

# The English Modal “can” and Its Vietnamese Counterpart “có thể”

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**Abstract:** Considering *modality* as whatever that lies out of *the lexis* (also called *the dictum*) of the proposition of a declarative sentence, I have considered the meanings conveyed by the modal verb “can” as well as its English alternative modal expressions, in comparison with those conveyed by its so-called Vietnamese counterpart “có thể”, if possible. If not, other translated versions into Vietnamese are suggested. The English modal verb *can* is translated into Vietnamese in a number of different ways, and *có thể* is one of these ways, however frequent and thus prominent it is; in other words, besides *có thể*, among other Vietnamese counterparts of “can” are “được”, “mới ... được”, “có thể ... được”, “có thể sẽ”, “biết”, and “thường”. The alternative modal expressions of “can” as shown in the English declaratives in this paper have plenty of Vietnamese equivalents, as identified in their suggested translated versions. Although these inevitable differences cause both Vietnamese learners of English and native speakers of English who do a course in Vietnamese a lot of trouble, their potential similarities are the objective bases for successful practice in translating or interpreting. There is no doubt that the interesting and fruitful research on modal expressions in Vietnamese and English declarative sentences is of undeniably practical significance in the current time of world-wide explosion of information and cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Declaratives, Modality, The Realis Modality, The Capacity Modality, Physical or Mental Capacities, Possibility, Permission, General Characteristics

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## 1. Introduction

In the current time of world-wide explosion of information and cross-cultural communication, there is an urgent need for the Vietnamese peoples to learn and use the English language efficiently as an international means of communication. So is the sincere desire to express various aspects of the languages, the cultures, and the knowledge of the Vietnamese peoples’ lives, as simplest as they may be made known for basic understanding, if not for sympathy? To fulfil such a need, the theory and practice of translation and interpretation from English to Vietnamese and vice versa is constantly under some change, closely related to the gradually increased number of Vietnamese students who have been studying for a Bachelor of Arts in English and whose concentration is Translating and Interpreting, at least in and around Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Generally speaking, it is a challenge for the students to acquire modality in general and the meanings conveyed by

the modal verb *can* as well as its English alternative modal expressions, in comparison with those conveyed by its so-called equivalent Vietnamese *có thể*, in particular. Playing the role of the nurture of their attempt to overcome such a challenge is the focus of this paper. This hopefully “reinforces the conclusion that the basic facts about meaning in all languages are, by and large, parallel. This is not to deny, of course, that there are interesting differences between languages” [Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007: 10].

## 2. Aims and Theoretical Background of Research

### 2.1. Theoretical Background of Research

Bybee and Fleischman [1995: 2] define modality as “the semantic domain pertaining to elements of meaning that languages express. It covers a broad range of semantic nuances – jussive, desiderative, intentive, hypothetical,

potential, obligative, dubitative, hortatory, exclamative, etc. – whose common denominator 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.”

Cao Xuan Hao [2017: 100-101], on the other hand, distinguishes two separate sections within the proposition of an utterance: “lexis or dictum, which is the combination of a rhema (a logical predicate) and its participants, both existing in a potential relationship”, and “modality,” which is the way to realize the relationship, showing that it is either real (realis) or not (irrealis), either indispensable or dispensable, either possible or impossible.” Out of the same dicta of a proposition, including *help*, *Nam*, *eat candy*, and *the baby*, he creates a number of sentences in the three following different modalities:

1. The capacity modality is expressed by *có thể*:

Nam *có thể* cho em bé ăn kẹo.

‘Nam *can* help the baby eat candy.’<sup>1</sup>

2. The negative modality is expressed by *không*:

Nam *không* cho em bé ăn kẹo.

‘Nam *does not* help the baby eat candy.’

3. The realis modality is expressed by “the arrangement of the lexical items expressing the rhema and its participants according to the order typical of a basic sentence of the Theme-Rheme structure:

Nam cho em bé ăn kẹo.

‘Nam helps the baby eat candy.’

Reintroducing the two above-mentioned authors’ assertions of modality, I would like to confirm that what is referred to as modality in this paper is anything that does not belong to the lexis or dictum of the proposition of a declarative sentence, “the illocutionary force of which is simply presenting or asserting something, neither requiring any reply, nor suggesting any action ...” [Cao Xuan Hao, Hoang Xuan Tam, Nguyen Van Bang and Bui Tat Tuom, 1998: 123]

## 2.2. Aims of Research

Acknowledging that “there are no other notions except for modality that cause a large number of different or even contradictory opinions” [V.Z. Panfilov, 1977: 37-38; as quoted in Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep, 1998: 215], I have concentrated in this paper on the ways in which modality is expressed via the modal verb *can* as well as its English alternative modal expressions in the English declaratives. Then I compare such modal expressions in English with the so-called equivalent *có thể* in their

translated versions in Vietnamese. Whenever *có thể* is not the optimal choice, other ways of expression are suggested with respect to the intuition of a native speaker of Vietnamese. This also aims to follow Hurford, Heasley & Smith’s belief [2007: 10] that “it is possible to translate any sentence of one language (at least roughly) into any other language (however clumsily).”

## 3. Scope and Procedure of Research

Approximately five dozen simple declarative sentences have been selected, the third-person-singular subject pronoun *he* and the lexical verb *come back* being used as frequently as possible. Then the meanings conveyed by the modal verb *can* and its English alternative modal expressions are analyzed one by one. Last but not least, ways to translate into Vietnamese these English modal expressions, which are in fact various forms of the English verb phrase in the very sample declaratives chosen from quite clear and thus reliable sources, i.e. from a number of textbooks published by native speakers of English, are suggested, of course in comparison to the Vietnamese expression *có thể* whenever it is possible. If not, other translated options are then suggested, to fulfil the task of translation practice.

## 4. Result of Research

### 4.1. In Reference to Physical or Mental Capacities

#### 4.1.1. “Can” Describing the Physical or Mental Capacities of the Subject of the Sentence

According to Hofmann [1995: 98], *can* describes “the physical or mental capacities of the subject of the sentence.”

(1) He *can* come back.

We use *can* and *be able to* alternatively to express present capacities though *may* is “a little more formal and less usual than *can*” [Eastwood, 1994: 124]:

(2) He *is able to* come back.

A number of Vietnamese and foreign authors of teaching-Vietnamese textbooks [Bui Phung, 1993; Vuong and Moore, 1994; Phan Van Giuong, 1990; Jordan, Sheehan and Nguyen, 1967; and Vu Van Thi, 1996] agree that *có thể* in this case is equivalent to *có thể ... được* or simply *được*. *Biết* is another satisfactory way to translate *can*. Up to this point of the discussion, I would like to suggest the two ways to translate both (1) and (2):

‘Anh ấy (*có thể*)<sup>2</sup> về được.’

or

‘Anh ấy *có khả năng* (*sẽ*) trở về.’

#### 4.1.2. “Can” as a “Plain Form”

Hofmann [1995: 99] considers *can* as a “plain form” that can be used for events at any time except in the past, i.e. present, future or always. He gives the three following illustrations:

<sup>1</sup>A number of conventions applied in this paper are:

- Original English and Vietnamese declaratives are first numbered, occasionally marked *a*, *b*, *c*, etc. for further consideration and later comparison, and then followed right below by their suggested translated version(s) enclosed within a pair of single quotation marks ( ‘ ’ );

- For clarification, *can*, its English alternative modal expressions, and their Vietnamese equivalents, including *có thể*, are in italic in the examples given as illustrations in this paper;

- The symbol / stands for “or.”

<sup>2</sup>The section enclosed within the two round brackets may be omitted without altering the meaning of the whole.

(3) I *can* finish it now.

‘Tôi *có thể* làm xong việc này ngay đây.’

‘Tôi *có thể* hoàn thành việc này ngay đây.’

or

‘Tôi làm *được* việc này ngay đây.’

(4) I *can* leave in a half-hour.

‘Nửa giờ nữa (thì) tôi *có thể* đi.’

‘Nửa giờ nữa (thì) tôi *mới* đi *được*.’

(5) I *can* read.

‘Tôi *biết* đọc.’

#### 4.1.3. “Will Be Able to” or “Am/Is/Are Going to Be Able to” Describing Future Ability

Hayden, Pilgrim and Haggard [1972: 110-111] believe that it is quite acceptable for *can* in (4) to be replaced by *will be able to* or *am/is/are going to be able to*, resulting in its synonymous sentences:

(6) I *will be able to* leave in a half-hour.

(7) I *am going to be able to* leave in a half-hour.

Accordingly, “Anh ấy *có thể* (sẽ) trở về” has three possible English versions:

(8) He *can* come back.

(9) He *will be able to* come back.

(10) He *is going to be able to* come back.

Eastwood [1994: 124-125], however, doesn’t think that (8) and (9) are identical to each other: (8) shows “a possible future action” while (9) refers to “a future ability or opportunity.” Alexander [1990: 161] approves of this remark and emphasizes that only *will be able to*, neither *can* nor *could*, expresses “future ability” in the following sentence:

(11) Baby *will be able to* stand up in two weeks.

‘Hai tuần nữa<sup>3</sup> (thì) bé *có thể* đứng chững *được*.’

#### 4.1.4. “Could” – the Past-Tense form of “can” – Describing General Ability in the Past

Alexander [1990: 158] also distinguishes “general ability in the past” expressed by *could* or *was/were able to*, as in:

(12) I *could/ was able to* run fast when I was a boy.

‘Hồi tôi còn là một cậu bé, tôi *đã có thể* chạy nhanh.’

from “the successful completion of a specific action” expressed by *was/were able to* or *managed to*, not *could*, as in:

(13) We *were able to/ managed to* get tickets for the match yesterday.

‘Hôm qua chúng tôi *đã mua được* vé đi xem đá bóng.

Therefore, it is possible to translate:

(14) He *was able to* come back ahead of time.

into either:

‘Anh ấy *đã có thể* trở về trước thời hạn quy định.’

following the way we treat (12), or:

‘Anh ấy *đã* trở về *được* trước thời hạn quy định.’

imitating the way we analyze (13).

In this treatment, (14) shares the same meaning with the

following (15) and (16):

(15) He *managed to* come back ahead of time.

(16) He *succeeded in* coming back ahead of time. while:

(17) He *could* come back ahead of time.

is interpreted in the same way as (12), expressing “general ability in the past” only.

#### 4.1.5. “Be able to” in the Perfect, Infinitive and -Ing Forms

As mentioned above, *can* is more common than *be able to* in describing the subject’s physical and mental capacities. Nevertheless, in a number of specialized constructions like those of the following perfect, infinitive and *-ing* forms, only suitable is *be able to*:

(18) He *has been able to* come back in time for the New Year’s Eve.

‘Anh ấy *đã* trở về kịp để dự Đêm giao thừa.’

(19) It’s nice *to be able to* come back home earlier than usual.

‘*Có thể* về nhà sớm hơn thường lệ thì thật là dễ chịu.’

(20) *Being able to* come back home every weekend is my greatest ambition these days.

‘*Có thể* về nhà mỗi kỳ nghỉ cuối tuần là mong muốn tha thiết nhất của tôi lúc này.’

It is interesting to recognize that *be*, conjugated in the perfect present in (18), expresses an action completed in the past but closely connected with another activity that extends into the present or future.

#### 4.1.6. “Could Have + Past Participle” Describing the Past Ability or the Chance left Undone

To say that someone had the ability or the chance to do something but in fact did not do it, we use *could have + past participle*:

(21) He *could have* come back, but he decided not.

‘Anh ấy *đã có thể* trở về, nhưng rồi anh ấy lại thôi.’

#### 4.1.7. “Couldn’t” Describing a Specific Action not Successfully Completed

Generally speaking, to express the subject’s inability in the above-mentioned sentences, we make them negative by adding the negative word *not*. However, it is necessary to notice that the negative forms of (14), (15), (16) and (17) are absolutely the same in meaning because *couldn’t* describes a specific action not successfully completed:

(14’) He *wasn’t able to* come back ahead of time.

(15’) He *didn’t manage to* come back ahead of time.

(16’) He *failed to* come back ahead of time.

(17’) He *couldn’t* come back ahead of time.

‘Anh ấy *đã không thể* trở về trước thời hạn quy định.’

## 4.2. In Reference to Possibility

### 4.2.1. “Can” Describing Possibility

*Can* also describes possibility. Thomson and Martinet [1986: 133] believe that the sentence subject + *can* means “it is possible” or “circumstances permit.” Two of their illustrations are:

(22) You *can* ski on the hills. (There is enough snow.)

<sup>3</sup>“Sẽ” is not here because the future meaning has already conveyed by the Vietnamese range topic of Time *hai tuần nữa* at the beginning of the Vietnamese declarative, which is considered as equivalent to the English adverbial of time *in two weeks* at the end of the English declarative.

‘Bạn *có thể* trượt tuyết ở trên đồi. (Có đủ tuyết đấy.)’  
 (23) We *can’t* bathe here on account of sharks. (It isn’t safe.)

‘Chúng ta *không thể* tắm ở đây vì có cá mập. (Nó không an toàn.)’

In this treatment,  
 (1’) He *can* come back.  
 means circumstances permit him to come back. No external factor prevents him from doing this.

**4.2.2. “May”, “Might” or “Could” Describing a Lesser Degree of Possibility**

In comparison with *can*, *could* signals a lesser degree of possibility though it is usually considered as a reliable substitute for *can* in this sense. McKay [1995: 192] asserts that *may*, *might* and *could* all express possibility and she also gives their approximate certainty:

**Table 1.** The approximate certainty expressed by the English modals *may*, *might*, and *could* in McKay [1995: 192].

	APPROXIMATE CERTAINTY	MEANING
(24) John <i>may</i> know the answer.	55%	Possibility
(25) John <i>might</i> know the answer.	50%	Possibility
(26) John <i>could</i> know the answer.	49%	Possibility

‘John *có thể* biết câu trả lời.’

Unlike McKay, Alexander [1990: 157] supports the idea that *might* is “very uncertain” while *could* is “fairly certain.” In his belief, *could* can’t be a modal verb of the least degree of certainty.

**4.2.3. “May”, “Might” or “Could” Describing Ways of Being Less than Certain**

According to Eastwood [1994: 122], other ways of being less than certain in English are clearly shown not by the modal verbs *may*, *might* and *could* but by either the modal adverbs such as *possibly*, *perhaps*, *maybe*, etc. or modal clauses such as *it’s possible that*, *there’s a possibility that*, etc. Therefore, to say that he will possibly come back, we use one of the following expressions:

- (27) He *could/ may/ might* come back.
  - (28) *Possibly/ Perhaps/ Maybe* he comes/ will come back.
  - (29) *It’s possible that/ There’s a possibility that* he comes/ will come back.
- ‘Anh ấy *có thể* (sẽ) trở về.’

**4.2.4. “May”, “Might” or “Could” Describing the Speaker’s Lack of Trust in the Proposition of an Utterance**

Coates [1995: 58-59] believes that the speaker also conveys his lack of trust in the proposition of an utterance by using both a modal verb and a modal clause. Below are some of Coates’ illustrations:

- (30) That *may* be yellow fever, I’m not sure.  
 ‘Đó *có thể* là bệnh sốt vàng da, nhưng tôi không chắc.’
- (31) I *may* be a few minutes late, but I don’t know.  
 ‘Tôi *có thể* trễ vài phút, nhưng tôi cũng không biết nữa.’
- (32) I think it’s unlikely actually but he *might* do it today.

‘Tôi nghĩ không có gì chắc chắn, nhưng anh ấy *có thể* làm việc đó hôm nay.’

**4.2.5. “Could Have, May Have or Might Have + Past Participle” Describing Possibility in the Past**

“Possibility in the past” is a term that refers to “something in the past that is possibly true” [Eastwood, 1994: 124]. *Could have*, *may have* or *might have + past participle* can be used alternatively to express this sense, resulting in the three sentences marked (33-35), which all share the same Vietnamese translated version:

- (33) He *could have* come back.
  - (34) He *may have* come back.
  - (35) He *might have* come back.
- ‘Anh ấy *có thể đã*<sup>4</sup> trở về.’

Notice that this is quite different from an opportunity to do something that was not taken, which is illustrated by (21). Some other paraphrases of the sentences numbered (33), (34) and (35) are:

- (36) *Possibly/ Perhaps/ Maybe* he came/ has come back.
- (37) *It’s possible that* he came/ has come back.
- (38) *There’s a possibility that* he came/ has come back.

**4.2.6. “Can’t” and “Couldn’t” Describing Impossibility**

*Can’t* (not *cannot*) and *couldn’t* (not *could not*) are the two negative forms used to express “impossibility”, in Eastwood’s belief [1994: 123]:

- (39) She *can’t* be very nice if no one likes her.  
 ‘Cô ta *không thể* nào lại rất dễ thương nếu không ai thích cô cả.’
- (40) You *can’t* have seen/ *couldn’t* have seen Bob this morning. He’s in Uganda.  
 ‘Chị *đã không thể* nào lại gặp Bob sáng nay. Anh ta hiện ở Uganda.’

**4.2.7. “Can’t” or “Couldn’t” Describing Negative Deduction**

By giving quite similar examples to those given by Eastwood above, Thomson and Martinet [1986: 148-149] call the very phenomenon “negative deduction.” *Can’t* or *couldn’t* in this case is the antonym of *must* in the following sentences of “affirmative deduction.”

- (41) She *must* be very nice. Everybody likes her.  
 ‘Cô ấy *chắc hẳn là/ ắt hẳn là* rất dễ thương. Mọi người đều thích cô ấy.’
- (42) You *must* have seen Bob this morning. He’s just come back from Uganda.  
 ‘*Chắc hẳn là/ Ắt hẳn là* chị *đã gặp* Bob sáng nay. Anh ấy vừa trở về từ Uganda.’

Coates [1995: 63] agrees with Thomson and Martinet, asserting that *It can’t be true!* means *It’s must be false*. In this belief,

- (43) He *can’t* come back.  
 ‘Anh ấy (sẽ) *không thể* nào trở về được.’

<sup>4</sup>Compare “*có thể đã*” right here with “*đã có thể*” in the Vietnamese translated version of (12) and that of (14) above to see that the order of the two sections “*đã*” and “*có thể*” in a given Vietnamese verb phrase does convey some sense significant enough to be dealt with great care.

means the speaker thinks that the person called “he” here can hardly come back now or in the future, while

(44) He *can't* have come/ *couldn't* have come back.

‘Anh ấy *không* (có) *thể* nào đã trở về được.’

‘*Không* có lý nào anh ấy lại trở về rồi.’

means the “he” here could hardly come back.

#### 4.3. In Reference to Permission

##### 4.3.1. “Can” and Its Two Negative Forms – “Can’t” and “Cannot” – Used to Give or Refuse Permission

To give or refuse permission, Eastwood [1994: 119] says that *can* and its two negative forms – *can't* and *cannot* – are frequently used instead of *may* and *may not*; “mainly used in writing” are *may* and *may not*, though; because they are formal. Below are some of Eastwood’s illustrations:

(45) Any person over 18 years *may/ can* join the club.

‘Bất kỳ ai trên 18 tuổi đều *có thể* gia nhập câu lạc bộ này.’

(46) I’m afraid you *can't/ cannot/ may not* walk in here.

‘Tôi e rằng anh *không được phép* đi bộ vào trong này.’

In English, “prohibition” is expressed not only by the modals *can't*, *cannot* and *may not* but also by a variety of lively expressions:

(47a) You *mustn't/ must not* smoke here.

(47b) You *are prohibited to/ are forbidden to* smoke here.

(47c) You *are not permitted to/ are not allowed to* smoke here.

‘Anh *không được phép* hút thuốc ở đây.’

(48a) No one *can/ may* take photos.

(48b) No one *is allowed to/ is permitted to* take photos.

(48c) No one *has a right to/ has the right to/ has permission to* take photos.

‘*Không* ai *được phép* chụp hình.’

##### 4.3.2. “Can”, More Common than “May”, Used to Give Permission

Hofmann [1995: 104-105] explains why *can* is more common than *may* in giving permission: “May is not used very much anymore in this meaning, for it depicts possibility that derives from the speaker’s authority. Most people use *can* instead of *may* as we prefer not to talk about authority in these democratic and egalitarian times, so even if the speaker permits X to do Y, still we would normally say ‘X can Y’ and use ‘X may Y’ only when we want to note the authority of the speaker (e.g. a teacher or judge).”

Hofmann also asserts that nowadays *may* is used mostly in a humble formula to request permission ‘May I ...?’ because using *may* in such a request implies ‘You may ...’ and therefore acknowledges the authority of the person who is to give permission.

##### 4.3.3. “Can” and “Could” Used to Talk About Permission Respectively in the Present or Future and in the Past

According to Eastwood [1994: 120], when “talking about permission”, not “giving it or asking for it,” we use *can* (not *may*) referring to the present or the future and *could* referring to the past. Some of Eastwood’s illustrations are:

(49) I *can* stay up as late as I like. My parents don’t mind.

‘Tôi *có thể* thức khuya như tôi thích. Cha mẹ tôi không la rầy bao giờ.’

(50) These yellow lines mean that you *can't* park here.

‘Những lần gạch màu vàng này có nghĩa là anh *không được phép* đậu xe ở đây.’

(51) At one time anyone *could* go and live in the USA.

‘Đã có một thời kỳ bất cứ ai cũng *có thể* đến và sống ở Mỹ.’

##### 4.3.4. “Be Allowed to” Referring to Giving Permission in the Present or Future; “Could” Referring to General Permission

Also in Eastwood’s belief [1994: 120], whenever *be allowed to* is used instead of *can* to refer to giving permission in the present or future, it implies “the permission does not depend on the speaker or the person spoken to”:

(52) I *am allowed to* use this phone number.

‘Tôi *có thể/ được phép* dùng số điện thoại này.’

(53) You *won't be able to* bring your own food into this café.

‘Bạn *sẽ không được phép* mang thức ăn của mình vào tiệm cà phê này.’

Whenever *was/were allowed to* is used instead of *could*, it implies “an action that someone did with permission.” Accordingly, in order to report somebody’s return under the local authorities’ permission, for instance, we say:

(54) He *was allowed to* come back after two years in prison.

‘Anh ấy *đã được phép* về nhà sau hai năm trong tù.’

And to refer to “general permission” without emphasizing the completion of such an action, we use *could*:

(55) He *could* come back after two years in prison.

##### 4.3.5. “Be Allowed to”, Neither “Can” nor “May”, Used with the Perfect or Infinitive Forms

Only *be allowed to*, neither *can* nor *may*, is used with the perfect or infinitive forms:

(56) He *has not been allowed to* come back for years.

‘Anh ấy *đã không được phép* về nhà trong nhiều năm.’ (Và hiện vẫn ở cách xa gia đình.)

(57) He didn’t expect *to be allowed to* come back home on the Christmas Eve.

‘Anh ấy *đã không hy vọng được phép* về nhà trong đêm Giáng sinh.’

I strongly believe that *be permitted to* can also take all the positions especially assigned to *be allowed to* by Eastwood.

#### 4.4. In Reference to General Characteristics

Hofmann [1995: 102-103] presents another use of *can* and *could*. Although not used so often, it is “a very natural way to express *general characteristics*.” This, in Hofmann’s belief, is mastered by only a few foreigners. In this case, *can* and *could* depict “something that happens generally or characteristically and that probably annoys the speaker.” Some of Hofmann’s illustrations are:

(58) She *can* talk your ears off if you don’t watch out.

‘Cô ấy *có thể* nói đến khi cái tai của anh rớt lia ra nếu anh

không chú tâm quan sát.’

(59) She was in great pain and *could* get angry over the smallest thing.

‘Cô ấy (thì) rất khó chịu và đã có thể nổi giận vì cái chuyện nhỏ nhặt nhất.’

The meaning expressed by *can* and *could* here is quite similar to that of *will* and *would*. Hofmann confirms this by two ways. Firstly, he gives a few examples in which *can* substitutes for *will* (often) and *could* for *would* (often) with a small change in meaning. He did not, however, clearly assert what change it is:

(60a) I’ll spend the whole night, often enough, getting a program to run.

(60b) I can spend the whole night, getting a program to run.

‘Tôi thường dành trọn một đêm để làm cho chương trình này chạy.’

(61a) When I lived in Toyama, it *would* often snow 1 metre in a day.

(61b) When I lived in Toyama, it *could* snow 1 metre in a day.

‘Khi tôi sống ở Toyama, mỗi ngày trời thường rơi 1 mét tuyết.’

Secondly, Hofmann says that the negative form of *can* is *won’t* (not *can’t*) and that of *could* is *wouldn’t* (not *couldn’t*) as illustrated in the negative answers *No, she won’t* and *No, she wouldn’t* used to deny or refute the remarks in (58) and (59).

I have failed to recognize this very use of *can* and *could* in a number of English grammar textbooks commonly found in Vietnam. Therefore, I report it with care and with a strong desire for an opportunity to study it further in the future.

#### 4.5. In Reference to the Realis Modality

The above-mentioned analysis shows the many-faceted and multi-level modal verb *can*. There is still another way to clarify the modalities expressed by *can* and its alternative forms: observing the ways they express *the realis modality*. Let me compare the following pairs of sentences:

(62a) You are right.

‘Bạn (thì) đúng đấy.’

(62b) You *may* be right.

‘Có lẽ là bạn đúng.’

(63a) We didn’t understand the instructions.

‘Chúng tôi đã không hiểu những lời chỉ dẫn đó.’

(63b) We *couldn’t* understand the instructions.

‘Chúng tôi đã không thể hiểu những lời chỉ dẫn đó.’

(64a) John knows the answer.

‘John biết câu trả lời.’

(64b) John *might* know the answer.

‘John có thể biết câu trả lời.’

(65a) He didn’t come back yesterday.

‘Hôm qua anh ấy đã không về.’

(65b) He *can’t* have come back yesterday.

‘Anh ấy không thể nào đã trở về hôm qua được.’

‘Không (có) thể nào/ Không có lý nào anh ấy lại về hôm qua được.’

The absence of a modal verb in the sentences numbered (62a-65a) above is crucial for the exposure of the realis

modality. “We use *be* or an ordinary verb, not a modal, for absolute certainty” [Alexander, 1990: 157]. Both McKay [1995: 192] and Eastwood [1994: 124] approve of the remarkable observation.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1. Various Ways of Translating “Can” into Vietnamese

The English modal verb *can* is translated into Vietnamese in a number of different ways, and *có thể* is one of these ways, however frequent and thus prominent it is; in other words, besides *có thể*, among other Vietnamese counterparts of *can* are *có thể ... được*, as in (1); *được*, as in (3); *mới ... được*, as in (4); *biết*, as in (5); *có thể sẽ*, as in (8); and *thường*, as in (60b).

### 5.2. Means of Expressing Modality in English and Vietnamese

In English, modality is conveyed by the following lexical means of expression:

- Modal verbs (or just modals): *can, could, may, might, will, would, must*, etc.

- Ordinary verbs that temporarily play the role of modal verbs: *manage, succeed, fail*, etc.

- Adverbs: *already, yet, just, probably, perhaps, maybe, possibly, certainly*, etc.

- Special combinations: *be able to, be going to, be going to be able to, be allowed to, be permitted to, have a/ the right to, have permission to*, etc.

- Modal clauses: *I’m not sure, I don’t know, I think, I expect, it’s possible that, there’s a possibility that*, etc.

These lexical means sometimes combine with one or more grammatical means of expression, which are also known as morphological means of expression, to show a variety of modal meanings. For instance, the sentence:

(66a) Anh ấy chưa thể trở về (được).

has two English versions:

(66b) ‘He *hasn’t been able to* come back yet.’

(66c) ‘He *isn’t able to* come back yet.’

*Chưa*, which is a Vietnamese lexical item conveying modality, is equivalent to the combination of *the two English lexical items, not and yet*, and the two English grammatical means, the present tense and the perfect aspect, in (66b). Vuong and Moore [1994: 85] believe that it is quite acceptable for the simple to replace the perfect as in (66c), with no change in meaning.

From the standpoint of the Vietnamese language, the close combination of the English grammatical means and lexical ones in expressing modality constitutes redundancy, which is one of the principal causes of the serious grammatical mistakes frequently made by Vietnamese learners of English in their speech and/ or writing.

In the Vietnamese language, “modal meanings are generally expressed by lexical means, mostly by modal verbs, though others may be conveyed by adverbs such as (làm) rồi ‘(do) already’, (làm) lại ‘(do) again’, (làm) được

‘managed to (do)’, etc.” [Cao Xuan Hao, 1999: 261]

Jorden, Sheehan and Nguyen [1967: 3] say that grammatical means do not convey modality in Vietnamese because “unlike English verbs, Vietnamese verbs do not change their form to indicate differences of person, tense, etc. There is nothing in Vietnamese comparable to the difference in English forms like *run, runs, ran, running*, etc. A Vietnamese verb has only one form.” Vuong and Moore [1994: 23] and Cao Xuan Hao [1999: 262] approves of this remark.

### 5.3. *Inter-lingual vs. Intra-Lingual Difficulties in the Foreign Learners’ Acquiring Modality*

According to a hierarchy of difficulty originally proposed by Stockwell, Bowen and Martin [1965], Vietnamese learners of English have to face a lot of difficulties in Level 5 \_ Split. This is the most difficult level at which “one item in the native language becomes two or more in the target language, requiring the learner to make a new distinction” [Brown, 1994: 196].

Dealing with the very narrow scope of the modal expressions shown in this paper only, Vietnamese learners of English at one time consciously select one from a wide range of shades of meanings assigned to *can* and its alternatives: they have to choose between “the subject’s physical or mental capacities” and “the ability brought about by external circumstances,” between “general ability” and “the successful completion of a specific action,” between “the present or future ability” and “the past ability,” etc. Notice that the list above still fails to cover “permission” and “general characteristics.” (See 4.3. and 4.4. respectively.)

These difficulties are due first and foremost to the different ways according to which Vietnamese learners of English and native speakers of English get access to reality and then express modality in accordance with their various slices of the real or imaginary world. Let me call them *inter-lingual difficulties*. Brown [1994: 201], on the other hand, approves of Oller’s and Ziahosseiny’s idea [1970], asserting that “greater differences do not always result in greater learning difficulty;” they “are often easily perceived and stored in memory” because of their saliency. Basing on my own experience as a life-long non-native learner and university teacher of English as well as on the serious conclusions I have drawn from my two overseas graduate programs in Australia and in the USA, I approve of this idea, too.

Thus, what are the real difficulties facing Vietnamese learners of English, the ones that must be overcome if the learners want to master the ways to express modality in English declarative sentences? In my opinion, these are tricky and sophisticated points within the English language itself. They originate in the complex nature of the expression of ideas via language, and the expressions of modality take up only a small proportion. Let me call them *intra-lingual difficulties*.

Brown [1994: 201-202] warns us of the danger of underscoring the errors that come from the tricky and sophisticated points within a certain language. He says that

“intra-lingual factors can lead to some of the greatest difficulties” in the acquisition of a second language. Vietnamese learners can do nothing to change or get rid of the so-called redundancies or the complexities in English. This does not mean, however, that these learners are in a too disadvantageous position to study a language that is quite different from their mother tongue. Being an international language, English has been studied closely and thoroughly all over the world, and the achievements in this field is remarkable. With a little patience and a few required language skills, Vietnamese learners undoubtedly acquire all the different ways of expressing subtle modal meanings in English declarative sentences through a large quantity of current textbooks and other reference periodicals.

At first glance, the British, American and Australian people and those who speak English as their mother tongue seem to have some advantages in learning Vietnamese. They appear to be comfortable, recognizing that two or more “items in their native language become coalesced into essentially one item in the target language” [Brown, 1994: 195]. In the above-mentioned hierarchy of difficulty this phenomenon is referred to as Level 1 \_ Coalescence. Studying a few lexical modals such as *biết, được, có thể* and *có thể ... được* and paying adequate attention to their position(s) and their ability to substitute for one another in Vietnamese utterances, the “true beginners” will be able to express a number of modal meanings. On the other hand, they will face the problem of perceiving various modal shades of meaning in specific contexts. How do they know that *có thể* in a particular situation signals “physical or mental capacities,” “possibility,” “permission,” or “general characteristics?” The suggested answer is they have to depend on the whole utterance, the whole text or the context. In other words, to understand Vietnamese utterances they have to rely more on contextual clues, much more than they do when they deal with English texts. And this is not always easy for them, those who are familiar with a language almost all modal expressions of which have their own formal marker or markers, all being identified clearly in the structure of any sentence or verb phrase.

### 5.4. *Potential Similarities Between English and Vietnamese in Expressing Modality*

As far as language functions are concerned, both English and Vietnamese are efficient means of communication; but “modality is expressed differently in different languages” [Hoang Trong Phien; 1980: 51], especially in the two languages of different types like English and Vietnamese. However, it is unnecessary for the differences to play crucial roles throughout the process of comparing the two languages. Within the very differences a lot of similarities will probably be recognized, and they are the objective bases for any translation or interpretation activity to be successfully carried out. Let me illustrate the so-called potential similarities. It is easy enough to find out a number of English sentences that are lexically and structurally equivalent to the following Vietnamese sentences extracted from The Vietnamese

Language: A Rough Draft on Functional Grammar by Cao Xuan Hao [2017: 331-332]:

- (67) “a. *Chắc chắn là* Nam sẽ trúng cử.  
 b. Nam *chắc chắn (là)* sẽ trúng cử.  
 c. Nam trúng cử *là cái chắc*.  
 d. *Theo tôi thì* Nam thế nào cũng trúng cử.  
 e. *Tôi tin chắc là* Nam sẽ trúng cử.  
 f. *Nam thì tôi tin chắc là* sẽ trúng cử.  
 g. Nam sẽ trúng cử *một cách chắc chắn*.  
 h. Nam sẽ trúng cử, *(và) đó là một điều chắc chắn.*”

And below are their English equivalents:

- (67) a'. *There is no doubt that* Nam will win the election.  
*Certainly/ Undoubtedly*, Nam will win the election.  
 b'. Nam will *certainly/ undoubtedly* win the election.  
 Nam will, *without doubt*, win the election.  
 c'. That Nam will win the election *is certain*.  
 d'. *In my opinion*, Nam will win the election.  
 e'. *I strongly believe that/ I do believe that* Nam will win the election.  
*I'm sure (that)/ I'm certain (that)* Nam will win the election.  
 f'. *As for Nam, I strongly believe that* he will win the election.  
*As for Nam, I do believe that* he will win the election.  
*As for Nam, I'm sure (that)/ I'm certain (that)* I he will win the election.  
 g'. Nam will win the election *certainly/ undoubtedly*.  
 h'. Nam will win the election, *and that is certain*.  
 Nam will win the election, *and there is no doubt about it*.

These similarities partly prove that studying ways to express modality in English and Vietnamese declarative sentences is interesting and fruitful. Its value is undeniable, especially in the current time of world-wide explosion of information and cross-cultural communication.

### 5.5. Limitation of this Paper

All the sentences analyzed in this paper are in the active voice and the indicative mood; therefore, I have no chance to compare them with those in other moods as well as in the passive voice to appreciate their modal meanings fully. Also, outside the scope of my research is the influence of intonation and other prosodic features on modality. I fail to cover within the limits of this paper context and some marked differences between British English and American English concerning modality, too. All bring about its unavoidable drawbacks.

## 6. Conclusion

It is interesting to come up with the fact that English native speakers' perceptions of the meanings conveyed by the English modal verbs are not exactly the same, as illustrated by the approximate certainty expressed by the English modals *may*, *might*, and *could* in McKay [1995: 192] in comparison to other authors' quoted statements, directly or indirectly. This has been raised once when I had a chance to

observe a number of my friends and colleagues, who are native speakers of English, responding to how they feel on possible change of meaning when the fronting of the English adverbial of time is applied in a number of selected declaratives<sup>5</sup>. As non-native speakers of English, we have to depend on natives, and in fact we refer back to the natives as frequently as we can. That is how we, as the non-natives, overcome the difficulties in dealing with the different ways of getting access to reality but having to express modality in virtually the same slices of the real or imaginary world, as the natives do, to communicate successfully via the English language.

This probably reflects why non-native speakers of English have been encouraged to think in English and expressed themselves directly in English. As far as I know, confronting this piece of advice, a great number of Vietnamese learners of English are confused, unfortunately. This paper and the like display an attempt to make clear such a piece of advice, leading these learners along the process of their second language acquisition less painfully. And hopefully learners of Vietnamese, especially those who are native speakers of English, may get benefits from the same pain experienced to explore the Vietnamese language.

“No theory ... is complete. That is, no matter how many facts a theory actually succeeds in explaining or predicting, there are always further facts in need of explanation, other facts about which the theory as yet makes no prediction (or possibly about which it makes a false prediction), and facts which do not seem to be readily describable in the terms provided by the theory” [Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007: 11]. That is why I would like to publicize the very paper in all modesty but with a strong desire for further consideration on various ways to express modality in English and Vietnamese declarative sentences, beyond the scope of *can*, its alternative modal expressions in the English language, and its seemingly accepted counterparts in the Vietnamese language, including *có thể*.

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<sup>5</sup>For further consideration, see Thanh Minh To (2014). The English adverbial of time vs. the Vietnamese range topic of time. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 2(6), 348-355.

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