

**MODALITY AND MODAL VERBS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN, AND THEIR
EXPRESSION IN UZBEK****Ibragimova Diyora**

Gulistan State University MA student

Contacts: +99893-327-0-29

Email: engdishadiyora@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines how **modality**—speaker stance toward possibility, necessity, and obligation—is expressed in **English** and **German** through modal verbs, and in **Uzbek** through lexical predicates and particles. The paper outlines similarities and differences, highlights issues of ambiguity, and discusses implications for translation and teaching. Comparative examples illustrate how necessity, permission, and epistemic judgment are encoded across these three languages.

Keywords (English): modality; modal verbs; epistemic; deontic; English; German; Uzbek

Introduction

Modality has long been recognized as one of the most universal yet complex categories of human language. It represents the speaker's stance toward the proposition expressed, encompassing notions of **necessity, possibility, obligation, ability, volition, and probability**. As Palmer (2001) and Kratzer (1981) note, modality can be broadly divided into **epistemic** (concerned with degrees of truth and knowledge) and **root** (covering obligation, permission, ability, and volition), though many scholars also include **evidentiality** as an overlapping category in certain languages.

In the Indo-European tradition, languages such as **English** and **German** have developed a relatively compact and grammaticalized system of **modal verbs**, which are syntactically defective but semantically versatile. For example, English uses *must* both to mark obligation (You must submit your work) and epistemic inference (She must be at home). Similarly, German employs *müssen* in parallel ways, while also distinguishing prohibition with *nicht dürfen*. These auxiliaries form a closed class that interact with tense, aspect, and negation in ways that present challenges both for learners and for semantic theory.

By contrast, **Uzbek**, as a Turkic language, does not rely on a closed set of auxiliary modals. Instead, modal meanings are typically conveyed through **lexical predicates** such as *kerak* ('necessary'), *mumkin* ('possible'), and *shart* ('obligatory'), which govern infinitival complements or nominalized verb forms. Furthermore, **particles** like *balki* ('perhaps') and *ehtimol* ('probably'), as well as **mood and evidential markers** (-sa, -dir, ekan), play a central role in expressing possibility, inference, and reportative stance. This results in a system that is **more analytic and distributed**, spreading modal meanings across different lexical and grammatical resources rather than concentrating them in a small auxiliary paradigm.

This cross-linguistic contrast is highly relevant not only for **typological studies** but also for **pedagogy and translation practice**. Students learning English or German often misinterpret polarity contrasts—for instance, equating English *must* not with German *musst nicht*, when in fact the latter means ‘need not’ rather than ‘prohibition’. Similarly, when translating from Uzbek into English or German, the flexible lexical items (*kerak*, *mumkin*, *shart*) may require careful mapping to auxiliary verbs, depending on whether the intended sense is epistemic, deontic, or dynamic.

The present paper aims to explore these issues systematically. It first outlines the theoretical frameworks for analyzing modality, then presents the inventory and functions of modal verbs in English and German, followed by an account of Uzbek strategies. Finally, it highlights the implications of these contrasts for linguistic theory, translation studies, and language teaching.

The study of modality has been central in linguistic theory because it captures how speakers express possibility, necessity, obligation, ability, volition, and probability. Although modality is universal, languages differ widely in the strategies they employ. Modern semantic approaches, particularly those of Kratzer and Palmer, provide a useful lens for cross-linguistic comparison.

Kratzer’s framework describes modality in terms of force and base. Force refers to whether the modal expresses necessity or possibility. The base refers to the source of information or rules that the modal is anchored to, such as knowledge, law, moral norms, or goals. An ordering source may also intervene, ranking alternatives according to preference, obligation, or likelihood. For example, *She must be at home* represents epistemic necessity, with knowledge as the base and necessity as the force. By contrast, *You must submit the paper* illustrates deontic necessity, with rules as the base and necessity as the force.

A central problem in modal semantics is ambiguity. The same form often serves multiple functions. English *must* can indicate obligation (*You must finish your homework*) or inference (*He must be tired*). German *müssen* expresses both necessity of action and epistemic certainty. Uzbek *kerak* also operates broadly, requiring contextual clues to distinguish deontic necessity from epistemic reasoning.

Many scholars argue that modality and mood form a continuum rather than separate categories. Mood refers to grammatical categories like the subjunctive or conditional, while modality encompasses the broader semantic and pragmatic domain of speaker attitude. In Uzbek, this overlap is clear: evidential suffixes such as *-dir* and *ekan* not only provide information about the source of knowledge but also carry epistemic force. Thus, Uzbek illustrates how mood, evidentiality, and modality intertwine in natural language.

English contains a small, closed class of modal verbs: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*. These modals share several features: they do not take inflectional endings (*musts*, *musted* are impossible); they require a bare infinitive complement (*She can swim*); and they lack non-finite forms (*to must* is ungrammatical).

Functionally, English modals can be classified as epistemic, deontic, or dynamic. For example, *He may be sleeping* illustrates epistemic possibility, *You must wear a seatbelt* conveys deontic necessity, and *She can play the violin* denotes dynamic ability. This system is elegant but also ambiguous, since a

single form often encodes more than one function. Teachers and translators must therefore train learners to interpret modals according to discourse context.

German modal verbs—können, dürfen, müssen, sollen, wollen, and mögen—are semantically rich and syntactically integrated into the verbal system. Like English modals, they combine with infinitives, but they display several unique features.

One of the most striking differences concerns negation. *Du musst nicht kommen* means ‘you do not have to come,’ not ‘you must not come.’ The latter sense is expressed by *Du darfst nicht kommen*. Another distinctive feature is the reportative use of *sollen*. For example, *Er soll krank sein* translates as ‘He is said to be ill,’ showing that *sollen* can carry a reportative or evidential meaning absent in English modals. Finally, German employs subjunctive forms such as *dürfte* and *könnte* to weaken epistemic statements, approximating English *might* or *could*. The German system therefore demonstrates greater sensitivity to context and subtle gradience, especially in distinguishing obligation, prohibition, and evidentiality.

Unlike English and German, Uzbek does not rely on auxiliary modal verbs. Instead, modality is distributed across lexical predicates, periphrastic constructions, and morphological markers.

Lexical predicates are the most direct expressions of modality. For instance, *Men borishim kerak* (‘I must go’) expresses necessity, *Bu ishni qilish mumkin* (‘It is possible/allowed’) conveys possibility or permission, and *Siz kelishingiz shart* (‘You are obliged to come’) marks obligation.

Particles and adverbs such as *balki* (‘perhaps’), *ehtimol* (‘probably’), and *shekilli* (‘it seems’) supplement the modal system by marking epistemic uncertainty or probability.

Evidential and mood markers are also important. The suffix *-dir* often indicates inference (*kelgandir* ‘must have come’), while *ekan* expresses reported or indirect knowledge. The conditional suffix *-sa* is used to mark hypotheticality or counterfactual situations. This typological pattern, shared with other Turkic languages, demonstrates that modality in Uzbek is not encoded in a single word class but is distributed across several layers of grammar and discourse.

The three languages under discussion cover similar semantic domains but differ in their strategies. English and German concentrate modality into a compact set of auxiliary verbs, while Uzbek distributes modal meanings across predicates, particles, and morphology.

For instance, obligation is expressed by English *must*, German *müssen*, and Uzbek *kerak* or *shart*. Permission corresponds to *may* in English, *dürfen* in German, and *mumkin* in Uzbek. Prohibition is expressed as *must not* in English, *nicht dürfen* in German, and *mumkin emas* in Uzbek. Epistemic necessity is marked by *must* in English, *muss* in German, and inferential markers such as *-dir* in Uzbek. Epistemic possibility corresponds to *may* or *might* in English, *könnte* or *mag* in German, and adverbs like *balki* and *ehtimol* in Uzbek.

Understanding these contrasts has important implications for teaching and translation.

Learners frequently fall into polarity traps. For example, English *must not* is not equivalent to German *musst nicht*. While the English phrase expresses prohibition, the German construction means ‘need not.’ Prohibition in German requires *nicht dürfen*.

Another difficulty arises from lexicalization in Uzbek. Translators must carefully select among *kerak*, *mumkin*, and *shart* to reflect the intended modality of the source language. One Uzbek predicate may correspond to multiple modal verbs in English or German, depending on context.

Politeness and pragmatics also play a role. Uzbek often employs the past tense form *kerak edi* to soften a request (‘I would need’), which lacks a direct equivalent in English or German. This pragmatic strategy highlights the interaction of modality with politeness conventions.

Finally, evidentiality marks another gap. Uzbek frequently encodes evidential stance through forms like *ekan* and *-dir*, while English and German rarely do so grammatically. This can cause difficulties in translation, where explicit evidential meaning in Uzbek may need to be paraphrased in European languages.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of modality in English, German, and Uzbek demonstrates both the universality of modal categories and the diversity of their linguistic expression. While the core semantic domains—necessity, possibility, obligation, permission, and epistemic stance—are present in all three languages, the strategies employed to encode them differ significantly.

English and German have developed **closed systems of auxiliary modal verbs** that are syntactically defective but semantically flexible. These modals often carry ambiguous readings, requiring contextual cues to distinguish between epistemic and deontic meanings. German, moreover, shows unique features such as the polarity contrast between *musst nicht* and *nicht dürfen*, as well as the reportative sense of *sollen*, which has no direct English equivalent. Such patterns illustrate how modal verbs are not only grammatical tools but also reflections of broader pragmatic and cultural conventions.

Uzbek, by contrast, illustrates a typological alternative in which modality is **distributed across lexical items, particles, and morphological markers**. Expressions such as *kerak*, *mumkin*, and *shart* cover much of the same semantic ground as English and German modals, yet they function as independent predicates rather than auxiliaries. Additional evidential and mood markers, such as *-dir*, *ekan*, and *-sa*, contribute meanings of inference, reportativity, and hypotheticality, thereby enriching the Uzbek modal system with nuances that are not overtly grammaticalized in English or German. This analytic structure underscores the flexibility of Turkic languages in combining modality with evidentiality and discourse pragmatics.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm the relevance of **Kratzer’s framework of force and base** as a cross-linguistic tool. Both Indo-European and Turkic languages can be analyzed in terms of necessity versus possibility, and in terms of epistemic versus root sources of modality. However, the means by which these categories are realized—auxiliary verbs in English and German, versus predicates and morphology in Uzbek—highlight the importance of considering not only semantics but also morphosyntactic pathways of expression.

The pedagogical and translational implications of these contrasts are considerable. Learners of English and German often struggle with polarity differences, and Uzbek speakers must be trained to avoid mapping their native lexical modals too rigidly onto European auxiliaries. Translators must also take into account the evidential dimension of Uzbek, which requires paraphrase or approximation when rendered into English or German. For language teaching, a contrastive approach that makes these differences explicit can prevent common misunderstandings and foster greater linguistic awareness.

Ultimately, the study of modality across these three languages demonstrates that while **the conceptual space of modality is shared universally, its linguistic encoding is shaped by typological, cultural, and pragmatic factors**. Recognizing both the common ground and the unique features of each system not only deepens our theoretical understanding but also enhances the practical tasks of teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication.

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