A Semantic and Pragmatic Approach to CAN

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The paper is concerned with the study of <u>can</u> from a semantic and pragmatic point of view, emphasizing its functions as <u>ability</u>, <u>permission possibility</u>, <u>permission</u>, and <u>request.</u>

1. Introduction

Modal auxiliaries essentially represent the relationship between the proposition and the speaker's (or writer's) attitude of mind or psychological state. We have such a large range of complexity of mind that it is extremely difficult to frame the explanation concerning the behaviours of modal auxiliaries. We will focus on the function of <u>can</u> in terms of semantics and pragmatics with a view to giving an in-depth analysis of the auxiliary <u>can</u>.

2. The semantics and pragmatics of <u>can</u>

2.0 Introduction

The study of modal auxiliaries has provoked a great deal of controversy. Modals have their peculiar and important roles of expressing modality, which reflects the speaker's cognitive attitudes, and this makes the interpretation of modals extremely complicated. Though a great deal of effort has been made to clarify the meanings of modal auxiliaries, the ambiguity of the meanings still puzzles us.

Various approaches have been proposed to modals, and recent works include cognitive and relevance theoretic accounts. In any case, we cannot argue about meanings of modals without taking into consideration contexts in which they are used. In the relevance theoretic framework, unitary meanings are proposed whose interpretations totally rely on contexts (see Groefsema 1995, Papafragou 1998). Sperber and Wilson (1986) suggest that the interpretation of utterances with modals depends on an addressee's choice of context, which is relevant to him/her, and this is not because each modal has several different

meanings. Though this account seems reasonable, based on the fact that most people interpret an utterance in the same or a similar way, it is more natural to think that there are distinct meanings rather than a unitary meaning, which conveys different interpretations.

The amount of information we get from contexts is limited and sometimes it is not fully expressed. Therefore, we have to guess implicit contexts to derive the appropriate meanings of modals. It would be ideal if we could anticipate the meaning to some extent from the components in the sentence in which it is used.

Observe the following sentence in Walton (1991):

(1) Freddie can recite a poem now.

He argues that can is ambiguous among 'ability', 'possibility' and 'permission' readings.

As for Walton's explanation of (1), Klinge (1993:318) rightly points out that the recurring problem for linguistic analysis of the modals has been the lack of a principled account of the temporal adverb now we arrive at an explicit interpretation of an utterance of a sentence containing a modal. This point of view is what we would like to introduce in this paper.

From this point of view, we will try to explore ways to resolve the ambiguity, adopting semantic and pragmatic approaches. As it consumes considerable effort and time to study all modals, at the outset, we will focus especially on the use of can, which is generally said to have three meanings: ability, possibility and permission.

2.1 Ability

2.1.1 Definition of 'ability'

Before entering into a detailed discussion of an 'ability' reading of can, it is important to make it clear what the term 'ability' means. The Longman Dictionary of Current English suggests two major meanings as follows: (1) something that you are able to do, especially because you have a particular mental or physical skill; (2) someone's, especially a student's, level of intelligence or skill, especially in school or college work. Likewise, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines it as: (1) the quality of being able to do something; physical, mental, financial or legal power to perform. (2) a nature or acquired skill or talent.

Judging from the above, we can safely state that the definition of 'ability' is (2):

(2) a nature or acquired quality or skill that someone or something has.

However, the term is defined differently according to linguists. For example, Declerck

(1991:389) equates the meanings of 'capability' and 'opportunity' to the term 'ability'.

(3) a. capability: the (inborn or acquired) capacity or power to do something physical or mental

　　b. opportunity: the idea that the necessary physical circumstances for doing something are present (i.e. that the action is not prevented by material or circumstantial factors)

It seems questionable to categorize the meaning of 'opportunity' meaning with 'ability'. Declerck adduces example (4) for this use of can:

(4) We can have tea at the office. We have cooking facilities there.

It seems more reasonable to interpret (4) as 'it is possible for us to have tea at the office, because we have cooking facilities there' than as 'we have the ability to have tea at the office', and to suppose that this opportunity meaning should be classified into the 'possibility' sense, which will be discussed in the next section.

　　In this paper, we will use the term 'ability' to refer to (2) given above, in accordance with the definitions supplied by the dictionaries.

2.1.2 Subject of can (＝ability)

　　Coates (1983:89) suggests the characteristics of can with ability meaning as follows: (a) subject is animate and has agentive function; (b) verb denotes action／activity; (c) the possibility of the action is determined by inherent properties of the subject.

　　Now, let us consider the first feature. Leech (1987:74) also states that can (＝ability) requires a human or at least animate subject. Furthermore, Declerck (1991:390) states that we will normally speak of capability when the referent of the subject is animate (especially if it is human) and of possibility when it is not, and adduces the following examples:

(5)a. Doctors can cure this disease only if the patient is not too old.
　　 (capability)

　 b. This disease can only be cured if the patient is not too old.
　　 (possibility)

(6)a. Only the best gardeners can grow this flower in our climate.
　　 (capability)

　 b. In our climate, this flower can only be grown by the best gardeners.
　　 (possibility)

However, this does not have to be the case, as the definition of ability stated in (2) shows. The occurrence of can (＝ability) with an inanimate subject is not rare:

(7) Now out of the bubble of noise which the human vocal system can produce,
it is possible to separate different sounds and oppose one to the other.

(S. Lake, D. Cobb, Our Greatest Possession)

(8) A lot of small words, more than you might think, can meet your needs
with a strength and charm that some large words lack.

(Richard Lederer, Reader's Digest)

Can in all the examples above denotes the ability of the inanimate subject. In this case the term 'quality' is a more proper word than 'ability'. The same observation applies to Palmer (1990[2] :85), who states that only animate creatures may have ability, but subject orientation is possible with inanimates, where it indicates that they have the necessary qualities or 'power' to cause the event to take place.

Now, let us go back to examples (5) and (6). Can in (5b) and (6b) expresses a possibility meaning as Declerck suggests, but it is not because of the inanimate subject. The reason of this interpretation lies in the sentence structure: passive form. Leech (198 7[2]) states that only can (= possibility) can occur in passive clauses. Here, the question arises why can (= ability) cannot be used in passive clause? As was stated above, can (= ability) signifies quality or skill that the subject has.

(9) a. Mary can play the violin.

b. CAN [Mary play the violin]

(10) a. The violin can be played by Mary[1] .

b. CAN [The violin be played by Mary]

In the case of (9), whether or not the proposition will be fulfilled depends largely on Mary's ability; if Mary does not have the ability to play the violin, this sentence appears to be false. On the other hand, in example (10), whether or not the violin makes a sound depends not on the quality of the violin, but on Mary's ability. We may need some quality or skill to do something, but we do not need to have something done by others. This justifies the idea that can (= ability) cannot be used in a passive clause.

2.1.3 More Features of can (= ability)

Ability or quality is to be possessed or furnished constantly, and cannot be removed or acquired easily. In short, it should not be affected by change of environment. Thus, an ability reading of can cannot be influenced by situation:

(11) a. *Tom can drive a car when he gets 18. (ability)

　　　b. ＊Tom can drive if you lend him your car. (ability)

　　　c. ＊Tom can drive on Sundays. (ability)

Now consider the following examples:

(12) This plant can grow in the rain forest.

(13) He can swim for two hours (continuously).

Can in (12) and (13) refers to the subject's ability or quality though it seems to restrict the place and time, respectively. How should these cases be explained?

　　(12') a. ＊This plant can [grow] in the rain forest.

　　　　 b. This plant can [grow in the rain forest].

　　(13') a. ＊He can [swim] for two hours.

　　　　 b. He can [swim for two hours].

In (12), what can modifies not only 'grows' but 'grows in the rain forest,' and in (13), he can not only 'swim', but also 'swim for two hours'. This is why can in these cases allow an ability reading. This enables us to propose 'Constant Condition' for can with an ability sense:

(14) Constant Condition:

　　Ability meaning of can cannot be affected by a change of environment[2].

　Now, can any can that applies to a constant condition be interpreted as 'ability'? Such verbs as sneeze, blink, breathe, smile, stand, sit, and so forth denote inherent properties of human beings. That is, most human beings are able to do these actions without any difficulty. When can is used with these kinds of verbs, the acceptability of can with an ability meaning is low. This phenomenon is nicely explained by Grice's cooperative principle:

(15) The maxim of quantity:

　　1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current
　　　purpose of the exchange).

　　2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

When we use can with an ability meaning, its embedded proposition has to be something that ordinary people, creature and things can do. There has to be some special reason or value for uttering words.

(16) Billy is only 9 months and he can already stand up.

　　(Longman English Grammar)

(17) I can stand on my hands.

(18) (uttered by a Japanese) I can speak English.

(19) He can run 50 meters in five seconds.

These cases are worth stating. It is extremely easy for most people to stand (up), but special skill is needed if you are a nine month old baby or stand on your hands. In the same way, it is natural to speak English if you are from an English speaking country, but for Japanese, it is a difficult task. There arises the need of context for this kind of interpretation.

2.1.4 CAN + Perception verbs

The verbs of inert perception (see, hear, feel, smell, taste) are not normally used in a progressive form. To express duration, they are accompanied by <u>can</u>.

(20) a. *I am seeing a bird.

　　 b. I can see a bird.

This use of <u>can</u> is categorized into an ability meaning though <u>can</u> itself loses its distinctive modal meaning (Leech 1987[2] , Coates 1983, Palmer 1990[2]). Coates (1983:91) explains this classification by stating that (1) seeing, hearing, understanding and so forth are all inherent properties of human beings and that (2) while CAN= 'Permission' and CAN= 'Possibility' are both non-factive, CAN= 'Ability' is factive - that is, the speaker is committed to the truth of the proposition expressed in the main predication.

However, McCallum-Bayliss (1988) objects to this peculiar use of <u>can</u>, pointing out that there are many sentences in which <u>can</u> and perception verbs co-occur but do not express the progressive aspect:

(21) Sitting in a cafe: I can see the towers of Notre Dame from the balcony of my
　　 hotel room.

(22) I can hear the violins better from over there.

(McCallum-Bayliss 1988:61)

It is obvious that <u>can</u> in (21) and (22) does not express progressive aspect. How should these cases be explained? Ando (1983) points out that this interpretation depends on the situation; not all <u>can</u> + perception verb denotes progressive aspect, and whether or not it is the case should be judged from the context. According to our theory, (21) and (22) seem to express a possibility meaning because there are adverb of place such as 'from the balcony of my hotel room' or 'from over there'.

Then in what situation does <u>can</u> + perception verb express progressive aspect? Sawada (1994) names this use of <u>can</u> as 'Involuntary Perception' and proposes the following condition.

(23) Involuntary Perception Condition:

  CAN／COULD (= Involuntary perception) express the state that the

  subject undergoes some mental action. In this case, the propositional

  content has to denote an unintentional mental action.

This condition shows that examples (21) and (22) do not have an aspect use. Can +

perception verb can also express 'ability' 'possibility' and 'permission', according to the

context in which it is used.

2.1.5 CAN + verbs of inert cognition

 Can frequently occurs with cognitive verbs (understand, believe, remember...). In this

case, many linguists point out that can loses its modal meaning as is the case with

perception verbs, but does not add any meaning to the main verb; e.g. I can remember

scarcely differs from I remember (Leech 1987[2] :74), but there has to be some kind of,

say, pragmatic differences. It needs further consideration.

2.2 Possibility

2.2.1 Two readings of possibility

 This section will discuss can with what is called 'possibility' meaning. As mentioned

above, can is generally regarded as having three meanings: 'ability' 'possibility' and

'permission'. However, we would like to suggest four senses for this word. The reason

we mention 'what is called possibility' here is that we are assuming two different

readings are possible for this meaning. Observe the following examples:

 (24) a. Even expert drivers can make mistakes. (Leech 1987[2])

   b. Anybody who wants to can join the club. (Swan 1995[2])

Can in these examples is generally interpreted as a 'possibility' sense, but it is not

difficult to see that they denote different meanings when we examine them more closely.

The subject of (24a) is the likelihood of the occurrence of the proposition, that is,

probability of the occurrence. On the other hand, the question in (24b) is whether or not

it is physically possible to fulfill the proposition. This difference also can be clearly seen

in Japanese.

 (25) a. Kare ga amerika ni iku kanosei wa arimasuka.

   (Is there any possibility that he will go to America?)

  b. Kare ga amerika ni ikukoto wa kano desuka.

   (Is he able to go to America?)

Thomson and Martinet (1986[4]) categorize these uses of <u>can</u> as 'occasional possibility' for the first use ((24a) and (25a)), and 'general possibility' for the latter use ((24b) and (25b)). In this paper, we will adopt Thomson and Martinet's terms and distinguish these two meanings, though these terms are not fully appropriate for the reason that will be given later. Now let us go on to the closer examination of each meaning to support this distinction.

2.2.2　Occasional Possibility

　　There are two kinds of 'occasional possibility': theoretical possibility expressed by <u>can</u>, and factual possibility expressed by <u>may</u> (see Leech 1987[2]). The contrast between theoretical and factual can be seen in the following examples:

　(26) a. It's a pity (for Bill) to refuse such an offer.

　　　　b. It's a pity that Bill refused such an offer.　(Leech 1987[2])

Leech (1987[2]) notes that the theoretical example (26a) contains an infinitive construction, whereas the factual example (26b) contains a that-clause, whose difference conveys different meanings. The factual sentences hint at the truth of the statements, but the theoretical sentences do not. That is, example (26b) indicates that Bill did in fact refuse the offer, but we cannot tell whether or not he refused the offer from example (26a). Leech uses the term "truth-committed" for the factual sentence, and "truth-neutral" for the theoretical one.

　　These differences in <u>can</u> and <u>may</u> can be seen in the following examples:

　(27) But in my opinion this person, whoever he may be, is not sane in the
　　　　accepted sense of the word. He <u>may</u> be dangerous. In my opinion, it would
　　　　be well for us to leave this place as soon as possible. I suggest that we leave
　　　　tonight.　(Christie, And Then There Were None) (The underline is ours.)

　(28) Aunt Edith's not too bad, but she's old. Things have been a bit more
　　　　cheerful since Sophia came back - though she <u>can</u> be pretty sharp
　　　　sometimes. But it is a queer household, don't you think so? Having a step-
　　　　grandmother young enough to be your aunt or your older sister. ...

　　　　　　　　　　(Christie, Crooked House) (The underline is ours.)

Example (27) is stated by Wargrave, who is one of the guests on Nigger Island. Noticing that no one knows about the host, and the host is forming a plot against them, Wargrave concludes that the host is a dangerous person. <u>May</u> is used to express 'possibility' here, because Wargrave actually thinks that the man actually has that

character. Thus, factual possibility <u>may</u>, not <u>can</u>, is chosen.

Now, let us consider example (28): An old man was killed leaving a vast fortune to his big family. All things considered, the murderer has to be someone from his house. In order to know well about this family, Charles, the hero of the story, tries to correct as much information about each family member as possible. (28) was stated by Eustace, a grandson of the dead man.

<u>Can</u> is used in this context to state Sophia's characteristics. This is because what Eustace refers to here is Sophia's personality that she sometimes shows. If <u>may</u> is used here, the sentence implies that Eustace thinks Sophia to be sharp at the time of speaking, which interpretation does not fit in this context.

All the sentences with <u>can</u> (= occasional possibility) can be paraphrased with either some or sometimes, or both.

(29) Football players can be sex maniacs.

    a.Any given football player sometimes is, and sometimes isn't, a sex maniac.

    b.Some football players are (always) sex maniacs, and some football players aren't.

    c. Some football players are (sometimes) sex maniacs (sometimes not).

                                     （R. Lakoff 1972）

(30) Football players can be tall.

    Some football players are (always) tall and others aren't.(Ibid.)

Sometimes <u>can</u> be accepted when occurrence of an event depends on time, and some is adopted when a variety of the subject can be seen in a sentence. That is, in the case of (30), it is reasonable to think that some football players are tall and others are not, but it is not possible for any football player to be sometimes tall and sometimes not. To put it the other way round, occurrence or existence of events expressed by <u>can</u> (=occasional possibility) have to be not always or specific, but occasional.

(31) a. Measles can be quite dangerous.

      → Sometimes it is possible for them to be quite dangerous ／ Sometimes they are quite dangerous.)   （Thomson and Martinet 1986[4] ）

    b. ＊AIDS can be fatal. （Sawada 1997）

      cf. Cancer can be fatal.

Considering the situation given above, Sawada (1997) proposes Sporadic Condition for <u>can</u> (=occasional possibility).

(32) Sporadic Condition

　　　Any event expressed by can (＝occasional possibility) is nonspecific and

　　the occurrence of the proposition is sporadic.

'Sporadic' here means that occurrence or existence of the event is here and there or now and again, and not very frequent.

　　Negative or interrogative form of <u>can</u> (＝occasional possibility) has different features from affirmative forms, as is shown by the following example:

　(33) ＊He can be busy now.

Example (33) is ill-formed because it cannot be paraphrased either with some or sometimes, and does not follow Sporadic Condition. However, the negative or interrogative form of (33) can be accepted perfectly.

　(34) a. He can't be busy now.

　　　b. Can he be busy now?

This is because negative and interrogative form of <u>can</u> (＝occasional possibility) comes to express factual (epistemic) possibility, compared with theoretical (root) possibility expressed by affirmative form of <u>can</u>. It acquires subjectivity and expresses the speaker's subjective inferences toward the proposition (For further details, see Sawada 1990, 1993, 1995). The negative and interrogative form of <u>can</u> (＝occasional possibility) is paraphrased by 'It is not possible that - ' or 'Is it possible that - ?' Sentences with <u>can</u> of these forms cannot be paraphrased with some or sometimes, but come to express a specific event.

　(35) Don't know what Fred Narracott <u>can</u> be doing this morning.

　　　　　(Christie, And Then There Were None) (The underline is ours.)

　　　→ ＊Don't know what Fred Narracott is sometimes doing this morning.

　(36) I keep feeling that things like this <u>can't</u> happen! (Ibid.)

　　　→?? I keep feeling that things like this don't sometimes happen!

This use of <u>can</u> with subjective inferences can be followed by the progressive and the perfect.

　(37)＊She can have gone to school.

　　　a. Where can she have gone?

　　　b. She can't have gone to school - it's Saturday. (Swan 1995[2])

(38)＊He can be working at this hour.

　　　a. He can't be working at this hour! (Leech 1987[2])

　　　b. Can he be working at this hour?

This is because the progressive and the perfect are used to talk about actual events or states which are going on or have already happened, which <u>can</u> (= possibility) cannot express but <u>can</u> (= Neg) and <u>can</u> (= Q) can. (Sawada 1995:243)

2.2.3 General possibility

Leech (1987²) states that 'if someone has the ability to do X, then X in a sense is possible.' To put it the other way round, when we say 'one can do X', there is a premise that the subject has the ability to fulfill the propositional content.

(39) I can fix your car.

→ I have enough knowledge and skill to fix a car.

However, this cannot explain the following example:

(40) You can fly from Brussels to New York in less than twelve hours.

(Declerck 1991)

As stated in the previous section, what <u>can</u> (= ability) denotes is the ability or the quality of the subject in a sentence. But in (40), what makes this situation possible is not the ability of the subject, but the existence of the plane.

Here, we propose a premise for the use of <u>can</u> (= general possibility):

(41) When <u>can</u> (= general possibility) is used, there needs circumstances that permit propositional contents to be fulfilled.

Notice that there is a crucial difference between Constant Condition in (14) and this condition: the former is not affected by circumstances but the latter is.

Observe the following example:

(42) *You can fly from Japan to Australia in 3 hours. (general possibility)

There is no grammatical problem in (42), but this sentence appears to be false because there is no circumstance that permits us to go to Australia from Japan in 3 hours even with the latest technique. This can be applied to the maxims of quality (see Grice 1975):

(43) The maxim of quality:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

As stated above, there are two kinds of possibility, theoretical and factual, expressed by <u>can</u> and <u>may</u> respectively. Interestingly, there is no use of <u>may</u> which corresponds to <u>can</u> (= general possibility).

(44) a. This problem can be solved. (general possibility)

b. This problem may be solved. (＊general possibility, occasional possibility)

This seems to support the validity to treat <u>can</u> (= occasional possibility) and <u>can</u> (= general possibility) separately.

There are some additional features of <u>can</u> (= general possibility) that differ from <u>can</u> (= occasional possibility). First of all, this use of <u>can</u> cannot be paraphrased either with some or sometimes; it cannot be applied to Sporadic Condition.

(45) If it rains, we can hold the meeting indoors. (Leech 1987[2])

　　→ ＊If it rains, we sometimes hold the meeting indoors.

(46) I <u>can</u> perhaps give you some help towards that theory.

　　　　　(Christie, And Then There Were None) (Underline is ours.)

　　≠ I perhaps sometimes give you some help towards that theory.

The events expressed by <u>can</u> (= general possibility) can be general (nonspecific) or specific, and this is why we stated that the term 'general possibility' does not entirely fit in this use.

(47) You can go from France to England by train. (general)

(48) She can go to your birthday party tomorrow, but I'm afraid I can't.

　　(specific)

The occurrence of events expressed by <u>can</u> (=general possibility) depends on circumstances. Considering the premise assumed in (41), the propositional content has to be fulfilled unless something prevents. Under this condition, we propose nihil obstat condition' for <u>can</u> (=general possibility) borrowing Ehrman's (1960) phrase (see Coates 1983).

(49) Nihil Obstat Condition:

　　<u>can</u> (=general possibility) can be paraphrased as 'there's nothing to

　　prevent - ' (in the case of a negative sentence, 'Something prevents - '.)

(50) You can go from France to England by train. (= (47))

　　= There is circumstances that make it possible to go from England by

　　　train, and there is also nothing to prevent you to do it.

(51) I can't cook tonight.

　　= I have the ability to cook, but something (e.g. health condition) prevents

　　　me to do it.

Coates states that one of the felicity conditions for utterances of the kind 'x can y' (where x is animate, y is an agentive verb) is the subject's willingness to perform y (1983:95).

(52) We can make coffee.

　　≒ We will make coffee. (volition)

But this is not always applied to the use of <u>can</u> (＝general possibility) as the following example shows:

　(53) Well, we can go to Hokkaido this summer if you insist. But I'd rather stay

　　　in Tokyo.

Secondly, though the negative and the interrogative form of <u>can</u> (＝occasional possibility) expresses subjective inference of the speaker, in the case of <u>can</u> (＝general possibility), the negative and the interrogative forms do not express subjectivity, but express objectivity.

　(54) We <u>can</u> state definitely now that your husband died as a result of eserine

　　　poisoning.　　　　　　(Christie, Crooked House)　(The underline is ours.)

　　　a.We can't state definitely now that your husband died as a result of

　　　　eserine poisoning.

　　　b.Can we state definitely now that your husband dies as result of eserine

　　　　poisoning?

3. The Structure and Meaning of can(＝Permission)

　There are two kinds of permission: (a) discourse-oriented and (b) non-discourse-oriented.　Then, how can we account for the semantic difference of the following examples?

　(55) a. You can't smoke in here.

　　　b. You may not smoke in here.

According to Leech (1987²), (55a) and (55b) can be paraphrased as (56a) and (56b), respectively:

　(56) a. You are not permitted to smoke in here.

　　　b. I do not permit you to smoke in here.

Notice that the semantic difference between <u>can</u> and <u>may</u> is closely related with that of passive and active: <u>can</u> has a passive meaning while <u>may</u> has an active one.　How can we explain such a distinction from a structural viewpoint?

　Following Tredidgo (1982), let us assume here the following formula of <u>may</u> (＝permission):

　(57) X PERMIT Y -Y CAUSE -ab　　(Tredidgo 1982:90)

(57) shows that <u>may</u> (＝permission) implies "X PERMIT Y ...," in which X and Y

respectively stand for the source and goal of the permission.   As shown by the following examples, X is an entity such as the speaker／hearer, rule, nature, etc.:

(58) a. May we smoke? ('Do you permit us, or do the rules permit us?')

　　　b. You may call further witnesses if you so desire. ('I permit you, or court procedure permit us')

　　　c. The seeds may be sown on open ground at any time of year.

　　　　 ('Nature or normal gardening practice permits it of gardners')

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Tredidgo 1982:84)

Notice that <u>may</u> always implies an active meaning because its semantic strucure is X PERMIT Y.

　(59)

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　p
　　　　　　　　X ------------➤Y
　　　　　　　　　　PERMIT
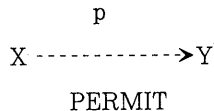
　　Swan (1980, 1995^2) states that when we talk about permission that has already given, <u>can</u>, but not <u>may</u>, is usually used:

(60) a. It's not fair. Joey can／＊may stay up till ten and I have to go to bed at eight.

　　　b. Can／＊May you park on the pavement in your country?

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Swan 1980:131)

Furthermore, he states that in the past, <u>could</u> is used to say that one was allowed to do something at any time (＝general permission):

(61) When I lived at home, I could watch TV whenever I wanted to.

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Swan 1980:131)

(61) shows that <u>could</u> is an objective state, because it is the past.   These above examples show that the kind of permission which <u>can</u> expresses is captured from the viewpoint of Y, but not of X.

　　Interestingly, this is in parallel with the case of <u>must</u> and <u>have to</u>.   Observe the following contrast:

(62) a. You really must go to church next Sunday--you haven't been for ages.

　　　b. Catholics have to go to church on Sundays.

It is generally said that <u>must</u> is used mostly to talk about the feelings and wishes of the speaker and hearer, while <u>have (got) to</u> is used to talk about obligations that come

from outside, e.g. from laws, regualtions, etc. (Swan 1995² :352). This can be explained in terms of the following diagram:

(63)

$$p$$
$$X \dashrightarrow Y$$

must　　DEMAND　　have to
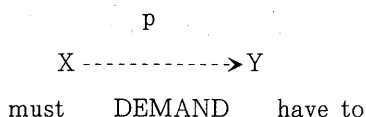
According to this structure, <u>must</u> and <u>have (got) to</u> respectively shows obligation／necessity which is captured from the viewpoints of X and Y. In (63), for example, Catholics' obligation is described from the viewpoint of Y (=Catholics), and the sentence is an objective statement of what Catholics are. Therefore, there is a parallelism between the following examples:

(64) a. It's not fair.　Joey can／＊may stay up till ten and I have to go to bed at
　　　　eight
　　 b. Catholics have to／＊must go to church on Sundays.

These examples both express an habitual and objective meaning, and <u>can</u> and <u>have to</u>, but not <u>may</u> and <u>must</u>, are well-formed. This can be represented by the following structure:

(65)

may　　　PERMIT　　　can
　　X　　　　p　　　　Y
　　　　---------------->
must　　　DEMAND　　have to
subjective ←----------→ objective
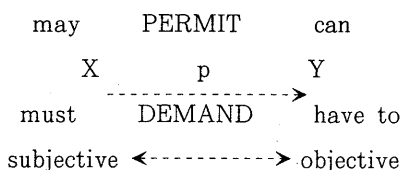
Finally, we would like to comment on the difference between two types of rules. Compare the following examples:

(66) a. Students may not use the staff car park. (Swan 1995² :326)
　　 b. You can take two books home with you.

(Thomson and Martinet 1986⁴ :129)

Though there is formal／informal contrast here, we can safely conclude that a-sentence means a permission which is captured from the side of X, while b-sentence means one which is captured from the side of Y.

4. Request via CAN

In the final section, we will discuss the modal auxiliary <u>can</u> from the viewpoint of pragmatics, emphasizing (a) some behaviours of <u>can</u>／<u>could</u> in request and (b) distinction in request between the auxiliary and the type of the 'please' form, as shown in (67).

(67) a. Can／Could you open the door for me?

　　 b. Please open the door for me.

In normal conversation, people generally behave as if their expectations concerning their face wants will be respected, and accordingly participants will attempt to respect the face wants of other people. One of the maxims to lessen the possible impoliteness is Leech's (1983:132) Tact Maxim 'Minimize cost to others', but regarding the speech act of request, the fact is that it inevitably concerns imposition. The question is, then, how we can lessen the degree of imposition via speech act. Leech(1983:133) argues that (68a) is impolite, but on the other hand (68b) is polite because the former does not 'minimize benefit to self' and the latter 'maximizes cost to self.'

(68) a. You can lend me your car.

　　 b. I can lend you my car.

According to Leech (1983:97), the request produced by the 'Can you?' construction is performed via the suggestion strategy.

(69) A: Can you answer the phone?

　　 B: Yes.

　　 A: In that case, please answer it.

　　 B: O.K.

(70) A: Can you answer the phone?

　　 B: O.K.

(70) is a shortened dialogue derived from (69), which is then assumed to perform the illocutionary act of request. It is worth noting that the illocutionary act of request of this type is made via the suggestion strategy.

There is another way of looking at the 'Can you?' type of request presented above, as shown in (71) and (72), which is assumed to be a pre-request.

(71) A: Can you answer the phone?　　　（＝pre-request）

　　 B: O.K.　　　　　　　　　　　　（＝accept）

(72) A: Can（＊Could）you answer the phone?　（＝pre-request）

　　 B: Yes.　　　　　　　　　　　　（＝go ahead）

A: In that case, please answer it.　　　（＝request）

B: O.K.　　　　　　　　　　　　（＝accept）

What interests us here is that can in (72) cannot be replaced by could, which means that in (72) could cannot operate to make the utterance perform a pre-request ·like can does; it is simply the past tense form of can, indicating past time (which excludes the present moment). Given this analysis, we can assume that could was employed later as a mitigating device because the past tense indicates distance in temporal deixis and thereby respects the hearer's facewants. Yule (1996:133) defines a pre-request as:

(73) an utterance before a request to check if a request can be made.

Our further observation of a pre-request reveals that it can be described as a pre-condition, namely a preparatory condition. This leads us to note that the pre-request in (72) is confirming whether the preparatory condition will be satisfied. A preparatory condition for a request stipulates that the content of the utterance must be about a present or future event. In (72), can is concerned with a present or future event, but the case is not true of could. The discussion here proves that can is involved with preparatory conditions, while could is not.

There is another point we have to make in relation to the pragmatic meaning of can. Ability supplied by can is defined as 'the capacity or power to do something physical or mental', as shown in 2.1.1. Depending on the definition, 'Can you answer the phone?' is ambiguous; in the 'physical ability' interpretation of can, it means that 'Is it in your power to answer the phone?', and in the 'mental ability' interpretation, it means that 'Are you willing to answer the phone?'.

The utterances in (67a) and (67b) are similar in that they both are assumed to present a polite way of performing the speech act of request. However, the different uses or interpretations associated with these types of form have not been investigated so far. To clearly understand the ·obliqueness in these utterances, let us map out the difference of the utterances in terms of speech act theory.

First, sentence (67a) is structurally an indirect speech act, while sentence (67b) is structurally a direct speech act, because the former has no direct relationship between the structure and the function and the latter has a direct relationship between the structure and the function. Sentence (67a) is not directly associated with request, but is asking a question about the hearer's assumed ability. Notice, however, that the following sentence, with or without 'please', does not present a request despite its sharing the same syntactic form with 'Can you open the door for me?'

(74) Are you able to open the door for me?

Sentence (67b), in nature, belongs to Directives, and only if it cooccurs with 'please' can it be a naked request, which otherwise will present a naked order.

Second, sentence (67a) is a request with or without please, while sentence (67b) will be no more a request if 'please' is left out, thus a command taking the place of the request. It follows then that the please in sentence (67a) is assumed to act as an intensifier of force of request or a mitigating device, while the please in sentence (67b) is assumed to be a necessary element of the structure for performing a request.

Third, we have to examine the social relationship between the speaker and hearer in terms of politeness. George Yule (1997:60) remarks:

Politeness, in interaction, can be defined as the means employed to show awareness of another person's face. In this sense, politeness can be accomplished in situations of social distance or closeness. Showing awareness for another person's face when that other seems socially distant is often described in terms of respect or deference. Showing the equivalent awareness when the other is socially close is often described in terms of friendliness, camaraderie, or solidarity.

Now, let us examine the following questions when asked a total stranger at the bus stop.

(75) a.(Excuse me, but) Can you tell me the time?

　　 b.(Excuse me, but) Please tell me the time.

In this particular context, (75a) is a polite utterance, while (75b) is an impolite utterance. In a situation where the hearer is socially distant, respectful or deferent expressions are expected because such an utterance as (75a) is structurally a question asking if the hearer can comply with the speaker's request (he or she can reject the request). Questions are also concerned with optionality (Leech 1983:123). The utterance in (75a) affords optionality to the hearer.

On the other hand, a sentence like (75b), syntactically speaking, does not give the hearer an opportunity to think otherwise ignoring optionality, and thereby gets the pragmatics wrong in the context described above.

Indirect speech acts are generally assumed to be associated with greater politeness in English than direct speech acts. However, if asking the time occurs between a married couple, pragmatically, sentence (75b) is usually more appropriate than sentence (75a) because the latter presents distance and the former closeness.

From the perspectives discussed above, we arrive at the outcome that if sentences

(67a) and (67b) are requested of someone with higher social status, sentence (67a) is again preferred to sentence (67b), as shown in (76a) and (76b).

(76) a. Professor Burke, can you open the door for me? My hands are full.

b. Professor Burke, please open the door for me. My hands are full.

Fourth, making a request by using (67a) is described as negative politeness and making a request by using (67b) is described as positive politeness. Sentence (67a) is oriented to the hearer's negative face, emphasizing the speaker's awareness of the imposition. Sentence (2) appeals to more friendship and solidarity. Yule (1997:64) presents examples of negative politeness in (77a) and (77b), which make a sharp contrast with (77c) showing positive politeness. The type of request presented in (77c) appeals to a common goal, and even friendship.

(77) a. Could you lend me a pen?

b. I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?

c. Hey, buddy, lend me a pen, please.

Yule argues that negative politeness is typically expressed via questions, even questions that seem to ask for permission to ask a question. Mind that this argument is related to the respect of optionality mentioned above.

Next, we will discuss another sentence type that performs a 'can' type of request. A request can be performed via the declarative sentence, as is shown in (78a) and (78b). Sentence (78a), in nature, is a request with emphasis on warning or threat. What is communicated in (78a), without being said, is that the speaker is assumed to be not interested in, and dubious about the hearer's being more thoughtful. It seems, then, that the speech act produced via the utterance is not so much a request as irony. The reason for this is because (78a) presupposes that 'You were not careful', which expresses the opposite state of affairs from what the speaker has in mind.

(78) a. You could be more thoughtful.

b. Could you be more thoughtful?

Despite the fact that sentences (78a) and (78b) with different syntactic forms perform the same type of speech act (＝request), they are distinct in that the request performed by sentence (78b) is a rather 'straight-forward' matter and that (78a) presents, as described above, a more intricate strategy to communicate much more than is said (in this case, irony and strong order). However, it remains a request at any rate, passing the 'please' insertion test ('You could be more careful, please').

In the classroom situation, the teacher may use (79a), (79b), or (79c) to get a

student who is dozing off out of the room.

(79) a. Would you like to go out of the room?

     b. Could you go out of the room?

     c. Please go out of the room.

The choice of such a type of expression as (79a) in the particular context means that the speaker is, pragmatically, making a more polite request than is needed. In other words, on the face of it, it does not fit in with the context, and thereby is inadequate to be employed for a request in this situation. However, in terms of distance, we can assume that the politeness expressed in sentence (79a) is in sharp contrast with the way the student is, which produces irony. There is assumed to be an aim in using this kind of irony in the particular context: strong order. Similarly, (79b) presents an order as well, which is not as strict as (79a) assumedly because of the nature of its construction ('like' in 'Would you like to go out of the room?' is assumed to be a mitigating device). On the surface, sentence (79c) is the most ordinary expression of the three to be used in this context, but ironically, but factually, a weaker expression is 'Go out of the room'. This argument leads us to assume that the degree of the speaker's anger in this context is in proportion to the degree of politeness.

Participants in conversation in English, which lacks special honorific affixes or existent words, depend a great deal on modal auxiliaries and sentence forms for politeness. In this section, we have examined the 'please' form and some behaviours of 'can' in request, and have arrived at the outcome that the request using the 'please' form is straightforward, while the request using the 'can' form communicates an unsaid speaker's psychological state.

5. Conclusion

We have reviewed some important literature on auxiliary <u>can</u> and discussed its functions as ability, possibility, permission and examined <u>can</u> in use for the speech act of request. As a matter of fact, the discussion carried out in this paper has not covered some other problems involving auxiliary <u>can</u>. Much awaits further research.

Notes

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＊ Section 2 is an expanded version of Mayumi Takahashi's graduation thesis submitted to Gakushuin University in December, 1997.

1.　The following sentence may need further consideration.

(i) This solar car can be driven without gas.

This sentence might sound well-formed if emphasis is placed on the capacity of the car.

2　Notice that an ability meaning of can can be paraphrased by the present tense.

(i)　He can speak German.

(ii)　He speaks German.

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