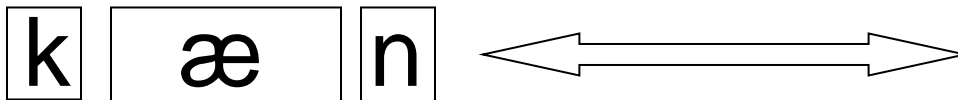


Can and Can't

Many non-native speakers struggle with these two words because in isolation they tend to sound very similar. These words can sometimes cause problems for native speakers, but the differences in their effect on stress help us tell them apart.

In some forms of English, “can” and “can’t” sound very different by themselves because they have different vowels, but in American English, the vowels are the same. In addition, you won’t be able to rely on the final “t” in “can’t” because as you learned in the unit on consonants, native speakers generally don’t release that final /t/ sound. There is a slight difference when Americans say these words by themselves, and it relates to vowel lengthening. When native speakers say these words in isolation very clearly, they might add the /t/ sound at the end, but if they are speaking more naturally, we can probably represent the way these words would sound with the following diagrams:

“can”



“can’t



We can also make the distinction clear by using the word *cannot* instead of *can't*, but we rarely do this. Instead, we rely on stress to make the difference clear. Compare:

I can go to the beach.
I can't go to the beach.

Because we usually stress negative words, these two sentences can be represented in the following way:

I can **GO** to the **BEACH**.
I **CAN'T** GO to the **BEACH**