MODALS, PSEUDOCLEFTS AND THE SUBJECT ROLE

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1. THE ROOT VS. EPISTEMIC DISTINCTION. In many of the world’s languages, modals have what seems to be a two-faced value. Thus, a modal typically has a “root reading”, where it is taken to denote e.g. some sort of complex social relation (obligation and permission are cases in point), and an “epistemic (or metaphysical, or evidential) reading”, whereby “the speaker signals his attitude to the truth-value of the proposition” (Palmer 2001). The Norwegian data in (1) illustrates the phenomenon.

(1) Jon må være på kontoret
Jon must be in office-DEF
‘Jon must be in his office’
(a) Jon is obligated to be in his office (root reading).
(b) It must be the case that Jon is in his office (epistemic reading).

2. THE ARGUMENT STRUCTURE OF MODALS: CONTROL VERSUS RAISING? There exists a comprehensive literature on the argument structure of modals. A widespread analysis, implemented in various frameworks, assumes that an epistemic modal is best construed as a one-place predicate taking the proposition as its argument, whereas root modals denote two-place predicates, construed as a relation between an agent (e.g. Jon) and an action.

In the generativist framework, this analysis has a long tradition, starting with Ross (1967). It is often referred to as the “control-versus-raising” (CvR) analysis, since root modals are analysed as control verbs, whereas epistemic modals are analysed as raising verbs. To illustrate; in the root modal construction in (3a), the subject Jon receives its thematic role (\(\theta\)–role) from the root modal and controls the PRO subject of the downstairs verb. In the epistemic modal construction in (3b), the subject Jon receives its thematic role from the downstairs verb and moves to fill the subject position of the epistemic modal verb, but receives no subject role from the modal.

Now, the CvR analysis has a range of predictions (cf. 4), in particular pertaining to the properties of the subject in a modal construction. Control verbs (e.g. hope) take rational agents as their subjects, whereas raising verbs (e.g. seem) impose no selectional requirements on their subjects. Thus, if root modals are control verbs, we would not expect them to take e.g. expletive subjects and other subject types assumed to occur in non-thematic positions (cf. Thráinsson and Vikner 1995 and many others), but we would expect raising verbs to do so. Moreover, raising verbs are typically scopally ambiguous, capable of scoping over the subject or under it, unlike control verbs, where the subject always takes the wider scope. All things equal, we would expect root modals to pattern with control verbs and epistemic modals to pattern with raising verbs in this respect.
Predictions of the CvR analysis

- Epistemic modals Root modals
  a. Allow expletive subjects yes no
  b. Allow weather-DET ‘it’ subjects yes no
  c. Allow idiom-chunk subjects yes no
  d. Allow quirky (non-nominative) subjects (Icelandic) yes no
  e. Allow passive complement with inanimate subject yes no
  f. Display subject-modal scope ambiguity yes no

However, these predictions are not borne out (cf. Eide 2002). Although dispositional modals (denoting ability and volition) behave as expected on the CvR analysis, deontic modals (denoting permission and obligation) pattern instead with raising verbs, not control verbs, with respect to the properties listed in (4). Thus, (5) illustrates root modals with expletive subject (5a), weather-it subject (5b), idiom-chunk subject (5c), quirky subject (5d), passive complement with inanimate subject (5e) and subject-modal scope ambiguity (5f). Our findings are summed up in (6).

Root modals with raising verb properties

a. Det skal bestandig være minst to voksne til stede.  
   there shall always be at-least two adults at place
   ‘There should always be at least two adults present.’

b. Nå bør det snart regne; gresset er så tørt.  
   now should it soon rain; the grass is so dry
   ‘It ought to rain soon; the grass is so dry.’

c. M.h.t. Jon, så kan fanden ta ham!  
   ‘As for John, the devil may take him (= permission).’
   (Idiom: Fanden ta Jon! Devil-def take-OPTATIVE Jon)

d. Umsækjandann verður að vanta peninga  
   the-applicant-ACC must to lack money
   ‘The applicant must lack money
   (in order to apply for this grant).’

e. Maten må/ skal/ kan/ bør bli servert snart.  
   ‘The food must/ will/ may/ should be served soon (epistemic/root = OK).’

   ‘Some applicants should/may/must/will apply again.’
   i) There are some applicants and they should/may/must/will apply again.
   ii) It is preferred/allowed/necessary/intended that some applicants apply again.

Our findings concerning modals and the properties in (4)

- Raising verbs, epistemic modals & deontic root modals:  
  Control verbs & dispositional root modals:
  a. Allow expletive subjects yes no
  b. Allow weather-DET ‘it’ subjects yes no
  c. Allow idiom-chunk subjects yes no
  d. Allow quirky subjects (Ic.) yes no
  e. Allow passive compl. with inanimate subject yes no
  f. Display subject-modal scope ambiguity yes no

That is, our findings so far suggest that deontic root modals pattern with raising verbs (i.e. one-place predicates), not with control verbs. However, this picture changes when we look at the behavior of modals in pseudoclefts.
3. MODALS IN PSEUDOCLEFT CONSTRUCTIONS. Although versions of the CvR analysis keep surfacing in the literature, it has had a lot of critics over the years. A number of authors (e.g. Pullum and Wilson 1977, Wurmbrand 1999) have suggested instead that all modals are raising verbs. This analysis is also problematic for certain classes of modals. As listed in (6), dispositional root modals behave like control verbs in all types of constructions, whereas deontic modals seem to pattern with raising verbs. On closer scrutiny, however, deontic modals constitute something of a paradox. Although their properties (cf. 6) reveal their resemblance to raising verbs, it is still possible to construe them as two-place predicates semantically. Thus, it is possible to argue that (7) has two distinct deontic (i.e. non-epistemic) readings, one where Jon is subject to the obligation (what is sometimes called the subject-oriented reading), and another where somebody else (not mentioned) is subject to the obligation, e.g. Jon’s babysitter, some arbitrary person, or perhaps no-one (i.e. the proposition-scope deontic reading).

(7) Jon må spise grøten sin.
Jon must eat porridgeDEF his
‘John must eat his porridge’
(a) Jon has an obligation to eat his porridge (subject-oriented reading).
(b) It is required that Jon eats his porridge (proposition-scope reading).

Certain authors, e.g. Wurmbrand (1999), have claimed that the proposition-scope deontic reading – which is easily construed as a one-place predicate relation, just like epistemic modals (cf. 2 above), is the basic reading. The subject-oriented reading arises in many cases because of contextual/pragmatic factors. This two-place reading, she claims, does not mirror the semantic representation of a modal, and it is always possible to force a non-directed reading under any circumstances. However, this is incorrect. There is one construction type where only the subject-oriented (two-place) reading is allowed, notably where the complement of the modal undergoes pseudocleft. Raising verbs are typically ungrammatical in this construction (8ab), whereas control verbs are fine (8cd). Root modals are fine in this construction, too, as long as the subject-oriented reading is the natural reading (8ef). When this reading is unnatural, and the proposition-scope reading seems to be the only natural reading, the construction is ungrammatical (8gh). Our findings are summed up in (9).

(8)

   it Jon showed self, was to be incompetent
   (Int.: ‘What John turned out to be, was incompetent.’)
   it Marit suppose-PASS, is to be dishonest
   (‘What Marit is supposed to be, is dishonest.’)
c. Det Jon provde, var å være ærlig.
   it Jon tried, was to be honest
   ‘What John tried, was to be honest.’
d. Det Marit håpet, var å få snakke med ham.
   it Marit hoped, was to get talk to him
   ‘What Marit hoped (for), was to get to talk to him.’
e. Det Marit må, er å snakke med ham.
   it Marit must is to talk to him
   ‘What Marit must (do), is to talk to him.’
f. Det du skal, er å pusse tennene.
   it you shall is to brush teeth-DEF
   ‘What you will (do), is to brush your teeth.’
g. *Det en kvinne bor, er å bli vår neste statsminister.
   it a woman should, is to be our next prime minister.
   (Intended: ‘What should happen is that a woman becomes our next prime minis ter.’)
h. *Det en apene ikke må, er å mates av besøkende
   it the monkeys not must, is to feed-PASSive by visitors
   (Intended: ‘What must not take place is that the monkeys are fed by visitors.’)

(9) Readings available for Mainland Scandinavian modals:
4. THE ARGUMENT STRUCTURE OF MODALS. The CvR analysis gives the right predictions when we look at dispositional modals (denoting ability and volition) and epistemic modals exclusively. Dispositional modals are always construed as two-place predicates, and they behave like control verbs syntactically. Epistemic modals are always construed as one-place predicates and they pattern with raising verbs syntactically. However, deontic modals constitute a problem and a paradox for the CvR analysis and the Wurmbbrand analysis alike. Deontic modals patterns with raising verbs in some respects and with control verbs as regards other properties. I will claim that the only way to resolve this paradox, is to analyse deontic modals as predicates with an ambiguous argument structure, they sometimes select for a subject role and sometimes not.

However, to account for the argument structure of modals in an exhaustive way, it is necessary to describe their semantics on two different levels (cf. Bierwisch and Lang 1986, developing a two-level semantics for adjectives). The level Semantic Form (SF) specifies the semantics relevant for syntax (e.g. the number of syntactically realised arguments), whereas the level Conceptual Structure (CS) contains the solely conceptually relevant information (e.g. the source of the modality). By means of this two-level system I show how the obligation-reading of deontic modals is not part of the semantic matrix of the modal, but arises as a result of one specific combination of SF- and CS arguments.

REFERENCES


