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### **Invariantism about ‘Can’ and ‘May’ (as Well as ‘Might’)**

I argued for a non-relativist, invariantist theory of ‘might’ in Braun (2013). According to this theory, ‘might’ semantically expresses the same weak modal property in every context, but speakers who utter sentences containing it typically assert propositions that concern stronger types of modality. For instance, the semantic content of ‘Holmes might be in Paris’ is the same weak modal proposition in all contexts, yet when Lestrade and Mycroft utter that sentence, they may thereby assert different, stronger, modal propositions: Lestrade may assert that (roughly speaking) Holmes’s being in Paris is compatible with what Lestrade knows, while Mycroft may assert that Holmes’s being in Paris is compatible with what Mycroft knows.

Igor Yanovich (2013) argues that invariantism about ‘might’ is inconsistent with certain historical facts about other modal terms, such as ‘can’ and ‘may’. Suppose (for *reductio*) that invariantism about ‘might’ is correct and ‘might’ is not context-sensitive. Then either ‘can’ and ‘may’ are context-sensitive or they are not. Suppose first (for *reductio*) that they are context-sensitive (unlike ‘might’). This supposition, Yanovich argues, conflicts with the historical fact that all of these terms have changed their “modal flavors” over time. Suppose instead (again for *reductio*) that ‘can’, and ‘may’ are not context-sensitive. Then, Yanovich claims, invariantism about ‘might’ entails (i) that ‘can’ and ‘may’ have the same semantic content as ‘might’ (in all contexts) and (ii) that the differences in “modal flavor” among these terms are due to pragmatics alone. But these consequences conflict with certain facts about how these terms changed in

meaning over time, Yanovich argues. So both suppositions about the context-sensitivity of ‘can’ and ‘may’, together with the supposition that ‘might’ is not context-sensitive, conflict with historical facts about these terms. Therefore, the supposition that ‘might’ is not context-sensitive is false.

Yanovich’s argument raises a number of interesting and important issues. I will take an indirect approach in my reply. I will first argue that facts about disquotation suggest that ‘can’ and ‘may’ are context-*ins*sensitive, and so invariantism about ‘can’ and ‘may’ is correct. Second, I will ask how an invariantist about all three terms should explain their differences in modal flavor. I will consider both pragmatic and semantic explanations, tentatively choosing a semantic explanation. I will next consider whether this theory is consistent with what I said about ‘might’ in my earlier paper. Finally, I will consider whether this theory is consistent with facts about diachronic meaning changes in these terms.

Perhaps the primary evidence in favor of invariantism about ‘might’ comes from facts about disquotation. Suppose that Lestrade and Mycroft utter ‘Holmes might be in Paris’, in the ways described above, each describing compatibility with his own knowledge. Then a speaker who utters ‘Lestrade and Mycroft said that Holmes might be in Paris’ says something true. This strongly suggests that there is a single proposition that both Lestrade and Mycroft said, and that suggests that the semantic content of ‘Holmes might be in Paris’ is the same in all contexts, though speakers may use it to assert different propositions. For details, see Braun (2013).

I did not consider ‘can’ or ‘may’ in my earlier paper. But I tentatively believe that similar arguments can be given in favor of invariantism for both. Suppose Noam utters ‘David can speak Finnish’, meaning (roughly!) that if David were to receive the right kind of exposure to Finnish, he would speak Finnish. Suppose that Jaakko utters ‘David can speak Finnish’,

meaning that David has already mastered Finnish.<sup>1</sup> And finally, suppose that someone who overhears both Noam and Jaakko, but who is unsure about what sorts of modalities they are trying to convey, utters ‘Noam and Jaakko said that David can speak Finnish’. Such a speaker says something true, which suggests that there is a single proposition that both Noam and Jaakko said, and this suggests that ‘David can speak Finnish’ semantically expresses the same proposition in all contexts. This proposition would presumably concern a weak sort of modality, from which can be derived (by enrichment) the stronger types of modal propositions that Noam and Jaakko assert. A parallel argument could be given in favor of invariantism for ‘may’. So, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that both terms are context-*insensitive*.

The words ‘might’, ‘can’, and ‘may’ differ in modal flavor, as Yanovich puts it. As I would put it, these terms differ in the sorts of propositions a speaker typically uses them to assert. Speakers typically use ‘may’, but not ‘might’, to assert a proposition concerning moral permissibility, or some other sort of permissibility. Speakers typically use ‘can’, but not ‘might’, to assert a proposition concerning ability. How should an invariantist explain these differences? At first glance, an invariantist has (at least) two options, one pragmatic, one semantic.

As Yanovich points out, an invariantist might hold that ‘might’, ‘can’, and ‘may’ semantically express the very same weak modal semantic content, and differ only in their pragmatics properties, broadly construed. Perhaps such an invariantist could claim that they differ from each other in something very roughly like conventional implicature. A speaker who utters ‘*P* but *Q*’ cannot avoid implying that there is a contrast between *P* and *Q*. Perhaps somewhat similarly, a speaker who utters ‘can’ cannot (easily) avoid asserting or conveying a proposition concerning a certain sort of modality, and a different sort from one who utters ‘might’. Exactly how the theory would go is not clear to me, and the analogy with conventional

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<sup>1</sup> The example is inspired by Lewis (1976).

implicature is imperfect. I will not pursue it further here.

An invariantist could instead hold that each term differs from the other two in (invariant) semantic content. The very weak modal property expressed by ‘might’ (in all contexts) has nothing to do with moral, legal, or any other sort of permissibility; that is why one does not typically use it to assert a proposition about any sort of permissibility. The semantic content of ‘may’, however, is more inclusive (and perhaps even weaker than the content of ‘might’) and can easily be used to assert a proposition about permissibility. So, the two terms semantically express different weak modal properties. Parallel reasons could be given for thinking that ‘can’ differs in (invariant) semantic content from the other two terms. Let us call this the *Three Semantic Contents Theory*.<sup>2</sup> I am inclined to accept this theory over the merely pragmatic theory of the terms’ modal flavors.

Yanovich’s argument against invariantism about ‘might’ implicitly relies on the following premise: if ‘might’, ‘can’, and ‘may’ are all context- insensitive, then they have the same (invariant) semantic content. Since I have tentatively accepted the Three Semantic Contents Theory, I tentatively deny this premise of his argument.

Yanovich may think that the Three Semantic Contents Theory is inconsistent with the invariantist theory of ‘might’ that I presented in Braun (2013). But I said nothing about ‘can’ and ‘may’ in that paper. So, the Three Semantic Contents Theory can be shown inconsistent with that earlier theory only by adding further premises to the latter. I am unsure what those further claims would be. Perhaps Yanovich thinks that my paper commits me to saying that

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<sup>2</sup> Each term’s semantic content would be equivalent to (but not the same as) the content of an existential quantifier over worlds, but each such quantifier would quantify over a different class of worlds than the other two. Contextualists typically say (roughly) that each term’s semantic content, in a given context, is quantificational, but in a given context, the quantificational semantic content of any one such term quantifies over a different class of worlds (a different modal base) than the others. Such contextualist views entail that the three terms differ in Kaplanian *character*. (See Portner 2009, p. 55, for a clear example of a theory that has this sort of implication.)

‘might’ expresses the *weakest* possible modal property, and that this (together with other claims) implies that all three terms express the same modal content. But I did not claim that ‘might’ semantically expresses the very weakest modal property; moreover, saying so is consistent with saying that ‘may’ and ‘can’ do not semantically express this weakest modal property. In any case, even if I have lapsed into inconsistency, there is still a remaining (and more interesting) issue about whether the Three Semantic Contents Theory is consistent with (synchronic) facts about these modal terms. As far as I can tell, it is.

Yanovich appeals to historical facts to argue against certain invariantist theories of ‘might’, ‘can’, and ‘may’. So, it is natural to ask whether the Three Semantic Contents Theory is consistent with these historical facts. I cannot consider all of the facts he mentions, so I shall concentrate on just one. Yanovich says that in Old English ‘can’ meant <sup>3</sup> ‘Can’ gradually came to have its present meaning because Old English speakers at some point started using sentences containing ‘can’ to assert, implicate, or otherwise pragmatically convey modal propositions (concerning ability or circumstantial modality). Later such ‘can’-sentences were *primarily* used in this way, and at some point such sentences were rarely used to convey propositions regarding knowledge. By this point, ‘can’ meant what it presently does.

All of this sounds plausible. Fortunately, all of it is consistent with the Three Semantic Contents Theory. The Three Contents theorist can hold that the semantic content of a term is determined (in some complex way!) by what sentences containing it are used to assert or otherwise pragmatically convey. If, over a period of time, the term ‘can’ gradually came to be used primarily to convey propositions concerning not knowledge, but a certain range of modal properties, then its semantic content gradually changed from <sup>3</sup> to a weak modal property,

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<sup>3</sup> Yanovich cites Nordlinger and Traugott (1997). I here use <sup>E</sup> to refer to the semantic content of *E* (in modern English).

namely <sup>^can^</sup>, which can be pragmatically enriched to yield the propositions that ‘can’-sentences are standardly used to assert.

Yanovich seemingly argues that such a *gradual* shift is inconsistent with invariantism about ‘can’. He appears to believe that invariantism about ‘can’ implies that “as soon as that word starts to convey modal meanings, we need to say that it abruptly becomes able to express the almost trivial weak-possibility meaning” (p. 4). But invariantists can and should hold that speakers can use sentences that semantically express *non-modal* propositions to assert, or otherwise pragmatically convey, *modal* propositions. (For instance, an invariantist can hold that a modern English speaker who utters ‘Mary knows that the combination to the safe is 10-15-20’ may convey a modal proposition concerning Mary’s ability to open the safe, though the sentence semantically expresses no such modal proposition.) Old English speakers could have used ‘can’ to convey such modal propositions, though the word meant <sup>^know^</sup> in their language. Such a use could have gradually become so regular that the semantic content of ‘can’ shifted. This is consistent with invariantism.

It might be useful to consider whether contextualists are better off than invariantists in reconciling their synchronic semantic and pragmatic theory with the historical facts. If ‘can’ meant <sup>^know^</sup> in Old English, then (I will assume) it was context-*insensitive* in Old English. If the contextualist is right, then changes in its use forced it to become a context-*sensitive* term, whose varying semantic contents, relative to contexts, fell within a certain range of modal properties, many of which have nothing to do with knowledge. That hypothesized shift in meaning is remarkable. The invariantist says that changes in the use of ‘can’ allowed it to remain a context-insensitive term, but forced it to change its context-invariant semantic content to a thin modal meaning and allowed it to be regularly used to convey a certain range of richer modal

propositions. That hypothesized shift in meaning is also remarkable. But offhand, it seems no more remarkable than the semantic shift that the contextualist hypothesizes. Furthermore, the known historical facts do not appear to support one of these theories over the other, as far as I can tell.

I believe parallel points, with suitable modifications, hold for the other historical facts that Yanovich cites, including those in which a modal word gradually acquires a non-modal semantic content (and a new syntax). So, I suspect that historical facts of the sort that Yanovich mentions do not support contextualism over invariantism for ‘might’, ‘can’, and ‘may’.<sup>4</sup>

## Works Cited

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the editors of *Linguistics and Philosophy*, and especially Thomas Ede Zimmermann and Graeme Forbes, for giving me an opportunity to write this reply.

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