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Phonemics and Lexicon

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Most, if not all, phonological systems show combinatory, also called conditioned, or contextual, variants. In Received Southern English, /t/ is generally alveolar, but before /l/ it is lateral.

Again, most, if not all, phonological systems show free, also called stylistic, or optional, alternants. In RP [ʔ] may be substituted for [t] at the end of a syllable before a consonant.

The relative frequency of free alternants may depend on the phonological context. In RP [ʔ] compared with [t] is more frequent before /m/, /n/, and /r/ than before other consonants.

The relative frequency of free variants may also depend on the style of speech. In colloquial standard German an unaspirated variety of /t/ is often substituted after /ʃ/ for the slightly aspirated variety which is commonly used in formal speech.

Besides, a given sound variety may be both a free and a combinatory variant. At the end of a syllable before /r/ both a post-alveolar [t] and a glottal stop may be used in RP. But if the sequence /tr/ occurs as an onset, only a post-alveolar [t] can be used.

These phonological traits are paralleled rather closely by lexical traits. As an example we may quote the English auxiliary verbs 'can' and 'may'. In present-day English 'can' and 'may' are used to denote

(a) a physical possibility, e.g.

"As *may* be seen from figure 4, the buffer has a very large core array."

"As *can* be seen from the illustrations, this feature is automatic."

(b) a moral possibility, e.g.

"Under Decree Law 40,350, persons belonging to certain categories *can* be detained as a security measure for an indeterminate period from six months to three years, which *may* be extended by successive periods of three years as long as they continue to show themselves dangerous."

(c) a logical possibility, e.g.

"The *x*'s in non-numerical work are, if not arbitrarily restricted, essentially an unbounded set from an infinite set which is everywhere dense. That is, one cannot tell, unless one in fact looks in the table, whether there is not another *x* which lies between x_1 and x_2 , since *x* and the set of *x*'s belong essentially to the continuum. For example, in a dictionary with the ordinary alphabetical order, there *may* be the words 'bee' and 'beef'. Between these *can* be 'beech', 'beeches', and any idiomatic phrase beginning with either of these words."*

In such instances as those quoted above, 'can' and 'may' are interchangeable. In other words, they are free lexical variants.

There are contexts, however, in which only one of the two words can be used: 'can' does not occur

(a) when it expresses a moral possibility

– in rhetorical questions of the type

"May I ask where you are from?"

– in clauses with 'as well' immediately after the auxiliary

(b) when it expresses a logical possibility

– in purely positive clauses** with a perfect infinitive after the auxiliary

– in subordinate clauses of concession

'may' does not occur

(a) when it expresses a physical possibility

– in negative, semi-negative, and positive interrogative clauses

(b) when it expresses a moral possibility

– in interrogative clauses with a subject in the 2nd or 3rd person

– in negative interrogative clauses with a subject in the 1st person

(c) when it expresses a logical possibility

– in clauses with a semi-negative immediately after the auxiliary.

Thus, 'can' and 'may' are optional variants in some clauses and combinatory alternants in others.

When they are free variants, their relative frequency may depend on the formal context. In comparison with 'can', 'may' expressing a physical possibility is more frequent before passive than before active infinitives.

Their relative frequency may also depend on the style that is

* 'May' can also be used to mark a clause as optative, but this function is disregarded here because it can never be fulfilled by 'can'.

** I.e. without so much as a semi-negative.

used. Relatively to 'can', 'may' denoting a moral possibility is more frequent in formal than in colloquial English.

Previous studies have shown that the distinctive features that make up a phoneme and are actualized in each member of this phoneme together with adventitious or phonologically irrelevant traits, can in a way be compared with the distinctive features that make up a significatum and are designated as an entity by a significant, sometimes by several substitutable significant.

We may add that when a significatum has more than one significant, these may be free alternants in some contexts and complementary variants in others, in much the same way as the various members of a phoneme may be in free alternation in some positions and in complementary distribution in others. Moreover, the relative frequency of free lexical variants may, like the relative frequency of optional phonetic alternants, depend on style and context.

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Discussion

Nickel (Kiel): Hinweis auf die unterschiedliche Rangordnung und Wichtigkeit der partiellen «free variants» auf den einzelnen Ebenen. Auf der lexikalischen Ebene (*can - may*) ist auch bei totalem Austausch in allen Positionen das Kommunikationsrisiko relativ gering. Gering ist es auch bei Allomorphen (*puis - peux*). Hier handelt es sich im wesentlichen um stilistische Risiken. Am größten ist das Risiko zweifellos auf der phonologischen Ebene, wobei freilich, wie so oft, der Kontext dieses Risiko wieder reduzieren kann.

Die Teilsostituierbarkeit ist wohl auch als eine Warnung vor Verabsolutierungsversuchen bei Definitionen von Begriffen wie Phonem, Morphem, Synonym usw. zu betrachten.