



Shaping Narrative Atmosphere via Modality: A Stylistic Inquiry into Tonal Shading in *All the Light We Cannot See*

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Abstract

The present research investigates the role of modality in establishing shading within Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), applying Simpson's (2004) stylistic framework. In this context, shading denotes the tonal trajectory of a narrative, ranging from positive to negative, which is articulated through specific linguistic patterns, notably modal verbs. Although shading has been extensively studied in classic literature and short stories, its application in contemporary novels remains underexplored. To bridge this gap, this study employs a methodology that synthesizes corpus linguistics with detailed stylistic analysis. A dataset comprising 1,378 instances of core modal auxiliaries (can, could, will, would, should, may, might, must) alongside the lexical verb think was extracted from the novel's complete text. Each instance was categorized based on modality type (epistemic, deontic, boulomaic, perception) and correlated with specific shading classifications. Quantitative results indicated a distinct polarization: 67.7% of the instances were associated with negative shading (primarily epistemic and perception), whereas 32.3% contributed to positive shading (deontic and boulomaic). Instances of neutral shading were negligible. A chi-square test validated a significant correlation between modality types and shading (χ^2 (2, N = 1,378) = 724.51, $p < .001$). Furthermore, these findings broadened the application of Simpson's model to contemporary fiction and offered new insight into Doerr's stylistic construction of wartime experience. They showed how patterns of modality contributed to the novel's persistent tension between uncertainty and hope. The study also illustrated the value of modality-based shading analysis for supporting interpretive and critical reading practices.

Keywords: modality, shading, stylistics, Simpson's model, narrative tone

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Introduction

Research on narrative discourse has consistently emphasized that fiction does not present events as neutral records of reality; rather, it represents them through linguistic and stylistic choices that shape narrative perspective and interpretation. Among the most fruitful approaches in stylistic analysis for capturing this aspect is the concept of “shading,” which was coined by [Simpson \(2004\)](#) to refer to the ways in which the linguistic features of narrative contribute to the tone of the narrative. While this concept specifically captures the idea that the narrative discourse indicates attitudes of optimism, pessimism, certainty, or uncertainty, among other attitudes, it also, by necessity, draws the analyst's attention to the workings of the grammatical and lexical systems, not simply for the purposes of plotting the narrative, but for the ways in which these systems contribute to realizing the atmospheric, attitudinal, and connotative features of the narrative. According to Simpson, the conceptual areas of modality and shading overlap. According to this view, the system of modality is the language mechanism that is used for obligation, belief, possibility, and perception.

According to the definitions given by [Palmer \(2003\)](#) and [Halliday and Matthiessen \(2004\)](#), modality is an interpersonal resource. It is the ways that the narrator of the story communicates their stance on the proposition, indicating their commitment, certainty, or engagement with the utterance. In literature, according to [Simpson \(2004\)](#), the use of modality goes beyond the language of grammar and is used for stylistic effects, indicating the worldview and the narrative perspective. There are four major types of modalities: epistemic (certainty, probability, belief), deontic (obligation, duty), boulomaic (desire, will), and perception (sensory evaluation). These offer varying degrees of contribution toward the creation of the neutral, positive, and negative shadings of the narrative where the epistemic and perception modalities offer the negative, the deontic and boulomaic the positive, and the neutral offers the results of the minimal use of the modality.

Stylistic studies preceding the current examination have indicated the manner in which the use of shading is essential for the affective potential of literature. For example, [Trimarco \(2021\)](#) investigated the works of Edgar Allan Poe, concluding that epistemic modality is crucial for the creation of the horror and uncertainty effects. In other works, negative shadings of estrangement have been employed in modernist fiction, as opposed to positive shadings of ethical engagement in realist fiction, according to [Toolan \(2016\)](#). Furthermore, [Parina and De Leon \(2014\)](#) and [Tenev \(2019\)](#) illustrated that the use of clusters of modality affects the differences of shadings, essential for the evaluation of the narrator's reliability. Nonetheless, it can be asserted that contemporary novels, especially those that have complex narrative patterns and make use of shadings for the thematization of relevant motifs, have not been explored thoroughly.

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* ([2014](#)) offers a rich site for analysis. The novel is told through the use of several focalizers, including Marie-Laure, “blind French girl,” living in occupied France, and Werner, a German orphan drafted into Hitler's army, in the context of World War II. It is also characterized by

a rich narrative style that displays heavy modalization, using verbs like “can”, “must”, “might”, “would”, and “seem” very often. Notice that these frequently used modal verbs reflect the uncertainty of survival during war, the need imposed upon authoritarian states, and the hopes of the characters for survival amidst the rubble. More significantly, the novel illustrates the systematic variation of modalization. The novel’s sections dominated by epistemic and perception modalization promote a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, reflecting the insecure situation of individuals living during war. However, the use of deontic and boulomaic modalization emphasizes the moment of morality, duty, and resilience, which project a strongly positive variation of the narrative’s coloring. Neutral shading patterns occur relatively infrequently in the novel, suggesting a tendency toward evaluative positioning in the modal expressions analyzed. This pattern is consistent with the narrative’s sustained engagement with uncertainty, obligation, resilience, and human experience.

Thematically, the contrast between negative and positive shadings of Doerr’s novel reflects the novel’s other concerns. On the one hand, the epistemic uncertainty of war, the fact that it is impossible to know what will happen, who will live, who will die, or whether liberation is near, is a hallmark of the “Reflector” sections of the novel. On the other, the deontic modalities and boulomaic messages of hope reflect the strength of individuals who, despite the oppression, go about their business with intention. This contrast between shadings also mirrors the contrast between fear and hope that exists during wartime. By this means, the modalities of the novel take on, not merely grammatical, but also narrative significance.

The present study examines how modality contributes to the construction of shading in Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* through the analytical framework proposed by Simpson (2004). Following Simpson’s classification, epistemic and perception modalities are associated with negative shading, whereas deontic and boulomaic modalities are associated with positive shading. The study pursues two objectives. First, it investigates the distribution of modal categories in the novel through quantitative analysis. Second, it employs qualitative analysis to explore how these modal patterns contribute to evaluative tone and narrative perspective in specific textual contexts.

Beyond its theoretical relevance, the study may also have pedagogical value. In many TEFL and EFL contexts, modality is often taught primarily as a grammatical category, while its stylistic functions receive less attention. Examining shading provides an opportunity to connect modal choices with tone, attitude, and atmosphere, thereby linking linguistic analysis with literary interpretation. Stylistic approaches have frequently emphasized the importance of attending to linguistic features when interpreting literary texts, as such features can offer insight into uncertainty, obligation, stance, and evaluation. In this respect, modality may provide learners with a concrete linguistic resource through which aspects of narrative perspective and tone can be examined more systematically.

The study also contributes to ongoing discussions of Doerr’s novel by investigating the linguistic mechanisms through which evaluative perspectives are

expressed. Rather than focusing solely on thematic concerns, the analysis explores how modal patterns are associated with recurring tensions between uncertainty and hope, vulnerability and resilience, which are central to the novel's wartime setting. By applying Simpson's framework to a contemporary historical novel, the study seeks to contribute to research on modality and shading while offering a linguistic perspective on narrative evaluation in *All the Light We Cannot See*.

Literature Review

Shading in Stylistics

Within stylistics, narrative discourse is generally understood as a linguistically mediated representation rather than a neutral record of events. While narratological approaches have long examined point of view, focalization, and narrative perspective, Simpson's concept of shading gives particular attention to the evaluative coloring produced by modal choices. Shading is therefore useful because it links grammatical form to tonal orientation: modal expressions may signal certainty, hesitation, obligation, desire, perception, or detachment, and these meanings influence how readers interpret narrative situations and viewpoints.

Recent research on literary narrative has also highlighted the importance of examining textual and narrative mechanisms underlying readers' responses to fiction. For example, [Baghaei et al. \(2022\)](#), in their study of Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem*, examined how narrative organization, uncertainty, suspense, and curiosity contribute to readers' engagement with a literary text. Such work supports the broader view that narrative effects can be investigated systematically through features of narrative discourse. Building on this perspective, the present study focuses more specifically on modality as a linguistic resource through which evaluative perspective and narrative tone may be constructed.

Shading matters because it moves past simply asking "who speaks" and "who sees" to ask "how does the narrator evaluate things?" It acknowledges that narration rarely feels neutral and even descriptive snippets carry a subtle stance. This makes shading a powerful tool for understanding how texts position readers with respect to characters, events, and moral decisions.

Modality as the Engine of Shading

At the heart of shading lies modality, the method by which speakers encode obligation, possibility, necessity, and evaluation. According to [Palmer \(2003\)](#), modality encompasses the grammar of stance, including epistemic (knowledge and belief), deontic (duty and permission), boulomaic (desire), and perception (sensory stance) domains. This is echoed in [Halliday and Matthiessen \(2004\)](#), who tie modality to the interpersonal function of language and its part in negotiating meaning and stance.

Modality falls into shading in Simpson's map. Epistemic and perception modals point toward negative shading through highlighting doubt or lack of knowledge. Deontic and boulomaic modals drive shading toward the positive-obligation, aspiration, volition. When modality is removed or diminished, shading is more neutral, resulting in detachment. The link here between grammar and tone is in

common use within stylistics since it provides a clear measure by which one can relate form to mood.

Modal expressions therefore function simultaneously as grammatical markers and stylistic resources. In narrative contexts, forms such as *might* may encode probability while also contributing to uncertainty, whereas *must* may encode necessity while producing authority, urgency, or moral pressure.

Empirical Studies on Shading

Previous research has demonstrated the usefulness of modality and shading analysis across a range of literary and non-literary texts. Trimarco (2021), for example, found that negative shading was particularly prominent in Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction, contributing to the atmosphere of uncertainty and psychological tension.

Toolan (2016) likewise highlighted the role of linguistic perspective in shaping readers' interpretations of narrative texts. Studies applying modality-based approaches have also examined point of view, characterization, and evaluative stance in different literary contexts (Parina & De Leon, 2014; Tenev, 2019). Collectively, these studies suggest that modal patterns provide valuable insights into the linguistic construction of narrative perspective, although most analyses have focused on shorter texts or standard literary works.

Shading in Contemporary Fiction

Even with this solid work on shading, most studies have focused on either canonical texts (Poe, Lawrence) or on short fiction. Much fewer studies have systematically explored shading in contemporary novels and few include twenty-first-century novels. This is a lacuna, since modern narratives often display complex structures-shifting focalizations, time jumps, and experimental themes.

The fiction also often engages with historical trauma, war, and global crises-all contexts in which shifts between despair and hope count for a great deal. In such works, shading isn't ornamentation; rather, it becomes an essential element of expression that depicts uncertainty, duty, and resilience. Yet systematic stylistic analyses of shading in modern novels remain scant.

Critical Perspectives on *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*

To situate the present study within existing scholarship, it is necessary to consider the main critical approaches that have been applied to Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. Existing studies have examined the novel from several perspectives, including sensory perception, disability, trauma, hope, existential conflict, and narrative design. Anghel (2020), for example, reads the novel as an artfully structured war narrative in which memory, music, literature, and the legend of the Sea of Flames contribute to its puzzle-like form. Goh (2019) approaches the novel through the idea of touch, arguing that Marie-Laure's world requires readers to attend to tactile and sensory modes of literary experience. Hossain (2023)

similarly focuses on Marie-Laure's blindness, cognition, and language, emphasizing the relationship between sensory limitation and psycholinguistic representation.

Other studies have approached the novel through psychological and ethical concerns. [Waddell \(2019\)](#) offers a psychoanalytic and poetic reading of hope, while [Pandit \(2019\)](#) examines trauma and transformation in the context of war. [Herdianti \(2021\)](#) focuses on Marie-Laure's struggle as a blind teenager, and [Sakinah \(2019\)](#) studies Werner Pfennig's search for meaning through an existential-psychological framework. More recently, [Srie and Kannadhasan \(2024\)](#) examine Werner's dread and desperation, highlighting his moral conflict, uncertainty, and existential anxiety during wartime.

Taken together, these studies show that *All the Light We Cannot See* has been discussed in relation to perception, blindness, trauma, hope, morality, existential struggle, and narrative structure. However, they do not systematically examine the linguistic mechanisms through which evaluative perspective and narrative tone are constructed. In particular, the role of modality in shaping shading, uncertainty, obligation, hope, and narrative stance remains underexplored. The present study addresses this gap by examining how modal patterns contribute to evaluative orientation through Simpson's framework of shading.

Positioning *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* offers a suitable text for examining modality and narrative shading because the novel is shaped by war, uncertainty, and shifting perspectives. Its narrative moves between Marie-Laure and Werner in situations where knowledge is limited and choices are difficult. [Hossain \(2023\)](#) shows that Marie-Laure's blindness is closely connected with cognition and language, while [Srie and Kannadhasan \(2024\)](#) read Werner's experience through dread, desperation, and existential conflict. Taken together, these studies suggest that the novel repeatedly presents scenes of insecurity, moral pressure, and emotional struggle.

At the same time, the existing scholarship has mainly examined what the novel represents rather than how its evaluative stance is linguistically produced. For example, studies of Marie-Laure have emphasized blindness, tactile perception, and cognitive-linguistic adaptation; studies of Werner have focused on guilt, dread, desperation, and the search for meaning; and broader readings have examined war, trauma, hope, art, and narrative structure. These studies provide important interpretive contexts, but they leave room for a more systematic stylistic account of the language through which uncertainty, duty, fear, and hope are textually organized. This is where Simpson's framework becomes useful. Studies on shading and modality have shown that modal patterns can be used to examine point of view, narrator reliability, and evaluative stance ([Parina & De Leon, 2014](#); [Tenev, 2019](#); [Toolan, 2016](#); [Trimarco, 2021](#)). In the same line of inquiry, corpus-based and stylistic studies have continued to show that modality is a useful resource for

analyzing stance and meaning in literary discourse (Mahmoud, 2024; Nawaz, 2023; Siddique & Ahmad, 2022; Virdis, 2024). The present study therefore extends this line of research by applying modality-based shading analysis to a contemporary historical novel.

On this basis, the present study examines modality as a stylistic resource in Doerr's novel and uses Simpson's (2004) framework to trace how modal choices contribute to shading. Rather than treating shading as a result already known in advance, the study looks at how modal expressions are distributed across the text and how they contribute to evaluative tone. In this way, *All the Light We Cannot See* becomes a useful case for extending shading analysis to a contemporary historical novel and for adding a linguistic perspective to existing discussions of Doerr's work.

Methodology

Methodological Justification

The methodology of this study is designed to connect systematic corpus retrieval with context-sensitive stylistic interpretation. Since the study investigates the relationship between modal expressions and narrative shading, it requires a procedure that can first identify relevant modal forms across the whole novel and then interpret their functions in specific narrative contexts. A purely quantitative approach would identify frequency patterns but would not explain how modal choices contribute to tone, perspective, or evaluative meaning. Conversely, a purely qualitative reading would provide interpretive depth but might overlook the broader distribution of modal forms across the text. For this reason, the study combines corpus-based frequency analysis with close stylistic reading.

Corpus-based approaches have increasingly been employed to identify and quantify recurring linguistic patterns across systematically constructed datasets. Such approaches are particularly useful when the objective is to move beyond impressionistic interpretation and establish a systematic account of linguistic features across a complete or carefully defined corpus (Khaghaninejad et al., 2022). In the present study, a corpus-based procedure was adopted for the systematic retrieval and quantitative examination of modal expressions throughout the complete text of the novel.

This approach is appropriate for three reasons. First, it is aligned with Simpson's model because the analysis focuses on core modal auxiliaries and the lexical item *think*, which are central to the present investigation of modality and shading. Second, the use of AntConc allows for systematic retrieval of all selected modal forms rather than selective sampling. Third, close reading ensures that each modal expression is interpreted in relation to its local narrative context, since the same form may perform different modal functions in different passages. In this way, the methodology provides both systematic coverage and interpretive depth.

Research Design

This paper combines a corpus-based quantitative analysis of modality with qualitative stylistic reading to examine how modal patterns contribute to the

construction of shading in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. A mixed-methods approach is appropriate for the study of shading because it is at once quantifiable-through the modal verb distributions-and interpretive, requiring context for understanding. The quantitative component charts modality patterns; the qualitative component describes how those modality patterns sculpt tone. Using both approaches allows the findings to be triangulated and provides a more comprehensive account of shading as a stylistic feature.

Text Selection and Corpus

The dataset for this research is the complete text of Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. Three reasons led to this choice: its stylistic complexity and extensive use of modal expressions make it particularly suitable for investigating modality and shading; its themes swing between despair and hope, fear and duty, which fall into shading's evaluative functions. Also, filling the gap in research, [Simpson's \(2004\)](#) model has been applied mainly to canonical or shorter fiction, not commonly to long contemporary novels. The whole text was digitized and processed so as not to miss any single modal verb, avoiding limits related to offering a comprehensive view of modality-related shading patterns across the novel.

Analytical Framework

This study adopts Simpson's framework as an interpretive model through which modality patterns are examined. Modal expressions are first classified according to modality type and are subsequently interpreted in relation to Simpson's positive, negative, and neutral shading orientations. The analysis therefore focuses on how modality contributes to evaluative perspective and tonal effects within the narrative.

Scope of Modal Verbs Analyzed

The study focuses on a restricted set of modal expressions selected on both theoretical and methodological grounds. Consistent with [Simpson's \(2004\)](#) framework, the analysis concentrates on core English modal auxiliaries because they provide the most explicit and systematically identifiable realizations of epistemic, deontic, and boulomaic modality in the text. In addition, the lexical item *think* was included due to its frequent use as a marker of epistemic judgment and uncertainty, making it relevant to the investigation of modal shading.

Restricting the dataset to these forms ensured consistency in coding and facilitated reliable comparison across modality categories. While other modal and semi-modal expressions (e.g., *have to*, *need to*, *ought to*) may also contribute to evaluative meaning, they were excluded in order to maintain alignment with the analytical scope of Simpson's model and to preserve a manageable and systematically coded corpus. The modal expressions analyzed were:

- **Core modals:** *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *should*, *may*, *might*, and *must*
- **Lexical item with modal function:** *think*

These nine items were then systematically retrieved and analyzed.

Tools and Data Retrieval

The modal verbs were extracted using AntConc (Version 3.5.9) (Anthony, 2018), a widely used concordance tool in corpus stylistics. Separate searches were conducted for each target form, and the resulting concordance lines were examined in context to determine modal function. Raw frequencies were then exported into Microsoft Excel, where each instance was coded for modality type: epistemic, deontic, boulomaic, or perception. These classifications were subsequently interpreted within Simpson's shading framework. This procedure balanced computational efficiency with interpretive accuracy.

Coding Scheme

Each token was coded in three layers:

1. The identity of the modal verb itself, such as *can*, *must*, *might*.
2. Modality type (according to Simpson's categories):
 - Epistemic: *might*, *could*, *think*
 - Deontic: (*must*, *should*)
 - Boulomaic/*would love*, *can hope*, *would* in volitional contexts
 - Perception: *seems*, *will* in predictive use
3. Interpretation within Simpson's shading framework:
 - Epistemic + Perception = Negative shading
 - Deontic + Boulomaic = Positive shading
 - Absence of modality = Neutral shading

Context matters, since the same form can be put to different functions. Thus, "*will*" is deontic in the imperative: "*You will report immediately*" and a perception in the predictive sense: "*This will happen even now?*". Similarly, *would* is boulomaic in the expression of desire: "*I would love to see you again*" but epistemic in signaling hypotheticality.

According to Simpson's model, epistemic and perception modalities are associated with negative shading, whereas deontic and boulomaic modalities are associated with positive shading. These associations were used as an interpretive basis for examining tonal patterns in the corpus.

Reliability Procedures

To ensure reliability, a pilot coding procedure was conducted on the first three chapters, representing approximately 10% of the text. This subset was double-coded, and Cohen's kappa for modality-type classification was $\kappa = .71$, indicating substantial agreement. The main coding challenges involved distinguishing deontic and predictive uses of *will* and separating epistemic from boulomaic uses of *would*. After the differences were discussed and the coding rules were refined, the remaining corpus was coded according to the revised criteria.

Quantitative Analysis

This consisted of three steps:

1. Frequency counts: total number for each modal verb e.g. will 380, can 375, might 88.
2. Interpretation within Simpson's framework: frequency distributions of modality types were examined in relation to Simpson's positive and negative shading orientations.
3. Descriptive frequency comparisons were used to examine the relative prevalence of modality categories associated with different shading orientations.

Qualitative Analysis

Close reading was combined with quantitative data in order to demonstrate exactly how modals create shading in context. Each category of shading is exemplified with representative excerpts:

- Negative shading: epistemic, perception in passages of uncertainty or sensory limitation. For instance, Werner's thoughts about hearing distant voices ("He might still hear her voice in the static") create a doubtful negatively shaded mood.
- Positive shading: deontic (must, should) and boulomaic (would love, can hope) in duty- or aspiration-forward passages. The imperative 'must not leave' is interpreted as positively shaded within Simpson's framework because it foregrounds obligation and commitment. Marie-Laure's "I would love to see you again" shows how boulomaic modality yields hopeful, positively shaded tone.
- Neutral shading: Instances approximating neutral shading were relatively infrequent and are discussed in relation to their local narrative contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The data are from a published novel, so no human subjects were involved. Consent and anonymity are not issues, but ethical scholarship was maintained through accurate attribution of frameworks (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Palmer, 2003; Simpson, 2004) and transparent method reporting. Excerpts from the novel were used solely for scholarly purposes.

Results

The goal of this study was to investigate how modality constructs shading in *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014). Following Simpson's (2004) framework, modal verbs were classified into epistemic, deontic, boulomaic, and perception categories and mapped onto shading orientations: negative (epistemic + perception), positive (deontic + boulomaic), and neutral (absence or minimization of modality). This section first presents the quantitative distribution of modals across shading categories, followed by statistical testing. It then provides a qualitative analysis of representative passages to illustrate how shading operates stylistically in the novel.

Quantitative Findings

To establish the overall modal profile of the novel, frequencies were calculated for each of the selected modal expressions. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of modal verbs across the modality categories used in the analysis.

Modal Verb Frequencies

Table 1 shows the frequency of the nine modal verbs included in the dataset (core auxiliaries plus *think*).

Table 1

Frequencies of Modal Verbs in All the Light We Cannot See

Modal Verb	Epistemic	Deontic	Perception	Boulomaic	Total
can	104	223	44	4	375
could	72	18	27	11	128
will	241	40	72	27	380
would	131	8	11	35	185
should	14	25	2	4	45
may	12	8	12	0	32
might	77	0	11	0	88
must	41	42	0	0	83
think	62	0	0	0	62
Total	754	364	179	81	1,378

There are a number of points that can be raised here. Firstly, *will* and *can* are the most frequently occurring modals, which together represent 55% of the total number of tokens. Secondly, epistemic modality is the dominant modality in the entire corpus, which stands at 54.7% followed by 26.4% for the deontic modals, 13.0% for the perception modals, and 5.9% for the boulomaic modals.

Distribution by Shading Categories

Table 2 reorganizes the data by shading orientation.

Table 2

Distribution of Modal Verbs by Shading Category

Shading Category	Frequency	Percentage
Negative (Epistemic + Perception)	933	67.7%
Positive (Deontic + Boulomaic)	445	32.3%
Neutral (Absence of modality)	0	0%
Total	1,378	100%

The data show a notable prevalence of negative shading, where more than two-thirds of the modal instances are involved in uncertainty, doubt, or ambiguity. Positive shading, while less prevalent, encompasses one-third of the tokens. Instances corresponding to Simpson's neutral shading were infrequent within the modal dataset examined in this study.

Statistical Analysis

To determine whether the distribution of modality types across shading categories was random, a chi-square test of independence was conducted.

- $\chi^2 (2, N = 1,378) = 724.51, p < .001$
- $\Phi = .724$, Cramer's $V = .724$

These values indicate a very strong association between modality type and shading category. The absence of neutral shading also contributed to the strength of the statistical association.

Qualitative Findings

Quantitative results alone cannot capture the stylistic force of shading. Therefore, this section presents close readings of representative passages for each shading category.

Negative Shading

Modal categories associated with negative shading are considerably more frequent than those associated with positive shading.

Example 1 (Epistemic):

"She could be lost, scraping her fingers along walls at the edge of town, drifting farther away every second."

Here, *could* signals possibility rather than certainty, foregrounding Marie-Laure's vulnerability. The use of an epistemic modal colors the passage with doubt, immersing readers in the fear of disorientation.

Example 2 (Epistemic):

"He might still hear her voice somewhere in the static."

Might conveys low probability, reinforcing Werner's uncertainty. The modalization here produces negative shading by highlighting the unreliability of sensory experience.

Example 3 (Perception):

"This will happen even now? Without Madame?"

Although *will* typically encodes futurity, here it expresses a predictive judgment, classified as perception modality. The shading effect is negative because the prediction carries an undertone of inevitability and dread.

Example 4 (Epistemic):

"The shell may be broken, and even portions of it removed."

The modal *may* presents the condition of the shell as a possibility rather than a certainty. By withholding definite knowledge, the passage foregrounds uncertainty and aligns with Simpson's characterization of negative shading.

Example 5 (Epistemic):

“He might be that voice just now drawing nearer.”

The modal *might* signals conjecture and limited certainty. Rather than establishing a stable fact, the statement reflects the speaker’s tentative assessment of the situation, thereby contributing to an atmosphere of ambiguity.

Example 6 (Perception):

“What would happen if the goddess took away the curse?”

Here *would* functions predictively by projecting a hypothetical future outcome. The question invites speculation about an unknown situation and therefore contributes to the uncertainty associated with negative shading.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how epistemic and perception modals generate an atmosphere of ambiguity, fear, and insecurity, consistent with life under occupation and war.

Positive Shading

Positive shading was realized through deontic and boulomaic modals, encoding obligation, volition, and hope.

Example 7 (Deontic):

“No person must attempt to leave the old city. No one must.”

The repetition of *must* encodes obligation and prohibition. While semantically restrictive, deontic necessity here produces positive shading by imposing clarity and authority. The tone conveys order amid chaos, anchoring the narrative in external rules.

Example 8 (Boulomaic):

“I would love to see you again.”

The boulomaic expression *would love* encodes longing and aspiration. In the context of wartime separation, it projects positive shading by foregrounding hope and emotional desire.

Example 9 (Deontic/Boulomaic overlap):

“We should remember, we must continue.”

Here, *should* and *must* work together to reinforce moral duty. Deontic obligation and aspirational force together establish a highly positive attitude in an effective way that resists despair.

Example 10 (Deontic):

“Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever.”

Although the modal *can* expresses ability, within this imperative context it reinforces a directive orientation. The passage emphasizes purposeful action and commitment and characteristics associated with positive shading.

Example 11 (Deontic):

“We will take only the purest, only the strongest.”

In this context, *will* expresses determination and institutional commitment rather than simple futurity. The modal contributes to a sense of decisiveness and obligation that aligns with positive shading.

Example 12 (Boulomaic):

“She can only hope for the best.”

The lexical expression *hope* explicitly encodes desire and aspiration. Despite the uncertainty of the circumstances, the passage projects an orientation toward a desired outcome, making it a clear example of positive shading. By contrast, positive shading helps to moderate the otherwise pervasive message of negativity presented by the novel.

Neutral Shading

Because neutral shading is characterized by minimal modalization rather than by specific modal expressions, it is less readily illustrated through isolated examples. In the corpus, neutral shading typically appeared in brief descriptive passages focused on physical settings or actions without overt expressions of certainty, obligation, prediction, or desire.

Example 13 (Neutral):

“The street is empty. Smoke drifts across the rooftops.”

The passage describes observable details without introducing modal evaluation or subjective judgment.

Example 14 (Neutral):

“The model house sits on the table. The rooms remain unchanged.”

Here the narration remains largely descriptive, presenting information without explicit modal orientation.

Although such passages occur throughout the novel, they are comparatively infrequent and are often followed by modalized discourse that reintroduces evaluative perspective.

Stylistic Interpretation

Modality patterns contributing to shading reveal several stylistic principles in Doerr’s narrative design:

1. Prevalence of negative shading: With nearly 70% of modal tokens contributing to negative shading, the novel foregrounds the uncertainty and precariousness of wartime life. Characters rarely speak or think with certainty; instead, their discourse is saturated with speculation and prediction.
2. Instances of positive shading: Positive shading, though relatively rare, emerges at critical points to establish obligation or convey hope. Such instances recur throughout the narrative to sustain it and prevent the text from descending into despair.

3. Relative absence of neutrality: The scarcity of neutral-shading patterns suggests that evaluative modal expressions play a prominent role in the novel. Within the modal dataset analyzed, expressions associated with negative and positive shading occur substantially more frequently than those corresponding to neutral shading.

These stylistic tendencies are consistent with [Simpson's \(2004\)](#) model and support it by showing how shading can be systematically analyzed in a contemporary novel.

Thematic Connections

The shading patterns are closely aligned with the novel's thematic concerns.

- Negative shading corresponds to the uncertainty of war. Epistemic and perception modals mirror the unpredictability of survival, the fragility of sensory experience, and the vulnerability of individuals.
- Positive shading corresponds to resilience and duty. Deontic and boulomaic modal constructions evoke the needs of war-era resistance and the ambitions of the characters who hold on to hope.
- Alternations between modal patterns associated with negative and positive shading contribute to the thematic contrast between uncertainty and hope that recurs throughout the novel.

Discussion

This paper investigated how modality affects shading in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), working within [Simpson's \(2004\)](#) stylistic framework. By combining corpus-based frequency analysis with close reading, the study demonstrates that shading in the novel proceeds according to a detectable pattern: it follows the distribution of modal verbs. Epistemic and perception modals cluster in negative shading, while deontic and boulomaic modals cluster in positive shading. The researchers find virtually no neutral shading in the corpus. A key implication of this study is that modality serves not just as a stylistic cue but also as a structural principle informing narrative design in contemporary long fiction.

By comparison, there is more extreme shading in Doerr's novel, with very few neutral passages. In comparison, [Trimarco \(2021\)](#) observed that shading was generally negative in Poe's Gothic tales, although some neutral moments were present. [Toolan \(2016\)](#) also observed a balance of shading in realist versus modernist texts. However, neutral shading patterns appear considerably less frequent than positive- and negative-shading patterns, resulting in a strongly evaluative modal profile. This pattern may reflect the evaluative demands of wartime storytelling in this novel, although broader comparisons would be needed before extending this observation to historical fiction more generally.

Theoretical Implications

The results advance stylistics on three counts. First, they illustrate how Simpson's modality-based account of shading can be applied to a contemporary novel. Second, they extend the reach of shading analysis beyond the canonical texts-

works such as Poe or Lawrence-where the approach has traditionally been applied-to a contemporary work of historical fiction. This suggests that shading may be a useful stylistic concept across different literary contexts. Third, the polarized shading witnessed in Doerr's novel-negative and positive, with hardly any neutral-suggests a refinement to Simpson's framework: neutral shading patterns may occur less frequently in narratives characterized by sustained evaluative tension.

Literary and Narratological Implications

Beyond its theoretical contributions to stylistics, this study offers significant insights for literary criticism and narratology. The findings reveal that modal patterns provide a linguistic perspective through which the novel's moral ambiguity can be examined. The strong polarization of shading, where negative modality dominates the scenes of war and positive modality marks moments of resilience, offers a linguistic account of how the novel represents uncertainty, obligation, resilience, and hope.

From a narratological standpoint, this analysis refines our understanding of "focalization" in the novel. Examples from Marie-Laure's sections frequently feature perception-related modality, which linguistically construct a world defined by sensory uncertainty, while Werner's internal conflicts are frequently expressed through deontic modal forms in the passages examined. The findings suggest a close relationship between modal patterning and thematic concerns within the novel. This supplements literary interpretation with systematic linguistic evidence, demonstrating the value of linguistic stylistics as a tool for rigorous narratological analysis.

Pedagogical Implications

These results also bear on language-and-literature teaching. Shading analysis may be used to:

- Indicate to students that modal verbs contribute to the construction of tone and evaluative perspective
- Assist the learner in distinguishing between the use of epistemic, deontic, boulomaic, and perception functions
- Explain the relationship between stylistic features and themes, and show how the skills are linked to linguistics

By closely reading shading in *All the Light We Cannot See*, students can observe how language indicate both uncertainty and hope, binding form to human experience.

The research indicates that modality plays a central role in the shading patterns identified in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. Negative shading prevails, making uncertainty widespread, while positive shading is used in the context of resilience and obligation. Neutral-shading patterns were comparatively infrequent within the dataset analyzed. This polarized pattern aligns with the novel's recurring themes of uncertainty, resilience, obligation, and survival.

While this analysis deepens our understanding of modality and shading in narrative fiction, it also shows how such linguistic insights can be brought to bear on

teaching practice. By foregrounding the connection between modal choice and the design of tone, the study provides teachers with a framework through which students may be directed toward more systematic, text-based understandings of narrative stance. This pedagogically oriented perspective widens the applicability of the findings beyond literary scholarship to classroom practice itself, demonstrating just how stylistic tools can enable more engaged approaches to complex narratives.

Methodological Contributions

The value of combining corpus tools with stylistic interpretation is also thrown into relief by the study. AntConc enabled the precise extraction and measurement of modal verb use, adding systematic quantitative evidence, and close reading contributed context and insight. There is clearly the potential for such mixed-methods research to illustrate how stylistics can facilitate the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation.

Beyond theory, the findings have practical implications for teaching by offering concrete classroom strategies. In literature classes, shading analysis helps students see how grammar and tone intersect, deepening engagement with narrative voice and atmosphere. Instructors can implement this by designing comparative exercises where students analyze excerpts from the novel to identify how specific modal verbs shift the emotional weight of a passage. For example, students can be asked to locate epistemic modals like "might" or "could" in scenes of danger and contrast them with deontic modals like "must" or "should" in scenes of moral decision-making. This activity moves students beyond intuitive interpretation, simply saying a text feels "scary" or "serious", to a precise linguistic analysis where they can demonstrate exactly how the author constructs those feelings. In TEFL contexts, where modal verbs are often taught in isolation as dry grammar rules, this study suggests that they can be introduced as stylistic devices that shape tone and attitude. By framing grammar as a tool for literary expression, teachers can enhance both linguistic accuracy and critical interpretation skills simultaneously, making the learning process more integrated and meaningful.

Beyond its pedagogical relevance, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) by providing a linguistic account of how evaluative perspective is constructed through modality. While previous studies have largely focused on the novel's themes, narrative structure, and representation of perception, the present analysis shows how patterns of epistemic, perception, deontic, and boulomaic modality contribute to the portrayal of uncertainty, obligation, resilience, and hope throughout the narrative. In this way, the study complements existing literary interpretations by identifying specific linguistic resources through which these thematic concerns are expressed. The findings may also have applications in language and literature education, particularly in EFL contexts where students often encounter difficulties in identifying tone and narrative stance. Analyzing modality may help learners develop more systematic and text-based approaches to literary interpretation. Modal auxiliaries provide accessible entry points for examining how varying degrees of uncertainty, obligation, desire, and emotional conflict are conveyed within a text. Classroom activities incorporating modality-based stylistic analysis may therefore

encourage students to connect linguistic choices with characterization, perspective, and thematic development.

The shading patterns in Doerr's novel, moving between fear, uncertainty, duty, and hope, invite taking a closer look at culturally embedded expressions of emotion and perspective. Seen this way, stylistic analysis may provide opportunities for connecting linguistic awareness with intercultural reflection.

Limitations

As with any single-text study, this work has limits. The results are limited to *All the Light We Cannot See* and cannot be generalized to all modern fiction without further evidence. Not taking semi-modals - need to, have to, ought to - into account reduces the dataset; this was necessary, however, so that this study would remain consistent with Simpson's model and the data. Moreover, while shading was examined at the level of modal verbs, other linguistic features responsible for tonal orientation, such as adjectives, adverbs, or narrative syntax, are also worthy of future study.

Future Research

Future work might extend this analysis in a variety of directions: Comparative studies across several contemporary novels would show whether the polarized shading pattern seen here is representative of modern historical fiction, or distinctive to Doerr's style. Cross-linguistic studies of translations could examine the extent to which shading patterns are maintained or altered across languages, thereby providing further insight into the interaction between modality, translation practices, and cultural context.

The analysis could also be extended to multimodal contexts by examining how shading interacts with visual and cinematic representations of narrative events and perspectives. Finally, the integration of modal analysis with reader response studies might show in detail how shading influences reader perception and emotional uptake.

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