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EXPLORING PRESENT ABILITY: A COLLOSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH²

The paper investigates two constructions commonly thought to be semantically equivalent, *S can V* and *S be able to V*. Both modal *can* and semi-modal *be able to* are used to express ability that could be described as either mental or acquired accomplishment, pertaining to past or present. The difference between them is typically denoted as general ability or that someone managed to do something on a particular occasion. If not limited by the main verb (e.g. there is a constraint against *can* after another modal verb)*, can* and *be able to* are mostly interchangeable. Starting from the premise that every construction carries meaning which is dependent on the meaning of lexical elements occurring in that construction, the aim is to shed light on the usage of the two verb constructions and the degree of their interchangeability by examining their complements. To compare and contrast the two constructions, we rely on a corpus-based and quantitative method of collostructional analysis (Gries and Stefanowitsch 2004), or specifically on distinctive collexeme analysis which allows us to determine if the V slot in the construction is preferred by or restricted to particular lexemes. As *S can V* and *S be able to V* are highly attested in the corpus, the research is restricted only to their meaning of the present ability.

Keywords: Construction, can, be able to, present ability, collostructional analysis, collexeme analysis, corpus analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The semantic category of ability in English can be expressed through many different lexical means and grammatical constructions, such as *can, could, managed to,* and *be able to*. In this paper, we will focus on two interchangeable expressions used in the present tense, modal verb *can* and semi-modal *be able to*. Despite the fact that these are commonly used words, they seem to be difficult to pinpoint, presumably because their usage (or preference) depends on the main verb imposing constrictions, while on the other hand the difference between *can* and *be able to* is more obvious in the past tense than it is in the present tense (this issue will be discussed at greater length in the following section). What they have in common, however, is that both take infinitival complements hence participating in the same construction type *V*

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(can/be able) + V. The term construction is understood here in the sense of Goldberg (1992, 2006: 5), as the basic linguistic unit, a sign, or pairing of form and meaning. Any linguistic pattern is considered a construction, as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts. What follows from the idea of non-compositional meaning is that constructions themselves encode meaning. If a lexical item is semantically incompatible with a certain construction, its meaning conforms to the meaning of the construction (Michaelis 2004: 25), as can be seen in *He drank the pub dry,* where *drink* as a transitive verb is used in a construction with resultative meaning. The example clearly illustrates how the construction assigns meaning to the slots occupied by lexemes.

The cognitive foundation of (usage-based) Construction Grammar is built upon the idea that frequently processed linguistic input leads directly to its entrenchment it the mind, thus building a systematic network of constructions. In other words, meaning, derived from various scenarios of human experience is paired with forms, and such constructions may "be extended in various ways, allowing the speaker to apply the familiar pattern to new contexts in principled ways" (Goldberg 1995: 43). This enables us to relate sentences like *He wiped the table clean* and *He drank the pub dry* and interpret them in the same way. The constructional framework assumes the syntax-lexicon continuum, with constructions of various levels of complexity and schematicity, whose participants exhibit varying strength of association to the construction[3].

At this point we might ask, is it plausible to claim that *can/ be able to+ V* is a construction? Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004) explored collocational preferences of *be going to* and *will* and arrived at the conclusion that these expressions clearly prefer different verb types as their complements, implying they are related yet semantically discrete. Simply put, verbs frequently following one or the other expression of future tense are in direct relation to the meaning of the entire construction.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relation between the modal verb *can* and semi-modal *be able to* as two alternative means for expressing present ability using the corpus-based (and corpus-driven) quantitative method developed by Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003) called *collostructional analysis* (to be elaborated later on). By measuring the strength of association between *can* and *be able to* and infinitival complements in respective grammatical constructions, we focus on their collocational (or colligational) preferences in search of potential difference in meaning or usage in the present tense. The results thus obtained are also qualitatively examined.

2. *CAN VS. BE ABLE TO*

There are certain formal and semantic dissimilarities between the modal *can* and semi-modal *be able to* which are going to be considered in this section. Syntactically, semi-modals generally behave like typical lexical verbs

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3   Some of the famous examples of constructions are so-called *caused-motion* constructions, *He kicked the ball into the room* (Goldberg 1995), or *let alone* construction (Fillmore 1988).

in that they are followed by *to* infinitive and require subject-verb agreement. Unlike lexical verbs, however, they are partially grammaticalized, which can be observed from contracted forms in the spoken language, e.g. *gonna*, and more notably from the fact that semi-modals hardly allow adverbs to interject between *to* and the verb. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 147–148) draw upon a data-based study (conducted by Polio (1988)) which showed that *be able to* is mostly used as a stopgap when the use of *can* is prohibited. Namely, the use of *can* is apparently constrained by the following structural features: a) *can* is not compatible with other modal verbs, b) it does not appear in perfective constructions, and c) it cannot be used instead of gerunds, infinitives and participles (e.g. *Being able to swim is the job requirement*). Additionally, the authors claim that *be able to* seems to be more formal than its modal alternative.

Modal verbs are used to express the speaker's attitude towards a proposition, ability, or to perform various social functions, unlike semi-modals which also encode aspectual meaning (Quirk et al. 1985: 143). Certainly, the verb *can* has a much wider semantic scope than its periphrastic counterpart does, as it expresses root and epistemic modality (e.g. *It can't be true*). Specifically, it is used to express ability (*I can swim*), possibility (*The paint can be applied with a spray*), and propensity (*It can be cold in Edinburgh in August*) (Downing, Locke 2006: 353). On the other hand, the meaning of *be able to* is limited merely to expressing ability, which explains the significant disproportion of the number of tokens in the corpus.

The meaning of mental or acquired ability encoded by *can* and *be able to* may be equally applied to animate and inanimate subjects, taking into account that when used with the latter, both verbs are understood rather as potentiality (e.g. *The car is able to/ can go faster with this fuel*) (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman 1999: 147).

The semantic contrast between these two verbs, most easily observed in the past tense, is regularly defined in terms of general or particular ability. Specifically, Downing and Locke (2006: 353) argue that *could,* as the past form of *can,* is obligatorily used in the affirmative and interrogative to express an action or state extended indefinitely, whereas *was/were able* is used for single, holistic achievements. The following examples corroborate this claim *He was able to escape in time*, as opposed to the unacceptable **He could escape in time*. The distinction between them no longer holds in the negative, e.g. *He couldn't/ wasn't able to escape in time*. Furthermore, *be able to* seems to be preferable when the agent exerts effort to achieve a goal (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman 1999: 147). Counter to the previous conclusions that are based on the examination of the activity in a context, this paper attempts to elucidate the contrast between *can* and *be able to* primarily by examining collocational preferences, i.e. by establishing which verbs are attracted or repelled by respective constructions.

3.   THE METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

Collostructional analysis[4] is a quantitative method measuring the co-occurrence of lexical and grammatical elements, or more precisely co-occurrence between constructions and lexemes participating in those constructions (Gries 2012: 92). Developed by Gries and Stefanowitsch (2003), and mostly related to Construction Grammar (even though it is not restricted only to this framework), it enables us to investigate and statistically measure the association of words to a certain construction, or possibly several constructions that are functionally related (Hilpert 2014: 392). In other words, collostructional analysis investigates which lexemes are strongly attracted or repelled by a particular slot in the construction, i.e. which lexemes occur more frequently or less frequently than expected, assuming a random distribution of these items across both alternations (Stefanowitsch, Gries 2004: 210; Gries et al. 2005).

This approach involves three different yet related methods (*simple collexeme analysis, (multiple) distinctive collexeme analysis*, and *covarying-collexeme analysis*), of which *distinctive collexeme analysis* is suitable for analyzing two roughly synonymous constructions—as we assume is the case with *can V* and *be able to V*.

The contingency table for distinctive collexeme analysis used to calculate the correlation between the variables is given below. Essentially, using Fisher-Yates test, the observed frequency is compared with expected frequency under the null hypothesis (the independence of two constructions), and calculated on the basis of the row and column totals. The *p*-value of this test is called *collostruction strength*.

Table 1. Contingency table for distinctive collexeme analysis

	V	¬V[5]	Totals
Construction A (be able to)	A	B	A+B
Construction B (can)	C	D	C+D
Totals	A+C	B+D	A+B+C+D

The corpus search results were first copied into a spreadsheet (the data consist of verbs occurring with *can* and *able* to and respective token frequencies), and inspected for errors, i.e. cleaned of duplicates and non-infinitival forms recognized by the search patterns. Such prepared data, with re-calculated frequencies, was used as input to R studio software, with an additional script (Flach 2017) designed specifically for *collocational analysis*[6].

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4   The name itself is a blend of *collocation* and *construction*. Lexemes attracted to a particular construction are referred to as *collexemes* of this construction; a construction associated with a particular lexeme is called a *collostruct*; a *collostruction* represents the combination of a collexeme and a collostruct (Stefanowitsch, Gries 2004: 214).

5   Corresponds to all other words in that slot.

6   Another script for distinctive collexeme analysis (by Gries 2014) is also available online. However, we prefer this one as it is more reader-friendly, i.e. comprehensible to readers without much background in statistics. For example, in Flach (2017) *p*-value as an indicator of association strength is represented through asterisks instead of numbers.

The corpus used is the British National Corpus (BNC), which is a text collection of an approximately 100 million words that documents the usage of British English in the second half of the 20th century. The corpus search was conducted for *is/am/are able to V* respectively, as the BNC does not have a single option for the present tense form of the auxiliary *to be*. All the duplicates of 895 collexemes were removed, and spelling alternations (*recognize/-ise*) with the belonging frequencies were ascribed to only one token. The search pattern obviously excluded the negative and interrogative forms, as well as particles of possible phrasal verbs.

The search of *can V* returned almost 3.000 hits, of which the auxiliary *to be* comprised 53.599 tokens. Since the auxiliary regularly accompanies the modal verb *can* in the construction *can Aux Adj*, frequently used in both active and passive voice, we decided to remove this number of tokens from the sum of all hits. What was also excluded were ungrammatical combinations (*can is/will*), or wrong verb forms belonging to another clause, non-infinitival verb forms (*performed, bought*), and mistagged parts of speech (e.g. *neverbe* for *never be*) (in total, 192 instances).

Inspecting only the raw frequency of the verbs following *can* and *be able*—*is/am/are able to V* counts 649, while on the other hand *can V* was observed with 2.713 discrete verbs[7]— confirms the usage disproportion mentioned earlier, which stems from the fact that the modal verb *can* is used to express a variety of meanings, as opposed to *be able to*. For this reason, we decided to conduct a collexeme analysis of only those verbs shared between *can* and *be able to* (610 in total). Verbs observed only with *be able to* are going to be valuable for the qualitative analysis as they appear to be attracted solely to this construction.

It must be noted that, despite the considerable merits, the collostructional analysis has its weaknesses, as any other statistical method used in linguistic research (see Schmid, Küchenhoff 2013), which cautions us against taking association measures as definite values of cognitive entrenchment.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result obtained through the script provides observed and expected frequency of the collexemes in the first specified construction, i.e. *be able to*, followed by the same frequencies calculated for the construction *can V*. The subsequent columns represent the construction preferred by lemmas, the association measure (the Fisher-Yates exact *p*-values), as well as the level of statistical significance. The association measure, referred to as collostructional strength, indicates the mutual attraction between the verb and a construction—the higher it is, the stronger the attraction (Gries 2012: 93). The last column of the original result indicates if a lemma is shared between the two constructions. Having established that the analysis would only include shared lexical items, it was excluded as redundant for the present purpose. One other

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7   It must be noted that a number of verbs is morphologically related, e.g. stabilize, destabilize, restabilize etc.

remark is in order: a statistically significant result, i.e. a result not attributed to chance, is represented by asterisks in descending order. Namely, five asterisks represent the greatest level of statistical significance with $p < .00001$, four asterisks indicate the result is significant at $p < .0001$, three asterisks mean significant at $p < .001$, while two should be interpreted as $p < .01$, and, finally, one asterisk signifies p-value $<.05$. If the probability is higher than .05, the difference between the two constructions is not statistically significant (marked *ns*).

The output of Fisher-Yates test is listed in descending order of attraction to the first specified construction, which is *be able to V*. Table 2 below shows the 25 verbs most strongly attracted to it, while Table 3 contains 20 verbs most strongly repelled by the construction *be able to V*[8].

Table 2. Verbs most strongly attracted to *able to V* and *can V* constructions

rank	Collexeme	Observed Fq. able to	Expected Fq. able to	Observed Fq. can	Expected Fq. can	Assoc.	Collex. str.	Signif.
1	offer	71	17	550	604	ABLE.TO	53.4595	*****
2	bind	12	0.9	20	31.1	ABLE.TO	24.49243	*****
3	identify	26	7.1	235	253.9	ABLE.TO	17.77002	*****
4	withstand	12	1.6	46	56.4	ABLE.TO	16.86898	*****
5	exercise	12	1.9	59	69.1	ABLE.TO	14.53269	*****
6	devote	7	0.5	13	19.5	ABLE.TO	14.25876	*****
7	maintain	14	2.8	90	101.2	ABLE.TO	13.81469	*****
8	demonstrate	11	2	63	72	ABLE.TO	12.13689	*****
9	tolerate	8	1	30	37	ABLE.TO	11.83309	*****
10	participate	8	1.1	31	37.9	ABLE.TO	11.6278	*****
11	cope	21	7.2	244	257.8	ABLE.TO	11.04556	****
12	exploit	8	1.2	36	42.8	ABLE.TO	10.69105	****
13	assess	9	1.7	52	59.3	ABLE.TO	10.1145	****
14	state	6	0.7	20	25.3	ABLE.TO	9.72605	****
15	finance	4	0.2	5	8.8	ABLE.TO	9.67357	****
16	attend	8	1.5	48	54.5	ABLE.TO	8.89996	***
17	exert	7	1.2	37	42.8	ABLE.TO	8.62925	***
18	detect	13	4.2	140	148.8	ABLE.TO	8.04904	***
19	compete	8	1.7	56	62.3	ABLE.TO	7.95619	***
20	absorb	7	1.3	42	47.7	ABLE.TO	7.94081	***
21	pursue	5	0.7	19	23.3	ABLE.TO	7.77762	***
22	manipulate	5	0.7	21	25.3	ABLE.TO	7.38628	***
23	uncover	3	0.2	4	6.8	ABLE.TO	7.32636	***
24	implement	4	0.4	12	15.6	ABLE.TO	7.15664	***
25	express	9	2.5	82	88.5	ABLE.TO	7.03416	***

The raw frequencies (i.e. the observed values) reflect the asymmetric distribution of *be able to* and *can* previously noted, yet they fail to reveal which construction is likely to attract the listed verbs, which is where collexeme analysis proves to be beneficial. As shown, the expected frequencies of *be able to V* are significantly lower than the observed ones, unlike the same values for

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8   The full list of verbs is available from the author at request.

the *can V* construction. As a result, 481 verbs, out of 610, exhibit preference for *be able to* construction.

Inspecting the distinctiveness of the first-ranking collexemes, we encounter a very interesting situation. Namely, *offer* is the most distinctive collexeme of the semi-modal expressing present ability, followed by *bind* whose strength of association unexpectedly decreases by half, with another salient drop in value ascribed to the verb *identify.* The subsequent decrease in association strength is more or less even and expected. To provide additional information that might shed some light on the listed collexemes, we inspected the context in the BNC corpora, and noticed that the verb complements almost exclusively denote abstract notions. For example, the verb *offer* collocates with *courses, proof, products*, *support, career,* and *assistance,* and it is mostly related to academic context, commerce, advertisement, social science and technical language. The same is also true of *bind,* as all examples contain terms related to natural sciences, as well as of the verb *identify,* which collocates with *link, reason, stability, item, type, flaw, feature, opportunity* etc., and is usually found in topics such as law, education, politics, and social science. Even the verb *exercise*, ranked fifth, has little to do with the gym. Instead, it is followed by abstract nouns like *right, influence, skill, power, supervision, discrimination* etc. The same is true of other collexemes, as well.

In a nutshell: what all these verbs have in common is a) register, i.e. professional or scientific jargon, and b) their complements denote abstract notions rather than tangible or visible items. Given the fact that the listed verbs are strongly attracted to *be able to* construction, these conclusions are in line with the observation that *be able to* appears to be more formal than *can* (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999: 147–148). It must be noted, however, that *can offer* also takes the same abstract complements as the semi-modal, as well as a variety of other complements not observed with *be able to* (e.g. *We can offer them a cup of coffee*.). One may conclude that both the modal and semi-modal may be used to express ability in formal or professional contexts, although statistical results indicate that *be able to* is more strongly associated with verbs occurring in those contexts.

With regards to the last column, of all the verbs tested, 465 were found to be not statistically significant, meaning that their *p*-value is greater than .05. This is to signify that the result is due to chance, consequently suggesting strong evidence against the null hypothesis. In other cases, nevertheless, the remaining collexemes have a lower *p*-value, implying that the relation between the given lexemes is indeed statistically significant.

The table below lists 20 collexemes strongly repelled by *able to V* construction and attracted to *can V.*

Table 3. Verbs most strongly repelled by *able to V* and *can V* constructions

rank	Collexeme	Observed Fq. able to	Expected Fq. able to	Observed Fq. can	Expected Fq. can	Assoc.	Collex.str.	Signif.
590	talk	4	11.4	414	406.6	CAN	4.56917	*
591	manage	3	9.9	359	352.1	CAN	4.5794	*
592	make	53	73.8	2647	2626.2	CAN	5.19472	**
593	ask	2	9.7	353	345.3	CAN	5.75107	**
594	play	5	14.7	534	524.3	CAN	5.81606	**
595	put	9	21.2	768	755.8	CAN	6.1779	**
596	come	9	24.8	898	882.2	CAN	8.48776	***
597	find	16	36.1	1304	1283.9	CAN	9.09309	***
598	become	4	18.9	688	673.1	CAN	10.3348	****
599	hear	2	17.4	633	617.6	CAN	12.47778	*****
600	afford	5	23.7	862	843.3	CAN	12.73083	*****
601	remember	4	23.5	856	836.5	CAN	14.20167	*****
602	lead	2	19.5	712	694.5	CAN	14.46195	*****
603	say	12	39.9	1446	1418.1	CAN	15.74037	*****
604	help	15	47.1	1706	1673.9	CAN	17.36551	*****
605	do	85	154.4	5561	5491.6	CAN	22.63583	*****
606	tell	9	45	1635	1599	CAN	23.99063	*****
607	go	15	60.1	2184	2138.9	CAN	27.25144	*****
608	get	26	109.6	3983	3899.4	CAN	51.03896	*****
609	have	9	87.3	3182	3103.7	CAN	62.13933	*****
610	see	27	138.7	5046	4934.3	CAN	74.11377	*****

As can be seen, it is quite similar to the previous table in that the last three verbs have exceedingly higher values of attraction to the modal verb than the rest of the listed linguistic items. In fact, their strength of association is even greater than that of the top three collexemes distinctive of *be able to* construction.

In addition, only 36 verbs attracted to *can V* construction prove to have low *p*-values, which translates to greater association strength, thus greater statistical significance. This prompts us to consider the semantic aspect of the listed collexemes in order to explain why these lexical items are repelled by *be able to*.

It is evident that the verbs closely related to *can* express more action (e.g. *go, do, come, put, play*). The dynamic aspect is also conveyed by the verbs of communication (*tell, say, ask, talk*), as well as sensory and cognitive verbs (*see, hear, remember*). Compared to the previous table, *be able to V* does not seem to attract verbs with concrete or specific meaning. Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004: 215) discovered a similar relationship between *be going to* and *will,* arguing that the first one encodes more dynamic and more specific actions, which may be related to the notion of premeditation, as "more dynamic actions require more effort, and hence perhaps more planning" (ibid.). A similar relation could be noticed here, as strong collocates of *be able to* denote abstract actions lacking dynamicity, while *can V* construction more strongly attracts verbs of perceptible action. Furthermore, collexemes of the modal verb appear to be common words, frequently used in everyday situations, and possibly phrasal verbs. At this point, we are not in the position to offer any explanation as to the reason behind this discrepancy.

However, if we inspect the verbs observed only in *able to V* construction, omitted from the distinctive collexeme analysis, we may outline the particular usage of this construction with a higher degree of precision.

The following verbs only occur with the present tense *be able* to in the BNC:

Adduce, amble, automate, buckle, budget, co-exist, conform, counterbalance, damp, deinstall, dephosphorylate, discontinue, dispatch, divest, empathize, entwine, fine, hydrolyse, immunoprecipitate, inhale, marshal, maximize, minister, mobilize, optimize, orientate, panelize, photosynthesise, pupate, rate, ration, resuscitate, subjugate, thread, trans-activate, tunnel, and *verbalise.*

It is more than evident that they are part of specialized terminology associated with medicine, psychology, biology etc. This further supports the previous conclusion that the present tense *be able to V* construction attracts verbs encoding abstract actions, thus it is related to formal or scientific contexts.

5. *CONCLUSION*

Relying on the method of collostructional analysis, the paper has explored and compared the relationship between the present tense usage of the modal verb *can* and its periphrastic counterpart *be able to*. These two verbs are often considered synonymous and mostly interchangeable when denoting mental or physical ability in the present tense, yet we presumed that they participate in two different constructions. Assuming that grammatical constructions are strongly associated with certain expressions they regularly co-occur with, and that the more frequently the speaker processes the two together, the more routinized they become in the mind, the goal was to measure the degree of association between the collexemes and the given constructions, and, consequently, to gain insight into the constructions' semantics. The analysis has shown that 465 out of 610 collexems shared by *can V* and *be able to V* have *p*-value higher than .05, meaning that the results were not statistically significant[9] (i.e. fail to reject the null hypothesis). Despite that, the association strength indicates that 481 verbs are more attracted to *be able to* construction.

The key difference between the two constructions proved to be the quality of their infinitival complements, which affects the pragmatic aspect of *can* and *be able to*. Namely, *be able to* strongly attracts verbs of abstract meaning, whereas *can* is more likely to be associated with more 'dynamic' verbs, like those of communication (*tell, say, ask, talk*), as well as sensory and cognitive verbs (*see, hear, remember*). Further examination of verbs observed only with *be able to* has not only confirmed the previous conclusion, but has also emphasized the contrasting nuances of pragmatic nature. Specifically, *be able to* is related to jargon, and, therefore, to science-related topics. This could explain why this semi-modal is considered more formal than *can*. Comparing the previous finding to the past tense usage of *can* and *be able to* would further deepen the research area.

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9 The middle section of the results is not presented in the paper.

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ZNAČENJE MOGUĆNOSTI U PREZENTU: KOLOSTRUKCIJSKI PRISTUP

Rezime

U radu se razmatraju dve konstrukcije u engleskom jeziku, *can V* i *be able to V*, konkretno u situacijama kada se koriste da iskažu mogućnost ili sposobnost, stečenu ili urođenu, u sadašnjem vremenu. Polazeći od ideje da su i same konstrukcije nosioci značenja, koje je, naravno, u sprezi sa leksičkim jedinicama koje u konstrukcijama učestvuju, fokus analize stavlja se na semantički međuodnos modala *can* i njegovog perifrastičnog parnjaka, fraze *be able to.* Pretraga žanrovski raznovrsnog korpusa (BNC) poslužila je kao osnov za takozvanu kolostrukcijsku analizu (kolokacija+konstrukcija) (Stefanovič, Gris 2003) osmišljenu kao statistički alat za utvrđivanje stepena privlačnosti, odnosno odbijanja između konstrukcija i leksičkih jedinica. Rezultati ove kvantitativne metode pokazali su da se *can* i *be able to* značenjski uglavnom preklapaju (ukoliko ne postoje druga gramatička ograničenja), te da se mogu smatrati sinonimnim. Međutim, na osnovu izračunate kolostrukcijske snage, pokazuje se da većina glagola koji su datim konstrukcijama zajednički preferira *be able to.* Kvalitativnom analizom koleksema i njihovih komplemenata utvrđeno je da polumodal u znatno većoj meri privlači glagole apstraktnog značenja, te je stoga frekventniji u naučnom stilu i žargonu struke. Sa druge strane, modalni glagol *can* je daleko zastupljeniji i privlači glagole koji podrazumevaju veći stepen dinamike ili aktivnosti koje se mogu doživeti čulima.

Ključne reči: Konstrukcija, can, be able to, značenje mogućnosti u prezentu, kolostrukcijska analiza, kolekseme, korpusno istraživanje