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LINGUISTIC MODALITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*: A CASE STUDY

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Linguistic Modality in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*: A Case Study

1.1 *Linguistic modality*

When speaking of 'modals' or 'modality' in the English language, one often means to refer simply to the limited set of modal auxiliary verbs which comprehends *can*, *will*, *may*, *must* and a few others. We know that they are used to express the concepts of *possibility* and *necessity*, and we associate them to ideas such as *permission* and *ability*: accordingly, they are used to make requests, issue commands, make comments which reflect personal attitudes towards the matter that is being discussed. Speakers are also usually aware of the fact that the choice of modal form will render statements or requests more or less polite, and perceive the past forms of some modal verbs as more courteous or respectful, as in "*Could* you open the door?" (a more polite request than "*Can* you open the door?"). At a first glance, the use of modality in language might appear to be a fairly straightforward process.

However, as scholars in the field have long known, the function and use of modality in language is far from being clear cut. It has been the object of numerous studies in the past decades, particularly with regard to its use in Early Modern English (although the concept dates back to Greek philosophy).[1] The ideas of *mood* and *modality*, in their most common sense, define grammatical categories and verbs with specific functions; in philosophy, these words are related to modal

[1] On modality with particular reference to Early Modern English, see, among others, D. Hart, M. Lima, eds., *Modality in Late Middle English and Early Modern English*: *Semantic Shifts and Pragmatic Interpretations*, Napoli, CUEN, 2002.

logic. A detailed account of the issue of defining linguistic modality is beyond the scope of this essay, which deals with a specific case study intended as part of a broader, ongoing research project on Shakespeare's use of linguistic modality. Throughout the following study, I will accept definitions that have been established by seminal linguistic studies, and focus on the significance that interpreting modality may have in reading a text, specifically a literary text.

Let us consider this basic definition of modality:

> Our linguistic understanding of modality has its roots in modal logic (a branch of philosophy of language) and in particular the distinction between 'deontic' and 'epistemic' modality. Modal logic has to do with the notions of possibility and necessity, and its categories epistemic and deontic concern themselves with these notions in two different domains. Epistemic modality has to do with the possibility or necessity of the truth of propositions, and is thus involved with knowledge and belief (Lyons 1977: 823). Deontic modality, on the other hand, is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents (Lyons 1977: 823), and is thus associated with the social functions of permission and obligation.[2]

It seems natural to infer that modality in language, then, deals with the way these philosophical categories (epistemic and deontic) are 'translated' in speech, and the above cited division of modality into epistemic and deontic, accepted by most linguists, is observed throughout this study.[3]

One point about modality which is crucial to a study of a literary work in this context is that modal auxiliary verbs are not the only 'modal' elements in language. Modality may be expressed through modal forms such as the modal auxiliary verbs, *quasi-auxiliary modal*

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[2]   "Modality in Grammar and Discourse – An Introductory essay", in *Modality in Grammar and Discourse*, ed. by J. Bybee, S. Fleischman, Typological Studies in Language, Vol. 32, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995, p. 4 (citation from Lyons: J. Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[3]   J. Bybee, S. Fleischman, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

expressions ('have to', 'have got to', 'need to', 'had better', etc.), *adjectival, participial, and nominal modal expressions* (which include numerous forms, such as 'it is possible that', 'is to', as in "you are to do your homework", 'be going to', 'be about to', 'be bound to', etc.), *modal adverbs* ('maybe', 'certainly', 'possibly', 'hopefully', and such), and *modal lexical verbs* ('order', 'assert', 'assume', 'believe', 'fear', 'guess', 'imagine', presume', etc.). In addition to this, modality may be expressed by *tense* ('to wish' with a past simple, for example), *mood* (as in the use of an *imperative* or a *conditional*), grammatical structures such as if-clauses and questions.[4] From a pragmatic point of view, it is possible to exhibit modality through gestures, facial expressions, and intonation patterns as well.

Both the linguistic and pragmatic elements related to modality are relevant to the kind of literary analysis that takes language into close account, often referred to as stylistics or *linguistic criticism*. If modality deals with the truth of propositions (thus with knowledge and belief), its use should be an indicator of the speaker's attitude towards what is being said, whereas when dealing with obligation and permission, modality would express one's attitude towards the source of obligation, and also indicate the degree of power the speaker has in a given situation. It is possible to use speech to communicate, but one may also use it to withhold information, and different choices of modal expression may betray personal feelings which may not be explicit otherwise. Furthermore, modality may be used to persuade someone to act in a certain way: speakers may underline the necessity of taking a certain course of action for example, using expressions that may flatter the interlocutor, expressing polite requests, or issuing explicit commands.

While speakers may often not be fully aware of the underlying processes which determine their choice of modal expression, written texts can be taken to exhibit a greater degree of deliberation, and

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4   I refer systematically in this list of modal expressions to M. Perkins, *Modal expressions in English*, London, Pinter, 1983, Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

the study of dramatic language is particularly interesting as a case in which what characters *say* is set down in writing – so that dramatic texts often closely approach natural language.[5] A writer may choose to use a modal adverb to express certainty (*certainly*, *surely*) as opposed to using a *will* future, for example, or even to use both. If we find the latter case in a sentence in a character's speech, we must decide whether this insistence on certainty shows that the character is actually sure of what is being said, or whether the character is really unsure but wishes to emphasize a statement to counteract his or her own insecurity. Context is obviously a key factor in this respect.

In dealing with the characters' use of modality in the love plot of *Troilus and Cressida*, significant modal forms will be extracted and commented upon, taking the larger frame of the story into account. If expressing modality is a fundamental process in language, taking notice of it and commenting on its presence (or absence) will encourage a close reading of the text, which will hopefully shed light on the characters' feelings and attitudes.

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[5] The distinction between the theatrical, or 'performance' text, and the written, or 'dramatic' text, is important to bear in mind although I have not observed it strictly for the purposes of this essay. Keir Elam makes the difference clear in his preliminary observations in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*: "'Theatre' is taken to refer here to the complex phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By 'drama', on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions. The epithet 'theatrical', then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet 'dramatic' indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction." (K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 2). Elam also notes, however, that the distinction is not to be taken as an "absolute differentiation between two mutually alien bodies".