The development of the modals in English: Radical versus gradual changes

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The development of the modals in the history of English has received a great deal of attention since the seventies, kindled and inspired as it was by the work of David Lightfoot (1974, 1979). Most of these studies have focused on the transition of the core modals (i.e. shall, will, must, may, can) from full-verb to (near) auxiliary status, and most indeed agree that there was a development in this direction. In Old English, the core modals still sported full-verb meaning (e.g. sceal was still also used in the sense of ‘to owe’, willan in the sense of ‘want, desire’, mot in the sense of ‘to have power, to have the opportunity’ etc.) and most of them could still be used in most morphological forms and in most of the syntactic positions of full verbs. However, Lightfoot’s idea of a ‘radical re-analysis’ (more of this, below), which he assumed the modals to have undergone, also led to many reactions, as can be seen primarily from the reviews of his 1979 book (see especially Aitchison 1980, Warner 1983) and from the reaction in Plank 1984. It could be said, indeed, that the articles brought together in this collection are a further outcome of this reaction. As against the idea of a radical re-analysis, there existed the view that the process was much more gradual, and this idea was resurrected under the more general umbrella of grammaticalization theory, which became very popular in the eighties. According to this view, the changes that the

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1 For this introduction I have used parts of a chapter which will be published in the forthcoming Compact History of the English Language (Cambridge University Press).
core-modals underwent were only one part of a ‘modality cycle’, which repeats itself again and again. This cycle involves not only (modal) verbs but also (modal) adverbs and elements in frequent collocation with the modals. In addition, the process is not merely driven by the syntax (as in Lightfoot’s proposal of a radical re-analysis) but also semantically and first and foremost pragmatically.

Let us look briefly at what happened. The scene was set by the fact that the original Old English synthetic subjunctive forms became opaque (because of syncretism with indicative forms in the late Old English and early Middle English period) and were no longer ‘expressive’ enough. The already existing ‘modal’ verbs (often termed ‘pre-modals’, because they lacked many of the properties associated with the present-day modals), such as *cunnan* ‘can’, *sceal* ‘shall’ and *magan* ‘may’, slowly began to take their place. They gradually lost their full-verb (their lexical) meanings and became restricted to deontic, dynamic and epistemic uses. As a consequence, they lost some of their morphological features (i.e. they lost infinitival, participial and ‘pure’ tense forms) and no longer occurred in a number of previously regular syntactic structures (e.g. they could no longer take a direct object or object clause; they had to be followed by a (full-verb) infinitive etc.). This, in turn, led to a new cycle, i.e. the introduction (or more precisely the grammaticalization – because these new verbs, in turn, must already have been ‘around’ just as the core-modals had been around to replace the subjunctive) of what are often called...
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've quasi' modal verbs, such as ought to, have to, be able to etc. to fill the syntactic gaps that the core modals had left.

Apart from being enlisted as modality markers, some core modals also began to function in the tense system. Thus, we witness the development of 'future' markers with the modals shall and will in the early Middle English period. These originally dynamic and/or deontic modals developed, probably through some kind of pragmatic inferencing or double modal marking, into more general 'future' markers expressing possibility or strong likelihood. Traugott describes this process as follows: "One of the conditions for the extension of the scul- of obligation to prediction may have been its use in sentences such as (1) where the modal adverb niede stresses the obligation,

(1) Ic sceal eac niede þara monegena gewinna geswigian [...] I must/shall also of-necessity of-those many battles be-silent

(Or 5 2.115.29)

'I must also necessarily be silent about those many battles' (Traugott 1992:196)

What happens here is that the notion of necessity gets, as it were, doubly expressed, which allows the modal of 'obligation' sceal to become bleached into a 'weaker' future modal. It could also be said that such examples show that the modal meaning was already weakening, and needed reinforcement by adverbials such as niede – this is a typical feature of grammaticalization processes. I have found as many as twenty-six collocations in the Old English on-line corpus with sceal and n(i)ede(n)ga, showing that this is clearly a frequent combination. The next step in the development towards a future marker is that shall and will come to be used in contexts where future reference may need reinforcing, thus backgrounding the original modality even further. The last stage would be the complete grammaticalization of the future tense marker. This stage has not been fully reached in present-day English, but there has been a steady increase over time in the contexts requiring future marking. Nowadays, the use of the present tense is virtually restricted to clauses which are already clearly marked for the future by other means (e.g. we find the present used instead of the future in conditional clauses where the main clause has a future tense), or when the future event is seen as or
considered to be pretty definite, i.e. seen ‘subjectively’ by the speaker as if it is the present. In Old English, the present tense was the rule in all future contexts, sometimes supported by a ‘futural’ adverb or phrase, and in Middle English we still come across many examples without a grammatical future marker, where such a marker would now be obligatory. Thus, in the following example from Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*,

(2) For after this I hope ther cometh more (MillT 3725)

there is no future marking in spite of the fact that the kisses that the subject (the feeble ‘courtly’ lover Absolon) hopes for are rather unlikely. In present-day English some marker would be usual here, as indeed the literal but excellent prose translation by David Wright shows:

(3) [...] for there’l be more to come after this, I hope (Wright 1964: 71)

Let us return to the larger picture, the ‘modality cycle’ and to what happened in Old English. The modality cycle in many ways resembles what Jespersen (1917) has called the ‘negative cycle’. Just as the negative element is typically connected with the verb and indeed placed close to the verb, in the same way we see a tendency for the modality marker to be placed close to the verb. Modality itself can be subdivided into dynamic, deontic (together also called ‘root’ modality) and epistemic modality, whereby the first two are agent-oriented and the last is speaker-oriented (expressing the role the speaker wants the proposition to play in the discourse). The most interesting cyclic developments concern epistemic modality because epistemic modals almost invariably derive from deontic and dynamic modals, and it is via this path that the original modal verbs may grammaticalize into auxiliaries, clitics and affixes on the verb. We could see the Old English subjunctive affixes, therefore, as the end of a modality cycle, and the use of root modals (or modal adverbs) in place of subjunctives as the beginning of a new cycle. Typical in all grammaticalization processes is the need for reinforcement of the meaningful element (in this case the ‘mood’ element) once it has been bleached through frequency of use and economy of speech. Just as in the negative cycle
the bleached preverbal clitic *ne* became reinforced by postverbal adverbs such as *nawiht, næfre* etc., in the same way mood became reinforced with the help of other verbs expressing obligation, ability, possibility etc. (the core modals) or with the help of adverbs. It is noteworthy that in Old English, the new modal markers were often used in the subjunctive, expressing double modality, as it were, just like the double negatives *ne ...nawiht/næfre*.

As far as the expression of mood in the history of English is concerned, we see two main shifts, both involving the modal verbs. First of all, there is the replacement of (subjunctive) inflections by periphrastic (modal) constructions. We see this already happening in subordinate clauses in later Old English. Where, before, a subjunctive was sufficient to express mood, as shown in the examples in (4), in which the subjunctive serves to express deontic, dynamic and epistemic modality respectively,

(4) a And micel is nydpearf manna gehwilcum þæt he Godes lage gime [SUBJ] And much is need of-men for-each that he God's law heed (WHom 20.2 26)

‘And it is necessary for each man that he should heed God's law’

b þæt hit nan wundor nys, þæt se halga cynincg untrumnysse geheale[SUBJ] nu that it no wonder not-is that the holy king illnesses heal now he on heofonum leofað he in heavens lives (ÆLS (Oswald)272)

‘that it is no wonder that the holy king can heal sickness now that he lives in heaven’

c Ne bið <his> lof na ðy læsse, ac is wen þæt hit sie [SUBJ] þy mare; not is his praise not the less, but is probable that it be the more (Bo 40.138.19)

‘his praise will not be the less, but may be greater’

we more and more see the insertion of a modal verb in that position (and as I mentioned above often itself in the subjunctive). Compare the instances in (5), which contain a modal verb, to (4a) and (4b), where a mere subjunctive ending was sufficient,

(5) a Forþon us is nydpearf, þæt þa mynstru of þære stowe moten [SUBJ] beon
Therefore us is need that the monasteries from that place must be gecyrrede to ojre stowe.
_changed to other place (GD 2 (C)5.112.24)
‘it is necessary therefore that the monasteries will be moved from that place to another’

b se Hælend cwæð to him, gelyfe gyt þæt ic inc mæg gehælan
the Saviour said to them, believe yet that I you-two can heal (Mt (WSCp) 9.28)
‘the Saviour said to them, do you believe me now that I can heal both of you?’

This development was possible because deontic and dynamic modals were already fully employed in main clauses, as shown in (6):

(6) a þa ðe bet cunnon and magon. sceolon gyman oðra manna.
Those who better can and may must heed of-other men
(ÆCHom II, 15 159.311)
‘those who have more abilities should take care of other men’

b [...] ac he ne mæg næne gehælan. þe god sylfær geuntrumode.
[...] but he not can none heal, whom god self before made-sick
(ÆCHom I (Pref)175.81)
‘[...] but he cannot heal anyone who had been made sick by God himself’

The development became also necessary due to the loss of distinction in finite verbal forms that began in Old English and resulted in the present-day situation where we have only three finite verb forms left, the stem, the stem + s and the past tense form.

Another aspect of this shift concerns the expression of epistemic modality. When the modals slowly grammaticalized from full verbs into verbal satellites due to their replacing the subjunctive, they also began to enter the epistemic or discourse domain, taking the place of, again, the subjunctive and of earlier lexical markers of epistemic modality.³ It is noteworthy that the epistemic subjunctive survived

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³ This particular grammaticalization development in modal verbs from deontic to epistemic is often subsumed under the heading of ‘subjectification’. This is a process whereby a lexical item (or a group of items) moves on a semantic cline beginning in the propositional domain, through the textual domain and finally into the expressive domain (see e.g. Traugott 1989, Sweetser 1990). It resembles the grammaticalization process in some ways, but is different in oth-
longer in main clauses in Old English than the deontic and dynamic ones, which already had been reduced to subordinate positions, i.e. they were used only in subordinate clauses (as I have shown through the examples in (4) and (5)). (7) is an example of an epistemic subjunctive in a main clause:

\[(7) \quad [...] \text{he heeded the less his own needs and probably himself} \quad \text{neglected} \]

\[\text{(GD 2 (C)3.106.10)}\]

'[...] he cared about his own needs less and less and probably neglected himself'

Note however, that even here there is reinforcement from an adverb, *wenunga*. Other adverbs and predicative phrases often used in the main clause to express epistemic modality were, *wenunga, eape, wen is poet* ‘(it is) possible, probable’. Also in use were verbal constructions such as *me hyncep* ‘me seems’. In later English this epistemic function in main clauses came to be expressed by core modals, just as had happened in main clauses expressing deontic and dynamic modality. We see the first signs of this already in Old English, cf. (8),

\[(8) \quad \text{Eastewerd hit [se mor] mag bion syxtig mila brad ofe hwene brædre} \]

\[\text{Eastwards it [the moor] can be sixty of-miles broad or somewhat broader} \quad \text{(Or 1 1.15.26)}\]

'Towards the east it may be sixty miles wide or a little wider'

Here, the inanimate subject (i.e. *hit*) makes clear that the modality cannot be agent-related, i.e. that it cannot be either deontic or dynamic. The core modals, indeed, begin to play an increasingly larger role in the epistemic domain. In fact, this development has led to some modals becoming virtually restricted to the role of epistemic markers. Thus, the form *might*, which used to have dynamic and deontic meanings (i.e. it expressed ability and – later – permission), is now (almost) exclusively used as an epistemic modal, so that *He might come a bit later* can only be understood as the description of a possibility, but not ability or permission. In its wake, an utterance like

\[\text{ers, for instance it does not obey the parameter of scope, showing scope increase rather than the usual scope decrease (see Tabor and Traugott 1998).}\]
He may come a bit later, with the modal *may*, is now also gradually losing its permission sense, especially in American English.

Having looked at the changes in the way the function of modality was expressed in earlier English, and especially at the relation between subjunctive and modal verbs, we must now consider the modal verbs themselves and the changes that took place there. The ‘modal story’ is particularly interesting because the original modal verbs have changed much more radically in English than in any of its sister languages. In English the modals have developed into what Warner (1993: 49 ff.) has called “anaphorical islands”, i.e. they show an “independent ‘word-like’ status”, with non-transparent morphology, in contrast to full verbs which have transparent morphological inflections of person and tense. The modals in other Germanic languages, on the other hand, have retained most of their verbal features. Additionally, the story is of theoretical interest because it has been used to support a generative linguistic view of change whereby certain grammar changes may have been ‘radical’, i.e. it illustrates the idea that seemingly unrelated changes on the surface may be related to one, deeper and more abstract change in the base. Such evidence is important, since it may not only tell us more about how syntactic change takes place, but it may also serve as empirical evidence for the existence of such an abstract rule system. More particularly it may give an indication of the degree of abstractness of this system, and more generally it may tell us more about the extent of the role the theory of grammar plays in change.

The idea of a radical change, as noted above, was first proposed by David Lightfoot, who saw the modals as a paradigm case. Lightfoot’s story briefly is as follows. In Old and Middle English the core modals *willan, *sculan, magan,*motan and *cunnan behaved like any other verb, and there is no reason to assume that they belonged to a special category, set apart from the category Verb. The descendants of these modals in Present-day English, *will, shall, may, must* and *can*, on the other hand, are no longer verbs, but must be considered to belong to a separate category, namely Auxiliary. Thus the so-called pre-modals could occur in positions where they now no longer occur: they could be used in both finite and non-finite position, they could be found on their own with a direct object NP or complement clause, and
they could be combined with another modal. The examples in (9) from Old and Middle English illustrate this:

(9) a as infinitive
   To conne deye is to haue in all tymes his herte redy
   (ME, Warner 1993:199, Caxton The Arte and Crafte to knowe Well to Dye 2)

   b two modals combined
      & hwu   muge we þone weig cunnen?
      And how may we the way can (OE, Jn (Warn 30)14.5)
      ‘and how can we know the way?’

   c as present participle
      Se ðe bið butan willan besmiten oðde se ðe willende on slæpe gefyrenað, singe
      <XXIV> sealma.
      He who is without will defiled or who willing in sleep fornicates, sing
      24 psalms (OE, Conf 1.1(Spindler)46)
      ‘Whoever is defiled against his will or who, willingly, fornicates in his sleep,
      let him sing twenty-four psalms’

   d as past participle
      Wee wolden han gon toward tho trees full gladly, 3if wee had might
      (ME, Visser 1963-73: § 2042, Mandeville 196, 34)

   e with an object
      He cwæð þæt he sceolde him hundteontig mittan hwætes.
      He said that he owed him (a) hundred bushels of-wheat (OE, ÆHom 17 26)

   f with a clause
      Leof cynelayford, ic wille, þæt þu beo æt minum gebeorscipe
      Dear liege-lord, I will that you be at my banquet’
      (OE, ÆHomM 14 (Ass 8)185)
      ‘Dear lord, I would like you to be present at my banquet’

In the course of the Old and Middle English periods a number of “unrelated” changes took place that isolated the pre-modals from the other verbs (cf. Lightfoot 1979: 101-109):

(10) (i) the pre-modals lost the ability to take direct objects
   (ii) the pre-modals were the only preterite-present verbs left, all others of this class were lost
(iii) the past tense forms of the pre-modals no longer signal past time reference
(iv) the pre-modals alone take a bare infinitive, all other verbs start taking to-infinitives

These changes Lightfoot believes to be unrelated because they are accidental (especially (ii) and (iv), which concern the behaviour of verbs other than the pre-modals) and/or because they do not happen at the same time. The changes had a common effect, however, in that they resulted in the isolation of the pre-modals: they became “identifiable as a unique class” (Lightfoot 1979: 109). The evidence for this category change is to be found in the fact that the pre-modals now underwent a second phase of changes, which were related and which did take place simultaneously (Lightfoot 1979: 110):

(11) (a) the old pre-modals could no longer appear in infinitival constructions
(b) the old pre-modals could no longer occur as present participles
(c) the old pre-modals could no longer occur as past participles
(d) the old pre-modals could no longer occur in combination (with the exception of some dialects, such as e.g. Modern Scots)

The simultaneity of these changes, according to Lightfoot, provides evidence that a deep, radical change must have taken place in the abstract system, which dissolved the verbal status of the pre-modals (i.e. they became a new category, that of Auxiliary) and thus forced the four characteristics given in (11) upon them. The simultaneity, therefore, is crucial.

There are quite a number of problems with this story. First of all, all the characteristics given in (11) involve losses, and such negative evidence is very difficult to date. The evidence would have been more convincing if, due to the category change of Verb to Aux, the modals began to occur in new constructions, but this is not the case. Also noteworthy is that the first change under (10), the loss of direct objects after pre-modals, is really on a par with the changes

4 Lightfoot gives a fifth change, which concerns word order. I will leave this out of consideration here, since the change is rather theory-internal, and dubious as it stands. In a later discussion of reactions to the radical modal change, Lightfoot (1991: 141 ff.) also leaves it out.
under (11). It too involves a feature that would be the result of a
category change from Verb to Aux. Since losses are difficult to spot
in time, (10i) could as easily have been placed under the changes of
(11). Indeed, examples of modals with a direct object are found till
quite late, i.e. till after 1500, the time of the purported change. Visser
(1963-73: §§551, 557-8) notes examples with *can* until 1652, with *may*
until 1597 and with *will* until 1862. Another aspect that remains
hidden under the notion of 'losses', is the interesting fact that most of
the losses involved in (11) involve Middle English losses and not Old
English ones: the use of infinitive forms, of past and present
participles was actually more frequent in Middle than in Old English
(see also note 2). With a story of loss, one would expect the
frequencies to be the other way around.

Another aspect that has been questioned is whether the changes
in (10) are really unrelated and accidental. If we start from the
assumption, as many linguists do, that already in Old English the pre-
modals were set apart from other verbs as a group, then the changes
under (10) can easily be seen as related. Already in Old English the
past tense modals could be used to express present time modality, so
in that respect they differed from 'normal' verbs. As to verbal
complementation (10iv), not so very much changes here. In Old
English there was only a restricted class of verbs that could take a
bare infinitive. This class comprised the modals, verbs of physical
perception (‘see’, ‘hear’), causatives (OE *laetan*, *biddan*, *hatan*) and
impersonal verbs. With a few exceptions (i.e. there were some verbs
that could take both bare and *to*-infinitives: e.g. *bencan* ‘think’ in Old
English, and in Middle English also *helpen*, *maken*), all other verbs
took only *to*-infinitival complements. There is no evidence that the *to-
infinitive encroached on the domain of the bare infinitive in Middle
English. It is true that the *to*-infinitive became much more frequent in
Middle English, but this is due to the fact that it started replacing *that-

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5 Warner (1993) notes that the pre-modals showed a number of formal
differences in Old English, which already distinguished them as a potential
subcategory of the Verb. He lists both the differences (p. 152) but also the
ways in which they were still verbs (p. 97 ff.). Unlike some other scholars he
does not set the pre-modals apart on the basis of semantic differences.
clauses; the distribution of the bare infinitive itself remaining relatively unaffected in Middle English (cf. Los 1999). As to the loss of all other preterite-present verbs (10ii), Harris and Campbell write (1995: 179): “But if auxiliary variants of the modal verbs already existed, it was the entire class of preterite-present verbs that was lost, and it was no accident.” Indeed, if the pre-modals were already looked upon as a subgroup in Old English, then this very fact may have pushed the other preterite-present verbs out of the system. Harris and Campbell suggest that the modals in Old English fell into two homophonous categories, one an auxiliary and the other a fully lexical verb. The Old English examples given in (9), in fact, illustrate this well: thus the infinitive *cunnen* (9b), the present participle *willende* (9c), *sceolde* with a direct object (9e) and *wille* with a object clause (9f) are all examples of the pre-modals used with full referential or lexical meaning. When the modals began to play a more important and frequent role in the Middle English period due to the loss of the subjunctive, it was the homophonous lexical pre-modal that began to die out, while the truly modal pre-modals developed further, at first still maintaining their verbal status, but gradually developing into more independent “word-like” elements.

In this connection, it is interesting to observe that the Middle English increase in the infinitival and participial forms of the pre-modals may have been connected with the development of periphrastic constructions to express the future and the perfect. The pre-modals (which were, after all, auxiliary-like too) were caught up in this, forming combinations with the auxiliaries of tense and aspect (just as they had combined with the auxiliaries of the passive in Old English), and we see constructions such as *shall may* and *have mought* occurring. The subsequent disappearance of these infinitival and participial forms presumably has to do with the fact that they were awkward to begin with (they were rare to non-existent in Old English), and with the fact that the homophonous lexical modals, which could have given support to these non-finite forms, had become truly separated from their sisters (indeed they all eventually became obsolescent). Another problem may well have been that the modals’ tense forms were already used in Old English as modality markers, i.e. they were not strict members of the tense system. This non-tense characteristic became
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reinforced in Middle English with the loss of the subjunctive, and the subsequent rise of indicative past tense modal markers to take their place. In other words, the modals did not sit well in a system of tense or aspect, and this made the combination with perfect HAVE and future SHALL difficult. Finally, the order of the auxiliary verbs presumably plays a role in this development as well, as suggested by Warner (1993).

With the loss of tense distinctions in the modals, and the increasing grammaticalization of the core modals in the late Middle English period, we begin to witness the start of a new cycle, as mentioned above, i.e. we see the rise of new 'quasi' modals. Some of these indeed, notably have to, have themselves again grammaticalized. Have to is now also used epistemically, and have got/has got (often reduced to got), is now finite only, and so are other new modals such as had/’d rather and (had/’d) better. Instances with the new modal be to, used non-finitely, now sound distinctly archaic:

(12) a You will be to visit me in prison with a basket of provisions  
b N.B. No snuff being to be had in the village she made us some.  
(Keats, Letters 78 p. 189 (20 Jul.), Denison 1998: 174)

To sum up, the evidence for assuming that there was only one homogeneous verbal category in Old English, which included the pre-modals, as suggested by Lightfoot, is not all that strong. It is not the case that the pre-modals developed more and more exception features in the Old and Middle English period; they were exceptional within the category of verbs to start with but they retained their verbal status, certainly still in Middle English. After the Middle English period they became isolated more and more, losing the trappings of full verbs in the process, but this happened slowly and not in the same way and at the same rate for each pre-modal. It may be that the pre-modals have become so opaque as verbs that they should be considered a different category, i.e. Aux, but the problem is that it is hard if not impossible to pinpoint when such a change should have taken place, and indeed when it took place for each separate verb. It is clear that synchronically, within the verbal class, there is a continuum running from full verbs to auxiliary-like verbs, where all the different features
available (verbal and less-than-verbal) are distributed unevenly across the original pre-modals, semi-modals and other auxiliary-like verbs such as perfect HAVE, passive BE, DO etc. This synchronic picture is the result of an uneven diachronic development.

All the papers in this volume are interested in this ‘uneven’ development, in the nitty-gritty, in other words, not (yet) in any overall picture, and they all attempt to throw more light on the behaviour of modal verbs in order to finally reach a more refined overall view. The period taken into consideration is the late Middle English and early Modern period, which spans the time in which many of the more crucial changes took place. The contributions are thus all geared towards an understanding of the modals in use, in their context. They also show in detail what factors other than syntactic (and semantic) ones may have played a role in the development of the modals. The investigation of the modals from a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic, speech-act point of view fill in some of the gaps left by Lightfoot’s description of a radical, syntactic change. They show that change can only be explained within a larger framework, taking into consideration the language system and the context in which the language system is used, where context includes both the social and the communicative situation in which the utterances take place. In addition, putting the modal story in a diachronic perspective may be of help in getting a better sense of what kind of ‘animal’ auxiliaries are synchronically. A recent account of the grammaticalization of lexical verbs or verb-groups into auxiliaries indeed stresses the difficulty of deciding what counts as an auxiliary. In her book on Auxiliation, Tania Kuteva (2001: 6) writes,

The main problem regarding auxiliation is that the dynamic character of the auxiliation phenomenon has generally gone unrecognized as a factor which can account for auxiliaries and the way they behave [i.e. synchronically OF]. While in many cases language development has tacitly been assumed in studies of auxiliaries, this diachronic aspect of auxiliation is generally overlooked as an explanatory factor for the nature of auxiliaries, and the latter are treated as a distinct, discrete category, readily separable from main verbs, i.e. they are treated as unrelated to the process out of which they arise.
Kuteva emphasizes that the most optimal way to account for the complexity and behaviour of auxiliaries is to observe them in language use as "an activity or process rather than a state or product" (p. 6). This is in fact what was lacking in Lightfoot’s account. Even though his is a diachronic account of the English modal verbs, it is in fact an account based on ‘slices of synchrony’, not on the dynamics of the change itself. It thus ignores the dynamics present in the synchronic variation at each stage. Studies, such as the ones collected in this volume, are an attempt to fill this gap.

References


