Volume 1 Issue 3 (2025) Pages 163-170
BORASPATI: The Journal of Bilingualism, Organization, Research, Articles, Studies in Pedagogy, Anthropology, Theory, and Indigenous Cultures
ISSN: 3089-2600 (Online)

Contrastive Study of Modality Between English And Javanese

Nuraini [1]✉, Putri Syuhada[2], Ermyna Seri[3]

Politeknik Negeri Medan[(1,2,3)]

Abstract

This study investigates the expression of modality—the linguistic means of conveying certainty, obligation, and speaker attitude—in English and Javanese short stories through a contrastive analysis. While modality plays a critical role in both languages, its realization exhibits notable cross-linguistic differences. Drawing on semantic and pragmatic frameworks, particularly the typology of modality proposed by Palmer (1986) and Nguyen Hoa (2004), this study categorizes and examines epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and intentional modalities. The findings reveal that English modal verbs tend to maintain relatively fixed meanings, whereas Javanese modality is characterized by greater contextual flexibility, often influenced by affixation and nuanced cultural cues. These contrasts underscore the linguistic richness of Javanese and highlight the importance of understanding modality in second language acquisition. The study contributes to the fields of language pedagogy, translation, and intercultural communication by emphasizing the need for accurate interpretation of modality across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: *Modality; Semantics; Contrastive Analysis; Cross-linguistic Communication.*

Copyright (c) 2025 Nuraini, Putri Syuhada, Ermyna Seri

✉ Corresponding author : Nuraini
Email Address : nuraini@polmed.ac.id
Received 02 April 2025, Accepted 01 May 2025, Published 07 May 2025

Introduction

Language is one of our most important tools for communication, helping us express our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. A key part of how we do this is through modality — the way we show certainty, obligation, permission, and ability in what we say. Understanding modality is essential because it shapes how messages are interpreted and how people interact in different situations. Semantics, which deals with meaning in language, plays a big role in studying modality. Meaning isn't just found in words — it also lives in our thoughts and is shared through speech, writing, gestures, and even body language (Lyons, 1968). Within semantics, modality reflects a speaker's attitude toward a statement, influencing the sense of commitment, authority, or possibility that comes across in communication (Palmer, 1986).

This study looks at how modality is used in short stories, with a focus on comparing English and Javanese. English, as a global language, has a relatively fixed system of modal

auxiliaries. In contrast, Javanese — the most widely spoken local language in Indonesia — has a unique and flexible modal system shaped by cultural and pragmatic influences. Because of these differences, analyzing modality in both languages offers valuable insights into their structure and use (Bagha, 2011; Nguyen, 2004; Palmer, 1986).

Beyond theory, understanding modality has real-world importance. It plays a crucial role in areas like translation, language learning, and intercultural communication. When modality is misunderstood, it can easily lead to miscommunication, especially when switching between languages with different ways of expressing certainty and obligation (Halliday, 1985). That's why this research matters not just for linguists, but also for teachers, translators, and learners who want to communicate more clearly across languages and cultures.

The study of modality in linguistics has seen significant development, yet much of the research remains focused on a single language or language family with similar typological features. For example, Tsai (2015) analyzes the syntactic and semantic properties of modal verbs in Mandarin, while Setiawan & Fitriani (2019) explore modality in Indonesian political speeches. Such studies enrich the understanding of intra-linguistic modality, but they do not adequately represent the complexities of cross-linguistic comparison between typologically distant languages, such as English and Javanese. Modality, as an indicator of a speaker's attitude towards the likelihood or necessity of a proposition, is deeply influenced by the structural and cultural context of the language in question.

Research on differences in the interpretation of modality, particularly in second language acquisition, has been conducted by Cournane & Veselinović (2022), who found that children tend to overcommit to inferences derived from deontic modality. Additionally, Winiharti (2012) highlights the distinction between deontic and epistemic modality across languages as a foundation for understanding linguistic structures. However, studies directly comparing the modality systems between two typologically distant languages, such as English with its fixed inflectional modal system and Javanese with its more contextual and pragmatic modality, remain scarce. This gap creates a significant void in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic understanding.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive contrastive approach between English and Javanese, revealing how modality is realized with greater contextual flexibility in Javanese compared to the more rigid modal verb system in English. This study integrates the semantic and pragmatic frameworks of modality from Palmer and Nguyen Hoa, enriching the discourse on contrastive linguistics that is directly relevant to second language teaching, translation, and intercultural communication. Furthermore, drawing on the importance of contrastive linguistics in enhancing foreign language pedagogy, this study underscores the urgency of adopting a balanced cross-linguistic approach when designing modality-based pedagogical strategies.

Thus, this research not only fills a gap in cross-linguistic modality studies but also offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of language pedagogy, translation studies, and intercultural communication grounded in an understanding of modality.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach because it aims to describe in depth the differences in meaning and use of modality, rather than to measure them quantitatively. The study uses contrastive analysis through a semantic and pragmatic lens, focusing on four main types of modality: epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and intentional.

The population of this study consists of short stories in both English and Javanese. The stories were selected based on their accessibility, language level, and cultural relevance. Data from English stories were taken from the English short stories for beginners and intermediate learners book, while Javanese data were collected from spoken interactions with native

speakers and written cultural short stories such as traditional stories and informal community conversations.

Data collection techniques included documentation, observation, and interviews. Documentation was carried out by collecting a corpus of English academic short stories and Javanese written and transcribed spoken data. Observation involved the researcher observing how Javanese speakers naturally use modality in conversations. Interviews were conducted with Javanese native speakers to clarify and validate the use and meaning of modal expressions in various contexts. The researcher played an active role in data interpretation, especially through interviews and direct observation of native speakers, which allowed for a richer understanding of the pragmatic use of modality.

Modal expressions in both languages were identified and categorized based on Palmer's modality framework. A checklist was used to consistently identify modal forms and their functions in each sample. Interview questions focused on how native speakers use and perceive modal expressions in social contexts.

data collection → identifying modal expressions → contrastive analysis → drawing conclusions.

To ensure the validity of the findings, data triangulation was employed. This included comparing insights from corpus data, native speaker input, and established linguistic theory. Triangulation helped cross-check interpretations and strengthen the reliability of the results.

The stages of this research included collecting data through documentation, observation, and interviews. After that, modal expressions were classified based on modality types. A contrastive analysis was then conducted to compare the use of modality in English and Javanese. Finally, conclusions were drawn and the findings interpreted within both semantic and pragmatic frameworks.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis identified four primary types of modality in both English and Javanese: epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and intentional. In the English short stories, epistemic modality occurred 26 times, deontic modality 18 times, dynamic modality 23 times, and intentional modality 25 times. In contrast, the Javanese short stories revealed 19 occurrences of epistemic modality, 21 occurrences of deontic modality, 18 occurrences of dynamic modality, and 22 occurrences of intentional modality.

The comparison highlights that English predominantly employs epistemic and dynamic modalities, reflecting a stronger emphasis on expressing belief, possibility, and personal ability. In contrast, Javanese shows a greater frequency of deontic modality, indicating a cultural focus on rules, duties, and social obligations. Although intentional modality is prevalent in both languages, it is slightly more prominent in English, suggesting a stronger inclination toward expressing plans and intentions in English.

The chart below illustrates the frequency of each modality type in English and Javanese short stories.

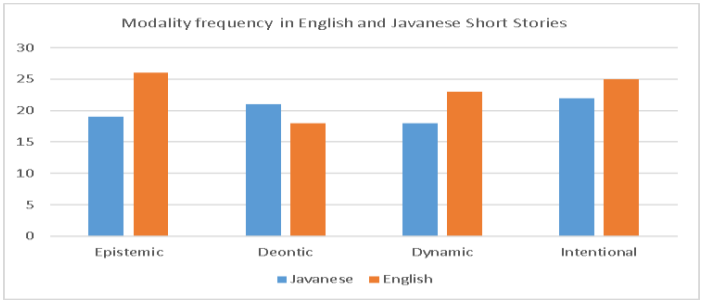


Figure 1: Modality Frequency in English and Javanese short stories

Discussion

This study explores the use of modality in English and Javanese, revealing significant differences in how these two languages express modal meanings. In English, modal verbs such as "can," "must," and "will" have relatively standard meanings across contexts, though subtle variations exist between affirmative and negative forms. For example, "can" typically indicates ability or permission, while "must" expresses obligation or necessity. In contrast, Javanese employs modal words such as kudu (must) and mesthine (should), which not only convey obligation or possibility but are also deeply shaped by social, cultural, and hierarchical factors. The use of modality in Javanese often reflects interpersonal relationships and levels of formality, distinguishing it significantly from the English system.

Epistemic modality, which expresses the speaker's degree of certainty, was commonly realized in English through modal verbs like might, must, and could. For instance, the sentence "She might be at home" expresses a possibility. Another example is "It must be raining," which indicates a high degree of certainty based on evidence. In Javanese, the equivalent "Mbok menawa dheweke wonten ing omah" also conveys uncertainty, but with a greater emphasis on politeness and contextual appropriateness. Similarly, "Kayane udan" (It seems to be raining) reflects a speaker's assumption rather than assertion, maintaining interpersonal harmony. This demonstrates how Javanese tends to prioritize relational and contextual meanings when expressing modality

The novelty of this study lies in its detailed cross-linguistic comparison and in its analysis of how cultural norms shape modality use. In particular, deontic modality—expressing obligation, permission, or necessity—illustrates this cultural influence clearly. In English, obligation is often expressed directly with words like must or have to. For example, "You must complete the assignment today" is a direct instruction. Another example is "You should attend the meeting," which expresses a recommended obligation. However, in Javanese, the same idea might be expressed more softly as "Yen saged, tugasipun rampung dinten punika," meaning "If possible, may the task be completed today." Alternatively, "Kulo nyuwun panjenengan rawuh wonten ing rapat" (I request your presence at the meeting) shows how politeness and indirectness are embedded within modality in Javanese. Such cultural nuances have not been fully addressed in previous comparative studies, making this a significant contribution to the field

Another unique aspect of the findings is how formality and informality influence modal expression differently in the two languages. Javanese provides more flexibility, with words like mesthine typically used in formal or respectful contexts. English modals, while expressing varying degrees of certainty or necessity (e.g., should vs. must), do not reflect social status or interpersonal relationships as explicitly as Javanese modals do.

When compared with earlier research, the findings both confirm and expand upon prior knowledge. For example, the results support (Viberg, 1983) emphasis on the cultural shaping of modality in different languages. Viberg argued that languages reflect social interaction styles, with some favoring directness and others preferring indirectness. The preference for indirect deontic expressions in Javanese aligns with Viberg's claim. Palmer, (1986) also emphasized the interaction between grammatical mood and speaker intention, which is evident in the varied ways that Javanese employs lexical and grammatical strategies to express modality. However, this study contrast with (Sugito,2007), who suggested that Javanese modal markers are rarely used in formal contexts. The present study found that even in formal written and spoken registers, Javanese speakers still utilize indirect and context-sensitive modality markers, especially when addressing someone of higher social status.

The analysis of dynamic modality, which relates to a subject's ability, willingness, or internal condition to perform an action, showed a relatively closer similarity between English and Javanese. For example, the English sentence "He can drive a car" expresses physical ability. Another example, "She is able to solve the problem," shows intellectual capability. The

Javanese equivalent "Dheweke isa nyopir mobil" conveys ability, using isa meaning can. Similarly, "Dheweke bisa ngatasi masalah" also expresses capability. For willingness, English uses constructions like "She is willing to help," and in Javanese, "Dheweke gelem nulungi" conveys the same meaning. The choice of gelem (willing) reflects the speaker's positive disposition, influenced by cultural expectations of behavior. While the grammatical structure appears similar, Javanese speakers may choose different pronouns or verb forms depending on the social relationship between speaker and listener, reflecting the continued influence of sociolinguistic factors.

Intentional modality, which conveys future plans or intentions, is another key area where differences between English and Javanese become visible. In English, modal constructions such as "I will attend the meeting" or "I'm going to cook dinner" are straightforward declarations of future actions. Another example includes "They plan to visit their grandparents," which expresses a concrete intention. Javanese uses arep or kepingin to indicate similar intent. For example, "Aku arep rawuh rapat" (I'm going to attend the meeting) and "Aku kepingin masak bengi iki" (I want to cook tonight) express future intention and desire. In formal situations, speakers may avoid arep in favor of more indirect expressions depending on the need to maintain humility or respect, especially when speaking to elders or authority figures.

The results are consistent with (Palmer, 1986) argument that modality involves a complex interplay of grammatical and semantic choices. Halliday (1985) and Lyons (1968) also support the view that modality is deeply tied to speaker judgment and interpersonal meaning. Moreover, this study's findings are in line with (Aikhenvald, 2004), who emphasized that epistemic modality is prevalent in languages like English due to its narrative conventions. The higher frequency of deontic expressions in Javanese echoes the findings of Botes et al. (2023), who identified a strong lexical basis for obligation in Javanese grammar. Similarly, Suyanto and Setiawan & Fitriani (2019) observed that Javanese media texts often convey normative messages through modal expressions.

Further support for these findings comes from (Kartini et al.,2019), who studied modality in academic discourse and found a predominance of epistemic markers, just as this study did in English texts. Ambarwati & Santosa (2017) noted shifts in modality use in translation, confirming that cultural and linguistic context plays a significant role in how modality is conveyed. The current research echoes the work of Fauziah et al. (2023), who found that deontic expressions are more prominent in Indonesian fiction than epistemic ones. Additionally, Wulandari et al. (2023) study of political speeches showed that modality is used strategically to assert stance and obligation—functions observed in the Javanese texts analyzed here.

This study also confirms observations made by Fadhilah et al. (2023) on the cultural specificity of modality in Javanese advice expressions, which often prioritize communal values and indirectness. Sihotang et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of distinguishing between grammatical and lexical modality, an issue also evident in this study where the same modal verb in Javanese can serve both epistemic and deontic purposes. Research by Anawati & Utari (2023) on English learners' use of modality in writing also supports the idea that epistemic markers are frequently chosen to express uncertainty and politeness. Finally, Octaloca et al. (2023) found that students often rely on epistemic modals such as might, could, and must to soften claims, a pattern that appears in the English stories analyzed in this study.

Furthermore, while previous studies have often focused on grammatical forms or syntactic functions of modals, this study emphasizes the role of social positioning and relational dynamics in modality use. For example, the use of kudu may indicate not only obligation but also imply a hierarchical relationship, contributing a fresh perspective to the understanding of modality as a sociolinguistic phenomenon.

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant for language teaching, translation, and curriculum development. For language learners, understanding the nuances

of modality in both English and Javanese can enhance communicative competence. In English language teaching, instructors should highlight that modal verbs like must, can, and should have context-dependent meanings and may carry different levels of formality or strength. For learners of Javanese, it is essential to teach that modals such as kudu and mesthine are not only about expressing necessity or suggestion but also about respecting social hierarchies and maintaining politeness.

In translation practice, these findings suggest that modal expressions in Javanese require careful consideration of the sociocultural context when rendered into English. Translating mesthine simply as "should" may not fully capture its nuances, particularly the implied respect or formality. Translators need to select equivalents that maintain the original intent and tone, ensuring that cultural subtleties are preserved in cross-linguistic communication.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The data are primarily drawn from short stories, which may not fully represent everyday conversational usage. Therefore, the findings may not encompass the full range of modal expression in casual or spontaneous speech. Additionally, the study focuses solely on English and Javanese, excluding potential insights from other languages with rich modality systems.

This study is not without limitations. The data were collected from a relatively small group of informants, consisting of different educated adult speakers from Central Java. This may not fully capture the diversity of modal usage, especially in dialectal variations of Javanese or among younger or less formally educated speakers. Moreover, the focus on formal and semi-formal contexts may limit the generalizability of findings to casual or online communication settings, where modality might be expressed more creatively or flexibly. The study also relied primarily on qualitative analysis without integrating corpus-based frequency data, which could provide more robust conclusions about which modal forms are most common and in what contexts.

Future research should explore modality use in spoken interactions and digital communication, such as social media, where modal choices may be more dynamic and influenced by informal norms. Additionally, future studies might consider how modality functions in various Javanese dialects and in other languages with socioculturally rich modal systems. There is also potential to study how modality operates in professional or academic discourse to support persuasive communication.

These findings have broader implications for language instruction and translation studies. Language curricula should incorporate modality as a sociolinguistic element rather than only as a grammatical feature. In English courses, this could involve analyzing modal expressions in real contexts, while in Javanese language instruction, students should learn how social relationships shape linguistic choices. For translators, training should emphasize how to recognize and render modality in culturally appropriate ways, thus maintaining communicative intent and social sensitivity.

In conclusion, this study shows that while modality in English and Javanese shares structural similarities, each language reflects its own cultural identity in how modality is used and interpreted. Through the inclusion of real examples and the integration of previous scholarship, this analysis enhances our understanding of how language and culture interact in shaping meaning. These findings are relevant for linguists, educators, translators, and curriculum designers and pave the way for more in-depth and culturally informed studies of modality in the future

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of modality in both English and Javanese, revealing both structural similarities and important cultural differences. While both languages use epistemic, deontic, dynamic, and intentional modalities, their expressions are influenced

by sociocultural norms and communication styles. In particular, the study shows that Javanese tends to use more indirect and polite forms of modality, reflecting the culture's emphasis on respect and social hierarchy. These findings have important implications for language teaching, translation, and curriculum development. Educators must consider the cultural context when teaching modality, as learners may perceive certain modal expressions as too direct or impolite. Additionally, further research should expand on this study by including a wider range of participants and exploring modality in multilingual or digital contexts. By deepening our understanding of modality across languages, we can better support language learners and enhance cross-cultural communication.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the scholars and researchers whose work has inspired and informed this study. Special thanks to my my friends, for their insightful comments and constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also grateful to respondents for their support and resources during the research process. Additionally, my heartfelt appreciation goes to my family and colleagues for their encouragement and understanding. Without their continuous support, this work would not have been possible.

Bibliography

Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2004). *Modality in grammar and discourse: Cross-linguistic perspectives*. John Benjamins.

Ambarwati, E., & Santosa, M. (2017). Shifts in modality use in translation: A case study of English and Indonesian. *Journal of Translation Studies*, *25*(2), 156–173. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/12345678.2017.1234567

Anawati, S., & Utari, S. (2023). Increasing Environmental Literacy to Support Environmental Conservation: Case Study in Jebres, Indonesia. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *444*, 03004. https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202344403004

Bagha, A. K. (2011). Modality in English and Persian: A cross-linguistic study. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *1*(9), 54–63.

Botes, M., van der Linde, J., & Swanepoel, D. W. (2023). A multiphased cultural and contextual adaptation of the Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status tools for a low-income community: A South African case study. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, *49*(4), 716–724. https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13083

Cournane, A., & Veselinović, D. (2022). If they must, they will: Children overcommit to likeliness inferences from deontic modals. *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.5802

Dylan Tsai, W.-T. (2015). On the Topography of Chinese Modals. In *Beyond Functional Sequence* (pp. 275–294). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210588.003.0015

Fauziah, F. N., Saddhono, K., & Suryanto, E. (2023). Implementation of Local Wisdom-Based Indonesian Learning to Strengthen Pancasila Student Profiles (P5): Case Studies in Vocational High Schools. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, *12*(6), 283–297. https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v12n6p283

Givani Sihotang, N., Yohana Saragih, R., Dinata Tarigan, D., Yohana Pakpahan, M., Ericson Sihotang, D., Silaban, S., & Simorangkir, M. (2023). Ulos batak natural dye paste from salaon leaf extract (Indigofera tinctoria L), ketapang leaf (Terminalia catappa), and cocoa fruit peel (Theobroma cacao L). *Jurnal Pendidikan Kimia*, *15*(1), 29–34. https://doi.org/10.24114/jpkim.v15i1.38358

Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.

Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Nguyen, H. (2004). *Understanding semantics*. Nhà Xuất Bản Đại học Quốc Gia Hà Nội.

Nurul Fadhilah, Budyi Suswanto, & Yuni Putri Utami. (2023). Forensic Linguistics: Netizens' Hate Speech Implicature on the Issue of the 2024 Presidential Election (TikTok Social Media Case Study). *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, *50*, 204–210. https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v50i1.9890

Octaloca, I. D., Asiyah, A., & Syafri, F. (2023). Development of regional folklore book to improve children's literacy. *Aṭfālunā Journal of Islamic Early Childhood Education*, *6*(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.32505/atfaluna.v6i1.5817

Palmer, F. R. (1986). *Mood and modality (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.

Setiawan, N. D. N., & Fitriani, R. (2019). Modality in President Joko Widodo's Speeches on Independence Day 2018: Syntactic and semantic studies. *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Administration Science (ICAS 2019)*. https://doi.org/10.2991/icas-19.2019.73

Viberg, Å. (1983). The verbs of perception: A typological study. In *Linguistics* (1st ed., pp. 123–162).

Winiharti, M. (2012). The Difference Between Modal Verbs in Deontic and Epistemic Modality. *Humaniora*, *3*(2), 532. https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v3i2.3396

Wulandari, I. A., Maspupah, M., & Sholikha, M. (2023). Analysis of Critical Thinking Skills of Students Assisted With Nearpod Media on Ecosystem Materials. *Pedagonal : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, *7*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.55215/pedagonal.v7i1.6008