



Video 10 – Real Grammar: can or may?

“Should I use *can* or *may* when I’m asking for permission to do something?”

That’s a good question and one that many English language learners often wonder about.

For example, let’s imagine you’ve been invited to go to a movie with some friends, and you would like to bring your sister. What do you say?

“*May* I bring my sister too?”

“*Can* I bring my sister too?”

Older textbooks will tell you that “*may*” is the correct verb to use when you’re asking for permission, and that “*can*” is wrong. That’s what I was taught when I was at school too. But the evidence in our corpus shows that this use of “*may*” has been declining for the last 30 years or more, and nowadays it’s quite rare. When asking for permission, people say “*Can I?*” at least ten times more often than they say “*May I?*”. So in this case, “*Can I bring my sister too?*” would be the more natural choice. It would also be natural here to say ‘*Could I bring my sister too?*’.

‘*May I?*’ still has its uses, but it’s mostly found in speeches or other official contexts - not for asking permission, but for introducing a suggestion or comment. People say things like “*May I suggest that we postpone this discussion until the next meeting?*” or “*May I begin by congratulating the bride and groom?*”

That’s it for now.

If you’d like to know more about this topic or other real grammar questions, have a look at the Macmillan Dictionary Blog.