My fellowship is focused on the investigation of must, may and could. This research builds on my previous research where I used a Columbia School lens to understand the distribution of can (and could). My hypothesis for can is part of a monosemic system of meaning which accounts for all occurrences of can, and identifies two forms of could (one being what is traditionally described as the past of can, and the other having its own place in the modal, or likelihood, system).

In the present investigation, I continue to explore may, might and the “other” could as part of this system. Based on my previous project, my very initial hypothesis is that these lexical items are used when a speaker assesses the likelihood of, but does not completely affirm, an utterance, with a scale whereby must is its highest member, may is in the middle, and could is its lowest member.

Data will be drawn from the naturally occurring data of recent written texts (for example, Owens’ (2018) Where the Crawdads Sing). Texts as such provide rich, expanded context for interpretation, help elucidate the relationship between lexical items, as well as demonstrate the need for analyses to go beyond the sentence level to understand the communicative function of must, may and could. Furthermore, findings will be tested in the written portion of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008-).

Through continuing my research on this system, I am building on Diver’s (1964) previous work. By approaching these terms synchronically, and with a Columbia School lens, I am hopeful to one day have a completed investigation of the whole system and account for the forms can, could, could, must, may, might, as well as the other forms that may be included (e.g. should, might).