

Linguistic Means of Expressing Possibility Modality: A Study of *Can*, *May*, and *Will*

RAKHIMOVA MEHRIBON ALLAYAROVNA
Urgench State University, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This study examines the English modal verbs can, may, and will as key means of expressing the modality of possibility. Using semantic field theory, the research combines paradigmatic and syntagmatic approaches to identify their invariant meaning and differential semantic features. The analysis is based on semantic-component, distributive, and contextual-communicative methods, as well as transformational and synonymic substitution techniques. The findings show that all three verbs share a common invariant meaning of potentiality, while differing in their semantic scope. Can expresses the broadest range of meanings, including ability and real possibility; may convey uncertainty and probability; and will reflects a higher degree of certainty and reliability. Despite their differences, the verbs demonstrate functional overlap in meanings such as probability, permission, and chance. Overall, the study highlights the complementary roles of these modal verbs in conveying nuanced meanings of possibility in English discourse.

Keywords: Modal verbs, can, may, will, possibility, probability, chance, certainty, uncertainty, permission, semantic analysis, differential features, invariant meaning, paradigmatic relations, syntagmatic relations.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary linguistics, the category of modality is interpreted as one of the most complex and multifaceted

phenomena within the language system. The English modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” have been extensively examined in scholarly research as central means of expressing modality, particularly within the semantic field of “possibility” (potentiality). It should be noted that in recent years increasing attention has been devoted to the category of “possibility” and its linguistic expression. This, in turn, indicates the relative scarcity of specialized studies aimed at revealing the functional and structural nature of the modal meaning of possibility.

In English linguistics, the approach to the category of modality is somewhat different. Since the existence of verbal mood as a grammatical category is not always recognized in its traditional sense, verb forms themselves are often treated as the primary morphological means of expressing modality. Within this framework, modality is commonly divided into external (objective) and internal (subjective) types, as reflected in a number of scholarly interpretations. At present, scholarly interest in the category of modality continues to grow and develop. This tendency can be observed in the works of various linguists. It should also be emphasized that the present study primarily focuses on the modal category of “possibility.” Over the past decade, several studies have emerged that specifically address “possibility” as a subcategory of modality.

The present study analyzes the role of the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” within the semantic domain of possibility from both paradigmatic and syntagmatic perspectives. The aim of the research is to identify the invariant meaning of these verbs, to elucidate their differential semantic features, and to provide a systematic account of their functional properties in discourse. Furthermore, the study offers a theoretically grounded examination of the interchangeability of these modal verbs, their synonymous relationships, and the context-dependent realization of their meanings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research indicates that these verbs are interconnected within a system of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, expressing

varying degrees of possibility within the domains of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality (Li 2004: 1; Zhang 2019: 2). The semantic analysis of modal verbs is carried out through the identification of their invariant and differential features (Hoye 2014: 3)

In particular, the modal verb “can” is distinguished by its ability to express both real and theoretical possibility in a broad sense, as well as more subtle semantic nuances such as ability and sensation. The verb “may,” by contrast, primarily conveys genuine possibility associated with probability and uncertainty. The modal verb “will,” in turn, functions as a unit expressing a high degree of likelihood, certainty, or adequacy. This demonstrates that, alongside their paradigmatic similarity, these verbs also exhibit clear semantic differentiation (Westney 2013: 4).

In the present study, the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” were examined within the framework of semantic field theory. The theoretical foundation of the research is based on the concepts of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. The invariant meaning of “possibility” inherent in these modal verbs, as well as their differential semantic features, were identified and clarified. The analysis employed the method of semantic-component analysis. In addition, the use of these verbs in discourse was examined through a contextual-communicative approach. The interchangeability of the modal units was tested using transformational and synonymic substitution method (Krug 2000: 5).

Through distributive analysis, the boundaries of their usage across different sentence types were determined. The examples were selected from contemporary English literature and linguistic sources. The combinability of the verbs with the infinitive was also analyzed separately. As a result, the systematic and functional characteristics of the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” in expressing the modality of “possibility” were established.

RESULTS

The results of the syntagmatic analysis conducted on the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” confirm the principal findings of their paradigmatic semantic analysis. United by the invariant meaning of potentiality (i.e., a power that is latent or capable of realization) and coinciding in several of their meanings (such as probability and permission), these verbs are regarded as closely related in a number of their uses. “Can,” “may,” and “will” are characterized by overlapping and, in many cases, converging domains of application; all three verbs are capable of expressing a range of modal meanings of “possibility” within the process of human communicative activity. The communicative approach employed to achieve a more comprehensive semantic description of these predicative units – whose meanings are closely related – makes it possible to identify all the principal meanings of “possibility” associated with these modal verbs, to provide a more precise identification of these lexical items, and to establish their distinctions more clearly.

Table 1. *Comparative table of the communicative meanings of the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will”*

| Modal verbs | Communicative meaning of verbs | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--------|--------------------|-------------------|------------|
| | Intellectual Ability | Physical Ability | Moral Ability | Sensation | Willingness | Possibility | Characteristic | Probability | Chance | Certainty-Sureness | Uncertainty-Doubt | Permission |
| can | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | + | - | + |
| may | - | + ^{1*} | + [*] | - | - | + | - | + | + | - | + | + |
| will | - | + [*] | - | - | + | - | + | + | + | + | - | + |

^{1*} Rarely attested in texts, these constitute the only instances in which modal verbs are used in this meaning.

The study conducted on the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” in English shows that they are consistently capable of substituting for one another, and that, due to their close interrelation, they manifest the formation of invariant meanings. In conclusion, the similarities and differential features of these modal verbs are reflected in the following semantic groups.

1. The modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will,” which are in synonymous relationships with one another, regularly express the modality of “possibility”; in different contexts, they can convey various degrees and subtle nuances of the concept of “possibility.”
2. The modal verb “can” most broadly represents the concept of “possibility,” practically covering its entire semantic scope. In general terms, the semantic content of “can” is constituted by the concept under investigation.

In each specific case, depending on the context, “can” (like the other verbs under study) has a single definite communicative meaning. All meanings of “can” are traced back to its invariant feature of expressing theoretical, adequate (real) “possibility.”

3. The second main predicative verb, “may,” which consistently expresses the modality of “possibility” in combination with a following infinitive, has a meaning that is associated with the invariant feature of real “possibility,” which is occasional, in some cases uncertain, yet genuine.
4. All communicative meanings of the third modal verb “will” are likewise traced back to its invariant feature of expressing adequate, reliable “possibility.”
5. The differential semantic features of “possibility” exhibited in “can,” “may,” and “will” complement one another, thereby making it possible to provide a relatively precise description of the scope of the concept under investigation.
6. The problem of identifying and differentiating the analyzed modal verbs cannot be resolved at the level of distributive analysis; rather, it can be addressed at the level of transformations and synonymous substitutions selected on the basis of a broader or narrower contextual framework.

7. As can be seen from the meanings of “can,” “may,” and “will” presented above, “can” possesses the highest degree of communicative activity. Among the main differential features of “can,” its use in the meaning of “possibility” as ability – particularly in the sense of intellectual ability and sensation – should be noted. In this case, the neutralization of the opposition between “can,” “may,” and “will” is not possible, since in these meanings *can* cannot serve as an equivalent of “may” or “will.” It is well known that in the sense of ability, “can” is synonymous with expressions such as “to be able to” and “to know how to.”

I can speak English.
I can paint it.

I'm able to speak English.
I know how to paint it.

In the sense of “ability,” “can” is capable of expressing the following subtle nuances of this meaning: “able,” “capable,” “clever,” “skillful,” “competent,” etc. (ability). In the sense of “sensation, can” is equivalent to the simple form of the infinitive.

I can see the smoke.
I can hear you well.

I see the smoke.
I hear you well.

In the remaining meanings (*willingness, possibility, characteristic, probability, chance, certainty–sureness, and permission*), the use of *can* increasingly overlaps with that of *may* or *will*. In the meanings of *probability, chance, and permission*, the domains of application of all three modal verbs converge.

8. “Can,” in the sense of “possibility” – as a person’s willingness to do something (willingness) – may be used in a meaning very close to that of “will.” Compare, for example:

I can do that for **you**.

I will **do**that for you.

In the meaning of “willingness, can” always indicates the possibility of an action occurring in the future. Hence, a

formal distributive feature of the use of “can” in this meaning is its potential compatibility with contexts referring to the future tense.

I can do that for you tomorrow (next week...).

When can is used in the sense of “possibility” (assumption), it is equivalent only to the modal verb may. “Possibility” is the core meaning of the communicative content of both can and may. Both verbs are characterized by a high frequency of use in speech communication precisely in the meaning of assumption (theoretical and, correspondingly, real). The mutual substitutability of can and may in the meaning of possibility is possible only in affirmative sentences (not in questions).

He can (ormay) be at home now.

It was observed that the verb “may” is used more frequently in sentences where the subject of the action is expressed by “it”, for example: “It may be all right for her but not for me” (Lawrence 2007: 6).

In the sense of “characteristic” (a type of assumption), the use of “can” and “will” can be considered close to one another. In this meaning, “can” typically denotes a characteristic of the subject that may occur occasionally at a given moment.

Daughters can be worrying. Friends can be useful.

A formal indicator of the use of “can” in this sense is its potential compatibility with adverbial modifiers such as “at times” and “sometimes.” “Will,” in the sense of “characteristic,” expresses not occasional features but regular, habitual characteristics, i.e., the typical traits of the subject of the action. Compare, for example:

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| She can be useful. | She will be useful. |
| He can be worrying. | He will be worrying. |

The realization of this meaning has not been attested in modal predicative constructions with “will” when the subject of the action is in the first person (I, we).

10. **Probability:** If “possibility” is considered a differential semantic feature of “can” and “may,” then “probability” can be regarded as a distinguishing feature of “can” and “will.” “Probability” is a core meaning of the communicative content of both “can” and “will.” In this meaning, the sphere of use of “can” may at times come close to that of “may.” A formal indicator of the use of “may” in the sense of “probability” is its compatibility with perfect and continuous infinitives. The meaning of “probability” can be considered a neutralization point of the oppositions among the modal verbs under consideration. Here, mutual substitution of the verbs (taking into account the stylistic particularities of their usage) is possible. Compare, for example:

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| (probably) | The pound, can be devalued. |
| (probably) | The pound may be devalued. |
| | The pound will be devalued now. |

11. **Chance:** The use of the analyzed verbs in the meaning of “chance” also constitutes a differential communicative feature of a weak position in which the opposition among the three modal verbs is neutralized. In this meaning, “can,” “may,” and “will” function as formal contextual markers, particularly through their use in purpose clauses introduced by the conjunction “so that.” Within this semantic domain, the modal verbs are interchangeable and are synonymous with expressions such as “have a chance,” “have a favourable opportunity,” and “to have a prospect” (luck, occasion, fortune, etc.).
12. If “certainty” or “sureness” can be regarded as a differential semantic feature of “can” and will, then “uncertainty” or “doubt” constitutes the differential feature of the modal verb “may.”

When we wish to indicate a possibility with which doubt or uncertainty is mixed, may and might are often used”

In the meaning of “uncertainty” or “doubt,” “may” is typically used to express an action that is presumed or anticipated to occur in the future:

When are you going on holiday?
We may go next week, but it depends on my father [7: 7]

13. **Permission:** In the meaning of “request” or “permission,” the use of “can,” “may,” and “will” converges. In this sense, we present several illustrative examples of the usage of the modal verbs under consideration in contemporary English.

Child at table: “Please, can I get down?”
Mother: “Yes, and you may.”
Admirer to pretty maiden: “Phyllis, you can come and kiss me.”
Phyllis: “Oh, can I?”
-Can I go now? -You can if you want to.
-Will you tell me the time, please?

DISCUSSION

The results of the syntagmatic analysis of the modal verbs “can,” “may,” and “will” confirm the main findings obtained through the paradigmatic approach, demonstrating a strong interrelation between their semantic and communicative properties. The study reveals that these modal verbs are united by a common invariant meaning of “potentiality,” which serves as a semantic core underlying their diverse contextual realizations. At the same time, their ability to express such meanings as probability, permission, and possibility highlights a significant degree of functional overlap. The findings indicate that “can” possesses the broadest semantic scope among the three modal verbs. Its invariant meaning is associated with real or adequate possibility, which enables it to express a wide range of communicative meanings, including intellectual ability, physical ability, and sensation. In particular, the use of “can” in expressing ability and sensory perception distinguishes it from “may” and “will,” as these meanings cannot be neutralized or substituted by the other

modal verbs. This confirms the central role of “can” in representing the general concept of possibility within the modal system.

In contrast, “may” is characterized by an invariant meaning of uncertain or conditional possibility. Its semantic specificity lies in expressing doubt, uncertainty, and probability, often associated with hypothetical or future-oriented situations. The frequent use of “may” in contexts involving uncertainty-doubt further supports its role as a marker of epistemic modality. Unlike “can,” its application is more restricted and context-dependent, particularly in formal and cautious discourse.

The modal verb “will,” on the other hand, is associated with reliable or assured possibility, reflecting a higher degree of certainty. Its communicative meanings, such as willingness, characteristic behavior, and probability, indicate a tendency toward expressing predictable or habitual actions. The distinction between “can” and “will” becomes particularly evident in the expression of characteristic meanings, where “can” denotes occasional tendencies, while “will” conveys regular or typical behavior.

Overall, the interaction of differential semantic features in “can,” “may,” and “will” allows for a more precise representation of the concept of possibility. Their complementary nature contributes to the richness of the modal system in English, enabling speakers to convey subtle nuances of meaning in communication. Thus, the study confirms that the semantic and functional interplay of these modal verbs is essential for understanding their role in expressing modality in natural language.

CONCLUSION

Thus, “can,” “may,” and “will” constitute a system of means for expressing the modality of possibility in modern English. Their synonymous modal meanings complement one another and ultimately converge on a single semantic invariant of “possibility.” Their spheres of usage tend to overlap and, to a considerable extent, coincide. The modal verbs “can” and “may”

systematically express the modality of possibility. They convey this meaning with subtle semantic distinctions, reflecting various degrees and nuances of possibility depending on the context and the communicative purpose of the utterance. In contrast to “can” and “may,” the verb “will” (especially “would”), which primarily functions as a categorial marker of the verb and as a future tense auxiliary, expresses modal meanings of possibility only within specific contextual conditions. The formal indicators of the modal use of “will” include its compatibility with perfect and continuous infinitives, as well as the presence of contextual markers such as “probably” and “surely,” and micro- and macro-contextual cues that actualize its modal meaning. Although the contextual conditions governing these verbs may be similar or overlapping, the grammatical function of “will” as a future auxiliary tends to obscure its modal nature, rendering many examples open to interpretation. In linguistics, modality is studied as one of the most essential features of the sentence, whereas in logic it is regarded as a form of thought and as a fundamental property of judgment. This characteristic of modality demonstrates the necessity of examining logical modality in connection with linguistic modality [8: 8].

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RAKHIMOVA MEHRIBON ALLAYAROVNA

PHD STUDENT,

DEPARTMENT OF ROMAN-GERMAN PHILOLOGY,

FACULTY OF FOREIGN PHILOLOGY,

URGENCH STATE UNIVERSITY,

URGENCH, UZBEKISTAN.

E-MAIL: <UZTEACHER1221@GMAIL.COM>