

EPISTEMIC MODALITY MANIFESTED IN CONVERSATIONS IN “THE THORN BIRDS”

Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao, Tran Thi Van Anh, Hoang Thi Chung
Vinh University

Received on 18/4/2019, accepted for publication on 5/6/2019

Abstract: Modality has two main types, deontic and epistemic. However, our article only deals with epistemic. English modality’s realizations are very broad, including all word-forms: adjective, adverbs, verbs, nouns and a number of subordinate clauses. Yet, we only consider it in the first four word-forms. The data is based on the utterances in conversations among characters in “The Thorn Birds” written by an Australian writer, Colleen McCullough. We find that nowhere is better for the characters to express their feelings and attitudes toward every incident than in conversations which are reliable source of data for modality in general and epistemic in particular. The article also indicates the obstacles of the learners in applying “modal verbs” properly to express their own thinking, thereby giving some causes and solutions to ensure effective conversations.

1. Introduction

The term “modality” can be understood widely. It is grammaticalized by a modal system which is formally associated along with tense, aspect and voice; particularly in English, it is specialized in modal verbs system, such as *will, can, must, may...* In terms of semantics, the notion, however, is related to *attitudes and opinions, speech acts, subjective, non-factivity and non-assertion* which mean “the ideas that are concerned with the statements that are not used to make statements of facts” (Palmer, 1986, p.4). Modality could therefore be defined as the grammaticalization of speaker’s (subjective) opinions and attitudes which should be reflected vividly within everyday conversations presented by native speakers. Accordingly, *The Thorn Birds*, a bestselling novel written by the Australian author Colleen McCullough was chosen as an authentic source for our research which is aimed to figure out how modality of English is expressed in daily conversations appropriately, thereby offering some implications for learning and teaching English and some suggestions for further study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Modality definition

It is roughly impossible for the linguists to standardize a criteria system of modality for every language because modality, in fact, can be performed differently within different languages. Yet, most of them, share common sense for its definition though they may convey it in some different terms. According to Palmer F.R. (1986: 16) “[modality]... is associated with S’s [speaker’s] attitude or opinion about what is said”. In similar fashion, Downing and Lock (1992: 382) define *modality* as:

Email: thaontp@vinhuni.edu.vn (N. T. P. Thao)

“... semantic categories by which speakers express their attitude toward the event contained in the proposition as possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation, permission, doubt, wish, regret, design, and temporal notions such as usuality.”

In an effort to explicit some terms mentioned in the above definition, Steel et al. (1981:21) make another proposal: “Element expressing modality will mark any of the following: possible or the related notion of permission, probability or the related notion of obligation, certainty or the related notion of the requirement”, as illustrated in the following:

“*He may come tomorrow*” (Perhaps he will/ He is permitted)

“*The book should be on the shelf*” (It probably is/ It’s proper place)

“*He must be in the office*” (I am certain that he is/ he is obliged to be)

Meanwhile, Palmer (1986:14) makes a distinction between *modality* and proposition that is related to the terms “locutionary and illocutionary” proposed by Austin. According to him, “proposition is about what we say (locutionary) and then *modality* is what we want to do with what we say (illocutionary) - thanking, making a promise, making a complaint or an accusation ...”.

Above all, those linguists share a common thing which then was generalized briefly by Nguyễn Hoà (2004: 176): “Modality is described as the expression of the speaker’s attitude or opinion toward the content of proposition”.

Furthermore, Caffi (1994: 334, reproducing Bally, 1965: 36) defines separately two terms “modus” and “dictum”. Modus refers to the modality marker in relation to such dimensions as the speaker’s emotion, volition, attitude, and judgement towards what she/he says. Dictum is the core of information in the utterance, related to the communicative and descriptive functions of language. Thus, researching modality is to consider two parts: the dictum means what is said and the modus deals with how is said that is the speaker’s cognitive, emotive... attitude about what is said. For example, the dictum “*he is ill*” could be paired with various types of modus, such as:

I think that he is ill.

I hope that he is ill.

He must be ill.

2.2. Modality classification

Many linguists are interested in classifying modality. Noticeably, Jespersen (1924:320) divides modality into two sub-categories:

- One of them contains an element of will: Hortative, Precative, Advisory, Obligative, Permissive, Optative (realizable), Promissive, Intentional, Jussive.

- The other named “no element of will”:

Necessitative Assertive, Presumptive, Dubitative, Potential, Hypothetical, Concessional, Apodictive, Conditional.

However, his proposals are judged to have so much limitation, esp. containing little of theoretical significance, except for his recognition of two types and its terms are used to realize “deontic” and “epistemic” then.

More complicatedly, besides alethic, deontic, and epistemic, Rescher (1968) adds more three types into his list: “temporal” with aim to distinguish tense from modality (It is sometimes/mostly...); “boulomaic” (it is hoped/feared/regretted...); and

“evaluative” (it is a good/perfectly wonderful...) and “causal”. Unfortunately, this consideration is not highly appreciated because they relate with actual states of affairs that can be true or false. Despite of those limitations of some previous researchers in classifying modality, some interesting things in their study are still rather valuable for the later ones.

Finally, most of linguists come to agreement that modality consists of two main kinds: *deontic and epistemic*. According to Downing and Lock (1995), speaker uses *epistemic* to comment on the content of the clause, and non-epistemic or *deontic* to refer to obligation and permission and thanks to them, speaker is able to carry out two important communication functions: to comment on and evaluate an interpretation of reality; to intervene in and bring about changes in events. Lyons et al. (1977) also agrees with this division, but he defines them under another terms.

Epistemic modality which is concerned with “matters of *knowledge, belief*” (1977: 793), or “*opinion* rather than fact” (1977: 681), and “*Deontic* modality which is concerned with the *necessity* or *possibility* of acts performed by morally responsible agents.” (1977: 832)

Lyons’s remark seems to be more satisfactory because it can generalize all of the main characters of two types. When speaker uses *epistemic*, he is expressing his opinion or attitude toward the event that he believes or knows. That is to say, speaker commits to the truth of the utterance. Whereas speaker uses *deontic* to convey the action done by the hearer or by himself. In addition, being ambitious to show the real meaning behind those two terms, Palmer (1998) affirms that in semantic view, two basic kinds of modality belong to two worlds: the world “perception” or “epistemic” and the world “deontic” or “real” or “root”. Linguists have characterized as *root*, with those meanings which denote real world *obligation, permission, or ability* (as illustrated in **a**) and as *epistemic*, those which denote *necessity, probability, or possibility* in reasoning (as illustrated in **b**)”

a. *John must be home by ten. Mother won’t let him stay out any later.*
(Obligation)

b. *John must be home already. I see him coat.* (Possibility) (Sweetser, 1990: 49)

3. Methodology

Two basic methods, synthetic and analytical, are applied for this research. All of the related utterances are collected from the novel “The Thorn Birds”, which are then analysed based on epistemic modality. Nevertheless, the investigation is narrowed down in the four word-forms: verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and nouns. Of all kinds of English verbs, ten modal verbs are considered. After making some comparison among the frequency of these four types in epistemic modality available in the novel, the data collected from a test for students’ weakness recognition in using “modal verbs” is synthesized for the next analysis.

After studying more than 780 utterances with regard to modality, including *deontic* and *epistemic* in terms of the four word-forms, it is noteworthy that about 530 times of *epistemic* modality out of 960 times of the four word-form occurred in the novel. It gives us no surprise when the rate is closely equal for both of them, *epistemic* takes 55% yet, *deontic* seems slightly lower with 45% because obviously, the latter which may be superior in the realization “modal verbs”, has to yield to the former in the

three others. However, these results are not reasonable enough to conclude which kind has the higher frequency of occurrence in the novel, because the article only looks into a small realization of modality.

4. Findings

The below is the summary table to show how the four types of word forms manifested in epistemic modality.

Tab. 1: *The frequency of occurrence of epistemic modality seen from four types of word-forms manifested in the conversations in “The Thorn Birds”*

Word-forms	Epistemic			Deontic
	Judgment	Evidential	Epistemic	
Modal-verbs	52.90%	47.10%	49.40%	50.60%
Adverbs	91.20%	8.80%	90.90%	9.10%
Adjectives	78%	22%	75.00%	35.00%
Nouns	100%		100%	

The indicators show that only in modal verbs, they are hardly equal; yet, in the last three, *deontic* always accounts for rather small percentage. It is understandable because traditionally, three of them are used to support for epistemic modality. However, occasionally owing to these sharing, they cause us difficulty in distinguishing one from another, as presented in the following utterance in the novel:

“*I certainly wouldn’t weep any tears.*” (p. 324) can be interpreted as judgment to the truth of the utterance via the word “certainly” or a promise with the modal verb of “tentative” - “would”.

Secondly, it is targeted to see how they share the percentage of occurrence in two kinds of epistemic in spite of the fact that “there is no very clear distinction because speaker’s judgments are naturally often related to the evidence they have” (Palmer, 1998, p. 70). To some extent, that is true because in many cases, the next sentence is effected by the interpretation from the previous event or by the observation of the speaker; therefore that must be evidential, but considering that sentence itself is a judgment, such as in the following sentence: “*I’m sure she’d be delighted, Archbishop*” (p. 370) the speaker uses “would” not only to emphasize for her certainty that *she will surely delighted* as an encouragement toward the hearer (i.e. Anne wants Ralph to come visiting Meggie in the resort) but also she can deduce from her knowledge about Meggie’s physical at that time. However, the result tells that the judgment takes a large percentage via those four realizations than the evidential.

It also figures out some problems that Vietnamese learners often meet when they use ten modal auxiliaries verbs: can, could, may, might, shall, should, must, ought (to), will, would. In order to find out exactly what problems are, we made a small test with the participation of more than 200 university students. The data of which is taken from “The Thorn Bird” with a view to considering how the answers of the students fit with those in the novel.

5. Discussion and pedagogical implication

After analysing all of the answers collected from those students, a result is not out of expectation. Firstly, in case of multiple answers (for instance, the answer for question 4 in exercise 3 can be *will/might*), 48% answers are correct, which are still higher than 28% compared with those in the novel. Then, actually, it seems that there is much difference between the ordinary way people use modal verbs and the characters in the classical novel. The reasons may lay in the writing style of the writer or in some specific cases, it depends on the situations in which the conversations occur. For instance: the utterance of Frank: “*Could not you leave her alone, could not you keep your hands off her?*”. As usual, “*can*” can replace “*could*” in this case, but looking at the development of the story, this sentence is neither really a way for asking permission nor an insistence but a request of Frank toward his father-in-law who he hates. And “*could*” inferring a “strong tentative” must be an appropriate choice.

From the result, it can be recognized that, a number of Vietnamese students get confused between “*must*” and “*ought to*”. For example, some of them answer “*ought to*”, instead of “*must*” for question 2 in exercise 3. Because comparing with “*ought to*”, “*must*” refers to an action more definitely, and cling to a judgement for what has happened “I don’t know why children *must* pay for yours sins.” And they also have difficulty in distinguishing “*can*”, “*could*” and “*may*” for asking permission or in some certain cases.

The causes of the above difficulties may root from learners who are lack of a great deal of knowledge about “modal verbs”. Obviously, they have been equipped with only some basic background to fulfill some certain exercises, but that is not enough for a thorough progress, esp. communication skill. Not only in the skill of using modal verbs but in another fields, foreign language learners, certainly, have to suffer from the negative effect of the native language. That is true if they have not been equipped enough to make a contrast on their own. Objectively, the high percentage of wrong answers may slightly affected the skill in taking a certain task. In this case, the students may not pay much attention to the whole discourse or the situation they are in.

6. Suggestions for the learners

The first requirement is to understand thoroughly and systemically the way of using these modal verbs. Then in order to use them fluently, there is no way but practice frequently with classmates, or it is also extremely helpful if learners read stories in which conversations appear in high rate. The learners can make a contrast between Vietnamese and English modals verbs so that they will be able to avoid some confusion.

Actually, each modal verb carries each meaning under various circumstances. It is necessary to present the context for each case, accordingly. For example, teacher can set a situation.

T: One day, your friend wants to invite you to visit his house for a dinner, so how can he say?

S: Would you like to visit my house for dinner?

T: It is the first time you meet his parents. In the meal, you want his mother to give you the bowl of meat. How can you say?

S: Can you give me the bowl of meat?

The second answer of the student is not really appropriate with the situation. Therefore, teacher has to infer the cultural knowledge to explain. In English “can” is also used to make a request, but usually in informal situation. But here it is the first time you meet his parents - a formal context, as a result, you should use “could” instead. Besides that teacher can employ extended activities by guiding them through the use of other modal markers with similar function.

“I may not grow any bigger” (modal verb)

(“The Thorn Birds”, p. 127)

“It is possible I can not grow bigger” (modal adjective)

“I can possibly not grow bigger” (modal adverb)

During this process, teacher should manage to avoid translation work since it somehow can lead to intralingua errors and otherwise it increases the mother tongue interference toward the target language.

7. Conclusion

Modality may differ from language to language, esp. in the realization system of each. But in general, semantically it is used to express the commitment of the speaker toward what he is saying. It involves two other sub-types called deontic and epistemic. Yet, this article, based on the data from a great novel, examines one of them, with the theme Epistemic modality manifested in conversations in “The Thorn Birds”. There are quite a large number of modality’s realizations. But within the limit of an academic article, we have only focused on four word forms: verbs (ten modal verbs), adverbs, adjectives, nouns.

As Palmer (1998) remarks, “modality, as will be seen, does not relate semantically to the verbs alone or primarily but the whole sentence”. Applying this statement, we have studied not only the word-forms each self but also explore how it is conveyed different attitude or feeling of the speaker in different contexts. And one of the significances of our exploration via this research was find out that the frequency of occurrence of epistemic particularly and modality generally in conversations in the novel depends on the characters’ relationship, how they have known each other or even their personality. The rate between the lovers and members in the same family is often higher than the others. It can partly be explained by the fact that the frequency of conversations among these people is more often than the rests. But it also shows the fact that the people having close relationship usually express their cooperation in communication. Among four realizations related to our study, ten modal verbs employ the highest percentage (75.47%), the next is adverbs focus on “personal modality” with 18.86% and the two last ones with the lowest rate 5.67%. In addition, the ellipsis one of the factors causing the difficulty for the consideration also occurs at remarkable rate in every four indications (eg: “*May be, he will...*” can be interpreted epistemic or deontic meanings if we do not refer back the previous sentence “*I knew he would not come back*”). This problem proves for the fact that considering modality is sometimes necessary to see the surrounded sentences of the whole discourse.

REFERENCES

- Bybee, Joan L. (1985). *A study of the Relation between Meaning and Form*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Caffi, C., Janney, R. W. (1994). *Towards a Pragmatics of Emotive Communication*. *Journal of Pragmatics*. 22: 325-373.
- Downing, Angela, and Philip Locke. *A University Course in English Grammar*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Nguyễn Hòa (2004). *Understanding English Semantics*. Hanoi: VNU.
- Jespersen, O. (1924). *The Philosophy of Grammar*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Đỗ Thị Kim Liên (1998). *Ngữ pháp Tiếng Việt*. NXB Giáo dục.
- Đỗ Thị Kim Liên (1999). *Ngữ nghĩa lời hội thoại*. NXB Giáo dục.
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Đặng Thị Mạnh (2005). *Politeness strategies in conversation in "The Quiet American"*. Graduation Thesis, VU-CFL, Vinh.
- McCullough, C. (1979). *The Thorn Birds*. U.S.A: Harpers & Row.
- McCullough, C. (1980). *Tiếng chim hót trong bụi mận gai*. Phạm Mạnh Hùng dịch. Hà Nội: NXB Văn học.
- Palmer, F.R. (Ed.) (1986). *Mood and Modality*. CUP: Cambridge.
- Nguyễn Quang (1999). *A cross-cultural study of apologizing responding to apologies in Vietnamese and English*. M.A. Thesis, VNU-CFL. Hanoi.
- Rescher, N. (1968). *Topics in Philosophical Logic*. Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Steel (1981) *A study on evidential modal markers in English*.
- Sweetser, E.E. (1982). *Root and epistemic modals: causality in two worlds*. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 8: 484-507.
- Watts, R. (2003). *Politeness*, CUP: Cambridge.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. OUP: Oxford.

TÓM TẮT

TÌNH THÁI NHẬN THỨC ĐƯỢC THỂ HIỆN TRONG LỜI THOẠI CỦA TÁC PHẨM “TIẾNG CHIM HÓT TRONG BỤI MẬN GAI”

Phạm trù tình thái được chia làm hai loại chính là tình thái đạo nghĩa và tình thái nhận thức. Tuy nhiên, bài viết của chúng tôi chỉ đề cập một trong hai loại, đó là tình thái nhận thức. Dấu hiệu nhận biết tình thái trong tiếng Anh rất rộng bao gồm tất cả các dạng từ: tính từ, trạng từ, động từ, danh từ và một số mệnh đề phụ. Tuy nhiên, chúng tôi chỉ xem xét tình thái nhận thức trong bốn hình thức từ. Dữ liệu phân tích được dựa trên những lời thoại giữa các nhân vật trong tiểu thuyết kinh điển “Tiếng chim hót trong bụi mận gai” của nhà văn người Úc Colleen McCullough. Bài viết cũng chỉ ra hiện trạng, nguyên nhân cũng như giải pháp của việc sử dụng động từ tình thái của người học tiếng Anh.