

Speech-act participants in modality

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Abstract

Semantic accounts of subjective modality commonly assume that the speaker is the source of modal attitudes. However, there is a large body of data to suggest that attributing a certain subjective modality to the speaker is the default only for the declarative sentence type. In interrogative sentences, it is often systematically the hearer who is credited with the modal attitude. For instance, *Linda may go* is commonly interpreted as ‘I allow Linda to go’. However, the interrogative version *may Linda go?* usually means ‘do you allow Linda to go?’ rather than ‘do I allow Linda to go?’

Modal operators from a small set of diverse language (English *may*, German *sollen*, Korean *-kess*, Yucatec *he’l*, the Amharic and Kambaata jussive) are analyzed from the point of view of the shift of the modal assessor depending on sentence type. Some parallels from evidentiality and egophora are drawn. The result may be summarized as follows: By inferences or rules of grammar, subjective modalities may be attributed to a speech-act participant as their source. In declaratives, that is the speaker. In interrogatives, the speaker cedes the decision on the pragmatic focus to the hearer. A modal operator is the pragmatic focus of an utterance. Consequently, in interrogative sentences, the hearer becomes the default source of such modalities. The account generalizes to modalized complement clauses of predicates of communication, where the participants of the communicative act designated take the stead of speech-act participants.