

THE LANGUAGE OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Abstract

The aim of our paper is to draw attention to one of the areas of academic English – the language and the terminological apparatus of English grammar taught as part of linguistic disciplines at universities. We would like to concentrate on the inconsistent use of academic language based, perhaps, on the plurality of approaches to grammatical description. Various English grammar books and grammar reference sections of English language course books do not cover all grammatical items using the same language, terminology or even approaches to classification. In our contribution, we discuss selected examples of this inconsistency and suggest some possibilities of helping Czech students to cope with the language of English grammar so that it does not become an obstacle in understanding the grammar itself.

Key words

academic English, English grammar, terminology, inconsistent use

1 Introduction

This contribution addresses the variety of language used by various sources to describe the English language and its grammar. It has been inspired by the practical difficulties which English teachers commonly face in their teaching career with respect to such plurality of expression.

Generally, difficulties seem to arise where from the early stages of their English learning experience students had studied certain areas of grammar using grammar reference sections in various course books, practical student grammars and handbooks of English language usage. When the students enter the English study programme at university, they go on to deal with the same areas of grammar more theoretically and work with more advanced sources like comprehensive English grammars and advanced English textbooks. At this point they are challenged not only by different approaches to organization and classification of various grammatical items, but also by different sets of terms and differently worded definitions and explanations.

One of the reasons why the plurality of expression in describing English language and its grammar troubles Czech students of English may be the fact that they are not used to much variety of language used by Czech scholars in

establishing Czech grammar and its rules. Czech grammar books and textbooks seem to take a rather homogeneous approach to language description. This, traditionally, tends to be rather prescriptive, allows little manoeuvring and simply tells the users of the Czech language what is correct and acceptable as standard. The Czechs, similarly to some other European nations like the Italians or the French, have their “language academy”, which monitors the Czech language and prescribes certain usages. The institution known as The Czech Language Institute was officially founded as late as 1946 but its roots can be traced another hundred years back in history (Ústav pro jazyk český, online). The Institute of the Czech Language produces and publishes official codification grammar books, dictionaries and handbooks of usage that establish, rather unanimously, the rules of the language and make use of largely identical grammatical terminology.

Although there had been some pressure to establish an English language academy as early as the 18th century (e.g. by Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson), the idea never materialized. As the authors of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J., 1985: 14) remark, “Since we do not have an Academy of the English Language, there is no one set of regulation that could be considered authoritative. Instead, evaluations are made by self-appointed authorities who, reflecting varying judgements of acceptability and appropriateness, often disagree.”

Early grammars of English were modelled after Latin grammars and employed numerous Latin terms which are not very well applicable to English, a language structurally very different from Latin. Later, especially in the 20th century, many linguists, grammarians, and teachers proposed other grammar systems and new sets of terms.

Generally, terms are perceived as clearly defined expressions used to avoid ambiguity and confusion. The English grammar terms, however, do not seem to be very effective in this way. On the one hand, identical or very close concepts are labelled differently. Some examples are *progressive/continuous* verb forms, *past/perfect* infinitives, *dependent/subordinate* clauses, *restrictive/defining/integrated* relative clauses, etc. On the other hand, one term is sometimes used to cover different concepts. *Grammar* itself has a number of interpretations (Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J., 1985: 12). Other similar examples are *syntax*, *tense*, *relative clause*, *participle*, etc.

The above-mentioned examples are well established and students can usually cope with them quite easily. There are, unfortunately, areas of English grammar where the terminological apparatus is even more varied and complicated. One of these is undoubtedly the area of modal verbs, which we chose to survey and comment on in this contribution.

2 Survey

The stages of our survey were as follows: firstly, we have excerpted chapters on modal verbs from ten books that we use in our teaching practice at The Department of English, Faculty of Education, Palacký University. Our sources include four theoretical grammar books, four practical grammar books and two course books (cf. Sources). Secondly, we compiled the definitions of the modals that are commonly considered ‘central modals’, their meanings, functions, and usage. These were *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *shall*, *must*. Thirdly, we tried to group these according to the similarity of concept to display the variety of language used to describe similar ideas. We are presenting here two of them – *can* and *should*, which can serve as examples typical of the labelling inconsistency across this whole grammar area.

Just by scanning the following definitions of meaning of the modal verb *can*, you will notice that these range from one or two-word labels to one or two lines of explanations – it seems that theoretical grammar books tend to offer shorter labels while practical grammar books and grammar sections of course books mostly use descriptions or combinations of labels and descriptions. The abbreviations we use in connection with the labels or descriptions are listed at the end of the paper.

Before we proceed to the respective modal verbs, we would like to say that it was not our aim to comment on every single label and example but we would rather like to draw attention to some facts we consider either interesting or unique.

CAN

A

- possibility (GRE) *Even expert drivers can make mistakes. (2)*
- logical possibility (BIB) *These observations can be explained biochemically.*
- possibility (CAR) *How can they be there already? They only left ten minutes ago.*
- a more general possibility of something happening rather than the possibility of something happening in a particular situation (HEW) *Mountain daisies can be yellow or red. (1)*
- general truths (CAR) *Steel can resist very high temperatures. (1)*

- fact and things which have happened and happen (EGC) *For newcomers Asia can be a confusing place. (2)*
- to express what is generally and all time true, logically possible (HEAD) *Cycling in town can be dangerous. (2)*

B

- general ability (HEAD) *I can swim.*
- ability (GRE) *They say Bill can cook better than his wife.*
- ability (BIB) *I can hear what she's saying to somebody.*
- ability (CAR) *Liz can work right through the night.*
- to say that somebody or something has or has not the ability to do something (HEW)
- to refer to physical abilities or learned skills (LAND)

C

- permission (GRE) *Can we borrow these books from the library?*
- permission (BIB) *Can I have a piece of paper, please?*
- permission (CAR) *You can borrow the car but be careful.*
- to ask, give, refuse or report permission (HEW) *Jim says we can leave.*
- to talk about what is already allowed (MUR) *You can't drive in Britain at 17.*
- request (CAR) *Can you spell that for me?*
- offer/suggestion (MUR) *Can I get you a cup of tea?*
- to offer, to suggest (HEW) *Can I help you?*
- asking, offering, inviting (LAND) *Can you come to our village festival at the weekend?*

We divided the meaning and usage of *can* we found in our sources into three categories. Category A covers examples which, in our opinion, belong to the concept of possibility. The examples marked (1) express meanings which are always true – although the usage of the modal verb *can* here is very close, if not identical, the labels differ. The same applies to the examples marked (2), which express meanings true under certain conditions where the labels range

from ‘possibility’ and ‘facts and things which have happened and happen’ to ‘to express what is generally and all time true, logically possible’.

The category B examples refer to the concept of ability. Here we would like to emphasize the fact that while most sources use the label ‘ability’, only one source elaborated on this label and considered it important to stress that abilities expressed by *can* comprise both physical abilities and learned skills.

In category C we listed sentences whose meanings refer to communicative functions rather than abstract concepts and here we would like to point out the function of ‘inviting’ introduced by one of the course books that we found unique among the other sources as well as the description ‘to talk about what is already allowed’ introduced by one of the practical grammar books.

One of the theoretical grammar books we excerpted was the newest comprehensive grammar that claims to be the grammar for the 21st century, i.e. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Huddleston and Pullum. We have to confess that we found their treatment of modal verbs difficult to fit into the ‘boxes’ we used with the other nine sources. We, therefore, decided to keep this latest concept of modals separate, just to show how different it is – both theoretically and terminologically.

(HUD)

Epistemic modality – restricted to non-affirmative contexts

He can't have done it deliberately.

Deontic modality

deontic possibility

You can attend the lectures. (permission – subjective)

You can borrow up to six books at a time.
(reports of rules and regulations – objective)

Dynamic modality

what is reasonable or acceptable

You can always say you're too busy.

what is circumstantially possible

Water can still get in.

what is sometimes the case:

the ‘existential’ use

These animals can be dangerous.

ability

She can run the marathon in under three hours. (potential)

I can hear something rattling. (currently actualised)

SHOULD

A

- obligation (GRE) *You should do as he says.*
- personal obligation (BIB) *You should relax.*
- advice (MUR) *You should stop smoking.*
- suggestion/advice (LAND) *You should get more sleep.*
- suggestions (CAR) *You should tell him straight what you think.*

- asking for/giving opinion (MUR) *I think you shouldn't work so hard.*
- obligation and duty (LAND) *Society should really do more to look after old people.*

- rules and regulations (LAND) *Food should not be eaten in classrooms.*
- saying something is not right or what we expect (MUR) *Those children shouldn't be playing, they should be at school.*

- what is desirable (CAR) *He should have been here at five and he's not here yet.*

- obligation (HEW) *You should sent it back. (advice)*
The manual says the computer should be disconnected. (recommendations by authority)
I should leave early tomorrow if I were you. (giving advice with I)
I should visit my parents more often. (responsibility or duty)

B

- tentative inference (GRE) *The mountains should be visible from here.*
- probability (HEW) *You should have received the report by now.*
- what is likely or possible (CAR) *Tomorrow I've got a lot of sport. ... – It should be a pleasant day then.*
Why should anyone object to her getting the job?
- expresses what may reasonably be expected to happen; also carries the meaning that we want whatever is predicted to happen, and is therefore not used to express negative or unpleasant ideas (HEAD)

- logical necessity (BIB) *Our guest should be here soon.*
- logical conclusion (HEW) *This homework shouldn't take too long.*
If the preceding work has been done with care there should be few, if any, off-types.
It's the third time she's been skating this week – she should enjoy it.

C

- thanking (CAR) *Thanks so much for the CD. You really shouldn't have.*
- requests (HEW) *I should like some orange juice. (formal)*
- surprise (CAR) *I'm sorry that he should be so upset by what I said.*

D

- conditional sentences (CAR) *If you should need anything else, do just let me know.*
- conditional clauses (MUR)
- after certain adjectives (MUR) *(important, strange, funny, natural, surprised, surprising, essential, odd, typical, interesting)*
I was surprised that he should say such a thing.
- regularly used with some expressions (EGC) *(I should imagine, I should think, I should say)*

The meaning and usage of *should* was also divided into several categories – A is the concept of obligation, B the concept of probability, C contains examples of different communicative functions and D of other uses. In connection with the concept of obligation we would like to point out the first four examples which are identical in meaning, i.e. they express general obligation or obligation in a particular situation, where the labels used by the authors of our sources differ markedly. It is also interesting that 'advice' is sometimes seen as a distinctive category, sometimes as a subcategory of obligation.

Within the concept of probability it is worth noticing that while all the examples express something probable, i.e. the reader or listener infers something from some fact or facts that are either explicitly expressed or not, the labels differ from one another completely, there are no two labels that are the same.

(HUD)

Idiomatic uses (i.e. the meaning is not derivable from the meaning of *shall*)

Medium strength modality

Deontic modality (subjective)

You should tell your mother.

Epistemic modality (subjective)

The next road on the left should be King Street.

Low-degree modality

It is essential/desirable that he should be told. (mandative)

We invited her husband too, lest he should feel left out. (adversative)

We invited her husband too, in order that he should not feel left out. (purposive)

It's surprising that he should have been so late. (emotive)

If you should experience any difficulty, please let me know. (conditional)

Non-idiomatic uses

I knew I should easily finish before she returned. (backshifted report)

If they offered me the job I should certainly accept. (remote conditional)

From these examples, as well as from the rest of the excerpts not included in the paper, it can be concluded that although our survey is rather preliminary and research corpus limited, the results clearly expose the existing inconsistency of terminology in this area. Further research may identify other areas of grammar that are equally diverse in descriptive terminology and classification.

3 Conclusion

Let us again quote the authors of *A Comprehensive Grammar of English* (Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, and Svartvik, J., *ibid.*), who claim that “progress towards a more explicit type of grammatical description is inevitably slow and the whole field of grammar is likely to remain an area of interesting controversy”. We believe the same about the grammatical terminology.

However, in teaching the English language, distinctive labels are necessary and we have to make decisions as for the terminology and classification approaches we use. In addition, whether we want it or not, the problem also relates to the assessment of students' performance, especially in theoretical courses like English morphology and syntax. Our students have repeatedly raised questions like, “The sources listed in our recommended reading do not agree on certain points – so which answer will you mark correct in the test?”

We feel that the inconsistency of expression in relation to English grammar

is something that is worth bringing up since we face its consequences quite regularly. Our contribution does not aim at solving the problem but rather at drawing attention to the challenging and complex situation. So how is teaching the English grammar and linguistic theory to be approached so that our students are not baffled by the variety of language used by different sources or, on the contrary, tempted to believe in the “one correct answer”.

We believe that it is important to openly acknowledge the plurality of approaches to categorizing and labelling of the English grammatical items, to explain the historical roots of this situation and to compare it to the situation in the students’ mother tongue. Thus the students will not consider the inconsistency of their grammar books and textbooks on various grammatical issues wrong and confusing but will rather learn to accept it and work with it. Although it is perhaps most practical and effective to offer them one main source to study the English grammar systematically, they should be continuously reminded of the fact that this source is not the only possible one. They should be encouraged to use a variety of additional sources, invited to discuss the parallels and differences and allowed to use the terminology they prefer, as long as they do it consistently, are able to explain their choice and give their source.

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