THE PROBLEM OF MODALITY IN MODERN LINGUISTIC

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The study of modality in linguistics, that is, the pragmatic, semantic and syntactic processes involved in its realization, has become increasingly more popular in recent years, paralleling the advent of Cognitive Linguistics as well as constructionalist grammars. Interest in the subject of modality and its implications to language, however, is as ancient as the study of philosophy itself. Modality has enjoyed a long and heavily-debated history as a subject of logical discussion by classical philosophers such as Aristotle and Socrates.

By definition, modality is the denotation of mood, manner or mode. In linguistics, the study of modality concentrates on the means of expressing those qualities and the encoding process involved in that expression. This study can include core or semi-modals which express a range of modal shadings, from personal feelings or attitudes to judgements or assessments based on the speaker's knowledge of the world around her.

Though, there are any number of ways to divide and label the various semantic types of modality, the current study will use the "root" and "epistemic" distinctions preferred by Palmer in the field of both linguistic and logical modality.

Root modality can be divided into root possibility and root necessity, and is usually associated with the "deontic" sense, meaning that the modal verbs in question convey a sense of moral obligation, or the "dynamic" sense in which the modal verbs describe one's ability or opportunity. These two classifications are further divided by some , but for the current study, no further distinctions are necessary.

Modality is a useful tool in linguistic hedging and the deontic modals can range from a weak suggestion to a strict command depending upon the modal used, the subject matter discussed and the context in which it is uttered. Instead of asserting absolutely that such and such is the case, a speaker may – perhaps for reasons of uncertainty, tact or politeness – indicate that the truth of what one has to say is by no means assured; that it is based merely on conjecture or that it can be verified only as some point in the future.

Dynamic modality often subtly hedges a statement of belief, however, just as moral conviction is hedged in deontic modality. For example, sentences below:

a. *Hudson drives. b. Hudson can drive.*

The syntactic variation between the sentences in (a) is slight, but the semantic meaning behind the two is vastly different. While (a) asserts that Hudson does drive on a regular basis and in fact, may be currently driving, the dynamic modal verb can in (b) merely indicates that Hudson has the ability to drive, though he may never use this ability for the rest of his life. Sentence (b) serves to affirm the speaker's knowledge of Hudson's possession of the skill of driving, but does not make the further assertation that Hudson ever employs it, and so the speaker is able to commit to a slightly less ambitious statement. If Hudson never actually drives, (b) is still true.

Following the preferred classification scheme of both Portner and Perkins, the other main classification of modality is epistemic, in which a speaker may state a fact-based opinion. Epistemic modality, though related to root modality, is concerned with stating a fact or opinion based upon knowledge which the speaker may possess.

The two types of modality, root and epistemic, can be further delineated with regard to the orientation of the modality occurring in the individual utterance. Agent-oriented modality (AOM) refers to those instances of modality in which the agent performing the action of the clause is influenced in some way. This includes modality of obligation, necessity, ability and desire. Motivation in modality can initiate with the speaker as well. Speaker-oriented modality

(SOM) refers to clauses in which the speaker enables the condition, as in instances of directives, imperatives, prohibitions, optatives, admonitions and permissions.

The distinctions between AOM and SOM are relevant when considering illocutionary force, or the speaker's combination of grammatical elements, background social or cultural knowledge and awareness of the immediate conversational context. Illocutionary force is regarded as a domain of the pragmatic level of communication and can include communicative encoding of the purposes or aims of the speaker.

Some linguists suggest that the semantics involved in root modality can be defined in terms of force dynamics, as in the linguistic representation of the forces and barriers existent in the real or *irrealis* worlds.

Much of the theory involving modality revolves around the "strength" of the modal verbs in question. In these theories, modality serves mainly as a tool of quantification whether universal, in the case of necessity, or existential, in the case of possibility. This is perhaps due to the fact that the primary language of interest in the study of modality has remained within the confines of English. "Confines" seems an appropriate word when considering the fact that in some languages, a "weak" modal, usually associated with existential quantification, can actually embody universal quantification while encoding a limited scope of reference based on their context.

Also pertinent to the examination of modality's syntactic representations are the theories surrounding its argument structure. In generative syntax theories, it has been assumed that epistemic modals always take a single propositional argument and that root modals take two propositional arguments. It is true that some modals do display a raising predicate while others employ control predicates, but these distinctions cannot be neatly bound to the root/epistemic division lines. Popular, too, among generative grammarians is the idea that the different semantic categories of modal verbs are realized through different positions in the syntax, and reside at higher or lower positions in the tree structure of the generative grammar formal schemata: specifically, that epistemic modality always exists higher in the structure than root modality.

Normally, deontic and dynamic uses are grouped together under agent-oriented modalities (to be distinguished from speaker-oriented, i.e. epistemic, modalities or root modalities.

An interesting fact about the root and epistemic types of meaning is that they often tend to be expressed by a single class of modal expression in the languages of the world.

The modals constitute a good area for testing claims about the semantics-pragmatics interface: the root-epistemic alternation has long been at the centre of debates on how best to capture the contextual variability of lexical meaning, while ambiguity, polysemy and unitary semantic analyses have been proposed and defended for modality in English (and other languages). More generally, modality has always been an important area within linguistics, philosophy and psychology. In linguistics, modality epitomises a number of concurrent developments from language acquisition to language change. Furthermore, modal concepts are a cornerstone of human cognition and reasoning, so that theories of their lexicalization and use in natural language span a spectrum of different psychological and philosophical perspectives on the fundamental relation between language and thought.

Modality being such a well-documented area, there is a wealth of empirical material which requires explanation. However, modal data contain a notorious amount of idiosyncratic detail, which often makes the possibility of comprehensive analyses seem formidably elusive. Many linguistic treatments of the English modals use as a starting point the traditional categories of epistemic and deontic modality, and supplement them with a range of additional types to capture the full range of meanings natural language modals may express. Consequently, English modals come out as multiply ambiguous items; moreover, their candidate meanings seem to proliferate almost freely towards increasingly fine-grained classes.

There are more concrete arguments that this intuition points in the right direction. The categories introduced by the ambiguity view do not really correspond to distinct senses for the modals, among which it is always possible to choose. For one thing, the distinction between the two kinds of simple root modality is far from clear.

One thing you want to avoid, if you possibly can, is a present from my mother.

Coates' account again suffers from an excessive reliance on semantics to provide the whole array of meanings communicated by the modals; as a result, she constantly has to expand the semantic component so that it includes information about the degree of subjectivity or strength of the modality. Coates is primarily worried by the inadequacy of semantic labels to yield an empirically satisfactory analysis of the modals: however, no problem would arise if this indeterminacy were seen as resulting from the flexibility of pragmatic interpretation.

Sweet H. places her discussion of modality within a more general study of polysemy in natural language. Adopting a broader Cognitive Linguistic framework, she claims that polysemy is often motivated by a metaphorical mapping from the concrete, external world of socio-physical experience to the abstract, internal world of reasoning and of mental processes in general. She argues that motion verbs expressed modality display a similar, motivated polysemy, thus rejecting the 'standard' view that they are ambiguous between unrelated senses.

Sweet H. believes that an account based on 'modality in two worlds' explains the acquisitional and historical priority of the root over the epistemic meanings of the modals. However, although her approach correctly moves in the direction of supplying motivation for the systematic relation between root and epistemic uses of modal expressions, it cannot avoid some of the criticisms directed against the ambiguity view. For instance, distinctions between root/epistemic or ability/potentiality readings imply, first, that it is always possible to choose between them, and second, that cases of gradience or merger should be more difficult to comprehend; we saw that neither of these conclusions is warranted.

In the second place, even if one adopts the idea of a metaphorical mapping among modal concepts, this mapping will come out as very different from other examples of metaphorical mapping which have been claimed to motivate lexical polysemy. Consider the case of perception terms, which have displayed a cross-linguistic tendency to develop meanings related to mental processes (cf. see, view, etc.). According to Sweet H., this can be explained in terms of a metaphorical construal of the internal world delivered by reasoning on the basis of the external world delivered by perception: the semantics of perception terms thus includes a metaphorical mapping which relates two independent and distinct senses. A third problem for the proposal based on a metaphorical extension of modal meanings is that its application is constrained in various ways. An obvious case is positive can, which is not normally used epistemically. Sweet's account cannot handle similar examples, as she herself acknowledges.Sweet H. tries to turn this into an argument against a unitary semantic approach to the modals: It is not the case (as we might expect if the modals were simply monosemous) that all root modals must/can have epistemic uses - this is neither historically true for the English modals nor a cross-linguistic universal. It is not necessary, however, for a monosemous account to make such an assumption; on the contrary, a single semantics for the modals could leave room for a pragmatic explanation of the gaps in their distribution. It seems, therefore, that the historical development of the meanings of the modals cannot be explained in terms of a simple metaphorical mapping along the lines proposed by Sweetser. In any case, the extent to which diachionic evidence is relevant for a synchronic analysis of linguistic competence is a fairly controversial issue. Even if root meanings were the first to appear, the semantics of the English modals may well have developed towards a unitary meaning.

To summarise: although the fundamental point of the ambiguity-based approach is the rigid distinction between (roughly) the epistemic and non-epistemic 'meanings' of the modals, both Palmer, Coates and Sweetser are forced to recognise a wide range of intermediate cases, where for a variety of reasons the proposed semantic distinctions prove inert, indistinguishable or insufficient. These cases, however, may be viewed as a threat to the overall validity of the ambiguity position. A more viable alternative, which already hinted at, would explore the view that

traditional categories of modality are effectively byproducts of the comprehension process rather than stable and basic semantic information guiding
pragmatic interpretation.

Practically speaking, the facts of any language are too complex to be handled without arranging them into such divisions. We do not mean to say, however, that these three levels of study should be thought of as isolated from each other. The affinities between all levels of linguistic organisation make themselves quite evident. Conceived in isolation, each of them will always become artificial and will hardly justify itself in practice. It is not always easy to draw precise boundaries between grammar and vocabulary. Sometimes the subject matter becomes ambiguous just at the borderline. The study of this organic relationship in language reality seems to be primary in importance. For a complete description of language we have to account for the form, the substance and the relationship between the form and the situation. The study of this relationship may be referred to as contextual level of analysis.

List Of Used Literature

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