

# MODALITY IN VIETNAMESE LINGUISTIC STRUCTURES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDIES

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on examining the category of modality in Vietnamese and its implications for cross-linguistic comparative research. Based on Palmer's (2001) theoretical framework of three basic types of modality- epistemic, deontic, and dynamic, the study analyzes 520 sentences collected from three sources: journalism, literature, and natural conversation. The research methodology combines descriptive-analytical methods, contrastive-comparative analysis, and approaches from functional grammar, semantics, and pragmatics.

The results show that the distribution of modal devices in Vietnamese is stratified according to discourse type: journalism tends to favor modal predicates (44.0%), literature shows a predominance of particles and adverbs (40.6%), while conversation is marked by sentence-final particles (48.0%). A salient feature of the Vietnamese modal system is its flexibility, its strong dependence on context, and the rich diversity of sentence-final particles, elements without direct equivalents in English and less abundant in Chinese.

Comparison with English (310 sentences) and Chinese (305 sentences) reveals clear differences: English standardizes modality through modal verbs and intonation, Chinese employs modal verbs in combination with mood particles, while Vietnamese makes diverse use of predicates, adverbs, particles, and intonation with nuanced interpersonal meanings. Furthermore, references to previous studies (Bùi Thị Đào, 2014; Nguyễn Thị Nhật Linh & Nguyễn Văn Chính, 2024) reinforce the observation that Vietnamese tends to express obligation and strong assertion both in everyday communication and in legal texts.

This study not only contributes to clarifying the typological features and communicative culture of Vietnamese, but also provides important insights for translation, teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language, and cross-linguistic comparative research.

**Keywords:** Modality; Vietnamese language; Sentence-final particles; Cross-linguistic comparison; Semantics and pragmatics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In linguistic research, modality is considered a crucial category, reflecting the relationship between the speaker and the propositional content, and expressing degrees of certainty, possibility, obligation, evaluation, or emotional attitude of the communicative subject. Modality is therefore not only a grammatical component but also a semantic-pragmatic factor, playing an important role in constructing sentence meaning and regulating social relations in communication (Panfilov, 1977).

In many languages of the world, modality is expressed through a wide range of forms, including modal verbs, verbal morphology, modal words, specific syntactic constructions, and intonation. English, for instance, has a rich system of modal verbs (can, may, must, should...), while French and Russian convey modality through verbal moods. Cross-linguistic comparison shows that modality is a universal category, yet the ways it is encoded differ, depending on typological features and the communicative culture of each language.

For Vietnamese, an isolating language without inflectional morphology, modality is mainly expressed through modal words, sentence-final particles, auxiliary particles, as well as intonation. Many Vietnamese scholars have made significant contributions on this matter. Dinh VanDuc (1986), in Vietnamese Grammar, identified modality as a category closely tied to sentence structure. Diep Quang Ban (1994) affirmed the role of modal elements in completing the meaning of utterances. Lê Đông & Nguyen Van Hiep (2003) expanded the concept of modality in linguistics, clarifying its complexity and diversity. Particularly, Nguyen Mai Phuong (2022) examined sentence-final modal particles in Southern Vietnamese communication, highlighting their specificity and regional nuances. On the applied level, Ma Thi Thanh Tuyen (2014) studied the teaching and learning of modal particles in Vietnamese textbooks for foreigners, emphasizing the important role of modality in intercultural communication. It can be said that the Vietnamese system of modality is both rich and subtle: it not only expresses the speaker's stance toward a situation but also reflects how Vietnamese speakers organize utterances and maintain social relations. When placed in a cross-linguistic comparative context, research on modality in Vietnamese helps illuminate both the similarities and differences among languages, thereby contributing to contrastive linguistics, translation, and the teaching of Vietnamese as a foreign language.

**For these reasons, this study aims to:**

Systematize the means of expressing modality in Vietnamese.  
Analyze the semantic-pragmatic roles and characteristics of modality in Vietnamese sentence structure.  
Draw theoretical and practical implications for cross-linguistic comparative research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on concepts and classifications of modality in modern linguistics, while also referring to representative studies on modality in Vietnamese.

### 2.1. The Concept of Modality

Modality is understood as a linguistic category that expresses the speaker's attitude, viewpoint, or evaluation toward the proposition being uttered. According to Palmer (2001), modality can be divided into three basic groups: Epistemic modality: expressing the speaker's degree of certainty, possibility, or assumption about an event (e.g., chắc, có lẽ, hình như in Vietnamese).

Deontic modality: expressing obligation, duty, permission, or prohibition (e.g., phải, nên, được phép).

Dynamic modality: relating to the ability, capacity, or volition of the subject (e.g., có thể, đủ sức, muốn).

In addition to these three groups, many researchers (e.g., Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca, 1994) have proposed extending the scope of modality to other categories such as evaluative modality or interpersonal modality. In pragmatics, modality not only reflects the relationship to the state of affairs but is also linked to the status, attitude, and interaction between speaker and hearer within the communicative context.

### 2.2. Means of Expressing Modality in Language

Different languages have their own systems of devices to express modality, which can be summarized into three main groups:

Grammar: modal verbs (e.g., can, must, may in English), tense, mood, or verb forms (French, Russian).

Lexicon – function words: including modal words (có thể, phải, chắc), modal particles (nhé, nhỉ, cơ, mà, ư...), and lexical items with modal nuances (có lẽ, hình như, quả thật).

Intonation – context: rising or falling intonation, emphasis, and communicative context can all contribute to modal value.

### 2.3. Modality in Vietnamese

Vietnamese researchers have approached modality from various perspectives:

Dinh Van Duc (1986) viewed modality as a distinctive grammatical category tied to sentence structure.

Diep Quang Ban (1994) emphasized the role of modal elements in supplementing sentence meaning, enabling utterances to achieve full communicative value.

Le Dong & Nguyen Van Hiep (2003) pointed out that modality in Vietnamese is both diverse and difficult to sharply separate between grammar and pragmatics.

Nguyen Mai Phuong (2022) studied the system of sentence-final modal particles in Southern Vietnamese communication, thereby confirming the local and interpersonal nature of modal devices.

Ma Thi Thanh Tuyen (2014) examined the teaching of modal particles to learners of Vietnamese as a foreign language, demonstrating the importance of modality in intercultural communication.

Based on these studies, it can be summarized that modality in Vietnamese is expressed through:

Modal words: đã, sẽ, chắc, có lẽ, phải, nên, cần...

Auxiliary and sentence-final particles: nhé, nhỉ, đây, cơ, mà... – a striking feature that is richer in nuance than in many other languages.

Syntactic structures: imperative sentences, rhetorical questions, conditional clauses... often carry modal value.

Intonation: reflecting emotion, attitude, assertion, or doubt.

A prominent characteristic of modality in Vietnamese is its flexibility and high level of implicature. A modal word or particle can carry multiple values depending on context, while also containing specific socio-cultural nuances that reflect the relationship between speaker and hearer.

Recent Vietnamese scholarship further enriches this picture: Nguyen Van Pho (2019) analyzes the "modal comment" (thuyết tình thái) as a core component of Vietnamese clause structure; Nguyen Van Pho (2020) demonstrates that cả has developed into a modal particle signaling inclusiveness and emphasis; Nguyen Van Pho (2013) examines the negative constructions có...đâu and không...đâu with distinct pragmatic effects; and Nguyen Van Pho (2024) investigates the modal functions of là. In addition, Le Thi Minh Hang (2016, 2019) shows that the conjunctions còn and chừ not only link clauses but also convey subtle modal and attitudinal meanings.

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Han (2018) further analyzes the pragmatic nuances of sentence-final particles such as đi, nhé, and đã in Vietnamese imperative clauses, highlighting their key role in expressing subtle interpersonal attitudes.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of methods to ensure comprehensiveness in analysis and objectivity in comparison.

### 3.1. Descriptive-Analytical Method

This method was used to collect, systematize, and classify modal devices in Vietnamese.

Data sources:

Journalistic texts (VnExpress, Tuổi Trẻ, Thanh Niên...) to reflect standard language in social life.  
Modern and classical literary works to observe the richness of modality in artistic language.  
Natural conversations (recorded and transcribed) to capture the use of modality in everyday communication.  
Procedure:

Extract examples containing modal elements.

Classify them into groups: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality (following Palmer, 2001), while also comparing with Vietnamese classifications (Dinh Van Duc, 1986; Le Đong & Nguyen Van Hiep, 2003).

Analyze the semantic-pragmatic characteristics of each modal device in specific contexts.

### 3.2. Contrastive-Comparative Method

This method aims to clarify similarities and differences in how languages express modality.

Objects of comparison:

English: representative of inflectional languages with a clear system of modal verbs (can, must, may, should...).

Chinese: representative of isolating languages with many similarities to Vietnamese, particularly in the use of function words and modal particles.

Content of comparison:

Grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic means of expressing modality.

The semantic value and modal nuances in each context.

Significance:

Helps affirm the distinctive features of Vietnamese while also providing insights for cross-linguistic research, translation, and foreign language teaching.

### 3.3. Theoretical Approaches

The study is conducted based on a combination of three approaches:

Functional grammar: considering modality as a category tied to sentence structure and communicative function.

Semantics: analyzing the meaning value of modality at the word and sentence level.

Pragmatics: clarifying the role of modality in the relationship between speaker and hearer, social context, and communicative culture.

The integration of these three approaches allows the study not only to describe forms but also to explain the functions, meanings, and socio-cultural implications of modality in Vietnamese, as well as in cross-linguistic comparison.

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Modal Expressions in Vietnamese

#### 4.1.1. Distribution by Source of Data

Table 4.1. Distribution of modal devices in journalistic texts

Type of modal device	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Modal predicates (có thể, phải...)	88	44.00
Sentence-final particles (nhé, nhỉ...)	19	9.50
Auxiliary words/adverbs (chắc, đã, sẽ...)	65	32.50
Intonation	28	14.00
<b>Total</b>	200	100

The survey of 200 journalistic sentences shows the following distribution of modal devices: modal predicates (44.0%), auxiliary words/adverbs (32.5%), intonation (14.0%), and sentence-final particles (9.5%). This distribution reflects the typical features of journalistic language: oriented toward standardization and objectivity, with little use of interpersonal and intimate devices.

The predominance of modal predicates (44%) indicates that journalistic texts prioritize clear, explicit syntactic structures to ensure informational reliability. Modal predicates such as có thể, phải, cần, nên are often used to express possibility, obligation, or necessity. This fits the communicative function of journalism: to inform, analyze, and orient public opinion, rather than express personal emotions. For example, the phrase có thể xảy ra allows journalists to remain neutral, avoiding absolute statements, while phải thực hiện conveys legal or policy obligations. Thus, modal predicates play a central role in establishing accuracy and persuasiveness in journalistic discourse.

The significant presence of auxiliaries/adverbs (32.5%) suggests that journalism still requires additional devices to express degrees of certainty or evaluation. Words such as đã, sẽ, chắc, có lẽ often appear in commentaries, forecasts, or feature articles. For instance, in economic news, có thể sẽ tăng trưởng provides predictive information while maintaining caution. This shows that despite emphasizing objectivity, journalism cannot completely eliminate modality, as natural language always involves stance and attitude.

Intonation (14%) and sentence-final particles (9.5%) appear far less frequently, reflecting the limitations of written texts. Sentence-final particles such as nhé, nhỉ are nearly absent, as they are tied to spoken intimacy and conversational style. When present, they occur mainly in interviews or quoted speech. Intonation is conveyed indirectly through punctuation, such as exclamation marks or rhetorical questions, yet still adds nuance. For

example, the headline *Liệu giá xăng có giảm?* not only functions as an information-seeking question but also conveys doubt, creating attraction for readers.

From these data, three key features of modality in journalistic language can be identified. First, journalism favors normative use, prioritizing logical and rational modal devices over emotional ones. Second, the use of auxiliaries/adverbs shows that journalism still requires a degree of vagueness, reflecting the complexity of reality and cautiousness in reporting. Third, the scarcity of sentence-final particles demonstrates the social distance maintained in journalism, avoiding excessive intimacy.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, this phenomenon can also be compared with English and Chinese journalism. English journalism frequently employs modal verbs (may, might, must) to convey possibility while avoiding absolute certainty. Chinese journalism uses modal verbs (可能 *kěnéng*, 应该 *yīnggāi*) for similar purposes. Although Vietnamese lacks a distinct system of modal verbs, it achieves equivalent effects through modal predicates and auxiliaries/adverbs. This demonstrates both the universality of modality in journalistic discourse and the typological dependence of its expression.

In terms of application, these results suggest that in teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language, special attention should be given to the differences between modality in journalistic texts and in everyday conversation. Learners should be reminded that Vietnamese journalism almost never uses sentence-final particles, unlike daily speech. In translation, transferring Vietnamese modal structures into English or Chinese requires careful attention to degrees of certainty and objectivity. For example, *có thể sẽ xảy ra* must be translated as may happen rather than happens in English to preserve its non-assertive stance.

The data on journalistic texts reveal that the modal system in this genre is logical and objective, with limited intimacy. Modal predicates play a central role, auxiliaries/adverbs serve a supporting function, while sentence-final particles and intonation are minimally present. This not only reflects the essence of Vietnamese journalistic language but also clarifies the distinctions among discourse genres.

**Table 4.2. Distribution of modal devices in literary works**

Type of modal device	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Modal predicates	47	27.60
Sentence-final particles	28	16.50
Auxiliary words/adverbs	69	40.60
Intonation	26	15.30
<b>Total</b>	170	100

The survey of 170 sentences in literary works shows the following distribution: auxiliary words/adverbs account for the highest proportion (40.6%), followed by modal predicates (27.6%), intonation (15.3%), and sentence-final particles (16.5%). Compared with journalism, this distribution is markedly different: instead of prioritizing modal predicates associated with normative expression, literature tends to favor function words and adverbs, reflecting the expressive, creative, and individualized nature of artistic language.

Auxiliary words/adverbs dominate (40.6%), which is unsurprising given that literature emphasizes the expression of emotions, thoughts, and the subjectivity of characters or narrators. Words such as *chắc*, *có lẽ*, *hình như*, *đã*, *sẽ* appear frequently, creating layers of ambiguity and multidimensional meaning. For instance, the sentence *Có lẽ nàng đã quên* not only describes a possibility but also evokes sadness and hesitation in the character. Thus, modal adverbs in literature serve not only epistemic functions but also aesthetic values. This is clear evidence of the intertwining of semantics and literary artistry.

Sentence-final particles (16.5%) play a significant role in literary language. Particles such as *nhé*, *nhi*, *có*, *mà* not only convey attitudes but also help shape character traits, tone, and social relationships. For example, in the dialogue *Đi thôi nhé*, the particle *nhé* softens the utterance, creating intimacy. Meanwhile, *Anh đi rồi mà!* conveys reproach or regret. In this way, sentence-final particles are powerful tools for writers to create vivid communicative spaces and lifelike characters.

Intonation (15.3%) is realized through punctuation such as exclamation marks, question marks, and ellipses. Given the artistic nature of literature, intonation is often used to depict inner feelings, emphasize emotions, or evoke lingering effects. For example, the exclamation *Trời ơi!* expresses horror or despair, while ellipses suggest interpretive gaps that invite readers to infer meaning. Intonation in literature thus functions not only grammatically but also rhetorically, contributing to rhythm and emotional emphasis.

Modal predicates (27.6%) retain a notable presence but are less dominant than in journalism. This reflects a difference in purpose: literature is less concerned with logical affirmation, focusing instead on representing inner worlds. Nonetheless, predicates such as *phải*, *nên*, *cần* appear when characters admonish themselves or when authors highlight inevitability. These elements provide “threads of rationality” within streams of emotion, balancing reason and feeling.

Compared to journalism, the literary data reveal an intriguing contrast. Journalism prioritizes modal predicates to reinforce objectivity, while literature maximizes the use of adverbs and particles to deepen expressiveness. If modality in journalism aligns with “objective truth,” in literature it becomes a “mirror of the human soul.” This

highlights the flexibility of the Vietnamese modal system and demonstrates that the distribution of modal devices depends not only on language typology but also strongly on discourse genre.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, striking differences are also observed. English literature often exploits modal verbs such as might, should, must, but also makes rich use of punctuation-driven intonation. Chinese literature, meanwhile, relies heavily on mood particles such as 吧 (ba), 啊 (a), 呢 (ne), which resemble Vietnamese sentence-final particles. Thus, Vietnamese literature occupies an intermediate position: close to Chinese in its particle system, yet distinct in its abundant affective adverbs.

In terms of application, these findings are especially useful for teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language. Teachers should emphasize that in literature, sentence-final particles and modal adverbs are not merely function words but artistic tools. In translation, rendering Vietnamese sentence-final particles into English requires creativity rather than literal equivalence, since no direct forms exist in English. For example, Đì đi nhé can be translated as Please go now or Do go now, in order to preserve its softness.

The distribution of modal devices in literature demonstrates the clear predominance of adverbs, auxiliaries, and sentence-final particles. This reflects the expressive, personalized, and creative essence of literary language. It confirms that literature is fertile ground for the Vietnamese modal system to fully reveal its flexibility, diversity, and aesthetic richness.

**Table 4.3. Distribution of modal devices in natural conversation**

Type of modal device	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Modal predicates	16	10.70
Sentence-final particles	72	48.00
Auxiliary words/adverbs	34	22.70
Intonation	28	18.60
<b>Total</b>	150	100

The survey of 150 sentences in natural conversation shows the following distribution: sentence-final particles dominate (48.0%), followed by auxiliary words/adverbs (22.7%), intonation (18.6%), and modal predicates with only 10.7%. This distribution clearly reflects the fundamental characteristics of everyday communication: intimacy, interpersonality, and high flexibility in expression.

Sentence-final particles account for nearly half of all cases (48%), confirming their central role in Vietnamese conversation. Particles such as nhé, nhỉ, cơ, mà, à not only add modal meaning but also signal social relations, intimacy, or emotional nuance. For example, Ăn cơm chưa nhỉ? conveys friendly concern, while Đì ngay nhé! combines command with softness. Sentence-final particles can thus be called the “soul” of daily communication, shaping diverse and subtle nuances unmatched in other languages.

Auxiliary words/adverbs account for 22.7%. They are commonly used to express degrees of certainty, possibility, or assumptions. Words such as chắc, có lẽ, đã, sẽ not only encode epistemic stance but also convey politeness or mitigate communicative pressure. For example, instead of directly saying Anh sai rồi (“You are wrong”), a speaker may say Anh chắc là sai rồi (“You are probably wrong”), softening confrontation. This shows that in conversation, modal adverbs serve not only semantic but also socio-communicative purposes.

Intonation accounts for 18.6%—a significant proportion, given that conversation is the most natural environment for intonation to function. Rising, falling, or stressing intonation can completely alter an utterance’s modal meaning. For example, Đì rồi à? uttered softly may be an information-seeking question, but with rising stress, it becomes reproachful. Combined with sentence-final particles, intonation further enhances expressive subtlety, making conversation the richest context for pragmatic values.

Modal predicates account for only 10.7%, the lowest proportion among all devices. This indicates that in everyday communication, Vietnamese speakers seldom use words like phải, cần, nên to impose obligation or assert certainty. Instead, they prefer softer, more flexible means such as particles and intonation. For example, rather than Anh phải đi ngay (“You must go now”), speakers often say Anh đi ngay nhé (“Do go now, please”), conveying the same command while maintaining intimacy. This is a distinctive feature of Vietnamese communication compared to many other languages.

Compared with journalism and literature, the contrast is clear: journalism relies on modal predicates to ensure normativity; literature prioritizes adverbs and auxiliaries to express emotions; conversation, meanwhile, relies on sentence-final particles and intonation to sustain social relationships. This confirms the flexible distribution of modal devices in Vietnamese, dependent on discourse genre.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, Vietnamese conversation stands out for its rich system of sentence-final particles. In Chinese, mood particles such as 吧 (ba), 呢 (ne), 呀 (ma) play similar roles, but are less diverse and function more grammatically (e.g., marking questions or imperatives). English lacks sentence-final particles altogether, compensating instead with intonation or modal expressions like you know, right, okay. This makes Vietnamese conversation a typical example of the diversity of function words in isolating languages.

In terms of application, these findings are particularly important for teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language. Learners often struggle with sentence-final particles since they lack direct equivalents in English or many other languages. Teachers should emphasize their interpersonal functions and provide numerous contextual examples to

illustrate nuances. In translation, rendering these particles requires creativity to maintain intimacy or social nuance. For instance, *Đi ngay nhé* can be translated as Do go now, please, preserving both command and softness. The distribution of modal devices in natural conversation demonstrates the predominance of sentence-final particles and the important role of intonation, reflecting the intimate, flexible, and socially nuanced nature of Vietnamese communication. This vividly illustrates the close link between the modal system and socio-cultural context in language use.

#### 4.1.2. Summary

Journalistic texts: Primarily employ modal predicates (có thể, phải, cần...), emphasizing normativity and regulation.

Literary works: Heavily rely on modal auxiliaries/adverbs (chắc, có lẽ, đã, sẽ...), associated with the expression of emotions and thoughts.

Conversation: Dominated by sentence-final particles and intonation, reflecting interpersonal and social relationships as well as attitudes.

### 4.2. Salient Features of Modality in Vietnamese

The analysis of 520 sentences containing modal elements reveals several salient features:

#### Flexibility in use

A function word can assume multiple modal functions depending on the communicative context.

Example: the word *đây* (22 occurrences) can be used for emphasis (9 cases), affirmation (7 cases), or expressing surprise (6 cases).

#### Context-dependence

Modal meaning often cannot be derived from grammatical structure alone, but must be interpreted within specific contexts.

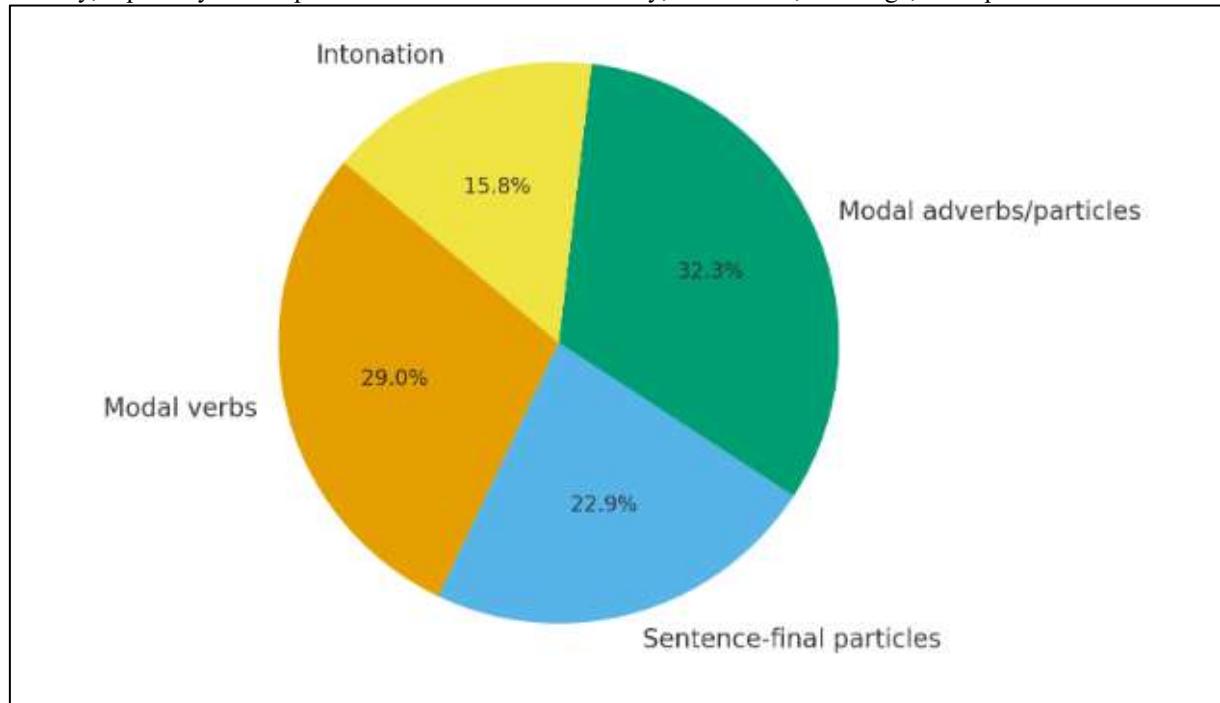
For instance, in 31 cases of *có lẽ* ("perhaps"), 19 conveyed prediction based on evidence, while 12 expressed politeness or tentativeness.

The particle *nhé* (37 occurrences) in literary texts often conveys intimacy and softness, but in everyday conversation it may function as a soft imperative (e.g., *Đi ngay nhé!* – "Do go now, please").

#### Diversity and richness of sentence-final particles

The survey recorded: *nhé* (37), *nhi* (28), *đây* (22), *cơ* (12), *mà* (10), *à* (10).

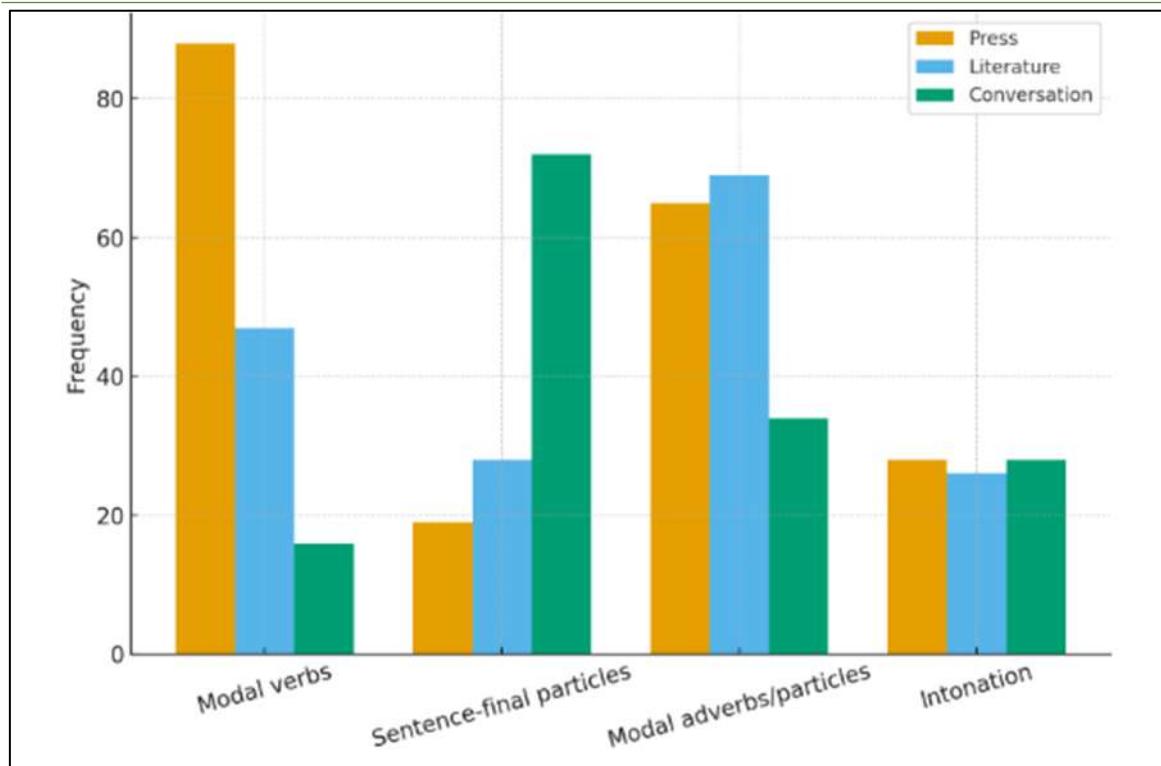
This is a striking feature of Vietnamese, entirely absent in English (which has no corresponding system) and only partially comparable to Chinese (e.g., *ba*, *ne*, *ma*). However, Vietnamese demonstrates greater diversity and subtlety, especially in interpersonal nuances such as intimacy, affirmation, challenge, or emphasis.



**Figure 1: Distribution of Modal Devices in Vietnamese Journalism, Literature, and Conversation**

Among all cases, modal auxiliaries/adverbs (32.3%) and modal predicates (29.0%) account for the highest proportions, followed by sentence-final particles (22.9%) and intonation (15.8%).

**Comparison across the three data sources shows:**



**Figure 2: Comparative Distribution of Modal Devices in Vietnamese, English, and Chinese**

**Journalism:** Focuses on modal predicates (có thể, phải, cần), reflecting normativity and standardization.

**Literature:** Frequently uses auxiliaries/adverbs (chắc, có lẽ, đã, sẽ...) to express emotions and create artistic nuance.

**Conversation:** Characterized by sentence-final particles (nhé, nhỉ, cơ, mà...) and intonation shifts, reflecting interpersonal aspects of everyday communication.

#### 4.3. Discussion

##### 4.3.1. Overview of Cross-Linguistic Comparison

Research on modality in Vietnamese would be incomplete without placing it in a comparative context. Within this scope, English and Chinese were selected for comparison for two reasons:

English is a typical inflectional language, with a clear, stable, and extensively studied system of modal verbs.

Chinese is an isolating language, sharing many similarities with Vietnamese in the use of function words, auxiliaries, and sentence-final particles, yet differing in structure and function.

Through comparison, both universality of modality in human language and the particular features of each language can be identified.

##### 4.3.2. Distribution of Modal Devices

The survey of 520 Vietnamese sentences, 310 English sentences, and 305 Chinese sentences reveals striking differences in the distribution of modal devices.

**Table 4.4. Comparison of the distribution of modal devices across Vietnamese – English – Chinese**

Type of modal device	Vietnamese (520)	English (310)	Chinese (305)
Modal predicates	151 (29.0%)	126 (40.6%)	68 (22.3%)
Sentence-final particles	119 (22.9%)	–	78 (25.6%)
Auxiliaries/adverbs	168 (32.3%)	63 (20.3%)	102 (33.4%)
Intonation	82 (15.8%)	121 (39.0%)	57 (18.7%)

**Vietnamese:** stands out for its use of auxiliaries/adverbs and sentence-final particles, reflecting syntactic flexibility and contextual reliance.

**English:** shows clear dominance of modal verbs and intonation, highlighting grammatical standardization yet flexibility in prosody.

**Chinese:** closer to Vietnamese in the use of auxiliaries and particles, but its particles are less diverse, functioning more to mark sentence type (e.g., interrogative, imperative) than interpersonal subtleties.

Thus, although all three languages possess systems of modal expression, the distributional emphasis differs: English favors morphology.

Chinese favors auxiliary verbs and function words.

Vietnamese represents a mixture, enriched with sentence-final particles and nuanced adverbs.

### 4.3.3. Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality relates to degrees of certainty, probability, or evaluative stance of the speaker toward a proposition.

**Vietnamese:** frequently employs adverbs (chắc, có lẽ, hình như, dường như...) combined with intonation. Among 168 instances of auxiliaries/adverbs, 97 were epistemic.

Anh ấy chắc đã về rồi ("He must have already gone home") → high certainty.

Có lẽ mai trời mưa ("Perhaps it will rain tomorrow") → assumption, prediction.

**English:** relies on modal verbs (may, might, must, should...) and perfect aspect forms.

He must have left already. (high probability, near certainty)

It might rain tomorrow. (medium probability, prediction)

**Chinese:** uses modal verbs (会 huì, 应该 yīnggāi, 可能 kěnéng) along with mood particles (吧 ba).

他应该已经走了。 (Tā yīnggāi yǐjīng zǒu le. → "He should/must have already left.")

明天可能会下雨。 (Míngtiān kěnéng huì xiàyǔ. → "It may rain tomorrow.")

Comparison shows:

English favors morphological grammar.

Chinese combines verbs and particles.

Vietnamese relies on adverbs and intonation, demonstrating high flexibility.

### 4.3.4. Deontic Modality

Deontic modality expresses obligation, command, permission, or prohibition.

**Vietnamese:** makes frequent use of modal predicates (phải, cần, nên, được phép...), complemented by sentence-final particles (nhé, đi, thôi...) to soften force.

Em phải làm bài tập ngay nhé! ("You must do your homework now, okay?")

Anh nên nghỉ ngoi đi. ("You should take a rest.")

**English:** clearly marked through modal verbs (must, should, can, may).

You must finish your homework.

You should take a rest.

**Chinese:** uses modal verbs (必须 bìxū, 应该 yīnggāi, 可以 kěyǐ).

你必须完成作业。 (Nǐ bìxū wánchéng zuòyè. → "You must finish your homework.")

你可以休息一下。 (Nǐ kěyǐ xiūxi yīxià. → "You may rest for a while.")

A distinctive feature of Vietnamese is its ability to soften deontic force through sentence-final particles. For example, Em làm đi nhé conveys command while also sounding intimate, unlike the directness of English and Chinese.

### 4.3.5. Dynamic Modality

Dynamic modality concerns inherent ability, capacity, or practical conditions for action.

**Vietnamese:** có thể, biết, dám, đủ sức...

Tôi có thể giúp ban. ("I can help you.")

Cậu dám làm việc đó à? ("Do you dare do that?")

**English:** can, could, be able to...

I can help you.

She could play the piano when she was five.

**Chinese:** 能 néng, 会 huì, 敢 gǎn

我能帮你。 (Wǒ néng bāng nǐ. → "I can help you.")

他敢说出真相。 (Tā gǎn shuōchū zhēnxiàng. → "He dares to tell the truth.")

Vietnamese in this respect is closer to Chinese, while English tends toward verbal morphology. Vietnamese also enhances nuances with intonation, e.g., Cậu dám làm việc đó à? with rising intonation conveys challenge.

### 4.3.6. The Role of Intonation

**Vietnamese:** Intonation is an important but often overlooked device in traditional grammar. In 82 cases, intonation altered the modal meaning of a sentence entirely.

Anh về rồi à? (gentle question) vs. Anh về rồi à?! (surprise, reproach).

**English:** Intonation frequently distinguishes modal meanings, with 121 cases recorded (nearly 40% of data).

Really? (surprise) vs. Really. (assertion).

**Chinese:** Intonation combines with mood particles, forming a diverse system. In 57 cases, such combinations were obligatory.

好吗 (hǎo ma → "okay?") with rising intonation.

好啊 (hǎo a → "great, okay") with soft falling intonation.

Thus, intonation plays a crucial role in all three languages, but in different ways: English uses intonation in place of particles, Chinese combines intonation with particles, while Vietnamese employs intonation as a supplementary device.

### 4.3.7. Cross-Linguistic Implications

From the above results, several points are clear:

**Universality:**

All languages possess modal devices, reflecting the universal human need to evaluate, regulate, and express attitudes.

**Particularity:**

English: grammaticalizes modality via modal verbs.

Chinese: systematizes modality through modal verbs and particles.

Vietnamese: rich in function words and sentence-final particles, strongly context-dependent.

**Theoretical significance:**

Comparison across the three languages shows that modality is both a grammatical and a pragmatic–sociolinguistic category. This supports Halliday's (1994) functional grammar view that modality is linked to the interpersonal function.

**Practical applications:**

In foreign language teaching, attention must be given to differences in modality. For example, Vietnamese learners of English often overuse maybe instead of might/may.

In translation, one must convey not only propositional meaning but also modal nuance. For instance, Đi ngay nhé cannot be translated literally as Go now, please, since it loses its softness.

In intercultural studies, differences in modal expression reflect how each culture conceptualizes social relations and communication.

**4.3.8. Summary**

Comparison across the three languages shows:

**English:** standardizes modality within verbal grammar.

**Chinese:** combines modal verbs with mood particles.

**Vietnamese:** the most flexible, combining adverbs, sentence-final particles, and intonation, while strongly dependent on context and social relations.

This feature makes Vietnamese both similar to Chinese in formal structure and distinct from both English and Chinese in its richness and subtlety of interpersonal expression.

**4.4. Previous Studies**

In addition to the corpus directly collected and analyzed in this study, it is necessary to refer to data from earlier works to broaden perspectives, verify the validity of results, and provide a foundation for cross-linguistic comparison. Within this scope, two representative studies are used: Bui Thi Dao (2014) on deontic modality in English and Vietnamese, and Nguyen Thi Nhat Linh & Nguyen Van Chinh (2024) on modality in legal texts of Vietnam and Singapore.

**4.4.1. Study by Bui Thi Dao (2014)**

In A Study on Deontic Modality Expressing Means in English and Vietnamese Declarative and Interrogative Sentences, the author examined 421 English sentences and 422 Vietnamese sentences from short stories, focusing on deontic modality. The findings show:

Modal devices were divided into three groups: commissives (commitments), directives (commands/instructions), and volitives (wishes).

In Vietnamese, directives accounted for a significantly higher proportion than commissives and volitives, reflecting a tendency toward explicit obligation and command.

Conversely, in English, commissives were more frequent, indicating that speakers favored commitments and promises rather than direct commands.

This study provides evidence that Vietnamese tends to employ stronger modal devices, especially in the deontic domain. This is consistent with our analysis of conversational data, in which sentence-final particles and intonation were frequently used to either reinforce or soften commands.

**4.4.2. Study by Nguyen Thi Nhat Linh & Nguyen Van Chinh (2024)**

The work A Contrastive Analysis of Modality in the Vietnamese Enterprise Law and Singapore Companies Act under the Systemic Functional Grammar Approach compared two representative legal documents: Vietnam's Enterprise Law and Singapore's Companies Act. The method used was Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), focusing on two key categories: Modalization (epistemic modality) and Modulation (deontic modality).

The results revealed that:

Both legal systems employ many finite modal operators to express obligation.

However, the Vietnamese Enterprise Law uses high modal operators at a significantly higher rate, reflecting stronger coerciveness and prescriptiveness compared to the Singaporean counterpart.

The Singaporean document distributes obligation, possibility, and permission more evenly, whereas the Vietnamese text emphasizes compulsory requirements.

This finding shows that even in formal legal texts, Vietnamese carries a "strong" modal character, consistent with everyday communication, where speakers tend to use modal devices to stress obligation or certainty.

**4.4.3. Evaluation and Implications**

Data from the two studies above add two important dimensions:

In natural communication (Bùi Thị Đào, 2014): Vietnamese favors directives, while English favors commissives.

In the legal domain (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2024): Vietnamese demonstrates stronger obligation compared with Singaporean legal texts.

When compared with our analysis of 520 sentences from journalism, literature, and conversation, a consistent pattern emerges: Vietnamese prioritizes modal devices with strong binding force and assertiveness. This both affirms the particularity of Vietnamese and opens broader directions for cross-linguistic research, especially in translation, teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language, and intercultural communication studies.

Additional recent Vietnamese scholarship further enriches this perspective: Nguyen Van Pho (2013, 2019, 2020, 2024) provides detailed analyses of modal particles and negative templates such as có...đâu and không...đâu, highlighting their pragmatic nuances. Likewise, Le Thi Minh Hang (2016, 2019) demonstrates that the conjunctions còn and chừ not only serve as clause linkers but also convey subtle modal and attitudinal meanings, reinforcing the flexibility of the Vietnamese modal system.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. Conclusion

This study has clarified that modality is a linguistic category that is both universal and uniquely realized in Vietnamese. Through the survey of journalism, literature, and conversation, the results reveal that the distribution of modal devices is stratified by discourse genre: journalism relies on modal predicates to ensure objectivity and normativity; literature exploits auxiliaries, adverbs, and sentence-final particles to express subjectivity and artistic nuance; while everyday conversation is characterized by a rich system of sentence-final particles combined with intonation to maintain social relationships and convey interpersonal nuances.

In comparison with English and Chinese, the study shows: English standardizes modality through its system of modal verbs and intonation; Chinese employs modal verbs and mood particles; while Vietnamese flexibly combines multiple devices, most notably sentence-final particles and socially/culturally nuanced adverbs. This affirms that Vietnamese possesses a rich, diverse, and subtle system of modal expression, with communicative context playing a crucial role in meaning construction.

At both theoretical and practical levels, this study demonstrates that investigating modality in Vietnamese not only clarifies typological features and the communicative culture of the language, but also provides important value for contrastive research, translation, and foreign language pedagogy.

These findings are consistent with recent Vietnamese scholarship on modal particles and clause-structural modality (Nguyen Van Pho, 2013, 2019, 2020, 2024; Le Thi Minh Hang, 2016, 2019).

### 5.2. Recommendations

For scientific research:

Future studies should extend the survey of modality to other discourse genres such as law, politics, and digital media to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this category.

Comparative studies should be expanded to include Vietnamese and languages from different typological families (Southeast Asia, South Asia, Europe...) to better confirm both the universality and particularity of modality.

For teaching and learning Vietnamese as a foreign language:

Textbooks should emphasize sentence-final particles and intonation—elements that are difficult for foreign learners to acquire but highly significant in interpersonal communication.

Teaching activities should be closely linked with real-life communicative contexts so that learners can grasp the flexibility of modal usage.

For translation and intercultural communication:

Translators should pay attention not only to logical meaning but also to modal nuances, especially sentence-final particles, which often lack direct equivalents in many languages.

Correct understanding and appropriate use of Vietnamese modality will enhance the effectiveness of intercultural communication and minimize misunderstandings in international interaction.

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