

## **What's a modal? Some preliminary observations on Modals in the Languages of Europe**

Bjoern Hansen and Ferdinand de Haan (University of Regensburg and Tucson / Arizona)

Although the term 'modal' is well established in English linguistics and frequently shows up in general linguistic works, we still do not know very much about the cross-linguistic status of the category and the typological or areal distribution of modals. The aim of the paper is to present the architecture and some preliminary results of a recent typological study on modals in the languages of Europe which is currently being prepared for print. The study comprises 14 chapters, written by experts in the respective languages, covering all language families in Europe: Germanic, Romance, Slavonic, Greek, Albanian, Irish, Baltic, Romani, Hungarian, Balto-Finnic, Turkic and Basque. For the sake of contrast, the book also looks at selected languages at the fringes of the European linguistic area: Maltese, Arabic vernaculars of the Mediterranean area and Berber. The goal of the project was to test the claim that modals show a certain degree of polyfunctionality and to examine the syntactic behaviour of auxiliaries. The individual authors were asked to describe the category of modals within the framework of grammaticalization theory to address the following questions: 1) How can modals be described in language (family) X? 2) Where is the borderline between modals on the one hand, and lexical and inflectional means, on the other? and 3) What can be said about the degree of grammaticalization of the relevant elements in language (family) X? As is well known, grammaticalization comes in degrees: within one language not all modals are grammaticalized to the same extent, and languages do not grammaticalize corresponding modals to the same degree either. The comparison is based on the application of the parameters of grammaticalization developed by Christian Lehmann 1995 (revised 2002). These parameters turn out to be a powerful tool for the inter-linguistic comparison and allow one to determine modals as elements showing clear evidence of the micro-processes captured by these parameters. The preliminary analysis of the descriptions of the individual languages allows for the following conclusions: 1. Polyfunctionality is not only an important, but even necessary feature of modals (parameter integrity: semantic bleaching); it is found in ALL languages in the European area. 2. in contrast, phonological erosion of modals is a relatively rare phenomenon (parameter formal integrity); 3. Coalescence is not typical of the European area; polyfunctional modal elements in the form of affixes are found only in Finnic, Turkic, Hungarian and Latvian (parameter bondedness). All these languages have both affixes and modals. 4. Modals can be distinguished from lexical elements not only in their semantics, but also structural scope and paradigmatic variability.

### **Bibliography**

- Hansen, Björn / de Haan, Ferdinand (eds.) (in prep) *Modals in the Languages of Europe*. (Eurotyp). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lehmann, Christian 2002 *Thoughts on grammaticalization*. Second, revised edition. Erfurt.