Modals – Speculation

Modal verbs are also frequently used when we speculate or try to guess. This can apply to events in the past, at the present time and in the future.

Speculating about the past

When speculating about the past, we use the modal verbs ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘can’t’, ‘couldn’t’, or ‘must’ followed by the ‘present perfect tense structure’ either ‘have done’, ‘have been done’ or ‘have been doing’.

With regards to the level of certainty, in positive sentences, ‘must’ is more definite that ‘may’ or ‘might’.

The following examples all refer to the speaker guessing or speculating what might have happened.

- ‘When he was forced to leave the company, he must have been given a large severance package.’ (fairly certain)
- ‘When he was forced to leave the company, he might have been given a large severance package.’ (less certain)
- ‘They can’t have known about the financial irregularities when they bought the company.’
- ‘They may have been expecting to expand the brand before the negative publicity.’

Speculating about the present

When speculating about the present, we use the modal verbs ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘can’t’, or ‘must’ followed by a present tense.

Again, with regards to the level of certainty, in positive sentences, ‘must’ is more definite that ‘may’ or ‘might’.

The following examples all refer to the speaker guessing or speculating a situation that is occurring now.

- ‘I’m unable to contact him. He might already be on his way here.’
- ‘The contract has not yet been signed. They may be having second thoughts.’
- ‘The agency has not got back to me. They may have forgotten.’
Speculating about the future

When speculating about the future, we use the modal verbs ‘may’, ‘might’, or ‘could’ followed by the ‘bare infinitive’.

Regarding the tone, all three modals are less certain, so if you want to be more certain, you can use the modal verb ‘will’.

The following examples all refer to the speaker guessing or speculating a situation that may happen in the future.

- ‘I might be transferred to our Chennai office in June.’ (possible future)
- ‘I will be transferred to our Chennai office in June.’ (certain future)
- ‘There could be a safety issue if the facilities are not repaired soon.’
- ‘The postponement of the launch may cause some difficulties with our clients.’

Tip - Levels of certainty

When speculating, the modal verb you use will give the listener an idea as to your level of certainty:

Speculating about the past

May/might – uncertainty
Can’t/couldn’t – expectation that something did not/could not have happened
Must – an element of certainty that something happened

Speculating about the present

May/might – uncertain, dependant on other factors
Can’t – speculation with disbelief
Must – speculation with certainty that something is happening

Speculating about the future

May/might – uncertain, possible, but unlikely
Could – possible, but dependant on other factors
Will – certainty