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Translating Russian Modal Predicatives. The Case of *можно* in Polish and Czech Literary Texts

1. *Introduction and Methodology*

Modal predicatives constitute a distinct lexico-grammatical class in Russian. They function as sentence predicates and convey the speaker's stance toward possibility, necessity, or permission. Unlike finite verbs, they typically occur in impersonal constructions and co-occur with dative experiencers, as in *Мне можно войти?* ('May I come in?'). These constructions express modal meanings without assigning agency to a nominative subject and thus represent a key means of encoding non-agentive modality in Russian.

The predicative *можно* ('can') is of particular interest due to its high frequency, syntactic flexibility, and semantic range. Bilingual dictionaries suggest Polish equivalents such as *można*, *wolno*, *móc* (e.g., Mirowicz *et al.* 1980; Wawrzyńczyk 2021; *Tłumacz* 2026; RPS 2026), while Czech dictionaries list a range of equivalents, including *je možné*, *dát se*, *může se*, and *smí se*¹, alongside more formal variants such as *lze* (e.g., RČESD 2007-2018; RČS 2009; *Lingea* 2026; *Seznam* 2026), reflecting different interpretations of possibility and permission. However, translation practice suggests that these equivalents do not fully capture the range of solutions attested in literary texts.

The aim of this study is to examine how *можно* is translated into Polish and Czech in contemporary literary texts and to assess the extent to which dictionary-based equivalents correspond to actual translation strategies. The central research problem concerns the grammatical and syntactic means employed to convey the meanings of *можно* in translation, as well as the distribution of impersonal and personal constructions in the target texts.

Given that Russian frequently employs impersonal constructions to express modality, it can be hypothesised that translation into Polish and Czech may involve shifts toward alternative structural solutions, including personal constructions or syntactic reformulations. Rather than assuming fixed typological differences, this study focuses on patterns observed in translation data.

Accordingly, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

¹ Forms such as *dá se*, *může se*, and *smí se* are cited in the form in which they appear in the dictionaries; in the analytical sections, modal verbs and reflexive constructions are referred to by their infinitive lemmas (e.g. *dát se*, *moci*, *smět*).

- RQ1: Do the dictionary equivalents of the predicative *можно* correspond to actual translation practices?
- RQ2: What syntactic and grammatical strategies are used in Polish and Czech to translate *можно*?
- RQ3: How are modal meanings expressed through personal and impersonal constructions in the analysed translations?

The analytical framework draws on Palmer's (1990; 2001) typology of modality, which distinguishes epistemic, deontic, and dynamic types, as well as on Fatkullina *et al.*'s (2021) classification of subtypes within the domain of possibility, and on Bondarko's (1990) functional-semantic theory of modality.

The research is based on a custom-built trilingual corpus of contemporary literary texts originally written in Russian and published in parallel Polish and Czech translations. The corpus comprises works by Russian authors writing after the 1980s; only texts available in both Polish and Czech translations were selected to enable direct comparison. All 371 occurrences of the predicative *можно* were manually extracted and matched with their equivalents in the target texts.

The corpus data are analysed by combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative contextual interpretation in a cross-linguistic perspective.

It should be noted that the corpus is limited to seven literary works and reflects the choices of individual translators; the results therefore indicate tendencies in literary translation practice rather than generalizations about the language systems as a whole. By comparing translation strategies in this limited parallel corpus, the study offers insights into how modality and agency are interpreted and rendered in Polish and Czech translations, while also illustrating the limits of dictionary-based equivalence in capturing actual translation practice.

2. *Theoretical Background*

2.1. *Modal Predicatives in Russian*

Modal predicatives in Russian form a distinct functional-grammatical class, widely discussed in Russian and Slavic linguistics (e.g., Madariaga 2011; Franks 2018; Kryzia 2004; Mocarz 2005). They serve as predicates in impersonal clauses and express modal meanings – possibility, necessity, permission, and prohibition – without requiring a nominative subject. They typically appear in constructions with a dative experiencer and an infinitive complement (e.g., *Мне можно идти* ‘I can go’), where the situation is framed as determined by external conditions rather than by the subject's volition (Zimmerling 2018).

Unlike personal modal verbs, modal predicatives are uninflected and form tense analytically. This class comprises items such as *можно*, *нельзя*, *нужно*, and *необходимо*. Lexicographically, *можно* is defined as ‘permissible’ or ‘allowed under certain conditions’ (Kuznetsov 2000; Morkovkin *et al.* 2016).

In terms of their semantic range, modal predicatives can be grouped into several functional types: alethic markers of possibility or impossibility (*можно* ‘it is possible / one can’, *нельзя* ‘it is not allowed / one cannot’, *невозможно* ‘it is impossible’), deontic markers of obligation or recommendation (*нужно* ‘it is necessary’, *следует* ‘one should’), evaluative predicatives (*хорошо* ‘it is good’, *трудно* ‘it is difficult’), and epistemic markers (*можно сказать* ‘one could say’). Their defining feature is non-agentivity: they encode external conditions rather than internal capacities or intentions (Madariaga 2011; Franks 2018). This non-agentive character is particularly relevant for translation, as it often requires restructuring in target languages.

In a contrastive perspective, Mocarz (2005) classifies lexical predicatives into four groups – predicatives of external conditions, inner state, axiological evaluation, and modal meaning – of which the last, expressing the subject’s attitude toward an action (Kryzia 2004: 44), constitutes the focus of the present study.

2.2. *The Predicative можно in Russian*

The predicative *можно* is the most frequent and functionally versatile member of the Russian modal predicative class. Its semantic range is context-dependent, which makes it particularly relevant for translation analysis.

It conveys objective possibility (*Здесь можно проехать* ‘One can get through here’), external permission (*Ему можно пить кофе* ‘He is allowed to drink coffee’), polite requests (*Можно вас попросить?* ‘May I ask you?’), and epistemic hedging (*Можно сказать, он герой* ‘One could say he is a hero’)(Rachilina 1991).

It also appears in rhetorical questions expressing indignation or reproach (e.g., *Разве можно так?* ‘How can one do such a thing?’, *Сколько можно?* ‘How much longer?’), and in the fixed superlative construction *как можно* + comparative (e.g., *как можно дольше* ‘as long as possible’), where it functions as an intensifier rather than an independent modal predicate.

These uses are relevant for the present study, as they tend to trigger different translation strategies in Polish and Czech.

Unlike the verb *мочь*, which expresses the subject’s ability and is inflected, *можно* denotes external or situational possibility and remains impersonal. It therefore functions as a default marker of non-agentive modality in Russian, including both written and spoken registers (Plungjan 2001), while leaving the interpretation of modality (possibility, permission, or evaluation) to contextual factors.

2.3. *Modal Expression in Polish and Czech*

Modality in Polish and Czech is expressed through modal verbs, impersonal constructions, and periphrastic expressions (Hansen 2014; Šaldová 2011). The contrastive study of these means has a substantial tradition (e.g., Rytel-Kuc 1982; Kryzia 2005), although relatively few studies have examined cross-linguistic differences through the lens of translation corpora. The following overview therefore focuses on those means that are most relevant

for the translation of *можно*, namely constructions expressing possibility and permission, interpreted within the framework outlined in §1 (Palmer 1990, 2001; Fatkullina *et al.* 2021).

In Polish, the modal verb *móc* ‘to be able to, can’ plays a central role in expressing ability and situational possibility. Impersonal forms such as *można* ‘it is possible, one can’ are also frequent, while *wolno* ‘one is allowed to’ tends to be restricted to more formal or normative contexts.

In Czech, impersonal constructions such as *je možné* ‘it is possible’ and *lze* ‘one can, it is possible’ occur primarily in formal registers, whereas the reflexive construction *dát se* ‘it can be done, it is feasible’ is widely used in neutral and informal contexts to denote practical feasibility (Šaldová 2011; Uličný 2016).

Both languages employ personal modal verbs, which introduce an explicit subject and shift the construction toward an agent-oriented perspective. In Polish, *móc* ‘to be able to, can’ functions as the primary personal modal verb, while in Czech the corresponding role is played by *moci* ‘to be able to, can’, alongside verbs such as *smět* ‘to be allowed to’, *muset* ‘to have to, must’, and *mít* ‘to be supposed to, to be expected to’, depending on the contextual interpretation of modality.

Periphrastic and discourse-based strategies are also used, including conditional constructions, evaluative expressions, and generalised subjects. These strategies account for a substantial portion of translation equivalents identified in the corpus (see §3).

2.4. Dictionary Equivalents and Translation Challenges

The Russian modal predicative *можно* is widely attested in bilingual dictionaries, where it is typically translated into Polish and Czech using a set of established equivalents. In Polish, these include *można*, *wolno*, and *móc* (e.g., Mirowicz *et al.* 1980; Wawrzyńczyk 2021). In Czech, dictionaries (e.g., RČS 2009; *Lingea* 2026; *Seznam* 2026) list equivalents including *je možné*, *dá se*, *smí se*, and *může se*, reflecting the core meanings of possibility and permission.

These resources also include context-dependent and phraseological equivalents, such as epistemic hedging (*lze říci*, *dá se říct* ‘it can be said’), rhetorical expressions (*To přece nejde!*, *To mě podrž!* ‘That’s impossible!’, ‘Wow’), and fixed constructions (*co nejlépe*, *co nejdéle* ‘as well as possible / for as long as possible’). They also provide examples of request constructions (*Mohu vstoupit?*, *Můžu si přidat?* ‘May I come in?’, ‘May I have some more?’) and other idiomatic uses.

More comprehensive lexicographic resources (e.g., RČESD 2007-2018) further expand this range by listing additional equivalents, including *je možno* ‘it is possible’, *lze* ‘one can, it is possible’, and *dovoleno* ‘it is allowed’, as well as a broader set of context-dependent variants. The form *je možno*, however, is attested only in this resource and is not recorded in concise dictionaries.

Despite this breadth of coverage, the polyfunctionality of *можно* remains a challenge for translation. The same form may express possibility, permission, epistemic hedging, rhetorical meaning, or function as part of a fixed comparative construction (see §2.2). Each

TABLE I
Frequency of *можно* in Russian Source Texts

Source (Title in English and in Russian)	Abbreviation	Number of <i>можно</i> Occurrences
<i>The Turkish Gambit</i> [<i>Турецкий гамбит</i>]	TG	33
<i>Metro 2033</i> [<i>Метро 2033</i>]	M	122
<i>Russian Beauty</i> [<i>Русская красавица</i>]	RK	26
<i>Oton Ra</i> [<i>Омон Ра</i>]	OR	23
<i>Here Comes the Messiah!</i> [<i>Вот идет Мессия!</i>]	VIM	61
<i>Bury Me Behind the Baseboard</i> [<i>Похороните меня за плинтусом</i>]	PMP	49
<i>The Kukotsky Enigma</i> [<i>Казус Кукоцкого</i>]	KK	57
Total		371

of these uses places different demands on the translator, who must select not only a lexical equivalent but also an appropriate syntactic structure and pragmatic framing.

While dictionaries document a wide range of equivalents, translation practice reveals additional variation in their contextual use. As a result, a direct one-to-one correspondence between dictionary equivalents and translation solutions is rarely observed. A formally impersonal construction in Russian may be rendered by an impersonal structure in the target language, but it may also be translated using personal modal verbs, reflexive constructions, or periphrastic reformulations, depending on context. These considerations motivate the corpus-based analysis that follows, which compares dictionary equivalents with the strategies actually attested in Polish and Czech translations.

3. *Corpus-based Analysis of the Predicative можно in Polish and Czech Translations*

Having outlined the theoretical framework and lexicographic background, this section presents a corpus-based analysis of how the Russian modal predicative *можно* is rendered in Polish and Czech literary translations.

The aim is to identify and classify translation strategies, assess the extent to which actual usage corresponds to dictionary-based equivalence (RQ1), and determine the grammatical means employed in translation (RQ2). The analysis combines a lexico-semantic perspective (focusing on the equivalents used and their meanings) with a morpho-syntactic perspective (examining the grammatical forms and constructions in which they occur).

The strategies identified in the corpus are discussed in detail in the following subsections. Their distribution is analysed quantitatively and illustrated with representative examples.

The corpus comprises 371 occurrences of *можно* across seven literary works, as shown in **TABLE 1**, which summarizes the distribution of occurrences across the analysed texts.

As noted in the introduction, the corpus consists of excerpts from contemporary Russian literary works and their officially published translations into Polish and Czech. The abbreviated titles shown in **TABLE 1** (e.g., TG, M, RK) are used throughout the analysis.

3.1. Polish Translation Equivalents in the Collected Corpus

In the Polish translations, the Russian predicative *можно* is rendered using a relatively limited but structured set of strategies. While impersonal constructions clearly dominate (with *można* accounting for nearly three-quarters of all cases), translators also employ personal modal verbs and, less frequently, reflexive and periphrastic constructions.

3.1.1. Impersonal Constructions

The most frequent equivalent of *можно* in the Polish subcorpus is the impersonal predicative *można*, accounting for 71.69% of occurrences. This form functions as a close structural and semantic equivalent, preserving the non-agentive character of the Russian original.

- (1) RU²: – Ну... Всегда *можно* к общему компромиссу прийти (РМР 1995: 85).
 PL: – No... Zawsze *można* znaleźć jakiś kompromis (РМР 2009: 179).
 EN³: ‘Well... it’s always possible to reach a compromise.’

In most cases, tense and mood correspond closely to the source. Minor deviations occur, but they do not affect the core modal interpretation. For instance, Russian present-tense forms may be rendered by conditional constructions in Polish when required by context (e.g., *jak gdyby można było przywyknąć*), where the hypothetical framing is made explicit.

² Hereafter, we will use abbreviations to indicate the language of the example: RU for the original in Russian, PL for the corresponding Polish translation, CZ for the corresponding Czech translation, and EN for the English translation.

³ All examples cited in this article have been translated into English by the authors. English translations are provided for accessibility and do not necessarily reflect the same structural or translational strategies as the analysed Polish and Czech equivalents.

Other impersonal predicatives also appear as equivalents. The form *wolno* ('it is permitted') preserves a strictly deontic interpretation, while evaluative predicatives such as *należy* ('one should') or *dobrze* ('it is good') introduce a shift toward obligation or evaluation.

- (2) RU: [...] *можно ли выходить замуж из жалости?* (TG 2004: 215).
 PL: [...] *czy wolno wychodzić za mąż z litości?* (TG 2001: 158).
 EN: 'Is it acceptable to marry out of pity?'

The reflexive construction *dać się* also functions as an equivalent, conveying practical feasibility.

- (3) RU: Иногда потянешься, расправишь руки – и *можно жить* (RK 1998: 125).
 PL: Byle się otrząsnąć, wziąć w garść – i *da się żyć* (RK 2004: 123).
 EN: 'Sometimes you just stretch, spread your arms, and one can live again.'

Although this construction is attested in descriptive lexicographic resources, it is not systematically represented in bilingual dictionaries as a general equivalent of *можно*.

Overall, impersonal constructions in Polish are structurally stable. The predicative *można* consistently preserves the non-agentive character of the source and covers a broad range of modal meanings with minimal restructuring. Variation within this group is limited and mainly involves shifts in lexical choice or subtle semantic reinterpretation.

3.1.2. Personal Constructions with Modal Verbs

Another major group comprises personal forms of the modal verb *móc* ('to be able' / 'to be allowed / permitted'), which shift the construction from an impersonal to a subject-oriented perspective. Such forms are often used in dialogic or subjective contexts.

- (4) RU: "Можно?" – и, услышав: "Конечно, можно!" (PMP 1995: 45).
 PL: "Mogę?" – i usłyszawszy: "Oczywiście, że możesz!" (PMP 2009: 90-91).
 EN: "'May I' – and hearing: 'Of course you may!'".

These forms occur in various tenses and moods, including analytic future forms, without altering the core modal meaning. In many cases, this strategy preserves the meaning of permission or possibility while making the participant of the situation explicit.

A smaller number of cases involve other modal verbs, such as *musieć* ('must'), which reflect a reinterpretation of the source construction.

- (5) RU: [...] за предстоящий день *можно было* особо не беспокоиться [...] (PMP 1995: 48).
 PL: [...] *nie musiałeś* się zbyt martwić o rozpoczynający się dzień [...] (PMP 2009: 96).
 EN: '[...] there was no need to worry too much about the day ahead.'

Here, the meaning of *можно не* is reinterpreted as the absence of necessity, resulting in a shift from possibility to necessity.

Taken as a whole, personal constructions in Polish introduce a higher degree of agentivity by making the participant of the situation explicit. While they generally preserve the core modal meaning of the source, they reframe it from a subject-oriented perspective and are typically motivated by contextual and pragmatic factors.

3.1.3. Other Equivalents

In addition to the dominant impersonal construction *można* and personal forms of *móc*, the Polish subcorpus contains several less frequent but recurrent strategies. These typically preserve the modal meaning of possibility while redistributing it across different syntactic structures.

(a) Conditional Constructions with Generalised Reference

One strategy involves conditional constructions connected with the meaning of possibility and potential action. In such cases, the Polish translation often introduces a generalised subject, most frequently *człowiek* ('one, a person'), while the conditional verb form conveys potentiality.

- (6) RU: Интересно, что лифт был старым, еще довоенным, и ехал вниз так долго, что *можно* было успеть прочитать две-три книжные страницы (OR 2012: 74).
 PL: Ciekawe, że winda była stara, przedwojenna, i jechała w dół tak długo, że *człowiek* *zdążyłby* przeczytać kilka stron książki (OR 2007: 57).
 EN: 'Interestingly, the lift was an old, pre-war model, and the descent took so long that you could easily read two or three pages of the book.'

In this case, the impersonal construction is replaced by a generalised subject and a conditional form, introducing a subject-oriented perspective.

(b) Superlative Constructions

Another strategy concerns the fixed Russian pattern *как можно* + *comparative* ('as [...] as possible'), which is rendered in Polish by constructions with *jak* and a superlative form of an adjective or adverb.

- (7) RU: Хотелось слушать как *можно* дольше, и я слушал, слушал и слушал... (PMP 1995: 61–62).
 PL: Chciało się go słuchać *jak najdłużej*, więc słuchałem, słuchałem, słuchałem... (PMP 2009: 124).
 EN: 'I wanted to listen to him for as long as possible, so I just kept listening and listening...'

This construction represents a conventionalised equivalent of the Russian intensifying pattern.

(c) Purpose Constructions

In some cases, the meaning of the Russian clause containing *можно* is rendered through a purpose construction introduced by *żeby*. Here, modality is integrated into the expression of intended action rather than expressed explicitly.

- (8) RU: [...] мне подумалось, что под это дело *можно* заполучить на десерт какие-нибудь конфеты для врачей или, на худой конец, шоколадку (PMP 1995: 35).
 PL: [...] wpadłem na pomysł, *żeby* z tej okazji *wyłudzić* na deser jakiegoś cukierka, z tych dla lekarzy, albo przynajmniej czekoladkę (PMP 2009: 69).
 EN: 'It occurred to me that we could get some sweets for the doctors as a treat, or at a very least a piece of chocolate.'

The possibility expressed in the Russian source is conveyed indirectly through the purposive structure.

(d) Constructions with Generalised Subjects

The Polish material also includes constructions with an explicit but non-specific subject, such as *każdy* ('everyone') or *ktoś* ('someone').

- (9) RU: [...] *можно* было бы догадаться [...] (VIM 2008: 42).
 PL: [...] *każdy* łatwo *się domyśli* [...] (VIM 2006: 31).
 EN: '[...] one might have guessed [...].'
- (10) RU: – *Можно* ли поверить [...]? (TG 2004: 245).
 PL: *Czy ktoś uwierzy* [...]? (TG 2001: 179).
 EN: 'Can one believe it [...]?'

These forms preserve the generalised meaning while shifting the sentence toward a personal syntactic structure.

(e) Epistemic Marking

A further isolated strategy involves the use of an epistemic particle, such as *może*, which shifts the construction toward subjective assessment.

- (11) RU: [...] и я тоже подумала, что *можно* и позвонить [...] (RK 1998: 131).
 PL: [...] więc ja też pomyślałam, *żeby może* i zadzwonić do Mierzliakowa [...] (RK 2004: 129).
 EN: '[...] and I thought I might as well give them a call [...].'

Here, the translation conveys not only potential possibility, but also the speaker's subjective stance toward the proposed action.

Taken together, these strategies show that Polish translation is not limited to the direct equivalents *można* and *móc*. Conditional constructions, generalised subjects, purpose

TABLE 2
Overview of Lexical and Syntactic Strategies for Translating *можно* into Polish

Grammatical and lexical type	Lexical units	Syntactic construction	Number of examples	%	Lexicographically attested
Modal predicative	<i>można</i>	Impersonal predicate clause	266	71.69%	Yes
Other modal predicatives	<i>wolno /należy</i>	Impersonal predicate clause	8	2.16%	Yes/No
Personal modal verb	<i>móc / (nie)musieć</i>	Personal modal clause	47	12.67%	Yes/No
Reflexive modal expression	<i>dać się</i>	Impersonal reflexive clause	10	2.69%	No
Evaluative predicative	<i>dobrze, łatwo</i>	Impersonal predicate clause	2	0.54%	No
Paraphrastic or idiomatic expressions	various idioms and free paraphrases (e.g. <i>jak najdłużej, każdy się domysli</i>), expressing particular meaning within a specific context	Periphrastic or rephrased construction	31	8.36%	Partial
		No lexical equivalent	7	1.89%	–
		Total	371	100%	

clauses, superlative forms, and epistemic particles provide context-sensitive solutions for rendering particular uses of *можно*, but their frequency remains relatively low: paraphrastic and idiomatic expressions account for 31 cases (8.36%), while constructions without a lexical equivalent account for 7 cases (1.89%).

The Polish translation equivalents of *можно* thus form a relatively cohesive group, broadly consistent with lexicographic descriptions and centred around a limited set of recurrent forms. One notable exception is the reflexive verb *dać się*, which is listed as a synonym of *można* in the descriptive dictionary *Wielki słownik języka polskiego* (Żmigrodzki

2026), where it is defined as “używane do zakomunikowania, że jest możliwe wykonanie czynności wskazanej sąsiadującym czasownikiem” (‘used to communicate that it is possible to perform an action indicated by an adjacent verb’) (Żmigrodzki, 11.03.26), but is not systematically represented in bilingual dictionaries as an equivalent of *можно*. In the corpus, it accounts for 2.69% of cases.

These observations confirm the central role of *można* as the dominant Polish equivalent, while also highlighting the presence of less frequent but functionally relevant alternative strategies. The distribution of Polish translation strategies is summarised in **TABLE 2**: it confirms the relative concentration of Polish translation strategies around a limited set of recurrent equivalents.

3.2. Czech Translation Equivalents in the Collected Corpus

In Czech translations, the Russian predicative *можно* is rendered using a relatively broad and structurally diverse set of strategies. While impersonal constructions such as *je možné* and *dát se* are frequently attested, personal modal verbs and periphrastic constructions also play a substantial role. The Czech data thus display a high degree of structural variability, reflecting a tendency toward context-dependent reinterpretation.

3.2.1. Impersonal Constructions (*je možné, dát se, lze*)

One of the most common strategies in Czech translations of *можно* involves impersonal modal constructions, including *je možné, dát se*, and *lze*. These forms preserve the non-agentive structure of the source and express possibility without introducing an explicit subject. Among these, the reflexive construction *dát se* is particularly frequent and typically conveys circumstantial or pragmatic feasibility.

- (12) RU: Скажите, у нас в Вифинии за такие деньги домик *можно* купить (OR 2012: 124).
 CZ: No prosím, u nás v Bitunii *by se* za takové peníze *dal* koupit domek (OR 2022: 69).
 EN: ‘Look at that – you can buy a house for that sort of money here in Bithynia.’

Another productive equivalent is *je možné*⁴, which corresponds to *можно* in expressing general or context-independent possibility.

- (13) RU: [...] что все явления, как и все предметы, *можно* описать в трех позициях [...] (КК 2012: 52).
 CZ: [...] že veškeré jevy a předměty *je možné* popsat ze tří pozic [...] (КК 2018: 42).
 EN: ‘[...] that all phenomena, like all objects, can be described in three ways [...]’.

⁴ Notably, *je možno*, attested in the *Rusko-česká elektronická slovníková databáze* (RČESD 2007-2018) but not in concise Czech-Russian dictionaries, does not occur in the translated texts of the present corpus.

The predicative *lze*, though less frequent than *dát se* or *je možné*, is attested in the corpus and occurs primarily in contexts where possibility is construed in a generalised or more formal manner.

- (14) RU: [...] *можно* образовать бессчетное количество самых разных по значению понятий (VIM 2008: 311).
 CZ: [...] *lze* ve spojení s dalšími slovy vytvořit bezpočet výrazů nejrůznějšího významu (VIM 2003: 141).
 EN: ‘[...] it is possible to form an infinite number of concepts with very different meanings.’

Impersonal constructions (*dát se*, *je možné*, *lze*) account for 108 occurrences (29.1%) in the Czech subcorpus. Within this group, *dát se* is the most frequent form (70 occurrences, 18.87%). These constructions preserve the non-agentive structure of the source and express possibility without introducing an explicit subject.

3.2.2. Personal Construction with Modal Verbs (*moci*, *muset*, *smět*, *mít*)

Another recurrent strategy in Czech translations of the Russian predicative *можно* involves the use of personal forms of modal verbs, most notably *moci*. This approach introduces an explicit subject and shifts the structure of the utterance from impersonal to subject-oriented. Despite this structural change, the translations preserve the modal meaning of the source while introducing an explicit participant perspective.

- (15) RU: – *Можно?* – и, услышав: «Конечно, *можно!*» – ставил коробку обратно (РМР 1995: 45).
 CZ: – *Můžu?* – a když jsem uslyšel „Samozřejmě že *můžeš!*“, vrátil jsem krabičku zpátky (РМР 2020: 105).
 EN: “‘May I’ – and, hearing: ‘Of course you may!’; he put the box back.”

In this example, the Czech translation uses the first-person form *můžu*, thereby making the participant of the situation explicit.

- (16) RU: Я бы все равно скорее смогу пить стала, чем у нее забрала, но предложить не можно (РМР 1995: 68).
 CZ: Já bych stejně radši pila smělu, než abych si od ní něco vzala, ale mohla to alespoň nabídnout (РМР 2020: 161).
 EN: ‘I’d sooner drink tar than take it from her, but I could at least offer it.’

Here, the form *mohla* presents the action as a hypothetical, unrealised possibility.

Overall, these examples show that *moci* functions as the primary means of rendering *можно* in personal constructions, introducing an explicit participant and a more specified perspective.

Beyond *moci*, Czech translations occasionally employ other modal verbs: *muset* ('must'), *smět* ('to be allowed to'), and *mít* ('to be supposed to'), where the context favors a more specific interpretation of modality.

- (17) RU: [...] поняв, что математику *можно* не делать, побежал к маме (РМР 1995: 83).
 CZ: [...] když jsem pochopil, že matematiku *dělat nemusím*, běžel jsem za mámou (РМР 2020: 201).
 EN: '[...] realising he didn't have to do maths, he ran to his mum.'

The construction *можно не делать* is rendered as *nemusím dělat*, where *muset* expresses the absence of necessity rather than possibility. The Czech translation thus interprets *можно* as 'it is not necessary to', rather than 'it is possible not to'.

- (18) RU: Сколько *можно* прозябать в нищете и унижаться?! (ВИМ 2008: 46).
 CZ: Proč *máme* živořit a snášet bídu a ponižování?! (ВИМ 2003: 22).
 EN: 'How long can one just vegetate in poverty and be humiliated?'

In (18), the rhetorical question *Сколько можно...?* is translated using *mít* (*máme živořit*), which conveys a normative or evaluative interpretation ('how long are we supposed to...').

- (19) RU: Человек хороший. Мясо вкусное. Сладкое. Но есть *можно* только врагов (М 2012: 409).
 CZ: Člověk dobrý. Maso chutná. Sladké. Ale *smím* jíst jen nepřátele (М 2015: 365).
 EN: 'A man is good. The meat is tasty. Sweet. But only enemies may be eaten.'

In (19), the use of *smět* (*smím jíst*) renders *можно* as permission ('one is allowed to'), thus making explicit a deontic interpretation implicit in the Russian original.

These examples show that Czech personal modal constructions do not function as direct formal equivalents of *можно* but rather reflect its contextual interpretation. They make explicit distinctions between possibility, absence of necessity, permission, and normative evaluation, which remain semantically underspecified in the source.

Personal constructions account for 159 occurrences (42.85%) in the Czech subcorpus, making them the most frequent strategy.

3.2.3. Periphrastic and Rephrased Constructions

In addition to standard modal equivalents, Czech translations frequently employ reformulations that convey the meaning of *можно* implicitly or through structural redistribution of modality rather than through direct lexical or syntactic correspondence. These strategies account for 98 occurrences (26.41%) in the Czech subcorpus. This suggests a strong tendency toward discourse-sensitive restructuring.

A particularly high concentration of such reformulations is observed in the Czech translation of *Metro 2033*, which also contains several instances where clauses with *можно* are omitted. As these omissions are not attested elsewhere in the corpus, they appear to reflect text- or translator-specific choices rather than a general tendency.

The following types of periphrastic strategies were identified. The classification is based on the form of the Czech translation, with reference to the function of *можно* serving as an interpretative layer explaining the choice of strategy.

(a) Idiomatic and Rhetorical Reformulations

In expressive contexts, especially in dialogue, Czech translations tend to render *можно* through idiomatic constructions that preserve pragmatic force rather than grammatical form.

- (20) RU: Разве *можно* вести себя так неосторожно! (РК 1998: 169).
 CZ: *Copak to jde*, chovat se takhle neopatrně! (РК 1992: 184).
 EN: ‘How could anyone be so careless!’
- (21) RU: – Сколько *можно*, Сень? Успокойся! (РМР 1995: 70).
 CZ: – *Kolikrát to mám ještě opakovat*, Seño? Uklidni se! (РМР 2020: 167).
 EN: ‘How many times do I have to repeat this, Senya? Calm down!’

The idiomatic construction *Copak to jde* (‘is that even possible’) is the most frequently attested expression of this type in the corpus. Other solutions include temporal questions with personal verbs (21), where the impersonal modal frame is recast as an agent-oriented expression.

(b) Evaluative and Discourse Reformulations

In a range of contexts, the modal meaning of *можно* is recast through evaluative predicates or discourse-oriented hedging devices.

- (22) RU: [...] *можно* ли выходить замуж из жалости? (ТГ 2004: 215).
 CZ: Ale stále víc ji trápila otázka: *Je správné* vdát se z lítosti? (ТГ 2005: 163).
 EN: ‘And yet, an unsettling thought kept creeping in: could she marry out of pity?’
- (23) RU: Этот младенец умер, *можно* сказать, по-вашему, некрещеным (КК 2012: 239).
 CZ: To dítě, *řčeno po vašem*, zemřelo nepokřtěné (КК 2018: 183).
 EN: ‘This child died, to use your wording, unbaptised.’

In (22), the modal question about possibility is reframed as a normative judgment (*Je správné* ‘is it right’). In (23), the parenthetical *можно сказать*, which already has a meta-textual function in Russian, is rendered by a passive construction (*řčeno po vašem* ‘as you put it’). In such cases, the modal component is backgrounded, and the expression is recast

as an explicit metatextual marker, resulting in a shift from modal indeterminacy to explicit discourse framing.

(c) Generalizing Constructions

A distinct group involves the introduction of a generalised human subject, typically *člověk* ('one, a person'), which replaces the Russian impersonal frame.

- (24) RU: Главное что – ведь их тоже понять *можно* (OR 2012: 70).
 CZ: Důležitý je, že *člověk* jim vlastně taky rozumí (OR 2022: 41).
 EN: 'The main point is that they can be understood too.'

The impersonal *можно* is recast through a generic subject, making the statement more concrete while preserving its generalised meaning.

(d) Structural Rewordings

In some cases, the modal meaning of *можно* is not expressed by a dedicated modal or evaluative element but is encoded differently across the sentence structure through nominal phrases, conditional forms, or adverbial expressions.

- (25) RU: *Можно* уходить назад... (M 2012: 240).
 CZ: Samozřejmě vždycky *existovala možnost* ustoupit... (M 2015: 215).
 EN: 'It was always possible to retreat...'
- (26) RU: От сияния эполетов и орденов *можно* было просто ослепнуть (TG 2004: 187).
 CZ: *Málem ošlepla* leskem výložek a vojenských řádů (TG 2005: 142).
 EN: 'The gleam of the epaulettes and medals was nearly blinding.'

In (25), modality is expressed nominally (*existovala možnost* 'a possibility existed'). In (26), the potentiality of *можно было* is rendered through the adverb *málem* ('almost'), which encodes near-realization rather than abstract possibility.

The analysed material shows that periphrastic constructions avoid direct formal equivalents of *можно* and redistribute modality across syntax, lexis, or discourse, often making explicit distinctions (evaluation, certainty, generalization) that remain implicit in the Russian original. These constructions are only partially reflected in lexicographic descriptions and are not systematically represented as translation patterns, yet they function as contextually effective solutions that allow the translator to preserve the intended meaning of *можно* without reproducing its syntactic form.

Their frequency and versatility in the corpus highlight the importance of context-dependent translation strategies and demonstrate the adaptability of Czech in expressing non-agentive modality. The distribution of Czech translation strategies is summarised in TABLE 3.

TABLE 3
Overview of Lexical and Syntactic Strategies for Translating *можно* into Czech

Grammatical and lexical type	Lexical units	Syntactic construction	Number of examples	%	Lexicographically attested
Reflexive modal expression	<i>dát se</i>	Impersonal reflexive clause	70	18.87%	Yes
Modal predicative adjective	<i>je možné</i>	Impersonal copular clause	32	8.63%	Yes
Modal predicative	<i>lze</i>	Impersonal predicate clause	6	1.62%	Partial
Personal modal verb	<i>moci</i>	Personal modal clause	142	38.27%	Yes
Other modal verbs	<i>muset, smět, mít</i>	Personal modal clause	17 (10 + 2 + 5)	4.58%	Yes (core) / Partial (contextual)
Paraphrastic or idiomatic expressions	various idioms and free paraphrases	Periphrastic or rephrased construction	98	26.41%	Partial (phrase-level)
		No lexical equivalent	6	1.62%	–
		Total	371	100%	

Taken together, the Czech data reveal a systematic distribution across three major types of strategies: impersonal constructions (29.1%), personal constructions with modal verbs (42.85%), and periphrastic reformulations (26.41%). The choice of strategy depends on the contextual interpretation of the source construction, and Czech translations frequently make explicit distinctions between possibility, permission, absence of necessity, and evaluation that remain underspecified in the Russian original. This shift often involves a move from non-agentive to more agent-oriented structures. These findings confirm that dictionary-based equivalence captures only part of the functional range of *можно*, while translation practice relies on a broader and more structurally diverse set of context-dependent strategies.

3.3. Dictionary Equivalents and Comparative Strategies

As outlined in §2.4, bilingual dictionaries document a range of equivalents for *можно*, including core forms such as *možna*, *je možné*, and *moci*, as well as more context-dependent

TABLE 4
Cross-linguistic Patterns in Translating *МОЖНО*: Polish vs. Czech Approaches

Feature / Strategy	Polish translation tendency	Czech translation tendency
Impersonal construction	Very frequent (<i>można</i>)	Less frequent; used selectively (<i>je možné, lze</i>)
Reflexive construction	Rare (<i>dać się</i>)	Frequent and idiomatic (<i>dát se</i>)
Personal modal verbs	Common (<i>móc</i>); relatively stable semantics	Varied (<i>moci, muset, smět, mít</i>); modal shifts frequent
Periphrastic rephrasings	More limited; often near-structural equivalents	Frequent and structurally diverse

variants attested in comprehensive lexicographic resources. In Polish, *można* functions as the dominant default equivalent, while in Czech concise dictionaries list *je možné, dá se, smí se*, and *může se* as core forms (Lingea 2026; Seznam 2026). Lexicographic resources with broader coverage (e.g., *Rusko-česká elektronická slovníková databáze, 2007–2018*) further include *lze, je dovoleno*, and *je možno*, alongside phraseological equivalents. The form *je možno*, however, is not attested in the Czech subcorpus analysed in this study.

A comparison with corpus data shows that these lexicographic descriptions do not capture the full range of strategies employed in translation.

In Czech, personal constructions with modal verbs – above all *moci* – account for the largest share of equivalents (38.27%), although they are not consistently presented as primary equivalents in dictionary entries. Czech translators also frequently rely on periphrastic expressions and evaluative paraphrases, such as *existuje možnost* ‘a possibility exists’, *je jasné* ‘it is clear’, or *Copak to jde* ‘is that even possible’, which fall outside the scope of fixed lexicon-based equivalence. While some of these patterns are partially documented in the RČESD 2007–2018, they are not systematically represented in concise dictionaries.

Polish translations, in contrast, rely more consistently on a limited set of recurrent equivalents, as reflected in the corpus distribution.

TABLE 4 presents a cross-linguistic summary of the main tendencies identified in the Polish and Czech subcorpora.

These patterns reflect differences in translation strategies attested in the corpus. Polish translations tend to preserve the impersonal, non-agentive framing of the Russian source more consistently, while Czech translations display a broader range of structural solutions, including personal constructions and paraphrastic reformulations. This variation is particularly evident in contexts where the modal meaning of *МОЖНО* is context-dependent or pragmatically nuanced.

The findings suggest that dictionary equivalents provide an important but incomplete representation of translation practice. While they capture central and frequently used

forms, they do not fully reflect the range of reflexive constructions or periphrastic strategies attested in the corpus. Rather than replacing lexicographic descriptions, corpus-based analysis complements them by revealing context-dependent patterns of usage not systematically captured in dictionary entries.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the translation of the Russian modal predicative *можно* into Polish and Czech on the basis of a trilingual corpus of contemporary literary texts. The three research questions formulated in §1 can now be addressed as follows:

RQ1: Do the dictionary equivalents of the predicative *можно* correspond to actual translation practices?

The corpus analysis indicates only a partial correspondence between dictionary recommendations and translation practice. While frequently used forms such as *można*, *je možné*, and *moci* are well represented in bilingual dictionaries, other productive strategies are less systematically captured. These include reflexive constructions (*dać się* in Polish and *dát se* in Czech), as well as a wide range of periphrastic and evaluative expressions. Although some of these patterns are documented in more comprehensive lexicographic resources, they are not consistently represented as general translation equivalents. This suggests that corpus-based evidence can usefully complement lexicographic descriptions.

RQ2: What syntactic and grammatical strategies are used in Polish and Czech to translate *можно*?

The analysis shows that Polish translations tend to rely on a relatively limited set of structurally consistent strategies, most notably the impersonal predicative *można* and the modal verb *móc*. Other options, such as reflexive constructions (*dać się*) and periphrastic reformulations, occur less frequently but form a recognizable part of the system. Czech translations, by contrast, exhibit a broader range of syntactic solutions, including impersonal constructions (*je možné*, *dát se*), personal constructions with modal verbs (*moci*, *muset*, *smět*, *mít*) and periphrastic reformulations. This results in a higher degree of structural variability and reflects a greater tendency toward context-sensitive reinterpretation.

RQ3: How are modal meanings expressed through personal and impersonal constructions in the analysed translations?

The corpus data reveal a clear asymmetry in the distribution of personal and impersonal constructions. Russian predominantly encodes modality through impersonal structures, reflecting a non-agentive perspective. Polish largely preserves this pattern, while Czech more frequently shifts toward personal or agent-oriented constructions, introducing an explicit subject or reinterpreting the modal meaning in context. This shift does not entail a loss of modal meaning, but rather its re-encoding through different grammatical means, often with a higher degree of semantic specification.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the translation of *можно* cannot be reduced to a fixed set of lexical equivalents. Instead, translation involves context-dependent strategies that combine lexical choice with syntactic and pragmatic adaptation. While dictionaries provide an important starting point, they do not fully reflect the diversity of solutions attested in translation practice.

Future research may extend this approach to other Russian modal predicatives (*нельзя, нужно, надо*) and to larger and more diverse corpora.

Abbreviations

CZ:	text translated into Czech
EN:	text translated into English
KK:	<i>Kazus Kukockogo</i>
M:	<i>Metro 2033</i>
OR:	<i>Omon Ra</i>
PL:	text translated into Polish
PMP:	<i>Pochoronite menja za plintusom</i>
RK:	<i>Russkaja krasavica</i>
RU:	original Russian text
TG:	<i>Tureckij gambit</i>
VIM:	<i>Vot idët Messija!..</i>

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Abstract

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Translating Russian Modal Predicatives. The Case of možno in Polish and Czech Literary Texts

This article examines the translation of the Russian modal predicative *možno* into Polish and Czech on the basis of a trilingual corpus of contemporary literary texts. The corpus comprises 2,627 sentences containing modal predicatives, 371 of which include *možno*. The study compares dictionary equivalents with actual translation practices and analyses the grammatical strategies used to express non-agentive modality. The findings show that, alongside core equivalents such as *można*, *je možné*, and *dát se*, translators employ personal modal verbs, reflexive constructions, paraphrastic reformulations, and, in some cases, omission of the modal component. Polish tends to preserve impersonal constructions, whereas Czech exhibits greater structural variability and more frequent context-sensitive reinterpretation. The study demonstrates that dictionary equivalents provide only a partial account of translation practice and highlights the value of corpus-based analysis for refining lexicographic descriptions of modal expressions.

Keywords

Russian Language; Polish Translation; Czech Translation; Modal Predicatives; Translation Equivalents.