

## A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: A STUDY OF SELECTED POLITICAL COMMENTS IN NIGERIA

*TIAMIYU, Abiola Jamiu and ADAMU, Shuaibu*

### **Abstract**

In recent years, social media has played a crucial role in the dissemination of political discourse in Nigeria, allowing individuals to express opinions, share information, and engage in political debates. This paper focuses on the use of modal auxiliary verbs in political comments on social media, specifically examining their semantic implications. Through a Qualitative Content Analysis of selected Facebook and X (former twitter) comments on political issues in Nigeria, this paper aims to uncover the strategic use of modal verbs to express power dynamics, intention, obligation, and probability in discourse. Findings reveal that epistemic modality was predominantly used to convey certainty and probability about future events and outcomes in political discourse. Modal verbs such as *will* were frequently employed in statements reflecting strong beliefs and predictions in political discourse, especially online platforms. The findings highlight the strategic use of modal verbs in political discourse, particularly in online platforms where language is a key tool for persuasion and mobilization. Also, the strategic deployment of modals, such as *may*, *should*, and *will*, in the sampled post of President Tinubu and the replies from his followers reveal an underlying intent to manipulate or influence audience perceptions.

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*TIAMIYU, Abiola Jamiu, PhD*, Department of English, University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria. Correspondence: [tiamiyu.abiola@uniabuja.edu.ng](mailto:tiamiyu.abiola@uniabuja.edu.ng)  
08071730911

*ADAMU, Shuaibu*, Department of English Language and Linguistics, Sokoto State University, Sokoto Nigeria. Correspondence: [shuaibu4adamu@gmail.com](mailto:shuaibu4adamu@gmail.com) - 08032407350

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### **Introduction**

The role of social media in shaping political discourse in Nigeria cannot be overstated. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have given Nigerians the ability to voice their opinions on various political matters, from elections to governmental policies. Central to this discourse is the strategic use of language, particularly modal auxiliary verbs. Modal verbs such as *can*, *may*, *must*, *will*, and *shall* are not only grammatical elements but carry semantic weight in political commentary. These verbs reflect attitudes, convey levels of certainty, obligation, and permission, and reveal the speaker's stance regarding political matters. This paper explores the semantic role of modal auxiliary verbs in social media comments, specifically focusing on Nigerian political discourse. By analysing a sample of social media posts, this paper provides insights into how modality functions to convey political intentions and influence public opinions.

### **Literature Review**

Modal verbs are an essential part of English grammar, contributing significantly to meaning in various contexts. Semantically, modal auxiliary verbs express necessity, possibility, permission, and obligation (Palmer 2001). Scholars have analyzed the use of modality in various forms of communication, but limited work has been done on its use in social media political discourse in Nigeria.

Modal auxiliary verbs have been extensively studied in linguistic literature due to their crucial role in expressing modality, which involves notions of necessity, possibility, permission, and ability. Quirk et al. (1985, p 127) note that "modals like *can*, *may*, *must*, and *shall* are unique in that they do not inflect for tense or agreement and are often employed to

reflect the speaker's attitude toward the action or state described". Modal auxiliaries operate within two primary domains: epistemic modality, which relates to the speaker's degree of certainty or belief about a proposition, and deontic modality, which expresses obligation, permission, or necessity in social or moral contexts (Palmer, 2001). These dual functions make modal verbs flexible tools in discourse, allowing speakers to shape meaning according to their intentions or the requirements of the communicative situation.

The semantic versatility of modal auxiliary verbs has been further explored in studies examining their use in different linguistic contexts. Leech argues that modals are not only a grammatical necessity but also convey subtle shades of meaning that reflect power dynamics, politeness strategies, and social relationships (125). For example, using *must* rather than *should* can intensify the sense of obligation or urgency in a sentence, thus influencing how the listener perceives the message. Modals also have cultural variations in usage, as seen in different English dialects, where certain modals may be preferred or used differently (Biber et al. 1999, p.485). This rich body of literature underscores the importance of modal auxiliary verbs in both grammatical structure and the broader semantic functions they serve in communication.

Political language, especially in social media, often employs modal verbs to manipulate meaning and influence audiences (Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2013). Chiluwa's study on Nigerian digital activism emphasizes how online users express their political agency through linguistic choices, particularly using modal verbs to assert certainty or express hypothetical scenarios (221). This paper builds on these insights, focusing specifically on the semantic nuances of modal verbs in the context of Nigerian political debates.

### **Empirical Review**

Research on the semantic analysis of modal auxiliary verbs on social media in Nigeria has gained significant attention among Nigerian linguists due to the growing influence of online platforms in shaping political discourse. Studies have shown that modal verbs, such as *will*, *can*, *must*, and *should*, are frequently employed in social media comments to express certainty, obligation, and possibility in political contexts. For instance, Chiluya's (2013) study on Nigerian social media activism highlights how modal auxiliary verbs are used strategically by political actors and their supporters to influence public opinion and frame political events. He found that the use of *will* and *must* in comments often reflected confidence in political outcomes or demands for immediate action from the government (Chiluya 215). This suggests that modality is a crucial tool for expressing both epistemic certainty and deontic obligation in the political discourse circulating on social media in Nigeria. In another study by Ifukor (2016) on political discourse in Nigeria during the 2015 elections, Ifukor observed a pattern in which citizens employed modals like *can* and *might* to speculate about political possibilities and outcomes, reflecting uncertainty about the political landscape. In contrast, the use of *must* in comments related to political protests or activism signified a strong sense of moral duty or necessity, signaling citizens' demand for change or accountability (Ifukor 58). These findings demonstrate that modal verbs are not only tools for expressing varying levels of certainty but also carry significant weight in expressing political agency and social expectations on Nigerian social media platforms.

Also, the semantic role of modal auxiliary verbs in Nigerian political discourse is tied to broader themes of power and resistance. According to Opeibi (2019), modal verbs like *should* and *shall* are often employed in social media posts to propose alternative futures or challenge governmental authority. His study on online discussions surrounding economic and security

issues in Nigeria indicates that citizens use modals to reflect both their frustration with the current state of affairs and their hope for a better future (Opeibi 119). The strategic use of modals in political comments allows for a nuanced expression of both dissent and optimism, providing a critical lens through which to analyse public sentiment and political engagement in Nigeria. The empirical studies reviewed above support the argument that modal auxiliaries are essential in shaping the semantic fabric of political discourse on Nigerian social media, reflecting both certainty in predictions and moral imperatives for social change. And, of course, the studies have influenced the current paper which seeks to compliment and advance the frontiers of knowledge in the field.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Palmer's Theory of Modality, as articulated in his seminal work *Mood and Modality* serves as the theoretical framework for the paper. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how speakers express different degrees of certainty, possibility, obligation, and permission through language. Palmer distinguishes between two main types of modality: epistemic and deontic. Epistemic modality refers to the speaker's assessment of the truth of a proposition, indicating degrees of certainty or possibility, while deontic modality is concerned with obligation and permission, often reflecting societal norms or authority (Palmer 2001). This distinction is central to Palmer's theory, as it demonstrates how modality serves not only as a grammatical tool but also as a means of expressing attitudes and beliefs. In addition to the distinction between epistemic and deontic modalities, Palmer introduces the concept of dynamic modality, which focuses on the subject's ability or willingness to perform an action. Unlike epistemic and deontic modalities, dynamic modality is centred on the subject's inherent capacities or circumstances (78). This allows for a more nuanced understanding of modals such as *can* and

*will*, which may convey personal abilities or volition rather than external obligations or likelihoods. Palmer's categorization highlights the multifunctionality of modal verbs, as they can operate in various semantic contexts depending on the speaker's intent.

Palmer's theory has been widely influential in linguistic studies, particularly in understanding how modality operates across different languages and contexts. His work emphasises the close relationship between grammar and meaning, illustrating how modal verbs can be used to manipulate or guide interpretations of truth, authority, and agency in discourse. By providing clear distinctions between different types of modality, he offers a valuable framework for analysing both the syntactic and semantic roles of modal verbs in communication (Palmer, 2001, p. 93). His insights have become foundational in the study of mood and modality, influencing subsequent research in linguistics and discourse analysis with no exception to the current paper.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse modal auxiliary verbs in political comments on social media. The data were collected from two major social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – focusing on comments related to major political events in Nigeria, such as the recent October 1<sup>st</sup> 2024 national protest, the 2023 General Elections and the comments following president Tinubu's visit to South Africa in December, 2024.

The sampling was purposive, targeting posts with high engagement (i.e., those with a significant number of likes, shares, and comments) to ensure that the selected data reflect a broad range of opinions. A total of 20 comments were purposively selected for detailed analysis.

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Epistemic Modality: Expressing Certainty and Probability*

One of the most common uses of modal auxiliary verbs in the sampled comments was epistemic modality, where speakers used modals to express degrees of certainty or probability. For instance, the modal verb *will* often appeared in comments predicting future actions: The epistemic modality and deontic modality of Palmer's theory, analyse the following face book and X (twitter) comments:

- i. *"The nationwide protest will hold at the Eagles Square Abuja" according to Sowore.*
- ii. *"The protests will hold across all parts of Nigeria because the scale of the devastation, hunger, insecurity, and hardship that this government has unleashed on Nigerians is national. I will emphasise again that these will be peaceful protests, as they've always been.*
- iii. *"The last protests were peaceful, yet the government met the protesters with batons and bullets.*
- iv. *"We will not be deterred, though our only weapon is truth, and no amount of force or violence will prevent us from speaking truth to power," Akpotife stated,*
- v. *"We are insisting that October 1, 2024 provides us the opportunity, the window, the latitude to come out again and say we will refuse to be cowed, we will refuse to be slaves."*
- vi. *"I arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, for the 11th session of the Nigeria-South Africa Bi-National Commission, which coincides with 25 years of the framework established to strengthen ties between Nigeria and South Africa." (President Bola Tinubu arriving South Africa in December,2024)*

Palmer's epistemic modality which deals with the speaker's degree of certainty or belief about a proposition, is evident in the repeated use of the modal auxiliary verb *will* in the above data. For instance, in the comment "**The nationwide protest will hold at the Eagles Square Abuja according to**

**Sowore,**” the use of *will* indicates a high level of certainty about the occurrence of the protest, reflecting the speaker’s strong belief in the planned event. Similarly, the phrase “**The protests *will* hold across all parts of Nigeria**” conveys not only a belief but a strong assertion that the protests are inevitable, despite the challenges posed by the government. This confidence in the future actions emphasises the epistemic modality of the comment, where the speaker expresses firm certainty regarding the planned protests. The statement “**...no amount of force or violence *will* prevent us from speaking truth to power**” further solidifies this epistemic stance, as the speaker is unwavering in their conviction that nothing can deter their mission.

Applying this framework to the modals in President Bola Tinubu’s post: The modal phrase “*coincides with*” is epistemic. It indicates a factual alignment of events (the Bi-National Commission and the 25-year framework). This conveys certainty and enhances the formal tone of the statement, affirming the significance of the occasion.

- vii. “The government *will* fail if they continue with these policies” (User A): Here, the modal *will* expresses a high level of certainty regarding the predicted failure of the government. Similarly, *can* and *could* in the data below were frequently employed to discuss possibilities in hypothetical political scenarios.
- viii. “If the opposition had a stronger candidate, they *could* have won the election” (User B): In this case, *could* indicates a conditional possibility, reflecting the speaker’s speculation about the election outcome. These verbs suggest that epistemic modality is used by social media users to make assertions and speculate about political events.

**Deontic Modality: Expressing Obligation and Permission**

Deontic modality, which deals with obligation and permission, also featured prominently in the comments. Examples:

Deontic modality which relates to obligation, permission, or necessity, is clearly reflected in the comments regarding moral imperatives and the rights of the protesters. The sentence

- ix. "I will emphasise again that these will be peaceful protests, as they've always been"

The viii datum above highlights an obligation to maintain peacefulness during the protest, reflecting a moral imperative on how the protests should be conducted.

Also, Akpotive's statement,

- x. "We *will* refuse to be cowed, we *will* refuse to be slaves".

Also, this emphasises a sense of deontic obligation where the speakers declare their firm resolve not to submit to oppression. The use of *will* here functions not just as an expression of certainty, but also as an assertion of moral responsibility, implying that it is necessary for them to resist subjugation. The statement:

- xi. "October 1, 2024 provides us the opportunity, the window, the latitude to come out again".

This reflects a deontic modality in which the speaker suggests that there is an opportunity, almost a duty, for Nigerians to exercise their rights by protesting. The blend of epistemic and deontic modalities highlights both the certainty about the protests happening and the moral necessity behind them, as articulated by the speakers.

Also, in the following data, modal verbs such as *must* and *should* were used to express moral or political imperatives:

xii. "The government *must* listen to the people or face consequences" (User C).

In this example, *must* conveys a strong sense of obligation, implying that the government has a duty to heed public opinion. Similarly, *should* often appeared in comments suggesting the appropriate course of action:

xiii. "Politicians *should* prioritise the welfare of the people instead of their selfish interests" (User D).

These examples highlight how modal verbs in political discourse are used to assert demands and advocate for social change. Deontic modality in this context reflects the social expectations placed on political actors and institutions. The epistemic Modality: found primarily in the President's post reinforces the factual and formal nature of the communication.

#### xiv. Replies to President Tinubu's Posts from Nigerians

**@David:**

*"May your stay in South Africa be successful. We are praying for God to continue to give you wisdom to rule this country."*

**Deontic Modality:** The modal "*may*" expresses a wish or a form of polite obligation, indicating the commenter's hope for success in Tinubu's diplomatic engagement. This aligns with Palmer's deontic use of modals to reflect permission or blessing.

**@Willisagbedo:**

*"Common sense should tell you that you don't sit your ... arse in one place to fix a problem. You need to move around. You have absolutely no sense of administering a country."*

**Deontic Modality:** The modal “*should*” is used prescriptively, expressing a perceived obligation for the President to travel as part of governance. This reflects the commenter’s criticism and prescriptive stance.

**Dynamic Modality:** The use of “*need*” conveys necessity or compulsion, further underscoring the commenter’s belief in the indispensability of mobility in effective governance.

**@Idowuadebayo:**

*“If he still sit down, you lots will still complain. Remove hate, sentiment and emotions when you see anyone you don’t like do good at times. Just appreciate when they do well and rebuke them when they do the opposite.”*

**Deontic Modality:** The verb “*will*” is dynamic, predicting the behaviour of critics regardless of the President’s actions. It implies inevitability and highlights a deterministic view of public reactions. The phrase “*just appreciate*” reflects obligation, advocating fairness in acknowledging good actions. In other words, deontic modality predominates in the replies, indicating obligations, permissions, or normative judgments.

### **The Strategic Use of Modal Verbs in Political Manipulation**

Modal auxiliary verbs also function as tools for political manipulation on social media. Speakers can downplay or intensify statements by choosing specific modals to influence public perception. For instance, the difference between saying, “The economy *may* improve” versus “The economy *will* improve” can shape the audience’s expectations about future events. Social media users often deploy modal verbs to either express uncertainty, downplay negative outcomes, or create a sense of inevitability about their predictions of political events.

Politicians’ supporters often use *will* and *shall* to create a sense of certainty about electoral success, while critics use *may* and *might* to express doubts about their rivals:

- "Our candidate *will* win the next election" (User E).
- "The opposition *may* not be as strong as they think" (User F).

These subtle choices in modality illustrate how political discourse is strategically crafted to shape perceptions and garner support.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, the study findings reveal that epistemic modality was predominantly used to convey certainty and probability about future events and outcomes in political discourse. Modal verbs such as *will* were frequently employed in statements reflecting strong beliefs and predictions, as seen in the comments about nationwide protests and government policies. For example, expressions like "*The nationwide protest will hold at the Eagles Square Abuja*" and "*The government will fail if they continue with these policies*" demonstrate a high level of confidence in the outcomes discussed. These modal verbs serve to assert inevitability and strengthen the speaker's claims, which in turn fosters conviction in the audience.

Also, deontic modality, which relates to obligation, permission, and necessity, was used to emphasize moral imperatives and prescribe actions in the sampled comments. Statements like "*We will refuse to be cowed*" and "*The government must listen to the people or face consequences*" reflect a sense of duty or obligation, often aimed at rallying support for social or political causes. In the replies to President Tinubu's post, modal verbs such as *should* and *may* were employed to advocate specific behaviours or express normative expectations, revealing a prescriptive undertone in public commentary.

In other words, these findings highlight the strategic use of modal verbs in political discourse, particularly in online platforms where language is a key tool for persuasion and mobilization. The frequent use of *will* in the context of protests and political predictions underscores how epistemic modality serves to create a sense of certainty about future events, thereby

influencing public perception and bolstering confidence among supporters. This aligns with Palmer's framework, which suggests that epistemic modality is instrumental in reflecting the speaker's belief and influencing the audience's expectations.

Additionally, the strategic deployment of modals, such as *may*, *should*, and *will*, in the comments and replies reveals an underlying intent to manipulate or influence audience perceptions. These subtle linguistic choices enable speakers to downplay uncertainties, intensify assertions, or prescribe actions, depending on their rhetorical goals. This demonstrates the dual role of modality in not only expressing attitudes but also shaping discourse and public sentiment.

In conclusion, the analysis underscores the power of modal verbs as rhetorical tools in political discourse, highlighting their ability to communicate certainty, enforce obligations, and manipulate perceptions in ways that align with speakers' strategic objectives.

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