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Aspect and subjectivity in modal constructions

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Aspect and subjectivity in modal constructions

This thesis investigates the interaction of aspect and subjectivity in modal constructions. In the linguistic literature dealing with the connection between aspect and modality, a link has often been observed between imperfective aspect and modal readings. However, as is shown in this study, both aspect prominent languages, such as Slavic languages, and tense prominent languages, such as Germanic languages, present exceptions to this hypothesized rule, since perfective aspect can appear with modal readings in both types of languages. The following two questions concerning the interaction between aspect and modality are discussed in this thesis:

Can the hypothesis about a link between imperfective aspect and modality be confirmed or rejected?

Is imperfective aspect attracted to more 'subjective' modal readings?

The data which are the focus of the thesis comprise modal infinitive constructions in Russian, German and Dutch, imperative constructions in Russian and Dutch, and modal uses of tenses in Russian and Serbian. In order to compare the interaction of aspect and subjectivity in modal constructions, the data are classified according to a parameter of modality. For that purpose, the semantic map approach to modality proposed by Van der Auwera & Plungian (1998) is used. The notion of subjectivity adopted in the thesis is based on the definition of Langacker (1985). The thesis proposes three tests for determining degrees of subjectivity in modal uses of the different constructions. The tests relate to the following factors:

The nature of the modal source;
The role of the modal target participant;
The nature of the subject.

The book shows that modal meanings can actually be expressed with both imperfectives and perfectives, both in aspect and in tense prominent languages. However, modal readings that are more subjective do most often correlate with imperfective aspect.

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