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# Offer-*can*

(and some comments on conditionals, authority and permissions)

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## Abstract

This paper studies the commissive use *can* in conditionals such as *I can do the dishes, if you like*. Its main goal is to spell out the semantic building blocks of what we call offer-*can*, arguing that the seemingly speech act interpretation is a feature of the conditional statement as a whole rather than the modal itself. To achieve this, we disentangle authority, ability at the semantic level (in agreement with Copley (2009)), and single out the notion of ‘issue to be solved’ and ‘preferred solution worlds’ as epistemic basis and bouletic ordering respectively for the modal quantification. We propose a comparison between the conditional offer and other non-conditional conditionals, and offer some thoughts regarding permission-*can* and *can-you-pass-me-the-salt* questions, arguing for authority shift in questions, in a way akin to the interrogative flip in questions with evidentials and epistemic modals.

**Key-words:** *can*, offer, ability, authority, commissives, conditionals, permission, questions

## 1 Introduction

Commissive readings of the modal *can* are well attested cross-linguistically as the following English (1-a), French (1-b) and Italian (1-c) examples illustrate:

- (1) a. I can make the dishes, if you want.
- b. Je peux faire la vaisselle, si tu veux.
- c. Posso fare i piatti, se vuoi.

It immediately emerges that this modality cannot be solely reduced to abilitative modality (2),<sup>1</sup> and it is tempting to state that this is an instance of speech act modality that contributes a commissive force OFFER scoping over propositional content *p*. (e.g. Papafragou

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<sup>1</sup>We will comment later in the paper in Section 2.3 on example (2).

(2000); Rossari and Smirnova (2021); Sweetser (1990)). In this Searlian framework,<sup>2</sup> (1) would be analyzed as OFFER( $p$ ).<sup>3</sup>

(2) #I am able to do the dishes, if you want.

In the framework of Portner (Portner, 2007), where assertions add  $p$  to the the common ground and imperatives add  $p$  to a To Do List, Ninan (2005) proposes that deontic modality (3-a) behaves like imperatives (3-b), by adding  $p$  to a To Do List.

- (3) a. You must close the door.  
b. Close the door !

We defend here a more nuanced position that distinguishes layers of meanings articulating core semantic modal content (of ability, in this specific case), together with conditional content.

We show that the abilitative content has not disappeared from the commissive interpretation of the modal, and argue for a series of preconditions to be satisfied, which most notably include an authority relation. We argue that the seemingly speech act like interpretation is built on what it is referred to as a non-conditional conditional, of the form ‘If you want, I can  $\phi$ ’, where the speech act interpretation arises via anchoring of the protasis of the conditional to the addressee.

Our paper proceeds as follows: we unpack the ingredients of offer-*can* in Section 2, we present our analysis in Section 3 and compare it with Copley’s (2009) analysis of offer-*will* in Section 4. We discuss the conditional meaning in Section 5 where we compare the conditional structure of offer-*can* with those of biscuit conditionals, discourse-structuring conditionals, anankastic conditionals and eparkastic conditionals. In Section 6 we also offer some thoughts on cases similar to offer-*can*, namely *can-you-pass-me-the-salt* questions and permission-*can*, showing that a manipulation of the authority parameter in question explains how the injunctive use of the question comes about. In particular, we advance the new hypothesis of the *authority shift* in questions. We also argue that the semantic architecture of permission-*can* is similar to the one of offer-*can*. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Unpacking offer-*can*

### 2.1 Problems and solutions

What is the meaning of (4)? In a sense, it highlights a possibility of me going to the lab. But more than that, it is used to make an offer: it proposes to solve the problem of

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<sup>2</sup>Searle (1969)

<sup>3</sup>See Portner (2009) and references therein.

our addressee of having left the papers to review at the lab. In this sense, *can* is used to make an offer: it proposes a solution to a ‘problem’. This is the sense of *can* we examine in this paper.

(4) I can go to the lab and grab the papers you left there.

The problem, at the time at which the offer is made, might be acknowledged and endorsed by the addressee, but this is not necessarily so. The speaker might believe that the addressee has a problem to solve, but the addressee can deny that this is the case, as illustrated in (5).

(5) A: I can go to the lab and grab the papers you left there.

B. Do not worry, I do not need them.

The solution proposed, on the other hand, is always part of a set of epistemic alternatives of the speaker. The speaker envisions several possible manners to solve the problem, and thus projects epistemic alternatives where these solutions become operational. At a very first approximation, offer-*can* is a proposal of a what the speaker believes to be a possible solution to a real or a potential problem.

Offers can also be made with will, as discussed in Copley (2009). However, unlike offer-*will* (6), offer-*can* highlights one of the several possible solutions to the problem. As discussed in Copley (2009), offer-*will* leaves no room for a multiplicity of solutions.

(6) We’ll change your oil in Madera.

The example (6) issues an offer that presents it as the sole alternative, suggesting that there is no choice other than changing the oil in Madera, or else the problem cannot be solved. With offer-*can*, the solution is envisaged as one among other potential ways of solving the problem.

(7) a. We can change your oil in Madera, or we can change it in Fresno.

b. We’ll change your oil in Madera, #or we can change it in Fresno.

## 2.2 Offers are conditional on acceptance

In the dialogue in (5), the addressee has refused the offer by clarifying that there is no problem to begin with. The addressee can also refuse the offer in cases where she recognizes that the problem is real and not merely hypothesized by the speaker. If, for whatever reason the addressee does not want to accept the offer, the offer can be refused.

To state this otherwise, the *realization* of offer is conditional to the acceptance of the offer by the addressee (Copley (2009); Geurts (2019) a.o.), and even when not overtly expressed, a covert restriction of the type ‘if you want’ is always present and intrinsic to

the statement of the offer. For this reason, we call the offer-*can*, conditional offers CO:

(8) I can go to the lab, if you like/want.

The antecedent is optionally realized, as we just mentioned, and also mobile.

- (9) a. I can do the dishes (if you want me to).  
b. (If you want me to,) I can do the dishes.

The verb in the consequent of a CO is heavily constrained : the weak modal *CAN* seems always licensed, but never the strong *MUST*. Moreover, predicates of ability quite close to the abilitative *can*, like *know how* or *be able* are not straightforwardly compatible with the offer reading.<sup>4</sup>

- (10) a. I must do the dishes, # if you want.  
b. #I'm able / know how to do the dishes, if you want.

The antecedent appears to have quite an idiosyncratic role in the offer: rather than describing a sufficient condition for the consequent or simply restricting the domain of quantification (Kratzer, 1991), it makes explicit the nature of the speech act realized by uttering the full sentence. Just like a question begs for answers, an offer ultimately relies on the preferences to whom it is made, since they will determine whether it will be accepted or rejected. This view provides a natural explanation to the incompatibility of the first person in the antecedent : the preferences of the speaker are not relevant for the felicity of an offer.

(11) #If I want, I / you can do the dishes.

At the same time, an overt antecedent can also have the role of restricting the domain of quantification as in (12):

(12) If you are tired, I can do the dishes.

Yet, the antecedent that spells out the pragmatic condition of offering can be added to the example even in these cases, which shows that the two antecedents have a different function:

(13) If you are tired, I can do the dishes, if you want me to.

To conclude, with Geurts (2019), we assume that offers are conditional propositions. The condition encoded in this conditional proposition is the acceptance of the offer itself on the part of the addressee. This makes offers a special type of 'conditional', whose nature is further discussed in section 4.

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<sup>4</sup>See discussion in Section 2.3.

## 2.3 Abilities as preconditions for offers

Offers are also contingent on the belief that the offer can be carried about. If the offer is in the first person, the speaker herself can carry it out herself. The individual denoted by the subject will carry it out in the other cases:

- (14) a. I can go to pick up Flavio  
b. She/We/They can go to pick up Flavio

In this respect, (14) look *prima facie* as a trivial abilitative statements. Yet their modal cannot be replaced by a predicate that unambiguously describes a capacity as in (15). The addition of (14)'s covert antecedent renders the utterance in (15) infelicitous, or, at least, poses specific constraint on the context of utterance as we clarify in a few paragraphs.<sup>5</sup>

- (15) #If you want, I'm able / know how to do the dishes.

To carry about the offer, the entity denoted by the subject, which we label  $\alpha$ , has to have the ability to do so. The ability is a precondition for action (Copley (2018); Giannakidou and Mari (2021); Gordon and Lakoff (1975); Horty and Belnap (1995); Kenny (1976); Mandelkern, Schultheis, and Boylan (2017); Mari (2016); Mari and Martin (2007); Nadathur (2019); Thomason (2005) a.o.) and several accounts and logics have been developed to unfold the complex notion of ability. The shades of the notions are not relevant here, and the reader is free to adopt their favorite account.<sup>6</sup> We will assume that having an ability means having a disposition to carry about  $p$ , granted that no unexpected impediment intervenes.

That  $\alpha$  has the ability to carry about the offer is a presupposition of the speaker. If I offer to do the dishes, it is because I believe that I am able to do the dishes.

With offer-*can*, the ability can surface more or less prominently across the contexts in which the offer is made. In a scenario where Marie's mother is doing the dishes and Marie sees her tired, she can offer that someone else does the dishes. If her offer is that her husband does the dishes, the offer-*can* is only presuppositionally abilitative. Presumably, it is clear in the context that her husband is able to do the dishes, and the ability is not at issue.

- (16) Peter can do the dishes

If she offers that her son does the dishes, the abilitative meaning component becomes more prominent. Assume her son, John, is 12 years old, and, although he can do the dishes, this is not taken for granted in the context of the conversation by Marie's mother who lives away from Marie's family and does not see her grandson very often. In the

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<sup>5</sup>See discussion surrounding (20).

<sup>6</sup>See Mari, Beyssade, and Del Prete (2013), ch. 1 for extended discussion.

utterance (17) ability is more foregrounded than in (16).

(17) John can do the dishes

(17) makes the abilitative component visible as a precondition of action, while being a commissive statement. These two components, we propose, co-exist, with the abilitative-*can* being backgrounded or foregrounded according to the context.

The attested<sup>7</sup> example (18) shows that when the capacity is surprising, the abilitative component can become salient.

(18) Si tu veux, je peux te rendre invulnérable aux balles de revolver. Seules les balles d'or ou d'argent pourront t'atteindre.

If you like, I can make you invulnerable to revolver bullets. Only bullets or silver bullets can reach you.

When we make an assertion, we do so in relation to an information state: what is new is asserted, and what is old is presupposed. Therefore, what is asserted or presupposed depends in part on the information state, i.e., on what we already know and what is new. In contexts with radically different information bases, the same sentence can assert/presuppose completely different things. This is illustrated by the following example, taken from Stalnaker (1974):

(19) My cousin is not a boy any more.

In a context where it is known that the cousin is male but his age is unknown, the sentence asserts that the cousin is now an adult. In a context where the possibility of sex-change is salient, the sentence can assert that the cousin is now female while presupposing that the cousin is still a child. Examples like this show that in theory any piece of information can function as either a presupposition or an assertion. However, there are tendencies, as well as pragmatic and grammatical constraints, on what type of content is typically presupposed in discourse.

In a similar vein, note that the offer interpretation for *be able to* is obtained at the price of the calculation of a complex set of inferences enhanced by an ironical offer statement, but that it is not impossible given certain contextual conditions. (20) indeed presupposes that the addressee might want to ask the speaker to help, but refrain from doing so, as if she believed that the speaker is not able to do the dishes.

(20) If you want, I am able to do the dishes.

As one anonymous reviewer notes, *be able to* enhances an offer in a situation where it is seemingly not common ground that the holder of the ability is in fact able to carry about

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<sup>7</sup>Fratext R063 LEDUC Violette - La Bâtarde (1964) (p. 101)

*p*. The use of the abilitative modal foregrounds the abilitative interpretation, which, in the use of offer-*can* is backgrounded, as we mentioned.

Going back to the context where it is not taken for granted by my mother that John is able to do the dishes (see discussion surrounding (17), (21) enhances an offer by foregrounding the ability.

(21) John is able to do the dishes.

Conversations take place against a background information state (or common ground, Clark (1996); Stalnaker (1974)), but the interlocutors are unsure what is in the information states of the other participants. Understanding a statement therefore involves the listener trying to infer what the speaker considers part of the common ground. We assume thus that is ‘presupposed’ is a hypothesis formed by the hearer about what is in the information state of the speaker (See partly similar views in: Wilson and Sperber (1979), Qing, Goodman, and Lassiter (2016), Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver, and Roberts (2010), Degen and Tonhauser (2022), Abrusán (2022), Roberts and Simons (pear).

This explains the differences in focus on the abilitative component for (17) and (16). Here we will maintain, for simplicity (see also Copley (2009)), that the ability is always assumed as part of the background knowledge. What matters for us is that the abilitative component is present and part of the overall interpretation.

## 2.4 Desirability

Dispositions have been understood in the literature as intrinsic features of individuals that allow them to perform an action (a.o. Menéndez-Benito (2013)).

A richer notion of disposition, however, *to be disposed to* (22), would imply some intention or willingness to carry about *p*.

(22) I am disposed to talk to her to clarify the situation.

The intrinsic capacities and the desire (or lack there of) to carry about *p* need to be neatly separated<sup>8</sup>. Individuals are able to carry about horrible things, yet, they are not necessarily disposed to do so.

There is thus a ‘desirability’ condition to be added, which is dependent on *s*. Exterminating the humans is not suitable for the writers of this paper, yet, it is a desirable action from the perspective of a Replicant in Blade Runner. In this context, Replicants have both the ability and the desire to do so. Exterminating the humans is the best solution to the Replicants problem, which is to rule the Earth.

(23) I can exterminate the humans.

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<sup>8</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this important distinction.



The analysis of offers will thus include a desirability component in the definition of what a solution of a problem is: a solution is not only an epistemic possibility, but it is also an outcome that is preferable to the others, given  $s$ 's perspective. This desirability component will be encoded as an ordering source, as we explain in section 3.

## 2.5 Authority

The final ingredient of offer-*can* is authority. To issue the offer and for the offer to be realized, the speaker  $s$  has to have authority over  $\alpha$ . In the first person,  $s = \alpha$  and the authority relation is trivially satisfied (granted that one can control him/herself).

In the third person (e.g. (17)), to say that  $s$  has authority over  $\alpha$  means that the speaker assumes to be in the position to make  $\alpha$  carry out the action.

Note that when the authority relation does not hold, the statement no longer issues an offer. Consider the case where there has been a party at the lab and it is very clear that the head of the department never takes care of the dishes.

(24) PhD students, do not worry, the head of the department can do the dishes!

The example in (24) does not make an offer, at best it can be understood in an ironic way.

It is important to note that authority is necessary but not sufficient for  $\alpha$  to act to bring about  $p$ .  $\alpha$  has to recognize the authority and accept to realize  $p$ . We assume that the agreement is tacit unless otherwise stated, and that the semantics of offer-*can* does not encode this extra endorsement component on the part of  $\alpha$ . On the assumption that  $\alpha$  carries about  $p$ ,  $s$  has *effective authority* over  $\alpha$ .<sup>9</sup>

Offer-*can* is thus a proposal of a possible solution to a real or a potential problem. This solution has to be accepted by the addressee.  $\alpha$  has to be able (and to agree) to realize  $p$ .

## 3 Analysis

We use a  $W \times T$  forward-branching structure (Thomason, 1984). A three-place relation  $\simeq$  on  $T \times W \times W$  is defined such that (i) for all  $t \in T$ ,  $\simeq_t$  is an equivalence relation; (ii) for any  $w, w' \in W$  and  $t, t' \in T$ , if  $w' \simeq_{t'} w$  and  $t$  precedes  $t'$ , then  $w' \simeq_t w$  (we use the symbols  $<$  and  $>$  for temporal precedence and succession, respectively).

In words,  $w$  and  $w'$  are historical alternatives at least up to  $t'$  and thus differ only, if at all, in what is future to  $t'$ .

For any given time, a world belongs to an equivalence class comprising worlds with identical pasts but different futures. Let  $w_0$  be the actual world.

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<sup>9</sup>On the term 'effective' in relation with imperatives, see Condoravdi and Lauer (2011).

We set a time  $t \in T$ , at which *problem worlds*  $\mathcal{P}(t)$  are defined, as the set of worlds that are identical to the actual world  $w_0$  at least up to and including  $t$ , and in which the issue to be solved arises.

$$(25) \quad \mathcal{P}(t) := \{w \mid w \simeq_t w_0 \text{ and in which the issue to be solved arises}\}$$

In the case depicted in Figure 1, the problem worlds at  $t$  is the set given in (26).

$$(26) \quad \mathcal{P}(t) = \{w_1, w_2, w_0, w_3, w_4\}$$

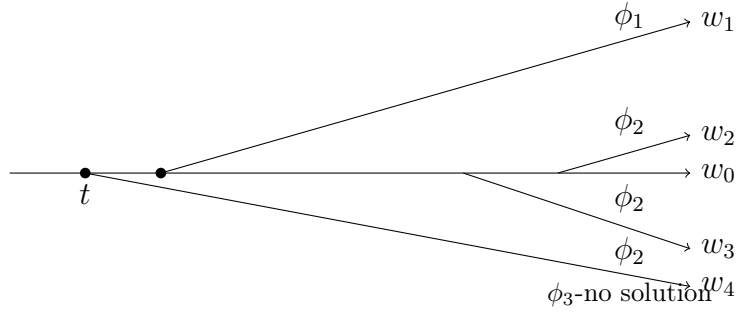


Figure 1:  $\mathcal{P}(t)$

In the problem worlds, different outcomes are possible regarding the problem. For example, if the problem is that the dishes are dirty, the epistemically possible outcomes might include that  $\phi_1 = I \text{ do the dishes}$ ,  $\phi_2 = \text{you do the dishes}$ ,  $\phi_3 = \text{the dishes are never done and rot forever, etc.}$  Suppose for simplicity that  $\{\phi_1, \phi_2, \phi_3\}$  are all the possible outcomes. The first two of these count as solutions to the problem, in some practical sense, while the last one,  $\phi_3$ , is not a solution.

We now introduce an ordering source that (A) defines a partition on the outcome worlds and (B) orders cells of the partition according to *practical commitments* of the speaker (the term is borrowed from Bratman (1987)).

(A) Let  $\pi(\mathcal{P}(t))$  be a partition of  $\mathcal{P}(t)$ , where for each cell  $u \in \pi(\mathcal{P}(t))$  there is a set of worlds in which there is a specific outcome  $\phi$  related to the problem.

In the case depicted in Figure 1, these subsets are  $u_1, u_2$  and  $u_3$ : the set  $u_1$  comprises only  $w_1$ , the set  $u_2$  comprises  $w_2, w_0, w_3$  and the set  $u_3$  comprises only  $w_4$ .

$$(27) \quad u_1 = \{w_1\} ; u_2 = \{w_2, w_0, w_3\}; u_3 = \{w_4\}$$

This defines three possible outcomes:  $\phi_1$  that is carried out in  $w_1$ ,  $\phi_2$  which is carried about in  $w_2, w_0, w_3$  and  $\phi_3$  that happens in  $w_4$ . We call  $\phi(u)$  an outcome that is carried out in a cell  $u$  of the partition of the outcome worlds.

(B) Practical commitments are a set of propositions that describe a state of affairs or actions according to which the speaker evaluates one outcome as *preferable* to the

others. For instance, if we suggest to our colleague that we do the dishes, it is because we prefer that the dishes are done rather than not and we know that we want her to go to an important lab meeting that she cannot miss. The outcome suggested is the most preferred one according to the speakers commitments in the context of utterance  $c$ . So defined, these practical commitments are the ordering source  $g(s, c)$ .

Our lexical entry for offer-*can* is as follows:

- (28) Offer-*can*:
- a. Assuming that:
    - (i)  $\text{able}(\alpha, \phi)$  &
    - (ii)  $\text{authority}(s, \alpha)$  &
    - (iii) there is a cell  $u \in \pi(\mathcal{P}(t))$  defining an outcome  $\phi$  such that there is a ranking  $g$  which is a practical commitment, s.t.  $\forall \phi' \in \pi(\mathcal{P}(t)), \phi' \neq \phi, \phi <_{g,s,c} \phi'$  (i.e.  $\phi$  is the solution preferred by the speaker).
  - b.  $\forall w' \in u, \exists t' > t_u (\text{agrees}(\mathcal{H}, \phi) \rightarrow \phi(\alpha, w', t'))$

This states that in order to issue an offer, some conditions must be met. We are reticent to assume that these are lexically defined conditions (i.e. lexical presuppositions), as, as we have noted, some of this content can be more or less foregrounded or backgrounded according to the context. These conditions are that  $\alpha$  has to have the ability to carry  $\phi$  about (the action that solves the problem); that  $s$  has to have authority over  $\alpha$ . If these conditions are met, the offer  $\alpha$  *can*  $\phi$  states that there is an outcome  $\phi$ , preferred by the speaker to the other possible outcomes, in which the action is carried out; i.e. in all worlds in the cell of preferred outcome, there is a future time such that, if the addressee ( $\mathcal{H}$ ) agrees, the action  $\phi$  is performed by  $\alpha$ .

As we see in the lexical entry in (28) the abilitative reading of the modal remains in the lexical presuppositions. Furthermore, offer-*can* differs from offer-*will* in presupposing diversity or non-veridicality (Condoravdi, 2002; Giannakidou and Mari, 2021): the modal space is a partition of the outcome worlds into cells for different outcomes.

As previously mentioned, we conceive the branching futures in  $\mathcal{P}(t)$  as epistemic alternatives: the speaker conceives possible outcomes relating to an issue or a problem. Within these epistemically available alternatives, the speaker takes into account those where  $\alpha$  has the ability of carrying out  $\phi$  and where  $s$  has authority over  $\alpha$ . A secondary modal background orders these epistemic alternatives according to the practical commitments of the speaker, which include desirable outcomes as ranked higher. In proposing to do the dishes, rather than using the dishwasher, the speaker considers her commitments to protecting the environment, to lower the electricity bill, to let her mom rest ...

## 4 Comparison with Copley (2009)

Copley (2009) assumes that some elements expressing the future have (a) presuppositional, (b) modal, and (c) aspectual components.<sup>10</sup> Let us discuss the first two here:

(a) First, futures have a presupposition that someone or something controls the future. In other words, constructions expressing future meanings presuppose that someone, or something, determines what happens in the future. Copley (2009) calls this entity a *director*. Animate (mostly human) directors have commitments, and these commitments— together with some aspects of the world—are assumed to make the outcome inevitable:

- (29) a. Direction presupposition  
           The director has the ability to ensure that a  $p$ -eventuality happens  
       b. Commitment assertion  
           The director is committed to a  $p$ -eventuality happening

The semantics of commitment in turn requires modality.

(b) The modal component of elements expressing the future is a universal metaphysical modal. Copley (2009) assumes that speaking of the future involves reference to future possibilities that are a subset of the metaphysically accessible worlds, namely those worlds that are possible continuations of the actual worlds. These are the worlds that agree with the commitments of the director, in other words, the entity that is presupposed to have control over the state of affairs. Thus the worlds quantified over are a subset of all the metaphysically accessible worlds. The modality in futures and futurates (*be going to*) bears on this commitment modality and not on epistemic modality.<sup>11</sup>

With this background, we can look at the example of offer discussed by Copley, repeated below:

- (30) We'll change your oil in Madera.

Offers are special, in comparison with other future meanings, in that in addition to the presupposed director, they also convey that the outcome also depends on the hearer. This

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<sup>10</sup>Since the foundational work of Copley (2009), it has been shown that languages divide into those that encode mere epistemic modality like Italian (a.o. Giannakidou and Mari (2018); ?) and Spanish (a.o. Escandell-Vidal (2021); Rivero (2014)) and those that stand with expressions of desires and practical commitments like English *will* (see Copley (2009) herself and, for cross-linguistic comparison Paul and Copley (2019)). French future has been claimed to be of a third 'ratificational', and different form both the mere epistemic and the bouletic futures (De Saussure and Morency, 2012).

<sup>11</sup>Copley's (2009) definition of direction:

- (i) An entity  $d$  directs a proposition  $p$  in  $w$  at  $t$  iff:  
       a.  $\forall w'$ ,  $d$  has the same abilities in  $w'$  as in  $w$ :  
       b.  $\forall w''$  metaphysically accessible from  $w'$  at  $t$  and consistent with  $d$ 's commitments in  $w'$  at  $t$ :  
           i.  $[\forall w''$  metaphysically accessible from  $w$  at  $t$ :  $[\exists t' > t: [p(w'')(t')]] \Leftrightarrow [\exists t'' > t: [p(w'')(t'')]]]$ ]

second condition, Copley argues, is not a presupposition of the utterance, but rather an elided antecedent of a silent conditional.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this antecedent, the following result obtains:

- (31) A person  $d$  has offered to bring about  $q$  for  $h$  iff  $d$  believes  $d$  directs  $q$  and:
- a. If  $h$  wants  $q$ ,  $q$ .
  - b. If  $h$  doesn't want  $q$ , not- $q$ .

The meaning of (offer)-*will* is represented in Figure 2 below. Time  $t$  represents the actual world at  $t$ , and the lines branching off represent the worlds maximally consistent with the director's ability and their commitments as well as the elided conditional antecedent. If, for some  $d$ ,  $\phi_1$ ,  $\text{ALL}_b(d)(\phi_1)(w)(t)$  is true, that means that all the worlds branching off at time  $t$  are  $\phi_1$  worlds.

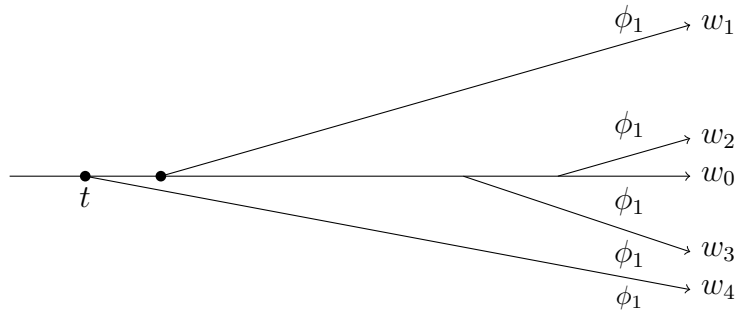


Figure 2: *Future Reading of “will”*

Our analysis of offer-*can* shares certain assumptions with Copley's (2009) approach to offer-*will*: similarly to her, we also assume that there is an elided conditional that spells out the acceptance condition of the hearer and also that a number of presuppositions have to be met in order to interpret the construction. Yet, these assumptions differ in that Copley (2009) presupposes that there is a director that has the ability to ensure that some outcome  $\phi$  happens while we assume an authority relation between the speaker and the subject of the sentence  $\alpha$ . The authority relation does not guarantee that the action offered will be carried out by  $\alpha$ , but only that the speaker assumes to be in the position to make  $\alpha$  carry out the action.<sup>13</sup>

We crucially differ also in that offer-*can* introduces existential quantification over a set of alternative options that are each possible outcomes related to a problem at hand, while (offer)-*will* denotes universal quantification over alternative options. As a result, offer-*can* and offer-*will* can be seen as duals of each other. A similar duality of *can* and

<sup>12</sup>Copley (2009) argues that the reason why *going to* does not have the offer reading follows from its aspectual properties being different from *will*.

<sup>13</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

*will* can be observed with quantificational modals (cf. Portner 2009, p.210.):<sup>14</sup>

- (32) a. A dog will bite, if it is angry.  
b. A dog can bite, if it is angry.

A second difference is in the nature of the modality that we assume, which is epistemic, while Copley’s (2009) semantics is based on metaphysical modality. Our choice is guided by the fact because we do not use a notion of “director” understood as an entity that ensures that  $\phi$  will be brought about. Therefore, we can only consider future branches as envisioned, hence epistemic alternatives, rather than possible future controlled by an individual or a force.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude the comparison with Copley (2009), we note with an anonymous reviewer that, while with offer-*can* the conditional can always be silent, there is a preference for a non-silent conditional with offer-*will*. We advance that the overt conditional ensures that the director presupposition is leveled, and, with it, the homogeneous/universal interpretation of *will*.

## 5 Comparison with non-standard conditionals

Our analysis—similarly to that of Copley—incorporates a silent conditional into the analysis of offer-*can*. The offer is valid on the condition of acceptance by the hearer. The antecedent of this conditional spells out the pragmatic condition for the realization of the offer. In this sense, our construction is similar to some other non-standard conditionals (see Geis and Lycan (1993)). Offer-*can* shares several characteristics with non-standard conditionals: the incompatibility of the consequent with *then* (see Iatridou (1993)), the mobility and optionality of the antecedent and the loose causal link between the two propositions. CO are particularly similar to Biscuit Conditionals BC like (33) (see a.o. Csipak (2018); Franke (2009); Rawlins (2020)).

### 5.1 Biscuit conditionals

So-called “biscuit conditionals” are sentences which have the surface appearance of a conditional, but whose logical form is not conditional:

- (33) a. There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want. (Austin, 1956)

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<sup>14</sup>We leave the comparison of quantificational and offer uses of *will* and *can* for future work. Likewise, in the realm of speech acts imperatives feature existential and universal force in correlation with the existential and universal reading of FCI (Larrivé, 2007). How quantification and permission/obligation uses arise in these other areas of grammar is a complex open issue that we leave for future research.

<sup>15</sup>This issue touches on a larger debate about the semantics of the future that we are not able to enter into here. For evidential accounts, see Eckardt and Beltrama (2019); Ippolito and Farkas (2021); Mari (2010); for epistemic accounts, see Giannakidou and Mari (2018); Mari (2009). See Giannakidou and Mari (2023) for more details on non biased epistemic necessity.

- b. Si tu veux, il y a des biscuits sur la table.

According to Geis and Lycan (1993), biscuit conditionals are a special type of what they call *non-conditional conditionals*. Such sentences have the syntactic form IF A, B, but differ from “standard” conditionals with respect to some core principles. Some of them are replicated below: (Geis and Lycan, 1993, pp36-38)

- (34) Some properties of “standard conditionals” :
- a. **A.** Taking the resumptive pronoun *then* without change of meaning.
  - b. **B.** Modification by *only*.
  - c. **E.** Equivalence to disjunction.  $A > C$  is equivalent to  $\neg A \vee C$
  - d. **H** : Assertion pattern: An utterer of  $A > C$  asserts neither A nor C, but does make an actual and not merely conditional assertion. More generally, illocutionary force attaches to the conditional sentence.

We can observe that sentences with offer-*can* (b-examples below) seem to pattern like biscuit conditionals (a-examples below):

- (35) **A.** :
- a. #If you want a biscuit, then there are some on the table.
  - b. ?? If you want, then I can do the dishes.
  - c. If it has rained, then the road is wet.

- (36) **B.** :
- a. #There are biscuits on the table only if you want them.
  - b. #I can do the dishes only if you want me to.  
Note : OK with *will*, but with a slightly different meaning.
  - c. The road is wet only if it has rained.

- (37) **E.** :
- a. # Either you do not want biscuits or there are biscuits on the table.
  - b. # Either you do not want me to do the dishes, or I will do the dishes.
  - c. Either it hasn't rained, or the road is wet.

Biscuit conditionals and offer-*can* seem to have a common point wrt. **H.** : the illocutionary act crucially relies on the propositional content of the consequent, and not on the whole sentence. Thus in both cases the antecedent primarily makes explicit the felicity conditions of the consequent: the latter is added to the common ground, while the former has a discourse-structuring function.

- (38) There are / might be biscuits on the sideboard, if you are hungry.

Biscuit conditionals also share with offer-*can* an aversion to first person antecedents, but only when they have the illocutionary force of an offer : (39-a) cannot be interpreted as such. When biscuit conditionals describe ability or opportunity (see Leclercq and Depraetere (2021) for the distinction) as in the attested example (39-b), they seem to systematically accept speaker reference in the antecedent, with an interpretation similar to (11).

- (39) a. # If I want, there are biscuits on the sideboard.  
 b. I can turn on the light if I want. (There is a little lamp, next to me.)

However, modals in BC's consequent as in (38) only seem to have an epistemic interpretation, which is not the case in the examples we are concerned with. Thus sentences with offer-*can* cannot be reduced to biscuit conditionals, despite some similarity in the function of the antecedent of the conditional.

## 5.2 Discourse-structuring conditionals

Discourse-structuring conditionals are a type of conditional very close to biscuit conditionals. They have been described by Csipak (2018), who suggests the following examples:

- (40) a. If I am being frank, you look awful.  
 b. If you ask me, Alex is getting ready to leave.

Discourse-structuring conditionals, biscuit conditionals and offer-*can* have in common that the truth of their consequent seem independent of the antecedent: the consequent can be taken from granted as soon as the conditional is uttered. As close as they are to biscuit conditionals, discourse-structuring conditionals seem to display some properties that differ from these. Some of these are also instantiated by CO: for example the examples are not compatible with the past tense and the truth of the antecedent seems to be settled immediately by the participants:

- (41) Compatibility with past tense :
- a. Hypothetical conditional :  
 If Alex was in San Francisco yesterday, she was having iced coffee.
  - b. Biscuit conditional :  
 If you were hungry yesterday, there were biscuits on the sideboard.
  - c. Discourse-structuring conditional :  
 # If I was being frank yesterday, you looked awful.
  - d. CO :  
 # If you wanted, I could have done the dishes yesterday.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Here the reading, if there is one, seems to trigger an abilitative interpretation of the modal.



- (42) The truth of the antecedent might be immediately settled by the participants :
- a. Hypothetical conditional :  
If Alex is in San Francisco, he is having an iced coffee.
  - b. Biscuit conditional :  
If Alex is hungry (when he arrives), there are biscuit on the sideboard.
  - c. Discourse-structuring conditional 1 :  
If you promise not to tell anyone, Alex is asleep.
  - d. Discourse-structuring conditional 2 :  
If we now turn to page 5, we will see the proof of the theorem.

The properties such as (in)compatibility with past tense and relevance of the antecedent might indicate that CO have a discourse oriented meaning. Csipak (2018), building on Franke’s (2009) notion, assumes that biscuit conditionals and discourse-structuring conditionals are just conditionals instantiating a peculiar link between the antecedent and the consequent. Notably, they fail to undergo any Ramsey-test-like evaluation :

- (43) **Conditional independence** : two propositions  $p$  and  $q$  are conditionally independent if changing one’s beliefs about one will not cause a change in one’s belief about the other.

Yet a major distinction between offer-*can* and discourse-structuring conditionals is that the former are not in themselves self-verifying utterances. In the case of discourse-structuring conditionals, this property leads to the incompatibility with past tense, because such a temporal setting prevents the self-verification of the utterance.

With respect to offer-*can*, the incompatibility with past tense could be that such utterances are essentially designed to solve a problem. The speaker is asking for information regarding the preferences of the hearer before committing herself to a proposed resolution of the matter.

### 5.3 Anankastic conditionals

Anankastic conditionals are a special type of conditionals, notably studied by Condoravdi and Lauer (2016); von Stechow and Iatridou (2005); von Stechow, Krasikova, and Penka (2006) among (many) others. They can be exemplified by a sentence like (44-a), and have a structure like (44-b).

- (44) a. If you want to go to Harlem, you have to take the A train.  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  Taking the A train is necessary to go to Harlem (in an optimal way).
- b. If  $x$  WANT  $A$ ,  $y$  MUST  $B$ .  
 $\rightsquigarrow$  Doing  $B$  is necessary to  $A$  (in an optimal way).

Anankastics are famously puzzling because the desire report in their antecedent seems to be absent from their paraphrase, a characteristic which blocks a straight-forwardly compositional analysis. They also share some features with offer-*can*: they both are (unconventional) conditionals, have a desiderative attitude in their antecedent, a modal in their consequent, and there seems to be an imbalance between the former and the later.

Anankastic conditionals, however, also are easily distinguishable from offer-*can*. Firstly, Anankastics require a strong modal like MUST in the consequent, while, as discussed above, CO do not allow it. Second, the antecedent of an anankastic is also mobile, but not optional : if it's not realized, there is simply an assertion of the necessity, which is not exactly the same thing. Third, anankastics do seem to respect some criteria of standard conditionals discussed above:

- (45) a. If you want to go to Harlem, then you have to take the A-Train.  
 b. You have to take the A-Train only if you want to go to Harlem.  
 c. Either you don't want to go Harlem, or you have to take the A-Train.

Moreover, the anankastic reading isn't disturbed by the first person in the antecedent or the consequent:

- (46) a. **Anan.** :  
 If I want to go to Harlem, I have to take the A-Train.  
 b. **CO** :  
 # If I want to, I can do the dishes.  
 ~> Only the ability reading is available

Thus, overall, offer-*can* cannot be reduced to anankastic conditionals.

## 5.4 Eparkastic conditionals

Nissenbaum (2005) discusses the problems of “*existential anankastic*” conditionals, dubbed “*eparkastic*”.

- (47) If you want to go to Harlem, you can take the A-Train.

The surface structure of eparkastic conditionals is very similar to CO : a preference is described in the antecedent, and a weak modal is found in the consequent. Nevertheless, there are some contrasts between CO and eparkastic conditionals that make the latter look more like a special case of anankastic conditionals and the former much more particular. For example, the pronoun *then* is allowed in eparkastic conditionals, and first person utterances are acceptable:

- (48) a. Resumptive pronoun :  
       If you want to go to Harlem, then you can take the A-Train.
- b. 1st person :  
       If I want to go to Harlem, I can take the A-Train.

Moreover, anankastic and eparkastic conditionals have a “rational” paraphrase that is absent from offer-*can*. This is presumably because the former are closer to “standard” conditionals than the later offer-*can* and also because the modals don’t play the same role.

- (49) a. If you want to go to Harlem, you must / can take the A-Train.  
       ↷ Taking the A-Train is a possibility / a necessity in order to go to Harlem.
- b. If you want, I can do the dishes.  
       ↷ That I do the dishes is a possibility in order to bring about that I do the dishes.
- c. If you want to rest, Paul can do the dishes.  
       ↷ That Paul do the dishes is a possibility in order for you to rest.

Hence, CO do not seem teleological in the same sense as eparkastic and anankastic conditionals. That, however, doesn’t mean that the the prejacent of a offer-*can* antecedent or consequent are causally unrelated.

## 6 Extensions

Once we acknowledge that there is no such thing as a speech act *can*, but that the commissive interpretation arises from the interplay of several meaning components, that most notably include authority as a parameter, we can shed a new light on a series of phenomena, leveling the possible doubt that offer-*can* is idiosyncratic.

As of today, we see at least two other uses of the modals that can be accounted for in a similar manner: the use of *can* in Austinian pass-me-the-salt type of questions (Austin, 1975), and permission-*can*.

### 6.1 Pass-me-the-salt and interrogative flip of authority

Questions like (50) are requests for action, that have been described as a case whereby the speaker questions the abilitative precondition for action to in fact asking for the action to be achieved Gordon and Lakoff (1975).

- (50) Can you pass me the salt ?

We submit here the idea that the question is built out of (28), but that the question

speech act flips the authority anchor, in a way similar to what happens with evidentials where the interrogative flip anchors the addressee as the source of the evidence needed to answer the question Bhadra (2020); San Roque, Floyd, and Norcliffe (2017).

Insofar as the interrogative flip proceeds in questions with evidentials, in a nutshell, it has been said what follows (we use the Italian future to illustrate the proposal). On the assumption that Italian future has an inferential evidential component,<sup>17</sup> the impossibility of (51) is explained by the fact that the addressee has direct evidence for the answer rather than inferential evidence, as expected by the future.

- (51) #Quanti anni avrai ?  
 How-many years have.FUT.2SG  
 How old might you be ?

In other words, the question flips the source of the evidence.

Importantly, this is not a specificity of evidentials. Epistemic modals can be analyzed exactly in the same manner. The reason why (52) is odd, is because the addressee has knowledge about her own age, and she is not in a state of epistemic uncertainty, as the modal expects. There is a flip, and the flip is available with modals as well.<sup>18</sup>

- (52) #Quanti anni puoi avere ?  
 How-many years might.2SG have  
 How old might you be ?

We propose thus here a more general rule, according to which questions can shift any individual parameter to the addressee, including the authority parameter. We thus obtain what follows:

- (53) Offer-*can* in questions:
- a. Assuming that:
    - (i)  $\text{able}(\alpha, \phi)$  &
    - (ii)  $\text{authority}(\mathcal{H}, \alpha)$  &
    - (iii) there is a cell  $u \in \pi(\mathcal{P}(t))$  defining an outcome  $\phi$  such that there is a ranking  $g$  which is a practical commitment, s.t.  $\forall \phi' \in \Phi, \phi' \neq \phi, \phi <_{g,s,c} \phi'$  (i.e.  $\phi$  is the solution preferred by the speaker).
  - b.  $\forall w' \in u, \exists t' > t_u(\text{agrees}(\mathcal{H}, \phi) \rightarrow \phi(\alpha, w', t'))$

Here the speaker has an issue, she needs more salt. She could go downstairs and buy

<sup>17</sup>This assumption is undiscussed, no matter whether theoreticians assume that Italian future is a plain evidential (Frana and Menéndez-Benito, 2019) or an epistemic modal (Giannakidou and Mari, 2018) or a mix of the two (Ippolito and Farkas, 2021; Mari, 2010) a.o.

<sup>18</sup>This view has been challenged by several theoreticians, who have argued that these anti-addressee questions are cases of reflection or conjectural questions. See discussion in Eckardt and Beltrama (2019); Littell, Matthewson, and Peterson (2010); Mari (2021)

it at the closed supermarket, but given her practical commitments (keep on sharing the meal with her family) she prefers to choose the solution whereby her addressee passes her the salt. The question confers authority to the addressee in such a way that, if the addressee agrees, then the addressee performs the passing of the salt (in this case  $\mathcal{H} = \alpha$ ). The question serves the purpose of flipping the authority, and because the addressee is in charge of ratifying the offer, she can refuse to act.

## 6.2 Permission-*can*

The interplay between core modal meaning and conditional modal meaning giving rise to a speech act like interpretation is not a peculiarity of offer-*can* in the assertive case either. Exactly the same design applies to permission-*can*.

The permission reading of *can* is generally categorized under the label ‘deontic’ and permission-*can* is considered to be the counterpart of deontic *must* (see for extended discussion Portner (2009)).

- (54) a. Since you are 12, you can now go alone to school.  
 b. Since you are 12, you must go alone to school.

Issuing a permission, however, is also a directive act (Bach and Harnish, 1979). When Flavio asks whether he can go sailing while it rains, and he is allowed to do so, there is nothing properly deontic at stake. Flavio’s parent issues a permission thereby allowing him to go sailing.

- (55) Flavio: Can I go sailing ?  
 Mom: Yes, you can (go sailing).

The permission-*can* is very similar to the offer-*can* insofar as the architecture of semantic core component and the at issue conditional component are concerned. The main difference, or at least the main point that we want to emphasize here, is the shift in the anchoring of the conditional antecedent in the at-issue component.

At the core semantic level, there is no doubt that the modal basis of permission-*can* and of offer-*can* are different. With permission-*can*, the set of worlds at stake are not ‘issue worlds’ but ‘goal worlds’. However, just as with offer-*can* (and indeed any modal, see Condoravdi (2002); Giannakidou and Mari (2021)), the modal base is non-homogeneous: the reaching of the goal might fail.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly for our comparison is that, as with offer-*can*, the speaker must have the authority to issue the permission to  $\alpha$ .

The main shift is that the conditional is first-person oriented and is akin to ‘If **I** want to’

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<sup>19</sup>The details of what the teleological modal base looks like do not matter here.

- (56) Permission-*can*:
- a. Assuming that:
    - (i) telos worlds( $\alpha, \phi$ ) &
    - (ii) authority( $s, \alpha$ ) &
    - (iii) there is a cell  $u \in \pi(\mathcal{P}(t))$  defining an outcome  $\phi$  such that there is a ranking  $g$  which is a practical commitment, s.t.  $\forall \phi' \in \Phi, \phi' \neq \phi, \phi <_{g, \alpha, c} \phi'$  (i.e.  $\phi$  is the telos preferred by the addressee).
  - b.  $\forall w' \in u, \exists t' > t_u(\text{agrees}(s, \phi) \rightarrow \phi(\alpha, w', t'))$

This states that on the assumption that  $\alpha$  (the addressee when the sentence is in the second person) has a telos, that  $s$  **has authority** over  $\alpha$  and that  $\phi$  is the preferred outcome for  $\alpha$  (or telos in this case), then, if the speaker wants,  $\alpha$  performs  $\phi$ . In other terms, if the **speaker** agrees, the permission is realized in future worlds by  $\alpha$ . In Geurts (2019) terms the “the basic function of permissives is to remove a potential obstacle on the speaker’s part to a potential action on the part of the addressee.”

We are aware that (56) is only an attempt to account for the permission as a notion at the intersection between core modality and speech act uses of modal sentences. What we want to emphasize here, is that, in the speech act uses of modal sentences, flavors (commissive vs. directives) can be derived by manipulating the anchoring of the authority and of the person responsible for the ratification or the agreement.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to disentangle a variety of semantic components that play a role in the interpretation of offer-*can* in commissive statements. We have identified a set of what we call “assumptions” and that can be foregrounded or backgrounded across contexts, as well as a conditional meaning that gives rise to the commissive speech act. We have compared and contrasted this conditional to a variety of non-conditional conditionals, and we believe that it is of a special sort that deserve the dedicated label of “conditional offer”.

Our analysis shares some important properties with Copley’s view of offer-*will* and most notably the ability and authority preconditions. We have diverged in assuming an epistemic modal base rather than a metaphysical one and in elaborating on the notion of goal and solution worlds rather than commitment worlds.

We have suggested the hypothesis that the layered structure distinguishing some modal core components on one hand and a conditional on the other is shared by those modal statements that function as injunctions and directives. The main differences that cut across these uses lie in the anchoring of the authority relation and in the identification of the individual in charge of agreeing that  $p$  comes about. Relatedly, we have

also tentatively proposed that questions can flip any individual parameter, including the authority. We expect this tentative idea to be the starting point of future research on a larger class of performative statements with modals.

Future work will also ultimately tell whether this layered approach is fruitful enough to reconcile the so called modal and speech act uses, or whether an ambiguity account for the modals as able to be interpreted at the sentential or sub-sentential level is, after all, preferable.

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