

A Comparative Study on the Semantic Similarities and Differences Between Chinese Modal Verbs and Korean Modal Constructions in Daily Communication

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Abstract

This study employs a mixed-method contrastive analysis to investigate the semantic similarities and differences between Chinese modal verbs and Korean modal constructions in everyday communication. Modal structures in both languages are categorized by their function (ability, obligation, desire) and systematically compared using corpus data, contextual examples, and learner feedback. Key findings highlight that while Chinese and Korean share these basic modal categories, they differ in structural expression (Chinese uses invariant modal verbs whereas Korean uses inflected modal constructions) and in pragmatic usage (Korean encodes politeness levels overtly, whereas Chinese relies more on context). These differences often pose challenges for learners, as evidenced by a survey and interviews, underscoring the need for explicit contrastive teaching. The study proposes pedagogical strategies for bilingual education to address these issues and improve learners' accuracy and intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: Chinese modal verbs, Korean modal constructions, contrastive linguistics, pragmatics, language teaching, bilingual education

1. Introduction

In the context of global integration, the need for mastering foreign languages is becoming increasingly vital. Chinese and Korean have emerged as popular choices, especially in East Asia. Beyond vocabulary and basic grammar, learners must grasp key linguistic structures to communicate effectively. Modal verbs in Chinese and modal constructions in Korean play essential roles in expressing ability, obligation, and desire. However, due to grammatical and pragmatic differences, learners face challenges in transferring these structures correctly. This paper conducts a systematic comparative study of these two systems to enhance bilingual Chinese–Korean language instruction. Furthermore, this study argues that a deep understanding of modal structures not only enhances learners' communication skills but also fosters intercultural competence. Learners need to recognize how language reflects social hierarchies and politeness strategies, which are crucial in East Asian communication cultures.

In light of these challenges, a systematic comparative analysis of Chinese and Korean modal expressions is necessary. Although Chinese and Korean are often studied separately, there have been only limited direct comparisons of their grammar; notable exceptions in modality research include Zhang (2016) and Han (2014), who laid groundwork for understanding specific differences. Such an analysis not only contributes to linguistic theory by revealing how two different grammars solve similar communicative tasks, but also has practical value for learners and teachers navigating both languages. As Chinese and Korean continue to grow in global importance, understanding their differences and similarities helps in translation, diplomacy, and education. This study addresses this need by examining the modal systems of both languages side by side. The following sections describe the theoretical background for the study, the research methodology, the results of the analysis, and a discussion of their implications for linguistics and language education.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the disciplines of contrastive linguistics and pragmatics, which together provide a lens for examining how different languages handle similar communicative functions. Contrastive linguistics (as discussed by Lado, 1957, and others) involves the systematic comparison of languages to identify similarities and

differences, often to predict areas of difficulty for language learners. Lado's (1957) contrastive analysis hypothesis posits that language elements that differ markedly between a learner's first and second language will be more challenging to master. Therefore, we anticipated that Chinese-specific or Korean-specific modal patterns would create learning difficulties—an expectation borne out by the survey results. In our context, it means comparing Chinese and Korean to uncover structural correspondences or mismatches in expressing modality. General linguistic theories of modality define it as the grammatical and semantic expression of a speaker's attitudes, possibilities, obligations, or desires (Palmer, 1990). Lyons (1977) distinguishes modality into categories like **epistemic** (related to knowledge and belief) and **deontic** (related to duty and permission), among others. Although this study focuses on deontic and dynamic modalities (ability, obligation, desire), these fall within the broader semantic framework outlined by Lyons and Palmer.

In Chinese linguistics, modal verbs (情态动词) such as those studied here are a well-defined category: they precede the main verb and impart meanings like possibility, necessity, or desire (Lu, 2011). They do not conjugate for tense or politeness, which means their interpretation heavily relies on context and particles. Korean, on the other hand, often expresses modality through verb endings or auxiliary constructions integrated into the verb phrase (Lee & Ramsey, 2000). For example, what functions as a single-word modal verb in Chinese might correspond to a verb + suffix or a compound construction in Korean. This fundamental difference ties back to typology: Chinese is an **isolating** language (words are mostly uninflected), whereas Korean is an **agglutinative** language (using inflected verb forms). As a result, Chinese modal verbs stand as separate units (e.g., 能, 要) and Korean modals attach to verbs (e.g., -아야 하다). Pragmatic theory also informs this study, especially in understanding how social context affects language use. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) helps explain why, for instance, a direct "must" might be softened in one culture and not in another. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that in any language, speakers use politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts like commands or requests; thus a direct imposition (such as telling someone they *must* do something) is often softened. This theory is reflected in our analysis: what might be a blunt command in Chinese may be delivered more indirectly in Korean, or cushioned with polite markers in Chinese, aligning with universal politeness principles. In both Chinese and Korean, cultural values such as respect for elders and authority influence how obligations or desires are expressed. This linguistic contrast is partly rooted in sociocultural differences: Korean's speech levels align with a deep-rooted emphasis on hierarchy and respect in society, whereas Chinese, though it has polite forms of address, relies less on grammatical hierarchy and more on situational context for politeness. This study builds on previous comparative research (Zhang, 2016; Han, 2014; Wang, 2018) that has noted these languages share modal meanings but differ in use. By situating our analysis within these theoretical frameworks, we aim to systematically account for not only *what* the similarities and differences are, but also *why* they might exist – be it due to grammatical structure or pragmatic convention.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this comparative study are as follows:

- To define the scope and semantic functions of Chinese and Korean modal structures.
- To compare modal expressions in both languages based on form, function, and pragmatic features.
- To analyze differences in politeness levels and sociocultural contexts influencing modal usage.
- To assess learner comprehension and usage of these modal forms, providing pedagogical insights.
- To evaluate how these modal expressions influence language perception and intercultural awareness among learners.

4. Methodology

The research employs a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis of modal constructions in Chinese and Korean. The qualitative components allow an in-depth exploration of semantic and pragmatic characteristics of modal verbs and constructions, while the quantitative components support the aggregation and statistical examination of linguistic data and learner responses. This approach enables the study to not only compare grammatical forms but also consider usage frequency and learner perception. Table 1 provides an overview of the research design, outlining each major step of the methodology along with its purpose and data sources.

Table 1. Overview of the research design and methodology.

Step	Activity	Purpose	Tools/Data Sources
Semantic Analysis	Analyze modal expressions in both languages	Identify functional scope of modal usage	Linguistic texts (grammar books, dictionaries)
Pragmatic Analysis	Examine contextual usage in real communication	Assess politeness and nuance in usage	Dialogues, films, class conversations
Corpus Analysis	Collect and process usage examples	Provide empirical evidence and usage frequency	Textbooks, transcripts of speech
Systematic Comparison	Compare form–function correspondences	Identify structural similarities and differences	Contrastive tables and charts
Learner Survey	Gather student and teacher feedback	Derive practical insights for teaching	Questionnaires, interviews

As outlined in Table 1, the study consisted of sequential stages incorporating both analysis of language data and collection of learner feedback. Specifically, the research design included five main components. Table 2 below summarizes these steps with their specific objectives and data sources, and each step is detailed in the subsequent subsections.

Table 2. Detailed methodological steps with objectives and data sources.

Step	Activity	Objective	Data/Tools
Semantic Analysis	Analyze the expressive functions of Chinese and Korean modal forms	Clarify the semantic scope, equivalences, and variations in expression	Grammar books, linguistic studies (e.g., Lee & Ramsey 2000; Lu 2011)
Pragmatic Analysis	Observe modal usage in natural contexts	Examine politeness strategies and context-dependent meanings	Real-life conversations, film dialogues, teaching scripts
Corpus Analysis	Compile a bilingual corpus of modal usage examples	Provide quantitative frequency data and usage patterns	Sample sentences from textbooks, transcribed conversations
Systematic Comparison	Align Chinese and Korean modal expressions by category	Highlight one-to-one and one-to-many form-function correspondences	Comparative charts, contrastive analysis framework
Learner Survey	Survey and interview language learners and instructors	Evaluate learning difficulties and gather pedagogical feedback	Questionnaires (100 students), interviews (5 instructors)

4.1 Semantic Analysis

This phase focused on identifying and cataloguing the modal verbs and constructions in Chinese and Korean, particularly those expressing ability, obligation, and desire. Key linguistic resources and grammar references were consulted to establish a list of relevant modal forms in each language (Lee & Ramsey, 2000; Lu, 2011). For Chinese, this included modal verbs such as 能 (néng), 可以 (kěyǐ), 必须 (bìxū), 应该 (yīnggāi), 得 (děi), 想 (xiǎng), among others, each representing different shades of ability, necessity, or desire. For Korean, core modal constructions and auxiliary verbs were identified, including the ability construction “-(으)ㄴ 수 있다”, the obligation expression “-아/어야 하다”, and the desire expression “-고 싶다”, along with their variations. During this stage, definitions and example sentences for each modal were gathered from grammar texts and bilingual dictionaries to understand their meanings and usage. This semantic inventory provided the foundation for subsequent contrastive analysis, ensuring that the comparison covers equivalent functions in both languages.

4.2 Pragmatic Analysis

In this stage, the usage of modal expressions was examined within real-life communicative contexts to capture pragmatic nuances. Sample dialogues and conversational excerpts were collected from sources such as contemporary films, TV dramas, everyday situational dialogues, and classroom interactions. Approximately 20 dialogues (10 in Chinese and 10 in Korean) were selected to represent informal daily communication scenarios (for example, making requests, offering help, or stating personal needs). These dialogues were analyzed to observe how native speakers employ modal expressions in context—paying particular attention to politeness levels, formality, and implicit meanings. For instance, the analysis noted whether speakers softened obligations (e.g., using polite phrasing in Korean to mitigate a command) or dropped modal words when context made the intent clear. Examining modals pragmatically allowed the study to document not just literal meaning but also how factors like social relationship (e.g., speaking to a friend vs. a superior) influence the choice and form of modal expressions. This qualitative context analysis was crucial for understanding cultural conventions behind the use of modals in both languages.

4.3 Corpus Analysis

To complement the qualitative insights, a mini-corpus of written and spoken material was compiled to provide empirical data on modal usage frequency. This corpus consisted of example sentences and short passages extracted from Chinese and Korean language textbooks, as well as transcripts of spoken conversations from instructional materials. In total, approximately 200 sentences (about 100 from each language) containing at least one modal expression were collected. Each instance in the corpus was coded for its modal type (ability, obligation, or desire) and context (e.g., a formal written example or an informal speech segment). Using this data, the frequency of each modal form was tallied and compared across languages. For example, the occurrences of Chinese 能 vs. 可以 were counted to see which is more commonly used for “can,” and similarly the frequency of the Korean “-아/어야 하다” for “must/should” was noted. This quantitative analysis provided a statistical backdrop to the contrastive study, revealing which modal expressions are most prevalent in educational materials and whether certain functions are emphasized more in one language than the other. Basic descriptive statistics (percentages and counts) were used to summarize this information, which fed into the interpretation of how modality is emphasized or nuanced differently in Chinese and Korean usage.

4.4 Systematic Comparison

With the semantic list and usage data prepared, the study carried out a systematic contrastive comparison of the Chinese and Korean modal expressions. Each Chinese modal verb identified was paired with its closest Korean equivalent(s) in function, and vice versa, to map out direct correspondences and gaps. For instance, Chinese “能/可以” (denoting ability or permission) were matched with Korean “-(으)러 수 있다,” whereas Chinese “想” (“want to”) was aligned with Korean “-고 싶다.” These pairings were organized into comparative charts (such as Table 3 in the Results section) highlighting how each semantic category (ability, obligation, desire) is realized in each language. During the comparison, special attention was given to one-to-many correspondences; for example, the Chinese obligation modals “必须/应该/得” versus the essentially single Korean construction “-아/어야 하다.” Differences in grammatical structure were noted, such as the use of standalone modal verbs in Chinese compared to affixed verb endings in Korean, as well as differences in how tense or politeness is encoded alongside modality. This stage was analytical and interpretive, drawing on contrastive linguistics principles to articulate the precise similarities and differences in meaning, usage, and formality of each modal expression across the two languages. The outcome of this step was a clear mapping between the modal systems of Chinese and Korean, which serves as the basis for discussing pedagogical implications.

4.5 Learner Survey

Finally, to incorporate an applied perspective, the study gathered data on learner experiences with Chinese and Korean modals. A survey was conducted using an online questionnaire, completed by 100 university students (50 whose primary foreign language was Chinese and 50 whose primary foreign language was Korean). To encourage honest feedback, responses were collected anonymously. These students, all of whom had intermediate proficiency in their target language, were asked about their understanding and usage of modal expressions. The survey included multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions on topics such as the students’ confidence in using modals appropriately, perceived difficulty in learning these expressions, and instances of confusion or error when translating modals between Chinese and Korean. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, including 7 Likert-scale statements and 3 open-ended questions. Students were asked to rate statements such as “I can easily find an equivalent modal expression in Korean for a Chinese sentence” and “Using Korean modal constructions appropriately requires attention to politeness levels” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

They also provided examples of any modal expressions that had confused them. Meanwhile, the interviews were semi-structured, lasting about 20 minutes each, allowing instructors to elaborate on specific difficulties (for example, one question was “What common mistakes do your students make when using modals in the target language?”). Responses from the interviews were later transcribed and analyzed for common themes. In addition, five language instructors (two teaching Chinese to Korean students and three teaching Korean to Chinese students, each with five to fifteen years of teaching experience each) were interviewed to gain qualitative insights. These instructors provided observations on common mistakes students make with modals and suggested teaching strategies to address these issues. Data from the surveys were compiled and analyzed quantitatively (calculating response percentages for each question), and the interview responses were summarized to highlight recurring themes. Furthermore, to observe learners in action, a subset of the surveyed students participated in a simulated dialogue activity. They were given short bilingual role-play scenarios requiring the use of modal expressions (e.g., one student gave instructions in Chinese which another had to translate into Korean in real-time). This exercise provided additional qualitative data on how learners apply modal knowledge spontaneously. Common issues noted in these role-plays (such as a tendency to translate literally and thereby produce pragmatically odd sentences) were recorded for analysis. By integrating learner feedback, this step ensured that the study’s findings would directly relate to real-world educational challenges and outcomes.

In summary, this combination of qualitative and quantitative methods ensured a well-rounded and thorough analysis. The detailed contrastive examination of grammar and context (qualitative) illuminates subtle differences in meaning and usage, while the empirical data from corpus frequencies and learner surveys (quantitative) provide evidence of how prominent those differences are in actual language use. This robust approach lays the groundwork for the findings presented in the next section, allowing the study to pinpoint precisely where Chinese and Korean modal expressions converge and where they diverge.

5. Research Findings

The analysis of the data revealed that Chinese modal verbs and Korean modal constructions share certain core semantic functions, but they differ significantly in structure, usage frequency, and pragmatic nuances. Both languages clearly express the notions of ability, obligation, and desire, indicating a common set of communicative needs. However, the manner in which these are expressed—through standalone verbs in Chinese versus conjugated verb endings or auxiliary constructions in Korean—introduces differences in formality and nuance. In particular, the grammatical inflection system and honorific levels in Korean contribute to more layered expressions of modality, whereas Chinese modal usage tends to be more straightforward and context-dependent. Table 3 provides an overview of representative modal expressions in each language for the three categories examined, along with their general meanings and example sentences.

Table 3. Comparison of modal expressions in Chinese and Korean (ability, obligation, *desire*).

Semantic Function	Chinese	Korean	General Meaning	Example (Chinese)	Example (Korean)
Ability	能 / 可以	-(으)를 수 있다	can, be able (ability/possibility)	我可以跳舞。 (<i>Wǒ kěyǐ tiàowǔ.</i>) – I can dance.	나는 춤출 수 있어요. (<i>Naneun chumchul su isseoyo.</i>) – I can dance.
Obligation	必须 / 应该 / 得	-아/어야 하다	must, have to, should	你必须完成作业。 (<i>Nǐ bìxū wánchéng zuòyè.</i>) – You must finish your homework.	숙제를 꼭 해야 해요. (<i>Sukje-reul kkok haeya haeyo.</i>) – You absolutely have to do your homework.
Desire	想	-고 싶다	want to (desire/intention)	我想吃饭。 (<i>Wǒ xiǎng chīfàn.</i>) – I want to eat.	밥 먹고 싶어요. (<i>Bap meokgo sipeoyo.</i>) – I want to eat.

5.1 Expression of Ability

Both Chinese and Korean have a way to express the concept of “can” or ability, but they do so using different structures. In Chinese, ability or possibility is commonly expressed with the modal verbs 能 (*néng*) or 可以 (*kěyǐ*). These two words are often interchangeable in contexts of ability, though 可以 can also imply permission

(“be allowed to”). Additionally, Chinese uses 会 (huì) to indicate a learned ability or skill (e.g., 我会说韩语. “I can (know how to) speak Korean”). In Korean, by contrast, a single construction -(으)ㄴ 수 있다 encapsulates both ability and possibility (e.g., 한국어를 할 수 있다 “can speak Korean”). Korean does not have separate standalone modal verbs for “can”; instead, it uses this verb-ending construction attached to the main verb. If expressing permission explicitly, Korean might use a different phrase (如 “-아/어도 되다” meaning “it is okay to...”). As a result, Chinese speakers have to choose between 能, 可以, or 会 based on nuance, whereas Korean speakers consistently use -ㄴ 수 있다 and rely on context or additional phrases to clarify the exact meaning (ability vs. permission vs. learned skill). For example, where a Chinese speaker might say 你可以走了。(Nǐ kěyǐ zǒu le, “You can leave now”), implying permission, a Korean speaker would likely say 이제 가도 돼요。(Ije gado dwaeyo, “You may leave now”), using a permission construction rather than the general ability form. In terms of usage frequency, our corpus analysis found that approximately 60% of Chinese “can” statements used 可以 and 40% used 能, indicating a slight preference for 可以 (often for permission). Meanwhile, the Korean -ㄴ 수 있다 was one of the most frequently occurring modal forms overall, reflecting its broad usage for various types of ability or possibility statements. Notably, the structure of the Korean expression requires the verb to be conjugated (e.g., 춤추다 *chumchuda*, “to dance,” becomes 춤출 수 있다), and a polite ending (e.g., -어요) is added when needed, whereas Chinese 能/可以 remain the same regardless of formality (politeness in Chinese is conveyed by context or adding polite words like 请). This difference means that learners transitioning between the languages must pay attention not only to vocabulary but also to sentence structure and honorifics when expressing ability.

5.2 Expression of Obligation

To express necessity or obligation (“must/should”), Chinese and Korean again use different mechanisms with subtle differences in strength and politeness. In Chinese, multiple modal verbs convey obligation. 必须 (bìxū) denotes a strong necessity (“must”), 得 (děi, colloquial for “have to”), and 应该 (yīnggāi) suggests a softer obligation or expectation (“should/ought to”). All three appear in daily communication, though 应该 is often used for giving advice or stating what is expected in a given situation, whereas 必须 is used for non-negotiable requirements. For example, 你必须按时上课 (“You *must* attend class on time”) versus 你应该多练习 (“You *should* practice more”). Korean primarily employs the construction -아/어야 하다 (literally “to have to”) to cover the meaning of must/should. For instance, 숙제를 해야 합니다 means “(I/you) have to do homework.” This construction is quite firm, but Koreans can soften an obligation by phrasing it differently—such as using a suggestion like -는 것이 좋다 (“it would be good to...”) instead of directly saying “must.” Unlike Chinese, which chooses different words to adjust the force of the obligation, Korean adjusts the delivery: the same grammar -아/어야 하다 might be used in both strict and mild contexts, with tone, additional adverbs, or alternative expressions differentiating the nuance. For example, to strongly emphasize necessity, a Korean speaker might add 꼭 (kkok, “absolutely”) as in our example 숙제를 꼭 해야 해요, while to merely suggest something, they might avoid -야 하다 altogether and say 숙제 하는 게 좋겠어요 (“It would be good to do your homework”). The Chinese side, in contrast, directly switches to a softer modal like 应该 for that purpose. Politeness levels also play a major role in how obligations are expressed. In Chinese, politeness is conveyed lexically or by using a polite address (您, polite “you,” or adding 请) – the modal verb itself remains unchanged. A sentence like 您应该休息了。(Nín yīnggāi xiūxi le, “You should rest now.”) is polite mainly because of the honorific pronoun 您, not because of any change in 应该. In Korean, the verb ending changes with the level of respect: -해야 합니다 (*haeya hamnida*) is a formal level appropriate when speaking to someone of higher status, whereas -해야 해요 (*haeya haeyo*) is polite but more casual. For example, a Chinese speaker might say to a superior, 您应该休息了。(“You should rest now.”) directly using 应该 with a polite pronoun, whereas a Korean speaker in a similar situation might avoid a direct “must” and instead say 좀 쉬시는 게 좋겠습니다 (*Jom swisineun ge jotgetseumnida*, “It would be good if you rested a bit.”), thereby implying the suggestion more gently without using -야 하다. Our analysis found that 应该 was the most commonly observed Chinese obligation modal in conversational-style data (accounting for roughly half of all obligation usages), while 必须 and 得 together accounted for the other half and appeared mostly in contexts implying strict rules or urgent necessity. On the Korean side, instances of -아/어야 하다 were frequent across contexts, but especially common in instructional or advisory statements. This suggests that English-speaking learners might find Chinese obligative expressions more lexically varied but structurally simple, whereas Korean obligative expressions are structurally uniform but require attention to context and formality to interpret correctly.

5.3 Expression of Desire

When it comes to expressing desires or wants (“want to do something”), Chinese and Korean use somewhat parallel constructions, but again with differences in usage constraints. In Chinese, the primary modal verb for

expressing a desire to do something is 想 (xiǎng, “want to”). For example, 我想吃饭 translates literally to “I want to eat.” One can also say 想要 in some cases (我想要喝咖啡, “I want to drink coffee”), but 想 followed by a verb is the most common colloquial form for personal desires. In Korean, the construction -고 싶다 attached to a verb stem (literally “to want to do”) is used, as in 먹고 싶어요 (*meokgo sipeoyo*, “(I) want to eat”). This is fairly direct and is typically used for first-person statements or questions to the second person (e.g., 뭐 하고 싶어요? “What do you want to do?”). One key difference is that in Korean, it’s uncommon to use -고 싶다 to directly state someone else’s desire (third person) unless quoting them; instead, a construction like -고 싶어하다 is used to mean “someone wants to...” in a descriptive sense. In Chinese, 想 can be used for any person (我想, 你想, 他想) without changing form, though context clarifies who has the desire. Another difference is how polite or indirect one might be when expressing wants. In many Korean contexts, especially when speaking to someone of higher status, it can be seen as too forward to directly state one’s desire or ask about the other’s desire. Koreans often opt for more indirect expressions such as -으면 좋겠다 (“it would be nice if...”) to express a wish or preference. For instance, rather than saying 저는 지금 가고 싶습니다 (*Jeoneun jigeum gago sipseumnida*, “I want to leave now”) to a superior—which, while grammatically correct, might be considered too blunt—a Korean speaker might say 지금 그만 퇴근하면 좋겠습니다 (*Jigeum geuman toegeunhamyeon joketseumnida*, “It would be good if I could finish work now”), phrased as a tentative wish. In Chinese, an analogous situation would more likely be phrased directly: 我想下班了 (Wǒ xiǎng xiàbān le, “I want to get off work now”), relying on context and tone for politeness. Chinese lacks a formal honorific system, so politeness is conveyed by word choice (e.g., using 您 for “you”) or tone rather than changing the modal verb. In terms of frequency, expressions of desire are very common in both languages for everyday conversation (talking about wants, plans, etc.). Our data showed that 想 was indeed among the most frequent modals in Chinese informal dialogue samples (with over 30 occurrences), often appearing in personal conversations about plans or needs. Another variant, 想要, appeared only a few times and typically when the object of desire was a noun rather than an action. The Korean -고 싶다 also appeared frequently (over 25 instances), though slightly less often than the ability modal or obligation construction, perhaps because Koreans sometimes use alternative phrasing (like proposing an activity with -까요 or expressing preferences indirectly with -으면 좋겠다). Overall, both languages provide a straightforward way to express wants, but Korean requires attention to social context when using -고 싶다, whereas Chinese speakers navigate the expression of desire with relatively more grammatical simplicity, adjusting politeness in other ways.

5.4 Learner Survey and Usage Statistics

The comparative frequency analysis and learner feedback shed light on how these similarities and differences impact actual language learners. In the sample corpus of textbooks and dialogues, it was observed that ability expressions accounted for roughly 35% of modal usage in both Chinese and Korean data, obligation-related expressions about 30%, and desire-related expressions around 35%. These proportions suggest that all three functions are prominently featured in language use, with a fairly balanced distribution. However, the specific words and forms used differ, as discussed above (e.g., Chinese splitting the share among several obligation words versus Korean relying mainly on one). Specifically, in the Chinese portion of the corpus, the modal of desire 想 had the highest count (30 instances), followed by the ability/permission modals 可以 (25 instances) and 能 (20 instances). The obligation-related modals were less frequent: 应该 appeared 15 times, while the stronger 必须 and the colloquial 得 appeared 5 times each. In the Korean data, the versatile -ㄴ 수 있다 (“can”) occurred 45 times, reflecting its use for both ability and possibility, while -아/어야 하다 (“must”) appeared 30 times and -고 싶다 (“want to”) 25 times. This numerical distribution illustrates how Chinese spreads modal meanings across a larger set of words, whereas Korean concentrates them into a few high-frequency forms.

Importantly, the learner survey provided insight into how non-native speakers perceive and handle these modal differences. The key results of the survey can be summarized as follows:

- **72% of students** reported difficulties in transferring equivalent modal constructions between Chinese and Korean. In other words, a majority found that knowing how to express a modal idea in one language did not guarantee they could do so correctly in the other language.
- **64% of students** said they struggled to fully recognize or interpret the nuanced meanings of Korean modal expressions. This was especially true for expressions of obligation and politeness in Korean, which they found less straightforward than their Chinese counterparts.
- **80% of learners** agreed that a contrastive learning approach (directly comparing Chinese and Korean structures) is essential for mastering these modal forms. These students believed that side-by-side comparison helped them understand the differences better than learning each language in isolation.

These findings underscore the pedagogical importance of addressing modal expressions in a comparative manner. The high percentage of learners facing transfer difficulties indicates that without guidance, students tend to apply the modal usage rules of their first language to the other, leading to errors. Notably, during the role-play task described in the methodology, several learners simply translated Chinese modal verbs word-for-word into Korean (and vice versa) without adjusting for formality or structure, resulting in sentences that sounded unnatural to native speakers. After a brief corrective feedback session, those same students were able to reformulate their sentences using the appropriate modal constructions and politeness levels, illustrating how increased awareness can immediately improve cross-language communication. For example, several Chinese learners of Korean in the survey confessed to translating “应该” too directly into Korean or using -고 싶다 in contexts where it was inappropriate to the level of politeness. Likewise, some Korean learners of Chinese admitted to overusing 必须 (must) thinking it covers all senses of “have to,” thus sometimes coming across too strong in situations where 应该 (should) would be more appropriate. One Chinese respondent admitted, “I used -고 싶다 to ask my Korean teacher what she wanted to do, and she looked surprised. Now I realize that’s not a polite way to ask.” This illustrates a pragmatic misunderstanding in using a direct modal expression. Conversely, a Korean student learning Chinese shared that they found the choice between 应该 and 必须 confusing in terms of strength, leading them to sometimes choose overly mild wording when a stronger tone was intended.

Overall, the usage statistics and learner feedback confirm that while Chinese and Korean share analogous ways to express modal meanings, the differences are non-trivial and can hinder communication if not addressed. They also confirm that a pedagogical approach which compares and contrasts these structures can significantly aid learners in navigating both languages more effectively.

6. Discussion

The comparative findings above offer several insights into both the linguistic nature of modality in Chinese and Korean and the practical challenges faced by learners. In this section, the key discoveries of the study are interpreted in light of existing research, and their academic and practical significance is highlighted.

To summarize, the analysis identified several key contrasts between Chinese and Korean modal usage:

- **Structural form:** Chinese employs standalone modal verbs (e.g., 能, 想) placed before the main verb, whereas Korean uses verb-affixed constructions or auxiliary verb phrases (e.g., -아/어야 하다, -고 싶다) to convey modality.
- **Politeness encoding:** Korean modal expressions inherently tie into the honorific system (verb endings change depending on politeness level), while Chinese modal verbs themselves do not change form; politeness in Chinese is conveyed through words like 请 (“please”) or pronoun choice (e.g., 您) and context rather than grammatical inflection.
- **Lexical variety vs. generality:** Chinese often has multiple modal terms for a similar function (each with a slight nuance)—for instance, three ways to express obligation—whereas Korean typically uses one primary construction for that function, relying on context or extra words to adjust nuance. Conversely, for expressing ability, Chinese splits meanings among 能 (capability), 会 (learned ability), and 可以 (permission/possibility), whereas Korean’s -ㄴ 수 있다 covers all, requiring context for precision.
- **Pragmatic usage:** Korean speakers tend to soften or imply modal meanings to maintain politeness (often preferring indirect suggestions over direct “must” or “want” statements), whereas Chinese speakers more often articulate the modal concept directly (though they may use particles like 吧 or tone to soften commands or requests). This means a direct translation of a modal expression from one language to the other can sometimes sound too blunt or too vague if cultural context is not considered.

These contrasts form the basis for the following discussion on theoretical and pedagogical implications.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

From a linguistic perspective, this study reinforces and extends the understanding of modality within the framework of contrastive analysis. By examining ability, obligation, and desire expressions, we see that these categories are indeed fundamental semantic domains present in both languages, supporting general modality theories (Palmer, 1990; Lyons, 1977) that classify modals into deontic (obligation/permission), dynamic (ability/volition), and other types. Our findings confirm that Chinese and Korean, despite belonging to very different language families, have parallel semantic categories for modality – a point noted in previous comparative studies (Zhang, 2016; Wang, 2018). However, the way these languages encode those categories differs considerably due to their typological characteristics. Chinese, an isolating language, tends to use separate, invariant modal verbs (or modal adverbs) to express modal meanings, whereas Korean, an agglutinative language, uses verb

suffix constructions that integrate modal meaning with tense and politeness marking. As Song (2005) describes, Korean's agglutinative structure and honorific system mean that modality in Korean cannot be entirely separated from its speech-level context – a nuance exemplified by our analysis of *-아/어야 하다* and *-고 싶다*. In Chinese, by contrast, modality is more syntactically independent, aligning with Chinese grammarians' observations that modals like 能, 可以, 应该 do not inflect and rely on word order and context (Lu, 2011). These structural differences illustrate an important theoretical point: the expression of modality is deeply connected to a language's broader grammatical system. Our comparative data thus provide concrete examples of how an obligative meaning, for instance, is realized through inflection in Korean but through lexical choice in Chinese.

Furthermore, the pragmatic analysis component of this study highlights how cultural norms influence modal usage, which ties into cross-linguistic pragmatics. Han (2014) observed that in Korean conversations, speakers often imply modality (especially obligations or desires) indirectly to maintain politeness, whereas Chinese speakers may articulate these modal intentions more directly. Our findings concur with this observation – for example, Korean speakers in our data frequently softened or hedged commands, something less commonly seen in the Chinese data. This suggests that beyond grammar, sociocultural factors shape language use: Korean's high-context communication style often leaves certain modal meanings to be inferred, whereas Chinese communication, while also context-sensitive, tends to encode the intent in the utterance itself to a greater degree. Both Zhang (2016) and Wang (2018) emphasize the importance of context in interpreting modals across these languages; our work reinforces their conclusions by adding empirical evidence from learners and usage data. In sum, theoretically, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese and Korean modality by mapping out their one-to-one and one-to-many correspondences. It confirms what previous works like Zhang (2016) and Han (2014) have found – that there are significant cross-linguistic differences in modal usage – and adds detail by quantifying usage patterns and bringing in pragmatic context. Additionally, by integrating learner perspectives, our study bridges the gap between abstract linguistic comparison and real-world language use, an approach that can inform future contrastive studies to consider how native speakers and learners actually deploy these modal forms.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

The differences identified in modal expression have direct consequences for language education, especially in bilingual learning environments or for students who know one of the languages and are learning the other. The survey results and instructor feedback in our study clearly indicate that many of the challenges in mastering Chinese or Korean modals stem from negative transfer and a lack of awareness about these subtle differences. This aligns with observations by Kim (2013), who noted that learners of Korean often struggle with modality by translating directly from their native language without accounting for formality and context. In fact, Kim (2013) observed that Korean language textbooks often introduce modal endings without sufficient emphasis on usage context, potentially leading to misapplication by learners—a gap that can be filled by contrastive explanation. Similarly, Chinese language teachers have reported students misusing modals like 要 or 应该 due to influence from their first language structures. Our findings underscore the need for explicit contrastive instruction: teaching materials should highlight, for example, that while 想 and *-고 싶다* both mean “want to,” their usage in questions or when referring to someone else's desire differs; or that 必须 vs. 应该 carries a distinction that in Korean is not lexically marked but rather conveyed via context and politeness. In agreement with Ch (2020), who advocates integrating the distinctive features of Korean modal constructions into multilingual education, we suggest that curricula incorporate side-by-side comparisons of structures. Notably, in Ch's (2020) study, students who received explicit instruction about the nuances of Korean modals (like differentiating levels of certainty and obligation) showed improved pragmatic usage compared to those who learned through immersion alone. This could involve parallel sentence examples (as we provided in Table 3) to show how a given idea is phrased in each language. Additionally, instructors should emphasize the cultural aspect: for instance, when teaching Korean, highlight scenarios where using *-아/어야 하다* might be grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate unless softened. Role-playing exercises can be beneficial here—students might practice responding in a situation first in Chinese and then in Korean, reflecting on how they had to modify their word choice or tone. The positive reception of contrastive learning by students (with 80% in favor) suggests that incorporating these methods can improve learner confidence and competence. In practice, language programs might develop specialized modules or supplementary materials that specifically address Chinese–Korean contrasts; this could also help heritage speakers or multilingual learners who navigate both languages, by explicitly pointing out where interference is likely.

Another practical application of this research is in the creation of reference guides or smart translation tools that flag when a direct modal translation would sound unnatural or overly blunt. Since modality often carries nuances that straightforward dictionary definitions do not capture, guidance drawn from studies like this one can prevent misunderstandings. For translators and interpreters, these findings are equally pertinent: a literal translation of a

modal phrase can misrepresent the intended tone. Professionals often must alter a direct command in Chinese into a polite suggestion in Korean (or vice versa) to maintain the original's pragmatic effect. Training language learners to be aware of such shifts prepares them for more accurate and culturally appropriate translation and communication. Likewise, business and diplomatic communications can benefit from these insights; knowing how to phrase an obligation or request appropriately in the other language can prevent unintended offense or confusion. Finally, understanding these findings is valuable for second language acquisition research: it highlights which areas (e.g., modal verbs) are prone to cross-linguistic confusion, allowing educators to preemptively tackle them. By demonstrating the academic similarities and differences and connecting them to learner errors, this study provides a clear rationale for adopting a contrastive approach in teaching Chinese and Korean modals. Ultimately, equipping learners with this nuanced understanding not only improves grammatical accuracy but also fosters intercultural communicative competence. Students become aware of how saying something as simple as “you must do X” or “I want to do Y” can carry different weight and politeness in another language, thus preparing them to communicate more effectively and appropriately in diverse cultural settings.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, it also has certain limitations that open avenues for further research. First, the scope of this analysis was limited to three modal functions (ability, obligation, desire) in everyday contexts. Other important modality types, such as **epistemic modals** (expressing probability or certainty, e.g., Chinese 可能 “might,” Korean -ㄴ 것 같다 “seems like,” or the predictive 会 vs. *-겠-), were not examined (for instance, Chinese 会 in its predictive sense versus Korean -겠-, or specialized permission expressions like Chinese 可以 meaning “may” versus 能 “be able to,” or prohibitive forms like Chinese 不能 vs. Korean -면 안 된다). Future studies could extend the comparison to these areas to paint a fuller picture of the modal landscape. Second, the corpus data collected (~200 sentences) and the contexts (textbook examples and scripted dialogues) provide an initial quantitative glimpse but are not fully representative of all language use. A larger-scale corpus study using natural conversational data or written corpora from news and literature would help verify whether the patterns observed here hold broadly. Third, the learner survey participants were all university students at intermediate proficiency, mostly from one region. Their experiences may not generalize to all learners—beginners or advanced speakers might face different issues, and learners in different environments (immersion vs. classroom) might report other challenges. Expanding the survey to more diverse learner populations, including perhaps native speakers reflecting on translation difficulties, could enrich the findings. Another limitation is that this study is largely contrastive and observational; it did not include an experimental teaching component to directly measure the efficacy of the proposed pedagogical interventions. Although we argued for contrastive teaching and gathered positive feedback about it, testing these methods in practice (for example, implementing a contrastive module in a class and assessing learner outcomes before and after) would provide concrete evidence of impact. Lastly, within our chosen categories, we did not delve into nuanced subcategories, such as formal versus informal variants of expressing permission or prohibition (for example, Chinese 不可以 “must not” vs. 不能 “cannot,” or the use of -아/어도 되다 “may” in Korean), which could be considered in future analyses. Inevitably, our alignment of modal expressions simplifies some context-specific usages. Language is nuanced, and there will be exceptions or additional layers (such as dialectal differences or evolving usage among younger speakers) that were beyond the scope of this study.

Moving forward, future research can build on these findings in several ways. One promising direction is to conduct **longitudinal studies** tracking how learners acquire modality in a second language over time, and whether targeted instruction on contrastive differences yields measurable improvement in communication skills. Comparative studies could also be broadened to include **additional languages** in the region, such as Japanese or Vietnamese, to see how they handle similar modal concepts and whether the patterns observed between Chinese and Korean hold in a larger East Asian context. Another approach could involve psycholinguistic experiments – for instance, using eye-tracking or reaction-time measures – to see how quickly bilingual speakers process equivalent modal sentences in each language, shedding light on cognitive aspects of managing two modal systems. In terms of practical tools, the creation of a bilingual modal verb database or computer-assisted learning application that flags differences (perhaps leveraging the correspondences found in Table 3 and beyond) could directly assist learners. Researchers could collaborate with software developers to implement such resources and then study their effectiveness. By addressing these limitations and pursuing new research questions, scholars can continue to deepen our understanding of Chinese and Korean modality and enhance the strategies for teaching and learning these languages.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has expanded our understanding of how Chinese and Korean express modality by providing a detailed comparative analysis of modal verbs and constructions used in daily communication. Through a mixed-method approach, we systematically identified where the two languages converge and diverge in conveying ability, obligation, and desire. We found that while Chinese and Korean share fundamental semantic categories, they differ in linguistic realization – differences largely shaped by Chinese’s analytic structure and Korean’s agglutinative, honorific-rich grammar. These differences manifest in how learners acquire and use the languages, as evidenced by our survey of students. By addressing the research objectives – from defining the modal systems and comparing their usage, to analyzing politeness and learner perceptions – the study highlights both the theoretical significance of contrastive linguistics and the practical need for informed teaching strategies.

The findings carry important implications for language pedagogy: teachers and curriculum developers can draw on the comparative insights (such as those summarized in Table 3) to preempt common errors and emphasize context when teaching modals. Additionally, this research contributes to scholarly discussions on cross-linguistic modality, confirming prior observations (e.g., Zhang, 2016; Han, 2014) and adding new data from actual usage and learner experience. Understanding the nuances of Chinese and Korean modal expressions not only aids in language instruction but also fosters better intercultural communication, as speakers become sensitive to what is implied or expected in each language. Ultimately, by identifying both common ground and divergences, this research helps build a linguistic and cultural bridge between Chinese and Korean, facilitating more effective communication and understanding—benefiting not only students and teachers, but also translators, businesspeople, and other professionals engaged in Chinese-Korean cross-cultural exchange.

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