6.1 A Brief Look at a Little Recognized Lack of Regularity

Students of English clause structure may rightly be struck by the simplicity of the imperatives discussed in Chapter 4. It is scarcely worth mentioning that the syntax of indicative clauses is far more complex than that of imperatives. Here we must contend not only with tense inflection but also with auxiliary verbs of various sorts. We must also deal with the fact that indicative clauses may have either of two word orders, which I call canonical and inverted. These are exemplified in sentences (71) and (72), respectively:

(71) Mary has been studying hard.
(72) Never has Mary been studying harder.

A complication that arises right away when we look at canonical and inverted indicative clauses is that, where auxiliaries are concerned, not all possibilities are reflected in both canonical and inverted orders: some auxiliaries occur in only one. Thus epistemic *may* occurs only in canonical indicatives:

(73) a. John may have pneumonia. ‘It is possible that John has pneumonia’
    b. *May John have pneumonia? ‘Is it possible that John has pneumonia?’

This is a fact about inverted indicative clauses generally, not specifically one about direct questions. Thus (74b) is as bad as (73b) if *may* is given an epistemic interpretation:

(74) a. Mary may be studying hard. ‘It is possible that Mary is studying hard.’
    b. *Never may Mary be studying hard. ‘It is never possible that Mary is studying hard’

In contrast to the situation with epistemic *may*, which occurs only in canonical indicative clauses, *aren’t I* occurs only in inverted clauses:
(75) a. Aren’t I clever?
   b. *I aren’t clever.

Additional irregularities occur in indicative clauses where negation is concerned. The scope of negation in an indicative clause with a modal is not predictable but varies depending on the modal. Thus, while (76a) and (77a) express different modalities, (76b) and (77b) are synonymous – that is, they are synonymous if the modals are taken in their deontic sense:

(76) a. John must leave the country. ‘John is required to leave the country’
   b. John must not leave the country. ‘John does not have permission to leave the country’

(77) a. John may leave the country. ‘John has permission to leave the country’
   b. John may not leave the country. ‘John does not have permission to leave the country’

In other words, in (76b) the negation has narrow scope with respect to the modal, whereas in (77b) it has wide scope. The wide scope that negation has with respect to deontic may in (77b) is not reflected in sentences with epistemic may, in which the negation has obligatorily narrow scope with respect to a modal:

(78) John may not have heard our warning. ‘It is possible that John has not heard our warning’

Further specific irregularities will be noted in the following sections of this chapter. One more that I will mention here pertains to tense. Where the modal auxiliaries are concerned, a present/past distinction scarcely exists and is indeed a relic of earlier stages of English, when the modals had more of the properties of so-called main verbs – for example, more than one modal could occur in a clause.\(^2\) Sentences like those in (79) simply have no past-tense counterparts:

(79) a. You must do this.
   b. You better do this. (Baker 1981)

Although there are modal pairs like can/could, may/might, will/would, and so on that are relics of a stage in the history of English where past tense

\(^2\) Sentences like (i) and (ii), with some regional variation in the sequences permitted, are possible in white South Midland and Southern U.S. English (DiPaolo 1989) and also African-American English: