'Can You Pass the Salt?': A Short-Circuited Implicature?

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Abstract

In this paper I will argue that we do not have to postulate that utterances like 'Can you pass the salt?' are 'indirect requests', which have to be accounted for as special uses of CAN, e.g. in terms of conventions or 'short-circuited implicatures'. Underlying this analysis is the assumption that CAN is ambiguous, with an 'ability', a 'possibility' and a 'permission' meaning. I will show that the claim that CAN is ambiguous is untenable, and instead propose a single unitary meaning for CAN. The interpretation of utterances like the above will then turn out to be a direct development of this unitary meaning, guided by the principle of Relevance.

1 Introduction

In the literature, utterances like (1) are generally regarded as being different from other utterances containing CAN, in that they are 'indirect speech acts'.

(1) Can you pass the salt?

Morgan (1978) says that expressions like this are 'apparently paradoxical' because:

> "One can use a sentence like Can you pass the salt? to convey a request, though it seems at first glance we would not want to consider the literal meaning of the sentence to be that of a request for the salt."
> (p. 262)

In order to account for this, different explanations have been put forward. Gordon and Lakoff (1975) offer an explanation based on Grice's (1975) notion of 'conversational implicature' and his Co-operative Principle. Sadock (1974) rejects the Gricean approach and proposes that utterances like (1) are in fact semantically ambiguous, the request reading being an instance of a 'speech act idiom'. Searle (1975) argues that "there can be conventions of usage that are

not meaning conventions" (Searle, 1975, p.76). He proposes that utterances like (1) are not idioms in the sense of being 'meaning conventions', but rather that they get their idiomatic flavour as a result of having become 'conventions of usage'. Morgan (1978), based on Searle's (1975) position, proposes that these 'conventions of usage' give rise to 'short-circuited implicatures', i.e. implicatures that are recovered automatically, without having to be 'calculated'. Morgan says that this explains the intuition that utterances like (1) are meant in their literal meaning even when they are used to make a request.

In this paper I want to challenge the assumption that utterances like (1) are 'indirect speech acts'. I will show that this view is based on the assumption that CAN is ambiguous, one of its meanings being 'ability', and I will argue that this assumption is untenable. Without this assumption there is no need to treat utterances like (1) as special cases, different from other utterances containing CAN. I will propose a basic unitary meaning for CAN, and I will show that our interpretation of utterances like (1) as requests can be explained as a direct development of this basic meaning of CAN, rather than a convention, or a (short-circuited) implicature.

I will start by looking at Morgan's (1978) proposal in more detail, and point out some of the problems that this proposal comes up against. I will then give an account of CAN's contribution to the interpretation process (as set out in Groefsema, 1991), and finally show how this explains how we come to interpret utterances like (1) as requests.

2 A short-circuited implicature?

Morgan (1978) argues that the expression Can you (do such and such)? is in some ways 'natural' and in some ways 'conventional'. What he means by 'natural' is that even when a communicator utters (1) to make a request, that communicator is using the sentence with its literal meaning of a yes/no question. That an addressee will interpret (1) as a request is not a matter of knowledge of English, but a matter of inferring the intentions of the communicator in uttering (1), which for Morgan means applying Grice's (1975) maxims. Morgan says about this that:

> "... the relation between what is said and what is conveyed as natural meaning is not arbitrary, as it is in the case of the literal meanings of words, but can be reasoned out from the literal meaning taken together with the facts surrounding the utterance (i.e. "context")."
> (Morgan, 1978, p. 267)

Morgan argues that some support for the claim that utterances like (1) are 'natural' in this sense, comes from the fact that the class of possible responses

to Can you ... is about what one would expect from its literal meaning. By 'conventional' Morgan means that (1) is idiomatic, i.e. what the expression had as an implicature in the past has now become its literal meaning. This would mean that an utterance of (1) is ambiguous between the literal meaning of a yes/no question and the literal meaning of a request. Morgan says that support for this view comes from the observation that we can use preverbal "please", which is associated with direct requests, with utterances like (1); and that we intuitively take (1) to be more direct than expressions like Are you able to ... and Is it possible for you to ...., which can be used to make indirect requests, but cannot occur with preverbal please. A third observation that Morgan gives as supporting the view that utterances like (1) are conventional is his claim that:

> "... although Can you pass the salt? is indeed CALCULABLE, it is not in fact calculated;rather, one gets the point more or less directly, without any inferential processing, which is what we would expect if it has become an idiom, thereby part of knowledge of language." (Morgan, 1978, p. 263)

However, Morgan does not tell us on what data he bases this claim, which as it stands has to be a consequence of the view that utterances like (1) are conventional, rather than evidence supporting that view.

In order to reconcile the opposing claims that utterances like (1) are 'natural' and 'conventional', Morgan refers to Searle's (1975) observation that there are two kinds of convention, meaning conventions and conventions of usage. 'Meaning conventions' are conventions of language, which Morgan considers to constitute all or part of our knowledge of language. 'Conventions of usage' at the other hand are not conventions of language, but rather conventions of usage of language, or conventions of the culture that uses the language. As an example of this kind of 'convention' Morgan refers to greeting someone by enquiring after that person's health in some cultures. 'Conventions of usage' can become 'meaning conventions' when the relation between what is said and what it is said for becomes arbitrary.

For Morgan the notion of 'convention of usage' is the key to an explanation of how we interpret utterances like (1). Morgan proposes that:

> "... The expression Can you ... is not an idiom, but has only the obvious literal meaning of a question about the hearer's abilities. One can readily see how the expression could have, via Grice's maxims, the implicature of a request. In fact it has become conventional to use the expression in this way. Thus speakers know not only that Can you ... has a literal meaning (a convention of language); they know also that using Can you ... is a standard way of indirectly making a request (a convention of usage). Both are

> involved in a full understanding by the hearer of what is intended in the use of the expression."
> (op. cit., p. 274)

Morgan goes on to say that this may be counter-intuitive because the 'feel' of an implicature is lacking. In order to account for this Morgan proposes that what we have here is a 'short-circuited' implicature, i.e. an implicature that is calculable, but not in fact calculated. Because it has become a convention of usage to utter Can you (do such and such)? to convey an indirect request, the hearer will know more or less immediately, without 'calculating the inference' that the implicature of a request was intended. However, Morgan argues, a speaker of the language who lacks knowledge of the convention can still recover the intended meaning by calculating the implicature.

A question to ask here is what it means for an addressee to 'know more or less immediately that the implicature of a request was intended'. Morgan says that what was formerly a matter of natural inference, has become a convention about language. This has given rise to a 'short-circuited' implicature, which then can be viewed as a 'conversational postulate'. It seems then that what Morgan means by saying that an addressee will know more or less immediately that the implicature of a request was intended, is that whenever an addressee encounters an utterance of Can you (do such and such)? this 'conversational postulate' is accessed automatically, and the utterance is interpreted as a request. However, a consequence of this would be that when someone asks me (2):

(2) Can you swim?

I would automatically access the 'conversational postulate', and interpret (2) as a request. However, (2) is commonly interpreted as a question about the swimming ability of the addressee, and it seems counter-intuitive to claim that every time we come across an utterance like (2) we first interpret it as a request and then reinterpret it as a question about our swimming ability.

Morgan could argue that when we encounter an utterance of Can you (do such and such)? we know that it has a certain literal meaning, but we also know that sometimes it automatically gives rise to a 'short-circuited' implicature. However, this position brings us back to utterances like (1) and (2) being ambiguous between a 'literal meaning' interpretation and a request interpretation, a position that Morgan intended to resolve by proposing his notion of 'short-circuited implicature'. Worse still, in order for an addressee to decide between these two interpretations s/he would have to make inferences about the communicator's intentions, so that the notion of a 'short-circuited implicature' becomes meaningless.

The root of this problem lies in what Morgan considers to be the literal meaning of Can you .... As quoted above, Morgan takes this as obviously

having the literal meaning of a question about the abilities of the hearer. Because of this, he takes it that expressions like Are you able to ... are synonymous to Can you..., thereby creating the problem of what the difference is between these synonymous expressions with regards to conveying a request. However, Morgan gives no justification for the claim that these expressions are synonymous. Besides, Can you... can be used to express other things than a question about the hearer's abilities. This raises the question of how one decides that the 'literal' meaning of questions like (1) is about the hearer's abilities.For example, take a situation in which two kids, Ann and Mary, want to go to the cinema together, and Ann has gone to her mother to ask permission to go. afterwards Mary asks (3):

(3) Can you come to the cinema?

Ann will not interpret (3) as a question about her abilities, or as a request, but rather as a question about whether she is allowed to go.
Morgan says about examples like this that:

> "I am ignoring other readings of Can you... (e.g. deontic and epistemic readings of Can) that are irrelevant to the present discussion."
> (op. cit., p. 274)

However, it seems to me that these other 'readings' of Can you... are not irrelevant to the present discussion, since in order for Morgan's proposal to work, there has to be some explanation of how an addressee decides on interpreting some utterance as, for example, deontic, rather than as a request.

If the 'conversational postulate' becomes available automatically whenever an addressee encounters an utterance of Can you (do such and such)?, then there is nothing to stop her/him from interpreting any question of this form as a request. In order to avoid this and keep Morgan's proposal, we would have to assume that CAN is multiply ambiguous, having (at least) a 'permission', a 'possibility', an 'ability' and an 'ability plus short-circuited implicature' reading. However, if an addressee has to decide between all these different interpretations, then s/he will have to make inferences about what the addressee intended to convey, and so infer that the communicator is making a request, rather than 'knowing this more or less immediately'.

It seems then that proposing a 'short-circuited implicature' to account for our interpretation of utterances like (1) as requests, does not in fact explain how we get this interpretation. As Morgan points out, the alternative to view an utterance like (1) as having the 'literal' meaning of a request, runs into problems because the possible responses to an utterance like (1) can be just what one would expect from its 'literal' meaning as a yes/no question, e.g. (4):

(4) No, I can't quite reach it.

It seems then that we have reached an impasse. However, as I said above, the root of the problem lies in what one takes the 'literal' meaning of CAN to be, so let's take a step back, and consider what it is that CAN contributes to the interpretation process.

3 CAN: The polysemy view

In the literature on modality one can distinguish two main views on modal verbs, on the one hand the view that the modals are polysemous, i.e. multiply ambiguous (e.g. Coates, 1983; Palmer, 1979, 1986), which seems to be the view that Morgan (1978) espouses; and on the other hand the view that the modals have a single unitary meaning, and that the apparent ambiguities are a result of the interpretation of an utterance containing the modal in a particular context (e.g. Ehrman, 1966; Kratzer, 1977; Walton, 1988).

On the polysemy view, three meanings are usually distinguished for CAN: an 'ability' meaning, i.e. CAN refers to the subject's inherent or learnt abilities, as exemplified by (5):

(5) John can swim

a 'permission' meaning, i.e. the subject is permitted or allowed to do something, as exemplified by (6):

(6) Can I smoke in here?

and a 'possibility' meaning, as exemplified by (7):

(7) Ann can drive you to the station tomorrow.

Coates (1983) says about 'possibility' examples that they are not homogenous and can only be defined in terms of not satisfying criteria for the 'ability' and 'permission' meanings (such as inherent or learnt abilities of the subject, or whether the utterance can be paraphrased with 'permitted' or 'allowed').

However, there are a number of problems which follow from the view that CAN has three distinct 'meanings'.

In the first place, there are many examples of uses of CAN where it is not clear to which of the three possible 'meanings' CAN refers, such as Palmer's (1979) example in (8):

(8) One thing you want to avoid, if you possibly can, is a present from my mother.

Palmer (1979) says about this that it is not clear whether CAN in (8) refers to the person's ability to avoid receiving a present, or to the possibility of doing so. Coates (1983) notes the same indeterminacy for examples like (9) and (10):

(9) These young assistants can give the pupils valuable practice in understanding and speaking the foreign language.
(10) All we can do is rake up somebody like Pier Plowman who was a literary oddity.

In order to account for this Coates (1983) proposes that the three 'meanings' of CAN are in fact two fuzzy concepts, 'permission' and 'ability', with an overlapping area, which accounts for the 'possibility' examples. Examples like (8), (9) and (10) fall somewhere in the area between the 'core' of the 'ability' concept and the 'possibility' area.

In the second place, there are examples of uses of CAN which cannot be assigned to any of the three distinguished meanings, nor can they be explained by proposing fuzzy concepts for CAN. As examples of these uses of CAN, Walton (1988) gives:

(11) You can wash up for a change.
(12) Can I get you an aspirin?
(13) You can forget about that ice-cream.
(14) You can get lost !

None of these examples can be successfully paraphrased by '(subject) has the ability to ...', '(subject) is permitted to ...', or 'it is possible that ...'.

Coates (1983) discusses an example which is similar to (12) above, given here as (15):

(15) Can I pour you your tea?

She says that:

> "This literally means 'do you give me permission to pour you your tea?' but is conventionally interpreted as meaning 'would you like me to ...?'."
> (Coates, 1983, p. 88)

Coates does not explain how she decides that the 'literal' meaning of (15) is 'permission', rather than something like: 'is it convenient that I pour you your tea?'. Besides, as we saw above, in order to be able to use notions like 'conventional interpretation' as an explanation, it has to be explicated what the difference is between a 'meaning' of CAN and a 'conventional interpretation'.

To account for examples like (16) and (17) Coates (1983) has to resort to a notion of 'pragmatic extension':

(16) Milord I can check if your lordship thinks it is helpful the exact date.
(17) Can we examine this more carefully.

Coates (1983) says that (16) has the pragmatic extension of 'willingness', and (17) of being a 'covert imperative'. Again, she does not explain what the difference is between a meaning of CAN, a 'pragmatic extension', or a 'conventional interpretation', nor does she explain how these 'pragmatic extensions' are arrived at.

In the third place, it is a question whether the three proposed 'meanings' for CAN do in fact cover what we communicate when we use CAN.
Consider, for example (18):

(18) The painters can paint the doors.

In isolation, (18) is commonly interpreted as expressing 'ability'. However, it could also be interpreted as expressing 'permission' or 'possibility'. Compare this to example (19), where a group of workers is discussing the schedule for the day:

(19) *A:* Who is doing what?
B: The painters can paint the doors.

Although the possibility of the action is determined by the painters' ability to paint, B's answer would not be interpreted as: 'the painters have the ability to paint the doors', but rather as: 'it is possible that the painters paint the doors.' Similarly, when we compare example (18) to example (20):

(20) The painters can paint the doors tomorrow.

we see that although in isolation sentence (18) is commonly interpreted as having the 'ability' meaning, sentence (20) cannot be interpreted as having this meaning in any context. The difference between these examples is not, however, that only (18) expresses 'ability' while (20) only expresses 'possibility' or 'permission': in both examples the possibility of the action depends on the painters' ability to paint. Nor is it the case that (20) is indeterminate between an 'ability' reading and a 'possibility' or 'permission' reading. Rather, the difference is that in sentence (20) the possibility of the action is not ONLY determined by the painters' ability to paint, but also by whether they are permitted, or whether it is possible for them to use this ability

on a particular day. That the painters' ability to paint does play a role in the interpretation of (20) is illustrated in the following exchange, by the oddity of B's reply:

(21) *A:* Can the painters paint the doors tomorrow?
? *B:* No, they can't, because they can't paint.

However, compare this to the following example, where some volunteers are helping to decorate a house:

(22) *Ann:* Can you paint the doors tomorrow?
Paul: No, I can't, because I can't paint.

To account for the oddity of B's reply in (21) on the polysemy view, one could say that CAN in the question in (21) is a 'possibility' or 'permission' CAN, and therefore requires a 'possibility' or 'permission' answer, rather than an 'ability' answer. Unfortunately, that would not account for the acceptability of Paul's answer in (22). Note moreover that B's answer in (21) still sounds odd when we replace CAN by another verb, as in (21'), which raises the question of whether 'ability' is really the 'meaning' of CAN:

(23) *A:* Will the painters paint the doors tomorrow?
? *B:* No, they can't, because they can't paint.

It seems then that, rather then by the use of CAN, the oddity of B's reply is caused by our strongly held assumption that painters have the ability to paint, whereas any assumption about Paul's ability to paint in (22) can easily be overridden on hearing his assertion that he cannot paint. However, if this is the case, then there is no justification for saying that in sentence (18) CAN *means* 'ability', but in sentence (20) CAN *means* 'possibility' or 'permission'. In (20) CAN facilitates 'ability' as part of the interpretation, and an account has to be given of how this facilitation relates to CAN's interpretation as 'ability' in examples like (18).

What then is the justification for having these three 'meanings' for CAN? Coates (1983) says that:

> "The validity of this three way distinction [of possibility, permission and ability, mg] is nicely demonstrated by the interrogative use of CAN, which questions the 'enabling' circumstances. (...) an utterance such as 'Can we smoke here?' questions the authority of the local rules and regulations, as to the permissibility of smoking. Interrogative examples involving 'Ability' CAN question the addressee's innate capacities:

(22) "Can you swim?"
"All commandos can swim," said Willie.

(...) Interrogative examples involving 'possibility' CAN question the existence of enabling (or disabling) circumstances. The addressee will often expand his yes/no answer to spell these out:

(24) *A:* Can you pick up your own trousers?
B: No, I don't think it'll - likely, I've got this meeting at three thirty.

(Paraphrase: 'the meeting at three thirty makes it impossible, probably').

(Coates, 1983, pp. 93-94)

On this view, the particular interpretations of CAN in different examples are taken to be different 'meanings'. If B's answer in Coates's (24) had been: 'No, because I can't get about anymore', CAN in A's question would have been an 'Ability' CAN, or, if B's answer had been: 'No, because they don't allow patients off the ward', CAN in A's question would have been a 'permission' CAN. This view then seems to imply that the hearer disambiguates CAN in the question, and then answers according to the meaning the speaker intends. However, consider the following examples, where some people have to make their way to a meeting:

(23) *A:* Can you drive?
B: No, I can't, I've never learnt.

(23') *A:* Can you drive?
B: Yes, I can.

According to the above view, CAN in the question in (23) is an 'ability' CAN, and B's answer is an 'ability' answer. However, B's answer in (23') would be inappropriate if B had the ability to drive, but did not have a driving license, or there was some other circumstance which prevented him from driving to the meeting; although by disambiguating CAN in the question as 'ability' CAN, he would have answered the question truthfully. On the above view, this would mean that A actually asked different questions in examples (23) and (23'). Moreover, there is a range of answers that could have been given to A's question, e.g.:

(24) No, I can't, because my license has been endorsed.
Yes, I can, but my license has been endorsed.
No, I can't, because by car is broken.
Yes, I can, but my car is broken.
No, I can't, because my eyesight is too bad.
Yes, I can, but my eyesight is too bad.

On the above view, these answers would be answers to a number of different questions, rather than to one.

A question to ask here is whether A actually intended to convey a particular 'meaning' of CAN, or whether it is the case that all A wants to convey is something like 'are the conditions such that [you drive]', leaving it to the hearer to check whether all the prerequisites are fulfilled, be they possibility, permission, ability, or something else. If this is the case then the hearer cannot disambiguate CAN in the question. What these examples then demonstrate is not the validity of the 'three-way distinction' of 'meanings' of CAN, but rather the validity of different interpretations in particular situations.

It seems then that claiming that CAN is ambiguous does not account for the facts; on the one hand, this claim is too strong, because it is not the case that CAN is always disambiguated, on the other hand the claim is not sufficient, because it leaves a whole range of examples unexplained. Rather then viewing CAN as having different meanings and referring to examples that do not fit into the distinguished meanings as 'exceptions' or 'pragmatic extensions' without an explanation of how these extensions are arrived at, what is needed is an account of CAN that explains the different interpretation in a unified way. The question is whether the polysemy view is capable of giving such an account. On the view that CAN is ambiguous we would expect that it can be disambiguated in all cases. However, as was shown above, there are many cases in which a straightforward disambiguation is not possible. As we saw, there are cases of indeterminacy, such as Palmer's (1979) example, repeated here, of which Palmer says that it could either refer to the addressee's ability to avoid getting a present, or to the possibility of doing so:

(8) One thing you want to avoid, if you possibly can, is a present from my mother.

However, compare this to a 'clear' ability example, such as (25):

(25) It is now getting quite difficult to find choir boys old enough to behave in church who can still sing treble.
(Coates, 1983, p.92).

The interpretation of examples like (8) is not indeterminate in itself, it would commonly be interpreted as something like (8'):

(8') One thing you want to avoid, if you have any options for doing so (whatever they are), is a present from my mother.

Nor does (8) seem more difficult to interpret than (25). Indeterminacy is brought in only if we try to assign one of the three 'meanings' distinguished for CAN on the polysemy view, and as such it undermines the case for

polysemy. For an account which proposes that CAN has a single unitary meaning, there is no difference between the contribution that CAN makes to the interpretation of examples (8) and (25). As a consequence, (8) and (25) are equally 'clear' examples of the 'meaning' of CAN and the way is open for a principled explanation of how the different interpretations of utterances containing CAN are achieved.

4 CAN: the single unitary meaning view

In the literature there have been different proposals for what the basic meaning of CAN is. Ehrman (1966) proposes that the basic meaning of CAN is 'nothing in the state of the world prevents the predication'. However, as Walton (1988) points out it follows from a proposal such as this that positive modal utterances are semantically negative and negative modal utterances are semantically positive or double negative, which seems implausible. Besides, consider my saying something like (26) to a friend who has invited me to a party:

(26) I can come to your party next week

Although by uttering (26) I am communicating that nothing in the state of the world prevents the predication, the utterance seems to make a more positive assertion, namely that as far as I can see I will actually come to your party. In order to cope with intuitions like this Ehrman has to invoke a notion of 'overtones', derived from the basic meaning of CAN, but conditioned by elements of context. Ehrman does not explain when and how these 'overtones' come into play.

Perkins (1983) proposes a similar meaning for CAN which he formulates as 'K(C does not preclude x)', where 'K' stands for a system of organized belief (for example, natural or social laws), 'C' for a set of circumstances, and 'x' for the truth of the proposition p or the occurrence of an event e. However, this proposal encounters the same problems as Ehrman's (1966) proposal, and in addition it is often difficult to assign any value to 'K'; for example it is hard to see what natural or social laws underlie an example like (26).

Sweetser (1990) analyses the modals from the point of view that a structured system of metaphors underlies much polysemy in language. She proposes that the root senses of the modals (which she views as being within the 'external world' domain) are projected into the epistemic (internal) domain. For CAN, however, she only proposes one meaning, because she takes it that CAN can be used epistemically only in negative and interrogative forms. Sweetser's analysis of CAN is that CAN denotes positive ability on the part of the doer. As a physical analogy to CAN Sweetser proposes 'potential' force or energy. However, this characterization is not without problems. Reconsider example (12), repeated here:

(12) Can I get you an aspirin?

According to Sweetser's characterization of CAN we should be able to paraphrase this with (12'):

(12') Does some potentiality enable me to get you an aspirin?

According to this analysis the addressee's wanting an aspirin would enable the speaker to get one. But in this example it is not the ability of the speaker that is at stake, but rather the speaker is offering to use her/his ability to get an aspirin. However, Sweetser's characterization of 'ability' differs from, for example, Coates (1983), as given in the last section. Sweetser says that:

> "...the best force-dynamic characterization I can give for ability is to say that it is the human physical and social modality in terms of which we view potential energy in physics."
> (Sweetser, 1989, p. 53)

As far as I am able to interpret this characterization, it seems that the way in which Sweetser would explain (12) is that the addressee's wanting an aspirin would enable the speaker to turn his/her potential for getting an aspirin into actually getting the aspirin. However, on this interpretation (12) seems to express the speaker asking for permission to get an aspirin;it still does not explain why (12) is commonly felt to be an offer on the part of the speaker.

Sweetser's analysis runs into worse problems when we try to apply it to an example like (27):

(27) Accidents can happen.

According to Sweetser's characterization of CAN we should be able to paraphrase this with (27'):

(27') Some potentiality enables accidents to happen.

In the literature it has been argued that CAN in (27) is used epistemically (e.g. Perkins, 1983; Walton, 1988). Because Sweetser does not allow that CAN can be used epistemically in declaratives, the only interpretation of (27) that her analysis of CAN gives is (27'), which does not seem to express what is communicated by an utterance of (27).
Furthermore, Sweetser does not explain how we get from the proposed basic meaning for CAN to the different interpretations that CAN is felt to have.

Walton (1988) picks up on the notion of 'potential', which he proposes as the basic meaning of CAN. Walton uses paraphrases to express the modals'

propositional operator function, which for CAN he gives as: 'the potential exists that p' (where p is the proposition expressed by the sentence in which the modal stands as first auxiliary in the verb phrase). He argues that it does not matter that a notion like 'potential' is not semantically transparent, because:

> "The explanatory power of these paraphrases will be shown to be semantically adequate in clearing the undergrowth of "contextual meaning" which surrounds the modals, and in dealing with a wide range of issues in modal pragmatics."
> (Walton, 1988, p. 51)

Walton argues then that we have to turn to pragmatics rather than semantics for an explanation of how we get the different interpretations that utterances containing modals are felt to have. Walton rejects the Gricean approach to pragmatics (cf. Grice, 1975), which proposes that communication is governed by the Co-operative Principle, consisting of a number of maxims. He says that this approach is based on a number of untenable assumptions, for example, the assumption that communicators always give us the most, the best and the most relevant information, and the assumption that communicators and addressees have mutual knowledge. Instead, Walton bases his account on Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). He argues that his proposed basic meaning for CAN together with Relevance theory gives an adequate explanation of CAN's contribution to the interpretation process. However, this claim does not seem to be borne out. Take, for example, (28):

(28) Ann can speak fourteen languages.

When we interpret (28) in isolation, we commonly get the interpretation in (28'):

(28') Ann has the ability to speak fourteen languages.

Besides, it is well nigh impossible to think of a context in which (28) would be interpreted without 'ability' being part of the interpretation. Walton says that:

> "... it is not the sentences with CAN or CAN itself which select the meanings of 'ability', 'possibility' or any other meaning of CAN. These are the interpretations of the modal sentence in a particular context."
> (op. cit., p.46)

Although context indeed seems to play an important role in the interpretation of utterances containing modals, this statement seems too strong for two

reasons. In the first place, it implies that when we encounter (28) in isolation, we are not able to interpret it as (28'). Yet we do interpret (28) as (28') when processed in isolation, and moreover, as was noted above, (28) resists being interpreted differently in whatever context we could supply. This points to the sentential context (i.e. the concepts referred to in the sentence) as playing a role in the interpretation process as well as the extralinguistic context, but Walton does not account for this. In the second place, the linguistic semantic content (or basic meaning) of CAN has to be rich enough to explain why some enrichments are possible and others are not, and Walton's notion of 'potential' does not seem to be capable of doing this. Compare CAN's basic meaning of 'potential' with Walton's proposal for MAY as expressing 'possibility'. On the basis of Walton's quote above, one cannot explain why (28) would be interpreted as (28'), but (29) cannot be interpreted as (28'):

(29) Ann may speak fourteen languages

On Walton's account, MAY's function as a sentential operator can be paraphrased as:'it is possible that p', which would give (29'):

(29') It is possible that Ann speaks fourteen languages

Walton does not explain why CAN's sense of 'potential' can be enriched to express 'ability', but MAY's sense of 'possibility' is not/cannot be enriched to express 'ability', for example, because the possibility is due to Ann's ability. It seems then that Walton's proposal for the basic meaning of CAN is not explicit enough to be able to give a satisfactory account of CAN's role in the interpretation process.

Kratzer (1977) proposes that the basic meaning of CAN is a neutral 'possibility' meaning complemented by the phrase 'in view of'. CAN then relates the proposition expressed by the sentence with a completion of 'in view of'. This completion is done from the 'conversational background' (context). Kratzer works within the classical possible world tradition. For her a 'conversational background' is a function that assigns sets of propositions to possible worlds.

A problem with this in relation to the study of semantic properties of natural language is that although 'possible worlds' may be a useful tool in formal semantics, when we want to investigate how people interpret natural language utterances, we cannot just stipulate that there are 'possible worlds', but we have to come up with some explanation as to what they are and how we use them.

A more general problem with Kratzer's account is that on her story there has to be a unique 'conversational background' for some sentence to express a proposition. However, as Sperber & Wilson (1986) argue, no unique context is given; rather an addressee chooses a context against which an utterance is

relevant to her/him, which implies that addressees may interpret an utterance differently depending on their choice of context. Besides, by saying that there has to be a unique 'conversational background', Kratzer is in effect claiming that we cannot interpret a sentence like (28) when processed in isolation: her account offers no explanation of how we come to interpret (28) as expressing that Ann has the ability to speak fourteen languages.
Kratzer (1981) goes on to try and distinguish between different sorts of 'conversational backgrounds', depending on what kind of information they contain, such as an 'epistemic conversational background' and a 'deontic conversational background'. However, it turns out that it is as difficult to classify all the different possible 'conversational backgrounds' as it is to classify all the possible interpretations that CAN may have.

It seems then that none of the above proposed basic meanings for CAN can account for the different interpretations that we feel CAN can have. What has become clear though is that proposing a unitary meaning for CAN in itself is not enough to give a satisfactory account of how this interpretation process takes place. By rejecting the view that we can position the different interpretations of CAN at the semantic level (the polysemy view), we have to look for a theory of pragmatics which can explain in a principled way how we get from a unitary semantics to different interpretations of CAN in use. One possible candidate would be Grice's (1975) approach to pragmatics. Grice makes a distinction between *what is said* and *what is implicated*. Working out *what is said* involves recovering the linguistic meaning of words, disambiguation and reference assignment. Implicatures at the other hand have to be calculated. Grice claims that the truth conditions of an implicature do not contribute to the truth conditions of *what is said* (the literal meaning expressed by the utterance): they are functionally independent. A consequence of this is that implicatures are cancelable without causing a contradiction in *what is said*. When we apply these ideas to a unitary meaning view of CAN, the following picture arises: when we process (28), repeated here:

(28) Ann can speak fourteen languages.

what is said is (28"):

(28") Ann (basic meaning of CAN) speak fourteen languages.

From this (28'), repeated below, has to be calculated:

(28') Ann has the ability to speak fourteen languages.

According to Gricean pragmatics (28') has to be cancellable without causing a contradiction, as in (30):

(30) Ann can speak fourteen languages. However, she does not have the ability to speak fourteen languages.

However, (30) does not make sense, because it does give us a contradiction. It seems then that (28') cannot be an implicature. But according to Grice it cannot be part of *what is said*, because 'ability' is not the linguistic meaning of CAN nor can it be obtained by reference assignment or disambiguation. It seems then that the Gricean approach to pragmatics cannot explain how CAN gets its different interpretations.

If (28') contributes to the truth conditions of (28), then it must be part of what is explicitly communicated. A theory which can explain how this is possible is Sperber & Wilson's (1986) Relevance theory.

5 Relevance Theory

The basic claim of Relevance theory is that in processing information people try to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible amount of processing cost. Sperber & Wilson (1986) postulate that human cognition and communication is driven by relevance and the maximisation of relevance. What they mean by this notion of relevance is that information is relevant to an individual if it yields contextual effects, i.e. if it interacts in a certain way with the individual's existing assumptions about the world. They distinguish three different types of contextual effect, strengthenings, contradictions, and contextual implications.

Assumptions can be held with different degrees of strength. A 'strengthening' of an assumption takes place if new information causes a person to have more confidence in an assumption already (weakly) held. New information may also contradict an existing assumption, in which case the weaker of the two assumptions is eliminated.
A contextual implication is defined as follows by Sperber & Wilson:

> A set of assumptions {P} contextually implies an assumption Q in the context {C} if and only if
> (i) the union of {P} and {C} non-trivially implies Q,
> (ii) {P} does not non-trivially imply Q, and
> (iii) {C} does not non-trivially imply Q.
> (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, pp. 107-108)

Where non-trivial implication is defined as:

> A set of assumptions {P} logically and non-trivially implies an assumption Q if and only if, when {P} is the set of initial theses in a derivation involving only elimination rules, Q belongs to the set of final theses.
> (op. cit., p. 97)

However, relevance cannot be established purely in terms of contextual effects. Computing contextual effects involves processing effort, and since we do not have infinite processing resources, this means that the more effort is required to work out the contextual effects of some phenomena, the less relevant it is. Because of this Sperber & Wilson define Relevance as follows:

a. The greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance.
b. The smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance.

According to Sperber & Wilson people will only pay attention to information they think is relevant, or more relevant than any other information they could be attending to at that moment. For a communicator this means that her/his information should be relevant to the addressee. Because a communicator asks for the attention of the addressee, the addressee is entitled to assume that the communicator is trying to be as relevant as possible. Sperber & Wilson capture this in the principle of relevance, which says that:

> "Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance."
> (op. cit, p. 158)

where the presumption of optimal relevance is defined as:

> a. The set of assumptions {I} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
> b. The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {I}.
> (op. cit., p. 158)

This principle of relevance differs from Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and maxims. Sperber & Wilson say about this difference that:

> "Grice's principle and maxims are norms which communicators and audience must know in order to communicate adequately. Communicators generally keep to the norms, but may also violate them to achieve particular effects;and the audience uses its knowledge of the norms in interpreting communicative behavior.

> The principle of relevance, by contrast, is a generalization about ostensive-inferential communication. Communicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principles of genetics to reproduce. Communicators do not 'follow' the principle of relevance;and they could not violate it even if they wanted to. The principle of relevance applies without exception."
> (op. cit., p. 162)

In order to derive contextual effects a context has to be found against which the information is to be processed. It has often been assumed that the context of an utterance is uniquely determined and that the relevance of the utterance is assessed against this context. Furthermore, it is assumed that the context is determined before the utterance is interpreted (eg. Brown and Yule, 1983; Levinson, 1983). However, Relevance theory proposes that an utterance communicates the presumption of optimal relevance. Because of this the addressee can take it that the relevance of the utterance is given, and therefore need not to be assessed. The task of the addressee is rather to select a context which bears out this guarantee of the relevance of the utterance. How is this context selected? Sperber & Wilson propose that at the start of processing some new item of information there is an initial context consisting of the assumptions left over in the memory of the deductive device from the immediately preceding deductive process. However, this context is merely an initial context which can be extended in different directions during the interpretation process. One way of extending the context is to add assumptions used or derived in previous deductive processes. A second way is to add assumptions stored under the encyclopaedic entries of concepts already present in the context or in the assumption being processed[1]. A third way of extending the context is to add to it information about the immediately observable environment. However, extending the context involves processing cost, which means that an addressee cannot freely access all kinds of different extensions, because this would diminish the overall relevance of the assumption being processed. Sperber &

[1]Sperber & Wilson (1986) see concepts as psychological objects considered at a fairly abstract level, which contain three distinct types of information: logical, encyclopaedic and lexical. What is present in a logical form is a conceptual address, a point of access to these different kinds of information. The logical entry of a concept contains deductive rules, associated with the concept, the encyclopaedic entry contains information about the extension and/or denotation of the concept, and the lexical entry contains information about the natural language counterpart of the concept.

Wilson take it that there is a finite set of contexts[2], and that they are ordered in range of accessibility:

> "The initial, minimal context is immediately given; contexts which include only the initial context as a sub-part can be accessed in one step and are therefore the most accessible contexts; contexts which include the initial context and a one-step extension as sub-parts can be accessed in two steps and are therefore the next most accessible contexts, and so on."
> (op. cit., p. 142)

A claim of Relevance theory which is especially important for our treatment of the modals is the claim that the linguistic content of an utterance underdetermines its propositional content, i.e. a semantically complete logical form. Sperber & Wilson say that linguistic coding and decoding is involved in communication, but that the linguistic meaning of an utterance falls short of encoding what the speaker wants to communicate: the addressee can only take the output of the linguistic decoding process as a piece of evidence about the communicator's intentions. The output of the linguistic decoding process is taken to be an incomplete logical form, which the addressee then has to complete into the fully propositional form, which the communicator intended to convey. This process of enriching the incomplete logical form is a pragmatic process; points at which the logical form is incomplete have to be assigned values from the context, and this assignment is done according to the principle of relevance.

This then can account for the claim that CAN has a single unitary meaning, but also gives rise to different interpretations: the output of the linguistic decoding process is a logical form containing the unitary meaning of CAN, which then can be enriched according to the principle of relevance to yield a full interpretation.

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[2]Sperber & Wilson (1986) say about this that: "We may assume that the memory of the deductive device has a limited, indeed a rather small capacity, so that no extensions beyond that capacity are possible. The maximal contexts are therefore those which, in view of their size, cannot be extended further." (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.261, footnote 7).

6 The basic meaning of CAN

I propose that the basic meaning of CAN is the following:

CAN: p is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p. (where p is the proposition expressed by the rest of the utterance).

A question to ask here is what it means for a proposition to have a bearing on another proposition. 'Bearing' here is a technical notion, which can be defined (cf. Groefsema, 1991).

A proposition P can have a bearing on a proposition Q in different ways. P positively has a bearing on Q iff Q or -Q follows from P, or Q or -Q follows from a set of propositions X together with P (where $X = \{x_1, ...,x_n\}$) , and Q or -Q does not follow from X alone, and Q or -Q does not follow from any set of propositions X' together with P (where X' refers to set X without the sentence x_i, for any i, $1 \leq i \leq n$). If we can conclude Q in this way, we can say that P positively has a positive bearing on Q. If we can conclude -Q in this way we can say that P positively has a negative bearing on Q.
P negatively has a bearing on Q, iff Q or -Q follows from -P, or Q or -Q follows from X together with -P, and Q or -Q does not follow from X alone, and Q or -Q does not follow from any X' together with -P. If we can conclude Q in this way, we can say that P negatively has a positive bearing on Q. If we can conclude -Q in this way, we can say that P negatively has a negative bearing on Q[3].

In informal terms, what the basic meaning of CAN does then is to focus the addressee's attention on all the 'evidence' (of whatever nature) for the proposition expressed. This basic meaning together with the Relevance theory view of how utterances are interpreted can account for the different interpretations that we give to utterances containing CAN.

I will illustrate this by discussing some of the examples given above. Let us look again at example (19), repeated here, where a group of workers building a house is discussing the schedule for the day:

(19a) *A:* Who is doing what?
(19b) *B:* The painters can paint the doors

This would yield the (incomplete) logical form:

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[3]With thanks to Nadim Obeid who helped me make my intuitions about 'bearing' and the meanings of the modals explicit, and who defined them in a formal way. These formalizations can be found in Groefsema, 1991.

(19') [$_p$ the painters paint the doors] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p.

This logical form has to be enriched in different ways. Reference has to be assigned to 'the painters' and 'the doors', and since the workers are discussing the schedule for the day, the interval 'today' is added, which yields:

(19") [$_p$ painters123 paint doors789 day15] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p.

What this logical form then does is focus the attention of the addressee on all the propositions which have a bearing on p, such as that the painters have the ability to paint, that the doors are ready for painting, that painting the doors will not interfere with the other jobs that have to be done, that paint and brushes are available etc. This then gives us the intuitive interpretation of (19b) as expressing 'it is possible that the painters paint the doors today'. This interpretation may gain relevance, for example in conjunction with an assumption such as (31):

(31) If the painters paint the doors today then the carpets can be laid tomorrow.

Together with assumption (31) B's utterance will yield the contextual implication:

(32) the carpet can be laid tomorrow.

In this example we cannot get an ability interpretation because CAN tells us to focus on all the 'evidence' that bears on the proposition, and whether the painters do paint the doors is not only dependent on their ability to paint, although it is a prerequisite for it.
However, compare this to a situation in which everything has been in readiness for the doors to get painted for a week, but all that week the two painters have been prevented from painting, because they have strained muscles. The carpet layers sit around twiddling their thumbs, when one of the workers walks in and says:

(33) The painters CAN paint the doors today.

Although CAN focusses the attention of the carpet layers on all the 'evidence' for the proposition expressed, they have known for a week that the paint and brushes are available, that the doors are ready for painting, etc. so that only the proposition that the painters have back their ability to paint will yield contextual effects: for example, that because the painters have back their ability

to paint they will paint the doors, and the carpet layers will be able to do their job. Because the only 'evidence' in this example that yields contextual effects is the painters' renewed ability to paint, our intuitive interpretations of this example is an 'ability' interpretation.
How then does this example relate to a 'clear' ability example such as (28)?:

(28) Ann can speak fourteen languages

When processing this sentence in isolation, we do not know who is referred to by 'Ann', what fourteen languages are involved, etc.
However, we do know in general that if someone performs an action/ activity, they have the ability to perform that action/activity; in other words, someone performing an action/activity entails that that person has the ability to perform that action/activity. According to Relevance theory, the human deductive device, when presented with a set of assumptions, automatically computes the full set of non-trivial implications. Since entailments are a subset of the full set of non-trivial implications, this means that when we process the incomplete logical form (28'):

(28') [$_p$ Ann speak fourteen languages] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p.

we automatically deduce that 'Ann has the ability to speak fourteen languages'. Because this is the only proposition which has a bearing on the proposition expressed, this yields an 'ability' interpretation.
In this respect CAN's 'ability' interpretation differs from other interpretations. Other interpretations depend on 'evidence' in the context. The processing cost involved in retrieving this 'evidence' has to be offset with contextual effects. However, the 'ability' interpretation is a result of the entailment relation and therefore becomes available automatically. This does not mean, however, that all sentences containing CAN and an action/activity verb will be interpreted as expressing 'ability' when processed in isolation. As an example of this, reconsider (20):

(20) The painters can paint the doors tomorrow

When processing (20) in isolation, we will automatically deduce that the painters have the ability to paint. However, 'tomorrow' indicates that what is at stake is not just that the painters have the property of 'painting' and therefore the property of 'having the ability to paint', but an instantiation of that property at a particular moment involving some particular doors. Given this together with the logical form of (20), i.e. (20'):

(20') $[_p$ painters(x1..xn) paint doors(y1..yn) day(z)] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on p.

we can conclude that all the 'evidence' supports painters(x1..xn) using their ability to paint, to paint doors(y1..yn) on day(z). In other words, this gives us the intuitive interpretion of (20) as expressing 'possibility'. Because (20) is processed in isolation, there is no way in which we can enrich the basic meaning of CAN any further, nor will there be any contextual effects: (20) in isolation is not an act of ostensive communication.

7 'Can you pass the salt?':a direct request

I started this paper by saying that I want to challenge the assumption that utterances like (1) are 'indirect speech acts'.

(1) Can you pass the salt?

In Speech Act theory interrogatives are taken to have the illocutionary force of questions, where questions are commonly characterized as follows:

> "Questions are special cases of requests, special in that what is requested is that the speaker provide the hearer with certain information."
> (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p. 40)

On this view, the speech act performed with utterances like (1) is a request for information. However, the communicator wants not only information, but wants the hearer to actually give her/him the salt. On the speech act view, this means that the communicator performs an indirect or implicit speech act, namely a request for the hearer to pass the salt. These different speech acts then can be dealt with using the Gricean distinction between *what is said*, a request for information, and *what is implicated*, a request for the hearer to perform the action.

This view is put forward by, among others, Morgan (1978), whose quote I will repeat here:

> "One can use a sentence like Can you pass the salt? to convey a request, though it seems at first glance we would not want to consider the literal meaning of the sentence to be that of a request for the salt."
> (Morgan, 1978, p. 262)

Morgan takes it that the literal meaning of CAN in utterances like (1) is 'ability'. It follows from this that *what is said* is a request for information, namely whether the addressee has the ability to pass the salt. When (1) is used to get the hearer to perform the action, this cannot be part of *what is said*, but must be implicated, i.e. an indirect speech act. However, I have argued above that the view that CAN has 'ability' as a literal meaning is untenable. This has as a consequence that (1) cannot 'literally' be a request for information concerning the hearer's ability to pass the salt. I showed that by rejecting the view that CAN has a literal 'ability' meaning in favour of a unitary meaning for CAN which is enriched by pragmatic processes, Grice's (1975) distinction between *what is said*, the literal (linguistic) meaning of a sentence, and *what is implicated* cannot be maintained. A consequence of rejecting this distinction is that it leaves us without a principled way in which to decide whether the speech act performed in (1) is direct or indirect.

I want to propose that utterances like (1) are in fact direct requests, rather than indirect requests. However, on the Speech Act theory view this is not possible because interrogatives are analyzed as requests for information. The question then is whether this is the right analysis for interrogatives.

Sperber & Wilson (1986) show that there are many interrogatives which present problems to the Speech Act analysis. They show, for example, that exam questions are asked not because the communicator wants to know the answer, but rather because he/she wants to evaluate the candidate's attempt at an answer, so that they cannot be intended as requests for information. Rhetorical questions are not asked as requests for information either: the communicator of a rhetorical question would normally not expect an answer at all. Expository questions are asked by a communicator to arouse the interest of the audience in an answer which the communicator plans to give her/himself, so that again they cannot be requests for information. Analyzing interrogatives as requests of information then offers no explanation for these sorts of questions. Sperber & Wilson offer an alternative analysis of interrogatives. They propose that the addressee of an interrogative utterance recovers its logical form and integrates it into a description of the form The speaker is asking Wh-P (in which P is the propositional form of the utterance), where P is relevant if true. In this analysis there is no mention of a request being made. Because of this, we do not have to make a distinction between direct requests and indirect requests as a consequence of recovering the illocutionary force of the interrogative utterance. Rather, whether an utterance is taken to be a request for information or a request for action will be decided by the way in which it is interpreted, i.e. whether it achieves relevance as a request of some sort.

How then is (1) interpreted? In a situation in which Ann and Mary are having dinner together and Ann utters (1), this would yield the logical form (1'):

(1') Ann is asking whether ($_p$[$_q$ Mary pass salt12] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on q) and p is relevant if true

This then encourages Mary to focus on all the 'evidence' there is for her passing the salt to Ann, such as whether she is physically able to do it, whether the salt is standing in front of her, whether the salt cellar is not empty, etc. In the case of any of these things being incompatible with her passing the salt to Ann, this will cause Mary to utter something like (34) or (35):

(34) No, sorry, but I can't reach it
(35) No, the salt cellar is empty

However, in a situation in which it is obvious that Mary is physically able to pass the salt etc., this 'evidence' will fail to achieve relevance, because it will not give rise to new contextual effects. The only 'evidence' that will give rise to contextual effects will be the proposition 'Mary pass salt12', for example with an assumption such as (36):

(36) If Mary passes the salt then Ann can put salt on her food

The best way in which Mary can communicate to Ann that 'Mary pass salt12' is compatible with 'Mary pass salt12', is then to actually hand her the salt. However, it is quite possible for Mary to say (37), whilst handing the salt to Ann:

(37) Yes, here you are

by which she communicates that [$_q$Mary pass salt12] is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on q, and provides the strongest evidence for it at the same time. In the same way, if one is stopped by a stranger on the street who asks (38):

(38) Can you tell me the way to the station?

(38) focusses the addressee's attention on the 'evidence' for the proposition expressed, such as whether s/he knows the way to the station. However, a relevant answer cannot just be "yes": the knowledge that the communicator is a stranger gives access to the assumption that if a stranger asks your attention then they have a reason for that. (38) gives easily accessible evidence that the reason is that they do not know the way to the station, and that once they know the way to the station then they can go to the station. Because of this, the only relevant answer one can give to (38), if one knows the way to the station, is to

provide the 'evidence' for the proposition expressed, i.e. tell the communicator the way to the station.

On this analysis, we do not have to postulate that (1) is interpreted as a request for action, and (38) is interpreted as a request for information. The way in which the addressee interprets these utterances will give rise to their providing 'evidence' for the proposition expressed (if they can), which for (1) will be a physical action, and for (38) will be the action of providing the communicator with information.

Notice that there are many requests for action to which it is perfectly acceptable to answer 'yes'. For example, imagine John asking Mary (39):

(39) Can you come to my party next friday?

(39) focusses Mary's attention on all the 'evidence' she has for coming to John's party. If the proposition expressed is compatible with all the 'evidence' for it, this may cause Mary to say 'yes'. However, because 'Mary comes to John's party next friday' is part of the 'evidence' for the proposition expressed, Mary's answer entitles John to expect that she actually will come to his party.

On this analysis, it is not necessary to postulate that the addressee explicitly represents that a request has been made at all. It is the communicator who intends the utterance to be interpreted as a request, and he/she will choose a linguistic form which he/she thinks will be interpreted in such a way that the addressee fulfills the request if he/she can. In order to guide the addressee to the intended interpretation, the communicator can use a marker like "please" to show the desirability to the communicator of the proposition expressed.

8 Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that it is not necessary to postulate that utterances like (1) are 'indirect requests', different from direct requests for information like (38). Rather, their interpretation is a straightforward development of the basic meaning proposed for CAN. There is no need to use a notion like 'convention' in order to explain how an addressee comes to interpret utterances like (1) as requests, in fact the addressee does not have to represent to her/himself that a request is being made, because the only relevant interpretation is the one which causes the addressee to directly provide the 'evidence' for the proposition expressed (in the case in which the addressee is able to provide this evidence).

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