

Modal auxiliaries

I-Introduction

Modal verbs belong to the larger category of auxiliary verbs. They are not used on their own in the sentence and have to be used in conjunction with another verb (the main verb). They are placed immediately before the main verb in affirmative and negative sentences. They are used to make an assessment, judgement or interpretation of what we are speaking about.

They are used to express a number of meanings in the sentence:

- 1) **Ability** (she can swim)
- 2) **Obligation** (you ought to be more polite)
- 3) **Necessity** (You must try to stand up and walk)
- 4) **Possibility** (It could rain tomorrow)
- 5) **Logical deduction/ expectation** (the family should be home soon)
- 6) **Disproval** (They will try to do things before they have learnt how to)

Modals can also be linked to a number of communicative functions:

- 1) **Requesting** (Can you please give me a hand? Would you like to open the window?)
- 2) **Offering** (May I help you?)
- 3) **Asking or granting permission** (A: can I take tomorrow off? B: I'm afraid you can't)
- 4) **Advising** (You ought to/ should/ had better stay in bed)
- 5) **Suggesting** (You could buy a smaller one)
- 6) **Inviting** (would you like to join us?)

II- Can-could

Can and could are used to express:

- 1) Possibility:
 - Even expert drivers can make mistakes
 - If it rains, we can hold the meeting indoors.
 - He can't be working at this hour. (It is not possible)
 - This road can be dangerous.
- 2) Virtual impossibility (= can't)
 - He can't have missed the way, I have given him a detailed plan.
- 3) Ability, power, capacity

-She can speak English well, can you swim ? I could jump 7 donkeys.

4) Permission or granting permission : less formal than may ; (the negation = prohibition).

-Request for permission takes the form of a question (1st or 3rd person) :

-May/ can I borrow your pen ?

-Yes you may/ can.

-No you cannot/ may not.

-In those days only men could vote in elections. (were allowed to...)

-You can take my seat I'm leaving. (you are allowed to...)

-Nowadays, you can't repeat the same class level twice.

Note : the future of 'can' is expressed by 'to be able to' which is its equivalent also in the past when it means ability.

Could besides being the past tense of can, is also its conditional (a hypothetical condition). Examples :

-If you tried, you could convince her.

-Could you finish if you had more time ?

-Even if she had been there, she couldn't have let you in.

5) Making requests

Could is more gentle and polite than can in requests. Example :

-Could I borrow your book ?

6) Tentative possibility

-Expressing a tentative opinion :

-There could be something wrong with the light switch.

III- May-might

May and might are used to express:

1) Asking for or granting permission

-You may go now.

-May I go to the party ?

-She asked me if she might go...(might for past in reported speech)

-May I ask you a question ? yes you may.

-If i may say so.

'Might' in a request for permission is more deferential :

-Might I talk to you alone ?

In if clauses, as in questions, 'may' typically indicates that the speaker is asking the hearer for permission (it's the hearer who is supposed to grant permission not the speaker). For example :

- May I smoke? (will you permit/ allow me to smoke?)
- I'll pay you tomorrow if I may. (...if you'll permit me)

2) Possibility

- You may be right. (It is possible that you are right).
- The rumour may be true.
- You may deserve success, but you can't command it.

Both 'may' and 'might' can express present and/ or future possibility. However, the use of 'might' in this case suggests rather more doubt, reserve, reluctance on the part of the speaker.

- John might pass the examination. Yes and pigs might fly.

'Might' and not 'may' is used in reported speech (past) in conditional sentences:

- He was told he might leave early.
- If we didn't have some home, we might go mad.

NB: 'May' in the sense of possibility is common in statements. It doesn't occur, however in questions:

- May I eat it? (asking for permission)

3) Possibility in the past: 'May' is used with the infinitive perfect to express doubt at the present time about a possibility in the past, e.g.:

- He is late. He may have overslept or he may have missed the train.

If 'might have' is used in the sentence, it expresses less certain possibility than 'may have':

- They might have gone to the cinema but I'm not sure.

'Might' may be used in a similar construction often implying a negative inference:

- John might have lent you the money if you had asked him but you didn't ask him.

4) Exclamatory wish and subjunctive clauses:

- May he never set foot in this house again.
- May God have mercy on your souls, you poor sinners.

5) In 'that' clauses followed by verbs like 'trust' and 'hope':

- I hope that she may get married.
- I trust that you may find what you like there.
- He trusted that you might find what...

6) Clauses of concession:

'May' and 'might' are used in clauses of concession like:

- She may be poor but (=although he is poor) she is not stupid.
- The building may be old, but it is very strong.
- Try as you may, you will not make me change my mind.

7) Expressing reproach/ rebuke:

'Might' (not 'may') is sometimes used to express a reproach and a rebuke like in:

- You might listen when I'm talking.

-Why did you leave me waiting for you yesterday? You might at least have told me you weren't coming.

Exercise

Rewrite the sentences using 'may' as in the following examples:

- Although your job is very demanding, at least it isn't boring.
 - Your job may be very demanding, but at least it isn't boring.
- 1- Although the restaurant is expensive, the cuisine is excellent.
 - 2- Although the book is long, you could hardly call it boring.
 - 3- Although the method is crude, it is certainly effective.
 - 4- Although his work has improved, it is still not good enough.
 - 5- Although I was rude to him, I feel he had give me every justification.
 - 6- Although his work is rewarding, he is still very badly paid.

IV- Should/ would

Should and 'would' are past equivalent of 'will' and 'shall'. These two modals are also used to express:

1) Obligation/ giving advice:

- He should study very hard. (but he doesn't)
- You should do what the teacher tells you.
- People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

2) Logical deduction/ obviousness:

- Malika went to Casablanca by train at seven O'clock this morning, she should be home by now.
- I've got 80 dirhams, it should be enough for a meal.

3) Would is used to express polite requests:

- Would you listen to her?

4) To refer to a past habit:

- When he was a boy, he would often miss classes.

5) Describe what we are imagining:

- I would never consider changing career.

V- Must

1) Obligation or requirement:

- You must be back by 3 o'clock (you are obliged (by me) to...)
- Tell Betty she must be more careful with her money.
- I must go now, or I'll be...(self – obligation – duty)
- In England the traffic must keep to the left.

In paraphrasing the meaning of 'must', we can use:

- It is obligatory that...