



Modals Used in Interrogatives as Lubricants to Soften Directives and Commissives in English

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Abstract

Speakers of English use certain tones, grammatical and lexical items to express themselves politely. Avoiding impositions on the hearers, providing options to them by respecting their liberties and creating a congenial environment are the factors which call into play appropriate use of politeness strategies. Modals in English are used in a large number of socio-cultural situations. They are also used to perform multiple speech acts and functions. Hence the study of modals cannot be confined to the semantic and formal analyses. Man is a social being and his utterances are often shaped by socio-pragmatic factors. Since communication is a goal-directed activity, politeness strategies are used by the speakers to avoid unpleasant commands and impositions. The present paper explores the use of modals in interrogative sentences as lubricants to observe Tact Maxim of

politeness to avoid direct impositions on the hearer in directive and commissive speech acts in order to save an utterance from being impolite.

Keywords: Modals, Interrogatives, Politeness Maxims, Tact Maxim, Directives,
Commissives

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People use language with one another in order to manage their social lives. A language is used as a means of social interaction and it expresses various social roles and performs various communicative functions like questioning somebody, requesting or commanding somebody or seeking permission, expressing rights, obligation and possibility or telling somebody something. Modality is directly related to the social functions of language. Modality, which expresses different semantic implications like permission, request, obligation, necessity, possibility etc. is used to perform different communicative acts. These communicative acts are performed through various sentence types like declarative, interrogative and imperative or through the system of modals. Linguists are of the opinion that modals have the singular potential to express various illocutionary acts and functions in a language. The paper explores the use of modals in interrogatives to observe the tact maxim of politeness in order to soften directives and commissives in English.

Modal Auxiliaries: A Brief Review of Literature

Modal auxiliaries are overtly realized in English. However, there are some differences among grammarians regarding the inventory of modal auxiliaries in English. In the first half of the 20th century, various auxiliaries like ‘can’, ‘may’, ‘shall’, ‘will’, ‘must’, ‘ought’, ‘dare’ and ‘need’ were treated separately and were not grouped together under the system of modals. Henry Sweet(1955), Jespersen(1969), Kruisinga (1932) and Strang(1962) do not distinguish separate set of modal auxiliaries. It was in the nineteen sixties that various grammarians like Sledd(1959), Martin Joos(1964), Twaddell(1960), Ehrman(!966), Palmer(1974), Leech(1971), Quirk and Greenbaum(1973) etc. discovered some common properties in these verbs and classified them as modals.

Eharman (1966), Palmer(1986) and Quirk and Greenbaum(1973) follow formal criterion for defining modals in English. **Eharman** includes ‘can’, ‘will’, ‘shall’, ‘must’, ‘ought’, ‘dare’ and ‘need’ in the list of modal auxiliaries and defines them as “That closed class of verbs which may occupy the first position of verb phrase, which may not be immediately preceded by another verb, which may invert with the subject in interrogation, and which is negated directly by ‘not’” (Eharman, 1966, p.9).

Leech(1971) in addition to ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘must’, ‘will’, ‘shall’, ‘need’, ‘ought to’ also included ‘have(got)to’, ‘am/is/are to’ and ‘(had)better’ and treated them as modals as they can be substituted by other modals and hence are also similar in meaning. Leech regards that the meanings of ‘have (got) to’ relates to ‘must’ and ‘am/is/are +to infinitive’ are similar in meaning to ‘have (got) to’ and ‘ought to’. He chooses semantic criterion to describe various modal auxiliaries.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) list ‘can’, ‘may’, ‘shall’, ‘will’, ‘must’, ‘ought to’, ‘dare’ and ‘need’ as modal auxiliaries. They regard ‘used to’ as a marginal modal auxiliary as “It takes ‘to-infinitive’ and occurs only in the past tense”(1973, p.37). ‘Dare’ and ‘need’, according to them, can be used both as “modal auxiliaries (with bare infinitive and with no inflected –s form) or as lexical verbs (with to infinitive and with inflected –s form)” (1973, p.37). They define modals by following morphological and syntactic criteria. However, the use of modals, according to them, is governed by meaning categories like ability, compulsion, permission etc.

Palmer(1986) follows formal criterion for defining modals in English. He includes ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘must’, ‘ought to’, ‘will’, ‘shall’ and marginally, ‘need’ and ‘dare’ (including ‘might’, ‘could’ ‘would’ and ‘should’) in the list of his modals. According to him modals exhibit what Huddleston (1976, p.333) has called the “NICE (negation, inversion, code and emphasis) properties” that distinguish them from main verbs. According to him, in addition to NICE properties, modals do not co-occur and have no ‘-s’ forms for their 3rd person singular and also have no non-finite forms and imperatives (1986, pp. 33-34). These formal features exclusively belong to modals.

Several linguists including Boyd and Thorne (1969), Halliday (1970) and Lyons(1977) have acknowledged the fact that modals possess illocutionary force and to confine the study of modals only to semantic and formal analysis without taking into consideration their pragmatic potential will be a partial study. For example, ‘He will

come on Monday’ can be analyzed as ‘I predict he comes on Monday’ and ‘He may come on Monday’, can be analyzed as ‘I guess he comes on Monday’. In the above examples, modals ‘will’ and ‘may’ are related to the illocutionary force of the speaker’s mental acts of predicting and guessing respectively. Halliday (1970) regards modality an important element in the semantics of personal participation. He believes that it is derived from the ‘interpersonal’ function of language. Modality is a form of participation by the speaker in the speech event.

Collins Cobuild Grammar (1996) further extended the scope of modals to Pragmatics and makes an important point that modals are also used to express politeness and tactfulness. Referring to pragmatic factors, Collins’ Grammar observes, “Modals are often used to produce a particular effect, and the modal you choose depend on several factors, such as the relationship you have with your listener, the formality and informality of the situation, and the importance of what you are saying” (Sinclair, 1996, p.218).

Modals are used as softeners in many discourse situations in English to make the utterances indirect, tentative, optional, less forceful in order to avoid blunt and direct commands and impositions. I, therefore, think that Pragmatics that takes into account significance of politeness strategies in facilitating illocutionary goals may be best suited to the study of modals. However, the paper is confined exclusively to the application of tact maxim of politeness on the use of modals in interrogative sentences. Hence, in the next section of the paper, I present a brief account of the Tact Maxim of Politeness so that the same can be applied to the study of modals in interrogative sentences in the

selected directive and commissive speech acts culled from various one-act plays written in English over the last fifty years.

The Proposed Frame Work: Tact Maxim of Politeness

Exchange of message is not the only aim of human communication. Man is a social being and hence his aim is to carry forward communication in an amicable atmosphere through mutual trust and cooperation. This cooperation is impossible unless addresser and the addressee show concern for each other's sentiments and interests. Politeness means showing concern for the feelings of others. Philosophers like Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978) and Leech (1983) suggest some politeness strategies to maintain harmony and to strengthen the bond of friendship among individuals. Lakoff(1973, pp. 292-305) suggests three principles of politeness: (a) Don't force any body (b) Give freedom to choose (c) Make the addressee feel comfortable.

Brown and Levinson (1978) group politeness strategies into two categories – Positive politeness strategies and Negative politeness strategies. The speaker employs positive politeness strategies when he claims common objective with the hearer and expresses his desire to help him in fulfilling his wants. These wants include goals and values. Brown and Levinson claim that through positive politeness strategies speakers and listeners show respect and concern for “the interest and approval of each other's personality” (1978, p.101). Negative politeness strategies are used with an end in view to minimize the encroachment upon the freedom of others. Positive politeness strategies rely

on intimacy whereas Negative politeness strategies are used to save the negative face of the hearer.

Leech (1983) contributes to the Politeness principles by discussing various maxims of politeness with regard to the process of minimization and maximization. He believes that “PP is required to mitigate the intrinsic discourtesy of the goal” (1983, p.105) and Tact Maxim is applied as “a means of avoiding conflict” (1983, p.105). Tact Maxim is applied to directive and commissive speech acts and competitive and convivial illocutionary functions to tone down impoliteness by minimizing cost to others and maximizing benefit to others. According to Professor Leech indirectness is related to optionality and the use of indirectness and allowing options to the hearer to decline the choice contribute to politeness. He writes, “Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tend to be” (1983, p.108). Direct questions threaten the face of the addressee and are impolite.

To avoid impoliteness and threat to the face of the addressee, modals are tactfully used in interrogatives as yes-no questions to soften the force of directives and commissives by providing the hearer freedom to respond. Through the use of Modals in yes-no questions, speaker observes the tact maxim by avoiding a direct imperative and providing hearer the freedom to refuse. Therefore, in the next part of the paper the Tact Maxim of Politeness has been applied on the selected examples so as to examine the use

of modals in interrogatives as requestives to soften directives and commissives in English.

Methodology and Analysis of the Samples

The present paper assumes the inadequacy of formal and semantic criteria to study the modals. Palmer (1990) and Lyons (1977) are of the view that modals are potentially ambiguous and can be best interpreted with the help of the context in which they are uttered. I think that the shared knowledge between the interlocutors, which consists of the context and the background assumptions, plays a vital role in the comprehension of an utterance. In order to support my point of view, I have collected examples from some popular one-act plays written by modern writers of English over the last fifty years. A reference to the plays has been made in the brackets after each example and also in the appendix at the end of the study. This saved from using examples which are generally separated from the context. The utterances extracted from the one act- plays written during the period 1950-2000 are selected as they approximate the specimen of English spoken by the native speakers in everyday socio-cultural situations and provide the context to understand the intended meaning of the utterance.

1. *May I have your attention please?*

(Hijack)

Context of the Utterance:

Captain Stewart: Ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Stewart speaking. May I have your attention please? As you must be aware by now, a most regrettable incident had occurred. I want all of you to do exactly as Mr. Shafti says.

As evident from the context, the above utterance is functioning as a directive giving direction to the hearers to pay their attention to the command of the speaker. The above situation takes place on board a transatlantic airliner that has been hijacked. The addresser, who is the captain of the hijacked plane, requests the passengers to pay their attention to him. The captain could do so in a simple and direct manner by using an imperative (impositive). But the use of ‘may’ in an interrogative sentence provides optionality to the hearer and makes the utterance a polite request. The use of ‘may’ in the interrogative eases the force of an impositive and in this way helps the hearer in establishing rapport with the addressees. ‘May’ in the interrogative is used skillfully to observe tact maxim to hedge an impositive in order to perform the social goal of seeking cooperation from the addressees.

2. *Might I just kiss you again before we begin?* (The Princess and the Wood Cutter)

Context of the Utterance:

Princess (nodding): Yes – Well, now we must think of a plan for making mother like you.

Woodcutter: Might I just kiss you again before we begin?

The utterance deals with the trial of quality proposed by the King for the suitors for the hand of the royal Princess. The Princess, however, is in love with an ordinary wood cutter. She wants the wood cutter to devise a plan to prove his generosity so that her mother likes him. We, thus, come to know from the context that utterance (2) is a request for permission. The wood cutter requests the Princess to allow him to kiss her before they begin their discussion regarding their plan to win the trial of quality. Here the relationship between the interlocutors is that of a lover and his beloved. The wood cutter by his profession is in subordinate position to the princess. Hence he uses ‘might’ as a hesitant to avoid a direct imposition and to lessen the offence that may be caused by it. In such an intimate and affectionate relationship, there is no place for the imposition of the wants of any one of the partners. Knowing the delicate nature of their relationship and also keeping in mind the inferior status of his occupation, the wood cutter cannot express his wish in a straightforward manner through a declarative or an imperative sentence. Hence, in order to win the favour of his beloved, the wood cutter uses ‘might’ a tentative form of ‘may’, to politely request the beloved to allow him to kiss her. Thus ‘might’ is used in an interrogative sentence to provide optionality and choice to the hearer. It performs the directive speech act but the option provided to the hearer hedges the inherent impositive. ‘Might’ is used in the interrogative sentence in a tactful manner to tone down the effect of an impositive by hedging the hidden command and to make it a request at the surface level.

3. *In what way can I be of service to your honour?* (The Queen and Mr. Shakespeare)

Context of the Utterance:

Cecil: Absorbed in your work, eh? Ah, you poets! But your man servant insisted on my coming in to await your return. He was under the impression that you were out.

Shakespeare: Foolish of him. But in what way can I be of service to your honour?

In the above social context, Sir Robert Cecil and Queen Elizabeth come to visit William Shakespeare's house. William Shakespeare, however, is very busy as he is working on one of his play. He, therefore, instructs his servant not to allow anyone to disturb him. His servant does not recognize the Queen and Sir Robert Cecil and tells them that Shakespeare is away and they will have to wait for his return. The Queen and his minister hide themselves behind the curtain. When Shakespeare sees the distinguished visitors, he is surprised. He requests Sir Cecil to tell him if he could be of any service to him. The illocutionary act in this speech situation is commissive. As the speaker (Mr. Shakespeare) is in subordinate position to the listeners, the Queen and Lord Cecil, he requests them to tell him if he could be of any service to them. The speaker tries to tone down the offence of his servant who did not recognize the Queen and Lord Cecil and told them that Shakespeare was away. The use of modal 'can' in a question form provides option to the listeners and increases the degree of politeness. The speaker uses 'can' in an interrogative in a polished way to politely offer his services. In English social customs, as we see in the above example, offers are made polite by using a modal in a question form and by providing choice to the hearer to act as per his own wishes.

4. *Could I have a word with him, miss?*

(Waterloo)

Context of the Utterance:

Sergeant (Saluting): Beg your pardon, miss, but does Corporal Gregory Brewster live here?

Norah (timidly); Yes, sir.

Sergeant: Could I have a word with him, miss?

Norah: He's not down yet.

In the situation in which (4) is uttered, a Sergeant from the Scots Guards arrives to the house of old Gregory Brewster, a Scots Guard who had won a medal for his valour in the battle of Waterloo. The Sergeant on reaching the house of Corporal Gregory requests the girl who was present there to allow him to have a word with the Corporal. He uses an indirect illocution and in this way lessens the force of an impositive. Instead of giving an instruction in an imperative, the speaker uses an interrogative to hedge the command and by providing option to the addressee he lessens the force of an instruction and increases the degree of politeness. Hence (4) is not a simple 'yes-no' question. The contextual knowledge provides us clue that the speaker uses tact maxim to establish intimacy with the addressee so that he will be able to achieve the intended goal of meeting the Corporal. Utterance (4) is used as a directive speech act. 'Could' as a modal auxiliary is used in the interrogative to hedge an impositive and to turn it tactfully into a requestive.

5. *Persome, will you favour this gentleman with your company at supper?*

(The Bishop's Candlesticks)

Context of the Utterance:

Convict: Stop! Neither of you leave this room till I do.

Bishop: Persome, will you favour this gentleman with your company at supper? He evidently desires it.

Persome: Very well, brother.

Utterance (5) is uttered in “The Bishop’s Candlesticks”, a popular one act play. It gives us the hint about Bishop’s generosity and kind-heartedness. When a convict enters Bishop’s house without taking permission from him, Bishop is not at all worried and annoyed at this trespassing. Further, when the convict threatens the Bishop and his sister Persome not to leave the room till he allows them, then in spite of his threat, Bishop requests his sister to favour the convict (whom he calls a gentleman) by giving him company at the supper. Here Bishop is not sure that his sister will favour his request as the convict enters the house at midnight and also looks horrible. Hence due to apprehension about the possibility of hearer’s negative response to his proposal, Bishop uses request question to know whether his sister is willing to follow his request at such a critical time. Utterance (5) is used as a directive speech act. The speaker uses modal ‘will’ in the interrogative sentence to provide option to the hearer and in this way he hedges the rudeness that may be caused by a direct command.

6. *Would you bless me before I go?*

(The Bishop’s Candlesticks)

Context of the Utterance:

Bishop: I see – you must travel by night.

Convict: I - I - didn't believe there was any good in the world – One doesn't when one has been in hell, but somehow I - I know you're good and it is a queer thing to ask that – but could you, would you bless me before I go - I - I think. I would help me.

In the situation in which (6) is uttered, a convict forcefully enters into Bishop's house in the darkness of the night. The Bishop, who is a very kind-hearted person, wants the convict to be comfortable. He provides him food and protects him from being arrested by the police. The convict, who was apprehensive of the Bishop in the beginning, is now so much impressed by his generosity and godliness that he requests the Bishop to bless him before leaving his house. Utterance (6) is a directive used as a polite question as the speaker demands cooperation from the addressee to benefit himself. In this situation the Convict (speaker) is uncertain whether the Bishop (the addressee) with whom he had not behaved well earlier, will be willing to do him a favour. This uncertainty leads the speaker to ask a polite question to the hearer using the tentative modal 'would' as a softener to hide the offence that may be caused by an impositive so that he could respect the choice of the addressee whether he is willing to help him or not. In English social system, blessings are never sought through an imperative. The Convict follows the English social customs and politely requests the Bishop and in this way makes it voluntary for the latter to do him a favour by blessing him. Thus in utterance (6) modal 'would' is used tactfully in an interrogative sentence to avoid a direct impositive.

7. *Shall I show you the bed, Barron?*

(Lithuania)

Context of the Utterance:

Mother: [taking up the lamp]: Shall I show you the bed, Barron?

Stranger: Yes, I really must turn in.

Sample (7) is uttered in a situation in which a poor family lives in isolation in a small village in Lithuania. A rich stranger arrives in the family for a night's rest. The mother, who is the addresser, commits herself to help the addressee by offering to show him the bed on which he could take rest. Utterance (7) is a commissive intended as an offer of help and willingness on the part of the addresser to help the addressee. However, instead of imposing his own intentions on the addressee, the addresser wanted to know from the addressee whether he is interested in receiving his help or not. In English society imposition of speaker's wishes on the addressee is always regarded as discourteous. An offer in English refers to addressee's desires and opinions. The offer implies that the speaker is not trying to impose his wishes on the addressee and wants to know what the addressee wants and thinks for himself. Hence in (7) the addresser avoids an impositive and makes a request by following the tact maxim. By using modal 'shall' in an interrogative in a tactful manner the addresser provides full freedom to the addressee to refuse or reject his offer if it is against his wishes or interests.

8. *Can I help you in any way?*

(The Bishop's Candlesticks)

Context of the Utterance:

Convict: If you call out. You are a dead man!

Bishop: But, my friend, as you see, I am reading. Why should I call out? Can I help you in any way?

In the above utterance, 'can' is used as a commissive to express the offer of help for the welfare or benefit of the addressee. The context of the utterance suggests that the speaker is uncertain about the wants of the hearer. Hence, he asks the hearer to provide him the information that is necessary for him to carry forward his offer to help the latter.

Utterance (8) deals with a situation in which a convict enters into Bishop's house in the darkness of the night and threatens to kill him if he calls out the people. The Bishop who is a very kind-hearted person, offers to help him in any way he likes. He politely asks the convict if he can help him in any way. An offer requires both a question and a request. The speaker thinks that the addressee needs his help. The speaker needs some information from the hearer and this information can be obtained through a question. The Bishop, in the context in which (8) is used, is willing to help the convict. So he offers his help in a simple and straightforward manner and makes his offer polite by using modal 'can' in a tactful manner in an interrogative sentence. In this way, Bishop (the addresser) uses a politeness strategy to win the confidence of the hearer (the convict) who otherwise is apprehensive of the possibility of calling police by the addresser.

Conclusions:

As is evident from the analyses of the selected samples used in the study, non-commitment, tentativeness and indirectness are some of the pragmatic devices used by

the speakers to avoid impolite commands and impositions by providing options to the hearer in order to create congenial environment by minimizing threat to his face and to make him feel comfortable and good. In English society, an illocution that respects the freedom of the addressee and provides him choice to act as per his wishes is regarded as polite. In order to avoid offence to the hearer, speakers use modals in interrogatives as an indirect mode of expression.

In English, directive acts which make an order or a command are inherently impolite. We come to know from the analyses of the above samples that modals are used in interrogatives in English to signal optionality, tentativeness and indirectness. The options provided to the hearer save impositives and commissives from being impolite. In English society, while making an offer, the speaker never imposes his own likes and dislikes on the hearer. The hearer is given full freedom to decline the offer if he pleases to. As we have seen in example no. (3), (7) and (8) offers are made polite in English by using a modal auxiliary in an interrogative sentence. While making an offer, the speaker always consults the wishes of the hearer. The speaker lessens the force of an impositive by using a question pattern tactfully and through the observance of tact maxim he hedges the offence that may be caused by a directive or a commissive.

Modals 'could', 'might', 'should' and 'would' are used in interrogatives to make a request in a less bold manner. They are used as tentatives as the use of these modals aids a speaker to remain non-committal and distances him from any direct imposition on the hearer. As we see in examples (2) and (6), there are many social situations in which a

request is made with hesitation as the speaker is either in a subordinate position or not sure that his request will be responded favourably. Therefore, in such social situations, speakers use modals in interrogatives to observe tact maxim to signal politeness and to seek a favourable response from the hearer. 'Could', 'might', and 'would' when used as tentatives in interrogatives are more polite than 'can', 'may', 'shall and 'will' as the force of a command is softened if a request is made in a less bold manner. As we see in the analyses of samples 1 to 8, use of modals 'may', 'might', 'can', 'could', 'will', 'shall' and 'would' signals indirectness, tentativeness and optionality and thus saves directives and commissives from their face threatening quality and through the use of tact maxim turns impositions into a polite request.

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Appendix

Selections of English One-Act Plays as Sources for Illustrative Material in this Paper

Brooke, R. (1999). *Lithuania*. In Jagdish Chander (Ed.), *Short Plays*. Chennai: Oxford University Press.

Daniell, D.S. (1978). *The Queen and Mr. Shakespeare*. In S. Sharma (Ed.), *Plays to*

Instruct and to Inspire. Agra: Mahalaxmi Prakashan.

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