



Translating English Modal Auxiliary Verbs into Indonesian

(A Case Study of *Broken Strings*)

Lola Deliva^{1*}, Wahyu Budi²

^{1,2}Sastra Inggris, Universitas Dian Nusantara, Indonesia

*Penulis Korespondensi: delivalola@gmail.com

Abstract. Translating English modal auxiliary verbs into Indonesian presents a unique linguistic challenge because the two languages express modality through entirely different grammatical structures. In literary texts, these verbs do far more than indicate tense or possibility; they are crucial for establishing tone, perspective, and character depth. Despite their narrative weight, modal verbs are often overlooked in English-Indonesian literary translation studies. This study addresses the gap by identifying the core modal auxiliary verbs in Aurélie Moeremans's memoir *Broken Strings* and analyzing how they are rendered into Indonesian. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach supported by quantitative data, the study tracked nine core modals—can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would—through the lens of Molina and Albir's (2002) translation techniques framework. The analysis revealed 682 total occurrences, with *could* appearing most frequently at 245 instances (35.92%), followed by *would* at 216 instances (31.67%). Five specific translation techniques emerged: established equivalent, reduction, transposition, modulation, and variation. Established equivalent was the dominant strategy, used in 382 cases (56.01%), which underscores the translator's strong preference for natural Indonesian phrasing over the rigid preservation of English grammatical forms. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that translating modal verbs relies heavily on contextual nuance and communicative intent, requiring flexible structural and semantic shifts to ensure clarity and readability in the target text.

Keywords: Literary Translation; Memoir; Modal Auxiliary Verbs; Translation; Translation Techniques.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is a complex communicative act that extends well beyond the conversion of words from one language to another. Translation activities help in the development of vocabulary and syntax because they involve multi-level processing, namely, form, meaning, and usage, which allows learners to develop their vocabulary and syntax. It has been highlighted that translation practices facilitate learners to process vocabulary at a multiple level form, meaning and use and increase grammatical awareness and sentence construction (Rahmayani et al, 2026). Grammatical cohesion is substantial in academic writing because it can help ensure a linguistic sense in the discourse or text, aid in interpreting the message, and negotiate the meaning within the texts (Wulansari et al, 2024).

Memoir is a genre in which past experience is reconstructed through memory, and in which the narrator's present perspective shapes the way past actions, feelings, and possibilities are described. Modals are central to this reconstruction: *could* and *would* carry the weight of past ability, habitual action, and conditional reasoning; *must* have encodes confident retrospective inference; *should* imposes normative expectation and self-reproach. When these functions are poorly handled in translation, the narrator's voice loses precision and emotional authenticity.

This study addresses the genre gap by analyzing 682 tokens of modal auxiliary verbs in *Broken Strings* by Aurelie Moeremans (2025)-a memoir recounting the author's experience of abuse during adolescence-alongside their corresponding translations in the official Indonesian edition. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What types and frequencies of modal auxiliary verbs appear in the source text? (2) What translation techniques from Molina and Albir's (2002) taxonomy are applied to render these modals into Indonesian? By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute a genre-specific account of English-Indonesian modal translation that complements existing research and offers practical implications for translators working with personal narrative texts.

Among the linguistic elements that most consistently challenge translators, modal auxiliary verbs occupy a uniquely demanding position. In English, modals such as *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, *would*, and *must* perform a wide range of semantic functions-encoding the speaker's degree of certainty, their attitude toward obligation, the social dynamics of an utterance, and the emotional relationship between speaker and event (Palmer, 2001). These verbs are grammatically compact but semantically expansive, and in literary texts especially, their translation carries interpretive stakes that extend into characterization, narrative voice, and emotional tone.

Grammatical frameworks routinely distinguish these core modals from periphrastic expressions that fulfill similar semantic functions but diverge syntactically. For instance, constructions such as *have to*, *need to*, *used to*, *be supposed to*, and *had better* are categorized as quasi-modals or semi-modals because they retain lexical verbal characteristics, including inflection for tense and the requirement of a *to*-infinitive (Collins, 2009). Positioned between these categories is *ought to*, frequently classified as a marginal modal; although it expresses deontic meanings of obligation and advisability analogous to central modals, its unique requirement of the *to*-infinitive sets it structurally apart. Therefore, analyzing English modal expressions demands a dual focus on both their semantic versatility and their formal grammatical behaviors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

When applied to translation, the transfer of modal meanings triggers a dynamic interaction between two distinct linguistic systems. The process requires navigating a fixed source framework and reconstructing its implicit conceptual meaning within a flexible target environment. To analyze this shift, scholars have developed various taxonomies of translation techniques.

Molina and Albir (2002) conceptualize a translation technique as an analytical tool used to describe the micro-units of translation, illuminating how semantic equivalence is achieved. These procedural methods operate at various structural tiers, allowing researchers to evaluate the choices made at the word, phrase, clause, or sentence level.

Prior research has addressed modal translation from several angles. Duereh (2015) documented the translation of English modal verbs in *The First Phone Call from Heaven*, finding context-sensitive variation across modal types. Octavita (2017) conducted a focused study on Indonesian equivalents for English modal auxiliaries, concluding that no single technique accounts for the full semantic range of each modal and that translatorial choice is consistently shaped by pragmatic context.

Wibowo (2023) and Tambunsaribu (2019) examined auxiliary verbs in fictional and genre prose respectively, both identifying systematic grammatical shifts in their Indonesian renderings. Collectively, these studies confirm that English-Indonesian modal translation is context-driven and resistant to formulaic approaches. However, they share a common limitation: none examines modal verb translation in the specific genre of memoir, where the modal system is under unusual pressure from the retrospective, emotionally complex character of the narrative.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for analyzing linguistic phenomena that require interpretation, contextual sensitivity, and example-grounded reasoning rather than measurement (Creswell, 2014).

This research is conducted using the parallel text of *Broken Strings* (2025), a memoir by Aurélie Moeremans, and its published Indonesian translation. The total population of this study is all central modal auxiliary verb occurrences present in both editions of the text. Because the population is too large to be analysed exhaustively within the scope of this study, a sampling procedure is applied. There are nine modal auxiliary verb types in English—can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would—thus the total population is divided into nine strata based on modal type. The sampling technique used is disproportionate stratified random sampling (Cohen et al., 2018). This technique is chosen because the nine modals occur at very different frequencies in the text: high-frequency modals such as *could* and *would* dominate the corpus, while low-frequency modals such as *may* and *must* appear very rarely. By sampling each stratum independently, the procedure ensures that all nine modal types are

represented in the final corpus regardless of their natural frequency in the text, making it possible to analyse the full range of translation techniques applied to every modal type.

The instrument of this research is a data classification sheet. The classification sheet is used to record and organise all modal auxiliary verb occurrences identified in the source text alongside their corresponding renderings in the Indonesian target text. Each entry on the sheet records three items of information: the source-text sentence or clause containing the nine modal auxiliary verb, with the relevant page number; the corresponding target-text sentence, with the relevant page number; and the translation technique applied, classified according to Molina and Albir's (2002) taxonomy of eighteen techniques. The classification sheet is developed by the researcher based on Molina and Albir's (2002) theoretical framework and is validated through expert judgement. The validation process involves cross-referencing each classification decision against the operational definitions of the eighteen techniques as specified in Molina and Albir (2002), and consulting some authoritative dictionaries.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results are organized into two parts: the distribution of modal auxiliary verbs across type and frequency, followed by an analysis of the five translation techniques identified in the data. Representative examples are examined for each technique, with supporting reference to both the source-language context and relevant theoretical literature.

Distribution of Modal Auxiliary Verbs

A total of 682 modal auxiliary verb tokens were identified across the source text. Table 1 presents the full distribution.

Table 1. Distribution of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in *Broken Strings*.

Modal Auxiliary Verb	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Can	56	8.21%
Could	245	35.92%
May	2	0.29%
Might	30	4.40%
Shall	0	0.00%
Should	36	5.28%
Will	87	12.76%
Would	216	31.67%
Must	10	1.47%
Total	682	100%

As Table 1 illustrates, the modal could dominates the data with 245 occurrences (35.92%), followed closely by would with 216 occurrences (31.67%). Together, these two past-form modals account for approximately 68% of the entire dataset-a proportion that reflects the retrospective and confessional character of memoir as a genre. The modal will rank third at

12.76% (n = 87), followed by *can* at 8.21% (n = 56), *should* at 5.28% (n = 36), *might* at 4.40% (n = 30), *must* at 1.47% (n = 10), and *may* at 0.29% (n = 2). The modal *shall* register zero occurrences throughout the entire sampled corpus, a finding consistent with its documented decline in contemporary English narrative prose, where it has been largely displaced by *will* and *should* (Biber et al., 1999; Swan, 2016).

The dominance of *could* and *would* is interpretively significant. In memoir writing, the narrator recounts events from a vantage point removed in time from the original experiences, which generates heavy reliance on past-form modals to reconstruct past ability, habitual action, and retrospective evaluation. *Could* allows the narrator to mark what was possible, or what she was capable of, at a specific point in the past—often including actions that were pre-empted or never realised, a narrative pattern highly characteristic of testimonial prose. *Would*, meanwhile, functions as a marker of habitual past action as well as hypothetical and conditional reasoning, both of which are central to the memoir's attempt to make sense of a traumatic relationship. This modal distribution therefore reflects not merely an individual stylistic preference but a genre-specific linguistic pattern.

Distribution of Translation Techniques

Five techniques from Molina and Albir's (2002) taxonomy were identified across the 682 data items. Table 2 presents their distribution.

Table 2. Translation Techniques Applied to Modal Auxiliary Verbs.

Translation Technique	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Established Equivalent	382	56.01%
Reduction	140	20.53%
Transposition	117	17.16%
Modulation	38	5.57%
Variation	5	0.73%
Total	682	100%

Established Equivalent is the overwhelmingly dominant technique at 56.01% (n = 382), indicating that the translator's default strategy was to deploy the standard, dictionary-sanctioned Indonesian counterpart whenever one was available. Reduction follows at 20.53% (n = 140), reflecting systematic compression or omission of modal constructions where full rendering would yield unnatural target-language output. Transposition accounts for 17.16% (n = 117) and involves grammatical category shifts—most commonly from modal auxiliary verb to adverb or adjective. Modulation is observed in 38 cases (5.57%), involving conceptual or perspectival reframings, while Variation is the least frequent technique at 0.73% (n = 5), confined to register adjustments in direct dialogue.

Analysis of Translation Techniques by Modal Type

The following subsections present a detailed analysis of the translation techniques applied to each modal auxiliary verb, illustrated with representative data drawn from the corpus. Each data is presented in a parallel format, with source text (ST) and target text (TT) accompanied by analytical commentary.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs Can

The modal *can* occur 56 times (8.21%) in the sampled corpus, performing a range of semantic functions including ability, permission, and-in negated form-prohibition. In the context of *Broken Strings*, *can* frequently appears in emotionally charged passages where questions of agency and control are at stake, as the abuser uses modal structures to define what the narrator is or is not permitted to do.

Table 3. Transposition-Can rendered as *boleh*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
He slipped a small Nokia phone into my hand and whispered, "Hide it in your underwear. If anyone tries to take it, say you'll report them. That's your private spot, nobody can touch it but me." (p.53)	Ia menyelipkan ponsel kecil ke tanganku dan berbisik, "Sembunyikan di celana dalammu. Kalau ada yang mau ambil, bilang aja kamu bakal lapor. Itu bagian pribadimu, cuma aku yang boleh sentuh." (h.61)	Transposition

This text highlights a clear instance of psychological dominance. By using the modal *can* in the phrase "nobody can touch it but me," the speaker establishes a strict prohibition, claiming sole possession and authority.

When translating this line, the author utilized transposition. The English verb *can* shifts into the Indonesian adverb *boleh*, shifting the original grammatical structure. From a linguistic standpoint, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that *can* often conveys permission (deontic modality). This aligns perfectly with the Indonesian word *boleh*, which the KBBI defines as "*diizinkan; tidak dilarang*" (permitted or not forbidden).

Modal Auxiliary Verbs Could

With 245 occurrences (35.92%), *could* is the most frequently used modal in the corpus. As the past form of *can*, it performs a broad range of semantic functions including past ability, polite requests, hypothetical conditions, conditional possibility, and temporal pre-emption. Its high frequency is consistent with the memoir genre, where the narrator frequently reconstructs past situations and evaluates the limits of her own agency during the period of abuse. All five translation techniques are observed, though Established Equivalent dominates strongly.

Table 4. Established Equivalent-Could rendered as *bisa*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
My mom worked as a maid across from our home and sometimes babysat my friend for extra money, while my dad took whatever work he could find, even collecting trash in the parks if that's what kept us going. (p. 3)	Mamaku bekerja sebagai asisten rumah tangga di seberang rumah kami dan kadang menjaga anak teman untuk menambah penghasilan, sementara papaku mengambil pekerjaan apa pun yang bisa , bahkan mengumpulkan sampah di taman, asalkan kami bisa tetap hidup. (h. 4)	Established Equivalent

Here, the modal *could* is embedded in the relative clause "whatever work he could find," underscoring the family's desperate efforts to secure an income during a harsh financial crisis. As noted by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *could* serves here as the past-tense counterpart of *can*.

In handling this sentence, the translator utilized the established equivalent technique, translating *could* into the Indonesian word *bisa*. This choice aligns with *the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)*, which defines *bisa* as being capable or having the ability to do something (*dapat; mampu*), making it the standard linguistic match for expressing ability. Furthermore, because Indonesian verbs do not change form to reflect tense, *bisa* naturally absorbs the past-tense context of the original phrase without requiring extra grammatical markers.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs May

The modal *may* have the lowest frequency among modals that actually appear in the data, with only 2 occurrences (0.29%). Both instances perform distinct functions: in one case, *may* expresses polite permission, and in the other it encodes epistemic possibility. The rarity of *may* in the corpus is consistent with its generally formal register, which is largely absent from the personal, conversational tone of this memoir.

Table 5. Transposition-May rendered as *mungkin*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
The world may not always understand, but the truth stays with you, and that truth is enough. (p. 188)	Dunia mungkin tidak selalu mengerti, tapi kebenaran tetap bersamamu, dan itu sudah cukup. (h. 203)	Transposition

Found near the final pages of the memoir, this text captures a moment where Aurélie reflects on her journey and shares a quiet message of resilience. The modal *may* in the phrase "the world may not always understand" serves an epistemic function, signaling the author's realization that external understanding is never a guarantee.

The author opted for a transposition technique here. By shifting the English verb *may* into the Indonesian adverb *mungkin*, the grammatical structure of the sentence was naturally realigned. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, *may* is commonly employed to

indicate possibility-a concept that aligns well with the Indonesian *mungkin*, which the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)* defines as something uncertain, possible, or perhaps (*belum tentu; barangkali; dapat terjadi*). Introducing *mungkin* allows the Indonesian translation to retain the original meaning while maintaining a completely smooth and natural flow.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs Might

The modal *might* was found 30 times (4.40%) in the corpus. Semantically, *might* functions similarly to *may* but implies a lower degree of epistemic probability. In the memoir, it is frequently used to express tentative speculation, conditional outcomes, and past hypotheticals-all of which characterise the narrator's cautious, hedged way of evaluating past events and future possibilities.

Table 6. Reduction-Might is Ommiting.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
I had only asked, but the way he said it made me feel cheap, greedy, ungrateful. I just said sorry, afraid he might explode again. (p.79)	Aku cuma bertanya, tapi cara ucapnya membuatku merasa murahan, serakah, tak tahu terima kasih. Aku cuma minta maaf, takut ledakan berikutnya. (h.89)	Reduction

Here, *might* appears in the phrase "afraid he might explode again," where it functions to express a degree of uncertain possibility. Specifically, it highlights Aurélie's anxiety regarding a potential future action that, while not guaranteed, is probable enough to cause concern. This aligns with the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* definition of *might* as expressing "something that is possible but uncertain." In the target text, the author utilized the reduction technique by omitting the modal verb "might" from the clause. As defined by Molina and Albir (2002), reduction involves suppressing specific information items from the source text, which explains why the modal is not explicitly translated here.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs Should

The modal *should* was identified 36 times (5.28%) in the source text. It primarily expresses expectation, obligation, advice, or conditional reasoning. In the memoir's context, *should* surfaces frequently in emotionally charged moments where Bobby frames his expectations as normative obligations, making it an important element in the linguistic construction of coercive control.

Table 7. Modulation-Should not rendered as *tidak akan*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
But he didn't stop. His voice hardened. "If you really love me, if you're really mine, this shouldn't be a problem. Otherwise what am I waiting for." Then came the threat again, louder, more frantic. "If you don't, I'll jump. Right now!" (p.45)	Tapi ia tidak berhenti. Suaranya mengeras. "Kalau kamu benar cinta, kalau kamu benar milikku, ini tidak akan jadi masalah. Kalau tidak, buat apa aku menunggu." Lalu ancaman itu muncul lagi, lebih histeris, "Kalau kamu nggak mau, aku lompat sekarang!" (h.51)	Modulation

Here, "should" appears in the negative construction "this shouldn't be a problem," functioning to express an expectation. Bobby deploys this phrasing as an instrument of emotional coercion, framing Aurélie's sexual compliance as something she ought to accept without objection if she truly loves him. According to the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, this use of *should* denotes "what is expected" in a given situation. By translating this as *tidak akan* (will not), the author applied the modulation technique, replacing the source text's modal structure with a different semantic perspective. This shifts the focus from a normative expectation (negated *should*)-which implies that Aurélie's reluctance deviates from what is expected-to a categorical assertion of futurity. Consequently, the target language's future negation presents the matter as an already settled prediction rather than a moral expectation.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs Will

The modal *will* was identified 87 times (12.76%), making it the third most frequent modal in the study. In English, *will* primarily encodes future prediction, intention, or certainty. In the memoir's narrative context, it appears most frequently in dialogue, where characters make promises, threats, or declarations about anticipated actions-many of which carry significant interpersonal weight given the abusive dynamics being described.

Table 8. Variation-Will rendered as *bakal*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
To avoid a fight, I smiled and said, "Yes, yes, of course." His face lit up, almost like a child's, and he said, "Yay, I promise I'll marry you one day." (p.23)	Untuk menghindari pertengkaran, aku tersenyum dan menjawab, "Iya, iya, tentu saja." Wajahnya langsung cerah, hampir seperti anak kecil, lalu ia berkata, "Yay, aku janji suatu hari aku bakal nikahin kamu." (h.27)	Variation

Here, *will* appears within the contracted phrase "I'll marry you one day," functioning as a marker of future intention framed as a promise. Following Aurélie's submission to avoid further conflict, Bobby responds with childlike enthusiasm, seemingly oblivious or indifferent to the coercive dynamic he has established. Here, the modal verb captures Bobby's self-assurance and his idealized perception of the relationship's future. In the translation, the author utilizes the variation technique by rendering *I'll* as *bakal*, a colloquial Indonesian future marker. While the *Cambridge Dictionary* notes that "will" expresses future events that the speaker is certain about, the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)* classifies *bakal* as an informal or dialectal term typical of casual, everyday speech. Additionally, Wikikamus indicates that *bakal* is inherited from Old Javanese. This shift from the standard English contraction to the informal Indonesian marker reflects a deliberate register adjustment, lending the target text a more casual and youthful tone. This modification of stylistic register, rather than semantic meaning, perfectly exemplifies the variation technique.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs *Would*

The modal *would* is the second most frequent modal in the corpus, recorded 216 times and accounting for 31.67% of the total. Its high frequency is characteristic of memoirs, where *would* serves multiple narrative functions: recounting habitual past actions, constructing conditional or hypothetical scenarios, conveying future-in-the-past meaning in reported speech, and expressing the narrator's retrospective evaluation of events. The interaction between these different functions and the absence of a morphologically equivalent form in Indonesian makes *would* one of the most translationally complex modals in the dataset.

Table 9. Established equivalent-*Would* rendered as *tidak akan*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
She believed someone with a public image like his wouldn't risk his career by doing anything reckless. (p.10)	Ia percaya seseorang dengan citra publik seperti itu tidak akan berani berbuat gegabah. (h.13)	Established Equivalent

Here, the modal *would* is embedded in the negative construction "wouldn't risk his career," where it functions as a marker of conditional prediction. This structure reflects the mother's logical deduction regarding expected professional conduct, with the negative phrasing serving to heighten the perceived certainty of her conclusion. In translating this segment, the author utilized the established equivalent technique by rendering "wouldn't risk" as *tidak akan*. Although the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)* defines *akan* as an adverb used "untuk menyatakan sesuatu yang hendak terjadi" (to denote an impending event), combining it with *tidak (tidak akan)* transcends a rigid, literal translation. Instead, it offers the most natural and idiomatically appropriate means of conveying this specific epistemic judgment within an Indonesian linguistic context.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs *Must*

The modal *must* was identified 10 times (1.47%) in the corpus. It carries two primary functions: deontic necessity (obligation) and epistemic necessity (logical inference or deduction). In *Broken Strings*, both functions are present, though epistemic uses-where the narrator draws inferences about mental or emotional states-are somewhat more frequent, reflecting the memoir's introspective character.

Table 10. Transposition-*Must* rendered as *pasti*.

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)	Translation Technique
Later, when I checked, the money was gone. It must have slipped out while I was hurrying. (p.16)	Belakangan, saat kuperiksa, uang itu hilang. Pasti jatuh ketika aku tergesa-gesa. (h.20)	Transposition

Here, the modal verb *must* functions as a marker of deductive reasoning. Upon noticing that her money is missing, the narrator constructs the most logical explanation available: that the cash must have slipped out of her pocket while she was rushing. To translate this, the author applied the transposition technique, converting the source text's modal auxiliary verb *must* into the Indonesian adjective *pasti*. In Indonesian, *pasti* is a standard modifier used to convey a confident deduction. This shift alters the grammatical category from a modal auxiliary to an adjective. Correspondingly, the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)* defines *pasti* as "tentu; mesti" (certain; must), demonstrating how this structural category shift successfully preserves the original epistemic certainty.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGESSTION

This study examined the translation of modal auxiliary verbs in *Broken Strings* by Aurelie Moeremans, analyzing 682 modal tokens across nine modal types. Could was most frequent (35.92%), followed by would (31.67%) and will (12.76%), a distribution shaped by the memoir genre's dependence on retrospective narration. Shall recorded zero occurrences. Five translation techniques were documented: established equivalent (56.01%), reduction (20.53%), transposition (17.30%), modulation (5.57%), and variation (0.73%). The author consistently prioritized communicative fluency, relying on established equivalents where stable correspondences exist and on reduction, transposition, and modulation where English modal constructions—particularly idioms, habitual pasts, and epistemic inferences—resist direct translation into Indonesian. Future research should extend the analysis to multiple memoir texts and incorporate translation quality assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of each technique employed.

Based on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research are recommended. First, subsequent studies could expand the analytical scope by examining the translation of modal auxiliary verbs across diverse textual genres, such as cinematic subtitles, academic discourse, or news media, to yield a more comprehensive and varied dataset. Second, future investigators are encouraged to explore the reverse translation direction—from Indonesian into English. Such inquiries would offer valuable comparative insights and contribute to a more profound understanding of bidirectional cross-linguistic modal mapping and translation patterns.

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