

From ability to epistemic possibility

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Diachronic cross-linguistic work on modality has established that modals arise out of lexical verbs via grammaticalization and originate as root modals, only later acquiring epistemic interpretations. This type of change is unidirectional. Other well-known cases of unidirectionality in semantic change can be explained as instances of meaning generalization in terms of entailment. Two obstacles to extending this model to modal pathways are: (a) modalities of different flavors and fixed force are not related by entailment, (b) on Kratzer's account of modal flavor in terms of context-dependent conversational backgrounds, it is not clear why one type of conversational background would be privileged over another. Focusing on the diachronic pathway from ability to epistemic interpretations, I show how ability modals arise out of lexical verbs with a particular kind of meaning, based on an independently motivated analysis of ability modals, and then how their meaning expands to circumstantial and epistemic possibility by liberalizing the presuppositional constraints on the conversational backgrounds they are construed with.