

Semantics and pragmatics of the double modal 'might could'

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The paper presents an analysis of semantic and pragmatic features of the double modal 'might could' which proves to be the most common of combinations of modal auxiliaries observed in modern English. Although at first glance combinations of two modal verbs might seem to be cases of grammatical distortion, their use is scientifically recognised. The first instances of double modals date back to the seventeenth century. While previous research has focused primarily on formal, pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of double modality, this study aims to describe the functional potential of double modal combinations by looking into the semantics of their components. The distinction between epistemic, deontic and dynamic modalities forms the basis for the analysis. It is generally assumed that in the case of 'might could' the first-tier component is normally used in the epistemic meaning of supposition implying uncertainty, whereas 'could' is either deontic or dynamic. Close analysis of situations where 'might could' was used by native speakers of English enabled us to conclude that although the epistemic value of 'might' prevailed in the majority of the analysed examples, in about one third of them its use was not purely epistemic. With the deontic 'could' the first-tier 'might' was clearly a politeness marker, whereas in the case of the dynamic 'could' it manifested possible lack of commitment. While the double modal is not recognised as standard British or American English, it does exist as a dialectal feature in both Britain and the US, and this article discusses the use of double modals as a popular dialectal variety of English used in regions of the US and Great Britain.

KEYWORDS: modality, double modal, might could, epistemic possibility, tentativeness, unwillingness, sociolinguistics



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1. INTRODUCTION

Double modality is observed in the southern United States and some regions of the UK such as northern England, Northern Ireland and Scotland where there exist combinations of two modal verbs. Hasty (2012) gives an overview of different double modal forms attested in literature: *might*

could, must can, might oughta, might would, must could, could oughta, might should, may can, should oughta, might can, may could, would oughta, might will, may will, may should. The double modal *might could* is the most commonly used one. Research into the area has been conducted since the 1960s (Labov, 1972; Butters,

1973; Coates, 1983; Boertien, 1986; Di Paolo, 1989; Battistella, 1995; Bigham, 2000; Dickey, 2000; Nagle, 2003; Bernstein, 2003). Formal, pragmatic and sociolinguistic characteristics of double modal combinations have been extensively described so far; however, the semantics of the components still remains understudied, which accounts for the topicality of the present paper.

Although double modality is outside the scope of Standard English and is not addressed in the school syllabus, it is a widespread phenomenon which non-native speakers of English might find confusing and should at least be aware of. For this reason, the topic of the paper is of practical importance for modern English language teaching and learning, particularly in developing reading comprehension.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study presents an analysis of the semantic and pragmatic features of the double modal *might could*. This choice is determined by the fact that double modals with *might* as the first-tier component are by far the most common among other double modal combinations, *might could* being the most frequent of all. The number of double modals subjected to analysis totals 690 tokens. These are instances of double modal combinations obtained from The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), British National Corpus (BYU-BNC), Scottish Corpus of

Texts & Speech (SCOTS), Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (LAGS), Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS), Verilogue Corpus, as well as collections of examples and samples of electronic discourse which include brief news items, internet comments, e-mails and blogs covering the period from the 1990s to 2015.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Double modals in the linguistic literature

There exist different views on double modal combinations. Labov (1972) states that first-tier modals formally function as adverbs. Bigham (2000) also asserts that the initial *might* in the combinations *might could*, *might would* and some others appears to be an adverb for a number of reasons.

1. *Might* is never used in the tag of disjunctive questions (the question *I might could get back on time, mightn't I?* should be viewed as ungrammatical), whereas normally modal auxiliaries are allowed to be repeated in the tag, as in *I might get back on time, mightn't I?*
2. In echo questions it is the second modal verb in the pair which is fronted, as in an echo question to the statement *I might could be a Valkyrie for Halloween* would be *Could I might be what for Halloween?* rather than *Might I could be what for Halloween?*

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3. The initial modal *might* cannot be preceded by an adverb, similar to two adverbs of the same type that cannot be placed together (the sentence *You probably possibly could get to the dentist on time* is ungrammatical). As the evidence obtained by Bigam (2000) shows, it would be incorrect to say *You possibly might could get there on time*.

According to Boertin (1986), both components in the double modal combination are verbs. Di Paolo (1989) argues that double modals should be thought of as an idiomatic, single lexical item, where both modals appear to be tense-matched (*may can* and *might could*), rather than tense-mixed (*may could* or *might can*). Hasty (2012, p. 10) contradicts this view saying that the first-tier modal, for example *might*, can combine with several other modals (*might could*, *might should*, *might would*), which points to the compositionality of double modal combinations. If the two components were a single lexical item, they would resist separation, but such sentences as *He might probably could help you* or *I might not could go to the store*, where the double modals

are split by an adverb and a negation, suggest that the two components function independently. According to Nagle (2003, p. 350), double modals are usually arrayed in tiers: the first-tier modals (*may*, *might*, *must*) express 'speaker-oriented epistemic possibility', so *must* in *She must can speak Spanish* denotes the speaker's certainty about the person's ability to speak Spanish; the second-tier modals are a more open class and include *can*, *could*, *should*, *will*, *would*. The ordering of the modals closely parallels the ordering of adverbials: 'speaker-oriented' adverbials are always to the left of 'subject-oriented' adverbials.

3.2 Geographical distribution of double modals

Nagle (2003, p. 349) names northern England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and the southern United States as the areas of the double modal construction distribution. However, within the United States, evidence suggests, the use of *might could* extends to states outside the South. Feagin (1979) reports occasional usage of *might could* in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, North Dakota, and Nebraska. Di Paolo (1989) adds examples from Utah. Using data from the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS), Montgomery (1998) points out that double modals are associated with speakers from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, New Jersey, West Virginia, Ohio, and Delaware. LAMSAS evidence does show that double modal

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combinations occur outside the South. The Verilogue Corpus presenting samples of doctor-patient discourse provides examples attested in Georgia, Massachusetts, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio and Nebraska. Among speakers of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE), double modals are common both within and outside the South (Labov, 1972; Feagin, 1979; Fennell & Butters, 1996). Bernstein (2003, p. 110) notes that some of the combinations are also found among Caribbean creoles (there are territorial differences in the distribution and frequency of double modals; however, *might could* is the most widespread of all double modal combinations, which fact has been attested in all the areas).

3.3 Semantics and pragmatics of double modals

Semantics of the double modals may be addressed by considering the range of meanings that have been attributed to modals in general. If the classification of modalities into deontic, epistemic and dynamic (Palmer, 2001) is taken into consideration, it makes sense to see *I might could do it* as ‘combining a degree of willingness and

ability (dynamic modality) with a degree of uncertainty (epistemic modality); that is, I’m willing to do it, but I’m not sure I have the ability’ (Bernstein, 2003, p. 113). According to Bernstein (2003) a sentence such as *It might could be rape* sounds wrong to native Southerners because it has only epistemic value; it lacks the dynamic function associated with *might could*.

Bigham (2000, p. 5) differentiates between three major semantic types of double modals. The first domain of the double modal meaning is uncertainty. ‘*If a speaker is unsure of the certainty of a statement or the probability/possibility of an action but does not wish to seem simplistic and curt by simply stating that the speaker doesn’t know*’, a double modal can be used. Bigham (2000, p. 6) provides two examples to illustrate the meaning:

- a. *I might could make it up, but I don’t know;*
- b. *Jenny Lee might could sign up, couldn’t she?*

In the first example, the speaker had failed a college course and was being asked by her parents whether or not she would be allowed to repeat the class for a better grade. Later the researcher questioned the speaker on this usage and she explained that while she did not want to lie to her parents, she still wanted to ease their minds so she could continue to receive money from them. The second double modal meaning is that of reducing

force. 'When a speaker wishes to express reluctance to a request or wishes to make a critique without sounding harsh, overstepping personal boundaries, or seeming unyielding' (Bigham, 2000, p. 6), they use a double modal. This semantic type is seen in the following examples:

- a. *I might could stitch, but my hand's been actin' up.*
- b. *He might should study a little harder.*
- c. *Hayden shouldn't oughta be playin' with those lights, should he?*

Example (a) is typical of the reluctance type since it is an indirect response to an indirect question (the researcher asked his grandmother about a Halloween costume). Examples (b) and (c) are typical of the desire to critique while not overstepping personal boundaries (both examples are comments from the speaker to the mother on her parenting skills). The third semantic type is that of remote past. To illustrate this type of meaning Bigham (2000, p. 7) gives an example with *usedta*, regarding it as a semi-modal. In the sentence *You usedta couldn't go shopping after nine* the first modal expresses an extra dimension of remoteness to past events. This example was produced by a clerk at the local 24-hour Walmart about how people's shopping had changed in the past ten years since the store became a 24-hour location. This example would have been meaningless if the

store had opened only last year.

What Bigham (2000) calls semantic types, Mishoe and Montgomery (1994) regard as pragmatic functions of double modals. They single out two of them. One is found in face-to-face conversations, particularly those that take the form of negotiation. The other is observed in conversations where there is a threat to the speaker's 'face' (Goffman, 1959). Brown and Levinson (2014) mention two groups of wants associated with the perception of 'face' – positive face (the desire of positive approval and recognition) and negative face (the desire not to be bothered by someone). Di Paolo (1989) observes that sales assistants would normally use *might could* when they wanted to offer a suggestion that might run counter to their own wishes as a customer. According to Bernstein (2003) who sticks to the same approach, *might could* is a mark of politeness in conversation. It is used so that the listener will not feel threatened by the possible lack of agreement on the part of the speaker.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

4.1 The double modal 'might could' with possibility 'might'

We proceed from the assumption that the first-tier component in the double modal combination *might could* is used in the epistemic meaning of possibility (supposition implying uncertainty). The other is either dynamic or deontic. The nature of the second component (*could*), the type of the

speech act and the setting affect the meaning of *might*.

The first group is the largest of the three mentioned above (76% of the *might could* corpus). Below are samples of spoken discourse where *might* and *could* form a combination of epistemic and dynamic modalities. *Might* expresses epistemic possibility (supposition implying uncertainty).

(1) *'It's an important cause because it's relatable to us girls,' Richardson said. 'Any girl could be diagnosed with breast cancer right now, and if we teenagers get involved in raising money, we might could find a cure.'*

This example comes from a recorded interview with a cheerleader participating in Birmingham's (AL) Race for the Cure – the annual charity race aimed at raising money to help breast cancer patients. The first-tier *might* expresses epistemic possibility, which can be paraphrased as *it is possible that*. *Could* is used in the dynamic meaning of ability and is equivalent to *we will be able to*. Therefore, saying *we might could find a cure* the speaker expresses her uncertainty as to whether it will be possible to find a cure for breast cancer. The two types of modality combined here are epistemic and dynamic.

As for the pragmatic function of the double modal it is used to make a supposition. Since 'epistemic

possibility' presupposes less than 50% of certainty – according to Vince's (2008) estimates, around 30% – the speaker obviously feels rather uncertain about the propositional content conveyed in the utterance.

(2) *He said he had yet to decide how his team/school would use the prize money if it won. 'It's really way more than we would spend in an average year,' Blackerby said. 'The first thing is Justin plays in our faculty game so I'm sure we would get some very nice shoes and uniforms for that. We would obviously share it with our girls program, and I would sit down with our principal and see how we might could help some of the other programs at the school.'*

In example (2) the coach of a school basketball team shares his plans for spending the prize money. There are a few school programmes he is responsible for, so he makes a supposition (*might*) about what could be done (ability) to foster the other school programmes.

(3) *The doctor said that each patient is different. There might be a chance I might could be back for some playoff games, but maybe not at full capacity.*

In this situation, an injured sportsman makes a supposition concerning whether he might be able to participate in some playoff games in case he

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recovers and is 'at full capacity'.

Of considerable relevance is the context in which the double modal is used: it is preceded by the phrase 'there might be a chance' and is followed by the adverb *maybe*, which suggests still a greater degree of uncertainty and supports the assumption that the first-tier modal *might* is epistemic.

The use of *might could* alongside other means expressing uncertainty, as in (3), is not infrequent.

(4) *If one school can give \$5,000 a year and another \$4,000, hell, that's just the way it is. If they can out-recruit you because of it, maybe the school with the new indoor facility might could out-recruit the other one.*

(5) *I thought that maybe if 'c' were at the top we might could finally get 'm' outside of that triangle. No such luck. One more try!*

(6) *Could be, this here City Man, once he finishes gettin' his folks out, might could go on back, fetch Lottie and her kids...?*

The corpus gives ample evidence for the use of the Perfect Infinitive after the double modal *might could*. In this case the second-tier component *could have done* is used in the dynamic meaning of unrealised possibility.

(7) *'Eli Jenkins did really well,' Clark said. 'We hope to have (Shortell) all ready for the playoff game but still don't know for sure. He might could have went (against SEMO), but wasn't full speed so we held him out.'*

This example was obtained from an interview with a coach whose quarterback, Max Shortell, was not able to perform in a match because of injury. *Might* is used in the meaning of epistemic possibility. As for *could*, it is followed by the perfect infinitive and, therefore, is used in the dynamic meaning of unrealised possibility. The speaker is uncertain as to whether the sportsman would have been able to perform had he not been held out, so the whole sentence can be paraphrased as 'it is possible that he would have been able to perform'. Hence, in (7) epistemic and dynamic modalities are combined and the double modal serves the purpose of making a supposition about a past event.

Below are a few other examples of this kind.

(8) *Brooker says Busey was solid in the role, but other actors may have been more accepted. 'But John Wayne wasn't available,' he said. 'The guy*

who played in 'Gun Smoke' (James Arness), he might could have looked more like him, but Gary Busey picked up on his characteristics, his walk, his gait.'

(9) *Beshear could not afford to have an avowed abuser as the number two man in the Cabinet that oversaw child and spouse abuse. He couldn't have it. He might could have moved him to the Alcoholic Beverages Commission or something like that. But that didn't happen.*

There are instances of *might could* where both modals seem to be epistemic.

(10) *'Ain't that somethin',' I said. 'This piece of paper is worth six thousand dollars.' 'Maybe might could be,' Armando said.*

(11) *'Can they do it on a mass scale, to a whole shipload of people?' 'Might could be. Would require some serious training for the practitioners.'*

(12) *'First time I've thought kindly of rattlesnakes.' 'You think he's still here?' 'Might could be.'*

Our analysis of examples (10), (11) and (12) is based on the assumption made by Coates (1983) that *could* is replacing *might* as the main exponent of epistemic possibility. Although Gresset (2003) doubts that *might* and *could* are strictly synonymous, she supports Coates' (1983) view by

saying that *could* is used 'more and more frequently in apparently epistemic or epistemically-oriented contexts' (Gresset, 2003, p. 82). *Might could* is followed by the notional *be* in all the three sentences, which supports Vince's (2008) evidence that *could* used to describe what is possible is especially common with the notional *be*. Hence, we presume that both modals in the tier in the above-mentioned examples are epistemic and the use of the double modal can be accounted for by the tendency for *could* to appear more and more often in epistemic contexts: the speaker first resorts to *might* and then, advertently (or inadvertently), chooses the more common *could*.

Thus, the double modal *might could* gives evidence for the gradual transition of the initially dynamic *could* into the epistemic equivalent of *might*. Below are a few other examples of this type.

(13) *'Might could be you're right,' Daniel allowed.*

(14) *'I'll bet that's Spanish Jack's brother,' said Morgan softly. He heard his father draw in a quick breath, saw him look upriver at the Spaniard. 'Damn. Might could be. Looks to be a Spanisher.'*

(15) *Might could be I'd find me a friendly Yank on the other side, trade him some tobacco for coffee and sugar and maybe some o' them little hard*

candies they have sometimes.

(16) *It still might could be viewed as a short-sighted move by O'Brien, but the decision is clearly paying off for both quarterbacks.*

(17) *I saw M. Butterfly. I could see what might could be slightly objectionable to some people.*

In most instances of such usage the double modal is found in simple elliptical sentences with the notional *be*, which suggests that the use of *might could* in the epistemic meaning has become conventional: speakers of American English normally use *might could be* to say that something is possible. In this case the semantics of *might could be* is close to the meanings of the adverbs *maybe* and *perhaps*.

(18) *He had a curiously uneven beard, long black hair, and a squirming bundle of arms, legs, fingers, and ears in each hand. When the right-hand burden paused for a moment to shriek, 'Daddy Odo!' Odo recognised it as Dunwin. And when the left-hand burden began crying, Odo recognised Wulfrith's distinctive wail. 'Are they yours?' the stranger repeated. His voice was really quite amazing, Odo thought. 'Well,' he replied cautiously, 'What if they are? I suppose I might could perhaps have seen one of them before.' The stranger was clearly not satisfied with this, but before he could object Odo added, 'Have they*

broken anything?' 'Not of mine,' the stranger said.

In example (18) Odo, the speaker, is asked whether the children, Dunwin and Wulfrith, who must have misbehaved, are his. Wulfrith says 'Daddy Odo', which proves he recognises him, however, Odo is wary of telling the truth. He expresses a high degree of uncertainty. Both verbs seem to be epistemic and are followed by the perfect infinitive (supposition is made about a past event, the speaker sounds highly doubtful or, which is more likely, pretends to be so).

4.2 The double modal 'might could' with disinclined 'might'

This group (6% of the *might could* corpus) comprises examples in which the speaker employs the double modal *might could* to express reluctance to perform an action or to disclaim responsibility for doing/not doing something. Speakers who use *might could* to talk about their ability/disability are often perceived as irresponsible, unreliable or lacking in commitment. Below is an example obtained from the novel *The Prefect Prey* (Andrus, 2011, p. 4).

(1) *Last night the four young women had visited five different clubs. Most were crammed with students from across the Southeast. Allie knew enough students and wanted to meet someone a little older and more mature. Someone totally different. That's what Allie was looking forward to:*

meeting guys who didn't say things like, 'I might could do that,' or 'You seen my new custom Camaro?' She'd only had one serious boyfriend, Tommy McLaughlin, and he'd moved away to go to LSU, then a week later had pictures of a new girlfriend up on Facebook. She didn't even bother to call him to find out what had happened. Allie did hook up with one nice boy from Louisville who was in the counselling psychology program at USM. He had a sweet smile and good, tight body.

Allie, one of the main characters, is in search of a suitable match. However, the girl does not want her potential boyfriend to say 'I might could do that', which suggests that using this double modal cannot be regarded as a person's good point. Furthermore, the girl wants to meet 'someone a little older and more mature', 'someone totally different' from people saying 'I might could do that'. Her perceptions of those whom she considers mature and boys who do say *might could* differ. Moreover, the girl's description of her undesirables suggests that she perceives boys saying 'I might could do that' as unreliable, immature and irresponsible people.

(2) *We might could make the case for that, but wouldn't we be overstating it?*

This example was attested in South Carolina and represents an extract from a student's speech. A student, aged 20, is making a report in front of a

class. Although she admits that making the case for that is possible, she most likely does not see any point in going into detail.

(3) *I might could do that, but that's the prettiest part of the yard.*

This is a conversation between an elderly mother and her son. The son suggests that she plant her trees elsewhere as he plans to make a swing for his children in the place. The mother replies saying she might could do that, but as it is the prettiest part of the yard and the trees will not look so good in a different place, she is unwilling to agree.

(4) *Dena Dalton handles those accounts. I might could help you, but I would rather have her call you.*

A bank clerk is talking to a client. The clerk admits he could (ability) help the client but is unwilling to do so because it is Dena Dalton's job. The use of *might* signals the expression of reluctance in the utterance.

(5) *'I think everybody knows that I'm leaning toward running for chairman,' Strong said Thursday. 'Nothing against Mike Gillespie. I'm just interested in that job and some things that might could be done through that job.'*

In (5) a candidate for the chairman's position

perceives his primary aim in case he gets elected as 'to do some things'. The use of *some* and *might could* makes the speaker sound unconvincing and uncommitted, because he is speaking in too uncertain terms.

4.3 The double modal 'might could' with tentative 'might'

Quirk et al. (1995) point out that epistemic *might* can be used tentatively in requests, directives and in expressions of opinion to add a note of politeness. In our corpus we found instances of *might could* combinations with the so-called tentative *might* (18% of the corpus), which were used in the speech acts mentioned by Quirk et al. (1995) as well as in suggestions and refusals. Below are a few representative examples of *might could* where *might* imparts tentativeness to the utterance.

(1) 'Well how do you think you'll get in?' I just looked at her and said, 'I wondered if you might could arrange that, Ms. Tilley.'

Analysing this example, we proceeded from the assumption that the conventional 'I wondered if...' suggests that the utterance is a polite request. *Might could* has become a common way of making a request where *could* expresses deontic modality (requesting) and *might* is a politeness marker (it attends to the interlocutor's negative face – the desire to be free from imposition (Brown

& Levinson, 2014). The Distance (D) between the speakers in this situation is long, the speaker's Status (P) – Subordinate.

(2) 'I thought you might could do it a little different this time. I'm tired of this same old look.'

This is a conversation between the client (P+, D+) and her hairdresser (P-, D+). A woman in her forties wants to have a new haircut and addresses the hairdresser with this request. This example is similar to (1): epistemic *might* used as a marker of politeness is followed by deontic *could*. The only observed difference is the perceived P-variable: in (2) the female speaker is Superior.

(3) 'You might could try Don's Hobbies down on Park [Avenue].'

In this situation the sales assistant (P-, D+) fails to find what the customer (P+, D+) needs and suggests that he visit another store. *Might* is used in the epistemic meaning (supposition implying uncertainty), whereas *could* is deontic (suggesting).

It is a case of unequal communication where the clerk occupies the subordinate position. Due to his lower status and inability to meet the customer's needs, the sales assistant resorts to politeness to mitigate imposition (Rx – the rank of imposition) (Brown & Levinson, 2014).

(4) *Despite all the disciplinary incidents, Winston was suspended just once – sitting out the 2014 Clemson game after shouting an obscenity in a crowded area of campus. Nevertheless, Bowden said Fisher treated a star player like Winston ‘like most coaches would.’ ‘There would be some that would be strict,’ Bowden said. ‘He might could have been suspended a little bit more for his actions. But Jim is faced with what all coaches are faced, and that is having a great player, and trying to save him through problems.’*

Example (4) presents an expression of opinion. A coach is trying to help a notorious sportsman resolve problems. The speaker, another coach who calls the sportsman an ‘*embarrassment to Florida State*’, shows his disapproval of Winston.

In directives and requests the double modal *might could* is often used alongside other politeness devices.

(5) *Describing the Village Tavern’s vinaigrette as ‘very light with just the right amount of tartness and sweetness,’ Kitty Robinson e-mailed to inquire, ‘Do you think you might could get the recipe?’*

(6) *Commissioner McMurrian: Thank you. And I guess I was actually going to follow up on some of the things that Commissioner Edgar said and follow along that line of thought. But given that comment, I was hoping Ms. Gervasi might could*

speak to that.

(7) *Good afternoon Mr. Peavy last year you were so generous as to send the letter notifying Ag teachers in Georgia of our Open House event. I was wondering if I might could get you to forward the letter for this year’s event to your Ag teacher list serve? Hope to see you later.*

(8) *‘Just out?’ he half mimicked. ‘Out where? You think you might could tell me?’*

Due to the high Rank of imposition (Rx) (Brown & Levinson, 2014) inherent in directives and requests. the politeness markers observed in (5), (6), (7) and (8) serve to increase the manifested degree of politeness.

It is assumed that physicians tend to use double modals at large. Hasty’s (2012) sociolinguistic analysis conducted in the US South reveals that double modals are favoured by experienced doctors, especially women. Patient-doctor interaction is a reliable source of instances of tentative *might* used to reduce the Rx of directives. Patient-doctor interaction is a clear case of unequal communication where the physician is the one who gives directives, yet it is the patient who is perceived as the powerful speaker (P+, D+).

(9) *You might could try and see if you want to try a*

little bit of that and see how it does for you.

(10) *Another thing we might could have on is the Neurontin.*

5. CONCLUSION

The double modal *might could* consists of two modal components arrayed in a tier. *Might* is used in the meaning of epistemic possibility (supposition implying uncertainty), the other component – the modal verb *could* – is either dynamic or deontic. With dynamic *could* the modal verb *might* is used to express either a high degree of uncertainty or the speaker's reluctance or unwillingness to perform an action. In opinions, suggestions, requests, refusals, and directives *might* is perceived as a politeness marker and is used alongside other politeness devices. The speaker's decisions concerning the necessary degree of politeness (the number of politeness means which apply) depend on the situation.

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The double modal *might could* occurs in highly informal environments which are characterised by the use of lexical items belonging to the informal register, exorbitant use of interjections, hedging devices and frequent occurrences of ellipsis, as well as elements of informal or non-standard grammar including the informal use of *there's* with plural nouns, the use of the non-standard *ain't*, double negation, incorrect usage of pronouns, wrong verb forms, incorrect word order (including the direct word order in questions).

Although the use of double modality displays lots of territorial variation, *might could* is common in all the areas where instances of double modals have been attested. The epistemic value of *might* depends largely on the environment (the meaning of the second-tier *could* and contextual features). Perceptions of *might* by recipients vary and depend largely on the setting (the situation, its pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects).

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