

THE FUNCTIONS OF MODAL VERBS IN THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHAPTER 3 (KARMA-YOGA) OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA BY A. C. BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI PRABHUPADA

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Abstract. This article delves into the nuanced use of modal verbs in the English translation of Chapter 3 (*Karma-yoga*) of the *Bhagavad Gita*, as rendered by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Modal verbs, integral to the text's theological and philosophical essence, are analyzed through the frameworks of deontic and epistemic modality, as well as their role in expressing divine will and spiritual aspirations. The study explores how Prabhupada's linguistic choices serve to bridge the original Sanskrit meanings with English-speaking audiences' understanding, enabling a multifaceted interpretation of the scripture's teachings.

The research identifies a predominant use of deontic modality to articulate duties, ethical imperatives, and prescribed actions central to the philosophy of *Karma-yoga*. These modal verbs underscore the inevitability and significance of action in accordance with divine will and human responsibility. Epistemic modality, though less frequent, captures moments of spiritual inquiry and acknowledges the uncertainty inherent in human perception of divine plans. Additionally, modal expressions tied to divine will are found to reinforce the interconnectedness of human agency and spiritual destiny, a recurring theme in Prabhupada's translation.

The findings highlight the critical role of modality in shaping the interpretative landscape of religious discourse. Prabhupada's translation demonstrates how modal verbs function not only as grammatical tools but also as mechanisms for theological expression, balancing prescriptive teachings with aspirational guidance. The study concludes that the strategic use of modality in *Karma-yoga* enhances its accessibility and spiritual resonance, providing a pathway for deeper engagement with the text's universal principles.

This analysis contributes to the broader study of linguistic features in sacred texts, offering insights for scholars of translation studies, linguistics, and comparative religion. By examining the interplay between language and theology in this translation, the study underscores the transformative potential of modal verbs in rendering complex spiritual concepts comprehensible across cultural and linguistic divides.

Keywords: Modality, modal verbs, Bhagavad Gita, Karma-yoga, deontic modality, epistemic modality, Divine will.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Bhagavad Gita*, often referred to as the *Gita*, is one of the most important philosophical and spiritual texts in the world. It is a 700-verse Hindu scripture that is the part of the Indian epic

Mahabharata. The text takes the form of a dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his guide, Lord Krishna, who serves as his charioteer. Set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the *Gita* addresses profound ethical, philosophical, and spiritual dilemmas, with Krishna imparting divine wisdom on concepts such as duty (*dharma*), selflessness, and the paths to liberation (*moksha*).

The *Gita* is divided into 18 chapters, each focusing on different aspects of life, including action (*karma*), devotion (*bhakti*), and knowledge (*jnana*). Its core teachings emphasize living a life in accordance with one's spiritual and social duties, detachment from the fruits of action, and devotion to God as the ultimate path to freedom. Over the centuries, it has been interpreted and translated by numerous scholars, with each version offering new insights based on cultural, philosophical, and linguistic contexts.

Prabhupada's English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (published in the 1960s) is one of the most well-known versions. This translation is particularly notable for its clarity and for highlighting the importance of devotion and the practice of *Bhakti Yoga*. Through this translation, Prabhupada sought to make the ancient teachings accessible to the global audience, ensuring that the wisdom of the *Gita* would continue to inspire individuals to live purposeful and spiritually enriched lives.

The *Gita* is celebrated for its universal themes, making it relevant not only within the Hindu tradition but also in a broader philosophical and ethical context. Its teachings have influenced countless thinkers, spiritual leaders, and activists, from Mahatma Gandhi to Carl Jung, and continue to offer profound insights into the human experience and our relationship with the divine.

As one of the central texts in the study of Sanskrit literature, Indian philosophy, and religious studies, the *Bhagavad Gita* continues to be a subject of deep academic research, especially in translation studies, comparative theology, and linguistics. Its timeless wisdom remains a guiding light for those seeking answers to life's most fundamental questions.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology for this analysis involves a qualitative review of Swami Prabhupada's English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with a particular focus on *Chapter 3*, titled *Karma-yoga*. The research draws on the identification and categorization of modal verbs used in the text. A close reading of key verses where these modals appear provides insight into how they function within the discourse on duty and righteousness. Additionally, comparison with other translations and scholarly interpretations of the *Gita* helps in understanding the choices made in Prabhupada's translation, especially regarding the subtleties of modal usage.

Key steps of the research include:

1. Identifying modal verbs within Chapter 3.
2. Categorizing their use (e.g., expressing necessity, possibility, permission, or obligation).
3. Analyzing how these modals affect the reader's understanding of the philosophical concepts being discussed.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Modal verbs, as an area of study in linguistics, have been examined through various theoretical frameworks, each emphasizing different aspects of their function and meaning.

The cognitive view, as advocated by Ronald Langacker in *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (2008), conceptualizes modal verbs as tools for expressing speaker attitudes and perspectives. Langacker emphasizes the role of conceptualization and mental spaces, wherein modals operate to project possibilities, obligations, or necessities depending on the context. This approach highlights the dynamic interplay between speaker, hearer, and context in determining the modal's function: «Modality reflects the speaker's mental simulation of potential scenarios and their likelihood» (Langacker, 2008, p. 230).

M.A.K. Halliday's work on systemic functional linguistics (*An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 1994) posits that modal verbs are central to the interpersonal metafunction of language. Halliday identifies modals as instruments for enacting social roles, expressing politeness, and managing interactional meanings. They bridge the gap between speaker intention and listener interpretation, making them indispensable in persuasive or informative communication: «Modality is part of the interpersonal metafunction of language, expressing the speaker's judgment of probabilities and obligations» (Halliday, 1994, p. 88).

Geoffrey Leech's *Principles of Pragmatics* (1983) explores modals within the framework of pragmatic principles, particularly politeness. Modals like *might*, *could*, and *should* soften directives or requests, contributing to cooperative communication. Leech also underscores their role in mitigating face-threatening acts, aligning with Gricean maxims of communication (Leech, 1983).

Angelika Kratzer's *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives* (2012) provides a formalist interpretation of modality. She introduces the concepts of «modal base» and «ordering source», which define the contextual factors and priorities that determine a modal's interpretation. For instance, the modal *must* conveys epistemic necessity when grounded in evidence or deontic obligation in prescriptive contexts.

Norman Fairclough's work in *Language and Power* (2006) views modality as a discourse strategy. According to Fairclough, modal verbs reflect power relations and ideological stances. For example, the choice of *should* or *must* in institutional discourse signals authority, while *can* or *might* denotes inclusivity or tentative claims.

Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, in *The Translator as Communicator* (1997), explore how modals are rendered in translation. They argue that translating modal verbs requires sensitivity to cultural and linguistic norms, as modals often carry implicit meanings tied to social expectations. This is particularly relevant in religious texts where modals must balance literal accuracy with interpretative faithfulness: «Modal expressions in translation are crucial for maintaining the equivalence of interpersonal meaning between source and target texts» (Hatim & Mason, 1997, p. 78).

Modality is a crucial linguistic feature that enables speakers and writers to express necessity, possibility, obligation, and permission. Its role in religious texts is especially significant, as these texts often aim to guide behavior, convey spiritual truths, and establish moral frameworks. Modal verbs and related expressions serve as tools to articulate divine commands, ethical principles, and human limitations, making modality an essential aspect of their interpretation and translation.

Religious texts often employ modal verbs to convey a hierarchy of authority and a spectrum of spiritual possibilities. Modal expressions reflect not only grammatical structures but also theological concepts such as divine will, human agency, and moral imperatives. According to Baker, «modality in sacred texts bridges linguistic expression and theological intent, shaping how audiences perceive divine

authority and human responsibility» (Baker, 2018, p. 112). For instance, modals such as *shall*, *must*, and *may* are frequently used to assert divine commands or suggest pathways for spiritual growth.

Nuyts explores the relationship between epistemic modality and the theological certainty expressed in religious texts. He argues that epistemic modals (*might*, *could*) often appear in contexts of divine mystery or prophecy, balancing human doubt with spiritual conviction (Nuyts, 2016, p. 76–79). In contrast, deontic modality (*must*, *should*) frequently underscores moral obligations or divine commands, reinforcing the prescriptive nature of religious discourse.

Translating modality in religious texts poses a significant challenge for translators, particularly because the semantic range of modal verbs can differ substantially between languages. For example, while English may use *must* to convey an obligation, other languages may use different constructions or verbs to express a similar concept, which can alter the degree of imperative or urgency.

In translating seminal religious texts such as the *Bible* or *Quran*, modality plays a central role in how divine commands, laws, and promises are conveyed. Translators must be mindful of not only linguistic accuracy but also the theological implications of their choices. As Hatim and Mason explain, «the translator must navigate the delicate interplay between linguistic precision and theological fidelity, ensuring that modal expressions resonate with the target audience» (Hatim& Mason, 2017, p. 58). This requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, as well as the theological nuances that the modal verbs carry in their original context.

Moreover, some languages may lack direct equivalents for certain modals, creating ambiguity or necessitating a more interpretive approach. This is particularly true for languages that are less modal in their structure. For instance, some languages may rely on mood or aspect to express modality, which can lead to different interpretative strategies in translating religious imperatives.

Thus, translating modality is not merely a matter of linguistic transfer but also of maintaining the spiritual and doctrinal integrity of the text. Each translation must balance clarity for the reader with respect for the original theological message, ensuring that the fundamental principles of the religious discourse are preserved.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a key text in Hindu philosophy, offers profound insights into duty, righteousness, and the nature of the self. In its translation from Sanskrit into various languages, including English, special attention is given to the use of modality, especially through modal verbs. These verbs are essential for expressing the imperative tone and the nuances of moral obligations, divine commands, and spiritual possibilities inherent in the Gita's teachings. The translation by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada is particularly noteworthy in this regard, as he employs modal verbs in ways that preserve the original meaning and spiritual depth of the text while making it accessible to a global audience.

Chapter 3 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, titled *Karma-yoga* or «*The Yoga of Action*», explores the path of selfless action as a means to achieve liberation and spiritual enlightenment. This chapter plays a pivotal role in Krishna's discourse with Arjuna, addressing the complexities of action, duty, and detachment within the framework of spiritual discipline.

The chapter begins with Arjuna's confusion about the necessity of action when knowledge appears to be the higher path. In response, Krishna underscores the inevitability of action in human life, rooted in one's intrinsic nature and societal duties (*dharma*). Krishna emphasizes that even the enlightened cannot avoid action, as inaction would disrupt the cosmic order (*rita*) and set a poor example for others.

Instead, the goal is to act selflessly, performing one's duties without attachment to the fruits of labor—a concept known as *nishkama karma*.

A major theme of Chapter 3 is the synthesis of action (*karma*) and knowledge (*jnana*), portraying them as complementary rather than opposing paths. Krishna advocates for action performed with wisdom and devotion, aligning personal responsibilities with the divine will. He explains that such selfless actions purify the mind and lead to liberation, bridging the gap between worldly engagement and spiritual attainment.

The chapter also introduces the concept of the *yajna* (sacrifice) as a metaphor for duty and interconnectedness. Krishna describes how all beings are sustained by the cycles of nature, which are maintained through sacrifices to the divine. By acting in harmony with this order and dedicating actions to the divine, individuals contribute to the well-being of the world while advancing their spiritual goals.

In terms of practical advice, Krishna warns against hypocrisy, urging Arjuna to act according to his station as a warrior. He highlights the dangers of egotism and advocates humility, suggesting that individuals surrender their actions to the divine rather than seeking personal gain. This guidance reveals the ethical dimension of *Karma-yoga*, presenting it as a path not only to personal liberation but also to a harmonious and just society.

The chapter's universal appeal lies in its ability to integrate spiritual and practical concerns, making it relevant to both seekers of transcendental wisdom and those navigating everyday challenges. Through metaphors, allegories, and logical reasoning, Krishna conveys profound philosophical truths, inspiring readers to view action as a means of spiritual growth rather than mere worldly engagement.

The intricate philosophical and ethical discourse of Chapter 3, *Karma-yoga*, is expressed with the nuanced use of modal verbs in its English translation by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. These modal verbs function as critical linguistic tools, shaping the interpretative framework of Krishna's teachings. They convey obligations, possibilities, permissions, and predictions, reflecting the interplay of divine authority and human agency.

In translating such a profound text, modals like *must*, *should*, and *may* play a pivotal role, encapsulating Krishna's imperatives and suggestions to Arjuna. For example, deontic modals express moral duties and divine commands, while epistemic modals reflect uncertainty or possibilities within philosophical reasoning. The translator's choice of modal verbs not only carries theological implications but also bridges the cultural and linguistic gap between the original Sanskrit verses and the contemporary English-speaking audience.

The English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada was chosen for analysis due to its extensive commentary and emphasis on devotional interpretation. Prabhupada, combined literal translation with theological explanation, making the text accessible to a global audience. His work is recognized for faithfully representing the Gaudiya Vaishnava perspective, which highlights devotion (*bhakti*) and selfless action (*karma-yoga*) as central spiritual practices.

This translation is particularly relevant for linguistic and modal analysis because it reflects the dual goals of conveying the textual meaning and maintaining theological fidelity. Modal verbs in Prabhupada's translation often serve to emphasize divine command, spiritual obligation, and possibilities for liberation, encapsulating the philosophical depth of the original Sanskrit text while adapting it for a contemporary English-speaking audience.

The detailed analysis of modal verbs in Chapter 3 (*Karma-yoga*) of the *Bhagavad Gita* in A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's English translation reveals their diverse and purposeful application. The functional load of modal verbs makes it possible to classify them into several groups: *a) deontic modal verbs; b) epistemic modal verbs; c) modal expressions of Divine will and Spiritual aspirations.*

Deontic modal verbs express commands, obligations, and permissions. In *Bhagavad Gita*, these verbs underline Krishna's instructions to Arjuna, emphasizing moral and spiritual duties.

Verse 3.5. says: «Everyone is forced to act helplessly according to the qualities he has acquired from the modes of material nature; therefore, no one can refrain from doing something, not even for a moment». While the verb **must** is not directly used, the sense of **obligation** is strongly implied. The phrase «*forced to act helplessly*» communicates the inevitability of action, dictated by the *gunas* (modes of nature). This reflects an ineluctable necessity rather than a command, aligning with deontic modality when interpreted in a philosophical context. The obligation here is not external but arises from one's nature, implying universal participation in the cosmic order. Instead, the verb **can** expresses **inability** (a form of deontic impossibility), emphasizing the unceasing nature of action. This verse illustrates a fundamental principle of the *Bhagavad Gita*: action is inescapable due to the inherent qualities of material nature. The use of modal constructions like **cannot** reinforces the inevitability of engagement in the physical world, providing a philosophical basis for the Karma-yoga doctrine.

The use of **should** in the verse 3.19: «Therefore, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme» establishes a clear moral imperative, aligning with deontic modality. This emphasizes the prescriptive nature of Karma-yoga, urging individuals to act selflessly for spiritual progress.

Can emphasizes the impossibility of avoiding action, highlighting the inevitability of engaging in work, whether consciously chosen or not in the verse 3.5: «Everyone is forced to act helplessly to the qualities he has acquired from the models of material nature; no one can refrain from doing something, not even for a moment». It speaks to the fundamental nature of human existence in the material world.

While **must** is not explicitly stated in the verse 3.30: «Therefore, O Arjuna, surrendering all your works unto Me, with full knowledge of Me, without desires for profit, with no claims to proprietorship, and free from lethargy, fight», the command to «*surrendering all your works unto Me*» conveys a strong sense of obligation. This aligns with deontic modality, as the verse imposes a divine command rooted in duty and devotion.

Epistemic modal verbs express degrees of certainty, possibility, or logical inference. In the context of the *Bhagavad Gita*, they appear less frequently but are used to explore philosophical reasoning and divine insight.

The modal verb **has to** in the verse 3.9: «Work done as a sacrifice for Vishnu has to be performed; otherwise work causes bondage in this material world. Therefore, O son of Kunti, perform your prescribed duties for His satisfaction, and in that way, you will always remain free from bondage» indirectly expresses epistemic certainty by grounding the necessity of action in spiritual truths. Although primarily deontic, it carries epistemic undertones, asserting an inevitable consequence based on divine law.

Verse 3.22 says: «O son of Pṛthā, there is no work prescribed for Me within all the three planetary systems. Nor am I in want of anything, nor have I a need to obtain anything — and yet I am engaged in

prescribed duties». The phrase «*nor have I a need*» involves epistemic certainty, where Krishna speaks of His absolute self-sufficiency. This reflects an unshakable truth about divinity, reinforcing the Gita's theological assertion that divine actions are not bound by material necessity. This exemplifies *possibility and choice*, showing how divine beings can act without the constraints typical for human beings.

The modal verb *should not* in the first part of the verse 3. 26: «So as not to disturb the minds of ignorant men attached to the fruits of work, a learned person should not induce them to stop work» balances moral obligation with consideration of possible outcomes, acknowledging the sensitive nature of guiding others.

Modal expressions of Divine will and Spiritual aspirations highlight the use of modals to express divine imperatives and spiritual guidance. There is the implied modal *is better* in verse 3.35: «IT is better to discharge one's own duties imperfectly than to perform another's perfectly». It might be considered as a prescriptive statement illustrating the value of authenticity in spiritual practice. The comparison implies divine approval of individual dharma.

Implied modal verbs *will not, must not* are presented in the verse 3. 16: «My dear Arjuna, one who does not follow in human life the cycle of sacrifice established by the Vedas certainly leads a life full of sin, living only for the satisfaction of the senses, such a person lives in vain». The warning "*one who does not follow [...] certainly leads a life full of sin*» reflects the consequences of disobedience to divine principles. While explicit modals are absent, the inevitability of the consequences («*certainly*») suggests a prophetic tone, closely tied to divine will and moral responsibility.

The verse 3.21 with implied modal verb *will* «Whatever action a great man performs, common men follow. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues» indicates a universal principle of influence and action. The implied *will* denotes certainty and inevitability in human behavior, reinforcing the role of leaders and the divine responsibility they bear.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study of modal verbs in the English translation of Chapter 3 (*Karma-yoga*) of the *Bhagavad Gita* highlights the linguistic mechanisms that underpin the transmission of profound philosophical and theological ideas. Modal verbs play a pivotal role in shaping the interpretive framework of the text, contributing to its instructional, contemplative, and prescriptive dimensions.

The analysis demonstrates that deontic modality is central, reflecting the chapter's emphasis on duty, action, and moral obligation. These linguistic forms resonate with the philosophical core of *Karma-yoga*, which calls for selfless action as a spiritual practice. Modal expressions underscore the inevitability of action and the prescribed adherence to one's duties, aligning with the deterministic worldview of the text.

Epistemic modality, while less prominent, enriches the discourse by addressing uncertainties and possibilities, reflecting the balance between divine mystery and human understanding. This modality invites readers to engage with the text reflectively, acknowledging their limitations while pursuing spiritual growth.

The inclusion of modal expressions of divine will and spiritual aspirations bridges the gap between the literal translation and the contextual needs of the target audience. These expressions ensure that Prabhupada's translation retains the philosophical depth of the original Sanskrit text while making it accessible to a global readership.

This research underscores the translator's role in navigating linguistic, cultural, and theological complexities. Modal verbs, as linguistic tools, are not merely grammatical devices but essential elements of theological interpretation, ensuring that the text conveys its spiritual imperatives effectively.

In broader terms, this study contributes to the understanding of modality in religious discourse. It demonstrates how linguistic choices shape the delivery of sacred messages, reflecting the interplay between language, culture, and theology. This insight is crucial for scholars of translation studies, linguistics, and comparative religion, offering a foundation for further exploration of modality in other religious texts and translations.

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Наталія Комлик, Алла Болотнікова. Функції модальних дієслів в англійському перекладі розділу 3 («Карма-його») «Бхагават-Гіти» А.Ч. Бхактіведанти Свами Прабхупади. *Журнал Прикарпатського університету імені Василя Стефаника. Філологія*, 11 (2024), 27–35.

У статті розглянуто нюанси використання модальних дієслів в англійському перекладі третього розділу («Карма-йога») «Бхагавад-Гіти», виконаному А.Ч. Бхактіведантою Свами Прабхупадою. Модальні дієслова, невід'ємні від богословсько-філософської сутності тексту, проаналізовано крізь призму деонтичної та епістемічної модальності, а також їхньої ролі у вираженні божественної волі та духовних прагнень. У дослідженні спостережено, як лінгвістичний вибір Прабхупади слугує мостом між оригінальним санскритським значенням і розумінням англомовною аудиторією, уможливаючи багатогранну інтерпретацію вчення священного писання.

Дослідження виявило переважне використання деонтичної модальності для репрезентації обов'язків, етичних імперативів і приписаних дій, що є центральними для філософії карма-йоги. Ці модальні дієслова підкреслюють неминучість і важливість діяльності відповідно до божественної волі та людської відповідальності. Епістемічна модальність фіксує моменти духовного пошуку й визнає невизначеність, притаманну людському сприйняттю божественних планів. Крім того, модальні вирази, пов'язані з божественною волею, підкреслюють взаємозв'язок людської долі та духовної волі, що є наскрізною темою в перекладі А. Ч. Бхактіведанти Свами Прабхупади.

Результати дослідження підкреслюють важливу роль модальності у формуванні інтерпретаційного ландшафту релігійного дискурсу. Проаналізований переклад демонструє, як аналізовані одиниці функціують не лише в ролі граматичних інструментів, а й механізмів богословського вираження, балансуючи між директивним вченням та настановами, що спонукають до духовного пошуку. Автори висновкують про те, що стратегічне використання модальності в розділі «Карма-йога» вможливує краще сприйняття читачами божественної волі й забезпечує глибоке пізнання універсальних ідей аналізованого дискурсу.

Здійснений аналіз сприяє ширшому вивченню мовних особливостей сакральних текстів, пропонуючи ідеї для наукових пошуків перекладознавців, лінгвістів та релігієзнавців. Пропоноване дослідження підкреслює трансформаційний потенціал модальних дієслів у передачі складних духовних понять, які часто важкозрозумілі у контексті культурних і мовних розбіжностей.

Ключові слова: модальність, модальні дієслова, Бхагават-Гіта, карма-йога, деонтична модальність, епістемічна модальність, божественна воля.