Learning modal verbs of the students at Ho Chi Minh City Technical and Economic College

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Abstract: It's said that modality is a complex aspect of the English language for Vietnamese students becauses of the differences in expressionsbetween English and Vietnamese, and between Technical and General English in Macmillan English Grammar in Context in terms of frequency of use and semantic values. Therefore, it is important topresent the different uses of modality in context.Technical studentsshouldidentify, comprehend and use accurately those discourse elements whichcharacterize special and scientific language.
This papershows an analysis of modal verbs used in some student's books: English for Information Technology, Accounting, Finance-Banking, Mechanics Engineering Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology, Automotive Engineering Technology in Technical English and compararison with the use of them in Macmillan English Grammar. The resultswill allow me to shed some light on the role played by these verbs in these books, with special emphasis on their use intechnical texts.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Vietamani (2008) said modal verbs are not only auxiliaries in the grammatical sense, but they also appear to contribute to the semantics of communication. Sincecommunication is an intergral part of the society, and the most important means of human communication is language, the mechanics of language has to be understood in terms of how it facilitates communication. This includes the knowledge of grammar as without its communication will fall as structure will be lacking.

Perkins (1983) explains that many linguists have defined modal verbs as "[. ..] preeminent vehicles for the expression of modality in English, since the modals are the onlymodal expressions which constitute a reasonably well-defined cIass" (Perkins, 1983, p. 25).This, it was thought, would reduce subjectivity when the time came to select the verbs thatwould be analysed in the present study. Nonetheless, when the selection of modal verbsstarted, this cIosed class did not prove to be so well-defined. It is true that, as Palmer argues,modality is "[. ..] a semantic term ... to refer to the meanings of the modals".

Lyons (1977) said that modality is concerned with the codification of the speaker's attitude towards "the proposition that the sentence expresses" or, in other words, Radden & Driven (2007), "speaker's assessment of, or attitude towards, the potentiality of a state of affairs". Modal verbs may express more than one type of modality, such as possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, certainly, etc. Because modal verbs may have different semantic values depending on the context in which they appear, their use determines the propositional value of the message transmitted.

The use of these books has proved to be excellent resources for a wide range of research tasks. In the first place, these books have provided a more realistic foundation for the study of language than earlier types of material, a fact which has given new impetus to descriptive studies of English lexis, syntax, discourse and prosody. Secondly, they have become a particularly fruitful basis for comparing different varieties of English.

In this paper I compare the different uses of modal auxiliary verbs in Technical books and General English. Firstly, I conduct a statistic based on the analysis of counting of modal verbs in these books. The results of the analysis have allowed me to identify the different uses of modal auxiliaries in both varieties of English with the purpose of developing effective learning strategies in students of English for specific purposes, because developing the students' skills in different genres requires knowledge about how grammatical resources are typically used in realizing those genres.

The modal verbs counted were *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*, and semi-modals *going to, have to, need to, ought to* in both positive and negative.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper analyzes the use of modal auxiliary verbs in Technical English books andand the use of them in Macmillan English Grammar in Context. I use MSExcel to count the number of modal verbs had in these books and whether which semantic uses have in these books.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

1. Can-could

The analysis of the results indicates a somehow higher frequency of modal auxiliaries in technical books, witha total of 671 cases. However, major differencescan be seen in the kind of modal verb and meaning in each genre.To simplify the analysis of results and facilitate their application to teaching, I have grouped these verbs intotwo main groups, according to the data found in our study: The followinganalyzesto be found in their semantic values.

Semantic values	Can	could
Ability	55	73
permission	2	5
possibility	89	62
Total	146	140
Percent	52%	48%

Table 1: *Semantic values of 'can-could'in Technical books*

As we can see, in Technical English books, *can* and its verbal form *could*, *can*exceeds 52% of all cases, and *could*, which account for about 48%. From 286 found, 151 refer to possibilitydistributed as follows: 89 cases of *can* and 62 cases of *could*, accounting for 52.9% of the use of these two verbforms, and 128 cases (44.7%)express ability, only 7 cases (2.4%) show permission.

2. Other modal verbs

In this group I have included the modal verbs *must, have to, may, might, should, will, would, ought to* and *need to.*

Semantic values	Must	Have to	May	might	Shall	Should	Will	would	Ought to	Need to
necessity	35					20	9			32
obligation	3	46							7	
permission			5	8						
possibility			67	89						
intention								13		
probability							5	46		
Total	38	46	72	97	0	20	14	59	7	32

Table 2: *Semantic values of othermodal verbs*

In technical English books, in 385 cases, I can observe three main sematic values, namely necessity, possibility and obligation. Necessity is expressed (24.7%) by *must* (9%), *should* (5.1%), *will* (2.3%), *need to* (8.3%). Possibility is showed (40.5) by *may* (17.4%) and *might* (23.1%). The values of obligation (14.5%) are expressed by *have to* (11.9%), *must* (0.77%), and *ought to* (1.8%).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I analyzed the use of modal auxiliary verbs inTechnicalEnglish books for educational special purposes.Although the results show a somewhat greater use in significant differences are found in the semantic values and verbs used in these books.

I see that in Technical English books, these verbs are primarily used to expresspossibility (52.9% of thetotal in using *can-could*). With other modal verbs 40.5% is used *may-might*, and to a much lesser extent, necessity (24.7%) and obligation (14.5%).

Similar findings can be observed in TechnicalEnglish books, the semantic values mentioned above are realized through a big selection of auxiliary verbs, namely*can/could* and *may/might* to express possibility, and *must*, *should, need to* to express necessity and obligation with *have to*.

The results allow us to conclude that Technical English books prefer the use of certain auxiliary verbs to expressvery specific semantic valueswhich presents a greater variety of verbal forms and semanticmeanings.

The data obtained will help us to better plan the grammatical content of our courses fortechnical students byfocusing on the main uses of these modal verbs in order to develop more efficient and effective learning strategiesfor them.

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