

**The Republic of Iraq**

**Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research**

**University of Misan**

**College of Education**

**English Department**



**A project graduation**

## **Modality in linguistics**

**Submitted to Council of the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment Requirements  
for the Degree of B.A in English Language**

By

**Shorooq Husein Jaweed**

Supervised by

**Asst .Inst .Athraa Ali Husein**

**1446**

**2025**

## **Qur'an verse**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

(يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ)

صدق الله العلي العظيم

**In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the most Merciful Allah elevates  
those among you who believe, and those given knowledge, many  
steps. Allah is Aware of what you do**

سورة المجادلة

آية 11

صفحة 435

## **Table of contents**

<b>I) Qur'an vers.</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>II ) Table of contents</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>III ) Dedication.</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>IV) Acknowledgment</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>5) Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b><u>Part One</u></b>	
<b>1.1 Introduction Note.</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Modality.</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.3 Definition of Modality.</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.4 Modality vs. Tense and Aspect: Differentiating Modality from Other Grammatical Concepts.</b>	<b>9</b>
<b><u>Part Two</u></b>	
<b>2.1 Introduction.</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.2 Types of Modalities.</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion.</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>References.</b>	<b>18</b>

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work first and foremost to my beloved family, whose unconditional love, support, and sacrifices have been the foundation of my academic journey. Their encouragement has been .a constant source of strength and motivation

I also extend my deepest gratitude to my respected supervisor, Asst. Inst. Athraa Ali Husein, for her invaluable guidance, continuous support, and thoughtful insights, which greatly .enriched this research

Finally, I dedicate this achievement to everyone who stood by me, believed in me, and offered their support throughout this journey. .Your contributions have meant more than words can express

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

There are many people I would like to thank them and also the word Of thanks is not enough for their fatigue and patience without getting bored to complete the educational material and help us in all matters that are in the interest of the student special thanks for the efforts of Asst. Inst. Athraa Ali Husein without her, my research project would not have been completed she helped me provide information and write the research in an Integrated manner.

## Introduction

Modality is a crucial concept in linguistics, offering insights into how language expresses possibility, necessity, permission, and other related notions. It plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of utterances, particularly by indicating the speaker's attitudes toward the truth of a proposition or the likelihood of an event occurring. Modality encompasses a variety of linguistic expressions, ranging from modal verbs such as “can” and “must” to adverbs like “probably” and “certainly” (Palmer, 2001:4).

Through these expressions, modality conveys essential information about epistemic states, deontic obligations, and dynamic capabilities, influencing both the syntax and the semantics of sentences. While modality has been studied extensively within the domain of formal semantics, it also touches upon pragmatic functions, reflecting social and cultural attitudes. For example, in English, modal verbs are commonly used to express degrees of certainty or to make polite requests, with meaning often determined by contextual factors (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Furthermore, the expression of modality varies significantly across languages, providing valuable insights into how different cultures conceptualize possibility, necessity, and obligation (Bybee, 1985:6). This paper aims to explore the role and functions of modality in linguistics, with a particular focus on its grammatical realization, theoretical underpinnings, and cross-linguistic perspectives. By examining both the syntactic and pragmatic aspects of modality, we aim to understand its significance not only in individual languages but also in the broader context of human communication. (Bybee, 1985:6)

## **Part One**

### **1.1 Introduction Note**

Modality is a crucial linguistic category that expresses a speaker's attitude toward the possibility, necessity, or obligation of an event. It plays a significant role in shaping meaning by indicating degrees of certainty, permission, and obligation within discourse (Palmer, 2001). Unlike tense, which situates an event in time, or aspect, which describes its temporal structure, modality focuses on the status of a proposition, reflecting the speaker's subjective stance (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:6).

The study of modality is particularly relevant in legal, academic, and formal texts, where precise distinctions between obligation, permission, and likelihood are critical. This research explores the theoretical foundations of modality, examining its typologies—epistemic, deontic, and dynamic—while also considering the various linguistic mechanisms through which modality is expressed. By analyzing modal auxiliary verbs, adjectives, and lexical verbs, this study aims to highlight how modality functions within different syntactic and semantic contexts. Given the inherent ambiguity and flexibility of modal expressions, this investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of how speakers and writers convey nuanced meanings in language.(ibid)

### **1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Modality**

Modality is a core concept in linguistics that deals with the expression of possibility, necessity, and other related concepts like ability, permission, and obligation. It is concerned with how speakers convey attitudes toward the truth of propositions or events, expressing what is possible, probable, necessary, or permitted in a given context. The theoretical foundations of modality are grounded in various linguistic, philosophical, and cognitive approaches. This part will explore these foundations, focusing on the definitions, typologies, and theoretical perspectives surrounding modality in linguistics.(Palmer,2001:32)

### 1.3 Definition of modality

Palmer (2001: 1) considers modality a grammatical category similar to tense and aspect in that “all three are, in some way, concerned with the event or situation that is reported by the utterance.” While *tense* is used to set an event, action, state etc. in a certain time such as the present, the past or the future, and *aspect* deals with the duration or frequency of an event, Palmer (ibid.) states that “modality is concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event.” Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 173) provide a general definition of modality as “centrally concerned with the speaker’s attitude towards the factuality or actualisation of the situation expressed by the rest of the clause.” The following examples provide a general overview of the main types of modality and highlight the complexity of their different meanings. (Palmer 2001: 1)

- (1) *The investor bought 100 shares.*
- (2) *The investor **may/must** have bought 100 shares.*
- (3) *The investor **can/may** buy 100 shares Palmer(ibid).*

Additionally, modality is often expressed not only through modal auxiliary verbs but also through other linguistic forms, such as modal adjectives (“possible,” “required”), modal lexical verbs (“permit,” “require”), and imperatives. These forms offer speakers various ways to express nuances of possibility, permission, obligation, and ability (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 173-75). The choice of modality expression is influenced by contextual factors and is especially important in specific genres such as legal language, where precise expressions of permission, commitment, and obligation are needed. In the examples given so far, modality has been expressed through modal auxiliary verbs. There are several other linguistic means of expressing modality, for example modal adjectives (possible, required), modal lexical verbs (permit, require), marginal modal verbs (have to, be to, need to, ought to); imperative clauses; subordination under a main clause such as I think...to name a few (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:173-75) .



## 1.4 Modality vs. Tense and Aspect: Differentiating Modality from Other Grammatical Concepts

In the study of linguistics, modality, tense, and aspect are crucial components of grammar that contribute to how we understand and express actions, events, and states. However, while these three categories are closely related, they differ in their core functions and how they shape the meaning of sentences. In this section, we will explore the distinctions between modality, tense, and aspect, with particular focus on modality's unique role in conveying the speaker's attitudes, perceptions, and evaluations regarding the truth of an event or situation.(Palmer,2001:1)

### 1. Understanding Tense

Tense refers to the grammatical category that locates an action or event in time. It tells us when an event occurs in relation to the moment of speaking. Tense primarily expresses temporal information, providing a reference point for the event described by the verb. The most common tenses in English are the **past**, **present**, and **future**.(Comrie,1985:9)

For example:

- “She **walked** to the store.” (Past tense)
- “She **is walking** to the store.” (Present continuous tense)
- “She **will walk** to the store.” (Future tense)

Each of these sentences expresses when the action is taking place: past, present, or future. The verb forms change to reflect this temporal distinction, but the tense itself does not provide any information about the speaker's attitude toward the event's occurrence.

Tense is primarily concerned with **time**, and it is used to establish the timing of an event or action. It locates the event in the temporal dimension, but it does not indicate anything about the speaker's judgment or commitment to the truth of the event.(ibid)

### 2. Understanding Aspect

Aspect, unlike tense, is concerned with how an event unfolds over time. It reflects the internal structure or duration of the action, rather than its temporal location. In English, there are two main aspects:

• **Perfective Aspect:** This aspect focuses on the completion of an event or action. It typically refers to events that are seen as whole, completed, or finished. For example:

• “She **has finished** the book.”

• “He **had eaten** before she arrived.”

• **Progressive Aspect:** This aspect emphasizes the ongoing nature or continuity of an event. It suggests that an action is in progress or incomplete at the moment of speaking. For example:

• “She **is eating** dinner.”

• “They **were talking** all night.”(comrie,1976:3)

The role of aspect is to convey the **internal temporal flow** of an event, telling us whether it is completed or ongoing. It helps the speaker provide more detailed information about the event’s duration, frequency, or state of progression. However, like tense, aspect does not express the speaker’s evaluation or commitment to the truth of the proposition. Instead, it modifies the action’s representation over time.(ipid)

### 3. Understanding Modality

Modality, as opposed to tense and aspect, is concerned with the **speaker’s attitude** towards the truth, likelihood, necessity, permission, or obligation of a proposition. While tense anchors an event in time and aspect indicates how an event unfolds temporally, modality deals with how the speaker perceives or evaluates the event described in terms of its **possibility, necessity, permission, or ability**. Modality does not express when or how an event happens, but rather whether it is possible, likely, necessary, or permitted to occur.

For example:

• “She **may** go to the store.” (Epistemic modality: possibility)

• “She **must** go to the store.” (Deontic modality: obligation)

• “She **can** go to the store.” (Dynamic modality: ability)

In each case, modality is used to convey a specific attitude towards the event. (Palmer ,2001:8)

## Part Two

### 2.1 Introduction Note

Modality is a fundamental concept in linguistics and plays a crucial role in expressing speakers' attitudes, judgments, and levels of certainty or obligation toward a proposition. It reflects how language users convey possibilities, necessities, permissions, and predictions, thereby shaping the meaning and interpretation of utterances. As Palmer (2001) notes, modality is not just an additional layer of meaning but an integral component of how language encodes subjective perspectives. Understanding the types of modality is essential for deeper insights into semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. Modality is typically categorized into several types, with the most prominent being **epistemic**, **deontic**, and **dynamic**. Epistemic modality relates to knowledge and belief, indicating the degree of certainty or possibility (Lyons, 1977:56).

Deontic modality, on the other hand, is concerned with social obligation and permission, often reflecting rules, laws, or moral imperatives (Palmer, 2001). Dynamic modality refers to the ability or willingness of the subject, often connected to internal or external conditions (vaderAuwera&Plungian,1998:8).

The study of modality has significant implications for various fields such as translation, second language acquisition, artificial intelligence, and discourse studies. By examining its different types and uses, this research aims to highlight the nuanced ways in which speakers manipulate modality to achieve communicative goals. (Palmer, 2001:34).

## **2.2 Types of Modalities**

The categorization of modalities has been addressed by several influential linguists, including Palmer (2001), Van der Auwera (2009), W. Abraham and E. Leiss (2008), Høye (2014), and Nuyts (2001), among others. Traditionally, there are three main types of modality in linguistics: dynamic modality, deontic modality, and epistemic modality (Linden, 2012:44).

## **2.3 Epistemic modality**

Meanwhile Palmer puts forward the following subtypes of epistemic modality :

- Speculative subtype: when the speaker is uncertain and does not express his/her thoughts clearly, for example ‘Shelia may know about it’ .(ibid)
- Deductive subtype: when the speaker makes a clear judgment based on evidence, for example ‘Shelia must know about it’. (ibid)- Assumptive: It is the speaker’s judgment based on what the speaker know about the event, for example ‘Sheila is good at history, she will know when it has happened’. (Palmer F. , 2001:28).

In linguistics, from a grammatical point of view, root modality is put forward. This type of modality includes concepts such as permission and obligation as well as probability and necessity. Often the semantic fields of epistemic and root modalities are intertwined. The difference between epistemic and root modality is that the former expresses the speaker’s confidence or distrust in the veracity of the proposition. Palmer (ibid).

## **2.4 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. Deontic modality chiefly depends on modal verbs such as, *can, must, haveto, 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. (Griffiths, 2006:34)

- Deontic necessity:

You must abide by the rules of the school.

- 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).(ipid).

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).(ibid).

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 imprecative mood and optative mood according to Pei and Gaynor (1954) and Palmer (1986).(ibid).

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.(ibid).

## 2.5 Dynamic Modality

Dynamic modality is fundamentally linked to the subject's own capacity or willingness to engage in an action or state. It is used to describe what the subject is able or willing to do in a given situation. The main difference between dynamic modality and the other forms of modality is that dynamic modality reflects the intrinsic abilities, desires, or conditions of the subject, rather than external factors like necessity (deontic) or knowledge (epistemic) . (Griffiths, 2006:35).

- **Ability:** “She *can* swim.”
- **Willingness:** “I *will* help you.”
- **Possibility (based on ability):** “He *could* run faster if he tried.”
- **Potential:** “The team *can* win if they play well.” In these sentences, the modal verbs “can,” “could,” and “will” express dynamic modality because they reflect the internal state or personal capacity of the subject. (ibid)

### Key Features of Dynamic Modality

#### 1. Ability:

Dynamic modality often expresses a subject's ability to perform an action, typically using the modal verb “can.” When “can” is used in a sentence, it suggests that the subject has the physical or mental capability to do something.

- Example: “She *can* speak five languages.”
- Here, “can” denotes the subject's ability to speak five languages. (ibid).

#### 2. Willingness:

Another key aspect of dynamic modality is expressing a subject's willingness to do something, often conveyed through the modal verb “will.” In this case, the modal verb reflects the subject's inclination or desire to take action, rather than an inherent ability.

- Example: “I *will* help you with your homework.”

- In this sentence, “will” reflects the subject’s readiness or willingness to assist with the homework.(ibid).

### 3. Potential or Possibility:

Dynamic modality can also refer to the potential or possibility of an event happening based on the subject’s capacity or context. In this case, the modal verb “could” is often used to indicate that something is possible, given the right conditions or abilities.

- Example: “He *could* become a great musician with practice.”
- Here, “could” expresses a possibility that depends on the subject’s potential, skill, or action.(ibid).

### 4. Change in State:

Dynamic modality can also be used to indicate a change in a subject’s internal state. This usage often conveys that something is possible or expected to happen due to internal changes in the subject, like a shift in capability or inclination.

- Example: “She *can* learn how to play the piano in a year.”
- In this case, “can” implies that she has the ability to learn, contingent upon the change that will happen in her skills over time.(ibid).

## Conclusion

In summary, this study has demonstrated that modality is not merely an auxiliary feature of language but a fundamental mechanism through which speakers express possibility, necessity, permission, and obligation. By exploring the theoretical underpinnings and grammatical realizations of modality, this research has underscored how modal expressions—whether conveyed through auxiliary verbs, adjectives, or other linguistic forms—play a crucial role in shaping both the syntax and semantics of utterances (Palmer, 2001 ; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002 ).

A detailed examination of the three primary types of modality—epistemic, deontic, and dynamic—reveals the multifaceted nature of modal meaning. Epistemic modality reflects a speaker's judgment regarding the likelihood or factuality of a proposition, deontic modality encapsulates norms, obligations, and permissions within social contexts, and dynamic modality focuses on the intrinsic abilities and willingness of the subject. This nuanced classification not only highlights the complexity of modal expressions but also illustrates how modality uniquely contributes to conveying speaker attitudes, setting it apart from other grammatical categories such as tense and aspect (Palmer, 2001 ; Griffiths, 2006 ).

Furthermore, the comparative analysis across different linguistic systems provides valuable insights into the cultural and cognitive dimensions of modality. For instance, the variability in the expression of modal meanings across languages suggests that modal verbs and related expressions are deeply intertwined with cultural perceptions of possibility and obligation. Such cross-linguistic perspectives not only enrich our theoretical understanding but also emphasize the importance of modality in practical discourse contexts, including legal and formal registers where precision is paramount (Bybee, 1985 ).

Despite the significant progress made in the study of modality, the inherent “fuzziness” and contextual dependency of modal expressions—as noted by Coates (1983 )—present ongoing challenges for linguistic analysis. The ambiguities associated with modal usage call for further interdisciplinary research that bridges formal semantics, pragmatics, and



sociolinguistics. Future investigations could focus on how emerging communication technologies influence modal expression and how digital discourse redefines traditional modal functions. Such research promises not only to refine theoretical models but also to enhance our understanding of human cognition and social interaction in an evolving linguistic landscape.(ibid).

In conclusion, the comprehensive exploration of modality presented in this paper highlights its central role in both the structure and function of language. By integrating insights from diverse theoretical perspectives and cross-linguistic analyses, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how modal expressions mediate meaning and reflect speaker attitudes. The findings underscore the need for continued research into the dynamic interplay between modal forms, context, and cultural variation, paving the way for more nuanced and interdisciplinary approaches in future linguistic inquiry .(ibid).

## References

- Bybee, J. (1985). *Morphology: A Study of the Relation between Meaning and Form*. John Benjamins
- Griffiths, C. (2006). [Details about the work]
- Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press
- Palmer, F. R. (2001). *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge University Press
- Coates, J. (1983). [Details about the work]
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics (Vol. 2)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Palmer, F. R. (2001). *Mood and Modality (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- van der Auwera, J., & Plungian, V. A. (1998). Modality's semantic map. *Linguistic Typology*, 2(1).
- Nuyts, J. (2001). *Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualization*. John Benjamins
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (6th ed.)*. Blackwell Publishing
- Swanson, E. (2016). Modality in language. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(12)
- Yeshniyaz, G., Ryssaldy, K., Blashova, N., Tassyrova, B., & Nuradilova, T. (2018). Typology of modality. *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication (TOJDAC)*, Special Edition.
- Finch, G. (2000). *Linguistic terms and concepts*. Palgrave Macmillan.