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# Lives in language

**Cameron Morin** looks at the life of a British semanticist and language typologist who influenced how we think about the notions of mood and modality, which allow us to express degrees of possibility and necessity of events, in languages around the world

## Frank Robert Palmer (1922–2019)

**F**rank Robert Palmer is often cited as a pioneering scholar of modality in modern language science.

Most linguistics students who have taken a course or written an essay on the topic will have encountered his renowned book *Mood and Modality*, first published in 1986 and re-edited in 2001. This is far, however, from being the only highlight of his career – his contributions to the emergent discipline of Grammatical Typology, as well as his dedication to the institutional promotion of linguistic research in universities, have had a lasting influence in the field and made him an important figure in 20th century theoretical linguistics.

Palmer was born in 1922 and grew up in Kendleshire, South Gloucestershire. He attended primary school in the nearby village of Hambrook until 1932, and then Bristol Grammar School, from

where, thanks to his hard work, he was admitted to the University of Oxford in 1941. His undergraduate years were interrupted, however, by the Second World War, during which he served for the British Army in Africa, attaining the military rank of lieutenant. It was only then that he returned to Oxford to pursue his studies, receiving a Master of Arts in 1949.

In the years that followed, Palmer took up a lectureship in Linguistics at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London. It was in this context that he was introduced to a stimulating research atmosphere that encouraged the documentation and analysis of geographically and structurally diverse languages. The department of Linguistics at SOAS was directed by the reputed professor John Rupert Firth; his supervision was instrumental in Palmer's early

specialisation in Ethiopian languages such as Tigre, Bilin, Amharic and Cushitic, which allowed him to travel to Ethiopia, where he engaged in fieldwork for a year. During his time in London, he became acquainted with colleagues who would become prominent linguists in their own right, such as Richard Sprigg, Terence Mitchell and Mark Halliday, the leading architect of Systemic-Functional Linguistics.

Leaving SOAS in 1960, Palmer became Professor of Linguistics, and after a short stay at the University of Bangor, he moved to the University of Reading, where he became a founding member of the Department of Linguistic Science. While maintaining his interest in diverse non-European languages, he also devoted a substantial amount of research to English grammar, publishing an influential

book on Modality and the English Modals in 1976. His subsequent focus on modality was fueled by the fact that, unlike tense and aspect, the former category of verb meaning had not received any unitary treatment or definition across a wide variety of languages. Modality was basically understood as the expression of several degrees of possibility and necessity regarding events. This was a driving motivation in the writing and publication of his most important book, *Mood and Modality*, one year before he retired and became Emeritus Professor.

Based on data from an astounding 122 languages, Palmer distinguished modality from tense and aspect by arguing that the latter two were associated with the nature of an event itself, while the former was associated with the nature of the proposition (or statement) describing the event ('He sees the fox' vs 'He may see the fox') – hence the terms derived from Latin *modus*, a 'way' or 'manner' of evaluating a state of affairs.

Palmer argued that modality in natural language can be realised by two different means, with one being dominant over the other in many languages of the world: mood operates a binary dichotomy between assertiveness and non-assertiveness, sometimes known as *realis* versus *irrealis* (in the declining English subjunctive versus the indicative, for instance) while modal systems introduce several commuting terms in the semantic realm of non-assertiveness (typically in the English modals). Within modality, Palmer reorganised

a series of subcategories that were to influence decades of research to come: event-oriented modality included dynamic meaning (which focuses internally on the participant, as in 'Tigers can bite') and deontic meaning (which focuses externally on the participant, as in 'You can leave the room now'), and proposition-oriented modality included epistemic meaning (factual judgments about an event such as 'It may rain tomorrow') and evidential meaning (evidence-based statements about an event such as 'He must be cooking chicken').

Although competing accounts and various contentions subsequently emerged, the book soon became a reference point in research on modality, and remained relevant up to the early 2000s when the author published an updated edition. Moreover, it was a substantial contribution to research concerned with the variability of languages in the world and the possibility of inferring generalisations from this variation, also known as the discipline of Linguistic Typology.

Palmer followed up the typological orientation of his research with an influential study on Grammatical Roles and Relations. By distinguishing grammatical roles (such as Agent, Patient and Beneficiary) from grammatical relations (including Subject, Object and Indirect Object), he showed that their interplay in English was, in light of all the languages in the world documented up until then, far from being the norm, and that future studies should always

take this into account.

Throughout his career, Palmer proved to be a brilliant linguist as well as a reliable academic and colleague. As Mike Garman put it on the 50th anniversary of the Department of Linguistic Science at Reading in 2014, Palmer had "leadership qualities of intellectual inquiry, fearless honesty, down-to-earth temperament, and pragmatic outlook. In an age when Professors were still customarily addressed by their staff with their title, Frank insisted on being called Frank. He had the confidence to let colleagues 'get on with it', and expected them to do so".

Frank Palmer died on 1 November 2019, at the age of 97. ¶

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## Find out more

### Books

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### About Palmer and Linguistics at Reading

Mike Garman (2016) *The Department of Linguistic Science and its Successors*, University of Reading Language Studies Working Papers 7, 5–12.