

Hladký, Josef

A brief comment on some previous works on modality

Brno studies in English. 1976, vol. 12, iss. 1, pp. 85-92

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118073>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

A BRIEF COMMENT ON SOME PREVIOUS WORKS ON MODALITY

Josef Hladký

An extensive study of modality has been undertaken by L. Ďurovič. His book *Modálnost* is primarily concerned with the lexical and syntactical means of expressing modality. According to Ďurovič, modality is a grammatical ('grammatical' including 'lexical' and 'syntactical' as well as 'intonational') expression of the speaker's attitude to the reality of the utterance, i.e. of its predication core or any of its parts (1956.9). Ďurovič claims that modality is a fully grammatical phenomenon, not only when expressed by grammatical, but also when expressed by lexical means. The lexical means enter into syntactical relations which are determined by the type of modality to be expressed. The grammatical, or the lexicogrammatical character of modality then excludes any semantic conception of modality (60).

Ďurovič's definition of modality excludes the speaker's assessment of the utterance (e.g. *It's a shame... It's a pity...*) and negation. Moreover, introductory modal words and questions are treated as belonging to modality in a wider sense of the word because they do not or cannot participate in the formation of the predicate though expressing the speaker's comment on the utterance as a whole or on any of its parts. When defining spheres bordering on modality, just as when defining relations inside modality, Ďurovič always stresses that the boundaries between the categories in question are not invariably sharp.

The means of expressing modality include intonation, the moods and the lexical / syntactical means: modal particles, modal verbs, adjectives, nouns, adverbs. Ďurovič's main concern then is how this inventory of means is employed in Slovak and in Russian for expressing the main spheres of modality, i.e. volition, possibility and intention, and accomplished activity. The system of assessment expressions and relations remains outside the scope of modality. Though discussing modality under the above mentioned headings, Ďurovič notes that the individual types of modality are only crystallisation points around which the individual expressions are grouped. There is no vacuum between the crystallisation points but gradual transition from point to point.

The transitional character of some expressions is indicated either by their oscillation in rection or by a number of synonymical expressions with different rection.

Đurovič introduces the term 'syntactical type', meaning the obligatory grammatical surroundings (conditions) in which a word can function: e.g. in Slovak, words expressing volition directed at the subject of the sentence are either followed by an infinitive or the conjunction *že* [that] ÷ the future tense.

In the present author's view, Đurovič's treatment of modality raises several problems of general interest. First, it is that of the scope of modality. Đurovič's conception is very wide and includes spheres which are not considered modal by other authors: the sphere of intention, with expressions like *to try hard*, *to endeavour*, *to request* (115) seems to be a sphere rather bordering on modality than modality itself. Secondly, Đurovič's consistent interpretation of modality as a purely grammatical phenomenon may be open to discussion. Even if the individual modal types correspond to certain, obligatory grammatical relations (cf. Đurovič's example of volition / 78ff /) and thus form certain syntactical types, this is not a phenomenon characteristic of all spheres of modality.

Another point open to discussion is Đurovič's grammatical conception of modality. It might be objected that the means of expressing modality are not limited to grammatical means only but include purely lexical means, such as modal adverbs, if written utterances are concerned. In spoken utterances intonation plays an important role. The validity of this objection, however, largely depends on the interpretation of the term 'grammatical': according to Đurovič's definition quoted here on p. 85) 'grammatical' may include 'lexical' and 'intonational' as well.

Đurovič also discusses the question of whether every sentence, every utterance, is modal or not. He adduces the views of Vinogradov, Brunot, Bally, Dokulil and others, and comes to the conclusion that modality is a 'constituting part of every sentence, of every predication'. The question then arises what modality is present in sentences like *John came late last night* or *Webster passes the ball to McCormick*, describing facts that happened in the past or are reported as happening. The finite verb forms are in the indicative mood, which signals that the basic, grammatical modality is present in the clause or sentence. The indicative mood, however, by itself, does not express the reality of the action nor can it be taken for the expression of the speaker's attitude towards the reality of the action.

A summarizing treatment of modality was published by M. Dokulil. In his paper he distinguishes between subjective and objective modality, the former referring to the relation of the speaker ('subject') to the content of the utterance, while the latter refers to the relation between the content of the utterance and the reality. In Dokulil's view, modality cuts across the lexical and the grammatical planes. Modality is often accompanied by emotiveness. The means of expressing modality are numerous and varied, their spheres complement one another and even overlap. They are not, however, of the same order and of the same importance. Intonation is the only generally binding means of expressing modality.

Dokulil distinguishes between primary and secondary means of expressing modality. The primary means can also be designated as vertical because they

seem to be organized in superimposed layers within the limits of the predicate. The lowest layer is that of the semantics of the predicate, by itself usually non-modal, but sometimes, in a certain sense, limiting the choice of modality: *S father ÷ P (predicate) ill* exclude command etc. As second comes the grammatical basis of modality of the predicate, the verbal mood. Then follow the modal verbs and the impersonal predications of the type *It is necessary...* etc. The fourth layer includes modal particles and modal words like *possibly* etc. The highest layer is that of intonation which can either agree with the lexical and the grammatical modality of the predicate, or it can decide the choice of one of the possible modal meanings (e.g. Cz. *Prší* ['It is raining'] can be indicative or interrogative). Intonation can also change the modal meaning of the sentence (though this is a stylistically marked case, as Daneš points out — 1957.34).

The secondary means are all optional, they only supplement the modal meaning of the predicate. The arrangement of the primary means was viewed as vertical and that of the secondary ones is viewed as horizontal. A transitional category is formed by the modal words and particles which are not employed directly in the predication core. The secondary means themselves are mainly parenthetical modal expressions. — In verbless sentences modality is expressed by intonation, e.g. *Polévka? Spíše voda* [Soup? Rather water].

A detailed treatment of modality is also offered by F. Kopečný in his *Základy*. In Kopečný's view modality forms part of a wider region of assessment. Assessment itself is the subjective comment on the objective sentence modality. There are, however, clashes between the grammatical moods and the content of a sentence, e.g. in *It is necessary to...*, where the verb is in the indicative but the utterance should be classified as coming under the heading of 'necessity'.

Kopečný divides modality into three main spheres: reality, possibility and necessity, the sphere of possibility comprising also various shades of uncertainty. The modality of reality is expressed by the indicative and can be taken for an unmarked mood. The marked mood of necessity has several layers: a distinct type is the command, other layers being necessity proper and wish, the latter forming a transition to the modality of possibility. The sphere of possibility includes possibility proper, condition and concession.

Two ranges of modality, wider and narrower, are distinguished by V. Šmilauer. Modality in the wider sense is displayed by sentence types based on the speaker's attitude: indicative, interrogative, imperative, desiderative and exclamatory clauses.

The narrow modality is concerned with the real or non-real character of the content of the utterance or its part. The non-real content of the utterance may then be possible, it may be wanted, permitted, requested or necessary. As regards the means of expressing modality, Šmilauer extended their range by adding gestures and face movements.¹

The last work discussing modality to be summed up here is *Skladba spisovné češtiny* [The Syntax of Standard Czech] by J. Bauer and M. Grepl. The authors distinguish four levels of sentence structure: the level of concrete content (a lexical phenomenon), the level of modality, the level of grammar, and the level of functional sentence perspective. In consequence, modality is considered

¹ The classification of gestures under syntactic means, however, is not very precise.

to be neither a grammatical nor a lexical phenomenon but one of the levels of sentence structure. There are three types of modality in Bauer and Grepl's view: attitudinal modality, voluntative modality and modality of certainty. Attitudinal modality, also called general modality, is one of the obligatory factors in every utterance.² In the sphere of general, attitudinal, modality the speaker either states (asserts or denies), or asks, or orders, or wishes. The basic intonational models for each type of sentence are given. Voluntative modality has three main spheres: necessity, possibility and intention.

Needless to say, the offered brief review is not exhaustive. Problems of modality are in the centre of attention of many linguists, especially those specialised in Slavonic languages. An international conference on the problems of modality in Slavonic languages was recently held in Brno.

Even a brief review, however, reveals different approaches to some questions relating to modality, such as the very concept of modality, the place of modality in the system of language, the range of modality and the spheres related to modality.

The first question, that of the very concept of modality, can hardly get a universally accepted and definite answer. If modality is regarded as a phenomenon of the grammatical or of the lexical level only, it seems to be a simplification in some way. Moreover, the fact that grammatical, or lexical (or intonational) means are employed to express modality does not, by itself, make modality a grammatical category. A solution perhaps less objectionable is to view modality in a wider angle and to understand by it an element which i) is present in every utterance, ii) expresses the reality of the action, iii) employs grammatical, lexical and prosodic (intonational) means of expression.

The first characteristic feature of modality, its presence in every utterance, is often touched upon in works discussing modality. The question is whether those utterances where no grammatical or other means of modality have been used should be regarded as modal or not modal. (It should be remembered, however, that the whole problem is partly hypothetical because it is usually discussed in works where no regard to intonation is paid.) In sentences like *This is the one I wanted, I was there at the beginning of July* there is no other traditional 'mood' than the indicative nor any other expression of uncertainty, necessity, volition etc. (except in spoken language where the intonation pattern will help). The absence of any other means of expressing modality is important because pure contrast between the indicative on the one side and the other moods on the other is well known not to be sufficient: the indicative is used in utterances expressing possibility and other types of modality — *Perhaps he is not there*). The signal of the modal classification of the two sentences quoted above is in the absence of the non-indicative mood and of any other means of expressing modality (in written utterances, that is, while in spoken utterances the intonation pattern employed is the ultimate signal). We might say that there is a zero signal of modality; its presence refers to real, factual events, reported by the speaker as such. The other signals of modality (inclusive of intonation) are then 'positive'. The terminology 'zero — positive' may be

² The term 'attitudinal' could lead to some misunderstanding, see our discussion of the speaker's attitude on p. 90-1. In Grepl (1973) the term 'general modality' is preferred.

more suitable for the purpose than perhaps 'zero — real' (although the third member current in the original, mathematical terminology, 'negative', is not used here,) for the latter pair would lead to cumbersome expressions such as 'a real signal of possibility' etc.

According to the second characteristic quoted above, modality expresses the reality of the action. 'Reality' here means that the action is either reported as a fact (zero-signal modality) or as probable etc. (positive-signal modality). The term 'reality' abstracts from the difference constituted by actual and fictional (literary) events as well as from the difference constituted by negative and positive actions. Grammatical negation and positiveness, however, play a part in staking out the sphere of modality. In other words, once an event is denoted as negative or positive without any adumbration of probability etc., it is within zero-signal modality. Cases of positive-signal modality then can be said to be placed between 'yes' or 'no' or to point to 'yes' or 'no'. The 'yes / no' limit may be used still in another direction: to exclude from the sphere of positive—signal utterances those only conveying the speaker's knowledge of a fact. In this way some questions are classified as zero-signal modal statements because the speaker wants to gain some knowledge of a fact that happened before (*What happened?*, *Why were you so late?*).

The third characteristic of modality, the employment of various means of expression, may be discussed from the point of view of the encoding and decoding processes in the act of communication. The selection of means of expression in the encoding process (and their deciphering in the decoding process) is subject to various influences, which may be detected in the utterance. There are differences between speech communities. Further, within every speech community, there are differences based on regional conventions and/or on conventions prevalent inside a social or professional group (e. g. the differences in the verbal behaviour of the working-class parents and of the middle-class parents — Bernstein 1969, or those due to the reserved way of speaking characteristic of some professions. There are even differences between men and women (Šípoš 1970). All these and perhaps other differences combined with the character of the speaker and with the extra-linguistic context (psychological and situational pressures — Leech 1969) influence the encoding and the decoding process.

The above-quoted differences are of importance to foreign-language teaching, to translators and they are not without importance for the study of modality, more so if two or more languages are compared. Though a detailed discussion has to remain outside the scope of the present comment, one or two examples may be quoted in order to indicate the methodological problems involved, especially if the comparison of different languages is based on translations of literary works. Careful translators adapt some of the aspect of the extra-linguistic reality to the conventions of the reader's speech community, e.g. units of measure, titles etc., These adaptations should be extended to include attitudinal differences. Let us take two examples from *Lucky Jim* and its Czech translation: '*Look, Mary, can't we go out for a drink?*' 43.25 — '*Podívejte se, Marie, pojďme se raději někam napít*' 50.—1 [A literal English translation of the Czech version would be '*Look, Mary, let us rather go for a drink*'], *If you'll excuse us, I think we might circulate round the company* 43.6' — '*Jestli dovolíte, obrazíme teď trochu společnost* 50.16' [If you excuse us, we shall circulate

now...]. In both these sentences the toned-down English way of suggesting an action, employing modal verbs, is rendered in the Czech version by a simple imperative and a simple future. In this connection mention may be made of various degrees of appeal as found in other spheres as well, e.g. in public notices. There is a difference between a notice not allowing entrance into some army installation and a notice in zoological gardens. (In some cases the strictness of the appeal need not stem from a wish to be strict but from the effort to be brief — cf. 'No Entry'.)

In some of the situations discussed above the modal attitude also involves the speaker's own idiolectal attitudes. This may mean that the selection of the means of expressing modality in some communicative situations may be quite specific owing to the specification of the relation between the interlocutors. That would mean that some types of modality could be included under the heading of 'interpersonal' relationship (to use Halliday's term, cf. Halliday 1969). Even if 'interpersonal' is used in the most general sense of the word, e.g. when the speaker is a representative of an institution and the hearer / reader is not a particular person but any member of the speech community, it does not seem suitable to reduce all communicative situations, more precisely their modal element, to the interpersonal relationship (the sphere of probability or of necessity, for instance). Though every communicative act is aimed at a hearer of some kind, Halliday's view of modality as an 'interpersonal component in the grammar of language' may be considered too general.

The differences in the choice of the means of expressing modality need not be limited to the speaker's preference for a certain degree of appeal. A comparison of English and German has shown that the functions performed in English by some intonation patterns in statements, commands and questions are taken over by a modal particle ('doch') in German (Schubiger 1965). In the long run, a consistent and exhaustive discussion of the choice of the means of expression would necessarily lead us to stylistics. But this would lie outside the limited scope of the present comments.

The discussion in the preceding paragraphs has indicated that modality should not be considered purely an expression of interpersonal relationship. The survey of some previous works on modality on p. 000—000 has shown that modality is often defined in some relation to the extralinguistic reality. It is an open question whether extralinguistic reality should be regarded as an unspecified sum of everything outside language; because it includes the hearer, the speaker and even the speaker's reasoning processes, as long as they are not formulated in utterances. For the purpose of the present discussion it seems suitable to observe the usual separation of the speaker and of the hearer from the rest of the extralinguistic reality, to regard them as a specific section of the reality. This separation helps the analysis of the sources of modal attitudes, e.g. the appeal coming from the speaker to the hearer, the uncertainty stemming from the non-personal extralinguistic reality or the necessity based on the speaker's opinion. If the source of the modal attitude is in the speaker, in his mind, we could talk of internally determined modality. If it is outside the speaker, we could use the expression 'external determination'. As an example of external determination can serve the necessity given by the reality outside the speaker.

Discussions of modality usually operate with the term 'attitude' (the attitude

of the speaker to the reality, attitudinal modality etc.). It has been indicated in the above paragraph that the modality of the utterance may be also externally determined by the part of the extralinguistic reality outside the speaker and the hearer. The question then arises whether the term 'attitude' is fully appropriate for this type of modality. Rather than an attitude it is a position that the speaker takes, or more precisely, is given in the communicative situation. Thus 'attitudinal' might be used only with instances of internally determined modality, where the speaker functions as an active element in respect of modality, while 'positional' might be used for the cases of external determination (the speaker is 'passive' in respect of modality, though otherwise he is 'active' because he communicates; the will to communicate, naturally comes before any encoding process—Mathesius 1961). The classification into attitudinal and positional, just as the classification into objective and subjective modality, cannot be expected to be clear-cut and easily observable in every utterance, even if the full context of the utterance is considered in the analysis.

The distinction between external and internal determination might be extended even beyond the sphere of modality, e.g. to sphere of tenses. Although it is usually suggested that 'the choice of tense and modality is within the speaker's range of responsibility' (cf. Chloupek 1973), there are types of utterances to which such a suggestion need not apply in full extent. The choice of the grammatical tense may be determined by the position of the speaker at the moment of communication. Thus (with the exception of the stylistically coloured historic present) a speaker of English has to use other than the present or the future tense when reporting a past event, and similarly for other time-tense relations. In some cases, he may have the choice between the simple preterite or the simple pre-present form.

REFERENCES

- Bauer, J.—Grepl, M. (1972). *Skladba spisovné češtiny* [The Syntax of the Czech Language] (Prague).
- Bühler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie* (Jena).
- Daneš, Fr. (1957). *Intonace a věta ve spisovné češtině* [Sentence-Intonation in Present-Day Standard Czech] (Prague).
- Dokulil, M. (1954). K modální výstavbě věty (On the Modal Structure of the Sentence), *Studie a práce lingvistické I.* 255—62 (Prague).
- Đurovič, L. (1956). *Modálnost* [Modality] (Bratislava).
- Grepl, M. (1973). Vyjadřování modalitní kategorie záměru [The Means of Expressing the Modal Category of Intention], *Slovo a slovesnost* 34.44—7 (Prague).
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1969). *A Note on Modality in English* (a mimeographed 'work note' London).
- Chloupek, J. (1973). (Ne)aktuálnost slovesného děje [The (Non)-Actuality of the Verbal Action], *Slovo a slovesnost* 34.48—51 (Prague).
- Kopečný, Fr. (1962). *Základy české skladby*² [The Foundations of Czech Syntax] (Prague).
- Leech, G. N. (1969). *Towards a Semantic Description of English* (London).
- Mathesius, V. (1961). *Obsahový rozbor současné angličtiny na základě obecné lingvistickém* [Functional Analysis of Present-Day English on a General Linguistic Basis] (Prague).
- Panevová, J.—Benešová, E.—Sgall, P. (1971). *Čas a modalita v češtině*. [Temporal and Modal Meanings in Czech] (Prague).
- Schubiger, M., (1965). English Intonation and German Modal Particles — A Comparative Study, *Phonetica* 12.65—84 (Basle).

- Šmilauer, V. (1966). *Novočeská skladba*³ [Modern Czech Syntax] (Prague).
Šípoš, I. (1970). Verbálne podnety ako experimentálne premenné veličiny [Verbal Impulses as Experimentally Variable Values] *Studia psychologica* 12.188—213 (Bratislava).

RESUMÉ

Stručný komentář k některým pracím o modalitě

Na základě některých československých prací ukazuje autor dosavadní výklady oblasti modality, jejího místa v systému jazyka. — Prostředky vyjadřování modality se nekryjí a vhodná volba při překladu musí brát v úvahu např. anglické nepřímé označování odpovídající přímému, indikativnímu vyjádření v češtině. — Mimojazyková skutečnost není při studiu modality chápána jako souhrn všeho, co existuje mimo jazyk. Vydělení mluvčího a posluchače pomáhá při hledání zdroje modality. U některých modálních oblastí je vhodnější mluvit o „pozici“ mluvčího, nikoli o jeho postoji. Rovněž v časovém zařazení děje je někdy mluvčí omezen ve své volbě.