Metaphors in the Modals: ASL Modals and Mental Spaces

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Overview

- Semantics of polysemous modal verbs
  - Why do they have scalar strength?
  - Why do epistemics metaphorically (and sometimes iconically) invoke force?
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  - Why are epistemics metaphorically (and sometimes iconically) characterized by force?
- Modals and mental spaces
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- Modals in ASL
  - Iconicity and prosody exhibit force dynamics
  - Parallels between root and epistemic forms
  - Provide evidence for embodied nature of modality
Modal Verbs

- Root form: obligation, permission, necessity
  - You **must** go home now
- Epistemic form: possibility and certainty
  - You **must** be tired
- Have degrees of “strength”
  - obligation: must > will > need > should > ought-to
  - certainty: must > could
Mental Spaces and Modals

- Mental space: cognitive conceptualization of situation
- Conceptual metaphors and modals
  - You must be tired:
  - (BELIEF) STATES ARE LOCATIONS
  - REASONING IS MOTION
  - INFORMATION AND ARGUMENTS ARE FORCES
Token space: blend of signing space (physical) and mental spaces create meaning
Signing Space and Blends

- Blend of signing space (physical) and mental spaces create meaning
  - Token space

- Modal verbs: also in token space?
  - Semantics are not inherently spatial
  - Iconic and metaphorical: move from one mental space to another in signing space
ASL Modals: Root/Deontic

- Iconicity
  - Same parameters (handshape, location, palm orientation)
  - Vary in motion (and facial)
  - Motion iconically represents force dynamics
    - Force dynamics represents modal semantics
  - Stronger modals have larger, more forceful range of motion
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  - Note the single, forceful MUST
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- Iconically conveys Causes are Forces metaphor
  - Strong modals = strong prosody
  - Weak modals = weaker prosodic force
ASL Modals: Epistemic

- Spoken language prosody and cospeech gesture
  - Obvious in root forms: You can’t go in there!
  - Not always so in epistemics:
    - That can’t be true. – possibly prosodic emphasis
    - You must be tired. – probably little prosodic emphasis
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  - Video: I can ride a bicycle
  - Video: If he studies over and over, will he pass the test?
    - POSSIBLE / MAYBE NOT / POSSIBLE-NOT
ASL Modals: Epistemic
ASL Modals: Epistemic (con’t)

- Correspondences to physical experiences
  - STRONG - > CAN - > POSSIBLE
  - EMOTION FEEL - > EPISTEMIC FEEL
  - MIRROR/COMPARE -> SEEM
  - BRIGHT -> OBVIOUS

- Prosody in motion parameter
  - Larger motions = greater likelihood
  - Iconicity of force dynamics
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- Modal “strength” is semantics of motion and force
  - “Strength” is metaphorically transferred from source domain of force dynamics
References (1)

References (2)

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