

Review of F R Palmer, Mood and Modality (Second Edition), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2001,

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Mood and Modality (Second Edition) F R Palmer Cambridge textbooks in Linguistics, Cambridge University Press 2001 236 pages

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Published by The Linguist List 2001.

Modality has gained much popularity among linguists since the first edition of this classic book in 1986. The different ways in which different languages allow the speaker to insert themselves into their discourse, expressing their desires or opinions ("You have to be joking!" You could have helped me!") have become a common subject of study. From syntax to prosody, the study of modality has spawned innumerable academic papers.

Palmer's work is fundamentally a catalogue of ways in which modality is expressed grammatically in languages. Examples are taken from many dozens of languages, and categorized conceptually. Because of this, it constitutes an Aladdin's cave of wonderful language mechanisms, but is more likely to be useful as a reference book than as bedside reading.

One of the difficulties faced by Palmer is that linguists working on modality have often chosen their own vocabulary for distinguishing different types of modality. There is no internationally recognized set of technical terms which allow us to quickly categorize uses. Moreover, since some of the uses are conceptually rather complex, establishing an agreed jargon is fraught with difficulty. One of Palmer's strengths is that he brings together examples from the research of many different writers, and he suggests a standardized vocabulary to characterize the many varieties of modality.

The first part of the book attempts to clarify basic concepts. He begins with the distinction between Realis and Irrealis - unmarked forms and modalized forms - and the distinction between propositional modality (where different types of desire/will/capacity are expressed) and event modality (where different information about the truth of a proposition is given).

These last two categories are broader than the traditional categories of "modality of action" and "modality of knowledge, and the following chapter look in great detail at the different sub-types of modality which are marked in different languages.

As an example of different types of event modality, we could mention that different forms are used in the language central Pomo to signify

a) It rained

b) It rained (that's an established fact)
c) It rained (I saw it)
d) It rained (I heard it)
e) It rained (I was told)
f) It rained (everything is wet).

The rest of the book categorizes in great detail a very large number of examples of propositional modality and event modality, and then looks at how different grammatical categories (such as tense and mood) are used to express modality in the languages of the world;

This makes it a difficult book to summarize, because there are so many types both of propositional and event modality.

The book also analyzes in some detail the interaction between modality and other grammatical phenomena such as "past" tenses, and negation. For example, the negative in "You may not borrow my car." Negates the permission - the modality, whereas the negation in "He might not have heard you" negates the event. (It is possible that he didn't hear you).

Despite my natural perfectionist instincts, I only found one significant mistake in the book, on page 103. Palmer write "MAY and MUST followed by *have* are always epistemic, never deontic" (that is, they are always about certainty, never about ordering people). But "You must have finished the work by next Friday afternoon, or I'm not paying you," would seem to me to be a perfectly reasonable counter-example.

I didn't find this last example myself, it comes from the standard work of Paul Larreya *Le possible et le néecessaire -modalités et auxiliaires modaux en anglais britannique.* This is my little plug for this book, not mentioned in Palmer's bibliography, but considered in France as THE standard work on modality.

All in all, though, Palmer's book is a handy reference and a useful attempt to draw together many researchers work into a useable catalogue of modality.

John Mullen

I am a member of the Linguistics and Didactics group at Paris 12 University, though I also work on British Trade Union history.. My most recent paper on language, looked at referee design and its effect on vocabulary choice in the editorials of *The Economist*. I am a lecturer in the English Department at Paris 12.