verbs used in the conversations on this topic were modal verbs of advice or obligation (should, must, have to), the most frequently used one of which was 'have to'.

The more opinionated students who were having a conversation with their fellow students about the **fifth topic** (talking on the phone while out with friends), and who were also more passionate about the topic (most of them also disapproved of the usage of cell phones while out with friends), mostly referred to modal verbs representing ability and obligation (can, must) when expressing, even though the ratio between the more opinionated students and the less opinionated students on this topic and their usage of modal verbs was 2:5, the greater digit of which belonged to the less opinionated students, who admitted to using their phones while out with friends, and kept on using modal verbs expressing possibility (might, may, could, can) and permission (can, could, may).

4. DISCUSSION

Lado (1964) says- "Second language learning is as acquiring the ability to use its structures within a general vocabulary, essentially under the condition of normal communication among native speakers at normal conversational speed". For Macedonian learners, using modal verbs in appropriate ways and in appropriate situations can be difficult. If students misuse a modal even slightly, it will change the perceived intention or tone of their statement, making them appear rude or uncertain. Therefore this kind of research is absolutely essential, especially if you are working as a teacher.

Macedonian learners differ from native English speakers in the use of modal verbs in different genres. It is hypothesized that Macedonian learners' improper uses of modal verbs are caused by the negative transfer from Macedonian language, in which the meaning potentials of modal verbs are different from those in English. Different cultures have different social cultural norms, the modal verb systems in different cultures in turn vary from one to

another (Hinkel, 1995), and it is inevitable for non-native speakers to negatively transfer the modal system in their L1 to the L2 system, thus resulting in interlanguage pragmatic errors.

Based on a corpus analysis, the study examines the use of modal verbs by Macedonian learners in comparison with native speakers. One of the reasons why Macedonian learners overuse some of the modal verbs is because in classroom teaching in Macedonia more focus is put on the accuracy of forms rather than appropriateness in pragmatics. As modal verbs do not share some grammatical properties of other verbs, like tensed forms and person-number agreement, students may find them easy and safe to use and thus have a tendency to overuse them in their writing. Another key feature of Macedonian learners' overuse of high-value modal verbs, which might cause their utterances less polite and more imposing. It is believed this overuse might be caused by the L1 transfer, in which the semantic meanings or semantic prosodies of modal verbs differ from one language to another. In this sense, it is strongly advisable to present to students the nuanced differences of modal verbs in different languages so as to reduce negative transfers from L1 to L2.

5. CONCLUSIONS

When teaching modal verbs, the teacher/course book designer can provide the context in which they are used and allow more real communication rather than controlled practice to take place among students. The focus of instruction should not only be put on accuracy and literal meanings of modal verbs but on the pragmatics in discourse as well. Devices to convey modality other than modal verbs should be introduced and made clear so that students have more linguistic resources that they can make use of. Students can understand the use of modal verbs in a variety of discourse. Modality, its types and uses are crucial to learn. It is necessary for both language teachers and language learners to learn more about modality, and understanding the notion is crucial for language teachers.

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