

Kyriakoula Drakaki  
Dimitra Boudopoulou  
Constantina Katsari  
Vasileia Tsimi-Tsimidopoulou  
Niki Tsioubleka 2016

On the modal potential  
of items:  
a parallel data  
approach



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## ON THE MODAL POTENTIAL OF ITEMS: A PARALLEL-DATA APPROACH

**Kyriakoula Drakaki, Dimitra Boudopoulou, Constantina Katsari, Vasileia Tsimi-Tsimidopoulou, Niki Tsioubleka**

### **Abstract**

The study draws on a collaborative project examining the translation shifts English modal operators undergo in the course of translation from English into the Greek press. It uses Halliday's modality value model (1985) to account for typical tendencies in the parallel data with respect to modal marker rendition, namely, a tendency for favouring high modality values in the Greek data. The study further focuses on a set of items which may not be readily identifiable as conveying modality, because they do not fall into the categories 'modal verb' and 'modal adverb'. The study intends to broaden learners' perception of modal markers and show the potential of parallel data to enhance EFL learners' understanding of how modal notions may permeate discourse to construct socio-cultural appropriateness.

### **Key words**

Intercultural language learning, epistemic/deontic, modality, value model, press translation.

### **1. The use of modals in L1 and L2 contexts**

In studying qualification and certainty in L1 and L2 students' writing, Hyland and Milton (1997) argue that the ability to express doubt and certainty in English is critical for effective communication. A number of writers have commented on this difficulty. Skelton (1988) and Bloor & Bloor (1991) argue that direct and unqualified writing is more typical of EFL students than of native speakers. Likewise, Manika (2006) refers to problems Greek students face in mas-

tering modality. Furthermore, a number of studies have identified variation in the degree with which certainty is expressed in different languages. Bloor and Bloor (1991) claim that academic writing in German and Czech appears more direct than in English. These observations suggest that students from different cultures may have certain preconceptions about 'appropriate' expressions or the degrees of certainty, which may differ from that of the native speakers'. This study addresses variation in the use of the modal system, across English and Greek, by examining a sample set of parallel press article pairs (English articles culled from English newspapers and their Greek translations). It hopes to identify tendencies in the use of the modal system across English and Greek which may account for the difficulty Greek learners have in achieving a native-like mastery of the modal system. It also aims at drawing on empirical analysis of authentic language use to design pedagogical material enhancing learners' intercultural learning.

## **2. On high and low modality values**

This study takes a Hallidayan view to modality. It uses Halliday's modality value model (high, medium, low modality) to describe the types of shifts between ST and TT versions of the data. The following table shows some English modal verbs associated with the high, medium and low modal values of the Hallidayan model (1985: 339). The model suggests that the higher the modal value conveyed by the modal item, the higher the certainty assumed on the part of the speaker.

Table 1. Modal values, notions and corresponding modal markers

<i>Value</i>	<i>Notion</i>	<i>Modal markers</i>
High	CERTAIN	must, ought to, need, have to, be to
Median	PROBABLE	will, would, shall, should
Low	POSSIBLE	may, might, can, could

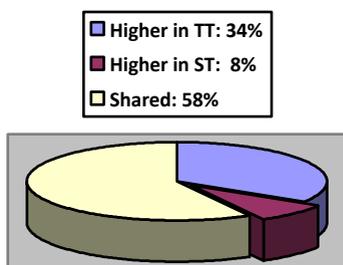
The study draws on a set of subcorpora compiled by the co-authors for the purposes of a MA course, Faculty of English, University of Athens, Spring 2014. The aim is to identify shifts in modality value

between the source and the target text marker and their pragmatic value, namely, the degree of certainty and obligation privileged across versions. The study further reports on a second quantitative analysis conducted in Subcorpus A, to explore the overall tendencies across the English and Greek press material. The intention is to use findings for conducting educational activities consolidating appropriate use of the modal system in English.

### 3. Tendencies across versions

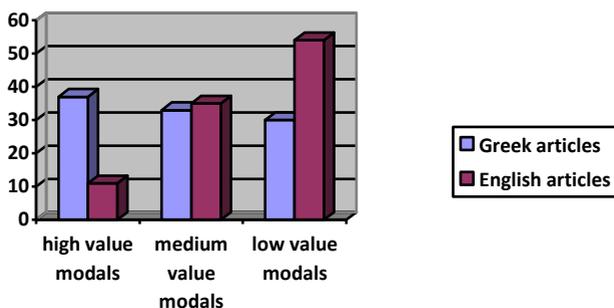
The study seems to verify findings in Andriotou and Metaxa (2016, this e-issue) with respect to the ratio of shared vs. modified modal items and values. 58% of the modal markers are transferred intact in the TT, in terms of the modal value conveyed, with the rest 42% representing the modified instances. Five subcorpora have been compiled for the purposes of this study, by each one of the co-authors, comprising about twenty English-Greek article pairs (see T.E.G.MA. archive, 2013 and 2014). These subcorpora seem to converge with respect to tendencies found in subcorpus A. For instance, higher certainty/obligation was found in the Greek TT by 34%, whereas the opposite tendency (higher certainty in the English ST) was much lower (8%) in subcorpus A, as shown in Chart 1.

**Chart 1.** Distribution of no/-shifts across versions, Subcorpus A



Likewise, Chart 2 shows the level of modal values favoured across versions of subcorpus A (20 English-Greek article pairs from the T.E.G.MA. archive). Column 1 shows the tendency of the Greek version to favour higher modal values. Column 3 shows that the language version which favours lower modal values is English.

**Chart 2.** Variation in modal value level across versions, Subcorpus A.



An instance of a higher value marker on the Greek side (higher certainty) appears in TT1, of a lower value marker in TT2. TT1 item *είναι προφανές* conveys higher certainty than ST1 *seems likely to* and ST2 item *εν μέρει τουλάχιστον* strongly mitigates the force of *αποδεικνύει*, to convey lower modal value than ST2 item *appear* does.

### Example 1

- ST The study *seems likely to* lead to an even deeper polarization between those who believe that regular mammography saves lives, including many breast cancer patients and advocates for them, and a growing number of researchers who say the evidence is lacking or, at the very least, murky.  
(Vast Study Casts Doubts on Value of Mammograms *The New York Times* 12/2/2014)
- TT *Είναι προφανές* ότι η μελέτη θα εντείνει την πόλωση ανάμεσα σε αυτούς που πιστεύουν ότι η μαστογραφία σώζει ζωές και στους επιστήμονες που πιστεύουν ότι δεν

υπάρχουν αρκετές αποδείξεις γι’ αυτό.  
(Αμφιβολίες για τη μασογραφία *Η Καθημερινή* 13/2/2014)

### Example 2

ST ... findings which *appear* to support the widely held belief of a link between madness and creativity.

(Successful comedians display symptoms of psychosis, study says *The Guardian* 16/1/2014)

TT ... η έρευνά τους αποδεικνύει, *εν μέρει τουλάχιστον*, ότι υπάρχει σχέση που να συνδέει την παραφροσύνη και τη δημιουργικότητα.

(Οι κωμικοί είναι ψυχωτικοί *Η Καθημερινή* 17/1/2014)

Language educators are expected to benefit from such findings in that they may focus on teaching learners to adjust their modal value level across cultures. For instance, Greek learners of English would learn to lower the value of the modal markers they are using when communicating in L2.

The next section focuses on less easily identifiable modal markers, through examples contributed by subcorpora A-E.

### 4. More markers conveying modality

“It is often difficult to decide what to include and what to exclude from a grammatical study of modality” (Palmer 1986: 6).

Palmer (1986: 168) reports that the lexical means that mark modality outnumber the grammatical ones. Among the lexical exponents of modality, one can include a) mental state predicates (*I know, I need, I think, I want*), b) modal adjectives (*certain, necessary, possible* etc.), c) modal adverbs or adverbial phrases (*in my opinion, maybe, perhaps*, etc.), and d) impersonal constructions (*it is certain, it is necessary, it seems* etc.). The use of these items is important because they are “associated with some (often indirect) expression of how accountable a writer is for knowledge content” (Malmström 2008: 36).

The section highlights markers which have a less obvious modal value potential, to enhance educators' and learners' view of how modal values may permeate discourse. It identifies such items and verifies their modal value potential, through the modal maker which appears in the other language version of the present data set. Educators may want to consolidate learners' potential to convert implicit into explicit markers.

### 3.1. The subjunctive

The modal particle *va* is a typical modal marker in Greek (Babinotis 2008), which is often transferred in terms of an infinitive in the English production of Greek learners. For instance TT3 item *καλούνται να πληρώσουν* may be rendered as *they are asked to pay*, which would have blurred the modal value conveyed by ST *must*. Language educators may want to make sure that instances of the subjunctive in Greek would be transferred as modal values, in agreement with the ST producer's insight.

#### Example 3

ST Like others who break the country's strict family-planning laws, an unmarried mother *must* pay a fine, even if it is her first child.

(For Chinese women, unmarried motherhood remains the final taboo *The Guardian* 20/1/2014)

TT Οι ανύπαντρες μητέρες στην Κίνα *καλούνται να* πληρώσουν πρόστιμο για το παιδί τους, ακόμη και αν πρόκειται για το πρώτο.

(Ανύπαντρες μητέρες το μεγαλύτερο ταμπού στην Κίνα *Το Βήμα* 24/1/2014)

The same holds for examples 4 and 5. Educators may want to ensure that learners would use an explicit modal marker like ST4 item *should* or ST5 item *can* rather than a *to* infinitive, which could have rendered the TT4 subjunctive *να είναι* or the TT5 item *να διεξάγει*.

#### Example 4

- ST ... it is an irony of history that two women *should* now be in this role  
(Golden Dawn: courage of two women stems the rise of Greece's neo-Nazis, *The Guardian* 23/3/2014)
- TT ...μοιάζει ειρωνία της ιστορίας να είναι δύο γυναίκες σε αυτή τη θέση  
(Δύο γυναίκες απέναντι στη Χρυσή Αυγή *Έθνος* 23/3/2014)

#### Example 5

- ST If Ukraine *can* successfully hold a democratic presidential election...  
(This week's crucial vote is in Europe – but not in the European Union *The Guardian* 19/5 /2014)
- TT Αν η Ουκρανία καταφέρει να διεξάγει μια δημοκρατική προεδρική εκλογή...  
(Τριάντα κάλπες στην Ευρώπη *Η Καθημερινή*, 24/5/2014)

### 3.2. Hedges

Hedges are items which may carry modal value, as TT6 item *δύσκολα* does in TT6 (*it is difficult for a thousand words to render the meaning conveyed by three*). The source version assumes a low modal marker explicitly.

#### Example 6

- ST Thousands of words *may not* capture them, but two will also do the job: Germany's call.  
(This week's crucial vote is in Europe – but not in the European Union *The Guardian* 19/5/2014)
- TT Χιλιάδες λέξεις *δύσκολα* αποδίδουν το νόημα που μεταδίδουν μόνο τρεις: Η Γερμανία αποφασίζει  
(Τριάντα κάλπες στην Ευρώπη *Η Καθημερινή* 24/5/2014)

Likewise, *there is less reason to do x* is another hedge whose modal value is made explicit in TT7 (*δεν χρειάζεται* [*needn't*]).

### Example 7

ST But when you graduate from high school, *there is less reason* to be secretive. At this age, couples go on to spend a lot more time together without having to care about what other people might think.

(Dating, North Korean style *The Guardian* 22/4/2014)

TT Όταν όμως τελειώσεις το σχολείο, *δεν χρειάζεται* να είσαι τόσο μυστικοπαθής. Σε αυτήν την ηλικία, τα ζευγάρια περνούν περισσότερο χρόνο μαζί χωρίς να νοιάζονται για το τι θα σκεφτούν οι άλλοι.

(Ένας βορειοκορεάτης εξομολογείται: Ο έρωτας στα... χρόνια του Κιμ Γιονγκ Ουν *Έθνος* 26/4 /2014)

### 3.3. Frequency adverbs

Frequency adverbs may function as hedges (or boosters) and they may not necessarily be attributed a modal value. They seem to do so, though, in the mind of the ST producer. Example 8 shows that TT item *σε πολλές περιπτώσεις* (*in many cases*) renders ST marker *most likely*, while example 9 aligns ST *may* to TT *συχνά* (*often*). Although the TT often seems to favour a higher modal value, confirming the tendency described in section 3, above, the focus here is on making learners aware of the modal potential of items, to enhance their intercultural potential.

### Example 8

ST Median income in Canada pulled into a tie with median United States income in 2010 and has *most likely* surpassed it since then.

(The American Middle Class Is No Longer the World's Richest *The New York Times* 24/4/2014)

TT Το διάμεσο εισόδημα στη Δυτική Ευρώπη είναι χαμηλότερο από τα αντίστοιχα στις ΗΠΑ, αλλά οι διαφορές *σε πολλές περιπτώσεις*, όπως της Βρετανίας, της Ολλανδίας και της Σουηδίας, είναι πολύ μικρότερες από ό,τι ήταν προ δεκαετίας (Επλήγη η μεσαία τάξη των ΗΠΑ *Η Καθημερινή* 24/4/2014)

### Example 9

- ST Even the bread, the French bread, *may* have been made in an industrial bakery.  
(In France, a Battle to Keep Menus Fresh *The New York Times* 28/1/2014)
- TT ακόμη και το γαλλικό ψωμί *συχνά* έχουν παρασκευασθεί από κάποιο γίγαντα της βιομηχανίας κατεψυγμένων τροφίμων και έχουν ξαναξεσταθεί στην κουζίνα.  
(Η γαλλική κουζίνα εν κινδύνω *Η Καθημερινή* 30/1 /2014)

### 3.4. Shifts with a ‘potential’

Greek learners would not straightforwardly attribute modal value to *potential*. The Greek version does, through TT10 item *πιθανές παρενέργειες*. The data set in this study shows more instances of the *potential* item expressing epistemic modality: e.g. *there is a potential for harm* is rendered as *μπορεί να αποδειχθεί εξαιρετικά επικίνδυνο*.

### Example 10

- ST The new study is one of the several in recent years that have highlighted cardiac problems as a *potential* side effect of testosterone gels, patches, pellets and injections.  
(New Concern About Testosterone and Heart Risks *The New York Times* 29/01/2014)
- TT Η νέα μελέτη είναι μία από τις πολλές που εκπονήθηκαν τα τελευταία χρόνια αποδεικνύοντας τις *πιθανές παρενέργειες* των τζελ τεστοστερόνης, των χαπιών και των ενέσεων, που χορηγούνται όταν τα επίπεδα τεστοστερόνης του οργανισμού είναι χαμηλά.  
(Επικίνδυνη η τεστοστερόνη *Η Καθημερινή* 31/01/2014)

## 4. Intercultural language learning

The study of modality has attracted researchers' attention (Robberecht & van Petegham 1982, Walton 1991, Bybee & Fleischman 1995, Sidiropoulou 2015, to mention only a few) and so has the study of cultural attitudes in discourse (Harder 1984, Mauranen 1993).

A significant development in teaching language, which acknowledges the importance of intercultural variation in the manner we behave and talk, is Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL, Liddicoat, Papademetre, Sccarino and Kohler 2003 online). It is based on the idea that students are required to reflect on the knowledge and assumptions related to their own culture as well as of that of the target language. They also need to reflect on the ways languages embody cultures and manifest culturally significant attitudes and behaviours. The following activities are considered fundamental for Intercultural Language Learning (ibid: 24):

- the teaching of links between language and culture
- the comparison between the learners' first language/culture and target language culture
- intercultural exploration.

The approach to the modal system suggested in this study favours reflection on the interaction of cultures in the way proposed by the Intercultural Language Learning framework. It rejects the notion of 'native speaker' norm and adopts a 'bilingual speaker' as the norm, that is, someone who is aware of both the target language and culture and his/her own language and culture. Interaction of L1 with L2 in the EFL classroom assumes processes such as analyzing, making connections and reflecting. The use of authentic materials in this study are resources indicative of cultures in "action" (ibid).

Other scholars (Carreres 2006 online) have also argued in favour of L1 in language learning. According to Cook (2010) translation is an essential part of modern language teaching and learning. Teachers can't stop students translating in their mind and studies have shown that they find such activities enjoyable and beneficial. Translation occurs everywhere, so why not in the classroom.

Translator (and language learner) beliefs, attitudes, knowledge are projected onto their production "so that any translation will to some extent, reflect the translator's own mental and cultural outlook, despite the best of impartial intentions" (Hatim and Mason 1990: 11). Thus, it becomes obvious that the lexico-grammatical choices of the translator reveal tendencies which may be favoured across language

ges. Familiarizing learners with these tendencies, in the case of modality, promotes awareness of language variation.

From a pedagogical perspective, the aim of the study is to enhance the EFL teaching and learning process by drawing attention to the demanding process of learning modality in English through juxtaposition of the English modal system to the Greek one. Through a contrastive analysis of the English and Greek data sample, the study attempts to explore the incongruities between the two systems and how they can be seen under a new intercultural prism. Identifying the similarities and differences in rendering modality and drawing parallels between the two languages can provide useful insights into the design of teaching and learning materials or form the basis for more effective grammar instruction in ELT materials, helping learners to make the appropriate connections between modal verbs and the preferred realizations they correspond to in the Greek context (Rouki and Diamantopoulou 2016 this e-issue). Also, EFL teachers and students can benefit from this comparative study since newspaper articles comprise an authentic source of teaching materials, and classroom activities are designed by drawing on newspaper articles. The knowledge acquired by such an analysis has the potential to familiarize students with the discourse conventions employed in this genre. Learners also develop critical learning which enables them to challenge the ideological content of the articles since the selection of linguistic resources (of the translator or writer) for modality conveys ideologically significant meanings. Consequently, the findings of the present study on modality may benefit both teachers and learners. Teaching English, and more specifically the acquisition of the English modal system through parallel data is highly promising for enhancing intercultural language learning perspectives..

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For Chinese women, unmarried motherhood remains the final taboo

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### **About the co-authors**

Kyriakoula Drakaki, Dimitra Boudopoulou, Constantina Katsari, Vasileia Tsimi-Tsimidopoulou, Niki Tsioubleka received their BA from the Faculty of English Language and Literature, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. They hold a MA in English Studies (Specialization:Applied Linguistics) from the same Faculty. Their interests lie in comparative linguistics, TEFL and translation. Their contribution to this Special e-Issue of the *Interlingual Perspectives* e-volume is an edited version of the research initiated in their ‘Interlingual & Intercultural Communication’ MA course, taught by the editor.