

Multimodality in Literary Text
Lecture 11
Committing and Evading: Truth, Modality, and Hedging
By: Lerrisa Daniela, S.S. M.Pd.

Learning objective

At the end of this meeting, you are expected to understand:

1. Modality in language
2. Modals and authority
3. Hedging
4. Modality and certainty in visual communication

This lecture ten will be mainly sourced from the book Machin and Mayr entitled “How to Do CDA” in 2012. However additional references will be added from other books and journal articles. Examples will be made based on the topic discussed or taken from any relatable sources.

This would be the last chapter of our discussion about Critical Discourse Analysis. The discussion will revolve around a language feature that reveals how committed people are to what they say. In language, people may want to show their strong support for an idea or thing, but they also want to avoid making it sound like a definite promise or command. According to Hodge and Kress (1978), this kind of feature is called “**modality**” (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Fairclough also stated that modality involves any part of language that shows how much the speaker or writer personally believes or commits to what they’re saying. This can include things like hedging by using phrases such as “I believe” or “I think”, modal verbs, modal adjectives, and their adverb versions. Modality comes in two flavors: ‘**high modality**’ and ‘**low modality**.’ We use these language structures constantly when we talk and write. These help us express our perspective on how likely something is, our sense of obligation, and about its certainty and uncertainty (doubt).

Language acts not only to share information, but also to express and gauge our feelings and level of certainty about the information given. Language can be used to conceal and to reveal something as well as to inform and to deceive. Therefore, grammar plays a role in making this happen without drawing too much attention to it. Hodge and Kress point out that **modals** are the key tool for achieving this. In the scope of visual communication, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) propose that certain features and qualities serve a similar role to language modals. They focus on visual semiotic resources like the amount of detail in objects and settings, the use of naturalistic lighting and color, and how these elements can create a sense of distance from real-world appearances. As with modals in language, these ‘visual modals’ are used to conceal or enhance the truth and commitment to reality in visual representations.

A. Modality in Language

The use of modals can bring different levels of certainty about something. For example:

I will go grocery shopping today.

I may go grocery shopping today.

The first sentence shows more commitment of the speaker compare to the second one. These two are just simple examples which indicates that modals are used in the daily interaction to express the certainty of what we do or what we do not do.

Machin and Mayr (2012) categorize modality in three:

1. **Epistemic modality:** it is about how sure the speaker or writer is about something. So, if I say “*I may go grocery shopping today,*” I am not very certain about it. But if I say, “*I will probably go grocery shopping,*” I am more sure it will happen. So, simply explained, epistemic modals indicate the level of certainty or uncertainty in someone’s statement.
2. **Deontic modality:** it deals with expressions related to influencing people and events through obligations, permission, and necessity. It is about the authority, rules, and control over actions. In the use of deontic modals, it is essentially indicating how the speaker instruct others to act in a certain way.

For example, when I say, “*students must submit the assignment,*” I emphasize that it is their obligation to complete the assignment, indicating a high level of influence. On the other hand, if I say, “*students may submit the assignment,*” I am granting them permission or indicating that it is optional, which represents a lower level of influence.

3. **Dynamic modality:** it is related to possibility, ability, and prediction but without the same level of subjectivity found in epistemic and deontic modality. It deals with the capacity to carry out actions, the likelihood of events, and potentiality. Dynamic modality does not focus on personal judgement or attempts to influence others but rather conveys the ability of something happening. For example, “*I can do this quiz,*” this sentence indicates the speaker’s personal capability to complete the quiz. Also, the example, “*I will go to the doctor tomorrow,*” in this case, the speaker is expressing a prediction about their future action. It indicates his intention that they will visit the dentist.

Therefore, dynamic modality focuses on the practical aspects of language, to help us communicate our actions, intentions, and expectations.

Machin and Mayr (2012) also argue that modality can be associated with hedging terms, such as ‘I think’, ‘seems’, or ‘kind of/ sort of.’ The differences can be seen clearly from the following examples:

This is the most updated regulation applied.

I think this might be the most updated regulation applied.

This seems to be the most updated regulation applied.

The second sentence reflects epistemic modality because it shows the speaker’s judgement about the truth of the statement “this is the most updated regulation.” They are expressing his opinion regarding the accuracy of the information. Meanwhile, the third sentence demonstrates dynamic modality, which

talks about the possibility of something happening. In this sentence, the speaker would like to suggest that it is possible for the regulation to be the most updated one. **So, epistemic modality is about truth judgement, while dynamic modality is about possibility.**

*You **have to** implement this regulation.*

The above sentence is the example of deontic modality in which the modal 'have to or must' is used to order someone to do something.

B. Modals and Authority

The choice to use certain modal verbs in text can reveal the author's identity and their authority and the power they have over the others. For example, if we receive a message from our employers stating that we 'must' do something, it implies a stronger sense of authority compared to a message that states we 'should' do it. Therefore, modals in language can indicate the power relations that the speaker or writer and how it influences the others.

*All citizens **will** wear mask during the pandemic situation.*

*All citizens **should** wear mask during the pandemic situation.*

***Government thinks that** all citizens should wear mask during the pandemic situation.*

The above sentences show the descendant order of authority, especially in the third sentence. In the third sentence, there is a very small possibility of the citizens to wear the mask as they don't feel forced to do so. Other simpler examples, as follow, show the descendant order of power in more clearly:

You will go with me.

You must go with me.

The officials order you must go with me.

In the first sentence, the speaker is making a straightforward statement and expecting the listener to accompany him. The speaker appears to have the authority to decide what will happen as the sentence reflects a sense of certainty and his power. Meanwhile in the second sentence, the speaker is using deontic modality which means he is emphasizing the necessity for the listener to go with them. By using 'must', the speaker expresses a stronger sense of obligation. The last sentence shows weak power of the speaker compared to the other two sentences. Their weakness is shown as they need to evoke a higher authority, 'the officials', to make the demand. This indicates that the speaker lacks of personal power to convince the listener that they have to rely on other party to do so.

Similar situation often happens to siblings at home in their daily interactions. It is a common way to evoke their parent's authority to communicate when they have less personal authority. By evoking the parent's authority such as "Mummy says you've got to do that!" they are attempting to enforce their request or demand. Such kind of structure can be found in various contexts, reflecting power dynamics and levels of authority.

Certain modal verbs can serve to conceal power dynamics. For example, “*you may speak*” can convey either a permission or a possibility to speak. This duality allows the speaker to both assert power and deny it. It means that hidden force can be masked in seemingly rational language. Rarely, here are some cases where the meaning is clear. This suggest that ambiguity in language is quite useful and contributes to its richness, rather than being an issue (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The same ambiguity can be seen in political speech.

For example, “*We must take globalization as an opportunity.*” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, PP. 191)

This ambiguity can be interpreted in two different sentences with different perspectives:

1. The evidence strongly suggests that we should see globalization as an opportunity.
2. The politician tells us to see globalization as an opportunity.

Another example of political speech is “*We cannot avoid the fact that we are now part of a global economic order.*” Here, ‘cannot’ suggests that it would not be reasonable to think otherwise rather than a legal impossibility. It conveys the idea that it is not practical to avoid the fact that national economies are now part of the global economic order. They are included and undeniable.

Modal verbs, such as ‘must’ can be ambiguous about when something will happen. In this sentence, “*we must adapt to changes in global markets through building a knowledge-based economy that is dynamic and versatile*” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, PP 191), the use of ‘must’ does not specifically state whether this requirement applies to the future or is a general principle in the current moment. This ambiguity is useful for speakers because it allows them to discuss an issue and convey a sense of addressing it without committing to a specific time frame. It is the way to keep the statement open-ended and flexible.

To close this modality part, Hodge and Kress (1979) highlight the practical purpose of this ambiguity in language. They suggest that because language serves both to convey information and, at times, to deceive, grammar includes forms that help us avoid being too specific. Modals express probabilities and certainties, but they often hide the exact timing of an action and the power dynamics involved. In essence, modals can act as a shield for our statements, protecting them from potential criticism or challenge. They offer a degree of flexibility and ambiguity that can be quite useful in communication.

C. Hedging

Hedging is a linguistic strategy used to express tentativeness or uncertainty in language (Ifga and Pratiwi, 2021). As well as modal verbs, speakers and writers can use hedging, which is a way to show uncertainty and non-commitment in their statements. This helps to make the statements seem detailed and precise while actually avoiding directness. The speakers can distance themselves from their statements and reduce the chances of receiving unwelcome responses (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

For example:

1. His house is *almost* 150 meters wide; I *think*.
2. It *seems* like only few people will attend.
3. I *think* I have to go.
4. He *kind of* being ignorant to the current situation.
5. His writing is *more or less* the same with the other one.

A study by Mentari (2018) examine the use of hedging in presidential debate between Clinton and Trump in 2016. She used the theory by Francoise Salager-Meyer (1997) to see the seven linguistic features of hedges and also the theory of Rabab'ah and Rumman (2015) to see the functions of the hedges. The result of the study showed a pattern in the use of hedges in the presidential debate.

1. **Modal auxiliary verbs**, which express the uncertainty, especially about future predictions in the events and outcomes.
2. **Modal lexical verbs**, which serve dual purposes: mitigating claims indicating uncertainty and a lack of complete commitment.
3. **Modal phrases** which consist of adjectival, adverbial, and nominal, are used to show uncertainty.
4. **Approximators** in which the words are related to degree, quantity, frequency, and time, indicate uncertainty.
5. **Introductory phrases** have multiple functions, such as showing a lack of full commitment, seeking acceptance, being polite, and involving the listeners.
6. **'If' clauses** are used to avoid direct criticism, especially in predicting future events.
7. **Compound hedges** are used to express a lack of full commitment while seeking acceptance and politeness.

For example:

Trump:

"It's *probably* \$5 trillion that we can't bring into our country, Lester. And with a little leadership, you'd get it in here very quickly, and it could be put to use on the inner cities and lots of other things, and it would be beautiful."

Clinton:

"And I have -- well, not quite that long. *I think* my husband did a pretty good job in the 1990s. I think a lot about what worked and how we can make it work again..."

A study by Fraser (2010) about Hedging in Political Discourse found in the documents of Bush's responses to the reporters' questions. Fraser's research found few cases of hedging used by Bush for purposes of avoidance when the questions seem challenging. Then Bush avoided a direct, outspoken answering to the point. Instead, the research found Bush skillfully avoided addressing the issue by employing outright lying technique, as recommended by Partington (2003). This technique left the audience wondering which issue he is trying to address or which questions from the reports he is trying to answer.

For example:

Reporter: “Mr. President, thank you. Since General Pace made his comments that got a lot of attention about homosexuality, we haven’t heard from you on that issue. Do you, sir, believe that homosexuality is immoral?”

President Bush: “*I will not be rendering judgment about individual orientation. I do believe the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is good policy.*”

Reporter: “You weren’t this circumspect when you were talking to reporters yesterday about the economy.”

President Bush: “*I think I pretty much said the same thing yesterday, in all due respect.*”

Reporter: “Was it on your order, sir?”

President Bush: “As I said, *this program is a necessary program that was constantly reviewed...*”

D. Modality and Certainty in Visual Communication

In this part, we will discuss modality in visual communication. These ways of visually expressing things are like the signs that indicate modality in images. They can be applied in various kinds of visual communication. They are useful tools for helping us to understand the meaning behind the elements, features, and styles in images. It is about how linguistic modality markers help readers or receivers to describe what they read or hear (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

Machin and Mayr (2012) divide the markers of visual modality into seven categories:

1. **Detail Level:** From simple line drawings to highly detailed photographs.
2. **Background Clarity:** From a blank background to a detailed and sharp one.
3. **Depth Perception:** Ranging from no depth to a highly deep perspective.
4. **Light and Shadow:** Varies from no articulation to the maximum.
5. **Tonal Gradation:** From just black and white to a full spectrum of colors.
6. **Color Modulation:** From flat, unmodulated color to finely nuanced representations.
7. **Color Saturation:** Ranges from black and white to highly saturated colors.

These categories help us understand the visual elements in terms of detail, background, depth, light, tone, color modulation, and saturation.

Examples:



Figure 1 (Enniful, E., 2018)



Figure 2 (Tempo., 2020)



Figure 3 (Riana, F., 2019)



Figure 4 (Bartolo, L., 2020)

Summary and Conclusion

In this last chapter of CDA, we have delved in the features of both language and images that helps us to assess the commitment of truth. In language, the use of modality allows speakers to express strong commitment to certain ideas while hedging on other parts, revealing a sense of relationship between power and authority. Hedging, seemingly precise, can actually obscure the information. Similarly, in images, we explored the diver characteristics from their naturalistic representations. Analyzing these divergences, much like examining modals in language, which enables us to uncover the identities, values, and narratives being communicated through the visuals images.

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