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The Category Status of English Modals

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## THE CATEGORY STATUS OF ENGLISH MODALS

Jackendoff (1972, 100) states that modals and 'true verbs' in English display 'totally different syntactic behavior'. I will argue in this note that none of the five differences that he cites provide much support for his policy of assigning modals to a separate syntactic category and that the analysis which he adopts does not have some virtues that he ascribes to it.

(1) 'Modals do not undergo number agreement, though all verbs do'. This is not quite true, as witness the combinations *thou canst*, *thou may'st*. English modals (like those of Old English and modern German) have the morphological irregularity of having a zero ending in the third person singular. They give the illusion of not undergoing person and number agreement only because the one subject with which they exhibit a non-zero agreement marker is archaic. While few children these days grow up hearing *thou canst*, etc., once people are exposed to *thou* and its agreement marker they appear to have no hesitation in putting it on a modal (and, by the same token, no tendency to put it on *not* or on adjectives). If the occurrence of non-zero agreement markers is a criterion for verbhood, then learning to say *thou canst* should involve changing the category of *can* in one's internalized grammar from 'Modal' to 'Verb'. I question, however, that anything more is involved than learning that *thou* takes *-st* as its agreement marker.

(2) and (3) 'Modals do not occur together, and they do not appear in gerunds and infinitives'. The second of these facts provides the explanation of the first: the verb following a modal is in the infinitive form and, since modals do not have an infinitive form, cannot itself be a modal. More generally, English modals have highly defective paradigms, exhibiting at most present and past forms<sup>1</sup>. Even those (such as Jackendoff) who hesitate to call the verb after a modal an infinitive could hardly call it a present or past tense form. Thus in any event facts (2) and (3) are special cases of a generalization which is a matter of morphology rather than syntax. Given a universal output constraint against surface structures that contain non-existent forms, there is no need to

<sup>1</sup> Some modals do not even have that: *must*, which is historically a past tense form, has no past tense in modern English. *Shall* and *should* likewise have only present tense forms, except to the extent that *should* can function as a past tense of *shall* in clauses involving sequence of tense.

accommodate the defectiveness of the paradigms of modals by any special treatment in the base rules.

(4) 'Modals also differ from all main verbs but *be* and some uses of *have* in that they undergo subject-aux inversion, precede *not* and block *do*-support'. Though this is a difference between modals and most 'true verbs', Jackendoff's remark indicates that two 'true verbs' behave in the way that modals do. Moreover, there is dialect variation as regards which uses of *have* behave in which way. There is thus at least some irregularity involved, and the facts are amenable to a description in terms of a minor rule which sets up a structural difference that conditions the way in which Subject-aux inversion, Negative placement, and *Do*-support apply in the two types of cases. The obvious minor rule to propose is one which adjoins *be*, a modal, or certain uses of *have* to an immediately preceding tense, and the appropriate formulations of Subject-aux inversion and Negative-placement call respectively for moving a V over an immediately preceding NP (as in Figure 1)<sup>2</sup> and for right-adjoining a *not* to an immediately following V. Setting up a category distinction between modal and verb contributes nothing to the analysis of these phenomena.

(5) 'If the surface main clause in sentences with modals is to be a deep structure complement clause, modals must govern a rule deleting the complementizer, since none shows up at the surface'. Jackendoff himself observes that there are 'true verbs' exhibiting precisely this characteristic:

Harry made John wash the dishes every night.  
Betty heard Sue walk into the bathroom.

However, he points out that these verbs allow prepositional phrases in place of the complement, whereas modals do not:

Harry made John into a nervous wreck.  
Betty heard Sue in the bathroom.  
\*John may into a nervous wreck.

and he notes that those 'true verbs' which do not allow a prepositional phrase

<sup>2</sup> In the interests of maximizing comparability of analyses, I have given a derivation which agrees with Jackendoff's analysis in all respects except those directly relevant to this note. I in fact contest several details of the derivation given here; for example, I maintain (McCawley, 1970) that 'VP's' are simply S's that have lost their subjects and that there is thus no need for such a node label as VP. See McCawley (1971) for arguments supporting the analysis of tenses and auxiliary verbs as 'V'.

or noun phrase in place of the complement do not allow deletion of the complementizer:

Fred seems to/\* $\phi$  enjoy swimming.

But this means that whether the absence of complementizers after modals is a difference between them and 'true verbs' depends on whether the absence of non-modal verbs which require a surface complement and allow deletion of the complementizer is not just an accident, comparable to the fact that all

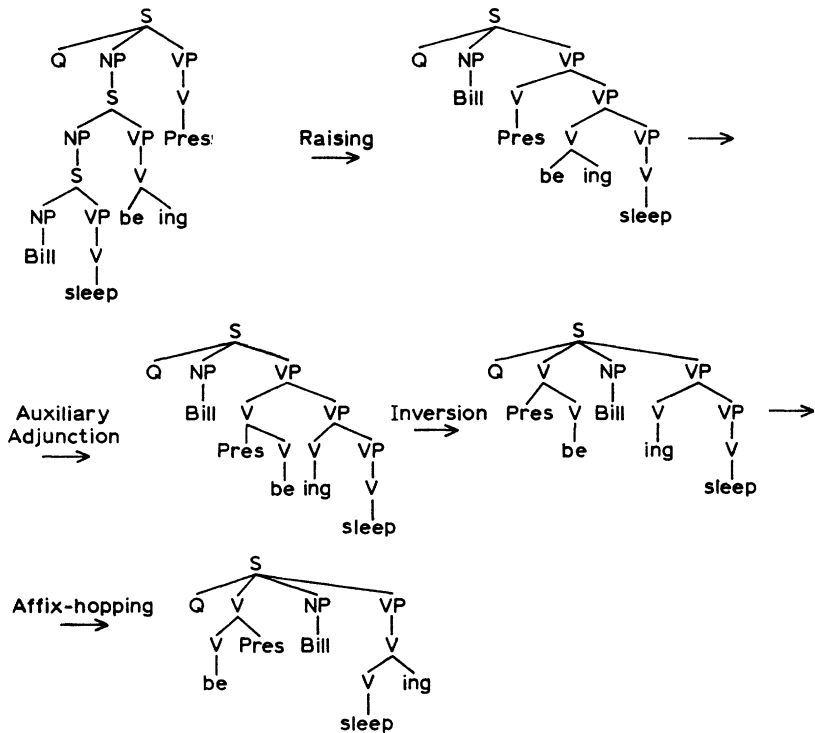


Fig. 1. Derivation of *Is Bill sleeping?*

Japanese verb roots ending in /t/ (all eight of them) are accented. Would the addition to the language of verbs of that type imply any change in English grammar? I rather doubt it; however, Jackendoff's argument seems to imply that the introduction into English of a verb used as follows

Denny glorched Luke (\*to) go upstairs.

\*Denny glorched Luke into the living room.

would be reason to reanalyze *can*, etc. as 'V' rather than 'Modal'.

This completes the list of things that Jackendoff offers as arguments against analyzing modals as verbs.<sup>3</sup> He then proceeds to adopt a variant of the *Syntactic structures* analysis, observing that it 'captures the syntactic disparity quite accurately, with no use of the notion "exception" at all. The only cost of this analysis is the addition of the node Modal in the base rules'.

While Jackendoff's analysis 'captures' the syntactic disparities that he has mentioned, it fails to capture many other similar syntactic disparities, e.g. that between *can* and *must* (*can* has a past tense, *must* does not) or that between *make* and *cause* (*make* is subject to complementizer deletion, *cause* is not). Jackendoff has provided no criterion for determining which captive facts fit into which cellblocks of a grammatical prison. Is there any reason why the disparities between *can* and *must* should not be captured in terms of base rules that assign them to different categories? It is not at all clear that Jackendoff's largely unstated policy on identity of category would yield just the two categories 'V' and 'Modal' rather than a large number of quite small categories.

Notwithstanding Jackendoff's disdain for the notion of 'exception', both the *Syntactic structures* analysis and Jackendoff's variant of it actually make crucial use of that notion. In the former the rules of Subject-aux inversion, etc. involve the list {Modal, *be*, *have*}<sup>4</sup> and in the latter the rule adjoining *be* and certain uses of *have* to a preceding tense simply lists the items that are to be moved. The fact that there is no use of 'exception features' such as [+Subj-aux inversion] is of no particular significance, since these lists accomplish exactly the same thing that such a feature would: they indicate an 'arbitrary bifurcation' between those items which undergo the rule and those which do not.

Jackendoff's reference to 'cost' is misleading, since it assumes a notion of 'cost' in which certain linguistically significant pieces of information are assigned no cost. Specifically, no 'cost' is assigned to the information as to WHERE the modal is among the constituents of the S, and thus a phrase structure rule putting modals at the end of the S would cost no more than one putting them after the subject. The analysis of modals as verbs entails

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins (1972) adds a further difference: that modals do not have nominalizations (other than the highly idiosyncratic ones found in *John has a strong will* and *This dishwasher is a must for every housewife*). But if modals undergo raising out of a subject complement (i.e. [*John play tennis*] *may* → *John may play tennis*), the absence of nominalizations is actually a similarity between true verbs and modals, since (as noted by Chomsky (1970)) there are no nominalizations of structures in which raising has applied (e.g. \**The happening of/by John to run into Marcia*). See, however, Postal (1974) for discussion of possible counterexamples such as *John's tendency to yell at me*.

<sup>4</sup> These rules are inadequate since they fail to distinguish those uses of *have* which undergo Subject-auxiliary inversion, etc. from those which do not.

that modals will occur in a position where verbs can occur (thus, in English, after the subject and before any objects), whereas the *Syntactic structures* analysis puts modals in their position only by fiat. The defective morphology of modals provides the explanation of why they not only occur in a position where verbs can occur but are restricted to being the FIRST verb of a tensed clause.

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