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The Use of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in Nigerian Newspaper Reports on Corruption

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Abstract

Crime and corruption are often interconnected, as corruption can contribute to the spread of criminal activities. Corruption is a broad subject being reported by Nigerian dailies everyday. This paper examined the use of modal auxiliary verbs in selected newspaper reports on corruption. The reports analyzed were on purpose chosen from four Nigerian National dailies, *Vanguard, The Nation, Daily Trust* and *Nigerian Tribune* published between November and December, 2022. This is because of their vast readership and circulation across major geographical areas of the country. From each of the newspaper, five reports were randomly selected. However, the data gathered were analyzed in line with the different functions of the modal auxiliary verbs in question. Five categories of modal auxiliaries namely, certainty, probability, usuality, obligation, and inclination characterized the data. Findings indicated that reporters chose predictive auxiliary modals *will* and *would*, and obligative modals *must* and *should* in that order in the reports. Other types of modal used are *can*, *shall* and *may*. The modals used presented the opinions of the reporters and *will* reported the highest frequency. It concluded that employing modals is a potent tool with the potential to influence public perceptions of corruption and those involved in it.

Keywords: Modality, Modal verbs, Corruption, Newspaper Reports

1. Introduction

For every language use, there is a particular purpose for it. That is why Adebayo (1997) considered the aspect of language that deals with choices of diction, phrases, sentences and lingustic materials that are consistent harmonious with the subject matter. This paper is dedicated to the examination of modal auxiliaries and how they are employed in reporting issues of corruption in major Nigerian dalies. There are nine central modal verbs. They are *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should* and *must* alongside some marginal ones (*dare to*, *ought to*, etc.). They primarily function as helping verbs to the main verbs to form their tenses- past, present and future in the English language (Onuigbo, 2005). According to Crystal (1995, p. 317), modal auxiliaries are "verb-like words which typically express speaker's attitude towards the factual content of an utterance such as suspicion necessity and necessity." Halliday (1970) considered modality as the way that makes it possible for the speaker to interfere and take up a viewpoint in the speaking incident. Basically, the perform two functions which are the specification of the semantic relationship between the subject and the action described by the verb, such as suspicion, necessity, permission and the expression of the speaker's subjective attitude towards the utterance; i.e. paraphrases of verbal mood (Bussmann Hadumod, 1996). Modals can be employed by writers, for instance the news article writers to properly and effectively present messages and show their attitude or opinion on a topic. However, the purpose of this research is to analyze the different uses of modal auxiliary verbs in reporting issues of corruption in selected newspapers- *Vanguard, The Nation, Daily Trust and Nigerian Tribune* by identifying the modal used and their frequency and also examining their uses on the problems of corruption. It should be noted that it is delimited to the aforementioned aim and objectives. The data for this study are analyzed in the light of Halliday's (1960) Modality Theory in Systemic Functional Lingustics. It is established that since modals can be a powerful tool for shaping public perception and conveying the tone and intent of a news story, they should be used strategically.

2. Literature Review / Theoretical framework

Modal auxiliary verbs, often referred to simply as "modal verbs" or "modals," are a specific category of auxiliary (helping) verbs in English. These verbs are unique because they modify the meaning of the main verb in a sentence to express various shades of possibility, necessity, ability, permission, and obligation. Modals are important for conveying the mood or attitude of the speaker, and also for indicating the likelihood or certainty of an event or action. Crystal (1995, p. 317) has a similar opinion as he describes modals as "verb-like words, which typically express speakers' attitudes towards the factual content of an utterance, such as uncertainty, possibility, and necessity." To Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p. 40), "the modals express two main types of meaning" : human control over events, such as is involved in permission, intention, ability, or obligation and judgement whether an event was, is, or will be likely to happen. However, in newspaper reports, most especially on corruption, which is the concern of this paper, modal verbs are used by the reporters to properly convey their messages to the readers.

A newspaper report according to William Maulsbyl (2019) is defined as "an accurate, unbiased

account of the significant facts of a timely happening that is interest to the readers of the newspaper that prints the account." To Mitchel Chinley (2020) it is a timely report of facts or opinions that hold interest of importance or both for a considerable number of people. Yinka Agoro and Rotimi Bolarinwa (2011, p. 12), put that "news report is current information made available to the public about what is going on, information often of vital importance to men and women trying to make up their minds about what to do and how to act." Thinking of a comprehensive definition of a news report, it can be described as a precise and impartial portrayal of a current, timely event. This report, disseminated through mass media, holds significance for a broad audience in a particular locality. In today's context, news pertains to genuine aspects of life, involving real people, events, places, or issues in the world. These reports are conveyed in real-time using various available communication channels. Likewise, Agbese (2018) sees news "as finding out and publishing the things people do not want others to know and second, anything that will make people talk."

Systemic Functional Lingustics is adopted as the foundational and substantial theory for this paper. Halliday (1960, p. 1) puts that "it is one variety of functional lingustics with distinctive feature of explaining the internal organization of language in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve". Halliday treats the system of modality as a representative of the interpersonal function of language in Systemic Functional Lingustics. Therefore, the intermediate degrees between the positive and negative poles are known collectively as modality. He summed up that, modality is of two types: modalization and modulation. Each of this modality has sub-types. Modalization is made of probability and usuality scales to which the term 'modality' strictly belongs. In contract, modulation includes obligation and inclination. Modalization expresses producer's opinions, whereas, modulization expresses the content of the clause i.e. it represents the relevant conditions to the process being expressed. However, this research shall follow suit. The modal auxilaries gathered shall be analyzed based on these scales of modalization and modulization.

3.   Materials and Methods

This study employs secondary data. It is designed to investigate the modals used, their frequency, and their uses in four different Nigerian newspapers- *Vanguard, The Nation, Daily Trust and Nigerian Tribune* on the issues of corruption. It employs a purposive design to select twenty (20) reports from November to December, 2022. Five reports were drawn from each of the newspapers. However, the modal verbs extracted from the four newspapers and for the period stated above are the data for this paper. They are analyzed manually with regards to different functions of modals auxiliary verbs in question.

4. Result

The different tables below presented the data collected from the reports in *Vanguard, The Nation, Daily Trust and Nigerian Tribune* respectively in order to reveal the usage of different modal verbs in the newspapers.

4.1 Vanguard

Table 1: Frequency of Modals in Vanguard Newspaper

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
WILL	24	33.8
WOULD	11	15.5
MUST	10	14.1
SHOULD	6	8.5
CAN NOT	4	5.6
COULD NOT	4	5.6
WILL NOT	2	2.8
SHALL	2	2.8
SHOULD NOT	2	2.8
NEED TO	2	2.8
WOULD NOT	1	1.4
CAN	1	1.4
MAY	1	1.4
COULD	1	1.4
TOTAL	71	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

In the above table, which presents data from *Vanguard* , eight of the nine central modal verbs are used in reports on corruption, five negatives or the modals are used as well as one semimodal. The total modals used is 71 and *will* has the highest usage.

4.2   The Nation

Table 2: : Frequency of Modals in The Nation Newspaper

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
WILL	26	35.1
WOULD	15	20.3
MUST	9	12.2
SHOULD	6	8.1
COULD NOT	3	4.1
WILL NOT	3	4.1
CAN	2	2.8
COULD	2	2.8
SHOULD NOT	2	2.8
SHALL	1	1.4
WOULD NOT	1	1.4
MAY NOT	1	1.4
NEED TO	1	1.4
TOTAL	74	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

This second table above, which presents data from *The Nation* reveals that seven of the central modals are used and it also uses five negatives of the modals and one semimodal. *Will* also have the highest usage here but the total modals used is higher than that of *Vanguard*.

4.3   Daily Trust

Table 3: : Frequency of Modals in Daily Trust Newspaper

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
WILL	10	34.5
WOULD	5	17.2
MUST	3	10.3
SHOULD	3	10.3
CAN	2	6.9
CANNOT	2	6.9
WILL NOT	1	3.4
SHALL NOT	1	3.4
WOULD NOT	1	3.4
Total	29	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

This table 3 above provides data from *Daily Trust*. It shows that only five of the nine central modals are used in reporting issues of corruption as well as four negatives of the modals but without any semimodal. It has a total usage of 29 modals.

4.4   Nigerian Tribune

Table 4: : Frequency of Modals in Nigerian Tribune Newspaper

Modal	Frequency	Percentage
WILL	11	35.5
WOULD	7	22.6
SHOULD	4	12.9
MUST	3	9.7
CAN	2	6.5
COULD NOT	1	3.2
CANNOT	1	3.2
WILL NOT	1	3.2
SHALL	1	3.2
USED TO	1	3.2
Total	32	100%

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

The last table, *Nigerian Tribune*, reveals that six of the central modals are used , with three negatives and one semimodal. It has the third highest usage of modals, 32 and Daily Trust being the newspaper with the least modal usages.

Meanwhile, all the central modals have been used except might, which did not appear in any of the above tables. The indication from these tables is that reporters use a variety of modals to pass their messages to the readers.

5.   Discussion

The Nation has the highest number of modal usage which is 74, followed is *Vanguard* with 71 modals while Nigerian Tribune and Daily Trust have 32 and 29 modal usage respectively. The reason for this wide disparity in the usage of modal by these different newspapers is mostly as a

result of their perspective about corruption. There is significant difference in the use of the various modal verbs. The modal *will* is used by the four newspapers but is greatly used by *The Nation* and *Vanguard* , 26 and 24 times respectively while *Nigerian Tribune* and *Daily Trust* have low frequency of *will* usage which are 11 and 10 respectively compared to the first two.

The modal auxiliary *would* is the second most used modal based on the data collected. It accounts for a frequency of 15 in the *The Nation* and 11 in *Vanguard*. *Nigerian Tribune* used it 7 times while *Daily Trust* on the other hand used it 5 times. The least central modal used in the four newspapers as revealed in the tables is *may* and it only appears in *Vanguard*.

5.1   The Use of Modal Auxiliary Verbs

A few of the modals have been randomly selected from the total of 206 usages in the data for the purpose if discussing their functions in regard to issues of corruption. Examples of modal auxiliaries used in the context of the selected reports of this paper are identified below for discussion.

5.1.1 Certainty

In this study, certainty refers to the level of confidence or the degree of assurance that a particular event or something will happen or take place. In the reports of the four newspapers, the modal *will* has the highest frequency but it is obvious that *Vanguard* and *The Nation* have the highest usage. Therefore, they show certainty mostly using *will* and a set of other modals. The reporters have employed different modals to show the aftermath situation or reality of corrupt activities on the people and their environment. However, modals *will*, *would* and *cannot* in the following sentences show certainty.

1.   It *will* take years for those who have been displaced, especially the innocent ones to recover and face their lives again. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 22, 2022)

2.   The matter *will* surely be brought to calabar. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 1, 2022)

3.   The profiling *would* be done. (The Nation, Friday Nov. 4, 2022)

4.   Both parties agreed that the terms of settlement *cannot* be altered. (The Nation, Thur. Dec. 29, 2022)

In sentence 1, *will* is used to express the certainty of taking years before the victims of the crime perpetrated could recover and face their lives again. *Will* in sentence 2 provides the assurance that the criminal matter of a mother of two killing an eleven-month-old son in Cross River would be brought to Calabar in order to provide justice to the case.   *Would* as used in sentence 3 indicates certainty. It is been revealed by Abuja security body that all the hotels in the city would be profiled. This is a security strategy to avert any sort of crime that may want to be perpetrated in the hotels while cannot in sentence 4 establishes certainty in the impossibility of neither NCC nor MTN altering the terms of settlement.

5.1.2 Probability

Probability refers to the fact that something or an event is likely to occur. The modals *may* and *will* show probability in the reports. *May* generally shows probability but has an extremely low usage in the examined reports accounting for a frequency of 1 and 1.4% only in *Vanguard.* On the other hand, *will* rarely show probability, except for few cases when it is supported by 'if' or an adverb. The reason for probability in some of these reports is as a result of the uncertainty that surrounds some events. The instances of *may* and *will* showing probability are reflected in the following examples.

(5) I *may* not be happy with a lot of things, especially when some people have access to AK 47 and use it anyhow and others do not. (Vanguard, Mon. Nov. 1, 2022)

(6) Probably, after the invasion, we *will* conduct a head count. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 22, 2022)

May is used in sentence 5 to express the probability of Governor Ugwanyi not being happy with the people that use AK 47 against the humanity in Enugu state. The adverb "probably" at the beginning of sentence 6 makes the *will* to show that it is likely for the Police to conduct head count after their planned invasion which is necessary to control killings in Imo state. The use of *will* and *may* account to the fact that reports on crime and corruption show the lack of certainly regarding certain aspects.

5.1.3 Usuality

Usuality refers to the frequency or regularity with which an event occurs. It can also denote that something has become a normal occurrence or a usual act of some people and not necessarily happening every day. Usuality in this research has to do with how event or something happens sometimes, usually or always. However, it should be noted that when *will* denotes usuality, it is usually in a statement made by an authority. Modals *will* and *would* in the following examples show usuality.

(7) We *will* continue to ensure the safety of our people in the boarder towns. (Vanguard Thur. Dec. 29, 2022)

(8) In Nigeria there is a social expectation that public officer *will* and should be corrupt. (Vanguard, Sat. Dec. 24, 2022)

(9) We *will* continue to find those that will collaborate with us. (Tribune, Dec. 31, 2022)

(10) Irabor, however, called on Nigerians to have confidence in Nigerian military officers and men who *would* remain totally committed to being neutral and apolitical. (Daily Trust, Friday Dec. 9, 2022)

In sentence 7, there is usuality in the statement of Ugwanyi, Enugu state governor, to always provide adequate security to their people leaving in the boarder towns. *Will* in sentence 8 indicates that Nigerians always expect a public officer to be corrupt. This is a belief they have nurtured overtime which is still fresh in their mind while in sentence 9, it is used by Abiodun, the leader of the Security Network code-named Amotekun to show that looking for people to collaborate with them on security matters will always be their concern. In the statement of Irabor, Cheif of Defense Staff,

as it is seen in sentence 10, *would* indicate that the military will remain neutral and apolitical while discharging their duties which is why Nigerian citizens should confidence in them.

5.1.4   Obligation

Obligation means allowed to, supposed to or required to. It indicates an act that is considered by the speaker to be obligatory in which an agent is obliged to do something. Most times, *must* is used to denote obligation and this is seen in the reports of *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* and *The Nation*. Other modals used include *will* and *should* in *Vanguard*. The data below exemplify instances of obligation.

(11)   The unity of our people and economy of Eha-Amufu are paramount and we *must* restore life to the area. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 22, 2022)

(12)   He said that the alert *must* be taken seriously taking into cognisance the security challenges. (Daily Trust, Friday Dec. 25, 2022)

(13)   The Police officers *should* be the first layer of protection for citizens and should be consistently caught being the opposite. (Vanguard, Wed. Dec. 28, 2022)

(14)   I can assure you that the activities of these criminals *will* soon be checked. (Nigerian Tribune, Tuesday Dec. 20, 2022)

In sentence 11, *must* shows that the leadership of Eha-Amufu is obliged to restore life to their town in order to achieve peace and unity among its people while in sentence 12, it indicates obligation on the part of the people to take security alert seriously taking into cognisance security challenges. *Should* has the function of imposing an obligation on the addressees. *Should* in sentence 13 indicates obligation on the Nigerian Police to protect the citizens while in sentence 14, the authority considers it an obligation to check the activities of the criminals.

5.1.5 Inclination

Inclination is described as an offer, which means willing to, anxious to or determine to. It has to do with a feeling that you wants to do a particular thing or the fact that you prefer or are more likely to do a particular thing. *Vanguard* used such modals as *would*, *shall* and together with *Nigerian Tribune*, *will* to show inclination whereas in the reports of *Daily Trust, would* is used. The following sentences show inclination.

(15)   The IGP warned that the police *would* no longer allow such criminals to keep operating in any state in the South East. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 22, 2022)

(16)   By the time you return next year we *shall* stop sit at home. (Vanguard, Thur. Dec. 2022)

(17)   We *will* ensure that it is done speedily because justice delayed is justice denied (Nigerian Tribune, Tuesday Dec. 20, 2022)

(18)   The public relation officer for Osun Stats Police command, Yinka Opadola, also confirmed the incident and assured that it *would* be investigated. (Daily Trust Friday Nov. 4, 2022)

Would the second most used modal in the four newspapers in sentence 15 indicates that the police are determined to stop all forms of criminal activities in the South East and in sentence 18 there is an indication that the Osun State Police command is determined to investigate the attack on INEC in Osun state. *Shall* in sentence 16 is used to express the willingness of the people of the Anambra to stop sit at home orders. In sentence 17, *will* indicates that the police are determined to do justice to the killing of a female lawyer without being corrupt in the process.

5.2 Conclusion

It can be concluded based on the analysis and discussion carried out by this study that, the use of modal auxiliary verbs in newspaper reports on corruption reveals the opinion of the reporters. However, the use of modals is a powerful tool that has the potential to shape public perceptions of corruption and those involved in it. Our research suggests that the use of modal verbs in these reports can be indicative of the degree of severity or culpability associated with the corruption being reported, as well as the potential consequences for those involved.

In addition, we have seen that the use of modal verbs can likewise influenced by political or ideological biases, further complicating our ability to interpret their precise meaning in these contexts. Therefore, our investigation suggests that the use of modal verbs in news reports concerning corruption demands further examination, not only with respect to its possible influence on public perception but also its contribution to shaping a broader societal reaction towards corruption.

6. Acknowledgments

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