SEMANTICS OF PROBABILITY AND POSSIBILITYIN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES

Mukhamedova Nigora,
USWLU 3rd English faculty

Teaching English methodology-3 department

Abstract

This article explores the semantics of probability and possibility in English and Russian, focusing on how these two languages express degrees of certainty, likelihood, and potentiality. The study examines modal verbs, adverbs, and other lexical and grammatical markers that convey epistemic modality. Through comparative semantic analysis, the paper identifies the functional similarities and differences between English and Russian modal systems, emphasizing the cultural and cognitive underpinnings of expressing probability and possibility. Special attention is paid to the contextual usage of modals like *may, might, can* in English and their Russian counterparts such as *может быть, возможно, наверное*. The research highlights how each language systemizes uncertainty and modality, offering insights into the typological and pragmatic distinctions of expressing epistemic judgments.

Keywords: Semantics of modality**,** Probability and possibility**,** English-Russian comparison**,** Epistemic modality, Modal verbs**,** Linguistic uncertainty**,** Cross-linguistic semantics**,** Cognitive linguistics**,** Typology of modality**,** Pragmatic meaning.

The semantics of modality—particularly expressions of probability and possibility—is a central concern in the study of language and meaning. Both English and Russian possess rich systems for expressing epistemic modality, yet they utilize different grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic tools to convey varying degrees of certainty and hypothetical scenarios. This paper aims to investigate and compare how these two languages articulate probability and possibility, identifying both common patterns and typological differences.

Epistemic modality refers to the linguistic expression of the speaker's judgment about the truth of a proposition. It includes notions of certainty, probability, and possibility. According to scholars such as Palmer (2001) and Lyons (1977), modality can be classified into deontic, epistemic, and dynamic types, with this study focusing primarily on epistemic modality.

In both English and Russian, modality is expressed through:

- Modal verbs (e.g., may, might, must / может быть, должен)
- Modal adverbs and particles (e.g., probably, possibly / наверное, возможно)
- Parenthetical constructions (e.g., It seems that... / кажется, что...)

English uses a range of modal verbs and adverbials to express degrees of likelihood: High Probability: must, will, certainly, definitely

Example: She must be at home.

Medium Probability: should, would, probably

 Example: They should arrive soon.

Low Probability/Possibility: may, might, could, possibly

Example: He might come later.

These modals are context-dependent and often influenced by tense, aspect, and discourse structure.

Russian expresses probability and possibility using a combination of modal words, impersonal constructions, and lexical markers:

High Probability: должен, наверняка, очевидно

Example: Он должен быть дома.

Medium Probability: скорее всего, по-видимому

 Example: Скорее всего, он придет.

Low Probability/Possibility: может быть, возможно, наверное

Example: Может быть, он придет позже.

Unlike English, Russian more frequently employs particles and adverbials in place of modal verbs, relying heavily on intonation and word order to signal nuance.

Structural Differences

English heavily depends on modal auxiliaries that precede the main verb, creating predictable syntactic patterns. Russian, on the other hand, often uses adverbs and parenthetical expressions placed more freely within the sentence

Lexical Preferences

English prefers grammaticalized modality (e.g., might), while Russian leans toward lexical markers (e.g., наверное). This reflects a broader typological contrast between analytic and synthetic language tendencies.

Cultural and Pragmatic Nuances

In English, modal expressions often imply politeness or hedging, especially in academic or formal writing. Russian, in contrast, may convey modality more directly or rely on context and shared knowledge, making modality less explicit.

Examples in Parallel Translation

English	Russian
He may be at the station.	Он, возможно, на вокзале.
She must have forgotten.	Она, должно быть, забыла.
It's probably true.	Это, наверное, правда

In conclusion we can say that, the semantics of probability and possibility in English and Russian reveals both universal tendencies and language-specific strategies. While both languages aim to articulate degrees of certainty, they employ different grammatical and lexical means. Understanding these contrasts has implications for translation, language teaching, and intercultural communication. Further research may delve into corpus-based analyses or pragmatic functions in dialogue.

References:

1. Lyons, J. (1977). "Semantics" (Vols. 1–2). Cambridge University Press.
2. Palmer, F. R. (2001). "Mood and Modality" (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
3. Sweetser, E. (1990). "From Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure". Cambridge University Press.
4. Coates, J. (1983). "The Semantics of the Modal Auxiliaries". Croom Helm.

5. Bybee, J., Perkins, R., & Pagliuca, W. (1994). "The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World". University of Chicago Press.
6. Saidova M.S. "The concept of function and context within the framework of the communicative approach". Western European Journal of Historical Events and Social Science Volume 1, Issue 3, November, 2023,46-48p;