

VERB DISTINCTIONS IN ENGLISH

Be careful to distinguish between **COULD** (*should be able*), the conditional tense of **TO BE ABLE TO**, and **COULD** (*was able*), a past tense of the verb **TO BE ABLE (POUVOIR)**:

I could do it tomorrow (might be able). CONDIT.
JE POURRAIS LE FAIRE DEMAIN.

I could not understand (wasn't able to) IMPERF.
JE NE POUVAIS PAS COMPRENDRE.

Be careful to distinguish between **WOULD** used as an auxiliary to form the tenses of the conditional (or the imperfect) and **WOULD** meaning **WILLINGNESS** (which is expressed by the past tense of **VOULOIR**):

He would write to you if he had the time. CONDIT.
IL VOUS ECRIRAIT S'IL AVAIT LE TEMPS.

Last summer I would (used to) get up at 5 am every morning. IMPERF.
L'ETE DERNIER JE ME LEVAIS A CINQ HEURES.

I told him several times, but he would not listen (wasn't willing to listen) IMPERF.
JE LUI AI DIT CELA PLUSIEURS FOIS, MAIS IL NE VOULAIT PAS
ECOUTER.

CAN/MAY: POUVOIR:

CAN (*to be able to*) and **MAY** (*have permission to*) are both translated by **POUVOIR**.
Study the sentences below along with the translations in the various tenses:

You may come in.
Vous pouvez entrer.

I cannot promise anything.
Je ne peux rien promettre.

You can (may) do it tomorrow.
Vous pourrez le faire demain.

We shall be able to help you.
Nous pourrons vous aider.

Could you help me now?
Pourriez-vous m' aider maintenant?

You could have (might have) done it yesterday.
Vous auriez pu le faire hier.

I would not (was unable to) come.
Je n'ai pas pu venir (or: Je ne pouvais pas venir).

We hadn't been able to (could not) find a taxi.
Nous n'avions pas pu trouver de taxi.

Note that **COULD**, according to the case, may be translated by the **CONDITIONAL PRESENT**, or by a **PAST TENSE** of the indicative. **MIGHT** and **COULD HAVE (MIGHT HAVE)** are translated by the **PRESENT** and **PAST CONDITIONAL** respectively. In colloquial English speech, you might hear: “ *I might've come,*” “ *I could've done better on the test.*” Note that these are contractions of “ *could have*” and “ *might have*” and **NOT** contractions of “ **could of,**” or “ **might of.**” These last two expressions **ARE NOT ENGLISH!**

MAY, meaning **IT MAY BE THAT (MIGHT)**, is translated by **IL SE PEUT QUE**, followed by the subjunctive:

Il se peut qu'ils viennent vous voir.
They may come to see you.

Il se pourrait qu'ils viennent de bonne heure.
It's possible that they might come early.

Il se peut qu'ils soient déjà arrivés.
(It's possible that) they may have arrived already.