

# Exploring the Impenetrability of Narrative: A Study of Linguistic Modality in Alice Munro's Early Fiction

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Article abstract

An undercurrent of obscurity flows throughout much of Alice Munro's fiction. In fact, recent Munro criticism has noted the author's increasing involvement with a poetics of uncertainty and a rhetoric of mistrust. Modality -- recognized as one of the most fruitful areas of intersection between linguistic and literary styles -- provides the basis for an examination of the stylistic approach taken in three of Munro's early stories: "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," "Royal Beatings," and "Half a Grapefruit." Close study of these early narratives considering both epistemic and deontic modality reveals that the epistemic commitment encoded in the stories is often weak, that Munro uses modality to encode gossip, and further, that often the boundaries between epistemic and deontic meaning are unclear, resulting in a pervasive narratorial ambiguity. Such stylistic analysis of the role of modality in these texts also leads to the discovery that knowledge is most often the theme of these narratives.

# EXPLORING THE IMPENETRABILITY OF NARRATIVE: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC MODALITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S EARLY FICTION

*Pilar Somacarrera*

As W.H. New observes, with writers such as Alice Munro, ostensible literary realism is merely a "surface illusion" (48). The fluid uncertainties of perception and understanding, which underlie the fixed apparent certainties of text, become an enigmatic sub-text. This undercurrent of obscurity, which flows through Munro's most recent short story collection *Open Secrets*, can already be traced back in her earliest fictions. As John Moss points out, the perceived realism which contributes towards the notoriously difficult tone of her prose invites analysis of content over that of form or style (8). In other words, her major themes attract critical inquiry far more than do her subtle genius with language and narrative technique. However, the present study will concentrate on the relatively unexplored realm of Munro's style. To this end, I will focus on the linguistic sources of the impenetrability of her narratives, which reside in the modalized statements conveying the narrator's attitude towards the reliability of the narrated events.

Modality has been recognized as one of the most fruitful areas of intersection between linguistic and literary studies. In this article<sup>1</sup> I would accordingly like to argue for a stylistic approach to linguistic modality in three early stories by Alice Munro: "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," "Royal Beatings" and "Half a Grape fruit." Linguistic modality seems a relevant issue in a writer like Munro because, as Katherine Mayberry points out, most of her narrators come to recognize the imperfection and inadequacy of their medium (531). Coral Ann Howells corroborates this view in her analysis of three stories from *The Progress of Love*, observing that in the shift from event to language, incalculable differences are introduced, because words do not coincide with

events (142). In most cases, this inadequacy is a function of the essential incongruence between experience itself and the narrative that would render it, an incongruence complicated by the necessary mediation of memory. This uneasy relationship between language and experience is a recurring concern of Munro's work, one that entices us to investigate the writer's linguistic encoding of this inadequacy.

Recent Munro criticism has correctly noted her increasing involvement with a poetics of uncertainty and a rhetoric of mistrust (Heble 96), offering insight on her use of language in relation to the issue of knowledge. Ajay Heble notices the "rhetoric of supposition" (98) deployed by Munro's narrators and sets out to "shift the focus away from the prevailing tendency to emphasize her realistic presentation of lives and events, and to attend, instead, to those shadings and absences which illustrate the impossibility of taking anything in life, or in fiction, for granted" (x). The shortcomings of Heble's study are, however, that he neither uses the appropriate stylistic terminology to define his impressions about the narratives, nor does he analyze them systematically. The methodological framework of literary stylistics, on the other hand, seems to offer the necessary systematic approach to the linguistic expressions of uncertainty in the stories. According to Carter, stylistics aims at providing a basis for fuller interpretation of literary texts by seeking to demonstrate how literary effects are achieved by linguistic means (93).

As Katie Wales points out, modality has come to be discussed in stylistics as a result of an increasing interest in discourse and interpersonal relations between narrator and reader (303). Fictional narrators usually encode their point of view towards the story they are telling, or else deliberately avoid giving an assessment, an option which is also significant. The more qualified or evaluated the statements, the more a sense of the narrator's personality is conveyed and the greater the awareness revealed of an implied addressee. The presence of the narrator is particularly conspicuous in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," a narrative, described by Carrington as "a story of sadistic watching" (113), that concerns the love affairs (realized and unrealized) of two sisters, Et and Char. Narrative strategies are as crucial in the other stories we are analyzing: "Royal Beatings" and "Half a Grapefruit" present an account of a female character's (Rose) childhood experiences, characterized by a triple split between the two voices of the protagonist (young and mature), and that of the nar-

rator. The story, despite its third-person narrator, does not offer an omniscient account of events but is primarily filtered through Rose's perspective, as the study of modality will reveal. These stories already present what Howells has seen as a characteristic of Munro's later work: her approximation to Virginia Woolf's abnegation of authorial omniscience in such novels as *Jacob's Room* (151).

From the linguistic point of view, modality has been recognized as a major exponent of the *interpersonal* function of language. This term, borrowed from systemic-functional linguistics, is concerned, according to Halliday, with

the establishment of social relations and with the participation of the individual in all kinds of personal interaction. Language, in this function, mediates in all the various role relationships contracted by the individual, and this plays an important part in the development of his personality. (335)

Modal meaning is conveyed by a variety of grammatical devices, amongst which are included modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs, evaluative adjectives and adverbs, generic sentences and verbs of knowledge, prediction and evaluation. In this study, we will be describing two modal systems of English in the narratives: the epistemic system and the deontic system. Epistemic modality has to do with the speaker's assumptions or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed (Coates 112). In addition, I will occasionally refer to deontic modality, which Paul Simpson defines as the modal system of "obligation," as it is concerned with a speaker's attitude toward the desirability (or undesirability) of certain actions and events ("Modality" 67). Linguists have commented on the fuzziness of this apparently clearcut distinction between epistemic and deontic modality (Coates 16), which will be illustrated by some expressions from the stories.

We have already mentioned how certain verbs of knowledge encode modal meaning. These verbs are known in linguistics as *factive predicates* and have the effect of turning propositions into presuppositions. Lyons considers *know* the paradigm of the factive predicates, noting that if a speaker employs *know* rather than *believe*, he is making a stronger commitment (794). This verb recurs in the analyzed stories, signalling that the truth of embedded propositions is assumed:

Et differed from Arthur in knowing that something went on, even if she could not understand why; she differed from him in knowing there were those you could not trust. (SBT 13)<sup>2</sup>

In the above example *know* encodes a very firm accusation of adultery which is at odds with the indeterminacy of the indefinite pronouns *something* and *those*. Presuppositions become even more ingrained with the successive embedding of the factive predicator *know*:

"Ignoramuses," said Flo. At which Rose knew, and knew her father knew, that Flo had never heard of the planet Venus either. (RB 27)

From the point of view of their content, most of the propositions introduced by the factive predicator *know* are related to Rose's certainty about her father's thoughts: "She knew perfectly well, too, that he had another set of feelings about her. She knew he felt pride in her as well" (HG 62).

According to their degree of commitment, epistemic modal expressions can be classified into the following categories: expressions of epistemic certainty (strong commitment), epistemic probability (medium commitment) and epistemic possibility (weak commitment). At the most "certain" end of the continuum are categorical assertions, which express the strongest possible degree of speaker commitment (Lyons 763), and in that sense they are "epistemically non-modal." Epistemic expressions of certainty indicate a high level of speaker confidence, yet the truth of the proposition encoded in the utterance is qualified. Not many expressions suggesting epistemic certainty are to be found in the analyzed stories. Significantly, the one adverbial of epistemic certainty ("no doubt") that we could trace in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" qualifies a proposition about Char's affair with her lover Blaikie: "That was a look she would like to have described to Char. No doubt Char had seen it" (SBT 3). In relation to the stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, expressions of epistemic certainty are also rare, and when they are used, they assess Rose's inferences about her father's character, which are based on external appearances: "Her father must have got rid of them" (RB 2); "But he must have had a home-loving nature; he grew geraniums in old tobacco cans, on the thick cement windowsills" (HF 63). The past version of the modal indicates that the inferences are to be assigned to the adult protagonist rather than the child. Significant statements about

Rose's actions are also qualified as almost certain: "It was for him she brought the books, no doubt about it" (HG 60).

A close study of the texts reveals that most instances of modality in the stories encode weak epistemic commitment (possibility):

Perhaps what was in the bottle was not what it said. She was not even sure that it had been there last evening. . . . Perhaps it had been thrown out earlier and Char had taken something else, pills maybe. Perhaps it really was her heart. All that purging would have weakened anybody's heart. (SBT 23)

In this highly modalized passage we find the modal adverbs "perhaps" (three times) and "maybe," the adjective "sure" in a *be* . . . *that* construction, and the modal auxiliary verb "would." The adverb "really" stands in what Simpson calls a *non-harmonic* combination with "Perhaps," meaning that modal operators exhibiting conflicting degrees of commitment are combined (*Language* 153). Obviously, the narrator, or perhaps Et, for the narrative voice is looking over Et's shoulder, does not want to commit herself to the truth of the propositions for several possible reasons. It could be that Et really has doubts about the cause of her sister's death, or maybe that she is involved in that death and wants to protect herself. As Blodgett observes, we are to be left with an unsolved mystery (82). In fact, the epistemic modal adverbs conceal the real course of events since, as Perkins notes, *perhaps* and *maybe* appear to be neutral with regard to the subjective/objective distinction (90). Therefore, it is uncertain whether the utterances are based on real facts, or are just Et's impressions. Other expressions in the text also indicate this pervading uncertainty: "She could not tell if Char went paler" (SBT 1); "Et had no way of knowing how much of it was true" (SBT 2). These instances become even more abundant after Char's death: "She did not know what she wanted" (SBT 22); "Nor could Et ever know" (SBT 23); "Et in her natural confusion could not remember what it was" (SBT 23).

Non-harmonic modality is also used when the narrator tries to justify Et's evil intentions in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You": "She supposed she might have wanted to make trouble between him and Char—make Char pick a fight with him" (SBT 22). The nonharmonic combination of the modal lexical verb "suppose" implying possibility with the modal auxiliary "might," reducing the degree of commitment, provides another example of

the pervasive narratorial ambiguity of the story. Perhaps the most significant example of contradictory modality is the following instance of Et's thoughts: "But there was none gone, the bottle seemed full. What awful nonsense. Like something you read about, Agatha Christie" (SBT 13). The categorical assertion about the rat poison ("there was none gone") stands in stark contrast with the perception operator *seem* in "the bottle seemed full." The possibility emerges in Et's mind, that some of it might have been used by Char to poison Arthur or to try to kill herself again.

In "Royal Beatings," in answer to the question about how Rose started to get beaten by her father, we are offered an account where epistemic modal adverbs are also prominent:

Saturday, then. For some reason Flo is not going uptown, she has decided to stay home and scrub the kitchen floor. Perhaps this has put her in a bad mood. Perhaps she was in a bad mood anyway, due to people not paying their bills, or the stirring-up of feelings in spring. (RB 15)

In the above example the epistemic modal adverbs highlight Rose's alienation from her stepmother. Similarly, the narrator distances herself from Rose's behaviour, signalling her lack of omniscience through modality: "At the first, or maybe the second, crack of pain, she draws back" (RB 22); "Rose could have been the girl that lost the Kotex. That was probably a country girl" (HG 53).

Epistemic possibility is also encoded in modal lexical verbs: "And it seemed as if Becky and Robert had no interest in seeing justice done" (RB 12). The state of affairs in the subordinate clause is a direct perception of the speaker, supplemented by the comparator "as if." The perception modality evoked by modal lexical verbs such as *seem* and *appear* generates a quality of alienation, especially when reporting the actions of certain secondary characters: "Old man Tyde appeared to have recovered his strength" (RB 11). *Seem* designates Et as the interpreting source of the events in the following crucial passage of "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You":

Char and Blaikie seemed to her the same kind of animal — tall, light, powerful, with a dangerous luxuriance. They sat apart but shone out together. *Lovers*. (SBT 14)

The assumption that they are lovers is under the control of the verb "seem" and can, therefore, be considered Et's perception of the

scene. The highly elliptical expression "*Lovers*" allows for several interpretations. It could stand for "They were lovers," but "They looked like lovers" is an equally possible way to construe the contextually reduced utterance. The perception verb *seem* is sometimes combined with other verbs to hint at the difficulty that the penetrating consciousness (Et's? the narrator's?) experiences when trying to make sense of Blaikie's behaviour: "He had a gentle and laughing but ultimately serious, narrowing look . . . that made him seem to want to be a deep-sea diver diving down" (SBT 2-3).

Modal operators of epistemic possibility can sometimes be postponed, having important effects in the processing of meaning, as Simpson records:

Given the 'on-line' nature of the reading process, there is the natural tendency to interpret what precedes these epistemic markers as categorical assertions; in other words, as statements to which no doubt or uncertainty is attached. No sooner has this information been accessed, however, than it is immediately jeopardized by the postponing of epistemic weakeners. (*Language* 60)

Instances of postponed modal operators abound in the beating scene in "*Royal Beatings*," enhancing the sensation that what is happening is a farce:

At the first, or maybe the second, crack of pain, she draws back . . . Not an ounce of courage or of stoicism in her, it would seem . . . He throws Rose down. Or perhaps she throws herself down. (RB 22-23)

In fact, modality in the first stories of *Who Do You Think You Are?* is related to the pervasive theme of theatricality. The modalized narrative utterances emphasize the fuzzy distinction between reality and acting:

for it seems that Rose must play her part in this with the same grossness, the same exaggeration, that her father displays, playing his. She plays his victim with a self-indulgence that arouses, and maybe hopes to arouse, his final, sickened contempt. (RB 23)

The reader has to be constantly making decisions about whether Rose is pretending or not, and this sense of uncertainty is heightened by the device of postponing the modal lexical verb of per-



ception, which is itself modalized by the auxiliary "would": "Not an ounce of stoicism in her, it would seem" (RB 22-23). The fact that Rose's father also feels an obligation to play his role is foregrounded by the combination of deontic and epistemic modality in the following quotation from "Half a Grapefruit": "And he had to seem to be in sufficient agreement with Flo" (HG 62). Munro is intrigued, as she has indicated to Doug Freaque, by how people set up and play roles, invent their parts, make drama of their lives (6).

Munro also uses modality to encode gossip. As Patricia Meyer Spacks points out, gossip is relevant to considerations both of content and form in realistic fiction, particularly with respect to narrator-reader relationships (*Gossip* 7). When the narrator reports the town's opinion on any given issue or person, it is through the device of modal operators, which convey the narrator's doubts about the 'truth' of the proposition. To illustrate: "The reason that Becky was kept out of sight was now supposed to be her pregnancy and the father of the child was supposed to be her own father" (RB 9). In this example the gossipy tone is generated in the phrase "was now supposed to be" by the use of free indirect speech.<sup>3</sup> Gossip functions as a form of surveillance and ultimately locates the subject within a seemingly benign but ultimately coercive social matrix (Finch and Bowen 3). In "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" (the title of which itself is an allusion to gossip), the narrator's report is qualified as follows:

He [Blaikie] had married the lady ventriloquist. . . . The only thing people recalled for sure about her was that she could not have been under forty. A nineteen-year-old boy. It was because he had not been brought up like other boys, had been allowed the run of the hotel, taken to California, let mix with all sorts of people. The result was depravity, and could have been predicted. (SBT 11)

The combination of different types of modality heightens the oppressive atmosphere of a small town, where everyone must abide by a strict social code. The modal operators of epistemic certainty (the colloquialism, "for sure") and probability ("could not have been") indicate that people in Mock Hill project a sense of certainty about the lady ventriloquist's age. Modality therefore highlights the double perspective which Spacks recognizes as essential to gossip:

It is a paradox essential to gossip that those who engage in it

must in the process combine the roles of insider and outsider. Indeed, that combination generates one of gossip's more powerful appeals. The person who talks about others must belong to their world enough to know what is going on, but the gossip speaks, often, as one judging from the position of the outside observer. (*Gossip* 212)

About the reasons for Blaikie's erratic behaviour, the narrative voice elicits a categorical assertion ("It was because he had not been brought up like other boys . . ."), which implies a multiplicity of voices, all of which disapprove of Blaikie's upbringing. Again, Spacks's comments are relevant:

Gossip creates its own "inside," making a unity of talkers; it creates this unity by thrusting its subject firmly out, into the position of exemplum. Gossip interprets on the basis of unlocated but insistent authority. It often disguises its malice as moralizing; it generates the superiority of its speakers from their capacity to condemn what they see. (*Gossip* 212-213)

Gossip, in short, operates as a gauge of community authority. This "gauge" also measures and attempts to redirect Char's actions through deontic modality:

It was because she was a teacher's wife that she should have refrained from doing either of these things, but Arthur of course let her do anything she liked, even buying a cigarette holder so she could look like a lady in a magazine. (*SBT* 19)

On the one hand, the deontic modal operator ("should") indicates that her behaviour does not correspond to what is expected of her as a teacher's wife. On the other hand, the expression "of course" serves to show Arthur's permissiveness towards his wife's behaviour.

At the beginning of this article we referred to the basic indeterminacy of much modal meaning, especially concerning the epistemic-deontic distinction. The stories present several utterances where the boundary between epistemic and deontic meaning is unclear, a linguistic device which also contributes to making the pervading ambiguity of these narratives even more salient. The following passage from "Royal Beatings" contains an instance of ambiguous *ought* to, implying either weak obligation or/and weak inference:

Rose detects in her father some objections to Flo's rhetoric,

embarrassment and reluctance. She is wrong, and ought to know she is wrong, in thinking that she can count on this. The fact that she knows about it, and he knows she knows, will not make things any better. (RB 21)

The factive predicator "know" points to the fact that the narrator is committed to the truth of the proposition "she is wrong," as it had been previously expressed in the categorical assertion. The modal auxiliary verb "ought to," whether epistemic or deontic, weakens the presupposition triggered by the factive verb "know." In this passage, modality raises the question of the limits of knowledge, and logic, in predicting action.

After the stylistic examination of modality in the texts, knowledge crops up as the main theme of the stories, a fact which is not surprising if we recall that narrative has often been regarded as a kind of epistemology. On the lexical level the pervasive presence of the factive predicator *know* is particularly expressive of the significance of this issue. It can also be traced in the plots: "Royal Beatings" and "Half a Grapefruit" are about the precocious knowledge of a girl who is trying to establish her position in the world in relation to her father and stepmother. In "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," Et knows too much—in fact, "Nobody but Et knew it all" (SBT 19)—but the reader is left wondering about the reliability of the information transmitted by the narrator, who is complicitous with this character. As Howells puts it, for Munro there is always the irony of belief which coincides with the inability to know, though the absence of knowledge does not prevent belief (144). The inability to know is present at all levels: Rose the protagonist feels the impossibility of understanding her father's actions, in the same way that the narrator cannot figure out Rose's. Reality, as Rosalie Osmond observes, or even the simple truth about events in the past, is rather difficult to recover (82). We hope to have demonstrated that the linguistic study of modal expressions does shed some light on the complex narrative strategies of these stories. As a component of the interpersonal function of language, modality is responsible for the peculiar kind of interaction established between narrator and reader in these stories. The former expects the latter to take an active part in the disentangling of a narrative which, as Miller puts it, questions its own truths and

mocks its own telling (106). Several critics on Munro agree on the role that the narrator plays in generating this semantic indeterminacy. Howells reminds us that as soon as there is a teller, that teller creates meanings that cannot be controlled or determined (142). As Heble rightly points out, in "Royal Beatings" the narrator's attempt to tell a story is continually disrupted by a hermeneutics of suspicion, which requires us to question whether or not certain events are actually taking place (18). The linguistic constructions in which this uncertainty is couched are the modal expressions deployed by the split narrator. These voices always adopt an alienated and bewildered position towards the characters, alleging no privileged knowledge about their behaviour. In "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," since almost all the reflections can be readily attributed to Et (Carscallen 20), she can be considered the source of the modality in the text. In this story, modality is also responsible for the thriller-like quality which pervades the text. The modal system predominating in the stories is that of epistemic possibility, not without certain complexities which mirror the intrinsic ambiguities of the stories. The non-harmonic combination and postposition of modal operators ties in with the inscrutability we perceive at the content level, and the confusion between epistemic and deontic meaning is consistent with the omnipresent indeterminacy of the texts.

Finally, modality is an excellent grammatical index for encoding the theatricality which pervades most of the stories from *Who Do You Think You Are?* (in particular, "Royal Beatings"). According to Heble, on this same note, acting serves to undermine the distinction between what is genuine and what is merely an imitation (98). To sum up, the gossip motif, which is central to Munro's work, is also encoded through modality. Heble's remarks concerning the predominance of suppositional phrases (in our terms, modal operators) alert us to the fact that Flo's stories and Mock Hill's rumours evolve out of a local community of gossip (102). Ultimately, the stories have the uneven texture of gossip, in which no statement is ever completely reliable. Perhaps, as Spacks suggests, the urge to participate in gossip comes from our sense of the impossibility of knowing ("Borderlands" 812). Even after close analysis of the bi-partite structure of Munro's narratives, many issues still remain unclear: to what extent was Rose acting? Was Et involved in her sister's death? We have no

way of knowing for sure. Despite this, we have attempted to apply known methodological tools in order to systematically and rigorously explore these enigmatic and fascinating tales.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by a Government of Canada Award for the academic year 1994-95.

<sup>2</sup> All references to the stories are from the Penguin editions of the collections and are incorporated into the text of the article using the following abbreviations: *SBT* ("Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"), *RB* ("Royal Beatings"), *HT* ("Half a Grapefruit").

<sup>3</sup> Free indirect speech is a way of representing the characters' words in narrative which does not claim to be a reproduction of the original speech, but at the same time it is more than a mere rendering of the original (Leech and Short 325).

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