Modality and Meaning: A Stylistic Approach to Speaker's Perspective, Ideology, and Linguistic Framing

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Abstract

This study conducts a stylistic analysis of Donald Trump's State of the Union Address, focusing on how modality reveals the speaker's point of view and communicative intentions. Grounded in the analytical framework of "Point of View and Modality," the research explores how linguistic choices in the speech construct speaker's worldview, shape interpersonal relations, and signal degrees of certainty, obligation, and belief. The study seeks to uncover how such modality-laden expressions reflect not only the speaker's stance toward the propositions he utters but also the intended alignment with his audience, ideologies, and national vision. Methodologically, the analysis adopts a qualitative, text-based approach informed by stylistic and discourse-analytic tools. Key aspects of modality—epistemic, deontic, boulomaic, and perceptual—are examined in conjunction with narrative structure, spatial and temporal deixis, and modality shading (positive, negative, and neutral). The speech is dissected to uncover patterns that reveal Trump's strategic use of language to assert authority, inspire trust, and polarize or unify audiences. The findings suggest that Trump's speech is saturated with epistemic modality to project certainty and assert ideological dominance, while deontic and boulomaic modalities are strategically employed to outline obligations and national aspirations. Temporal deixis and positive shading further amplify a forward-looking, success-oriented narrative. The study contributes to political discourse analysis by demonstrating how stylistic features, particularly modality, serve as critical instruments in constructing persuasive political identity and influencing public perception.

Keywords: Stylistics, Modality, Discourse Strategies, Modality, Ideology, Rhetoric, Point of View

Introduction

The role of language is very important in organizing political ideologies, constructing leadership. It is also fundamental in impacting the opinions of public. When we look at the political speeches we understand easily that they reflect powerful communication and serve as an important tool of communication. Through the communicative power of the speeches the leaders assert powers on the people. They manipulate the minds of the public and thus influence their opinions and perceptions. Through political speeches, the leaders assert authority, project national visions, and persuade audiences. Within this rhetorical landscape, modality—the linguistic expression of possibility, necessity, certainty, and obligation—emerges as a vital stylistic feature. It reflects not only the speaker's attitude and level of commitment to the propositions presented but also how they engage with their audience's expectations and emotions.

The stylistic analysis is based on a non-literary text that is Donald Trump's State of the Union Speech delivered on February 2020. Rather than focusing on literary aesthetics, the analysis is grounded in linguistic stylistics, emphasizing how particular modal constructions reveal layers of meaning that contribute to the speech's persuasive power. The objective is to unpack the speaker's rhetorical stance and ideological positioning through a detailed examination of modal choices. It aims at finding out the aspects of modality from the text that are important to understand speaker's point of view. Modality helps understanding what the speaker's intentions and beliefs are and what is the nature of his relationship with others. For this, the analytical framework, used for the

stylistic analysis is "Point of View and Modality". The analysis will focus on the aspects of modality in relation with point of view. Modality refers to the mode within which proposition of a sentence is reflected like certainty, possibility, and obligation. It also functions to regulate interpersonal function (Iwamoto, 2017). Point of view indicates a particular way of conceptualizing and refers to worldview. As a part of modality and point of view, the following issues have been considered in the text:

Spatial and temporal deixis, narrative type, deontic, boulomaic, epistemic, and perception modality. Along with this, the positive, negative and neutral shading have also been explored, discussed and interpreted.

The research is situated within the broader domain of political discourse analysis and stylistics, aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how language operates in real-world, high-stakes communication. In particular, it explores how modality functions not simply as a syntactic feature but as a strategic instrument in the political arena, shaping discourse to fulfill persuasive and ideological goals.

Literature Review

When we look closely at modality, we understand it has different roles that are distinct and influence the communication. In political discourse the role of modality has taken the attention of many scholars in various fields; stylistics, discourse analysis, and critical discourse studies. This linguistic phenomenon is very significant and forms the base to understand the underlying patterns of language in political field. We understand how political language plays a pivotal role not only to communicate information but it also helps in expressing the attitudes, constructing ideologies, negotiating power relations, and persuading audiences. Political discourse is widely acknowledged to be ideologically charged and rhetorically strategic; modality serves as a key linguistic device that encodes these underlying functions.

Modality as a Stylistic and Ideological Resource

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One of the foundational contributions to the study of modality in stylistics is offered by Simpson (2003), who provides a comprehensive classification of modality into three primary types: deontic, epistemic, and boulomaic. Deontic modality relates to obligation, permission, and necessity, reflecting what ought to be done. Epistemic modality deals with knowledge, belief, and degrees of certainty or probability, expressing how sure the speaker is about a proposition. Boulomaic modality, less frequently discussed, captures desire and wishes. Simpson emphasizes modality's function as a "point of view" indicator, making it indispensable in stylistic analyses that aim to decode the speaker's stance, intent, and alignment with propositions. This conceptualization highlights that modality is not a mere grammatical feature but a window into the speaker's mindset and communicative strategy.

The seminal work of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) in An Introduction to Functional Grammar situates modality firmly within the interpersonal metafunction of language. This metafunction encompasses how speakers and listeners interact, negotiate meanings, and enact social roles. For Halliday, modality is integral to interpersonal meaning because it allows speakers to express attitudes, judgments, and degrees of commitment, shaping the relational dynamics between interlocutors. In political discourse, this negotiation is amplified as leaders and politicians seek to influence public opinion, assert authority, and manage consensus. The alignment between speaker and audience is thus mediated through modal expressions that signal confidence, caution, or obligation.

Building upon Halliday's framework, Thompson (2014) underscores the nuanced ways modality reveals a speaker's confidence, authority, and ideological stance. His work illustrates that modal verbs and adjuncts serve to calibrate the speaker's level of commitment to propositions, signaling certainty or doubt as well as degrees of obligation or permission. These markers provide crucial insights into the rhetorical positioning of political figures, revealing how they navigate complex social and institutional expectations.

Modality and Ideological Manipulation

The integration of stylistics with critical discourse analysis (CDA) has further illuminated the ideological implications of modality in political language. Jeffries (2010), in Critical Stylistics, explores how modality functions as a subtle but powerful means of ideological manipulation. She shows that modal verbs such as must, should, and can do more than express logical relations; they frame propositions in ways that guide audience interpretation and response. For example, must often signals obligation or inevitability, suggesting that certain actions or beliefs are non-negotiable or morally necessary. This framing influences how listeners perceive the legitimacy and urgency of political messages. Jeffries highlights modality's role in including or excluding alternative viewpoints, effectively shaping the ideological boundaries of discourse.

Similarly, Toolan (2012) asserts that stylistic features like modality are not neutral conveyers of meaning but active constructors of perspective. Through specific modal choices, speakers communicate their communicative goals, negotiate authority, and signal interpersonal relationships. Toolan's analysis reveals how modality contributes to constructing a speaker's identity and managing the audience's expectations, reinforcing power relations embedded within political rhetoric.

From a broader critical discourse perspective, Fairclough (2015) situates modality as a fundamental ideological tool that shapes political reality through language. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis emphasizes that modality helps to naturalize certain political positions by portraying them as logical, authoritative, or inevitable, thus sustaining power relations. He identifies modality as a resource through which speakers can manage consensus and dissent, legitimize policies, and construct identities aligned with dominant ideologies. This perspective aligns with Van Dijk (2006), who argues that modality forms part of wider macro-strategies in political discourse, such as legitimization, polarization, and emphasis. Van Dijk views modality as instrumental in maintaining ideological dominance by subtly influencing audience perceptions and reinforcing societal power structures.

Recent Empirical and Corpus-Based Studies

Recent empirical research has increasingly applied corpus linguistics methodologies to the study of modality in political discourse, enriching qualitative insights with quantitative data. Zheng and Huang (2021) conducted a corpus-based analysis of political speeches, focusing on modality use during crisis communication. Their findings reveal a high frequency of epistemic modality, particularly expressions of uncertainty and tentative knowledge. These modal choices serve to manage public uncertainty, maintain credibility, and assert leadership in turbulent times. Their study underscores how modality is strategically deployed to balance reassurance with transparency, essential for effective crisis rhetoric.

Similarly, Martínez Lirola (2022) analyzed political speeches delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how modal choices fluctuated between expressing solidarity with the public and asserting governmental control. The oscillation between inclusive and authoritative modal expressions reflects the complexity of political communication during global emergencies, where leaders must simultaneously foster trust and enforce compliance. This study illustrates the adaptability of modality as a rhetorical resource in response to situational demands.

The methodological innovation of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), advocated by Partington et al. (2013), combines stylistic analysis with large-scale empirical data, enabling the identification of recurrent modality patterns in political language. CADS reveals how clusters of modal expressions function as persuasive mechanisms, reinforcing key ideological messages through repetition and patterning. This approach enhances the reliability and generalizability of findings on modality use in political discourse.

Further interdisciplinary contributions include the work of Koller and Wodak (2008), who examine the intersection of modality with gender and ideology. Their research demonstrates how modal constructions contribute to constructing national identity and moral authority in political speeches, often reflecting gendered and ideological dimensions. Their findings highlight the complex interplay between linguistic choices and broader social discourses.

In addition, Breeze (2019) explores the interplay of modality with rhetorical appeals such as ethos and logos in political speeches. Breeze shows that modality bolsters credibility and logical persuasion, supporting arguments by expressing degrees of certainty or obligation. This integration of modality with classical rhetorical concepts enriches our understanding of how political language functions to persuade and legitimize.

Theoretical Synthesis and Contribution

The convergence of stylistics, critical discourse analysis, rhetoric, and corpus linguistics in recent scholarship reveals modality as a multidimensional linguistic and rhetorical phenomenon. It is no longer viewed merely as a grammatical category but as a deeply ideological and persuasive resource. Modality mediates the relationship between language, power, and ideology by encoding speakers' attitudes, managing audience alignment, and constructing social realities.

This body of literature underscores that modality performs several interrelated functions in political discourse:

i. Revealing Speaker Attitude and Stance: Modal expressions communicate degrees of certainty, obligation, and desire, providing insight into the speaker's viewpoint and emotional investment.
ii. Managing Audience Alignment: By calibrating commitment and contingency, modality helps negotiate consensus or dissent, influencing how audiences interpret and respond to political messages.
iii. Encoding Ideological Content: Modality frames propositions in ways that naturalize certain political positions and marginalize alternatives, thereby sustaining ideological dominance.
iv. Constructing Power and Authority: Modal choices contribute to the enactment of authority, legitimacy, and moral responsibility, crucial for effective political leadership.
v. Facilitating Persuasion: Modality interacts with other rhetorical devices to strengthen argumentation, build credibility, and engage audiences emotionally and logically.

This study builds upon these theoretical foundations by employing a stylistic methodology to analyze modality in a recent political speech. It offers empirical validation of how modality shapes narrative structure, positions the speaker, and persuades the audience.

In doing so, it contributes to the expanding interdisciplinary scholarship that situates linguistic analysis within broader socio-political contexts.

Methodology and Data Collection

The study is a stylistic analysis of modality within a political speech aiming to explore how linguistic choices shape the speaker's perspective and communicative intent. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of stylistics and modality, the study investigates the use of modal expressions—such as modal verbs, adverbs, and other grammatical structures—that convey degrees of certainty, obligation, possibility, and volition. These elements are essential in interpreting the ideological stance and rhetorical force embedded within political discourse. The methodology of the study is qualitative in nature, involving close textual analysis of the speech through the lens of linguistic modality. The qualitative research design, focuses on the stylistic and discourse-based analysis of modality within a contemporary political speech delivered in February 2020. The research is grounded in the frameworks of linguistic stylistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly drawing from models established by Simpson (2003), Jeffries (2010), and Fairclough (2015). These frameworks enable a detailed examination of how language functions not only structurally but ideologically and rhetorically in political contexts.

Political speeches can be best used to understand the underlying ideological realities of the speakers and how the minds of the listeners be caught by the speakers' use of the words. The speech selected for the present study id of Donald Trump. The stylistic analysis is based on a non-literary text that is Donald Trump's State of the Union Speech delivered on February 2020. Rather than focusing on literary aesthetics, the analysis is grounded in linguistic stylistics, emphasizing how particular modal constructions reveal layers of meaning that contribute to the speech's persuasive power. The speech represents Donald trump's high profiled political address. The address is marked by strategic persuasion, ideological positioning, and national rhetoric. It is non-literary in nature and was chosen for its relevance, visibility, and rhetorical richness. The speech was transcribed and divided into analytical units (paragraphs and sentences) for a systematic examination of modality.

The analysis is based on stylistics approach. The purpose of the analysis is to identify and interpret modal verbs, modal adverbs, semi modals and periphrastic modal constructions and other type of modality expressions.

Procedure

The speech was read and annotated manually to extract modal elements. Each occurrence was analyzed in its immediate and extended context to understand its contribution to the speaker's overall rhetorical strategy. The analysis paid attention to frequency, distribution, and clustering of modal forms as well as their alignment with key ideological themes in the speech.

Validity and Limitations

To enhance analytical validity, the study draws from established theoretical models and relies on systematic textual evidence rather than interpretive speculation. However, given the qualitative nature of the study, findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to all political discourse. The study focuses on linguistic function rather than content accuracy or political affiliation, maintaining a neutral analytical stance.

Analysis

The selected text was analyzed manually to identify and classify instances of modality, with particular attention given to the speaker's lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and rhetorical positioning.There is a reflection of various characteristics in the speech about internal point of view with positive shading. In the speech, the president Trump is enthusiastic and optimistic about the future of America. He frequently refers to past to make a comparison between past and present and he also jumps towards future.

The parts, relevant to the analysis have been, underlined.

Three years ago, we launched the great American comeback. Tonight, I stand before you to share the incredible results. Jobs are booming, incomes are soaring, poverty is plummeting, crime is falling, confidence is surging, and our country is thriving and highly respected again. In just three short years, we have shattered the mentality of American decline, and we have rejected the downsizing of America's destiny. We have totally rejected the downsizing. We are moving forward at a pace that was unimaginable — just a short time ago, and we are never, ever going back. I am thrilled to report to you tonight that our economy is the best it has ever been. Our military is completely rebuilt, with its power being unmatched anywhere in the world — and it's not even close. Our borders are secure. Our families are flourishing. The vision I will lay out this evening demonstrates. From the instant I took office, I moved rapidly to revive the U.S. economy. Our agenda is relentless. We are advancing. Jobs and investments are pouring into 9,000 previously neglected neighbourhood.

Our roaring economy has, <u>for the first time ever</u>, given many former prisoners the ability to get a great job and a fresh start. This second chance at life is made <u>possible</u> Members of Congress, <u>we must never</u> forget that the only victories that matter in Washington are victories that deliver for the American people. <u>We must</u> always remember that our job is to put America first. <u>This is</u> a place where greatness is born, where destinies are forged, and where legends come to life. <u>This is</u> the home of Thomas Edison and Teddy. <u>This</u> is the country where children learn names like Wyatt Earp, Davy Crockett, and Annie Oakley. <u>This</u> is the place where the pilgrims. The American nation was carved out of the vast frontier by the <u>toughest, strongest, fiercest, and most determined</u> men and women ever to walk on the face of the Earth. <u>This</u> is <u>our glorious and magnificent</u> inheritance. <u>We</u> are Americans. We are pioneers. We are the pathfinders. We settled the New World, we built the modern world, America is the place where anything <u>can</u> happen. America is the place where anyone can rise.

Spatial and Temporal Deixis

The elements of spatial deixis in the text are: this, before you, and temporal deixis are: ago, tonight, three years, previously, first time, before, tomorrow,
According to these elements, there is a deictic shift in the text as the narrator moves from point to point. He is constantly talking about past, present and future and thus mark a shift in deixis. This brings a shift with deictic orientation.

Narrative Type

This text belongs to category A 'Narrative'.
Point of View

Having a look at the underlined words, the point of view reflected is an internal point of view of positive shading. The speaker is enthusiastic and passionate and is trying to transfer his passion in the masses of his country that is very important for the progress.

Modality

Different types of modality is reflected in the speech that throw light on his intentions, passion, and zeal.

Deontic Modals

The deontic modals such as "must, must never" are the deontic modals that focus on the obligations and duties, expected from the listeners. Through them, Internal subject perspective is also revealed.

Boulomaic Modals

Boulomaic modals express wishes and desires. "I will lay down" shows the desire of the speaker where he wants to promote mutual relationships.

Use of first-person pronouns "I, we" indicated the desire of interpersonal relationship.

Modality can further be divided into three types (Amalia & Subandowo, 2018). High modality that expresses strong obligations and determination as must, always, certainly, should. Middle modality shows possibility   likelihood, frequency, usually. Low modality shows certainty like might, can, and may.

Following is the illustration from the text:

High modality	Middle modality
Must	Can
Must never	
Totally	
Never, ever	
Completely	
Relentlessly	

Positive Shading

"I will lay down" reflects the positive shading of the speaker where he is inclusive in the duties and obligations, he assumes others to take part.

"Our citizens can join… Community can take part… Anyone can rise…." reflect positive shading of hope and belief on people. This epistemic modality reinforces the possibility and openness of values, subject to individual desires and commitments.

Evaluative Adjectives

The evaluative adjectives and adverbs like "booming, surging, thriving, toughest, strongest, fiercest, most determined" throw light on the enthusiastic behavior of the speaker.
Evaluative adjectives for past are: broken promises, jobless recoveries, tired platitudes, constant excuses.
Adverbs like "relentlessly, rapidly, totally" represent indirect thoughts and Use of free direct speech/direct speech through using "I, we" indicate free direct thought/direct thought.

Interpretation

The text is a good example of modality and point of view. The speaker talks about the past and makes its comparison with the present with the use of temporal deixis. He very impressively achieves his target of getting the confidence of the listeners. The adverb "now" reflects present and "ago" past. The readers are allowed to revaluate the deictic orientation shift as it switches from past to present.

Modality has been used to go into past, to focus on present and to dream about future. The speaker wants to wish and inspir others. Modality shows how different actions are possible (Roberts & Zuell, 2008). In the speech, interpersonal meanings are communicated that reflect speakers' intentions of the messages (Declerck, 2011). These meanings are effectively conveyed through modality (Sadighi,2008 & Feng& Liu,2010). Modality has been used to represent interpersonal function of language and to regulate people's behaviour. Use of first-person pronouns "I, we" and deontic modals have a significance here. The use of first-person pronoun like "I, we" indicate the shared values and feelings, the speaker expects to produce in the listeners.

It can be said that in written/spoken communication modal verbs are used like must, should, could, will, shall, may, might. They all have meanings relating to modality that indicate the possibility and probability through "can, may"; certainty and uncertainty through "can, may"; obligation and duty through "should, must" and intention through "will and would". In stylistic analysis, using the theory of point of view and modality has helped revealing the speaker's mind map and his point of view. Deontic, Boulomaic, and epistemic modality has been used with positive shading that reflect speaker's mind and point of view. He is determined to get his aim but for this, he wants to develop mutual relationships.
A dichotomy of past and present is also reflected in the speech through evaluative adjectives that show a contrast between past and present. This is a deliberate choice, aiming at inciting the people to stand with the speaker after developing a mutual relationship. There is a dominant use of deontic modality as the speaker is determined to achieve the targets with the cooperation of the people "we, must, must never" reflect the determination. The use of free direct speech indicates free direct thoughts. The Overall impression of the text is based on positive shading. The use of different type of modality has enhanced the stylistic effect and tried to develop interpersonal relationships between speaker and listeners.

Conclusion

The aim of the study is to explore the role of modality in a text or a speech. The analysis of data reveal that modality is not only a feature of grammar but it is also a powerful and strong tool that is used to assert authority and impact the perception of audience. It also expresses commitment of the speaker. Modality has different patterns and these varied patterns, that are uncovered in speech, reflect strategic efforts to project confidence and construct ideological alignment. Through these findings it is highlighted that modal structures are used to shape the interpretive stance of the audience and to reinforce the speaker's position on key national and global issues. Moreover the findings also reveal the significance of stylistic analysis that help uncover subtle rhetoric techniques that influence public perception. Thus the study offers valuable insights into the intersection of language, politics, and ideology.

The analysis gives insight about the positive shading of modal constructions that build an image of the speaker showing his determination to achieve certain goals but also invested in building mutual understanding and cooperation. Modality builds a connection between the speaker and the audience and create a mutual harmony and foster positive participation in a collective vision. There is a strong alignment between the speaker and the audience that invites them to harmonize communication. The findings of the study resonate with existing literature that showcase the importance of modality in presenting point of view and reflecting speaker's ideological position. The findings demonstrate that modality serves as a marker of point of view, allowing speakers to position themselves epistemically and morally. Additionally, the critical discourse perspective of Fairclough (2015) is

echoed in how modality is shown to enact power relations and ideological stances. The nuanced modal choices illustrate how language constructs authority and consensus simultaneously, reflecting the complex nature of political communication. Additionally, the study reveals that modality is not merely a grammatical or lexical feature but a rhetorical resource intricately tied to persuasion. Through modal verbs and related expressions, the speaker can soften or strengthen claims, express commitments, or hedge statements to manage risk and uncertainty. This flexibility is essential in the political context, where language must both assert and accommodate diverse viewpoints. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to the field of stylistics by showing that Modality analysis is applicable beyond literary texts. This extends the scope of modality analysis to non-literary and real-world political speeches. The application of stylistic tools develops our understanding of how subtle linguistic features shape meaning and ideology in public discourse. This approach provides a richer, multidimensional view of language use, moving beyond surface semantics to uncover deeper layers of communicative intent. Modality foregrounds the intricate interplay between language, power, and persuasion that characterizes effective political communication.

The study explores how modality as a stylistic feature demonstrates the perspective and intent of the speaker. It also reveals ideological positioning in Donald Trump's 2020 State of the Union Address. Through the framework of modality, the study examined the linguistic choices of the speaker to uncover the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and power relations embedded in the discourse.

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