SEMINAR 4 – PRIMARY VERBS AND MODAL AUXILIARIES

Verbs as operators

Auxiliaries become the operator when they occur as the first verb of a finite verb phrase. The main verbs “be” and “have” are also operators when they are the only verb in the verb phrase.

Characteristic features of operators:
- to make a negative, we put “not” immediately after the operator
- to make questions, we put the operator in front of the subject (subject-operator inversion)
- the operator can carry nuclear stress, e.g. Won’t you try again? – I will try again.
- the operator is used in elliptical clauses., e.g. Won’t you try again? – Yes, I will.

If there is no operator in positive sentences, the operator “do” is introduced:
- negative - She saw him. – She didn’t see him.
- questions - He wants to come. – Does he want to come?
- expressing emphasis – But I do listen to you.

Modal auxiliaries

- are followed by the bare infinitive, e.g. I will help you.
- cannot occur in nonfinite functions, i.e. as infinitives or participles
- have no –s form for the 3rd person sg of the present tense
- their past forms can refer to present and future time, e.g. I think he might be outside.

PRIMARY VERBS

BE

a) functions as a main verb (copular verb), e.g. Carol is a pretty girl.
b) Functions as an aspect auxiliary for the progressive, e.g. She is learning French.
c) Functions as a passive auxiliary, e.g. She was asked to leave. Our team has never been beaten.

Note

!Ain’t is a nonstandard contraction used especially in AmE in place of am not, is not, are not (but also has not and have not)
! Aren’t is the standard contraction for am not in questions, e.g. Aren’t I tall? I am your friend, aren’t I?

HAVE

a) functions as a main verb, normally takes a direct object, e.g. I have no money.
b) Functions as an auxiliary for perfect aspect, e.g. I have finished.
In stative senses have is used as an operator. There is also the informal have got construction.

    e.g. We haven’t any butter. – We have some.
    We haven’t got any butter. – We’ve got some.

In dynamic senses, have is used with do (negative, questions), have got is not possible.

    e.g. Do you usually have coffee in the morning? – No, I don’t.

DO

    a) functions as a main verb ( has nonfinite forms – doing and done)
    b) functions as an auxiliary; as an aux. it has no nonfinite forms, only present and past forms

!Especially in informal speech, the main verb do is used a transitive verb, e.g. Let’s do the dishes.

MODAL AUXILIARIES (central v. marginal)

Central modal auxiliaries: can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must

Marginal modal auxiliaries: used to, ought to, dare, need

Used to

    - always takes the to-infinitive
    - occurs only in the past tense
    - normal interrogative and negative are formed with do

Ought to

    - normally has the to-infinitive, but to is optional following ought in ellipsis, e.g.
      Ought I to stop smoking? – Yes, I think you ought (to).

Dare and need

    - can be used either as modal auxiliaries (with bare infinitive and without the
      inflected forms) – mainly in negative and interrogative sentences
    - or as main verbs (with to-infinitive, inflected –s, -ing and past forms) – can
      always be used, it is more common

MODAL IDIOMS AND SEMI-AUXILIARIES

Modal idioms – are combination of auxiliary and infinitive or adverb: had better, would rather, have got to, be to. They do not have nonfinite forms.

Semi-auxiliaries – are introduced by primary verbs have or be: be able to, be about to, be bound to, be due to, be going to, be likely to, be supposed to, have to. They have nonfinite forms.