

CONSTRUCTING POSSIBILITY IN CONDITIONAL CLAUSES. EPISTEMIC MARKERS IN ENGLISH AND BULGARIAN

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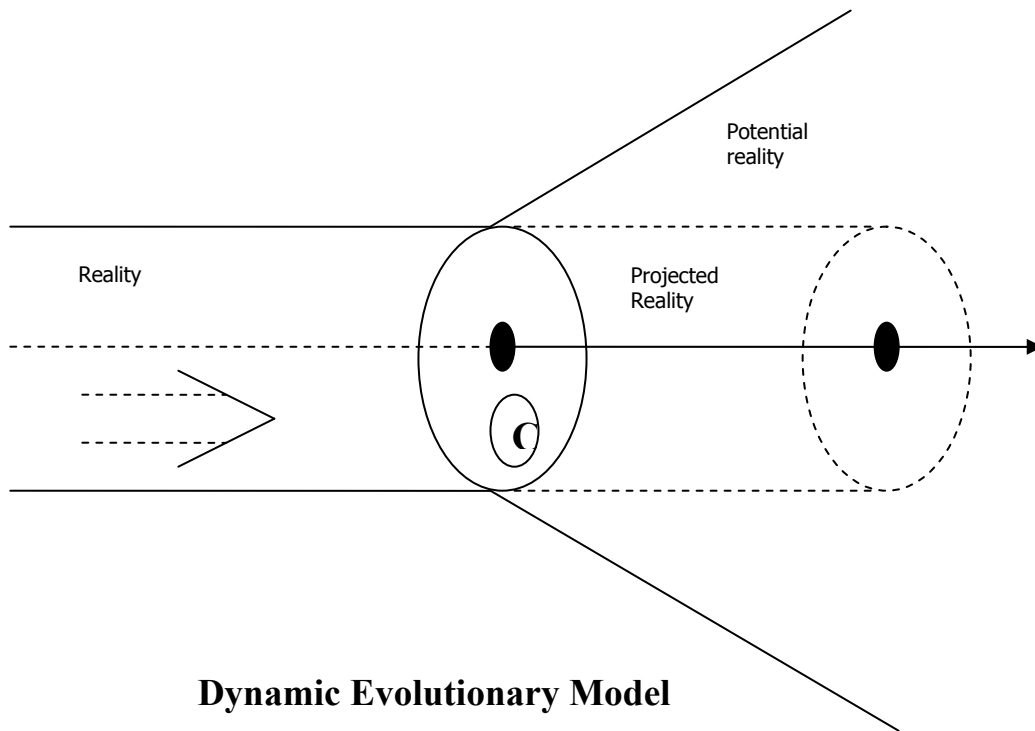
The object of study in the present paper is the semantic meaning of possibility in English and Bulgarian in conditional clauses. The review offers a formal characterisation and a description of the usage of the markers, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a cognitive perspective as regards constructing meaning in discourse.

Key words: epistemic markers, constructing meaning, discourse, cognitive, possibility

The object of study in the paper is the epistemic meaning of possibility manifested in conditional clauses in English and Bulgarian. The subject matter is discussed from cognitive perspective, and a comparison is drawn between the respective epistemic markers that serve as linguistic means of expressing and constructing possibility in English and Bulgarian.

For the needs of the analysis I have adopted Langacker's approach to modal auxiliaries in English, which occur in the matrix or the apodosis in conditional clauses. On the other hand, I have applied this approach to Bulgarian, trying to establish whether it works with the epistemic markers in Bulgarian as well. The corpus of examples is excerpted from the works of Jane Austen, Dan Brown, Nora Roberts, Dimitar Dimov, Pavel Vejinov and Emiljan Stanev.

I shall start with his dynamic evolutionary model, which reflects the idea of the evolution of reality into a future stage (Langacker 1991:277)



Dynamic Evolutionary Model

Langacker provides the following explanations of his model: “reality is depicted by a cylinder (to be envisaged as growing along the temporal axis); C is the conceptualizer (identified as the speaker); the dashed arrow represents reality’s evolutionary momentum which tends to carry it along certain future paths and keep it from following others.” (1991: 277)

“The crux of this model is the notion that the world predisposes the occurrence of particular event sequences under certain kinds of circumstances. Hence the configuration of reality at given point, Q, has substantial influence on the direction of its subsequent evolution“ (Langacker 1991: 281). Langacker’s perception of the “force-dynamic aspect“ of the world’s structure and his study of the modal auxiliaries *will* – a builder of “projected reality“ and *may* –a builder of “potential reality“ (Langacker 1991: 278) have actually inspired me to focus on the issue of constructing possibility in conditional clauses in English and Bulgarian.

I. Epistemic Markers of Projected Reality in English and Bulgarian in the Apodosis with Present and Future-Time Reference.

According to Langacker when the reference point Q is located at present reality, the conceptualizer can project the future course of events with great degree of certainty in case the condition, which is set up at Q, is satisfied. The conceptualizer’s confidence is based on the strength of the evolutionary momentum, which gives impetus to the sequence of the

events to follow. The epistemic markers of projected reality in English are the modal verbs *will* and *would*.

Example 1 *If anything happens inside that dome, we will all be in the crossfire.* (D. B.) The modal verb *will* in the apodosis of the conditional sentence constructs projected reality and is an example of “open conditional clause“ (Huddleston, Pullum 2003: 85). The future sequence of the events is judged by the conceptualizer as quite likely to occur as there is minimal epistemic distance between his standpoint in current reality and the reference point Q, in which the condition is set up. The example illustrates a real conditional clause.

Example 2 *If she had a dream, or a story to tell a young girl, Rowan decided, it would be about the enchanted forest...* (N.R.)

The example illustrates unreal conditional clause. The reference point Q is again located at present reality, but the condition is set up at a greater epistemic distance from the conceptualizer’s standpoint at current reality. He or she judges the condition to be contrary to facts and that judgement is linguistically expressed by a verb phrase in past tense form in the protasis. The evolutionary momentum needs much more energy in order to change the present configuration of reality and the condition set up at Q becomes hypothetical. The modal verb *would* in the apodosis projects the hypothetical condition in the future and constructs “remote conditional clause“ (Huddleston, Pullum 2003: 85) for its evolution. Hence *would* implies less degree of certainty than *will* about the future evolution of reality.

The epistemic markers in the apodosis of the conditional clauses in Bulgarian are the grammeme Conditional Mood, the forms of futurum (future tense), and the forms of futurum praeterite (future in the past). I consider the latter two as markers of projected reality, when they are used to build up open or remote possibility in real or unreal conditional clauses with present- and future-time reference.

Example 3 *Ако това е вярно, ще предизвика истинска революция в биологията...* (P. V.) (*Ako tova e vjarno, shte predizvika istinska revoljucija v biologijata...*) (If that is true, it will cause a real revolution in biology...)

Similar to English, the tense in the protasis is present tense, which sets up the condition at the reference point Q in current reality. There is minimal epistemic distance between the conceptualizer and the reference point Q, so he or she experiences the future evolution of the events as very likely. The grammeme futurum (future tense) constructs open possibility in the apodosis and thus is a marker of projected reality. Moreover, it

demonstrates modal meaning (an issue discussed by Miroslav Yanakiev, who calls it “категоричен презумптив на континуатива“ (kategorichen presumptive na kontinjuativa) (categorical conclusive form of the continuative) (Yanakiev 1976: 240) and in this way functions just like the modal auxiliary *will*. Consequently, we can conclude that it fits appropriately into Langacker’s model.

Example 4 *Получаваш голяма заплата и годишно възнаграждение, разполагаш с кола... Ако бях на твое място, щях да бъда доволен* (E. S.)

The condition is set up at present time and is expressed by modal preterite, just like its English counterpart. The modal preterite does not signal past-time reference, but hypothetical condition and the epistemic distance between the conceptualizer and the reference point Q is greater. The futurum praeterite in the apodosis locates the event in the area of projected reality, thus constructing remote possibility. Similar to English modal auxiliary *would*, the forms of Bulgarian futurum praeterite express a certain possibility for the potential sequence of the events in the future if the condition is satisfied, although the evolutionary momentum requires more energy and effort to take that course. Actually, there is a controversy running among linguists as regards the status of the futurum praeterite in this function. The debate is whether it has only a modal use or can be regarded as a form of the Conditional Mood. Some of them, including Hristina Panteleva, who based her research on Golomb, consider it as “кондиционал от балкански тип“ (kondicional ot balkanski tip) (Balkan Conditional Mood) and treat it as a separate grameme of “modus irrealis and as a member of Conditional Mood“ (Panteleva 1998: 92). As this is not an issue to discuss in my presentation, I will not take sides, but have just focused on it as a marker of projected reality with similar usage to that of the modal auxiliary *would* in unreal conditional clauses with present and future-time reference.

II. Epistemic Markers of Potential Reality in English and Bulgarian in the Apodosis with Present and Future-Time Reference.

According to Langacker the modal auxiliaries *may* and *might* build up potential reality in the apodosis of conditional clauses. He disregards the modal auxiliary *can*, which he considers “marginal“ in this use and “more readily construed as root modal“. (Langacker 1991: 278) As far as the modal verb *may* is concerned Langacker states that it can be described as situating the process in the realm of potential reality as “nothing in the

speaker's conception of reality is seen as barring it from evolving along a path leading to the occurrence of that process [...]“ (Langacker 1991: 278).

Example 5 *If the canister is in one of your central buildings or underground, the effect outside these walls **may be** minimal, but if the canister is near the perimeter...* (D. B.)

Comparing *will* in Example 1 to *may* in example 5, we will immediately feel some degree of uncertainty implied by *may*. The conceptualizer judges the evolution of reality as potential, but lacks the confidence he or she has when using *will*. Yet, just like *will* in the apodosis of real conditional clauses *may* constructs open possibility.

If *may* in example 5 is substituted for *might*, the conceptualizer will definitely express strong doubt about the potential evolution of reality into the designated path. Hence, the distal form *might*, used with present and future –time reference indicates a greater degree of unlikelihood than *may* and constructs remote possibility in a real conditional clause.

Example 6 *If this chapel **was** the first altar of science, it **might still contain** the Illuminati sculpture that served as the first marker.* (D. B.)

The example illustrates unreal conditional clause with present-time reference. The distal form *might* builds up remote possibility and denotes potential reality in case the condition set up at the reference point Q is fulfilled. The condition expressed by modal past is hypothetical, and it seems difficult for the evolutionary momentum to push the events to follow into the designated path.

The modal verb *could* has a similar function to that of *might* as a builder of remote possibility in unreal conditional clauses with present and future-time reference and can freely substitute it, denoting the same degree of likelihood of the event's occurrence.

Example 7 *If this chapel **was** the first altar of science, it **could still contain** the Illuminati sculpture that served as the first marker.* (D. B.)

I consider as epistemic markers of potential reality in the apodosis of conditional clauses with present and future-time reference in Bulgarian the semi-modal auxiliary construction *може да* (*mozhe da*), and the grammeme Conditional Mood.

If we go back to example 3 and substitute the futurum for *може да* (*mozhe da*) construction, we will turn up with example 8.

Example 8 *Ако това е вярно, може да предизвика истинска революция в биологията...* (P. V.) (Ако това е вярно, *mozhe da predizvika istinska revoljucija v biologijata...*) (If that is true, it may cause a real revolution in biology...)

The conceptualizer judges the future evolution of reality as potential one and expresses that with a semi-auxiliary construction, denoting possibility. There is a certain degree of doubt, although he or she considers

it an open possibility and in this way *може да* construction functions as the English modal auxiliary *may*.

The grammeme Conditional Mood expresses “the attitude of the speaker as regards the occurrence of a possible future event at given definite circumstances“ (Bojadjiev 1999: 406). The formal markers are analytical and synthetical. I will focus only on the analytical forms as the excerpted examples are from fiction in which they are the predominant markers. The construction consists of the specific conditional form of the auxiliary verb *be* and the past participle of the content verb. It agrees with the subject in person and number but is atemporal, which means that it can be used in the apodosis of conditional clauses with present, future, and past-time reference.

Example 9 *Защото, ако ви представя тази типеса облечена, както трябва, всички бихте изпонадали на гърба си* (D. D.) (Zashtoto, ako vi predstavja тази tipesa oblechena, kakto trjabva, vsichki bihte izpopadali na gurba si.) (Because if I present to you that lady, dressed appropriately, all of you will be stunned.)

The condition in the protasis is expressed by present tense and is set up at a reference point Q at current reality. The grammeme Conditional Mood in the apodosis constructs open possibility of a real conditional clause. I, personally, perceive it as a marker of potential rather than projected reality, compared to futurum that can be used in the same clause. The speaker’s confidence about the future sequence of the events is a little bit weaker than that implied by the futurum *ще изпонадаме* (*shte izpopadate*), and in this respect the form of the Conditional Mood seems not only to be more tentative in meaning and usage but also less categorical than the future tense.

Example 10 *И би се смаял, ако знаеше, че прозвучава понякога и в собствения му глас, макар и рядко, студен и изострен като лезвие.* (P. V.) (I bi se smajal, ako znaeshe, che prozvuchava ponjakoga i v sobstvenija mu glas, makar i rjadko, studen i izostren kato lezvie.) (And he would be amazed if he knew that sometimes it can be felt in his own voice, although rarely, cold and sharp as a blade.)

The example illustrates unreal conditional clause with present-time reference. The reference point Q is located at present reality at a greater epistemic distance from the conceptualizer. The form of the Conditional Mood in the protasis constructs remote possibility and expresses potential reality. The conceptualizer assesses both the condition and the sequential event in the future as hypothetical and less likely to occur.

III. Epistemic Markers of Remote Possibility in English and Bulgarian in the Apodosis with Past-Time Reference.

The epistemic marker constructing remote possibility in the apodosis of a conditional clause with past-time reference in English is the modal perfect infinitive construction.

Example 11 *She would have fallen if he hadn't moved quickly, so quickly she had no sense of him moving at all.* (N. R.)

The example illustrates unreal conditional clause with past-time reference. Not only is Q located in a past configuration of reality, but the condition set up at it is highly hypothetical as it is contrary to facts. Therefore, the epistemic distance from the conceptualizer's standpoint at current reality and the reference point Q is beyond his or her reach. The evolutionary momentum can hardly influence the future sequence of the events in the past. The verb phrase in past perfect sets up the condition in the protasis of unreal conditional clause in the past. The epistemic marker – the modal perfect infinitive construction builds up remote possibility and locates the event into the area of irreality rather than potential reality.

The same effect can be achieved if we substitute the modal auxiliary *would* for *might* and *could*. Analysing a past situation, the conceptualizer is faced by the imminence of a familiar evolution of events, which can't be changed or controlled, no matter what his or her assumptions may be.

Example 12 *Perhaps she might have passed over more had his manners been flattering to Isabella's sister.* (J. A.)

Example 13 *If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have borne anything.* (J. A.)

The epistemic markers constructing remote possibility in the past in the apodosis of conditional clauses in Bulgarian are the futurum praeterite and the grammeme Conditional Mood. The condition in the past protasis is set up either with the preterite perfect (past perfect) or the imperfect.

Example 14 *И навярно тъй щяха да си изгорят, ако наистина се беше запалила вилата.* (P. V.) (I navjarno tui shtjaha da si izgorjat, ako naistina se beshe zapalila vilata.) (Probably, they would have burnt down if the cottage had been on fire.)

The reference point Q occupies a mental space in the past configuration of reality far away from the conceptualiser's standpoint in current reality, and the sequence of the events is placed at a great epistemic distance from the ground in the past reality. The hypothetical condition suggests a situation contrary to the fact and implies that the condition was

not fulfilled. Hence, the *futurum praeterite* in the apodosis constructs remote possibility and locates the sequential event into the area of irreality.

Example 15 *Ако не беше ординарец, сигурно би станал калугер и също така робски щеше да служи на владиката, както сега служеше на полковника.* (D. D.)

The example illustrates both markers – the *futurum praeterite* and the grammeme Conditional Mood in the apodosis of a past unreal conditional clause. Their function is identical, namely, to build up an impossible configuration of events in the past known reality. Consequently, when used in past unreal conditional clauses the *futurum praeterite* and the grammeme Conditional Mood cannot be considered as markers of potential reality but as markers of irreality.

To sum up, the analysis has proven that the English and the Bulgarian epistemic markers constructing possibility in conditional clauses denoting present, future, and past-time reference function alike and take identical positions in the dynamic evolutionary model, developed by Langacker.

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