

Linguistic Manifestations of Modality in Newspaper Editorials

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Abstract

Modality as a property of language use is generally exploited by language users. Its role in newspaper editorial is of special importance in that editorial writers tend to make use of this property to establish either a favorable or unfavorable bias throughout the text to manipulate their readers' opinion. Through textual analysis of the selected editorials culled from the American newspaper, *The New York Times*, and the Persian English newspaper, *Tehran Times*, the present study firstly aimed at identifying the linguistic manifestation of modality employed in the two *newspapers* followed by presenting the classroom implications of the findings. Revealing some genre-specific features of this media discourse, the comparison of the two papers in terms of employing auxiliary modal verbs suggested that both of the papers preferred mainly predictive auxiliary modals such as *will* or *would* to the other kinds of modals. However, the higher number of the predictive modals in NYT suggested the idea that identifying what would happen in the future was the main concern of the editorial writers in NYT. On the other hand, comparing the modals of necessity in the two papers suggested that editorial writers in Tehran Times were occupied with what should be done.

Key words: Media discourse, Modality, Linguistic structures

1. Introduction

The term modality has been originally understood as the truth value of the proposition by logicians. In linguistics, modalities are considered as the structures that in one way or another evaluate the state of affair. They "refer to aspects of meaning which cause sentences to be about the non-factual ,that is, about the alternative possibilities for how things could be" (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2006, p. 153).

As a semantic-grammatical category concerned with the "status of the proposition that describes the event" expressed by an utterance (Palmer 2007, p: 1), modality might also be construed as "the relativization of the validity of sentence meanings to a set of possible worlds" or "ways in which people could conceive the world to be different" (Kiefer, 1994, p: 2515). In other words, modality allows language users to express what is, what would be, what may be, and what should be. All languages express modality through either grammatical mood or modal systems (or both), making modality a "valid cross-language grammatical category" in need of a cross-linguistic description (Palmer, 2007, p: 1).

Modality can be both epistemic and deontic (Palmer, 2003). Epistemic modality indicates the means by which speakers/writers express judgment on the truth of the propositions they utter/write. In other words, language users use epistemic modality to make judgments about the possibility or necessity of an entire proposition (Palmer 2003: 7)

Deontic modality, on the other hand, is concerned with the criterion by which speakers/writers decide which future events are necessary, possible, desirable, etc. Deontic modality is the "expression of the judgment of possibility including permissibility or necessity including obligation of an action, state, or event by a speaker" in which control of the action, state, or event is external to the subject of the clause (Palmer, 1990, pp:50, 69-74; Palmer, 2003,p: 7). In general, deontic modality is "dependent on some kind of authority, often the speaker" (Palmer, 2007, p: 70); in order words, the ability of an event to occur comes from the permission granted by the speaker or some other authority as opposed to the subject (Palmer 2003: 7)

Referring to Halliday's overarching functions which language is said to fulfill, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual, modality operates within the interpersonal function of the language- the function through which we represent ours to others (Halliday, 2002, p. 200). Thus as a realizer of the interpersonal function of language, modality may be used as a linguistic tool to direct and control the behavior of the people. In line with this definition, and considering the texts as pieces of discourse "representing values embedded in ideology, attitudes or power relation outside of the text" (Sulkunen,& Törrönen, 1997, p.45), within discourse analysis, modality concerns the writer's (or speaker's) attitude toward and/or confidence in the proposition being presented.

Modality, in its simplest sense, indicates a speaker's or writer's special way of conceptualizing a world view or ideology. According to Fowler "language does not allow us to say something without conveying an attitude to that something" (Fowler, 1997, p. 76). In other words hardly

one can find a piece of written or spoken text as purely objective, neutral, or value-free. It is basically the writer's point of view, "angle of vision", "angle of telling", or authorial interest that determines the essence of a story's style and that provides the story with its particular "feel" and "color" (Simpson, 1993, p. 5).

2. Review of literature

Due to the importance of modality, some studies have focused on it trying to shed light on its function and frequency in written discourse. F. R. Palmer did fundamental work in the study of mood and modality in a typological way (Palmer, 2007). He emphasized the lexical forms of modality and various modal expressions across languages. He pointed out that modality can be classified into two groups, namely, propositional modality and event modality. Furthermore, he combined the classic dichotomy of epistemic and deontic modalities arguing that propositional modality includes epistemic and evidential modality while event modality covers deontic and dynamic modal types.

According to Palmer (2007, pp: 8-10), epistemic modality shows the speaker's "judgments about the factual status of the proposition", while evidential modality reflects "the evidence" the speaker has for its "factual status". When we are concerned about the possibility and necessity of an issue, we tend to use epistemic modality, which is also regarded as "inference" in a cognitive sense. On the other hand, deontic modality relates to "obligation or permission", a force from the external world, whereas dynamic modality conveys the "ability or willingness", one of the inner feelings.

To demonstrate the distinctive patterns of morality in media discourse, Iwamoto (1998) focused on newspaper articles. The results of the study indicated that the articles used frequent high-value deontic modality such as *must*, *should*, *ought to*, *need to* without almost any emotive kinds of modality such as *I wish ...*, *I hope ...*, *I regret ...*. Moreover, to convey a lower degree of certainty and commitment on the writer's part with regard to the propositional content the writers used lower value epistemic modality such as *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*.

Gotti (2003, p:271) focusing on the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts found that *shall* was "commonly used in speech-based prose" in contrast to a "very low normalized figures for SHALL-forms in scientific texts". Smith (2003, p: 252), on the other hand, focused on the diachronic development of *have to* and pointed out that the use of *have to* was "most concentrated in the fiction and press genres, with growth being most significant in the press reportage section". Both of these studies revealed that modality might reflect generic features of a certain genre.

Qun (2010), employing corpus analysis techniques, conducted a research study to reveal the characteristics of modality in academic papers and newspaper editorials. The findings of his study revealed that in scientific papers avoided epistemic modals such as *I think* and *surely*, due to their emphasis on presenting an objective view of the news events. Apart from being objective, scientific papers also justified their findings in an assertive, consistent and

reasonable way; therefore the occurrence of *often* was higher than the appearances of *usually* and *sometimes*.

As for the newspaper editorials, findings of Qun's study also indicated that *should* and *could* were the prominent features in editorials. A possible reason mentioned for this preference was that most editorials tried to comment on events which had already happened, thus the past tense was preferred. On the other hand, though editorial writers tried to show their stance in an unambiguous way, they did not intend to offend readers. Thus they preferred mitigating modal verbs *could* and *might*.

Furthermore, editorial writings had more uses of *perhaps* while scientific papers tended to use *may* more frequently. With the use of *perhaps*, editorial writers were presenting a fuzzy semantic stance to shun possible criticism. If scientific writers used this word more frequently, the objectivity and truth value of their scientific findings would become doubtful.

As a regular feature of opinionated genre of journalism (Richardson, 2007), modality refers to “the grammar of explicit comment, the means by which people express their degree of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter, and their views on the desirability or otherwise of the status of affairs referred” (Fowler, 1986, pp. 131-132). In this sense, modality is a means of indicating a writer's ideological point of view. In other words, through modality newspaper editorial writers try to reveal their values and attitudes towards the text.

Considering the importance of modality in manipulating social reality, the present study, then, sets out to shed light on the linguistic manifestations of the concept in the selected editorials of *The New York Times*, as an example of American English, and the Persian English newspaper *Tehran Times*, as an example of Persian English.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The present study has employed a purposeful sampling for the purpose of data collection, and there are two main reasons for doing so. Firstly, we aimed at focusing on only the editorials of criticism. Secondly, as some editions in *Tehran Times* were not written by Iranians, there was a need to identify and exclude them from the corpus.

Thus, by adopting a nonrandom purposeful sampling, the present study selected 40 editorials [20 culled from the electronic version of the Iranian English newspaper, *Tehran Times* at <http://www.tehrantimes.com/>, and 20 editorials culled from the electronic version of The English daily newspaper, *New York Times* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/18/opinion/> out of a large pool of editorials published daily over a specific span of time (April to September, 2008). The two newspapers are among the top broadsheets in terms of readership as stated by the official websites of the papers.

3.2 Classification of the Editorials

For selecting the editorials to be included in the corpus, we used the classification proposed

by Hall (2003). Based on the proposed classification, it is possible to sort the newspaper editorials into editorials of Criticism, Attack, Defense, Endorsement, Praise, Appeal and Entertainment. Editorials of criticism are defined here as editorials that aimed at criticizing policies and decisions that are considered as controversial by the newspaper staff. Since editorials of criticism are very similar to the editorials of attack, which are supposed to be much more forceful and “call for changes to be made immediately” (Hall, p.159), the two kinds of editorials in the corpus have been referred to as editorials of criticism.

Considering the limitations of the study (focusing on only those editorials of criticism written by the Iranian editorial writers for the editorials of The Tehran Times), the number of editorials (40) can be considered large enough to enable us to determine with a certain degree of reliability the schematic structures of the editorials along with their rhetorical characteristics. Besides, the selected editorials constitute a coherent collection that can be studied meaningfully as they represent the same type of discourse, namely editorials of criticism.

4. Analysis

Modality in the selected editorial of NYT was expressed through using different textual strategies such as modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs, evaluative adjectives, reporting verbs and generic phrases.

The following excerpts include modality expressed through modal verbs.

- 1) The United States, Zimbabwe’s African neighbors and the rest of the international community must immediately press for a postponement of the balloting. (Ref. NYT 14)
- 2) Otherwise, oil will just become one more centripetal force pulling the country apart. (Ref. NYT 15)
- 3) Pakistan’s army, with intelligence help and carefully monitored financial support, should do most of the fighting. (Ref. NYT 8)
- 4) If an American raid captured or killed a top Qaeda or Taliban operative, the backlash might be worth it. (Ref. NYT 4)
- 5) In a democratic Zimbabwe, or in an Africa that insisted on respect for democratic elections, Mr. Tsvangirai would be president and Mr. Mugabe would be gone. (Ref. NYT 6)
- 6) Recognizing these enclaves could inspire a host of rebellions around and inside Russia. (Ref. NYT 10)
- 7) Flush with its military gains, Hezbollah may demand more than Mr. Siniora can grant without forfeiting all legitimacy. (Ref. NYT 18)

In the above mentioned excerpts, the editorial writers not only reported the information but also provided their own attitude towards the events through using certain modal auxiliaries. In excerpt no. 1 and 3 the editorial writers included their own ideas that certain courses of action, *pressing for a postponement of the balloting* and *doing most of the fighting*, should be

taken through using the auxiliary modal *must* and *should*. In 2 and 5 the editorial writers expressed their own prediction of future events. In the same way, the editorial writers in excerpts no. 4, 6 and 7 expressed the evidentiality, different realms of possibility through auxiliary modals *might*, *could* and *can*. The distribution of modality through auxiliary modals has been tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Modality Through Modal Auxiliaries in NYT Editorials

Auxiliary Modals		N	%
Prediction	will, would	88	51.46
Possibility	can, could, may, might	41	23.97
Necessity	must, should	42	24.56

As Table 1 suggests, 51.46 % of the modals were used to express the prediction of the events by editorial writers in NYT and the rest either expressed possibility or necessity. This might signify the idea that prediction of the future events can be regarded as an important feature of this genre in NYT which is textually realized through two modal auxiliaries namely *will* and *would*.

Modality in some cases was expressed through modal adverbs. The following excerpts represent the point.

- 8) We *certainly* share his alarm and his clear frustration that the Pakistanis are doing too little to defeat the extremists or stop their attacks into Afghanistan. (Ref.NYT4)
- 9) That is, *undoubtedly*, why Mr. Tsvangirai accepted it, despite Mr. Mugabe's history of bad faith. (Ref. NYT 6)

The degree of evidentiality has been indicated through certain adverbs in the above mentioned excerpts. The other adverbs of this kind used in the editorials included *unlikely*, *less likely*, *undeniably*, *apparently*, *clearly*, *truly*, *accurately*, *unacceptably*, *grandly*, *surely*, and *genuinely*.

Besides using the adverbs to express evidentiality, editorial writers employed some highly evaluative adverbs and adjective as another textual strategy to express their own attitude towards the desirability or otherwise of the state of affairs referred to in the editorials. Excerpts no. 10 and 11 present the point.

- 10) Instead of defending Zimbabwe's people and their right to democratic change, he [South Africa's president] has *shamefully* chosen to protect Mr. Mugabe. (Ref. NYT 14)
- 11) Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, *foolishly* and *tragically* baited the Russians — or even *more foolishly* fell into Moscow's trap — when he sent his army into the separatist enclave of South Ossetia last week. (Ref. NYT 11)

The above-mentioned excerpts indicated that the editorial writers not only presented some factual information on the South African president's decision and events in Georgia but also

expressed their own evaluation of the events through evaluative adverbs namely *shamefully*, *foolishly*, *tragically* and *more foolishly*. The other evaluative adverbs used in the editorials are *woefully*, *substantially*, *seriously*, *painfully*, *deadly*, *badly*, *dyspeptically*, *sadly*, *cynically*, *chiefly*, *not surprisingly*, *unfortunately*, *frighteningly*, *ruthlessly*, *efficiently*, *uncritically*, *rapidly* and *understandably*.

Furthermore, phrases such as *lawless border*, *credible investigation*, *sufficient urgency*, *manmade disasters*, *dictatorial president*, *devious maneuver* and *brutalized citizens* can be named as examples of evaluative adjectives used in the editorials, expressing the writers' attitudes and values towards the issues referred to in the editorials.

In the analyzed data modality was also found to be expressed through certain reporting verbs such as *claim*, *voice*, *warn*, *declare*, *admit*, *speculate*, *hope*, *doubt*, *concede*, *predict*, *announce* and *charge*. The following excerpts exemplify the point.

12) Moscow *claims* it is merely defending the rights of ethnic minorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been trying to break from Georgia since the early 1990s. (Ref. NYT 11)

13) We *doubt* that they [Russians] will be eager to return to the grim days of Soviet isolation. (Ref. NYT 11)

The use of these reporting verbs is of significance as they reflected editorial writers' opinion and attitude towards the truth value of the reported content, that is, the extent to which they consider a proposition as true or false.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that in eleven cases the editorial writers expressed modality through verbs such as *seem*, *appear*, and *believe*, which can be referred to as "knowledge verbs" (Fowler, 1986). The following excerpts are instances of this kind of modality.

14) Prime Minister Vladimir Putin ... *appears* determined to reimpose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with. (Ref. NYT 11)

15) All of this [withdrawal of American troops from Iraq] *seems* to be driven more by what is happening in American battleground states than any battleground in Iraq. (Ref. NYT 9)

The use of such knowledge verbs is also important in editorials as they are often "associated with some (often indirect) expression of how accountable a writer is for knowledge content" (Malmström, 2007, p. 36).

The most obvious and straightforward strategy for expressing modality in the editorials was found to be the employment of certain generic phrases. In 21 cases the editorial writers revealed their own opinion towards the propositions through this kind of modality as exemplified in the following excerpts.

16) *It is increasingly clear that* at least one major dairy company, the Sanlu Group, knew

about the problem for months (Ref. NYT 5)

17) *There were no surprises* in Sunday's balloting. (Ref. NYT 20)

Throughout the selected editorials the following generic phrases of modality have been used.

Table 2. Generic Phrases Expressing Modality in NYT Editorials

Editorial No.	Generic Phrase of Modality
1	<i>It is frustrating that ...</i> <i>It is tragic that ...</i> <i>It is unlikely that ...</i>
3	<i>Let us be clear ...</i> <i>In direct defiance of ...</i> <i>That is looking less likely ...</i> <i>We are certain ...</i>
4	<i>We fear that ...</i> <i>We fear that ...</i>
5	<i>It is conceivable that ...</i> <i>It is increasingly clear that ...</i>
6	<i>We are less certain ...</i>
10	<i>It is unnerving enough ...</i>
11	<i>There is no imaginable excuse ...</i>
13	<i>It is hard to ...</i>
14	<i>It was unclear ...</i> <i>We fear that ...</i>

In general, NYT editorial writers employed several linguistic strategies to realize modality throughout the selected editorials of criticism. To express their attitude towards the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence (evidentiality) and also their evaluative opinion about the described event, they employed modal auxiliaries, adverbs and adjectives, certain reporting verbs and verbs of knowledge and generic phrases.

Editorial writers in TT have expressed modality, their own attitude towards the situation, news event, through different linguistic devices. Auxiliary modals were found to be one of the common devices to express modality. The following excerpts show how modality was realized through using modal auxiliary verbs.

19) Mr. Brown should not lie about Iran's nuclear program to butter up hardliners in the Knesset. (Ref. TT 1)

20) It will be impossible to establish security in the country unless the occupiers unconditionally withdraw from Iraqi territory.... (Ref. TT 16)

21) Any detour from this path would set the country back years ... (Ref. TT 7)

22) Israel can no longer attain its goals through military action. (Ref. TT 11)

23) Arab allies must join together to confront the danger before it is too late. (Ref. TT

17)

- 24) Cars are being fed with agricultural products that could be used for food ...
(Ref. TT 6)

Referring to the above-mentioned excerpts, one might see that the modal auxiliary verbs *should*, *must* in excerpt no. 18 and 22 have been used as a way of expressing necessity. Modals in excerpts no. 19 and 20 *will* and *would*, on the other hand, have been used to express *Prediction*. *Possibility* has been implied through the use of *could* in the last excerpt. Table no. 3 represents expressing modality through modal auxiliary verbs.

Table 3. Modality Through Modal Auxiliary Verbs in TT Editorials

Auxiliary Modals		N	%
Prediction	will, would	41	48.23
Possibility	can, could	15	17.64
Necessity	must, should	29	34.11

As Table 3 indicates, 48.23% of the modal auxiliaries were used to imply prediction of the future news events and 34.11% were used for necessity. Only 17.64% have been used as indication of possibility.

Writers' attitude towards news events were also revealed through evaluative adverbs and adjectives. The following excerpts are examples of the case.

- 25) Fossil fuel reserves will surely be depleted in the not-too-distant future.
(Ref. TT 6)
- 26) Western media outlets are illogically comparing Iran's nuclear program to North Korea's. (Ref. TT 8)

The adverbs of this kind included most likely, ostensibly, however, unfortunately, probably, clearly, nevertheless, increasingly, insidiously, apparently, never, savagely, in- fact, mainly, correctly, nevertheless, indeed.

Phrases such as enslaving order, cruel occupation, false allegation, lasting prosperity, rampant inflation, and occupying forces can be named as instances of using evaluative adjectives expressing the writers' attitudes.

Moreover, the predominant reporting verb in the editorials was found to be the verb *say*; however, in only four cases, the editorial writers' attitudes were revealed through the two other reporting verbs such as *claim* and *admit*.

Editorial writers in some cases (N=16) expressed modality through certain generic phrases. The following excerpt exemplifies the point.

- 26) It could safely be said with a high degree of certainty that, for a long time, the U.S.

has not been a country that is able to convince other nations to follow its path to peace ... (Ref. TT 9)

Table 4 represents the generic phrases identified in Tehran Times selected editorials.

Table 4. Generic Phrases Expressing Modality in TT

Editorial No.	Generic Phrase of Modality
1	<i>It seems that ...</i> <i>There is no doubt that...</i>
2	<i>It is never acceptable ...</i> <i>It makes us wonder</i>
5	<i>Doubts have now arisen ...</i>
6	<i>It is clear that ...</i> <i>There are several doubts as to ...</i>
7	<i>These actions run contrary to ...</i>
9	<i>There is no doubt ...</i> <i>It could safely be said with high degree of certainty ...</i>
11	<i>It is obvious that ...</i>
15	<i>It is natural that ...</i>
16	<i>It is apparently obvious of the fact that...</i>
17	<i>I appears that ...</i>
19	<i>There is no doubt that ...</i> <i>There is no doubt that</i>

5. Summary

The analysis of the selected editorials in both The New York Times and Tehran Times indicated that editorial writers not only aimed at reporting and giving information on news events but also tried to provide the readers with their own judgments and comments through mainly Modality. Modality was realized in the two papers through modal auxiliary verbs, adverbs and adjectives, certain reporting verbs and some generic expressions.

A comparison of the two papers in terms of employing auxiliary modal verbs suggested that both of the newspapers preferred mainly predictive auxiliary modals such as *will* or *would* to the other kinds of modals (cf. Tables 1,3). But the higher number of the predictive modals in NYT (N= 88) suggested the idea that identifying what would happen in the future was the main concern of the editorial writers in NYT. On the other hand, comparing the modals of necessity in the two papers (TT 34.11%, NYT 24.56%) suggested that editorial writers in Tehran Times were occupied with what should be done.

In general expressing modality mainly through modal auxiliary verbs confirmed the findings of the study conducted by Morley (2004) who acknowledged the greater importance of modals in editorials compared with news reports.

More frequent use of generic phrases like *That is looking less likely ...* for expressing modality in both newspapers (cf. Tables no. 2,4) revealed that editorial writers inclined to thematize modality possibly to increase its persuasive effect.

6. Pedagogical implications

From a pedagogical point of view, the interface between the linguistic analysis of newspaper editorials, as an example of media discourse, and the teaching of English as a foreign or second language would be a relevant issue if one considers the growing number of students majoring in English language studies in Iranian universities. These students can profit from a comparative study of English-Persian editorials since it may enhance their rhetorical awareness in media discourse.

In fact, certain characteristics of newspapers, such as having a wide variety of sub-genres, the standard language use and their fresh and current content have encouraged the use of newspaper language as input to language teaching materials.

Considering the fact that “linguistic awareness can be more effectively developed with purposeful language practice and critical analysis of a genre” (Bronia, 2005, p. 79), the findings of the present study on modality can provide the EFL teachers and students with the required knowledge about the discourse conventions in a certain sub-genre, namely newspaper editorials, making them ready to use the newspaper editorials in the classrooms.

Specifically, newspaper editorials can be employed in teaching courses dealing with reading, academic writing and journalism. According to Bhatia:

A genre-based flexible language curriculum can facilitate language learning within, across and beyond the confines of a curriculum, which will allow more freedom to the participants in the teaching and learning process. This can be effectively realized by using a daily newspaper, which is easily available and also contains a wide variety of genres and sub-genres that can enrich the linguistics repertoire of any language learner. (1993, p. 157)

Through designing interesting classroom activities based on editorials, it is possible to provide the students with the logic of the ideas and the organization and development of the arguments in the editorials. This would in turn transform the students into critical readers who are able to read between the lines of a newspaper and to critique stories for structure, content and meaning.

However, using the newspaper and its sub-genres as an input in EFL classes without initial focusing on their generic distinctive may be counterproductive. As Bhatia remarked:

Genre specificity, thus, within the pages of newspaper is so significant that any attempt to use newspaper language without being aware of it can become misleading. In other words, if the learner is not made sensitive to genre distinctions, then the very strength of newspaper language can become its weakness. (1993, p. 161)

Thus, any study that attempts to provide EFL students with generic characteristics of the editorials will make them ready to make use of newspaper editorials in the classrooms.

Emphasizing the importance of more critical awareness toward the analysis of language, Wallace (1992) has argued that readers would not be successful in their reading unless they are involved in challenging the ideological assumptions and propositional knowledge which are usually presented as “obvious” in written texts (1992, p. 61). Hence, in order for teachers to raise the critical consciousness of their students in EFL classes, the teachers should try to develop a general understanding of the relationship between “ideology” and “power” partially realized through modality in the newspaper editorials.

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