Historically in language descriptions, the grammatical terms “modality” and “mood” have lacked truly definitive categories of meaning. For that reason, linguistic dictionaries have often treated them as synonyms, cross referencing their entries and in some cases, describing how different theories or authors have used the terms.

In this book, Palmer treats “modality” as a valid cross-language grammatical category that, along with tense and aspect, is notionally concerned with the event or situation that is reported by an utterance. However, he says that unlike tense and aspect which are categories associated with the nature of the event itself, modality is concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event.

Palmer then goes on to define two basic distinctions in how languages deal with the category of modality: MODAL SYSTEMS and MOOD. He believes that many languages may be characterized by one or the other. He also claims that typology related to modality cannot be undertaken on purely formal grounds because of the complexity of cross-linguistic differences in the grammatical means used to express what he terms “notional” categories. This claim is substantiated by the great variety of forms and structures evident in the data from 122 languages that he uses to illustrate the expression of modality.

Palmer distinguishes two sorts of modality: PROPOSITIONAL MODALITY and EVENT MODALITY. These notional systems express the following categories:

**Propositional modality**

- **Epistemic** - speakers express their judgment about the factual status of the proposition
  - Speculative: expresses uncertainty
  - Deductive: expresses inferences from observable data
  - Assumptive: expresses inferences from what is generally known

- **Evidential** - speakers give evidence for the factual status of the proposition
  - Reported - evidence gathered from others
  - Sensory: evidence gathered through sense perception, e.g., seen, heard
Event modality

- Deontic: speakers express conditioning factors that are external to the relevant individual
  - Permissive: permission is given on the basis of some authority, e.g., rules, law, or the speaker
  - Obligative: an obligation is laid on the addressee(s), also on the basis of some authority
  - Commissive: a speaker commits himself to do something; the expression may be a promise or a threat

- Dynamic: speakers express conditioning factors that are internal to the relevant individual
  - Abilitive: expresses the ability to do something
  - Volitive: expresses the willingness to do something

These notional categories are discussed and illustrated throughout the book.

The illustrative data reveal many of the formal means for expressing the notional categories in a variety of languages. According to Palmer, three grammatical categories predominate in the expression of the notional categories: (1) affixation of verbs, (2) modal verbs, and (3) particles. Many of the languages from which Palmer chose data use more than one grammatical category to express the notions.

This is probably not unusual. In fact, the two Austronesian languages with which I am most familiar spread the notions across all three grammatical categories, and the lexical and morphosyntactic patterns are completely unlike English patterns, although the similarity of notions is fairly obvious. I would expect to see a closer correlation of the grammatical means of expressing modality among related languages.

Palmer’s chapter titles give a clear presentation of the content of each:

- Chapter 1 Introduction
- Chapter 2 Modal systems: Propositional modality
- Chapter 3 Modal systems: Event modality
- Chapter 4 Modal systems and modal verbs
- Chapter 5 Indicative and subjunctive
- Chapter 6 Realis and Irrealis
- Chapter 7 Subjunctive and irrealis
- Chapter 8 Past tense as modal

Palmer discusses the use of modal verbs and their association with possibility and necessity in chapter 4. He draws together issues involving epistemic modality, i.e., a speaker’s attitude to the truth value or factual status of a proposition in contrast to deontic and dynamic modality that refer to unactualized events. Although notionally there is a difference, Palmer explains that in English and many other languages, the same modal verbs are used for both types. He gives three English sentences as examples:
(1) He may come tomorrow.
(2) The book should be on the shelf.
(3) He must be in his office.

He states that each of the modal verbs in the sentences can express either epistemic or deontic modality. However, he goes on to say in a later section that there are some formal differences: deontic must and may can be negated whereas epistemic must and may cannot be; if may and must are followed by have in a clause, they always express epistemic modality, never deontic; another formal difference between may and must is that deontic may is replaceable by can and would still express deontic modality, but if replaced by can’t it would then likely express epistemic modality, i.e., a truth value. This type of illustration and explanation is used throughout the book.

In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Palmer discusses the links between mood and modal systems with particular respect to languages that express mood formally, or in combination with modal notions. Although Palmer suggests that there is basically no typological difference between indicative/subjunctive and realis/irrealis since both are instances of mood, he does state that there are considerable differences between the functions of what have been labeled “subjunctive” and “irrealis” (p. 5). For that reason he deals with them in three separate chapters.

Although Palmer’s notional categories make sense, I found that it was difficult to process the grammatical patterns in the language data used to illustrate the categories. Part of my difficulty may be attributed to the fact that I believe modality needs to be studied in the context of use, i.e., natural texts, not isolated sentences; and also, I believe, that a thorough study of all grammatical expressions of modality and mood must be done within a single language before the results are compared and contrasted cross-linguistically. Perhaps the authors of the papers and grammars that Palmer used had done just that, but the contexts were lost through the excerpting of sentences to illustrate his notional categories.

In spite of this criticism, I found Palmer’s categories, his compilation of data from many different languages, and explanations of terminological usage very helpful in my own work, as well as thought provoking. I wholeheartedly recommend the book for your reference shelf, particularly if you are a linguist or translator who needs to do an in-depth study of modality in a single language or a cross-language comparison of modality.