

## Grammaticalization and the pragmatic field: the Romanian ‘can’

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This paper discusses the intra-speaker variation in the use of the Romanian constructions with the modal *putea* ‘can’ in (1) and (2). The modal selects a subjunctive complement in (1), and a bare infinitive in (2). Each construction may yield two readings: epistemic or deontic. Speakers seem to use (1) and (2) in free alternation (for either epistemic or deontic reading), within the same language register, while addressing the same interlocutor. I show that the option for (1) and (2) is not free, but determined by the presence/absence of speech act features in the derivation.

The use of (1) and (2) questions the exclusion of optionality in the grammatical theory, because: (i) each configuration is associated with two readings (distinguishable only through pragmatic clues); (ii) the two configurations may substitute for each other. This paper focuses on these two properties, aiming to (a) sort out the syntactic configuration underlying the ambiguous reading; (b) verify if the alternation between (1) and (2) is indeed free.

The framework for the assessment comes from: the cartography for modal possibility (Cinque 1999); the proposal of a syntactic approach to Speech Acts – which introduce the *speaker* and *hearer* role features in the left periphery of clauses (Baker 2008; Speas & Tenny 2003 a.o.); the definition of grammaticalization as the re-analysis of an item as merged in a higher hierarchical position (Roberts & Roussou 2003). The results are:

**Syntax.** Word order, constituency tests, clitic placement and verb ellipsis indicate that ‘can’ is a non-thematic, raising verb in (1), but a functional verb merged directly in the TP domain in (2). As shown in (3) and (4), respectively, the configuration is bi-clausal in (1) but mono-clausal in (2), the latter having both the modal and the bare infinitive verb sharing the same TP domain. Hence, the functional ‘can’ in (2) comes from a re-analysis of the modal higher in the hierarchy. According to the criteria in Roberts & Roussou (2003), the version in (2) must be more recent and, therefore, preferred in colloquial language. Irrespective of the bi- or mono-clausal structure, each modal construction allows for deontic or epistemic readings because: (i) the merging site for the modal is low (i.e., ‘little’ v for the raising verb; Mod<sub>ability</sub> for the functional verb); (ii) obligatory verb movement to the highest inflectional head applies in both cases. Hence, the modal may either check the modal features low in the structure (yielding a deontic reading) or high, above T (in Mod<sub>epistemic</sub>, yielding an epistemic reading). However, ambiguity arises only out of context, which means that pragmatics determines the qualification of [possibility] in the Numeration, so only one [possibility] ModP has active features (either low or high).

**Performance.** The direction of grammaticalization predicts that (2) should be preferred over (1) in colloquial language. This is not the case, as the two versions have coexisted at this degree of alternation for at least 400 years. I elicited judgments for a list of 9 modal constructions, counting how many times the speakers (30 women, age 40 and above) opt for subjunctive or bare infinitive complementation. It appears that the bare infinitive is a regular option when economy is at stake (e.g., constructions with recursive sentential complements have the second verb as bare infinitive versus subjunctive (5)), but not when ‘can’ has only one complement. In the latter case, the choice depends on the degree of speaker-orientedness: a strong point of view pairs with the option for subjunctives (6,7), while neutral sentences show the infinitive option (8). Hence, the choice between (1) and (2) depends on the presence/absence of speech act features in the left periphery. The pairing of the subjunctive with speaker-orientedness occurs elsewhere in the language (e.g., the alternation between the auxiliaries ‘be’/‘have’), so it is independent of the properties of ‘can’. The main point is that speech acts influence the choice in syntactic derivation to the point of cancelling the default option given by the direction of grammaticalization (i.e., preference of an older form over a more recent one).

### References

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- Cinque, G. 1999. *Adverbs and functional heads: a cross-linguistic perspective*. Oxford: OUP.  
 Roberts, I. and A. Roussou. 2003. *Syntactic change*. Cambridge: CUP.  
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Data. Abbreviations: SUBJ = ‘subjunctive’ (mood marker or verb ending); INF = infinitive

- (1) Ar putea domnia-sa să- i lumineze sufletul.  
 would could lord-his to-SUBJ him lighten-SUBJ soul-the  
 ‘His highness might enlighten his mind.’ (epistemic)  
 OR ‘His highness could enlighten his mind.’ (deontic)
- (2) Domnia-sa i- ar putea lumina sufletul.  
 lord-his him would could light-INF soul-the  
 ‘His highness might enlighten his mind.’ (epistemic)  
 OR ‘His highness could enlighten his mind.’ (deontic)
- (3) [TP T<sub>can</sub> Mod<sub>ability/can</sub> [vP V<sub>can</sub> [TP T<sub>enlighten</sub>’...]]] (deontic)  
 OR  
 [TP Mod<sub>epistemic/can</sub> T<sub>can</sub> [vP V<sub>can</sub> [TP T<sub>enlighten</sub>’...]]] (epistemic)
- (4) [TP T<sub>can</sub> Mod<sub>ability/can</sub> Voice<sub>enlighten</sub>’ [vP V<sub>enlighten</sub>’...]] (deontic)  
 OR  
 [TP Mod<sub>epistemic/can</sub> T<sub>can</sub> Voice<sub>enlighten</sub>’ [vP V<sub>enlighten</sub>’...]] (epistemic)
- (5) *Maria pare [să poată [să se angajeze.]]* options#: 3  
 Maria seems SUBJ can-3sg to-SUBJ REFL get.employed-3sg.SUBJ  
*Maria pare [să se poată angaja.]* options#: 25  
 Maria seems to-SUBJ REFL can-3sg get.employed-INF undecided: 2  
 ‘Maria seems to be able to get herself hired.’
- (6) *Dragă, nu poți să lucrezi în ritmul ăsta!* options#: 19  
 dear not can-2sg to-SUBJ work-2sg in rhythm-the this  
*Dragă nu poți lucra în ritmul ăsta!* options#: 8  
 dear not can-2sg work-INF in rhythm-the this undecided: 3  
 ‘Dear, you cannot work in this rhythm!’ = **mild/polite point of view**
- (7) *Sigur că poate să întârzie.* options#: 25  
 surely that can-3sg to-SUBJ retard-3sg  
*Sigur că poate întârzia.* options#: 3  
 Surely that can retard-INF undecided: 2  
 ‘Of course s/he could be late.’ = **strong point of view**
- (8) *Legea spune că nu putem să călătorim fără pașaport.* options#: 10  
 law-the says that not can-1pl to-SUBJ travel-1pl without passport  
*Legea spune că nu putem călători fără pașaport.* options#: 14  
 Law-the says that not can-1pl travel-INF without passport  
 ‘The law says that we cannot travel without a passport.’ undecided: 6