Quasi-modals and Grammaticalization: What TESOL Professionals Ought to Know

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Abstract

Recent studies in corpus linguistics indicate a general rise in the popularity of quasi-modal use and a general decrease in the use of modal auxiliaries, particularly in the realm of World Englishes. This rise in popularity, particularly in spoken registers, indicates a need for teachers of English to adequately understand quasi-modal verbs. The author describes the formal and semantic properties of quasi-modal verbs and discusses their usage in contemporary Englishes.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, grammaticalization, quasi-modal, World Englishes
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Modal auxiliary and quasi-modal verbs are decidedly difficult for English language learners to acquire. Their formal properties are greatly different from other verbs and their meanings are often too subtle to concretely convey to English learners. Most linguistic descriptions have focused on the modal auxiliaries; however, recent studies in corpus linguistics indicate a rise in the frequency of quasi-modal use and a decrease in the frequency of modal auxiliary use. This rise in frequency, particularly in spoken registers, indicates a need for teachers of the English language to develop an adequate understanding of quasi-modal verbs. In the following paper I will define the terminological parameters of quasi-modal verbs; I will provide a brief description of the formal, functional, and semantic similarities and disparities between modal auxiliary and quasi-modal verbs; and, to conclude, I will discuss current corpus research into the grammaticalization of quasi-modal verbs, including the general increase in discourse frequency of quasi-modals and the subsequent decline in usage of modal auxiliaries.

A variety of different terms are used to label paraphrastic modal verb forms. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) delineate a continuum of modal verb forms that ranges between modal auxiliaries and lexical verbs. The continuum begins with what they describe as the central modals (modal auxiliaries); these include *can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would*, and *must*. After the central modals are the marginal modals, these are *dare, need, ought to*, and *used to*. Next are the modal idioms, these are *had better, would rather/sooner, be to, and have got to*. After the modal idioms are the semi-auxiliaries, these include *have to, be about to, be able to, be bound to, be going to, be obliged to, be suppose to, and be willing to*. Next are the catenatives, these
are appear to, happen to, seem to, get + -ed participle, and keep + -ing participle. Finally, the continuum ends with main verb + nonfinite clause, such as hope + to-infinitive, and begin + -ing participle. The current paper is concerned with what Quirk et al. (1985) describe as modal idioms (primarily have got to) and the semi-auxiliaries; however, I have chosen to adopt the terminology of current researchers (Krug, 2000; Collins, 2009a; Collins, 2009b) and will be using quasi-modal to describe both of these categories.

**Formal, Functional, and Semantic Features**

Although the current paper is concerned with the description of quasi-modals, a brief introduction to the formal, functional, and semantic features of the modal auxiliaries is warranted; this will not only illuminate the similarities between the modal auxiliaries and the quasi-modals, but it will also indicate the qualities that maintain a separation between the two types of verbs. Palmer (1990) describes the primary formal and functional qualities of the modal auxiliaries under the acronym NICE. NICE stands for negation (negation occurs directly after the modal auxiliary); inversion of the modal when forming an interrogative; code, or “post verbal ellipsis dependent for its interpretation upon previous context” (Collins, 2009b, p. 281); and emphasis, or “emphatic polarity involving the use of contrastive stress” (Collins, 2009b, p. 281). Huddleston and Pullman (cited in Collins, 2009b) explain five additional features to modal auxiliaries, these include: lack of subject-verb agreement and tense; use in unreal conditionals; and the use of the historical past form (e.g. could and would) to express remoteness. Semantically, modal auxiliaries are divided into two classes, deontic (social/necessity) and epistemic (probability); however, some authors describe the deontic uses under the heading of root, and then divide root into the subcategories of
deontic and dynamic. This division accounts for the origin of the obligation or necessity; the source of obligation for the deontic modal is said to come from a source outside of the speaker, whereas the source of the dynamic modal is said to originate from the speaker (Palmer, 1990).

Quasi-modals form a heterogeneous group that is “formally distinguishable from, but semantically similar to the modals” (Collins, 2009b, p. 281). Scholarly opinions differ about the relationship between quasi-modal and modal auxiliary verbs, but it is generally agreed that the two share a close semantic affiliation (Collins, 2009a), and that quasi-modals can function as a suppletive role in the “defective morphological paradigms of the modals” (Collins, 2009b, p. 282). For example, unlike modal auxiliaries, quasi-modals can take tense; therefore, in situations that require the use of modality in, for example, the past, a quasi-modal can take the place of a modal auxiliary without drastically changing the meaning of the sentence. Collins (2009b, p. 282) provides an example, the “preterite was able to in contexts where could is not possible, as in I reached high and *could/was able to grab hold of the handle.”

Collins (2009a) distinguishes two general types of quasi-modals that differ in form: one that exhibits semi-modal properties and one that exhibits lexico-modal properties. Semi-modals are more closely related to modal auxiliaries. They contain an auxiliary verb as their first element, they have no non-tensed forms, and “they could only be considered ‘aux-like’ if we involved a special construct of the NICE properties, insofar as it is the first element rather than the whole construction that satisfies these properties” (Collins, 2009a, p. 17). For example, “he hasn't got to go versus *he has gotn't to go” (Collins, 2009a, p. 17). The lexico-modal class is a “set of idiomatic expression
expressing modal (and in some cases aspectual) meanings which—except for *have to, need to,* and *want to*—have *be* as their first element” (Collins, 2009a, p. 17). These forms are modal-like in demonstrating voice-neutrality and there use in conjunction with existential *there;* however they also exhibit non-modal-like features. According to Collins (2009a, p. 17) these include “the availability of non-tensed forms, making possible combinations of the type *had been meant to* and *seems to be going to.*” Collins (2009a) explains that membership to this class is not straightforward. Indeed, as Krug (2000, p. 3) indicates, formal criteria for the quasi-modals is ambiguously defined and their classification is an ongoing process.

Although their formal category is seemingly uncertain, there are three basic criteria for determining whether a complex verb qualifies as a quasi-modal; the verb form must express semantic relatedness to the modal auxiliaries, idiomacy (a meaning that goes beyond the form's individual parts), and be undergoing the process of grammaticalization. Recent corpus studies indicate that quasi-modals are currently undergoing grammaticalization, or the process by which lexical units are transformed into grammatical ones (Collins, 2009a). It is important to note that these transformations are not uniform; rather they range from near central modality to the hinterland of near lexical verb (Krug, 2000). Grammaticalization theory predicts that changes occur in phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics (Krug, 2000). In the case of quasi-modals, Krug (2000) argues that this grammatical transformation is more accurately described as the auxiliarization of quasi-modal form; that is, particular quasi-modals are becoming more auxiliary-like (Krug, 2000). Krug (2000) argues that this transformation necessitates a new category of modality, that of the emerging modals. There are a
plethora of categorical changes intrinsic to the grammaticalization of quasi-modals (such as tense neutrality, iconicity, and subjectification); however, the following description will focus on the phonological erosion, syntactic reanalysis (primarily inversion without do insertion), extension from deontic to epistemic meanings, and the increase in discourse frequency. These features are of particular importance to English language teachers and English language learners because they affect the way quasi-modals should be taught, especially in relation to fluency development. To illustrate these processes, the forms have to, have got to, and want to will be discussed, and then general trends in discourse frequency will be noted.

According to Krug (2000), a diachronic analysis of be going to, have got to, and want to demonstrates that these forms have undergone phonological erosion. In colloquial speech, these forms are now shortened. Respectively, be going to or is/am/are going to transformed into 's/m/re going to and then to what is orthographically represented as gonna; have got to transformed from 've got to and then to what is orthographically represented as into gotta; and want to transformed into what is orthographically represented as wanta and then into wanna. These newly phonological forms are then used in interrogative inversion that is similar to modal auxiliaries; their form is maintained (e.g. I should eat and should I eat?) and is not accompanied by do insertion. For example, “Do you want to eat? becomes Wanna eat?”; “Are you going to eat? becomes Gonna eat?”; and, “Have you got to go already? becomes Gotta go already?” (Krug, 2000, p. 178).

Krug (2000) also indicates that these forms are undergoing a semantic shift from deontic to epistemic uses. Although the deontic sense is used more often in all cases,
these forms are beginning to be used in an epistemic sense with increased frequency. For example, Krug (2000) cites corpus data that demonstrates the form *have to* correlating with an inanimate object. The sentence cited states, “*if the accused is not here, the hearing will have to go on without him.*” As Krug (2000, p. 91) explains, “it is...difficult for inanimate subjects to be obliged to complete a predicate action, that is, to co-occur with deontic *have to.*” Subsequently, *have to* in the example sentence above represents an epistemic notion of modality rather than a deontic.

**Quasi-modal verbs and World Englishes**

As indicated above, an increase in discourse frequency is indicative of grammaticalization. Two studies (Leech, 2003; Collins, 2009b) demonstrate an increase in discourse frequency of certain quasi-modal verb form, particularly the ones illustrated above. In a limited diachronic study of spoken and written corpora from America and Great Britain, Leech (2003) found evidence that demonstrates a decrease in modal use over time, and a general increase in quasi-modal usage; evidence was particularly prominent in the spoken corpora, and the shift was more pronounced in American English than in British English (Leech, 2003). Although the author determined that the findings “do not in general support the view that true modals are declining because they are being supplanted by semi-modals” (Leech, 2003, p. 229), Leech (2003) does admit that further research in spoken corpora will need to be conducted to investigate this claim. The spoken register is more amiable to changes, and therefore it is likely that the notion of replacement would be better studied through spoken corpora.
While Leech (2003) only studied changes within what Kachru (1985) describes as the Inner-Circle of English, Collins (2009b) investigated the use of modals and quasi-modals in a more global arena; this includes the Inner-Circle varieties of British, American, Australian, and New Zealand Englishes, and the Outer-Circle varieties of English from the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, and Kenya. The corpora were both spoken and written, although, like Leech (2003), the spoken corpora were much smaller than the written. In general, Collins (2009b) found that modals are more prevalent in writing for all English varieties represented, although there has been a rise, over time, in quasi-modals in the written register. He also determined that diachronic trends in quasi-modal use indicate that quasi-modals are more prevalent in speech, particularly for the Inner-Circle varieties. In both the written and spoken corpora, Collins (2009b) states that America is leading the way in the shift towards more quasi-modal use in both spoken and written registers of English.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, both modal and quasi-modal verbs are difficult constructs for English language learners to master. Modal auxiliaries tend to exhibit fairly homogeneous formal characteristics relative to the more ambiguous and varied quasi-modal verbs. The functional properties of quasi-modals are argued to be suppletive, and, because of their frequent representation in the spoken register, are generally more informal than their modal counterparts. Semantically, modal auxiliaries and quasi-modals are quite similar; however, quasi-modals tend to use the deontic sense more than the epistemic. Of particular importance to the teaching and learning of quasi-modal verbs are current trends of grammaticalization; for the purposes of fluency development, English
language teachers need to be aware of phonological erosion, syntactic reanalysis, extension from deontic to epistemic meanings, and the increase in discourse frequency for quasi-modal verbs.
References


