

## Interaction between structural positions and interpretations: Evidence from Chinese modal *neng*, *keneng* and Vietnamese modal *có thể*

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By contrasting semantic and syntactic characterizations of three modals *neng*, *keneng* and *có thể*, I would like to make a typological study on Vietnamese and Mandarin Chinese modals. I found that, in different structural positions, the scope of these modals with other grammatical elements will change, and their meanings will also change from a modal meaning to another modal meaning. To investigate the interaction between structural positions and interpretations of these modals, I test the hierarchical relationship between modal verbs, main verbs and other elements, such as negation, adverb *only*, tense markers and aspect marker.

### 1. Introduction

This paper is about the contrastive analysis between two Chinese modals *neng*, *keneng* and a Vietnamese modal *có thể*. One of the reasons why this issue is remarkable is that these modals mean different things in different structural positions. Another reason is that the modal meanings of *có thể* are a meaning set of *neng* and *keneng*. *Neng* mainly contains deontic and ability meaning, *keneng* contains epistemic meaning, but, *có thể* includes all these three modal meanings. Here are some examples:

- (1a) 事情做好後，你就**能**/\***可能**回去了。 → Deontic
- (1b) Sau khi làm xong việc, cậu **có thể** về. → Deontic  
After when do finish thing, you can go  
'When things are done, you can/may go home.'
- (2a) 他**能**/\***可能**說三種語言。 → Ability
- (2b) Anh ấy **có thể** nói ba thứ tiếng. → Ability  
He that can speak three CL language  
'He can speak three languages.'
- (3a) 他**可能**去台北了。 → Epistemic
- (3b) 他**能**去台北了。 → Deontic/Ability
- (3c) Anh ấy **có thể** đã đi Đài-Bắc rồi. → Epistemic  
He that can TP go Taipei Asp

‘It’s possible that he already went to Taipei.’

- (3d) Anh ấy đã **có thể** đi Đài Bắc rồi. → Deontic/Ability  
 He that TP can go Taipei Asp  
 ‘It was the case that he could go to Taipei.’

In above examples, *có thể* means deontic, ability and epistemic, respectively, corresponding to *neng* and *keneng*. Especially, (3c) and (3d) show different interpretations of *có thể*, when it occurs in different structural positions (in (3c), CỐ THỂ>RỒI, but in (3d), RỒI>CỐ THỂ). Although *neng* and *keneng* in (3a), (3b) seemingly occur in the same positions, they actually show different syntactic hierarchies (in (3a), KENENG>LE, but (3b) shows the scope relation LE>NENG).

It’s noteworthy that *neng* also has epistemic modal meaning, indicates value or possibility, as in (4), (5). Nevertheless, epistemic modal *neng* can not totally replace *keneng*, and vice versa. This is the fact that in some sentences, if we replace *keneng* with *neng*, the modal meaning will switch from epistemic to deontic or ability (see example (3a) and (3b)).

- (4) 我猜也不能是什麼好人！(Possibility)  
 (5) 這個工作能/\*可能做。(Value)

In order to investigate the interaction between structural positions and interpretations of these modals, we will test the hierarchical relationship between modal verbs, main verbs and other elements, such as negation (*bu*, *mei* and *không*, *chưa*), adverb of scope *only* (*zhi* in Chinese and *chỉ* in Vietnamese), tense markers like *yijing* or *đã*, aspect marker *le* or *rồi*.

This paper is organized as follows. In section Two, we introduce the meanings of *có thể*, since Vietnamese maybe not familiar with most people. In section Three, we examine the three modals in interaction relationship with negation, tense marker, aspect marker and adverb *only*, respectively. The co-occurrence between these modals will be also discussed. Section Four is the conclusion of this paper.

## 2. Vietnamese modal *có thể*

Following is the modal meanings of *có thể*, corresponding to Chinese modals *neng*, *keyi*, *hui*, respectively.

2.1 ‘To be able to, have capability of’. Mandarin Chinese (henceforth MC) often use *neng*. Apparently, this is a kind of ability modal meaning. See some examples.

- (6) Tôi **có thể** chạy 10 cây số.  
 I can run 10 kilometers  
 ‘I can run 10 kms.’

- (7) - Câu **có thể** trả lời câu hỏi này không? - Không (thể).  
 You can answer question Det<sup>1</sup> QP<sup>2</sup> Not (can)  
 ‘Are you able to answer this question?’ ‘No.’

It’s possible if you put another modal - *được* after the main verb, original meaning of the sentence will not change.

- (6’) Tôi **có thể** chạy **được** 10 cây số.

**2.2** ‘Be allowed to do something (in accordance with regulations), be endowed with some certain authorities.’ MC uses *neng* or *keyi*. See the following examples.

- (8) Ai cũng **có thể** mượn sách ở thư viện này.  
 Who also can borrow book at library Det  
 ‘Anyone can borrow books from this library.’  
 (9) Câu này **có thể** chuyển thành câu bị động không?  
 Sentence Det can change into sentence passive QP  
 ‘Is it possible to change this sentence into passive voice?’

**2.3** ‘Be permitted to do something.’ With this meaning, *có thể* is interchangeable with *được*. MC often use *keyi*. When we change into negative form, *có thể* will turn into *không được*, rather than *không thể*.

- (10) Mẹ nói hôm nay tôi **có thể** ra ngoài chơi.  
 Mother say today I can<sup>E</sup> go out play  
 ‘Mother says today I can go out and have fun.’  
 (11) Em **có thể** ngồi xuống rồi.  
 You can sit down Asp  
 ‘Now you can sit down.’

2.2 and 2.3 are deontic meanings of *có thể*.

**2.4** ‘Estimation of certain possibility’. It corresponds to modal *hui* or *keneng* in MC, indicates epistemic modal meaning, as it should be.

- (12) Cảnh sát tìm tôi **có thể** có việc gì nhỉ?  
 Police call on I may have affair what MP<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Det for Determiner

<sup>2</sup> QP for question particle

<sup>3</sup> MP for modal particle

‘Is it possible the case that something happens, because the police called on me.’

- (13) Theo tôi biết, việc này **có thể** là thật đấy.  
 As I know affair Det should be true MP  
 ‘As I know, this (event) should be true.’

### 3. Interaction between structural positions and interpretations

#### 3.1 Interaction between modals and negation

First of all, we will examine the situation of interaction between three modal auxiliaries *neng*, *keneng*, *có thể* and two kinds of negative: *mei*, *bu* in Chinese and *chưa*, *không* in Vietnamese.

##### 3.1.1 *Mei*, *bu* with *keneng*, *neng*

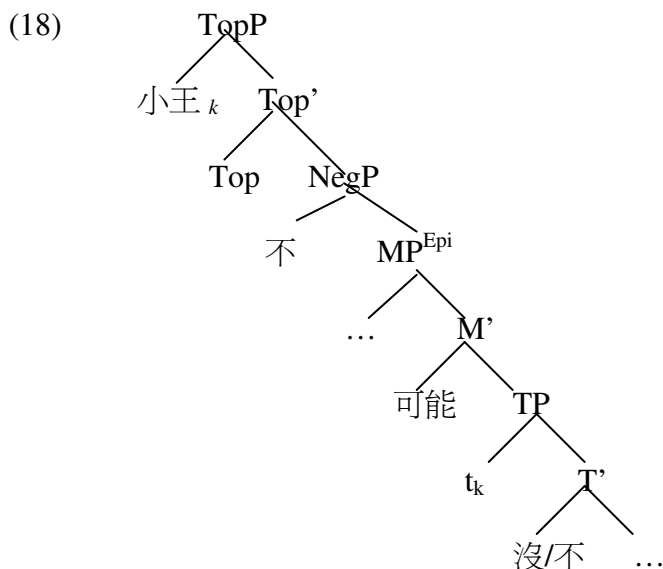
*Mei* is realis negative. We found that this kind of negative can not scope over epistemic modals, as shown in contrastive sentences in (14a, b), (15a, b).

- (14) a. 他**可能**沒收到我的信。 (Epistemic modal > realis negative)  
 b.\* 他沒**可能**收到我的信。 (\*Realis negative > Epistemic modal)  
 (15) a. 他**可能**沒去看醫生。 (Epistemic modal > realis negative)  
 b.\* 他沒**可能**去看醫生。 (\*Realis negative > Epistemic modal)

However, this restriction doesn’t exist with irrealis negative *bu*: *bu* can scope over epistemic modals and vice versa. Example (16a, b) and (17a, b) indicate that the change of positions between *bu* and epistemic modal *keneng* do not invite any ungrammatical problem; but then because the change of negative scope, there are differences in semantic interpretations of these sentences, obviously.

- (16) a. 小王**可能**不去美國。 (Epistemic modal > irrealis negative)  
 b. 小王不**可能**去美國。 (Irrealis negative > epistemic modal)  
 (17) a. 他**可能**不知道這件事。 (Epistemic modal > irrealis negative)  
 b. 他不**可能**知道這件事。 (Irrealis negative > epistemic modal)

To sum up, we can use following tree-form construction showing hierarchies of MC epistemic modal *keneng* and realis negative *mei*: Because *mei* is related closely to two categories tense and aspect, it is tied together with tense phrases in sentences, thus it can only be under epistemic modals. In contrast with *mei*, *bu* doesn’t have so restriction, it can either precede or succeed epistemic modals. (MP<sup>Epi</sup>: epistemic modal phrase; NegP: Negative phrase)



Example (19) shows us other ample evidences on the scopal interaction between two negatives and epistemic modal *keneng*: *bu* both precedes and succeeds *keneng*, reveals unrestrained character of its distribution (see (19a)). In the other side, *mei* is restricted by tense phrase, thus, can only succeed epistemic modal, as shown in (19b). This also explains why (19c,d) are ungrammatical.

- (19) a. 他不可能不去美國。 (irrealis negative > epistemic modal > irrealis negative)  
 b. 他不可能沒去美國。 (irrealis negative > epistemic modal > realis negative)  
 c.\* 他沒可能沒去美國。 (\*realis negative > epistemic modal > realis negative)  
 d.\* 他沒可能不去美國。 (\*realis negative > epistemic modal > irrealis negative)

Secondly, we found that MC deontic modals can not co-occur with realis negative, absolutely, as demonstrated in (20a-d); but irrealis negative still shows us its unrestraint, can either precede or succeed deontic modal, see (21a-d) for demonstration.

- (20) a.\* 小王可以沒去美國。 (\*deontic modal > realis negative)  
 b.\* 小王能<sup>D</sup>沒去美國。 (\*deontic modal > realis negative)  
 c.\* 小王沒可以去美國。 (\*realis negative > deontic modal)  
 d.\* 小王沒能<sup>D</sup>去美國。 (\*realis negative > deontic modal)  
 (21) a. 小王可以不去美國。 (deontic modal > irrealis negative)  
 b. 小王能<sup>D</sup>不去美國。 (deontic modal > irrealis negative)  
 c. 小王不可以去美國。 (irrealis negative > deontic modal)  
 d. 小王不能<sup>D</sup>去美國。 (irrealis negative > deontic modal)

In my point of view, this asymmetry may originate from the hypothesis that syntactic range of deontic modal is closed to realis negative, therefore occurs mutual reject effect (see more details in section 3.2).

The distribution of ability modal in sentences is absolutely opposite to epistemic modal's distribution, i.e. ability modal *neng* can only succeed realis negative *mei*, as in (22a); however, it can not precede *mei*, see (22b).

- (22) a. 他沒能<sup>A</sup>去美國。 (realis negative > ability modal)  
 b.\* 他能<sup>A</sup>沒去美國。 (\*ability modal > realis negative)

(23a,b) reveal, again, that irrealis negative *bu* is almost omnipresent. *Bu* can occur either in front of or behind ability modal.

- (23) a. 他不能<sup>A</sup>去美國。 (Irrealis negative > ability modal)  
 b. 他能三天不睡。 (Ability modal > irrealis negative)

The hierarchy of these modals and negation is summarized as following feature:

$$(24) \boxed{\text{Neg}_I > M^E > M^D / \text{Neg}_R > M^A > \text{Neg}_I}$$

### 3.1.2 Vietnamese negatives *không* and *chưa*

The two most general forms of negation in Vietnamese are *không* and *chưa*. See following examples.

- (25) Nó **không** dự buổi tiệc đó.  
 He NEG attend CL party that  
 'He did not attend that party.'  
 (26) Nó **chưa** làm bài tập.  
 He NEG do homework  
 'He hasn't done homework.'

The discrimination between MC negatives *bu* and *mei* involves the concept of "completion": "Given that *mei* (*you*), but not *bu*, is used to deny the completion of an event"<sup>4</sup>. The two Vietnamese negatives, however, do not use "completion" as a distinguishing mark. *Không* indicates absolute negation of actions or states, expresses certain action/event does not happen, or certain state doesn't occur; *chưa* is relative

<sup>4</sup> Li, C.N. & Thompson, S.A., *Mandarin Chinese: A Function Reference Grammar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 424.

negative, indicates certain action or event hasn't happened, or certain state hasn't occurred, but they're possible to happen or occur in the future. *Chưa* is equal to “*hai + bu/mei (you)*” in Chinese. See the comparison table below.

Vietnamese	Mandarin Chinese
Anh ấy <b>không</b> đi. Anh ấy <b>chưa</b> đi.	他不去。 他還沒去。
Thầy giáo <b>không</b> giảng ngữ pháp. Thầy giáo <b>chưa</b> giảng ngữ pháp.	老師不講語法。 老師還沒講語法。
Anh ấy <b>không</b> phải là đoàn viên. Anh ấy <b>chưa</b> phải là đoàn viên.	他不是團員。 他還不是團員。
Tôi <b>không</b> rõ lắm. Tôi <b>chưa</b> rõ lắm.	我不大清楚。 我還不大清楚。

We can see, from the above table, that *không* and *chưa* are not restricted by tense element. *Không* can negate both future events and past events, and so can *chưa*. *Không* and *chưa* are not corresponding one by one to *bu* and *mei*. If one wants to express an event happened in the past, MC will use the adverb *hai* to distinguish *không* and *chưa*. See following examples for demonstration.

- (27) a. Nó **không** làm bài tập.  
He not do homework  
'(Yesterday) He didn't do homework.'
- b. Nó **chưa** làm bài tập.  
He not do homework  
'(Till now) He hasn't done homework yet.'

To sum up, we can not simply call two Vietnamese negatives *không* and *chưa* as realis versus irrealis negative, because their tense-related character is not absolute, both of them can be used to indicate an event/action that happens in the past or in the future. Because the main discrimination between them is “completion”, thus, in this paper, I temporarily name *không* as denial negative and *chưa* as delay negative.

### 3.1.3 *không*, *chưa* with *có thể*

In general, the interaction relationship between negatives *không*, *chưa* and *có thể* is basically similar with the interaction between *mei*, *bu* and *keneng*, *neng*, i.e. delay negative *chưa* can not scope over epistemic modal *có thể*, it can only be under the range of epistemic modal *có thể*; while denial negative *không* unrestrictedly precedes or follows epistemic modal *có thể*. The case of ability modal *có thể* is mostly the same with the case of ability modal *neng*: delay negative *chưa* doesn't follow ability modal *có thể*, but vice

versa; denial negative *không* doesn't have this restriction. See the feature below for summary.

- (28) a. Denial negative > epistemic modal > denial negative  
 b. Denial negative > epistemic modal > delay negative  
 c.\* Delay negative > epistemic modal > delay negative  
 d.\* Delay negative > epistemic modal > denial negative  
 e. Ability modal > denial negative  
 f. Denial negative > ability modal  
 g. Delay negative > ability modal  
 h.\* Ability modal > delay negative
- (29) a. Anh ấy **có thể không** tới. (Epistemic modal > denial negative)  
 He may not come  
 'He may not come.'  
 b. Nó **không thể**<sup>5</sup> còn sống. (Denial negative > epistemic modal)  
 He not can still alive  
 'It's not possible that he's still alive.'  
 c. **Có thể** nó **chưa** từng đi Mỹ. (Epistemic modal > delay negative)  
 Maybe he not yet ever go America  
 'Maybe he has not ever been to America.'  
 d.\* Nó **chưa thể**<sup>6</sup> tới. (Delay negative > epistemic modal)  
 He not yet possible come

(29d) is ungrammatical with epistemic meaning of *có thể*, but the ability modal meaning is acceptable.

- (30) a. Tôi **có thể**<sup>A</sup> **không** ăn, nhưng **không thể**<sup>A</sup> **không** ngủ. (Ability modal > denial negative)  
 I able not eat but not able not sleep  
 'I'm able not to eat, but not able not to sleep.'  
 b. Nó **không thể** chạy 10 cây số. (Denial negative > ability modal)  
 He not able run 10 kilometer  
 'He's not able to run 10 kilometers.'  
 c. Cô ấy **chưa thể** tự đứng dậy. (Delay negative > ability modal)  
 She not yet able RP<sup>6</sup> stand up  
 'She's still not able to stand up by herself.' (Because of illness)  
 d.\* Cô ấy **có thể**<sup>A</sup> **chưa** tự đứng dậy. (Ability modal > delay negative)

<sup>5</sup> In Vietnamese, when *có thể* changes into negative form, *có* is removed and replaced by the negative *không* or *chưa*.

<sup>6</sup> RP for 'Reflexive pronoun'



She able not yet RP stand up

There exists a difference in the interaction between Vietnamese negatives and deontic modal *có thể*, in comparison with the hierarchical relationship between MC negatives and deontic modal *neng* that we discussed above, i.e. MC deontic modals can not co-occur with realis negative, absolutely (see example (20a-d) again). By contrast, Vietnamese delay negative can precede deontic modal *có thể*, while MC realis negative *mei* can not either precede or succeed any deontic modal. As for denial negative *không*, it's relatively free to combine with deontic modal, like MC irrealis negative *bu*. Following examples are illustration.

(31) a. Cậu có thể<sup>D</sup> không tới dự buổi họp này. (Deontic modal > denial negative)

You can<sup>D</sup> not come attend CL meeting Det  
'You're permitted not to come to attend this meeting.'

b. Cậu không thể<sup>D</sup> tới dự buổi họp này. (Denial negative > deontic modal)

You not can come attend CL meeting Det  
'You're not permitted to attend this meeting.'

c. Anh ấy chưa thể<sup>D</sup> kết hôn. (Delay negative > deontic modal)

He not yet able married  
'He still can not get married.' (because of his age)

d.\* Nó có thể<sup>D</sup> chưa đi làm. (Deontic modal > delay negative)

He/she can not yet go work

This discrimination may be caused by the different nature of MC realis negative *mei* and Vietnamese delay negative *chưa*. Because realis negative *mei* is closely related to tense and aspect element, thus it is tied together with the head of tense phrase (TP) of sentence. In other hand, syntactic range of deontic modal is closed to realis negative, therefore *mei* can not occur simultaneously with deontic modal. But, Vietnamese delay negative *chưa* is just refer to the "level" of negative (absolute or relative), thus, it is not affected by tense and aspect element, like *mei*.

The hierarchy of *có thể* and Vietnamese negation is demonstrated as follows:

(32)  $\text{Neg}_{\text{denial}} > M^E > \text{Neg}_{\text{delay}} > M^D > M^A > \text{Neg}_{\text{denial}}$

### 3.2 Interaction between modals and tense and aspect

The analysis of this paper can also get evidences from the interaction between modals and tense – aspect elements: only epistemic modal can be followed by action-completed marker *le* (*le<sub>I</sub>*), as in (33a); but deontic modal can not, as in (33b).

- (33) a. 他可能去了台北。 (Epistemic modal > *le*)  
 b.\* 他能<sup>D</sup>去了台北。 (\*Deontic modal > *le*)

This is because structural position of epistemic modal is above tense phrase, and the range of deontic modal is under tense phrase. Besides, aspect phrase is under deontic modal, thus the movement of aspect marker to the head of tense phrase will jump directly over deontic modal, and violate the Head Movement Constraint (Travis, 1984). The sentence is only grammatical if aspect phrase keeps being above the range of deontic modal, as in (34).

- (34) 他能<sup>D</sup>去台北了。 (*le* > deontic modal)

The same case happens to Vietnamese modals, as shown in examples (3) above, repeated below.

- (35) a. Anh ấy có thể<sup>E</sup> đã đi Đài-Bắc rồi. (Epistemic modal > Asp)  
 He can TP go Taipei Asp  
 ‘It’s possible that he already went to Taipei.’  
 b. Anh ấy đã có thể<sup>D/A</sup> đi Đài Bắc rồi. (Asp > deontic modal/ability modal)  
 He TP can go Taipei Asp  
 ‘It was the case that he could go to Taipei.’

These restrictions on the arrangements of modals and aspect and tense elements in Vietnamese clearly indicate that there is a hierarchy of modals in the syntactic structure of Vietnamese sentences. The hierarchy is as follows:

- (36) Epistemic modal > TP > AspP > deontic modal > ability modal

There is one thing particularly noteworthy here, namely, in example (35), if we remove past tense marker *đã*, this sentence can be interpreted as both epistemic modal meaning and deontic or ability meaning.

- (37) Anh ấy có thể<sup>2</sup> đi Đài Bắc rồi. → epistemic/deontic/ability  
 He can go Taipei Asp  
 ‘It’s possible that he went to Taipei.’ (Epistemic meaning)  
 ‘He was allowed to go to Taipei.’ (Deontic meaning)  
 ‘(Now) He’s able to go to Taipei.’ (Ability meaning)

Once tense marker *đã* occurs, it's easier to distinguish the modal meaning of *có thể* in (37), basing on the position of *đã*. It can be said that this tense marker is an important sign to demarcate epistemic modal and ability/deontic modal in Vietnamese.

### 3.3 Co-occurrence of *có thể* and modal *được*

In section 2.1, we referred to a Vietnamese modal – *được*: When we use *có thể* as a ability modal, we can put *được* after the main verb without any change in original modal meaning. Actually, *được* put right after the main verb makes the ability modal meaning of sentence clearer. See the examples below for comparison.

- (38) a. Nam ***có thể*** trả lời câu hỏi đó. → Deontic/Ability  
 Nam can answer question Det  
 'Nam is able to answer that question.' Or 'Nam can<sup>D</sup> answer that question.'  
 b. Nam ***có thể*** trả lời ***được*** câu hỏi đó. → Ability  
 Nam can answer PVM<sup>7</sup> question that  
 'Nam is able to answer that question.'

*Được* also often occurs in the negative form of *có thể*, both epistemic and root modals.

- (39) Anh ta ***không thể*** còn sống ***được***. → Epistemic  
 He not possible still alive PVM  
 'It's not possible that he's still alive.'  
 (40) Không có vé thì ***không thể*** vào ***được***. → Deontic  
 Not have ticket Conj not can enter PVM  
 'If you don't have ticket, you can not enter this place.'  
 (41) Tôi ***không thể*** trả lời ***được*** câu hỏi của cậu. → Ability  
 I not able answer PVM question of you  
 'I'm not able to answer your question.'

We should note here, that *được* can either precede or succeed main verbs of sentences, but it absolutely can not precede *có thể*, but just follow *có thể*. This is because *được* doesn't have epistemic modal meaning, *có thể*, however, does have. Thus, its structural position must be above the syntactic range of *được*.

In MC, two modals *neng* and *keneng* can also co-occur like those in Vietnamese, but there must be certain restriction on their combination, namely, *neng* must follow *keneng*. The reason of this restriction is the same with that of Vietnamese modals. See following examples for demonstration.

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<sup>7</sup> PVM for 'Post-verbal modal'

- (42) 他可能能<sup>D</sup>結婚了（，因為年紀夠大了）。
- (43) 他可能能<sup>A</sup>修車。

The examples above are other evidences of hierarchical interrelationship between modals.

### 3.4 Interaction between modals and adverb *only*

In Mandarin Chinese, when epistemic modal *keneng* change position with adverb *only*, its epistemic meaning is still remained. But in Vietnamese, when you move *có thể* from the beginning of the sentence, like (47), to the position after *chỉ* as in (48), its modal meaning will change from epistemic to deontic or ability meaning.

- (44) 可能只有他去台北。(Epistemic modal > *only*)
- (45) 只有他可能去台北。(Epistemic modal > *only*)
- (46) 只有他能去台北。(only > deontic/ability modal)
- (47) Có thể chỉ có Nam đi Đài Bắc. (Epistemic modal > *only*)  
 M<sup>E</sup> only have Nam go Taipei  
 ‘It’s possible that only Nam go to Taipei.’
- (48) Chỉ có Nam có thể đi Đài Bắc. (only > deontic/ability modal)  
 Only have Nam M<sup>D/A</sup> go Taipei  
 ‘Only Nam can go to Taipei.’

However, so long as you add future tense marker *sẽ* right after *có thể* as in (49), this *có thể* denotes epistemic meaning again.

- (49) Chỉ có Nam có thể sẽ đi Đài Bắc. (epistemic modal > *only*)  
 Only have Nam M<sup>E</sup> will go Taipei  
 ‘It’s possible that only Nam will go to Taipei.’

Once again, we can see that tense marker helps demarcate epistemic meaning and root meaning of the same modal *có thể*.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper is a contrastive analysis on MC modals *neng*, *keneng* and Vietnamese modal *có thể*. Through testing the interaction between these modals and other elements (negation, tense marker and aspect marker), we found out the hierarchical structures of MC modals and Vietnamese modals, and the corresponding relationship between their distributions and interpretations. In general, both in MC and Vietnamese, the range of epistemic modals is highest, then deontic modals, and ability modals are the lowest. This conclusion also exhibits cross-linguistic universality.

**References**

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