Invariantist ‘might’ and modal meaning change
A reply to Braun (2012)

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Abstract  Invariantism proposed by Braun (Linguistics and Philosophy 35(6):461–489, 2012) aims to maintain full identity of semantic content between all uses of ‘might’. I invoke well-known facts regarding diachronic change in meanings of modals to argue that invariantism commits us to implausible duplication of familiar processes of lexical semantic change on the level of “lexical pragmatics”, with no obvious payoff.

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Braun (2012) proposes an invariantist theory of ‘might’, which analyzes the literal semantic content of ‘might’ as extremely weak: according to Braun, ‘might p’ is semantically true iff p is possible on any possible notion of possibility. Those notions include epistemic possibility, metaphysical possibility, deontic possibility, and so forth. Under this semantics, ‘might p’ will be true for practically every imaginable p in practically every imaginable context: for example, if p is metaphysically impossible, but somebody doesn’t know that, ‘might p’ would still be true on the literal meaning. Obviously, speakers usually use ‘might p’ statements to convey something much stronger. Braun argues that it is because in addition to literally conveying (locuting, in Braun’s terms, which I accept for the purposes of this paper) a very weak proposition by uttering ‘might p’, speakers also express (in Braun’s terms, assert) a much stronger one. Thus Mrs. Hudson uttering Holmes might be in Paris would normally assert by that utterance a claim much stronger than the weak literal meaning of the sentence—for instance, the assertion may be “It is compatible with Mrs. Hudson’s knowledge...
that Holmes is in Paris”. Braun (2012) invariantism is supposed to apply not only to ‘might’, but to many, or perhaps all, modal words (Braun explicitly mentions ‘must’, ‘possible’ and ‘necessary”).

Invariationism may seem a crazy theory, but it is not. Once we consider sentences like *I graded a million exams yesterday*, it becomes apparent that the proposition the speaker intends to assert may be plausibly taken to be quite different from the one literally expressed by the uttered sentence. Thus there is no reason to reject the invariantist explanation out of hand. I refer the reader to Braun (2012) for a fuller justification.

What I argue in this note is that despite being a reasonable theory, invariantism commits us to a quite implausible duplication of familiar mechanisms of semantic diachronic change on the level of pragmatics. The short form of the argument is as follows: once we accept an invariantist semantics for ‘might’, we are forced to accept it for all modals, because today’s semantic distribution of ‘might’ is a historical accident; once we do that, all modals (with the same modal force) become literally synonymous, and the burden of accounting for their distributional differences has to be shifted to “lexical pragmatics”; as the semantic properties of modals change, such changes have to be analyzed as changes in this “lexical pragmatics”; and finally, as modals have both non-modal ancestors and non-modal descendants, we have to conclude that meaning change first needs to jump from lexical semantics to “lexical pragmatics” once a word acquires modal meanings, and then back again to lexical semantics when a modal becomes a post-modal particle or morpheme. The only way to avoid those two jumps seems to be to say that all words in the language have the same literal meaning, and it is the “lexical pragmatics” that takes care of all their distributional differences.

In many respects, invariantism is close to the familiar contextualism regarding modals. Under both types of theories, the context determines what the speaker intends to convey by a ‘might’-claim. Where the two disagree is on what level the context’s influence applies. Consider 1, cited from Braun (2012).

(1) Carla might have run three miles yesterday.

Suppose Alice uttered 1 intending to assert that for all she knows, Carla ran three miles (an epistemic reading), and Beth uttered the same 1 knowing full well that Carla didn’t run three miles yesterday, but intending to state that at some point yesterday it was metaphysically possible for Carla to do so (a metaphysical reading). A contextualist would say that the context determines whether 1 features an epistemic or a metaphysical use of ‘might’, so that the semantic content of 1 would depend on the context. Braun, being an invariantist, says that the *semantic content* of the sentence is the same in both utterances, though the *propositions asserted by Alice and Beth* differ. For an invariantist, “‘might’ is not context-sensitive” (Braun 2012, p. 2), and whether the speaker intended a metaphysical or an epistemic interpretation is determined with the help of the context on the level of pragmatics.1

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1 Braun (2012) discusses the relevant issues mostly using different instances of epistemic ‘might’, but the distinction between contextualism and invariantism in that domain is much smaller. Braun assumes that a contextualist theory has to ascribe different semantic contents to different instances of epistemic ‘might’. That is not true, as MacFarlane (2009) discusses. For example, a contextualist may analyze the