

## Pragmatics of TAM: Its Descriptive and Observational Adequacy

By Shinian Wu\*

*The Tense-Aspect-Modality (TAM) system of English illustrates a subsystem of grammar that situates events, states, or actions in time. However, such generic conceptual framing requires a more complex description of not only the structural forms of TAM itself, but more importantly, adequate observations of pragmatic contexts in which these forms manifest themselves in social interactions. Hence, there are two issues to address: 1) the inadequate description of the TAM system in many grammar books and 2) the inadequate observation of how the system is used in real-life communicative scenarios. The former is about describing the structural properties such as the difference between the “simple past” and “present perfect”, which is not always straightforward in situating an action in time; the latter presents semantic complexities as every TAM structure must be anchored in how interlocutors interpret it in conversations, such as the meaning of “I’m reading the book” as an ongoing act or as an expression of state. This paper addresses these two ends of the grammatical spectrum and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the form and function of TAM in English that can benefit grammarians and teachers of English (especially those who teach English as a second language).*

**Keywords:** *tense-aspect-modality system, descriptive adequacy and observational adequacy, pragmatics, form and function*

### Introduction

Traditional grammars of English are primarily used for two distinct purposes: teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and teaching pre-service or in-service teachers of English in post-secondary educational programs. The former typically targets learners of English as a second language (ESL) in countries where English is natively spoken as well as those who reside outside native-speaking areas where English is used as a foreign language (EFL). The terms “second” and “foreign” are more pedagogically meaningful than geolinguistically relevant in that educators and researchers see social and linguistic environments as major contributors to the likelihood of success or failure in learning the language (Sato & Storch, 2020). For English language learners, in either context, the tense-aspect-modality (TAM) system often presents the most learning challenge due to its complexity, lack of explainability, and variable usage. In teacher education, on the other hand, prospective teachers study English grammar to equip themselves with metalinguistic knowledge about the language many aspects of which they may not be aware of as native speakers. Among them is also the TAM system, although the nature of the challenge differs from that for language learners. The

---

\*Professor, Grand Valley State University, USA.

challenge is naturally not the usage itself, as all competent native speakers can appropriately deploy the sixteen tense and aspect forms and nine modal auxiliaries in their daily social interactions (Klammer et al. 2013). It is the lack of adequate observation, hence, awareness of the intricacies and nuances of the TAM system which impedes its optimal teachability. Traditional grammar books intended not for researchers but for teachers and learners understandably “go for the most obvious” and the most easily explainable, such as “past-tense verbs are used to describe past events”, while in reality, the conceptual terms of “present” and “past” are merely formal grammatical labels that overlook the disparity between form and function—what something is vs. what something does. That is, “present-tense” verbs in English can perfectly be used to express events and actions of all three time points: the past, the present, and the future in different grammatical moods under different pragmatic contexts—inconsistent with what a structural concept (present tense) is supposed to denote. In other words, the TAM system is not merely a structural or formal component of English grammar, but it needs to be examined both within the larger grammatical system and from the pragmatic perspective that often renders valid but unexpected analyses of meaning in order to better serve the needs of English language learners and those who teach them.

### **Describing TAM as a Structural System**

Most traditional grammar books and English teaching materials treat TAM as separate conceptual domains, with tense being the most prominent grammatical feature which is also presumed most explainable and teachable, followed by modal and regular auxiliaries. One of the well-known grammar-editing software program Grammarly states on its website:

*Verb tenses are changes or additions to verbs to show when the action took place: in the past, present, or future.*

With its dubious use of the term *tense* in the statement aside, what it describes indeed represents a prevailing view that there are three verb tenses in English each seamlessly corresponding to a particular point in a chronological timeline, and it is commonly taught in elementary and middle schools in the United States and elsewhere. Some grammatical sources such as EnglishClub further expand the three tenses to twelve, showing awareness of additional verb forms such as “present perfect” or “past continuous”, but still categorize them as part of the tense system.

More advanced sources that target audiences of English teacher education programs describe the TAM system more holistically with more conceptual accuracy, such as Aarts (2011), Colln & Gray (2015), Klammer et al. (2013), and Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia (2016). While Aarts and Klammer et al. specifically differentiate form from function in their discussion of TAM and other lexical categories, Larsen Freeman & Celce-Murcia devote an entire chapter on TAM, although none of the references goes beyond the twelve verb forms that a typical teaching website provides:

**Figure 1.** *Tense and Aspect system (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016)*

Tense & Aspect	Examples
1. Simple present	It breaks.
2. Simple past	It broke.
3. Simple future	It will break.
4. Present perfect	It has broken.
5. Past perfect	It had broken.
6. Future perfect	It will have broken.
7. Present progressive	It is breaking.
8. Past progressive	It was breaking.
9. Future progressive	It will be breaking.
10. Present perfect progressive	It has been breaking.
11. Past perfect progressive	It had been breaking.
12. Future perfect progressive	It will have been breaking.

What is glaringly missing are four more TAM forms not listed above and often omitted in many grammar books:

**Figure 2.** *Past Tense Form of the Four Aspects*

Tense & Aspect	Examples
13. Past future	It would break.
14. Past future progressive	It would be breaking.
15. Past future perfect	It would have broken.
16. Past future perfect progressive	It would have been breaking.

There may be understandable reasons for why the last four verb forms are conveniently avoided in grammatical description. Terminologically, and perhaps conceptually as well, there is a logical dilemma in a TAM form that consists of both past and future at the same time as it is a contradiction to conceptually imagine present and past times expressed within the same form. While the TAM system should not overlook the last four descriptively inconvenient forms as they are observationally valid, that is, they are in the grammar of English and used in real-life speaking and writing, there must be a theoretically viable explanation of the apparent incompatibility of forms.

Klammer et al. (2013) advocate for a scientific approach to analyzing lexical categories instead of the more traditional and intuitively appealing definitions by distinguishing between form and function of words. Form is literally what a word looks like—its orthography including inflectional and derivational morphemes attached to it while function refers to the grammatical role a word plays in phrases and clauses. *Desk* is a noun because it can be pluralized by the inflectional marker *-s* and can syntactically be modified by a determiner *a* or *the* to serve its nominal function in sentences. The nonword *briggily* is morphologically recognized as an adverb because of a derivational process that adds the adverbial suffix *-ly* to the

adjectival form *briggy*, which in turn derives from the nominal form *brig*. Applying the same principle to the TAM system, the sixteen verb forms can be reconceptualized based on their form:

English has two tense categories: present and past.

English has three aspectual categories: future, perfect, and progressive.

And functions are predicated on illocutionary acts in social interactions. In *It will break* (Figure 1), *will* is a present-tense modal, and its past form is *would*. Each form can vary in its function depending on the pragmatic context in which it is deployed: *will* can express a future point in time or one's subjective determination, as in

*I will finish the job*

- a) promising to finish the job at a certain point in time in the future as an assignment
- b) expressing inclination or determination to finish the job because it is important

Likewise, the past-tense form *would* can either anchor a future point in time that began at a past point in time or convey politeness or subjunctive mood:

<i>You said you would finish the job the following Wednesday.</i>	(past, past + future)
<i>You would finish the job if you were given two weeks.</i>	(subjunctive)
<i>Would you finish the job please?</i>	(politeness)

In other words, technically there are only two tenses in English, not three. The modal *will* denotes future, but the modal itself is in its present-tense form. Its past-tense form is *would*, although most textbooks list three tenses for English. One argument Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia make is that there needs to be a logical requirement for a special form of future tense because the TAM system “needs to account for what form-meaning combinations *do* (italics original) exist that relate to a time after present” (p. 106). On the other hand, it must also be noted that the formal terms *present* and *past* can be misleading to teachers and learners based on their lexical semantic denotations as the two terms do not necessarily function the way they are supposed to in specific discourse genres. Suh (1992a) observes that English speakers often use one TAM form to frame or introduce a type of narrative and then switch to another TAM form to elaborate the narrative with details. The Frame-Elaboration Hypothesis proposed by Suh is based on the observation that present-perfect is frequently used to introduce a habitual narrative followed by a switch to the simple present that elaborates the narrative, or the topic transitions to the simple past when the narrative switches to past experiences.

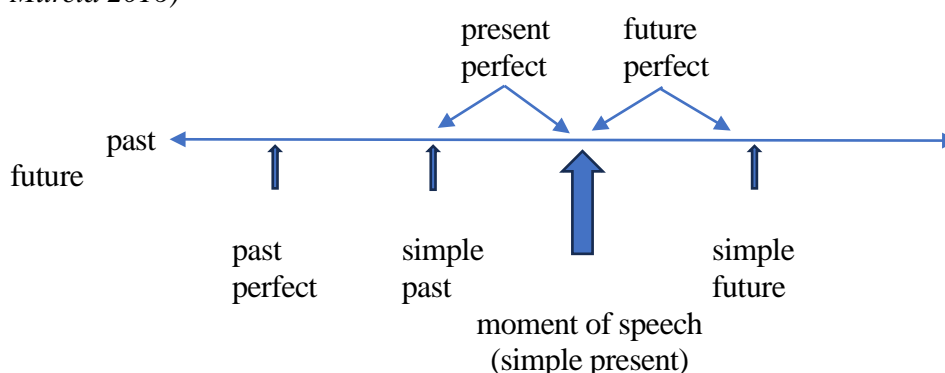
It has also been observed that English speakers, typically in informal settings, often begin a conversation about a past event by using simple past verbs, then switch to simple present-tense verbs, and end the narrative back in the simple past:

*Last Friday I went to my neighbor's house for a weekend party after work... I'm standing there by the kitchen counter having a beer when the neighbor's sister comes*

over to me and **asks** me if I've **seen** that Barbie movie... By about nine, I **went** home as I **was** so tired...

The past-present-past V-shaped TAM use is observed as occurring commonly in spoken discourse, especially among young speakers which Levey (2006) describes as *a turn of events in a narrative*. The use of verb tenses which follows a linear order in anchoring everything in discourse temporally at a present point in time (moment of speech) and extends into the past and the future time all from that starting point often defies empirical data, despite the fact that many textbooks still follow this conventionalized framework which remains pedagogically useful for explanations to elementary level learners:

**Figure 3.** Tense and Aspect Forms on a Single Line (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 2016)



The classic descriptive framework proposed by Bull (1960), which captures the variability from the linearity of time, argues that our concept of time is not truly linear and static, and that speakers often view a specific event or action in different temporal perspectives in specific pragmatic contexts, such as what to look for in the following interaction and how to interpret the two replies:

*Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?*

- a) *No thanks. I've already eaten.*
- b) *No thanks. I already ate.*

For this example, the time the speaker ate is not of concern or interest, but the two responses reflect two temporal perspectives: whether the respondent wanted to add the current relevance to her response or not: completion of an action (eating) at the moment of speaking or simple reporting of a past action with no relevance to the present. That is, such variability in TAM use is common and expected in pragmatic contexts where intended meaning is the focus of attention.

Apart from the question of how to adequately describe the TAM system based on the observation of what happens in real life, one will quickly notice that, of the sixteen verb forms in the TAM system represented in most grammar books, only one modal auxiliary *will* is used to both convey time and perform other pragmatic functions, including what Suh (1992b) calls the *habitual past* (*That regular customer would always arrive at 9:00*). The description of the TAM system

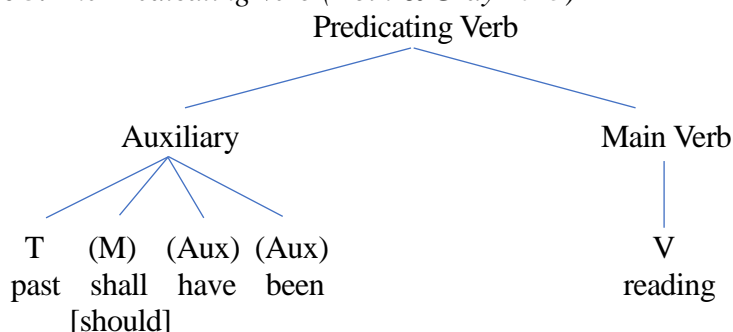
is not complete without examining the descriptive and observational adequacy of the rest of the modals:

**Figure 4.** *Present and Past Forms of English Modals*

Present	Past
will (already discussed)	would
can	could
shall	should
may	might
must	?

Since all verbs in English are tensed in finite clauses and sentences, including modals, the TAM system naturally includes both present and past forms for accuracy and completeness. However, there is a lack of consensus on whether the present and past forms should be descriptively treated as two variants of one modal or separate modals. Huddleston & Pullum (2021) recognize that *could*, *should*, *might*, and *would* are preterite forms of *can*, *shall*, *may*, and *will* while they also acknowledge, correctly, that “they differ considerably in their uses from ordinary preterites, and thus may not appear to be preterites” (p. 37). It is indeed true that if anyone searches the internet for information on English modal verbs (mostly for teaching tips), what they are most likely to find are the so-called nine modals shown in Figure 4. Some authors may also throw in a few more, such as *ought (to)*, *dare*, or *need (to)* into the mix, although they do not consistently share the same grammatical characteristics as those five. The status of *need* in particular, used in both British and American English, is at best dubious (*They need not do it* vs. *They don’t need to do it*). Arguments from the two sides are ultimately rooted in how these forms are viewed—from a formal (what they are) or functional (what they do) perspective. Kohn & Gray (2015), for example, present a structural model for the predicating verb consisting of all the tense and aspect elements in it:

**Figure 5.** *The Predicating Verb (Kohn & Gray 2015)*



The model is essentially a demonstration of “form”, not function, of the TAM system consistent with Figure 4, while Klammer et al. (2013) treat the nine forms as separate modals, and yet, like Carnie (2021), adopt a functional approach in

describing them, for example, *will* as a modal denotes future time instead of a modal in its present tense form.

The inconsistencies in the way the TAM system in English is described likely stem from the conceptual ambiguity with which different scholars attempt to view the TAM system both scientifically and pedagogically. The scientific approach must be consistent and exhibit descriptive adequacy while the pedagogical approach must appeal to a physical world with concrete objects that learners of English can easily see and perceive. More abstract, scientific concepts develop later as a result of learners' cognitive maturity. A book can be formally and scientifically defined as "a portable volume consisting of a series of written, printed, or illustrated pages bound together for ease of reading" (Oxford English Dictionary). It is largely a formal definition of what a book is with a function added (for ease of reading). However, it is hard to imagine a teacher of English explaining the word to students by using this type of definition. Rather, teachers tend to hold a physical book and tell students simply that "look at it, feel it, and this is something we read". The argument that words can be taught as independent processes devoid of their pragmatic functions draws its validity more from input-impooverished classroom teaching in an EFL setting as described by Luchini & Ferreiro (2023) in Argentina than input-rich ESL environments in the US.

For grammarians wishing to accurately characterize and explain the TAM system to teachers and learners alike, and for that matter, any grammatical (sub)system of a language, consistency in description based on adequate observation can be achieved by taking into account both its form and function. Following Leech & Biber (2015), contrary to Klammer et al. (2013), the English TAM system consists of two tenses, not three, and fourteen aspects, and five modals as laid out earlier (Figures 1, 2 and 4).

Separating form from function in TAM not only adds more descriptive adequacy to grammatical analysis and explanation, it also lends more validity to itself as it reflects observed real life language use. These forms play two essential communicative functions: the inherent function embedded in the TAM system and the pragmatic function shaped by external factors (to be expounded on in the following section). For example, it is observationally valid to state that

*Present-tense verbs can express present, past, and future time.*

*Past-tense verbs can express present, past, and future time.*

It may sound counterintuitive to make such a claim until real language data are presented, such as the V-shaped example discussed earlier where present-tense verbs are used to narrate a past event. And a sentence employing a present-tense verb indicating a future event is equally observationally valid:

*Her mom **arrives** next Tuesday.*

Contrasted with

*Her mom **will arrive** next Tuesday,*

the latter expresses the speaker's prior knowledge that her mom has intentionally made plans to visit whereas the former expresses certainty of her mom's arrival, presumably based the speaker's knowledge of a flight or train itinerary—a pragmatically driven TAM form. Likewise, the sentence

*Her mom would have arrived last Tuesday if her flight hadn't been cancelled*

conveys a counter-factual subjunctive mood on something not realized even though the sentence itself is not negative. The meaning of the sentence is internally generated by its subjunctive structure using the past-future perfect in the main clause and past perfect in the subordinating clause, which is independent of pragmatic contexts.

### Pragmatic Functions of the TAM System

LoCastro (2003), in her seminal work on pragmatics, defines the field as intricately pertaining to two salient dimensions of communication: action and context. One of the questions linguists ask is how a speaker uses a linguistic form to act in the world and to express an intended meaning in a specific communicative context with the expectation that her interlocutor “gets it” and acts accordingly. Taguchi & Roever (2017) put the field in more plain terms: pragmatics is concerned with meaning-making based on four dimensions: the language system, the speaker, the listener, and the context of an utterance. The English TAM system as a structural component of the language is an integral part of linguistic pragmatics studied by scholars but surprisingly, infrequently taught in English classrooms.

In November 2022, the dollar amount of the Power Ball lottery in the US reached \$2.04 billion. People were lining up in queues to buy the lottery tickets. An NBC News reporter chanced upon a woman in a long queue in a California city and engaged her in a short interview with a part cited here which is germane to the current discussion of pragmatic functions of the TAM system:

*Reporter: What would you do if you won the lottery?*

*Woman: If I win, I will use the money to travel and also replace my old car.*

It is easily observable to a grammarian that the reporter used the past-tense form of *will* in the main clause and the past-tense form of *win* in the if-conditional clause in her question to raise a purely hypothetical scenario which was extremely unlikely to materialize given the statistical probability of hitting the multi-state jackpot. The woman who the reporter was interviewing, however, used a present-tense non-subjunctive construction in her response. While the reporter's use of past-tense forms in the subjunctive mood implicitly conveyed improbability of winning the lottery, one can speculate on what the ticket buyer's pragmatic perspective might be by the type of TAM forms she used, consciously or unconsciously. It seems that to the ticket buyer, the reality of hitting the jackpot, at



least in her perception of things in that context, was not as impossibly remote as the reporter's judgment shown in the grammatical choices she made.

It leads us back to the question of how pragmatics impacts interpretations of grammatical forms like TAM as they do not exist in a vacuum. All languages have a social and cultural component that makes human communication productive and meaningful in specific pragmatic contexts. Language development, be it in one's first or second language, is essentially a socialization process. Ochs & Schieffelin (2017) see language as an instrument through which speakers use appropriate linguistic forms to effect what Hymes famously terms "communicative competence" (Cazden 2011) as an unavoidable part of human experience. They argue that language socialization is rarely explicit. Speakers rely on their ability to "infer meanings through routine indexical associations between verbal forms and socio-cultural practices, relationships, institutions, emotions, and thought-worlds" (p. 2).

Meaning, therefore, is not only linguistic but social, pragmatically rooted in real-life experiences, a key point echoed by Cruse (2011), who sees meaning as generated from three sources: lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic. If TAM is a subsystem of English used to convey time points (tense), temporal/spatial relations (aspect), and modality (various degrees of certainty, probability, ability, permissibility, and obligation), then these structural forms, apart from their inherent lexical semantic senses, are intricately associated with grammatical and pragmatic meanings. Hence, the TAM system examined from this vantage point demonstrates more descriptive and observational adequacy because meaning-making is more nuanced and authentic than that out of grammar-internal stipulations, such as "past-tense verbs describe past events".

### **Tense and Aspect again**

As previously illustrated, verb tense as a structural form designated as being *present* or *past* is semantically misleading since the terms do not always mean what they are supposed to mean in terms of time concepts. It is pragmatically possible for verbs in their simple present tense form to indicate all three time concepts: present, past, and future. Leech & Biber (2015) point out that

*in special cases, simple present tense is used to refer to past events or future events. When it refers to past time, it is called the historical present tense. This use is most common in conversations (p. 152).*

And they observe that the use of historical present tense is observably frequent in spoken corpus data with verbs that express directional movement (e.g., *come* and *go*) and those that describe speaking (e.g., *say*, *go*, *tell*, *ask*, *reply*) in the pragmatic context of story-telling and casual joking. They cite an example that illustrates the usage from corpus linguistic research:

*And the daughter comes home from school one day and says, mum I want to be like you. And the mum goes, okay dear (p.152).*

If these observations are valid based on corpus data in spoken English (Biber 1988), and there is no reason to believe otherwise, then there is still the question of how to adequately describe, and further explain, the usage phenomenon systematically to formulate some sort of pragmatic rule that stipulates that speakers of English use the *x-tense* in the *y-context* for the *z-purpose*. After all, the narrator *could* use simple past-tense verbs to tell exactly the same story. For English teachers and learners, such observation, description, and ultimately explanation help them develop metalinguistic awareness of the pragmatically sanctioned usage rules.

The use of past-tense verbs also exhibits versatility: they are used to make hypothetical or imaginary statements in the if-conditional sentences at the present time and for future reference with no relation to the past, or make a counterfactual statement about an event that did not happen:

<i>Just think what I <b>would</b> do if I <b>were</b> in this situation!</i>	(present)
<i>It's late. It's high time we <b>went</b> home.</i>	(present)
<i>If you <b>decided</b> not to make the trip to Greece next month, you <b>would</b> regret your decision for the rest of your life.</i>	(future)
<i><b>Had</b> she known the facts then, she <b>wouldn't</b> have voted for the bill.</i>	(past)
<i>(Alternate but controversial: If she <b>would</b> have known the facts, she <b>wouldn't</b> have voted for the bill)</i>	(past)

Each of the sixteen verb forms (two tenses and fourteen aspects) is describable based on some level of observational adequacy in most grammar books, such as

*Present progressive verbs describe an ongoing action at the present moment of speaking.*

It seems to be a simple enough concept to grasp when a present progressive verb is used in the following interaction:

*What are you doing right now? I need some help!*  
*Oh, sorry! I'm **reading** the book.*

However, such description falls short of adequacy when the reply is in response to a different question:

*I can't find my book. It's not on the shelf. Did you see it?*  
*Oh, sorry, I'm **reading** the book.*

The respondent in the first instance told the other person what she was doing at that moment of speaking: reading the book; the respondent in the second instance was telling the questioner where the book was: somewhere in her possession. The same TAM form renders two different meanings in two different pragmatic contexts where the interpretation of meaning goes beyond the (*Be* + {-*ing*} + *V*) intra-sentential tense-aspect relations and into the more speculative inter-sentential interpretation.

The same present-progressive form, according to Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia (2016), also conveys a sense of temporariness in addition to the immediacy of present time:

*Where do you live?*

- a) *I **live** in Piraeus.*
- b) *I'm **living** with my parents.*

Descriptively, both replies indicate the status of where the respondent resides rather than a specific act of living as *live* in this case is not a performative act unlike proclaiming that *I'm living a happy life*. The only difference between the simple present and present progressive usages is the sense of permanency, which is inherently built in the lexical semantic properties of the verb in a specific tense-aspect form.

Even this descriptive parameter does not seem sufficiently generalizable observationally. An MSN blog discussing how to recognize everyday millionaires in America reads:

*It might sound like a plot from a fancy Hollywood flick, but guess what? Millionaires aren't just in the movies. They're **living** right next door, blending in like regular folks,*

where the use of the present progressive form does not differ in semantically significant ways from its simple present counterpart for all practical purposes of communication:

*It might sound like a plot from a fancy Hollywood flick, but guess what? Millionaires aren't just in the movies. They **live** right next door, blending in like regular folks.*

The choice of the present progressive seems to exert a higher level of immediacy than the simple present, giving the listener/reader an up-close, literally next-door feel.

Pedagogically oriented grammarians and teachers often feel at more ease with describing grammatically more stringent tense and aspect forms than the shorter and more nuanced ones. The latter are more open to interpretation since the more modifiers one uses to describe a form, the more restrictive the interpretation of that form becomes. *A teacher of history* is much more open to interpretation depending on pragmatic factors than *a teacher of the medieval European political history*. The present perfect progressive form of a verb contains the present time of speaking about an action as well as the status of completion of the action which includes the portion of the action already completed and remaining portion of the action still being carried out. Such modifiers/descriptors necessarily constrain the interpretation of the form:

*What's the status of the project?*

- a) *The research team **has been writing** the final report.*
- b) *The research team **is writing** the final report.*
- c) *The research team **wrote** the final report.*

In the above instances, *a*) calls for more elaborate description than *b*), which in turn contains more grammatical information than *c*). Each entails different levels of contextual information for clarity and comprehensibility, with *c*) needing the least contextual support.

On the other hand, interpretability with fewer pragmatic variables does not automatically result in higher levels of teachability as all tense and aspectual pieces of information must be integrated in descriptions supported by observations, and the latter may or may not be readily available from empirical data. In other words, it is a frequency of occurrence problem as a function of data collection of natural language occurring in everyday life: The TAM form in *The research team will have been writing the final report* statistically occurs much less frequently than *The research team wrote the final report*. Interestingly, the corresponding passive form of *The final report will have been being written by the research team*, while completely grammatical and is allowed in the TAM system, is very rarely if ever discussed in grammar books and taught in classrooms as it is rarely observed in natural language corpora. The passivization process can reasonably be described, but it lacks observational adequacy as pragmatic requirements for its use are hard to find, let alone trying to teach such TAM structure to English learners.

### Dissecting the Modals

Of the sixteen forms (or twelve in most pedagogical grammar books) in the TAM system of English, the modal verb *will* is the only one of the “typical five” (see Figure 4) included in it due to its unique time-telling status, even though its past-tense variant *would*, for unknown reasons, is often omitted. The exception is found in corpus-based research and grammar books (e.g., Biber 2006, Conrad 2009) as corpus linguists base their observation and description of grammatical features on natural language corpora extensively sampled from real-life language use registers ranging from casual conversations to social-media genres to formal academic writing. Apart from the typical five, there are also the modal-like and modal-functioning verbs in the usage mix. The complete list is shown below:

**Figure 6.** A Fuller List of Modals and Modal-like Forms

Present	Past
will (already discussed)	would
can	could
shall	should
may	might
must	?
ought to	?
have to	had to
need	needed
?	used to
dare	dared
am	was
is	were
are	
going to	going to

The renewed list is certainly not a clean sight to see, but it is observationally more valid in reflecting the reality of language use than the original five. Describing these modal verbs (some uncertain of their modal status) individually necessitates a lexical semantic definition (meaning) and their varied grammatical behaviors: two cannot be tensed for past time (*must* and *ought*), two require the infinitive marker *to* in order to function grammatically (*ought* and *be going*), two can be tensed for the past time by the inflectional *-ed* ending (*dare* and *need*) like regular lexical verbs, one cannot be tensed for the present time (*used to*), and finally, the *be* in the *be going to* construction has five variants, three of which are in the present tense and two in the past. It is a complex, highly irregular, and yet complete description of the tense and aspect system of English.

However, grammar is not merely a description of rules of words based on their lexical meaning and lexical categories; the meaning of a phrase, a sentence, or an utterance is not the sum of meanings of individual words in it (Siderits 1985), and recent semantic theory on compositionality incorporates both the meanings of a sentence's constituent expressions and its structure (Holloway, 2022). TAM is a subsystem of English grammar which connects its parts (tense, aspect, and modality of words) to show the semantic and grammatical interrelationships among them. As discussed earlier, the tense of modals, in interaction with other elements of TAM and other constituents of a sentence and beyond at the discourse and pragmatic levels, no longer only denotes present and past time. In fact, many grammar books already treat the tense variants of some modals as distinct modals, such as *shall* and *should*, *may* and *might* while others are in the slow evolving process of becoming separate, such as *will* and *would* each with its distinct degree of certainty, probability, and obligation. The tense boundaries of the modals become blurry as they acquire new meanings. Function wins over form, as past tense forms of the prototypical five (*will*, *shall*, *can*, and *may*) have long acquired their own semantic and grammatical identity apart from serving as time indicators. *Would* has literally taken over *used to*, a peculiar TAM form, to express past habituality:

*They used to visit the metropolitan museum every weekend.*  
*They would visit the metropolitan museum every weekend.*

Likewise, past-tense forms of the modals are a favorite choice in conveying subtlety, politeness, indirectness, respectfulness, social distance, or even sarcasm in a complex hierarchical society where pragmatic knowledge and skills are eminently relevant. Sometimes a choice of tense could decide success or failure in “getting things done” in communication.

There are still challenges, though, in the descriptive and observational adequacy of the modals. Observationally, the modal *shall* is either rarely used or used in restricted formal registers or for emphatic purposes. English speakers are often hard pressed to tell the semantic difference between the two in expressing degrees of certainty and determination. The same is true with *may* and *might*, which, more often than not, are treated as separate modals functionally in real-life use rather than as two variants, with the former suggesting a stronger degree of

commitment and likelihood than the latter. Needless to say, *can* and *could* are not only separated by tense, but each has its own pragmatic functions, with the former expressing more directness and less politeness than the latter in a social hierarchy.

The two seeming semantic equivalents *should* and *ought to* present an intriguing case for analysis. It is possible to use them interchangeably although the interpretation of the two may be elucidated in a specific pragmatic context, for example, in a restaurant setting where a patron wants to lodge a complaint about his server's unfriendly attitude. The restaurant can select one of two modals to direct the patron in its instructions:

*If you think your waiter is rude, you **should** talk to the manager.*

*If you think your waiter is rude, you **ought to** talk to the manager.*

Ordinarily no one would read closely into either one of the two sentences if presented separately. Juxtaposed in one sight, however, it may suddenly dawn on the patron that the second sentence could imply that going to the manager is not a good idea—the manager is even ruder than the waiter! Without this observation of usage for the modal *ought to*, adequate description as part of the TAM grammar is not possible. The same principle should apply to a flip-a-coin scenario in which one TAM form results in two completely different interpretations by the use of the modal *should*:

*Jennie **should have purchased** the book.*

The sentence begs the question: Did Jennie purchase the book?

The TAM structure actually allows either a yes or a no answer. How each is decided is dependent upon the contextual analysis of the scenario in which the sentence is interpreted. In formal grammatical jargon, the yes answer is an epistemic reading of the sentence based on a pragmatic context of how and when Jennie was assigned the work and when the expected outcome would be. The no answer conveys a deontic sense of an obligation that the actor (Jennie) has failed (see Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 2016, further attesting to the pivotal role pragmatics plays in arriving at an appropriate meaning). The fact that the TAM system of English even allows two contradictory interpretations to happen in the first place is an intellectual curiosity for grammarians and teachers. Kabackiev (2020), in his analysis of tense and aspect of Bulgarian in comparison with English, notes that a problem with grammatical categories is not what they express but what they do not express. Paradoxically, though, the subjunctive sentence above is neither lexically nor morphologically negated, yet almost all native speakers of English will judge it as expressing a negative sense without a second thought of the positive interpretation derived from exactly the same sentence until it is epistemically analyzed in a pragmatic context.

Likewise, the synonymy between *must* and *have to* is also worthy of inquiry. The question stems from the observation linguist Grabe made (personal communication) that since *must* has no corresponding past-tense form, *had to* could play the

substitutive role. And since *had to* is the past-tense form of *have to*, *must* and *have to* should logically carry an equal force of determination or obligation, as in

*You **must** complete the assignment on time.*

*You **have to** complete the assignment on time.*

Anecdotal accounts from native speaker respondents suggest that *must* exerts a stronger sense of determination or obligation, although empirical research on a more systematic scale is needed to achieve descriptive adequacy. The role of pragmatics is unclear, although one may speculate that stress patterns in spoken language, a suprasegmental phonological feature, could alter the degree of forcefulness between the two under specific discourse contexts.

The modal form and function of *need* and *dare*, unlike the rest of the modal class discussed above, is peculiar in that both can be inflected with the *-ed* ending used for lexical verbs, and both can be preceded by a bona fide modal auxiliary:

*The rescue team **needed to** venture into the canyon.*

*The rescue team **would need to** venture into the canyon.*

*The rescue team **dared to** venture into the canyon.*

*The rescue team **would dare to** venture into the canyon.*

The grammatical behavior of *need* and *dare*, therefore, raises the question about both their grammatical status and modality. No sentence can accommodate two modals:

*\*The rescue team **will can** venture into the canyon.*

*\*The rescue team **should can** venture into the canyon.*

*\*The rescue team **must can** venture into the canyon.*

A true modal must be accompanied by a lexical verb to express a central action or state, such as

*The students **will read** more classical literature.*

Thus observationally, classifying *need* and *dare* as modals is cast in doubt. Indeed, both can act as regular transitive verbs accepting a direct nominal object:

*I **need** you to defeat the competition.*

*I **dare** you to defeat the competition.*

Nevertheless, grammatical ambiguity abounds. If *need* and *dare* are placed in parallel to *will*, which is considered to be a bona fide modal, resultant sentences are well-formed, notwithstanding the additional use of the infinitive marker *to* for *need* and *dare*:

*The students **will read** more vampire literature.*

*The students **need to read** more vampire literature.*

*The students **dare to read** more vampire literature.*

Thus, *need* and *dare* can function like *will* to exert a sense of obligation or determination. However, a manipulation of the word order in the sentence through grammatical transformations produces the following outcomes:

*\*Read more vampire literature is what the students will.*  
*To read more vampire literature is what the students need.*  
*?To read more vampire literature is what the students dare.*

Clearly, the transposed sentences illustrate the descriptive dilemma of inconsistency. The *need*-sentence is well-formed as long as *need* is grammatically acting as a regular transitive verb, while the *will*-sentence is not. The *dare*-sentence is up for grabs depending on who picks it up. It is no surprise that some grammar books include *need* and *dare* in the modal lineup (e.g., Huddleston & Pullum 2021) while others do not. It goes to show that describing the TAM system in a neatly organized manner when the grammatical behaviors of modals and pseudo-modals are descriptively consistent is a daunting task.

This type of analysis borrowing principles of classical and modern generative-transformational syntax (Radford 1988, 2004, Fowler 2016), dissects the seeming structural parallelism in modality and uncovers descriptive chaos in the TAM system, although it does not fundamentally alter the functional roles of these words in it. They still add some level of modality, if not actual modals, in one way or another, to lexical verbs after them.

The final peculiar modal-like construction in the TAM mix is the multi-word *be going to* sequence, which indicates future time like *will*. It is often neglected in many grammar books except in corpus-based grammar since corpus linguists analyze language use patterns based on natural language data, especially spoken language where variants of *be going to* enjoy high frequencies of use.

Since it is a form of modal like the single-word ones, it behaves like a modal, can grammatically be substituted by a modal, but cannot concurrently occur with one:

*The university is going to raise tuition fees.*  
*The university will raise tuition fees.*  
*\*The university will be going to raise tuition fees.*  
*The university was going to raise tuition fees.*  
*\*The university might be going to raise tuition fees.*

Since it also expresses the progressive aspect of the lexical verb *go*, the modal use and lexical use can simultaneously exist in one sentence:

*The tour group is/was going to go to the Acropolis of Athens.*

Descriptions of the use of the *be going to* juxtaposed with *will* are by no means consistent. Leech & Biber 2015) describe it as an expression of the speaker's intention or prediction while the ESL teaching site ESLBUZZ characterizes it as a TAM form used to indicate a pre-planned future event as opposed to *will*. It is probably not very fruitful to seek an accurate description without sufficient observation of



how it is used in which communicative situations and by whom—Canale’s (1983) classical proposition for how to define communicative competence.

## Conclusion

The TAM system of English has a complex structure with both regular and irregular patterns. They primarily occur in tense forms for modals and lexical verbs, which, when in past tense, are not always inflected with the *-ed* suffix. In fact, most of the frequently used everyday verbs do not take it (*eat, drink, sleep, sit, lie down & get up, come & go, see, hear, speak, drive, fly, run, swim, rise & fall, take & bring, and read & write*). Apart from orthographic and pronunciation irregularity, the seemingly simple notion of *past* invokes more than the discussion of time, as empirical observations will quickly reveal that tense does not just mark time. There is no such neat correspondence between form and function: present-tense verbs express present action and state, and the past-tense verbs temporally move action and state into yesterday or yesteryear. Forms do not change; their functions do. Empirical usage data from spoken and written language amply demonstrate the variability of use of the forms for different communicative functions. Speakers make grammatical decisions, albeit mostly unconsciously, to suit their needs in social interactions based on who they talk to, when, where, why, and how. Grammarians and teachers may be able to describe what a tense formally is, but to explain its various functions becomes much more nuanced when pragmatics is involved. This is particularly true for teachers.

Tenseless aspectual forms present less challenge for observers of how different aspects render different temporal relations. The terminology that describes them, however, like *future perfect progressive* is often semantically opaque. It takes grammarians and teachers to present and describe communicative contexts in which aspectual meanings are differentiated, such as present perfect vs. simple past, both of which concern a past action or event. It is considerably harder to find a pragmatic context for the past future perfect progressive (*Joe would have been writing the book*) than, say, the future progressive (*Joe will be writing the book*).

Descriptive and observational adequacies are two underlying tenets for understanding the form and function of a grammatical system. There are intricate interrelationships between the two. The use of a particular form for a particular function in a particular social interaction is not as clear-cut as it is often perceived to be. The TAM system is no exception.

## References

- Aarts B (2011) *Oxford Modern English Grammar*. 1st Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Azar B, Hagen S (2016) *Fundamentals of English grammar*. 5th Edition. London: Pearson Education ESL.
- Biber D (1988) *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Biber D (2006) *University language: A corpus-based study of spoken and written registers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bull WE (1960) *Time, tense, and the verb: A study in the theoretical and applied linguistics, with particular application to Spanish*. Berkeley, CA: The University of Berkeley Press.
- Canale M (1983) From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. *Language and Communication* 1(1): 1–47.
- Carnie A (2021) *Syntax: A generative introduction*. 4th Edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cazden C (2011) Dell Hymes's construct of "communicative competence". *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 42(4): 364–369.
- Conrad S, Biber D (2009). *Real grammar: A corpus-based approach to English*. London: Pearson Education ESL.
- Cruse A (2011) *Meaning in language: An introduction to semantics and pragmatics*. 4th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- EnglishClub. <https://www.englishclub.com>
- ESLBuzz. <https://eslbuzz.com>
- Fowler R (2016) *An introduction to transformational syntax*. London: Routledge.
- Grammarly. <https://www.grammarly.com>
- Holloway K (2022) *Compositionality in formal semantics*. New York: States Academic Press.
- Huddleston R, Pullum G (2021) *A student's introduction to English grammar*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kabakciev K (2020) On the raison D'être of the present perfect, with special reference to the English Grammeme. *Athens Journal of Philology* 7(2): 125–146.
- Klammer T, Schulz M, Volpe A (2013) *Analyzing English grammar*. 7th Edition. London: Pearson.
- Larsen-Freeman D, Celce-Murcia M (2016) *The grammar book*. 3rd Edition. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.
- Leech J, Biber D (2015) *Longman student grammar of spoken and written English*. London: Pearson.
- Levey S (2006) Tense variation in preadolescent narratives. *Journal of English Linguistics* 34(2): 126–152.
- LoCastro V (2003) *An introduction to pragmatics: Social action for language teachers*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Luchini P, Ferreiro G (2023) Second language vocabulary teaching and learning: Inspecting alternatives and analyzing results. *Athens Journal of Philology* 10(2): 83–100.
- Marth C, Loretta G (2015) *Understanding English grammar*. 10th Edition. London: Pearson.
- Ochs E, Schieffelin B (2017) Language socialization: An historical overview. In: Duff, P., May, S. (eds.) *Language socialization. Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. New York: Springer
- Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>.
- Palmer FR (2013) *Modality and the English modals*. 2nd Edition. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Piqué-Angordans J, Posteguillo S, Andreu-Besó J (2002) Epistemic and deontic modality: A linguistic indicator of disciplinary variation in academic English. *LSP & Professional Communication* 2(2): 49–64.
- Radford A (1988) *Transformational grammar: A first course*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Radford A (2004) *English syntax: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Richard N (2020) *Modality (grammar and semantics)*. Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/modality-grammar-and-semantics-1691396>.
- Sato M, Storch N (2020) Context matters: Learner beliefs and interactional behaviors in an EFL vs. ESL context. *Language Teaching Research* 26(5): 919–942.
- Siderits M (1985) Word meaning, sentence, meaning, and “apoha”. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 13(2): 133–151.
- Suh KH (1992a) *A discourse analysis of the English tense-aspect-modality system*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Los Angeles, CA: University of California.
- Suh KH (1992b) Past habituality in English discourse: Used and would. *Language Research* 28(4): 857–882.
- Taguchi N, Roever C (2017) *Second language pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

