

On acquisitive modals

Johan van der Auwera

<http://webh01.ua.ac.be/vdauwera/>

In ‘Standard Average European’ (‘SAE’), the linguistic contact area extending from both the Romance and the Germanic side of the river Rhine, modal verbs of possibility typically derive from a lexical item with an original meaning related to knowledge (e.g. *can*) or strength (e.g. *may*, *pouvoir*). This phenomenon is certainly not restricted to SAE, but it has exerted too strong an influence on current thinking on the universals of modality (as found in e.g. Bybee et al 1994, van der Auwera & Plungian 1998) (van der Auwera & Ammann 2005). Thus one has neglected another major source, viz. the ‘get’ etymon. For SAE it is marginal, as in English (1).

(1) I *get* to watch TV all day.

But for languages of the Baltic (both North Germanic, Finnic, Latvian) as well as for many languages of South(-East) Asia (Sino-Tibetan, Mon-Khmer, Daic, and other families), it is of major importance (as shown from an areal perspective by Enfield 2003). Of special interest is furthermore the fact that the etymon readily feeds into both possibility and necessity strands - see Burmese (2a,b).

- (2) a. di ja'-ne nin yoʔʃinyoN ʻθwa lo' ya' tɛ
this night-day 2SG movies go like get REA.ASS
,
'You can go the movies tonight.'
- b. ʻmiN ko tɔ-soN-tɔ-ya me`myan khɛ' yin
2SG OBJ one-CLF-one-thing ask PST if
,
θwɛʔ-θwɛʔ- lɛʔ- lɛʔ- phye ya' mɛ
quickly answer get IRR.ASS
'If he asks you something, you must answer him quickly.'

The talk addresses the following questions: (a) language-specifically: what are the paths and mechanisms of ‘get’ in the modal domain in the various languages? (b) what are the repercussions of the hypotheses on (a) for universalist models of modality.

References

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