

Modal structure and conditions of use in Blackfoot: *aahk-* a case study

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Issue: There has been considerable discussion on the distribution and use of double modals (di Paolo 1989, Hacquard 2006, Barbiers 2007). According to di Paolo (1989), double modal elements, such as ‘might could’ in English, spoken in the southern states, are one lexical item, as they have a single interpretation and no other lexical item can go between them. Blackfoot (Algonquian) has a rich modal system that can utilize double modals and can use negation between the two modal elements. Consider the data in (1).

- (1) *na imitaa aahkomaapssinai'nitii ni poos*
na imitaa-wa aahk-maap-sstsina-i'nit-ii-wa ni poos-yi
DEM dog-3SG might-NEG-need-kill-DIR-3SG DEM cat-4SG
‘the dog must not kill the cat’ [deontic necessity, obligation]

As shown in (1), the two modal elements *aahk-* and *sstsina-* can be broken up by the negation morpheme *maap-*, similar to *maat-* ‘not’, which is the common negator in Blackfoot, appearing in word initial position. If the two modal elements were one lexical item, as di Paolo (1989) claims for English, then we would expect that they could not be broken up by negation, which is not the case. This paper addresses the question: what is the distribution and use of *aahk-*? In other words, where can modal elements appear, which ones can be used with *aahk-*, and how does such uses affect its meaning?

Proposal: As discussed above, modals in Blackfoot can be broken up by negation. Following Butler’s (2002) analysis of English double modals, I claim that Blackfoot makes use of a high and low modal position, on either side of negation. In addition, Blackfoot makes formal distinctions based on modal strength (necessity vs. possibility) and type (epistemic vs. deontic).

Analysis: One way that modality is expressed in Blackfoot is based on *aahk-* and its following morpheme. Frantz and Russell (2009) define the affix *aahk-* as “might/non-factive” (i.e. in terms of modal strength), and Marshall (2012) references it as epistemic necessity (i.e. in terms of modal type). Based on elicitations from three native Blackfoot speakers in context judgement tasks, I claim that Blackfoot has a four-way system that can contrast possibility, necessity, epistemic, and deontic readings overtly, as illustrated in (1).

- (2) *na imitaa-wa aahk-(∅/ohkott/oma/sstsina)-i'nit-ii-wa ni poos-yi*
DEM dog-3SG might-(MOD)-kill-DIR-3SG DEM cat-4SG
‘the dog might/must/ought/must kill the cat’
[epistemic possibility/deontic possibility/epistemic necessity/deontic necessity]

Based on the modal following *aahk-*, Blackfoot can overtly signal weak and strong epistemic readings, as well as weak and strong deontic readings. The classification of *aahk-* as a single lexical item, is similar to the item *noohk-* ‘counter-expectation’ (Louie 2011). Furthermore, like *noohk-*, the context of *aahk-* is dependent on additional semantic content of the utterance (Louie 2011). Interestingly, there is also a possibility adverb *Kanitsinatsii* (lit: ‘it looks like’), and due to modal concordance (Huitink 2012), it cannot be used with necessity modals in the same clause.

Conclusion: Based on data from native speakers and parallels in other double modal dialects, I claim that Blackfoot has a four-way modal system that makes use of double modals, which are independent lexical items, that are located in a high and low modal position on either side of negation. This research provides additional insight into the distribution and use of double modal structures and suggests that modal meanings are compositionally derived.

References:

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