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Modal Past Tense: An Applied Linguistics Approach

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MODAL PAST TENSE: AN APPLIED LINGUISTICS APPROACH

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MODAL PAST TENSE: AN APPLIED LINGUISTICS APPROACH

by

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Introduction

Students and teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) regularly encounter unconventional uses of the past tense in conditional sentences, in indirect or "reported" speech contexts, in sentences with *wish*, and so on. Usually the use of past tense in such contexts is explained as a "backshifting rule," or simply a "past tense rule" which applies only in certain enumerated types of English sentences. Additional and special treatment is warranted because, in these types of sentences, English speakers use nominally "past" tense verb forms in contexts which clearly refer to present or future time.

Linguists have also commented on this unconventional use of the past tense. Jespersen (1954) refers to it as an "imaginative" use, Steele (1975) terms it "dissociative," and Langacker (1978) "distal." It has often been subsumed under the broader category "irrealis" (Botne, 2003, Fleischman, 1989, Steele, 1975, Winford, 2000). Fleischman speaks of "metaphorical" uses of the past tense, and James (1982) simply regards this usage as signaling hypothetical meaning. I will designate this phenomenon of past-as-hypothetical as *modal past*. The present study is motivated by the view that EFL practitioners, rather than regarding this phenomenon as merely a mechanical, arbitrary rule of English grammar, would benefit from a more integrative approach which emphasizes its underlying semantics and its role within the broader context of language acquisition.

The goal of this paper is to investigate the ways in which modal past is expressed in contemporary English and to effectively apply this analysis to the development of English language pedagogy. I will endeavor to produce an account of modal past which is based in the scientific principles of linguistics while also remaining accessible to practitioners such as language teachers and which may aid in the professionalization of EFL instructors.

In the first section, I examine the ways in which modal past manifests in English, specifically in modal auxiliaries, hypothetical conditionals, *wish* sentences, polite requests, reported and indirect speech constructions, and other sentence types. In the second section, I consider a broad spectrum of cross-linguistic data on modal past usage, with a particular focus on the ways in which modal past in other languages coincides with, or diverges from, its use in English. In the third section, I argue that modal past is an element of the Universal Grammar of human language, and discuss the pedagogical implications of the universality of modal past with regard to EFL learning and teaching.

I. Modal Past in English

Definitions

Most speakers of English, if asked what is meant by the *-ed* ending on a word such as *lived*, will know very well that it means "past tense" and signifies that the action of living is in the past. And in many cases, of course, this is true. However, past morphology also frequently has a meaning quite apart from "past time"; in fact, it often refers specifically to present or future time and semantically reflects modality rather than temporality. Consider the following uses of past morphology on the verb *live*:

When I was 16, I lived in Hawaii.

If I lived in Hawaii, I could go to the beach every day.

I wish I lived in Hawaii.

Of the above examples, only the first actually refers to past time. The others refer to the present time, despite containing the same nominally "past" form of the verb, *lived*. This incongruity between past morphology and non-past time is made more salient by the use of adverbs:

If you called her right now, you wouldn't get her because she's not at home.

If you asked me tomorrow, I would say yes.

This phenomenon is also reflected in the use of nominally past tense morphology alongside present tense morphology, which appears in either implied context or the paraphrased version of the sentence with nominal past tense morphology:

If I had a car, I would come pick you up.

(implied: *I don't have a car*; present tense)

How did you know I was here?

(implied: *I'm here now*; present tense)

He talks to me as if I were a child.

(implied: *I'm not a child*; present tense)

What did you say your name was? (Jespersen, 1924, p. 294)

(temporally equivalent: *What is your name?* present tense)

I was hoping you could help me.

(temporally equivalent: *I'm hoping you can help me*; present tense)

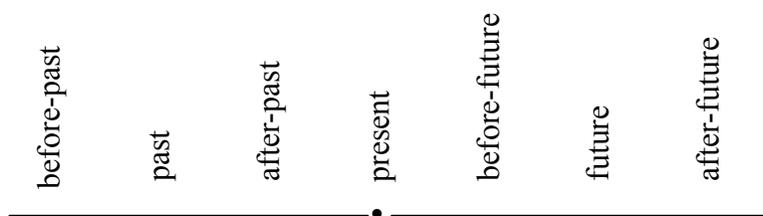
Could I ask you question?

(answer: *Yes, you certainly can*; present tense)

Jespersen (1954) refers to these uses of past morphology as "tenses of the imagination" and writes that "verbal forms which are primarily used to indicate past time are often used without that temporal import to denote unreality, impossibility, improbability or non-fulfillment" (p. 112). Davidsen-Nielsen (1990) points out that using past morphology to denote "unreality" is an epistemic usage, i.e., clearly modal (p. 170). Iatridou (2000) proposes that "past" is not actually the primary meaning of the morphology that usually goes by that name, but rather that "past" is simply one manifestation of its semantics. For the purposes of this paper, I will follow Davidsen-Nielsen's lead in viewing this as an epistemic, or modal, usage of past morphology, and will reprise his term *modal past* to refer to any instance of "past" morphology which does not denote a past time meaning. For cases in which past morphology does denote a past time meaning, I use the term *temporal past*. Modal past and temporal past are thus identical in form, yet distinct semantically.

Time

Critical to the analysis of modal past is an understanding of both the form of tense morphology and the various notions of time as they are represented in English. English tense morphology corresponds to a binary system of past and non-past, signaled by verb inflections. Notional time, on the other hand, comprises past, present, and future, as well as relative pasts and futures. Notional time can be indicated many ways: periphrastically, through markers such as *will* and *be going to*; with adverb phrases of time, habituality, or punctuality; with verbal inflections such as *-ed* and *-s*; with aspectual morphology; through lexical sub-categorization, i.e., eventive (*run*) vs. stative (*be*); and simply through implied context. Jespersen (1924, p. 257) organizes notional time according to the following diagram:



Since the present is a point, it "has no dimensions and cannot be divided" (Jespersen, p. 256). The future and past, on the other hand, stretch infinitely in each direction and are sub-divided into distinctions of anterior and posterior time: anterior past, posterior past, anterior future, posterior future.

Anterior time, the past relative to another time, is formally represented in English by the perfect aspect. In the sentence, *I had been in Istanbul for two months before I found that great kebab restaurant*, the "having been in Istanbul" is past relative to the "finding of that great kebab restaurant." It is the past of a past - an anterior past, marked by combining past morphology with

perfect aspect. Likewise, anterior future is rendered by combining the future marker *will* with the perfect: *By the time I leave Istanbul next June, I will have eaten lots of kebab*. This mechanism also shows up in the present perfect, which connects past and present time. It is important to differentiate anterior past and remote past, which exists in some languages.¹ Remote past is a deictic designation, marking past as remote from the time of speaking, whereas anterior past is a relative designation which simply marks one past as occurring before another.

Notional past, then, can be represented in English both by inflectional past morphology and by the perfect aspect. An important feature of the perfect-as-marker-of-past is that the perfect can be used to mark *temporal* past only, never *modal* past. This will be illustrated in the following sections on modal auxiliaries and hypothetical conditionals, where the perfect aspect plays an important temporal role. Inflectional past, on the other hand, is generally ambiguous between a temporal and a modal reading. Whether a particular instance of inflectional past morphology represents temporal past or modal past depends on contextual elements. This ambiguity is demonstrated in the examples below, in the past morphology of *had*:

If he had a car... then why did he ride his bike everywhere? (temporal)

If he had a car... then he wouldn't have to ride his bike everywhere.

(modal)

Modal Auxiliaries

In order to understand how the phenomenon of modal past relates to modal auxiliaries, we need to first understand the nature of modal auxiliaries, define what is meant by "root" and

¹ Some languages exhibit a grammatical distinction between recent and remote past time. Bantu languages are known for this (Welmers, 1973); the Bantu language Chindali is a specific example (Botne, 2003).

"epistemic" meanings, and clarify the relationship between various modal auxiliaries. Modal auxiliaries are polysemous; in any given instance, the meaning of a modal auxiliary will fall into one of (at least) two categories. As Traugott (1989) observes, there is considerable diversity of opinion among linguists regarding the classification of modal auxiliaries and description of their meanings. For the purposes of this paper, I will classify modal semantics according to "epistemic" and "root" meanings. I follow Traugott in claiming that when a modal auxiliary exhibits epistemic meaning, it expresses "knowledge and belief about possibilities, [and] probabilities..." (p. 32). Her definition is derived from that of Palmer, and by extension those of Lyons and Jespersen, and is widely accepted among linguists (Traugott, p.32). Epistemic modality therefore deals with the degree to which a given proposition is, was, or will be an actual fact. Nearly all² modal auxiliaries have epistemic meaning, though of course not in all discourse contexts.

The other category of meaning is more diverse; its semantics depend on the particular modal in question. This category is often termed "deontic" and has been used to encompass meanings of obligation, necessity, permission, ability, and volition. However, I follow Cook (1978) in referring to the non-epistemic meanings of modal auxiliaries as "root" meanings because they are more closely tied to the historical semantics of those verbs which are the lexical roots of our modern auxiliaries. The difference between root and epistemic meaning can be demonstrated by a simple example:

She must study hard if she wants to do well in school. (root meaning of
must)

² *had better* is an exception - it does not appear to have any epistemic uses. It also differs from the other modals in that it appears to be a grammaticized idiomatic expression rather than a grammaticized lexical verb.

She must study hard; she always gets As. (epistemic meaning of must).

It is widely acknowledged by historical linguists that the modal auxiliaries of modern English are reflexes of forms that were once used as main verbs with root meanings and that these meanings predated their development of epistemic meanings (Traugott, 1989, p. 36). These root meanings are still expressed by today's modal auxiliaries *must, shall, ought to, had better, should, may, might, can, and could*. It should be noted that while the modal auxiliary *will* still signals volition in some cases, it has also developed a different meaning - that of futurity or consequentiality.

Gradually, the modal auxiliaries developed epistemic meanings in addition to their root meanings, resulting in the polysemy noted above. Because of their origin as main verbs, many modal auxiliaries still bear tense inflections. However, the process of grammaticalization has altered the function of these inflections, often causing modality to win out over tense. Four pairs of modal auxiliaries exhibit this historical tense relationship:

OE ³ infinitive	OE pres. tense (1 st , 3 rd persons)	OE past tense (1 st , 3 rd persons)	modern English modal auxiliary	modern English modal auxiliary
<i>willan</i> (to wish, to will)	<i>wille</i>	<i>wolde</i>	<i>will</i>	<i>would</i>
<i>cunnan</i> (to know, be able)	<i>cann</i>	<i>cūþe</i>	<i>can</i>	<i>could</i>
<i>magan</i> (to be able)	<i>mæg</i>	<i>mihte</i>	<i>may</i>	<i>might</i>
<i>sculan</i> (to be obliged to)	<i>sceal</i>	<i>sceolde</i>	<i>shall</i>	<i>should</i>

The modal auxiliaries *must* and *ought to* are each descended from the past form of an Old English verb of which there are no present form reflexes in modern English.⁴ Likewise, *had*

³ The Old English data is taken from Moore and Knott, 1962, pp. 194-198.

better appears to be a reflex of a past form for which there is no present construction in current use. The distinction between these three modal auxiliaries and those with both present and past forms (in the chart above) is crucial. Although *must*, *ought to*, and *had better* look as if they contain past morphology due to their /t/ and /d/ suffixes, their usage in modern English indicates otherwise. These three forms by themselves never exhibit either temporal past *or* modal past meaning and cannot be used in a past time context. Their alveolar stop endings represent a vestigial inflectional morphology which reveals their historical origins but has no grammatical semantic import in Modern English. The past meaning they once carried has since been neutralized. The following pair of sentences clearly shows this incompatibility with past meaning:

<i>He</i>	<i>must</i> <i>ought to</i> <i>had better</i>	<i>go to the bank today.</i>
<i>He</i>	* <i>must</i> * <i>ought to</i> * <i>had better</i>	<i>go to the bank yesterday.</i>

To place *must*, *ought to*, and *had better* in a past time context, it is necessary to combine them with the perfect; it is the perfect morphology which provides the necessary temporal past meaning:

<i>He</i>	<i>must</i> <i>ought to</i> <i>had better</i>	<i>have gone to the bank yesterday.</i>
-----------	---	---

⁴ *Must* is from OE *mōtan* (be permitted); *ought to* is from OE *āgan* (preterit *āhte*) (possess) (Moore and Knott, 1962)

Note, however, that the past meaning provided by the perfect in such examples can *only* be a temporal past. To verify this, consider that the verb phrase *must have gone* necessarily indicates past time, and cannot be used with any present time adverb or other indicator of non-past temporality:

**He must have gone to the bank right now.*

Further, *must have gone* is not the modal past of *must go* - it does not indicate that "the going" is more hypothetical, less likely, or less real than in its non-past version; rather it simply places it in a past time context.

In contrast to *must*, *ought to*, and *had better*, which contain vestigial /t/ and /d/ endings which no longer signal past semantics, *would*, *could*, and *might* retain fully active past morphology. This means that they exhibit either temporal past or modal past meaning in all contexts, just like lexical verb forms such as *lived*. In the case of modal auxiliaries, whether the past meaning in a given instance is modal or temporal depends on whether the auxiliary is being used for its epistemic or for its root semantics. When employed in the context of their root semantics, *would* and *could* have a temporal past meaning:

When I was a child, I could run really fast. (past time ability)

He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1953. He would later become president. (future in past time)

In the first example, *could* is the temporal past of *can* in the sense of "ability." The use of *would* in the second example is best described as future-in-the-past; it is the temporal past of the future marker *will*. Thus, the past morphology modal auxiliary forms *would*, *could*, and *might* represent temporal past when used in a root sense, and modal past when used in an epistemic sense.

Whereas temporal past places an action in past time, modal past places an action in the domain

of the hypothetical. This differentiation makes good sense when one considers the historical origin of the modal auxiliaries. It is their root semantics that most closely resemble their former selves as lexical, or main verbs, with past and present time distinctions, whereas their epistemic semantics - the result of grammaticalization - bring them into the domain of modality, where the distinction is one of asserted propositions versus hypothetical propositions.

There remains one modal auxiliary which does not fit neatly into either the group of those with vestigial /t/ and /d/ endings or the group with active past morphology. The modal in question is *should*. Although in some contexts *should* behaves as if it is the morphologically past counterpart to *shall*, its uses also often confound the pattern of *would*, *could*, and *might* and more closely align with that of *must*, *ought to*, and *had better*. Consider:

You shall do it.

You should do it.

In these two examples, the first sentence implies obligation whereas the second is more an offer of advice. The second sentence, with *should*, is epistemically weaker, less assertive than the first, and therefore may be analyzed as the modal past of the sentence with *shall*. In this context, *should* seems to have genuine past morphology as the past form of *shall*. However, in other contexts, *should* is clearly not the past form of *shall*, and seems incompatible with a temporal past meaning.

Today, I shall go to the bank.

**Yesterday, I should go to the bank.*

Yesterday, I should have gone to the bank.

In the third of these sentences, the temporal past meaning derives from use of the perfect, and *should* seems to belong in the same category as *must*, *ought to*, and *had better*, with a vestigial

/d/ ending rather than active past morphology. I suspect that this patterning of *should* is linked to the fact that, at least in American English, its present form *shall* is now seldom used. Without *shall* as a present form counterpart, *should* will likely lose any remaining past meaning and become, like *must*, *ought to*, and *had better*, a purely present form.

A final note on modal auxiliaries is the divergent, or dual root semantics of *shall / should*. Following its Old English ancestor *sculan*, this modal auxiliary pair maintains in some contexts the semantics of obligation or necessity, as in *if it's a matter that concerns him, you should tell him about it*, while in other contexts, the pair mirrors *will / would* as a marker of futurity. This can be seen in sentences such as *we shall see* and *I shall do as I please*. Generally, it is *should* that maintains the semantics of obligation/necessity, while *shall* functions more as an alternative marker of futurity (except in legal language - a linguistically conservative preserve). Perkins (1982) writes that *shall*, as it occurs in modern English, is essentially "a suppletive form of *will*" used for more formal contexts and in cases where the addressee's disposition is referenced, such as in *shall I go?* (p. 264). This semantic discontinuity between *shall* and *should* likely also contributes to the partial loss of *should* as a past form of *shall*. *Would*, also, in occasional archaic usage, exhibits a similar duality of root semantics by conveying the meaning of "volition" in addition to its more usual root semantics as future-in-the-past. This rare duality of *would* will be discussed further in a later section of the paper.

Modal Past in Hypothetical Conditionals

As I have shown in the previous section, the past morphology that we see in *would*, *could*, *might*, and *should* relative to *will*, *can*, *may*, and *shall* often signifies a *modal past*

relationship rather than a temporal past relationship. This is true for all epistemic uses of *would*, *could*, *might*, and *should*. In such cases, past morphology has the effect of weakening epistemic force, of making the epistemic claim more remote or less direct. This effect of weakened epistemic force plays an important role in many contexts where modal auxiliaries are used. One of the most common of these is the case of hypothetical conditional sentences.

Conditional sentences can be sub-classified as follows: those dealing with real possibilities, and those dealing with hypothetical possibilities. Real conditionals such as *if it rains, we'll go to the movies* contain propositions that are either neutral or positive with regard to actualization; they do not cast doubt on the likelihood of actualization or the reality of the proposition expressed in the protasis (*if it rains*). Perhaps it will rain, and perhaps it won't - the above statement makes no claim for either outcome. By contrast, hypothetical conditionals are those which deal with imaginary situations, whose propositions are specifically marked as being in some way removed from reality, non-actual. Hypothetical conditionals can be set in present, future, or past time:

- a. *If I knew how to cook, we wouldn't eat out so often.* (present time)
- b. *If I won the lottery, I would buy a new house.* (future time⁵)
- c. *If she had told me she was a vegetarian, I wouldn't have made steak for dinner.* (past time)

Linguists sometimes refer to these kinds of sentences as "counterfactual" conditionals, or break them into categories of "counterfactual," and "future less vivid," (Iatridou, 2000). And it is

⁵ There is no formal difference between the present time and the future time examples. This is a case where the notional time reference is expressed through the subcategorization of the verb used in the sentence. We assume that b. is future time because the verb is eventive (non-stative). In English, eventive verbs are generally interpreted as habitual when coinciding with present time, but can be either habitual or non-habitual when coinciding with future time. Pragmatically, we assume that "winning the lottery" is not a habitual occurrence, so we therefore assume that this sentence is not referring to the present time. The only remaining possibility is that it refers to future time.

true that we often interpret the meaning of such sentences as "contrary to fact" when they deal with present and past time propositions, and as "unlikely to occur" when they deal with future time propositions. However, these interpretations are not inherently part of the semantics of the past morphology, but rather are derived from the pragmatic context of the sentence. When I say *if I won the lottery*, it's quite possible that I haven't even bought a lottery ticket, in which case my winning is not just unlikely, but impossible. Similarly, we might say *if John were coming to the party tomorrow* knowing full well that it isn't possible for John to come, implying a meaning that is *counterfactual* rather than just unlikely.

Yet "counterfactual" is also an inaccurate description of the underlying semantics of modal past morphology. Consider the following example: *If the butler had done it [and he may have], we would have found exactly the clues we did in fact find* (attributed to Comrie, 1986 and Harder, 1989, as cited in Davidsen-Nielsen, 1990, p. 180). An inspector investigating a murder case might proclaim the above sentence and subsequently conclude that the butler did, in fact, do it. Thus even a past time hypothetical conditional may express a proposition that is actually *true* or *factual*, in that it matches the real world facts of the situation. The semantic import of a hypothetical conditional is merely that it *represents* a proposition *as* an imagined possibility; it is an "imaginative representation" of a proposition (Field's term in describing what he calls "the subjunctive," 1925, p. 30). Hypothetical conditionals are thus a coherent category comprising any and all those conditional sentences which express a proposition as a *hypothetical* reality, regardless of whether that proposition is factual or counterfactual, likely or unlikely to actualize.

Hypothetical conditionals are formally distinguished from real conditionals by the presence of modal past morphology in both the protasis (the *if* clause) and in the apodosis (the "result" clause). In addition, the modal past in the apodosis clause must be expressed by a modal

might have active past morphology, only these three may appear in the apodosis of a hypothetical conditional. These three modals thus often perform a role that other modal auxiliaries never do; they alone are available to convey the semantics of modal past. It should be noted that in some dialects, *should* also belongs in this group; in these cases *should* functions as a variant of *would*. In the examples below, assuming that *won* is an instance of modal past, we can clearly observe this requirement that the modal auxiliary in the apodosis be a modal with active past morphology:

If I won the lottery, I

<i>would</i>
<i>could</i>
<i>might</i>
<i>(should)</i>

buy a new house.

If I won the lottery, I

<i>*must</i>
<i>*ought to</i>
<i>*had better</i>
<i>*will</i>
<i>*can</i>
<i>*may</i>
<i>*shall</i>

*buy a new house.*⁶

The presence of *would*, *could*, or *might* in the apodosis is sometimes the only feature which distinguishes a hypothetical conditional from a past time real conditional. Because the past morphology in the protasis can, in the absence of contextual clues, be interpreted as either temporal or modal, the distinction between past modal auxiliaries and present modal auxiliaries is crucial; the difference between a past time real conditional and a non-past time hypothetical conditional may hinge on this distinction. Consider:

⁶ Notice that each of the sentences with *must*, *ought to*, and *had better* is perfectly valid as a *real* conditional, where the protasis is referring to past time: '*Assuming that I have won the lottery...*'. There is no requirement that the two clauses of a conditional sentence match each other with regard to temporal semantics, but they must match in terms of modal semantics.

If you visited Istanbul, then you must know how beautiful the Bosphorus is.

(real)

If you visited Istanbul, then you would know how beautiful the Bosphorus

is. (hypothetical)

The only structural difference in the examples above is the use of *must* versus *would* in the apodosis clauses. Since *must* contains no past morphology, there is no modal past in the apodosis of the first sentence. *Would*, by contrast, does have past morphology and thus supplies an instance of modal past in the apodosis of the second sentence. This structural difference signals an entirely different semantics. Whereas the first sentence is a real conditional, the second sentence is a hypothetical conditional, implying that the hearer has not, in fact, visited Istanbul.

Both Iatridou (2000) and Fillmore (1990) observe that conditional sentences must be symmetrical with regard to modal morphology; Fillmore writes that "conditional sentences... are special grammatical constructions with two parts whose [modal] properties must be established in parallel" (p. 159). This means that one must often compare both clauses of a conditional sentence against each other in order to determine whether the ensemble expresses a real proposition or a hypothetical one, as in the examples above.

There are, nonetheless, some cases which are genuinely ambiguous:

If I wanted to, I would go to the movies.

If I walked quickly, I could get to school in 15 minutes.

The above sentences could represent real conditionals referring to a past time, as in: *when I was 16, I lived close to my high school and if I walked quickly, I could (was able to) get there in 15 minutes. After class, if I wanted to, I would (used to) go to the movies.* Alternatively, these sentences could represent hypothetical conditionals in non-past time: *If I wanted to, I would go to*

the movies next weekend, but I don't want to. And: If I walked quickly, I could get to school in 15 minutes, but since I'm walking slowly I won't make it that soon. This ambiguity stems from the fact that *would* and *could* convey temporal past when used in the context of their root semantics (thus rendering real conditionals), and modal past when used in the context of their epistemic semantics (thus rendering hypothetical conditionals).

In addition to the defining elements of having modal past in both clauses and a past form modal auxiliary in the apodosis clause, there are other structural features which set hypothetical conditionals apart from real conditionals. Conditional sentences are essentially composed of two (or more) clauses combined such that the content of one clause is contingent on the content of the other. In addition to the two clauses, there must be some indication of conditionality; i.e. some way of marking the conjoined relationship between the two clauses. Hypothetical conditionals differ from real conditionals in the range of ways that this relationship may be marked. Often, this relationship is marked by a conjunction such as *if, unless, otherwise, although, lest*, or a conditional expression such as *on condition, in case, even if, as if, as though, in the event that, so long as*, etc. In a hypothetical conditional, inversion of the subject and auxiliary may substitute for a conjunction as the marker of the conditional relationship:

Had I known, I would have told you.

If I had known, I would have told you.

This does not hold for real conditionals, however:

**Have you been to Istanbul, then you surely have eaten kebab.*

A similar type of difference between hypothetical and real conditionals is that in a real conditional, the conjunctions *and* and *but* can serve to connect the two clauses, whereas in a hypothetical conditional they cannot. Likewise, real conditionals may be simply juxtaposed

without any overt conjunction, whereas for hypothetical conditionals, a conjunction is required.

Consider:

Do it again and you won't get any dessert. (real)

**Did it again and you wouldn't get any dessert.* (hypothetical)

You snooze, you lose. (real)

**You snoozed, you would lose.* (hypothetical)

Other differences between the two types of conditionals appear only in certain dialects.

One such difference is the use of *was* versus *were* in the protasis. In formal contexts, speakers of standard English tend to use *was* primarily for real conditionals and *were* primarily for hypothetical conditionals. However, this distinction is often blurred or non-existent in informal contexts as well as in many dialects which either systematically use *was* for both types of conditionals, or use *was* and *were* interchangeably for hypothetical conditionals, and *was* for real conditionals. Although many prescriptive grammarians insist on a strict division of *was* for real, *were* for hypothetical, contemporary usage seems to increasingly favor *was* as a substitute for *were* in all conditional sentences. Shift in the other direction, with *were* used for real conditionals, is rare, though certainly not unheard of.⁷

A much clearer distinction can be seen with the phrases *were to* and *was to*. These phrases can form part of a past morphology verb phrase so long as the past morphology in question is modal past, and not temporal past. Thus, a hypothetical conditional may contain *were to* / *was to* in its protasis, whereas a real conditional cannot:

If I were to loan you the money, would you pay me back? (hypothetical)

⁷ Jacobsson (1975) has compiled a list of such examples taken from American literature. Ex: *if it were the police, there was nothing left but to face them* (p. 226). The use of *were* in this particular example seems to be motivated in part by the fact that "the police" is a plural noun.

**If I were to loan him the money, he paid me back. (real)*

In colloquial usage, phrasing such as *if I would've known* or *if I hadda known* is commonly heard in the protasis of past time hypothetical conditionals (Hancock, 1993 and Fillmore, 1990). These variants - *would have known* and *had have known* - replace the standard past perfect form *had known*, yet significantly, they maintain its essential elements of two instances of past morphology, one modal past and one temporal past (represented by the *would / had* and the perfective, respectively). These non-standard yet increasingly common variants thus serve the same function as the standard past perfect, supplying both hypotheticality and past temporality to the past time hypothetical conditional structure. It is interesting to note that these variants do not replace the past perfect in cases where the past perfect represents anterior past, but rather only in those cases where it provides both a modal and a temporal past (Fillmore):

**I would've / hadda already eaten dinner when the phone rang.*

Modal Past in Sentences with *Wish*

Sentences with *wish*, as in *I wish I were a millionaire* and *you'll wish you hadn't done that* are another very common environment of modal past usage. The subordinate clause of a *wish* sentence (*...I were a millionaire*) is similar to the protasis of a hypothetical conditional sentence in that it contains more or less the same dialectal variations regarding use of *was* versus *were*, and *would've known* or *hadda known* as substitutes for the past perfect *had known* (Fillmore, 1990). Nonetheless, *wish* sentences merit separate discussion as they are in many ways a unique structure in English.

Like any lexical verb, *wish* has a full range of past and non-past forms which can refer to past, present, or future time. And the past forms of *wish*: *wished*, *was wishing*, *had wished* etc.,

behave as would be expected of any lexical verb. However, the non-past forms of *wish*, including *will wish*, *be going to wish*, and *has wished*, appear to have an inherently modal character unlike any other lexical verb in English. Specifically, when a non-past form of *wish* is the matrix verb of a sentence that includes a complementation structure, the subordinate verb must exhibit modal past morphology. As with hypothetical conditionals, the subordinate clause of a non-past time *wish* sentence contains one instance of past morphology (modal past), whereas the subordinate clause of a past time wish sentence contains two instances of past morphology (one modal, one temporal past):

I wish it wasn't raining right now. (1 PAST; present time)

I wish we didn't have class tomorrow. (1 PAST; future time)

I wish you had told me that last week. (2 PASTs; past time)

In contrast with hypothetical conditionals, *wish* sentences do not necessarily exhibit modal past morphology in both clauses. The matrix clause (*I wish...*) may contain a non-past form of the verb *wish*. Iatridou (2000) offers an explanation for this apparent mismatch between *wish* and its subordinate verb. She argues that *wish* sentences, like hypothetical conditionals, must have underlying modal past morphology in *both* clauses, and that *wish* is actually a "lexicalized" form which despite outward appearances, actually does contain inherent past morphology (Iatridou). In her analysis, *wish* is the modal past (she uses the term "counterfactual") form of *want*, a claim which she supports with data from Modern Greek, whose word *iθela* translates as both *wish* and *want* in English (Iatridou).

Although this explanation does not seem wholly satisfactory, there is some evidence from English that *wish* may indeed have implicit past morphology. Consider the following semantically equivalent (though not equally fashionable) sentences:

I wish I were rich!

Would that I were rich!

The second sentence contains explicit past morphology, in the past form modal auxiliary *would*. Since these two sentences have the same meaning, both temporally and modally, this may be an indication that *I wish* is, in this usage, temporally and modally equivalent to *would*. A complicating factor for this analysis is that *I wish* and *would* do not change when the sentence is past time hypothetical:

I wish / Would that I had been rich!

Other expressions that can stand in for *I wish*, with exactly the same meaning, are *if(...)only* and *if...but* (*if you would only listen!* and *if you could but see her!*). Interestingly, these expressions contain no verb at all, and therefore no temporal or modal morphology. Such structures have sometimes been analyzed as partial conditionals, with ellipsis of the apodosis, but their meaning is equivalent to *I wish*, and it seems more accurate to include them in this category. One way in which *I wish* does not equate with *would*, *if(...)only*, and *if but* is that the verb *wish* also has lexical status. Thus, its subordinate verb phrase may be an infinitive:

I wish to be rich.

**Would / *If only / *If but to be rich.*

When employed as a lexical verb, *wish* is a synonym for *want*.

Palmer's (1986) analysis of *wish* diverges from Iatridou's (2000) significantly. Palmer writes that "it may... be the case that a language has no grammatical modal form for a common modal function; thus modern colloquial English has no way of expressing a wish other than by the performative use of the verb WISH" (p. 168). Analyzing *wish* as a performative construction, Palmer places it in the same category with imperative verb forms, modal auxiliaries, and

performative uses of lexical verbs such as *urge*, *beg*, *order*, etc. which "express the subject's modal attitude or opinion" (p. 168). This analysis of *wish* ascribes to it a certain inherent modality, at least in its performative use, which may explain how it can function as the matrix verb of a modal past sentence structure without exhibiting modal past morphology.

Iatridou's (2000) and Palmer's (1986) analyses do not necessarily have to be contradictory. In each case the analysis finds in favor of an inherent modal semantics in the use of *wish* which is not usual for most lexical verbs. The notion that some words - other than modal auxiliaries - carry inherent modal semantics is not unique to English. A useful comparison can be drawn between English *wish* and its counterparts in Spanish and Turkish. Both the Spanish word *ojalá* and the Turkish word *keşke* are the result of fossilized expressions whose lexical etymon is a word for "volition" (in Arabic and Persian, respectively). In their modern incarnations, they are discrete elements which do not conjugate as main verbs, do not take agreement of person or number, and do not carry any tense morphology. They may be paired with both past time and non-past time subordinate verb phrases. They both translate more or less exactly as "I wish," since they always refer to the modal attitude of the speaker. They are more similar in that regard to the English expressions *if only*, *would that*, or the colloquial use of *wish* in the example below:

*Wish you were here!*⁸:

Ojalá que estuvieras aquí!

[*Ojalá* - comp - past subjunctive second person singular be - here]

Keşke burada olsaydın!

[*Keşke* - here - past conditional second person singular be]

⁸ This data was suggested by Dr. Ellen Courtney, personal communication, March 2, 2011.

Modal Past in Polite Requests

It has been widely observed that modal past is frequently used in making requests; in particular, in rendering a request more polite. Consider the following:

Can you help me? (right now - present time)

Could you help me? (right now - present time)

Both requests are present time, and both mean nearly the same thing; the one difference between them is the degree of assertion conveyed. *Could*, as the modal past of *can*, implies a greater degree of uncertainty, remoteness, or removal from reality. In the pragmatic context of making a request, this remoteness manifests as politeness, giving the person hearing the request more flexibility to reject it. Davidsen-Nielsen (1990) terms this "tentative" politeness (p. 174) as does Huddleston (1969, p. 802), and Jespersen (1924) refers to the "modest uses" of the modals *could*, *would*, and *might* when substituting for *can*, *will*, and *may* (p. 268). Fleischman (1989) similarly focuses on "assertiveness" and argues that it is this feature which ties the usage of past morphology in polite requests to modal past usage in other structures, such as in hypothetical conditionals. In both polite requests and hypothetical conditionals, the speaker refuses to "assert" the proposition, and the refusal is marked with modal past morphology.

One difference between this usage and others we have looked at so far is that modal past in polite requests is not mandated by grammatical necessity but rather by sociolinguistic and pragmatic necessity. The distinction here is one of formality and sociolinguistic appropriateness, as well as individual speaker choice; although *can* and *could* are of equal acceptability in the examples above, they convey a socially nuanced difference in meaning.

Modal past is commonly incorporated into polite requests when modal auxiliaries are involved. We find this usage for *would*, *could*, and *might*, the latter in both its root and epistemic meanings:

Would you do me a favor? (Davidsen-Nielsen, 1990, p. 174)

Could you lend me a hand?

What might your name be? (Jespersen, 1954, p. 121)

Might I go along too?

Modal past in polite requests is also common for verbs of hoping, wanting, thinking, etc.:

I was hoping you might help me.

I was wondering if you could help me.

I wanted to ask you a question.

Did you want to speak to me? (Davidsen-Nielsen, p. 174)

I thought you might be able to help. (Davidsen-Nielsen, p. 174)

As noted earlier, because of the duality of past morphology, which can signify either modal past or temporal past, some sentences may ambiguously express either a past time factual interpretation or a present time remote (polite) interpretation, as in the following example:

Could you tell him the way to the post office? (Huddleston, 1969, p. 802)

which could be paraphrased alternately as either *would you mind telling him...?* or *were you able to tell him...?*

Modal Past in Reported and Indirect Speech Constructions

Perhaps the most complex environment of modal past usage is in reported speech constructions. When a speaker is reporting the speech of another person, as opposed to

expressing his own thoughts, the verb of the reported, or subordinate, clause frequently exhibits past morphology, even when the state or action represented is actually in the present time.

Consider:

She said she spoke Turkish. (implied: *She speaks Turkish*)

She asked me if I spoke Turkish. (equivalent: "Do you speak Turkish?" she asked.)

What did you say your name was? (Jespersen, 1924, p. 294) (equivalent: *What is your name?*)

He said his name was John. (implied: *His name is John*)

In the sentence, *He said his name was John*, we do not assume that the man's name has changed since he introduced himself, but rather that his name still is John. So why, in such cases, do we say *was* instead of *is* in the clause *his name was John*? The handbooks generally refer to this phenomenon as the "backshifting rule" or "sequence of tenses rule" that applies whenever one is reporting the speech of another person. This is usually taught as a conversion rule, whereby the present tense morphology (*is*) of the original utterance, ("*My name is John*"), is backshifted to produce the reported speech version in the example above. In the pedagogical context, this rule is usually accompanied by a conversion chart for each tense: if the reported verb starts out as present tense, it "backshifts" to past tense, if it starts out as present perfect or simple past, it "backshifts" to past perfect, etc. In order to explain how the modal auxiliaries function under this paradigm, a complex set of exceptions is required, for the modal auxiliaries do not always follow the rule.

While this presentation may have some ad hoc pedagogical utility, it doesn't really explain the phenomenon, nor does it accurately describe it. For one thing, one frequently hears reported speech utterances where no backshifting occurs:

John admitted that he hates spiders. (Leech, 2004, p. 108)

We were told that the police are still looking for him. (Leech, p. 108)

She finally told him that she likes him.

Sarah revealed that she knows the president well.

He confirmed that they can see us despite our camouflage.

Leech (2004) explains that this "break[ing of] the concord" can occur if the action of the reported clause was valid at the time of the original utterance and still remains valid at the time of the reporting (p. 108). Downing and Locke (2002) concur that it is the present time validity of the action which allows it to appear un-backshifted (p. 360). However, this reasoning simply returns us to our original dilemma of why we find past morphology at all in cases where the reported proposition is assumed to be valid in the present time.

A similarly circular suggestion is that the past morphology is actually a temporal past, resulting from the fact that the reported proposition was valid at the time of its original utterance, which now, at the time of reporting, is in the past. This explanation misses the point that although the proposition was valid in the past, its continued validity in the present time should normally assign it a present tense verb form. Both this explanation as well as Jespersen's (1954) proposal that "mental inertia" is responsible for the tendency to use past morphology (p. 152) are implausible and, like the backshifting rule, fail to account for why we use sometimes present and sometimes past morphology in the reported clause.

In some cases, the past morphology of reported speech does indeed have a temporal past meaning. In the sentence, *He told me he lived in London*, there are two possible interpretations. The original utterance could have been either of the following:

a. *"I live in London (now)."*

b. *"I lived in London (when I was a boy)."*

In *a*, the act of "living in London" is present time both in the original utterance and in the reported speech utterance. By contrast, in *b*, the action of "living in London" is clearly temporally past, and the reported version of it, *...he lived in London*, is an instance of temporal past morphology. However, if we assume a *b* interpretation of *He told me he lived in London*, we would expect a past time adverbial phrase (*when he was a boy*) or the double past of past perfect (*He told me he had lived in London*) to clarify that past time is intended; in the absence of these, a present time interpretation is the default reading of such a sentence.

The most plausible explanation for the use of past morphology in present time reported speech constructions is the desire to convey a modal meaning. Palmer (1986) notes that in reported speech, the speaker's choice of tense can reflect whether or not the speaker accepts the proposition as true. This assessment of true/likely versus untrue/unlikely on the part of the speaker - the essence of modal expression - is reflected in reported speech constructions just as it is in the other sentence types discussed in this paper. This analysis is supported by minimal pair sentences like the following:

1) a. *The police said they will call us when they have more information.*

b. *The police said they would call us when they had more information.*

2) a. *On the news they said it's gonna rain today.*

b. *On the news they said it would rain today.*

For each minimal pair, the meanings of the two sentences are nearly the same, and in fact would be interchangeable in many contexts. Yet in some contexts, for example if the speaker doubts that the police will actually call or that it will actually rain, the *b* sentences are appropriate where the *a* sentences are not. In other words, past morphology lends an available dubitative meaning to the sentence; it leaves open the possibility that the proposition is not accepted. The *a* sentences, by contrast, reflect the speaker's subjective assessment that the reported propositions are likely to be true. This effect is further illustrated by utterances in which the speaker uses stress to emphasize his or her non-acceptance of the proposition:

They SAID they would call... (implied: *but I don't believe they will*).

In such sentences, past morphology (*would*) is appropriate, and non-past morphology (*will*) is not.

We can therefore conclude that the past morphology found in present time reported speech sentences is indeed a modal past, and that its role in this environment is generally consistent with its role in other environments. Yet there remains a significant point of contrast between modal past in reported speech sentences and in other environments. Modal past in reported speech does not *always* convey a sense of uncertainty or unreality. Often, it seems to simply be the default tense morphology for the subordinate (reported) clause when the matrix clause verb is also a past form; as such, it can actually be epistemically neutral.

Other types of subordinate verb clauses, which are not instances of reported speech per se, but are nonetheless structurally and semantically very similar, also seem to use modal past as a default tense, particularly with certain kinds of verbs. Consider the following examples, of which a-c and f are taken from Jespersen (1924, p. 294) and e is taken from Jespersen (1954, p. 114):

- a. *How did you know I was here?*
- b. *I didn't know you knew [so and so].*
- c. *I thought he was married.*
- d. *How did you know that he brews / brewed beer?*
- e. *He believed that twice two was five.*
- f. *It was he who taught me that twice two is four.*

In sentence *a*, if we uncouple the two clauses, we get: *I am here; how did you know?*, in which the formerly subordinate, past morphology clause (*I was here*) is now a non-past, free-standing clause, yet it is equivalent in meaning to the sentence in *a*. The same manipulation is possible with sentences *b* and *c*. It does not seem plausible in these cases that modal past indicates the speaker's assessment of counterfactuality or unlikelihood with regard to the subordinate clause, likewise in cases of reported speech where the speaker is reporting his or her own previous utterance (*I said I would call you*). Rather, there seems to be something inherently modal in the subordinate clause structure.

In *d*, which mirrors the structure of sentences *a - c* except that the verb of the subordinate clause is eventive rather than stative, both present and past morphologies are acceptable for the subordinate verb form. It is notable, also, that in sentences like *a - c*, it does not work to substitute non-past for past morphology: **How did you know I am here?* Yet, in sentences like *d*, *e*, and *f*, this substitution is possible, and is employed to convey a distinction in epistemic validity of the subordinate propositions.

Other Uses of Modal Past

In addition to those environments described above, modal past appears in various other types of sentences that express hypothetical meaning. For example, modal past is commonly employed in conjunction with hypothetical entities introduced by a relative pronoun (*a person who...*, *a thing which... etc.*). The following examples have been taken from literary works cited by Jespersen (1954), and illustrate the use of modal past with hypothetical entities:

The way to wean him from any opinion would be to place somebody near him who was perpetually dinning it in his ears. (W. Hazlitt, as cited in Jespersen, p. 117)

It would be no pleasure to a London tradesman to sell anything which was what he pretended it was. (C. Dickens, as cited in Jespersen, p. 117)

A nation that stopped working would be dead in a fortnight. (G. Bernard Shaw, as cited in Jespersen, p. 116)

...I could not endure a husband [who had] a beard on his face. (adapted from Shakespeare, as cited in Jespersen, p. 120)

In other cases, the hypothetical element is tied to a particular timeframe, as in the following examples (here signaled by *the moment...* and *while...*):

The moment he married the widow, he would sell off all the furniture and run away. (C. Dickens, as cited in Jespersen, p. 116)

...I couldn't... not while my mother was alive. (C. Mackenzie, as cited in Jespersen, p. 117)

Sentences with hypothetical entities or timeframes are very similar in form to hypothetical conditionals; they both contain a modal auxiliary exhibiting modal past morphology (*would* and

could in the examples above), and exhibit modal past in the clause introducing the hypothetical entity or timeframe (*a husband who had a beard, while my mother was alive*).

Modal past is also often used, as James (1982) notes, in clauses of hypothetical conjecture, cued by conjunctions such as *suppose, imagine, and what if*. In these sentences, both past and non-past morphologies are possible, but the use of past morphology signals a greater degree of hypotheticality (James, p. 391):

Suppose she fails the test... (more likely)

Suppose she failed the test... (less likely)

James argues that the same distinction is at work in clauses introduced by the subordinating conjunctions *like, as if, and as though*. She suggests that, in the following examples, the first sentence "would be more consistent than [the second one] with a context in which the speaker either suspected or knew that 'he' was not in fact sick" (James, p. 390):

He's behaving like he was sick.

He's behaving like he's sick.

Certain fixed expressions also use modal past, though not exclusively. One example of this is the expression, *It's (high/about) time....* Jacobsson (1975) asserts that the usual verb tense to follow this expression is the modal preterit, as in *It's time you went to bed* (p. 223) or *It's about time he got what he deserves*. While modal past is clearly acceptable here, alternative formulations abound as well, including present tense, and especially, infinitive verb forms. Expressions with *would rather* and *had rather* provide a similar example. In some cases, these expressions trigger modal past in the subordinate clause, as in *She wants to fly but I'd rather she went by train* (Thomson and Martinet, 1969, p. 173), or *I'd rather you didn't do that*. Yet a quick

survey of English language newspapers shows these expressions also frequently paired with the subjunctive form of the verb, as in *I'd rather she go by train* or *I'd rather it be sooner than later*.

Certain verbs and expletive phrases seem to divide along dialectal lines with regard to use of modal past. Jacobsson (1975) writes that the sentences *I suggested he took it with him*, and *I suggested he should take it with him*, both using modal past, are acceptable in British English and equivalent to the American version *I suggested he take it with him*, which uses subjunctive (p. 222). Likewise, *It's important (that) you went at once* (British dialect) (Jacobsson, p. 222) as compared with *It's important (that) you go at once* (American dialect). And there are many more examples of this kind. Interestingly, this dialectal difference is not merely stylistic, as Jacobsson observes: "In British English, the sentence *It is important that we have an adequate supply of atom bombs* could be taken to mean that we have already got the supply, while the American interpretation would be that it is important for us to get it" (p. 222).

Finally, the modal past expression *as it were* is commonly employed, at least in American English, as a rhetorical device signaling metaphor. It is frequently used to reinforce the metaphorical nature of an idiomatic expression that directly precedes it, as in: *He told me so himself, straight from the horse's mouth, as it were*.

II. Modal Past Cross-Linguistically

Cross-Linguistic Findings

The use of past morphology to convey modal meaning that is evident in English occurs frequently in human language; it is found in many different languages and language families. Palmer (1986), discussing connections between modality and both past and future morphologies in many languages, states that although "the future may be thought to be the most "modal," yet it is the past tense that is in fact mostly interrelated with modality, and particularly with unreality" (p. 209-210). Iatridou (2000) also notes the wide cross-linguistic attestation of past morphology coinciding with what she calls "counterfactual" morphology, concluding that the sheer weight of evidence precludes accidental homophony as an explanation for this phenomenon (p. 245). James (1982), in her study of cross-linguistic modal past usage, writes that "there is clearly a universal semantic link between the notion of past tense and the notion of remoteness from reality... the past tense marking device universally gravitates in its use towards the situations in which the greatest distance from reality is involved" (p. 396).

Some languages which have been determined to use modal past include the following⁹:

⁹ The sources for these claims are the following: Davidsen-Nielsen (1990): Danish; Han (2006): Korean; Iatridou (2000): Modern Greek; James (1982): Chipewyan, Classical Greek, Cree, French, Garo, Haya, Latin, Old Irish, Russian, Tonga; Winford (2000): Sranan. Palmer (1986) cites his earlier work on Bilin and that of W. Leslau on Tigrinya. Palmer cites A. E. Hammer's grammar of German. Both Iatridou and Steele cite K. Hale's work with Papago, and Iatridou cites E. Cho's work with both Japanese and Korean. Iatridou cites personal communication with B. Citko regarding Polish.

<u>Language Family</u>	<u>Language</u>
Indo-European	English, French, Spanish, Latin, German, Classical and Modern Greek, Russian, Old Irish, Danish, and Polish
Sino-Tibetan	Garo
Afro-Asiatic	Arabic, Bilin, Tigrinya
Niger-Congo	Haya, Tonga
Altaic (Turkic)	Turkish
Japonic	Japanese
Algic (Algonquian)	Cree
Na-Dene (Athabaskan)	Chipewyan
Uto-Aztecan	Tohono O'odam ("Papago")
Language Isolate	Korean
Creole	Sranan (English-based)

The case has also been made for Nitinaht of the Wakashan family (James, 1982), and Old Marathi, an exemplar of the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European (Palmer, 1986). Steele (1975) argues that the re-constructed Proto-Uto-Aztecan also belongs in this group. The above list is by no means conclusive, but represents merely a sample of those languages in which modal past usage has been studied.

The universal nature of the modal past phenomenon does not mean that its manifestations are symmetrical in the various languages in which it occurs. As in English, other languages require modal past in some environments - usually where the context is inherently hypothetical - while in other environments an available modal past may be optionally used or eschewed to convey a greater or lesser degree of hypothetical meaning (James, 1982). Other languages also make some distinctions that English does not (or rarely does). For example, in some languages, modal past in certain environments coincides with the subjunctive mood, rendering past subjunctive morphology (this was the case in Old English). In other languages, modal past

associates with the form of the imperfective aspect, regardless of whether the meaning is perfective or imperfective.

James' (1982) study of past-for-hypothetical focuses on eleven languages representing five language families: English, French, Latin, Classical Greek, Russian, Tonga, Haya, Cree, Old Irish, Garo, and Chipewyan. She finds that the environments in which modal past is used vary across languages but that *all* of the languages in her study use the device in the apodosis of present and past time hypothetical conditionals (James). Most, though not all, of the languages in James' sample also use modal past in the protasis of present and past time hypothetical conditionals, and most use it at least optionally in counterfactual wishes, which she finds is the second most common environment, cross-linguistically, for modal past usage.

James' data set can be instructively expanded to include Spanish, Turkish, and Arabic, representing two additional language families, which also employ modal past in both the protasis and the apodosis of hypothetical conditionals, and in the case of Spanish and Turkish, in counterfactual wishes:

Spanish: *Si yo fuera el rey de España, viviría en Madrid.*

[If I be-past-subjunctive the king of Spain, I live-conditional in Madrid]

'If I were the king of Spain, I would live in Madrid.'

Ojalá (que) fuera rico.

["I wish" (that) I be-past-subjunctive rich]

'I wish I were rich.'

Turkish: *Eğer ben Türkiye'nin başbakanı olsaydım, Ankara'da yaşardım.*

[If I Turkey's prime minister be-conditional-past-1st pers.-sing, in
Ankara I wide-present-past-1st pers.-sing. live]

'If I were the prime minister of Turkey, I would live in Ankara.'

Keşke zengin olsaydım.

[I wish rich I be-conditional¹⁰-past-1st pers. sing.]

'I wish I were rich.'

Arabic (Lebanese dialect): *law kaan 3indii žawaneH, kaan fiini Tiir.*

[if be-past-3rdpers.-sing. to-me (have) wings, be-past-3rdpers.-sing.
possible-for-me fly-1st pers.]

'If I had wings, I could fly.'

German also uses the imperfect subjunctive - i.e. past morphology - in the protasis and either imperfect subjunctive or "conditional tense" in the apodosis of hypothetical conditionals (Hammer, as cited in Palmer, 1986). For example:

Wenn ich ein Auto hätte, könnte ich Dich mitnehmen.¹¹

[if I a car have-imperfect-past-subjunctive, can-imperfect-past-subjunctive
I you take-with]

'If I had a car, I could take you with me.'

I will discuss the conditional tense and its relationship to modal past later in this section.

James (1982) suggests that the apodosis clause of a hypothetical conditional may be "more" hypothetical than the protasis clause - in other words, even more removed from reality (p. 378). She proposes this as an explanation for her finding that, while all of the languages in her study use modal past in the apodosis clause, not all use it in the protasis clause; Garo,

¹⁰ The Turkish conditional morpheme is not a combination of past and future tense morphologies like the French and Spanish "conditional" tenses.

¹¹ Example provided by Dr. Charles Elerick, personal communication, April 19, 2011.

Chipewyan, Russian, and Cree are examples of languages which do not or do not always use past morphology in the protasis of hypothetical conditionals (James). Contemporary English actually provides evidence for this hypothesis as well. Although English hypothetical conditionals use modal past in both clauses, they also require a modal auxiliary - in other words, an additional modal element - in the clause that elaborates the apodosis. This appears to be a relatively recent development in English. Jespersen (1954) cites numerous examples in early Modern English of hypothetical conditionals with no modal auxiliary, such as the following one taken from the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible: *If thou hadst bene here, my brother had not died*¹² ('If you had been here, my brother would not have died') (p. 127). At least in contemporary English, however, the modal auxiliary is a requisite marker of hypothetical conditional apodoses, lending support to James' claim of a "more modal" status for apodosis clauses.

It has been noted earlier in the paper that the modal auxiliary *would* is a combination of past and future morphology: the *-ed* past applied to the paraphrastic future marker *will* - and that this morphological syncretism is often used in hypothetical environments. As noted by Paillard (1976) and Iatridou (2000), English is not alone in combining future and past morphology for this purpose. In other languages, this morphological combination is frequently termed the "conditional tense." Consider the French and Spanish data:

French: *Si j'étais riche, j'achèterais un avion.*

Spanish: *Si yo fuera rica, compraría un avión.*

'If I were rich, I would buy a plane'

¹² Typically, biblical language is far more conservative than language in other spheres of life, and as such usually represents the English of a period earlier than the time of publication; however, the 1611 Authorized (King James) Version of the bible was specifically intended to be written in the layman's English of the time and so may give a relatively more accurate picture of early 17th century English.

In each case, the verb in "conditional" tense - *achèterais* and *compraría* - is actually a combination of the future tense verb stem and the imperfect past suffix:

	future stem	imperfect past 1 st person singular suffix
French	<i>achèter-</i>	<i>-ais</i>
Spanish	<i>comprar-</i>	<i>-ía</i> ¹³

That this is a case of the future stem, and not the infinitive form, combining with imperfect morphology, is made even clearer by irregular verbs such as French *aller* ('to go') or Spanish *hacer* ('to make, to do'):

infinitive form	imperfect past form	future form	conditional form
<i>aller</i>	<i>allais</i>	<i>irai</i>	<i>irais</i>
<i>hacer</i>	<i>hacia</i>	<i>haré</i>	<i>haría</i>

Paillard (1976) notes that this phenomenon of morphological combination is equivalent in French and in English and that it represents a usage of past morphology for "irreal" (p. 179). Iatridou (2000) demonstrates very thoroughly this symmetry between *would* and the French "conditional" form, arguing that the conditional is not actually a separate mood, but rather a concurrence of two indicative mood tenses, future and past, just as in English. She notes that Modern Greek exhibits the same phenomenon (Iatridou). Other languages which combine elements of both future and past morphology in the apodosis of hypothetical conditionals are Cree, Garo, Chipewyan, Old Irish, Sranan, and possibly Nitinaht (my analysis of James' (1982) and Winford's (2000) data). This may be, as in English, a strategy for marking the apodosis

¹³ *-ía* is the imperfect suffix for -er and -ir verbs; the -ar verb imperfect suffix *-aba*, is not used in the Spanish conditional, where all verbs, including those of the -ar category, take the *-ía* imperfect suffix.

clause of hypothetical conditionals with "extra" modality (in the form of a modal future), further supporting James' claim, although more extensive analysis would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis. The modal nature of future morphology is an investigation for another time.

In addition to hypothetical conditionals and wish sentences, past morphology is used for a wide range of functions cross-linguistically, many of which coincide with English usage. For example, French and Spanish both use modal past in polite contexts, as these examples from Fleischman (1989, p. 9) show:

Spanish: *Querría hablar con usted.*

Quisiera hablar con usted.

French: *Je voudrais vous parler.*

 'I would like to speak with you.'

In the above sentences, *querría* and *quisiera*, which both translate as 'I would like,' are conditional (future + past) and past subjunctive forms, respectively, and *voudrais*, 'would like,' is the conditional (future + past) form. According to James' (1982) sources, Modern Greek and Russian use modal past in this environment as well, although Cree does not. Steele (1975) argues that Proto-Uto-Aztecan also belonged in this category of modal past for polite requests, and James suggests that the past morphology in negative imperatives in Latin was a polite usage.

In reported and indirect speech clauses, Old Irish, Cree, Russian, and sometimes German exhibit modal past usage (James, 1982 and Palmer 1986). This is also the case for French, Spanish, and Turkish:

French: *Il m'a dit qu'il vivait à Bruxelles.*

 (*vivait*: [live-past-imperfect-3rd singular])

Spanish: *Me dijo que vivía en Bruselas.*

(*vivía*: [live-past-imperfect-3rd singular])

Turkish: *Bana Brüksel'de yaşadığını söyledi.*

(*yaşadığını*: [live-past-possess.-3rd singular-accusative])

'He told me he lived in Brussels.'

In French and Spanish, it is the imperfect past form which is used in the present time subordinate clause, *he lived in Brussels*. In Turkish, it is actually a nominalized verb form, *yaşadığını*, which might translate literally as 'his living,' and which contains the internal past morphology *-dik*,¹⁴ although the implied time reference is clearly present.

Additional areas of overlap between modal past usage in English and in other languages are found in sentences of hypothetical conjecture and comparison, and in idioms such as *It's time...* For example, Russian and Spanish use modal past for hypothetical conjectures such as *suppose she failed the test*; French, Old Irish, and Spanish exhibit modal past for hypothetical comparisons such as *he's behaving like he was sick*; and Cree uses it in the sentence *it's (high/about) time we went* (James, 1982 for claims about Russian, French, Old Irish, and Cree).

Not all uses of modal past coincide with English usage. James (1982) finds that Russian and Old Irish use modal past following purpose clauses (*I did this so that... + subordinate clause using modal past*) and that Russian also uses it after verbs of negated thinking (*I don't believe that... + subordinate clause using modal past*) and following verbs such as "'order', 'permit', and 'warn' when the clause is finite" (p. 393-394). At least Russian (James) and Danish (Davidsen-Nielsen, 1990) also appear to use it in the subordinate clause following a verb of emotion, and Danish (Davidsen-Nielsen) and Latin (James) use it in clauses expressing surprise. In the Levantine dialect of Arabic, the expression, *eemta-ma kaan* 'whenever (as soon as) possible'

¹⁴ *-dik* is actually the simple past 1st person plural suffix; however, it is used for past and present time nominalized verb clauses in all persons, both singular and plural. The /k/ of *-dik* becomes /ğ/ in intervocalic position; this is a phonological rather than morphological process.

contains a verb bearing modal past morphology - literally 'whenever it were possible' (Nydell, 2005). French frequently employs modal past combined with future morphology in what is termed the "conditionnel de presse" or 'media conditional,' often used by reporters to emphasize the second-hand nature of the information they are relaying. James gives as an example of this "conditionnel de presse": *Le roi serait à Paris* 'It appears that the king is in Paris,' literally: 'The king would be in Paris.' (p. 386).

Overlap with Mood and Aspect

Tense, mood, and aspect are closely related, often overlapping categories, and the context of modal past usage is no exception. In the cross-linguistic analysis, two trends emerge regarding morphologies that tend to combine obligatorily with past morphology in modal contexts. One is the subjunctive, an inflection of mood, and the other is the imperfect, an inflection of aspect. English does not have inflections for imperfect aspect, nor does it retain distinctive past subjunctive forms, yet this overlap of tense, mood, and aspect in modal past constructions is prevalent in at least the broader Indo-European data on modal past usage, with some evidence from non-Indo-European languages as well.

Many languages have distinct inflections for past imperfect and past perfective action, and among these there is a clear tendency to use only the imperfect past in hypothetical contexts. In such cases, the imperfect form seems to be an obligatory element of modality, and is used regardless of whether the meaning conveyed is actually imperfective. Iatridou (2000) calls this "fake aspect," since it often results in imperfect morphology being interpreted perfectly, in the same way that modal past is a "fake past" because it is independent of temporal considerations and can easily appear in present or future time utterances.

French provides a good example of this "fake" - or "modal" - aspect. In French, there are two distinct past tenses: the imperfect past and the perfective past (*passé composé*). In environments where modal past is called for, it is always the imperfect past which fulfills this role. Consider the following examples of hypothetical conditionals:

Present time: *Si tu me donnais de l'argent, je te payerais une bière.*
[If you me give-imperfect-past some money, I you buy-
conditional a beer]
'If you gave me some money, I would buy you a beer.'

Past time: *Si je t'avais vu, je t'aurais dit bonjour.*
[If I you see-imperfect-past-perfective-past, I you say-
conditional-perfective-past hello]
'If I had seen you, I would have said hello (to you).'

In the examples above, the imperfect past is the only acceptable past form to convey hypothetical meaning, in both the protasis and the apodosis clauses (recall that the conditional form is actually a combination of future and imperfect past morphologies).

In making this distinction between imperfect past and perfective past, languages like French resolve an ambiguity that is sustained in English. If the protasis clause of a French conditional sentence contains the perfective past form, it immediately signals that the utterance is a real conditional in past time rather than a hypothetical conditional in non-past time. Despite containing imperfect past morphology, the examples above actually convey perfective past action; the imperfect morphology is effectively modal rather than aspectual. Thus, in the past time hypothetical conditional, there are two instances of aspectual-past morphology: one is the imperfect past indicating hypothetical, and one is the perfective past indicating past time

perfective action. As evidence that the true aspectual meaning of the sentence is perfective, consider the non-hypothetical statements implied by 'If I had seen you, I would have said hello' :

Je ne t'ai pas vu, je ne t'ai pas dit bonjour.

[I (neg) you neg-see-perfective-past, I (neg) you neg-say-perfective-past hello]

'I didn't see you, I didn't say hello.'

In addition to French, languages which exhibit this pairing of modal imperfect aspect with modal past tense are Hindi, Modern Greek (Iatridou, 2000), Classical Greek, Latin, German, (Palmer, 1986), Old Irish, and Cree (James, 1982). Russian and Polish do not fit the pattern, as they pair both imperfect and perfective aspectual morphology with modal past, maintaining the semantically-appropriate aspectual distinction just as in non-hypothetical contexts (Russian data from James, Polish data from Iatridou). Yet there is no language in James' sample that shows the opposite pattern - of default perfective morphology in hypothetical phrases with imperfect meaning, and she concludes that there is a clear cross-linguistic tendency to use imperfect aspectual morphology in hypothetical contexts.

The reason for this relationship is not clear. James (1982) cites Hopper's argument that it has to do with assertiveness, specifically the "reduced assertion of the finite reality of the event" that is common to both hypothetical contexts and imperfect - that is, non-completive - contexts (as cited in James, p. 399). Iatridou (2000) argues that aspectual morphology maintains a true aspectual meaning only when "the temporal coordinates of an eventuality are set with respect to the utterance time," and that in all other cases, imperfect is the default aspectual morphology (p. 262).

The other trend of interrelated morphology concerns the subjunctive. This relationship seems more natural, given that subjunctive mood inflections are themselves a means of marking modality, and thus perform a function similar to modal past. An example of this is Spanish, which pairs the subjunctive with modal past in the protasis clauses of hypothetical conditionals, in "wish" sentences, and in certain polite contexts:

<i>Si yo <u>fuera</u> el rey de España...</i>	'If I were the king of Spain...'
<i>Ojalá que <u>fuera</u> rico.</i>	'I wish I were rich'
<i><u>Quisiera</u> hablar con usted.</i>	'I would like to speak with you.'

The underlined verb in each of the above examples is the past subjunctive form. Interestingly, in the polite context, the conditional form (which combines future and imperfect past morphologies) is an equally acceptable alternative:

<i><u>Querría</u> hablar con usted.</i>	'I would like to speak with you.'
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Jespersen (1954) notes that Old French also used the past subjunctive for hypotheticality, although in Modern French the past subjunctive has been replaced by the imperfect past indicative in most hypothetical environments¹⁵ (p. 114). Various other languages actually combine all three morphologies: modal imperfect aspect, subjunctive mood, and modal past tense. Examples are Latin, German (Palmer, 1986), and Old Irish (James, 1982), all of which use an imperfect past subjunctive verb form in various hypothetical contexts. English, too, once exhibited this tendency of interrelated modal morphology. Jespersen (1965) states that in earlier English, hypotheticality was denoted by the past subjunctive form, which in Old English was formally distinct from the past indicative form (p. 113). This is perhaps why some linguists refer to English hypothetical conditionals as "subjunctive conditionals," and why others, for example

¹⁵ Interestingly, Modern French uses not past but present subjunctive for certain highly formal polite requests and particularly in formal writing: *Veillez m'excuser...*, *Veillez agréer...*

Curme (1947), Long (1966), and Thomson and Martinet (1969), refer to all instances of modal past as uses of the subjunctive past form; they analyze the English verb system as having both past subjunctive and past indicative forms which simply happen to be identical. Reference texts tend to cite *were* as the only surviving past subjunctive form. In fact, in the Old English conjugation of 'to be', both the subjunctive and the indicative forms included etymons which might be the ancestor of our modern *were*:

Old English *bēon, is, wesan* ('to be')¹⁶:

	singular	plural
Preterit Indicative 2 nd person:	<i>wǣre</i>	<i>wǣron</i>
Preterit Subjunctive (all persons):	<i>wǣre</i>	<i>wǣren</i>

¹⁶ Old English data from Moore, Samuel and Knott, Thomas A. Revised by Hulbert, James R. The Elements of Old English. 10th Edition. The George Wahr Publishing Co. Ann Arbor, 1962.

III. Implications

Modal Past as a Language Universal

The broad cross-linguistic correspondence between temporally past forms and modally "remote" forms - what I have called "modal past" - is no coincidence, but rather a phenomenon of greater linguistic significance. Coincidental homomorphy certainly does occur, as for example with the English suffix *-s*, which can mean either 'plural' or 'possessive' when applied to nouns, or '3rd person singular' when applied to verbs. Homomorphy, however, occurs at the level of a particular morpheme rather than at the conceptual level. Modal past, by contrast, is conceptual and not confined to just the *-ed* suffix; *ate*, though irregular, can be either a temporal or a modal past form, but *geese* cannot be the possessive of *goose*. More importantly, the wide-ranging occurrence of modal past across world languages renders the accidental homomorphy hypothesis untenable. The fact that modal past appears in numerous and un-related languages and language families around the world leaves little doubt that it should be considered a language universal.

That universal principles of human language exist is not a new concept, but it has become the dominant assumption underlying modern linguistics, beginning with the Generative revolution initiated by the work of Chomsky. Usually referred to as Universal Grammar (UG), these principles constitute the defining and delimiting foundation of every human language. Furthermore, these principles are innate and as such are essentially biological even as they shape and constrain the culture-specific manifestations which are individual languages. To be certain, they are not grammar "rules" of the sort one learns in elementary school, but rather actual constraints on the way the human mind and brain unconsciously internalize, organize, process, and perceive language. The best analogy is to an organ in the body, or as Pinker (1994) terms it, a "language instinct."

It is important to remember that "universal" in the linguistics sense does not mean that a particular principle is at work in every single human language. As White (2007) explains, "universal principles...operate...only in that subset of languages that exhibit the relevant properties" (p. 43). Universal principles, in other words, are part of the universal repertoire, but a principle that concerns tense inflections will be relevant only for those languages which inflect for tense. Universal Grammar is the macro-set of all possible grammatical strategies, patterns, and features of Human Language, and the grammar of every individual human language is a subset of UG; its particular set of features are drawn from the universal set.

Modal Past as Principle or Parameter?

Approaches to Universal Grammar generally assume the existence of not just universal principles but also parameters. Parameters are conceptualized as switches with two or more settings such that for some languages, the parameter will be set in one direction, while for other languages, it will be set in the opposite direction. An example of this is the parameter setting for yes/no question formation. In general, languages form yes/no questions in one of two ways: either by inversion of the subject and a verbal element, or with a dedicated question particle. English is an example of the inversion parameter setting, while Turkish is an example of the question particle parameter setting:

Statement: *There is a tea garden nearby.*

Question: *Is there a tea garden nearby?* (inversion of *there* and *is*)

Statement: *Buralarda çay bahçesi var.*

Question: *Buralarda çay bahçesi var mı?* (addition of question particle *mi*)

Universal principles, on the other hand, are presumed to operate uniformly in every language that contains the set of features governed by that principle. So, is the phenomenon of modal past a UG principle, operating in all languages with the relevant features, or is it one setting of a UG parameter - one of two fundamental alternatives? While a thorough investigation of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, I will nonetheless offer a preliminary analysis.

If we assume that modal past is one end of a parameter setting, the logical next question is: what is the other end of the parameter setting? Since the English tense inflection system is binary, with 'past' as the marked value and 'non-past' as the unmarked value, and this is cross-linguistically a common arrangement, one possibility is to hypothesize a generalized relationship between the marked tense value and hypotheticality. If this is the case, then just as 'present' is the conceptually unmarked value for time, so would 'real' be the conceptually unmarked value for modality. Some languages organize tense inflections not according to a binary system of 'past' and 'non-past' but rather of 'future' and 'non-future'. If one assumes that 'real' and 'hypothetical' align with the unmarked and marked tense values respectively, then one would expect to find that future / non-future languages exhibit not modal past morphology but modal *future* morphology in hypothetical contexts.

Zeitoun, Huang, Yeh, Chang, and Wu's (1996) study of Formosan languages and Dempwolff, Bradshaw, and Czobor's (2005) study of the New Guinean language Jabêm have in fact claimed a link between "irrealis" modality and futurity. For Jabêm and for eight of the nine Formosan languages studied, the authors claim a syntactic dichotomy between future and non-future time, and an alignment of non-future time with realis modality and future time with irrealis modality (Dempwolff et al., Zeitoun et al.). However, in both studies, the authors insist that the traditional categorization of verbal morphology according to tense is inaccurate for these

languages and that rather than having tense as their primary feature, verbs in Jabêm and the Formosan languages are better analyzed as having realis/irrealis distinctions as their primary feature (Dempwolff et al., Zeitoun et al.). Dempwolff et al. write that Jabêm verbs are in fact lacking in tense, but that they do distinguish between a "modus realis and a modus imaginativus [translated as "irrealis"]" and that "our present, imperfect, and perfect correspond to the realis; while we have to render the irrealis by means of our future, imperative, subjunctive, or even by our auxiliary verbs" (p. 12).

The problem with viewing these studies as corollaries to the analysis of modal past in this paper is that it cannot be determined if what is meant by "irrealis" in the Jabêm and Formosan languages studies is the same thing that is here referred to as modal uses of tense morphology. In the Formosan languages study, Zeitoun et al. (1996) give no definition of what they mean by "irrealis," nor is there any data to indicate that this feature is present in hypothetical conditionals, *wish* sentences, or other common environments of modal past morphology. In the Jabêm study, Dempwolff et al. (2005) say only that the "modus imaginativus" is used when a speaker judges that he is speaking about an event "in his imaginary world" as opposed to "in the real world" (p. 12). However, Dempwolff et al. state that the irrealis mode is used in both clauses of a conditional sentence, irregardless of whether it is a real conditional or a hypothetical conditional (p. 115), and there is little evidence from their data that irrealis morphology in Jabêm is really akin to modal past in English. Furthermore, the fact that tense does not seem to be a primary syntactic feature in either Jabêm or the Formosan languages undermines the comparison with those languages which clearly exhibit modal past morphology; since the analysis of modal past in hypothetical contexts hinges on distinctions of tense morphology, it may not be possible to extend it to languages lacking distinctive tense morphology.

If modal past is not one end of a UG parameter, then it may be a UG principle. If this is the case, then we should expect modal past to operate in all languages which exhibit the relevant properties (as per White, 2007). It seems reasonable to assume that the existence of distinctive tense morphology is one of the prerequisites for the operation of modal past morphology. To my knowledge, there is no readily-available data for languages which exhibit past tense morphology and which do not employ it in at least some of the hypothetical environments that English does.

There are certainly languages which do not exhibit modal past morphology. For example, the highly analytical Mandarin Chinese does not. However, Mandarin Chinese has no tense morphology at all; that is, no grammatical element that specifically locates a verb phrase in past, present, or future time (Li and Thompson, 1981). As such, Mandarin utterances which convey hypothetical meaning are structurally very different from their English counterparts. An example from Li and Thompson's comprehensive reference grammar demonstrates the structural ambiguity of conditional sentences in Mandarin Chinese (p. 647):

rúguǒ nǐ kàn - dào wǒ mèimei, nǐ yídìng zhīdào tā huáiyùn le

[if you see - arrive I younger:sister, you certainly know 3rd sing pregnant
CRS particle¹⁷]

'If you see my younger sister, you'll certainly know that she is pregnant.' /

'If you saw my younger sister, you'd know that she was pregnant.' (I *could*

imagine your seeing her) / 'If you had seen my younger sister, you would

have known that she was pregnant.' (you *didn't* see her)

Li and Thompson write that "which type of message is conveyed by a Mandarin conditional construction is inferred by the hearer from the proposition in the second clause and from his/her

¹⁷ Li and Thompson (1981) indicate that the *le* used here means 'currently relevant state' (CRS). They specifically confirm that it is not in any way a tense marker.

knowledge of the world and of the context in which the sentence is being used" (p. 647). In other words, Mandarin speakers use pragmatic and contextual rather than grammatical information to differentiate the meanings "real" and "hypothetical" in conditional sentences.

If we assume that the existence of tense morphology is a prerequisite for the principle of modal past to operate, then the case of Mandarin Chinese simply illustrates White's (2007) claim that a UG principle will operate "only in that subset of languages that exhibit the relevant properties" (p. 43). In this very preliminary analysis, then, it seems likely that modal past is a universal principle; however, further investigation of those languages which do not exhibit modal past is necessary in order to confirm this hypothesis.

UG and Language Acquisition

Whether modal past is one end of a UG parameter, or, as I suspect, a UG principle, the fact that it forms a part of Universal Grammar has implications that extend into language pedagogy due to the central role that UG plays in language acquisition. In fact, arguments in support of a theory of Universal Grammar are heavily rooted in the study of language acquisition. The most conclusive evidence of the existence of UG is the otherwise inexplicable, overwhelming linguistic feat achieved by children acquiring their native language.

All (developmentally normal) individuals achieve mastery of their native language at an early age regardless of individual cognitive ability and despite widely divergent environmental factors during acquisition. Once achieved, adult native language competence reveals a relative conformity of end states. Further, this feat is achieved with absolutely no teaching; it is an inevitable and natural part of normal human development that occurs independent of external encouragement. And, like other universal human abilities, language acquisition is a largely

unconscious process which leaves the individual with no *conscious* knowledge of his or her native language, but with *unconscious* mastery of it. A crucial final point is that the degree of linguistic competence achieved by children is underdetermined by the amount and nature of input data they are exposed to (White, 1989). In other words, children are able to take a relatively limited sample of raw language data and develop an unconscious but expert knowledge of the complete grammatical workings of the language. This final point, called the "poverty of the stimulus" (White, 2007, p. 37) argument, is an especially strong indication that some force other than mere cognitive reasoning is at work.

Pre-existing knowledge of the principles of Universal Grammar is the most plausible explanation for the accomplishments of first language acquisition. The theory of UG proposes that the possible incarnations of a particular grammatical expression are limited to a few manageable alternatives, and that children are born with innate unconscious knowledge of these possible alternatives. Thus, children do not start out *tabula rasa* from a linguistic standpoint; rather, they start with the full set of possibilities in UG and use the language data of their environment to eliminate and narrow down the possibilities until they are left with just those elements relevant to their native language. This view of first language acquisition is widely accepted by modern linguists. There is much less consensus with regard to the operational nature of second language acquisition.

Individuals acquiring a second or non-native language differ from those acquiring a native language in a crucial way. Whereas native learners approach the task with the macro set of UG principles, unspecified for any particular language, non-native learners approach the task with a complete, language-specific subset of grammar features already configured. The controversial questions are whether or not non-native language learners retain access to the full

set of UG principles later in life and after they have mastered their native language, and to what extent competence in the native language influences the learning of a non-native language.

The Full Transfer / Full Access Hypothesis

Accounts of second language acquisition (SLA) vary significantly. Some linguists¹⁸ have proposed that non-native language learners, at least in the case of adults, have no recourse to the principles of UG, and that learning is achieved via more general cognitive ability rather than a language-specific mechanism. These proposals sometimes argue that although learners retain no *independent* access to UG, they are able to indirectly draw on UG principles via their L1, and that they therefore apply only those principles and parameters which operate in the L1 to the L2 learning process (White, 2007, p. 49-50). Other linguists¹⁹ have proposed that SLA is driven fully by UG, and that knowledge of the L1 plays no role at all. This UG-only account posits that second language acquisition and first language acquisition are identical processes with respect to UG principles. Still other accounts²⁰ argue for varying degrees of partial access to UG; for example, some argue for access to principles but without the ability to reset parameters, others for access to principles and only certain kinds of parameters, and so on.

Much of this debate is motivated by the notable mismatch between native and non-native grammars which is the rule rather than the exception for most non-native language learning. The fact that individuals are able to master a non-native language, even one radically different from their L1, is evidence that UG must play some role in the process. Yet, non-native speakers rarely achieve the same level of competence as native speakers, and in most cases never lose the

¹⁸ White (1989) lists Clahsen and Muysken, as well as Schachter, as proponents of this hypothesis (p. 49).

¹⁹ Krashen argues for this view (as cited in White, 1989, p. 49).

²⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of partial access accounts, see Kong (2005) and Schwartz and Sprouse (1996).

tendency to display non-native grammatical behavior in the L2. A theory of second language acquisition must account for both the fact that non-native acquisition is possible, and the fact that FLA and SLA generally produce disparate end results.

The explanation that I find most convincing, and which I adopt as the theoretical basis for the analysis in this paper, is the Full Transfer / Full Access Hypothesis proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996). The FT/FA Hypothesis makes a two-part claim: first, that individuals begin the task of learning a non-native language by initially transferring in full the grammar of their native language to their conceptualization of the L2 (Full Transfer), and second, that learners also retain full access to Universal Grammar, which allows them to "restructure" their conceptualization of the L2 when the language input they receive in the learning process is revealed to be inconsistent with the grammar they have transferred from the L1 (Full Access). In other words, the end point of L1 acquisition is the starting point for L2 acquisition, and UG is the tool which allows the learner to make the necessary adjustments to get from the L1 to the L2. Thus, the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis implies that first language acquisition and second language acquisition are similar processes, with the crucial distinction that they have different starting points.

Evidence in support of the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis comes from empirical studies of interlanguage grammars of students learning a non-native language. "Interlanguage grammar" is the term for grammatical behavior which has departed from the L1 grammar but is not yet consistent with the L2 grammar; it's the intermediary step - really series of steps - between the L1 and the L2. Various empirical studies, including those of Yuan (1997), Slabakova (2000), and Haznedar (as cited in White, 2003, p. 62), as well as Schwartz and Sprouse's (1996) review of SLA hypotheses, have analyzed the interlanguage grammars of

students acquiring a non-native language and demonstrated both the presence of L1 grammar properties as well as the subsequent shift to L2 grammar properties. In addition to the evidence from formal studies, FT/FA also has the advantage of conforming to the anecdotal experiences of language teachers, which indicate that students' errors are overwhelmingly based in grammatical bias from their native language, particularly in the early stages of L2 acquisition. By contrast, more advanced students demonstrate a native-like tendency with regard to core features of the language, and errors often result from over-generalizing those core principles. The matter of differing end points for FLA and SLA is an area where the FT/FA Hypothesis needs to be further elaborated, but the implication is that the degree to which the end results vary depends not just on how well the new L2 settings can be acquired, but also, and especially, the degree to which settings for the L1 can be overcome.

Pedagogical Implications

Assuming that the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis of non-native language acquisition is correct, then overcoming L1 grammar settings and triggering the UG-based restructuring process should be the goals of language pedagogy with regard to grammar. The implication of the preceding analysis is that all students of English will have inherent access to a feature such as modal past, whether or not their L1 exhibits it. However, whether or not their native language contains modal past morphology will have implications for how they go about acquiring its use in English, and likewise for how their teachers should approach its presentation in the classroom.

Grammar presentation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks is generally organized not according to broad principles such as modal past, but rather as a series of unrelated

individual topics. This may or may not be the best organizational format for the typical student; however, for the EFL teacher, a broader understanding of the underlying principles is indispensable. Another essential part of EFL pedagogy is the connection of distinctive form with distinctive meaning. Although this seems obvious, it is an often overlooked part of grammar teaching. The teaching of conditional sentences provides a good example of this. Many textbooks and grammar exercises stress the proper matching of verb forms (in the result clause, use *will* if the "if" clause is in present tense, and *would* if the "if" clause is in past tense) but fail to focus adequately on the semantic distinction rendered by those forms, i.e. the difference in meaning between real and hypothetical conditionals. The result is that diligent students are often very adept at choosing the proper verb forms to match other elements of a given sentence, but unsure as to exactly when one or another type of sentence is semantically appropriate.

The challenge for the EFL teacher is to focus on the underlying concepts of various elements of English grammar and present these to students in a way that clearly highlights the semantic contrast. In order to do this effectively, an EFL teacher must have some knowledge of the grammatical properties of the students' L1. When presenting hypothetical conditionals, *wish* sentences, polite requests, indirect speech, or any other construction which exhibits modal past, it will be highly relevant to know what, if any, overlap exists between English and the students' L1. If the students' native language does not contain modal past morphology, then the teacher's task is to focus on the Full Access part of the SLA model, perhaps drawing on multiple environments of modal past usage to highlight its operation as a broader principle. If the students' native language does exhibit modal past morphology, then the teacher's task is to focus on the Full Transfer part of the model, drawing attention to those areas where the usage does not coincide with English, and thus helping the students overcome any inappropriate transfer of their L1

settings. For example, although Turkish does exhibit modal past in some environments, it does not do so for polite requests. As a result, Turkish speakers may not use modal past effectively in polite requests when speaking English, and could benefit from extra emphasis on that usage in their English language curriculum.

Given that the student begins the L2 acquisition process by initially transferring his or her L1 grammar and then falling back on UG to make adjustments, grammar presentation should take the form of focused, contrastive language data which illustrate the semantic distinctions between different grammatical forms. Minimal pairs are an excellent way to do this, since they isolate a particular distinction in form which can then be analyzed for distinction in meaning. An example of this is the contrast between the following pairs:

Can you help me?

Could you help me?

and

The police said they will call us when they have more information.

The police said they would call us when they had more information.

Lexical context can also create very salient contrasts. For example, adverb phrases of time can anchor the temporal reference of a sentence and help students grasp the non-temporal nature of modal past morphology. For example:

If you called her right now, you wouldn't get her...

If you asked me tomorrow, I would say yes.

A good contextualized approach is to use a particular narrative or back-story as a basis for discussion. This establishes the "facts" of the speech context and allows one to clearly designate statements as either "real" or "hypothetical" within the given context. Another important

technique is exploiting ambiguity. When students understand that a past tense protasis clause, on its own, has two possible meanings, this will further cement the concept of modal past. For example:

If he had a car... then why did he ride his bike everywhere?

If he had a car... then he wouldn't have to ride his bike everywhere.

Some techniques are better suited to either facilitating Full Access or overcoming Full Transfer. For example, when working with students whose L1 does not exhibit modal past, such as with Mandarin Chinese speakers, in order to trigger their access to this universal concept, it may be helpful to group together hypothetical conditionals, *wish* sentences, and sentences of hypothetical comparison, which are incredibly similar in both form and function. This way, modal past morphology can be better understood as a broader concept rather than just a list of unrelated rules. It may also be useful, with the Full Access group, to focus on hypothetical conditionals as an archetypal environment for modal past morphology, since they are the environment where modal past is most prevalent cross-linguistically. The statistical prominence of modal past in hypothetical conditionals may indicate that hypothetical conditionals possess an especially salient quality of hypotheticality from a UG perspective, and may therefore be more accessible to the learner than other modal past contexts. For those students whose L1 settings bias them towards using modal past in an environment where English does not use it, or vice versa, oral drills are an incredibly effective way to access and alter those unconscious settings.

Conclusion

The endeavor of this paper has been to account for non-temporal uses of past tense morphology in English, and to accomplish this in a way that is both rooted in scientific analysis and also accessible to practitioners of English as a Foreign Language. The investigation of modal past in English reveals that it is no arbitrary mechanical rule but rather a coherent linguistic device whose semantics are consistent across different contexts of use. It is a grammatical means of representing a proposition as hypothetical. While modal past is sometimes an obligatory grammatical element - i.e. in hypothetical conditionals - in other environments it is simply an available tool that offers the possibility of a more nuanced meaning. In these cases, its use conveys the speaker's subjective assessment that the proposition may not be true, or, alternatively, allows the speaker to avoid fully asserting the proposition. Its use may be motivated both by grammatical-semantic and by sociolinguistic considerations.

Significantly, modal past is not unique to English, but is common in many languages. However, its manifestations are not exactly symmetrical across languages, nor across different dialects of the same language. In this way, it is no different from other grammatical categories such as mood and aspect, which also manifest asymmetrically in different languages. And in many languages, modal past tense morphology coincides with morphologies of aspect and mood, specifically, imperfective aspect and subjunctive mood.

The fact that modal past operates in a diverse array of languages and language families is evidence of its status as an element of Universal Grammar, i.e. an inherent part of the language instinct of every human being. This universal status of modal past is critical to its acquisition by both native and non-native language learners. The availability of UG in the non-native language acquisition process, as articulated by the Full Transfer / Full Access Hypothesis, means that all

students have inherent access to the principle of modal past, whether or not their native language exhibits it. However, a student will approach the acquisition process differently depending on whether they have transferred the principle of modal past from their L1 or face the task of accessing it directly from UG.

The implication for EFL practitioners is that an effective approach for teaching modal past will involve 1) treating it as a coherent linguistic device for signaling hypotheticality rather than a list of ad-hoc mechanical rules, and 2) designing teaching materials which address either the Full Transfer or the Full Access circumstances of acquisition, according to the status of modal past in the students' L1. It is my hope that the preceding analysis of modal past and its place in the process of non-native language acquisition may contribute to the development of such an approach.

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Curriculum Vita

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