

English Modal Auxiliaries & Kurmanji Equivalents

Modality, not a one-to-one list of auxiliary verbs

A nine-modal comparison: meaning, grammatical structure and idiomatic Kurmanji examples.

English modal comparison chart

English	Function	Kurmanji strategy	Example / note
can	ability	karîn	Ez dikarim biçim.
could	past ability / possibility / politeness	past karîn / dibe ku / polite question	Meaning decides form
may	permission / possibility	destûr / dibe ku	Dibe ku ew were.
might	tentative possibility	dibe ku	Dibe ku ew were.
must	necessity / inference	divê / other inferential expressions	Divê ez biçim.
should	advice / expectation	baş e ku / divê	Baş e ku tu bixwîni.
shall	offer / suggestion / formal future	hortative / future constructions	Werin em biçin.
will	future / willingness	ê / dê + verb	Ez ê biçim.
would	hypothetical / polite / past habit	conditional / polite / habitual	Ez berê her roj diçûm.

Learning goals — Armancên fêrbûnê

Compare the English core modals can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would with natural ways to express ability, possibility, permission, necessity, advice, future reference, offers and hypothetical meaning in Kurmanji. Learn why the two languages do not have matching inventories of modal auxiliaries.

1. What is an English modal auxiliary?

In English, can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would are central modal auxiliary verbs. They precede a bare infinitive (can go, not *can to go), do not take third-person -s (*she cans), and form negatives and questions without do-support (Can she go? She cannot go). Kurmanji uses several different constructions for the same functions. This is a meaning-based comparison, not a claim that Kurmanji has nine equivalent modal auxiliaries.

2. The key difference: function versus grammatical category

English can is an auxiliary; Kurmanji karîn is a lexical verb meaning 'be able'. English must is a modal; Kurmanji divê is an impersonal necessity expression. English will is a modal; Kurmanji future reference is often expressed using ê/dê and a non-indicative verb. English would covers several functions; Kurmanji does not have one word that translates every use of would.

3. CAN — ability

Ez dikarim biçim. — I can go. Ez dikarim bixwînim. — I can read / study. Ez nikarim biçim. — I cannot go. Karîn is inflected (dikarim, dikarî, dikare, dikarîn); its complement can appear in a subjunctive/non-indicative form. These are examples of ability, not a one-to-one auxiliary paradigm.

4. COULD — past ability, tentative possibility, polite request

English could has different functions. Past ability can be expressed using past forms of karîn, with the exact construction dependent on context. For possibility, dibe ku plus an appropriate subordinate verb is one option. Polite requests can be expressed with a question, politeness markers and context. Do not automatically translate could as the past of karîn in every sentence.

5. MAY — permission and possibility

Permission: Destûr heye ku ez biçim? — Is there permission for me to go? / May I go? Possibility: Dibe ku ew were. — He/she may come. Permission and epistemic possibility are different meanings and need not use the same Kurmanji expression.

6. MIGHT — weaker or tentative possibility

Dibe ku ew were. — He/she might come. The same Kurmanji construction can correspond to English may or might; the intended strength of possibility comes from context, additional adverbs and the speaker's stance. There is no required single-word may-versus-might contrast.

7. MUST — necessity and inference

Divê ez biçim. — I must go / I need to go. Divê tu bixwî. — You must / should study. English must can also mark a confident inference ('She must be home'); that meaning cannot always be expressed by the same Kurmanji necessity construction. Avoid treating divê as a universal translation of every must.

8. SHOULD and OUGHT TO — advice

Baş e ku tu bixwî. — It is good/advisable that you study; you should study. Divê tu bixwî. — You should / must study (strength depends on context). Ought to usually has a similar advisory or moral-duty meaning in English. Kurmanji expresses degrees of obligation with construction and context, rather than an English-style should/ought-to pair.

9. WILL — future reference and willingness

Ez ê biçim. — I will go. Tu yê biçî. — You will go. Em ê biçin. — We will go. The ê/dê future marker combines with a non-indicative verb form. English will can also signal willingness or habitual behaviour, which may require different wording in Kurmanji.

10. SHALL — offers, suggestions and formal future

In contemporary English, shall is especially associated with formal wording and first-person offers or suggestions ('Shall we go?'). A natural Kurmanji suggestion may use a first-person plural hortative: Werin em biçin. — Come, let's go. This conveys a suggestion rather than a literal shall auxiliary. Formal legal shall needs context-specific translation.

11. WOULD — hypotheticals, politeness and past habits

English would can express a conditional result ('I would go if...'), a polite request ('Would you help?'), or a past habit ('Every summer we would travel'). Kurmanji expresses these functions through conditional structures, polite requests, or past habitual forms respectively. For past habit: Ez berê her roj diçûm. — I used to go every day / I would go every day. Do not equate xwestin ('want') with would.

12. Negative meanings are not identical

Ez nikarim biçim. — I cannot go. Ez naxwazim biçim. — I do not want to go (not 'would not' in every context). Ez ê neçim. — I will not go. English must not (prohibition) is different from do not have to (lack of necessity). Kurmanji requires attention to the intended meaning, rather than simply adding one negative prefix to every modal expression.

13. Questions and word order

Tu dikarî biçî? — Can you go? Tu yê biçî? — Will you go? Divê ez biçim? — Must / should I go? Dibe ku ew were? — Might he/she come? Question intonation and context matter. The English subject-auxiliary inversion rule does not transfer mechanically into Kurmanji.

14. Mini-dialogues — Axaftinên kurt

A: Tu dikarî sibê biçî? — Can you go tomorrow? B: Erê, ez dikarim biçim. — Yes, I can go. A: Tu yê biçî? — Will you go? B: Erê, ez ê biçim. — Yes, I will go. | A: Divê ez niha biçim? — Must I go now? B: Baş e ku tu biçî. — It would be good for you to go / You should go.

15. Frequent mistakes — Çewtiyên gelemperî

Do not call karîn, divê and ê/dê identical 'modal auxiliary verbs'. Do not translate would with xwestin without considering the sentence. Do not assume must and should always differ by a fixed Kurmanji word. Do not confuse may as permission with may as possibility. Do not use the indicative di- form after the future marker in the basic future construction taught in Lesson 08.

16. Exercises — Rahênan

A. Identify the meaning of English may: 'May I enter?' versus 'It may rain.' B. Match: Ez dikarim biçim; Divê ez biçim; Ez ê biçim; Dibe ku ew were. C. Translate into English: Ez nikarim biçim; Baş e ku tu bixwînî; Tu yê biçî? D. Why is xwestin not a general translation of would? E. Which English modal can indicate both obligation and inference? F. Explain why English could cannot always be translated with a past form of karîn.

17. Answer key — Bersiv

A. Permission; possibility. B. I can go; I must/should go; I will go; He/she may/might come. C. I cannot go; You should study / It is good that you study; Will you go? D. Xwestin means 'want'; would has conditional, polite and habitual uses. E. Must. F. Could also expresses possibility and politeness, not only past ability.

18. References and editorial notes — Çavkanî

For English modal classification, consult a standard descriptive English grammar (e.g., Huddleston & Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, 2002). For Kurmanji morphosyntax and verb forms, consult W. M. Thackston, *Kurmanji Kurdish: A Reference Grammar* (2006), and Geoffrey Haig and Ergin Öpengin's linguistic work on Kurmanji. Examples are pedagogical illustrations, not verbatim quotations. Kurmanji dialects vary, and the examples have not undergone independent native-speaker editorial review.

19. Next lesson — Dersa pêş

Lesson 11: Imperative, Subjunctive and Conditional (Ferman, Awayê Mercî û Hevokên Şertî). These constructions help explain several meanings of English could and would.