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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute Grammar

### Modals of deduction and speculation



*This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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#### **Finn**

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me Finn.

#### **Catherine**

And me Catherine. In today's programme we're having a look at modal verbs.

#### **Finn**

Now modal verbs are used in a lot of different ways but in this programme we're looking at the modal verbs we use when we're talking about things we think are possible or true – both in the present and in the past.

#### **Catherine**

That's right. When we don't know something for sure, we often make guesses. And modal verbs can express how sure or unsure we are about our guesses. We'll give you lots of examples...

#### **Finn**

And we'll check what you've learned in our quiz.

#### **Catherine**

But first, we're listening to Fiona, who is a science reporter. And Fiona is talking about some ancient fossils that were found in China and Taiwan.

#### **Finn**

While you listen, think about this question: Are the fossils from humans?

### **INSERT**

#### **Fiona**

The research teams analysing fossils found in China and Taiwan **could be looking** at something very important. It seems that the fossils **can't be** from any known human species. They **might be** the result of breeding between species or they **may belong** to an unknown human species. The fossils suggest that before modern humans arrived in Asia, more diverse human groups **may have lived** there than previously thought.

**Finn**

So that was Fiona. And we asked you: Are the fossils from humans?

**Catherine**

And the answer is: Maybe. They **might be** the result of breeding between species or they **may belong** to an unknown human species.

**Finn**

So we don't know the answer for sure.

**Catherine**

Exactly. Now the modal verbs **might** and **may** plus an infinitive show that we're talking about a present possibility, not a certainty. The modal verb **could** does this too, either with an infinitive or with a continuous form. Here's an example.

### **INSERT CLIP 1**

The research teams analysing fossils found in China and Taiwan **could be looking** at something very important...

**Finn**

In fact, we can say **could be looking, might be looking** or **may be looking** there.

**Catherine**

That's right: it's a modal verb plus the continuous form of **be** plus **verb-ing**.

**Finn**

But what about this sentence? Listen.

### **INSERT CLIP 2**

It seems that the fossils **can't be** from any known human species.

**Catherine**

Fiona uses the modal **can't** there. Now we use **can't** with an infinitive when we believe strongly that something isn't possible. The researchers believe strongly that the fossils don't belong to any known human species. They **can't** come from a known human species – it's not possible.

**Finn**

So they **must be** from an unknown human species.

**Catherine**

That's right. **Must** or **can't** plus an infinitive both help us to express a strong belief that something is or isn't possible.

**Finn**

When we're less sure about something, we can say, for example, the fossils **might not, mightn't or may not be** from a known human species.

**Catherine**

That's right, but don't use the negative **couldn't** like this. It's different. **Couldn't** plus an infinitive means that something is completely impossible. Right then. Now let's look at possibilities and certainties in the past. Here's the next clip.

### **INSERT CLIP 3**

The fossils suggest that before modern humans arrived in Asia, more diverse human groups **may have lived** there than previously thought.

**Finn**

So we can also use **might, may, could, can't** and **must** with **have** and the past participle of the verb when we think something was possible in the past.

**Catherine**

Yes, we can say **may have lived, might have lived or could have lived** to express past possibility.

**Finn**

And we use **can't** or **must** with **have** and the past participle when we're **certain** about something in the past. For example, **the scientists can't have expected to find anything so important.**

**Catherine**

Exactly. **They must have been very excited.**

**Finn**

I'm sure they were!

### **IDENT**

6 Minute Grammar from BBC Learning English.

**Finn**

And we're talking about modal verbs.

**Catherine**

And it's quiz time! For each of these sentences, choose **might, must** or **can't** to fill the gap: Number one: Finn, you got an A grade in physics? Wow. You \_\_\_\_\_ have studied really hard.

**Finn**

And the answer is **must**. You must have studied really hard. I did Catherine.

**Catherine**

Very good, Finn! Number two: Nick just called, he is stuck in traffic, he \_\_\_\_\_ be late.

**Finn**

And this one is **might**. **He might be late**.

**Catherine**

Well done! Number three: You \_\_\_\_\_ have seen a ghost. There's no such thing.

**Finn**

And the answer is **can't**. **You can't have seen a ghost**. There's no such thing. Is there Catherine?

**Catherine**

I don't think so, Finn. What about you?

**Finn**

No.

**Catherine**

We don't believe in ghosts. And that's the end of the quiz. I hope you got them all right.

**Finn**

And there's more about this at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). Join us again soon for more 6 Minute Grammar.

**Both**

Bye!