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Pragmatic Features of Speech Acts Expressing Possibility and Impossibility in Arabic Modality

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Abstract: This study examines the pragmatic characteristics of speech acts that convey the meanings of possibility and impossibility within the framework of modality in Modern Standard Arabic. The research draws upon both linguistic theory and pragmatic analysis to identify how modal meanings are encoded and interpreted in various communicative contexts. The corpus for the study consists of authentic Arabic texts from literary, media, and conversational sources, allowing for a comparative analysis of modal markers across formal and informal registers. Special attention is given to the influence of cultural norms, politeness strategies, and speaker-hearer relationships on the choice and pragmatic function of modal expressions. The findings reveal that Arabic employs a range of syntactic, lexical, and prosodic devices to express degrees of possibility and impossibility, and that these are often shaped by context-sensitive pragmatic considerations rather than purely semantic constraints. This underscores the importance of integrating pragmatic analysis into the study of modality, particularly for understanding the communicative and interpersonal functions of modal expressions in Arabic. The results contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Arabic modality and provide useful insights for linguistic theory, translation studies, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Arabic modality, possibility, impossibility, speech acts, pragmatics, communicative context.

INTRODUCTION

Modality is a fundamental category in linguistics that reflects the speaker's attitude toward the proposition expressed in an utterance, encompassing notions such as possibility, necessity, obligation, and probability. Within the framework of modality, the concepts of *possibility* and *impossibility* occupy a special place, as they are directly linked to the pragmatic intentions of the speaker and the interpretation of the hearer. In the Arabic language, these meanings are conveyed through a rich system of grammatical, lexical, and prosodic devices, which are deeply rooted in the cultural and communicative traditions of Arabic-speaking communities.

The study of modality in Arabic has traditionally focused on semantic and syntactic aspects, such as the role of modal verbs, particles, and verbal moods. However, in real communicative interaction, the meaning of possibility or impossibility often goes beyond grammatical form and is shaped by pragmatic factors, including speech act type, discourse context, speaker-hearer relationship, and politeness strategies. For example, the same modal form can function as a polite request, a cautious suggestion, or an emphatic prohibition, depending on situational variables.

From a pragmatic perspective, speech acts expressing possibility and impossibility in Arabic can serve diverse communicative purposes—granting or denying permission, expressing ability or inability, forecasting potential outcomes, or emphasizing constraints. The choice of modal form is therefore influenced not only by linguistic rules but also by socio-cultural norms and the speaker's strategic use of language to achieve specific communicative goals.

Despite the importance of these factors, the pragmatic dimension of modality in Arabic, especially regarding possibility and impossibility, has received relatively limited scholarly attention compared to semantic or morphosyntactic analyses. This gap is particularly notable in the context of intercultural communication and translation studies, where understanding pragmatic nuance is essential for accurate meaning transfer.

The present study seeks to address this gap by conducting a pragmatic analysis of speech acts in Modern Standard Arabic that express the meanings of possibility and impossibility. Drawing on a corpus of authentic texts from literary, media, and conversational sources, the research investigates the formal markers, functional roles, and context-dependent interpretations of these modal expressions. By integrating insights from pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cross-cultural communication, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Arabic modality and its communicative functions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of modality in linguistics has a long-standing tradition, with early theoretical foundations laid by scholars such as Palmer (1986), Lyons (1977), and Bybee *et al*. (1994), who emphasized the central role of modality in

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expressing a speaker's stance toward the propositional content of an utterance. These works typically distinguish between epistemic modality, which relates to the degree of certainty or probability, and deontic modality, which expresses obligation, permission, or prohibition. Within these classifications, *possibility* and *impossibility* emerge as core modal meanings, relevant to both domains.

In the Arabic linguistic tradition, modality has been described from various angles, with notable contributions focusing on the morphosyntactic properties of modal expressions. Holes (2004) and Badawi, Carter, and Gully (2016) provide comprehensive accounts of modal markers in Arabic, particularly the role of particles such as *qad*, *yumkin*, and *lā yumkin*, as well as the subjunctive and jussive moods. Research by Ryding (2005) and Alhawary (2011) has documented the grammatical mechanisms through which possibility and impossibility are encoded, highlighting the interaction between verb morphology and modal meaning.

While these grammatical descriptions have been essential, many scholars acknowledge the importance of discourse and pragmatic factors in determining modal interpretation. Al-Saqqa (2010) and Al-Qadi (2014) argue that Arabic modal expressions often function beyond their literal meaning, adapting to the communicative intent of the speaker and the cultural context of the conversation. For instance, *yumkin* ("it is possible") may be employed as a strategy for indirect refusal or polite hedging, while *lā yumkin* ("it is not possible") can serve as an emphatic denial or a mitigated prohibition depending on prosody and situational framing.

Cross-linguistic studies, such as those by Coates (1983) and Nuyts (2001), have shown that the pragmatic interpretation of modal expressions is highly language-specific, influenced by cultural norms, politeness conventions, and genre. In the case of Arabic, these aspects are particularly significant due to the language's diglossic nature and the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic with numerous regional dialects. El-Yasin and Mahadin (1996) note that dialectal variation introduces additional pragmatic layers to modal usage, as some expressions of possibility and impossibility in colloquial Arabic carry sociolinguistic connotations absent in the standard form.

Despite the recognition of pragmatics in modality studies, there remains a notable gap in systematic research that focuses specifically on the pragmatic functions of Arabic modal expressions conveying possibility and impossibility. Existing works often mention pragmatic factors in passing but do not provide in-depth, corpus-based analysis of how these meanings are negotiated in actual discourse. This gap is especially relevant in translation studies and intercultural communication, where failure to account for pragmatic nuances can lead to misinterpretation or loss of intended meaning.

Recent developments in speech act theory (Searle, 1969; Levinson, 1983) provide a useful framework for addressing this gap, as they link linguistic form with communicative intent and social interaction. Applying this perspective to Arabic modality allows for a more nuanced understanding of how speakers use expressions of possibility and impossibility to perform specific illocutionary acts—such as granting permission, issuing warnings, making predictions, or expressing limitations—in ways that align with cultural expectations and interactional norms.

Thus, the present study builds on prior grammatical and semantic analyses while prioritizing a pragmatic approach. By examining authentic data from literary, media, and conversational sources, it seeks to uncover the functional range of possibility and impossibility expressions in Arabic, the contextual variables that influence their interpretation, and the pragmatic strategies underlying their use. This approach aims to contribute both to the theoretical understanding of modality in Arabic and to its practical applications in teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was designed as a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical linguistic investigation, focusing on the pragmatic interpretation of Arabic modal expressions that convey the meanings of possibility and impossibility. The research was carried out between January 2024 and April 2025 and was based on a linguistic corpus compiled from three domains: literary sources, including modern novels, short stories, and plays; media discourse, comprising news articles, opinion pieces, interviews, and televised talk shows; and conversational data, drawn from transcribed dialogues in social media, radio programs, and natural face-to-face interactions. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of

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texts representing both Modern Standard Arabic and selected regional dialects such as Levantine, Egyptian, and Gulf Arabic, thereby capturing pragmatic variation. The inclusion criteria required the presence of explicit modal expressions related to possibility (يمكن، قد، عسى) or impossibility (لا يمكن، مستحيل، غير ممكن), as well as sufficient discourse context to allow for pragmatic interpretation. Texts lacking adequate contextual information or containing ambiguous modality markers were excluded from the analysis.

For data recording, a structured linguistic coding sheet was developed to capture the modal expression, its grammatical form, the immediate discourse context, the speech act type according to Searle's classification, the pragmatic function such as granting permission, expressing doubt, or issuing prohibition, and relevant contextual variables including setting, participant roles, and politeness strategies. The coding instrument was validated through expert review by three specialists in Arabic linguistics and pragmatics, and its reliability was confirmed through inter-coder agreement testing on a sample representing 20% of the data, yielding an agreement rate of 92%.

Texts were obtained from public literary archives, online news portals, official television channel transcripts, and recorded conversational material available in open-source linguistic corpora. Conversational data were collected with minimal researcher interference to preserve authenticity. All selected texts were read in their entirety to establish the communicative setting prior to identifying relevant modal expressions, and each identified instance was coded using the prepared linguistic sheet, with verification between researchers to ensure consistency.

As the study did not involve direct interaction with human participants but relied exclusively on publicly accessible language data, formal ethics committee approval was not required. Nonetheless, the research adhered to ethical principles of linguistic scholarship, including anonymization of conversational transcripts to remove personal identifiers and the use of only publicly available or consented materials. Intellectual property rights of authors and publishers were respected through accurate citation of all sources.

Analysis was conducted using a pragmatic discourse analysis approach, with qualitative examination of the corpus to determine the range of pragmatic functions associated with expressions of possibility and impossibility. Each occurrence was classified according to its illocutionary force, polarity, and politeness strategy, followed by a comparative analysis of usage patterns in Modern Standard Arabic and regional dialects. NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate coding and thematic categorization, enabling systematic retrieval of examples and organization by category. Quantitative counts of frequency and distribution were generated to supplement the qualitative observations and to identify the most recurrent pragmatic uses of each modal expression.

RESULTS

The analysis of the compiled corpus revealed a wide range of modal expressions used to convey the meanings of possibility and impossibility in both Modern Standard Arabic and selected regional dialects. Across the 1,250 identified instances, expressions of possibility accounted for approximately 62% of the data, while expressions of impossibility represented 38%. The most frequently occurring possibility markers were يمكن, قد, and عسى, whereas impossibility was most often expressed through لا يمكن, مستحيل, and غير ممكن. These forms not only differed in frequency but also demonstrated distinct pragmatic functions depending on the communicative setting, degree of formality, and relationship between interlocutors.

In literary sources, the use of يمكن and قد was dominant, often functioning in epistemic contexts to indicate likelihood, hypothetical scenarios, or potential outcomes within narrative structures. For example, in modern novels, يمكن would appear in dialogue as a marker of cautious prediction or as an indirect way of giving advice without imposing on the hearer. قد, in contrast, frequently conveyed a narrator's interpretive stance, introducing possibilities within descriptive or reflective passages. The pragmatic force in these contexts often went beyond the expression of objective probability, extending into rhetorical functions such as foreshadowing or subtle persuasion. Impossibility markers in literary works, especially مستحيل, were highly salient in emotionally charged exchanges between characters, serving as intensifiers to express absolute denial, moral rejection, or dramatic emphasis. This usage revealed the emotive weight carried by impossibility expressions in fictional discourse, where they often signal heightened interpersonal conflict or narrative turning points.

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In media discourse, the pragmatic functions of modal expressions were more closely tied to the conventions of journalistic style. قد was particularly prevalent in news reporting, where it served to mark cautious forecasts, unconfirmed developments, or speculation—especially in political, economic, and weather-related content. This reflects the journalistic need to present possibilities without asserting absolute certainty, thereby preserving credibility and avoiding premature conclusions. The expression لا يمكن was a common feature of editorials, political speeches, and official statements, where it was employed to reinforce institutional authority and assert categorical denials or prohibitions. This usage aligns with the persuasive and authoritative goals of such texts, projecting the speaker's or institution's stance as definitive and non-negotiable. In some cases, لا يمكن appeared in combination with justificatory clauses, linking the impossibility claim to legal, moral, or procedural constraints, which further anchored its pragmatic effect.

Conversational data exhibited the widest range of pragmatic variation, reflecting the flexibility of modal expressions in spontaneous interaction. In face-to-face dialogue, يمكن often functioned as a politeness strategy, softening directives, requests, or suggestions. For instance, speakers would use يمكن in proposing joint action, thereby framing the suggestion as a possibility rather than a direct imposition. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of negative politeness, as the speaker mitigates potential threat to the hearer's autonomy. In contrast, لا يمكن in informal conversation was often pragmatically weakened by prosody, facial expression, or co-occurring discourse markers, making it more negotiable than its formal counterpart. This allowed speakers to convey reluctance or conditional refusal while leaving space for further discussion. In Levantine dialects, مستحيل frequently functioned as an exclamatory device indicating astonishment or incredulity, detached from its literal meaning of impossibility. For example, مستحيل could be uttered in response to surprising news, similar to the English "No way!", illustrating a shift from semantic content to an affective pragmatic function.

From a speech act perspective, expressions of possibility were most commonly associated with directive acts such as suggestions, offers, and recommendations, as well as commissive acts including promises and conditional commitments. For example, يمكن أن أساعدك ("I might help you") serves not only as an expression of potential action but also as a mitigated offer, balancing willingness with non-obligation. On the other hand, expressions of impossibility were primarily linked to assertive acts (e.g., categorical denials, declarations of fact) and directive acts involving prohibition. Statements like لا يمكن أن نوافق على هذا ("We cannot agree to this") simultaneously convey factual impossibility and a directive refusal, reinforcing the speaker's control over the decision-making process.

Illocutionary force was often nuanced by co-occurring particles such as ربما and مع أن, which modulated the strength of the modal meaning. For example, the combination of قد with ربما introduced an additional layer of uncertainty, producing a highly tentative stance. Conversely, the pairing of لا يمكن with emphatic structures or repetition intensified its force, signaling non-negotiable impossibility.

Comparative analysis between Modern Standard Arabic and dialectal varieties revealed that while core semantic values of modal expressions remained consistent, pragmatic deployment varied considerably. Modern Standard Arabic tended to preserve more formal, contextually literal uses, particularly in institutional or media discourse, where clarity and authority were prioritized. Dialectal forms, however, exhibited greater idiomatic range and creative adaptation, with frequent use of figurative and hyperbolic functions. For example, in Gulf Arabic, ما يمكن and مستحيل often appeared in casual conversation as emphatic interjections, detached from their strict logical meaning, while in Egyptian Arabic, يمكن was frequently embedded in elliptical constructions to express tentative agreement or soft refusal.

Quantitative distribution patterns indicated that يمكن was overwhelmingly preferred when speakers sought to maintain interpersonal harmony, avoid direct imposition, or create space for negotiation, whereas لا يمكن and مستحيل were chosen in contexts requiring authority assertion, boundary-setting, or strong emotional emphasis. The prevalence of hyperbolic uses of impossibility markers in dialectal speech suggests that pragmatic enrichment through context is a defining feature of Arabic modality in everyday communication.

Overall, the findings confirm that the pragmatic interpretation of possibility and impossibility in

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Arabic is deeply context-dependent, shaped by grammatical form, situational setting, social relations, and cultural norms. The same modal expression can fulfill multiple communicative functions—from hedged suggestion to emphatic refusal—depending on how it is embedded in discourse and supported by prosodic, lexical, and contextual cues. These patterns underline the importance of integrating pragmatic analysis into the study of modality, as purely semantic accounts risk overlooking the communicative strategies that speakers employ to manage relationships, negotiate meaning, and align with social expectations.

Table 1: Pragmatic Functions and Distribution of Possibility and Impossibility Expressions in Arabic

Expression (Arabic)	Core Meaning	Common Contexts	Pragmatic Functions	Frequency in Corpus (%)
يمكن	Possibility / Potential	Literary, media, conversation	Polite suggestion, tentative agreement, cautious prediction, softening directives	28
قد	Possibility / Probability	Literary, media	Narrative foreshadowing, cautious speculation, rhetorical emphasis	22
عسى	Hope / Possibility	Literary, formal speech	Polite or hopeful request, optimistic projection	12
يمكن لا	Impossibility / Prohibition	Media, conversation	Authoritative refusal, categorical denial, setting boundaries	18
مستحيل	Absolute impossibility	Literary, conversation (dialect)	Strong denial, emotional emphasis, astonishment (figurative use in dialects)	14
ممكن غير	Impossibility / Impracticality	Media, formal writing	Technical or procedural impossibility, formal denial	6

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive view of how expressions of possibility and impossibility function pragmatically in Modern Standard Arabic and selected regional dialects. The corpus analysis revealed not only the frequency distribution of key expressions—يمكن, قد, عسى for possibility and لا يمكن, مستحيل, غير ممكن for impossibility—but also the diverse communicative roles these forms perform depending on discourse type, social setting, and speaker-hearer relationships.

One of the most significant outcomes is the confirmation that the semantic core of these modal expressions remains relatively stable across genres and varieties, but their pragmatic functions are highly context-sensitive. This aligns with Nuyts (2001) and Palmer (2001), who emphasize that modality, particularly in natural discourse, must be examined as an interaction between semantic content and situational factors. In Arabic, the pragmatic variability is amplified by the diglossic situation, where Modern Standard Arabic and dialects coexist and interact, leading to overlapping but distinct patterns of usage.

In literary texts, possibility markers such as يمكن and قد demonstrated a strong epistemic orientation, often serving as narrative devices for foreshadowing, indirect persuasion, or subtle characterization. These uses correspond to Coates' (1983) observation that modality in fiction often serves more to shape the reader's expectations than to convey factual information. Impossibility markers, especially مستحيل, were prominent in emotionally intense dialogue, where they functioned as expressive acts to heighten tension and emphasize categorical rejection.

Media discourse exhibited a more restrained and formal pattern of usage, consistent with institutional norms of credibility and authority. The prevalence of قد for cautious forecasts and لا يمكن for official denials supports earlier findings by Al-Qadi (2014) and Ryding (2005) that media Arabic favors forms that balance informativeness with politeness and institutional ethos. In this domain, the choice of modal expression appears to be strategically motivated to project reliability and avoid overcommitment, especially in political or sensitive topics.

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Conversational data, in contrast, displayed the highest functional diversity. The frequent use of يمكن to soften requests, mitigate suggestions, and maintain interpersonal harmony illustrates the application of Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies in Arabic. The pragmatic weakening of لا يمكن in informal interaction—through prosody, facial expressions, or accompanying hedges—reflects an interactional preference for negotiability rather than confrontation. Dialectal uses, such as the Levantine figurative مستحيل to express astonishment, demonstrate the extent to which modal expressions can undergo pragmatic bleaching, shifting from their original propositional meaning to serve as affective discourse markers.

From a speech act perspective, the study confirms that possibility markers are predominantly associated with directive and commissive acts, while impossibility markers are more frequent in assertive and prohibitive directives. This distribution supports Searle's (1969) claim that modality often encodes illocutionary force indirectly, allowing speakers to manage social relationships while pursuing communicative goals. The co-occurrence of modal expressions with particles like ربما or مع أن further nuanced the illocutionary force, indicating that Arabic modality frequently relies on multi-layered structures for pragmatic effect.

A key implication of these findings is the need to incorporate pragmatic competence into the teaching of Arabic as a second or foreign language. While learners are often introduced to the grammatical forms of modality, they may lack awareness of the subtle functional differences in real discourse. Without this awareness, there is a risk of either underusing modal expressions in contexts where they serve important politeness functions or overusing them in ways that appear inappropriate or overly direct.

Another important consideration is the impact of sociocultural norms on modal interpretation. In many Arabic-speaking societies, direct refusal can be perceived as impolite or face-threatening, leading speakers to employ possibility markers as indirect negatives and impossibility markers in softened, negotiable forms. This cultural preference for indirectness in certain settings highlights the intersection of modality, pragmatics, and politeness theory in Arabic discourse.

The study's findings also open avenues for further research. While the present analysis was qualitative and corpus-based, future studies could benefit from incorporating experimental methods, such as discourse completion tasks or perception tests, to measure how native speakers interpret and evaluate different modal expressions in controlled contexts. Additionally, the integration of prosodic analysis could provide deeper insights into how intonation patterns interact with modal meaning, especially in dialectal speech.

The results demonstrate that the pragmatic deployment of possibility and impossibility in Arabic is a dynamic process shaped by grammatical resources, discourse conventions, and socio-cultural expectations. These expressions are multifunctional, capable of signaling epistemic stance, managing interpersonal relations, and structuring discourse. Understanding their full range of functions requires a holistic approach that considers not only their linguistic form but also their pragmatic and cultural embedding.

Study Limitations

Although this study offers a comprehensive account of the pragmatic functions of possibility and impossibility expressions in Arabic, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the corpus was limited to Modern Standard Arabic and three major regional dialects (Levantine, Egyptian, and Gulf), which means that findings may not fully capture the pragmatic nuances of other Arabic varieties, such as Maghrebi or Sudanese Arabic, where different modal markers and cultural norms may be prevalent. Second, the analysis relied primarily on textual and recorded data from publicly accessible sources, which, while authentic, did not allow for systematic control over contextual variables such as speaker age, gender, or socio-economic background; these factors may influence modal choice and interpretation. Third,

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prosodic features—intonation, stress, and rhythm—were not systematically analyzed, even though they play an important role in shaping pragmatic meaning, especially in distinguishing between literal and figurative uses. Fourth, the study adopted a qualitative corpus-based approach, which provides rich interpretive detail but does not allow for statistical generalization across the entire Arabic-speaking world. Finally, the research did not include perception-based methods such as surveys or interviews, which could offer additional insight into how native speakers interpret modal expressions in different social and cultural contexts. Addressing these limitations in future studies would help to broaden the empirical scope, enhance cross-dialectal comparability, and provide a more complete picture of the pragmatic behavior of Arabic modality.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that expressions of possibility and impossibility in Arabic, such as مستحيل, لا يمكن, عسى, قد, يمكن, and غير ممكن, perform a wide range of pragmatic functions that extend far beyond their core semantic meanings. The analysis of literary, media, and conversational data revealed that while the semantic values of these expressions remain relatively stable across Modern Standard Arabic and regional dialects, their communicative roles are highly dependent on discourse type, degree of formality, and socio-cultural context. In formal settings such as media discourse, possibility markers are often used for cautious prediction and qualified assertion, while impossibility markers serve as authoritative denials or prohibitions. In informal and dialectal contexts, the same expressions can function as politeness strategies, mitigate refusals, or even operate as exclamations of surprise with little connection to literal impossibility.

From a speech act perspective, possibility markers were most frequently linked to directives and commissives, while impossibility markers were dominant in assertives and prohibitive directives. These patterns confirm that modality in Arabic is deeply intertwined with politeness strategies, relational management, and rhetorical effect, supporting the view that pragmatic factors are essential for understanding its real communicative function.

The findings highlight the importance of teaching Arabic modality not only as a grammatical category but also as a pragmatic and cultural phenomenon. Awareness of these functions is crucial for accurate interpretation, effective communication, and nuanced translation, particularly in intercultural contexts. While the study provides a detailed description of usage patterns, it also points to the need for further research incorporating prosodic analysis, cross-dialectal comparison, and perception-based methods to gain a more complete understanding of how speakers deploy and interpret modal expressions of possibility and impossibility in diverse communicative environments.

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