

## "SUBJUNCTIVE" *MAY*: A FOSSILIZING PATTERN

A. M. SIMON-VANDENBERGEN

*State University of Ghent*

Recent studies have revealed that the distinction between *can* and *may* in present-day British English usage can be summed up as follows: *can* is the exponent of dynamic possibility, while *may* typically expresses epistemic possibility<sup>1</sup>. However, there remain certain uses of *may* which cannot be termed epistemic<sup>2</sup>. This paper concentrates on the so-called 'subjunctive' use. It aims to show that both the present-day situation and the historical development in the semantics of *may* provide evidence for the hypothesis that these subjunctive uses are vestiges of the earlier situation in which dynamic possibility was the domain of *may*.

### 1. PRESENT-DAY USAGE

Palmer (1979) discusses some instances of *may* that do not fit into the area of epistemic possibility. Such uses present a problem because Palmer claims that '*may* is not a dynamic modal' (1979:152). The problematic cases can be grouped into two types: *may* in independent clauses and in sub-clauses. Each type is briefly considered below.

#### 1.1. *MAY* in independent clauses

The use of *may* in the following example is clearly dynamic:

- (1) Cader Idris, however, *may* be climbed from other points on this tour.  
(Palmer 1979).

<sup>1</sup> The terms are borrowed from Palmer (1979). The paraphrase for dynamic possibility is 'It is possible *for* × *to* V'; the paraphrase for epistemic possibility is 'It is possible *that* × V'.

<sup>2</sup> Deontic possibility is left out of consideration here.

I suggested elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that such instances, typical of formal written English, testify to the decline of dynamic *may*. They occur in an area of overlap between *can* and *may*, where *may* is marked for formality.

## 1.2. *MAY* in dependent clauses

### 1.2.1. Sub-clauses of purpose or envisaged result.

*May* occurs in clauses introduced by conjunctions such as *that*, *so that*, *in order that*

(2) How can you keep bees? You have to have lots of land in order that they *may* eat. (Palmer 1979).

Here also *can* would be more usual in colloquial speech: '...so that they can eat'.

### 1.2.2. Sub-clause of wish

*May* is also found in object-clauses following such verbs as *wish*, *desire*, *hope*, *pray*, *beg*, etc.

(3) I pray that God *may* bless you. (Palmer 1979)

The use of *may* in independent exclamatory clauses expressing a wish may be mentioned here:

(4) *May* God bless you all through the coming year. (Palmer 1979)

## 2. HYPOTHESIS

There is evidence from the semantic history of *may* that the 'quasi-subjunctive'<sup>4</sup> is another relic of dynamic *may*. Its use in sub-clauses of purpose falls within an area where *can* and *may* overlap and is in that respect comparable with dynamic *may* in independent clauses. In sub-clauses of wish, *may* is not substitutable by *can* and may be considered a fossilized pattern.

## 3. HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

### 3.1. The use of 'subjunctive' *MAY* in Middle English

Under the entry *mouen* the MED provides many examples of this auxiliary in sub-clauses of purpose or wish:

(5) He wolde senden hym oyle of mercy for to anoynte with his membres pat he myghte haue hele. (*Mandev.* (1) 7/17)

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Simon-Vanderbergen, 'On the Decline of Dynamic *MAY*'. Forthcoming in *Studia Neophilologica*.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'quasi-subjunctive' is used in Quirk et al. (1972: § 3.45).

(6) I wysshed to god hit myzt be pus. (*Titus* & V. (Pep) 2758)

The comment in the MED is that *mouen* occurs here in 'weakened varieties of sense 2.' (i.e. to be able), in which 'the ability or potentiality becomes mere possibility, or is made contingent upon something else'. It seems plausible indeed to argue that 'subjunctive' *may* developed from dynamic *may*, since (i) in all the examples the paraphrase 'It is possible for X to V' is appropriate; (ii) dynamic possibility was the earliest and in Middle English still the most common meaning of *may*<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2. The development since the 15th century: evidence from a corpus

#### 3.2.1. Statistical data

A pilot study on the use of *can* and *may* from the 15th to the 19th century was based on a sample of 2,181 instances of these two modals. The examples were collected from letters, expository prose, novels and plays. The following figures were obtained:

— total number of instances of <i>may</i>	= 1,085
— <i>may</i> in sub-clauses of purpose and wish	= 169 (= 15.50%)
— <i>may</i> in exclamatory wish-clauses	= 22

#### 3.2.2. Examples from the corpus

##### 3.2.2.1. Dependent purpose-clauses.

(7) Also, sir, all the goods that be gotyn at this bataylte lette hit be serched, and whan ye have hit in your hondis lette hit be geffyn frendly unto thes two kyngis, Ban and Bors, that they *may* rewarde their knyghtes wythall...

(Malory, *The Tale of King Arthur*, 25/8)

The meaning of dynamic possibility is very obvious in the above example, and also in the following:

(8) Tis I (quoth Iohn) what meane you by this? I pray you come downe and open the doore that I *may* come in. (Deloney, *Iacke of Newberie*, 18/20)

(9) Then (said Evangelist) stand still a little, that I *may* shew thee the words of God. (Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 23/15)

Relative clauses with final import are also common:

(10) And now let's go to an honest ale-house, where we *may* have a cup of good barley-wine, and sing Old Rose, and all of us rejoyce together. (Walton, *The Complete Angler*, 45)

<sup>5</sup> Goossens (1981) points out that it is extremely difficult to find clear epistemic examples in Middle English.

## 3.2.2.2. Dependent wish-and request-clauses.

(11) Wherefore I besech you that my maystir *may* be buried, and that som knyght *may* revenge my maystirs dethe. (Malory, *The Tale of King Arthur*, 31/10)

(12) I'll bestow Sir Thomas Overbury's milk-maid's wish upon her, 'That she *may* die in the spring, and being dead, may have good store of flowers stuck round about her winding sheet'. (Walton, *The Complete Angler*, 70)

(13) If any English gentleman of your Honour's acquaintance have occasion to repair to Florence, I humbly desire he *may* be commended to me, ... (Wotton, *Letters*, 20/277)

It may seem as if in this type of clause the modal expresses deontic rather than dynamic modality:

'...that  $\times$  *may* V' = '...that some authority permits  $\times$  to V'  
[ $\pm$  vocative]

(rather than: '...that it is possible for  $\times$  to V', which is the paraphrase for purpose-clauses).

However, there are some strong arguments in favour of classifying this type with dynamic possibility:

(i) The deontic element is not so obvious in all instances:

(14) I had rather wish, that whatever he may do at her marriage, *may* flow spontaneously from himself. (Nelson, *Letters*, 53)

(15) I will say no more of this fish at the present, but wish you *may* catch the next you fish for. (Walton, *The Complete Angler*, 57)

In (15) one might suggest 'Fate' as the authority, but this is very close to 'circumstances' and dynamic possibility includes the meaning element 'circumstances permit  $\times$  to V'.

(ii) The boundary between dynamic and deontic possibility is not clear-cut anyway, since the latter developed from the former (Visser 1969: §1661).

It is a matter of gradience.

(iii) There are some convincing counter-examples against a deontic interpretation:

(16) and I'll pray that heaven *may* grant it thee in the meantime. (Congreve, *The Way of the World*, I, 1, 405)

It is difficult to see who would give permission to heaven.

## 3.2.2.3. Independent exclamatory wish-clauses

(17) Much good *may* it do you good gossip (said mistress Winchcomb). (Deloney, *Iacke, of Newberie*, 56/40)

(18) An' *may* the Lord bless ye, dear, kind gentleman, for your kindness. (Stevenson, *Deacon Brodie*, III, iv)

Palmer (1979:162) suggests that such clauses could perhaps be seen, 'synchronically, at least' as being derived from an underlying 'I pray that —'. Very tentatively I feel inclined to adopt this view, also diachronically. Some evidence may be found in the following facts: (i) whereas the dependent wish-clauses are found in all periods (Visser's earliest example (§1678) is from Alfred, Boeth. (Fox) 88, 30, Nis nan gesceaft ðara ðe ne wilnige ðæt hit pider *cuman mæge*), the exclamatory wish-clause was not yet used in Old English. Even in the sixteenth century the number of examples remains comparatively small (Visser 1969: § 1680): (ii) whereas in present-day usage the subject follows *may*, examples are found in the older language in which this is not so. (For examples, see Visser §1680). This might suggest that the independent wish-clauses developed from dependent clauses which were separated from their embedding clauses. The change in word order might have been caused by the desire to avoid ambiguity. This hypothesis would need further exploration, but it seems to be a plausible way to account for the idiom.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The 'untidiness' in the system of modal possibility in present-day English can be explained from the historical development in the use of *may*. Essentially the semantic evolution is a weakening of the dynamic component element.\* Synchronically it is economical to retain a dynamic *may*, because it solves the problem of classifying instances which are clearly neither deontic nor epistemic. The situation in present-day English may be described as follows:

MAY	MAY + CAN	CAN
— sub-clauses of wish	— independent clauses ( <i>may</i> =[+formal])	all other contexts, stylistic and grammatical
— exclamatory wish-clauses	— sub-clauses of purpose ( <i>may</i> =[+formal])	
fossilized usage	declining usage	productive usage

## DYNAMIC POSSIBILITY

\* Statistical evidence for this is provided in 'On the Decline of Dynamic MAY'. (See note 3).

## REFERENCES

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