

## THE ACT OF THANKING AND THE ROLE OF MODAL VERBS IN TEACHING GERMAN IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

The act of thanking represents one of the most frequent and pragmatically significant speech acts in both everyday and educational discourse. In the context of learning German as a foreign language, the appropriate realization of this speech act largely depends on the correct use of the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können*, which convey different semantic and pragmatic values related to obligation, permission, and possibility. The aim of this study is to examine the role and function of these modal verbs in expressing gratitude among secondary school students, with particular focus on second and third-year students in the advanced German program, as well as fourth-year students in regular classes. The research is based on an empirical analysis conducted through a questionnaire, which includes various communicative situations of thanking, the selection of an appropriate modal verb, and the perception of politeness and appropriateness in both educational and everyday contexts. The results indicate clear differences in the choice and interpretation of modal verbs depending on students' age, educational profile, and the degree of formality of the communicative situation. In the final part of the paper, a teaching model aimed at developing pragmatic and intercultural communicative competence among secondary school students is proposed; through targeted exercises, analysis of authentic examples, and scenarios drawn from real communicative situations, with the goal of improving the effective and functional use of modal verbs in the German language.

**Keywords:** *act of thanking, modal verbs, modality, pragmatics*

## 1. Introduction

In both everyday and school discourse, a considerable part of communication takes place through the expression of gratitude for good deeds, assistance, or favors, whereby the speech act of thanking plays a central role in maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Although gratitude is often expressed spontaneously, its actual meaning and intended effects are not always sufficiently specified, which can sometimes lead to formulaic or insincere utterances and thus to pragmatic failure.

As a speech act, thanking is not limited merely to the verbal acknowledgment of a favor, but it also functions as a means of strengthening trust and confirming positive interaction between speaker and addressee. Within the theoretical framework of speech act theory, thanking is classified as an expressive speech act, with the focus placed on expressing recognition and appreciation toward the interlocutor (Searle, 1969). Like other expressive speech acts, thanking also pursues an illocutionary goal, namely to express acknowledgment, politeness, and positive attitude toward the addressee's action. In practical use, an appropriately realized act of thanking contributes to social harmony and fosters positive interaction in various communicative contexts.

In German language teaching, the speech act of thanking is of particular importance, as it is used in situations governed by clearly defined norms of politeness and social appropriateness. In this context, the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen* and *können* represent central linguistic means through which learners express: obligation, permission, or possibility in connection with the expression of gratitude. Their use has not only got a semantic dimension, but also entails essential pragmatic implications related to politeness, directness, and situational appropriateness in both school and everyday discourse. Against this background, the present study aims to analyze the use and perception of the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* in the realization of the speech act of thanking at the secondary level, in order to relate theoretical insights from pragmatics to concrete classroom practice.

## 2. Speech Act Theory

Communication plays a central role in everyday human life, with language serving as the fundamental means through which information is exchanged, and thoughts, feelings, and intentions are expressed. In the communication process, speakers do not merely convey facts, but simultaneously perform various actions, such as requesting, promising, refusing, congratulating, or apologizing. These linguistic actions are referred to as speech acts and constitute a central concept in pragmatics - a linguistic discipline concerned with the meaning of language in concrete communicative contexts.

The foundations of speech act theory were laid by the British philosopher J. L. Austin, who pointed out that utterances are not used solely to describe states of affairs or transmit information, but can also serve as a means of performing actions through language (Austin, 1962). Language is therefore understood as an active instrument of social interaction. This approach was further developed by John Searle, who emphasized that not the sentence itself, but the action performed by means of it, represents the fundamental unit of communication (Searle, 1969, p. 1979).

In the realization of speech acts, Austin distinguishes three interconnected levels: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary act. The locutionary act refers to the linguistic form of the utterance and its literal meaning; the illocutionary act denotes the speaker's intention in producing the utterance; and the perlocutionary act encompasses the effect that the utterance has on the listener (Austin, 1962). For pragmatic analysis, the illocutionary act is of particular importance, as it is through it that the actual speech act is realized. Illocutionary force is always context-dependent, meaning that the same locutionary expression may fulfill different functions depending on the communicative situation.

Searle distinguishes five fundamental types of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (Searle, 1969). Within this classification, the speech act of thanking is assigned to the category of expressives, as it serves to express the psychological state of the speaker, such as gratitude or a sense of responsibility.

The perlocutionary aspect of speech acts refers to the consequences that an utterance produces in the listener. In this sense, the success conditions of a speech act depend not only on its linguistic form but also on its social and pragmatic acceptance within the respective context. In recent years, speech acts have increasingly been examined from an intercultural perspective, analyzing differences in their realization and interpretation across various linguistic and cultural contexts. Particular attention is paid to the speech act of thanking, as it has a direct influence on interpersonal relationships and norms of politeness.

### **3. The Modal Verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* in German Language**

The modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* occupy an important position in German, as they not only complement the meaning of the main verb, but also express the speaker's attitude, stance, and intention. Their use is particularly significant in pragmatically sensitive speech acts, such as the speech act of thanking, in which the choice of modal verb signals the degree of responsibility, politeness, and sincerity.

#### **3.1. Basic Semantic Meaning**

According to Helbig and Buscha (1996, p. 132), modal verbs can express both objective and subjective modality. Similarly, Biber et al. (2007) distinguish between deontic and epistemic meanings of modal verbs. In the present study, the focus lies exclusively on the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können*, as they occur particularly frequently in school discourse and in students' utterances.

Deontic (objective) modality refers to rules, norms, and external circumstances and can express obligation, permission, or possibility.

Example: *Wir können heute baden gehen, es ist warm genug.* (Helbig & Buscha, 1996, p. 131)

In this example, *können* expresses a real possibility conditioned by external factors.

Epistemic (subjective) modality, on the other hand, expresses the speaker's assessment or assumption regarding the truth of a statement.

Example: *Er kann noch auf dem Sportplatz sein.* (Helbig & Buscha, 1996, p. 131)

Here, *können* does not indicate objective possibility, but rather the speaker's subjective assumption.

According to Duden (2009, p. 557), the epistemic meaning of *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* frequently occurs in combination with the perfect infinitive, where the speaker expresses a conclusion or assumption about a past event.

Example: *Sie muss Jura studiert haben.* (Duden, 2009, p. 557)

In such constructions, *müssen* expresses the highest degree of certainty, *dürfen* a lower degree, while *können* signals the lowest degree of certainty.

### 3.2. The Pragmatic Role in the Speech Act of Thanking

Within the framework of the speech act of thanking, the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* perform an essential pragmatic function, as they structure and nuance the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Through their use, the degree of directness and politeness is regulated in particular, which is of special relevance in the school context.

*Müssen* is used to express an obligation or inner necessity to express gratitude, for example: *Ich muss mich bei Ihnen bedanken.* ("I must thank you.") With this construction, the speaker signals awareness of the help or support received and feels a moral or social obligation to express gratitude.

*Dürfen* serves to mitigate the utterance and to express politeness toward the addressee, especially in formal or semi-formal situations: *Darf ich mich bei Ihnen bedanken?* ("May I thank you?") Here, thanking is formulated as a permitted action, thereby emphasizing respect and consideration toward the interlocutor.

*Können* allows for an indirect and polite formulation of thanks by implicitly leaving room for a positive response from the addressee: *Könnte ich mich bei Ihnen bedanken?* ("Could I thank you?") Through such constructions, the speaker avoids excessive directness and contributes to a cooperative and pleasant communicative atmosphere.

In German language teaching, students learn through practical examples to use modal verbs appropriately in different thanking situations - from informal everyday contexts (*Danke, dass du mir beim Lernen geholfen hast!* / *Thank you for helping me study!*) to formal school situations (*Vielen Dank für Ihre Unterstützung bei der Vorbereitung auf die Prüfung!* / *Thank you very much for your support in preparing for the exam!*). The targeted application of these structures promotes the development of pragmatic competence and supports the acquisition of appropriate politeness strategies as well as a situationally adequate degree of directness when expressing gratitude.

## 4. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyze the use of the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* in the speech act of thanking among secondary school students and to examine their perceptions of politeness, directness, and possibility in German language classes. The study focuses on students in years 2 and 3 enrolled in the advanced German program

(German Language Diploma – /DSD Programm/), as well as students in year 4 in regular classes, in order to identify possible differences in the use of modal verbs depending on age, linguistic competence, and communicative abilities. To achieve this aim, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**Hypothesis 1:** Students in higher years (year 4) use *müssen* more frequently when expressing gratitude than students in years 2 and 3, due to a greater awareness of obligation and formality in communication.

**Hypothesis 2:** The modal verb *dürfen* is perceived as the most polite and appropriate in formal thanking situations.

**Hypothesis 3:** The use of *können* allows for more indirect and informal expressions of gratitude and is used more frequently in everyday and informal classroom discourse.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students in different grade levels use the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* when expressing gratitude?
2. Which modal verbs are perceived by students in classroom discourse as the most polite, appropriate, or appealing?
3. Are there differences in the choice of modal verbs depending on the formality of the situation and the context of thanking?

These hypotheses and research questions provide a clear focus for the study and establish a direct connection between the theoretical framework and the practical analysis of the students' questionnaire responses.

## 5. Methodology

The study was conducted to examine the use of the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* in the speech act of thanking among secondary school students, as well as their perception of politeness, directness, and possibility in German language teaching.

### 5.1. Participants

The study was carried out at the secondary school “Jane Sandanski” in Strumica in January 2026. It included students from years 2 and 3 enrolled in the advanced German program, as well as students from year 4 in regular classes, in order to identify possible differences in modal verb usage depending on age, linguistic competence and communicative abilities. In total, 36 students from the extended German classes and 28 students from year 4 in regular classes participated in the study.

### 5.2. Instruments

A questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions combining multiple-choice tasks and short written responses in which students justify their choice of a modal verb. It was designed to enable students to demonstrate their ability to use modal verbs in the context of thanking and to evaluate their appropriateness in different communicative situations.

## 6. Analysis of Demographic Data

The collected demographic data shows that the sample consists of students from different educational levels and German language programs, allowing for a relevant comparative analysis.

A total of 18 students from year 2 attend the advanced German program, as do 18 students from year 3, while the largest group consists of 28 students from year 4 who learn German in regular classes. This composition of the sample makes it possible to observe potential differences in linguistic and pragmatic competence depending on the intensity and continuity of the teaching process.

Regarding gender, the sample is evenly distributed with 32 male and 32 female students. This balanced representation reduces the influence of gender on the results and enables a more objective interpretation of the data, with the focus remaining on the linguistic, pragmatic and instructional variables of the study.

*Situation 1: Deine Lehrerin hat dir geholfen, eine schwierige Grammatik zu verstehen. Welche Modalverben drücken dein Gefühl am besten aus? (Your teacher helped you understand a difficult grammar topic. Which modal verb expresses your feeling of gratitude in the best way?)*

In the first practical situation, which describes the speech act of thanking in a context where the teacher helped the student understand a difficult grammatical structure, the choice of modal verb clearly reflects the semantic-pragmatic interpretation of gratitude among students from different educational levels.

Among second-year students in the advanced German program, the distribution across the three modal verbs is relatively balanced: *müssen* was chosen by 6 students, *dürfen* by 4, and *können* by 8. This distribution suggests an early stage in the development of pragmatic awareness. Gratitude in this group is primarily interpreted as a personal possibility (*ich kann mich bedanken / I can thank you*), that is, as a spontaneous and subjective act rather than a socially and culturally conditioned norm. The use of *müssen* is present but not dominant, indicating that the sense of obligation is not yet firmly conceptualized, while *dürfen* appears only to a limited extent, suggesting that politeness as a pragmatic category is still insufficiently developed.

In contrast, third-year students in the advanced German program show a markedly different pattern. The dominant choice is *müssen*, selected by 14 students, while *dürfen* was chosen by only 4 students and *können* was not chosen at all. This result indicates a strong deontic interpretation of the speech act of thanking. Students in this group clearly perceive gratitude as a moral and social duty rather than as a possibility or merely a polite gesture. The absence of *können* suggests that thanking is no longer seen as optional but as something that “must be done”, which may be associated with a more formalized school experience and a normative teaching approach.

Among fourth-year students in regular classes, *müssen* is again the most frequently selected modal verb (14 students), but a greater variety is evident: *dürfen* was chosen by

10 students and *können* by 4. This result indicates a more advanced level of pragmatic awareness compared to the third year. Although the sense of obligation remains strong, the significant selection of *dürfen* shows that part of the group interprets gratitude as a polite and socially permissible act, which is closer to interculturally appropriate usage in German. The presence of *können*, though less frequent, reflects the continued existence of a subjective interpretation, albeit it is secondary.

*Situation 2: Deine Freundin hat dir ein Lehrbuch geliehen. Welches Modalverb würdest du verwenden (Your friend lent you a textbook. Which modal verb would you use to thank her/him?)*

In the second practical situation, which describes thanking in an informal peer context, the choice of modal verbs reveals a clearly different pragmatic orientation compared to the institutional context of the previous situation. This difference provides insight into how students adapt modal semantics to social relationships.

Among second-year students in the advanced German program, *dürfen* is dominant (8 students), while *müssen* and *können* were each chosen by 5 students. This shows that gratitude in a peer context is primarily perceived as a polite gesture rather than a moral obligation. '*Ich darf mich bedanken*' functions here as an expression of socially acceptable politeness, which is a positive indicator of developing pragmatic awareness. The relatively even distribution of *müssen* and *können* suggests that different interpretations, from obligation to personal possibility, still coexist.

Among third-year students, the dominance of *dürfen* is even clearer (10 students), followed by *können* (5 students) and *müssen* (3 students). This distribution indicates a clear pragmatic shift emphasizing politeness and socially sensitive interpretation. In this context, *müssen* loses its dominant position, showing that students distinguish between institutional hierarchy (teacher–student) and symmetrical relationships (student–student). Gratitude is perceived as a socially appropriate reaction rather than a duty.

The most pronounced pragmatic development appears among 4th-year students. Here, *dürfen* is by far the most frequently chosen modal verb (15 students), followed by *können* (8 students) and *müssen* (5 students). This result indicates a stabilized interpretation of gratitude as a polite but non-obligatory act within friendships. Students clearly recognize the difference between social norms and moral obligation, which is typical for advanced intercultural pragmatic competence.

*Situation 3: Ein Mitschüler hat dir bei der Vorbereitung auf einen Test geholfen. Welches Modalverb drückt Höflichkeit oder Direktheit am besten aus? (A classmate helped you prepare for a test. Which modal verb best expresses your politeness or directness?)*

In this semi-formal peer context, the distribution of modal verbs reveals subtle but significant differences in the perception of politeness and directness.

Among second-year students, the distribution is relatively balanced: *müssen* (7), *können* (6), *dürfen* (5). This indicates pragmatic uncertainty and the coexistence of different interpretative patterns. Some students perceive the help as creating a moral obligation (*müssen*), others as a possibility to express gratitude (*können*), and others as a polite but non-obligatory act (*dürfen*). The distinction between directness and politeness is not yet fully stabilized.

Among third-year students, *dürfen* becomes dominant (10), followed by *müssen* (6) and *können* (2). Gratitude is mainly perceived as a polite and socially appropriate act, rather than a strict obligation or neutral possibility. The low frequency of *können* suggests that gratitude is less often seen as an individual optional decision.

Among fourth-year students, the dominance of *dürfen* is even more pronounced (15), while *müssen* (7) and *können* (6) are nearly balanced. This distribution reflects a high level of pragmatic awareness. '*Ich darf mich bedanken*' functions as a formulation balancing politeness and autonomy, typical for advanced intercultural pragmatic competence.

*Situation 4: Dein Lehrer hat dich beim Lernen einer neuen Lektion ermutigt. Welches Modalverb würdest du für deinen Dank verwenden? (Your teacher encouraged you while learning a new lesson. Which modal verb would you use to express your thanks?)*

This situation combines institutional hierarchy with positive emotional support. Among second-year students, the distribution is completely balanced: *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* were each chosen by 6 students. This indicates the absence of a dominant pragmatic model. Some students perceive encouragement as activating obligation (*müssen*), others as a polite permitted act (*dürfen*), and others as a personal possibility (*können*).

Among third-year students, *dürfen* becomes the most frequent choice (8), followed by *müssen* (6) and *können* (4). Students increasingly interpret encouragement as socially meaningful and deserving of polite response rather than as a mere professional duty.

Among fourth-year students, *müssen* and *dürfen* are equally dominant (12 each), while *können* is less frequent (4). This indicates developed pragmatic differentiation. Gratitude is interpreted both as moral/social obligation and as a polite, voluntary act arising from respect and positive interaction.

*Situation 5: Ein Mitschüler hat dir Materialien für ein Projekt gegeben. Beispielsatz: „Vielen Dank, dass du mir die Unterlagen gegeben hast!“ Welches Modalverb würdest du verwenden? (A classmate gave you materials for a project. /Example sentence: ‘Thank you very much for giving me the documents!’ / Which modal verb would you use to thank him/her?)*

In this horizontal peer context, no institutional hierarchy exists. Among 2nd-year students, *dürfen* and *können* dominate (7 each), while *müssen* is less frequent (4).

Gratitude is mainly perceived as polite or optional rather than obligatory.

Among third-year students, all three modal verbs are equally distributed (6 each), suggesting a transitional phase in pragmatic competence where different strategies coexist.

Among fourth-year students, *dürfen* is dominant (13), followed by *müssen* (10) and *können* (5). Gratitude is interpreted primarily as a polite and socially expected act rather than a strict duty. The continued presence of *müssen* reflects internalized social norms („*Hilfe mit Dank erwidert werden muss*” / “Help must be reciprocated with thanks”), while the low frequency of *können* shows that gratitude is rarely perceived as purely optional.

*Situation 6: Ein Freund hat dir beim Training oder der Vorbereitung auf einen Wettkampf geholfen. Beispielsatz: „Danke, dass du mir beim Training geholfen hast!“ Welches Modalverb würdest du verwenden? (A friend helped you during training or while preparing for a competition. /Example sentence: ‘Thank you for helping me with training!’ / Which modal verb would you use?)*

In this informal friendship context, differences between grade levels are again evident. Among second-year students, all three modal verbs are equally distributed (6 each), indicating that gratitude is not yet pragmatically stabilized.

Among third-year students, *dürfen* becomes dominant (9), followed by *müssen* (6) and *können* (3). Gratitude is increasingly understood as a polite, socially expected act rather than a strict duty or optional choice.

Among fourth-year students, *dürfen* (12) and *können* (11) dominate, while *müssen* is least frequent (5). This reflects mature pragmatic understanding: gratitude toward a friend is not perceived as moral obligation but as a polite and voluntary act. Students demonstrate the ability to distinguish between institutional help (where *müssen* appears more frequently) and friendly help, where gratitude is understood as an expression of personal choice and social closeness.

*Situation 7: Jemand hat dir schwierige Grammatik im Deutschen erklärt. Beispielsatz: „Vielen Dank, dass du mir die schwierige Aufgabe erklärt hast!“ Welches Modalverb würdest du verwenden? (A friend helped you during training or preparation for a competition. /Example sentence: ‘Thank you for helping me with training!’ / Which modal verb would you use to thank him/her?)*

In Situation 7, which concerns thanking a person who explained difficult German grammar, the choice of modal verbs once again clearly reflects the relationship between the type of help (cognitive/academic) and the pragmatic interpretation of the speech act of thanking.

Among second-year students in the advanced German program, the distribution is:

*müssen* – 7, *dürfen* – 6, *können* – 5. This shows a relatively balanced distribution, with a slight dominance of *müssen*. This suggests that some students perceive gratitude for grammatical help as a normative obligation, especially since it represents intellectual support that directly contributes to their academic success. At the same time, the presence of *dürfen* and *können* indicates that different interpretations still coexist at this age – gratitude as a polite act and as a personal possibility.

Among third-year students, there is a clear concentration on *müssen* (13 students), while *dürfen* is chosen much less frequently (5 students) and *können* is completely absent. This indicates a clear pragmatic shift: gratitude for explaining difficult grammar is perceived as an explicit social and moral obligation rather than an optional act. The absence of *können* suggests that students in this group do not view gratitude as a matter of personal choice but as an expected response within the school context.

Among fourth-year students in regular classes, *dürfen* dominates (14 students), followed by *müssen* (10 students), while *können* is minimally represented (4 students). This distribution reflects a more differentiated pragmatic assessment: gratitude for grammatical help is primarily perceived as a polite speech act that is socially appropriate and desirable, but not necessarily a strict obligation. At the same time, the presence of *müssen* among some students indicates that the educational context continues to activate the dimension of obligation, particularly when the help has clear instructional value.

*Situation 8: Dein Lehrer hat dir Ratschläge gegeben, wie du die Essay-Aufgabe verbessern kannst. Welches Modalverb würdest du verwenden? (Your teacher gave you advice on how to improve your essay assignment. Which modal verb would you use to thank him/her?)*

In Situation 8, which concerns thanking a teacher for advice on improving an essay, the influence of the institutional context on the choice of modal verbs becomes evident, as does the gradual shift in pragmatic interpretation with increasing school experience.

Among second-year students in the advanced German program, *dürfen* is chosen most frequently (8 students), followed by *müssen* (6 students), while *können* is least represented (4 students). This suggests that gratitude toward the teacher is primarily perceived as a polite and socially permissible act rather than solely as a moral obligation. At the same time, the relatively high frequency of *müssen* indicates that some students perceive the teacher’s advice as activating a sense of obligation to show gratitude due to the teacher’s authority and pedagogical commitment.

Among third-year students, *müssen* dominates (8 students), while *dürfen* and *können* are evenly distributed (5 students each). This suggests that students at this stage perceive gratitude for academic advice as a normatively expected response—something that “goes without saying” in the teacher–student relationship. However, the balanced presence of *dürfen* and *können* indicates that some students still interpret gratitude as a polite choice or personal possibility, reflecting a transitional stage in pragmatic awareness.

Among fourth-year students in regular classes, *dürfen* clearly dominates (15

students), while *müssen* (8 students) and *können* (5 students) are significantly less frequent. This indicates more advanced pragmatic competence, where gratitude toward the teacher is primarily interpreted as a polite and socially appropriate speech act rather than as an imposed obligation. Students recognize the asymmetrical, but professional relationship with the teacher, and select the modal verb appropriately to express respect and cultural appropriateness.

## 7. Analysis of the Qualitative Questions

*Situation 9: Erkläre, warum du in den vorherigen Situationen genau dieses Modalverb gewählt hast. (Explain why you chose that particular modal verb in the previous situations.)*

In Situation 9, the qualitative responses clearly reveal students' pragmatic perceptions of gratitude and the role of modal verbs, showing gradual development from simpler to more complex interpretations depending on grade level.

Among second-year students, the distribution is dominated by *dürfen* and *können*, indicating an early pragmatic differentiation between politeness and individual freedom. *Dürfen* is usually associated with polite and socially acceptable behavior, particularly when thanking someone who has provided help. Gratitude is perceived as something "one should do," but not always as a strict obligation. *Können* is interpreted as expressing possibility and personal choice; some students explicitly state that gratitude is not a moral or obligatory category, but an individual decision. Interestingly, some students already show contextual sensitivity: gratitude toward authority figures (teachers, older people) is experienced as *müssen*, while gratitude toward peers is perceived as *können*. This suggests early awareness of hierarchical relationships in the pragmatic use of modal verbs.

Among third-year students, a higher level of pragmatic awareness is evident. They explicitly state that the choice of a modal verb depends on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee and on the specific situation. Gratitude toward peers is associated with *können* or *dürfen*, while toward teachers or authority figures it appears as *müssen* - not as externally imposed obligation but as inner responsibility. Some students also question the semantic "weakness" of *können*, arguing that it does not express sufficiently strong gratitude, indicating conscious evaluation of the pragmatic strength of modal verbs. At the same time, they emphasize that gratitude is not a formal obligation but an act of politeness, reflecting a mature balance between normativity and individual agency.

Among fourth-year students, gratitude is mostly conceptualized as a general cultural and moral norm. Although most respondents emphasize that the choice of modal verb depends on the situation and the person addressed, the more frequent use of *müssen* stands out as an expression of appreciation and a marker of mature social attitude. At the same time, critical distance remains: some students highlight that gratitude is not

formally obligatory but rather a matter of personal culture and upbringing.

*Situation 10: Unterscheidet sich die Art des Dankens in der Muttersprache und im Deutschen? Falls ja, erklären Sie, wie. (Does the way of expressing thanks differ in your native language and in German? If yes, explain how.)*

In Situation 10, students' responses provide valuable insight into their intercultural and pragmatic awareness, particularly regarding the speech act of thanking in their mother tongue compared to German. The analysis across grade levels shows a clear developmental line - from perceiving universality to consciously recognizing linguistic and cultural specificities.

Among second-year students, the dominant view is that there is no difference between the two languages. This suggests an early stage of intercultural pragmatic competence, in which gratitude is experienced as a universal speech act independent of language. However, some students show initial differentiation: they observe that German offers more linguistic means and variants for expressing gratitude in different situations, whereas in their mother tongue a simplified and standardized model is often used. These responses indicate initial awareness of systematic differences, though without deeper pragmatic analysis.

Among third-year students, a significantly higher level of reflection is evident. While some still claim that there is no major difference, their explanations are more nuanced. They emphasize that in their mother tongue they also adapt expressions depending on whom they are thanking. At the same time, clearly articulated intercultural differences emerge, especially regarding the role of modal verbs. Students consciously recognize that in their mother tongue they do not explicitly think about modality when expressing gratitude, whereas in German, the choice of form requires greater linguistic and pragmatic control. The remark that in the mother tongue the expression "comes naturally" strongly indicates the difference between implicit pragmatic competence and consciously constructed pragmatics.

The responses of fourth-year students reflect the highest level of intercultural maturity. Although some continue to emphasize the universality of gratitude, they most clearly discuss differences in forms of address, vocabulary, and pragmatic structure. They recognize that German possesses a richer lexical and modal system that allows for precise nuance in expressing gratitude. Particularly noteworthy are the comments regarding the modal verb *müssen*: while in Macedonian the equivalent term *mora* is often avoided and replaced with more polite formulations, *müssen* in German can function as an expression of moral or social obligation without necessarily carrying a negative connotation.

## **8. Conclusion**

In line with the established hypotheses and research questions, the results provide clear insight into the use of the modal verbs *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *können* by students of different grade levels when expressing gratitude in German.

The first hypothesis that older students use *müssen* more frequently due to a higher

awareness of obligation and formality is largely confirmed. The analysis shows that *müssen* appears significantly more often among fourth-year students, particularly in situations involving teachers or authority figures. This suggests that with increasing age and linguistic and social experience, students develop stronger normative awareness, a sense of responsibility, and institutional politeness; interpreting gratitude as a moral or social obligation rather than merely a personal choice.

The second hypothesis that *dürfen* is perceived as the most polite and appropriate modal verb in formal situations of gratitude is also confirmed. Across all grade levels, particularly in the third and fourth years, *dürfen* is frequently chosen as the form that best expresses politeness, without imposing direct obligation. Qualitative responses additionally show that students associate *dürfen* with culturally accepted behavior, permission, and respect toward the interlocutor, reflecting pronounced pragmatic sensitivity in classroom discourse.

The third hypothesis that *können* enables more indirect and informal expressions of gratitude and is used more frequently in everyday contexts, is partially confirmed. Although *können* is not dominant in formal situations, its presence is more noticeable among younger students and in peer contexts. Students perceive *können* as expressing personal freedom and voluntariness, making it suitable for informal contexts but insufficient for expressing “genuine” gratitude in formal or hierarchical situations.

Regarding the research questions, it can be concluded that clear differences exist in the use and perception of modal verbs depending on age, educational level and situational formality. This study demonstrates that the development of students’ linguistic competence is closely linked to the development of their pragmatic and intercultural awareness, underscoring the necessity of integrating such aspects more strongly into modern German language classes.

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This publication presents the results of the project *Contemporary Approaches to Intercultural Pragmatics Research and Its Application in Language Teaching – From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation*. The project brings together researchers, academic staff and students from the Faculty of Philology at Goce Delcev University in Stip and the South East European University in Tetovo, reflecting the multicultural and multilingual context of North Macedonia. The volume explores contemporary theoretical perspectives in intercultural pragmatics and illustrates how these insights can be applied in language teaching practice. By connecting scientific research with practical classroom implementation, the book aims to contribute in enhancing intercultural communicative competence and foster innovative approaches in modern language education.

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