

# EXPRESSING CERTAINTY AND QUALIFICATION THROUGH THE USE OF ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

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The fact that "... the use of modal verbs is one of the more problematic areas of English grammar" (Quirk, 1985, p. 220), probably accounts for the widespread practice of placing heavy emphasis on the teaching of modal auxiliaries. However, I believe that an analysis of writing and speaking behaviours reveals a need for more attention to be paid to training learners of English in the use of adjectives and adverbs as a means of moderating meaning.

This paper derives from my experiences in working with non-native speakers enrolled in English-intensive university preparation programmes; in the undergraduate-level paper *English in Academic Contexts*; and in English papers offered as part of the International English and Management Degree Programme - all at the University of Waikato. Some of the students enrolled in these courses have spent varying amounts of time in New Zealand secondary schools, some have attended English language schools, while others have embarked on university study directly upon arrival in New Zealand. Students are mostly from Thailand, China, Malaysia, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan.

With the exception of those who have spent a fair amount of time at local secondary schools (where the "standard" English language course books are not in widespread use), almost all of these students have in the recent past prepared, at least partly, for tertiary-level studies by means of upper-level English grammar books and course books specifically written for learners of English as a second language. Because I have found that many students lack the skills necessary to express degrees of probability, frequency, intensity and so on appropriately, I have investigated some language teaching texts which are in general use, in order to find out what is, and what is not, the thrust of modals teaching. Even at the advanced level, I have found that such texts largely focus on modality as expressed through modal auxiliary verbs and that modality is typically treated, for teaching purposes, as a structural, and only cursorily as a semantic point.

McCarthy (1991) says that modality

is often thought of as the province of the closed class of modal verbs (*must, can, will, may, etc.*) and treated as part of the grammar of English, but a large number of 'lexical' words (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs) carry the same or similar meanings to the modal verbs. (pp. 84-85)

He cites two studies of modality in large amounts of discourse by Holmes (1983) and Hermeren (1978), which "show a wide range of uses of the traditional class of modal verbs and of a vocabulary of lexical items carrying modal meanings" (p. 85). The vocabulary of modality includes verbs such as *appear, assume, doubt, guess, look as if, suggest, think*; adverbs such as *actually, certainly, inevitably, obviously, possibly*; and nouns and adjectives related to them. As McCarthy points out, all of these words carry important information

about the stance and attitude of the sender to the message: "they are concerned with assertion, tentativeness, commitment, detachment and other crucial aspects of *interpersonal* meaning". McCarthy goes so far as to claim that "*all* messages choose some degree of modality, even if it is only to make a *neutral* choice of bald assertion (e.g. 'The cat sat on the mat', as compared with the heavily modalised 'I suppose it's possible the cat just may have sat on the mat')" (p. 85).

According to McCarthy (1991), one contribution that the study of vocabulary in naturally occurring discourses has made is "to point up the all-pervasiveness of modality in spoken and written language" (p. 84). Findings demonstrate that other word classes play an even more important role in expressing modality than modal verbs do. Yet it seems that, so far, the outcomes of McCarthy's and other recent research into real discourse as entered into by real people have largely failed to impact on course book designers.

The *Headway English Series* is widely used and considered to be among the best of English language course books. I looked at the work on modals in *Headway Advanced* (Soars and Soars, 1992). In the introduction the book is described as providing a comprehensive coverage of the grammatical and lexical systems of English and as being useful in preparing students for the Cambridge Proficiency Examination. There is very useful work in Unit 10 on adverb and verb collocations (*thoroughly approve*) and on adverb and adjective collocations (*bitterly disappointed, utterly amazed*). *Upper Intermediate Matters* (Bell and Gower, 1992) is the second course book I investigated in terms of adjectival and adverbial modality. The writers state that it takes learners up to a level equivalent to Cambridge First Certificate. Unit 3 gives practice in using adverbs of degree with adjectives (*really attractive, absolutely dreadful*) and Unit 15 has an exercise on using "attitude words" (*presumably, undoubtedly*). However, both of the surveyed texts focus very extensively on modal auxiliaries - indeed the emphasis is such that students could be forgiven for believing that modality very largely begins and ends with modal auxiliary verbs. In 1988 Holmes (cited in McCarthy (1993, p. 85)) surveyed four ESL textbooks and found that the larger vocabulary of modal lexical items was often under-represented in teaching materials. There did not seem to be a perceived need to redress the balance in light of what the natural data shows.

Teachers need to be aware of the limitations of course books and other teaching materials so that they can supplement them appropriately. Of course, neither *Headway Advanced* nor *Upper Intermediate Matters* purports to prepare students for tertiary studies - and in any case no one course book series should be expected to provide anything like the wide-ranging preparation that is needed. Nevertheless, the course books I looked at, and others that are similar, are in wide use in New Zealand English language schools and we are witnessing a trend whereby increasing numbers of second language learners of English are graduating from these institutions and going on to tertiary studies at polytechnics and universities. While it is useful for all learners of English to have adequate skills at expressing qualification (even at early conversational levels, the lack of such skills can be a strong inhibitor to communication), at tertiary level such skills are critical. Advanced learners need to be adroit in adverbial qualification in order to generalise about information, and to report on higher level analysis: to interpret and comment appropriately, to recombine ideas and information into argument, and to speculate and hypothesize. Much formal assessment is based on the ability to write expository essays and to present carefully argued, logical, oral presentations.

Stating claims in professional academic writing and seminar presentations requires great care. As Basham and Kwatchka (1991) point out,

Overstatement of a case leaves the writer open to criticism and refutation, whereas an understated argument may go unnoticed. Unskilful use of qualifying or hedging devices (e.g. adverbs, adjectives, and modal auxiliaries) by novice writers is judged negatively as not getting to the point or as evidence of 'fuzzy thinking'. (p. 39)

A tendency towards circumspection may be mistakenly assessed as vagueness or incompetence. Speech which is lacking in qualifiers can seem tentative, colourless - and boring.

Transferring assumptions and expectations about successful discourse from one cultural and educational system to another can create difficulties. Basham and Kwachka's (1991, p. 37) interesting study of university students from Alaska's Native American population focused on modal usage to exemplify problems with assessing the writing of "linguistically different" students. Many of the students were bilingual; however, the majority spoke English primarily, with only a passive knowledge of their ancestral language. Yet despite the fact that English was the dominant language for almost all of the students surveyed, it was found that their writing tended to reflect patterns more congruent with their home cultures than that of the university. One major trend found was excessive qualification. By qualification, the writers mean "any grammatical strategy the intention of which is the mitigation of an element of discourse". Three main areas of excessive qualification highlighted in the study were:

- 1     **Doubles** - whereby there was immediate paraphrasing of a word within a sentence.  
*There's a lot of cars waiting for the green light to come or appear.*
- 2     **Overuse of adverbial or adjectival modifiers.**  
*The difference between a religion and a cult is probably how they act and carry out a duty.*
- 3     **Extension of modal auxiliary verbs to perform a qualifying function.**  
There are many instances, especially in future or volitional contexts, where assertive *will* is replaced by *would*.  
*So the stories are going down generations of natives to the younger generations so the customs wouldn't be forgotten.*

In the researchers' view, the overuse of the modal auxiliary *would* reflects a general qualification, congruent with Eskimo social norms requiring circumspection with regard to talk. They believe that writing intensifies this characteristic because of its relative permanence.

In my own work with students from many parts of Asia, rather than excessive qualification, I find under-qualification: students display a tendency to make sweeping claims and statements which native speakers would often find hard to take seriously. Below are some examples from my students' writing:

*If you are not fluent in your own language, you are not qualified to learn a second language.*  
*Age contributes greatly to learning.*  
*Equipment and environment will make you progress more quickly.*  
*Experienced teachers know how to cope with .....*

*The most important thing is education.*

Instances of inappropriate expressions of modality can have a disproportionate effect on the overall perceived quality of written work. Bald assertions of "facts" which cannot possibly be true may raise more than just issues of credibility. Assessors of written work who are not accustomed to working closely with English second-language learners may even question the intelligence that lies behind such statements. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) refer to the work of Kaplan, who has for more than two decades drawn the attention of applied linguists to the way in which different cultures appear to produce different rhetorical styles. They say that his seminal insights seldom percolate through to academic colleagues working in other disciplines and that lecturers, "faced with student writing that falls outside their own notions of acceptable styles and patterns of argument, immediately respond by peppering the margins of the essay with charges of 'irrelevance,' 'illogicality,' 'incoherence,' and so forth" (p. 20).

### **SOME SUGGESTED STRATEGIES**

Native speakers of English can become adept at manipulating adjectival and adverbial modality from an early age. How can we facilitate matters for second language learners?

- Use students' own writing as a basis for group discussion. (Using anonymous examples of work from previous courses will avoid causing embarrassment.)
- Let students analyse texts to see how native speakers manipulate cautious language. Periodicals dealing with subject material from students' specific disciplines and newspapers can yield valuable material. Ask students to identify examples of frequency, quantity, probability and so on. They can be encouraged to search out and collect examples to share/discuss.
- Use cline to demonstrate degrees of meaning. Let students work in groups to decide where to place words or phrases on a cline. For example, rank these adverbs to do with frequency from highest to lowest: *seldom, never, always, sometimes, rarely, often, usually, frequently*.
- Draw attention to instances of adjectival and adverbial qualification as they occur naturally in spoken and written texts.
- Provide students with guidelines and reference materials. The Structure and Vocabulary Aids in Jordan's (1990) *Academic Writing Course* are excellent. Regularly setting speaking and writing tasks that require students to refer to and make use of these resources provides consolidation.

Students often rely on us, as teachers, to help them set learning priorities: what we see as important assumes importance for them. I now focus on the role of adjectives and adverbs as qualifiers very early in any teaching programme so that there will be time for many repeated, "spaced" opportunities for learning to occur. By and large I have found that students are enthusiastic about acquiring the necessary understandings - but remembering to apply them independently and gaining the confidence necessary to do so take practice.



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