

Background

Modals form a small and well-defined class in English, united by **syntax, morphology, and semantics**

- *must, may, might, shall, should, will, would, can, could* (+ *ought, need, dare, marginally*)
- But evidence that modals are **declining** in use, being replaced by corresponding semi-modals.
 - *must > have to* (Tagliamonte and Smith, 2006; Tagliamonte and Tracy, 2007)
 - *will > going to* (Beard, 1997; Scramsey, 2002; Tagliamonte, 2002)

What about *can > able to*?

- Google Ngrams: all modals decreasing—**except can**:

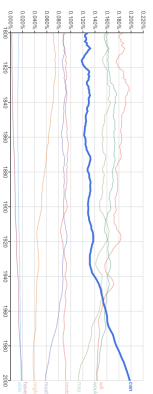


Fig. 1. Modals and semi-modals from 1800–2000 (Mehel et al., 2011)

- Questions:
1. Are changes in *can* reflected in spoken English?
 2. Is there evidence of a **change in progress**?
 3. Do **grammatical** factors condition the increase in *can*?

In all three cases: **Yes**.

Main Proposal:

can is diverging from the rest of the modal system because it is **structurally exceptional**, associated with a **uniquely low position**.

The corpus + study

Modals examined: all **possibility** modals (*can, could, may, might*) + semi-modal *able to*.

- Source: **York English Corpus** (YEC; Tagliamonte, 1996-1998)
- Sociolinguistic interviews conducted in 1997
 - Ages 15–91 (Born 1906–1982)

Coding: for demographic properties of the speaker, and for a range of grammatical properties. Focus here: **modal interaction**.

Analyses: using **GoldVarb** (Sankoff et al., 2005)

A dynamic increase in *can*

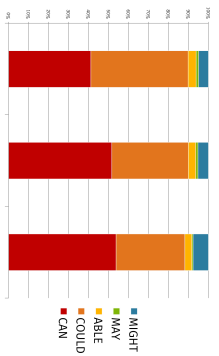


Fig. 2. Overall distribution of possibility modals by age

Overall increase in *can*.

Significant effects of:

- **age** (younger speakers use more *can*)
- **subject type** (generic and 3rd person)
- **interpretation** (see Fig 3)
- weak effect with root meanings (ability, circumstantial, deontic)
- no increase in epistemic meanings
- sharp rise in **dispositional / quantificational questions and negation**

Confirmation: *can* is increasing in apparent time (significant effect of age).

Persisting exceptionality of *can*

Can is known to be **exceptional** in several ways.

- Epistemic only when negative (Confirmed here: all 15 epistemic tokens of *can* in YEC are negative)
- Preterite *could* retains transparent past meaning (Cf. *would*, which in matrix clauses can only have past habitual meaning)

A new exceptionality: absence of “British *do*” with *can*

British *do* appearance of *do* below another auxiliary in ellipsis contexts.

Can occurs more often than any other possibility modal in the YEC (Fig 4), yet occurs with *do* only once (2).

- (2) If someone wanted to nick your bike they **can do**. (Shk 57, Age 17)

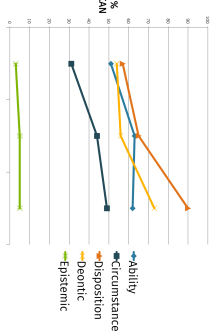


Fig. 3. % *can* for different modal interpretations

Dispositional interpretations

- (1) a. the North-Sea [...] it can be so rough it sort-of goes along sideways. (Shk 30, Age 20)
 - b. They can be quite expensive, can't they? (Shk 64, Age 46)
 - c. So that *can* be really tedious, marking. I don't like marking. (Shk 34, Age 24)
- A subtype of dynamic (event-oriented) modality.
 - express a tendency of the subject
 - often paraphrasable by sometimes (cf. quantificational modals: Carlson, 1977; Brennan, 1997)

This is **not** because British *do* requires an epistemic modal.

- British *do* with dynamic *could* in the YEC.
 - (3) a. You had your own room. Just the basics and bin which you made as friendly as you could do. (Shk 69, Age 54)
 - b. But if I wanted to come home in the evening I could do. (Shk 69, Age 54)

	# of <i>do</i>	(# overall)	%
can	1	(1819)	0.051
could	8	(1513)	0.53
may	2	(36)	5.6
might	7	(218)	3.2
total	18	(3727)	0.48

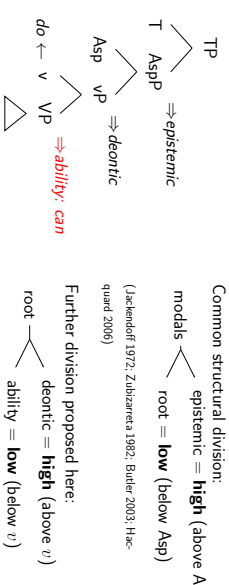
Fig. 4. Rates of British *do* with possibility modals

Discussion

Puzzle: why is *can* exceptional—and why are *could* and *can't* not?

Proposal: *can* is associated with a **uniquely low** position, not only below T and Asp, but also below *v*.

- Suggested in particular by incompatibility with British *do*, if *do* = *v* stranded by VP ellipsis (Thoms, 2011)



Back to *could* and *can't*:

- If *could* and *can't* are just *can* + past tense or negation, why does *could* license *do* and why do both allow epistemic readings?

Further proposal: the **finite tautum** status of modals links *could* and *can't* to higher structural positions.

- Traditional view: *finite tautum* reflects syntactic position (in T).
- Revision: finite tautum reflects fixed and *interpretable* features on modals: *could* bears [PAST], and *can't* bears [NEG]
- *could* and *can't* are consequently syntactically tied to positions outside the in a way that *can* is not.

Conclusions

This study draws on both **variationist** and **formal** perspectives:

- Variationist: quantitative evidence of changes in progress in the modal system, not visible at the level of individual speakers.
 - Formal: structural properties explaining *can*'s exceptionality can also explain why it resists the general pattern of modal decline.
- Next steps:** Other varieties of English (Toronto): finite tautum and spans; sufficiency readings for *can*; interaction with perfect *have*.

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	<35	%	36-65	%	>65	%	Total	%
Ability	310	62	415	63	278	51	1003	59
Circumstantial	155	49	178	44	128	31	458	41
Dispositional	37	90	32	65	17	57	86	72
Deontic	85	73	89	56	83	54	257	60
Epistemic	6	5	6	5	3	3	15	4

Figure 5: Instances of *can* by modal interpretations

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