Epistemic vs. Deontic

Epistemic vs. Deontic meaning

1.1) The mother comes into Robert’s room and sees that he is playing computer instead of doing his homework for the following day.
“You should learn French.”
→ obligation

1.2) John is talking with his friend Michael about his imminent stay in France. Michael says: “You should learn French before leaving Germany.”
→ advice

2) He can read this book.
→ certainty
→ permission
→ ability

3) She must be the new English teacher.
→ obligation
→ certainty
→ advice

Choose the right answer!

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Epistemic vs. Deontic meaning

2.1) He has lived in France for several years, he studied the French language and so he can read this book.
→ certainty

2.2) It is right. He already asked me yesterday. He can read this book.
→ permission

2.3) He is 7 years old and learned reading at school. He can read this book.
→ ability

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Epistemic vs. Deontic vs. Dynamic meaning

Many modals have different meanings depending on the context.
• The same modal can have an epistemic (expresses the speaker’s opinion about the truth about a proposition), deontic (concerned with obligation, permission, offering, requesting, granting, commanding) or dynamic (expresses ability or willingness) meaning.
→ creates ambiguity
• e.g.: CAN
Epistemic vs. Deontic

Epistemic vs. Deontic vs. Dynamic

- I can do it.
  = POSSIBILITY (external circumstances allow me to do it)
- I can do it.
  = ABILITY (inherent properties allow me to do it)
- I can do it.
  = PERMISSION (human authority/rules allow me to do it)

Epistemic vs. Deontic

- every modal has mood and modality

  three modalities:
  - epistemic,
  - deontic,
  - dynamic

  three moods (verbs in general):
  - indicative (stating),
  - imperative (commanding, encouraging),
  - subjunctive (wishing)

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Extensions

- Deontic modality can be subdivided into:
  1. directives (possibility): you may leave (necessity): you must leave
  2. commissives (promises, undertakings): you shall be rewarded
  3. imperatives: Come in!
  4. others: volitaves, evaluatives: he won't go

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Problem cases

MUST & HAVE TO:
- Epistemically: little difference between must and have to (He has to be home; there is his car/ He must be home; …)
- Deontically: must obliges the subject of the sentence to do sth. (You must be home before 9 o'clock.) have to does not have a strong deontic role
- Dynamically: distinction between must and have to creates confusion

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Problem cases

Dynamic modality:
- obligation is clearly speaker-oriented: must
- obligation is clearly external: have to
- neither “clearly external” nor “clearly speaker-oriented”: Native speakers use must and have to more or less indiscriminately
### Epistemic vs. Deontic

#### Problem cases: MAY

1. John may go home.  
   → permission to leave (deontic)

2. John may go home.  
   → speaker is not certain if John is leaving (epistemic)

#### Problem cases: MAY and MIGHT

1. MAY expresses:
   a) Permission
   b) Possibility

2. MIGHT expresses:
   a) Possibility

MIGHT can replace MAY only when MAY is used to express possibility (they then never take the negative form):

- *It may rain today.*
- *It might rain today.*

#### Problem cases: CAN and COULD

1. **Ability**
   a) Tom can play chess.
   b) I can't pick the box up, it's too heavy.
   c) Louise could read when she was three.
   d) I stood on a chair, but I still couldn't see.  
   Here *can* is used for the present, and *could* is used for the past.

2. **Permission**
   a) You can use my phone if you want.
   b) I'm sorry but you can't bring drinks in here.
   c) Could Tom sit next to you?
   d) We couldn't keep pets when we lived in a flat.

3. **Possibility**
   a) *Can* and *could* are often used to suggest possible future actions.  
   **NOTE:** *Can* expresses a more definite possibility than *could.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you don't like it, I can paint it a different colour.</th>
<th>vs. If you don't like it, I could paint it in a different colour.</th>
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#### Problem cases: CAN and COULD

b) *Could* is often used to say that something is or was possibly true:

- He *could* be working late tonight.
- She *could* have missed the bus.

- *Can* is sometimes used to say that something is generally possible:

  - Smoking *can* seriously damage your health.
  - Paris *can* be very hot in the summer.
Epistemic vs. Deontic

Problem cases: CAN and COULD

You could listen to the radio. — emphasizes that this is a suggestion or an advice (more personal involvement-subjective)

You can listen to the radio. — emphasizes simply that this is an option that is available (more factual-objective)

CAN and COULD (like other modals) have developed a wide range of meanings and uses.

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Exercises: Choose the right one!

1) They (can/might) be away for the weekend but I’m not sure.
2) You (may/might) leave now if you wish.
3) (Could/May) you open the window a bit, please?
4) He (can/could) be French, judging by his accent.
5) (May/Can) you play the piano?
6) Listen, please. You (may not/might not) speak during this exam.
7) They (can’t/may not) still be out!

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Exercises:

8) You (couldn’t/might not) smoke on the bus.
9) With luck, tomorrow (can/could) be a sunny day.
10) You (can/might) be right but I’m going back to check anyway.
11) The exam (can/might) be easy. You never know.
12) I (can/might) go to the party but I’m not sure yet.
13) Students (may/might) study in the library from five to nine in the evening.
14) (May/Could) you lend me 40 Euros till Monday?

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Exercises: Please paraphrase these sentences using modals.

1. Suzanne has the ability to speak Spanish.
   Suzanne ______ speak Spanish.

2. I am reasonably certain that Francesca is home.
   Francesca ______ be home.

3. I am not very sure if he comes tomorrow.
   He ______ come tomorrow.

4. She isn’t at home. I am sure she is in her office.
   She ______ be in her office.

Epistemic vs. Deontic

Exercises

1. Suzanne can speak Spanish.
2. Francesca should be home.
3. He may come tomorrow.
4. She must be in her office.
Modals have a wide range of meanings and uses depending on the context one single modal can have different modalities and moods. For example, the book should be on the shelf. (epistemic or deontic meaning?) Both are right! An example for dynamic meaning is: John can play the pan flute.