Carmen POPA

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu, Facultatea de Litere şi Arte
„Lucian Blaga" University from Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts

# Expressing modality in English and German by other means than modal verbs

*Expressing modality in English and German by other means than modal verbs*

This contrastive study of English and German gives us an insight into the ways of expressing modality through other lexical means than modal verbs. Within the framework of English modality, considered to be the reference system, I provided German similarities and dissimilarities for each category of lexical means: semi-modals, semi-auxiliaries, modal words, modal adjectives, modal nouns. It is explained how important it is to distinguish between a categorical statement and a modal one. From these considerations modality is to be understood as a semantic category which covers such notions as: possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation, permission etc. The projection of any of these notions onto the content of the proposition indicates that the speaker is presenting this content not as a simple assertion of fact but rather expressing the personal attitude towards that action.

**Keywords:** modality, semantic category, semi-modals, semi-auxiliaries, modal-words, modal-adjectives, modal-nouns

**Institution's address**: Bd-ul. Victoriei, nr. 5-7, Sibiu, 550024, România, t**el:** +40-(269)21.55.56, fax**:** +40-(269)21.27.07, **e**-mail**:** *litere@ulbsibiu.ro*, w**eb:** http://*litere.ulbsibiu.ro*

**Personal e-mail**: *corasabi2004@yahoo.com*

It's worth analysing the English and German modal systems in a contrastive manner, both languages being related in many respects. Within the framework of English modality, considered to be the reference system, I provided German similarities and dissimilarities. Each English modal situation is given its German equivalent, even if this is expressed by other means than modal ones (e.q. full-verbs, subjunctives).

It is important to distinguish between a categorical statement and a modalized one. From a semantic point of view in making an assertion such as *It's raining/Es regnet* speakers express a proposition and at the same time commit themselves to the truth of that proposition. The utterance *It's raining but I don't belive it/Es regnet aber ich glaube es nicht* is semantically unacceptable because the second part of it contradicts the categorical assertion of the first. In: *It **may** be raining/Es **dürfte** regnen; It **can't** be raining/Es **kann** nicht regnen; It **must** be raining/Es **muss** regnen* the speakers are not commiting themselves wholeheartedly to the truth of the proposition. They are not making a categorical assertion, but are rather modifying their commitment to some degree by expressing a judgement or assessment of the truth of the situation. This is an important choice which speakers face everytime they formulate a declarative clause: to make a **categorical stetement** or to express less than total commitment by **modalizing**.

From these considerations, modality is to be understood as a semantic category which covers such notions as: **possibility, probability, necessity, volition, obligation, permission, etc.** The projection of any of these notions onto the content of the proposition indicates that the speaker is presenting this content not as simple assertion of fact, but coloured rather by personal attitude or intervention. Very general, modality may be taken to express a **relation** with reality, whereas a non-modal utterance treats the process **as** reality.

Modality is expressed mainly by modal verbs but also by other means such as ***semi-modals***, ***modal-idioms***, ***semi-auxiliares***, ***modal words***,

*modal adjectives and modal nouns.*

**1. Semi-modals: dare/es wagen or sich unterstehen, need/müssen, used to/pflegten zu**

**Dare, need and used to** can be used as modals or they can be used in other ways. When they are used as modals, they have some characteristics, which other modals do not have. For these reasons, they are sometimes called semi-modals.

When **dare** and **need** are used as modals, they have the same meaning as when they are followed by a "to"-infinitive clause. However they are normally used as modals only in negative sentences and in questions.

**Dare** has no German modal counterpart, but the full-verb **es wagen** or the reflexive one **sich unterstehen**. Unlike **dare, need** has a modal equivalent **müssen. Need not** is translated by **nicht brauchen**, a German semi-modal verb. Consider following examples:

*Nobody **dare** disturb him.*
*With his father, he **need not** fear.*

*How **dare** you speak to me like that ?*

***Need** you go so soon ? Niemand **wagt es**, ihn zu stören.*
*In Gegenwart seines Vaters, **braucht** er sich **nicht** zu ängstigen.*
*Wie **unterstehst** du dich, so mit mir zu sprechen ?*
***Musst** du so früh gehen ?*

**"Dare not"** and **"need not"** are often shortened to **daren't** and **needn't**. There are no contracted forms for the German modal verbs.[1]

Unlike other modals, **dare** has some inflected forms which are occasionally used. In the simple present tense, the third person singular form can be either **dare** or **dares**.[2]

In the simple past tense, either **dare** or **dared**can be used. **Dare** is more formal than **dared**. In this case the preterite form of the German verb **wagen** is used.[3]

**Need** is not inflected when it is used as a modal.

Normally, modals cannot be used with other modals. However, **dare** can be used with **will, would, should,** and **might**, as it follows:

*No one **will dare** override what the towns decide.*

*I **wouldn't dare** go to Europe.*

*I **should not dare** dogmatize about a matter such as this. Niemand **wird** es **wagen**, die Entscheidungen der Behörde in Frage zu stellen.*
*Ich **würde** es **nicht wagen** nach Europa zu fliegen.*
*Ich **sollte** es **nicht wagen** so bestimmt über diese Sache zu debattieren.*

Unlike other modals **dare** can be used with the auxiliary verb **do**.[4]

**Used to** has inflected forms, and cannot be used with other modals. The most common German verb used instead of **used to** is **pflegte zu**. Notice that **pflegte zu** isn't a modal verb but carries a modal meaning, as it is shown by the following examples:

*What did we **used to** call it ?*
*It **used to** be said, ... Wie **pflegten** wir das zu nennen ?*
*Man **pflegte zu** sagen,...*

**Used to/pflegte zu** is used to say that something happened regularly or existed in the past, although it no longer happens or exists. **Used to** is similar to **would** when it is used to describe repeated actions in the past. However, unlike **would, used to** can also describe past states and situations.

*I'm not quite as mad as I **used to** be.*

*Actresses **used to** be very reluctant to wear tight corsets. Ich bin nicht mehr so närrisch wie ich zu sein **pflegte**.*
*Schauspielerinnen **pflegten** sehr ungern enge Korsetts zu tragen.*

Unlike in English in German two modals do often occur in one sentence[5].

**2. Modal idioms and semi-auxiliaries**

Two other categories of verbs are intermediate between auxiliaries and main verbs. They express modal or aspectual meaning.

(a) The **modal idioms** are a combination of auxiliary and infinitive or adverb. None of them have nonfinite forms and they are therefore always the first verb in the verb phrase. The most common modal idioms are: ***had better, would rather, have got to, be to.***

There, is no specific category in German named "modal idioms". The English modal idioms may have as counterparts either a subjunctive construction (in the case of **had better**)[6], a modal verb (in the case of **would rather, have got to**, sometimes **be to**[7]) or a modal Infinitive (in the case of **be to**[8]).

(b) The **semi-auxiliaries** are a set of verb idioms, which are introduced by one of the primary verbs **have** and **be**. They have nonfinite forms and can therefore occur in combination with preceding auxiliaries. Indeed, two or more semi-auxiliaries can occur in sequence. Common semi-auxiliaries include: ***be able to, be about to, be bound to, be due to, be going to, have to, be likely to, be supposed to.***

The German counterparts of these semi-auxiliaries may be a full-verb, a verbal expression, a

modal verb or a modal Infinitive. Consider the following examples:

*He **was not able to** get up.*

*He **was about to** go out.*

*He is **bound to** tell me.*

*He is **bound to** be late.*

*He **is due to** return today.*

*He **is going to** read it.*

*He **is not likely** to come.*

*He **is supposed to** be rich.*

*We **have to** obey.* *Er **könnte nicht** aufstehen. (modal verb **können** preterite)* or: *Er war **nicht imstande** aufzustehen. (verbal expression)*

*Er **war im Begriff** hinaus zu gehen. (verbal expression)*

*Er **ist verpflichtet**, es mir zu sagen. (verbal expression)*

*Er **muss** ja zu spät kommen. (modal verb present)*

*Er **wird** heute zurückerwartet. (full verb Passiv, present)*

*Er **wird/will** es bald lesen. (full verb Passiv, present)*

*Es **ist nicht wahrscheinlich**, dass er kommen wird. (verbal expression)*

*Er **soll** reich sein. (modal verb present)*

*Wir **haben zu/müssen** gehorchen. (modal infinitive present/modal verb present)*

### 3. Modal words

Besides the modal verbs, the modal defective words may express the idea of modality. The modal words have developed from adverbs, so nowadays adverbs and modal words are homonymous (ex. happily, surely, certainly, etc.) Formally, the modal words are identical with the adverbs but they differ in meaning and syntactic function in a sentence. The modal words act as parantheses in a sentence (*"We have fulfiled our obligations" he said pompously and yet not quite **certainly**. (certainly=adverb)*; ***Certainly**, my uncle had a way with him. (certainly-modal verb)).*

There is a similar class of words in German, **modalwörter** (i.e. **modal words**), that are semantically and syntactically different from adverbs.

Both English and German modal words have common features, as follows:

(a) the speaker uses modal words to lend a particular self-appreciation to his utterance or to stress a certain subjective shade of meaning.

(b) modal words do not have a nominal function, and are richer in content than the auxiliaries.

(c) modal words do not refer only to a specific part of speech but to the sentence as a whole.

Both English and German modal words may take the first place in a sentence and they may be required as an answer to yes or no questions.[9]

Is it quite difficult to distinguish modal words from adverbs, both having the same form. Though there are some syntactic criteria that enable us to make the difference:

Unlike adverbs, modal words may be transformed into a main clause:

***Probably**, he will come.*
***It is probable**, that he will come.*
*(modal word)*

*He comes **punctually**.*
**It is **punctually**, that he comes.*
*(adverb)*

*Er kommt **vermutlich**.*
***Man vermutet**, dass er kommt.*

*Er kommt **pünktlich**.*
**Es ist **pünktlich** so, dass er kommt.*

b) Unlike adverbs, modal words may answer to yes-no questions:

*Will he come ? - **Probably**.*
But not:
****Punctually***
*Kommt er ? - **Vermutlich**.*
But not:
****Pünktlich***

(c)German has one more criterion that stresses this difference between modal words and adverbs: the negation **nicht (not)** is placed before the adverb and after the modal word, like in the following examples:

*He probably won't come.*
*He does not come punctually.*

*Er kommt **vermutlich nicht**. (modal word) Er kommt **nicht pünktlich**. (adverb)*

**Modal words** can refer both to style and to content. The ones referring to style can be looked at as abbreviated clauses in which the adverbial would have the role of manner adverbs: ***Frankly**, I am tired./**Ehrlich**, ich bin müde.* Sometimes it has full clausal form.[10]

The comment on the content of an utterance may be of two kinds: relating to **certainty** or relating to **evaluation.** Both can be expressed by a wide range of adverb phrases, by prepositional phrases and especially those referring to style by clauses.

The modal words relating to certainty comment on the truth-value of what is said, firmly endorsing it, expressing doubt, or posing contingencies such

as conditions or reasons. For example, beside the statement *"The play was written by Francis Beaumont"/"Das Theatherstück wurde von Francis Beaumont geschrieben"*, we may have:

***undoubtedly***.

*The play was* ***apparently perhaps*** *written by Francis Beaumont.*

***sicher***

*Das Theatherstück wurde* ***anscheinend wahrscheinlich*** *von Francis Beaumont geschrieben.*

The modal words relating to evaluation express an attitude to an utterance by way of evaluation.

***Wisely****, Mrs Jensen consulted her lawyer.*

*("Mrs Jensen was wise in consulting her lawyer")*

***Klug****, Frau Jensen hat ihren Anwalt zu Rate gezogen.*

Other evaluation modal words carry no implication of comment on the subject.[11]

**4. Modal adjectives**

Adjectives may carry a modal meaning when they are used in impersonal constructions or are part of a nominal group.

*It's* ***possible*** *for him to came.* (Impersonal construction)

*a* ***likely*** *winner of this afternoon's race*

(nominal group) *Es ist* ***möglich****, dass er kommt.*

*ein* ***wahrscheinlicher*** *Gewinner des Rennens an diesem Nachmittag.*

**5. Modal nouns**

Such nouns as:

***possibility / möglichkeit, probability / wahrscheinlichkeit, chance / chance*** and ***likelihood / vermutung*** convey the idea of modality. In German the use of modal nouns is not as common as the use of modal adjectives or modal verbs.

*There is no* ***possibility*** *of his coming.*

*The* ***probability*** *is that he will come.*

*There's just a* ***chance*** *that he may come. There is a strong* ***likelihood*** *of his succeeding in business.*

*Es besteht keine* ***Möglichkeit****, dass er kommt.*

*Es besteht die* ***Wahrscheinlichkeit****, dass er kommt.*

*Es gibt nur eine* ***Chance****, dass er kommt. Man äubert die* ***Vermutung*** *er wird in seinen Geschäften erfolgreich sein.*

**Conclusion**: The material above constitutes an essential foundation for the contrastive study of English and German modality. It is very important to bottom-line this contrastive study of modality by underlining two major situations:

(a) The ones in which English and German modal systems function in the same way.

(b) The ones in which there is no overlapping between the two systems.

Both cases are briefly presented as follows:

(a) 1. **Have to/es besteht die Notwendigkeit** conveys **obligation** generally without specifying who does the compelling. **Have not to/nicht müssen** expresses **prohibition**.

2. The semi-modal **need,** respectively its German counterpart **brauchen** is used to express the ideea of **necessity** (e.q. *It* ***needs*** *but to become known./Es* ***braucht*** *nur bekannt zu werden.)*

3. There is both in English and German a class of modal words (Modalwörter) that act like paranthesis in a sentence. Formally, they are identical with the adverbs, but they differ in meaning and syntactic function. (e.q. ***Certainly****, he has not recognized me./****Allerdings*** *hat er mich nicht erkannt.)*

4. Both English and German adjectives may carry a modal meaning when they are used in impersonal constructions or are part of a nominal group. (e.q. ***It's possible*** *for him to come./****Es ist möglich****, dass er kommt.* respectively ***a likely*** *winner of this afternoon's race/ein* ***wahrscheinlicher*** *Gewinner des Rennens an diesem Nachmittag)*

5. There are some English and German nouns that convey the idea of modality. (e.q. *There is no* ***possibility*** *of his coming./Es besteht keine* ***Möglichkeit****, dass er kommt.)*

(b) 1.To express the idea of **probability** the English modal **will** is translated into German by the non-modal verb **werden**. (e.q. *They'll be on holiday at the moment./Sie* ***werden*** *jetzt Ferien haben.)*

2. In making a **promise shall** and **should** are translated by the non-modal **werden** followed by an additional statement such as: *Ich verspreche/I promise you; Ich gebe dir mein Wort/I give you my Wort; Auf mein Wort/(up) on my word.* If **should** is translated by **sollten** the meaning changes from promise to recommendation.

3. The semi-modal **need** is translated by the German modal **müssen** expressing the idea of **logical necessity,** and not by its German semi-modal counterpart **brauchen**. (e.q. *It* ***needs*** *to be done./Es* ***muss*** *getan werden.)*

4. The semi-modal **dare** is translated by the non-modal verbs **sich unterstehn** or **es wagen**. (e.q. *Nobody* ***dare*** *disturb him./Niemand* ***wagt*** *es ihn zu stören; How* ***dare*** *you speak to me like that ?/Wie* ***unterstehst*** *du dich mit mir so zu sprechen ?)*

5. The semi-modal **used to** is translated by the German non-modal **pflegte zu,** both being used to

say that something happened regulary or existed in the past, although it no longer happens or exists. (e.q. *I'm not quite as mad as I* ***used to*** *be./Ich bin nicht mehr so närrisch, wie ich zu sein* ***pflegte.)***

6. The English modal idioms (a combination of auxiliary and infinitive or adverb) are translated into German by subjunctives, modal verbs or modal infinitives. (e.q. ***had better/es wäre besser; would rather/möchte; have got to/müssen; be to/sollen*** or ***ist zu)***

7. The English semi-auxiliares (verb idioms introduced by **have** or **be**) are translated into German by full-verbs, verbal expressions, modals, modal infinitives. (e.q. ***be able to/können*** or ***imstande sein zu; be about to/im Begriff sein zu; be bound to/verpflichtet sein zu*** or ***müssen; be due to/werden; be going to/werden*** or ***wollen; be likely to/wahrscheinlich sein; be supposed to/sollen; have to/müssen*** or ***haben zu).***

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


1. Alexander, L.G. **English Grammar**, Longman, London and New York, 1994

2. Buscha, J., Heinrich, G., Zoch,I. **Modalverben**, VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, Leipzig, 1989

3. Duden, Drosdowski, G. **Grammatik der deutschen Gegenwartssprache**, Dudenverlag, Mannheim 1984

4. Greenbaum, S., Quirk, R. **A Student's Grammar of the English Language**, Longman, 1990

5. Helbig, G., Buscha, J. **Deutsche Grammatik. Ein Handbuch für den Ausländerunerricht**, Leipzig, 1972

6. Leech, G., Svartvik, J. **A Communicative Grammar of English**, Longman 1991

7. Palmer, F.R. **Mood and Modality**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986

8. Stănescu, S. **Probleme der Wortklassifikation am Beispiel der unflektierbaren Wortarten**, Tipografia Universităţii Bucureţti, 1992

9. Stănescu, S. **Limba germană. Morfosintaxa**, Tipografia Universităţii Bucureţti, 1980

10. Zdrenghea, M., Townson, N. **English Grammar**, Clusium, Cluj-Napoca, 1995


Note:

1 *I* ***daren't*** *ring Jeremy again. Ich* ***wage*** *es* ***nicht****, Jeremy erneut anzurufen.*
We **needn't** worry about that. Wir **brauchen** uns deswegen **nicht** zu sorgen.
2 *When he comes, she* ***dare not*** *express her feelings.Wenn er da ist,* ***wagt*** *sie es nicht, ihre Gefühle zu zeigen.*
*What nobody* ***dares*** *suggest is that women be told to stay at home.*
*Was niemand sich* ***untersteht*** *vorzuschlagen, ist, den Frauen zu sagen, sie sollten zu Hause bleiben.*
3 *He* ***dare not*** *take his eyes off his assailant. Er* ***wagte*** *es* ***nicht****, die Augen von seinem Angreifer abzuwenden.*
*He* ***dared not*** *show he was pleased. Er* ***wagte*** *es* ***nicht*** *zu zeigen, dass er zufrieden war.*
4 *We* ***do not dare*** *examine it. Wir* ***wagen*** *es* ***nicht*** *dies zu untersuchen.*
**Don't** you ever **dare** come here again! **Untersteh** dich, nochmals her zu kommen!
5 *Ich* ***muss*** *erst* ***wollen*** *und dann werde ich auch schwimmen lernen.*
6 You ***had better*** go! Es ***wäre besser***, du gingest! (Past Subjunctive)
7 *I* ***would rather*** *think.... Ich* ***möchte*** *fast glauben....(modal verb:* ***mögen*** *past subjunctive)*
*I* ***would*** *much* ***rather*** *go. Ich* ***möchte*** *viel lieber gehen. (modal verb* ***mögen*** *past subjunctive)*
*We* ***have got to*** *do it. Wir* ***müssen*** *es tun. (modal verb* ***mögen*** *present)*
*I* ***am to*** *go. Ich* ***soll*** *gehen. (modal verb* ***sollen*** *present)*
8 *He* ***is to*** *be pitted. Er* ***ist zu*** *bedauern.(modal Infinitive present)*
9 ***Certainly****, he has not recognized me.* ***Allerdings*** *hat er mich nicht erkannt.*
Did she like Kate ? – **Apparently**. Mag sie Kate ? - **Anscheinend**.
10 ***If I may say so without giving you offence****, I think your writing is rather immature. / Wenn ich so sagen dürfte, ohne dich zu beleidigen, meine ich, dass deine Auffassung eher kindisch ist.*
11 ***Naturally***, my husband expected me home by then. / ***Selbstverständlich*** hat mich, zu der Zeit, mein Mann zu Hause erwartet.