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THE USE OF ENGLISH MODAL VERBS BY EFL LEARNERS IN GREEK STATE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The most important formal devices found in the English language for expressing modality (Stephany, 1997: 375) are:

- 1) Modal verbs e.g. *must, should, will, would, can, could, may, might* etc.
- 2) modal inflections or moods, e.g. *imperative, subjunctive, optative, conditional*, and
- 3) modal adverbs, e.g. *possibly, probably, maybe, perhaps*, etc.

The main concern of this study is the modal verbs' category, since this group of modal carriers by being more systematically studied at schools, plays a significant role in the Greek EFL classroom. In this light, the aim of the present study is a cross-pragmalinguistic discussion of the English modal verbs used by EFL learners in the Greek State Schools, within a Cognitive Linguistic framework. This interdisciplinary approach is what basically constitutes the novelty of the present study.

The idea for this research emerged after several observations of mismatches, i.e. wrong form-meaning connections- FMCs- between certain modal verbs and their meanings by Greek EFL learners in State Schools. These learners seem to have difficulty in making the correct associations between modal verbs and their concepts they correspond to when used in real communication. The question naturally arising concerns the cause of these mismatches and whether these are related with the learners' L1 and their conceptual system as native speakers of M. Greek. Hence, the contrastive character of this study. The whole idea of comparing and contrasting, however, is reinforced by a pragmatic element, i.e. it involves the comparison of English modal verbs with their M. Greek modal equivalents when used to perform certain communicative acts. Furthermore, it emphasizes the psychological underpinning of *transfer* (Kellerman, 1995), since this cross-pragmalinguistic comparison is approached from a psychological processing perspective.

The cognitive grounding of the cross-pragalinguistic discussion, being initially triggered by the incorrect FMCs, can be further explained as follows:

The most common labels used to describe *modality* meanings are necessity, obligation, advisability for the *deontic* senses and certainty, probability, possibility for the *epistemic* senses. However, these labels suggest viewing modal verbs as distinct lexicogrammatical elements with no semantic-pragmatic interrelationships among themselves. This study suggests a cognitive perspective, i.e. looking at the modal verbs as inseparable, interrelated parts whose *deontic* and *epistemic* meaning will be

defined by the unifying element of force against the conceptual background (ICM) of the speech acts of **directives** and **conclusions**, respectively. It is proposed, therefore, that the primary meaning of modal verbs, when used in certain communicative purposes, i.e. in **directives** and **conclusions**, is to express different kinds of power relations between the interactants, which are metaphorically mapped from the physical milieu to the social (*deontic* senses) and to the reasoning milieu (*epistemic* senses). These power relationships are subject to certain restrictions. In the case of **directives**, they are a function of the domain (social context) to which the interactants belong (school, family, work, neighborhood, friends, etc.), while in the case of **conclusions** they are a function of the interaction between the evidence and the expectations. In this connection, there is a kind of gradation ascribable to them ranging from high to medium and then to low strength. The strength of the *force* has an immediate effect on the speaker's expectations with regard to the realization either of the **directive** or of the **conclusion**. In fact, the degree of the speaker's expectations is proportionate to the strength of *force* exercised by him on the hearer in the case of **directives** or by the evidence on his/her reasoning system in the case of **conclusions**. This kind of interaction between speaker and hearer and between speaker and evidence by virtue of the element of force indicates the interactional character of the speech acts of **directives** and **conclusions** (Winters, 1990; Marmaridou, 2002), which is also emphasized in this study.

Given the contrastive character of our study, we are concerned within this cognitive framework with the use of subjunctive mood in the M.. Greek language, since it is one of the main exponents of *deontic* modality in M.Greek. Being a structure with not an equivalent from the target language, it was necessary to see for the sake of teaching, how it compares with English. What was also of interest here was to examine the role of certain modal verbs, mostly in expressing **assertives** in L1 (i.e. *λογικά, κανονικά, μάλλον, πιθανόν*), with a view to further exploring formal equivalencies between the two languages. To this end, we studied the English modal verbs *must, should, may* and *can't* in the interlanguage (IL) of Greek EFL learners. The IL data was collected by means of an instrument specially designed for our purposes.

Our main hypotheses were actually born out. The psychological reality of *transfer* was confirmed as the test data revealed the cognitive dimension of L1 influence on EFL learning. In particular, *must* and *should* appeared to be in 'competition' among themselves. It was actually evidenced that the form of prototype phenomena being triggered during the operationalisation of categorization mechanisms in the use of the specific modal verbs. In particular, the learners' developing languages, i.e. their interlanguage (IL), exhibited signs of L1-motivated form-meaning connections with regard to these modal verbs. Greek EFL learners appeared to be influenced while making modal verbs-meaning connections (FMCs) by prototypical modal verbs and prototypical meanings in M. Greek. On the one hand, the modal verb *πρέπει (prepi)*, being associated with the most central concepts, i.e. high strengths of *deontic* and *epistemic force* in the M. Greek categories of **directives** and **conclusions**, respectively, was evidenced to affect the connections the Greek EFL learners made in English. On the other hand, due to the absence of certain concepts, such as the medium strength of *deontic* and *epistemic force* from their conceptual system, the learners showed some difficulty especially in the early and intermediate stages to identify in the L2 the contexts in which it is discharged.

Besides the contribution to FL learning research, the pedagogical implications of the findings yielded by this study are also discussed in this thesis, in the sense that pedagogical interventions are necessary for making more effective FMCs with regard to the specific English modal verbs. Our emphasis is on the acquisition of English

modal verbs used in the speech acts of **directives** and **conclusions** as involving the activation of cognitive mechanism. The underlying assumption is that viewing a cognitive dimension in SLA/FLA can provide a comprehensive and well-specified theoretical framework for SL/FL learning. In keeping with this argument, the final end-point is to make the way teachers teach compatible with the way individuals process information.