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Translating Modal Meanings in the EFL Classroom

1. Introduction

According to Bald (1988) modal verbs count among the most difficult areas of teaching and learning in the German EFL classroom. Considering the problems noted even in native speakers' attempts to explicate the possible uses and interpretations of individual modals, this is not surprising.¹ Even though there is widespread agreement that modals "are used mainly in contexts where the speaker is talking about states of the world which he cannot assert to be true or real" (Mitchell 1988: 173-4), there is an equally general lack of clear-cut categories into which the interpretations of specific modals may be parcelled, especially within a language-teaching and language-learning context. Of course, some well-known descriptive labels such as e.g. 'possibility', 'necessity', 'intention', 'ability', 'permission', and 'appropriateness' (cf. Hermerén 1978; Leech 1971; Palmer 1990) more or less explicitly find their way into English textbooks of German secondary school students, but the problems remain just the same: as Bald (1991: 348) points out, most conspicuous about the treatment of modals in the literature are the difficulties involved in (i) devising a descriptive system of categories, (ii) developing a profuse terminology, (iii) presenting meaning-definitions through paraphrases and (iv) accounting for semantic and syntactic indeterminacy of elements appearing in context. With regard to the EFL classroom we add (v) the noticeable imbalance between the use of certain modal verbs or specific modal meanings in the textbooks and their actual occurrence in a corpus of contemporary spoken British English.²

In this paper we will argue that the difficulties EFL learners encounter with respect to modal verbs in English are at least partially due to the learners' limited access to the cultural values encoded in the descriptive labels used in the traditional paraphrases. On the basis of Anna Wierzbicka's system of semantic primitives (e.g. 1972, 1992, 1996) we present alternative forms of paraphrases which focus on what Bald (1991: 349) terms "speaker judgements" and "speaker directives", namely the opposition between THINKING³ (i.e. a proposition) and SAYING (i.e. an illocution). While the former clearly relates to notions such as 'probability' or 'appropriateness', the latter corresponds to concepts like 'permission', 'obligation', or 'advice' – according to the traditional dichotomy epistemic and deontic modality – or "facts" and "acts" following Mitchell's terminology

¹ See, for instance, Bald (1991: 352, fn. 4).

² We collected data from the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC). This subcorpus contains approximately 10 Mio. words of spoken British English, including informal conversations, lectures, and interviews.

³ For this paper we adopt Wierzbicka's convention according to which semantic primes or primitives, which she considers to be "lexically embodied undefinable concepts" (Wierzbicka 1996: 32), are quoted in capitals.

(1988: 178). Bald, however, reaches beyond this purely notional level of description in that he explicitly refers to the distinct functional status of utterances containing one or the other kind of modality. Epistemic modality is thus associated with the expression of a proposition, i.e. the speaker's thoughts, while deontic modality implies a directive illocutionary force. We will start from the widely shared assumption that speech acts, i.e. (at least) their felicity and appropriateness conditions differ between cultures and that these differences correspond to different cultural norms which in turn are – to some extent – reflected in the language spoken (cf. Wierzbicka 1985: 145-6). While Wierzbicka's Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) on the whole is sometimes criticized for its reductionism (see e.g. Diller, this volume), its language-like conceptual system (cf. Wierzbicka 1996: 22) certainly provides a possible approximation to a culture-free metalanguage. We will provide examples which show that within limits it is possible to paraphrase modal notions by means of NSM.

Our discussion of the different meanings of the modals under investigation (*can, may, will, shall, and must*) will be based on real data, i.e. on actual occurrences of the modal verbs in the context of natural discourse. It is worth mentioning that the paraphrases we provide are not only supposed to explicate the expression of probability estimates or of permission-granting. More importantly, at least from an EFL teaching and learning perspective, NSM paraphrases can also help to elucidate culture-specific components of modal meaning in English. Thus, in addressing problem (iii) in Bald's list, we aim to provide a more comprehensive explication of meaning than traditional paraphrases do. At the same time we see NSM paraphrases not only as useful points of departure for the teaching and learning of culture-based modal meanings and functions in the EFL classroom but also as a means to account for learner problems resulting from an overrepresentation of deontic modality in English textbooks (cf. (v) above). In the final section of this paper we will therefore suggest how taking into consideration the cultural concepts encoded in the use of modal auxiliaries may improve the teaching and learning success.

2. Speech acts and modal meanings in English

It has frequently been noted that speakers of English "prefer agreement and support to dispute and disagreement" (Bald 1991: 357). Studies on politeness in an English-speaking context (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987; Leech 1983) capture this by the notions 'positive politeness' (approval of the other person) and 'negative politeness' (avoidance of imposition) as Anglo-American cultural values.⁴ Consequently, personal opinions and evaluations (usually referred to as expressions of epistemic modality) as well as requests, orders but also the granting of permission (deontic modality) are from a pragmatic perspective most unmarkedly expressed in English by formulae which indicate the

⁴ While Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as Leech (1983) generally assume the related concept of 'face' to be of universal validity, numerous studies in the 1980ies have shown a considerable anglo-centric bias in this claim; see e.g. Wierzbicka (1991) for a discussion of counter-examples.

speaker's consideration of the "principle of personal autonomy", which Wierzbicka (1991: 80) represents as follows:

1. Principle of personal autonomy

everyone can say:	'I want this', 'I don't want this'
	'I think this', 'I don't think this'
one can't say to someone:	'you have to do X because I want it'
	'you can't do X because I don't want it' ⁵

In addition, Wierzbicka discusses other Anglo-American cultural assumptions (1991: 91ff.), two of which also have a bearing on expressing modality in English. We suggest to label these two *freedom of self-expression* and *respect for other people's freedom of self-expression*:

2. Freedom of self-expression

I think:	I can say: 'I want this', 'I think this'
I know:	other people don't have to want the same/think the same
no one can say:	'I want you to want this', 'I want you to think this'

3. Respect for other people's freedom of self-expression

you can say:	'I want this', 'I think this'
I know:	I can say: 'I don't want this', 'I don't think this'
	if I say: 'I don't want this', 'I don't think this'
	I don't want you to feel something bad because of this
	I will say something more about it because of this

Pragmatically unmarked forms of expressing epistemic and deontic modality in English relate to these assumptions as follows:

- According to 1. and 2. speakers are free to express their personal opinion, wishes and intentions to act.
- According to 3. they will use different means of self-expression if their opinions, intentions etc. are likely to conflict with those of their communication partners.
- The expression of what a speaker wants and what a speaker thinks is pragmatically unmarked as long as it does not involve saying what the addressee has to want, think or do as a consequence of this.
- Directive speech acts as well as expressions of disagreement are likely to be mitigated ('I will say something more about it') by some kind of reference to the principle of personal autonomy.

⁵ As noted above, NSM primitives are presented in capitals. Paraphrases, on the other hand, are intended to base on semantic primitives but are not committed to a claim of universality and consequently appear in normal type.

Implicit in this list is a contrast between the use of predicates involving the semantic primitives I THINK (THIS), i.e. speaker judgements henceforth referred to as *propositional*, and that of predicates involving I SAY (YOU DO THIS), i.e. speaker directives henceforth referred to as *illocutionary*. In contexts which up to now have been classified according to the 'epistemic' vs. 'deontic' opposition it may therefore be useful to consider the difference between propositional and illocutionary forms in addition to the distinction between epistemic and deontic functions: rather than telling the addressees what to do, what to think, or what to want (illocutionary form), speakers of English will express their demands on other people (deontic function) as expressions of their personal opinion or speculations (propositional form) about possible future events (epistemic function). Thus, we expect that the expression of deontic modality based on illocutionary I SAY predicates is comparatively rare in English usage and that propositional I THINK predicates are used much more frequently.

Considering the difficulties language learners have with using modal verbs appropriately, it may be more promising to study their uses in the light of self-expression and the principle of (the respect for) personal autonomy than to suggest a binary distinction of an epistemic and a deontic category of modal meanings, which disregards pragmatic aspects of speaker interaction. Our decision to apply Wierzbicka's semantic primitives in this context is therefore motivated by didactic purposes, i.e. the need to present EFL learners with a simple or basic vocabulary for the explication of sometimes slight semantic differences on the basis of cultural contextualizations.⁶ At the same time we take the applicability of NSM for this purpose as evidence in favour of the validity of Wierzbicka's conceptual model, without, however, making any claims with regard to its universality or theoretical sufficiency.

2.1 The semantic primitives CAN, SAY, THINK, and WANT

Semantic primitives are indefinable concepts which can be expressed in any language and which are taken to translate from language to language without any loss or distortion of meaning. Wierzbicka's (1996) list contains just under 60 semantic primitives which include the mental predicates THINK and WANT, the speech predicate SAY and the metapredicate CAN. To illustrate the indefinable she uses the English representatives of other universal primitives and formulates so-called "canonical sentences" (Wierzbicka 1996: 30):

THINK: this predicate corresponds to psychological processes of cognition and a subjective perception of reality; combines with a psychological subject (I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE) and a psychological complement (SOMETHING, THIS).

Canonical sentence: I think something/this. (I don't say: I know.)

(Wierzbicka 1996: 49, 119).

⁶ For an earlier study illustrating the applicability of NSM paraphrases for didactic purposes see Klages-Kubitzki (1997).

WANT: this predicate, too, corresponds to psychological processes of cognition but in terms of a subjective perception of possible states; combines with a psychological subject (I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE) and a psychological complement (SOMETHING, THIS).

Canonical sentence: I want something.
(Wierzbicka 1996: 49, 119).

SAY: saying something can be seen as doing something, and in this sense this predicate combines with agentive subjects and an obligatory complement.

Canonical sentence: I say this.
(Wierzbicka 1996: 120-1)

CAN: this predicate reflects the basic concept of 'freedom from constraint'. It combines with the action predicate DO and with an agentive subject.⁷ But CAN also occurs with non-personal subjects.

Canonical sentences: I can do it. (agentive subject)
Something can happen. (non-personal subject)
(Wierzbicka 1996: 104, 140-1).

The canonical sentences illustrate how primitive predicates combine with other semantic primitives. NSM paraphrases of modal meanings in English specifically involve the following sub-set: the substantives: I, YOU, SOMEBODY and SOMETHING; the determiner: THIS; the action and event predicates: DO and HAPPEN; the metapredicate NOT; the evaluators: GOOD and BAD; the time signifiers: WHEN, BEFORE, NOW and AFTER; the interclausal linkers: IF and BECAUSE, and a signifier of imagination/possibility: MAYBE (cf. Wierzbicka 1996: 35ff., 73ff.).

2.2 NSM paraphrases of modal meanings

As we have argued above, it can be useful for didactic purposes to translate modal meanings into NSM paraphrases, if only to make underlying culture-based assumptions explicit. In section 2 we used this approach to present paraphrases for three different assumptions frequently associated with Anglo-American culture and which help to account for the relative lack of impositives and/or directives in English usage. The NSM paraphrases we propose below work on the same basic assumptions:

- The use of modal auxiliaries expressing I THINK predicates is pragmatically unmarked in English usage (cf. *freedom of self-expression*) and should therefore occur most frequently.
- Since English language users are likely to refrain from imposing their view on their conversation partners (cf. *principle of personal autonomy*) they will use a propositional I THINK predicate even when they wish to influence the addressee's future actions

⁷ Wierzbicka (1996: 140) suggests that "I" may be the prototypical subject. We assume that many constructions involving e.g. YOU CAN may be taken to express a proposition, i.e. a speculation about the addressee's ability to act (cf. 2.2.1 below).

(directive illocution) i.e. they are likely to express orders/requests in the form of giving a personal opinion. In terms of the more traditional dichotomy, an epistemic form (cf. "speaker judgements" above) is employed to convey a deontic function (cf. "speaker directives" above).

- Since directive speech acts are typically mitigated by some kind of indication of respect for other people's *personal autonomy* and *freedom of self-expression* we expect the paraphrases of I SAY predicates to include some kind of reference to the addressee's attitude to possible (future) states or events, wishes (cf. the primitive WANT), and/or to possible negative consequences which can be avoided.

On this basis we can now propose the following paraphrases for the modal auxiliaries *can*, *may*, *must*, *shall*, and *will*.⁸ They represent the decompositions of modal meanings into semantic primitives.

2.2.1 Can

The modal auxiliary *can* is used to convey one of three different meanings:

- The expression of 'ability', which corresponds to the expression of the semantic primitive CAN as in the canonical sentences

I can do it. It can happen.

Example (1): *Oh I know she's on the bus because I can see her there.* (BNC HED 107)

'Ability'-*can* typically occurs with 1st person subjects, presumably because a speaker can at best speculate about another person's ability to act without constraints.⁹

- The expression of an I THINK predicate which corresponds to the speaker's judgement of possibility as represented by the following paraphrases

I think: this can happen

I think: I/you/someone can do it

Example (2): *You can get them to dig for you, in this other rule, you can get them to dig through the wall.* (BNC KDW 5060)

⁸ According to Wierzbicka (1996: 26) a primitive may have two or more lexical exponents (*allosexes*). The modal *can* and its corresponding (sometimes labelled 'past tense') form *could*, for instance, both belong to the semantic primitive CAN. Goddard and Wierzbicka (1994: 446) describe the problem of allosexy as follows: "just as one word (or morpheme) may have two or more different meanings, one meaning may have two or more lexical exponents, and this applies also at the level of semantic primitives." In the present context we will therefore disregard *might*, *should* and *would*, although the notion of 'allosexy' and its applicability to modal meanings certainly requires further detailed analyses.

⁹ CAN is a fairly recent addition to the set of primitives (cf. Wierzbicka 1996: 67). In earlier analyses, 'ability'-*can* was explicated as follows:

ABILITY (e.g. our team can beat your team)

I say: if X wants to do it X will do it (Wierzbicka 1987: 32)

An alternative view would be to interpret these I THINK predicates as non-1st person instances of 'ability'-*can*.

- The expression of an I SAY predicate which corresponds to a permission-giving speaker directive as in

I say: you can do X

i.e. a statement about another person's ability to act. Our assumption is that only speakers of a socially higher rank can actually state another person's freedom from constraints, which thus relates the I SAY predicate to the notion of deontic modality.

Example (3): *...you can work as much as you like, finish at ten o'clock at night if you want.* (BNC KCX 7975)

Interestingly, in this example the speaker explicitly refers to the addressee's freedom to choose his future actions ("if you want"). In other words, giving permission and thereby assuming a higher rank is mitigated by invoking the *principle of personal autonomy and respect for other people's freedom*.¹⁰

2.2.2 May

The modal auxiliary *may* has no primitive counterpart but occurs both with the propositional as well as with the illocutionary primitive predicate in combination with MAYBE and WANT:

- The expression of speaker judgements corresponds to an underlying I THINK predicate. This combines with the primitive MAYBE, which in turn relates to the notion of 'possibility' (Wierzbicka 1996: 106):

I think: maybe X can happen

I think: maybe you can do X

Example (4): *You never know dear, you may be a very very fit ninety five* (BNC KB7 11229)

- The expression of speaker directives corresponds to an underlying I SAY predicate in combination with the primitive WANT as in

I say: you can do X if you want to do X¹¹

The illocutionary point of giving permission and thus assuming a position of relative power is thus mitigated by an implicit reference to the addressee's wishes.

Example (5): *You may have a poached egg but you not have a poached egg with rice.* (BNC F7A 933)

¹⁰ Dismissals in the form of *You can go now* work on a similar basis: in contexts where the speaker is significantly more powerful than the addressee the speaker can assume the ability to state the addressee's freedom to act rather than allowing the addressee to judge for him- or herself. There is no respect for the addressee's freedom etc. Consequently, this form of a dismissal is pragmatically marked and considered as impolite.

¹¹ Interestingly, our suggestion of a paraphrase is almost identical to Wierzbicka's (1987: 32) decomposition of the 'ability' reading of *can* at a stage in research when CAN was not yet classified among the primitives, cf. fn. 9.

2.2.3 *Must*

Must can likewise be decomposed into an I THINK predicate and an I SAY predicate:

- Used with an I THINK predicate, *must* expresses (logical) reasoning rather than a probability estimate. Its paraphrase therefore involves the semantic primitive BECAUSE as in

I think: something has happened
because of this
I think: X cannot not happen¹²

Example (6): *...somebody must have been there, you must have put it in yourself, you must have done it.* (BNC HDD 213)

- Used with an I SAY predicate *must* is said to express obligation rather than permission. This is captured by the following paraphrase:

I say: do X
if you won't do X, something bad will happen

In this case the directive speech act is mitigated by an implicit reference to unpleasant consequences which may be avoided.

Example (7): *Anyway, as I say, you must be careful because it will run out.* (BNC KST 1380)

2.2.4 *Shall*

Like the previous modal auxiliaries *shall* occurs with propositional I THINK predicates as well as with illocutionary I SAY predicates.

- In present-day English *shall* typically occurs in interrogative clauses and/or with first person subjects (cf. Wierzbicka 1987: 33). Consequently, most uses appear to express the speaker's volition and involve an I SAY predicate as in

I say: at some time after now I can do X. (I will do X if you want me to do X.)
I say: do you want me to do X?

Example (8): *Shall I make some custard?* (BNC KC4 352)

The speaker thus offers to commit him-/herself to some future action, but not without indicating respect for the addressee's wishes. With non-1st person subjects, on the other hand, I SAY predicates are pragmatically highly marked (as in e.g. *You shall obey my orders*, cf. Wierzbicka 1987: 33), because the directive speech act then commits the addressee to a future act complying with the speaker's wishes.

- *Shall* can also occur in I THINK predicates used for predictions as in
I think: I/you can do X. (and I want to do X/I want you to do X.)

¹² Compare Wierzbicka's discussion of the illocutionary force of *must* sentences (1991: 237).

Example (9): *I know, but you shall have to bring it home won't you?* (BNC KB7 11551)

2.2.5 Will

Will is closely related to *shall*, but shows an almost complementary distribution (cf. Figure 2 below).

- In contrast to *shall* the modal auxiliary *will* predominates in I THINK predicates which are used for predictions with high probability rates as in

I think: at some time after now X will happen.

I think: at some time after now I/you/someone will do X.

Example (10): *But of course this will be lovely for you.* (BNC KC0 5564)

- In those cases where *will* corresponds to an I SAY predicate indicating volition the difference to *shall* is more subtle:

I say: at some time after now I can do X.

I say this because I want to do X.

Example (11): *Erm we will pay we will pick up the tab for your hotel.* (BNC J9X 1082)

While *shall* can be used to ask the addressee about his or her preferences, *will* is used to express one's own wishes. This is in accordance with the cultural assumption of *freedom of self-expression* without imposing on the other person's autonomy.

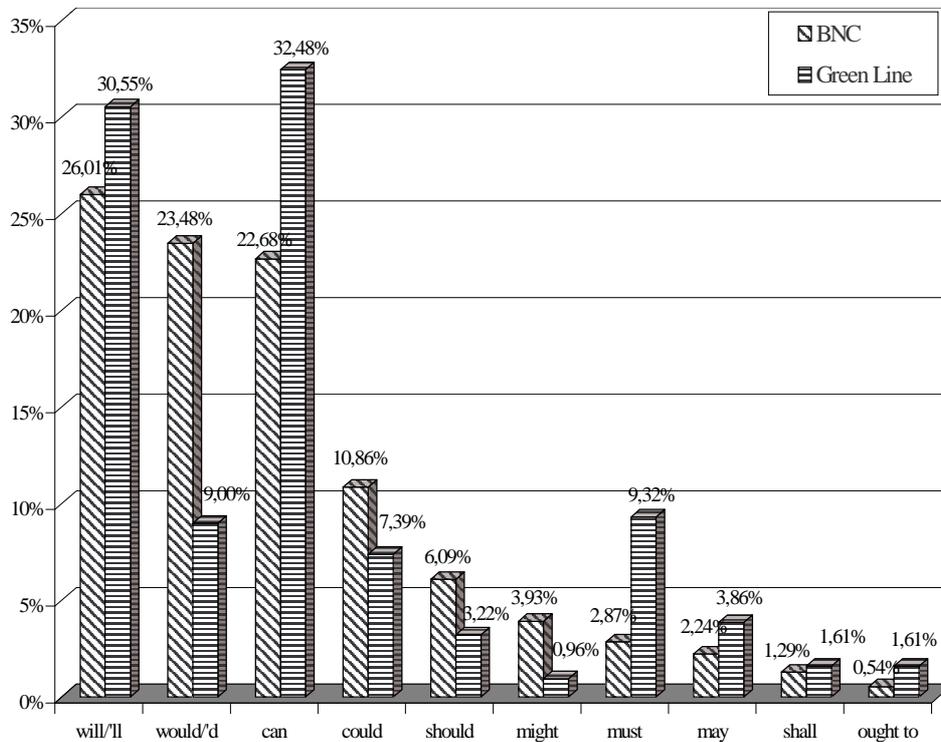
What these examples of paraphrases illustrate is that the decomposition of modal meanings into NSM primitives not only uncovers subtle differences but also supports the distinction between speaker judgements and speaker directives. Moreover, our discussion has shown that a deeper understanding of the interpersonal, culture-based meanings conveyed by the different uses of modal auxiliaries can help language learners to distinguish between different modal auxiliaries. As the following section, however, demonstrates, textbooks of English tend to overemphasize the use of I SAY predicates, thus ignoring the pragmatic restrictions on this kind of usage.

3. Corpus information: modal verbs and their meanings in 'real' English and 'school' English

In our introduction we suggested to extend Bald's (1991) list of problems connected with the treatment of modals in the literature by adding (v) the noticeable imbalance between the use of certain modal verbs or specific modal meanings in EFL textbooks and their actual occurrence in a corpus of contemporary spoken British English. How strong this imbalance really is and which negative consequences are connected with this problem, will be shown in the following sections of our proposal. We will try to explain how Wierzbicka's concept of semantic primitives and her NSM can be used to improve the situation for language learners and teachers.

Our approach is corpus-informed in that we use frequencies and concordances for the central modal verbs based on the spoken part of the BNC to find out which modal meanings are (at least from a communicative perspective) the most important ones in contemporary spoken English and should thus probably be dealt with in some detail in the EFL classroom. In addition to the BNC corpus data evaluation we investigated selected units from *Learning English – Green Line* (volumes 1-6), a German textbook series widely used in EFL teaching in German secondary schools, paying special attention to frequencies and different meanings of the modal verbs.¹³

Figure 1: Relative frequencies of modal verbs in *Green Line* and BNC (spoken part)



Concerning the frequency distribution of modal verbs some interesting observations can be made.¹⁴ As we can see in the diagram above (Figure 1), there are significant

¹³ The frequency counts and semantic analyses were based on all texts (excluding exercises or learner instructions) from those units which discuss one or more modal auxiliaries in their grammar sections.

¹⁴ A more detailed discussion of the frequency differences can be found in Römer (1999) and (2001).

differences between modal frequencies in the spoken part of the BNC and in *Green Line*. Some of the modals (*will/ll, can, must*) are apparently overused in the textbook texts while others (*would'd, could, should, might*) appear less frequently in *Green Line* than in spoken British English. This underuse is especially significant in the case of the modal *would* and its contracted form *'d*. What is interesting here, is that the underused verbs all belong to the group of so-called past tense modals, and that these modals are usually considered to be more tentative and – in view of the cultural assumptions discussed above – more polite versions of *will, can, shall, and may* (cf. also Mitchell 1988: 174-7). Summing up the frequency findings, we can say that the distribution of modal verbs in *Green Line* does not at all mirror their distribution in contemporary spoken English. For that reason and to learn more about differences of modal usage, the next step is to take a closer look at the modals and their meanings or functions in the BNC and *Green Line* data collected.

To find out more about the contexts in which modal verbs are used, we examined BNC concordances of positive (e.g. *can*) and negative (e.g. *can't, cannot*) forms of the central modal verbs and all texts from the *Green Line* textbook units chosen.¹⁵ We then labelled each example sentence with (either) an illocutionary I SAY predicate or a propositional I THINK predicate and thus put all occurrences of the modal verbs into two semantic groups. Our major aims were to find out which modal meaning (i.e. propositional I THINK or illocutionary I SAY) was more frequently used with which modal verb and to see whether there were important differences between spoken corpus data and EFL textbook data.

In the case of *can* and *could* this labelling process turned out to be more problematic than for the other verbs. This is probably due to the presence of the modals' additional primitive meaning of ability (cf. section 2.2.1). We therefore decided not to put sentences in which *can* and *could* are used to express an ability in either of the two meaning groups defined above (i.e. I SAY and I THINK) but to treat ability *can* and ability *could* separately.

The following figure and table show the distribution of propositional and illocutionary meanings of the core modals in the spoken part of the BNC and in *Green Line*. The shares of the modal verbs' different meanings are listed in Table 1. A graphic illustration of the percentages is provided in Figure 2. Different from chapter 2.2 where only *can, may, will, shall, and must* were studied in detail, we now also include the allolexes *could, might, would, and should* and the modal *ought to* in the different meanings analysis. The treatment of the whole group of core modal verbs is supposed to give the reader a more comprehensive picture of the meaning differences between 'real' English and the English represented in textbook texts.

¹⁵ We carried out a manual analysis of randomly collected sets of 200 BNC concordance lines for each verb form.

Figure 2: Distribution of different modal meanings in *Green Line* and BNC (spoken part)

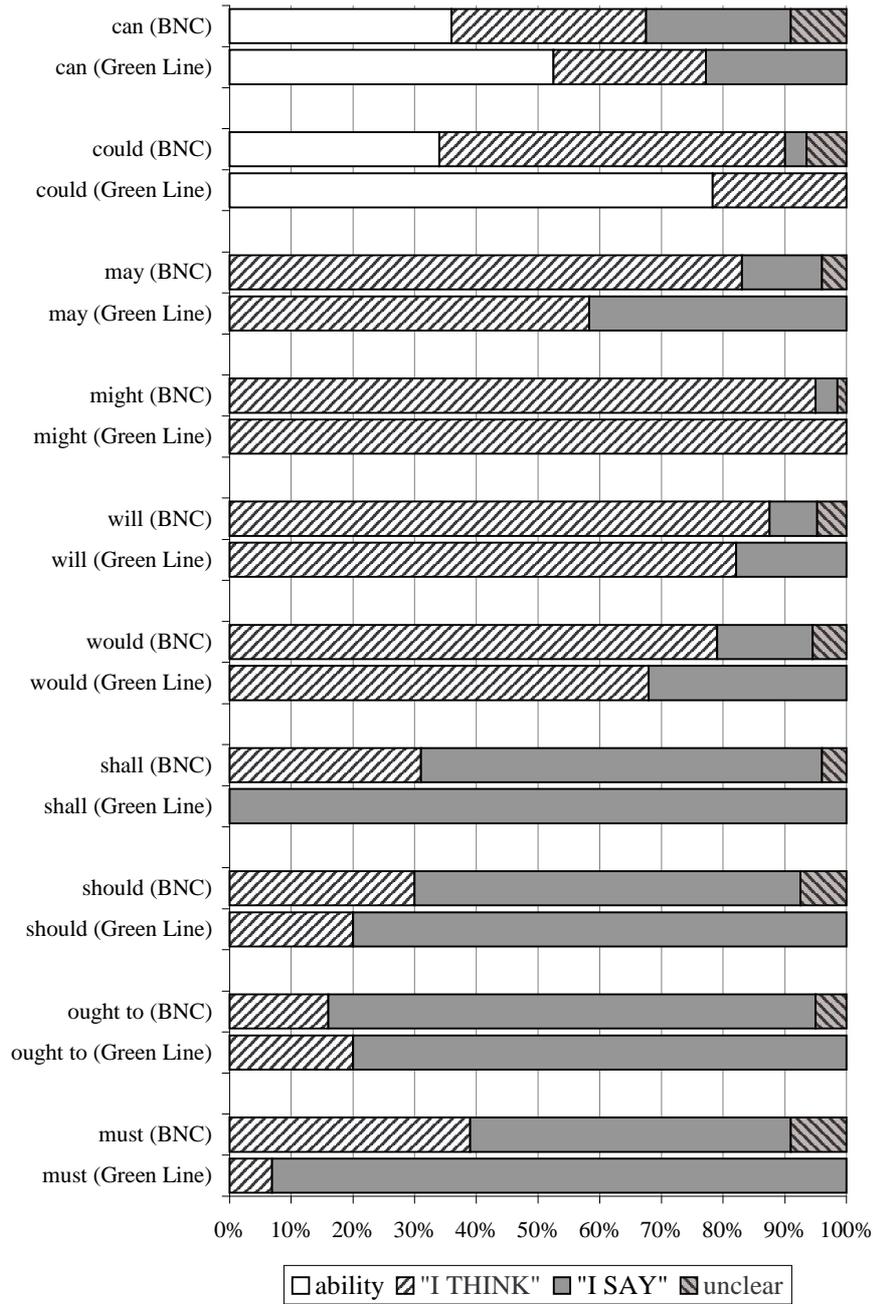


Table 1: Distribution of different modal meanings in *Green Line* and BNC (spoken part)

	ability	I THINK	I SAY	unclear
can (BNC)	36%	31.5%	23.5%	9%
can (<i>Green Line</i>)	52.5%	24.7%	22.8%	0%
could (BNC)	34%	56%	3.5%	6.5%
could (<i>Green Line</i>)	78.3%	21.7%	0%	0%
may (BNC)	–	83%	13%	4%
may (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	58.3%	41.7%	0%
might (BNC)	–	95%	3.5%	1.5%
might (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	100%	0%	0%
will (BNC)	–	87.5%	7.75%	4.75%
will (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	82.1%	17.9%	0%
would (BNC)	–	79%	15.5%	5.5%
would (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	67.9%	32.1%	0%
shall (BNC)	–	31%	65%	4%
shall (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	0%	100%	0%
should (BNC)	–	30%	62.5%	7.5%
should (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	20%	80%	0%
ought to (BNC)	–	16%	79%	5%
ought to (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	20%	80%	0%
must (BNC)	–	39%	52%	9%
must (<i>Green Line</i>)	–	6.9%	93.1%	0%

As we can see in Table 1 and Figure 2, the shares of I SAY predicates of almost all modals (except for *could*) are higher in the textbook data than in the BNC concordances analysed. Significant differences can especially be found in the cases of *must* (93.1% in *Green Line* vs. 52% in BNC), *shall* (100% vs. 65%), *will* (17.9% vs. 7.75%), and *may* (41.7% vs. 13%). On the other hand in *Green Line* texts modal verbs are on the whole less frequently used to express propositional I THINK meanings than in 'real' spoken English. Again the differences are rather big with *must* (6.9% in *Green Line* vs. 39% in BNC), *shall* (0% vs. 31%) *will* (82.1% vs. 87.5%), and *may* (58.3% vs. 83%) but in addition to that also with *can* (24.7% vs. 31.5%), *could* (21.7% vs. 56%), and *would* (67.9% vs.

79%). As for the shares of ability meaning of the modals *can* and *could*, we find much higher numbers in *Green Line* than in the BNC data (52.5% and 78.3% vs. 36% and 34%). Another interesting observation is that of the non-occurrence of unclear or semantically indeterminate cases in the EFL textbook texts, probably due to the fact that the syntactic context given in the invented *Green Line* examples have been constructed unambiguously by the textbook editors whereas in the BNC concordances the sometimes insufficient context and the occasional fragmentary style made it difficult to assign categories.

The data collected and evaluated here show that apparently not enough attention to the culture-specific avoidance of directive speech acts has been paid in the production of the *Green Line* series. This leads us to different conclusions/speculations. First of all, the overrepresentation of deontic uses of modal verbs or of illocutionary I SAY predicates may be put down to interferences with some of the textbook compilers' mother tongue. In German an equally strong restraint on using I SAY predicates as in English does not seem to exist. The high percentage of I THINK predicated uses of modals in the spoken part of the BNC can on the other hand be explained as follows: speakers of English who interact on the basis of personal autonomy will assume that the expression of personal opinions may well have a deontic function: Why else do we express opinions if we are not explicitly asked to do so, and if we otherwise refrain from imposing our views on other people (cf. Grice's maxims of conversation, esp. his maxims of quantity and relation)? Consequently, the differentiation of epistemic and deontic modality might be insufficient as modal uses that are traditionally labelled 'epistemic' may fulfil deontic/directive purposes. To clarify this, we will briefly reinterpret two of the examples presented in section 2.2. The BNC concordance lines

(4) *You never know dear, you may be a very very fit ninety five* (BNC KB7 11229)
and

(6) *...somebody must have been there, you must have put it in yourself, you must have done it.* (BNC HDD 213)

can be read as propositional forms that actually express deontic functions. Thus, a reformulation of the meanings of *may* in (4) and *must* in (6) leads us to the paraphrases

(4') I say: be positive (for *may*)

(6') I say: say you did it (for *must*).

Perhaps the problems involved in the learning and teaching of modal verbs and their meanings in the EFL classroom can at least be partially solved if teachers and textbook compilers differentiate more accurately between propositional vs. directive/illocutionary forms on the one hand and the more abstract notions of epistemic vs. deontic modal functions on the other.

4. Conclusion

Starting with Bald's observations concerning the most conspicuous difficulties involved in the treatment of modals, the present study was aimed at presenting meaning-definitions through paraphrases which take underlying culture-based assumptions into account. For this purpose we applied Anna Wierzbicka's system of semantic primitives to develop a clearer description of the meanings of modals than traditional labels provide. We were

able to show that these new formulations can help to solve at least some of the problems modal verbs and their meanings present for German learners.

Wierzbicka's NSM can indeed be useful to provide clearer descriptions of modal meanings and to reduce the level of complexity of the concepts involved.¹⁶ Beside facilitating the learners' and teachers' access to modal meanings, the translation of modal concepts by means of a Natural Semantic Metalanguage can serve additional important purposes: it can enable students to improve their intercultural communication skills and their pragmatic competence, and it may help them raise their level of cultural awareness. We think that English 'culturemes' are not represented in enough detail in German EFL teaching materials. To use the predicates defined above, we found too many expressions of I SAY and too few expressions of I THINK in the textbook texts compared to the BNC corpus data. We also found that the so-called past tense modals, i.e. the more polite or tentative allolexes of *can*, *will*, *may*, and *shall*, are underused in the *Green Line* textbook sections analysed and that these past tense modals (except for *would*) have higher shares of I THINK predicated meanings than their non-past tense counterparts. Consequently our suggestion would be to put more emphasis on propositional I THINK predicated functions and weaken the status of modal verbs' illocutionary I SAY meanings in EFL teaching.

As we could see, EFL textbooks sometimes offer misleading and inaccurate descriptions of lexico-grammatical phenomena and do not always mirror actual language use. They thus leave foreign language teachers and learners with a lot of problems linguists may be able to help them find solutions for. In the future more corpus-informed semantic and especially pragmatic descriptions will be needed to solve at least some of these problems and to help students to participate more successfully in cross-cultural communicative situations.

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¹⁶ We agree with Wierzbicka who notes that "... one is struck above all by the generally accepted practice of 'defining' relatively complex and obscure words such as *can*, *must* or *should* by means of even more complex and obscure such as, for example, *necessity*, *obligation*, *compulsion*, *authority*, *likelihood*, *execution* ..." (1987: 27).

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