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Dynamic modality: English and Spanish contrasted

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will analyse different expressions of dynamic modality in English and Spanish. Dynamic modality usually refers to those modal meanings related to the concept of 'ability' or 'tendency' in a general way. Nevertheless, this kind of modality is more complex than that: it includes a variety of meanings, including possibility due to external or internal circumstances, predisposition... and in some cases it overlaps with habitual aspects. According to the literature dynamic modality is typically realized in English by modals like *can* or *could* and semi-modals like *be able to*. Spanish modals have not received as much attention as their English counterparts¹, but the common translations of this 'ability' meaning seem to be verbs like *poder* or *saber*. After a brief description of some relevant modals two conversational corpora will be used in order to contrast both languages (Svartvik and Qui 1980; Marín 1992). Up to one hundred expressions of dynamic modality (only modal verbs) will be studied in each language, paying special attention to cases of ambiguity, possible translations and other factors like repetition process of the verb or negation. It is important to remember that when dealing with modality, unclear cases are inevitable, like authors like Leech and Coates emphasize (1980). Palmer's view (Palmer 1979²) is similar: modal meanings are continua with extremes that are distinct, but with indeterminacy in the middle.

2. Some relevant English and Spanish dynamic modals

2.1. CAN

Can is the prototypical dynamic modal and it has been widely studied. Different authors give several interpretations of its meaning (Silva-Corvalán, 1995). Bolinger (1989), among others) looking for its basic sense or differentiating several meanings. I will just focus on Coates' view (1983:86). According to her, 'permission' and 'ability' correspond to the cores of the two main sets associated with *can*, while 'possibility' is the meaning assigned to examples

¹ Silva-Corvalán (1995:67-68) comments that they received little attention perhaps due to the fact that their syntactic characteristics have not appeared to be as distinct as those of the English modals.

² See Leech and Coates (1980:80) for reference.

found in the area that overlaps between the two meanings. Coates summarizes the distinction between the different meanings of *can* in the following way (1983:93)³:

I can do it = PERMISSION – human authority / rules and regulations allow me to do it.

I can do it = POSSIBILITY – external circumstances allow me to do it.

I can do it = ABILITY - inherent properties allow me to do it.

2.2. BE ABLE TO

Coates discusses the meaning of *be able to* and argues that it can cover all the range of meanings associated with *can*, although it is often assumed on morphological grounds that it is associated with the 'ability' core (1983:123-124). Therefore, if their meanings are similar, what are the differences between the two? Coates mentions two main differences: (1) form and (2) aspect and meaning. In form it differs from *can* in its ability to occur freely in a wide range of syntactic contexts, but the meaning it conveys seems to be the same as that of *can*. This flexibility permits that in standard English *be able to* supplies the forms which *can* cannot provide. *Be able to* seems to differ also from the true modals in aspect and meaning: in addition to the stative meaning it expresses (when it is equivalent to *can*), it has another meaning which is dynamic rather than stative. Palmer (1980-91) gives two circumstances in which, although *can* is possible, *be able to* is preferred (1980:95-96):

1) In the past, even if there is reference to repeated actions, *be able to* is preferred if there is a very strong implication of actuality: "Most people worked harder than me during the University, of course, and when it came to the exams, they were able to draw not just upon two weeks of knowledge. They were able to draw upon three years of knowledge".

2) *Be able to* is preferred in the present, if actuality is implied: "...and yet you are able to look at the future of it in this very objective way".

Although Coates assumes that *be able to* can occur in the same contexts as *can*, it is not clear that *be able to* can be used when dynamic modality is caused by internal circumstances and the speaker expresses perfective aspect and passive. In those cases the translation in Spanish is *pudo*; for example, *Yesterday the door could easily be opened* (but "*Yesterday the door was able to be opened.*")

2.3. PODER

Silva-Cotvalán (1995) proposes for Spanish *poder* a similar meaning as that of English *can* (1995:75-76): '*C does not preclude X*' [C = circumstances; X: events, states of affairs]. She notices how *saber* may also convey 'ability for z', as in "Yo sé nadar" 'I know how to swim'. *Saber*, however, "simply asserts knowledge or ability for; it does not implicate precluding circumstance' as *poder* does". That is the reason "when y performs an event that involves effort, or the overcoming of a given barrier, or a certain degree of difficulty p may be modalized with *poder*, but not with *saber*" (1995:80).

³ Myhill also discusses the differences between these three meanings, emphasizing the importance of context to express one or other meanings. He applies two tests for determining when *can* has a 'ability' meaning (1996:37):

(1) One of these tests is conceptual: a token is coded as having 'ability' meaning if doing the future action is dependent purely on the physical, intellectual, financial, psychological, professional, or organizational capacity of the subject rather than social constraints or the will of the subject'.

(2) The second test codes 'tokens as 'ability' if they can be paraphrased with *be capable of* or *know how to*'.

2.4. SOLER

It has been usually included within modal verbs, as it has been commented in a previous section, but it presents several differences with the rest of the modals. Due to these differences Casado argues that *soler* must be separated from auxiliary verbs, and most appropriately included within aspectual verbs⁴. Therefore *soler* may reflect some of the characteristics of modals, but it is not a prototypical example of a modal verb (rather it is similar to English semi-modals), and therefore it differs from the most central members of the category like *poder*. The same could be applied to its English direct counterpart *used to*.

3. Analysis of the corpus

3.1. Description of the corpus

The design of this study is based on Carretero (1998). The Spanish corpus consists of conversational texts, recorded surreptitiously (Marcos Marín 1992). The English examples are taken from the London Lund corpus, which describes the grammatical repertoire of educated native British English speakers. The transcription of the Spanish corpus is orthographic; the English corpus includes prosodic signals, but these have been omitted. The size of the English corpus was designed following two criteria: (1) using complete texts (2) up to 100 examples. The same criteria were used for delimiting the Spanish one, using conversational texts chosen at random from the Spanish corpus in Marcos Marín (1992). The texts used were the following:

- English: LLC-1-1, LLC-1-2, LLC-1-3, LLC-1-4 (approximately 20,000 words).
- Spanish: ACON001A, ACON006A, ACON006C, ACON006D, ACON007B, ACON009A, ACON012A, ACON012B, ACON017A, ACON017B, ACON019A, ACON019B, ACON021A, ACON022A, ACON022B (approximately 23,000 words)⁵.

A database was created with DATA BASE III PLUS, in order to analyse quantitatively the data obtained from the corpus. The database created included the following fields:

- a) Expression: the dynamic expression studied.
- b) Number of text.
- c) Context: lines preceding and following the utterance.
- d) Process of the verb: a difference was made between dynamic and stative verbs.
- e) Coexistent dynamic expression: other dynamic expressions that may occur.
- f) Repetition: examples in which the expressions are repeated (for reasons of emphasis, hesitations...).
- g) Speech act of the utterance: statement, directive or question.
- h) Negation: it was signalled if the expression occurred in the negative form.

3.2. Expressions studied

⁴ Some of the differences are the following: while *poder y deber* have other nonauxiliary uses ("Me pudo el cansancio", "Debo muchos favores"), *soler* cannot be used in sentences like "Suelo paseos los domingos". Casado notices another formal difference between *soler* and other *deber* and *poder*: *soler* can only be employed in indicative present and preterite.

⁵ In the quotations from the texts it is signalled the line (in the Spanish corpus) and the tone unit (in the English corpus) where the modal expression appears plus the name of the text.

The dynamic expressions found in the English corpus are the following:

EXPRESSIONS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Can	65
Could	12
Be able to	9
Possible	6
Possibility	4
Used to	2
Ability	1
Necessary	1

Total: 100

The dynamic expressions found in the Spanish corpus are the following:

EXPRESSION	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Forms of <i>sober</i>	89
Forms of <i>poder</i>	2
Forms of <i>necesitar</i>	2
Other forms	7

EXPRESSIONS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES	EXPRESSIONS	NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES
Poder	4	Pueda	4
Puedo	6	Pudiera	1
Puedes	9	Pudieran	2
Puede	19	Podido	5
Podemos	12	Posible	3
Podéis	3	Imposible	2
Pueden	4	Imposibles	1
Podré	1	Suele	1
Podía	8	Solemos	1
Podías	5	Necesitan	1
Podían	2	Incapaces	1
Podría	4	Capacidad	1

Total: 100

3.3. Results: comparison English-Spanish

3.3.1. *Poder* and *Can*

The first remarkable thing in both corpora is the great number of occurrences of *poder* and *can*, which surpasses by far the other expressions. In English *can* reaches a 65%, but if we add to this percentage the appearances of *could* we are nearer the number of occurrences of the different forms of *poder* in Spanish. Therefore *can* and *poder* are the most common verbs for the

expression of dynamic modality, and the most prototypical ones, as it was noticed before. This means that the translation of *can* as *poder* and vice versa is not only justified on semantic grounds, but also in their distribution, in the use of the language. It may be also significant in English that in these 100 tokens studied there did not appear any examples of dynamic will and *would*. Although they are usually included within dynamic modals, they do not seem to be central examples in this corpus.

3.3.2. Negation

The quantitative analysis also reveals parallels in other aspects: the number of expressions negated in both languages is also similar (22 negatives in English, 14 in Spanish plus the 3 cases of *incapaz* and *imposible*, with negative meaning). *Can't* is found in 17 cases, while positive *can* in 48 occasions. No examples of negative *could* and *used to* were found. In the examples analysed by Coates (1983:91) *can't* receives stress, while *can* is very rarely stressed. In the corpus used in this paper that seems to be also true:

- " m\any cases of c/ourse the Awords *can "!\n\ot {be As\ubstitute#i#* (979, LLC-1-1)
- because they 'can't do the stuff *them!!s\elves# (791200, LLC-1-1)

3.3.3. Process of the verb and speech act of the utterance

As far as the process of the verb that accompanies the modal, we find similarities too: 42 examples were dynamic verbs and 41 stative in English: in Spanish 35 were dynamic and 47 stative. Statements are also the most common speech act in both languages: 90 in both English and Spanish. An example in Spanish of a speech act which is not a statement is the following: "Bueno, pues ya podéis daros prisa para tenerlo, porque..." (35S ACON017A). The mood is declarative, but this example has the illocutionary force of a directive: the speaker is ordering the listeners to hurry up with some photographs they are talking about. The following examples in English have the force of a directive too: "You can't say that "worth" is adjectival, right. Because you can't say "very" in front of it" (651-656, LLC-1-1); "You can premodify it in that way" (665, LLC-1-1). Some examples of questions are the following:

- I can't see really unless there's something wrong with the candidate from the college why she shouldn't get it, can you? (270, LLC-1-3) (Tag question)
- How could I know at this stage - when it came to actually being asked the spot, in the interview, to apply this to Chaucer? (383, LLC-1-3) (rhetorical question)
- Oye, ¿mañana te podría localizar en algún sitio? (30, ACON012B)
- Igual podemos quedar mañana... por la, noche o algo. (283, (declarative mood, but illocutionary force of a question)

3.3.4. Repetition

Repetition was higher in English (16) than in Spanish (6), but they were mainly due to hesitations on the part of the speaker, rather than emphatic purposes. Examples (an example of emphasis is provided in the 1st sentence):

- También Pilar puede colaborar ...puede...puede ratificar lo que yo diciendo, esa niña ha esta<(d)>o pidiendo, suplicando. (222, ACON009A)
- I shall have roughly from the twenty-ninth of June to the eight of July on which I can ... I can spend the whole of that time. (195, LLC-1-1)
- You can't, as you say, you can't, you can't premodify it in that way. (665, LLC-1-1)

In Spanish there were several examples in which the speaker changes the tense of the verb in the second instance of the modal: "Por ejemplo, yo uedo... a través de la visualización podría... podría decir... pelos y señales de., de cómo es y hasta el color que tiene los ojos" (269, ACON009A). In this example the speaker decides to change from present to conditional to indicate the remoteness and tentativeness of the action. He is talking of showing some details of a murder (he is a journalist) and how these details could affect the family and the murderer. He has decided not to reveal these details, so therefore the consequences that this action would have are only hypothetical, and not real as the present tense could suggest.

3.3.5. *Soler vs. Used to; need.*

Soler and *used to* are relatively scarce in their number in both languages (2 examples in each). Its meanings are normally considered equivalents, meaning 'habit', but one must notice that *used to* always refers to the past, while the examples of *soler* found are in the present tenses:

- La verdad es que los domingos siempre... como siempre solemos hacer algo o salimos... (38, ACON012B)
- I'll crown that bastard before I'm finished with him. It used to be the same with the board as well. (798, LLC-1-1)
- Do you sew? I used to sew a lot. (68, LLC-1-3)

Expressions as *need* in English or *necesitar* in Spanish were also searched in the corpus as part of dynamic modality, but they seem to be more related to deontic modality:

- I've already suggested that he approaches Bill Short and that doesn't mean that if necessary some. (181162, LLC-1-2) (deontic)
- El chico sale por las noches y le ayuda mucho al ciudadano, porque los pobres necesitan..(164, ACON017B) (dynamic)

In Spanish the expression *estar en su poder* (75, ACON009A) can also have a dynamic meaning in some contexts, as well as the noun "imposibles" in the following example: "Es Santa Rita la que tiene que dar... El aboga<(d)>o de los imposibles..." (297, ACON012A). In English the expression *as far as* was repeatedly used with examples with *possible* and *can*: "She asked them for a summary using your own words as far as possible" (961, LLC-1-1). The appearance of adverbs like *just*, *hardly*, etc with *can* is common:

- On the other hand you can never tell with Edgar Sparrow; he's a canny old so and so... (352, LLC-1-1)
- They can hardly snub five vice-presbyters. (522, LLC-1-2)
- I can quite see there's ...there's cause for disappointment. (128, LLC-1-2)

3.3.6. Problems in the classification

While establishing the corpus used in this paper several problematic examples appeared. The decision was made only to include those items that appeared more clearly dynamic in meaning. It is interesting to have a look at possibly ambiguous occurrences. In the following sentences the dynamic meaning does not seem the only one possible:

- Lo bueno que tiene "Da Nicola" es que puedes comer los domingos. (406, ACON017A)
- If you want to have philosophy and mathematics as you your two possible subjects as an undergraduate then you can do those. (813310, LLC-1-2)

In the first case, the modal could have a deontic interpretation instead of dynamic, if the speaker focuses on the fact that the owners open the restaurant "Da Nicola" and allow to eat there, and not the capacity of the speaker to eat there. Looking at the co-text in which the sentence appears; it is impossible to know. In the second sentence *can* may refer again to the capacity of the student to take some subjects in his/her condition a undergraduate (dynamic interpretation), or to the fact that s/he is allowed to take those subjects by the university organization (deontic interpretation). That is, the forces which do not preclude the state or event are difficult to classify as either social or circumstantial.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, many similarities exist between English and Spanish modals, in meaning (e.g. *poder* and *can*) as well as in the contexts where they are used (e.g. negation, speech acts, etc). These similarities facilitate translation. Nevertheless, one must take into account that these results apply to the kind of texts of the corpus used in this paper, that is, oral texts. In other kinds of text-types or genres the results may be different. The examples of the corpora have also shown that there are some items difficult to classify under one type of modality or another. Therefore, when studying modality is important to distinguish between more or less prototypical examples of each category and to establish where these indeterminacies lie. In further studies it would be interesting to look at aspects where this kind of modal expressions differ in both languages, like for example their occurrences with adverbs or their behaviour in other kinds of texts.

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