Possibility Modality in Saamáka

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This paper discusses the modal morpheme *sa* in Saamáka, an English-based creole spoken along the Suriname river, Suriname. In the literature, the language is also referred to as Saramaccan.[1] In the sense of Kratzer (1991), *sa* has an existential modal force, an epistemic and a circumstantial modal base, and an unrestricted ordering source. Modal base and ordering source together form conversational background. Following Palmer's (2001) classification of modal categories, *sa* is ambiguous between a dynamic ability (1), a deontic permissive (2) and a speculative epistemic reading (3).

(1) A taánga téee. A sa hópo wán hóndo kiló.
3SG strong NARR 3SG MOD lift up ART hundred kilo
'S/he is strong, s/he can lift a hundred kilos'.

(2) Ée i ta tyá i sééi búnu nóo i sa gó peé ku dee óto míi.
if 2SG IMP carry 2SG self good NARR 2SG MOD go play with DET.PL other child
Mother to child: 'If you are behaving yourself well, you may go and play with the other children'.

(3) Freddy hén nóo sa téi dí móni u mi a táfa líba akí.
Freddy 3SG NARR MOD take DET money of 1SG LOC table top here
'Freddy might have taken my money from the table'.

An event embedded under ability or premissive *sa* has a present/future orientation and embedded under epistemic *sa*, a past orientation.

Kratzer (1991) discusses conversational background as the main source of different interpretations of multi-interpretable modals. In this paper, I show that in Saamáka not only the conversational background influences the choice of modal base, but aktionsart and the temporal orientation of an event embedded under a modal also influence this choice. Condoravdi (2002) argues that modals contribute to the temporal interpretation of a proposition. In addition, an event embedded under a modal also contributes to the temporal interpretation of a proposition. A clause containing a modal morpheme has two temporal intervals, one expressing modal time and one expressing event time. The temporal interpretation of these two intervals need not coincide (Condoravdi 2002). (4) and (5) illustrate this for Saamáka.

(4) A sa dé a wósu.
3SG MOD BE LOC home
'S/he is allowed to be at home'.
or 'It may be that s/he is at home'.

(5) A sa gó a lío.
3SG MOD go LOC river
'S/he is allowed to go to the river'.
or 'It may be that s/he has gone to the river'.

(4) combines a stative verb with the modal *sa* and it is ambiguous between a permissive and an epistemic reading. For both readings of (4), the modal time and the event time have a present

[1] This study is based on data collected in Pikinslee, Suriname and in Wageningen, the Netherlands. In addition to narrative and conversational data, questionnaires developed by Dahl (1985, 2000), and Donald Winford & Bettina Migge (p.c.) were used for data elicitation.

time reference. In (5), a non-stative verb is embedded under *sa* and it also has a permissive and an epistemic interpretation. In both readings of (5), the modal time has a present time reference. However, in the permissive reading, the event time is future, and for epistemic *sa* the event time is past. There is a strong correlation between the complement of a modal and the choice of modal base. Stative verbs with a present event time can have either an epistemic or a circumstantial modal base. Non-stative verbs with a present/future event time trigger a circumstantial modal base, and non-statives with a past event time trigger an epistemic modal base. The choice of modal base depends on aktionsart and event time.

Furthermore, I argue that there is another difference between a circumstantial and an epistemic modal base. In Saamáka, the role of conversational background, in the sense of Kratzer (1991), on different interpretations of multi-interpretable modals should should be expanded with a constraint. The epistemic interpretation of *sa* only arises when it embeds a stative complement. Based on evidence, I claim that the past orientation of an event embedded under epistemic *sa* is not a past tense. Condoravdi (2002) claims that epistemic modality cannot co-occur with past tense. The illusion of past tense embedded under an epistemic modal is created by perfect, expressing a result state (see e.g. Parsons 1990). This is also the case in Saamáka. I present evidence that Saamáka has a null perfect. This null perfect is embedded under epistemic *sa*. As a result, perfect sets the event time of epistemic *sa* to a past orientation.

From these findings, I argue that in Saamáka, aspect controls the event time, whereas tense influences the modal time. This is supported by the interaction between the past time reference marker *bi* and the possibility modal *sa*. When they combine, the past time reference marker *bi* pushes the modal time back to some relevant past moment. *Bi* cannot combine with epistemic *sa*, it can only combine with ability or permissive *sa*, as in (6). The impossibility of epistemic *sa* to co-occur with the past time reference marker *bi* follows from the fact that a judgment of a speaker towards the truth value of a proposition is made at and refers to the time of utterance.

(6) A bi sa téi dí móni.
3SG ANT MOD take DET money
'S/he was able to take the money'.
*'It may be that s/he has taken the money'.

I show that in Saamáka, the choice of modal base is not purely pragmatic, but is strongly constrained by the aktionsart of the event description embedded under the modal. On the other hand, overt tense morphology in Saamáka directly affects the modal time, not the event time. I speculate that this is not a language specific fact, but reflects the universal ordering of functional elements in the syntax-semantics of the clause.