

**What "might" might could be in "might could": The case of double modals  
in Appalachian English**

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Expanding on a paper I wrote for Dr. Lakshmanan's Syntax class, I will be addressing the role of double modal constructions in American dialects, especially the dialect spoken by my family, which I believe to be Appalachian English. Using both spoken and written sources, we can deconstruct the double modal constructions of "*might could*", "*might should*", 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. Hopefully, this re-analysis will head toward the proof that a double modal construction in the true sense does not exist, but that certain modal verbs have taken on the properties of, and thus become, adverbs. Also examined will be why and when double modals are used and what this means to the theory proposed.

### **1.0 Introduction**

Double modal constructions are present, if not overly frequent, in Appalachian English. However, perhaps due to the general lack of study in Appalachian English, how they are used is rarely addressed.

### **1.1 Double Modals**

#### Standard English

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

#### 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)
- (5) That's all the further you *usedta could* go.
- (6) He *shouldn't oughta* be playin' in the street.
- (7) \*You *may should* listen more carefully when I'm talking.
- (8) \*I *could might* get it done on time.

## 1.2 Purpose

I 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 Appalachian English, double modals do not exist in a true sense. I will present evidence from the syntactic and semantic domains to show that what appears to be a "double modal" is actually an adverb disguised as a modal plus a modal.

## 2.0 Semantics

### Uncertainty

- (9) I *might could* make it up, but I don't know.
- (10) JennyLee *might could* sign up, couldn't she?

### Reducing Force

- (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?

### Remote Past

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

## 3.0 Syntactic tests

### 3.1 Negation

#### Standard English

- (15) She *couldn't* go to work.
- (16) He *would not* get the job done.

#### Appalachian English

- (17) a. \*She *might couldn't* do it.  
b. \*She *might could not* do it.  
c. \*She *mightn't could* do it.  
d. \*She *might not could* do it.
- (18) a. Hayden *shouldn't oughta* be playin' with those lights.  
b. \*Hayden *should oughtan't* be playin' . . .

### 3.2 Tag Questions

#### Standard English

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

#### 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?

### 3.3-Wh Questions

#### Standard English

##### Non-Echo Question:

- (23) When *could* I go?

##### Echo Question:

- (24) I *could* go when?

#### Appalachian English

- (25) a. \*When *might could* I go? (cf. 23)  
b. \*What *might could* I be for Halloween?  
c. \*What *might should* you check on before we begin?

##### Question Form— Echo and Non-Echo:

- (26) a. I *might could* go when? (cf. 24)  
b. I *might could* be what for Halloween?  
c. You *might should* check on what before we begin?  
(27) a. You *usedta could* get them in what?  
b. \*What *usedta could* you get them in?

### 3.4 Yes-No Questions

#### Standard English

- (28) a. *Could* she sign you up?  
b. *Should* he work on that?  
c. *Would* you make better grades?

#### Appalachian English

- (29) a. She *might could* sign you up.  
b. *Could* she *might* sign you up?  
c. \**Might could* she sign you up?  
d. \**Might* she *could* sign you up?
- (30) a. You *might would* make better grades.  
b. *Would* you *might* make better grades?  
c. \**Might* you *would* make better grades?  
d. \**Might would* you make better grades?
- (31) a. You *usedta could* buy it in mason jars.  
b. *Could* you *usedta* buy it in mason jars?  
c. \**Usedta* you *could* buy it in mason jars?  
d. ?*Usedta could* you buy it in mason jars?

### 3.5 Adverbs & “Double Modals”

#### Standard English

- (32) a. You *possibly could* get to the dentist on time.  
b. \*You *probably possibly could* get there on time  
c. He *perhaps should* study a little harder.  
d. \*He *probably perhaps should* study a little harder.

#### Appalachian English

- (33) a. You *might could* get to the dentist on time.  
b. \*You *possibly might could* get there on time. (cf. 32a)  
c. He *might should* study a little harder.  
d. \*He *probably might should* study a little harder. (cf. 32c)

#### 4.0 Conclusion

From the data 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 inconclusive, yet the tag-question test is quite compelling. Also, with wh-questions, we find that the double modal construction does not allow for wh-movement or auxiliary pre-positioning, giving us what looks like an echo question but does not function as one. Lastly, we see this proof in that an adverb of possibility cannot precede the double modal construction— the adverb slot has already been filled and another would be redundant. Finally, we have testimony from those who are using these phrases. “Might” means “possibly”, “usedta” means “back in the day” or the remote past (giving the past-tense “could” the extra remoteness) and “should oughta” is used when “you should, but you don’t just want to be so pushy.”

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