



Consultant advice **Scott Thornbury**

Modality

Here is a passage from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in which Mr Collins expresses his disbelief that his cousin Elizabeth Bennett won't accept his offer of marriage. Notice that there is a heavy concentration of modal verbs – in fact, seven of the nine *pure* modals occur in the passage. Can you spot them – and what are the two that don't appear? (Answers at the end)

'You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these: It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration, that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females.'

More interesting, perhaps, than simply counting the modals is the question: Why is there such a heavy concentration of modals in this extract? Put another way, why is the text *modalized* to this extent? To answer this question, we need to ask another one: What does modality *do*? That is to say, what *meanings* does modality express?

Let's have a look at some examples, both with and without modality. In the sentence

'Elizabeth rejects Mr Collins. In the end she marries Darcy.'

the writer is stating facts and, at the same time, committing to the truth of the statement. It would not be logical, for example, to say 'In the end she marries Darcy but I doubt it'.

If, on the other hand, we write:

'She may marry Darcy.'

or

'She could marry Darcy.'

we are qualifying our commitment to the statement by expressing our judgement as to its likelihood. It is quite possible to say 'She could marry Darcy *but I doubt it*'. All modal verbs can be used to express some degree of probability. Here, for example, are some examples from the Cambridge Spoken Corpus:

'They *might* not be open on a Saturday'

'Some translation *can* be thought of as purely linguistically based.'

'It *should* be quite quiet in September, shouldn't it?'

'An eighteen year old *couldn't* have made up all that stuff, I don't think.'

'But *will* it make money? *Will* it sell?'

'It *must* be easier for a woman photographer to go in and photograph a baby than it is for a man.'



As well as expressing our judgement as to the likelihood of a situation, modal verbs have a second function: we can use them to *intervene* in the situation, by expressing how we would like to influence events:

'She should marry Darcy.'

'She must marry Darcy.'

etc.

And

'She oughtn't to marry Collins.'

'She can't (possibly) marry Collins.'

etc.

All modal verbs express some kind of attempt to influence a situation, whether by saying what is desirable (*should*), obligatory (*must*), or permitted (*may, might, can* etc).

Here are some examples, again from the Cambridge Spoken Corpus:

'You *should* have told me, straight out, instead of bottling it up.'

'*May* I get your phone number and call you right back?'

'*Shall* we go in the other room? Might be warmer.'

'You really *must* read The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle.'

'Well members of the jury, *would* you go to your room please while we get this sorted out?'

To summarize, then, modality has two functions, and all modal verbs perform both functions:

1. to express doubt or certainty (the *knowledge* function)
2. to influence events (the *interpersonal* function).

We can see the two functions operating in this sentence pair (from Halliday 2005):

'You must be very careless'

'You must be very careful.'

So, why is the Jane Austen text so heavily modalized? The answer is partly because it deals with doubts and certainties (e.g. 'it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage *may* ever be made you') and it is also heavily coercive: Collins is trying to influence Elizabeth's decision (e.g. 'you *should* take it into further consideration ...').

We can expect to find modal verbs, therefore, in texts that are either speculative or persuasive – or a combination of both. Unsurprisingly, in academic research papers modal verbs figure more prominently in the more speculative discussion section of the paper than in the literature review or in the description of the research process, where language is more factual. Likewise, rules and regulations (such as what you can or cannot carry in your hand luggage on a plane) will have a high incidence of modal verbs. Furthermore, the distribution of modal verbs will vary across different registers. O'Keeffe et al (2007) show that *would* and *could* are much more common in fiction texts than in academic writing, and that *will* is much more frequent in newspaper texts, while *may* is preferred in academic texts. Findings such as these can help teachers who are looking for specific text types with which to contextualize the teaching of modal verbs.



However, modality can take other forms apart from modal verbs. For a start, there are the many different modal phrases, such as *have to*, *be able to*, *be allowed to*, etc, all of which express meanings the same as, or similar to, specific modal verbs.

Also very common are the ways in which modality is expressed through forms other than modal verbs. These include adverbs like *possibly*, *surely*, *hopefully*, *maybe*; adjectives, as in *it's unlikely that ...* or *the most probable outcome ...*; noun phrases, as in *a good chance*, *a strong possibility*; verbs such as *wonder*, *seem*, *reckon*, *think*, as well as a host of expressions that convey doubt, certainty, desirability, obligation and so on: *if you don't mind ...*, *if you ask me ...*, *God willing*, *chances are ...*, *do you fancy ...*? etc.

Here are some examples of lexical modality from the Jane Austen extract:

'My reasons for believing it ...'

'It does not appear to me ...'

'it is by no means certain ...'

'in all likelihood ...'

'highly desirable'

'highly in my favour'

'your wish.'

How frequent are these modal *chunks* compared to modal verbs? Both are very common, but, on the whole, instances of lexical modality – and especially the use of verbs and adverbs – outnumber instances of auxiliary modality, (McCarthy 1991). This is a finding that is not always reflected in teaching materials. In a study of four ESL coursebooks, Janel Holmes (1988) found that modal chunks were under-represented, and that the materials were biased towards modal verbs instead. Given their relative infrequency, and given the syntactic and semantic problems associated with modal verbs (e.g. their negation, their past forms and so on), shouldn't we be spending less time teaching modal verbs and more time teaching other, more lexical ways of expressing modal meanings?

References

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Holmes, J (1988) Doubt and certainty in ESL textbooks, *Applied Linguistics*, 9/1.

McCarthy, M (1991) *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Keeffe, A, McCarthy, M, and Carter, R (2007). *From Corpus to Classroom: Language Use and Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Answers to quiz

These are the modal verbs in the Jane Austen extract: *must*, *can*, *would*, *should*, *may*, *will*, *shall*. The two not represented are *might* and *could*.