How to understand and elicit modals

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1 Modals

Modality is the part of the grammar that deals with possible or conceivable situations that are not known to be actual situations. That sounds complicated, but examples are easy to understand. An example of a modal in English is *might*:

(1) Aman *might* be at his house right now.

Here, you are not sure if Aman is in fact at his house right now, but there is a possibility that he is. In other words, we don’t know what the actual situation is (Is he home? Is he at work? Is he out of the country?), but we can make a statement about a possible or conceivable situation. This is an example of a *possibility modal*. You can replace it with *it is possible that*...

(2) Aman *might* be at his house right now.

= *It is possible that* Aman is at his house right now.

Some modals have a stronger meaning. Let’s look at *has go to* in English:

(3) The Winter Olympics are live right now, man, Aman *has got to* be at his house – you know how much he loves curling.

This is an example of a *necessity modal*. You can replace it with *it is necessary that*...

(4) Aman *has got to* be at his house right now.

= *It is necessary that* Aman is at his house right now.

Modals are interesting because you can’t use them if you’re totally sure about the actual situation. If you have clear evidence that Aman is at home right now (say you can see him through the window, or you have his GPS location – creepy!), then it’s very weird to say a modal. (That weirdness is indicated by the “hash” mark.)

(5) *Context*: I can see that Aman is sitting in his living room watching tv.

#Aman *has got to* be at his house right now.

So now you know two things: (i) modals are special because they are only used in talking about non-actual/unrealized/unconfirmed but conceivable situations, and (ii) they can talk about *possibility* or they can talk about *necessity*.

In addition to these two categories of modals, you can classify them further, depending on what in the context creates the possibility or necessity – this is called modal *flavor*. In (1) above, there is a possibility
of Aman being home right on based on what we know about Aman’s usual habits. The Greek word episteme means ‘knowledge’. So whenever a modal expresses a possibility or necessity based on what we know about something that usually happens, it is an epistemic modal. In fact, the example in (3) above is, similarly, an example of an epistemic necessity modal. Common flavors of modality are given below. Here I have put all the necessity ones in boxes, and underlined all the possibility ones.

(6) a. Epistemic
    (In view of what we know,) Aman must/might/may be at home.

b. Deontic
    (In view of his parents orders,) Aman may watch TV, but he must go to bed at 8pm.

c. Ability
    (In view of her physical abilities,) Sahana can lift 200 lbs.

d. Teleological
    (In view of her goal to get a PhD,) Sahana must write a dissertation.

e. Bouletic
    (In view of her desire to retire at age 50,) Sahana should work hard now.

You should be able to use this as a guideline, and try to elicit all of the five flavors of modality, and both necessity and possibility in each case – so ten in total. Some you have already. You can add “future tense” to this list too. Future also deals with unarealized possibilities, so we might want to look at that too.

Once you have those in place, you can think about whether that’s enough information to work with, or if necessary talk to the tense/agreement people and pool resources.

2 General notes

When you do your own elicitation, try to use normal, simple language to give very very short context sentences. Try always to just start by saying the context and then asking the informant, “In this situation, can you say _ ?” Avoid saying things like, “This might be silly” (it’s not, you are amazing, don’t second-guess yourself), or “I’m not sure if we did this already” (it’s ok, if you did, we’ll let you know and you can have a do-over). Also try not to say, “I’m not sure if you can say it this way...” because that could bias the informant and make her feel like the target response sentence is weird (when it might be totally natural in Telugu).

Feel free to ask me if you have any questions at all! See you soon!