

**POSSIBILITY TREND of 'CAN' AND 'MAY' AS MODALS:  
A SEMANTIC ORIENTED STUDY**

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**Abstract:**

This article tackles the notion of possibility of the two central modal verbs 'can' and 'may' in English. It starts to introduce 'can' concentrating on its possibility sense. It sheds light on how linguists present the various aspects of meanings of 'can' especially Palmer (1990). It also introduces 'may' as a polysemous modal verb. So 'may' could be regarded as an epistemic and root possibility verb at the same time. There is involvement of certain steps to distinguish the ambiguous senses of 'may'. In negation, 'may' affects the proposition. Ultimately, it shows that both 'can' and 'may' share a feature of similarity and certain features of difference especially the theoretical and factual possibility difference where 'can' expresses 'theoretical possibility' and 'may' indicates 'factual possibility' sense .

**Key Words:** Possibility Trend of 'Can' and 'May'.

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## Introduction:

Different semantic trends like ability, *possibility*, obligation and hypotheticality are expressed by different modals in English and are covered under the term 'modality' – epistemic, deontic (root) or dynamic. One characteristic which is familiar to modals in general is that they rarely show situations as straight forward facts. It means they never assure that the situations they state are facts, and most of them point out the speaker's dealing with the necessity or *possibility* that is related to the truth of a proposition or the realization of a situation.

Out of a wide range of semantic notions, this paper provides an explanation for the *possibility* meaning of two central modals 'can' and 'may'. It also includes the similarities and differences of the *possibility* meaning of these two modals.

## 1-2 Can

### 1-2-1 Preliminary

The basic meaning of 'can' has been presented by Ehrman (1966:12) as "there is no obstruction to the action of the lexical verb of which *can* is an auxiliary" or "nihil obstat" (Ehrman :22), which means the action occurs freely. In fact, 'can' has different meanings depending on its interpretation on the speaker's specification of the circumstances considered consistent with the realization of the proposition. Without such specification, an utterance may be rather ambiguous. Out of well recognized meaning of 'can' such as 'Ability', 'Possibility' and 'Permission', I intend to deal here with the 'Possibility' meaning of 'can'.

### 1-2-2 The Possibility Meaning of 'Can'

*Possibility* is most simply referred to as the unmarked sense relating to the two gradients of restricted aspect and inherent tendency. As there is no outstanding explanation either of restrictive trend or of inherent characteristics of the subject, thus *Possibility* is the notion which applies.

The subtle distinctions indicated appear in the following triad:

Can do it = permissive aspect — human action / rules and disciplines

'Give me a hint to do it'. (Restriction)

Can do it = *Possibility* — external circumstances 'make me an indication to do it'.

Can do it = Ability — inherent properties 'allow me to do it' (Inherency)

'Can', as we know, expresses dynamic modality or a neutral *possibility*. As Palmer (1990:83) generally points out, dynamic modality refers to the ties that occur between circumstances and unactualised events in agreement with real laws or simply to say that an event is possible. The *possibility* notion of 'can', would then be rephrased as, 'It is

possible for.....’ or "nihil obstat" to use Ehrman’s (1966:22) definition which is equivalent to ‘There is nothing to prevent.....’

The following examples clearly indicate the use of 'can' in a sense of neutral *possibility* i.e. simply to state that an occurrence is possible:

- 1- The lights are the only things they *can* observe.
- 2- Who knows ? She *can* follow either plan.

The first means ‘lights alone are observable’, whereas the second expresses future alternative *possibility*.

This neutral meaning is even made obvious in examples as the subject could be the impersonal 'you' or the statement is in the passive structure:

- 3- I understand the situation. You *can* take all reports.

.....(impersonal 'you')

- 4- I'll see what *can* be done and send you the answer.

.....(passive)

In all these examples, the appropriate paraphrase is ‘It is possible for.....’ and not ‘.....has the ability to.....’. In this sense, it is clear that 'can' is used to talk about a more general or theoretical kind of *possibility*.

Interrogative instances tackling 'can' of *Possibility*, touch the occurrence of enabling (or disabling) circumstances. The addressee would then extend his/ her yes/no response to speak out :

- 5- B : *Can* you lift the ladder up ?

A : No, I am not sure. I have set this session at one o'clock.

.....(disabling circumstances)

( ‘the session at one o'clock makes it possible, probably’)

- 6- C: *Can* you get down before Dan has the baby ? (ibid)

B: I think we might manage it. You know things are a bit hectic, but she is still all right for travelling. (ibid)

.....(enabling circumstances)

( ‘Dan being all right for travelling makes it possible for us to get down’)

In case of indeterminate examples where the enabling or disabling circumstances are not given, then it is only the negative point that neither certain external power nor definite hidden ability is approaching the *possibility* of the act which permits these utterances to be explained in terms of *Possibility* tendency.

A typical example of 'can' of *Possibility*, where no external circumstances are specified, besides 1 and 2, is:

7- I *can* make tea like this upstairs.

( I '*can*' make tea i.e. there is nothing to prevent me making tea).

It is according to, as mentioned earlier, the use of Ehrman's (1966:22) "nihil obstat" phrase.

It would be exciting to see that most examples with NOT do specify external circumstances, unlike positive examples. If 'CAN' = 'Root *Possible facet*' state means 'nihil obstat', thus negative Instances tend to declare 'not nihil obstat' i.e. something prevents as in :

8- You *can't* talk to him because he is having tea with a manager.

( 'his having tea with a manager prevents you from talking to him.')

The above paraphrase reveals that it is the modal aspect and not the propositional orientation that accepts negation. This is what we normally find with Root modals.

Pullum and Wilson (1977:784) reveal '*can*' as occasionally being harboring to neither side between a root and epistemic explanation and point out that:

9- lions *can* kill hyena.

would be explained as either of :

9a. lions have the ability to kill hyena. (Root)

9b. It can occur that a lion kills a hyena. (Epistemic)

Steele (1975:38), however, deals with 'can' in a totally different way. She asserts that in :

10- lana *can* run one thousand meters in minutes.

The real indication of '*can*' would not even be regarded as tackling modality as it never expresses the *possibility* act of the situation that the example tries to declare, rather the potential .....of the subject of the sentence.as far as Steele (1975) is concerned, '*can*' tend to be a root modal verb only if it covers permission.

Such confusion goes back to various sorts of reasons. The first is that certain scholars have provided sufficient definitions for modality. In this connection, the word 'modal' is in many occasions applied to underline a syntactic category. At the same time, it could used to deal with a semantic category. Such a thing is clear with labels like 'root' and 'epistemic' modals. Moreover, there is an outstanding reference to define terminology in describing modals. Thus, Anderson (1971)sticks to ' non-complex vs. complex' modality, Halliday (1970) adds 'modality vs. modulation', leech (1971) adheres to 'factual vs. theoretical' modality. Young (1980) deals with 'knowledge vs. influence' modality. Hence , this proliferation results into different nuances by different linguists.

Also, 'can' is willingly used, side by side since the eighteenth century, deontically to show possibility. In this connection, it is closer to permission (Traugott, 1972. 198) as seen below

11- *can* I borrow the sharpener, please ?

'*Can*' is often modified by '*always*', with the meaning 'There is always the *possibility* that .....' to suggest that *the possibility* is timeless, not just present.

12- You *can* always say it's just not your style.

(i.e. There is always the *possibility* for you of saying.....)

The negative progressive aspect is often used with '*Can*' in the sense as reference which is related with possibility, i.e., away of the sense of 'permission' or the 'ability'. In comparing (13) and (14) below :

13- She *can't* be studying at this time of the night.

14- John *can't* come tomorrow.

We see that example (13) indicates *possibility* whereas the present form in (14) can be interpreted as either 'permission' or 'ability'.

Finally, *can*, in this sense, sometimes has a habitual meaning or an 'existential sense' (Palmer 1990:107) that is usually paraphrased as adhering to the adverb 'sometimes' in:

15- It *can* be awfully hot in Baghdad in July.

which means 'It is sometimes awfully hot in Baghdad in July.'

The present tense form of '*can*' may be used to talk about future events, provided that the *possibility* can be seen as present. The meaning here is that 'it is possible for something to happen and that it will or may happen in the future', as in:

16- I will see what *can* be done and send you the documents.

### 1-3 May

#### 1-3-1 Preliminary

It is widely recognized that '*May*' is most frequently used to indicate the sense of 'epistemic *possibility*'. In this sense, it sticks to the speaker's loss of confidence in the utterance created. But it also expresses a deontic meaning being performative too. In this sense, it gives permission. But sometimes, there is no dividing line between the 'permission' sense and the '*possibility*' sense of '*May*'. In the following line '*May*' deals with the *possibility* sense.

#### 1-3-2 The possibility Meaning of 'May'

'*May*', as is widely known, expresses epistemic '*possibility*', which means, it harbours the speaker's non-confidence in the truth of the proposition. Thus, it is commonly paraphrased as 'It is possible that .....' as in (17) below :

17- He *may* succeed in his mission.

( It is possible that he will succeed in his mission)

'May' is also used to express root 'possibility' but this use occurs only in more formal context as in :

18- I mention such a thing to remind you of making arrangement there in case you are able to.

The crucial distinction between the form expressing epistemic *possibility* modality and the frame showing root *possibility* is that the former involves Subjectivity.

The form involving subjectivity could be underlined as "device whereby the speaker, in making an utterance, simultaneously comments upon that utterance and expresses his attitude to what he is saying", as far as (Lyons 1977:739) is concerned. As example (17) above illustrates that subjectivity is part and parcel of the elements creating epistemic possibility. Thus the speaker in (17) is not only preparing a statement but is indicating his inclination away from confidence in the proposition uttered. On the other hand, the expression of root *possibility* (18) lacks subjectivity.

The problem with 'may' is that it is normally considered as being completely polysemous. Huddleston (1971:279), for instance, distinguishes six different uses of 'may':

- a- Qualified generalization: 'The reproductive cells *may* encyst themselves and .....
- b- Exhaustive disjunction: 'These anemones *may* be blue or dull green .....
- c- Uncertainty: 'The study of luminescence ..... *may* provide a valuable test for long distance geological .....
- d- Concession: 'Whatever the relations *may* be, .....
- e- Legitimacy: 'This lacuna in our knowledge of the sea *may* be attributed in a large part to .....
- f- Ability: 'It *may* be shown that .....

Huddleston's six categories of clues for 'may' seem to be related to pragmatic inferences from the context of situation and the semantic uses apparently seen in the other parts of the sentence, but such various applications of 'may', in this sense, represent the speaker's not having enough confidence in the truth of the proposition. Therefore, 'may' is possibly rephrased as 'It is possible that .....

May and Merger: Merger (Coates, 1983) provides examples as two meanings exist together in a given utterance and the hearer could be able to deal with both senses. Merger appears most commonly in texts that capture more formality as in:

19- Such quality of final product ought to be affected by the quality of the basic substance....and the ways of dealing with *may* affect its nutritional sort.

The two meanings merged can be stated as:

Root: 'It's possible for .....

Epistemic: 'It's possible that .....

'May' is used to refer to states in either the present or the future:

20- He *may* be at school

.....(the present state)

21- He *may* come tomorrow.

.....(the future state)

There is often ambiguity between an epistemic and a deontic interpretation. Therefore, underlining the progressive form of the verb, as the sense of duration is not present, would clearly influence the interpretation to be of epistemic tendency as in:

22- He *may* be coming tomorrow.

'May' is commonly used where there is reference to only one act of future as seen below:

23- I *may* rise up when this month ends.

To talk about the *possibility* of past events or happenings, the insertion of 'have' directly in front of the main verb is possible, as in:

24- I *may* have dropped it on the shelf.

'It is possible that I (have) left it on the shop.'

### 1-3-3 Negation

'May not' affects the proposition and not the modality. In other words, 'may not' negates the proposition, and so the speaker's evaluation of *possibilities* is never not influence by the negative process.

Schibsbye (1965:82) points out that "*may* and *may not* cover roughly the same reality". Thus the meaning in (25) below is 'It is possible that Albert won't attend the race if it is dusty'.

25- Albert *may* not attend the race if it is dusty.

The collocative sense of 'may' or 'may not' is quite possible when the fifty-fifty evaluation of *possibilities* is done explicitly, as in:

26- Allen and John *may* or *may not* step ahead.

This can be interpreted as 'It is possible that they will come and tow the car' or 'It is possible that they will not step ahead'.

Under the heading of epistemic *possibility* we should also, perhaps, handle the 'concessive' (Scheurweghs 1959:369) use of 'may':

27- Whatever Allen *may* say.....

The meaning here is that of 'possible that' and so the meaning could be 'Allen *may* say that .....

#### 1-4 Similarities and Difference between 'Can' and 'May'

##### 1-4-1 Similarity

Both 'Can' and 'May' are the central modal auxiliaries and they share one feature as both never assure that the circumstances they characterize are facts. They capture the speaker's view point on the *possibility* of the truth of a proposition.

##### 1-4-2 Differences

i) Both 'Can' and 'May' are commonly used to express possibility, but in general, 'can' represents 'theoretical possibility' and *may* represents 'factual possibility' and so they can thus be paraphrased by 'It is possible for .....

- 28- The road *may* be blocked.  
= 'It is possible that the road is blocked'.  
= 'Perhaps the road is blocked

- 29- The road *can* be blocked.  
= 'It is possible that the road is blocked'  
= 'It is possible to block the road'

Leech (1987:81.2) argues that the ways they point out seem so different. In (28) *the road can be blocked by the security forces* ('and in doing so, we are going to stop the criminals' – stated by a security officer to another). But in (29) *the road may be blocked by reconstruction* ('that possibly declares why our relatives haven't arrived' – husband talking to his wife as they expect visitors).

ii) Because '*may*' of *possibility* doesn't occur at all in questions, it is replaced by 'can'. Thus the distinction between 'actual' and 'theoretical' *possibility* disappears in questions as in (30) below :

30- *Can* they have missed their exam ?

would prompt the response :

Yes, they *may* have done.

rather than

Yes, they *can* have done.

iii) In some contexts '*may*' is viewed to be of upper grade as far as the conventional standard is considered, when compared with 'can' as in:

31- After many years of experience, the student's proficiency *may* be judged.



In case like this, both '*may*' and '*can*' are possible (*can* be substituted for *may*). The only distinction is in terms of formality.

iv) Negation is maintained through proposition or modality. '*Can't*' negates the modality and is interpreted as 'It is not possible .....,', and '*may not*' negates the proposition and can be paraphrased by 'It is possible that ..... not .....,'

v) '*May*', like '*can*', can also be used in an existential sense. Huddleston's (1971:297-8) examples, which are taken from written and scientific language, show that '*may*' could be used in this sense, as in:

32- The Lamellae *may* get de novo from the middle of the cell and move to the periphery.

This means that *the lamellae sometimes arise in the way described*, rather than – *this is the possible way in which they arise*. But Palmer (1990:108) mentions that there is a clear difference between '*may*' and '*can*', especially in the negative. He argues that the meaning in (33) is that 'Lions are occasionally not dangerous', while (34) means 'Lions are never characterized to be dangerous.'

33- Lions *may not* be dangerous.

34- Lions *can not* be dangerous.

vi) The use of '*may*', to indicate epistemic *possibility* trend, that is, to show the speaker's non- confidence in the truth of the proposition, is quite distinct from any usage of '*can*'. Therefore, '*can*' cannot be substituted for '*may*' in :

35- A: Have you got a sharpener, please ?

B: I *may* have one.

## 1-5 Conclusion

The two modals might be interpreted in different ways depending on certain circumstances where they have basic and minor meanings. The process of tracing 'can' and 'may' is not without ambiguity. The area of difficulty is whether 'can' is root or epistemic and this is due to the fact that linguists themselves refer to modality as a syntactic category or a semantic one by others. There is a clear indication to a proliferation of terminology in the description of modals.

The different uses of 'may' harbor difficulty of not having a straight sense. So 'may' is regarded to be multisense word and this sense is inferred from the context of use. It, sometimes, holds two senses in one utterances. Negative progressive is sometime used with 'can' to indicate *possibility* sense rather permission or ability. In addition, the progressive intervenes to determine epistemic rather than deontic interpretation. Furthermore, it is seen that both 'may' and 'can' don't describe a fact because they express the speaker's comment on the *possibility* of the truth of the proposition and differ in that 'can' is of theoretical *possibility* sense and 'may' represents factual *possibility*.

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