

# The Pragmatic Aspect of Modality in the English Mass-Media Discourse

Aigul Mukhtarullina<sup>1</sup>, Sabira Issakova<sup>2</sup>, Gaukhar Alimbek<sup>3</sup>, Assylymay Issakova<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Foreign Languages of Humanities Faculties, Ufa University of Science and Technology, Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

<sup>2</sup> Department of Kazakh Philology, K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Aktobe, Republic of Kazakhstan

<sup>3</sup> Department of Practical Kazakh Language, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan

<sup>4</sup> Department of Kazakh Philology, Caspian University of Technologies and Engineering named after Sh. Yessenov, Aktau, Republic of Kazakhstan

Correspondence: Sabira Issakova, Department of Kazakh Philology, K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Aktobe, Republic of Kazakhstan.

Received: February 11, 2024

Accepted: April 1, 2024

Online Published: April 12, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n4p322

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n4p322>

## Abstract

The article is devoted to the pragmatic aspect of modality representation in the English mass-media discourse. The categorial status of modality, typology of modal meanings and their interaction have been examined from the viewpoint of historical perspective. The research is aimed at revealing the pragmatic characteristics of subjective-interpersonal (author-recipient) modality, which reflects the author's intentions to describe the world (epistemic modality), change the world (deontic modality), evaluate the world (axiological modality). The four factors of internet communication - the addresser, the addressee, the text, the objective reality - are studied within the framework of communicative-pragmatic approach to modality. The discourse-analysis and pragma-stylistic analysis have been applied to depict language means representing modality in the English mass-media Internet discourse, in the article on political issues. It has been revealed that the author of the article may act differently in accordance with the roles he assumes - of an informer, of an expert-analyst, of a consultant-adviser; his task is to attract the readers and involve them in discussion in the comments section. The expression of authorship is principal here and the author's modality is always explicit. The comments following the text of an article are distinguished by a variety of the authors' communicative strategies and modal meanings.

**Keywords:** category of modality, objective and subjective modality, the author's modality, internet-communication, communicative-pragmatic approach, mass-media discourse, article, internet-comment

## 1. Introduction

The categorial status of modality has long been the object of heated discussions among linguists: they argued upon the semantic volume, the typology of modal meanings, the interaction with other notional categories. Due to its complexity and ambiguity in different historical periods the given language phenomenon has been treated from different viewpoints - logic and philosophy, rhetoric and grammar, pragmatics and semiotics, text linguistics and cognitive science (Peshkovsky, 1935; Panfilov, 1982; Baranov, 1993; Palmer, 2001; Nuyts, 2006; Portner, 2009; Torres-Martinez, 2020), yet, up to now modality causes controversy among scholars as to its linguistic nature concerned. Thus, within the framework of logic and philosophy modality was subdivided into two types: objective (ontological) and subjective (persuasive) modalities, regarded as equal. The objective modality reflects the objective facts, events, relations referring to a certain situation in reality cognized by a person; these relations are denoted as potential (possible), real and obligatory. The linguists, in their turn, oppose objective modal meanings to the subjective ones as essential vs optional. From the viewpoint of linguists, the objective modality is an obligatory property of any utterance, inseparable from the sentence as a predicative unit. Many linguists share the opinion that the objective modality expresses the attitude of the uttered to the reality (syntactic forms of the indicative mood - the present, past and future tenses) and irreality (syntactic forms of irreal moods - subjunctive, conditional, optative, suppositional, imperative). It should be stressed that modality is essentially connected with the grammatical categories of tense and aspect. Comrie (1976) states that in notional terms all three are, in some way, concerned with the event or situation that is reported by the utterance. Tense, rather obviously, is concerned with the time of the event, while aspect is concerned with the nature of the event, particularly in terms of its' internal temporal constituency.

Back to the past, the logicists argued that the subjective modality indicated the degree of validity of the thought reflecting the objective reality and it was classified as problematic, simple and categorial (Panfilov, 1982). They claim that the subjective modality reveals the person's cognitive aptitude, that is, it has gnoseological characteristics. The degree of the thought validity in the sentence from the viewpoint of the speaker and its truthfulness are believed to be quite different notions. The linguistic interpretation of subjective modality implies the attitude of the speaker to the uttered; the expression of subjective modality is predetermined by the author's will, desire and intention. Correspondingly, it should be treated as something optional and excessive. Lyapon (1990) notes that the semantic volume of subjective modality is considerably wider than that of the objective modality and embraces the whole gamut of various multi-faceted means of the

utterance qualification in natural languages.

Further on, Eslon (1997) brings forth the idea that the realms of the subjective and the objective are intertwined and thus the category of modality represents a dialectical unity of both entities. Admittedly, the conventional character of binary opposition of subjective and objective modal meanings was long ago emphasized by Peshkovsky (1935), who pointed out that the category of modality conveyed only one type of relationship - the attitude of the speaker to the connection between the content of the utterance and the objective reality. Such an approach presupposes that modality interacts with pragmatic categories, namely, with four main factors of communication - the speaker (addresser), the interlocutor (addressee), the content of the utterance and the objective reality. Later on, this idea of communicative-pragmatic approach to studying modality intermingled with the functional-pragmatic conception of text modality, put forward by Baranov (1993). Instead of the notion of objective modality, the scholar introduced the term "referential" modality which is supposedly more accurate in conveying the relationship between the cognitive component of the text and the real world as the author intended it. Accordingly, by the criterion of interactivity, two subtypes of subjective modality can be singled out - subjective-personal (author-text) and subjective-interpersonal (author-addressee) modalities. The former modifies the cognitive component of the text and characterizes the author of the text, the latter is predetermined by the author's intentions in communication and expresses his inner desire to describe the world (epistemic modality), change the world (deontic modality) and evaluate the world (axiological modality) (Baranov, 1993). This conception is treated by Mukhtarullina et al. (2015) as a "broad" approach to modality interpretation, since it involves units of pragmatic level - evaluation, emotivity, expressiveness, stylistic charge, national colour, etc. The "narrow" approach only highlights one aspect of modal meanings description - grammatical, semantic or functional - without taking into account the human factor. Yet, almost all topical issues in modern linguistics have lately been studied within the anthropocentric paradigm, with its close interest to the subject of text/discourse activity and the personality's cognitive and communicative potentials, therefore, it seems quite relevant to consider the realization of modal meanings in the text/discourse in the pragmatic aspect. The advantage of applying the broad conception of modality to the mass-media discourse analysis is still more evident taking into account that the present-day communication is conducted mostly via Internet, involving all types of text activities, communicative strategies and tools applied by the participants - the author of the text and other communicants.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In nowadays socio-cultural conditions - the further expansion of internet-communication forms and emergence of sub-genres of mass-media discourse - the modal parameters of communication should be thoroughly examined and specified. Thus, taking into account four factors of communication mentioned above, we shall adhere to the broad interpretation of text/discourse modality, which provides the expression of the author's position and forms the reader's comprehension. It necessarily involves the method of discourse analysis.

We should admit that in mass-media Internet discourse the expression of authorship is principal, as the main goal of a journalist is to impart to the reader his thoughts, ideas, emotions and estimations. Accordingly, the degree of authorization here is extremely high and the author's modality tends to be always explicit. Indeed, any periodical, be it a printed or an electronic journal/newspaper, has in the recent years become the most significant channel of information delivery, allowing a wide scope of the reality representation. It is no wonder that mass-media discourse reflects all the topical problems arising in the modern society and undergoes the changes along with it. As Negryshev (2005) admits, it is the mass-media discourse that serves as an intermediate between the objective reality, cognitive individual consciousness of a person and separate social groups. In fact, nowadays mass-media discourse is being mostly considered as internet-discourse, which in its turn is defined by Menovshchikov (2007) as the text functioning in the Internet space, in which the persuasive communicative intention implicitly reflects the author's subjective-personal point of view, formed in compliance with psychological, linguistic and technological factors. In addition to the author's modality as a constituent component, the internet-discourse may be characterized as dynamic, communicative, virtual, distant, indirect, creolized and personified. Publishing different texts in the internet, the internet users are unconsciously involved into internet-communication, which is realized through genre-forms of electronic communication (forums, chats, blogs, comments, etc.). All these types of internet-communication are characterized by specific usage of language means according to genre and style requirements. For instance, polilogues are more typical for forums than monologues or dialogues. The multitude of communicants' modalities imply the use of a great variety of language units for achieving a desired stylistic effect. Thus, the discourse analysis of mass-media texts should necessarily involve the pragma-stylistic analysis of language units representing various types of modal meanings.

## 3. Results

Besides the author's text, the Internet space of mass-media discourse comprises rather a new form of communication - internet-comment which is a text that represents a person's verbal communicative act; here the author discloses himself via direct expression of his opinion/evaluation (in the comments section). The use of non-verbal tools of commenting (signs "LIKE/DISLIKE") also contributes to achieving the desired effect. All in all, having considered a number of definitions suggested by various linguists, Mityagina (2012) claims that internet-comment should be treated as a peculiar communicative genre of personal internet-discourse that may be both phatic (communication-oriented) or presentational (ensuring self-expression of a language personality).

To fulfil the phatic and presentational functions of internet-comments the following tools are to be used: the comments section, the nickname, the date of publication. Some comments are supplied with photos (avatars), some are published in a chronological order and are marked by "likes". Quite frequently, comments are followed by special emoticons - smiles.

The author of the text as a language personality acts in accordance with a certain strategy: as a member of community he forms public

opinion and can make other communicants act in a desired way.

#### 4. Discussion

As an illustrative example of such an interaction between the author's personality and internet-community through the prism of their comments may serve the article on political issues in the Internet tabloid *The Mirror* - a weekly known for its support for the Labour party in Great Britain (Steel, 2022).

#### OPINION

By **Mark Steel**

19:20, 21 May 2022

Out-of-touch Tories think they have discovered the solution to poverty

Mark Steel says Conservative Party MPs would tell someone who finds it hard to live on Universal Credit to stop working in a hospital and run Formula 1 racing instead

The author of the article, Mark Steel (born 4 July 1960), is an English author, broadcaster, stand-up comedian and newspaper columnist. He has made many appearances on radio and television shows as a guest panellist, and has written regular columns in *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Daily Mirror*. The author's background suggests huge experience in public performances and a good command of language expressive means. The text of the article is emotionally charged, it is explicitly subjective and is published under the heading OPINION. As we know, the article commonly comprises the heading, the lead paragraph, the main part (story) and the summary, yet, the given article lacks the summarizing part - it ends with the advice given to the British Parliament Chancellor Rishi Sunak in the manner that the previous newsmaker Tory MP Lee Anderson gives it to the poor population of Great Britain. The whole article may be treated as a response to the widely quoted phrase in the British mass-media: *Tory MP Lee Anderson said foodbanks are 'largely unnecessary'*. The author's negative attitude to this person is clearly seen in the heading and lead paragraph of the article.

Indeed, the whole text of the article is built on the principles of contrast, which involves such pragma-stylistic devices as antithesis and irony. As we know, irony as a literary device represents a situation in which there is a contrast between expectation and reality, i.e. the difference between what something appears to mean versus its literal meaning. Irony is associated with both tragedy and humour, it may be mild, bitter, sarcastic depending on the context. Thus, Mark Steel's words in the main part are treated as ironic:

e.g. *Several Conservative MPs have kindly offered advice to the poor and hungry. For example, Rachel Maclean suggested that if you're struggling you could "move to a better-paid job. At last someone has discovered the solution to poverty.*

The lexical units *kindly offered advice*; *the solution to poverty* change seemingly positive connotations of underlined words to the negative ones against the context - *Rachel Maclean suggested that if you're struggling you could "move to a better-paid job."* Further on, in the story these modal pragmatic meanings involving evaluation, emotiveness and expressiveness reinforce the subjectivity of the author's point of view:

e.g. *If a woman pleads at the benefits office how she can't feed her kids, she should be told: "Have you considered becoming the Queen? She seems to do all right so instead of grumbling, why not do the same as her?"*

The absurdity and irony of the situation are created due to the author's deliberate use of antithesis, rhetorical questions, hyperbole. The author pursues displaying his sarcastic attitude to the politics of the Tory party through a variety of pragma-stylistic means at all language levels – lexico-grammatical, syntactical means - conditional and imperative mood, modal verbs:

e.g. *If you find it hard to live on Universal Credit, stop working in a hospital and run Formula 1 racing instead. You might have to go to Brazil and China and spray champagne over the winner, but you can't complain if you're not prepared to graft.*

The main part of the article usually features facts and events of objective reality, there may be used any kind of details - statistic data, time and space indicators serving the task of objectivized delivery of information. Mark Steel's intention for objectivity is manifest in lexical units representing temporality and locality:

e.g. *Many people debate the reason why recessions happen. For example in the 1930s, hundreds of millions starved as industries shut down in Europe, across America and Australia.*

Yet, in the subsequent paragraph the author's seemingly sincere desire to explain the objective facts thrusts upon the hyperbolised fictional reality:

e.g. *Now we know the most likely reason is they all decided to be poor at once. There was a craze for walking barefoot and living with mice, like the current one for Wordle, until everyone changed their mind and decided to afford food.*

Still relying on the objective reality, Mark Steel has cited a real political figure - Lee Anderson - we can hear him say exactly those nonsensical words, which are followed by the author's ironic remark:

e.g. *Also, Tory MP Lee Anderson said foodbanks are "largely unnecessary", but are used because people can't cook properly. Exactly! We've forgotten the old crafts that used to get us by. In the old days, if we couldn't afford a meal we became highwaymen, stopping carriages as they were riding to London and taking bags of gold coins off them. If we wanted something straight away, we would hold up a musket and demand: "Stand and deliver a cheese and pickle sandwich.*

The author's emotional and expressive dialogue with his opponent gets complemented by additional pragmatic information - allusion, reference to the old times and ironic interpretation of historical events. We have to stress it again, irony as part of Mark Steel's modality is not humorous and mild, it is biting and sarcastic, it aims at exposing the social and political vices. Constant use of hyperbole and antithesis as pragma-stylistic devices and imaginary situations add to the absurdity of the narrative, which by all means draws the readers' attention:

e.g. *Or we would make imaginary meals that cost absolutely nothing. Stewed armadillo with dodo egg was always a favourite and full of nutrition. These MPs could go to an area of Somalia blighted with famine and tell hungry people to stop sitting around covered in flies and become the owner of a computer software company in Los Angeles instead. They could even make a charity record, "Feed the world, learn to make a soup from pebbles."*

The narrative implying the emotional, expressive and evaluative exchange of opinions between two people is addressed primarily to the reader involving him into the fiction-like inner conflict between the protagonist - Mark Steel and the Tory party viewed as antagonist. We have already mentioned that *The Mirror* is a tabloid supporting the Labour party, correspondingly, the editorial board's policy influences greatly the journalists' communicative strategy. Directly naming the "villain" - the opposing political party, the author of the article makes allusions to the Bible and Jesus Christ, using Old English:

e.g. *The Conservative Party often emphasises how it's the party of the Church, and this is why. They follow the teachings of Jesus, who as it says in the Bible: "Stood before the thousands who were hungry, with only five loaves and two fishes. And Jesus did say unto them, 'Thou hath lost the art of making it stretch. Take half a crumb each and boileth it up with dust from the mountains of Galilee, covereth it in cling film and placeth in the freezer. Thou shalt hath enough for three weeks. Otherwise don't moaneth to me about being famished'."*

The summarizing part of the article brings us back again to a present-day routine and discloses the financial state of the British Parliament Chancellor Rishi Sunak, the representative of the Conservative party. Mark Steel, paying back his political opponents, advises the Chancellor to improve his position to a better paid number 17 instead of 222 among the rich top:

e.g. *Also this week, it was announced that Chancellor Rishi Sunak is in the Sunday Times rich list, at number 222, with £730million. If this leaves him short, I advise him to move to a better paid number such as 17, so he can make ends meet.*

Thus, the narrative permanently alternates the time and space characteristics - the author refers to historical and religious figures and events to strengthen his position in the argument; as a real actor Mark Steel duly assumes on the parts of a judge, of an expert and of an adviser. The author's point of view, his modality (the author plays the part of a protagonist) is intertwined with the antagonist's modality - the Conservative party is an object of constant mockery, but the author's intention expands also to impart his ideas to a potential reader, make him choose his side and then act as he was instructed. Throughout the text this strategy is realized through the author's intentions - to describe the world (epistemic modality; mostly represented by the indicative mood and present/past/future tense forms in the sentence referring to the objective reality), change the world (deontic modality; mostly expressed by the imperative mood, modal verbs of duty and necessity, modal words) and evaluate the world (axiological modality; permeating the whole text and explicit on the scale "positive - negative" evaluations).

Regarding the interactivity as one of the main features of the mass-media discourse, we should not ignore the part played by participants of communication. The main characters, acting in the comments section beneath the text of the article, are the addresser (the sender of a text message, ready to join the discussion) and the addressee (the receiver of the message). The anonymous status and the absence of direct feedback predetermine the emergency of virtual personalities who are represented by their nicknames - real or fake.

For example, the most liked comment by the user *PlasticFace* provokes the quick response from another user whose nick reveals his music likings *Love the band The Beaches*:

**PlasticFace** 3 DAYS AGO

*More insane ramblings from a man who used to be funny on the telly*

REPLY1

**Love the band The Beaches** 3 DAYS AGO

Reply to **PlasticFace**

*He is still funny and talks more sense than most politicians*

The addresser *PlasticFace* counterparts the author of the article Mark Steel, who is a popular stand-upper; he does not share his opinion on the political situation in the country. The derogatory lexical units are used here to show his attitude to the author of the article: "insane ramblings"; "used to be funny."

The user with the nickname *Love the band The Beaches* disagrees with him and displays his sympathy with the author and with the Labour party in the whole: "talks more sense than most politicians." Later on, one more participant of internet-communication joins the dispute - under the nickname *TaniaWhite*:

**TaniaWhite**21 HRS AGO

*Anderson claims £23,000 a year rent from us. Plus all energy/water/council tax/phone/ internet. No cut off amount Parasites*

*No wonder he's not worried about the rise in cost as we will pay it for him  
 On a good wage too  
 Maybe he can stop lecturing us until he pays his own bills - he's well off enough  
 Same for the woman who said work longer/better job  
 £24,400 year rent + utilities  
 Pay their way and we'd have the means to pay  
 When you don't have any money, nothing to budget  
 And they say benefit claimants are scroungers...*

This user definitely supports the Labour party, her political position is manifested through expressive language means - *Parasites; stop lecturing us, etc.* Besides, she explicitly draws the line of demarcation between "them" and "us", relating herself to the working class who opposes the ruling party - the Conservative party. Very often the thoughts that the users deliver remind us of the so-called "stream of consciousness" phenomenon, the users neglect all graphic or phonetic rules, omit the dots, commas, use capital letters to stress the words:

**awake2 DAYS AGO**

*YES do not have kids you cannot afford, spend money on flash cars, sky, holidays etc*

Speaking about the roles played by the participants of internet-communication, we should also mention the third part - *the observer* - the passive communicant who follows the discussion not participating in it. Yet, from time to time he may assume on the part of the addresser and publish his text or he may stay aside and just watch, unbiased.

## 5. Conclusions

Thus, the discourse-analysis and the analysis of pragma-stylistic devices in the article from the *The Mirror* tabloid have allowed us to come to certain conclusions. Internet-users are the language personalities, who via Internet become the active participants of the communication process, in the course of which they may exchange their roles.

The author of the article may act differently throughout the text narrative - he may assume on the parts of an unbiased informer delivering facts and details objectively, of an expert-analyst commenting on and assessing the object described, of a consultant-adviser who predicts the forthcoming events and consequences - all these are predetermined by the author's intentions and reveal his communicative strategies to describe the world (epistemic modality), to change the world (deontic modality) and evaluate the world (axiological modality). In the mass-media discourse the expression of authorship is considered to be a principal task, since the main goal of a journalist is to impart to the reader his ideas, thoughts, emotions, estimations. Accordingly, the degree of authorization is extremely high and the author's modality is always explicit. In the comments section his viewpoint, however, may not be supported by the active internet-community. The majority of readers remain the observers, as a rule. From the pragmatic point of view the modality of a political media-discourse may be represented as interaction of different-level language units - phonetic, graphic, lexical, morphological and syntactical, as well as by various stylistic means. The mass-media internet-discourse acquires the characteristics of communication "room" where the users, applying various tactics and means, can display their own personified vision of the objective reality, interpret facts and events. They constantly interact, exchanging the parts - the addresser may turn the addressee, or the observer. In this interplay the active communicants may use various tactics - pressing their opinions on others, provoking them or faking the facts, sometimes neglecting the logic and consistency of argumentation. On the whole, the comments, following the text of an article, are distinguished by a variety of the authors' communicative strategies and modalities, by a diversity of language expressive means.

## Acknowledgments

Not applicable

## Authors contributions

Prof. A.Mukhtarullina and Prof. S.Issakova were responsible for study design and revising. PhD G.Alimbek was responsible for data collection. Prof. A.R. Mukhtarullina drafted the manuscript and PhD A. Issakova revised it. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript. All the authors contributed equally to the study.

## Funding

Not applicable

## Competing interests

Not applicable

## Informed consent

Obtained.

## Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

#### **Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

#### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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