



## THE ISSUES OF MODALITY IN SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

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### Abstract

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To know the crucial of the semantic structure of human language, as well as the use of modality, this paper focuses on some linguists' views of the meaning of modality such as Coates (1983) and Palmer (1986) proposed and then suggests considering a research of the use of modality in a context-free and a context-dependent based on the features of the specific language being studied (English) to teach modality better for students who aim to study English as second language.

**Keywords:** *Modality, Epistemic, Deontic*

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### INTRODUCTION

There are many different views about modality from the perspective of word meaning, sentence meaning to utterance meaning of the speaker. For instance, Coates (1983) named root modality and epistemic modality, Palmer (1986) called deontic and epistemic modality, etc. In fact, in the complexity of modality, many linguists often grouped the meaning of modality into their own concept, but they didn't generalize all meaning of modality because the term of modality is too broad and complex. A linguist stated "comparing the relevant grammars and the monographs to [...] modal aspects in general, one is astonished to find that in seemingly no other field of grammar so much disagreement prevails as in what I summarize under the term of modality. It is the true sense of the world a maze in which every grammarian is searching for his way." Or, other interesting saying of Perkins (1983) "doing research on modality is very similar to trying to move in an overcrowded room without treading on anyone else's feet."

Because of complexity of modality, both native speakers and other advanced learners of English use modality incorrectly. They usually focus on grammatical characteristics without noticing the subtle different meanings of each modality namely modal verbs. They ignore the semantics and pragmatics of modal verbs. They may use grammar of modality correctly, but it is not proper in the situation. For instance, Altman (1982) cited in Phong Tran Ky (2014) said "I began to look at the acquisition of expressions of modality when I noticed that even very advanced learners of English were using modals incorrectly. I was driving somewhere with a friend – a native

Spanish speaker who speak English almost perfectly. We were looking for a certain address, following the numbers on the street, and just where we would have expected the place to be, we came upon a driveway and my friend said "That should be the place." Considering the circumstances, I was much more convinced that was in fact the place and would have left a lot more comfortable had she said "That must be the place."

In semantics implies that if Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 are having a conversation, there will be certain information that must be shared between them. It means that the intersection of the two sets of knowledge lies what they both know. Both Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 believe they know what the other knows based on the surrounding environment, or the information from any prior interactions that they may have had, as well as all of the information that everyone knows, like the norms of their society. For example, dynamic modality interprets an utterance based on the potential of that utterance to update the context of the hearer, but epistemic modality interprets an utterance based on what the speaker knows and he assumes that the hearer also knows.

Since the variety of modality has been told, the author only focuses on the notions of epistemic modality and deontic modality through the views of semantics and pragmatics. According to pragmatics, language should be interpreted in relation to the social context that the speaker uses it. On the other hand, language should not be analyzed in an isolated way of either symbols or mental rules, but in a specific context and a specific communicative purpose.

## Modality distinction

Modality is an expression of possibility or necessity or anything in between. In linguistic understanding of modality, there are two different notions; epistemic versus deontic modality. Epistemic modality does with possibility or necessity of the truth of propositions, and is thus involved with knowledge and belief whereas, deontic modality is concerned with the possibility or necessity of acts performed by morally responsible agents, and is thus associated with the social functions of permission and obligation Lyons (1977). Modality has a variety of forces including, but not limited to, certainty (must), likelihood (should), possibility or low probability (might), etc. When a speaker uses an epistemic modal statement such as “*It must be fine tomorrow*”, the speaker states that according to his epistemic modality, or what he knows, it is a certainty that it is fine. But insofar as the statement “*It must be fine tomorrow*” signals that it is made based on what the speaker believes only, it can actually be a weaker statement than “*It should be fine tomorrow*”. This is because in degree of the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the proposition contained in the modal.

Epistemic modality is used with a bigger meaning, beside of the meaning of possibility or necessity, it is also associated with the degree of a speaker’s commitment to the truth of a proposition contained in an utterance. Therefore, epistemic modality has a subjectivity of the speaker because all evidences or predictions that the speaker says are aim to give the degree of a speaker’s commitment. Palmer (1986) defines modality like a grammatical category based on speaker’s attitudes and opinions that are determined cross-linguistically by semantics and pragmatics.

Followings are some examples of the degree of a speaker’s commitment.

- Tom *can* buy a new house next month.
- *Perhaps* Tom buys a new house next month.
- Tom’s buying a new house next month is *possible*.
- *It is possible that* Tom buys a new house next month.
- Tom *might* buy a new house next month.
- Tom *must* buy a new house next month.
- *When Tom gets enough money*, he will buy a new house.

These statements above, the speaker’s subjectivity can be expressed by his personal evidentiality or judgment to commit the degree of evaluation of what he says.

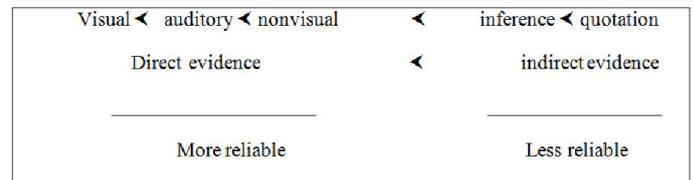
So, if he does not assume the truth of what he said, epistemic modality will be expressed by non-factuality.

According to Palmer (1986), there are at least four ways in which a speaker can indicate that he does not present what he is saying as a fact:

- that he is speculating about it
- that he is presenting it as a deduction
- that he has been told about it
- that it is a matter only of appearance, based on the evidence of possibly fallible senses

These four ways are concerned with the indication by the speaker of his commitment or lack of commitment to the truth of the proposition contained in an utterance.

From his notions, it must be a link between the interpretation of direct and indirect evidence as well as the truth value of the proposition is expressed.



Here are some examples for the system of evidentiality:

- I saw Tom go out.
- I heard Tom went out.
- It is possible that Tom went out.
- Tom must be gone out.
- Tom may go out because the light is off.

Sum up, epistemic modality focuses on the status of the speaker to the truth of what he is saying based on evidentiality or judgment that he had.

Deontic modality focuses on the notions of permission and obligation. It is found in a directive permission (*you may go out now*) or a forcing obligation (*you must go out now*), or the statement that reports deontic conditions (*you should give him a help*).

At a glance the notions of deontic modality, we discover that the subjectivity is an expression of the speaker’s attitudes or opinions on his acts. The speaker says that the act is an obligation, prohibition or permission. Thus, the speaker hopes the hearer do what the speaker said. On the one hand, deontic modality, non-factuation is also expressed by an action that the speaker hopes himself or the hearer do. Hence, it is also seen an imposition of the speaker. Consider some following examples:

- Tom should have gone to the party last night.
- Tom should make an appointment with a doctor tomorrow.

In the utterance (1), the speaker does not impose Tom must go to the party last night, but the speaker thinks in this case Tom has a duty go to the party. Thus, the speaker only confirms the act, but not the obligation.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the author notices two notions, one, evidentiality or judgment of epistemic modality that the speaker has for his statement and evaluation of the speaker’s commitment contained in an utterance, while the other, obligation or permission of deontic modality that the speaker hopes, imposes himself or the hearer do. Also, we can see that the division of modality into epistemic and deontic shows some cases of polysemy in which at the same form can be used for both kinds of modality. For instance, the word “may” can be

used either for epistemic possibility (*this may be Anna's good day!*) or deontic permission (*Anna may come in now*). For other instance, the word "must" can be used either deontic obligation (*she must eat the bowl*) or epistemic possibility (*she must eat the bowl because she did not eat anything this morning*). Last but not least, the author hopes my analysis can help readers have a various picture of epistemic modality and deontic modality as well as help them overcome the ambiguity when they use or analyze modality in a context.

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