

MODALITY MARKERS AND SHIFTING GENRE CONVENTIONS IN DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

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Abstract. The paper analyses the entries of *Oxford Fowler's Modern English Usage* (2004), building up on our previous research on changes in modality of lexicographic discourse. It is argued that its prescriptivist stance has been toned down not only by the preference for genre-specific epistemic modality markers instead of deontic modality markers, but also by employing in definitions a wide scope of common epistemic modality markers related to probability, certainty or uncertainty as regards the validity of the proposition. The prevailing defining vocabulary is now that of opinion or advice. Recommendations on usage also often refer to register variables singled out by systemic-functional linguistics: tenor (degrees of formality signalled by labels like *formal*, *informal*, and by pragmatic labels: *offensive*, *affectionate*, etc.), field (*legal language*, *marketing*, etc.) and marking the type of discourse and mode (*spoken – written*). Register variables split the notion of Standard English further and qualify prescriptive statements on usage, making them fully valid for a particular register only. Thus, the analysis reveals a broad range of both non-specific and genre-specific low modality markers employed in the texts of dictionary entries as new genre conventions of both content and form. It shows that these conventions are historically relative and that low modality is a new mode of address to dictionary users.

Key words: dictionaries of usage, prescriptivism, genre conventions, modality markers, register variables

INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on the results of the previous research (Dorošenko, 2012) which had analysed shifts in the concept of the standard of usage in *Oxford Fowler's Modern English Usage* (2004) brought about by the increasing use of corpus data or, at least, of secondary sources based on them, in traditionally conservative and overtly prescriptive dictionaries of usage. The previous paper had been focused on indicators of frequency of usage (e.g. 'widely used, increasingly found, typically/often/mainly/sometimes/ rarely/ used', etc.) in *Fowler's* entries serving as markers of epistemic modality, and all modal markers expressing deontic modal meanings (e.g. 'has to be used, should be avoided, preferred, advisable', etc.). It had taken into account high and low modality in both epistemic and deontic modal meanings. The findings based even on this limited range of modality markers had revealed that in *Fowler's* entries the overall balance was decidedly in favour of epistemic modality; in epistemic modal meanings it was in

favour of high modality markers, while in deontic modal meanings the share of low modality was bigger. The findings had also allowed us to conclude that genre (or type of discourse) and context are the decisive factors in establishing the meanings and functions of particular modality markers. For example, indicators of frequency referring to high probability or likelihood of occurrence have functions opposite to those in academic discourse beyond lexicography, where they are used primarily as hedges signalling low modality (e.g. 'often' signals there lower epistemic modality than 'always', while 'often used' in *Fowler's* is a booster). Thus, it had been shown that both the range and functions of some modality markers in dictionary entries are genre-specific.

The present research discusses several groups of modality markers left beyond the scope of the previous paper and interprets observations on modality markers in *Fowler's* dictionary entries in the frameworks of contemporary genre studies and systemic-functional linguistics. It focuses on the link between the changing genre conventions of lexicographic description, register variables (field, tenor and mode) of this description and the modality of the dictionary's entries, viewed as part of tenor. Observations on tenor, in their turn, allow to draw conclusions on two target readerships of *Fowler's* dictionary and the changing writer-reader relationship.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 GENRE STUDIES

While approaches to genre, genre definitions and classifications are highly diverse (outlined in Chandler, 1997), several assumptions relevant for this study have been used for the purposes of this research:

- genres constitute particular conventions of content and form which are shared by the texts regarded as belonging to them;
- genre can be viewed as a *relationship* between the makers and audiences of texts (a *rhetorical* dimension);
- genre conventions are not necessarily fixed forms, they are subject to changes: both their forms and functions are dynamic;
- changes in genre conventions may involve shifts in boundaries between genres.

Several comments on these interrelated assumptions are required.

It should be noted that the writer-reader relationship in genre studies often tends to be discussed in terms of positioning or construction of the subject: 'genre is a textual code which constructs the subject' (Chandler, 2007: 189), or: 'generic frameworks can be seen as involved in the construction of their readers' (*ibid.*: 190). However, the writer-reader relationship is admittedly a two-way street: 'In order to communicate, a producer of any text must make some

assumptions about an intended audience; reflections of such assumptions may be discerned in the text' (ibid.: 184). It is then equally justifiable to discuss here the writer-reader relationship in terms of dictionary-makers meeting the needs and expectations of the assumed dictionary users. Thus, 'assumed target readership' is probably preferable to 'constructed' in the given context. The traditional profile of an average dictionary user commonly portrays a person with some degree of language awareness or linguistically somewhat insecure: 'The definition of a word given by a dictionary entry is intended for a group of users belonging to those who speak or want to speak the standard form of the language of the dictionary in question' (Janssen, M. et al., n.d.: 2).

The assumptions of dictionary makers about the intended readership should be reflected by certain conventional features of the texts of entries. Among others, these are the 'modes of address' (Chandler, 2007: 190) and, more specifically, also the modality of lexicographers' statements, which 'refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a sign, text or genre' (ibid.: 254).

It is also argued in genre studies that genres are dynamic: 'genre is ... in a constant process of negotiation and change' and that their boundaries can change: 'the boundaries between genres are shifting and becoming more permeable' (Chandler, 1997). The latter two assumptions concern different kinds of variation in genre conventions. Variation can concern genre development in time or differences in genre conventions in a certain period. For example, Hyland's comparison has revealed genre variations in academic writing across disciplines: in 'soft' and 'hard' sciences (in Hyland, 2004, 2008 and other works). The term *discourse community* 'understood as a group who have texts and practices in common', in Hyland's view, helps 'to explain genre variation across different groups' (Hyland, 2008). This makes genre variation ultimately determined by the writer-reader relationship.

From the viewpoint of variation in genre conventions it also makes sense to find out to what extent the definitions in *Fowler's* dictionary can be viewed as prototypical lexicographic discourse, or an aberration, or a hybrid revealing some new tendencies, i.e. the dynamics of the genre. By 'prototypical' we mean that traditional dictionaries are viewed as samples of 'didactic discourse', or metalinguistic texts of didactic nature where the default modality of lexicographic texts was a statement of fact (Dorošenko, 2012: 15). This implies strong/high epistemic modality in general explanatory dictionaries at large and in dictionaries of usage in particular, as well as a very visible presence of strong deontic modality in dictionaries of usage, given their explicitly prescriptive nature. Deviations from the traditional default (strong) modality may signal shifts in genre boundaries.

2 REGISTER AS REALISATION OF GENRE IN SFL

In a different theoretical framework, in systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), the concept of genre is defined through register variables: field, mode and tenor (Eggins, 2004: 26). The link between the concepts of genre and register at large

is referred to in SFL as ‘contextual coherence’, or else, as ‘coherence of register and genre’ (ibid.: 95). Since the language used is determined by register variables, register is seen in SFL as a realisation of a genre: ‘It is through language that genres are realised’ (ibid.: 42).

It is possible to establish links between the terminological frameworks of genre studies and SFL. Thus, ‘conventions of content’ can be related to field (all *Fowler’s* entries concern standards of language use), while ‘conventions of form’ – to the kind of language used in the entries: ‘...texts of different genres will reveal different lexico-grammatical choices’ (ibid.: 42). The ‘relationship between the makers and audiences of texts’ in genre studies is actually related to all register variables: field, mode and tenor, and the latter variable is defined, broadly, as the ‘social roles’ played by the participants of communication (ibid.: 26), the notion being further split into the relative status of participants (and therefore the degree of authority claimed by the author) and social distance, which involves attitude and modality. Thus, modality is one of the constituent elements of tenor and as such is an integral feature of genre.

It will be argued that markers of register in dictionary entries can be viewed as modality markers, since they qualify recommendations on language use, making them not universally applicable to all its levels and, therefore, lowering their modality. This, in its turn, allows us to consider register markers as genre-specific modality markers in lexicographic discourse. The approach had been used in the discussion of frequency markers in *Fowler’s* entries (Dorošenko, 2012), based on one of epistemic modal meanings singled out in SFL: ‘degrees of certainty, likelihood or usuality/frequency (the speaker expresses judgments as to the frequency with which something happens or is)’ (Eggins, 2004: 180).

GOALS OF ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research investigates some elements of *Fowler’s* dictionary entries not taken into account previously, namely:

- epistemic modality markers related to probability, certainty or uncertainty as regards the validity of the proposition, or degree of commitment to its truth-value beyond/others than indicators of frequency of use (not genre-specific);
- markers of three register variables singled out in systemic-functional linguistics (SFL): tenor, field and mode, which, we shall argue, can be interpreted as genre-specific modality markers.

Both groups of modality markers are part of what is usually called the metalanguage of lexicographic description, but there is a difference between them. The markers in the first group have to do with the validity of statements made by lexicographers about the units described in the entries. Unlike indicators of frequency of use investigated earlier (Dorošenko, 2012), they are non-genre-specific, i.e. they can be used in the same functions in other kinds of texts, e.g.

academic. The members of the second group are practically labels (even though in *Fowler's* they are not presented graphically as such, being part of the texts of entries). As noted by Janssen M. et al., 'We have to make the notion of label independent of the specific medium in which a dictionary is presented. So, even if we read somewhere in a dictionary: **buck**, an informal way of saying *dollar*> the entry in fact contains a usage label' (Janssen M. et al., n.d.: 2). It is often indicated in *Fowler's* entries that the units described are restricted in use due to belonging to a particular field, tenor and/or mode. Since this means that recommendations are not universal truths, but apply to a limited scope of language use, we treat these indications as genre-specific modality markers signalling relatively low modality. Moreover, the indicators of register variables sometimes have qualifiers (e.g. very, quite), which makes modality a continuum or a gradable scale.

The extended range of entries' elements under analysis will allow us to determine the overall balance between epistemic and deontic modality in the sample of *Fowler's* entries on the whole, i.e. to establish the prevailing type of modal meanings in them. Since all deontic modality markers had already been taken into account in the previous research, it stands to reason to assume that the relative 'weight' of epistemic modality markers will increase considerably, but it remains to be seen whether the dominance of low modality will be as obvious. It will also be possible to find out the share of different modality markers in the sample.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURE OF ANALYSIS

The same sample of data as in the previous research has been used: all entries for the letter E in *Oxford Fowler's Modern English Usage* (2004: 192–235) (the total number of entries is 206). The collection of data involved:

- common epistemic modality markers related to probability, certainty or uncertainty as regards the validity of the proposition, or degree of commitment to its truth-value;
- indicators of register variables for the units of description: field, tenor and mode.

It should be noted that both the units of description (heads of entries) and the metalanguage of definitions in dictionaries of usage are much more varied than in explanatory dictionaries. Heads of entries vary from morphemes to phrases, and no restrictions on defining vocabulary or the structure or size of the entries are at work.

Similarly to the previous research, word-classes of modality markers were not relevant when grouping data: the presence of the marker in the dictionary entry and its function regardless of the word-class (e.g. adverb or adjective, verb or noun of the same root) were relevant. Tokens (the number of occurrences) of modality markers were taken into account to determine the overall number of modality markers having particular functions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1 EPISTEMIC MODALITY MARKERS: PROBABILITY, CERTAINTY/UNCERTAINTY

1.1 DELEGATING RESPONSIBILITY/AUTHORITY TO LANGUAGE USERS

Some statements on language use in the entries of *Fowler's* are presented as the opinion or preferences of the public (or part of it), rather than the opinion or preferences of the dictionary makers. The full list comprises: regarded as offensive (2), attracted disapproval (2), strong disapproval, regarded with disfavour, criticized for, the object of criticism, had their share of criticism, has come in for much adverse criticism, attacked, objected to, would object to, defended by ..., unchallenged' (1 token for each).

Some of the entries are exercises in diplomacy, e.g.:

end product, end result ... These have been criticized for containing an element of redundancy (...) but they are well-established.

enjoin ... Fowler (1926) wrote that this construction [*you enjoin a person to do something*] is not recommended, but (...) it is now too common and useful to be objected to.

The issue is not whether an opinion or attitude registered in the entry is positive or negative (though negative ones in the list above are in overwhelming majority), but that this is the vocabulary of opinion and debate, i.e. of probability, not certainty or obligation. These markers refer specifically to the presumed attitudes of the public to instances of language use described in the entries, not to the preferences of the dictionary-maker or the attitude of the speaker/writer implied in the language forms described (discussed below in 2.2.2.). Reporting a public opinion instead of stating one's own implies distancing from recommending or prohibiting a particular instance of use and delegating the responsibility for the judgment to the speaking/writing community, thus in a sense lowering the modality of the lexicographer's own statements. Passive voice forms ('have been criticised', etc.) with the optional by-agent absent becomes a useful tool for voicing depersonalised statements ascribed to the community.

While the total number of such entries (15) is not impressive, we should also take into account the 105 references to frequency of use ('widely used, regular/rare use', etc.) in 206 entries of the same sample, discussed in the previous research. Notably, high frequency markers dominate (83 tokens of 105) and are either used for recommended, not prohibited use, or else no explicit advice is given by the dictionary in entries containing indicators of high or low frequency of use. (Dorošenko, 2012: 22–23). Frequency markers should therefore also be viewed as the delegation of authority to the community of speakers/writers.

1.2 HEDGING THE DICTIONARY MAKERS' OWN OPINIONS ON LANGUAGE USE

When no explicit references to public taste are made in the entries, i.e. responsibility for the statements in entries is definitely that of the dictionary, modality markers related to probability, certainty or uncertainty as regards the validity of the proposition, or degree of commitment to its truth-value are often used. The tendency to resort to scalar evaluations is obvious. The scale is represented by:

- adverbs of degree: most (2), more (17), less (6), principally (3), primarily (3), largely (2), somewhat, rather, mainly, especially (each by one token) – 37 tokens. They are often used as modifiers of evaluations: 'correct, standard, appropriate, attractive, natural, interchangeable', of the verbal form 'is used', etc.
- modal adverbs or adjectives: *probably, possible, likely* – 5 tokens. The verbs *seem* and *tend*, the noun *tendency* – 4 tokens.

Examples:

empathy ... tends to replace *sympathy* or *feeling for* when these words are sometimes more appropriate.

-er and -est forms of adjectives and adverbs ... some words ... can take *-er* and *-est*, although the forms sound somewhat less natural.

ellipsis ... less obviously wrong, but best avoided, are cases where the number (singular/plural) changes ...

-er and -est forms of adjectives and adverbs ... It is often possible to form comparatives and superlatives both by *-er* and *-est* forms and with *more* and *most*.

Exceptionable ... In the following examples, *exceptionable* seems to be used in error for other words...

The overall number of tokens amounts to 46, i.e. they are employed in almost one fourth of the entries in the sample.

2 REGISTER VARIABLES: FIELD, TENOR, MODE

2.1 FIELD MARKERS

Field markers refer to various domains of activity, practical or academic, and, therefore, to the types of discourse used in them. Irrespective of the particular domain, field markers indicate that the word/phrase/form is not part of general usage, but is restricted to particular occupational groups, be it terminology or professional jargon. This makes the recommendation or prohibition of the item not universally applicable to all situations, and, therefore, it has a relatively weak

modal value. The fields and respective types of discourse can be roughly divided into the following groups:

- legal language (legal language, law, lawyers) – 10 tokens;
- verbal arts (poetry, literature, rhetoric, correspondence) – 12 tokens,
- journalism (newspapers, magazines, journalese) – 18 tokens;
- other arts (ballet, photography, theatre) – 5 tokens;
- business, marketing and advertising – 9 tokens;
- natural and exact sciences (chemistry, ecology, physics, computing) – 8 tokens;
- humanities (ethics, metaphysics, psychology, aesthetics) – 4 tokens;
- bibliographical citation – 2 tokens.

A surprisingly small group of 3 markers are tags for ideological stances and respective discourses (feminist, politically correct, male chauvinistic) – 3 tokens.

Examples:

epoch ... in geology, the three terms *epoch*, *era* and *period* have special meanings...

executive ... In attributive use (before a noun) *executive* has developed a meaning used in marketing to describe anything promoted as suitable for use by executives...

evasion ... has a special meaning in relation to legal obligations, and differs from *avoidance* in denoting illegality.

-ess ... In the 20th c. the feminist and politically correct movements have had a devastating effect on the fortunes of many *-ess* words, and have effectively brought the life of *-ess* an active suffix to an end.

Field markers are the largest group of register variables in the sample – 61 token.

2.2 TENOR MARKERS

2.2.1 Degrees of formality

Tenor markers applied to the items described in *Fowler's* entries fall into two groups: indicators of degrees of formality and indicators of attitudes. The first group comprises 24 tokens denoting degrees of formality; they place the unit described in the entry in the formal-informal continuum:

- formal(ly) – 8 tokens;
- literary – 2 tokens;
- informal(ly) – 10 tokens;
- casual, everyday, slang – 4 tokens.

In 4 instances, ‘formal’ has qualifiers: *more, rather, somewhat*, which makes the formal pole itself also a gradable scale. The prevalence of ‘informal’ over ‘formal’ is insignificant (14 versus 10), but might be due to the fact that being inappropriately informal is more of a risk socially than being too formal: ‘The reason for marking a certain use has traditionally been to warn users about the possible social consequences of a word’ (Janssen et al., n.d.: 3).

Examples:

enough, sufficient, sufficiently ... Choice between *enough* and *sufficiently* [...] is normally determined by the degree of formality, *sufficiently* being the more formal.

even ... In informal contexts involving negatives, *even* sometimes comes at the end of a sentence.

2.2.2 Attitudes

Since tenor concerns the roles of participants of communication and interpersonal meanings, the second group comprises references to attitudes, expressed explicitly or implied in particular words, phrases or forms. They are loosely known as connotations, but some explanatory dictionaries, e.g. *Cobuild* (2009) list many of them as ‘pragmatic’ labels. They can be divided into markers of positive and negative attitudes:

- negative: offensive (4), disparaging (2), negative (2), ironic(ally) (2), derogatory, hostile, disapproval, dislike, not favourable, bad overtones (1 token for each);
- positive: favourable (2), approval, in positive contexts, affectionate, humorous, comic, facetiously (1 token for each).

The markers of negative attitudes in the sample are prevailing: 16 negative versus 7 positive. The balance is, again, the evidence of social risks involved for the speaker/writer unaware of negative connotations.

Examples:

enough, sufficient, sufficiently ... in the sentence [...] *sufficient* implies a stronger element of disapproval of the inadequacy than would be the case if *enough* had been used.

-eer ... In more recent use, it has taken on disparaging connotations, as in *pamphleteer*...

ever so ... used... in positive contexts as an intensive meaning ‘vastly, immensely’.

The total number of markers of attitudes is 24. The markers of degrees of formality and attitudes all in all account for 48 indicators of tenor, the second largest group of register variables in the sample.

2.3 MODE MARKERS

There are 22 direct references to either the spoken or the written mode. The indicators used are: writing, writer(s), written English (10 tokens); speech, spoken (English), speaker(s), conversation, conversational (12 tokens). They are sometimes used with markers of formality, as in ‘casual speech’ or ‘everyday speech’. It should also be noted that mode markers are generally a group with fuzzy boundaries, since they overlap with field markers: either the spoken or the written mode, or both can be implied by such fields as journalese, legal language and some others. The total number of register markers is 131.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the 105 frequency markers discussed in our previous research, the total number of epistemic modality markers for 206 dictionary entries of the sample amounts to 312 (about 1.5 per entry). The number of epistemic modality markers is 6 times higher than that of deontic modality markers (*can, cannot be used, advisable, best avoided*, etc.) in the sample: 52 (Dorošenko, 2012: 25). Frequency and register markers dominate: 120 and 131 tokens respectively. Indicators of the tenor of the units of description (degrees of formality and attitudes) and of the tenor of lexicographers’ opinions on language use voiced in the entries (hedges) are prominent: 48 and 46 tokens.

Reliance on factors like frequency, public opinion, register variables restricts traditional prescriptivism. Differentiation of levels of usage (markers of register variables) leaves little place for ‘universal truths’ and therefore lowers the modality of lexicographers’ statements.

In this study markers of register variables in the entries of *Fowler’s* have been viewed as elements of genre conventions of its entries, sharing a common function: they all lower the modality of statements on language use by making them not universally applicable to all its levels. A broad range of both non-specific and genre-specific low epistemic modality markers employed in them shows that new conventions of both content and form of lexicographic discourse emerge not only in explanatory, but also in the traditionally prescriptive dictionaries of usage. Low modality is a new mode of address to their readers. These conventions are therefore historically relative. This is evidence to the fact that, even though genre dynamics is largely associated with ‘literary genres in particular’ (Chandler, 1997), genre is not a ‘given’ or fixed form in lexicography either.

The changed conventions for dictionary entries signal the change in the composition of the target readership. The average users of dictionaries and their needs remain largely the same (they still tend to look for authoritative recommendations on language use). However, if genre is seen in terms of communicative purposes, then *Fowler’s* dictionary now aims not only at

recommending correct usage, but also at informing and convincing. Moreover, since dictionary claims to take into account the data from language corpora, texts of entries are viewed as part of academic, not only prescriptive discourse. They become susceptible to the judgment of another group of readers—academic peers. Their opinion has become relevant and the texts of entries have been geared to their, if not ‘needs’, then requirements. As noted by Hyland, ‘...writing is a practice based on expectations. The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognise and expect’ (Hyland, 2008: 544). Then the changes involve not only a shift in the relationship between the authors and readers, but also another category of users: those not seeking advice, but assessing the texts critically.

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