

DOUBLE MODALS IN SCOTLAND AND THE SOUTHERN
UNITED STATES: TRANS-ATLANTIC INHERITANCE OR
INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT?

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades linguists in Scotland, Northern England, and the American South have intensively studied how modal verbs co-occur in varieties of English spoken in these three parts of the world, as we see in sentences 1-3.

- (1) Scots: *He will can do it.* (Brown 1991: 97)
- (2) Northumbrian English: *A good machine clipper would could do it in half a day.* (Beal 1989: 7)
- (3) Southern American English: *I wonder if we might could get a copy of last year's test.* (Mishoe and Montgomery 1992: 18)

Working independently and using various methodologies, they have detailed the auxiliary systems in which *might could* and other combinations of modal verbs are regularly permitted for many speakers. They have largely put on a systematic footing the understanding of modal combinations that were noted in Scotland first by James Murray in his 1873 grammar of Lowland Scots and first in the U.S. apparently by Joseph W. Carr 1905 in his "A List of Words from Northwest Arkansas". Beyond establishing the existence of such unusual patterns, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have described the range of permissible combinations, identified the relative acceptability/frequency of these combinations in Scots and especially in Southern American English, and offered analyses of the systems underlying the surface structures.

The oddity of double modals to many speakers of English is due in part to their occurrence in only a few regions of the English-speaking