

The Catalan Epistemic Modal Marker *Pot molt ben ser*: from Emphatic Possibility to High Probability*

Mar Massanell i Messalles

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona / Institut d'Estudis Catalans

mar.massanell@uab.cat

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9288-5974>



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Abstract

In this article I deal with the Catalan epistemic marker *pot molt ben ser* 'it may very well be', which expresses high confidence on the part of the speaker in the truth value of the propositional content of his utterance. I start by extracting examples of the construction from the *CICA*, *CIVAL* and *CTILC* computerized corpora, and then analyse them within the framework of the Invited Inference Theory of Semantic Change (Traugott & Dasher 2002). Grammaticalization begins in contexts in which the modal periphrasis with *poder* 'can, may/might' as auxiliary and *ésser* 'be' as main verb is intensified with the interpolation of the adverb *ben* 'well', the resulting construction serving as an expressive resource to defend the existence of a previously denied possibility. Through bridge contexts that allow the interlocutor to infer that the speaker values the propositional content of his statement as not only possible but even probable, as happens when the emphatic expression is intended to reinforce a neutral one, or when it is accompanied by a causal clause that gives it inferential value, the conventionalization of the high probability meaning eventually comes about.

Keywords: Catalan language; epistemic marker; grammaticalization; intensifier; interpolation; modal periphrasis; semantic change

Resum. *El marcador modal epistèmic pot molt ben ser: de l'expressió emfàtica de la possibilitat al significat d'alta probabilitat*

En aquest article ens ocupem del marcador epistèmic *pot molt ben ser*, que expressa una alta confiança del parlant en el valor de veritat del contingut proposicional. Partim del buidatge dels corpus informatitzats *CICA*, *CIVAL* i *CTILC*, i n'analitzem les mostres en el marc de la teoria de la inferència invitada del canvi semàntic (Traugott & Dasher 2002). La gramaticalització s'inicia

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en contextos en què la perífrasi modal amb *poder* com a auxiliar i *ésser* com a verb principal és emfasitzada amb la interpolació de l'intensificador *ben*, com a recurs expressiu per a defensar l'existència d'una possibilitat prèviament negada. A través de contextos pont que permeten inferir que el parlant valora no només com a possible sinó també com a probable el contingut proposicional del seu enunciat, com s'esdevé quan l'expressió emfàtica de possibilitat és el reforç d'una de neutra, o quan s'acompanya d'una oració causal que li atorga valor inferencial, s'arriba a la convencionalització del significat d'alta probabilitat.

Paraules clau: llengua catalana; marcador epistèmic; gramaticalització; intensificador; interpolació; perífrasi modal; canvi semàntic

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4. Conclusions
2. Old Catalan data	References
3. Contemporary Catalan data	

Pot molt ben ésser que el resultat no correspongui al desig;
però volem solament al·legar en descàrrec propi que hem posat en el treball
el major esforç i la millor voluntat d'encertar.

(CTILC; 1927, Carles Pi i Sunyer, *L'aptitud econòmica de Catalunya*, I)

1. Introduction

This article is about the epistemic modal marker *pot molt ben ser* 'it may very well be', which is used in several Catalan dialects, mainly in Central Catalan, but also in North-Western Catalan. From a syntactic point of view, this structure has been formed from the modal periphrasis *poder* 'can, may/might' + infinitive, with the existential verb *ésser* 'be' as the main verb and with the interpolation of the intensifying adverbial phrase *molt ben* 'very well'. From a semantic point of view, this construction first emerged as an expressive resource with which the speaker defended the existence of a possibility that had been previously ignored or denied by the interlocutor or someone else. Today, under these same contextual circumstances or similar ones it is still used with its original meaning of emphatic expression of possibility, but in most usage contexts its semantic value has shifted towards the expression of high probability.

My aim is to analyse the emergence of this epistemic modal marker on the basis of examples extracted from three open-access digital corpora of Catalan: the *CICA* (Computerized Corpus of Old Catalan), which contains texts from all Catalan dialects dating from the 11th century (the earliest texts in this language) to 1600, with several complementary texts from the 17th and 18th centuries; the *CIVAL* (Computerized Corpus of Valencian), which consists of Catalan texts from the Valencian Country subdivided into a diachronic corpus from 1275 to 1932 on the one hand and a corpus of present-day Valencian on the other; and the

CTILC (Computerized Textual Corpus of Catalan Language) which is a compilation of texts dating from 1832 to 2019 from all Catalan dialects but mainly Central Catalan.

I will carry out my analysis within the theoretical framework of grammaticalization and with specific reference to the Invited Inference Theory of Semantic Change (Traugott & Dasher 2002). Special attention will be devoted to the inferential processes involved in the semantic transition of this construction from its original meaning, through bridge contexts, to an epistemic modal marker of high probability.

In this introduction, I briefly present Catalan epistemic modal periphrases (§ 1.1) and summarise the uses of the intensifying adverb *ben* ‘well’ as modifier of modal predicates (§ 1.2). Next, in section 2, I deal with Old Catalan data extracted from the above-mentioned *CICA* and *CIVAL* corpora. Then, in section 3, I analyse Contemporary Catalan data from the *CTILC*, paying attention to their dialectal distribution (§ 3.1), syntactic behaviour (§ 3.2) and semantic value (§ 3.3). Finally, in section 4, I present my main conclusions.

1.1. Catalan epistemic modal periphrases

Catalan has several modal periphrases of epistemic value (Picallo 1990; Gavarró & Laca 2002: § 23.4; *GIEC*: § 24.8.4). With these periphrases, the speaker expresses his degree of commitment regarding the certainty of the propositional content. The most common ones are formed with the auxiliary verbs *poder* ‘can, may/might’ and *deure* ‘must’, but the periphrasis formed with *haver de* ‘have to’ can also assume this function in certain pragmatic contexts.

Thus, when it has an epistemic meaning, *poder* + infinitive expresses possibility – in other words, it conveys here the meaning of ‘may/might’, not ‘can’. A statement containing the epistemic periphrasis with *poder* ‘may/might’ (1a) is equivalent to a copulative construction with the adjective *possible* ‘possible’ as the attributive complement (1b).¹ This meaning of possibility is similar to that expressed by the adverb *potser* ‘maybe’ (1c). In fact, this adverb (like its English equivalent) was created by the grammaticalization of the periphrastic sequence *pot ser* ‘may be’ (*DCVB* s. v.; *DECat* s. v. *poder*), in which the epistemic modal auxiliary *poder* ‘may/might’ is followed by the infinitive of the existential verb *ésser* ‘be’ (1d), the verb most often inserted in this periphrasis.² In addition, *poder* is also used to form root periphrasis to express the notion that an agent has the capacity (dynamic root modality) (2a) or the authorization (deontic root modality) (2b) to do some

1. The examples in the introduction, from (1) to (3) and from (5) to (16), come from my own use as a native Catalan speaker. All the tokens that support my analysis in the body of the article, from (17) to (56), are extracted from corpora.
2. In the *CTILC* there are 379,601 tokens of the verb *poder* ‘can, may/might’. If you list the words that immediately follow it in each example in order of frequency, the first is the existential verb *ésser* ‘be’ (38,173 tokens), followed at a distance by the factitive verb *fer* ‘do’ (19,964 tokens), the diction verb *dir* ‘say’ (14,937 tokens), the perception verb *veure* ‘see’ (7,406 tokens) and the possession verb *tenir* ‘have’ (7,284 tokens).

action – in other words, it conveys here the idea of ‘can’ and permissive ‘may’, respectively.³ The history of this construction is summarised in Sentí (2018).

- (1) a. *Pot* *ploure*.
 might-3PI rain-INF
 ‘It might rain.’
- b. *És* *possible* *que plogui*.
 is-3PI possible-M.SG that rain-3PS
 ‘It is possible that it will rain.’
- c. *Potser* *plourà*.
 maybe rain-3FUT
 ‘Maybe it will rain.’
- d. *Pot* *ser* *que plogui*.
 may-3PI be-INF that rain-3PS
 ‘It may be that it will rain.’
- (2) a. *Ho pots* *fer* *millor*.
 it-AC can-2PI do-INF better
 ‘You can do it better.’
- b. *Ja* *podeu* *plegar* *per avui*.
 already may-5PI stop-working-INF for today.
 ‘You may stop working for today.’

In turn, *deure* + infinitive is an inferential periphrasis that expresses probability. A statement containing the epistemic periphrasis with *deure* ‘must’ (3a) is equivalent to a copulative construction with the adjective *probable* ‘probable, likely’ as the attribute (3b). This value of probability is similar to that expressed by the adverb *segurament* ‘surely, probably’ (3c). Despite this, in Old Catalan (4a) the periphrasis with *deure* ‘must’ had a deontic meaning of obligation, which is still maintained in Valencian Catalan (4b) (regarding the evolution of *deure* + infinitive, see Sentí 2017).

- (3) a. *Deu* *ploure*.
 must-3PI rain-INF
 ‘It must be raining.’

3. Abbreviations used in glosses: 1 = first person singular, 2 = second person singular, 3 = third person singular, 4 = first person plural, 5 = second person plural, 6 = third person plural, AC = accusative, ART = article, AUX = auxiliary, COND = conditional, CONJ = conjunction, DAT = dative, F = feminine, FUT = future, II = imperfect indicative, IMP = imperative, INF = infinitive, INT = interrogative, IS = imperfect subjunctive, LOC = locative, M = masculine, NEG = negation, PART = partitive, PI = present indicative, PL = plural, PREP = preposition, PRON = pronoun, PS = present subjunctive, REFL = reflexive, RESP = treatment of respect, RPL = royal plural, SG = singular, SUBJ = subjunctive.

- b. És *probable* que estigui plovent.
is-3PI likely-M.SG that be-3PS raining
'It is likely to be raining.'
- c. *Segurament* plou.
probably rain-3PI
'Probably it is raining.'
- (4) a. e volien parlar ab nós
and wanted-6II talk-INF to us-RPL
així con vassayls *deuen* parlar ab lur seyor natural
thus as vassals must-6PI talk-INF to their lord natural
'and they wanted to talk to us just as vassals must talk to their natural lord'
(CICA; 1343, Jaume I, *Fets*: f. 19v)
- b. Jo... la veritat, no crec,
I the truth not believe-1PI
però pense que es *deuen* respectar les creences dels altres.
but think-1PI that REFL must-6PI respect-INF the beliefs of-the others
'I, to tell the truth, do not believe [in God], but I think that others' beliefs must be respected.'
(CIVAL; 1983, Enric Valor, *Temps de batuda*: 312)

Even the periphrasis *haver de* + infinitive, which usually has a deontic meaning of obligation (5a), in certain pragmatic contexts can assume an epistemic meaning of probability (Picallo 1990; Gavarró & Laca 2002: § 23.4; *GIEC*: § 24.8.4). This use of *haver de* 'have to' can be observed when the speaker's statement expresses a conjecture based on his observations combined with his prior knowledge of the world (5b) (regarding the evolution of *haver de* + infinitive, see Sentí 2017). The literature has analysed these epistemic meanings as inferential evidentiality (for Catalan, see Sentí 2023).

- (5) a. *Has de fer* el que et diguin.
have-2PI to do-INF what you-DAT.SG tell-6PS
'You have to do what they tell you.'
- b. *Ha de ser* a casa, perquè hi ha els llums encesos.
have-3PI to be-INF at home because there is-3PI the lights on
'He has to be (= must be) at home, because the lights are on.'

1.2. Adverbial phrases as modifiers of modal predicates

Constructions formed with these modal auxiliaries can be modified by an adverbial phrase, which can be inserted in various locations. Thus, (6a) contains a sentence adjunct in initial position, the adverb *segurament* 'probably', which is semantically redundant because it conveys the same idea as the auxiliary verb *deure* 'must'. In

turn, at the end of (6b) we find an adverbial phrase consisting of the idiom *per força* ‘necessarily’, which underlines the speaker’s confidence in the certainty of his inference. Finally, in (6c) we have an intensifying adverb, *ben* ‘well’, interpolated between the modal auxiliary and the main verb to add emphasis to the propositional content.

- (6) a. *Segurament* ja deuen haver arribat.
 Probably already must-6PI have-INF arrived-M.SG
 ‘Probably they have already arrived.’
- b. Tard com és, han de ser a casa *per força*.
 late as is-3PI must-6PI PREP be-INF at home necessarily
 ‘Late as it is, they must necessarily be at home.’
- c. Ens en podem *ben* estar, d’ anar -hi!
 REFL PART can-4PI well restrain-INF from go-INF there
 ‘We can well restrain ourselves from going there!’

This last verbal modifier with intensifying value, *ben* ‘well’, is involved in the emergence of the epistemic modal marker with which I am concerned in this paper. It is always found in a marked position, which contributes to its emphatic value, either interpolated between the pronominal clitic and the verbal form if it is simple (7a) or, in compound verbal forms such as those of periphrastic past (7b) and perfect tenses (7c), preceding the infinitive or the participle of the main verb. In this use the intensifying adverb *ben* has an aspectual value of completion, with a meaning equivalent to that of the adverbs *completament* ‘completely’, *totalment* ‘totally’ or *plenament* ‘fully’ and the idiom *del tot* ‘entirely’ (Solà i Pujols 2002: § 26.2.1m).

- (7) a. T’ ho *ben* asseguro: ha anat així.
 you-DAT.SG it-AC well assure-1PI has gone thus
 ‘I fully assure you: it went like this.’
- b. Ja us vau *ben* equivocar, ja!
 already REFL.2PL AUX.PAST well be-wrong-INF already
 ‘You were totally wrong!’
- c. Mira que t’ han *ben* enredat, aquells
 look-IMP that you-AC.SG have-6PI well hoodwinked those
 poca-vergonyes!
 scoundrels
 ‘Look how they completely hoodwinked you, the scoundrels!’

It is worth noting that this intensifier that occurs in a marked position with an emphatic meaning is used mainly in exclamative sentences to add weight to a fact or an event, whether positive (8a) or negative (8b).

- (8) a. Tu sí que l' has *ben* encertat!
 you yes that it-AC have-2PI well guessed-right
 'You sure guessed it right!'
- b. El van *ben* apallissar, pobre!
 him-AC AUX.PAST.6 well beat-up-INF poor-guy
 'They completely beat him up, poor guy!'

The emphatic adverb *ben* 'well' can also occur interpolated in modal periphrases such as the one I analyse in this paper. In fact, the root periphrasis *poder* + infinitive intensified with the interpolated adverb *ben* 'well' has even generated idiomatic expressions that appear frequently in certain pragmatic contexts in spoken Catalan. Such is the case, for example, with *T'ho pots ben creure!* 'You'd better believe it!' (9a), with the cognition verb *creure* 'believe'. When this idiomatic expression is used by a speaker it serves to emphasize in front of his interlocutor the truthfulness of what he has just told him, despite the surprising, scandalous or extraordinary nature of the events he reports. Another similar idiomatic expression is *Ja ho pots ben dir!* 'You can say that again!' (9b), with the diction verb *dir* 'say'. This idiom is used as a reply formula that emphatically expresses agreement with the interlocutor and acts as a corroboration of what he has just said.

- (9) a. Tan educada com sembla, i em va engegar! Tal com
 as polite as seems-3PI and me AUX.PAST.3 sent-INF thus as
 ho sents. T' ho pots *ben* creure!
 it-AC hear-2PI REFL.2SG it-AC can-2PI well believe
 'She seems so polite, but she sent me [packing]! Just as you're hearing.
 You'd better believe it!'
- b. —Quin corrupte! D' aquests polítics no en podem esperar
 what corrupt from these politicians not PART can-4PI expect
 res de bo!
 anything PART good
 'What a corrupt man! We can't expect anything good from these politicians!'
- Ja ho pots *ben* dir!
 already it-AC can-2PI well say-INF
 'You can say that again!'

When the periphrasis with *poder* 'may/might' has an epistemic meaning, it can also receive the intensifier *ben* 'well'. Through the interpolation of this adverb, emphasis is placed on the fact that the possibility mentioned by the speaker actually exists. Emphasis is required by the situational context: in the example in (10), the presence of *ben* serves to correct a first impression that would exclude a possibility that the speaker is now considering. In this use *ben* has a semantic value similar to that of the adverbs *certament* 'certainly', *veritablement* 'truly' or *realment* 'really'.

- (10) No hi havia caigut, en això. Sí,
 not PRON.LOC have-1^{II} fallen in this yes
 també *podria ben ser* que hagués anat com dius tu.
 also could-3^{COND} well be-INF that had-3^{IS} happened as say-2^{PI} you-SG
 ‘I did not realize this. Yes, it could also well be that it happened as you say.’

Although the adverb *ben* ‘well’ alone already has an intensifying value when interpolated in the modal periphrasis with *poder*, it usually appears accompanied by the degree quantifier *molt* ‘very’, which increases the emphatic value of the adverbial phrase. In (11a) the modal periphrasis has a root meaning of capacity, while in (11b) the periphrastic construction including the existential verb *ésser* ‘be’ has an epistemic value.

- (11) a. —I fa mal aquesta prova?
 and causes pain this test
 “And does this test hurt?”
 —Mal mal, no, una mica d’ incomoditat. *Es pot molt ben*
 pain pain no a bit of discomfort REFL can-3^{PI} very well
aguantar.
 tolerate-INF
 “Hurt, no—it’s just a bit uncomfortable. It can be tolerated very well.”
 b. De lluny m’ ha semblat que duia taronges,
 from afar me-DAT has seemed that was-carrying-3^{II} oranges
 però també *podien molt ben ser* mandarines.
 but also could-6^{II} very well be tangerines
 ‘From afar it seemed to me she was carrying oranges, but they could also very well have been tangerines.’

It is worth noting that this construction with the epistemic auxiliary *poder* intensified with *molt ben* ‘very well’ has expanded its meaning from the emphatic expression of possibility to the expression of high probability. Certainly, an example like (11b) fits well with a reading of possibility: the speaker at first thought that someone was carrying oranges, but has since realized that in fact the fruit in question could also be tangerines, because the speaker was far away and could not see the fruit clearly; the intensification of the second possibility with the adverbial phrase *molt ben* simply balances the scales with respect to his first impression and places both options at the same level of probability. Except in specific contexts like this, in which it is necessary to restore a possibility that has been ignored or denied either by the interlocutor or by the speaker himself, *pot molt ben ser* ‘it may very well be’ acts as an epistemic modal marker of high probability.

Thus, the answer in (12) is interpreted as a justification of Maria’s behaviour based on the speaker’s belief that very likely she is unaware of the situation that irritated the speaker’s interlocutor. Note in the co-text the modal marker *és que* ‘the thing is’, whose typical function is precisely to introduce a subjective cause, that is,

a justification or an excuse, of attenuating value, often in reply to a recrimination (Marín & Cuenca 2012).

- (12) —Quina barra! No entenc com li ho tolera això,
 what cheek not understand-1PI how him-DAT it-AC tolerates-3PI this
 la Maria!
 ART Maria
 “What cheek! I don’t understand how Maria puts up with this.”
 —És que pot molt ben ser que no en sàpiga res,
 is that can-3PI very well be-INF that not PART know-3PS anything
 de tot plegat!
 about all together
 “The thing is, it may very well be that she knows nothing at all about it.”

In (13), when we see examples with a neutral expression of possibility, either the copulative construction *és possible* ‘it is possible’ (13a) or the adverb *potser* ‘maybe’ (13b), followed by the emphatic *pot molt ben ser* ‘it may very well be’, this latter marker is not perceived as a simple redundancy in the possibility, but rather is equivalent to *és {molt / el més} probable* ‘it is very/most likely’. In these cases, the second statement reinforces the confidence in the validity of the first one and, in (13b), the speaker even seems by the end of his comments to have convinced himself of the certainty of his previous supposition.

- (13) a. És possible que a hores d’ara ja ho sàpiga. *Pot molt ben ser.*
 is possible that by-now already it-AC knows-3PS may-3PI very
 well be-INF
 ‘It is possible that by now he already knows it. It may very well be.’
 b. Ai, que no trobo l’ abonament! Si el duia a la mà!
 oh that not find-1PI the ticket if it-AC carry-1II in the hand
Potser m’ ha caigut al baixar del tren. *Pot molt ben ser.*
 maybe I-DAT has dropped when getting-off from-the train may-3PI
 very well be-INF
 ‘Oh, I can’t find my ticket! But I just had it in my hand! Maybe I dropped it when getting off the train. It may very well be.’

Similarly, the meaning of a statement like (14), in which a conjecture is raised, is semantically very much closer to *segurament plourà* ‘probably it will rain’ than to *potser plourà* ‘maybe it will rain’. In this case, the construction with *pot molt ben ser* shows the speaker’s high degree of confidence in his inference.

- (14) Quins núvols més negres! *Pot molt ben ser* que plugui.
 what clouds more black may-3PI very well be-INF that rain-3PS
 ‘What black clouds! It may very well be that it will rain.’

In situations with only two known and obvious resolution possibilities (either yes or no) presenting one or the other by means of the epistemic periphrasis with *poder* ‘may/might’ intensified with the adverbial phrase *molt ben* ‘very well’ clearly leads to the meaning of high probability. Thus, the statement in (15) is not interpreted as ‘Jordi’s grant application may be accepted’ (this is obvious for all concurrent projects and informatively empty) but rather as ‘Jordi’s grant application is very likely to be accepted’. Once again, the speaker shows strong confidence in the truth value of his statement by means of the construction *pot molt ben ser*.

- (15) —Que ha presentat la sol·licitud del projecte el Jordi?
 CONJ has submitted the application of-the project ART Jordi
 “Has Jordi submitted his grant application?”
 —Sí, i *pot molt ben ser* que l’ hi concedeixin.
 yes and may very well be-INF that it-AC him-DAT grant-6PS
 “Yes, and it may very well be they will award him the grant.”

Without reaching the degree of fixedness seen in the idioms *T’ho pots ben creure!* ‘You’d better believe it!’ and *Ja ho pots ben dir!* ‘You can say that again!’, which I have already referred to, the epistemic modal marker *pot molt ben ser* ‘it may very well be’ is used in spoken interactions as a reply (16a) and, in particular, as an answer to questions about the truth value of a statement (16b), once again with a meaning equivalent to *és {molt / el més} probable* ‘it is very/most likely’.

- (16) a. —Que tard que és! A veure si trobarem la farmàcia tancada...
 how late that is let see-INF if find-4FUT the pharmacy closed
 “How late it is! Let’s see if we find the pharmacy closed...”
 —*Pot molt ben ser!*
 can-3PI very well be-INF
 “It may very well be!”
- b. —Quina salutació més seca! Creus que estan enfadats?
 what greeting more dry thing-2PI that are-3PI angry-M.PL
 “What a dry greeting! Do you think they are angry?”
 —*Pot molt ben ser!*
 can-3PI very well be-INF
 “It may very well be!”

This stereotyped use is what attracted my attention and motivated the present work. Despite the fact that these latter expressions, being used mainly in spoken language, are not easy to find in written textual corpora, the inclusion in the corpora of plays and other works containing dialogue makes it possible to obtain samples for analysis like those in (17).

- (17) a. —Un negoci ben ruïnós, a fe de Déu! —va dir l’ Esteve.
 A business very ruinous, in faith of God! said-3PAST ART Esteve
 “A very ruinous business, by God!” said Esteve.
 —*Ja ho pots ben dir, ja.*
 already it-AC can-2PI well say-INF already
 “You can say that again!”
 (CTILC; 1989, Josep Coll, *La mula vella*)
- b. sí, sí, t’ ho pots ben creure,
 yes yes you-SG it-AC can-2PI well believe-INF
 els afusellen tots al mig d’ una plaça.
 them shoot-6PI all in-the middle of a square
 ‘yes, yes, you’d better believe it, they shoot them all in the middle of a square.’
 (CTILC; 1962, Mercè Rodoreda, *La plaça del Diamant*)
- c. —Ademés faltan encare de tres á quatre setmanas;
 in-addition leave-6PI still from three to four weeks
 qui sab si serém vius.
 who knows if be-4FUT alive
 “In addition, there are still three to four weeks left; who knows if we will be alive.”
 —No digas aquestas cosas...
 not say-2PS these things
 “Don’t say such things...”
 —*Podria molt ben ser.*
 could-3COND very well be-INF
 “It could very well be.”
 (CTILC; 1890, Manuel Figuerola i Aldrofeu, *L’esca del pecat*)

2. Old Catalan data

Modal periphrasis with *poder* (< Vulgar Latin *POTERE, replacing the Classical POSSE; *DCVB* s. v.; *DECat* s. v.) is found in the very oldest texts in Catalan (18), including the combination with the existential verb *ésser* ‘be’ (18c). According to Sentí (2018), its original meaning is dynamic root modality.

- (18) a. aquels verament a nós *poden donar* lo Regne Celestial
 those certainly to us can-6PI give-INF the kingdom heavenly
 ‘those can certainly give us the heavenly kingdom’
 (CICA; end of the 13th century, *Organyà*: 193)
- b. la terra senes justícia no *pot viure*
 the land without justice not can-3PI live-INF
 ‘the land without justice cannot live’
 (CICA; first half of the 13th century, *Usatges*: 113)

- c. —So no *pot ésser* —dix lo rey—, que·l rey
 this not can-3PI be-INF said-3PAST the king that the king
 Karles [...] aya axí vilment desamparada la terra.
 Karles has-3PS thus vilely abandoned-F the earth
 “It cannot be,” said the king, “that King Karles [...] has thus vilely abandoned the earth [to its fate].”
 (CICA; end of the 13th century, Desclot, *Crònica*: III.112)

The Catalan adverb *ben* ‘well’, coming from Latin *BENE* (*DCVB* s. v.; *DECat* s. v.), is also found in the earliest Catalan texts. Among other functions, this adverb modifies the modal periphrasis with *poder* ‘can, may/might’. In (19a) *ben* is interpolated and retains the original qualitative meaning of ‘in a correct, appropriate way’. In (19b), by contrast, the adverb *ben* heads the construction and has shifted towards a quantitative meaning, since it expresses the idea that the distance indicated was covered and perhaps even exceeded. In (19c) there is a more grammaticalized use: the proclitic *ben* has only an assertive meaning, similar to that of the affirmative adverb *sí* ‘yes’ (*ben pot* = *sí que pot* ‘yes, he can’). Finally, (19d) also shows a grammaticalized use, with the proclitic *ben* acting as an emphatic focus adverb and having a meaning of opposition, which occurs in pragmatic contexts where the validity of the interlocutor’s position is questioned or refuted. In this use it is equivalent to *prou* ‘enough’, and in fact the two words are interchangeable in the idiom or can even be used in combination, as in {*bé / prou / bé prou*} *que ho hauries pogut fer, si haguesses volgut* ‘of course you could have done it if you had wanted to’.

- (19) a. ne *pot ben governar* ço que Déus li ha donat
 nor can-3PI well govern-INF this that God him has given
 ‘he cannot properly govern what God has given him’
 (CICA; first half of the 14th century [1261–1271], Jaume I, *Furs*: F0)
- b. *ben podia aver cavalcat* ·X· legües
 well could-3II have-INF ridden ten leagues
 ‘he could well have ridden ten leagues’
 (CICA; end of the 13th century, Desclot, *Crònica*: II.58)
- c. li respon que *ben pot ell entendre* que [...]
 him answers-3PI that well can-3PI he understand-INF that
 convendria que [la pau] fos tractada e fermada ab
 would-be-suitable that the peace be-3IS discussed and confirmed with
 lo senyor rey a part
 the lord king separately
 ‘he answers him that he can well understand that it would be suitable to discuss and confirm [the peace] with the lord king separately’
 (CICA; 1327–1335, Alfons III: doc. 41)

- d. Ayçò que dius, *pories -ho mostrar*
 this that say-2PI can-2COND it-AC show-INF
 per autoritat de la sancta Escriptura [...]?
 by authority of the Holy Scripture
 ‘Could you show what you say by the authority of Holy Scripture [...]?’
Ayçò ben se pot provar, P[ere].
 This well REFL can-3PI prove-INF Pere
 Cor en lo libre de Gènesi se lig [...]
 because in the book of Genesis REFL read-3PI
 ‘This can well be proven, P[ere], because in the book of Genesis we read [it...].’
 (CICA; 1340 [second half of the 12th century], *Diàlegs*: f. 81r)

It might be noted that in Old Catalan we sometimes find in these same uses the variant *bé*, with loss of the final nasal, instead of *ben* ‘well’. This is no longer the case in present-day Catalan, in which these two evolutionary variants of the Latin adverb BENE occur in complementary distribution (Gulsoy 1996: 43-44).⁴ I illustrate this in the examples in (20), which parallel those in (19).

- (20) a. ocela que à mota carn e poques plomes no *pot bé volar*
 bird that has a-lot-of flesh and few feathers not can-3PI well fly
 ‘a bird that has a lot of flesh and few feathers cannot fly well’
 (CICA; end of the 13th century, *Vides*: 471)
- b. De temps, dix que *bé pot aver* ·I· ayn e mig.
 for time said-3PAST that well can-3PI have-INF one year and half
 ‘As for time, he said [it happened] a year and a half ago.’
 (CICA; 1294–1295, *Cocentaina* II: 743)
- c. Lo preu, *bé* ·I· *pot minvar*, mas no créxer
 the price well it-AC can-3PI reduce-INF but not increase-INF
 ‘He can well reduce the price, but not increase it’
 (CICA; 1272, *Costums*: 417)
- d. Ací és venguda la nova dels cardenals. Vostra santedat ha
 here is come the news of-the cardinals your-2PL holiness has-3PI
 fet per ésser dotze; *bé podien ésser tretze* ab mon fill.
 made to be-INF twelve well could-6II be-INF thirteen with my son
 ‘Here has come the news of the cardinals. Your Holiness has made [them]
 to be twelve; well they could be thirteen with my son.’
 (CICA; 1493–1494, *Cartes Borja* II: c. 3)

4. See, however, the beginning of section 3.

The cases that particularly interest me are those in which *ben* (or, when that is the case, the variant *bé*) modifies a predicate constituted by the auxiliary *poder* and the infinitive of the existential verb *ésser* with an emphatic, intensifying meaning. There are only five tokens in the *CICA* with the structure conjugated form of *poder* + *ben/bé* + infinitive *ésser*, but in the two oldest instances, which have epistemic value, *bé* ‘well’ takes on a quantitative meaning, like what we saw in (19b) and (20b), and expresses the notion that the number of sails (21a) or the time (21b) indicated has been reached or even exceeded.⁵

- (21) a. E, quant vench al matí, veem les veles bé
 And when came-3PAST to-the morning saw-4PAST the sails well
 ·xxv· milles envès la mar de Manoresques; e *podien bé*
 twenty-five miles across the sea of Menorca and could-6II well
ésser ·xvii· veles
 be-INF seventeen sails
 ‘And when the morning came, we saw the sails well twenty-five miles
 across the sea of Menorca; and they could well have been seventeen sails’
 (*CICA*; 1343, Jaume I, *Fets*: f. 179r)
- b. e quan fom endret lo castell, a la ràpita,
 and when were-4PAST in-front-of the castle in the ribat
podia bé ésser hora nona
 might-3II well be-INF hour ninth
 ‘and when we were in front of the castle, in the ribat, it might well have
 been the ninth hour [after sunrise]’
 (*CICA*; 1343, Jaume I, *Fets*: f. 129v)

The remaining three tokens, however, are the ones that turn out to be really interesting and relevant. I am referring to those in (22), (23) and (25), from the 15th and 16th centuries, because they constitute clear precedents for the epistemic modal marker I am analysing. In these tokens, the interpolation of *bé*, in the two

5. With this quantitative meaning, it is also possible for the adverb *bé* to appear after the infinitive. Compare (21a) with (i-a) and (21b) with (i-b):
- (i) a. vengren los cònsols ab d’ altres hòmens a nós [...]; e *pogren ésser bé*
 came-6PAST the consuls with of other men to us-RPL and could-6PAST be-INF well
 tro a ·xx·
 until twenty
 ‘the consuls came with other men to us [...]; and they could well have been as many as
 twenty’
 (*CICA*; 1343, Jaume I, *Fets*: f. 124r)
- b. ·ia· nuyt vengren -nos ·ii· almugàvers de Lorca e tocaren a la
 one night came-6PAST us-DAT two Almogavars from Lorca and knocked-6PAST to the
 nostra porta; e *podia ésser bé* mija nuyt
 our door and could-3II be-INF well midnight
 ‘one night two Almogavars from Lorca came to us and knocked on our door; and it could
 well have been midnight’
 (*CICA*; 1343, Jaume I, *Fets*: f. 163r)

first examples, or *ben*, in the last one, implies an intensification of the idea of possibility conveyed by the statement: its interpretation is not simply ‘it is possible’ but ‘it is really/undoubtedly/truly possible’. The need for emphasis is provoked in all cases by the pragmatic context.

The oldest example comes from a sermon by Saint Vicent Ferrer which he devotes to the dispute that took place between Saint Catherine and the philosophers of Alexandria. When one of the latter argues that it is not possible for Jesus Christ to be both God and man (*açò no pot ésser* ‘this cannot be’) (22a), Catherine rejects his arguments without being intimidated and ends her rebuttal with the statement *e açò pot bé ésser* ‘and this can indeed be’ (22b). Thus, the reason for the presence of the intensifying adverb *bé* ‘well’ interpolated into the modal periphrasis is that the interlocutor has previously denied the possibility that the saint firmly defends.

- (22) a. Na Caterina, vós dyeu que Jesuchrist és Déu e hom,
 ART Catherine you-PL.RESP say-5PI that Jesus Christ is God and man
 e *açò no pot ésser*
 and this not can-3PI be-INF
 ‘Catherine, you say that Jesus Christ is God and man, and this cannot be’
 (CICA; 1445–1449 [1410–1415], Sant Vicent, *Sermons* IV: 136)
- b. Jesuchrist ab la divinitat ha ·s ajustat la humanitat en una
 Jesus Christ with the divinity has REFL joined the humanity in one
 persona, sostenint -la ·s en sí, e axí la ·s reté, e
 person sustaining it REFL in himself and thus it REFL retains and
açò pot bé ésser
 this may-3PI well be-INF
 ‘Jesus Christ has united divinity and humanity in one person, sustaining it
 in himself, and thus he retains it, and this can indeed be’
 (CICA; 1445–1449 [1410–1415], Sant Vicent, *Sermons* IV: 136)

The next example is taken from a dialogue in the medieval chivalric romance *Curial e Güelfa* (23), the English translation I offer in (24) being that by Max Wheeler (2011: 243). The knight Curial had promised not to reveal the fact that he was receiving the favours of Güelfa, a secret known only by the two lovers and his mentor, Melchior. When it became public, both she and Melchior accused Curial of breaking his promise, arguing that if only the three of them knew the secret and neither Güelfa nor Melchior had revealed it, he was the only possible culprit. In this dialogue, desperate from having fallen out of favour with Güelfa, Curial defends himself by emphasizing the fact that there exists another possibility that they have ignored, namely that someone had simply deduced what was going on and then spread the news.

- (23) —[...] E pensa encara en la ley que ordonà, com primerament te començà a avançar, dient que, lo primer jorn que per servidor seu te publicaries, la perdries per a tots temps. Donchs, tu sabs si és fama divulgada per lo món ella donar-te tot ço que tu guastes: ella no ho ha dit, ne yo tanpoch; donchs, de tu és exit, e aquesta és presumció rahonable.

[...]

—No pusch ne vull negar les coses que dites m'avets ans dich e confés ésser veres e contenents veritat. Emperò, que yo hage traspassada la ley que m'imposà no és ver, car de mi nulls temps isqué tal mot; emperò *pot bé ésser* que alguns ho hagen pensat, e, aquell pensament denunciât a altres, aquest fet se serà publicat, e axí m'pens que serà a les sues orelles pervengut.

(CICA; 1442, *Curial*: 274)

- (24) Melchior: “[...] Remember too the condition she laid upon you when first she began to give you advancement, that the first day you gave yourself out as her servant you would lose her forever. You know well whether or not the story is spread through the world that she gives you all you spend: she has not said so, nor I, so it is a reasonable assumption that it must have come from you.” [...] Curial: “I cannot and will not deny what you have said, indeed I confess that it is true or contains truth. But that I have disobeyed the condition she imposed is not true, for not a word of that ever escaped me. It *may well be* that some have thought it and have declared their thought to others so that it has become spread abroad, and thus, I imagine, has come to her ears.”

The last example is taken from Cristòfol Despuig's *Los col·loquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa* (25), a Renaissance literary work written in the form of a dialogue between three interlocutors. I offer in (26) the English translation by Henry Ettinghausen (2014: 160). In this excerpt Lúcio, the author's alter ego, rejects the opinion of the historian Pere Miquel Carbonell, who refuses to accept the legend of Otger Cataló as true because of the lack of documentary evidence. Lúcio (that is, Despuig), affronted by the idea that a Catalan author would attack the founding narrative of Catalonia (Alcoberro 2000: 93), insists that documentary evidence may well have existed but has not been found or has been destroyed: he feels the need not only to state that this fact is possible, but to categorically insist that it is possible.

- (25) Y la rahó que Carbonell dona en la opinió sua, no sols contradient a Tomich mas impropertant-lo és molt dèbil y de poch fonament: que diu que ell no ha trobat may ni llegit tal cosa, que no per ço que no u ha llegit ni trobat, se segueix que no y ha hagut, perquè *podia ben ser* que en aquell archiu real sien estats los originals de assò y que ell per mal cercar no·ls haurà trobats, o també, per desgràcia se seran entre altres escriptures cremats o de altra manera perduts; que no per so que no se són en nostres temps allí trobats se prova que may hi són estats, que provar la negativa en semblant cosa que aquesta és impossible.

(CICA; 1557, Despuig, *Col·loquis*: 182)

- (26) And the reason Carbonell gives for his view – not just contradicting Tomic, but actually insulting him – is really very weak and unsupported, as all he says is that he’d never come across or read anything about it. And, just because he’d never read or come across anything, it doesn’t follow that it never happened, because *it’s quite possible* that the original documents were in the royal archives and that he didn’t look for them hard enough, or else that they were unfortunately amongst the papers that got burnt, or were lost in some other way. The fact that they can’t be found in our day doesn’t prove that they were never there, as it’s impossible to prove a negative in a case like that.

It is worth noting that in all three cases the utterances emphatically intensified with *bé* or *ben* ‘well’ come from interactions that took place in contexts with a strong emotional load for the speaker, who risks a great deal if he cannot convince his interlocutors that what he says is certainly possible. In the first case, Saint Catherine has been imprisoned by the Emperor because of her faith and in the dialectical struggle with the fifty philosophers of Alexandria martyrdom is at stake. In the second case, Curial is deprived of the love and financial support that Güelfa provided him, because of an accusation that he considers unjust. In the third case, Lúcio feels that the foundations of his nation have been attacked in a way that he considers unfounded and unworthy of a Catalan, to the point that he declaims regarding Carbonell “no sé què pugué moure-l a fer-hi la contradicció que y ha feta essent cathalà, que no u sabera fer més un castellà” (*CTILC*; 1557, Despuig, *Col·loquis*: 182-183).⁶

What I did not find in the *CICA* is this same structure intensified by the insertion of the adverbial phrase *molt ben* (nor the variant *molt bé*), in which the adverb *ben* ‘well’ used with its intensifying meaning is modified by the quantifier *molt* ‘very’. Despite this, the adverbial phrase *molt ben* is found interpolated in periphrasis with the modal verbs *poder* ‘can, may/might’ and *deure* ‘must’ (27a), as well as in infinitive constructions following the causative verb *fer* ‘do’ (27b), the verbs close to auxiliaries *saber* ‘know’ (27c) and *voler* ‘want’ (27d), and the perception verb *veure* ‘see’, (27e), and even modifying an infinitive with a figurative sense of location (27f).

- (27) a. Este cosa às tu huy pensade molt e sí la deus molt
 this thing have-2PI you today thought a-lot and so it must-2PI very
 ben saber
 well know-INF
 ‘You have thought a lot about this today and so you must know it very
 well’
 (*CICA*; 1380, *Questa*: f. 52ra)

6. English translation by Ettinghausen (2014: 160): “I don’t understand what could have persuaded him to deny it, as he does, especially with him being a Catalan. A Castilian couldn’t have done worse.”

- b. començà de ajustar molta gent y fer -los molt ben
 began-3PAST to gather-INF many people and make-INF them very well
armar
 arm-INF
 ‘he began to gather many people and arm them very well’
 (CICA; 1620 [1586], XVlb, *Il·lustracions*: 281)
- c. e ere ben instruyit en totes les arts e sabia molt ben
 and was well instructed in all the arts and knew-3II very well
scriure
 write-INF
 ‘and he was well instructed in all the arts and knew very well how to write’
 (CICA; 1450?, *Exemples*: 331)
- d. E pregà ·l que ·s volgués molt ben informar
 and asked-3PAST him that REFL want-3IS very well inform-INF
 del stament de l’ emperador
 about-the condition of the emperor
 ‘And he asked him to inform himself very well about the emperor’s condition’
 (CICA; 1490 [1460], Martorell, *Tirant*: 1310)
- e. lo qual la véu / molt ben morir
 who her-AC saw-3PAST very well die-INF
 ‘who saw her / very well die’
 (CICA; 1490 [1460], Roig, *Spill*: 15991)
- f. e la donzella posà sa diligència en molt ben servir a
 and the maiden set-3PAST her diligence in very well serving PREP
 Ypòlit
 Ypòlit
 ‘and the maiden put all her diligence into serving Ypòlit very well’
 (CICA; 1490 [1460], Martorell, *Tirant*: 984)

The few instances where the adverbial phrase *molt ben* ‘very well’ occurs after the modal auxiliary *poder* always contain infinitives other than *ésser* ‘be’ as the main verb, and in all cases the periphrasis has the root meaning of ‘can’, specifically to express the idea that someone has the opportunity to do something, with the perception verbs *veure* ‘see’ (28a) and *oir* ‘hear’ (28b), or the freedom or authorization to do something, with the diction verb *dir* ‘say’ (28c) and the factitive verb *fer* ‘do’ (28d). From a semantic point of view, in (28a,b) the adverbial phrase *molt ben* ‘very well’ means that the agent can do the action (see or hear) properly, whereas in (28c,d) it is used emphatically and its meaning is similar to that of the adverb *certament* ‘certainly’.

- (28) a. e de allí *podia molt ben veure* a la princessa
and from there could-3II very well see-INF PREP the princess
'and from there he could see the princess very well'
(CICA; 1490 [1460], Martorell, *Tirant*: 1041)
- b. ell e tothom *ho podia molt ben oir*
he and everyone it-AC could-3II very well hear
'he and everyone else could hear it very well'
(CICA; 1454–1484, Safont, *Dietari*: 130)
- c. *se pot molt ben dir* sens ningún perjudi
REFL can-3PI very well say-INF without any prejudice
'it can very well be said without any prejudice'
(CICA; 1557, Despuig, *Col·loquis*: 153)
- d. *pogueren molt ben fer* y eren obligats ha fer lo que
could-6PAST very well do-INF and were-6II obliged to do-INF the that
en la capsíó
in the capture
'they could very well do and were obliged to do what [they had done]
during the capture'
(CICA; 1557, Despuig, *Col·loquis*: 167)

Searching the diachronic subcorpus of the *CIVAL* provided me with some several examples of *molt ben* preceding an infinitive, some of which were interpolated into the root periphrasis with *poder*, but in no case did I find this adverbial phrase followed by the existential verb *ésser* 'be'. However, it must be said that examples like these, with the adverbial phrase *molt ben* interpolated between two verbs the second of which is an infinitive, are not found beyond the end of the 16th century, the last ones being those shown in (29), despite the fact that this subcorpus of Valencian texts covers up to the first third of the 20th century.

- (29) a. *questio [...] de la qual se poden molt ben informar* de
matter of ART which REFL can-6PI very well inform-INF by
don Sabastia
Don Sabastia
'[a] matter about which they can very well be informed by Don Sabastia'
(CIVAL; 1542, *Memorial del síndic del braç militar sobre els desacataments que hauria produït Jeroni de Cabanyelles*)
- b. Lo vell *sap molt ben amar*
the old-man knows very well love-INF
'The old man knows very well how to love'
(CIVAL; 1562, Timoneda, *Flor d'Enamorats*: 49)
- c. lo señor official *se volgué molt ben enterar* del fet
the mister officer REFL wanted-3PAST very well find-out-INF about-the fact
'the officer wished to inform himself very well of the deed'
(CIVAL; 1585, Pere Joan Porcar, *Coses evengudes en la ciutat e regne de València* I: 427)

3. Contemporary Catalan data

In contrast to the scarcity of Old Catalan examples (in the entire *CICA* there are only the three we saw), the *CTILC* offers 139 instances of the construction I am analysing, namely, the modal periphrasis with *poder* as auxiliary and *ésser* as the main verb, intensified by the interpolation of the adverbial phrase *molt ben* or the adverb *ben*. These 139 examples correspond to 99 different authors (in addition to six examples from periodicals whose authors are unknown).

I must point out that in the *CTILC* there are also instances where the modal periphrasis with *poder* and *ésser* is modified by the adverb *bé* ‘well’, the variant of *ben* with loss of the final nasal (§ 2), either alone or accompanied by the quantifier *molt* ‘very’ or even by the intensifier *ben* ‘well’ itself, forming the redundant idiom *ben bé*. Unlike (*molt*) *ben*, which always occurs interpolated, adverbial phrases *bé*, *molt bé* and *ben bé* occur in all positions: postverbal (30), preverbal (31) and, surprisingly, also interpolated between the auxiliary and the main verb (32), which transgresses the supposed complementary distribution between variants *ben* and *bé*.

- (30) a. Més *pot* *ser* *be* qu’ en discreció vos guanyen
 but may-3PI be-INF well that in discretion you-2PL.RESP.AC win-6PS
 ‘But it may well be that in discretion they are superior to you’
 (*CTILC*; 1888, Joaquim Rubió i Ors, *Luter*)
- b. *Pot* *ser* *molt bé* que el diner del futur no tingui
 may-3PI be-INF very well that the money of-the future not have-3PS
 cap forma física
 any form physical
 ‘It may very well be that the money of the future will not have any physical form’
 (*CTILC*; 1996, Alfons Cornella i Josep Rucabado, *Les autopistes de la informació*)
- c. Realment, *podia ésser ben bé*.
 really could-3II be-INF well well
 ‘Really, it could very well be.’
 (*CTILC*; 1891, Narcís Oller, *La febre d’or*, II)
- (31) a. Per causes, que *bé podrien ésser* més polítiques que
 for reasons that well could-6COND be-INF more political than
 literàries
 literary
 ‘For reasons that could well be more political than literary’
 (*CTILC*; 1918, Josep M. López-Picó, *Escriptors estrangers contemporanis*)
- b. Sí, *molt bé pot ésser* aixó que vosté diu.
 yes very well may-3PI be-INF this that you-RESP.SG say-3PI
 ‘Yes, it may very well be what you say.’
 (*CTILC*; 1883, Lluís Puig i Savall, *Medis pera millorar la condició social dels obrers*)

- c. *Ben bé pot esser una cançó d' enyorança*
 well well may-3PI be-INF a song of longing
 'It may very well be a song of longing'
 (CTILC; 1967, Alexandre Ballester i Moragues, *Siau benvingut*)
- (32) a. *Aquest capítol podria bé ser un llibre de distints volums*
 this chapter could-3COND well be-INF a book of different volumes
 'This chapter could well be a book of different volumes'
 (CTILC; 2016, Andreu Escrivà, *Encara no és tard*)
- b. *Podria molt bé ésser que ells mateixos en fossin els*
 could-3COND very well be that they themselves PRON were the
 autors
 authors
 'It could very well be that they themselves were its authors'
 (CTILC; 1954, Lluïsa Vilaseca Borràs, *El gremi de blanquers i assaonadors de Reus*)
- c. *No obstant això, podria ben bé ser que el valor de Ω*
 however could-3COND well well be-INF that the value of Ω
 fos superior
 was higher
 'However, it could well be that the value of Ω was higher'
 (CTILC; 1992, Eduard Salvador, *L'univers conegut*)

I leave for future research these cases, quantified in table 1, in which the modifier of the verbal periphrasis of possibility is *bé*, *molt bé* or *ben bé*, given that they present similarities, but also syntactic and semantic differences, with respect to the examples with interpolated (*molt*) *ben*.

Table 1. Number of occurrences in the CTILC of the modal periphrasis with *poder* 'can, may/might' and *ésser* 'be' as main verb modified by the insertion in different positions of the adverbial phrases *bé* 'well', *molt bé* 'very well' and *ben bé* 'very well'

	preverbal position (<i>molt/ben</i>) <i>bé pot ser</i>	interpolated <i>pot (molt/ben) bé ser</i>	postverbal position <i>pot ser (molt/ben) bé</i>	Total
<i>bé</i>	61	2	4	67
<i>molt bé</i>	18	36	45	99
<i>ben bé</i>	13	17	25	55
Total	92	55	74	221

3.1. Dialectal distribution

Returning to the examples with interpolated (*molt*) *ben*, the first issue that the data from the CTILC allow us to verify is that this construction is used to very different degrees in Catalan dialects (table 2).

Table 2. Number of occurrences, normalized frequency (number of occurrences per million words) and first documentation in the *CTILC* of the epistemic modal marker *pot* (*molt*) *ben* ser ‘it may (very) well be’, by dialect

	Central Catalan	North-Western Catalan	Balearic Catalan	Valencian Catalan
Number of occurrences	128	6	4	1
Normalized frequency	1.555 pmw	0.840 pmw	0.512 pmw	0.107 pmw
Year of first documentation	1838	1907	1951	1985

According to the *CTILC* data, it seems to be a structure mainly used in Central Catalan and, to a much lesser extent, in North-Western Catalan. In Balearic Catalan, and even more so in Valencian Catalan, its presence seems to be late and marginal. There are no instances of this construction in the *CTILC* from either Northern Catalan or Alguerese Catalan. However, it is necessary to check the absolute number of tokens in the corpus (figure 1, middle graph) according to the proportion of text in each dialect in the corpus (figure 1, left-hand graph), to obtain relative frequency of tokens per dialect (figure 1, right-hand graph), which gives us a better picture of the presence of this construction in each dialect.⁷

In the case of Valencian Catalan, we can compare the results for this dialect in the *CTILC* with those obtained from the present-day Valencian subcorpus of the *CIVAL*. In the latter, I found no instances of (*molt*) *ben* interpolated in the periphrasis of possibility with *poder* and *ésser*. By contrast, I found thirteen instances of

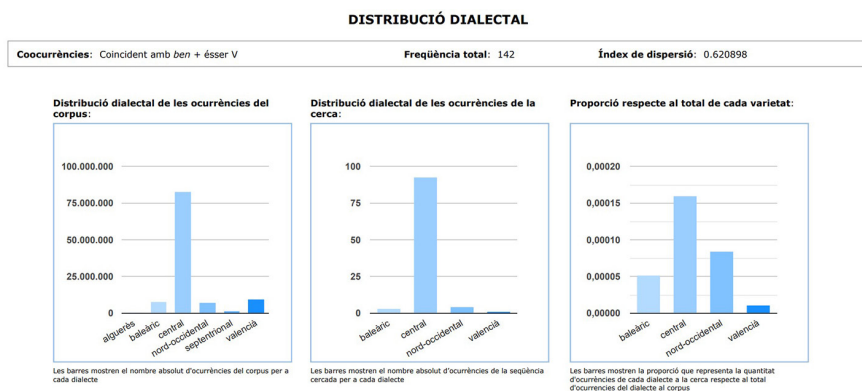


Figure 1. Left-hand graph: number of words by dialect in the *CTILC*. Middle graph: instances of the structure under study in the *CTILC*. Right-hand graph: relative frequency of tokens per dialect

7. These graphs were generated automatically by the *CTILC* analysis tools on the basis of my search for the combination of lemmas *ben* + *ésser*. The small numerical discrepancy in the total number of tokens (142 in the graphs, 139 in my tables) is due to the fact that I had to discount three tokens from Central Catalan that did not correspond to the construction under study.

the structure with the interpolated adverbial phrase *ben bé* (the first one from 1979) and four with interpolated *molt bé* (from 1980), and also eleven with postposed *ben bé* (from 1995) and three with postposed *molt bé* (from 2009). Therefore, the only Valencian instance with *ben* in the *CTILC*, *pot ben ser*, by Lluís Guarner (1985), can be safely labelled as an outlier (and, given that the source text was published in Barcelona, it may reflect intervention on part of a proof-reader rather than the author's choice of words).

The dialectal distribution revealed by the data is not entirely surprising if we bear in mind that the interpolation of modifiers in compound verb forms, that is, periphrastic past with auxiliary *va* (*va cantar* 'he sang') and perfect tenses with *haver* 'have' (*ha cantat* 'he has sung'), is not allowed to the same degree in all Catalan dialects (*GIEC*: § 24.8.3.2c): it is especially common in Gironese Catalan, a subdialect included in Central Catalan, and in Northern Catalan, the Catalan spoken in the part of historical Catalonia that currently lies within France.⁸ In its official grammar of Catalan, the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute for Catalan Studies) has this to say on the matter:

Modal and aspectual periphrases allow the interpolation of certain elements between the auxiliary verb and the main one. Specifically, it is possible to interpolate the [negative] adverb *pas* [...], a focal adverb [...], the adverb *mai* 'never' [...] and, less commonly, the subject [...]. In the periphrases of the past and perfect, the interpolation is fundamentally peculiar to Northern [Catalan] and Gironese [Catalan]: [...] *Ho he ben repassat* 'I have well reviewed it' [...]. Outside of these varieties, the construction without the interpolation is more general: [...] *Ho he repassat bé* 'I have reviewed it well' [...]. [my translation] (*GIEC*: § 24.8.3.2)

3.2. Syntactic behaviour

On the basis of examples obtained from the *CTILC*, four features of the syntactic behaviour of this intensified epistemic periphrasis can be discerned:

a) It always occurs in an imperfect tense of the indicative mode (table 3), the most common being the present (34a) and the conditional (34b), although there are also occurrences in the imperfect (34c) and even the future (34d).

Table 3. Distribution of tokens in the *CTILC* of the construction *pot (molt) ben ser* among the several imperfect tenses of indicative mode

Tense	present indicative <i>pot</i>	conditional <i>podria</i>	imperfect indicative <i>podia</i>	future <i>podrà</i>
Number of occurrences	63	56	16	4
%	45.3 %	40.3 %	11.5 %	2.9 %

8. Northern Catalan is poorly represented in the *CTILC*, comprising a mere 0.9% of the contents (940,663 words out of a total of 107,636,134). Perhaps this explains the absence of examples coming from this dialect, if this construction is in fact used there.

- (34) a. Després de tot, *pot molt ben ser* que els rèptils
 after PREP all, may-3PI very well be-INF that the reptiles
 no hagin fet mai ús de cap llenguatge
 not have-6PS done never use of any language
 ‘After all, it may very well be that reptiles have never used any language.’
 (CTILC; 1970, Josep Ferrater Mora, *Els mots i el homes*)
- b. Així, *podria molt ben ésser* que el cognom fos jueu
 thus could-3COND very well be-INF that the surname was-3IS Jewish
 i la raça una mica barrejada.
 and the race a bit mixed
 ‘Thus, it could very well have been that the surname was Jewish and the
 race a bit mixed.’
 (CTILC; 1966, Josep Pla, *El quadern gris*)
- c. *podia molt ben ser* que realment volgués ser arpista
 could-3II very well be-INF that really wanted-3IS be-INF harpist
 ‘it could very well have been that he really wanted to be a harpist’
 (CTILC; 1996, Quim Monzó, *Guadalajara*)
- d. *podrà molt ben ser* que la seva acció sigui nul·la
 may-3FUT very well be-INF that his action be-3PS void
 ‘it may very well be that his action will be void’
 (CTILC; 1935, Joan Puntí i Collell, *Manera de parlar en públic*)

Regarding the association between the periphrasis with *poder* and the conditional, it should be noted that this tense, rather than in its basic temporal use as a relative tense with the meaning of ‘future in the past’, is used mainly with various modal meanings (Pérez Saldanya 2002: 2640–2645) which are linked to unreality or counter-factuality (*Ho faria, però no tinc temps* ‘I would do it, but I don’t have time’), courtesy (*M’estimaria més no anar-hi* ‘I would rather not go there’) and evidentiality (*D’acord amb la recerca d’Abel Soler, Enyego d’Àvalos seria l’autor de Curial e Güelfa* ‘According to Abel Soler’s research, Enyego d’Àvalos would be the author of *Curial e Güelfa*’), this last use being current only in academic and journalistic writing and suspected of being a Gallicism, even though in Old Catalan there did exist a reprise evidential conditional (Martines 2015, 2018). In this sense, it is understandable that the epistemic modal periphrasis with *poder* is frequently associated with the conditional tense, as a redundant way of marking the conjectural meaning of the statement. In fact, the Catalan normative grammar rules recommend this association as a “more natural” resource to avoid certain journalistic uses of the conditional with the meaning of ‘unconfirmed information’.

Journalistic language tends to use this conditional to present unconfirmed information: *Per les informacions que ens arriben, la bomba hauria_[3COND] causat la mort de trenta civils*. ‘According to the information that has reached us, the bomb would have caused the death of thirty civilians.’ To convey this meaning, it is often more natural to combine the conditional with the modal verb *poder*: *Per les informacions que ens*

*arriben, la bomba podria*_[3COND] *haver causat la mort de trenta civils.* ‘According to the information that has reached us, the bomb may have caused the death of thirty civilians.’ [my translation] (*GIEC*: § 24.4.8c)

b) The epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* is found in affirmative declarative sentences but not in negative ones, given that the intensifying adverb *ben* is a positive polarity term, that is to say, it requires an affirmative context to be legitimized. This is also the case when *ben* acts as a degree quantifier and modifies an adjective (*Estan ben satisfets de com els han anat les coses* ‘They are well satisfied with how things have turned out for them’, but **No* [‘not’] *estan ben satisfets de com els han anat les coses* is ungrammatical; example taken from Espinal 2002: § 24.3.2).

Two occurrences, however, are negative interrogative sentences, which are possible because they are counter-expectation questions. These sentences express surprise and displeasure because the speaker’s assumptions about the facts have been altered and he seeks to motivate the interlocutor to justify himself or give an explanation for his position (*GIEC*: § 34.2.1.2). An example like (35) legitimizes the insertion of the intensifier *ben*, despite the presence in the sentence of the negative adverb *no*, because it is a rhetorical question equivalent to a covert assertion of opposite polarity (Payrató 2002: § 3.4.3): *¿no pot ben esser que [...]*? ‘could it not well be that [...]?’ = *pot ben esser que [...]* ‘it could well be that [...]’. By means of this expressive resource, the speaker in (35) seeks to persuade his audience to validate the certainty of the postulates he is defending.

- (35) —A més—va dir —¿no pot ben esser que, com ell declara,
besides said-3PAST not may-3PI well be-INF that as he declares
tobat pel beure, s’ hagués adormit de tal manera que no
addled by drink REFL had-3IS fallen-asleep in such way that not
sentís ni ’l soroll més fort?
hear-3IS even the noise more loud
“Besides,” he said, “could it not well be that, as he claims, addled by drink,
he had fallen asleep so deeply that he did not hear even the loudest noise?”
(*CTILC*; 1905, Antoni Careta i Vidal, *Narracions estranyes*)

c) The epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* can form several types of sentences, in accordance with the syntactic possibilities of the verb *ésser*. On the one hand, we find intransitive sentences in which *ésser* denotes the existence of a fact or situation (table 4). In this type of structure, the subject can be a complement clause (36a) or it can remain implicit and be understood by the context (36b) or it can be a pronoun or a relative: I had found three examples with the universal quantifier *tot* ‘everything’ used as a pronoun (36c), two with the relative pronoun (*lo*) *que* ‘that’ (36d) and two with the relative adverb *com* ‘as’ (36e).

Table 4. Number of tokens in the CTILC of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* ‘it may (very) well be’ in intransitive sentences

Intransitive sentences with <i>ésser</i> ‘be’ used with an existential meaning		
with a subject complement clause	with an implicit subject	with a pronoun or relative subject
83	11	7

- (36) a. *Pot molt ben ser que t’ equivoquis.*
 may-3PI very well be-INF that REFL.2SG be-wrong-2PS
 ‘It may very well be that you are wrong.’
 (CTILC; 1993, Quim Monzó, *El perquè de tot plegat*)
- b. *De vegades s’ identifiquen amb els seus propis interessos, pot*
 sometimes REFL identify-6PI with their own interests may-3PI
ben ser.
 well be-INF
 ‘Sometimes they identify with their own interests, it may well be.’
 (CTILC; 2008, Helena Lamuela [translator], *No pensis en un elefant!*)⁹
- c. *Oy qu’ es cert; tot podria ben ser.*
 yes-INT that is true everything could-3COND well be-INF
 ‘Isn’t that true? It could all well be.’
 (CTILC; 1881, Emili Vilanova, *Cuadros populares*)
- d. *Si encara no s’ ha dit —que podria molt ben esser—,*
 if yet not REFL has said that could-3COND very well be-INF
ara ho dic jo.
 now it-AC say-1PI I
 ‘If it hasn’t been said yet—which could very well be—I’m saying it now.’
 (CTILC; 1951, Joan Bonet i Gelabert, *Els nins*)
- e. *¿Y si mor com pot bèn sèr [/] Que s’ dirà del*
 and if dies as may-3PI well be-INF what REFL say-3FUT about-the
doctor Pau?
 doctor Pau
 ‘And if he dies, as may well be [= come to pass] [/] What will be said about Doctor Pau?’
 (CTILC; 1851, *Poesias*, Pau Estorch i Siqués)

On the other hand, the epistemic modal marker *pot molt ben ser* can form copulative sentences with various types of attributes (table 5): a nominal attribute, in identification sentences (37a); an adjective attribute, in characterization sentences (37b); and even a prepositional phrase (37c) or an adverb (37d) as attribute. Unlike

9. The original English text is “They may identify with their self-interest. *That can happen.*” (George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*, Vermont, Chelsea Green, 2014 [2004], p. 17).

what happens in the intransitive sentences we saw above, where the subject was usually a complement clause and the auxiliary verb necessarily occurred in third singular person, in copulative sentences *poder* can be conjugated in a grammatical person other than the third singular, in accordance with the agreement required by the subject (38).¹⁰

Table 5. Number of tokens in the CTILC of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* ‘it may (very) well be’ in copulative sentences

Copulative sentences with different kinds of attributes			
SN	SAdj	SPrep	SAdv
28	5	1	1

- (37) a. el vell oficial *podria molt ben ésser* l’ heroi somniat
 the old officer could-3COND very well be-INF the hero dream
 ‘the old officer could very well have been the hero they had dreamt of’
 (CTILC; 1926, Agustí Calvet, *Hores viatgeres*)
- b. cosa no ben exacte i que *pot molt ben ser* casual
 thing not well accurate and that may-3PI very well be-INF coincidental
 ‘which is not very accurate and which may very well be coincidental’
 (CTILC; 1991, Francesc Nicolau, *Ciències físiques i filosofia de la naturalesa*)
- c. Y aquell cap [...] *podria molt ben ser* d’ un home d’Estat
 and that head could-3COND very well be-INF of a statesman
 ‘And that head [...] could very well be of a statesman’
 (CTILC; 1898, Artur Masriera [translator], *Hamlet príncep de Dinamarca*)¹¹
- d. *podia ben ésser* altrament
 could-3II well be-INF otherwise
 ‘it could well be otherwise’
 (CTILC; 1934, Josep Carner [translator], *Les grans esperances de Pip*)¹²
- (38) aquelles paraulas *podian ben ser* fillas de la seva exepcional
 those words could-6II well be-INF children of her exceptional
 innocencia
 innocence
 ‘those words could well have been born of her exceptional innocence’
 (CTILC; 1874, Martí Genís i Aguilar, *Julita*)

10. An intransitive sentence like *totes les coses que has dit poden (molt) ben ser* ‘all the things you have said may (very) well be’, with the verb in third person plural, is conceivable, but no such instance was found in the corpus.

11. The original English text is “This *might be* the pate of a politician” (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Edinburgh, A. Donaldson, 1770, p. 92).

12. The original English text is “it *might be* so” (Charles Dickens, *Great expectations*, Boston, Estes and Lauriat, 1881, p. 184).

On only one occasion in the *CTILC*, the sequence I am searching for is inserted into an impersonal construction (39a).¹³ There are also two instances in which the sequence *pot (molt) ben ser* is part of a periphrastic passive (39b), in which *ésser* is not the main verb but rather the passive auxiliary of a transitive verb.

- (39) a. *Podia ben ser mitja nit*
 could-3II well be-INF midnight'
 'It could well have been midnight'
 (*CTILC*; 1915, Carles Riba [translator], *Històries extraordinàries*)¹⁴
- b. *això podria ben ésser abandonat, amb altres històries velles*
 this could-3COND well be-INF abandoned with other stories old
 'this might [= could] well be abandoned, with other old stories'
 (*CTILC*; 1934, Josep Carner [translator], *Les grans esperances de Pip*)¹⁵

d) The last observation I want make is that the first instances of the structure in the *CTILC* contain the adverb *ben* as intensifier without the quantifier *molt*. Thus, it could be said that they link to the *CICA* data, in which I found three instances of the modal periphrasis of interest reinforced with *bé* (the two oldest, from the 15th century) or *ben* (the last one, from the 16th century), but none reinforced with *molt ben* (or *molt bé*). The first occurrence in which the intensifier *ben* is, in its turn, intensified with the quantifier *molt* is from 1872, while the first with the interpolation of *ben* in the *CTILC* is from 1838 (see table 6).

Table 6. Last occurrence with *ben* 'well' in the *CICA*, in which there are not samples with *molt ben* 'very well'; first occurrences with *ben* 'well' and *molt ben* 'very well' in the *CTILC*

Structures with <i>ben</i>		Structures with <i>molt ben</i>
<i>CICA</i> (last occurrence)	<i>CTILC</i> (first occurrence)	<i>CTILC</i> (first occurrence)
1557	1838	1872
Despuig, <i>Col·loquis</i>	Abdó Terradas, <i>Lo rei Micomicó</i>	C. M., <i>Los camps y'ls prats</i>

However, the variant with increased emphatic intensification, *pot molt ben ser* (105 tokens), quickly becomes the most frequent, far outnumbering *pot ben ser* (34 tokens), as can be seen in table 7. The tendency of speakers to use load words and constructions with subjective modal meanings causes the linguistic elements most linked to the expression of internal meanings (valuations, perceptions, points of view, etc.) to pass through successive reformulations to prevent the erosion caused by use from making them lose intensity, or because of a desire to endow them with more emphasis. This is illustrated by the way that the expression of gratitude has

13. Compare (39a) with (21b).

14. The original English text is "It might have been midnight" (Edgar Allan Poe, *Ligeia* [1838], in *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1990, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press).

15. The original English text is "that might be laid aside now, with other old belongings" (Charles Dickens, *Great expectations*, Boston, Estes and Lauriat, 1881, p. 268).

tended to become progressively intensified, passing from *gràcies* ‘thanks’ to *moltes gràcies* ‘many thanks’ and then to *moltíssimes gràcies* ‘so many thanks’, or the transition of the expression of assent from *bé!* ‘good’ to *molt bé!* (and in Balearic Catalan *beníssim!*) ‘very good’ and then to *perfecte!* ‘perfect’ or even *perfectíssim!* ‘very perfect’).

Table 7. Distribution of tokens of *pot ben ser* ‘it may well be’ and *pot molt ben ser* ‘it may very well be’ in the *CTILC* by quarter-of-a-century intervals

	1832 1850	1851 1875	1876 1900	1901 1925	1926 1950	1951 1975	1976 2000	2001 2019	Total
<i>ben</i>	1	6	3	12 ¹	4 ²	0	5	3	34
<i>molt ben</i>	0	3	15	19	15	16	21	16	105
Total	1	9	18	31	19	16	26	19	139

1. Half of these occurrences correspond to a single author, Carles Riba, and another two are from Josep Carner.

2. All of these occurrences correspond to a single author, Josep Carner.

The data show that, for all types of constructions with a minimum number of occurrences, there are instances of both variants of the emphatic intensifier, *ben* and *molt ben*, the latter being the more numerous, as seen in table 8.

Table 8. Distribution of tokens in the *CTILC* of *ben* ‘well’ and *molt ben* ‘very well’, by type of construction

	<i>pot molt ben ser</i>	<i>pot ben ser</i>	Total
intransitive: subject complement clause	70	13	83
intransitive: implicit subject	7	4	11
intransitive: pronoun or relative subject	4	3	7
copulative: attribute SN	19	9	28
copulative: attribute SAdj	3	2	5
copulative: attribute SPrep	1	-	1
copulative: attribute SAdv	-	1	1
impersonal	-	1	1
periphrastic passive	1	1	2
Total	105	34	139

3.3. Semantic value

The three occurrences I found in the *CICA* of the modal periphrasis with *poder* ‘can, may/might’ as auxiliary and *ésser* ‘be’ as main verb and with the interpolation of the intensifying adverb *ben* (or *bé*) ‘well’ came always from dialogues taking place in contexts with a strong emotional load, and all of them had the same semantic value, the intensive expression of possibility, and the same pragmatic use: the

speaker defended emphatically the existence of a possibility previously denied by the interlocutor or by someone else (§ 2). Naturally, it was this previous negation that motivated the need for emphasis and caused the transition from a neutral statement expressing possibility, *pot ser* ‘it may be’, to a marked statement emphatically expressing possibility, *pot ben ser* ‘it may well be’. The great increase in instances in the *CTILC* of the latter construction, either in its original form, *pot ben ser*, or in a new variant with the intensifier intensified (redundancy intended), *pot molt ben ser*, allow us to see that a diversification of the meanings and pragmatic uses of this epistemic modal marker has taken place.

The first thing to note is that *pot (molt) ben ser* occurs in all types of texts in the *CTILC*. Texts in this corpus are divided according to a binary typology into literary texts and non-literary texts and then each of these two classes are further subdivided. Literary texts are classified by genre as narrative, essay, theatre and poetry. In the case of non-literary texts, one class consists of writings from the press, and the rest are classified thematically as works of philosophy; religion and theology; social sciences; pure and natural sciences; applied sciences; fine arts, leisure, games and sports; language and literature; and history, geography and biography. Table 9 shows the number of occurrences of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* for each literary genre as well as the proportion they represent considering the total word count for each literary genre relative to the full word count of all literary texts in the corpus. It will be seen that by far the highest concentration of the structure occurs in the essay genre. Similarly, table 10 shows the number of occurrences of the marker I am dealing with for each thematic classification in the corpus as well as the proportion they represent considering the total word count for each class relative to the full word count of all non-literary texts in the *CTILC*. Regarding the comparison between the presence of *pot (molt) ben ser* in literary and non-literary texts, in absolute value the number of occurrences is practically the same (68 versus 71 respectively), but taking into account the volume in the *CTILC* of each type of texts it turns out that proportionally the presence is 57% in literary texts against 43% in non-literary texts.¹⁶

Table 9. Number of tokens of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* ‘it may (very) well be’ in literary texts in the *CTILC*, broken down by genre, and proportion according to the presence of each genre in the corpus

Literary texts: genre			
narrative	essay	theatre	poetry
37	21	8	2
21.4%	51.3%	19.6%	7.7%

16. All percentages, including those in tables 9 and 10, were automatically calculated by the *CTILC* tools.

Table 10. Number of tokens of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* ‘it may (very) well be’ in non-literary texts in the *CTILC*, broken down thematically, and proportion according to the presence of each thematic class in the corpus

Non-literary texts: thematic classification								
press	philosophy	religion & theology	social sciences	pure & natural sciences	applied sciences	fine arts, leisure, games & sports	language & literature	history, geography & biography
7	3	8	10	11	11	9	8	4
8.4%	6.6%	13.6%	8.1%	21%	10.9%	13.7%	13.1%	4.8%

I will begin by focusing on literary texts, among which works of theatre and narrative works containing dialogues or interior monologues are of particular interest because they are most likely to reflect every-day usage of the spoken language, and I will also consider journalistic texts. The earliest example of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* in the *CTILC* has the expected meaning of emphatic expression of possibility and shows links with the use I found in the *CICA* in examples from the 15th and 16th centuries (§ 2). Thus, the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* remains in the field of possibility without entering that of probability.

This first occurrence (40) comes from the 1838 play in verse *Lo rei Micomicó*, an anti-monarchical satire written by Abdó Terradas that portrays a world of madmen revolving around a central figure, King Micomicó. The play begins with the preparations for the king’s wedding to an old woman, who is already married but has joined this imaginary world nonetheless, much to the utter bewilderment of her husband. Despite his scepticism, the old woman advises her husband to go through an initiation ceremony intended to make him see that what appears to be a chimera is in fact perfectly possible. As in the medieval examples we saw above, the need for emphasis arises, in a context with a strong emotional load, because the interlocutor has previously denied the possibility that the speaker expresses.

- (40) Deixa t passar per lo Rey, [/] Y luego de una altre lley [/]
 let-IMP REFL.2SG pass-INF by the king and after of another kind
 Serán tots tos pensaments; [/] Llavors los encants [/
 be-6FUT all your-SG thoughts then the enchantments
 Que ara t’ semblen impossibles [/] Los veurás clars y
 that now you-DAT.SG seem-6PI impossible-PL them see-2FUT clear-PL and
 creïbles; [/] Entendrás que *pot ben ser*.
 credible-PL understand-2FUT that may-3PI well be-INF
 ‘Let yourself be passed by the King, [/] And after that of another kind [/] All
 your thoughts will be; [/] Then the enchantments [/] That now seem impossible
 to you [/] They will appear to you clear and credible; [/] You will understand
 that it may well be.’
 (*CTILC*; 1838, Abdó Terradas, *Lo rei Micomicó*)

Beyond cases like this, where the use of the structure coincides with its use in Old Catalan, we find in the *CTILC* another type of use, with the same meaning,

in which there is an internal confrontation between two possibilities raised by the speaker himself. In other words, the speaker is self-correcting an excessively hasty first impression. When the speaker realizes that there is another possibility beyond what he had initially thought, he appends it to his previous comments, emphasizing that it is also possible. The end result is that two possibilities remain, without the speaker deciding on either one.

Thus, in (41a), taken from a fable, the frogs in a pond wonder why the only fish that lives in it never says anything to them. At first, they think that their croaking scares him, but then they add another possibility: the fish might be mute. Note the adverb *també* ‘also, as well’. In (41b), which comes from a children’s magazine, the speaker, a young fellow who is jealous because he saw the girl he likes talking to another man, expresses doubts about his first impression of what he saw and emphatically proposes a more reassuring alternative. Note the verbal phrase of inchoative aspect *entrava en el dubte* ‘he began to wonder’, the conditional conjunction *si* ‘if, whether’, and the verbs *exagerar* ‘exaggerate’ and *creure* ‘believe’. In (41c), which is a stage direction for a play, a first possibility is immediately corrected by the posing of a second, equally plausible alternative. Note again the presence of *també* ‘also, as well’.

- (41) a. Elles pensaren, a la primeria, que llur cant enquimerava
 they thought-6PAST at ART first that their singing frightened-3II
 el peix. [...] també cavil·laven que aquell peix
 the fish also speculated-6II that that fish
podia ben ésser mut de naixença.
 could-3II well be-INF mute from birth
 ‘They thought, at first, that their singing was frightening the fish. [...] they
 also speculated that the fish could well be mute from birth.’
 (CTILC; 1924, Carles Riba, *L’ingenu amor*)
- b. Alguns dies s’ escolaren i ja John entrava en el
 some days REFL passed-6PAST and already John entered-3II into the
 dubte de si havia exagerat en creure festeig
 doubt PREP whether had-3II exaggerated in believing-INF courtship
 el que *podia molt ben ésser* simple col·loqui.
 ART what could-3II very well be-INF simple conversation
 ‘Some days passed and John began to wonder whether he had exaggerated
 in believing to be courtship what could very well have been a simple
 conversation.’
 (CTILC; 1938, *En Patufet*, 1.764)
- c. Se senten sospirs, que també *podrien molt ben ser*
 REFL heard-6PI sighs which also could-6COND very well be-INF
 sanglots ofegats.
 sobs stifled
 ‘Sighs are heard, which could also very well be stifled sobs.’
 (CTILC; 1964, Gabriel Bas, *Diàlegs de Carmelites*)

In another kind of occurrence (42), which shares similarities with the previous ones, the existence of two possibilities is proposed from the start by the speaker, who commits himself to neither. The intensifier thus covers both possibilities, and the emphasis serves to point out that both are equally likely. Note the difference with respect to the examples in (41), in which the epistemic modal marker affected only the second possibility, which was intensified to highlight the speaker's self-correction.

In (42a), taken from a detective story, the speaker emphasizes that either possibility considered – whether a person's death had been natural or not – might really be true, but he prefers not to commit himself to one or the other. Note, on the one hand, the universal quantifier *tot* 'everything' as a pronoun subject and, on the other, the speaker's refusal to decide between yes and no answers. Similarly, in (42b), taken from a novel, two equally plausible explanations are posed (note the disjunctive conjunction *o* 'or') by the speaker, a widower speculating to himself about his former mistress, of whom he has heard nothing for many years, while he is walking towards her house in the hope of catching her by surprise.

- (42) a. No us diré que sí ni que nó; tot *pot molt ben*
not you-PL tell-1FUT that yes nor that no everything may-3PI very well
esser.

be-INF

'I won't tell you yes or no; everything could very well be.'

(CTILC; 1905, Antoni Careta i Vidal, *Narracions estranyes*)

- b. *Podia molt ben ser que s' hagués canviat de pis o*
could-3II very well be-INF that REFL had-3IS changed PREP flat or
que hagués tornat al poble, però lo que em feia més
that had-3IS returned to-the village, but ART what me do-3II more
por era que s' hagués casat o que tingués un fulano
fright was that REFL had-3IS married or that had-3IS a fancy-man
vivint amb ella.

living with her

'It could very well have been that she had moved to a different flat or had returned to the village, but what frightened me most was the possibility that she had got married or that she had some man living with her.'

(CTILC; 2011, Ramon Solsona, *L'home de la maleta*)

It is worth noting that in examples of (41) and (42) a balance of forces between two possibilities is established, without the speaker opting for either. Thus, the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* remains in the field of possibility without entering that of probability. Despite this, we find in these examples the idea of weighing up two possibilities, even if the speaker does not dare to tip the scales in favour of either, and this brings us a little bit closer to the meaning of probability, because probability is based precisely on the evaluation of two or more possible situations to decide which has more chances of being true.

In the examples I have analysed so far, at least two possibilities appear explicitly. In some cases, including the Old Catalan examples from the *CICA*, the speaker expresses a possibility that his interlocutor or someone else had previously denied, and this is the reason why he enunciates it with emphasis through the interpolation of the intensifier *ben*. In other cases, it is the speaker himself who refers to the existence of two possibilities, without opting for either one or the other. Sometimes this involves self-correcting a hasty first impression, in which case the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* affects only the second constituent and has the function of equating it to the first, and at other times it involves an option proposed by the speaker from the start, without his daring to favour that option over another, in which case what is emphasized is precisely that both options have the same level of probability.

However, there are examples in the corpus where only one possibility is made explicit in the interaction without its having been previously denied by the interlocutor or a third party and without being weighed by the speaker against a stated. When this occurs, what motivates the speaker to insert an intensifier into the periphrasis? And how does the interlocutor interpret this? Because one thing is clear: if a speaker inserts an emphatic linguistic element into an utterance he does so for some reason. And in turn when an interlocutor decodes a message that contains an intensifying element he tries to find a meaning for it.

It seems that, in such a case, when only one possibility is explicitly raised, the emphasis caused by the interpolation of the adverbial phrase (*molt*) *ben* has less to do with the fact that the situation enunciated is considered possible (no one questions it) than with the fact that it is perceived as possible and moreover as highly probable. In other words, in the absence of contrast with other possibilities, the presence of the intensifier *ben*, alone or accompanied by *molt*, can lead to an extension of the original meaning of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* from the emphatic expression of possibility to the expression of high probability.

I have identified two bridge contexts for such a semantic change, in which the original meaning of this epistemic modal marker is pragmatically enriched with the inference of a new semantic value that will be grammaticalized and later expanded beyond these bridge contexts that caused the change. The first one is found in those cases in which the possibility raised by the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* had already appeared in the preceding statement by means of a non-emphatic expression of possibility. This invites the interlocutor to infer that in the meantime the speaker has evaluated the possibility, and the repetition of it, now emphasized, is not a simple redundancy but rather an expression of the confidence of the speaker in the truth value of his statement.

Let us look, for instance, at the example in (43), taken from a dialogue in a detective story. When the victim's cousin, who has falsified photographic evidence, is faced with an uncomfortable question from the judge who identified the cadaver, he tries to justify something in his falsified photograph that does not fit with what was found at the scene of the crime. First, he offers an impromptu explanation presented as possible through the adverbial phrase *tal vegada* 'perhaps'. Then, he evaluates his own hypothesis with the epistemic modal marker *podria molt ben*

ésser ‘it could very well be’, which is interpreted not as a simple redundancy in the idea of possibility, but as a step towards probability, not done disinterestedly, of course, because he is trying to keep his deception from being discovered. The example in (44) illustrates the same semantic extension from possibility to probability caused by the succession of a non-emphatic expression of possibility followed by an emphatic expression of the same possibility, from which it is inferred that the added emphasis indicates a high probability. This example comes from the Catalan translation of Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), with the only differences being that the possibility adverb in the preceding sentence now is *potser* ‘maybe’, and the step from possibility to probability has a nobler reason: the speaker, a young soldier, tries to reassure his mother, who is worried because he is going to the front.

- (43) —Es ben extrany qu’ en la fotografia aparega l’ escena al
 is-3PI very strange that in the photograph appears-3PS the scene in
 revés de com seria de creure que hagués passat,
 reverse of how be-3COND PREP believe-INF that have-3IS happened
 segons la disposició en que va trobar se la difunta quan
 according the disposition in which found-3PAST REFL the deceased when
 anàrem a regonèixer la en lo Jardí.
 went-4PAST to recognize-INF her in the garden
 “It is very odd that the scene which appears in the photograph is the reverse of
 how it ought to be if what happened is what one would suppose, judging from
 the way the deceased was lying when we went to identify her in the garden.”
 —No sé què li diga; però tal vegada, abans de caure
 not know-1PI what DAT.RESP say-1PS but perhaps before falling
 y després de clucar los ulls, vaja fer un mohiment de
 and after closing the eyes made-3PAST.SUBJ a movement of
 desviació. *Podria molt ben ésser.* En fi, a les seves ordes.
 swerve could-3COND very well be-INF well at your command
 “I don’t know what to tell you; but perhaps, before falling and after shutting her
 eyes, she swerved. It could very well be. Well, anyway, I’m at your service.”
 (CTILC; 1905, Antoni Careta i Vidal, *Narracions estranyes*)
- (44) —Potser podries aconseguir un càrrec on no hi hagués
 maybe could-2COND get a position where not there was
 tant de perill.
 so-much danger
 “Perhaps you could get a posting where there wasn’t so much danger.”
 —Sí, mare, potser em destinaran a la cuina. *Podria molt
 yes mother maybe me assign-6FUT to the kitchen could-3COND very
 ben ésser.*
 well be-INF
 “Yes, mother, perhaps they will assign me to the kitchen. It may very well
 be.”

—Accepta-ho, sents?, que diguin el que vulguin els altres...
 accept it hear-2PI that say-6PS what want-6PS the others
 “Accept it, do you hear me? Let others say whatever they want...”
 (CTILC; 1930, Joan Alavedra i Segurañas [translator], *Res de nou a l'oest*)¹⁷

The second bridge context is found in cases in which the speaker accompanies the statement introduced with the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* with a causal clause. The presence of such a justification in the co-text invites the interlocutor to think that the speaker is making an inference based on his observations and previous knowledge of the world. This shifts the meaning from possibility to high probability, because the point raised by the speaker heightens confidence in the truth value of the statement.

Let us see some examples. The dialogue in (45) is taken from a narrative depiction of customs and traditions (*narració costumista*, in Catalan) which addresses the issue of marriage between a *cabaler* (‘son who does not inherit because he is not the eldest male offspring’) and a *pubilla* (‘daughter who inherits because she has no brothers’) and, in particular, the requirement that the groom in such instances was expected to adopt his wife’s surname, an acknowledgement of the *pubilla*’s superior social standing, that was perceived as humiliating for the *cabaler*. The protagonist, the humble Àngel Bellnom (literally, ‘Angel Beautiful-Name’), does not want to adopt the surname of his rich fiancée. A friend agrees to intercede with the girl’s father, even though he believes that *pot molt ben ésser* ‘it may very well be’ that his intervention will be fruitless because the tradition is so deeply rooted. Making this reason explicit leads the interlocutor to infer that the speaker considers the statement introduced with *pot molt ben ésser* not only possible, but highly probable.

- (45) —¿Y si aqueixes influències no hi valen?
 and if those influences not have-effect-6PI
 “And if those influences have no effect?”
 —Com *pot molt ben ésser* que no hi valgan, perque,
 as may-3PI very well be-INF that not have-effect-6PS because
 preocupació ò lo que sía, está això tant arrelat y l’ amo de
 worry or whatever is-3PI this so rooted and the owner of
 Riublau tant encarinyat deu estarhi, que res d’extrany tindria
 Riublau so attached must-3PI be-INF that nothing strange have-3COND
 un fracàs en les negociacions nostres.
 a failure in the negotiations ours
 “As it may very well be that they will have no effect, because, out of concern
 or whatever, this [tradition] is so deeply rooted and the owner of Riublau
 must be so attached to it, that a breakdown in our negotiations would hardly
 be surprising.”
 (CTILC; 1881, Lluís Bertran Nadal i Canudas, *Qüestió de nom*)

17. The original German text is “Ja, Mutter, vielleicht komme ich in die Küche, das kann wohl sein” (Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues*, 2004 [1929], Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, p. 106).

The instance in (46), from a satirical magazine, is another example of this kind of bridge context. In this journalistic note about the limited success of a performance of the zarzuela *El guante amarillo*,¹⁸ the chronicler wonders about the reasons for its failure. Reflecting on the critics' negative reviews, he admits that *podria molt ben ser que tinguessin rahó* 'it could very well be the case that they are right'. This statement does not mean simply 'it is possible that they are right', but rather 'it is very likely that they are right', this interpretation being favoured by the presence of a causal subordinate clause introduced by *perquè* 'because', which validates the critics' views through a statement expressing a universal reason (note the adverb *sempre* 'always').

- (46) ¿A qué atribuirlo? Els intel·ligents en aquest gènere estimulant
to what attribute-INF-it-AC The experts in this genre stimulating
ne donavan la culpa á ciertas deficiencias plásticas de carácter
PART put-6II the blame on certain deficiencies plastic of nature
femení. *Podria molt ben ser* que tinguessin rahó, perque
feminine could-3COND very well be-INF that were-6IS right because
aquesta classe de produccions se salvan sempre no per lo que
this class of productions REFL save-6PI always not by what
instruïxen, sino per lo que *ensenyan*.
instruct-6PI but by what show-6PI
'What should this be attributed to? The experts in this stimulating genre lay
the blame on certain plastic deficiencies of a feminine nature. It could very
well be they are right, because this sort of production is always saved not by
what it instructs, but by what it shows.'¹⁹
(CTILC; 1906, *La Esquella de la Torratxa*, no. 1455)

A final example will illustrate how the shift in the semantic value of *pot (molt) ben ser* from its original meaning of possibility expressed emphatically to the inferential meaning of high confidence in the certainty of the statement is favoured when the words of the speaker are perceived by the interlocutor as a conjecture or inference based on the speaker's prior knowledge of the world. Note, in (47), the presence of a causal clause introduced in this case by the conjunction *com (que)* 'as, since', used to justify the speaker's confidence in his statement (the prediction of a not only possible but likely breakup between a boyfriend and his girlfriend because she is not really very much in love with him).

18. Lyrics by José Jackson and Jacint Capella, music by Amadeu Vives and Gerónimo Giménez.

19. A play on words based on the double meaning of the Catalan verb *ensenyar*, which can mean either 'to teach, to instruct' or 'to show, to let see'. The word is italicized in the original.

- (47) Per altra part, ella no el volia tal com era; i, com l' afecte
 for other part she not him-AC want-3II as was and, as the affection
 que la noia li duia no era dels que fan passar
 that the girl him-DAT had-3II not was of-the that make-6PI pass-INF
 per damunt de tot, *podria molt ben ésser* que un altre se
 above everything could-3COND very well be-INF that one else REFL
 la hi emportés.
 her-AC him-DAT took-away-3IS
 'On the other hand, she did not want him as he was; and, as the affection that
 the girl felt for him was not of the kind that sweeps all before it, it might very
 well be that someone else would take her away.'
 (CTILC; 1921, Jaume Massó i Torrents, *Croquis pirenencs*)

From bridge contexts such as these, a routinization leading to the convention-
 alization of the invited inference occurs, so that the meaning of *pot (molt) ben ser*
 as a high probability epistemic modal marker extends beyond the contexts that
 allowed its emergence. The example in (48), from a humour magazine, is a case in
 point. In telling a joke involving an Englishman (*el cuento de las avellanas tendres*
 'the tale of the tender hazelnuts'), quotes the Englishman in Catalan, not English,
 because otherwise *podria ben ser que molts no ho entenguessin* 'it may well be that
 many people do not understand it'. Why not simply say *podria ser que molts no*
ho entenguessin 'it may be that many people do not understand it'? Did he need to
 emphasize the existence of this possibility, if no one had previously questioned it
 and, in fact, it would have been completely obvious in 1866 that the vast majority
 of this Barcelona weekly's readers did not understand English (most likely, the
 journalist himself included)? The answer is clearly no. It must be, therefore, that
 the emphasis added by the interpolation of the intensifier *ben* has to do not with
 the existence of a certain possibility, but rather with the assessment of this pos-
 sibility as highly probable. Moreover, the interpolation of the intensifier becomes,
 in this particular case, a humorous resource used by the journalist, who amusingly
 emphasizes as certainly possible and even likely – as if anyone could question it – a
 reality well known to everyone.

- (48) Advertesquin que aixó ho va dir ab anglés
 note-6IMP that this it-AC said-3PAST in English,
 mes com *podria ben ser* que molts no ho entenguessin,
 but as may-3COND well be-INF that a lot not it-AC understand-6IS
 me he pres la llibertat de dir ho en catalá.
 REFL.1SG have taken the liberty of saying-INF it-AC in Catalan
 'Note that he said this in English, but as it may well be that a lot [of people]
 do not understand it, I have taken the liberty of saying it in Catalan.'
 (CTILC; 1866, *Lo Noy de la Mare*, no. 27)

Moving from a humorous example to a completely serious one, in (49) we find the opening paragraph of the epilogue to *Quadern d'Aram*, a novel about the genocide of the Armenian people written by Maria Àngels Anglada. In this epilogue a hypothesis is raised about the future of the protagonist, Aram, the fictional co-author with his mother of the diary (the *quadern* 'notebook' of the title) found by the narrator-editor. The ending of the novel is left open, so the reader will never be sure whether Aram, after learning the details of his father Vahé's murder, will end up joining the Armenian armed resistance groups to fight for the independence of his people and retribution for those who murdered them. However, the fact that this hypothesis is presented not with a neutral expression of possibility (*pot ser* 'it may be') but rather with an emphatic one (*pot molt ben ser* 'it may very well be') marks it as not merely possible but highly probable.

- (49) Hi ha una altra, possibilitat, més inquietant: Aram va confiar el
 there is another possibility more disturbing Aram entrusted-3PAST the
 quadern al seu amic perquè va triar un camí perillós.
 notebook to his friend because chose-3PAST a path dangerous
Pot molt ben ser que s'afiliés a un dels grups armenis
 may-3PI very well be-INF that REFL joined to one of-the groups Armenian
 de resistència armada, a la diàspora, decidits a lluitar per la
 of resistance armed in the diaspora determined to fight for the
 independència del seu poble i perquè fos feta justícia contra
 independence of his people and for be-3PS done justice against
 els seus assassins —els assassins de Vahé.
 their killers the killers of Vahé
 'There is another more disturbing possibility: Aram entrusted the notebook
 to his friend because he chose a dangerous path. It may very well be that he
 joined one of the Armenian armed resistance groups in the diaspora, deter-
 mined to fight for the independence of his people and for justice to be done
 against their killers—the killers of Vahé.'
 (CTILC; 1997, Maria Àngels Anglada, *Quadern d'Aram*)

The semantic change involved in the conversion of *pot (molt) ben ser* into an epistemic modal marker of high probability is shown schematically in table 11.

Table 11. Steps in the expansion of the meaning of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* 'it may (very) well be' from the emphatic expression of possibility to the expression of high probability

Original meaning: emphatic expression of possibility		
rebuttal	self-correction	balance
defence of a possibility previous denied by someone	addition of a possibility to correct a hasty first impression	raising two possibilities without opting for either
[this may <u>not</u> be] – this may <u>really</u> be	it is this... or it <u>also</u> may be that	<u>either</u> it is this <u>or</u> it is that

Table 11. Steps in the expansion of the meaning of the epistemic modal marker *pot (molt) ben ser* ‘it may (very) well be’ from the emphatic expression of possibility to the expression of high probability

Inferential meaning: expression of high probability		
bridge contexts: invited inference		conventionalized inference
redundancy	conjecture	routinization
neutral expression of possibility followed by an emphatic one	emphatic expression of possibility with a causal clause	emphatic expression of possibility extended to expression of probability
<i>this may be, this really may be</i> ↓ <i>this is <u>highly likely</u></i>	<i>this really may be, because...</i> ↓ <i>this is <u>highly likely</u></i>	<i>this really may be</i> ↓ <i>this is <u>highly likely</u></i>

In particular, the high probability meaning is what is intended when *pot (molt) ben ser* is used as a stereotyped reply in present-day spoken Catalan, the use that initially caught my attention (§ 1). As we saw in § 3.2, in the *CTILC* there are eleven instances of intransitive constructions with an implicit subject, whose referent can be recovered from the co-text provided by the speaker himself or from the words of the interlocutor. Eight of the eleven are fully independent sentences, as in (50a), an instance in which the author interrogates himself, the remaining three being inserted into the speech introduced by either a diction (*dir* ‘say’) or a cognition (*entendre* ‘understand’) verb or linked by a copulative conjunction (*i* ‘and’), as in (50b).

- (50) a. El senyor Pla? Josep Pla? Es refereix Aymà a aquest senyor Pla?
ART mister Pla Josep Pla REFL refers-3PI Aymà to this mister Pla
Podria molt ben ser.
could-3COND very well be-INF
‘Mister Pla? Josep Pla? Is Aymà referring to this Mister Pla? It could very well be.’
(*CTILC*; 2019, David de Montserrat & Juli Gutiérrez, *L’home que no llogia els diaris*)
- b. ab las calors que fa á Barcelona, no s’ está bé sinó en
with the heat that do in Barcelona not REFL is-3PI good except in
dos llocs: en aquells subterranis y al aygua; dich mal,
two places in those underground and in-the water say-1PI wrong
la patrona n’ hi afeigeix un altre, la Catedral, y *pot*
the mistress PART LOC adds another the Cathedral and may-3PI
ben esser.
well be-INF
‘with the heat in Barcelona, one is only comfortable in two places, in those that are underground ones and in the water; I’m wrong, the mistress adds one more place, the Cathedral, and it may well be [true].’
(*CTILC*; 1882, Narcís Oller, *La papallona*)

Some of these dialogic fragments provide a new context of use which leads to the emergence of something that is close to concessive meaning. I am referring to cases in which *pot (molt) ben ser* affects the first constituent of a partial adversative coordinate sentence whose second constituent is introduced by the conjunction *mes* ‘but’ (51) or *però* ‘but’ (52). The insertion in this context adds a concessive flavour to the statement introduced with *pot (molt) ben ser*, because an adversative coordinated sentence and a sentence containing a concessive adjunct share the meaning of contrast or opposition, and each one can be paraphrased by the other one: *pot molt ben ser que ho hagi fet de bona fe, però ens ha perjudicat* ‘it may very well be that he did it in good faith, but it harmed us’ ↔ *encara que pot molt ben ser que ho hagi fet de bona fe, ens ha perjudicat* ‘even though it may very well be that he did it in good faith, it harmed us’. This concessive nuance does not affect the truth value of the statement, that is, the consideration of the situation referred to as highly probable; in fact, an expression of certainty can occupy this same position without losing any of its force: *És cert/veritat/ver que s’hi ha d’esforçar molt, però això no el priva de treure bons resultats* ‘It is true that he has to put in a lot of effort, but that does not prevent him from getting good results’.

- (51) a. *Pot molt ben esser, no dich pas que no;*
 can-3PI very well be-INF not say-1PI NEG that no
mes jo responch que ’s pot escollir la mena de retornar.
 but I answer that REFL can-3PI choose-INF the type of return
 ‘It may very well be, I’m not saying it isn’t; but I answer that you can choose the type of return.’
 (CTILC; 1872, C. M. [translator], *Los camps y’ls prats*)²⁰
- b. *Á qui ’m vinga ab que tot això no es més que una ilusió*
 to who me tells-3PS PREP that all this not is more than an illusion
poètica d’ un esperit somiador, li diré que pot molt
 poetic of a spirit dreaming him-DAT tell-1FUT that may-3PI very
ben ser; mes que ’m deixe ab ella
 well be-INF but that me leave-3PS with her
 ‘To whomever tells me that all this is nothing more than the poetic illusion of a dreaming spirit, I will say that it may very well be; but leave me with it’
 (CTILC; 1887, Jacint Verdaguer, *Excursions y viatjes*)
- c. —[...] *Os juro que no hi ha res mes que això.*
 you-DAT swear-1PI that not there is nothing more than that.
 ‘I swear to you that there is nothing more than that.’
 —*Podrà ben ser, mes quelcom ha servit d’ apoi.*
 can-3FUT well be-INF but something has served as support.
 ‘It could well be, but something has served as support.’
 (CTILC; 1915, Joaquim Torres-García, *Diàlegs*)

20. The original French text is “*C’est possible, je ne dis pas non*” (Pierre Joigneaux, *Les champs et les prés*, troisième édition, Paris, Librairie Agricole de la Maison Rustique, 1865, p. 63).

- (52) *Pot molt ben ser; però, çí si Déu va veure 'm, [/] i ve*
 may-3PI very well be-INF but and if God saw-3PAST me and comes
 la mort?
 the death
 'It may very well be; but what if God saw me, [/] and death came?
 (CTILC; 1953, Josep M. Boix i Selva [translator], *El paradís perdut*)²¹

I have left for last the use of *pot (molt) ben ser* in academic texts. In this type of writing it is possible to find the maintenance of its original semantic value in contexts in which the author emphasizes the existence of a possibility that has been previously denied or omitted. This is the case in (53), where the author corrects an erroneous inference and emphatically points out the existence of a possibility that the person who made this wrong inference overlooked.

- (53) *del analisi d' una terra rica en nitrogen no pot deduir*
 from-the analysis of a soil rich in nitrogen not can-3PI deduce-INF
 -se n que siga fertil, puix *pot molt ben ser* que siga
 REFL PART that is-3IS fertile since may-3PI very well be-INF that is-3PS
 dolenta a causa d' estar mal constituïda físicament o de no poder
 bad due to being bad constituted physically or to not can-INF
 -se efectuar la nitrificació per falta de calç o d' aigua.
 REFL carried-out-INF the nitrification for lack of chalice or of water
 'from the analysis of a soil rich in nitrogen it cannot be deduced that it is
 fertile, since it may very well be that it is bad due to being poorly constituted
 or that nitrification cannot be carried out for lack of lime or water.'
 (CTILC; 1898, Joaquim Aguilera, *Teoria y practica del adobs*)

Notwithstanding, *pot (molt) ben ser* is commonly used in academic writing as a resource to formulate hypotheses. In this use, which is found in all subject areas, the presence of the intensifier (*molt) ben* interpolated in the epistemic periphrasis becomes a sign of the author's confidence in the hypothesis he is formulating. In some cases, the author makes explicit an opposition to a contrary assumption made previously by someone else, as in (54), an instance in which the co-text of the epistemic modal marker clearly enhances its meaning of probability to an extreme degree: in fact, the author even seems to be certain of what he is saying, since he presents the opposite hypothesis as a belief without foundation (*s'havia cregut sense arguments* 'it has been believed without arguments') and his own assumption as a proven fact (*pot molt ben ser, i tot ho demostra* 'it may very well be, and everything proves it'). I refer next to the reinforcement of the meaning of the epistemic modal marker I am analysing by means of other linguistic elements in the co-text.

21. The original English text is "This *may be well*: but what if God have seen, [/] And death ensue?" (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1668], p. 270).

- (54) si fins ara s' havia cregut sense arguments que la moral era
 if until now REFL had-3II believed without arguments that the morality was
 més gran que la religió, *pot molt ben ser*, i tot ho
 greater than the religion can-3PI very well be-INF and everything it-AC
 demostra que la religió sigui molt més gran que la moral
 proves-3PI that the religion is-3PS much greater than the morality
 'if thus far it has been believed without arguments that morality is greater than
 religion, it may very well be, and everything proves it, that religion is much
 greater than morality'
 (CTILC; 1921, Francesc Pujols, *La religió i la moral*)

In most cases, however, the author raises his hypothesis without it being explicitly preceded by a contrary assumption. In spite of that, the idea that the author is providing a new explanatory possibility which more or less contradicts the previous ones is always there, implicitly in the background, because science is built on dialogue with those scholars who have previously dealt with the same subject. In (55) I provide some examples of usage coming from various fields of knowledge, namely numismatics (55a), metallurgical industries (55b), fine arts (55c), literary history (55d) and physics (55e).

- (55) a. L' atribució de les monedes que'ns ocupen resulta,
 the attribution of the coins that us-AC concern-6PI results-3PI
 doncs, molt dubtosa y *pot molt ben ser* que no fossin
 therefore very doubtful and may-3PI very well be-INF that not were-6PS
 encunyades a Catalunya.
 minted in Catalonia
 'The attribution of the coins that we are concerned with is therefore very
 doubtful and it may very well be that they were not minted in Catalonia.'
 (CTILC; 1908, Joaquim Botet i Sisó, *Les monedes catalanes*, I)
- b. *podria molt ben ésser* que aquesta farga fos la de la
 could-3COND very well be-INF that this forge was-3IS ART of La
 Corba, de la qual tenim un testimoni en el citat
 Corba of ART which have-4PI a testimony in the aforementioned
 Arxiu de Ripoll
 Archive of Ripoll
 'it could very well be that this forge was that of La Corba, of which there
 is mention in the aforementioned Archive of Ripoll'
 (CTILC; 1930, Antoni Gallardo & Santiago Rubió, *La farga catalana*)

- c. El gravat és poc hàbil i una mica tosc i fa tota la the engraving is unskilful and a bit crude and gives all the impressió d' ésser obra d' una mà poc destra. *Pot* impression of being-INF work of a hand little dexterous can-3PI *molt ben ésser* que fos gravada per un gravador a la fusta very well be-INF that was-3IS engraved by a engraver in the wood que no sabés manejar el burí damunt del metall amb la who not know-3IS handle-INF the burin on the metal with the destresa desitjada. dexterity desired
'The engraving is clumsy and a bit crude and gives all the impression of being the work of an unskilled hand. It may very well be that it was engraved by a wood engraver who did not know how to handle the burin on the metal with the necessary dexterity.'
(CTILC; 1947, Joan Amades, *Xilografies gironines*, I)
- d. La poesia titulada "Viatge nupcial" *pot ben ser* una the poem entitled journey nuptial can-3PI well be-INF a continuació del mateix cançoneret amorós. continuation of-the same little-songbook love
'The poem entitled "Nuptial Journey" may well be a continuation of the same little book of love songs.'
(CTILC; 1985, Lluís Guarnier, *La Renaixença valenciana i Teodor Llorente*)
- e. Això va suggerir a l' italià Amadeo Avogadro (1776–1856) this suggested-3PAST to the Italian Amadeo Avogadro (1776–1856) que *podria molt ben ser* que qualsevol gas a una that could-3COND very well be-INF that any gas at a temperatura donada tingui sempre el mateix nombre de molècules. temperature given has-3PS always the same number of molecules
'This suggested to the Italian Amadeo Avogadro (1776–1856) that it could very well be that any gas at a given temperature always has the same number of molecules.'
(CTILC; 1991, Francesc Nicolau, *Ciències físiques i filosofia de la naturalesa*)

In all these instances from academic writing, in the absence of a previous denial of the possibility raised by the author, the choice of an emphatic expression (*pot (molt) ben ser* 'it may (very) well be') instead of a neutral one (*pot ser* 'it may be') reflects the high confidence of the author in the truth value of the hypothesis he formulates, and therefore it is further evidence of the conventionalization of the meaning of high probability that initially arose by inference in bridge contexts. This semantic value, moreover, can be reinforced by the co-text in which this epistemic modal marker is found, due to the meaning of words or constructions that surround it.

For instance, in (56) everything invites us to think that *pot molt ben ser* is underlain by firm confidence in the high probability of the propositional content introduced by this epistemic modal marker, due to the lexical choices that encourage this perception. The author raises the hypothesis that the images used by language can become an impediment to comprehension. This possibility is intensified by means of the epistemic modal marker under study but also greatly amplified by the other lexical and constructional choices in the co-text, which emphasize both the power of the images and the danger that that power entails. Pay attention to these expressions: the images are a very powerful temptation that we must overcome (*temptació que hem de vèncer, molt poderosa*); they drag us along without our even realizing it (*ens arrosseguen sense que ni ens n'adonem*); we must treat them with great caution (*amb molta precaució*); they are a great danger (*un grandíssim perill*); it is easy (*fàcil*) to get carried away (*deixar-nos endur llenguatge avall*); and it is difficult if not impossible to avoid being blinded by them (*difícil —per no dir impossible—, ens enceguen*). The only possible interpretation of this available to the reader is that the author thinks that being blinded by the images in a language is not just possible but highly likely.

- (56) L'essencialisme, però, no és pas l'única temptació que hem de vèncer. N'hi ha una altra que també és molt poderosa: és la temptació que ens ve de les imatges mateixes del llenguatge. I és que el llenguatge és tan pictòric i tan viu que sovint ens presenta imatges que ens arrosseguen sense que ni ens n'adonem. Per això hem de tractar el llenguatge amb molta precaució, si no ens volem deixar endur llenguatge avall. Literàriament, les imatges del llenguatge són una meravella riquíssima i imprescindible. Però també poden ser un grandíssim perill: si les imatges ens enceguen, serà fàcil que no veiem altra cosa que la llum que elles projecten i, per tant, *podria molt ben ser* que acabéssim no veient ni entenent res. En aquest sentit, les imatges del llenguatge són com les il·lustracions d'un còmic: ens permeten visualitzar coses, però després se'ns fa molt difícil —per no dir impossible— d'imaginar aquelles coses pel nostre compte i d'una manera diferent de com les hem vist representades en el còmic. 'Essentialism, however, is not the only temptation we must overcome. There is another one that is also very powerful: it is the temptation that comes to us from the images in language themselves. And the fact is that the language is so pictorial and so alive that it often presents us with images that drag us along without our even realizing it. That is why we must treat language with great caution, if we do not wish to let language take us down. Literarily, the images of language are a rich and essential wonder. But they can also be a great danger: if the images blind us, it will be easy for us to see nothing but the light they project and therefore it might very well be that we end up not seeing or understanding anything. In this sense, the images of language are like the illustrations in a comic book: they allow us to visualize things, but then it becomes very difficult – if not impossible – to imagine those things on our own and in a way that is different from how we have seen them represented in the comic.'
- (CTILC; 1998, Josep Maria Terricabras, *Atreveix-te a pensar*)

4. Conclusions

In this article I have dealt with the Catalan epistemic modal marker *pot molt ben ser* ‘it may very well be’, which is made up of the modal periphrasis *poder* ‘can, may/might’ + infinitive with the existential verb *ésser* ‘be’ as the main verb, intensified by the interpolated adverbial phrase *molt ben* ‘very well’. On the basis of excerpts taken from the *CICA*, *CIVAL* and *CTILC* written text corpora, I have analysed the emergence of this epistemic modal marker within the theoretical framework of the Invited Inference Theory of Semantic Change (Traugott & Dasher 2002).

I have obtained the following results:

- 1) This emphatic construction emerged in contexts with a strong emotional load as an expressive resource with which the speaker defended the existence of a possibility that had been previously ignored or denied by his interlocutor or by others. It was this previous negation that motivated the need for emphasis and caused the intensification with *ben* of a neutral statement expressing possibility, *pot ser* ‘it may be’, to generate a marked statement emphatically expressing possibility, *pot ben ser* ‘it may well be’. The earliest instances documented always contain the intensifier *ben* ‘well’ (or the variant with loss of nasal *bé*) without being accompanied by the quantifier *molt* ‘very’, and they date from the 15th and 16th centuries. In particular, we find this use in the sermons of Saint Vicent Ferrer, in the medieval chivalric romance *Curial e Güelfa* and in *Los col·loquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa*, a Renaissance literary work written by Cristòfol Despuig.
- 2) In Contemporary Catalan, *pot molt ben ser* seems to be mainly used in Central Catalan and, to a much lesser extent, in North-Western Catalan, while in the other Catalan dialects it seems to be non-existent or marginal. It occurs transversally in all the classes of texts making up the *CTILC*, whether literary or non-literary.
- 3) This epistemic modal marker always occurs in an imperfect tense of the indicative mode, the most common being the present and the conditional, although the imperfect and even the future occasionally appear. Its frequent association with conditional tense is a redundant way of marking the conjectural meaning of the statement.
- 4) *Pot (molt) ben ser* is found in affirmative declarative sentences but not in negative ones, given that the intensifying adverb *ben* is a positive polarity term. It is used also in negative interrogative sentences which are counter-expectation questions, because they are equivalent to a covert assertion of opposite polarity.
- 5) *Pot (molt) ben ser* can form several types of sentences, in accordance with the syntactic possibilities of the main verb. On the one hand, we find the construction in intransitive sentences in which *ésser* ‘be’ denotes the existence of a fact or situation: in this type of structure, the subject can be a complement clause, pronoun or relative, or it can remain implicit. On the other hand, we find it in copulative sentences with various types of attributes: nominal, adjectival, prepositional or adverbial. The construction can also be found, very sporadically, in impersonal structures.

- 6) The earliest instances of *pot (molt) ben ser* from the *CTILC* contain as intensifier the adverb *ben* ‘well’ unaccompanied by the quantifier *molt* ‘very’, as is also the case of examples in the *CICA*. The first occurrence in which the intensifier *ben* is in turn intensified with the quantifier *molt* is from 1872. However, the variant with increased emphatic intensification quickly becomes the most frequent, which is unsurprising given that constructions loaded with subjective modal meanings tend to pass through successive reformulations to prevent the erosion caused by use from making them lose intensity, or because of a desire to endow them with greater emphasis.
- 7) The earliest example of *pot (molt) ben ser* in the *CTILC* has the expected meaning of emphatic expression of possibility. Some later examples express a slightly different meaning in which there is an internal confrontation between two possibilities raised by the speaker himself. When the marker affects only the second possibility, it is because it is emphasized as the self-correction of a perhaps hasty first impression. There are yet other instances in which a choice between two possibilities is proposed by the speaker, who shows no preference for one or the other. In such instances the emphasis merely serves to point out that both possibilities may really be true. In all these cases there is a weighing up of two possibilities, implying the idea of evaluation, even if the speaker dares not tip the scales in favour of either. This brings us a little bit closer to the meaning of probability, based on the weighing up of possibilities to decide which one is most likely to be true.
- 8) We also find examples of *pot (molt) ben ser* where only one possibility is made explicit in the interaction, without its having been previously denied and without its being weighed against another possibility. In the absence of contrast, the interpolation of the intensifier can lead to a shift in meaning from the emphatic expression of possibility to the expression of high probability. I have identified two bridge contexts in which this semantic shift takes place.
- 9) The first bridge context is found in those cases where the possibility raised by *pot (molt) ben ser* has already appeared in the preceding statement by means of a non-emphatic expression of possibility. This invites the interlocutor to infer that in the meantime the speaker has evaluated the possibility, the repetition of which, now emphasized, is not a simple redundancy, but rather an expression of the confidence in the truth value of the statement.
- 10) The second bridge context is found in cases where the speaker accompanies the statement introduced by *pot (molt) ben ser* with a causal clause. The presence of such a justification in the co-text invites the interlocutor to believe that the speaker is making an inference, and this causes a semantic shift from possibility to high probability because the reason raised strengthens confidence in the truth value of the statement.
- 11) From bridge contexts like these, a routinization leading to the conventionalization of the invited inference occurs, so that the meaning of high probability is expanded outside the contexts that initially allowed its emergence. We find this semantic value, for instance, when *pot molt ben ser* is used as a stereotyped reply with a meaning equivalent to *és {molt / el més} probable* ‘it is very/most

likely'. Sometimes this epistemic modal marker gains a concessive nuance, because it is found in the first constituent of a partial adversative coordinate sentence whose second constituent is introduced by the conjunction *mes* or *però* 'but', but this does not affect the truth value of the statement.

- 12) In academic writing, *pot (molt) ben ser* is a resource used to formulate hypotheses. In this use, which is found in all fields, the interpolation of the intensifier *(molt) ben* '(very) well' reflects the high confidence of the author in the truth value of the hypothesis he is formulating and constitutes further evidence of the conventionalization of the semantic value which first arose by inference in the aforementioned bridge contexts.

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