MODALITY IN ENGLISH AND KURDISH: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts a contrastive analysis of modality between English and Kurdish. The problem of the study is attributed to the difficulties faced by Kurdish learners and students at the Translation and English Departments at the College of Languages at the University of Duhok regarding mastering English modality in general and modal auxiliary verbs in particular. Modality is the category of meaning which is employed to express necessities and possibilities. The main aims of this study are to describe both epistemic and deontic modality in the two languages under study in order to define similarities and differences between them with respect to modality. The findings of the study show that modals in English are mostly grammatical auxiliaries, whereas in Kurdish they are mostly lexical items, and a variety of lexical items are employed for the expression of one single English modal auxiliary. The study ends up with a number of conclusions and recommendations.

KEYWORDS:- Modality, Epistemic Modality, Deontic Modality, Behdini Kurdish, Modal Auxiliaries

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, modality will be investigated in English in comparison to Kurdish. By Kurdish in this study, the Behdini dialect or the Northern Kurmanji variety is meant. This variety is mainly spoken in the Duhok governorate.

The problem of the study lies in the difficulties and challenges faced by Kurdish learners and students at the Translation and English Departments at the College of Languages at the University of Duhok regarding mastering English modality in general and modal auxiliary verbs in particular. Linguists and researchers have detected that both primary and modal auxiliary verbs are the source of difficulty for the majority of EFL learners with different language backgrounds (Celece- Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999; Chandra Bose 2005). Behdini Kurdish learners’ main challenges in mastering the modal verbs are related to the meanings and uses of the modals. Difficulties can be ascribed to the fact that Kurdish, unlike English, lacks modal verbs both in form and function (Bomba, 2001: 78-88; Ahmed, 2005: 6). Moreover, the English modals have a large variety of meanings; each modal might have more than one meaning and each meaning belongs to an interrelated system which can lead to confusion and ambiguity of use by English learners.

The study aims at presenting modality in English and in Kurdish and then to compare the results in a comparative way showing similarities and differences between the two languages. The main purpose of this study is to alleviate the difficulties faced by Kurdish students when translating modal auxiliaries from English to Kurdish. This piece of research also aims at finding solutions to the problems referred to above.

The value of this study lies in the hope that syllabus designers, teachers, and Kurdish EFL learners, translators, and students will make benefit of the findings of this study. This study will be of a significant value for the students at the Department of Translation as it tackles one of the fundamental topics in Contrastive Grammar.

2. MODALITY AND MODAL AUXILIARIES

One of the considerable grammatical categories in English is made by modal auxiliary verbs. A wide range of research has been conducted on modal verbs; among them Halliday (1970), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Lyons (1977), Leech (1987), Kreidler (1999), and several others. Many of these studies have tried to investigate modality showing the different uses of modal verbs and the type of modality that each modal verb expresses, i.e.,
whether it is epistemic or deontic modality (for example, Leyons, 1977 and Kreidler, 1999). It is to be noted that epistemic modality makes a reference to “the possibility, probability or impossibility of a particular proposition,” whereas deontic modality expresses “the necessity of an individual to act or not act in a particular way” (Kreidler, 1999: 241). Other studies have attempted a detailed account of the uses of each modal verb in contextualized situations; Leech’s thought (1987) is probably the most one of such treatments.

Modals in the field of linguistics are connected to the notions of possibility and necessity. Also, modal verbs possess a lot of different interpretations which not only rely on the particular modal being used but also on a number of factors including the position of the modal in the sentence, the meaning of the sentence which is independent of the modal, the context of conversation, and many others. For instance, an English sentence that contains the modal must might be interpreted as a sentence of knowledge or inference (roughly/ epistemic) or how something ought to be (roughly/ deontic). Consider examples (1) and (2) which explain the interpretive difference.

1. The lights in Jason’s home are off, he must be at bed.
2. The lights in Jason’s home are off, he must be away.

In (1), must is interpreted as indicating a statement of reasoned conclusion because the speaker comes to the conclusion that Jason is at bed because otherwise the lights in his house would have been on. In (2), on the other hand, must takes the shape of an interpretation of how something ought to be; the speaker thinks that since the lights in Jason’s home are off, Jason ought to be outside his home.

There is a contradiction in the use of the modal, especially in cases like example (1) with not using a modal, for example:
3. Jason must be at bed.
4. Jason is at bed.

In (3) to reach the conclusion that Jason is at bed is followed by a process of reasoning that was employed. However, if the speaker would know for sure that Jason is at bed, which means that this is taken as a fact as is the case in example (4), then there is no need for example (3).

There are various ways to express modalities in various languages. In English, for instance, apart from modal auxiliary verbs, modality can also be expressed by modal adjectives such as probable and possible, modal adverbs such as probably and possibly, and by modal nouns such as probability and possibility.

Behdini Kurdish, unlike English, does not have a distinct class of modal verbs with clear-cut distinctions (Bomba, 2001: 78- 88). In Kurdish, modal meanings are realized by various means with syntactic structures including particles (ئەز ئەڤ شەڤە زوى بنڤم), phrases (دڤێت) (شێت), (عبەرگە وەئ) (دڤێت) (شێت), and lexical verbs (دڤێت) (شێت).

English examples (5-7) below together with their Kurdish translations illustrate the points raised above. It is to be noted that the examples are researchers’ own.

5. Azad can type very quickly.
6. I should sleep early tonight.
7. The phone may be on the table.

All the three English sentences (5, 6, and 7) above contain modal auxiliary verbs, which are can, should, and may respectively. Because Kurdish lacks modal auxiliary verbs, however, the English modal meanings expressed by modal verbs are realized through other ways including the verb (ئەز ئەڤ شەڤە زوى بنڤم) (دڤێت) (شێت) and the phrase (دڤێت) (شێت) as a translation for can, the particle (دەوە) as a translation for should, and particles (دەوە), (دەوە), (دەوە), and the phrase (دەوە) as translations for may.

Based on the comparison above, it is clear that English has a grammaticalized modality, whereas Kurdish does not seem to have a grammaticalized modality. Therefore, a variety of lexical items are employed in Kurdish to express the meaning of a single English modal auxiliary verb. However, it is not to be assumed that the two paraphrases of (a) and (b) under (5), the two paraphrases of (a) and (b) under (6), and the three paraphrases of (a), (b), and (c) under (7) are exact synonyms.
3. CLASSIFICATION OF MODALS

In general, according to Steel et al., (1981) modality is expressed to denote any of the semantic meanings listed below:

a) “Possibility” and the connected notion of “Permission,”
b) “Probability” and the connected notion of “Obligation,” and
c) “Certainty” and the connected notion of “Requirement.”

Linguists have tackled the topic of modals in English in two different ways: formally and logically. Quirk, et al (1974: 219) have defined modality as “the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified.” For Bell (1991: 193), the system of modality is “an extremely important one, since it gives the communicator the options of expressing an opinion about the extent to which the assertion is possible, probable, and certain or frequent”. Bell (1991: 139-140) draws a distinction between modality and modulation. According to him, modality is related to propositions, but modulation is connected to proposals. Moreover, modality involves probability, possibility, certainty and frequency, whereas modulation comprises obligation and inclination.

Modality is viewed as part of the impersonal constituents of language for Halliday (1970). Halliday also classifies modal auxiliary verbs in English in terms of modality and modulation (which is the ideational constituent of language). As for Lyons, he (1977) classifies modals into epistemic and deontic. Generative grammarians, on the other hand, usually deal with modals as root and epistemic modals (Hacquard & Cournane, 2016). Lyons attributed characteristics to epistemic modals to make them concerned with matters of knowledge, belief, or opinion rather than facts, but he attributes necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally reasonable agents to deontic modality.

Lyons (1977: 797) exemplifies a modal or modalized utterance as in (8) and (9).

8. Alfred may be unmarried.
9. Alfred must be unmarried.

Lyons is probably the first one to distinguish between two kinds of epistemic modality: subjective and objective (1977: 799). In his description of subjective epistemic modality, Lyons proposes the opinion of the speaker or his/her tentative inference. And the essence is to “express the speaker’s reservations about giving an unqualified or categorical ‘I-say-so’ to the factuality of the proposition embedded in the utterance.” On the other hand, objective epistemic modality does not reveal the expression of reservations as shown in the subjective. Rather, the speaker in an objective epistemically modalized utterance is committed to the factuality of what he says in the proposition; he only performs the act of telling and nothing else.

4. MODALITY IN ENGLISH AND KURDISH

Modality is a muddy notion that revolves around the senses of permission, possibility, and necessity. Therefore, apart from why a modal expression is used, the proposition content of the sentence is expressed by a modal sentence concerning some contextual limitations (Werner, 2006: 235). The two kinds of modality proposed by Lyons (epistemic and deontic) are approved and recognized to a wide range as the two semantically principal types of modality (van der Auwerda & Plungian 1998).

4.1 Epistemic modality

Several modals possess functions that overlap between deontic and epistemic meanings. The basic past and non-past epistemic modals include must, may, might, will, would, can’t, couldn’t, should/ought to, needn’t, and daren’t.

Epistemic modality is connected to truth or reality relations by pointing out to a speaker’s commitment to the truth of a proposition. Actually, these modal auxiliaries give the ability to the speaker to express ‘certainty’, ‘deduction’, ‘probability’, and ‘possibility’ (Berk, 1999: 133).

Epistemic modality also refers to a judgement a speaker makes about a proposition, which indicates the necessity and possibility of the being or truthfulness of the proposition (Querk et al 1985: 223). The proposition is seen as uncertain or probable relative to the speaker’s knowledge. Therefore, the discussion below is going to be about uncertainty, which is epistemic possibility. The English modal auxiliaries that can be used epistemically are may/might and can/could as illustrated below.

4.1.1 May / Might

In English may is used to express doubts by the speaker as to the reality or truth of the proposition (Coates 1983: 133). The Kurdish
translations are provided for comparative purposes.

10. a. You may be right.
    دیەت (چێدیپ) تو بێت راست بی.

   b. He may go to London every day.
    رەنگە (چێدیپ) ناوەھەر رۆژ دەیەت بایەڕێیە نەخۆتە.

As shown in (10), ‘possible that’ sounds to be an accurate paraphrasing. 

11. a. Of course I might be wrong.
    ەیەیەت دیەت (چێدیپ) تەو بێت شەش بیم.

   b. So he might go and live with his parents for a while.
    نەخەما رەنگە (چێدیپ) ناوەچیت دەگەل دەیکویبایەن خەو زەبێت ئەوە نەەویکەیە.

The difference between may and might in accordance with Quirk et al (1985: 233) seems to be neutralized when they are used for expressing a speculative or unsettled (tentative) possibility or meaning. Let us consider the examples in (12) below.

12. a. You may be wrong.
    دیەت (چێدیپ) تو بێت شەش بی.

   b. You might be wrong.
    رەنگە (چێدیپ) تو بێت شەش.

(a) and (b) under (16) are considered identical for many speakers.

Also, epistemic modality is rarely interrogated. And if it is interrogated, the form that is used in negation is also used in interrogation. Most often, can is used instead of may for questions as in (13).

13. Can they be on holiday?
    ئەو بچیت دگەل دەیکویباین خۆ بیت.

However, sometimes may is also used in questions as in (14).

14. May we be doing him an injustice?
    ئەو بچیت دگەل دەیکویباین خۆ بیت.

(a) ئەو د بێهنەیەن دا بن؟

(b) ئەو دبێژیت دەتوانە لە دەکەنەیەکەیەبەرە بەڕەبی؟

4.1.2 Can / Could

Palmer states that can and could impose a problematic and controversial status in epistemic modality (1990: 51). For Coates (1983: 19), can is never epistemic in its positive form. As for Goosens (1979: 31), can only expresses epistemic modality in non-assertive constructions. Also, can replaces may in negation and questioning modality. Could, on the other hand, is the tentative form in non-assertion and it replaces might. It is to be noted that can and could are not the dominating modals when functioning in the epistemic possibility.

15. a. Can they be serious?
    ئەو بچیت دەتوانە ەوە دەزەن بین؟

   b. What can they be doing?
    ئەو بچیت دەتوانە چ دکەن؟

   c. Where can she have put it?
    ئەو بچیت دەتوانە دەبەستەیە کەرێ?

As shown in (15), we can use can epistemically in questions when we want to express doubt, surprise, or confusion (OALD 1995: 161).

In Kurdish, a lot of expressions are available to convey the same meaning as the one expressed by may/might and can/could in English. For example, the sentence in (16) below can be translated in four different ways expressing the same meaning.

16. The dean may be at his office.
    دیەت رەگەر ئەنەفیسا خەو بیت. (a)
    رەنگە رەگەر ئەنەفیسا خەو بیت. (b)
    دەشیان دایەکەوە رەگەر ئەنەفیسا خەو بیت. (c)
    چێدیپ رەگەر ئەنەفیسا خەو بیت. (d)

One point of similarity can be detected between the grammatical structure of the English and the equivalent Kurdish expressions. This is because, just like English, all the Kurdish translations of the sentence “The dean may be at his office” involve an epistemic modal marker which is preceded by a proposition. On the other hand, the main difference between the two languages is that the Kurdish translations (a), (b), (c), and (d) under (16) are not grammaticalized modal auxiliary verbs like English, but they range between a variety of lexical items that are used to express the modal meaning. Kurdish grammarians do not actually recognize modality as a grammatical category nevertheless dispersed references they make to the semantic meaning of modal particles and phrases like (ئەوەیەکەیە، دەشیان دایەکەیە، ئەچکە (چیتەوەیەکە)، دەبیتگەیەکە، etc. (Subir, 2008).
The Kurdish two forms of (رەنگە) (and) and (دەشێت) are probably the closest equivalents of *may* in English. Their use is usually susceptible to certain syntactic restrictions as shown below:

a. (رەنگە), (دەشێت) normally precede a verbal sentence and they either follow the subject as in (17a) or follow the subject as in (17b).

b. (رەنگە), (دەشێت) can be followed by a nominal (non-verbal) sentence introduced by the Ezafe particle as in (18).

As for the modal phrase (دەشێن دایە), it usually introduces the sentence and it is followed by the complementizer (کر) as in (19).

&mdash; The modal auxiliaries of *may* and *can* are used to express permission. For instance:
22. They may come in.

(a) ناو دەشێن بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (a)

(b) ناو دەستوێر دەکەی بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (b)

(c) وان رۆخسا ەیە بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (c)

23. You can see her now.

(a) تو نێشتنین وە بەپێی. (a)

(b) تو بەپێی دەستوێر دەرەوە وە بەپێی. (b)

It is to be noted that *may* sounds more formal than *can* according to Palmer (1990: 78). Also, *can* is more frequent in speech when it comes to expressing permission. In Kurdish, it is not easy to find exact equivalents to *may* and *can* with this stylistic variation. However, *can* is best translated into (دەشێت) (deshit) and *may* into (دەستوێر دەیە) (destoverdye) (dewty).  

4.2 Deontic modality

According to Lyons (1977, 792), deontic modals are related to the possibility and necessity of those acts that are performed by agents. We use them for expressing the meanings of wants, obligation, desires, necessity, commands, permission, and undertaking. The modal auxiliary verbs involved are *should*/*ought to*, *daren’t*, *needn’t*, and *shall* for undertaking; and *must*, *may*, and *can* for permission.

4.2.1 Permission

The modal auxiliaries of *may* and *can* are used to express permission. For instance:

22. They may come in.

(a) ناو دەشێن بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (a)

(b) ناو دەستوێر دەکەی بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (b)

(c) وان رۆخسا ەیە بەپێی دەرۆزەرە. (c)

23. You can see her now.

(a) تو نێشتنین وە بەپێی. (a)

(b) تو بەپێی دەستوێر دەرەوە وە بەپێی. (b)

It is to be noted that *may* sounds more formal than *can* according to Palmer (1990: 78). Also, *can* is more frequent in speech when it comes to expressing permission. In Kurdish, it is not easy to find exact equivalents to *may* and *can* with this stylistic variation. However, *can* is best translated into (دەشێت) (deshit) and *may* into (دەستوێر دەیە) (destoverdye) (dewty).  

4.2.2 Undertaking

According to Querk et al, the deontic modal auxiliary that is used for undertaking in English is *shall*, which is limited to second and third person subjects in assertion (1985: 815). Consider the following examples and the explanation followed for the meaning expressed by *shall*.

24. You shall do exactly as I say.

تو دەو دەئ بە نەوانەکەی کەی، تەوا نەو نزیزم.

In (24), *shall* does not only express an obligation but it also provides a guarantee or an undertaking that the action will occur. *Shall* here is thought to be stronger than *must* (Palmer 1990: 74).

25. She shall get her money as soon as she has earned it.

نەو دەن پارە خو وەرگریت نیکەسەر ئیشتی بەبەستەریانی وی وارمی.

In (25), *shall* is described by Querk et al as a modal that is used in granting a favor.

26. You shall suffer for this.

بەسەی دەزەر خاڵیا چەکەنی، نویییی نازانیان یی.

In (26), on the other hand, *shall* expresses a threat.
27. The 1947 act shall have effect as if this section were included in part III thereof.

In Kurdish, on the other hand, ('پێدڤییە' and 'دڤێت') are used without any variety in the obligation degree of strength as equivalents to must, should, and ought to as seen in the last three examples.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has reached a number of conclusions. The findings below are put forward comparatively between English and Kurdish:

1. There are two main types of modality: Epistemic and Deontic, which are approved and recognized to a wide range as the two major semantically fundamental types of modality. However, the majority of the modals share both epistemic and deontic senses, and they only differ in the strength they show.

2. In English, among the means expressing modality the main ones are grammatical auxiliaries such as can, could, shall, should, will, may, might, etc., whereas in Kurdish they are mostly lexical items; a variety of lexical items are employed for the expression of one single modal auxiliary in English. For example, in Kurdish, modal meanings are realized by various means with syntactic structures including particles ('پێدڤییە', 'چەنیبەت'), phrases ('شیان هەنە، شیان دایە'), and lexical verbs ('شیان دایە').

3. The English modal auxiliaries that are used to express epistemic meanings are may/might, can/could, and must to show the senses of ‘deduction’, ‘probability’, ‘possibility’, and ‘certainty’ respectively. The Kurdish lexical items used as equivalents to may/might and can/could include (دڤێت، بێگۆمان), (پێدڤییە، نەڤێت), whereas the items used as equivalents to must include (پێدڤییە، نەڤێت), (بێگۆمان), and (شیان دایە).

4. As for deontic modality, in English may and can are used to denote permission, shall is used to denote undertaking, and must, should, and ought to are used to denote obligation or necessity. The Kurdish equivalents for may and can are (دروخسەت هەیە، دروخسەت هەیە), for shall the equivalent is (دڤێت), and for must, should, and ought to are (پێدڤییە) and (دڤێت).

5. There is an overlap in meaning and function in the majority of the English modals, for example must can show both obligation and certainty and can show both ability and permission and so forth. In Kurdish, on the other hand, this overlap in meaning is almost only shown with (دڤێت), which can show ability and permission.
6. In English, there is a semantic complexity of modals and a multiplicity of meanings which are expressed by one single modal, but this is not the case in Kurdish.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the differences between the English and Kurdish modality systems, Kurdish learners of English will definitely face challenges and difficulties in acquiring, mastering, and translating English modal auxiliaries; based on those difficulties, the following recommendations are made:

1. Holding a study on the acquisition of modal auxiliary verbs by Behdini-Kurdish learners of English.
2. Holding a study on the translation competence of English modal auxiliary verbs by Behdini-Kurdish translation students.
3. Teachers and textbook designers have to raise the level of the consciousness of students to the importance of modals in everyday communication.
4. The negative consequences of misusing modals must be shown to students by teachers and textbook designers.

REFERENCES


پوخته

یافته‌های فکلیندی هاول دخت شلوفاکرناکا بیمارود لسار چامکن چاوئینی (Modality) داناینارا هاردوو زمانان نینگلیزی و کوردی دا نامه‌ی بیستیا فلاکولینی د هندی دا دیار دیبیت کو فیدروز و فوتوییزی کورد ل هاردوو پاشین و ورگریز و زمانی نینگلیزی ل کوتیز زمانان ل زانکنس ده‌هکی بارهوکاریا زخمی‌کاری و ناسی‌کاریان دین دیباکره فیبروییئنا چاوئینی د زمانی نینگلیزی دا بگنی و کارن هاریکارنگ چاوئینی باینیماتی. چاوئینی ژوره‌که راوی زمانی بین کو ده‌هکی بکاریئن بی دیبیرینا پیدایانی و ریتی‌چنی. نارمنجلس هاریکارنگ نینگلیزی بیش فکیلینی (deontic modality) و ای ناندوی (epistemic modality) د بیزی د چاوئینی: یا زانییان هاردوو زمانان نامزه‌یکیر د مارما دستنشی‌کارنگی خالیلق و کهیا میت و چاوئینی د هاردوو زمانان دا سمارت چاوئینی. نامزه‌یکی فکلینی بجه‌کی د کمراخته‌نازگان کو نامزه‌یکی چاوئینی نینگلیزی د کارن هاریکارنگ نیزمانی. باین د زمانی کوردی دا بتیبی دهمان توخمنگ فاره‌هایگی، ناماده‌کو د چندیگر ژوراوجوزر یا توخمنگ فاره‌هایگی ده‌هکی بکاریئن بی دیبیرینا نیک کارن هاریکارنگ زمانی نینگلیزی. فکلینی ب زمارها درناماجم و راسپاردا ب دوماه‌هکی ده‌هکی.

الخلاصه

تحاول هذه الدراسة إجراء تحلیل مقارن للموقفیة (Modality) في اللغتين الإنجليزية والكردیة. تکمیل مشکلة الدراسة في الصعوبة التي يواجهها المتعلمون والطلاب الكردیة في قسم الترجمة واللغة الإنجليزیة في كلیة اللغات فی جامعة دهوك فيما يتعلق باتنان الموقفیة في اللغة الإنجليزیة بشكل عام والاعمال المساعدة الموقفیة بشكل خاص. الموقفیة هي فئة المعنى المستخدمة للتعبير عن الضرورات والإمکانیات أو الإحتمالیات. والأهداف الرئیسیة لهذه الدراسة هي وصف كل من الموقفیة المعرفیة والادبیة في اللغتين في اقل تحديد چی ایشی والاختلاف بينهما فيما يتعلق بالموقفیة. وتظهر نتائج الدراسة أن الوسائل الموقفیة الرئیسیة في اللغة الإنجليزیة هي اقل مساعدة تحویلیة، بينما في اللغة الكردیة هي في الغالب عناصر معمّقة، وبالتالي يتم استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من العناصر المعجمیة للتعبير عن فعل مساعد إنجليزی واحد. وتختم الدراسة بعدد من الاستنتاجات والتوصیات.