

The Use of “Can” & “Could”

Asst. Lect. Masar Abbas Jasim

Possibility and impossibility

We use could to show that something is possible, but not certain:

They *could come* by car. (= Maybe they will come by car.)

We use can to make general statements about what is possible:

It *can be* very cold here in winter. (= It is sometimes very cold here in winter.)

We use can't or cannot to say that something is impossible:

That can't be true.

You cannot be serious.

Ability

We use **can** and **can't** to talk about someone's **abilities**:

- She **can speak** several languages.
- He **can swim** like a fish.
- They **can't dance** very well.

We use **could** and **couldn't** to talk about **the past**:

She **could speak** several languages.
They **couldn't dance** very well.

Permission

We use *can* to ask *for permission* to do something:

Can I ask a question, please?

Can we go home now?

could is more *formal* and *polite* than *can*:

Could I ask a question please?

Could we go home now?

Thank You