

Actuality effects as conversational implicatures

David Rubio Vallejo

Department of Linguistics and Cognitive Science, University of Delaware, 125 E Main St., Newark, DE 19711, USA

Received 20 July 2016; received in revised form 17 February 2017; accepted 18 February 2017

Available online 8 March 2017



CrossMark

Abstract

Past perfective on the Spanish possibility modal *poder* (“can”, “be able to”) can trigger either an actuality or a counterfactuality effect on the prejacent. This is surprisingly different from other languages with an overt perfective vs. imperfective distinction (French, Hindi, Greek, etc.), where past perfective morphology on a possibility modal leads to actuality *entailments* (Bhatt, 1999; Hacquard, 2006). Contrary to previous work (Borgonovo and Cummins, 2007; Borgonovo, 2011), in this paper I argue that the effects observed in Spanish are best characterized as arising pragmatically from the interaction between the discourse model of the Question Under Discussion (Büring, 2003) and the Levinsonian maxims of Quantity and Informativeness. I propose that constructions with past perfective *poder* can be potentially ambiguous between the two readings, whereas those with past imperfective *poder* are just vague.

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Actuality effects; Counterfactuality; Conversational implicature; Quantity maxim; Informativeness maxim; Spanish

1. Introduction

Previous literature (Bhatt, 1999; Hacquard, 2006; Homer, 2011; a.o.) has shown that when a French circumstantial modal bears past perfective morphology,¹ it loses its intensionality and behaves like an implicative predicate (“manage”, “remember”) in that the prejacent is asserted to hold in the actual world. Consequently, trying to cancel the content of the prejacent in these cases results in a contradiction. There is no such restriction when imperfective aspect is used, because this lexical head does not trigger what has become known in the literature as an *actuality entailment*.

- (1) Jean a pu ouvrir la porte (# mais il ne l'a pas fait).
J have._{Pres} could open the door but he NEG it-have not done
“Jean managed (lit. was able to) open the door (# but he didn't do it).”
- (2) Jean pouvait ouvrir la porte (mais il ne l'a pas fait).
J can._{PstImpfv} open the door but he NEG it-have not done
“Jean was able to open the door (but he didn't do it).”

Following Kratzer (2012), I assume that modal verbs are context-sensitive quantifier expressions over possible worlds. The restrictions over what constitute the sets of worlds relevant to assess the truth of a modal sentence are pragmatically

E-mail address: drubio@udel.edu.

¹ Just a quick note on the tense paradigm in French. Nowadays, the *passé composé* (or present perfect) has taken the place of the *passé simple* (or simple past) in colloquial speech. Therefore, what looks like the present perfect in the French examples given can be understood as equivalent to the past perfective in Spanish.

supplied by conversational backgrounds known as the *modal base* and *ordering source*. The modal base in all the relevant examples in this article is circumstantial (it contains the propositions that are true at some time *t* in a world of evaluation *w*). The ordering source (which is used to rank the worlds in the modal base and resolve ties) can be empty, deontic (relative to laws), teleological (relative to goals), etc.

Note that these effects apply to French circumstantial modals in general. The ability interpretation above has accrued most of the attention in the literature, but deontic and teleological readings of the modal (both possibility and necessity) also give rise to actuality entailments. A teleological example of each is offered below.

- (3) *Jean a pu prendre le bus pour aller à l'hôpital (# mais il*
 J have.*Pres* could take the bus to go to the-hospital but he
ne l'a pas pris).
 NEG it-have not taken
 "Jean managed to take the bus to go to the hospital (# but he didn't take it)."

- (4) *Jean a dû prendre le train pour aller à l'hôpital (# mais il*
 J have.*Pres* must take the bus to go to the-hospital but he
ne l'a pas pris).
 NEG it-have not taken
 "Jean has had to take the bus to go to the hospital (# but he didn't take it)."

Given this behavior of French modals when they express past perfective, one might expect that a closely related language like Spanish, which also has an overt distinction between perfective and imperfective in the past, would behave exactly the same. Surprisingly however, this is not the case across all comparative dimensions. When a Spanish modal is conjugated with past perfective morphology, additional meanings arise beyond the purely asserted ones – but these are not like the ones seen in French. As it turns out, a Spanish version of (3) can trigger either an actuality reading of the prejacent, or a counterfactual one (Borgonovo and Cummins, 2007; Borgonovo, 2011). The possible continuations below highlight these options. I refer to such Spanish sentences where a circumstantial possibility modal bears past perfective/imperfective morphology as (counter)factual constructions (cFCs).

- (5) *Juan pudo coger el bus... pero no quiso/ y tuvo un viaje fantástico.*
 J can.*PstPfv* take the bus but not want and had a trip wonderful
 "Juan was able to take the bus...but he didn't want to/ and he had a wonderful trip."

It is important to remark that sentences like (5) will typically be understood as expressing either of the two aforementioned readings (actuality or counterfactuality). In specific cases (when the perfective cFC is a full answer to the Question Under Discussion (QUD), cf. section 3), these sentences can also be used to convey a pure possibility meaning that is agnostic with respect to whether the prejacent materialized or not. These instances can be somewhat difficult to distinguish from epistemic readings like (6) and so, imperfective aspect is normally used to express agnosticity with a circumstantial interpretation (as in (7)).

- (6) *Según dicen, Juan pudo coger el bus pero no sabemos si lo hizo.*
 according say, J can.*PstPfv* take the bus but not know if CL-3*Sg* did
 "According to what they say, Juan might have taken the bus, but we don't know if he did."
 (= $\Diamond$ Juan took the bus, $\Diamond \neg$ Juan took the bus)

- (7) *Juan podía coger el bus, pero no sé si lo hizo.*
 J can.*PstImpfv* take the bus but not know if CL-3*Sg* did
 "Juan was able to take the bus but I don't know if he did."

In any case, it should be emphasized that in the absence of any contextual cues, (5) is perfectly ambiguous between either actuality or counterfactuality. Nevertheless, as will be discussed further when I present my analysis, there are constraints that can favor one interpretation over the other. In order for the actuality reading to arise, for example, the temporal anchoring of the modal and that of the prejacent have to coincide. The fact that (8) can only be understood counterfactually supports this constraint (the adverb "tomorrow" below can only modify the prejacent given that the modal bears past morphology):

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5042724>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5042724>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)