

## Modals in the History of English

In English such verbs have largely replaced the subjunctive mood, and three kinds of modality can be distinguished for them:

→ **epistemic** modality, which expresses a judgement about the truth of the proposition

*John may be in his office.*

→ **deontic** modality, which involves the giving of directives (in terms of such notions as permission and obligation)

*You must leave immediately.*

→ **dynamic** modality, which ascribes such properties as ability, and volition to the subject of the sentence

*I can come.*

Often one and the same verb is used for more than one kind of modality.

OE modality differs fundamentally from PdE modality. All the PdE **modals** can be used to express epistemic meaning in addition to their ‘root’ meaning. There is also a large number of **adverbs** that express epistemic modality in PdE (probably, possibly, etc). The situation is different in OE. The pre-modals *cunnan*, *motan*, *agan* show **no traces of epistemic** meaning in OE, while *magan* *sculan* *willan* and possibly also *beon* show only marginal epistemic colouring. In addition there are **very few epistemic adverbs** in OE expressing possibility and probability. Probability and possibility is expressed in OE primarily by **phrases** such as: *wen is þæt* ‘hope is that’.

→ Epistemic modality seems to have been only marginally grammaticalised in OE.

### Old English

- The set of pre-modals in OE includes:

<i>cunnan</i>	know how to, have the power to, be able
* <i>durran</i>	dare
<i>magan</i>	be strong, sufficient, in good health, be able to (with more focus on physical activity)
* <i>motan</i>	be allowed to, be obliged to
* <i>sculan</i>	owe, be necessary
<i>þurfan</i>	need
<i>willan</i>	will, wish, desire
<i>beon/wesan</i>	in some uses (cf. (3) below)
<i>habban</i>	expressing necessity or obligation
<i>agan</i>	have/possess from the late 10 <sup>th</sup> c. owe, be obliged to

- Pre-modals belonged to the small but interesting group of Teutonic *preterite-present* verbs (now chiefly used as auxiliaries of tense, mood, or predication), in form characterised by having as their present tense an original preterite, which retains the preterite form but has come to have a present signification, and from which a new weak past tense has subsequently been developed.

- The syntax of OE pre-modals

→ All the verbs are used as **main verbs**, either intransitive (cf. (1) frequently with a directional expression (cf. (1b)) or transitive, allowing NP (cf. (2)) or an infinitive (cf. (3)) as a complement. Moreover, *magan* and *willan* also allow a *þæt*-clause complement (cf. (4)).

- (1) a. Eac neah þan ealle þa ðing þe ðanon cumað, wið ælcum atre **magon**.  
also nearly than all those things PT thence came, against every poison they-prevail  
‘But nearly all those things that are extracted from it can be used as an antidote to any poison’
- b. ... þa hi to scipan **woldon**  
when they to ships wanted  
‘When they wanted to go to their ships’
- (2) ... þæt he geornor **wolde** sibbe wið hiene þonne gewinn  
that they rather wanted peace with him than conflict  
‘that they wanted peace with him rather than conflict’
- (3) a. hwæt **is** us to donne

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- what is for-us to do  
'what we must do'
- b. Þas þing **sint** to donne  
these things are to do  
'These things are to be done'
- (4) ... Deme ge nu, swa swa ge **willon** þæt eow sy eft gedemed  
judge you now just as you wish-SUBJ that to-you be afterward judged  
'Judge now as you wish to be judged later'

→ They may have been **auxiliaries** as well:

- although \**sculan* and \**motan* are clearly main verbs in some contexts, they never appear in non-finite forms. If they were exclusively main verbs, one would expect them to appear at least occasionally as infinitival complements;
- if these occur with a verb which exhibits impersonal syntax, they share the properties of that verb, while when they appear with a verb exhibiting personal syntax they are used personally → they do not seem to have a subject of their own:

- (5) þonne **mæg** hine scamigan þære brædinge his hlisan  
then may he-ACC shame that spreading-GEN/DAT of-his fame  
'Then he may be ashamed of the extent of his fame'

- semantic evidence that pre-modals had properties of auxiliaries: *magan*, *willan* and \**sculan* are **occasionally** used to express epistemic modality.

### Middle English

- By the end of ME periphrastic constructions far outweighed subjunctive forms. This development started in IOE when periphrastic constructions became increasingly common. What probably happened is this:
  - gradual erosion of verbal inflections → subjunctive needed to be replaced by something more transparent
  - the use of periphrastic constructions at a fairly early stage was itself responsible for the disappearance of the subjunctive
- Together with the loss of the subjunctive came the grammaticalisation of modals.
- Important changes taking place in ME but **NOT completed** in that period are:
  - (a) the modals lost the ability to appear in non-finite forms and to take NP objects; in general they move towards an invariable form; this is related to the loss of the notional meaning of modals;
  - (b) tense differences in modals no longer serve a temporal purpose;
  - (c) the close relation between a modal and its infinitive is emphasised by the fact that
    - the to-infinitive never replaces the bare infinitive as happened after most other full verbs
    - the increasing unwillingness of modals to appear without an infinitive of another verb in series.
- In ME we still find the modals in some of their non-auxiliary functions:
  - (6) a. Manye **kunnen** suche textis bi herte. (c1449 Pecoock *Repr.* i. xvi. 89)
  - b. And by that feith I **shal** Priam of Troie (Troilus III. 791)
  - c. And seyde he smoste unto Italye, ... (HF 187)
  - d. Oper þat **kan** þaim noht. **a1340** Hampole *Psalter* ix. 11
  - e. The craft that he **canne**. **1467** *Eng. Gilds* (1870) 407
- (7) a. Þat mankinn **sholde muzhenn** well  
Upp cumemnn inntill heoffne (Orm. 3944-5)  
'That mankind should be able to go up to heaven'

Next to so-called core modals (shal, wil, may, mot, can) periphrastic constructions also expressed

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modality. Some of these occur in OE ('be to do', 'have to'). These together with the ME innovation borrowed from Old French 'to be able to' remain sporadic until they fill a systemic gap left by the grammaticalisation of the core modals (loss of the non-finite forms and to some extent finite past forms).

### SHALL/WILL

Already in OE *sculan* and *willan* are used with predictive meaning but in these cases *sculan* usually expresses **obligation** or **necessity** as well and *willan* **volition**. This situation continues in ME:

(8) And rightful folk **shul** gon, after they dye, to hevене; (PF 55-6)

*Shul* expresses future + an ordained event' → **shal** is more frequent in prophesies, in contexts where a sense of obligation is present, in commands and instructions → it is particularly common in 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

*Wil* occurs far more often in the 1<sup>st</sup> persona since, modally, it is connected with the desire of the speaker/subject:

(9) we **wulleð** folhi, we **wulleð** don alswa, leauen al as þu ddest (Ancr. (Corp-C) 87.6-7)  
'we will follow you, we will do likewise [wee will] leave everything [behind] as you did'

*Wil* occurs especially in promises, wishes, resolutions.

Because *shal* is not related to the will of the subject, it develops into the pure future marker earlier than *wil*. The more frequent use of predictive *shal* may also be due to other factors. This may be partly a matter of style: in biblical writings *shal* is preferred to *wil*; *wil* seems to be a product of a more popular style.

## Modern English

Culmination and conclusion of the changes described under ME.. In addition to the central ones, some verbs have been defined as 'marginal modal auxiliaries':

dare/durst

need

ought to

used to

### SHALL/WILL

The peculiar pattern: shall – 1<sup>st</sup> person **pure future aux**  
will - 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> person **pure future aux**

can be traced in eMnE:

shall – written and literary

will – oral and colloquial

¶ In 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> persons *will* originally was less frequent than *shall* because volition was less easily projected to other persons than obligation and necessity → the **purely predictive** use of *will* was easily established in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons.

¶ In 1<sup>st</sup> person obligation was less natural and less frequent than volition or intention → *shall* resisted the tendency to be superseded by *will* longer in non-modal contexts

¶ In questions the situations is reversed.

¶ 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c normative tendencies of grammarians contributed to the establishment of this distinction in the Southern Standard.