

What are Modal Expressions and Nuance in French?

Worksheet

Modal expressions modify the main verb's meaning: pouvoir (ability/permission), devoir (obligation/probability), vouloir (desire), falloir (necessity). Each shifts the context—'Il peut arriver' (He can arrive) vs 'Il doit arriver' (He must arrive).

Questions

1. 'Il peut arriver tôt.' Meaning?

- A) He must arrive early.
- B) He wants to arrive early.
- C) It is possible he arrives early.
- D) He will definitely arrive early.

2. Modal expressing strongest obligation?

- A) Je peux
- B) Je veux
- C) Je dois
- D) Je voudrais

3. 'Il doit partir' vs 'Il pourrait partir'?

- A) Same meaning.
- B) First: obligation/probability; second: condition/possibility.
- C) First: possibility; second: obligation.
- D) First is negative; second is positive.

4. Which modal expresses desire?

- A) devoir
- B) pouvoir
- C) vouloir
- D) falloir

5. Compare intent: 'Je peux / Je veux / Je dois partir à midi.'

6. Distinguish certainty: 'Il peut / Il pourrait / Il doit arriver.'

7. Obligation and advice: il faut vs devoir vs vouloir.

8. Define: What does pouvoir mean in modal context?

9. Define: What does devoir mean as a modal?

10. Define: What does vouloir mean as a modal?

Answer Key

1. C) It is possible he arrives early. — Pouvoir = possibility/ability/permission, not certainty.
2. C) Je dois — Devoir (and il faut) express obligation; pouvoir is weaker (permission).
3. B) First: obligation/probability; second: condition/possibility. — Devoir = must/should; pourrait = might/could (conditional, tentative).
4. C) vouloir — Vouloir = to want / desire.
5. Je peux partir à midi. = I can leave at noon. (permission/ability) Je veux partir à midi. = I want to leave at noon. (desire) Je dois partir à midi. = I must leave at noon. (obligation) Each modal reframes the speaker's relationship to the action.
6. Il peut arriver. = He can arrive / It's possible he arrives. (neutral). Il pourrait arriver. = He might/could arrive. (conditional, more uncertain). Il doit arriver. = He must/should arrive. (high probability/obligation).
7. Il faut étudier. = One must study (objective, universal). Tu dois étudier. = You must study (directed obligation). Je veux que tu étudies. = I want you to study (desire/request).
8. Can / may / be able to. Expresses ability or permission: 'Tu peux partir.' (You can leave.)
9. Must / should / have to. Expresses obligation or probability: 'Il doit arriver.' (He must arrive.)
10. Want / wish to. Expresses desire: 'Je veux partir.' (I want to leave.)

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