

# 「Can」という動詞の認識論的使用について

## On the Epistemic Use of the Verb “Can”

Alan Bunyan (バニヤン・アラン)

Osaka Shin-ai University Faculty of Education (大阪信愛学院大学 教育学部)

### ABSTRACT

The present paper, which is primarily for the attention of authors of English-language grammar guides, investigates a variety of reference sources with the aim of discovering what kind of information is generally available in English concerning certain aspects of the epistemic use of the verb ‘can’ in the written language, finding that barely one-tenth of sources surveyed provide adequate guidance.

*Keywords:* Assertive, Epistemic, Interrogative, Modal, Positive

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Regarding the epistemic function of present-tense ‘can’ <sup>\*1</sup>, the acceptability of its use to express general, but not specific, possibilities (to wit that, while e.g.

[1] He could be hiding here now.

cannot be rephrased as

[2] \*He can be hiding here now.

, we may say e.g.

[3] It can rain in the desert.

to mean ‘it *sometimes* rains in the desert’ ) is generally well understood by English learners, at least of intermediate level or above.

However, the fact that this constraint relates to positive-assertive, but not to positive-interrogative, sentences (to wit that we may *inquire* about a specific possibility using ‘can’ , e. g.

[4] Can he really be hiding here?)

tends to be less widely known, with the result that many learners, on the basis of solecisms such as [2], will tend quite reasonably, in the absence of clear guidance to the contrary, to assume that [4] must simply be an erroneous version of

[5] Could he really be hiding here?

rather than a viable alternative to it, this potentially, and quite needlessly, contributing to the propagation of a grammatical misconception.

The purpose of this paper will therefore be to attempt to ascertain what kind of guidance concerning the epistemic functionality of ‘can’ , with particular reference to positive-interrogative cases\*<sup>2</sup>, the contemporary English learner studying grammar via the target language can reasonably expect to find, and thus to determine the general level of adequacy of said guidance in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

## 2. SURVEY

We commence our survey with authorities that afford at least reasonably comprehensive guidance relating to our topic, arguably both the fullest and yet the most admirably concise and accessible of which is provided by Swan<sup>1)</sup>, who not only (p.107) offers up interrogative “Who can it be?” as an instance of ‘can’ used to express “present ( ‘logical’ ) possibility” , but goes on, even more helpfully, to note the additional possibility of an affirmative ‘can’ , where modified by a restrictive or implicitly negative adverbial (only, hardly, etc.), functioning as an expresser of present possibility\*<sup>3</sup>, citing by way of example “Who’ s that at the door? It **can** **only** be the postman” (and further observing that this usage is similar to that of ‘must’ ).

Next, we have Quirk et al. <sup>2)</sup>, whose guidance relating specifically to our topic is (somewhat disappointingly, we might feel, for such a major reference work) confined to noting (p.815) the possibility of saying “Can they have missed the bus?” instead of “Could they have missed the bus?”

Thirdly, and finally, we have the website [toppr.com](http://toppr.com)<sup>3)</sup>, which, under the heading ‘Modal Verbs’, cites “Can it be true?” as an instance of ‘can’ used to express possibility.

Moving on next to authorities that, while touching to some extent on the epistemic use of ‘can’, give no clear indication of any significant difference between affirmative and interrogative forms, we have Huddleston et al.<sup>4)</sup>, who cite (p.184) “These animals can be dangerous” as an instance of ‘existential possibility’<sup>\*4</sup> but provide not a single example of interrogative ‘can’, even as a general epistemic.

Downing et al.<sup>5)</sup>, invoking the term ‘extrinsic possibility’ to denote the specific-epistemic use, exclude that of ‘can’ from this category, citing (p.384) “\*They can be real pearls” as an unacceptable sentence. However, while no one would argue that this sentence could not be equivalent to ‘they may be real pearls’ (i.e. referring to a particular set of gems under consideration at the time of speaking), there would be nothing strange in making the assertion in relation to, say, the items that people bring in *from time to time* to a jeweler’s store for valuation (i.e. they - the items that they bring - are sometimes real pearls). Hence the sentence is shown to be perfectly possible depending on the interpretation. Yet again, sadly, not a single example of interrogative ‘can’ is provided.

Greenbaum<sup>6)</sup> (p.261) offers “Can this be sent[?]” as an instance of possibility, but what might, on account of the combination ‘can...be...?’, appear at first glance to be a specific epistemic analogous to [4] above is quickly revealed, by virtue of the participle ‘sent’, merely to realize a passive construction relating to the *ability* of some person(s) to perform the task in question, i.e. a simple dynamic use meaning no more than ‘Are we able to send this?’

Similarly disappointing partial guidance concerning epistemic ‘can’ is provided by the following websites: [englishpage.com](http://englishpage.com)<sup>7)</sup>, [Perfect English Grammar](http://PerfectEnglishGrammar.com)<sup>8)</sup>, [guinlist](http://guinlist.com)<sup>9)</sup>, [Books for Languages](http://BooksforLanguages.com)<sup>10)</sup>, [Wikipedia](http://Wikipedia.com)<sup>11)</sup>, [British Council](http://BritishCouncil.com)<sup>12)</sup>, [bka](http://bka.com)<sup>13)</sup>, [Proofed](http://Proofed.com)<sup>14)</sup>, [Woodward English](http://WoodwardEnglish.com)<sup>15)</sup> and [EnglishStudyPage.Com](http://EnglishStudyPage.Com)<sup>16)</sup>.

Finally, the following popular guides offer no guidance whatsoever relating to epistemic ‘can’: Strumpf et al.<sup>17)</sup>, Lester et al.<sup>18)</sup>, Gucker<sup>19)</sup>, Terban<sup>20)</sup>, and Azar<sup>21)</sup>, nor do any of the following websites, despite the promise of their headings (given in parentheses): [GrammarBank.com](http://GrammarBank.com)<sup>22)</sup> (Can/Can’t), [English Language Centre](http://EnglishLanguageCentre.com)<sup>23)</sup> (Modals of Ability: Can, Could, Be able to, May, Might), [Linguapress](http://Linguapress.com)<sup>24)</sup> (Modal verbs in English), [EnglishCLUB](http://EnglishCLUB.com)<sup>25)</sup> (can, could, be able to), [Aderalingua English](http://AderalinguaEnglish.com)<sup>26)</sup> (Expressing Ability, Possibility and Obligation), [YaClass](http://YaClass.com)<sup>27)</sup> (Use of can: Possibility and Ability), [Common Ground International Language Services](http://CommonGroundInternationalLanguageServices.com)<sup>28)</sup> (English Modals - Verbs that Express Ability, Permission, Probability, Advice, Necessity and Requests), [Lingoda](http://Lingoda.com)<sup>29)</sup> (Explained: modals of obligation and probability) and [LEARNENGLISH-ONLINE](http://LEARNENGLISH-ONLINE.com)<sup>30)</sup> (Modal Verbs of Possibility).

### 3. RESULTS

Of the 30 reference sources here surveyed, only 3, or 10%, can be regarded as providing at least moderately comprehensive guidance relating to our topic, whilst 14, or almost half, not only fail to note the specific-epistemic functionality of positive-interrogative ‘can’ but do not even mention the general-epistemic functionality of the positive-assertive form.

### 4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above, it seems clear that learners are relatively unlikely, whether they search in print or online, to find satisfactory information in English-language grammar guides relating to the epistemic, and most particularly the specific-epistemic, use of ‘can’.

It is consequently to be hoped that authors of English grammar guides – whether devising new, or simply revising old, guidance – will henceforth endeavor to devote greater attention to this topic.

### FOOTNOTES

\*<sup>1</sup> Although some authorities prefer to limit the reference of the term ‘epistemic’ to considerations of specific possibility (typically involving ‘may/might’), and invoke a range of other expressions to classify the usage exemplified by [3] (including ‘existential possibility’ (Huddleston et al.) and even ‘root possibility’ (Quirk et al.)), the present author contends that such a distinction is quite without foundation, not least because there is no identifiable difference between e.g.

[6] A bear with young cubs can be dangerous.

and

[7] A bear with young cubs may be dangerous.

, both serving to express a *possible state of reality*, whilst there is plainly a huge gulf separating [6] from instances of ‘can’ relating to that which we would typically regard as falling, in some sense, into the domain of actual ‘ability’, whether that ability be manifested as skill, as in

[8] John can play the violin well.

, knowledge/understanding, as in

[9] I can tell you that you' ve got the job.

, perception, as in

[10] I can smell burning.

or mere schedule-based practicability, as in

[11] We can fit you in next Thursday.

Indeed, we need not rely here solely on appeals to common sense, since the fundamental differences between [6] and [7], on the one hand, and [8]~[11] on the other, can be clearly highlighted via the application of a simple transformation, so that whereas the former can be rephrased by means of the formula [It is possible that [NP] will [VP]], in the case of both [6] and [7] yielding semantically identical

[6/7a] It is possible that a bear with young cubs will be dangerous.

, the same operation performed on [8] ~ [11] yields sentences that are different in meaning, whether obviously so, viz.

[8a] It is possible that John will play the violin well.

[9a] It is possible that I will tell you that you' ve got the job.

[10a] It is possible that I will smell burning.

or more subtly but still identifiably so, viz.

[11a] It is possible that we will fit you in next Thursday.

(since, while [11] would be construed unambiguously as constituting an *undertaking* relating to

the event in question, [11a] merely hints at a future possibility regarding which actual confirmation would still be required or expected at some later date.)

For the reasons outlined above, the term ‘epistemic’ will be used throughout this paper to include the use of ‘can’ in sentences such as [3] as well as that of ‘could/may/might’ in sentences such as [1].

\*2 There is, of course, no intent here to deny the possibility of positive-interrogative ‘can’ functioning also - as context dictates - as a general epistemic, as in

[12] Can there ever be thunder without lightning?

However, since this usage follows predictably from that of positive-assertive ‘can’, learners will - unless otherwise informed - naturally expect it to be possible, and it will thus not be a focus of this paper.

We will, for essentially the same reason, be equally unconcerned here with the specific-epistemic functionality of negative-interrogative ‘can’, as in

[13] Can’ t there ever be thunder without lightning?

, which again follows on quite predictably from that of the corresponding assertive as a standard form (albeit primarily in BrE) of logical denial.

\*3 Swan is, in fact, the only authority amongst all those here surveyed who takes the trouble to make this point!

\*4 Although, somewhat confusingly, under the general heading of ‘dynamic possibility’, leaving one to wonder where exactly they draw the line between ‘existential’ and ‘dynamic’ senses.

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<連絡先>

バニヤン・アラン

〒536-8585 大阪府大阪市城東区古市2-7-30

大阪信愛学院大学教育学科

E-mail: alan@osaka-shinai.ac.jp