The 'potential' optative in Homeric Greek[1]

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Abstract

When translating the 'potential' Homeric Greek optative into English, 'could' is often the best modal verb to use, to be preferred to the more usual 'would'. I will argue that, in some cases, this reveals that the optative expresses what is termed in the literature 'dynamic' modality. Examining several examples in more detail I will claim that the optative expresses a wide range of meanings, the differences between which are subtle and not always clear-cut.

1 Introduction

The meanings of the optative in the language of the Homeric epics, just as in the Classical language, have typically been divided into two broad categories in grammar books. For example, Chantraine (1948: §314) claims that the optative either expresses 'souhait' or 'possibilité'. Similarly, Monro (1891: §315) calls the two types the 'quasi-imperative' and the 'quasi-future', and Goodwin (1889: §13) claims that it expresses 'wish' or a 'potential' sense. It is claimed that these two categories are formally distinguished: while the 'potential' optative is negated with οὐ and is accompanied by the 'modal particle' ἀν or κε, the optative of wish is negated with μή and is not accompanied by the modal particle (Monro 1891: §299 & §300; Chantraine 1948: §306). This formal marking appears to lend weight to the belief that these are two coherent categories.

[1] This paper is based on a talk given to the Cambridge Philological Society entitled 'The Modality of Power' on 1st December 2005, and is an extended version of a section of my book (Willmott 2007: §5.5.2). Thanks are due to the audience of that talk, and to James Diggle and two anonymous reviewers for discussing the written version; all of their comments have much improved the paper.

I will return to the question of formal marking at the end of the paper, and will argue that this belief is in fact questionable. But the main focus of this paper is on the 'potential' category. I will consider examples to show that the category is rather complex. Particularly important are some examples that express the ability of the subject. These appear to correlate to a category termed 'dynamic modality' in modern theoretical literature. The distinction between the 'traditional' meaning of the optative and this 'new' meaning appears to have some overlap with English modal verb that may be used to translate the two meanings: in the first case it is normally 'would', in the second, 'could'.

A detailed examination will however show that the single 'potential' category may not simply be replaced with two sub-categories corresponding to the English modal verbs. Just as the choice between 'would' and 'could' in English is itself not straightforward, the optative has various different meanings which may not be cleanly differentiated from each other. But the difficulty of distinguishing a particular meaning does not contradict the general observation made here that the 'potential' category is more complex than the traditional descriptions suggest.

2 A semantic difference

Monro's description of the category under question as 'quasi-future' suggests that he saw the core of this meaning as consisting of those examples that are translated by English 'would', formally the 'past-tense' of the future marker 'will'. Optatives of this kind typically express an event that the speaker believes might happen, as long as some other event happens first. For instance, in the following example, the speaker expresses a wish in the first clause, and then explains, using the optative, what would happen if the wish were to be fulfilled:[2]

[2] The Homeric examples throughout the article use the text from the OCT editions. *Iliad*: Monro, D. B and Allen, T. W. (1920); *Odyssey*: Allen, T. W. (1917). References starting with an I come from the *Iliad*, those starting with an O come from the *Odyssey*. The reference in each case is to the line in which the optative occurs, which may not necessarily be the first line of the example. In all cases these are accompanied by my own translations, which are intended to aid comprehension of the context and do not aspire to any literary merit.

I 14.107 νῦν δ' εἴη ὅς τῆσδέ γ' ἀμείνονα μῆτιν ἐνίσποι
ἢ νέος ἠὲ παλαιός· ἐμοὶ δέ κεν ἀσμένῳ εἴη.
I wish that there was someone with a better plan than this one, whether he was young or old: I would find that pleasing.

This use is commonly found in the apodosis of conditional clauses, where the optative expresses the consequence of fulfilment of the proposition in the protasis. For example:

I 16.747 εἰ δή που καὶ πόντῳ ἐν ἰχθυόεντι γένοιτο,
πολλοὺς ἂν κορέσειεν ἀνὴρ ὅδε τήθεα διφῶν,
νηὸς ἀποθρῴσκων, εἰ καὶ δυσπέμφελος εἴη,
If he were out on the fishy sea, this man would please many by diving for oysters, leaping from his ship however stormy the weather.

It should be pointed out that the name ‘quasi-future’ is rather problematic, however. While it could be claimed that I 14.107 and I 16.747 refer to some possible future, the optative is also found in similar contexts with reference to a past possibility:

I 5.311 Καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Αἰνείας,
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη,
And then Aeneas, the captain of men, would have died, if Zeus’s daughter Aphrodite had not been quick to notice him.

In all of these sentences, I believe that, in their most natural reading, the speaker is making a prediction that an event will happen, or would have happened. The prediction is ‘modified’ by the content of the accompanying clause. This would appear to correspond to what, in modern linguistic

theory is termed ‘epistemic modality’, that is, it appears to be “concerned with the speaker’s attitude to the truth-value or factual status of the proposition” (Palmer 2000: 8).

However, not all of the examples of the optative that are accompanied by the modal particle may be so easily translated by English ‘would’. More importantly, it does not appear to be possible to interpret them as being related to the speaker’s evaluation of the possibility of the occurence of the event. For example:

I 12.448 ῞Εκτωρ δ’ ἁρπάξας λᾶαν φέρεν, ὅς ῥα πυλάων
ἑστήκει πρόσθε, πρυμνὸς παχύς, αὐτὰρ ὕπερθεν
ὀξὺς ἔην· τὸν δ’ οὔ κε δύ’ ἀνέρε δήμου ἀρίστω
ῥηϊδίως ἐπ’ ἄμαξαν ἀπ’ οὔδεος ὀχλίσσειαν,
οἷοι νῦν βροτοί εἰσ’· ὁ δέ μιν ῥέα πάλλε καὶ οἷος.
And Hector seized and lifted a rock that lay before the gates — it was thick at the base, but sharp at the point. Two men, the best of the lot, could not easily lift it from the ground onto a chariot, as mortals now are, but Hector wielded it easily even on his own.

In this example, the optative does not express the speaker’s prediction of an event. It is translated ‘could’, rather than ‘would’, and appears to be describing the capacities or abilities of the subject. This is significant because modern descriptions of the field of modality distinguish between ‘dynamic’ modality (connected, as its name suggests, with the ability of the subject) and ‘epistemic’ modality.

Importantly, I believe that this use of the optative is significantly different from the ‘traditional’ meaning examined above. While it might be possible to translate the optative in

I5.311, for example, with 'could' as well as 'would',[3] it is only possible to translate the optative in I12.448 with 'could'.

Of the 563 optatives with the particle in the Iliad and the Odyssey, I have classed 92, from both main and subordinate clauses, as describing the abilities of the subject.[4]

In passing, I must acknowledge that the optative is not the only way to describe the abilities of the subject. The name for the category, after all, derives from the modal verb δύναμαι, which is itself found in Homer. For example:

I 8.299 ὀκτὼ δὴ προέηκα τανυγλώχινας ὀϊστούς,
πάντες δ' ἐν χροΐ πῆχθεν ἀρηϊθόων αἰζηῶν·
τοῦτον δ' οὐ δύναμαι βαλέειν κύνα λυσσητῆρα.
Eight are the pointed arrows I have sent forth, and all of them stuck in the flesh of the strong and quick to fight, but him I cannot hit, that raving dog.

The optative is thus not the exclusive means of expressing the capacities of the subject, but it is nonetheless interesting that the mood *may* express this meaning, as examples such as I 12.448 suggest.

[3] The possibility of translating the line I5.311 with 'could' was pointed out by an anonymous reviewer. I will return to the problem that the English modal verbs are themselves polysemous in section 5 below.

[4] Iliad: 1.100, 1.272, 1.301, 3.066, 3.223, 3.235, 3.235, 4.318, 4.539, 5.085, 6.522, 8.143, 8.451, 9.57, 9.77, 9.304, 10.243, 10.556, 11.803, 12.59, 12.382, 12.448, 12.465, 13.57, 13.127, 14.54, 14.58, 14.245, 14.344, 15.736, 15.738, 16.45, 17.260, 17.327, 17.399, 19.90, 19.218, 19.415, 20.247, 20.286, 20.359, 20.359, 20.367, 24.566, 24.567. Odyssey: 1.65, 2.31, 3.114, 4.64, 4.78, 4.649, 5.17, 5.74, 5.74, 6.300, 7.212, 7.213, 8.177, 8.195, 8.280, 9.126, 9.242, 9.351, 10.384, 10.434, 10.574, 11.104, 11.144, 11.375, 12.77, 12.77, 12.84, 12.102, 12.107, 12.287, 13.87, 14.123, 14.197, 15.317, 15.321, 16.196, 16.243, 17.268, 18.31, 19.108, 19.286, 20.212, 20.392, 22.138, 23.126, 23.188.

3 Context

The optatives that I have classed as expressing the capacities of the subject tend to share certain syntactic or semantic contexts. In most cases the context restricts the operation of the capacity in some way. In many examples, the kind of people who have the particular capacity are described in a relative clause. For instance:

I 6.522 δαιμόνι' οὐκ ἄν τίς τοι ἀνήρ, ὃς ἐναίσιμος εἴη,
ἔργον ἀτιμήσειε μάχης, ἐπεὶ ἄλκιμός ἐσσι·
Lord, no righteous person could belittle your work in battle — you're a good soldier.

In other examples, the restriction of the capacity is expressed in other ways, such as adjectives, descriptive noun phrases or particles:

O 12.77 οὐδέ κεν ἀμβαίη βροτὸς ἀνήρ, οὐδ' ἐπιβαίη,
οὐδ' εἴ οἱ χεῖρές τε ἐείκοσι καὶ πόδες εἶεν·
No mortal man could climb it or set foot upon the top, not even if he had twenty hands and feet

O 19.108 ὦ γύναι, οὐκ ἄν τίς σε βροτῶν ἐπ' ἀπείρονα γαῖαν
νεικέοι·
Lady, no mortal in the whole world could quarrel with you.

O 8.195 Καί κ' ἀλαός τοι, ξεῖνε, διακρίνειε τὸ σῆμα
ἀμφαφόων· ἐπεὶ οὔ τι μεμιγμένον ἐστὶν ὁμίλῳ,
ἀλλὰ πολὺ πρῶτον·

Even a blind man, stranger, could make out this mark by touch: it is not mixed up with the others but is the very first.

It is also common to find adverbs modifying the capacity of the subject, particularly some version of ῥεῖα (‘easily’). For example:

I 12.59 ἔνθ' οὔ κεν ῥέα ἵππος ἐΰτροχον ἅρμα τιταίνων
ἐσβαίη, πεζοὶ δὲ μενοίνεον εἰ τελέουσι.
A horse, straining on a well-wheeled chariot, could not easily enter there, but the soldiers were keen to do it, if they could.

The meaning of this adverb itself supports the claim that this meaning has to do with capacity rather than possibility.

4 Problems

The examples above give clear reason to suggest that we may distinguish a ‘potential’ meaning from a ‘dynamic’ meaning for the optative. However, the claim that the mood expresses dynamic modality is not straightforward.

Firstly, it may be noted that the syntactic and semantic contexts exemplified above in which the dynamic meaning of the optative is found are neither necessary nor sufficient for the expression of this kind of modality. There are some instances where the dynamic meaning is found without any extra pointer. For example:

I 5.85 Τυδεΐδην δ' οὐκ ἂν γνοίης ποτέροισι μετείη,
You would not have been able to tell which side Tydeus’ son was on.

I 3.235 νῦν δ' ἄλλους μὲν πάντας ὁρῶ ἑλίκωπας Ἀχαιούς,

οὕς κεν ἐϋ γνοίην καί τ' οὔνομα μυθησαίμην·

And now I see all the other quick-eyed Achaeans — I could recognise them all and tell their names.

Conversely, the optative may be found in such contexts but not express the ‘dynamic’ meaning. For example, in the following sentences, the subject is described by means of a relative clause, and yet the optative expresses its ‘normal’ meaning of possibility, translated by ‘would’:

I 12.228 ὣδέ χ' ὑποκρίναιτο θεοπρόπος, ὃς σάφα θυμῷ

εἰδείη τεράων καί οἱ πειθοίατο λαοί.

It is in this way that a soothsayer (one who had in his mind clear knowledge of omens, and who was listened to by the masses) would prophesy.

O 1.228 νεμεσσήσαιτό κεν ἀνὴρ

αἴσχεα πόλλ' ὁρόων, ὅς τις πινυτός γε μετέλθοι.

A man of sense would be enraged if he joined them and saw all these terrible acts.

In the following example an adverb of capacity is found, and yet the optative is best translated with ‘would’:

O 13.141 οὔ τί σ' ἀτιμάζουσι θεοί· χαλεπὸν δέ κεν εἴη

πρεσβύτατον καὶ ἄριστον ἀτιμίῃσιν ἰάλλειν.

The gods are not disrespecting you: it would be difficult to disrespect the oldest and best of us.

However, although it makes the question of categorisation more subjective and difficult, the fact that there are no simple ways to tell from the context whether the optative is expressing dynamic meaning should not be used to counter the claim that the optative expresses this meaning.

A second problem to contend with is that these examples are translated with ‘could’ not ‘can’. This means that these are not clear-cut expressions of dynamic modality. With the past tense, said to be expressing ‘modal remoteness’ (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 148-150), these are still in the realm of the potential. The examples translated by ‘would’ and ‘could’ do not therefore correspond exactly to the examples of epistemic and dynamic modality given in textbooks exemplified by the modal verbs ‘may’ and ‘can’:

1. It may rain tomorrow

2. She can play the piano

Given that the meanings expressed by the optative are not the ‘textbook’ examples of epistemic and dynamic modality, we might be tempted to return to the position of not distinguishing these meanings, instead finding one term that could capture the meanings represented by English ‘would’ and ‘could’. Since they both remain in the realm of the potential, the term ‘irrealis’ might appear to fit the bill here.

The term was apparently first used to differentiate the modal distinctions in Australian, Native American and the languages of the Pacific from those traditionally noticed in the languages of Europe (Palmer 2000: 185). Nonetheless the term as described for these languages appears to correspond well to the ‘super-category’ described here. In her description of native North American languages, Mithun claims that what she has defined as irrealis “portrays situations as purely within the realm of thought, knowable only through imagination” (Mithun 1999: 173).

However, while it is true that the term has previously been used in such a way that it would encompass both of the meanings of the optative noted here, it has been argued that this very breadth makes it so vague that it is no longer useful as a term to describe the meaning of particular forms. It is often used as synonymous with the term ‘modal’. It is in this sense that Givón (1994: 268) appears to use the term when he defines irrealis sentences as propositions that are “weakly

asserted as either possible, likely or uncertain . . . , or necessary, desired or undesired". Bybee, Pagliuca and Perkins note that in their survey of seventy-six languages they did not find any "in which a single gram could adequately be described as marking off all this irrealis territory" (Bybee *et al*. 1994: 238). They thus argue that the different types of modality expressed by these so-called irrealis markers should be distinguished and named, not grouped together into this rather amorphous category.

As a preliminary conclusion, then, it is noteworthy that there are differences of meaning between uses of the optative in Homeric Greek which correspond in some way to differences between types of modality noted in the theoretical literature. Although all the uses share certain features, and could all be described as 'irrealis', it would appear to be useful to distinguish these different meanings. Indeed, the meaning of 'dynamic modality' is generally signalled by elements in the context, although this is not necessary for the meaning to be discerned.

5 Further analysis of the category

The evidence presented so far might suggest that there is a clear division between sentences in which the optative can be said to be describing a 'possibility' and those in which it is describing the 'capacity' of the subject, and that these will translated by 'would' and 'could' respectively. But in fact the evidence shows that the situation is more complicated. For example, we may consider the following:

I 5.192 ἵπποι δ' οὐ παρέασι καὶ ἅρματα, τῶν κ' ἐπιβαίην·

There are no horses or chariots which I could ride.

This optative should clearly not be translated with 'would'. The speaker is certainly not asserting that, if there were horses or chariots, he would not ride on them. The translation with 'could' is therefore appropriate. But the speaker is not denying his own ability to ride on horses and chariots. Rather he is saying that the possibility does not exist for him to ride on a chariot, because there are no horses or chariots around.

This goes to show that, even if that some optatives should be translated 'would' and some 'could', we may not divide the meanings of the optative straightforwardly into two. This conclusion is indeed unsurprising when we consider what 'could' means. Formally, it is the past tense of 'can', and it has been shown to be polysemous in meaning.

Primarily a marker of ability (originally mental ability, cf. 'beyond my ken', and then later physical ability), the verb also expresses permission, as well as what is termed 'root possibility' (Coates 1983: chapter 5).[5] The following sentences exemplify the different meanings of ability, permission and root possibility respectively (from Coates 1983: 88-95):

3. Ability: I can only type very slowly as I am quite a beginner.

4. Permission: You can start the revels now.

5. Root possibility: I think there is a place where I can get a cheap kettle.

As at least two of these meanings appear to be expressible by the Homeric Greek optative, it is worth considering the definition of these meanings in more detail.

According to Coates, the ability meaning has three characteristic features (Coates 1983: 89):

i. The subject is animate and expresses the agent of the action

ii. The verb denotes action/activity

iii. The possibility of the action is determined by inherent properties of the subject

The permission meaning shares the first two features, but not the third. In addition, the permitting authority may be specified. In sentence 4 above, the speaker is himself the permitting authority. But other authorities may also be implied. For example:

6. If you are uncertain where you can or can't smoke, just look for the no-smoking signs or ask someone in charge.

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[5] In their description of different types of modality, van der Auwera & Plungian (1998: 84) criticise the use of the term 'root' as it suggests that the category is in some way more 'primitive'. They prefer the term 'participant-external modality'. Since all the examples from English have been taken from Coates (1983), her terminology will be retained here, with no implications made about the relationship of this type to any others.

In this example, the permitting authority is the law of the land.

The meaning of 'root possibility' is perhaps harder to grasp. Coates defines it in opposition to the other two (Coates 1983: 93):

i. The possibility is not 'inherent' as the ability meaning is, rather the possibility is subject to external circumstances

ii. The possiblity is not 'restricted' as the permission meaning is: rather than being 'allowed' by an authority or a human law, the possibility is available only because of the operation of natural law

This more detailed definition allows us to confirm that most of the examples considered so far as 'dynamic' fit into the 'ability' category. For example, we can consider again O 12.77:

O12.77 οὐδέ κεν ἀμβαίη βροτὸς ἀνὴρ, οὐδ' ἐπιβαίη,
οὐδ' εἴ οἱ χεῖρές τε ἐείκοσι καὶ πόδες εἶεν·
No mortal man could climb it or set foot upon the top, not even if he had twenty hands and feet.

In this example, the subject (βροτὸς ἀνὴρ) is animate, and is the agent of the action. The verbs (ἀμβαίη and ἐπιβαίη) are agentive, and the possibility of the action (in this case, as often, a negative possibility) is determined by inherent properties of the subject (here, his 'mortality').

In I 5.192, on the other hand, repeated here for convenience, the optative instead appears to express root possibility:

I 5.192 ἵπποι δ' οὐ παρέασι καὶ ἅρματα, τῶν κ' ἐπιβαίην·
There are no horses or chariots which I could ride.

The speaker is acknowledging the existence of a possibility. However, the possibility is not inherent to the subject, nor is it allowed by any authority. Another definition of root possibility describes it as meaning 'nihil obstat' (Coates 1983: 95). The meaning of the optative in I 5.192 is captured well by this definition.

There are several more examples of the optative with particle in Homeric Greek which may be classified as expressing 'root possibility': translatable by 'could' but not referring to the ability of the speaker. For example:

I 17.711 οὐ γάρ πως ἂν γυμνὸς ἐὼν Τρώεσσι μάχοιτο.
He cannot fight against the Trojans, naked as he is.

In this sentence it could be claimed that it is not the capacity of the soldier to fight naked which is in question, but the existence of the possibility for him to do so. This could therefore be described as an example of 'root possibility'.[6]

In many examples, it appears that flavours of both 'ability' and 'root possibility' may be present. For example we may reconsider I 6.522:

I 6.522 δαιμόνι' οὐκ ἄν τίς τοι ἀνήρ, ὃς ἐναίσιμος εἴη
ἔργον ἀτιμήσειε μάχης, ἐπεὶ ἄλκιμός ἐσσι·
Lord, no righteous person could belittle your work in battle — you're a good soldier.

[6] For further possible examples, see I2.029, I2.066, I14.299, I14.335, I19.321. It is notable that all of these examples come from the Iliad rather than the Odyssey. We might wish to draw conclusions about the development of the meaning of the mood from this distribution. However, further investigation into the meaning of the optative in the classical language would first be necessary to confirm whether this distribution had any diachronic significance.

In this example we could claim that the possibility has to do with the inherent properties of the subject: a capacity for righteousness is incompatible with the capacity of belittling the work of Paris in battle. Thus we would class this as an example of the ability meaning. But we may also interpret it in terms of root possibility: the possibility does not exist for righteous people to belittle his work in battle.[7]

Again, the indeterminacy of some of these examples is exactly what we expect from a comparison with English. There too there are 'fuzzy edges' to the different categories: certain uses share features of more than one category, and uses may be classed as closer to the 'core' of the category or closer to the periphery (Coates 1983: 10-17).

Returning to the classification of the Greek data, I have discovered one example where the optative accompanied by the modal particle could be said to express permission:

I 2.12 νῦν γάρ κεν ἕλοι πόλιν εὐρυάγυιαν
Τρώων·
Now he can take the Trojan city with its wide streets!

Here, Zeus is instructing a Dream to take a message to Agamemnon. He could be seen as giving permission (albeit falsely) to Agamemnon to take Troy. In this interpretation, the subject is animate, the verb is agentive, and the 'permitting authority' would be Zeus himself, thus fulfilling all the criteria of the 'permission' meaning. The Dream continues to take the message to Agamemnon, and the sentence is repeated, with a change of meaning:

I 2.29 νῦν γάρ κεν ἕλοις πόλιν εὐρυάγυιαν

[7] For further examples of optatives that are indeterminate between an 'ability' and a 'root possibility' meaning, see I1.100, I3.066, I4.318, I6.522, I8.143, I8.451, I9.057, I9.077, I9.304, I10.243, I10.556, I13.057, I13.127, I14.058, I15.736, I15.738, I16.045, I19.090, O4.064, O4.078, O5.074, O6.300, O7.212, O7.213, O9.351, O11.144, O12.102, O12.107, O14.123, O14.197, O15.317, O16.196, O16.243, O18.031, O19.108, O20.212, O20.392, O22.138, O23.126.

Τρώων·

Now you can take the Trojan city with its wide streets!

The same line is found again in I 2.66, where Agamemnon repeats the words of the Dream to his men. In all cases there are arguments against taking this as an example of permission. In both the second and the third person, the permission-granting is certainly indirect. Thus it is very little different from a meaning of root possibility ('now it is possible for him/you to take the city'). Given that there are such limited examples, and that in each example the meaning of permission is not the sole meaning, the claim that the Homeric Greek optative can express permission must be rather moot.

The evidence has shown that the optative may be translated 'would' or 'could', and that when the optative is translated 'could' it may express at least two different meanings. Previously described in terms of a single category before, the optative with the particle appears to express three significantly different meanings: consequence, ability, and root possibility.

It is important to note that these three meanings may not always be sharply distinguished. I have already discussed cases where it is difficult to decide whether the optative is expressing ability or root possibility (for example, I6.522). Even more significantly, perhaps, there are several examples that are translatable by either 'would' or 'could'. For example:

I 10.243 εἰ μὲν δὴ ἕταρόν γε κελεύετέ μ' αὐτὸν ἑλέσθαι,

πῶς ἂν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆος ἐγὼ θείοιο λαθοίμην,

If you are really ordering me to choose myself a companion, how would/could I forget godlike Odysseus?

Here the best translation of the optative is debatable. As it is found in the apodosis of a conditional sentence, it might appear to be best translated by 'would'. However, if it is accepted that the optative has the meaning of root possibility or ability elsewhere, then it is possible to read

this line as having either one of these two meanings, either ‘how would I be able to forget’ or ‘how would it be possible for me to forget Odysseus’.

Similarly, O 10.384 is ambiguous between a ‘would’ and ‘could’ reading:

O 10.384 ὦ Κίρκη, τίς γάρ κεν ἀνήρ, ὃς ἐναίσιμος εἴη,
πρὶν τλαίη πάσσασθαι ἐδητύος ἠδὲ ποτῆτος,
πρὶν λύσασθ' ἑτάρους καὶ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδέσθαι;
Circe, what righteous person would/could taste food or drink before he had freed his companions and seen them with his own eyes?

The context, where the type of man is further described (ὃς ἐναίσιμος εἴη) suggests that we take this with an ‘ability’ reading (‘what man would be able to feast, given his righteousness’). But the consequence reading is also acceptable (‘what man, if he was righeous, would feast?’).

With the definition of ‘root possibility’ in mind, it is possible to consider afresh even some of those examples given earlier as clear examples of the ‘traditional’ category. It was mentioned above that I 5.311 may be translated with ‘could’ as well as ‘would’. For ease of reference, I repeat the line here:

I 5.311 Καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Αἰνείας,
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη,
And then Aeneas, the captain of men, could/would have died, if Zeus’s daughter Aphrodite had not been quick to notice him.

Although this is clearly distinguishable from those lines, such as I 12.448, where the optative expresses the ability of the subject, this optative could still be translated with ‘could’, implying that a possibility existed for Aeneas to have died. The choice between ‘would’ and

‘could’ in this instance lies in determining whether the the translator believes that the possibility is more subjective, asserted by the speaker (translated by ‘would’), or objective (translated by ‘could’).

We must therefore conclude that different meanings of the optative may not always be certainly distinguished, and that it will not even always be simple to determine which will be the correct choice of the English modal verb to translate it. Again this is unsurprising, given the polysemous nature of ‘could’, and Coates’ description of the ‘fuzzy edges’ to the various categories (Coates 1983).

6 Formal marking

We may finally return to the issue of formal marking mentioned in the introduction. As stated there, grammarians have claimed that the ‘potential’ optative is negated with οὐ and is accompanied by the ‘modal particle’ ἀν or κε, while the optative of wish is negated with μή and is not accompanied by the modal particle (Monro 1891: §299 & §300; Chantraine 1948: §306). These patterns would appear to confirm the claim that, whatever the internal complexity of the ‘potential’ category, there is still a clear-cut difference between it and the ‘wish’ category, which is reflected in the formal marking. Other grammarians have noted that, in Homeric Greek at least, these patterns are more of a tendency than a rule (Kühner & Gerth 1898-1904, 2.2: 225; Schwyzer & Debrünner 1950, 2: 320). However, the reanalysis of the meaning of the optative adds a further dimension to this observation.

A consideration of all wishes in Homer would seem to confirm the grammar-book ‘rule’. Of the 143 optatives that I have categorised as expressing wish in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, only 3 are accompanied by the modal particle (I3.255, I6.282, O1.380). In all other cases, just the bare optative is used. For example:

I 6.464 ἀλλά με τεθνηῶτα χυτὴ κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτοι,
πρίν γέ τι σῆς τε βοῆς σοῦ θ' ἑλκηθμοῖο πυθέσθαι.

May piles of earth hide my dead body before I hear your cries as you're dragged away!

However, there are many contexts in which the optative is found without the particle where it does *not* express wish. The lack of particle alone is therefore not able to determine that the optative expresses wish. Indeed of the 760 examples of the optative without either the particle or the negator I counted in the Iliad and the Odyssey, only 113 of them are in wishes. Another 344 are found in subordinate clauses, and another 239 are found in conditional protases. But there are 64 examples of the optative found in main clauses without a particle or a negator which do not according to my interpretation express a wish.

Of these, the meaning of the optative is similar to those discussed here in 7 cases. For example:

I 10.556 ὦ Νέστορ Νηληϊάδη, μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν,
ῥεῖα θεός γ' ἐθέλων καὶ ἀμείνονας ἠέ περ οἵδε
ἵππους δωρήσαιτ', ἐπεὶ ἦ πολὺ φέρτεροί εἰσιν.
Nestor, son of Neleus, great glory of the Achaeans, if a god wanted, he could easily give us better horses than these ones, since the gods are more powerful by far.

I 10.556 is no wish. The subordinate clause clearly shows that the gods are capable of giving better horses, thus the optative appears to be expressing the ability of the subject in the main clause.[8] In other examples, there is a meaning of 'root possibility' rather than 'ability'. For instance:

[8] See also I5.303, I20.286.

I 19.321 οὐ μὲν γάρ τι κακώτερον ἄλλο πάθοιμι,

οὐδ' εἴ κεν τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο πυθοίμην,

I could not suffer anything worse than this, not even if I heard that my father had died.

The optative πάθοιμι in I 19.321 has features of both the ability meaning and the root possibility meaning. The agentive subject could be claiming that it is not within his capacity to suffer any more, or that there is no possibility that he suffer any more.[9] In this example, the formal marking half supports this 'non-wish' reading: the negator is οὐ not μή, after all.

This last example in particular supports the claim made elsewhere, that formal marking should not be used to distinguish the different meanings of the optative in Homer (Willmott 2007: appendix 1). Not only does the optative not simply express two meanings, but there are a few examples with the 'wrong' marking, or, as in the case of I 19.321, mixed marking, where the absence of particle would suggest one meaning, but the choice of negator another. While the particle may be more 'grammaticalised' in the later language, where exceptions to the 'rules' are rarer, in Homer we may not take the presence or absence of the particle as evidence for a particular meaning.

In conclusion, then, an examination of the evidence from a semantic perspective has shown that the optative expresses at least four different meanings: wish, consequence, ability and root possibility. The last three tend to be formally marked in the same way. However, because this is only a tendency rather than a rule, it is not clear that these may be grouped into two categories (wish vs. the rest) in the Homeric language.

[9] See also I4.318, I19.321, I24.149, I24.178

7 Conclusion

Recognising and describing the different meanings of the optative has been shown to be a more complex task than a cursory glance at the grammarbooks would suggest. It has been shown that the very distinction into two categories, which is primarily done on formal grounds, is questionable, since there are examples with the 'wrong' marking. Semantically, it is quite clear that more than the two meanings of 'wish' and 'potentiality' must be distinguished. Most significant are the large number of examples that describe the ability of the speaker, described as expressing 'dynamic' modality in the theoretical literature. These are often recognisable from contextual clues. Another meaning is that of 'root possibility', where the existence of a possibility is acknowledged. A detailed examination of particular examples has not only demonstrated that the optative expresses these meanings, but has also shown that the edges to the categories are 'fuzzy', so that the distinction between different meanings is not clear-cut.

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