

Curious Question – **Can vs. Can't**Transcript

Robin: Hi everyone, this is Robin

Maura: And Maura

Robin: And we're here with the **Culips Questions** podcast where we answer your English questions.

Maura: Do you have a question that you don't know the answer to about English?

Robin: Well if you do you're in the right place because this is where we deal with all your English language questions. Please ask us! You can email us at questions@culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Maura: Today we're going to look at a question about pronunciation. It is about a little T on the end of a word. Let's listen to David from Greece.

Robin: *I am having a difficult time telling the difference between **can't** and **can**. Their meanings are totally opposite of each other. Help me better understand the pronunciation. Please give tips and examples of sentences using **can't** and **can**.*

Robin: First of all I want to say don't worry about asking people to clarify. You can easily ask: "Did you say **can** or **can't**?" Native speakers need to do this too. The T is such a little sound that sometimes we **can't** be sure either. I said, "**can't** be sure."

Maura: For this one, I looked around online and asked some friends to see what other people were saying and what I found was that it is very divided. **Can** and **can't** are explained differently by different people. I think the reason is that there are varied pronunciations of **can** and **can't**. Depending on accents, even within North America in the same regions, there are differences.

Robin: Here is the best advice that I've got. Sometimes **can** sounds like **kun**. An example: I **kun** do that for you. And **can't** never sounds like **kun**. At least not in Canada, as far as I know.

Here are some examples:

One: I **kun** hear you.
I **can't** hear you.

Two: She **kun** tell you how.
She **can't** tell you how.

Maura: Also, use your instincts. This is good advice in any language situation. Sometimes you know if the speaker used **can** or **can't** from the context. If someone says to me, "Maura, you **can** drive," I know that it could not be **can't** because I know that I **can** drive. Does that make sense? I hope so.

Robin: The difference in writing is the same in pronunciation. That is, you **can** hear the T sound at the end of **can't** when it is negative. It is such a little sound and a subtle sound that it **can** be hard to hear.

Maura: The difference between a positive and negative form is one little letter and it **can** be especially difficult if the next word also starts with a T like "I **can't** talk properly". There was a T at the end of **can't** and a T at the beginning of talk.

Robin: Do you know the expression "practice makes perfect"? Well, unfortunately, in this case there is no quick fix for this difficulty in comprehension. One just needs to practice to get better at hearing this difference.

Maura: I will give you a few more examples. Now, see if you **can** tell the difference.

Robin: Example 1: They **can't** decide where to go.
They **can** decide where to go.

Maura: Example 2: I haven't told them I **can't** go yet.
I haven't told them I **can** go yet.

Robin: Example 3: He **can't** tell them.
He **can** tell them.

Maura: Did you hear the difference? In all three examples the negative **can't** was first. Listen to them again if you are not sure.

Robin: So in this case of **can't** and **can**, just keep on practicing and listening. And don't feel bad if you **can't** hear the difference so easily. Like I mentioned at the beginning, sometimes native English speakers need to clarify if someone said **can** or **can't** too.

Maura: One thing is for sure: You **can't** give up!

And that's about all the time for this question today. Hopefully it is a bit more clear for you when listening to **can** or **can't**.

Robin: I hope you enjoyed this podcast and I hope we answered a question for you this time. Please join us again next week as we explore more questions at **Curious Questions** at Culips.com. This has been Robin.

Maura: And Maura. See you next time!

Robin: Bye-bye!

Detailed Explanation

Can

What **can** I tell you about **can** that wasn't in this episode?

I am sure that everyone reading knows that meaning for **can**. It can mean the ability or the knowledge of how to do something. We also use **can** when we talk about permission and when we talk about possibilities.

And also remember, we **cannot** use **can** with "to".

I mean, we do **not** say:

I **can to** eat. Or I want **to can** eat.

You probably know this already! I just wanted to include a reminder.

The transcripts explain a lot about the difference between the positive **can** and the negative **can't**. The best advice is to practice by saying it yourself and by paying extra attention when you hear **can** or **can't** being used. We usually **can** hear the small difference when someone says the T at the end of **can't** and makes the word negative.

One more hint: Tone. The tone of voice is another clue to whether **can** or **can't** was used. In a positive sentence the voice and tone generally raise, or go up, at the end of the sentence. In a negative sentence the voice and tone generally go down at the end. The tone of voice can help us determine if the speaker said **can** or **can't**.

Example:

I **can't** go to the party. – negative

I **can** go to the party. – positive

It can be difficult to tell the difference between **can** and **can't** when there is a T at the beginning of the word following **can** and **can't**. But listening for the tone can help.

Example:

She **can't talk** right now. – negative

She **can** talk right now. – positive

Let's look at other ways we **can** use **can**.

Other uses for can

A **can** is a metal container, a cylinder shape that usually is holding or has held food. In fact, we even call it **canned food**. You can also have a **can** of worms when you go fishing.

You **can** also use **can** as a verb in another way. To **can** something is to put something into a jar and keep it for later, usually for the winter. Fruit is often put in a jar to be preserved for the winter. So I **can** say, this weekend I am going to **can** fruit with my mother. This means I am going to prepare fruit and put it in a sealed jar. This **canned** fruit will be eaten later in the year.

Slang with Can

We **can** use the verb to **can** to mean to fire, or for when someone is asked to leave their job because they **can** no longer work there.

Example:

My friend got **canned** because he was always showing up late.

Here's another one. Be careful with this one.

The can is also slang for toilet.

Example:

I will be right back. I've got to go to **the can**.

The can-can

This is a special kind of dance that is done with a line of people, traditionally women, who kick their legs up one at a time, at the same time.

Here is a photo of the **can-can**:



Quiz (see the answers at the bottom of this Lipservice)

1. Which of the following sentences is correct?

- a) She can to go to the movies.
- b) She cannot to go to the movies.
- c) She can't to go to the movies.
- d) She can go to the movies.

2. Which of the following is the negative form of can?

- a) cant
- b) cannot
- c) can't
- d) Both cannot and can't

3. Which of the following is NOT true about can't ?

- a) Sometimes it sounds like can.
- b) Sometimes it is hard to hear the T at the end of the word.
- c) Its long form is cannot.

4. Can spoken slowly sounds like:

- a) Lan
- b) Mother
- c) Taxi
- d) None of the above

5. Can spoken quickly sounds like:

- a) Kun
- b) Laser
- c) Audio
- d) Refrigerator

Answers: 1.d 2.d 3.a 4.a 5.a

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