

# Modal verbs in Pakistani English: Case study of Can and Could A corpus-based Comparative analysis

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## Abstract

This study explores the use of modal verbs Can & Could in Pakistani English variety. It is a corpus based exploration that compares the use of Can & Could in Pakistani English Fiction (PEF) and British English Fiction. (BEF). It is a quantitative as well as qualitative research. The study investigates how on the semantic level these two modals verbs work in Pakistani English variety. This study helps us to locate the tendencies of the use of Can & Could in Pakistani English variety. The comparison of these tendencies on semantic level with BEF provides a proof to establish Pakistani English as a separate variety.

## 1. Introduction

English has become a lingua franca all over the world. It is being frequently used in all areas of the world and in all departments like business, trade, law, medicine common day to day affairs. It is a source of communication and is understood all over the world. The post-colonial scenario has given birth to the different varieties of English. It is still unanswerable matter for linguists to decide that 'Who owns English'? (Widdowson, 1993) Is it owned by the native speakers or the non-native speakers whose number has been rising day by day as compared to native monolingual speakers? Even the matter has become quite difficult today regarding which model to follow in learning English, either the British model or the American model and which paradigm, EFL, ENL or ESL should be adopted in learning English language? The present research also explores the features of non-native variety of English i.e. Pakistani English and the above-mentioned features make the theoretical background for the present research.

Once the focus of the linguists was the standardization & nativization but with the spread of English and increase in the number of users other than the native people, the focus is now correct codification of English. The present study is an attempt to contribute in this connection. It studies modal verbs in Pakistani English with its focus on can & could. The deviant use of can & could has been studied on semantic level with their use for the expressions of politeness, surprise category.

## 2. Literature Review

In Pakistan, the English language has established its status and has become 'Lingua Franca'. It has proved a major 'link language' and bridged the country with the whole English speaking world. The English language is not only being used for the official purposes but also being beneficially used in Islamic law and Sharia. In all the educational institutions, British English model is followed to design the syllabus of English at various levels. With the arrival of Cable Media in Pakistan, people have started watching the American movies and have also been using American English over the last many years. Both British and American models of English are being used by Pakistani people. Pakistani English (PE) fulfils all the requirements needed to be called New English. Kachru (1983) also observed some tendencies of using more complex structures in the South Asian Englishes which make them overloaded in their diction. Mahmoo.R. worked on the lexico-syntactic study of noun phrase in Pakistani English. Aqila(2012) worked on the modal verbs in Pakistani English. The present research studies the modal verbs can & could in Pakistani English and highlights the innovative use of these modal verbs on semantic level.

## 3. Methodology & Analysis

The present study is mixture of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The theoretical framework of the present study is world Englishes and the data consists of one million corpus of Pakistani English Fiction (PEF) compiled by the researchers of GC, university Faisalabad, Dr.Rashid Mahmood and Dr. Asim Mahmood and has been approved by ICE-Hk. The one million corpus of PEF has been compared with the one million corpus of British English fiction (BEF) also compiled by the same researchers. The frequencies of both modal verbs can & could have been explored in different contexts and compared in both corpora and differences have been studied.

### 3.1. Can/ Could in Present Day Pakistani English

In this section the use of can/could in present day Pakistani English will be discussed.

### 3.2. Use of Can/Could in Pakistani English

Table-01

Token	PEF	BEF
Can	8272	5672
Could	8426	8741

The table- 01 shows that Can is more frequently used in PEF but usage of Could is almost same in both PEF & BEF.

The purpose of the study is to look into how in various ways Can & Could are being used in PEF by comparing their use in BEF. The study focuses itself over the use of could for the expression of surprise and can for the expression of politeness/polite request/polite question in PEF.

An endeavor has been made to show through comparison frequency tables & examples from PEF that Pakistani English has its own norms and it is no more following the standards set by British English. The next sections of this chapter deal with the comparison frequency tables (PEF & BEF) of the use of Could & Can for the expression of Surprise & Politeness. Also, examples from PEF have been produced & discussed in these two categories.

### 3.2.1 Use of Could for Expression of Surprise in Pakistani English

It has been noted during the study of could in both PEF & BEF that besides other uses it is used for the expression of Surprise in both the varieties. The difference of the frequency of the use of Could in the category of Surprise shows (Table-2) that its use in this category is far less (almost half) in BEF as compared with PEF. The examples below discuss the use of Could in the category of surprise.

1-How fantastic could it be? (PEF, 36)

2-How could anyone reduce that man's life to this? (PEF, 61)

In examples 1 & 2 there is a straight away expression of surprise over some action or an object.

3- What's the secret? What could be the secret? What could keep her away for so long? (PEF, 55)

In example 3, Could is being used for guessing followed by the expression of surprise by using the interrogative pronoun 'what' instead of 'how' as was the case in the first two examples.

4-How could she tell me such a line as 'Domesticity or a dildo'? No, she would not tell me that. (PEF, 94)

Example 4 gives a kind of construction that expresses a surprise and then a response from the same character to justify that surprise.

5-How could a government be stupid enough to kill him while everyone knew he was working on a collection of political poems? How could a government be stupid enough to do that when, for all they knew, there were copies of his poems in someone's house, in someone's memory, making their way to someone's mailbox? It made no sense. (PEF, 154)

6- But even if I were part of the game, how could I act differently, how could I pass this opportunity by?

If the explorers knew the treasure map was written by a malevolent hand, would that stop them from digging deep into the earth in search of what was buried? (PEF, 262)

Example 5 & 6 express surprise then an emphatic could construction deepens that surprise and then the reason for the expression of surprise.

7-I wondered how I could ever have been so ungenerous and so blind to have thought otherwise, and I was disturbed by what this implied about myself: that I was a man lacking in substance and hence easily influenced by even a short sojourn in the company of others. (PEF, 165)

In example 7, there is a combination of wonder & surprise by using 'Could' construction.

8- Samia knew well enough not to say anything. She started walking down the street, a few paces ahead of me, but aware enough of my footfall to look back when I stopped to scrape a bit of banana off the sole of my shoe. I refused to catch her eye. How could she just pull me off the train like that? How could she? Could she? Could she do such a thing if I were not willing? Could she have done it if in that split second between Khaleel saying 'Liaqua-tabad' and Samia's hand reaching out to grab mine I hadn't already thought of escaping? (PEF, 230)

Example 8 shows the multiple and emphatic expression of surprise by using 'could' construction. 'could' is being used five times for the expression of surprise. This continuous expression of surprise hangs the text between belief & disbelief.

Table- 2 shows the occurrence of Could in the category of surprise in both PEF & BEF.

Table-2

	Could	% of Could
PEF	337	4
BEF	174	2

Table- 2 suggests that occurrence of Could in the category of surprise in PEF is far greater as compared with BEF. When percentage of this occurrence in the surprise category out of the total occurrence of Could (Table-1) was calculated, it was found to be 4% in PEF and 2% in BEF. It is double in PEF as compared with BEF.

### 3.2.2. Use of Can for Expression of Politeness/Polite Request/Polite Question in Pakistani English

The 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of this study notes that the total frequency of the occurrence of Can in PEF (8272) is larger as compared with BEF. (5672) as is shown by table-1. The interesting aspect of the study of Can in the category of expression of politeness is that it occurs more in BEF as compared with PEF in this category as shown by table-3. Also, the examples below discuss that Can is being used for polite offer, polite request and polite question in

Pakistani English.

1-I suppose it does look like that."

"Can I have some?"

I look down. "Where's Ozi? We should all share it."

2-"Can you get me some ex?" I ask, reminding him that he's my dealer first and my friend only a very distant second.

3-I'm thirsty, and the smell from Murad Badshah's armpit is overpowering. I want to get rid of him. "Can I offer you a beer?" I ask, standing up.

4-My mouth tastes awful. "No one," I say. "Just a friend." "Listen, Daru, can you do me a favor?" "Is everything all right? Where's Ozi?"

5-I say, motioning for her to sit. "Can I offer you some lunch?" "No thanks," she says

In examples 1-5, a polite offer has been made by using Can in interrogative sentences. Can has been frequently used in this category in PEF.

6-Her mobile. How classy. I think quickly: What can be wrong in going with her? Ozi would want me to help her out.

7-"What about boxing?" "I hit a bag sometimes." "Can you teach me?" she asks.

8-"Is everything all right?" I ask. "Yes. So can you sell me some more?" "Of course.

9-it'll be twenty years.' I looked at the CEO. 'Can you send me the bio?' He nodded and put his hand

10-she said, 'Aasmaani, can I ask you a personal question?'

11-All those political ideals, notions of inspiration and activism and all that good stuff which you used to lecture me about in response to a question as seemingly apolitical as "Can I borrow your Walkman?" Was it when the Poet died or when your mother disappeared? I can't remember.'

12-'Can I ask you something?' 'Of course,' she said.

Polite questions have been asked by using Can. The examples 6-12 prove that use of any other verb than 'can' would have marred the degree of politeness.

13-'Can I hear some poetry, Mirza? Please. For old times' sake.' He looked startled and I realized he was as lost in his thoughts about those days as I had been. 'Go on. Recite a poem for me.'

14-'Yes' 'but, please, Can we avoid the tangle of family rights and privilege?'

Examples 13 & 14 are the examples of polite requests by using 'Can' constructions.

Table-3 shows the occurrence of Can in the category of politeness.

Table-3

	Can	% of Can
PEF	147	1.77
BEF	117	2.06

Table-3 points out an interesting fact that the overall occurrence of Can in PEF is greater as compared with BEF but its occurrence in the category of politeness is less in PEF as compared with BEF in the same category.

### 3.2.3. Replacement of Might be by could be in Pakistani English

It has been a tendency in Pakistani variety of English that the constructions which take *might be* are formed by using *could be*. This section of the study deals with this tendency by first comparing the frequencies of both could be & might be in PEF & BEF and then quoting such examples from PEF to prove this tendency.

Token	PEF	BEF
Could be	504	548
Might be	387	464

The above table suggests that frequency of occurrence of could be in both PEF & BEF are the same but it is not the same with might be. Its frequency differs in PEF & BEF. The reason being the replacement of might be by could be in PEF. This in turn proves the larger frequency of could in PEF.

Following are some examples to prove the above tendency.

1- We could be hiding enormous differences. (PEF,3)

2- I am sending this too you, though it could be dangerous for me. (PEF,5)

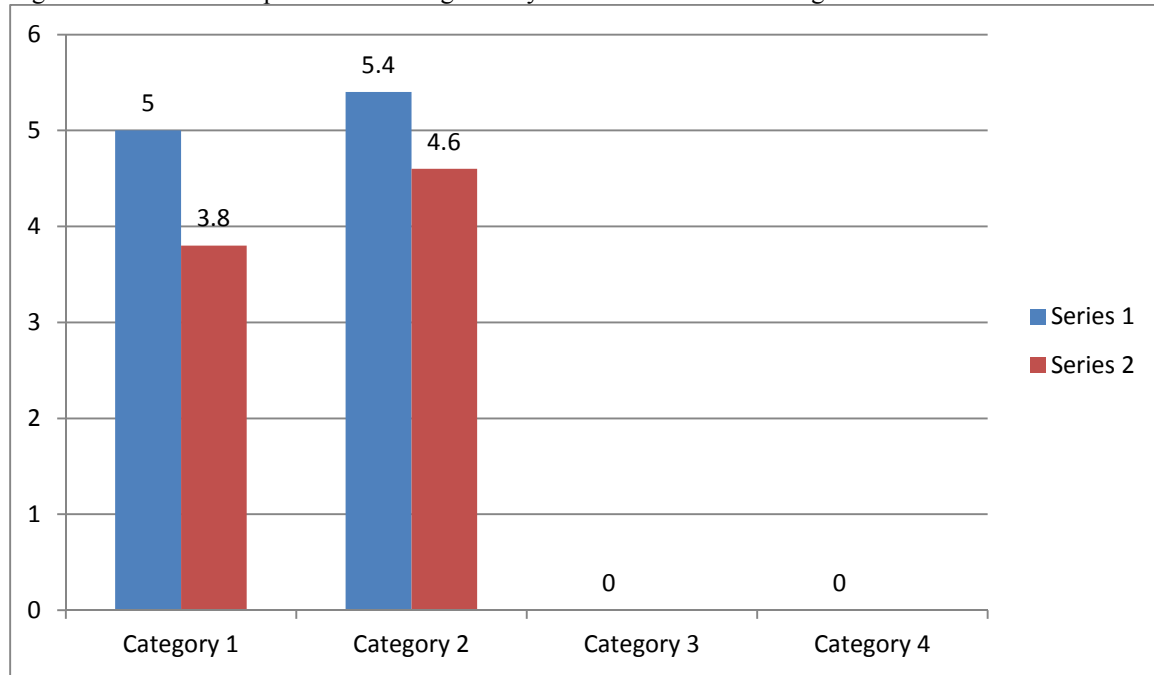
3- Anyone could be looking. (PEF,26)

4- Any thought, no thought, could be passing through his mind. (PEF, 42)

5- It could be one of his brothers without uniform. (PEF, 85)

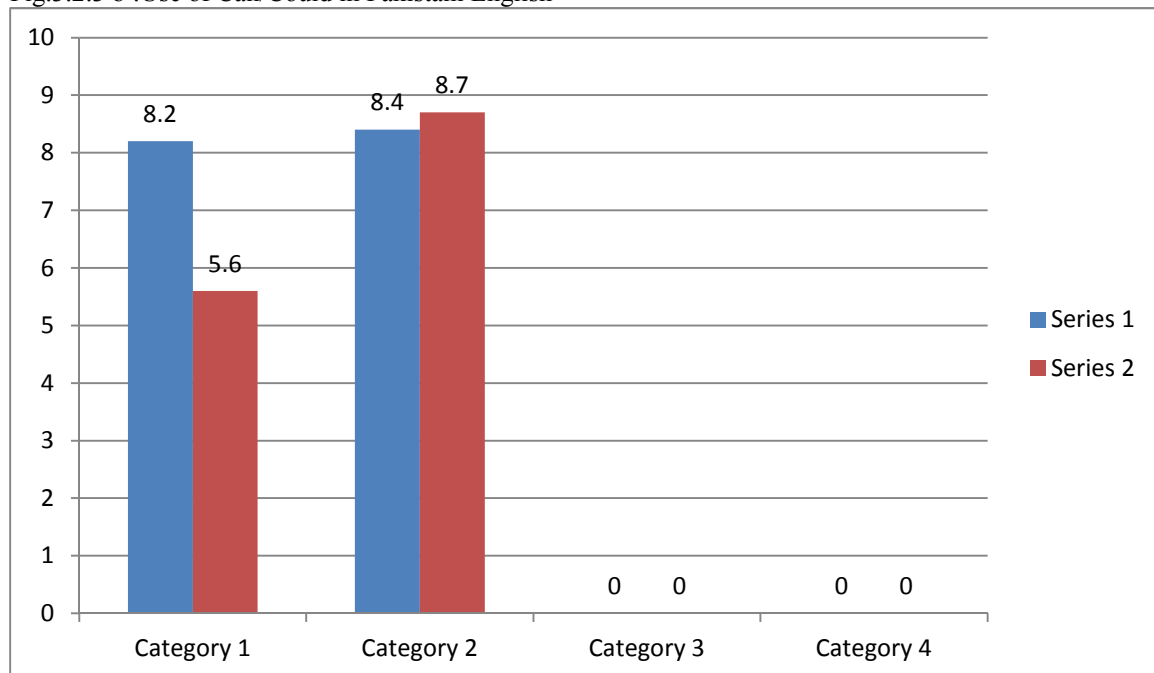
In the above examples 1-5, all expressions suggest a doubt, an uncertain condition and could be replaced by might be.

Fig.3.2.3a Chart for Replacement of Might be by Could be in Pakistani English



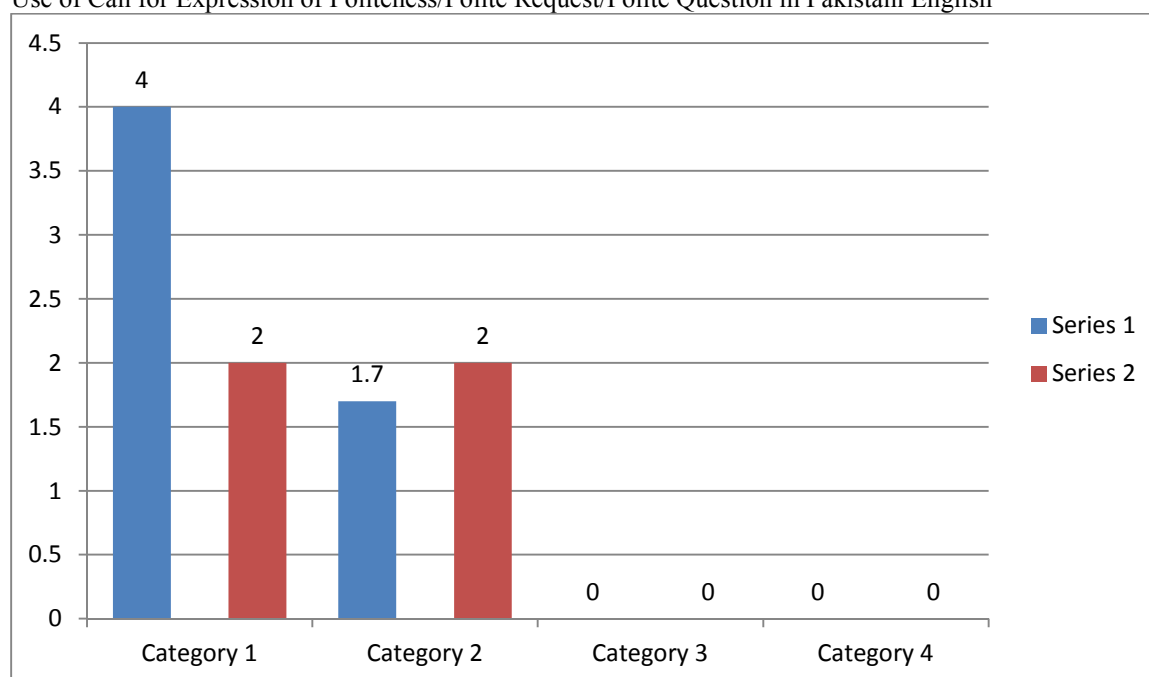
The frequencies of could be & might be are divided by hundred to accommodate the chart within the page limit. The chart clearly shows the difference of frequencies. In each pair of bars, the first bar represents could be & 2<sup>nd</sup> bar represents might be. Category-1 shows PEF & category-2 shows BEF.

Fig.3.2.3 b :Use of Can/Could in Pakistani English



The above chart shows the frequency comparison of can & could in PEF & BEF. The frequency of both can & could has been divided by thousand to keep it within page limit. In category-1, first bar represents frequency of can in PEF & 2<sup>nd</sup> bar represents frequency of can in BEF. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> category, could is represented by the two bars in PEF & BEF respectively.

Fig. 3.2.3 c. Use of Could for Expression of Surprise in Pakistani English & Use of Can for Expression of Politeness/Polite Request/Polite Question in Pakistani English



Category-1 shows the percentage of could in the category of surprise in the category of surprise in PEF & BEF respectively. Category-2 shows the percentage of can in the category of politeness in both PEF & BEF respectively.

#### 4. Conclusion

The modal verbs can & could are used in an innovative way on both the semantic and syntactic level in Pakistani English. The use of can and could have been studied on quantitative and qualitative basis and the frequencies of these modal verbs have been studied in PEF and BEF. However, could is more frequently used in the other contexts. The modal verb could has been found frequently used in expression of surprise which is in contrast with BEF whereas can has been found being used in the category of polite expressions which also speak for the individual innovative use Pakistani English. All these individual features ascertain the fact that Pakistani English has been developing its own individual features to establish itself as a new variety of world Englishes.

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