



IIT Madras

BSc Degree

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Functions of Modal Verbs

Rajesh Kumar

Some examples -

- Can I tell you something?
- I can play piano.
- I would love to hear from you.
- They may go to Canada next year.
- She might like these dresses.
- We must study.
- We should listen to others.

Modality

- Modality deals with semantic aspects of a sentence.
- Common among all modals is that they do not represent a situation as a fact.
- It deals with a range of semantic notions.
- It has following readings:
 - Possibility
 - Ability
 - Necessity
 - Certainty
 - Obligations
 - Willingness

Modals in English

Can could

May might

Must

Shall should
Will would



Tense Auxiliary in English

SNG

PL

PRES

is

are

am

PAST

was

were

FUT

shall/will

Modal Auxiliaries ..

- Do NOT inflect for number and person (agreement);
- Does NOT mark tense;
- Works differently for negation
- Does NOT have infinitive form;
 - ** To can
 - ** Can-**ing**

Use of Modals

Subject Modal Verb (Object)

Sachin can speak English.

No other auxiliary verb is needed in the context of modals.

Negation

- Raju likes pizza. Raju liked pizza
 - Raju **does not** like pizza. Raju **did not** like pizza.
 - Raju and Ramu work at the Railway Station.
 - Raju and Ramu **do not** work at the Railway Station.
-
- Raju can eat pizza. *Raju can ate pizza.
 - Raju **cannot/can't** eat pizza
 - Raju and Ramu can work for Railways.
 - Raju and Ramu **cannot** work for Railways.

Questions

- Do you like pizza?
- Did they like pizza?
- Can they eat pizza?
- Can you eat pizza?
- What do you like?
- What can they say?



More than two readings ...

- CAN
- Anyone can become a minister. [Possibility]
- Can I ask you a questions? [Permission]
- She can walk fast. [Ability]
- They can speak several languages.

- May (1) [Permission]
May I come in?
- May (2) [Good probability]
We may visit Mexico this summer

- Must (1) [Responsibility]
Everyone must pay taxes
- Must (2) [Assumption]
She didn't arrive. She must be sick

Tense and Modals

[Modals can be used in a tensed sentence but cannot be used as tense markers.]

- It **must** have been a difficult decision.
- They **should** have invited her to their wedding.
- He must have been in a traffic jam.
- Joe may / might have taken the wrong train.
- You could have played better.
- You should / ought to have warned me earlier.
- He shouldn't have told them.
- I wouldn't have survived.

Practice

- Think about the situations where you need to talk the following:
 - Possibilities
 - Necessities
 - Advice/Suggestions
 - Ability
 - Permissions