

Unravelling the Secret of the German Modal Verbs

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1 A bewitched legacy

The claim that the so called “modal verbs” (MV) constitute a syntactical class in German – although broadly adopted (Diewald 1999, Oehlschlaeger 1989, Wurmbrand 2001) – lacks any empirical justification. Not a single property can be found that is shared by each of those verbal elements and only by those. None of the criteria which these definitions of MV usually are based on suffices to distinguish MV-lexemes from other verbs: neither those of morphological nature (preterite present inflection), nor those of a syntactic nature (selection of bare infinitivals), not even those concerning their semantic specification and functionality (ability to encode epistemicity). Furthermore, the morphological criteria fail to hold for *wollen* and *sollen*. Similarly, it is quite doubtful, whether the quotative-epistemic reading of *wollen* can be truly considered as an epistemic form. In addition, regarding the “separatist” subjunctive forms *möchte* and *dürfte* as independent members of the MV-class, even more problems arise. Apart from this some verbs (e.g. *brauchen* or *werden*) fit better into these definition than some of the conventional modal elements.

Hence, maintaining the MV-class in its traditional extension would only be possible, if we define it by exhaustive enumeration – from the linguist’s point of view not a very satisfactory solution. But if we extend our attention to other arrays of data apart from introspection, we will be able to shed light on the very root of this puzzle.

2 Lifting the spell

Despite of their idiosyncratic behaviour, the majority of the MV share a property which seems to be unique within the category V: the ability to encode epistemicity. But as mentioned before, it is more than doubtful if all of the traditional MV involve such epistemic readings. Moreover, there exists a range of other verbs sharing this ability. Accordingly, I suggest to shift the focus from the conventional extension of German MV towards the set of all V capable to encode epistemicity. But what ex-

actly is the nature of those epistemic forms? The most promising option is to take a closer look at the circumstances of their diachronic emergence, so that we are able to conceive, which feature specification is necessary for a verb to develop an epistemic form.

According to the recent debate, three properties have turned out to be crucial for the development of epistemicity. First of all, a verb has to lose its external theta-role in order to become an epistemic verb (EV). Some authors (Abraham 2002, Diewald 1999) claim that this loss already triggers epistemicity. However, Axel (2001) proved the existence of non-epistemic – i.e., deontic/root - MV in Old High German involving raising constructions. The second property concerns the aspectual configuration of the infinitival complement. Following Abraham 1989/Leiss (2002) epistemic MV occurred initially only with imperfective infinitivals (in non-negated distributions). Third, it appears that verbs need to involve obligatory coherence in the sense of Bech (1955/57) in order to be able to acquire epistemicity, as pointed out by Reis (2001) and Maché (2004).

Turning to historical data it turns out that EV were obviously not available in the XII / XIII centuries. An investigation of Wolfram's *pârzival* showed that at that time MV occurred already as raising verbs but lacked the ability to encode epistemicity (Maché 2004). For our purpose here Schmid's *Neuwe Welt* (1567) provides far more reliable expressive data. My hitherto unpublished investigation revealed a lot of remarkable insights. On the one hand, it contains – though not yet in high frequency – EV (each selecting an imperf. inf.). On the other hand, it includes a range of verbal constructions which have to be considered as obligatorily coherent already. While at least 80% of the MV behave in this manner, about surprisingly only 66% of the *wollen*-tokens do. These data provide further evidence for the hypothesis that the system of EV emerged no earlier than in the course of the XVI century, as claimed by Fritz (1997) and Diewald (1999). This strengthens Reis' assumption that the establishment of the coherence-opposition is the main trigger for the grammaticalization of EV.

According to the diachronic evidence, epistemicity entails always raising and obligatory coherence. If so, the quotative-epistemic use of *wollen* cannot be considered as EV, for this form involves an control construction, which enables it to occur in distributions, where other EV are excluded. Note that there are additional good reasons to exbraciate *wollen* from the set of EV, for it behaves radically different regarding its coherence behaviour as demonstrated above.

3 Saving the prince(ss).

Generally, the overall picture gets much clearer if we extend our attention to another type of data: historical grammars. If we examine the history of the notion of MV in German, we will find out that ancient grammarians like Boediker (1698) originally reserved this concept for a very different purpose than it is used today, namely to distinguish verbs that were able to substitute an obligatory subjunctive in certain distributions in that time. So this notion relating to German MV never was intended to gather verbs sharing syntactical peculiarities.

All of this makes me suggest that the fallacious concept of MV be replaced by the more adequate concept of EV, based on the features [+raising] and [+obligatorily coherent].

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