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What "might" might could be in "might could":
The case of double modals in Appalachian English[i]

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The goal of this paper is to examine the role of double modal constructions in American dialects, especially the dialect spoken around Southern Illinois, which I believe to be a form of Appalachian English. By considering data collected from both spoken[1] and written[2] sources, we can deconstruct the double modal constructions of "*might could*", "*might would*", and others, in an attempt to show that what at first appears to be a double modal is actually an adverb + modal, with the adverb in disguise. I will begin with section 1 by introducing a working definition for both adverbs and modals, along with the some counter arguments to my own. Then, in section 2, I will briefly discuss the semantic role of double modal constructions. In section 3, I will move on to the spoken and written data I have collected and present syntactic tests to analyze the roles of each modal as either modal auxiliary verb or adverb. Hopefully, this re-analysis will show that the so-called double modal construction found in Appalachian English is actually a sheep in wolf's clothing. I propose that, at least in Southern Illinois Appalachian English[3], double modals do not exist in a true sense. I will present evidence from the syntactic and semantic domains to show that certain modal verbs have taken on the properties of, and thus become, adverbs. Also, briefly examined throughout the paper, will be the pragmatics of how double modals are used and

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what this means to the theory proposed.

1.0 Characteristics and Proposed Theories

1.1 Adverbials are not exactly an easy class of words to define. They have been called the "leftovers" of grammar and many words fall under the adverb category. It has been said that:

> Adverbs may be described as the principal ways in which the language user characterized the conditions and circumstances, the hows and wherefores of actions and events. (Shuan-Fan Huang, cited in Morenberg 1997:36)

Although slippery, adverbs in English do share some basic properties:

a.) Adverbs can be used in several possible positions in a sentence, albeit with some restrictions (i.e. adverbs cannot occur between the verb and a light object *SVAdvO).

b.) Adverbs express a wide range of meaning: manner, time, place, formality.

c.) Adverbs do not affect the verb type (i.e. transitives remain transitive, etc).

1.2 Unlike adverbs, however, modal verbs (a subset of auxiliary verbs) have characteristics that are easily definable and generally agreed upon. They include:

a.) A modal verb can be preposed with the subject for question formation.

b.) If a modal verb is present in verb string within a clause, the modal verb is the first verbal element and carries the finiteness feature.

c.) Sentential negation can be achieved by placing "not" after the finite auxiliary.

d.) Modals are most often used epistemically to convey a range of judgements about the

likelihood of events.

e.) The nine modal verbs are: *can, could, may, might, must, will, would, shall,* and *should*, while

dare (to), need (to), used to, better, and *ought to* are considered semi-modal auxiliaries..

1.3 In standard English, example (1) is grammatical, while example (2) is not:

Standard English

(1) You *could* get to the dentist on time.

(2) *You *might could* get to the dentist on time.

In Appalachian English, however, we find what appears to be two finite modal auxiliary verbs

heading the same verb string, seemingly violating characteristic (b) in section 1.2. Thus, in

Appalachian English, (3) is still grammatical, as in standard English, but examples (4), (5), and (6)

are also grammatical.

Appalachian English

(3) I *could* go to town later.

(4) I *might could* stitch, but my hands's been actin' up. (cf. 2)

(5) He *might should* get to it tomorrow. (cf. 2)

(6) I *might would* want to go if I didn't have all this work. (cf. 2)

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These multiple modal combinations are still highly rule-governed and many combinations of two or more modals are still regarded as ungrammatical, like *can shall.   It appears that the specific rules that govern modal combinations can vary extremely from speaker to speaker, even within the same speech group, indicating "a system whose center is governed by syntax but whose periphery is far more open..." (Mishoe & Montgomery 1994:7).   Thus, in the speech group used for my spoken data, the rules appear to be such that, (a) the first element in the double modal must be epistemic in meaning, and that, (b) of the nine traditional "full" modals, only *might*+modal is an allowable combination (semi-modals are therefore not affected by this rule). Therefore, examples (7) and (8) are judged to be ungrammatical.

(7) *You *may should* listen more carefully when I'm talking.

(8) *I *could might* get it done on time.

Although I could find no definite source[4], it has been suggested that in double modal constructions the second modal is a reduction of a longer phrase with comparable meaning. Thus, *might could* means *might be able to*, with *could* as a reduction of *be able to* through *can*. However, the reduction theory does not hold since it cannot account for other modal combinations like *should oughta*, or *might would*.   Another theory proposed is that double modals should be considered as single lexical items comprised of two parts (Di Paolo 1989). However, in consideration of the novel and spontaneous nature of the pragmatic force behind double modals (Mishoe & Montgomery 1994), this view seems too overgeneralizing.   Finally,

while the possibility of one modal in a double modal functioning adverbially has been briefly suggested in previous literature (Labov 1968, Di Paolo 1989, Mishoe & Montgomery 1994), this analysis[5] will actually demonstrate this view to be correct through semantic definitions and syntactic testing.

2.0 Semantics

2.1 For those speakers who use double modals, the semantic force behind them is often quite transparent.   In fact, Mishoe & Montgomery (1994) use this transparency as the starting point for their analysis of the pragmatic force of double modals.   They claim that it is this semantic nature which is inherent to the production of double modals in negotiations and in threats to the "face" (the desire of positive approval/recognition from, or the desire not to be bothered by, someone) of speakers.   I have devised three major semantic types for double modals, presented below.

2.2 Uncertainty.   If a speaker is unsure of the certainty of a statement or the probability/possibility of an action, but does not wish to seem simplistic and curt by simply stating that the speaker "doesn't know", a double modal can be used.   This semantic type is seen in examples (9) and (10).   Example (9) is an example I witnessed at a friend's house while working on this paper.   The speaker had failed a college course and was being asked by her parents whether or not she would be allowed to repeat the class for a better grade.   Later, I questioned

her on this usage and she explained that while she did not want to lie to her parents, she still

wanted to ease their minds so she could continue to receive money from them.

> (9) I *might could* make it up, but I don't know.

> (10) JennyLee *might could* sign up, couldn't she?

2.3 Reducing Force.   When a speaker wishes to express reluctance to a request, or wishes to

make a critique without: a.) sounding harsh, b.) overstepping personal boundaries, or c.) seem

unyielding (classic types of "negative face" mitigation), a double modal can be used.   This

semantic type is seen in examples (11), (12), and (13).   Example (11) is typical of the reluctance

type since it is an indirect response (from my grandmother) to an indirect question (from myself,

concerning the creation of a Halloween costume).   Examples (12) and (13) are typical of the

desire to critique while not overstepping personal boundaries.   Both are comments from the

speaker to a mother on the mother's parenting skills.

> (11) I *might could* stitch, but my hands's been actin' up.

> (12) He *might should* study a little harder.

> (13) Hayden *shouldn't oughta* be playin' with those lights, should he?

2.4 Remote Past.   Finally, although *usedta* is only a semi-modal, it still fits into the analysis of

this paper in examples like (14).   Here, the first modal is used to express an extra dimension of

remoteness to past events.   This example was produced by a clerk at the local 24-hour Wal-Mart about how people's shopping had changed in the past ten years since the store became a 24-hour location.   This example would have been meaningless if the store had opened only last year.

> (14) You *usedta couldn't* go shopping after nine.

From this base, then, we can view the meaning and situational context that gives rise to double modals while we apply syntactic tests.

3.0 Syntactic tests

3.1 As described in Napoli (1993) and Radford (1997), four syntactic tests can be used for assessing the modal auxiliary features of a verb.   In sections 3.2 - 3.5, I will apply these tests in the following order: negation, tag-questions, wh- questions, and yes/no questions.

3.2 Negation.   In standard English, we can achieve sentential negation by placing *not* or contracted *n't* immediately after the finite auxiliary verb.   Thus, examples (15a) and (16a) become (15b) and (16b) and both are grammatical.

> Standard English

> (15)   a. She *could* go to work.

>> b. She *could not* go to work.

> (16)   a. He *would* get the job done.

b. He *wouldn't* get the job done.

In Appalachian English, however, my research has found no form of sentential negation with full double modals, and only sparse examples of sentential negation when semi-modals are included. Although negative forms of double modals have been noted[6] in other works (Di Paolo 1989, Mishoe & Montgomery 1994, etc.), they are always among the rarest types of forms. For example, in Mishoe & Montgomery, only 18 of 236 collected forms were negative, and of those 18, only 6 were negated on the first word of the set (1994:9). Given the paucity of these negative forms, then, I propose that the inherent semantic/pragmatic notion of double modals would be unjustified in statements of a negative concord.   That is, one typically uses the double modal to avoid such unmitigated statements (in terms of "face") that sentential negation produces. Therefore, all variants of examples (17) and (18) are judged as ungrammatical by both my sources and myself.

Appalachian English

    (17)   a. *She *might couldn't* do it.

            b. *She *might could not* do it.

    (18)   a. *She *mightn't could* do it.

            b. *She *might not could* do it.

The discrepancy between my work and that of others is not surprising given that the variation of

double modal constructions from speaker to speaker has already been described as extreme.

Also, my data corpus is roughly 1/4 that of Mishoe & Montgomery (1994), for example. So,

due to the pragmatic nature of double modals, the negation test is not revealing— neither a "true"

modal auxiliary nor the "adverb" modal can be negated.

3.3 Tag Questions. Another test for determining a finite auxiliary verb is testing whether or not

the item can be repeated with opposite polarity in the tag of a tag question. In the declarative

part of a tag question, only an auxiliary verb with the finiteness feature is allowed to be repeated

in the tag. Therefore, in standard English, the modal auxiliary is repeated, as seen in examples

(19a) and (19b).

    Standard English

        (19)   a. I *could* get back on time, *couldn't* I?

                b. I *might* get back on time, *mightn't* I?

In Appalachian English, the same rule can be applied when double modals are used, but it is only

the item carrying the finiteness feature which is repeated, as in grammatical examples (20a) and

(21a). If both items of the double modal were true modal auxiliary verbs, then either should be

possible for repetition in the tag. However, we see in the ungrammatical examples (20b) and

(21b) that *might* cannot be repeated. Also, if the double modal were a fused form (as proposed

by Di Paolo 1989), then the whole set should be repeated. But, in examples (20c) and (21c), we

see that this is ungrammatical.   The fact that *might* cannot be repeated, in any way, in the tag

part of a tag question shows that it is not carrying the TENSE/INFL features.   While this does

not conclude that *might* is an adverb, it does show that it is not a "normal" modal auxiliary verb.

Finally, example (20d) is shown as the "preferred" form for a tag question, according to my

informants.

Appalachian English

(20) a. I *might could* get back on time, *couldn't* I?

b. *I *might could* get back on time, *mightn't* I?

c. *I *might could* get back on time, *might couldn't* I?

d. I *might could* get back on time, *right*?

(21) a. He *might would* go with me, *wouldn't* he?

b. *He *might would* go with me, *mightn't* he?

c. *He *might would* go with me, *might wouldn't* he?

(22) a. He *shouldn't oughta* be playin' with those lights, *should* he?

b. *Hayden *shouldn't oughta* be playin. . ., *ought* he?

3.4 Wh- Questions.   In standard English, wh- questions come in three flavors: echo, non-echo,

and auxiliary-fronted echo.   In non-echo questions, the wh- word is fronted and the finite

auxiliary verb is preposed relative to the subject.   Non-echo questions do not require rising

intonation.   In echo questions, the wh- word and the finite auxiliary verb are in situ from the

declarative form.   In auxiliary-fronted echo questions, the wh- word is in situ while the finite

auxiliary verb is preposed relative to the subject (i.e. fronted).   In standard English, all echo

questions require rising intonation.   Therefore, declarative statement (23a) yields the

grammatical non-echo (23b) and the grammatical echos (23c, d).

Standard English

  (23) a. I *could* go when [I'm finished working].

Non-Echo Question:

  b. When *could* I go?

Echo Question:

  c. I *could* go when?

Auxiliary-Fronted Echo Question:

  d. *Could* I go when?

In Appalachian English, the same rules apply.   However, when using a double modal, the

traditional form for a non-echo question is disallowed.   Thus, the grammatical declarative

examples (24a, b, c) yield the ungrammatical non-echo question examples (25a, b, c).

Declarative grammatical example (24a) also yields the ungrammatical variation with *might*

movement in example (25d), but yields a grammatically questionable variation with *could*

movement in example (25e).   This pattern is the same for declarative examples (24b) and (24c)

in traditional non-echo wh- question formation.

When echo question rules are applied to the declarative grammatical examples (24a, b, c), the

grammatical echo-question examples (26a, b, c) are produced.   When applying the standard rules

for auxiliary-fronted echo questions to the second modal auxiliary verb in the grammatical

declarative examples (24a, b, c), my data were deemed questionable but not wrong (see examples

27a, b, c).   These are the forms that are reported by (for example) Mishoe and Montgomery

(1994).   In order to test the fused-form hypothesis of double modals and to test the modal

auxiliary nature of *might* in double modals, examples (27d, e, f) and (27g, h, i) were created.   All

were rejected outright as ungrammatical.

Appalachian English

(24)   a. I *might could* go when [I'm finished].

b. I *might could* be [a valkyrie] for Halloween

c. You *might should* check on [the batteries] before we begin.

Traditional Non-Echo Question:

(25)   a. *When *might could* I go? (cf. 23b)

b. *What *might could* I be for Halloween?

c. *What *might should* you check on before we begin?

d. *When *might* I *could* go?

e. ? When *could* I *might* go?

Question Form— Echo and Non-Echo:

(26)   a. I *might could* go when? (cf. 23c)

        b. I *might could* be what for Halloween?

        c. You *might should* check on what before we begin?

(27)   a. ?*Could* I *might* go when? (cf. 23d)

        b. ?*Could* I *might* be what for Halloween?

        c. ?*Should* you *might* check on what before we begin?

        d. **Might could* I go when? (cf. 23d, 27a)

        e. **Might could* I be what for Halloween?

        f. **Might should* you check on what before we begin?

        g. **Might* I *could* go when? (cf. 23d, 27a)

        h. **Might* I *could* be what for Halloween?

        i. **Might* I *should* check on what before we begin?

What these wh- question tests tell us, then, is two-fold. First, in Appalachian English, echo question structure stands in for both the standard English echo and non-echo question types. Informally, I observed that the difference was made in the intonation patterns— echo question form was given both rising intonation when functioning as an echo question and non-rising

intonation when functioning as a non-echo question. Second, as the variations of example (27)

show, if a speaker had to produce an auxiliary-fronted echo question with a double modal, then it

would be the second element of the pair, the *could/should*, which is fronted— and not the *might*.

This shows that *might* is categorically rejected as carrying the finiteness feature of modal auxiliary

verbs. I believe that the echo question form is the only possible form when double modals are

used due to its inherent politeness and non-(face)threatening nature.

3.5 Yes-No Questions. In standard English, to form yes-no questions (those that can be

answered with a simple "yes" or "no"), we see that the finite auxiliary is preposed before the

subject. Thus, declarative grammatical examples (28a, b, c) yield "yes-no" grammatical

examples (29a, b, c).

    <u>Standard English</u>

        (28)   a. She *could* sign you up.

                b. He *should* work on that.

                c. You *would* make better grades.

        (29)   a. *Could* she sign you up?

                b. *Should* he work on that?

                c. *Would* you make better grades?

In Appalachian English, in both single and double modal forms, the same rules apply. It is the modal auxiliary verb that is carrying the TENSE/INFL finiteness features which is allowed to move. Therefore, grammatical declarative examples (29a, b, c) yield the grammatical "yes-no" examples (30a, b, c) when we assume that the second element of the set is carrying the typical modal auxiliary features. Likewise, if we assume that both elements of the double modal are carrying these features, then preposing the first element (*might/usedta*) with the subject should also yield grammatical results. However, this does not hold true. Instead, preposed *might/usedta* yields ungrammatical examples (31a, b, c). Finally, if double modals were indeed a fused idiomatic form (as in Di Paolo 1989), then the set as a whole should allow for preposing relative to the subject in "yes-no" questions. However, when this is tested, the ungrammatical examples (32a, b) are created, and example (33c) is only questionably grammatical.

Appalachian English

(29) a. She *might could* sign you up.

b. You *might would* make better grades.

c. You *usedta could* buy it in mason jars.

(30) a. *Could* she *might* sign you up?

b. *Would* you *might* make better grades?

c. *Could* you *usedta* buy it in mason jars?

(31) a. *Might she *could* sign you up?

b. *_Might_ you _would_ make better grades?

c. *_Usedta_ you _could_ buy it in mason jars?

(32)   a. *_Might could_ she sign you up?

b. *_Might would_ you make better grades?

c. ?_Usedta could_ you buy it in mason jars?

Again, this test shows that the _might_ (etc.) element in double modals is NOT a normal modal auxiliary verb.   It is not carrying the TENSE/INFL features.   The reluctance of example (33c) to conform is, I would suggest, due to the fact that _usedta_ has become an adverb of time and adverbs of time most often occur at the beginning of a sentence; compare it to "Once upon a time...".   These examples are also typical of those recorded by Mishoe & Montgomery (1994:11):

> The pattern in the Carolinas is to uniformly front the second modal,
>
> which agrees with the elicitation studies to the limited extent to
>
> which there is a consensus...

4.0 Adverbs & "Double Modals".   Finally, having shown that the _might_ (etc.) particles in double modal constructions do not carry the TENSE/INFL and finiteness features of normal modal auxiliary verbs, I can begin to show what these words have become.

4.1 In normal standard English (excluding poetry, etc.), two adverbs of the same type (i.e.

possibility, time, manner, etc) cannot be placed together in the same bracketed string.   Thus,

while examples (33a, b) are grammatical, examples (34a, b) are not.

Standard English

(33)   a. You *possibly could* get to the dentist on time.

b. He *perhaps should* study a little harder.

(34)   a.*You *probably possibly could* get to the dentist on time.

b. *He *probably perhaps should* study a little harder.

If, in Appalachian English, the *might* particle in a double modal has truly become an adverb of

possibility, then we should expect an ungrammatical judgement if an extra adverb of possibility is

inserted.   I found this exact type of judgement to be true.   Thus, examples (35a, b) are

grammatical while examples (36a, b) are not.

Appalachian English

(35)   a. You *might could* get to the dentist on time. (cf. 33a)

b. He *might should* study a little harder. (cf. 33b)

(36)   a.*You *possibly might could* get there on time. (cf. 34a)

b. *He *probably might should* study a little harder. (cf. 34b)

While this holds true for the speakers I questioned, there are occasional citations elsewhere (Di

Paolo 1989:205) that allow for this combination[7].   It is worth noting that in Di Paolo's work, the

use of double modals in situations where "logical possibility" was the forced semantic meaning of

a reading is also the type of reading that received the lowest acceptability rating.   I would offer

that her findings only support the claim that one of the modals in a double modal set is an adverb.

If users of double modals have in their semantic/pragmatic knowledge the adverb function of

might (etc.), then a forced semantic reading of possibility would seem excessive.

4.2 Finally, some evidence for *might* as an adverb (that I have not yet fully research, but have

occasionally heard and found written) is included.   In the following three examples (two spoken,

one written), *might* appears to be functioning as a full adverb synonymous with *maybe*, a view

which is somewhat supported in recent literature[8].

> (37) I'm *might* supposed to move out on the 5th of August. (spoken)

> (38) I hope to *might* feel better later on. (spoken)

> (39) I'll *might* go to the movies with you. (written)

5.0 Conclusion

     From the data presented above, I conclude that those phrases known as "double modals"

are actually only one modal preceded by an adverb that looks like a modal.   Due to the semantics

of double modal constructions, we see that the negation tests are unclear; one would simply not

use a normal double modal in a sentence of negative concord.   The tag-question test, in which

the *could* (etc.) is repeated in the tag, but the *might* (etc.) is not, is quite compelling for evidence

that *might* is not carrying the modal auxiliary verb features of TENSE.   Also, with wh-questions, we find that the pragmatic meaning of a double modal construction does not allow for wh-movement, giving us what looks like an echo question but does not function as one.   In echo questions themselves all elements from the declarative are in situ, therefore movement tests do not apply.   However, in auxiliary-fronted echo-questions, we find exactly what we expect.   The actual modal that is carrying the finiteness feature (*could,* etc.)   is the item in the double modal that is   allowed to prepose with the subject, while the adverb *might* (etc.) remains in situ.   Next, we see the evidence for an adverb in modal disguise in the fact that an adverb of possibility cannot precede the double modal construction *might could*—   the adverb slot has already been filled and another would be redundant.   Finally, we have testimony from those who use these phrases. *Might* means "possibly", *usedta* means "back in the day",   and *should oughta* is used when "you should, but you don't just want to be so pushy."   Therefore, so-called "double modals", allow for a richer type of adverb system, one that expresses reluctance, uncertainty, politeness, or remoteness that cannot otherwise be conveyed in standard American English.

EndNotes

i.)   This paper is the culmination of four different works I produced at Southern Illinois University - Carbondale.   It began in the fall of 1999 with two short papers (squibs) and one research paper (where I collected my own data, and not researched other articles) for

LING 408 - Syntactic Theory under the guidance of Dr. Usha Lakshmanan.   Then, in the spring of 2000, Dr. Lakshmanan asked me to present this paper at SIU's Linguistics Luncheon Series.   From the three original papers, the notes gathered during the oral presentation, and finally from outside sources, this paper has been formed.

. 1.) Spoken sources were collected primarily during conversations I had with my mother, maternal grandmother, co-workers, and friends.   I developed the habit of carrying a tape recorder and noting each occurrence as soon as discretely possibly (all within two minutes).   If possible, I would occasionally question the speaker as to his or her meaning.

2.) Written sources came from a large selection of Usenet Newsgroup postings found on the Internet.

3.) I consider the variety of speech in the Southern Illinois area as Appalachian English due to the large amount of families both from the Scotch-Irish migration across the Appalachians and from the large amount of shared cultural heritage and dialect features typical of Appalachian English found in this area (*a*-prefixing of verbs, positive *anymore*, *needs* as past participle, irregular past tense of some verbs, and double modals).

4.) Although I could not find one solid source that claimed doubles modals to be a modal + reduction, this appeared to be the consensus of opinions taken from Linguist List (see below).

5.) Originally, this paper was written purely from data I collected.   I then formulated and tested

my "adverb + modal" hypothesis without any outside sources.   It was only once I was

revising this paper for presentation at the Linguistics Luncheon series that I discovered

that others researchers had proposed this analysis as well (Labov 1968, Di Paolo 1989,

Mishoe & Montgomery 1994).   However, even in these readings, I did not find a full

syntactic analysis such as I have shown.

6.) *Should oughta* is one of the more difficult of the double modals.   First, *oughta* is only

considered a semi-auxiliary to begin with.   Second, *should oughta* is the only double

modal in negative sentences that I have found.   Finally, with other double modals, I

propose that it is the first particle which is an adverb, while the second is an actual modal

auxiliary verb.   However, in *should oughta*, this is reversed and *oughta* is the adverb

while *should* is the modal auxiliary verb carrying the TENSE/INFL features.   Keeping in

mind, then, that the particles are the reverse of *might could* (etc.) we find that *should*

oughta still holds to the rules set in each of the syntactic tests.   In the negation test, for

example, the negation occurred exactly where expected— after the "true" modal and not

the adverb, as shown in the comparison between the grammatical example (x6a) and the

ungrammatical examples (x6b, c).

> (x6)   a. Hayden *shouldn't oughta* be playin' with those lights.
>
> b. *Hayden *should oughtan't* be playin'. . .
>
> c. *Hayden *should oughtn't* be playin'. . .

7.)   Di Paolo's (1989) work was primarily concerned with the possibility of double modals being single lexical items.   In one section concerned with semantic properties, she provides three semantic categories for four separate double modals.   Of these, the category related to "logical possibility" is consistently judged with the lowest acceptability by her informants.   In this work, I did find one example with both an adverb of possibility and a double modal.   The example Di Paolo cites with this lexical "double possibility" marking is within an example already loaded for "logical possibility", therefore triple loading the sense of "possibility".   I would argue that since the actual citation containing the adverb of possibility + double modal.   was already in the logical possibility category, a production of poetic exaggeration for the sake of emphasis, much like triple negation, was produced, and thus not in the domain of "normal" double modal occurrences.

8.) For discussion of *might* as an adverb synonymous to *maybe* see (as cited in Mishoe & Montgomery 1994:26):

Miller, J. and K. Brown.   1982.   "Aspects of Scottish English Syntax".   *English World Wide* 3:3-17.;

and

Mongomery, M. and S. Nagle.   1992.   "Multiple Modals in Scotland and the Southern United States: Trans-Atlantic Inheritance or Independent

Development?". Paper Read at Societas Linguistica Europaea meeting,

Galway, Ireland. *Folia Linguisitca Historica.XIV* 1-2: 91-107.

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