

MODALITY IN SYNTAX, SEMANTICS,
AND PRAGMATICS

Volume 165

What do we mean when we say things like *If only we knew what he was up to!?* Clearly, this is more than just a message, or a question to our addressee. We are expressing simultaneously that we don't know and also that we wish to know.

Several modes of encoding contribute to such modalities of expression: word order, subordinating conjunctions, sentences that are subordinated but nevertheless occur autonomously, and attitudinal discourse adverbs which, far beyond lexical adverbials of modality, allow the speaker and the listener to presuppose full agreement, partial agreement under presupposed conditions, or negotiation of common ground. This state-of-the-art survey proposes a new model of modality, drawing on data from a variety of Germanic and Slavic languages to find out what is cross-linguistically universal about modality, and to argue that it is a constitutive part of human cognition.

WERNER ABRAHAM is Professor Emeritus in Linguistics and Mediaeval Studies at the Rijksuniversiteit of Groningen, the Netherlands, and Honorary Professor at the University of Vienna, Austria; he is also still active at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. He is author of more than 350 articles, 5 monographs, and 35 book collections.

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To the memory of my wife, Gerda Abraham, 1941–2020

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Preface

What do we mean when we utter something like *If only we could know what he is up to!*? Clearly, we do not only send a message or ask an addressee a question. What is more relevant, we express our failure to know and, at the same time, the wish to get to know the propositional content *What is he up to?* Perhaps even more important for the hearer at site is that much depends on the speaker's knowledge of the propositional content of the direct question, i.e. the communicative common ground between speaker and hearer and what the implied strategy could be that both speaker and hearer pursue in order to understand each other. The conditional conjunction *if* and the connected irrealis *could* in our example signal not propositional but attitudinal conditions, i.e. wishful contingency. Several modes of encoding contribute to such modalities of expression: word order (particularly in languages with verb-second (V2) and verb-final (Vfinal) word order, such as German and Dutch), subordinating conjunctions, sentences which are subordinated in the first place but nevertheless occur autonomously (i.e. as main, independent clauses), and attitudinal discourse adverbs ('modal particles'), which, far beyond lexical adverbials of modality, allow the producing and, at least partially, the receiving communicative partner to presuppose full agreement, partial agreement under presupposed conditions, or negotiation of the common ground.

Grammatical modality is the functional category, which is acquired later than all other functional categories. Thus, it is necessarily dependent upon, and colored by, the language-specific architecture of the early acquired functional categories such as aspect, tense, and mood, whose semantics serve as elementary building blocks for the construction of the exceptionally complex functional category of modality. Beside pointing out the cross-linguistic diversity of modality, the main aim will be to provide a unified picture of modality that explains the driving force (or illocutionary force) creating different cross-linguistic patterns of modality. The very search for the deeper sources of modality reveals that the linguistic architecture of modality largely depends

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on the development of the category of person. The category of person is defined as a *shifter* (in the Jakobsonian sense). Its reference shifts with the origo of the speaker. At this point, pragmatics comes into the picture. It is of central importance to understand how shifters serve as building blocks for functional categories. Functional categories involve double displacement and the splitting up of the speaker into multiple personalities or viewpoints. As a consequence, one central aim will be to give evidence of, and theoretical support for, the hypothesis that the development of the Theory of Mind (ToM) in acquisition (and, presumably, also of evolution) depends largely on the development of functional categories, especially that of modality (as has been proposed and supported by Papafragou 2002 and Papafragou et al. 2007) – and not vice versa, i.e. that the cognition of complex modality arises out of the developing ToM (this being the majority position in the field). What is of central importance from a pragmatic point of view is that modality constitutes the highest linguistic achievement in the creation of different viewpoints (or perspectives, as we also say). The entirety of modality in itself, of course, comprises a range of different means to express illocutionary force, among which modal verbs, modal particles (common to all of Germanic – except for English – and Slavic), and modal adverbials. In order to understand, what is common to them, what separates them, and what lies behind them, the syntax of modality will finally be investigated thoroughly. The different layers of modality or illocutionary force are defined by the structural web of syntax which specifies the function (semantics and pragmatics) of different linguistic techniques of modality. An essential outcome of the syntax part will be that lexical modality is not on a par with grammatical modality. Another investigative aim will be to expand the syntactic operator of illocutionary force into suboperators and to specify and define them in syntactic terms. This pathway also implies that modality is excluded from syntactic domains where illocutionary force is inactive, such as in (a major subset of) dependent clauses, insofar as they do not allow for Force autonomy (partly truth assessment, partly felicity conditions). The module division, as sketched above, does not reflect the sequence of topics treated in the main chapters of the present book.

I have taken great pains to spell out the common structure of the four grammatical modules, aspect, tense, mood, and modality, and the perspective under which the common structure is achieved. The polyvalent semantics of aspect form the building block of modal functions. Aspect, tense, and mood cannot be listed as separate modules. They are linked in terms of stacked inclusion (part-whole, or mereological) relations. They are different categories of the same functional domain, the so-called ATM(M)-complex. The most

basic category is aspect, structured binarily between the features of inner and outer perspective [\pm perfective], tense between past and future, mood between [\pm realis], and modality between [\pm speaker's certainty]. The feature sets linking the four modules are the deictic categories of speaker distance. Aspect encodes spatial distance, tense encodes temporal distance, mood allows the speaker to view distant (possible) worlds as being encoded by irrealis and optative moods; and, finally, epistemic and evidential modality signal that the speaker distances him- or herself from the positive truth value of the proposition, which means that the speaker as a person does not take responsibility for the certainty of the information given. Here the grammatical category of person (\pm distant from the origo) comes into the picture. All in all, we can say that aspect, tense, mood, and modality are linked by processes of reinterpretation of the feature [\pm distance]. The path of reinterpretation correlates with the path of grammaticalization: aspect > tense > mood > modality, which is well documented in the literature.

Different degrees of distance lie between the four modules sketched – the remotest, and least overtly visible, distance lying between aspect and epistemic/evidential modality, while the closest separates aspect and tense (past vs. present ongoing). The external, distance motivated, relation between these sets is that modality includes the feature characteristics of the other three modules in a hierarchical setting: the features of modality contain those of mood, mood contains those of tense, tense those of aspect, and aspect is the most basic one. This new view on the hierarchy of categorial relations explains insights into the solid empirical evidence of links between the modalities of root and epistemics, on the one hand, and aspectual perfectivity and imperfectivity, on the other. This comes most clearly to the fore in languages that have to express modalities in forms of aspect. Russian is the model for this link in the book at hand. All of this motivates the general claim made in this book that the semantics, pragmatics, and syntax of modality converge, thus allowing for a universally valid explanation of modality as a constitutive part of human cognition and also human language.

I know from my own experience that books like this one will be read in parts. A look into the table of contents will help detect certain subtopics that interest the reader more than others. The individual chapters of the present book were written with that in mind. They can be read individually without getting lost by the absence of the horizons drawn in previous chapters. I have also taken great care to insert cross-references to other pertinent chapters for additional illustration and for exegesis. Needless to say, what may sometimes appear to be the duplication of information is planned to help the reader.

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