MODAL FORMS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN FOLKLORE

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Abstract. *Fairy tales rely on compact language to express rules, danger, hope, and moral choice. One of the most efficient tools for doing this is modality - linguistic resources that signal necessity, possibility, obligation, ability, permission, prediction, and the speaker's degree of certainty. This article examines how modality functions in fairy-tale discourse and argues that modal meanings are not decorative: they are structural signals that organize plot constraints ("you must not"), activate trials ("you must"), enable magic ("you can"), and manage belief and uncertainty ("perhaps," "surely"). Using a qualitative discourse analysis of representative European literary and oral-tradition fairy tales, the study identifies recurring modal patterns across key narrative moments: interdiction, transgression, test, assistance, and resolution. The findings show that deontic modality (obligation/prohibition) dominates at the level of plot rules, dynamic modality (ability/constraint) supports the "trial + competence" logic of quests, and epistemic modality (certainty/possibility) is concentrated in scenes of deception, prophecy, and moral evaluation. These patterns help explain how fairy tales communicate social norms while preserving wonder and narrative suspense.*

Keywords. *fairy tale discourse, modality, modal verbs, deontic, epistemic, dynamic, narrative structure.*

Introduction. Fairy tales are often described as simple stories, yet their language performs complex social and cognitive work: it constructs a moral universe, encodes rules, and makes the impossible feel temporarily plausible. A central mechanism for this work is modality, broadly understood as how language marks attitudes toward events and propositions—necessity, possibility, permission, obligation, and degrees of certainty (e.g., must, may, can, should; perhaps, surely; if…then structures). In functional terms, modality tells the audience not only what happens, but also what is allowed, required, likely, or merely hoped for.

Linguistic descriptions commonly distinguish deontic modality (duty, prohibition, permission), epistemic modality (certainty, probability, inference), and dynamic modality (ability, internal capacity, circumstantial possibility). This typological perspective is strongly associated with work in modality studies such as Palmer's account of mood/modality and cross-linguistic modal systems.[1]

Fairy tales also have well-studied narrative "grammar." Structural approaches - classically, Propp's analysis of wonder tales—show that many tales repeat a limited set of

functions (interdiction, violation, test, reward, etc.), making them ideal for studying systematic linguistic cues that support structure.[2] If fairy tales recycle functions, then we should expect them to recycle modal patterns that cue those functions.

Methods. The study uses a qualitative, interpretive discourse analysis of a small set of widely circulated fairy tales from European literary collections and oral tradition (e.g., Grimm/Perrault/Andersen lineages, and closely related retellings). These tales are treated as a representative sample of the wonder-tale type where interdictions, trials, magical helpers, and transformations are common.

Analytic procedure 1. Identify modal markers in key scenes: modal auxiliary verbs (must, should, may, might, can, could, will, would); semi-modals and periphrastic forms (have to, be able to, be going to); modal adverbs and stance expressions (perhaps, surely, certainly, I think) conditional and predictive framing (if…then; whoever…will).

Classify modal meaning into deontic, dynamic, or epistemic categories (following standard typological distinctions in modality research).[1]

Map modality to narrative function (interdiction, test, deception, helper intervention, closure), using a Propp-inspired functional lens to relate form to plot role.[2]

Because the goal is functional explanation rather than frequency-based generalization, the analysis emphasizes pattern recurrence and role in narrative sequencing. Counts are not presented as corpus statistics; instead, evidence is provided through repeated functional configurations across tales.

Results. 1) Deontic modality builds the *"rule-world"* of fairy tales

Fairy tales commonly begin by establishing explicit or implicit rules: do not open the door; do not go into the forest; you must return before night. These are deontic constraints: obligation/prohibition/permission.

Functionally, deontic modality often clusters around *the interdiction → violation* sequence (a well-known engine of wonder-tale plotting). When a character violates *"must not"* the tale converts moral boundary into narrative motion.

Discussion. Fairy tales are moral-normative systems disguised as entertainment. Deontic modality gives the tale its *"legal code":* what is forbidden, what is demanded, what is permitted. Without explicit modal framing, transgression becomes less legible as a meaningful act. In other words, must not is the linguistic seed of plot. At the same time, fairy tales must preserve wonder - the feeling that reality's constraints can be suspended. Dynamic modality offers that mechanism: a character who *"cannot"* becomes one who *"can"* typically through transformation, gift, trick, or moral growth.

Even though fairy tales contain magic, they still need internal credibility. Epistemic modality manages this by calibrating certainty and doubt: characters speculate, misjudge, infer, and believe. This is especially important in deception scenes, where the conflict is often epistemic (who knows what, who believes what) rather than physical.

Modality and typological perspectives. Cross-linguistic research suggests tense/aspect/modality systems develop along recurrent semantic pathways *(e.g., possibility → ability/permission; obligation → necessity; inference).* [3]

Fairy tales, as stable cultural forms, likely preserve and highlight these pathways in concentrated, teachable ways - making them useful pedagogical texts for teaching modal meaning, stance, and pragmatics.

Because modal patterns align with narrative functions, teachers can explicitly connect grammar to storytelling:

Interdiction lesson: must / mustn't / can't+ classroom "rules of the tale"

Quest lesson: can/could for ability + have to for tasks

Deception lesson: epistemic adverbs (maybe, probably, surely) + persuasion role-plays. Alternate endings: rewrite with different modality (soften "must" to "should," change "will" to "might") and observe how moral force changes.

Conclusion. Modality is a central organizing resource in fairy-tale discourse. Deontic modality constructs the rule-world that makes transgression narratively productive; dynamic modality encodes trials as shifts in capacity and constraint; epistemic modality manages belief, persuasion, and prophecy. Together, these modal systems function as compact signals that align with classic wonder-tale functions described in structural folklore studies.[2] Beyond theory, the findings support the use of fairy tales as high-yield texts for teaching modal meaning and pragmatic stance.

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