POSSIBILITIES FOR *CAN* IN TRANSLATION ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

Computer assisted translation (CAT) offers the possibility of investigating a large database fed into the translation memory and term base of translation environments, such as *SDL Trados* or *MemoQ*. We look into the possibilities of adding the English modal verb *can* to a term base with many of its possible meanings, and checking whether this will speed up the process of translation into non-Indo-European languages, such as Romanian or Hungarian.

Keywords: translation memory, term base, modal verb, *can*, database

Introduction

According to Palmer, 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, it is worth considering their possible meanings, even if we accept that there is no basic meaning. Many grammar books and dictionaries list modal verbs as irregular verbs (e.g. Bădescu 1984:367, Soars 2000:143), so 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. We cannot agree with this type of categorisation, as in case of *can* counterexamples are easy to construct:

Jill ***can't*** *have seen my brother.* (past meaning, impossibility)

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 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

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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 *can*

Antinucci and Parisi warn us that modal constructions (especially epistemic) involve some kind of comment on the environment within which a particular act does or does not take place (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.

Thanks to Kilgray's Academic License Programme, *MemoQ* translation environment is available for study at Sapientia University. The environment contains three main columns: the left column shows the source text, the second the target text, whereas the third one shows the translation results (matches):

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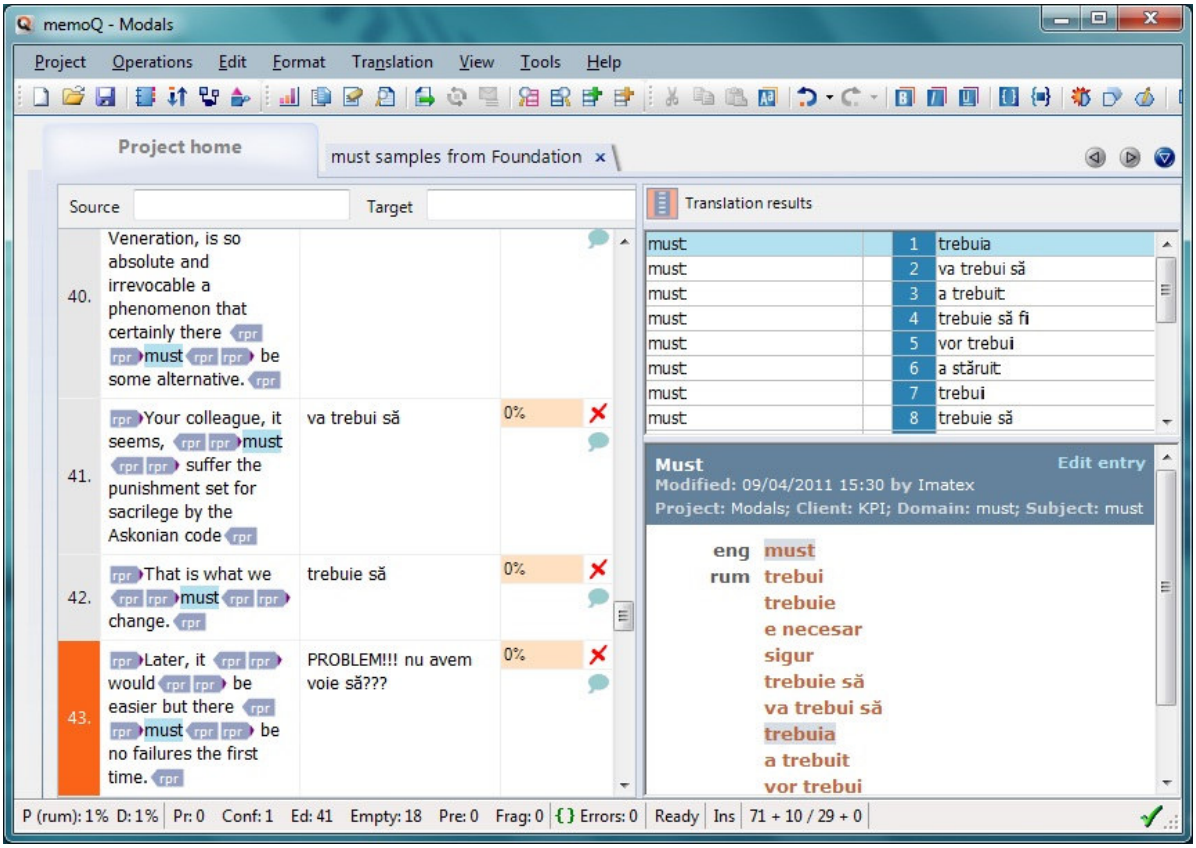

1. MemoQ layout

We started our investigation by extracting *can* from a collection of about 1,000 sentences containing English modal verbs (source: Asimov's *Foundation*, a database created by P. Keresztesi and A. Imre), out of which 151 sentences contained various forms of *can*: 100 in affirmative, 65 in negative (*can't* and *cannot*), 23 in interrogative (15 instances of *...can...*, and 8 instances of *Can...?*, as translation environments handle small and capital letters differently):

Type	Instances	Percentage
Affirmative *can*	91	47.39%
Negative *can* (*can't, cannot*)	67	34.89%
Interrogative *can*	29	15.10%
Interrogative-negative *can*	5	2.60%
Total	192	100%

2. Instances of *can*

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As in case of any other modal verb, we could easily detect at least three possibilities when modals are translated:

1. The modal verb is preserved in the translation:
   Of course, you ***can****.* → *Bineînţeles, că* ***poţi****.* (Ro)
   Psychohistory, which ***can*** *predict the fall,* ***can*** *make statements concerning the succeeding dark ages.* → *A pszichohistória, amely meg* ***tudja*** *jósolni a bukást, arra is* ***képes****, hogy mondjon valamit a rákövetkező sötét korszakokról.* (Hu)
2. The modal verb is partially lost in the translation, as only the suffix signals its original presence:
   Of course, you ***can****.* → *Persze, hogy megte****het****ed.* (Hu)
3. The modal verb is completely lost in the translation (cf. polite requests):
   Can I get you a drink? → *Să-ţi aduc ceva de băut? Bei ceva?* (Ro)

As a preliminary result, it is easy to suspect that it is not worth the effort saving *can* into a database, as even in the first case the Romanian and Hungarian words are too short (either 3 or 5 characters). This is further complicated by the fact that when Romanian verbs are conjugated, the endings contain language specific diacritical marks (*ţ* with cedilla) or even the root word is altered (*pot, poţi, puteţi*). At first sight, translating *can* into Hungarian is more successful (the root *tud* does not change), but we should take into consideration all the possible conjugated forms (*tudok, tudsz, tud, tudjuk, tudjátok, tudják*), let alone subjective and transitive (objective) paradigm (*tudom – tudok*). As matches are shown in the third column of *MemoQ* (see above), one will easily realise 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. A possible improvement might be to save *can* together with the preceding personal pronoun, but this involves further problems: for instance, capital letters (cf. beginning of sentences), inserted words between the personal pronoun and *can* (in which case we will find no matches), or the possibility of replacing *he, she, it* with any other noun.

Grammar books describe *can* with various functions, such as *ability* (physical, mental), *possibility*, *basic senses* (*I* ***can*** *see you.*), impolite *requests, mild commands/ suggestions* and *giving permission* (Palmer 1990, Gălăţeanu – Comişel 1982, Imre 2008). If negative forms are considered (*can't*, *cannot*), we can also add *impossibility*, or *logical deduction*. It is worth noticing that not a single case of *can't* + *have* + *past participle* form was found, so the next stage was to check, which words in Romanian and Hungarian tend to appear when translating *can* in affirmative, negative and interrogative:

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can affirmative – 91 instances					
Romanian	**Nr.**	**Percent**	**Hungarian**	**Nr.**	**Percent**
poate	21	23.07%	*tud*	17	18.68%
pot	16	17.58%	*képes*	3	3.29%
putem	7	7.69%	*lehet*	15	16.48%
(ar, veţi) putea	6	6.59%	*-hat, -het*	29	31.86%
poţi	7	7.69%	**lost**	**27**	**29.67%**
puteţi	5	5.49%	-	-	-
lost	**31**	**34.06%**	-	-	-

3. *Can* affirmative

The table above clearly shows that around one third of *can* is 'lost' in translation. Some examples are:

You can accuse him. → *Găseşti tu vreo acuzaţie.* (Ro)

I can see that. → *Én is látom.* (Hu)

The Romanian *poate* and *pot* represent around 40%; the other Romanian words are negligible. The Hungarian *–hat* and *–het* are suffixes, which are not worth saving into a database; *tud* and *lehet* stand for around 35%, but in some cases they only represent the root of the word (***tud****ok,* ***lehet****séges*).

These were completed with interrogative and negative forms as well (including shortened forms), taking into consideration that negation 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". Although we did not detect spectacular changes in meaning, from our point of view the results were rather discouraging. *Cannot* and *can't* was translated 11 times as *nu poate* and 11 times as *nu pot* into Romanian (altogether 32.83%); the rest is not useful, as only 1 or 2 instances were found, or in the majority of cases there are further words between *nu* and the conjugated form of *a putea* (mostly personal and reflexive pronouns). The Hungarian translation is much less encouraging: 31 instances contain the *–hat* and *–het* suffixes, and we could only find 6 cases of *nem lehet* and 5 cases containing the negative *nem* and the root *tud*. The problem is further complicated, as both Romanian and Hungarian express negation with more than one word (*nu, n-o, n-aş; nem, sem, sose, -talan, -telen*).

We should also bear in mind that even the English negative is not always expressed by *can't* or *cannot*, as in the examples below:

I can make nothing of all this. → *Nu pot aşa ceva.* (Ro)

You can scarcely ... → *Ez még nem jelent semmit.* (Hu)

He can scarcely fail to realize... → *Nu reuşeşte să înţeleagă.* (Ro)

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Even if '*can scarcely*' refers to negation (cf. 'minimizers,' Quirk et al. 1972), translators may become very inventive when translating:

There can scarcely be any doubt. → *Dincolo de orice bănuială.* (Ro)

A further interesting case is when antonym translation is activated, during which an English negative is turned into interrogative:

You can't maintain discipline that way. → *Ki tud így fegyelmet tartani?*

Whereas the interrogative-negative forms are completely irrelevant from the point of view of term base, the interrogative *can* is slightly better than the negative, and can be added to *can* affirmative to improve the percentage (cf. *poate, poţi, tud, lehet*):

can interrogative – 29 instances					
Romanian	**Nr.**	**Percent**	**Hungarian**	**Nr.**	**Percent**
poate	7	24.13%	*-hat, -het*	10	34.48%
poţi	7	24.13%	*lehet(ne)*	4	13.79%
pute – root *(aş/ am* ***pute****a* ***pute****ţi,* ***pute****m)*	10	34.48%	*tud* – root ***(tud****ja,* ***tud****na,* ***tud****juk)*	8	27.58%

4. *Can* interrogative

Conclusions

As the above analysis shows, it is not worth adding various forms of *can* to a Romanian or Hungarian term base. Although English grammars describe many cases of *can*, few of them appear in Romanian and Hungarian. There are many negative possibilities in all three languages, but they – evidently – do not coincide. However, translating modal verbs into Romanian is more satisfactory than translating them into Hungarian, for at least two reasons:

1. Passive constructions (*can be* + adjective) work well in Romanian: *poate fi* or *pot fi*, whereas Hungarian uses suffixes (*-hat, -het*);
2. Expressing ability, possibility and permission in Romanian is possible with the same verb (*a putea*), even if with different forms (some of them coincide: *eu/ ei/ ele pot fi*), whereas in Hungarian *tud, képes* is used for ability, *lehet* and the suffixes –*hat, -het* are used for possibility and permission.

Can combined with verbs expressing the basic senses represent a particular case in English ('private' verbs, cf. Hill, Joos in Palmer 1990), but *can* is hardly ever translated into Romanian and Hungarian with this meaning.

To sum up, we tend to think that *can* is one of the 'worst' modal verbs as far as translation is concerned, compared to other modal verbs, which are much more 'translation-environment-friendly,' such as *should* and *must* (Imre 2010, 2011, Imre–Keresztesi 2011).

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If we take into consideration that the chosen text belongs to literature (science-fiction), the results speak for themselves, as even the developers of M*emoQ* accept that productivity in case of non-technical texts is 10-30% (*MemoQ Quick Start Guide* 2011). Nevertheless, we may add that quality assurance is excellent when CAT-tools are involved, if correct data input is provided; and even if during a later translation previous error is observed, there is a possibility to correct it at any time. The developers of *MemoQ* still have to improve the correct rendering of specific Romanian diacritical signs (*ă, î, ş, ţ, â,*), as we have tried file encoding possibilities (e.g. UTF8, UTF7, Latin 1252, etc.) in vain.

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