

## Is there a “Meditative-polemic-*May*”?

Maruszka Eve-Marie Meinard

*Lumière University Lyon 2, France*

### Abstract

This article aims at displaying the results of a preliminary study on MAY and MIGHT in extraposed subject clauses where they compete with the meditative-polemic-Should. Two types of extraposed subordinate clauses will be compared, one in which MAY and MIGHT have an epistemic meaning and one in which they behave like the meditative-polemic-Should. The examples extracted from Google reveal that this specific use of MAY and MIGHT is mostly found in American English, that it is mostly used in journals, and that the subclause refers to past events that could logically be expected. What is more, the subordinate clause containing this modal auxiliary reformulates the title of the article or of a paragraph. This shows that the proposition in which it is found plays a crucial role in the text, which is to provide the main information of the article once the background has been explained. We will also see that when the subject of the content clause is animate, MAY and MIGHT are less likely to have an epistemic or root reading than when the subject is inanimate. Finally, the examples reveal that this form collocates with subjective markers denoting the point of view of the subject, via the use of verbs of cognition and perception or via the progressive aspect (*it's not surprising that he may want, need, choose, be feeling...*). We propose to call it the “subjective-explanatory-*May*”.

**Keywords:** May; Might; Modal auxiliaries; Meditative-polemic-should

### 1. Introduction

In content clauses after certain evaluative adjectives like *odd*, *surprising*, *weird*, *strange*, *normal*, the modal auxiliary SHOULD has a very particular meaning, which has neither an epistemic nor a root value. It is used when the speaker refers to an event or a situation that is taken for granted, like in 1:

(1) It's odd that he should resign.<sup>1</sup>

As noted by Khalifa (2004: 293), the meaning of SHOULD seems to have a reversed polarity compared with its meaning in an independent clause, as can be seen with 2, more or less equivalent to 1:

---

<sup>1</sup> This example is taken from Khalifa (2004: 108).

- (2) It's odd, because he should **not** have resigned.

This SHOULD is called *meditative-polemic-Should* by Behre (1955). It has drawn the attention of many linguists, some of whom consider it to be a subjunctive marker. Jespersen (2013 [1931]) calls it *emotional should*, Leech (1971) calls it *Theoretical should*, Quirk *et al.* (1985) call it *putative should*, Coates calls it a *quasi-subjunctive* (Coates, 1983: 17), Bouscaren and Chuquet (1987) simply call it *should in that-clauses* and consider that it denotes a *type III modality*, Jacobsson (1988) calls it *should<sub>2</sub>*, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1002) call it *Attitudinal should*, Larreya et Rivière (2005: 109) talk about *contextes appréciatifs (evaluation contexts)*, Celle (2018), calls it *pragmatic should*.

This presentation of the different labels is still oversimplified since different subclasses of SHOULD in content clauses have been proposed in the literature, e.g., ‘*should-mandative*’ vs ‘*should-non-mandative*’ (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 998), *should<sub>2</sub>* versus *should that is commutable with the present subjunctive* (Jacobsson, 1988: 79), but these considerations are not central for the present article. What is more, as the “*polemic-meditative-Should*” is factive, it would also be interesting to compare it with *would* used in factive contexts: Spears (1973: 627, 637) uses the term ‘*Factive would complements*’, Larreya (2015: §63) calls it *WOULD conjecturel-factuel (circumstantial-factual WOULD)*, and Celle (2018) *pragmatic ‘would’*.

As far as I know, a lot has been said about SHOULD in *that-clauses* (to the authors already mentioned above, one can add Adamczewski and Delmas, 1982; Paillard, 1984; Mélis, 2002 ; Kanté, 2010), but a similar use of MAY and MIGHT has received little or no attention in grammars and articles.

Indeed, Paillard merely mentions it (1984: 74); Coates (1983: 165) mentions the existence of a *quasi-subjunctive MIGHT*, but only to signal that there were no more than seven occurrences in her corpora. Larreya (2015 §63) provides one example but does not comment on it, as well as Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 994, 1001), who observe that in some contexts where MAY is not interpreted like that of the main clause, it can *count as a specialised-modal construction*. Apart from these sparse remarks, I am not aware of any study clearly devoted to MAY and MIGHT in this factive context. Yet, as I hope to show in this article, these modals seem to compete with the *meditative-polemic-Should*.

In this article, I will focus on the presence of MAY and MIGHT in content clauses that are extraposed subjects in matrixes with *surprising* as predicative adjective and where the subclause is a factive (the event referred to in the subclause did eventually happen). Many other evaluative adjectives could have been chosen, but the existing research on the *meditative-polemic-Should* focusses on this type of adjectives (*surprising, odd, weird, strange, normal*, cf Celles, 2018) since this SHOULD is used when the speaker takes into account both the fact that the event took place and the fact that it is contrary to the speaker’s and the addressee’s expectations.

To illustrate the specificities of this syntactic structure with MIGHT instead of the *meditative-polemic-Should*, let us start with an unambiguous example (authentic occurrence extracted from my list):

- (3) Lilya has no family (save for an uncaring and indifferent aunt), no money, and no job skills, so it’s not surprising that she might turn to prostitution.

The text from which sentence 3 is extracted summarizes the plot of a movie (*Lilja 4-ever*, by Lukas Moodysson), which narrates the life a young woman, Lilja, who becomes a prostitute. Within this fictional framework, there is no doubt concerning the factuality of the event referred to in the subordinate clause (the protagonist did turn to prostitution in the movie). For the moment, I will call this use of MAY and MIGHT “M2” (in reference to Jacobsson’s *SHOULD*<sub>2</sub>, 1988). This M2 clearly differs from an epistemic use of MIGHT, where it refers to a virtual situation, like in the following constructed example: *Lilya feared that her mother might know one day*. I call “M1” both the root and epistemic MAY/MIGHT.

Some tests show that MIGHT in example 3 is what I call an M2:

- This MIGHT is at least syntactically commutable with the *meditative-polemic-should*: *it’s not surprising that she should turn to prostitution*,
- it cannot have the same meaning as an M1, i.e., a MIGHT with an epistemic or root value, like in an independent clause: *she might turn to prostitution* is not semantically equivalent to example 3, since the former means that her turning to prostitution is a mere possibility, while the latter means that she eventually turned to prostitution.

The aim of this article is to provide a preliminary descriptive account of the main grammatical properties of MAY and MIGHT when used as alternatives to the *meditative-polemic-Should*, since they deserve to be taken notice of in grammars.

In section 1, I will present my corpus. In section 2, I will briefly compare M2 with M1 in *that*-clauses that are not factual to show how I have tagged the occurrences once extracted. In section 3, I will describe the different uses of M2 depending on the variety of English and I will describe its grammatical properties. In section 4, I will focus on its pragmatic and semantic properties: I will mention the contexts in which M2 is used, that it can mostly be found in journal and magazine articles and that it plays a very specific role in these articles (the subclause often refers to the title). I will also show that the nature of the subject of the subordinate clause has an impact on the interpretation of the modal (if the subject is inanimate, the M2 is more often what Coates calls a *merger*).

## 2. Method: Data collection on Google and the limits of the present study

As noted by Coates (1983: 165), this use of MIGHT is very rare and the traditional corpora (COCA, BNC) do not contain enough occurrences to make any substantial observation. Coates’s corpora (Lancaster corpus and Survey of English Usage) only contained 7 occurrences of this use of MIGHT.

Because they are quite rare, I thus chose to collect the results of queries on Google. The relevance-based ranking of Google inevitably creates a bias, yet, extracting a list of examples from Google also has some benefits, like to make it possible to collect information on the authors (to determine the variety of English they spoke) and to have access to a very large context (much larger than the “expanded context” of the COCA, for instance). Thus, this list of examples is quantitatively poor, but qualitatively rich.

My list is elaborated after the systematic extraction of the results of six queries in quotation marks on Google. The queries correspond to the combinations of parameters X and

Y in the following structure: “[**surprising that X Y**]”. X is a singular third person pronoun (X = *he, she, it*) and Y is a modal auxiliary (Y = *may, might*).

As noted above, the choice of “surprising” is in line with previous research works which have already extensively studied the *meditative-polemic-Should* in subclauses governed by evaluative adjectives denoting the expectations of the speaker (Celle, 2018, Bouscaren & Chuquet, 1987, Behre, 1955). The adjective in the main clause serves to provide a judgment on the content of the subclause, which is why adjectives like *it’s strange, odd, funny, surprising, revolting, weird* are often found in this context (Khalifa, 2004: 109); Behre calls them *expressions of sorrow and displeasure* and *expressions of surprise and wonder* (Behre, in Khalifa, 2004: 109). In order to extract as many occurrences as possible on Google in as small as possible an amount of time, I chose only one adjective, but it goes without saying that other evaluative adjectives will have to be studied in this context too.

Indeed, Google being a dynamic corpus, I had to minimize the amount of time devoted to the extraction: I have only extracted the first occurrences that were suggested. A random extraction would have required some automatized device, which is not possible with Google. The extraction was spread over three days in October 2021 (in a southern suburb of Paris, France). It was not possible to reduce it to a smaller amount of time because I had to extract the expanded context of each occurrence to find as much information as possible on the source to determine the category of the source (e.g., journal, magazine, blog, etc... and its geographical location), as well as information on the speaker to determine the variety of English they spoke.

I determined the language of the speakers with some additional research on their biography thanks to cross-reference information available in the internet site of the source itself, on the biographies available on site *Muckrack.com*, on Wikipedia and on the social networks to which they subscribed (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook). What is more, as some of the MAY and MIGHT occur in reported speech (*X said it’s not surprising that Y may...*) I had to find information on the quoted speaker. When the origin of the speaker was untraceable, I used the headquarter of the source itself to classify the English as American or British: for instance, if the occurrence was found in a journal located in the United States, I then categorized the occurrence as AmE (American English). Thus, I have two degrees of confidence as to the variety of English: the personal information that I found in the speaker’s biography, which I consider as maximally reliable, and which I annotate *Direct Information (DI)*, and the source of the internet site, which I consider as less reliable and which I annotate *Indirect Information (II)*. Therefore, the occurrences are annotated the following way: *AmE-DI*, for *American English, Direct information*, or *BrE-II*, *British English, Indirect Information*. Few occurrences were totally untraceable, especially when they were found in blogs or chat forums, which I annotate *unknown origin (UO)*.

As will be shown in the next section, the identification of the semantic value of MAY and MIGHT requires some interpretation and thus implies the analysis of a largely expanded context, which in turn implies to collect as much information as possible (it is particularly true with the category “merger”, as will be shown below). And because of the amount of information that I had to collect and process for each occurrence, the sample is very small (109 occurrences). Indeed, an optimal solution between two contradictory requirements had

to be found: on the one hand, a minimal amount of time devoted to the extraction (due to the dynamic nature of Google) and on the other hand, a maximal amount of information (to interpret the value of the modal auxiliary and to identify the variety of English).

Yet, I hope that this sample suffices to show that MAY/MIGHT can compete with the meditative-polemic-SHOULD.

### 3. M1 and M2

#### 3.1. Comparing MAY/MIGHT1 with MAY/MIGHT2 to tag the data

When used as epistemic or root modal auxiliaries, MAY and MIGHT express a logical possibility or a permission, and the event referred to is virtual (in *he may be there by now*, the predicative relation <he-be there by now> is a mere supposition and is not taken for granted). I call them here M1. When the event referred to in a subclause governed by MAY and MIGHT is factual, I call them M2. As shown with example 3 in the introduction, some uses of MAY and MIGHT are unambiguously M2 (in *It's not surprising that she might turn to prostitution*, <she-turn to prostitution> is factual). At first glance, it seems to be due to the governor in the main clause (*not surprising*). Indeed, some matrix clauses seem to only license an M1 in the subclause, like in 4 [present + *foreseeable*]:

(4) It is reasonably foreseeable that he may eventually marry her.

Here, MAY has the same meaning in the subclause as in an independent clause: *he may eventually marry her (but he also may not)*.

Yet, the adjective *foreseeable* is not the only cause for this interpretation, since the modal could be interpreted as an M2 if the preterite was used in the matrix clause, like in 5:

(5) It **was** reasonably foreseeable that he **might** marry her (so why didn't you propose to her before he did?)

Thus, the interpretation of the modal auxiliary as an M2 or as an M1 depends on a combination of factors: the choice of the governor of the *that*-clause and the tense of the superordinate clause.

Apart from the tests presented in the introduction, the differences between M1 and M2 can be determined thanks to the scope of an adverbial subclause. Let us add an adverbial subclause introduced by the conjunction WHILE and observe what the circumstantial subordinate clause modifies. If the subclause expresses a contrast with the evaluative adjective, it's an M2, like in 6:

(6) John finds it **odd** that Peter may marry Julia (**while it was perfectly foreseeable**, Peter has always been in love with her).

With an M2 in the content clause, the adverbial subclause provided a comment on the governor of the content clause (here, the adjective *odd*), i.e. a comment on the subject's judgment (John shouldn't have found it *odd*, since it was *foreseeable*). This corresponds to the

use of the *Meditative-polemic-Should* and in accordance with the fact these clauses are said **not to be assertive**: *Although the content clause is seemingly in accordance with the evaluative judgement expressed in the superordinate clause, it is not vouched for by the speaker* (Celle, 2018: 48, my emphasis). And if Behre calls it “polemic-should”, it is precisely because *should* conveys the *mental resistance* of the speaker.

By comparison, if the adverbial subclause modifies the content clause, then it is an M1, like in 7:

- (7) John finds it obvious that **Peter may marry Julia** (**while it can't happen**, fortunately, since Peter lives abroad).

With the M1, the adverbial subclause disputes the statement in the embedded clause. Indeed, the fact that Peter may marry Julia is refuted by the adverbial subclause (John shouldn't believe that **such an impossible event may happen**), not the fact that John finds it obvious. This test is also in accordance with what Pelyvás calls a “predication shift” (2006: 123-124), revealed by question tags, where what is in profile in a complex clause governed by a cognitive matrix predicate can either be a “grounded head” or a “cognitive predicate”.

The reason for these different scopes of WHILE may be that the contrasting subclause modifies the element that is most likely to be contrasted. As the M2 signals factive contexts (i.e., events that are taken for granted), the content clause in example 6 is less likely to be contrasted than the judgment concerning the event (so, for this example, the adjective *odd*): one cannot refute what is already taken for granted. Thus, the only thing that can be contrasted is the judgement present in the main clause. Conversely, as the M1 signals non-factual contexts (it signals a logical possibility or a permission), the event referred to in the content clause is more likely to be contrasted than the judgment on this hypothetical event (like in 7): it is more direct to refute the relevance of a virtual situation (a logical possibility or a permission) than to refute a subjective judgement concerning the relevance of the virtual situation. This corresponds to the path of least effort in the *Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure* explained by Wilson and Sperber:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure

- a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

Given clause (b) of the definition of optimal relevance in (8), **it is reasonable for the hearer to follow a path of least effort** because the speaker is expected (within the limits of her abilities and preferences) to make her utterance as easy as possible to understand. [...]

Thus, when a hearer following the path of least effort arrives at an interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance, in the absence of contrary evidence, this is the most plausible hypothesis about the speaker's meaning. Since comprehension is a non-demonstrative inference process, this hypothesis may well be false; but it is the best a rational hearer can do.

(Wilson & Sperber, 2004, my emphasis)

### 3.2. M1, M2 and Merger

Among the 109 occurrences that were extracted, 79 have a factual use (they correspond to what I call M2), which represents 72% of the total. Among the 30 remaining occurrences, 29 correspond to an M1, i.e., a purely epistemic or root use of MAY or MIGHT (which represents almost 27 % of the occurrences) and one is a case of ambiguity.

These results are yet to be refined, since a substantial part of these 79 occurrences are in fact what Coates calls *mergers*, i.e., modal auxiliaries that contain different values (epistemic/root + subjunctive), as will be explained. My list of examples contains 62 occurrences of pure M2 (or SEMs), which in fact represents about 57% of the extracted occurrences.

The root and epistemic values of modal auxiliaries are discrete categories that cannot always be clearly distinguished in some authentic examples and some examples are indeterminate. Coates distinguishes three kinds of indeterminacy: *gradience*, *ambiguity* and *merger*. What Coates calls *Gradience* refers to the fact that the meaning of modal auxiliaries is itself a *fuzzy set* (Coates, 1983: 11) composed of a *core*, which is statistically rare but corresponds to the first meaning learned by children (Coates, 1983: 13), a *skirt* and a *periphery*; what she calls *ambiguity* is found when the context does not make it possible to identify the meaning of the modal. *Merger* will be particularly helpful to describe MAY and MIGHT in this article. Let us have glance at Coates' (1983) definition:

Examples of merger, like those of ambiguity, are indeterminate in the sense that the context fail to exclude one of the two possible meanings. However, merger differs from ambiguity in that it is not necessary to decide which meaning is intended before the example can be understood; with merger the two meanings involved are not in certain contexts mutually exclusive. This can be described as contextual neutralisation. This phenomenon has long been recognized by some linguists and is certainly not confined to the modal auxiliaries.

Coates (1983: 16-17)

The examples of *merger* given by Coates for SHOULD (1983: 17) roughly correspond to what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 998) call a neutralized distinction between *should-mandative* and *modally harmonic non-mandative*. The cases of MAY merger and MIGHT merger are quite different. Indeed, for MAY (ibid., 2002: 145), merger corresponds to *examples where both Root and Epistemic interpretations are possible and they are not in conflict*, while for MIGHT (ibid., 1983: 163) two possible interpretations can merge: first, *the simple Epistemic meaning of MIGHT, and the hypothetical Epistemic meaning* and second, *Root hypothetical meaning and Epistemic hypothetical meaning*. Contrary to the possible merging interpretations of SHOULD, Coates does not count the quasi-subjunctive MIGHT or MAY as being possibly merged with the epistemic or root meaning. Yet, I think that this case of merger does exist, as the following examples extracted from my sample show (the italics are in the original text, but I underline the modal auxiliaries):

- (8) Another one read: 'no shade but if you abandon your friend when they're going through a rough time it speaks more on your character than anything. idc if you think you're "helping" or "not enabling" someone...there are other ways to get your point across.'

Wilmer became friends with the Jonas' through Demi, **so it's not surprising that she may be feeling betrayed by both parties at this time.**

[Magazine, *Celebrity Insider*, 2019, AmE-DI (American English, Direct information)]

In (8), the subject of the *that*-clause (*she*, i.e. Demi Lovato) was betrayed by Wilmer and Jonas because they met thanks to Demi, became friends, and finally let her down. The context reveals the that she indeed feels betrayed (9) and acts as such (10):

- (9) [...] **she thinks that they abandoned her** after her nearly fatal overdose in 2018;
- (10) Demi Lovato **Likes Shady Posts** About Wilmer Valderrama And The Jonas Brothers Ahead Of Joe Jonas And Sophie Turner Wedding!

These extracts confirm the factuality of the event referred to in the content clause (the event is her feeling betrayed, not the fact that she was eventually betrayed), MAY is thus an M2. Yet, other parts of the article counterbalance the certainty of her truly feeling betrayed (my emphasis):

- (11) **By the looks of some of the photos....**
- (12) One of the posts that Demi **appeared** to agree with read [...]
- (13) ... leaving Demi to **seemingly** feel left out;

These sentences cast doubt on the previous remarks: here, the elements in boldface support an epistemic reading of MAY. Indeed, sentence 8 could very well be rephrased *she may be feeling betrayed, which wouldn't be surprising*. If it is the case, then MAY in example 8 was an M1 after all. Thus, as the two interpretations of MAY are not incompatible, I classify the MAY in this example as *merger* (it merges the epistemic and M2 meaning of MAY).

My list contains 17 cases of merger in total.

## 4. Descriptive considerations

### 4.1. Variety of English

As far as the English is concerned, 99 occurrences out of the 109 were traceable. Among these 99 occurrences, more than two thirds are AmE, about 10% were BrE, as the following table shows:

**Table 1:** MAY and MIGHT, variety of English

	MAY (47 occurrences)	MIGHT (52 occurrences)
USA	30/47 = 64 %	38/52 = 73 %
UK	4/47 = 8.5 %	6/52 = 11.5 %
Other	13/47 = 27.5 %	8/52 = 15.5 %

In the category *other*, several English-speaking countries are represented: Australia (3), Canada (4), Jamaica (1), Scotland (2), South Africa (2), India (1). There are also occurrences that I have labeled “international” (7), either because the occurrence was found in an academic paper with several co-authors from different countries, or because the biography of



the author could not make it possible to determine which variety of English they spoke, since the biography of the author indicated that they had spent several years in different English-speaking countries (for instance, one of them was born in England, then studied in the United States, then lived in Canada). I have also labeled one example “standard”, since the occurrence is a constructed sentence found in a grammar book.

Yet, as already mentioned, two degrees of reliance as to the variety of English of each occurrence are to be distinguished: what I call “Direct Information” (“DI”, henceforth), where I have found information on the speaker’s origins, and “Indirect Information” (“II” henceforth), where I have found information on the origins of the source (the journal, the blog):

**Table 2:** Direct and Indirect Information concerning the variety of English

	MAY DI	MAY II	TOTAL traceable MAY (47 occurrences)	MIGHT DI	MIGHT II	TOTAL traceable MIGHT (52 occurrences)
AmE	23	7	30/47 = 64 %	36	2	38/52 = 73 %
BrE	4	4	4/47 = 8.5 %	6	6	6/52 = 11.5 %

Crossing the data: kinds of MAY/MIGHT and the variety of English:

As said above, I have collected three kinds of MAY/MIGHT:

- those which have an epistemic or root value, which I call here MAY/MIGHT1,
- those which are *semantically empty*, to use Coates’ terms concerning the quasi-subjunctive *Should* (1983: 18), which I call here MAY/MIGHT2 (but which I will call later *subjective explanatory MAY/MIGHT*),
- and the mergers, i.e. those which contain both aspects of MAY/MIGHT1 and MAY/MIGHT2.

In extraposed content clauses after *surprising*, there is a majority of MAY/MIGHT2<sup>2</sup> as shown in Table 3:

**Table 3:** Proportion of M1, M2 and Merger

MAY/MIGHT1	MAY/MIGHT2	merger	MAY/MIGHT2 + merger
29/109 = 26.61 %	62/109 = 56.88 %	17/109 = 15.6 %	79/109 = 72.48 %

When one crosses these results with the variety of English, one can see that M1 and M2 are predominantly American, as shown in the following table:

<sup>2</sup> 29 + 62 + 17 = 108, but I have 109 occurrences. I have labeled the remaining occurrence “ambiguous”, because the context does not make it possible to decide which reading is the correct one.

**Table 4:** Kinds of MAY/MIGHT depending on the variety of English

	AmE	BrE
MAY/MIGHT 1 (29 occurrences)	16/29 (55 %)	1/29 (3.45 %)
MAY/MIGHT 2 (62 occurrences)	44/62 (71 %)	4/62 (6.45 %)
MERGER (17 occurrences)	8/17 (47 %)	5/17 (29 %)

#### 4.2. Grammatical context

The grammatical context in which these modal auxiliaries appear is quite regular. In the following section, I will sketch out some of the regularities that can be found as to the tense and the polarity of the main and the subclause.

##### Main clause – No surprise:

One of the most striking characteristics is the fact that in almost all the occurrences collected, MAY/MIGHT2 appears when the content clause refers something that is presented as **predictable** in the main clause. Indeed, out of the 109 occurrences, 95 were assertive and negated, generally with the adverb *not* (*it's **not** surprising that he may...*) and occasionally with a near negative adverb (*it is **hardly** surprising that*). To that number, one needs to add 5 non-assertive occurrences (*is it surprising that he may... ?*). No interrogative was negated in my list (*\*isn't it surprising that she may...?*), which still confirms the predictable nature of the content clause. Only 6 occurrences were affirmative (*it is surprising that he may*), but 2 of them were found in grammar books and cannot count as authentic occurrences. In total, 103 occurrences out of 107 authentic occurrences were not affirmative, which represents more than 96% of the list. Even if the relevance-ranking bias of Google might have modified the results some way or another, this figure seems to show a tendency. What is more, this result corroborates Celle's research on factual uses of *should*, according to whom the *pragmatic 'should' is encountered in content clauses that convey hearer-old information. This use is 'meditative-polemic' and not generated by a sense of surprise* (Celle, 2018: 49). As will be shown, it is also in accordance with Behre's remarks, that *'what the should-clause refers to is generally a fact which is stated, directly or indirectly, in a preceding passage of writing'* (Behre, 1955: 174).

##### Main clause – Tense:

In a large majority of the occurrences, the main clause verb is in the simple present (95 occurrences out of 109, which represents 87%). 9 occurrences were in the preterite, 3 in the conditional. Only 1 contained *should* (*it **shouldn't** be surprising that he might just poke himself in the cornea with a piece of hay*).

**Table 5:** Tense and mood of the main clause

TOTAL: 109 occurrences					
Modal in the subclause  Tense of the main clause	MAY: 52 occurrences		MIGHT: 57 occurrences		Total: 109 occ.
	HE/SHE MAY: 34 occurrences	IT MAY: 18 occurrences	HE/SHE MIGHT: 41 occurrences	IT MIGHT: 16 occurrences	
Simple present	31/34	17/18	33/41	14/16	95/109
Other tenses, aspects and moods	3	1	8	2	14/109
Other tenses, aspects and moods of the main clause:					
<i>Shouldn't</i> + verbal stem	0	0	1 (MIGHT2)	0	1/109
preterite	1 (MAY1)	0	6 (MIGHT2)	2 (1 MIGHT1 + 1 merger)	9/109
conditional	2 (MAY1)	1 (MAY1)	0 (MIGHT2)	0	3/109
>>Conditional + present verb stem ( <i>would not be</i> )	2	1	0	0	>>3/3
>>Conditional + past verb stem ( <i>would not have been</i> )	0	0	0	0	>>0/3
Pragmatic WOULD	0	0	1	0	1/109

As could be expected, the tense of the main clause has an impact on the choice of the tense of the auxiliary in the subclause: most of the preterite superordinate clauses (9 occurrences) license a MIGHT (8/9) in the subclause, even if this MIGHT is an M2, which shows that the quasi-subjunctive MAY has a past form, contrary to SHOULD. As recalled by Celle (2018: 22) the “pragmatic SHOULD” (or *meditative-polemic*) can very well be used when the superordinate clause is in the preterite (*it **was** inevitable that X **should** Y*). The existence of a past form with MAY could explain why MAY and MIGHT can efficiently compete with SHOULD to signal a factive clause.

3 occurrences were in the conditional (with WOULD in the superordinate clause) and all were negated (*it **wouldn't** be surprising that X **might**...*). As could be expected, all of the MAY and MIGHT found in these 3 occurrences of non-factive contexts are M1.

#### Subclause – tense of the lexical verb:

The lexical verb in the subclause can be a present infinitive (*may **do***) or a past infinitive (*may **have done***). The first is by far the most represented tense: 92 occurrences, which represents 84,5% of the corpus, while there are only 17 occurrences with the second, which represents 15,5%.

Among the 9 superordinate clauses in the preterite, only 2 were followed by a past infinitive in the subclause: one with MAY + HAVE BEEN, and one with the past version of the auxiliary (MIGHT) + HAVE BEEN:

(14) The auction houses added that the painting was “almost entirely overpainted,” so it **was** not surprising that it **might have been** overlooked by any professional appraiser.

In 14, I classify MIGHT is a Merger.

The tense of the subclause does not seem to have an influence on the choice of the modal auxiliary, since 10 of the subclauses with a past infinitive contain MAY (*may have done*) and 7 contain MIGHT (*might have done*). The difference between M1, M2 and MERGER does not seem to have an influence either (5 occurrences of M1, 7 occurrences of M2, 5 occurrences of Merger):

**Table 6:** Past tense in the subclause

Past tense in the subclause					
MAY 1	MAY2	MAY Merger	MIGHT 1	MIGHT 2	MIGHT Merger
4	3	3	1	4	2

Subclause - polarity:

Few occurrences contained a negated process in the subclause (*hardly surprising that she might not conform to the looks of many Spaniards*): only 7 occurrences out of 109, which represents 6,5% of the total.

**Table 7:** Affirmative versus negative process in the content clause

Content clause	TOTAL
Affirmative	102
Negative	7 occurrences: 2 occurrences of MAY/MIGHT 1 4 occurrences of MAY/MIGHT 2 1 occurrence of MAY/MIGHT MERGER

Difference between MAY and MIGHT

As stated by Coates (1983: 147), *MAY and MIGHT, in their Epistemic usage, are usually interchangeable*. In their quasi-subjunctive use (which we call M2), they also seem to be interchangeable, apart from two distinguishing factors:

- first, as shown in table 5, when the superordinate clause is in the preterite, MIGHT in the content clause is preferred to MAY
- second, MAY is more often a Merger than MIGHT.

Indeed, MIGHT is more likely to be an M2 than MAY in extraposed content clauses: if one compares the amount of MAY2 among all the occurrences of MAY with the amount of MIGHT2 among all the occurrences of MIGHT, one can see that MIGHT2 is more represented (70%) than MAY2 (42%), as shown in the following table:

**Table 8:** The proportion of MAY and MIGHT as M1, M2 and Merger

	MAY 52 occurrences	MIGHT 57 occurrences
M1	18/52 = 34,5 %	11/57 = 19,5%
M2	22/52 = <b>42,5 %</b>	40/57 = <b>70 %</b>
MERGER	11/52 = 21%	6/57 = 10.5%
Ambiguous	1/52 = 2%	0/57

This is perhaps why MAY in content clauses is so rarely presented as a potential quasi-subjunctive in the literature: Coates (1983: 132) only mentions the quasi-subjunctive MAY that serves to express a wish (like in *May it be*) but not the MAY that can be found in subclauses.

## 5. Semantic and pragmatic properties

### 5.1. Animate versus inanimate subject

In the following section, I will describe the influence of the subject on the interpretation of the modal.

What is particularly interesting is the influence of the subject of the subordinate clause on these three kinds of modals (M1, M2, Merger). Indeed, when the subject is animate (a *she* or a *he*), the proportion of M2 is more important (65%) than the proportion of M1 (12%). Conversely, when the subject is inanimate, the amount of M1 is more important (59 %) than the proportion of M2 (38%). This may be explained by the fact that the M2 appears when the verbs of the content clause are verbs of perception, cognition and emotion (*it's not surprising that he might want to, feel, decide, etc....*), which requires an animate subject, while the M1 expresses the fact that the event referred to in the content clause is a possibility. The results are summarized in table 9:

**Table 9:** Animate or inanimate subject in the subclause

Subject = animate: M2 is more represented than M1:	
subject of the subclause = <i>he/she</i>	M2 = 49 occurrences (65.3 %)
subject of the subclause = <i>he/she</i>	M1 = 9 occurrences (12 %)
Subject = inanimate: M1 is more represented than M2:	
subject of the subclause = <i>It</i>	M2 = 13 occurrences (38.2 %)
subject of the subclause = <i>It</i>	M1 = 20 occurrences (58.8 %)

As one can see, my sample contains 29 occurrences of M1 in total. The majority of these M1 are found in the sample where the subject of the content clause is inanimate: there are 20 occurrences of *it is/was not surprising that it may/might...* (which can be reformulated with *that it is possible for X to Y is not surprising*). MAY1 is more represented than MIGHT1 in this configuration: out of the 20 occurrences, there are 14 occurrences of MAY1 (so 70%) and only 6 occurrences of MIGHT1 (30%).

Here is an example of this configuration:

- (15) With this El Niño event set to be one of the strongest on record, it is not surprising that it may have had an expected disruptive effect on monsoon circulation.

[Journal: CLIMAS (popular science journal article), 2015, AmE-DI]

Such occurrences of M1 are often found in the context of a scientific discussion (13 occurrences were found in academic papers or popular science journal article). In comparison, the sample with animate subjects in the subclause does not contain any occurrence of MAY or MIGHT in a context belonging to the scientific field. This leads me to the next section, devoted to the context.

## 5.2. Source and Context

Let us now move to the context of these MAY/MIGHT in a subclause:

**Table 10:** Labelling the Source

Journals & magazines:	70 occurrences (64.5 %)
Blogs	28 occurrences (25,5 %)
Chat forums & social networks	7 occurrences (6,5 %)
Other <sup>3</sup>	4 Occurrences (3,5 %)

As shown in table 10, these structures tend to be mostly used by journalists. Now, if one crosses these results with the variety of MAY and MIGHT (M1, M2 and Merger) and with the nature of the subject (animate or inanimate), one can see that M2 with an animate subject is clearly a variety found in journals and magazines, while M2 with an inanimate subject is less represented in this type of corpus.

**Table 11:** Kind of MAY/MIGHT in journals and magazines

	JOURNALS & MAGAZINES		
	M1	M2	MERGER
<b>Animate subject:</b>			
<b>HE/SHE</b> MAY (34 occurrences, 21 found in journals or mags)	2/21	15/21	4/21
<b>HE/SHE</b> MIGHT (41 occurrences, 25 found in journals or mags)	4/25	17/25	4/25
<b>Inanimate subject:</b>			
<b>IT</b> MAY (18 occurrences, 10 found in journals or mags)	9/10	1/10	0/10
<b>IT</b> MIGHT (16 occurrences, 14 found in journals or mags)	6/14	7/14	1/14

In table 11, one can see that most of the MAY and MIGHT found in journals and magazines are M2 when the subject is animate (third column, 15/21 and 17/25), while most occurrences of MAY are M1 when the subject is inanimate (9/10). Indeed, most of MAY 1 found in journals and magazines are found in academic papers or popular science journal articles and

<sup>3</sup> In the category *other*, I have included 1 online course, 2 constructed examples found in grammar books and the biography of an employee in the site of a company.

have an inanimate subject. This MAY1 denotes a logical possibility (e.g., *Since cannabis is a potent anti-inflammatory, it isn't surprising that it may be helpful in the treatment of IBD*).

### 5.3. Recurring pattern: [it is not surprising that <TITLE>]

The most striking fact revealed by this list of occurrences is the very important number of subclauses that directly or indirectly refer to the title of the article or to the title of one of its paragraphs, as shown in the following examples:

- (16) With this much negative talk surrounding her, it's not surprising that **she might have chosen to step away from unnecessary chatter.**

Title of the article: *Naya Rivera Deletes Her Twitter Account*  
[Journal (*PopCrush*); 2014, (AmE-DI)]

Out of the 107 authentic occurrences of my sample<sup>4</sup>, 74 of them directly refer to a title, which represents 69% of the occurrences. Among these 74 occurrences, the most frequent variety of MAY/MIGHT is M2, followed by M1, and in the last position, Merger: 43 occurrences of subclauses referring to the title are M2, which represents 58% of the total, 20 occurrences are M1, which represents 27% and 11 occurrences are Merger, which represents 15%. Here is another example:

- (17) Gruden said he “cried for three days” after making that trade, so it's not entirely surprising that **he might want to try and get Mack back on the Raiders** at some point, right? Turns out he reportedly tried to do exactly that.

Title of the article: *Jon Gruden reportedly tried to get Khalil Mack back on Raiders, but Bears weren't interested*  
[Journal (*Yahoo Sports*), 2021 (AmE-DI)]

The large number of subclauses referring to the title in my list seems to indicate that MAY and MIGHT, in this construction, appear in a sentence that plays a very specific role, which is to finally **provide an explanation to the title**: after having settled the background and having given all the relevant information concerning the context, the journalist explains why, after all, the important event mentioned in the title was to be expected. This clearly echoes what Behre called a *meditative-polemic* SHOULD: *what the 'should-clause' refers to is generally a fact which is stated, directly or indirectly, in a preceding passage of writing* (Behre, 1955: 174), and what Celle's study reveals: *Pragmatic 'should' is encountered in content clauses that convey hearer-old information. This use is 'meditative-polemic' and not generated by a sense of surprise* (Celle, 2018: 24).

What is more, a large majority of the occurrences of the list contain a discourse connector in the superordinate clause (*therefore, so, thus, as a result, as a consequence, considering the fact that, etc...*) presenting the content clause as a logical consequence.

---

<sup>4</sup> Let me recall that 2 occurrences are isolated constructed examples found in grammar books and as a consequence do not occur in texts likely to have a title.

One might add that generally, MAY and MIGHT are regular modal auxiliaries (with a root or an epistemic meaning): they are used in non-factual contexts, since they put some predicative relation in the modal category of NECESSITY or POSSIBILITY (in the sentence *he must be there*, the predication <he-be there> ∈ NECESSITY). As this is by far the most frequent use of these modal auxiliaries, the journalist has to signal very clearly to the reader that the event referred to in the subclause did eventually occur. Thus, the piece of information has to be apparent in a part of the article that is salient enough for the reader to retain it. The most salient part of an article being the title, it is not surprising to find such rare uses of MAY and MIGHT there. For these reasons, I shall call M2 the *explanatory MAY/MIGHT*.

#### 5.4. Semantic context - when the speaker includes the point of view of the subject

In the last part of my descriptive account, I would like to mention another important aspect of these M2, which is their tendency to appear in content clauses where **the point of view of the subject** is taken into account. Let us start with one of the most striking examples.

In an article whose title is *Former Obama Official Defends Romney's Bain Capital Record*, the content clause reads *it's not surprising that he might **want to defend** the honor of the industry that made him rich* instead of the predictable [...] *that he might **defend** the honor [...]*. All the same, in an article whose title reads *Jon Gruden reportedly **tried** to get Khalil Mack back on Raiders*, [...], the content clause goes *it's not entirely surprising that he might **want to try and get Mack back***. The addition of the verb WANT in the subclause referring to the title shows that an element which carries the point of view of the subject is included in the subclause. One could even say that there is a collocation between MAY/MIGHT in content clauses and the verb WANT, since my corpus contains 10 occurrences of the structure [*surprising* + animate subject + MAY/MIGHT + *want*] out of the 75 occurrences of the corpus with an animate subject in the content clause. It represents 13.5 % of the occurrences.

Other verbs carrying the point of view of the subject can be found in my corpus, like FEEL (4 occurrences: e.g. *it is not surprising that he may **feel like** his version would have been great*), NEED (2 occurrences: e.g. *it's not surprising that he may **need** some dental work done*), FIND (*it's not surprising that he might **have found** that bulk to not be worth the benefits*), SEE (*Is it really all that surprising that he might **not have seen** a significant moral difference*), CHOOSE (*it's not surprising that she might **have chosen** to step away from unnecessary chatter*).

Apart from the presence of verbs like WANT, FEEL, CHOOSE, one can also find several other strategies to include the point of view of the subject in the content clause, namely:

- The addition of predicative adjectives: BE CONSCIOUS, BE FED UP WITH.
- The choice of the passive voice in the content clause when the title was in the active voice.
- The addition of *him/herself*.
- The addition of VIEW.
- The addition of the progressive aspect (**be+ -ing**) and some moderation markers (*quite, a bit, some, at this time*).



This inclusion seems to go hand in hand with some moderation of the statement from the author. These two markers show that the speaker takes the point of view of the subject into account, and adds his/her own uncertainty. Thus, both the point of view of the subject of the content clause and the point of view of the speaker are marked.

All in all, 44 content clauses contain some element indicating the point of view of the subject (out of the 75 occurrences with an animate subject, which represents 58,5% of the sample). This addition seems to be specific to M2, since out of these 44 occurrences, a majority of content clause including the point of view of the subject contain an M2 (34 occurrences), while a minority contain a Merger (7 occurrences) and an M1 (3 occurrences).

For these reasons, I also call it the *subjective MAY/MIGHT*, hence my overall label *subjective-explanatory MAY/MIGHT*, in reference to Behre's *Meditative-polemic-SHOULD*.

The inclusion of the point of view of the subject with these M2 may recall Rothstein's analysis of the subjunctive (Rothstein, 2009), according to whom the subjunctive serves to include the point of view of the addressee. For now, we can observe that these subjective-explanatory MAY and MIGHT serve to add an information layer concerning the speakers or the agents of the action.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, I hope to have shown with this preliminary description that MAY and MIGHT in this syntactic context, as substitutes for the *meditative-polemic-Should*, deserve to be paid more attention. The fact that not only SHOULD, but also MAY and MIGHT can play this role could be interpreted as an indication that these modal auxiliaries substitute for the subjunctive mood in this syntactic context. This article aimed at displaying a preliminary study, and it goes without saying that a more extended data collection is required: one needs to study the influence of other adjectives than *surprising* (like *odd*, *strange*, *(im)possible*, etc...) and more syntactic structures. One also needs to study the effects of the grammaticalization of MAY and MIGHT (maybe from structures like *fear that he may*, where MAY is still an M1, to unambiguously factual contexts).

## References

- Adamczewski, H., and C. Delmas. 1982. *Grammaire linguistique de l'anglais*. Armand Colin, 5<sup>ème</sup> édition.
- Behre, F. 1955. *Meditative-polemic should in Modern English that-clauses* (Vol. 4). Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Bouscaren, J., and J. Chuquet. 1987. *Grammaire et textes anglais: guide pour l'analyse linguistique*. Editions OPHRYS.
- Celle, A. 2018. Epistemic evaluation in factual contexts in English. In Z. Guentchéva (ed.), *Epistemic Modalities and Evidentiality in Cross-Linguistic Perspective*, 22–51. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110572261-002>
- Coates, J. 1983. *The semantics of the modal auxiliaries*. Routledge.
- Huddleston, R., and G. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2005-0209>
- Jacobsson, B. 1988. Should and would in factual that-clauses. *English Studies* 69(1): 72–84.
- Jespersen, O. 2013 [1931]. *Essentials of English grammar*. Routledge.

- Kanté, I. 2010. Mood and modality in finite noun complement clauses: A French-English contrastive study. *International journal of corpus linguistics* 15(2): 267–290.
- Khalifa, J. C. 2004. *Syntaxe de l'anglais: théories et pratique de l'énoncé complexe aux concours*. Editions OPHRYS.
- Larreya, P., and C. Rivière. 2005. *Grammaire explicative de l'anglais*. 3 e édition.
- Larreya, P. 2015. Modalisations a priori et a posteriori: le cas de would. *Anglophonia. French Journal of English Linguistics* 19.
- Leech, G. 1971. *Meaning and the English verb*. London: Longman.
- Melis, G. 2002. Nominalisateurs et prise en charge. In C. Delmas, and L. Roux (eds.), *Construire et Reconstruire en Linguistique Anglaise. Syntaxe et Sémantique*. C.I.E.R.E.C Travaux 107, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 139–150.
- Paillard, M. 1984. La question du subjonctif en français et en anglais contemporains. *Cahiers Charles V* 6(1): 63–86. <https://doi.org/10.3406/cchav.1984.955>
- Pelyvás, P. 2006. Subjectification in (expressions of) epistemic modality and the development of the grounding. In A. Athanasiadou, C. Canakis and B. Cornillie (eds.), *Subjectification: Various paths to subjectivity*. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110892970>
- Quirk et al. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Pearson Longman.
- Rothstein, P. 2009 (October). Le linguistique dans l'expression de la subjectivité en traduction: une problématique du subjonctif. In H. Anamur, A. Bulut, and A. Uras-Yilmaz (eds), *Colloque international de traduction. La traduction sous tous ses aspects au centre de gravité du dialogue international*. Istanbul.
- Spears, A. K. 1973 (April). Complements of *significant-class* predicates: A study in the semantics of complementation. In *Proceedings from the Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (Vol. 9, No. 1), 627–638. Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Wilson, D., and D. Sperber. 2004. *Relevance Theory*. In L. R. Horn, and G. Ward (eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, 607–632. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cite this article as:

Meinard, M. E.-M. (2024). Is there a “Meditative-polemic-May”? *LingBaW. Linguistics Beyond and Within*, 10, 113–130.