MODALITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND EVERY DAY COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Many linguists consider that any discussion on modality should have its roots in the theory of speech acts, as we rarely simply convey information in discourse, but we very often express opinion, doubt, possibility or actually do things with words: ask questions, order things, allow or prohibit something to happen. If we manage to make our students understand these aspects of written and spoken communication, then they will undoubtedly grasp the purpose and utility of studying the modal constructions, the sentence types, the communicative functions of language in various contexts. Obviously, many of the theoretical considerations that follow belong to the meta-language and we will never try to present them as such to our intermediate students unless we want to scare them away!
Sometimes, the term "mood" is used to refer to the distinction between declarative, interrogative, and imperative. But traditional grammarians use the term in relation to the indicative, subjunctive and imperative moods that are marked inflectionally in Latin and other languages. Some languages employ a wide range of forms to indicate different meanings. English has the system of modal verbs to express the degrees and kinds of commitment by the speaker: will, shall, can, may, must, and ought to. So, the term "mood" refers to grammatical form, while "modality" refers to the function the form expresses. We have started from the assumption that modality is generally defined as the expression of the speaker's attitudes and opinions. Austin's speech act theory is mainly concerned with the relation between the speaker and what he says and for this reason it may represent a good starting point in discussing modality.

Keywords: modality, communicative functions, different degrees, speech act theory.

The concept of modality has been a controversial linguistic issue for many decades and it has become a source of inspiration and speculation for philosophers, sociolinguists, theoreticians who now analyse modality as a broad concept stressing its social, communicative and pragmatic function. Modality is grammatically viewed as a notion similar to tense, gender, aspect, number but we must emphasise the fact that it is more difficult to be defined than any of these grammatical categories.

Leon Levițchi explains that its complexity resides in the fact that each utterance is much more than the mere form and content. The speaker always expresses an attitude towards the statement either implicitly or explicitly. Modality is the reflection of the speaker's opinion in discourse and the receiver can only entirely understand the message if he/she is aware of the modal connotations involved in the text. This means being able to identify the means of expressing modality correctly and relating the statement to the larger context in order to avoid ambiguities. Thus, John Lyons offers the well-known definition according to which modality "expresses the opinion or attitude of the speaker." We can say that modality is the field of emotive language.

Opinions, attitudes and emotions are difficult to perceive exactly as they were experienced or intended by the speaker simply because every human being relates to the inner and outer world differently and individually. Things get even more intricate when we have to convey the modal meaning from one language into another. There is a

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correspondence in meaning in all languages and this meaning is represented formally by a modal system be it mood, as in Latin, or modal verbs as in English. Yet, in other languages such, as French or Romanian, things are more complex as the modal system, the modal verbs are not so obviously identifiable within the verbal system. Although the systems differ, there is a "translational equivalence" that allows us to understand other languages than our mother tongue in order to successfully translate from one language into another. This is due to the fact that the different languages express nearly the same notions connected to universal human needs and relationships.

Most grammarians and language philosophers try to find explanations to the mechanisms involved in human communication, the ways in which language is used and the means of expressing and deciphering messages in various contexts. We use language and we engage in conversations in order to achieve more practical goals. If we want our communicative aims to be reached and if we want to be socially accepted, we must observe a set of rules that are closely connected to indirectness and politeness and are commonly accepted. Teachers must be aware of these rules when dealing with the communicative functions of language in class.

One relevant theory on the topic is Grice's theory of implicature presented by Levinson. It is a theory about how people *use* language and it is interesting through the set of four maxims and a principle it proposes which help us determine the implicature (implication) of an utterance:

a. **The co-operative principle**: Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.
b. **The maxim of quality**: Do not say what you believe to be false./Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
c. **The maxim of quantity**: Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange./Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
d. **The maxim of relevance**: Make your contributions relevant.
e. **The maxim of manner**: Avoid obscurity./ Avoid ambiguity./ Be brief./ Be orderly.

These maxims show what speakers have to do in order to communicate efficiently. Sometimes conversations happen according to these rules:

Mary: *"How old is Jane?"*
Susan: *"She is 20."*

The direct question is answered directly, clearly, without irrelevant information and obviously follows Rice's rules. This is an ideal situation. But sometimes people fail to offer a relevant answer unintentionally or simply because they want to lie. For example, we may have a context such as: "Have you attended Professor Parker's seminar?" "Oh, I'm really interested in the problem of global warming!" It is not a straight answer. This apparently makes it wrong or irrelevant according to Rice's set of rules. But if we look at a deeper level of interpretation, the hearer might know that the seminar was about global warming and the actual/understood answer might be: "Yes, I attended it and it was really interesting." The theory addresses this kind of situations, too.

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Just like Levinson, Jenny Thomas admits the fact that this theory has its merits and it established some interesting facts about the ways in which we communicate but sometimes practice contradicts the beautifully wrapped theoretical interpretations. Experience and context, the choice of words and intonation are elements that are not to be neglected when we are engaged in conversation. Modal constructions are one of the most common means we make use of in order to build polite and socially-acceptable conversations.

Many scholars interested in the study of modality associate it with the concept of politeness viewed "in a technical rather than in an everyday sense, where it tends to be associated with refined manners and courteous behaviour. The pragmatic notion is broader in scope and (…) the most influential is the "face-saving" model proposed by Brown and Levinson." Leo Hoye explains the term "face" and its relation to modality. The concept of "face" refers to the individual's publicly manifest self-esteem. There are two aspects to face: a positive one which affirms the individual's right to self-determination as an independent agent and a negative one which stresses the individual's need for approval and freedom from the imposition of others. Any kind of linguistic action is a potential threat to this face. So, different politeness strategies are necessary to counteract this risk. The strategies used in the case of *positive politeness* are those that express speaker-hearer closeness; there is no feeling of power or social distance between the participants (the use of first names, nicknames). *Negative politeness* involves linguistic strategies, which reflect distance and respect between the participants (for example: family names, titles and so one).

Many of the theories concerned with the way in which modality is expressed have as starting point the distinction between the present and the past tense forms of the modals as indicators of different degrees of modality. Grammarians often talk of "primary" and "secondary" modals, arguing that the past tense forms are secondary to their present tense counterparts. Palmer calls the past tense forms "tentative forms" and argues that they are more modally marked, having a greater degree of tentativeness or indirectness depending on the context. The same distinction is emphasised by Zdrenghea and Greere in their discussion of modal verbs:

For example, they say that "*Might I* borrow your book?" is much more hesitant than "*May I* borrow your book?" and it suggests greater uncertainty about the answer.

In his discussion of the "core modals" or 'true modals" as he calls the main group of modal verbs, Roderick Jacobs points out the fact that the past tense forms are more tentative, polite versions of present tense forms. We can add that the different levels of modality are very well illustrated in connection with politeness, as modal expressions are in close relation to polite requests.

For example, *"Can you* give me your book for a few minutes?" is less formal than: *"Could you* give me your book for a few minutes?" and this is even less formal than: *"Could* you *possibly* give me your book for a few minutes?"

So, the simple presence of the modal verbs, their form, the adverbs determining them, automatically suggest a certain degree of politeness on semantic grounds. This politeness and the number of modal expressions the utterance contains are correlated with such features as subjectivity and objectivity, directness and indirectness.

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Brown and Levinson, refer to the use of modal expressions in protecting negative face, they assert that speakers engage in strategic behaviours or "facework" in order to counter or minimize any threat to "face":

> Hence negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formally and restraint...Face threatening acts are redressed with apologies for interfering or transgressing, with linguistic or nonlinguistic difference, with hedges on the illocutionary force of the act, with impersonalizing mechanisms and with other softening mechanisms that give the addressee an 'out', a face-saving line of escape permitting him to feel that his response is not coerced.

Speakers usually rely on conventionalized expression, which regularly incorporate modality. For instance, there are fully conventionalized modal-adverb expressions which function as mechanisms of indirectness, of expressing indirect requests. "Could" and "possibly" are markers of indirectness:

"Could you possibly give him a call and tell him that I am here?"

In other instances "may" and "just" function as markers of indirectness:

"Mr. Johnson, *may* we *just* pass on to the next item as everybody has already understood all the details concerning this chapter?"

"Wouldn't perhaps... would" and "perhaps... might" are even stronger:

"You *wouldn't perhaps* mind our meeting tonight, *would* you?"

"*Perhaps* you *might* like to help us in solving this difficult case."

All these utterances are understood as requests by the participants in the conversation and the use of modal expression to soften impositive force is of the greatest importance.

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose four main strategies that the speaker can employ when addressing negative face and they explain their close relation to modal expressions: "hedge," "be pessimistic," "minimize the impression" and "impersonalize." All these soften the impositive force. For instance, the modal adverbs ("possibly," "perhaps") above mitigate the directness of the request and help the speaker avoid commitment. "Be pessimistic" refers to the uncertainty about the likelihood of the face-threatening act being carried out; the means used in this strategy are the past tense forms (see the examples above). "Minimize the imposition" is the strategy through which the potential threat to face is diffused by indication that the seriousness of the imposition is downgraded by such intensifiers as "just." Through the last strategy mentioned, "impersonalize" the speaker is not identified directly as the agent of the face-threatening act and the hearer is not cited as the person addressed. The indirectness achieved has the role of downgrading the request: "A solution *ought to* be found by midnight." means "I'm telling you that you should find a solution by midnight."

As one can see from the examples above, modal expressions are mostly used in protecting negative rather than positive face. The mechanism functions through an association between modality and indirectness, and indirectness and politeness in English. Nevertheless, modal expressions can also be directed to positive face:

e.g. "I *certainly must* give you my approval."

The function of modal expressions or particles is to mitigate impositive force. They modify the threat to face without entirely removing it. "Modality markers," as they are sometimes

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called, modify face-threat either by increasing it: "I really *can't* understand this man!" or by decreasing it: "It is possible that I *just couldn't* understand the meaning of your words properly."

Obviously, modality and politeness go hand in hand in human communication. The modal expressions are the most important devices of the rich arsenal of linguistic strategies available for the realization of politeness. Their main role is that of matching the politeness value of linguistic action with the context of use: politeness and modality are omnipresent in everyday human interaction.

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