

Can in Colloquial Singapore English

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates and discusses the use of *can* in Colloquial Singapore English (CSE).

2 Methodology and Data collection

The study is based primarily on my analysis of WhatsApp messages collected between July 30th, 2018 and January 10th, 2021. As my WhatsApp database did not contain an unambiguous instance of *can* being used as a discourse particle and it was difficult to find such instances in my chat groups, I used a personal example when analysing *can* as a discourse particle.

The corpus data is collected from two WhatsApp chat groups with nine unique participants – six in Chat 1, four in Chat 2 – and one personal example between two others. One participant is in both chat groups. All participants in the database are Singaporean Chinese females.

Chat 1 contains six participants. They are a close group of friends who met in Secondary School in 2013. Four participants are 17 years old and two are 18. Chat 2 contains four speakers. They are a group of friends who met in the National University of Singapore in 2019. One participant is 19 years old, two are 20, and one is 22. Both participants in the personal example are 20 years old.

3 Results and Categorization of *can* by function

The database contains 21275 words in total including timestamps and pseudonymized labels.

There are 53 tokens of *can* in Chat 1, 38 in Chat 2, and 1 from the personal example, giving a total of 92 tokens (see Table 1).

Some text messages are omitted in the examples for conciseness, without compromising on data, due to several overlapping conversations in the chats since the nature of text messaging allows for multiple conversations between speakers at once. The omissions are indicated with the ellipsis ...

The orthography of *can* in my database includes *can*, *canz*, and *cannn*. In Chat 1, *can* appears as *canz* and *cannn* twice for each variant. In Chat 2, one instance of *can* is not counted as a token as it appears in the default message received when a chat group is created.

Chat	Word count	Date	Number of participants	Number of Tokens
Chat 1	7162	30/7/18 to 11/1/21	6	53
Chat 2	14090	15/11/19 to 2/7/20	4	38
Personal Example	23	2/10/20	2	1
Total	21275	–	12	92

Table 1. Summary of Tokens in Database

	Function of <i>can</i>	Number of tokens				Percentage of tokens (%)
		Chat 1	Chat 2	Personal example	Total	
StE & CSE	modal auxiliary (express possibility, permission, ability)	32	33	0	65	70.7%
CSE only	marking agreement	17	2	0	19	20.7%
	pragmatic: pseudo-tag question marker (seeking confirmation)	2	1	0	3	3.3%
	pragmatic: discourse particle (convey assertion or firm stance)	0	0	1	1	1.1%
	pragmatic: ambiguous	2	2	0	4	4.3%

Table 2. Classification of tokens according to usage

	Possibility	Permission	Ability	Total occurrences
Chat 1	13	4	15	32
Chat 2	10	6	17	33
Total occurrences	23 (35.4%)	10 (15.4%)	32 (49.2%)	65

Table 3. Breakdown of concept expressed by modal verb

4 Analysis of *can* by function

Can is categorized by its function in the following categories in Table 2.

My database contains 65 tokens of *can* as a modal auxiliary, 19 tokens marking agreement, 3 tokens as pseudo-tag question markers, 1 token as a discourse marker, and 4 behaving as both a pseudo-tag question marker and discourse marker, otherwise labelled as ambiguous (see Table 2). Standard English (StE) uses *can* only as a modal auxiliary. The other functions of *can* are specific to CSE.

4.1 Analysis of *can* as a modal auxiliary

In StE, modals rarely occur alone, only doing so when their main verb is clearly understood (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Despite containing other grammatical functions in CSE, CSE still uses its default function as a modal auxiliary. Of the 65 tokens as modal auxiliaries, 35.4%, 15.4% and 49.2% express concepts such as possibility, permission, or ability respectively (see Table 3). When classifying according to the concept expressed, I checked whether *can* indicated the possibility or likelihood of the proposition happening (for possibility), the consent or clearance of carrying out the proposition (for permission), and the physical or mental capability of carrying out the proposition (for ability). I will briefly elaborate on *can* as a modal auxiliary and focus my analysis on the CSE-specific functions of *can*.

As the pro-drop seemed like a salient feature, I investigated occurrences of the pro-drop occurring with *can* as a modal auxiliary in my database. CSE is a pro-drop language, where the subject and/or object are left out, especially when the pronoun can be inferred from the context (Bao, 2001; Gupta, 1994; Leimgruber et al, 2020). Studies explain the pro-drop to be a result of CSE's continuous and intense contact with Sinitic and Malay languages, in which the pro-drop is prevalent (Sato & Kim, 2012; Leimgruber, 2020). My database contains 12 instances of the pro-drop occurring when *can* is a modal auxiliary (Appendix A).

(1) HY/F/CH/22: THERES PAST YESR PAPER

HY/F/CH/22: HAHAHAU

WY/F/CH/20: Oh theres past yrs qn?

a. ZY/F/CH/20: I'm not sure haha. but *can* check if nus library hv or not

Example (1) features an omitted subject, the second person pronoun “you”. The use of *can* in (1a) marks ZY’s suggestion for the potential possibility of finding the past year paper in the

NUS library. As (1a) is an imperative sentence, ZY might have tried to mitigate coming across as overly assertive by omitting the pronoun “you” in order to reduce the social distance created by using an imperative command. Since the speakers in (1) are of equal social status and hierarchy, there is reason for features of informality to appear in their speech, of which I suggest the pro-drop is one.

4.2 Analysis of can as marking affirmative agreement

The meaning of *can* in CSE has expanded beyond its default function as modal auxiliary to mean “ok”, “alright”, and other forms of agreement or affirmation. The additional meanings of *can* in CSE are traceable to its substrate languages Hokkien, Cantonese, Bazaar Malay and Baba Malay which contain words that mean both *can*, and *alright* or *ok* (Hiramoto, 2012).

My database contains 19 instances of *can* being used to mark agreement or affirmation (Appendix B).

(2) CL/F/CH/17: When r we meeting up ahh

TY/F/CH/17: Thats a great qn HAHA

TY/F/CH/17: When yall freeee

YZ/F/CH/18: Next week im free on mon and thurs dinner

CL/F/CH/17: Mon dinner i *cannn~*

...

YL/F/CH/18: What time are you guys meeting?

YL/F/CH/18: I may be able to meet you guys before dinner but my dinner starts at 7....

YZ/F/CH/18: I can reach by 5+!! Maybe we can meet at some cafe to talk first HAHA slightly before dinner

YZ/F/CH/18: WAIT sry this is assuming we meet at plaza sing bc closer to JW/F/CH/17's sch HAHA

(a) TY/F/CH/17: Yess *can can*

(b) Yes *can*

(3) RW/F/CH/17: we shd meet soon

RW/F/CH/17: r yalls back in sg? @TY/F/CH/17 and yl

YZ/F/CH/18: Yes pls!!! How are y'all doing in cb haha

TY/F/CH/17: yesh HAHA

TY/F/CH/17: im still having sch :(

CL/F/CH/17: We can meet on zoom first before cb ahaha and play games xD

CL/F/CH/17: Before cb is over*

YZ/F/CH/18: My exam in 2 weeks' time ;-; but idm joining for a while!!

...

TY/F/CH/17: so tmr onz?

CL/F/CH/17: Afternoon? Cos RW/F/CH/17 need go at 7pm

JW/F/CH/17: *cannn*

(a) YZ/F/CH/18: OH *ok!!! Can* sures HAHA sry i missed the msg

In the examples (2a) and (3), the word *can* indeed conveys meanings like *ok* and *alright* which are not found in Standard English. Additionally, I observe a reduplication of *can* in (2a), “Yess *can can*”. This feature is of great interest as I have been unable to find studies on the reduplication of the originally-modal auxiliary *can*. While Wee (2004) discusses nominal, adjectival and verbal reduplication, his findings do not mention the reduplication of modal auxiliaries. I claim that besides indicating agreement, the reduplication of *can* in CSE has a pragmatic function indicating a compliant or agreeable attitude of the speaker.

As there was a long discussion in (2) before settling on the date and timing to meet, it is possible that the speakers did not wish to prolong the discussion and desired to finalise the meeting date. Once the date and timing was proposed, speaker TY used *can* twice to emphasise her agreement with the date. Due to the brevity and conciseness of CSE, a reply of

just “Yes can” (2b) could seem curt, impolite (Stadler, 2018) or possibly disinterested, bearing in mind that the other speakers had sent far longer texts than TY in (2). Thus, TY attempted to come across as extra-agreeable by using *can can* in (2a) before “Yess”, marking a triple agreement.

This feature could be viewed as an accommodation strategy, albeit an overkill or at the least a hypercorrection towards informality. I argue that using double *can* together with a *yes* (“Yess”) to explicitly indicate affirmation is an instance of TY trying to balance maintaining informality by using CSE while making up for the possible curtness, impoliteness or disinterest by hypercorrecting agreement, in an effort to reduce social distance and maintain group affinity (Tan & Tan 2008:476) with her close group of friends.

Furthermore in (3), YZ uses three words indicating agreement in succession, namely *ok*, *can*, and *sures*. In this instance, *can* is used to mark agreement meaning *ok* instead of modality. (3) shows another instance where speakers use *can* synonymously with words meaning *yes* to convey agreement, and multiple words indicating agreement – *ok*, *can*, *sures* – to convey an attitude of agreeableness and politeness. YZ might have been motivated to come across as agreeable due to her late response to the text which could have been interpreted as her ignoring the text. Thus in an effort to maintain the level of informality in the friendship and to redeem herself, YZ agreed thrice, though possibly coming across as obliging in the process.

4.3 Analysis of *can* as a pragmatic marker

When found in the sentence-final position in CSE, *can* functions as a pragmatic marker. The sentence-final *can* has two pragmatic functions, one as a pseudo-tag question marker and the other, a discourse particle (Hiramoto, 2012:891). While *can* as a pseudo-tag is used by a speaker seeking confirmation, the discourse marker conveys the speaker's strong stance when making an assertion (Hiramoto, 2012).

Three judgment tests distinguish between *can* as a pseudo-tag and as a discourse marker (Hiramoto, 2012:904). They are 1. moving *can* to a front position to form an interrogative sentence, 2. the interchangeability of *can* with *can or not*, and 3. the acceptability of denying sentence-final *can* phrases with *cannot*. A positive answer indicates the likelihood of *can* as a pseudo-tag marker.

4.3.1 Analysis of *can* as a pseudo-tag question marker

Tag and pseudo-tag questions are used by speakers to request confirmation or disconfirmation of a statement while expressing the speaker's bias towards one response (Sadock & Zwicky, 1985:183). Unlike tag questions, pseudo-tags attached do not reflect the verb type used in the statement (Hiramoto, 2012; Tallerman, 2015). As a pseudo-tag, *can* conveys the meaning of "ok?" or "is it possible?".

While the pseudo-tag *can* is suggested to originate from *can or not*, choosing *the latter* over *the former* might be more coercive since the alternative to a positive answer is removed (Hiramoto, 2012:898). In other words, using *can or not* allows a negative response to the question, as compared to *can*. With this in mind, I investigate whether using *can or not* indeed allows more responses.

There are 3 instances of *can* functioning as a pseudo-tag in my database.

(4) JW/F/CH/17: when r y'all free

CL/F/CH/17: Tis fri..? Will stuff be open on voting day ahaha

CL/F/CH/17: Im free next mon (full day) tues, wed and thurs and fri (morn-afternoon)
ahaha

TY/F/CH/17: shld be? i think HAHA

TY/F/CH/17: next mon i start internship lolol

TY/F/CH/17: so i'll be free only at night

JW/F/CH/17: eh I can't most nights

TY/F/CH/17: shizzles :(

TY/F/CH/17: fri *can* anot?

(4) (a) TY/F/CH/17: fri *can* anot?

(a') cannot.

(b) fri *can*?

(c) can anot, fri?

(d) is (meeting up on) friday alright/alright or not?

Here, *anot* is a variant of *or not*. *Can anot* in (4a) implies a confirmation-seeking attitude of the speaker. When applying the judgment tests, *can anot* is interchangeable with *can* without a change of meaning (still seeking confirmation) (4b). Fronting of *can anot* is possible (4c), and *cannot* is an acceptable response (4a'). This confirms the use of *can* as a pseudo-tag marker in (4a).

As seen in (4a), the speaker TY used *can anot* to ascertain whether the other friends were free to meet up on Friday. When substituted with *can* in (4b), the sentence (4b) shows the TY's bias towards hearing an agreement to meet up on Friday, which is the confirmation to her question.

As the possibility of the group of friends meeting on Friday hinged on the availability of JW and the rest of the group, which was out of TY's control, TY knew that her question might receive a negative response. Since whether they would meet on Friday was not a matter of persuasion due to a lack of desire to meet but a matter of the availability of the group, TY used *anot* in (4a) to provide the notion of choice.

If TY were to phrase the question as in (4b), her friends' denial of (4b) with cannot in (4a') might place them in a negative light. Although the negative response might be due to their unavailability, denying (4b) might still convey an attitude of disagreeableness and seem impolite. Since the tag *or not (anot)* provides the added notion that an alternative to positively agreeing with the speaker exists, the use of *can anot* over *can* expands the possible responses to include the option of responding negatively, meaning that the friend is unable to meet on Friday.

I argue that the inclusion of the tag *or not* in *can or not* is a face-saving strategy used by speakers to provide the hearers (and responders) room to maneuver in their response by allowing a negative response, thus preventing responders from coming across as impolite in the event that they respond negatively to the question. Hence, we see that using *can or not* provides room for an alternative answer.

(5) JW/F/CH/17: hi friends hope y'all r alive and well do y'all wanna meet up before school starts!! 

TY/F/CH/17: yEs heh

CL/F/CH/17: Yessssss

TY/F/CH/17: Yall free on fri?

TY/F/CH/17: Wait thatd christmas lol

TY/F/CH/17: Next week?

CL/F/CH/17: Ahaha

CL/F/CH/17: Next fri?

CL/F/CH/17: Thats new year ahahaha

TY/F/CH/17: gOnE HAHAHA

TY/F/CH/17: Tbh i v free after this fri lol

TY/F/CH/17: Any day also can

CL/F/CH/17: Okie dokes~ lets try to match our time!!

YZ/F/CH/18: how abt lunch this weekend?

JW/F/CH/17: oo sat lunch *can*?

(5) (a) JW/F/CH/17: oo sat lunch *can*

(a') cannot.

(b) oo sat lunch *can or not*?

(c) oo *can (we meet on)* sat (for) lunch?

Can in (5a) might function as a pseudo-tag as it implies a confirmation-seeking attitude of the speaker. Performing the judgment tests, *can* is interchangeable with *can or not* (5b), *can* can be fronted (5c), and cannot is an acceptable response (5a'), confirming that *can* is used as a pseudo-tag in (5a).

As suggested, using the phrase *can* over *can or not* could be a strategy used by the speaker to induce a positively-biased response from the hearer. This is seen in example (5a). In (5), the speaker is asking her friends whether it is possible for the group to meet for lunch on Saturday. The omission of or not in the pseudo-tag *can* which omits the alternative response, together with the mention of the specific day (“sat”), shows the speaker’s bias towards the positive answer, Saturday.

Despite this strategy being employed, the denial of pseudo-tag *can* is still possible, as shown in (5a'). Replying “cannot” to the speaker’s question in (5a) would have the meaning of “I am unable to meet on Saturday for lunch”. This denial in (5a') is not awkward since the speaker’s friends have the authority in making their own decisions despite how coercive the

speaker might appear in the phrasing of her question.

This instance shows that using the pseudo-tag *can* in (5a) reduces the option of alternative answers and is biased towards the speaker's preferred answer. Conversely, *can anot* in (4a) is less biased than *can* as it provides hearers the option of an alternative response without appearing impolite and thus room to maneuver the social situation. Yet in both cases, the authority still lies with the hearers to respond either positively or negatively to the pseudo-tag question, no matter how biased the question may be phrased.

4.3.2 *can* as a discourse marker

When used as a discourse particle in CSE, *can* expresses the speaker's assertion of a proposition or unwavering stance (Hiramoto, 2012:904). Discourse particles contain the following properties: occurs at sentence-final position, is monosyllabic and conveys pragmatic meanings (Hiramoto, 2012:891).

Example (6) shows this usage.¹

- (6) A: Why don't you know how to speak proper Chinese?
B: My family never speak Chinese at home so don't like that can
A': #cannot!
B'. *Can my family never speak Chinese at home so don't like that
B''. *My family never speak Chinese at home so don't like that can or not

- (7) *My family never speak Chinese at home so don't like that can, lah/leh/meh/hor

When used in the sentence (6B), *can* appears to bear the meaning of *ok* or *alright*, where B is trying to convey the meaning that he wants A to accept the truth of B's proposition, while pragmatically conveying an attitude of holding true to the proposition.

When put through the pragmatic marker test, *can* cannot be fronted while bearing the same meaning (6B'), is not interchangeable with *can or not* (6B''), and cannot be denied (6A').

When fronted (6B'), the sentence appears ungrammatical. Since B is pushing forth his opinion rather than soliciting a response from A, it is awkward to deny (6A) with (6A') and therefore, *can or not* is unacceptable in (6B'') as the inclusion of *or not* would indicate that an alternative opinion is being sought.

Since discourse particles do not usually co-occur (Hiramoto, 2012), the ungrammaticality of discourse particles lah, leh, meh, hor is additional evidence that *can* functions as a discourse particle in (7).

4.3.3 *can* containing both pragmatic functions (ambiguous)

There are 4 instances where the pragmatic function of *can* is unclear. The following is one instance.

(8) RW/F/CH/19: for the analysis for 2104, do yall wna discuss still? or do on our own easier haha

- (a) WY/F/CH/20: We discuss in class later *can*?
- (a') Cannot.
- (b) *Can* we discuss in class later?
- (c) We discuss in class later *can or not*?

Can in (8a) seems to function as a discourse marker as it conveys the speaker's assertion of her preference to discuss the analysis in class instead of doing it on her own. However, *can* might behave as a pseudo-tag marker as *can* can be fronted in (8b), though this sentence suggests a different meaning from (8a) since (8b) is in the interrogative form which is grammatical in StE, and does not show the speaker's bias towards a preferred answer, unlike

(8a). Furthermore, *can* is interchangeable with *can or not* (8c), and *cannot* is an acceptable response (8a'), though negating (8a) is seen as challenging the speaker rather than merely responding with a neutral response.

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6 Appendix

Appendix A: Instances of pro-drop occurring when *can* is a modal auxiliary (12 instances)

1. 11/12/18 5:37 pm: RW/F/CH/17: can send the prom pics!
2. 2/9/19 7:58 am: YL/F/CH/18: Can meet earlier? I need to leave by 6.30 latest
3. 4/6/20 7:11 pm: CL/F/CH/17: Or if yall have some of our tramp vids can send me too!
^^ thanksssss
4. 28/11/19 3:33 pm: ZY/F/CH/20: I'm not sure haha. but can check if nus library hv or not
5. 3/12/19 12:40 pm: ZY/F/CH/20: I think can go in Alr..
6. 22/1/20 12:21 am: HY/F/CH/22: Yeah can just upload it!!
7. 12/2/20 4:43 pm: WY/F/CH/20: And can really tell they want the best for the child so they will try everything they can
8. 12/2/20 5:48 pm: WY/F/CH/20: Not really cause you know that they are in good hands and are getting the help they need. But must also be composed cause they were skyping and can see us there lol 😂
9. 15/2/20 9:24 pm: WY/F/CH/20: Then simple and systematic a bit funny ah Simple: they alr use, use again a bit weird ah and there is no assignment of number etc (everything that makes it simple random sampling)

Systematic: no structure in how they select who to ask to fill up the questionnaire (can be seen in the airline question)

10. 21/2/20 9:31 pm: HY/F/CH/22: can explain how why you choose neither for question 1 uh
11. 25/2/20 6:43 pm: RW/F/CH/19: hehe @HY/F/CH/22 can reply her and ask peace if will be doing the debrief and thus if the paper will be due 2 weeks after peace's debrief?
12. 25/2/20 6:44 pm: RW/F/CH/19: *can reply peace and ask if

Appendix B: Instances of *can* being used to mark agreement or affirmation (19 instances)

1. 12/2/19 11:12 am: CL/F/CH/17: Shld be can~~ next mon is 18th feb hor
2. 5/5/19 7:49 pm: YZ/F/CH/18: Ok can!
3. 4/8/19 9:20 pm: CL/F/CH/17: Not gonna register then xD (can right kek)
4. 29/8/19 11:19 am: CL/F/CH/17: Mon dinner i cann~
5. 31/8/19 12:32 pm: TY/F/CH/17: Yess can can
6. 31/8/19 1:29 pm: TY/F/CH/17: She said plaza sing can!
7. 31/8/19 6:22 pm: YL/F/CH/18: So anywhere around orchard can
8. 2/9/19 8:19 am: YL/F/CH/18: Can
9. 21/5/20 9:48 pm: JW/F/CH/17: cann
10. 21/5/20 9:52 pm: YZ/F/CH/18: OH ok!!! Can sures HAHA sry i missed the msg
11. 22/5/20 4:58 pm: YZ/F/CH/18: Okiee can
12. 9/7/20 7:51 am: CL/F/CH/17: <omitted> Or afternoon aso can
13. 9/7/20 10:59 pm: CL/F/CH/17: Okie can ~ see yallz
14. 21/12/20 10:26 pm: TY/F/CH/17: Any day also can
15. 22/12/20 3:25 pm: YL/F/CH/18: But maybe brunch can
16. 23/12/20 12:07 pm: TY/F/CH/17: canz
17. 15/1/20 11:35 pm: RW/F/CH/19: yep can! starts at 9am tmr
18. 21/1/20 11:39 pm: WY/F/CH/20: I read it and i think can :)