TRANSLATING THE ENGLISH *COULD*

Attila IMRE[1]

Abstract

After having examined the possibilities of translating the English *can, must, need* and *should*, we are interested whether it is worth creating a database for translating the English modal verb *could* into Hungarian. Computer assisted translation (CAT) offers the possibility of creating and investigating a large database (e.g. *SDL Trados* or *MemoQ*), and we will check whether there is a possibility of enhancing productivity in case of *could* analyzing fiction and legal texts.

Keywords: **term base, modal verb, *could*, fiction, legal texts.**

Introduction

As Palmer correctly observes, the English modal verbs are "extremely messy" (1990:49), and he does not believe that there is a 'basic meaning' regarding modal verbs. However, scholars try to categorize modals, although this may be both arbitrary and forced in order to conform to the criteria established for certain investigation (cf. Greere–Zdrenghea 2000:35).

As we are primarily interested in modals from the point of view of translation, their meaning becomes the most important criterion, even if we accept that there is no basic meaning. Although many grammar books and dictionaries list modal verbs as irregular verbs (e.g. Bădescu 1984:367, Soars 2000:143), we cannot agree that – for instance – *can* appears in the first column (Infinitive), *could* in the second (Past Simple), whereas the third column (Past Participle) is either empty or *been able* is given. In order to support our statement consider the following examples:

[1] *Jack* ***could*** *be anywhere.* (present meaning, possibility)
[2] *Jack* ***could*** *read when we was five years old.* (past meaning, ability)

The possibility of using *could* in present or past context is presumably 50-50% (see the next section). Greere–Zdrenghea (2000:38) correctly observe that those who hesitate to call the verb after the modal an infinitive could hardly call it a present or past tense form. Palmer (1990:3–4) establishes 7 criteria for differentiating modal verbs from other (primary auxiliary) verbs, which includes their behaviour in interrogative and negative forms, as well as their formal characteristics. However, for teaching purposes, the

[1] Lecturer PhD., Sapientia University, Târgu-Mureş

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description of modals should be simplified, but it should be rigorously analysed for translating purposes.

Modality is the grammaticalized expression of the subjective attitudes and opinions of the speaker including possibility, probability, predictability, necessity, obligation, permissibility, ability, desire, and contingency, and it is external to the content, being part of the attitude taken up by the speaker (Bybee et al. 1994:176–181; Kosur 2009:1; Halliday 1970:349, cited by Greere–Zdrenghea 2000:29). Modals and 'quasi-modals' are used to express hypothetical meanings as possibility, futurity, necessity, obligation, ability, intention, permission and assertion (Greere– Zdrenghea 2000:33, 91), thus the most flexible concept of modalisation must include both of them. Kosur (2009:1) also states that modal verbs are not the only grammatical categories expressing modality, as in modern English both modal verbs and grammatical mood is defined as a set of inflected verb forms that express modality of an action or state.

From the point of view of translation, we are primarily interested whether feeding samples of modal verbs into the translation memory (full sentences) and the term base (words and expressions) enables us to enhance productivity or not.

Translating *could*

Modal constructions (especially epistemic) involve some kind of comment on the environment within which a particular act does or does not take place (Antinucci–Parisi 1971:28–9). Modal sentences cannot be understood at all apart from considerations of their being anchored in some social context (Greere–Zdrenghea 2000:13), which seems to leave no hope for computer-assisted translations (CAT), as no one can expect from a software to take into consideration environment. Nevertheless, these programs can take into consideration the immediate 'context' of the sentence in question, which means that the sentences prior and after are also checked (*MemoQ Help*).

The problem Fillmore presents (cf. 1973:111) – either polite or ironical meaning of a modal verb – can be tackled, at least partially, by feeding into the translation memory and term base as many instances as possible, for the translator to select the most appropriate meaning. As large databases are collections of human-translated texts fed into translation memories and term bases, so – unfortunately – these can be of either top quality or poor one, as in many cases it is difficult to check the source.

We started our investigation by extracting *could* from a collection of more than 1,300 sentences containing English modal verbs (Asimov: *Foundation*, Carson McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and five texts from the European Parliament Register of Documents); all in all 187 sentences contained various forms of *could*; their distribution is presented in the table below:

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COULD	Instances	Percent
Affirmative/interrogative	148 / 11	79.14 / 5.88
Negative/interrogative	39 /1	20.85 / 0.05
Present meaning	93	49.73
Past meaning	94	50.26
Active voice	155	82.88
Passive voice	32	17.11

1. Instances of *could*

After having examined the possible translation of other modal verbs (*can, should, must, need*), we have certain presuppositions, which are enlisted as follows:

1. *Could* is not really worth adding to the term base of a translation environment (see the case of *can* (Imre 2011);
2. Fiction should contain much more instances of *could* than non-fiction (Recski 2002); in our case, specialized texts (EU documents) should contain very few epistemic meanings;
3. When *could* is translated into Hungarian, about two-thirds of the translations will contain only the suffixes *-hat, -het, -na, -ne, -ná, -né* or no distinct marker;
4. When *could* is followed by a verb referring to the five basic senses, the meaning of *could* should disappear; interestingly, this may be the marker of a professional translator.

Then we have investigated how the 187 instances of *could* were translated into Hungarian. Before presenting the findings, it is worth remembering some facts about the discrepancies in English – Hungarian translations. Hungarian has a much more elaborate system of affixes, especially suffixes compared to Indo-European languages; thus, the possible translation of *could* into Hungarian may result in a full verb, a suffix, or the combination of a word or suffix(es). As a full verb, the following words may appear:

a. *tud* (able to):

[3a] *You killed the wolf, but* ***could*** *not get rid of the m…* (Asimov)
[3b] *Maguk megölték a farkast, de nem* ***tud****ták lerázni az em...* (P. F. Nagy)

b. *képes* (capable to):

[4a] *I have handy little gadgets that* ***could*** *do tricks.* (Asimov)
[4b] … *egy okos kis szerszámot, amely csodákat* ***képes*** *művel****ni.*** (P. F. Nagy)

c. *lehet* (possible):

[5a] *What* ***could*** *you do with it?* (Asimov)
[5b] *Mit* ***lehet*** *vele kezde****ni****?* (P. F. Nagy)

It is worth noticing that after *tud, képes* and *lehet* another verb follows with the infinitive suffix *(-ni*), but this only a tendency, not a rule, as further words (even verbs may also precede the infinitive (*Could you do this?* ***Képes*** *vagy ezt megten****ni****?,* my example, A.I.).

Could is often translated with suffixes:

d. *-hat, -het* (possibility suffix):

[6a] *I* ***could*** *retool your factories.* (Asimov)

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[6b] *Ajánl**hat**ok új gépeket a gyáraikba.* (P. F. Nagy)

e. *-na, -ne, -ná, -né* (present conditional mood suffix):

[7a] ... *he **could** make war on heresy, as represented by you...* (Asimov)

[7a] ... *hadat üzen**ne**, mondjuk, a maga képviselte eretnekségnek,...* (P. F. Nagy)

Nevertheless, there are more complicated possibilities as well:

f. the combination of a suffix (*-hat, -het*) and the invariant past conditional auxiliary *volna,* which is the third person singular condition form of 'to be'. In this case the meaning is invariably past conditional:

[8a] …*we **could** have done the same*… (Asimov)

[8b] …*mi is megte**het**tük **volna** ugyanazt*… (P. F. Nagy)

g. double suffix, that is the combination of the possibility suffix and the present conditional mood suffix:

[9a] *Ponyets **could** have handled them at a pinch.* (Asimov)

[9b] *Ponyets, ha úgy adódna, könnyen elbán**hatna** velük.* (P. F. Nagy)

[10a] … *he **could** say that he had lured me on into a trap*… (Asimov)

[10b] … *kivág**hatná** magát azzal, hogy … lépre csalt engem*… (P. F. Nagy)

In these cases the combination of the suffixes results in a more weakened conditional meaning (cf. Benő 2011).

h. the combination of one or two words and one or two suffixes:

[11a] *I wonder if you **could** tell me exactly what happened.* (Asimov)

[11b] *Meg **tudná** mondani, mi történt pontosan?* (P. F. Nagy)

[12a] *It **could** be arranged, Trader Mallow.* (Asimov)

[12b] *Meg **lehetne** oldani, Mallow kereskedő.* (P. F. Nagy)

[13a] … *we **could** possibly hope to do.*(Asimov)

[13b] … *mi **képes**ek **lehetné**nk.* (P. F. Nagy)

Naturally, there will be cases when *could* is not translated into Hungarian, mainly for two reasons:

i. in case of verbs referring to the five senses, *could* can hardly be traced either as a verb or a suffix:

[14a] ... *he **could see** a torrent of madmen* ... (Asimov)

[14b] ***látta**, hogy eszüket vesztett emberek özöne* ... (P. F. Nagy)

j. the translator's freedom of choice:

[15a] *He had not spoken, nor, as far as Mallow **could** tell...* (Asimov)

[15b] *Amennyire Mallow visszaemlékezett rá, szótlanul...* (P. F. Nagy)

Counterexamples can be also found, for instance in case of passive constructions:

[16a] *there **could** be heard in the town the thin wild whistle of the train.* (Asimov)

[16b] *hallani le**het**ett a városban ... a vonat vékony, vad füttyszavát.* (P. F. Nagy)

A further aspect is negation, which may refer to either the meaning of the modal or to the meaning of the main verb (Palmer 1968:105). Greere–Zdrenghea (2000:92) say that "it is obvious that negation, questioning, emphasis and combinations of these three processes result in changes of meaning that are not immediately predictable from the negation or questioning or traditionally accepted content of modals". The negative

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instances (about 21%) present more variability, if we look at a few the possibilities: *could* ***not****, could****n't****, could* ***never****,* ***neither*** *could, could* ***no****, could* ***scarcely****, could* ***in no way****, there was* ***nothing*** *she could do.* This means that the Hungarian negative possibilities are also varied, and the best options are the ones when full verbs are completed with one or more negative words (***nem*** *képes,* ***aligha*** *tud,* ***sem*** *lehet,* ***semmit sem*** *tudok*). However, there are also negative suffixes (*kép****telen****, lehet****etlen***) or cases when we can observe a combination of the negative and suffix to render negative *could* (***sem*** *mond****hat****tuk*). Whatever the case, in our opinion negative suffixes are not worth adding to the database, as it takes time, and when new instances are to be translated, it is faster to translate than search the best option out of many, not forgetting that any of them is just a few characters long. Another interesting case is when antonym translation is activated, during which an English negative may turn affirmative:

[17a] *I* ***couldn't*** *squeeze to nothing...* (Asimov)

[17b] *bármely pillanatban összeszorít****hat****om a markomat* (P.F. Nagy)

Conclusions

Although it was easy in the initial phase to suspect that it is not worth the effort saving *could* into a database, we tried to bring arguments to support it. Let us check the table below:

COULD	**HU**			
	Fiction	**EU texts**	**[nr.]**	**[%]**
word [+suffix]	71	2	**73**	**39.04**
suffix	46	13	**59**	**31.55**
Ø	49	6	**55**	**29.41**
TOTAL	166	21	**187**	**100.00**

2. Translations of *could*

At first sight, the possibility of a successful English–Hungarian term base regarding *could* may seem viable due to the 73 instances when a word for word translation is possible (39%). However, the root *tud* has conjugated forms (*tud****ok****, tud****sz****, tud****juk****, tud****játok****, tud****ják***), let alone subjective and transitive (objective) paradigm (*tud****om*** – *tud****ok***), which is further complicated when the possibility suffixes and present conditional suffixes accompany this word (*tud****hatnám****, tud****hatnád****, tud****hatnánk****,* etc.). It is easy to observe that the variable suffixes stand for the longer part of the words, so they are not worth adding to the database. The only invariable word is *képes*, which only appears 11 times out of 187 (5.88%). The other 62 instances when *could* was translated with a word are conjugated (past, present) and/or suffixed, so there is a huge variability. Still, if we

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take into consideration that the same occurrences may also show up in case of translating other modal verbs (*can, may, might*), our findings may appear in a better light. For instance, in the case of *can* we could identify about 37% instances of *tud, képes* and *lehet* (Imre–Benő 2011).

Suffixes should not be added to the potential term base (59 instances, 32%), and the remaining 55 *could* instances (30%) were not even translated (cf. *could* + five basic senses, language diversity and the translator's freedom of choice). One can easily realise that the moment matches are shown in any translation environment (as translation options) that we are going to have too many hits (too much time to check the correct one), and it is much easier to type the proper word or suffix, which – by the way – may even overlap (cf. the translation of *can, may, might*).

The interrogative (negative) forms are quite promising, although there are only 12 cases (6,41%) to check. There were 2 instances with no translation, 2 with suffix translation, one with double suffix translation, but 7 sentences in which words appeared: *lehetett volna, lehet, lehetne, tudná, tudta,* ***talán*** (maybe) and ***vajon*** (whether, I wonder). The words in bold signal the vast possibility in translating modal verbs.

When comparing fiction to other types of texts, we will find that the instances of modal verbs are more reduced (cf. Recski 2002) on the one hand, and on the other hand their vast possible meanings is also reduced. We have checked more than 500 pages, out of which only 21 instances were found. This is not necessarily due to the fewer number of pages, as within a single 146 pages-document more than 500 instances of *shall* were found, in which not a single *could* was tracked (EP – *Position of The European Parliament* 2008). Out of 15 translated instances the large majority (13 instances, 86%) is translated with suffixes, and only 2 with words. Although few instances were found, we can state that the specificity of legal documents resulted in a high occurrence of passive constructions with *could*. However, *could* is preferred in these legal documents when a possibility is active under particular circumstances, so these are rather reduced possibilities (closer to 0% than 50%, which is further supported by the 3 double suffixes); remember that we have already observed that double suffixes weaken the possibility.

To sum up, we tend to think that *could* is a further 'worst' modal verb, alongside with *can* as far as translation into Hungarian is concerned, compared to other modal verbs, which are much more 'translation-environment-friendly,' such as *should* and *must* (Imre 2010, Imre–Keresztesi 2011). Only 3 Hungarian words may be added to the English–Hungarian *could* term base: *tud, képes* (ability) and *lehet* (possibility and permission). The productivity in using translation environments will surely not derive from the Hungarian database of *could*, as even the developers of M*emoQ* accept that productivity in case of non-technical texts is 10-30% (*MemoQ Quick Start Guide* 2011), and *could* is predominant in fiction.

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