Lecture 7: Modals

*In the previous unit we looked at how conditionals are used to express doubt and hypothesis. Another linguistic tool used for this function is modality. The modals are a small set of auxiliaries which behave quite differently from other verbs and convey a different sort of information. Unlike most verbs, modals do not refer to facts about the real world but give the speaker's **opinion** as to the **possibility, probability**, and **expectancies** of a given situation or action.*

As always in language, there are alternative ways of expressing modality, including adjectives, adverbs and non-modal verbs.

Functions & Grammar

KEY POINTS – MODALITY

1. The meaning of modals

- Modals are a special category of words. They include: **can / could, may / might, must, will / would, should / ought to**.
- Most modals have at least 2 meanings – a simplified presentation is given below *G. Notes 21*.
- Modals give a different sort of information from other verbs. In an ordinary verb phrase when you say "The volcano has erupted" you are giving information about the **volcano**. With modals, the information is not about the **action**, it tells us whether the **speaker** estimates that the action is **probable, possible,** or **advisable**.

  ➤ *The volcano **may** erupt.* (I think there is a 50% chance of this happening)
  ➤ *The inhabitants **should** leave the valleys.* (I think it would be a good idea)

■ WILL

  ➤ *The sun **will** rise at 5.32 tomorrow.* (this is a fact – there is no possible doubt)
  Meaning – Total certitude about a future event – probability "100%".
  cf. – It is certain …

■ MUST

  ➤ *There **must** be ice on the moon.* (I am convinced, but I have no proof)
  ➤ *She's absent – she **must** be ill.* (it is the only logical explanation)
  Meaning – Almost total certitude – probability "90%".
  cf. – I am almost sure …

▌ MAY

➤ *The volcano **may** erupt next year.* (perhaps it will erupt, perhaps it won't)

Meaning – There is a reasonable chance – probability "50%".

cf. – Perhaps … maybe …

▌ MIGHT

➤ *It **might** erupt next year. (it is possible, but I would be rather surprised)*

Meaning – The difference between **might** and **may** is slight in modern English. However, **might** frequently expresses the notion of "reduced probability". That is why it is often followed by "but …" – probability "25%".

cf. – Perhaps, but … it is just possible …

▌ SHOULD / OUGHT TO

➤ *You **should / ought to** help old ladies cross the road.* (if you are a good person)

➤ *You **should** turn off the electricity at night.* (if not, you will waste electricity)

➤ *You **should** read this book.* (it is a good book – it would be a mistake not to read it)

➤ *The letter **should** arrive tomorrow.* (if nothing abnormal happens)

Meaning – The primary meaning of **should / ought to** is **"what is right, good, normal"**.

cf. – It would be a good idea … it is advisable / desirable … it is to be expected / if nothing goes wrong … normally / theoretically / in principle …

▌ CAN

➤ *Satellites **can** detect objects with a diameter of 10 cm.* (it is feasible, technically possible …)

➤ *He **can** speak German.* (he has the capacity, the knowledge …)

➤ *He **can't** answer the question.* (it is too difficult …)

Meaning – Unlike the previous examples, **can** and **could** do not express **probability**, but **feasibility** – what is physically, technically or intellectually possible. The feasibility is 100%.

cf. – To be able to … to succeed in …

▌ COULD

➤ *A short-circuit **could** be responsible for the break-down.* (there are several possible causes – this is one of them)

Meaning – **Could** expresses the idea that something is technically possible, but that it will not necessarily happen. It is just one hypothesis.

cf. – It is a possibility … perhaps … maybe …

N.B.

The distinctions in meaning between "could", "may" and "might" are very small. In practice, when speaking of probability and possibility, they are used almost interchangeably.

➤ *Someone is knocking on the door. It **may / might / could** be the postman.*

2. Future and past time

• **The future** – As modals give the speaker's assessment of the situation at the time of speaking, they can be used to talk about the future.

➤ *He may get a job in Turin next year.* (I think **now** that there is a reasonable chance of this happening **next year**)

• **The past** – Past modality is expressed by using the past infinitive.

SUBJECT	+	MODAL	+	HAVE	+	PAST PARTICIPLE	
She		**must**		**have**		**telephoned**	last night.
He		**could**		**have**		**come**	yesterday.
She		**may**		**have**		**finished**	already.

3. Alternative expressions

to suppose · assume · to presume · to expect	it is probable · possible · feasible · likely / unlikely · doubtless / doubtful

➤ *The introduction of screening procedures for all donors means that infection through blood transfusion is now extremely **unlikely**.*

➤ *In classical physics, it was **assumed** that all observers obtained identical measurements.*