

Might should we consider this?: Double modal inversion in Southern United States English

Sara Williamson and Chung-hye Han, Simon Fraser University

Introduction. Southern United States English (SUSE) is among the dialects of English that permit a double modal construction, e.g. *might could* or *might should*. While elicitation studies have tested double modal inversion in questions in SUSE (Di Paolo et al., 1979; Di Paolo, 1986; Hasty, 2012), the experimental results are mixed. Di Paolo et al. (1979) found joint double modal inversion, as in (1a), to be acceptable in Texas English, whereas Di Paolo (1986) found it to be marginal as compared to inversion of the second modal, as in (1c). Hasty (2012) suggested that only second-modal inversion is possible in Tennessee English. These studies used differing methods in different varieties of SUSE, impeding a cross-study comparison. This work addresses two questions: (i) is joint inversion of double modals acceptable in SUSE? And (ii) are there regional differences in inversion patterns within SUSE? Results from an experiment conducted with speakers of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas Englishes show that joint inversion is preferred in some varieties of SUSE. However, at least in Tennessee, second-modal inversion is also viable.

The experiment. 108 native English speakers whose local dialects permitted double modals participated in a web-based acceptability judgment task. 44 of the participants were born and raised, at least to age 12, in Kentucky; 27 were born and raised in Tennessee; and 37 were born and raised in Texas. The task tested the relative acceptability of three levels of INVERTED MODAL (joint inversion (1a), first-modal inversion (1b), and second-modal inversion (1c)) in each of the three levels of REGION for the common double modals *might could* and *might should* (Di Paolo, 1986; Hasty, 2011). All target items (32 test item sets, 32 fillers) were given as informal dialogues to encourage participants to give accurate judgments for non-standard constructions (Henry, 2005).

- (1) Billy is at the park with his mother. He says to her:
 - a. “Might could I play on the monkey bars?”
 - b. “Might I could play on the monkey bars?”
 - c. “Could I might play on the monkey bars?”

Raw ratings (1–7) were z -score transformed prior to analysis. A main effect of INVERTED MODAL and an interaction between INVERTED MODAL and REGION ($p < .01$) were found. Joint inversion was rated significantly higher than first-modal inversion overall (mean $-.47$ vs. $-.62$, $p < .001$), as well as in Kentucky ($-.39$ vs. $-.55$, $p < .001$), Tennessee ($-.55$ vs. $-.65$, $p < .05$), and Texas ($-.51$ vs. $-.68$, $p < .001$). Since Di Paolo (1986) and Hasty (2012) consistently found first-modal inversion to be unacceptable in SUSE, these results suggest that joint inversion, by contrast, is at least marginally acceptable in SUSE. Joint inversion was also rated significantly higher than second-modal inversion in Kentucky ($-.39$ vs. $-.65$, $p < .001$) and in Texas ($-.51$ vs. $-.67$, $p < .001$). However, no significant difference between these conditions was found in Tennessee ($-.55$ vs. $-.59$, $p = .44$), suggesting that both forms of inversion are acceptable in this region.

Implications. These results provide a means of evaluating theoretical approaches to the SUSE double modal construction. Previous analyses predict either the availability of joint inversion (e.g. Di Paolo, 1989) or the availability of second-modal inversion (e.g. Battistella, 1995; Close, 2004; Hasty, 2012), but cannot readily account for both patterns. Yet these results show that while joint inversion is at least marginally acceptable in some varieties of SUSE, second-modal inversion is also acceptable, at least in Tennessee English. Therefore, an adequate theoretical analysis of the SUSE double modal construction must not only allow joint inversion in questions, but must also account for regional variations in the accepted patterns of inversion.

References

- Battistella, Edwin. 1995. The syntax of the double modal construction. *Linguistica Atlantica* 17:19–44.
- Close, Joanne. 2004. English auxiliaries: A syntactic study of contraction and variation. Doctoral Dissertation, University of York.
- Di Paolo, Marianna. 1986. A study of double modals in Texas English. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- Di Paolo, Marianna. 1989. Double modals as single lexical items. *American Speech* 64:195–224.
- Di Paolo, Marianna, Charles McClenon, and Kenneth Ranson. 1979. A survey of double modals in Texas. *Texas Linguistic Forum* 13:40–49.
- Hasty, J. Daniel. 2011. I might not would say that: A sociolinguistic investigation of double modal acceptance. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 17:91–98.
- Hasty, J. Daniel. 2012. This might could help us better understand syntactic variation: The double modal construction in Tennessee English. Doctoral Dissertation, Michigan State University.
- Henry, Alison. 2005. Non-standard dialects and linguistic data. *Lingua* 115:1599–1617.