

How might should we vary?

Double modal constructions (DMCs) are a salient feature of Southern United States English as well as some varieties of Scots English. DMCs in Southern United States varieties are mostly formed from a combination of *might/may* with *could/should/would/can*:

- (1) We might could go out for dessert.

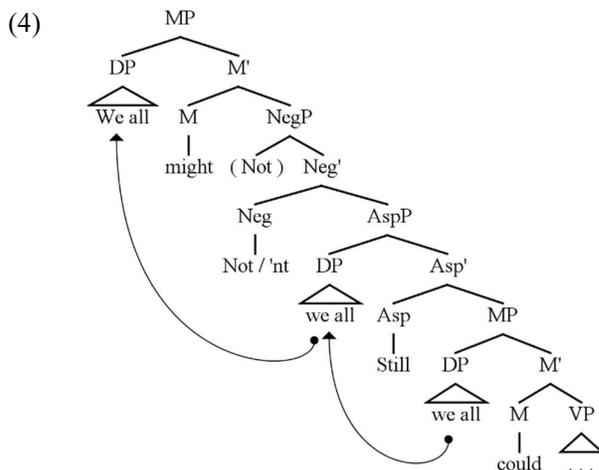
Previous studies of DMCs have focused on the microvariation in modal combinations (Boertien 1986, a.o.), the structure of declarative sentences and one form of question (Hasty 2012). This study explores intraspeaker variation with respect to question formation in DMCs for a group of speakers from outside Atlanta, Georgia, USA. I argue that the three analogous questions in (2) are derived from both syntactic movement (auxiliary inversion) and a postsyntactic operation (head raising). Questions can be formed by the inversion of either modal independently or a joint inversion:

- (2) a. Could we might have some cake?
 b. Might we could have some ice cream?
 c. Might could we have some pie?

Impressionistically, (2a) occurs most commonly, though these formulations do not give rise to scope or meaning differences. (2b) is indexed socially for some sort of affectation, as all inverted *might*'s may be (cf. *Might it rain today?*). (2c) is unique in its ability to be interrupted by modifiers (like *still*) and have a medially scoping negation clitic:

- (3) a. Might still could the cook whip up another cake?
 b. Might couldn't you ask again?

(3b) can be paraphrased "is it possibly not the case that you are able to ask again?". In order to provide an analysis of the examples in (3), I will adapt the structure of DMCs in Hasty (2012), adding medial projections for negation and continuative aspect (*still* here analyzed as the aspect head). Under the structure I propose in (4), each Modal Phrase (MP) and the Aspect Phrase (AspP) allow for a projected specifier hosting the subject (as suggested by quantifier float in (5)). The negation head is represented similarly to French *ne pas* which has a clitic head and a full negation in its specifier, allowing for a doubled negation in (6).



- (5) a. We all might not still couldn't...
 b. *We might all not still couldn't...
 c. We might not all still couldn't...
 d. We might not still all couldn't...
 e. We might not still couldn't all...

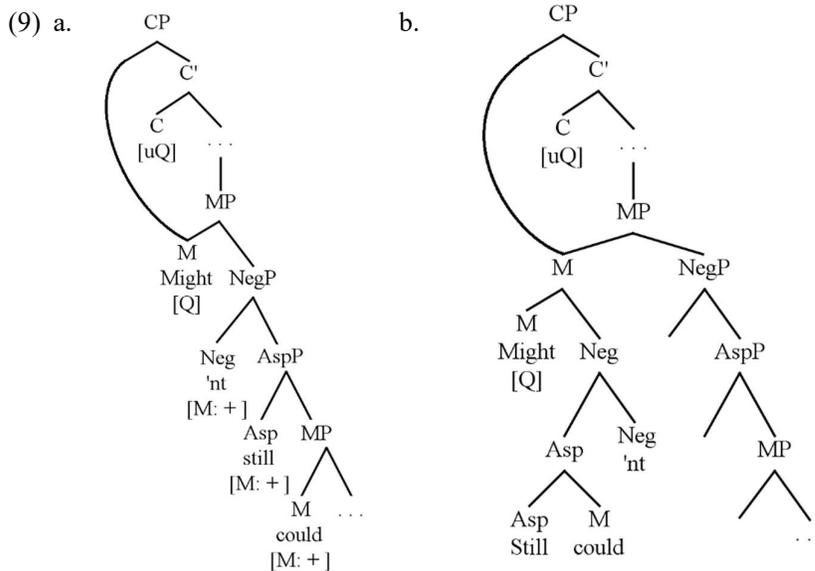
- (6) a. We might not shouldn't go home yet.
 b. We might shouldn't go home yet

With the structure in (4), we can then explore yes-no question formation. Following Harizanov and Gribanova (2018), I assume that yes-no questions are internal merge of a head to Spec-CP. As such it need not be local movement (contrasting traditional accounts of T-to-C). To derive the variation in independent modal movement, I assume a single question feature [Q] which motivates syntactic movement to C in order to check [uQ] there. The single occurrence of [Q] may be the result of which modal occurs in (or merges with) T, a principled restriction on this feature, or a result of combinatorial variability (Adger 2006).

A closer examination of doubly inverted modal questions, reveals that more than just the auxiliaries can invert (as in (3)). However, these inversions cannot include any floated quantifiers, or the negation hosted in Spec-NegP, likely ruling out remnant movement:

- (7) *Might all could we get some more cookies?
- (8) *Might not couldn't we get some milk too?

This suggests that just the heads M, Neg, Asp, and M invert as a unit. The scope relations are too semantically complex to compose syntactically. I argue instead that these heads merge via a postsyntactic raising operation. Under the formulation of Harizanov and Gribanova (2018), raising occurs after transfer to PF, and raised heads merge into all occurrences of the target syntactic object. This allows a low postsyntactic head merger to affect a high surface output. (9a) represents the output of the syntax and (9b) the morphosyntactic structure at linearization. Morphological merger is driven by a morphological feature: [M: +] for raising and [M: -] for lowering. I take the ordering of heads to be derived from affixal features not shown here.



This analysis suggests a reason for the greater frequency of *could* questions. *Might* inversion is both sociolinguistically marked and is variably co-opted for *might could* questions. This analysis has several theoretical implications as well. It posits several loci of variation: both narrow syntactic variation (placement of [Q]) and postsyntactic variation (occurrence of [M: +]). Further social meaning associated with inverted *might* (affectation) must not attach within the narrow syntax. Otherwise *might could* would share this meaning. Rather, we must take social meaning as attaching to linear strings rather than the syntactic structures or movements, reaffirming the modularity of syntax (cf. Adger 2007).

References

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