

The second meaning of modal verbs

SUBJEKTIVE MODALVERBEN

The second meaning of German modal verbs expresses the speaker's judgment or assumption instead of an obligation or permission: *muss*, *soll*, *will*.

Er **muss** krank **sein** does not mean “he is required to be sick” — it means “**he must be sick**”.

English does the same trick with *must be*, *is said to be* and *claims to be*; German just hands the whole job to its modal verbs. A certainty scale, plus the **soll** of newspaper German.

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01 00:10

Right now: one sentence, two readings

⚡ SHORTCUT If **sein** or a **state** follows, the modal is most likely a guess. If an **action** follows, it is probably the normal meaning. **sollen** is hearsay: “supposedly...”.

SENTENCE	FIRST MEANING	SECOND MEANING
Er muss arbeiten .	He has to work .	—
Er muss krank sein .	~~he has to be sick~~	He must be sick .
Er soll reich sein .	~~he should be rich~~	He's said to be rich .
Er will Arzt sein .	~~he wants to be a doctor~~	He claims to be a doctor .

The last row is especially sneaky: **Er will Arzt sein** = he *claims* to be a doctor. To say “he wants to become a doctor” you say **Er will Arzt werden**. **One word, the exact opposite meaning.**

02 01:10

You already do this in English

English has the same toolbox: **must be** (I worked it out), **is said to be** (I heard it from someone), **claims to be** (his own story, and I'm not convinced). German does all of it with **modal verbs**, so a sentence that looks like an order can

secretly be a guess.

ENGLISH	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	GERMAN
He must be sick .	confident deduction — I worked it out	Er muss krank sein .
He's said to be rich .	hearsay — somebody else said it	Er soll reich sein .
He claims to be a doctor .	his own claim — I'm doubtful	Er will Arzt sein .
He's probably about forty .	soft guess	Er dürfte vierzig sein .

So your English instinct **works for you** here: when you translate, ask yourself — *am I saying “must be”, “is said to be”, or “claims to be”?* The answer hands you the modal.

03 02:10

Table: which modal, how sure

These verbs form a **certainty scale**. Certainty sits at the top, impossibility at the bottom:

MODAL	HOW SURE	EXAMPLE
muss	95% — certain	Er muss krank sein . — He must be sick .
dürfte	75% — most likely	Er dürfte zu Hause sein . — He's probably at home .
könnte / kann	50% — possible	Er könnte krank sein . — He might be sick .
kann nicht	0% — impossible	Das kann nicht stimmen . — That can't be true .

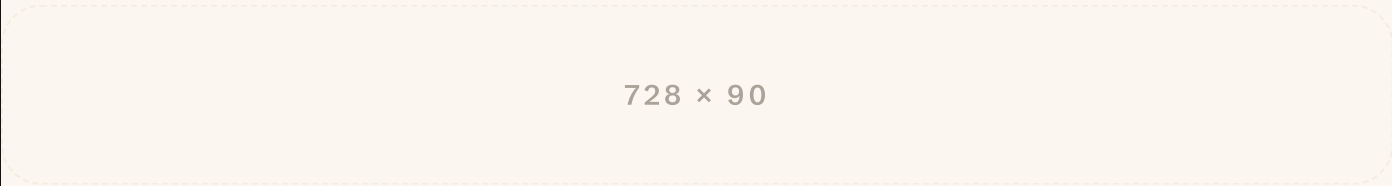
Here **dürfte** is a Konjunktiv II form and **carries no permission meaning**. It is the polite guess you will hear most in conversation — read it together with [the Konjunktiv II page](#).

The second group is not about certainty but about **the source of the information**. Think of the English split between “*is said to*” and “*claims to*”.

MODAL	WHO IS SAYING IT	EXAMPLE
soll	other people — “they say that...”	Der Film soll gut sein . — The film is said to be good .
will	the person themself — “according to him”	Er will alles gesehen haben . — He claims to have seen everything .

When **wollen** is used this way, it adds **doubt** to the sentence. When a German says **Er will das nicht gewusst haben**, it means “he says he didn’t know *but I don’t believe him*”.

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Two places people go wrong



TRAP 1

Reading sollen as "should"

At A1 you learned **sollen** = "should" or "is supposed to", and that is correct. But when **a state** follows it, the meaning slides to hearsay — and the two readings can be exact opposites.

✓ **Du sollst** mehr schlafen.

You should sleep more. — advice, first meaning.

✓ **Er soll** sehr reich sein.

He's said to be very rich. — hearsay, second meaning.

How to tell them apart: **who is being addressed?** If the sentence is said to **du** or **Sie**, it is most likely advice. If it is about a third person and a **state** follows, it is hearsay.



TRAP 2

Not being able to build the past form

When the guess moves into the past, the structure changes and learners freeze. There is only one pattern: **modal + Partizip II + haben / sein**, all at the end.

NOW	PAST	IN ENGLISH
Er muss krank sein .	Er muss krank gewesen sein .	He must have been sick .
Er soll reich sein .	Er soll reich gewesen sein .	He's said to have been rich (back then) .
Sie muss es wissen .	Sie muss es gewusst haben .	She must have known .

The order is always the same: **Partizip II first, then the infinitive of the auxiliary**. **gewesen sein** · **gewusst haben** · **gegangen sein**.

✗ **Er muss krank gewesen ist.**

The auxiliary is not conjugated; it stays an infinitive.

✓ **Er muss krank gewesen sein.**

This is the right one.

05 05:00

The part nobody tells you: newspaper German runs on this

Textbooks squeeze this topic into a box called “the second meaning of modal verbs” and move on. In reality **sollen** is **the backbone of German journalism** — it lets a journalist report something **without taking responsibility for it**.

- ✓ **Der Täter **soll** 30 Jahre alt **sein**.**

The perpetrator is reported to be 30 years old. — the paper does not confirm this.

- ✓ **Die Firma **soll** Millionen verloren **haben**.**

The company is alleged to have lost millions.

A learner who doesn't know this reads the story as **established fact**. But every time you see **soll**, the writer is telling you: *“I’m not the one saying this; somebody else is.”*

In the same way, **wollen** is a **doubt marker** in court and police reports: **Der Angeklagte will nichts gewusst haben** — the defendant *says* he knew nothing. The moment you see this word in a German text, you know **the writer doesn't believe it**.

- ① Practical upshot: this page is **for reading, not for speaking**. Nobody expects you to produce it in an oral exam, but if you plan to read German news, ads or official letters, you have to know the difference.

06 05:25

What to do this week

This topic sinks in through **reading** — not through doing exercises. Five minutes a day:

- Open a short article on a German news site (tagesschau.de writes plainly).
- Underline every sentence with **soll** and **will**.
- Translate each one into English with **“is said to”** and **“claims to”** — does the meaning fit?
- Make up three guesses about your own life: **Er muss ... sein** · **Sie dürfte ... sein** · **Das kann nicht stimmen**.
- Once a week, push the same sentence into the past: **Er muss krank gewesen sein**.

- ① You are at the end of the B1 path. From here the topics aren't new material but **going deeper**: recognising the same structures in longer texts. Go back to the B1 path and pick whatever is still missing.

07 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

07 05 : 40

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Take the full test

13 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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