

Epistemic possibility in a Slavonic parallel corpus—a pilot study¹

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Introduction

In this paper we engage on an exploratory study of epistemic possibility in the Slavonic languages. We compare auxiliary and adverb strategies found in the Slavonic translations of a *Harry Potter* book both with the original and with each other. We find there to be big frequency differences and we speculate about the relevance of grammaticalization, areality and polyfunctionality. This paper is also a plea for a serious Slavonic parallel corpus.

Epistemic possibility: verbs and adverbs

Epistemic possibility concerns the speaker's degree of uncertainty about the truth-value of his/her assertion. In English this can be expressed in various ways, including modal auxiliaries as in (1), modal adverbs as in (2) and modal adjectives as in (3).

- (1) *John may/might have done it.*
- (2) *Maybe/perhaps John has done it.*
- (3) *It is possible that John has done it.*

Epistemic modality can also be expressed mental state verbs, but at least in English there does not seem to be any verb that expresses the low degree of certainty that characterizes the commitment expressed in (1), (2) and (3). Thus a use of a verb such as *think* or *believe* is already too strong.

- (4) *I think/believe that John has done it.*

The Slavonic languages seem to be no different in these respects. Below are translations of (1) into (4) in Polish.

- (5)

<i>Jan</i>	<i>mógł</i>	<i>to</i>
John. NOM.SG	may. IMPF. PST. M. 3SG	this. ACC. SG. N
<i>zrobić.</i>		
do. PF. INF		

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west cline, with more modal verbs and fewer modal adverbs in the west, as well as with more borrowing of German modal auxiliaries (*müssen* and to a lesser extent *dürfen*) in the west. The success story of *müssen* has meanwhile been documented in detail by Hansen (2000). Also in the wake of Porák (1968), van der Auwera & Ammann (in print a, b) asked whether modal auxiliary uses could not be a feature of Standard Average European (van der Auwera 1998, Haspelmath 2001). Note that a view of modality as a feature of a *Sprachbund* is not unique: Enfield (2002) provides a powerful case for South-East Asia.

The parallel corpus

This pilot study is restricted to an analysis of some expressions of epistemic possibility occurring in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets* and its translations into Slavonic, i.e., Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovene, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Russian and Ukrainian—we are not aware of translations into other Slavonic languages (Sorbian or Belorussian) or variants. The restriction to just one text, one direction (from English into Slavonic), and one translation is, of course, a very strong one, but within the confines of this one book project, the choice of a *Harry Potter* book makes sense. We are dealing with present-day English, a text with a lot of dialogue, and with mystery and uncertainty—an ideal environment for epistemic modality. The text exists in most of the Slavonic languages, and one may hope that the translators have chosen the same register. For Russian, it is important to add, we have a partial second and seemingly independent translation.

In the original text we isolated all the occurrences of epistemic uses of *may*, *might*, *could*, *maybe*, and *perhaps*. We took a fairly liberal attitude: if a use was vague or ambiguous between an epistemic or non-epistemic interpretation, it was counted. We included both positive and negative occurrences, but for negative environments we only listed the ones in which possibility has scope over negation, as in (9).

- (9) *Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir ...* [English 18]⁴

We thus excluded uses with negation having scope over possibility as in (10), which do not express any epistemic possibility.

- (10) *... but it couldn't possibly be any one else ...* [English 201]

For the adverbs we only included uses with sentence scope, like (11), for it is only in these contexts that there is a choice between the adverbial and the auxiliary uses. Excluded therefore were uses like (12).

- (11) *'Maybe he's ill', said Ron hopefully.* [English 77]

- (12) *He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), ...* [English 3]

⁴ Numbers refer to the pages of the editions consulted.

The original contained one sentence ((13)) with both an adverb and an auxiliary (out of the chosen set of two adverbials and three auxiliaries). We left this sentence out of consideration.

(13) “*maybe your friend could take it ...*” [English 96]

For each of the sentences thus isolated, we searched for the translational equivalent, and analyzed it with a perspective of finding out whether the target text used a relevant auxiliary or adverb expressing epistemic possibility.

The source text

The total set of sentences with *may*, *might*, *could*, *maybe* and *perhaps*, chosen according to the principles set out in the previous section amounted to 87. The breakdown in subtypes is shown in Table 1.

Types		Number of occurrences		
auxiliary	<i>may</i>	4	66	87
	<i>might</i>	41		
	<i>could</i>	21		
adverb	<i>maybe</i>	16	21	
	<i>perhaps</i>	5		

Table 1. Epistemic modality in the source text

It is clear that Rowling prefers the auxiliaries to the adverbs when it comes to epistemic possibility, and within each class, there are also clear preferences: the author prefers *maybe* to *perhaps*, and *might* to *could* and *may*. Perhaps the most striking difference is that between the numbers for *may* and *might*. Traditionally, the latter is considered more tentative than *may*, in which case one would simply have to conclude that the author had more of a need for a tentative expression of epistemic possibility. However, the numbers are also in accord with the hypothesis that *might* has lost its tentativeness and has superseded *may* as the main auxiliary for epistemic possibility (Coates 1983: 147; see also Aijmer 1999: 314). This problem will be not investigated any further, nor any other aspect of the English data, the focus of this paper being Slavonic.

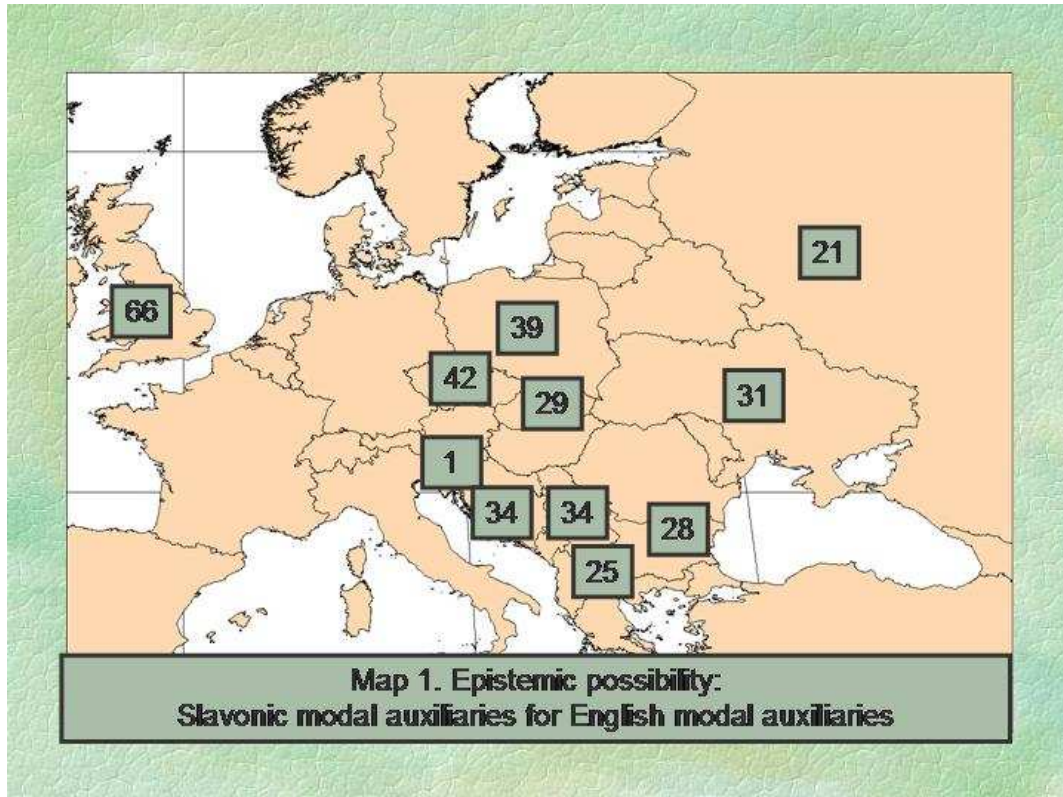
The target texts

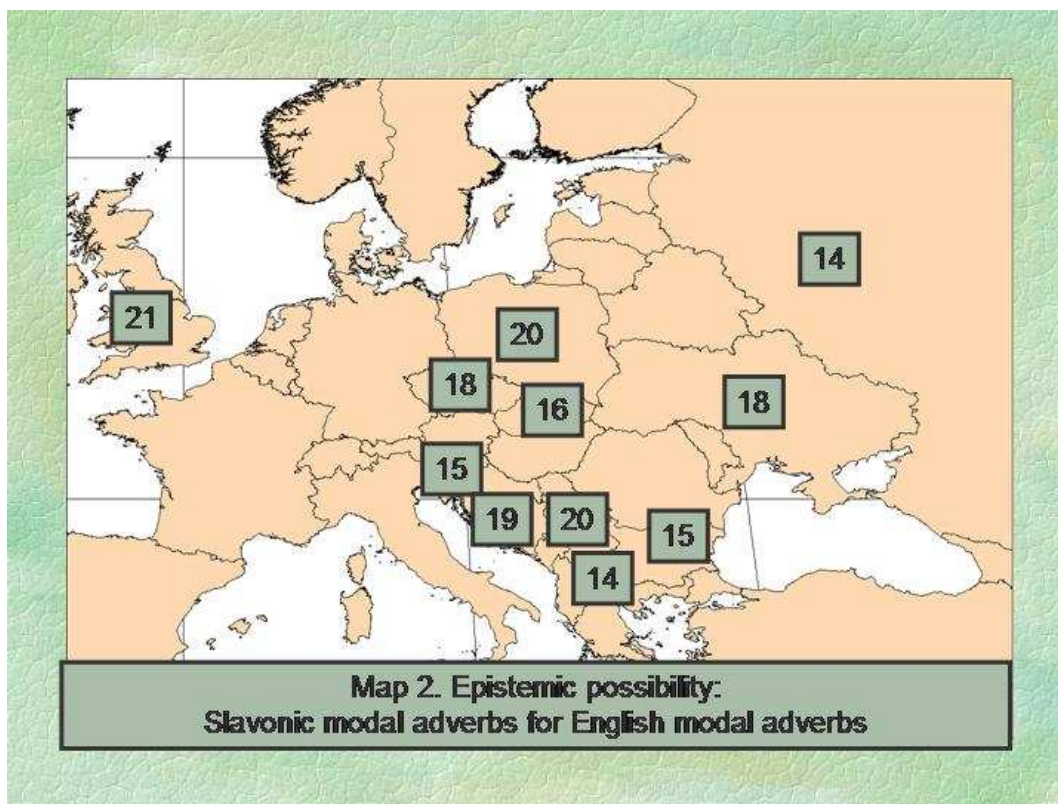
In the analysis of the translational equivalents we are interested only in whether the translator opted for a modal auxiliary or a modal adverb.⁵ More specifically still and only because of limitations of space, we focus on whether or not the translator translated the English auxiliary with a Slavonic auxiliary, and the English adverb with a Slavonic adverb. The auxiliary was in almost every case a form of a descendant of the Old Church Slavonic verb **mogti* (e.g. Czech *moci*, Russian *moč'* or Serbian *moći*), but we also included the few cases of a translation with a probability modal. Most of the adverbs included a form of this verb as well, either (i) in a set phrase with a copula (e.g. Bulgarian *može bi* ‘may be’), its univerbation (only Macedonian *možebi* ‘maybe’) or a shortened copulaless form (e.g. Polish *może* < *može być* ‘may be’; Hansen 2001: 297),

⁵ What we call ‘adverbs’ are often also called ‘particles’ (e.g. Hansen 2001, Čermák & Klégr 2004). Nothing hinges on this terminological choice.

or (ii) in a univerbation with the complementizer (e.g. Serbian *možda* < *može da* ‘may that’; Hansen 2001: 217). Other adverbs are etymologically related (e.g. Slovene *mogoče*, Czech *možna*), but some are not (e.g. Slovene *lahko* ‘lightly’, Czech *snad* ‘easily’). Again, we included the few cases in which the translator chose a probability adverb.

Maps 1 and 2 show the results for the three auxiliaries and the adverbs. The subtypes are not distinguished. The maps merely tell us in how many sentences either *may*, *might* or *could* was translated with a Slavonic modal auxiliary (Map 1) and in how many sentences either *maybe* or *perhaps* was translated with a Slavonic modal adverb (Map 2).





How shall we interpret the findings? It cannot be stressed sufficiently, of course, that we are only facing one translation of one text, both of which may have idiosyncracies that we cannot at this stage judge the importance of. With these caveats, we dare to say that the use of Slavonic modal auxiliaries of epistemic modality seems to involve a frequency cline. West Slavonic resembles English most, with Slovak much less than either Czech or Polish. With East Slavonic Ukrainian is more like English than Russian. Northern South Slavonic, i.e., Croatian and Serbian, but not Slovene, resemble English more than southern South Slavic Bulgarian and Macedonian. With respect to the use of modal adverbs, we see some of the same tendencies, more particularly, the lower frequency of Slovak relative to Czech and Polish, the lower frequency of Russian relative to Ukrainian, and the lower frequency of Bulgarian and Macedonian relative to Serbian and Croatian. There are also differences; most importantly, Slovene is no longer the big exception.

Three further comments. First, the fact that a translator uses a relatively low number of modal auxiliaries or adverbs means one or two things. Either the translator does not use any expression for modality at all or (s)he employs other means, like the adjectives and mental state predicates mentioned above, but there is also the future tense or the conditional mood. This remains to be investigated. Second, the special feature of Slovene on Map 1 is due to the fact that its possibility modals never reached the epistemic stage (on the paths or maps of modal change; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994, van der Auwera & Plungian 1998). This is different for its necessity modals, and in the one sentence in which the Slovene translator translated a modal auxiliary with a modal auxiliary, he actually used the necessity modal *morati* 'must'.

(14) a. *because I think another delivery might finish your one off*

[English 45]

- b. *kajti tale* *skovir*
 for this.NOM.M.SG.EMPH.PRT wood-owl.NOM.SG.M
bi se moral že zdavnaj
 PRT REFL have.to.IMPF.PST.3SG already long.ago
upokojiti
 retire.PF.INF [Slovene 40]

Third, at least for Russian we have a second translation, be it incomplete. So for this language, we can free ourselves a little bit more from the possible idiosyncracies of the translator. It can be seen from Table 2 and 3 that the relatively low figures are also found in the second translation. The numbers cover the pages found in both translations.

	Number of modal auxiliaries in	
	Russian 1	Russian 2
English <i>may, might, could</i>	14/44	14/44

Table 2. Comparing auxiliary use in the two Russian translations

	Number of modal adverbs in	
	Russian 1	Russian 2
English <i>maybe, perhaps</i>	12/15	10/15

Table 3. Comparing adverb use in the two Russian translations

The figures in Table 2 are even identical. Note that the actual uses of auxiliaries and adverbs are not. Here is just one example: in (15) English third person plural *might* finds a corresponding first person singular *mogu* in one translation, but a third person plural *mogli* in the other one.

- (15) a. *I have a few - ah - items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call ...* [English 51]
- b. *A u menja doma... m-m... koe-čto*
 and at 1SG.GEN at.home m-m...something.NOM.SG
est'. I esli ko mne pridut,
 be.IMPF.PRS.3SG and if to 1SG.DAT come.PF.FUT.3PL
ja mogu okazat'sja v
 1SG.NOM may.IMPF.PRS.1SG turn.out.PF.INF in
nelovkom položenii.
 embarrassing.LOC.SG.N situation.LOC.SG [Russian1 73]
- c. *Zdes' perečisleny neskol'ko...*
 here enumerate.PF.PART.PASS.PL several
predmetov, kotorye mogli
 objects.GEN.PL which.NOM.PL may.IMPF.PST.3PL
by postavit' menja v neprijatnoe
 PRT put.PF.INF 1SG.GEN in unpleasant.ACC.SG.N,
položenie, esli by ljudi iz
 situation.ACC.SG if PRT people.NOM from

<i>ministerstva</i>	<i>obnaružili</i>	<i>ix</i>
ministry.GEN.SG	discover.PF.PST.3PL	3PL.ACC
<i>v moëm</i>	<i>dome</i>	
in my.LOC.SG.M	home.LOC.SG	[Russian 2]

Let us now come to the issues of grammaticalization and areality. Is it likely that a higher frequency of a modal auxiliary correlates with its degree of grammaticalization? Of course, detailed work on the grammaticalization of all of the Slavonic epistemic modal verbs does not exist, but we think that the approach could at best explain only part of the facts. The difference between Ukrainian and Russian seems significant: Ukrainian has 31 occurrences of *mic*, but Russian has only 21 occurrences of the corresponding auxiliary. Or consider the 41 occurrences of the Czech verb and put them next to the 29 of Slovak. The Czech figure (42) is also the double of the Russian figure (21). Will one really be able to relate these frequencies with differences in degree of grammaticalization? To the extent that one can judge from Hansen (2001, 2003), it is clear that Slavonic languages have indeed grammaticalized their overall modal field to different degrees, but the grammaticalization of their **mogni* verbs is in fact rather similar, at least for the languages mentioned so far. It must be admitted that the Bulgarian and Macedonian (and optionally also the Serbian) **mogni* verbs have a different grammar: they are complemented by the conjunction *da* ‘that’ and a finite clause instead of an infinitive.

- (16) a. ‘- and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it appear -’
[English 51]
- b. *a kakto viždate, njakoi ot tezi*
and as see.IMPF.PRS.3PL some.PL from this.PL
otrovi mogat da sâzdadat
poison.PL may.IMPF.PRS.3PL COMPL create.PF.PRS.3PL
vpečatlenie-to
impression.SG.-DEF [Bulgarian 47]

A complementation with *da* and finite clause is indeed interpretable as a lower degree of grammaticalization than complementation with an infinitive (see Hansen 2001)⁶, and Bulgarian and Macedonian do use fewer modals than Croatian and Serbian (28 and 25 versus 34 and 34). But the figures of Bulgarian and Macedonian are still higher than those for Russian. Mutatis mutandis and assuming that the lower figures for adverbs can be taken seriously, too, we get the same problem here: will a grammaticalization hypothesis explain why Russian uses fewer adverbs than Ukrainian, Slovak fewer than Czech, and Bulgarian and Macedonian fewer than Croatian and Serbian? And perhaps the problem is bigger here, for there has been much less work on the effect of grammaticalization in the domain of adverbs and particles than on its effect in the domain of verbs and auxiliaries.

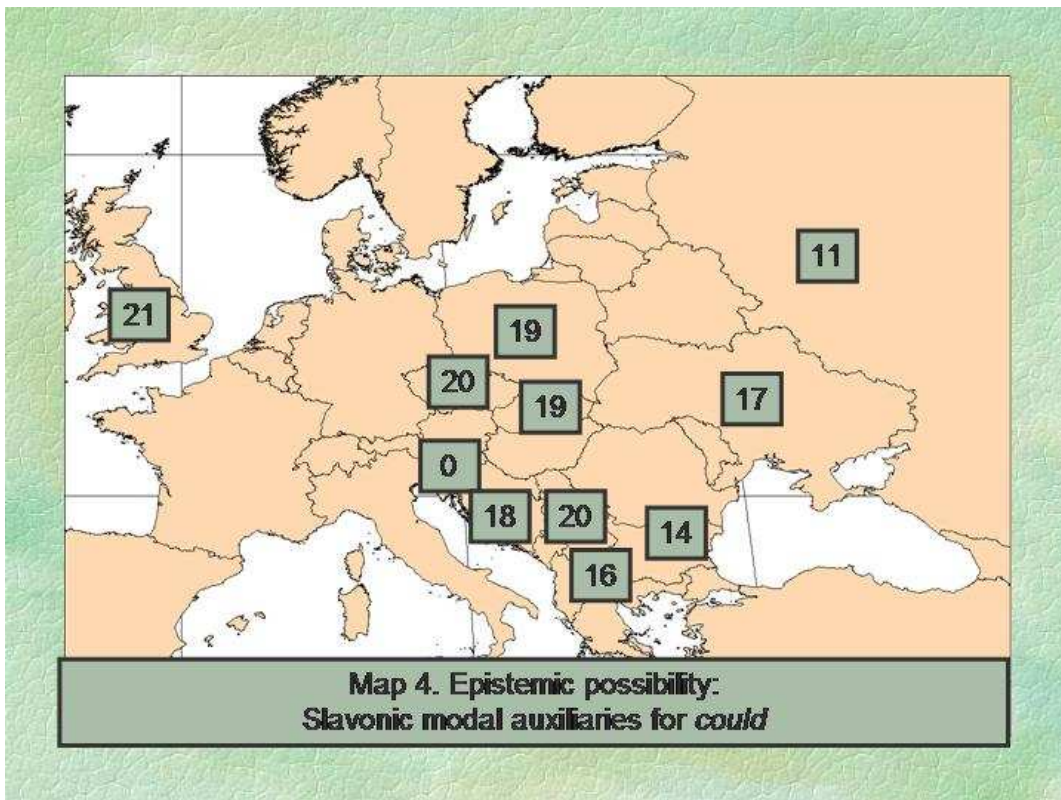
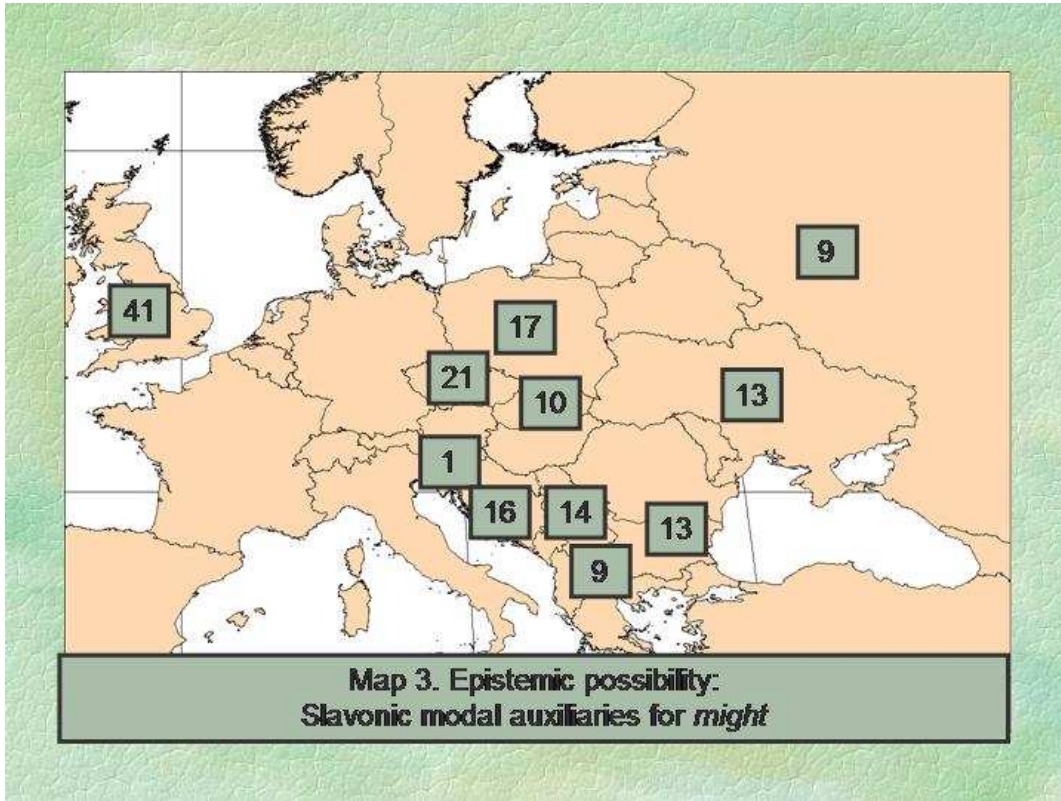
⁶ The general point about interpreting finite clause complementation as less grammaticalized than infinitival complementation is far from certain, however. In Dutch, for example, the complementing pattern *het kan zijn dat ...* ‘it may be that ...’, which is specializing for the epistemic use, appears to have evolved later than the use of the auxiliary with an infinitive (Nuyts 1996), and there is no reason to assume that the auxiliary in the former is less grammaticalized than in the latter.

How about the explanatory potential of areality? There are two partial answers, one for the south, and one for the north. First, the one for the south: the complementation with *da* found in Bulgarian, Macedonian and, to some extent, Serbian, is indeed an areal phenomenon: we are dealing with the classical Balkanism of the absent or low frequency infinitive, not just in epistemic modal contexts, but in all contexts (see e.g. Schaller 1975).⁷ However, the Balkanist nature of this pattern does not yet explain why it should be less frequent than the non-Balkan infinitival pattern. Second, as for the north, we know that the necessity modals of East and West Slavonic are partially explained by contact inference, i.e., the borrowing from German. From this point of view, it would indeed be plausible that possibility modals were also affected, and assuming that the epistemic uses of modals may be typical for Standard Average European (van der Auwera & Ammann in print a, b), the phenomenon of the eastward decreasing frequencies would indeed make areal sense.

Note that an areality approach does not rule out that grammaticalization has a role as well. In particular, Heine & Kuteva (2003) have argued that one often needs recourse to both and they speak about “contact-induced grammaticalization”. This notion is not uncontroversial (see Bruyn 1995), but if it makes sense, it might prove of value in the present discussion too.

Finally, it is possible to study the translations of each of the five English strategies individually. For *maybe* and *perhaps* it is not worthwhile: their profiles do not seem to be different, and the absolute numbers are very small. The absolute numbers for *may* are even smaller, and we will not study them any further either. But for *could* and *might* the numbers are somewhat bigger, and the translations are by no means parallel. The findings for *might* and *could* are shown on Maps 3 and 4.

⁷ A complementing pattern for epistemic uses of the modals is, of course, a much wider phenomenon, which is ultimately semantically motivated (Nuyts 2000).



Maps 3 and 4 clearly show that it is much more difficult to get epistemic *might* translated with a Slavonic modal. Why should that be the case? We suspect that at least

part of the answer lies in the different degrees of specialization of *could*, *might* and their Slavonic **mogti* counterparts. *Might* as well as the adverbs are much more specialized for epistemic possibility than either *could* or the Slavonic **mogti* verbs. Only the latter two are also used for non-epistemic meanings, like an ability in (17) or a more circumstantial possibility in (18).

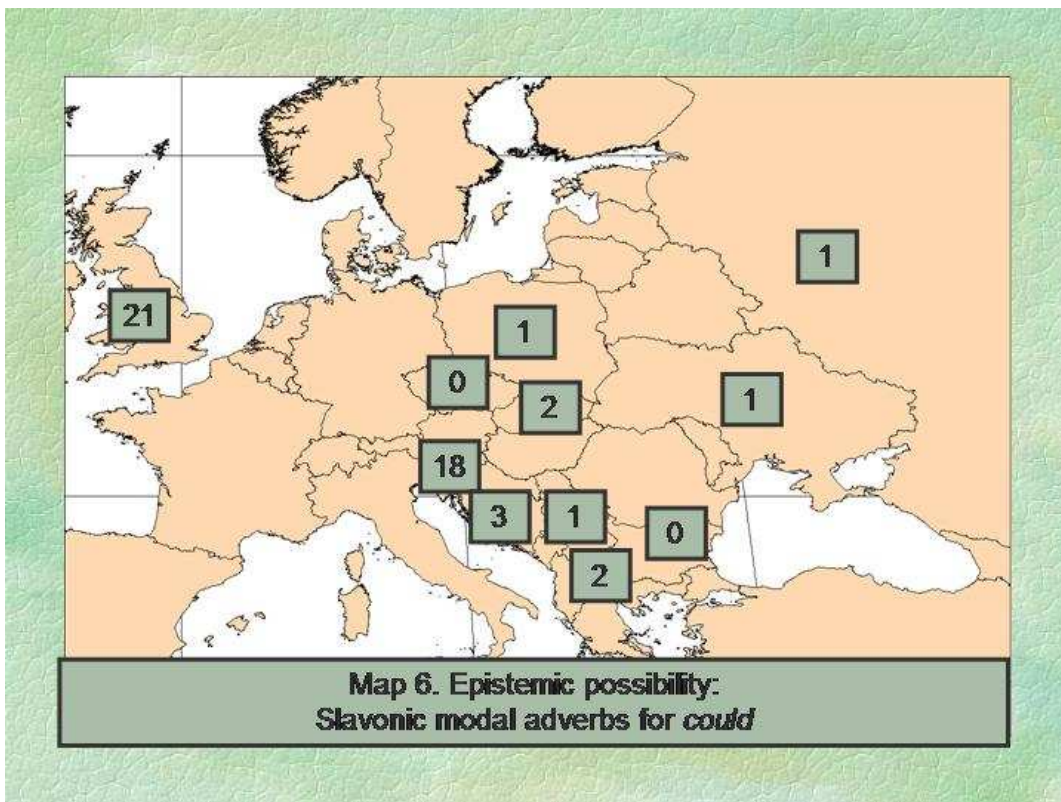
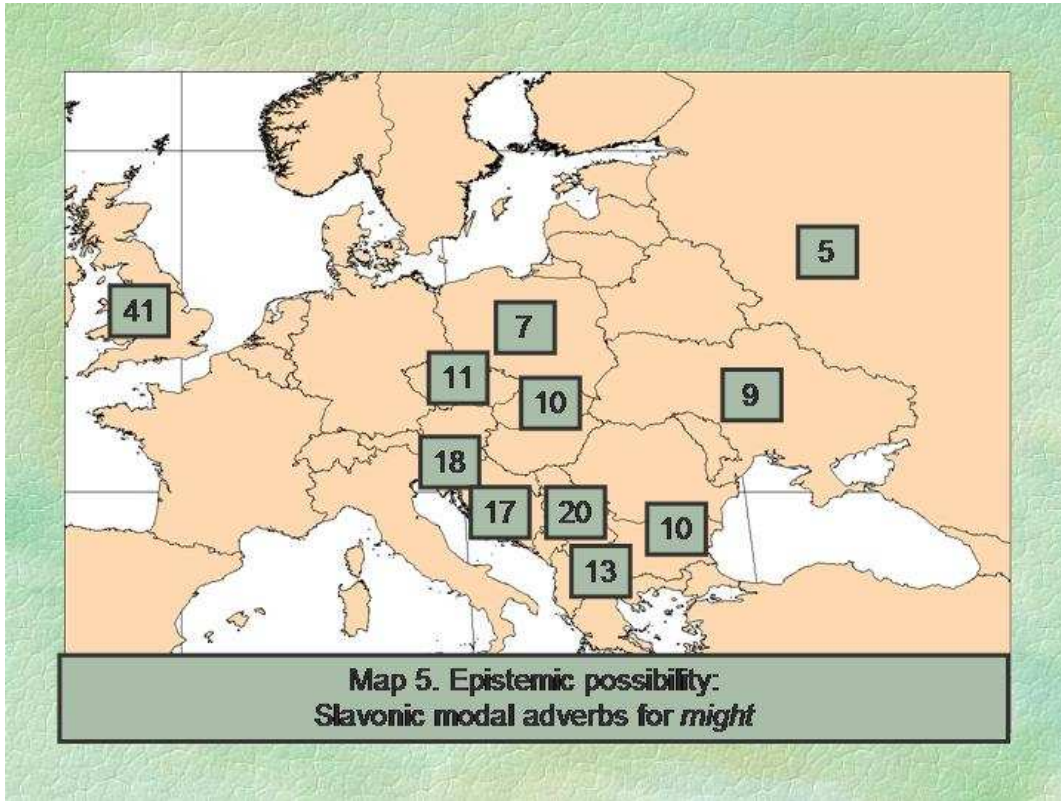
(17) a. *They went, as quickly as they could without actually running.*
[English 19]

b. *Więc odeszli, a zrobili*
thus go.away.PF.PST.3PL and do.PF.PST.3PL
to tak szybko jak mogli nie
this.ACC.SG.N as fast as can.IMPF.PST.3PL NEG
biegnąc
run.CONV. [Polish 155]

(18) a. *...creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars.*
[English 22]

b. *...podchodząc na palcach do*
approach.CONV on toe.LOC.PL to
okna i otwierając je
window.GEN.N.SG and open.CONV 3SG.ACC.SG.N
żeby mogli porozmawiać przez
in.order.to can. IMPF.PST.3PL talk.PF.INF through
kraty.
bar.ACC.PL [Polish 31]

From that point of view, the **mogti* verbs are better equivalents for *could* than for *might*. This is what appears on Maps 3 and 4. It would also follow that the adverbs are better equivalents for *might* than for *could*. This is supported by the findings on Maps 5 and 6.



Note that a degree of polyfunctionality is not the same as a degree of grammaticalization. *Might* should probably be deemed as more grammaticalized than *could*, on account of its having completely lost its lexical meaning, yet it is less polyfunctional than *could*. The breakdown of *might* and *could* shown on Maps 3 to 6 suggests that it is the degree of polyfunctionality rather than of grammaticalization that matters more. But it does not explain everything. Again there is an areality effect. For both *might* and *could*, Czech has more modal auxiliaries than Slovak, Ukrainian more than Russian, and Croatian and Serbian more than Bulgarian and Macedonian.

Conclusion

In this paper we have investigated some of the Slavonic translational equivalents for some of the English auxiliaries and adverbs of epistemic modality. The database is very restricted, the most important restriction being that we only investigated the translations of one book, *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets*. The Slavonic translations were found to differ substantially and systematically, and we explored the explanatory relevance of grammaticalization, areality, and polyfunctionality. The latter two were considered most relevant. Of equal importance is the methodological message: we want this pilot study to show that parallel corpora are important (for another Slavonic modality-based illustration see Čermák & Klégr 2004). Maybe the results of this exploratory study for modality will not stand the test of professional corpora, but we will only know this when such parallel corpora exist.

Epilogue

Hansen (this volume) has independently approached similar issues. His method is different, but some of his conclusions point in the same direction. Most importantly, he too argues that there is a Slavonic areal cline in the grammar of modality. With respect to the present study, this might mean that ‘Harry Potter linguistics’ can be given some confidence, even when the work is based on just one book. We also see a nice confirmation of the usefulness of parallel corpus work for areal linguistics. Hansen (this volume) does not find any (relevant) difference in the grammar of modality between Czech and Slovak. This was also the suspicion we voiced in the present paper. On the basis of grammar only, Hansen thus gives Czech and Slovak the same value in the Isopleth Tables 2 and 3 and on Map 6. With respect to Harry Potter frequencies, however, Czech and Slovak can be very different (see Maps 1 and 3), in a way, furthermore, that is consistent with their geographical positions (with ‘further to the east’ translating into ‘more different from English’).

Abbreviations

ACC	accusative	NOM	nominative
CONV	converb	PART	participle
DEF	definite	PASS	passive
EMPH	emphatic	PF	perfective
FUT	future	PL	plural
GEN	genitive	PRS	present
IMPF	imperfective	PRT	particle
INF	infinitive	PST	past
LOC	locative	REFL	reflexive
M	masculine	SG	singular
N	neuter		

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