Interpersonal Functions of Epistemic Modality in Academic English Writing

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Abstract

In semantics, epistemic modality expresses writers’ commitment to their propositions. In pragmatics, epistemic modality performs interpersonal functions. To date, its politeness and negotiative functions have been studied, but its constructive function seems to have failed to attract researchers’ attention. Put simply, epistemic modal variants can be used to construct social reality, including writers’ identity, writer-reader relations and the corresponding discourse community in which writers and readers live. The purpose of this paper is to provide a more complete picture of the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality and to raise Chinese learners’ awareness of the importance of using such words appropriately.

Key words: epistemic modality; politeness function; negotiative function; constructive function; appropriate use

1. Introduction

The earliest research of modality was conducted primarily in the areas of logic and traditional grammar, with a focus on its semantic meanings. Halliday’s (2000) Systemic Functional Linguistics makes fine distinctions of its semantic meanings and puts modality under the name of interpersonal metaphor. This term is well-chosen for two reasons. First, it points out the interpersonal functions of modal expressions, which have been previously overlooked. Second, it considers words and expressions of modality as a metaphorical language, that is, something implicit rather than explicit. What is worth mentioning is that Halliday’s focus seems to be on semantic distinctions of modality rather than on its pragmatic functions, although the two aspects are closely related. In more recent years,
some scholars (e.g., Li, 2002) have begun to pay attention to the interpersonal functions of modality, among which the two most important are politeness and negotiative. The supporting theories include Brown and Levinson’s face theory (1978) and Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia (trans., 1998a, 1998b). The above two functions are important but they are not exhaustive. The author of this paper believes that there is still another function, i.e., the constructive function. That is to say, different epistemic modal expressions may be used to construct different types of writer identities (negotiative vs. authoritative writers), writer-reader relations (equal vs. hierarchical; bidirectional vs. unidirectional) and discourse communities (democratic vs. hegemonic ones). The theoretical support for this function is drawn primarily from theories of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These three functions and their supporting theories will be presented in order in Section 3.

2. Epistemic Modality: Definition, Forms and Importance

Halliday (2000: 356) says “modality refers to the areas of meaning that lies between yes and no—the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity.” According to philosophical semantics, “probability” is epistemic modality and “permission or obligation” is deontic modality. Palmer (2007: 8-10) identifies four categories of modality: epistemic modality (speakers express their judgment about the factual status of the proposition, e.g., It may be true), evidential modality (speakers indicate the evidence they have for its factual status, e.g., He is said to be extremely rich), deontic modality (relates to obligation or permission, e.g., John may come in now) and dynamic modality (relates to ability or willingness, e.g., John can speak French). Coates’ fuzzy model (1983) makes a simple distinction between two types of modality: epistemic and root modality with the latter equaling to deontic modality. These distinctions may show that the two most representative types of modality are epistemic and deontic modality. Examples are given as follows:

(1) It may be true.
(2) It is probably true.
(3) I think it is true.
(4) It must be true.
(5) It is certainly true.
(6) You must come before 9 o’clock tomorrow.
(7) You may come if you like.

In the above sentences, (1)-(5) are epistemic modality and (6)-(7) are deontic modality. Palmer (2007) also calls epistemic modality propositional modality, expressing writers’ commitment to their propositions. Lyons (1977) believes epistemic modality is mainly about writers’ subjective attitude rather than objective facts. In Coates’ (1983) words, epistemic modality is writers’ judgment of probability. To be more precise, it is writers’ subjective attitude to the objective world (Hoye, 1997).
The prototypical forms of epistemic modality include modal verbs (*may, must*, etc.), modal adverbs (*probably, sort of*, etc.) and some set expressions consisting of lexical verbs (*I think, I believe*, etc.). Other less frequently used forms include modal adjectives (*possible, probable*, etc.), link verbs (*seem, appear*, etc.), some formulaic expressions indicating that the information comes from a source (*I’m told*, etc.) (Fairclough, 2003), and some other formulaic expressions serving more or less the same function as epistemic modality (*Let me tell you, If I may say*, etc.) (Dedaic, 2004). These forms are summed up in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Forms of epistemic modality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of epistemic modality</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modal verbs</td>
<td>It <em>may</em> or may not be true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It <em>must</em> be true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal adverbs</td>
<td>It is <em>probably</em> true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is <em>sort of</em> funny.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical verbs</td>
<td><em>I think</em> it is true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I believe</em> you are right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal adjectives</td>
<td>It is <em>possible</em> that he is right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some link verbs</td>
<td><em>It seems</em> to be the right thing to do at the moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some formulaic expressions</td>
<td><em>I’m told</em> that they’ve been back for a couple of weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indicating that information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or the same function as</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>epistemic modality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y’know, <em>I’d like to say</em></td>
<td>If <em>I may</em>, I would also like to say a few words on Lesotho (Mandel’s speech).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something really serious to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone in this chamber in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>both parties (Clinton’s speech).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other formulaic expressions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noticing that an increasingly wide variety of expressions have been put under the umbrella term of epistemic modality as researchers’ understanding of the issue goes deeper. That is to say, epistemic modal variants have grown in both type and number over the past two decades or so. Consequently, we need to have a broader understanding of this issue and its possible linguistic resources.

Different epistemic modal expressions carry different values with them. This can be easily seen from Table 2 (which takes modal verbs and adverbs as examples). If we take writers’ commitment to their propositions as a continuum, with positive at one end and negative at the other, high-valued modal words express strong commitment, getting closer to the positive polarity; low-valued modal expressions indicate reserved commitment, coming closer to the negative polarity.

**Table 2.** Values of epistemic modal verbs and adverbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Modal verbs</th>
<th>Modal adverbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td><em>must</em></td>
<td><em>certainly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td><em>will</em></td>
<td><em>probably</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td><em>may</em></td>
<td><em>possibly</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The importance of modality has gained wide recognition. Halliday (2000) states modality is important because it is related to one of the three metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual). Similarly, Simpson (1993) remarks that modality is one of the most important means of expressing interpersonal functions. Bakhtin (trans., 1998a) goes a step further by pointing out that writers’ personal style is primarily decided by their use of modality.

Concerning epistemic modality, a lot of research has shown that non-native English learners have encountered enormous difficulty in using such expressions appropriately. Camiciottoli’s (2004) corpus-based study shows that non-native English speakers use may and would far less frequently than their native counterparts in expressing this type of modality. This amounts to saying that L2 learners cannot use epistemic modal expressions properly. Gao’s (2009) small-scale exploratory study indicates that Chinese students tend to overuse deontic modal expressions but underuse epistemic modal variants in their argumentative writing. Hyland (1994) also notices that English textbooks have not given adequate attention to epistemic modality in general, particularly not to its hedging function. To sum up, in academic English writing, non-native speakers: 1) underuse epistemic modality, which makes it difficult for readers to see their attitude and personal style; 2) overuse strong epistemic modal expressions but underuse weak ones or hedges, which violates the rules of the polite and negotiative way of talking in mainstream Western culture. In order not to perpetuate the above pragmatic failures, it is necessary for us to make a systematic study of the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality, so that we may raise L2 learners’ awareness of pragmatic appropriateness in using such linguistic resources and help them get well integrated into the mainstream Western academic discourse community.

3. The Interpersonal Functions of Epistemic Modality

The semantic meaning of epistemc modality is writers’ commitment to propositions. Pragmatically speaking, this kind of modality serves a number of functions, and among them, politeness, negotiative and constructive functions are the most important.

3.1 Politeness function

Brown and Levinson’s (1978) politeness theories have long been accepted in research on interpersonal communication, and among them, face theory is one of central importance. They believe that people will try to protect each other’s face to guarantee that their own face is not threatened. They also make a distinction between positive face and negative face, the former referring to people’s desire for gaining understanding, recognition or appreciation, the latter referring to their wish of being left unimpeded, or being left free from control. In Western culture, the interpersonal strategies are primarily designed to protect negative face as it is regarded as the most essential element of respect. Against such a background, we may easily see why the appropriate use of weak modality and hedging words has become a common practice in Western discursive practice. In other words, the
use of weak modal expressions and hedging devices protects readers’ negative face; at the same time, it also protects writers’ positive face. On the contrary, the overuse of strong modality and underuse of hedges threatens readers’ negative face and also writers’ positive face.

In the examples given in Section 2, speakers of (1)-(3) make mild statements in a polite way by using words and expressions like *may*, *probably*, *I think*. In so doing, they may effectively protect the listeners’ negative face and their own positive face. In English culture, this is considered to be a polite and socially acceptable way of talking. On the other hand, speakers of (4)-(5) make very bold statements by using words like *must* and *certainly*. In so doing, they run the risk of threatening the interlocutors’ negative face and their own positive face. In English culture, this in some situations can be taken to be a less polite and socially dis-preferred way of speaking.

In the setting of academic English, the introduction of any new theory or special term may become something which is imposed on the discourse community. Taking this into consideration, the writer needs to apologize for its potential threat, one of the important means of which is to use hedges in making statements (Myers, 1989). Myers (1989: 13) clarifies this by stating that: “the hedging of claims is so common that a sentence that looks like a claim but has no hedging is *probably* not a statement of new knowledge.” This statement shows that the practice of using hedges has become so deeply embedded in the Western culture that people no longer talk about it explicitly. The implicit nature of this discoursal behavior makes it more difficult for non-native English writers to be aware of this and therefore to use such words appropriately. Examples (8) to (10) are quoted to show the different ways of making statements by native English and Chinese writers.

(8) The hedging of claims is so common that a sentence that looks like a claim but has no hedging is *probably* not a statement of new knowledge. (Myers, 1989: 13)

(9) …Scientific knowledge is *supposed to* be taken as universal; therefore, any implication that a belief is personal weakens it. (Myers, 1989: 14)

(10) 大家别以为，孔夫子的《论语》高不可及，现在我们必须得仰望它。这个世界上真理永远都是朴素的⋯⋯《论语》告诉大家的东西，永远都是最简单的。

《论语》的真谛，就是告诉大家，怎么样才能过上我们心灵所需要的那种快乐的生活。（中国学者）

[The truths in the world are always simple...What *Lun Yu* conveys to readers is always the simplest. The purpose of *Lun Yu* is to tell us how to live a happy life that satisfies the needs of our soul. (an anonymous Chinese writer)]

In Examples (8) and (9), Myers uses *probably* and *is supposed* to weaken the statements as if he was expressing apology to readers for the potential threat of his ideas. Such a way of writing or talking is pervasive in English academia. In contrast to this, the anonymous Chinese writer uses *be* three times, *always* twice to express her interpretation of *Lun Yu* (not to mention the strong deontic modal verb *must* and the imperative statement at the beginning). This way of writing may sound too bold or even offensive to many readers as it
leaves us the impression that the writer is too assertive and over-confident of what she says and is trying to force her ideas on us readers. It seems that she is unaware that interpretation can be risky and can often go wrong. My observation is that many Chinese writers, especially “academic authorities”, may write and talk in this tone, leaving readers the impression of their being impolite or even rude. If they wish to present themselves as well-cultivated writers, they need to learn to express themselves with more hedged expressions.

To sum up, it is a common practice for native English writers to use weak modal expressions or hedging devices in presenting their points of view. The violation of such a convention may offend members of the discourse community as they regard this as an impolite and therefore socially unacceptable way of talking. For this reason, one of the important tasks of EAP instruction is to help non-native English speakers learn to present their ideas in a more tentative or cautious tone (Myers, 1989).

3.2 Negotiative function

Epistemic modality can also be used to serve the negotiave function between people, texts or people and texts. The theoretical support for this function is derived from Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia (negotiation of meaning between different voices). When Kristeva (1986) first introduced this term to the Western readership, she translated it into the English word “intertextuality”.

This theory originated from Bakhtin’s study of the dialogues between various characters in Dostoevsky’s novels. “Heteroglossia” was later used to refer to various types of dialogical relations between people, between texts and between people and texts. Some of the dialogical relations are explicit, but many are implicit. Bakhtin (trans., 1998b) believes that dialogues play a significant role in the generation of new ideas. He maintains that people’s ideas come into shape only when they are engaged in active interactions with one another. In other words, heteroglossia is the precondition of the creation and production of new ideas.

Bakhtin also puts emphasis on the importance of the role of readers in dialogical relations. He states that statements are constructed for readers. Readers are active participants rather than passive listeners. Writers always expect responses from readers (Bakhtin, trans., 1998a). In other words, writers’ success is, to a large extent, determined by whether they receive responses from readers or not.

Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia is based on his study of carnivalized literature. In a carnivalized world, freed from all sorts of social controls and fears, people of different social status are involved in intimate relations where their ideas mix and their horizons mingle. Free dialogues between equal partners being made possible, new ideas and knowledge of truth are thus generated.

Bakhtin’s contribution lies mainly in his observation of all sorts of dialogical relations pervasive in texts and his elaboration on the importance of dialogues in generating new ideas. To be more specific, texts are dialogical by nature and readers and writers are on the way of getting close to truth in conducting dialogues with one another.

Setting the study of epistemic modality against this background, we may see that the use of weak modal expressions and hedging words represents a bidirectional,
dynamic, open discursive practice, which is likely to make readers think and respond. In the negotiation of meaning between writers and readers, different voices get mixed and new ideas emerge. On the other hand, the use of strong epistemic modality represents a unidirectional, static and closed way of talking. In using expressions of this type, writers try to impose their own views on readers, consciously or unconsciously. This way of talking leaves no room for readers to think or to respond. As a result, negotiation of meaning and generation of new ideas are rendered impossible. Such a discursive practice can be damaging to academic writing as its major task is to create and produce new ideas. The example below is quoted to further illustrate the negotiative function:

(11) Acquisition may be the exciting, colorful cutting edge of current thinking. But (many would argue) learning is what teachers believe in, and learning is what students do. (Johnson, 2001: 102)

The above excerpt is taken from the English education expert Professor Keith Johnson’s book entitled An Introduction to Foreign Language Learning and Teaching. The topic of the chapter is acquisition. As an expert teacher who has had a wide experience of teaching English in different parts of the world, it is simply natural for the writer to be fully aware of the significance of learning although he admits that acquisition theory is useful. He expresses his recognition (with some reservation though) of the role of acquisition theory by employing the hedge may. At the same time, he highlights the importance of learning in a cautious tone by inserting the expression many would argue in brackets. In so doing, he is trying to negotiate meaning both with the advocates of acquisition theory and with the potential readers of the book (a lot of them may be teachers of English in foreign language settings who have a firm belief in the indispensable function of learning). Such a meticulous way of writing creates a large open space for all parties concerned (including the writer, theorists of acquisition and readers as well) to reconsider the issue of acquisition and learning, to weigh the importance of each and to discuss the meaning by either reaching a consensus or maintaining their own point of view. The reason for taking such a mild tone lies in the writer’s awareness that there are other possible points of view. Such awareness is perhaps the key element in understanding the meaning and importance of the negotiative function of language in general and that of epistemic modality in particular.

On the other hand, the Chinese writer in Example (10) sounds much too authoritative by using be three times and always twice without any hedging. In talking this way, she does not leave any space for negotiation of meaning. In other words, readers are not invited to have a dialogue with her and her own interpretation of the classic work becomes the only choice. Such a closed way of writing is damaging to academic development and prosperity.

3.3 Constructive function

It has been widely accepted that language and society are co-constructed. To be more specific, language is socially constructed and society is (at least partially) linguistically constructed (Fairclough, 2003). In the postmodern intellectual climate, the latter function
GAO Qiuping

has jumped on the bandwagon and has become the focus of interest. Put simply, social existence or reality is more or less shaped by our way of using language. In terms of academic writing, epistemic modal variants may be used to serve constructive functions, namely, to construct writers’ identity (equal partner vs. privileged authority), writer-reader relations (equal vs. hierarchical; bidirectional vs. unidirectional), discursive behavior (tentative vs. assertive) and discourse community (democratic vs. hegemonic). The theoretical support is derived mainly from theories of CDA.

It is well recognized that discourse is a social act which involves the writer (or speaker) and the reader (or listener) in a power relation of one kind or another. This power relation is predetermined by social norms and may pervade all our writings or conversations, quite often unconsciously. Fairclough (2001) says that the ideological influence on language is pervasive in our life. In modern society, knowledge is also an important form of power and it is highly likely to be embodied in texts (Xin, 2000). The purpose of CDA is to reveal the power relation in the use of language, to undermine it and to seek emancipation. This makes it possible for the two or more sides concerned to have dialogues on a more equal footing. Such is the discursive practice of the mainstream Western ideology of democracy (Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003; Wudok, 1997, 2001).

The targets of CDA are primarily political leaders’ speeches, language of mass media, doctor-patient dialogues and dialogues in courts. The purpose is to expose the power relation in the use of language in hope of raising people’s awareness of democracy in their discursive practice. Contrary to the mainstream approach of CDA (which is critical), Dedaic (2004) made an analysis of the speeches of former US president Bill Clinton and South African president Nelson Mandela and found that the two leaders often use modality-construed metalingual adverbials such as *Let me say to you*, *I’d like to say*, *If I may say*, *Allow me*, etc. to lower themselves and shorten the distance between themselves and the audience. Examples are quoted as follows:

(12) So *let me say to you* tonight, I reach out my hand to all of you in both Houses and both parties and ask that we join together in saying to the American people: We will save Social Security now. (Clinton)

(13) But *I’d also like to say* again to the American people: it’s important not to isolate China. (Clinton)

(14) *If I may*, I would like to say a few brief words on Lesotho. (Mandela)

(15) *Allow me*, Madame Speaker, to cast my eyes further back than the period under review. (Mandela)

(Source of data: Dedaic, 2004: 49-50)

The formulaic expressions (in bold type) serve similar functions as other epistemic modal variants. The use of such discourse markers indicates that both statesmen are fully aware of the power relation in the use of language. Out of this consideration, they try to lower their privileged positions, putting themselves on an equal footing with the audience. In other words, they treat their audience as their equals and as full members of a democratic society who have their own independent way of thinking (and who are then likely to
disagree). By using these expressions, they successfully undermine the power relation and create a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere and as a result, the persuasive power of their speeches is increased rather than the other way round.

The purpose of CDA is to raise people’s awareness of power relation in the use of language in hope of undermining it or of putting two interlocutors on an equal footing. Putting epistemic modality in this framework, we may see that the use of such expressions shows how writers position themselves, what kind of relation they wish to construct by using certain discourse markers, what kind of tone they prefer to set and what type of discourse community they would like to construct with their own effort (quite often unconsciously). To be more specific, appropriate use of hedges in the writing indicates that the writer, by putting himself or herself in the position of a colleague, wishes to build an equal relation with the reader. The kind of tone they prefer is usually tentative. In addition, they regard the academic discourse community as a free and democratic place and would like to enforce this feature through their own effort (see Examples (8) and (9)). On the other hand, overuse of strong epistemic modal expressions and underuse of hedging devices shows that writers, by putting themselves in the position of an academic authority and treating readers as being intellectually inferior, wish to construct a hierarchical relation with readers. The tone they prefer is assertive. In addition, they consider the academic discourse community as a controlled and hegemonic place, where only powerful people may have the right to get their voice heard. In such relations, the kind of language adopted by the writer is monological rather than dialogical. The writer is talking in a way as if they had the absolute truth. This is the discursive practice of hegemony or of more powerful people (Fairclough, 2003; Xin & Chen, 1999), which is damaging to academic progress and prosperity (see Example (10)). The constructive functions can be better illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

![Democratic discourse community](image1)

**Figure 1.** The use of weak epistemic modality and the construction of a negotiative writer, bidirectional, equal writer-reader relationship and of a democratic discourse community

![Hegemonic discourse community](image2)

**Figure 2.** The use of strong epistemic modality and the construction of an authoritative writer, unidirectional, hierarchical writer-reader relationship and of a hegemonic discourse community

360
To summarize, the three interpersonal functions discussed above represent considerations from different perspectives: the politeness function is a way of looking at the issue from the perspective of pragmatics, the negotiative function is one primarily from social perspective (although some ideological elements are already conceived there) and the constructive function is one from ideological perspective. The three functions and their supporting theories are listed in Table 3. By elaborating on the three functions and their theoretical underpinnings, we have gained a better understanding of the issue in question, and an increased understanding will help us use epistemic expressions more appropriately in academic writing.

**Table 3. The interpersonal functions of epistemic modality and their theoretical underpinnings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The interpersonal Functions</th>
<th>Theoretical underpinnings</th>
<th>Source and orientation of the theories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politeness function</td>
<td>Face theory</td>
<td>Pragmatics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiative function</td>
<td>Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia</td>
<td>Literary criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>social-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive function</td>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ideologically oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is worth adding is that Bakhtin’s theory is rich in ideas. I put it into the category of social-oriented theories for convenience, but actually, in his theory of carnivalized literature, the considerations of ideological elements are already conceived. For example, he also touches upon the importance of dialogues between two interlocutors on an equal footing. What distinguishes his theory from that of CDA lies in the difference of their sources: while the former is from literary criticism, the latter is from critical linguistics.

The pool of the linguistic-, social- and ideologically-oriented approaches has provided a more complete picture about the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality. It also shows that inappropriate use of such words and expressions can be seriously damaging to interpersonal relations because it is a socio-pragmatic failure (far more serious than a grammatical error) which is socially unacceptable and politically incorrect.

Figure 3 indicates that our understanding of the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality has expanded in both range and depth. To be more specific, our understanding has expanded and risen from pragmatic consideration to social dimension and finally to ideological consideration. If we say the first two functions deal with the rules or social norms of human interaction, the last one touches upon the ethics in this interaction. That is to say, the first two are about what the socially acceptable is and the last one is about what the politically correct way of keeping a discourse running is. Violations of social rules will probably make readers feel emotionally uncomfortable. Violations of political correctness may challenge people’s ethical standards about what is the right way to talk. Concerning epistemic modal expressions, inappropriate use may offend readers both...
emotionally and ethically. To writers who always use a very assertive tone, readers may very well ask: “who gives you the right to speak to us like that?”

![Diagram showing the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality: Politeness function (Pragmatic consideration), Negotiative function (Social consideration), and Constructive function (Ideological consideration).]

**Figure 3.** An increased understanding of the interpersonal functions of epistemic modality

### 4. Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned at the outset of the paper, the study of epistemic modality used to be confined to the area of semantics. Its pragmatic functions seemed to be neglected by researchers and teachers in the field of English language teaching. For this reason, EFL teachers in China need to give more attention to this issue and try to raise students’ awareness of the pragmatic functions of epistemic modality and the importance of appropriate use of such words. To be more specific, Chinese learners of English need to change their often-too-assertive way of writing, which is the result of an overuse of strong modal verbs like *should* and *must*. Instead, they need to learn how to adopt a more tentative tone by using more hedges in their writings so that they may sound more polite and leave more room for negotiation of meaning. Concerning the use of hedges, they also need to take variety or diversity into consideration. That is to say, they need to learn to use not only modal verbs but also modal adverbs, adjectives, nouns and some modal-like formulaic expressions appropriately. Only when they can use this type of linguistic resources with ease, will they be likely to make their statements idiomatically and appropriately in academic writing.

### 5. Conclusion

Academic writing puts great emphasis on objectivity and openness of texts, both of which can be seen from the use of epistemic modality. Semantically speaking, this modality expresses writers’ commitment to or confidence in their propositions. Pragmatically speaking, it performs three major interpersonal functions, namely, to be polite, to be negotiative and to be constructive. A raised awareness of its interpersonal functions may help us learn to use such words and expressions appropriately so that novice writers will get well integrated into the mainstream Western discourse community. By using...
such words and expressions appropriately, we are also likely to cultivate a more civilized, negotiatory discursive behavior and build a democratic discourse community of our own, which is probably one of the important prerequisites of academic progress and prosperity. The successful learning of the mainstream Western way of talking may also bring about a positive influence to Chinese way of writing or speaking and hopefully make it more civilized, more open and more democratic.

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