

The study is concerned with the English modal auxiliaries CAN and MAY and their morphologically past tense forms COULD and MIGHT.¹

It is essentially a

small-scale corpus-based investigation into possibility meanings of these modal auxiliaries in contemporary written British English, taking account of stylistic variation. The investigation focuses on assigning appropriate readings to contextualized occurrences of modal auxiliaries and is thus primarily based on discussions of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects.

The study attempts to present a general account of possibility senses of CAN/COULD and MAY/MIGHT and reviews the issues relating to their use and distribution on the basis of a semantic and quantitative analysis. However, frequency of occurrence is meant to provide merely a supplementary view of the qualitative analysis, focusing on the role of context in interpreting modal meanings. Among the modal-specific questions that the treatise addresses are those concerning modal semantics, syntactic co-occurrence patterns, stylistic variation, and pragmatic inferencing. It is important to note that the study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive and systematic semantic description of CAN/COULD and MAY/MIGHT. Based on interpreting particular contextualized occurrences, it primarily investigates relevant contextual factors and patterns in order to reveal their significance in terms of the root-epistemic distinction. ...