THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MODAL VERBS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This article explores the differences between modal verbs in English and German, two widely spoken languages with unique grammatical systems. Although both languages use modal verbs to express similar meanings - like ability, permission, and obligation - their structure and usage are quite different. This comparison helps learners avoid common mistakes and improve fluency in both languages. These insights are especially helpful for students learning English and German as a second language.

Keywords: modal verbs, English grammar, German grammar, grammar structure, language structure, modal verbs differences, second language.

Introduction

Languages often share similar grammatical elements, yet their usage and structure can vary greatly. One such element is modal verbs, which play a significant role in expressing necessity, possibility, ability, permission, and obligation. Both English grammar and German grammar include modal verbs in everyday communication and formal writing. Despite the similarity, the two languages differ in how modal verbs are conjugated, placed in sentences, and used in different tenses. These differences in syntax and structure can be challenging for learners. This article provides a language comparison to help learners avoid common mistakes and better understand both systems.

Werner Abraham (2021) emphasizes that, unlike English, German modal verbs can function as full lexical verbs and are influenced by aspectual and Aktionsart embeddings. This syntactic flexibility underscores the complexity of German modal constructions compared to their English counterparts.

In a corpus - based study, Dieter Mindt (1995) analyzes the frequency and usage patterns of English modal verbs, revealing that modals like "would", "could", and "will" dominate in expressing modality. This contrasts with German, where modal verbs exhibit a broader range of syntactic behaviors and contextual dependecies.

Further, Odiljonova et al. (2020) provide a comparative analysis of modal verbs in both languages, noting that while English modals are relatively fixed in form, German modals display greater morphological variation and are more sensitive to contextual factors.

According to Svenja Kranich (2016) explores the epistemic modality in English and German, highlighting that German modal verbs often carry nuances that are contextually determined, whereas English modals tend to have more standardized interpretations.

By examining each language's system individually and then comparing them side by side, this article aims to give learners a clearer understanding of how modality is expressed and how to apply modal verbs correctly.

Modal verbs in English

Modal verbs are auxiliary (helping) verbs that express necessity, possibility, permission, ability, or obligation. They are used with the bare form of the main verb (without "to") and do not change form according to the subject.

List of common modal verbs: can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would.

Characteristics of Modal verbs.

1. No "-s" in third person singular (e.g., He can, NOT He cans)

2. Followed by the base of the main verb (e.g., She must go, NOT She must goes)

3. Do not need auxiliary verbs in questions or negatives (e.g., Can you swim?, You must not smoke)

Modal Verb	Function	Example
Can	Ability	She can play the violin.
	Permission	Can I use your car?
	Possibility	It can be cold in February.
Could	Past ability	I could run faster when I was 15.
	Polite request	Could you open the window, please?
	Possibility	It could rain later.
May	Permission (formal)	May I leave early today?
	Possibility	He may come to the party.
Might	Weak possibility	We might go to the park.
Must	Strong necessity/obligation	You must wear a seatbelt.
	Logical conclusion (deduction)	She must be at home (I am sure she is).
Shall	Offers/Suggestions	Shall we start the lesson?
	Future (formal. UK English)	I shall run before dark.

Should	Advice	You should drink more water.
	Expectation	The bus should arrive soon.
Will	Future	I will send you tomorrow.
	Promise/ Willingness	I will help you with that.
Would	Polite request	Would you like some coffee?
	Hypothetical condition	I would travel if I had money.

Semi-modal verbs

1. Ought to - advice. You ought to respect your parents.

2. Have to - obligation. I have to submit the form today.

3. Be able to - ability. She is able to solve difficult problems.

4. Need to - necessity. You need to drink more water.

Modal + Perfect Infinitive (past use)

Structure	Function	Example
Should have + V3	Unfulfilled advice	You should have studied more.
Could have + V3	Missed possibility	I could have won the race.
Might have + V3	Uncertain past possibility	She might have forgotten the meeting.
Must have + V3	Strong past certainty	He must have left already.

Would have + V3	Hypothetical in the past	I would have helped if I had known.

Modal verbs in German

Modalverben (modal verbs) are auxiliary verbs used with the infinitive of another verb to express ability, permission, necessity, obligation, desire, or possibility.

List of German modal verbs

German Modal Verb	English Equivalent
dürfen	may, to be allowed to
können	can, to be able to
mögen	to like
müssen	must, to have to
sollen	should, to be supposed to
wollen	want to

Key grammar rules

- Modal verbs are placed in second position in main clauses.

- The main verb is sent to the end of the sentence in infinitive form.

- Modal verbs are conjugated, but the main verb remains in the infinitive.

Example: Ich muss heute viel lernen. (I must study a lot today.)

Conjugation table (Present Tense)

Person	dürfen	können	mögen	müssen	sollen	wollen
ich	darf	kann	mag	muss	soll	will
du	darfst	kannst	magst	musst	sollst	willst
er/sie/es	darf	kann	mag	muss	soll	will

wir	dürfen	können	mögen	müssen	sollen	wollen
ihr	dürft	könnt	mögt	müsst	sollt	wolt
sie/Sie	dürfen	können	mögen	müssen	sollen	wollen

Meanings & Examples

1. dürfen (to be allowed to/may)

Ich darf heute Abend fernsehen. (I am allowed to watch TV tonight.)

2. können (can/to be able to)

Wir können Deutsch sprechen. (We can speak German.)

3. mögen (to like)

Er mag Pizza essen. (He likes to eat pizza.)

4. müssen (must/to have to)

Du musst deine Hausaufgaben machen. (You must do your homework.)

5. sollen (should/to be supposed to)

Ich soll mehr Wasser trinken. (I should drink more water.)

6. wollen (to want to)

Sie will Ärztin werden. (She wants to be a doctor.)

Modal verbs in past tense (Präteritum). Modal verbs are often used in simple past (Präteritum) in conversation.

Verb	Ich (Präteritum)
dürfen	durfte
können	konnte
mögen	mochte
müssen	musste
sollen	sollte
wollen	wolte

Example: Ich konnte gestern nicht kommen. (I could not come yesterday.)

Modal + Perfect tense (Modalverb + haben + Infinitiv + Modal)

Example: Ich habe Deutsch lernen müssen. (I had to study German.) This structure uses haben + past participle of the main verb + modal verb at the end in infinitive.

Verb	Meaning	Use
dürfen	to be allowed to	Permission
können	to be able to	Ability/possibility
mögen	to like	Preference/liking
müssen	must/have to	Necessity/obligation
sollen	should/supposed to	Duty/moral obligation
wollen	to want to	Desire/intention

Conclusion

The article compares the use of modal verbs in English and German, focusing on their functions, sentence structure, and forms. Both languages use modal verbs to express ability, permission, necessity, obligation, and desire, but their usage and grammar rules differ. In English, modal verbs like can, may, must, should, will, and would are followed directly by the base form of the main verb. For example: She can swim. In German, modal verbs are also followed by another verb, but the main verb goes to the end of the sentence in its infinitive form. For example: Sie kann schwimmen. Although modal verbs in both languages serve similar purposes, their sentence construction, conjugation, and placement in German require more grammatical awareness, especially when using them in different tenses.

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