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THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS
OF CAN, COULD AND BE ABLE TO*

Takemasa Fujita
I. SYNTAX

1.1.0. Can is a defective verb in that it is not fully inflected, that is, it does not take -s in the third person present or take the progressive be ... ing form. Can, and its preterite could are treated as auxiliary verbs by the following criteria.

1.1.1. In negation, not, or its contracted -n’t or ’t, follows immediately after can and could.

(1) Tom cannot (or can’t) date Mary.
    Mary could not (or couldn’t) forget him.
This is impossible with a full verb.

(2) * Tom dates not Mary.
    * Mary forgot not him.

1.1.2. In interrogative sentences, can and could precede the subject NP.

(3) Could you tell me the time?
    When can I see you again?
This inversion is not possible with a full verb.

(4) * Told you me the time?
    * When see I you again?

1.1.3. In avoidance of repetition, can and could precede the subject NP.

(5) That scholar can speak Esperanto.
    So can Taro.

(6) Japan couldn’t do without oil.

* I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Roderick A. Jacobs at the University of Hawaii, who read this paper and gave me useful comments.
Neither could America.

Again this structure cannot be employed by a full verb alone.

(7) You don’t speak Hawaiian creole.

☆ Neither speak I.

1. 2. 0. Can and could can be treated as full verbs as are being done by some transformational grammarians (Jacobs and Rosenbaum 1971). The emphasis in this treatment is on the underlying meanings of the auxiliary verbs.

1. 2. 1. For example, the sentence:

(8) Ed can speak Mandarin.

indicates that Ed has the ability as to the speaking of Mandarin. But it also indicates that Ed is the one to do the speaking of Mandarin. Ed is semantically the subject both of can and speak. This depth understanding could be shown this way:

```
S
  NP   VP
    Ed  can

VP
  S   VP
   NP   speak Mandarin
     Ed
```

1. 2. 2. The treatment of can and could as a full predicator, i. e. a transitive verb whose complement is a bare infinitive, can be seen in a historical perspective. In OE and ME, can and could had full word meanings of know and knew and were frequently used without following infinitives.

(9) Magister: Canst ðu ænig ðing?

Venator: Ænne cræft ic cann.
(Master: Canst (=knowest) thou any thing?  
Hunter: One craft I can (=know).)

...... Aelfric, Colloquy

1. 2. 3. 0. It can also be looked at from synchronic point of view. As an example, let's see how the Japanese counterparts of can and could behave in the language.

1. 2. 3. 1. Kazuko Inoue (1969) treats a Japanese equivalent of can, rare `be able to' as the main verb in a matrix. Into rare-V sentence a non-rare-V sentence is embedded.

1. 2. 3. 2. In present-day Japanese the other equivalent of can, dekiri `be capable' is much more common. And dekiri cannot be treated other than as a transitive verb.

1. 2. 3. 3. For example, deep structure of a Japanese sentence:

(10) Kare wa mondai wo kaiketsu suru koto ga deki ta.

(He could solve the problem.)

may look something like the following:
N.B. 1. A typical Japanese word order is: NP -NP-V-AUX
(Agent) (object)

2. There is no article in Japanese.

3. wa: (upper sentence) subject marker.
   wo: object marker.
   ga: (lower sentence) subject and object marker. Here it
   is the latter.
   ta: past tense marker
   koto: embedded sentence marker, corresponds to English
   that.

4. If the optional transformation is carried out and COMPLEMENTIZER ‘koto’ is deleted together with AUX and the
   inflectional part of V, the embedded sentence comes to
   look like an English gerundive complementation.

1.2.3.4. Through the Complementizer Deletion, N+V, e.g.
kaiketsu dekiru (can solve), is formed. The result of the transformational process is that many nouns can be used as verbs simply by the
addition of dekiru (can). For example,

(11) dasshitsu dekiru (can get out)
    tobei dekiru (can go to America)
    shakuho dekiru (can release from prison)
    gaman dekiru (can tolerate) (Hanzel 1969, p. 73)

1.2.3.5. It is to be noted that dekiru belongs to the category of
verbs [ + stative, + durative, - limited] together with aru ‘be’,
iru ‘be’, and iru ‘need’. This is the same category of verbs to
which such English verbs as know, believe, love, resemble, etc.
belong. In other words, the Japanese verb dekiru and the English
verb know share the same syntactic characteristics, one of which is the fact that they cannot take the progressive form (Ota 1971).

II. SEMANTICS

2.1.0. The meanings of can (= know) in OE were simple, as shown in 1.2.2. Today because of various shifts and developments of meaning, the situation is so complex that no categorizations yet formed seem adequate to mark out precisely their areas of use.

2.1.1. Can expresses all kinds of ability or capability, power or potentiality, or possibility or feasibility.

2.1.1.1. Can is chiefly used as a neutral present.

(12) A parrot can talk like a man: she can repeat whole sentences. We call this talking, but it is not real speaking, for the parrot can no more make up sentences of itself than a dog can.

(13) I’ll take this room. When can I move in? Shall I pay you a week’s rent in advance?

(14) Personality can be irresistible.

The neutral present is used when no time is thought of as in (12), or the future is referred to as in (13), or to denote a quality that a person or a thing possesses as in (14).

2.1.1.2. Can expresses the same meanings in the function of actual present.

(15) "Can I help you?"

"Well, er... give me a teri steak and er... a guava."

The distinction between the actual and the neutral present is often impossible for the simple reason that speakers are quite
unaware of any difference.

(16) Can I have some more bread, please.

2. 1. 1. 3. In interrogative and negative sentences, can expresses
doubt, astonishment, or impatience.

(17) Can the report be true?
   It can’t be true.

(18) What can he mean by that?
   In this use, can is often stressed and pronounced as [kæn]
   and/or intensive adverbial phrase such as in the world, on earth are
   added.

2. 1. 2. Can expresses permission or sanction.

(19) You can go now.

   May shares the same area of meaning in this respect, but
   there is a difference.

2. 1. 2. 1. Can expresses the possibility that is the result of
   qualities inherent in the subject of the verb. So the sentence (19)
   means that there are no circumstances or conditions that prohibit
   the person’s going.

2. 1. 2. 2. In contrast, may expresses the possibility that is provided
   by some person other that the subject of the verb. So the sentence:
   (20) You may go.

   expresses that the speaker (or somebody else) gives the permission.

(Kruisinga 1931, Section 678)

2. 1. 2. 3. It follows from 2.1.2.1. and 2.1.2.2. that in asking per-
   mission can is usable but that can lacks the polite deference that may
   has.
(21) Can I open the window?  
May I open the window?

2.1.2.4. Very often, however, and especially when followed by a passive stem, can is almost equivalent to may.

(22) The points of argument, some of which are on what may be called the major questions for consideration, can first be indicated.

2.1.3. If can is followed by a perfect stem, the idea of possibility (or ability or permission) is present in time but the idea of the action indicated by the main verb is past. So one paraphrase of the sentence:

(23) He can't have left.
will be: It isn't possible that he (has) left.

2.2.0. Could is the past tense form of can when used in past-time contexts.

(24) I tried to lift the sack but I couldn't.
She thought she could come back amply in time.

2.2.1. In present-day English, however, could rarely carries past tense meanings, but expresses more often the present or even look toward the future.

This use of could is derived from the use in the hypothetical subjunctive mood, although the sense of the subjunctive mood is apparently lost nowadays.

Nevertheless, this origin gives could a feeling of the politeness of indirection. For example, the sentence:

(25) Could I borrow your dictionary for a few minutes? expresses
a more delicate kind of politeness, perhaps, than that of the directly honorific may.

2. 2. 2. If predications are formulated in a stream of imagined occurrences, then could functions as a subjunctive modal.

(26) If the moon were a mirror, I could enjoy seeing your face reflected on it every night.
    I wish I could marry you now.

2. 2. 3. Could combined with a perfect stem is always a subjunctive modal.

(27) These seven years had been well enough as a preparation; now at last he was to be flung, head foremost, into life.
    He could have sung, he could have shouted.

The last two sentences could be paraphrased as:

He was so happy that he felt like singing and shouting (but in actuality he didn’t.)

2. 3. 0. Be Able To: In some uses can and could can alternate with forms of the group potential verb be able to. Because the verb be is fully inflected, be able to furnishes ways of distinguishing meanings which the defective verb can is not fitted to cope with. For example, the following forms are only possible to the group potential verb be able to:

(28) Perfect Forms: have (has, had) been able to/
    Future Forms: will (shall, would, should) be able to/
    Infinitives: to be able to, to have been able to/
    Gerunds: being able to, having been able to.

2. 3. 1. But there is a certain limit to substitutability of be able
to. For example, in the neutral present only can is used.

We don’t say:

(14’) Personality is able to be irresistible.

As can be inferred from this example, be able to is restricted to animate subjects for many speakers.

If we substitute is able to for all the uses of can in (12), the meaning of the sentence is yet clear but the broad, infinite feeling of the neutral present, which covers both the present and the future, is lost. Besides, in reality, be able to as an actual present is hardly used in other than negative sentences.

2.3.2. The use of be able to is “time-limited”, that is, it can be substituted only when a definite time is thought of.

(29) You’ll be able to drive after a few more lessons.

I regret that I am not able to lend you the book.

2.3.3. The preterite of be able to seems to be preferred as a past tense because the preterite could is tending to be restricted to the subjunctive modal uses (2.2.2. and 2.2.3.).

(30) But these forest flies, even when they came in legions about me, were not able to spoil my pleasure.

2.3.4. It is interesting to note that for C. K. Ogden’s Basic English, which consists of 850 words, only BE, HAVE, MAY and WILL are selected as auxiliaries, that is, can and could together with the rest of modal auxiliaries are deleted from the system. Instead, the system uses only ABLE and POSSIBLE (together with NECESSARY for the deleted “must”). So the result is that what is left vacant by the deletion of can and could and the other modals
must be filled by effective employment of may, be able to, be possible and other deliberately selected words.

It seems that the system manages rather well without most of the modal auxiliaries, although it must be admitted that some of the delicate nuances which are only possible to these modals are pitifully lost. The following is an example of how it looks like if we totally do away with the use of the auxiliary can. (A) is a passage from President Roosevelt’s talk given on 5/12/1934. (B) is its transcription into Basic English by its advocate. (Ogden 1934, p. 149)

(31) (A) It needs no prophet to tell you that when the people find that they can get their money—that they can get it when they want it for all legitimate purposes—the phantom of fear will soon be laid. People will again be glad to have their money where it will be safely taken care of, and where they can use it conveniently at any time. I can assure you that it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than it is to keep it under the mattress.

(B) No special knowledge of the future is needed to make it clear to you that when everyone sees that he is able to get his money—that he may have it when desired, for all the purposes of everyday existence—the shades and fictions of fear will quickly be put at rest. Men will again be happy to have their money where they are able to make use of it at their pleasure at any time. I give you my word that it is safer to keep your money in one of the banks which will be open again than to keep it under the bed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


