

Wat mutt, dat mutt: ‘Independent’ modals in West Germanic vernaculars

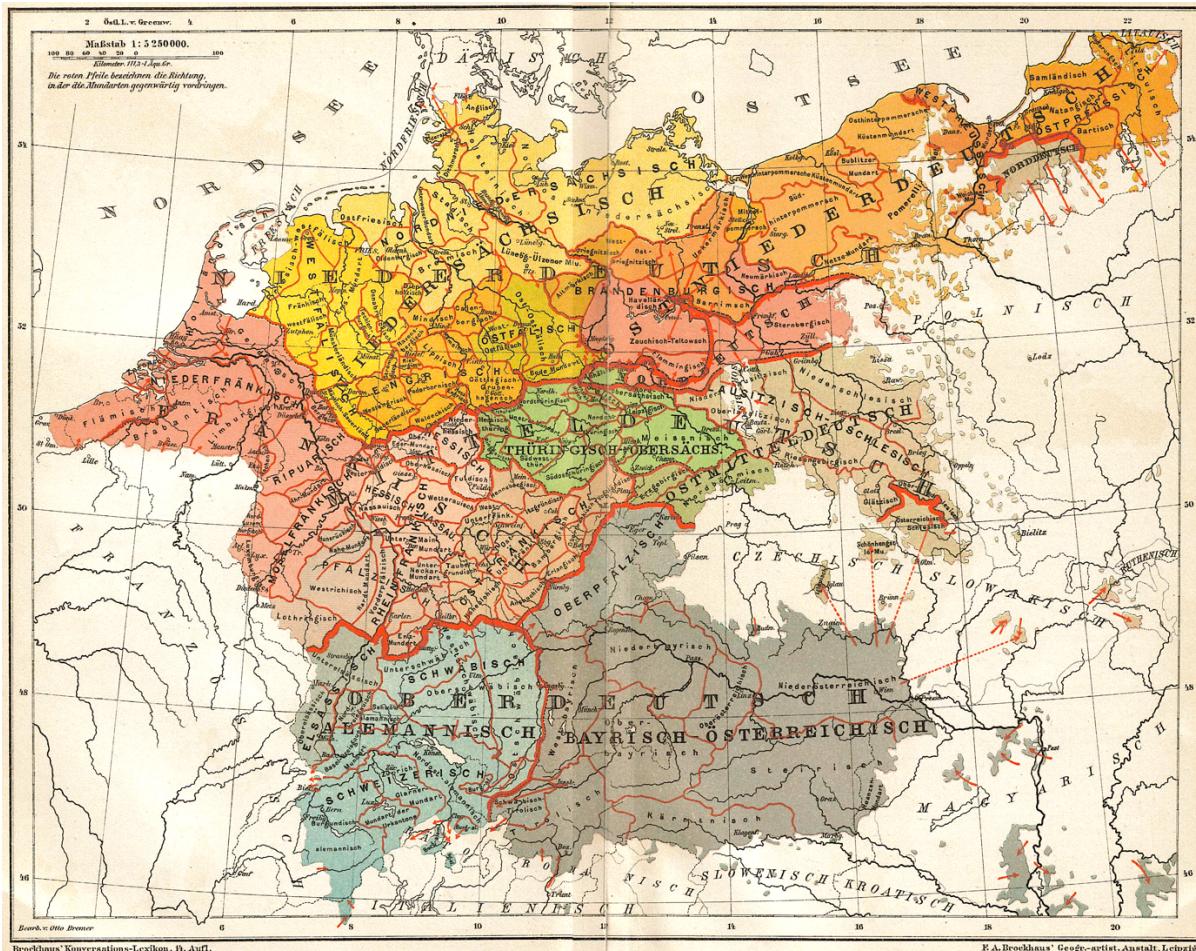
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Overview of paper

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Map 1: “Karte der deutschen Mundarten”, *Brockhaus’ Konversations-Lexikon*, 14th edn, vol. 5. K.A. Brockhaus’ Geographisch-artistische Anstalt, Leipzig 1892. (Licenced under CC BY-SA 3.0). Online source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brockhaus_1894_Deutsche_Mundarten.jpg>.

1 Background

- Topic of this paper: 'Independent' use of the modal verbs *kunnen* 'can', *mogen* 'may', and *moeten* 'must' which appears to be peculiar to Dutch. Not found in English and German cognates (cf. e.g. Mortelmans et al. 2009: 36–37).
- The literature on modal verbs in Germanic has primarily paid attention to the larger standard languages. In this paper we investigate whether the Dutch independent modal construction is also found in lesser-studied West Germanic languages and dialects.
- Primarily spoken vernaculars, hence few written sources or comprehensive grammatical descriptions. Data has been gathered wherever we could find it: early dialect dictionaries and word collections, spoken language corpora, and grammar sketches.
- The construction is found to be attested in Dutch and (western) Low German dialects, Frisian in the Netherlands, and Afrikaans. In contrast, no attestations found so far in High German or the easternmost Low German dialects.

2 'Independent' modals in Present-Day Dutch

- The construction under investigation is shown in three Dutch examples in (1)–(3):
 - (1) *Tsjernobyl moet dus dicht. Maar kan dat wel?*
'So Chernobyl has to be closed. But is that even possible?' (lit. 'can that even')
(CHN, periodical, 1994)
 - (2) *De schilder zal zich iedere keer als hij een ladder neerzet moeten afvragen of dat mag.*
'Every time the painter puts down a ladder, he will have to ask himself if that is permitted.' (lit. 'if that may')
(CHN, newspaper, 2004)
 - (3) *In één kwartaal kunnen we 500.000 stuks leveren als dat moet.*
'In three months we can supply 500,000 units if that is necessary.' (lit. 'if that must')
(CHN, newspaper, 2005)
- Distinguishing features: **no infinitive**, i.e. the modal verb is used alone; **eventive subject**, i.e. the subject refers to an event, not a participant. In (1)–(3) the subject is the demonstrative pronoun *dat*; in (4) it is a noun phrase with a verbal noun:
 - (4) *Het berijden van deze weg kan slechts met een fourwheeldrive.*
'Driving on this road is only possible [lit. 'can only'] with a four-wheel drive.'
(CHN, newspaper, 2010)
- NB: The investigation does not concern the 'directional modal' construction in (5). Here the subject refers to a participant rather than an event, and a directional expression (adverb, prepositional phrase, etc.). This construction is found across the Germanic languages, including Scandinavian, (High) German, and earlier English, cf. (6).

- (5) *Johannes moest in de Gevankenis*

'Johannes had to go to prison'

(DBNL, Van Swaanenburg, 1728)

- (6) *My Emperor hath wrote, I must from hence*

(Shakespeare, *Cymb.* III. v. 2, 1623)

- The different nature of the Dutch construction in (1)–(4) is noted by Mortelmans et al. (2009) and has recently been the subject of some discussion (Nuyts 2011, 2013; Honselaar & Olbertz 2016; Olbertz & Honselaar 2017). The modals in smaller Germanic languages like Frisian and Low German have attracted much less attention.

3 Material and methods

- Dialect dictionaries and descriptions from the last two centuries. Many of these freely available online because of various digitalisation efforts (DBNL, eWND, IA, MDZ).
- For the Frisian material we consulted the corpora Korpus Sprutsen Frysk (KSF) and Yntegrearre Taaldatabank Frysk (YTF) as well as the Frisian texts in the Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank (NVb).
- Many Low German sources only available in print. In locating these we made use especially of the bibliography of the Society for Low German Studies (VndS 2018) and the online bibliography compiled by Bordasch (2018).

Table 1: Online collections used

Collection	Abbr.	Web address
Digitale Bibliotheek van de Nederlandse Letteren	DBNL	< https://dbnl.org/ >
Elektronische Woordenbank van de Nederlandse Dialecten	eWND	< http://meertens.knaw.nl/ewnd/ >
Internet Archive	IA	< https://archive.org/ >
Korpus Sprutsen Frysk	KSF	< https://www1.fa.knaw.nl/ksf.html >
Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum	MDZ	< https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/ >
Nederlandse Volksverhalenbank	NVb	< http://www.verhalenbank.nl/ >
Yntegrearre Taaldatabank Frysk	YTF	< http://tdb.fryske-akademy.eu/tdb/ >

- The corpora were searched orthographically (KSF) or per lemma (YTF). In the dictionaries we scrutinised the definitions and example sentences under the lemmas *kunnen*, *mogen*, and *moeten* or their cognates.
- Necessary caveats: Sources vary greatly in their scope and coverage; no data on usage frequency, function, etc.; no negative evidence (non-attestation ≠ non-existence).

4 Findings

- **Dialects of the Netherlands:** The construction has been noticed by many linguists and amateur lexicographers. We have found it in Hollandic, Brabantian, Limburgish, and Low Saxon sources. (7)–(8) give two examples from Low Saxon dialects:

- (7) Groningen (Low Saxon)
*Hou **kin** t! = Hoe is 't mogelik!*
'How is it possible!'
(Ter Laan 1929, s.v. *kinn*)

- (8) Barneveld (Low Saxon)
damōsnīmagən [= 'dat moest niet mogen']
'That shouldn't be allowed'
(Van Schothorst 1904, s.v. *magən*)

- Often recorded in idiomatic expressions, especially with *moeten*, as in (9)–(10):

- (9) Groningen (Low Saxon)
wat mout dat mout [or:] as 't mout den mout 't
'what has to be, has to be'
(Molema 1887: s.v. *mouten*)

- (10) Kempen (Brabantian)
A's 't moet dan moet et, 'Als het noodzakelijk is moet het natuurlijk gebeuren'
'If it's necessary, of course it has to happen'
(De Bont 1958, s.v. *mutə(n)*)

- Also found in the Dutch 'daughter language' Afrikaans. The standard dictionaries give several recent examples (e.g. HAT, s.v. *kan*¹; WAT, s.vv. ³*mag*, ¹*moet*). The earliest example we have found is from a late 19th-century source:

- (11) *Di eerste boeki wat "Di Genootskap van Regte Afrikaanders" uitge is Di Eerste Beginsels van di Afrikaanse Taal. En dit kan oek ni anders ni*
'The first booklet published by "The Society of True Afrikaaners" is *The basic principles of the Afrikaans language*. And it can't be in any other way'
(Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners 1882 [1876])

- **Frisian:** Examples like (12)–(13) are easy to find in the modern Frisian material.

- (12) *ik woe even wat wetter helje, **kin** dat?*
'I'd just like to get some water, is that possible?'
(KSF, speech)

- (13) *fan Fryslân sizze wy ja, it moat wol*
‘from Fryslân we say, yes, it is necessary [including Frisian in the school curriculum]’
(KSF, discussion)
- One might suspect recent Dutch influence here, but examples can be found in sources from the 19th and early 20th century as well, as in (14) from Johan Winkler’s *Dialecticon*, and the proverb in (15):
- (14) Schiermonnikoog Frisian (dated January 1871)
In hi kriige so'n huenger dot hi wuuë wol graag siin liif fol ite mooi de swiine, mar dot mocht net.
‘And he got so hungry that he would have liked to stuff himself with the pig, but that wasn’t allowed.’
(YTF; Winkler 1874: 458)
- (15) *Hwet moat, dat moat, sei de boer, en hy forkoft syn kou en koste in prûk.*
‘What has to be, has to be, said the farmer, and he sold his cow and bought a wig’
(WFT, s.v. *moatte*; *Frysl.*, 1916)
- **Low German:** We have found attestations in sources from nine different locations in northwestern Germany, e.g. Osnabrück (16) and Emden (17):
- (16) Osnabrück (Westphalian)
et mag lichte, et mag sachte dat [...] ‘es ist leicht möglich, daß [...]’
‘it may easily be that...’
(Rosemann gen. Klöntrup 1982 [1824], s.v. *mügen*)
- (17) Emden (Ostfriesland, North Low Saxon)
't moot. [i.e.:] es muß sein, muß geschehen
‘it has to be, has to happen’
(Krüger 1843: 42)
- The expression *wat mutt, dat mutt* is still used today and appears to be salient and noticeable to speakers of other German varieties. (18) is from a humorous radio vignette from the Northern German Broadcasting where it is used to characterise an alleged Northern German sense of resignation:
- (18) *Es gibt im Norden gewisse Sachzwänge, an denen man nicht vorbeikommt. Wenn ein derartiger Sachzwang vorliegt, sagt der Norddeutsche: "Wat mutt, dat mutt."*
‘In Northern Germany there are certain practical necessities which one can’t avoid. If one such necessity presents itself, the Northern German will say, *Wat mutt, dat mutt.*’
(NDR 1 Niedersachsen 2008)

- This particular expression is also attested in eastern Low German, in the same proverb as in the Frisian example (15) above. But here the modal is used with an infinitive, as shown in (19). Perhaps this is accidental, perhaps an infinitive was required in eastern dialects.

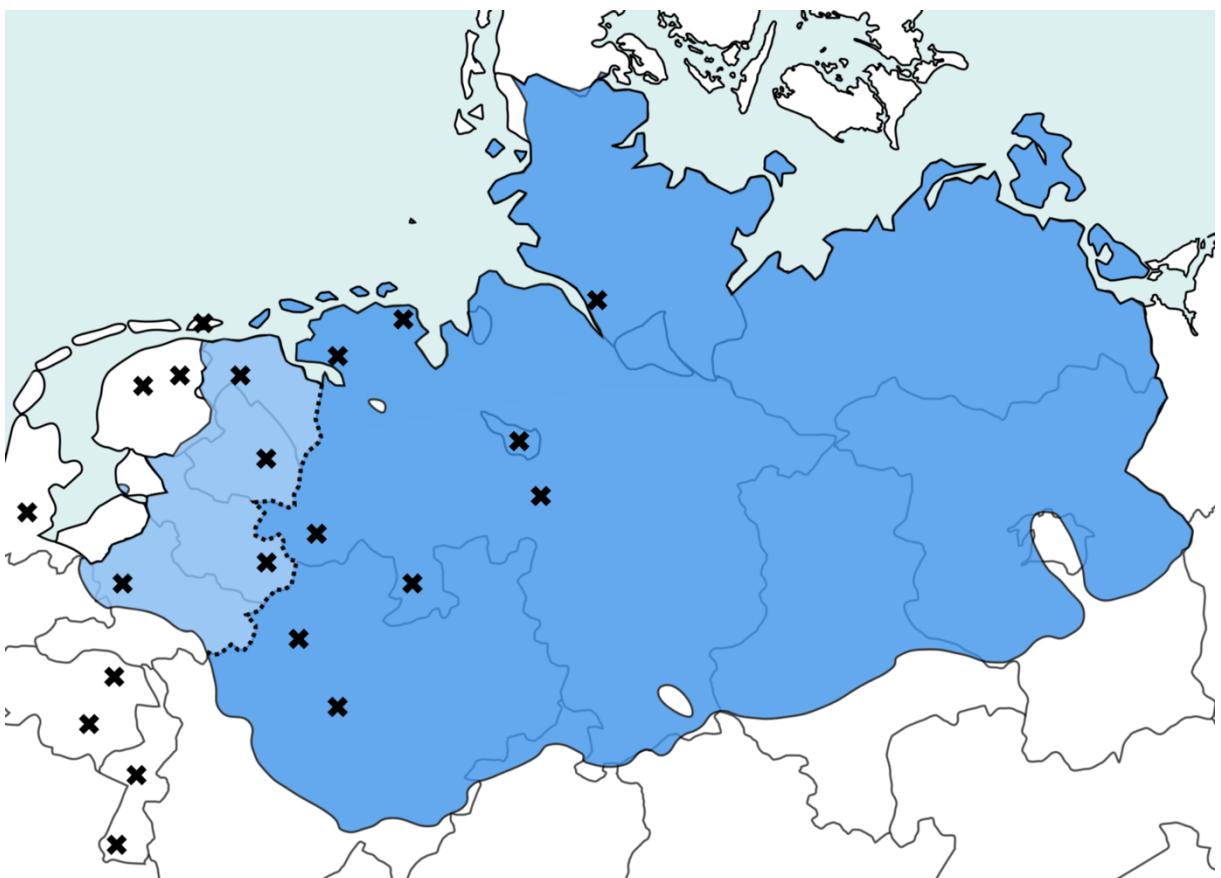
- (19) Hinterpommern (East Pomeranian)

Wat wesen mutt, datt mutt wesen! säd' jenn' gaud' Buur; verköfft sin Ossen, unn köfft sick'n Priück

“‘What has to be, has to be!’ said the good farmer, sold his ox and bought a wig’

(Haken 1994 [1806]: 179)

- Map 2 shows the geographical distribution of the attestations we have found so far. Our hypothesis is that the independent modal construction is an areal feature of ‘northwestern continental’ West Germanic (including the side branch Afrikaans).



Map 2: Distribution of attestations in Low German, Frisian, and eastern Dutch. (Based on map in the public domain). Online source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nds-de_nds-nl.svg>

5 Historical note: *maglichte* 'perhaps'

- Unsurprising to find syntactic parallels between Dutch and Low German dialects, as these are part of one continuum, and in fact used to be regarded as the same language, cf. Map 1. (And Frisian, while more distantly related, has been in contact with Low German and Dutch for centuries.)
- In the Low German material we also often encounter the epistemic adverb *maglichte* (or *magsachte*) 'perhaps, maybe', cf. (20). No cognate in modern Dutch, but found in both Middle Dutch (21) and Middle Low German (22) texts. We suggest that this is another shared pattern which was lost in Dutch but survived in Low German dialects.

- (20) Helzendorf (Grafschaft Hoya, North Low Saxon)
mach lichde bzw. *mach sagde* „kann sein, vielleicht“.
 ‘may be, perhaps’
 (NW, s.v. *mögen*)
- (21) Middle Dutch (Brabant, c.1400)
Men vindt heden enen raet, machlichte hi wert morghen quaet
 ‘If one finds a solution today, perhaps it will turn bad tomorrow’
 (MNW, s.v. *machlichte*; *Melib.* 1544)
- (22) Middle Low German (Lübeck, 1485)
machlichte ik mochte schnelliken steruen vmme myner boszheit
 ‘perhaps I might soon die because of my wickedness’
 (Schiller & Lübben 1875–1881, s.v. *machlichte*; *Lüb. Gebetb.*)
- Interesting from a cross-Germanic perspective because epistemic adverbs are not usually derived this way: The most usual etymologies are MAY + verb and intensifier + 'easily'. The Dutch/Low German type MAY + 'easily' intermediate between the two; cf. Table 2.

Table 2: Epistemic adverbs across Germanic

MAY + 'happen'	Dutch <i>misschien</i> , Frisian <i>miskien</i> , Danish <i>måske</i> , Norwegian <i>kanskje</i> , Swedish <i>kanske</i> , Icelandic <i>kannski</i> , older English <i>mayhap</i>
MAY + 'be'	English <i>maybe</i> (cf. French <i>peut-être</i>)
intensifier + 'easily'	German <i>vielleicht</i> , Dutch <i>wellicht</i> , Frisian <i>allicht</i>
MAY + 'easily'	Low German <i>maglichte/magsachte</i> , Middle Dutch <i>maglichte/machode</i>

6 Conclusions

- Independent modal construction: Not unique to contemporary standard Dutch; found in Dutch dialects, Afrikaans, Frisian, and western Low German. In addition, the possibly related adverb *maglichte* was found both in Middle Dutch and Middle Low German.
- Shared features between closely related languages and dialects is of course the rule rather than the exception. But the recent literature (e.g. Nuyts 2011, 2013; Honselaar & Olbertz 2016; Olbertz & Honselaar 2017) has only looked at standard Dutch.
- Reference works on European languages often limited to the modern standard languages (e.g. Hansen & de Haan 2009; Rothstein & Thieroff 2010; but cf. Boye & Kehayov 2016 for a recent counterexample). This may give the impression of categorical differences between languages (e.g. Dutch vs. German); a less standard-centred approach reveals a more gradient picture.
- While the 'independent modal' construction may have been overlooked in the recent literature, it was, of course, noticed and recorded by many early dialectologists and amateur lexicographers. Much of this earlier literature has been digitalised and made available online. We hope this may lead to more (re)discoveries in the Germanic dialects.

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