Emphatic Negation and the Potential Optative

The potential optative in Greek, i.e. the optative with ἄν, represents an expression of possibility or likelihood: “it is possible that x is the case”. When οὐ (or one of its compounds) is added to this construction, the result is an emphatic, total negation not just of the topic at hand but indeed of possibility itself: “it is not possible that x is the case”. In linguistic terms, the negative has scope over the modal. Guided by this principle, we should translate οὐκ ἂν βαδίσαιμι τὴν ὁδὸν ταύτην (Ar. Ra. 135), as ‘There’s no way I’m going to walk that road’ instead of ‘It’s possible I won’t walk that road’.\(^1\) The prevailing stated opinion in current scholarship is that this type of emphatic speech is limited to constructions using an aorist optative. In what follows, I offer evidence that supports the extension of this concept of emphatic negation to the present optative as well.

Gildersleeve (1900) was the first to explicitly articulate this understanding of negated potential optatives.\(^2\) In §442, he declares: “especially common is the aorist optative with ἄν to express total negation, which cannot be brought out so well by the future indicative.” Smyth (1956) is less direct, and splits Gildersleeve’s idea into two parts. In §1824a, showing general preference only, he notes that “the aorist optative with ἄν and a negative is very common”. Later (§1826a), he clarifies that “with a negative, the potential optative may have the force of a strong assertion”. The one example given for this section implies that the aorist is the key means of expressing this type of “strong assertion”.\(^3\) Kühner and Gerth (1898) provide examples of both presents and aorists, but only mark out one example overtly, an aorist, as an emphatic negation.\(^4\) All of these scholars do not explicitly prohibit the present from being used in a similar fashion to the aorist, but neither do they explicitly include the present. In this silence, the superiority of the

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\(^1\) Loeb translation: ‘I’d rather not stroll that route.’ Texts and translations throughout are from the Loeb series, to be consistent with the Perseus Project database (see below). Some translations are edited to be more literal; for these examples, like this one, the original Loeb translation will be given in a note.

\(^2\) Goodwin (1890) published his grammar earlier but does not discuss emphasis in this construction.

\(^3\) The only example Smyth provides is οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἀπέλθοιμ’, ἀλλὰ κόψω τὴν θύραν (Ar. Ach. 403). Note that verbs of arrival and departure, being telic, prefer the aorist.

\(^4\) §396.4 gives S. OT 343 οὐκ ἂν πέρα φράσαιμι with the parenthetical explanation “ent-schiedene Weigerung”. Much like Smyth, this singled-out example provides the impression that this mode applies to aorist verbs in particular, whether or not such an impression is intentional.
aorist is suggested by their comments and examples. More recently, Rijksbaron (2002) seems to expand on Gildersleeve’s stipulation by deliberately excluding the present. In §14.2.1 he writes: “In combination with οὐ ... the aorist optative + ἄν expresses an emphatic negation: it is not even possible that the state of affairs should occur.” Rijksbaron later provides the example from Aristophanes above, and explains the emphatic refusal in the following way (§16.3): “The use of the aorist here is readily understandable, since the present optative would stress the course of the state of affairs concerned, a rather meaningless implication, since it is expressly stated that the state of affairs will not be carried out.”

With this explanation, Rijksbaron becomes the first scholar who attempts to provide a semantic reason for the emphatic use of the aorist in particular. Unfortunately, his explanation is not universally applicable, but is only relevant to the given example. It is perfectly reasonable that a situation could arise in which a speaker would stress the course of a state of affairs, using a present, instead of the complete state of affairs, using an aorist. As in all verbal constructions, the choice of present or aorist depends on the precise meaning that is to be conveyed. Rijksbaron is sensitive to this distinction elsewhere, connecting present verb forms with simultaneous or open actions, and aorist verb forms with anterior, closed or specific actions. The reluctance of Rijksbaron to permit the present to express emphasis in this particular construction may stem from an initial problem of data collection. With the advent of easily searchable texts, however, the full incidence of the present can finally be recognized.

To examine the quantitative side of the issue properly, I relied on the PhiloLogic interface to the Perseus project which has a tool allowing searches by vocabulary and morphology. In the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Lysias, and Xenophon (combined) there are 615 negated optatives with ἄν which could express emphatic negation. Present verbs account

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5) This is clarified as “a frequent construction” in §16.3.
6) Generally discussed in §1, with regard to the optative in §16.1 and §16.3.
7) Searching was done through the website perseus.uchicago.edu/greek.html. All 10-word phrases containing an optative, ἄν, and οὐ (or one of its compounds) were searched in each of the stated authors. Longer negative potential optative constructions were omitted. The search results were hand-checked to remove any false positives, i.e. duplicate search results, words in close proximity that were part of different clauses, and negation with narrow scope. The remaining sample should have only wide scope negation, in which the negative has scope over the verb and/or the extended verb phrase. Interpretations of emphasis and scope can vary; de Haan (2006, 55-6) points out that in sentences containing possibility ambiguity is common. Accordingly, some examples in my corpus may be objectionable to some readers. This understanding of sentence-level negation is more permissive than what is expressed in Moorhouse (1959) and therefore allows more examples to be included in my corpus.