

# **T**he Syntactic and Semantic Study

on Modal Verbs  
in Chinese

现代汉语情态动词的  
句法语义研究

· 崔靖靖 著



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## 前言

情态是一个非常复杂的范畴。不管是在逻辑学还是语言学界，情态都因为其本身的复杂性和争议性而成为逻辑学和语言学研究中的热点话题。现代语言学的诸多学派均对情态问题进行了深入研究，不断涌现出新的研究成果。尤其 Talmy (1988)，Sweetser (1990) 和 Papafragou (2000) 从人类认知和关联的新视角研究情态问题，这极大推动了英语情态动词的研究工作。汉语语法中有关情态问题的研究也是源远流长。《马氏文通》就对“助动字”有所记载，上个世纪 80 年代后，就有学者开始借鉴西方语言学中对情态的研究方法和研究成果，对现代汉语的情态表达问题进行较为全面而系统的研究。近几年，现代汉语的情态研究逐渐为现代汉语语法学者所重视，有过以情态为专题的学术会议，研究情态的成果也偶有所见。虽然如此，相对英语语法学而言，现代汉语的情态和情态动词的研究在现代汉语语法研究中却是一个较薄弱的环节。

本书主要从句法和语义两方面来研究现代汉语情态动词的情态语义系统和句法结构。重点探讨了现代汉语动词情状、体、否定等范畴之间的关系，并试图建立一个相对完整的现代汉语情态动词情态语义的语法形式解释系统，深化对情态及现代汉语情态动词的情态表达的认识。

本书共分为 9 章。第 1 章介绍了与情态有关的一些基本概念，如写实与非写实，命题情态和事件情态，同时，又对情态系统进行了简单的分类。第 2 章详细具体地讨论了情态系统的分类。命题情态包含认知情态和证据型情态，并对认知情态和证据型情态进行细分；事件情态包含道义情态和动力情态，并对道义情态和动力情态进行细分。第 3 章分析了情态系统和情态动词。运用传统逻辑学上的中心概念——可能性和必要性来解释认知情态和责任型情态之间的密切关



系。同时,讨论了汉英中的情态动词。最后讨论了与情态相关的其他系统,如情态与语气,情态与时间和情态与否定。第4章列举了划分情态动词的标准。通过对情态动词与普通动词和副词的比较,得出本研究划分情态动词的标准。第5章讨论了情态动词连用的规则,并分析了影响多义情态动词解读的因素。第6章分析了情态与体的关系。重点分析了认知情态和根情态与体态词连用的同现关系,指出体态影响多义情态动词的解读,同时又分析了影响多义情态动词解读的其他因素。第7章论述了情态与否定的关系及其相互作用。第8章分析了情态动词的句法结构。第9章结语,对本研究内容和主要论点进行了归纳和整理,并指出了本研究中尚存在的不足和今后值得更深入研究的问题。

第8章是本书的重点。本章节主要探讨现代汉语情态动词的句法特点,并根据这些句法特点提出一个新理论,以便更好地解释下面两种有争议的语言事实:

(1) 根情态动词不能与体态词(了,着,过)共现。

(2) 认知情态动词不能发生在不确定的语境中。

基于对以前研究的仔细分析,本研究提出一个新的理论,即根情态动词处于 AspP,并与体态词成对比分布,然而认知情态动词处于 CP,并不能出现在不确定的语境中。

语言学家从不同的角度来解释根情态动词与认知情态动词的差异,以 Ross (1969) 为代表的词汇决定论,即认知情态动词是一元性谓词,也就是提升动词,根情态动词是两元性谓词,也就是控制动词。McDowell (1987) 认为这种差异是由句法因素决定的,即认知情态动词聚合在 IP 层面上,根情态动词聚合在 VP 层面上。然而 Papafragou (1998) 认为这种差异是由语义或语用因素决定的,不是由句法或词汇因素决定的。以上的理论可以解释一些语言现象,例如,多个情态动词的连用。但是他们不能够解释上述两个有争议的问题。本研究也认同根情态动词与认知情态动词的差异是由句法因素决定的。

通过情态动词与体态词的比较,本文把情态动词与体态词联系起来,得出根情态动词处于 AspP 并与体态词成对比分布,同时选择 VP 作为其补语。基于以下两个论证,即认知情态动词不能出现在不

确定语境中和情态动词否定不对称现象，我们得出认知情态动词处于 IP，并移到 CP 的位置，而且不能发生在不确定语境中。上述理论不仅能够充分解释情态动词的连用，而且也能充分解释上述两个有争议的问题。这对于现代汉语情态动词的句法研究有一定的启示作用。

本书只是从句法和语义两个方面对情态动词系统做了较为全面的考察和分析，并对情态动词与体态和情态动词与否定之间的关系做了一些尝试性的探讨。但本书的研究仍处于起步阶段，还有很多问题有待于进一步深入探讨。如汉语情态系统与英语情态系统的比较研究等。希望本书的研究能引起更多语言学者的兴趣，有更多学者加入到情态研究的行列中来，使现代汉语的情态研究更加全面和深入。

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Modality is an old and young topic in that it originates from the old Greek Philosophy and there are still many inconvincible conclusions about it, which attract many scholars to probe into it. In recent years, modality is recognized to be a cross-language grammatical category that can be the subject of a typological study. This category is closely associated with tense and aspect in that all three categories are connected with the event or situation which is reported by the utterance. It is obvious that tense is concerned with the time of the event while the aspect is connected with the nature of the event, especially in terms of its internal temporal consistency (Comrie 1976: 3). Therefore, Modality is concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event.

### 1.1 Basic Concepts

#### 1.1.1 Realis and Irrealis

Modality is different from tense and aspect in that it doesn't refer directly to any characteristic of the event, but to the status of the proposition. There is a possible approach to its analysis, which makes a binary distinction between "non-modal" and "modal" or "declarative" and "non-declarative" or "factual" and "non-factual" or "real" and "unreal".

However, the above terms are not really satisfactory, and there is a new binary term for this distinction in recent years with the notional



contrast of “realis” and “irrealis”. The advantage of this new term can avoid any possible connotations of the more familiar terms. Mithun (1999: 173) argues that the realis describes situations as actualized, as having occurred or actually occurring, knowable through direct perception; whereas the irrealis describes situations as purely within the realm of thought, knowable only through imagination.

Notional features of realis and irrealis are grammaticalized as the typological categories although there are many doubts about the validity of the realis and irrealis distinction in a typological study. In all typological studies, when languages deal with grammatical categories there is a considerable variation. What’s more, there is more variation with modality than with other categories. At a fundamental level, there is variation in the categories that are treated as realis and irrealis in different languages. For example, if one language marks commands as irrealis, another language may mark them as realis, even another language may not treat them as part of a system of modality at all.

There are examples which can illustrate the different ways in which they are treated in different languages, for instance, English often uses a modal verb to distinguish a judgment about a proposition from a category statement, comparing the first sentence with no modal verb with the other two with modal verbs:

- (1) Mary is at home.
- (2) Mary *may/might* be at home.
- (3) Mary *must* be at home.

While Spanish often distinguishes what is believed to be true from what is doubted by using the indicative and subjunctive mood, the following examples which are from Klein (1975) can illustrate it clearly:

- (4) Creo      que aprende.  
I believe that learn + 3SG+PRES+IND  
“I believe that he is learning.”

(5) Dudo que aprenda.

I doubt that learn + 3SG+PRES+SUBJ

"I doubt that he's learning."

### 1.1.2 Propositional and Event Modality

There is another important term we must distinguish, that is the propositional and event modality. The distinction between propositional and event modality can be illustrated by the following pairs of examples.

(6) Mary *may* be at home now.

(7) Mary *must* be at home now.

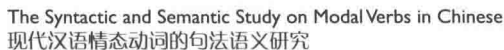
(8) Mary *may* come in now.

(9) Mary *must* come in now.

It clearly suggests that the first two pairs are concerned with the speaker's judgment of the proposition that Mary is at home, whereas the second are concerned with the speaker's attitude towards a potential future event about Mary coming in. For that reason, a basic distinction may be made between propositional modality and event modality.

This distinction not only applies to epistemic and deontic modality but also to other types of modality, especially dynamic modality (Palmer 1979:36-7; 1986:102-3) within event modality and evidential modality within propositional modality. The term "epistemic", "deontic" and "dynamic" are taken from Von Wright (1951:1-2).

In summary, epistemic modality and evidential modality refer to the speaker's attitude to the truth-value of factual status of the proposition, which are called propositional modality; however, deontic and dynamic modality are concerned with the events that are not actualized, events that have not taken place but are merely potential, which are called event modality.



### 1.2.1 Epistemic and Evidential

The second observation is that evidential may occur within what is primarily an epistemic system. The modal verbs in German, for instance, which are similar to those of English, express the judgments Deductive and Speculative, but *SOULEN* and *WOLEN* are used as evidential (Hammer 1983:231, 232):

- 4

The first sentence indicates what is reported, while the second sentence expresses what is claimed by the person designated by the subject of the sentence. In both cases the speaker merely provides the evidence for the proposition.

Therefore, there are two main types of evidential modality, which may be identified as Sensory and Reported, the former subsuming visual, non-visual and auditory and the latter, three sub-types of report. These form distinct types of propositional modality, so that there are three types of evidential modality including Epistemic, Reported and Sensory.

### 1.2.2 Deontic and Dynamic

Deontic and dynamic are the two main types of event modality. The distinctive difference between them is that as for deontic modality the conditioning factors are external to the relevant individual, whereas as for dynamic modality they are internal. Therefore deontic modality relates to obligation or permission, emanating from an external source, whereas dynamic modality relates to ability or willingness, which comes from the individual concerned. The distinction can be illustrated as follows:

(12) Mary *can/may* come in now. (permission)

(13) Mary *must* come in now. (obligation)

(14) Mary *can* speak English. (ability)

(15) Mary *will* do it for you. (willingness)

The first two examples exemplify the typological categories of deontic permission and obligation. The second two exemplify the categories of dynamic ability and willingness. Therefore, we can sum up them in three aspects.

Firstly, although deontic modality originates from some kinds of external authority such as rules or the law, generally speaking, the authority is the actual speaker who gives permission to or lays an obligation on the addressee. That's the reason why Searle (1983:166) speaks of directives, which he defines as "where we try to get others to do things".



Secondly, ability, which belongs to the categories of dynamic modality, has to be interpreted rather more widely than in terms of the subjects' physical and mental power, including circumstances that immediately affect it. There is a contrast between deontic and dynamic CAN, where deontic CAN indicates permission, while dynamic CAN may indicate not merely ability, but also the possibility in a more general sense, the distinction can be seen in:

(16) You *can* go there. (deontic: I give permission)

(17) He *can* read and write. (dynamic: he has the ability)

(18) He *can* escape. (dynamic: the door's not locked)

Thirdly, there is another type of deontic modality, which is commissive, Searle defines it as "where we commit ourselves to do things", and exemplified by the English word SHALL:

(19) You *shall* have it tomorrow.

From the example, conclusion can be made that the action lies with the speaker, not the subject. It can be claimed that commissive and the two forms of dynamic modality are much more clearly marked in English than in many other languages.

### 1.3 Summary of Basic Categories

It may be important and useful to sum up the main typological categories and their classification. Within modal systems these categories can be arranged neatly as follows.

Firstly, modality can be divided into propositional modality and event modality, which is the first level. Secondly, propositional modality can further be divided into epistemic and evidential modality, whereas event modality can further be divided into deontic and dynamic modality, which is the second level. Thirdly, epistemic modality can be divided into

speculative, deductive and assumptive modality while evidential modality can be divided into reported and sensory modality; deontic modality includes permissive, obligative and commissive modality while dynamic includes abilitive and volitive modality, which is the third level, as for the third level, this book will not have further discussion.

However, there are other categories that are not easily classified, such as realis and irrealis mood. Some important categories which may be marked as irrealis are mostly found with mood.

## 1.4 Organization

Our research is embedded in the syntactic and semantic perspective to explore the modal verbs in Chinese. The rest of the book is organized as follows.

Chapter 2 elaborates on the modal systems and the classification of modality, including propositional modality and event modality. Propositional modality is concerned with the speaker's attitude to the truth-value or factual status of the proposition, which can be divided into epistemic modality and evidential modality, while event modality is concerned with events that are not actualized and events that have not taken place but are merely potential, which includes deontic modality and dynamic modality. Each of them can be further divided.

Chapter 3 discusses the modal systems and modal verbs. Modal systems share a number of features not only in the systems themselves, but also in the use of modal verbs and the association with possibility and necessity, while modal verbs are used in all four of the main types of modality including judgments, evidential, deontic and dynamic. This chapter also mentions modal systems and other categories, such as mood, time and negation.

Chapter 4 presents that modal verb is a controversial topic in terms of its name, classification, its relationship with other parts of speech. Therefore, we make a detailed discussion on the status of modal verbs, the former criteria for modal verbs and re-examine these criteria. By



comparing modal verbs with full verbs and adverbs, we get the conclusion that modal verbs have their special characteristics although they have some same characteristics with verbs and adverbs. By re-examining the criteria put forward by different scholars, we present our own views on the criteria for modal verbs and exemplify them. According to our own criteria, we list modal verbs in Chinese and divide them into monosyllabic modal verbs and disyllabic modal verbs, and then try to find their differences by comparing them.

Chapter 5 discusses a typical phenomenon of modal verbs in Chinese, which is the succession of modal verbs. Based on the former studies and careful re-examination, we get the order of multiple modal verbs, which is epistemic > deontic > dynamic. Not only can the different types of modal verbs succeed, but also the same type of modal verbs. When the same type of modal verbs can succeed, the order of them can change, while the different types of modal verbs must follow the rule of succession, and the order of them cannot change. In the meanwhile, this chapter discusses the polysemy of modal verbs and analyzes some syntactic factors which influence the interpretation of modal verbs.

Chapter 6 elaborates on the relationship between modality and aspect. Through the analysis of the co-occurrence of modal verbs and aspect markers, we conclude that aspect markers have influence on the interpretation of modality. Besides the above mentioned, we also analyze other factors influencing the interpretation of modality and conclude that predicate, subject, subject pronoun also have influence on the interpretation of modality, therefore, when we have research on modal verbs, we should analyze the components related to modality comprehensively rather than the modality in isolation. In the meantime, the sentential factors should not be ignored; it affects not only the semantic differentiation of modality but also the speakers' mood.

Chapter 7 expounds on the relationship between modality and negation. It is well known that English uses different modals for different scope interpretations. In Chinese, these two interpretations can be distinguished by simply placing the negative marker in different locations in a sentence without changing the verbs. Therefore, English is considered



to be a Modal Suppletion Strategy (MSS) language, whereas Chinese is considered as a Negation Placement Strategy (NPS) language. However, MSS predominant English mentions the NPS and an NPS predominant Chinese also mentions the MSS. In the end, we conclude several points in terms of the wide scope and the narrow scope of the negation along with their interactions with Chinese and English modals.

Chapter 8 explores the syntactic structure of modal verbs based on the above chapters. After a careful re-examination about the previous studies and by comparing modal verbs with aspect markers, we make modal verbs relate to aspect markers and conclude that root modal verbs originate in ASPP and have complementary distribution with aspect markers. Based on the two arguments that epistemic modal verbs cannot occur in non-assertive contexts and the asymmetry of negation of modal verbs, we claim that epistemic modal verbs are in COMP and have complementary distribution with non-assertive contexts.

The conclusion part summarizes the contributions and outlines the remaining tasks in this book.