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## **Modality, Mood and Modal Auxiliaries: A Critique**

**Prashant Mishra, M.A., M.Phil., Ph. D.**

# **Modality, Mood and Modal Auxiliaries: A Critique**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a critique of modality, mood and modal auxiliaries. The endeavour is to remove many a misconception related to modality, mood and modal auxiliaries. Various views of the prominent linguists and grammarians have been discussed. Grammarians confuse the notion of modality with modal verbs. However, modality is not a formal but a semantic concept which refers to a number of semantic categories like question, assertion, request, ability, wish, permission, possibility, insistence etc.

The semantic notion of modality is often influenced by various socio-cultural factors and manifested by the formal category of mood and modal auxiliaries. Some linguists regard mood as an inflectional category marked by verb inflections whereas some other linguists treat it as a syntactic category that depends upon the order of words in a sentence. However, C.C. Fries and Quirk and Greenbaum are among the linguists who rule out the existence of mood in English.

Unlike mood, grammarians agree on the category of modal auxiliaries. They define modals on morphological and syntactic criteria and regard meaning categories like ability, compulsion, permission etc. governing their use. However, recent grammars like Collins's *Cobuild* extend the use of modals to pragmatics and regard their use situational and goal-oriented being governed by politeness and cooperative principles. Since mood does not exist in English, modal auxiliaries are the chief means of expressing modality.

## **Modality**

Most of the grammarians deal with modality in terms of modal verbs. However, modality is not a formal notion, it is a semantic notion. It is "a conceptual category, a type of meaning, or complex of meanings, with various reflexes in language" (Khlebnikova 1976:3). Modality refers to certain meaning categories like question, assertion, request, ability, wish, permission, possibility, insistence etc. These meaning categories are expressed through the use of different moods such as declarative, interrogative, imperative or through the use of modals such as will, shall, can. Khlebnikova says that modality "is expressed principally in a generalized form, in the imperative and conjunctive moods, and also in the lexical meanings of modal verbs and certain lexical units" (1976:5).

Modality is a term used by the logicians to refer to a certain way of classifying propositions. It has been discussed since the days of Aristotle. Aristotle's 'De Interpretations' and 'Prior Analytics' are said to initiate the discussion on the modal logic. His discussion of the notions of necessity, possibility and impossibility and the relations between them are said to provide the basis of modal logic.

Modal logic deals with various propositions which are drawn from human attitudes and experiences from which semantic choices like necessity, possibility, impossibility, available for utterances, are derived. The method of analysis in modal logic is based on "the proposal that a proposition can be said to be true in one particular (real or imagined) world and false in another" (Perkins 1983:6). Modality is, thus, interpreted in terms of an event or a proposition and analyzed with respect to the universe in which such events or propositions are thought of as true or false. According to Perkins in the framework of modal logic "a given event or proposition may be made relative to, or may be qualified by, a particular world view, state of affairs, set of principles, etc" (1983:9).

Lyons, while discussing various types of modalities-- epistemic, deontic etc.-- treats mood as a grammatical category and favours the traditional description based on the inflected forms of the verbs. According to him, "Mood is a grammatical category that is to be found in some, but not all, languages. In traditional usage, 'mood' is applied to such subsets of inflected forms of verbs as are distinguished one from another by means of the terms 'indicative', 'imperative', 'subjunctive', etc; and we have chosen to respect this usage" (Lyons 1977: 848). But he has not attempted to define modality in the above cited work. However, in one of his earlier works (1968:308), Lyons has hinted at his notion of modality. He has discussed three scales of modality -- the scale of 'wish' and 'intention', of 'necessity' and 'obligation', and of 'certainty' and 'possibility'. However, the above classification of modality on three scales makes us infer that modality is a semantic term for Lyons and is expressed with the help of grammatical categories like mood and modal auxiliaries. Palmer (1979:4) too agrees with Lyons in this respect and treats mood and modality as two opposite categories-- the former is grammatical whereas the latter is semantic.

Halliday (1970), who made a significant contribution to the functional paradigm, believes that a text is a product of social and cultural context from where it springs. He is of the opinion that people use language with one another in order to manage their social lives. Modality is directly related to the social functions of language. Modality, which expresses different semantic implications like permission, request, obligation, necessity, possibility, is used to perform different communicative acts. Halliday regards modality a form of participation by the speaker in the communicative act. Modality is related to the interpersonal function of the language.

A language is used as a means of social interaction and it expresses various social roles and performs various communicative functions like questioning somebody, requesting or commanding somebody or telling somebody something. Such types of

interpersonal functions of language are reflected in various sentence types like declarative, interrogative and imperative and also through the system of modals. The three choices in the mood system perform various communicative functions like declaring, asking a question, making a request or giving a command. With these sentence types, modal verbs like 'can', 'may', 'will', 'must' help in expressing various social functions such as making a request, seeking permission, expressing rights, obligation and possibility. Thus, modality is directly related to the social functions of language.

Modality, as we have discussed above, is a notional category (Khlebnikova 1963, Harries 1978, Lyons 1968) used to perform various communicative functions (Halliday 1970). Performative verbs that indicate performance of action are said to express modality and illocutionary force in language. Austin believes that a person utters a sentence not only to convey something but also to perform some act. When a person utters a sentence like -- 'I promise to come back within a week'-- he is not making a simple statement but is performing the act of promising.

According to Austin, "a complete account of the meaning of a sentence cannot be restricted to semantic analysis as these are usually understood and that they must be extended to include information about the kind of speech act involved in uttering the sentence- that is, its illocutionary force" (Austin 1962 quoted in Boyd and Thorne 1969:58). In the beginning of his discussion, Austin makes a distinction between performative (short) utterances and constative (descriptive) utterances.

This distinction is related to the various functions performed by language. In his 1962 work "How to Do Things with Words", Austin says that constative utterances refer to the statements which describe some event, process or state of affairs and which can be characterised as either true or false. Performative utterances, on the other hand, instead of evaluating something as true or false, are used to do something. The difference between constative and performative utterances depends upon the difference between 'saying something and doing something by means of language'.

Austin, in this way, challenged the view of the logical positivists who thought that language makes only empirically verifiable statements. According to them, language had only one function i.e. descriptive. All the other utterances are classified as emotive.

But people, like Wittgenstein (1953), who were earlier associated with this theory, soon came to realize that language utterances are heterogeneous and are determined by various social conventions. A person becomes competent in the use of language by learning to use it in different types of social contexts. Besides relating the use of language to social situations, Wittgenstein also relates the semantic aspect of a word to its use.

Thus both Wittgenstein and Austin "emphasize the importance of relating the function of language to the social contexts in which languages operate and insist that, not only

descriptive, but also non-descriptive utterances should be of concern to the philosopher” (Lyons 1977:728). Hence the theory of speech acts which relates modality, a notional concept, to the illocutionary force of an utterance, which is governed by various socio-cultural situations, is of great relevance to the study of moods and modals.

Modality is expressed linguistically by a number of devices like moods, modal auxiliaries, quasi auxiliaries, adjectival and participial expressions, nominal expressions, lexical verbs (Perkins 1983). Apart from these grammatical categories, modality is also manifested in orthographic devices like punctuation, prosodic features like stress and intonation-contour (Searle 1969). Verbal categories like tense are also used in some cases to express modality. Lyons says that “reference to the future..... is often as much a matter of modality as it is of purely temporal reference” (Lyons 1977:816).

In English, for example, modals like ‘will’ and ‘may’ have a temporal function besides their modal functions like prediction, willingness, intention, insistence. But most of the grammarians recognize the modal function as primary and the temporal function as secondary.

Moods and Modal auxiliaries are the two important grammatical categories which have the potential to express different aspects of modality. Modality and illocutionary force, which are influenced by various socio-cultural factors, are realized grammatically by the formal category of mood and modal auxiliaries. Moods and modal auxiliaries perform various grammatical functions like expressing modality and tense. But they primarily express different types of modality and illocutionary force.

The semantic notion of modality is often influenced by various socio-cultural factors. Linguists have now realised that modals have the singular potential to represent illocutionary force in language. For example, ‘He will come on Monday’ can be interpreted as ‘I predict he comes on Monday’.

Searle regards the study of the meaning of sentences and the study of speech acts synonymous as “the speech act or acts performed in the utterance of a sentence are in general a function of the meaning of the sentence” (Searle 1969:18). This view of Searle’s relates the semantic notion of modality to the functional concepts like speech act and illocutionary force. We have clearly stated that moods and modal auxiliaries are used in various languages to express various propositions. However, the meaning of these propositions is always influenced by various pragmatic forces.

We have so far tried to discuss the concept of modality and how it is related to the concepts of speech act and illocutionary force. Before going ahead in our study, we shall look at the concepts of mood and modal auxiliaries as these two grammatical categories are by and large capable of expressing different types of modality in various languages.

## Mood

Jespersen (1969) recognizes three moods -- indicative, subjunctive and imperative. He regards mood as a formal category which is marked by the verb forms. Mood, according to Jespersen, reflects the attitude of the speaker that forms the content of the sentence. According to him, “the imperative, like the infinitive, has the same form as the base of the verb, and the same is true of the present indicative (except the third person singular) and the whole of the present subjunctive” (Jespersen 1969:293). These forms are used to express the various attitudes of the speaker e.g. statements and questions (indicative); a wish (subjunctive) and requests (imperative).

Myklestad (1971:243) too regards mood as a grammatical category and says, “by the mood of a verb we understand the designation by means of conjugational patterns or equivalent verbal forms of how an act or a state as expressed by the verb is to be conceived (a) as a fact, (b) as a command or request (c) as desirable, possible, contingent, doubtful, unreal”. He agrees with Jespersen that mood is a formal category realized grammatically by verbal inflections. He too recognizes three moods in English and illustrates them by giving the following examples:

Come! (Imperative). He comes (indicative). May he come (subjunctive) (Myklestad 1971:243). Myklestad, thus, classifies moods as imperative, indicative and subjunctive depending upon the relation of the subject to the predicate and as conceived by the speaker.

Zandvoort (1962) also associates mood to the verb inflections and regards the third person singular form of the verb with ‘-s’ inflection as subjunctive and the same without ‘-s’ as the indicative. He says that this difference in the form of the verb between the two is one of mood (1962:86).

Palmer (1979) regards mood a grammatical category in English as opposed to modality which is a semantic term. Mood, he thinks, is “usually reserved for inflectional categories that exhibit modality--the subjunctive, optative, etc. as opposed to the indicative”(1979:5). He dismissed the category of mood in English and even rejected the presence of subjunctive mood in the English grammar.

In his scholarly work “Mood and Modality”, Palmer writes, “There is no need to be much concerned with the subjunctive in English. The only possible candidate for this is the simple form (identical with the infinitive) that is used in formal language after verbs of ordering, requiring etc. This form has largely disappeared from English, and it can well be argued that it has been replaced by the modal verbs, though traditional scholars may still argue for its use” (1979:7). Palmer, thus rejected subjunctive and regards modal auxiliaries as its substitutes in English. He does not find any difference between subjunctive and simple present tense as their forms are the same.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1975) do not recognize mood as an important category in English and hence it has not been discussed in detail. They observe that “mood is expressed in English to a very minor extent by the subjunctive, as in, So be it then! to a much greater extent by the past tense forms, as in, If you taught me, I would learn quickly but above all, by means of modal auxiliaries, as in: It is strange that he should have left so early” (1975:51). The above statement is incomplete and vague. It only makes us infer that recently the attitude of the grammarians towards mood has completely changed and as we have seen various criteria for the study of mood have failed to satisfy the grammarians.

Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1996) treats mood as a syntactic category that depends upon the order of words in a sentence. Collins’s grammar holds that “the main clause of every sentence is in a particular mood” (Sinclair 1996:196). It lists three moods declarative, interrogative and imperative. For example, when we look at the following sentences:

John is an intelligent boy.  
Is John an intelligent boy.  
Go and bring a glass of water for me.

The word- order indicates that the first sentence is a statement: the second sentence is a question and the third sentence is a command. The first sentence, in which the subject is placed before the verb, is in the declarative mood whereas the second sentence, in which the main verb or auxiliary verb is placed before the subject, is in the interrogative mood. But the third sentence is an example of the imperative mood. In an imperative mood, subject is absent and the base form of the verb is placed in front of the clause.

After considering the views of some of the Traditional Grammarians, let us examine the views of some of the representative Structuralist and T.G. Grammarians on mood. Bloomfield, whose book ‘Language’ (1933) is regarded as the manifesto of modern linguistics, mentions mode (mood) as one of the chief inflectional category discovered by the ancient Greek grammarians. However, he says that Greek linguists defined these inflectional categories not in formal terms that are identifiable but with respect to the abstract semantic implications.

Discussing modes in English, Bloomfield says, “English has many modes distinguishing various approaches of an action to its actual occurrence”(1933:273). He regards mood as a formal category and chooses morphological and syntactic criteria for identifying and classifying them. Bloomfield writes, “morphologically, English distinguishes between ‘real’ (he is here) and ‘unreal’ (if he were here); syntactically, English recognises a whole series by the peculiarity of certain irregular (‘auxiliary’) verbs which are followed by an infinitive without to: he will write, shall write, can write, must write, may write” (Bloomfield 1933:273). He mentions



indicative and subjunctive with regard to the verb of the clauses. Indicative refers to the real in clauses, whereas subjunctive refers to the unreal in clauses.

Noted linguist C.C Fries (1940) denies the existence of mood in English. He says that mood is absent in present-day English and instead of verbal inflections, modal auxiliaries are used to express various modalities. Referring to the subjunctive mood, he says, "In general the subjunctive has tended to disappear from use. This statement does not mean that the ideas formerly expressed by the inflectionally distinct forms of the verb, called the subjunctive, are not now expressed, but rather that their ideas are now expressed chiefly by other means, especially by function words" (Fries 1940:106). Some other prominent Structuralists like E.A. Nida (1964), H.A. Gleason (1965), Martin Joos (1964) do not discuss mood at all in their works. They discuss only modal auxiliaries.

T.G. Gramscians in their description of the structure of English syntax have not mentioned mood at all and represented the modal auxiliaries under the label of 'M'. We do not find any mention of the mood in the works of the distinguished T.G. Gramscians like Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968), Lester (1971), and in 'Syntactic Structures' (1957) and 'Aspects of the Theory of Syntax' (1965) by Noam Chomsky.

Halliday (1970) regards modality "a form of participation by the speaker in the speech event and is derived from the interpersonal function of language, language as expression of role" (Halliday:335). He believes that mood and modal auxiliaries are the two important grammatical categories that manifest the interpersonal function of the language. In 'Language Structure and Language Function' (1970) Halliday quoting Sweet (1955) says that "subject and finite verbs are closely linked together, and combine to form the one constituent which we call mood. The mood is the element that realizes the selection of mood in the clause. It has sometimes been called the 'Modal' element; but the difficulty with this is that the term modal is ambiguous, since it corresponds both to mood and to modality" (Halliday 1970:73-74). In "Functional Diversity in Language", Halliday writes that verbal as well as non-verbal means, like word-order and prosodic features, are used to represent modality. However, Halliday (1970:328-330) lists only modal auxiliaries among the verbal forms and does not mention moods at all.

## **Modal Auxiliaries**

Having discussed the concept of mood, let us examine the category modal auxiliaries. Unlike the grammatical category 'mood', there seems to be some agreement among grammarians on the category of 'modal auxiliaries'. Modal auxiliaries are overtly realized in English. However, there are some differences among some English grammarians regarding the inventory of modal auxiliaries in English. In the first half of the 20th century, various auxiliaries like 'can', 'may', 'shall', 'will', 'must', 'ought', 'dare' and 'need' etc. were treated separately and were not grouped together under the system of modals.



Henry Sweet (1955), Jespersen (1969), Kruisinga and Erades (1960) and Strang (1962) do not distinguish a separate set of modal auxiliaries. It was in the nineteen sixties that various grammarians like Sledd (1959), Martin Joos (1964), Twaddell (1965), Ehrman (1966), Palmer (1974), Leech (1971), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) etc. discovered some common properties in these verbs and classified them as modals.

Ehrman (1966) includes 'can', 'will', 'shall', 'must', 'ought', 'dare' and 'need' in the list of modal auxiliaries and defines them as "that closed class of verbs which may occupy the first position of verb phrase, which may not be immediately preceded by another verb, which may invert with the subject in interrogation, and which are negated directly by 'not'" (Ehrman 1966:9).

Leech (1971) in addition to 'may', 'can', 'must', 'will', 'shall', 'need', 'ought to' also included 'have (got) to', 'am/is/are to' and '(had) better' and treated them as modals as they can be substituted by other modals and hence are also similar in meaning. Leech regards that the meanings of 'have (got) to' relates to 'must' and 'am/is/are + to infinitive' are similar in meaning to 'have (got) to' and 'ought to'. He chooses semantic criterion to describe various modal auxiliaries.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) list 'can', 'may', 'shall', 'will', 'must', 'ought to', 'dare' and 'need' as modal auxiliaries. They regard 'used to' as a marginal modal auxiliary as "it takes 'to-infinitive' and occurs only in the past tense" (1973:37). 'Dare' and 'need', according to them, can be used both as "modal auxiliaries (with bare infinitive and with no inflected -s form) or as lexical verbs (with to infinitive and with inflected-s form)" (1973:37). Quirk and Greenbaum define modals by following morphological and syntactic criteria. However, the use of modals, according to them, is governed by meaning categories like ability, compulsion, permission etc.

Palmer (1986) follows formal criteria for defining modals in English. He includes 'may', 'can', 'must', 'ought to', 'will', 'shall' and marginally, 'need' and 'dare' (including might, could, would and should) in the list of his modals. According to him, modals exhibit what Huddleston (1976:333) has called the NICE (negation, inversion, code and emphasis) properties that distinguish them from main verbs. In addition to NICE properties modals also have some formal features that exclusively belong to them. Palmer lists the following formal features of modals:

They do not co-occur: there is no \*will can come, \* may shall be, etc.

They have no '-s' forms for their 3rd person singular: e.g. He\* oughts to come.

They have no non-finite forms: e.g. \*'to can' or \* 'canning'.

They have no imperatives: \*can be here! (1986:33-34).

In her work on Modal auxiliaries, Jennifer Coates (1983) includes 'must', 'should', 'ought', 'may', 'might', 'can', 'could', 'will', and 'shall' in the list of modals. In this

classification, she follows formal criterion to separate modal auxiliaries from main verbs. The first four of this list follow the NICE properties as marked by Huddleston (1976:333) and the last three follow the modal criteria (NO ‘-s’ form for third person singular; no non-finite forms; no co-occurrence) as laid down by Palmer (1986:33,34) to exclude the auxiliaries ‘be’, ‘have’ and ‘do’ (Coates 1983:4). Coates regards ‘have to’, ‘be going to’, ‘be able to’, ‘be bound to’ as quasi-modals and excludes ‘dare’ and ‘need’ from her list as “the use of ‘need’ and ‘dare’ as modals as opposed to main verbs is rare and apparently on the decline” (1983:5).

Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1996) includes ‘must’, ‘should’, ‘ought to’, ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘can’, ‘could’, ‘will’, and ‘shall’ in its list of modals. ‘Dare’, ‘need’ and ‘used to’ do not find a place in this list of modals. Collins’s Grammar calls them semi-modals for “they have some characteristics which other modals do not have” (Sinclair 1996:241). Modals are considered to be special kinds of auxiliary verbs used to make requests, offers, or suggestions, or to express our wishes or intentions. Modals are used to indicate our feelings about what we are saying (1996:217).

Collins’ Grammar extends the study of modals to Pragmatics and makes an important point that modals are also used to express politeness and tactfulness. Referring to the use of modals, it is observed that “modals are mainly used when you want to indicate your attitude towards what you are saying, or when you are concerned about the effect of what you are saying on the person you are speaking or writing to” (1996:217).

Modals are chiefly used to indicate the speaker’s attitude when (s)he gives information; his/her attitude towards the things (s)he intends to do, or intends not to do; and his/her attitude to people i.e. how (s)he affects and responds to a particular person or audience. The use of modals is situational and goal-oriented. Referring to pragmatic factors, Collins’ Grammar observes, “Modals are often used to produce a particular effect, and the modal you choose depends on several factors, such as the relationship you have with your listener, the formality or informality of the situation, and the importance of what you are saying” (1996:218). Apart from pragmatic and registral characteristics of modals, Collins Grammar also discusses in detail the various formal characteristics of modals as discussed by Palmer and other grammarians.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presented a critique of modality, mood and modal auxiliaries. This exercise, related to their brief historical discussion, helped us in building a conceptual background and removing many a misconception prevailing about the notions of modality, mood and modal auxiliaries. Thus, from the above discussion, we concluded that modality is a semantic notion used to refer to a number of semantic categories like question, assertion, request, ability, wish, permission, possibility, insistence etc.

Moods and modal auxiliaries are among the various grammatical means which can be used to express modality. We also observed that the concepts of mood and modality were interpreted differently by different grammarians and they even differed with each other in respect to the membership of modal auxiliaries. We further found that grammarians do not recognize the existence of mood as a grammatical category in English. From the findings in the present paper we come to know that modal auxiliaries are the chief means of expressing modality.

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9 : 9 September 2009

Prashant Mishra, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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