

## The Use of Modality: A Stylistic Analysis of Karel Capek's *Grafitto*

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### Abstract

The article analyses various shades of modality and its role in extracting the literary and thematic concerns of the writer from the text. It focuses on the use of modality in Karel Capek's *Grafitto*, identifies the shades used in the text and shows that by using different verbs the characters express their attitude to various events and situations. The article shows that the study of modality not only helps the readers determine the style of the writing but also assists them to comprehend the meanings in the story meticulously and scientifically and why the writer uses certain shades of modality more frequently than others. To analyse the text, the researcher has used Paul Simpson's given types and shades of modality and shown that by using epistemic modality more often, the author has brought forth the existential uncertainties and ambivalence in the life of characters.

**Keywords:** stylistics, stylistic variation, modality, textual interpretation, human existence

### 1. Introduction:

Stylistics was formerly viewed only a method that emphasized the analysis of language only. Stylistics was the description and analysis of the variability of linguistic forms in actual language use. The concepts of 'style' and 'stylistic variation' in language rested on the general assumption that within the language system, the same content could be encoded in more than one linguistic form. Operating at all linguistic levels (e.g. lexicology, syntax, text linguistics, and intonation), stylisticians had analysed both the style of specific texts and stylistic variation across texts. These texts could be literary or non-literary in nature (Fish, 1970).

The present-day stylistics has become a rigorous tool that enriches theories related to not only discourse but also society and culture. Stylistics has developed into various branches such as deconstructive stylistic (Mishra, 2011), discourse stylistics, cognitive stylistics and feminist stylistics (Simpson, 2004). Generally, stylistics is considered as an "accepted method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language" (p. 2). Because language is so complex a phenomenon having various forms, levels and patterns that it needs profound attention to be explored. Karel Capek's *Cross Roads* brings together two early volumes of short stories: *Wayside Crosses* (1917) and *Painful Tales* (1921). These two books are thus an important milestone in Karel Capek's literary career, and the second came out at another critical turning point, just after the premiere of the play that would make the young Czech author internationally known. Some critics deem these metaphysical tales in *Wayside Crosses* to be among Capek's

best work; others see their value more as a starting point for some of the themes Capek continued to address: the nature of miracles and the absolute, of faith and reason, of truth and intuition, of illness and time (Comrada, 2002). In Capek's own words: "The motivations behind *Wayside Crosses* were the war and the expectation of a miracle, meaning that it would end favorably for us, and – based on a mistaken diagnosis – a supposedly fatal illness and thus, to a certain extent, a coming to terms with life and death" (p. 8).

It is difficult to make moral judgments about the characters in the stories – greedy, frustrated, and obsessed as they may be. The stories show how difficult it is for anyone to judge anyone fairly. Capek wrote of the book: "People act wrongly, cowardly, cruelly or weakly, in a word, painfully; and the whole point is that you cannot judge any of them; you can't throw stones at anyone, there is no one to blame" (p. 9). The pain we feel in reading these stories is offset by the compassion Capek encourages us to have for their characters, for each other. "Capek's world breaks up into dream and reality, shadow light. Nothing can escape the dialectical relativism of positive and negative, creation and destruction, joy and suffering" (Haman & Trensky, 1967, p. 177). The article explores how the study of various shades of modality helps the readers comprehend the thematic concerns of the writer.

## 2. Literature Review

For stylistic analysis, some other methods of identifying the text's meanings or interpretations are also implied. Halliday (1994) calls them functional principles: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. The first function expresses the experience of the speaker not only of the real world but also the conscious and inner world. The ideational function was later given the name of "representational function" (Graffi, 2001). The interpersonal function deals with the speaker's usage of communicative function whereas the textual function deals with the speaker's ability to organise various forms and messages into a text and logical patterns. These functions are also referred to as metafunctions. The study and implication of these metafunctions, according to Halliday (1994), can help the readers comprehend that how meanings are formed and made through language. Stylistics emphasises on the study of "language as a function of texts in context" (Simpson, 2004, p. 3).

The interpersonal function out of the three metafunctions focuses on the analysis of the usage of modality which has been used in the story quite extensively. The reasons behind the use of modality can be various: to ascertain the attitude of the character or characters of the story and the persona (Simpson, 1993) and to identify "the area of meaning that lies between yes and no--- the intermediate ground" (Halliday, 1994, p. 74), with the help of words such as perhaps and may be; modality can also be used to identify the degrees of certainty, probability and obligation.

Through modality, the reader comes to know about the speaker's attitude or opinion of any situation or about certain circumstances. The reader realises this when he identifies the way in which the character expresses his viewpoint in a sentence or sentences. Simpson (2004) regards modality as the "grammar of explicit comment" (p. 124). The utterances and texts generated and uttered by the speakers convey intended meanings and the social role of interactants play the vital role in delivering meanings. The analysis of interpersonal function, in many cases, permits the researcher to explore, according to Mishra (2011), "the inherent tensions, polysemy, un-decidability and open-endedness to a text" (p. 49).

Modality can also be understood by the categories such as deontic, epistemic and dynamic. Epistemic modality is "concerned with the speaker's attitude to the status of the

proposition” whereas “deontic and dynamic modalities are seen as directives concerned with enabling the subject of the sentence to act” (Palmer, 2003, p. 7). In deontic modality, the circumstances are usually external to the subject of the sentence while in dynamic, “the control is internal to the subject and ability comes from the subject” (p. 7). For instance:

He may be on his way. (*epistemic*)

You can stop them from fighting. (*deontic*)

You can work hard to achieve your goal. (*dynamic*)

The better comprehension of modality can help the reader understand literary prose in a better way. In a story, it captures feelings, senses, moods and thoughts. Modality, according to Simpson (2004) can be categorized into various shades: positive, negative and neutral. Deontic modality which is assertive and obligatory usually falls under the positive shading. Positive shading, Simpson (2004) says, “is a narrative modality where the narrator’s desires, duties, obligations and opinions of events are foregrounded” (p. 126).

Most of the verbs used by the character or characters denote his thoughts and feelings. If the character uses perception and epistemic modalities, that gives off negative shading. The character is often uncertain, bewildered and alienated. This uncertainty is because of his reliance on the external appearances. He finds himself unable to give clarity to events. Neutral shading is the absence of modality that shows a detached and uncommitted modality. Here the narrator does not express his feelings and perceptions. He holds back his personal judgment. He does not intrude into events. In neutral shading physical description is given more importance as compared to psychological reality. Though “neutrally shaded modality” (p. 127) is found less in fiction.

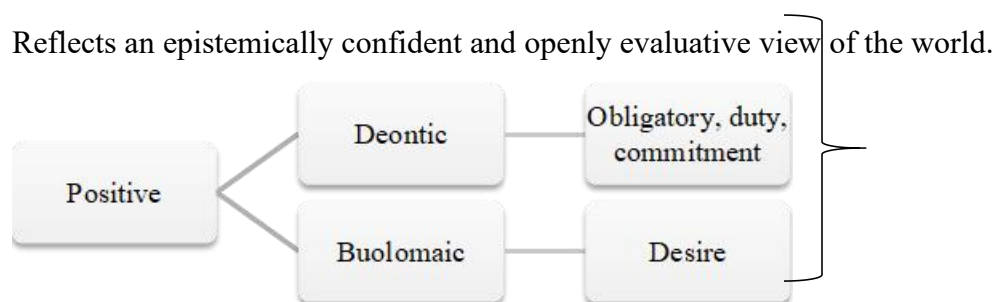
## 2.1 Research Questions

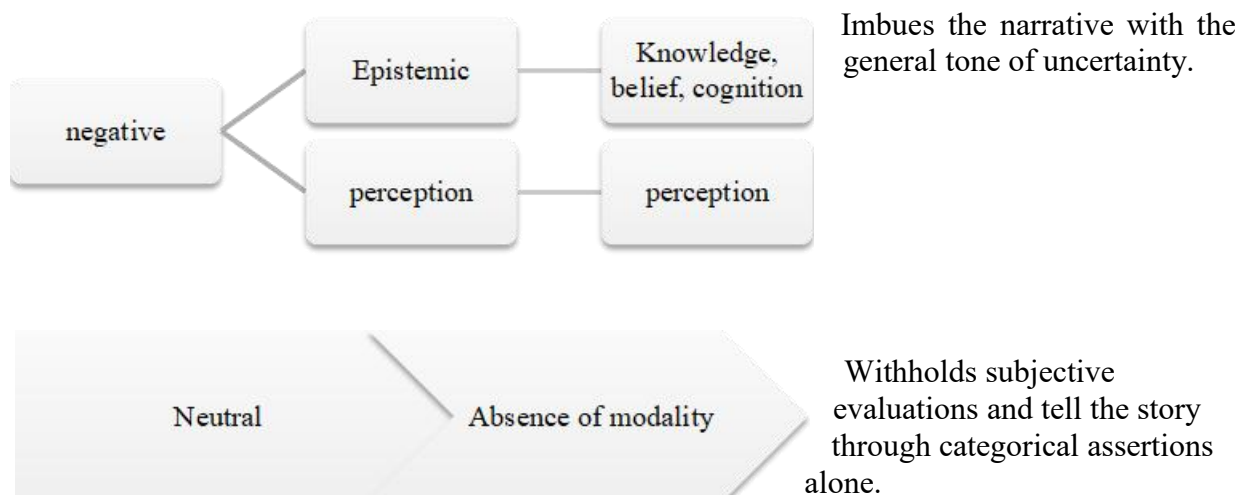
In this article, the following research questions have been taken into consideration while analysing modality in Capek’s *Grafitto*:

- What commonly used modality is identified in the story.
- What is the attitude of the characters toward the events and situations when they use various verbs?
- Which shades of modality have frequently been used by the narrator and what is their purpose?

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Various studies are present regarding modality and its functions. In this article, Simpson’s modal framework has been used because it focuses not only on different types of modality but also on how these “modalities determine the essence of a story’s style and that provides the story with its particular feel and color” (Iwamoto, 2007). In the following figure given by Simpson (1993), types of modality and shade can be summarized.





Deontic modality is related to the system of duty and it represents the speaker's attitude toward obligation that is associated with the performance of specific actions. Here the auxiliaries show a continuum of commitment: obligation, permission and requirement.

*The work should be finished before dinner time.*

*You may have your meal.*

*You must complete your assignment.*

Boulomaic modality is very much related to deontic but in it the speaker expresses his wishes, desires and hopes. Simpson (1993) is of the view that "modal lexical verb, indicating the wishes and desire of the speaker, are central in the boulomaic system" (p. 44).

*She wishes for a bright future.*

*He hopes that he will get a raise in salary.*

Epistemic modality represents either the speaker's confidence or lack of it in any proposition and it can help in analyzing the point of view in the story.

*I presume that you are wrong.*

*I am certain that you are wrong.*

According to Simpson (1993), "there is also a group of epistemic modal adverbs which includes, but is not restricted to, the following: arguably, perhaps, possibly, probably, certainly, supposedly, allegedly" (Simpson, 1993, p. 45).

Perception modality--- a sub-category of epistemic modality, is based on human perception and that usually relies upon visual perception but it can be understood only when the reader looks at it in the context of the story.

*It is categorical that you are wrong.*

#### 4. Analysis

The omniscient (external) narrator begins the story to present the condition Kvicala is in. Kvicala feels himself happy. Deontic modality is at work as his feelings have been brought forth and he thinks that poor ailing Matys will be happy upon his arrival. He feels that it is his duty to be with Matys who is out of sort. The first thing that comes to his mind is that that Kvicala should meet him. "I'll drone on for a while by his bedside" (Capek, 2002, p. 43). The atmosphere inside the room is so grim and painful as it is conveyed through the jangling of bells that Kvicala

is alarmed and feels uncertain about it. Uncertainty in his attitude can easily be felt. Epistemic modality tells that the character is unable to be about the world around him. "It seemed to him that the sound was blindly" (p. 43). This atmosphere of uncertainty prevails in the whole paragraph. "Without knowing why" and "as if he were sleeping" (ibid) throw light on the behaviours of Kvicala and Matys respectively. The characters' inability to make sense of the whole event emphasizes on the paragraph's negative shading.

Matys is hopeful that he will get well soon as Kvicala's arrival gives him strength: In two weeks' time I'll be up and around" (ibid). That is boulomaic modality. Kvicala is ambivalent. He is uncertain whether he feels sorry for the sick man or disgusted. The odour of various things such as 'urine' and 'eggs', and the heat in the room oppress him but when he looks at 'unshaven chin' and 'bright eyes' of Matys, he is moved. He is upset that he has not brought anything for him but also "a vague feeling of disgust swept over him" (ibid). he also desires to escape from him.

Perception modality is based on the character's perception of the world around him. Kvicala perceives the situation which he is in and tries to avoid it, but he also talks of the obligations that Matys should fulfil. The use of imperative tells about Matys obligations: "At least open the window! Listen to what's happening outside! Transport at least a portion of yourself out there!" (p. 44).

At the very moment, Matys draws Kvicala's attention to a word "Return" written on the wall and asks who the possible writer of it can be. Their subsequent conversation is filled with epistemic modality as the speaker shows sometimes confidence and often lack of confidence. The basic questions are: who has written this and what possible meanings and interpretations can it have. The negative shading prevails upon the overall conversation. "Someone wrote it there" (ibid) set the mood of their conversation. Matys asks most of the questions and Kvicala struggles to answer though with uncertainty. The word 'Return' is present there for the last many years but neither of them knows the exact number of years. "I don't know. Five or ten, perhaps" (ibid). their conversation is rich in the "words of estrangement" (Fowler, 1996), and it reinforces the character's seeming uncertainty. The questions like who has written there and what it can possibly mean with no answers yet intensifies the atmosphere of vagueness, undecidability and ambiguity. What inspiration can be behind this writing is also beyond their comprehension:

"Return," Matys repeated. "Don't you have any idea what it might mean?"

"God knows, maybe some kind of resolution. To return something, for instance."

"Or to go back to something?"

"Possibly. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I'm wondering why it was written there."

"Perhaps someone had an idea or an inspiration and wrote down the word as a reminder, so as not to forget." (Capek, 2002, p. 45).

The above dialogues are replete with words like 'might', 'God knows', 'maybe', 'possibly', 'I'm wondering', 'perhaps', which tell that how epistemic system heightens the characters' struggle to grasp the situation. This gives the situation negative shading.

The story takes an interesting turn when Matys says that it is his handwriting and he is quite sure about it. This gives the story, for the moment, positive shading. This positive shading remains for a while. The very next moment, Matys expresses that he does not know when and why he has written the word and what it means? Though the past seems familiar to him, yet vagueness prevails around the word: "why it seemed so unbearably important to me" (ibid). He has been guessing, even in dreams, why and when he has written the word. He does not know

whether he has acted upon the proposition indicated in the word or not. The more he struggles to understand the past, the vaguer it gets. This also throws light on the fragility of human memory. The narrator, through depicting Matys's character, emphasises the point that there are less certainties about human life. Even the very meagre things like a written word on the wall put human beings in difficulty about its recognition and importance. How can other things written--- histories, chronicles, biographies and autobiographies---can be real or true? Matys' ambivalence puts a question mark to all that has been written. "The past is dizzying" (p. 46). All the things of the past seem unclear to him and his illusion about it being obvious is disillusioned. The half familiarity with the world by the character shows uncertainty related to it: "It is enormously unclear. . . . It seems as if I were standing at the edge of an only half-familiar world; . . . infinitely farther than I had supposed. I had no idea. ... It is a merciful fallacy that our pasts seem familiar to us" (p. 46).

After contemplating about many a uncertainty, Matys returns from epistemic modalities to boulomaic modality where he shows some hope that he will get back to his feet in two weeks. But, again he uses epistemic modality as he is not sure whether, after his recovery, he will remember the scrawled word on the wall or not. The question also arises if one can return to one's past or not. If returning has been possible, what will have happened? Do human beings have desire to go back to the past? Can anyone return to his/her beginnings or the returns to beginnings are actually the returns to endings? Is it possible to turn back or not? "Perhaps everyone feels this way at some point" (p. 47). This "perhaps" play very important role in every human being's life.

The uncertainty that prevails upon the whole story can also be felt in the mind of the readers. They are aware of the linearity of the time where one cannot put one's feet into the same water twice. Kvicala feels that the world outside Matys' room has coolness and is moving "forward!" (ibid), but the reader does not know which notion hold authenticity. Do human beings really move forward? Has humanity progressed anyway? The relations between human beings, in the world of story as well as outside seem fragile, un-durable and selfish. Nobody can be in the shoes of the other to understand his or her miseries or anguish. The fragility in language reflects fragility in relationships. The brief moments onto the face of the earth does not allow humans even to comprehend their own life or self in a better way. "I should live it all over again, linger, pay attention-- even the worst moments. As though I could let them all slip through my fingers, still not knowing what they were" (p. 46). The use of the exclamatory sign after the word 'forward' shows incongruity on the part of Kvicala.

The reader along with the characters remains in ambiguity about the nature of things happening in the world of story. On the other hand, there is no penetration into the minds of the characters. One is unable to give them titles as villains or heroes; they are human beings with weaknesses, prejudices, cowardice and so on. They are full of self-doubt, and of dubious, often conflicting motives. They torment themselves; they yearn for meaning and resolution, love and understanding, in a world filled with disappointment, discord, banality, vulgarity, and misunderstanding. Often, they cannot or will not express their true feelings, creating a dichotomy between what is said or done and what was intended. Their limited emotional resources hinder their attempts to contend with a variety of troublesome situations and choices. They have mingled feeling for each other.

Kvicala, sometimes, feels disturbed and restless in the company of the ailing Matys and wants to escape from there, while, simultaneously, he feels pity for the sick man and considers it his duty to be with him, at least, for a short span of time. One of the themes in the story is of

searching, whether for a specific person or solution, or for truth and redemption. The searches are necessarily limited by the characters' all too human shortcomings and their varied perceptions of reality. The dilemmas these characters face are on a much more down-to-earth, everyday level. They too are searching, but for practical solutions, for ways of coping with the predicaments they find themselves in, or for escaping from an unbearable situation.

It means that epistemic modality is in abundance in the story. The knowledge and beliefs of the character about the world around are shaken through a scrawled word "return". This lends negative shading to a major part of the story. This story seems raising existential questions for the reader as the characters in it show their inability in knowing the world around them. They are in an existential dilemma of being stuck. The characters seem in existential crisis of being thrown and not knowing fully the world around them, but they do not feel much compassion for one another either. Though harmony among them can lessen their pain. These sorts of stories usually have negative shading as Simpson (2004) says, "Negative shading often characterises 'existentialist' or 'Gothic' styles of narrative fiction" (p.127).

## 5. Conclusion

If one delves even further into Capek's universe, one discovers yet another conflict and another reason for the dramatic quality of his work. It is the sense of doubt and ambiguity about the purpose of existence and the search for resistance to it, particularly in tradition. There are numerous instances in Capek's writings where descriptions of senseless flight, plummeting through nothingness, etc. are used to represent the anxiety of a man without certainty.

In Capek's work, there is a deeper, metaphysical struggle. A man who is suddenly thrust into this world and longs for a long-lost unity with the cosmos experiences existential loneliness and horror. Nearly all of Capek's works express these emotions; they first appear in *Wayside Crosses* and *Painful Tales* in the themes of aimlessness and cosmic stillness, and they recur tragically in *Grafitto*, *An Ordinary Life*, and *Meteor*. As a response to his horrified feelings of abandonment in the cosmos, Capek creates his myth of "home." The construction of one's home, its furniture, etc., are variants on this topic that appear in over half of the author's feuilletons. A home is a symbol of a person's adjustment to the outside world as well as of his security. "The basic experience of our age is the dynamic nature of the world. The absolute has vanished, we have learned that we are living, man has always been living unawares on a floating ground" (Kahler, 1957, p. 256). The language and words of the story aptly convey the thematic concerns of the author. The analysis of text with the help of the shades of modality enriches the interpretation of the story and eases the discovery of the thematic concerns of the writer.

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