



# A Semantic Analysis of the Modality Category and Modal Verbs in English Fairy Tales

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## Abstract:

In this paper we carry out a semantic analysis of modal verbs in the domain of English fairy tales. Modal verbs, as a category of modality, are essential to express a character's belief or the truth or likelihood of a proposition (epistemic modality) or the history or her belief in the course of actions and choice or others (deontic modality). Based on a qualitative analysis of a curated corpus of classic English fairy-tales, this research investigates the occurrence and role of core modal verbs (must, should, can, may, will). The results suggest a predominance of deontic modality, which is used to construct clear moral binaries, enforce social norms and move the plot via commands, prohibitions and permissions. This type of structure is claimed to be a fundamental mechanism for the representation of the cultural stereotypes and didactic function commonly characterizing the fairy tale genre.

**Keywords:** Modality, Modal Verbs, Semantics, Fairy Tales, Deontic, Epistemic, Discourse Analysis, Folklore

## Introduction

Fairy tales are more than simple stories for children; they are complex cultural artifacts that encode societal values, norms, and warnings. The linguistic fabric of these tales is meticulously woven to create a world of clear morality, magical possibility, and consequential action. Central to this construction is the use of modal verbs. Modality, the grammaticalized expression of possibility, necessity, and obligation, allows narrators and characters to navigate the fictional world's rules.

This paper argues that a semantic analysis of modal verbs is key to understanding the pragmatic and didactic function of English fairy tales. By examining how verbs like must, should, can, and may are employed, we can decode the power dynamics, ethical frameworks, and inherent worldviews presented to the audience[1]. This study aims to identify and categorize the modal verbs in a selection of classic fairy tales, analyzing their semantic contribution to the genre's characteristic tone and purpose.

## Literature Review

The study of modality has a rich history in linguistics. Palmer provides a foundational framework, distinguishing between propositional modality (concerned with the truth of a proposition) and event modality (concerned with actualization of an event). These are further broken down into:

Epistemic Modality: Expresses judgment about the truth of a proposition (e.g., "She must be the princess.").

Deontic Modality: Involves permission, obligation, and prohibition, often emanating from an external authority (e.g., "You must leave before midnight.")[2-3].

The application of linguistic analysis to literature is well-established. Toolan emphasizes how grammatical choices shape narrative and reader perception. Specifically concerning fairy tales, Propp's morphological analysis identified recurring narrative functions, many of which are triggered by deontic modals (e.g., a prohibition given by a king, a command issued by a witch).[4]

Warner and Zipes have explored the socio-cultural functions of fairy tales, highlighting their role as tools for socialization. This paper bridges these linguistic and cultural approaches, positing that modality is the primary grammatical vehicle through which socialization is enacted within the tales themselves.[5]

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, corpus-based approach.

Corpus: A curated corpus of classic English fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Andrew Lang, used to represent the canonic texts most usually published in English. Such as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Jack and the Beanstalk and Rumpelstiltskin.

Method: Close reading and manual annotation of texts to locate occurrences of the core six English modal verbs: can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would.

Analysis Framework: Each extracted modal verb was analyzed in its context on whether its semantic role was primarily one of deontic or epistemic. The origin of the modality (e.g., a parent, a magical being, the narrator) and its influence on the narrative were also mentioned [6-8].

## Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals an overwhelming dominance of deontic modality, which serves three primary functions: establishing rules, creating conflict, and reinforcing moral codes.

Deontic Modality: The Architecture of Rule and Transgression Fairy tale worlds are governed by strict, often magical, rules. Deontic modals are the linguistic tool used to establish these rules[9].

Obligation and Necessity (must, shall):

Example: "You shall go to the ball." (Fairy Godmother, Cinderella)

Example: "You must leave the ball before midnight." (Fairy Godmother, Cinderella) These modals create non-negotiable directives that drive the plot. The imperative nature of must and shall creates the stakes for the narrative[10-11].

Prohibition (must not, cannot):

Example: "Do not leave the path." (Mother, Little Red Riding Hood). While an imperative, the meaning is deontic prohibition.

Example: "No one must see you until you have finished." (The King, Rumpelstiltskin). Prohibitions are crucial for generating the central conflict of many tales. The entire plot of Little Red Riding Hood hinges on the violation of a deontic command.

### Permission (may, can):

Example: "You may go to the ball, but first you must separate the lentils from the ashes." (Stepmother, Cinderella). Permission is often conditional, highlighting power imbalances. The stepmother's use of may reinforces her control.

Epistemic Modality: Uncertainty and Realization Epistemic modals are less frequent but appear at critical moments of doubt, discovery, or realization.

Example: "That must be the witch's house!" (Hansel and Gretel). Here, must is not an obligation but a logical conclusion based on evidence (the house made of candy). This marks a key moment of epistemic judgment for the characters.[12-13]

Example: "There might be someone who could help you... but his price is high." (A character giving advice). Epistemic might and could often introduce potential solutions or dangers, building suspense and outlining the possibilities within the tale's logic.

The Special Case of will: Volition and Prophecy The modal will operates uniquely in fairy tales. It often functions as a marker of volition (willpower) or a prophetic declaration, blurring the line between deontic and epistemic meaning.

Example: "I will find a way to break the spell." (A prince). This expresses strong intention (volition)[14].

Example: "The princess will prick her finger on a spindle and die." (A curse, Sleeping Beauty). This is a predictive, prophetic use, treated as an absolute truth within the story's world, demonstrating how fairy tales often treat future events as fated[15].

## Conclusion

The semantic analysis of modal verbs in English fairy tales reveals a grammar of power, morality, and consequence. The high frequency of deontic modality is not a linguistic coincidence but a fundamental feature of the genre. It is the mechanism through which:

1. Social Norms are Encoded: Rules are explicitly stated through obligation and prohibition.
2. Plot is Driven: Conflict arises directly from the violation of these modally-expressed rules.
3. A Didactic Purpose is Served: The clear consequences for obeying or disobeying (may leads to reward, must not leads to peril) serve to teach lessons about societal expectations.

While epistemic modals are present, their relative scarcity underscores the nature of the fairy tale world: it is not a world of ambiguity and probability, but one of absolute rules and certain outcomes. The characters do not often wonder what is true; they are told what must be done. Therefore, studying modal verbs provides a key to unlocking the very essence of the fairy tale: a structured, moral universe where language itself has the power to command, forbid, and ultimately shape destiny.

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