

## CAN AND COULD

### 3.28.1 INTRODUCTION

The modal auxiliaries are can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must, ought, used to, need and dare. They are different from the primary auxiliaries be, have and do in two aspects. Firstly, they have special grammatical features and secondly, more than the grammatical function modal auxiliaries have got a dictionary meaning too. Each of these modal auxiliaries is used for different purposes which will be discussed in the following chapters.

### 3.28.2 CAN and COULD

'Can' and 'Could' are the modal auxiliaries mainly used for seeking permission, to indicate probability and ability.

### 3.28.3 CAN

The Modal Auxiliary 'can' is used in the present tense, to express ability, permission, polite request, possibility, etc.

Ability/capacity

I can run fast.

He can speak French.

I can swim across the river.

I can play football.

Most people can swim.

Here 'can' is used to indicate that something is possible because someone has the potential to do it.

Seeking permission

Can you help this old man?

You can leave now.

Can you lift this box?

Can I ask you a question?

We can leave our luggage at the hotel.

The modal auxiliary 'can' is used here to ask permission.

Polite request

Can I use your umbrella today?

Can you lend me your pen?

Can you pass this salt!

Can you help me?

Can you give me your book for an hour?

Possibility

She can be at home.

Maths can be fun.

You can go on the train.

The road can be crowded.

It cannot be true.

‘Can’ is used here to express possibility in affirmative, interrogative and negative sentences.

Note: ‘Cannot’ denote impossibility as in It cannot be true.

### 3.28.4 COULD

The modal auxiliary ‘could’ is used in the past tense mainly to express suggestion, request, past ability, etc.

Ability

If I won the prize, I could buy a piano.

Amir could run fast if he tried.

I could take better photos if I had a better camera.

My grandfather could walk on his hands.

I could swim when I was younger.

‘Could’ the past equivalence of ‘can’, is used to express the ability to do an act, but not the performance of an act.

Polite request

Could you please lend me your pen?

Could you give me a lift in your car?

Could I use your mobile phone?

Could you give me your notebook?

Could you wait for a minute?

Could is here used to express a polite request.

Note: could means a more distant possibility than can

Suggestion

You could join for MBA at Bangalore.

We could see another day.

We could have a party.

We could go by bus.

To make a suggestion use the modal auxiliary could.

Possibility with negative implications

She could have disclosed the matter.

She could have passed the examination.

He could have sent a message.

I could have complained about him.

I could have lent you the money.

In order to show the possibility with negative implications we use could+ have.

Note: Could is rather formal than can

### 3.28.5 LET'S SUM UP

This unit has dealt with the uses of modal auxiliaries 'can' and 'could' in various contexts.

## MAY AND MIGHT

### 3.29.1 INTRODUCTION

The modal auxiliaries 'may' and 'might' are used to say something is possible or that it is quite likely.

### 3.29.2 MAY

The modal auxiliary 'may' is used in the present tense to express:

Wish

May God bless you!

May you live happily ever after!

May success attend you!

May you have a good companion!  
May god bless our home!

Granting and refusing permission  
You may take my laptop.  
May I take this umbrella!  
You may go after 10 o' clock.  
You may not leave this campus till 4 o'clock.  
You may not go there.

Possibility  
She may tell her husband.  
Keerthmay know Kannan's address.  
Anita may be waiting at the station.  
The company may not accept my resignation.  
It may not rain.  
'May'is used to express possibility.  
To express a polite request  
May I come in sir?  
May I take this book?  
May I share your food?  
May I light this lamp?  
May I stay here?  
'May' is more formal than 'might' and 'can'.

### 3.29.3 MIGHT

'Might'is used as the past equivalent of 'May'. The modal auxiliary 'might' is used in the past tense to express:

Remote possibility

The idea might go wrong!  
I mightbe playing football tomorrow.  
I might drive up to London on Saturday.  
Might they be waiting outside?  
Rameesa said she might lend a car.

In these examples 'might'is used to express remote or less possibility than

‘may’.

Permission

Might I come in sir?

Might I stay with you?

He said I might go.

Might I borrow your book?

Might I meet you tomorrow?

‘Might I?’ or ‘I might’ is possible and can be used for the present or future.

Note: ‘Might not’ has a short form- mightn’t

That mightn’t be a bad idea.

### 3.29.4 LET’S SUM UP

‘May’ and ‘Might’ are the modal auxiliaries which are mainly used for expressing possibility, granting or refusing permission or showing probability.

‘Might’ is the less positive version of ‘may’ like ‘can’ and ‘could’.

## USED (TO)

### 3.33.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Used to’ indicates a discontinued habit.

### 3.33.2 USED TO

The modal auxiliary ‘used to’ indicate:

A discontinued habit

I used to live there when I was a child.

I used to read books every weekend.

They used to play cricket in the evening.

There used to be a house there.

He used to make fun of others.