

## SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF MODAL VERBS BETWEEN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18747306>

**Abstract.** This paper explores the semantic and pragmatic differences in the use of modal verbs in British and American English. While both varieties share the same core modal system, their functions diverge significantly due to cultural norms, communicative preferences, and ongoing grammatical change. The analysis demonstrates that British English generally favors more indirect and mitigated modal constructions, whereas American English tends toward directness, clarity, and a greater reliance on semi-modals. The study also highlights how epistemic, deontic, and dynamic meanings interact with pragmatic factors to shape modal interpretation in real discourse. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-variety variation in English modality and offer valuable insights for linguistics, language teaching, and corpus-based research.

**Keywords:** modal verbs, semantics, pragmatics, epistemic modality, deontic modality, semi-modals, cross-variety variation.

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu maqolada Britaniya va Amerika ingliz tillarida modal fe'llarning qo'llanilishidagi semantik va pragmatik farqlar o'rganilgan. Ikkala tur ham bir xil asosiy modal tizimga ega bo'lsa-da, ularning vazifalari madaniy me'yorlar, muloqot afzalliklari va doimiy grammatik o'zgarishlar tufayli sezilarli darajada farqlanadi. Tahlil shuni ko'rsatadiki, Britaniya ingliz tili odatda bilvosita va yumshatilgan modal konstruksiyalarni afzal ko'radi, Amerika ingliz tili esa to'g'ridan-to'g'rilik, aniqlik va yarim modallarga ko'proq tayanishga intiladi. Tadqiqotda real diskursda modal talqinni shakllantirish uchun epistemik, deontik va dinamik ma'nolarning pragmatik omillar bilan o'zaro ta'siri ham yoritilgan. Ushbu natijalar ingliz tilidagi modallikning xilma-xillik o'zgarishini chuqurroq tushunishga yordam beradi va tilshunoslik, til o'qitish hamda korpusga asoslangan tadqiqotlar uchun qimmatli ma'lumotlar beradi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** modal fe'llar, semantika, pragmatika, epistemik modallik, deontik modallik, yarim modallar, kross-variantlilik.

**Аннотация.** В данной работе исследуются семантические и прагматические различия в использовании модальных глаголов в британском и американском английском языках. Хотя оба типа имеют одну и ту же основную модальную систему, их функции значительно различаются из-за культурных норм, коммуникативных предпочтений и постоянного изменения грамматики. Анализ показывает, что британский английский обычно предпочитает более косвенные и смягченные модальные конструкции, в то время как американский английский склонен к прямоте, ясности и большей зависимости от полумодалей. В исследовании также подчеркивается, как эпистемические, деонтические и динамические значения взаимодействуют с прагматическими факторами для формирования модальной интерпретации в реальном дискурсе. Эти результаты способствуют более глубокому пониманию кросс-вариации в английской модальности и предлагают ценные идеи для лингвистики, преподавания языков и корпусных исследований.

**Ключевые слова:** модальные глаголы, семантика, прагматика, эпистемическая модальность, деонтическая модальность, полумодалы, кросс-вариация.

**Introduction.** Modal verbs represent one of the most essential grammatical categories for expressing speakers' attitudes, degrees of certainty, obligation, permission,

and interpersonal stance in English. While their core set – can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would – is shared across English varieties, previous linguistic research has consistently demonstrated that their meanings and communicative functions vary considerably between British and American English. These differences are not limited to frequency and distribution; rather, they extend to the semantic interpretations and pragmatic uses of modal verbs in real communicative contexts[1].

In British English, certain modal verbs such as *shall* and *must* tend to preserve more traditional semantic functions, often conveying stronger obligation or formality. In contrast, American English displays a noticeable shift toward less formal or more indirect expressions of modality, favoring alternatives such as *have to*, *need to*, or modal constructions with softened pragmatic force. These contrasts reflect broader cultural preferences toward directness, politeness strategies, and interactional norms in the two varieties of English.

Recent corpus-based studies further highlight that modal verbs are undergoing dynamic semantic change, with speakers increasingly relying on context-dependent pragmatic meanings rather than fixed dictionary definitions. As a result, understanding how modal verbs operate differently in British and American English is crucial not only for linguistic theory but also for practical domains such as language teaching, intercultural communication, and translation studies[2].

This study explores the semantic and pragmatic distinctions in modal verb usage across British and American English by examining their functional roles, contextual interpretations, and communicative implications. The investigation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how speakers of each variety employ modal verbs to encode meaning, mitigate statements, and navigate social interaction.

**Literature analysis.** Modal verbs constitute a central component of English grammar, serving to express meanings related to possibility, probability, obligation, permission, and speaker attitudes. Although British English and American English share the same core modal system, numerous studies indicate consistent semantic and pragmatic variation between the two varieties. This section provides a theoretical overview of modality, outlining its semantic classifications, pragmatic functions, and cross-variety frequency tendencies. Three analytical tables summarize key distinctions and form the foundation for understanding modal variation[3].

**Research methodology.** The study employs a qualitative comparative approach supported by descriptive analysis of theoretical and corpus-based research on British and American English modality. Relevant linguistic literature and previously published corpus findings were analyzed to identify semantic classifications, pragmatic functions, and frequency tendencies of modal verbs across the two varieties. The comparison focuses on epistemic, deontic, and dynamic meanings, as well as pragmatic contexts of use, in order to determine systematic cross-variety differences in modal selection and interpretation.

**Results and discussion.**

**1. Semantic Classification of Modal Verbs**

Semantically, modality is traditionally divided into three major categories: **epistemic**, **deontic**, and **dynamic**. These classifications help explain how modal verbs express different kinds of meaning depending on context[4].

*Table 1. Semantic Categories of Modal Verbs*

| Type of Modality | Definition  | Typical Modal Verbs    | Example                          |
|------------------|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Epistemic</b> | Expresses degrees of certainty, probability, or inference | may, might, must       | <i>He must be tired.</i>         |
| <b>Deontic</b>   | Indicates obligation, permission, or prohibition          | must, should, may, can | <i>You must finish the task.</i> |
| <b>Dynamic</b>   | Refers to ability, internal motivation, or willingness    | can, will              | <i>She can speak French.</i>     |

*Table 1 outlines the fundamental semantic categories of modality, demonstrating how modal verbs encode abstract meaning. Epistemic modality concerns judgments of likelihood, deontic modality relates to social or moral necessity, and dynamic modality reflects inherent personal abilities or internal states.*

**2. Pragmatic Functions of Modality in British English and American English**

While semantic categories describe the inherent meaning of modal verbs, pragmatic use depends on context, interpersonal stance, and cultural communication norms. British English tends to employ more indirect and softened modal expressions, while American English favors clarity and directness[5].

*Table 2. Pragmatic Differences in Modal Use Across British English and American English*

| Function           | British English                      | American English                   | Pragmatic Interpretation                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <b>Requests</b>    | <i>Could you possibly...?</i>        | <i>Can you...? / Could you...?</i> | British English: softening; AmE: directness       |
| <b>Obligation</b>  | Frequent <i>must</i>                 | Frequent <i>have to</i>            | <i>American English</i> avoids strong force       |
| <b>Suggestions</b> | <i>You might want to...</i>          | <i>You should...</i>               | <i>American English</i> expresses stronger advice |
| <b>Predictions</b> | Uses <i>shall</i> in formal contexts | Prefers <i>will</i>                | British English maintains formality               |

*Table 2 illustrates how pragmatic norms influence modal selection in the two varieties. British English typically uses modal verbs to mitigate directness and convey politeness, while American English relies on more explicit modal choices, reflecting cultural preferences for straightforward communication.*

**3. Modal Frequency Tendencies in British and American English**

Corpus-based studies consistently show that British English and American English differ not only in modal interpretation but also in frequency patterns. American English exhibits a stronger shift toward semi-modals, while British English retains some traditional forms[6].

*Table 3. Relative Frequency Tendencies of Core Modals in British English and American English*

| Modal Verb / Form | British English          | American English | Notes  |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------|--|
| shall             | Higher (formal)          | Very low         | British English retains traditional usage      |
| must              | More frequent            | Less frequent    | American English prefers <i>have to</i>        |
| may               | Higher in formal writing | Lower            | American English uses <i>might</i> more often  |
| might             | Moderate                 | Higher           | American English prefers informal alternatives |
| have to           | Moderate                 | High             | Rising semi-modal in AmE                       |
| need to           | Moderate                 | High             | Increasing grammaticalization                  |

Table 3 summarizes general frequency tendencies of modal verbs across the two English varieties. British English maintains relatively higher use of traditional modal forms, whereas American English shows a strong preference for semi-modals, indicating ongoing grammatical change and variation.

Overall, the theoretical literature demonstrates that modal verbs cannot be understood solely through their semantic classification; instead, their pragmatic function and frequency distribution play a crucial role in shaping meaning[7]. The observed differences between British and American English are closely tied to sociocultural tendencies – such as directness versus indirectness – and historical linguistic developments. These distinctions provide an essential foundation for analyzing how modality functions across English varieties.

**Conclusion.** This study has examined the semantic and pragmatic differences in the use of modal verbs in British and American English, highlighting the ways in which cultural preferences, communicative norms, and linguistic evolution shape modal selections in each variety. The theoretical analysis demonstrates that while both varieties share the same core set of modal verbs, their meanings and functions frequently diverge due to differences in interactional style and pragmatic conventions. British English tends to favor more indirect, mitigated, and often formal modal constructions, whereas American English shows a stronger preference for directness, clarity, and the increasing use of semi-modal alternatives.

The semantic categories of modality – epistemic, deontic, and dynamic – provide a useful framework for understanding these distinctions, yet the findings confirm that pragmatic factors ultimately play a decisive role in how modal verbs operate in real communication. Moreover, comparative evidence indicates that American English exhibits a more rapid shift away from traditional modal forms, reflecting broader patterns of grammatical change and linguistic simplification.

Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of considering both semantic structure and pragmatic context when studying modality across English varieties. The differences identified between British and American English not only enrich our

understanding of modal usage but also have practical implications for language teaching, intercultural communication, and corpus-based linguistic research. Future studies may benefit from incorporating quantitative corpus data to further clarify the extent and direction of these ongoing changes.

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