LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY IN SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*: A STUDY OF EPISTEMIC MODALITY

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the forms and values of epistemic modality in Glaspell's Trifles*. The story narrates a mysterious, dynamic atmosphere in thematic exploration of gender and power between male and female characters. This study employs Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework to examine the expressions of certainty and uncertainty shown in the dialogues of the characters. The findings reveal that the female characters use epistemic modality more dominantly (67.3%) than the male characters (32.7%). In terms of epistemic markers, the most dominant forms are positive modal verbs (32.7%) and positive mental clauses (30.2%). This denotes that the characters utilize more direct attempts to express probability. As for the values of epistemic modality, there is a balanced occurrence of low and median values at 40.1% each. This indicates the consistent use of uncertainty markers to invoke the ambiguity in this mysterious genre.*

Keywords: *certainty, uncertainty, epistemic modality, Trifles*

INTRODUCTION

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) is a one-act play in early American feminist drama that tells a story of the uncovering the truth in a murder case happened in a rural domestic setting. The male authorities dismiss the domestic domain as trivial while the female characters reveal the truth by paying attention to 'trifles' that the men overlook. This dramatic tension can be seen in the language of the characters that exposes the epistemic stance of each character. This language expression of certainty and uncertainty is frequently used in the context of fact-finding storytelling. Thus, examining how the markers and degrees of epistemic modality used in literary texts becomes significant, especially by using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework.

Modality can be categorized into epistemic and deontic modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Banks, 2019). The former deals with the speaker's judgment about the truth of a proposition, and the latter relates to necessity and obligation. In Glaspell's *Trifles*, the use of epistemic markers, such as modal verbs, adverbs, and other devices, by the characters can reveal their attitudes toward knowledge and belief. As a result, this can reveal the fundamental tensions in the story. Studying the epistemic modality in *Trifles* is necessary as it has its potential to enhance the understanding of the readers on how language functions in the context of a dramatic story. Radden and Dirven (2007) point out that this type of modality enables the speaker to evaluate the potential situation that is closely related to his inferences and knowledge. Furthermore, hypothetical situations engaging the readers in unpredictable outcomes can also be effectively presented by the epistemic modality (Hastuti, 2024). The

characters in the story express certainty and uncertainty not only to reflect their individual perspectives but also to emulate the broader attitudes in society toward gender and power. In certain literary works, for instance, the male characters typically exhibit a strong sense of certainty in their judgments towards something, dismissing the women's insights as irrelevant. In contrast, the female characters are often shown as having uncertain attitudes and opinions as they deal with their own beliefs about justice and morality. This difference creates a gap of epistemic expressions that are worth close examination.

On the role of modality in literature, particularly in relation to character development and thematic exploration, register and genre are considered important in understanding how language functions in different contexts, including drama (Biber & Conrad, 2019). They highlight how linguistic choices, such as modality, can shape character interactions and influence reader interpretation. Thus, it adds deeper necessity to conduct a study of epistemic modality in *Trifles*.

Several studies have been conducted on the issues on epistemic modality and on Glaspell's *Trifles*. On epistemic modality, Muhaimi, Sribagus, and Fadjri (2017) investigate the use of the epistemic modality by using the cognitive pragmatic approach. The result reveals that the items of epistemic modality are very dominant and that the narrative fiction is linguistically characterized by the established utterances on the basis of knowledge and reasoning. Hastuti (2024) discusses the value or degree of epistemic modality in Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and its Indonesian translation by using descriptive translation approach and comparative analysis. It is found that the low degree of modal markers dominate the English original story and the high degree markers are for the Indonesian translation. Besides, it is revealed that the most frequent English epistemic modality is in form of positive modal auxiliary (46.8%), while the most frequent Indonesian one is modal adverbs (27.7%).

Meanwhile, a study on *Trifles* was conducted focusing on how the play depicts that the investigation story not only shakes the strict bounds of convention but also divulges social justice precariousness particularly for women in the early twentieth-century in the United States (Köşker, 2020). Moreover, Prasasti and Nadhif's (2024) exploration of deixis in *Trifles* complements the study of epistemic modality by providing insights into how context strongly contributes to the use of language in making meaning as it refers to the characters' expressions of certainty and uncertainty. This deixis is employed in the characters' utterances in specific contexts, thereby influencing how their certainty or uncertainty is perceived by the readers. This study reveals that the most dominant type of deixis found in *Trifles* is person deixis.

To conclude, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis on the forms and values of the linguistic expressions of certainty and uncertainty in Glaspell's *Trifles*. By revealing the forms and values of epistemic modality by utilizing Halliday's SFL framework, the intricate relationship between language, thought and social dynamics can be uncovered. Moreover, the exploration of epistemic modality in "Trifles" can also contribute to the broader field of gender studies. As noted by Ben-Zvi (2005), Glaspell's work often reflects the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures on women's lives. By analyzing the epistemic markers employed by Glaspell's female characters, this research can illuminate how their expressions of uncertainty serve as a form of resistance against dominant narratives and societal expectations.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Forms of Epistemic Modality

According to Banks (2019), the most common way of encoding modality is by using modal auxiliaries. Furthermore, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) elaborates that probability, similar to the expressions of certainty and uncertainty, can be expressed in three ways, namely (a) by a finite modal operator in the verbal group such as *must, might,* and *may*; (b) by a modal adjunct such as *perhaps, maybe, certainly, probably,* and *possibly*; and (c) by both together, forming a prosody of modalization such as *might probably*, *may usually*, and *can certainly*. In a phrase or clause level, in addition to lexical modal form, epistemic modality can also be expressed (d) by a relational attributive clause such as *It is possible that* or *It is certain that*; and (e) by a cognitive mental clause such as *I'm sure* or *I'm certain*.

Values of Epistemic Modality

Modality is widely seen as a continuum in terms of degrees: high, median, and low (Forlain, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). High value of epistemic markers refers to a strong probability for the truth of the proposition while low value means uncertainty. Both high and low values are different from median values as how they behave with the negative proposition. The negative stance invokes a reversion where the high value in positive assumes a low value in negative, and vice versa. Epistemic markers in high value include modal operator *must* and modal adjunct *certainly.* Median value is expressed by the modal operator *will* and modal adjunct *probably*, while the low value is by *may* and *possibly*, respectively.

METHODOLOGY

By using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, this study applies a qualitative descriptive approach conducted to analyze the forms and values of epistemic modality in Glaspell's *Trifles* which are stated quantitatively. As it focuses on the expressions of certainty and uncertainty, it investigates the characters' dialogue to find out how these linguistic devices reveal the epistemic stances and contribute to the play's exploration of truth revelation. The primary data for this study is the full text of *Trifles*, particularly focusing on the dialogue between characters, specifically the male characters (the County Attorney, Sheriff, and Mr. Hale) and the female characters (Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters). The selection of this play is justified by its tightly structured one-act format, which allows for an intensive analysis of linguistic choices in a condensed dramatic narrative. Since epistemic modality plays a crucial role in fact-finding story, the interactions between characters become significant source for examining how certainty and uncertainty are expressed through language.

The analysis is conducted in two main phases: (1) identifying the forms of epistemic modality markers and (2) evaluating the values of epistemic modality. The first phase involves a systematic identification of epistemic modality markers within the text. This includes modal auxiliaries (e.g., *must, might, may*), modal adjuncts (e.g., *certainly, probably*), relational attributive clauses (e.g., *It is possible that*), and cognitive mental clauses (e.g., *I'm sure*). Each instance will be categorized according to Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) framework, which delineates the expressions of certainty and uncertainty. The second phase focuses on evaluating the identified markers based on their values—high, median, and low—following the

continuum described by Forlain (2013) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). High-value markers (e.g., *must, certainly*) will be contrasted with low-value markers (e.g., *may, possibly*) to explore how these expressions reflect the characters' attitudes toward knowledge and belief. This evaluation also considers the negative propositions and their implications for the characters' expressions of certainty and uncertainty.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings reveal that the expressions of certainty and uncertainty in Glaspell's *Trifles* occur 147 times throughout the one-act play. This occurrence reflects how the author uses epistemic modality in order to build the mysterious atmosphere in the story. Based on Table 1 below, it can be seen that the female characters play a major role in using the expressions compared to the male characters. The female characters use 67.3% of the expressions while the male characters have fewer percentage at 32.7%. It certainly shows how women in general often think more deeply toward a certain situation and give more doubts to a certain proposition.

Furthermore, the findings also show that the majority of epistemic modality used in Glaspell's *Trifles* is balance between median and low values, at 59 occurrences (40.1%) each. It may indicate how the story is built in a mysterious way that the characters show more uncertainty than certainty. The author wants to bring the reader to some kind of speculation that invokes deep thinking.

Table 1. *Trifles'* Characters Use of Epistemic Modality

Characters	Value			Total	%
	High	**Median**	**Low**		
Male	11	19	18	48	32.7%
Female	18	40	41	99	67.3%
Total	29	59	59	**147**	100%
%	19.8%	40.1%	40.1%	100%	

Besides revealing the value of epistemic modality used by the male and female characters above, another finding reveals the forms of epistemic modality as well as the value of the expressions based on its marker type. The following Table 2 provides a summary of the findings on the forms and values of epistemic modality in Glaspell's *Trifles*. A total of 147 occurrences are spread into different epistemic markers and values.

Table 2. Forms and Values of Epistemic Modality in Glaspell's *Trifles*

Marker	Value			Total	%
	High	**Median**	**Low**		
Modal verb - positive	12	21	15	48	32.7%
Modal verb - negative	0	5	1	6	4.1%

Modal adjective - positive	2	0	0	2	1.4%
Modal adjective - negative	0	0	2	2	1.4%
Modal adverb	0	10	0	10	6.9%
Other mood adjunct	3	0	5	8	5.5%
Modal verb + modal adverb	1	0	0	1	0.7%
Mental clause – positive	11	18	16	45	30.2%
Mental clause – negative	0	5	15	20	13.6%
Relational attributive clause	0	0	5	5	3.5%
Total	29	59	59	**147**	100%

Table 2 above reveals that there are seven markers of epistemic modality in Glaspell's Trifles, namely modal verb, modal adjective, modal adverb, other modal adjunct, the combination of modal verb and modal adverb, mental clause, and relational attributive clause. Modal verbs, modal adjectives, and mental clauses occur in two different environments, positive and negative. These environments contribute to the reverse of values between high and low of the markers. Overall, the most dominant type of epistemic marker is mental clause, of which the combination of its positive and negative forms is at 65 occurrences (43.8%). Modal verbs follow at closely at 54 occurrences (36.8%). Howener, when the positive and negative forms are separated, it turns out that the most dominant form of epistemic marker in *Trifles* is the positive modal verbs at 48 occurrences (32.7%). The positive mental clauses follow closely at 45 occurrences (30.2%). The least frequent types of markers of epistemic modality are the combination of a modal verb and a modal adverb with only one occurrence (0.7%).

Discussions

a. Forms of Epistemic Modality in Glaspell's Trifles

The most frequently used epistemic marker in the story is positive modal verbs. In the *Trifles*, the positive modal verbs are represented by *can, could, may, might, must, ought to, should, will,* and *would* as can be seen in the following data.

(1) Mrs. Hale: "I know how things *can* be—for women." (Para. 98)

(2) Mrs. Peters: "As if that *could* have anything to do with—with—wouldn't they laugh!" (Para. 136)

(3) Mrs. Peters: "They *may* be through sooner than we think…" (Para. 83)

(4) Mrs. Hale: "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they *might* be." (Para. 33)

(5) Mr. Hale: "I knew they *must* be up, it was past eight o'clock." (Para. 11)

(6) Mr. Hale: "I got a feeling that I *ought to* make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone, and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me." (Para. 22)

(7) County Attorney: "Somebody *should* have been left here yesterday." (Para. 6)

(8) Mrs. Hale: "How soon do you suppose they*'ll* be through, looking for the evidence?" (Para. 131)

(9) Mr. Hale: "I guess you *would* call it a laugh." (Para. 18)

Data (1) – (9) above show the use of positive modal verbs in the characters' utterances. In contrast to the positive form of modal verbs that occurs the most frequently, the negative modal verbs happen significantly less frequently, with only 6 occurrences, representing 4.1% of the total. The markers of negative modal verbs are *mustn't, shouldn't, won't,* and *wouldn't*. Another negative modal marker, *couldn't*, is combined with a modal adverb, *possibly*, to form a combination of modal operator and modal adjunct as shown in datum (14) below.

(10) Mrs. Peters: "Well, you *mustn't* reproach yourself, Mrs. Hale." (Para. 99)
(11) County Attorney: "I *shouldn't* say she had the homemaking instinct." (Para. 40)
(12) Mrs. Hale: "You *won't* feel them when you go out." (Para. 69)
(13) Mrs. Hale: "Maybe they would—maybe they *wouldn't*." (Para. 137)
(14) Mrs. Peters: "There *couldn't possibly* be any objection to it, could there?" (Para. 107)

Mental clauses in general are the most dominant marker of epistemic modality in *Trifles*, that contain positive (30.2%) and negative (13.6%) forms as the second and third most frequent markers. The positive mental clauses are indicated by epistemic markers *I believe, I declare, I guess, I hope, I know/knew, I suppose, I think/thought*, and *I wonder* as shown in following data (15) – (23).

(15) Mrs. Hale: "*I declare* I believe that's the only one." (Para. 52)
(16) Mrs. Hale: "I declare *I believe* that's the only one." (Para. 52)
(17) Mrs, Hale: "Well, *I guess* John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck." (Para. 63)
(18) Mrs. Hale: "*I hope* she had it a little more red-up up there." (Para. 67)
(19) Mr. Hale: "*I knew* they must be up, it was past eight o'clock." (Para. 11)
(20) County Attorney: "*I suppose* you were friends, too." (Para. 34)
(21) Mrs. Peters: "Why, *I think* that's a real nice idea, Mrs Hale." (Para. 107)
(22) Mrs. Peters: "*I wonder* what happened to it." (Para. 87)
(23) Mrs. Hale: "No, *I don't mean* anything." (Para. 43)
(24) Mrs. Hale: "Well, *I don't think* she did." (Para. 61)
(25) Mrs. Peters: "*We don't know* who killed the bird." (Para. 124)

Data (23), (24), and (25) above show that the negative mental clauses are *I don't mean, I don't think*, and *we don't know*. The negative and positive polarity in epistemic modality contributes significantly to the alteration of values between high and low. The last type of epistemic markers that contain positive and negative forms are modal adjectives that occur twice at 1.4% respectively.

(26) County Attorney: "To be *sure*." (Para. 32)
(27) Mr. Hale: "*I wasn't sure, I'm not sure* yet, but I opened the door –" (Para. 11)

Datum (26) illustrates the positive modal adjective *sure*, while datum (27) show the negative modal adjective *I wasn't/I'm not sure.* The other markers for epistemic modality found in Glaspell's *Trifles* are 10 occurrences (6.9%) of modal adverbs, 8 occurrences (5.5%) of other realizations of mood adjunct, and 5 occurrences (3.5%) of relational attributive clauses.

(28) Mrs. Hale: "*Maybe* because it's down in a hollow and you don't see the road." (Para. 98)
(29) Mr. Hale: "She had her apron in her hand and was *kind of*— pleating it." (Para. 12)

(30)   Mrs. Peters: "*Of course* it's no more than their duty." (Para. 49)

(31)   Mrs. Hale: "You know, *it seems* kind of sneaking.." (Para. 67)

Datum (28) refers to the use of modal adverb *maybe* to show epistemic stance of the utterance. Meanwhile, data (29) and (30) contain *kind of* and *of course* to indicate the other modal adjunct. Lastly, relational attributive clauses are represented by the marker *It seem/seems/seemed*.

b.   Values of Epistemic Modality in Glaspell's Trifles

As shown in Table 1 and 2 above, it can be seen that from the total of 147 occurrences of epistemic modality, the low and median values have similar number of occurrences at 59 times or 40.1% each. This shows that the level of uncertainty in the characters' utterances to show their judgment toward the case or conflict in the story is significant. This is normal in a mysterious story as it gives an unpredictable storyline to the readers.

The high value of epistemic markers in *Trifles* occurs 29 times or 19.8% of the total. It is dominated by the positive modal verbs (12 occurrences) and positive mental clauses (11 occurrences). The other occurrences happen in a small number of other realizations of mood adjunct with three occurrences, positive modal adjectives with two occurrences, and one occurrence as the combination of modal verb and modal adverb in negative polarity.

The positive modal verbs for high value of epistemic modality are *must* and *ought to* as shown in data (5), (6), and (14) above. For high value of positive mental clauses as shown in data (15), (16), (18), and (19), the markers are *I believe, I declare, I hope,* and *I know/knew.* Positive modal adjectives are expressed by the marker *I'm sure* or *To be sure* as in (26), while the other realizations of mood adjunct are expressed by *of course* as in (30). Lastly, the combination of modal verb and modal adverb that shows the high value of epistemic modality happens in negative form that is *couldn't possibly*, as in (14). Thus, it is concluded that the high value of epistemic markers do not include negative modal verbs, negative modal adjectives, modal adverbs, negative mental clauses, and relational attributive clauses.

For low and median values, the dominant markers for the expressions of uncertainty are slightly different although they both have similar total number of occurrences. The low values of epistemic markers are dominated by positive mental clauses with 16 occurrences, followed by similar number of occurrences in positive modal verbs and negative mental clauses, that is 15 occurrences each. As for the median values, the most dominant markers are positive modal verbs (21 occurrences), followed by positive mental clauses (18 occurrences), and modal adverbs (10 adverbs). The other common findings about these two values is that they are not available in forms of positive modal adjectives and the combination of both modal verbs and modal adverbs.

In *Trifles*, the markers for low value of epistemic modality consists of seven forms, except for positive modal adjectives, modal adverbs, and the combination of a modal verb and a modal adverb. The dominant positive mental clauses in low values are *I guess* and *I wonder* as shown in data (17) and (22), while the negative mental clauses are expressed by *We don't know* as in (25). The markers *can, could, may,* and *might* are used to express the low values of positive modal verbs as in (1) – (4). The relational attributive clauses and the other realizations of mood adjuncts happen five times each by using *It seems/seemed* as in (31) and *kind of* as in (29), respectively. Lastly, the least occurrence of low value marker is the negative modal verb *mustn't* as in Mrs. Peters's dialogue "Well, you *mustn't* reproach yourself, Mrs. Hale" (Para. 99).

The median values of epistemic markers in *Trifles* are expressed frequently by positive modal verbs such as *will*, *would*, and *should* as in data (7) – (9) and by its negative forms such as *shouldn't, won't*, and *wouldn't* as in (11) – (13). The markers for median values of mental clauses are indicated by *I suppose* and *I think* in data (20) and (21) for the positive forms, and by *I don't think* and *I don't mean* in data (23) and (24) for the negative ones. The last form of epistemic markers in median values is the modal adverb *maybe* as in datum (28).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions above, the analysis of the linguistics expressions of certainty and uncertainty in Glaspell's *Trifles* reveals significant insights into the distinctive roles of male and female characters in the story. From the total of 147 occurrences, the female characters utilize the epistemic expressions more frequently (67.3%) than their male counterparts (32.7%). This reveals that in narrative, women engage in deeper observation and show greater uncertainty toward the situations they encounter, especially in the genre of mysterious story.

The findings also reveal the main seven types of epistemic markers found in *Trifles*, namely modal verbs, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, other realization or mood adjuncts, the combination of a modal verb and a modal adverb, mental clauses, and relational attributive clauses. Out of the seven types, modal verbs, modal adjectives, and mental clauses are in forms of positive and negative polarity. Based on their occurrences, the positive modal verbs occur the most frequently at 32.7%, followed by the positive mental clauses at 30.2%. This domination of positive markers depicts the characters' attempts to navigate the uncertain realities directly. The limited use of negative markers, however, suggests the characters' reluctance to express outright denial.

Lastly, regarding the values of epistemic modality, the domination of a balanced occurrence of low and median values at 40.1% each contributes to the overall tone of ambiguity in mysterious narrative. The significantly outnumbered high-valued epistemic markers emphasize the focus of the story on doubt and uncertainty as it encourages speculation and critical thinking among readers. Thus, it can be concluded that Glaspell's use of epistemic modality in *Trifles* not only highlights the characters' ambiguity but also enhances the story's theme of mystery.

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