

## Tensed modal forms in non-finite contexts

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### 1. Introduction

Unlike English, the Nordic languages have non-finite forms of certain modal verbs (e.g. *kunne/kunna* ‘can inf.’), and these modals can be embedded under other modals, as in the Swedish example in (1) (see e.g. Thráinsson & Vikner 1995, Eide 2005).

(1) vi skulle kunna vända här. (Swe.)

*we would can.INF turn.INF here*

‘It would be possible for us to turn here.’

In Danish, the embedded modal verb sometimes takes a seemingly finite (or tensed) form in this context, for an expected infinitival form; see (2a). Seemingly finite forms sometimes also appear in infinitival clauses, as in (2b).

(2) a. vi må skal dreje her (Da.)

*we must.PRES shall.PRES turn.INF here*

‘It must be that we should turn here.’

b. jeg er ked af å må sige det

*I am tired of to must.PRES say.INF it*

‘I am tired of having to say it.’

(Pedersen 2009:221)

Characteristic for these examples is that the finite form for infinitive involves a modal verb like *skal* ‘shall’ or *må* ‘must’. The finite form is never obligatory but alternates with the expected infinitival form, and the use of finite forms have been debated in Denmark. See e.g. Barbiers 2005 and Corrigan 2006 for data from Dutch and British dialects where modals embed modals.

The Danish part of the ScanDiaSyn survey included several sentences to test the possibility of a finite or infinitival form of a modal. Some of the results are presented below; see further Pedersen (2009) for a full overview of the data. I refer to modal forms like *må* ‘must’ as tense forms, although this is not necessarily correct; see section 3 for some discussion.

## 2. Results

### 2.1 Nordic Syntax Database

#### Modals embedding modals

The Danish questionnaire included the following sentences with a present tense modal *må* ‘must’ embedding another present tense modal:

(3) a. når I er to så må I nok kan klare ham (#500) (Da.)

*when you are two then must.PRES you probably can.PRES manage him*

‘Since you are two, you should be able to manage him.’

b. vi må skal dreje her (ellers kommer vi for langt). (#505)

*we must.PRES shall.PRES turn.INF here or come we too far*

‘We must turn here (or we’ll go too far).’

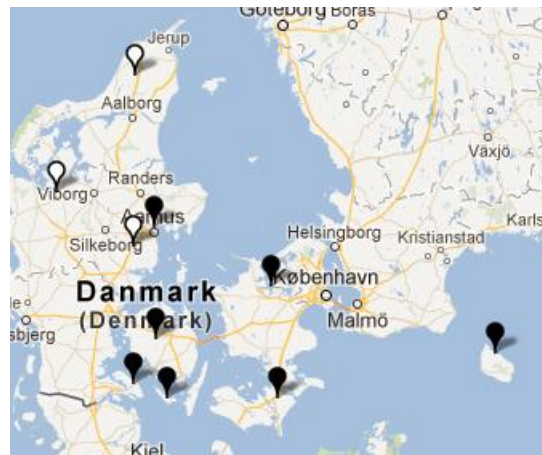
Sentence (#500), with epistemic *må* ‘must’ embedding deontic *kan* ‘can’ is accepted in Jutland but rejected in other parts of Denmark; see Map (1). Sentence (#505), with epistemic *må* ‘must’ embedding *skal* ‘shall’ has largely the same pattern, but is not accepted in Århus; see Map (2).



Map 1: Present tense of the modal *må* ‘must’ embedding a present tense form of the modal *kan* ‘can’ in Danish.

(#500: *Når I er to så må I nok kan klare ham.* ‘Since you are two, you should be able to manage him.’)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).



Map 2: Present tense of the modal *må* ‘must’ embedding a present tense form of the modal *skal* ‘shall’ in Danish.

(#505: *Vi må skal dreje her (ellers kommer vi for langt).* ‘We must turn here (or we’ll go too far).’)

The survey also included sentences with *vil* ‘will, want’ and *kan* ‘can’ as the matrix verb:

- (4) a. jeg vil ikke have hjælp, jeg vil kan gøre det selv. (#508) (Da.)  
*I want not have help I want.PRES can.PRES do.INF it self*  
 ‘I don’t want help, I want to be able to do it by myself.’

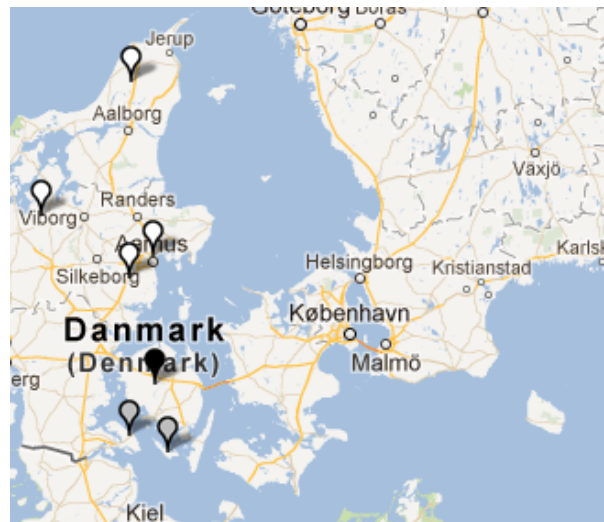
- b. det skal vi altså kan bedømme (#498)  
*it shall.PRES we then can.PRES judge*  
 ‘So we should be able to judge it, then.’

Sentence (#508), with *vil* ‘will, want’ embedding *kan* ‘can’ is accepted in Jutland, but rejected in other parts of Denmark; see Map (3). It receives a medium score in Århus. Sentence (#498), with *skal* ‘shall’ embedding *kan* ‘can’ is slightly more generally accepted; see Map (4). It receives a high score on Jutland, a medium score on Als and Ærø and is rejected on Fyn. (It was not tested in all locations.)



Map 3: Present tense modal *vil* ‘will, want’ embedding a present tense form of the modal *kan* ‘can’ (#503) in Danish.

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).



Map 4: Present tense modal *skal* ‘shall’ embedding a present tense form of the modal *kan* ‘can’ (#498) in Danish.

### Modals in infinitival clauses

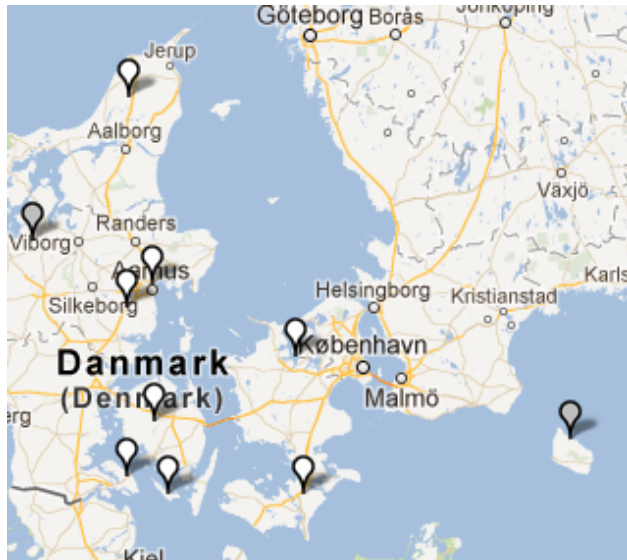
The Danish questionnaire included the following sentences with a present tense modal (*må* ‘must’ and *kan* ‘can’) in an infinitival clause introduced by the infinitival marker:

- (5) a. jeg er ked af å må sige det. (#509) (Da.)  
*I am tired of to must.PRES say.INF it*  
 ‘I am tired of having to say it.’

- b. han er stærk nok til å kan gøre det. (#514)

*he is strong enough to to can.PRES do it*  
 ‘He is strong enough to be able to do it.’

Sentence (#509), with *må* ‘must’, is accepted all across Denmark, except on Bornholm and on eastern Jutland, where it gets a medium score; see Map 5. Also sentence (#514), with *kan* ‘can’, is accepted in most locations; see Map (6). However, it is rejected on Zealand, and it gets a medium score on Bornholm and Falster.



Map 5: Present tense modal *må* ‘must’ in an infinitival clause in Danish.

(#509: *Jeg er ked af å må sige det.* ‘I am tired of having to say it.’)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).



Map 6: Present tense modal *kan* ‘can’ in an infinitival clause in Danish.

(#514: *Han er stærk nok til å kan gøre det.* ‘He is strong enough to be able to do it.’)

In addition, the survey included a sentence with a present tense modal *skal* ‘shall’ in an infinitival clause introduced by the infinitival marker, in a context where the matrix verb is in the past tense:

(6) *vi valgte Peter til å ska kræve penge ind.* (#525)  
*we choose.PAST Peter to to shall.PRES claim.PRES money in*  
 ‘We chose Peter to claim the money.’

Unlike the other sentences, sentence (#525) is rejected in several locations; see Map 7. It is fully accepted only on eastern Jutland.



Map 7: Present tense modal *ska* 'shall' in an infinitival clause with a past tense matrix in Danish.

(#525: *Vi valgte Peter til å ska kræve penge ind.* 'We chose Peter to claim the money.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

## 2.2 Nordic Dialect Corpus

The NDC contains a couple of examples of a modal embedding a finite form of another modal; see (7). Corresponding examples have not been attested for the other Nordic languages.

(7) a. du skal kan se øjne (Da.)

you shall.PRES can.PRES see eye.PL.DEF

'You should be able to see the eyes.' (harboere\_51, Western Jutland)

b. vi skal jo også kan blive ved at snakke vestjysk (Da.)

we shall.PRES PRT also can.PRES remain.INF by to talk.INF west.Jutlandic

'We should also be able to continue speaking West Jutlandic.' (thorsminde\_67, Western Jutland)

## 3. Discussion

Hansen & Heltoft (2011:776) states that modals lack a separate infinitival form in many Danish dialects, and that the present tense form is used instead. Pedersen (2009) observes that the use of forms like *ska* in non-finite contexts can hardly be considered dialectal: it can be attested in all parts of Denmark. In the survey, several of the tested sentences were accepted on Jutland, but not in other parts of Denmark. The sentences with the forms *skal* 'shall', *må* 'must' and *vil* 'will' embedded under another modal largely have the same geographical distribution. The possibility of a present tense form of *må* and *kan* 'can' is more widespread when the seemingly finite form is used in an infinitival clause.

It should be noted that not all of the investigated modals have non-finite forms in the other Nordic languages. For instance, *måste* 'must' lacks an infinitive in Swedish and the old infinitive of *ska* (*skola*) is no longer used. Some of the tested sentences therefore lack direct correspondences in the other Nordic languages (as in English). Some of the Danish speakers in the survey that rejected a tested sentence might also only allow

the modal in finite contexts. However, we would then expect the modal to be at least as bad in infinitival clauses as in the complement of another modal.

Preterite and infinitive forms of the modals are homophonous in Danish (cf. Pedersen 2009, Hansen & Heltoft 2009:775), and the observed variation can therefore be described as an alternation between a seemingly present tense form (e.g. *ska* ‘shall’) and a form ambiguous between an infinitive and past tense. Veirup (1965) refers to the forms used in non-finite contexts as a present infinitive and a past infinitive (cf. Pedersen 2009:222). Pedersen (2009) points out that it might also be taken as a case of tense-agreement, as in e.g. pseudo-coordination and in the so-called double supine (see [Larsson 2014a](#) and [Larsson 2014b](#)). The results from the survey suggest that the matrix tense might have something to say: the use of the present tense forms appears to be less widespread when the matrix verb is in the past tense.

In some Swedish varieties, the modal *lär* ‘is said to, is probable that’ sometimes can take a finite complement of another modal verb, namely *ska* ‘shall, will’ (see Teleman et al. 1999/4:305, Teleman 2007). An example is given in (8). The form *ska* does not otherwise appear in non-finite contexts, and Teleman (2007:33) takes the combination *lär ska* to be a lexicalized expression.

- (8) Han lär ska komma hit. (Swe.)  
*he is.probable.that.PRES shall.PRES come here*  
 ‘He will surely come here.’

The possibility of embedding a finite form of a modal under *lär* presumably relates to the fact that *lär* is an epistemic modal. *Lär* often expresses evidentiality, but when the complement is *ska* it typically (necessarily?) expresses a high degree of probability (sometimes possibly obligation). Interestingly, also the present tense form *kan* ‘can’ can sometimes be embedded under *lär* in some informal varieties of Swedish, even if the infinitival form *kunna* ‘to be able to’ is fully productive. An example is given in (9); this usage is not well known (and not described by Teleman et al. 1999).

- (9) att flera låtar nog lär kan (Swe.)  
*that more songs probably is.probable.that can.PRES*  
 hamna på repertoaren för olika dansband.  
*end.up on repertoire.DEF for different dance.bands*  
 ‘that more songs most probably will end up on the repertoire of different dance bands.’  
 (SweWaC – Swedish Web as Corpus)

Like *ska*, the form *kan* does not otherwise appear in non-finite contexts, and should hardly be treated as an alternative infinitive in the way that the Danish forms have been described. This use of *ska* and *kan* and its geographical distribution remains to be investigated.

## References

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### Web sites:

- Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>
- Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>
- Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>
- SweWac – Swedish Web as Corpus. Available at <http://spraakbanken.gu.se/>