

## EPISTEMIC AND DEONTIC MODALITY IN ONLINE CUSTOMERS' REVIEWS

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the past few years, the Internet has extended its original applications and become a worldwide marketplace where all kinds of products are bought and sold. In order to stay competitive, firms have adapted their advertising strategies to this new digital medium. In the publishing and bookselling industry, a new promoting technique is being used: along with traditional blurbs and official reviews by experts, customers' reviews (CRs) are gradually becoming more popular.*

*Drawing on a corpus of 50 online CRs from Amazon ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)), this study analyses the use and function of modality, both epistemic and deontic, in this genre. My purpose is to explore the level of command and/or appreciation amateur writers have as to the subtleties of modality, which reflects in turn their understanding of the interpersonal relations involved in the genre.*

**KEY WORDS:** *book review, customer's review, modality, epistemic, deontic.*

**RESUMEN.** *En los últimos años, Internet ha ampliado sus aplicaciones iniciales y se ha convertido en un mercado global donde se venden y compran todo tipo de productos. Para seguir siendo competitivas en este próspero mercado online, las compañías han debido adaptar sus técnicas publicitarias al nuevo medio digital. En el caso del sector editorial, una nueva estrategia se está popularizando cada vez más: ofrecer al público reseñas de libros escritas por lectores, además de los tradicionales blurbs y reseñas oficiales firmadas por expertos.*

*En este estudio analizamos la modalidad, tanto epistémica como deóntica, en el género de la reseña crítica, concretamente aquella escrita por lectores. Con un corpus formado por 50 reseñas publicadas en Amazon ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)), nuestro objetivo es explorar el nivel de dominio que muestran los escritores amateurs o no profesionales respecto al complejo fenómeno de la modalidad, así como su percepción de las relaciones interpersonales en este género.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *reseña de libro, reseña de lector, modalidad, epistémica, deóntica.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the Internet has extended its original information and communication applications, and it is now quite frequently employed to buy and sell all kinds of products. In a way, the World Wide Web has become a *world wide market*. Among the vast range of products available in this online *bazaar*, I am interested in books, more specifically in the way most publishing and bookselling companies promote and sell books online. Along with blurbs, official reviews and solicited opinions from experts (Bhatia 2004; Gea Valor 2005), bookselling websites also try to attract potential readers by offering customers' reviews (CRs). As a matter of fact, CRs are becoming increasingly popular, possibly because, in contrast with professional reviews, the opinions and comments of ordinary readers seem more impartial and objective, and therefore may be accepted more readily by an audience of peers.

Drawing on a corpus of 50 online CRs from Amazon ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)), this study analyses a most interesting aspect in the book review genre: modality, both epistemic and deontic. My main purpose is to explore the level of command and/or appreciation amateur writers have as to the subtleties of this complex feature, which reflects in turn their understanding of the interpersonal relations involved in the genre.

## 2. MODALITY: DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY

Modality is a complex notion which has attracted the attention of many scholars in different disciplines, especially philosophy, logic and linguistics. Since the 1980s, many insightful accounts of modality from a linguistic perspective have contributed to a deeper understanding of the concept, and have produced a most useful mapping of a modal typology (Lyons 1977; Coates 1983, 1990; Perkins 1983; Halliday 1985; Stubbs 1986; Palmer 1986, 1990).

In general terms, modality involves two essential dimensions: on the one hand, the expression of our attitudes, beliefs and personal opinions; and, on the other hand, our degree of commitment to what we say, to the truth or validity of the proposition uttered. According to Downing and Locke (2002: 381), modality “is the [semantic] category by which speakers express attitudes towards the event contained in the proposition.” By means of modality, language users intrude in their message and present reality not as a simple assertion of a fact but by personal attitude or intervention. Moreover, as McCarthy (1991: 81) puts it, modal elements convey “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 (as opposed to ideational, or content, meanings).”

As regards a modal taxonomy, there is general agreement on two main types: epistemic and deontic. Epistemic modality refers to the logical status of events or states, usually involving levels of certainty, likelihood or logical necessity. The main communicative function of epistemic modality is that it allows speakers to comment on the content of the clause by assessing the probability that the proposition is true in terms of certainty, probability or possibility. On the other hand, speakers can intervene in the speech event by means of deontic modality. This type of modality refers to the control of actions and events by human agents, and involves personal permission, obligation, and volition (or intention). Functionally, deontic modality enables speakers to intervene in and bring about changes in events, actions or states (Downing and Locke 2002; Biber et al. 2003).

Taking these aspects into consideration, the present study examines modality in the book review genre, specifically in the CR. One of the most attractive features of the book review is the enormous influence of interpersonal dynamics on the array of linguistic and rhetorical features used, especially modal ones, which, according to Downing and Locke (2002: 389), “are instrumental in the establishing and maintaining of social relations and interaction.” While any review certainly entails description, it is widely agreed that the book review is essentially an evaluative genre involving a high degree of social interaction between three basic participants: writer, author reviewed, and audience. Modality, therefore, is a clear indicator not only of the reviewer’s personal stance in the assessment rendered but also of his/her grasp of the interpersonal dynamics at work within the genre.

## 3. THE STUDY

This paper analyses 50 online CRs displayed by the well-known online bookstore Amazon in its British version ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)). All the CRs in the corpus have been written by native English speakers, identified both by their name or nickname and by the location they provide, usually in the United Kingdom. Besides, the reviews analysed refer to the so-called ‘Hot 100 Books’, the most popular books among the Amazon readership. Most of them are fictional bestsellers published recently. The latest search was performed in November 2006.

Given the wide range of linguistic devices available to realise modal meaning, the scope of this study was narrowed by exclusively focusing on the verbal and non-verbal modal system, specifically modal (and semi-modal) verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which are considered the most conspicuous markers of modality. Lexical verbs expressing doubt and wish, and the so-called private verbs (such as *think*, *find* or *believe*) were also considered, since they encompass modal uses which release speakers from total commitment to propositions. Another important factor taken into account in this analysis was the nature of the evaluation, that is, its approximate degree on the positive–negative (or praise–criticism) spectrum, as this helped define the function of the modal element in question. After identifying all modal expressions in the corpus, I classified them according to their basic meaning—either epistemic or deontic—and their specific communicative function.

#### 4. RESULTS: FUNCTIONS OF EPISTEMIC AND DEONTIC MODALITY IN THE CR

This section presents an orderly categorisation of the functions typically fulfilled by modal markers, both epistemic and deontic, in the CR. Below each main function, examples are provided to illustrate the reviewer’s communicative intention.

##### 4.1. *Epistemic modality*

The first function identified is that of mitigating negative evaluative comments, as the underlined phrases in these examples show:

“It may not be one of his better works but I found myself captivated by the atmosphere created” (CR6 on *The Treasured One*)

“I bought this after reading the free installment in *The Times* which got me hooked. Remained so till near the end which seemed rather rushed and disappointing” (CR4 on *Cell*)

“My only thought would be that it is perhaps more of a girl than a guy book. But as a bloke I thought it was stunning” (CR6 on *The Time Traveler’s Wife*)

“The only set-back is perhaps a certain lack of descriptive element as to the Spain of today and the Spain of a generation ago. The surroundings can be a bit vague at times but the vivid characters make up for it” (CR5 on *The Shadow of the Wind*)

Another function is to emphasise the fact that the assessment rendered, either positive or negative, is based on the reviewer’s personal impression or opinion about a specific aspect of the book:

“I find [...] the plot of *My Sister’s Keeper* is contrived to cause tears and lacks subtlety in many respects. Having said that, I think as a teen novel it is truly compelling and highly thought-provoking” (CR7 on *My Sister’s Keeper*)

“I believe David and Leigh Eddings have really captured the essence of the Characters and Lands of *the Dreamers Series*” (CR6 on *The Treasured One*)

“I found this book very useful and a very easy read” (CR2 on *Everything You Need to Know about Bird Flu*)

“As far as I am concerned, I shall say that it supported once more my conviction that imagination plays a serious part not only in the writing of the History, but in the History itself” (CR4 on *The Da Vinci Code*)

“I suppose what made this one really special for me was that while it’s a great thriller and a rich historic mystery, it’s also very moving. I felt the writer really cares about the issues he’s discussing” (CR5 on *The Last Templar*)

A third purpose of epistemic modality in the CR is to convey insecurity, diffidence and self-deprecation, which reveals the amateur status and lack of proficiency of the persona behind the review:

“[t]his may sound like a contradiction on my statement of farfetched but Dan Browns short chapters and pace kept me hooked, whereas Kate’s were far too drawn out” (CR3 on *Labyrinth*)

“This book is OK but not amazing. Maybe I am just an insensitive soul but I just wanted to slap the mother and I don’t think the point was to pick sides [...]. I have read other books by Picoult [...] and I think this is the best one if you wanted to try this author” (CR18 on *My Sister’s Keeper*)

Logical deduction and prediction are other typical meanings of epistemic modals in the CR, as the following excerpts suggest:

“This is presumably a setup for a sequel that this reviewer, for one, will cheerfully skip” (CR5 on *Cell*)

“Ironically, the book I ordered with this one, called *Enchanted Erotic Bedtime Stories for Women*, was absolutely fabulous, probably one of the best books I have read in women’s fiction” (CR1 on *The Devil Wears Prada*)

“When I was about fifty pages from the end, I refused to take the book to work to read at break times, as I knew whatever the ending was going to be, it would be powerful” (CR9 on *My Sister’s Keeper*)

A most interesting function of epistemic modality in the CR is that it allows the reviewer to indulge in pure speculation, especially when suggesting ways of improving a particularly weak aspect of the book:

“As a ‘what if’ novel about a sudden catastrophic apocalypse, it probably would have worked” (CR5 on *Cell*)

“There could have been more time spent on the war scenes, although the landscapes and cultures in the book were good enough to draw you into the story” (CR6 on *The Treasured One*)

“Interesting. And I probably would have enjoyed a non-fiction book about those theories. But to be fair, this is a work of fiction, never intended to be non-fiction” (CR6 on *The Da Vinci Code*)

## 4.2. Deontic modality

The primary function of deontic modals in the CR is that of imposing an obligation on others, that is, on other readers, which evokes one of the most salient features of advertising:

“I absolutely loved it. Wouldn’t normally bother to write a review but I need to share this with someone: the book is that good! You MUST read it” (CR11 on *The Shadow of the Wind*)

“Even though it is a historical fiction, this is a very good book to read. True that some of the points he wrote about were true. But we should know that this is open to interpretation. What is also important is that as readers, we should be able to discern where historical truths end and where fiction begins” (CR1 on *The Da Vinci Code*)

A variant of the former realisation is to recommend the book to other readers, which clearly indicates the positive tone of the assessment:

“Everyone should read it. You’ll regret it if you don’t” (CR2 on *Labyrinth*)

“You might want to try that [book] and skip this one” (CR1 on *The Devil Wears Prada*)

“If you’re looking for something out of the ordinary yet completely satisfying, I would try Jeffrey Eugenides’ marvellous *Middlesex*” (CR10 on *The Time Traveler’s Wife*)

“I would recommend it to the 12 to 20 age group and anyone else interested in the moral labyrinths created by the progress of the science of stem-cell research” (CR7 on *My Sister’s Keeper*)

Another deontic use of modals is what I call *self-imposed obligation*, usually in set phrases which establish a contrast between a praising statement and a critical comment—the so-called *bad news/good news pairing* strategy (Belcher 1995):

“I must admit it is an entertaining read: he mixes art, history, and theology into a well plotted thriller [...]. What I don’t quite understand is the phenomenal best selling status of this book?” (CR7 on *The Da Vinci Code*)

“I’ll admit that the plot isn’t as strong as it could’ve been, but the idea of Elder and Younger gods is intriguing, and it should be explored in the later books” (CR3 on *The Treasured One*)

“The ending was an amazing twist and I have to say I was on the verge of tears” (CR13 on *My Sister’s Keeper*)

“All in all I cannot say this is a bad novel but I did enjoy the *Da Vinci Code* much more” (CR3 on *Labyrinth*)

“I must say that I agree with the other reviewers—this book is dreadful and I too would give it no stars if possible [...]. I really can’t emphasise how awful this book is. What a waste of money! (CR4 on *Labyrinth*)

Finally, the deontic meaning of ability must be highlighted, especially with the modal verb *could* in the conventional expression *I couldn't put it down*:

“[t]he entire concept is new and fresh, and I honestly couldn't find huge similarities with past books” (CR3 on *The Treasured One*)

“I have to say that I only bought this book because of the hype, but when I started to read it I could not put it down” (CR9 on *The Da Vinci Code*)

“I couldn't put this book down once I'd started it” (CR3 on *The Time Traveler's Wife*)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that ordinary native readers—who become writers and send their reviews to an online forum where opinions about books are shared—generally favour certain modal uses in accordance with the genre's rationale. These functions are also subject to the nature of the evaluation carried out, which extends in varying degrees from the positive to the negative pole.

In general terms, reviewers mitigate their evaluative comments and express diffidence or self-deprecation by means of epistemic modality. This may be interpreted as a signal that amateur reviewers are very much aware of their lack of authority and expertise in the evaluative task, and therefore try to soften the force of their statements. On the other hand, deontic modals are especially used to recommend the book—in a way that certainly evokes advertising style—and also in fixed expressions which generally precede evaluation.

An interesting follow-up to this study would be to compare modality usage by native and non-native amateur reviewers. This could also have interesting pedagogical applications in the ESL classroom, enabling students to better grasp modality as a key element in interpersonal communication.

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