

Mood and Modality in English

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- modality: cover term for a range of semantic notions such as ability, possibility, hypotheticality, obligation and imperative meaning (practical definition)
- modal utterances do not represent situations as facts, modal meaning involves the notions of necessity and possibility, or rather, it involves a speaker's judgement that a proposition is possibly or necessarily true
- modality may be coded in several ways (verbal inflections, auxiliary verbs, adverbs, particles,...)
- verb inflections → mood (e.g. imperative mood and subjunctive mood) rare in English
- most common: modal auxiliary verbs

1. Inflectional moods

- imperative (will-mood), function is to signal that the speaker wants a certain state of affairs to be brought about (e.g. *Come here!*), the verb is in the base form
- subjunctive (thought-mood), reference to a state of affairs that is the case in a possible world
- indicative (fact-mood), represents situations as facts, but the indicative past tense and past perfect can also be used modally to represent situations as non-factual or counterfactual

(1) It would be great if it *rained* tonight.

subjunctive (referring to the form)

- present subjunctive: base form of the verb; can be embedded in a clause with present, past or future time reference

(2) God save the Queen

- past subjunctive (only existing for the word *be*) – only distinct from the past indicative for first and third person singular (→ *were*); refers either to a hypothetical or to a counterfactual situation

(3) Jimmie wishes/wished/will wish his girlfriend *were* with him.

2. Analytic mood: Formal Properties of Modal Auxiliaries:

- (Huddleston): non-inflectional verbal forms that establish modal meaning
- central modals (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, would, must, will*)
- peripheral/marginal modals (*dare, need, ought*)
- semi-modals/quasi-modals/periphrastic modals (*have to, be able to, be going to, be supposed to, be about to, be bound to,...*)

Central modals: 'NICE' properties:

N – negative form consisting of the auxiliary followed by *not*

I – they can precede the subject in subject-verb inversion

C – they can occur in ‘code’, that means they can be used instead of a full lexical verb

E – they can be used in emphatic affirmation, that means that they do not require of *do*

Central modals are invariable for person and number (no third person *-s* form) and have no non-finite forms.

Peripheral modals differ from central modals, in the case of *dare* and *need* because these auxiliaries only occur in non-assertive contexts and in the case of *ought* principally because it takes a *to*-infinitive.

The semi-modals (*be X to*), generally have the NICE properties in respect of the *be* part of their form, but they do inflect for person and number and they have non-finite forms. They can also co-occur with the central modal auxiliaries.

(4) She may be able to help.

3. Categorizations of Modal Meanings Expressed by Analytic Mood

3.1. Epistemic vs. non-epistemic (or root) meaning

Epistemic meaning deals with the necessity or possibility of the truth (or non-truth) of propositions. It reflects the speaker’s judgement of the likelihood that the proposition underlying the utterance is true.

Non-epistemic meaning deals with the necessity or possibility of the actualization of situations.

Root modality is divided into root possibility root necessity, ability and volition. Deontic modality includes obligation (a type of root necessity) and permission (a type of root permission).

Non-deontic root possibility (*You can get coffee from this machine*) and non-deontic root necessity (*The fish have to be fed every day*) concern possibility and necessity that arise due to circumstances in general.

Ability: *Can you climb over that wall?* – Is it possible for you to climb over that wall? (physically and perhaps mentally)

Volition: *I’ll help you.* – It is possible for me to help you. & I am willing to help you.

3.2. Meaning expressed by the central modals

Each of the central modal auxiliaries can be used with more than one meaning.

CAN: John Mayer can become Prime Minister. (root possibility)

Can I hold you and kiss you, here and now? (permission)

Can you speak any East European languages? (ability)

COULD: With the simple digging of a well a large amount of pasture could be reclaimed but they... (root possibility)

There has been recurring speculation that Fortura could be planning a full-scale bid for Headlam and ... (epistemic possibility)

MAY: You never know, I may eventually get a full-time job. (epistemic possibility)

May I sit down for a minute? (permission)

No book or other library material may be taken from the library’s premises. (permission)

MIGHT: I suspect that you might be seeking a room in a house of young women... (epistemic possibility)

You said to me once you might come to London to visit. (epistemic possibility)

MUST: With all the bits of work you've done over the years, your CV must be pretty full? (epistemic necessity)

You must tell DVLA as soon as buy a used vehicle. (root necessity)

To track environmental change the gene pool must be able to : a) b)...

WILL: The main proposals of the White Paper will come into operation in April 1991. (epistemic)

Why won't anyone believe them? (volition)

WOULD: Colubus Columba then prophesied that he would become a beggar... (epistemic)

Would you get the Fairground Attraction album for me? (volition)

SHALL: We shall be away on holiday for a fortnight from Wednesday 29 August. (epistemic)

SHOULD: You should just about get this letter by the time I get home. (epistemic necessity)

Read our article on why you should smile to find out even more interesting facts. (root necessity)

Will and *shall* (and *would* and *should*), used for prediction, do not fit in the paradigm of 'either possibility or necessity of the truth of a proposition', because prediction involves some judgement of likelihood.

Each auxiliary has a range of modal meanings, and a given modal meaning can generally be expressed by more than one modal auxiliary.

3.3 Approaches to the classification of modal meanings

Table 12.2 Classification of (analytical) modal meaning

<i>epistemic modality</i>	<i>root necessity</i>	<i>root possibility</i>	<i>ability</i>	<i>obligation</i>	<i>permission</i>	<i>willingness or volition</i>	
epistemic	root modality						Coates (1983)
extrinsic				intrinsic			Quirk et al. (1985)
epistemic	n/a	agent-oriented					Bybee and Fleischman (1985)
propositional modality	n/a	n/a	event modality				Palmer (2001)
evidential epistemic			dynamic	deontic		dynamic	
epistemic	dynamic			deontic		dynamic	Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002)
epistemic	non-epistemic					n/a	Van der Auwera and Plungian (1998)
	participant-internal	participant-external	participant-internal	participant-external			
		non-deontic		deontic			

(from Depraetere & Reed 2006: 280)

3.4. Problems

There are fuzzy boundaries in modality → some difficulties in analysing

The question of *will* being a modal auxiliary or just a marker of future tense.

The use of *can* for progressive interpretation (*I can hear the sea*) is often argued to be non-modal.

4. Polysemy vs. monosemy

Polysemy:

Many linguists defend the idea that modals are polysemous, with at least a sense distinction between root and epistemic meanings of a given modal.

In the next example it is impossible to decide whether the modal has root or epistemic meaning:

- (5) a. At the same time he must remember one of the principal lessons of Vietnam: that wars cannot be successfully pursued without strong public support.
 b. You must live near the university.
 c. You may have a car.

Monosemy:

Each modal has a core meaning, one invariant meaning with different contextual uses.

Example:

- (6) A: Newcastle Brown is a jolly good beer.
 B: Is it?
 A: Well it ought to be at that price.

5. Composition of a modal utterance

1. A sentence with a modal consists of two parts: P and M, a proposition and a modal meaning.

You may be right about that. - It is possible (M) that you are right (P).

Negation may be either on the proposition or on the modal meaning expressed.

2. temporal information : A distinction should be made between the temporal location of the modal meaning and the temporal relation between the modal meaning communicated and the situation referred to.

Not all modals have a past form that locates the modal meaning in the past sector. (e.g. *must* cannot be used with the meaning past obligation in direct speech)

6. Conclusion

The range of meanings covered by the term 'modality' is functionally very wide. It includes meanings such as ability and volition, permission and obligation. A clause containing a modal auxiliary becomes twin-faceted, provided complex possibilities for the temporal location and/or the negation of the modality and of the proposition.