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TITLE: *Can* and *may*: monosemy or polysemy?

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Bolinger's (1989) observation that "Modals are rampant as conversation pieces, and no other pair has received quite the attention showered on *can* and *may*" is no less true today than it was in the 1980s. These two modals – which share a greater degree of semantic overlap than any of the other modals – have figured prominently in debates over the relative merits of a 'monosemy' or 'polysemy' analysis. Proponents of the former maintain that each modal has a core or unified meaning that is evident in all its uses, with different interpretations simply being prompted by the contexts in which the modal is used. Proponents of the latter claim that each of the modals expresses two or more independent meanings and that, in abstraction from context, this may lead to ambiguity.

In this paper I shall critically assess the relative merits of the two approaches via a corpus-based ('International Corpus of English') study of *can* and *may* in over two million words of contemporary spoken and written Australian, British and American English. The study was exhaustive: all previous studies based on standard corpora have been restricted by their limitation to a subset of tokens. The data used yielded information not only on the semantics of *can* and *may* but also insights into their regional and stylistic variation and into the influence of such socially-driven dissemination processes as 'Americanisation' and 'colloquialisation' upon their relative popularity.