



# THE IMPACT OF THE USE OF MODAL VERBS ON THE POLITENESS AND INDIRECTNESS OF REQUESTS IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Modal verbs are essential tools in both English and Russian for modulating the politeness and indirectness of requests. This article analyzes the differences and similarities in how modal verbs are used to soften, hedge, or modify the strength of requests in both languages. It also discusses the cultural and linguistic factors that influence these uses, particularly focusing on how the choice of modality reflects social norms, hierarchies, and the relationship between the speaker and the listener. By examining the grammatical structures and social functions of modal verbs in both languages, the paper aims to enhance the understanding of how modal verbs contribute to the politeness strategies in requests, which are essential elements in both communication and pragmatics.*

**Keywords:** *modal verbs, politeness, indirectness, requests, English, Russian, pragmatics, speech acts.*

## INTRODUCTION

In both English and Russian, modal verbs play an essential role in shaping the tone of requests, allowing speakers to soften their requests, express uncertainty, or show deference. These verbs are key instruments in adjusting the level of politeness



and indirectness, which are critical in maintaining social harmony and politeness norms.

In English, modal verbs such as "can," "could," "may," "might," "would," and "should" are widely used to convey varying degrees of possibility, ability, permission, and necessity. When making requests, the use of modals typically serves to soften the tone, making the request less direct and more polite. For example, the request "Can you help me?" is more polite and less demanding than the direct "Help me."

In Russian, the situation is more complex due to the absence of modal auxiliary verbs in the same form as in English. Russian relies on verb forms (imperative, subjunctive, and conditional) and various modal expressions (like "могу" [can], "хотел бы" [would like], and "следует" [should]) to achieve similar effects (Kiparsky, 1996). The indirectness in Russian requests is often modulated by the use of conditional forms or the inclusion of polite phrases, which in turn can modify the strength of a request.

### **Modal Verbs and Politeness Strategies**

Politeness is an important social construct that varies across cultures, and the use of modal verbs is one of the most common strategies to express politeness in requests. In both English and Russian, indirectness is often employed as a politeness strategy to avoid imposing on the listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In English, modal verbs create a level of detachment between the speaker and the request, making it less of a demand and more of a suggestion or a query. For instance:

- "Could you pass the salt?"
- "Would you mind opening the window?"



The use of "could" or "would" in these examples makes the request less direct and more polite, signaling that the speaker is aware of the possibility of refusal, thus maintaining a balance between the request and the listener's autonomy.

In Russian, the concept of politeness is also influenced by indirectness, but the mechanisms of politeness differ. While Russian does not use modal verbs in the same way as English, indirectness is still achieved through conditional forms and modal phrases:

- "Вы могли бы передать соль?" (Could you pass the salt?)
- "Не могли бы вы открыть окно?" (Could you open the window?)

Here, the use of "могли бы" (could) or the negation "не могли бы" (couldn't you) introduces a sense of politeness and indirectness, softening the command into a question. However, Russian politeness can be more explicit than English in certain contexts, with a greater emphasis on formality (e.g., using the formal "вы" instead of "ты") (Searle, 1975).

### **Indirectness of a request**

Concerning the use of modal verbs for modulating indirectness of a request, both English and Russian use modal verbs and expressions of indirectness to navigate social hierarchies. The relationship between the speaker and the listener plays a significant role in the choice of modality. In English, the use of "could" or "would" in requests may signal an awareness of the other person's status, especially in situations where the speaker is of lower status or wishes to show deference. For example:

- "Could you please pass me the salt?" (More polite)
- "Can you pass me the salt?" (More neutral)



In this case, "could" is more polite and suggests that the speaker recognizes the listener's freedom to refuse. It can be used in both formal and informal contexts to reduce the demand.

In Russian, the use of polite expressions is more rigid and closely tied to social hierarchies, with the use of the formal "вы" being mandatory when addressing someone of higher status. The structure of the request also tends to reflect this hierarchy:

- "Не могли бы вы передать соль?" (Could you pass the salt?)
- "Ты можешь передать соль?" (Can you pass the salt?)

The former is used with respect for the listener's higher social status, while the latter is more casual and familiar, typically reserved for close relationships (Kurylo, 2001).

While both languages rely on modal verbs to modify requests, there are key differences in how these verbs are used. English speakers often use modal verbs like "can," "could," "would," and "may" to soften requests. The word "could" is commonly used to imply politeness, as it expresses a hypothetical or conditional situation. "Would" similarly conveys politeness by making the request seem like a polite favor rather than an imposition. In contrast, Russian speakers rely heavily on the verb forms "могли бы" and "хотели бы" to express requests with politeness and deference: "Could you help me?" - "Вы могли бы помочь мне?" The use of "могли бы" in Russian parallels the use of "could" in English, serving as a marker of politeness. However, the level of formality can be more pronounced in Russian, and the cultural context often dictates the formality of the verb choice (Kiparsky, 1996).



The choice of modal verb and the degree of indirectness also reflect cultural values. In English, the culture tends to favor a balance between directness and politeness, often preferring less formal ways of requesting when appropriate. This reflects a more egalitarian approach to social interactions. In contrast, Russian culture places a significant emphasis on respect and hierarchy, particularly in formal contexts. As a result, Russian speakers may use more formal expressions and constructions in requests, especially when speaking to strangers, elders, or superiors. The linguistic structure and choice of modality reflect these underlying cultural norms.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, modal verbs are essential tools in both English and Russian for modulating the politeness and indirectness of requests. While the forms and structures may differ, the underlying function of modal verbs in softening requests and reflecting social hierarchies is consistent across both languages. In English, modal verbs are relatively flexible, with a variety of modals available to express varying degrees of politeness and indirectness. However, in Russian, the system of expression is more complex, relying on verb forms and conditional structures that are not as straightforward as the modal verbs in English.

Understanding how modal verbs operate provides valuable insight into the pragmatic and cultural aspects of communication in English and Russian. This study underscores the importance of linguistic politeness strategies and the role of modality in fostering respectful and effective communication.

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