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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Modality in News Reports on Public Health Events from the Perspective of Political Discourse Analysis

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**ABSTRACT**

Since 2020, the Covid-19 epidemic has become a hot issue in the world. Based on the theory of modality combined with political discourse analysis, this study aims to analyze the situation of the prevention and control of the Covid-19 epidemic, to dissect American people's attitudes towards the epidemic and to discuss the influence of American political system with 30 news reports from *the New York Times* by the combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. The findings are as follows. In terms of Modality, modal operators clearly reflect interviewers' opinions and interviewees' attitudes. In terms of political institutions, federalism, differences between two parties, and conflicts between them make it a challenge for the United States to surmount Covid-19.

**KEYWORDS**

Modality, Federalism, Two-Party System, The Covid-19 Epidemic

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### 1. Introduction

In 2020, the Covid-19 epidemic widely spread all over the world, which had an adverse effect on people's daily life to some extent. Countries around the world have been taking measures to prevent the further spread of the novel coronavirus. China has made great achievements in the prevention and control of the epidemic by adhering to a people-centered approach (Wang, 2020). However, not every country has taken timely and firm prevention and control measures to deal with the epidemic. The United States, as a developed country with a strong economy, did not control the epidemic promptly, which resulted in some problems. Based on the theoretical framework of modality combined with political discourse analysis, this study analyzes news reports on the COVID-19 epidemic in the United States in *the New York Times*, explores the situation of the COVID-19 epidemic in the United States, analyses the attitudes of the U.S. government and American people towards the COVID-19 epidemic and dissects what kinds of factors impact their attitudes.

### 2. Literature Review

In recent years, the exploration of modality and political discourse analysis at home and abroad has gradually shifted from theoretical research to practical applications. This chapter first reviews the research of modality with some meaningful research findings and then summarizes previous research on political discourse analysis.

#### 2.1 Overview of Modality

The interpersonal function is one of the three meta-functions of language constructed by Halliday (1994). It is mainly composed of mood, intonation and modality. The effective interaction of the three makes the speakers' intentions fully realized. Modality, as one of the main points of the interpersonal function, reflects the speakers' intentions or judgments.

There are many scholars focusing on modality. Long et al. (2016) explored the features of modal verbs in Chinese English majors' argumentation, finding that the use frequency of modal verbs is unequal. Niu (2017) built an analytical model for the grounding function of the modal verb "may" within the framework of grounding theory in cognitive grammar, finding that the modal verb "may", as a grounding element, imposes a momentum of imagination, assumption and prediction. Xu (2022) concentrated on the mechanism for the disambiguation of modality in English at the sentence level, finding that the high correlations of co-occurring modal expressions with the semantic type of modality, grammatical constructions as well as the syntactic properties are beneficial to make the modality oriented toward a particular semantic type and hampering the selection of other semantic types, so that the ambiguity of modality is settled.

## **2.2 Overview of Political Discourse Analysis**

Political discourse analysis refers to how discourse dissects politics. Van Dijk's definition of political discourse is based on three aspects: the actors, the political scope of the discourse and the context of communication (Van, 1997). According to this definition, a discourse is considered a "political discourse" if it is produced by political actors taking political actions in the context of communicative interaction. Therefore, this method excludes other forms of discourse, such as discourse on political issues or civil discourse in the media, from the scope of political discourse analysis. Fairclough (2006) argued that the political discourse should not be pre-defined but should be understood as "socially constructed". Political discourse analysis should be oriented towards social issues, focus on the relationship among language, ideology, power and social structure, and reveal how language serves stances and values from three angles: text, discourse practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1993). Okulska and Cap (2010) pointed out that political discourse should be regarded as a socially-oriented polity or policy study located at the intersection of public discourse and political institutions and emphasized that political discourse should be studied under the paradigm of critical discourse analysis. Chilton and Schaffner (2002) deemed that the conception of political discourse can be understood in its institutional sense, but it can also have a broader meaning and can refer to any level and any type of power negotiation.

Political discourse analysis is widely used in various genres. Gruber (2015) selected parliamentary debates as the research corpus to explore the formal attributes, recontextualization practices and pragmatic functions of oral direct quotation in the parliamentary debates after the inauguration speech of the new Chancellor of the Austrian Parliament, as well as the relationship between the quotations used by speakers in the inauguration debate and the public role. Fenton-Smith (2007) used the three meta-functions of systemic functional linguistics as the analytical framework to analyze the official diplomatic condolences of various countries after the death of Palestinian President Arafat. Jones (2014) used the theory of multimodal discourse analysis and the critical semiotic framework to interpret the semiotic principles of political campaign posters in the 2011 Thai general election and analyze their potential ideologies. Krieis (2017) chose Twitter network discourse as the research object to explore the meaning and function of U.S. President Donald Trump's discourse strategies on Twitter and found that his top-down use of Twitter discourse may lead to the normalization of right-wing populist discourse. Hanauer (2011) took graffiti photos as the research object, analyzed the discourse function of graffiti on the separation wall in the disputed territorial space, and then discovered the role of graffiti as political discourse at the micro level.

The news report is one of the main research objects of political discourse analysis because news discourse is not a natural and transparent medium but a reflection of socialized ideology that plays a manipulative role under the shell of language (Wang & Yang, 2008). Wu et al. (2022) analyzed the "legitimization" of trade between the United States and China from the perspective of critical metaphor and found that the United States constructed China as a "bully" and the United States itself as a "victim" through fictitious politics, thus creating a negative image of China. This metaphorical pattern has also become the American people's perception of the trade war between China and the United States. Li (2019) combined corpus and critical discourse analysis methods to analyze the reports of 11 German mainstream media related to the Belt and Road Initiative in the past five years and found that German media's cognition and attitude toward the Belt and Road Initiative showed the coexistence of "questioning, anxiety and expectation, and cooperation". Based on the self-built corpus of Russian media reports on the Syrian War, Wang and Liu (2022) found through word collocation analysis that during the three stages of Russia's participation in the Syrian War, Russian media's image construction of the United States experienced a "positive - negative - negative" process. The image construction of Turkey reflected the trend of "negative - positive - negative". In conceptually-oriented critical discourse analysis, Krzyżanowski (2019) examined media discourse about the Brexit vote in Austria, Germany, Poland and Sweden in the moments of transition before and after the vote. The study found that before the vote, Brexit was regarded as an imaginary crisis by the media of various countries. After the vote, the media of various countries recontextualized the elements of the previous economic, social and political crises in the UK to determine the authenticity of Brexit. Narte and Ladegaard (2021) analyzed Ghanaian news media's description of domestic nomads and found that Ghanaian media used dangerous discourse, alienated discourse and stigmatized discourse to discriminate against and marginalize domestic nomads.

### 3. Methodology

In this chapter, research questions and research procedures are manifested in detail. Two research questions were answered in the following sections step by step.

#### 3.1 Research Questions

This study analyses news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic based on the framework of modality combined with political discourse analysis. In terms of three aspects combined with theories of the news, the purpose of this study is to address the following two questions: (1) How is modality manifested in news reports on the COVID-19 epidemic in *the New York Times*? (2) How do political institutions impact epidemic prevention and control in the United States?

#### 3.2 Research Procedures

In order to solve the above questions, this study randomly selected 30 news reports on the COVID-19 epidemic from *the New York Times*. AntConc3.5.8 was used to make statistics on modal verbs in the selected articles after text cleaning was finished. Then, American political institutions were dissected so as to reveal the connections among language, power and ideology.

### 4. Modality

Text, which is related to functional grammar, is composed of forms with meaning potential. This section aims to discover the real intentions of reporters hidden in informative descriptions based on an analysis of modal verbs.

#### 4.1 The Overall Distribution of Modal Verbs

Modal verbs can be divided into the following three categories: high-value modal verbs, median-value modal verbs, and low-value modal verbs; as one of the crucial ways to realize modality, the distribution of modal verbs can effectively manifest the tendency of discourse, so as to reflect the attitudes of different characters. Table 1 shows the distribution of the three values of modal operators in the 30 selected news reports.

**Table 1 The Value of Modal Verbs**

Value	Modal Verb	Frequency	Total	Percentage
High Value	must	6	58	14.04%
	cannot	16		
	couldn't	4		
	may not	2		
	have/has/had to	30		
Median Value	will	61	219	53.03%
	would	103		
	should	35		
	won't	6		
	wouldn't	7		
	shouldn't	7		
Low Value	can	50	136	32.93%
	may	23		
	could	45		
	might	18		

Table 1 shows that the median-value verbs account for the highest proportion, followed by the low-value modal verbs, and the high-value modal verbs account for the lowest proportion. In general, the use of median modal verbs mainly expresses the news reporters' neutral attitudes or predictions about the event. However, in some sentences, "will" and "would" also indicate the meaning of possibility. Although the distribution of low-value modal verbs is not as wide as that of median-value modal verbs, it also plays a crucial role in the text. Reporters use low-value modals to show their concern about the prospects of the COVID-19 epidemic. High-value modals appear infrequently in the selected news reports on the COVID-19 epidemic. In the face of an unfamiliar virus, it is difficult for the U.S. government to make decisions that are accurately targeted at them at a time, and the future trend of social life is full of uncertainties, so reporters cannot use a large number of high-value modals to express clear opinions.

#### **4.2 High-value Modal Verbs**

Example 1 :

*Bars, restaurants and gyms across the state **must** close nightly at 10 p.m. starting Friday, and that private residential gatherings should not exceed 10 people.*

Example 2 :

*We know this is hard work, but we **must** do more. The virus is not over just because we are tired of it.*

In the first example, the word "must", as a positive modal verb of high value, expresses a powerful force, demonstrating that commercial activities must comply with relevant regulations out of necessity, which represents the mandatory policy of epidemic prevention and control from the American government. The reason why the second wave of the outbreak started is that officials relaxed their vigilance when the harsh situation only changed a little, which led to such serious consequences. This sentence shows that the U.S. government was finally willing to learn from Chinese strategies for confronting the pandemic, which could lay the groundwork for preventing the American second wave of the epidemic.

Example 2 comes from an appeal by a local official in the United States, in which the positive high-value modal verb "must" also appears. In the preceding part, American people showed complaints about restrictions on commercial trade and public gatherings, which they believed violated their human rights. An official, however, argued that the current restrictions were necessary, and what really helped prevent and control the epidemic was what they prepared to do next because the epidemic will not end until people do not discount the importance of prevention and control any more. These remarks reflect the clear understanding of the situation among some local officials in the United States and their determination to explore more effective measures in the future. After the second large-scale spread of the epidemic in the United States, a relatively strict policy of prevention and control has become an inevitable requirement.

Example 3 :

*In Brunswick, Ga., lab technicians are working around the clock. Machines churn out results in 50 minutes to four and a half hours, but there are so many orders that the labs **cannot** keep up. Regular shipments of chemicals needed to test for the virus do not last even a week, so pathologists have begun to carefully dole out their supplies.*

Example 4 :

*"We're all stressed before we even come to work. Tons and tons of patients. We **can't** even keep up with the amount of patients coming into the hospital."*

In the third case, the degree of affinity of the word "cannot" is very congenial to the proposition that "testing is not quick enough", which is also the title of this report. Using the word "cannot", the writer reflects the fact that administrative inefficiencies and inadequate preparation lead to excessive pressure on basic scientific units despite some deployment of testing by the U.S. government. The reporter anticipated that the U.S. government would make emergency plans as soon as possible rather than just put forward so-called preventive suggestions.

Example 4 is a poignant account from a general nurse in California. The negative high-value modal verb "cannot" appears in this paragraph. The degree of affinity of the word "cannot" is very congenial to the proposition that "Hospitals in Southern California are overwhelmed." The nurses were shocked and distressed by the current number of infections. Therefore, after the modal verb "cannot", the speaker adds the highly emotional adverb "even" to further highlight her sadness and indignation at the increased pressure of work caused by the government's inadequate prevention and control. Through the eyes of ordinary medical workers, it can be found that the prevention and control measures of the government in the early stage of the second round of epidemic outbreaks in the United States did not achieve the desired effect, resulting in a sharp increase in medical pressure. This is inconsistent with the "fact" that the White House believed that the pressure on U.S. hospitals was getting smaller and smaller, demonstrating the negative attitude of the U.S. official government towards the epidemic and the unscientific judgment on the current situation.

#### **4.3 Median-value Modal Verbs**

Example 5 :

*Prioritizing minority groups **would** erode public trust in vaccines at a time when immunization is seen as crucial to ending the pandemic.*

Example 6 :

*Ms. Porter said she feared that even after the pandemic ends, her children **will** struggle to escape the cycle of poverty and community violence that has scarred their young lives.*

The word “would” appertains to modal verbs of median value with positive connotations, which theoretically proves that the reporters held a favorable attitude towards an upcoming event. However, most “would” that occur in news reports on the Covid-19 epidemic in *the New York Times* do not reflect such a positive future but often show an imminent and negative impact or elicit a pressing and harsh action. In the fifth example, it can be found that the word “would” stands for a possibility of occurrence, suggesting that prioritizing vaccination on the basis of race may contribute to a loss of people’s trust. The reporter used the modal verb of median value to convey to readers the imminent crisis of vaccination in the background of racialization, appealing to the American government to abandon the idea of racial differences and treat everyone who craved to be vaccinated equally so that equality for all did not become an empty slogan. Compared with racial discrimination widespread existing in the United States, it is commendable for China to treat everyone who needs vaccination with equality.

Example 6 is an American citizen’s opinion on life in the post-epidemic era, and the median-value modal verb “will” appears in this case. The word “will” does not contain too much personal emotion and generally indicates an objective prediction of the future. If the epidemic situation is under control, the American people can look forward to a better life. However, some Americans did not see it that way. The social problems resulting from the epidemic would not disappear without a trace even if the epidemic faded away, but it would have a huge impact on people’s lives. The strict control of the economic and trade during the epidemic period had made it difficult to guarantee the life quality of the people at the bottom of the United States. In addition, it was hard to ensure social security during the epidemic, which risked people’s lives. Since the social problems caused by the epidemic could not be settled in the short term, some American people had a negative attitude towards life in the post-epidemic era.

#### 4.4 Low-value Modal Verbs

Example 7 :

There **may** be a therapeutic option that **could** help keep you out of the hospital.

Example 8 :

All available evidence so far makes it clear that older children, particularly those closest to adulthood, **may** spread the virus as much as adults.

“Could” and “may” in the above sentences represent typical modal operators of low value. The meaning of the eleventh example is very vague. Both the subject of the sentence and the appositive clause of the subject include uncertain messages. The modal verb “may” in the main clause reflects the fact that a systematic treatment model perhaps exists and that no conclusion is definitive. “Could” in the subordinate clause manifests the possibility that there is perhaps no guaranteed cure for patients infected with the coronavirus, even if industrious and intelligent scientists find such an efficacious method. Modal verbs “may” and “could” enunciate a kind of incredulity on the validity of the so-called treatment, furthermore implicitly demonstrating the reporters’ wish for the government to seek out congruent therapies as soon as possible.

Example 8 is a scientific description of the study of the coronavirus. Experts in the United States believe older children may be just as likely as adults to catch the virus when it comes to transmission. Here, the low-value modal verb “may” is used instead of the high-value modal verb “must”, which fully shows the rigorous attitude of scientists and reporters towards science, indicating that the current scientific evidence can be inferred but not enough to prove this view. At the same time, it can prove that American scientists were doing research into the route and probability of virus transmission among children, providing a scientific basis for the practical search for prevention and control strategies. Compared with the rigorous attitude of U.S. scientists, some U.S. officials imagined that the coronavirus could not be transmitted among children. As a result, some states failed to take strict control measures in primary schools and kindergartens, leading to the tragedy of large-scale transmission among children.

### 5. The Influence of Political Institutions on the Covid-19 Epidemic

News reports in close liaison with politics and culture are often considered as reflections of social phenomena. This section focuses on the impacts that political institutions have on epidemic prevention and control in the United States.

#### 5.1 The Constraint of Federalism on the Prevention and Control

Federalism means a form of statehood in which political authority is divided between the central government and the state governments, with both the federal and state governments enjoying the power to act freely in their respective spheres of authority (Zhang, 2015). After the Constitution was drawn up in 1787, the division of authority was kept vague, which is the main reason for considerable confusion regarding epidemic prevention and control. At the beginning of the pandemic, Trump did not view the coronavirus as a perilous thing, so the White House did not require the states to take active protective measures at all. At that time, every state took orders from the White House, and everything seemed to be in perfect harmony. When it gradually became evident that Covid-19 swept through almost every region at a horrendous speed, the White House commenced to become anxious. However, instead of being responsible for policies, the Trump administration set the ultimate goal to shift responsibility for waging

the lengthy battle against the epidemic to the states, which to some extent sparked chaos. Each state made its own policies. Some states managed to impose strict restrictions, and others still did not take active measures, which directly led to the huge distinction in the number of people infected with the coronavirus among the states. When serious consequences occur, both sides abdicate their responsibilities. The state officials consider that the rapid spread of the New Coronavirus epidemic is imputed to the lack of a unified policy from the White House, while the Trump administration deems that the states fail to do their part so that widespread complaints among the public will prevail for a long time. This kind of loose political union demonstrates its deficiencies when the American people are faced with such a grave public health event, and it is difficult for governments at all levels to work together to surmount Covid-19.

### ***5.2 The Impediment of Two-party System and Inner-party Struggles to the Prevention and Control***

Apart from federalism, the two-party system also has a huge impact on epidemic prevention. First, the Republican Party, with Donald Trump as President, to some extent represents the interests of the middle and upper classes, mainly including some white people who have a high social status as well as some wealthy people who have some power. It is these people who boycott imposing restrictions on different fields, such as trade and education, because these actions will directly threaten their economic interests. Differing from the Republican Party, the Democratic Party often represents the middle and lower classes, which are most affected by the epidemic and crave to resolve the problem. Therefore, the two political parties hold different attitudes towards the pandemic. Second, the Republican Party is a relatively traditional party that strongly advocates individual freedom, so Trump constantly calls for people to take off their masks, support school reopening and unrealistically pursue freedom. However, compared with the Republican Party, the Democratic Party concentrates on preserving order, concurring with the opinion that restrictions are beneficial to people's life and health right during the pandemic period, which is the reason why Biden enjoins people to wear masks the moment he takes office. Third, the Republican Party opposes too much government intervention in society. Hence, the Trump administration always takes negative measures to inhibit the epidemic, minimizing interference from governments, which results in disastrous consequences. The Democrats advocate expanding government intervention in society, so Biden makes his efforts to control the epidemic, which makes the situations become a little better. The ideological distinctions between the two parties give rise to different methods of epidemic prevention.

Due to different ideas of governance, inner-party struggles gradually become more and more intense and finally contribute to the muddle of the government. Instead of performing their respective duties, both parties squander precious time reprimanding each other. It is well known that the second wave of Covid-19 began during the period of the American presidential election, when both leaders took advantage of their approaches to the pandemic as a way of expanding their political leverage, constantly offering their supposedly effective methods, albeit without making many substantive decisions. The Republicans who should have administrated the affairs did not succeed in coming up with a strategy to dispose of the epidemic, and the Democrats who should have supervised the Republican Party failed to perform their duties, leading to the phenomenon that American civilians, risking their health and lives, paved the way for the election.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study dissects modality in news reports on public health events from the perspective of political discourse analysis. Modal operators, as an important part of the interpersonal function, can reflect the value of reporters' attitudes towards Covid-19 so that readers can feel how reporters express concerns for epidemic prevention and control and identify what kind of judgement reporters make on the prospect. In terms of political institutions, it is difficult for the United States to surmount Covid-19 as a whole on account of the division of power resulting from federalism. Besides, intense inner-party conflicts make it hard to implement prevention and control policies, which leads to a tragedy that more and more civilians are exposed to a perilous environment. Although this study deeply analyses modality in news reports and the impact of political institutions on news reports and the Covid-19 epidemic, there is still a limitation that mood, as part of modality, is not discussed in the study. In the future, scholars can try to build relationships among mood, news reports and social reality.

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