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## **Book Review: Modality in Contemporary English**

Zouhair Maalej

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Facchinetti, R., Krug, M., & Palmer, F. (Eds.). (2003). *Modality in Contemporary English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

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The reader of the collection *Modality in Contemporary English (MCE)* soon realizes that Frank Palmer's introductory article is tone-setting for the collection. He provides a general terminological framework for discussing modality, clarifying the distinction between *mood*, *modality*, and *modal system*, and points to the syntactic and semantic difficulties in analyzing modality. For Palmer, *mood* denotes a binary system, corresponding to the contrast between indicative and subjunctive in classical European languages, for which he prefers the terms *realis* and *irrealis*, respectively (2). In contrast, *modal systems*, as typified by English, occur as a set of forms generally demarcating modality that are opposed to a nonmodal (that is, unmarked) *realis* form. Thus, *modality* names a grammatical category, and there are two subcategories of modality, *mood* and *modal system* (2). Furthermore, mood and modal systems are "to a large extent" mutually exclusive, as exemplified by Modern English, where "the subjunctive mood has died out and the modal system has developed" (3). On the semantic pole, and following Lunn (1995, 430), Palmer identifies the essential feature of modality as the speaker's "assertion" versus "nonassertion" of the marked proposition (5). Cross-linguistically, modality demonstrates four types; to the traditional division found in the English modal system of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities, Palmer adds a fourth, evidential modality, and reshuffles them into two groups: "propositional modality" (epistemic and evidential), which is centrally concerned with the status of the proposition, and "event modality" (deontic and dynamic), which is centrally concerned with whether the event described is controlled by circumstances external to the subject of the sentence (deontic) or by circumstances internal to the subject, as with dynamic modality (7). Of the two groups, propositional modality is more modal because it is concerned with the reasons for a proposition's nonassertion (8).

The first part of *MCE* on the semantics and pragmatics of core modals is represented by four chapters, three of which fall into what seem to me problems of pragmatic terminology. Paul Larreya's main thesis is that the English past-tense morpheme *-ed* captures a "presupposed unreality" or *irrealis* in the present, called "linguistic" or syntactic "presupposition raising." However, the conception of presupposition he uses is not dissimilar from "lexical presupposition" (Green 1989, 74), where knowledge is packaged in or presupposed as part of the semantics of the lexical item as in *assassinate*, *criticize*, *reign*, *govern*, and so on. Larreya argues that in

“I wish I knew the answer,” it is the *-ed* of *knew* that adds irrealis to the semantic makeup of the finite subordinate clause (40). However, the counterfactuality is triggered by *wish*, which, in Fauconnier’s (1994, 109) terminology, introduces the counterfactual mental space, creating a “forced incompatibility between spaces.”

Gregory Ward, Betty Birner, and Jeffrey Kaplan’s problem, on the other hand, is with the sister of presupposition. They offer a pragmatic account, based on conventional implicature, of epistemic *would* in English, a construction exemplified by the following exchange:

- (1) A: Who’s the British woman over there?  
B: That would be J. K. Rowling.

They argue that the construction “conventionally implicates that the speaker believes she or he has conclusive objective (that is, empirical or logical) evidence for the truth of the proposition encoded in the utterance” (75). As far as knowledge of conventional implicature in the Gricean perspective goes, for an implicature to be conventional, it has to satisfy, among others, the criterion that it is “simply attached by convention to particular lexical items or expressions” (Levinson 1983, 127). Some of the surface items that implicate conventionally include *and*, *but*, *therefore*, *yet*, and *even*, and they trigger meanings as in *She was fifty-five but beautiful*, which conventionally implicates that this is rather contrary to expectations in the speaker’s worldview. The examples discussed by Ward, Birner, and Kaplan include none of this, which suggests that what they are discussing are presuppositions that are part of the conventional meaning of *would*.

Richard Matthews’s difficulty is with pragmatic context. Apart from the new terminology offered in connection with modality (as if there is not already enough proliferation of that in the literature) and its interaction with the interrogative, he only suggests in his conclusion the relevance of pragmatic factors, along with conventionality, to the disambiguation of modals. Although Matthews’s classes might be useful for the grammar and pragmatics of modality, they do not emanate from naturally occurring contextualized data, thus generating somewhat bizarre English sentences such as “She must be being nice,” “She must have been being nice,” “She can be being nice,” “She could be being nice,” and so on. We are also told nothing about the origin of Matthews’s data and its methodology of collection, though he mentions several times that he “tested” the modals under discussion.

Of the four chapters in this part, Stéphane Gresset’s contribution is the more pragmatically straightforward in accumulating evidence for what he advances from environing discourse. Starting from the formal premise that a difference in form occasions a difference in meaning, Gresset argues against the equivalence of epistemic *might* and *could*; he finds that *could* is heavily backed by evidence from the surface of discourse, whereas *might* is more speculative (86), although in the expression of possibility, both can expect to be falsified.

The second part of *MCE* gives attention to emerging modals. Bringing cross-linguistic evidence to bear on English, Philippe Bourdin addresses the constructions *go un-V-en* ("X goes undetected," found frequently in moralizing discourse) and *go V-ing* ("don't go believing," found in dialogues). He argues that counternormativity/counterexpectation is governing the *go un-V-en* and animacy and agency of the *go V-ing*, although both constructions are evaluative modality. Focusing on more frequent modals than Bourdin's, Keith Mitchell wonders why, although they bear all the characteristics of full modals, *had better* and *might as well* are marginalized as advice-giving speech acts having deontic and epistemic dimensions. As a less salient modal in the literature, *want to/wanna* is defended by Heidi Verplaetse, who uses a Hallidayian study of the verb processes following it but only manages to show indirectly that *want to/wanna* has a modal meaning because it originates in volition. Although *want to/wanna* does have a speaker-volitional commitment and hearer-deontic involvement, it does not satisfy any of the NICE formal features common to all core modals: it needs *do*-support to be negated, it does not undergo subject-auxiliary inversion in interrogatives, it cannot serve alone in so-called "coda" constructions like interrogative tags, and it does not allow the expression of emphatic positive polarity without *do*-support (Huddleston 1976, 333). Finally, adopting a Langackerian approach, Carita Paradis studies *really* as a case of epistemic commitment.

The third part of *MCE* gives attention to stylistic variation and change in modals. It is inaugurated by Geoffrey Leech, who argues for a decline in the frequency of occurrence of core modals in speech and writing, not due to core modals being supplanted by semi-modals like *have to* (although the latter show a sharp increase in occurrence in spoken discourse), but due to a diachronic decline in some senses of these modals across the epistemic and deontic divide. While Leech's survey crosses the boundaries of dialects of English, Nicholas Smith studies change in British English (BrE) and confirms the decline of *must* as against a rise of *have to* in both spoken and written varieties. Smith attributes the decline of core modals and rise of semi-modals to aspects of style (such as increased informality), which are mainly due to the "democratization of discourse" (253). Diachronic change between *shall* and *will* is studied by Maurizio Gotti, who confirms the steady substitution of *shall* by *will* and the slide of both from deontic to epistemic and dynamic uses. Studying a corpus of BrE for *may*, Roberta Facchinetti confirms more epistemic than deontic uses (except in instructional writing) and more frequency for *may* in the written than in the spoken form. *May*, accordingly, in scientific discourse, functions sociopragmatically like a hedge in the presentation of facts as opinions.

The final part of the book deals with modality and its relation to sociolinguistic variation and syntactic models. The sociolinguistic dimension is addressed by Jennifer Coates in dealing with epistemic modality in women's speech, arguing that women use epistemic modality to hedge their speech to protect their own face and others' because of topic sensitivity, self-disclosure, and preference for open and collaborative

discussion (346). Stephen J. Nagle discusses the double modal within the Chomskyan paradigm, arguing for the construction's "high degree of semantic and syntactic regularity" in the southern United States (368). To conclude the collection, Graeme Trousdale uses sociolinguistic variation in modals collected from Tyneside English to evidence both formalist and variationist accounts of morpho-syntactic structure.

One critical question about *MCE*'s effectiveness as a book is the degree of coherence among the different chapters and among the themes around which it is built. The collection deals with two linguistic levels (semantics and pragmatics) and includes two parts on the stylistics and sociolinguistics of modality, which are two subdisciplines of linguistics. Apart from that, the collection also offers two views of modality in terms of core and emerging modals. Although all the preceding approaches are needed and useful, they do not make the collection as homogeneous as one would wish it to be. Moreover, including within the same part Coates's sociolinguistic treatment of epistemic modality and Nagle's syntax of double modals is not a felicitous marriage. In terms of the mix that the chapters offer, especially if compared to other collections on modality such as Barbiers, Beukema, and van der Wurff (2002), which is coherent by focusing mostly on the syntax of modality (although syntax alone cannot render account of a complex sociopragmatic phenomenon such a modality), the collection under review will strike the reader as being somewhat patchy and contrived. The collection would have been more coherent if it had been structured into two parts: Approaches to Modality (along the syntactic, morpho-syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic axes) and Changes in Modal Meanings and Occurrence (which suggest stylistic, sociological, sociolinguistic explanations).

Another more important kind of coherence that is not seriously addressed in *MCE* is that among the various classes of modals. As they stand in this collection, modalities constitute a set of unrelated homonyms (or monosemes) emerging from nowhere, an approach that poses a deep theoretical and methodological problem. Apart from Gresset, who considers them as coextensive, and Matthews, who said that he cannot side with monosemists in the dichotomy of epistemic versus root modality, almost all the other contributions simply do not provide a coherent framework within which the various epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and other classes can be accommodated. In particular, there seems to be a tacit, unanimous unresponsiveness to a significant body of literature in the cognitive paradigm that attempts precisely this unification of modals, with root senses as embodied through the image schema of FORCE (Talmy 1988), which is then projected metaphorically from the physical to the sociophysical and the epistemic domains (Johnson 1987; Sweetser 1990; Pelyvas 2000; Maalej 2002).

An interesting point raised in the collection, however, is the decline of traditional modals (*must*) and the rise of semi-modals (*have to*) through a thirty-year period. Apart from the possible influence of American English on other dialects, the explanation offered is the fact that modality seems to be conversant in this trend with societal changes having to do with equal opportunity, rejection of power relations and

hierarchy, and overall (at least in theory) democratization of society, all of which have an impact on discourse as a social phenomenon.

In sum, the collection may be seen as offering the reader, in spite of some of the negative points, a nice exposure to various facets of English modals across dialects, times, and linguistic levels. It can constitute a good read for advanced students of modality and specialists owing to the reliability of some of the conclusions drawn from corpus studies.

Zouhair Maalej  
University of Manouba–Tunis

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