

# A Corpus-Based Comparison of “М о ж н о ” Used as a Particle and as a Predicate Adverb

## Abstract

In Russian, “м о ж н о ” is generally categorized as a predicate adverb and has the modal meaning of ability and permission. Grammatically, this element co-occurs with a verb in the infinitive, and when expressing the semantical subject of a verb, it occurs in dative. However, in sentences requesting permission used in conversation, “м о ж н о ” acts as a particle. In this case, it appears together with a subject in the nominative and a verb that agrees with it. In this paper, we analyzed the syntax of this phenomenon using corpus data, and showed that this particle usage of “м о ж н о ” is still undergoing change.

As a result of the analysis, first of all, we pointed out some general tendencies of predicate-adverbial usage and particle usage. While “м о ж н о ” as a predicate adverb appears in several syntactic constructions with variations in word order, person, and type of sentence, the form “м о ж н о м н е ~?”, which is a yes-no interrogative sentence in first person singular, is significantly more common than others. Another form is “м о ж н о я ~?”, which is grammatically similar. However, a comparison of these first person singular patterns reveals that when requesting permission, the particle usage “м о ж н о я ~?” is used significantly more often than the predicate-adverbial usage “м о ж н о м н е ~?”. We can conclude that although “м о ж н о ” can display syntactical variation, when used as a particle it performs a specialized role in yes-no interrogative sentences in the first person.

Secondly, we analyzed syntactic features of the particle usage of “м о ж н о ”. As a particle, “м о ж н о ” can theoretically occur with all persons, numbers, genders, as well as both affirmation and negation. However, it is used overwhelmingly more often in affirmative questions in the first person singular. Also, we found that it stands at the head of the sentence and opens the question. While there are two types of requests for permission – “м о ж н о м н е ~?” and “м о ж н о я ~?” – the diachronic change of their respective frequencies shows that the particle usage has increased in last decades. Moreover, in the particle usage, the patterns of separating “м о ж н о ” by a comma (or not) display a diachronic variation that suggests the structural change of this modal word is still ongoing.