Ability Modals and their Actuality Entailments

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1. Proposal
I show that the English ability modal was able to is ambiguous between two readings which can be paraphrased as ‘managed to’ and ‘had the ability to’. In languages where the presence of genericity is marked morphologically, these two readings are expressed by distinct forms. I provide an analysis that derives these two readings from an underlying predicate AB LE. It is proposed that AB LE has the semantics of an implicative verb like ‘manage to’. The ‘had the ability to’ reading is derived by combining be able to with a Gen operator.

2. The Ambiguity of was able to
(1) can be embedded in two quite different kinds of contexts as indicated in (2a, b).

   (1) John was able to eat five apples in an hour.

   (2) a. Yesterday, John was able to eat five apples in an hour. (past episodic)

   b. In those days, John was able to eat five apples in an hour. (past generic)

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(2a) implicates that John actually ate five apples in an hour. I will refer to this implication as the **actuality implication** (leaving open, at this point, the question of whether it is an implicature or an entailment) of (2a). If an ability attribution attributes an ability $\mathcal{P}$ to an individual $x$, the actuality implication corresponding to this ability attribution states that the ability is realized by $x$. This is shown in (3).

(3)  
   a. Ability Attribution: $ABILITY (\mathcal{P})(x)$  
   b. Actuality Implication: $\mathcal{P}(x)$

(3) abstracts away from issues of tense and temporal modifiers. I assume that any temporal modifiers that modify the ability attribution in (3a) will be inherited by the actuality implication in (3b).

Cancellation of the actuality implication leads to a certain oddness.

(4) Last night, a masked assailant attacked me on my way home. I was able to wrestle him to the ground. #But I didn’t do anything since I am a pacifist.

The two readings associated with *be able to* allow different interpretive possibilities for indefinite/bare plural subjects.

(5) A fireman was/Firemen were able to eat five apples.
   a. Yesterday at the apple eating contest, a fireman was/firemen were able to eat five apples. (Past episodic, actuality implication, existentially interpreted subject)
   b. In those days, a fireman were/firemen were able to eat five apples in an hour (Generic, no actuality implication, generically interpreted subject)

In its most natural interpretation, (5a) has a ‘managed to’ reading i.e. there is an actuality implication. The indefinite subject *a fireman* (or the bare plural subject *firemen*) receives an existential interpretation. On the other hand, (5b) has a ‘had the ability to’ reading. There is no actuality implication and the indefinite subject *a fireman* (or the bare plural subject *firemen*) can only be interpreted generically.

There seems to be a link between the availability of a non-generic reading and the presence of an actuality implication. The ‘managed to’ reading (the actuality implication reading) of *be able to* is available in the simple past tense, but not in the simple present. In English, non-states in the simple past tense are ambiguous between a past generic and a past episodic reading, while non-states in the simple present tense only have a present generic reading. To investigate this link further, I will now consider languages where generic readings are marked by aspectual morphology, typically imperfective aspect.
3. Crosslinguistic Evidence

In languages where imperfective aspect appears on generic sentences (sentences in the perfective aspect lack generic readings), we find that when the ability modal occurs with imperfective aspect, there is no actuality implication. However, when the ability modal occurs in the past perfective, there is an actuality implication. Further, in these languages, the actuality implication seems to be uncancelable so I will be referring to it as the actuality entailment.

3.1 Greek

When the ability modal is in the imperfective, the assertion of the ability can be followed by a clause asserting that the ability was not actualized (cf. 6a). However, when the ability modal is in the past perfective, the modal assertion cannot be followed felicitously by a clause asserting that the ability was not actualized1 (cf. 6b).

(6) a. Borusa na sikoso afo to trapezi ala #en CAN.impfv.1s NA lift.non-pst-pfv.1s this the table but NEG to sikosa it lift.impfv
   ‘(In those days), I could lift this table but I didn’t lift it.’

b. Boresa na tu miliso (# ala #en tu CAN.pst-pfv.1s NA him talk.non-pst-pfv.1s but NEG him milisa) talk.pst-pfv
   ‘I was able to talk to John (but I did not talk to him).’

The presence of the actuality entailment when the ability modal is in the past perfective can also be seen by the contradictoriness of the examples in (7).2

(7) a. # O Yanis borese na skotosi ton Petro 3 fores the John CAN.pst-pfv NA kill.non-pst-pfv the Peter 3 times
   ‘John managed to kill Peter three times.’

b. # Boresa na aftoktoniso CAN.pst-pfv NA kill-self
   ‘I managed to kill myself.’

1Judgements by Sabine Iatridou
2The corresponding examples in the imperfective are not contradictory. (7a) with the ability modal in the imperfective means something like ‘On three occasions, John could have killed Peter’. Similarly, (7b) means something like ‘I could have killed myself’. Sentences similar to (7) will also be discussed in the context of Hindi. There too the contradictoriness vanishes if the ability modal is put in the imperfective. Similar facts obtain in Bulgarian and Catalan.
3.2 Hindi
Like the Greek ability modal in the imperfective aspect, the Hindi ability modal *sak* in the imperfective\(^3\) lacks an actuality entailment. This can be seen by the fact that they can be followed by a clause asserting the non-actualization of the ability (cf. 8a).

There is an actuality entailment when the ability modal is in the past-perfective. The assertion cannot be followed by a clause asserting the non-actualization of the ability (cf. 8b).

(8) a. Yusuf havaii-jahaaz uraa sak-taa hai/thaa (lekin vo Yusuf air-ship fly CAN-impfv be.Prs/be.Pst but he havaii-jahaaz nahii uraa-taa hai/thaa air-ship Neg fly-impfv be.Prs/Be.Pst
   ‘Yusuf is/was able to fly airplanes but he doesn’t/didn’t fly airplanes.’

b. Yusuf havaii-jahaaz uraa sak-aa (# lekin us-ne havaii-jahaaz Yusuf air-ship fly CAN-Pfv but he-erg air-ship nahii uraa-yaa)
   Neg fly-Pfv
   ‘Yusuf could fly the airplane, but he didn’t fly the airplane.’

The presence of an actuality entailment when the ability modal is in the past perfective is also demonstrated by the contradictoriness of (9a, and b).

(9) a. # Yunus Yakub-kaa tiin baar khoon kar sak-aa
   Yunus Yakub-Gen 3 times murder do CAN-Pfv
   ‘Yunus could murder Yakub three times/on three occasions.’

b. # mE apne-aap-ko maar sak-aa
   I self-Acc kill can-Pfv
   ‘I could kill myself.’

3.3 General pattern
The pattern that emerges across the languages\(^4\) where the perfective/imperfective distinctions is marked on ability modals is shown in (10).

\(^3\)In addition to genericity, the Greek imperfective has an additional ‘event-in-progress’ reading. The Hindi imperfective lacks this reading, which is realized by a separate progressive marker. Because of the absence of the ‘event-in-progress’ reading, -taa, the marker of imperfective aspect, is sometimes glossed as ‘H(ab)ituval’.

\(^4\)The same facts obtain in Bulgarian (Roumyana Izvorski p.c.), Catalan (Sergi Casals, Miguel-Angel Hernando-Cupido, Luis Lopez, Josep Quer, and Maria Isabel Oltra-Massuet p.c.) and French (Philippe Schlenker p.c.). The facts in Albanian (Dalina Kallulli p.c.), Basque (Karlos Arregui-Urbina p.c.), Galician (Carmen Rio-Rey p.c.), Brazilian Portuguese (Luciana Storto p.c.), and Spanish (Olga Fernandez p.c.) are substantially similar though not identical to Bulgarian, Catalan, French, Greek, and Hindi.
The two readings associated with be able to (in the past) are realized in these languages by distinct forms. Across languages, imperfective aspect primarily makes two distinct semantic contributions - the semantics of an event in progress and the semantics of genericity. The semantic contribution relevant here is the semantics of genericity. This can be seen by the fact that the Hindi imperfective marker -taa only contributes the semantics of genericity, the ‘event-in-progress’ reading being marked by a specialized progressive marker.

4. The Actuality Implication and its relationship with Ability

Does an ability modal with an actuality implication still have an ability component to its meaning? At first it seems that it does. However, looking at a wider array of facts suggests that an ability modal with an actuality implication does not have an ability component to its meaning.

Ability modal sentences with an actuality implication do not just mean that an event related to the embedded predicate took place. If they did, then the sentences in (11) would have been fine on the readings indicated in parentheses.

(11)  
a. *Yesterday, it was able to rain here. (Yesterday, it rained here)

b. # The mailman was able to be bitten by a dog yesterday. (The mailman was bitten by a dog yesterday)

Also, if all that was asserted was that an event related to the embedded predicate was actualized, the oddness of (12) would be puzzling.

(12) # A woman in Watertown was able to win 3 million dollars in the lottery yesterday.

A plausible explanation for the oddness of (11a, b) and (12) is that they do not constitute good ability attributions. This explanation presupposes that ability modal sentences with an actuality implication involve an ability attribution. However, the oddness of (12) vanishes if the context makes it clear that winning the lottery involves some kind of sustained (non-minimal) effort.

(13) After buying lottery tickets regularly for several years, a woman in Watertown was finally able to win 3 million dollars in the lottery yesterday.

The manner in which the oddness of (12) is alleviated in (13) suggests that ability modals with an actuality implication do not necessarily involve an ability attribution and that what was wrong with (12) was not that no ability was involved but that the context did not indicate that some effort went into the action. Once that was fixed, (12) (cf. 13) improved considerably (also see §4.2).
4.1 Relationship with Implicative Verbs
The oddness of (12) and the manner in which this oddness is ameliorated are similar to the oddness of (14) involving the implicative verb *manage* and the manner of the amelioration of this oddness.

(14)  
(a) # A woman in Watertown managed to win 3 million dollars in the lottery yesterday.  
(b) After buying lottery tickets compulsively for several years, a woman in Watertown finally managed to win 3 million dollars in the lottery yesterday.

We saw that the odd (12) and (14a) became acceptable, if the context indicates that some effort went into the action. How is this component of the meaning of *be able to* and *manage to* represented? I will argue that this component of their meaning is represented as a conventional implicature. To this end, I will introduce some tests developed by Karttunen & Peters (1979) for identifying conventional implicatures.

Karttunen & Peters (1979) argue that the meaning of an implicative verb like *manage* is best represented in terms of its assertion and its conventional implicature as in (15).

(15) John managed to sit through the Chinese opera.  
(a) Assertion: John sat through the Chinese opera.  
(b) Conventional Implicature: Sitting through a Chinese opera requires some effort for John.

They base this distinction upon the fact that the parts of the meaning of (15) indicated in (15a) and (15b) behave differently with respect to entailment patterns and presupposition projection. For example, (16a) entails (16b) but not (16c).

(16)  
(a) I just discovered that John managed to sit through the Chinese opera.  
(b) I just discovered that John sat through the Chinese opera.  
(c) I just discovered that sitting through a Chinese opera required some effort for John.

The facts with *was able to* with an actuality implication seem similar.

(17)  
(a) I just discovered that John was able to sit through the Chinese opera.  
(b) I just discovered that John sat through the Chinese opera.  
(c) I just discovered that sitting through a Chinese opera required some effort for John.
The pattern in (17) suggests that the part of the meaning of was able to that makes cases like (11a, b) and (12) odd is part of the conventional implicature of was able to and not part of its assertion.

4.2 More was able to without ability

(18b) is another case where we seem to have just an actuality entailment without an accompanying ability attribution.

(18) (from Thalberg 1969)

a. Yesterday, Brown hit three bulls-eyes in a row. Before he hit three bulls-eyes, he fired 600 rounds, without coming close to the bulls-eye; and his subsequent tries were equally wild.

b. Brown was able to hit three bulls-eyes in a row.

c. Brown had the ability to hit three bulls-eyes in a row.

From (18a), we can conclude (18b) but not (18c). Brown could have hit the target three times in a row by pure chance and he does not need to have had any ability for (18b) to be true.

If we accept that was able to can be used in the absence of any actual ability attribution, we have an argument that shows that treating actuality implications as implications of an associated ability attribution cannot be correct. As (13) and (18b) show, actuality implications are present even in the absence of an ability attribution to entail them. So the actuality implication cannot be the implication of an associated ability attribution. The actuality implication (and its associated conventional implicature) is all there is.

We can still ask the question of whether the actuality implication is cancelable or not and on the basis of (13) and (18b), we can say that it is not cancelable. Therefore, it is either part of the assertion (or entailed by the assertion) or part of the conventional implicature. The entailment pattern in (17) suggests that what we are calling the actuality implication constitutes the assertion of (17a). I will, however, continue to refer informally to the ‘managed to’ reading of be able to as the actuality entailment of the ability modal.

4.3 Conclusions from Section 4

When an ability modal has an actuality entailment, there is no ability attribution. In fact the term ‘actuality entailment’ as defined in (3) is misleading because it suggests that there is an ability attribution that entails the actuality entailment. The actuality entailment is all there is. The actuality entailment has as part of its meaning that the relevant event involved some effort on the part of the subject. This part of the meaning is part of the conventional implicature of the ability modal. (11a) is bad because no effort is involved and hence the conventional implicature of the ability modal is not satisfied, and not because of a pragmatically odd ability attribution.
5. Compositional Derivation

5.1 Existential Readings with *be able to*

We have seen in (5) that bare plural/indefinite subjects of *was able to* can receive both a generic and an existential interpretation. The existential interpretation of a bare plural/indefinite subject of *was able to* was accompanied by an actuality entailment (cf. 5a). But is it, in general, necessary for an ability modal to have an actuality entailment, in order for its indefinite subject to be interpreted existentially? The following examples seem to be cases where there is no actuality entailment and yet the indefinite subject receives an existential interpretation.5

(19) a. Yesterday, at the apple eating contest, a fireman was able to eat fifty apples in an hour. I know because I had seen him drink an illegal performance enhancing potion. However, he never ate any apples at the contest because the judges caught him and barred him from the contest.

b. Last Tuesday, in Schenectady, a five year old girl was able to lift 500 kilograms. The scientists were able to detect her ability by measuring her muscle stress. She never actually lifted anything because she was straightjacketed throughout Tuesday to prevent her hurting herself. It is speculated that she had temporary acquired superhuman strength due to demonic possession.

However, if we look at bare plurals the facts go in the other direction. Consider (19a, b) with the indefinite subjects replaced by the corresponding bare plural subjects. Then, it does not seem possible to interpret the bare plural subjects existentially.

Diesing (1992) and Kratzer (1995) show that existential readings for indefinite subjects are available only when existential readings for bare plural subjects are also available. The seemingly existential readings in the absence of an actuality entailment in (19) are not true existential readings but are instead instances of specific indefinite readings, which are always available.6 Therefore, from the absence of existential readings with bare plural subjects in the absence of an actuality entailment, I conclude that existential readings are only available when there is an actuality entailment.

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5 For a few speakers, (19a, b) are quite odd. For most other speakers, the temporary ability without any accompanying actualization reading is available. I am unable to explain this variation in judgements currently.

6 It is instructive to look at the case of ability modals in the present tense. There is no actuality entailment and existential readings for indefinite and bare plural subjects are not available (cf. i).

   i. a. A fireman is able to do fifty pushups in a minute.

   b. Firemen are able to do fifty pushups in a minute.

However, even here, in (ia), the indefinite can be interpreted specifically as in ‘a fireman, namely Michael’.
It follows from the above conclusion that instances of momentary/short-lived ability (cf. 19) and instances of more long term abilities are not truly distinct with respect to genericity/ILP-hood. This is a welcome result since in the languages which mark the perfective/imperfective distinction on ability modals, long term abilities and momentary abilities are both realized by the same form: an ability modal in the imperfective.

5.2 Back to Compositional Derivation

The goal is to try and connect the two readings of *be able to*: managed to and *had the ability to*. I assume that underlying the two readings of *be able to* is one predicate which combines with different operators to yield the two readings. I will call this predicate $ABLE$.

What kind of predicate is $ABLE$? It could be a stative stage level predicate, a stative individual level predicate, or a non-stative.

On the basis of the absence of existential readings in the English simple present, it could be argued that $ABLE$ is not a stage level predicate. However, as has been discussed by Fernald (1994) and Glasbey (1997), the absence of existential readings for bare plural subjects is not the most reliable test for stage-levelhood. Glasbey (1997) notes it is difficult to get an existential reading for *plates* in (20a), while an existential reading is obtained without difficulty in (20b).

(20) a. Plates were dirty.
    b. The hotel inspector filed a bad report on Fawlty Towers. The standard of service was, he said, disgraceful. Plates were dirty, cutlery was bent and the floors were thick with grease.

The exact explanation of these facts is beyond the purview of this paper. What is relevant is that there are many adjectival stage-level predicates that do not allow existential readings for their bare plural subjects. So the absence of existential readings does not prove that $ABLE$ is not a stage level predicate.

This leaves us with the following options: either $ABLE$ is a stative (ILP or SLP) or it is a non-stative. Both these options will be explored in the two following sections.

5.2.1 $ABLE$ is a stative

I will make the following set of assumptions about the interaction of tense and aspect, and the English tense-aspect system in particular: the feature $+/-=\text{bounded}$, which is introduced by the aspectual morphology, is available to the semantic computation. In the present tense, the $+/-$bounded feature is not available.\(^7\)

Languages vary in how they realize the feature $+/-$bounded. Languages like Greek, Hindi, Spanish etc. realize the $+/-$bounded feature as perfective aspect and the $[\text{-bounded}]$ feature as imperfective aspect. How these features are realized in English is shown in (21) taken from Anagnostopoulou, Iatridou & Izvorski (1997).

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\(^7\)This $+/-$bounded feature should not be confused with telicity. See fn. 2 of Anagnostopoulou, Iatridou & Izvorski 1997 for a definition.
(21) a. non-stative, [unbounded] $\rightarrow$ Progressive
b. non-stative, [bounded]  
c. stative, [unbounded] $\rightarrow$ non-Progressive
d. stative, [bounded]  

To derive the actuality entailment, we need to basically stipulate it.

(22) \[ ABLE_{\text{state}} (P)(x) + [+\text{bounded}] \rightarrow P(x) \text{ (Actuality Entailment)} \]

When there is no [+bounded] feature around, we just get the normal ability attribution. Consequently, in languages which realize the [+bounded] feature by perfective aspect, ability modals in the perfective have an actuality entailment. Since there is no [+bounded] feature in the imperfective, ability modals in the imperfective lack an actuality entailment.

In English, states in the past tense can have either the [+bounded] feature or the [−bounded] feature. Consequently, an ability modal in the past tense may or may not have an actuality entailment.

However, treating \( ABLE \) as a stative is problematic. Firstly, the actuality entailment has to be stipulated. Further this stipulation is quite unexpected given the general pattern of how stative predicates combine with perfective aspect in Greek (also in Bulgarian and Hindi): when [+bounded] combines with a state (i.e. when a state appears in the Perfective), it yields an inchoative interpretation cf. (23).

(23) (from Anagnostopoulou, Iatridou & Izvorski 1998)

\[ O \text{ Jannis agapise} \text{ tin Maria} \text{ to 1981} \]

\[ \text{the Jannis love-pst-perf-3sg the Maria in 1981} \]

`John started loving/fell in love with Mary in 1981.’

Hence, our actuality entailment stipulation is rather shaky on consistency grounds too.

Finally, the conventional implicature that appears with the actuality entailment (see §4.1) also has to be stipulated. In comparison, the other approach, which treats \( ABLE \) as a non-stative implicative verb, seems more promising and it is to that that we turn next.

5.2.2 \( ABLE \) is a non-stative implicative verb

We assume that \( ABLE \) is a non-stative implicative verb with a conventional implicature somewhat similar to \textit{manage to}.

The fact that in the episodic past in English, and past perfective in Bulgarian, Catalan, Greek, Hindi etc., there is an actuality entailment does not come as a surprise, but instead follows from our assumption that \( ABLE \) is an implicative verb.

(24) John managed to eat the pizza $\rightarrow$ John ate the pizza.

The predicate embedded under the implicative verb is evaluated with the matrix tense specification.
The interpretive possibilities available to bare plural/indefinite subjects of *be able to* follow from our analysis of *be able to* as a non-stative predicate. The English past tense allows for both episodic and generic readings of non-states but the English present only allows for generic readings (cf. 25a, d). These are exactly the possibilities found with *be able to* (cf. 25b, e) (and also with *managed to* cf. 25c, f).

(25)  a. Firemen lift heavy cinder blocks. (only gen.)
    b. Firemen are able to lift heavy cinder blocks. (only gen.)
    c. Firemen manage to lift heavy cinder blocks. (only gen.)
    d. Firemen lifted heavy cinder blocks. (gen./\#)
    e. Firemen were able to lift heavy cinder blocks. (gen./\#)
    f. Firemen managed to lift heavy cinder blocks. (gen./\#)

The conventional implicature discussed in §4.1 survives to the actual ability attribution. It is somewhat odd to attribute trivial abilities such as the ability to lift one’s finger. However, such ability attributions become perfect if the context makes it clear that they are not trivial for the person to whom the ability is being attributed.

(26)  a. # Timmy is able to breathe.
    b. Timmy had a terrible car accident as a result of which he lost control over most of his muscles. Thankfully, he is able to breathe.

So (26a) is odd because its conventional implicature is not satisfied. Once the conventional implicature is satisfied, as in (26b), the oddness vanishes.

The LFs in (27) show how the ability attribution reading (*had the ability to*) of *be able to* is derived. In Bulgarian, Catalan, Greek, Hindi etc. the *Gen* operator is contributed by the semantics of imperfective aspect.

(27)  a. (In those days,) A fireman was able to eat five apples.
    LF: Past *(Gen (ABLE (eat-5-apples)) (fireman))*
    b. A fireman is able to eat five apples.
    LF: *Gen (ABLE (eat-5-apples)) (fireman)*

The absence of actuality entailments is not surprising since the LFs in (27a, b) do not entail the corresponding generic sentences. Also consider the fact that (28a) does not entail (28b).

(28)  a. John manages to sit through a Chinese opera.
    b. John sits through a Chinese opera.

It may be argued that the analysis offered here suffers from the problem of too strong truth conditions. Even in the generic, implicative verbs need some verifying instances. Consider (28), which can presumably not be said unless John has on some occasions sat through a Chinese opera. Such a need for
verifying instances seems absent with be able to. However, this problem only arises if we identify the semantics of be able to with the semantics of manage to. Not all generic sentences require verifying instances. Consider the following examples of generic sentences from Carlson (1995).

(29) a. This machine crushes up oranges and removes the seeds.
    b. The Speaker of the House succeeds the vice president.
    c. Sally handles the mail from Antarctica.

Carlson (1995) notes that (29a-c) seem quite possibly to be true even under circumstances where the corresponding episodes do not ever take place. So it is not the case that all generic sentences require verifying instances. Lawler (1973) and Dahl (1975) have noted that generic sentences can have two quite different readings as can be seen in (30).

(30) John drinks beer.

(30) has a ‘universal’/habitual reading under which John habitually drinks beer (all the time or on the relevant drinking occasions) and an ‘existential’/dispositional reading that says that John does not object to drinking beer. It seems the dispositional reading does not require verifying instances while the habitual reading does. Why it is the case that (27a, b) only involve the dispositional flavor of genericity, however, still remains to be explained.

Another potential problem is Hackl (1998)’s analysis of ability can/is able to as an individual level predicate. Hackl argues that with respect to compatibility with locative modifiers and quantificational adverbs, can/is able to pattern with individual level predicates like be intelligent and not derived generics like eat pizza. The point he makes about can/is able to can be extended to non actuality entailment was able to also. Are his analysis and the current treatment of the had the ability to ability attribution as a derived generic compatible? I think yes, if we use a recent analysis of individual level predicates developed by Chierchia (1995). Chierchia’s analysis treats individual level predicates as derived inherent generics. He derives the differences that exist between individual level predicates and transparently derived generics from lexical properties of individual level predicates and not from an appeal to the undervided status of individual level predicates. The relevant features of his account can be adopted by us to give the derived generics in (27) individual level properties. So there is no contradiction between assuming individual level properties for the ‘had-the-ability-to’ ability attribution and treating it as a derived generic.

A problem that I do not have much to say about at this point is the incompatibility of be able to with the progressive. If be able to is a non-stative predicate, we expect it to be compatible with the progressive. This expectation is not met.

(31) * John was being able to eat the pizza.
While I do not have an explanation, I would like to note that other implicative verbs are not perfect in the progressive either.

(32) ? John was managing to eat the pizza.

Further, the ill-formedness of (31) may very well have something to do with the fact that adjectives in English do not generally occur in the progressive.

6. Conclusions

To conclude: I propose that sentences like ‘John was able to lift the truck’ are ambiguous between a ‘managed to’ implicative verb-like reading which asserts that John actually lifted the truck and says nothing about John’s abilities and a ‘had the ability to’ reading which asserts that John has the ability to lift the truck. Furthermore, the implicative verb reading is only available in non-generic (perfective) environments, while the ‘had the ability to’ reading is only available in generic (imperfective) environments. In his 1971 paper on implicative verbs, Karttunen writes:

If the quarterback in 46a (= ‘In the last game, the quarterback was able to complete only two passes’) did not in fact complete two passes, it is very improbable that anybody would regard 46a as true. (pg. 355)

What remains to be explained, however, is why be able and other similar verbs in contexts like 46a, which I am unable to describe in any general way, must be interpreted as giving not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for the truth of the embedded sentence. (pg. 356) (emphasis mine: RB)

The paper gives a general characterization of the environments where be able to behaves like an implicative verb and makes a proposal as to why be able to behaves the way it does.

I will end this paper with a related puzzle. be able to is not peculiar in its interaction with aspect. There seems to be a class of verbs which behave like implicative verbs in the perfective and attribute ability in the presence of genericity. Consider the pattern with the Greek verb epitrepo ‘permit’.

(33) a. i karta mu epetrepse na xrisimopiiso tin vivliothiki
   this card me allow.pst.pfv use the library
   ‘This card permitted me to use the library.’ (I used the library)

b. i karta mu epitrep na xrisimopiiso tin vivliothiki
   this card me allow.impfv use the library
   ‘This card permitted me to use the library.’ (I don’t have to have used the library)

An understanding of the interaction of be able to with aspectual morphology will help us to understand the closely related behavior of verbs like the Greek epitrepo ‘permit’.
References


The ‘had the ability to’ ability attribution appears in generic environments, while the ‘managed to’ ability attribution appears in non-generic environments. In languages where imperfective aspect appears on generic sentences (sentences in the perfective aspect lack generic readings), we find that when the ability modal occurs with imperfective aspect, there is no actuality entailment (cf. the Hindi sak-taa ‘CAN-Habitual’). When the ability modal occurs in the past perfective, there is an actuality entailment (cf. the Hindi sak-aa ‘CAN-Perfective’). Raje The modal verbs ‘can’, ‘could’ and ‘be able to’ show ability. Read this article to learn what they mean and how to use them correctly. ‘Can’ is a modal verb that describes what someone is able to do, i.e. general ability in the present. It is used in different forms to describe past and present abilities. Peter can cook Italian food. Positive statements. In positive statements we put ‘can’ between the subject and the main verb in its base form: subject + can + the verb (infinitive without ‘to’). I can ride a bicycle. The actuality entailment is a veridicality entailment (Giannakidou 1998, 1999, 2006, 2009): (3) (Non) veridicality for propositional operators. (following Giannakidou 2006). i. A propositional operator F is veridical iff Fp entails or presupposes that p is. Words like bori, can and their equivalents, express both kinds of ability. Ability as action asserts actualization, hence it is veridical; but ability as modality does not depend in any way on actualization and is nonveridical. Mari, A. and Martin, F. 2007. Tense, ability and Actuality Entailments. in Dekker, P. et al (eds), Proceedings of the Sixteenth Amsterdam Colloquium. Mari, A. and Martin, F. 2009. Perfective and Imperfective in French. Kinds of abilities and Actuality Entailment (ms). McIntyre, Andrew.