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## Lezione 8

[/en/de/home/en/de/courses/1/german-grammar-by-reading-pirandello/lessons/8/modal-verbs](https://en/de/home/en/de/courses/1/german-grammar-by-reading-pirandello/lessons/8/modal-verbs)

### Modal verbs

The conjugation of modal verbs and *wissen*

Present (Indikativ Präsens)

1st/3rd person singular: (*ich/man*) *kann, muss, soll, darf, mag, will, weiß*

1st/3rd person plural: (*wir/alle*) *können, müssen, sollen, dürfen, mögen, wollen, wissen*

Past (Indikativ Präteritum)

1st/3rd person singular: (*ich/man*) *konnte, musste, sollte, durfte, mochte, wollte, wusste*

1st/3rd person plural: (*wir/alle*) *konnten, mussten, sollten, durften, mochten, wollten, wussten*

Conditional (Konjunktiv II)

1st/3rd person singular: (*ich/man*) *könnte, müsste, sollte, dürfte, möchte, wollte, wüsste*

1st/3rd person plural: (*wir/alle*) *könnten, müssten, sollten, dürften, möchten, wollten, wüssten*

Modal verbs all form the verbal complex with an infinitive. This verbal complex is syntactically arranged according to the usual pattern of 'brackets':

- In the absence of complements and in the case of an intransitive verb, the verbal elements are adjacent: *Ich will schlafen.*
- in the presence of one or more complements, the verbal items are spaced according to the order of the 2nd modal position of the conjugated verb and the last infinitive position of the verb:

*Man konnte es nicht Monsterchen nennen.*

Man konnte es nicht Monsterchen nennen. (You couldn't call it a little monster.)

Let us now examine the third part of Pirandello's passage to discover the modal verbs. There are four of them in the last 200 words:

*können, müssen, sollen, dürfen.* We do not find mentioned: *mögen* and *wollen*.

### The modal verb *können*

In this context, the protagonist (*ich*) pronounces the modal verb *können*. The modal verb *können* means 'power'.

*Ich war's, ich war's; ich war der Tod; ich hatte ihn hier zwischen meinen zwei Fingern und in meinem Hauch; ich konnte alle umbringen.*

Ich war's, ich war's; ich war der Tod; ich hatte ihn hier zwischen meinen zwei Fingern und in meinem Hauch; ich konnte alle umbringen. (I was it, I was it: I was death. I had it right there, between my two fingers and in my breath. I could make anybody die. )

The ability seems to be more physical and innate than mental. It is as if someone said:

*Vögel haben Flügel, Vögel können fliegen.*

### The modal verb *müssen*

Immediately afterwards he uses the modal verb *müssen*.

The modal verb *müssen* means 'necessity' or 'force majeure' arising from something outside the agent subject. Or perhaps the narrator uses the modal verb *müssen* because he feels a strong inner impulse.

*Musste ich jetzt nicht alle umbringen?*

Musste ich jetzt nicht alle umbringen? (Shouldn't I now kill everybody else?)

He adds immediately afterwards:

*Aus Gerechtigkeit, nicht aus Hass! Wie der Tod.*

Aus Gerechtigkeit, nicht aus Hass! Wie der Tod. (In order to be fair, I wouldn't do it out of hatred. Just like death. )

### The modal verb *sollen*

But then he gets a doubt, an uncertainty (*Ungewissheit*). The protagonist begins to question whether he 'really must', through the modal verb *sollen*, which questions the necessity and compulsion of *müssen*. Perhaps it is a law, a norm or a general principle: '*Du sollst nicht töten*'. (You shall not kill.) He is uncertain. He has a free choice between yes and no, both equally possible, but one excludes the other.

*Aber sollte ich denn wirklich – die ganze Menschheit? alle Häuser verwaisen? alle Straßen aller Städte? und alle Wiesen und Felder und die Berge und die Meere? die ganze Erde verwaisen? Das war unmöglich.* (Could I really do that to the whole of humanity? Depopulate every house? Empty every street in every city? The countryside, the mountains, the sea? Erase everyone from the face of the earth? No, it wasn't possible.)

### The modal verb *dürfen*

Choose no. Why? Because he thinks he is not allowed to 'uninhabit the whole earth'. He uses the modal verb *dürfen* together with the negation, thus expressing a direct prohibition. This does not alter the fact that it is also his direct will. The sentence remains elliptical, but its overall meaning is easily deduced from the context.

*Absolut nein, ich durfte keinen mehr, keinen mehr.*

Absolut nein, ich durfte keinen mehr, keinen mehr. (And so, no, I couldn't kill anyone else, not anymore. )

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Risorse per la scuola

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<https://www.francescobelloni.it>