

The Disunity of the Modals

John Maier, ANU

June 30, 2011

john.maier@anu.edu.au

1. Two claims about alethic modality

1.1 Characterizing alethic modality

1.2 The Operator Thesis: Alethic modality is properly represented by an operator on propositions or sentences

1.3 The Unity Thesis: Alethic modality is in this respect unified with epistemic modality, which is also properly represented in this way

1.4 The point of view of modal logic

1.5 The point of view of natural language

2. 'It is possible that p'

2.1 A minor embarrassment for the Operator Thesis (DeRose 1991)

2.2 On the idiolect of philosophers

2.3 A common remark that may be relevant

2.4 Why this remark may be true but misleading

2.5 Sources of alethic modality in natural language

2.5.1 The subjunctive conditional

2.5.2 'It is possible for x to F'

2.5.3 Circumstantial (or 'dynamic') modals

3. The behavior of 'can'

3.1 'Can' as the core circumstantial modal in English

3.2 A conjecture about 'can': 'x can F' *never* expresses epistemic modality

- 3.3 Corpus-based evidence for the conjecture
- 3.4 Cross-linguistic evidence for extending the conjecture
- 3.5 Negatives and interrogatives (Coates 1995)

4. The semantics of 'can'

- 4.1 The 'no worries' response: the Operator Thesis and the standard semantics for 'can'
- 4.2 Why the standard semantics has trouble with the conjecture
- 4.3 Further problems for the standard semantics
 - 4.3.1 The substitution phenomenon
 - 4.3.2 The Stalnaker/Thomason test
- 4.4 An alternate view of 'can'
 - 4.4.1 'Can F' as a predicate (cp. Vetter 2010)
 - 4.4.2 Why this explains the conjecture
 - 4.4.3 How this handles the other two objections

5. Alethic modality revisited

- 5.1 The challenge to the Operator Thesis
- 5.2 The challenge to the Unity Thesis
- 5.3 On the possibility that we have learned nothing at all from this
- 5.4 A view of alethic modality that coheres well with these considerations
- 5.5 Unity regained?