

Hypothetical Orientation of Could and Might as Modal Verbs in English : A Semantic Study

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Abstract:

This study tackles an explanation for the 'hypothetical' meanings of the English modals could and might with respect to some common semantic notions related with possibility, ability and permission. Such notions are illustrated by giving some examples. This paper also shows a sort of comparison between these two modals especially when 'could' and 'might' are studied as substitutes for 'can' and 'may'. Also it has been indicated how these modals are in many cases more or less interchangeable. In addition, hypothetical 'could' is seen to be used with perfective aspect to indicate contrary to fact meanings.

Keywords: (Hypothetical trends, Contra-factual inclination , Semantic Aspect) .

توجه افتراضي للقدرة والقوة

كأفعال شرطية في اللغة الإنجليزية: دراسة دلالية

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة شرحاً للمعاني "الافتراضية" للنماذج الإنجليزية التي يمكن وربما فيما يتعلق ببعض المفاهيم الدلالية الشائعة المتعلقة بالإمكانية والقدرة والإن. يتم توضيح هذه المفاهيم من خلال إعطاء بعض

الأمثلة. تُظهر هذه الورقة أيضًا نوعًا من المقارنة بين هذين الشكلين خاصةً عندما تتم دراسة "يمكن" و "يمكن" كبديل لكلمة "can" و "may". كما تم توضيح كيف تكون هذه النماذج في كثير من الحالات قابلة للتبادل بشكل أو بآخر. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يُنظر إلى "يمكن" الافتراضية على أنها تستخدم مع الجانب التكميلي للإشارة إلى معاني الحقائق المخالفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الاتجاهات الافتراضية ، الميل إلى الحقائق المعاكسة ، الجانب الدلالي).

1.1 Introduction

There are certain modal verbs like *could*, *might*, *would* and *should* that can be used either in reference to past time or in a hypothetical sense. This study tackles the hypothetical *could* and *might* to show definite semantic meanings such as possibility, permission and ability with suitable examples. Also, the hypothetical *could* is compared to the hypothetical *might* so as to understand the difference between them.

1.2 The Hypothetical Aspect of *Could*

It should be mentioned that the modal verb *could*, like other hypothetical modals, has two forms. *Could* is regarded as the past tense form of *can* and as a hypothetical form(Coates, 1983: 107). Also Abdul- Fattah (2011: 54) stresses that *could* in addition to its modal uses has far more functions including hypotheticality. Downing and Locke (2006:

393) point out further that the past tense modal *could* can have a hypothetical sense in main and subordinate clauses. *Could* shows the function as a hypothetical form for all the three meanings identified for *can* as the following sub-sections point out

1.2.1 The hypothetical ‘possibility’ Aspect of *could*

The hypothetical form of *could* in this sense can be paraphrased by ‘It would be possible for’ with the meaning that ‘If the condition specified is fulfilled, then nothing would prevent X’. The fulfillment of the condition removes the only obstacle to realization, which is then dependent on the will of the speaker as can be seen in the following examples:

1- If he got extra time, he could do it better.

(=It would be possible for him to do better, if he got extra time)

2- I could do another test if I was certain I’d got accurate results.

(=It would be possible for me to do another test if

It might be clear that with the hypothetical *could* + *if*-clause, we are concerned with a possible change in the circumstances. However, in the real world, many of those circumstances can be taken for granted. In the above examples the conditions upon which the realization of the proposition was dependent were stated explicitly, but there are utterances where the explicit condition (the *if*-clause) is not expressed, as in (3) and (4):

3- Well, she could hire another car.

(‘if she wanted’)

4- I could spend all day walking round this wonderful exhibition.

(‘if I wanted’)

Leech (1971:119) describes the hypothetical uses of modal verbs where there is no explicit condition as ‘special uses’. He argues that:

These special uses can best be explained in terms of psychological factors such as diffidence and tact. Hypothetical forms are substituted in order to tone down the meaning of the non-hypothetical auxiliary where it might be thought too bold or blunt.

But the problem is that the distinction between a ‘tentative’ and an ‘unreal conditional’ meaning is not always possible, where there is no explicit condition. Jespersen (1931:112), for example, speaks of the ‘imaginative use of tenses’; Halliday (1970) refers to this modification by ‘undertone or overtone’; Palmer (1990:58) uses the term ‘tentativeness’; Perkins (1983:50) calls the past forms of the modal verbs ‘secondary modals’, which can be used for hypothesis, formality, politeness, tentativeness, etc. We might understand from these terms that when there is no conditional clause the meaning of the hypothetical form is more likely to be tentative or diffident.

The hypothetical form of *could* in this sense, then, is often hardly more than a weaker or more diffident variety of the non-hypothetical form *can*, especially when making requests, as Examples (5) and (6) show.

5- Could you tell me the nearest way to the airport ?

6- I wonder if you could give me a hand with the cooking.

In addition, the hypothetical form of *could* is used to suggest a course of action to the addressee i.e. the use of the hypothetical form makes the suggestion more tactful, as in (7):

7- A: What shall I do to improve my French?

B: Well, you could try some intensive courses.

It is clear from these examples that *could* functions exactly like *can*, but it is more tentative and it is more polite in requests. It is true that *can* implies greater involvement of the speaker and in some situations this may be undesirable, particularly when giving advice or making suggestions. Thus by selecting *could*, the speaker appears simply to state what is possible, and succeeds in advising the addressee without arousing his antagonism.

1.2.2 The hypothetical 'permission' Aspect of *could*

Could can be used in a conditional sense with an implied meaning 'Would be allowed to', or 'Would be permissible to', as in the instances below :

8- I could have an extra week's holiday if I asked for it.

('it would be permissible for me to ')

9- He could borrow my suit if he asked.

('it would be permissible for him to ')

10- I wonder if I... can leave a message for her then. (Coates, 1983: 118)

(If it would be permissible for me to....)

Could is often used as a more diffident or polite alternative to can in the first person, to ask for permission as the following examples show :

11- Could I have a piece of that cake?

12- I wonder if we could leave him a message.

There is no apparent reason for the choice of *could* rather than *can*. Whereas *can* would not be selected in certain more formal situations, the use of *could* may often be a personal idiosyncrasy, not necessarily influenced by extra-linguistic factors.

1.2.3 The hypothetical 'ability' Aspect of *could*

The most natural meaning of the unreal or hypothetical form *could* is 'Would be able to' or 'Would be capable of'. The *if*-clause is sometimes implied, as in (13) and (14) below :

13- I'm sure you could get into university (if you applied).

(=I am sure you would be capable of getting into)

14- He could pass the exam (if he wanted to).

(=He would be able to pass)

It may also be explicitly expressed, as in (15) and (16):

15- We could do it if we were taught how to diagnose.

16- I could have a really good time if I had a business of my own.

With both the conditional and the implied conditional sentences we can use *could* with the perfect infinitive to refer to an ability or capacity that was not used due to personal failure or lack of opportunity as in these two examples:

17- I could have killed him ('I was so angry that I was capable of killing him,

but I didn't)

18- I could have won if I hadn't fallen over.

(I would have been able to win, but I didn't).

1.3 Hypothetical *could* and the perfective Aspect

With modal verbs, past hypothetical meaning can be expressed by the use of the perfect infinitive. Hypothetical *could*, in the 'possibility' sense, is used to speculate or guess about the past, as Example (19) shows.

19- She could have gone off with some friends.

Notice that *can* -can be used, but only in interrogative and negative sentences, as in (20):

20- Where can she have gone?

Hypothetical *could* with the perfect infinitive is also used to talk about unrealized past 'possibility'. That is something that was possible, but did not happen. *Could* in this construction is contrary-to-fact and has the meaning of 'It would have been possible for ... but...not' (Coates, 1983: 121), as is illustrated by the following examples:

21- You were stupid to go skiing there. You could have broken your leg.

22- We could have borrowed the money. (Quirk et al, 1985: 233)

(It would have been possible for us to borrow the money ...but we didn't)

23- If you had come to me sooner, I could have tackled the problem.

The same structure can be used to say that we had the ability to do something but we did not try to do it, as in (24) :

24- I could have gone straight there but I just couldn't get there.

(='It would have been possible for me to go straight there but I wasn't able to get there.')

Abdul-Fattah (2011: 51) summarizes the hypothetical relation between *could* and *could have* to be paraphrased as ' would be ' and ' would have been possible ' respectively.

1.4 The Hypothetical Aspect of *Might*

In spite of the fact that *might* is regarded as the past tense form of *may*, some linguists especially Hermeren (1978) and Palmer (1979) have recently stated that the former is the tentative or unreal form of *may*. Moreover, Kennedy (2003: 191) adds that there are some modals including *might* used to indicate hypothetical statements or conditions. In addition, Downing and Locke (2006: 393) declare the past tense modal *might* to catch hypothetical sence.

1.4.1 Hypothetical ‘possibility’ Aspect of *might*

Might in its hypothetical meaning is different from its epistemic meaning in that it is the proposition (the main predication), and not the modality, which is affected. Thus, it means ‘It is possible that...would.....’, as the following examples illustrate:

25- The student who brings it to class might get into trouble for not doing it

legally.

(=It is possible that the student who brings it to class would get into trouble for not doing it legally)

26- he might retire next May. (Quirk et al, 1985: 128)

(It is possible that he would retire....)

27- A shop catalogue might have different offers.

(=It is possible that a shop catalogue would have different offers)

This does not necessarily refer to what is purely hypothetical but to any situation from which the speaker detaches himself especially when there is an overt conditional clause, as in (28):

28- If you slowed down a bit you might enjoy some of the lovely countryside.

The speaker here is speculating about a non-actual situation which cannot occur unless a certain condition is fulfilled.

Thus, Coates (1983: 159) states that hypothetical *might* is found with no restriction with *have + en*. A possible event in the past can be described by the construction *might + have + en*. In this respect, *might* is a slightly more tentative variant of *may have*. But the polysemy of *might* is particularly liable to cause confusion when it is combined with *have + en*. A good example is:

29- She might have saved their lives.

(='It would have been possible for her to save their lives.')

30- They might have become champions. (Quirk et al, 1985: 233)

(It is possible that they would have become champions

This could either mean ‘It is possible that she would have’ or ‘It would have been possible for her to’. The effect of the hypothetical modal, with its implication ‘contrary to expectation’, makes the expression of possibility more tentative and guarded which can be paraphrased as ‘It is barely possible that.....’ or ‘It is possible, though unlikely, that.....’ as in the following example:

31- You might have dropped it somewhere.

(‘It is barely possible that you (have) dropped it somewhere’)

In addition, this combination (*might* + perfect infinitive) is also used to talk about unrealized past possibility which was possible, but did not happen, as in (32) below :

32- You might have met him if you had been there.

(=‘It is possible that you would have met him.....’)

1.4.2 The hypothetical ‘permission’ Aspect of *might*

Might can be used in a conditional sense with an implied meaning ‘Would be allowed to’ or ‘Would be permissible to’, as in (33) and (34)

33- I might have an extra charge if I asked for it.

(=‘It would be permissible for me to.....’)

34- She might get more time if she asked.

(='It would be permissible for her to.....')

Might is often used as a more polite alternative to *may* to ask for permission in the first person as given in the following examples :

35- Might I have a glass of milk?

36- I wonder if we might leave him a message?

37- Might I call you by your first name ? (Quirk et al, 1985: 816)

1.5 *Could* and *Might* Comparison

There are many aspects through which it would be seen that it is possible to compare *could* and *might*. Thus *could* can be compared with *might* as in the following lines:

a- *Could* and *might* occur (as substitutes for *can* and *may*) frequently in utterances with the meaning of 'hypothetical possibility', as in (38) and (39):

38- He could be waiting for you at the station.

39- It might rain tomorrow.

The effect of the hypothetical modal, with its implication 'contrary to expectation', is to make the expression of 'possibility' more tentative.

b- The difference between 'theoretical' and 'practical' meaning seems less distinct in the hypothetical forms, and *could* and *might*

are in many cases more or less interchangeable. The absence of this discrimination is because they, in the hypothetical forms, have the same meaning which can be paraphrased by ‘It would be possible for’ , but not a *that*-clause following ‘It would be possible.....’, as in (40) and (41):

40- It would be possible for you to pass the exam.

41- It would be possible that you will pass the exam.

c- Both *could* and *might* are commonly used in suggestions for future actions in a way analogous to *can*:

42- You could answer this fax for me.

43- We might see each other again next Easter.

d- With the perfect infinitive, as in (44) and (45), *could* is a slightly more tentative variant of *can/may have*, while *might* seems to be used almost as a colloquial variant of *may* (as factual possibility), without any implication of reduced likelihood.

44- Could you have left it on the table?

45- He might have done it.

e-The negative form *couldn't* negates the modality ‘It isn't possible.....’, and it is an instance of external negation. On the other hand the negative form *mightn't* negates the proposition ‘It is

possible..... not', and it is an instance of internal negation as shown in the following examples:

46- I couldn't have made that mistake.

(='It is not even barely possible that I made that mistake')

47- He mightn't have made that mistake.

(='It is just possible that he did not make that mistake')

1.6 Conclusion

It has been seen in this study that modals are not only used to express modal sense. They can go beyond their common sense. So they can express hypotheticality, but attention should be paid to the form of the modal and the meaning intended. This means that the modals concerned in this study can function as past tense forms and as hypothetical forms. Also the modal itself when functioning hypothetically could express various notions represented by possibility, permission and ability notions. The modals concerned when used in the hypothetical way are viewed to express desirable advice and suggestions. Moreover, these modals seem to express the same sense when they are used hypothetically and this appears clearly by paraphrasing them. But they may differ in some aspects.

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