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A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF MODAL USAGE OF 'CAN' IN ENGLISH, FRENCH, AND SWAHILI

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Abstract

Understanding and analysing languages with different grammatical systems is a major challenge, but by identifying formal grammatical categories and exploring their common meanings, as linguist Frank Palmer suggests, it is possible to uncover cross-linguistic patterns. This paper undertakes a contrastive and descriptive study of the modal verb 'can' in three languages: French, English and Kiwahili. The aim is to examine, through illustrative examples, how different languages operate within different linguistic frameworks to convey concepts of comparable semantics. Particular attention will be paid to the peculiarities of English modal verbs, including subject-auxiliary inversion, ellipsis and direct not-negation.

***Keywords*:** Contrastive analysis; cross-linguistic patterns; ellipsis ; modal verbs; subject-verb inversion

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1. Introduction

Modal verbs play an important role in expressing different shades of meaning in different languages around the world. Although the actual modal verb may not exist in all languages, modal meanings can still be expressed using other linguistic tools. Through this contrastive study I aim to discover both similarities and differences in the use of modal verbs to convey modal meanings, with a particular interest in the modal auxiliary 'can', hoping to gain insight into how languages with different grammatical systems work (compare and contrast) on a particular element, and also to understand the different features of these languages that may make language learning either easier or more difficult for the learner.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Contrastive analysis

Contrastive analysis can be defined as the theoretically based, systematic and synchronic comparison of two languages or a small number of them (Mair, 2023). This can be done by considering both their genetic and typological relationships. Genetic relatedness refers to the historical links between the languages, while topological relatedness considers their structural similarities (ibid). Such comparisons can be symmetrical, providing a balanced view of the languages being compared, taking into account their specificities in an equitable way, as is common in theoretical orientations where the aim is to understand the similarities and differences between languages without favouring one over the other. It can also be asymmetrical, focusing on the characteristics of one language over another, often for practical or pedagogical purposes.

In this paper, the focus is not on the practical aspects of learners' language use in the different languages, but rather on a theoretical perspective in order to show similarities and differences between three languages with different grammatical features, as mentioned above, the comparison of which is therefore symmetrical.

2.2 A brief topological comparison of the English, French and Swahili languages

The topological comparison of French, English and Kiswahili (referred to as Swahili in the English language) examines their structural similarities and differences. While French is a Romance language, English is a Germanic language and Kiswahili is a Bantu language. There are similarities between these languages in that they all have some influence from each other, particularly French and English, although French tends to have stricter rules about gender agreement. There are also words in Kiswahili that derive from both French and English, such as *divai* (*du vin* = wine), *shamba* (*champ* = farm), *sinema* (cinema), *disko* (disco), *menyu* (menu), *bajeti* (budget) and *shampeni* (champagne). According to Jao (2015), these words were brought directly into Kiswahili by French speakers, with some of the words being of English origin.

The three languages also share certain topological features such as word order (subject-verb-object), grammatical structures (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and sentence constructions. However, they differ in aspects such as grammatical gender (present in French but not in English or Kiswahili) and verb conjugation patterns. Moreover, Kiswahili, which is agglutinative in structure and relies heavily on prefixes and suffixes to convey grammatical information such as tense, aspect and mood, often has more flexibility in word order than English and French, which allows for greater variation in sentence structure (Ng'ang'a, 2003).

Kiswahili places a strong emphasis on noun classes, which affect both syntax and morphology. Hence, syntactic and functional information can be inferred from the meaningful affixes attached to a given noun, other verbs and their derivatives. For example, in verbs such as *ku* + *penda*, meaning 'to + love', where the present tense becomes */a/na/penda* (he or

she/at present time/loves) and the past tense becomes */a/li/penda* (he or she/at a past time/loved). Throughout these transformations, the verb stem *penda* remains constant, while the prefixes indicate tense, subject, aspect or mood. The expression of mood therefore differs from French and English, which have distinct mood forms, such as the subjunctive or modal auxiliaries.

Generally, to conjugate a verb in another tense in French, the stem of the word is formed by taking the infinitive of the verb and removing its ending, which can be represented as *-er*, *- ir* or *-re*. Infinitive endings change according to tense and subject, while mood is expressed by conjugated verb forms such as the indicative, subjunctive and imperative. English expresses mood mainly by using modal auxiliaries such as 'can', 'could', 'will', 'would', 'may', 'might' or 'shall', which give different shades of meaning such as possibility, necessity, obligation, permission or ability. It also uses verb constructions such as the subjunctive for hypothetical or non-factual situations, although its use is less common and less distinct than in French.

2.3 Defining modal auxiliaries/verbs

The precise definition of modal auxiliaries in English remains a point of debate among linguists. For example, Depraetere and Langford (2020), along with others such as Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1999) or Palmer (1990), choose not to offer a precise definition, but instead focus on describing their semantic or syntactic behaviour. Drawing on the information provided by the Cambridge Grammar of the English Language and the existing literature on the subject, we can identify modal verbs as a subset of auxiliary verbs that convey modality – the speaker's attitude towards the action or state of the main verb.

Palmer identifies main modal verbs such as 'will', 'shall', 'may', 'can', 'must' and 'ought to', while others such as 'might', 'could' and 'should' are also recognised (Depraetere and Langford, op. cit., p. 257). These verbs modify the meaning of the main verb to indicate necessity, possibility, permission, obligation, ability, likelihood and volition when considering their lexical meanings encompassing deontic necessity, epistemic necessity and dynamic modality (Huddlestone and Pullum, 2002). They differ from other auxiliary verbs in their inability to take non-finite forms (e.g. infinitives such as *to should (apart from 'ought to') or participles such as *musting) and their lack of agreement with the subject in terms of tense and number (e.g. *she may-s or *may-ed). In Palmer's view, for a grammatical system to qualify as modal in any language, it must contain a subset of modal meanings, recognising that variations in modal expressions represent different degrees of modality (Palmer, 2013).

In French like in English, the understanding of modal verbs lacks a single, universally accepted definition. This absence has led linguists to offer different interpretations to elucidate their modal meaning. According to Charaudeau and Maingueneau (2002), in the French language, modality refers to the means through which speakers convey attitudes, levels of certainty, or commitment to statements. Linguistic tools are employed to articulate opinions regarding the likelihood, necessity, or desirability of events or behaviours.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology characterised by both a contrastive and a descriptive approach. The decision to use a contrastive method stems from the fact that the study focuses on a cross-linguistic analysis of the modal verb 'can' in three languages with different grammatical structures. This approach makes it possible to explore how variations in linguistic systems influence the use of 'can'. Complementing this, a descriptive approach is used to highlight similarities and differences in the use of this modal verb, providing a comprehensive understanding of language dynamics. The inclusion of examples drawn from existing published research in grammar and linguistics within each language strengthens the foundation of the study. In addition, the textbook "*Advanced English Grammar, A Linguistic Approach, 2nd Edition*" by Depraetere and Langford (2020) serves as a central reference point, particularly for the analysis in English and for the examination of linguistic features.

4. Results

The results of this study highlight both similarities and differences in the use of the modal verb 'can' in English, French and Kiswahili. While the modal meanings conveyed are generally similar across the three languages, the syntactic structures employed differ significantly. English and French show standardised patterns that allow for subject-verb inversion in modal constructions, a feature that is absent in Swahili. Instead, Swahili shows greater flexibility in modal expression, relying on auxiliary verb constructions and contextual cues to convey modal meanings due to the lack of distinct modal verbs. The study also reveals differences in the construction of the direct not-negation. In French, the negative marker surrounds the modal verb, whereas in Swahili it is reflected by the use of prefixes and a morpheme. Finally, French uses specific constructions for ellipsis, such as modal ellipsis or antecedent deletion, as not all constructions are possible.

5. Analysis

5.1 Modal auxiliary usage in French and Swahili

Here I will compare the use of modal auxiliaries in French and Swahili with English as a basis for reference, to gain an understanding of how they express necessity, possibility, obligation and permission.

5.1.1 In the French language

In French, there is a notable difference in the specific modal verbs used. For example, French relies mainly on three main modal verbs: *pouvoir* (can/ability or permission), *vouloir* (willingness, similar to the English lexical verb 'want') and *devoir* (must or need to/obligation and necessity). Thus, *Je peux venir means* 'I can come', and may indicate both ability and permission, whereas *Il veut aller au cinéma* means '*He wants to go to the cinema'*, indicating willingness. The verb *savoir* (to know) also sometimes replaces *pouvoir* in certain contexts, indicating an ability that depends on a physical or mental characteristic or situation (Vetters, 2012; Riegel et al., 2009). For example, *Je sais danser* (literally 'I know how to dance') differs from *Je peux danser* (I can dance), with the former implying a learned ability and the latter an immediate ability. However, this usage varies in Belgian French and in certain northern regions of France, where the modal verb *savoir* completely replaces *pouvoir* (Hanse and Blampain, 2000). For example in the sentence, *Tu sais me passer le sel?*, which translates to 'Can you pass me the salt?' *sais* replaces *peux.* The literal translation being *Do you know how to pass me the salt?, sounds strange in English.

One aspect that emerges in the use of modal verbs in French, as with some English modals, is that these verbs are followed by infinitives and have polysemy (Le Querler, 1996; Gosselin, 2010), the latter adding another layer of complexity to their use.

Example: (1) *Pierre* [subject] + *peut* [modal aux.verb] + *venir* [verb in the infinitive form].

This sentence can be interpreted as expressing both ability and permission (polysemy).

5.1.2 In Swahili

In terms of modal verbs, Swahili modal constructions serve similar functions to those in English and French, encompassing abilities, permissions, obligations, and necessities (Ndung'u, 2017). However in Swahili, as mentioned above, modal concepts are often conveyed through a mixture of verb constructions, particles, and contextual cues, as opposed to stand-alone modal verbs such as 'can', 'must', or 'may' as in English and French. This flexibility and variation in expression indicates a distinct approach to conveying modality, an observation supported by the research of Bernander et al., (2022), who found a lack of comprehensive descriptions of the modal system and modal auxiliaries in what they term

‘standard Swahili’, despite its significant socio-cultural role in East African linguistics (Bernander et al., p. 43).

Existing literature on modality in Swahili fails to address these nuances (ibid), with some scholars using knowledge of English modal usage to explain constructions that convey modal meanings similar to English, often using various auxiliaries such as *kuwa* (to be) or particles such as *na* for ‘to have’ or ‘hu-’ as a habitual marker. The modal auxiliary or particle precedes the main verb in the sentence, indicating the modal meaning, emphasising the importance of contextual cues such as tone and word choice in conveying modality. To illustrate the granting of permission, consider the English clause ‘You may/can go’, which translates into French as *Tu peux partir*. In Swahili, this clause becomes *Unaweza kuondoka*, where the structure can be explained as follows:

1.[U] 2. [-na] 3.[wez-] 4. [a] + main verb in the infinitive.

1. *U* acts as a prefix to indicate the subject of the verb, indicating the second person singular subject, ‘you’.

1. *-na-* acts as a subject prefix that serves as a tense marker, specifically indicating the present tense, meaning that the action is happening now.

1. *-wez-* represents the root of the verb, which translates to ‘can’ or ‘be able to’.

1. *-a-* acts as a suffix, marking the infinitive form of the verb and also reinforcing the notion of ability, as the contrast ‘inability’ would contain the morpheme ‘ i’ instead.

While the primary focus of this discussion goes beyond the examination of modality across languages, the particular emphasis is on the use of the modal verb ‘can’ to express ability, possibility and permission. Consequently, it will be examined whether certain features characteristic of English modals are reflected in the other two languages under consideration. As highlighted earlier, these features include subject-verb inversion, the use of ellipsis and direct not-negation. This investigation is however limited to constructions in the present tense.

5.2 Modal verb/auxiliary ‘can’

The modal verb/auxiliary ‘can’ is inherently polysemic as mentioned above, and has different interpretations in different linguistic contexts. In English, it can mean ability, permission and possibility (Celce - Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Similarly, in French it encompasses notions of permission, ability, possibility, probability (éventualité épistémique) and aspectual aspects (Fuchs and Guimier, 1989; Gosselin, op.cit). This is also the case in Swahili (Ndung’u, op. cit).

Let us now compare modal constructions in Swahili with those in French and English, highlighting differences in semantic structure and syntactic behaviour, starting with asking for permission (subject-verb inversion), giving permission, ability/possibility, and not giving permission/inability (direct not-negation), and finally the use of ellipsis.

5.2.1 Asking for permission (Subject-modal aux. verb inversion /interrogative form)

In English, asking for permission often involves subject-verb inversion to form interrogative sentences. This strategy reverses the typical word order to politely ask for consent or authorisation, often using modal verbs such as ‘can’, ‘may’ or ‘could.’ For example,

(1) Can you swim?

Modal auxiliary [can] + subject [you] + main verb [swim]? This construction is relatively straightforward in English, as the modal auxiliary remains consistent across all conjugations (e.g., I can - can I? ; you can - can you?).

In French, the interrogative form of conjugated verbs is a little more complicated, especially for non-native speakers. Irregular verbs like *pouvoir* (conjugated as *je peux, tu peux, il/elle peut, nous pouvons, vous pouvez, ils/elles peuvent*) follow specific conjugation rules.

For example, the interrogative form of *pouvoir* is *puis-je* rather than **peux-je?*, which conveys a meaning closer to *'*may I?*'* than *'*can I?*'* While *'Je peux'* is the standard present indicative conjugation, it becomes *'puis-je'* in questions where the subject and verb are reversed, as in *Puis-je vous accompagner?* This change of form only applies to the first person singular *'je',* the subject-verb inversion also applies to other verbs.

Let's consider the same example as in the English version (1), which translates to French as follows.

(1) *Peux-tu nager?* (Can you swim?) This construction follows the pattern of modal auxiliary [peux] + subject [tu] + infinitive of the main verb (*nager*). According to the French grammar book by Riegel et al. (op. cit.), the subject-verb inversion form is more prevalent in written French than in spoken French. Alternatively, it can be expressed as follows: *Est-ce que tu peux nager?* Or simply, *tu peux nager?* (in spoken French, where intonation clarifies the meaning).

The Swahili construction is as follows:

(3) Swahili: (*Wewe* - the subject pronoun 'you' is often omitted) *Unaweza kuogelea?* =

Can you swim?

[U] (subject prefix indicating the second person singular 'you') + [-*na*] (tense marker for the present tense) + [-*wez*] (root verb for 'to be able to') + [-*a*] (suffix indicating the infinitive form of the verb 'to'). So the auxiliary is 'weza' = to be able to or to manage to do something.

Here the structure in Swahili closely resembles the subject-auxiliary verb construction

+ main verb (swim) compared to (1) and (2). The subject pronoun (indicated by the subject prefix *u+na)* precedes the auxiliary verb. This suggests that the subject-modal-auxiliary verb inversion may not be feasible in Swahili constructions when asking for permission, although the meaning remains the same as in French and English.

Note: **wezauna kuogelea?* - This construction is incorrect because it lacks logical sense.

5.2.2 Giving/Granting permission

Giving or granting permission, as defined by Depraetere and Langford, involves a speaker's utterance that results in the hearer being allowed to do something (op. cit., p. 275). In this context, 'can' serves as the unmarked form of expressing permission, while 'may' is reserved for more formal situations, particularly when emphasising hierarchical differences between the giver and receiver of permission. However, 'may' can also indicate politeness (ibid.). To illustrate this concept, let's look again at the examples of asking for permission, but without focusing on hierarchical reasons or politeness, instead emphasising the meaning of 'being allowed to', while also examining the syntactic properties:

(4) English: [You can swim] in the pool = (you are allowed to do so) [Subject + modal auxiliary + main verb]

(1) French: [*Tu +peux +nager*] *dans la piscine* = You can swim (you are allowed to do so). [subject + modal auxiliary + infinitive of the main verb]

(1) Swahili: [*U/na/weza +kuogelea*] *kwenye bwawa la kuogelea* = You can swim = (you are

allowed to).

(You/at the present time/can) + (swim)

Subject-auxiliary construction + infinitive verb (the explanation for the modal construction is the same as above in the part about asking permission, but without the question mark).

While these three languages employ a similar structure to convey modal meaning, the specific sentence constructions differ due to the grammatical features and word order inherent in each language. In both French and Swahili, the modal verbs/markers are followed by a verb

in the infinitive form, as English modal verbs like can, could, should, and alike cannot accept a 'to' infinitive form (e.g., * can to swim).

5.2.3 Ability (uwezo, pouvoir) / Possibility

Given the polysemic nature of this verb, I will focus on its expression of ability, which refers to 'the physical, intellectual or perceptual capacity to do something' (Depraetere and Langford, op.cit., p. 279). This definition of ability is close to its French counterpart (cf. Riegel et al.; Charaudeau and Maingueneau), where ability is often associated with the notion of possibility, albeit often implicitly. Below I illustrate how to use this modal verb to denote ability in the three languages:

(1) English: I can swim = (I am physically able to do this = it is possible for me to do so). [subject + modal auxiliary + main verb]

(2) French: *Je peux nager* = I can swim = (I am physically able to do this / possibility). [Subject + modal auxiliary + infinitive of the main verb]

(1) Swahili: *Na-weza kuogelea* or *Ni-na-weza kuogelea* = I can swim = (I am physically able to do this / possibility).

[Subject + auxiliary verb + infinitive of the main verb]

Comparing construction (6) *(unaweza + kuogelea*) with (9) (*Na-weza kuogelea* or *Nina-weza kuogelea*) in Swahili, there is a change in the subject prefixes. In Swahili, as mentioned above, the use of personal pronouns is optional when expressing ability. Similarly, the subject prefix is only used to emphasise the subject of the verb, which explains the difference between *Na-weza kuogelea* and '*Ni*' (optional) in '*-na-weza kuogelea*'.

To better understand these constructions, it is important to understand how verbs are used in the present tense. This is often indicated by the subject prefix-*na* (Vuzo, 1995; Ferrari, 2012).

The Swahili present tense marker '*-na*' plays *5.2.4. The present tense marker – na in Swahili*

an important role in verb conjugation, especially in the formation of verb structures. According to Ferrari (2012), Swahili verbs in their basic form consist of a verbal prefix, also known as a pronominal index or subject prefix, followed by a marker indicating tense, aspect or mood, and then the verbal base. The choice of verbal prefixes varies from person to person, with certain prefixes being associated with different pronouns (p. 16). (My translation from Swahili)

1st person singular (**Mimi** = I or Je) is represented by *ni-*

1st person plural (**Sisi** = We or Nous) *tu-*

2nd person singular (**Wewe** = You or Tu) *u-*

2nd person plural (**Ninyi** = You or Vous) *m-*

3rd person singular (**Yeye** = He/she or Il/elle) *a-*

3rd person plural (**Wao** = They or Ils/elles) is represented by *wa-*

The optional personal pronouns (bolded) are often indicated by the subject prefixes.

Now, let's examine some examples:

- *U* (2nd person singular = subject pronoun you or *tu*) + *na* (subject prefix marking the present tense for the second person singular) + *weza kuogelea?* = Can you swim?

- *U* (2nd person singular, same as above) + *na* (same as above) + *weza Kuogelea* = You can swim.

- *Ni* (1st person singular = subject pronoun I or *Je*) + *na* (subject prefix marking the present tense for the first person singular, often used for emphasis) + *weza kuogelea* = I can swim.

- *Na* (subject prefix for the 1st person singular 'you' not marking tense but acting as subject) + *weza kuogelea* = I can swim.

Again, as in the case of giving permission, the modal meaning conveyed remains consistent in all three languages (ability and possibility). In both French and Swahili, the modal verbs/markers are followed by a verb in the infinitive form.

5.3 Lack of permission - (direct not-negation)

In English, negative forms are constructed by adding 'not' after the modal verbs. Unlike lexical verbs, modal verbs do not include the auxiliary 'do' in their negative forms, such as 'don't', 'doesn't' or 'didn't. Here are some examples.

(1) English: You can/may swim in the pool = (you are allowed to do so).

Negative form: You can + not swim (cannot swim in the pool) / You may + not swim (may not swim in the pool) = (you are not allowed or able to do so).

[Subject + modal auxiliary + not + main verb]

I have used 'may' here to avoid confusion that the negative marker 'not' is attached to the modal verb, as shown by 'cannot'. The latter forms a unit with the negative form. However, this is not universally true for all modal verbs.

Let us see if the same form can be applied to French.

(1) French: *Tu peux nager dans la piscine* = You can swim in the pool (you may/possibility). *Tu + ne + peux + pas + nager dans la piscine.* (you cannot swim/impossibility/not allowed to do so).

Here, *tu peux nager dans la piscine* implies an impossibility or lack of permission to swim rather than an inability to swim in the pool. In French, it is preferable to use the verb *savoir* for this purpose, as in *tu ne sais pas nager* = unable because the skill has not been learnt.

As far as sentence structure is concerned, negation expressed by the use of 'not' is presented differently in French, where the negative form surrounds the verb. *Ne* precedes the conjugated verb and *pas* follows it. In French, the negation of a modal verb, as seen above, is *ne...pas*, but this can be used with all other verbs, whether they express permission to be absent or not (cf. Charaudeau and Maingueneau).

For example, consider the following sentence, which does not use a modal verb: *Il permet à ses enfants de sortir.* = (He allows his children to go out.)

The lack of permission can be expressed as follows: *Il ne permet pas à ses enfants de sortir* = (He does not allow his children to go out).

Let us see how this is done in Swahili.

To express lack of permission in Swahili, negative verbal structures are formed using negative verbal prefixes, also known as negative pronominal indices or subject prefixes, followed to the verbal base. For beings, the negative verbal prefixes are as follows (examples by Ferrari, 2012, p. 21):

1st person singular *si-* 2nd person singular *hu-* 3rd person singular *ha-*

1st person plural *hatu-* 2nd person plural *ham-* 3rd person plural *hawa-*

In all negative forms, the morpheme 'i' is added at the end of the auxiliary verb to emphasise the negative aspect or inability. In particular, the prefix *hu-,* usually used as a habitual marker, also serves as a negative prefix marker in the 2nd person singular.

(1) Swahili: *unaweza* + *kuogelea kwenye bwawa la kuogelea* = (You can) + (swim in the swimming pool) = (you are allowed to do so).

For the negative form, there are two possibilities *(udondoshaji wa maneno* - omission of a letter in a word without altering the meaning):

1.Hauwezi kuogelea

2. Huwezi kuogelea

Both expressions convey the same meaning of lack of permission, inability, and/or impossibility. However, the first one is more commonly used in spoken Swahili.

5.4 Ellipsis

I am not going to discuss the different types of ellipsis here, e.g. gapping, pseudogapping, stripping, sluicing, etc. Rather, I will look at the existence and use of this feature with the modal verb 'can' in the three languages. Ellipsis has been defined as the omission of elements normally required by grammar and which the speaker or writer considers obvious from the context (McCarthy, 1991; Lobeck, 1995).

In English, the following examples provided by Depraetere and Langford illustrate this phenomenon (op. cit., p. 322).

Peter can drive, and so can his sister Ø. (cf. *Peter can drive, and so can his sister drive.)

(13) Can you speak Russian? – Yes, I can Ø. Can you Ø?

In French, according to Busquets and Denis (2001), the use of ellipsis is less common because of the language's restrictions on leaving verbal complements of auxiliaries empty. They give an example to illustrate this (p.3).

(1) Hobbes doesn't have to do the washing up, but Calvin has to. (16) **Hobbes n'avait pas à faire la vaisselle, mais Calvin avait à.*

This is not to say that all French constructions do not support the use of the ellipsis. They argue that such a use of ellipsis is possible in modal ellipsis (17) and in antecedent-contained deletion (18).

Here is an example that the authors use to illustrate this: (ibid., p.4 and p.13).

(17) *Kramer n'a pas pu venir à la soirée, bien que Jerry, lui, ait pu.* (Translates to = Kramer couldn't come to the party, although Jerry could.) Past Modal 2b.3)

(1) *Il a [SV mangé tous les gâteaux qu'il a pu [SV∅]]*

(Translates to = He [SV ate all the cakes he could [SV ∅] Past modal

Ellipsis in Swahili is closer to English ellipsis, where words are left out of a sentence but are understood from the context.

(1) *Naweza kuogelea, na yeye pia anaweza kuogelea.* (Translates to = I can swim and he can also swim.)

(1) *Naweza kuogelea, na yeye pia* [~~*anaweza kuogelea*~~ *]* (Translates to = I can swim and so can he)

In (19) the repeated part *anaweza kuogelea* = he can also swim [subject prefix + auxiliary + infinitive of the main verb] is omitted from the second part of the clause and the meaning is understood from the context.

6. Conclusion

This contrastive analysis aimed to explore the use of modal verbs in three different languages, with a particular focus on the modal verb 'can'. By examining its polysemic nature, I narrowed the investigation to its expressions of ability, permission and possibility. I also investigated the presence of common features associated with modal verbs in English, including subject-verb inversion, direct negation and ellipsis. Such a contrastive study may be of interest to learners of one language or the other, and may also be useful to language teachers teaching foreign learners or non-native speakers, but more research of this kind is needed, for example to explore other languages, or to investigate the impact of these cross-linguistic differences on language processing and comprehension, as this study was only intended to provide a general perspective on how different language systems work, rather than an in-depth analysis of each component.

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