On the Semantics and Pragmatics of 'Be Able To': Modality and Actualisation

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Abstract : The goal of this presentation is to shed new light on the semantics and pragmatics of be able to. It presents the results of a corpus analysis based on data from the BNC (British National Corpus), and discusses these results in light of a specific stance on the semantics-pragmatics interface taking into account recent developments. Be able to is often discussed in relation to can and could, all of which can be used to express ability. Such an onomasiological approach often results in the identification of usage constraints for each expression. In the case of be able to, it is the formal properties of the modal expression (unlike can and could, be able to has non-finite forms) that are in the foreground, and the modal expression is described as the verb that conveys future ability. Be able to is also argued to expressed actualised ability in the past (I was able/could to open the door). This presentation aims to provide a more accurate pragmatic-semantic profile of be able to, based on extensive data analysis and one that is embedded in a very explicit view on the semantics-pragmatics interface. A random sample of 3000 examples (1000 for each modal verb) extracted from the BNC was analysed to account for the following issues. First, the challenge is to identify the exact semantic range of be able to. The results show that, contrary to general assumption, be able to does not only express ability but it shares most of the root meanings usually associated with the possibility modals can and could. The data reveal that what is called opportunity is, in fact, the most frequent meaning of be able to. Second, attention will be given to the notion of actualisation. It is commonly argued that be able to is the preferred form when the residue actualises: (1) The only reason he was able to do that was because of the restriction (BNC, spoken) (2) It is only through my imaginative shuffling of the aces that we are able to stay ahead of the pack. (BNC, written) Although this notion has been studied in detail within formal semantic approaches, empirical data is crucially lacking and it is unclear whether actualisation constitutes a conventional (and distinguishing) property of be able to. The empirical analysis provides solid evidence that actualisation is indeed a conventional feature of the modal. Furthermore, the dataset reveals that be able to expresses actualised 'opportunities' and not actualised 'abilities'. In the final part of this paper, attention will be given to the theoretical implications of the empirical findings, and in particular to the following paradox: how can the same expression encode both modal meaning (non-factual) and actualisation (factual)? It will be argued that this largely depends on one's conception of the semantics-pragmatics interface, and that this need not be an issue when actualisation (unlike modality) is analysed as a generalised conversational implicature and thus is considered part of the conventional pragmatic layer of be able to.

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