

Linguistic Principles of English Grammar, ENG 595G

Handout: Aspect and Mode in English Verbs

(Second supplement to Berk, ch. 3)

Review (see first supplement to ch. 3 for a description of various aspects):

Aspect is a semantic or grammatical notion. Semantically, aspect refers to the internal temporal "shape" of a situation or event, whether it is ongoing, completed, instantaneous, iterative, etc. Grammatically, aspect refers to the verbal inflections that deal with this semantic domain. English grammaticalizes "progressive" and "perfect" aspect. Other semantic aspects can only be inferred from a combination of tense inflection, verb semantics, post-verbal particles, characteristics of the nouns associated with the verb, and other contextual factors.

New material:

Modality (pp. 130-131) is a semantic notion. It describes a range of speaker attitudes or perspectives on an event. **Mode** refers to the specific grammatical means a language provides to deal with the semantic domain of modality. In English, the modes are expressed by the modal auxiliaries (see p. 133). Linguists often consider "have to" and "be going to" to be modal auxiliaries, in addition to the ones illustrated in your text, though these have slightly different syntactic properties than the others. We will discuss these below.

Epistemic modality describes the speaker's perception as to how "real" an event or situation is.

Deontic modality describes the speaker's perception as to how "necessary" an event or situation is. A way of remembering this is that the word "deontic" comes from the same root as "debt." Think of deontic modes as expressing one's obligation or debt to do something.

Most of the modal auxiliaries in English have both Epistemic and Deontic functions, though some tend to express one more than the other. Here is a selection of examples of each auxiliary, functioning to express a variety of modalities. More examples can be found on pp. 133-145:

Epistemic modality:

Possibility: I **might** borrow Slumbat's car this weekend.
They **may** just want to ask us some questions.

Probability: They **should** be here by 3:00.

Prediction: They **will** be here at 6:00 pm.

Ability: Mariela **can** sing the alto part to the Hallelujah chorus.

Contingent/conditional: I **could** make spaghetti, if you make a salad.
Give her that gift and she **would** be in seventh heaven.

Assumption: They **must** be in Cincinnati by now.
That **ought to** be enough curry for this recipe.
The output **has to** equal the input.

Deontic Modality:

Permission: You **can** go now.
The defendant **may** be seated.

Suggestion: You **might** just send her a card.

Slight obligation: I **should** eat more green vegetables.

Stronger obligation: They **ought to** be more polite to her family.

Insistence: He **must** stop chewing his fingernails.
They **have to** submit the application by next Tuesday.

The expressions "to have to do something" and "be going to do something" are historically recent additions to the list of modal auxiliaries. For this reason, they have not lost all of their full verbal character, the way most of the other modals have. However, they clearly belong to a different word class than the corresponding verbs.