Double modal (DM) constructions, while nonstandard in the majority of American English dialects, are frequently and grammatically uttered by those in the Southern/South Midland regions of the country. While DMs occur in complimentary distribution with single modals, pragmatically, the two constructions send different social signals. I will endeavor to answer the questions of how DMs are used, why they are used, and what implicatures are generated in their use that are not generated in the use of comparable constructions.

(1) The question is whether or not the attorney general has said things in the past, which would - - might could mitigate his objective ability to enforce the law, as he is charged to do as attorney general. (Source: Fox_HC, Corpus of Contemporary American English)

In order to answer these questions, I will gather examples of DM use in natural speech through two corpora: the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the USC Database of Multiple Modals. I will pay special attention to examples that address a power differential between speakers; it appears that many people in positions of authority (e.g. doctors, politicians) use DM constructions when interacting with those with less power (e.g. patients, constituents). I will also examine prior research on DM constructions to better understand the context and implications of their use. If the research shows that DM constructions are commonly used by authority figures, it could be posited that DMs implicate a noncommittal uncertainty that allows them to “save face,” or maintain respect and dignity.

Bibliography:


