MODAL VERBS IN TYNESIDE ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Until very recently, the syntax of Tyneside English, like that of most English dialects, has been more or less neglected. This has partly been due to the methodological problems involved in collecting sufficient tokens of forms that will occur rarely in even a long stretch of speech, as is pointed out by Jones-Sargeant (1985).

This paper constitutes a condensed account of a larger study carried out by the first-named author: at present, this is the only major study of Tyneside syntax to have been undertaken.[1] The modal syntax of Tyneside differs from that of Standard English in several important ways. Firstly, may and shall are hardly used at all in Tyneside, and at best are stylistic variants of can and will respectively, there being no context in which either may or shall is compulsory. Can and could have even more 'non-modal' characteristics in Tyneside than in Standard English. Other differences between Tyneside and Standard English include the more frequent use of 'epistemic' must and the rarity of ought, which coincides with infrequent use of should in 'non-root, non epistemic' uses as would be predicted by Leech & Coates (1977a and 1977b). Finally, the system of tags is totally different in Tyneside and Standard English respectively, the former having a larger set of options in which single and double negatives, contracted and uncontracted, are contrasted in order to distinguish between tags which ask for information and those requiring confirmation.

1. Introduction

The syntax of Tyneside English has, until very recently, been an almost totally neglected area of research. In 1968 an extensive

linguistic survey of Tyneside English--the Tyneside Linguistic Survey (henceforth TLS)--was inagurated by Professor Barbara Strang. The principal workers involved in designing the methodology, collecting and analysing the data for the TLS were John Pellowe, Graham Nixon and Vincent McNeany. Later, the programming work was carried out by Val Jones-Sargent, whose (1983) account of the TLS work is the clearest and most complete available. The principal aim of the TLS was to determine 'the ecology of varieties of spoken English in urban areas' (Pellowe et al. 1972a:1). By contrast with previous sociolinguistic studies such as that of Labov (1966), the TLS set out to achieve the above-mentioned aim by using multivariate techniques in order to avoid both selectivity and atomism in the treatment of social and linguistic variables. Thus, each speaker in the sample would be analysed first in respect of a large number of linguistic variables simultaneously, and allotted a unique, multicoordinate place in a multidimensional 'Variety Space', each of whose dimensions would be a linguistic criterion with its variants. The methods of cluster analysis would then be used to determine sets of linguistically similar speakers. Groups of socially similar individuals would be determined using the same methods, but with social, or extra-linguistic variables this time. Finally, the two sets of groupings would be compared in order to determine the relationship between linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. The sample was made up partly by random sampling, supplemented by a hand-picked sample of speakers either known to speak 'non-localised' varieties of English, or residing in a street judged to be 'middle-class.' This supplementation was to ensure that 'non-localised' varieties were adequately represented in the sample. In all, 200 speakers were included in the TLS corpus (Jones-Sargent 1983).

To put it more simply, the aim of the TLS was to leave no stone unturned in the search for sociolinguistically significant groupings of speakers. Yet even here, syntax was treated as a poor relation: out of the 459 variables originally included in the TLS coding frame, only 84 were syntactic.[2] Moreover, the coding of these latter was much cruder and more generalised than that of the phonological variables: for instance, localised modal verbs were counted along with other localised verb forms such as he's went, giving a score for each speaker representing the total number of localised verb forms. This is unsatisfactory in two ways: firstly in that the analyst has to prejudge which forms are localised (i.e., characteristically Tyneside) and secondly in that information concerning individual syntactic features, such as double modals, cannot be retrieved except from the raw data. Small wonder then that very little work on syntax has been published from the TLS, the only published article to our knowledge being that by Jones-Sargent (1985). Specific information is thin on the ground even here: however, Jones-Sargent does make some useful points concerning

the methodological problems involved in the collection of syntactic data. In Jones-Sargent's sample, localised forms, i.e., those forms in which the researcher is most likely to be interested, are rare, but are realised with high frequency by a minority of speakers. The rareness of occurrence of these forms overall can perhaps be explained by the fact that any specific syntactic feature is used less frequently in the course of spontaneous speech than any phonological feature: thus, however large the corpus, some syntactic features will always be missing. Moreover, as we shall see in the course of this paper, many of the localised verb forms of Tyneside involve negation, interrogation and modality, all of which tend to be used in particular kinds of discourse which simply may not be employed in the course of an informal interview. All this means that bodies of data collected for the purpose of phonological or other types of investigation may not be suitable for the study of syntax, and that investigations into regional syntax cannot be based on such corpora alone. Jones-Sargent's discovery of the tendency for certain individuals to use a large number of localised syntactic features is more difficult to explain, especially since these individuals do not seem to form or belong to any coherent social grouping: possibly they were simply the most vociferous or least inhibited individuals?

The only major study of Tyneside syntax to date is that undertaken by McDonald (1981): it is on this study of modal verbs that the present paper is largely based. McDonald's study was based on two spoken corpora of 150,000 words each recorded between 1970 and 1978. Of the Non-Tyneside (henceforth NT) corpus, 70,000 words were obtained from the corpus used in the Survey of English Usage, for which surreptitious recordings of educated speakers were made; 30,000 words were taken from that part of the TLS sample designed to represent non-localised speakers; and 50,000 words were recorded from unscripted discussion programmes on the radio. The Tyneside (henceforth T) corpus consisted likewise of 150,000 words, from 67 speakers: 90,000 words consisted of spontaneous conversation from relatives, friends and neighbours, whilst the remaining 60,000 words involved conversation between speakers on a less intimate footing. None of the T corpus was obtained by surreptitious recording. McDonald recognises that there may be differences in formality between different parts of her corpora, but is always careful to point this out where it affects results.

To overcome the problems of rarely occuring features discussed above, McDonald supplemented her corpus by attested utterances and elicitation tests. Attested utterances are those which are heard in conversation or overheard, and are subsequently noted down and investigated: every sociolinguist knows that such utterances can provide invaluable nuggets of information which are maddeningly absent from even the largest corpus. Elicitation experiments were

conducted, not only to provide more information about items which were rare in the corpora, but also to gain some information about usage in areas of Britain other than Tyneside. Although there are problems regarding the reliability of answers given in elicitation experiments, sometimes a disparity between these answers and actual usage can be a valuable indication of what Labov (1966) calls 'linguistic insecurity.' The elicitation experiments used by McDonald were taken from Quirk & Svartvik (1966) and Greenbaum & Quirk (1970). Examples of the kind of test used are:

The Acceptability Test, in which informants are asked if a given sentence is:

Y: wholly natural and normal
N: wholly unnatural and abnormal
?: somewhere in between

The Semantic Test, in which informants are asked to choose the interpretation associated with a particular modal verb, e.g.,

S1 He'll not come tomorrow.
a. I'm certain he is not going to come tomorrow.
b. He is not willing to come tomorrow.

The Stimulus-Response Test, which involves a stimulus or gloss followed by a response sentence with one or more words omitted. The informant is asked to fill in the missing word or words so that the response sentence means the same as the stimulus, e.g.,

SR1 Do you want me to write on the blackboard?
.....I write on the blackboard?

For the elicitation experiments, McDonald used 415 informants. 230 of these were Tynesiders; 55 came from other regions in the far North of England (Northumberland, Durham, Cleveland and Cumbria); 45 were from the rest of the North (Lancashire and Yorkshire); 70 were from various places South of the Wash, but mainly the South East; and 15 came from Scotland.

2. Modal Verbs

Although there is disagreement amongst linguists as to the status of verbs such as need, dare, ought to, there is a set of central modal verbs, or verbs generally agreed on as being modal in Standard British English (henceforth SBE). These are: shall, should, will, would, may, might, can, could, must. In Tyneside English even the catalogue of central modal verbs is different from that of SBE: as we shall see, can and could have certain

'non-modal' characteristics even in SBE, but they have several more in Tyneside, possibly placing them outside the canon of modals, whilst may and shall, which are definitely members of the modal class in SBE, should be excluded from such a description of Tyneside English, on the grounds of their extreme rarity in this variety.

2.1. Can and could

The breakdown of tense-relationship between past and present forms is seen as characteristic of modal verbs (Lightfoot 1979). In both SBE and Tyneside, can and could do not conform to the modal pattern in this respect, for in many ways could behaves as past tense of can. McDonald finds that could in both the T and the NT corpora 'occurs fairly frequently to actually indicate the past time and not only in environments which are reported' (1981:214). Another 'non-modal' characteristic of can and could in both Tyneside and SBE is their inability to occur to the left of other auxiliary verbs such as have--en and be--ing. In both the T and the NT corpora, McDonald found can, particularly, very rare in this position, whilst acceptability tests showed can with have--en and be--ing to be unacceptable generally (1981:205-208). On these two criteria, then, can and could are less 'modal' than other modal verbs even in SBE. In Tyneside English, however, they have more 'non-modal' characteristics. The most obvious of these is their ability, in Tyneside, to occur in 'double modal' constructions. McDonald's evidence suggests that 'double modals' are far more restricted in Tyneside than in Scots or Appalachian, for only can and could occur in second position in Tyneside. The only example of a 'double modal' to appear in McDonald's corpora is the following:

1. A. They don't break any of your windows or anything?
   B. Oh no! They're double glazed. They wouldn't could.

However, attested utterances reveal that can occurs in Tyneside after might, must and will; whilst could occurs after might, must and would: the patterning of will only with can and would only with could shows tense-concord. There are also indications that, particularly with regard to the combination of would and could, negatives of double modals are more likely to occur than positives in Tyneside English; only wouldn't could as in the example above is found. However, in rural Northumberland, the following attested utterance was heard:

2. A good machine-clipper would could do it in half a day.

Indeed, McDonald's evidence suggests that there might be an increasing restriction on the range of 'double modals' used in the varieties of English spoken as we move southwards from Scotland:

Scots uses more than Northumbrian, which in turn uses more than Tyneside, and acceptability tests show that, south of Durham, 'double modals' are not acceptable at all.

In contrast with SBE, Tyneside does not use can and could to express what Halliday (1970) terms 'modality' or what Palmer (1980) terms 'epistemic modality': in other words, where possibility or probability are involved. Instead, can is used for permission, to the almost total exclusion of may, not only in interrogatives, such as:

3. Can I have a record on?

but also in positive declarative sentences, such as:

4. I might want one or two, but you can use what you want.

Otherwise, and especially in 'double modals,' can is used with the meaning 'be able to,' as in:

5. Some day I might can afford a one for me Christmas dinner.

Further contrasts between the use of can in Tyneside and in SBE are evident in negative sentences In SBE, can't is often used for 'negation of the proposition' rather than negation of the modal verb itself: in other words, it acts as a gloss for 'the evidence forces me to conclude that.....not,' as in:

6. I stayed at home last night, so you can't have seen me at the party.

In such cases, Tyneside uses mustn't. In a stimulus-response test in which informants were asked to fill in the appropriate verb in the framework:

7. The lift ..... be working.

glossed as 'the evidence forces me to conclude that the lift isn't working,' 41.86% of informants in the North East (i.e., North of Cleveland) chose mustn't, as opposed to 0.0% South of the Wash, in which region 93.75% chose can't (McDonald 1981:255). Thus, yet another 'epistemic' use of can is absent from Tyneside.

The negative of can is often uncontracted in Tyneside, appearing as cannot [kanɪt]. In the rare cases in which uncontracted cannot appears in SBE, it is a highly formal or emphatic usage, whereas in Tyneside it occurs in informal and non-emphatic usage. McDonald's T corpus shows cannot as the form used in 36.47% of negative declaratives with can as opposed to 2.35% in the NT corpus. Since

the contracted negative is another characteristic of modal verbs in English, the tendency for cannot to appear uncontracted in Tyneside is another reason for us to doubt the modal status of can in this variety.

Pullum & Wilson (1977:743) give quantifier and adverb placement as tests for 'auxiliaries' (including modals). Certain adverbs normally appear after auxiliaries but before 'main verbs' in SBE. In Tyneside, both can and could appear with such adverbs before them in such sentences as:

8. That's what I say to people. If they only could walk a little bit, they should thank God.

9. She just can reach the gate.

In Tyneside, then, can and could have far more 'non-modal' characteristics than they do in SBE. As in SBE, they have a relationship to each other which is more closely associated with tense than that of any other pair of 'past' and 'non-past' modals, and a tendency not to occur with have--en or be--ing. Yet in addition, Tyneside can and could occur in second place in 'double modal' constructions; occur after certain adverbials; are not used in 'epistemic' senses; and can has an uncontracted negative. The extent to which these latter features of Tyneside can and could may be found in other (Northern or Scots) varieties of English is a matter for further research, although McDonald does point out (1981:365) that the uses of modals in Tyneside are often similar to those found in certain varieties of American English.

The last point of contrast between SBE and Tyneside uses of can and could concerns their appearance with perfective adverbials in Tyneside. Where SBE would use hasn't been able to, Tyneside uses cannot, as in:

10. He cannot get a job since he's left school.

Where SBE would use would have been able to, Tyneside uses could've, as in:

11. I say its a bit of a disappointment, nurse. I though I could've brought it back again.

2.2. May and might

In the discussion of can above, some indication has already been given as to the reason for excluding may from the canon of modal verbs in Tyneside. May is extremely rare in Tyneside, and

occurs very infrequently in McDonald's T corpus. In 'permission' uses, it occurs only once, and then in the 'indirect speech act' may I ask?. As we have noted above, can is used to ask permission in Tyneside, to the exclusion of may. This is certainly not restricted to Tyneside, and may well be a general feature of non-standard dialects of British English. In Tyneside, may is also very rarely used to express 'epistemic possibility': only 14 such uses occur in McDonald's T corpus, as opposed to 75 in the NT corpus. Of these 14, 10 occur with an inanimate subject and copular verb, in the frame it.....be, as in:

12. It may be a Tyneside word.

It would appear that might is used in Tyneside rather than may to express 'epistemic possibility': in the NT corpus, 'epistemic possibility' uses of may and might were almost equally divided (44.38% and 55.62% respectively), whilst, in the T corpus, might accounts for over 90% of such uses. Thus, Tyneside speakers appear to have chosen what was originally the 'past tense form' might, as the modal verb for 'epistemic possibility,' leaving may for occasional use only in positive declarative sentences (no negative occurrences of may are found in the T corpus), and then mainly in the frame it.....be. May, then, is peripheral to the modal system of Tyneside simply because it hardly ever occurs, and has no exclusion function that cannot equally well be performed by either can or might.

2.3. Shall and will

Shall is in a similar peripheral position in Tyneside English, and for similar reasons: it is a rare verb in English generally, and Ehrman (1966:57) suggests that it is becoming obsolete, functioning only as a 'stylistic variant' of will. McDonald's findings suggest that this is true of Tyneside, but not yet of SBE. In the NT corpus, shall occurs only with first-person subjects, and is interchangeable with will except in first-person interrogatives, where shall is obligatory. In Tyneside, shall is never obligatory, not even in first-person interrogatives, and so can properly be described as a 'stylistic variant' of will. Thus, sentences such as:

13. Will I call Mrs. Whiteman in?

occur in Tyneside, but not in SBE.

Can, could, may and shall, then, for different reasons, have a peripheral status in the modal system of Tyneside. With respect to can and could, Tyneside may be seen as more conservative than

SBE, for, according to Lightfoot (1979) can, particularly, was very late in acquiring such modal characteristics as the inability to take direct objects, even in SBE. On the other hand, with regard to may and shall, Tyneside is more advanced than SBE: the encroachment of can on the semantic territory of may is a process which has been going on for centuries, and which has evidently progressed further in Tyneside than in SBE, as has the erosion of shall's territory by will. This mixture of conservative and advanced forms would appear to be characteristic of non-standard dialects of English.

2.4. Other modal verbs

Other verbs which are as centrally modal in Tyneside as in SBE do show different patterns of usage in the two dialects. We have already commented on the use in Tyneside of mustn't rather than can't for sentences glossed as 'the evidence forces me to conclude that ...not.' Generally speaking, 'epistemic' uses of must in Tyneside form a greater percentage of total uses of must than in SBE (73/82 = 89.02% in the T corpus; 100/189 = 52.91% in the NT corpus) (1981:253). Conversely, 'root' uses of must are very rare in Tyneside: only 9 such uses appear in McDonald's T corpus (1981:231-232). Of these 9, 4 are used by the same informant; one is a doubtful utterance; and the remaining 4 are 'indirect speech acts,' such as I must say (c.f., the use of may in 'indirect speech acts'). The contrast between Tyneside and SBE uses of must and have got to are most striking in the negative, where misunderstandings could easily arise between a Tynesider and a speaker of SBE. In Tyneside, a sentence such as:

14. You haven't got to do that.

would mean 'it is necessary for you not to do that,' whereas in SBE the same sentence would mean 'it is not necessary for you to do that.' In SBE, of course, the 'necessary not' meaning would be expressed by 'root' mustn't, which, as we have seen, is rare in Tyneside. In a semantic test requiring informants to choose between the two possible interpretations of the above sentence, McDonald (1981:248) found that 27/43 informants from the North East of England chose the 'necessary not' interpretation, as opposed to 3/14 informants from south of the Wash (62.79% and 17.65% respectively).

Ought to is not a central modal verb even in SBE: in Tyneside it is not used at all. In contrasting Tyneside and Non-Tyneside uses of should and ought to, McDonald found evidence to support a theory proposed by Leech & Coates (1977a and 1977b). They found, in contrasting British and American usage, that more frequent use of ought to in British English coincided with use of should in

four areas which were neither 'root' nor 'epistemic,' and in which ought to could not occur. These are:

i) With first person subjects in place of would
ii) In reported speech as 'past' of shall
iii) In subordinate clauses introduced by 'It is adj. that'
iv) As a marker of subordinate adverbial clauses of condition

Conversely, infrequent use of should in these four contexts in American English coincided with infrequent occurrence of ought to. Leech & Coates concluded that ought to is used as an unambiguous alternative, especially of root should, in dialects where should occurs in these non-root, non-epistemic uses. McDonald's research supports this theory, in that the T corpus has neither should in the four contexts outlined above, nor ought to, whilst the NT corpus has both ought to and non-root, non-epistemic uses of should.

2.5. Tag questions

Apart from these contrasts in modal usage between Tyneside and SBE, there are major differences between the two varieties in the use of tags, which involve other auxiliaries as well as modals. Firstly, tags which are positive occurring after positive main clauses are much more frequent in Tyneside than in SBE. The figures from McDonald's T and NT corpora are as follows (1981:325):

Tags	NT		T		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
pos-neg	33	73.33	45	46.39	78
neg-pos	9	20.00	16	16.49	25
pos-pos	3	6.67	36	37.11	39
	45	100.00	97	99.99	142

Thus, sentences such as:

15. They'll be alright, will they?

are much more common in Tyneside. Moreover, where a modal verb in the main clause in a positive-positive tag construction is followed by auxiliaries, the tag may contain one of these auxiliaries rather than the modal, as in:

16. You'll be having a Christmas party, are you?

This phenomenon was not found at all in the NT corpus.

Secondly, in tag constructions of the positive-negative type in Tyneside where a modal occurs in the tag, a contrast is made between tags with modal + n't + subject and those with modal + subject + not. The former is used where there is an expectation of confirmation or agreement with the main clause, whilst the latter (uncontracted) form is used when information is sought (this latter function can also be performed by positive-positive constructions in Tyneside). In SBE, both these functions are performed by contracted negative tags, the distinction being made by the use of different tones - falling tone is used where confirmation is requested. Pellowe et al. (1972b:33) indicate that Tyneside has a relatively high percentage of level tones: possibly contrasts such as that outlined above, which are carried by different tones in SBE, are 'syntacticised' in Tyneside because there is less variation in tone in the latter. Further evidence that this is indeed the case is provided when we look at the contrasting patterns in negative-negative tag constructions in Tyneside. Such constructions do not appear in McDonald's NT corpus at all, but in the T corpus, there are two patterns: a negative main clause followed by modal + subject + not, used when information about a negative main clause is sought; and a negative main clause followed by modal + n't + subject + not, used when confirmation of a negative is sought. Thus:

17. She can't come, can she not?

asks for information, whereas:

18. She can't come, can't she not?

ask for confirmation of the negative: the only proper answer to this second question is 'No, of course not!'

In this discussion of tags we have strayed away from the modal issue per se into an area in which further investigation of Tyneside usage would bear much fruit.

3. Conclusion

We have attempted here to outline the major areas of difference between modal usage in Tyneside and in SBE. Further contrastive studies of modal usage in other areas of Britain, particularly of the North and Midlands, would prove invaluable in showing how far the patterns outlined above are characteristically Tyneside, or characteristically Northern. The similarities with Scots (see Miller & Brown 1980) do suggest that we should be wary of dividing our studies along national boundaries, and that a study of Northumbrian and Borders usage might prove illuminating.

FOOTNOTES

[1]All the research on which this paper is based was carried out by the first-named author. The second-named author was responsible for writing it in its present form.

[2]For a complete account of the variables included by the TLS, see Pellowe et al. (1972a and b).

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