

## The acquisition of English modal auxiliaries by advanced francophone EFL learners

Research in the second language (L2) acquisition of English modal auxiliaries by francophone learners is in its infancy compared with the plethora of studies on past tense and aspect (see *e.g.* Ayoun & Rothman 2013 for a review; Ayoun & Gilbert 2015). Although both languages display various means of expressing deontic, epistemic and dynamic modalities, English is characterized by a rich modal system with morpho-syntactically defective auxiliaries, while French exhibits fully-fledged lexical modal verbs – *pouvoir*, *devoir* and *savoir* (Achard 1998). Francophone learners must shift from a mood system to a modal system and acquire at least the traditional modal auxiliaries – ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘shall’, ‘should’, ‘will’, ‘would’, ‘must’ – which present several difficulties: a) they are semantically polysemous; b) they exhibit formal differences in epistemic and deontic senses in terms of negation and tense; c) past tense modal forms are not necessarily anchored in the past (Palmer 2001; Wärnsby 2006).

We adopt the Minimalist program in which TAM features are construed as interpretable semantic features because they play a role in the semantic interpretation of the event (Adger 2003; Borer 2005). Following others (*e.g.*, Ayoun 2013), we assume that Universal Grammar constrains L2 grammars allowing the acquisition of functional categories and features. However, because of their inherent complexity, we hypothesize that TAM systems are not fully acquired until very advanced proficiency levels. We further hypothesize that because modals are at the interface of morpho-syntax and pragmatics, learners in a naturalistic setting will outperform learners in a foreign language setting.

This study is part of a larger semi-longitudinal study investigating the acquisition of TAM systems by French native speakers as advanced English (n=36). English native speakers served as controls. The computerized data collection consisted in a pre-test as an independent measure of proficiency followed by five sessions with two different elicitation tasks per session targeting present, future and past temporalities, the subjunctive, the conditional and modals.

We are reporting on the sentence completion task for which participants completed individual sentences with a modal auxiliary. Among the 45 stimuli, 17 were designed as to require a single possible answer (*i.e.*, a forced choice), while 28 allowed two different answers. Statistical analyses included cross-tabulation of chi-square tests, MANOVAs and post hoc Tukey tests. A strong modal and modality effect was found in that they clearly performed better with some modals (*e.g.*, ‘can, might’) and modalities (*e.g.*, increasing performance in accuracy from deontic to epistemic and dynamic). We propose the modal auxiliaries’ varying input frequency, their polysemy, the ambiguous contexts in which they occur as well as a lack of useful negative feedback and of appropriate exposure to pragmatics for these instructed EFL learners as tentative explanations for their overall poor performance.

## References

- Achard, M. 2002. "The meaning and distribution of French moods and inflections". In *Grounding. The epistemic footing of deixis and reference*, F. Brisard (ed.), 197-249. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Adger, D. 2003. *Core Syntax*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayoun, D. 2005. "The acquisition of tense and aspect in L2 French from a Universal Grammar perspective". In *Tense and Aspect in Romance Languages: Theoretical and applied perspectives*, D. Ayoun and R. Salaberry (eds), 79-127. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ayoun, D. 2013. *The Second Language Acquisition of French Tense, Aspect, Mood and Modality*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ayoun, D. and Gilbert, C. The acquisition of modal auxiliaries in English by advanced Francophone learners. In *Tense-Aspect-Modality in a Second Language: contemporary perspectives*, M. Howard & P. Leclercq (eds), 181-209. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ayoun, D. and Rothman, J. 2013. "Generative approaches to the L2 acquisition of temporal-aspectual-mood (TAM) systems". In *Research Design and Methodology in Studies in L2 Tense and Aspect*, R. Salaberry & L. Comajoan (eds), 119-156. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Borer, H. 2005. *The Normal Course of Events. Structuring Tense*. Volume 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, F. R. 2001. *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wärnsby, A. 2006. *(De)coding Modality. The case of must, may, måste, and kan*. Lund: Lund University.