
Are *could have been* and *might have been* interchangeable?

First answer – *might have* and *could have* are not interchangeable in all situations.

As usual, of course, we have to dig into the meaning of the verbs to detect the differences. The key is to understand the **function** of the modal:

Is it expressing possibility, permission or ability?

A more technical way to say this is to ask whether the verb expresses epistemic, deontic or dynamic ability respectively.

The usual past tense of *may* when it is used for permission is *could*, so we get:

Present:

He may come

Past:

He could come (in the sense of *He is / was allowed to come*).

You can't say *He might come* when it isn't performing the function of expressing permission.

However, when *may* is used to express possibility it forms its past tense with *might* so we get:

Present:

It may rain

Past / Reported speech

He said it might rain

Notice, however, that *could* is equally acceptable here but sometimes slightly ambiguous because it is also the past tense of *may* for permission. Here, there is no possible confusion because we don't (can't yet) give the weather permission to do anything. We must be talking about possibility.

In other circumstances, there is a possible ambiguity – does

He said I could join them

mean

I was allowed to join them

or

It was possible that I would join them?

The same issues occur in the perfect form of the verbs.

Compare these two sentences:

1. *I might have left my car keys with John*
2. *I could have left my car keys with John*

In the first sentence, we are only talking about possibility and we are speculating so it means something like:

It is possible that I have left my car keys with John.

Sentence 2 can mean exactly the same thing if we are talking about possibility but look what happens when we want to express permission.

Only sentence 2 can mean:

I was given permission to leave my car keys with John

and could be followed by

... but I didn't because I knew you'd want them.

The verbs are interchangeable when talking about possibility, not when talking about permission.

Now consider ability. Here are two sentences again to illustrate the difference:

3. *He could have lifted the box for him*

4. *He might have lifted the box for him*

In sentence 3, we are talking about either possibility or ability. In some cases, it also implies criticism of his not helping. It can mean, therefore:

a) *He should have lifted the box for him*

b) *It's possible that he lifted the box for him*

c) *He was able to lift the box for him (but didn't)*

In sentence 4, we could be implying criticism of his negligence or we could be saying that it is a possibility in the past and we don't know whether he did or not. So it can mean:

a) *He should have lifted the box for him*

b) *It is possible that he lifted the box for him but we don't know (compare c) above where we know he didn't lift the box)*

Compare, too, the meanings of:

5. *If we had had more money we might have bought a car*

6. *If we had had more money we could have bought a car*

In sentence 5, we are talking about a possibility that existed but wasn't fulfilled but in sentence 6, we are talking about an ability which wasn't used. They are different.

So the verbs are not interchangeable when we are talking about ability, either.