A Study of *Can* and *May* in *Matthew* : A Comparison of Wycliffite Version, Authorized Version and Revised Standard Version

Keiko HAYASAKA

0. Introduction

From the modern usage of *can* and *may*, it is not easy to imagine that they originally functioned as main verbs and often appeared in object-taking constructions. A study of the diachronic syntax and semantics of *can* and *may* shows their transition from main verbs to auxiliaries and also shows the changes in their meanings. A study of *can* and *may* in English Bibles compiled in Old English(OE), Middle English(ME), Early Modern English (ENE) and Modern English (NE) is one of the ways by which we can see these differences clearly. Such a study is appropriate because English translations of the Bible are available in each period of OE, ME, ENE and NE thereby making verses in one version easily compared to those in other versions. Therefore the intent of this paper shows through a comparative study of the English Bibles the transition of *can* and *may* in the history of English language development after the Middle English period.

Attention here is paid especially to *can* and *may* in *Matthew* of the Authorized Version (AV) related to those of the Wycliffite Version (WV) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the former as an example of ME, and the latter, of NE.[1]

1. Outlines of the present study

In general, syntactical and semantic functions of *can* and *may* in ME, ENE and NE can be illustrated as in Table 1.

Table 1 *Can* and *May* : Syntax & Meanings

	Syntax			Meanings		
	ME	ENE	NE	ME	ENE	NE
CAN	MV〈Vt Vi AUX	MV〈Vt Vi AUX	AUX	Intellectual power Capacity Physical power	Intellectual power Capacity Physical power	Capacity Physical power Permission
MAY	MV〈Vt Vi AUX	AUX	AUX	Physical power Capacity Permission Eventuality Wish Must Ought	Physical power Capacity Permission Eventuality Wish	Capacity Eventuality Wish

MV : main verb　　AUX : auxiliary
Vt : transitive vb　　Vi : intransitive vb

Granting that the English used in each of the Bibles reflects the period to which they belonged, the following hypotheses can be made :

1)　WV will reflect the characteristics of ME so that there are

examples in which *can* and *may* are collocated with a noun or a pronoun as well as with an infinitive. If this is true, then *can* and *may* function both as main verbs and as auxiliaries, which conforms to the characteristics of ME. In its meanings, *can* is used not only to mean 'have intellectual power' but also to mean 'have physical power' and 'capacity', while *may* means 'physical power', 'capacity', 'permission', 'eventuality' and 'wish' as well as being equivalent to *must* and *ought*, as shown in Table 1.

2) In AV, *may* will show more syntactical changes than *can* shows. *May* functions only as an auxiliary, while *can* is still used as a main verb, though the frequency would be relatively low. In meanings, there are no remarkable differences.

3) In RSV, *can* and *may* function as auxiliaries collocated with infinitives or implied infinitives, or with 'be + pp.' *Can* means 'capacity', 'physical power' or 'permission' and *may* means 'eventuality', 'capacity' or 'wish'.

If the above-mentioned hypotheses can be proved, the usage of *can* and *may* in such English Bibles as WV, AV and RSV will concur with the general usage of *can* and *may* in ME, ENE and NE. If there are some facts which cannot be included within the realm of these

Table 2 Frequency

	WV		AV	RSV
	I[2]	II[3]		
CAN	1	3	20	21
COULD	0	0	4	4
MOWEN	7	7	—	—
MAY	16	·16	17	17
MIGHT	6	6	19	8

hypotheses, they must be accounted for in some other way.

The frequency of *can* and *may* in *Matthew* of WV, AV and RSV is shown in Table 2.

2. Wycliffite Version

In the first text of the WV, *can* appears only once.

(1) WV I Pilate seith to hem, 3e han the kepinge ; go 3e, kepe
　　　　3e as 3e *kunnen.* (Mt 27 : 65)

The sentence ends with *kunnen* but an infinitive *kepe* is implied after it.　Then *kunnen* functions as an auxiliary, meaning 'capacity', and follows the norm of *can* in ME.　In addition to this, Purvey used two more *can's* in the second text of the WV.

(2) WV I Therefore 3if 3e, when 3e ben yuel men, han *knowen*
　　　　for to 3eue good thingus to 3oure sonys, (Mt 7 : 11)

　　　WV II Therfor if 3e, whanne 3e ben yuele men, *kunnen*
　　　　3yue good 3iftis to 3oure sones

(3) WV I Therefore 3e han *knowe* to deme wisely the face of
　　　　heuen, (Mt 16 : 4)

　　　WV II Thanne 3e *kunne* deme the face of heuene,

In other verses, the verb *knowen* in WV I is also expressed by *knowen* in WV II, from which we can assume that Purvey is not a con- servator of *kunnen*.　What could be the reason that caused Purvey to translate the verb of knowing into *kunnen* in Mt 7 : 11 and Mt 16 : 4,

while he translated *knowen* in other places of the earlier version into *knowen*? Since it is generally assumed that *can* as a verb of knowing has been replaced by *knowen*, there would be no problem if it went in the reverse, from *kunnen* to *knowen*. Perhaps he used *kunnen* for stylistic reasons. In both verses, *knowen* is followed by to-infinitives. Purvey might have changed this cluster into *kunnen* + infinitive. In other places where he used *knowen*, there is no such cluster but *knowen* comes at the end of a clause or is followed by a noun or a pronoun. It seems that what he intended to change was the style, not the meaning. Purvey is said to have tried to make his translation of the Wycliffite Version a more refined one by applying a more stylistically free translation.[4]

May appears 16 times and *mowe* with the same meaning as *may*, 7 times. In every example, *may* is followed by an infinitive except for one example in Mt 20: 20.

(4) WV 1 Thei seiden to hym, We *mowen*. (Mt 20 : 20)

However, an infinitive *drynken* is implied after *mowen*.

In meaning, all *may's* and *moue's* in WV are used to mean 'physical power' or 'capacity'. Historically, both *can* and *may* could be used to mean 'physical power' and 'capacity'. It is significant that WV preferred *may* to *can* in the meaning of 'physical power' or 'capacity'. In actual fact *may* only is used in WV to mean either 'physical power' or 'capacity', not *can*.

Miȝ ten which appears 6 times is used as a preterit form of *may* and there is no syntactic or semantic difference between *may* and *miȝ ten*.

The use of *can* and *may* in WV can be summarized as follows :

1) They are used according to the norm without any exception. 2)
May is preferred to *can* in the sense of 'physical power' and 'capacity'.
3) In the sense of 'know how to', *witan* and *knowen* are preferred to
can. 4) *Might* is used as a simple preterit form of *may*.

3. Authorized Version and Revised Standard Version

Next is a study of AV and RSV. *Can* appears as many as 20
times in AV. The meaning of *can* is equivalent to 'know how to' in
the following two verses.

(5) AV   O yo hypocrites, ye *can* discern the face of the sky
          (Mt 16 : 3)[5]

(6) AV   And they answered Jesus, and said, We *cannot* tell.
          (Mt 21 : 27)

Can is used 17 times in the sense of 'power' or 'capacity'.
Although *may* was preferred to *can* in WV, AV shows that *can* is
taking precedence over *may* and the use of *may* in this sense is thus
declining.
    Another meaning of can is found in AV.

(7) AV   how *can* ye escape the damnation of hell? (Mt 23 : 33)

Can does not mean either 'capacity' or 'know how to' but it means
shall. The equivalent of this *can* in RSV is *be to*.

(8) RSV how *are* you *to* escape being sentenced to hell?
          (Mt 23 : 33)

Could is used three times to mean 'capacity' in AV, and once in
a periphrastic use. *Miʒht* in WV, which is a preterit form of *may*

and means 'capacity', is replaced by *could* in Mt 17 : 16, Mt 17 : 19 and Mt 26 : 40. There is one more example of *could* in AV, whose RSV translation indicates that the meaning of *could* is not 'capacity'.

(9) AV When Pilate saw that he *could* prevail nothing
(Mt 27 : 24)
RSV So when Pilate saw that he *was gaining* nothing

The change of *could* from a preterit of *can* meaning 'capacity' to other meanings is well explained by Visser.

> When *can* is collocated with verbs of perception and with the verb remember, it can hardly be said to express power, capacity, ability or the like. . . . It does not seem impossible to look upon this *can* as a survival of the empty, periphrastic can. . . . [6]

Though *prevail* in Mt 27 : 24 is not a verb of perception, the meaning there is relevant to what Visser says.

May appears only once in AV as a direct translation of *may* in WV. This is replaced by *can* in RSV as shown in the following verse.

(10) AV if this cup *may* not pass away from me (Mt 26 : 42)
RSV if this *cannot* pass unless I drink it

There are 16 other examples of *may* in AV used in the subjunctive mood. English verbs had the inflected subjunctive forms by the time of ME. But the use of *may, might, should* and *could* had taken the place of inflected subjunctive forms, except for *be* and *were*. Although *be* and *were* survived until NE, the frequency of their use declined, specifically in colloqual usage.[7] In some cases, *may* colloacates with an infinitive and expresses subjunctive mood in RSV,

but in others, it was replaced by to-infinitives and lost the form of subjunctive mood. (11) is an example of the former pattern and (12), the latter.

(11) AV Let your light so shine before men, that they *may* see
          your good works (Mt 5 : 16)
     RSV Let your light so shine before men, that they *may* see
          your good works

(12) AV send the multitude away, that they *may* go into the
          villages (Mt 14 : 15)
     RSV send the crowds away *to go* into the villages

May in Mt 9 : 21 is an example of a periphrastic use of the auxiliary.

(13) AV If I *may* but touch his garment (Mt 9 : 21)
     RSV If I only *touch* his garment

Touch in RSV is a variant form of *may touch* in AV. We have already seen a similar type of *could* in Mt 17 : 14. In both cases, the WV form of this *may* or *could* is an inflected subjunctive. In AV, however, subjunctive is expressed in the form of 'auxiliary + infinitive' but semantically, it is the same as 'ϕ + infinitive'. *May touch* (Mt 9 : 21) is equivalent to *touch*, and *could prevail* (Mt 17 : 14) is equivalent to prevailed. *May* here shares a periphrastic use with *could*. Strong's glossing of 'do' for *may* in this verse is another example of supporting this interpretation.[8]

A remarkable increase of *might* is found in AV. More frequent expression of '... that it *might* be fulfilled.' is considered to be one of the reasons. Should→might → might / to-infinitive is likely to be a

typical variation of this type. *Should* in WV is translated into *might* in AV. Then it either retains a form of *might* or is changed into to-infinitive in NE.

In addition to this typical phrase, *might* is used in Matthew 12 : 10, 12 : 14, 14 : 36, 22 : 15, and 26 : 4, within the pattern of should → might → might / to-infinitive. Two verses are quoted as examples.

(14) AV and besought him that they *might* only touch the hem
             of his garment. (Mt 14 : 36)
       RSV and besought him that they *might* only touch the
             fringe of his garment ;

(15) AV and consulted that they *might* take Jesus by subtilty,
             and kill him (Mt 26 : 4)
       RSV and took counsel together *in order to* arrest Jesus
             by stealth and kill him.

As Visser writes, 'The use of *may* and *might* in clauses depending on such verbs as wish, demand, desire, beseech, hope, pray, etc., and their allied nouns, is common in all periods.'[9] All the examples of this variation written above depend, more or less, on this type of verb or noun.

Moreover, *might* keeps the meaning of 'be able' in Matthew 8 : 28, 21 : 34, 26 : 9. The variation of *might* from ME to NE through ENE in these three places is respectively shown as might → might → could, subjunctive → might → to-infinitive and might → might → might. This fact tells us that there are diverse changes of *might* between ME and ENE and between ENE and NE. Although their original words are not the same, they share the meaning of 'capacity' in the ENE period. Additionally, the use of *might* in the sense of 'capacity' is relatively less frequent here compared with the former types. This means the decline of *may* in the sense of 'capacity' was

already strong by ENE.

In WV, the use of *can* and *may* is accorded with the norm and the frequent use of *may* to mean 'have physical power' is remarkable. The range of *can* and *may* in AV has been semantically expanded. *Can*, whose use as 'know how to' is replaced by *knowen*, has gained the new meaning of 'physical power'. Its use in this meaning has become more frequent.

With this develoment of *can*, *may* in the sense of 'physical power' became obsolete. The frequent use of *may* in AV is attributed to its use in the subjunctive mood. Inflected subjunctive verbs and *should* are replaced by *may* or *might* to express subjunctive mood. Inflected subjunctive verbs are less frequently found in AV. The English language was originally an inflexional language like Greek or Latin. The survival of inflected subjunctive verbs in ME and the use of *may* and *might* to express subjunctive mood in ENE shows that the English language was in transition from an inflected language to an analytical one in the period between Middle English and Modern English.

Additional meanings are applied to *can* and *may* in AV. But the examples are too few to generalize the meanings of *can = shall* (Mt 24 : 33) or the periphrastic use of *could* and *may* (Mt 27 : 35, Mt 9 : 21).

Distinctive features of *can* and *may* in AV are 1) The use of *can* and *might* became frequent. 2) *Can* is used to mean 'capacity'. 3) *May* in the sense of 'capacity' is declining. 4) *May* and *might* in subjunctive mood are frequent. 5) There are some other meanings applied to *can*, *could* and *may*.

As mentioned at the beginning, the purpose of this paper is to consider the change of the two auxiliaries, *can* and *may*, that is, how much difference is there among WV, AV and RSV? Has the change been done under the norm? In answering these questions, the outline

of the diachronic transition of *can* and *may* should be clarified.

Since this study seeks to find the influence of ME and ENE on NE, not only the significant usage in each period but also the relation between ME and ENE, and also between ENE and NE needs to be clearly explained. In the previous section, it has been already shown that the use of *can* and *may* in AV is not very far from the modern usage. For this reason, a detailed explanation of RSV would be redundant and a summary of significant elements concerning *can* and *may* in it might be sufficient.

The characteristic features of *can* and *may* in RSV are :

1) *Can* as 'intellectual power' is not found.
2) *Can* shares other meanings with AV.
3) *Can* is used once in a rhetorical question to express astonishment in Mt 12 : 23.

(16) RSV '*Can* this be the Son of David?' (Mt 12 : 23)

4) *Could* is used as a preterit form of *can* and the frequency is the same as in AV.
5) The use of *may* here is also similar to AV ; mostly in subjunctive mood.
6) Subjunctive *may* in Mt 12 : 29 is a pattern of shall → will → may as in

(17) AV   and then he *will* spoil his house (Mt 12 : 29)
     RSV Then indeed he *may* plunder his house

7) *Might* in '... that it *might* be fulfilled.' is not used any longer, being replaced by to-infinitive. However, the opposite pattern from to-infinitive to *might* is found once in a similar construction.

(18)　AV　... sought false witness against Jesus, *to put* him to death (Mt 26 : 59)

　　　RSV ... sought false testimony against Jesus that they *might* put him to death

8)　The replacement of *should* by *might* takes place in

(19)　AV　Little children, that he *should* put his hands on them (Mt 19 : 13)

　　　RSV children were brought to him that he *might* lay his hands on them

4. Conclusions

　A brief outline of *can* and *may* in WV, AV and RSV (Table 3) is shown on the next page.　Consider the changes shown by Table 1 and Table 3.

　Hypothesis 1 (see p. 146) has been shown to be correct.　The only difference is that there is no example of *can* as a main verb.　As a whole, the frequency of *can* in WV is not enough to substantiate the use of *can* there.　Since Chaucer uses *can* as a main verb as well as an auxiliary, the reason for infrequency of *can* in WV might be attributed to its translation.　If Wycliffe translated the Vulgate word by word, and if the Latin words for *can* and *know* were the same, it is not very difficult to guess why *can* is seldom used.

　Hypothesis 2 is partially correct.　As shown above, it is not possible to discuss *can* in depth because of its infrequency in the text. As far as *may* is concerned, however, this hypothesis is well founded. A new function of *may* as subjunctive is also found in this period. Inflected verbs are becoming fewer in this period.

　Hypothesis 3 needs to be restated in some parts.　There is no *can* or *may* as a main verb.　Both *can* and *may* function as auxi-

Table 3 *Can* and *May* in WV, AV & RSV

	Syntax			Meanings		
	WV	AV	RSV	WV	AV	RSV
CAN	AUX	AUX	AUX	Intellectual power Physical power	Intellectual power Physical power Capacity Periphrastic use Shall	Physical power Capacity Rhetorical question
MAY	AUX	AUX	AUX	Physical power Capacity	Physical power Capacity Periphrastic use Subjunctive	Capacity Subjunctive

liaries in as far as the present study is concerned. They are col-
located with infinitives, implied infinitives or 'be + pp'. There are
no remarkable differences in meanings but some new meanings
should be added.

The decline of *might* in RSV, as explained above, seems to de-
pend on stylistic changes as there seem to be no actual grammati-
cal or historical reasons for such a decline.

FOOTNOTES

1. The texts used here are :
   a. Wycliffite Version of the Holy Bible (1382 & 1388), edited by

the Rev. Joshiah Forshall, and Sir Frederic Madden. 4 vols. Oxford, 1850.

   b.   The Holy Bible, King James Version, American Bible Society, New York, 1975.

   C.   The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Collins' Clear-Type Press, London, 1972.

2.   Translation of Nicholas de Hereford.

3.   Translation of John Purvey.

4.   Terasawa & others, p. 13.

5.   Strong, 1953 & Young, 1952. Strong is for 'know how to' but Young's interpretation of *can* here is 'be able to'. The Strong's translation is applied here since the translation of this verse in RSV is 'know'.

     You *know how to* interpret the appearance of the sky. (Mt 16 : 3)

6.   Visser, p. 1737.

7.   Nakajima, p. 223.

8.   Strong, 1953.

9.   Visser, p. 1783.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1.   Ichikawa, S., *Seisho no Eigo*, Kenkyusha, Tokyo, 1937 (1980).

2.   Nakajima, F., *Eigo Hattatu Shi*, revised ed. Iwanami, Tokyo, 1979.

3.   Ono, S., *Eige Ho Jodoshi no Hattatu*, Kenkyusha, Tokyo, 1969.

4.   Strong, J., *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, New York, 1953.

5.   Terasawa, Y., Funato, H., Sotome, T. & Tsuru, N., *Eigo no Seisho*, Fuzanbo, Tokyo, 1969.

6.   Traugott, E. C., *The History of English Syntax*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., New York, 1972.

7.   Visser, F. Th., *An Historical Syntax of the English* Language, III, Leiden, 1969.

8.   Young, R., *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible*, 8th ed., Lutterworth Press, London, 1952.

A Study of *Can* and *May* in *Matthew* : A Comparison of Wycliffite Version, Authorized Version and Revised Standard Version

APPENDIX : *Can* and *May* in WV, AV and RSV

	Wycliffite Version		Authorized Version	Revised Standard Version
	I	II		
1:22	shulde	shuld	might	to-inf
2: 8	v	v	may	may
15	shuld	shuld	might	to-inf
23	shuld	shuld	might	might
4:14	shuld	shuld	might	might
5:14	may	may	can	can
16	v	v	may	may
36	maist	maist	canst	can
45	be	be	may	may
6: 2	be	be	may	may
4	be	be	may	may
5	be	be	may	may
16	v	to-inf	may	may
18	be	be	v	may
24	may	may	can	can
〃	mown	moun	can	can
27	may	mai	can	can
7:11	knowen	kunnen	know	know
18	may	may	can	can
〃	v	v	can	can
8: 2	maist	maist	canst	can
17	should	be	might	to-inf
28	miȝte	myȝte	might	could
9: 6	v	v	may	may
15	mow	moun	can	can
21	v	v	may	φ
28	may	mai	be able	be able
10:28	mowen	moun	be able	can
〃	may	mai	be able	can
12:10	shulden	schulden	might	might
14	shulden	schulden	might	to-inf

17	shulde	be	might	to-inf
23	be	v	be	can
29	may	may	can	can
〃	shal	schal	will	may
34	mowe	moun	can	can
13:35	shuld	schuld	might	to-inf
14:15	v	v	may	to-inf
36	shulden	schulden	might	might
16: 3	knowe	kunne	can	know
〃	mowen	moun	can	can
17:16	myȝten	myȝten	could	could
19	miȝte	myȝten	could	could
18:16	v	v	may	may
19:11	v	v	can	can
12	may	may	be able	be able
13	shulde	shulde	should	might
16	v	v	may	to-inf
25	may	may	can	can
20:21	v	v	may	may
22	mowen	moun	be able	be able
〃	mowen	moun	be able	be able
33	be	be	may	v
21: 4	shulde	schulde	might	to-inf
19	be	v	v	may
27	v	v	can	know
32	v	v	might	φ
34	v	to-inf	might	to-inf
22:15	shulden	to-inf	might	to-inf
46	miȝt	miȝte	be able	be able
23: 4	mown	moun	to-inf	to-inf
26	be	be	may	may
33	schulen	schulen	can	be
35	v	v	may	may
24:20	be	be	φ	may
24	may	may	possible	possible

A Study of *Can* and *May* in *Matthew* : A Comparison of Wycliffite Version,
Authorized Version and Revised Standard Version

26: 4	shulden	to-inf	might	to-inf
9	miȝte	miȝte	might	might
40	miȝte	myȝten	could	could
42	may	may	may	can
53	may	may	can	can
56	schulden	schulden	might	might
59	schulden	schulden	to-inf	might
61	may	may	be able	be able
27:24	v	v	could	φ
35	shulde	to-inf	might	φ
42	may	may	can	can
65	kunnen	kunnen	can	can