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JCGL

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MODAL AUXILIARIES

CAN	COULD
WILL	WOULD
SHALL	SHOULD
MAY	MIGHT
MUST	

MARGINAL MODAL AUXILIARIES

USED TO
OUGHT TO
DARE
NEED

Characteristics of modal auxiliaries

1. They do not need the auxiliary verb TO DO to negate a clause or to form an interrogative clause.

She *may* do it. – She *may not* do it.
He *will* speak first. He *will not* speak first.

2. They can function in a range of elliptical clauses where the rest of the predication is omitted.

Won't you try again? – Yes, I *will*.
I can speak Portuguese – So *can* I.
You can speak Russian, *can't* you?

3. They are followed by the bare infinitive.

She *will come* with us.

4. They cannot occur as infinitives, gerunds or participles. So they can occur only as the first verb in the verb phrase.

May - **Maying* - **Mayed*

5. They have no *-s* form for the 3rd person singular of the present tense.
Contrast:

You *must* write. – She *must* write.

You *like* to write. – She *likes* to write.

Characteristics of marginal modal auxiliaries

1. *Used to* /'ju:st tə / 'ju:st tɔ/ always takes the *to*-infinitive and occurs only in the past tense:

She *used to* play basketball.

It is used both as an auxiliary and as a main verb with DO-support:

He *didn't use to* smoke.

He *usedn't to* smoke. <formal BrE>

The normal interrogative construction is with DO-support:

Did he *use to* drink?

He used to drink, *didn't* he?

Note. There is a tendency for speakers to avoid the problem of negating *used to* by employing the negative adverb *never*:

I *never used to* watch television.

2. *Ought to* /'ɔ:t ə / 'ɔ:t tɔ/ normally has the *to*-infinitive, but the *to* is optional following *ought* in ellipsis:

You *oughtn't to* smoke so much.

A: *Ought* I to stop smoking?

B: Yes, I think you *ought (to)*.

3. *Dare* and *need* can be used either as modal auxiliaries (with bare infinitive and without the inflected forms) or as main verbs (with *to*- infinitive and with inflected forms and past forms). The modal construction is restricted to non-assertive contexts, *ie* mainly negative and interrogative sentences, whereas the main verb construction can always be used and is in fact more common.

Meanings of the modal and marginal modal auxiliaries

CAN / COULD

1. ABILITY = TO BE ABLE TO

Bill can cook better than his wife.

2. PERMISSION = TO BE ALLOWED TO

Can we borrow these books from the library?

3. POSSIBILITY

Even expert drivers can make mistakes.

4. CONCLUSION (negative)

You can't be serious!

MAY / MIGHT

1. POSSIBILITY

You may be right.

There might be some complaints.

2. PERMISSION (*formal*)

You may borrow my bicycle if you wish.

MUST / NEED / (TO HAVE TO)

1. CONCLUSION

You must be joking!
There has (got) to be some mistake!

2. OBLIGATION

You must be back by ten o'clock.

Note. In this example there is the implication, to a greater or lesser extent, that the speaker is advocating a certain form of behaviour. Thus *must*, unlike *to have (got) to*, typically suggests that the speaker is exercising his authority. Compare:

Productivity will have to be improved if the nation is to be prosperous.

3. LACK OF OBLIGATION

You don't need to worry about the test.
You don't have to worry about the test.
You needn't worry about the test.

4. PROHIBITION

You mustn't smoke in class.

Note. Since *must* has no past tense form and no nonfinite forms, *to have to* is used in many contexts where *must* is impossible, eg following a modal verb:

We'll have to be patient.

SHOULD / OUGHT TO

1. CONCLUSION (TENTATIVE)

These plants should reach maturity after five years.

Note. The speaker does not know if this statement is true, but tentatively concludes that it is true, on the basis of whatever he knows.

2. MORAL OBLIGATION / ADVICE

You ought to help your parents.

Note. *Should* is more frequent than *ought to* in both senses.

Note. *Ought to* and synonymous uses of *should* express the same basic modalities as *must* and *to have (got) to*. They contrast with *must* and *to have (got) to* in not expressing the speaker's confidence in the occurrence of the event or state described.

WILL / WOULD

1. PREDICTION

You will feel better after this medicine.
I was told I would feel better after this medicine.

2. INTENTION

I will write as soon as I can.
The manager said he would phone me after lunch.

3. WILLINGNESS

Will / would you open the window, please?

Note. This meaning is common in requests and offers. *Would* is more polite.

4. INSISTENCE

If you will go out without an overcoat, what can you expect?
She would keep interrupting me.

Note. This somewhat rare use implies wilfulness on the part of the subject referent. The auxiliary is always stressed, and cannot be contracted to *'ll* or *'d*. In this case, *would* expresses past time, rather than politeness.

SHALL

1. PREDICTION

When shall / will we know the results of the election?

2. OFFERS

Shall I open the door for you?

3. SUGGESTIONS

What shall we do this evening? Shall we go to the cinema?

Note. *Shall* is in present-day English a rather rare auxiliary and only the uses shown above, both with a 1st person subject, are generally current. It is only in questions like 2. and 3. that *shall* cannot regularly be replaced by *will*.

USED TO

1. We use *used to* to talk about past habits and states which are now finished.

I used to smoke but now I've stopped.
That bingo used to be a cinema.

2. *Would* may have the same meaning but cannot refer to past states or regular, habitual behaviour.

When we were children we would /used to go skating every winter.
I used / ~~would~~ to have an old Rolls-Royce.
I used / ~~would~~ to smoke.