

May I or Can I

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Have you heard this question before (perhaps when someone comes to your home or office): Can I sit down? What does it mean?

“Can” is about ability or capacity. So when someone asks “can I sit down”, that person is asking a stupid question. Why? Why would someone ask himself whether or not he has the capacity to sit down (¿por qué alguien se preguntaría si él personalmente tiene la capacidad de sentarse?)? He should know the answer.

So the question is a stupid one. Can is about ability to do things: can Ricardo cook well, can Ricardo play the piano? Many people use “can” when they should use “may”.

“May I sit down” is the correct question, the correct way to ask for permission. When mortals use “can I sit down” we understand (perhaps) what they mean, given the context, but it is an error, and a common error.

So to ask for permission use “may”.

Errors abound (abundan) with these two words. Their uses are distinct.

“May” is about permission, or requesting something. It is polite and courteous. Contemplate these:

- May I read your newspaper?
- May I have another beer?
- May I sit here?
- May we study some English idioms?

Easy? Yes. "Can" is about ability or the capacity to do something. Consider these:

- Mr. Sanchez, the Spanish Prime Minister, can speak English.
- Jorge can ride a Ducati.
- Mr. Podemos cannot understand free markets.

So, if someone says to you, "can I read your newspaper", you will be confused. There are two options. The first option is that he really means "may I read the newspaper".

The second option is that he is asking himself (preguntándose) whether or not (si o no) he has the ability to read it. Then why is he asking you that question, when he should know the answer? Who knows?

Many mortals (muchos mortales) think that these questions are the same. They could not be more wrong.

For example, they think that "can I sit down? " and "may I sit down? " are the same. A misconception (un concepto erróneo). Part of the problem is that many English people make this mistake, perhaps unthinkingly (irreflexivamente), and because you hear it often, you assume it is right. Wrong!

Remember that for many centuries people thought the world was flat! That did not mean that this was correct.

Let's get to the nub of the issue (vamos al quid del asunto). Can (poder) is about the ability or capacity (la capacidad para hacer algo) to do something.

For example, the statement that Mr. Rajoy, the Spanish Prime Minister, and Miss Ester Cuni, Tenerife web designer, can play the piano is about their ability to play the piano. If I asked you whether you can speak English, then the answer may be yes or no or a little. This has nothing to do with permission - only ability.

So to the question "can Javier fly a plane " the answer is about whether he has the ability to fly a plane, not whether (or not) he has a licence to do so.

So "can I sit down" (if you are asking another person) is a stupid question. Why would you ask someone if you had the capacity or ability to do something? You should know the answer. So why ask the question?

“May I sit down ” is asking for permission. There is no other option for the well-spoken (buen hablado).