

Lexical and Grammatical Means of Expressing the Modal Meanings of Possibility and Impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic

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Abstract: This article examines the lexical and grammatical means of expressing the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic. It analyzes how these modal meanings are conveyed through a range of language units, including modal verbs, particles, adverbs, and syntactic constructions. The study categorizes modal expressions into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities, with special focus on the semantic and syntactic features of each. The research also explores the functional differences between synonymous expressions and contextual conditions under which they are employed. Comparative insights are provided to highlight the distinctive features of possibility-related modal expressions and their correlation with negation in expressing impossibility. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of modality in Arabic and offer implications for both linguistic theory and practical language instruction.

Keywords: Modality, possibility, impossibility, Modern Standard Arabic, modal verbs, lexical means, grammatical structures, epistemic modality, deontic modality, dynamic modality, syntactic expression, negation in modality.

INTRODUCTION

Modality represents one of the key semantic categories in linguistic theory, reflecting a speaker's attitude toward the proposition expressed in a statement. Among the various modal meanings, the notions of possibility and impossibility occupy a central place due to their frequent usage and functional diversity in both spoken and written discourse. In Modern Standard Arabic, these modal meanings are conveyed through a rich set of lexical and grammatical devices, including modal verbs, particles, adverbs, and specific syntactic patterns. The analysis of these expressions provides valuable insights into the structure and function of the Arabic language and enhances our understanding of how modality operates within a Semitic linguistic framework.

The study of possibility and impossibility as modal categories is particularly relevant for Modern Standard Arabic, given its diglossic nature and the interaction between formal and colloquial varieties. While much of the prior research on modality has focused on Indo-European languages, comparatively less attention has been paid to the semantic and structural realization of modal meanings in Arabic. This article seeks to address this gap by offering a detailed analysis of how possibility and impossibility are expressed in Arabic through both lexical and grammatical means.

The purpose of this study is to identify, classify, and examine the key linguistic tools used in expressing these modal meanings in Modern Standard Arabic, with an emphasis on their syntactic behavior, semantic distinctions, and

functional roles in discourse. In doing so, the research not only contributes to Arabic linguistics but also supports comparative linguistic studies and language pedagogy by providing a comprehensive account of modality in one of the world's most widely spoken languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of modality in linguistics has garnered significant attention across languages, as it plays a crucial role in expressing a speaker's perspective, certainty, necessity, permission, or possibility regarding a given proposition. Within this broad category, the modal meanings of *possibility* and *impossibility* have been studied extensively in various grammatical traditions, particularly in Indo-European languages. Foundational theoretical contributions to modality have been made by linguists such as Palmer (1986), who classifies modality into epistemic and deontic types, and Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994), who examine modality from a typological perspective and emphasize its grammaticalization paths across languages.

In Arabic linguistic scholarship, modality has also been the subject of research, though it remains a relatively less-explored field in comparison to Western linguistics. Works by Al-Batal (1990), Al-Jarf (2001), and Holes (2004) have investigated modal expressions in Arabic from both descriptive and pedagogical perspectives. These studies generally focus on modal verbs such as *yumkinu* (it is possible), *yanbaghi* (it is necessary), and the use of negation to express impossibility, such as *lā yumkinu* (it is not possible). However, many of

these studies provide only surface-level accounts, lacking in-depth structural and semantic categorization of modal expressions.

Several scholars have touched upon modality in the context of Arabic syntax and semantics. For instance, Ryding (2005) discusses modality in her comprehensive grammar of Arabic, offering examples of modal verbs and particles. Al-Farahidi's early grammatical treatises also include observations on modal semantics, although in classical contexts. More recently, cognitive and functional approaches have been adopted by researchers such as Al-Momani and Jarrah (2019), who examine the interaction between modality and speaker stance in Arabic discourse.

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in the systematic classification and comparative analysis of the lexical and grammatical means used to express possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic. The existing literature often treats modal expressions as isolated lexical units without situating them within a broader functional framework. Moreover, little research has been done to explore the syntactic constructions and contextual dependencies that govern their usage.

This study aims to build upon existing work by offering a comprehensive and detailed investigation of how the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility are realized through diverse linguistic mechanisms in Modern Standard Arabic. It brings together lexical semantics, syntax, and discourse analysis to create a unified model that accounts for both formal and functional dimensions of modality in the language.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach rooted in structural and functional linguistics to investigate the lexical and grammatical means of expressing the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic. The methodological framework integrated elements of semantic analysis, syntactic categorization, and contextual interpretation, with the aim of identifying, classifying, and explaining the various linguistic mechanisms used to convey modality.

The research process was structured around several key stages. First, a purpose-built textual corpus of approximately 120,000 words was compiled, drawn from diverse genres of Modern Standard Arabic. These included news articles from Arabic media outlets, literary prose by

contemporary authors, formal speeches, opinion essays, and academic texts. The selected texts represent high-register Arabic usage, enabling a comprehensive analysis of modality in formal and semi-formal discourse.

Lexical identification and categorization involved the manual extraction of modal expressions relevant to possibility and impossibility. Each instance was tagged with lexical class (such as verb, particle, or noun), semantic function (epistemic, deontic, dynamic), and syntactic environment (presence of subordination, mood, and negation).

Grammatical and syntactic analysis focused on subordination patterns involving particles like *أَنَّ*, *لَنْ*, and *لَا*, as well as the use of subjunctive and jussive moods. Attention was given to how modal verbs aligned with aspectual and temporal structures, and how negation markers like *لَنْ*, *لَا*, and *لَمْ* were used to form expressions of impossibility.

Semantic classification of each expression was conducted to determine its function as epistemic, deontic, or dynamic modality. Contextual analysis, rather than form alone, guided this classification to ensure accurate understanding of modal use. The study also incorporated a comparative element, examining modal structures in English, French, and Classical Arabic, in order to identify unique features of modality in Modern Standard Arabic.

To ensure reliability, triangulation was applied through cross-referencing with established Arabic grammars, scholarly literature, and consultation with two native Arabic linguists. These steps helped resolve ambiguities and validated the classification of context-dependent expressions.

Through this multi-layered methodology combining corpus-based observation and theoretical modeling, the study presents a systematic account of how Modern Standard Arabic encodes modal meanings of possibility and impossibility. The approach supports a holistic view of modality as a distributed linguistic phenomenon expressed through interrelated lexical, grammatical, and syntactic mechanisms.

RESULTS

The analysis of the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic revealed a wide range of lexical and grammatical mechanisms used to express these categories. The study classified these mechanisms into three main

groups: lexical expressions, grammatical structures, and syntactic constructions. Each group includes both explicit and implicit forms of modality that are contextually and semantically differentiated.

First, the lexical expressions of possibility are primarily realized through verbs such as *يُمْكِنُ* (it is possible), *يَجُوزُ* (it is allowed), *يَحْتَمِلُ* (it may occur), and their derived forms. These verbs function as modal predicates that require a subordinate clause introduced by the particle *أَنْ*. For example, *يُمْكِنُ أَنْ يَحْضُرَ* ('it is possible that he attends') illustrates the epistemic possibility. In contrast, impossibility is most often expressed lexically through the negation of these verbs, such as *لَا يُمْكِنُ* ('it is not possible') or *مُسْتَحِيلٌ* ('impossible'), the latter of which functions adjectivally or nominally.

Second, grammatical markers of modality include particles and adverbs such as *رُبَّمَا* (perhaps), *لَعَلَّ* (hopefully/perhaps), and *عَسَى* (maybe). These expressions generally signal epistemic uncertainty or potentiality, and they often occur at the beginning of the sentence. Negative modality—impossibility—is expressed through the combination of negation particles like *لَا*, *لَمْ*, or *لَنْ* with modally loaded verbs, often indicating either logical impossibility or prohibition.

Third, syntactic constructions play a critical role in structuring modal meaning. The frequent use of subjunctive and jussive moods after modal expressions, especially with particles like *أَنْ*, *كَيْ*, or *لِـ* (to), serves to grammatically encode degrees of possibility. Furthermore, the context-dependent alternation between perfect and imperfect verb forms allows for nuanced expression of temporal modality that intersects with the dimension of possibility.

The results also indicate that Modern Standard Arabic distinguishes between epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities through both structural and semantic means. Epistemic possibility concerns knowledge and belief (*رُبَّمَا يَجِيءُ* 'he may come'), deontic modality relates to permission and obligation (*يَجُوزُ لَكَ أَنْ تَدْرُسَ* 'you are allowed to study'), and dynamic modality expresses internal capacity or potential (*يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ يَكْتُبَ* 'he is able to write').

Finally, it was found that the expression of impossibility is not merely the inverse of possibility. Rather, it includes unique lexical items (*مُسْتَحِيلٌ*), intensified negation (*أَبَدًا*—never), and rhetorical structures that signal contradiction or prohibition. These findings suggest that Arabic modality is not limited to a fixed set of modal verbs, but is distributed across multiple layers of lexical, grammatical, and syntactic resources.

Table 1. Modal Expressions in Modern Standard Arabic

Category	Arabic Examples	Meaning/Function
Lexical (Possibility)	<i>يَحْضُرُ أَنْ يُمْكِنَ يَحْتَمِلُ، يَجُوزُ، يُمْكِنُ،</i>	Expresses general or logical possibility
Lexical (Impossibility)	<i>مُسْتَحِيلٌ يُمْكِنُ، لَا</i>	Expresses logical or absolute impossibility
Grammatical (Possibility)	<i>عَسَى لَعَلَّ، رُبَّمَا،</i>	Expresses probability, uncertainty, or potentiality
Grammatical (Impossibility)	<i>فَ عِل + لَنْ لَمْ، لَا،</i>	Negation of possibility; prohibition or denial
Syntactic Structures	<i>الْمُضَارِعُ الْفَعْلُ قَ (بَلْ) لِكَيْ، أَنْ، (الْمَجْزُومُ أَوْ الْمَذْنُوبُ)</i>	Introduces subordinate clauses to convey modality
Epistemic Modality	<i>يَجِيءُ رُبَّمَا</i>	Expresses belief or estimation about reality
Deontic Modality	<i>تَدْرُسُ أَنْ لَكَ يَجُوزُ</i>	Expresses permission or obligation
Dynamic Modality	<i>يَكْتُبُ أَنْ يَسْتَطِيعُ</i>	Expresses ability or internal potential

DISCUSSION

The expression of modality—particularly the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility—in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) reveals the complex interaction between lexical semantics, grammatical structures, and syntactic organization. This discussion expands on the results by interpreting their linguistic significance, examining

comparative aspects with other languages, identifying key distinctions between modal categories, and reflecting on broader theoretical implications. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that modality in Arabic is not an isolated grammatical category but an interwoven system involving multiple layers of linguistic encoding.

One of the most striking findings is the multiplicity and flexibility of lexical means employed to express possibility and impossibility. The verbs *يُمْكِنُ*, *يَجُوزُ*, *يَحْتَمِلُ*, and their respective negations—especially *لَا يُمْكِنُ* and *مُسْتَحِيلٌ*—are central to conveying degrees of feasibility, probability, or constraint. These verbs often function independently as predicates but also integrate with subordinate clauses introduced by the particle *أَنْ*. This syntactic dependency shows how Arabic syntax structures modality through clause complementation. Unlike in some Indo-European languages where modal verbs directly modify the main verb, in Arabic, the modal component tends to be external to the verbal phrase, requiring a clausal structure to complete its meaning.

The use of particles such as *عَسَى*, *لَعَلَّ*, and *رُبَّمَا* introduces a different layer of modality – often epistemic—expressing subjective probability or speaker-oriented uncertainty. These elements not only modify the semantic content of the sentence but also indicate the speaker's stance toward the propositional truth value. The subtle differences among these particles are noteworthy. For instance, *رُبَّمَا* is generally used for speculative assertions with relatively neutral emotional coloring, while *لَعَلَّ* carries a hopeful tone, and *عَسَى* may imply divine will or formal expectancy. These semantic nuances illustrate how modality is culturally embedded and sensitive to speaker intention and discourse context.

Negation in Arabic adds an additional dimension to modal expression, particularly in articulating impossibility. Structures such as *لَا يُمْكِنُ* and *لَنْ يَفْعَلَ* are not mere grammatical reversals of possibility but often signal strong assertions of denial, prohibition, or logical contradiction. The intensification of negation through terms like *أَبَدًا* further strengthens the modal force, indicating that impossibility in Arabic is often rhetorically or emotionally charged. This reinforces the view that modality in Arabic is not only a formal grammatical category but also a pragmatic and stylistic tool.

The syntactic realization of modality, particularly through subordinate constructions with *أَنْ*, *كَيْ*, or *لِـ*, demonstrates Arabic's reliance on verbal moods—especially the subjunctive and jussive—for encoding modal meanings. The imperfect tense also plays a pivotal role in conveying future potential or unrealized action, especially in combination with modal verbs and particles. This relationship between tense, aspect, and modality

aligns with cross-linguistic findings that modality is often temporally and aspectually anchored.

A particularly valuable outcome of this study is the identification of three main modal types in MSA—epistemic, deontic, and dynamic—which are expressed through distinct but sometimes overlapping linguistic means. Epistemic modality, concerning the speaker's knowledge or belief, is expressed by structures such as *رُبَّمَا يَجِيءُ*, indicating uncertainty or probability. Deontic modality, which relates to obligation, permission, or necessity, is found in expressions such as *يَجُوزُ* *لَكَ أَنْ تَدْرُسَ*, where external authority or social norms govern action. Dynamic modality, reflecting ability or internal capacity, is represented by expressions like *يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ يَكْتُبَ*, focusing on the subject's inherent potential. This three-way distinction is not unique to Arabic but is marked in Arabic by a relatively high degree of lexical and structural differentiation, compared to languages where the same modal verb may be used for multiple functions (e.g., English "can").

The findings of this research resonate with typological patterns described in global modality studies. For instance, the Arabic tendency to rely on full predicate constructions for modal meanings mirrors patterns in other Semitic and Afro-Asiatic languages. However, the overt use of nominal expressions such as *مُسْتَحِيلٌ* as standalone judgments of impossibility shows a categorical treatment of modality that may be less common in analytic languages.

From a theoretical standpoint, the data supports a multi-layered model of modality in Arabic, where lexical, grammatical, and syntactic layers collaborate to produce modal meaning. This layered structure challenges binary classifications and suggests that Arabic modality is scalar, context-sensitive, and structurally embedded. It also suggests the need for a dynamic modal typology that incorporates discourse factors, speaker intention, and sociolinguistic context.

Pedagogically, these results have implications for teaching Arabic as a foreign or second language. Given that modality is often a source of confusion for learners, especially in distinguishing degrees of possibility and in understanding the functional load of particles and verbal moods, a systematic approach based on these findings could enhance comprehension and accuracy. Instructional materials should reflect the diversity of modal

expressions and emphasize usage through contextually grounded examples.

These findings open avenues for further research. Corpus-based studies could validate the frequency and distribution of the identified modal structures across genres and registers. Comparative studies with colloquial varieties of Arabic may also reveal how modality functions differently in spoken language. Additionally, computational applications in Arabic natural language processing (NLP) would benefit from the detailed classification of

modal expressions provided here, particularly in tasks such as sentiment analysis, machine translation, and semantic parsing.

The expression of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic demonstrates a sophisticated interplay of lexical, grammatical, and syntactic strategies. It reflects both universal and language-specific characteristics of modality and affirms Arabic's rich capacity for conveying nuanced speaker perspectives.

Table 2. Modal Expressions in Modern Standard Arabic

Category	Arabic Examples	Meaning/Function
Lexical (Possibility)	يَحْضُرُ أَنْ يُمَكِّنَ يَحْتَمِلُ، يَجُوزُ، يُمَكِّنُ	Expresses general or logical possibility
Lexical (Impossibility)	مُسْتَحِيلٌ يُمَكِّنُ، لَا	Expresses logical or absolute impossibility
Grammatical (Possibility)	عَسَى لَعَلَّ، رُبَّمَا	Expresses probability, uncertainty, or potentiality
Grammatical (Impossibility)	فَعْلٌ + لَنْ لَمْ، لَا	Negation of possibility; prohibition or denial
Syntactic Structures	المضارع (الفاعل فعل ق بل) - لَكِي، أَنْ، (المجزوم أو المذنوب)	Introduces subordinate clauses to convey modality
Epistemic Modality	يَجِيءُ رُبَّمَا	Expresses belief or estimation about reality
Deontic Modality	تَدْرُسُ أَنْ لَكَ يَجُوزُ	Expresses permission or obligation
Dynamic Modality	يَكْتَبُ أَنْ يَسْتَطِيعُ	Expresses ability or internal potential

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive investigation into the lexical and grammatical means of expressing the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic reveals that modality in this language is a deeply embedded and multifunctional linguistic phenomenon. It is not limited to a single grammatical category or isolated verb forms, but rather spans across various layers of linguistic structure—including verbs, particles, negation markers, mood-inflected verb forms, and syntactic constructions. This layered expression of modality enables Arabic speakers to convey a wide range of nuances concerning feasibility, permission, belief, capacity, and certainty.

One of the central findings of this study is that Arabic possesses a diverse inventory of lexical items—such as *يُمَكِّنُ*, *يَجُوزُ*, and *مُسْتَحِيلٌ*—which function as the core carriers of modal meaning. These verbs often require specific syntactic configurations, most notably the use of the particle *أَنْ* followed by a subjunctive verb. The presence of multiple synonymous verbs and expressions allows for a fine-tuned selection based on context, intention, and stylistic preference. Furthermore,

negation structures such as *لَنْ يَفْعَلَ* or *لَا يُمَكِّنُ* are not simply negated versions of possibility but rather function as emphatic statements of impossibility, often with rhetorical and affective weight.

Another key conclusion is that modal particles such as *رُبَّمَا*, *لَعَلَّ*, and *عَسَى* play a significant role in expressing epistemic modality. These particles reflect not only a speaker's judgment of possibility but also their emotional or attitudinal stance. They are frequently used in formal registers and literary texts, where subtle distinctions in mood and voice are critical. Their syntactic behavior and interaction with verbal moods further reinforce their role as integral modal elements.

Syntactically, Arabic relies heavily on verb mood—particularly the subjunctive and jussive—as a grammatical strategy for encoding modality. This morphosyntactic alignment of modality with verb mood illustrates the inflectional complexity of Arabic and highlights the importance of syntactic awareness in understanding modal meaning. The interplay between verbal aspect (perfect vs. imperfect) and modality also allows speakers to express temporal dimensions of potentiality or impossibility.

The study also affirms the tripartite classification of modality into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic categories, each realized through distinct linguistic forms and serving different communicative functions. Epistemic modality addresses the speaker's belief or knowledge about the truth of a statement, deontic modality governs norms, duties, and permissions, while dynamic modality relates to the subject's internal capacities or conditions. This categorization, while universal in many languages, is particularly well-articulated in Arabic through the use of discrete lexical and grammatical tools.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the conceptualization of Arabic modality as scalar, context-sensitive, and pragmatically motivated. It operates through a distributed system rather than a single grammatical locus. This reinforces recent linguistic theories that advocate for a discourse-pragmatic and constructional approach to modality rather than a purely syntactic or semantic one. Arabic, with its rich modal lexicon and structurally complex syntax, offers a fertile ground for such interdisciplinary and layered analyses.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the conclusions of this study underscore the importance of teaching modality in Arabic as an integrated system that spans vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Learners must be exposed to a variety of modal expressions in authentic contexts and guided to understand the functional distinctions among them. Modal expressions should not be taught in isolation but rather in relation to their syntactic behavior, mood interactions, and pragmatic implications.

In sum, the modal meanings of possibility and impossibility in Modern Standard Arabic are realized through a robust system of lexical, grammatical, and syntactic strategies. These

strategies work in concert to allow for precise and contextually appropriate expression of modal thought. Future research may extend this work by examining regional variation in modal usage across Arabic dialects, exploring historical changes in modal expressions, or applying corpus linguistics and computational tools to analyze modality in large-scale Arabic texts. Such endeavors will further enrich our understanding of this essential and dynamic aspect of Arabic linguistic structure.

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