

## MODALS AND MODALITY IN ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** Modality is a semantic concept dealing with necessity and possibility of the knowledge of the world. It is basically divided into two types, viz. epistemic modality and deontic modality. Various grammatical categories are possibly used to show modality. However, modal verbs are one of the most important means related to the modality. Modal verbs are flexible in showing modality. This article discusses basic knowledge of modality including definition, classification (epistemic and deontic) and relationship between modality and modal verbs

**Key words:** obligations, regulations, epistemic modality, deontic modality, epistemic interpretations, evidentiality, judgement modality

Modality is generally related to the necessity, possibility, obligation, permissibility, feasibility and certainty etc. As for the classification of modality, there are several proposals. However, many scholars agree that there are generally two major types: epistemic modality and deontic modality. To begin with, let's briefly go over various perspectives on the classification of modality. Jespersen (1924) divided modality into twenty subcategories which involved "certain attitudes of the mind of the speaker towards the content of the sentence" (1924, p. 313). This kind of classification has a significant influence to the modern research on modality and its classification though it has too many subcategories with many overlapping. The second classification was made by Rescher He divided the whole modality system into eight subcategories and his classification also includes two most important categories of modality that we still use nowadays, viz. epistemic modality and deontic modality. One of the classifications widely accepted by many scholars was made by Von Wright (1951). He divided the modality into four categories. He called modality modes at that time. His classification also included two of the most important items that had been mentioned in the previous two classifications. Von Wright's classification is as follows. Four modes by Von Wright (1951) 1) The alethic modes or modes of truth. 2) The epistemic modes or modes of knowing. 3) The deontic modes or modes of obligation. 4) The existential modes or modes of existence. From these classifications, we can see that epistemic modality and deontic modality are the two most important categories in modality, though the criteria of the classification are different. Based on these classifications, scholars generally divide modality into two major types: epistemic modality and deontic modality. A. Epistemic Modality "Epistemic interpretations have to do with knowledge and understanding". It concerns the necessity and possibility of a proposition when there is clear-cut evidence. Therefore, epistemic modality is derived from the fact that can be true from reality. It connotes how much certainty or evidence a speaker has for the proposition expressed by his or her utterance. (1) There's no answer, Mary must have gone. Epistemic modality is different from logical modality which always can be true in any case. Epistemic modality is further divided into two subcategories, viz. epistemic necessity and epistemic possibility. Epistemic necessity cannot always be true though it comes from real knowledge of the world. Epistemic possibility, on the contrary, isn't based on the knowledge of the real world. It only provides one of the possibilities according to the speaker's assumption. For example, (2) Epistemic necessity: The dinosaurs must have died out suddenly. (Kearns, 2000) (3) Epistemic possibility: It is possible that there is intelligent life in deep space. (Kearns, 2000) Epistemic modality is also divided into evidentiality and judgement modality according to Chung and Timberlake (1985) and Bybee (1985) etc. Evidentiality is an epistemic modality that connotes the speaker's assessment of the evidence for his or her statement. Judgment modality is an epistemic modality that connotes the speaker's strength of inference or degree of confidence in the reality of the proposition expressed by his or her utterance. According to Jespersen (1924), epistemic modality is further divided into apodictic, necessitate, assertive, presumptive, dubitative, potential, conditional hypothetical and concessional modality etc. Generally speaking, non-human subjects are used in epistemic sentences. B. Deontic Modality Deontic modality is a modality that connotes the speaker's degree of requirement, desire or commitment to the proposition. It relates to "constraints grounded in society: duty, morality, laws, rules etc." and deontic proposition often concerns obligations or permissions, hope or requirements etc. (Griffiths, 2006) Deontic modality chiefly depends on modal verbs such as, can, must, have to, ought to, could have done etc. to express the meanings. Deontic modality is also divided into deontic necessity and deontic possibility. Deontic necessity concerns obligations and regulations that must be followed by the people, whereas deontic possibility concerns permissible proposition. (4) Deontic necessity: You must abide by the rules of the school. (5) Deontic possibility: You may go home. There are also some other ways of classifying deontic modality by the scholars. For example, deontic modality can be divided into commissive modality, directive modality and volitive modality according to Chung and Timberlake (1985) and Palmer (1986). Commissive

modality is a deontic modality that connotes the speaker's expressed commitment, as a promise or threat, to bring about the proposition expressed by the utterance. Directive modality is also one of a deontic modality that connotes the speaker's degree of requirement of conformity to the proposition expressed by an utterance. Directive modality is further divided into deliberative mood, imperative mood, jussive mood, obligatory mood, permissive mood, precative mood, prohibitive mood according to Palmer (1986), and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985). The third type of deontic modality is volitive modality. It is a deontic modality that expresses the speaker's attitude of hope, wish, or fear concerning the proposition expressed by the utterance. It is also further divided into imperative mood and optative mood according to Pei and Gaynor (1954) and Palmer (1986). This kind of classification is very much alike the different categories of the speech acts which are related to the certain illocutionary acts in pragmatics. Jespersen (1924) classifies deontic modality into jussive, compulsive, obligative, advisory, precative, hortative, permissive, promissive, optative (realizable), desiderative (unrealizable) and intentional etc. In general, human subjects are used in deontic sentences. IV.

Modal verbs are the main carriers of modality. Though we can use inflection of the verbs, viz. mood to show modality, it is not enough. Therefore, it is necessary to apply some other means of modal expressions and that is modal verb. Modal verbs are also regarded as helping verbs or auxiliary verbs. A. Classification of English Modal Verbs Quirk et al. (1985) classify the modal verbs into can/could, may/might, shall/should, will/would, must, be used to, ought to, need and dare etc. Palmer (1986) remarks that modal verbs are can/could, may/might, shall/should, will/would, must, ought, dare and need etc. Modal verbs help the main verb in the sentence to add more information on the different levels of necessity and possibility. Modal verbs that are related to the obligation, requirement or no choice etc. are must, need, have (got) to. Should and ought to are generally related to the recommendation to the hearer. Can and its past form could (without relationship with tense) are connected with possibility. Options, choices and permissions are to be expressed via modal verbs may and might. It was found that modals were used in about 15 per cent of clauses that could have them." (1999). Some of the modal verbs used often are will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should, must and ought to etc. In addition, there are also some other means, (viz., semimodals) to show modality. For instance, have to, need to, be able to etc. In the following parts, some of the basic modals are to be discussed first. Modal verbs are the basic means or main carriers to show modality. Many of the modal verbs have both epistemic and deontic use of modality. Generally speaking, epistemic modality deals with possibility, necessity, predictability. Modal verbs like must/ have to, should/ought to, will/shall, would/should, may/might, can/could/be able to etc. are often used for these modality. Deontic modality deals with obligation, volition and permission and modal verbs such as must/have to, will/shall, may/can etc. are often used. Modal verbs have different grades in their strength of possibilities. For example, must is generally considered as a mark of strong modality. It delivers strong certainty to the proposition by the speaker. In contrast, may, can or might, could are often related to the possibilities with less certainty than must or have to. Generally speaking, modal verbs are different in showing strength of possibilities. Though most of the modal verbs such as, might, may, could, should, ought to, would, will, must show epistemic possibility, they are different in the strength of possibilities as follows. Epistemic modality derives from the fact that can be true from reality. Sometimes it connotes certainty or evidence a speaker has for the proposition. Epistemic modality is divided into epistemic necessity and epistemic possibility. Modal verbs can/could; may/might; will/would; shall are often used for epistemic possibility, and must; should/ought to are used for epistemic necessity. 1. Epistemic Possibility: (1) Can/Could: Use of can/could is related to the abilities, possibilities (epistemic modality) and permission (deontic modality). Scholars have different perspectives on the classification of can when it is related to the ability. Some scholars argue that can is non-epistemic, while others suggest that can is epistemic. Coates (1983) remarks that can is deontic when it refers to the ability. Coates (1983) regards ability as the core meaning, extending towards possibility as primitive and establish a cline of ability-oriented meanings as one moves towards the periphery. Some scholars also argue that "ability" meaning of can belongs to dynamic modality and it cannot be replaced by may when it refers to the ability. However, many scholars agree that can is possibly replaced by be able to or be capable of etc. and dynamic modality actually belongs to the epistemic modality (Griffiths, 2006). Therefore, ability meaning of can is considered to be a kind of possibility. When it shows possibilities, can is often used in negative or interrogative sentences. According to the statistics (Lancaster Corpus, cf. Coates, 1983), among three major meanings of can, possibility occupies the highest rate. Could may be used as the past tense of can. However, in many cases, it has no relationship with past tense, but politeness or some other indirect speech which have pragmatic considerations. Could (possibility) is much more related to the remoteness in time and reality. (6) Can you help me tomorrow? (ability) (Griffiths, 2006) ? May you help me tomorrow? (7) He can't finish his task. (possibility) Can you do it for me? (possibility) (8) Could you give me some

help? (politeness) Could you open the door? (indirect speech) (9) When John was young, he could read English. (remoteness in time) If I were you, I could do it in this way. (remoteness in reality) (2) May/Might: May/might is related to possibility. However, might has lower strength than may in the degree of possibility. Both may and might are used as epistemic modality to show possibility. Might is often used to show either mere possibility of present situation or politeness. Might is generally weaker than may in the possibility. (10) He may be home. (possibility) He might be home. (mere possibility) Might you be free to help me tomorrow? (politeness) (Griffiths, 2006, p. 111) I thought that he might come to school. (mere possibility) (3) Will/Would: Will and would are often concerned with prediction. Therefore, they are much related to the future. Would is often related politeness as well. If it is used as the past tense of will, it means past prediction or past futurity. Will/would also is used as deontic modality. (11) He will be here at 5. (prediction-futurity) I will come this afternoon. (prediction-futurity) Would you help me? (politeness) I thought he would be here at 5. (past futurity) (4) Shall: Shall can also show prediction as will. However, it is restricted in the use of first person subject. However, in modern English, particularly, in American English, will is used even in the structures with first person subject to show prediction in the future. In the interrogative sentences, shall is used as obligational meaning, viz. deontic modality rather than epistemic modality. (12) I shall/will be happy if he comes. (prediction) I shall finish the work if others help me. (prediction) 2. Epistemic Necessity: (1) Must: Must often deals with epistemic necessity. In addition, must is also used as deontic modality to show obligation. It is hard to differentiate these two modalities. Therefore, scholars argue that context is very important to distinguish epistemic and deontic modality of must. Must often emphasizes subjectivity rather than objectivity. Have to which has the similar meaning with must can't be replaced by must in showing epistemic modality. Have to is only used as deontic modality. (13) The ground is wet. It must have rained. (necessity) (14) He must be studying in the classroom, because he always does so. (epistemic necessity) He must be studying in the classroom, because he has on other places to go. (deontic) Negated must is often replaced by can't when it shows epistemic necessity. Must and can are different modals. However, when they are negated, the meaning becomes identical because the two sentences are convertible based on the relative scope relationship. (15) You must not provide the receipt. You can't provide the receipt. You must not provide the receipt.  $\Leftrightarrow$  It is necessarily not that you provide the receipt.  $\Rightarrow$  necessarily not P You can't provide the receipt.  $\Leftrightarrow$  It is not possible that you provide the receipt.  $\Rightarrow$  Not possibly P necessarily not P (proposition)  $\Leftrightarrow$  not possibly P (proposition) You must not provide the receipt.  $\Leftrightarrow$  You can't provide the receipt. (2) Should/Ought to<sup>3</sup> : Should is used as a necessity modal like must. However, it isn't as strong as must. Generally speaking, should and ought to are interchangeable. Palmer (1979) argues that "it is not at all clear that English makes any distinction between should and ought to". However, some scholars insist that there is difference between should and ought to. One of the representatives who suggests that should and ought to are different is Coates (1983). Should and ought to are weaker in force compared with must and the result will not actually be carried out. (16) They really should be home by now. (necessity) They really ought to be home by now. (necessity) D. Modal Verbs and Deontic Modality Deontic modality is concerned with requirement, desire, commitment, obligations, permissions, hope or requirements etc. (Griffiths, 2006) Deontic modality chiefly depends on modal verbs such as must, have to, ought to, may, can, etc. to express the meanings. Deontic modality often shows the meaning of obligation, volition and permission etc. 1. Deontic Possibility: (1) May; Can: May and can are often used to show possibility. However, they are also used as deontic modality. In this case, they are more concerned with permission rather than possibility. Can is more informal than may. Therefore, it is more frequently used in the conversation. In contrast, may is used formally. In some cases, can is disallowed to replace may. Past form of may, might is argued to be stronger in the power of permission than may, and it often transfers to requirement. (17) You may go home. (permission) May I come in? (permission) (18) You can go home. (permission) You can leave now. (permission) I will wander along to your loo if I may. 3 Some scholars suggest that ought to is a semimodal verb (Fintel, 2006). This article considers it as a modal verb. \*I will wander along to your loo if I can. You might take off your dirty shoes. (permission  $\Rightarrow$  requirement) 2. Deontic Necessity: (1) Must/Have to<sup>4</sup> : When must/have to is used as deontic meanings, it means necessity and obligation. When must refers to the futurity, it becomes deontic rather than epistemic by showing obligations or duty. Compared with must, have to is more objective. Have to is only used for objective obligation. (19) You must finish all the tasks. (obligation) You must receive a good supply of both sunshine and moisture to be healthy. (obligation) (20) You must be in London next week. (obligation) You must work hard. (subjective obligation) You have to work hard. (objective obligation) (2) Will/Shall: Will is used as deontic modality when it is related to the volition. Volition includes intention and willingness. This volition is much related to the futurity. Will is often used in the interrogative sentences with second person subject when it shows willingness. Past form would is also possible in this case. However, the willingness will transfer to the slight obligations to the

listeners. When the subject is the first person, volitional or intentional shall shows speaker's undertaking to pursue a course of action and may be treated deontically. In questions, shall shows obligatory meaning. (21) My chauffeur will help you. (willingness) Will/would you like to help me? (willingness⇒ slight obligation) (22) I shall do it myself. (volition) (I intend to do it myself.) (23) Shall we replace the carpets? (obligation) (Let's replace the carpets.) (3) Should/Ought (to): Should is the past form of shall. Should and ought to are almost the same when they are used as deontic modality. Coates (1983) argues that, "It is possible that OUGHT occurs more frequently in speech than in written language because of its potentiality for stress. That is, if a speaker wants to emphasize the modality expressed by OUGHT and SHOULD, he will tend to choose OUGHT rather than SHOULD. This distinction is lost, however, in written language". (p. 70) Both should and ought (to) focus on subjectivity rather than objectivity. Though should and ought to show obligation similar to must, they are not interchangeable. Compared with must/have to, should and ought to are much weaker in showing deontic modality. What's more, the result will not actually be carried out, when should and ought to are used. (24) \* I must finish the work, but I don't want to. (contradictory) I should/ought to finish the work, but I don't want to. (deontic) (25) \* I had to finish the work, but I didn't. (contradictory) I should/ought to finish the work, but I didn't. (deontic) E. Semimodals In addition to the modals discussed above, there are some more words which are considered as semimodals. Semimodals have both features of main verbs and modal verbs. Quirk et al. (1972) call these words semi-auxiliaries, Chapin (1973) calls them quasi-modals and Palmer (1974) calls them quasi-auxiliaries. These semimodal verbs are need, be able to, dare and had better etc. Semimodals have the meanings similar to modals. It is reported that there are about twenty semimodal verbs in English (Quirk et al, 1972). Some of the major semimodals commonly concerned are need, be able to, dare, had better, would rather and be going to etc. and these are closely related to the epistemic and deontic modality respectively. F. Flexibility and Ambiguity of Modal Verbs Modal verbs can be used flexibly in showing either epistemic modality or deontic modality. In the following part, the article focuses on some of the core modal verbs used for epistemic modality and deontic modality. As a matter of fact, many of the modal verbs can be used for both epistemic modality and deontic modality. Firstly, we will see must, have to and will. Must is a modal verb with strong possibility derived from the factual proposition. However, it can be related to the obligations as well. (26) a. He must be a student because he wears school uniform. (Epistemic) b. He must finish all the work till 5 o'clock PM. (Deontic) (27) This has to be a joke. (Griffiths, 2006) a. Epistemic modality: This must be a joke, because nobody believes it. (Possibility) b. Deontic modality: This must be a joke. Sometimes, words like please can be considered as one of the markers to distinguish the epistemic from deontic modality. Because the word please itself shows polite requirement, sentences including please generally belong to deontic modality. When it is used in the epistemic modality, it functions as the converter to change epistemic modality into deontic modality. In the following example (28), the sentence sounds like someone with a vested interest in this proposition praying that its truth will be confirmed or accepted. (28) Warmer summers must please be a sign of global warming. (Epistemic → Deontic) (Griffiths, 2006) V. Research on modality is closely related to the possible world. Modality shows necessity and possibility of the world. This article focuses on some major aspects of modality such as, epistemic modality and deontic modality, usage of basic modal verbs, some semimodals that are frequently used and ambiguity of modals in meanings etc. Modality deals with necessity and possibility. These two are the core concepts of modality. Many scholars classified modality according to their own standard. However, epistemic and deontic modality are the two forms existing in all the classification types. That implies epistemic and deontic modalities are most frequently used. Modal verbs are the main carriers to show modality. This article analyzes major types of modality and semimodal verbs/semi-auxiliaries such as need, dare, be able to etc. Modality is a very important semantic concept that attracts many scholars' interests. A number of studies on modality have been conducted. In addition to the modal verbs, some other syntactic forms such as adverbs, nouns, verbs, adjectives also can represent modality.

## References

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