Possibility and Ability in Kisubi

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Introduction (1/6)

It is common to find a distinction between modal **forces** (in Bantu languages and beyond):

(1) a. Majaliwa must be in Mwanza. (Necessity)

b. Majaliwa might be in Mwanza. (Possibility)

In English, *must* expresses a modal necessity, while *might* expresses a modal possibility.

Introduction (2/6)

In many languages, there is a further grammatical split in modal **strength**, i.e., "**strong**" and "**weak**" necessity (Bybee et al., 1994; Fintel and Iatridou, 2008)

(2) a. Majaliwa must be in Mwanza. (Strong necessity)

b. Majaliwa should / ought to be in Mwanza. (Weak necessity)

While both statements express a modal necessity, the statement in (2b) is (in some sense) "weaker" than (2a).

Introduction (3/6)

Things are less clear with respect to whether possibility shows a strength distinction.

- Rivière (1981) claims *might* is a weaker version of *may*
- Vander Klok and Hohaus (2020) suggest that *could* is weaker than *can*.

$\rightsquigarrow$ There is no known language that systematically and conclusively exhibits and weak/strong distinction in possibility modals.

Introduction (4/6)

The lack of a strength distinction in possibility appears to be a particularly striking typological gap.

> *"The null hypothesis would be that [weak possibility modals exist], and that we might be able to find an existential counterpart to* **ought** *in languages that grammatically distinguish between weak and strong necessity."* (Rubinstein, 2012, 102)

It's surprising that there are no weak/strong possibility modals given that languages can **express** weak/strong possibility, e.g., *a slight/strong possibility*—it just doesn't seem to encoded in the system of modals for any language.

Introduction (5/6)

Our goal today is to examine a language, Kisubi (JE26) which appears to grammaticalize a distinction between strengths of possibility.

(3) a. Majaliwa ya-ku-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' Weak possibility

b. Majaliwa ya-ka-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' Strong possibility

As such, Kisubi fills a typological gap—but not in the way that Rubinstein predicts. While Kisubi does make a distinction between weak and strong possibility, it does not distinguish between weak/strong necessity. It is therefore the mirror image of Western languages.

Introduction (6/6)

Main questions and goals

- **Are there languages with strength distinctions in possibility modality?** → Yes!
- **Why don't we see strength possibility more frequently?** → (maybe) Strength in possibility and necessity are fundamentally different. (Formal stuff in the appendix.)

1. Introduction
2. Language background
3. Walkthrough of Kisubi's modal system
   - Ability and possibility
   - Need and necessity
4. Implications for modal systems
5. Conclusion

Language background

Kisubi (JE26) has been mis-classified as Kishubi (JD64) in most typological studies (e.g., Maho 2009; Hammarström 2019) due to language proximity (both are spoken in Northern Tanzania) and similar names.

Kisubi is closely related to Haya and Nyambo and therefore falls into JE20 (according to Hammarström 2019)—we're calling it JE26.

Our data were collected using a modified version of the modal questionnaire in Vander Klok (2014) which uses contexts to disambiguate modal meanings. The data are the judgments of the second author. (We are working on transcribing some narratives to see more contextual uses and/or speaker variation.)

Modal distinctions in Kisubi (1/3)

We're adopting an extended version of the Kratzerian system which makes fine-grained distinctions in both the force and flavor of modal elements.

Participant internal	**Participant external**		**Epistemic**
	Deontic	**Goal-oriented**	
Ability	*Permission*	*Possibility*	*Possibility*
Weak need	*Weak obligation*	*Weak necessity*	*Weak necessity*
Need	*Obligation*	*Necessity*	*Necessity*

(Gluckman and Bowler, 2020, 202)

Notably, in this system, which was developed on Western languages, there is no differentiation between weak and strong possibility/ability.

Modal distinctions in Kisubi (2/3)

As we discuss in Gluckman and Vumilia (2025), Kisubi uses a variety of strategies for (verbal) modality.

Part. internal	**Part. external**		**Epistemic**
	Deontic	**Goal-oriented**	
ka-/ku-	*ka-/ku-*	*ka-/ku-*	*ka-/ku-*
-etag(-w)	*-etag-w*	*-etag-w*	*-etag-w*
-etag(-w)	*-etag-w*	*-etag-w*	*-etag-w*

- With necessity, the verb *-etag* consistently appears. In all contexts except participant-internal necessity, the passive *-w* is also required.
- With possibility and ability, either prefix *ku-* or *ka-* are found. These occupy the tense slot before the verb.

Modal distinctions in Kisubi (3/3)

In our previous talk we left the difference between *ka-/ku-* up in the air, but today we'll make the following claims:

- *Ku-* ≈ "Possibility": it is used when there is relatively less "certainty" that the proposition will be true.
- *Ka-* ≈ "Probability": it is used when there is relatively more "certainty" that the proposition will be true.

We note that this does not exhaust the options for expressing possibility. Like many other languages, possibility can be expressed with adverbs, true verbs, and even future tense.

Weak vs. strong epistemic possibility (1/5)

The morpheme *ku-* is used in cases where the speaker is less sure about whether P is true.

(4) **Weak epistemic possibility.** You walk past Majaliwa's house at 11am on Saturday. He's often home on Saturday, but sometimes he goes to the market.

a. Majaliwa ya-ku-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' ('Majaliwa is possibly home.')

b. ?? Majaliwa ya-ka-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' ('Majaliwa is probably home.')

Weak vs. strong epistemic possibility (2/5)

However, in contexts in which there is a stronger belief that the proposition is true, then *ka-* is appropriate.

(5) **Strong epistemic possibility.** You walk past Majaliwa's house at 11am on Saturday. He's often home on Saturday, but sometimes he goes to the market. However, his car is there, and you can see a light on in the house.

a. ?? Majaliwa ya-ku-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' ('Majaliwa is possibly home.')

b. Majaliwa ya-ka-bha ahamuka
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 17LOC.home
'Majaliwa might be home.' ('Majaliwa is probably home.')

Weak vs. strong epistemic possibility (3/5)

(6) **Weak epistemic possibility.** The professor for this class sometimes comes late on Mondays. It's a Monday, so,

a. ya-ku-kererw-a mbwenu
1SM-MOD-be.late-FV today

'He might be late today.' ('He will possibly be late today.')

b. ?? ya-ka-kererw-a mbwenu
1SM-MOD-be.late-FV today

'He might be late today.' ('He will probably be late today.')

Weak vs. strong epistemic possibility (4/5)

(7) **Strong epistemic possibility.** On the way to school, you passed your professor, whose car had broken down. It looked unlikely to be fixed in time for class, so,

a. ?? ya-ku-kererw-a mbwenu
1SM-MOD-be.late-FV today
'He might be late today.' ('He will possibly be late today.')

b. ya-ka-kererw-a mbwenu
1SM-MOD-be.late-FV today
'He might be late today.' ('He will probably be late today.')

Weak vs. strong epistemic possibility (5/5)

With epistemic possibility, the difference between *ka-* and *ku-* is akin to an **evidential** distinction,

- If the speaker has relatively weak evidence for P, *ku-*
- If the speaker has strong evidence for P, *ka-*

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (1/6)

Outside of epistemic modality (i.e., participant-external and participant-internal modality), it is less obvious that *ku-/ka-* make a similar evidential distinction.

It is still that case that *ka-* is "stronger" than *ku-*, but the reasoning is not necessarily based on observable evidence.

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (2/6)

(8) **Weak deontic possibility.** Majaliwa has been tasked with standing outside of the boss' door. The boss told Majaliwa that he doesn't want to be disturbed by anyone at all, but if one of the managers comes by, then he'd better meet with him (even though he doesn't want to). A manager comes to see the boss, introduces himself as a manager, and so Majaliwa says,

a. wa-ku-za=mu
2SG.SM-MOD-go=in
'You may go in.' (≈'You may possibly go in.')

b. ?? wa-ka-za=mu
2SG.SM-MOD-go=in
'You may go in.' (≈'You may probably go in.')

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (3/6)

(9) **Strong deontic possibility.** Majaliwa has been tasked with guarding the boss' door. The boss said that if anyone comes to see him, they can be shown in. Someone comes to see the boss, so Majaliwa says,

a. ?? wa-ku-za=mu
2SG.SM-MOD-go=in
'You may go in.' (≈'You may possibly go in.')

b. wa-ka-za=mu
2SG.SM-MOD-go=in
'You may go in.' (≈'You may probably go in.')

With deontic possibility, the difference is something like "sort of allowed" (*ku-*) versus "definitely allowed" (*ka-*).

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (4/6)

Goal-oriented possibility also shows this distinction. If the speaker intends to simply claim a possibility for achieving ones goals, then *ku-* is appropriate.

(10) **Weak goal-oriented possibility.** Jeff and Frank are visiting Mwanza. Neither has been there before and neither is very familiar with African transportation, though they've heard of things like daladalas and pikipikis. Jeff wants to the go the market, and Frank suggests,

a. wa-ku-twal-a edaladala
2SG-MOD-take-FV daladala

'You can take a daladala.' ('You can possibly take a daladala.')

b. ?? wa-ka-twal-a edaladala
2SG-MOD-take-FV daladala

'You can take a daladala.' ('You can probably take a daladala.')

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (5/6)

(11) **Strong goal-oriented possibility.** Jeff and Frank are visiting Mwanza. Neither has been there before, but Frank has traveled widely in Tanzania and knows how to get around. Jeff wants to the go the market, and Frank suggests,

a. ?? wa-ku-twal-a edaladala
2SG-MOD-take-FV daladala

'You can take a daladala.' ('You can possibly take a daladala.')

b. wa-ka-twal-a edaladala
2SG-MOD-take-FV daladala

'You can take a daladala.' ('You can probably take a daladala.')

With goal-oriented possibility, the difference is something like *can possibly...* (*ku-*) vs. *can probably...* (*ka-*).

Weak vs. strong participant-external possibility (6/6)

Unlike with epistemic possibility, it is less clear that the distinction between *ka-* and *ku-* is evidential in nature. Instead, it is contextually determined.

- For deontic possibility, if the outcome is more in line with the "rules" that are in place, then *ka-* is best.
- For goal-oriented possibility, if the outcome is deemed more achievable, then *ka-* is appropriate.

Weak vs. strong participant-internal ability (1/4)

The same distinction holds for participant-internal modality. Again, *ku-* is "weaker" than *ka-* in that, based on the circumstances, there is a reasonable possibility that the subject cannot manage to perform an action.

(12) **Weak participant-internal modality.** Majaliwa is strong. There's a huge rock on the ground, and many people have tried to lift it. Still, because Majaliwa is strong,

a. Majaliwa ya-ku-sutur-a eli ibhare
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM rock
'Majaliwa can lift the rock.' (≈'Majaliwa can possibly lift the rock.')

b. ?? Majaliwa ya-ka-sutur-a eli ibhare
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM rock
'Majaliwa can lift the rock.' (≈'Majaliwa can probably lift the rock.')

Weak vs. strong participant-internal ability (2/4)

(13) **Strong participant-internal modality** Majaliwa is very strong. There's a small rock on the ground which many people have managed to lift.

a. ?? Majaliwa ya-ku-sutur-a eli ibhare
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM rock

'Majaliwa can lift the rock.' (≈'Majaliwa can possibly lift the rock.')

b. Majaliwa ya-ka-sutur-a eli ibhare
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM rock

'Majaliwa can lift the rock.' (≈'Majaliwa can probably lift the rock.')

Weak vs. strong participant-internal ability (3/4)

In this context, the difference between *ka-* and *ku-* tracks something like "possibility" vs. "capacity"

- *Ku-* indicates a pure possibility—there's still a reasonable chance that the proposition will turn out false.
- *Ka-* indicates a capacity—it's relatively assured (but not certain) that the proposition will be true.

Weak vs. strong participant-internal ability (4/4)

Summarizing, Kisubi exhibits a systematic distinction between strong and weak ability and possibility.

- *ku-*: relatively weak ability and possibility (roughly "possible")
- *ka-*: relatively strong ability and possibility (roughly "probable")

We say "relatively" because, like all modal elements, *ka-/ku-* are context-dependent.

Weak vs. strong Epistemic necessity (1/2)

There is no comparable distinction in the necessity/need domain in Kisubi. To express all flavors and forces of need/necessity, a form of the verb *-etag-* is used, with the following morpho-syntactic variation:

- It appears in a passive form (with *-w*) in epistemic and participant-external modality
- It can be impersonal in epistemic and participant-external modality.

None of these factors affect the strength of the necessity claim.

Weak vs. strong Epistemic necessity (2/2)

(14) **Epistemic weak necessity.** Majaliwa works almost every day, but every once in a while he takes the day off to visit his parents. You saw him leave the house today, so when someone asks where he is, you say,

Majaliwa	ni-a-etag-w-a	kubha	ahamilimo
Majaliwa	FOC-1SM-MOD-PASS-FV	INF.COP	17LOC.WORK

'Majaliwa should be at work.'

(15) **Epistemic strong necessity.** Majaliwa goes to work every day without fail. So when someone asks where he is, you say,

Majaliwa	ni-a-etag-w-a	kubha	ahamilimo
Majaliwa	FOC-1SM-MOD-PASS-FV	INF.COP	17LOC.WORK

'Majaliwa must be at work.'

Weak vs. strong participant-external necessity (1/2)

(16) **Goal-oriented weak necessity.** Majaliwa wants to go to the market. There are a few ways to get there, but you think that, because it's cheapest,

Ni-ki-etag-w-a	Majaliwa a-tol-e	edaladala
FOC-7SM-MOD-PASS-FV	Majaliwa 1SM-take-SBJV	daladala

'Majaliwa should take a daladala.'

(17) **Goal-oriented strong necessity.** Ingwe are playing in a tournament. In order to advance,

Ni-ki-etag-w-a	Ingwe egi-sing-e	Gor Mahia
FOC-7SM-MOD-PASS-FV	Ingwe 9SM-beat-SBJV	Gor Mahia

'Ingwe must beat Gor Mahia.'

Weak vs. strong participant-external necessity (2/2)

(18) **Deontic weak necessity.** It is advisable that you change the oil in your car every 1000km. Of course, it's probably fine if you don't, but just to be sure,

ni-bhi-etag-w-a	o-ses-e	eoili	omu-motoka	yawe
FOC-8SM-MOD-PASS-FV	1SM-change-SBJV	oil	LOC-car	your

'You should change the oil in your car.'

(19) **Deontic strong necessity.** In Tanzania, it's a law that when you ride a motor bike,

Ni-ki-etag-w-a	o-zwal-e	enkonfira
FOC-7SM-MOD-PASS-FV	2SM-wear-SBJV	helmet

'You must wear a helmet.'

Weak vs. strong participant-internal need

(20) **Weak need.**This is going to be a long bus ride. Therefore, before getting on this bus,

ni-ni-etag-(w-)a	kukoyola.
FOC-1SG-MOD-PASS-FV	INF.urinate

'I should urinate.'

(21) **Strong need.** Majaliwa sneezes whenever he cooks with pepper. Because Majaliwa is cooking with pepper,

ni-ki-etag-w-a	a-yechemur-e
FOC-7SM-MOD-PASS-FV	1SM-sneeze-SBJV

'He has to sneeze.'

Note that this is the only context in which passive is optional.

Implications for modal systems (1/5)

Summarizing, Kisubi makes a systematic distinction between strengths of possibility, but not necessity.

	Part. internal	Part. external		Epistemic
		Deontic	**Goal-oriented**	
Weak Poss.	*ku-*	*ku-*	*ku-*	*ku-*
Strong Poss.	*ka-*	*ka-*	*ka-*	*ka-*
Nec.	*-etag(*-PASS*)*	*-etag*-PASS	*-etag*-PASS	*-etag*-PASS

This division is the mirror image of languages that demonstrate a strength distinction in necessity but not possibility.

Implications for modal systems (2/5)

You might wonder whether *ku-* and *ka-* can be prefixed to the necessity modal *-etag(w)*—they can't.

(22) * ni-ki-ku-/ka-etag-w-a o-zwal-e enkonfira
FOC-7SM-MOD-MOD-MOD-PASS-FV 2SG.SM-wear-SBJV 9NC.helmet

Intended: 'You should/ought to wear a helmet' or
'You might possibly/probably have to wear a helmet.'

That is, possibility and necessity are independent modal systems.

Implications for modal systems (3/5)

From a formal perspective, the central issue is, **How do you get a grammatical strength distinction in one force, but not the other?**

This is a crosslinguistic issue—because in no language that has a strength distinction in the necessity modal is there a strength distinction in the possibility modal.

Implications for modal systems (4/5)

This is the central question of Vander Klok and Hohaus's (2020) study of Javanese, which creates weak necessity by adding the affix *-ne* to the necessity modal. (See also Indo-European languages in Fintel and Iatridou 2008.)

(23) Bu Deli mesthi-ne nek omah sa'iki.
Mrs. Deli EPIS.NEC-NE at house now
'Mrs. Deli should be at home now.'
Javanese (Vander Klok and Hohaus, 2020, 28)

Crucially, you can't add *-ne* to a possibility modal to create "weak possibility," and they explain this by arguing that the way to "weaken" necessity just doesn't apply to the semantics of possibility.

Implications for modal systems (5/5)

We think that the asymmetry might have a natural explanation in the different ways of **deriving** the strengths. Necessity can be **weakened**, and possibility can be **strengthened**.

- Necessity (*must*) $\longrightarrow$ Weak necessity (*should*)
- Possibility (*ku-*) $\longrightarrow$ Strong possibility (*ka-*)

This would explain why languages don't use the same strategy for weak/strong distinctions across possibility and necessity. (See appendix for a first pass semantics.)

Conclusion (1/2)

- ⇝ Kisubi exhibits a typologically unattested grammatical distinction: distinct modal morphemes for weak and strong possibility across all modal flavors.
- ⇝ This distinction is not reflected in necessity: there is no grammatical distinction in weak/strong necessity.
- ⇝ We suggest that this is due to the different ways that modal strength is derived.

Conclusion (2/2)

Thanks to Vera Hohaus and participants of the Bantu Modality Workshop in Iringa for very helpful discussion and suggestions.

Thanks!

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Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (1/7)

Traditionally, the necessity/possibility distinction has been thought of in terms of quantification over a relevant set of modal worlds.

(24) a. $[\![\text{must}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda w . \forall w' \in \text{MOD}(w), P(w') = 1$
≈ "in all of the imaginable worlds, P is true."

b. $[\![\text{might}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda w . \exists w' \in \text{MOD}(w), P(w') = 1$
≈ "there exists a world in the imaginable worlds in which P is true."

Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (2/7)

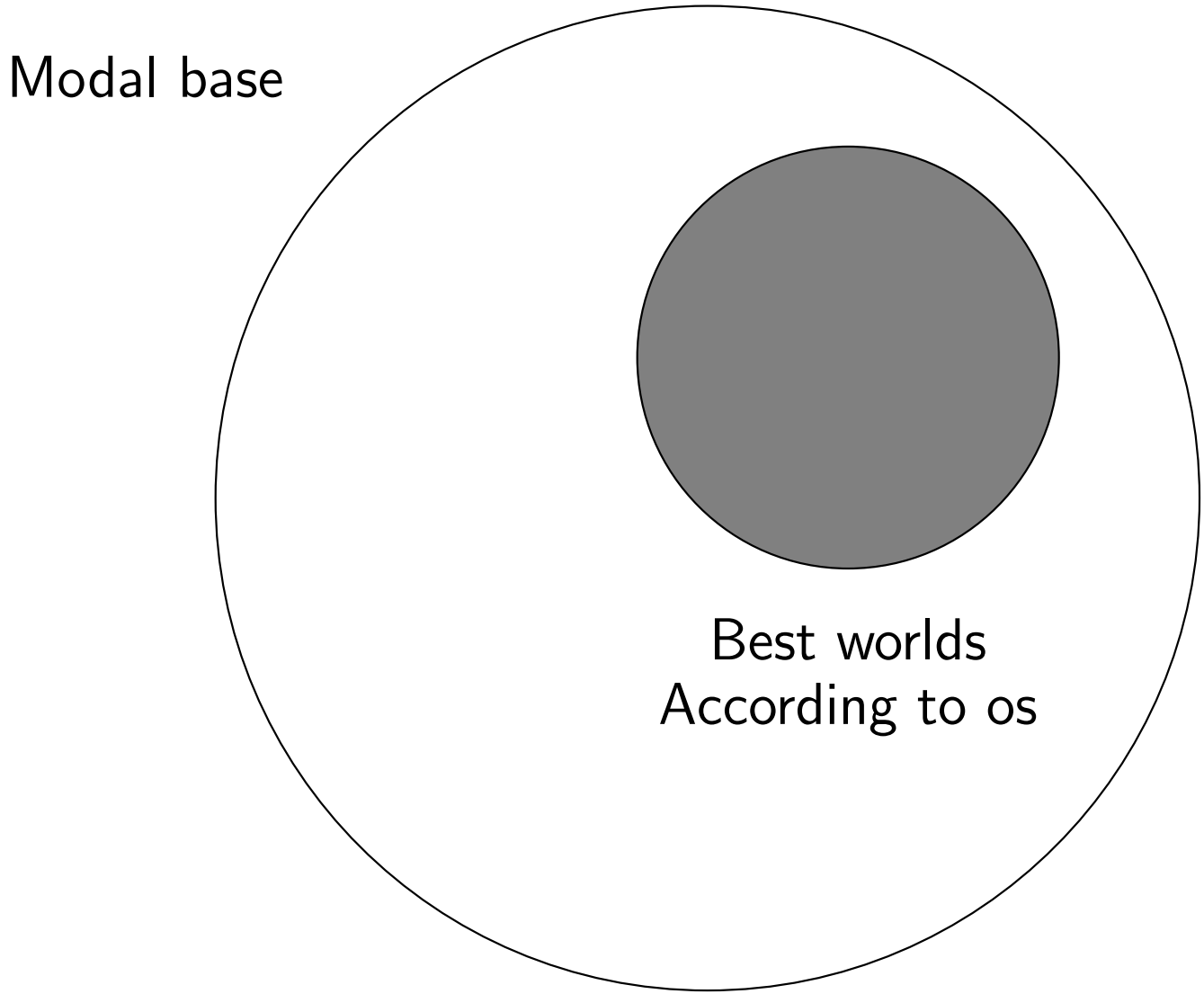
Weak necessity has received a variety of competing analyses. In Kratzerian tradition, a weak necessity claim involves domain restriction of the modal base to a subset of worlds via an **ordering source**.

(25) $[\![\text{must}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda w. \forall w' \in \textsc{Mod}(w), P(w') = 1$

(26) $[\![\text{should}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda \textsc{os} \lambda w. \forall w' \in \textsc{best}(\textsc{Mod}_{os}(w)), P(w') = 1$

The ordering source ranks the worlds in the modal base from "best" to "worst", and then the quantification only applies to the best worlds. Intuitively, a modal claim is weaker if the speaker only imagines that it holds in a subset of the relevant worlds.

Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (3/7)



Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (4/7)

For possibility modality, weaker and stronger versions of possibility are *expressable*—it's just that English (and other languages) do not grammaticalize these differences.

(27) a. There is a good possibility that Michl is the murderer.

b. There is a slight possibility that Michl is the murderer.

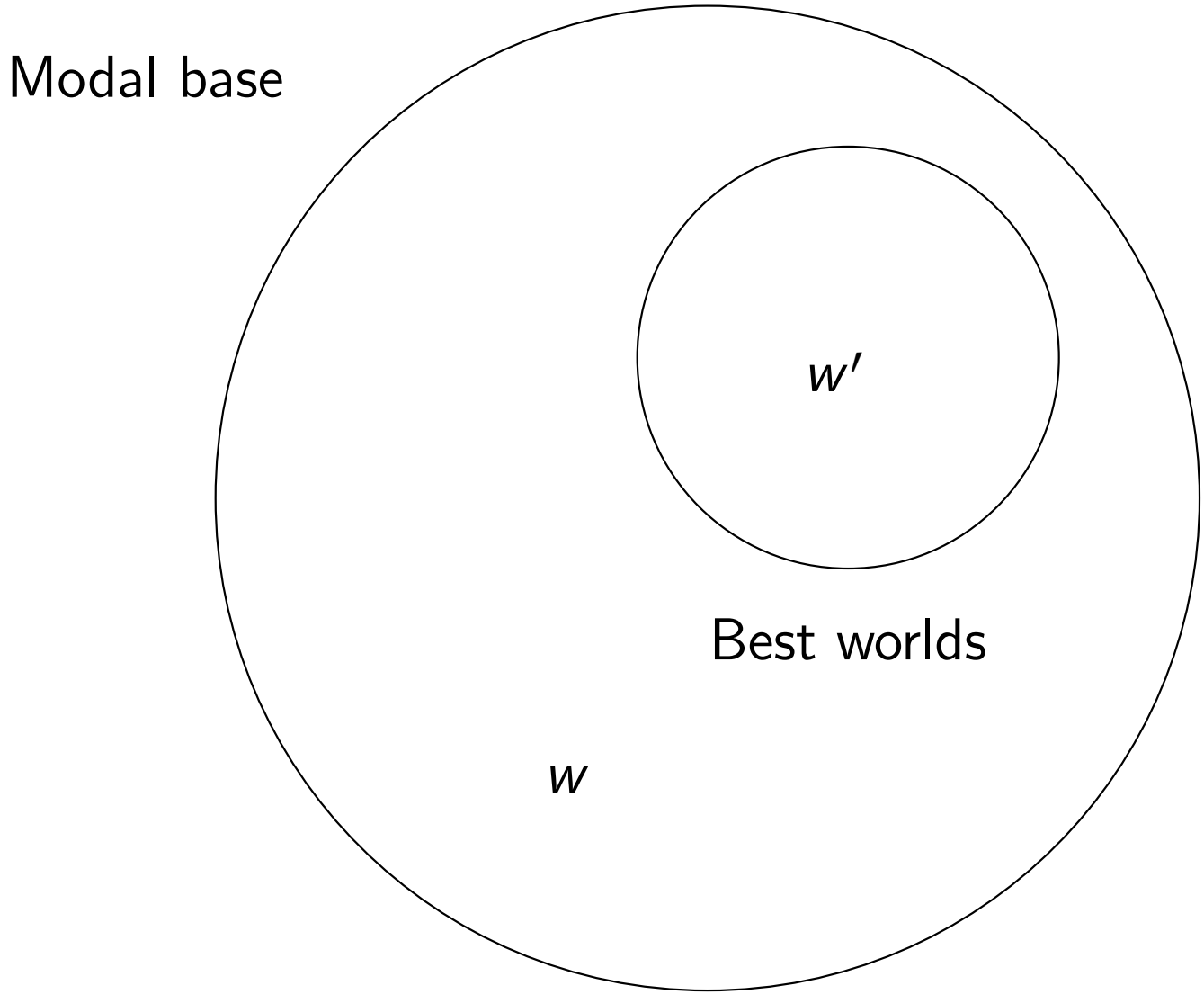
(Kratzer, 1991, 643)

This is usually taken to be an argument for a **gradient** (or **scalar**) notion of modality (Lassiter, 2017). In any case, there is still no grammatical distinction between weak/strong possibility.

Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (5/7)

As Vander Klok and Hohaus (2020) note, domain restriction with possibility modal doesn't result in a weakening of the possibility, but rather a strengthening. If there is an world in the "best" worlds in which P is true (w'), that upwardly entails that there is a world in the entire set of worlds in which P is true.

Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (6/7)



Appendix I: A first pass at a semantics (7/7)

In other words, the best worlds are a non-empty set.

(28) $[\![\text{ka-}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda \text{OS} \lambda w . \exists w' \in \text{BEST}(\text{MOD}_{os}(w)), P(w') = 1$

In contrast, to derive weak possibility, we simply make an existential claim that there is a word in the modal in which P is true, without restricting ourselves to any subset.

(29) $[\![\text{ku-}]\!] = \lambda P \lambda w . \exists w' \in \text{MOD}(w), P(w') = 1$

In other words, possibility (*ku-*) can be **strengthened** to strong possibility (*ka-*).

Appendix II: Restrictions on possibility markers (1/4)

We'll close with two restrictions on the modal possibility markers—specifically *ka*-, which does not appear under negation, or in the scope of yes/no-questions.

Appendix II: Restrictions on possibility markers (2/4)

First, as Gluckman and Vumilia (2025) report, *ka-* cannot co-occur with negation on the same verb:

(30) a. Majaliwa ti-ya-ku-sutur-a eli ibhale
Majaliwa NEG-1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM 5NC.rock
'Majaliwa cannot lift this rock (≈ possibly/probably can't).'

b. * Majaliwa ti-ya-ka-sutur-a eli ibhale
Majaliwa NEG-1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM 5NC.rock
Intended: 'Majaliwa cannot lift this rock.'

Appendix II: Restrictions on possibility markers (3/4)

The point is emphasized by comparing negative participant-internal ability (above) with negative epistemic possibility, where negation follows the modal marker—and both *ku-/ka-* are possible.

(31) a. Majaliwa ya-ku-bha a-ta-li omuka.
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 1SM-NEG-COP home
'Majaliwa might not be home (≈ possibly isn't).'

b. Majaliwa ya-ka-bha a-ta-li omuka.
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-COP 1SM-NEG-COP home
'Majaliwa might not be home (≈ probably isn't).'

Appendix II: Restrictions on possibility markers (4/4)

Second, *ka-* cannot appear in yes/no question, again, independent of context. (Yes/no questions are marked prosodically.)

(32) a. Majaliwa ya-ku-sutur-a eli ibhale?
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM 5NC.rock
'Can Majaliwa lift this rock (≈ possibly/probably can)?

b. * Majaliwa ya-ka-sutur-a eli ibhale?
Majaliwa 1SM-MOD-lift-FV 5DEM 5NC.rock
Intended: 'Can Majaliwa lift this rock?