

# ***BE able to and the categorization of modal markers in English***

A corpus-based study

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of BE X TO structures in English via the analysis of the quasi-modal BE ABLE TO. Based on previous accounts of the marker and its comparison with modal auxiliary CAN, defining characteristics are identified and contrasted with the description of other BE X TO structures such as BE ALLOWED TO and BE LIKELY TO. Consequently, the availability of non-finite forms along with property attribution and goal orientation stand out as unifying properties of the BE X TO quasi-modal category, which occupies a singular place within the modal system of English.

## *1. Introduction*

Understood as a semantic category embracing a range of notions that ‘all involve some kind of “non-factuality”’ (Collins 2009:11), modality forms a rich system in English and one that has extensively been dealt with in the literature (see for instance Coates 1983; Palmer 1990). Most of the time however, the accounts have concentrated on the central modal auxiliaries and, except in recent years, little has been said about other modal markers such as quasi-modal periphrastic expressions, e.g. BE ABLE TO, BE LIKELY TO, BE BOUND TO, BE SUPPOSED TO. The very denominations of such expressions have varied a lot, including in reference grammars such as Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002), where they have alternately been referred to as ‘semi-auxiliaries’ or ‘marginal modals’, ‘relatively fixed expressions with meanings similar to that of the modal auxiliaries’ and ‘lexical modals’.<sup>1</sup> This actually shows the lack of consensus prevailing today over the status to be attributed to this set of expressions whose boundaries are not clear-cut. Indeed, structures like those mentioned above have modal meanings which are also found in modal auxiliaries but present on the other hand different degrees of grammaticalization (see Westney 1995:36-7), which does not facilitate their characterization as a homogeneous category. Yet, as pointed out by Krug (2000:257), expressions such as BE EXPECTED TO, BE DUE TO, BE ALLOWED TO and others do seem to constitute a subclass as they all contain the verb BE followed by an adjective or past participle taking *to*-infinitive complementation. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘quasi-modal’ will be used throughout this paper to refer to those modal expressions, in line with Collins (2009:15).

way these structures operate and the place they occupy in the modal paradigm deserve to be further investigated and this is what this paper sets out to do.

The issue of the categorization of modal markers in English will be approached via a case-study of BE ABLE TO and its relation to both modal auxiliary CAN and other BE X TO structures. Indeed, even though BE ABLE TO is one of the most studied BE X TO structures (see for instance Facchinetti 2000; Aijmer 2004), its modal characterization still needs to be refined because the semantics of the marker remains elusive. Moreover, its uses may have evolved in recent years given the changes experienced by the modal system as a whole (see Mair & Leech 2006). Working in the unifying framework of the Theory of Enunciative Operations (see Culioli 1990), I will provide a comprehensive analysis of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features of the structure based on the survey of a 40-million-word corpus comprised of the 2009 year of publication of the British newspaper *The Independent*.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Previous accounts of the structure

As noted by Aijmer (2004) and Facchinetti (2000), studies on BE ABLE TO have mostly focused on a comparison of the quasi-modal with CAN, the two markers being presented as near synonyms with BE ABLE TO a minor variant of CAN in certain contexts. We will briefly review the arguments given for such a characterization in the literature before comparing them with examples taken from the *Independent* corpus in sections 3 and 4.

### 2.1. Suppletive use

Both Quirk et al. (1985) and Facchinetti (2000) insist on the strong syntactic complementarity obtaining between BE ABLE TO and CAN. This so-called ‘suppletive’ use is an argument for the inclusion of BE ABLE TO in the category of quasi-modals as it allows the structure to ‘fill slots in a modal verb paradigm’ (Quirk et al. 1985:144), and is confirmed by the high and relatively stable frequency of non-finite uses, which represent about 60% of all uses of the marker in the 1961-93 British English corpora analysed by Facchinetti (2000:119-23). Yet, given the increasing use of some quasi-modals as opposed to corresponding modals shown by Mair & Leech (2006) and the phenomenon of grammaticalization undergone by quasi-modal expressions described by Krug (2000), there may have been an evolution in the distribution of the marker in more recent years, which the present study will allow us to check.

The predominance of the suppletive use of BE ABLE TO has often caused its semantic differentiation from CAN to be backgrounded, but a distinction is still made between the two as far as actuality and objectivity are concerned.

### 2.2. Actuality

Quirk et al. (1985:232) evoke the emphasis put on the ‘fulfilment of the action’ by BE ABLE TO in past assertive contexts, where *could* has a potential meaning only. This opposition is also phrased in terms of ‘actuality’ v. ‘non-actuality’ (see Facchinetti 2000:124), and is attributed

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<sup>2</sup> The corpus was collected by Catherine Collin (University of Nantes) in digital form. The data was then extracted using a Python command-line tool as well as the concordancer *CasualConc* (© 2008-2015 Yasu Imao).

by Aijmer (2004:73) to the grammaticalization of the quasi-modal into an aspectual marker, the meaning being derived ‘from participant-internal ability to participant-internal actuality in certain contexts’. Context certainly seems crucial for this interpretation to develop, meaning that it can hardly be considered a core value of the marker. Furthermore, as indirectly highlighted by Aijmer (2004), attributing an ‘actual’ meaning to BE ABLE TO is problematic insofar as it would exclude it from the modal category altogether since the latter is characterized by ‘non-factuality’ (Collins 2009:11). The exact origin of such an interpretation thus needs to be ascertained.

### 2.3. Objectivity

Another characteristic of BE ABLE TO that is often discussed in the literature (see Facchinetti 2000:125; Collins 2009:29-30) is its ‘objective’ nature, as opposed to the ‘subjectivity’ expressed by CAN. This is mostly presented as a characteristic of the quasi-modal category which allows its differentiation as a whole from modal auxiliaries. Yet, as shown by Westney (1995 quoted in Collins 2009:29), this distinction sometimes proves problematic when compared with corpus uses since quasi-modals can also be used ‘subjectively’. The problem actually seems to reside in the definition given to the notion of ‘objectivity’ as opposed to ‘subjectivity’, which is not always very clear and which tends to differ between authors. Consequently, this characterization deserves further investigation, especially in light of Perkins’ claim (1983:68) that ‘all modal expressions which incorporate the verb BE express objective modality, the objectivity being a function of the fact that the modality itself is actually asserted’, a statement which noticeably establishes a direct link between the morpho-syntactic and semantico-pragmatic properties of the marker.

### 3. BE ABLE TO and the modal auxiliary CAN

In what follows, I compare the elements highlighted in the previous section with the analysis of the *Independent* (2009) corpus presented earlier, providing both quantitative and qualitative data on authentic uses of the marker.

#### 3.1. Syntactic complementarity

	Non-finite forms of BE <i>able to</i>			Present tense forms of BE <i>able to</i>			Past tense forms of BE <i>able to</i>		All forms of BE <i>able to</i>
	be	been	being	am	are	is	was	were	
<b>Number of tokens</b>	4429	980	587	24	388	232	793	501	7934
	5996			644			1294		
<b>Frequency</b>	55.82%	12.35%	7.40%	0.30%	4.89%	2.92%	9.99%	6.31%	100%
	75.57%			8.12%			16.31%		

Table 1. *Distribution of the occurrences of BE able to in The Independent (2009)*

The syntactic complementarity between BE ABLE TO and CAN discussed in 2.1. appears very clearly in Table 1 where we can see that the non-finite uses of BE ABLE TO account for more than 75% of the uses of the marker. This figure is significantly higher than the overall percentage given by Facchinetti (2000) for her multi-register corpora<sup>3</sup>, but it is comparable to the frequency she gives for the Press section of her corpora, which is about 73% for Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (LOB 1961) and 81% for Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (FLOB 1991), as shown in Table 2.

	LOB (1961)				FLOB (1991)			
	Non-finite	Present tense	Past tense	Total	Non-finite	Present tense	Past tense	Total
<b>Number of tokens</b>	22	1	7	30	34	1	7	42
<b>Frequency</b>	73.33%	3.33%	23.33%	100%	80.95%	2.38%	16.67%	100%

Table 2. *Distribution of BE able to in the Press section of the LOB (1961) and FLOB (1991) corpora, adapted from Facchinetti (2000)*

Thus, a few observations can be made on this set of frequencies. First, there is a specificity of newspaper discourse regarding the uses of BE ABLE TO, which is even more frequent in non-finite forms in this particular register than in general British English. Second, the frequencies within the newspaper corpora are not that homogenous either. This may be explained in part by the much smaller size of the LOB and FLOB corpora compared to *The Independent* (2009), but may also have to do with the sampling process and composition of LOB and FLOB. The *Independent* (2009) corpus is characterized by a form of coherence and unity which cannot exist in (F)LOB because it is made up of a variety of sources. On the other hand, a single newspaper is not necessarily representative of all newspaper discourse, which might explain the variation between the two sets of corpora. Furthermore, it is worth noting that *The Independent* did not exist at the time of elaboration of the LOB corpus in 1961 but did in 1991 when FLOB was created, so that there are samples of *The Independent* in the latter but not in the former. Thus, although LOB and FLOB were designed so as to be comparable, there are still differences in the sources of the texts sampled in each which might also explain the variation in the frequency of non-finite forms of BE ABLE TO. Finally, the hypothesis of an evolution in the uses of the marker over time in journalistic discourse is not supported by enough evidence, and would require comparing *The Independent* (2009) to another year of publication of the same newspaper to be reassessed, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Saying that there is syntactic complementarity between BE ABLE TO and CAN, however, does not necessarily lead to describing this use of the quasi-modal as suppletive. Such a description would suggest that there is a clear alternation between the two markers, with no possible choice between two competing forms, while also implying that the two markers at stake fulfill the same function and are basically interchangeable. It is true that CAN does not have any non-finite forms, but in some cases, a choice does seem possible if we allow what

<sup>3</sup> Facchinetti's study is mostly based on the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (LOB) and Freiburg-Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (FLOB) corpora. LOB and FLOB were designed to be comparable corpora of British English, both totalling one million words and offering samples of various registers (e.g. press, imaginative writing, religion or scientific writing) but with textual material published respectively in 1961 and 1991. For more information see LOB (<http://clu.uni.no/icame/lob/lob-dir.htm>) and FLOB (<http://clu.uni.no/icame/manuals/FLOB/INDEX.HTM>) manuals.

precedes the non-finite form of BE ABLE TO to be taken into account. For instance, the sequence *will be able to*, which is often interpreted as a future ‘concrete’ possibility, can sometimes be replaced with CAN without any changes in temporal reference. The following utterance is an example of such cases.

- (1) “It’s a great honour to come back to my ‘family’,” said the former Pakistan Test bowler. “It will be nice to see all my friends again and I hope I **will be able to** take my performances from the field into the dressing room. // “When you have a passion for something, you allow yourself to give your best – and I have the passion and desire for coaching.”<sup>4</sup>

In (1), *be able to* cannot directly be replaced with *can* given that the sequence \**will can* is unacceptable. Yet, *will be able to* can be replaced with *can* with minimal loss on the referential plane (1’).

- (1’) “It will be nice to see all my friends again and I hope I **can** take my performances from the field into the dressing room.

This is because *will* primarily marks future projection in a context where future time reference is already implied via *hope* in the main clause, along with *will* in the coordinated clause. This does not mean that the two alternatives are equivalent, as the presence or absence of *will* necessarily involves differences in terms of modal positioning.<sup>5</sup> Quite to the contrary, it indicates that the use of *will be able to* v. *can* results from a choice by the speaker, depending on the point of view he/she wants to convey. In fact, whatever the context, it could be argued that there is always a choice between BE ABLE TO and CAN, given that another turn of phrase is always possible. It should thus be emphasized that the complementarity shown by the two markers on a syntactic level is reflected on a notional level, and is not the sign of interchangeability. We will explore the semantics and pragmatics of both markers in greater depth in the following sections.

### 3.2. Goal orientation

According to the data extracted from *The Independent* (2009), past tense occurrences of BE ABLE TO constitute the most frequent finite use of the marker, which as for non-finite uses seems to be linked to a sharp contrast with CAN, as evoked in section 2.2. Example (2) provides an illustration of this usage.

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<sup>4</sup> All examples are from *The Independent* (2009). Double slashes in examples signal a paragraph break in the original.

<sup>5</sup> The absence of equivalence between *will be able to* and *can* is also linked to the type of possibility expressed by BE ABLE TO on the one hand, and by CAN on the other hand, and to the operating mode of each marker, as we shall see further on. Here, the goal is merely to show that the choice of a marker along with a syntactic configuration does not necessarily derive from external referential or propositional constraints.

- (2) They asked 13 ear, throat and mouth (otolaryngology) residents in Vancouver to each flip a coin 300 times to see if they could bring up heads. // All of the participants achieved more heads than tails, with 7 of the 13 coming up with “significantly more heads” than tails, said the study published in the current December 7 issue of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ). // One of the participants **was able to** achieve heads 68 percent of the time.

In (2), we have a case of the quasi-modal denoting ‘actuality’, i.e. the syntactic subject had the ability to validate the predicate and he/she did, as indicated by the assertion in the previous sentence. Aijmer (2004:72) suggests that this interpretation is the result of ‘pragmatic inferences’ which have been conventionalized. It seems reasonable indeed to describe ability as a property that can be attributed to a subject only if the subject is known to have realised the predicate under consideration at least once. When the situation associated with the predicative relation is unique—as is the case here—then there is only one possibility for verification, which means that the event actually took place. This shows, however, that the ‘actual’ character of the event is not expressed by the quasi-modal marker itself, but most likely results from the interaction between BE ABLE TO, the past tense, and contextual factors such as the type of situation referred to in the utterance, i.e. specific or generic. In fact, the study of corpus data reveals that such an interpretation does not arise in generic contexts, as shown by example (3).

- (3) In the 1960s, “pirate” radio stations really did live up to their name. Due to a loophole in the legal system, stations **were able to** broadcast from international waters – in this case, ships in the North Sea – to listeners in Britain and Europe. Richard Curtis's latest comedy film, *The Boat That Rocked*, is about that era of pirate radio: it tells the story of an offshore station that conquered the airwaves, and stars Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Bill Nighy, Rhys Ifans and Kenneth Branagh.

In this utterance, the syntactic subject *stations* is indefinite and generic and, along with the time adverbial *in the 1960s*, thus suggests the existence of a class of occurrences of the predicative relation <stations – broadcast...>. In this context, *were able to* is not interpreted as referring to a single event which would actually have taken place but merely evokes the possibility for the subject to validate the predicate in a broad past situation. It is therefore possible to paraphrase with *could* (3’).

- (3’) Due to a loophole in the legal system, stations **could** broadcast from international waters – in this case, ships in the North Sea – to listeners in Britain and Europe.

It is worth noting, however, that this use of the quasi-modal is rather rare as *could* seems to be preferred to *was/were able to* in most cases. This is probably because as opposed to BE ABLE TO, CAN is intrinsically linked to the construction of a class of occurrences (see Gilbert 2003:779), which explains in turn the relative<sup>6</sup> incompatibility of the modal auxiliary with specific contexts naturally favouring an ‘actual’ reading of the utterance in the past.

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<sup>6</sup> CAN is sometimes found in specific contexts when the utterance is non-assertive, e.g. *Nadal raced to a 5-2 lead when Federer's backhand let him down repeatedly. // And staring down the barrel of defeat and with hopes of a record-equalling 14th major title slipping away, Federer fought off three championship points, but **could** not do it for a fourth time.* It could be argued that negation, or interrogative inversion, makes the marker

The etymology of ABLE and CAN offers another element of explanation concerning the different behaviour of the two markers in the past. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, ABLE comes from Latin *habilis* via French: ‘easy to handle, easily dealt with, suitable, fit for a purpose’, from *habēre* ‘to hold’. All those dimensions point to the relational nature of the notion /able/, which tends towards an object, or ‘purpose’, as much as it qualifies its first argument. In use, this orientation towards a specific goal is actually reinforced by the *to*-infinitive complement of the adjective which marks a projection towards the validation of the predicative relation, and which interestingly also appears in other quasi-modal expressions that receive an ‘actual’ interpretation in the past, e.g. HAVE TO. In the words of Coates (1983:127 quoted in Facchinetti 2000:124), all this confers to BE ABLE TO a ‘dynamic’ character which is not found in CAN, from Old Germanic *kunnan* ‘to know, know how, be mentally or intellectually able’, which is as a result much more stative (*know, be*) and abstract (*mentally, intellectually*) in meaning. This fundamental difference might help to explain why BE ABLE TO sometimes appears in contexts where the event it qualifies is understood to have taken place, when CAN does not. Yet, it also confirms that BE ABLE TO never expresses ‘actuality’ as such but rather a projection towards a goal, which is *a priori* virtual and requires specific contextual parameters to be actualized. As a consequence, the ‘actual’ interpretation, which only arises in specific, past contexts, cannot be considered a stable property of the marker and does not disqualify it as a (quasi)modal marker. However, the fact that BE ABLE TO can occur in contexts where the validation of the predicative relation is inferred is a strong argument for positing the existence of a modal continuum in the uses of the marker.

### 3.3. Property attribution and expression of point of view

The idea of a continuum of modal degrees leads us back to the notion of ‘objectivity’ discussed in section 2.3. If this notion is understood as referring to a marker being used to qualify a proposition independently from the speaker’s judgement, then the following utterance could be considered as an example of the ‘objective’ use of BE ABLE TO.

- (4) Close links with Oxford University mean that students **are able to** attend Oxford university lectures and use its libraries, as well as joining its student societies.

In (4), the relation between the subject and the predicate is modified by *are able to* which attributes a property to the subject via the linking construction of the verb BE. This property seems ‘objective’ because it is presented in the context of the utterance as the consequence of *close links with Oxford University* via the verb *mean*, so that it is not actually based on the speaker’s subjective opinion. Yet, this ‘objectivity’ remains when replacing *are able to* with *can*, which is also acceptable here (4’).

- (4’) Close links with Oxford University mean that students **can** attend Oxford university lectures and use its libraries, as well as joining its student societies.

This means that the ‘objective’ effect does not indeed depend on which (quasi)modal marker is used, but rather seems to be caused only by context. It could be argued that the tendency for

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indifferent to the type of reference (i.e. specific or generic) because it blocks the validation of the predicative relation either way.

BE ABLE TO to appear in such contexts is proof of its ‘objective’ nature. As alluded to by Perkins (1983, see section 2.3), that statement is sustained by the operating mode of the marker, which is truly integrated to the predication by means of the predicative operator BE X TO that allows the syntactic subject to be located relative to the predicate, while explicitly specifying the nature of this relationship. This is not the case with modal auxiliaries like CAN, which remain ‘maximally unspecified’ (see Collins 2009:30 quoting Westney 1995:54). Yet, we can see that this interpretation of the notion of ‘objectivity’ differs from the one proposed before: saying that the structure is ‘objective’ as a construction does not mean that the content of the modal predication is necessarily objective as well. Example (5) seems indeed to contradict the idea that BE ABLE TO does not involve the speaker’s modal judgement.

- (5) The UK-wide policy was officially confirmed by the Scottish Government today ahead of a similar announcement in England, expected later. // Scottish Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon said: “I **am able to** announce today that the next group in the population that will be vaccinated, or offered vaccination, is children aged over six months and under five years.”

In this utterance, the quasi-modal predicate bears on a verb of speech (*announce*) which is followed by a *that*-complement clause specifying the content of the speech-act and is as such used in a performative way. As a result, the predicative relation is in fact actualized in context. Yet, the use of BE ABLE TO marks a choice on the part of the speaker not to assert the qualified relation, but rather to distance him/herself from it. In emphasizing the ‘attitude’ of the speaker regarding the propositional content of the utterance (see the definition of modality in Palmer 1990:2), the quasi-modal thus fulfils a crucial modal function, which shows that it is in fact a marker of point of view, and as such can hardly be considered ‘objective’.

When contrasted with assertion—as it is here and as it also was in example (2)—BE ABLE TO also points to the presupposition that what is said or done is or was not such an easy thing to say or do, which signals another form of evaluation, or appreciation, of the predicative relation on the part of the speaker.<sup>7</sup> CAN is sometimes used in similar contexts, but while the idea of having to overcome difficulties in order to validate the predicative relation is also present with the modal, the interpretation is that of a general concrete possibility which could be phrased as ‘it is possible (for X) to say/do Y’. The quasi-modal on the other hand clearly puts the emphasis on the subject which is presented as an agent<sup>8</sup>, who is in control of the outcome, which is particularly important in the first person since the syntactic subject is identified with the speaker. This means that the speaker does not envisage the predicative relation in the same way when modalizing it with CAN or BE ABLE TO, which confirms the status of the latter as an expression of the speaker’s point of view.

In the end, it seems that the specificity of BE ABLE TO resides not so much in its being more objective than CAN but in its blurring the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity: a BE ABLE TO evaluation is presented as objective by the speaker because of the way it is predicated, but it is in fact always the trace of some form of modal judgement. Going back to the idea of a modal continuum, the inherent tension between objectivity and subjectivity exemplified by the marker would situate the majority of its uses in the middle range of this

<sup>7</sup> This presupposition also plays an important part in the argumentative uses of the marker, which often occurs in such sequences, e.g. in conditional clauses.

<sup>8</sup> See Westney (1995:28) for a discussion of this characteristic of BE ABLE TO. After reviewing Coates’ (1983) and Palmer’s (1990) positions, he concludes that there is ‘a cline of availability for uses of *be able to* in senses possible for *can*’, depending on ‘the ease with which subjects [...] can be treated as agent-like entities’.

continuum, while contextual factors would allow it to be used in more—as in (5)—or less—as in (4)—subjective/modal ways.

To conclude this section, what makes a quasi-modal expression such as BE ABLE TO fundamentally different from a modal auxiliary like CAN can be summarized as follows.

- i) BE ABLE TO has a full set of both finite and non-finite forms;
- ii) BE ABLE TO is the trace of a locating operation and as such it attributes a property to the first argument relative to the predicate, which is the object of a projection.

The question remains, however, as to whether these criteria specifically characterize BE ABLE TO or actually apply to the BE X TO quasi-modal category as a whole—which is the issue addressed in section 4.

#### *4. BE ABLE TO and other BE X TO structures*

Given that BE X TO structures are comprised of a great variety of expressions and that it is impossible to give a full account of all of them, I have selected two structures to shed some light on the characteristics identified in the previous sections for BE ABLE TO.

The first one is BE ALLOWED TO, which seemed interesting because it shares with BE ABLE TO affinities with the modal CAN, not in the ability sense, but in its deontic uses, i.e. permission. On the other hand, it also differs from BE ABLE TO, in that ALLOWED is not adjectival but participial, so that the structure as a whole can be regarded as a passive construction of the verb ALLOW.

The second one is BE LIKELY TO, which seems very different from BE ABLE TO from a notional point of view, but which is the second most widely used adjectival BE X TO construction, especially so in newspaper discourse. Moreover, the apparently very different type of modality expressed by BE LIKELY TO, i.e. epistemic modality with an evidential basis yielding a ‘probable’ value, is linked to the idea of suitability—a secondary sense of the adjective LIKELY—which echoes the etymology of ABLE.

##### *4.1. Syntactic distribution of BE X TO structures*

Like BE ABLE TO, both structures are found in finite and non-finite forms, which is a property of the verb BE that they have in common. There is a sharp difference, however, in the distribution of BE ALLOWED TO and BE LIKELY TO, as shown by the frequencies given in the two tables on the next page. While BE ABLE TO occurs three times out of four in non-finite forms and twice as much in the past as in the present tense, the two structures under study here allow for those results to be put into perspective. In Table 3, we can see that BE ALLOWED TO shares some characteristics with BE ABLE TO: even though it occurs almost as much in the present as in the past, non-finite forms still represent the majority of its uses. BE LIKELY TO, however, has a completely different distributive pattern since Table 4 shows that it is used close to 90% of the time in the present tense, while non-finite uses represent just over 1% of its occurrences.

	Non-finite forms of BE <i>allowed to</i>			Present tense forms of BE <i>allowed to</i>			Past tense forms of BE <i>allowed to</i>		All forms of BE <i>allowed to</i>
	be	been	being	am	are	is	was	were	
<b>Number of tokens</b>	800	187	115	3	173	126	226	139	1769
	1102			302			365		
<b>Frequency</b>	45.22%	10.57%	6.50%	0.17%	9.78%	7.12%	12.78%	7.86%	100%
	62.30%			17.07%			20.63%		

Table 3. *Distribution of the occurrences of BE allowed to in The Independent (2009)*

	Non-finite forms of BE <i>likely to</i>			Present tense forms of BE <i>likely to</i>			Past tense forms of BE <i>likely to</i>		All forms of BE <i>likely to</i>
	be	been	being	am	are	is	was	were	
<b>Number of tokens</b>	47	2	1	2	1224	2392	292	155	4115
	50			3618			447		
<b>Frequency</b>	1.14%	0.05%	0.02%	0.05%	29.74%	58.13%	7.10%	3.77%	100%
	1.22%			87.92%			10.86%		

Table 4. *Distribution of the occurrences of BE likely to in The Independent (2009)*

One of the reasons for this discrepancy between the frequencies observed for BE ABLE/ALLOWED TO on the one hand and BE LIKELY TO on the other might be found in the relation of the two sets of markers with the modal auxiliaries. Indeed, as mentioned before, both BE ABLE TO and BE ALLOWED TO are possible paraphrases for CAN in two of its uses, i.e. ability and permission, which means that they might both be used in non-finite contexts when CAN is not available—even if they are not strictly equivalent to the modal auxiliary<sup>9</sup>—which might in turn explain the high frequency of non-finite occurrences of both markers. On the contrary, according to Westney (1995:36, drawing on Palmer 1990 and Quirk et al. 1985), BE LIKELY TO is not directly related to any modal auxiliary, although the degree of probability it expresses can be considered rather close to that expressed by *should* (see Quirk et al. 1985:236). This seems to confirm the syntactic complementarity involved in the occurrence of non-finite forms of a quasi-modal marker.

Yet, the very need for non-finite expression of a modal notion is dependent on another factor which might also explain in part the quasi-absence of non-finite occurrences of BE LIKELY TO. Indeed, non-finite forms of modal expressions occur for a large part in modal sequences, that is to say following and/or preceding other modal markers. In such sequences, epistemic markers such as BE LIKELY TO tend to appear before markers of root modality like BE ABLE TO: while *is likely to be able to* is unproblematic in the abstract, *\*is able to be likely to* is unacceptable—most probably because a concrete possibility bearing on the probability

<sup>9</sup> The lack of equivalence between modals and quasi-modals is even more salient with BE ALLOWED TO than with BE ABLE TO since the deontic force which characterizes CAN in its permission uses necessarily disappears, or is at least redefined, in a non-finite context either because the subject and addressee is not overtly expressed or because there is a hiatus between the time of uttering and the time of events.

of an event can hardly be envisaged. Given that the marker that comes first in the sequence is in a finite form, it is therefore not surprising that BE LIKELY TO should present so few occurrences in a non-finite form. This hypothesis actually seems to be confirmed by other quasi-modal markers such as BE BELIEVED TO, BE THOUGHT TO, or BE DUE TO, which are much less frequent in non-finite forms than other expressions such as BE ASKED TO, BE MADE TO, or BE FORCED TO. All quasi-modals certainly do not fall neatly into these two categories, but the trend seems strong enough to suggest modality type as a factor for explaining the syntactic distribution of those markers.

#### 4.2. Goal orientation and relation to actuality

Both BE ALLOWED TO and BE LIKELY TO show goal orientation because this is a property of the *to*-infinitive complementation that they share with BE ABLE TO. Moreover, this abstract projection of the predicate is reflected in the semantics of the two markers. With BE LIKELY TO, it is paralleled by a probability judgement, while BE ALLOWED TO expresses approval or the absence of resistance to the actualization of the predicative relation. It should be emphasized, however, that this correspondence between the notion expressed by X and the projection implied by the *to*-infinitive is not always found in BE X TO structures, as shown by the negative<sup>10</sup> counterparts of BE ABLE TO and BE LIKELY TO, i.e. BE UNABLE TO and BE UNLIKELY TO. Nevertheless, this does not contradict the idea that the predicate is the object of a form of projection. Indeed, as part of the predicative relation, it is represented as incomplete and therefore in tension, while being the object of an evaluation carried out from a detached position and supposed to bridge the gap between the two members of the predicative relation. The link between the syntactic subject and the predicate is then recreated via the attribution of the property X—which is in fact secondary as far as the operating mode of the structure is concerned (see Rivière 1983 on lexis-cleaving).

This type of orientation, which thus appears as a stable property of BE X TO structures, does not seem to be a sufficient condition for such constructions to gain an ‘actual’ interpretation in specific past contexts, as shown by the following example.

- (6) Under Kyoto, the rich industrialised countries agreed to cut their carbon emissions by fixed amounts by 2012, but the developing nations were not required to make any cuts at all. They **were allowed to** carry on with business as usual.

In (6), the *were allowed to* predication is understood as a reformulation of the previous sentence where *were not required to* highlights the same idea, albeit from an opposite perspective. Consequently, the focus of the whole utterance is the absence of anything preventing the validation of the predicative relation <they – carry on with business as usual>. That is to say that what matters is that they were *allowed* to carry on, as opposed to being *forced* not to. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the predicative relation was validated, i.e. that they *chose* to carry on. BE ALLOWED TO simply states that nothing prevents *p*, i.e. the positive value, which does not mean that it excludes *p'*, i.e. the negative value—so that permission does not behave like ability in this respect, perhaps because the idea of

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<sup>10</sup> Negated BE X TO structures such as BE *not* LIKELY/ABLE TO are not taken into account here because the negation is not part of the structure itself in those cases, so that it does not bear on the notion expressed by X but on the predication as a whole—which makes a difference as far as the construction of meaning is concerned, even though the resulting interpretation may be similar.

verification is irrelevant to the former notion. Yet, example (7) shows that BE ALLOWED TO is still compatible with the predicative relation being validated, provided that the source of the ‘actual’ interpretation is directly found in the context, which needs to be explicit enough for this interpretation to develop.

- (7) Peter Dawson, acting president of the International Golf Federation, had to go on the defensive after American IOC member Anita DeFrantz questioned why golf clubs such as Augusta **were allowed to** be male only.

Here, it is the presupposition marked by the interrogative adverb *why* that influences the reading of the utterance. In this particular case—which is not unique—there seems in fact to be a shift from the presupposition that the validation of the predicative relation <golf clubs such as Augusta – be male only> was indeed *allowed* to the actual validation of the relation.<sup>11</sup> This might be seen as an argument supporting the extra-predicative status of the modal expression which, despite its apparent integration to the predication, actually belongs to another level of construction of the utterance, i.e. the enunciative level, where the pre-existing predicative relation is modalized.

If we now turn to BE LIKELY TO in (8), we will see that actuality cannot be inferred either from the marker or the context, which is due to the epistemic value of the quasi-modal.

- (8) Announcing the Walker Review yesterday, Mr Darling indicated that some staff at a bank bailed out by the taxpayer **were likely to** receive some bonuses, amid mounting pressure for all payments to be halted.

Indeed, contrary to expressions of root modality like BE ABLE TO or BE ALLOWED TO, BE LIKELY TO inherently expresses a degree of uncertainty concerning the validation of the predicative relation. In this utterance, <some staff [...] – receive some bonuses> is thus merely described as probable in the past, from which we cannot logically infer that the event occurred.

Moreover, as is often the case with BE LIKELY TO, the past tense on BE does not express past time relative to the assessor, i.e. the source of points of view, but is the consequence of the reported speech situation introduced by *Mr Darling indicated that*, so that the modal evaluation marked by BE LIKELY TO took place in the past, as signaled by the temporal adverb *yesterday*, but the event referred to at that time was, and most probably is, not past. This means that the referential relation between the notion expressed by X and the event denoted by the predicative relation can be radically different depending on the structure. With dynamic BE ABLE TO, the time of X—ability—is the same as the time of events. With deontic BE ALLOWED TO, the time of X—‘allowing’—and the time of events are ordered, meaning that the permission or enabling necessarily occurs prior to the (potential) event, since it is a prerequisite for the occurrence of the event, and the two are usually contiguous—even though there may be a time lapse between them if specified by a temporal marker in the context. Finally, with epistemic BE LIKELY TO, the time of X—likelihood—and the time of events are

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<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that the restrictive adverb *only* (see Culioli 2004) also plays a role here because *male only* entails *not female*. It must be emphasized however that *were allowed to be [not female]* can be considered more or less equivalent to *were allowed not to be female* but certainly not to *were not allowed to be female*. Moreover, it is worth noting that the ‘actual’ interpretation of the utterance remains if *only* is deleted. This means that the emergence of this interpretation is not a matter of polarity but rather of a shift in presupposition indeed—even though the restriction might be seen as a facilitating factor in this case.

disconnected: they may of course coincide, but the probability judgement may also be past and the event non-past, or vice versa—which probably also explains why the tense form of the quasi-modal has no impact on the interpretation of the actuality of the predicative relation.

### 4.3. Property attribution as a defining characteristic

Finally, we have seen that what characterizes BE ABLE TO as opposed to CAN is that while expressing a point of view as any modal auxiliary, it does so via the attribution of a property to the subject. As this characteristic is linked to the verb BE<sup>12</sup>, it would seem reasonable to suggest that it is shared by all quasi-modal markers, including BE LIKELY TO and BE ALLOWED TO. Yet, we may wonder whether the epistemic character of BE LIKELY TO on the one hand, and the passive structure of BE ALLOWED TO on the other hand are compatible with such a characterization.

In various theoretical frameworks including the Theory of Enunciative Operations (see Bouscaren 1993), epistemic modality is indeed described as concerned with the relation between the speaker and the predicative relation as a whole, as opposed to root modality which is concerned with the relation between the subject and the predicate. From those definitions, it would follow that epistemic markers cannot modalize the relation between the subject and the predicate. And yet, the operating mode of BE LIKELY TO seems to contradict this idea. As evoked in the introduction, one aspect of quasi-modals is that they are not in fact fully set or grammaticalized expressions in that the contribution of each part to the whole is still discernible. This means that to a certain extent, BE LIKELY TO can be described as BE + LIKELY + TO. Thus, as an adjective functioning as a subject complement, LIKELY does attribute a property to the subject of BE—even if on another level it also qualifies the predicative relation as a whole. This shows that because of their particular structure, BE X TO quasi-modals tend to blur the boundary between root and epistemic modality.

With BE ALLOWED TO, the problem resides in the nature of ALLOWED. If the role of an adjective is indeed to modify a noun via the attribution of a property to that noun, a verb does not have the same function. And yet, past participles are special in this respect, since it is widely recognized that there is a gradient between participial adjectives and verbal participles, especially when considered relative to the passive construction (see for instance Aarts 2007:178-179). It is thus worth noting that in the case of BE ALLOWED TO—as for other BE –EN TO structures—the agent is usually not expressed, as is indeed the case in (6) and (7). In those two examples, what matters is not who allowed or even the process itself, but rather the result of this process, and even if it might be more dynamic than the property expressed by an adjective—although it is not necessarily the case judging from ABLE—that result still is a property. The fact that ALLOWED—as many other past participles—is actually sometimes used as an adjective in attributive position (see *Oxford English Dictionary* 2013) is proof of that. And yet, it is also true that, whatever the context, an agentive *by*-phrase can always be recreated with BE –EN TO structures, as shown in (6') by the glosses of example (6).

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<sup>12</sup> Whether BE functions as a copula or a primary auxiliary, it can be argued that it is a locating operator which always attributes a property to the subject, namely that of being located relative to what follows—so that I do not explicitly differentiate between those two uses of the marker, although its function is indeed correlated with the characterisation of X.

- (6') a. They **were allowed** [by other countries] **to** carry on business as usual.  
LONG PASSIVE
- b. [Other countries] **allowed** [them] **to** carry on business as usual.  
ACTIVE

Admittedly, the choice of a short passive is significant and not equivalent to the long passive precisely because the agent is left unexpressed, but implicit reference still remains, and with it the underlying presence of a modal source which is absent from BE *ADJ* TO structures themselves—albeit necessarily present on another level. In the end, although property attribution can indeed be considered a defining characteristic of BE X TO structures, it should be noted that the nature of this property along with the mode of attribution may vary.

### 5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the syntactic properties of quasi-modal BE X TO structures are key to understanding the place of those markers in the modal system of English. First, quasi-modals have non-finite forms, making them available in all contexts, contrary to modal auxiliaries. Second, their syntactic properties have a great impact on their semantic and pragmatic functions, since they allow a ‘subjective’ modal evaluation to be presented in an ‘objective’ light. In the end, the comparison between BE *ABLE* TO and CAN on the one hand, and between BE *ABLE* TO and other BE X TO structures on the other hand has demonstrated that BE X TO quasi-modals differ from central modals in a number of ways—syntactic distribution, goal orientation, property attribution—which are strong arguments in favour of the existence of a coherent sub-category of quasi-modal markers within the wider semantic domain of modality. Within this sub-category, there is some variation, however, which partly mirrors the variation found in the central modal category via the distinction between epistemicity and root modality, but also seems to redefine this opposition. This, along with the subtle differences observed between adjectival and participial constructions, raises questions concerning the nature of the point of view expressed by BE X TO structures—a crucial issue which deserves further investigation, especially in newspaper discourse.

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