

REMARKS ON THE "SPORADIC"
CAN

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In this brief paper we would like to draw attention to some of the semantic and syntactic aspects of the modal *can*, as it is attested in sentences like the following:¹

1. The Monsoon can be dangerous
2. She can be very unkind
3. Carelessness can kill

In these examples the modal corresponds to Boyd and Thorne's 'sporadic' *can* (cf. Palmer's (1965) 'characteristic' use of *can*). In this particular use the modal may occur together with adverbials like *at times* and *sometimes*. Consider:

- 1a. Sometimes the Monsoon can be dangerous
- 2a. Sometimes she can be very unkind
- 3a. Sometimes carelessness can kill

Semantically, there is very little difference between 1a to 3a and their corresponding paraphrases with a non-modal simple form:

- 1b. Sometimes the Monsoon is dangerous
- 2b. Sometimes she is very unkind
- 3b. Sometimes carelessness kills

It will be apparent to any English-speaking person that the type of possibility with which we have to do in 1 to 3 is expressly distinct from that which we encounter in the following examples with *may*:

4. It may happen tomorrow
5. You may be right
6. They may have left yesterday

¹ It is worthy of note that Boyd and Thorne (1969: 71) do not grant the "sporadic" *can* the status of a modal auxiliary. Also they do not treat *can* as a modal auxiliary in cases where it occurs as a marker of "ability" and when it combines with a verb of sensation.

These are basically equivalent to the following two-clause structures:

- 4a. It's possible that it'll happen tomorrow
- 5a. It's possible that you are right
- 6a. It's possible that he left yesterday

In 4a to 6a the construction *it's possible* may be easily replaced by either of the adverbs: *perhaps* or *possibly*, without this resulting in any radical change of meaning (note that the replacement would entail the deletion of the complementizer *that*). This fact, by the way, explains why the modal is sometimes referred to as the *may* of 'uncertainty' (Huddleston 1971: 300).

The difference between the meanings of the two modals is formally reflected in the fact that in the paraphrases of the sentences in which they appear the construction *it's possible* is followed by two different complementizers. Thus, the paraphrases of 4 to 6 involve *that*, while those of 1 to 3 the "for...to" complementizer. The following are legitimate paraphrases of 1 to 3, respectively:

- 1c. It's possible for the Monsoon to be dangerous
- 2c. It's possible for her to be unkind
- 3c. It's possible for carelessness to kill

The predication of the *may* sentences may be located in a future (Ex. 4), in a present (Ex. 5) or in a past time (Ex. 6). The ungrammaticality of the following sentences is the consequence of the violation of the rule stating that the 'sporadic' *can* may not combine with either the PERFECT or the PROGRESSIVE element:

7. ? He can be telling awful lies
8. ? He can have told awful lies

8 would, of course, be acceptable on the assumption that the modal in the sentence is used with the meaning of "uncertainty".

It is quite obvious that the *can* examples are not tied up to any specific point or period of time. Rather, they bear a general character, as opposed to the *may* examples, which, to use Leech's (1970: 221) words, represent "(...) a more particular and practical kind of possibility". Contrasting the sentences *The pound may be devalued* and *The pound can be devalued*, Leech (1970: 221) says the following concerning the latter: "it is merely a statement which every one knows to be true: that it is possible for currencies to be devalued, and that the pound is no exception"².

It should be quite clear by now why the *can* in 1 to 3 and similar examples does not co-occur with: a. adverbials suggesting doubt or uncertainty (such as *perhaps*, *possibly*, etc.); b. adverbials of future time. While 9 and 10 are perfectly normal, 1d and 2d are rather anomalous:

² Cf. Dvor, W. (1964: 331): "(...) *can* admits only that the occurrence is a possibility. *May*, however, suggests that the speaker takes the possibility for granted and is willing, further, to speculate on its probability".

9. It may perhaps be true
10. She may come next Monday
- 1d. ?The Monsoon can perhaps be dangerous
- 2d. ?She can be very unkind tomorrow

Closest in meaning to the "sporadic" *can* is what Palmer refers to as "characteristic" *will*, attested in sentences like: *He will tell you awful lies* (As it stands, the sentence is ambiguous between a "future" and a "characteristic" interpretation. Here, of course, the former interpretation is not taken into account).

Of the sentences *He will tell you awful lies* and *He can tell awful lies* neither is time specific. However, in contrast to *will*, which implies regular (or habitual) activity, *can*, as was pointed out earlier, suggests sporadic behaviour on the part of the subject, which fact is syntactically confirmed by the acceptability of *He can sometimes tell awful lies* and the obvious strangeness of *He can always (often) tell awful lies*.

Our last point concerns the relation of the "sporadic" *can* to negation. As regards the effect of negation upon the English modals, one can distinguish three cases:

- a. the negation affects the semantics of the modal itself (MODAL NEGATION);
- b. the modal remains outside the scope of negation (PRINCIPAL NEGATION);
- c. it is in principle irrelevant whether we interpret the negative particle *not* as referring to the semantics of the modal or to that of the principal verb (NEUTRAL NEGATION).

To illustrate the third type of negation, let us consider the sentence: *This book won't have been written by John*. Here it does not really matter whether we associate *not* with the principal verb *write*, as in *It's likely that this book was not written by John* or with the meaning of *will*, as in *It is not likely that this book was written by John*, since either of these may be expressed as *This book won't have been written by John*.

It may be pointed out that the *may* of "uncertainty" (possibility) is never affected by negation. Thus, in the examples that follow the negation refers to the principal verb:

11. It may not come true (=It's possible that it won't come true)
12. I may not be here next week (=It's possible that I won't be here next week)
13. He may not have come yesterday (=It's possible that he didn't come yesterday)

11 to 13 and their non-negated counterparts (11a to 13a) cover roughly the same range of meaning. In fact, *may* and *may plus not* are occasionally brought

together in order to emphasize the element of uncertainty implied in the sentence, as is the case in *He may or may not arrive at six*.

The unacceptability of the following sentences clearly points to the fact that the "sporadic" *can* is insensitive to the negative polarity:

- 14. ? Parties can't sometimes be boring
- 15. ? She can't sometimes be very unkind
- 16. ? Carelessness can't sometimes kill

The fact that the following sentences cannot be taken as legitimate paraphrases of 14 to 16 seems to indicate that the feature "negative" is incompatible with the feature "sporadic" as it is understood here (note that 14a to 16a sound slightly strange even on entirely independent grounds):

- 14a. ? Parties aren't sometimes boring
- 15a. ? She isn't sometimes very unkind
- 16a. ? Carelessness does not sometimes kill

Notice that 14 to 16, as well as their non-modal paraphrases, become perfectly acceptable after the deletion of the adverbial expression *sometimes*. Consider:

- 14b. Parties can't be boring
- 15b. She can't be very unkind
- 16b. Carelessness can't kill

However, the fact that it is possible to paraphrase 14b to 16b by means of sentences with the construction *it's possible* followed by the complementizer *that* indicates that the *can* in 14b to 16b cannot be the "sporadic" *can* here under consideration.

- 14c. It's impossible that parties are boring
- 15c. It's impossible that she is very unkind
- 16c. It's impossible that carelessness kills

The above considerations lead us to conclude that the *can* in 14b to 16b must be a negative counterpart either of the *may/can* of "uncertainty" (possibility) or even of the *may/can* of "permission", which seems to be also the case in 15b. On the interpretation we suggested for examples 14b to 16b the nuclear stress will normally fall on the modal auxiliary constituent.

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