THE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMANTICS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH *MOWEN* IN THE LIGHT OF ITS RISE TO EPISTEMICITY AND EVENTUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper offers a historical analysis of the semantic development of the ME verb *mowen* with particular attention paid to the emergence of its epistemic use. The contexts for the analysis of the ME verb *mowen* were taken from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Contrary to prevalent assumptions which view the inception of epistemicity in the light of the metaphorical process itself, the present study aims to show that by relying solely on the metaphor itself, the process of the emergence of epistemicity would be distorted. Instead, the paper offers the approach of a gradual shift, by means of defocusing of a source of enablement, via metonymy and metaphor in the light of the grammaticalization process. Hence, the aim is to view metaphorical and metonymic transfers as complementary as both are activated but at different stages of the development of the verb *mowen*.

Moreover, the paper attempts to analyse the variety of concepts evolving on the path to epistemicity, thus intrinsic and contingent abilities followed by root and epistemic possibilities.

Last but not least, the study shows that the approach of a gradual shift accounts also for the rise of eventuality underlying the future sense of ME *mowen* and of PDE *may*.

1. Introduction

The present paper offers a historical analysis of the semantic development of the ME verb *mowen* < OE *magan* with particular attention paid to the emergence of its epistemic use. It should be emphasised that a relatively high number of articles have been devoted to the mechanism of the inception of epistimicity in the pre-modals via metaphor.

The present paper, by drawing on theories represented by Gamon (1997), Hopper and Traugott (1993), and Sweetser (1990) illustrates the analysis of the semantics of ME *mowen* in the light of its rise to epistemicity and eventuality. Hence, the aims of the present paper are the following:

First of all, the study will attempt to prove that the epistemic, thus propositional (Palmer 1989: 7) function of the verb *mowen* arises out of a diachronically basic root function, thus the event one (Palmer 1989: 16), yet via the intermediate stages of the root possibility by way of defocusing of a source of enablement (Gamon 1997: 127).

It should be emphasised that the present theories on the development of ME *mowen* either exclude the role of metaphor in the process of the emergence of epistemicity in ME *mowen* (Gamon 1993), or claim that the metaphorical transfer is the only means to epistemicity (Sweetser 1990). The present study will modify these approaches by claiming that the process of metaphor was one of the transfers on the way to epistemicity in ME *mowen*. In other words, the paper will argue that the role of metaphor should neither be denied nor conceived as the only means to epistemicity but rather as complementary with metonymy. Thus, the present study will prove that by applying a mechanism of a gradual three-fold shift within the root meaning, thus from inherent to the contingent ability, and then from the root possibility to the epistemic one, via metonymic and metaphorical transfers, a linguist obtains a cognitively more plausible path than when applying the only process of metaphor.

According to Gamon (1993: 127), the process of metaphor fails to account for the category of the root possibility. In other words, the mechanism of metaphor illustrates only the first stage of the path, namely the root intrinsic ability, and the last one, thus the epistemic possibility completely disregarding the intermediate stage – the root possibility. Hence, relying on the metaphor itself, as the only means from the root to the epistemic sense, the process of the emergence of epistemicity would be incomplete, if not distorted.

Moreover, the present analysis will illustrate that it is both metonymic and metaphorical transfers that are activated at different stages to the emergence of the subjectivity and the subsequent grammaticalisation process. Hence, metaphor and metonymy should be viewed as complementary in the process of the rise to the epistemicity in ME *mowen* as the process itself involves shifts both within one conceptual domain, thus metonymic ones, at the initial stages and across conceptual domains, thus metaphorical ones, at the latter ones.

Furthermore, the paper will indicate that the gradual shift, the final stage of which was the subjectification stage, corresponds to the three tendencies of grammaticalisation advocated by Traugott (1989). Consequently, one can observe a shift from an ordinary verb with a semantic meaning underlying physical ability to an attitudinal modal operator contributing to a subjectively-modalised statement of opinion, or hear-say, or tentative inference rather than statement of fact (Lyons 1977: 799).

Last but not least, the paper will show that the approach of a gradual shift by way of defocusing of a source of enablement is consistent not only with the rise

of the epistemicity but it also accounts for the shift from a positive ability, with the connotation of a certain degree of certainty in the accomplishment of some undertaking, to the emerging in ME sense of eventuality, uncertainty underlying the future meaning of the root possibility.

The present analysis is based on the whole *Canterbury Tales* from the collection of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by Fred Norris Robinson (1957, 2nd edition).

According to OED (sv. *may*), the concept of ME *mowen* could be analysed along the following senses:

– to be strong, to have power or influence
– expressing ability or power = *can*
– objective possibility, opportunity or absence of prohibitive conditions
– permission or sanction
– subjective possibility, i.e. admissibility of a supposition

Following the terminology used in the paper, the first two concepts ('to be strong, to have power or influence' and 'expressing ability or power' = *can*) will be referred to as the *root ability*, the concept of the objective possibility as the *root possibility*, while the subjective possibility will be named *epistemic possibility*.

The semantic analysis of ME *mowen* in the whole *Canterbury Tales* records the following concepts:

a)	intrinsic root ability	–	34 instances,	14%
b)	contingent ability	–	50 instances,	21%
c)	root possibility	–	139 instances,	58%
	– speech act verbs	–	19 instances,	8%
d)	epistemic possibility	–	17 instances,	7%

2. The semantic analysis of senses underlying the root ability

Gamon (1993), while illustrating the idea of the root ability points to a two-fold division within the concept of the root ability, namely into the inherent and the circumstantial, hence the contingent ability. Thus, he links the root inherent ability with intrinsic qualities of the subject, while the contingent one with a set of circumstances enabling the performance of an activity. Such a standpoint seems to be at variance with the assumption posited by Kytö (1991: 155), for whom the ability meaning is the possibility of action determined by inherent properties of the animate subject. Comparing the two definitions and juxtaposing them with the analysis of contexts from *The Canterbury Tales*, it seems that one

should be rather more inclined towards Gamon's approach as it corresponds better to medieval linguistic reality.

1) intrinsic ability

> For many a man so hard of his herte,
> He *may not* wepe, although hym soore smarte
> ("General Prologue" 230: 19).

> And finally he dooth al his labour
> As he best *myghte*   ("The Merchant's Tale" 1765-1766: 116).

> Now help me, lady, sith ye *may* and *kann*
> ("The Knight's Tale" 2312: 39).

One can compare the above sentences with the ones reflecting the contingent ability.

2) contingent ability

> With empty hand men *may* none haukes lure
> ("The Merchant's Tale" 415: 80).

> They seyden that it were a charitee
> That Theseus wolde enhauncen his degree,
> And putten hym in worshipful servyse,
> Ther as he *myghte* his vertu exercise
> ("The Knight's Tale" 1433-1436: 31).

At that stage, it is the metonymic transfer that is activated. According to Hopper and Traugott (1993: 82), metonymy is a semantic transfer through contiguity and operates across interdependent syntactic constituents, hence within one domain. Thus, contrary to metaphor that works via analogy and similarity thereby bridging different conceptual domains, metonymy operates via reanalysis and contiguity within one conceptual domain. Hence, in the analysis of the type of transfer between the intrinsic and the contingent ability in the ME *mowen*, the relation between the inner self and the completed activity is substituted for the relation between the external factor and the completed activity. Moreover, on the semantic level, both types are propositional, hence descriptive. In other words, they provide a description of reality, refer to a state of affairs. Thus, the change from the intrinsic to the contingent ability can be interpreted in terms of associative metonymic changes arising out of contiguity in linguistic contexts.

Moreover, comparing the two types of abilities, the intrinsic one predicating the physical quality of its subject with the contingent one predicating ability in a non-physical domain and deriving from circumstantial enablement, one can no-

tice certain semantic connotations, which contributed to the development of the semantics of *mowen*. Thus, in the first stage, the verb is associated with a high degree of certainty about the accomplishment of the activity, while in the second stage, the enabling factor does not lie within the subjects' inner capacity but is external. Consequently the degree of certainty about the accomplishment of the activity is weaker. In other words, the first two-fold shift within the root ability can be viewed as the first step in the development of the sense of eventuality and futurity, which emerged in the further stages of the development of the verb in medieval English.

3. The semantic analysis of the senses underlying the root possibility

In the analysis of the root possibility, there are at least two issues that need elaboration. The first of them is related to the interpretation of the root possibility i.e., how it can be conceived of, and the other pertains to differences between root and epistemic possibilities. The first point will be discussed in this section while the other in the following one together with the interpretation of the epistemic possibility.

Kytö (1987: 155), while discussing the issue of the root possibility assumes that there is no clear indication of the restriction or inherent properties of the subject, but external circumstances make the state or action referred to in the verb possible.

Yet, according to Lyons (1977), the category of the root possibility has been referred to as objective epistemic possibility. Hence one can assume a vague borderline between the root possibility and the subsequent epistemic stage, and that the root possibility represents a natural and plausible link between the root and the epistemic modality (Gamon 1993: 127). Lyons (1977: 787), while referring to this category, claims that the speaker is committed by the utterance of an objectively modalised utterance to the factuality of the information that he is giving to the addressee. Thus, he is performing an act telling. From this assumption, one can infer that statements belonging to the 'bridging category' have no tentative character but are rather statements of facts, hence objective. Further, Lyons indicates (1977: 796) that the category of the root possibility involves a cline from a recognition or assertion of the circumstances permitting the materialisation of a state of affairs represented by a proposition through a simple assertion of the possibility of such materialisation. Approaching the idea of the root possibility, one can draw a two-fold character of the category itself. It may have either a factive mode when the speaker identifies the enabling circumstances, or it may have a mode of a prophecy when the source is vague, uncertain and the reasons, the speaker outlines, are either overtly or covertly stated thus inferred from the context.

In order to see the consequences of these interpretations, one should approach the following contexts:

3) For I *moot* wepe and wayle, whil I lyve,
    With al the wo that prison may me yive
    And eek with payne that love me yeveth also
    That doubleth al my torment and my wo
    <div align="right">("The Knight's Tale" 1295-1298: 29).</div>

4) Thow walkest now in Thebes at thy large,
    Thou *mayst*, syn thou hast wisdom and manhede,
    Assemblen alle the folk of oure kynrede,
    And make a werre so sharp on this citee,
    That by som aventure or some tretee
    Thow *mayst* have hire to lady and to wyf
    <div align="right">("The Knight's Tale" 1283-1290: 29).</div>

Comparing the two contexts, one may notice that in the first one the source of enablement, thus the external circumstances, is clearly identified, while in the second one the source of enablement seems rather defocused. Yet, approaching this sentence, it seems that the enabler must be somehow conceptualised as it is the phrase *by some aventure* (PDE – *by some chance*), that makes the linguist more inclined toward the interpretation that it is the *fate* that is the enabler. It is also Gamon (1991: 144) who claims that "[s]ome enabler, which has the role for the occurrence of an event exists – or equivalently no disenabling circumstances exist."

Thus "some enabler" may correspond to unidentified, vague force, which is, however, conceptualised at some abstract level and affects the accomplishment of the activity.

Consequently, one cannot but notice that the range of senses within the root possibility can extend from the possibility whose source is clearly identified to the one whose source seems rather vague, uncertain. Therefore, one should say that it is not the presence of the enabler (in (3)) which changes into its absence (in (4)) but rather the change of the concept of the enabler, which becomes more abstract. The fate, that is a conditioning factor, entails such connotations as uncertainty, vagueness as well as it affects the time-span of the activity. Hence the semantics of *mowen* shifts and becomes more future-oriented, fuzzy and unlimited. According to Gamon, enablement shades into possibility (1993: 137).

Approaching the root possibility in the light of the grammaticalisation process, and to be precise, the shift from the contingent ability to the root possibility, one can notice that it corresponds to Tendency I (Traugott 1989):

— Meaning based in the external described situation > meaning based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) situation.

As the process of metaphorisation works by mapping more tangible, concrete phenomena upon the abstract ones, the idea of the root possibility, so the possibility of the realisation of a state of affairs, can be derived from the more concrete concept of the contingent ability. Thus the concept of the possibility can be conceived of in terms of the ability of either external circumstances or the fate to help to fulfil a certain state of affairs.

Thus, the above metaphorical transfer operates via similarity across the two conceptual domains.

3.1. The analysis of speech acts in the conversational world

The analysis of *The Canterbury Tales* records specific semantic connotations of ME *mowen*, which neither predicate epistemic possibility nor real world ability but occur in the conversational world and are classified as speech-act verbs within the root possibility.

5) God of his grete goodnesse seyde than, "Lat us now make an helpe unto this man lyk to hymself" and thanne he made him Eve Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve, That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort
    <div align="right">("Merchant's Prologue" 1327-1331: 116).</div>

    And he bigan with right a myrie cheere
    His tale anon, and seyde as ye may heere
    <div align="right">("General Prologue" 858: 25).</div>

Such sentences correspond to Tendency II (Traugott 1989):

Meanings based in the described external or internal situation > meaning based in the textual situation.

The analysis of such contexts points to a certain set of common semantic attributes that makes them classified as one separate subgroup of the root possibility. To begin with, their context is always conversational and necessitates the existence of a speaker and a hearer. Consequently, it is only the premises in the conversational world that affect the hearer's potential standpoint.

Moreover, *mowen* performing the function of a speech-act verb should be conceived of as constituting a subgroup of a larger category – the root possibility category. The reasons underlying such a classification are the following. First of all, the mode of *mowen* as a speech act verb is restrictive for the hearer and prevents him/her from making tentative, subjective judgements.

Secondly, the presence of premises in the conversational world corresponds to the presence of external circumstances in the real world. Similarly to external circumstances which affect the possibility of emerging states of affairs, and impose a certain course of events, the premises affect the potential standpoint of the speaker and impose him a way of thinking, valuing and judging.

4. The semantic analysis of senses underlying the epistemic possibility

While analysing the root and epistemic possibilities, one can notice that the borderline between them is vague, hence the shift from the root to the epistemic possibility was but a minor one. According to Lyons (1977: 796), root possibility involves a cline from a recognition or assertion of the circumstances permitting the materialisation of a state of affairs represented by a proposition, through a simple assertion of the possibility of such materialisation. Epistemic possibility, however, as he further maintains (1977: 797) involves a qualification of the speaker's commitment to the truth or factuality of an assertion that a state of affairs will materialise or commitment to the truth of a proposition. In other words, the root possibility highlights either the materialisation, or the possibility of materialisation, of a state of affairs, as opposed to the epistemic possibility, which is related to the speaker's reasoning process and his/her own attitude towards a proposition.

The following contexts are well informative about the nature of epistemic possibility.

6)   Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe

                            ("Franklin's Tale" 1479: 143).

    No man may alwey han prosperitee

                            ("The Clerk's Tale" 810: 110).

In the light of these contexts, one should maintain that the epistemic possibility codes speaker's attitude not speaker-independent potentiality (Gamon 1993: 147). In other words, such sentences are tentative statements of opinion thereby being nonpropositional and non-descriptive. Consequently, epistemic possibility corresponds to Tendency III (Traugott 1989):

    Meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker's subjective belief-state/attitude toward the situation.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, the present paper has been an attempt to carry out an analysis of the concept of *mowen* and to emphasise that its epistemic use emerged from the process of a gradual shift via both metonymy and metaphor. Hence, the paper argues the metonymic and metaphorical transfers should be viewed as complementary in the emergence of epistemicity.

Besides, the aim of the study has also been to show that the process of a gradual shift is consistent with the long-lasting assumption of the gradual accretion of subjectivity as it illustrates all its stages on the path to epistemicity.

Furthermore, the study also indicates that the process of a gradual shift corresponds to the three tendencies of grammaticalisation advocated by Traugott. Hence, combining the approach of a gradual shift via metonymy and metaphor in the light of the grammaticalisation process, a linguist obtains a series meanings of *mowen*, thus senses denoting:

- intrinsic ability
- contingent ability
- root possibility
- speech act verbs, thus a subgroup of the root possibility category
- highly subjective epistemic possibility

Moreover, the paper has also argued that the approach of a shift by defocusing of a source of enablement accounts for the rise of eventuality underlying the future sense of *mowen* and of PDE *may*.

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