

A Syntactical Study of *Can* & *May* in *Ancrene Wisse**

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0. *Can* and *may* have interesting histories. Originally they functioned not only as auxiliaries but also as main verbs. *Can* was used as a transitive verb in object-taking construction to mean 'to know how to' as in

no hie fæder *cunnon* 'they know no father' (Beowulf
1355)

On the other hand, *may* was used intransitively in OE to mean 'to be strong,' or 'to prevail over.'

ælc wiht *mæg* bet wyð cyle þonne wið hæte 'each
creature prevails better against cold than against heat'
(K. Ælfred Orosius 24, 29)

May was also used in infinitive-taking construction in the same way as in Modern English but with a different meaning, 'to have the physical power to' as in

a *mæg* god wyrcan wunder æfter wundre. 'God can
ever work wonder after wonder.' (Beowulf 930)

The characteristic features of *can* and *may* in the transition from

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the original use as main verbs to the use in the present-day English as auxiliaries are supposed to be retained in the Middle English period which was a time when changes of the English language are more noticeable than in any other period.¹⁾

The present study was designed to examine the syntactical development of *can* and *may* from main verbs to auxiliaries in the earlier stage of the Middle English period. *Ancrene Wisse*, which was chosen as a text here, offers the distinctive use of English of the Early Middle English period. Moreover, the influence of *Ancrene Wisse* (A.W. henceforth) on devotional literature persisted into later periods. Thus, it is thought to be one of the most important and influential of the prose works of the Early Middle English period.²⁾ The text used here is *Ancrene Wisse* Corpus Christi College MS. (EETS 249, 1962) edited by J. R. R. Tolkien.

1. Definition

In this study, AUX (auxiliary) and MV (main verb) will be defined as follows:

(1) AUX

a. S + can/may + \emptyset -Inf³⁾

b. S + can/may + deleted \emptyset -Inf

i. with deleted \emptyset -Inf drawn from the context

ii. with deleted verb of motion

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- 1) "The Middle English period (1150-1500) was marked by momentous changes in the English language, changes more extensive and fundamental than those that have taken place at any time before or since." (Baugh, p.158)
 - 2) I will not be concerned here with a semantic study of *can* and *may* in A.W., which will be dealt with in a future paper.
 - 3) A study of the word order is excluded from this discussion. The order here is tentative. For details see Traugott (1965) or (1972).

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(2) .MV

a. S+can/may+NP

b. S+shall (or may) +can/may

2. *Can*

2.1. Forms

Indic. Pres. sg. 1	-----
2	const
3	con
pl.	cunnen, kunnen
Pret. sg. 1 & 3	cuðe
2	cuðest
pl.	cuðen
Subj. Pres.	cunne
Imp.	cunneð

2.2. Syntactical Features & Frequency

Syntactical features of *can* in A.W. will be illustrated as follows :

Table 1 Syntactical Features of *Can*

AUX		MV	
1	2	3	4
+ ϕ -Inf	+ ^{deleted} ϕ -Inf	+NP	+AUX
+	+	+	+

Table 2 Frequency

AUX		MV		Total
1	2	3	4	
+ ϕ -Inf	+ ^{deleted} ϕ -Inf	+NP	+AUX	
14	9	17	2	42
23		19		

Can construed with \emptyset -Inf is a predominant cluster of *can* as AUX and *can* construed with NP is a predominant cluster of *can* as MV. These two clusters occupy 74 % of all occurrences. The frequency of other clusters is rather low compared with these two.

Now, examples will be shown concerning the above groups.

(1) *Can* + \emptyset -Inf

Out of the 14 examples of this type, three are tentatively chosen.⁴⁾

ne *cuðen* ha neuuer *stutten* here cleappe. 'they were quite unable to stop their chattering.' (18a/18)

p he. . . ne ne *cunne* ow nowðer *lastin* ne *preisin* 'so that he. . . will not be able to blame you or praise you.' (15b/27)

ʒef *pu* hit *const polien* 'if you are able to endure it,' (34b/15)

(2) *Can* + deleted \emptyset -Inf

There are nine examples of this cluster. Deleted \emptyset -Inf can be traced back from the context. (Deleted \emptyset -Inf are underlined)⁵⁾

o sum oðer time penche o godes rode. ase muchel as he eauer *con* 'at some other time, meditate on God's cross as fervently as she can meditate.' (8b/26)

Segge . . . Aleast oremus hwa se *con*. 'Say . . . lastly

4) The others are (7a/7), (16a/19), (57a/15), (69b/23), (77b/22), (86a/11), (86a/14), (91b/24), (107b/1), (110b/2) and (110b/25).

5) The others are (7a/20), (12a/8), (16a/17), (55b/12), (72b/11), (90a/24) and (108a/17).

oremus whoever can.' (12a/6)

(3) *Can*+NP

The cluster of *can* with NP is a distinctive usage of older English whose function is the same as a transitive verb in object-taking construction. High frequency of this structure (17 times, 41%) infers that the traditional use of *can* is in force and keeps predominance in the use of *can* in A.W. The objects are nouns, pronouns and antecedents of relative pronouns.⁶⁾

3ef heo ne *con o boke* ; segge bi pater nostres. 'If she does not have knowledge of a book, let her say her hours with paternosters.' (115b/9)⁷⁾

& is 3et euche dei of.eadmode men & wummen *pe hine wel cunnen*. 'and (it) is still deceived every day by humble men and women who know it well.' (76b/17)

Ich schal do *pe a turn* p tu ne *cuðest* neuer. 'I shall play you a trick which you have never known.' (76b/13)

Two examples of 'can thank' are also found in this group.

6) The rest of this type are (5a/24), (9a/24), (10b/22), (12a/3), (15b/26), (16a/15), (30a/5), (34a/16), (62a/2 7), (76b/6), (116a/25) and (116b/18).

7) Ono treats this *con* as an independent verb, then 'o (=on) boke' as a prepositional phrase in the sense of 'in a book.' (Ono, 1969, p.176) However, the first appearance of 'can on boke' in the sense of 'to know how to read, or be literate' in MED is later in

a1400 (c1303) Mannyng *HS* 441 : Y pat neuer *on boke coupe*, Alle y hrt red with opun mouþe.

No quotation from A.W. is found in MED.

þah godd ne *cunne* him neauer þonc of his sonde. 'even though God does not express thanks to him for his messenger.' (34b/14)

wac crist ure euchan to segil wardein bereð to lutel menske. & *kunnen* him to lutel þonc of his seruise. 'Christ knows, everyone of us pays too little honour to so noble a guardian and shows him, too little gratitude for his service.' (85a/21)

(4) AUX + *can*

There are two examples in which *can* is collocated with such verbs as *will* and *may*. In these clusters, *can* functions as a \emptyset -Inf in object-taking construction in the same way as (3) above.

nalde he *cunne* god þonc a mon þe duste uppon him of peonehes a bigurdel forte reimin him wið & lesen him of pine. 'would he not express thanks to anyone who threw a bag of money at him, with which he could settle the debt and set himself free from suffering?' (34a/20)

Ich schal do þe a turn þtu ne cuðest neauer. ne ne *maht* neauer *cunnen*. þe turn of of eadmodnesse. 'I shall play you a trick which you have never known and which you never could know, the trick of humility.' (76b/13)

3. *May*

3.1. Forms

Indic. Pres. sg. 1 & 3	mei
2	maht
pl.	mahen

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Pret. sg. 1	mahte, mihte, mah ⁸⁾
2	mahtest
3	mahte, muhte
pl.	mahten, mahte
Subj.	mahe, muhe

3.2. Syntactical Features & Frequency

Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of syntactical features of *may* in A.W. and its frequency.

Table 3 Syntactical Features of *May*

AUX		MV	
1	2	3	4
+ ϕ -Inf	+ deleted ϕ -Inf	+ NP	+ AUX
+	+	-	-

Table 4 Frequency

AUX		Total
1	2	
+ ϕ -Inf	+ deleted ϕ -Inf	
305	45	350

The distribution of *may* in A.W. is very limited in its grammatical functions. The clusters applied here are two: + ϕ -Inf

8) The form of *mah* for pret. 1 sg. in (64b/1) is because of the omission of -te as it occurs at the end of the line in the MS.

ich walde awakenin *pe.* & for *pu* sleptest swote ; ne *mah/ich* for reowde. 'I wanted to wake you up but could not for pity because you were sleeping sweetly.'

and +deleted \emptyset -Inf and the former has the chief rate of incidence, occupying 87% of all occurrences. Groups 3 and 4 are filled with (-) features.

Now, examples will be shown.

(1) *May*+ \emptyset -Inf

Among 305 occurrences of *may*+ \emptyset -Inf construction, three examples are tentatively chosen.⁹⁾

ʔus ʔah me ʔuncheð ʔ ha *mei seggen*. 'Thus though it seems to me that she may say.' (93b/5)

Ah for ʔi ʔ sum *mahte ʔurh to muche bitterness fallen* in to unhope; 'But because some, through too great bitterness, might fall into despair,' (101a/10)

Dame ʔu art iweorret. & ʔine van beoð se stronge; ʔ tu ne *maht* nanesweis wið ute mi sucurs *edfleon* hare honden. 'Lady, you are assailed, and your enemies are so strong that you can by no means escape from their hands without my help.' (105b/8)

As it was already seen in the study of *can*, frequent use of this cluster suggests that the usage of *may* as an auxiliary is increasing in number and the usage as a main verb is decreasing in the Early Middle English period. That 87% of the whole occurrences are in this cluster in A.W. is reasonable to support this idea.

(2) *May*+deleted \emptyset -Inf

Sentences in the cluster of *may*+deleted \emptyset -Inf might be divided into two groups according to its use: (A) one with implied infinitive

9) An additional 302 examples are not mentioned here because of the limited space.

which can be drawn from the preceding clause and (B) the other with implied infinitive which cannot be drawn from the immediate context. The frequency is as follows:

	(A)	(B)
may	31	7
might	4	3
Total	35	10

- (A) In the following examples, \emptyset -Inf can be drawn from the preceding clause.¹⁰⁾

swucche *opre heard schipes* \emptyset *moni fles mei polien.*
moni ne mei nawt. 'such other severities which the
 flesh of many can bear, but which many cannot.' (2a/8)

\exists ef *pu hauest leaue do sting* \exists ef *pu maht.* 'If you have
 permission, sting (me) if you can.' (62b/2)

\exists is *sihðe leoue sustren schal frouerin ow marepen mahte*
ei wortlich sibðe. 'This sight, dear sisters, shall be of
 more comfort to you than could any worldly sight.' (24a/
 27)

- (B) \emptyset -inf cannot be found in the context in the following examples but adverbs or adverbial phrases can help to understand that verbs of

10) Other lines are: (6a/3), (8b/24), (8b/24), (8b/25), (8b/27), (11b/3), (12b/22), (24b/25), (28b/3), (28b/6), (34a/8), (35a/20), (35b/1), (37a/27), (45b/10), (50a/4), (50a/5), (54a/25), (55a/4), (59a/15), (64b/1), (74b/22), (81a/10), (84a/22), (85a/24), (90a/24), (93a/26), (94b/18), (97a/26), (110b/14), (112a/21), (114b/9) and (117a/4).

motion can be added.¹¹⁾

hwēn me punt hit ; & stoppeð hit biuore wel þ hit ne
mahe duneward 'when it (water) has been firmly stopped
and dammed so that it cannot *flow* downwards' (18a/25)

he is as þe burh wið ute wal þ ferde *mei in ouer al*. 'he
is like a city without a wall, into which an army can
enter from all sides.' (18b/12)

þ he ne *mahte hider ne þider* ten dahes fullē. 'so that
for fully ten days he could not *move* this way or that.'
(66a/17)

Buh þe he seið duneward þ ich *mahe ouer þe*. 'Bow
down, that we may *go over*.' (73a/2)

There are also instances in which such verbs as *do, make, get, be*,
etc. could be added, depending on the context.¹²⁾ The following
examples are of this kind.

I bedd se uorð se 3e *mahan* ne do 3e ne ne þenchen na
þing bute slepen. 'In bed, do not do anything, or think
of anything, as far as you can (do), but sleep.' (12a/2)

3ef þu seist þ tin unstrengðe ne *mahte* nawt elles ; ' If
you say that in your weak state you could not (do)
otherwise,' (82b/23)

11) Visser treats this kind of *may* as an independent use (§177). As
implied verbs can be drawn from the context, this *may* is discussed in
this group in the present study.

12) MED mouen v. (3) 5.6.

Namon ne schal i schrift wreien bute him seoluen ; ase forð as he *mei*. 'No one, in Confession, ought to make known (anything about) anyone except himself, so far as he can (do).' (92a/24)

ne sitte ne ne stonde. bute *p* leaste *pet* ha eauer *mei* ear *pen* ha ham cume. 'and let her spend as little time as she can (do), sitting or standing about, before she comes home again.' (115a/28)

In proverbial phrases such as the following, *do* is said to be implied.

Ah ofte him likeð *pe* wrench. *p* he ne *mei* hwen he wule ; *pe* nalde *pa* he *makte*. 'but these tactics often fail him, so that he who would not (do) it when he could (do) it, cannot (do) it when he wishes to (do) it.' (92a/1)

May construed with implied infinitives functions as an auxiliary in the same way as *may* with \emptyset -Inf. The 350 occurrences (100%) of these two clusters can be a persuasive proof of the evolution of *may* in its auxiliarization.

4. Conclusion

If *can* and *may* combined with + \emptyset -Inf and +deleted \emptyset -Inf function as auxiliaries and if *can* and *may* combined with +NP and +AUX function as main verbs, the following syntactical difference of *can* and *may* in A. W. can be seen as shown by Table 5.

The paralleled (+) features in groups 1 and 2 show that both *can* and *may* are used as auxiliaries, while the feature discrepancy in groups 3 and 4 shows the difference. The object-taking construction of a verb is one of the cues to distinguish it from an auxiliary. This

Table 5 Comparison of *Can* & *May*

	AUX		MV	
	1 + ϕ -Inf	2 + deleted ϕ -Inf	3 + NP	4 + AUX
Can	+	+	+	+
May	+	+	-	-

construction is found in *can* but not in *may*. The grammatical function of *may* is that of an auxiliary without any exception, as far as the present study is concerned.

From these findings, it may be said that the auxiliarization of *may* precedes the auxiliarization of *can* in A.W.

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OED

MED

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Can and *may*, whose grammatical functions are those of auxiliaries in present day English, are said to have interesting histories. They were both used as main verbs either transitively or intransitively. How will it be possible to trace back the process of their auxiliarization in the history of the English Language? Middle English is the most important period in which a number of significant changes can be found.

The present study is designed to show the use of *can* and *may* in *Ancrene Wisse* from the syntactical point of view. *Ancrene Wisse* was written in the Middle English period. Ælfric's Old English is inherited on one hand and the traits of Middle English are shown on the other hand, and the distinctive use of the English of the time is offered in the book.

Lastly, the study may shed some light not only on the use of these two words in *Ancrene Wisse* but also on their transition from main verbs to auxiliaries.