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Hypothetical Use of *May* + Perfect Infinitive

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Abstract

Although it is still often stigmatised as a grammatical deviation, *may have* has been increasingly used for expressing a hypothetical possibility in the past, irrespective of regional variations of English. A close analysis of the contexts in which the phrase is used reveals that it is likely to emerge in the reports of new findings about tragic accidents or events of public concern. Given that an epistemic *may* typically implies a speaker's higher commitment to the truth of a proposition or a greater likelihood of an event occurring than *might*, it is arguable that *may have* in hypothetical conditions is deliberately chosen to make the news more sensational and relevant to readers, with the likely intention of overturning their assumptions.

1. Introduction

New Zealand's worst railway disaster occurred in the vicinity of Tangiwai in the North Island on Christmas Eve of 1953, at a time when the entire country was celebrating the first visit to NZ of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. A colossal lahar, or mudflow, surged out of Mt Ruapehu's crater lake and down the Whangaehu River, carrying huge quantities of ash, rock and volcanic debris, before striking the piers of a railway bridge with tsunami-like force. In ten minutes or so, under the weight of a night

express, the bridge collapsed. The train's engine, tender, and six carriages plunged into the torrent of dark, cold water below, the tragedy claiming 151 lives. In 2002 TV ONE produced a documentary about the incident, reporting, among other information, the little-known fact that two amateur geologists had warned of a dangerous rise in the crater lake's waters. The following is from a preview of the programme which appeared in *The Press*, a local newspaper in Christchurch.

- (1) The Truth About Tangiwai (Documentary New Zealand next Monday at 8.30 pm on TV ONE) looks at what happened on Christmas Eve 1953 and claims to have uncovered evidence not publicly aired before about the role of New Zealand Railways ... They analyse still photography of the Tangiwai Bridge before the disaster and tell the frustrating story of two young canoeists, whose warnings about Mount Ruapehu *may have prevented* the disaster had authorities taken notice. (*The Press TV Week*, 16 April 2002)

This paper, then, concerns itself with the hypothetical use of *may* + perfect infinitive construction, an example of which appears in the last sentence of the above excerpt. Such usage might seem grammatically incorrect, on the grounds that *may have* implies the possibility, however small, of an event having happened in the past. The accepted construction would be *might have prevented*, since the disaster did occur within a historical timeframe. Nevertheless, *may have*, used to express a past hypothetical possibility, is found so commonly in NZ English texts that it cannot be dismissed as a mere instance of grammatical slovenliness. There must be some semantic explanation for its extensive use.

2. A New Zealandism?

The following examples are quoted from NZ journals.

- (2) Losing her husband while she was away on an overseas trip would be bad enough, but an angry and bitter Mrs Nunnick says the knowledge that he *may have survived* had he been able to get immediate surgery in Christchurch, is terrible. (*The Press*, 26 July 1996)
- (3) Here in New Zealand, a study by Land Transport reveals that 143 lives *may have been saved* on our roads last year if the vehicles involved had been fitted with ESP. (*AA Online*, 19 June 2006, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://www.aa.co.nz/media/>)
- (4) For in each of the 1967 and 1968 seasons, when Vodanovich served on the national selection panels under Fred Allen, he [i.e. Trevor Morris] was given All Black trials. Perhaps if he had had more chances in a metropolitan union Morris *may have achieved* even more. (*The New Zealand Rugby Museum*, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://www.rugbymuseum.co.nz/>)
- (5) Mr McGee said a public servant who openly attacked a minister before a committee could not be expected to retain the confidence of that minister and could probably by [sic] justifiably moved to a different position. In the case of Mr Fraser it was possible if TVNZ had taken a more judicious approach to disciplining him, MPs *may have not chosen* to punish the broadcaster. —NZPA (*Stuff*, 21 July 2006, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://www.stuff.co.nz/>)

Incidentally, the source of the article from which (5) was taken, NZPA (New Zealand Press Association), was also the basis for the article, taken from an Auckland-based paper, in which passage (6) appeared.

- (6) ... A public servant who openly attacked a minister could probably be justifiably moved to a different position. If TVNZ had taken a more judicious approach to disciplining Mr Fraser, MPs *might have not chosen* to punish the broadcaster. —NZPA (*New*

Zealand Herald, 21 July 2006)

The same news is described, though (5) shows the use of the phrase *may have not chosen*, while (6) employs *might have not chosen*.¹ This indicates that there is little or no difference between the two phrases as far as a cognitive or denotative meaning is concerned. At the same time it is worth noting that *Stuff*, an online newspaper, tends to quote an interviewee's speech as close to the original as possible, although its focus on breaking news could have resulted in its mistyping *be* as *by*.

3. Evidence from other varieties of English

It might appear from the above examples that *may have* in the main clause of unreal conditions is unique to NZ English,² but there are abundant recent samples from other varieties of English.

- (7) A pilot who ejected from a jet as it headed towards the M11 motorway *may have survived* if he had remained in the plane. (*BBC News*, 3 October 2003, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/cambridgeshire/>)
- (8) The government's supporters would argue that Tuesday's raids in Sydney and Melbourne—described as the biggest counter-terrorism operation in Australia's history—*may not have been* possible without a slight amendment to these laws this week. (*BBC News*, 9 November 2005, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/>)
- (9) The finding contradicted some early reports that the Princess *may have survived* if she had received medical help sooner. (*Irish Examiner*, 10 September 2004, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://archives.tcm.ie/irishexaminer/>)
- (10) However, I'm sure ... you can assume that more people *may have survived* if there'd been an operating alarm, or had no bunk beds

been against doors. (*PM*, 7 July 2006, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2006/>)

- (11) Scientists studying shyness never tire of pointing out that Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were unusually reserved people and *may have achieved* far less if they'd been otherwise. (*Time*, 4 April 2005)

Examples (7) and (8) are drawn from *BBC News*, and (9)–(11) from Irish, Australian, and American journals respectively. Copperud (1964) was among the first American dictionaries to refer to a case of *may have* 'mistakenly used' in place of *might have*, whereas LDEL (1984), Ilson (1985), and Quirk et al. (1985) found early counterparts in British texts, while questioning the appropriateness of the use. Citing an example from *The Guardian* in 1973, WDEU (1989) asserted that *may have* in the hypothetical sense was used on both sides of the Atlantic, though evidence of its use was reported more often in Britain. Burchfield's (1996) observation that the usage could be traced back at least to the 1960s, with the earliest example taken from *The Sunday Times* in 1977, may be well-founded and reasoned, given that any new usage would usually have been around for a decade or so until it was noted in a usage guidebook. All these remarks, along with the above-mentioned common use in NZ English, indicate that this usage was not restricted to a particular regional and/or social variation of English, but may have emerged across the English-speaking world during the same period.

4. Acceptability

While *may have* in hypothetical conditions is still more or less stigmatised by a large number of usage guides (Weiner and Delahunty 1994; Burchfield 1996; CCEU 2004; CED 2006), its usage evidently has been finding its way into prestigious journals, as well as into the mouths of influential politicians, as noted by Randall (1988) in his example of its use by the

former US President Jimmy Carter. The subtle change in Swan's explanation about its hypothetical use from (12) to (13) is indicative of its increased frequency and acceptability over the past decade. Note the deletion of 'British English' in (13). Furthermore, taking a most generous attitude towards its use, Peters (2004) observes that for many people, *may have* is 'the modal verb of choice' in the context of current affairs.

- (12) *May* is occasionally used in the same way in British English, but many people feel that this [i.e. *may have* in hypothetical conditions] is incorrect. (Swan 1995)
- (13) *May have* ... is now sometimes used with this meaning too; some people feel that this is not correct. (Swan 2005)
- (14) A secret Pentagon study disclosed in news reports last week found that four out of five Marines who died in Iraq from wounds to their torsos *may have survived* had their body armor been more complete. (*NPR Morning Edition*, 12 January 2006, transcribed from the broadcast)
- (15) A secret Pentagon study revealed in media reports last week found that four out of five Marines who died in Iraq from torso wounds lacked more complete body armor that *might have saved* them. (*NPR Morning Edition*, 12 January 2006, retrieved 2 August 2006 from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/>)

WDEU (1989) points out that this use is more frequent in speech than in writing, and examples (14) and (15) demonstrate the correctness of this view: *may have* in an oral delivery (14) becomes *might have* in the written summary (15) of the same news item. In fact, the WDEU account applies as well to the contrast between the online edition (5) and the corresponding print edition (6) of identical news.

5. Shades of meaning

Statistics from Biber et al. (1999) give a clear indication that an epistemic *might* is in the process of superseding *may* in frequency of use in conversational context.³ In the same vein, it is evidenced that the emergence of *might* is five times as common as that of *may* in speech of children aged six to twelve years (Perkins 1983).⁴ Given that *might* is now an unmarked modal of possibility, the recent increase of *may have* for past hypothetical meaning is a kind of counter-tendency and must be semantically motivated rather than simply caused due to speakers' lack of grammatical knowledge. After all, each word or phrase has its own connotative meaning, or shades of meaning, which otherwise could never be lexicalised.

(16a) I *may go* to London tomorrow.

(16b) Joe *might come* with me.

(17) Any broadcasting station that airs more commercials than the code allows *may be fined*, and in extreme cases its license *might be taken away*. (Bernstein 1965)

(18a) Someone *may have made* a mistake.

(18b) Someone *might just have made* a mistake.

(19a) = (7) A pilot *may have survived* if he had remained in the plane.

(19b) A pilot *might have survived* if he had remained in the plane.

Although semantic equivalency between the two modals is mentioned by Coates (1983), Declerck (1991), and Leech (2004), a greater number of usage references maintain that *might* in the present tense makes the statement more tentative, more hesitant, or less definite, and the possibility more remote or less certain (Randall 1988; Palmer 1990; Garner 2003;

Peters 2004; Carter and McCarthy 2006). Swan (2005), for example, attaches a 50 and 30 percent chance respectively to the occurrence of the acts described in (16a) and (16b) and example (17) illustrates the difference between the modals, with regard to the degree of certainty as to the possibility of the station being fined or stripped off its license. As would be expected, a similar contrast holds between *may have* and *might have* for past possibility. Examples (18a) and (18b), for instance, are different only in terms of tentativeness or speakers' commitment to the truth of the proposition (Leech and Svartvik 2002). It could be reasonably considered that the same account further applies to examples (19a) and (19b) in describing hypothetical conditions.

Returning to example (1), whether the disaster described could have been avoided if authorities had paid serious attention to the warning about the lake may still be considered doubtful, because the resulting flood, as the official report has it, was unprecedented both in scale and in destructive effect. Nevertheless, the film reviewer's commitment to the newly discovered evidence may have resulted in his/her choice of *may have prevented*, which seems to assure prospective viewers of the disaster's possible prevention. On the other hand, 'grammatically more correct' though it may be, *might have prevented* would not have given the programme that sense of urgency necessary to draw in viewers, because, as an established 'contrary-to-fact' phrase, it confirms a sense of remote relevance, even of irrevocability. *May have* must have been deliberately used here to show public dissatisfaction at the then negligent government.⁵ Presumably, it is not a coincidence that *may have* for past hypothetical possibility is likely to be used in the reports of new findings about fatal tragedies [e.g. (1), (2), (3), (7), (9), (10), and (14)] or events of public concern [e.g. (4), (5), (8), and (11)]. The use of this modal works to make the reported findings more sensational, overturning readers' assumptions about the case and possibly evoking stronger emotional reactions from them.

Notes

- 1 *May/might not have* is generally considered as the preferred form to negate the proposition of a sentence, whereas *may/might have not* seems also to be increasingly accepted to convey the same meaning.
- 2 A number of linguists, including UK-born Professor Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy at University of Canterbury, had been considering the frequent use of *may have* in this sense as characteristic of NZ English (personal communication, 1996).
- 3 On the other hand, the same statistics show that *may* in the epistemic sense appears much more frequently in academic prose than *might* (Biber et al. 1999). This is because the sample of *may* apparently includes the use in impersonal phrases such as *The problem may be ...* and *It may be noted ...*, which are extremely common in academic writing. Leech (2004) notes that such a formulaic use for soliciting and focusing the reader's attention could be interpreted either as 'possibility' or as 'permission'.
- 4 Although not indicating numerically the ratio between the root and epistemic senses, Perkins (1983) observed that both *might* and *may* were always used epistemically in his data, except in the formulaic expression *might/may as well*.
- 5 However, the board of inquiry officially concluded that no one in the service of the New Zealand government was to blame for the disaster (Report Board of Inquiry 1954).

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