Tikrit University

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Forth Stage/ Translation

Translation of MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS/MODALS

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1. 1. Translation of MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS/MODALS

There are ten main auxiliary verbs (or modals / modal auxiliaries) in English: „can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must, ought to". They create several problems of translation for two major reasons:

(1) They do not have one-to-one single semantic equivalent in Arabic. Moreover, there is no grammatical class of verbs called modal auxiliaries (أفعال مساعدة) in Arabic. The so-called Arabic 'defective verbs' (أفعال ناقصة) are different.

(2) They have several, complex and complicated functions in English. Here is a short list with the main functions of each of these verbs (mostly adopted from Quirk et al (1973: 52-57):

1. 'CAN': present ability, possibility, permission; willingness;

2. 'COULD': past ability/possibility, present/future permission; present possibility, willingness;

3. 'MAY': permission, possibility;

4. 'MIGHT': possibility/probability;

5. 'SHALL': future (restricted use), willingness, intention, insistence,

(legal)obligation;

6. 'SHOULD': less categorical obligation, logical necessity, putative use, contingent

use, formal real conditions;

7. 'WILL': future (preferable in use to 'shall'), certainty, willingness, insistence, prediction;

8. 'WOULD': past future, request, probability, willingness, insistence, contingent use in the main clause of a conditional use, volition(especially with 'would rather');

9. 'MUST': more categorical obligation/compulsion, logical necessity;

10. 'OUGHT TO': less categorical obligation, logical necessity

Clearly, these verbs are complicated and multifunctional in English. Therefore, it is difficult to give one single specific meaning for each of them. Usually, the students know them by their most common meanings (underlined above). The following comparative discussion of the problems of translating some of the functions of these modals into Arabic and the possible solutions to them may be helpful to students to understand. The concentration on the grammatical differences between the two languages would be enlightening in this connection.

1: "will, shall" are not verbs in Arabic:

These two modals are not verbs in Arabic when they are used to refer to future. They mean the future particleسوف\(س\(for the future reference of 'would' in the past, see conditional sentences below).

1. "They will forgive us": (سوف يغفرون(سيغفرون) لنا سيسامحوننا)

2. "We shall delay the meeting": (سوف نؤجل (سنؤجل) الاجتماع)

Problem 2: The literal translation of modals into one word:

„Can‟, „may‟, and „must‟ are usually understood by the students to mean one word each. (يجب ، بستطيع ، يمكن). But the case is not so .They imply two words. The problem becomes clearer when the students translate them from Arabic into English.

Solution: They are translated into the following☺ (يستطيع ان، يجب ان ، يمكن ان) because (ان) is implied in each of these verbs. At the same time, grammatically it is obligatory in Arabic. e.g.:

1. "We can walk": نستطيع نمشي( ) نستطيع ان نمشي) (We cannot say:

3. "we may walk":(يمكننا ان نمشي)( ) not: (يمكننا نمشي

4. "We must walk": يجب علينا (يلزمنا ان نمشي) يجب علينا نمشي   (not)

(the second version, (يلزمنا) expresses necessity, which is one of the meanings of „must").

The same applies to the past tenses of these verbs, „could", „might", and „must": They are translated into two words each: (وجب (لزم) أن ، أمكن أن ، استطاع آن)

Problem 3: The special use of „shall":

„Shall" has a special use in the language of law in particular. It is not used to refer to future, but to obligation.

Solution: In an English legal text, „shall „means „must".e.g.

1.The defendant shall appear before court now: (يجب على المدعي عليه ان يمثل امام المحكمه الان)

Problem 4: „should" is for obligation only:

Usually „should" is understood by many students as the past tense of „shall", and used in English to refer to the future in the past. In fact, „should" is not used in this sense, but in the sense of „ must" only.

Solution: „Should"= „must": „Should" is always translated into يجب أن e. g.

1. "You should say everything": ((يجب) عليك أن نقول كل شئ)

2. "We should face him":   ((يجب) علينا أن نواجهه)

3. "I should believe my parents": ((يجب) علي ان اصدق والدي)

Problem 5: The confusion of „must have" and „should have":

Many students understand these two constructions as having the same meaning in the past. But they are not so; on the contrary, they are opposites.

Solution: „Must have"=action which took place; „should have"=action which did not take place. At translating these two examples, we must distinguish between the first which implies action, and the second which implies no action:

1. "They must have finished wok": لا بد أنهم أنهوا العمل

2. ''They should have finished work'':(كان عليه أن ينهوا العمل)

(لكنهم لم ينهوه) (but they have not)

(لابد) is used to express the doing, or the expectation and necessity of doing something in the past; whereas (كان عليهم) expresses the wish to have something done, but for some reason, it did not take place.

Problem 6: The unclear meaning of „could" „would". „might":

Understood as the past tenses of „can, will and may", these modals remain unclear when used in the present simple, with different meanings.

Solution: Could, would, might=possibility: The common use of these verbs is in the senses of possibility, permission and expression of politeness/request Therefore, they have the meaning of „may".

1. ''She could blame herself'':

2. ''She would blame herself'': قد (يمكن أن) تلوم نفسها

3. ''She might blame herself'':