



## Epistemic Modality in Miss Marple's Language: From Assumption to Certainty in Agatha Christie's Nemesis

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                                                                    | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| Received: 2026 - 06- 01                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>While epistemic modality has been examined across various discourse contexts—from political speeches to academic writing—its correlation with narrative development in detective fiction remains largely unexplored. The existing studies dominantly applied Systemic Functional Linguistics frameworks that position epistemic modality within interpersonal functions, so its semantic aspects in literary narratives are not discussed. To fill this gap, this study analyzes Epistemic Modality in Miss Marple's language in Agatha Christie's Nemesis (1971), with the research question of how changes in epistemic commitment are connected with narrative development. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research applies Palmer's (2001) framework of epistemic modality, which categorizes into: epistemic possibility, epistemic probability, and epistemic certainty. Palmer's framework is particularly suited to this study, as it examines epistemic modality at the level of propositional meaning, enabling a systematic analysis of how each degree of commitment shifts across the novel's 23 chapters. The data exclusively consist of Miss Marple's utterances containing epistemic modal markers, collected through purposive reading and analyzed through identification, classification, and interpretation. The findings reveal that all degrees of epistemic commitment occur throughout the narrative, though the distribution varies across the investigation's stages. A gradual increase in epistemic commitment is observed, from tentative assumptions in the earlier chapters toward certainty based on reasoning in the final chapters, while lower degrees coexist with higher ones. This pattern demonstrates the layered and progressive nature of investigative reasoning. Therefore, these findings confirm that Epistemic Modality in Miss Marple's language functions as a semantic mechanism that reflects Nemesis's narrative arc, contributing to literary linguistics by demonstrating how Palmer's</i> |
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*semantic framework can reveal the relationship between characters' epistemic language and narrative development. by illustrating how a character's epistemic language can reflect narrative development.*

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## 1. Introduction

Language is defined not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a means for humans to understand, evaluate, and express the reality around them. In every utterance, a speaker implicitly and explicitly demonstrates their belief in the truths of what they say. Jaweed (2025) argued that this ability to express degrees of belief, certainty, probability, or even possibility in language is commonly known as modality. Among its types, Epistemic Modality is primarily concerned with the speaker's degree of knowledge and beliefs, referring to the linguistic framework that speakers use to assess the logical status of a proposition based on the available evidence or knowledge (Gatzia & Brogaard, 2016). Following Palmer's (2001) semantic framework, epistemic modality operates across three tiers: Epistemic Possibility, the lowest degree of commitment, in which the speaker considers the proposition plausible but makes no claim to it; Epistemic Probability, a middle degree based on general knowledge; Epistemic Certainty, the highest degree of commitment, in which the speaker asserts a proposition based on factual evidence.

Detective fiction provides a highly productive medium for examining epistemic modalities, as this genre fundamentally relies on rationality in its efforts to solve problems through the analysis of written documents, which convey their role in preserving knowledge (Link, 2023). As Sargent (2017) argues, detective fiction employs two methods of finding truth—direct forensic evidence and character testimony—both of which rely on epistemic markers to reflect how a detective evaluates the reliability of information and expresses varying levels of certainty about the truth.

This is especially evident in the Golden Age of detective fiction written between 1920 and 1939, a period dominated by Agatha Christie, widely known as the 'Queen of Crime' (Chakraborty, 2024; Tyagi, 2022). Among Christie's two principal detectives, Miss Marple stands apart from convention: an elderly amateur woman detective who frequently makes discoveries through gossip and keen observation to identify the perpetrator, drawing on the experience of human character she has gained. However, due to her advanced age, Miss Marple relies on conversations and social interactions rather than confrontation or physical evidence (Soares et al., 2025). This makes language Miss Marple's most powerful investigative tool, particularly in how she expresses certainty or doubt regarding information, and offers a rich area for further analysis.

Nemesis by Agatha Christie (1971) presents an intriguing case to examine. Miss Marple begins her investigation without any clues—her late colleague, Mr.

Rafiel, leaves only a scrap of paper with an implicit request, forcing her to reconstruct the context on her own. As more clues emerge, she progressively adjusts her degree of belief towards the truth, making her language a semantic reflection of her evolving knowledge. This aligns with Palmer's (2001) view that epistemic modality can serve as an indicator of one's attitude toward the truth of a proposition. In Miss Marple's case, this continuum develops progressively alongside the narrative—her epistemic commitment shifts chapter by chapter as the investigative understanding deepens. This is what makes *Nemesis* not only detective fiction but also a linguistic document in which the character's epistemic language can mirror the narrative itself.

While previous studies have examined epistemic modality across various contexts, significant gaps still remain. Hastuti (2025) and Romadlani & Hardjanto (2024) both adopt Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, positioning epistemic modality within interpersonal social functions—a valuable approach that, however, limits the analysis to relational dynamics rather than semantic gradations. Studies in non-literary contexts, such as Wibowo (2020) on student research proposals, Liu (2024) on academic conclusions, and Borisenko (2025) on reactive discourse, similarly treat epistemic modality as a synchronic, context-bound phenomenon, without considering how epistemic commitments evolve throughout a narrative. Crucially, none of these studies examines the relationship between epistemic modality and narrative development in literary works—a significant gap this research directly addresses.

To fill this gap, this study analyses epistemic modality in Miss Marple's language through Palmer's (2001) theoretical framework, tracing how shifts across the three epistemic degrees correlate with *Nemesis's* narrative development. Unlike previous SFL-based studies that emphasized social function, Palmer's framework enables a focus on gradations of meaning, thereby enabling the mapping of epistemic commitment as a structural dimension of narrative. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to literary linguistics, particularly by examining how a character's language can function as a structural marker that illustrates the narrative journey from uncertainty to certainty.

## **2. Method**

To investigate and interpret linguistic phenomena in depth without using any query data, this research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytic design. By collecting and analyzing non-numeric information, this qualitative approach aims to reveal the complex details of a problem or issue (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Therefore, this approach adopts a perspective that is basically no different from the interpretive process in everyday communication. This view provides a relevant basis for the research, given that epistemic modality analysis in a fictional character's language operates at the semantic level—examining how linguistic markers encode degrees of epistemic commitment toward the truth of a

proposition, which demands a critical and systematic reading of the text within its narrative that cannot be reduced to numbers.

The source data comes from *Nemesis* by Agatha Christie, selected for its distinctive narrative structure in which Miss Marple's investigative journey progresses chapter by chapter from uncertainty toward certainty. To systematically establish the relationship between epistemic modality and narrative development, the novel's chapters were categorized into three narrative stages corresponding to the progression of Miss Marple's investigation. The early chapters are a speculative stage, in which Miss Marple begins the case with minimal information, relies heavily on her speculations, and is inconclusive as she attempts to reconstruct the implicit request of Mr. Rafiel with no additional information.

The middle chapters form the evaluative stage, in which she gathers observations and evaluates testimonies from other characters, gradually shifting her epistemic commitment from possibility to probability. The final chapters represent the conclusive stage, in which her epistemic degree reaches its highest certainty—her inconclusive conclusion reaches confident, deductive statements that were created as the truth of the mystery. This chapter-by-chapter progression aligns with Palmer's framework (2001), which epistemic modality moves from the weakest possibility through probability and ultimately reaches the highest degree of certainty.

The data consist exclusively of Miss Marple's utterances containing epistemic markers, including modal auxiliaries (*might, must, could, seem*), adverbials (*perhaps, probably, possibly*), and cognitive verbs (*think, believe, and suppose*) (Diachok, 2021). To qualify as epistemic, an utterance must meet two criteria: it must encode the speaker's degree of belief, knowledge, or certainty regarding a proposition, and it must reflect Miss Marple's own evaluative attitude, rather than expressing obligation, permission, or a reported speech. Statements that use modal expressions with deontic or dynamic meanings are excluded from the sample.

Data collection was conducted through purposive reading, in which each chapter of the book *Nemesis* was read in its entirety, focusing solely on Miss Marple's speech. Every utterance containing epistemic modality will be identified and systematically organized, including chapter number, page number, evidence of the utterance, and context within the narrative flow. To ensure the reliability of this classification, the coded data were reviewed through a peer-review process, in which a second evaluator independently verified a portion of the classifications based on Palmer's (2001) criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached, thereby strengthening the credibility of the analysis results.

Data analysis proceeded through three stages. First, Identification—marking every utterance containing epistemic markers. Second, Classification—

grouping the identified data into three epistemic modalities based on Palmer's (2001) semantic framework: Epistemic Possibility (Speculative), Epistemic Probability (Assumptive), and Epistemic Certainty (Necessity). Third, Interpretation—examining how the semantic value encoded by these markers shifts across chapters, and how the shifts correlate with the novel's narrative development, specifically how Miss Marple's epistemic journey progresses from speculative at the start of the investigation to deductive at its resolution.

### 3. Result

This section presents the research findings, which are based on a thorough analysis of Miss Marple's language in *Nemesis* by Agatha Christie. The primary objective is to examine how changes in epistemic commitment within the novel correlate with the narrative's development. The data are presented in two tables—Table 1 classifies the identified epistemic markers, while Table 2 summarizes their frequency distribution across chapters.

#### *Types of Epistemic Commitment in Miss Marple's Language*

Analysis of the data was conducted using the modality framework proposed by Palmer (2001), with a focused examination of Miss Marple's language. Among 23 chapters of *Nemesis*, a total of Miss Marple's language containing epistemic modal markers was identified and classified into three different levels of commitment, which are Epistemic Possibility, Epistemic Probability, and Epistemic Certainty. The distribution of these three levels is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Classification of Epistemic Modality in Miss Marple's Language*

| No. | Chapter | Evidence in Novel                                                                                   | Epistemic Marker | Degree of Certainty            |
|-----|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1.  | Ch. 3   | Miss Marple: "... in which he <b>might</b> possibly have been interested ..." (p.26)                | Might            | Epistemic Possibility (Low)    |
| 2.  | Ch. 4   | Miss Marple: "... <b>perhaps...</b> that he <b>might</b> have confided any troubles to you." (p.39) | Perhaps, Might   | Epistemic Possibility (Low)    |
| 3.  | Ch. 5   | Miss Marple: "... it is <b>presumably</b> not espionage or fraud or robbery, ... " (p.56)           | Presumably       | Epistemic Probability (Middle) |

|    |        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                 |                                                                |
|----|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4. | Ch. 13 | Miss Marple: "... it <b>seems</b> indicated... <b>perhaps... might</b> even not have been recognized by Miss Temple. ..." (p.131)                                                                                                                   | Seems, Perhaps, Might           | Epistemic Possibility (Low)                                    |
| 5. | Ch. 13 | Miss Marple: "... <b>more likely</b> to have been a man... there <b>might</b> easily ... <b>possibly</b> in the neighborhood... Someone whom she herself <b>might</b> not recognize... <b>might</b> in some way prove a danger to her." (p.132-133) | More likely, Might, Possibly    | Epistemic Possibility (Low) and Epistemic Probability (Middle) |
| 6. | Ch. 18 | Miss Marple: "... you <b>couldn't</b> do that... Strangling- <b>perhaps</b> , but you <b>wouldn't</b> do beat in..." (p.187)                                                                                                                        | Could not, Perhaps, Would not   | Epistemic Possibility (Low) and Epistemic Probability (Middle) |
| 7. | Ch. 19 | Miss Marple: "... It <b>may</b> have a slip... <b>may</b> have a fictitious name ... "                                                                                                                                                              | May, Might                      | Epistemic Possibility (Low)                                    |
|    |        | Miss Marple: "It <b>might</b> possibly..." (p.192)                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                 |                                                                |
| 8. | Ch. 19 | Miss Marple: "... <b>might</b> be quite important."<br><br>Miss Marple: "... I <b>think</b> that... <b>might</b> be a second body to be found."                                                                                                     | I think, Might, I am quite sure | Epistemic Possibility (Low) and Epistemic Certainty (High)     |

|     |        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                             |                                                                                                                    |
|-----|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |        | Miss Marple: "... <b>I'm quite sure</b> of it..."<br>(p.193)                                                                                                                                                                               |                                             |                                                                                                                    |
| 9.  | Ch. 21 | Miss Marple: " <b>I didn't think... I thought</b> the body... <b>would</b> be the first applied to... You <b>had to go...</b> " (p.218)                                                                                                    | I didn't think, I thought,<br>Would, Had to | Epistemic<br>Possibility<br>(Low),<br>Epistemic<br>Probability<br>(Middle) and<br>Epistemic<br>Certainty<br>(High) |
| 10. | Ch. 21 | Miss Marple: " ... <b>might</b> have known... <b>might</b> have written... <b>might</b> with what they both knew... <b>must</b> not be allowed... You <b>could</b> have rolled... It <b>must</b> have taken some doing... " (p.218 -219)   | Might, Could, Must                          | Epistemic<br>Possibility<br>(Low) and<br>Epistemic<br>Certainty<br>(High)                                          |
| 11. | Ch. 22 | Miss Marple: "... <b>almost certain... presumably</b> I would not have woken up again." (p.222)                                                                                                                                            | Almost certain and<br>Presumably            | Epistemic<br>Probability<br>(Middle)                                                                               |
| 12. | Ch. 22 | Miss Marple: "... <b>must be, must</b> logically be... There <b>must be</b> somewhere... It <b>must be</b> a deliberate crime. It <b>must be...</b> There <b>must be</b> someone who... <b>must be</b> clearly a victim..." (p. 224 - 225) | Must                                        | Epistemic<br>Certainty<br>(High)                                                                                   |

Table 2. Frequency of Epistemic Commitment Across Chapters

| Chapters     | Epistemic Possibility | Epistemic Probability | Epistemic Certainty |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Ch. 3        | ✓                     | -                     | -                   |
| Ch. 4        | ✓                     | -                     | -                   |
| Ch. 5        | -                     | ✓                     | -                   |
| Ch. 13       | ✓                     | ✓                     | -                   |
| Ch. 18       | ✓                     | ✓                     | -                   |
| Ch. 19       | ✓                     | -                     | ✓                   |
| Ch. 21       | ✓                     | ✓                     | ✓                   |
| Ch. 22       | -                     | ✓                     | ✓                   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>7</b>              | <b>5</b>              | <b>4</b>            |

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Epistemic Possibility markers appear most frequently across the chapters, followed by Epistemic Probability and Epistemic Certainty. Epistemic Possibility is present from the earliest chapters, while Epistemic Probability first emerges in Chapter 5 and Epistemic Certainty appears from Chapter 19 onward. Notably, several chapters— particularly Chapters 13, 18, 19, 21, and 22— contain more than one degree of epistemic commitment within a single utterance, indicating the coexistence of multiple levels across the later stages of the investigation. The detailed interpretation of these distribution patterns and their correlation with narrative development will be discussed further in the Discussion section.

#### 4. Discussion

##### *Epistemic Possibility in Miss Marple's Language*

The lowest degree of commitment, known as Epistemic Possibility, occurs when the speaker lacks factual evidence or knowledge to claim the proposition. (Romadlani & Hardjanto, 2024). This degree can be expressed by using various modals such as 'can', 'could', 'may', 'might', and 'perhaps'. The modal verb expressions presented the proposition as a hypothesis, interpretation, or conclusion that remains open to revision (Serhiivna et al., 2025). Specifically in *Nemesis*, this modality becomes the most dominant epistemic modality in Miss

Marple's language, consistent with the narrative context, as she has no information about the cases.

The earliest instance begins to appear in Chapter 3 (Table 1, No. 1), where Miss Marple wrote a letter to Mr. Broadbribb:

Miss Marple: "I think I am justified in asking if there has been recently in his life any criminal affair in which he **might** possibly have been interested, either in the course of his business or in his personal relations." (p.26)

By using the modal auxiliary '*might*', Miss Marple is not asserting the case as a criminal affair but merely entertaining it as a possibility, reflecting her epistemic position at the early stage of investigation— she has received nothing more than an implicit request from a deceased colleague, with no concrete evidence. The proposition, '*any criminal affair*,' therefore, remains speculative.

A similar speculative pattern emerges in Chapter 4 (Table 1, No. 2), when Miss Marple made some effort to gather information about Mr. Rafiel by making a seemingly accidental encounter with Esther Andeson, who was once Mr. Rafiel's secretary.

Miss Marple: "No. No, of course not. But I thought **perhaps**, you having been- well, his secretary for so many years, that he **might have** confided any troubles to you." (p. 39)

The markers '*perhaps*' and '*might have*' create a deepening layer of epistemic possibility, which, as a whole, indicates that Miss Marple's epistemic commitment to this proposition is at the weakest level. This is consistent with her investigative position at this early stage, where evidence remains insufficient to justify a higher level of semantic commitment.

By Chapter 13 (Table 1, No. 4), Miss Marple's epistemic possibility becomes a more intense quality following the death of Miss Temple:

Miss Marple: "In that case, it **seems** indicated that there is someone on our coach tour who recognized Miss Temple or knew who she was, but who **perhaps** after the passage of some years was not remembered or **might** even not have been recognized by Miss Temple. It seems to throw it back on our passengers, does it not? That pullover you mentioned- red and black checks, you said?" (p. 131)

Three markers— '*seems*', '*perhaps*', and '*might*'— all operate at the lowest degree of commitment. Although these markers remain semantically at the lowest level, the propositions they encode are now directed toward a specific category of suspects rather than open-ended speculation, reflecting a narrowing of the epistemic field. Notably, the marker '*seems*' as a modus verb could alternatively be interpreted as encoding perceptual reasons rather than merely pure epistemic

possibility— an interpretive ambiguity that cannot always be ultimately resolved by Palmer's (2001) framework, which points to limitations in the categorical precision of this analysis.

In Chapter 19 (Table 1, No. 7), the dominant markers '*may*' and '*might possibly*' characterize Miss Marple's description of various plausible scenarios regarding a package that had been sent:

*Miss Marple: "I rather think not. It **may** have a slip of paper saying from friends or it **may** have a fictitious name and address something like Mrs. Pippin, 14 Westbourne Grove and if anyone made enquiries there, there would be no person of such a name living there."*

*Miss Marple: "It **might possibly**, most unlikely but possible, have a slip saying 'From Miss Anthea Bradbury-Scott'-" (p.192)*

The combination of the markers '*may*' and '*might possibly*' creates a double layer of epistemic possibility, which is further reduced by the clarification provided by Miss Marple herself— '*most unlikely but possible*,'— thus placing the proposition right on the edge of epistemic possibility on Palmer's (2001) continuum. The combination of '*might*' and '*possibly*' creates a double layer of epistemic uncertainty, further reducing the low degree of certainty inherent in each marker when used separately. This is relevant to Palmer's (2001) characterization of Epistemic Possibility as the degree to which a speaker acknowledges a proposition as conceivable, not making any claim about its probability or truth.

### ***Epistemic Probability in Miss Marple's Language***

The middle degree of commitment, known as Epistemic Probability, occurs when a speaker makes their judgment based on their general knowledge. This degree is typically expressed through markers such as '*probably*,' '*presumably*,' and '*more likely*,' as well as modal constructions such as '*would*' and '*could*'. In *Nemesis*, Epistemic Probability emerged from Chapter 5 onward, signaling a gradual shift in Miss Marple's commitment as her investigative knowledge develops. Different from Epistemic Possibility, which relies on an open-ended speculation characteristic, Epistemic Probability reflects Miss Marple's judgment, in which she draws on accumulated evidence, logical inference, and her deep understanding, even if not yet fully confirmed.

The first instance appears in Chapter 5 (Table 1, No. 3):

*Miss Marple: "... Mr. Rafiel has distinctly stated in his letter. He said I had a flair for justice and that necessarily included a flair for crime. So crime is involved, and it is **presumably** not espionage or fraud or robbery, because such things have never come my way and I have no connection with such things, or knowledge of them, or special skills..." (p.56)*

The marker '*presumably*' encodes the middle degree of epistemic

commitment— treating the proposition as a reasonable assumption based on available reasoning rather than direct evidence. What makes this utterance significant is that it marks the first appearance of epistemic probability in Miss Marple's language, which counts as a first step indicating that the field of possibility is beginning to narrow semantically, though not yet a significant turning point.

A further instance emerges in Chapter 13 (Table 1, No. 5):

Miss Marple: "Yes. It widens the possibilities. I agree with you that the attacker is **more likely** to have been a man than a woman. That boulder, if it was done with intent, was sent on its course very accurately. Accuracy is more a male quality than a female one. On the other hand, there **might** easily have been someone on our coach, or **possibly** in the neighborhood, who saw Miss Temple in the street, a former pupil of hers in past years. Someone whom she herself **might** not recognize after a period of time." (p. 132 – 133)

The dominant marker '*more likely*' encodes epistemic probability through a reasoned-based judgment— Miss Marple actively evaluates conflicting hypotheses, rather than merely speculating openly. However, it is important to note that '*more likely*,' as a comparative marker, plays an ambiguous position on Palmer's (2001) continuum. Unlike typical probability markers that encode a proposition as probable in absolute terms, this marker encodes relative probability— asserting that one proposition is more plausible than another rather than making a standalone probabilistic claim. This study treats it as a probability given the explicit comparative reasoning employed by Miss Marple, but this categorization reflects an interpretive judgment rather than a definitive semantic boundary. The coexistence markers '*might*' and '*possibly*' remain subordinate, encoding separate yet related speculations at the lowest degree of commitment.

Another instance emerges in Chapter 18 (Table 1, No. 6):

Miss Marple: "Horrible! Horrible! And you **could not** do that to anyone you loved even if you had to kill 'for love,' could you? If he **would** killed her, he **could not** have done it that way. Strangling- **perhaps**, but you **would not** do beat in the face and the head that you loved." (p.187)

The dominant epistemic markers in this utterance are '*could not*' and '*would not*'— both markers encode Epistemic Probability through reasoned character-based reasoning. Miss Marple reads human behavior through the lens of life experience rather than forensic evidence (Soares et al., 2025), constructing a probabilistic argument that a person who truly loves another could not bring themselves to commit an act of such brutal disfigurement. The coexisting marker '*perhaps*' remains subordinate, encoding a single concessive alternative without undermining the stronger probabilistic framework.

The final instances of Epistemic Probability emerge in Chapter 22 (Table 1, No.

11), as the investigation reaches its resolution:

Miss Marple: "That would have been quite the wrong thing to do. I wanted Clotilde Bradburry-Scott to come in. I wanted to see what she would say or do. I thought it was **almost certain** that she would come in when sufficient time had elapsed, to make sure that I had drunk the milk, and was in an unconscious sleep from which **presumably** I would not have woken up again." (p.222)

The markers '*almost certain*' and '*presumably*' capture Miss Marple semantically positioned at the edge between probability and certainty. The remaining element of doubt almost prevents this proposition from reaching epistemic certainty in Palmer's (2001) framework, acknowledging that her conclusion, even though based on a strong foundation, remains a probability, not a fully verified fact.

### ***Epistemic Certainty in Miss Marple's Language***

According to Romadlani & Hardjanto's statement (2024), this type of modality communicates the speaker's judgment based on their knowledge or belief to make the proposition asserted by the speaker undeniable, which relates to the highest degree of commitment. This degree is typically used with markers such as '*must*', '*definitely*', and '*certainly*', as well as with expressions such as '*I am sure*' and '*I am quite sure*'. In *Nemesis*, Epistemic Certainty markers are specifically absent from the earlier chapters and emerge only from Chapter 19 onwards as Miss Marple's knowledge starts to reach its fullest development. This distribution of commitment reflects the narrative logic of the investigation, in which certainty markers become linguistically available in Miss Marple's language after several pieces of evidence have been assembled.

The first instance occurs in Chapter 19 (Table 1, No. 8), during a conversation with Professor Wanstead about the possibility of a second body connected to the crime:

Miss Marple: "**I think... I think** that whoever's in charge of these things, ought to be warned that there **might** be a second body to be routed."

Miss Marple: "Yes. **I'm quite sure of it, as a matter of fact.**" (p.193)

The coexisting markers '*I think*' and '*might*' encode epistemic possibility—the cognitive marker '*I think*' functions tentatively to indicate the speaker's hesitation (Huschová, 2025), whereas '*might*' semantically encodes the proposition as something conceivable without asserting its likelihood. The dominant marker '*I am quite sure*' reinforced by '*as a matter of fact*,' encodes the highest level of epistemic certainty—a direct and unconditional statement that affirms the proposition as something that has been fully proven. This marks the first instance in the novel

where Miss Marple's language crosses the boundary from probability to certainty, while also indicating that this certainty is semantically qualified—she distinguishes precisely between what she knows with absolute certainty and what remains unverified.

The second instance appears in Chapter 21 (Table 1, No. 9), as Miss Marple continues her confrontation with Clotilde:

Miss Marple: "... **I didn't think** from what I saw of you that you could have borne to strangle and disfigure the girl you loved. But another girl disappeared also about that time, a girl whose body has never been found. But **I thought** the body had been found, only they hadn't known that the body was Nora Broad's. It was dressed in Verity's clothes, it was identified as Verity by the person who would be the first applied to, the person who knew her better than anyone else. You **had to** go and say if the body found was the body of Verity..." (p. 218)

The cognitive verbs '*I didn't think*', and '*I thought*', encode the lowest degree of epistemic possibility, reflecting Miss Marple's earlier tentative reasoning rather than her current conclusions. The modal '*would*' encodes epistemic probability—treating Clotilde's expected role as an identifier as a reasonable conclusion based on logical expectations. The dominant marker '*had to*' encodes epistemic certainty—asserting that Clotilde's identification was not a coincidence, but rather logically necessary and intentional, a conclusion Miss Marple considers to have been fully proven based on the evidence she has gathered.

However, it must be acknowledged that the phrase '*had to*' contains an inherent interpretive ambiguity between deontic modality (obligation) and epistemic certainty (logical necessity) — a distinction that Palmer's (2001) framework does not always clearly resolve. This study classifies it as epistemic certainty given its deductive context— Miss Marple is not asserting that Clotilde was obligated to identify the body in a social or moral sense, but rather concluding that her doing so was the only logically inevitable outcome given the evidence she has gathered. Nevertheless, this classification remains an interpretive judgment that may be contested by alternative analyses.

The third instance appears later in the same Chapter 21 (Table 1, No. 10), when Miss Marple reconstructs Clotilde's motivation for murdering Miss Temple, which is her third murder:

Miss Marple: "A week ago you committed a third murder, the murder of Elizabeth Temple. You killed her because she was coming to this part of the world, and you were afraid what she **might** have known, from what Verity **might** have written to her or told her, and you thought that if Elizabeth Temple got together with Archdeacon Brabazon, they **might** with what they both knew come at some appraisal of the truth. Elizabeth Temple **must**

not be allowed to meet the Archdeacon. You are a very powerful woman. You **could** have rolled that boulder down the hillside. It **must have** taken some doing, but you are a very strong woman.” (p.218 – 219)

The markers *‘might have known’*, *‘might have written’*, and *‘might’* encode epistemic possibility— intended to reconstruct Clotilde’s fears and inner motivations, which remain beyond the reach of direct evidence. Dominant markers *‘must not’* and *‘must have’* encode epistemic certainty— asserting propositions that Miss Marple treats as logically necessary and fully proven based on the evidence she has gathered. The modal verb *‘must’*, according to Marques (2020), conveys the highest degree of certainty, further supported by Ekawati (2019), who states that *‘must’* encodes a strong and firm argument.

The final instance emerges in Chapter 22 (Table 1, No. 12), where the case is resolved with Clotilde taking her own life after Miss Marple accurately reveals the truth:

Miss Marple: “There were certain things that **must be, must logically be**, I mean, because of what Mr. Rafiel had indicated. There **must be** somewhere a victim and somewhere a murderer. ... So it could not be any other type of crime. And it could not, either, be a casual crime. It must be a deliberate crime. It **must be**, and show itself definitely to be the handiwork of someone who had accepted evil. Evil instead of good. There seemed to be two victims indicated. There **must be** someone who had been killed and there must be clearly a victim of injustice. ...” (p. 224 - 225)

The five repeated uses of the phrase *‘must be’*, are clearly the most complete expressions of epistemic certainty in Miss Marple’s language throughout the novel. Semantically, each use of the phrase *‘must be’*, encodes a different yet interrelated proposition as a logically necessary one— no longer a hypothesis to be tested, but an inevitable conclusion based on the gathered evidence, which marks the end of Miss Marple’s epistemic journey.

### ***The Correlation Between Epistemic Commitment and Narrative Development***

The analysis of Miss Marple’s language across the 23 chapters of *Nemesis* reveals a systematic and progressive correlation between the distribution of epistemic commitment levels and the development of the novel’s narrative. The appearances of epistemic markers are not random across the text, but each chapter represents a distinct and identifiable phase in Miss Marple’s investigative journey. The degrees of Epistemic Modality identified by Palmer’s (2001) framework— Epistemic Possibility, Epistemic Probability, Epistemic Certainty— collectively trace a semantic progression from the lowest level of commitment at the beginning of the story to the highest at its conclusion. This progression directly addresses the study’s research question: changes in Miss Marple’s epistemic commitment are

closely associated with the narrative's development and serve as semantic markers of an investigative process that moves from uncertainty to absolute truth.

Abood (2018), in his research on Poe's *"The Fall of the House of Usher"* (1839), argues that Epistemic Modality is particularly significant in narrative discourse as it reflects a speaker's confidence or lack of it regarding the truth of propositions, revealing the narrator's stance toward the fictional world. This supports the present findings that the shifts observed in Miss Marple's epistemic language not merely reflect the degrees of commitment but the gradual development of the investigation itself, as linguistic commitment increases in line with mounting evidence and decreasing narrative uncertainty. This connection between epistemic language and narrative structure is consistent with the broader characteristics of detective fiction as a genre, which is built upon the systematic reconstruction of the truth from incomplete evidence (Sargeant, 2017), in which the language used by the detective encodes the cognitive process of moving from speculation to resolution.

The first phase of this correlation is established through the dominance of Epistemic Possibility in Chapters 3 through 13 (Table 1, No. 1-4), where markers such as *'might'*, *'may'*, *'perhaps'*, and *'possibly'* encode propositions as conceivable but unverified. This semantic pattern aligns with the narrative conditions of complete uncertainty— Miss Marple begins without a single clue, armed only with an implicit request from a deceased colleague and no direct information about the case she has been asked to solve. Semantically, every hypothesis she considers is formulated at the lowest level of certainty because the evidence she has is too weak to support the higher level. The dominance of Epistemic Possibility in this phase is a semantic reflection of the basic uncertainty within the narrative— the starting point of the investigation that serves as the foundation for all epistemic development.

The second phase of the correlation emerges as Epistemic Probability markers, which begin to appear from Chapter 5 onward (Table 1, No. 3,5,6,11)— *'presumably'*, *'more likely'*, *'could not'*, *'would not'*, and *'almost certain'*, encoding propositions as rationally justifiable rather than merely conceivable. Crucially, this appearance does not replace the Epistemic Possibility. Markers of lower commitment continue to coexist within the same utterances, reflecting the semantic reality that Miss Marple's evidential base is growing but remains incomplete. This overlapping pattern demonstrated that the progression from possibility to probability is not a clean break but a gradual semantic shift that reflects the progressive nature of investigative reasoning.

The final phase is marked by the appearance of Epistemic Certainty markers, most prominently in Chapters 19, 21, and 22 (Table 1, No. 8,9,10,12)— *'I am quite sure'*, *'had to'*, *'must'*, and *'must logically be'*, encoding propositions as logically compelled and fully proven. However, the appearance of Epistemic Certainty does not signal the complete disappearance of the lower degrees)—

Some utterances still contain coexisting markers of possibility and probability, particularly when Miss Marple reconstructs the murderer's internal motivations. The pattern in the final chapters thus reflects an increase in epistemic density—a progressively higher concentration of high-certainty markers that gradually outweigh the lower levels of certainty that continue to coexist alongside them. This confirms that Miss Marple's epistemic journey is a cumulative semantic accumulation—each new degree adds to, rather than eliminates, what has come before, reflecting the dynamic and progressive nature of investigative reasoning as the narrative approaches its conclusion.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed Epistemic Modality in Miss Marple's language in Agatha Christie's *Nemesis* using Palmer's (2001) semantic framework, examining how changes in Epistemic Modality correlate with narrative development. The findings indicate that Epistemic Possibility, Epistemic Probability, and Epistemic Certainty systematically correspond to the different phases of Miss Marple's investigative journey.

From total uncertainty in the early chapters, through partly developed and increasingly developed knowledge in the middle chapters, to a convincing resolution in the final chapters. More importantly, these three levels consistently coexist and overlap throughout the chapters, reflecting the cumulative and evolving nature of Miss Marple's investigative reasoning. These findings indicate that the epistemic commitment in her language serves as a semantic marker that map the progression of the narrative, guiding the movement from initial speculation to increasingly certain conclusions.

However, this study is limited to the semantic level of analysis, leaving the pragmatic and discourse dimensions of Miss Marple's epistemic language unaddressed. Therefore, further research could expand this study in several directions. A pragmatic analysis drawing on Speech Act Theory or Relevance Theory could examine how Miss Marple's epistemic expressions function rhetorically within conversational interactions.

Additionally, a comparative study across multiple Miss Marple novels, or between Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, could determine whether the patterns identified in *Nemesis* reflect Agatha Christie's broader stylistic tendencies in this narrative. Finally, cross-linguistics translation studies could further extend the scope of this inquiry, offering intercultural perspectives on the epistemic dimensions of Agatha Christie's detective fiction.

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