

## Modality and Hedges

### Modality and Hedges

Modality concerns the linguistic devices a speaker uses to express an attitude toward a statement about the world or about an action involving, primarily, the speaker and the listener. In English, modality is marked both grammatically and lexically. A hedge is literally a line of bushes surrounding a bit of land, but figuratively it refers to the way a speaker avoids taking full responsibility for what he or she says, that is by “protecting himself or herself” with a linguistic barrier. We will begin with a brief discussion of modality.

### Modality

Modality can be classified in a number of ways, but the most common distinction is between two main types: epistemic and deontic. The terms are unfamiliar and off-putting for most, but the meanings are rather straightforward. Epistemic modality, also called belief modality, is about knowing, or more precisely how we communicate our certainty or lack of certainty about the truth of a statement or proposition about the world. Statements with no modal expressions suggest that the speaker feels certain about, and accepts full responsibility for, the truth of the assertion.

*Egypt has a larger population than Ethiopia.*

Epistemic modals express probability, and therefore uncertainty.

*Egypt very probably has a larger population than Ethiopia.*

-> possibility, speculation

*Egypt can't have a larger population than Ethiopia.*

-> improbability based on deduction

Deontic modality, also called action modality, has to do with events and the relationship between the participants in those events, especially the speaker and the listener. This is the familiar terrain of permission, obligation, prohibition, and so forth. Again, unmodalized statements reflect the speaker's certainty about a state of affairs.

*People are fleeing Libya.*

The use of deontic modality suggests that the speaker perceives that there is a dynamic relationship between the participants “people” and “Libya”.

*People are being allowed to flee Libya.*

-> permission granted by Libyan authorities

*People must flee Libya.*

-> people forced by circumstances to flee

These two broad categories, modality of propositions and modality of actions, account for most of the instances of modality you will encounter or use. They also account for the main meanings of the modal auxiliaries in English, each of which has both epistemic and deontic uses.

<b>Modal auxiliary</b>	<b>Epistemic (belief)</b>	<b>Deontic (action)</b>
may	After all, there may be danger.	This material is protected by international copyright laws and may not be copied.
can	There are some elegant instances of the sorts of things which can happen.	You can bring anything in here if you pay for it.
will	The above steps will, I hope, help to make it a little easier.	On receipt of your application you will be sent an acknowledgement and full details of the Plan.
must	He argued that since crime, as officially recorded, was greatest amongst the working class, it followed that anomie too must be greatest in that social stratum.	This point must be addressed by those in and out of government and education before changes are made.
shall	Since he'll be rich, I shall be one of the most important women around.	The publisher shall compile statements of sales.

(Source: The British National Corpus)

The phrase “modal auxiliaries” is familiar enough and may lead to the conclusion that modality is a property of this class of verbs. The conclusion would be mistaken. Modality concerns, once again, the attitude of the speaker toward a proposition or toward his or her perception of the relationship between participants in an action or situation. There are many ways that this attitude can be expressed. Here we will mention the principle grammatical categories that can contribute to expressing modality.

### Nouns

Nouns often refer to the abstract qualities that embody the basic notions of epistemic and deontic modality. Here are a few:

Epistemic: *probability, likelihood, possibility, impossibility, certainty*

Deontic: *permission, prohibition, constriction, obligation*

### Adjectives

Clearly many adjectives express meanings that can be situated along the clines of possibility/impossibility and permission/obligation. Some of the more common are:

Epistemic: *possible, probable, likely, unlikely, inevitable, certain*

Deontic: *necessary, obligatory, forbidden, allowed, permissible, recommended*

### Adverbs

Most of the modal adjectives have corresponding adverb forms, but there are others as well.

Epistemic: *possibly, probably, inevitably, certainly*

Deontic: *necessarily, obligatorily, freely, acceptably*

While nouns, adjectives and adverbs tend to be less ambiguous than modal auxiliaries in their expression of modality, nuances of meaning are still present. Consider the following:

*It is now possible for people to flee Libya.* (someone makes it possible)

*It is possible that thousands of refugees will flee Libya.* (speculation)

## Hedges

A hedge is an optional expression or a choice of vocabulary which reduces the commitment of the speaker/writer to the truth of a proposition. Hedges clearly overlap with epistemic modality but they also include a variety of other linguistic options.

If someone were to ask you whether Italy or Germany had a larger population, you would probably have no doubts and respond: Germany. You would probably base your answer on knowledge that you feel sure of but that you can't cite precisely. If you were asked about the relative populations of Ethiopia and Egypt, could you assert with authority that Egypt has a larger population than Ethiopia? If not, you would probably want to communicate this lack of certainty to your listener/reader. One way to do this is to attenuate the proposition using epistemic modality.

*Egypt may have a larger population than Ethiopia.*

*In all probability Egypt has a larger population than Ethiopia.*

*It is very likely that Egypt's population is larger than Ethiopia's.*

*The population of Ethiopia must be smaller than that of Egypt.*

All of these statements are weaker than the unmodalised categorical assertion "Egypt has a larger population than Ethiopia".

Another way to avoid assuming full responsibility for the truth of a claim is attribute the assertion to someone else. This option can be used both to appeal to strong external authority and to distance yourself from the proposition.

*In Wikipedia I read that Egypt has a larger population than Ethiopia.*

*According to Wikipedia, Egypt's population is larger than Ethiopia's.*

*Wikipedia, citing official government estimates, states that the population of Egypt is larger than that of Ethiopia.*

*I have read that more people live in Egypt than in Ethiopia.*

*Egyptian authorities claim that Egypt's population is greater than that of Ethiopia.*

It is also possible to weaken a claim, and thus make it easier to defend, by qualifying constituents of the proposition. To illustrate this option, we will use a different claim: "Women are better drivers than men." Consider the following attenuations:

*Some women drive better than some men.*

*A minority of women driver better than some men.*

*Most women drive better than the worst male drivers.*

*In certain circumstances, women can park better than men.*

In each of the above statements, the initial generalization has been modified to refer to a subgroup of women or men or to a particular aspect of driving. Qualified statements tend to be easier to defend than broad, sweeping generalisations.

Ex. 1

Use qualifying expressions to render the following statements academically defensible.

1. Federalism will solve Italy’s problems.

.....

2. Immigrants should be granted the right to vote.

.....

3. Girls perform better than boys in school.

.....

4. Minors should not drink alcohol.

.....

Evidentials

An evidential is an expression which indicates to the listener/reader the evidence that exists in support of an assertion. In English they are largely concerned with the relationship between the writer and reader. Most commonly, they are used to suggest that the writer and reader can or should share the same perspective on a state of affairs. Expressions such as *obviously, it seems that, evidently* and *clearly* belong to this group.

*It seems clear that the City Council will be forced to raise taxes.*

*The only solution, obviously, is to ban the sale of alcohol in discos.*

*It appears that the Prime Minister is on the verge of resigning.*

*The commissioner’s decision is apparently definitive.*

The rhetorical effect of an evidential is to give the impression that there is evidence to support the writer’s assertion which is available to any reasonable observer (who can be convinced to agree with the writer).

Ex. 2

Apply evidentials to the following propositions.

1. Federalism will solve Italy’s problems.

.....

2. Immigrants should be granted the right to vote.

.....

3. Girls perform better than boys in school.

.....

4. Minors should not drink alcohol.

.....