

The meaning of modals: a view from pragmatics

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In this talk, I will address questions in the semantics/pragmatics interface taking modals as a test case. Given the range of meanings that can be expressed by possibility modals as well as necessity modals, and the continuing debate whether modals are polysemous or, rather, whether their meanings should be considered as indeterminate, this area of English grammar constitutes a very fertile ground to assess approaches to 'meaning in context'. I will illustrate and discuss various ways in which the meaning of modals can be said to be 'contextual', and what this means for specific views on pragmatics. I will address the concepts of saturation, free pragmatic enrichment and will also bring into the discussion the notion of construction: I will reflect on their usefulness to get a firmer grip on the meaning of modals as well as on how modal meaning can shed light on and help delineate specific pragmatic concepts.