

Reviews

Wärnsby, Anna. 2006. *(De)coding Modality. The Case of Must, May, Måste, and Kan*. Lund Studies in English 113. Lund: Lund University.

Over the last few decades, a number of scholarly studies have been dedicated to the interpretation of modalized utterances in English and other languages. This book is an original contribution to the debate, providing detailed information and extensive discussion on the use and values of four modals in English and Swedish: *must*, *may*, *måste*, and *kan*. Specifically, the author investigates the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features of the utterances modalized by these verbs, in order to identify what enables speakers to encode modality in such a way that it can be correctly decoded by the interlocutors. To do so, she exploits the *English-Swedish Parallel Corpus*, a bi-directional translation collection of written texts covering a total of 2.8 million words.

The book is divided into six chapters. In chapter 1 the author focuses on the methodological background, both with reference to the theories concerning modality and to the advantages and drawbacks of corpus use in linguistic studies. As to the former, she provides an overview of the most prominent theories put forward so far, particularly with reference to modal verbs in English and Swedish; this serves as a basis for establishing her own theoretical and conceptual framework. The author largely draws on the generally acknowledged classification of epistemic, deontic and dynamic modality and specifically endorses Eide's (2002) terminology of 'directed' and 'non-directed' modality, by focussing on the source of the modality rather than its goal. Then, she addresses a set of methodological issues concerning the value of corpora for linguistic investigation and criticises the mere exploitation of quantitative data results, which "can sometimes give a false air of scholarliness" (page 41). Indeed, she convincingly argues that quantitative data need to provide statistical foundation for a solid qualitative discussion.

In chapter 2 the author focuses on Jennifer Coates' and Anna Papafragou's studies of modality in order to support her main tenet according to which a set of co-occurring contextual features may promote or demote epistemic or non-epistemic interpretation in modalised utterances. She further remarks that the role of narrow context is crucial for the interpretation of modal expressions, as it bears a

specific effect on the interpretation of a modalized utterance. Her tenet is further developed in the central chapters of the book, chapter 3 and 4, where the author presents her corpus data and identifies an array of contextual features whose co-occurrence favours the disambiguation of the utterance, both with reference to the English modal verbs *must* and *may* and to the Swedish *måste* and *kan*. So, for example, a strong association is assumed between the epistemic interpretation of *must* and (a) perfect or progressive aspect, (b) verbs denoting states, combined with inanimate subjects, (c) involuntariness of the action, and (d) absence of subject control. Yet the author also acknowledges that the majority of the epistemic examples traced in her corpus are actually weak epistemic; this should lead to more cautious conclusions. As for *must* and *måste*, in her discussion she posits that deontic interpretation is promoted, among others, by (a) explicit or implicit condition, (b) posterior reference of the proposition to the time of the utterance, also in combination with (c) inanimate subject, and (d) the main predicate being an event verb. Unfortunately, throughout the discussion, some of the Swedish examples are translated in such a way as to allow ambiguous interpretations in English, thus making it difficult for the reader to fully endorse the author's semantic interpretation.

Special focus is dedicated to the notion of 'Controllability', which is considered central to the interpretation of modal utterances. This complex, compositional notion is taken to reflect the ability of an agent to choose to carry out the proposition. Specifically, when modalized utterances indicate lack of agent control, they tend to be interpreted epistemically, while when the intended agent is in control of the situation denoted by the proposition, the preferred interpretation is deontic.

In order to ground her discussion, in chapter 5 the author carries out a Data Mining analysis of her corpus results and applies a computerized programme of statistical analysis to automatically interpret every single modalized utterance. As further remarked in the concluding chapter 6, overall the computer proves more successful in classifying deontic examples than epistemic ones with reference to *must* and *måste*; moreover, none of the weak epistemic cases or indeterminate examples of *may* were identified by the programme; similarly, with reference to *kan*, epistemic and deontic utterances were interpreted correctly only in a limited number of cases.

Unfortunately, the author discusses only the correct classifications made by the computer and disregards the faulty ones. In contrast, it might have been useful to focus on the wrong classifications as well, in order to check (a) if there is any recurrent pattern of error in the programme, (b) if it is the sequence of tests carried out to identify the patterns of correlations among the co-occurring features that may lead the computer along the wrong path, and (c) if and to what extent it is possible to adjust the computer programme for further analyses.

The above-mentioned comment and the limited number of misprints scattered here and there in the book do not impair the great value of this in-depth, systematic investigation, whose added value is also determined by the constantly integrated use of well-grounded theoretical discussion on the one hand and solid empirical quantitative data with frequency counts and statistical analysis on the other.

References

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Roberta Facchinetti
University of Verona, Italy