TEACHING EPISTEMIC MODALITY THROUGH A NEWSPAPER TEXT¹

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Abstract

Epistemic modality which deals with possibility (validity) and predictability is quite a complicated grammar topic for second language learners in comparison with deontic modality which indicates obligation, permission and desirability. While deontic modality refers to more evident attitudes, epistemic modality deals with subtle nuances of reality. The problem is aggravated by the fact that core English modal verbs (*must, can, may, might, should*, etc.) are dual and can express both types of modal meaning. Besides, a set of language means which express epistemic modality is rather extensive, and includes various adverbs and adjectives, e. g. *possible, possibly, probably, perhaps, likely, unlikely, presumably*, etc. The article aims to highlight difficulties in the acquisition of epistemic modality and suggest some teaching techniques to master it. The material for the linguistic analysis was obtained from British and American quality newspapers (The Guardian, Independent, The Times, The Economist, The New York Times, and The Washington Post) for the period 2018-2020. The paper argues that epistemic modality should be in the ESL teacher's focus not only at the grammar lessons but during the whole teaching process. Classes of translation might give a good opportunity to develop the relevant skills to discern epistemic modality and define its function in the text. In this paper I analyse newspaper texts and show that media writers often resort to epistemic modality as a means of creating ambiguity and uncertainty to articulate their ideas in an indirect and subtle way and thus to influence the public opinion. I argue that to understand the function of epistemic modals in the text and discover the author's message a thorough analysis of the text and context is needed. The combination of traditional teaching techniques with discourse-pragmatic analysis complemented by constructivist approach constitutes a relevant method of SL teaching and learning. It contributes to developing translation skills and educating independent thinkers.

Keywords: epistemic modality, English, translation, Critical Discourse Analysis, second language teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Modality expresses different types of relations and attitudes between the utterance and reality, the speaker and the hearer. Being a universal linguistic category it has its culture specific features (see e.g. Bybee et al. 1994, de Haan 2007, Frawley 2007, Ozyumenko 2012, 2018), as the concept of self as well as relations between individuals, their values and attitudes differ across cultures (e.g. Bilá and Ivanova 2020, Gladkova and Larina 2018a,b., Larina et al. 2017, Wierzbicka 2003).

Modality is one of the most complicated topics in SL teaching and learning. As contrastive studies reveal some languages have a more variable system of modals compared with others and the need in them can also vary. As it will be showed in this paper English has a bigger set of linguistic means of modality compared to Russian and the category of modality plays a more significant role in English in different types of discourse including media discourse. It will also demonstrate that there is no direct correspondence between sentences containing modals in English and Russian.

There are different types of modality and the ways of its categorization. The paper deals with epistemic

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modality, illustrates its peculiarities and suggests some techniques of its teaching and learning.

2. TYPES OF MODALITY

Traditionally scholars define three basic categories of modality: dynamic, deontic and epistemic (Palmer 1979). They also distinguish between Propositional modality which is concerned with the speaker's attitude to the truth value of factual status of the proposition and Event modality which refers to events that are not actualized, events that have not taken place but are merely potential (Palmer 2001: 8). Propositional modality encompasses epistemic and evidential modality, and event modality encompasses deontic and dynamic modality (Ozyumenko 2012).

Modality indicates speaker's/writer's attitudes to the proposition they make. They fall into areas of validity – the speaker expresses greater or lesser confidence in the truth of the proposition; predictability – the future events referred to are more or less likely to happen; desirability – practical, moral, or aesthetic judgments; obligation – speaker's judgment that another person is obliged to perform some action; permission – speaker allows addressee to perform some action (Fowler 1985: 72). It is important to point out that validity and predictability refer to epistemic modality, while desirability, obligation and permission refer to deontic modality.

Deontic modals show that the reality does not meet some standards (personal or social) according to certain norms, expectations, speaker's desire, etc. They indicate that some actions should be undertaken to change the reality and make it closer to the standard. Deontic modality also connotes the degree of requirement, desire, or commitment to the realization of the proposition expressed by the utterance.

Epistemic modality is based on the speaker's evaluation and judgment in relation to the degree of confidence of the knowledge on the proposition (e.g. Nuyts 2001, Suhadi 2011). It comments on and evaluates an interpretation of reality pursuing different goals. Epistemic modality shows a speaker's knowledge of the proposition, its degree of certainty which may fall under several grades: certain, probable and possible (Suhadi 2011). So, it refers to the way speakers communicate their certainty, or uncertainty. Thus, the meanings of epistemic modality can fall into: certainty, probability, and possibility.

In other words, epistemic modality is a linguistic means for construing a general weakening of the speaker's commitment to the truth of the utterance (Larina, Ozyumenko, Ponton 2019: 13). As Halliday says of modal verbs, they construe a 'region of uncertainty' where what is at stake is 'the validity of what is being said' (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 116).

Epistemic modality is quite a complicated grammar topic for SL learners in comparison with deontic modality which indicates obligation, permission and desirability. While deontic modality refers to more evident attitudes, epistemic modality deals with subtle nuances of reality (Ozyumenko 2018). The problem is aggravated by the fact that core English modal verbs (*must, can, may, might, should*, etc.) are dual and can express both types of modal meaning. Besides, a set of English language means which express epistemic modality is rather extensive, and includes various adverbs and adjectives, e. g. *possible, possibly, probably, perhaps, likely, unlikely, presumably*, etc. and it is not always easy to find their equivalents in Russian. The article aims to highlight difficulties in the acquisition of English epistemic modality by Russian students and suggest some teaching techniques to master it.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

The material for the linguistic analysis was obtained from British and American quality newspapers (The Guardian, Independent, The Times, The Economist, The New York Times, and The Washington Post) for the period 2018-2020. The text were analysed with the implementation of combined methodology, the combination of traditional teaching techniques with discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001, Ponton and Larina 2016, 2017, Richardson 2007), complemented by constructivist approach (Kurteš 2017, Ozyumenko 2020), which constitutes a relevant method of SL teaching and learning.

Newspaper translation classes for BA and MA students revealed some difficulties in understanding and acquisition of epistemic modality, as well as its translation from English into Russian and vice versa. They showed that due to the fact that epistemic modality is mostly limited to the grammar lessons neither lexical nor pragmatic competences of the students appear sufficient for the acquisition of this category. The problem is aggravated by the fact that English and Russian systems of modality do not coincide. All these justify the necessity of thorough addressing modality during the whole teaching process and developing a comprehensive system of relevant exercises.

The paper suggests 5 types of exercises designed for MA Russian students of English, which have proved

effective.

4. RESULTS

English possesses an elaborate system of linguistics means of epistemic modality which expresses variety of meanings. They can be collocated at a continuum with high certainty at the one extreme and low possibility at the other. It is not always easy to find a place for each element as the degree of certainty/uncertainty can be intensified or modified by other linguistic tools.

In other words co-textual analysis is needed. Besides, the real situational context should also be taken into consideration.

Epistemic certainty conveys the highest degree of confidence based on the speaker's knowledge on the proposition. It is commonly expressed by the modal verbs *must* and *will*. The verbs which express less degree of certainty are *can*, *could*, *may* and *might*. If *can* and *could* can express some degree of probability *may* and especially *might* indicate the least possible event. Ex.1 is offered to practice these semantic differences.

Ex.1. Read the sentences and range them according to the certainty degree starting with the highest one. Translate them into Russian paying attention to modal verbs.

(1) But The New York Times identified the facility in March as a Saudi plant, at a time that there was wide consensus that the attack **must have been** initiated by Iran, Saudi Arabia's great rival for regional influence. (The New York Times, 23.10. 2018)

(2) Russia '**will** sow dissent during European parliament elections' (The Times, 18.03.2019)

(3) Moscow **may seek** to influence the 2020 elections by launching cyber-attacks, social media disinformation, covert agent operations and other "active measures" as it did in the 2016 election (The Guardian, 27.05.2019)

(4) But the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, said on Wednesday that the chemical agent identified in the Salisbury attack **could have been used** by someone else other than the Russian state... (The Guardian, 16.03.2018)

(5) A Corbyn spokesperson suggested a "mafia-like group" or "oligarchic interests in London" **might have been** responsible. (The Guardian, 16.03.2018)

(6) Mr Skripal **may still have been seen** as a target even after he was convicted of espionage and handed over to Britain in a high-profile spy swap, Mr Sedwill added. (Independent, 05.07.2018)

Epistemic certainty can also be expressed by modal adjectives and adverbs. Certainty is expressed by *certain(ly)*, *definite(ly)*, *sure(ly)*, etc. Our findings show that media discourse tends to avoid certainty. When certainty modals are used they often are mitigated, as in (10-12) where adverb *almost* which precedes *certain* and *certainly* reduces the degree of certainty:

Ex.2. Read the sentences, underline the means of epistemic modality and translate them into Russian.

(7) They [the investigators] are **sure** they [the suspects] are Russian. (Independent, 19.07.2018)

(8) Marine experts **believe** it was trained by the Russian military..... Another marine mammal researcher said it was "**undoubtable**" that the whale was trained. (CNN, 29.04.2019)

(9) We would still **assert to a very high assurance** that the Russian state was behind the original attack. (The Guardian, 19.07.2018)

(10) [...] with those responsible for the attack **almost certain** to have left the UK after carrying it out. (Independent, 19.07.2018)

(11) Mrs May said that it was "**almost certain**" the attack on the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal, 67, and his daughter, Julia, 34, was authorised by someone senior outside the GRU... (The Times, 06.09. 2018)

(12) Researchers have not been given access to equivalent information by Facebook, which **may be** more influential over public opinion than Twitter, and would **almost certainly** be part of any sophisticated propaganda operation. (The Economist, 23.11. 2017).

Epistemic probability which conveys the medium degree of confidence is expressed by *probably*,

evidently, supposedly, allegedly, seemingly, etc. These adverbs deserve special attention as mastering them enriches students' vocabulary.

Ex.3. Underline the means of epistemic probability in the sentences below and find their Russian equivalents.

(13) American government officials also reportedly concluded over the summer that Russia had penetrated the computer networks of companies that operate nuclear power stations and other energy facilities, **evidently** gathering information and probing for vulnerabilities. (The New York Times, 14.11.2017)

(14) There is a suspicion that the same hackers who recently infiltrated Democratic Party organisations are "**probably**" responsible, reports ABC News(BBC,24.08.2016)

(15) It was a great story. A giant gold mine, **supposedly** controlled and guarded by one of President Putin's cronies, in an African country filled with large deposits of diamonds and uranium - all of which the Kremlin was keen to exploit. (The Times, 04.08.2018)

(16) A former aide to Donald Trump has recalled his shock when a Stirling University academic **allegedly** offered him "categorical" assurances that Russia possessed dirt on Hillary Clinton. (The Times,11.09.2018)

(17) Though an indictment is a charge only, it **presumably** relies on hard evidence of a wide and deep Russian project -- so wide and so deep that it could only and paid for by the Kremlin.(Fox News, 22.02.2018)

(18) Detectives have **seemingly** identified the two individuals they believe flew in and out of Moscow to carry out the hit on Sergei Skripal. (The Guardian, 06.08.2018)

The degree of certainty/uncertainty can be enhancing by other linguistic tools. An illustrative example is an adjective *likely* which is frequently used in media discourse. The collocations with *likely* express different degrees of possibility: *unlikely*, *likely*, *very likely*, *more than likely*, *highly likely*, *overwhelmingly likely*. Not only the translation of the sentences containing these expressions is of interest but also the discussion of their pragmatic function.

Ex.4. Translate the sentences paying attention to the expressions in bold. Give your idea why the author uses them and what pragmatic goal s/he pursues.

(19) 'However, despite the advances being made in the investigation, **it is unlikely** any arrests will take place in this country...(Independent,19.07.2018)

(20) This is what was agreed to by President Trump.' " Bergmann added that the Russians "**likely** have a detailed record of that conversation," while "we're all in the dark. (The Washington Post, 20.07.2018)

(21) The EU say, in a well-tempered statement, that the Russians are very likely involved in the attempted murder of the Skripals and that there is no other plausible explanation. (Independent, 23.03.2018)

(22) **More than likely**, it has torpedoed the Russian president's chances of extracting practical benefits from Trump's fervent attempt to court him ...(The Washington Post, 20.07.2018)

(23) After chairing a meeting of the national security council, the prime minister told MPs that it was "**highly likely**" that Russia was responsible for the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Julia.(The Guardian,13.03.2018)

(24) Boris Johnson, said on Friday it was "**overwhelmingly likely**" that the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, personally took the decision to use the nerve agent against the ex-spy.(The Guardian,16.03.2018)

The special focus is placed on the fact that the means of epistemic modality are often used in combination. Modal verbs (could, may, might) express different degrees of probability, thus letting the journalist describe actions which are not proven and may have hardly taken place at all, or else are hypothetical future actions which may never happen (Larina, Ozyumenko and Ponton 2019:13). The usage of other means containing modality (e.g. verbs *suggest*, *suppose*, *believe*, *think*, etc., as well as adverbs and adjectives discussed above, e.g. possibly, *probably*, *seemingly*, *likely* etc.) enhances the uncertainty and enables the author to state whatever s/he wants without bearing any responsibility. The important thing is that "in processing a linguistic message the reader tends to perceive the broad contours of the ideational proposition, while less attention is paid to nuances which may hedge the writer's stance towards what is described" (Larina, Ozyumenko and Ponton 2019:15).

The analysis of such examples as well as the context involved promotes to develop pragmatic competence

of the students.

Ex.5. Discuss the contexts related to the sentences below. Which keywords can help you to restore the whole picture? What message does the author try to convey to the reader? What are the functions of the means of modality used?

(25) **Might** the new poisoning be an attempt to divert attention from the earlier one? **Could** it be a devious plot, to make it seem that novichok is available on every street corner... (The Guardian, 05.07.2018)

(26) The murder of three Russian journalists who were investigating Kremlin-linked mercenaries in the Central African Republic **could be** an act of reprisal, a colleague of the victims has **suggested**. (The Times, 02.08. 2018)

(27) Sajid Javid **suggested** that Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov would not be prosecuted over the nerve-agent attack in Salisbury on Sergei Skripal because "the reality is we'll **probably** never see them in the UK". (The Times, 10.09. 2018)

(28) I **suppose** I **can** see why the Kremlin **might** want to kill an ex-spy such as Sergei Skripal and his daughter, so as to deter others from defecting (The Guardian, 05.07.2018).

Here I have limited to 5 types of exercises dealing with epistemic modality which precede the work with the text. However, the most efficient way is to work with the whole article. This gives an opportunity to conduct a thorough Critical Discourse Analysis which involves the text and context.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper argues that epistemic modality should be in the ESL teacher's focus not only at the grammar lessons but during the whole teaching process. Classes of translation might give a good opportunity to develop the relevant skills to discern epistemic modality and define its function in the text. In this paper I show that media writers often resort to epistemic modality as a means of creating ambiguity and uncertainty to articulate their ideas in an indirect and subtle way and thus to influence the public opinion. I argue that to understand the function of epistemic modals in the text and discover the author's message a thorough analysis of the text and context is needed. The combination of traditional teaching techniques with discourse analysis complemented by constructivist approach constitutes a relevant method of SL teaching and learning. It contributes to developing translation skills and educating independent thinkers.

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