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Acquisition of modal forms in discourse: a crosslinguistic and developmental approach

Introduction

This research seeks to examine the L2 acquisition of modality and mood in relation with narrative discourse organization. Previous research is scarce and largely based on interview and discussion data. We hypothesize that the choice of modality marker is constrained by the informational status of the utterance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We seek to examine:

1. how native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) of French and English modalize when retelling a story;
2. what type of modal forms (personal vs logical meaning, roughly equivalent to deontic and epistemic modal meanings) are assigned to a specific discursive function in a narrative context.

Second Language Acquisition of Modality

Expression of modal meanings in an L2:

- Learners in the first stages of L2 acquisition (e.g., Dittmar, 1993; Giacalone Ramat, 1995; Stoffel & Véronique, 1993)
- rely on pragmatic means and their interlocutor's capacity to reconstruct modal intentions through inference.
- show greater use of deontic (personal meaning) markers than of epistemic (logical meaning) ones.
- Use of explicit modal markers increases with time.

→ Early emergence of the expression of modality (though not necessarily with target modality markers)

Modality in discourse

In narrative discourse, speakers have to:

- select the protagonists they are going to speak about and the events they participate in;
- provide information regarding temporal ordering and spatial location.

The **informational structure of a text** is constrained by the *Quaestio*, the underlying question to which the text responds (von Stutterheim, 1993). For a narrative, the question is "What happens to P at t0, t1,...tn?" where P is a given protagonist and t is a given moment in time.

Foreground: utterances which provide a direct answer to the *Quaestio*. Chronological backbone of the story (sequence of events) with validity status.

Background: other utterances (e.g., comments, explanations, motivations, etc.)

→ The default modal value in a narrative is neutral, or "factual" (von Stutterheim, 1993); as a rule, modals do not appear in narrative heads (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 28)

Although modalized sentences ('the dog has to throw [a scarf]', MIC, EngL1, utt 145) are generally considered background, they can be part of the storyline by means of implication (von Stutterheim 1993:14-17): thanks to the context, the hearer will assume that the dog has actually thrown something. There can be no such implication with epistemic modals. A first study (Leclercq & Edmonds, 2017) highlights the predominance of personal meaning modals in this context.

Selected references

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Modality in French and English

Modality: a semantic domain providing the "addition of a supplement or overlay of meaning to the most neutral semantic value of the proposition of an utterance, namely factual and declarative". Bybee and Fleischman (1995: 2)

French

- Modal verbs (*pouvoir* 'can', *devoir* 'must', *savoir* 'know/can', *vouloir* 'want...') can be used as main verbs (*je le veux* 'I want it') as well as auxiliary modal verbs (*je veux manger* 'I want to eat') and can combine with aspect and voice.
- Other verbs, such as *sembler* 'seem' and *falloir* 'have to' can be considered to express a type of modality (with logical modal meaning).

English

- The English modal system includes nine modal verbs (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *should*, *will*, *would*, *shall*), which are invariable.
- The system also includes semi-modals, some of which (such as *have to* or *be going to*) take tense and person inflections.
- Both modals and semi-modals can combine with aspect and voice.
- Other verbal expressions may also express volition (*want*), intention (*decide*), obligation (*be obliged to*), possibility (*be likely to*), or inference (*seem*) without sharing the syntactic properties of modals.

Personal vs logical modal meaning

We have adopted Biber et al. (2002)'s classification, which distinguishes between personal and logical modal meanings:

Personal (intrinsic) modal meaning refers to the control of actions and events by human and other agents. These meanings are personal permission, obligation, and volition (or intention). **Logical (extrinsic) modal meaning** refers to the logical status of states or events. It usually refers to levels of certainty, likelihood, or logical necessity. (Biber et al. 2002: 176-177)

Methodology



PARTICIPANTS

15 English-speaking learners of French (5 lower intermediate, 5 upper intermediate, 5 advanced)

15 French-speaking learners of English (5 lower intermediate, 5 upper intermediate, 5 advanced)

10 English NSs, 10 French NSs

DATA COLLECTION

- Proficiency: American University of Paris placement test (L2 French) / Oxford Quick Placement Test (L2 English).
- Oral film retelling task (Rekso cartoon featuring two protagonists (the dog and a little boy) who go ice-skating on a frozen lake. Data collection procedure from APN Project (Watorek 2004). Task: « Watch the movie and tell the interviewer what happened ».
- Database of 50 participants / 3234 utterances.

DATA CODING

Transcribed narratives (CLAN) are coded for modal reference (personal, logical, mood), modal semantics (ability/possibility, necessity, inference...) and for informational structure (foreground / background)

Analysis

- Cross-tabulations showing verbal expressions of modality across L2 level and in the two languages
- Cross-tabulations showing how verbal expressions of modality pattern as a function of informational structure (foreground vs. background)

Utterance	Modalization	Type	Modal semantics	Inf. structure
<i>mais <il tombe> [/]/ il est tombé dans l'eau</i>	X			Foreground
<i>'but he falls he fell in the water'</i>				
<i>quand le glace a cassé</i>	X			Background
<i>'when the ice broke'</i>				
<i>et il n'a pas pu sortir tout seul</i>	✓	Personal	Ability/possibility	Background
<i>'and he couldn't get out alone'</i>				
<i>et <le dog> [/]/ le chien a dû venir à son aide</i>	✓	Logical	Necessity	Foreground
<i>'and the dog had to come help him'</i>				

Table 1. Example of coding (advanced learner of French)

RQ1: Verbal expressions of modality across L2 level

- Complete corpus: Modalized (n = 410) vs non modalized (n = 3208)

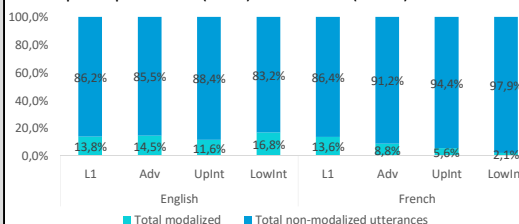


Table 2. % of modalized and non modalized utterance by group

Modal meaning	French					English					Total
	L1 n=10	Adv n=5	Up Int n=5	Low Int n=5		L1 n=10	Adv n=5	Up Int n=5	Low Int n=5		
Logical	23	5	1			30	7	2			94
inference						6					6
necessity	8	3	1			3	2				17
possibility	4					4	3	1			12
prediction	13	2				17	2	1			35
certainty	2	1	1			18	1		1		24
Personal	83	16	9	2		112	31	23	27		303
ability/possibility	41	10	4			55	15	11	15		138
intention	29	6	4	1		45	9	12	7		113
obligation						5	3				8
permission						1					1
volition	13		1	1		6	4		5		30

Table 3. Modal semantics expressed by group

RQ2. Verbal expressions of modality in foreground/background

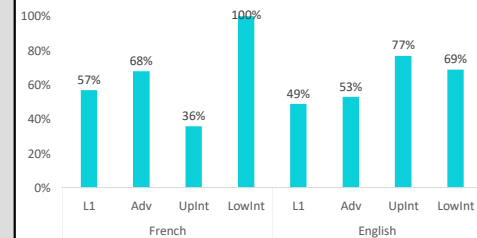


Table 4. % of modalized utterances in the foreground by group

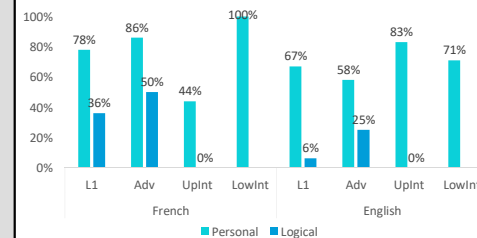


Table 5. % of personal and logical modal meanings in foreground by group

→ **Logical modal meanings:** at lower levels, they are restricted to the background; advanced learners use such forms in both the background and foreground, although they tend to overuse them in the foreground (compared to the NSs)

→ **Personal modal meanings:** used in both background and foreground across levels (cf. lower intermediate learners of French)

Next steps: a closer look at modalization in the background of narratives (see following extract from ROM, an advanced L2 English learners)

Logical modal meaning to evaluate an outcome

and tries to reach for the hand of his friend. foreground
but again <he cannot> [/] he cannot do it. foreground
so he thinks foreground
that again the scarf might help. background
so <he> [/] <he er flings> [/] he casts his scarf. foreground
and the boy catches it. foreground
and so they they' re now able to go back to <the> [/] the foreground
bank of the lake <safe> [/] safe and sound. foreground
And so they hug. foreground
and the little boy runs runs home. foreground
and we can see him # through the window. background

Personal modal meaning to make a comment

Conclusions

Across levels and languages, personal modal meanings dominate and are most frequent in the foreground; this is unsurprising, as they can help move the story forward (i.e., respond to the question *What happened?*)

Much more variety (and freedom) is seen in modalization in the background:

- NSs make use of personal and logical modal meaning in order to express comments, evaluations, motivations, suppositions, etc.
- Higher proficiency learners also make use of logical meaning in the background; only advanced learners use such modal meanings in the foreground, where they use proportionally more such examples than NSs (see Table 5).

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