

The Auxiliary Verbs and Their Functions: An Overview

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Abstract: Several researchers have pointed out that the verbal group, being an obligatory element of the clause structure, carries high syntactic and semantic loads. As such, it is an area of maximum divergence and one of the most difficult aspects to master particularly by learners of English as a second language. On this note, this paper discusses the English auxiliary verbs, being integral components of the verbal group. The discussion is done through reviewing the works of different authors on the auxiliaries distinguishing the two sets - **the primary auxiliaries** (have, be & do) and **the modal auxiliaries** (can, could, dare, may, might, must, need, ought, shall, should, will & would). Each set of the auxiliaries are discussed with much emphasis on different usages to illustrate how crucial the auxiliaries are, as far as the conjugation of the verbal group is concerned.

Key Words: Primary Auxiliaries, Modal Auxiliaries, Verbal Group

Date of Submission: 06-03-2020

Date of Acceptance: 20-04-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Auxiliary verbs are among the grammatical elements that play crucial roles in the construction of grammatical units particularly clauses and sentences. They (auxiliaries) sometimes require the presence of lexical verbs to function within verbal groups; however, that does not deny their significance as grammatical sentence elements. Despite their syntactic dependency, auxiliary verbs enjoy high frequency as far as the use of sentence elements is concerned. So, it is worthy to note that, the auxiliary verbs although require lexical verbs, have semantic indispensability and sometimes some of them function as main verbs in sentences and convey effective meanings on their own.

The English Auxiliary Verbs

Murthy (1998) explains auxiliary verbs as those verbs that are used to form negatives, questions and tenses on one hand, and used to express various moods and mental attitudes like hope, expectation, possibility and futurity (modal) on the other hand.

Christophersen and Sandved (1969) discuss the English auxiliary verbs through categorizing them into four sub-groups which are according to the form of the verb with which the auxiliary occurs.

1. The first group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the base form of the verb, the form that is often called the '*bare or plain infinitive*' the following are examples of such auxiliaries:

The man }
The men } { *can/could*
 } { *may/might*
 } { *will/would*
 } { *shall/should*
 } { *do/did*
 } { *must*
 } { *(dare)*
 } { *(need)* } remember the boy.

2. The second group consists of auxiliaries which are used with the *-ing* form of the verb:

I *am* }
He *is* } { (or *was*) }
They *are* (or *were*) } } going.

3. The third group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the past participle of the verb:

- (a) He *has* } (or *had*) gone.
 (b) They *have* }
 (c) I *am* } (or *was*) } gone.
 He *is* } (or *were*) }

4. The fourth and last group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the infinitive preceded by the function word to:

- I/He/They { *ought*
am/is/are/was/were
(have/has/had)
(used) } to go.

(Christophersen & Sandved, 1969: 73)

Quirk & Greenbaum (1973) explain that, any discussion on auxiliaries should be done together with placing emphasis on the certain strict order in which auxiliaries are used in a complex verb phrase. They stress that modal, perfective, progressive and passive auxiliaries follow a fixed/strict order when used in verb phrase as in the following:

- (i) MODAL, always followed by a bare infinitive, as in:
 - ❖ He *would* visit.
 - ❖ They *can* visit.
 - ❖ She *may* visit.
- (ii) PERFECTIVE, always followed by an ‘-ed’ form as in:
 - ❖ He *had* visited.
 - ❖ She *would have* visited.
 - ❖ They *could have* visited.
- (iii) PROGRESSIVE, always followed by ‘-ing’ form, as in:
 - ❖ They *are* visiting.
 - ❖ He *was* visiting.
 - ❖ She *would have been* visiting.
- (iv) PASSIVE, always followed by an ‘-ed’ form as in:
 - ❖ I *have been* visited.
 - ❖ He *was* visited.
 - ❖ She *would have been being* visited.

(Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973: 39)

Twaddell (1963) points out that any systematic discussion on auxiliary verbs should begin with distinguishing the two sets of the auxiliaries. He classifies the primary and the model auxiliaries by making the point that, the former group are concerned with subject-verb agreement and full past syntax while the latter group have no concern with concord and in some cases even the full past syntax. He also stresses that in verb constructions containing members of both sets, the model precedes the primary auxiliaries, not vice versa as seen in some of the examples above.

The Primary Auxiliaries

Eastwood (1998) explains that the English auxiliary verbs can be used in two different ways, either as ‘auxiliary verbs’ or ‘ordinary verbs’. He further justifies his claim by providing the following table:

Auxiliary Verbs	Ordinary Verbs
We <i>are</i> waiting for a bus.	We <i>are</i> at the bus stop.
I <i>have</i> thought about it.	I <i>have</i> a suggestion.
<i>Does</i> Tina need any help?	Tina <i>does</i> all the work.

(Eastwood, 1998: 104)

Adejare and Adejare (1996) discuss the primary auxiliaries with paying attention to their dual functions. They explain that the auxiliaries, BE and HAVE, have both finite and non-finite forms but the third member, the auxiliary DO, has only finite forms. These collectively generate a host of finite and non-finite forms. The auxiliary *be* generates five finite forms and three non-finite forms. In turn, the auxiliary *have* generates three finite forms and two non-finite forms. Finally, the auxiliary *do* generates only three finite forms. The table below shows the finite and non-finite forms.

Aux →	BE	HAVE	DO
Finite Forms	am, is, are was, were	has, have, had	do, does, did
Non-Finite Forms	be, being been	have, having	

(Adejare and Adejare, 1996:195)

In order to demonstrate the dual membership of lexical and auxiliary subsets by the primary auxiliaries’ finite forms, another table is provided:

FINITE FORMS	LEXICAL VERB	AUXILIARIES
AM	I <i>am</i> a student.	I <i>am</i> studying English.
IS	John <i>is</i> good at figures.	He <i>is</i> training to be a banker.
ARE	They <i>are</i> friends.	They <i>are</i> planning a joint venture.
WAS	I <i>was</i> in Abuja in May.	It <i>was</i> raining everyday.
WERE	We <i>were</i> young men then.	We <i>were</i> staying on the campus.
HAS	Tola <i>has</i> good looks.	She <i>has</i> taken good care of herself.
HAVE	I <i>have</i> some money.	I <i>have</i> gone to the bank today.
HAD	He <i>had</i> problems with tense.	They <i>had</i> been with him for long.
DO	I <i>do</i> my work well always.	You <i>do</i> go on, don’t you?
DOES	Foyeke <i>does</i> well in every exam.	She <i>does</i> not like loafing.
DID	Olu <i>did</i> a U-turn.	He <i>did</i> not do it well, though.

(Adejare and Adejare, 1996:196)

More about the Modal Auxiliaries

As it has been stated earlier, the modals are used to express various moods and mental attitudes of the speaker or writer. The modals are otherwise called secondary auxiliaries and they primarily mark modality. In their discussion on modal auxiliaries, Adejare and Adejare (1996:196) have the following:

...modality in the verbal group performs special semantic functions that enable a speaker to infuse personal views such as permission, e.g., (can), intention e.g., (will), ability e.g., (can) and compulsion e.g., (must) etc

For better understanding of the above quotation, a comprehensive table, showing the modal auxiliaries with their various attached meanings is shown below:

MODALS AND THEIR MEANINGS	
Model Auxiliary	Meanings Attached
CAN	Ability, Permission, Request, Possibility
COULD	Ability, Request, Possibility
SHALL	Futurity, Willingness, Intention, Suggestion, Insistence
SHOULD	Obligation, Advisability, Necessity, Expectation
WILL	Willingness, Intention, Prediction, Insistence, Request
WOULD	Willingness, Habitual Action in the Past, Possibility, Wishes, Desire
MAY	Permission, Possibility, Wishes, Purpose, Concession
MIGHT	Permission, Possibility, Concession, Reproach
MUST	Necessity, Prohibition, Compulsion, Obligation, Certainty, Probability
OUGHT (TO)	Moral Obligation, Duty, Necessity, Desirability
USED (TO)	Past Discontinued Habit
NEED	Necessity, Importance, Desirability
DARE	Challenge, Courage, Boldness, Disapproval

(Murthy, 1998: 134)

Some of the meanings attached to the above auxiliaries would be illustrated below:

❖ **Ability**

I *can* teach English.

She *could* work long when she was young.

❖ **Permission**

Can I speak to the manager?

May I open the window?

❖ **Request**

Could you post this letter for me?

May I join the conversation?

❖ **Possibility**

If I were you, I *could* do it easily.

He *can/may/might* come tomorrow.

❖ **Futurity**

We *shall* visit Jos the next week.

I *shall* see Omotola tomorrow.

❖ **Willingness**

I *will* drop you by bike.

The nurse said she *would* look after the patient.

❖ **Intention**

I wish I *would* know her address.

She wishes *would* visit Jos.

❖ **Necessity**

You *must* take the medicine daily.

She *ought* to work hard for her family.

❖ **Obligation**

We **must** complain the matter to the police.

You **ought** to be polite to others.

❖ **'Dare'**

The verb 'dare' is used in the senses of defying, challenging or facing something boldly and it has all usual forms as a regular verb.

He doesn't **dare** to write a letter to her.

She **dared** to drink before her father.

As an auxiliary verb, it has no inflexions and it is then used in the sense of '**have the courage to**'.

She **dare** not to speak to her father.

How **dare** he talk like that!

❖ **'Used to'**

It is used to express to talk about a past discontinued habit.

There **used to** be a hotel in our village.

She **used to** teach English to school children.

(Murthy, 1998: 144-146)

There are also certain points to be noted in connection with the use of auxiliary verbs in some other constructions or expressions. The use of the auxiliaries like can, may, etc., in for instance, reported speech or conditional sentences has to be given a special attention. Christophersen and Sandved (1969) briefly discuss the use of the auxiliaries in reported and conditional sentences, and below are some of the points worthy of noting.

❖ If the verb of reporting is in the present tense, the form of the auxiliary in the reported speech is the same as in the original utterance:

I **can** swim – He says he **can** swim.

It **may** be true – She says it **may** be true.

One exception here is that, **will** sometimes replaces **shall** and vice versa

I **shall** do it straight away – He says he **will** do it straight away.

You **will** regret this – He says I **shall** regret this.

❖ If the verb of reporting is in the past tense the auxiliary in the reported speech occurs in a different form from the used in the original utterance as in :

I **can** do it – He said he **could** do it.

It **may** be true – she said it **might** be true.

So, **can-could, may-might, shall-should, will-would** but **dare** and **need** are regularly unchanged.

I **dare** not tell her – He said he **dare** not tell her.

You **needn't** go – He said I **needn't** go.

❖ In conditional sentences, we normally use **would** or **should** plus infinitive as in:

If you asked him, he **would** probably agree.

If I had enough money, I **should** go to the West Indies.

(Christophersen & Sandved, 1969: 204-208)

❖ **Negation**

Auxiliaries also used to make negative expressions even if the positive counterparts do not have the auxiliaries as in:

She likes singing – She **does not** like singing.

They wrote names last week – They **did not** write their names last week.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper talked about the English auxiliary verbs through reviewing some of the relevant points discussed by different authors. It began with an introduction where the importance of the auxiliary verbs has been pointed out. The two main sets of the auxiliaries – primary and modal have been discussed thoroughly and the different forms of verb that are used with different types of auxiliary have been identified. Discussion has also been done on the various meanings attached to the modal auxiliaries before lastly talking about the use of auxiliary verbs in different types of sentences such as reported speech and conditional sentence.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers make the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should endeavour to make their lessons students-centred so that there would adequate participation of the lesson by the students in order to encourage retention of the auxiliary verbs.
2. Teachers should formulate various class exercises with the auxiliary verbs (both primary and modal) in sampling paragraphs and passages for easy identification of the auxiliary verbs by the students.
3. Components of verbs and verb formation such as tenses, mood, aspect and voice should be thoroughly taught to students to aid understanding and usage of the auxiliary verbs.
4. Personal pronouns (first, second, third, singular and plural) such as I, we, you, he, she, it they should be extensively taught along finite and the auxiliary verbs to help students be able to understand how to use the various auxiliary verbs in English language.
5. Students should be encouraged to practice oral and written communication with the auxiliary verbs so as to support linguistic and communicative competence in the use of English language.
6. Teachers should also make constructive analysis between the native and target language (mother tongue and English) so that they would be in good position to tackle errors from the negative transfer.

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Bakoji Mohammed Fema PhD,etal. "The Auxiliary Verbs and Their Functions: An Overview." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(4), 2020, pp. 01-06.