THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MODAL VERBS
IN DEONTIC AND EPISTEMIC MODALITY

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ABSTRACT

Modality is always interesting to discuss. Understanding it is crucial for both language teachers and learners. This essay discusses the concept of modality, its types and uses. It has a goal to find the difference between deontic and epistemic modality that is indicated by their modal verbs. It also provides the readers a better understanding of modality, particularly of its types and uses. The result of the analysis shows that in general, deontic modality indicates obligation and permission, while epistemic modality expresses possibility and prediction. However, the difference between deontic and epistemic modality is not a clear cut, since one single modal verb can express both types, and one single proposition can be expressed by more than one modal verb.

Keywords: modal verb, deontic modality, epistemic modality

ABSTRAK

Modalitas selalu menarik untuk dibahas. Memahaminya merupakan hal yang sangat penting baik bagi pengajar bahasa maupun siswa yang belajar bahasa. Makalah ini membahas tentang konsep modalitas, jenis-jenisnya dan bagaimana penggunaannya. Tujuan dari penulisan makalah ini adalah untuk mengetahui perbedaan modalitas deontik dan epistemik, yang ditunjukkan oleh kata kerja modalnya. Selain itu, pembaca akan lebih memahami modalitas, terutama jenis-jenisnya dan penggunaannya yang sering kali membingungkan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa modalitas deontik mengindikasikan kewajiban dan izin, sementara modalitas epistemik mengekspresikan kemungkinan dan perkiraan. Meskipun demikian, kedua macam modalitas ini tidak dapat dibedakan dengan langsung begitu saja karena sebuah kata kerja modal dapat mengekspresikan kedua jenis modalitas, dan sebuah proposisi dapat diekspresikan oleh lebih dari satu kata kerja modal.

Kata kunci: kata kerja modal, modalitas deontik, modalitas epistemik

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the notion of modality is a necessity for language teachers, especially to those who deal with grammar and semantics subjects. Whether or not they sufficiently understand the notion will have an effect on their teaching, which in turn may cause confusion to the language learners when they do not use it properly. What is more, one modal verb can be used to convey some different expressions, and one single expression may use several modal verbs.

Saeed (2003: 135) argues that modality is a cover term for devices which allow speakers to express varying degrees of commitment to, or belief in, a proposition. He also claims that modality is one important semantic category which operates at the sentence level. Yet, Cruse (2004: 298) states, "Modal expressions are those which signal a particular attitude on the part of the speaker to the proposition expressed or the situation described (typically in a statement)." In other words, modality is a speaker's attitude toward the content of the speak event or utterance. It is usually expressed in modal verbs such as *must, have to, should, can, may* and *will*. Correspondingly, Kreidler (1998: 301) notes that modality is the expression of necessity, possibility and probability, and is frequently expressed through modal verbs. According to him, the modal verbs include:

> *can, could, may, might, will, would, must, should,*
> *ought, need, have to, have got to*

Take a look at these examples:
(1) *You must study hard if you want to pass the test.*
(2) *Her face looks so pale. She might be sick.*

From these examples, the problem that comes up is:

- What is the difference between example (1) and that of example (2)?

Sentence (1) talks about an obligation of 'what must be done by *you*'. In other words, it means that: *You are obliged to study hard if you want to pass the test*. Sentence (2) talks about probability of 'what might be happened'. It means that: *Because her face looks so pale, it is probable that she is sick*. It can be said that the obligation in (1) is focused on the subject *you*, while the probability in (2) is not focused on the subject *she* but is contained on the whole proposition. (Kreidler, 1998: 239-40)

Therefore, this paper tries to elaborate the difference between the modal verbs that are used in obligation and probability.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data are taken from several uses of modality that are written in several textbooks. Then they are analyzed based on the theory of deontic and epistemic modality in order to find the difference of use between the modal verbs that occur in both types of modality.

DISCUSSION

The first important thing to discuss is the types of modality proposed by several linguists.

Types of Modality

Semanticists seem to divide the types of modality differently. However, Cruse (2004), Saeed (2003), Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), and Kreidler (1998) are of the same opinion that modality is classified into two broad types*: deontic modality* and *epistemic modality*. The former deals with obligation and the latter is about probability.

Deontic Modality

According to Kreidler (1998: 241), *deontic modality* is the necessity of a person to do or not to do in a certain way. It shows the speaker's desire for the proposition expressed by the utterance. Let us take a look at examples (3) and (4).

(3) *You may go at 4 o'clock.*
(4) *All programs should take place on schedule.*

Sentence number (3) shows that the speaker has an authority or desire to allow the addressee to go at 4 o'clock. In (4) the speaker shows his attitude that it is necessary that all programs take place on schedule.

According to Saeed (2003: 136), deontic modals may convey two kinds of social knowledge, i.e. *obligation* and *permission*. *Obligation* is concerned with 'what a person must do', as in (5), whereas *permission* deals with 'someone's authority to permit somebody else to do something', as in (6).

(5) a. *I must phone him.*
     b. *I have to phone him.*
     c. *I need to phone him.*
     d. *I ought to phone him.*
     e. *I should phone him.*

(6) a. *You can have these postcards for free.*
     b. *You could have these postcards for free.*
     c. *You may have these postcards for free.*
     d. *You might have these postcards for free.*

Must, have to, need to, ought to, and *should* in (5) are all obligation. Conversely, *can, could, may*, and *might* in (6) are all permission. Yet, they differ in their uses and strength, which is discussed later.

Epistemic Modality

Kreidler (1998: 241) notes that *epistemic modality* deals with the possibility, probability or impossibility of a certain proposition.
Examples (7) and (8) talk about possibility or probability, whereas sentences (9) and (10) talk about impossibility or improbability.

(7) *She may be in her office.*
     (It is possible that she is in her office.)

(8)   *Ask father. He might know.*
       (It is possible that father knows.)
(9)   *You've only just had dinner. You can't be hungry already.*
       (It is impossible that you are hungry.)
(10)   *Is he serious? No, he can't be that serious.*
       (It is impossible that he is serious.)

From the elaboration above, the types of modality can be summarized in the following chart.
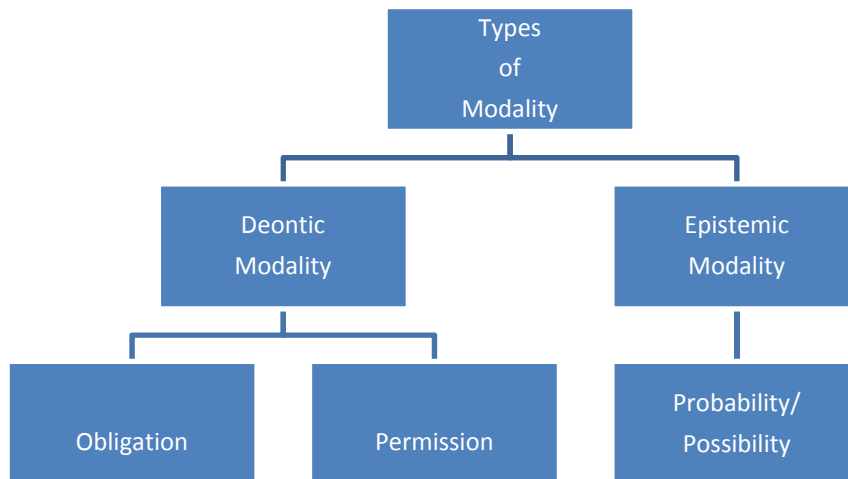

Figure 1 Types of Modality

However, the distinction between deontic and epistemic modality is not a clear cut since both of them can be marked by the same modal verbs, as shown in the following example (Saeed, 2003: 137):

(11)   *You can drive this motorbike.*

The meaning of (11) can be either: You have my permission to drive this motorbike, or, it is possible for you to drive this motorbike. From this example it can be seen that the former meaning expresses deontic modality, while the latter shows epistemic modality.

Furthermore, Saeed (2003: 137) also points out that an epistemic modal can be used by speakers to imply a deontic interpretation, as in the following example:

(12)   *You could have told me he was here.*

Instead of possibility, (12) is used to imply a missed obligation, which turns into disapproval.

Negation in Modality

Negativity may combine with modality. The occurrence of *not* with a modal verb may negate the modal verb itself or the content of the following proposition (Kreidler, 1998: 244, 247). Example (13) expresses the negativity in deontic modality and (14) shows the negativity in epistemic one.

(13) a. *You mustn't shout.*
       b. *You don't have to shout.*
       c. *You needn't shout. / You don't need to shout.*
       d. *You oughtn't to shout.*
       e. *You shouldn't shout.*

In (13a) the proposition implied is that '*not shouting* is your obligation'. In other words, the modal *must not* indicates prohibition, so the negativity is embedded to the proposition. In (13b), (13c), (13d) and (13e) negativity is attached to the modal verbs, meaning that 'it is not necessary to shout'. In this case, the speaker gives a choice to the addressee, i.e. 'you can shout, but it is not necessary' (Celce-Muria and Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 144).

(14) a. *Harry may not be at work now.*
       b. *Harry might not be at work now.*
       c. *Harry must not be at work now.*
       d. *Harry can't be at work now.*

(14a) and (14d) show different thing. The former expresses the possibility of Harry not being at work, and the latter talks about the impossibility of Harry being at work. *Not* in (14a) applies to the proposition, while in (14d) *not* applies to the modal verb *can*.

Sentence (14b) is similar to (14a). They only differ in their strength. The possibility in (14b) is less forceful as compared to that in (14a). And (14c) shows high probability that Harry is not at work.

Degrees of Strength of Modal Verbs

With regard to epistemic modality, it is necessary to distinguish probability from possibility. In general, it can be said that possibility is already included in probability. In other words, probability presupposes possibility (Kreidler, 1998: 242). Probability occurs when there is a strong evidence that establishes the assumption. It can be expressed in various degrees of adjectives. Degrees of probability can be shown in the following scale:

Table 1 Degrees of Probability

POSSIBLE					IMPOSSIBLE
apparently true	highly probable	fairly probable	slightly probable	Improbable	

Source: Kreidler (1998: 242)

Degrees of probability can also be represented in modal verbs as in the followings (Celce-Muria and Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 143):

Degree of probability

(15) a. *It will rain tomorrow.*   High
       b. *It should rain tomorrow.*   ⇑
       c. *It may rain tomorrow.*   ⇓
       d. *It could/might rain tomorrow.*   Low

The meaning of each of those sentences is: in (15a) it is certain that it will rain tomorrow; in (15b) it is probable/likely that it will rain tomorrow; in (15c) it is quite possible that it will rain tomorrow; and in (15d) it is possible that it will rain tomorrow.

With regard to deontic modality, degrees of strength also exist in the functions, i.e. expressing permission and obligation. Examples (16a) to (16d) indicate the ranking in permission, whereas (17a) to (17e) show the ranking in obligation.

(16) a. *You can have these postcards for free.*
      b. *You could have these postcards for free.*
      c. *You may have these postcards for free.*
      d. *You might have these postcards for free.*

Sentences (16a) to (16d) show a decreasing ranking in modal force. Sentence (16a) indicates the strongest version of permission and (16d) is the weakest and politest version of such ranking.

(17) a. *I must phone him.*
      b. *I have to phone him.*
      c. *I need to phone him.*
      d. *I ought to phone him.*
      e. *I should phone him.*

According to Kreidler (1998: 241) *must* is the most powerful obligation and is usually used in formal way. *Have to* and *have got to* are not as strong as *must*, i.e. they are weaker than *must*, and used in a colloquial way. *Need to* is stronger than *ought* but a little bit weaker than *have to*. *Should* is the weakest form of such ranking.

Cruse (2004: 299-300) says rather differently, i.e. he labels the degrees of strength of modal verbs as 'values of modals'. He mentions what Halliday has proposed, i.e. there are three strengths or levels of modality: high, median, and low. According to him, modal verbs are classified as follows:

High-value modals: *must, ought to, need, have to, is to*
Median-value modals: *will, would, shall, should*
Low-value modals: *may, might, can, could*

The Uses and Meanings of Modal Verbs

The uses of deontic and epistemic modality can be shown in the following table.

Table 2 The Uses and Meanings of Modal verbs

Modal Verbs	Meanings	Deontic	Epistemic
Can/Could	Permission	*You can leave now.* *Could I go now please?*	
	Possibility		*Can it be sent?*
	Ability	*I can speak French.*	
May/Might	Permission	*You may smoke.* *Might we have another one?*	
	Possibility		*He may be at home.* *It might get too hot.*
Will/Would	Volition	*I will answer you in a minute.*	
	prediction		*That will be the doctor.* *Who would have guessed he was so young?*
Shall/Should	Obligation	*You should write more legibly.*	
	regulative	*The committee should consider the hearings.*	
	volition	*We shall promise you to bring your father back home.*	
	Probability		*I shall be leaving soon.*
	Prediction		*He should be very unhappy on the continent.*
Must	Obligation	*You must be patient.*	
	Certainty		*It must be your sister on the phone.*

Summarized from Greenbaum (1996: 260-4)

As shown in the table, it says that a modal verb may be used for several functions. For example *can*, in addition to its use for expressing permission, *can* is also used to express possibility and ability. In this case, permission and possibility *can* is interchangeable with *may*. Examples:

(18) *You can/may smoke if you like.*   (permission/deontic reading)
(19) *The rumor can/may be true.*   (possibility/epistemic reading)

In addition to the uses shown in table 2, there is a single proposition expressing both deontic and epistemic modality. Take a look at these examples:

(20) *We should arrive on time.*
      Deontic reading: We are under obligation to arrive on time.
      Epistemic reading: It is likely/probable that we'll arrive on time.

(21) *She must be good to get into Yale University.*
      Deontic reading: It is required that she be good in order to enter Yale university.
      Epistemic reading: It is evident that she is good since she is at Yale University.

To distinguish whether a proposition expresses deontic or epistemic modality, the context in which the proposition exists must be considered.

CONCLUSION

In general, deontic modality indicates obligation and permission, while epistemic modality expresses possibility and prediction. However, the uses are quite complicated since the distinction between deontic and epistemic modality is not a clear cut. One single modal verb can express both types, and one single proposition can be expressed by more than one modal verb. Therefore, it is clear that modality, its types and uses are crucial to learn. It is necessary for both language teachers and language learners to learn more about modality, and understanding the notion is crucial for language teachers.

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