THE CASE OF 'CAN'

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ABSTRACT: Modality and English modals have been largely discussed in the literature. Basically, scholars have focused on three main issues: the nature of modality, the formal system and the meaning. Among these issues, meaning seems to be the most controversial point, with many different ways to categorize and define the same modal verb. In this paper I will concentrate mainly on the uses of *can* as well as on a discussion about monosemantic or polysemantic approaches in relation to its meaning. An analysis of the subsenses of *can* in two monolingual English-English dictionaries will be carried out in order to exemplify different readings of the same modal verb.
KEY-WORDS: modality, modal verbs, polysemy.

MODALITY

Modality, in a general sense, is related to the speaker's "opinion or attitude towards the proposition that the sentence expresses or the situation that the proposition describes" (Lyons, 1977:452). Concern with modality has mobilised many researchers in an attempt to come up with a comprehensive model for the analysis of modals. As a result, there has been a proliferation of terminology related to modals. Some examples are, "factual" vs. "theoretical" modality (Leech, 1971:75-106), "truth-functional" vs. "non-truth-functional" modality (Lakoff, 1972:232), "subjective" vs. "objective" modality (Lyons, 1977:797), among others. Still, Modal logic's categories of "dynamic", "epistemic" and "deontic" modality have been borrowed to differentiate modals.

According to Palmer (1990), deontic modality is used to express what is obligatory, permitted, or forbidden. In this way it influences actions, states or events. Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker's judgement about the truth of the

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proposition. Finally, dynamic modality is related to ability and disposition of the subject. Palmer (1990), following von Wright, also mentions existential mode, a matter of quantificational logic. Von Wright also suggests the alethic mode[2], or modes of truth.

Many scholars, nonetheless, make a binary distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic, also called Root modality. In English (like in most languages) grammatical modal expressions regularly have both epistemic and deontic uses (Cruse, 2000). Thus, scholars have been discussing the semantic nature of modals, more specifically, between a monosemantic or a polysemantic approach.

THE MEANING (S) OF *CAN*

A first distinction to be made is between polysemy and homonymy. Polysemes have been defined as etymologically, consequently semantically related words. Homonyms, on the other hand, are words that 'happen to be represented by the same string of letters in a language' (Ravin and Leacok, 2000:2), but that are not etymologically related. Sweetser (1990:50) mentions that some authors "treat English modal verbs as essentially cases of homonymy rather than ambiguity, tacitly assuming that (…) Epistemic and Root modality are strongly unrelated". However, she regards modal verbs as being cases of polysemy, arguing that they are metaphorically related. For Sweetser (1990):

> Root-modal meanings are extended to the epistemic domain precisely because we generally use the language of the external world to apply to the internal mental world, which is metaphorically structured as parallel to that external world. (ibid:50)

For Cruse (2000a), the degree to which two readings can be related forms a continuous scale, without a clear boundaries between relatedness and unrelatedness. Lyons (1977) states that the criteria for judging relatedness are not objective ones, since etymological information, one of the most common criteria claimed for establishing relatedness, is not always known. In this way, relatedness can be based on speakers' intuition.

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[2] This type of modality seems to be the interest of philosophy, as it hardly ever occurs in natural languages.

The discussion about the meanings of *can* lies between "one meaning" or "many meanings", or between monosemy or polysemy. This distinction seems to be too sharp, as 'there are many degrees of distinctness which fall short of full sensehood'(Cruse, 2000b).

Regarding lexicography, in the Webster's Seventh Dictionary, almost 40 per cent of the entries have more than one sense assigned to them and 'moreover, the most commonly used words tend to be the most polysemous' (Ravin and Leacok, 2000:1). In this way, and agreeing with Palmer (1990), the claim for having to have only one single meaning for a modal verb does not apply. This is the line of thought adopted by Huddleston, Kenny quoted in Palmer (1990:14), Coates and Sweetser quoted in Silva-Corvalon (1995:72). Each of these scholars, to a certain extent, believes there are different meanings in each modal, with categories having fuzzy boundaries.

On the contrary, Haegeman, Kratzer, Perkins, Silva-Corvalan quoted in Silva-Corvalan (1995:71) and Ehrman quoted in Palmer (1990) propose a basic core meaning which they claim to be present in all modals' uses. For the authors, in the modals' lexical entry form, only this basic meaning is present. Silva-Corvalan argues that fuzziness is present, but in contexts, rather than in the meanings.

Ravin and Leacok (2000) state that polysemy is not usually a problem for language use, as contexts usually make meanings clear, but that it does pose some problems in applied semantics, such as translation and lexicography.

Additionally, when talking about the meaning of animate creatures, such as the *foot* of a person and *foot* of the mountain (because of position), it is possible to treat the "literal meaning" as the basic meaning; however, with the modals "there is no clear literal sense, and any core meaning has to be deduced" (Palmer, 1990:15). Sweetser (1990) argues that historically, Deontic modal meanings came first, and only later came the Epistemic readings; this would make the Deontic meaning more basic. She mentions that creoles develop expressions of Root modality first, extending to the Epistemic domain later on. Sweetser (as well as Coates, 1983) still mentions that children seem to acquire the Deontic senses of modal verbs earlier than the Epistemic ones. For Coates (1983:13) "core represents the meaning learned first by children", or usually corresponds to the cultural stereotype, or, still, to the prototype. Conversely, Coates points out that core examples occur infrequently. Coates (ibid) and Palmer (1990) suggest Wittgeinstein's (1953, in Aarts at al, 2004) "family resemblances" concept to categorize modal verbs, i.e., that there might be a gathering of somehow vaguely related

meanings, and that each meaning is linked to at least one other meaning in a given set, but not necessarily sharing any common features with all of them.

Perkin 1982 quoted in Silva-Covalan (1995) and in Palmer (1990) came up with a formula for the core meaning of *can*. The formula reads: K (C does not preclude X). K represents one of various systems of laws or principles (social, natural, rational, etc.) according to which the modalized proposition can be interpreted; X represents the event, state-of-affairs, the occurrence of the event, the truth of the proposition; C stands for a set of circumstances, identified (presupposed or explicitly), under which K is relevant. Ehrman's proposal (in Palmer, 1990, p.16) is very similar, it says 'circumstances exist which do not preclude'. For Silva-Corvalan (1995:77), a negative meaning better captures the sense of 'difficulty overcome' which appears to incorporated in most contextualized meanings of *can*.

Palmer (1990) criticizes this approach on the basis that, according to this definition, *may* has the same core meaning, and that the term 'preclude' applies to both deontic and epistemic modalizations, being, then, ambiguous. Lyons (1977) talks about different interpretations or readings for modals, i.e., that modals can be deontically or epistemically interpreted. According to Cruse (2000a), the competition between two readings of a word, i.e., that only one reading can be processed at a time, is a sign of antagonism, which shows 'independence of at least some semantic properties of one nodule from the other' (ibid, p.31). In this way, *can* would be considered polysemous.

Commenting on Wierzbicka's (already modified) definition of 'bachelor as a man who has never married thought of as a man who can marry if he wants to', Geeraerts (1993) argues that the polysemy of the word *can*, makes it difficult to define bachelor, since it preserves the polysemy between the sense of permission (e.g., a young man who does not get his parent's permission to marry his beloved (ibid, p.254)) and the sense of objective conditions, or impossibility (e.g., Tarzan who cannot marry because of the absence of a priest, or a judge). Interestingly, even though the focus of the discussion was not the modal *can*, it was brought about as an example of polysemous words not to be used in definitions. For the author, 'various things could be meant that clearly need not be all true at the same time' (ibid, p. 253).

In an attempt to add to the discussion, some diagnostic tests to verify whether a word is polysemous or not (Ravin and Leacock, 2000), will be applied to *can*.

A word will be polysemous if an assertion involving a word can be both true and false of the same referent (Quine, 1960) quoted in Ravin and Leacok (2000), For

example: *I can dance but I can't dance*. *I can dance* refers to "I know how to dance" (ability), whereas *I can't dance*, might refer to the fact that "my husband (or father) does not allow me to dance" (permission), or still, that *I can't dance* because "I have got a broken leg" (possibility).

Secondly, a linguistic constraint exists on using multiple senses in a single usage of a polysemous word, a zeugma test. For example: *Peter can be really annoying and play the piano.* The former meaning is to be understood as "sometimes", whereas the latter has the meaning of "ability".

Tracing back to Aristotle, a word will be considered polysemous if a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions does not account for all the concepts expressed by a word. Regarding dictionary definitions, in *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Henceforth *LDOCE*), the modal can has 10 sub-entries, which will be analysed later on. The *COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Henceforth COBUILD) has 12 sub-entries for the same modal. This fact may suggest some degree of polysemy. About dictionaries, Ravin and Leacok (2000) state that hardly ever do dictionaries (or lexicographers) agree about the number of senses that each word has, about the way the different senses should be organized, as well as about the content of the definitions. It means that dictionary definitions are arbitrary, and deserve further analysis before being considered an authority in a given language.

I shall now try to analyse the two above mentioned dictionary entries and subsenses of modal *can* under the light of the literature related to can, mainly comparing to Palmer's (1990) uses and definitions of this modal.

According to the Introduction of the Longman Dictionary, *can* is one of the 3000 most frequent words in the English language nowadays (the top 3000 most frequent words are indicated in a different colour). Also, the meanings in the entries are ordered in accordance with their frequencies in the language as shown by the Longman Corpus Network, with about 300 million words.

The COBUILD was based on the Bank of English Corpus, of around 400 million words. *Can* is considered to be one of the 680 most frequent words in the English language. These words are supposed to make up 95% of all spoken and written English. In the Introduction there is no information regarding the order of meanings for each entry, however, it is stated that, as much as possible, the information about 'a word' will be in a single entry, divided into several sections. So, for *can*, there is an index with two items: 1) modal uses, 2) container.

Being such a frequent word, it is very likely to be polysemous, for, the 'most commonly used words tend to be the most polysemous' (Ravin and Leacok,2000, p.1). In the table I show the definitions of the two dictionaries in the order of appearance. Some examples will be given later on to further clarify the definitions.

At first glance, it is possible to see that the number of subentries in the two dictionaries is different, so, as has already been stated by Ravin and Leacock (2000) the lexicographers may have had different readings or interpretations of the various senses, or, it may also be that, the kinds of occurrences in the two corpora were different. LDOCE's meaning 1, clearly relates to COBUILD's meaning 2, that of "ability". However, in the COBUILD, there is some extra information about opportunity. For example:

I-LDOCE: *You can swim, can't you?*

II-COBUILD: *I cannot describe it, I can't find the words.*

Something to be noted here is that in the COBUILD, there is no prototypical example of ability such as the one in the LDOCE, or the one found in Palmer (1990, p.85): 'They can't speak a word in English…'. One of the reasons may be the lack of occurrences in the corpus, since Palmer mentioned that there were only few examples in the Survey[3] where ability was clearly indicated. Nevertheless, this is somehow intriguing, for as it is the first sense to appear in the LDOCE, according to the Introduction, it is supposed to be the most frequent use of *can*. Palmer (1974, p.115) also suggests that the use of *can* expressing ability to perform an action is the most familiar one, and gives the example, *I can read Greek*. He adds that, in this case, *can* is more like a full verb than any other modal.

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[3] Corpus used by Palmer to carry out his research (1990).

	LDOCE	COBUILD (You use …)
1	Ability- to be able to do something or to know how to do something.	*can* when you are mentioning a quality or fact about something which people may make use of if they want to
2	Requesting- used to ask someone to do something	*can* to indicate that someone has the ability or opportunity to do something
3	Allowed- be allowed to do something or to have the right or power to do something	*cannot* to indicate that someone is not able to do something because circumstances make it impossible for them to do it
4	Possibility- used to say that something is possible	*can* to indicate that something is true sometimes or is true in some circumstances
5	Seeing/hearing etc- used with the verbs 'see', 'hear', 'feel', 'taste', and 'smell', and with verbs connected with thinking to mean that someone sees something, hears something, etc.	*cannot* and *can't* to state that you are certain that something is not the case or will not happen.
6	Not true- [in negatives] – used to say that you do not believe that something is true.	*can* to indicate that someone is allowed to do something. Cannot or can't to indicate that someone is not allowed to do something.
7	Should not- [in questions and negatives] used to say that someone should not or must not do something.	*cannot* or *can't* when you think it is very important that something should not happen or that someone should not do something.
8	Surprise/anger- [usually in questions and negatives] used when you are surprised or angry	*can*, usually in questions, in order to make suggestions or to offer to do something.
9	Sometimes- used to say that something happens or how someone sometimes behaves	*can* in questions in order to make polite requests. Can't in questions in order to request strongly that someone does something.
10	Giving orders- used to tell someone in an angry way to do something.	*can* as a polite way of interrupting someone or of introducing what you are going to say next.
11	--	*can* with verbs such as 'imagine', 'think', and believe in order to emphasize how you feel about a particular situation.
12	--	*can* in questions with 'how' to indicate that you feel strongly about something.

Table 1: Subsenses of *can*

The LDOCE also presents:

III- LDOCE: *Even a small personal computer can store vast amounts of information.*

This is to illustrate Palmer's additional explanation of ability as not being restricted to animate creatures, but also with inanimate ones, indicating that the latter have the necessary qualities or 'power'.

Looking at the other examples for this subentry 2 at the COBUILD, it seems that "opportunity" is used to mean "possibility", in this way, further relating this subentry to meaning 4 in the LDOCE. E.g.:

IV-LDOCE: *Some packaging cartons can be stored flat.*

V-COBUILD: *Customers can choose from sixty titles before buying…*

Sub-senses no. 1 and no. 3 in the COBUILD also seem to link to "possibility" as in the example:

VI-COBUILD: *…the statue which can still be seen in the British museum.*

VII-COBUILD: *She cannot sleep and the pain is often so bad she wants to scream.*

The appropriate paraphrases for examples IV, V and VI are "it is possible for…", and for VII is "it is not possible for", whereas for example I is "…has the ability to…". The reading in example II is somehow ambiguous, *I cannot describe* seems to be related to "ability", whereas *I can't find the words*, to "possibility". For the COBUILD, the two senses, of ability and of possibility seem to be very much linked in no.2; however, it has two extra sub-senses related to "possibility". In Palmer (1990), both senses are classified in the dynamic possibility type, being 1, 2 and 3 subject oriented and 4, 5, 6 and 7 neutral possibility.

COBUILD's 12 also seems to be a case of dynamic possibility. Palmer (1990) does not account for cases exactly like that, e.g.:

VIII-COBUILD: *How can you complain about higher taxes?*

Adding the adverb "possibly" to all the examples in sub-sense 12 of the COBUILD, it becomes easier to classify it as possibility, e.g.: *How can you "possibly" complain about higher taxes?*. It is like a rhetoric type of question, as the speaker is not actually expecting an informative answer, but rather, asking a question to emphasize a point and/or continue the conversation.

Subsense 2 in the LDOCE is related to 9 in the COBUILD, as can be seen in the examples:

IX-LDOCE: *Can I have a cigarette, please?*

X-COBUILD: *Can you please help?*

In these cases the modals have a deontic reading and are used to ask if the person addressed gives permission, lays an obligation, etc (Palmer, 1990). The negative interrogative form expects the answer "yes" as in:

XI-COBUILD: *Why can't you leave me alone?*

Subentries no. 8 and 10 in the COBUILD have a lot in common with the above sense. Examples are provided respectively:

XII-COBUILD: *Oh, can I help you?*

XIII-COBUILD: *Can I interrupt you just for a minute?*

For Palmer (1990, p.78), in this case, 'permission is sought as a matter of courtesy', these situations would be unusual to be denied, however, it would still be expected to ask for them before acting. Example XIII may be more "deniable" than example XII, but it would depend very much on a broader context so that one can be sure of the illocutionary force of the question. For the COBUILD, the discreteness between subentry 8 and subentry 10 lies not in the force, but in the associated meanings, as in 8 the definition implies an offer, whereas in 10 it implies interruption. They are all classified as occurrences of deontic modality in Palmer.

LDOCE's subsense 3 relates to COBUILD's 6, with the meaning "being allowed to". E.g.:

XIV-LDOCE: *Any police officer can insist on seeing a driver's license.*

XV-COBUILD: *You cannot ask for your money back before the agreed date.*

This use is, once again, linked to deontic possibility (Palmer, 1990, pp.70-71), or permission, to be more specific. In negative sentences, like in 15, permission is negated, as only the modality is negated, and not the whole proposition.

LDOCE's 7 and COBUILD's 7 can still be classified as having a deontic reading. In both definitions there is the presence of *must not* as being a synonym of *cannot*[4] (can't). For Palmer (1990) *can't* is not the same as *mustn't*. With *can't* it is assumed that permission is normally required, while with *mustn't* the speaker takes a positive step in preventing the action for which may not normally be required (Palmer, 1990). The examples are as follows:

XVI-LDOCE: *We can't go on like this.*

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[4] In the COBUILD *mustn't* stands on the margin of the page near the number of the subentry.

XVII-COBUILD: *It is an intolerable situation and it can't be allowed to go on…*

LDOCE's 5 and COBUILD's 11 make a reference to private verbs, or, 'states or activities that the speaker alone is aware of' (Palmer, 1974, p;.71). E.g.:

XVIII-LDOCE: *I can see their car.*

XIX-COBUILD: *I can't understand why folks complain about false teeth.*

Kjellmer (2003, p.149) calls this the 'dummy can', or 'occurrences of *can* in a context where its removal would not change the meaning of the utterance'. So, *I can see the car* would be the same as "I see the car". For the author, it carries out three (not very) distinct functions, named 'shock absorber, empathiser/emphasiser and qualifier' and their main semantic prosody is their interactive character. These characteristics seem to be better defined in the COBUILD's definition.

LDOCE's 6 and 8 and COBUILD's 5 are senses of epistemic modality. The examples are respectively:

XX-LDOCE: *It can't be easy caring for a man and a child who are not your own.*

XXI-LDOCE: *You can't be serious.*

XXII-COBUILD: *Things can't be that bad.*

In these cases there is a negation of the modality, more specifically, of the epistemic possibility. The paraphrase would be 'It is not possible that…' (Palmer, 1990:60). Here, the LDOCE has a different reading of what, in Palmer's terms, seems to convey a very closely related sense.

Meaning no.9 in the LDOCE and no. 4 are cases of existential modality, a subclass of dynamic modality (Palmer, 1990:107). E.g.:

XVIII-LDOCE: *It can be quite cold here at night.*

XVIV- COBUILD: *Coral can be yellow, blue or green.*

For the examples above we can have different paraphrases as shown by Lakoff (1972, p.231). For example XVIII we have a paraphrase as 'sometimes it is cold and sometimes it isn't'. However, we cannot use sometimes for example XVIV, but rather "some coral are yellow, some are blue and some are green".

The last entry for the LDOCE is related to commands, e.g.:

XXV- LDOCE: *And you can stop that quarrelling, the pair of you.*

Palmer (1990) puts that this use of command may be seen as an extended meaning or implied meaning from the permission use, indicating that the speaker wants

the action to be performed, however, the illocutionary force is different (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is also considered to be a case of deontic possibility. In the COBUILD, no cases of command were found. The explanation might be Palmer's "extended meaning" issue.

In addition to the 10 definitions, the LDOCE presents a chart called 'Word Choice' in which the use of *can* is compared to those of *be able to* and *could*. The sense used for *can* in this chart is that of "ability", the most frequent use. The COBUILD does not provide a similar explanation.

FINAL REMARKS

The two dictionaries analysed have roughly the same coverage, and are aimed at the same public, so, expectedly, as Fillmore and Atkins (2000, p.92) point out, their 'descriptions of the lexicon will resemble each other'. However, as for the definitions of modal *can*, it is possible to see that there is a great deal of discrepancies between the dictionaries in respect to the order of the senses, the choice of words for each subentry and about the sub-senses defined. For Dolan et al (2000), sense divisions are ultimately arbitrary, and fail to adequately describe actual language use.

Nonetheless, Wierzbicka (1996) quoted in Goddard (2000), criticizes the defining methodology of conventional dictionaries, particularly the use of multiple glosses to define the same meaning, or, which according to the author is less common but more serious, the conflation of meanings which are related but are not the same.

Wierzbicka's criticisms seem to take place in the definitions of the dictionaries. LDOCE's definitions 6 and 8, which seem to be very similar, are stated in two subentries. COBUILD's on the other hand, puts together the sense of ability and of possibility, and does not provide a very clear example of the sense of ability.

The order of senses presented in the COBUILD is also intriguing. The first subentry seems to be very specific and very similar to others, such as definitions 2 and 3, particularly if one takes the examples into account.

One of the senses shown by Palmer (1990, p.72), that '*can* seems to be used in rules and regulations', was not present in any of the two dictionaries. Something else to be noted is that in most semantic books on modal verbs, there is a discussion trying to establish the boundaries between *can* and *may*. This point was, again, absent from both dictionaries.

For Wierzbicka (1996) quoted in Goddard (2000), there should be a rigorous and consistent lexicography theory, with a firmly established principle of determinacy of meaning so that the weaknesses could be remedied. Goddard (2000) suggests the "natural semantic method" of semantic analysis to treat the phenomenon of lexical polysemy. For him, the NSM approach makes meanings more accessible, concrete and determinate through the use of reductive paraphrase in a standardized metalanguage of semantic primes found within natural language. This could be a solution for the problems with definitions in the dictionaries.

As for the case of *can*, I agree with Palmer (1990) in that, trying to have one core meaning to account for all the meanings (or uses), makes the core meaning too vague a little informative.

Silva-and-Corvalan (1995) argues against a polysemantic approach for *can* and defends the K(C does not preclude X) core meaning. However, K, C and X in this formula seem to encompass an (nearly) infinite number of variables, making it even difficult to deny the formula, since almost anything goes. I, once again, agree with Palmer (1990) in that for the modal *can* 'It is more likely that there is a conglomeration of vaguely related meanings, each linked in some way to at least one of the others in the set, but not necessarily sharing any common feature with, or directly linked to, all of them.' (ibid, p.15)

The search for a single core meaning for such a frequent word as the modal can has shown to be unfruitful. Nevertheless, clearer principles are needed so that boundaries between related meanings can become less fuzzy.

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ABSTRACT: Modality and English modals have been largely discussed in the literature. Basically, scholars have focused on three main issues: the nature of modality, the formal system and the meaning. Among these issues, meaning seems to be the most controversial point, with many different ways to categorize and define the same modal verb. In this paper I will concentrate mainly on the uses of *can* as well as on a discussion about monosemantic or polysemantic approaches in relation to its meaning. An analysis of the subsenses of *can* in two monolingual English-English dictionaries will be carried out in order to exemplify different readings of the same modal verb.
KEY-WORDS: modality, modal verbs, polysemy.

RESUMO: Modalidade e verbos modais em inglês têm sido amplamente discutidos na lingüística. As discussões focalizam três questões básicas: a natureza da modalidade, o sistema formal e os significados. A questão relativa aos significados é o ponto de maior controvérsia, com muitas formas diferentes para categorizar e definir o mesmo verbo modal. Esse artigo concentra-se principalmente nos usos do modal *can* assim como na discussão sobre as visões monossemantica e polissemantica do modal. Será realizada uma análise das definições do modal *can* em dois dicionários monolingues inglês-inglês com o intuito de exemplificar as diferentes leituras do mesmo modal.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: modalidade, verbos modais, polissemia.