WRITING A CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR OF ENGLISH AND DUTCH. THE TREATMENT OF MODAL NOTIONS

FLOR AARTS and HERMAN WEKKER

University of Nijmegen

A. *The Nijmegen Contrastive Grammar*

Anyone setting out to write a contrastive grammar of two languages should take at least two questions into account:

1. what is the purpose of the grammar?
2. what students is it intended for?

Since to a large extent the answers to these questions determine the grammar's nature and scope, we shall use them as our starting point to explain what we think a contrastive grammar of English and Dutch might look like.
It is necessary to distinguish in principle between two kinds of contrastive grammars:

1. pedagogical contrastive grammars
2. theoretical contrastive grammars

We believe that pedagogical contrastive grammars should start virtually from scratch, taking little for granted. They should be written for intermediate students who know some of the basic facts of the grammar of the target language, but have not yet mastered it completely. The purpose of this type of grammar, in other words, is threefold:

1. to provide information about the facts of the target language
2. to illustrate similarities and differences between the two linguistic systems involved
3. to facilitate the teaching and learning of the target language

A pedagogical contrastive grammar is thus an attempt to achieve several goals simultaneously. The views underlying it were formulated by Fries in *Teaching*

and learning English as a foreign language, who claims that

> *"only with sound materials based upon an adequate descriptive analysis of both the language to be studied and the native language of the student (or with the continued expert guidance of a trained linguist) can an adult make the maximum progress toward the satisfactory mastery of a foreign language"* (1945 : 5);

as well as by Lado in *Linguistics across cultures: applied linguistics for language teachers*, who argues that

> *"The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them. He gains an insight into the linguistic problems involved that cannot easily be achieved otherwise"*. (1957 : 2).

Theoretical contrastive grammars, on the other hand, are based on a particular theoretical framework (say transformational grammar or case grammar. Cf. Fisiak, Lipińska-Grzegorek and Zabrocki 1978). This kind of approach is advocated, for example, by Stockwell, who writes:

> *"the least one could ask for is the display of a wide range of deep structures and an exemplification, perhaps rather loose, of the major syntactic rules that convert these to appropriate surface structures in the two languages. At least for the languages of most interest in American schools, the deep structures share an enormous amount of similarity and the differences of surface structure result from the existence of different transformational rules"* (1968 : 22).

Since the sole purpose of such grammars is to provide explanations for and insights into contrastive problems, and since the treatment of such problems will only be understood by advanced students familiar with not only the linguistic theory being applied but also the grammatical systems of the two languages involved, it is clear that a theoretical contrastive grammar is quite unsuitable for teaching the grammar of the target language.

The Nijmegen Contrastive Grammar of English and Dutch is a pedagogical contrastive grammar. It is only concerned with syntax, not with phonology or the lexicon, and is primarily designed to meet the needs of first-year university students of English. Given this category of students, the first question to be answered is which approach to adopt in the presentation of the material. Theoretically there are two possibilities:

1. *either* the (basic) facts of English grammar are presented first, followed by a discussion of contrastive problems
2. *or* the (basic) facts of English grammar are from the outset systematically related to the corresponding facts in Dutch.

Since first-year students have no more than a fairly elementary knowledge of English grammar, we believe that it is pedagogically more useful to adopt the non-integrated approach.

Accordingly the Nijmegen Contrastive Grammar of English and Dutch consists of three main parts:

I. Introduction
II. The Structures of English and Dutch compared
III. Notions and functions

I. *Introduction*

After a brief discussion of general questions such as 'What is grammar?' and 'What is contrastive grammar?' (1.0), we present an outline of the grammar of English based on the units of grammatical description (1.1). The purpose of Part I is to provide the beginning student with the necessary information about English structures and with clear working definitions of the most important grammatical terms, so as to enable him to read Parts II and III without too much difficulty. Using Halliday's notion of the rankscale, we discuss the morpheme, the word, the phrase, the clause and the sentence, together with relevant grammatical categories such as number, gender, person, case, mood, voice, aspect, etc. In 1.2 we deal with the functions in the English sentence (subject, direct object, etc.) and the various linguistic structures by means of which these functions can be realized. Part I therefore looks as follows:

1.0 What is grammar? What is a contrastive grammar?
1.1 The Units of grammatical description
1.1.0 Introductory: the grammatical rankscale
1.1.1 The morpheme
1.1.2 The word
1.1.3 The phrase
1.1.4 The clause
1.1.5 The sentence
1.2 Functions and their realizations

Naturally we do not claim that, if students know the facts presented here, they know enough about English grammar. What we do claim is that this outline can serve as a basis for Parts II and III and as an adequate introduction to more comprehensive grammars, which will have to be studied later, such as Quirk & Greenbaum, *A university grammar of English* and Quirk et al., *A grammar of contemporary English*.

Our grammar is theoretically a compromise and so is its terminology, although in very general terms it falls within the tradition of British linguistics; it is compatible with the compromise position adopted by the Quirk grammars. Although we believe that, at some stage, students should be introduced to linguistic theories, we think that they should first thoroughly familiarize themselves with the facts of English grammar before attempting to tackle questions that have to do with the explanation of these facts.

II. *The Structures of English and Dutch compared*

Part II is the central part of our grammar, in which we attempt to systematically discuss those structures of English and Dutch that appear to us to be relevant from a contrastive point of view. On the whole the emphasis is on differences rather than similarities.
We have adopted the following provisional outline of Part II:

1. the noun and the noun phrase
2. the adjective and the adjective phrase
3. the adverb and the adverb phrase
4. the verb and the verb phrase
5. the preposition and the prepositional phrase
6. the simple sentence
7. the complex sentence

In order to illustrate the kind of approach we have in mind we shall give some examples:

The Structure of the noun phrase in English and Dutch

Among the most striking differences between English and Dutch noun phrases is the fact that Dutch NP's can have very complex premodificational structures which English does not allow. Compare:

Een door mijn vader in 1950 geschreven brief	— A letter written by my father in 1950 (lit.* A by my father in 1950 written letter)
Een van alle humor ontblote beschrijving	— A description devoid of all humour (lit.* An of all humor devoid description)
Een voor dit doel ongeschikt boek	— A book unsuitable for this purpose (lit.* A for this purpose unsuitable book)

The Tense-systems of English and Dutch

Among the differences that deserve comment are the use of the past tense in English in sentences with an adjunct referring to past time, where Dutch employs the present perfect (e.g. Du. *heb ... geschreven* and *is... gestorven*):

Ik heb die brief gisteren geschreven	— I wrote that letter yesterday
Mijn vader is in 1976 gestorven	— My father died in 1976

Equally important is the use in English of the present perfect, the past perfect and the future perfect in sentences like the following, where Dutch employs

the present or the past tense (e.g. *is* and *woonde*):

Jan is al 5 jaar professor	— Jan has been a professor for 5 years
Vorige maand woonde hij precies 10 jaar in Amsterdam	— Last month he had lived in Amsterdam for exactly 10 years
Volgend jaar is zij 25 jaar getrouwd	— Next year she will have been married for 25 years

Relative clauses in English and Dutch

Unlike English, Dutch does not allow non-introduced restrictive relative clauses, nor relative clauses with extraposed prepositions:

The book you bought is too expensive	— Het boek *dat* je gekocht hebt is te duur
The way he did it was perfect	— De manier *waarop* hij het deed was perfect
The man you gave your telephone number to was my boss	— De man *aan wie* jij je telefoonnummer gaf was mijn baas
Is this the address you were looking for?	— Is dit het adres *waarnaar* je zocht?

Word-order in English and Dutch

Sentence-initial adjuncts cause inversion in Dutch, but not, as a rule, in English:

Then he told me that he was ill	— Toen vertelde hij me dat hij ziek was (*lit ... then told he me)
Sometimes I am lazy	— Soms ben ik lui (*lit ... am I lazy)

In subordinate clauses, Dutch, unlike English, often has special word-order:

I know that John is ill	— Ik weet dat Jan ziek is (*lit. ... that John ill is)
You don't understand why I admire her	— Jij begrijpt niet waarom ik haar bewonder (*lit. ... why I her asmire)

Concord of number in English and Dutch

There is no subject-complement concord in Dutch in sentences like the following:

His brothers are officers in the army — Zijn broers zijn officier in het lager (*lit. ... are officer in the army)

Mary and Susan are actresses — Mary en Susan zijn actrice (*lit. ... are actress)

So far we have briefly discussed the first two Parts of our proposed grammar: I, the Introduction, and II, The Structures of English and Dutch compared. In the second half of our paper, we shall devote some attention to Part III of the Nijmegen Contrastive Grammar of English and Dutch, and illustrate, in particular, how we deal with modal notions and the language functions associated with them.

B. *The Treatment of Modal Notions: Exemplification*

Modality is recognized as one of the major notional categories. Thus, according to Wilkins (1976:21—22), modality is one of three distinct types of meaning that can be conveyed in the uttering of a sentence. The other two are the "ideational" or "propositional" meaning (expressing our perceptions of events, processes, states and abstractions) and the "interactional" meaning (involving the role an utterance performs as part of the interactive processes between the participants, i.e. what we can *do* with language). Modal meaning, on the other hand, has to do with the speaker's attitude towards what he is saying. As Wilkins puts it, the speaker may, for example, wish to express the degree of validity that his statement has, either representing it as simply an objective truth, or indicating that the ideational meaning is subject to some contingency, is desired rather than positively asserted or is potential rather than actual.

Following Wilkins (1976:38), we will thus define a modal sentence (utterance) as one in which the truth of the predication is subject to some kind of contingency or modification. The utterances we have mind are those in which the speaker wants to express, for example, that there is an obligation, a necessity, a possibility or an intention that something should be so (should have been so). The two main categories of modal meaning usually distinguished are called *logical* and *moral*, or *epistemic* and *non-epistemic* respectively. Epistemic modality involves objective and personal assessments of the validity of the predication, and includes such notions as certainty, logical necessity, probability, possibility, conviction, conjecture, doubt and disbelief. Philosophers and linguists have associated these modal meanings with a "scale of certainty". Non-epistemic modality, on the other hand, has to do with degrees of moral undertaking and responsibility, whether on the speaker's or on someone else's part, and involves a "scale of commitment". This scale includes notions like intention, volition, permission, prohibition, obligation/necessity, duty, etc.

One interesting syntactic difference between the epistemic and non-epistemic uses of modal auxiliaries in English is that with epistemic modals it is the full verb, not the modal itself, which is normally marked for past tense. There are some exceptions to this rule, but it emerges clearly as a general pattern. Thus, the past time equivalent of *John may do it tomorrow* is not **John might do it yesterday* but *John may have done it yesterday*, with *have* as the verbal marker of the past. Similar cases are *John will have done it yesterday*, *John must have done it yesterday* and *John can't have done it yesterday*. When used non-epistemically, modal auxiliaries cannot normally occur in the past tense either, unless the past tense form is used in a tentative sense or occurs in reported speech. In such cases, the *may* of permission changes into *was allowed to* for past time reference, not into *might*. Similarly, the *must* of obligation becomes *had to* or *was obliged to*.

Another difference is that epistemic modals, or rather the epistemic uses of modals, usually co-occur with main verbs denoting a present state or habit, or with main verbs in the progressive. *Must*, for example, which may be epistemic or non-epistemic, is epistemic (denoting logical necessity) in examples like *John must be at home now* and in *Paul must be leaving tomorrow*. Otherwise, in *John must go home now* or *Paul must leave immediately*, *must* can only be interpreted non-epistemically, expressing an obligation or a command.

Epistemic modal notions are parallelled by language-functions such as "expressing/inquiring whether something is considered a logical conclusion (deduction)", "expressing how certain/uncertain one is of something" and "inquiring how certain/uncertain others are of something". Non-epistemic modal notions correspond with language-functions such as "expressing that one is/is not obliged to do something", "inquiring whether one is obliged to do something", "giving and seeking permission to do something", "inquiring whether others have permission to do something", and "stating that permission is withheld" (see Van Ek (1975:19—20)).

Both English and Dutch possess a great variety of grammatical, lexical and phonological devices to express modal notions. The exponents of these notions include such distinct categories as modal particles, moods of the verb, modal auxiliaries, modal uses of some of the tenses, and lists of lexical items expressing the various modal meanings. It is clear that the two languages do not have the same set of linguistic devices at their disposal for the expression of modal notions.

By way of illustration, we shall briefly discuss our treatment of one epistemic and one non-epistemic notion. The epistemic notion that we have chosen for our present purposes is that of *possibility* and the non-epistemic one is *permission*. They are representative of the way in which we deal with *logical necessity* and *probability* on the one hand, and *obligation/necessity* and *prohibition* on the other. Our two sections *possibility* and *permission* are added here as an appendix. We wish to emphasize that these are, of course, prelimin-

ary versions. Each section is subdivided into three parts. The first part is a short introduction, in which an attempt is made to describe the notion and, if necessary, to distinguish it from related notions. Thus, in the case of *permission* we state that this notion and the language-function related to it normally imply two human participants with different roles: one that gives permission and another who gets permission to do something. Apart from giving or seeking permission, speakers may also report permission or inquire whether permission exists.

Epistemic notions like *possibility* are less easy to define, apart from saying, perhaps rather vaguely, that they have to do with the speaker's assessment of the validity of what he is saying. We have refrained from such definitions and have decided to warn our students that there is no one-to-one relationship between this notion and a particular linguistic form, and that this may lead to ambiguity.

The second part of each section is devoted to the ways in which the notion can be expressed in English. *Possibility*, for example, can be expressed by means of the modal auxiliaries *can (could)* and *may (might)*, by means of phrases like *it is possible that ..., it is possible to ..., there is a possibility that ...* and *is there any possibility that ...*, and also by means of the adverbs *possibly, perhaps* and *maybe*. In our section on *permission* we discuss the differences in meaning between the exponents *can (could)* and *may (might)* in statements and in questions, then go on to talk about the use of *be allowed to* and *be permitted to*, the use of the negative phrase *not be supposed to*, as in *I am not supposed to tell you*, and the use of the verbs *let* and *mind*, as in *Do you mind if I smoke?* Finally, under f, g and h, we deal with a number of formal and informal expressions that can be used to give or seek permission.

Part 3 of each section is always entitled *English and Dutch compared*. Contrastive points are arranged according to relative importance and frequency, but structures or expressions belonging to the same linguistic category are grouped together. In this way we provide a survey of all the important devices that English and Dutch possess to express a notion, pointing out what the differences between the two languages are, both semantically and syntactically. The kinds of facts that we draw our students' attention to in this part of the grammar are:

(1) the formal differences between the modals in English and Dutch and the use of suppletive forms in English,
(2) the various meanings of certain English verb forms and their Dutch equivalents,
(3) the range of devices in the two languages to express modal notions, and
(4) translation problems on a lexical level, such as the translation of Dutch *onmogelijk* by *not possibly*, rather than **impossibly*, in sentences like *I cannot possibly come* (Du. *Ik kan onmogelijk komen*).

APPENDIX

POSSIBILITY

1. In what follows an attempt is made to separate the notion of possibility from other notions such as permission and ability, which are often expressed in the same way. The following sentence, for instance, is triply ambiguous, since the auxiliary *can* can express possibility as well as permission and ability:

Can you tell us where he is now?

It is usually the context that disambiguates such sentences.

2. *Possibility can be expressed in the following ways:*

a. by means of the auxiliary *can (could)*
Examples:
Such things can happen
Students can be called up for military service in this country
I can tell you later, if you like
This park can be closed in the evening
You cannot be serious about this
I don't know where he is, but can he be reading in the library?
Could is used with reference to past time and to express hypothetical and tentative possibility.
Examples:
Last year you could buy that car for less than £ 3000
In those days you could be arrested for critizing the Government
Since our neighbours had a swimming-pool, the children could swim all day
If you removed that wall, the house could collapse
We could go and see them tonight
That information could be valuable

b. by means of the auxiliary *may (might)*, which often expresses possibility and uncertainty at the same time.
Examples:
If you leave now, you may get there in time
Geoffrey may finish his dissertation before the end of the year
Aspirin may cure your headache
You may be right
A distinction is sometimes drawn between 'factual possibility' (expressed by *may*) and 'theoretical possibility' (expressed by *can*). For example:
This park may be closed in the evening (=It is possible that this park will be closed in the evening)
This park can be closed in the evening (=It is possible for this park to be closed in the evening)
In formal English 'theoretical possibility' can also be expressed by *may*.
When followed by a perfect infinitive *may* is normally used rather than *can*:
We may have made a mistake
* We can have made a mistake

I may have told you this
* I can have told you this

On the other hand, *can* is used rather than *may* in questions and in negative sentences expressing impossibility:

Can he be serious about this (=Is it possible that ...?)
* May he be serious about this?
He cannot be serious about this (=It is impossible that...)
* He may not be serious about this.

The last sentence is of course correct when the meaning is 'It is possible that he is not serious about this'.

Might is used to express hypothetical and tentative possibility:

If you did that, he might get very angry
We might go to the pictures next Sunday
It might rain tomorrow
Do you think he might refuse?

c. By means of the phrases *it is possible that ..., it is possible (for ...) to, there is the/a possibility of ..., is there much/any possibility of ...?*
Examples:

It is possible for students to register from the beginning of next week
It is possible that you fail a second time
It is possible (for him) to sit the exam again
There is the possbility of an accident
Is there any possibility of your going tomorrow?

Note the difference between

It is possible for him to sit the exam again (=theoretical possibility)
It is possible that he sits the exam again (=factual possibility)

d. By means of the adverbs *possibly, perhaps* and *maybe*

Is John intelligent? Possibly.
Can you possibly lend me a fiver?
I cannot possibly come
Perhaps he is ill
Maybe he doesn't like you

3. *English and Dutch compared*

The following points deserve comment:

a. the examples below show that Dutch can use the verb *kunnen* independently (i.e. without an infinitive) to express possibility. The auxiliaries *can* and *may* cannot be used in this way, except in cases of ellipsis (as in the last two examples). The corresponding English sentences require the phrase *be possible:*

Dat kan	— That is possible
Vroeger kon dat	— That used to be possible
Kon dat maar	— If only that was/were possible
Dat heeft ooit gekund	— That was possible at one time
Dat zal niet kunnen	— That will not be possible
Had dat maar gekund	— If only that had been possible
Dat kan heel goed	— That's quite possible
Kan dit raam open? Natuurlijk	— Can this window be opened? Of course it can.
Denk je dat ze vanmiddag komt? Misschien.	— Do you think she'll come this afternoon? She may.

b. Note the independent use of the verb *kunnen* in cases like the following:

Kan je koffer nog dicht?	— Will your suitcase still shut?
Kan die rommel weg?	— Can this rubbish be thrown out?
Kan die prijs niet wat omlaag?	— Can't you knock off something?
Deze imperiaal kan er in een mum van tijd af	— This roofrack comes off in no time

c. Since the Dutch verb *kunnen* is a fully conjugated verb, whereas the English auxiliary *can* is defective, English requires the phrase *be possible* in sentences with future reference:

Dit artikel zal niet voor het einde van de maand geleverd kunnen worden	— It won't be possible to supply this article before the end of the month
Zoiets zal nooit meer kunnen gebeuren	— It will never be possible for such a thing to happen again
Zal men de inflatie ooit kunnen beteugelen?	— Will it ever be possible to check inflation?

d. Note the various meanings of English *might have* and *could have*, which can be used in the following ways:

1. *Might have/could have* are used as tentative variants of *may have* to express the present possibility of a past event or action: it is just possible that an event or action (has) occurred.

Dutch uses:

— *kan wel* + perfect infinitive
— perfect + *misschien (wel)*
— a construction with *zou(den)*

Examples:

She may have made it all up/ She might have made it all up/ She could have made it all up	Ze kan alles wel verzonnen hebben/Zij heeft misschien alles wel verzonnen/Ze zou alles wel eens verzonnen kunnen hebben
He may have hit her/He might have hit her/He could have hit her	Hij kan haar wel geslagen hebben/ Misschien heeft hij haar wel geslagen/ Hij zou haar wel eens geslagen kunnen hebben
They may have left yesterday/ They might have left yesterday	Ze kunnen gisteren wel vertrokken zijn/ Ze zijn misschien gisteren wel vertrokken/
They could have left yesterday	Ze zouden gisteren wel eens vertrokken kunnen zijn.

Note that *might have* and *could have* can also occur in interrogative sentences. Examples:

Might she have made it all up?	Heeft ze misschien alles verzonnen?/ Zou ze (misschien) alles verzonnen hebben?

Could they have left yesterday?	Zijn ze misschien gisteren vertrokken?/ Zouden ze (misschien) gisteren vertrokken zijn?

Note that in negative sentences *could not have* is used as a tentative variant of *can't have* to express that it is not possible that an event or action (has) occurred. When both *could* and *not* are accented *could not have*, like *may not have* and *might not have*, expresses that it is (just) possible that an event or action has not occurred.
Examples:

He couldn't have noticed her absence	Hij kan haar afwezigheid onmogelijk opgemerkt hebben
He could not have noticed her absence/He may not have noticed her absence/He might not have noticed her absence	Hij heeft haar afwezigheid misschien (wel) niet opgemerkt/Hij kan haar aanwezigheid wel niet opgemerkt hebben

In all these cases *might have* and *could have* can be said to be ignorance-based, i.e. the speaker does not know whether a possible action or event actually occurred in the past.

2. In conditional contexts *might have* and *could have* are knowledge-based, i.e. the speaker knows that the event or action did not actually occur. Knowledge-based *might have* and *could have* are not freely interchangeable. *Might have* expresses the present possibility of a past contingency: it is possible that an event or action would have occurred (if...). *Could have*, on the other hand, expresses a past possibility that did not materialize: it would have been possible for an event or action to occur (if...). For knowledge-based *could have* Dutch uses *had kunnen*, for *might have*:
   - pluperfect + *misschien wel*
   - *had wel eens kunnen* + infinitive
   - a construction with *zou (den)*

Examples:

might have	
She might have invited you (if you had been there)	Ze had je misschien wel uitgenodigd /Ze zou je misschien wel uitgenodigd hebben (als...)
It might have happened to you (if you had been in that situation)	Het was U wellicht ook overkomen/ Het had U ook wel kunnen overkomen (als...)
The train might have been cheaper (if we had taken it)	De trein was wellicht goedkoper geweest/De trein had wel (eens) goedkoper kunnen zijn/De trein zou wellicht goedkoper geweest zijn (als...)
could have	
She could have invited you (if you had been there)	Zij had je kunnen uitnodigen (als...)

It could have happened to you (if you had been unlucky enough)	Het had U ook kunnen overkomen (als...)
The train could have been cheaper (if we had bought a season-ticket)	De trein had goedkoper kunnen zijn (als ...)

Note again that in *could not have* the auxiliary is negated, while in *might not have* it is the perfect infinitive that is negated. Hence *could not have* equals 'it would not have been possible for ...' while *might not have* means 'it is possible that an event or action would not have occurred'.

Examples:

Such measures could not have had any effect	Zulke maatregelen hadden geen enkel effekt gehad kunnen hebben
Such measures might not have had any effect	Zulke maatregelen zouden wellicht geen enkel effekt gehad hebben/ Zulke maatregelen hadden misschien geen enkel effekt gehad.

3. *Might have* and *could have* are freely interchangeable when they express a reproach. Dutch uses *had wel eens mogen/kunnen* + infinitive.
Examples:

You might have kissed me!	Je had me wel eens mogen/kunnen kussen!
You could have sent me a postcard!	Je had me wel eens een kaartje mogen/kunnen sturen!
It might have been a bit shorter!	Het had wel wat korter gekund!

e. It is worth while noting that Dutch learners of English tend to use *perhaps/maybe* almost to the exclusion of *may/might*, etc. In English one often finds possibility expressed by one of these modal auxiliaries.

Examples:

Misschien heeft hij wel gelijk	He may/might be right/Maybe he is right/Perhaps he is right
Het was misschien te donker	It may have been too dark/Perhaps it was too dark

f. The Dutch adverb *onmogelijk* corresponds to *not possibly* in English

Ik kan onmogelijk komen	I cannot possibly come

PERMISSION

1. Permission in its normal use implies two human participants with different roles: a person who gives permission (A) and is in a position of authority over another person (B), who is given permission in respect of what the permission is about (X). Characteristic situations are: Boss (A) — employee (B) — have a day off (X); Parent (A) — child (B) — have a chocolate bar (X), etc. ...
   Speakers can grant permission or ask for permission, as well as report permission (i.e. state that permission exists or does not exist) or inquire after permission (i.e. ask whether permission exists or does not exist). In Dutch these four cases can be exem-

plified as follows:

Jij mag (van mij) gaan
Mag ik (van jou) gaan?
Dat mag/Ik mag
Mag dat?/Mag jij?

Absence of permission is also discussed in the section on prohibition (see section .....)

2. *Permission can be expressed in the following ways*:

a. by means of the auxiliaries *can* (*could*) and *may* (*might*). *May* is considered to be more formal and polite than *can*. Some speakers prefer *may* to *can* as being the more 'correct' form for the expression of permission, but many people today tend to avoid the use of *may* as being too authoritarian in statements, and unduly unassertive in questions. 'The story of "Can I come in?" — "You can, but you may not" belongs to a different age', as Palmer observes (1974:118).
The tendency to avoid the use of *may* may be related to the fact that *may* stresses the unequal status of A and B in relation to X: in statements it implies that it is the speaker who gives or refuses permission, in questions that it is up to the hearer to give or refuse permission. *Can*, on the other hand, serves to give or refuse permission without acknowledging the source of permission; in questions *can* serves to ask for permission, again without the implication that it is up to the hearer to grant permission (although this is in fact the case). The use of *can* rather than *may* in statements may therefore be due to the wish to avoid authoritatian overtones in giving or refusing permission and, in questions, to the desire to save the hearer the embarrassment of appearing authoritarian when answering the question. Apart from this, *can* is also used to report permission, i.e. to state or deny that permission exists and to inquire after permission, i.e. to ask whether permission exists. Examples:

Statements:

— giving/refusing permission (performative utterance): *can/may*
You may watch Match of the Day tonight (I allow you...)
You can watch Match of the Day tonight (You have (my) permission...)
Johnny may watch Match of the Day tonight (I allow him...)
Johnny can watch Match of the Day tonight (He has (my) permission...)

Although all four sentences indicate that permission is granted to the subject, the *can* examples imply that the speaker's role as permitter is disguised, hence the use of parentheses around *my*.

There is at least one exception to the rule that *may* in statements implies that permission is given or refused by the speaker. The combinations *I may/We may* merely report that permission exists for the subject of the sentence. Thus, *We may cross the border again* merely states that it is (once more) permissible for us to cross the border.

— reporting permission: *can*
I can watch Match of the Day tonight (I have permission...)
You can't go out tonight (You don't have permission...)
Johnny can watch Match of the Day tonight (He has permission...)

Questions:

— asking for permission: *can/may*
May I use your phone (Will you allow me...)
Can I use your phone? (It it all right (by you) if...)
May Johnny watch Match of the Day tonight? (Will you allow him...)
Can Johnny watch Match of the Day tonight? (Is it all right (by you) if...)
Note that in the *can* sentence it is the hearer who figures as the disguised permitter.

— inquiring after permission: *can*
Can I watch Match of the Day tonight? (Have I got permission...?)
Can you stay up late tonight? (Have you got permission...?)
Can Johnny watch Match of the Day tonight? (Has he got permission...?)

It is worth noting that questions with *May you...?* are rare, presumably because the hearer cannot give himself permission. To inquire after permission for the hearer *Are you allowed to/Can you/ Will they let you*, etc. are more common (Du. Mag jij...?) *Could* and *might* combined with a first person subject are freqiently used in polite, tentative requests for permission. The main difference is that *might* is more formal than *could*.

Examples:

Could I have a copy of this letter?
Could I see your driving-licence, please
Might I make a suggestion?

Could can also express hypothetical permission and permission in the past:
If you were an OAP, you *could* get on free
When I was your age, I *could* go out every evening

Might can express permission in the past in reported speech only:
You said that I might/could use your phone
He asked if he might/could use a dictionary

b. by means of the verbs *allow* (*be allowed to*) and *permit* (be *permitted to*). *Permit* is considered to be more formal than *allow*.

Examples:

I cannot allow you to continue like that
Please allow me to finish what I am saying
Smoking is not allowed in this school
Next year you will not be allowed to take the exam in May
Undergraduates are not permitted to entertain leadies in their rooms
The rules do not permit us to elect a foreigner.

- Note that the forms *be allowed to/be permitted to* are also used when the modals *can* and *may*, which are not fully conjugated verbs in English, cannot be used.

In the simple present and past there seems to be a difference in meaning between *be allowed to*, etc. and *can*. Thus *Is Dick allowed to take the Friday afternoon off?* would be a way of inquiring after the existence of a permanent permission, while the sentence *Can Dick take the Friday afternoon off?* is more likely to be a reguest for permission on a particular occasion. Cf.:

A: Can I offer you a drink, inspector?
B: No, I'm afraid I can't accept your kind invitation, sir. We policemen are not allowed to drink on duty.

c. by means of the negative phrase *not be supposed to* (in present and past tenses)
Examples:

I am not supposed to tell you
We were not supposed to tell you (, but...)

The phrase *not be supposed to* is very close in meaning to Du. *eigenlijk niet mogen*. Note that the positive form *be supposed to*, does not express permission. One of its meanings is obligation (see section...).

d. by means of the verb *let*.
Examples;:

John won't let his daughter go to that party
The policeman would not let us pass
Will you let me explain this, please
Don't let him get away with it

The passive construction *be let*+ infinitive is very rare. Instead we usually find *be allowed/permitted to:*

After waiting for two hours at the border, { we were let go / we were allowed to go }

e. by means of the verb *mind* (in questions and negative sentences).
Examples:

I dont' mind if you tell her
Would you mind my opening that door?
Do you mind { if I smoke? / my smoking? }
You don't mind me using your phone, do you?

f. by means of the expressions *Is it all right/okay if...? Will/Would it be all right/okay if...?*
Examples:

Is it all right if I use your phone?
Will it be okay if do it tomorrow?

g. by means of (formal) expressions like *to give (grant) somebody permission, to have somebody's permission (leave) to ask (request) permission*:
Examples:

I give you permission to leave early today
Will you grant me permission to go away for two days?
You had my permission to stay until the end of the party
Do I have your leave to be absent tomorrow?

h. by means of expressions like *Yes of course, By all means, Please do, I suppose so, Be my guest*, and informal phrases such as *all right, okay* and *sure*, all of which are used as positive reactions to requests for permission. Note that utterances such as *I don't mind, Please yourself* and *Do as you like* express indifference on the part of the speaker, or his reluctance to grant permission.

To deny permission, English has expressions like *No, I'm afraid not, No, you can't, Of course not, You can't be serious* and *You must be joking. Forget it* and *No way* are often heard in colloquial conversation.

3. *English and Dutch compared*

The following points deserve comment:

a. Since the auxiliaries *can* and *may* lack-finite forms, whereas the Dutch verb *mogen* is a fully conjugated verb, we find that in the perfect and future tenses English uses the suppletive forms *be allowed/permitted to*:

Ik heb hem tot nu toe twee keer mogen bezoeken
So far I have been permitted to see him twice

Hij was blij dat hij haar had mogen kussen toen ze wegging
He was glad that he had been allowed to kiss her when she left

We zullen wel mogen meedoen, denk ik
We will be allowed to join in, I expect

English also uses the suppletive forms when the corresponding Dutch sentence contains the infinitive *te mogen*:

Ze scheen te mogen komen
She seemed to be allowed to come

b. *Be allowed/permitted to* is also used to express hypothetical permission:

Zou jij morgen naar Amsterdam mogen (gaan)?
Would you be allowed to go to Amsterdam tomorrow?

Had jij mogen gaan als je zo oud was geweest als ik?
Would you have been allowed to go if you had been my age?

As appears from the examples above Dutch *had mogen* corresponds to:

1. *had been allowed/permitted to* when the reference is to permission that was actually granted.
2. *should/would have been allowed/permitted to* when the reference is to hypothetical permission in the past.

c. The Dutch past tense *mocht(en)* corresponds to English

1. *was/were allowed/permitted to* in direct speech:
Mochten jullie terugkomen?
Were you allowed to come back?

Ik mocht niet blijven
I was not allowed to stay

2. *could* in direct speech:
Mocht je gisteren met hem spreken?
Could you talk to him yesterday?

This use of *could* is comparatively rare, be *be allowed permitted to* being far more common

3. *might/could* in indirect speech
Hij zei dat hij niet aan boord mocht gaan
He said that he might/could not go on board

Zij beloofde dat ik morgen mocht uitslapen
She promised that I might/could have a lie-in tomorrow

Note that Dutch also uses *mocht(en)* to express tentative condition, in which case English has *should*.

Mocht hij komen, laat hem dan niet binnen
Should he come, don't let him in

d. The English equivalen of Dutch *zou(den) mogen* in polite requests for permission is *could* or *might:*

Zou ik mogen weten waarom je niet komt?
Might I know why you are not coming?

Zouden wij meer inlichtingen over dit punt mogen hebben?
Could we have more information on this point?

e. English uses the subject-forms of the personal pronouns in sentences of the type
I (he, she) was
You (we, they) were } not allowed/permitted to attend the meeting
Dutch uses the object-forms *mij, hem. har, a ons*, etc.:
Mij (hem, haar, ons...) werd niet toegestaan de vergadering bij te wonen.

f. A striking difference between English and Dutch is the fact that when there is a further complement of some kind in X (usually an object) the verb may sometimes be left out in Dutch but not in English. This kind of "ellipsis" is often found in Dutch questions.

Examples:

May I have an ice-cream	Mag ik een ijsje (hebben)?
Can I go away now?	Kan/mag ik nu weg (gaan)?
You may have/take a sweet	Je mag een snoepje (pakken/hebben)
You cannot do it	Je mag (het) niet (doen)

g. In English ellipsis is possible in short-form questions and answers, provided the linguistic or extralinguistic context makes clear what is supposed to be left out.

Examples:

May I? { Of course you may (B picks up a cigarette and lights it)
{ No, you may not (B puts the cigarette back)

In Dutch ellipsis is common in questions (Mag ik?). In declarative sentences an indefinite object is required. — Ja, *dat* mag je; Nee, *dat* mag je niet.

Alternatively, B (the person who is given permission) may be left unexpressed, the indefinite object may then come out as the grammatical subject.
Cf.: Ja, dat/het mag. Nee, het/dat mag niet.

h. Note also the following:

Het mag niet, vrees ik
It is not allowed, I'm afraid

Dat mag je niet, Mary
You are not allowed/permitted/supposed to do that, Mary

Dat mag niet van mijn vader
My father won't allow me to/ My father won't let me

Van mij mag je
I don't mind if you do / It's all right by me

We mogen de grens weer over
We may cross the border again

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