

The nature of modality

Werner Abraham's perspective

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The present double special issue focuses on modality in the architecture of language. It is dedicated to the memory of Werner Abraham (1936–2024), who conducted research on this topic throughout his life. In the 1980s, he began studying modal particles (Abraham 1986, 1991b) and modal verbs (Abraham 1990) in German, Dutch, English and other Germanic languages (Abraham 1991a), with a particular focus on diachrony. He then went on to connect the expression of modality with other fundamental grammatical categories, such as aspect, case and referentiality (Abraham 1992, 1997), event structure (Abraham 2005), passivization (2006), diathesis (Abraham 2016a), illocutionary force (Abraham 2012), syntactic subordination (Abraham 2014, 2016b), verum focus (Abraham 2017a) and mirativity (Abraham 2017b). Working on the connections between modality and grammar enabled him to develop a general theory of modality based on the distinction between lexical and grammatical modal expressions in German (Abraham 2020).

In this respect, Abraham goes beyond the conception of modality as a means of relativizing the factuality of a situation (Narrog 2005, 2009), and understands it as a semantic-functional category that incorporates the speaker's perspective into the utterance. 'Perspective' encompasses the following aspects:

1. The speaker's attitude toward what is and is not the case in reality,
2. The degree of validity of his/her statement,
3. His/her horizon of knowledge,
4. The sources of his/her knowledge,
5. His/her belief system,
6. His/her will and expectations with respect to reality,
7. His/her attitudes toward what has been said.

Modal expressions (modal adverbs, modal verbs and modal particles) encode a speaker's perspectivization, which implies an assessment of the source and/or the validity of a proposition. For example, (1b) differs from (1a) in that the modal

adverbs express an assessment of either the source (*offensichtlich*) or the validity (*wahrscheinlich*) of the proposition.

- (1) a. Der Chef ist gestern betrunken gewesen.
 ‘The boss was drunk yesterday’
 b. Der Chef ist gestern *offensichtlich/wahrscheinlich* betrunken betrunken.
 ‘The boss was evidently/probably drunk yesterday’

Abraham (2020) organizes German modal expressions into a mereological system in which the elements are interrelated through binary features (\pm) that encode different types of assessment. Table 1 illustrates this system:

Table 1. Types of modality expressions according to Abraham (2020: 65–69)

	Modality expressions	Examples	Source of p (evidentiality)	Speaker's assessment of p (epistemicity)
lexical	<i>offensichtlich</i> ‘evidently’, ‘as it can be seen’	(a) Haider ist offensichtlich betrunken gewesen ‘Haider was evidently drunk’	+	–
	<i>vermutlich/wahrscheinlich</i> ‘probably’	(b) Haider ist vermutlich / wahrscheinlich betrunken gewesen. ‘Haider was presumably drunk’	–	+
grammatical	<i>sollen</i> ‘to be said to’	(c) Haider soll betrunken gewesen sein ‘Haider is said to have been drunk’	+	+
	<i>ja</i> ‘as we know’	(d) Haider ist ja betrunken gewesen ‘Haider was drunk, as we know’	+	++

Lexical expressions, such as modal adverbs, are considered less complex means of modality, as they can encode only one type of assessment, source or validity. Thus, in (a), *offensichtlich* indicates the source of information (i.e., objective, visible evidence present in the communicative context); this means the speaker evaluates the state of affairs in terms of evidentiality. In (b), *wahrscheinlich* evaluates the validity of the proposition and thus functions epistemically.

By contrast, grammatical modality expressions, such as modal verbs and particles, are semantically more complex as they operate at both evidential and epistemic levels. For instance, the modal verb *sollen* in (c) indicates that the speaker evaluates the truth value of the proposition by relying on an external source (which is different from him/herself). Finally, German modal particles are even more complex than modal verbs because they also include the addressee's perspective on the proposition. For example, the modal particle *ja* in (d) covers both the speaker's assessment on p and what he/she thinks about the addressee's knowledge.

Through his systematization of German modal expressions, Abraham builds on Bühler's (1934) fundamental *origo* insight, according to which language "has a central point of orientation, the *origo* (Latin for 'source')" (Abraham 2020: 1). This is conceived as a natural space-time-person-indexed viewpoint, which is common to both animals and humans. While "[a]nimals remain rooted in the world when communicating, which is because they remain in the prison of HERE, NOW and ME", humans are "able to overcome the natural viewpoint (*origo*) and to anchor it in distant places (by aspect), distant times (by tense), distant worlds (by mood), and in distant modes of security as to truth veridicality (by modality)" (Abraham 2020: 16).

In this view, aspect, tense, mood and modality are grammatical techniques of displacement from the natural *origo*, which are only present in human language. Thus, Abraham's theory of modality is also connected with a tradition of studies that sees modality expressions as means of deixis, i.e., linguistic pointing (Bühler 1934, Abraham 2011, Diewald 2013). This is understood as a fundamental semiotic operation of referentiality whereby a linguistically encoded state-of-affairs is connected to the speaker's *origo*. Although all linguistic items contribute to this semiotic operation, grammatical forms such as modal verbs and modal particles play a crucial role in instantiating what Abraham refers to as double assessment or double displacement.

The theory of modality also informs Abraham's (2019) reflection on the origin and evolution of language. In particular, he joined the debate on whether paradigmatics preceded or followed syntagmatics in language evolution (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010). Drawing on his revisitation of Bühler's (1934) double displacement and his studies on modality expressions in German (see Table 1), Abraham identifies the part-whole relation, that is mereology, as the building principle for every complexity stage in the evolution of grammar. For example, a part-whole systematics can be found in both the initial stage, i.e., the organization of the primary lexicon, and the final stage of epistemic modality. In this view, paradigmatics is not seen as a mere list of unordered items, each conveying an independent

meaning, but rather as a system of mereologically structured elements, which precedes syntagmatics and thus every syntactic operation.

The contributions of this special issue touch upon Abraham's thoughts on modality in the architecture of language from various perspectives. Maché's article deals with Werner Abraham's concept of the "Modal Protosoup" (Abraham 2009), an idea suggesting that all linguistic expressions of modality (i.e., modal verbs like German *brauchen* 'need', *wollen* 'want', *müssen* 'must') originate from a unified cognitive foundation. The author connects this idea with research from linguistics (especially semantics), psychology, philosophy, anthropology to argue that (i) modality originates in basic cognitive abilities, especially the capacity to simulate possible futures; (ii) needing and wanting are foundational concepts for understanding dynamic modality (modality tied to agent-internal conditions); and (iii) a deeper analysis of needing and wanting explains semantic contrasts in modal verbs and related speech acts.

The article by Hinterwimmer and Zeman adopts Abraham's notion of perspectivization as a central linguistic category that extends beyond the traditional definition of modality as merely the speaker's attitude. By analyzing historical data on the distribution of the German verb *sculan/sollen* ('shall') + infinitive as an alternative to the imperative mood, the authors argue that these two structures are not equivalent. While the imperative anchors the speaker's intention in the "here and now," the construction *suln* + inf. encodes a more complex viewpoint constellation by consistently referring to a third source or intention. Consequently, they claim that not only epistemic modality but also root modality is grounded in perspectivization. From this, the authors propose that perspectival mechanisms may be fundamentally at work across all modal phenomena.

The contributions of Speyer and of Erbach and Gergel also address modal verbs from a diachronic perspective. Speyer reconstructs the historical development of the "double reading" (deontic vs. epistemic) of German modal verbs. In particular, he focuses on modal verbs selecting past infinitives, such as *sie muss das gesehen haben* ('she must have seen it'), which in present-day German displays an epistemic reading ('I am sure that she saw it'). Drawing on texts from the Middle High German, Early New High German, and New High German periods, Speyer argues that the construction *modal verb* + *past infinitive* originally had a full-verb meaning that developed first a deontic and later an epistemic meaning. This grammaticalization process was possible because another modal verb construction – the *Ersatzinfinitiv* (i.e., *sie hat das sehen müssen*) – specialized for the deontic interpretation (meaning 'she was obliged to see it').

Erbach and Gergel delve into the mechanisms of language change in the modal domain from the perspective of experimental semantics. Within the Human Diachronic Simulation Paradigm, speakers are confronted with con-

structured meaning-form pairings that mirror historically attested changes. Through acceptability judgments, the authors test three English verbal expressions – *be able to*, *be allowed to*, and *might* – across different modal contexts triggering different readings. The participants' judgments confirm the diachronically attested unidirectional path from dynamic to deontic and ultimately to epistemic readings, thus corroborating the hypothesis that present-day speakers behave in ways similar to speakers of earlier varieties of the same language.

The contribution by Björn Wiemer focuses on clausal complementation. In his analysis, the author sees a connection between illocutionary force and modality but maintains a distinction between the two, thus considering illocutionary force as separate from Abraham's "Modal Protosoup" (Abraham 2009). Drawing primarily on Slavic languages, the author proposes a functional classification of clause-initial connectives that can act as complementizers, marking clauses as arguments of higher predicates. The paper examines how modality (understood as necessity vs. possibility) and illocutionary force (i.e., different types of speech acts) influence the formation of complement clauses. It highlights that many connectives oscillate between the role of complementizers and that of indicators of illocutionary force. Wiemer emphasizes that these "gray areas" often result from a lack of clear structural signals or from deictic shifts. The article also discusses the distinction between cognitive domains (propositions) and volitional domains (states of affairs). An onomasiological grid is proposed to classify connectives on the basis of concepts such as evidentiality and factuality. Ultimately, the study suggests that linguistic theory should systematically integrate these phenomena of empirical indeterminacy.

Like Björn Wiemer, Pierre-Yves Modicom also delves into the relationship between modality and illocutionary force. In his contribution, he revisits the well-established view of modal particles as markers of attitudes of speech act participants and proposes viewing them as instantiations of the "judge-and-ratifier-deixis". According to this perspective, modal particles encode intersubjective instances (termed the "judge" and the "ratifier") which validate the proposition in different ways. He illustrates this by discussing the uses of *wohl* and *ja* in German: while *ja* in assertion marks pragmatically uncontroversial information where the epistemic authority, i.e., the judge anticipates the ratification, the particle *wohl* in questions encodes a much weaker epistemic authority on the part of the judge.




Finally, the paper by Marco Coniglio addresses modal particles from a diachronic perspective. Coniglio's main aim is to propose a solution to a problem pointed out by Abraham (1991b: 357–371): the fact that, although modal particles are characteristic of languages with a middle field, their emergence does not coincide with the rise of the middle field (and thus with the emergence of V2 syntax)

in the history of the Germanic languages. Drawing on data from Gothic, as well as West and North Germanic, Coniglio shows that Early Germanic/Gothic, which did not exhibit fixed V2 syntax, displayed a complex particle system comprising two types of particles: C-particles (i.e., conjunctions and discourse markers in the left periphery) and I-particles (weakened adverbs). According to Coniglio's account, this system was still present in the early West Germanic languages (German, Dutch, and English), but later underwent a reduction through a shift from C- to I-particles when V2 arose, blocking the possibility for low adverbs to be reanalyzed as left-peripheral particles (C-particles). Stable V2 therefore prevented low adverbs from moving to C and allowed them only to grammaticalize as modal particles within the middle field.


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