

Toward an understanding of the
implicational relationships of multiple
modals: A study in Northeast Tennessee

An Investigation by

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Theoretical Background

- In the history of investigation into Southern American English, a certain form has emerged as difficult to evaluate and a focus of investigation: Multiple Modals (MMs).
- I might could finish that tomorrow or the next day.
- I think you might should do that this way.

Theoretical Background

- Why so intriguing?
- They present problems for most syntactic theories, as these theories usually require a single tensed element.
 - I could do that.
- It is not clear which item is tensed in MMs.
 - I might could do that.

Theoretical Background

- Many have argued (Labov et al. 1968, Mishoe and Montgomery 1994) that this is an adverb/verb series, allowing them to fit into current theories.
- Others, (Di Paolo 1986, Di Paolo 1989) refute this claim. She argues that they are stored as single lexical items, like compounds or idioms, allowing for the seeming violation of the prevailing syntactic theories.

Theoretical Background

- Additionally, the various combinations have been studied. Here is a 'short' list (summarized from Butters (1973), Boertien (1986), Mishoe and Montgomery (1994), Di Paolo (1986), and Fennell (1993))
- might could, might should, might would, might can, might oughta, might better, might did, might had better, might should better, might should oughta, might had ought, might supposed to, might woulda had oughta, might've used to; must can, must ought, must would, musta coulda; may can, may could, may will, may should, may supposed to, may shall, may would, may might, may did, may might can, may used to, may need to; should oughta, should might, should might better; could might; would might, would better; can might; used to could
- might not could, might wouldn't, might shouldn't, might not should, might not shouldn't, might not can, might will can't; may can't, may not can, may won't, may couldn't, may shouldn't, may didn't; must didn't; can't never would
- could _____ might; would _____ might; should _____ might

Where did they come from?

- Some argue that they are holdovers from earlier varieties of English (Paperone and Fuller 1993) or that they can be derived from these earlier varieties (Montgomery 1993).
- This is based on the fact that some British varieties have MMs, and so do various Caribbean Creoles. This would fit with a migration impact, as waves of Britons filtered through the South and into the Caribbean.
- Others do not support this claim (Fennell 1993, Nagle 1989): Combinations in British Varieties are different, so too are the Creole combinations.

Pragmatic Contexts

- Another avenue of research in the pragmatics of MMs (Mishoe 1991, Mishoe and Montgomery 1994).
- They argue that MMs are only used in face-to-face negotiations, supplanting the idea of strict Phrase Structure Rules of usage.
- ‘Multiple modals seem to be, at least for many speakers, a POTENTIAL set of constructions, governed by fairly loose constraints that generate (in the broadest sense) certain combinations, sometimes unique ones, for MM users when particular circumstances warrant’ (Mishoe and Montgomery 1994:8)

Avenue of Research

- What is lacking is an investigation of the Implicational Relationships (also called Implicational Scales) of the MM constructions.
- These are ‘hierarchical co-occurrence patterns in the acquisition and use of linguistic variables by individuals or groups, such that x implies y but not the reverse’ (Rickford 2002:143).
- For speakers of MM varieties, which combination comes first? The prevailing literature shows the most common to be *might could*, followed by *might should*, then by *may can*.

Avenue of Research

- Investigate the cline of acceptability
- My hypothesis is that the most common MM constructions, *might could*, *might should*, *may can*, in that order, form a cline of acceptability.
- A speaker who has *might should* will have *might could*, and will accept the latter in more contexts, etc.

Cline of Acceptability

Hypothetical Cline of MM usage

-might

might

may

could

should

can

Additional Question

- Where does question formation fit in? Is it a factor that the acquisition of each form allows a question, or are there additional stages to allow for yes/no questions?
- How will the question be formed? Which modal will be fronted, first, second or both?

Method

- Area: Hancock County, Tennessee
 - Multiple Modal usage area, representative of parts of rural South
- Participants (N=9): Lifelong residents, or arrived before age 5.
 - Various socioeconomic statuses: Working Class, Lower Middle, Middle Middle- determined by education and vocation
 - Males (N=3), Females (N=6)
- Interview and Instrument: Oral Interview with introductory questions, followed with a written instrument of acceptability judgments and hypothetical situations with responses.
 - Duration: 25-60 min.

Table of Participants

Participant/Age	Sex	Education	Vocation	SES
1- 18	M	High School (M- MA, F- HS)	Student	LM
2- 17	F	High School (M- BA, F- BA)	Student	LM
3 - 17	F	High School (M- HS, F- BA)	Student	LM
4- 17	M	High School (M- BA, F- HS)	Student	WC
5 - 51	F	Professional Degree (M- some college, F- M.D.)	Nurse	MC
6 - 37	F	Professional Degree (M- TS, F- BA)	Nurse Practitioner	MC
7 - 61	M	M.D. (M- BA, F- BA)	Retired Physician	MC
8- 85	F	BA (M- MS, F-MS)	Retired Teacher	MC
9- 30	F	Master's Degree (M-BA, F- M.D)	Health Education Coordinator	MC

Results

- Overall Acceptance for MM Declaratives
 - May can 71% (64/90)
 - Might could 61% (55/90)
 - Might should 44% (40/90)
- This goes contrary to my original hypothesis of *might could* being the first modal. It appears that *may can* could be seen as the first modal in the cline.

Results - Continued

- **Acceptance Based on Gender in Declaratives**

	Males	Females
• May can	63% (19/30)	75% (45/60)
• Might could	63% (19/30)	60% (36/60)
• Might should	50% (15/30)	42% (25/60)

- *May can* is still the most accepted, with females accepting it at a much higher rate.

Results- Continued

- **Acceptance Based on Age in Declaratives**

	17-29	30-55	55+
• May can	50% (20/40)	87% (26/30)	90% (18/20)
• Might could	55% (22/40)	63% (19/30)	70% (14/20)
• Might should	32.5% (13/40)	47% (14/30)	65% (13/20)

- This is the most interesting results. It appears that the acceptability is in decline for younger speakers, especially with the most common *may can* and *might could*.

Results- Continued

- **Acceptance Based on Socioeconomic Status**

	WC	LM	MC
• May can	40% (4/10)	53% (16/30)	88% (44/50)
• Might could	40% (4/10)	60% (18/30)	66% (33/50)
• Might should	30% (3/10)	30% (10/30)	54% (27/50)

- Middle Middle class has a higher incidence of these forms, espcecially with *may can* and *might should*. This is also very interesting, as this could mean that there is no stigma or that MMs are below the perceptual level.

Results- Continued

- Interrogatives were not accepted at a very high percentage. This supports previous literature that they are far less common than declarative MMs. This would mean that they are much further down the cline.
- **Overall Acceptance in Interrogative Constructions**
- Might could 26.6% (12/45)
- Might should 24.4% (11/45)

Results- Continued

- Most respondents were reluctant to choose any form of the MM questions. Here are some quotes
 - These all sound really funny. (Male, 17)
 - Why do you have all those extra words in these? I don't like any of them. Do I have to choose from these? (Female, 30)
 - There're too many mights in all these. You don't need those. Why would anyone say that? (Female, 85)
 - Are these the only choices? I wouldn't say any of 'em. Not a one. (Male, 61)
- However, in the forced choices that accepted MMs, 20/23 had the second modal fronted.
- But, 3/23 had both modals fronted, all with *might should*.

Results – Continued

- No clear trends based on Gender, Age, or SES

- **Acceptance Based on Gender of Interrogatives**

	Males	Females
• Might could	20% (3/15)	30% (9/30)
• Might should	33.3% (5/15)	20% (6/30)

- **Acceptance Based on Age of Interrogatives**

	17-29	30-54	55+
• Might could	35% (7/20)	26.6% (4/15)	10% (1/10)
• Might should	25% (5/20)	20% (3/15)	30% (3/10)

- **Acceptance of Interrogatives Based on Socioeconomic Status**

	WC	LM	MC
• Might could	0% (0/5)	46.6% (7/15)	20% (5/25)
• Might should	0% (0/5)	33.3% (5/15)	24% (6/24)

Limitations

- Small sample size (N=9)
- Due to small size, there are only 3 male respondents, no WC females or 30-55 males. This could play a factor in the results.
- Research is progressing to fill these gaps as expeditiously as possible!

Conclusion

- My hypothesis was not supported. It appears that *may can* is the first stage in the Implicational Relationship. This refutes previous research into MM constructions.
- Also, MMs appear to be in decline among younger speakers. This could be the initial stages of a change in progress.
- MMs are more common among MC speakers. Given that MMs are a non-mainstream feature, this contrasts with other such features. This could indicate that MMs are below the perceptual level, or that MMs are a prestige feature in this variety.
- Past research was supported with regard to MM yes/no interrogatives.

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QUESTIONS?