

CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH ENGLISH MODALITY

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Abstract

The spread of English in Indonesia carries an inherent philosophy with it. This essay will focus on how the view that ‘there is no absolute truth’ is ingrained in the linguistic modality of English. Furthermore it will show how this philosophy of modality may inevitably shape a student’s character since it allows people to create the shared truths they need or to downgrade the truths of others, with all the potential positive or negative consequences. Finally this essay will also show how a visual picture, descriptive text, and dialogue could serve as teaching aids to shape a student’s character through classroom drills in such modality signifiers as modal auxiliaries, frequency adverbs, reporting frames, tenses etc. On the whole this essay relies heavily on Halliday’s Functional Grammar, von Wright’s Deontic Logic, and Hodge and Kress’s Semiotics while the topic of the picture, text and dialogue heavily centers on the mysterious Alhambra Citadel of Granada.

Keywords : Modality, degrees of modality, subjective and objective modality, kinds of truth, deontic logic.

1. INTRODUCTION: CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Of late teachers have been searching for a method to shape students’ character, which has been seen as deteriorating in many ways. Most suggests relying on such extracurricular activities as the Arts, Sport, and Boy/ Girl Scouting. Some even went so far as suggesting hypno teaching! Fortunately English teachers don’t have to resort to other disciplines for help. What’s more convenient than teaching character education through English grammar? This essay will, however, not cover all of English grammar but only limit itself to *modality* due to constraint of space.

The semiotic concept of modality will be discussed and traced in a visual image, descriptive text and a dialogue to see how an awareness of modality may enhance a student’s character with traits of tolerance, broad-mindedness, and tactfulness.

2. THE CONCEPT OF MODALITY

‘Modality’ is actually a social semiotic signifier to the question of truth. It relates both to issues of representation – fact versus fiction, reality versus fantasy, real versus artificial, authentic versus fake – and to questions of social interaction, because the question of truth is also a social question – what is regarded as true in one social context is not necessarily regarded as true in others. Linguists and semioticians therefore do not focus on ‘How true is this?’ but on ‘How true is it represented?’ They are not preoccupied with the absolute truth but with the truth as speakers and writers and other sign producers see it, and with the semiotic signifiers they use to express it. The two are not necessarily the same. It is quite possible to represent something that does not exist as though it does. This is what readers see in realistic fiction. On the other hand it is equally possible to represent something that actually exists or has existed, as though its existence is to be doubted – consider for instance how politicians deny the Mass Rape of Chinese Women in Jakarta in 1998.

3. LINGUISTIC MODALITY

Linguists’ interest in modality has traditionally centered on a specific grammatical system, that of the modal auxiliaries– *may*, *will*, and *must*. These make up the three *degrees* of modality: low, median, and high. Consequently, for linguists, truth is not an ‘either–or’ issue (true or false), but an issue of degree. When different people, for example, look at the picture in Fig.1, each may express different degrees of truths as follows.



(Fig. 1: Subur Wardoyo at the Court of Myrtles)

Some students may see only two possible interpretations of Fig. 1, i.e., either ‘Subur is in a Middle Eastern palace’ or ‘Subur is not in a Middle Eastern palace.’ This would be a good time to explain to the class that ‘truth’ is not a narrow-minded ‘either-or’ matter, and that there are actually many degrees of truth, which the students could be prompted to see in the following use of modality:

Subur *may* be in a Middle Eastern palace (low modality)

Subur *must* be in a Middle Eastern palace (high modality)

If you think Subur is closely attached to Middle Eastern culture and religion, you might say ‘Subur *must* be in a Middle Eastern palace,’ however, if you don’t think so, you might choose to say ‘Subur *may* be in a Middle Eastern palace.’ These different degrees of modality can of course also be expressed by related nouns for example, *certainty*, *probability*, *possibility* – adjectives – for example, *certain*, *likely*, *possible* – and adverbs – for example, *certainly*, *probably*, *maybe*. This example fits in with Halliday’s philosophy that “...probability is organized as a system of three values: a median value ‘probable’ where the form of the negative is the same whether it is attached to the modality or the proposition, and two outer values, high ‘certain’ and low ‘possible,’ where there is a switch from high to low, or from low to high, if the negative is shifted between the two domains ...” (Halliday 1985: 149).

Halliday (1985: 149) added yet another important dimension to his philosophy of modality. He felt that modality not only invites the student to choose different degrees of truth, but also different kinds of truth. The examples given represent values on a scale ranging from ‘Yes, true’ to ‘No, false’. The logic behind this kind of truth can be seen as follows: the higher the probability that what-is-asserted really exists, or has really occurred, or will really occur, the higher the modality of the assertion. Another kind of truth is *frequency modality*. This is based on a scale ranging from ‘Yes, always’ and ‘No, never’ – or ‘Yes, everybody’ to ‘No, nobody’. Here the logic of truth is as follows: the more often what-is-asserted happens, or the more people think or say or do it, the higher the modality of that assertion. The linguistic resources used to realize this therefore again express *degrees* of frequency, for example, *always–often–sometimes*, *most–many–some*, etc. Along these lines, I presented Fig. 2, in addition to Fig. 1, to my students and asked them to draw a conclusion about Subur based on Fig.1 and Fig.2 in terms of the kind of truth that he/ she perceives about Subur and his visits to Middle Eastern palaces.



(Fig.2. Subur in Casablanca)

After prompting the Senior High class with the question “How often do you think Subur visits Middle Eastern palaces?” the following answers turn up.

Subur *sometimes* visits a Middle Eastern palace (low frequency modality)

Subur *often* visits a Middle Eastern palace (median frequency modality)

Subur *always* visits a Middle Eastern palace (high frequency modality)

The teaching objective of this drill, in terms of character education, is to have the students realize that each will come up with his/ her own degree of ‘truth’ and that basically everybody should foster a tolerance about the opinion of others since there is actually no absolute truth. This kind of modality drill is a wonderful way to teach students simultaneously about adverbs of frequency, the philosophy of modality, and a character education of tolerance towards the opinion of others.

Next Halliday (1985: 149) also distinguished between *subjective modality* and *objective modality*. In the case of subjective modality, the logic of truth is as follows: the stronger one’s inner conviction is about the truth of an assertion, the higher the modality of that assertion. In the case of objective modality the idea of objective truth is *explicitly* expressed. Again, this does not mean that the assertion actually *is* objectively true, merely that it is represented as such. In both cases the assertion is preceded by a reporting frame ending in ‘that’, for example in the case of Fig. 1 a student might be *objective* by saying ‘*It is a fact that* (Subur is in a Middle Eastern palace)’ or he/ she might be *subjective* by saying ‘*I have the impression that* (Subur is in a Middle Eastern palace)’. In the case of subjective modality this frame has a person as the subject and uses a ‘verb or cognition’. It is these verbs, which then express the degrees of modality, for example, *know–believe–guess*. Thus different speakers might give these different interpretations of Fig 1.

I have a feeling that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (low subjective modality)

I am fairly confident that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (median subjective modality)

I am convinced that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (high subjective modality)

In the case of objective modality, the reporting frame starts with ‘*it is*’ or ‘*there is*’, and it is this which explicitly expresses impersonal objectivity. The reporting frame then uses nouns or adjectives to show the degree of modality, for example:

It is possible that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (low objective modality)

There is a good likelihood that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (median objective modality)

It is a fact that he is in a Middle Eastern palace (high objective modality)

What is modalized	Linguistic realizations	Degree of modality	Kind of modality
Subur's presence in a Middle Eastern palace	<i>may be</i>	low	probability
	<i>must be</i>	high	probability
	<i>have a feeling that</i>	low	subjective
	<i>am fairly confident that</i>	median	subjective
	<i>am convinced that</i>	high	subjective
	<i>It is possible that</i>	low	objective
	<i>There is a good likelihood that</i>	median	objective
	<i>It is a fact that</i>	high	objective
	present tense	high	?
Subur's visits to a Middle Eastern palace	<i>sometimes</i>	Low	Frequency
	<i>often</i>	Median	Frequency
	<i>always</i>	High	Frequency
	present tense	high	?

I might probably reiterate now that modality is absolutely not an either/or business. It can express complex and ambiguous attitudes that are not easy to tabulate. It also shows that modality analysis is ultimately an interpretation, even if a speaker apparently lays his/ her cards on the table, the choices are not clear-cut. All this makes the teaching of modality an excellent exercise to get the students used to the idea that there is no absolute truth. This insight will introduce them to the mindset of pluralism, which a very important trait to live in a society with so many different cultures, religions, and races like ours. Without deeply ingrained pluralism, one could easily be intolerant towards others and fall into what John Stuart Mill, as quoted by Robinson and Groves, calls a "tyranny of the majority" (Robinson and Groves, 1999: 101). If, for example, the majority believe that they will only be happy when harsh measures are inflicted on the minority religions in Indonesia, then, Mill points out, "that is what the government is obliged to do" (Robinson and Groves, 1999: 101). Therefore Mill in *On Liberty* (1859), as quoted by Robinson and Groves, advocated "a tolerance for minority ideas and lifestyles, provided they do not harm others" (Robinson and Groves, 1999: 101).

In a setting of a secondary school classroom, students can acquire such a sense of modality and pluralism not only through pictures such as Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. They also have to move to the next step which is, of course, to identify those two interrelated aspects in their reading texts. From the various genres currently taught in Indonesian classes this essay will give the descriptive text as a sample classroom activity of integrating grammar and character education.

4. CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH MODALITY IN A DESCRIPTIVE TEXT.

The text below comes from Félix Bayón's *The Alhambra of Granada* (2009). It deals with the Architectural beliefs of the Moslem Moors and the European writer with respect to the Court of the Myrtles, a favorite spot for tourists to see in the Alhambra. The question I am asking here is: 'How true are the truths of these two different perspectives represented?' I have italicized the words and phrases that seem relevant to answering this question.



(Fig.3. Court of the Myrtles at the Alhambra Citadel in Granada)

Most Moors believe that the water also serves to reduce the effects of the extreme continental climate of Granada. The two big courtyards, The Court of the Myrtles and the Court of the Lions, are purposefully designed to take advantage of the shade in summer. The water *usually* cools the atmosphere creating currents of air and the fine plaster work, in the form of lattices, gives shelter from the sun and lets the air pass through. In winter, it *is often thought* that the sun glitters in the water and the marble, warming the air. The courtyards were always the centre of life at home for the Nasrids and, *in fact*, they received the utmost care and most recent innovations.

(Bayón, 2009: 67)

How true is the voice of the Moors represented here? First of all, their version of reality – 'the water also serves to reduce the effects of the extreme continental climate of Granada' – is introduced by the phrase '*Most Moors believe.*' Ever since science has taken over from theology and philosophy as the main source of truth, '*believe*' has been opposed to the proven facts and the dominant truths

grounded in science. The culture of the Moors, then, seems not to have such a division between science and theology, and this, in our modern scientific eyes, makes their truth less true than ours, however attractive and architecturally sound they may now seem to many of us. Second, the Moorish belief is represented as not shared by all – ‘*Most* Moors believe...’ This also lowers truth value though ‘*Most*’ might still be ranked as *high* since it still represents a big number.. Finally the voice of the Moors is also given low modality through the phrase ‘*it is often thought*’ – because ‘thinking’ has a lower truth value than ‘knowing,’ for example, and – it is more ‘subjective.’

The European writer’s representation of truth, on the other hand, has high modality by saying ‘*in fact.*’ This high modality, however, is only to strengthen the writer’s view that the fact expressed in the sentence ‘The courtyards were always the centre of life at home for the Nasrids and,... , they received the utmost care and most recent innovations’ was only a thing of the past. The past tense suggests that the Moor’s view is no longer applicable today and as such it has less truth today. This is an interesting semiotic example of how ‘tense’ can serve as a signifier to signify low modality.

Clearly the writer assigns different modalities, different degrees of truth, to these different versions of reality, by using such modality resources of English as: frequency terms like *usually, often*; cognition verbs such as *believe, thought*; modality adjuncts such as *in fact*; tense, and so on. And what is more, he does so with great confidence in his judgment, as though he knows exactly what the Moors believe. Even if some readers were to disagree, even if they were to think, for instance, that water does not really serve ‘to reduce the effects of the extreme continental climate of Granada’ or that ‘The courtyards’ are still ‘the centre of life at home for the Nasrids’ and they still receive ‘the utmost care and most recent innovations,’ the readers would still also realize that the writer’s truth is a powerful one and difficult to challenge by someone who is not familiar with the Moorish architecture of Alhambra. In terms of character education this is an invaluable exercise for the students to engage in and tolerate a new and unfamiliar truth though still reserving some of his own doubts. The teaching objective is to have the student acquire the board-mindedness of keeping his own view of truth while tolerating the Other’s.

What is modalized	Linguistic realizations	Degree of modality	Kind of modality
<i>Most</i> Moors <i>believe</i> that the water also serves to reduce the effects of the extreme continental climate	Most believe present tense	high median high	frequency subjective ?
The water <i>usually</i> cools the atmosphere	usually present tense	median high	frequency ?

... <i>it is often thought</i> the sun glitters in the water and the marble, warming the air	is thought often present tense	low median high	subjective frequency ?
... <i>in fact</i> , they received the utmost care and most recent innovations	in fact past tense	high low	objective ?

Descriptive texts, then, can use the modality signifiers of language to impose a view of the truth that may differ in degree and kind. It is another good exercise for students to interact with a text and try, with the help of the teacher, to sense these different degrees kinds of truth.

The same modality signs of a descriptive text can also be used in dialogue, to *negotiate* a truth to which the participants of the dialogue will then agree or disagree to bind themselves. An example of such a dialogue can be seen in the following text from Washington Irving's *Tales of The Alhambra*.

5. CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH MODALITY IN A DIALOGUE

In 'The Legend of The Arabian Astrologer' – one of the episodes of Washington Irving's Arabian-Nights-like *Tales of The Alhambra*, the King and the Astrologer are engaged in a disagreement about what to do about a beautiful but mysterious captive Gothic princes whose father's forces the king has destroyed in the mountains.

"Beware, O king!" *whispered* Ibrahim Ebn Abu Ayub, "this *may be* one of these northern sorceresses of whom we have heard, who assume the most seductive forms to beguile the unwary. *Methinks I read* witchcraft in her eye, and sorcery in every movement. *Doubtless* this is the enemy pointed out by the talisman."

"Son of Abu Ayub," replied the king, "thou art a wise man, *I grant*, a conjuror for aught *I know*; but thou art little versed in the ways of a woman. In that knowledge *will* I yield to no man; no, not to the wise Solomon himself, notwithstanding the number of his wives and concubines. As to this damsel, *I see* no harm in her; she is fair to look upon, and finds favor in my eyes."

(Irving, <http://manybooks.net/titles/irvingwaother07alhambra.html>)

At first the Astrologer Ibrahim Ebn Abu Ayub attaches low modality to his warning, both verbally ('this *may be*...'), ('*Methinks*...'), and non-verbally ('*whispered*'). Then he bids for a somewhat higher modality value in ('*I read*...').

His low modality (*Methinks...*) implies that he actually doesn't really know, but he immediately switches to a higher (*I read...*) which implies his assurance of knowledge and analysis of the *witchcraft in her eye, and sorcery in every movement*. Finally he closes his argument with the very high, objective modality word *Doubtless...*

The King, on the other hand, is sure that the Gothic princess is not dangerous. He has never had any reason to doubt it. Tactfully, however, he starts out with a high modality of (*I grant...*) instead of just a low 'I think,' for example, and another strong (*I know ...*) in admitting the Astrologer's special qualities as 'a wise man' and 'conjurator,' but he immediately switches to assert himself with a median modality of 'In that knowledge [the ways of a woman] *will I yield to no man...*., then closes with a high (*I see no harm in her...*).

A dialogue usually presents a negotiation of truth between two parties – the speaker and the hearer, while in a descriptive text it is between the writer and the reader. Anyway whether based on imposition by an authority or authoritative text or on a consensus reached in dialogue, modality always requires two parties, the speaker or writer and the hearer or reader who, willingly or grudgingly, falls in line with the accepted or agreed version. As Hodge and Kress have put it:

Social control rests on control over the representation of reality which is accepted as the basis for judgment and action ... Whoever controls modality can control which version of reality will be selected out as the valid version in that semiotic process. All other versions can exist briefly, but are deprived of force in the longer term unless a group refuses to let that force be negated.

(1988: 147)

Along these lines we may sense how grudgingly the Astrologer must have been to have his representation of truth about the Gothic princess overrun by the King who has the 'control over the representation of reality.'

What is modalized	Linguistic realizations	Degree of modality	Kind of modality
The astrologer's voice of the princess as sorceress	<i>whispered</i>	low	Non-verbal
	<i>may be</i>	low	probability
	<i>Methinks</i>	low	subjective
	<i>I read</i>	high	subjective
	<i>Doubtless</i>	high	objective
	Present Tense	high	?
The King's voice of the astrologer as 'a wise man' and the princess as 'no harm'	<i>I grant</i>	high	subjective
	<i>I know</i>	high	subjective
	<i>will I yield</i>	median	probability
	<i>I see</i>	high	subjective
	Present Tense	high	?

The linguistic signifiers of modality are obviously very important in society. They enable people to signify the shared truths necessary to form groups which believe in the same things and are therefore able to cooperate effectively in society— and they also enable people to downgrade the truths of others, with all the potential consequences that may have, from excluding people from a group of friends to an outburst of religious and ideological clashes. If students are trained in the use of modality, i.e. the skill to know when to use high, median or low modality in a particular situation, they may be able to avoid such potential consequences as they will consciously shape into a flexible and tactful personality.

6. CONCLUSION: MODALITY, SOCIAL OBLIGATION, AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

Since the concept of ‘modality’ can be seen as the key to create the truth or reality values of various semiotic signifiers, it seems to be very close to philosophy. As a matter of fact the study of modality actually began in the philosophy of language, as a concern with the absolute, context-independent truth of assertions. Then it moved to linguistics, which, as we have seen from the examples in this essay, started to emphasize the *expression* of truth values, but still remained mainly concerned with the modality of representations. Halliday moved this a step further when he observed that the same modal auxiliaries can express ‘what exists’ and ‘what is allowed’. For instance, ‘*may*’ can express not only *possibility* – ‘Subur may be visiting a Middle Eastern palace’ – but also permission, or its opposite – ‘Subur may not visit a Middle Eastern palace’ – and ‘*must*’ can express not only the certainty of logical truth but also the absoluteness of a social obligation. Thus there is a close connection between degrees of representational truth and degrees of social obligation. Philosophers have recognized this as well, through their concept of ‘deontic’ logic, the logic of obligation and permission (Von Wright, 1951).

So called modal concepts might conveniently be divided into three or four main groups. There are the alethic modes or modes of truth. These are concepts such as the necessary (the necessarily true), the possible (the possibly true), and the contingent (the contingently true). There are the epistemic modes or modes of knowing. These are concepts such as the verified (that which is known to be true), the undecided, and the falsified (that which is known to be false). There are the deontic modes or modes of obligation. These are concepts such as the obligatory (that which we ought to do), the permitted (that which we are allowed to do), and the forbidden (that which we must not do). As a fourth main group of modal categories one might add the existential modes or modes of existence. These are concepts such as universality, existence, and emptiness (of properties or classes).

(Wright, 1951: 1)

All this laid the foundations for the social semiotic view that modality should be thought of as central to social life. A language exercise in modality, consequently, will train the student to define his/ her own truths, and relate them to the truths of others. This will ultimately shape a student with a tolerant, broad-minded, and tactful character.

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