On Modality in English*

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I. Introduction

Modality is one of the most difficult grammatical categories for Korean EFL learners to grasp because it is closely related to tense, aspect, time, negation, etc., along with proposition, which is expressed by what follows the modality. It is argued in the literature that modality should be treated as an independent grammatical category (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986). Being independent, it is evidently distinguished from proposition in terms of tense, negation, time, etc., shown as follows.

(1) a. John may be in his office.
    b. John must come in now.
    c. John can run ten miles with ease.

According to Palmer (1987), the italicized modal verbs in (1a–c) are described as 'epistemic', 'deontic', and 'dynamic', respectively. These three types of modal verbs behave differently in terms of time and negation marking in connection with the proposition which follows them.

It is shown in this paper, however, that Korean EFL learners more often than not fail to separate modality from proposition in their interpretation of time and negation. I attribute this failure to the fact that

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they often ascribe tense and negation exclusively to modality and identify
tense with time. In this paper, I have conducted a survey among 30
Korean college students on time and negation marking with three types of
modals exemplified (1). It is shown from the survey that the subjects
often fail to interpret time and negation in connection with modality and
proposition. This failure renders us to suggest that these two grammatical
categories be separated and taught accordingly with respect to time and
negation marking.

II. Modality and Proposition

1. Definition

If we adopt the view that modality can constitute an independent
grammatical category as mentioned above, how do we define modality and
describe its role in a sentence? It might be beneficial to define modality in
connection with proposition because they work closely together in
expressing aspect, tense, time, negation, etc. As a first approximation,
Lewis (1946: 49) defines proposition as “assertable contents which can be
questioned, denied or merely supposed, and can be entertained in other
moods as well.” Modality in this sense, then, refers to all the
non-propositional elements of a sentence, which will include grammatical
devices denoting tense, aspect, question, and negation. The gist of
Jespersen’s (1924: 313) definition on proposition can be said to be the
‘contents’ of a sentence, which is quite analogous to that of Lewis (1946)
mentioned above.

Rescher (1968: 24–26) also talks about modality along with proposition.
He illustrates that “a proposition is presented by a complete, self-
contained statement, which, taken as a whole, will be true or false” as in
his own example The cat is on the mat. He adds that “when such a
proposition is itself made subject to some further qualification of such a
kind that the entire resulting complex is itself once again a proposition,
then this qualification is said to represent a ‘modality’ to which the
original proposition is subjected.”

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