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MODALITY: A CONCEPT OF THE ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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*Abstract: '**Modality** is the semantic domain, closely related to elements of meaning that languages express. It covers a broad range of semantic nuances, flavors – desiderative, hypothetical, potential, dubitative, hortatory, exclamatory, etc.- whose common denominator is the addition of a supplement of meaning to the most neutral semantic value of the utterance. Modality is expressed in a variety of ways: morphological, lexical, syntactic or via intonation. '*

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Although *modality* is one of the richest and most intriguing domains that English grammar offers to linguists, its study has not preoccupied grammarians till recently. Being such an interesting and rich domain for linguists makes it a real challenge for applied linguists, namely teachers.

According to Merriam – Webster dictionary, « modality is:

- the quality or state of being ***modal*** ;
- a modal quality or attribute;
- the classification of logical propositions according to their asserting or denying the possibility, impossibility, contingency or necessity of their content » (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/modality).

Modality, as used in logic, semantics and grammar is concerned with speakers' attitudes and perspectives towards the proposition they express. It is essentially a *subjective* and qualifying process: judging the truth of propositions in terms of degrees of possibility, probability or certainty and expressing also meanings of obligation, necessity, volition, prediction, knowledge and belief.

'The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics' defines the term ***modality*** as 'category covering either a kind of speech act or the degree of certainty with which something is said. '

As a *semantic category*, modality covers such notions as possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation, permission. These are the *basic modalities*. In order to understand these notions, we have to consider the following: when we utter something, such as *Barack Obama is the president of the USA*, we, as speakers, express a sentence, and at the same time commit ourselves to the truth of that sentence – that is, we know the truth of such a sentence. For this reason, a sentence such as *Barack Obama is the president of the USA, but I don't believe it* is semantically unacceptable since the second part contradicts the categorical assertion expressed in the first part.

If, on the other hand, we say *X may be/must be/can't be the president of the USA*, we are not committing ourselves to the truth of that sentence. In other words, any of these utterances is not a categorical assertion, but the speakers modify their commitment to some degree by expressing a judgment or assessment of the truth of the situation. This is an important choice

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which speakers face every time they make up a declarative clause: to make a categorical statement or to express less than total commitment by *modalising.*

A different kind of modification is made when we intervene directly in the speech act itself, by saying, for example, *I must leave now*, *You'd better come, too* or *The rest of you can stay*.

The speaker makes use of modal expressions to impose an obligation, to prohibit, to express permission or consent to the action in question. The projection of any of these notions onto the content of any sentence indicates that the speaker is presenting this content not as a simple assertion of fact, but coloured rather by personal attitude or intervention.

According to Angela Downing and Philipe Locke, 'modality is the category by which speakers express attitudes towards the event contained in the proposition .' ('A university course in English grammar ', chapter 9 Tense, aspect and modality, module 44: Expressing attitudes towards the event: modality)

While Palmer took into consideration various aspects of a possible definition of modality, these authors clearly state its *syntactic status*: that of a category, just like that of number, determination (in the case of nouns), or those of aspect and tense (in the case of verbs). It is important to note that all modal expressions are less categorical than a plain declarative. Thus, *modality is said to express a relation to reality,* whereas an unmodalised declarative treats the problem as reality. (see Palmer, F.R., Mood and Modality, 1986:9)

Modal expressions:

1. *Nouns:* allegation, hypothesis, prophesy, proposal, command, exhortation, instruction, invitation, request, assumption, certainty, doubt, expectation, etc.

2. *Adjectives:* sure, certain, possible, probable, compulsory, imperative, lawful, legal, permissible, etc.

3. *Adverbs:* apparently, certainly, conceivably, evidently, hopefully, likely, necessarily, seemingly, supposedly, surely, etc.

4. *Verbs:* assume, believe, fancy, fear, feel, guess, hope, imagine, presume, reckon, suspect, think, trust, etc.

5. *Modal verbs:* can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, ought to, need, dare, used to.

These modal expressions are seen as ' realizations ' of modal meanings by Downing and Locke. Besides the above mentioned, they add some other means of expressing modality to the list:

- certain uses of *If clauses*:
  e.g. If you know what I mean ……
  If you don't mind my saying so …….
  What if ……..?
- *the use of the remote past:*
  e.g. I thought I'd join you, if you don't mind.
- *the use of non/assertive items:*
  e.g. ' any ' in She'll eat any kind of fruit.
- *certain types of intonation:*
  e.g. the fall – rise

As one can easily notice, Downing and Locke seem to have fallen into the trap that Palmer decided to avoid, namely *complex clause modality*. But they decided to adopt a more limited scope, taking modality to be basically the expression of possibilities, probabilities,

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certainty, obligations, and permission. They stress the fact, which is obvious in all grammar books, that the modal verbs are the most basic exponents of modality, which is taken into consideration by grammarians when they come to examine the Verbal Group. *The other modal elements tend to reinforce the modal meaning expressed by the modal verbs.*

The word *relation* is crucial to the meaning of modality; modality acts not like a reflection; in other words, each speaker uses not an ordinary mirror to reflect the image of the world, but a distorting one when he or she decides to make use of modal expressions.
Modality is not direct, but indirect, devious, and diverging.

In order to synthesize the views expressed, it only seems reasonable to believe that the possible worlds are those images reflected by the distorting mirrors.

Modality can be interpreted in terms of 'attitude of the speaker ', with the following definitions of speaker and attitude:

The speaker is:

- source of the speech act;
- source and experience of the inference in utterances with epistemic modality;
- animate source of a certain degree of volition in sentences with performative deontic modality.

Attitude means a certain degree of belief, resulting in the speaker's assessment of probability and predictability of a certain state of affairs or as an act of volition, desire, intention, resulting in permission or obligation for someone to do something. It also includes other psychological states, feelings and emotions signaled by the modals, especially in indirect speech acts: surprise, bewilderment, perplexity, hesitancy, modesty, acknowledgement of inconvenience caused, etc.

Modality is one of the areas of study which continue to intrigue and inspire logicians, philosophers and linguists. What is it about modality that makes it so present in everyday speech?

One very attractive feature is that to capture its essence, it seems to be necessary to go beyond the boundaries of morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics and all dimensions from cognition to communication are involved in the process. It follows that studies in modality hold challenges at all levels of linguistic description.

Another remarkable fact is that most often ***modality*** is not directly coded in linguistic expressions but arises through interpretation in a *context* of the utterance, be that through conventional indirectness, metaphorical mapping, enrichment procedures, non - demonstrative inference or other context - bound mechanisms (other researchers have come to the same conclusion, as stated by Eric Swanson in his Ph. D. Thesis, i.e. *context* is very important in establishing what kind of modality is referred to.)

Modality thus poses a challenge to any theory which claims to retrace the path from linguistic form to utterance interpretation. Finally, the elusive nature of the concept of *modality* is in itself a motivating factor to anyone who sees his job as a linguist as primarily one of providing conceptual clarification.

As Nuyts succinctly points out in his volume: « Modality is one of the 'golden oldies' among the basic notions in the semantic analysis of language. But in spite of this, it also remains one of the most problematic and controversial notions: there is no consensus on how to define and characterize it, let alone on how to apply definitions in the empirical analysis of data. And there are no signs that the debates are heading in the direction of a final solution. » (see Nuyts, Jan, 'Epistemic Modality, Language and Conceptualization', 2001)

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Palmer posits that 'it has come to be recognized in recent years that modality is a valid cross-language grammatical category that can be the subject of a typological study. ' (see Palmer, F. R. , Modality & the English Modals, 2014)

As such, Palmer also argues, *modality* is comparable to the categories of tense and aspect.

As previously suggested, « there is no unanimity regarding what the list of participating categories should look like, but in one version, there are 3 dimensions: *dynamic, deontic and epistemic modality.* The meanings of these three are also to be found in other views regarding the composition of the list, but are then "hidden" behind other labels which organize the semantic fields involved somewhat differently. There is also no unanimity about how each of these three notions should be characterized in detail:

I. ***Dynamic modality***, as it was labeled by Palmer or " inherent modality ", usually renders the capacity or ability to the subject – participant in the clause, that is the subject is able to perform the action expressed by the main verb in the clause, of the kind expressed in the modal auxiliary in 1a) or the predicative adjective in 1b) . It would be rather adequate to speak about a capacity of the first argument of the predicate, or of the 'controlling' participant in the state of affairs, though, since in passives, such as 1c), it is this implicit participant rather than the grammatical subject who/which 'carries out' the capacity/ability:

1. a) Dean can ski very well.
   b) Dean is able to come to the meeting tomorrow after all.
   c) The table has been dismantled so that it can be transported more easily.

But the category of dynamic modality should probably be caught wider than it is sometimes suggested.

First of all, to the extent that it concerns the notion of capacity/ability, this has to be defined broadly: the ability can be entirely inherent to the first argument - participant, as in 1a) or it can be a capacity of the participant determined by the circumstances explicitly expressed in the clause, as in 1c), or implicit in the context, as in 1b).

Secondly, the category is not restricted to ability alone, but also covers an *expression of needs* of the first argument - participant. One can therefore distinguish between a need which is entirely inherent to the first argument - participant, as expressed by the modal auxiliary in 2a) and the auxiliary – like predicate in 2b) and one which is determined by the circumstances, as in the modal auxiliary in 2c) and the auxiliary – like predicate in 2d).

2. a) I must drink something now or I'll die.
   b) I have to tidy up this bedroom, I can't stand the mess.
   c) To go into the garden, you must pass through the sitting – room.
   d) You need to clean your paintbrush before you can start painting again.

Thirdly, the category probably needs to be extended even further to cover cases which go beyond abilities or needs of any participant in the state of affairs in particular and rather characterize a potential or an inherent inevitability in the situation described in the clause as a whole. The clearest examples of this appear in expressions in which there simply is no participant, as in 3a), but it can also appear in cases with inanimate first participants, such as 3b) and it is even possible with animate (including human) first participants, as in 3c) or in 3d), in which the first participant is left implicit (all these instances involve a potential, but one can easily imagine similar ones involving a necessity).

3. a) It can snow in winter in this part of the country.

b) The book she is looking for can either be on the book – shelf or on the desk (but nowhere else).

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c) Little Tommy cannot have broken the window since he was not around when it happened.

d) It is possible to open the closet now, I've arranged all the clothing items in it.

One might question whether it is good to call such cases ' dynamic modality '; in any case, they are not epistemic since they do not involve an estimation of the chances that the state of affairs applies in reality or not. In a slightly metaphorical way, they may be characterized as expressing an 'ability/need of a situation' and as such, they are arguably still fairly close to the definition of *dynamic modality.*

II. ***Deontic modality*** is traditionally defined in terms of the notions of 'permission' and 'obligation', but again, this characterization is too narrow and in this case even somewhat unfortunate. More generally speaking, it may be defined as an indication of the degree of moral desirability of the state of affairs expressed in the utterance, typically but not necessarily on behalf of the speaker. As the notion of 'degree' already indicates, it can refer to a gradual scale going from absolute moral necessity via the intermediary stages of desirability, acceptability and undesirability to absolute moral unacceptability. The notion of 'morality' involved should be defined widely: it can be related to ' societal norms ', but likewise to strictly personal ' ethical ' criteria of the person responsible for the deontic assessment. This *semantic category* is rendered in the most direct way by expressions such as the modal auxiliary in 4a), here expressing moral necessity and the predicative adjective in 4b), expressing moral desirability; it is represented in a more complex way by expressions of permission, obligation or interdiction for the first argument –participant in the clause to realize the state of affairs expressed in the utterance, as involved in the modal auxiliary in 4c) and the speech act verb in 4d).

4. a) We cannot afford to lose credibility, so we must solve this problem before it gets public.

b) It is good that you have solved that problem before it got into the papers.

c) You may go now.

d) I insist that you leave the room at once.

Expressions of permission, obligation and interdiction are more complex because they do not only involve an assessment of the degree of moral accept – ability of a state of affairs, but also a ' translation' of this assessment into (non – verbal) ' action terms '. Specifically, they also involve an intention to instigate or to (not) hinder another person's actions or positions (usually the addressee's, who also figures as the first argument – participant in the clause) pertaining to the state of affairs, in view of the judgment of its degree of acceptability.

A matter of dispute is whether the notions of volition and intention, as expressed by the auxiliary – like predicate in 5 a) and by the auxiliary in 5b) respectively, also belong to the domain of deontic modality.

5. a) I want you to leave me alone.

b) Alright, I will leave you alone.

Volition is more problematic: on one hand, it is less clearly related to action plans; and, on the other hand, it first and foremost appears to refer to desires and the question is whether that still counts as a deontic notion.

III. ***Epistemic modality***

The third 'subcategory of modality' is *epistemic modality*. The 'core definition' of this category is relatively non – controversial: it concerns an indication of the estimation, typically but not necessarily by the speaker, of the chances that the state of affairs expressed

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in the clause applies in the world or not, or, in other words, of the degree of probability of the state of affairs, as expressed by the modal auxiliary in 6a) or the modal adverb in 6b).

6. a) Nick will have arrived home by now.
b) Nick isn't home yet – well, maybe he missed the bus.

Since this type of assessment is a matter of degree, as in the case of deontic modality, we are again dealing with a sale, going from absolute certainty that the state of affairs is real, via intermediary stages of probability, possibility and improbability to absolute certainty that it is not real. This is actually a fairly heterogeneous category, usually taken to cover the marking of information as being:

- directly perceived through the issuer's own sense organs (often called " experimental "), as expressed by the main predicate in 7a) ;
- indirectly deduced on the basis of other, directly perceived information (" inferential "), as expressed in the auxiliary – like predicate in 7b) ;

derived from or compatible with other general background knowledge (" reasoned "), as expressed by the predicative adjective in 7c) or received from others (' hearsay ' or 'reportative'), as expressed by the main predicate in 7d).

7. a) I have noticed that he has changed his office hours.
b) His car is parked here and the lights are on in the house, so he appears to have arrived home.
c) His story sounds plausible.
d) I hear he has got a new job.

G. Yule in his book *'Explaining English Grammar, 1988'* equates epistemic modality with deduction from speaker/writer; it ranges from strong conclusion to weak conclusion. Palmer observes that epistemic modality should apply not simply to modal systems that basically involve the notions of possibility and necessity, but to any modal system that indicates the degree of commitment by the speaker to what he says ; in other words, epistemic modalities should include evidential such as ' hearsay ' or the quotative ' report ' or verbs expressing the evidence of senses.

Well - known grammarians like Sydney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk refer to the deontic-epistemic dichotomy as to ***intrinsic - extrinsic modality***. The domains of intrinsic and deontic modality, on the one hand, and of extrinsic and epistemic modality, on the other, overlap. But intrinsic and deontic are only approximate synonyms, whereas for extrinsic the common variant is epistemic. Intrinsic modality involves some intrinsic human control over the events, whereas extrinsic modality involves human judgment of what is or is not likely to happen.

Another classification of ***modality***, according to Eric Swanson:

- ❖ deontic (what is compatible with the dictates of morality);
- ❖ logical (what is compatible with the laws of logic);
- ❖ boulomaic (from Greek boulomai = desire, what is compatible with a person's desire);
- ❖ nomological (what is compatible with the laws of nature);
- ❖ epistemic (what is compatible with what is known or believed).

Context alone determines which modality is being referred to.

Angelika Kratzer, the linguist whose semantics for modals is the starting point for most formal work on them, holds on the hypothesis that ' modals of different flavors have a common semantics and that the targeting of a particular modality depends on contextual supplementation. '

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After having considered aspects defining the concept of modality, it is now the time to underline its ***features.*** We have seen so far that modality is a very complex notion, whose sphere tends to spread until it becomes evasive and difficult to understand. That is why the first feature of modality that should be taken into account is perhaps ***the ambiguity*** of any modal system and especially of modal verbs. This means, of course, that most modal verbs are ambiguous between two readings. For instance, a sentence like *She may smoke* can be ascribed an epistemic reading (It is possible that she smokes) or a deontic one (She is allowed to smoke) but this ambiguity is only potential: in actual use, the ambiguity is generally resolved by linguistic or extra-linguistic factors; the rare cases of ambiguity are apparently due to a certain overlap in contextual features.

Therefore, in a real - life situation, an interlocutor would not say *She may smoke* but *I've never seen her doing that.* One may easily notice the close relationship between the real - world extra-linguistic context and the linguistic choices made by the participants in the discourse. Hence, the great importance of the context in which the discourse is uttered to render an adequate description and interpretation of linguistic phenomena.

From the modal expressions available to him, a speaker will choose the one that will best suit his communicative intentions in a particular situation. The selection clearly involves *pragmatic* elements in addition to *syntactic* and *semantic* ones.

If ambiguity is perhaps the most obvious of the characteristics of modality, the second of its features is ***subjectivity***.

Palmer mentions a distinction between subjective and objective modality, but only the latter eliminates speakers, has made the subject of the study for traditional logic.

However, modality in language, especially when marked grammatically, seems to be essentially subjective; this has already been shown in the discussion of speech acts and in reference to the speaker's 'opinion or attitude'. Modality in language is then concerned with subjective characteristics of an utterance and it could even be further argued that subjectivity is an essential criterion for modality. Palmer even gives the following definition of modality: 'Modality could be defined as the grammaticalization of speakers. ' (subjective attitudes and opinions)

But subjectivity does not apply to all the modal verbs. ***Can***, for instance, in as much as it expresses a subject's ability to do something, is one of these verbs which are excluded on semantic grounds; such verbs are used for what is called " dynamic " modality by von Wright (' An essay in Modal logic, 1951 ') , quoted by Palmer.

Moreover, there is often the case that modal verbs are used where it is not possible to decide whether they are subjective or not. A sentence like *You must leave immediately* can indicate either the speaker's insistence or a general (objective) necessity for leaving or it can well indeterminate between the two readings.

But pragmatic factors, such as speakers, must be incorporated in our analysis because they are part of the context, of the situation and, when it comes to modal verbs that is the only clarifying element.

On the other hand, it is difficult to suppose that concepts like probability and possibility can pertain to objectivity; rather the speaker calculates the probability, estimates possibility and makes the distinction between the two of them.

In the third place comes a feature of modality that cannot be described as either visible or basic, though undoubtedly important. It is ***scalarity*** and it means that modal elements can be ordered on scales. Some spoke about the existence of hierarchies within the modal system but they are difficult to establish.

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Not only modal verbs or phrases, but also verbs like *think, believe, know*, etc, or even verbs of saying like *tell, suggest, insist, urge, demand, order,* etc can carry some degree of modality which may range from near zero to the extremes of absolute certainty or strong volition. At a closer look, one can very easily notice that the three features, previously mentioned, are somehow inter – related. As Palmer put it, '***modality*** is a question of degree, on more or less of intensity. 'That makes the difference between possibility and probability, for instance. Subjectivity influences the scale. What to some speakers may seem only possible, can appear as very likely to others. The speaker's placement on the scale may be the answer to the problems caused by subjectivity and ambiguity.

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