

Lesson 2

Introduction to modal verbs

There are 9 CENTRAL MODAL AUXILIARIES in English:

can – could, may – might, shall – should, will – would, must

We distinguish 2 main kinds of meanings for modal auxiliaries:

- 1) INTRINSIC modality (DEONTIC) involves some intrinsic human control over events and includes **permission, obligation, and volition, (ability)**
- 2) EXTRINSIC modality (EPISTEMIC) involves human judgment of what is or is not likely to happen and includes **possibility, necessity, and prediction**

Each of the modals has both intrinsic and extrinsic uses, e.g. *I must go home. X She must be crazy.*, or *May I open the window? X She may come tonight.*

Most of the modals can be paired into present and past forms (see above). From the point of view of meaning, the past forms are often merely more tentative or more polite variants of the present forms, e.g.:

Could I see your passport? is more polite than *Can I see...?*

Would you lend me your book? is more polite than *Will you lend...?*

MARGINAL MODAL AUXILIARIES: *used to, ought to, dare, need*

MODAL IDIOMS: (a combination of auxiliary and infinitive or adverb): *had better, would rather, have got to, be to*

SEMI-AUXILIARIES: (a set of verb idioms introduced by *have* and *be*): *be able to, be about to, be bound to, be due to, be going to, be likely to, be supposed to, have to*

References:

Greenbaum, S. and R. Quirk (1990) *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*. Essex: Longman. – Chapters 4 and 10, pp. 60, 209 – 210.