

Attitudinal modality and Norwegian modal verbs

In the traditional literature on modality one usually speaks about epistemic and non-epistemic modality (dealing with propositions and events, respectively), and about *possibility* and *necessity* as discrete values (Palmer 2001, van der Auwera & Plungian 1998, Lyons 1977). Alternatively, some authors employ a scalar model where modality is described as a continuum (Nuyts 2006). Even when possibility and necessity are treated as discrete values, authors need to employ terms like *confident* vs. *tentative conclusion* (in connection with epistemic modality) and *strong* vs. *weak obligation* (non-epistemic modality) in order to describe differences between modal verbs like the English ‘must’ vs. ‘should’ or the German ‘muss’ vs. ‘sollte’.

The problem with such models is that the borderline between the semantics of modality on the one hand and pragmatic interpretations related to the communication situation, is quite unclear. For instance, the relationship between an order expressed by the modal verbs *må* or *skal* and a recommendation expressed by *skulle*, *bør* or *burde* is difficult to account for in terms of possibility and necessity. It is not always clear whether order and recommendation belong to the same type of modality. In my talk I propose a semantic model of modality, which is based on a clear difference between modality and communication situation.

The starting point is the assumption that modality is a semantic category which deals with people’s *attitude* towards the trustworthiness of propositions (here referred to as *epistemic attitude*) and/or the desirability of states of affairs (*non-epistemic attitude*). I treat attitude as a notion with two values, neutral and non-neutral. These can be combined with negation to form negative attitude.

Neutral attitude means that the speaker has no objections to accept a proposition as correct or a state of affairs as worth to occur. However, she may equally accept that the same proposition may turn out to be incorrect, or that the same state of affairs may turn out not to be worth to occur. In either case, no problems (no conflict) will arise for the speaker with respect to her beliefs or expectations. Thus, my term *neutral attitude* corresponds to a certain degree to the traditional term *possibility*, but emphasizes the importance of the speaker’s attitude.

Non-neutral attitude means that the speaker is only willing to accept a proposition as correct or a state of affairs as worth to occur. If the proposition turns out to be incorrect, or the state of affairs turns out not to be worth to occur, a conflict arises between the speaker’s beliefs and/or expectations and the reality. The notion of *non-neutral attitude* is related to *necessity*, but there are important differences between the two notions, and it may be argued that non-neutral attitude reflects the linguistic reality better and more precisely than necessity.

Particularly, the speaker may indicate in the utterance that she admits that other attitudes are possible. To put it in other words, the speaker may signal that other participants may have different attitudes than her own, but this does not mean that the speaker is unsure about her own attitude (if this were the case, one would have to do with neutral attitude, cf. above).

Technically, I distinguish between these cases by using the term *simple situation* for cases where the speaker only expresses her own non-neutral attitude in her utterance without approving of any alternative attitudes, and *complex situation* for cases where she expresses her own non-neutral attitude at the same time as she signals (in the same utterance) that other participants may have different attitudes towards the status of the attitude target, i.e., the proposition or the state of affairs in question.

The distinction between simple and complex situations is only relevant in connection to non-neutral attitudes. Neutral attitudes are always connected to simple situations since the speaker does not, and cannot, invite anyone to a discussion or to negotiations about the trustworthiness of a proposition or about the desirability of a state of affairs. Such discussion or negotiations are only possible when the speaker has a non-neutral attitude and is willing to listen to alternative attitude(s).

In practice, the non-neutral attitude in a complex situation may be perceived as a lower degree of the speaker’s commitment to the attitude target as compared with a simple situation which sounds more categorical and uncompromising. A complex situation can easily be interpreted as containing a certain element of doubt or non-assuredness and consequently as representing lesser confidence from the side of the speaker. However, the speaker does not actually need to be unsure about her own attitude in order to be able/willing to allow the other participant(s) to express their (alternative) attitudes.

I illustrate my model with Norwegian utterances containing modal verbs, and show that they support my model of the semantics of modality.

References

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