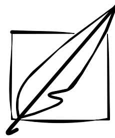

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The representation of modality in non-standard English

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ABSTRACT

Among the possibilities given to a speaker to express his/her subjectivity, there are often unexploited traces in utterances that may be of linguistic interest. The description of these marks shows that modality takes on various forms which are distinct from the usual phonological and syntactic types. Apart from double modal constructions which can be described as the result of epistemic modality in conjunction with root modality, this paper analyses the colloquial use of *ever*, *kind/sort of*, *like*, *happen* as they occur in informal speech. Such formulaic expressions are modal forms which signal an attitude toward a proposition and point to the concept of speaker involvement in utterances. These features, moreover, give the utterer's speech a personal touch and vary according to his/her own language use.

1. Introduction

The grammatical notion of modality, defined by Palmer (1986: 16) as the grammaticalization of speakers' attitudes and opinions, is often associated with so-called modal verbs like *can*, *must*, *will*, *may*, *should*, etc. (which represent well-known cases of grammaticalization). Biber et al. (2002: 458), for instance, think of modality as "the expression of logical meaning or personal meaning through the use of modal auxiliary verbs". Huddleston – Pullum (2002: 172-173) present modality as a category of meaning (as opposed to mood which is a category of grammar), but they illustrate it with examples containing modal auxiliaries. Indeed, these verbs mark the qualification in a proposition which indicates whether a statement is true, possible, necessary or contingent, but they also express concession, emphasis and degree. The proposition usually

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takes the form of a subject-predicate structure and modality designates the way in which the proposition is viewed by the speaker (Lapaire – Rotgé 1993: 291). In a sentence like *It may rain tomorrow*, the proposition <it – rain> is qualified by the modal verb *may* and can be reworded as follows: *it is likely to rain tomorrow*, expressing the probability of raining. The paraphrase (*is likely to*) brings out the contingent/epistemic reading of the modal verb and makes the attitude toward the truth of the proposition more explicit.

According to Culioli – Pécheux – Fuchs (1970), "any speech act presupposes an attitude to the relationship which contains the proposition". ("Tout acte d'énonciation suppose une attitude prise à l'égard de la relation qui contient la lexis".) This definition, which concurs with Huddleston – Pullum's statement that "modality is centrally concerned with the speaker's attitude towards the factuality or actualisation of the situation expressed by the rest of the clause" (2002: 173), points to the general concept of speaker involvement which exists in all utterances, especially those in interpersonal exchanges. In these, many surface markers other than modal auxiliaries can be analysed as revealing subjectivity.

Among the possibilities given to a speaker to express his or her subjectivity, there are often unexploited traces in utterances that may be of linguistic interest. The description of these linguistic marks may show that modality takes on various forms which are distinct from the usual phonological and syntactic types, particularly the form of the verb. Informal, non-standard speech is rife with what can be called set phrases or fixed formulae such as *like*, *you know*, *kind of*, etc. Not only do these fixed-form expressions punctuate people's speech, but they are also verbal markers denoting a speaker's personal comment on a proposition which are likely to refresh the addressee's attention (cf. *you know*, *you see*, *mind you*, …) and have a conative function which centers the message on him/her in the communication situation. Furthermore, these modal forms give the utterer's speech a personal touch and vary according to regional usage and his/her own language behavior in the same way as, for instance, an accent.

Apart from double modal constructions, which have been approached in the literature in many ways and can be described as the result of epistemic modality in conjunction with root modality (Brown 1991: 76-77; Abraham 1998; Denison 1998; Larroque 2005: 212-213; Brandstetter 2006; Larroque 2010), this paper analyses the colloquial use of *ever, kind/sort of, like,* and *happen* as they occur in examples mostly taken from Hughes – Trudgill's book *British Accents and Dialects* (1996) and Keith Richards's biography, *Life*, published in 2010. Other elements of the corpus come from informal instances. One

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example is an excerpt in dialectal English from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The selection of these features was based on the fact that they do not involve a verb phrase (*you know, you see*, …), and the notion that words can belong to more than one category according to the speaker's own language use.

I shall begin with a short survey of double modal constructions and briefly discuss some of their aspects.

2. Double modal constructions

Certain regional non-standard varieties in the southern states of America, the north of England (Tyneside, the Midlands), and Scotland allow some combinations of modals. Structures such as the following, which are considered mistakes in Standard English, are quite common, though limited, in non-standard dialects.

i. I **might could** be able to visit later on (North America, *Descriptive Grammar of Modern English*, 2009, p. 4)

ii. She **shouldn't ought** to be here (*Descriptive Grammar of Modern English*, 2009, p. 4)

iii. OK, erm, I've got I just thought I'**d might** just let you know that… (UK, taken from a conversation, spoken part of *BNC*)

iv. Erm, the next one we'**ll shall** go, erm go to market will do (UK, taken from a comment on Gauguin's paintings, spoken part of *BNC*).

In the introductory discussion, I said that double modal constructions arguably bring out the root and the epistemic readings of a modal. In such combinations, both modals seem to operate syntactically and semantically in a restricted order. For instance, in the above sentences the first modal has an epistemic meaning: *it is possible/predictable/required that*… With *might* in (i) it is not surprising since this modal is essentially used in its conditional sense. *Should* as a single modal can be either an epistemic (*it should rain tomorrow*) or a root modal (*you should obey your mother*), depending on whether the relationship is interpersonal or not. As the first modal in the above combination (ii), *should* can be used epistemically since the proposition refers

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to the sphere of non-self. *Would* (*I'd* in iii) generally occurs in desactualized propositions expressing condition or wish (epistemic sense), thus indicating an attitude to the truth of the proposition as in the example. *Will* (*we'll*) can be epistemic with the sense of prediction as in (iv) and should not be restricted to being a simple marker of futurity.

The second modal has a root meaning and concerns the subject-predicate nexus. For instance, in (i) *could* refers to ability, and *ought* in (ii) and *shall* in (iv) can be interpreted as deontic markers. As for *might* in (iii), it seems to be used in a root sense spelling out possibility (cf. *it would be possible for me to let you know*). The paraphrase here shows that the modal verb applies to the sole subject-predicate structure and not to the entire proposition.

It is instructive to note that the epistemic modal comes first in the construction as it denotes the speaker's assessment of the propositional content. Thus, the modal applies to the whole proposition and therefore establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the utterance; that is another reason why the first modal is logically and iconically restricted to an epistemic sense and has an attitudinal function. The nature of the second modal is close to that of a lexical verb: it marks the relationship between the subject and the predicate (Larroque 2010: 130).

Yet, modality, as we have seen, does not necessarily imply the form of the verb or the use of modal auxiliaries. Other surface markers may signal the speaker's subjectivity: let us first consider the case of the adverb *ever*.

3. The function of *ever*

Ever is a time adverb roughly meaning 'at any time', 'always', 'at all times'. It is used for frequency or temporal location as it scans over (a period of) time. It can also be used as an intensifier to emphasize a phrase expressing surprise or impatience. In the following examples, *ever* occurs in non-standard perfective constructions in which the auxiliary (*have*) is omitted[1].

(1) "**Well, the Finnegan family taught me the greatest apprenticeship that anyone could ever got**. I got a great apprenticeship off the Finnegans and unfortunately for them, luckily for me, because of my background in, in management, and being able to read blueprints, and estimates,

1 By 'perfective' we understand a construction which indicates the completion of an action or state denoted by the verb.

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I became the superintendent. So I was their boss after six months." (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 108)

(2) Mouse gets his nickname because he is small and weedy. In this extract, Mouse knows that the biggest, toughest boy in the school, Marv Hammerman, is looking for a fight with him. Mouse talks about it with his friend, Ezzie… "**You ever been hit**, before, Mouse? I mean hard?" Mouse sighed. (*BNC*, 1985-1994. An alternative assembly book. Hoy, Mike, Linda. Harlow: Longman Group UK, 1991)

The standard sentences corresponding to those in bold type in (1) and (2) are *Well, the Finnegan family taught me the greatest apprenticeship that anyone could ever have got* and *Have you ever been hit?.* In these sentences the locative operator *have* is deleted. In (1) it is the adverb *ever* that permits that interpretation, because *got* is ambiguous (past tense or perfect). In (2) the past participle *been* implies *have* and disambiguates the proposition. There are in non-standard English modals which are followed by a verb in the past (cf. *He ought to went to school,* W. Faulkner, *Soldier's Pay* 1930: 103). In that case the modal auxiliary is the only mark left by the speaker to indicate his subjectivity. In the above examples (1-2), *ever* signals the reviewing of all the situations endorsed by the speaker at the moment of coding. It therefore functions as a locative modality which relates the subject-predicate structure to the speaker. A sentence like *Have you ever heard anything?* may become by syntactic compression *You ever heard anything?* or *Ever heard anything?*. Sometimes the construction is reduced to a minimum: *You hear anything?*. The grammatical meaning of the latter will be defined with respect to the speech situation: the scanning (or reviewing) of several situations or a single reference. In the following example (3), the question applies to a specific situation which functions as the relative landmark:

(3) The truck driver said, "They was a big dance in Shawnee. I heard somebody got killed or somepin. You hear anything?" "No," said the waitress… (J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 1939: 5)

In examples (1) and (2) *ever* is the locative operator. According to the ease-of-effort principle, *have* – which has become redundant relative to the locative operation – is deleted. *Ever* remains since it represents the mark of a class-reviewing operation which consists in examining mentally a set of situations, and is precisely attitudinal. But *ever* is an adverb and as such

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can act as a surface marker expressing some relation with the speaker; it has been reanalysed or reinterpreted, as is the case with *kind/sort of.*

4. *He kind of liked that*

The phrase *kind/sort of* is cited by Hughes – Trudgill (1996: 96) as a colloquialism. This widespread usage consists in placing it between the subject and the predicate, and it is often regarded as natural or normal in everyday speech[2]. *Kind/sort* (*of*) usually occurs in instances in which a type of person or thing is expressed as in the following:

(4) a. What kind of person are you? (conversation, *Yahoo!Answers*)
b. …and he's the kind of guy that would do it. He's serious. ("Renaissance year in full swing for Blackley", *The Australian Baseball League*, July 29, 2012)
c. I don't like that kind of "joke". (conversation, *Yahoo!Answers*)
d. "So there's a lot of, er depressed and unhappy and very poor people there as well, so you've got erm… it's a kind of reflection of the nation." (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 50)
e. The five-string took me to the tribesmen of West Africa. They had a very similar instrument, **sort of a five-string, kind of like a banjo**, but they would use the same drone, a thing to set up other voices and drums over the top. (Keith Richards, *Life* 2010: 244)

In vernacular English, *kind of* functions somewhat differently from its common use:

(5) My apologies were very abject the following day. In the case of the old man, big Al, a great guy, I think at least he saw that I was willing to take a chance, and **he kind of liked that.** (Keith Richards, *Life* 2010: 429)
(6) Then jump in the car and drive. We had no idea where we went. **It was kind of like the drive** I did with John Lennon, we just went. (Keith Richards, *Life* 2010: 374)

[2] Natural or normal language corresponds to the linguistic behavior of ordinary people. An unnatural or abnormal use of language means that the utterance does not belong to an actual variety of the language (Andersson – Trudgill 1992: 28, see also Larroque 2008: 356).

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(7) “The shelf that’s in the airing cupboard won’t support the weight of any body, and from outside you can’t get your head up over the top. Well… no no, and it means that Pete’s got to s… **kind of get up and over**, well what’s worrying me is, you’ve got to turn the water off…” (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 80)

(8) “They go round well away shouting and everything and… and the boss and the manageress is standing watching them… **but they must be all right, kind of thing**, or otherwise they wouldn’t put up with it, would they, like… true, yeh…” (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 95)

(9) Let’s put on a straight chorus. In other words, let’s try and reach them people up there as well. **It was a dare, kind of**. (Keith Richards, *Life* 2010: 268)

In (5) and (6), *kind of* functions as an adverb which modifies the predicate. It can be construed as attitudinal, and it cushions the meaning of the predicate (approximation: *somewhat, rather*). In sentence (7), however, the modality does not exactly tone down[3] the meaning of *get up and over*, it, as it were, modifies it. The speaker, unsure of the exact word to describe the action, uses an attitudinal modality in order to tend toward the meaning of the predicate (cf. *nearly*). In examples (8) and (9) the adverbial modifiers, *kind of thing* and *kind of*, follow the subject-predicate relationship. The speaker points back to the assertion to make it weaker: in (8), *thing* is anaphoric to *they must be all right*, while in (9) the ellipted item is retrievable from the preceding sequence. Since this *a posteriori* modification is anaphoric, it follows that the referential element is given focal prominence (here, *they must be all right*). Thus, *kind of*, which has acquired an adverbial function, is actually a modal, for not only does it act as a quantifier (cf. *rather, somewhat, nearly*), but it also has a qualifying function (the attitudinal point of view).

The conversion from the noun (*a kind of*) to the modality may be explained by the fact that the word *kind* has a generic meaning. It refers to a species (cf. *mankind*) and therefore to a category, a unit-class from which syntactic constructions can be used to express grading. An item – a noun (*five-string, banjo, reflection*) or a predicate (*get up and over*) – can be selected in order to be modified, or toned down. There is much speaker involvement in this type of construction, which can be analysed as an attitudinal adjunct and a distance relative to the subject-predicate structure.

3 Quirk – Greenbaum (1973: 218) categorize *kind of* as a compromiser.

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Another grammatical form, *like*, which can be used as a preposition, a conjunction, an adjective or an adverb, and sometimes occurs with *kind of* (cf. *It was kind of like the drive*… in example 6, or …*kind of like a banjo* in sentence 4e), may also function as a post- modifier in cases of informal speech.

5. *Like*

It is not unusual in vernacular English for *like* to act as an adverb roughly meaning 'in a similar way'. The morpheme occurs twice in the following example:

(10) "Yeh, she's gone to America for three weeks, so we all go sad again next week… She comes over… I'll go polishing everything next week… **She's a good manager, like, isn't she?** But er… she's a real Annie Walker, you know everything's got to be so… she's… once you get to know her, she's great but you can't drink and you can't have a smoke… We're all walking round with four lighted cigarettes in our hand and having a drink off everyone that gives us one… yeh, we're in charge, yeh… well he's in charge of them all and I'm the monitor… I'm er… when he's not there I'm in charge… but er it's… I tell you what, if she left I wouldn't go there… cos, you know, I do really like working for her. She's straight… and she trusts you and **that's imp… that's the main thing, like, isn't it**, you know… she is… she's great… I don't think she's ever laughed till I went there…" (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 95)

In English *like* is a word that expresses comparison (cf. *liken*), similarity (cf. *likeness*), probability (cf. *likely*), grading (*to some extent, nearly*). It is also used when appearance or quality is interrogated as in *What does he look like?*. In vernacular English, *like* is regarded as a colloquialism, which means that it is a feature of informal, spoken language. It is also an attitudinal mark which punctuates oral speech, thus indicating the speaker's involvement in his production. In example (10), *like* follows the subject-predicate structure and fulfils several functions. The first occurrence is, so to speak, anaphoric and makes reference to identity (*she = a good manager*), which in turn is qualified (*like = to some extent*). *Like*, therefore, signals an *a posteriori* judgement on the subject-predicate structure (modal use). Then it can be said that in *she's a good manager* there is the implicit question: *what's she like?*, which aims to create an attitude. The context hedges on the speaker's judgement:

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"…but, er… she's a real Annie Walker, you know…",
"…she's great but you can't drink and you can't have a smoke…"

That is what the particle *like* signals in speech. The speaker mentions a fact or ventures an opinion, and then looks back to his statement to mitigate the force of it, as if he had a doubt or an afterthought which would justify reconsideration. It seems that the speaker distances himself from his utterance; hence, the modal reading of *like* which reflects an attitude to the propositional content.

This analysis is confirmed by the second occurrence of *like* in example (10), whose reconsideration of the subject-predicate relationship is also explicit in the context:

"…that' imp… that's the main thing, like, isn't it, you know…"

Like, in this case, directly relates the sentence to the speaker, who expresses an assessment of the proposition and reduces its force. Thus *like* is a verbal mark indicating the involvement of the speaker. It can, moreover, be analysed as an intensifier inasmuch as it points back to the predication, emphasizing it. Note also that both instances of *like* appear in sentences ending with a tag-question (*isn't it?*) which looks back to the subject-predicate relationship and may reverse the polarity of the statement, thus giving the addressee leeway as to the views of the speaker. *Like* represents, as it were, the first mitigating stage of an assertive proposition as it appears in (11).

(11) "I came back to the bed, like after breakfast… I was just like laying on it a bit and reading th… the paper, and…" (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 72)

In this sentence the proposition *I came back to the bed after breakfast* is punctuated, identified and commented upon. Again, there is the anaphoric value of the particle which picks up the proposition. Commenting or identifying an object presupposes that it has an antecedent. The second *like* occurs in *I was just like laying a bit on it,* and clearly shows the attitudinal and intensifying function of *like*. On the one hand, the proposition is to some extent "hedged", and *like* acts as an *as it were*, a judgement which emanates directly from the speaker (expression of modality). On the other hand, it points back to it. Thus in the sentence *I was just like laying a bit on it*, *like* expresses some kind of grading relative to the action *lay*, the subject intended to read his newspaper in bed and was not completely lying, and in the meantime it highlights the action.

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The modal use of *like* in non-standard English sentences naturally derives from its usual meanings. Indeed, comparison, similarity and attitude necessarily suppose looking back to a referent, hence the anaphoric value of *like* in the above contexts. This back-pointing operation permits a second quantifying/qualifying one, denoting the speaker's attitude to the propositional content. In addition, the sentences in which *like* occurs exhibit the speaker's expressiveness, a feature of informal, vernacular speech in which there is more speaker involvement.

In light of what has been said about the modal use of surface markers such as *like* or *kind of*, let us now turn to the case of the word *happen*, which is regularly used as an adverbial in Northern and/or dialectal English.

6. The conversion of *happen*

In modern Standard English *happen* is a regular verb used intransitively, in phrases (*happen to do something*), or in impersonal constructions. Some examples appear in (12a-e):

(12) a. …that, that's how it don't come out, what's happened to you? (conversation by 'Leon', 1985-1995, *BNC*)
b. I've got something humorous happened to me, one thing I'll never forget. (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 76)
c. "I'll tell you a s… a story about something that… that happened a couple of years ago, erm…" (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 51)
d. Well it so happens that I did intend you to do a paramount of talking this afternoon, so… (classroom interaction, recorded on 8 Feb. 1994, *BNC*)
e. …or did I have to fill a census form just at the time when Paul was with me? When he happened to be with me… (conversation by 'Brenda', Dec. 1991, *BNC*)

In these sentences *happen* has two meanings: on the one hand it bears the sense of *occur, take place without being planned* (12a-c), and on the other hand it may be used for saying that something is surprising or related to chance (12d-e).

It is a well-known characteristic of the English linguistic system to convert an item from one lexical or grammatical category to another without modifying its morphology. Take the word *work* from the abstract notion WORK, for example. It can be either a verb or a noun depending on

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its position in the sentence: it is a verb when it follows a noun or a pronoun (*Some people work hard to earn their living*) and a noun when it precedes or follows a verb or a preposition (*Work is not easy to find, I have a lot of work, Men at work*). Thus a morpho-syntactic analysis will be needed to draw a distinction between them. There may be some difficulty in identifying and understanding the message, but unclear cases are rare. Contexts will help to resolve all remaining ambiguities.

However, this grammatical flexibility has its limits and what happens with *work* (and many other words) cannot apply systematically. For example, Standard English does not allow the conversion of the verb *happen* into an adverb as is the case with *like,* which appears to be a multifunctional word. The category change will generally involve a morphological modification of the word or the addition of a suffix as in *happening* which can be a noun denoting an important or unusual event, or an adjective meaning lively and fashionable. In non-standard English, which is a more flexible variety than Standard English, liberties can be taken with the prescribed rules and *happen* can be used adverbially and describe a whole sentence as in (13) and (14):

(13) Happen it'll rain later on. (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2005)

(14) "Bud, Aw can look for norther horse nur man of a neeght loike this – as black as t' chimbley! und Heathcliff's noan t' chap to coom at maw whistle – **happen** he'll be less hard uh hearing wi' ye!" (Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 1847: 84)

Happen obviously derives from the verb *happen* which comes from Middle English *hap* meaning 'chance' or 'good fortune'. Moreover, *hap* is cited in the *Random House Webster's Dictionary* (2003) as synonymous with *happen,* as it is also an extended form of the verb *hap* (cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). In (13) and (14) it is a disjunct[4], i.e. an adverbial peripheral to the structure of the clause which expresses the speaker's evaluation of what is being said (Quirk – Greenbaum 1973: 126), that is, his attitude to the propositional content. In example (13) it applies to *it'll rain tomorrow* and in (14) *happen* modifies *he'll be less hard un hearing wi' ye!*. But it can also be used as an adjunct and be integrated in the structure of the clause as in the following:

4 The OED (2009) mentions an archaïc (dialectal) adverb *perhappen*, so in (13) and (14) *happen* may simply be analysed as an apheretic form of the adverb.

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(15) "I mean you couldn't sing with your teeth, he (the school teacher) said, like that, you know… You've got to open your mouth to sing… and he used to open his… and he'd about two teeth in the middle… sort of thing, you know, all of us kids, you know, looked and he seemed to have three or four, you, missing or more **happen** just two good… oh aye, he were a lad, I tell you…" (Hughes – Trudgill 1996: 91)

In this example uttered by a person from Bradford who relates his school years, *happen* has an adverbial function and applies to the phrase *just two good*. As the notion of adverb can be somewhat broad and vague, it may appear more appropriate to speak of modality to describe this particular use of *happen*, inasmuch as it signals an attitude to the utterance: it voices doubt about what is expressed, thus relating the utterance to the speaker. In English, doubt is usually expressed by *perhaps*. It is indeed easy to reword *happen* using that modal adverb:

> *…he seemed to have three or four, you know, missing or more perhaps just two good…*

Maybe can also occur instead of *perhaps* (there is indeed an archaïc adverb *mayhap* short for *it may hap*) as it makes the modal character of the proposition more explicit (cf. *may*). Note that in sentence (13), *happen* also means *perhaps*, the description of which shows a connection with *happen*, for it can be split up into *per* + *hap*(*s*), which takes us back to *hap*, the origin of *happen,* and semantically relates it to chance and by extension possibility, probability, and doubt. This may explain why *happen*, which usually occurs as a verb, both in non-standard and Standard English, can appear in the same adverbial position as *perhaps*.

7. Conclusion

The above analysis shows that the system of English is not affected by such semantic-pragmatic changes. English is capable of absorbing them. Other examples which illustrate this type of conversion include *you know*, *mind you*, *you see*, *why*, *I say*, …They help to keep the conversation going and define the roles of speaker and hearer. The description of *kind of* and *like* has revealed that they both have become attitudinal adverbs. As for *ever*, already an adverb, in non-standard speech it assumes the function of locative operator in the absence of the expected *have*, and as such it relates the subject-predicate

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structure to the subject and expresses an attitudinal relationship. It should not be forgotten that *ever* is used for emphasis – which is essentially attitudinal – when making comparisons. In example (1) *ever* occurs alongside a superlative structure (*the greatest apprenticeship*) which is the speaker's own doing, thus establishing a relationship between him/her and the utterance.

As we have said, none of these variations challenges the linguistic system. The phenomenon already exists in English with many words. What is at stake here is that the colloquial use of *ever*, *kind/sort of*, *like*, and *happen* seems to be motivated by the speaker's desire for expressiveness, that is, adding some significance to discourse, hence denoting his or her involvement. Semantic and grammatical changes are linked to subjectivity. These words tend to express an assessment of the propositional content, and as such can be analysed as types of modality. The modality either governs a noun or a verb phrase, or applies to the entire proposition, and shows an intention on the part of the speaker. Some of these attitudinal adverbs have undergone a category change, like *happen*, but also such expressions as *mind you* or *you know*. They have become set phrases, almost reflexes, speech formulae that fulfil an obvious linguistic function: redefining or reinforcing the speaker-hearer relationship.

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