

## A Study on Usage of *Can* and *May*

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### *Can* と *May* の用法に関する一考察

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#### Abstract

Using *Stories from New Yorker 1950–1960* as a text, the usages of auxiliaries *can* and *may*, *could* and *might* are analyzed in the context. The result shows that *may* used to express permission is more often used than *can* regardless of degrees of politeness. In the sense of possibility *may* is used in statements, on the other hand, *can* in questions or negative clauses. *Could* and *might* express hypothetical possibility with little difference in their meaning, and as modals they express politeness, suspicion or supposition in present tense. This leads to further studies on how *can* and *may* keep their links or dissolve together in the sense of permission and the sense of possibility, and how *could* and *might* will be treated in the feature of tense and how they will be defined as modals.

**Keywords** : Can, May, Auxiliaries

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#### 抄 録

Can と May, Could と Might の文脈における用法を “Stories from New Yorker 1950–1960” をテキストに分析する。許可を表す場合、丁寧の程度にかかわらず May は Can より頻繁に用いられ、可能性を表す場合には May は肯定文に、Can は疑問文、否定文に用いられる。Could と Might は可能性を表すと共に Modal として現在時制における丁寧さ、疑惑、推測を表す。今後の課題としては、許可、可能性を表す Can, May に関しては文脈中での用法、意味の変化を時代をおって調査し、Could, Might に関しては Modal としての用法を規定する要素についての調査を予定している。

キーワード : Can、May、助動詞

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## 0. Introduction

This paper aims at how *can* and *may*, *could* and *might* are used in the time between 1950 and 1960 referring to the traditional theories in prospect of further studies on changes in their uses and their present usage. *Can*, *may*, *could* and *might*, classified as auxiliaries, are defined according to F. R. Palmer, "We may classify the verbs first of all in terms of full verbs and auxiliaries; . . . Basically the criteria are that the auxiliary verbs occur with negation, inversion, 'code' and emphatic affirmation while the full verbs do not." (Palmer 14-15) This classification of the verb is rather arbitrary as Palmer himself admits as such, "The classification is to a small degree arbitrary since varying criteria are used and they do not give exactly the same answer." (Palmer 15) R.W. Zandvoort states the definition of the auxiliaries using the Oxford English Dictionary;

"The auxiliary verb is a verb used to form the tenses, moods, voices, etc. of other verbs. They include auxiliaries of periphrasis, which assist in expressing the interrogative, negative, and emphatic forms of speech, viz. do (did); auxiliaries of tense, *have*, *be*, *shall*, *will*; of mood, *may*, *should*, *could*; of voice, *be*; of prediction (i.e. vbs. of incomplete prediction which require a verbal complement), *can*, *must*, *ought*, *need*, also *shall*, *will*, *may*, when not auxiliaries of tense or mood." (Zandvoort 64)

Among the auxiliaries there are some which make couples such as *must* and *have to*, *can* and *may*, which are used synonymously in certain contexts. Their synonymy and difference have been studied by many linguists, but in this paper we shall look into how *can* and *may* are used in American short stories published in the time between 1950 and 1960. *Can* and *may* are defined separately by their basic meanings, and we can see their synonymy and difference from that point of view. But as Noriko Waida states in her studies on *must* and *have to* that "there must be delicate shades of meaning and the difference in the usage and the distribution in the contexts, and the difference caused by the author's characteristics, styles, or technique. So it is more appropriate not only to consider the basic meanings, but also to pay attention to the contexts in order to provide the overtone of the words." (Waida 36) Therefore, we shall see the meaning and usage of *can* and *may*, and their past tense forms of *could* and *might*, in contexts using "Stories from the New Yorker 1950-1960" as a text.

## 1. Usage of Can and May in American Short Stories in the Time between 1950 and 1960

In order to see the similarity and difference between *can* and *may*, it is more reasonable to show context in which both auxiliaries are used. According to Palmer's definition (Palmer 116-119, 121), *can* is used in the sense of ability, characteristic,

permission, possibility, willingness, and sensation, *may* is used in the sense of permission and possibility. We shall compare the usage of *can* and *may* in the sense of permission and possibility where both auxiliaries have some kind of overtone. Besides that we shall also look into how *can* and *may* are used in other senses.

### 1.2. Usage of *Can*

(1) Ability: The most familiar use of *can* is to express ability to do something.

(a) Replaceable by a form of "be able to" in certain grammatical context<sup>1</sup>

(b) Replaceable by *will* with "I" and "we"

(c) *Could* in past time

"A small bit of loin of lamb we might have, but my wife *can't* digest it."<sup>2</sup>

"Thank you, I have matches. . . . I *can* raise my arm . . ." (199)

My sack had almost sixty birds inside it, and it must have weighed a hundredweight and a half, at least. "I *can't* carry this." (540)

(2) Characteristic: Reference is to characteristic, though sporadic, patterns of behavior, usually, but not always, in a derogatory sense.

(a) No collocation with future time adverbials but with "at times"

(b) *Could* in past time

"His P.A. system," Father Burner explained. "Better tell him," he said to the young missionary, "You are closer. He *can't* bring me in on batte-

ries he uses." (265)

"Grossbart, why *can't* you be like the rest? Why do you have to stick out like a sore thumb?" (317)

(3) Permission: Permission to act may be granted by using *can*.

(a) Replaceable by *may*<sup>3</sup>

(b) No analogous simple, positive past tense forms

She looked first at Mrs. Sillburn, then at me, then at the Lieutenant. "You *can* all relax," she said. (111)

"Sergeant, *can* I tell you something? Personal?" (321)

"Just wait half an hour, old boy, and you *can* have one." (365)

(4) Possibility: *Can* is to suggest that perhaps something may be.

(a) Replaceable by *may* (except in questions)<sup>4</sup>

(b) *Can have* for past time

In the car, just a couple of minutes earlier, when the drum-and-bugle corps blasted by, a common discomfort, almost a common anguish, had lent our small groups a semblance of alliance—of the sort that *can* be temporarily conferred on Cook's tourists caught in a very heavy rainstorm at Pompeii. (89)

I write Daisy approximately the same letter I always write her under this particular set of circumstances, the burden of which is that nothing for either of us *can* never be as bad as the past before Gran mercifully died. (681)

We *can't* fail if we play it safe, and

that's what we're going to do. (830)

(5) Willingness: *Can* is used in a sense very similar to that of *will* to ask a favor or to make an offer.

(a) Replaceable by *will* (but not *may*)

(b) Collocation with future time adverbials

"What *can* I do for you?" (55)

"*Can't* you move over just a tiny bit?" she said to him. "I'm so squashed in here. I can hardly breathe." (78)

"And you are sweet. Look, *can* you try to forgive me for last night?" (510)

(6) Sensation: *Can* is regularly used with verb of sensation, without adding anything not implied by the simple verb.

"You *can* usually hear them at the front door, but we might have fallen asleep or they might have come in quietly. (20)

"She is so deaf she *can't* hear it thunder." (223)

Out of the corner of my eye I *can* see that there is a yellow chip straw with little wads of flamingo-coloured feathers around the crown, but again there is no time to examine anything. (336)

(7) Others: Palmer states the six uses of *can*, but in the actual usage there are many *can*'s which can not be sorted under any single definition or the use, but sorted under more than one definition. Concerning the usage of *can* in the sense of "sensation", Palmer says himself that it has the sense of ability, too (Palmer 118), there-

fore, we shall look into the usage which can be sorted under more than one definition.

a) *Can* in the sense of ability which also has the sense of possibility.

e.g. "Let's go have a soda, and I *can* phone from there!" (78)

*Can* in this case actually means that the Matron of Honour who is speaking will be able to phone at a certain place, but at the same time it means that she may possibly phone. Another example is as follows.

e.g. It is clearly my brother's duty to keep me and my family until I can get work and contribute my own earnings to household. (650)

b) *Can* in the sense of ability which also has the sense of permission.

e.g. "How *can* you do this to people?" (322)

*Can* in this passage may be replaced by "be able to" or "do you allow yourself".

c) *Can* in the sense of permission which also has the sense of ability.

e.g. He weighs about as much as a cat and he has the ecstatic look on his face that you *can't* talk to. (64)

In this case *can't* means "you are not allowed to" but also "you are not able to". Another example is as follows.

e.g. But such a system — which an adult can perceive rationally without feeling a thing, while a child feels it blindly — can work only if there are gods the child *can* go to. (558)

d) *Can* in the sense of permission which has the sense of possibility.

e.g. "You're a rebel," Caroline said gloomily.

"You *can* say that. But I'm a conformist." (250)

In this case *can* means "be allowed to" but also means "possibly do".

e) *Can* in the sense of possibility which has the sense of permission.

e.g. Once a pheasants had the horse-hair, you *can* fire a rifle in his ear and he won't even jump. (526)

"You *can* consider yourself lucky this isn't thirty years ago." (531)

"Nurse your baby until you have to go, and then you *can* wear him." (706)

### 1.3. Usage of *Could*

#### (1) Ability

It was true I *could* not understand, but I had been trying hard ot answer well. (656)

"Oh, not tonight—I *couldn't* come back tonight. (290) (tentative)<sup>5</sup>

"And the school system was almost the worst of all: if we *could* not understand fractions, was that not our teacher's fault?" (665) (condition)<sup>6</sup>

"I wish we *could* go to a ball." (602)<sup>7</sup>

#### (2) Characteristics

But even to himself, now, she *could* think of Bernadette only in terms of the most vulgar expressions, the terminology her own family had employed. (131)

For the moment, he forgot what he had been, just as he could sometimes forget the had not become a playwright. (124)

#### (3) Permission

She called Leora and told her that she *could* have the candlesticks at the price of a small retreat (176)

"But my aunt said I *could* bring my friends." (319)

"And I told her then that any that had to *could* smoke, but I wasn't ready to have a fire today, so mind out." (789)

#### (4) Possibility

I wondered to myself, what *could* it be? (51)

He *could* go to a psychiatrist, like Miss Rainey; he *could* go to a Danish massage parlor in the West Seventies that had been recommended by a salesman; he could rape the girl or trust that he would somehow be prevented from doing this; or he *could* get drunk. (859)

"Just think, Nim, you *could've* married Fred Kite, and all your life you *could've* been serenaded with 'The Devil's Dream'." (150) (tentative)

If I *could* have learned to sew, or she had had the patience to teach me, we might have found a medium in which we could communicate. (425) (condition)

#### (5) Willingness

"*Could* you do something?" (324)

"Let me say that until the last day or so the Paris trip was everything I

*could* have asked or that money could buy.” (731) (tentative)

“Good Bob, I wonder if you *could* do me a favor.” (324) (condition)

(6) Sensation

From the window of the bedroom where Jimmy and I slept, you *could* see the whole road up and down, . . . (9)

We *couldn't* hear him laughing or talking any longer . . . (40)

If only I *could* have heard then even faintly the hum of New York, . . . (643) (condition)

(7) Others: As we saw among the usage of *can* that there are some ambiguous uses, there are also some which are not to be put under one group of the use. *Could's* which basically have one sense sometimes have another sense.

a) *Could* in the sense of ability which has the sense of possibility.

e.g. What *could* I say? I didn't know what to say. (36)

The hum of the vacuum cleaners overheard in the living-room, the sad song of a mechanical universe, was all the reassurance he *could* hope for, . . . (206)

b) *Could* in the sense of ability which has the sense of characteristic.

e.g. Beautiful, well educated, aristocratic in her attitude, she *couldn't* clerk in a dime store; she *couldn't* model clothes; she *couldn't* be a waitress or cashier. (348)

c) *Could* in the sense of possibility which

has the sense of ability.

e.g. If I *could* believe their minds, . . . (308)

. . . there was nothing else he *could* possibly have been. (577)

d) *Could* in the sense of permission which has the sense of possibility.

e.g. “You must have understood when you settled here that you *couldn't* expect to live like a bear in a cave. (855)

“When I told Petrus, he just asked calmly when they *could* go and fetch the body.” (766)

1.4 Usage of *May*

(1) Permission: *May* is used to give permission.

(a) Tentative form *might* only in questions

(b) No past time analogue<sup>8</sup>

“*May* I ask if you were Buddy Black?” (79)

“Very well, you *may* do it now.” (85)

“*May* I present my son?” (591)

(2) Possibility: In the sense of possibility, *may* is used with reference to both present and future time.

(a) Tentative form *might* in all sentences

(b) Not used in questions<sup>9</sup>

(c) *May* have for past time, *might* habitual only

I *may* be gone for anywhere from six weeks to two months on this trip. (63)

It *may* sound strange that my sister-in-law, and not my wife, should

serve me, but it is so in our house.  
(649)

You *may* be sure we did not unlearn those years as soon as we put out of sight in the cemetery . . . (679)

(3) Wish<sup>10</sup>: Initial *may* followed by the subject of the clause indicates that the occurrence of the event is wished for.<sup>11</sup>

There is no example used in this sense.

(4) Others: However *may* has only two uses, permission and possibility, in the example from the text, there are several usage which are not put under one of the two uses.

a) *May* which has the sense of permission suggests the sense of possibility.

e.g. "You *might* tell Mrs. Placer," said Mr. Murphy, "that this lad will make a fine watchdog." (667)  
. . . he realized that he *might* better have stayed at his desk.

(851)

## 2. Overtone and Difference Between *Can* and *May*, *Could* and *Might*

*Can* and *may*, and *could* and *might* in the text are used as seen in the following chart.

There are two senses in which *can* and *may*, *could* and *might* appear under one meaning. The two senses are permission and possibility. We shall see how *can* and *may*, *could* and *might* show their overtone and difference in the two senses.

### 2.1 *Can* and *May*

Similar to Palmer's definition of *can* and *may* Geoffrey N. Leech states as follows:

"Linguistic law-makers of the past have considered *may* to be the correct auxiliary of permission, and have condemned the use of *can* for that pur-

	can	could	may	might
Ability	155 (46%)	330 (53%)		
Characteristic	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.3%)		
Permission	28 (8%)	12 (2%)	11 (30%)	1 (1%)
Possibility	14 (4%)	106 (17%)	23 (62%)	106 (97%)
Willigness	4 (1%)	4 (0.6%)		
Sensation	18 (5%)	64 (10%)		
Others	114 (34%)	99 (16%)	3 (8%)	2 (2%)
Total	335	617	37	109

pose. . . Yet in fact, *can* is more widely used than *may* as an auxiliary of permission in colloquial English, having the less specific meaning 'you have permission' rather than 'I give you permission'. . . . On the other hand, *can* tends to be avoided in formal and polite usage (in both written and spoken English), because *may* is felt to be the more respectable form." (Leech 70)

"In colloquial English, *may* signals permission given by the speaker. In more formal contexts, however, the meaning is not limited in this way, but is extended to GENERAL PERMISSION without respect to who does the permitting. In formal English, that is *may* may replaces *can*, which is often considered less polite and less correct than *may*." (Leech 67-68)

Both Palmer and Leech agree on the point that in the sense of permission *can* is the substitution for *may*, and *can* is more informal, colloquial than *may* which is more formal and correct. It is clearly seen in the text<sup>12</sup>. As far as we see the text, the difference between *can* and *may* in this sense mainly depends on formality and respectability.

Tomoshichi Konishi states the use of *can* and *may* from a different point of view, that is "both *can* and *may* have the sense of permission, and each has its own specific role in the category of grammar or levels"<sup>13</sup>. Konishi's opinion has something common with that of Leech, that is "In

colloquial speech, the difference<sup>14</sup> between *can* and *may* is unimportant enough to be ignored in most cases" (Konishi 49; Leech 70). Both linguists look into the difference between the two auxiliaries from the point of who gives the permission.

Konishi declares that *can* in the sense of permission has impersonal notion while *may* suggests that the permission is given by the speaker. (Konishi 51)<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, *can* has no other implication but only ask for the permission, and *can* may be used in the conversation with a respectable high rank person.

Leech has the same opinion.

"*May* signals permission given by the speaker. . . . *can* is more widely used than *may* as an auxiliary of permission in colloquial English, having the less specific meaning 'you have permission' rather than 'I give you permission'. *Can* tends to be avoided in formal and polite usage, because *may* felt to be the more respectable form." (Leech 67-68)<sup>16</sup>

Konishi gives further explanation on the usage of *may*.

"*May* is more specific than *can*, and has more polite feeling in it, which that *may* gives the authority of giving permission to the speaker. Therefore, to use *may* in a trivial matter, it may sound ridiculously polite or servile or sometimes arrogant." (Konishi 52)<sup>17</sup>

As a conclusion Konishi states that "As *may* has complete implication which *can* does not have, and in English there is not



a category so-called honoric form, *can* is more often used." (Konishi 54)<sup>18</sup>

(b) *Can* and *May* in the Sense of Possibility

C. C. Fries states that "*can* and *may* can be used to express ability and uncertainty" (Fries 175), which shows the basic meaning of the two auxiliaries, but quite different from Palmer's opinion that is both *can* and *may* have the sense of possibility.

While Palmer defines *can* and *may* from their basic meanings, Leech tries to define them from the form of the sentences.

"The use of *can* is not particularly frequent in positive statements, where it is in competition with *may*; but it is common in negative and interrogative clauses. Often *can* can be roughly paraphrased by the use of the adverb 'sometimes'." (Leech 71)

"The use of *may* is common in statements; it does not occur, however, in questions. *May* in the possibility sense is stressed, whereas in the sense of permission, it is unstressed. . . . *May* in this, as in the previous sense, usually refers to a future event when combined with an 'event verb': *may* go, *may* become, *may* lose, etc." (Leech 68)

It is clear that *may* is used more often in the sense of possibility rather than *can* when we compare the frequency of them, And when we see the usage of *can*, it is used almost two times as frequently as in the negative statements.<sup>19</sup> So the differ-

ence between *can* and *may* in the sense of possibility still mainly depends on the form of the sentences if they are positive or negative or interrogative.

As *can* and *may* in this sense are differentiated from the form of the sentences, both auxiliaries are also differentiated from the point of factual/theoretical contrast by Leech. (75) Leech states thus; "*can* describes a theoretical conceivable happenings" while *may* "gives the feeling of more immediate, because the actual likelihood of an event is being considered." (Leech 76) "Factual possibility' is stronger than 'theoretical possibility' because *can* . . . merely postulates a theoretical possibility, a general idea in the mind; *may* . . . actually envisages the event as a real contingency." (Leech 76)<sup>20</sup>

Similar to Leech's opinion, and as a certain proof of it, there is an opinion of B. and C. Evans. They state that both of the two verbals may be used to express possibility but never be used interchangeably in speaking about possibility. (Evans B. and C. 175) But the general definition and the meaning of *can* and *may* according to the traditional theory are more or less similar namely both *can* and *may* are used to express possibility as part of their function.

## 2.2 *Could* and *Might*

### (a) *Could* and *Might* in the Sense of Permission

*Could* and *Might* are generally considered as the past tense form of *can* and *may*, but in the sense of permission the usage is

quite limited. Palmer states as follows:

"In spite of its habitual nature there is no past tense analogue of *will*. But this is to be expected. Inductive statements are essentially present in all-time sense, and would not be made with specific past-time reference. Similarly *could* and *might* may be used in the past time, in a habitual sense of some uses." (Palmer 123)

"It is to be noted that both *can* and *may* in their sense of permission have tentative past time forms only in requests. (Palmer 130)

Leech explains the usage of *could* and *might* in this sense as follows:

"Hypothetical Permission: *Could* and *might* are often used as more polite alternatives to *can* and *may* in the first-person requests. . . . people will choose *could* and *might* out of a habit of politeness, . . . (Leech 173)

But when we see the examples from the text, *could* in the sense of permission appeared in the mere narration of what happened in the past, and there is no use of *might* in this sense. This may mean that in colloquial English in the 1950's *could* and *might* were considered as too polite expression.

(b) *Could* and *Might* in the Sense of Possibility

*Could* and *might* in the sense of possibility are stated as follows by Palmer.

"Very few of the past tense forms are used to refer to past time with exact parallelism with the present tense

forms. Only four uses are clearly found with the past tense forms:

*Will* Instance

*Can* Ability

Characteristic

Sensation" (Palmer 123)

"Each of the forms would, *could* and *might* is found in one of the uses of the verb in tentative sense, making either less positive statements, or more polite requests." (Palmer 129)

"Past time modal forms other than would and should may occur in the main clause of unreal conditions (and would in senses other than plain futurity). But it is only in the uses in which there is the possibility of future time reference that they so occur." (Palmer 134)

Leech states as follows:

"Hypothetical Possibility: The hypothetical forms *could* and *might* are frequently substitutes for *can* and *may* in expressing possibility. . . . The effect of the hypothetical auxiliary, with its implication 'contrary to expectation' is to make the expression of possibility more tentative and guarded. . . . It is difficult to see any difference in the use of *could* and *might* here, except that in the negative *couldn't* is an instance of external negation, and *mightn't* an instance of internal negation."

(Leech 120-121)

The chart on the page 175 shows that the most usage of *might* are in the sense of

possibility, and the frequency of *could* is quite big compared with *can*. This means that *could* and *might* are not mere past forms of *can* and *may*, but are used as modal auxiliaries. But there are also some usage in which *can* and *may* followed by "have + pp." are used as modal auxiliaries. At this point we would like to see what the distinction of "non-past" and "past" means in the classification of the auxiliaries is.

### 3. Modality

The word "modal" is originally used by Poutsma and Curme. (Baifukan's Dictionary 362-363)<sup>21</sup> Poutsma restricts the meaning of modal to subjunctive which means "prediction of uncertainty", and moreover he restricts Modal Auxiliaries to the extent of which substitute the subjunctive or conditional usage of the inflected verbs, and he calls other usage of auxiliaries Modal Verbs. (Baifukan 363) But as the editor of the dictionary, Mamoru Shimizu, says that those classifications go rather too trivial. (Baifukan 363) Therefore, we shall deal with modal without the classification of Modal Auxiliaries and Modal Verbs.

*Can* and *could*, except the situation in which they are used in the sense of ability<sup>22</sup> or permission, but like *may* in the sense of possibility, are used in the rhetorical way, irony, or negative in order to express strong judgment or suspicion. *May* and *might* except they are used in the sense of permission, are mostly modal, and express the supposition and light suspi-

cion of the possibility.

Different from the views before his, John Lyons holds the opinion about auxiliaries as modal as follows:

"The parts of speech as primary grammatical categories, and such notions as tense, mood case, etc., as secondary grammatical categories. The traditional syntactic notions of 'subject', 'object', 'predicate', etc., will be referred to as functional categories." (Lyons 274)

Dealing with the secondary grammatical categories, Lyons states, "Mood like tense, is frequently realized by inflecting the verb or by modifying it by means of Auxiliaries." (Lyons 307) He refers to several classes of sentences according to the virtues of their modality. He divides mood into two parts. One is "unqualified with respect to the attitude of speaker towards what he is saying." (Lyons 307) They are indicative as an "unmarked" mood, or instructions, interrogative as "characterized by additional modalities which indicates the expectations of the speaker." (Lyons 307-308) The other is including those which grammatically mark the attitude of the speaker. They are "wish" and "intention", "necessity" and "obligation", and "certainty and possibility". (Lyons 308)

There are such classifications, but the categories of mood and tense may "intersect" (Lyons 309) in various ways. Lyons states one of the ways as follows:

"There are many places in English where would, should, could, and

might are roughly described as past tense forms corresponding to the non-past forms will, shall, can, and may . . . . But there are other sentences with would, should, etc., which have no reference to past time . . . . In such sentences, the 'tense' distinction of non-past vs. past would seem to sub-categorize the modality in question in such a way that 'past' combines with mood to introduce a more 'tentative', 'remote' or 'polite' sense. In other words, 'tense' here 'converted' into a second modality." (Lyons 311)

Similar to Lyons' opinion, Roger Fowler refers to tense concerning modality.

" . . . , we may regard Aux as comprising Tense ([+ past] or [- past]) or Tense plus a 'modal auxiliary' such as can, will, etc." (Fowler 31)

"Aux appears to be an exactly parallel symbol to Det. . . . It is first and foremost a system of syntactic meanings rather than a set of classifiable morphemes. . . . It seems that four obligatory features of Aux must be present in every utterance." (Fowler 67)

They are "Tense", "Aspect", "Mood", and "Voice". (Fowler 67) Fowler states "Mood" as follows:

"This Very complicated, and as yet poorly understood system expresses the speaker's attitude to, confidence in, or rhetorical orientation toward, the topic of the sentence. . . . 'May', 'will', 'must', 'need', etc., all express

'marked' of positively specified choices under Mood. . . . Interrogative, Imperative and Negative as Mood, even though this interpretation has not been fully justified. (Fowler 71)

Under the group of "Marked" modal system, there are "Possibility/Certainty", "Permission", "Ability". "Obligation or Necessity". (Fowler 73)

There are roughly two ways of looking into the auxiliaries in the sense of modality. One is the traditional views which takes modal as the subjunctive or "prediction of modality", and the other is the transformational view which sorts the auxiliaries under Mood and "non-past" and "past". Either one is not a complete, perfect classification of the auxiliaries. In the former way it is not clear that if the auxiliaries are used as modal unless seeing them in the context. In the latter way, a rule T (M) (have + ed) (be + ing) Vb clarifies only Tense but not Mood. Therefore, both ways have the same kind of problem that is how to show the use of the auxiliaries as modal. There may be a suggestion of solving this problem in Lyons' opinion that is the categories of the Tense and Mood may intersect, and *could* and *might* do not always indicate past tense. This opinion shows that the basic classification of the auxiliaries are done more or less morphologically, but the analyzing process requires more semantic approach. Therefore, it must be necessary to look into modal from both semantic and morphological point of view.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the present-day English, in this case the short stories written by American writers in the time between 1950 and 1960, the usage of *can* and *may* are not very much different from that of traditional ways which were studied and defined by many linguists. And the difference between *can* and *may* in the sense of permission and the sense of possibility is roughly and generally state as follows.

In the sense of permission *may* is more formal and correct than *can* which is supposedly a substitution of *may*, and in the case of *may* the permission is given by the speaker while *can* has impersonal notion. But there is another opinion that in colloquial English the difference between the two auxiliaries in the sense of permission is unimportant enough to be ignored.

In the sense of possibility the difference between *can* and *may* is derived from the form of the sentences. *Can* is not frequently used in the positive statements where *may* is often used, but *may* is not used in question or negative clauses where *can* is used instead. Another difference is that *can* describes a theoretical conceivable happening and weaker in the sense of possibility than *may* which gives the feeling of "more immediate factual possibility".

*Could* and *might* are used more than mere past tense forms of *can* and *may*. It has sense of permission *could* and *might* have the implied meaning of more polite

alternatives to *can* and *may*. But there were no examples in the text. In the sense of possibility *could* and *might* express hypothetical possibility, and there is little difference between them in that sense. But apart from the difference in the usage between *could* and *might* there is a problem to be considered. That is *could* and *might* as modal auxiliaries, which have close connection with the category of tense. The same problem is in the use of *can* and *may*. Considering *could* and *might*, they are morphologically taken as past tense forms of *can* and *may*, but semantically in the context they may refer to present tense with the implication of politeness, suspicion, or supposition. Considering *can* and *may*, they are usually supposed to be as present tense auxiliaries, but they are used as modal auxiliaries followed by "have+pp".

In general *can* and *may* seem to keep their own spheres of usage that is *can* is used mainly in the sense of ability, and *may* in the sense of possibility, however, in the sense of permission *can* seems to be used more often disregarding the traditional feeling, that is *may* is more formal and correct than *can*, but in the sense of possibility, the division of usage between *can* and *may* is still clear. But the usage of *could* and *might* not as mere past tense forms of *can* and *may* are to be considered from the tense point of view, which requires more semantic study, except when we apply a very morphological theory to deal with auxiliaries, but even in such a

theory the way of studying auxiliaries tends to have inclination to be more semantic. Therefore, further studies on how *can* and *may* keep their links or dissolve together in the sense of permission and

the sense possibility, and how *could* and *might* will be treated in the feature of tense and how they will be defined as modal auxiliaries are in prospect.

#### Notes

1. G. Scurweghs states in *Present-day English Syntax* (London, 1969), p. 362, as follows; "to be able to or to be in position" and "to be free"  
Yvan Lebrun in *Can and May in Present-day English* (Bruxelles, 1965), p.69, as follows; "the absence of physical obstacle expressed by the auxiliary may imply the actualization of the event'
2. "Stories from the New Yorker 1950-1960" (London, 1965), p.54 All the examples are from this text.
3. Scheurweghs 362, "to be welcome to do something without being prevented"  
G. N. Leech, *Meaning and the English Verb*, (London, 1971), p. 70, "may is used to be considered as a more respectable form in formal and polite usage"
4. Zandvoort; pp. 65f, "in interrogative and negative sentences corresponding to affirmative with may, can, requires after possibility"
5. Palmer explains some uses of the past tense forms; "... some of the past tense forms are used in a 'tentative' sense that they are less positive than the present tense forms." (p. 129) When the notice (tentative) is given at the end of the examples, they refer to this use.
6. Palmer, p.134 "Past tense forms other than *would* and *should* may occur in the main clause of unreal conditions ... ." The notice (condition) refers to this use.
7. Palmer, p. 136 "In wishes — forms introduced by e.g., 'I wish', 'if only' — the position is similar to that in the 'if' clause of unreal conditionals." The notice (wish) refers to this use.
8. Scheurweghs, p.365 "*Might* is not frequently found as a past tense of may."
9. Zandvoort, p.67 "*Can* is used in the corresponding interrogative and negative sentences."
10. Palmer does not state this sense of may, but other linguists, Leech, Lebrun, Scurweghs, Zandvoort, refer to it.
11. Lebrun, p. 61
12. Examples in the page 171  
The first example is the words said by a hostess to her well-acquainted guests.  
The second example is the words addressed to a higher officer who has personal contact with the speaker.  
The third example is the words in soliloquy.  
Examples in the page 174  
The first example is the words said to a not well-acquainted, unfriendly person.  
The second example is the words to a younger person.  
The third example is the words said by quite an old lady to her visitor.
13. Tomoshichi Konishi, *Studies in Current English Grammar and Usage* (Translation is the present writer's), p. 56  
Following the sentence above, Konishi adds; "The sense of ability which *can* has is more and more taken its pace by 'be able to', and *can* is more often used in the sense of permission. Therefore, *can* is taking the

- place of *may* from the under structure.”
14. It means the difference in the sense of permission.
  15. Translation is the present writer's.
  16. Examples in the page 171  
*Can*'s in all three examples have the feeling of "you have permission".  
 The first example may be rewritten as follows; "You have permission to be relaxed."  
 The second example; "Do I have permission to tell you something?"  
 The third example; "You will have permission to have one."
  17. Examples in the page 174  
 In the three examples the situation of the conversation is rather formal and required to be polite, and *may*'s have the feeling of "Will you give me permission?"
  18. As we can see in the chart on the page 7, *can* is more often used than *may* in the sense of permission.
  19. *May* in the sense of possibility, all the examples from the text are used in the positive statements. On the other hand, *can* in this sense are used five times in the positive statements, six times in the negative clauses, and three times in the interrogative clauses.
  20. All three examples of *can* in the sense of possibility in the pages 171 and 172 are used under the situation of theoretical possibility, in another word, thought-up situation. On the other hand, all the examples in the page 174 have more likelihood to be

realized or being clear that possibility to be true is greater.

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