**Modality: introduction**

Modality is about a speaker’s or a writer’s attitude towards the world. A speaker or writer can express certainty, possibility, willingness, obligation, necessity and ability by using modal words and expressions.

Speakers often have different opinions about the same thing.

These speakers are looking at the same thing.

**Modal verbs**

Here are the main verbs we use to express modal meanings:

Core modal verbs: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *shall*, *would*, *should*, *must*

Semi-modals: *dare, need*, *ought to*, *used to*

Other verbs with modal meanings: *have (got) to, be going to* and *be able to*

**Modal words and expressions**

There are a number of other words and expressions in English, apart from the main modal verbs, which also express modal meanings.

Here are some examples:

| modal form | example |
| --- | --- |
| **noun** | *There is a****possibility****of snow this evening.* |
| **adjective** | *It’s****clear****that the Prime Minister is worried about education.* |
| **adverb** | *I’m****certainly****not fed up with it.* |

**Modality: meanings and uses**

**Modal meaning**

We often use modal verbs or other modal expressions when we want to express an opinion or attitude about a possible fact or to control a possible action. All modal expressions are about the speaker’s or writer’s view of the world.

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *He’s her brother. She told me.* | I know this fact for certain. I am not expressing an opinion about it. I am stating it as a fact. |
| *He****must****be her brother. They look so much alike.* | I am expressing an opinion about a fact because of the evidence that I have. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Jen always goes with us.* | I’m not expressing an attitude or opinion about this action. |
| *OK. Jen****can****go if she’s finished.* | I’m controlling a possible action. I’m giving Jan permission. |

We can divide most modal words and expressions into two types of meaning:

* The speaker or writer decides how certain something is, either in the present, future or past. They predict or speculate about a fact. We see this type of meaning when we talk about degrees of certainty, possibility, likelihood, doubt:

*Paula****can’t****be home yet. It’s****impossible****. She left 10 minutes after us.*

[The speaker hears the phone ring and predicts who is ringing.]

*There’s the phone. That****’ll****be Mum.*

*I****may****go. I haven’t decided yet.*

* The speaker or writer wants to control or ‘direct’ the action. They give and refuse permission. They talk about obligation and necessity. They talk about how they would like the world to be:

[parent says to child]

*You****can****come if you’re good.*

*He****should****take more care.*

*Tell Jen she****needn’t****bother about the washing up.*

*You****mustn’t****worry so much about her.*

*You****may****go now.* (formal)

**Modality: other modal words and expressions**

**Other modal words**

Apart from modal verbs, there are a lot of words which also express modality. They are words which express degrees of certainty or obligation.

Expressing degrees of certainty

Adjectives: *possible*, *probable*, *certain*, *sure*, *likely, unlikely, definite*, *clear*, *obvious*

Adverbs: *possibly*, *probably*, *certainly*, *surely*, *definitely*, *clearly*, *obviously*

Expressing degrees of obligation

Adjectives: *necessary*, *compulsory*, *obligatory*, *essential*

Adverbs: *necessarily*, *perhaps*, *maybe*

[on the phone]

*Is it****possible****to ring us back when my husband is home?* (or *Can/could you (possibly) ring us back when my husband is home?*)

*I’m thinking of****possibly****buying a house now.* (I might buy a house.)

[talking about a computer]

**A:** *It’s a good machine*.

**B:** *Yeah. It* ***certainly*** *is*. (I agree completely.)

*Necessarily* is often used with *not*.

*Erm… I met Gary in Wales when I was at university there and we ideally wanted to stay in Wales.****Not necessarily****in South Wales.* (not obligatory – it can be South Wales or in another part of Wales)

**Other modal expressions**

**Spoken English:**

These expressions are also very common in informal speaking: *for certain, for sure, for definite*:

*It’s nice to get something for free, that’s****for sure****.*

**A:** *When’s the wedding going to be? April?*

**B:** *April the seventeenth* ***for definite***.

We often use *for certain/ for sure/ for definite* with *know*:

*We think Graham is coming. We don’t know****for certain****.* (or *for sure/for definite*)

Certainly and surely

**Warning:** *Certainly* and *surely* do not have the same meaning. We use *certainly* when we have no doubt about something. We use *surely* when we want agreement:

*The car is****certainly****more comfortable than the bike.* (I have no doubt about it.)

*The car is****surely****more comfortable than the bike.* (I’m not certain but this seems likely.)

**A:** *When I go to town now in Cardiff, I don’t know anybody*.

**B:** *But, Richard*, ***surely*** *you’ve still got lots of friends here*. (The speaker is asking for agreement with something that seems likely.)

**Modality: expressions with *be***

Some expressions with *be* have modal meanings:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *be to* | *be certain to* | *be meant to* |
| *be able to* | *be due to* | *be obliged to* |
| *be about to* | *be forced to* | *be set to* |
| *be allowed to* | *be going to* | *be supposed to* |
| *be bound to* | *be likely to/that* | *be sure to* |