ФИЛОЛОГИЯ

Multiple Modals as a Cross-Level Phenomenon of Syntax and Discourse (Focus on Northern Ireland)

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The study of the grammatical features of the surviving dialects represents one of the pressing problems of linguistics, since it allows a more complete and in-depth characterization of the processes characteristic of modern literary languages.

The aim of the study is to estimate the extent to which multiple modal auxiliaries (MMs) are present in the written (and, indirectly, spoken) form of the Ulster-Scots dialect and whether these phenomena can be characterised as discursive signals (DS).

Material and methods. *The material for the study was the data of the CoBISE corpus, which contains transcripts of YouTube videos of local councils' sessions, grammar references and other descriptions of the Scots language. A corpus of prose, poetry and interviews with native speakers was collected by the authors and used the main resource. The methods of observation, description, comparison, of quantitative and qualitative content analysis as well as elements of discourse analysis were used.*

Findings and their discussion. *Multiple modals (will can do, can will do, may can do, etc.) are present in everyday speech of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, but are extremely scarce in the language of Ulster-Scots literature. The construction with the modal word maybe (can maybe do), which is close to the MM in terms of function and semantics, demonstrates a higher frequency in both the written and spoken forms of the dialect.*

Conclusion. *The MMs, as well as the construction with the modal word maybe, can be characterized as discursive signals (DS), as cross-level phenomena that go beyond syntax and extend to discourse.*

Key words: *the Scots language, Ulster-Scots dialect, multiple modals, discourse, discursive signal.*

Конструкции с множественными модальными глаголами как межуровневое явление синтаксиса и дискурса (на североирландском материале)

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Исследование грамматических особенностей сохранившихся диалектов представляет одну из актуальных проблем лингвистики, поскольку позволяет более полно и глубоко охарактеризовать процессы, характерные для современных литературных языков.

Цель исследования — оценить, в какой мере конструкции с множественными модальными глаголами (КММГ) присутствуют в письменной (и, опосредованно, в устной) форме ольстерско-шотландского диалекта и могут ли данные феномены рассматриваться в качестве дискурсивных сигналов (ДС).

Материал и методы. *Материалом изучения послужили данные корпуса CoBISE, содержащего расшифровки видеосюжетов сервиса YouTube, грамматики и описания шотландского языка, при этом, в качестве основного ресурса использовался собранный авторами корпус текстов прозы, поэзии и интервью с носителями диалекта. Использовались методы наблюдения, описания, сравнения, а также элементы количественного и качественного контент-анализа.*

Результаты и их обсуждение. *Результаты исследования: конструкции с множественными модальными глаголами (will can do, can will do, may can do и др.) присутствуют в обиходной речи, но крайне слабо представлены в языке ольстерско-шотландской литературы. Близкая к КММГ в функционально-семантическом плане конструкция с модальным словом maybe (can maybe do) демонстрирует более высокую частотность и в устной, и в письменной формах диалекта.*

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Заключение. КММГ, а также конструкцию с модальным словом *maybe* можно охарактеризовать как дискурсивные сигналы, как явления, выходящие за пределы грамматики предложения и распространяющиеся на грамматику текста.

Ключевые слова: шотландский язык, ольстерско-шотландский диалект, конструкции с множественными модальными глаголами, дискурс, дискурсивный сигнал.

Multiple modal auxiliaries (*MMs*) — *will can, may can, might could, etc.* — are a noticeable feature of some varieties of Scots and non-standard English. In publications devoted to this phenomenon in the speech of a number of regions of the UK and the USA, it is noted that besides the south of Scotland, the north of England and the south-east of the USA, this grammatical feature is characteristic of some dialects of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic [1, p. 349]. In the territory of the British Isles, *MMs* have been studied less amply than in American English, and there are numerous gaps in the description of their genesis, area of distribution, grammatical features, semantics, pragmastylistic strategies of use and the very list of such constructions.

The main problem in the study of *MMs* is the fact that the communicative situations in which one can expect the use of *MMs* are quite rare. In the available literature, there are no publications devoted exclusively to Northern Ireland, which cannot but attract attention, since some researchers consider this region as a kind of "a bridge" through which this feature could have been brought to the American continent along with migration flows [2, p. 227–278]. There are only few mentions in this regard of the Northern Irish linguistic situation, where *MMs* should presumably be found in local varieties of English, as well as in the Ulster variety of the Scots language.

The *aim* of the study is to estimate the extent to which multiple modal auxiliaries (MMs) are present in the written (and, indirectly, spoken) form of the Ulster-Scots dialect and whether these phenomena can be characterised as discursive signals (DS).

Material and methods. From the point of view of linguistic pragmatics, the use of *MMs* (at least a significant part of them) is intended to make a favourable impression on the addressee, to attract him/her to the speaker's side, to provide a careful and non-categorical expression of the speaker's desires or assessments.

Researchers have been trying to interpret the nature of this feature as a phenomenon of a lexico-grammatical nature, with some highlighting its lexical component, and others — the grammatical one. It seems, however, that *MMs* have a more complex, cross-level nature and should be considered not only as syntactic constructions, but also as phenomena of the discourse level. *MMs* seem to belong simultaneously to both grammar and discourse, due to the pragmatic determinacy and motivation of their use. Within the framework of a single communicative act, the principles inherent in all directly involved levels of language closely interact, and do not function "in turn" when making of the utterance is moving from one level to another [cf. 3].

We attempt to characterize the phenomenon of *MM* and to approach its interpretation in terms of discourse based on the evidence of the Ulster-Scots dialect as described in the available reference grammars of this idiom, as well as on the evidence of the corpus of authentic texts that we have selected.

It is obvious that *MMs* are a phenomenon that is more difficult to observe and account for than many other features of language and speech. Actually, the absence or extreme paucity of Ulster examples of *MMs* in the mentioned resources may indicate that their frequency in both oral and written speech is low, and that this phenomenon in Ulster-Scots is perhaps close to disappearing and, in fact, is no longer a characteristic regional feature. Meanwhile, recognizing the fact of complete lack of *MMs* in the Ulster dialects would mean a gap in the chain of transmission of this phenomenon, and would also run counter to some authoritative evidence to the contrary [cf. 1, p. 255–257; 4; etc.]. In recent years, new types of primary sources have appeared that make it possible to study various aspects of the natural oral speech of the regions of the British Isles, which are part of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Such sources include the Corpus of British Isles Spoken English (CoBISE), which is a collection of geolocated transcripts of recorded local councils' meetings [5; 6, p. 693–718]. Unfortunately, this resource is currently unreachable from Russia, but significant data obtained from it are available from some recent publications.

S. Coats points out that only 9 instances of such constructions were found in the transcripts of local councils' meetings in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the illustrative examples [i.e., 2, p. 227–278] are unavailable, since between 2019 and 2021, the corresponding video recordings, according to the author, were declared an object of property [6, p. 704]. The instances of *MM*s from Ulster are represented almost exclusively by constructions whose first element is *will/'ll — would/'d*, i.e. *will/'ll can, will/'ll could, will/'ll would, would may*. Each of the mentioned constructions occurs in the Northern Irish subcorpus of the CoBISE only twice [6, p. 705]. Besides, the *can will* construction occurs just once. It is noted that in the Northern Irish subcorpus, *MMs* are least frequent than in the other CoBISE subcorpora. Further expansion of this subcorpus is supposed to provide researchers with new data.

The author does not provide any instances demonstrating the functioning of *MMs* at both the sentence and discourse levels. He also points out that, according to the data available to him from the CoBISE corpus, the overall frequency of the *MMs* in

the Northern Irish subcorpus per 1 million words is only *1.38* [6, p. 706]. This is the lowest value compared to the subcorpora of the other British regions, of which Scotland predictably demonstrates the highest value — *2.40* — although Wales, quite unexpectedly, comes in second place by a small margin [ibid.].

It should be noted that the CoBISE examines colloquial English in all its regional diversity as might be used in the formal setting of British and Irish local council meetings. Taking into account the dialect continuum that exists across Northern Ireland (as well as a number of other regions), it will be difficult to accurately characterise the examples of *MMs* obtained from the corpus (when they become available) and the available quantitative data as relating either to Ulster-Scots or to any of the varieties of Ulster English. However, it is certain that this corpus would, and, in fact, does, shed much light on the general picture of how *MMs* function in colloquial speech.

The main conclusion that follows from the data in Table 1 is that *MMs* are still present in the speech of the population of Northern Ireland, that these constructions are really rare, and the set of their types at the present stage is, in all likelihood, small.

Taking into account the shortage of confirmed evidence of *MMs* in Ulster, we consider it necessary to characterize this phenomenon as described in the available reference grammars of Ulster-Scots. The grammars of this type are supposed to reflect the differential features of the idiom in question most accurately to ensure the distance in relation to standard English, on the one hand, and to local regional varieties of English, on the other.

One such a reference is Ian Parsley's "Ulster Scots: a short reference grammar" (2012), in which the author notes, that the modal auxiliaries *dowe* and *may* were supplanted by *can* and *coud* in Ulster-Scots. Meanwhile, *micht* is preserved, but at the present stage in the oral and written forms of the dialect, it has been rethought as an adverb. According to him, the modal auxiliary *ocht tae* has disappeared in all varieties of colloquial Scots and has been replaced by *sud* [7, p. 100].

Section 5.14 of this grammar is devoted to constructions with double modals and it states the fact that the joint use of two modals in Scots (obviously, its Ulster variety is meant. — *A.P.*) is really possible. In most cases, the first element of such combinations may be constituted by the verbs *sud, wad* or *will*, and the second one — by *can, daur, maun* or *need*, e.g.: *He sud can be* thaer [7, p. 101]. The author also quotes other examples of *MMs*:

Gif she canna mynd it, she wad maun wryt *it* out *(Engl. 'If she cannot remember it, she would have to write it down').*

He wad daur cum ower*, an her heir (Engl. 'He would dare to come over, if she were here').*

He will can dae *it neist week (Engl. 'He will be able to do it next week').*

He will need tak *it suin (Engl. 'He will be wanting to take it soon' / 'He will be better taking it soon')* [ibid.].

I.J. Parsley believes that in Ulster the use of *double modals* is in decline, but it is a notable and useful local feature (lit. useful(!) — *A.P.*) of Scots grammar and can be used in all genres of written speech [ibid.]. He adds that, being agrammatical in most dialects of English, double modals, nevertheless, are a characteristic feature of the dialects of northern England and the Appalachian region of the USA. Translating them into English (its standard variety, of course. — *A.P.*) usually requires replacing the second modal with a non-modal verb [ibid.]. Curious and symptomatic is the characterization of *MMs* in Ulster-Scots as a "*notable and useful*" feature given by I.J. Parsley. Along with the recognition of their decline in colloquial usage, this characterization accounts for the low frequency of *MMs* in Ulster-Scots and demonstrates the interested attitude of a language activist towards this feature. Such a positive attitude towards *MMs* is in itself a sociolinguistic fact worthy of mentioning.

Having obtained a certain understanding of how *MMs* function in Ulster-Scots based on the data of the above-mentioned grammars and the few other descriptions of the phenomenon [8; etc.], we decided to find out to what extent this feature is present in the language of Ulster literary tradition. For this purpose, we collected a corpus of texts written in Ulster-Scots, the volume of which is approximately 401,000 words. This corpus consists of the following sources, reflecting the Ulster-Scots literary tradition over the four centuries of its existence:

1. Ulster-Scots Writing: an Antology. Edited by Frank Ferguson. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008. XV, 527 p. 39 pieces of poetry and excerpts of prose representing the whole Ulster-Scots literary tradition (17th–21st) (308 160 words)

2. Betsy Gray or Hearts of Down. By W.G. Lyttle (a popular historical novel in the style of Kailyard school). Mourne Observer Ltd. Printers and Publishers, Newcastle Co. Down, N. Ireland: 1896. (56 541 words)

3. A Selection of Ulster-Scots writing. Selection and commentary by Wesley Hutchinson // Études Irlandaises, 38-2/2013. 11 short samples of poetry, prose and drama

Table

Northern Ireland — double modal types [from Coats, 2023, p. 705]

Type	No. of tokens
will/'ll can, will/'ll could, will/'ll would, would may	2 times each
can will	1

written in Ulster-Scots by the authors of 19th and 20th centuries (5 153 words)

4. Fenton, James. Thonner an thon: an Ulster-Scots collection. Belfast: The Ullans Press. 65 p. 39 verses and 3 prosaic pieces by the poet and language activist James Fenton (5 971 words)

5. Transcripts of the audio samples of old-age Ulster-Scots speakers provided by Ulster-Scots Academy. 21 transcripts of reminisces, story-telling and poetry (25 280 words). www.ulsterscotsacademy.com/audio/index.php.

The corpus texts — prose and poetry, as well as the transcripts of spoken language — underwent a continuous sampling in order to identify any *MMs* as they are described in the literature. It is symptomatic that in this way we were able to identify only one token that could be accurately characterized as an *MM* — namely "*could* (never) *will*". It was singled out in the text of the poem by the early 19th century Ulster poetess Sarah Leech "On Killing a Mouse in Harvest", in which the author enters into a dialogue with R. Burns based on his widely known poem "To a Mouse":

*Poor feckless thing, why did I kill thee? The muse sic death **could** never **will** thee — When some few grains o' oats wad fill thee…*

The lib'ral lan' Has often left an ear o't till thee ...

Results and discussion. In this example, *could* is an epistemic modal characterized by the seme of "*possibility*". "*Will*" in the same example is a deontic modal featuring the semes of "intention", "desire" or "willingness". This *MM* is used with the negative adverb *never* and its standard English equivalent in this case is *(never) could wish (to you)*. It is curious that the example we found is consistent with the *MM can will*, noted by S. Coats in the Northern Irish subcorpus of CoBISE, which probably confirms the viability of this construction [cf. 6, p. 693–718]. It can be underlined that in this case the *MM could...will* is used by the author as an expressive means, as evidenced by the choice of an archaic full-fledged lexical-semantic variant of the verb *will*, characterized by the semes of 'intention', 'desire' or 'readiness', which matches well the equally archaic form of the indirect pronoun of the second person singular *thee*. The *MM could...will* acts as a means of ensuring cohesion and coherence of this poetic text, helping the author in its deliberate archaization.

We did not encounter any other *MMs* in the collected corpus, either in the texts of fiction, replete with excerpts of direct speech of characters, or in the studied transcripts of audio recordings of local old-timers' speech. This fact, at least indirectly, testifies to the extremely low frequency of *MMs* and the rarity of situations and contexts in which they could be expected. This also suggests that Northern Irish authors either do not consider *MM* to be a characteristic phenomenon of Ulster-Scots or perceive it as a stigmatized and unprestigious feature of colloquial speech and in every possible way avoid using it.

The material we have collected also confirms the information provided in the aforementioned reference grammars that in Ulster-Scots combinations of modal auxiliaries (*will, would, may, might*) with the modal word *maybe*, which has several spelling variants in written sources, are relatively widespread.

Cf.:

*1) For then I could baith write and spell, An' speak, and leuk, grammatical, Av' would sic rhyming blethers tell *T ween truth and lies, As Maister Dick, or e'en yoursel', <u>Might may-be please</u>* [9, p. 129].

2) ' You <u>would may be seek</u> anither [9, p. 159].

3) Wow, but says I, Tam's writin an' my inditin', <u>may maybe mak</u> bad waur [9, p. 259].

4) I hadna thocht my puir letter wad be sae speedily effectwal; but sin' it has been sae, ye<u>'ll maybe prent</u> it [9, p. 267].

We note this in connection with the fact that the adverb or rather a modal word *maybe* performs the same functions as the initial modal *may/micht* in *MM* and it can be assumed that the combinations "*modal auxiliary + modal auxiliary + infinitive*" and "*modal auxiliary + modal word 'maybe' + infinitive*" are interchangeable and competing usages, which, however, requires special consideration and verification.

Getting back to the nature of the phenomenon of *MM* and its role in discourse organisation, it seems appropriate to use in relation to such combinations as "*modal auxiliary + modal auxiliary + infinitive*" (as well as "*modal auxiliary + modal word 'maybe' + infinitive*") the generalized concept of "*discursive signal*" (*DS*) proposed by Carla Bazzanella. According to her definition, "discursive signals are those elements that, partly losing their original meaning, take on meanings necessary to emphasize the structured nature of discourse, to connect phrasal, intraphrasal, interphrasal and supraphrasal elements and to explicate the position of the utterance in the interpersonal space, revealing the interactivity of the text structure" [10]. Apparently, all *MMs*, to one degree or another, are not neutral in terms of discourse and act as *DSs*.

It seems, however, that *MMs* are not equivalent in terms of their involvement in the organization of discourse, i.e. their role as discursive signals may vary. Probably, most constructions with the first element *will* can also be attributed to *DS*, for example, *will can*, where *will* acts as a desemanticized auxiliary verb of the future tense (cf. the facts regarding the real presence of constructions with *will/would* in colloquial speech in the territory of Northern Ireland quoted in [6, p. 693–718] (see above. — *A.P.*).

The motivation for choosing the form *will can do* instead of the standard *will be able to do* can be twofold. Firstly, it can be based on the so-called "economy of linguistic means", namely the choice in favor of one word (*can*) instead of three — (*be able to*), and, secondly, the pragmastylistic characteristics of the *MM*, conditioned by its status in oral speech in a given area

(i. e. it is acceptable or unacceptable to speak this way in a certain set of situations. — *A.P.*). The use of the *MM* signals the speaker's desire to sound "simpler", more familiar and more trustworthy, which should evoke a favorable response from the addressee. In general, the construction "*will + modal auxiliary + semantic verb*" can be characterized as a regional variant of the future tense form, acting as a *DS*. It is obvious that the perception by the listener of *will can do*, on the one hand, and *will be able to do*, on the other, is not the same. Other, more complex, pragmastylistic and discursive tasks are probably solved with the help of other, "specialized" *MMs*.

Having considered the collected data, we can make the following observations. The phenomena of vernacular speech and other non-literary varieties of the English language, as well as idioms that make up the Anglo-Scots continuum, have so far received relatively little attention from the experts in the field of discourse. Meanwhile, these non-standard varieties contain certain peculiarities of interest in the context of discourse studies. *MMs*, on the one hand, and combinations of the type "*modal auxiliary + maybe + infinitive*", on the other, are similar and interchangeable phenomena as regards their functions and semantics. Perhaps, by their nature, these usages are closer to each other than is commonly thought. For example, the combinations "*may+can+do*" and "*can+maybe+do*" are totally interchangeable as regards their functions and semantics. Perhaps, the modal auxiliary *may* in the first of the combinations might have been reinterpreted as a modal word, if not a particle, or might be in the process of such reinterpretation.

According to established views, typical and generally recognized *DS* are functionally, semantically and prosodically isolated elements in the sentence, while the *MM* is, in fact (at least, formally), a compound verbal predicate complicated by an extra modal auxiliary (rarely, two auxiliaries). This fact may even demand a certain revision of common definitions. The existence of combinations with the modal word *maybe* synonymous to certain *MMs* emphasizes the discursive nature of *MMs* and suggests that the "additional" modal auxiliary in their composition could have been reinterpreted, as has already been mentioned above. The peculiarities of the *MMs* in the Scots language, including its Ulster variety, confirm the fact that the *MM* is too complex and diverse a phenomenon, and the linguistic units, that make it up, differ too considerably in terms of function and semantics, for us to give them a single and unambiguous characteristic on the lines of discourse, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Let us restate that in this regard, the concept of the "*discursive signal*" comes to our aid, successfully describing all varieties of the *MMs* as a phenomenon that by its nature goes beyond the grammar of a sentence and extends to discourse.

According to K. Fedriani and A. Sansó, *DSs* are "a heterogeneous class of elements expressing different procedural meanings in the interpersonal, textual and subjective planes" [11, p. 5]. Therefore, we can conclude that the basic characteristics of *DSs* correspond to the nature and functions of *MMs*. The heterogeneity of DSs as a category presupposes their further subcategorization. Indeed, according to the previous athors, *DSs* can be subcategorized into *pragmatic marker* (e.g. *please, if I may interrupt, etc.*), *discourse markers* (*but, anyway, still, etc.*) and *modal particles* (*the German ja, eben, doch*) [11, p. 2].

The key point of this classification of *DSs* is that the above-mentioned subcategories combined within the framework of this concept do not act as mutually exclusive groups, but as a gradation allowing zones of overlapping of one category on another [cf. 12]. At the same time, a number of properties turn out to be common to all the three varieties of *DS*. Such features as the lack of a truth value, procedural functions, dependence on the sphere of action, polyfunctionality, variability of position, specific intonation contours are equally characteristic of *DM, PM* and *MP* [ibid.]. It seems that it is possible to add *MMs* (with some limitations) to the list of units of language and speech, classified as *DS.* In fact, *MMs* have never been considered before from the point of view of discourse.

The peculiarity of *MMs* opposing them to all the "classic" *DSs*, consists in the fact that the latter are semantically, functionally and prosodically distinctly isolated units within an utterance, while the former constitute a compound verbal predicate complicated by an extra modal (rarely — two). It is curious, that the availability of combinations with *maybe*, synonymous to certain *MMs*, emphasizes the discursive nature of the latter and forces us to interpret them as *DSs*. The assignment of various *MMs* subtypes to specific subcategories of *DSs* may become a topic for further research.

Conclusion. It can be stated that *discursive signals* (*DSs*) have been studied so far mainly on the basis of the standard varieties of English and other languages, while the data of vernacular speech, regional dialects, regional and minority languages has been employed very little. Meanwhile, the systems of these idioms contain some features that can expand our understanding of the inventory of *DSs*. One of these features is multiple modals — a phenomenon of regional and social variability, which have had relatively fewer chances to come to the attention of experts in the field of discourse analysis than the features of standard varieties. It seems that in the future, *MMs*, considered as an independent subtype of *DS*, can be studied in terms of their individual description and determination of their status within this group of functionally similar units. It is not impossible that some "extra" modals, reinterpreted as part of *MMs*, can be characterized, for example, as modal words or particles. Besides, this phenomenon must be studied more deeply in a typological and comparative-historical vein, in order to gain better understanding of its nature and role in the organization of discourse.

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