

# I Might Not Would Say That: A Sociolinguistic Study of Double Modal Acceptance

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## 1 Introduction

All varieties of English can use modal verbs as in (1) with the crucial constraint that there must always be only one modal per TP.

- (1) a. I **might** make some sweet tea.
- b. I **could** make some sweet tea.
- c. You **should** eat before you go.

However in Southern United States English (SUSE) and African American English (AAE), there exists a construction involving what appear to be two and sometimes three modal verbs, as in (2).

- (2) a. You **might could** make some sweet tea.
- b. You **might should** eat before you go.
- c. Those ducks **must not can** feel cold.
- d. I **might should oughta** take these out of the oven.

Montgomery and Nagle (1993) and Nagle (1994) trace the history of these so-called double modal constructions as coming from the Scottish immigrants who populated the South (Scots as well as some northern British dialects being the only other attested double modal varieties). While little formal work has been done on the semantics of double modals, Mishoe and Montgomery argue that the construction is used for hedging and politeness and that its main purpose is “the preservation of ‘face’ in interpersonal discourse” and “the negotiation of a speaker’s wants or needs” (1994:12).

Double modals are often puzzling to non-Southern speakers because there appears to be a contradiction of the fundamental analysis of auxiliary verbs, that there can be only one modal per TP. Because of this structural difference from standard varieties of English, many previous studies of the double modal construction have focused on attempting to account for its novel syntactic structure (see Pampel 1975, Boertien 1986, Di Paolo 1989, and Battistella 1995). Hasty (2010 and to appear) provides a critique of these previous structures and proposes a new account based on current theories of syntax (cf. Chomsky 1995). However, while there has been some attention to the structure of these forms and descriptions of their pragmatics, there has been little focus on the social constraints on double modal usage.

In this paper, I attempt to fill this gap in our knowledge by reporting the results of a study of the social constraints on acceptance of double modal sentences in Northeast Tennessee. The paper begins with a brief review of the literature focusing on the social distribution of the form. Next, I describe some specific hurdles in studying a syntactic feature like the double modal regarding its occurrence and determining semantic equivalence with a co-variant. These methodological concerns lead to using syntactic acceptability judgment surveys rather than traditional quantitative sociolinguistic methods, and these methods are discussed. I then present the results of the study which show acceptance of a double modal to be constrained by the specific linguistic form of the double modal as well as by the social factors of age, gender, and education, with younger respondents being the most accepting overall followed by older males with less than a college education. Lastly, I speculate on the causes of these results and point to some ongoing work on subjective reactions towards the double modal in the community to fully interpret these findings.

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## 2 Review of the Literature

There have been few studies of the social distribution of the double modal within and across communities. Because the focus for much of the previous literature has been on describing the structure of the double modal, most previous studies were unable to fully address questions regarding its social distribution. Given this interest in the syntax of double modals, previous work often employed small sample sizes (e.g., 4–5 respondents in Pampel 1975 and Boertien 1986) and homogeneous samples (e.g., all college students in Coleman 1975 and Butters 1973). While these practices are often followed in syntactic studies, they are unhelpful in answering questions about social distribution. Additionally, there has not been complete geographic coverage of the greater South in previous work. For example, studies have looked only at Alabama (Feagin 1979), North Carolina (Butters 1973, Coleman 1975), and Texas (Pampel 1975, Di Paolo, McClenon, and Ranson 1979). As a result we know nothing of the use of double modals in other subregions, especially the Mid South (Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Previous Discussion of Social Constraints

While most studies have been focused on descriptions of the double modal and its syntactic structure, a small number of studies have attempted to investigate social constraints on its usage. Di Paolo et al. (1979) used an elicitation survey in which respondents were presented sentences containing blanks after the first modal, as in (3), in order to elicit double modals in Texas.

(3) I might \_\_\_\_ use some.

From these data, Di Paolo et al. describe a possible urban/rural distinction in production of a double modal, with respondents from rural areas supplying a higher percentage of double modals. While they were ultimately unable to connect the use of double modals to the construction of a rural identity, Di Paolo et al. do show an age distinction in that the urban/rural difference disappeared in the younger age groups and that the younger respondents (ages 16–30) produced less double modals than older respondents (ages 46–65). Thus, in Texas there appears to be a rural/urban constraint on double modal use that interacts with age.

Feagin (1979) looked at the class distribution of double modals in her large-scale study of SUSE morphosyntax in Anniston, Alabama. In her study, Feagin recognizes that the double modal resists traditional quantitative sociolinguistic methods because of the difficulty in determining its envelope of variation. She notes that we can only really be sure of when a double modal has occurred but crucially not when it has not occurred (see Section 3.1 below for more discussion). Because of this, Feagin is unable to provide percentages for frequency of use of the form. However, she is able to provide some social descriptions based on who used double modals in her sample.

Feagin finds that double modals are used by members of all social classes but that there seems to be a class distinction in which the lower classes used double modals more often than the upper classes. However, she notes that these trends are based on a very small number of instances of the double modals in the interview portion of her study, because most of the double modals were overheard while interacting in the community rather than in the formal interviews. Since all members of society were found to use double modals, Feagin ultimately claims that “the use of double modals has no social evaluation in Anniston. Both school and society ignore them. Most Southerners are not conscious of using them at all” (1979:158). However, we have no empirical evidence of this social evaluation, and we do not know if this situation may have changed over time or if this situation will be different in different areas of the South.

## 3 Methodology

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<sup>1</sup>Wolfram and Christian’s (1976) study of West Virginia does include some discussion of double modal usage; however, they find such a small number of double modals that they are unable to make any solid conclusions. The reasons for the lack of double modals in their study most likely stems from the pragmatic constraints on the double modal as discussed in Section 3.1.

The goals of the present study, then, are to determine what social factors, if any, constrain informants' acceptance of double modals in Tennessee. Given the methodological hurdles recognized by Feagin (1979) and discussed in 3.1 below, the present study uses acceptability judgments rather than production data to determine the effect of respondent age, gender, and education on acceptance of a double modal sentence.

### 3.1 Constraints on the Study of Double Modals

As a syntactic variable, the double modal presents some unique constraints on its study. Traditional quantitative sociolinguistic methods (cf. Labov 1963, 1966, 1972) were designed for phonological variables which are of high frequency in spontaneously occurring speech and have clearly defined co-variants, allowing for simple quantification of the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the variant under study. However, the double modal seems particularly resistant to such methods given its low frequency, illustrated in the very small number of tokens in Wolfram and Christian (1976) as well as Feagin (1979) only finding 98 tokens in 5 years of field work. Along with the lower frequency of syntactic features in general compared to phonological features (cf. Cheshire 1999), Mishoe and Montgomery's (1994) description of the pragmatics of the double modal construction as negotiating wants and desires and preserving face would often preclude the construction from occurring in a traditional sociolinguistic interview in which the subject is asked to answer questions and tell stories.

Additionally, for the study of syntactic features like the double modal there is a problem in using the traditional concept of the sociolinguistic variable as two or more alternative ways of saying the same thing (cf. Chambers and Trudgill 1998). As highlighted by Feagin (1979), we can only really be sure of when a double modal has occurred, not when it has not occurred. This is because the double modal has no clear form with which it alternates. For example, it cannot be said that the single modals in (4a) or (4b) are alternate forms of the double modal in (4c) in that neither form provides the meaning encoded in (4c), which can best be described as limiting the possible worlds in which the speaker believes that the addressee should go to the store. Syntactic variables like the double modal, then, cannot be studied through traditional sociolinguistic methods of counting occurrences and non-occurrences, because it is often difficult or even impossible to be clear where they could have occurred but did not.

- (4) a. You **might** go to the store.  
 b. You **should** go to the store.  
 c. You **might should** go to the store.

### 3.2 Elicitation Methods

Therefore, since the double modal is a nonstandard syntactic form with no clear co-variant, a blend of sociolinguistic and syntactic methods was used in the present study. An acceptability judgment test of 12 double modal sentences representing several different double modal forms was used to assess variation in the acceptance of the construction. As highlighted by Henry (2005), great care needs to be taken in eliciting acceptability judgments of non-standard varieties to alleviate interference from prescriptive norms based on the standard variety and enforced by the educational system. In light of this, the double modal sentences were intermingled with 24 other sentences<sup>2</sup> not containing double modals to take attention away from the double modal and thus provide more accurate and less self-conscious judgments. The entire process was conducted orally by myself, a native speaker of the local dialect, because a written survey could cause a register clash in investigating forms that are almost exclusively oral.

The double modal sentences in (5) were selected to assess the range of double modals possible in the Tri-Cities. All of these sentences would be judged acceptable by my native speaker intuition. Some of these sentences, (5g) and (5i), were drawn from naturally occurring speech, and the rest were constructed to be as close to naturally occurring speech as possible.

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<sup>2</sup>Some of which were grammatical in all varieties of English and some were not.

- (5) a. I think I **may can** come tonight, if I can find something to wear.  
 b. If it weren't so hot, I **may could** get a little work done.  
 c. I **might can** ask my boss for the day off on Friday.  
 d. Well, I **might could** pick some up from the store if you really need them.  
 e. Since Bill won't, I guess I **might could** give you a ride home.  
 f. If you want, you **might could** make some sweet tea.  
 g. I **might should oughta** take these out of the oven before they burn.  
 h. You **might should** eat before you go to work.  
 i. If I were you, I **might would** try digging over by that creek.  
 j. If it rains, you **might would** want to have that umbrella with you.  
 k. It's cold outside, so you **might oughta** take your coat.  
 l. Those ducks **must not can** feel cold.

The speech community surveyed is a conurbation of three cities, Kingsport, Johnson City, and Bristol, all within 25 miles of each other in Northeast Tennessee. This area is known collectively as the Tri-Cities (population 490,238).<sup>3</sup> The sample includes 30 respondents recruited from my own social network in the community and is distributed equally by age and gender, with ages ranging from 19–82 (see Table 1).

	Male	Female	Total
Old (age 60+)	5	5	10
Middle (age 30–59)	5	5	10
Young (age 19–29)	5	5	10
Total	15	15	30

Table 1: Distribution of respondents.

For analysis purposes, the respondents were broken down into two education groups: a College group (N = 17) who had graduate from college or grad school and a No College group (N = 13) who had been to trade school, graduated high school, or dropped out of high school.

#### 4 Results and Discussion

The nine individual double modal forms<sup>4</sup> used in the 12-sentence acceptability judgment task were accepted at different rates (see Table 2).

	%	N
might oughta	63.3	19/30
might should	63.3	19/30
might can	53.3	16/30
might could	43.3	39/90
may can	36.7	11/30
might would	36	21/60
may could	26.7	8/30
might should oughta	20	6/30
must can	13.3	4/30
Total Acceptance	39.7	143/360

Table 2: Acceptance of all individual double modals.

A preliminary scan of the data shows that *may could*, *might should oughta*, and *must can* were

<sup>3</sup>Population data is gleaned from the 2008 estimates of the US Census Bureau (www.census.gov).

<sup>4</sup>*Might could* and *might would* were over sampled (3 instances of *might could* and 2 of *might would*) because of their salience in previous studies of double modals in SUSE.

accepted at very low rates by the respondents and apparently do not make up a significant part of the local dialect. The responses to these double modal forms, then, were not included in the analysis to follow. Additionally, Hasty (2010) reanalyzes *might oughta* to not be a true double modal given that *oughta* does not invert in questions as the other second position modals do, so the responses to *might oughta* are also not included in the analysis below.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the five double modal forms in Table 3 were retained for analysis.

	%	N
might should	63.3	19/30
might can	53.3	16/30
might could	43.3	39/90
may can	36.7	11/30
might would	36	21/60
Total Acceptance	44.1	106/240

Table 3: Acceptance of individual double modals after exclusions.

Double modal acceptance was coded as a binary dependent variable (1 for accept and 0 for reject) and a multivariate analysis was run. There was one linguistic independent variable used, the surface form of the double modal, and three social independent variables, Age (Young 19–29, Middle 30–59, Old 60+); Gender (Male, Female); and Education (College, No College).

#### 4.1 Distribution by Age

Respondent Age was revealed to be the strongest predictor of double modal acceptance. Overall, the Young respondents were the most accepting of double modals, followed by the Old age group, and lastly by the Middle age group (see Figure 1). This *u*-shaped distribution does not suggest a change in progress but may point towards possible age grading.

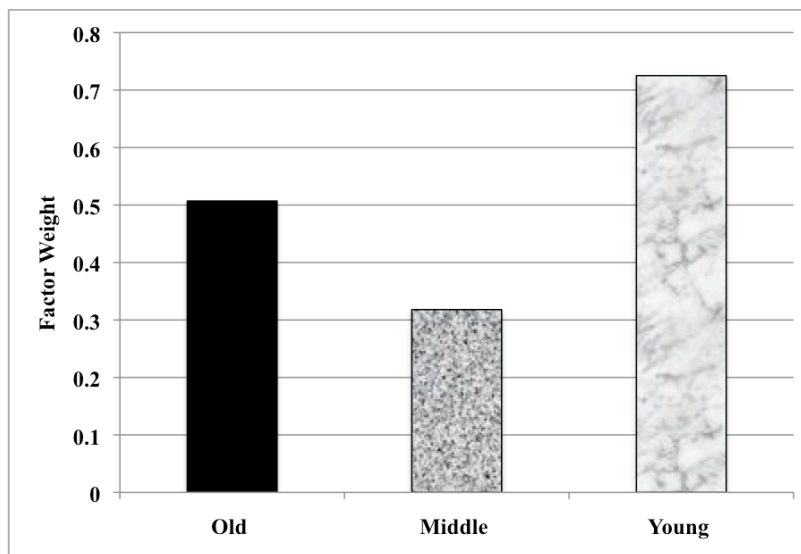


Figure 1: Factor weight by age.

#### 4.2 Distribution by Gender and Education

Turning to the other social variables, there was an interaction between the Education and

<sup>5</sup>The high acceptance of *might oughta* is predicted by the analysis of Hasty (2010) since it does not have the marked syntactic structure of true double modals. This behavior was seen in the high acceptance of *might oughta* by the Middle age group who were overall the least accepting of double modals as discussed below.

Gender variables that led to combining these two factor groups. Figure 2 shows that there is an overall Education effect, with No College more accepting, and inside of the Education groups, there is an additional Gender effect with males more accepting in both Education groups.

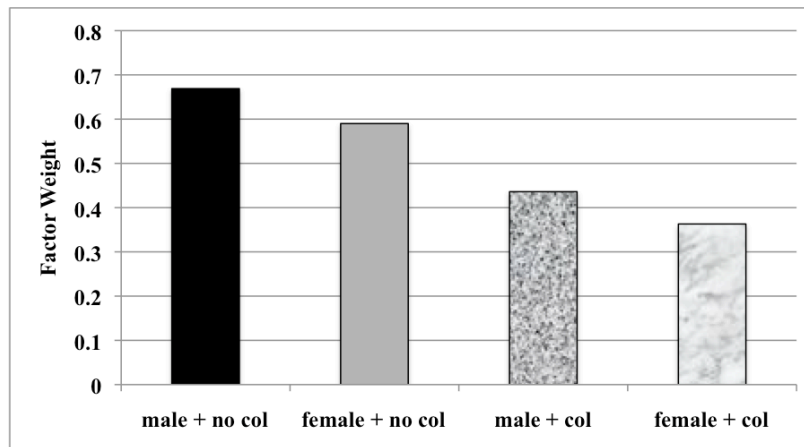


Figure 2: Factor weight by gender and education.

#### 4.3 Cross-Tabulations of Age and Other Social Factors

The importance of the Age group is seen in cross-tabulations of Age with the other two social factors. Figure 3 shows the Education effect with the No college group more likely to accept a double modal holding for the Old and Middle age respondents ( $p = 0.00$  for both age groups). However, in the Young group, there is a high rate of acceptance in both educational groups, with no statistically significant difference between them ( $p = 0.80$ ).

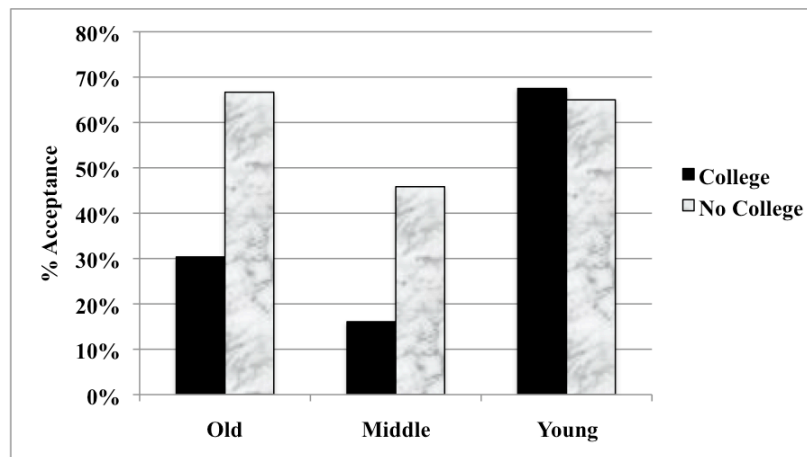


Figure 3: Acceptance by age and education.

A cross tabulation of Age and Gender again shows the Young to pattern differently than the other age groups. Figure 4 shows that the Gender effect with males leading holds only for the Old and Middle age groups, with no statistical difference in the Young ( $p = 0.84$ ).

## 5 Conclusion

From these results, we can speculate about the social evaluation of the double modal in the community. The age distribution is suggestive of a stable variable in the community, and double modal acceptance is shown to be correlated with a lack of higher education and with being male. This

gender and education pattern is suggestive of a low prestige evaluation of the double modal construction (cf. Labov 1990), and this is the same pattern that we have seen for other variables which exhibit a stable pattern of variation: (ing) (Trudgill 1974), negative concord (Wolfram 1969), and (r) (Labov 1966). Along with the overall gender and education pattern, the age distribution shows that there is something clearly different about the Young respondents.

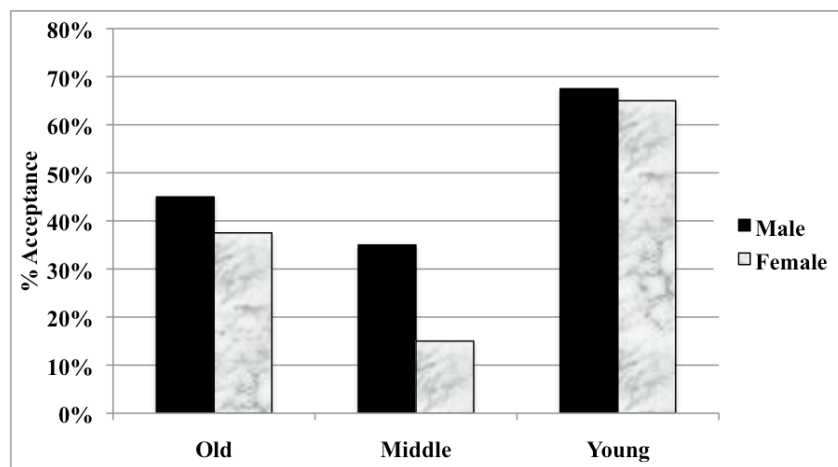


Figure 4: Acceptance by age and gender.

These age differences are expected if the double modal is seen as a low prestige variant. In this study, the Middle age group show very low acceptance of double modals. A common explanation for such behavior is the idea of the Conservative Middle Age (Chambers 2003). At this point in life, this group is actively engaged in gathering cultural and linguistic capital. They are established in their careers and would therefore have the most to gain from using prestigious varieties of language. The greater acceptance of double modals by the respondents in the Old age group can also be explained by their time of life. These respondents are mostly retired, and thus they are less in need of establishing cultural and linguistic capital through symbolic means and are more comfortable with their social position. This would lead to their greater acceptance of a non-prestige feature like the double modal appears to be.

While the Middle and Old age respondents pattern similarly in gender and education, the Young stood out as much more accepting of double modals overall and as a more homogeneous group with no statistically significant differences in Gender and Education. So, an important question is why the young are so different. There are at least two possibilities: this is an example of age grading or the Young respondents are using double modals to create a Southern identity.

The data do appear to pattern as we would expect for age grading, with a *u*-shaped age distribution (see Figure 2 above). However, the “young” respondents in this study are not that young, with ages ranging from 19–29, and are thus at an age older than where we would expect age grading to be in effect. A possible explanation for these data then is that the Young respondents truly have a more positive attitude toward double modals in general. That is, the Young respondents may be more willing to embrace their Southern identity, similar to the Cajun revival among young people in Louisiana reported in Dubois and Horvath 1999.

To answer this question definitively, we need more information. In light of this, I am currently extending this study to include a language attitude survey that will attempt to indirectly assess what the attitudes are in the community toward the double modal construction. From the acceptability judgment data, I can only identify that the young respondents are more accepting of double modals than are their older counterparts, and that they present no social differences inside this age group. However, I cannot completely say why this is the case. Using a language attitude survey, I will be able to investigate what qualities double modals index in the community, and how these attitudes differ by the age and educational grouping of community members. This will hopefully answer some of the questions regarding the age, education, and gender distribution seen in the acceptability judgment data, and allow me to more fully assess how the double modal is used and

perceived in the community.

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