Modality and the Conditionals in English and French  
A National Comparative Study  

Saleh Dahawi Elenizi  
Assouiatet Professor, College of Languages and Translation.  
King Saud University Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

(Received 17/4/1425A.H.; accepted for publication 7/8/1425A.H.)

Abstract. This paper investigates Arab students’ mastery of modals and conditionals in context. It shows that despite the relative little complexity of modals and conditionals in English and despite the fact that English is introduced to learners well before French, French learners seem to have a relatively better mastery of modals and conditionals. The author adduces this phenomenon to the textbooks in use and to classroom practices. He asserts that modals and conditionals be taught in a pragmatically-oriented approach.

Introduction

Modals play a vital role in text processing conducted by the reader and in thematic organization undertaken by the writer. Modality as such poses serious difficulties for EFL learners as well as native speakers.

Although the micro-text issue has been given a certain amount of attention by researchers in the field, its treatment in EFL classrooms has been lagging behind. EFL instructors, syllabus designers, and textbook writers have more often than not indulged in treating modality as a strictly grammatical category devoid of its pragmatic context. Furthermore, speaking classes, where role-play has been somewhat downgraded, have mistakenly missed out on utilizing modals as pragmatic components in performing speech acts, such as requesting, apologizing, offering, declining, giving permission, expressing certainty, probability, and referring to lost opportunities.
The present paper draws attention to modals as pragmatic categories in use. It focuses among other aspects on the complex sentence that has a condition in its subordinate clause and a modal in its main clause and claims that learning such correct construction and appropriate use have got to be in context. The paper thus, attempts to tilt the balance in favor of a pragmatically-oriented approach to the teaching of modals, modality, and conditionals.

A Brief Overview

Scholars who dealt with modality have used a number of terms. Halliday (1970: 189-213) distinguishes between modality and modulation. For him, the former is related to the speaker’s assessment of the probability of what he is saying and the latter to the ideational level of what the speaker is saying. Lyons (1977: 793) uses the terms “epistemic” and “deontic” modality. He uses “epistemic” modality to refer to the type of knowledge the speaker has about what he is saying, and “deontic” modality to refer to the speaker’s views or stance towards what he is saying.

Huddleston (1984: 166-176) makes the distinction between three types of modality: epistemic, deontic and dynamic. Epistemic modality has as its basis what the speaker knows about the world (It may rain tomorrow), deontic modality calls for an action to be taken (You must sign this paper), and dynamic modality indicates that an individual is capable of doing a particular action when the circumstances arise (Ali can speak German).

Meziani (1983: 268) uses the terms “knowledge” and “decision” in reference to modality. For Meziani, sentence 1, below, is an example of “knowledge” modality while sentence 2 is an example of “decision” modality.

1. John will be at home by noon.
2. You may eat my cheese sandwich; I am not hungry.

The discussion of the issue of modals in this paper will be based, among other things, on the varied pragmatic functions of modals used in varied contextual situations. For instance, the modal “may” could be used to mean giving permission,
3. You may express your point of view.

The same modal, “may”, could be used to express a formal request,
4. May I comment on these ideas?

It could also be used to mean a certain degree of certainty.
5. Ahmad may be at the library.
The first two functions of the modal “may” in examples 3 and 4, above, fall within Meziani’s “decision” modality while example 5 falls within what Meziani calls “knowledge” modality.

Other functions of modals include: necessity, obligation, lack of necessity, expression of lost opportunity, and advice. Consider the following examples:

(6) We must leave right away. (Necessity)
(7) All applicants must have a Ph.D. (Necessity)
(8) I don’t have to attend tomorrow’s meeting. (Lack of necessity)
(9) We had better work harder or we’ll flunk this course. (Advisability)
(10) Ahmad should have gone to the meeting yesterday. (Lost opportunity)

The foregoing overview indicates that the view of modals as grammatical categories has got to be supplemented by their pragmatic functions in discourse.

As stated in the introduction, modals can occur in the main clause of a complex sentence that expresses condition in its subordinate clause. A real condition leaves the fulfillment of the condition unresolved and places the truth of the main clause on the modality scale. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1972: 325).

(11) If Ahmed was awake, she certainly heard the noise.

The hearing of the noise is very much tied up to whether Ahmed was awake or not.

In an unreal conditional, it is clearly expected that the condition will not be fulfilled.

(12) If she had been awake, she would have heard the noise. The inference drawn from example 12, above, is that she was asleep and it was impossible for her to hear the noise. This sentence/utterance may have many functions according to the context of situation.

Modals and conditionals are so complex, especially if studied in French and English.

(13) a-Three soldiers were reported to have been killed.
b- Trois soldats auraient été tués.
c- Three soldiers would have been killed.

The past conditional in French is rendered in English by the past tense and reference to a particular discourse genre (The News). Both languages use the
passive voice to avoid legal responsibility. A literal translation would be grammatical but inappropriate and totally wrong, as example 13c testifies.

**Aims of the Study**

This paper seeks to verify the generally-held view among many EFL instructors that Arab EFL learners find the appropriate use of modals in real-life situations quite confusing. It tries to stress the significant role of the pragmatic dimension of modals and modality as a missing ingredient in most classroom activities. The author contends that the treatment of modals and modality in most Arab EFL classrooms tends to be based on a purely syntactic perspective. Furthermore, modals are devoid of their real-life contexts of use. In our EFL speaking classrooms, as mentioned earlier, we tend to deal with the modals as strictly grammatical categories as evidenced by most EFL instructors’ frequent use of the term “auxiliary verbs”. The speaking class, for instance, tends to be devoid of role-play as a technique to train EFL learners to use modals to express requests, complaints, giving instructions or directions, thanking, apologizing, offering, declining, etc. In other words, modals are not taught in association with their socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, EFL writing assignments rarely highlight to Arab EFL learners the significance of audience, the purpose of writing as a communicative act to convince, to complain, to give permission, to make an announcement, etc. Hence, modals are perceived as “empty” grammatical verbs, i.e. auxiliaries to main verbs in clauses or sentences.

The study conducted is a result of an experiment on a sample of two sets of Arab EFL learners at the college level. The first set consists of 25 Arab EFL majors and 25 Arab students majoring in French at the college level. The two sets of subjects were asked to write what they would consider the most appropriate utterances for a set of specific real-life situations assigned to them by the researcher.

**The Study**

The following section includes the instructions given by the researcher to the two sets of subjects described above.
**Situation One**

You want to report to your family what a friend of yours said a couple of days ago about his intention to do something in the near future. What do you say to report that to your family?

**Situation Two**

You want to talk about a hypothetical situation. Your friend is blaming you for not stopping-by the other day. You want to explain that you had no reservations about stopping-by and that next time you will.

**Situation Three**

You went to a party. You found out later that your presence must have caused some trouble to the others. You want to express your regret for having caused such trouble. What do you say?

**Situation Four**

What would you say if you were to give your opinion of someone, about his talent, skills, etc? You do not want to sound very sure of what you are saying; your statement is not meant to be very assertive.

**Situation Five**

What would you say if you were to express your gratitude to a close friend without whose help you wonder what would have happened?

The instructions were based on envisioned real-life situations. The situations and the instructions given to the subjects were in Arabic. They are translated here into English. The informants were instructed to respond in the language of their specialization, English or French.

**Results**

In this section, the author presents the subjects’ responses in English and French in all of the aforementioned contexts. The two groups of subjects did not have any serious difficulty using appropriate modals in real-life situations pertaining to the hypothetical but realistic future probability. Only 4 out of the 24 English majors used the simple future modal “will” instead of the appropriate one, which is “would” in this context.
The next finding has to do with using modals for expressing an unreal hypothetical situation, such as expressing regret over something that could not have happened or a remote and imaginary opportunity. Both groups failed to come up with the appropriate modal in this context. They either used the simple present or the simple past of the modal expressing a real or a semi-real probability.

Regarding the envisioned consequence of a highly likely event, both groups failed to use the appropriate modal. Most of them used the simple future modal “will” – a clear interference from Arabic, which has the form “sa+verb in the present”.

Below is a list of the subjects’ responses in all the aforementioned situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>EFL Majors’ Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>French Majors’ Responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Ahmad said that he would travel tomorrow</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>Ahamd a dit qu’il voyagerait demain</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>If I had the time, I would stop by.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Si j’avais le temps je passerais te voir</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>If I had know that my presence would cause such troubles, I wouldn’t have come.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Si j’avais su, je ne serais pas venu</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>This boy could be a genius in physics.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Cet enfant pourrait etre un génie en physique</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Without your help, I should be lost.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Sans votre aide, je me perdrais</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both the English and the French majors had no difficulty using the appropriate expression with the appropriate modal in the first situation.
Reporting something that was said by someone else (i.e. in the indirect speech) poses no difficulty for the two sets of subjects.

The second situation, which is essentially about a hypothetical event/activity whose likelihood is quite possible, poses serious difficulties for the English majors more than for the French majors.

In the third situation, which is about regrets about hypothetical and highly unlikely to have happened, both groups found it difficult to come up with the appropriate response. This situation is based on the use of the If-clause type 3, which refers to a lost opportunity or a wish that had never been or would never be realized.

The fourth situation pertains to a comment implying a high degree of uncertainty or to a statement that is meant to cast doubt on your “knowledge” modality. This situation was found to be difficult for the English majors. The French majors did not have serious problems expressing themselves correctly in this situation.

The fifth situation, which is somehow similar to the third situation, posed obvious difficulties to both groups of subjects. Both the English majors and the French majors failed to come up with the appropriate modals in both hypothetical situations.

**Discussion**

As stated earlier in the this paper, the two groups of English majors and French majors failed in many instances to come up with the most appropriate uses of modals and conditionals under consideration in this study.

Both groups of subjects had many hours of instruction in modals in their grammar classes. Yet, their inappropriate use of these modals indicates that the teaching of these categories has treated them as strictly grammatical categories in isolated sentences. The treatment of these modals as strictly grammatical categories, devoid of their socio-pragmatic context, must has led to the inadequacies described above.
It can be noted that in both groups most subjects were not aware of the hypothetical aspect of the conditional mode; they did not perceive that the tense must be back-shifted to the past when it referred to the present or the future in order to express the unreal conditional. This case was quite noticeable when the students had to deal with a certain hypothetical condition. Thus, most of the students understood the hypothetical conditionals as the expression of an action connected to the fulfillment of another as a real one.

It is interesting to indicate that most students in both English and French used the correct modal verb in indirect speech as in "Ahmad said that he would leave tomorrow" and the conditional in the present tense in the following French statement,

(14) *Ahmad a dit qu’il voyagerait demain.*

(Ahmad said that he would leave tomorrow).

This shows that most of the students in both languages acquired the usage of the modal verb (past) in English (conditional in French) in indirect speech probably because the teaching materials had introduced it in depth in the program, while at the same time, neglecting the high frequency of the other uses of the modal. Both groups resorted to formulation outlining the conditional mode expressed by modal verbs in English and verb inflections in French. For example, in order to present information, which is neither confirmed nor taken for granted, the students in French avoided the use of the conditional by using “I am not responsible for such information. I just heard that”, instead of using the conditional in the context: "Il y aurait une reduction des impots". "There could be a reduction of taxes". They reformulated as follows: “I heard something which is not sure”; “We expect reduction in taxes”; “There is a rumor saying that…” or “It is not my responsibility to tell such a thing”. The same reformulation has been detected in French contexts.

These reformulations indicate that the subjects attempted to reconcile their linguistic experience in their mother tongue (Weinreich, 1968) with their interlingual rules in the target language. So they translated in their mother tongue the different conditional forms in the context they envisaged. This led to producing incorrect sentences to indicate the conditional notions. The students did not rely on verb inflection to indicate the corresponding mode of conditional in French and in English. Thus, they resorted to the present tense and produced what their linguistic system at this stage permitted. (See Selinker’s processes and strategies in interlanguage, 1972). We can consider this to be a compensatory strategy at this stage of learning.
Conclusion

It is recommended that a well-structured and progressive introduction of modals in teaching materials be adopted; starting with their most frequent and most common uses (as opposed to usages), and then proceeding to the most complicated and less frequent ones. This is especially important for students of French.

We should proceed to the teaching of the diverse essential uses of modals in the design and development of French materials by emphasizing the functions and the notions of each modal so that the students can integrate these usages in their interlanguage.

The unexpected finding in this study is the high disproportion in correct answers between the two groups. It indicates that students of French were more aware of the hypothetical use of the verbs they used. Although the uses of conditionals in French are more complicated and cover a wider range than in English, the French majors made fewer errors than their English major counterparts.

Thus, we are led to conclude that French majors are more familiar with the conditional mode, though English is taught from high school as the only foreign language. This finding could be due to a lack of appropriate attention to the conditional mode in the teaching materials to which students have been exposed. For example, most students in English seem to have limited knowledge about the use of modal verbs that are back-shifted to the past in order to refer to the present or future, thus underlying the hypothetical aspect of the action or lessening its certainty. Clearly, the mother tongue has interfered in “the reasoning” of the students, thus bringing about most of the answers in both languages. Although interference is an acknowledged phenomenon, as practitioners we prefer that good pedagogy help learners move forward towards building up a much more sophisticated communicative competence.

References

الجمل الشرطية في الإنجليزية والفرنسية

صالح بن ضحوي العري
أستاذ مشارك بكلية اللغات والترجمة - جامعة الملك سعود
الرياض - المملكة العربية السعودية

ملخص البحث: يُظهر هذا البحث أن هناك الكثير من الصعوبة في أحيان الشرط في اللغة الإنجليزية والفرنسية مقارنةً بأحيان الشرط في اللغة الإنجليزية وعلى الرغم من أن اللغة الإنجليزية مدخلة في المناهج قبلة الفرنسية ممّا يؤدي إلى إلغاء أكثر لدى طلاب الإنجليزية، فإنّ دارسي اللغة الفرنسية أبدوا مكمِّلاً أوضحًا في استخدام مفاهيم وأحيان الشرط من دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية. ويرجع صاحب المقال بناءً على الدراسة التي قام بها أن مرت هذه الضعف التدريسي لدى دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية هو محتوى المناهج المستخدمة وكذلك النشاطات اللغوية الممارسة. ويدعو الباحث توصيات في إدخال الشرطية في المناهج اللغوية التدريسية بطريقة سليمة