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ORCID: 0000-0001-8863-948X E-mail: khairzhanovaa@gmail.com**SEMANTIC DIMENSIONS OF MODAL VERB CAN IN ENGLISH**

Abstract. Effective communication involves not only the exchange of information between people, but also the expression of the speaker's attitude towards the proposition. Accordingly, modality represents a fundamental component of linguistic communication. One of the modal verbs which encompasses a wide variety of modality meanings is *can*. *Can*¹ is the easiest modal verb, since it is the first type of modal verb learned and used by a child, at the same time it is the most ambiguous modal verb as it can have different interpretations. The ambiguous nature of modal verb *can* was approached from different perspectives; however, much uncertainty still exists about the semantics of *can*. Most studies in the field have accounted for the semantics of *can* along with other modal verbs in English, thereby subsuming all modal verbs under a broader modal category. Unlike previous works, this study considers the semantics of *can* solely. Hence, the present paper employs qualitative and quantitative analyses of utterances containing *can* drawn from fiction, with the aim of identifying the range of meanings expressed by *can* and examining its functions. The analysis of the data has shown that 'can' covers a broad range of modality meanings including participant-internal possibility modality, participant-external possibility modality, deontic modality and epistemic modality. The most frequent use of *can* was found to be as a marker of participant-internal possibility, whereas its deontic reading was the least frequent. Furthermore, the present study demonstrates the crucial role of context and cotext in determining the interpretation of *can* and distinguishing between its different modal readings.

Keywords: possibility modality; deontic modality; epistemic modality; context; modal verbs.**For citation:** Yeshniyaz, G., Islam, A., Khairzhanova, A. Semantic Dimensions of Modal Verb *Can* in English. *Tiltanyim*, 2026. No.3 (103). Pp. 100-107.DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55491/2411-6076-2026-3-100-107>**Гүлзада Салмырзақызы Ешнияз^{1*}, Айбарша Ислам², Ахмарал Хатифқызы Хайржанова³,**^{1*}автор-корреспондент, докторант,Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ халықаралық қатынастар және әлем тілдері университеті,
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ORCID: 0000-0001-8863-948X E-mail: khairzhanovaa@gmail.com**АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНДЕГІ CAN МОДАЛЬ ЕТІСТІГІНІҢ СЕМАНТИКАЛЫҚ СИПАТЫ**

Андатпа. Адамдар арасындағы тиімді қарым-қатынас тек ақпарат алмасумен шектелмейді, сонымен бірге сөйлеушінің айтылған ойға деген көзқарасын жеткізуді де қамтиды. Осы тұрғыдан алғанда, модальділік категориясы сөйлеудің маңызды құрамдас бөлігі болып табылады. Ағылшын тілінде модальділік категориясының түрлі реңін білдіретін модальді етістіктердің бірі – *can*. Аталған модальді етістік баланың ең алғаш меңгеріп, қолданатын модаль етістіктердің бірі болып саналғанымен, ол функционалдық мүмкіндігі кең әрі көпмағыналы күрделі модаль

¹ Wells, G. (1979) Learning and using the auxiliary verb in English. In *Language Development*, V. Lee (ed.). London: Croom Helm. Pp. 250-270.

етістігі. *Can* модаль етістігінің көпмағыналылығы теориялық тұрғыдан зерттелгенімен, оның семантикалық құрылымы әлі де толық айқындалмаған. Зерттеулердің басым көпшілігінде *can* етістігінің семантикасы ағылшын тіліндегі басқа модаль етістіктермен бірге қарастырылып, олар біртұтас категория ретінде талданады. Мақала *can* модаль етістігінің білдіретін мағыналары мен атқаратын қызметтерін анықтап, түсіндіруді мақсат етеді. Зерттеу көркем әдебиеттен алынған сөйленімдерге сипаттау және сандық талдау жүргізу арқылы жасалды. Талдау нәтижелері аталған модаль етістігінің модальділіктің кең ауқымды түрлерін қамтитынын көрсетті. Олардың қатарына ішкі мүмкіндік модальділігі, сыртқы мүмкіндік модальділігі, деонтикалық модальділік және эпистемикалық модальділік жатады. Зерттеу нәтижелері бойынша *can* модаль етістігінің ең жиі қолданылатын қызметі – субъектінің ішкі мүмкіндігін білдіру болса, ал деонтикалық мағынадағы қолданысы өте сирек кездеседі. Сонымен қатар зерттеу нәтижелері *can* модальді етістігінің әртүрлі модальдік мағыналарын ажыратуда, сондай-ақ оның қызметін анықтауда контекст пен лингвистикалық мәнмәтіннің (cotext) шешуші рөл атқаратынын көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: мүмкіндік модальділігі; деонтикалық модальділік; эпистемикалық модальділік; мәнмәтін; модаль етістіктер.

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СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ МОДАЛЬНОГО ГЛАГОЛА CAN В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Аннотация. Эффективное общение между людьми не ограничивается лишь обменом информацией, но также включает передачу отношения говорящего к высказанной мысли. В этом контексте категория модальности является важной составляющей речи. Одним из модальных глаголов английского языка, выражающих различные оттенки модальности является *can*. *Can* – самый простой модальный глагол английского языка, поскольку он является первым модальным глаголом, который ребёнок усваивает и начинает использовать. В то же время *can* считается наиболее многозначным модальным глаголом, поскольку может иметь различные интерпретации. Многозначность данного модального глагола неоднократно становилась предметом исследования, однако многие аспекты его семантики до сих пор остаются недостаточно изученными. Большинство исследований в данной области анализируют семантику *can* в совокупности с другими модальными глаголами английского языка, рассматривая их как единую группу. В отличие от предыдущих работ, настоящее исследование посвящено исключительно семантике модального глагола *can*. Цель исследования заключается в выявлении и объяснении значений, которые может выражать модальный глагол *can*. Исследование проведено с применением качественного и количественного анализа высказываний, содержащих модальный глагол *can*, отобранных из текстов художественной литературы. Проведённый анализ показал, что данный модальный глагол охватывает широкий спектр модальных значений, включая модальность внутренней возможности, модальность внешней возможности, деонтическую модальность и эпистемическую модальность. Установлено, что наиболее распространённой функцией *can* является выражение модальности внутренней возможности, тогда как деонтическое употребление встречается значительно реже. Кроме того, проведённый анализ выявляет существенное влияние контекста и лингвистического контекста (cotext) на интерпретацию модального глагола *can*, в частности на установление и разграничение его различных модальных значений.

Ключевые слова: модальность возможности; деонтическая модальность; эпистемическая модальность; контекст; модальные глаголы.

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Introduction

Our speech consists of sentences, which can be compared with a high-rise building. The

difference is only in the material we use and the way we build. In the former case, we use different kinds of concrete and construction blocks and we use physical strength, in the latter case we use different means of language and use our cognitive ability. The similarity is that a high-rise building consists of several floors, while several layers of language form our sentences. The first layer in the sentence is proposition, in the second layer it is refined by morphological and syntactic means to make it fit to time, place etc. and the last layer is modality which qualifies what is said in terms of possibility, probability, obligation, necessity, wish. Thus, we cannot build our sentences and communication without the category which is called *modality*. That can be a reason for long-standing history that dates back to philosophy, logic and linguistics where the category of modality was a research issue. Furthermore, as a semantic category of modality is closely connected with our cognition i.e., it expresses the speaker's objective or subjective viewpoint on what is said. However, it is hard to come up with one definition of modality and set its boundaries, as it is subject to diverse interpretations and even new subcategories of modality are still being suggested by scholars. Another controversial question is connected with its expression in our speech. Unlike other categories, no single morphological form can be considered as its main marker in a language. For instance, aspect is mainly expressed by tense in most languages of the world, while modality can be expressed grammatically, lexically as well as prosodically. One of the explicit markers of modality in English are modal verbs. Despite the interaction of modal verbs and modality has received considerable critical attention, there still remains a paucity of evidence on the semantics of modal verbs. All of the factors discussed above define the relevance of the present study, which addresses the semantic shades of modal verb *can* in English.

Materials and methods

The methodological approach taken in this study is a mixed methodology based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data for this study were collected from the novel by I. Murdoch "Black Prince". Overall, 231 utterances with modal verb *can* were collected and analyzed. Moreover, some ad hoc examples were used to display different semantics of *can*. It should be noted that the present study forms part of a broader research project, which accounts for the limitations of the corpus used in the analysis.

Literature review

According to Bybee J. and Fleischman S. "modality – ..., is the semantic domain pertaining to elements of meaning that language expresses. It covers a broad range of semantic nuances – jussive, desirative, intensitive, hypothetical, potential, obligative, dubitative, hortatory, exclamative, etc. – whose common dominator is the addition of a supplement or overlay of meaning to the most neutral semantic value of the proposition of an utterance, namely factual and declarative" (Bybee, 1995: 2). We understand modality as an additional meaning to the proposition of the sentence. The overlaying meaning can be explained in terms of possibility and necessity as the action or situation described in the preposition can be 1) necessarily/possibly true/false from the point of speaker (epistemic modality); 2) necessary/possible to do from the point of speaker (deontic modality); 3) necessary/possible to do for the subject of the sentence (possibility modality). The modality of possibility itself can be classified as *participant-internal possibility modality* and *participant-external possibility modality* (the terms are adopted from Auwera et.al. (Auwera, 1998: 80), where the former deals with the ability of the subject, whereas in the case of the latter, a favourable circumstance enables the subject to carry out the action. Hence, in the article we differentiate four modality meanings: epistemic, deontic, participant-internal possibility modality (henceforth PIPM) and participant-external possibility modality (henceforth PEPM).

The first claim to be made in the paper is that modal verb *can* can express all the modality shades mentioned above. It is illustrated in examples (1), (2), (3) and (4):

- (1) She can speak English.
- (2) She can talk to you now.
- (3) She can be at home now.
- (4) Students can use dictionaries during the lesson.

Here (1) has PIPM meaning, since she has an ability to speak English, whereas (2) is more likely

to be interpreted as PEPM, because it shows that she can fulfil the action thanks to favourable circumstances such as free time, being alone etc. (3) is the explicit case of epistemic modality since we are making a deduction about the truth base of the utterance. In (4) students are allowed to use dictionaries, therefore *can* express deontic meaning.

At this point arises a question about semantics of *can*: are we dealing with one modal verb- *can* or four different *cans*? In the literature on the semantics of *can* ambiguous nature of it has been subject to considerable discussion. Moreover, linguists attempted to tackle the issue proposing two approaches on *can*: monosemous and polysemous. The proponents of the former approach (Perkins (Perkins, 1983), Walton (Walton, 1991), Groefsema (Groefsema, 1995), Klinge (Klinge, 1993) argue for the single, core meaning of modal verbs that is contextually adapted, while the representatives of the latter view (Palmer (Palmer, 1990), Coates (Coates, 1983), Collins (Collins, 2007) suggest that modal verbs have multiple distinct meanings.

One of the first comprehensive studies on modal verbs in English is done by Michael Perkins. The author adopting the core meaning framework on modal verbs, explains *can* as expressing a basic core meaning of possibility conditioned by circumstances.

In Groefsema's view, *can* does not mean several different things (ability, permission, possibility), rather it has one abstract meaning of compatibility with circumstances and all specific interpretations of it are inferred from the context (Groefsema, 1995: 62).

Walton and Klinge representing unitary linguistic content can equate its meaning to the notion of "potential". However, they note that it "provides only a partial basis for determining the proposition expressed" (Walton, 1991: 342). Therefore, the core meaning of *can* – "potentiality" enriched by the context, gains different readings such as ability, permission and possibility.

Palmer conceptualizes modal verbs as expressions of the speaker's attitude towards a proposition or event. Within this framework, *can* is generally classified as a marker of dynamic modality, expressing ability and neutral possibility, and, in some contexts, as a marker of deontic modality, indicating that the speaker permits or does not object to a particular action (Palmer, 1990: 72). The author also states that *can* can have epistemic reading but only in negative form and in an interrogative sentence.

According to Coates, *can* encompasses three semantic categories: root possibility, ability, and permission, whereas *could* is associated with five: root possibility, epistemic possibility, ability, permission, and hypothesis (Coates, 1983: 5).

However, both Palmer and Coates admit that there are instances when it is not clear what modality is implied by *can*. One treats them as ambiguity, the other calls them gradient usage of *can* respectively.

Collins adopting polysemy approach, entitles to *can* three modality meanings: epistemic, dynamic and deontic (Collins, 2007: 476).

Collectively, these studies irrespective of approach they use, outline a critical role of context in studying *can*, since its interpretation is heavily determined by situational context. The modal verb *can* in (5) can be interpreted as possibility (PEPM), ability (PIPM) and permission (deontic modality). Only given the right context we determine what is exactly meant by *can*:

(5) Freddie can recite a poem now. (taken from Walton) (Walton, 1991: 342).

Thus, we support Joos on the role of context by stating "if by the meaning of a modal we understand equivalence between a modal and a natural-language paraphrase, the modals in isolation simply have no paraphrasable meaning and rely on cotext and context for a meaning. ... , and it follows that cotext and context require an explicit place in the framework" (Joos, 1964: 147). The context-sensitiveness of modal verbs was endorsed by Nathaniel et.al. stating that the listener disambiguates what is meant by a modal verb using discourse context (Nathaniel, 2026: 3). Following van Dijk, we distinguish cotext from context, defining *cotext* as the linguistic environment surrounding a linguistic item, while context refers to relevant non-linguistic factors of the communicative situation (van Dijk, 1972: 39). This distinction is particularly important for the interpretation of modal verbs, since the meaning of *can* may depend not only on its immediate syntactic environment but also on preceding and following discourse. In this respect, Janney views *cotext* as an immediate manifestation of context in discourse and emphasizes the role of preceding utterances in the interpretation of subsequent ones

(Janney, 2002: 1).

Thus, the second claim of the paper – *can* is not only context dependent but also cotext sensitive. In the present study, cotext refers to the linguistic environment surrounding *can*, including the words, phrases, clauses, and preceding or following utterances that contribute to its interpretation.

Results and discussions

The present study was designed to identify the semantic meanings and functions of the modal verb *can* based on an analysis of utterances containing *can* extracted from a corpus of fictional texts. The results of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1– Meanings of *can*

Кесте 1 – *Can* модаль етістігінің мағыналары

Таблица 1– Значения модального глагола *can*

The usage of CAN	Number of utterances	Percentage
PIPM	121	52%
PEPM	54	23,7%
Epistemic modality	19	8.2%
Deontic modality	16	7%
CAN + sense verbs	12	5.2%
CAN + inanimate subjects	9	3.9%
Total	231	

As can be seen from Table 1, our analysis includes not only modality meanings covered by *can*, but also other uses of it. Thus, we attempted to focus on all instances of *can* in our speech rather than separate meanings of it as it is done in most previous works in the field.

It is also apparent from this table that *can* mostly denote participant-internal possibility modality, i.e. ability of a subject to carry out the action given in the proposition, making up more than half of the cases. In our data *can* meaning PIPM is found in three forms *can* (6), *could* (7) and *could +have+past participle* (8):

(6) “I just walked out after breakfast. Not that I had any breakfast, I *can’t eat* these days at all, I *can’t bear* the smell of food. Bradley, I want you to go with me to the lawyer, and I want you to go with me to the hairdresser, I must get my hair rinsed. I think I *can just do that*, it won't be too much for me.”

(7) I got up but was suffering such extreme local discomfort that I *could hardly get dressed*.

(8) By the time Julian telephoned I was in deep anxiety and yearning but not in hell. I *could not then willingly have put off* seeing her, the craving was too acute. But I *was able*, when I was with her, to be perfectly happy. I did not expect the inferno.

In (6) the subject is not able to eat because of her illness and is only able to visit her hairdresser and get her hair rinsed which indicates present ability, whereas (7) is an explicit case of past physical ability. (7) is a hypothetical form of CAN which is contra-factive. In this construction, the ability is under the scope of epistemic modality and can be paraphrased as “it would not have been possible for...”.

According to Coates, instances with ability *can* generally have following three features:

- (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” [9, page 89].

The finding of the present study confirms that PIPM reading of *can* is associated with characteristics mentioned by Coates and two more points should be added:

- (d) *can* with private verbs denotes PIPM rather than PEPM;
- (e) verb is always in active voice.

When *can* is used with private verbs, it is more likely to have an ability meaning. In 30% of our PIPM data *can* is used with private verbs. A possible explanation for this might be the semantics of private verbs which describe internal mental processes. For instance, when we read (9) it only triggers ability meaning:

(9) God, I feel hard, hard, hard. I don't know if you *can understand*.

Leclercq B. studying lexico-grammatical patterns where *can* is used, found out that the second most frequent usage of *can* is in construction “as long as I can remember” which has an ability reading (Leclercq, 2022: 10). However, Bybee claims that when *can* is used with cognitive verbs ability meaning arises due to the symbiosis of both of them where ‘the lexical verb is used to shore up and flesh out the cognitive meaning of *can*’ (Bybee, 2010:163).

As for the next feature, our data have shown that PIPM reading of *can* is not consistent with passive voice. However, passive *can* with inanimate subjects denotes property of a thing as in (10):

(10) This book *can be translated* easily.

These features support the idea that context is relevant in interpreting *can*.

The second common meaning of *can* is participant-external possibility modality meaning, where a favourable circumstance enables the subject to fulfill the given action. Similar to PIPM reading here *can* is used in three forms: *can* (11), *could* (12) and *could have* +past participle (13):

(11) “Make me a cheque then, Brad. Here’s your cheque book. Make it out to ‘bearer’ and I *can take* it to your bank. Make it a big one, Brad, so I *can book* us the best way.”

(12) “I felt so ashamed with them because everything in their life was going so well and they were so sort of successful. I *couldn’t talk* to them about what I wanted with them and they were always in a hurry...”

(13) “Julian, I was going to tell you tomorrow. I was going to tell you everything tomorrow. I had to stay today. You saw how it was. We were both possessed, we were held here, we *couldn’t have gone*, it had to happen as it did.”

The utterance (11) displays the present time possibility, while (12) shows past time possibility. (13) expresses ‘unactualized possibility’, where leaving the place was logically possible but did not occur (Collins, 2007: 478).

It is worth noting that there are differences of contexts in PIPM and PEPM readings of *can*. In the case of the latter, the circumstance enabling the action is mostly given in a close context, whereas to construe an ability meaning we need a more broader context. However, there are cases when it is not easy to choose either interpretation as in (14):

(14) “I was as cold as ice by this time and I’d already made a plan to pretend to agree with anything he said and then to escape as soon as I *could*. So, I acted a climb-down, ...”

It is clear from the context that she was prepared emotionally and physically and waited for a favourable situation to escape and could do it.

The next reading of *can* which was attested in our data is epistemic modality. However, *can* is considered as “the only modal auxiliary where we do not find the Root-Epistemic distinction” [Coates, 1983: 87], which indicates the absence of epistemic reading of *can*. Palmer and Collins claim that *can* expresses epistemic modality, but in a negative form and interrogative form. Moreover, Palmer provides some instances of epistemic *can* but in an interrogative sentence and *could* that “look as if they are epistemic” (Palmer, 1990: 185). The findings of our study are consistent with those mentioned above and almost half of the epistemic instances are in negative form and the next half is with *could*. There is only one utterance of CAN with epistemic reading (15):

(15) As for my own identity: I *can scarcely*, “Dr.” Marloe, *be* an invention of Bradley's, since I have survived him.

In (15) the subject is expressing his certainty about the truth value of the action and can be paraphrased as ‘it is definitely not the case that I am his invention’. It can be seen here despite *can* is affirmative, the meaning is negative.

In (16) *Could* expresses subject’s deduction about the action and can well be replaced by modal verb *might*. The negative *can* in (17) shows the subject's strong doubt about the truth value of the event.

(16) «I'll stay here; I must. She'll come here, won't she. This is where she'll come to. She *could* come at any time. I'll leave the front door open again tonight, like I did last night.”

(17) “He *can't be* dead, he *can't be*- I kept calling him and calling him and calling him, but he wouldn't move.”

The results of this study revealed that *can* is least likely to have deontic modality meaning

comprising only 7% of all data. These results reflect those of Collins who also found that deontic *can* makes up 13 % of his corpus and deontic reading of *can* is the least common after dynamic (PIPM and PEPM in our study) and epistemic modalities (Collins, 2007:476). A similar finding was also reported by Coates (Coates, 1983:86). The examples of *can* in deontic sense occur less frequently than possibility and ability meanings. Deontic modality deals with permission and obligation. Deontic *can* is used in granting and withholding permission, but not with imposing obligation. In example (18) CAN has deontic reading and can be paraphrased with a word ‘allowed’:

(18) “This isn’t cruelty. There’s something I’ve got to understand. You say you’re just concerned with yourself. All right. I’m just concerned with myself. And you did start it. You *can’t just stop it* now when you decide to. I’m an equal partner in this game.”

In (18) the last sentence shed light on the meaning of *can* and it functions as a context for interpreting the modal verb.

Coates indicates three characteristics of deontic sentences with *can*:

(a) subject is animate;

(b) verb is agentive;

(c) utterance can be paraphrased with the words ‘permitted’ or allowed (Coates, 1983: 87).

The results of our study corroborate the points made by Coates. In addition, our data yields tokens of deontic *can* in the form of request as in (19):

(19) Arnold came back. He said, “There’s no need just now to act on the letter I sent you. *Could I have it back?*”

The request in (19) means “if I am allowed to have the letter back?” and the deontic source is the speaker. Some scholars (Collins, 2007), (Coates, 1983), (Groefsema, 1995) claim objective nature of deontic *can*, i.e. deontic source is mostly rule and regulations rather than the speaker. However, the deontic source is the speaker in almost all of the examples in our data.

The next usage of *can* differs from the previous ones in that it does not convey any modality meaning, but has more grammatical function rather than semantic one. Palmer noted that “there is a little indication of ability” (Palmer, 1990: 87). Our analysis has proved that *can* with sense verbs indicate that somebody actually sees, smells, etc. However, there are cases when ability or possibility meaning is involved. The token of the former meaning is represented in (20), whereas (21) and (22) are tokens of the latter usage:

(20) “Of course! I think I’ll just change, it’s got a bit chilly, and then we’ll go down to the sea, it must be just there, I think I *can hear it*.”

(21) Behind his unity there may be distinctions, but behind the distinctions there is unity and how far into that vista *can a human being see* and how far does an artist need to see.

(22) “- And you *can’t see* through the keyhole because the key...”

“- She’s probably just upset and won’t answer”.

Can in (20) cannot be paraphrased by “be able to”, while *can* in (21) can be replaced by ‘be able to’, hence it denotes PIPM. *Can* in (22) may be construed as PEPM, since it is not possible to see through the keyhole because there is a key in it. These results provide further support for the hypothesis that *can* is context dependent.

As Table 1 above shows, the minor usage of *can* is with inanimate subjects. We decided to analyze it separately, since utterances with modality meanings require animate subjects. In our data *can* with an inanimate subject indicates properties of a thing and there is a token of epistemic modality which are illustrated in (23):

(23) Whether words *can travel* that path, through truth, absurdity, simplicity, to silence I do not know, nor what that path *can be like*.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to determine the semantics of modal verb *can* based on an analysis of utterances containing *can* drawn from fictional texts. The second aim of this study was to find out what motivates different interpretations of *can*.

The results of this study have shown that modal verb *can* can have four modality meanings including participant-internal possibility modality, which denotes the type of modality where the ability

of the subject makes it possible to do the action; participant-external possibility modality, which deals with the cases when enabling factor is external to the subject, i.e. some circumstances; epistemic modality when the speaker evaluates the possibility of the action; deontic modality which deals with permissions and obligations. However, there are some functional limits of *can* in expressing these modal meanings. Precisely, in expressing epistemic and deontic modalities. As for the former, *can* mostly are used in negative and affirmative sentences, whereas in the case of the latter *can* only express permissions and it is the least frequent usage of *can*.

The traditional dilemma on the monosemantic and polysemantic nature of *can* was put aside in this study. We concluded that paradigmatic context and syntagmatic cotext trigger different readings of *can*.

Finally, it is worth noting that the present study heavily relies on empirical data and their analysis. Further study could assess the role of context and cotext more deeply.

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