Semantic Analysis Of Convergences And Divergences Between The Modal Verbs Can And May As Central Constituents Of The Possibility Domain

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Abstract: This study examines the semantic relationship between the modal verbs "can" and "may" in the English language, with a focus on their convergences and divergences within the domain of possibility. Modal verbs have long been recognized as crucial elements in expressing modality, and while "can" and "may" are often used interchangeably in contexts involving possibility, notable differences in their semantic range, contextual applications, and pragmatic nuances necessitate further investigation. Utilizing a descriptive and comparative methodology, this paper seeks to elucidate the distinct functions of "can" and "may" in conveying potentiality, necessity, and permission, thereby enhancing the understanding of modality in English grammar.

Keywords: Modality, possibility domain, semantic substance, paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, macrofield, microfield, modal system.

Introduction: Prior to engaging in a detailed semantic analysis of can and may as central exponents of the possibility domain, it is imperative to consider their diachronic emergence and pathways of grammaticalization, since an understanding of their historical development provides critical insight into their present-day semantic and functional properties.

In English linguistics, the semantic field is analyzed by dividing it into two main categories: macro-field and

micro-field. Modal verbs such as "can" and "may" form the core of a semantic field. The micro-fields are expressed by linguistic tools such as possibility, ability, chance, probability, uncertainty-doubt, and permission. These micro-fields are semantically interconnected with the core of the semantic field and constitute its important semantic content.

The modal verb may represents one of the earliest attested forms within the English modal system, with occurrences documented as early as the 8th century. Its earliest semantic function denoted physical strength or power, which subsequently underwent semantic extension to express the notion of ability. Although this sense has fallen into obsolescence in Present-Day English, traces of its usage persisted well into Middle English. Over time, may developed additional modal meanings, most notably that of epistemic possibility—still active in contemporary usage—and deontic permission, frequently emphasized in prescriptive grammar. Remarkably, these diverse semantic values—power, ability, possibility, and permission—were already established in the language before the end of the first millennium. The verb can emerged somewhat later, initially bearing the meaning 'to know,' which subsequently extended to 'knowing how to perform an action and ultimately to possessing the ability to perform it. This final sense, first attested around the early fourteenth century, marked the initial semantic convergence with may. By the fifteenth century, both verbs exhibited functional overlap, being employed to denote not only ability but also epistemic possibility, thereby establishing a shared domain of usage within the developing English modal system. By the late nineteenth century, can had extended its meaning to include permission, a function previously associated with may. Grammarians subsequently imposed a prescriptive rule distinguishing can as the marker of ability and may as the marker of permission, despite the lack of linguistic basis for such separation. In actual usage, can frequently conveys permission, especially in informal contexts, while may remains the more formal choice. Today, can primarily denotes ability, whereas both can and may continue to function in the domain of possibility.

LITERATURE VIEW

In the theoretical discussions surrounding the modality category in English linguistics, several unresolved issues continue to arise. The representation of modality and its connection to moods can be framed within three distinct theoretical perspectives. The first group of linguists contends that moods do not play a role in the expression of modality. The second group argues that modality is conveyed through moods. On the other hand, scholars from the third, semantic perspective assert that modal verbs and lexical items are integral in expressing the semantic category of modality. From our standpoint, these linguistic mechanisms are mutually reinforcing, and a scientifically rigorous approach would posit that the understanding and expression of modality can be effectively realized through morphological, lexical, and semantic strategies.

According to the theories of Coates and Leech, modality is considered one of the fundamental linguistic categories in linguistics, reflecting the speaker's stance toward reality and enabling the expression of meanings that extend beyond factual truth. It encompasses semantic dimensions such as belief, imagination, possibility, necessity, inferred certainty, obligation, and permission. While modality is a universal feature across all natural languages, the linguistic devices through which it is expressed can vary significantly across languages, as observed in the works of Bybee and Perkins.

In the English language, modality is mainly expressed through a fixed set of auxiliary verbs, such as can, may, will, shall, could, might, would, should, and must. In addition to these auxiliaries, modal meanings can also be communicated through various lexical items, including adverbs (e.g., possibly, probably, likely), verbs (e.g., believe, think), and more intricate syntactic constructions, particularly conditional clauses [Stewart, Haigh & Kidd, 2009].

English modal auxiliaries exhibit distinct characteristics that differentiate them from regular lexical verbs [Bybee et al., 1994], [Leech, 2003]. These features include their specialized behavior in questions and negations, the absence of nonfinite forms like infinitives and participles, and the semantic and pragmatic complexities they express. As a result, most academic classifications distinguish between two main types of modality: epistemic modality, which indicates the speaker's degree of knowledge, inference, or judgment, and root modality, which encompasses meanings such as obligation, permission, and ability. This distinction emphasizes the multifunctionality of modal forms across various discursive contexts. A key trait of modal expressions is their inability to present situations as straightforward or indisputable facts. Instead, modality conveys a semantic depth that goes beyond simply negating factuality. It is more accurately understood as encompassing core concepts of necessity and possibility, reflecting the speaker's evaluation of whether a proposition might or must be true, or whether a specific situation can or should occur. However, defining precise semantic relations between these concepts remains challenging, as the boundaries

between them are often context-dependent.

Thorndike's dictionary indicates that "may" is rarely used in colloquial language. Its usage to express "possibility" or "probability" is an exception. [Thorndike,1944] The strict distinction between "can" and "may" is observed only in formal language, where "can" refers to ability, while "may" conveys permission:

"You may if you can."

Another scholar, Palmer, in examining the usage of "can," "may," and other verbs, distinguishes only two meanings for "may": possibility and permission. In contrast, "can" is used in six different contexts: 1) possibility, 2) ability, 3) permission, 4) characteristic (the "possibility" that describes a person or object): She can be very catty at times, 5) willingness (the "possibility" of doing something for a person): I can do that for you. Can you pass the salt?, 6) sensation (the ability to perceive, i.e., "can" used with perception verbs): I can see the room. I can hear music. In a paradigmatic sense, "characteristic can" interacts independently with "possibility," while "willingness" and "sensation" relate to the independent semantics of "ability."[Palmer, 2003]

METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of this study is based on a comparative-componential analysis of the semantic structures of the verbs can and may within the domain of modality in English. The research employs the conceptual principles of the theory of "semantic field," as well as methods of lexico-semantic analysis and componential analysis. Through these methods, the internal semantic structures of the units expressing modality, along with their paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, are identified. The object of the study is the English modal verbs can and may, which constitute the central core of the "possibility" semantic field. The subject of the study is the identification of the primary and differential semantic components of these modal verbs, their paradigmatic relationships with one another, and a systematic analysis of meaning layers such as possibility, ability, probability, permission, certainty, and uncertainty. The componential analysis method is used to determine the lexical-semantic structure of can and may, identifying their invariant (common) and differential (distinctive) features. The comparative-semantic analysis method is employed to reveal the common

and differing semantic characteristics of the two verbs, establishing their synonymic and antonymic relations. In explaining the origins of can and may (knowledge – power, wish – power) and their historical semantic development, etymological analysis is utilized. The structural-paradigmatic method is applied to delineate the internal structure of the semantic field, that is, the system of paradigmatic connections between can and may. The results of the study are shaped by the logical-semantic structure of the modality category, as well as the scholarly views of Palmer, Bybee, Perkins, Thorndike, Lyons, and others regarding modality and the semantics of possibility, along with sources such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Webster's Dictionary, Hornby's Advanced Learner's Dictionary, and Roget's Thesaurus. This methodological approach allows for the identification of the similarities and differences within the semantic field of can and may, the determination of their place within the lexico-semantic system, and provides a scientifically grounded explanation of the adequate and contingent forms of the concept of "possibility."

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The semantic analysis of the core components of the field involves examining the obligatory primary semantic elements of the lexicon, focusing on the verbs can and may as expressions of the concept of "possibility" in its most general form (potentiality, possibility). In interpreting the lexicon that represents this concept in general terms, the modal verbs can and may play a crucial role in conveying all aspects of the meaning of "possibility."

A pertinent question arises: do can and may share identical semantic content? If not, what is the nature of the semantic relationships between these units within the field under investigation? Addressing this question necessitates a componential analysis of can and may to obtain a comprehensive picture of both the unifying and differentiating patterns of meaning within the semantic field. Solving this issue accordingly provides a more complete understanding of the systematic and structural-paradigmatic organization of the field. Before examining the semantic relations between these verbs, it is essential to undertake a detailed investigation of their semantic substances. Based on the lexical definitions of the modal verb can, a componential analysis demonstrates that its semantic structure encompasses all principal meanings represented in the field under consideration, as follows:

Can semantic substance

Possiblity	- (may possibly; may perhaps)
Ability	- (be able; know how)
Probability	- (be made probable)
Chance	- (be by chance)
Permission	- (be permitted; be allowed)
ve the proper conditions, circumstances...)	

The main meaning of "can" can be considered as consisting of "know (have mental potency)" and "to be able/power", that is, ability can be regarded as an independent semantic unit. This main meaning of "can" can be explained both by the etymology of the word and by the logical interconnection of the concepts of knowledge and power.

Based on dictionary definitions, we have identified three types of ability in the verb "can"- intellectual/mental, physical, and moral. The semantic field under investigation—power, which is potential—serves as an invariant feature for the general meaning of "can"; this feature is present in all the independent semantic analyses of "can" that have been listed.

The semantic structure of the modal verb "may" can also be expressed as a set of independent semantic meanings:

May semantic substance	
Possibility	- (be possible; will perhaps)
Ability	- (be able; have power)
Probability	- (be likely)
Chance	- (/physical and moral/ opportunity)
Permission	- (be allowed; be permitted)
Uncertainty-Doubt	- (be uncertain; be contingently possible)
Wish, desire	- in benediction, malediction

Among the differential features of "may" is the modal meaning of the possibility of the action being carried out (wish). In Crabb's aforementioned dictionary, this meaning of the verb "may" is explained through the relationship between wishing and the fulfillment of a wish: "…its present meaning having developed from the connections between wishing and complying with a wish."

If the main meaning of "can" is evaluated as a set of semantic connections between "know" and "able," then the main meaning of "may" is considered by the Oxford Dictionary as "to be strong or able, to have power" (as the etymology of the word also indicates). However, some dictionaries (including the Hornby Dictionary) do not separate the meaning of "able" in the verb "may." The Webster Dictionary marks this meaning of "may" as "archaic."

In the verb "may," the independent semantic component of ability does not include the semantic connection of "know." The component analysis of "can" and "may" suggests that if "can" denotes intellectual, physical, and moral ability, then "may" refers only to physical and moral ability.

The semantic opposition between "can" and "may"

Comparing the meanings of the modal verbs under consideration provides evidence of their significant semantic similarity (though not exactly identical).

Independent semantic meanings of can	**Independent semantic meanings of may**
Ability:	**Ability:**
mental ability	**-------**
physical ability	**physical ability**
moral ability	**moral ability**

Possibility	Possibility
Probability	Probability
Chance	Chance
Permission	Permission
Certainty-Sureness	-----
-----	Uncertainty-Doubt
-----	Wish

As seen from the table, the combined core meanings of the "can" and "may" sets form the important semantic content of the entire field. In this sense, "can" and "may" complement each other in terms of meaning. Undoubtedly, the verb "can" expresses much greater certainty than "may" when indicating "possibility." The antonymic character of Certainty-Sureness and Uncertainty-Doubt in their independent semantic components testifies to this opposition between "can" and "may." In the words of M. Joos "can" expresses "adequate potentiality." By adequate potentiality, M. Joos refers to real "possibility." The verb "may" expresses uncertain, contingent "possibility."

However, even when the meanings of "can" and "may" are neutralized, that is, when they can be used interchangeably, some semantic, particularly stylistic, differences become apparent. In fact, for example, the verb "may" in the sense of permission is much more formal, whereas "can" expresses a theoretical possibility—"theoretical possibility, expressing the possibility of an idea." At the same time, "may" in this sense expresses a real, impactful kind of possibility, where a certain piece of information, a fact from reality, is taken into account, and this fact, in turn, compels the expression of a conjecture—"factual possibility, expressing the possibility of a fact." Let's compare them:

The road can be blocked.   The road may be blocked.

The pound can be devalued.   The pound may be devalued ".

Thus, the component analysis of "can" and "may" shows that these verbs share the same invariant semantic feature (power which is potential) and are connected through a broad semantic relationship, both with each other and with other microfields within the semantic domain (this domain can be presented as a collection of their independent semantic components). The synonymous relationship between "can" and "may" is supported by synonym dictionaries, as well as by their inclusion in the same classes and sub-classes in Roger's thesaurus. From the perspective of the composition and structure of the thesaurus, the common classes of the verbs "can" and "may" can be presented as Abstract relations and Volition as follows:

can may	be able	power permission	Abstract Relations Volition
may	be able be allowed	power permission	Abstract Relations Volition

At the same time, it should be noted that along with the common semantic features that unite "can" and "may" in the analyzed semantic field, these verbs also possess differential features—without which their meanings would not fully align. The main strong situation in which these verbs are contrasted is the meaning of "ability."

CONCLUSION

The conclusion from the above analysis is that, although the component analysis of "can" and "may" does not allow for the identification of key gaps where they can interchangeably replace each other with units such as (possibility, probability, permission) when their contrast is neutralized, the degree of semantic similarity between the verbs can only be definitively determined by analyzing the actual use of these modal verbs in speech. In other words, this can be resolved by examining their syntagmatic features.

At this stage of the research, we have sufficient grounds to consider "can" and "may" as the main lexical units (in the structure of predicative sentences) that express the generalized meaning of "possibility" in all its forms.

The semantic analysis of the components forming the core of the semantic field focused on the semantic content of the key lexical components, "can" and "may," which express the concept of "possibility" in its most general form (potentiality, possibility). In analyzing the vocabulary that expresses the concept in a general sense, the modal verbs "can" and "may" reveal all the characteristics of the meaning of "possibility."

The component analysis based on the lexical definitions of the modal verb "can" shows that its semantic structure of the analyzed field can be divided into the following five groups: possibility, ability, probability, chance, and permission. The semantic structure of the modal verb "may" can also be expressed as a set of independent semantic meanings, which include the following components: possibility, capability, probability, chance, permission, uncertainty-doubt, wish, and desire. Among the differential features of "may" is the use of the modal meaning of possibility in the fulfillment of wishes (wish).The analysis of the examples reveals that the aggregation of the core meanings of the components "can" and "may" constitutes the essential semantic content of the entire domain. In this regard, "can" and "may" serve to complement each other semantically. Indubitably, it becomes evident that the verb "can" conveys a significantly higher degree of certainty in expressing "possibility" when contrasted with "may."

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