

Peculiarities of Expressing Rhetorical Questions in Chinese Through Modal Verbs

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Abstract: This article provides a detailed overview of the modal verbs used to express modality in rhetorical questions in the Chinese language.

Keywords: 能 néng “can” (physically able to), 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based), 敢 gǎn “dare to,” 肯 kěn “be willing to,” 得 dé (auxiliary for “able to do”), 可以 kěyǐ “may,” 应该 yīnggāi “should,” and others.

Introduction: The main modal verbs used to express modality in Chinese rhetorical questions include: 能 néng “can” (physically able to), 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based), 敢 gǎn “dare to,” 肯 kěn “be willing to,” 得 dé (auxiliary for “able to do”), 可以 kěyǐ “may,” 应该 yīnggāi “should,” and similar forms. Below, we will examine their use in rhetorical questions in detail.

Modal verbs related to 能 néng “can” (physically able to)

Among modal verbs expressing modality in Chinese, 能 néng “can” (physically able to) is one of the most frequently used. Rhetorical questions expressed with 能 néng can appear in general, special, affirmative, and negative forms.

Examples:

a) «在这个情况下我能不工作吗?» zài zhège qíngkuàng xià wǒ néng bù gōngzuò ma — In such a situation, could I possibly not work?

b) «悠久的历史连您不知道，我怎么能知道?» Hǎnjiǔ de lìshǐ nín bù zhīdào, wǒ zěnmé néng zhīdào? — You don’t even know ancient history, so how could I possibly know?

The modal verb 能 néng “can” (physically able to) is

usually not used alone in rhetorical questions. It is typically combined with interrogative pronouns and adverbs, carrying a subjective nuance.

Modal verbs related to 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based)

The modal verb 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based) is also widely used in Chinese rhetorical questions, similar to 能 néng “can” (physically able to). This modal verb is rarely used alone in rhetorical questions and appears in both affirmative and negative forms.

Examples:

a) “我哪里会有这样的想法?” Wǒ nǎlǐ huì yǒu zhèyàng de xiǎngfǎ? — How could I possibly have such an idea?

b) “我会照顾自己的，我连大熊猫它们也一起照顾，我怎么不会照顾自己?” Wǒ huì zhàogù zìjǐ de, wǒ lián dà māo tāmen yě yìqǐ zhàogù, wǒ zěnmé bù huì zhàogù zìjǐ? — I can take care of myself; I even take care of the giant pandas, so how could I not be able to take care of myself?

Although the modal verb 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based) appears frequently in Chinese rhetorical questions, its forms are quite simple. The following table shows the functional patterns of 会 huì “can” (mentally/skill-based) in sentences.

Form	Affirmative Form	Negative Form
还会 “...still knows?”	还会 “...still knows?”	还会不 “...might not know?”
哪(里)会 “...how could (someone) know?”	哪(里)会 “...how could (someone) know?”	哪(里)不会 / 哪(里)会不 “...how could (someone) not know?”
怎么会 “How could I know?”; “How could you know?”; “How could he/she know?”	怎么会 “How could I know?”; “How could you know?”; “How could he/she know?”	怎么不会 / 怎么会不 “How could I not know?”; “How could you not know?”; “How could he/she not know?”

Gǎn 敢 “to dare” Modal Verbs Modal verbs in the form of 敢 敢 (“to dare”) usually express the affirmative form. To express the negative form with this modal verb, it is necessary to use additional components. At the same time, rhetorical questions using this modal verb tend to have a slightly stronger tone.

For example: a) “路上的人一个比一个恶 · 我敢跟谁狠去?” Lùshàng de rén yīgè bǐ yīgè è, wǒ gǎn gēn shéi hěn qù? — The people on the road are each more vicious than the other; who would I dare to side with?

b) “你都敢来, 我干吗不敢来较量?” Nǐ dōu gǎn lái, wǒ gànma bù gǎn lái jiàoliàng? — You dared to come, so why wouldn't I dare to come and compete?

Modal verbs in the form of 敢 敢 (“to dare”) cannot generally be used independently in rhetorical questions. Their usage most often follows the structure “interrogative pronoun/adverb + question particle” as in example (a). In cases like example (b), the structure is “adverb + question particle.” The meaning conveyed by the accompanying components is essentially the same as that of 敢 敢 (“to dare”). The negative form 不敢 不敢 (“to not dare”) expresses a subjective improbability.

Kěn 肯 “to be willing” Modal Verbs Modal verbs in the form of 肯 肯 (“to be willing”) are generally not used independently but occur together with other words to create a rhetorical effect. Often, adverbs such as 又 又 (“again”) and 还 还 (“still, yet”) precede it, intensifying the rhetorical tone. Both affirmative and negative forms exist in sentences using this modal verb.

For example: a) “别人不帮助我 · 他还不肯?” Biérén bù bāngzhù wǒ, tā hái bù kěn? — When others aren't helping me, would he still be unwilling?

b) “客人们在这儿又是吃 · 又是喝 · 又是玩的 · 谁肯走?” Kèrénmen zài zhè'ér yòu shì chī, yòu shì hē,

yòu shì wán de, shéi kěn zǒu? — The guests are here eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves; who would want to leave?

Dé 得 “to manage to, to be able to” Modal Verbs The modal verb 得 得 (“to manage to, to be able to”) expresses subjective possibility or ability and is usually used in negative rhetorical sentences. In rhetorical questions, this verb often takes the form of ordinary interrogatives while implicitly expressing negation. The negatives 不得 不得 and 非得 非得 can also be used to form negative rhetorical structures.

For example: a) “不去就不去吧, 等他长两岁再说 · 对个没娘的孩子不就得格外心疼吗?” Bù qù jiù bù qù ba, děng tā cháng liǎng suì zài shuō, duì gè méi niáng de hái zi bù jiù dé géwài xīnténg ma? — If you don't go, then don't go. Let's talk when he is two years older; shouldn't one feel especially sorry for a child without a mother?

b) “难道不得‘谢谢’盗卖者吗?” Nándào bù dé “xièxiè” dào mǎi zhě ma? — Isn't it necessary to say “thank you” to the trafficker?

Rhetorical questions with 得 得 often convey meanings of obligation or necessity similar to the modal verbs 应该 应该 (“should, ought to”) or 必须 必须 (“must”).

Kěyǐ 可以 “may, can” Modal Verbs The modal verb 可以 可以 (“may, can”) frequently appears in rhetorical questions, taking both ordinary and special interrogative forms. Both affirmative and negative rhetorical forms exist.

For example: “这是加油站 · 哪可以随便抽烟?” Zhè shì jiāyóu zhàn, nǎ kěyǐ suíbiàn chōuyān? — This is a gas station; where could it possibly be okay to smoke?

a) “你怎么可以偷我未婚妻的葡萄?” Nǐ zěnmē kěyǐ tōu wǒ wèihūnqī de pútáo? — How could you possibly steal my fiancée's grapes?

As can be seen from the examples, 可以 可以 (“may,

can”) rarely appears alone in rhetorical questions and is usually accompanied by interrogative pronouns and other components to enhance the rhetorical effect.

Yīnggāi 应该 “should, ought to” Modal Verbs The modal verb yīnggāi 应该 (“should, ought to”) often appears in ordinary and special interrogatives in Chinese. However, in rhetorical sentences, it is rarely used alone; instead, it is combined with other components to create the rhetorical tone.

For example: a) “你是中国共产党党员，不应该坚持原则吗？” Nǐ shì Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng dǎngyuán, bù yīnggāi jiānchí yuánzé ma? — You are a member of the Chinese Communist Party; shouldn’t you adhere to principles?

b) “全厂的人谁不热心增产，我怎么不该卖点力气，去学新西呢？” Quán chǎng de rén shéi bù rèxīn zēngchǎn, wǒ zěnmě bù gāi mài diǎn lìqì, qù xué xīn xī ne? — Everyone in the factory is eager to increase production; why shouldn’t I put in some effort to learn new things from the West?

In general, the use of modal verbs in Chinese rhetorical questions has two main characteristics:

1. These modal verbs are usually not used independently but in combination with other components to create rhetorical style;
2. In rhetorical questions using these modal verbs (except for **huì 会** “can, be able to” and **kěyǐ 可以** “may, can”), the sentence is in an objective form, while the meaning understood from it is subjective.

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