

EXPLORING THE NUANCES OF MODAL VERB NEGATION IN ENGLISH: AN ANALYSIS OF AUXILIARY AND MAIN VERB NEGATION

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Abstract: *Although modal verb negation is a significant aspect of the English language, it is covered rather sparingly by grammarians, seemingly receiving little attention in linguistic studies. The present paper examines the intricacies of modal verb negation, with a particular emphasis on the distinction between modal auxiliary and main verb negation. In auxiliary verb negation, the negation relates to the meaning of the modal verb, shifting the implications of the sentence and frequently entailing lack of obligation, possibility, or necessity. On the other hand, in main verb negation, the main verb is negated in terms of its meaning, while the modal verb preserves its affirmative sense. The appropriate understanding of the many shades of meanings that are expressed by modal verb negation depends on this distinction. The present paper encompasses several critical aspects pertaining to topics related to modal verb negation, such as the distribution and interpretation of negated forms and the syntactic structures where modal verb negation occurs. We additionally analyse the semantic and pragmatic implications of modal verb negation, taking into account its impact on the meaning and interpretation of sentences in diverse contexts.*

Keywords: *modal negation, main verb negation, epistemic modality, deontic modality, semantic implication*

1. Introduction

Modality and negation constitute themselves as multifaceted linguistic manifestations which have been under the scrutiny of studies not only in linguistics, but also in philosophy and logic. It is a complex linguistic phenomenon, playing a crucial role in conveying the speaker's stance toward the proposition.

As Morante and Sporleder (2012: 224) point out, ‘modality is a grammatical category that allows the expression of aspects related to the attitude of the speaker towards her statements in terms of degree of certainty, reliability, subjectivity, sources of information, and perspective. We understand modality in a broad sense, which involves related concepts like “subjectivity”, “hedging”, “evidentiality”, “uncertainty”, “committed belief,” and “factuality”’. It encompasses various shades of meaning, encompassing epistemic, deontic (Portner 2009, Larreya 2009, besides epistemic and deontic, employ buletic modality¹) among others, indicating various levels of possibility, probability, necessity, obligation, permission, etc. They are used

¹ De Haan (2013), Larreya (2009), Coates (1983), Bybee et al. (1994) include and discuss also ‘root’ modality, incorporating dynamic modality as well. In fact, root modality encapsulates all non-epistemic modalities (cf. Larreya 2009:11).

to convey the speaker's attitude towards the proposition, as well as to indicate the degree of certainty or uncertainty that is associated with it (cf. Palmer, 1990). Bybee et al. (1994: 177) exemplify modality in terms of agent-oriented, speaker-oriented, epistemic, and subordinating.

2. Modality and Negation

In combination with negation, modal verbs add further nuances to the meaning of a sentence, altering its implications and emphasizing different aspects. Modal verb negation is an essential aspect of this system, allowing speakers to deny or negate the modal proposition and its associated implications.

However, 'even though the philosophical aspect of (the interaction of modality and negation) may be well-studied, the linguistic side of the problem has been largely ignored so far', as de Haan (2013:11) notes. This is one of the reasons why we investigate the intricate relationship between modality and negation, analysing the semantic subtleties that emerge when modal verbs are negated.

The negation of modal verbs influences the interpretation and communicative intent of a sentence in a significant way. Despite the importance of modal verb negation in the English language, it has received relatively little attention in linguistic studies, with grammarians and researchers typically providing only cursory treatment of the topic. The study of modal verb negation is a challenging task due to the fact that it involves not only syntax but also semantics and pragmatics. When analysing modal verb negation, it is essential to delve into the intricacies generated by at least two types of negation: auxiliary (or modal) verb negation and main verb negation, exploring the distinctions they generate. Auxiliary verb negation affects the meaning of the modal verb, while main verb negation affects the main verb's meaning. Understanding the differences between these two types of negation is critical if we want to accurately interpret the nuances of modal verb negation.

Even though negation, as Dahl (2010: 9) posits, 'has in a way been a "low-hanging fruit" for typologists, since few grammatical descriptions fail to provide at least some basic information about negation in the language under study, (...) it has some features that makes it relatively unique among linguistic items, whether lexical or grammatical: it has a comparatively straightforward basic meaning which varies little among languages at the same time as it tends to have grammatical properties that set it off from other items in the language'. However, 'the apparent simplicity is just an illusion', according to de Haan (2013: 9). It is an intricate linguistic operation which engenders transformative effects within sentences, casting an alternative light upon the reality or eventuality of the proposition.

Negation entails the introduction of linguistic elements that signify the non-occurrence or absence of a particular event or proposition. Horn (2001:7) states that, 'all human systems of communication contain a representation of negation (...), for as Spinoza and Hegel argue, any linguistic determination directly or indirectly involves a negation'. When negation intertwines with modal verbs, it weaves a complex fabric of modal strength alteration, substantially shaping the overall import of the sentence. The negation of modal verbs yields a spectrum of outcomes, pivoting the interpretation of modality.

The contrast between *can swim* and *cannot swim* exposes the polarity of dynamic ability, while the negation of *must* in *must not* instils a forceful prohibition within epistemic contexts. In deontic modality, negating *should* generates *should not*, communicating a withholding of recommended action. The intricate duality of modal negation lies in its ability to assert the absence of an action's necessity, as demonstrated by *do not have to*, or to accentuate the outright prohibition, as seen in *must not*.

3. Modal Verbs and Modality (epistemic, deontic, dynamic, intrinsic, extrinsic)

A cornerstone of linguistic expression, modal verbs wield the power to infuse sentences with a spectrum of meanings that encapsulate the intricate dimensions of modality. These verbs, including *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, *would*, *must*, and *ought to*, serve as the conduits through which various modal nuances are conveyed. Their employment enables the speaker to navigate a linguistic continuum that spans from epistemic uncertainties to deontic obligations and dynamic abilities.

The spectrum of modality embodied within modal verbs encompasses epistemic interpretations where *could* might denote potentiality or conditional possibility, and *might* conveys a remote or uncertain likelihood.

In the realm of deontic modality, *should* may entail moral advice or recommendation, whereas *must* imposes a stringent obligation. The dynamic modality domain (coined 'circumstantial modals' by Kratzer 2012, Condoravdi 2002, etc.) is exemplified by *can*, signifying capacity or capability, and *will*, indicating future certainty or prediction. The modal verbs *may*, *might*, and *can* also assume an interpretive role within permission contexts, and, in doing so, they amplify the intricate tapestry of modal meanings.

Epistemic modality encapsulates a speaker's assessment of the probability or certainty associated with a given proposition. Modal verbs such as *must*, *might*, *may*, and *could* are quintessential vehicles for the manifestation of epistemic modality (Palmer, 1990). For instance, the modal verb *must* in the sentence:

My nemesis must be at work

reflects a high degree of certainty, while *might* in:

My nemesis might be ready

denotes a lower level of conviction. The negation of epistemic modality involves a nuanced transformation of modal verbs to reflect doubt or repudiation, as exemplified by

My nemesis must not be at work,

which signifies the speaker's firm belief in the nemesis' absence (cf. Coates, 1983).

Deontic modality revolves around the expression of obligation, permission, or volition. Modal verbs like *should*, *ought to*, *must*, and *have to* serve as the primary vehicles through which deontic modality is conveyed (cf. Palmer, 1990). Illustratively, a sentence such as:

My nemesis should finish his preparations

communicates an inherent obligation, whereas:

My nemesis doesn't have to congratulate me on my good looks

conveys a lack of necessity. The negation of deontic modality necessitates an adjustment in the modal verb to signify permission or the absence of obligation, exemplified by

My nemesis shouldn't finish his preparations.

The way the modal verb *must* behaves when negated exhibits a particularly interesting situation. *Must* is employed to indicate obligation (1a) and prohibition (1b) in positive and negated phrases in the deontic meaning. However, *must* is only used in affirmative sentences conveying *necessity* in its epistemic meaning (2a). *Can't* is the modal verb that expresses the associated negative epistemic modality, which is impossibility (2b).

(1) a. They *must* turn on the light. [*obligation*]

b. They *mustn't* turn on the light. [*prohibition*]

(2) a. The light *must* be turned on. [*necessity*]

b. The light *can't* be turned on. [*impossibility*]

As Radden (2009: 169) notes, 'explanations that have been offered for the use of epistemic *can't* are not very helpful. Palmer (1990: 61) argues that *mustn't* is not used for the negation of epistemic necessity because *can't* is supplied, and Coates (1983: 20) suggests that *can't* is used because *mustn't* is unavailable. Both "explanations" beg the question: why should *can't* be used to denote negated necessity and why should *mustn't* be unavailable?

The negation of a modal sentence can affect the modality or the proposition. The negator *not* does not reveal which expression(s) are negated. The scope of negation is only visible in the paraphrases of negated modal sentences. Thus, sentence (1b) can be paraphrased as „it is necessary for you NOT to turn on the light“, i.e. the proposition is negated, while sentence (2b) can be paraphrased as „it is NOT possible that the light is turned on“, i.e. the modality is negated'.

Dynamic modality pertains to the speaker's evaluation of the feasibility or capability of an action. Modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, and *will* serve as conduits for the expression of dynamic modality. Notably,

Educated people can write

signifies capacity, while

They cannot write

denotes incapability. The negation of dynamic modality often entails the juxtaposition of the modal verb with a negation marker.

Whereas Fowler (2000), de Haan (2013), Coates (1983), Horn (2001), Bybee et al. (1994), etc. discuss mainly epistemic and deontic modality, other grammarians take a different approach, presenting a framework that delineates intrinsic, extrinsic, and speaker-centred modalities. Intrinsic modality centres on the inherent possibility or necessity of a proposition, while extrinsic modality pertains to external influences shaping modal expression. Speaker-centred modality captures the speaker's vantage point in relation to the proposition. Biber et al. (1999:491) and Quirk et al. (1985: 219) also adopt the terms intrinsic and extrinsic modality. They posit that, 'the constraining factors of meaning mentioned above may be divided into two types:

a) Those such as 'permission', 'obligation', and 'volition' which involve some kind of intrinsic human control over events, and

b) Those such as ‘possibility’, ‘necessity’, and ‘prediction’, which do not primarily involve human control of events, but do typically involve human judgment of what is or is not likely to happen.

These two kinds, between which there is a gradient, may be termed intrinsic and extrinsic modality respectively’.

4. Negation of Modality and Semantic Nuances

The negation of modality constitutes an intricate semantic endeavour encompassing the intricate interplay between modal verbs, negation markers, and contextual nuances. By dissecting the semantic ramifications of negation upon various modal verbs, scholarly investigations have illuminated the profound alterations in modal strength engendered by negation (cf. Faller, 2002).

The distinction between auxiliary and main verb negation is essential in understanding the nuances of modal verb negation. While auxiliary negation shifts the meaning of the modal verb and implies a lack of obligation, possibility, or necessity, main verb negation negates the action or event expressed by the main verb while the modal verb retains its affirmative sense (cf. Poletto 2020, Pop 2022). This distinction bears substantial importance in cases of multiple negations in a sentence, as the placement of the negative marker can significantly impact the interpretation of the sentence.

As Huddleston and Pullum (2002) note, in sentences with main verb negation, the negation marker *not* applies directly to the lexical verb, while the modal verb has a positive meaning that is not affected by the negation. In contrast, in sentences with auxiliary (modal) verb negation, the negation marker *not* applies directly to the modal verb, and the modal verb takes on a negative meaning.

According to Pop (2022: 70), ‘great consideration should therefore be bestowed upon the negation of modal verbs since it is possible that the scope of negation does or does not contain the sense denoted by the auxiliary. (...). Some auxiliary verbs, for instance *can*, *need*, are categorised by the pattern specific to auxiliary negation, while other modal auxiliary verbs, such as *shall*, *ought to*, *must* undergo the interpretation specific to main verb negation. An interesting case happens with *may*. When it denotes permission, *may* exhibits the structures of auxiliary negation, whereas when *may* denotes possibility, it belongs to the latter group, namely main verb negation, changing its behaviour.’

4.1. Auxiliary Verb Negation

The intricacies of modal verb negation within auxiliary constructions offer a fertile ground for exploring the intricate interplay of epistemic and deontic modalities. There are several interesting aspects to be analysed in both epistemic and deontic contexts when auxiliary verbs undergo negation. It mainly implies that the modal auxiliary verb is negated, while the lexical verb still retains a positive orientation, entailing that the negative particle *not* directly modifies the semantic interpretation carried out by the modal verb.

Epistemic modality pertains to a speaker's evaluation of the likelihood or certainty of a proposition. Auxiliary verbs, in conjunction with main verbs, are

instrumental in signalling the epistemic stance of the speaker. When negation is applied to auxiliary verbs in epistemic contexts, the interpretation of the proposition undergoes a transformative shift. For instance, consider the contrast between *must not* and *need not*. In the former, the negation of *must* yields a strong assertion of conviction, conveying a high degree of certainty that the proposition is false or prohibited. Thus, a sentence such as:

My teacher must not be at school²

implies a strong conviction that her presence is improbable. On the other hand, the negation of *need* in *need not* signals a lack of necessity, suggesting that the action is optional and not mandated. The sentence:

My teacher need not be at school

indicates a lower degree of certainty, allowing for the possibility of her absence. The implication of the modal auxiliary negation becomes more apparent when employing paraphrases:

Students need not/needn't join all activities. (non-necessity)

It is not necessary for students to join all activities.

It therefore becomes evident that it is the value of the modal verb that it is negated, rather than the semantic implication of the main or lexical verb.

They needn't solve all the exercises in the book. (non-necessity)

It is not necessary for them to solve all the exercises.

When *need* is employed in combination with perfect infinitives, it still conforms to modal auxiliary negation, implying that the activity in question was still completed.

They needn't have rented a car, we've got another one we can spare.
(non-necessity)

It was not necessary for them to rent a car as we've got one for them. Despite that, they still rented one.

The modal verb *can* may be employed under auxiliary negation with all its meanings, be they epistemic, deontic, or dynamic, corresponding to the semantic implications of possibility, permission, or ability. Its epistemic implication of possibility is made manifest in sentences such as:

My favourite team cannot win the match. (non-possibility)

It is not possible for my team to win the match.

This piece of information cannot be true! (non-possibility)

This transformation of epistemic modality through auxiliary verb negation underscores the delicate nuances that can be wielded to convey varying degrees of certainty or probability, thereby shaping the listener's understanding of the speaker's perspective.

Deontic modality encompasses the expression of volition, obligation, or permission. Within auxiliary constructions, negation can introduce shifts in the deontic meaning, yielding distinct implications in terms of duty or allowance.

² When used epistemically to denote necessity, *must* is not typically employed in the negative, being frequently replaced by *can't* or *needn't* (see Pop 2022: 72).

Consider the contrast between *should not* and *do not have to*. The negation of *should* in *should not* conveys a sense of obligation, suggesting that the action is contrary to what is expected or advised. The semantic value it exhibits in:

You should not swear in front of ladies

implies a moral or practical imperative to refrain from swearing in front of ladies. Conversely, *do not have to* negates the necessity, indicating the absence of obligation. The sentence:

You do not have to swear in front of ladies

implies that swearing in front of ladies is permissible but not mandated.

Another modal verb which undergoes auxiliary negation rather than main verb negation is *may*. It has to be noted, however, that of the possible meanings it might exhibit, only the deontic semantic implication of permission/non-permission is encompassed under the scope of this type of negation. Take, for instance, the following example:

You may not smoke in public. (non-permission)

You are not permitted to smoke in public.

When *can* expresses the semantic meaning of permission, it similarly enters the spectrum of auxiliary negation, importing and conveying a tapestry roughly analogous to *may*. Consider the value of *cannot* in the sentence below:

You cannot attend my birthday party! (non-permission)

You are not permitted/allowed to attend my birthday party.

By negating auxiliary verbs in deontic contexts, speakers navigate a linguistic landscape that enables them to modulate the level of volition, permission, or prohibition associated with a given proposition. This flexibility in conveying deontic modal nuances contributes to the complexity and richness of English communication.

The negation of auxiliary verbs in both epistemic and deontic contexts showcases the dynamic nature of modal auxiliary verb negation. This intricate interplay highlights the versatile communicative potential of auxiliary verb negation, allowing speakers to finely calibrate the shades of modality and enhance the precision of their intended meaning.

Dynamic modality, rooted in the evaluation of an action's feasibility or ability, finds its essence in the interplay between main verbs and modal verbs. The negation of the main verb within dynamic modal contexts introduces a compelling transformation in the assessment of capability, thereby reframing the implications embedded within the statement.

Consider the contrast between *can't ski* and *don't ski*. The negation of the main verb in *can't ski* firmly asserts the inability to perform the action, conveying a clear absence of capacity. Take, for instance, the following example:

My fiancé cannot ski. (non-ability)

My fiancé is not able to ski.

On the other hand, *don't ski* introduces an alternative narrative, suggesting a conscious choice or decision not to engage in the activity. The former highlights a

definitive lack of ability, while the latter underscores the avoidance of a deliberate action.

The intricate shift between main verb negation and dynamic modality offers a distinct prism through which speakers can portray nuances in ability, skill, or willingness, thereby contributing to the modality-laden message.

4.2. Main Verb Negation

Main verb negation within modal constructions traverses beyond the domains of epistemic and deontic modalities, exploring the shifts in meaning that transpire when main verbs are subjected to negation, attesting to the intricate interaction between negation and modality.

Deontic modality, characterized by the communication of obligation, permission, or volition is a terrain where main verb negation unveils potent shifts in the obligation diagram, whereas epistemic modality encompasses the semantic implications of possibility, necessity, prediction. Within deontic contexts, the negation of main verbs creates a narrative that conveys the absence of permission or imposes obligation or, rather, categorical prohibition, thus reshaping the discourse dynamics.

Obligation is a binding factor that compels someone to perform a certain activity. A person, usually the speaker, or some external events can act as a binding force. Subjective obligation occurs when a person in power (usually the speaker) forces a weaker person (often the hearer) to do something which might be sometimes considered as not necessarily agreeable. Since the speaker is the cause of the obligation, it is coined 'subjective obligation', regardless of the fact that the speaker's purpose for pushing an obligation seems rational or not. It is rendered as irrelevant whether the hearer finds the obligation normal or abnormal, intelligible or inconceivable. According to Radden (2009: 175), 'the meaning of a subjective obligation might be read as „the force of my (the speaker's) authority compels you (the hearer) to do X“, i.e. the speaker's force is stronger than that of the hearer so that the hearer will have to perform the action demanded of him'. This may be illustrated by a sentence such as:

You must wear a hat,

which might be paraphrased along the lines of:

I, the speaker, compel you, the hearer, to wear a hat.

The negation of an obligation is not necessarily translated into a non-obligation, but rather a prohibition. Thus, the sentence:

You mustn't wear a hat

is not paraphrased by

I, the speaker, do not compel you, the hearer, to wear a hat,

but rather by

I, the speaker, compel you, the hearer, not to wear a hat.

In such contexts, a prohibition refers to an obligation placed on a person to refrain from performing an activity. The speaker presumes that the hearer wishes, or may wish to, undertake a certain action and, owing to his superior power, prevents him from doing so. The speaker, relying on superior authority, prevents the hearer from carrying out an action which may have seemed desirable. The prohibition conveyed 'might thus be read as „the force of my authority compels you not to do X“ or „bars you from doing X“. The negation in the modal *mustn't* applies to the proposition and not to the modality' (Radden 2009 :176).

The negation of main verbs creates a narrative that conveys the absence of permission or imposes obligation or, more precisely, categorical prohibition, and, in so doing, modifying speech dynamics. *Must not* and *need not* exemplify this contrast vividly. The former, *must not*, encapsulates a stringent obligation that demands the action be refrained from, casting an imperative hue upon the utterance. Take the next sentence, for instance:

You must not cheat during exams. (obligation not to)

It is essential that you do not cheat during exams.

Conversely, *need not* subtly dismantles the obligation which *must* may encapsulate, but, in so doing, the negation is swayed from a main verb negation to an auxiliary one. Consider the following interrogation:

Must we solve or the exercises by tomorrow?

- No, you needn't! (non-obligation)

Needn't, in these kinds of contexts, is a less emphatic negation, suggesting not only non-obligation but also an absence of necessity.

The intertwining between the semantic implications of obligation and necessity, between deontic and epistemic modalities, engenders the analysis of the notion 'subjective necessity' applied to one of the possible meanings exhibited by *must*. It mainly refers to a 'logical necessity or deduction', being considered the sole inference that can be made by the speaker from the evidence at hand. *Must* is used to convey this epistemic position, as in the following sentence:

She must have left her umbrella at home. (logical necessity)

I am certain/It is certain that she has left her umbrella at home.

The same interpretation applies to the following pair of sentences:

She must be home by now.

The news must be false.

However, as far as negation is concerned, when *must* assumes the epistemic modality of 'subjective necessity' or 'logical necessity', the negated counterpart no longer corresponds to the standard pattern of adding the negative particle to the modal verb. Thus, the following sentences:

*She mustn't have left her umbrella at home.

*She mustn't be home by now.

*The news mustn't be false.

are considered grammatically unacceptable. Palmer (1990:61), nevertheless, acknowledges that, in cases where it is vital to make a decision based on necessity rather than possibility, it is feasible to use *mustn't* instead of an external modal verb. A sentence of the type 'She mustn't be there after all' might be considered acceptable with the potential interpretation of 'The only feasible inference is that she is not there'.

The question, though, still remains, as the unavailability of *mustn't* in such contexts to convey epistemic modality is rather inconvenient. One of the potential explanations is that negative *mustn't*, like affirmative *must*, would elicit an inferential procedure where the speaker is forced by facts to reach the only reasonable conclusion. We can usually posit that something is true, therefore arriving at positive conclusions, based on some evidence. For instance, in a sentence such as:

The TV in her room is on,

we assume that she or, perhaps, somebody else pertaining to her family or party of friends turned the TV on. Similarly, in:

Her car is in the parking lot,

we often assume that she is the one who carried out the parking activity. On the other hand, negative conclusions, i.e., judgments that something is not the case, are typically made from absence of evidence rather than from positive evidence. Therefore, statements of the sort:

The TV in her room isn't on

or

Her car isn't in the parking lot,

seem to warrant the logical conclusion that she is not at home. This may give rise to something problematic when we consider that missing information seldom leads to a single conclusion. Several potential explanations can be arrived at without contradicting the original statement. For instance, the TV in her room is not on because she is reading or sleeping, whereas the car is not in the parking lot because her father needed to borrow it as his was broken. As Radden (2009:185) posits, 'since lack of evidence is rarely conclusive, the use of epistemic *mustn't* is not licensed'. Therefore, the negation of

She must have left her umbrella at home.

She must be home by now.

The news must be false.

is

She can't have left her umbrella at home.

She can't be home by now.

The news can't be false.

where *can* expresses possibility and, by definition, undergoes auxiliary negation.

Pop (2022: 73) also states that 'there exists an interesting similarity between *mustn't* meaning 'obligation not to' and *may not* meaning 'not permitted'. It is due to the difference in meaning between permission and obligation:

He may not watch TV (He is not permitted to watch TV)

He must not watch TV! (He is obliged not to watch TV)

A special emphatic pause before *not* may alter the meaning of *may not*. Thus,

You may _□ not go to the party,

means *I permit/allow you not to go to the party, it is your choice if you do it or not*, while

You may not _□ go to the party,

means *I do not permit/allow you to go to the party*. The existence of such unorthodox interpretations as this one allows for the creation of an instance when double negation within a single sentence may occasionally exist and be considered acceptable, as in:

You can't/cannot not love her! (You can but love her/ It's impossible for you not to love her)'.

Another modal verb which may be included under main verb negation is *shall*. Both epistemic and deontic modalities are encompassed when analysing their semantic interpretation. Thus, *shall* may express volition, mainly strong volition or insistence, as well as weak volition, or willingness, as in the following examples:

You shall not commit adultery! (strong volition - insistence)

I, the speaker – higher authority – insist that you do not commit adultery.

Just relax, you shan't miss him!

I, the speaker, am willing to make sure that you will not miss him.

Besides volition, when *shall* expresses prediction, it conforms under the main verb negation pattern. Consider the following sentence:

We shan't find out the results soon enough. (prediction)

I, the speaker, predict that we will not find out the results soon enough.

An interesting case is exhibited by *will* when it exhibits the semantic implications specific to volition and prediction. Both epistemic and deontic modalities seem to accept not only main or lexical verb negation but also auxiliary negation. Take, for instance, the examples bellow:

No matter what he says, she won't accept his proposal. (strong volition – insistence)

She insists on not accepting his proposal.

She refuses to accept his proposal.

She won't have finished her dinner. (prediction)

I predict that she has not finished her dinner.

It's not probable that she has finished her dinner.

I won't keep you waiting. (intermediate volition – intention)

I intend not to keep you waiting.

I do not intend to keep you waiting.

Even though both patterns of negation seem to be acceptable as far as the modal values of *will* are concerned, it seems that there is a stronger tendency pivoting towards the employment of main verb negation.

When *may* exhibits the epistemic modality of possibility, it follows the same pattern, thus negating the lexical verb and preserving a positive interpretation of the modal meaning.

They may not win the match. (possibility)

It is possible that they will not win the match.

This subtle yet pivotal distinction redefines the listener's understanding of the expected course of action. The interplay of main verb negation and deontic modality unravels a narrative spectrum ranging from categorical mandates to the absence of obligatory imposition, thereby exemplifying the intricate intertwinement of modality and negation within the fabric of linguistic communication.

5. Contextual Considerations

The examination of modal verb negation extends beyond the confines of linguistic structures, delving into the intricate nexus between language, pragmatics, and discourse. The interpretation of modal verb negation is intricately intertwined with the pragmatic context within which it arises. These factors, including presupposition, implicature, and context dependence assume a paramount role in guiding the understanding of modal verb negation.

Presupposition, often an implicit assumption that precedes a negated proposition, contributes to the contextual framework against which the negation is evaluated. For instance, the negation of *must* in:

She must not be at school

presupposes a prior assumption of her potential presence.

Implicature, on the other hand, unveils the implied meanings that surface from the negation. A sentence such as:

She need not be at school

suggests an absence of obligation, implicating a freedom of choice.

Furthermore, the interpretation of modal verb negation is heavily contingent upon the broader linguistic and situational context. Context dependence becomes a compass that navigates the connotations and intentions embedded within the negation, shaping the pragmatic communication between interlocutors.

Modal verb negation extends its influence beyond isolated sentences, weaving its impact within larger discourse contexts. Discourse analysis discerns how modal verb negation reinforces, contradicts, or transforms prior modal assertions or expectations within a discourse. Kratzer (2012:32-37) identifies no less than eight conversational backgrounds ‘that play a distinguished role in the semantics of modal constructions’, such as informational, stereotypical, deontic, bouletic conversational grounds, to mention a few. The cohesive role of modal verb negation within discourse underlines its role as a connective string, supporting the broader communicative intent and modality-laden messages of the discourse.

6. Conclusion

Modal verb negation is, therefore, a crucial aspect of the language that has not received as much attention in linguistic studies as it deserves. The distinction between modal auxiliary and main verb negation is an important aspect to consider when analysing the nuances of modal verb negation. The distribution of negated forms and the syntactic structures where modal verb negation occurs are correspondingly critical aspects to consider. Additionally, the semantic and pragmatic implications of modal verb negation vary depending on the context in which it is employed, emphasizing the importance of a thorough understanding of this topic for effective communication.

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