UN(CERTAINTY)/POSSIBILITY/PROBABILITY: AN INSIGHT INTO MODAL VERBS AND ADVERB MODALITY

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Abstract: *It goes without saying that modality as part of language represents an extremely intricate phenomenon. So wide is the semantic field of modality that the number and type of forms is constantly increasing. Not only can verbs express modal meanings, but also other parts of speech such as adverbs. For this reason, this paper aims at highlighting the three levels of adverb modality in English: lexical, grammatical, intonational, to which one can add the use of the adverb along with modal verbs. Additionally, we will evince the aforementioned by means of a case study on the use of the adverb* ***really****.*

Keywords: *modality, adverbs, modal verbs, part of speech.*

Conceptual Framework

Modality, as an extremely complex phenomenon, includes beliefs and attitudes which are similar to but not identical with the logical, epistemic and deontic modalities. In addition, it includes feelings and emotions as well as modalities involving power and other concepts that do not exist in modal logic (Bîră, 1979: 7). According to Downing (1992: 383), besides verbs expressing modal meanings, there are also other parts which express modalities, namely the adverbs. It seems reasonable to assume the existence of a basic system of modality, which can be realized in a variety of ways with the help of semantic relations realized by moods, modal verbs and other modal structures involving adjectives, adverbs, which express various types and degrees of modality on the scale of probability (possibility, probability, virtual certainty), necessity/obligation (permission, obligation, compulsion), capability, potentiality (Bîră, *op.cit*.: 8).

Overall, we can claim there are three levels of adverb modality in English: lexical, grammatical, and intonational, to which one can add the use of the adverb along with modal verbs.

Lexical Modality

Modal words, namely adverbs in our case, are considered by some grammarians as forming a separate part of speech which became more important in Shakespeare's time than it had been in Chaucer's (Iarovici, 1973: 200). Adverbs rendering modal meanings can express the following notions; e.g. possibility: *You are certainly right.;* restriction: *That is hardly true.;* necessity: *The houses were necessarily pulled down.;* volition: *The manager has reluctantly raised my salary.;* viewpoint: *We are in good shape financially.;* emphasis: *He is obviously/just a miser.;* judgement: *The Minister has wisely resigned.;* attitude:

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Hopefully, everything will be fine.

Grammatical modality

Research on the interpretation of adverbs such as *really*, *just, only, rather, quite, apparently* or *absolutely* shows that they are contextually sensitive and highly flexible. This section takes a closer look at *really* in order to account for its various interpretations. The following examples are from Stenström (1986: 151), where she claims that the different readings of *really* are due to position and syntactic function:

(1) *this question is really surprising*
(2) *this is a really surprising question*
(3) *this is really a surprising question*
(4) *this really is a surprising question*
(5) *really this is a surprising question*

Stenström states that when *really* is placed next to the adjective, as in (1) and (2), it is a degree modifier which serves as an intensifier of *surprising*. But, the further *really* is moved to the left, the less is the emphasis on *surprising* and the more it is on the whole *a surprising question.* When *really* is placed in initial position, as in (5), it no longer intensifies a single clause element but is a comment on the whole proposition. Stenström concludes that what finally decides the function of *really* is the combined effect of position and the wider context. In contrast to Stenström, Carita Paradis proposes that the motivating factors for the readings are semantic/pragmatic in nature rather than syntactic/positional.

Clearly, position is an important clue to the interpretation of *really*, but it is not strictly predictive of differences in readings. Position is merely a linguistic reflex of the semantics and pragmatics of an utterance. Paradis claims that all the above examples of *really* are epistemic in the sense that they make a comment on the degree of truth of the proposition as perceived by the speaker in the actual situation of use. In (1) and (2) *really* is primarily a degree modifier, which reinforces a gradable property of surprising, and in (3), (4) and (5), it is primarily a marker of epistemic stance.

Really is representative of two types of meaning. On the one hand, *really* has descriptive properties, which evoke the concept of [REALITY]. On the other hand, it has procedural properties which govern the perspective in which the speaker wants the hearer to interpret *really* itself, as well as the expression that *really* has in its scope.

The data used in this study are based on COLT - The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language - which forms part of the British National Corpus. COLT consists of half a million words of spontaneous, informal face-to-face conversation among teenagers in London. The recordings were made in 1993, and the material was sampled so as to cover different social groups in London (Haslerud and Stenström 1995). (http://www.hd.uib.no/colt/)

Identifying the readings of *really*

Three different readings of *really* were distinguished in the first survey of the instances in COLT (*ibid*.):

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(1) *really*, *they are quite strange* [truth attesting of proposition]
(2) *I really appreciate your support* [subjective emphasis of situation]
(3) *they are really nice* [reinforcement of scalar property]

Despite their different reading, the examples of *really* are all expressive of epistemic commitment. They serve a function of epistemic grounding in that they specify an expression relative to the speakers and the addressees and their spheres of knowledge (Langacker 1987: 489). The above three types of *really* all express a judgement of truth from the point of view of the speaker in a given situation.

Really in (1) expresses epistemic modality in the sense that it expresses the speaker's judgement of the truth of the proposition based on what is known to be part of reality. *Really* in (2) has the function of emphasizing the subjective judgement of the importance of a situation involved in the proposition in question. In (3) *really* expresses reinforcement with respect to the degree of 'niceness'. (www.englund.lu.se)

Intonational Modality

Intonation and the LLC data (The London-LundCorpus – prosodically annotated) (Haslerud: 1995)

Another formal clue to interpretation is intonation, i.e. the presence or absence of the nuclear tone on *really* and the shape of that tone, if there is one. Previous research shows that the intonational possibilities and preferences in the context of adverbials are very complex (Allerton and Cruttenden 1974, 1976, 1978).

The question is what the intonational differences are across the three readings. For this purpose, 200 occurrences of *really* were extracted from the LLC, namely from informal face-to- face conversation. The prosodic system used in the LLC is the nuclear tone approach, which focuses on the perceptual side of speech.

Five different tones are distinguished in the LLC: fall, rise, rise- fall, fall-rise and level (Svartvik and Quirk 1980; Greenbaum and Svartvik 1990; Peppé 1995). In the LLC three different categories of tone are distinguished: simple tones (falls, rises and levels), complex tones (rise-falls and fall-rises) and compound tones which are simple tones and complex tones in various combinations (e.g. fall+rise, fall+fall-rise).

(1) A: what did you SAY
B: I said it was really EXCELLENT
(2) A: what did you SAY
B: I said it was REALLY excellent

In utterances of the type 'it was (adverb) (adjective)', some kind of contrastive focus is assigned when the nucleus falls on the adverb. This means that (1) represents non-contrastive focus, whereas (2) represents contrastive focus, which calls up the truth attesting reading of *really*.

The shape of the tone is mainly associated with attitudinal meaning. Generally speaking, a falling intonation is associated with conclusiveness, finality and certainty, while a rising contour suggests inconclusiveness, openness and uncertainty. It is also the pitch direction used by speakers to indicate that the speaker wants to hold the floor and continue to talk.

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Adverb Modality and Modal Verbs

Certain modal adverbs are very common in expressions of epistemic modalities. They may be used alone, as the only modal element, but quite often they co-occur with modal verbs, thus reinforcing each other or cumulating in meaning, (Bîră, *op.cit* : 211)

e.g. *Perhaps a change in air and scene might do you good.*

Possibly he may be looking for someone.

Certainly she might/must/will have heard the news.

More specifically, these non-verbal lexical items, in our case adverbs, are most likely to co-occur with the modal verbs in brackets: *maybe, possibly (*may*), perhaps* (might), *conceivably* (might), *probably* (will), *presumably* (would), *predictably* (would), *surely* (should, must), *assuredly* (should), *certainly* (must) etc.

Among some items that are constantly used to indicate epistemic modalities, there are *maybe* and *perhaps*. *Maybe* is often understood to be short form *it may be that*, (*ibid*.: 213) e.g.

Maybe/ It may be that she does not know what people say of her.

The underlying idea in the speaker's mind when he uses the modal verb **MAY** may be:

a. there are good reasons, there is every reason; this condition may also be described as the 'bien-fondé' of a certain state of affairs, e.g.
   You may well look surprised.
   Such symptoms might well be supposed to indicate a serious illness.
b. it does not seem amiss, it seems reasonable to do so, there is just as much to be said in favour of doing something as there is against it; in such cases *may* is not infrequently accentuated by '(just) as well', (*ibid*.: 90) e.g.
   As some people seem to miss the point, may/might as well explain what all this is about.

A combination of epistemic and deontic or ability modalities is possible but, they cannot be both expressed by synthetic modals. The following is an instance of epistemic modality expressed both verbally (*may*) and non-verbally (the adverb *perhaps*) in combination with the deontic phrase *be permitted*, (*ibid*.: 131) e.g.

As nobody can be expected to remember what I said last time, I may perhaps be permitted to sum up the main points or my argument.

Perhaps and *may/might* are semantic cognates but they are not interchangeable; *perhaps* cannot be substituted for *may* in sentences such as:

A man may be poor and yet happy.

Conversely, *may* cannot be substituted for *perhaps* in:

He got rich by dishonest means, by theft, perhaps.

A nice difference in meaning between *may* and *perhaps* is that the former represents the possible or the uncertain merely as a matter of fact, while the latter often implies at the same time a desire on the part of the speaker to appear modest or civil, or reluctance to be positive. *Perhaps* seems therefore to be closer to *might*. (*ibid*.: 213)

I understood things, perhaps, better than you think.

Perhaps you will be good enough to show me the way.

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Perhaps is sometimes used together with *may* or *might*, which could be explained as the speaker's desire to emphasize his attitude of uncertainty. *Perhaps* is often ascribed the power of emotional colouring, the speaker seemingly wishing to avoid being held responsible for the supposition made. It functions, therefore, as some kind of 'hedge':

He may perhaps be an eccentric person, this Mr. Wolfe.

I cannot give any solutions yet but I may/might perhaps offer a hint or two.

CAN is often used to denote 'recurrency', the fact that a tendency in a person or thing is apt to manifest itself occasionally, e.g.

Curiosity can kill.

Frenchmen can be very arrogant.

The modal defective CAN is stressed when it is accompanied by an adverb of indefinite time, taking its corresponding accent, (Bădescu: 406) e.g.

*You always **can** find the right word in a crisis, can't you?*

*You never **can** tell*!

As a modal auxiliary **WOULD** can be used to express a high degree of politeness, accompanied by an adverb, (*ibid*.: 433) e.g.

Would you kindly pass the sugar?

Concluding Remarks

The present article has aimed at pinpointing modality rendered both by modal verbs and adverbs. My object has been to show how different types of modality function in spoken language, based on COLT data.

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