

THE RELEVANCE OF POLITENESS IN THE EPISTEMIC INTERPRETATION OF THE ENGLISH MODALS

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Resumen

La literatura reciente sobre los auxiliares modales ingleses según la Teoría de la Relevancia ha abordado preferentemente su significado básico y los tipos principales de explicaturas de alto nivel que dan lugar a interpretaciones epistémicas o radicales. Este artículo avanza un paso, al demostrarse, mediante ejemplos de textos auténticos, que la interpretación epistémica de los modales no siempre implica falta de conocimiento absoluto: en ciertos contextos sólo puede explicarse por motivos de cortesía, esto es, por el deseo del hablante de satisfacer las necesidades de imagen del destinatario, de una tercera persona, o las suyas propias. En estos contextos los modales debilitan los supuestos de contenido inferibles de la proposición, pero este debilitamiento se compensa con la introducción de supuestos de cortesía; en otras palabras, en esta "interpretación de cortesía" los modales implican la comunicación de supuestos más numerosos y débiles, produciendo así vaguedad en las preferencias en que aparecen.

Palabras clave: pragmática, pertinencia, cortesía, modalidad epistémica

Abstract

Recent literature on English modal auxiliary verbs from the relevance-theoretic approach has largely concentrated on their basic meaning and on the main types of high-level explicatures which give way to epistemic or root interpretations. This paper proceeds one step further by setting forth, through the analysis of naturally occurring examples, that the epistemic interpretation of the modals does not always implicate lack of absolute knowledge: in certain contexts it can be due only to politeness, that is, to the speaker's wish to satisfy the addressee's, a third person's or his or her own face needs. In these contexts the modals weaken the content assumptions inferable from the proposition, but this weakening is compensated with the introduction of politeness assumptions; in other words, the modals in this 'politeness interpretation' implicate the communication of a wider array of weaker assumptions, thus conveying vagueness to the utterances in which they occur.

Key words: pragmatics, relevance, politeness, epistemic modality

Résumé

La littérature récente sur les auxiliaires modaux anglais d'après la Théorie de la Relevance s'est surtout occupée de leur signifié basique et des principales sortes d'explicatures de haut niveau qui donnent lieu à des interprétations épistémiques ou radicales. Cet article avance d'un pas, en démontrant, par des exemples authentiques, que l'interprétation épistémique des modaux n'implique pas toujours le manque de connaissance absolue: dans ces contextes elle ne peut s'expliquer que par des raisons de politesse, c'est à dire par le désir du parlant de satisfaire les besoins d'image du destinataire, d'une troisième personne, ou les siens propres. Dans ces contextes les modaux affaiblissent les assomptions de contenu inferibles de la proposition, mais cet affaiblissement se compense par l'introduction d'assomptions de politesse; en autres mots, dans cette "interprétation de politesse" les modaux impliquent la communication d'assomptions plus nombreuses et faibles, produisant alors du vague dans les préférences où ils se trouvent.

Mot clés: pragmatique, pertinence, politesse, modalité épistémique.

Sumario

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1. The relevance-theoretic approach to the modals

According to previous literature within the relevance-theoretic framework, such as Groefsema (1992, 1995), Berbeira (1993a, 1993b, 1996) and Klinge (1993), the modals are not polysemantic in nature: they have a single basic meaning, which gives rise to different interpretations depending on contextual factors. This section is based on Berbeira's and Klinge's approaches to the modals. Both show dissatisfaction towards their treatment in much of the preceding literature, where they are said to have potential ambiguity which is usually resolved by the context, without further explanation about how the resolution of the ambiguity is actually carried out in the interpretation of utterances. Berbeira and Klinge state that, in the semantic level, the modals are not ambiguous, but have a basic meaning common to all their instances; the distinction between different modalities (epistemic, deontic, dynamic) is a matter of utterance interpretation which depends on the contexts in which the modals occur, thus belonging to pragmatics. Furthermore, the meanings of all the modals have something in common, in correspondence to their homogeneous morphosyntactic behaviour. This shared semantic field is described in terms of potentiality: the modals are semantically specialized for the representation of potential worlds; that is, in modalized utterances, the propositional content is processed as a representation of a state of affairs (SoA) in a potential world. Potential worlds are, according to Wilson and Sperber (1988, 85), "worlds compatible with the individual's assumptions of the actual world, which may therefore be, or become, actual themselves". This potentiality that the modals codify is a kind of conceptual information¹.

The different interpretations of the modals are one more instance of the underdetermination of the propositional content by the semantic input of sentences: the logical form of utterances is incomplete, and the addressee (A) is to complete it by the process of inferential enrichment: the inferences so made are called explicatures. The explicatures inferred from modalized utterances belong to the higher-level type, since they express the speaker (S)'s attitude towards the proposition. They are constructed in accordance with the principle of relevance, that is, the utterance must be processed in such a way that its contextual effects are greatest and compensate for the efforts involved in the processing.

The higher-level explicatures raised by modals may situate the propositions either

¹ It must be noted that Berbeira views the modals as relators between the proposition expressed and a set of assumptions, and Klinge as relators between the proposition expressed and an actual SoA, but this difference does not affect the purposes of this paper.

in a potential world or in a potential-and-desirable world. These two situations correspond to the labels of epistemic and root modality, respectively; in the latter case the modals convey intentionality towards the proposition becoming true. The generation of one explicature or the other depends on the temporal index assigned to the SoA referred to by the proposition. If it is future, there may or may not be intentionality towards the proposition becoming true, so that both explicatures are possible; if the SoA is present or past, it is already true or false at the time of the speech, and consequently intentionality to bring it about is not possible: therefore, the proposition cannot be situated in a desirable world. For instance, let us consider the following utterances:

- (1) Peter *may* have sheets of paper available.
- (2) They *will* have arrived two hours ago.
- (3) Mary *must* be having a good time.
- (4) You *may* go home if you wish.
- (5) You *will* do what I tell you.
- (6) You *must* help me with the washing up.

In (1-3) the temporal index assigned to the SoA is present or past, so that desirability cannot be inferred, the epistemic interpretation being the only possible. In (4-6) the event is assigned a future time index, the agent is under control to carry it out, and its realization is desirable for at least one of the participants in the conversation. All these factors lead to the root interpretation.

The remainder of this paper will concentrate on a subtype of epistemic interpretation in which the lack of absolute knowledge of the truth of the proposition is to be ruled out because its assumption is inconsistent with the context and too weak to upset it. The modals liable to an interpretation of this kind are those which can express epistemic modality applied to present and past SoAs: absolute knowledge of a future SoA is impossible, since it has not happened yet. For reasons of space, the paper will be restricted to the modals that Klinge calls 'central', ie. those that have their origins in old non-past forms. The modals concerned are MAY, WILL and MUST, SHALL being excluded, since it always refers to future SoAs. The analysis will be based on occurrences sorted out of the face-to-face conversations in Svartvik and Quirk's corpus (1980), where the participants are educated native speakers of British English. The transcription conventions are specified in the Appendix.

Before dealing with the subtype of epistemic modality above mentioned, I will set forth a semantic and pragmatic characterization of MAY, WILL and MUST, taken from Berbeira (1992, 203-204) with the exception that my WILL corresponds to his MUST; the double negation used here for MUST is adopted from Klinge (1993, 351), with whom I agree in that MUST differs from WILL in the roundabout way through which S arrives at the entailment of all the propositions available to S towards the modalized proposition.

- MAY: *There is at least some set of propositions such that p is compatible with it, and the world type is potential.*
- WILL: *p is entailed by the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p, and the world type is potential².*
- MUST: *not-p is not entailed by any propositions of the set which has a bearing on p, and the world type is potential³.*

As it was shown above by examples (1-6), the basic meaning of these three modals can be applied either to the truth or to the desirability of the proposition, depending on the context. However, as was stated before, in certain instances in which the modals express epistemic modality S seems to know the truth of the proposition. For instance, it is easy to imagine (7), taken from a job interview in which speaker A took part and was not selected, uttered even when he positively knows that he is being cynical⁴:

- (7) c: ((well)) ^what was the ^outcome of all - this# ^what . transp^ired#
A: - - ^n^othing# "I haven't heard a w^ord# I mean ^I [th] ^you
kn^ow ((I say)) "I think they :made up their minds before they
!st^arted# .but I ^may be being a bit c^ynical a-bout it# - - -[@m ?
a] for ^instance# .[@m] - ^over sherry before :d^inner# .the
^president was - - - drivelling ^on a-bout# (Text 1-3, Tone Unit 992)

The modal does not express potentiality, but, assuming that every utterance follows the principle of relevance, some other motivation must be present for its use. For instance, MAY could be interpreted as a softener of the manifestness of assumptions the truth of which is compromising for S. It is my intuition that this softening can be explained in terms of politeness. Consequently, before embarking on the analysis of actual instances of the modals, it is convenient to provide a few considerations about politeness in relation to relevance theory. This will be done in Section 2.

² The notion of bearing has been introduced by Marjolein Groefsema, and it refers to the set of propositions which have an operative value in the processing of the expressed proposition, and therefore have to be considered for its interpretation. For a more technical definition see Groefsema (1992:124)

³ It is my intuition that this semantic characterization of WILL and MUST is too strong, insofar as instances of both modal coexist with counterevidence of which the speaker does dispose:

(1) I think Smith *will* win the race *although* he was ill *yesterday*

(2) To judge by his look Peter *must* be having a good time *although* his cheerfulness may be only apparent

However, I will leave this semantic characterization as it stands because a more extensive consideration would deviate from the main purpose of this paper.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the speaker and the addressee with masculine and feminine pronouns respectively.

2. The relevance of politeness

Jucker (1988) states that politeness at first sight seems to contradict the principle of relevance; for instance, if the following utterances are compared,

(8) (JUC 2) Close the window.

(9) (JUC 3) Don't you think it is a bit draughty in here.

it is easy to see that S can arrive in both cases at the same assumption [Mary wants me to close the window], the processing effort being greater in (9) than in (8). However, not all assumptions that a speaker communicates need relate to the content; they may also concern, for instance, the status of the message and S's attitude towards A. This kind of assumptions can be said to belong to the relationship level, in contrast to the content level⁵. For the sake of simplicity I will use the labels 'content assumption' and 'relationship assumption'. The communication of relationship assumptions seems to be especially important when the content assumptions endanger the relationship between the participants in the conversation, as is the case, for instance, of [Mary wants me to close the window].

In order to describe this possible endangering of personal relationships, I will use Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach to politeness, which is based on the assumption that adult members of a society have and know each other to have 'face', that is, public self-image⁶. Face is divided into 'positive face', which concerns the individual's need to be appreciated, and 'negative face', which is directed towards the individual's need for his or her territories to be respected and not intruded upon. Speakers attempt to respect their own and their addressees' negative and positive face needs, but in certain cases they find it necessary to perform face-threatening acts (FTAs) which menace them. Speakers may choose to do the FTA bald-on-record (that is, without any softening) or to soften it, either by on-record positive and negative politeness strategies, where S makes his communicative intention clear, and off-record strategies, where there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention⁷.

The content assumption inferred from examples (8) and (9) [Mary wants me to close the window] contains an FTA directed towards A's negative face, since it is an imposition on her by S to perform an action, thus menacing her freedom to do what she wishes. In (8) the FTA is done bald-on-record; that is, the content assumption is strongly manifest, but no relationship assumption is made manifest (or rather, S makes it manifest that the FTA

⁵ The distinction between the content level and the relationship level of communication has been adopted by Jucker from Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J.H. and D.D. Jackson (1967), *Pragmatics of Human Communication* New York, Norton

⁶ The term 'face' was first used in Goffman, E. (1967), *Interaction ritual: essays on face to face behavior*, New York, Garden City

⁷ Brown and Levinson (1987: 103) specify that positive politeness strategies can be used not only to mitigate FTAs, but also "as a kind of social accelerator" where S, in using them, indicates that he wants to 'come closer' to H". Concerning this paper, all the instances of the modals as politeness devices that I have found can be accounted for in terms of FTAs

is not important enough for him to be more indirect). In contrast, in (9) the content assumption is more weakly manifest, but this indirectness leads to A's inference of the relationship assumption [S cares about my need of freedom to act as I wish], which is relevant. From the comparison of (8) and (9) it may then be deduced that polite utterances would be less relevant than more direct ones if only content assumptions existed, but the communication of politeness is desirable for the creation and maintenance of good relationships between speech participants, thus being relevant in itself. The next section will show how epistemically interpreted modals lead in certain contexts to the inference of relationship assumptions (or, more specifically, politeness assumptions), with consequent changes in the processing of the utterance.

3. The expression of politeness by epistemic interpretations of modals

The epistemic interpretations of modals involving politeness strategies will be accounted for by Brown and Levinson's concepts of FTAs, positive/negative face and positive/negative politeness. I will not consider individual strategies, as I have done elsewhere (Carretero Lapeyre 1995) since they are too specific for my present purpose. Along the phases of interpretation, three characteristics of the FTAs will be made clear: a) what it consists of; b) the face threatened (positive or negative); c) the participant whose face is threatened (S, A or a third person).

The distinction between on-record and off-record strategies will be suppressed because there is no sharp dividing line between them, but rather they constitute the two extremes of a continuum, depending on the manifestness of the politeness assumption in each case. The bald-on-record performance of FTAs will not be studied either, since it does not cause any variation in the interpretation of the modals on grounds of politeness: for example, if for the sake of efficiency a speaker wishes to communicate directly something unfavourable to A, as

(10) Something must be burning in the kitchen. Go and see!

the use of MUST is in all probability due to nothing else but the lack of absolute knowledge of the truth. The study of the expression of politeness by epistemic modals will then be wholly accounted for by positive and negative politeness strategies.

3.1. The expression of politeness with epistemic MAY

To begin the analysis, let us return to example (7), rewritten as (11).

- (11) c: ((well)) ^what was the ^outcome of all - this# ^what transp^ired#
A: -- ^n^othing#"^I haven't heard a w^ord#I mean ^I [th] ^you kn^ow ((I say))
" ^I think they; made up their minds before they !st^arted# .but I ^may be
being a bit c^ynical a-bout it# - - -[@m ? a] for ^\instance# .[@m] - ^over
sherry before :d^inner# .the ^president was - - - drivelling \on a-bout# (1-3,
992)

In processing 'I may be being a bit cynical about it', A will probably access the following content and politeness assumptions:

- a) Direct evidence: speaker A says '... but I may be being a bit cynical about it...';
- b) Decodification of the semantic output: there is at least some set of propositions such that [speaker A is being a bit cynical about it] (henceforth α) is compatible with it, and the world type is potential;
- c) Inferential enrichment for completion of the propositional form: the present time index assigned to the SoA leads to the epistemic interpretation;
- d) Background assumption:⁸ S only knows the truth of only a set of all the propositions which have a bearing on α , there being another set of operative propositions the truth of which S does not know;
- e) Background assumption: being cynical about somebody or something is a personal attitude of S;
- f) Background assumption: people usually know which their attitudes are; therefore, this assumption is inconsistent with assumption d) and their relative weight is to be compared;
- g) Weighing of assumptions d) and f): assumption f) is stronger, because it is a common property of humans to know what their attitudes are; therefore, assumption d) is to be ruled out. However, if it is assumed that the utterance is relevant, the modal must have been used for some reason, which should be interpreted;
- h) Inference from the decodification of the semantic output of the modal: MAY weakens the manifestness of assumption α ; therefore, there must be a reason for this weakening different from the lack of knowledge of propositions which have a bearing on the proposition modalized;
- i) Background assumption: being cynical is a negative attitude;
- j) Background assumption. displaying a negative attitude may easily lead to S's depreciation by A, thus being an FTA against S's positive face;
- k) Background assumption: for the reasons set forth in assumption i), speakers have

⁸ I will use the label 'background assumption' to refer to assumptions retrieved from some kind of encyclopaedic knowledge

grounds to weaken the manifestness of assumptions about negative attitudes;

l) Assumption resulting from the confrontation of assumptions h) and k): speaker A has made assumption α weakly manifest in order to protect his own positive face needs, that is, on grounds of positive politeness.

The inferential process involved in the understanding of (11) has shown that the epistemic interpretation of MAY can give way to an interpretation of its use in terms of politeness, in order to soften a given FTA. The nature of this FTA may vary depending on the context: in (11) it concerned S's positive face; however, consider (12):

(12) A: **[@:] and** ^now it turns out that !you were

B: **((^yes of !course#))**

A: right all a:long# .and the ^{r\est of us} {b@:@} have been mis"
!taken#and par^{t\icularly} !M\allet's _been mis _taken#

B: I ^think this [m] this :m\ay be wh/y# he's so ^cross a!b\out the
_whole _thing (1-2, 338)

Here MAY weakens the manifestness of the content assumption [Mallet is so cross about the whole thing because he has been mistaken], which contains an FTA towards Mallet's positive face and also towards S himself (criticising others can lead to depreciation of the criticiser). MAY then fulfils the positive face needs of both S and a third person.

In contrast to the two previous examples, in (13) MAY weakens the manifestness of an assumption favourable to S, namely [they want somebody much more like me] for reasons of modesty: the transmission of information favourable to oneself consists of an FTA against the positive face of A and/or third persons, insofar as they may feel inferior to S (and therefore despised); the FTA is directed towards those people considered as 'not much like S' concerning work. Notice how the weakening is also conveyed by *I don't know*:

(13)B: I sus^pect ((that)) the 'kind of :person who's :d\ving for a 'job like that#
^wouldn't be 'good at !d\ing it# ((they)) ^probably (('want.somebody
much)) more 'like your:s\elf# -.

a: ^\ah# well ^that may *be !s\o# ^I don't !kn\ow##* (4-6, 496)

In (14), which takes place within a discussion concerning the reasons for Britain's loss of power, S uses MAY as one of many devices with which he softens his position in discourse, by weakening the manifestness of the assumption [my view of the reasons for Britain's loss of world power is right] in order not to appear impositive in A's eyes: making one's opinion strongly manifest may cause A to feel that S does not accept alternative opinions (including those that A supports), thus threatening A's positive face. MAY here can also be interpreted as a positive politeness device:

(14) (the talk concerns the reasons why Britain ceased to be a world power)

B: *I'm ^only* :putting it :forward as **a sug:g\vestion#

A: **^n\o# I ^think I ^think it !is [:@:] I ^think this !is* the way

B: I ^think there !may be !something !in it (laughs) (2-3, 765)

In the previous occurrences here described MAY has conveyed positive politeness assumptions. In other contexts it seems to fulfil negative face needs:

(15) (A is considering the possibility that Dily may be lodged in her house)

b: [i?] it's ^just the 'fact that - [m] !Dilys's 'room is ":\not# . a^w\ay#

from the ^rest of the !h\ouse# - - - and she ^may feel# that she

^needs to !ble# a^way from the 'rest of the !h\ouse# - - - (4-1, 965)

Here the modalized proposition is assigned a future time index and therefore the lack of knowledge cannot be ruled out; however, the use of MAY seems to convey politeness at the same time: S is communicating a proposition which easily leads A to the inference of a suggestion not to accommodate Dily in her house, that is, an FTA towards A's negative face. Therefore MAY in (15) can be interpreted to protect A's negative face needs as well as to express lack of total knowledge.

3.2. The expression of politeness with epistemic WILL

In the Svartvik and Quirk corpus I have found no clear instances of epistemic WILL where lack of total knowledge can entirely be ruled out. Instances have, on the other hand, been found where the use of WILL can be partly explained on grounds of politeness. This is the case of (16), where the two instances of 'll⁹ are not necessary in strictly logical terms, since potentiality is already conveyed in the semantic output of the utterance by *probably*. S seems to have special reasons to insist on the potentiality:

(16) C: [:@:~] Hart sees a 'lot of Pro'fessor :B\irdwood {^obviously#}

be^cause he

A: *^y\es#*

C: 'is . the !acting 'head of de:p\artment#

A: ^[=m]# ^[/m]# - - -

C: ^I should 'think there 'would . ^probably there'll be :some of them

that you'll :\never see# there's a^bout 'twenty-'five 'on the *!st'aff* list# -

⁹ The instances of 'll in the following examples will be considered as a form of WILL rather than SHALL because the utterances in which they occur refer not to the future but to the past or to the present, something possible with WILL but not with SHALL.

A: *^y\ea#*^[=m]#

C: and - ^we never !\see 'half of them# (1-5, 872)

On hearing the modalized utterance, speaker A would probably make the following inferences:

a) Direct evidence: speaker C says '...probably there'll be some of them that you'll never see...';

b) Decodification of the semantic output: [there are some of the members of the department staff that I never see, and the world type is potential], henceforth β , is entailed by the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p, and the world type is potential;

c) Inferential enrichment for completion of the propositional form: the present time index assigned to the SoA leads to the epistemic interpretation;

d) Background assumption: the situation of the SoA in a potential world is due to S's knowledge of the truth of only a the set of the propositions which have a bearing on β , namely those which he has available, there being another set of operative propositions not available to him;

e) Assumption from the decodification of the semantic output of the utterance: potentiality is encoded at both the semantic and the pragmatic level; moreover, in the latter it is encoded both in the main clause and also in the subordinate clause (where it is not logically necessary since this clause lies within the scope of the potentiality encoded in the subordinate clause); however, assuming that the utterance is relevant, these three encodings of potentiality have some reason, which is to be inferred;

f) Inference from the decodification of the semantic output of WILL: the modal WILL has weakened the manifestness of assumption β ;

g) Assumption derived from the decodification of the semantic output: the utterance concerns A's meeting her colleagues at the department;

h) Background assumption: A's seeing her colleagues at the department is part of A's private territory;

i) Background assumption: the transmission of a content assumption about anything concerning A's private territory may make A feel that S is being intrusive; in other words, such transmission is an FTA against A's negative face;

j) Background assumption: for the reasons set forth in assumption i), speakers have grounds to weaken the manifestness of assumptions concerning A's private territory;

k) Assumption resulting from the confrontation of assumptions f) and j): S has made assumption β weakly manifest in order to protect A's negative face needs, that is, on grounds of negative politeness.

The following utterance also refers to a private territory of A, namely A's opinion. It could be uttered even if S is almost certain that the proposition is true, in spite of the use of WILL together with *probably*, which reinforces the potentiality:

- (17) *[^]but I mean* _do we 'ever bring them 'out# [^]do we 'ever cre"l\ate an e'mergency# in [^]say a 'time llike "n\ow# - you [^]s'ee# I [^]mean at the m\oment 'say# our [^][i:k] e'conomy is :going 'down the str'eet# and you'll [^]pr\obably :{f\ind#}# -[^]that there are !'people# - with [^]t\alents# . un[^]h\heard of'talents\[^]who could !h\elp# . but *[^]how do you 'bring them \out#;. *; (2-3, 632)

From this analysis it can be deduced that WILL always expresses lack of total knowledge, but that in certain cases it also conveys politeness; in all such instances located in the corpus, the propositions transmit content assumptions about what Labov (1972, 124) calls B-events, that is, events of which the addressee is the privileged knower (in contrast to A-events, of which the privileged knower is the speaker). Modalization serves S to acknowledge A's status of privileged knower, thus mitigating the intrusion into her private territory, so that her negative face needs are satisfied.

3.3. The expression of politeness with epistemic MUST

MUST also occurs in utterances in which the proposition communicates assumptions about B-events, but unlike WILL it can be used even when it is inferred that S knows the truth of the proposition, its use being due only to S's wish to acknowledge A's negative face needs by respecting her role of privileged knower, as in the following conversation between work mates:

- (18) A: but I [^]still can't :read more than :twenty 'minutes at a :t\ime# with[^]out col!l\apsing# - my [^]v\eyes col'lapsing that 'is# - - -
b: if that's really true is tough . because you ((*must*)) have to read a lot - it's probably a function of tiredness (1-10, 577)

The processing of this utterance would probably be as follows:

- a) Direct evidence: speaker A says ' . you must have to read a lot...';
- b) Decodification of the semantic output: not-p is not entailed by any propositions of the set which has a bearing on the proposition [I have to read a lot] (henceforth γ). and the world type is potential;
- c) Inferential enrichment for completion of the propositional form: the present time index leads to the epistemic interpretation of MUST;
- d) Background assumption: the situation of the SoA in a potential world is due to S's knowledge of the truth of only a the set of the propositions which have a bearing on γ , namely those which he has available, there being another set of operative propositions not available to him;
- e) Assumption about S's knowledge of A: speaker knows A's professional duties;
- f) Background assumption: reading is one of A's professional duties;

g) Application of the deductive rule: speaker knows that A's duty is to read a lot; this assumption is inconsistent with d) and their relative weight is to be compared;

h) Weighing of assumptions d) and g): assumption g) is stronger: A does know without any doubt that S knows her duties; therefore, assumption d) must be ruled out. However, if it is assumed that the utterance is relevant, the modal must have been used for some reason, which should be interpreted;

i) Inference from the decodification of the semantic output of the modal: MUST has weakened the manifestness of assumption γ ; therefore, there must be a reason for this weakening different from the lack of total knowledge;

j) Assumption derived from the decodification of the semantic output of the utterance: the utterance concerns A's duties;

k) Background assumption: A's duties are part of A's private territory;

l) Background assumption: the transmission of a content assumption about anything concerning A's private territory may make A feel that S is being intrusive; in other words, such transmission is an FTA against A's negative face;

m) Background assumption: for the reasons set forth in assumption l), speakers have grounds to weaken the manifestness of assumptions when they concern A's private territory;

n) Assumption resulting from the confrontation of assumptions i) and m): S has made assumption γ weakly manifest in order to protect A's negative face needs, that is, on grounds of negative politeness.

In the following case it is meaningful that S is about to elicit an unmodalized utterance, but he corrects himself, in order to respect A's role of privileged knower:

(19) C: be[^]cause we're 'not a :clampus 'uni'versity# -I mean you ((^don't have + 'halls of)) + :residence that are ^n\ear# B/D/F: +H+

C: you've ^got to . :go 'to and fr\o# .

A: you're ^t\otally :right# I mean the [?] ^life of an :urban uni:\v\ersity# ^like th\is is# . " ^m\ust be *{d\ifferent#}# . (3-3, 1222)

A more complex case is (20), in which MUST admits two interpretations, apparently not mutually exclusive: it can be interpreted as a device to satisfy A's negative face needs as in previous cases (insofar at the utterance concerns A and consequently she is the privileged knower) but also as a signal of sympathy towards A. Therefore the use of MUST would protect both A's negative and positive face needs. Notice that the truth of the proposition can be inferred from A's previous utterance, so that the potentiality interpretation is clearly to be discarded:

(20) A: with the " ^d\azzling [@ @m] { al ^t\ernative be _fore them# }# of ^doing an !{utterly Riv\ensian} sort of ^option# which they're ^going to ch\oose# . " ^{m\y} g\oodness# it's e ^n\ough# . ^y\ou 'know# I mean ^just *- the !t\eaching# - ^is in 'is in 'absolute !hell#*

a: *during this interim period . it *must* be terrible ((for you)) yes -* yes
(1-9, 647)

However, not all instances of MUST conveying politeness refer to B-events. Some other examples have been found in the corpus of MUST protecting positive face needs. In (21) MUST occurs in an utterance in which S expresses disagreement with a previous utterance, reported by A. The expression of disagreement is an FTA against the positive face needs of Chrissie's mother; the softening of the corresponding assumptions is therefore a positive politeness strategy. At the same time, as MUST expresses the entailment of all the evidence available towards the truth of the proposition, it serves S to affirm his position in discourse, thus insisting that his ideas are worth considering, with the consequent fulfilment of his own positive face needs. Notice that the content assumption inferred from the modalized utterance in (21) refers to general knowledge of the world, about which it is difficult to have genuine doubt:

(21) b: oh we've all had lovely holidays in Ireland it's a *love*ly place

c: *[m]* [m] - - -

A: ^y^es# ^y=es# ^Chrissie's 'mother says# ^I . ^I "like the c\ountry# but
I "d\on't 'like the p\ople# - I - -

b: I suppose one *must* like some things about the people you can't - you
can't help enjoying the garrulousness if you like words - (1-14, 63)

(22) is another instance of MUST conveying positive politeness, its effects being similar to those of MAY in (12): MUST weakens the manifestness of a content assumption unfavourable to the referent of *she*, and in so doing S has softened the FTA involved in criticising another person, which menaces the positive face of both S himself and the person involved.

(22) I - I ^felt !\ery 'worried 'last n/ight# because ^when she rang \up# she was ^so
obvious she ^said to me {this ^m\orning#}# that she ^shfelt'awful
"\afterwards# be^cause she _said she _*must* have been _such a"!m\usery#
(5-8, 568)

To sum up, the analysis of utterances modalized with MAY, WILL and MUST carried out in this section has shown that the epistemic interpretations of these three modals can give way to inferences related to politeness, which belong to the relationship level described in section 2. However, the analysis also leads to the intuition that each of the three modals shows a peculiar behaviour in relation to politeness, and that this peculiarity is related to its basic meaning. Although further research on this issue needs to be made, I will give a tentative account of these individual differences in Section 4.

4. Differences in the expression of politeness by epistemic interpretations of MAY, WILL and MUST

4.1. Differences between MUST/MAY and WILL

In section 3 it was seen that MAY and MUST could refer to propositions the truth of which was inferred to be known by S, whereas WILL could not. This use of MAY and MUST fits into the concept of hedge proposed by Hübler (1983), where it is defined as a kind of understatement (that is, of statement by which S says less than he actually means) where indeterminateness is found in the neustic component of the utterance¹⁰. Hedges must meet the following conditions:

- (a) ambiguity between the literal meaning and the meaning identical to the categorical assertion, (b) qualitative contrast between what is said and what is meant and (c) reconcilability of such a contrast. (Hübler 1983, 114).

The fulfilment of these conditions will be proved on example (18), rewritten as (23):

- (23) A: but I ^still can't :read more than :twenty 'minutes at a :time#
with^out col'l\lapsing# - my ^\eyes col'lapsing that 'is# - - -
b: if that's really true is tough . because you ((*must*)) have to read a lot - it's probably a function of tiredness (1-10, 577)

a) ambiguity: the processing of the utterance may either stop in stage d) in the previous analysis, which corresponds to the potentiality interpretation, or proceed to stage m), thus giving way to the politeness interpretation;

b) qualitative contrast: both interpretations are different in that the weakening of the content assumption [A has to read a lot] is due in the first reading to lack of total knowledge, and in the second to the politeness assumption that a speaker should respect A's role of privileged knower;

c) reconcilability of the contrast: the politeness interpretation may be inferred from the potentiality one: A knows that S knows the extent of her reading duties, so that the potentiality interpretation is not relevant.

The modals interpreted as hedges cause two differences in the processing of the utterances:

- a) the weakening of the assumptions carried out by the propositional content;

¹⁰ The label 'neustic' was first used in Hare, R. M. (1970), "Meaning and speech acts". *Philosophical Review* 79, 3-24, and refers to a 'sign of subscription' concerning the speech act in other words, it is the part of the sentence which expresses the speaker's commitment towards factuality, desirability, etc., of the propositional content. According to this definition, modals belong to the neustic component of the sentences because they are a means of qualification of the factuality of the proposition by indicating potentiality (and also desirability in their root interpretations)

b) the introduction of certain politeness assumptions concerning positive or negative face needs of S, A or a third person. These assumptions can be said to be weak implicatures: S cannot be said to have communicated them, and their inference is largely A's responsibility. Unlike the content assumptions that lead to the epistemic or root interpretation of the modals, the politeness assumptions are not explicatures but implicatures, since they are not developments of incomplete logical forms encoded in utterances.

Therefore, the use of MAY and MUST as hedges in utterances causes A to infer a wider array of weaker implicatures. The utterance is then more vague. It must be remembered that this vagueness is shared by utterances conveying politeness assumptions by means other than modals, as may be seen if we return to examples (8) and (9), rewritten as (24) and (25):

(24) (JUC 2) Close the window.

(25) (JUC 3) Don't you think it is a bit draughty in here.

Epistemic WILL, unlike MAY and MUST, cannot be used as a hedge. Although WILL can lay emphasis on potentiality for politeness reasons, its use is always motivated by lack of absolute certainty, so that it produces neither ambiguity nor qualitative contrast between two different interpretations. The capacity of MUST to be interpreted as a hedge in contrast to WILL is in all probability due to the greater indirectness with which S arrives at the entailment towards the modalized proposition that it encodes. This indirectness increases the distance between the modalized and the categorical assertion, so that the qualitative contrast is strong enough to allow an interpretation of MUST as a hedge, while the smaller qualitative contrast between a categorical and a WILL-modalized assertion does not confer this possibility to WILL.

4.2. Differences between MAY and MUST as hedges

An obvious difference between MAY and MUST as hedges lies in their basic meanings: the qualitative contrast between the lack-of-knowledge and the politeness interpretation is stronger in MAY. With MAY, S communicates that there are only some propositions compatible with the truth of the modalized proposition, thus strongly implying that there is another set of compatible propositions the truth of which is unknown, even if it is pragmatically inferred that he has knowledge of this truth; on the other hand, MUST indicates that S has no proposition available which entails the falsity of the proposition elicited, thus being much nearer the absolute knowledge of the truth.

This inequality in the contrast between the two interpretations accounts for several differences in the use of these two modals in the politeness interpretation, which can be observed from the comparison of the examples with MAY to those with MUST. For reasons of space the examples will be referred to only by their numbers:

a) The modalized utterances of both (12) and (22) contain impolite assumptions about others; it can be noticed how in (12) MAY makes the politeness assumption stronger than MUST does in (22), while MUST expresses a stronger commitment of S towards the truth of the proposition, and in so doing makes the content assumption more strongly manifest.

b) Both (14) and (21) serve S to set up a personal position in discourse implicitly accepting other positions and thus protecting A's or a third person's positive face needs; this politeness assumption is quite strongly manifest in (14) with MAY, where S implicates that he is disposed to admit different positions; however, in (21), where MUST is used, S implicates that he respects contrary positions but also that his position has solid grounds, and that he is not readily disposed to change it.

c) In (11) and (13) the proposition concerns S and it can be easily assumed that he knows the truth of (nearly) all the propositions with a bearing on the proposition modalized; MAY in its potentiality interpretation would not be consistent with that assumption, and consequently will be interpreted as a hedge. If MUST were used in its place the politeness interpretation would be more difficult, due to the smaller distance between the potentiality and the politeness readings.

d) Examples (18), (19) and (20) concern A, and A knows (or expects) that S has sound evidence of the truth of the proposition, which comes from background knowledge of A in (18) and from previous utterances elicited by A in (19) and (20). Although it is polite for S to modalize the utterances in order to leave A the role of privileged knower (thus respecting A's negative face needs), at the same time S must express almost certainty: the use of MAY instead of MUST would make A feel depreciated, insofar as S has not stored or not given importance to the assumptions about A; in other words, MAY would fail to satisfy A's positive face needs.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

The relevance-theoretic approach to the modals, usually centred on their basic meaning and high-level explicatures, has here proceeded one step further into epistemic interpretations, by proving how the situation of the proposition in a potential world need not imply lack of absolute knowledge, but can in certain contexts be due to politeness, that is, to the speaker's wish to satisfy the addressee's, a third person's or his own face needs. In these contexts the modals weaken the content assumptions inferable from the proposition, but this weakening is compensated with the introduction of politeness assumptions, which are also weak, insofar as S does not communicate them in the strict sense, their inference being largely A's responsibility; that is to say, the modals in the 'politeness interpretations' entail the communication of a wider array of weaker assumptions, thus conveying vagueness. The politeness assumptions are implicatures, that is, they are communicated but do not develop from logical forms.

The interpretation of a modal entirely in terms of politeness assumptions is possible

for MAY and MUST, but not for WILL; this impossibility for WILL seems to be due to its basic meaning: the difference between an unmodalized and a WILL-modalized assertion is not very significant, and consequently the weakening of the content assumptions that WILL entails is too small to be used uniquely for the expression of politeness.

The study of some naturally occurring instances of modalized utterances gives hints of a number of contextual factors which favour the politeness interpretation of the modals:

- 1) the proposition can lead to the inference of unfavourable assumptions towards the speaker, the addressee or a third person;
- 2) the proposition can lead to the inference of favourable assumptions towards the speaker, who feels the need to be modest;
- 3) the speaker wishes to set up a position in discourse but also to indicate that he respects or even admits different points of view;
- 4) the proposition can lead to the inference of a speaker's prescription of a certain action to the addressee;
- 5) the addressee is the privileged knower of the truth of the proposition.

Finally, I must make it clear that this is only one of the many possible directions for the research of the English modals within the relevance-theoretic framework. Among other issues that deserve further consideration, I will mention the so-called 'concessive' use of the modals (as in 'Mary *may* be friendly, but she is never punctual'), where, just as in the politeness interpretations described in this paper, the speaker can have absolute knowledge of the truth of the modalized proposition.

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used in this paper are the same as those in the machine-readable version of the Svartvik and Quirk corpus, where prosodic analysis is limited to the interventions of surreptitious speakers:

A, B, a, b, etc = speaker identity; surreptitious speakers are identified with capital letters, and non-surreptitious ones with small letters;

..., +...+ = simultaneous talk;

(), as in (laughs) = contextual comment about non-linguistic activity;

(), as in ((yes)) = incomprehensible words, where what is said in the tape-recording is uncertain;

= end of tone unit;

^ = onset;

\ = falling nucleus;

/ = rising nucleus;

= = level nucleus;

∨ = fall-rise nucleus;

∧ = rise-fall nucleus;

_ , as in _yes: pitch continuance;

: = higher pitch-level than preceding syllable;

! = higher pitch-level than preceding prominent syllable;

!! = very high pitch-level;

' = heavy stress (except in contractions, where it indicates a graphic apostrophe);

. , as in yes . yes = brief pause (of one light syllable);

- , as in yes - yes = unit pause (of one stress unit or 'foot');

[?] = glottal stop;

[@] : schwa sound, used for muttering; lengthening of this sound is indicated by a following colon;

[], as in [lek]: transcription of phonetic sounds not corresponding to words.

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