The Auxiliary Verbs and Their Functions: An Overview

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Abstract: Several researchers have pointed out that the verbal group, being an obligatory element of the clause structure, carries high syntactic and semantic loads. As such, it is an area of maximum divergence and one of the most difficult aspects to master particularly by learners of English as a second language. On this note, this paper discusses the English auxiliary verbs, being integral components of the verbal group. The discussion is done through reviewing the works of different authors on the auxiliaries distinguishing the two sets - the primary auxiliaries (have, be & do) and the modal auxiliaries (can, could, dare, may, might, must, need, ought, shall, should, will & would). Each set of the auxiliaries are discussed with much emphasis on different usages to illustrate how crucial the auxiliaries are, as far as the conjugation of the verbal group is concerned.

Key Words: Primary Auxiliaries, Model Auxiliaries, Verbal Group

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I. INTRODUCTION

Auxiliary verbs are among the grammatical elements that play crucial roles in the construction of grammatical units particularly clauses and sentences. They (auxiliaries) sometimes require the presence of lexical verbs to function within verbal groups; however, that does not deny their significance as grammatical sentence elements. Despite their syntactic dependency, auxiliary verbs enjoy high frequency as far as the use of sentence elements is concerned. So, it is worthy to note that, the auxiliary verbs although require lexical verbs, have semantic indispensability and sometimes some of them function as main verbs in sentences and convey effective meanings on their own.

The English Auxiliary Verbs

Murthy (1998) explains auxiliary verbs as those verbs that are used to form negatives, questions and tenses on one hand, and used to express various moods and mental attitudes like hope, expectation, possibility and futurity (modal) on the other hand.

Christophersen and Sandved (1969) discuss the English auxiliary verbs through categorizing them into four subgroups which are according to the form of the verb with which the auxiliary occurs.

1. The first group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the base form of the verb, the form that is often called the ‘bare or plain infinitive’ the following are examples of such auxiliaries:

The man [can/could]
[shall/should]
[will/would]
[may/might]
[dare]
[need]

remember the boy.

2. The second group consists of auxiliaries which are used with the –ing form of the verb:

I am (or was) [going].

He is (or was) [going].

They are (or were) [going].
The Auxiliary Verbs and Their Functions: An Overview

3. The third group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the past participle of the verb:

(a) He has (or had) gone.
(b) They have am (or was) gone.
(c) I am (or were) gone.

4. The fourth and last group consists of the auxiliaries which are used with the infinitive preceded by the function word to:

I/He/They {ought am/is/are/was/were (have/has/had) (used)} to go.

(Christophersen & Sandved, 1969: 73)

Quirk & Greenbaum (1973) explain that, any discussion on auxiliaries should be done together with placing emphasis on the certain strict order in which auxiliaries are used in a complex verb phrase. They stress that modal, perfective, progressive and passive auxiliaries follow a fixed/strict order when used in verb phrase as in the following:

(i) MODAL, always followed by a bare infinitive, as in:
   - He would visit.
   - They can visit.
   - She may visit.

(ii) PERFECTIVE, always followed by an ‘-ed’ form as in:
   - He had visited.
   - She would have visited.
   - They could have visited.

(iii) PROGRESSIVE, always followed by ‘-ing’ form, as in:
   - They are visiting.
   - He was visiting.
   - She would have been visiting.

(iv) PASSIVE, always followed by an ‘-ed’ form as in:
   - I have been visited.
   - He was visited.
   - She would have been being visited.

(Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973: 39)

Twaddell (1963) points out that any systematic discussion on auxiliary verbs should begin with distinguishing the two sets of the auxiliaries. He classifies the primary and the model auxiliaries by making the point that, the former group are concerned with subject-verb agreement and full past syntax while the latter group have no concern with concord and in some cases even the full past syntax. He also stresses that in verb constructions containing members of both sets, the model precedes the primary auxiliaries, not vice versa as seen in some of the examples above.
The Auxiliary Verbs

Eastwood (1998) explains that the English auxiliary verbs can be used in two different ways, either as ‘auxiliary verbs’ or ‘ordinary verbs’. He further justifies his claim by providing the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auxiliary Verbs</th>
<th>Ordinary Verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are waiting for a bus.</td>
<td>We are at the bus stop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have thought about it.</td>
<td>I have a suggestion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does Tina need any help?</td>
<td>Tina does all the work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Eastwood, 1998: 104)

Adejare and Adejare (1996) discuss the primary auxiliaries with paying attention to their dual functions. They explain that the auxiliaries, BE and HAVE, have both finite and non-finite forms but the third member, the auxiliary DO, has only finite forms. These collectively generate a host of finite and non-finite forms. The auxiliary be generates five finite forms and three non-finite forms. In turn, the auxiliary have generates three finite forms and two non-finite forms. Finally, the auxiliary do generates only three finite forms. The table below shows the finite and non-finite forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aux</th>
<th>BE</th>
<th>HAVE</th>
<th>DO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>am, is, are</td>
<td>has, have, had</td>
<td>do, does, did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was, were</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Finite Forms</td>
<td>be, being</td>
<td>have, having</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adejare and Adejare, 1996:195)

In order to demonstrate the dual membership of lexical and auxiliary subsets by the primary auxiliaries’ finite forms, another table is provided:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FINITE FORMS</th>
<th>LEXICAL VERB</th>
<th>AUXILIARIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AM</td>
<td>I am</td>
<td>I am studying English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>John is</td>
<td>He is training to be a banker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARE</td>
<td>They are</td>
<td>They are planning a joint venture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAS</td>
<td>I was</td>
<td>It was raining everyday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WERE</td>
<td>We were</td>
<td>We were staying on the campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAS</td>
<td>Tola has</td>
<td>She has taken good care of herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAVE</td>
<td>I have</td>
<td>I have gone to the bank today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAD</td>
<td>He had</td>
<td>They had been with him for long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>I do</td>
<td>You do go on, don’t you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOES</td>
<td>Foyeke does</td>
<td>She does not like loafing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DID</td>
<td>Olu did</td>
<td>He did not do it well, though.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adejare and Adejare, 1996:196)

More about the Modal Auxiliaries

As it has been stated earlier, the modals are used to express various moods and mental attitudes of the speaker or writer. The modals are otherwise called secondary auxiliaries and they primarily mark modality. In their discussion on modal auxiliaries, Adejare and Adejare (1996:196) have the following:

...modality in the verbal group performs special semantic functions that enable a speaker to infuse personal views such as permission, e.g., (can), intention e.g., (will), ability e.g., (can) and compulsion e.g., (must) etc....
For better understanding of the above quotation, a comprehensive table, showing the modal auxiliaries with their various attached meanings is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODALS AND THEIR MEANINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model Auxiliary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COULD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHOULD</td>
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<tr>
<td>WILL</td>
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<td>WOULD</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIGHT</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUGHT (TO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USED (TO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Murthy, 1998: 134)

Some of the meanings attached to the above auxiliaries would be illustrated below:

- **Ability**
  I *can* teach English.
  She *could* work long when she was young.

- **Permission**
  *Can* I speak to the manager?
  *May* I open the window?

- **Request**
  *Could* you post this letter for me?
  *May* I join the conversation?

- **Possibility**
  If I were you, I *could* do it easily.
  He *can/may/might* come tomorrow.

- **Futurity**
  We *shall* visit Jos the next week.
  I *shall* see Omotola tomorrow.

- **Willingness**
  I *will* drop you by bike.
  The nurse said she *would* look after the patient.

- **Intention**
  I wish I *would* know her address.
  She wishes *would* visit Jos.

- **Necessity**
  You *must* take the medicine daily.
  She *ought* to work hard for her family.
The Auxiliary Verbs and Their Functions: An Overview

- **Obligation**
  
  *We must* complain the matter to the police.
  *You ought* to be polite to others.

- **Dare**
  
  The verb ‘dare’ is used in the senses of defying, challenging or facing something boldly and it has all usual forms as a regular verb.
  
  He doesn’t *dare* to write a letter to her.
  
  She *dared* to drink before her father.

  As an auxiliary verb, it has no inflexions and it is then used in the sense of ‘*have the courage to*’.

  *She dare* not to speak to her father.

  How *dare* he talk like that!

- **Used to’**
  
  It is used to express to talk about a past discontinued habit.
  
  There *used to* be a hotel in our village.
  
  She *used to* teach English to school children.

  (Murthy, 1998: 144-146)

There are also certain points to be noted in connection with the use of auxiliary verbs in some other constructions or expressions. The use of the auxiliaries like can, may, etc., in for instance, reported speech or conditional sentences has to be given a special attention. Christophersen and Sandved (1969) briefly discuss the use of the auxiliaries in reported and conditional sentences, and below are some of the points worthy of noting.

- If the verb of reporting is in the present tense, the form of the auxiliary in the reported speech is the same as in the original utterance:
  
  *I can* swim – He says he can swim.
  
  *It may* be true – She says it may be true.

  One exception here is that, *will* sometimes replaces *shall* and vice versa

  *I shall* do it straight away – He says he *will* do it straight away.
  
  *You will* regret this – He says *I shall* regret this.

- If the verb of reporting is in the past tense the auxiliary in the reported speech occurs in a different form from the used in the original utterance as in :

  *I can* do it – He said he *could* do it.
  
  *It may* be true – she said it *might* be true.

  So, *can-could, may-might, shall-should, will-would* but *dare* and *need* are regularly unchanged.

  *I dare* not tell her – He said he *dare* not tell her.

  *You needn’t* go – He said I *needn’t* go.

- In conditional sentences, we normally use *would* or *should* plus infinitive as in:

  If you asked him, he *would* probably agree.
  
  If I had enough money, I *should* go to the West Indies.

  (Christophersen & Sandved, 1969: 204-208)

- **Negation**
  
  Auxiliaries also used to make negative expressions even if the positive counterparts do not have the auxiliaries as in:

  She likes singing – She *does not* like singing.
  
  They wrote names last week – They *did not* write their names last week.

**II. CONCLUSION**

The paper talked about the English auxiliary verbs through reviewing some of the relevant points discussed by different authors. It began with an introduction where the importance of the auxiliary verbs has been pointed out. The two main sets of the auxiliaries – primary and modal have been discussed thoroughly and the different forms of verb that are used with different types of auxiliary have been identified. Discussion has also been done on the various meanings attached to the modal auxiliaries before lastly talking about the use of auxiliary verbs in different types of sentences such as reported speech and conditional sentence.
III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers make the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should endeavour to make their lessons student-centred so that there would be adequate participation of the lesson by the students in order to encourage retention of the auxiliary verbs.

2. Teachers should formulate various class exercises with the auxiliary verbs (both primary and modal) in sampling paragraphs and passages for easy identification of the auxiliary verbs by the students.

3. Components of verbs and verb formation such as tenses, move, aspect and voice should be thoroughly taught to students to aid understanding and usage of the auxiliary verbs.

4. Personal pronouns (first, second, third, singular and plural) such as I, we, you, he, she, it they should be extensively taught along finite and the auxiliary verbs to help students be able to understand how to use the various auxiliary verbs in English language.

5. Students should be encouraged to practice oral and written communication with the auxiliary verbs so as to support linguistic and communicative competence in the use of English language.

6. Teachers should also make constructive analysis between the native and target language (mother tongue and English) so that they would be in a good position to tackle errors from the negative transfer.

REFERENCES


