

What “must” and “should” can mean

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The meaning of epistemic modals like “must” and “should”, although widely discussed, is far from being well understood. *Prima facie*, “must” seems to indicate the necessity of whatever it precedes. Yet, it seems perfectly appropriate to assert “It must be raining” when we only see people carrying around wet umbrellas, but not when we have a direct perceptual evidence, that is, when we can actually see that it is raining. This observation motivated the view that preceding an assertion with “must” makes it weaker (see e.g. Karttunen (1972) or Kratzer (1977)).

By contrast, von Fintel and Gillies (2010) argued that “must” functions as an evidential marker signaling the presence of an inference. According to these authors, what has been erroneously taken as weakness is simply indirectness of the evidence, and hence there is no reason to doubt that “must” is a strong necessity modal. Although, as I shall argue, the first part of their claim is most likely correct, von Fintel and Gillies jumped to their conclusion too quickly, because they failed to take into account the variety of possible inferences. Might it not be the case that “must” indicates only one particular type of inference while, for instance, the weak necessity modal “should” signals a different type?

I will present a theoretical and empirical support for the claim that “should” can be thought of as an evidential marker signaling the presence of induction, whereas “must” usually indicates that the assertion is based on an abductive inference. Furthermore, I will discuss possible consequences of this finding for the semantics of epistemic modals.