A unified analysis of single and double modal syntax

Double modal (DM) structures such as *I might could get it for you* are employed by speakers of Southern American and African American English. On the traditional assumption that modals are always tensed, DMCs are anomalous, as they appear to counter-exemplify the standard accounts which typically (i) allow only one tensed element per clause and (ii) locate modal auxiliaries only in the tensed position. Previous analyses either treat DMs as single lexical units (Di Paolo 1989), or reclassify one of the DM constituents as a non-modal. For example, Marrano (1998) and Van Gelderen (2003) analyze the second modal as a bare infinitive, while others contend that the first modal is some sort of untensed modifier, either a “modal determiner” (Turner 1981) or sentential adverb (Battistella 1995). Di Paolo’s lexicalist analysis is refuted by the separability of the modals illustrated in (1a, 3c, 4), while the others are contradicted by the tense-like behavior variously exhibited by each of the modals (1-4). These previous analyses of DMCs suffer from the underlying assumption that all modal constructions contain no more than one true modal element, and therefore that DM structures involve either a compound single modal or some additional element that is not a true modal.

This paper argues that each modal in a DMC is a true modal, behaving as it does in Standard American English, but that only one has grammatical tense. Following McDowell 1987, we analyze epistemic *might*, *may*, and *must* as sentential polarity operators (P-modals) that move only after Spell-Out. They check [tense] at LF (like lexical verbs) and take sentential scope (like negation). All other modals (V-modals) are AUX verbs that undergo overt VÆT movement when tensed. Applying this categorization of single modal auxiliaries to the analysis of DMC structure reveals that the patterns in (1)-(4) result from the interaction of a V-modal and a P-modal when the two are inserted into a single clause. The extent to which the modals interact is determined by the order in which they are inserted, since in DMCs (as in Standard American English) either a V-modal or a P-modal may occupy the tensed position.

In (5a), the V-modal *could* is inserted higher than *might*, bears tense, and as a tensed AUX verb, must move at PF to T to check tense. Although the P-modal *might* is untensed in this structure, as a polarity operator, it must be interpreted in a position of sentential scope, but its movement to such a position is blocked at LF by *could* and its trace (Head Movement Constraint, Travis 1984). To avoid being stranded in an uninterpretable position within VP, *might* adjoins to *could*, producing the complex V-head [might [could]] shown in (5b). This complex head moves overtly to T to check tense, as in (5c), interacting with any intervening heads (e.g. ASP, negation) as it moves from V to T. Finally, the P-modal *might*, from its position in T, moves to the left periphery at LF to take sentential scope, as illustrated in (5d). This “adjunction-driven” analysis accounts for the data in (1), (2), and (3a-b). In the (a) cases, the V-modal (as the head of the adjunction structure) undergoes SAI (1a), and hosts the aspectual affix (2a) and negation (3a). In the (b) cases, the entire adjunction structure functions as a V-head: it undergoes SAI as a unit (1b), and the aspectual (2b) and negative (3b) elements attach to it and are realized on both constituent modals. Since P-modals do not move overtly, they cannot independently undergo SAI (*1c) or move to ASP (*2c).

In contrast, constructions such as (3c) and (4) are derived from a structure such as (6), in which the P-modal *might* is higher than *could* and bears tense, moving at LF (first to T to check [tense], and then to the left periphery for sentential scope). Here the untensed V-modal *could* remains in situ, adjunction does not occur, and the modals remain distinct phrasal heads. It is this type of structure which allows the insertion of intervening constituents, such as negation and adverbial adjuncts.

The analysis of DMCs posited here suggests that Standard American English (SAE) and DM-dialects differ primarily in their selectional restrictions. In SAE, polarity heads (P-modals and negation) are always merged above VP (Cormack and Smith 2002; Holmburg 2003), while in DM-dialects, V-modal heads may select P-modal complements, as in (5a). Further, while P-modals select VP complements in both SAE and DM-dialects, SAE restricts the complement of a P-modal to lexical (non-modal) verbs. In DM varieties, however, a P-modal may also select a modal VP complement, as in (6).
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(1) SAI:  
   a. Could we might cancel the trip?  
   b. Might could you do this later?  
   c.*Might you could do this later?  

(2) Aspect:  
   a. I think I might coulda done a lot better.  
   b. He mighta could've gotten home by now.  
   c.*You mighta could done that.  

(3) Negation:  
   a. I was afraid you might couldn't find it.  
   b. He might not couldn't refuse.  
   c. I might not could understand you.  

(4) Adverbs:  
   [They] might possibly could be flowers.  

(5)  
   a. …  
   b. …  
   c. …  
   d. …  

(6)  