

## THE INTERACTION OF EPISTEMIC AND DEONTIC MODALITY IN LITERARY DIALOGUE

*Akhadova Khulkaroy Zarifkhon kizi*

*UzSWLU, EFL teacher*

**Abstract:** This article explores the nuanced interplay between epistemic and deontic modalities within literary dialogue. By analyzing how authors employ these modalities to convey characters' beliefs, knowledge, obligations, and permissions, the study reveals how modality enriches character development, dramatic tension, and thematic depth in narratives.

**Keywords:** epistemic, deontic, modality in dialogue, interaction, text, modal meaning

### Introduction

Modality, a linguistic means to express attitudes such as possibility, necessity, permission, and obligation, is critical in shaping dialogue in literary texts. Primarily, modality divides into epistemic—related to knowledge and belief—and deontic—related to duty and permission. In literary dialogue, the interaction between these two modalities provides a layered insight into character psyche and social dynamics.

**Epistemic modality** reflects the speaker's judgment about the likelihood or certainty of a proposition. Expressions like "*might*," "*must*," "*could*," and phrases signaling belief or doubt indicate epistemic modality. For example, "*She must be home by now*" expresses a conclusion drawn from evidence.

**Deontic modality** involves necessity, permission, or obligation within a social or moral framework. Modal verbs such as "*must*," "*should*," "*may*," and "*can*" often signal deontic modality. For example, "*You must apologize*" imposes an obligation.

While epistemic modality concerns knowledge and possibility, deontic modality is about norms and duties. However, in dialogue, these often overlap or influence each other, providing a rich semantic field for character interaction.

### The Role of Modality in Literary Dialogue

Dialogue is a primary means of character interaction and plot progression. Modality marks how characters perceive reality (epistemic) and how they negotiate social or moral expectations (deontic).

#### Expressing Uncertainty and Authority:

Characters frequently use epistemic modality to reveal uncertainty or speculation, often juxtaposed with deontic modality expressing commands or requests. For example:

- "*You might be right, but you should reconsider.*"  
Here, epistemic "*might*" signals uncertainty, while deontic "*should*" indicates advice or

obligation.

### **Revealing Inner Conflict:**

Conflicts between what a character believes should be the case (epistemic) and what they feel must be done (deontic) create dramatic tension. This tension deepens character complexity and invites reader sympathy or critique.

### **Negotiating Power and Social Roles:**

Deontic modality can assert authority or submission, while epistemic modality may question or acknowledge knowledge disparity. Dialogue driven by these modalities reflects power dynamics and social hierarchies intrinsic to the narrative.

Consider Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where epistemic and deontic modalities interplay in key dialogues:

- Hamlet's famous line: "*It must be so.*"  
Here, "*must*" can be epistemic (logical necessity) or deontic (an imposed duty), reflecting Hamlet's uncertainty and obligation.
- Polonius' advice: "*You ought to listen to your conscience.*"  
"*Ought*" primarily signals deontic modality, but implies epistemic judgment about moral correctness.

Such interactions enrich characterization and underscore thematic concerns like doubt, moral obligation, and existential questioning.

### **Implications for Literary Analysis**

Understanding the interaction of epistemic and deontic modalities aids literary critics in:

- Interpreting character motivations beyond surface action.
- Analyzing how narrative tension arises through conflicting attitudes.
- Exploring socio-cultural norms embedded in dialogue.
- Uncovering subtleties in tone, irony, and subtext.

### **Conclusion**

Epistemic and deontic modalities, individually and in interaction, are indispensable tools in literary dialogue. They allow authors to portray nuanced mental states, social obligations, and inter-character dynamics. A keen awareness of these modalities enriches readers' engagement and enhances critical interpretation of literary works.

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