SOME NOTES ON ENGLISH MODALS

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These three notes appeared in October 1969 in No. 4 of "Phonetics Laboratory Notes", an informal underground journal compiled by students and faculty connected with the University of Michigan phonetics laboratory, and circulated at irregular intervals in duplicated form. Larkin's observations about systematic differences in meaning between English modal auxiliaries and their supposed paraphrases have been cited in R. Lakoff (1972) and Ōta (1970). The particular question of how will *and* be going to *differ has been studied subsequently in greater detail by Binnick (1971, 1972). The two notes were added by Larkin in 1975.*

WILL

A variety of terms, such as "future", "volitional", "characteristic", "habitual obstinacy", and "predictive", have been used to describe the meanings of modal *will*. None of these descriptions seems to cover the case of *will* in the relative clause of sentences like those given in (1):

(1) a. *John hires anyone who will tell him some old war stories.*

b. *?John hires anyone who will pass his screening test.*

c. *John hires anyone who will put a portion of his pay back into the business.*

(2) a. *John hires anyone who tells him some old war stories.*

b. *John hires anyone who passes his screening test.*

c. *?John hires anyone who puts a portion of his pay back into the business.*

The sentences in (2) differ from those in (1) in that the action described by the main clause (hiring) follows the action described by the relative clause (telling a war story, passing a test, putting pay back into the business) in the case of the sentences in (2), but precedes it in the case of the sentences in (1). This sequence of events explains the oddness of (1b) and of (2c). One might expect that there is a future tense lurking in the first set of sentences that is absent from the second.

But there is more to it than that. For sentence (1a), telling an old war story is not a condition for being hired, but agreeing to tell a war story is. The sequence for (1a) is: agreement, hiring, telling of story. Paraphrases for (1a) and (2a) might well be:

(1a') *If someone agrees to tell John some old war stories, then John hires him.*

(2a') *If someone tells John some old war stories, then John hires him.*

It is not ordinarily possible to agree to pass a test (unless it is a ridiculously simple test), but it is possible to agree to put some of your pay back into a business. These observations would serve to explain why (1b) but not (1c) is strange. The oddity of (3a), and the naturalness of (3b), can be explained in a similar way.

(3) a. *?John fires anyone who will tell him some old war stories.*

b. *John fires anyone who tells him some old war stories.*

While it is not strange to get fired for something you have done, it is strange to do something so that you can be fired. And making the sort of agreement that *will* indicates in this

sentence is doing something in order to be fired.

Sentence (4) is odd just because *be going to* does not imply that there is any such agreement.

(4) *?John hires anyone who is going to tell him some old war stories.*

To make any sense, (4) would have to refer to a situation where John went about discovering people who intended to tell him a war story and then hired them. Note that *be going to* in (4) is just as volitional and just as indicative of the future as *will* is in (1a).[1]

CAN

Consider now such sentences as:

(1) a. *You can anticipate more conspiracy indictments in the near future.*

b. *We can look forward to fewer fluctuations in the market in the months ahead.*

c. *Peter can expect to receive an important promotion before Wednesday.*

The speaker of a sentence like this is clearly not making an ordinary statement. As literal statements the sentences in (1) are next to meaningless. At best they are totally obvious, as the expected paraphrases of (1a) below show.

(1a') $\left\{\begin{array}{l}\textit{You are able to}\\ \textit{You are permitted to}\\ \textit{It is possible for you to}\end{array}\right\}$ *anticipate more conspiracy indictments in the near future.*

As "totally obvious" statements, these sentences bear a certain resemblance to another class of "obviously true statements". Carol Feldman and Mike Shen have pointed out to me that people often make statements that are clearly true but that, in effect, mean something quite different from what they state. Sentence (2) is an example of such a sentence:

(2) *Your husband can speak, Mrs. Westbrook.*

If (2) is the report of the decision of some assembly to allow Mr. Westbrook to address it, or if it is the report of a doctor on the outcome of an operation, then this sentence means what it appears to mean. But if (2) is an obvious statement of fact to both the speaker and the hearer (so

obvious, in fact, that it is clear to both of them that there is no point in making that particular statement), then (2) means something like:

(2') *Be quiet and let your husband talk for himself.*

That is, the point of saying (2) is not to make the obvious statement, but to insinuate something else.

The similarity between a sentence like (2) and the sentences in (1) is shown by the fact that the only possible predicates for type (1) sentences are verbs like *expect* and *anticipate,* but not, say, *await* or *schedule*. To state that someone *can anticipate* or *can expect* is to necessarily make a true statement, for these innate "abilities" are uncontrollable (unless, say, you have absolute power over someone's mind) and cannot be developed or learned (as the ability to swim can be, for example). That is, there is no way to constrain or improve an expectation or an anticipation.

These two sentence types differ, however, in that the speaker of a type (1) sentence is not mentioning anyone's abilities, nor is he saying something that the hearer already knows. Sentence (1c), for example, informs the hearer that Peter will get a promotion before Wednesday. If the hearer were to angrily respond *I know it* or *That's what you think* to (2), this response would be to the "obvious statement" that (2) makes, not to what it insinuates. The same response to (1c) would not be to any obvious statement made by that sentence, but rather to the proposition that Peter is going to be promoted. That is to say, a reply or evaluation of the factivity of a type (1) sentence is a response to or evaluation of the truth value of the information conveyed by the sentence embedded beneath the *expect*-type verb in the main clause. It is not a reply to or an evaluation of the factivity of the main clause, as it would be for a type (2) sentence.

Type (1) sentences, therefore, do not make "obvious statements", in the same sense that type (2) sentences do.

The following sentences also seem similar to those in (1):

(3) a. *You can go to hell.*

b. *Ralph can just forget the whole thing.*

(4) a. *You can take these invoices up to the boss now.*

b. *The patient in room four can get dressed now.*

Such sentences clearly are not statements; rather, they are "enabling" utterances of some sort. Those in (4) appear to

give permission, but it is not the permission of *may*, *allow*, or *permit* (e.g., it is not the sort of permission that is usually requested). The speaker of a type (4) sentence presumes to have some authority or inside information. For example, (4b) would normally be said by a nurse or doctor, not by another patient.

The sentences in (1) have this same restriction. For (1b) the speaker must presume some knowledge of the economic situation and economics (i.e., he is not just making a wild guess). For (1c) the speaker must have some inside information on Peter's promotion. That information can't be common knowledge. The speaker also presumes that the hearer is not as knowledgeable as he. He is informing the hearer, not, say, reminding him.

Consider the following sets of type (4) and type (1) sentences:

(5) a. *You can tell Winston to come in now, Miss Jones.*

b. *Winston can come in now, Miss Jones.*

c. *You can come in now, Winston.*

(6) a. *You can expect Winston to get the loan he applied for.*

b. *Winston can expect to get the loan he applied for.*

c. *You can expect to get the loan you applied for, Winston.*

We might claim that the sentences in (6) parallel their (5) counterparts, and that just as (5a) and (5b) enable Miss Jones to send Winston in, (6a) and (6b) enable the hearer to know something (or, literally, to expect something) about Winston. Certainly, (6a) is no more a statement about the hearer than (5a) is about Miss Jones. I find (6a) and (6b) to be synonymous except that (6b) contains the presupposition that Winston (as well as the addressee) doesn't yet know that he will receive the loan, while (6a) need not have this presupposition. And we have seen above that both sets of sentences presuppose the same sort of restrictions on their speakers.

But, although the structure of the (b) and (c) sentences of (5) and (6) seem entirely parallel, the (a) sentences are not parallel except for the fact of their surface subjects.

More importantly, it would be inappropriate to respond to the factivity of a type (5) sentence (e.g., by agreeing with it or denying it), but, as we have seen, it is entirely appropriate to reply to the factivity of a type (6) [i.e., a

type (1)] sentence.

The underlying nature of a type (1) sentence, therefore, remains a mystery.

MUST

Consider the root modal *must* and its supposed periphrastic form *have to*:

(1) a. *My girl must be home by ten.*

b. *My girl has to be home by ten.*

Sentence (1a) implies that the speaker "goes along with" the prohibition that the sentence states, while (1b) is neutral in this regard. On certain occasions (e.g., while on a double date) using (1a) instead of (1b) might open the speaker to the ridicule of his peers.

(2) a. *The garage must be cleaned up before we can use it.*

b. *The garage has to be cleaned up before we can use it.*

Sentence (2a) could be used to express the speaker's belief that the garage is too dirty to use. But it would sound a bit strange if used to report a condition imposed by the landlord, unless the speaker also intended to indicate either his agreement with the landlord (i.e., that the landlord was acting reasonably or justly in imposing this restriction) or his eagerness for the job. Sentence (2b), like (1b), is neutral in this regard.

(3) a. *Johnny must play in his own yard today.*

b. *Johnny has to play in his own yard today.*

If a playmate of Johnny's used (3a) instead of (3b), we would know that he was assuming some parental attitudes, and was identifying with those who put the restriction on Johnny rather than with Johnny himself.

Examples like these are relatively easy to concoct. They all show that there is some presupposition present in a *must* predication that is absent for *have to*. Just exactly what this presupposition is is not exactly clear. The speaker seems to identify, in some way, with the source of the need that is being expressed by a *must* sentence. On the basis of the examples given above, we might hypothesize that the speaker presupposes that the requirement or compulsion is a necessary and just one. However, this formulation of the presupposition would not cover the following apparently related

facts.

Jim Lindholm has discovered a very convincing case where there is a clear difference between *must* and *have to*. *Must* is excluded from sentences that indicate the necessity of engaging in some function of the human body or some act that satisfies some bodily need when the body itself is seen as the compelling force:

(4) a. *I've got to vomit.*

b. *Sam looked like he just had to laugh.*

c. *Betty has to use a mouthwash.*

d. *I have to* { *yawn* / *scratch* }.

e. *Ralph has to lie down.*

Although the (a) sentences below are grammatical, the source of the compulsion is not so obviously physical as it is for the (b) sentences. Rather, social convention, propriety, a tyrannical parent, or some other consideration provides the rationale for the stated need.

(5) a. *I must blow my nose.*

b. *I have to blow my nose.*

(6) a. *Adam must go to the john.*

b. *Adam has to go to the john.*

(7) a. *I must take a rest.*

b. *I have to take a rest.*

The explanation for these facts most probably has something to do with the fact noted above - the speaker of a *must* sentence identifies himself in some way with the source of the compulsion. Presumably, we do not identify our "selves" in this way with our baser physical needs.

This "identification" does not work like other presuppositions. Compare (8a) and (8b) to (2a) and (2b):

(8) a. *Henry assassinated Milo.*

b. *Henry murdered Milo.*

Sentence (8a) contains a presupposition that (8b) doesn't, just as (2a) has a presupposition that (2b) does not. *Assassinate* indicates that the speaker of (8a) believes that Milo's murder was a political killing and that Milo was a powerful figure. These presuppositions are absent from (8b). Someone might well agree with or subscribe to (8b), but not

(8a). In order to agree with (8a) someone would have to believe that the killing was political and that Milo was powerful; i.e., part of what someone agrees with, when he agrees with a particular utterance, are presuppositions of that utterance. This presupposition, then, is both a condition on "saying" (8a) and on "subscribing to" (8a).

However, if someone says (2b) is true, he seems logically bound to say (2a) is true, whether he believes that the extra condition (2a) carries is justified or not and whether or not he himself identifies with the source of the restriction in any way. That is to say, the presupposition that accompanies a *must* locution does not seem to affect the factivity of the statement made. It is a condition on "saying" a *must* sentence, but it is not a condition on "subscribing to" a *must* sentence.[2]

NOTES

[1]The particular property of *will* evidenced by these sentences shows up in other sorts of constructions as well. In an announcement like (i), for example, the use of *will* over *be going to* seems to imply that Peter was being asked or pressured to run (by a citizens committee, say) and had agreed to do so, rather than that he had decided on his own to throw his hat in the ring.

(i) *Listen, everone. Peter* { *will* / *is going to* } *run for mayor.*

But *will* does not just implicate agreements of this type, it's also more appropriate than *be going to* for proposing them

(ii) *If you* { *'ll* / *?'re going to* } *teach me karate, I'll teach you typing.*

or making them:

(iii) *Whose job is it to do the dishes tonight?*
I { *will* / *'m going to* }.

(iv) *If no one else wants to, I* { *'ll* / *'m going to* } *dig the trench.*

This property of *will* is surely not unrelated to certain other aspects of *will* sentences, for example, that *will* is sometimes barred from talking about inevitable events:

(v) *Hang on! We* { *?'ll* / *'re going to* } *crash!*

It's unclear to me exactly what unites the various uses of *will*, but it might well be that what distinguishes *will* from *be going to* here parallels the difference between *must* and *have to* noted below. We might say that a speaker of a *will* sentence is less talking about an already determined state of affairs than he is about one that still involves the decisions and attitudes of individual actors.

[2]Although I'd hesitate now to call it a "presupposition", and although the examples in this note have not been all that convincing, it still seems to me that the speaker of a *must* sentence identifies himself with the predication the modal makes in a way that the speaker of a *have to* sentence does not. This distinction can perhaps best be seen where the modal has an epistemic sense. Thus, where some strict or thorough process of reasoning is used to reach a conclusion, both *must* and *have to* seem okay:

(i) *We've checked every other possibility. The trouble* { *has to* / *must* } *be in the tubes.*

But where the deduction in a sense comes from the speaker rather than from the logically adduced nature of things, *must* seems more natural. So, for example, the guesses people make in attempting to deal with children's questions typically take *must* (as Mike O'Malley once pointed out to me):

(ii) a. *I see the barn, Mommy. But where are the cows?*
b. *They* { *must* / *?have to* } *be grazing somewhere else.*

(iii) a. *Why is there salt in the ocean, but not in lakes?*
b. *Well, there* { *must* / *?has to* } *have been more salt rocks where the oceans formed than where the continents did.*

Similarly, statements made about someone else's mental or physical state, where no firm conclusion is possible and the role of the speaker's suppositions is crucial, seem to prefer *must*.

(iv) *That was a long drive. You must be tired.*

(v) *Did you see the look Sandy gave Joe? She must really hate him.*

(vi) *So Tom got a raise, did he? He must be happy.*

Using *have to* in sentences like these would make them more emphatic, since by failing to identify the speaker with what was being said it would tend to appear that the speaker was simply speaking about a logically necessary state of affairs. Other types of epistemic utterances where the speaker's involvement is crucial similarly prefer *must* over *have to*. Estimates, for example,

(vii) *Boy, what a party. There* { *must* / *have to* } *be twenty lawyers here.*

or some self-introductions and other sorts of suppositions

(viii) *You* { *must* / *have to* } *be Harriet. Hello, I'm Joe's mother.*

(ix) *I* { *must* / *have to* } *sound a little silly.*

With regard to the root usage of *must* and *have to*, the difference between them seems to show up best in scenarios where the speaker's feelings about the obliged undertaking are at issue. Since it overtly indicates the speaker's identification with what's being said, the modal *must* seems somewhat out of place in situations where the speaker wishes to maintain solidarity with the people who are adversely affected by the mentioned state of affiars. Most of the examples given in the text are like this.

(x) *Sorry to break up our game, boys, but I* { *have to* / *?must* } *go pick up my wife.*

(xi) *It's time for us to go home now, Harry. It's 2:00 and the bartender* { *has to* / *?must* } *lock up.*

In some cases, the use of *must* gives an utterance a self-righteous air. Compare (xii) with (xiii):

(xii) *I understand your predicament, Mr. Butler. But I must always think of the company first.*

(xiii) *I understand your predicament, Mr. Butler. But I have to always think of the company first.*

By indicating that the speaker identifies himself with the necessity of putting the company first, the use of *must* here not only fails to show any solidarity with Mr. Butler, but it also tends to indicate that the speaker believes in what he's doing. This property of *must* sentences has an interesting outcome in utterances that are meant to indirectly accomplish certain speech acts. It usually turns out in such cases that modals are more natural than their periphrastic forms. Compare (xiv) with (xv):

(xiv) *I must ask you not to testify in the Jones case tomorrow.*

(xv) *I have to ask you not to testify in the Jones case tomorrow.*

In both cases, the speaker is attributing the necessity or motivation for asking the addressee not to testify to something or someone other than himself. But in (xiv) he identifies himself with it, he indicates that he goes along with it. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the speaker means to ask the addressee not to testify, and, consequently, to treat this particular utterance as sufficient for so asking. In (xv), however, the speaker does not overtly identify himself with the necessity of asking the addressee not to testify, and therefore the implicature is not so naturally pushed through. This sentence more easily leaves open the question of whether the speaker intends his utterance to make the possibly illegal request he says he's required to make. There is also a class of sentences like (xvi)

(xvi) *You must have some of Aunt Marie's pie.*

which seems to prefer *must* over *have to*. They work as polite utterances by verbally lifting the onus of making a decision or expressing a desire from the addressee and, with *must*, by indicating that the speaker himself is doing this and not, as with *have to*, simply talking about some externally mandated state of affairs. Consider also sentences where the speaker has just thought of something he takes to be a good idea (but has not yet thought it through). In such cases, *must* is again preferred over *have to*.

(xvii) *Speaking of Italian food, I* { *must* / *?have to* / *'ll have to* } *ask my mother for her recipe for lasagna.*

The way the speaker's identification of himself with what is being said works out here is very reminiscent of the way it works out with the epistemic *must* of sentences like (ii)

and (iii), where the utterance is also very much off the cuff.

What remains interesting to me about this attribute of *must* is that it attaches to the act of uttering the modal and not to the logical meaning it encodes. The notion of how (or how much) a speaker is identified with what is being said turns out to be important for understanding the nature of communicative events in general, I think. Consider, for example, the difference between an advertisement that uses a testimonial from a product user and an advertisement that uses an announcer to deliver the same message. Or think of the difference between a group of pickets with obviously hand-lettered signs versus the same pickets each carrying commercially printed signs. Or the way we would understand the answers of a witness at a congressional hearing who checked with his lawyer before responding to each question, as compared to a witness who answered spontaneously. The connection we make between a speaker and the content of what he says seems to be crucial to how we take what is being said and, following that, how we understand the message itself.