A Study in Syntactic Variation: Double Modal Constructions

Within generative grammar, grammatical representation conceives of clauses as containing only one modal verb. This view dates back to Chomsky’s (1957) *Syntactic Structure* and is still commonly found in the literature today. However, certain dialects of American English, particularly in the Southeastern U.S., allow two modals in a clause. These are known as double modal constructions (DMCs). The following is a representative spontaneous example that I have collected (data collected from four speakers who hail from the area in and around Memphis, TN, ‘the Delta’):

1. The participants are asked to choose two of the ideas that they *might could* adapt for use in their classes.
2. Yeah, I think she *might would* like those.

Data such as these have been approached in the literature in several ways. The approach put forth by Di Paolo (1989) treats the two modals as a modal-modal compound – a single lexical item. Battistella (1995) argues that these occurrences fall outside of the core grammar and do not follow the usual rules of sentence formation; one modal is a true modal, while the other is deficient. Boertien (1986) falls somewhere between these two, arguing that some DMCs are two verbal heads under a single V-node, while others are two auxiliaries, depending on the DMC. These analyses will be shown to be inadequate, as they do not properly account for the behavior of DMCs.

I will show, in light of Cinque’s (1999) proposal regarding the nature of adverbs and functional heads, that with respect to negation, VP ellipsis, (and, to a lesser degree, tag questions and inversion), for speakers of Delta English, DMCs are not single lexical items and both are true modals that occupy distinct head positions. For example, with negation, it is possible to modify both modals with *not*, which can only be supported by a head (Zanuttini (1997)):

3. a. Well, it might not would bother you, I would guess.
   b. Well, it might wouldn’t bother you, I would guess.
4. a. *...they might not could adapt it for use in their classes.*
   b. *...they might couldn’t adapt it for use in their classes.*

According to one speaker interviewed, all of the examples in (3) and (4) are grammatical. Furthermore, the meaning of the sentence in (3a) differs from that in (3b); the same is true of (4a) and (4b). The difference is one of scope – (4a) means ‘It is not probable that they could adapt it for use in their classes’ (negates the probability), while (4b) means ‘It is probable that they could not adapt it for use in their classes’ (negates the ability). The same is true for (3a) and (3b); *...it might not would bother you...* can be paraphrased as ‘It is not probable that it was going to bother you’ (negates the probability), where *...it might wouldn’t bother you...* can be paraphrased as ‘It is probable that it was not going to bother you’ (negates *would*).

Data from VP ellipsis also lends support to the idea of *may/might* occupying a head position. The following three examples were presented to one speaker and he was asked to choose the most grammatical one:

5. a. She might would like those, and he might, too.
   b. *She might would like those, and he would, too.*
   c. She might would like those, and he might would, too.

According to this speaker, (5a) is possible, but (5b) is not. (5c) is also acceptable, but (5a) is preferred. Only heads can license VP ellipsis (or more specifically, “the ellipsis site must be in construction with, or perhaps governed by, a member of ‘Aux,’” (p 439 Johnson (2001)). It is impossible to elide the VP plus ModP\textsubscript{epistemic}, as the two do not form a constituent (they are separated by *would* occupying the head position of ModP\textsubscript{root}). ModP\textsubscript{root} plus the VP do; this is what is elided in (5a).

I conclude that DMCs are the result of epistemic modality being realized as a head in conjunction with root modality being expressed as a head in this dialect of American English, ‘Delta’ English. This is an improvement over previous analyses, which could not properly account for the behavior of DMCs, perhaps because of the wide range of data involved. In the Delta variety, both modals function independently as heads and are a reflection of the richly articulated structure of UG. In addition, the constructions provide more evidence to support Cinque’s (1999) analysis of a richly articulated structure of the clause.

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1 For the purposes of this paper, speakers interviewed for grammaticality judgments were from Greenwood, MS; Memphis, TN; and Pine Bluff, AK.
Selected Bibliography:


