CAN and BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century Irish English

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Corpus Interrogation and Grammatical Patterns

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CAN and BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century Irish English: a case of ‘imperfect learning’?

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the status of CAN and BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century Irish English in comparison to English English through means of a corpus study of personal letters. Analysis of the data reveals that the use of BE ABLE TO is conditioned by the combination of time reference and polarity in the English English data but not in the Irish English data. Thus, the data suggest that some writers of nineteenth-century Irish English failed to acquire the subtle differences between CAN and BE ABLE TO present in English English. I propose that the increased use of BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century Irish English is the result of imperfect learning through perceived similarity (cf. Thomason 2001 and De Smet 2012).

Keywords: Irish English, modal verbs, corpus linguistics, imperfect learning

1. Introduction

The English language was introduced to Ireland over 800 years ago, making Irish English (IrE) the oldest variety of English outside Britain (Hickey 2007). Nevertheless, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that English became the preferred language of more than two-thirds of the population. The plantations of Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought speakers of many different dialects of English to the country. Although many native speakers of Irish could speak some form of English in those centuries, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the majority of native Irish speakers started to use English in their daily life (Ó Cuív 1986). They learned from other Irish speakers who spoke English as an L2 variety and through contact with English planters and their employees. It was during this time that the foundations were laid for the grammar of present-day IrE (Filppula 1999).
The grammar of IrE has been researched extensively, both from a historical and a present-day perspective (for an overview, see Hickey 2002). It is thus somewhat surprising that little systematic work has been carried out on modal verbs in IrE, especially considering the amount of attention the development of modal verbs in English English (EngE) in general, and Standard English (StE) in particular, has received. The aim of Van Hattum (2012) was to lay the first stone towards filling this gap with a morphosyntactic study of the nine core modal verbs and a semantic study of modal verbs of possibility from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries. One of the main findings reveal a significant increase in the use of BE ABLE TO (as opposed to CAN) in IrE in participant-internal possibility contexts during the second half of the nineteenth century in comparison to both EngE of the same period and earlier periods of IrE. Participant-internal possibility refers to a participant’s internal ability or capacity, as in example (1) where it is the internal ability of the participant Boris that allows the proposition, get by with sleeping five hours a night, to take place. In English the participant is generally the subject of the verb group containing the modal expression (Van der Auwera and Plungian 1998). The high use of BE ABLE TO in IrE in comparison to EngE decreased again during the twentieth century, and present-day English corpora showed little differences between IrE and EngE with respect to the use of BE ABLE TO and CAN in participant-internal possibility contexts. In this paper I argue that, although there does not seem to be much difference in the use of CAN and BE ABLE TO in present-day IrE and EngE, some writers of nineteenth-century IrE failed to acquire the subtle differences between these two modal constructions as a result of ‘imperfect learning’, which resulted in an increased use of BE ABLE TO relative to CAN during this period.

(1) Boris can get by with sleeping five hours a night. (Van der Auwera and Plungian 1998:80)
This study will offer a corpus-based analysis of the proportional distribution of the variants CAN and BE ABLE TO in IrE personal letters in comparison to a corpus of EngE letters. In particular, my paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent was the development of the modals CAN and BE ABLE TO in IrE similar to EngE?
- To what extent can the increased use of BE ABLE TO in participant-internal possibility contexts in IrE in the second half of the nineteenth century, as found in Van Hattum (2012), be explained by contact-induced language change (cf. Thomason 2001)?

I will start with an overview of theoretical frameworks in situations of unguided language shift, which will contextualise the linguistic changes ongoing in nineteenth-century Ireland (section 2.1). This will be followed by a discussion of research on BE ABLE TO and CAN in present-day Standard English (section 2.2) and the expression of participant-internal possibility in Irish (section 2.3). The methodology used in this paper is discussed in section 3, while section 4 presents the findings of the corpus-based study of the modal constructions BE ABLE TO and CAN in participant-internal possibility contexts. In section 5 the results of my analysis will be discussed in terms of the proposed research statement and questions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Contact-induced language change

Thomason claims that “any linguistic change that would have been less likely to occur outside a particular contact situation is due at least in part to language contact” (2001:62). The linguistic outcome of language contact is mainly determined by the sociolinguistic history of the speakers and not the structure of their language (Thomason and Kaufman 1991:35). The fact that the Irish learned from other Irish speakers and not by means of formal education, as mentioned in the introduction, suggests a contact situation of ’imperfect
learning’. It should be noted that imperfect learning is not necessarily concerned with a lack of ability to learn, and that other factors, such as attitude and availability of the target language (TL), can be a crucial determinant (Thomason and Kaufman 1991:39). Thomason and Kaufman (1991:47) argue that “imperfect learning is a probability and the learners’ errors are more likely to spread throughout the TL speech community” if (a) language shift occurs rapidly, as was the case in nineteenth-century Ireland, and (b) the shifting group represents a large proportion of the total population so that the TL is not fully available to the shifting group, as was again the case in especially late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland.

According to Thomason (2001:75), learners of a new language in a situation of imperfect learning carry over some features of their native language (or source language; SL) into their version of the target language, which Thomason refers to as TL\textsubscript{2}. Additionally, there is the possibility that the learners fail or refuse to learn some of the TL features, especially when they are marked features, and thus these learners' errors also become part of the TL\textsubscript{2}. De Smet (2012: 606-7) criticizes the role of markedness in actualization as these accounts frequently invite circular reasoning and “suffer from definitional vagueness and inaccuracies”. De Smet offers an alternative explanation by arguing that “actualization proceeds from one environment to another on the basis of similarity relations between environments” (2012:601). Thus, analogy seems to be an important mechanism involved in the process of actualization, i.e. the innovation of novel forms. This would suggest that, if learners make errors that resemble the original TL feature on a surface level, this could trigger an actuation process which results in the feature becoming part of the TL\textsubscript{2}.

Finally, if the shifting group integrates into the original TL-speaking community to form one speech community a new variety is formed, which Thomason calls TL\textsubscript{3}. This stage somewhat resembles Schneider’s (2003) Nativization stage, where the nation substantially weakens its
ties with the mother country often seeking or gaining political independence. The settler strand (TL-speaking community) and the indigenous strand (TL₂-speaking community) “become closely and directly intertwined” (Schneider 2003:247). Ireland’s nativization stage took place during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. A period in which the first Home Rule Bill was drafted (1866) and the Irish Free State was created (1922). In this stage the process of “linguistic accommodation” (also referred to as “negotiation”) causes the original TL and TL₂ to merge, adopting features from both varieties and thus forming a new variety altogether. Thomason (2001:142) describes accommodation as “the negotiation mechanism [that] is at work when speakers change their language (A) to approximate what they believe to be the patterns of another language or dialect (B)”.

Thomason (2001) proposes five requirements that need to be met before one can speak of “structural interference” of a native language in contact-induced language change: (i) It is very unlikely for just one feature from the SL to have influenced the proposed TL₂, thus the presence of other instances of structural interference from the same SL suggests that contact-induced language change is a possible account for a proposed language change. (ii) A SL must be identified; if there is no possibility of the proposed SL having come in contact with TL₂, no convincing case for contact-induced interference can be made. (iii) Evidence must be found of shared structural features in both the proposed SL and TL₂ or, if no evidence from this stage survives, in TL₃. What is important to note here is that the lack of evidence for structural transfer in a present-day variety of TL₃ does not exclude the possibility of structural transfer having been present in TL₂ or in an earlier form of TL₃. (iv) Evidence must be found which indicates that the structural feature which is purported to result from contact-induced language change was not present in the TL before it came into contact with the SL; the possibility of retention of older forms of the TL must be taken into account. (v) It must be proved that the shared structural feature was present in the SL before it came into contact
with the TL. Since the process of convergence is unidirectional, we must consider that a proposed shared feature might have been transferred from English to Irish and not the other way around.

2.2 CAN and BE ABLE TO in present-day Standard English

Before starting the account of CAN and BE ABLE TO in present-day Standard English, it is important to note two things: (i) when a modal verb and all its forms are being referred to, thus including both past and present tense forms and negative and positive polarity forms, the modal verb in question will appear in SMALL CAPS; and (ii) there is often confusion in the literature between typological (semantic) tense and language-specific (morpho-syntactic) tense. Tense in this chapter applies only to language-specific morphological or morpho-syntactic forms used to express the different elements of the temporal system. The term time will be used to refer to the semantic typological method of analysing temporal systems of any language.

BE ABLE TO and CAN generally express similar meanings, but they are not always interchangeable in present-day Standard English, especially in past time contexts. As Palmer (1990) points out, could cannot always be used for the expression of non-epistemic modality in the past. In positive polarity clauses that have a past time reference BE ABLE TO is sometimes an obligatory substitute for CAN. This is illustrated in example (2a), where the use of could is considered ungrammatical and instead was able to should be used, as in example (2b). However, if the sentence has a negative polarity, as in (2c), or is qualified, as in (2d), this restriction does not apply.

(2) a) * I ran fast, and could catch the bus.
   b) I ran fast, and was able to catch the bus.
c) I ran fast, but couldn’t catch the bus.

d) I could almost reach the branch. (Palmer 1990:93)

As discussed above, BE ABLE TO and CAN are not always interchangeable in past time contexts. According to Palmer (1990), there are semantic differences between the two in non-past contexts as well. (i) BE ABLE TO is only equivalent to CAN in the expression of participant-internal possibility (example 3) in the sense that BE ABLE TO is not likely to occur unless a participant-internal possibility interpretation is theoretically possible. However, Coates (1983) gives examples (4) and (5) to indicate that BE ABLE TO can be used in participant-external possibility (her root possibility) and deontic possibility (also referred to as permission) contexts as well. (ii) Similar to past time contexts, BE ABLE TO is preferred over CAN when actuality of the event is implied, i.e. BE ABLE TO means ‘can and does’ whereas CAN means ‘can and will do’. According to Perkins (1983), this difference in meaning can be explained by the fact that BE ABLE TO is objective and CAN is inherently neutral (nothing prevents the event from happening) and only becomes objective by ascribing participant-internal possibility, participant-external possibility and deontic possibility meanings to it. However, the examples below illustrated that BE ABLE TO can also express participant-external possibility and deontic possibility, which would suggest that this modal is subject to objectification as well. Rather, the preference for BE ABLE TO in contexts expressing actuality could be related to Coates’s claim that CAN always occurs in stative contexts, whereas BE ABLE TO can occur in dynamic contexts with the meaning ‘manage to’ or ‘succeed to’ alongside stative uses. For example, in (6) a friend is able to can be interpreted as ‘a friend succeeds in’ and not a general ability of a friend to prove people’s innocence. (iii) BE ABLE TO is more formal than CAN, which is shown by the fact that BE ABLE TO is more common in writing than in speech (Coates 1983).
Yet at the same time, when it comes to personal things, to family things you’re able to be very detached. (Palmer 1990:88)

The editor thanks you for submitting the enclosed ms but regrets he is unable to use it. (Coates 1983:124)

but it’s a bit ridiculous that I should be able to work in another college and not allowed to work in my own. (Coates 1983:124)

(film synopsis) The prosecutor is not concerned with him as an individual and is himself quite convinced of his guilt. But in the end a friend is able to prove the man’s innocence to the satisfaction of the court officials. (Coates 1983:127)

2.3 Participant-internal possibility in Irish

In order to establish whether the Irish language could have had any influence on the development of participant-internal possibility in IrE, a brief investigation of the expression of this kind of modality in Irish is in order. As mentioned above, an investigation into the SL before it came into contact with the TL would be necessary. However, to the best of my knowledge no studies on modality in historical varieties of Irish have been published to date. Therefore, the investigation will be based on what has been published on present-day Irish, complemented by my investigation of the existence of the constructions in the historical input variety, i.e. Irish from the seventeenth century onwards.

Hickey (2009) has argued that structural transfer from Irish to IrE was highly unlikely due to the lack of equivalence between the Irish and the English modal systems. However, there are at least some resemblances between the Irish and English modal systems. In Irish, participant-internal possibility is mainly expressed by the following constructions: the fully inflectable verb bí ‘be’ in combination with ábalta ‘able’ as in example (7) and the
theoretically fully inflectable verb féad ‘can’ as in example (8). When expressing non-
epistemic modality the modal construction is always followed by a verbal noun. The verb
féad can be traced back to the Middle Irish (ca. 900-1200) verb fétáid, which then already
had the meaning of ‘be able’ and ‘can’ (eDIL 2007: s.v. fétáid). It is quite likely that the bí ...
ábalta construction was borrowed into Irish from English: 1) there is evidence of other
instances of structural interference from English to Irish (e.g. Doyle 2001a, 2001b, Stenson
1993, Veselinović 2006); 2) there was a contact situation and English is the SL; 3) the Irish bí ...
ábalta and the English BE ABLE TO construction are a shared structural feature between
Irish and English; 4) the Irish bí ... ábalta construction was not present in Old Irish (up to
900) or Middle Irish (900-1200), and probably not early Modern Irish (1200-1600) either, as
examples can be found in the Corpus na Gaeilge (Úi Bheirn 2004) from the 1730s onwards,
but not in the eDIL; 5) BE ABLE TO can be traced back to late Middle English (cf. OED s.v.
able), which is before the second contact period between Irish and English.

(7) Tá mé ábalta “An Bhfuil Gaeilge Agat?” a léamh.
am I able is Gaelic at-you to read
‘I am able to read “An Bhfuil Gaeilge Agat?”’

(8) Féadaim snámh.
can-I swim
‘I can swim’ (Hickey 2009:269)

Hickey (2009) mentions another construction which expresses participant-internal possibility
in the Irish dialect of Connacht: the fully inflectable verb bí ‘be’ in combination with in ann
‘in wealth, able’ as in example (9).iii This construction is found in Connacht only and does
not seem to have developed the participant-internal possibility meaning until the nineteenth
century (Ó Máille 1964-66). Thus, it is unlikely that this construction played a role in the
development of the expression of participant-internal possibility in IrE.
The bí ... ábalta construction closely resembles the English *be able to* construction in form and meaning. Furthermore, both the Irish and the English construction can only be used to express non-epistemic modality. On the other hand, the Irish verb *féad* ‘*can*’, as in example (8), can be used to express both non-epistemic and epistemic possibility. As mentioned above, when expressing non-epistemic possibility the verb generally takes a verbal noun as complement, but when expressing epistemic possibility it takes a finite form of the verb as complement, as demonstrated in example (10). The ability to take on both epistemic and non-epistemic meanings is something the verb *féad* has in common with its English counterpart *can*. The main difference between *can* and *féad* is that *can* is never inflected, whereas *féad* is inflected, even though the verb is defective.iv

Another difference between the two languages is that in English *can* is the most frequently used construction to express participant-internal possibility, whereas in Irish the bí ... ábalta construction is most common (Hickey 2009). Therefore, a possible explanation for the high use of *be able to* in IrE in the second half of the nineteenth century is that the language-shifters used the constructions from English, as they resembled their own language quite closely, but had a distribution of the two variant forms that was closer to Irish. One of the shortcomings of this explanation is that the frequency of the two variant constructions in Irish is based on present-day Irish, and therefore it cannot be safely argued that the distributions were the same in the nineteenth century, even if all constructions were already present in the Irish language at the time. A study into their distribution during the time of the great language
shift, which to the best of my knowledge does not yet exist, is something I hope to be able to carry out in the near future.

3. Methodology

The discussion of the two modal constructions in Irish suggests that there is a possibility of minimal Irish influence, but to develop a better understanding of the constructions in Irish English it is necessary to look at language-internal factors as well. My study explores the distributional patterns of CAN and BE ABLE TO in participant-internal possibility contexts in both past and non-past contexts in IrE in comparison to EngE by means of a corpus-based analysis of IrE and EngE personal letters. The bulk of these letters are written both by and to emigrants. Emigrant letters have been proven to be a useful source for linguistic research (e.g. Montgomery 1995, Filppula 1999, Fritz 2007, Hickey 2007), as they provide insights into informal, intimate and relatively unmonitored language use. They are written mainly between family members and close friends often from the lower ranks of society, who had modest education (Fritz 2007:73), and thus they were often written with less self-consciousness than other letters (Montgomery 1995:33). Besides, the majority of emigrant letters are autographs and are almost always datable and localisable, which makes them particularly suitable for sociolinguistic research. On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that emigrant letters show variable usage between native and acquired features (Fritz 2007:74). However, Fitzpatrick (1994) notes that the emigrants sometimes avoided these newly acquired features in order to “strengthen the emigrant's weakening link with ‘home’” (Fritz 2007:73). I have consistently checked the background of the informants to test whether migration could have played a role in the deviating use of BE ABLE TO, but found that the increased use of BE ABLE TO could be found in the writing of those who migrated as well as those who remained in Ireland (cf. Van Hattum 2012).
3.1 Irish English data

In order to investigate the distribution of CAN and BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century and present-day IrE, Van Hattum (2012) made use of a corpus of approximately 300,000 words compiled from three sources: the CORIECOR corpus (McCafferty & Amador-Moreno, under construction), the book *Oceans of Consolation* by Fitzpatrick (1994), and the *International Corpus of English: Ireland component* (ICE-Ireland, Kirk & Kallen 2008).

ICE-Ireland is a transcribed corpus of more than one million words of contemporary IrE speech and writing. My study only uses the social letter section from the corpus, which consists of approximately 60,000 words of authors from various regional and social backgrounds. In *Oceans of Consolation*, Fitzpatrick (1994:5) is concerned “with a few individual experiences of migration, as represented in the correspondence of Irish settlers in Australia”. His aims lie mostly in the historical field, but he recognizes the value of these sequences of letters for linguistic research. The corpus of letters transcribed consists of over 80,000 words from 34 correspondents. The letters were mainly written during the nineteenth century by weavers or farmers who were forced to migrate because of the Great Famine and their families who stayed in Ireland. None of the correspondents was completely illiterate, but over a third were unschooled. CORIECOR is a corpus of personal letters, mainly from and to Irish emigrants, consisting of approximately 2.5 million words, covering a time-span from ca. 1670 to 1940, and with materials from the *Irish Emigration Database* at Queen's University Belfast's *Centre for Migration Studies*. I made a selection of roughly 170,000 words based on the following criteria: all the texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century with an identifiable author were selected, since not enough material was available to select authors based on socio-biographical data; for the nineteenth century, a selection was made based on sex, dialect region, and social class in order to construct as well-balanced a representation as possible. An overview of the sources used is given in Table 1 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>time-period</th>
<th>CORIECOR</th>
<th>Oceans of Consolation</th>
<th>ICE-Ireland</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1750-1774</td>
<td>37,120</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775-1799</td>
<td>75,489</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>75,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-1824</td>
<td>11,334</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11,334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825-1849</td>
<td>9,338</td>
<td>2,048</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11,386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1874</td>
<td>10,820</td>
<td>67,323</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>78,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875-1899</td>
<td>10,406</td>
<td>12,320</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1924</td>
<td>9,900</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-1999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60,508</td>
<td>60,508</td>
<td>60,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>164,497</strong></td>
<td><strong>81,691</strong></td>
<td><strong>60,508</strong></td>
<td><strong>306,696</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Word count of Irish English sources examined in this paper.

3.2 English English data

In an attempt to determine whether any idiosyncrasies found in the IrE data could also be found in EngE, the IrE data were compared to a corpus of EngE letters of a similar type, with materials drawn from the *Cherry Valley Chronicles* (Dennett 1990), the *Corpus of Oz Early English* (COEE, Fritz 2004) and the letter genre of the ARCHER 3.1 corpus. The texts selected from these sources were all personal letters and largely emigrant letters representing various dialects and sociolects of English. For my study, only texts which met the following criteria were taken into account: (i) texts produced between 1825 and 1899; (ii) texts written by someone who was born and educated in England; and (iii) texts classifiable as either personal correspondence in general, or emigrant letters in particular. In order to ensure that idiolect would not bias the results, no more than 5,000 words per author were selected. This resulted in approximately 16,000 words of lower-class emigrant letters taken from the *Cherry Valley Chronicles*, 70,000 words of lower- and middle-class emigrant letters taken from the
COOEE corpus, and 9,000 words of middle- and upper-class personal letters taken from ARCHER. For a comparison with present-day EngE I used the programme ICECUP (Wallis 2006), version 3.1, to examine the social letters of the International Corpus of English: Great Britain component (ICE-GB) consisting of approximately 30,000 words of authors from various social and regional backgrounds. An overview of the EngE sources used can be found in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Text type</th>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>1825-1849</th>
<th>1850-1874</th>
<th>1875-1899</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CVC</td>
<td>Emigrant letters</td>
<td>Lower classes</td>
<td>4,467</td>
<td>7,293</td>
<td>4,272</td>
<td>16,032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mainly male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>North-west England</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COOEE</td>
<td>Emigrant letters</td>
<td>Lower and middle classes</td>
<td>51,095</td>
<td>14,553</td>
<td>4,175</td>
<td>69,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARCHER</td>
<td>Personal letters</td>
<td>Middle and upper classes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5,366</td>
<td>3,451</td>
<td>8,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male and female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>55,562</td>
<td>27,212</td>
<td>11,989</td>
<td>94,672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Word count and description of British English corpora examined in this paper.

3.3 Data analysis

The analysis of CAN and BE ABLE TO in Van Hattum (2012) showed that the increased use of BE ABLE TO could only be found in participant-internal possibility contexts. The envelope of variation, that is, the environment where variation between CAN and BE ABLE TO is possible, was defined by extracting all instances of CAN and BE ABLE TO from the corpus and coding them according to their modal meaning, so that only those tokens expressing participant-internal possibility remained. It is important to note here that all instances of CAN and BE ABLE TO with participant-internal possibility meaning were considered, despite the fact that in present-day StE they are not always interchangeable (see Section 2.2). The reason for
including all instances is the belief that one should not assume that the subtle differences between CAN and BE ABLE TO in present-day StE also apply to earlier forms of English or to other varieties of English. The implications of including all tokens for the variant analysis are discussed where relevant.

The data were subdivided into time periods of twenty-five years, in order to represent one generation of writers, in accordance with the methodology used to investigate modality in early Ontario English (Dollinger 2008). Since the sudden increase in the use of BE ABLE TO occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, the main focus is on the periods from 1825 to 1849, the time of the Great Famine and the introduction of the national school system (ca. 11,000 words), 1850 to 1874 (ca. 80,000 words), and 1875 to 1899 (ca. 22,000 words). After coding, the tokens were analysed for several language internal factors, such as semantic context, time reference and polarity of the clause.

As argued in section 2.2, certain language internal factors can predict the choice of BE ABLE TO and CAN in non-epistemic contexts (e.g. Coates 1983, Palmer 1990). As mentioned above, CAN only occurs in stative contexts, whereas BE ABLE TO can occur in stative and dynamic contexts. When BE ABLE TO occurs in a more dynamic context, it often indicates a usually temporary physical state that enables the event to take place, as in example (11) where is able to could be paraphrased by ‘manages to’. In a stative context, on the other hand, BE ABLE TO signifies a general ability, as in example (12). For this paper, I have chosen to follow Coates (1983) in making a semantic distinction between dynamic (e.g. (11)) and stative (e.g. (12)) contexts.

(11) She was confined to bed for over six months, but is so far recovered that she is able to get up and walk about a little. (CORIECOR Miller 1882)
(12) You were right in your observation, when you said you thought it was Partick Cattney that was the writer of our letters – he is always able to wield the old pen.

(OC Brenan 1874)

Another factor mentioned was the time reference of the clause in which the modal constructions appear. BE ABLE TO is usually obligatory in positive polarity clauses which have a past time reference, as was shown in examples (2a) and (2b) above. However, if the sentence has a negative polarity (2c) or is qualified by an adverb (2d) this restriction does not apply. Since present and future time references have no such restrictions and since they also make use of the same morphosyntax, at least as far as CAN is concerned, it was decided to delimit the classification to the binary distinction between past and non-past contexts. In IrE, as in many other varieties of English, time reference and tense do not always correspond, as illustrated in example (13). Here, the phrase is merely able to is in the present tense, but the phrase if she had pain and the rest of the context suggest a past time reference. Therefore, it was decided to use time reference as a factor, and not tense.

(13) I seldom be at Milford I was there on last fair day, I may tell you that your mother then looked ill, she is merely able to be about if she had pain. (CORIECOR Williams 1883)

As mentioned above, the polarity of the clause is also predicted to have an impact on the choice for BE ABLE TO over CAN, thus polarity will be investigated as a variant with positive and negative as the variables. Example (2d) showed that, when participant-internal possibility in past time contexts is qualified by an adverb, the use of BE ABLE TO is not obligatory, as it would be when the polarity of the clause was positive. Therefore, sentences with a qualifying adverb such as (14) are classified as negative polarity.
They are not natives either but indeed I could scarcely tell you what is natives.

(OC McCance 1858)

4. BE ABLE TO versus CAN in participant-internal possibility contexts

Table 3 shows that there is little difference in the distribution of BE ABLE TO and CAN between present-day EngE and IrE corpora: in IrE BE ABLE TO is used with a frequency of 2%, whereas in EngE BE ABLE TO occurs in 8% of all instances, but this small difference is not statistically significant (p=0.2). The low frequency of BE ABLE TO is observed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as well, with percentages ranging from 7% to 12%. In the period from 1825 to 1849, EngE (13%) makes slightly more use of BE ABLE TO than IrE (9%). However, the IrE percentages increase substantially to approximately 30% in the second half of the nineteenth century, before decreasing again in the twentieth century to as low a frequency as in the early nineteenth century (8%). If we compare the IrE percentages with the EngE percentages for the second half of the nineteenth century, we can see that the frequency of EngE remains relatively low compared to IrE (3% vs. 29/30%). The differences between IrE and EngE for the periods 1850-1874 and 1875-1899 are statistically significant (p=0.0007 and p=0.004, respectively). In the second half of the nineteenth century the Irish make considerably more use of BE ABLE TO than the English. It was largely during this time that Irish/English bilinguals shifted toward using English on a daily basis, and as a result integrated into the English-speaking community. Thus it seems that, during this integration phase, the frequency of use for both these modal constructions in English seems not to have been transferred from the TL of the settler community to the TL3 of the integrated community, which resulted in a higher distribution rate for BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century IrE. In addition to this, the Great Famine and its aftermath caused a substantial increase in migration of mainly lower-class, minimally schooled people. In order to keep contact, many of these unschooled emigrants started to write to their families with little to no knowledge of
English grammar and spelling systems. Thus, not only did the TL₂ community integrate into the English speaking community, the new TL₃ community also became part of the English writing community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IrE</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>EngE</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N CAN</td>
<td>N ABLE</td>
<td>% CAN</td>
<td>% ABLE</td>
<td>N CAN</td>
<td>N ABLE</td>
<td>% CAN</td>
<td>% ABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750-1774</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1775-1799</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-1824</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825-1849</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850-1874</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>30%</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1924</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975-1999</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>193</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Distribution patterns in participant-internal possibility contexts from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day (after Van Hattum 2012)

The decrease in the use of **be able to** in twentieth-century IrE can be accounted for by the process of supraregionalization (cf. Milroy et al 1994, 1999, Hickey 2003a, 2007, 2012 Britain 2009). This is an historical process whereby varieties of a language lose specifically local features and become less regionally bound (Hickey 2007:309). Key to this historical process are the principles of suppression and selection. The emphasis is on the adoption of a feature from a non-regional variety with which speakers are in close contact (Hickey 2003b). The final stage of language change is not necessarily Standard English (StE), but rather a
more or less standardised variety of English as spoken in the region in question. Supraregionalization distinguishes itself from standardization in that it does not have a codified written form for official purposes. A further distinction is that suppression of local forms is an active process during supraregionalization, whereas it is more passive during standardization. The more localised varieties of English did not die out completely, but rather became restricted to informal contexts.

According to Hickey (2007:310), supraregionalization in Ireland was the result of the rise of a native middle class and the introduction of the national school system in the first half of the nineteenth century (1831). The IrE speakers probably became aware of the provinciality of their language, and the exposure to more mainstream varieties of English triggered an accommodation process in which the IrE speakers converged towards an EngE dialect, which eventually led towards a more or less standardised variety of IrE. Hickey has successfully demonstrated this process with reference to phonological changes in the late nineteenth century, but it seems that the convergence of the distribution of BE ABLE TO and CAN towards EngE transpired only in the early twentieth century.

Since the IrE divergence in frequency from EngE seems to take place in the second half of the nineteenth century, the following section will focus on this time period only. Thus, the percentages and raw frequencies in the figures represent the total of the period 1850 to 1899. The analysis aims to identify the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors determining the choice of BE ABLE TO over CAN in IrE in line with the methodology described above.

4.2 Language internal factors

4.2.1 Dynamic vs stative contexts

This section explores the possibility of semantic context having an impact on the choice between BE ABLE TO and CAN. As mentioned in section 3.3, the variables for this analysis are
dynamic and stative (cf. examples (11) and (12) above, respectively). Figure 1 shows that semantic context has a statistically significant impact on the choice of modal in both IrE and EngE. BE ABLE TO is more common in dynamic contexts, 66% for IrE and 41% for EngE, than stative contexts where BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 12% in IrE and 2% in EngE (IrE p=0.00000005 and EngE p=0.00002). However, there seems to be a difference between IrE and EngE when it comes to dynamic contexts. A Fisher exact test indicates that the difference between IrE and EngE in dynamic contexts has a p-value of 0.08, which suggests that there is a 92% chance that the null-hypothesis is false. Considering the small data set, it is highly suggestive that in IrE BE ABLE TO is the preferred variant in dynamic contexts, whereas in EngE CAN is preferred.

![Figure 1 BE ABLE TO and CAN in dynamic and stative contexts from 1850 to 1899 (percentages and raw figures)](image)

4.2.2 Polarity

As predicted, Figure 2 shows that BE ABLE TO occurs more frequently in positive polarity contexts opposed to negative contexts. In IrE, BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 39% in positive polarity contexts and 14% in negative polarity contexts, whereas CAN occurs at a rate of 61% and 86% respectively. The EngE data set shows a lower use of BE ABLE TO in general, but also has the difference between positive polarity, where BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 16%
against 84% for CAN, and negative polarity, where BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 3% against 97% for CAN. The difference between positive and negative polarity contexts is statistically significant in both IrE (p=0.01) and EngE (p=0.02), meaning that in both IrE and EngE the polarity of the clause influences the choice of one modal construction over the other.

![Figure 2 BE ABLE TO and CAN in positive and negative polarity contexts from 1850 to 1899 (percentages and raw figures)](image)

Figure 2 suggests a difference between IrE and EngE in the sense that the former variety uses BE ABLE TO more frequently in positive polarity contexts (IrE = 39% and EngE = 16%). A Fisher exact test gives a p-value of 0.01, but this does not necessarily imply a difference between IrE and EngE in the role that polarity plays. The difference between IrE and EngE in negative polarity contexts, 14% and 3% respectively, is also statistically significant (p=0.047). This, to me, suggests that the higher use of BE ABLE TO in IrE in general is causing the statistically significant high occurrence of BE ABLE TO in both positive and negative polarity contexts, and not a significant difference between IrE and EngE in the influence of polarity on the choice of modal construction. Thus, it seems that polarity cannot account for the differences between the IrE and EngE datasets in the second half of the nineteenth century.
4.2.3 Time reference

The time reference of the tokens was investigated to see whether there were any trends in opting for **BE ABLE TO** instead of **CAN** (see Figure 3). If we compare the percentages for past and non-past time, it can be seen that the distributions of **BE ABLE TO** and **CAN** in IrE and EngE are similar in past contexts: in IrE the share of **BE ABLE TO** is 19% and in EngE it is 23%. In non-past time contexts, on the other hand, there is a highly significant difference between IrE, which uses **BE ABLE TO** at a rate of 35%, and EngE, which uses this construction at a rate of only 3% (p=0.00000002). In other words, in late nineteenth-century EngE, the time reference of the clause in which the modal construction appears influenced the distribution of **BE ABLE TO** and **CAN**. The former was used significantly more frequently in past contexts (23%) compared to non-past contexts (3%) (p=0.001). This might be related to the fact that **BE ABLE TO** is sometimes obligatory in past contexts in present-day StE, as mentioned in section 2.2. It seems that in late nineteenth-century IrE, however, time reference does not influence the distribution, as the frequency of occurrence for non-past (34%) and past (19%) contexts is not statistically significant (p=0.16). Thus, the difference with EngE in the second half of the nineteenth century is entirely situated in non-past time contexts.

![Figure 3 Participant-internal possibility in non-past and past time contexts from 1850 to 1899 (percentages and raw figures)](image-url)

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4.2.4 Time reference and polarity

As mentioned in sections 2.2 and 3.3, it is the combination of time reference and polarity that plays a role in the choice of CAN and BE ABLE TO in present-day StE. Thus, this section will explore the combination of the two variants. As shown in Figure 4, there is not much difference between IrE and EngE in non-past negative contexts: in IrE BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 8% in non-past negative contexts, and in EngE BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 2%. There is, however, a significant difference between the IrE and EngE data in non-past positive contexts (p=0.0003): in IrE BE ABLE TO occurs at a rate of 42% in these contexts, whereas the rate in EngE only reaches 6%. In addition, it seems that in IrE there is a significant difference between BE ABLE TO and CAN in non-past contexts: in the IrE data, be able to occurs at a rate of 42% in positive contexts, whereas the construction is used at a rate of 8% in negative contexts (p=0.003). Thus, it seems that the high use of BE ABLE TO in non-past positive contexts, as in example (15), could account for the high use of BE ABLE TO in the IrE data from the second half of the nineteenth century.

(15) Tell John I am able to handle the Sythe yet and Set a Good Days Setting of potatoes But a God Deal Fataiged after it. (OC Fife 1864)
Figure 4 Participant-internal possibility in non-past time positive and negative contexts from 1850 to 1899 (percentages and raw figures)

Figure 5 shows the results of the use of BE ABLE TO and CAN in IrE and EngE in past positive and negative contexts. As predicted based on the literature, the use of BE ABLE TO in EngE in past positive contexts (36%) is significantly higher than in past negative contexts (8%), or the non-past contexts, as shown in Figure 4 above (p=0.002). Thus, it seems that the subtle rules that distinguish BE ABLE TO and CAN in past time contexts in present-day StE (cf. Section 2.2) were already in place in the late nineteenth century EngE. However, the IrE data show an equally high use of BE ABLE TO in both past positive (27%) and past negative contexts (27%). Thus, it seems that not only the non-past positive contexts cause the high occurrence rate of BE ABLE TO in the IrE dataset, but also the past negative contexts, e.g. example (16), keeping in mind that with Great Difficulty qualifies the ability to walk my lone.

(16) I was able to walk my lone with Great Difficulty. (OC Fife 1875)
5. Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to investigate the diachronic development of modals expressing participant-internal possibility during the formation period of IrE in the eighteenth and, especially, the nineteenth century, based on a case study of BE ABLE TO and CAN.

Van Hattum (2012) argued that although the distribution of the modals under investigation in this paper was similar in the present-day varieties of IrE and EngE, this was not the case in the nineteenth century. In fact, the study of IrE and EngE personal letters in this chapter showed that there was a relatively high use of BE ABLE TO in IrE from 1850 to 1899 in comparison to EngE (Section 4). The discussion of participant-internal possibility in Irish showed that there was indeed structural transfer concerning the constructions bí ábalta and be able to, but the direction of the transfer was from English to Irish, rather than from Irish to English. According to Hickey (2009), bí ábalta is more frequent in present-day Irish than be able to in present-day English, which might have influenced the higher use of BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century IrE. However, even though my study suggests that bí ábalta was already present in Irish before the language shift in the nineteenth century, further research is needed to establish the frequency of occurrence of bí ábalta in nineteenth-century Irish. In addition, research on possible constraining factors on the use of bí ábalta, such as time reference and polarity, is needed to establish (a) whether the constraints found in EngE of the time were transferred to Irish, and (b) if constraints on the use of bí ábalta in Irish, or lack thereof, could have been transferred to Irish English.

An analysis of language-internal factors showed a higher proportional distribution of BE ABLE TO in IrE in comparison to EngE when the sentence was in a non-past context. More specifically, the higher distribution seemed to occur in non-past positive, and past negative contexts. The data thus suggest that, while the use of BE ABLE TO in nineteenth-century EngE
is clearly conditioned by the combination of time reference and polarity, this is not the case in the IrE data from the second half of the nineteenth century. A group of language shifters might have failed to use the frequencies of occurrence associated with CAN and BE ABLE TO in their TL₂. Rather, they might have modelled the frequencies of occurrence after the distribution of similar constructions in their native language, or they failed to recognise the subtle differences between the use of BE ABLE TO and CAN in past and present contexts and as a result of perceived similarity used similar frequencies for both contexts (cf. De Smet 2012).

When these groups of language shifters came into contact with other English speakers throughout Ireland, there might have been a process of mutual accommodation where the TL speakers were influenced by the high frequency of BE ABLE TO of the TL₂ speakers. This resulted in less-restricted variation between BE ABLE TO and CAN in IrE for the two periods in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was clearly visible in the personal letters as the English-based writing community increased its proportion of minimally schooled TL₃-speakers.

The hypothesis that language shifters failed to recognize the subtle differences between CAN and BE ABLE TO in EngE is not only supported by the proportional distributions within certain contexts, but also by example sentences such as example (17). Here could occurs in a positive polarity clause with a past time reference. According to Palmer (1990:93), “the positive past tense form of CAN is not used in assertion if there is the implication of actuality, ie if it is implied that the event took place”, and instead BE ABLE TO should be used, which could be paraphrased as ‘managed to’ or ‘succeeded in’. The example below implies that the event (take his tumbler of punch and cup of tea as well as any of us) took place, despite the fact that the participant (Hughie) is complaining of bad health at present, probably the result of too much punch. The example suggests that the author was not aware of the difference between BE ABLE TO and CAN in EngE.
(17) They were both up spending the evening with us and Hughie could take his tumbler of punch and cup of tea as well as any of us, though he is complaining at the present (OC Fife 1860)

The decrease in the use of BE ABLE TO in the twentieth century might be explained by what Hickey describes as supraregionalization. Hickey (2003b, 2007) showed that supraregionalization of phonetic features took place in the late nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century was a time of increased regional and social mobility as a result of famine and small scale urbanization, which led to the rise of a native middle class. This, along with the introduction of the national school system in the first half of the nineteenth century led to increased exposure to more mainstream varieties of English which triggered the supraregionalization process. The analysis of CAN and BE ABLE TO in the second half of the nineteenth century yields no convincing evidence that supraregionalization affected the modal verbs as well, but the results do suggest that it took place in the twentieth century. This could possibly be explained by the fact that grammar tends to change at a slower pace than phonology.

To conclude, it seems likely that some writers of the nineteenth-century IrE data failed to acquire the subtle differences between CAN and BE ABLE TO as a result of unguided language shift and imperfect learning. This led to an increase in the use of BE ABLE TO during the second half of the nineteenth century. Future research will have to be carried out to further explore the possibility of structural transfer from Irish in terms of frequency distribution and linguistic constraints. The use of BE ABLE TO decreased again in the twentieth century, possibly due supraregionalization triggered by the rise of a native middle class and small-scale urbanization. A sociolinguistic investigation of BE ABLE TO and CAN in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which considers extra-linguistic factors such as gender, social class, and regional background should be carried out to verify this hypothesis.
6. References

ARCHER-3.1 = *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*, v3.1. (1990–1993/2002/2007/2010). Compiled under the supervision of D. Biber, & E. Finegan at Northern Arizona University, University of Southern California, University of Freiburg, University of Heidelberg, University of Helsinki, Uppsala University, University of Michigan, University of Manchester, Lancaster University, University of Bamberg, University of Zurich, University of Trier, University of Salford, & University of Santiago de Compostela. Co-ordinated by D. Denison, & N. Yáñez-Bouza at the University of Manchester (http://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/lel/research/projects/archer/).


McCafferty, K., & Amador-Moreno, C. P. (under construction). *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence (CORIECOR)*. University of Bergen and University of Extremadura.


Webster, N. (1789). *Dissertations on the English language: with notes, historical and critical to which is added, by way of appendix, an essay on a reformed mode of spelling*, with *Dr. Franklin’s arguments on that subject*. Boston: Thomas and Company.


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1 Some scholars have paid attention to some characteristic features of IrE concerning modal verbs, such as the absence of a distinction between *shall* and *will* (Webster 1789, Fogg 1796, Joyce 1910, Facchinetti 2000, Hickey 2007, McCafferty 2011), the use of *may* for *might* (Joyce 1910), the development of epistemic *mustn’t* in IrE (Kirk and Kallen 2006, Hickey 2007, 2009), the contraction ‘*ll not’ (Hickey 2007), the overuse of conditional *would* (Joyce 1910, Hickey 2007), the double modal construction (Traugott 1972, Visser 1973, Nagle 1993, Fennell & Butters 1996, Corrigan 2000, Hickey 2007, Corrigan 2011) and the *be + to* modal construction (Corrigan 2000). Hickey (2009) aims to discuss the formal and functional aspects of modal verbs in Irish and in present-day English, but he does not discuss IrE.


iii Hickey (2009) and Wagner (1959) have suggested alternative meanings for *in ann*. A discussion of the origin of the *in ann* construction is not relevant for this paper, but see van Hattum (2012).

iv All tenses and forms of this verb can be found in all the dialects of Irish combined, but no single dialect makes use of all of them (Ó Siadhail 1989).

v A sociolinguistic study of the difference between *CAN* and *BE ABLE TO* was carried out, but this resulted in an insufficient number of tokens per subgroup and has therefore been excluded from this chapter.

vi For a more detailed account of the compilation process of the corpus under investigation and my reasons for choosing these corpora, see van Hattum (2012).

vii For more information on the individual EngE sources I refer the reader to Dennett (1990), Fritz (2007) and Yáñez-Bouza (2011).

viii Since the number of tokens is generally very low in this study, I have applied a two-tailed Fisher Exact test of statistical significance.