

Understanding How Could Might and May Are Used to Express Possibility

Could May and Might – They are not the same when speaking of possibilities.

Every time I hear "may" used to express a possibility in news broadcasts the speaker always has reason to believe that something has a greater possibility of occurring based on the context and some sort of evidence within that context. More often, however, this is not the case, and it is why I think "might" for possibility gets more use than "may" for possibility. Consider that while both "may" and "might" can be used for a polite request, "may" is almost always chosen instead of "might". Using "might" may be too remote or distant for a request. It is extremely polite. Using "might" for a polite request is possible, but it is very uncommon.

Excerpt from The American Heritage Dictionary

It may rain. It might rain. What's the difference? Just as **could** is the past tense of **can**, **might** is the past tense of **may**: **We thought we might win the tournament.** But **might** can also be used as a substitute for **may** to show diminished possibility. Thus, saying **We might go to the movies** means that the likelihood of going is somewhat less than if you say **We may go to the movies.** When used to express permission, **might** has a higher degree of politeness than **may**. Thus, **Might I express my opinion** conveys less insistence than **May I express my opinion.**

<http://www.bartleby.com/64/pages/page20.html>

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The movie Titanic

ANDREWS: The pumps buy you time...but minutes only. From this moment, no matter what we do, Titanic will flounder.

SMITH: How much time?

ANDREWS: An hour, two at most.

SMITH: And how many aboard, Mr. Murdoch?

MURDOCH: Two thousand two hundred souls aboard, sir.

SMITH: I believe you **may** get your headlines, Mr. Ismay.

<http://www.angelfire.com/mi/peachypenguin/titanicquotes.html>

As we know, Mr. Ismay did get his headlines. We can see that "may" indicates a stronger possibility here. Captain Smith, I believe, is being somewhat sarcastic. He could easily have chosen to use "will", but definitely not "might".

The Movie The Temptations

Melvin develops rheumatoid arthritis, and due to his constant pain relies heavily on pain pills and cortisone injections. The doctor says to Melvin, "If you keep doubling up on your shots, arthritis **may** be the least of your problems." As it turned out, arthritis was the least of his problems. The cortisone injections led to other health complications. The possibility of Melvin having more problems with his health due to the cortisone injections was strong in the doctor's view, and he, therefore, chose to use "may".

X - Is that woman from Catalonia?

Z - I think she **may** be from Catalonia.

X - How do you figure that?

Z - Well, it's her name. I can usually figure it out by the name. Catalanian seems to be kind of a cross between Spanish and French. I believe I've been told that Catalanian is similar to Provençal. Anyway, it's her name. It seems kind of like Spanish and French together. I think she **may** be from Catalonia.

- Speaker Z has something in mind which supports the idea that the woman is from Catalonia. Therefore, speaker Z chooses to use "may" and not "might".
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Z - Is she from Catalonia?

Y - She **might** be. Why do you ask?

Z - Well, I once spoke to someone from Catalonia who said that by comparison to other people from Spain, Catalonians seem to be quieter.

Y - Yeah, she seems kind of quiet, but there's no way to know that for sure. What's her name?

Z - I don't know..... ah.... I mean I can't remember.....

Y - Well, she **might** be from Catalonia. Catalonians have last names that seem to be different from other Spanish last names. Ask one of the other people from Spain. One of them **might** know her name.

- Here, speaker Y doesn't feel strongly enough about the idea that the woman is from Catalonia. Therefore, speaker Y chooses to use "might". Speaker Y feels better about basing the idea that the woman is from Catalonia on her name than on her quiet personality.

I don't believe it's possible to quantify modal certainty or uncertainty with reference to "might, may, could". A speaker decides to use "might", "may", or "could" based on his or her viewpoint and other information that may or may not support an idea as being true or false.

- A. We've got two weeks off in July. What do you want to do?
 B. We **could** go to Maine or Vermont.

- A. What do you think you'll do with those two weeks you have off in July?
 B. I **might** go to Maine or Vermont.

- A. What do you think you'll do with those two weeks you have off in July?
 B. I **could** go to Maine or Vermont.

Clearly, "might" and "could" do not mean the same thing. If we use "could" it mostly acknowledges or suggests the possibility of something. If we use "might" it is more likely to suggest the possibility of something that is a weaker possibility. However, by using "might" in example number two, the speaker is most likely considering his or her actual intentions.

Where's Joe?

1. He could've gone to the movies. – possibility
2. He might've gone to the movies. – weaker possibility
3. He may have gone to the movies. – stronger possibility

It is possible that Joe went to the movies. In all three cases the respondent makes a guess as to the whereabouts of Joe. Context determines which one is the most accurate, as well as the speaker's subjective viewpoint.

Note: Joe could have gone to the movies.

This can be understood in two ways:

- It was possible for Joe to go to the movies, but he didn't.
- It's possible that Joe went to the movies. Maybe he's at the movies now.

Suggestion: Read these articles and observe how "could, might, and may" are used.

<http://planpro.jpl.nasa.gov/mrsrch2.html>

http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/solarsystem/fossil_life_mars_001205-1.html

http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/solarsystem/fossil_life_mars_001205-2.html

<http://people.msoe.edu/~tritt/sf/europa.life.html>