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D. Terence Langendoen The 'Can't Seem To' Construction*

It has been pointed out (for example, by Quirk 1965, 217) that sentences such as:

(1) a. John can't seem to run very fast

are paraphrases of sentences like:

- (1) b. It seems that John is unable to run very fast
 - c. John seems to be unable to run very fast
 - d. It seems that John can't run very fast1

If the relations among these sentences are examined from a generative-transformational point of view, we conclude that the negative element and the modal auxiliary can or could are moved out of subject clauses of the verb seem after subject-raising has been applied to those clauses.² We call this transformation can't-raising, and we begin by attempting to make a precise formulation of this transformational rule.

First of all, can't-raising accounts for the fact that in such sentences as:

- (2) a. Abe can't seem to afford paying the rent
 - b. Harry can't seem to help falling asleep
 - c. Sam couldn't seem to stand the sound of jackhammers underneath his bedroom window
 - d. Tevye couldn't seem to tell the difference between right and left
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- ¹ An earlier version of this paper appears under the title "Modal Auxiliaries in Infinitive Clauses in English" in *Ohio State University Working Papers in Linguistics* 3, 1969. A somewhat later version, with the present title, is available from the Indiana University Linguistics Club. I am indebted to David Perlmutter and Harris Savin for numerous helpful suggestions.
- ² According to Rosenbaum (1967), sentences like (1c) are obtained in three steps: (i) the infinitive marker is introduced into the subject clause of seem, (ii) the clause is extraposed, leaving behind the expletive it in subject position, and (iii) the it is replaced by the subject of the infinitive by a transformation called pronoun replacement. More recently, Lakoff (1967) has shown that the process actually takes place in one step; the subject of the subject clause is turned into the subject of seem, and the predicate of that clause is simultaneously made part of the main predicate. See also Langendoen (1969, Chapter 5) for an elementary discussion of this process. There the transformation in question was called "infinitive clause separation"; here, following Lakoff, it is called "subject-raising". Throughout this discussion, it is assumed that subject-raising precedes can't-raising.

the verbs afford, help, stand, and tell are interpreted just as they are when they occur directly with can't or couldn't as in:

- (3) a. Abe can't afford paying the rent
 - b. Harry can't help falling asleep
 - c. Sam couldn't stand the sound of jackhammers underneath his bedroom window
 - d. Tevye couldn't tell the difference between right and left

Notice, in fact, that these particular senses of these verbs cannot in general be used without an immediately preceding abilitative element; the following examples in particular being ungrammatical:

- (4) a. *Abe affords paying the rent
 - b. *Harry couldn't want to help falling asleep
 - c. *Sam stood the sound of jackhammers underneath his bedroom window
 - d. *Tevye didn't tell the difference between right and left

The fact that these verbs can occur without an immediately preceding abilitative element in the examples of (2) is accounted for by the claim that the abilitative element originates in the subject clauses of those sentences.

Second, can't-raising is apparently restricted to sentences in which can't or couldn't originates in subject clauses of the verb seem, and no other verb. For the author at least, even the near-synonym appear does not qualify; example (5a) is not a paraphrase of (5b):³

- (5) a. John can't appear to run very fast
 - b. It appears that John can't run very fast

Third, only the modals can and could are affected by can't-raising; thus (6a) and (6b) are paraphrases of each other just like (1a) and (1d), but not (7a) and (7b) or (8a) and (8b):

- (6) a. John couldn't seem to run very fast
 - b. It seemed that John couldn't run very fast
- (7) a. John won't seem to run very fast
 - b. It seems that John won't run very fast
- (8) a. John mustn't seem to run very fast
 - b. It seems that John mustn't run very fast

Fourth, can't-raising is not applicable in case seem is followed by an oblique object introduced by to. Thus, although we have such sentences as:

(9) a. It seems to me that John can't run very fast

³ In example (5a), appear is underlyingly transitive; its deep structure subject is *John*, and the infinitive is an underlying object clause. A parallel interpretation can also be given for examples (1a), which is to say that example is ambiguous, and that there are two underlying verbs each for seem and appear (compare Perlmutter's arguments for two verbs begin in Perlmutter 1968, Chapter 3).

the results of applying can't-raising to them are ungrammatical:

(9) b. *John can't seem to me to run very fast

However, the grammaticality of sentences like (9b) are improved if the offending phrases are put at the end of such sentences, and improved even further if they are preposed:

- (9) c. ?John can't seem to run very fast to me
 - d. To me, John can't seem to run very fast

The difference in grammaticality between (9c) and (9d), however, has nothing to do with can't-raising, but rather with restrictions on the order of post-verbal constituents, based on the length and internal complexity of their constituents (for discussion, see Ross 1967, Chapter 3). In order for can't-raising to be applicable, the restriction is that seem must be followed immediately by the infinitival phrase.⁴

Fifth, can't-raising is apparently inapplicable in case there is a modal or a negative element present in the clause in which seem is the main verb, or in case seem is itself in an infinitival clause. It would appear, in fact, that neither subject-raising nor can't-raising is applicable to the structure underlying the following sentences:

- (10) a. It doesn't seem that John can't run very fast
 - b. It might seem that John can't run very fast
 - c. It used to seem that John couldn't run very fast

We show in footnote 9 how subject-raising can be made to apply in case the underlying subject clause appears to contain a modal which can neither be raised nor simply deleted (for remarks on the deletion of modal auxiliaries in infinitival clauses, see Lees 1960, 108; Rosenbaum 1967, 31). For the present, it suffices to remark that if subject-raising on the subject clause of *seem* is blocked, then *can't*-raising would be inapplicable.

Sixth, the modals can and could can be raised only if a negative element is raised along with them. Thus, (11a) and (11b) are not paraphrases:⁵

- (11) a. John can seem to run very fast
 - b. It seems that John can run very fast

However, the negative element that is raised along with can or could need not be the morpheme n't or not. Any of the sentence negative elements discussed by Klima

⁴ If, as is likely, the positioning of the to-phrase in examples like those of (9) is handled by a late rule, then the ungrammaticality of (9b) cannot be handled by the suggested restriction on the can't-raising transformation. My guess is that the facts noted under point four are most appropriately handled by an output condition (see the discussion in the last paragraph of this paper).

⁵ Example (11a) contains an instance of the transitive verb seem (see footnote 3), and can originates there

Example (11a) contains an instance of the transitive verb seem (see footnote 3), and can originates there as a modal auxiliary to seem. It also seems possible, however, that (11a) can be given as a retort to (1a), provided that the speaker puts contrastive stress on can; in this case, it must be assumed that the can alone has been raised

from the subject clause.

(1964, 261) will do; for example, never and hardly. Accordingly, each of the following pairs of sentences are paraphrases:

- (12) a. John could never seem to speak in full sentences
 - b. It seemed that John could never speak in full sentences
- (13) a. John can hardly seem to make out the chart on the wall
 - b. It seems that John can hardly make out the chart on the wall

Moreover, upon application of can't-raising, the negative element can be incorporated into another constituent in the sentence, even constituents which are in the infinitival clause. Consider, for example:

- (14) a. No one could seem to figure out what to do next
 - b. The prosecuting attorney could seem to find no evidence on which to build a strong case

The fact that the negative element in (14b) has found its way back into the clause in which it started out in deep structure is not evidence that it has not been moved out of that clause by can't-raising, for as Klima (1964, 285) has shown, sentence negative elements can be incorporated into constituents which are themselves inside infinitival clauses.

There is still a problem here, however. Negative incorporation is "downward bounded" (Ross 1967b, Chapter 5); the negative element cannot be incorporated into constituents which are in a clause which is more than one clause subordinate to the clause containing the negative element. Thus (15a) and (15b) below are not paraphrases, because the *anyone* occurring in (15a) is in the second infinitive clause "down" from the negative element of that sentence:

- (15) a. John didn't want to force Bill to marry anyone
 - b. John wanted to force Bill to marry no one

But now consider the following sentences, which are paraphrases:

- (16) a. John couldn't seem to encourage Bill to speak to anyone
 - b. John could seem to encourage Bill to speak to no one

Example (16a) is obtained by subject-raising and can't-raising from:

(16) c. It seemed that John couldn't encourage Bill to speak to anyone

The fact that (16b) paraphrases (16a) and (16c) would be accounted for if we were to assume that can't-raising follows the negative incorporation transformation, since the negative is being incorporated into a constituent which is in a clause which is immediately subordinate to the clause containing the negative element. However, we would like to order can't-raising before negative incorporation, in order to make the statement of that transformation as simple as possible (it would then simply be a matter of copying the negative element before seem, and deleting it in its original position; by ordering the rule after negative incorporation, we would have to add a

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statement to the effect that can or could can be raised if a negative constituent arising from negative incorporation is present in the clause in which can or could occurs or in a subordinate infinitival clause). But if can't-raising precedes negative incorporation, then we would apparently have to change the statement of the downward bounding restriction so as to allow the negative element to be incorporated into a constituent which is in an infinitive two clauses down just in case the negative had been previously raised by can't-raising.

A solution to this dilemma is possible, however, if we alter the form of the negative incorporation transformation so as to make it a copying rather than a deletion transformation. That is, suppose the negative incorporation transformation applies to convert structures like (17a) into structures like (17b), and that a later operation then converts these into structures like (17c):

- (17) a. John NEG have INDEF QUANTIFIER money
 - b. John NEG have NEG + INDEF QUANTIFIER money
 - c. John have NEG + INDEF QUANTIFIER money

Then, the prior application of the negative incorporation transformation would not have an affect on the statement of can't-raising, since the negative which is raised along with the modal auxiliary will not have yet been deleted; rather, it will be deleted later on in the derivation by the same transformation which is needed to convert (17b) into (17c). In this way the simplicity of the statement of the bounding constraint on negative incorporation and of the can't-raising transformation will both be preserved. Moreover, this view of negative incorporation receives independent support from considerations of the regional and social dialect differences discussed by Labov (1968). Standard English and various of the dialects considered by Labov will then differ not in the form of the negative incorporation transformation itself, but rather in the presence in standard English of the rule which converts (17b) into (17c) and the absence of this rule in these other dialects.

Returning to the topic at hand, we observe, seventh, that can or could can only be raised if they are paraphraseable by be able to, not by be permitted to or be possible to. Accordingly, we observe that although the sentence:

- (18) a. It seems that Johnny can't come out and play today is ambiguous, being paraphraseable as either:
- (18) b. It seems that Johnny is not able to come out and play today or:
- (18) c. It seems that Johnny is not permitted to come out and play today the following sentence, which arises from subject-raising and can't-raising from (18a), is unambiguous, being paraphraseable only as (18b):
 - (18) d. Johnny can't seem to come out and play today

Similarly, (19a), which is paraphraseable as (19b), is not paraphraseable as (19c), which in fact is ungrammatical:

- (19) a. It seems that the war can't be ended by these means
 - b. It seems that it is not possible for the war to be ended by these means
 - c. *The war can't seem to be ended by these means

Rather than viewing can't-raising as being sensitive to the particular sense of the modal auxiliary involved, one could suppose, following Chomsky (1968, 51–52), that the modal is not interpreted semantically until after the transformation has been applied.⁶ Chomsky finds this view preferable on the grounds that making the operation sensitive to the difference in senses of the various occurrences of can would be "an otherwise unmotivated complication" (52). In general, according to Chomsky, it is incorrect to postulate multiple deep structure sources for each of the modals; rather one should obtain their various senses from certain post-transformational rules of semantic interpretation (78–79). The crux of his argument seems to be that the various senses that each modal auxiliary takes on in English is not an accident of that language, but is a much more general phenomenon, which is widespread among the languages of the world. This generality can be explained if the semantic interpretation of modals is handled by (presumably universal) rules of post-transformational semantic interpretation, whereas it cannot be explained by the ad hoc setting up of distinct lexical items for each of the modal auxiliaries.

Chomsky's argument against the setting up of multiple deep structure, or lexical, sources for the modal auxiliaries would not go through, however, if one could account for the cross-linguistic generality of the sense of modals by means of implicational statements of the sort envisioned by McCawley (1968, 130–131). The quest for such statements strikes me as having at least the same prospects for success as those of Chomsky's for general rules of post-transformational semantic interpretation. In the absence of concrete proposals on either side, however, the case should, I think, be left open.

On the question of how the can't-raising transformation is to be formulated, we agree with Chomsky that if the structure index of that transformation were formulated in terms of a particular sense of the modals can and could, the situation would represent an "otherwise unmotivated complication." However, the structure index of that transformation does not mention the modal auxiliaries can and could, at all, but rather an abstract abilitative element which we shall call ABLE. The reason for this is that can't-raising (like negative incorporation) must be formulated as a copying rather

⁶ Chomsky (1968, 79) in fact doubts the very existence of the transformation itself, a position which requires him to maintain that a surface structure semantic interpretation rule not only interprets the can of the can't seem to construction as meaning "be able to" but also as directly modifying the infinitival clause (ignoring seem).

⁷ For a discussion of the nature of such abstract elements, see, for example, Lakoff (1965), Langendoen (1969, Chapter 6).

than as a deletion transformation. It turns out that there are speakers of English who accept sentences such as (20), and who interpret them as paraphrases of sentences such as those of (1):

(20) John can't seem to be able to run very fast

Informally, what happens in the derivation of (20) is that the negative and abilitative elements are copied from the subject clause of *seem* in front of *seem*. The negative element is subsequently deleted from the subject clause, but the abilitative element is allowed to remain. The abilitative element which remains in the infinitival clause is lexically realized as *be able*, while its copy is lexically realized as *can*. If the original abilitative element is subsequently deleted, then sentences such as (1a) are obtained.⁸ Formally, we represent the *can't*-raising transformation as follows:

(21) NP, seem to, ABLE, NEG, X
I 2 3 4 5
$$\longrightarrow$$

I 3 + 4 + 2 3 4 5

It will be noted that the present account of can't-raising requires that the insertion of the lexical content for ABLE in English take place after the transformation has applied. If this account is correct, it provides one more piece of evidence that lexical insertion cannot be viewed as taking place entirely in the base component as has been suggested by Chomsky (1965, 84) and others, but rather as taking place at various points throughout the transformational derivation of sentences.

Indeed, such a view of lexical insertion, in particular concerning the insertion of lexical material for the various verbal modalities in English, such as possibility, necessity, obligation, contingency, futurity, and ability, is helpful in providing a syntactic account of how the modal auxiliary verbs will, would, shall, should, can, could may, might, must, and ought are excluded from infinitival clauses generally. We simply require that the insertion of lexical material for the various modalities take place after the application of subject-raising. In finite clauses, we are free to insert at most one modal auxiliary; in infinitival clauses, it is either the case that modal elements are deleted entirely, or non-auxiliary verbs which express the intended modality are used. To take a simple example, suppose an abstract element indicating futurity is selected to occur in the subject clause of the verb seem. We may say, as a first approximation to

⁸ Why the lexical realization of ABLE is be able inside the infinitival clause is discussed below. Why the lexical realization of the copy of ABLE which is put in front of seem is can and not be able, that is why (1b-d) is not paraphraseable as:

⁽i) John is unable to seem to run very fast is a more difficult question. Intuitively, the function of the can't-raising transformation (together with the deletion of ABLE in the subject clause) is to reduce the degree of recursion in the surface structure of sentences. It does so by replacing an element which would otherwise be realized as an adjective able which in turn takes a marked infinitive (which may be assumed to be dominated by the node S) by a modal auxiliary from whose complement the node S has presumably been pruned. But if the copy of ABLE were realized by able, then the transformation would effect no reduction of surface structure recursion.

the truth, that this element may be expressed lexically either by the modal auxiliary will or the non-auxiliary construction be going to. If subject-raising is not applied to the subject clause of seem, we may say either:

- (22) a. It seems that the plane will land in five minutes
 - b. It seems that the plane is going to land in five minutes

But if the rule is applied, then only the non-auxiliary construction may be used. We may say:

(22) c. The plane seems to be going to land in five minutes

but not:9

(22) d. *The plane seems to will land in five minutes

There are, however, various difficulties inherent in the solution just given to the problem of how modal auxiliaries are to be excluded from infinitival clauses. One of these has to do with the fact that the semantic correspondence between particular auxiliaries and non-auxiliaries, such as will and be going to, is not exact (see, for example, McIntosh 1967). The fact that will and be going to differ slightly in meaning, whereas can (in the abilitative sense) and be able to do not, presumably explains why will and be going to can be used together, as in (23a), but not can and be able to, as in (23b):

- (23) a. The plane will be going to land in five minutes
 - b. *John can be able to run very fast

Another, and perhaps even more serious, difficulty is that the syntax of particular correspondents, such as may and be possible, is different. May, if it is treated as a verb (as in Ross 1967a), requires subject-raising on its subject clause, whereas that transformation is inapplicable to subject clauses of be possible:

- (24) a. John may be home by now
 - b. It is possible that John is home by now
 - c. It is possible for John to be home by now
 - d. *John is possible to be home by now

According to the proposed view, (24a-c) have the same deep structure, roughly that which is given in Figure 1.

- 9 Applying subject-raising to the structures underlying examples (10a-c), we obtain:
 - (i) John doesn't seem not to be able to run very fast
- (ii) John might seem not to be able to run very fast
- (iii) John used to seem not to be able to run very fast

Since can't-raising is inapplicable, by virtue of the fact that its structure index is not satisfied by these examples, the element ABLE in the subject complement is realized lexically as be able. Alternatively, if can't-raising is allowed to apply, the resulting sentences could be ruled ungrammatical by one or another output condition having to do with the occurrence of modal auxiliaries in sentences (see the final paragraph of this paper).

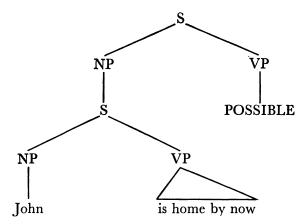


Figure 1. Postulated Deep Structure of Examples (24a-c)

Consider now the structure which is obtained by embedding this deep structure as the subject clause of *seem*. This new deep structure is given in Figure 2. Corresponding to this deep structure are the sentences:

- (25) a. It seems that it is possible that John is home by now
 - b. It seems that John may be home by now
 - c. It seems (to be) possible that John is home by now

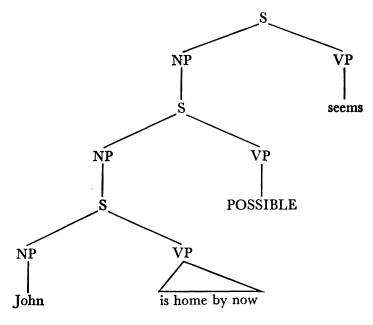


Figure 2. Deep Structure of Examples (25a-c)

However, suppose subject-raising is applied to the clause whose predicate is POS-SIBLE. Then somehow, we must prevent the application of subject-raising to the main clause, or else we obtain the ungrammatical sentence:

(25) d. *John seems to may be home by now

It does not help to make subject-raising either a cyclic transformation (see Chomsky 1965, Chapter 3; Ross 1967c) or a noncyclic one. In either case, a completely ad hoc restriction must be invoked to the effect that subject-raising is inapplicable to subject clauses of the verb *seem* just when subject-raising has been applied to the subject clause of that clause and the predicate of that clause is POSSIBLE.

The only available alternative at present is the view that the surface structures corresponding to (22d) and (25d) are well-formed outputs of the transformational component, but that they are ruled ungrammatical by an output condition (see Perlmutter 1968), which says, in effect, that surface structures in which modals occur within infinitival clauses are ungrammatical. If we adopt this view, then we would not be forced to accept in full the position that the lexical insertion of modal verbs, adjectives and auxiliaries must be delayed until after transformations such as infinitivization and subject-raising have applied. At present, however, it is not clear how much work the proposed output condition will have to do (see also footnote 9).

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