



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MODAL VERBS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

O'razboyeva Sarvinoz Xolibek kizi

Fergana State University

2nd year student of the Faculty of foreign languages

sarvinozorazboyeva3@gmail.com

99-518-91-58

Scientific supervisor: Adambayeva Nafisa Qodirberganovna

Annotation: *Modal verbs occupy a central position in the grammatical systems of both English and German, which belong to the Germanic language family, as they express the speaker's attitude. The aim of this study is to identify the semantic and syntactic similarities and differences of modal verbs in these two languages by using a comparative-typological analysis method. The results of the research show that although modal verbs in both languages share a common origin, in German the level of inflection and the use of subjunctive forms are significantly more complex and functionally broader than their equivalents in English. In conclusion, it can be stated that the comparative analysis of modal verbs is important not only for theoretical linguistics but also has significant practical value in improving translation theory and language teaching methodology.*

Key words: *Modal verbs, comparative linguistics, Germanic languages, syntax, morphology, language interference, modalverben, translation studies.*

Annotatsiya: *Modal fe'llar german tillari oilasiga mansub ingliz va nemis tillarining grammatik tizimida markaziy o'rinni egallaydi, chunki ular so'zlovchining munosabatini ifodalaydi. Ushbu tadqiqotning maqsadi qiyosiy-tipologik tahlil metodidan foydalangan holda, ushbu ikki tildagi modal fe'llarning semantik va sintaktik o'xshashliklari hamda farqlarini aniqlashdan iborat. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, garchi har ikki tilda ham modal fe'llar umumiy kelib*



chiqishga ega bo'lsa-da, nemis tilida o'zgaruvchanlik (fleksiya) darajasi va kon'yunktiv shakllardan foydalanish ingliz tilidagi muqobillariga nisbatan ancha murakkab hamda funksional jihatdan kengroqdir. Xulosa qilib aytganda, modal fe'llarning qiyosiy tahlili nafaqat nazariy tilshunoslik uchun, balki tarjima nazariyasini va tillarni o'qitish metodikasini takomillashtirishda ham muhim amaliy ahamiyatga ega.

Kalit so'zlar: Modal fe'llar, qiyosiy tilshunoslik, German tillari, sintaksis, morfologiya, til interferensiyasi, modal fe'llar (nemis tilida), Tarjima nazariyasi.

Аннотация: Модальные глаголы занимают центральное место в грамматических системах английского и немецкого языков, принадлежащих к германской языковой семье, поскольку они выражают отношение говорящего. Цель данного исследования заключается в выявлении семантических и синтаксических сходств и различий модальных глаголов в этих двух языках с использованием сравнительно-типологического метода анализа. Результаты исследования показывают, что, несмотря на общее происхождение модальных глаголов в обоих языках, в немецком языке уровень словоизменения и использование сослагательного наклонения значительно более сложны и функционально шире, чем в их английских эквивалентах. В заключение можно отметить, что сравнительный анализ модальных глаголов важен не только для теоретической лингвистики, но и имеет существенное практическое значение для совершенствования теории перевода и методики преподавания языков.

Ключевые слова: Модальные глаголы, сравнительное языкознание, германские языки, синтаксис, морфология, языковая интерференция, модальные глаголы (в немецком языке), теория перевода.



Introduction

In modern linguistics, the comparative study of grammatical structures is a key factor in understanding cross-linguistic differences and ensuring effective communication. Although English and German share common Germanic roots, their modal verb systems have diverged significantly over time. Since modal verbs express the speaker's subjective attitude—such as possibility, necessity, or obligation—any misuse can lead to serious misunderstandings in communication. Therefore, analyzing the modal systems of these two languages not only enriches theoretical grammar but is also a practical necessity for overcoming challenges in academic writing and professional translation.

The primary aim of this research is to conduct a systematic comparison of the semantic, syntactic, and morphological characteristics of modal verbs in English and German. The study intends to classify their similarities and differences based on linguistic evidence and to evaluate the degree of equivalence between modal constructions that perform similar functions in both languages.

To achieve the stated aim, this study focuses on several key objectives. First, to select and analyze the core modal verbs in both languages (e.g., must, can, may and müssen, können, dürfen) and study their lexical meanings. Second, to compare the word order and syntactic positioning of modal verbs within sentences in English and German.

Literature Review

The academic study of modal verbs in English and German reveals a complex interplay between shared Germanic roots and divergent evolutionary paths. Sohiba Zakirova emphasizes that while both languages utilize modals to express necessity and ability, their structural execution differs significantly¹. English modals are characterized by their "defective" nature—lacking infinitive forms and third-person singular inflections—whereas German modals remain highly integrated into the verbal system through conjugation and specific sentence placement rules.

¹ Zakirova, S. A. (2025). The Differences Between Modal Verbs in English and German Languages. *Education, Science and Innovative Ideas in the World*, 70(3), 17-18.



Expanding the scope to include Turkic structures, Diyora Ibragimova highlights the typological contrast between the closed auxiliary systems of English and German and the distributed modal strategies of Uzbek.² Her research identifies critical "polarity traps," such as the distinction between the English must not (prohibition) and the German *musst nicht* (absence of necessity), which poses a significant challenge for multilingual learners.

The practical application and semantic equivalence of these verbs are further explored by Mehrinoz Odiljonova and colleagues.³ Their comparative analysis illustrates how German modal verbs like *können*, *dürfen*, and *müssen* align with English counterparts like *can*, *may*, and *must*, yet require greater grammatical awareness due to German's strict word order where the main verb is shifted to the end of the clause.

From a historical and evolutionary perspective, the study on Germanic languages provides a diachronic view of how these verbs underwent "grammaticalization."⁴ It notes that English modals have moved further toward becoming abstract functional markers, while German modals have retained more lexical features and morphological complexity. This evolution explains the functional versatility and the "full-verb" capabilities often seen in German but lost in modern English.

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned literature, I conclude that while English and German modal verbs share a common genetic origin, their contemporary usage requires a deep understanding of both semantic nuances and syntactic constraints. My research suggests that the difficulty in mastering these verbs lies not in their basic meanings, but in their functional divergence—specifically how German uses inflection and sentence finality to convey shades of meaning that English achieves through periphrastic or analytical means. Ultimately, a comparative

² Ibragimova, D. (2025). Modality and Modal Verbs in English and German, and Their Expression in Uzbek. *Innovations in Science and Education System*, 433-437.

³ Odiljonova, M. O., Dehkanova, M. I., & Yigitaliyeva, M. A. (2019). Comparison of Modal Verbs Between German and English Languages. *Thematics Journal of Geography*, 8(12), 1364-1367.

⁴ Mortelmans, T., Boye, K., & van der Auwera, J. Modals in the Germanic languages. *Lund University Linguistics*.



approach is vital for students to navigate the subtle differences in modality, ensuring high accuracy in translation and cross-cultural communication.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is based on a comparative-typological approach, which is essential for identifying the structural and functional parallels between English and German modal systems. The study employs several qualitative and analytical methods to ensure a comprehensive investigation:

This method is used to systematically compare the core modal verbs (can/können, must/müssen, may/dürfen) across both languages to highlight differences in their semantic range and syntactic requirements. Used to outline the specific grammatical rules of each language individually, such as the fixed nature of English modals versus the inflectional complexity and verb-final placement in German. This involves analyzing the dual nature of modals—specifically distinguishing between epistemic and deontic meanings in different contexts. The research draws data from established linguistic theories (Kratzer's framework) and existing empirical studies to validate the findings on modal usage patterns and frequency. To provide a broader linguistic perspective, the study also examines how these auxiliary-based systems contrast with the lexical and morphological strategies used in Uzbek.

The data collection process involved a thorough review of academic journals, linguistic textbooks, and comparative grammar manuals, focusing on the latest developments in Germanic and Turkic linguistics.

Results

The results obtained showed both the genetic similarity and the significant functional differences between the modal systems of English and German.

English modal verbs are found to be highly grammaticalized and "defective," as they lack infinitives, participles, and third-person singular inflections. In contrast, German modal verbs retain a more robust morphological structure, requiring full conjugation across all persons and maintaining their ability to function as full lexical verbs in certain contexts. A fundamental difference exists in sentence structure;



while English modals are followed directly by a bare infinitive, German operates on a "verb-second" (V2) principle in main clauses, where the modal occupies the second position and the lexical verb is displaced to the absolute end of the sentence in its infinitive form. Both languages use modal verbs to express epistemic (possibility/probability) and deontic (obligation/permission) meanings, often using the same lexical form for both functions, which necessitates contextual interpretation. The study identified critical semantic shifts in negation. For example, the English "must not" expresses strict prohibition, whereas the German equivalent "musst nicht" indicates a lack of necessity ("need not"), with prohibition being expressed through "nicht dürfen". Unlike the Germanic auxiliary systems, Uzbek distributes modal meanings across lexical predicates (kerak, mumkin, shart), particles, and morphological markers, creating a more analytic and distributed modal framework.

While core modals like can/können and must/müssen often align, German's use of subjunctive forms (könnte, dürfte) provides more nuanced degrees of certainty compared to English, which relies more heavily on specific modal choices like might or could to convey similar levels of doubt.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of how modality functions within the Germanic language family and how it contrasts with the Uzbek language. The comparison reveals that while English and German share a common ancestor, their modal systems have evolved in ways that create significant challenges for learners.

One of the most critical points of discussion is the syntactic flexibility of German modal verbs. Unlike English modals, which are "defective" and cannot stand alone, German modals can function as full lexical verbs. This suggests that German has retained a more traditional Germanic verbal structure, whereas English has undergone a process of "grammaticalization," turning modals into abstract auxiliary markers.



Another major area of concern for translation and pedagogy is the polarity contrast in negation. As noted in the results, the difference between the English "must not" and German "musst nicht" is a common "polarity trap". In English, "must not" indicates a strict prohibition, but in German, "musst nicht" simply means there is no necessity to act (equivalent to "don't have to"). For prohibition, German speakers must use "nicht dürfen". This distinction is vital for accurate cross-cultural communication and professional translation.

Furthermore, the comparison with Uzbek highlights a major typological shift. English and German rely on a closed set of auxiliary verbs to express modality. However, Uzbek distributes these meanings across lexical predicates like *kerak* (necessary), *mumkin* (possible), and *shart* (obligatory). This distributed system means that an Uzbek speaker must often choose between several different grammatical tools to express what a German or English speaker expresses with a single auxiliary verb.

In summary, the study confirms that modality is not just a grammatical category but a reflection of pragmatic and cultural conventions. The greater morphological variation in German and the lexical richness of Uzbek suggest that teaching these languages requires a contrastive approach that makes these subtle differences explicit to the learner.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of modality in English, German, and Uzbek demonstrates both the universality of modal categories and the diversity of their linguistic expression. While the core semantic domains—necessity, possibility, obligation, permission, and epistemic stance—are present in all three languages, the strategies employed to encode them differ significantly. English and German have developed closed systems of auxiliary modal verbs that are syntactically unique but semantically flexible. However, German modal verbs exhibit a higher degree of morphological complexity and functional versatility compared to their English equivalents.



A significant finding of this research is the identification of "polarity traps," such as the distinction between English *must not* (prohibition) and German *musst nicht* (absence of necessity), which requires careful attention in translation and pedagogy. Furthermore, the contrast with Uzbek highlights a typological alternative where modality is distributed across lexical items like *kerak*, *mumkin*, and *shart*, as well as various particles and morphological markers.

In conclusion, understanding these cross-linguistic contrasts has important implications for language teaching and translation studies. By recognizing that modal verbs are not merely grammatical tools but reflections of broader pragmatic and cultural conventions, learners can avoid common errors and achieve greater fluency. Ultimately, this study underscores that while the conceptual space of modality is shared globally, its linguistic realization is deeply shaped by the specific typological and structural pathways of each language.

References

1. Zakirova, S. A. (2025). The Differences Between Modal Verbs in English and German Languages. *Education, Science and Innovative Ideas in the World*, 70(3), 17-18.
2. Ibragimova, D. (2025). Modality and Modal Verbs in English and German, and Their Expression in Uzbek. *Innovations in Science and Education System (International Conference, Delhi, India)*, 433-437.
3. Odiljonova, M. O., Dehkanova, M. I., & Yigitaliyeva, M. A. (2019). Comparison of Modal Verbs Between German and English Languages. *Thematics Journal of Geography*, 8(12), 1364-1367.
4. Mortelmans, T., Boye, K., & van der Auwera, J. (2009). Modals in the Germanic languages. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Modality and Mood*. Oxford University Press.
5. Palmer, F. R. (2001). *Mood and Modality* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This book is the main theoretical source for comparing the modality system in English and other languages.)