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'Can' and 'Must'-type modal verbs in the direct sanctioning of misconduct across European languages

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Deontic meanings of obligation and permissibility have mostly been studied in relation to modal verbs, even though researchers are aware that such meanings can be conveyed in other ways (consider, for example, the contributions to Nuyts/van der Auwera 2016). This presentation reports on an ongoing project that examines deontic meaning but takes as its starting point not a type of linguistic structure but a particular kind of social moment that presumably attracts deontic talk: The management of potentially 'unacceptable' or untoward actions (taking the last bread roll at breakfast, making a disallowed move during a board game, etc.). Data come from a multi-language parallel video corpus of everyday social interaction in English, German, Italian, and Polish. Here, we focus on moments in which one person sanctions another's behavior as unacceptable. Using interactional-linguistic methods (Couper-Kuhlen/Selting 2018), we examine similarities and differences across these four languages in the use of modal verbs as part of such sanctioning attempts.

First results suggest that modal verbs are not as common in the sanctioning of misconduct as one might expect. Across the four languages, only between 10%-20% of relevant sequences involve a modal verb. Most of the time, in this context, speakers achieve deontic meaning in other ways (e.g., infinitives such as German *nicht so schmatzen*, 'no smacking'). This raises the question what exactly modal verbs, on those relatively rare occasions when they are used, contribute to the accomplishment of deontic meaning. The reported study pursues this question in two ways: (1) By considering *similarities* across languages in the ways that modal verbs interact with other (verbal) means in the sanctioning of misconduct.; (2) By considering differences across languages in the use of modal verbs. Here, we find that the relevant modal verbs are used similarly in some activity contexts (enforcing rules during board games), but less so in other activity contexts (mundane situations with no codified rules).

In sum, the presented study adds to cross-linguistically grounded knowledge about deontic meaning and its relationships to linguistics structures.

References

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