

The role of aspect in the acceptability of epistemic modals in questions: Evidence from Colloquial Malay

According to Abdul Aziz Idris (1980), the modal *mesti*, which normally has both epistemic and deontic readings as shown in (1), cannot receive an epistemic interpretation when appearing in questions.

- (1) Dia mesti tidur. Epistemic: ‘S/he must be sleeping.’
 3SG must sleep Deontic: ‘S/he must sleep.’

In this paper, I show that the availability of an epistemic reading for *mesti* in questions is sensitive to aspectual distinctions. In particular, pre-verbal epistemic modal *mesti* may occur in yes/no questions and *wh*-questions when the sentence presents a “stative” situation. “Stative” situations may involve stative predicates or eventive predicates interpreted in the progressive or perfect. The progressive or perfect interpretations can be ensured with the addition of the progressive *tengah*, the perfective/perfect *dah* or the experiential *pernah* before the predicate, though an eventive predicate can be interpreted in the progressive or perfect without overt viewpoint aspectual markings. Examples of *mesti* in yes/no and *wh*-questions involving “stative” situations are given below:

- (2) a. Dia mesti ada cancer ke? b. Dia mesti tengah tidur ke?
 3SG must have cancer Q 3SG must PROG sleep Q
 ‘Must it be that s/he has cancer?’ ‘Must s/he be sleeping (now)?’
 c. Dia mesti dah kahwin ke? d. Dia mesti pernah beranak ke?
 3SG must PERF marry Q 3SG must EXP bear-child Q
 ‘Must s/he have been married?’ ‘Must she have given birth to a child?’
 (3) a. Siapa mesti ada kod tu? b. Siapa mesti tengah tidur sekarang?
 who must have code that who must PROG sleep now
 ‘Who must have the code?’ ‘Who must be sleeping now?’
 c. Siapa mesti dah beranak? d. Dia mesti pernah gila main game mana?
 who must PERF bear-child 3SG must EXP crazy play game which
 ‘Who must have given birth ‘Which game must he have played with
 to a child?’ great enthusiasm?’

When the sentence contains an eventive predicate without overt aspectual markings, the acceptability of *mesti* in questions with an epistemic reading varies. The variability depends in part on how easily the sentence is interpreted as presenting a “stative” situation. Note that the sentences are acceptable with a deontic reading, and that is the preferred interpretation for these sentences.

- (4) a. Dia mesti tidur ke? b. ?Dia mesti main game tu ke?
 3SG must sleep Q 3SG must play game that Q
 ‘Must s/he be sleeping now?’ ‘Must s/he be playing the game?’
 c. ?Dia mesti pergi ke US ke? d. *Dia mesti kahwin ke?
 3SG must go to US Q 3SG must marry Q
 ‘Must s/he be going to the US?’
 (5) a. ?Siapa mesti tidur (sekarang)? b. ?Siapa mesti lulus peperiksaan tu?
 who must sleep now who must pass examination that
 ‘Who must be sleeping now?’ ‘Who is certain to pass the examination?’
 c. ?Siapa mesti pergi ke US? d. *Siapa mesti kahwin?
 who must go to US who COMP must marry
 ‘Who will for sure go to the US?’

The sensitivity to aspectual distinctions in the occurrence of *mesti* in questions patterns like that of English epistemic modal *must* (see von Stechow and Iatridou 2003 on *must* in *wh*-questions). The fact that epistemic modal *mesti* can appear in questions raises questions about why sentence final *punya*, which has been analyzed as an epistemic modal evidential (Soh 2015, 2016), is incompatible with questions regardless of the aspectual presentation of the situation. I suggest that *mesti* and *punya*, as epistemic modals, differ in who can be considered the attitude holder of the evidence/knowledge, and that this difference is the source of the contrasting behavior between *mesti* and *punya* in questions.