

Modal Auxiliaries and Interpersonal Functions in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"

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Abstract: *The paper examines the employment of modal auxiliaries by the speaker to indicate duty, permission, desire, or confidence to the audience in the social context of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to analyze the interpersonal function of public addresses.*

Keywords: *Interpersonal Functions, Modal Auxiliaries, "I have a Dream"*

1. Introduction

Interpersonal function is one of the most interesting and complicated subjects in a linguistic study of a particular language. Modality is one of the main systems related to the communication of attitudes through language (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018). Modality, reflecting the writer's opinion and idea about a proposition, lexico-grammatically realizes the interpersonal meaning of an utterance. Simpson (1993) and other researchers, such as Halliday (1994) and Palmer (1986) focus on the modality while discussing the interpersonal meaning of an utterance. It also extends to the speaker's attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence. That is why modality is a major exponent of the interpersonal function of language. It is noticed that among the different lexico-grammatical realizations, modal auxiliaries are employed more frequently in expressing the writer or writer's attitude toward a proposition, especially in public speeches.

Many studies have been carried out on political speeches, especially on political leaders' inauguration address or messages (Pionery & Isti'anah, 2017), but relatively, less attentions have been paid to public speeches concerned to social issues from non-official perspective, and how modality contributes to the interpersonal features of full-length discourse types has remained ignored.

To investigate the interpersonal function of public speeches, this study focuses on Martin Luther King's speech "I have a Dream" through exploring the using of modal auxiliaries to express obligation, permission, desire or confidence by the speaker to the audience in the social context.

2. Theoretical Framework

Modality is considered as a major exponent of interpersonal relations and has been extensively studied. As for the notion of modality, different linguists show different views. Lyons (1977: 452) defined modality as speaker's opinion of or attitude towards the proposition the sentence expressing or the situation the proposition describing. He classified modality into epistemic and deontic. The former is concerned with knowledge, belief, and the latter with the necessity of possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents. Apart from that, he classified three scales of modality: (1) the scale of "wish" and "intention", (2) that of "necessity" and "obligation", (3) that of "certainty" and "possibility" (Halliday, 1994: 308). Givon (1995:112) views modality from another angle, who divides modality into epistemic and evaluative attitudes, which are the two main types of judgment, perspective or attitudes concerning the information packed in the clause. There are a larger number of ways of realizing modality: non-verbal and verbal, through non-deliberate features and deliberate features, which include fillers (sort of), adverbs (probably, quite, better), modal auxiliaries (can, must), and mental-process verbs (think, understand, and feel), and intonation.

In functional grammar, modality is considered as a major exponent of interpersonal relations, which means modality is one of the lexico-grammatical features to show the interpersonal function.

This article will focus on the modal auxiliaries which are a most important part in modality analysis. Based on Simpson's classification (1993), two types of modal auxiliaries, namely, deontic modals and

epistemic modals are identified and studied in this article.

3. Methodology

Simpson (1993: 47) defines deontic modality as a modal system of 'responsibility' that is used to denote a 'continuum of commitment' from permission to obligation to necessity. Deontic modality indicates a speaker's view of the degree of responsibility associated to a certain statement and is therefore a common aspect of persuasive language and social interaction. Modal auxiliary verbs such as "should", "must", and "may" may be used to convey deontic modality. The epistemic modality expresses a speaker's level of certainty or disbelief in the truth of a claim (Aidinlou & Mohammadpour, 2012). It is the modal system involved in transmitting knowledge, belief, and cognitive ideas. Modal auxiliaries like as 'could,' may, "might," must, "shall," should,' and 'will' communicate epistemic modality.

As a famous leader of the Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s United States of America, Martin Luther King was also a powerful speaker. He presented his most famous speech "I Have a Dream" (here after referred to as "A Dream"), before a quarter of a million demonstrators of the Civil Rights Movement at the step of the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August, 1963.

Through descriptive statistics, the lexico-grammaticalized modals employed in "A Dream" are to be described in terms of frequency and percentage and their roles in their functioning interpersonally are interpreted.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

First of all, we have an overview of the basic meaning and common use of modals. Can means ability, may means permission, must obligation, shall determination and will intention. In general, modality establishes the degree of the authority of an utterance. Modal auxiliaries (may, must, can, etc.) perform this function, but they contain a systemic ambiguity about the nature of the authority—whether it is based primarily on knowledge or on power.

For example, "She can talk" means either the speaker's permission or an expression of compulsion. "She may talk" either gives permission or suggests a possibility. Meaning of modals is heavily determined by the interactional contexts in which it occurred. This is precisely what we would expect if the ambiguity of the form is highly functional. In fact, such a property of the modality is often made good use of by politicians in their speeches, as we can see in the speeches by presidents in the following analysis.

Andersen (1988) points out that on the interpersonal function of modal auxiliaries language offers a variety of resources for directing attention to the external world, to the self, or to the relationship between speaker and hearer. Among these resources are modal constructions (e.g. in English, must, ought, need, should, can) that inject possibility, necessity, or obligation into unmodified utterances.

Among the many variants of the different modal operators, Halliday (2000: 362) just picked out some most familiar and frequently-used ones to demonstrate their values in high, median and low scales, as show in table 1:

Table 1: Scale of modals

Scale	modals				
high	must	ought to	need	has to	is to
median	will	would	shall	should	
low	may	might	can	could	

4.1 Research Questions

To investigate the significance of modal auxiliaries representing the interpersonal function in "A Dream", we try to examine the modals to answer the following questions:

- 1) Are epistemic modals or deontic modals employed equally? If not, what percentage does each allocate to itself?
- 2) How deontic modals and epistemic modals function interpersonally in the speech?

4.2 Discussion

As we have discussed, power is an important feature of political speeches. Speakers usually present themselves as authorities and enforce their wills upon the hearers. One of the ways is to employ modal auxiliaries in their speeches to realize different interpersonal meanings. What follows is the result of the calculation of the frequencies of occurrence of modals in “A Dream”.

Table 2: Modals in “A Dream”

Modal Aux	Frequency	Percentage
will	26	50
can	9	17.3
must	8	15.4
shall	5	9.7
would	2	3.8
need to	1	1.9
is to	1	1.9

total: 52

A quick survey of the list of the mood elements in the speech in Table 2, we will find that the most frequent modal operators are “will”, “can” and “must”. So the following is to elaborate how these three modal operators function in convincing the audience in the political public speech.

Table 3: Epistemic modals or deontic modals

Modals	frequency	percentage
Deontic	35	67.3
Epistemic	17	32.7

Total: 52

Table 2 and 3 are responsible for question 1. Table 2 shows the speaker’s preference of modals and table 2 indicates that epistemic modals are more frequently used than deontic modals, which indicates that expressing confidence or lack of confidence is more necessary and important than stating commitment from permission to obligation to requirement, which is closely related to the social situation and the speaker’s position.

4.2.1 Interpersonal Function of “will” XA

The modal operator “will” usually functions as a finite in a clause. It is often applied to express the ideas of possibility in a proposition or inclination in a proposal.

(1) It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual.

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

In this Part, King indicates the necessity and urgency of the civil rights movement. He does not utter this explicitly, but rather implicitly in three successive clauses through repeating “will”. The modal operator “will” is first with a negative polarity. In the proposition, it helps to indicate the possibility that the black people are going to keep on with their fighting for freedom and full civil rights until they have obtained them. The next two “will” assist the speaker to warn those people of the possible danger who think that the black people just want to blow off as they did before and that they are to feel contented and stop the movement again.

If they think this way, they are definitely wrong this time. The last two “will” indicates the possible danger not only to those apathetic people but also to the American government. The two modal operators reinforce the possibility of the dangerous aftermath from this apathy to the civil rights

movement. And this terrible aftermath is that the nation can be most unlikely to return to business as usual or to maintain peace and steadiness any longer. However, in the political public speech, the speaker will violate the rules, and use “will” to show different Interpersonal function.

(2) This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Here, “would” is past tense form of “will”, it transforms obligatory meaning without conjectures and helps to prove American black’s legitimate civil rights and their current struggle rightful.

“Will” can also be employed in sentences with an obvious modal use of the “promise”, in which the speaker puts himself forward as the guarantor, as it were, of the truth or the occurrence of the event he refers to (Lyons, 1977: 310). “Will” in this sense is similar to that proposed by and the will has “the use of showing force of will” and “a pure predicative use” (Hoffmann, 1993: 58).

(3) This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

King puts himself forward as the guarantor of the truth or the occurrence of the event he refers to. He encourages the black people to be confident about their future.

(4) I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

(5) I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the son of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

“Will” is mainly used to provide information about what will exactly happen in the future and the statement made about future occurrences which are necessarily based upon the speaker’s beliefs, predictions or intentions, rather than upon his knowledge of fact. Here, King convinces the black people that they will win their freedom they desire at last.

4.2.2 Interpersonal Function of “Must”

Like the modal operator “will”, “must” also functions as finite in a clause, but quite often it is applied to express what is necessary for one to do, what one ought to do, or what one is forced to do. This modal operator has a high value in modality.

(6) But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

In this part, the speaker instructs how the black people should react in the civil rights movement. In example, King first adopts the modal operator “must” to voice that he has the obligation to remind them of something vital. In political speech, speakers may enhance their authority; influence the

hearers' opinion and action through giving an irresistible suggestion or command with modals such as "must" and "should". In these processes, the speakers' willing is enforced upon the hearers in either a subjective or an objective way. Hofmann, in a political formal context, "should" is too weak to show sincerity in an invitation, so must is often used to express an "irresistible" suggestion (1993:106). King takes other "must" as a preference to express a strong obligation to or request of the black people to organize his suggestions. With the assistance of the subject "we" and the polarity of the modality, these suggestions pass on to the audience their attitudes and obligations in the process of gaining their rightful place.

They ought not to conduct any guilty or wrongful deeds, that is, they should not hate anybody or make the civil rights movement degenerate into any kind of violence. Instead, they should differentiate enemies from friends and take the peaceful action, i.e. non-violent movement. These are King's "irresistible" suggestion. To use the modal operator "Must" in these proposals (two negatives and two positives) strengthens the power of the proposals and convinces the audience of their obligations in their future movement.

"Must" sometimes means what is likely or certain to. The modal "must" also reveal the speaker's judgment according to his own standards and experience. (Tannen, 1993:45)

(7) And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Here "must" indicate the King's belief, spire and elicit hope from the hearers and put the speaker in the position of an authority to foretell the future, that is, the hopes become true.

4.2.3 Interpersonal Function of "Can"

"Can" has three meanings, which include "be able to", "be permitted to", and used to indicate that something is typically the case; however, it often indicates the idea of probability in a proposition and inclination in a proposal. The value of modality of this modal operator is low.

In political speech, "Can" is usually employed to measure what happens against what is possible. Besides, "it is used to describe the ability, which must be an inference since it cannot be observed from the outside" (Tannen, 1993:145). In addition, it may be used for granting permission.

(8) The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people. For many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.

After the speaker has convinced the audience of the right and lawful attitudes in the long march for civil rights, he adopts two clauses "We cannot walk alone." and "We cannot turn back." to provide the audience with the right manner for the movement. In these two intermittent proposals, he adapts the negative form of the modal operator "can", which confirms the audience of the least probability that the black people are planning to struggle without the help of other ethnic groups or other religious people, and that they are to stop or turn back whenever they are confronted with any difficulties or setbacks in their civil rights movement.

(9) There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only". We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

In response to the accusatorial remark "When will you be satisfied?" the speaker intermittently applies four negative forms of the modal operator "can". With the assistance of the negative adverb "never" and "not", the value of the modal operator "can" becomes high. Subsequently these four clauses powerfully elaborate the strong determination of the black people. Through using "can", the speaker determinedly and repeatedly calls on the audience to continue with the movement so long as they have not been granted their citizenship rights.

The modal can in most speeches, is also used to express possibility, which is to aspire and elicit hope from the hearers and put him in the position of an authority to foretell the future, as we can see in the following example.

(10) Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Here, King uses "can" to aspire the listeners that they will win their civil rights and freedom as an irresistible tendency, which indicates King's strong confidence and optimistic outlook.

5. Conclusion

Mainly based on the theory of Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Simpson's classification, the paper uses Martin Luther King's speech "I Have a Dream" as an example to demonstrate how interpersonal function is generally realized in this political speech through modal auxiliaries. It is found that modal auxiliaries are one of the important elements used in King's speeches to achieve interpersonal function. In "A Dream", King uses modals successfully, especially the high value modal operators, assist to achieve persuasiveness and show his confidence. In political speech, modal auxiliaries are usually employed to reflect the speaker's intention, opinion and attitude. However, they have some special functions in political speech. They can be used to enforce the power upon the hearers and by making use of the ambiguity of modal auxiliaries, the speaker may achieve both the purposes of establishing himself as an authority and mitigating his power to set up a friendly relationship with the hearers. This deliberate adoption of modal auxiliaries in the speech enhances the power of persuasiveness by enabling the audience to feel that the speaker is standing by their side, making the speech for their own good and benefit and make the speech more convinced and persuasive. All in all, modal auxiliaries can be used to help establish the speaker's authority, express speaker's perception of the degree of obligation, represent the speaker's degree of confidence and enforce the speaker's will and intention upon the hearers in a political speech.

The paper also has its limitations and there is still much room for improvement. For example, the persuasiveness can be promoted if the data are collected from more speeches by King or other speakers, and it only concerns modal auxiliaries in the speech while other types of modality are not included; and King's personal style in political speech also deserves more concern from perspective of stylistics, sociolinguistics as well as psycholinguistics.

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