Semantic Ambiguity in German können: Competing Redehintergründe in Modal Interpretation

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ABSTRACT:
The German modal verb können is one of the most productive and semantically complex expressions of modality, as it may convey ability, possibility, permission, and epistemic possibility. Previous studies have generally treated these interpretations as instances of lexical polysemy or classified them into different types of modality, without systematically explaining the mechanism through which one interpretation becomes dominant in a given context. This study investigates the mechanism underlying the semantic ambiguity of können through the concept of Redehintergrund. Adopting a qualitative corpus-based approach, it analyzes all occurrences and inflected forms of können in NADI Volume 28 (2021). The analysis is based on modal force, Redehintergrund, linguistic cues, and discourse context. The findings demonstrate that können consistently realizes the modal force of possibility, whereas its interpretive variation is determined by the Redehintergrund activated by context. Five principal Redehintergründe are identified: intrasubjective-circumstantial, extrasubjective-circumstantial, normative, teleological, and epistemic. The analysis further shows that multiple Redehintergründe may coexist within the same utterance, giving rise to competing modal interpretations. The dominant interpretation emerges from the interaction of subject type, the semantic class of the infinitive, voice, adverbials, mood, clause structure, and discourse context. On this basis, the study proposes the Competing Redehintergründe Model, which explains the semantic ambiguity of können not as a consequence of changes in lexical meaning or modal force, but as the outcome of competition among contextually activated Redehintergründe. The proposed model extends the distinction between modal force and modal background and provides a more systematic framework for analyzing the semantic ambiguity of German modal verbs.

Keywords: können, semantic ambiguity, Redehintergrund, modality, modal interpretation.

1. Introduction

Modality is a fundamental semantic category that enables speakers to express evaluations of a proposition, such as possibility, necessity, ability, permission, or degrees of certainty, rather than merely describing events as factual (Portner, 2009). In German, modality is expressed through

a wide range of Modalitätsausdrücke ('modal expressions'), including modal verbs, semi-modal constructions, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, modal particles, modal predicates, and grammatical mood (Dudenredaktion, 2022). Among these expressions, the six canonical modal verbs—dürfen, können, mögen, müssen, sollen, and wollen—occupy a central position because they are used productively to express a broad range of modal relations in communication (Hentschel & Weydt, 2021). One of the most productive of these verbs is können, which is generally associated with the modal force of possibility (Abraham, 2020). However, the possibility expressed by können does not always rest on the same evaluative basis. Consider the following examples.

(1) *Peter kann schwimmen.*

'Peter can swim.'

(2) *Hier kann man kostenlos parken.*

'One can park here free of charge.'

Although both examples contain the modal verb *können*, they express different kinds of possibility. In (1), the possibility is grounded in the subject's internal ability, whereas in (2) it depends on external circumstances or institutional conditions that make the action possible. This contrast demonstrates that the interpretation of *können* cannot be explained solely by its lexical meaning, but results from the interaction between modal force and the evaluative basis activated by context (Kratzer, 1991; Zifonun et al., 1997). Consequently, the semantic ambiguity of *können* is not simply a matter of lexical polysemy, but reflects variation in the *Redehintergrund* underlying the interpretation of a proposition (Hacquard, 2011).

This phenomenon makes können one of the most intriguing German modal verbs from a semantic perspective. Depending on the context, it may express ability, circumstantial possibility, permission, or epistemic possibility (Abraham, 2020; Hentschel & Weydt, 2021). These diverse interpretations indicate that the relationship between grammatical form and modal meaning is not one-to-one, but instead emerges from the interaction between linguistic cues and contextual information.

Research on German modal verbs has developed from a wide range of perspectives, including descriptive grammar, formal semantics, corpus linguistics, and interactional pragmatics. Within formal semantics, Kratzer (1981, 1991, 2012), Portner (2009, 2018), and Hacquard (2011, 2018) argue that modal interpretation arises from the interaction between modal force and modal background, rather than from the lexical meaning of modal verbs alone. Within the German linguistic tradition, Abraham (2020, 2021), Hentschel and Weydt (2021), Dudenredaktion (2022), and Zifonun et al. (1997) describe können as a modal verb that gives rise to a range of interpretations, including ability, possibility, permission, and epistemic inference. More recent studies further demonstrate that the interpretation of modal verbs is shaped by linguistic and interactional context, including discourse organization, sequential position in conversation, and multimodal cues accompanying an utterance (Zinken & Mack, 2025).

Despite these advances, previous studies have generally focused on classifying the meanings or functions of *können*, while the mechanism that explains why one interpretation becomes more prominent than competing alternatives has not been systematically investigated. Although formal semantic research distinguishes between modal force and modal background, and German descriptive studies have documented the various functions of können, neither approach adequately explains how linguistic cues and discourse context interact to determine the evaluative basis of modal interpretation. Consequently, the semantic ambiguity of können continues to be treated primarily as a matter of lexical polysemy or modal classification rather than as a process of context-driven semantic disambiguation.

Against this background, the present study adopts the concept of *Redehintergrund* as a contextual realization of modal background to account for the interpretation of *können*. The

study assumes that *können* consistently realizes the modal force of possibility, whereas interpretive variation results from differences in the *Redehintergrund* activated by linguistic cues and discourse context. Accordingly, the analysis is concerned not with cataloguing the meanings of können, but with identifying the *Redehintergründe* underlying modal interpretation and explaining the mechanism through which one interpretation becomes dominant when multiple *Redehintergründe* are simultaneously available.

Based on this framework, the study aims to explain the mechanism underlying the semantic ambiguity of the German modal verb *können* through a *Redehintergrund*-based analysis. More specifically, it seeks to identify the *Redehintergründe* underlying the interpretation of *können*, examine the relationship between modal force and Redehintergrund, analyse the coexistence and competition of multiple *Redehintergründe*, and identify the linguistic and contextual cues that determine the contextually dominant interpretation.

The study makes a theoretical contribution to German modal semantics by demonstrating that interpretive variation in *können* does not result from changes in modal force, but from differences in the *Redehintergrund* underlying modal interpretation. On this basis, it introduces the Competing *Redehintergründe* Model, an analytical framework proposing that a single utterance may activate multiple *Redehintergründe* simultaneously, thereby licensing competing modal interpretations. The interpretation ultimately selected is determined not by the grammatical form of können itself, but by the interaction of linguistic cues—including subject type, the semantic class of the infinitive, voice, adverbials, mood, and clause structure—with the surrounding discourse context, which together promote one Redehintergrund over competing alternatives.

The proposed model extends the distinction between modal force and modal background in formal modal semantics by demonstrating that Redehintergründe are not necessarily activated individually but may coexist and compete within the same discourse context. It therefore provides not only a more systematic account of the semantic ambiguity of *können*, but also a conceptual framework that can be extended to the analysis of other German modal verbs, including dürfen, müssen, and sollen.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative corpus-based semantic analysis. The design was chosen because the objective of the study was not to measure the frequency of occurrences of the German modal verb können, but rather to explain how its modal interpretation emerges from the interaction between a stable modal force and the Redehintergrund activated by contextual information. The analysis was conducted descriptively and interpretatively using authentic language data, allowing each occurrence of können to be examined in relation to its linguistic evidence and discourse context. Accordingly, the analytical process was designed to account for the mechanism of modal meaning construction and the competition between different modal backgrounds that gives rise to semantic variation.

2.2 Data Source

The data consisted of all German-language texts contained in NADI Volume 28 (2021). Every occurrence of the modal verb können, including its inflected forms (kann, können, konnte, konnten, könnte, and könnten), was included in the analysis. Consequently, the study adopted a total corpus analysis, in which all relevant data were analyzed without sampling. This approach enabled a comprehensive examination of the semantic interpretation of können across different syntactic structures and discourse contexts.

2.3 Research Procedure

The study began by identifying every occurrence of the modal verb *können* and its inflected forms in the NADI Volume 28 (2021) corpus. Each occurrence was subsequently documented together with its linguistic and discourse context because modal interpretation cannot always be established from an isolated sentence but

frequently depends on information distributed across a broader discourse unit (Biber et al., 1998). The data were then classified according to their morphological characteristics, including inflectional form, tense (Tempus), and mood (Modus), as the basis for grammatical description (Dudenredaktion, 2022). The next stage focused on identifying a set of linguistic parameters, including modal force, *Redehintergrund*, subject type, semantic class of the infinitive, active or passive constructions, adverbials, conjunctions, and intersentential relations, in order to determine the modal basis underlying each interpretation (Kratzer, 1991). Based on these parameters, every occurrence of *können* was classified into one of five *Redehintergründe* categories, namely intrasubjective-circumstantial, extrasubjective-circumstantial, normative, teleological, and epistemic, according to the linguistic evidence provided by the discourse context (Portner, 2009). Cases that allowed more than one possible interpretation were subsequently examined to identify Competing *Redehintergründe* and to determine the dominant *Redehintergrund* on the basis of the available linguistic evidence and contextual information (Hacquard, 2011). Finally, the findings were synthesized to establish the relationship between linguistic indicators, discourse context, and modal interpretation, forming the basis for the development of the Competing *Redehintergründe* Model. The model demonstrates that the semantic ambiguity of *können* does not result from changes in modal force, but from the competition among different Redehintergründe activated by the context. Through this procedure, the relationship between linguistic form, discourse context, and modal interpretation could be explained systematically and consistently.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through the integration of grammatical analysis and contextual semantic analysis to explain the interpretative mechanism of the German modal verb *können* in the research corpus. The analysis began with the identification of the morphological forms of *können* according to tense and mood as the basis for grammatical description (Dudenredaktion, 2022). Subsequently, each occurrence was examined syntactically by identifying the subject type, semantic class of the infinitive, active or passive constructions, and lexical elements that potentially influenced modal interpretation (Hentschel & Weydt, 2021). Building on these findings, the semantic analysis determined the modal force (Kratzer, 1991; Dudenredaktion, 2016) and the *Redehintergrund* underlying the expressed possibility (Zifonun et al., 1997; Hundt, 2003). The data were then classified into five *Redehintergrund* categories-intrasubjective-circumstantial, extrasubjective-circumstantial, normative, teleological, and epistemic-according to the linguistic evidence and discourse context associated with each occurrence (Portner, 2009). The final stage focused on analyzing Competing *Redehintergründe* by examining whether modal interpretation was supported by a single *Redehintergrund* or by multiple competing modal backgrounds. The dominant *Redehintergrund* was subsequently identified on the basis of the available linguistic evidence and contextual information. This analytical procedure demonstrates that the semantic ambiguity of *können* does not arise from changes in its modal force, but from the interaction and competition among different *Redehintergründe* activated by discourse context, thereby allowing identical lexical forms to receive different modal interpretations (Hacquard, 2011).

3. Results

3.1 General Findings

The analysis of NADI Volume 28 (2021) shows that the modal verb *können* occurs in a variety of syntactic and discourse contexts, including the present forms *kann* and *können*, the preterite forms *konnte* and *konnten*, and the Konjunktiv II forms *könnte* and *könnten*. Although these forms differ in tense, subject number, and mood, they all express the same modal force, namely 'possibility'. Their interpretation, however, depends on the *Redehintergrund* provided by the context, which may be grounded in the subject's ability, external conditions, rules, goals, or the

speaker's knowledge. These findings suggest that the semantic ambiguity of *können* arises not from its morphological variation but from differences in *Redehintergrund*, allowing the same form to receive different modal interpretations.

3.2 *Redehintergrund*-Based Analysis of Modal Interpretation

3.2.1 Intrasubjektiv-Circumstantial Redehintergrund

An intrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund* arises when the possibility of performing an action depends on the subject's abilities, skills, capacities, or other internal conditions. Consider the following examples:

(3) *Künstler müssen nicht nur künstlerisch arbeiten können, sondern auch mit elektronischen Medien umgehen können.*

'Artists must not only be able to work creatively but also be able to use electronic media.'

In example (3), both instances of *können* complement *müssen* and denote competencies required of the subject *Künstler*. The possibility of performing the actions is grounded in the subject's internal knowledge and skills; accordingly, *können* receives an ability interpretation. In this example, können expresses a possibility modal force grounded in an intrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund*. The possibility of performing both actions depends on the internal capacities of the subject *Künstler*. Since both *künstlerisch arbeiten* and *mit elektronischen Medien umgehen* denote actions requiring professional knowledge and skills, können receives an ability interpretation.

The repetition of *arbeiten können* and *umgehen können* reinforces the ability interpretation, as both actions require the subject to possess professional and technical competencies. Consider the following interrogative sentence:

(4) *Können Sie einige Ihrer Befunde hier vorwegnehmen?*

'Could you briefly present some of your findings here?'

In example (4), *können* still semantically expresses ability. However, in an interrogative context addressed directly to the interviewee, its interpretation shifts toward a polite request. This illustrates the competition between the intrasubjective and the normative-interactional *Redehintergrund*.

3.2.2 Extrasubjektiv-Circumstantial *Redehintergrund*

An extrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund* arises when the possibility of a situation depends on external conditions, such as technology, infrastructure, or the social environment. Consider the following example.

(5) *Technisch ermöglicht das Internet jedem, der Zugang dazu hat, am öffentlichen Raum teilzuhaben.*
'Technically, the Internet enables everyone who has access to it to participate in the public sphere.'

Although this sentence does not contain *können*, it provides the contextual basis for interpreting *können* in the following example. Here, the Internet and access to technology constitute external conditions that enable participation in the public sphere.

(6) *Die Kurse, die in Vorsprung entstehen, können zeit- und ortsunabhängig absolviert werden.*

'The courses developed in Vorsprung can be completed regardless of time and location.'

In example (6), the possibility of completing the courses is not grounded in the participants' abilities but in an external enabling condition, namely the digital learning system, which allows the courses to be completed regardless of time and location.

In example (6), *können* realizes the modal force of possibility with an extrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund*. The possibility of completing the courses is grounded in an external enabling condition, namely the digital learning system, which makes participation independent of time and location. This interpretation is reinforced by the grammatical subject *die Kurse* and the passive construction *können* + *Participle II* + *werden*

(absolviert werden), which attributes the modal meaning to the situational conditions rather than to the participants' abilities. Accordingly, *können* expresses possibility arising from external circumstances rather than from the subject's internal capacity.

A similar pattern is found in the following example.

(7) *Sogar die Zahlungen für Waren und Dienstleistungen können schon von Finanzinstituten, sowohl Banken als auch Nichtbanken, bedient werden.*

'Even payments for goods and services can now be processed by financial institutions, including both banks and non-bank institutions.'

In example (7), *können* expresses the modal force of possibility with an extrasubjektiv-circumstantial *Redehintergrund*. The possibility of processing payments does not arise from the grammatical subject *die Zahlungen*, but from the availability of financial institutions and the digital payment infrastructure. This interpretation is reinforced by the passive construction *können* + *Partizip II* + *werden* (bedient werden), which foregrounds the realizability of the event rather than the ability of an agent.

An even clearer case is presented in the following example.

(8) *Um online schauen zu können, sind ein guter WLAN-Anschluss oder ein Internet-Paket für mobile Endgeräte erforderlich.*
'To watch online, a stable Wi-Fi connection or a mobile internet package is required.'

Example (8) explicitly identifies the conditions that license the modal interpretation, namely *ein guter WLAN-Anschluss* and *ein Internet-Paket für mobile Endgeräte*. Without these external resources, the action online schauen cannot be realized. Accordingly, *können* expresses circumstantial possibility, with the Redehintergrund grounded in external enabling conditions rather than in the subject's ability.

3.2.3 Normative *Redehintergrund*

Normative *Redehintergrund* arises when modal interpretation is grounded in rules, rights, permissions, institutional policies, or authority. In this context, *können* does not express the subject's ability but possibility licensed by the applicable normative framework. Accordingly, its *Redehintergrund* is normative rather than factual or circumstantial.

This pattern is illustrated by the following example.

(9) *Studierende haben das Recht, dass sie drei Semester lang außerhalb ihres Studiengangs studieren können.*
'Students have the right to study outside their degree program for three semesters.'

In example (9), *können* realizes the modal force of possibility with a normative *Redehintergrund*. Its interpretation is not grounded in the students' abilities but in the rights granted by higher education policy. The phrase das Recht explicitly indicates that this possibility is licensed by an institutional rule. Accordingly, *können* is more appropriately paraphrased as *berechtigt sein* ('to be entitled') or *die Erlaubnis haben* ('to have permission') than as *fähig sein* ('to be able'), indicating that the modal meaning is grounded in normative legitimacy.

The same normative pattern is found in the following example.

(10) *Damit Studierende der UPI und der UNJ an einem Austauschprogramm teilnehmen können, haben sich die beiden Studiengänge auf eine Kooperationsvereinbarung verständigt.*
'To enable students from UPI and UNJ to participate in an exchange program, the two study programs have concluded a cooperation agreement.'

Unlike example (9), example (10) exhibits an interaction between a normative and an extrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund*. The *Kooperationsvereinbarung* not only creates the external conditions that enable students to participate in the exchange program but also serves as the institutional basis that legitimizes their participation. Consequently, the normative interpretation is primary, whereas the

extrasubjective-circumstantial reading functions as a supporting interpretation. In contrast to example (9), where legitimacy is explicitly marked by the phrase *das Recht*, institutional legitimacy in example (10) is established through the Kooperationsvereinbarung. Although both examples realize the modal force of possibility, the interpretation is grounded not in the subject's ability but in institutional norms that confer rights or permission. These findings demonstrate that a single occurrence of können may involve more than one modal background, with the discourse context determining which interpretation is most salient.

3.2.4 Teleological *Redehintergrund*

A teleological *Redehintergrund* arises when the possibility of an action is evaluated in terms of its function as a means of achieving a particular goal. In such cases, können expresses not merely that an action is possible but that it contributes to the realization of an intended outcome. Accordingly, a teleological interpretation is typically signaled by purposive constructions such as *um … zu, damit,* or by contexts that establish a clear means–end relation.

Consider the following example.

(11) *So können sie neben fachspezifischem Wissen auch digitale und interkulturelle Kompetenzen erwerben.*
'In this way, they can acquire digital and intercultural competences in addition to subject-specific knowledge.'

In example (11), *können* realizes the modal force of possibility with a teleological *Redehintergrund*. The preceding sentence explains that the students work virtually in international teams, while the adverb so links this activity to the goal of acquiring digital and intercultural competences. Accordingly, können expresses a possibility understood as the intended outcome of this learning strategy. Although the virtual project also provides the external conditions that make the activity feasible, the means–end relation is more salient, making the teleological interpretation primary and the extrasubjective-circumstantial reading secondary.

The following example exhibits the same pattern.

(12) *Damit mehr gemeinsame Programme durchgeführt werden können, muss die Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Studiengängen verbessert werden.*
'To enable more joint programmes to be carried out, cooperation between the study programmes must be strengthened.'

In example (12), *können* likewise realizes the modal force of possibility with a teleological *Redehintergrund*. The conjunction *damit* explicitly establishes a teleological relation in which stronger cooperation between the study programmes functions as the means to achieving the goal of implementing more joint programmes. Consequently, *können* expresses possibility oriented toward goal attainment. At the same time, the passive construction durchgeführt werden können also permits an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading because the implementation of the programmes depends on the availability of institutional cooperation. Nevertheless, the teleological relation remains more prominent, making the teleological interpretation the preferred reading.

A similar pattern is found in the following example.

(13) *Damit mehr Studierende des MBKM-Programms Praktikumsplätze vermittelt werden können, sind größere Anstrengungen nötig, Partner zu finden.*
'To enable more students in the MBKM programme to obtain internship placements, greater efforts are needed to find partner institutions.'

Example (13) follows the same pattern. The clause introduced by damit explicitly links the effort to find partner institutions with the goal of providing more internship placements, so that können realizes the modal force of possibility with a teleological modal background. At the same time, the availability of partner institutions also supports an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading because it constitutes a prerequisite for placing students. However, the context presents this prerequisite as a means to achieving the intended outcome, making the teleological

interpretation more salient. Taken together, these examples show that a teleological *Redehintergrund* arises when an action is construed as a means of achieving a specific goal. Although an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading may also be available, the discourse context determines which *Redehintergrund* becomes the most salient.

3.2.5 Epistemic *Redehintergrund*

An epistemic modal background arises when können expresses the likelihood of a proposition on the basis of the speaker's knowledge, evidence, observations, or inference. In such cases, können does not denote the subject's ability but the speaker's assessment of whether a particular state of affairs is likely to obtain.

Consider the following example.

(14) *Bestätigungsverzerrungen können zur Ablehnung objektiver Tatsachen führen.*
'Confirmation bias can lead to the rejection of objective facts.'

In example (14), *können* realizes the modal force of possibility with an epistemic *Redehintergrund*. The abstract subject *Bestätigungsverzerrungen* together with the causal relation established by the context indicates that *können* expresses an evaluation of the likelihood that confirmation bias may lead to the rejection of objective facts rather than the subject's ability. Although the same causal relation also permits an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading because it reflects real-world conditions, the context primarily supports an epistemic interpretation.

The following example exhibits the same pattern.

(15) *Soziale Medien können im schlimmsten Fall zu einem Radikalisierungsfeld werden.*
'In the worst case, social media can become a breeding ground for radicalization.'

In example (15), *können* likewise realizes the modal force of possibility with an epistemic *Redehintergrund*. The phrase im schlimmsten Fall explicitly marks the speaker's evaluation of a hypothetical scenario, indicating that *können* expresses a possibility inferred from the preceding discussion of social media algorithms and the formation of echo chambers rather than the subject's ability. Consequently, the epistemic reading is more salient than the extrasubjective-circumstantial one.

A similar pattern appears in the following example.

(16) *Die Auswirkungen können eine abschreckende Wirkung haben.*
'The consequences can have a deterrent effect.'

In example (16), *können* realizes the modal force of possibility with an epistemic *Redehintergrund*. The causal context, the abstract subject die Auswirkungen, and the predicate eine abschreckende Wirkung haben indicate that können expresses an evaluation of a projected consequence rather than an ability. Accordingly, the modal interpretation is grounded in the speaker's causal inference. This reading becomes even more explicit in the following example through the use of Konjunktiv II.

(17) *Ein Grund dafür könnte sein, dass Verträge und klare Regeln zu unflexibel sind.*
'One reason for this might be that contracts and clear rules are too inflexible.'

In example (17), *könnte* continues to realize the modal force of possibility, but the use of *Konjunktiv II* signals a lower degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition. The proposed cause is therefore presented as a hypothesis rather than an established fact, making *könnte* an explicit marker of tentative epistemic evaluation.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that an epistemic modal background arises when können is used to evaluate the likelihood of a proposition rather than to express ability or permission. Although some examples also permit an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading through causal relations, the discourse context consistently selects the epistemic modal background as the most salient interpretation. These findings further support the central claim of this study that the interpretive variation of können does not result from changes in modal

force. Instead, it reflects competition between different modal backgrounds, whose relative prominence is determined by contextual cues.

3.3 Competing *Redehintergründe* in Modal Interpretation

Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa tidak semua data dapat ditempatkan secara mutlak ke dalam satu kategori. Beberapa penggunaan können menyediakan lebih dari satu dasar interpretasi. Kompetisi tersebut terutama terjadi antara kategori yang berdekatan secara konseptual.

3.3.1 Intrasubjective–Normative Competition

(18) *Können Sie einige Ihrer Befunde hier vorwegnehmen?*

Could you briefly present some of your findings here?

The utterance licenses both an intrasubjective and a normative-interactional reading. The former derives from the addressee's ability to present the findings, whereas the latter construes the utterance as a polite request. Within the interview context, the normative-interactional reading becomes the preferred interpretation, since the interrogative form, the formal second-person pronoun Sie, and the surrounding question–answer exchange shift the focus from ability to request.

3.3.2 Extrasubjective–Teleological Competition

(19) *Damit mehr gemeinsame Programme durchgeführt werden können, muss die Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Studiengängen verbessert werden.*

'To enable more joint programmes to be carried out, cooperation between the study programmes must be strengthened.

The data license both an extrasubjective-circumstantial and a teleological reading. Increased cooperation establishes the external conditions that make joint programmes feasible, whereas the conjunction damit explicitly marks the goal-directed relation. As a result, the teleological *Redehintergrund* emerges as the dominant interpretation, while the extrasubjective-circumstantial reading functions as the enabling condition for achieving that goal.

3.3.3 Extrasubjective–Epistemic Competition

(20) *Soziale Medien können im schlimmsten Fall zu einem Radikalisierungsfeld werden.*

'In the worst case, social media can become a breeding ground for radicalization.

The data license both an extrasubjective-circumstantial and an epistemic reading. The surrounding discourse on social media algorithms, filter bubbles, and one-sided information spirals supports the former by establishing the external conditions under which radicalization may occur. The phrase im schlimmsten Fall, however, explicitly frames the proposition as a hypothetical scenario, thereby activating an epistemic *Redehintergrund*. As a result, the epistemic reading emerges as the dominant interpretation because the utterance evaluates the likelihood of the proposition rather than the enabling conditions of the event.

3.3.4 Normative–Circumstantial Competition

(21) *Die Studierenden können drei Semester lang außerhalb ihres Studiengangs studieren.*

'Students may study outside their degree programme for three semesters.'

The data license both a normative and an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading. The former is grounded in students' right to study outside their degree programme under the MBKM policy, whereas the latter derives from the availability of programmes, courses, and partner institutions as the external conditions enabling such study. The phrase das Recht explicitly activates a normative *Redehintergrund*, thereby making it the dominant interpretation; in its absence, the utterance is more naturally construed in extrasubjective-circumstantial terms.

3.4 Contextual Parameters Governing the Interpretation of *können*

3.4.1 Subject Type

Subject type provides an initial cue for modal interpretation but is not decisive on its own. Human subjects generally favor an ability reading, particularly when the infinitive denotes an activity requiring skill or competence. By contrast, abstract subjects such as *Bestätigungsverzerrungen*, *Digitalisierung, Auswirkungen,* and *soziale Medien* tend to license extrasubjective-circumstantial or epistemic readings. Nevertheless, human subjects do not invariably yield an ability interpretation. In constructions governed by rules, rights, or institutional authority, human subjects typically receive a normative interpretation.

3.4.2 Semantic Type of the Infinitive

The semantic class of the infinitive also contributes to modal interpretation. Predicates denoting skills or competences, such as *arbeiten, umgehen,* and *unterscheiden,* generally favor an ability reading. By contrast, predicates expressing change of state (e.g., *werden*), causal relations (e.g., *führen zu*), or passive events (e.g., *durchgeführt werden*) more readily license extrasubjective-circumstantial or epistemic interpretations.

3.4.3 Voice and Clause Structure

Voice constitutes an important indicator of modal interpretation. In passive constructions such as *können* absolviert *werden, können durchgeführt werden,* and *können bedient werden,* the modal meaning is rarely associated with the grammatical subject's ability. Instead, these constructions highlight the feasibility of an event under external conditions.

3.4.4 Adverbials and Discourse Markers

Adverbials and discourse markers further constrain modal interpretation. The expression *im schlimmsten Fall* introduces an epistemic scenario, whereas technisch foregrounds extrasubjective-circumstantial conditions. The adverb *so* may indicate a means–end relation, while *damit* and *um … zu* activate a teleological *Redehintergrund*. Likewise, schon may signal a change of circumstances that makes an action possible.

3.4.5 Mood and Tense

The preterite forms *konnte/konnten* do not alter the modal force but simply locate the possibility in the past. By contrast, *könnte/könnten* in the *Konjunktiv II* generally express a hypothetical or tentative possibility. In *Ein Grund dafür könnte sein …,* the form signals a reduced degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition. In other contexts, however, *könnte/könnten* may also function as markers of politeness or counterfactuality. Their interpretation therefore remains context-dependent.

3.5 Summary of the Analysis

The analysis of the data from NADI 28/2021 yields four principal findings. First, können consistently realizes the modal force of possibility, while its interpretation depends on the modal background activated by the context. Second, the ability reading represents only one possible realization; extrasubjective-circumstantial, teleological, normative, and epistemic readings occur more frequently in the corpus. Third, specific grammatical and lexical cues systematically guide interpretation: passive constructions favor extrasubjective-circumstantial readings; Konjunktiv II and expressions such as im schlimmsten Fall promote epistemic readings; damit and um … zu activate teleological readings; and references to rights, policies, agreements, or institutional authority trigger normative readings. Fourth, ambiguity arises when multiple modal backgrounds are simultaneously available, resulting in competition between alternative interpretations. These findings demonstrate that the interpretation of können is determined not by its grammatical form alone but by the interaction of linguistic evidence, discourse context, and the modal background that is most strongly supported in context.

4. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study on the semantic ambiguity of the German modal

verb können, taking Redehintergrund as the primary basis for modal interpretation. Whereas Chapter 3 identified and classified the empirical data, the present discussion explains how the core meaning of können relates to its interpretive variation, the competition between alternative Redehintergründe, and the contribution of linguistic and contextual cues to modal disambiguation.

The analysis demonstrates that the interpretive variation of können should not be regarded as arbitrary shifts in its lexical meaning. Across all examples, können consistently realizes the modal force of Möglichkeit, while variation arises from differences in the Redehintergrund that serves as the basis for evaluating possibility. Depending on the context, this evaluative basis may be grounded in the subject's internal capacities, external circumstances, institutional rules or permissions, goal-directed reasoning, or the speaker's knowledge and inferential reasoning. Consequently, the semantic ambiguity of können lies not in the modal force itself but in the uncertainty over which Redehintergrund governs the modal evaluation in a given context.

4.1 Semantic Ambiguity as Variation in Redehintergrund

The findings show that the semantic ambiguity of *können* does not necessarily arise from distinct lexical meanings. Instead, interpretive variation reflects a relatively stable modal force, namely possibility, whose realization depends on different modal backgrounds. This is illustrated by the following three examples:

(22) *Künstler müssen nicht nur künstlerisch arbeiten können, sondern auch mit elektronischen Medien umgehen können.*

'Artists must not only be able to work creatively, but also be able to handle electronic media.'.

(23) *Die Kurse können zeit- und ortsunabhängig absolviert werden.*

'The courses can be completed regardless of time and place.'

(24) *Ein Grund dafür könnte sein, dass Verträge und klare Regeln zu unflexibel sind.*

'One possible explanation is that contracts and clear rules are too inflexible.'

In example (22), possibility is interpreted in terms of the subject's internal ability: artists can work creatively and use electronic media if they possess the necessary skills. In the second example, possibility is grounded in an external enabling condition, namely a digital learning system that allows courses to be completed regardless of time and location. In the third example, possibility does not concern the ability to perform an action but rather the speaker's assessment of the plausibility of a proposition.

All three examples use the modal verb können, but each expresses a different basis of possibility. In the first example, possibility is based on the subject's ability. In the second, it depends on external conditions that make an action possible. In the third, it reflects the speaker's judgment about the truth of a proposition based on available knowledge or inference. These findings show that the interpretation of *können* cannot be determined by its lexical meaning alone. The modal verb simply expresses the general meaning of possibility, while the specific interpretation is determined by the context, which activates a particular *Redehintergrund*. Therefore, semantic ambiguity in this study does not mean that every use of können is inherently ambiguous. In most cases, the context clearly points to one dominant *Redehintergrund*. Ambiguity arises only when the context does not provide enough information or when more than one Redehintergrund can account for the same proposition.

4.2 Stability of Modal Force and Variability of Redehintergrund

The principal finding of this study is that *können* consistently realizes the modal force of possibility, whereas its interpretation is determined by the *Redehintergrund* activated in context. This distinction provides a more economical account than approaches that treat each use of *können* as a separate lexical meaning, since the observed variation can be explained without assuming changes in modal force.

What varies across interpretations is therefore not the modal force itself but the basis on which possibility is evaluated. Under the intrasubjective *Redehintergrund*, possibility is grounded in the subject's abilities or internal capacities. The extrasubjective *Redehintergrund* locates its source in external conditions, such as the environment, technology, facilities, or social circumstances. The normative *Redehintergrund* evaluates possibility with reference to rules, rights, permissions, or institutional authority, whereas the teleological *Redehintergrund* relates it to the means required to achieve a particular goal. By contrast, the epistemic *Redehintergrund* is based on the speaker's knowledge, evidence, or inference concerning the likelihood of a proposition. Thus, the source of evaluation changes, whereas the modal force remains constant.

Although these *Redehintergründe* are analytically distinguishable, the data show that they do not constitute rigid categories. Instead, they form a continuum in which neighboring *Redehintergründe* frequently overlap, allowing more than one interpretation to be available in a given context. This overlap is particularly evident between the extrasubjective and teleological Redehintergründe, since goal-directed actions generally presuppose enabling external conditions. By contrast, competition between the intrasubjective and epistemic Redehintergründe is comparatively rare because they rely on fundamentally different evaluative bases. These findings therefore support the view that the interpretive variation of können results from competition between alternative Redehintergründe rather than from changes in modal force.

4.3 Competition among Redehintergründe

The principal contribution of this study is the finding that the interpretation of *können* is not invariably grounded in a single *Redehintergrund*, but frequently arises from competition between multiple *Redehintergründe* available within the same context. Such competition does not place all interpretations on an equal footing. Instead, linguistic cues, syntactic structure, text genre, communicative purpose, and discourse context jointly determine which *Redehintergrund* emerges as the dominant interpretation, while the others function as supporting alternatives.

4.3.1 Intrasubjective and Normative-Interactional Competition

The following interrogative construction illustrates the competition between an intrasubjective and a normative-interactional *Redehintergrund*.

(25) *<u>Können</u> Sie einige Ihrer Befunde hier vorwegnehmen?*

'Could you give us a preview of some of your findings?'

Compositionally, the utterance licenses an intrasubjective reading by literally questioning the addressee's ability to present the research findings. In the interview context, however, its communicative function is not to evaluate that ability but to formulate a polite request for information. Consequently, the ability-based reading provides only the semantic basis for interpretation, while the normative-interactional *Redehintergrund* becomes the preferred interpretation. This case demonstrates that the disambiguation of *können* cannot be accounted for at the propositional level alone, but also requires consideration of the utterance's illocutionary force, which guides the selection of the contextually dominant *Redehintergrund*.

4.3.2 Circumstantial and Teleological Competition

The competition between the extrasubjective-circumstantial and teleological *Redehintergründe* is particularly productive, as illustrated by the following example.

(26) *Damit mehr gemeinsame Programme durchgeführt werden <u>können</u>, muss die Zusammenarbeit zwischen den Studiengängen verbessert werden.*
'To enable more joint programmes to be carried out, cooperation between the degree programmes must be strengthened.'

The teleological reading is explicitly licensed by the conjunction damit, which encodes a goal-

oriented relation. In this interpretation, implementing more joint programmes constitutes the intended goal, whereas strengthening cooperation between the degree programmes functions as the means of achieving it. At the same time, the same relation also supports an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading, since improved cooperation establishes the external conditions that make the implementation of joint programmes possible. In other words, the institutional goal can only be achieved if the necessary enabling conditions are in place. The interaction between the two Redehintergründe may be represented as follows:

strengthened cooperation
→ creates enabling conditions
→ implementation of joint programmes
→ achievement of the institutional goal

The teleological *Redehintergrund* nevertheless emerges as the dominant interpretation because the goal relation is grammatically encoded by damit. At the same time, the teleological interpretation presupposes the extrasubjective-circumstantial conditions on which the intended goal depends. This case demonstrates that co-occurrence between *Redehintergründe* is not always mutually exclusive. Rather, one *Redehintergrund* may incorporate or build upon another, jointly contributing to the interpretation of the same utterance.

4.3.3 Circumstantial and Epistemic Competition

The following example exhibits the competition of extrasubjective-circumstantial and epistemic *Redehintergründe*, giving rise to competition between the two interpretations.

(27) *Soziale Medien <u>können</u> im schlimmsten Fall zu einem Radikalisierungsfeld werden.*

'In the worst case, social media may become a breeding ground for radicalization.'

From an extrasubjective-circumstantial perspective, the preceding discourse establishes the external conditions under which social media may develop into a space for radicalization through personalized algorithms, filter bubbles, echo chambers, and one-sided information spirals. At the same time, the phrase *im schlimmsten Fall* activates an epistemic *Redehintergrund* by presenting the proposition as a plausible scenario rather than attributing any ability to social media itself. Accordingly, the epistemic reading is more salient because *können* takes scope over the proposition as a whole, while the extrasubjective-circumstantial reading provides the inferential basis for this evaluation. This example demonstrates that epistemic judgments need not arise independently but may be grounded in extrasubjective-circumstantial conditions established in the discourse.

4.3.4 Normative and Circumstantial Competition

The co-occurrence between the normative and extrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergründe* is illustrated by the following example from the context of higher education policy.

(28) *Studierende <u>können</u> drei Semester lang außerhalb ihres Studiengangs studieren.*

'Students are allowed to study outside their degree programme for three semesters.'

The possibility for students to study outside their degree programme licenses both a normative and an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading. The normative reading is grounded in the rights conferred by higher education policy, explicitly signaled in the broader discourse by the phrase das Recht, thereby making the meaning 'be entitled to' or 'be allowed to' the dominant interpretation. By contrast, the extrasubjective-circumstantial reading depends on the availability of courses, partner institutions, cooperation agreements, and credit-recognition mechanisms as the external conditions required for participation in the programme. This distinction highlights the difference between normative possibility, which derives from institutional legitimacy, and practical possibility, which depends on the availability of enabling conditions. Although these two *Redehintergründe* may coexist, they are not identical: an action may be institutionally authorized without being practically feasible, or conversely, it may be

practically feasible without being institutionally permitted.

4.4 The Role of Linguistic Indicators in Disambiguation

The findings indicate that no single linguistic cue is sufficient to determine the interpretation of *können*. Rather, disambiguation results from the interaction of multiple linguistic factors, including subject type, the semantic class of the infinitive, voice, adverbials, mood, and clause structure.

4.4.1 Subject Type

Subject type serves as an initial cue in the disambiguation of *können*, but it is not sufficient on its own to determine interpretation. Human subjects generally favor an intrasubjective *Redehintergrund* when the predicate denotes an action requiring physical, cognitive, or professional ability, as illustrated by *Künstler … arbeiten können* and *mit elektronischen Medien umgehen können*. However, human subjects may also license a normative reading when the discourse relates the action to rights or institutional policy, as in the example of students studying outside their degree programme. By contrast, abstract or inanimate subjects, such as *soziale Medien, Digitalisierung, Bestätigungsverzerrungen,* and *Auswirkungen,* tend to favor an extrasubjective-circumstantial or epistemic *Redehintergrund*. Subject type therefore functions only as an initial diagnostic cue and must be interpreted in conjunction with predicate semantics and discourse context.

4.4.2 Semantic Class of the Infinitive

The semantic class of the infinitive plays a crucial role in the disambiguation of *können*. Predicates denoting agentive actions, such as *arbeiten, umgehen, unterscheiden,* and *schützen*, tend to activate an intrasubjective *Redehintergrund* because they involve the agent's physical, cognitive, or professional abilities. By contrast, predicates expressing changes of state or causal relations, such as *werden, führen zu,* and *eine Wirkung haben,* favor an extrasubjective-circumstantial or epistemic *Redehintergrund*, as they characterize the possibility of an event or state rather than an agent's capacity, as illustrated by the following examples.

(29) *Bestätigungsverzerrungen können zur Ablehnung objektiver Tatsachen führen.*

'Confirmation bias can lead to the rejection of objective facts.'

(30) *Die Auswirkungen können eine abschreckende Wirkung haben.*

'The consequences can have a deterrent effect.'

In both examples, können does not attribute ability to the subject. Instead, it expresses the possibility that a particular consequence may arise on the basis of the causal relation established in the discourse.

4.4.3 Passive Constructions

Passive constructions tend to activate an extrasubjective-circumstantial *Redehintergrund* because forms such as *können absolviert werden, können durchgeführt werden,* and *können bedient werden* place the patient in subject position. As a result, the modal possibility is associated not with the agent's ability, but with the external conditions that enable the event to take place.

(31) *Die Kurse können zeit- und ortsunabhängig absolviert werden.*

'The courses can be completed independently of time and place.'

In this example, the possibility of completing the courses depends on the digital learning environment, temporal and spatial flexibility, and participants' access to the programme. Nevertheless, passive constructions do not automatically determine an extrasubjective-circumstantial Redehintergrund. In appropriate contexts, the same construction may also activate a normative Redehintergrund when grounded in rules or institutional policies, or a teleological Redehintergrund when it expresses a goal. Passive constructions therefore function as diagnostic cues that constrain the range of possible interpretations without determining the Redehintergrund categorically.

4.4.4 Adverbials and Connectives

Adverbials and connectives play a central role in the disambiguation of *können* because they often activate particular *Redehintergründe*. The phrase im schlimmsten Fall frames the proposition as a potential scenario and thereby favors an epistemic *Redehintergrund*. By contrast, adverbials such as technisch and enabling expressions such as *mit einem guten WLAN-Anschluss* highlight external circumstances, thus supporting an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading. Similarly, the connectives *damit* and *um … zu* encode means–end relations and therefore favor a teleological *Redehintergrund*.

(32) *So <u>können</u> sie neben fachspezifischem Wissen auch digitale und interkulturelle Kompetenzen erwerben.*

'In this way, they can acquire digital and intercultural competences in addition to subject-specific knowledge.'

In this example, *so* refers to the preceding strategy of working virtually in international teams and presents it as the means by which digital and intercultural competences are acquired. The teleological interpretation therefore arises not from können itself, but from the discourse relation linking the means to the intended outcome. This finding further demonstrates that adverbials and connectives function as diagnostic cues that guide the selection of the contextually appropriate Redehintergrund.

4.4.5 Mood and Epistemic Commitment

The Konjunktiv II forms könnte and könnten are frequently associated with hypotheticality and a reduced degree of epistemic commitment, as illustrated in the following example.

(33) *Ein Grund dafür könnte sein, dass Verträge und klare Regeln zu unflexibel sind.*

'One possible reason is that contracts and clear rules are too inflexible.'

In this example, the speaker does not present the proposed cause as an established fact, but rather as a plausible hypothesis. The form könnte signals tentativeness and enables the speaker to maintain epistemic distance from the truth of the proposition. However, *Konjunktiv II* is not inherently epistemic. In other contexts, it may express politeness, conditional possibility, or counterfactuality. Consequently, its interpretation cannot be derived from verbal mood alone, but must be established in relation to the sentence structure, communicative function, and the *Redehintergrund* activated by the discourse context.

4.5 The Role of Discourse Context

The analysis demonstrates that the interpretation of *können* cannot always be resolved on the basis of a single sentence, since the *Redehintergrund* is often constructed cumulatively across the discourse. In the examples concerning social media and radicalization as well as the MBKM policy, the intended interpretation emerges only when the preceding discourse is taken into account, as it provides the conditions, goals, norms, or evidence that constitute the basis for modal evaluation. This finding further demonstrates that a *Redehintergrund* need not be triggered by a single lexical item, but may instead arise from information distributed across a larger discourse unit. Consequently, analyses based on isolated sentences risk misclassifying the interpretation of können; contextual disambiguation therefore requires consideration of at least the surrounding paragraph or discourse segment that establishes the relevant interpretive conditions.

4.6 A Continuum Rather than Rigid Modal Categories

The findings of this study suggest that the five *Redehintergründe* should not be conceived as discrete and mutually exclusive categories, but rather as points along a continuum that reflects a gradual shift in the basis of modal evaluation. This continuum extends from the subject's internal ability (intrasubjective), through the external conditions that make an event possible (extrasubjective-circumstantial), to possibility grounded in social rules or institutional authority (normative), then to possibility construed as a means of achieving a goal (teleological), and finally to the evaluation of the likelihood that a proposition is true (epistemic). Although each *Redehintergrund* retains its own defining

characteristics, the categories are conceptually interconnected rather than sharply separated.

This graded relationship explains why interpretive competition is more likely to occur between adjacent *Redehintergründe* than between conceptually distant ones. Both the intrasubjective and the extrasubjective-circumstantial readings are grounded in factual situations, but they differ in the source of possibility: the former locates it in the subject's internal capacity, whereas the latter attributes it to external circumstances. The normative *Redehintergrund* remains connected to external conditions, yet the possibility it expresses derives from rights, obligations, or institutional authority rather than from factual circumstances alone. The teleological *Redehintergrund* further integrates these enabling conditions into a goal-oriented perspective, while the epistemic Redehintergrund shifts the focus from the possibility of an event or action to the likelihood that a proposition is true. This conceptual proximity explains why competition between extrasubjective-circumstantial and teleological readings, as well as between extrasubjective-circumstantial and epistemic readings, is considerably more productive than direct competition between intrasubjective and epistemic readings.

Despite forming a continuum, each *Redehintergrund* remains distinguishable according to the basis on which possibility is evaluated. An intrasubjective reading attributes possibility to the subject's internal ability, whereas an extrasubjective-circumstantial reading derives it from external conditions that enable an event or action. A normative reading evaluates possibility in terms of permission, obligation, or institutional legitimacy, while a teleological reading construes it as a means of achieving a particular goal. By contrast, an epistemic reading assesses the likelihood of a proposition on the basis of available knowledge or evidence. These diagnostic criteria do not necessarily yield a single interpretation, since multiple *Redehintergründe* may be simultaneously available within the same context. Rather, they provide an analytical framework for identifying the dominant Redehintergrund while accounting for the availability of alternative interpretations in context.

4.7 A Continuum Rather than Rigid Modal Categories

The analysis indicates that the five *Redehintergrund* categories are better understood as points on a continuum than as discrete modal classes. Rather than forming mutually exclusive categories, they represent progressively different sources of modal interpretation, ranging from intrasubjective, where possibility depends on the subject's internal capacities, through extrasubjective, normative, and teleological, to epistemic, where the evaluation concerns the likelihood of a proposition. This progression reflects a gradual shift in the locus of modality from the subject's abilities to the speaker's propositional evaluation.

Viewing the categories as a continuum also explains the distribution of ambiguity observed in the corpus. Competing interpretations arise most frequently between adjacent modal backgrounds, particularly between extrasubjective and teleological, and between extrasubjective and epistemic, whereas direct competition between intrasubjective and epistemic is comparatively rare. Although neighboring categories overlap, each retains a distinct diagnostic profile: the intrasubjective background is grounded in the subject's abilities, the extrasubjective background in external circumstances, the normative background in institutional rules or authority, the teleological background in means–end relations, and the epistemic background in the evaluation of propositional likelihood.

These findings have a broader theoretical implication. They suggest that the ambiguity of können should not be analyzed as lexical polysemy or as a change in modal force. Instead, können consistently realizes the modal force of Möglichkeit, while its interpretation emerges from competition between alternative modal backgrounds activated by linguistic and discourse context. The continuum model therefore provides a principled account of why a single occurrence of können may license multiple

readings and why one interpretation ultimately becomes dominant in context.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the data are drawn exclusively from a single issue of NADI devoted to digitalization and therefore may not represent the full range of können across other genres, such as everyday conversation, literary texts, legal discourse, or academic writing. Second, because the corpus consists of a bilingual Indonesian–German publication, some examples are translations whose use of können may reflect the influence of the source language or translators' choices. Third, the identification of Redehintergründe necessarily depends on contextual interpretation, and the boundaries between extrasubjective-circumstantial, teleological, and epistemic readings are not always clear-cut. Further research is therefore needed to assess the reliability of the proposed classification. In addition, the present study adopts a qualitative approach and does not examine the frequency distribution of the identified categories. Nor does it systematically investigate the interaction of können with negation, tense, or other modal verbs, although these factors may substantially influence modal interpretation and therefore deserve further investigation.

4.9 Directions for Further Research

Future research should broaden the empirical scope by comparing the use of können across a wider range of genres, including conversation, news discourse, academic writing, legal texts, and digital communication, in order to identify genre-specific distributions of Redehintergründe. Comparative analyses involving other German modal verbs, such as dürfen, müssen, and sollen, would also help determine whether the proposed Redehintergründe constitute general properties of the German modal system or are specific to können. Further validation may be achieved through experimental studies that manipulate contextual variables to examine how speakers resolve modal ambiguity in real time, while large-scale corpus analyses could clarify the interaction between linguistic cues—such as subject type, the semantic class of the infinitive, voice, adverbials, and discourse context—and thereby contribute to a more comprehensive and empirically validated model of semantic disambiguation in German modal verbs.

4.10 Summary of the Discussion

The discussion demonstrates that the semantic ambiguity of können does not arise from variation in modal force, but from differences in the *Redehintergrund* underlying modal interpretation. Across all data, *können* consistently expresses the modal force of possibility, while interpretive variation results from different *Redehintergründe* underlying the possibility of an action, event, or proposition. Five principal *Redehintergründe* were identified: intrasubjective-circumstantial, extrasubjective-circumstantial, normative, teleological, and epistemic. In many cases, two or more *Redehintergründe* remain compatible with the same context, thereby licensing multiple interpretations. Under such circumstances, the preferred interpretation emerges from the interaction of linguistic cues—including subject type, the semantic class of the infinitive, passive constructions, adverbials, mood, clause structure—and the surrounding discourse context.

The relationship can be summarized as follows:

können + proposition + contextually activated *Redehintergrund* → modal interpretation

This model shows that a single grammatical form of können may give rise to readings such as ability, circumstantial possibility, permission, or epistemic possibility, not because of changes in its lexical meaning, but because different Redehintergründe are activated by the linguistic and discourse context.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that the semantic ambiguity of the German modal verb können does not stem from variation in modal force, but from differences in the Redehintergrund underlying its modal interpretation. Throughout the corpus, können consistently realizes the modal force of Möglichkeit, whereas interpretive variation is determined by the Redehintergrund on which the

possibility of an action, event, or proposition is evaluated. The analysis identified five principal Redehintergründe: intrasubjective-circumstantial, extrasubjective-circumstantial, normative, teleological, and epistemic. These categories generate distinct interpretations without altering the modal force of können. Moreover, a single occurrence of können may license multiple interpretations when two or more Redehintergründe are simultaneously available within the same context. In such cases, the preferred interpretation is determined by the interaction of linguistic cues, situational context, and shared background knowledge, which together promote one Redehintergrund over competing alternatives. The semantic ambiguity of können should therefore be understood as a systematic phenomenon arising from competition between Redehintergründe rather than from lexical polysemy.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of an analytical framework that clearly distinguishes modal force from Redehintergrund. This framework demonstrates that interpretive variation in können is attributable not to changes in modal force, but to differences in the Redehintergrund underlying modal interpretation. On this basis, the study proposes a Competing Redehintergründe Model, according to which a single utterance may license multiple modal interpretations, while contextual factors determine which Redehintergrund ultimately becomes dominant.

The study is limited to data drawn from NADI Volume 28 (2021) and therefore does not capture the full range of können in contemporary German. Future research should test the proposed Competing Redehintergründe Model on larger and more diverse corpora—including conversational data, news discourse, academic writing, legal texts, and literary works—and combine qualitative with quantitative approaches to evaluate both the distribution and the reliability of Redehintergrund classification. Such research will help establish the proposed model as a more general analytical framework for investigating the semantic ambiguity of German modal verb

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- State no conflicts of interest