

## A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF MODAL VERBS IN FAIRY TALES

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Cercetarea și analiza verbelor modale continuă a fi un studiu dintre cele mai răspândite în gramatica limbii engleze. Actualmente, nu există o abordare unică a categoriei modale, astfel un număr crucial de dificultăți rămâne a fi explicat de către lingviști.

The present article is entitled “*A Contrastive Analysis of Modal Verbs in Fairy Tales*” and it has as a subject the study of a special “*closed system items*” – *modal verbs*. We have decided to develop this topic because modality remains one of the most complex and challenging areas of English Grammar.

In many languages there exist a certain number of modal auxiliaries functioning as additive elements to the main parts of a sentence. Modals, as a class, present generative theory with a number of crucial explanatory difficulties that have not yet been adequately dealt with:

- An interpretation of the modals that satisfy the simple distributional requirements that one usually suggested as defining the class of modals;
- A generalized description of the meanings of the modals.

As a result of our research it is necessary to mention some important points as far as the subject of our article concerns.

It is important to take into account that modality still remains a doubtful question in linguistics. Modal verbs have proved to be a magnet for linguists and logicians in the field of synchronic and diachronic study because many of them are survivals from the past but others may be recent development. Thus, modal verbs are used now in many constructions in which earlier English preferred the Present Subjunctive.

*Ex: - Though it **be** dangerous, we must press on.*

*Though it **may be** dangerous, we must press on.*

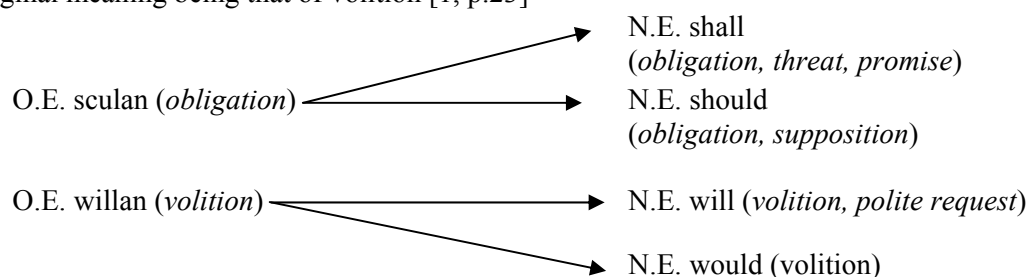
*If Gordon **fail** to come, the party will be ruined.*

*If Gordon **should fail** to come, the party will be ruined.*

*God **grant** your wish.*

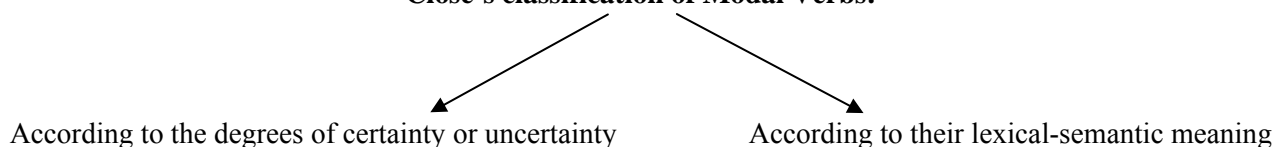
***May** God **grant** your wish.*

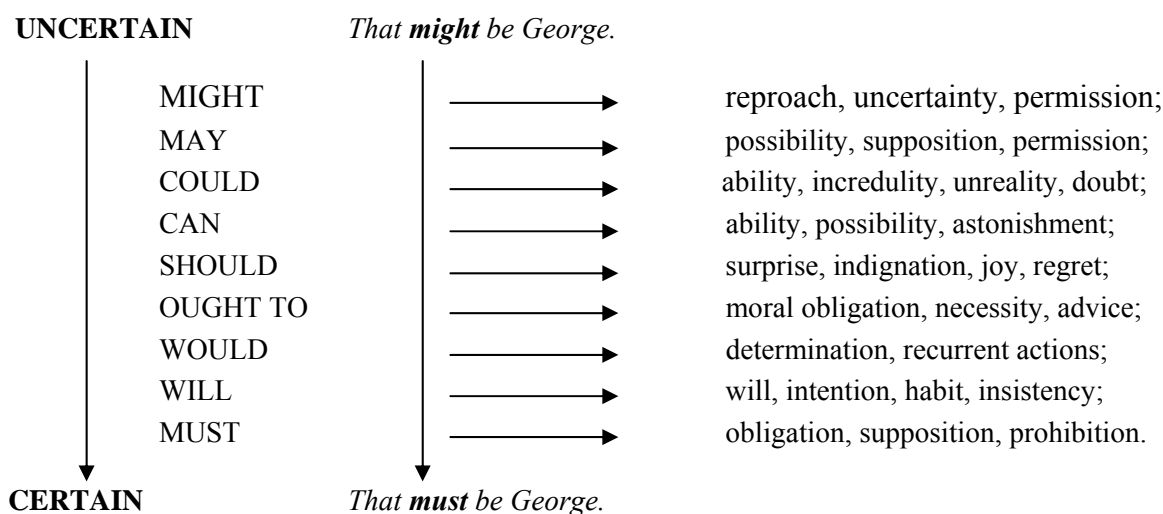
Historically *shall* and *should* were two forms of the same verb – *sculan* expressing obligation. But later they came to express different meanings and in present-day English their use is not parallel and they are treated as two different verbs while *will* and *would* are considered to be the forms of the same verb *willan*, its original meaning being that of volition [1, p.23]



Although a great majority of scholars have attempted to provide any more than a list of functions in dealing with their respective interpretations, the classification of Close based on the primary and secondary uses of the modals seems to succeed in denoting their lexical-grammatical and semantic meanings [2, p.47].

### Close's classification of Modal Verbs:





While confronting the category of modality in English and Romanian we have come to the conclusion that there is much in common between the two and in the same time we have come across certain differences in its interpretation. As we look around for a likely explanation, we should mention that English and Romanian languages are distantly related: the former comes from the Germanic branch and the later – from the Romanic branch. There are a number of interesting generalizations to be made regarding the coincidences among the English and Romanian modal verbs:

- As far as the lexical-semantic meanings of modal verbs concern, we must admit that the Romanian system of grammar distinguishes as well a special class of verbs, named modals [3, p.27]. The common feature is that some modals from both languages coincide entirely on lexical, grammatical and semantical level. These verbs are:

*Can* - „a putea” (ability, possibility, permission),

e.g. *Why **can't** you be like the Happy Prince?*

*Now I **can** finish my play.*

*I **cannot** allow you to annoy me.*

*De ce **nu poți** să fii și tu ca*

*Prințul Fericit? (O.Wilde)*

*Acum **pot** să-mi sfârșesc piesa. (O.Wilde)*

***Nu pot** să-ți permit să mă enervezi.*

(L.F.Baum)

*Must* - „a trebui” (obligation, command, prohibition).

e.g. *We **must** leave the chariot.*

*You **must** listen to what I have to say.*

*Remember, you **must** not take that.*

***Trebuie** să renunțăm la el. (L.F.Baum)*

***Trebuie** să ascuți ce am de spus. (L.Carrol)*

*Ține minte, **trebuie** să nu o iai. (L.F.Baum)*

- A special attention should be paid to the following pair of verbs:

*Will* – „a vrea” (volition, making a request, issuing an invitation)

These verbs go together only in the case when the English modal *will* usually adds to the idea of futurity an expression of volition. The explanation may be that the Romanian verb „a vrea” besides its modal state denotes also the function of an auxiliary verb of the simple future tense.

e.g. ***Will** you come away with me?*

*Perhaps Oz **will** help you.*

***Vrei** s-o luăm razna amîndoi? (L.Carrol)*

*Pesemne că Oz **vrea** să te ajute. (L.F.Baum)*

- The Romanian equivalent for the English infinitive is very often „Conjunctivul”, a form which is gradually taken over the functions of the infinitive.

e.g. *How **can** I get there?*

*You **may** go.*

*You **must** remember.*

*Cum **pot** să **ajung** acolo? L.Carrol)*

***Poți** să pleci. (O.Wilde)*

***Trebuie** să-ți **amintești**. (L.F.Baum)*

- Comparing the modals according to the system of moods in English and Romanian, we have to say that the same parallel forms sometimes are used to express the same modal meaning, like in the case of *Present Indicative* and *Conditional* which corresponds to the Romanian *Prezent* and *Condițional*.

Present Indicative  
e.g. *Well, I **can't** show it myself.*

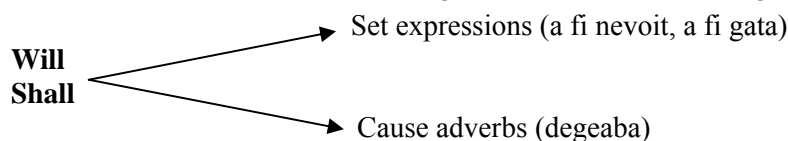
Conditional  
e.g. *We **must** protect him ourselves, if he is in danger.*

Prezentul Indicativ  
*Păi, **nu pot** să-ți arăt.* (O.Wilde)

Condiționalul  
***Ar trebui** să-l apărăm, dacă va fi în primejdie.* (L.F.Baum)

But to our surprise when analyzing a large number of examples we may conclude that the great majority of them are classified as non-coincidences. Thus, there is an interesting observation to be made about the considerable discrepancies of the English and Romanian modals. Further we will give the clear-cut distinctions concerning the modal systems of both languages:

- How strange it may seem but there is no Romanian variant of translation for *will* and *shall*. The lexical-semantic meanings of these verbs are denoted into Romanian with the help of certain *set expressions* (*a fi nevoit, a însemna, a fi gata*) or by the *cause adverbs* (*degeaba*). In this way, the shades of modality are reflected into Romanian owing to these different lexical-grammatical means.



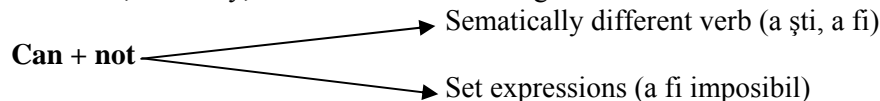
e.g. *For my part, I **will** bear all the unhappiness.*

*We **shall** have made our journey for nothing.*

*În ce mă privește eu **sunt gata** să sufăr toate nenorocirile.* (O.Wilde) -determination

***Am făcut** călătoria **degeaba**.* (L.F.Baum) - disappointment

- Although the English modal *can* has an equivalent for the Romanian translation, sometimes it may be omitted using *semantically entirely different verbs* (*a ști, a fi*) or certain *set expressions* (*a fi imposibil*). This is, naturally, the case when *can* is negated.



e.g. ***Can** he think, and speak, as you do?*

*It **can't** be automobiles.*

***Știe** și el să gândească și să vorbească?*

(L.Carrol) - astonishment

***E imposibil** să fie vorba de automobile.*

(L.F.Baum) - improbability

- *May* as well does not have a right verb equivalent in Romanian being translated by a *predicative adverb* „poate” or even it is omitted and only the English Simple Infinitive is translated.

**May**  
e.g. *To others I **may** have seemed brave.*

**Poate** (predicative adverb)

***Poate** că altora le par câteodată curajoși.*

(O.Wilde) - supposition

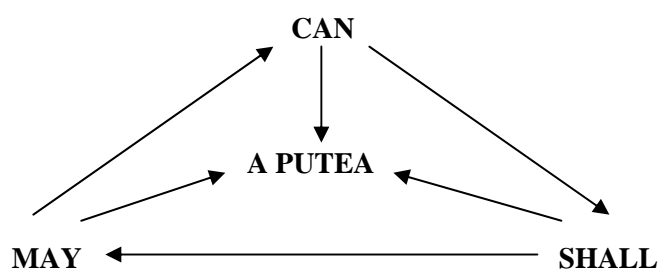
- If we are speaking about the time reference, then it should be said that there are cases when the translation of the English *present can* may be translated into Romanian as denoting a *past action*. While in English we do not observe any rules of sequence of the tenses concerning the modal *must*, then in Romanian it should be said that its equivalent „*a trebui*” is generally denoting a future action by the Present Subjunctive tense.

present **can**  
e.g. *You **can** see for yourself that Dorothy is able to use the magic belt.*

a past action  
***Ai văzut** și singur că Dorothy e în stare să folosească cingătoarea fermecată.* (L.F.Baum)

- Unlike the English modal verbs the Romanian modals present more possibilities at interspersing different words between them. (*Eu **am** altă treabă de făcut.*)

We would like also to mention the ambiguous character of *can/a putea* that parallels perfectly with *may/a putea*. The very diversity of this phenomenon described as “*generics*” leads to a semantic ambiguity underlined by the multiple meanings which the context confers to them, thus enabling the modals to be used to indicate more than one attitude.



e.g. *Get out of the doorway, so that I **may** enter with my friends*  
*But I **shall** have eleven guesses.*

*I **can** tell you more than that.*

*Dă-te la o parte să **pot** intra cu prietenii mei. (L.F.Baum) - possibility*  
*Dar **pot** să încerc de unsprezece ori. (L.F.Baum) - determination*  
***Pot** să-ți spun mai multe. (L.F.Baum) - ability*

Analyzing these five modal verbs (*will, shall, can, must, may*), we have to take into consideration **the specific context** in which they are used. First of all, we should mention the fact that Fairy Tales are written for children and while translating the sentences containing different modal verbs, the translator is not interested to obey the grammatical rules. Various shades of modality are omitted due to the lexical and grammatical modifications that are made for stylistic purposes so as to create *an expressive and emotionally coloured context*.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt is the fact that the specific context of Fairy Tales has proved that the simplification of the Romanian modal system does not imply less of ability of expressing different meanings. In an involved modal system like the English one, different meanings are expressed by the opposition of different forms while in the Romanian system with a small number of modals different meanings can be expressed by one and the same form in different contexts or by changing the lexical character of the verb.

Thus, the results of this article could also be used in solving some important confrontational linguistic difficulties of translation, lexicography, teaching English to students speaking Romanian and can also serve as material for a special course in Comparative Linguistics.

Having discussed these general problems, we now turn to say that not all the aspects of this subject were covered in this work, as there exists a great number of modal peculiarities. If somebody continues to study this phenomenon he/she will discover a lot of interesting and important things about the function of modal verbs in language and speech.

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