

Modal verbs and deontic meaning in social interaction across European languages

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 und van der Auwera, Johan 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 confronts another’s behavior as unacceptable. Using interactional-linguistic methods (Couper-Kuhlen und Selting 2018), we examine similarities and differences across these four languages in the use of modal verbs as part of confrontation attempts.

As this study is still in its early stages, I can offer initial results at this point. Early analyses suggest that modal verbs are not as common in confrontations of misconduct as one might expect. Across the four languages, only about 10% of confrontation 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 direct confrontations of misconduct. For example, we are interested in how modal verbs, as semantically vague structures, are grounded in a ‚deontically relevant‘ conversational background (for example, through imperatives, see related discussions in (formal) semantics, e.g., Portner 2007); (2) By considering differences across languages in the use of modal verbs. Here, language-specific ‚quasi-modals‘ are of particular interest, such as the Polish construction with *mieć* (‚have‘) (*ja mam to wszystko za niego zrobić!*, ‚I have/shall/am supposed to do it all on his behalf!‘).

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

References

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- Nuyts, Jan; van der Auwera, Johan (Hg.) (2016): The Oxford handbook of modality and mood. Oxford, New York, NY: Oxford University Press (Oxford handbooks in linguistics).
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