

# MODALS IN MALAYALAM: SOME REMARKS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines constructions with the two modals -aNam 'must/need' and -aam 'may/can' in Malayalam. -aNam is expressive of Epistemic, Speaker centric deontic and Subject oriented deontic modality. And -aam too expresses epistemic and also deontic modality notions like possibility, permission, ability etc. Further both modals induce case alternations for their subject: either Nominative or Dative. The sentences with the modal suffix -aNam taking a Dative subject may be structurally different from those with a Nominative case. The Dative case for the subject of sentences with the modal -aNam is argued to be owing perhaps to the presence of an underlying existential verb be in their expanded versions which is capable of taking a complement with a Dative case. The modal -aam on the other hand is argued to induce case alternations for their subjects due to the different argument structures it may permit.*

In this paper, we would like to examine modals in Malayalam and determine the relative positions of modality in the sentential structure in Malayalam. We would be particularly looking at the modal suffixes *aNam* 'must/need' and *aam* 'may/ can' respectively in Malayalam. We will demonstrate that *aNam* is used to express three kinds of modality: epistemic, Speaker centric deontic and subject oriented deontic.<sup>1</sup> And *-aam* expresses epistemic, and deontic modality. The occurrence of the different modality notions are in fact clearly detectable, as we shall see, given the structural location of their exponents and also, the case alternations induced by them in the subject of the sentence. Further, contra Jayaseelan (2004), it is possible that only one of the modals may be capable of assigning inherent dative case to the subject of the sentences containing them.

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<sup>1</sup>i Modality is here understood to mean linguistic devices to express speaker's attitude to the event expressed by the proposition in a sentence. (Lyons, 1995; and Palmer, 1986)

1. The two modal suffixes in Malayalam: *aNam* and *aam* respectively are reduced forms of the verbs *veNam* ‘want/need’ and *aakunnu* ‘be’ or ‘become’ (cf. Rajarajaverma, 1895). Interestingly, both, of these verbal suffixes, induce a case alternation in the subject of the sentence: namely, nominative or dative. Taking first, the case of the suffix *aNam*, we find that the sentences with case alternation are indeed different semantically too. Whereas the sentences with the subject in Nominative case are expressive of the speaker’s intension or attitude towards the action conveyed by the verb, the sentences with the subject in dative case appear to express the intension of their grammatical subject (cf. Srikumar, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

- (1) a. *raaman viiTT-il pook-aNam*  
 Raman-nom. house-loc. go mod  
 ‘Raman must go home’  
 b. *raaman-A viiTT-il pook-aNam*  
 raaman dat. house-loc. go mod  
 ‘Raman has to go home’

Both the sentences given in (1), however, reflect the necessity for the proposition expressed by the sentence, and are thus illustrations of Deontic modality. The difference being that (1a) is from the point of view of the speaker, whereas (1b) is from the grammatical subject’s point of view. Thus, the intended meanings of the above sentences may be read off from the paraphrases given below:

- (2) a. I think, it is necessary that he goes home.  
 b. For him, it is necessary to go home.

The negative counterparts of these sentences are also similarly different in their meaning.

- (3) a. *raaman ippoolL viiTT-il pook-aNDaa*

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<sup>2</sup>iiThis distinction is perhaps what Mohanan and Mohanan (1990) term as External demand for the meaning of *veeNam* with nominative subject and Internal need for the same with dative subject.

Raman now house loc go-mod not  
'Raman need/should not go home now'

- b. *raaman-A ippool viiTT-il pook-aNDaa*  
Raman dat. now house loc go want neg  
'Raman does not want to go home now'

Notice, however, that even though the suffix *-aNDa* is the negation of the modal suffix *-aNam*, (3a) is not, strictly speaking, a negation of the obligative, but it is rather the one given below with the negative particle *arutA*.

- (4) a. *raaman ippool viiTT-il pook-arutA*  
Raman now house loc. go- mod not  
'Raman must not go home now'

Such a means for negation is, however, not available for the sentences with the dative subject.

- b. *\*raamanA ippool viiTT-il pook-arutA*  
'For him, it is not necessary to go home now'

This may be a consequence of the fact that *arutA* is the Deontic negation from the speaker's point of view.

2. The epistemic deployment of *aNam* is available only when it attaches to auxiliaries like *aayirikkuka*, itself a complex of two light verbs *aak-* and *ir* as in (5a), thereby implying that it is a higher predicate. The negation of the epistemic *-aNam* cannot be obtained by suffixing *-aNTa*, but it is rather obtained by suffixing the existential negative *illa* as seen in (5c).

- (5) a. *raaman (ippool) viiTT-il uNT-aayirikk-aNam*

Raman now house-loc. be perf. mod

‘Raman must be at home now’ (It is probable that...)

b. \**Raaman ippooL viiTT-il uNTaayirikkaNTa*

c. *raaman (ippooL) viiTT-il uNT-aayirikk-illa*

Raman now house-loc be perf. not

‘Raman may/could not be at home now’ (It is probable that.)

Here, it may be pointed out that the epistemic *aNam* might be apparently turned into a deontic reading, if the sentences were suitably modified by a temporal adverb such as *naaLe* ‘tomorrow’, for instance.

(6) a. *raaman naaLe viiTT-il uNT-aayirikk-aNam*

Raman tomorrow house-loc. be perf. mod

‘Raman must be at home tomorrow’ (It is necessary that..)

b. \**Raaman naaLe viiTT-il uNTaayirikkaNTa*

Raman tomorrow house-loc. be perf. need not

\*‘Raman need not be at home tomorrow’ (It is not necessary that..)

c. *raaman naaLe viiTT-il uNTaayirikkarutA*

Raman tomorrow house-loc. be perf. mod not

‘Raman must not be at home tomorrow’ (It is forbidden that.)

As expected, the negation obtains in this case as predicted. The strong deontic negation

*-arutA* is attached rather than the negative counterpart *-aNTa* of *-aNam*.

One thing that stands out in the discussion above is that the subject of epistemic *aNam* is always nominative in case. In deontic use, on the other hand, the subject of the sentence with *aNam* is in nominative case, if it expresses Speaker's attitude, or else in dative case if it is expressive of the grammatical subject's attitude.

3. Another context, wherein we find a contrast between sentences containing the suffix *aNam* is when they are interrogated, as in the following examples adapted from Hanybabu (2002).

(7) a. *mini naTT-il-eekkA pook-aNam*

Mini home-loc.-to go-mod

'Mini must go home.'

b. *mini naTT-il-eekkA pook-aN-oo*

Mini home-loc.-to go-mod-Q

'Must Mini go home?'

(8) a. *minikkA naTT-il-eekkA pook-aNam*

Mini dat home--to go-mod

'Mini has to go home.'

b. *minikkA naTT-il-eekkA pook-aN-oo*

Mini dat home-loc.-to go-mod-Q

'Does Mini have to go home?'

(9) a. *naaTT-il innale mazha peyt-irikk-aNam*

home-loc. yesterday rain fall.-AUX-mod

'It must have rained in Kerala yesterday.'

b. *\*naaTT-il innale mazha peyt-irikk-aN-oo*

home-loc. Yesterday rain fall.-AUX-mod-Q

\*'Must it have rained in Kerala yesterday?'

- c. *naaTT-il innale mazha peyt-irikk-um-oo*  
 home-loc. Yesterday rain fall.-AUX- mod -Q  
 ‘Would it have rained in Kerala yesterday?’

We find that both kinds of Deontic modality sentences permit a yes-no question particle to attach to the suffix *aNam*. But the suffix *aNam* as an exponent of epistemic modality does not permit the suffixation of the yes-no question particle to it. This is usually taken to be a consequence of the fact that the epistemic modality exponent is syntactically located in a higher position than the deontic exponent in accordance with Universal Functional Hierarchy proposed by Cinque (1997) given below:

Mood<sub>speech act</sub> > Mood<sub>evaluative</sub> > Mood<sub>evidential</sub> > Mod<sub>epistemic</sub> > T(Past) > T(Future) >  
 Mood<sub>irrealis</sub> > Mod<sub>necessity</sub> > Mod<sub>possibility</sub> > Mod<sub>volitional</sub> > Mod<sub>obligation</sub> > Mod<sub>ability/permission</sub> >  
 Asp<sub>habitual</sub> > Asp<sub>repetitive(I)</sub> . . . T(Anterior) > Asp<sub>terminative</sub> > Asp<sub>continuative</sub> . . .

We encounter an apparent paradox, however, when we consider the occurrence of the *aNam* suffix after the auxiliary element *ir*. Notice that, in (10), *aNam* is an exponent of deontic modality.

- (10) a. *ñaan var-um-pooLeekkum atA tiirnn-irikk-aNam*  
 I come- mod -PRT that complete.-AUX- mod  
 ‘It should be finished before I come.’
- b. *nii var-um-pooLeekkum atA tiirnn-irikk-aN-oo*  
 you come- mod -PRT that complete.-AUX- mod -Q  
 ‘Should it be finished before you come?’ (= Is it necessary . . . ?)
- c. *avan var-um-pooLeekkum atA tiirnn-irikk-eeNTa enna*  
 you come- mod -PRT that finish.-AUX- mod.NEG COMP  
*avan paRaññu*

he said

‘He said that it need not be finished before he comes

But in (11), it is an epistemic exponent. In both, however, we have *aNam* occurring after the auxiliary *ir*.

- (11) *naaTT-il innale mazha peyt-irikk-aNam*  
home-loc. yesterday rain fall.-AUX- mod  
‘It must have rained in Kerala yesterday.’ (= It probably . . . .)

Hanybabu (2002) resolves this paradox by showing that *ir* is capable of occurring in multiple positions, as seen from the following two constructions

- (12) a. *paNTA avan iviTe ennum vannu-koNT-irunn-irunnu*  
earlier he here everyday come-CONT-AUX-AUX  
‘Earlier he used to come here every day.’

- b. *paNTA avan iviTe ennum vannu-koNT-irunn-irikk-aNam*  
earlier he here everyday come-CONT-AUX-AUX- mod  
‘Earlier he must have been coming here every day.’

- c. *\*paNTA avan iviTe ennum vannu-koNT-irunn-irikk-aN-oo*  
earlier he here everyday come-CONT-AUX-AUX- mod -Q

- d. *\*paNTA avan iviTe ennum vannu-koNT-irunn-irikk-eeNTa*  
earlier he here everyday come-CONT-AUX-AUX- mod -NEG

- e. *paNTA avan iviTe ennum vannu-koNT-irunn-irikk-illa*  
earlier he here everyday come-CONT-AUX-AUX-NEG  
‘Earlier he may not have been coming here every day.’

- (13) a. *avan iviTe ennum vann-irunn-irikk-aNam*  
 he here everyday come AUX-AUX- mod  
 ‘He must have been coming here every day.’
- b. \**avan iviTe ennum vannu-irunn-irikk-aN-oo*  
 he here everyday come- AUX-AUX- mod -Q
- c. \**avan iviTe ennum vannu-irunn-irikk-eeNTa*  
 he here everyday come- AUX-AUX- mod -NEG
- d. *avan iviTe ennum vann-irunn-irikk-illa*  
 he here everyday everyday come-AUX-AUX-NEG  
 ‘He may not have been coming here every day.’

Thus, we see that the two meanings of the modals (i.e. the higher (epistemic) and the lower (root)) are indeed matched by different structural positions. That is, the *ir* licensing the epistemic modality exponent is the higher one, and the *ir* licensing the deontic modality exponent is the lower one.

3. Sentences with the verbal suffix *aNam* expressing Deontic modality are also distinguished by the case marking of their subject NPs: Nominative or Dative. As noted in section 1, sentences with nominative case marked subject NPs are Speaker-oriented, expressing their Speaker’s attitude, whereas the sentences with dative case marking are Subject oriented, expressing their Grammatical subject’s attitude. In fact, the subject oriented sentences (i.e. those with dative subjects) such as those in (14 a) can be expanded with it being the complement of the possessives verb *unTA* ‘be’, as in (14 b).<sup>3</sup>

- (14) a. *avanA viiTT-il pook-aNam*  
 he dat. house-loc. go- mod

<sup>3</sup>iii In fact, even the fuller form of *aNam*, *veNam* ‘want’, when appearing with dative subject, permits the expansion with the verb *unTA*.

1. *enikka/\*naan caaya veeNam (enna unTA)*  
 ‘I want tea’



b. *avanA viiTT-il pookaNam ennA uNTA*

he dat. house-loc. go mod COMP be

‘He has the desire that he go home’

The expanded form is, however, not available for the speaker oriented deontic modality sentences, unless the matrix clause takes the speaker or anyone else as the Subject of the clause, as seen from the following contrast.

(15) a. *raaman viiTT-il pook-aNam*

Raman-nom. house-loc. go mod

‘Raman must go home’

b. *\*raaman viiTT-il pook-aNam ennA uNTA*

Raman-nom house-loc. go mod COMP be

‘Raman wishes that he must go home’

c. *raaman viiTT-il pook-aNam ennA*

Raman-nom house-loc. go mod COMP

*enikkA/ayaaLkkA uNTA*

I dat he dat be

‘I/He wishe(s) that Raman must go home’

Unlike the speaker oriented deontics, the subject oriented deontic sentence cannot take a subject other than its own subject for its expanded form as well.

(16) a. *\*avanA viiTT-il pookaNam ennA ramanA uNTA*

he dat. house-loc. go mod COMP Raman dat be

‘Raman wishes that he must go home’

b. *raamanA viiTT-il pookaNam ennA uNTA*

he dat. house-loc. go mod COMP be

‘Raman wishes that he must go home’

The Subject of the subject oriented deontic may then belong to the matrix clause while the embedded clause with the modal has a coreferential *pro* subject in the underlying structure.<sup>4</sup>

(17)  $[_{VP} raamanA_i [_{CP} [_{IP} pro_i viiTT-il pookaNam] ennA] unTA]$

The dative case on the subject of the subject oriented sentences could be due to the latent presence of the verb *uNTA*, which is capable of assigning an inherent dative case to its so called subject, as is evident from independently known facts.

(18) a. *innA enikkA pani uNTA*

today I-dat. fever be

‘Today, I have fever’

Or literally ‘There is fever to me today’

b. *raamanA avalooTA sneeham uNTA*

Raaman dat she-soc. affection be

‘Raman has affection towards her’

Or ‘There is affection towards her to me’

It may then be argued that the verb *uNTA* takes an obligatory argument with inherent Dative as one of its complements.

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<sup>4</sup> Within the embedded clause the modal may have a further embedded infinitive clausal complement with a controlled PRO subject.

In other words, these are reduced clauses of possessives clauses. Our conjecture here also receives support from clefting phenomenon as shown below:

(19) a. *avanA viiTT-il pookaNam enna aaNA uLLatA*

he dat. house-loc. go mod COMP FOC be- nomn.

‘It is to go home that he wishes’

b. *raaman viiTT-il pook-aNam enna aaNA enikka uLLatA*

Raman house-loc. go mod COMP FOC I dat be nomn.

‘It is that Raman must go home that I wish’

However, another analysis (cf. also Jayaseelan (2004) , wherein the suffix *aNam* may be held to be responsible for assigning Dative Case also looks quite plausible, given the fact that the postposition *veeNTi* ‘for’, a derivative from the verbal source of the suffix, can only occur with a Dative NP as complement in the language. Under such analysis, the Dative argument may start out as an inherently case assigned internal argument of the modal suffix *aNam* beside the nonfinite clausal complement with a PRO subject controlled by the Dative argument in the matrix clause. However, for the present, we just point to these two possible alternatives without indicating any preference for either of the analyses.

4. Apart from *aNam*, the modal suffix *aam* also triggers the case alternation: Nominative vs Dative, as mentioned earlier. However, with the suffix *-aam*, nominative case for subject is permitted only with the volitional sentences.<sup>5</sup> The rest of its uses involve dative subjects expressing modal notions like permission, ability, possibility and the like.

#### (Volition)

(20) a. *ñaan paTam kaaN-aam*

I nom. picture see-mod

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the nominative subject of sentences with modal *-aam* could imply possibility too.

‘I shall see the movie’

b. \**nijjaL paTam kaaN-aam*

You picture see- mod

‘You shall see the movie’

c. \**avan paTam kaaN-aam*

He picture see- mod

‘He shall see the movie’

**(Ability or Permissive)**

(21) a. *enikka paTam kaaN-aam*

I dat picture see- mod

‘I can/may see the movie’

‘I am permitted to see the movie’

b. *nijjaLkka paTam kaaNaam*

you dat picture see- mod

‘You can/may see the movie’

‘You are permitted to see the movie’

c. *avanA paTam kaaNaam*

He dat picture see- mod

‘He can/may see the movie’

‘He is permitted to see the movie’

All the sentences with the verbal suffix *-aam* taking dative subjects are either impersonal construction if they are expressive of the Speaker’s point of view; or are expressive of the ability of the grammatical subject. In fact, there are paraphrases of these where the suffix is replaced by verbs expressing possibility, permission, or ability, while the main verb occurs in its infinitive form.

(22) a. *ninṇaLkka paTam kaaNaan pat't'um*  
 You dat picture see-to possible  
 'It is possible/permitted for you to see the movie'

b. *ninṇaLkka paTam kaaNaan kaziyum*  
 You dat picture see-to able  
 'You will be able to see the movie'

c. *enikka veeNamenkil akattA varaan aakum*  
 I dat required if inside come to possible  
 'It is possible (if I want to) for me to come inside'

d. *enikka akattA varaan kaziyum*  
 I dat inside come to able  
 'I will be able to come inside'

Surprisingly, with the exception of the volitional, the negation of the above sentences with the suffix *-aam* is not effected by suffixing the negative to the verb; it is rather done periphrastically by attaching the negative *illa* to verbs expressing ability, permission, possibility and the like, keeping the content verb in the infinitive form.

(23) *enikka/ninṇaLkka/avanA paTam kaaNaan pat't'illa/kaziyilla*  
 I dat/ you dat./ he dat. picture see to possible not/able not  
 'It is not possible/ permitted for me/you/him to see the movie'

Hence, the plausible analysis for the sentences with the suffix *aam* or the verb *pat't'um* may involve them as the V of VP taking an NP and clause as complements, wherein the former is realized in the spec of VP with inherent Dative Case and the infinitive clause is realized as complement to the V. The clausal complement if an infinitive clause may have

a PRO subject controlled by the Dative case argument in the matrix clause, as shown in the structure below.

(24)  $[_{VP} raamanA_i [_{V'} [_{CP} [_{IP} PRO_i paTam kaaN (-aan)]] [_{V'} aam/ pat't'um]]]$

The difference between *aam* and *pat't'um* then should follow from their nature; that is, while the modal *aam* being a suffix will be adjoined to by the V of its clausal complement, the modal verb *pat't'um* will have clausal complement with an inflected infinitival verb. In the former case, it is conceivable that the clausal complement may involve a raising subject, for a finite clause cannot intervene between the dative subject and the modalised verb which could have suggested a *pro* subject for the latter.

(25)  $*[raamanA [pro paTam kaaNaam ennu] uNTA]$

As an evidence for the fact that the modal suffix *aam* is responsible for assigning inherent case dative to its subject, we may look at the following paradigm of sentences, wherein different modals attached to bare verbs are followed by the Aux *aayirunnu* signifying counterfactuals.

- (26) a. *raaman var-um-aayir-unnu*  
           ‘Raman would have come’  
       b. *raaman var-aNam-aayir-unnu*  
           ‘Raman should have come’  
       c. *raamanA var-aNam-(enn-uNT)-aayir-unnu*  
           ‘Raaman had to come’  
       d. *\*raaman var-aam-aayir-unnu*  
       e. *raamanA var-aam-aayirunnu*  
           ‘Raman could have come’

The epistemic *-aam*, however, as expected takes a subject with nominative case, but cannot be interrogated.

(27) a. *paNTA avan ninne caticc-irikk-aam*  
           earlier he you-acc cheat.aux-mod

‘Long back, he might have cheated you’ ( Probability)

- b. \**paNTA avan ninne caticc-irikk-aam-oo*  
earlier he you-acc cheat.aux-mod-Q

Another modal suffix *-um* can function as an exponent of both alethic (possibility) modality and epistemic modality. In its alethic function, negation and question can scope over it.

- (28) a. *innale mazha peyt-irikk-um*  
Yesterday rain fall.-AUX-mod  
‘It would have rained yesterday?’

- b. *innale mazha peyt-irikk-um-oo*  
yesterday rain fall.-AUX- mod -Q  
‘Would it have rained yesterday?’

- c. *innale mazha peyt-irikk-illa*  
yesterday rain fall.-AUX-NEG  
‘It would not have rained yesterday?’ (from Hanybabu, 2002)

There can be even multiple instances of *um* in a sentence, but in such instances, the outer *um* qualifies as the epistemic.

- (29) *avan var-um aayirikkum*  
He come-mod be-AUX-mod  
‘He may come’

However, the epistemic *um* does not permit negation or interrogation to take scope over it.

- (30) a. \**avan varum aayirikilla*  
b. \**avan varum aayirikk-um-oo*

But the modality can take scope over negation.

- (31) *avan var-ill aayirikk-um*

He    come-Neg   be-AUX-mod  
'He may not come'

The first instance of *um* may be replaced by any of the other modals

- (32) a. *avan varaNam aayirikkum*  
He    come-mod   be-AUX-mod  
'He may have to come'
- b. *avan varaNT aayirikkum*  
He    come-mod not be-AUX-mod  
'He need not have to come'
- c. *avanA varaNam aayirikkum*  
He dat   come-mod   be-AUX-mod  
'He may want to come'

- (33)    *avanA varaam aayirikkum*  
He dat   come-mod   be-AUX-mod  
'He may be able to come'

### Conclusion:

Thus we see that the root modality in Malayalam is structurally distinguished by their external properties. Both *aNam* and *aam* being reduced forms of fully verbal expressions perhaps head their own VPs. If the former acts as an exponent of deontic modality expressing Speaker's attitude, then the subject of the sentence containing it may be generated as an external argument in the vP (cf. Chomsky, 2000). However, if the grammatical subject's attitude were to be expressed, then the Subject could be base generated as an inherently case marked internal argument, of the existential verb external to the clause with the modal, or the modal itself. In either case, the suffix *aNam* may be assumed to take a non-finite clausal complement headed by a bare verb. For the modal suffix *aam* on the other hand, the modal itself may be realized within two structural configurations; for the permissives and abilitatives, the modal subcategorizes for an



inherently case marked argument and a clausal non-finite clause as complements while for its alternant with nominative case Subject, the modal subcategorizes for only a non-finite clausal complement while subject would be base generated as the external argument of the vP. For epistemic modality, on the other hand, the subject of the sentence is always nominative case marked, and it is outside the scope of question and negation.

### **Abbreviations:**

Nom : nominative  
CONT: continuous  
COMP : complementizer  
Dat: dative  
Loc: locative  
Mod: modal  
Neg: negation  
Perf. : Perfective  
Q: question  
AUX: auxiliary  
PRT: particle  
Soc.: Sociative  
FOC: focus  
Nomn: nominalization

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