A CORPUS STUDY OF BREXIT POLITICAL DISCOURSE: EXPLORING MODALITY THROUGH LEXICAL MODALS

UN ESTUDIO DE CORPUS SOBRE EL DISCURSO POLÍTICO DEL BREXIT: LA MODALIDAD A TRAVÉS DE LOS MODALES LÉXICOS

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the lexical modals used in the political speeches given by Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn during the final months of the Brexit process. This study explores whether lexical choice shows the politicians' commitment to their constituents, particularly to determine which lexical modals each politician uses and which semantic implication(s) these modals convey. The study is descriptive-interpretative and uses the corpus-assisted discourse studies approach. It contributes to research on modality in the English language by examining parts of speech other than (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. As the corpus analysis shows, lexical modals are a prominent resource employed by politicians to present facts to their audience.

Keywords: modality, lexical modals, corpus-assisted discourse studies, political discourse, Brexit.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar los modales léxicos utilizados en los discursos políticos de Boris Johnson y Jeremy Corbyn durante los últimos meses del proceso del Brexit. Este estudio se centra en investigar si la elección léxica muestra el

compromiso de los políticos con sus votantes, determinando qué modales léxicos utiliza cada político y qué implicación o implicaciones semánticas transmiten. El estudio es descriptivo e interpretativo y se ha realizado mediante la metodología del análisis del discurso asistido por corpus. Este artículo, al examinar otras clases de palabras diferentes a los verbos modales, contribuye a la investigación sobre la modalidad en la lengua inglesa. Como muestra el análisis del corpus, los políticos emplean los modales léxicos como un recurso destacado para presentar los hechos a la audiencia.

Palabras clave: modalidad, modales léxicos, estudios del discurso asistido por corpus, discurso político, Brexit.

1. Introduction

After the United Kingdom (UK) held a referendum on June 23, 2016, to determine whether the country should remain a member of the European Union (EU) or leave it, a process known as Brexit was initiated. Although the referendum result was fairly close —52% vs 48%—[1] more than half of voters chose to leave the EU. From the time the referendum was held until the withdrawal took effect, a few years went by in which the political confrontation between the leaders of the country's two main parties, Boris Johnson of the Conservative Party and Jeremy Corbyn from the Labour Party, drew wide attention.

As language is the main instrument at the disposal of politicians, it is relevant and worthwhile to analyse political discourse, since linguistic traces can uncover political stance. Speakers may have different opinions on the same issue, leading to the presentation of facts in one way or another; therefore, the speaker's attitude towards a given proposition is very significant from a linguistic point of view and is related to so-called modality.

The semantic category of modality is mainly associated with the speaker's attitude towards the situation or facts expressed in the clause. Apart from including a (semi)auxiliary modal verb in the verb phrase, there are other linguistic devices that the speaker can use to express modality. According to Huddleston and Pullum, "lexical modals" are other word classes (i.e. adjectives, adverbs, nouns, lexical verbs) that can also convey the same meaning as (semi)auxiliary modal verbs (2002: 173). Depending on the meaning expressed in the utterance, modality is classified as either epistemic or deontic (Huddleston 1988a: 78-80).

Therefore, this paper aims to compare and analyse the lexical modals used in the political speeches of both politicians during the last months of the Brexit process. As most studies on modality have focused exclusively on (semi)auxiliary modal

verbs, we intend to study the connections between modality expressed through lexical modals and the political context in which it occurs, namely the Brexit process (Paltridge 2012: 186). This analysis thus fills a gap in the research on modality and seeks to shed light on the nuances and intricacies of modality, further expanding the scope of modal research by exploring the concept beyond the realm of (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. In this sense, the study extends a previous analysis of (semi)auxiliary modal verbs in the Brexit political discourse (Orrequia-Barea and Almazán-Ruiz 2021), as there is relatively scarce literature on the topic and a lack of case studies. These two studies examine how modality might influence the public's perception of facts since politicians use it, for instance, to present facts as possible or necessary.

This descriptive-interpretative study uses Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) as its methodology (Baker 2020). It describes lexical modals using data from political discourse on Brexit. The study seeks to answer three main research questions: (RQ1) Which parts of speech —other than (semi)auxiliary modal verbs— are more commonly used to express modality in the political speeches of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn on Brexit? (RQ2) Are lexical modals more frequently used than (semi)auxiliary modal verbs? (RQ3) Which politician uses lexical modals more frequently in his discourse and what does this reveal?

After this introductory section, this paper is organised as follows. Sections 2 and 3 provide the political and theoretical background, focusing on political discourse on Brexit, and on modality and lexical modals, respectively. Section 4 describes the data and methods used to analyse the corpus. Sections 5 and 6 include the results and the discussion. Finally, some conclusions are drawn in Section 7.

2. Language, Politics and Brexit

Language is a distinctive feature of human beings, which becomes particularly relevant in politics. In political contexts, language is used to persuade the audience to take a particular political position. According to Ananko, communication in politics is essential as it helps political processes advance (2017: 128). Furthermore, communication can contribute to politicians' ability to influence society and make it more cohesive. In this vein, Chilton and Schaffner state that "politics cannot be conducted without language, and it is probably the case that the use of language in the constitution of social groups leads to what we call 'politics' in a broad sense" (in Dunmire 2012: 735). Likewise, Fairclough highlights that politics is language since it "consists in the disputes and struggles which occur in language and over language" (1989: 23).

Political language functions as an index of the speaker's current view of reality, just as the audience's interpretation of the same language may indicate an entirely different perspective (Edelman 1985: 10). Discourse interpretation and the possible implicit message underlying the words uttered become crucial in the political context, because expressing thoughts and conveying ideas is not neutral, and language always carries a purpose and meaning. Still, language simultaneously represents the intended meaning of the utterance (Ekawati 2019: 6). In this regard, the context and the timing of political discourse must be considered, as they will determine the interpretation of the particular language aspects analysed. Furthermore, the linguistic devices used to reach the electorate can reveal how politicians present facts.

As is well known, the UK has been notably ambivalent to EU membership. Only two years after joining the EU, the country held its first referendum to determine whether to remain in the European alliance, and two-thirds of voters chose to maintain membership in 1975 (Somai and Biedermann 2016: 139). Several decades later, the British nation again faced a choice between remaining or embracing an uncertain future shaped by a new reality (Torrecuadrada García-Lozano and García Fuente 2017: 5), as numerous socio-economic and political aspects would have to be decided if the UK ultimately split from the EU. In the so-called Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016, Britons voted to leave the EU.

The Brexit movement demanded the UK's exit from the EU, primarily to restore the nation's control. In an attempt to please Euroskeptics, the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, negotiated a deal with the EU to improve the UK's economic governance, competitiveness, sovereignty and control over the welfare state, and the free movement of people (Torrecuadrada García-Lozano and García Fuente 2017: 14). The unexpected result of the referendum led to Cameron's resignation, and a particularly troubled period in the UK political scenario began. After two years of negotiating with the EU to make Brexit take effect, his successor, the Conservative Theresa May, also resigned as Prime Minister. Then, the former Mayor of the City of London, Boris Johnson, clearly in favour of Brexit, became Prime Minister.

3. Mood, Modality and Lexical Modals

In a broad and traditional sense, the distinction between mood and modality is established by defining the former as a grammatical category that, in English, can be expressed in different ways. The latter, in contrast, is a semantic category related to the different implications expressed in the sentence. As Nuyts states, these two concepts have been the subject of numerous linguistic studies, both synchronic and diachronic (2016: 2). However, although mood and modality often appear together, the scholar

points out that while "mood is the older term", "modality […] has become the absolutely dominant concept in the last several decades" (Nuyts 2016: 1).

According to Huddleston (1988a; 1988b), mood is a grammatical property of the verb phrase, similar to tense or aspect, and can be marked analytically by the presence of (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. In addition, the subjunctive and the imperative are considered inflectional mood-related forms. Nuyts (2016) remarks that the term mood has been used in the literature to refer to three linguistic domains: the domain of the grammatical characteristics and formal realisations in the verb phrase, the dichotomy of indicative and subjunctive, and the domain between the distinction of sentence types and their illocutionary classification. Nevertheless, it could be said that mood is "the grammatical coding of modal meaning in verb inflections" (Depraetere and Reed 2020: 207). As Khomutova concludes, mood is also considered "the morphological means of expressing modality" (2014: 400).

Modality is defined as a semantic category related to different meanings or functions, which, as Huddleston et al. point out, "express certain kinds of alteration in the relation of clause contents to reality" (2021: 70). The authors state that "modality relates to the ways in which the possible situations described in a clause can relate to reality" (2021: 69). In this regard, a given situation can be expressed in various ways, which affect and determine the sense and meaning of what is described in the clause. Although modality is mainly expressed in English by non-inflectional resources such as modal verbs, other lexical categories such as adverbs, adjectives or nouns can be related to the expression of modality.

Since modality relates to how events are presented in an utterance, the speaker's perspective and involvement in these events become particularly meaningful. Accordingly, a distinction is made in the literature between what is considered modal and non-modal, and this distinction is associated with the dichotomy between factual and non-factual (Palmer 2001: 1). As Traugott states, "modal utterances are non-factual and […] involve speaker's comments on the necessity or possibility of the state of affairs" (2011: 382).

The concepts of possibility and necessity become particularly relevant in the context of modality, since the traditional and most widely used classification among scholars (Quirk et al. 1985; Huddleston 1988a and 1988b; Bybee and Fleischman 1995; Palmer 2001) is to determine whether events are presented as something that may happen or as something necessary. Although there is no agreement in the literature when it comes to establishing a taxonomy of types of modality (Nuyts 2016), in a traditional and general sense, modality can be epistemic and deontic.

There is also a lack of consensus regarding terminology and the typology used to distinguish modals. However, the two most widely accepted terms in the literature

are epistemic and deontic. Scholars (e.g. Rozumko 2019; Huddleston and Pullum 2002) use the etymology of both terms to clarify them. Both terms, epistemic and deontic, are derived from the Greek *knowledge* and *binding,* respectively. That is the reason why epistemic modality is related to "qualifications concerning the speaker's knowledge", and deontic modality is connected to "a matter of imposing obligation or prohibition, granting permission, and the like" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 178).

Therefore, establishing the differences between the two types of modality[2] entails determining the speaker's viewpoint on the events conveyed in the utterance. According to Palmer, "with epistemic modality, speakers express their judgements about the factual status of the proposition" (2001: 8), whereas "deontic modality relates to obligation or permission, emanating from an external source" (2001: 9). Palmer's words can be used to determine a broad distinction between the two types of modality. Nevertheless, more significant traits are worth mentioning.

As Rozumko states, it is necessary to consider that linguistic communication involves not only the speaker but also the addressee and the social context in which communication takes place (2019: 19-20). Hence, when analysing modality, it is important to consider that events or what is said by the speaker are rarely intended to express their viewpoint. Moreover, Nuyts points out that in both types of modality, a scale can be established to determine the degree of certainty or possibility in the case of epistemic modality and the level of obligation regarding deontic modality (2016: 36-39).

Even though modality in English is mainly expressed by the presence of (semi) auxiliary modal verbs in the utterance, Huddleston and Pullum state that there are other "items expressing the same kind of meaning as the modal auxiliaries, but which do not belong to the syntactic class of auxiliary verbs" (2002: 173). The scholars use the term "lexical modals" to refer to these items and include "adjectives like *possible, necessary, likely, probable, bound, supposed*, adverbs like *perhaps, possibly, necessarily, probably, certainly, surely*, verbs like *insist, permit, require*, and nouns like *possibility, necessity, permission*, and similar derivatives" (2002: 173).

Modal meanings are "understood to involve subjectivity or grounding in the speaker's perspective" (Traugott 2011: 390), and including modal words in the proposition may reveal the speaker stance. Accordingly, Simon-Vandenbergen claims that modal choices unveil "the speaker's position in the discourse" and that a high degree of commitment to a specific position reflects the speaker's aim to convince others of a questionable standpoint (1997: 353). Therefore, it is worth studying the use of lexical modals to determine whether the political protagonists of this study present facts or whether they try to avoid positioning themselves clearly in revealing the truth value of a given argument.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Procedure of Analysis

The first step of our study was to compile the data. Both politicians' speeches were downloaded from the internet using the programming language R.[3] Boris Johnson's corpus was extracted from the British Government's official website.[4] We restricted the query using the different options the website displayed. Firstly, we selected the dates from 24 June, 2019, until 31 January, 2020. Secondly, we set some keywords as filters, namely 'PM' (Prime Minister) and 'speech'. Additionally, we restricted the query to search for speeches delivered only by the Prime Minister. Once downloaded, we checked that the word 'Brexit' was mentioned to avoid those in which it did not appear. Eleven speeches were retrieved in this case, which together made for a corpus of 16,869 tokens.

The Labour Party's official website allows users to download their leader's speeches from "The Jeremy Corbyn Archives".[5] In this case, the same criteria were followed: we set the dates from June 24, 2019 to January 31, 2020, downloaded all the speeches retrieved by the query, and checked whether the word 'Brexit' was mentioned in each speech, discarding the ones in which the word did not appear. The corpus comprises 35,251 tokens from 28 speeches.

In the second stage, we compiled an exhaustive list of lexical modals using Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification as a foundation. Following their criteria, our classification also incorporated "similar derivatives" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 173) regarding morphology and semantics; the researchers' proficiency in the English language, their intuition and the use of English dictionaries were essential at this stage. Table 1 shows the classification of lexical modals in terms of word class and ordered alphabetically.

Adjectives	Adverbs	Nouns	Verbs
(un)bound	*actually*	*assurance*	*allow*
(un)certain	*(un)certainly*	*(un)certainty*	*assure*
(un)clear	*(un)clearly*	*intention*	*convince*
convinced	*indeed*	*necessity*	*ensure*
(un)likely	*maybe*	*permission*	*intend*
(un)necessary	*(un)necessarily*	*possibility*	*let*
(im)possible	*perhaps*	*promise*	*permit*
(im)probable	*(im)possibly*	*proposal*	*promise*
supposed	*(im)probably*	*reassurance*	*propose*
(un)sure	*surely*	*request*	*require*
	truly	*requirement*	

Table 1. Compilation of lexical modals classified by word class

The analysis was conducted using the software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al. 2014). This tool was used to manage the two sub-corpora analysed in this paper. We used the concordance function to query the items in Table 1 and checked whether they appeared in the corpora. Secondly, the concordance lines were downloaded, and the authors manually annotated these stretches of text for the type of modality according to the distinction made in Section 2, namely epistemic and deontic. The small size of the corpus also allowed us to annotate each lexical modal in terms of degree of certainty: strong, medium or neutral modality. Then, a comparison was made between the two annotations, and an agreement was reached between the annotators in cases of doubt.

The statistical test used to carry out the analysis was the log-likelihood measure. The cut-off point for the p-value was established at $p<0.05$ "to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the observed difference is unlikely to be due to chance and therefore is statistically significant" (Brezina 2018: 12). Thus, if the result is larger than 3.84 (the cut-off point for significance at $p<0.05$), it is statistically significant (Brezina 2018: 84). To calculate such a test, we used Paul Rayson's online Log-Likelihood Calculator.[6]

The last step was to look up the lexical modals in a reference corpus. *CPQWeb* software (Hardie 2012) was used to perform the comparison with a reference corpus, that is, the *British National Corpus* (BNC). The use of this tool instead of *Sketch Engine* was motivated by the part-of-speech tagging available in the former, as *CPQWeb* allows the user to specify word class using tags, particularly the UCREL CLAWS C6 tagset.[7] The verbs were queried using the lemma search. Verbs and nouns that coincide in form, e.g. *promise*, were looked up using tags, i.e. NN0 for nouns, which refers to neutral for number, such as in *aircraft*; and VVB for verbs, which stands for the base form of lexical verbs, except the infinitive, such as in *take* or *live*. Finally, for the (semi)modal auxiliaries, two different tags have been employed, namely VM0, which refers to modal auxiliary verbs such as *can, could* or *will* and VMK for modal catenative (*ought to, used to*).

4.2. Corpus Description and Analytical Framework

The corpus consists of transcribed speeches delivered by Johnson, Prime Minister of the Conservative Party, and Corbyn, the leader of the opposition at that moment, of the Labour Party[8]. Table 2 shows the distribution of the two sub-corpora.

	Tokens	**Types**
Boris Johnson	16,869	2,926
Jeremy Corbyn	35,251	4,149
TOTAL	**52,120**	**7,075**

Table 2. Distribution of the corpora

The methodology used to carry out this study is CADS, as it combines corpus linguistics and discourse studies, which are two methods commonly considered quantitative and qualitative, respectively (Arcano 2020; Partington 2004). CADS aims to uncover meanings that are not obvious (Partington et al. 2013) but not in a "particular language or linguistic variety but rather a particular situation, purpose or function repeatedly enacted within a speech community" (Taylor and Marchi 2018: 61).

According to Morley, combining these two methods "increases the researcher's analytical capacity to an extent greater than would be predicted from the sum of the two" (2011: 10). On the one hand, corpus linguistics allows researchers to manage huge amounts of texts using digital technology to study language, providing objectivity to the research since patterns that are not visible at first glance can be uncovered (Taylor and Marchi 2018: 2). On the other hand, discourse studies aims to analyse how language is employed, revealing subtle or underlying discourse. The corpus becomes a valuable tool for discourse analysts, allowing researchers to explain how language constructs discourses or reality (Baker 2006: 183). Researchers must account for the patterns found in the text, as "interpretation is also an essential step in any corpus-based analysis" (Biber in Baker 2006: 2). In addition, to carry out the statistical analysis intended, descriptive statistics have been employed, with a specific focus on frequency distribution. This method aims to determine the frequency of occurrence in the dataset.

5. Results

This section aims to answer the first two research questions. RQ1 explores how modality is conveyed through lexical modals in the speeches of the two politicians from a quantitative perspective. As mentioned previously, lexical modality is expressed using items with the same meaning as (semi)auxiliary modal verbs but that are not classified as such. Therefore, modality can be expressed through nouns, adjectives, adverbs and other lexical verbs. To answer this first research question, we thoroughly searched each sub-corpus for every lexical modal listed in Table 1 of Section 4.1. The results are depicted in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, both politicians rely on verbs and adjectives to express modality. However, the least frequently used word class to express modality differs between the two politicians. Johnson uses nouns less frequently (10.11 per cent), while adverbs were the least used category by Corbyn (9.2 per cent). However, Corbyn used more nouns (19.54 per cent vs 10.11 per cent) and verbs (46.36 per cent vs 40.43 per cent) than his counterpart.

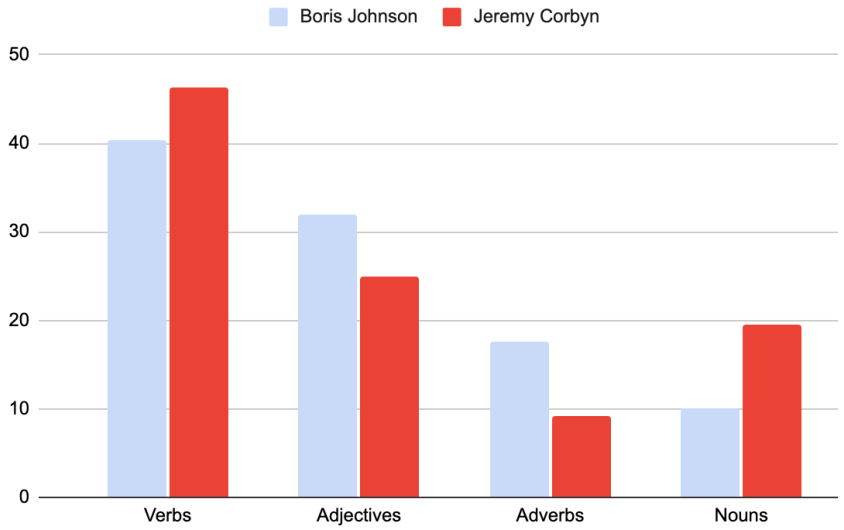

Figure 1. Percentages of lexical modals used by each politician

In the following lines, the use of each word class will be explained.[9] Table 3 shows the results of modal verb use by Johnson and Corbyn.[10]

	Boris Johnson			**Jeremy Corbyn**		
Verb	Hits	NF	LL	Hits	NF	LL
let	23	13.6	253.16	52	14.8	580.50
ensure	20	11.9	250.68	24	6.9	221.23
allow	15	8.9	154.81	17	4.9	154.71
promise	6	3.6	70.77	10	2.9	113.43
propose	4	2.4	42.49	5	1.4	47.98
insist	2	1.2	24.52	0	0	0.01
assure	2	1.2	22.15	3	0.9	31.23
intend	2	1.2	17.1	0	0	0.04
require	2	1.2	13.12	10	2.9	82.91

Table 3. Number of hits, normalised frequency and log-likelihood results of lexical modal verbs

As shown in Table 3, *let* is the most frequently used verb in both sub-corpora (253.16 in Johnson's sub-corpus and 580.5 in Corbyn's), followed by the verbs *ensure* (250.68 and 221.23, respectively) and *allow* (154.81 and 154.71, respectively). The next most significant verb in both sub-corpora is *promise* (70.77 in Johnson's and 113.43 in Corbyn's). Another frequent verb in Johnson's sub-corpus is *propose* (42.49), and in Corbyn's, it is *require* (82.91). It is also noteworthy that some verbs occur in one sub-corpus but not in the other. For instance, the verbs *insist* and *intend* were employed in Johnson's speeches but not in Corbyn's.

Adjectives are the second most prevalent grammatical category used by Johnson (31.91 per cent) and Corbyn (24.9 per cent). Table 4 shows the adjectives retrieved from both sub-corpora.

	Boris Johnson			**Jeremy Corbyn**		
Adjective	Hits	NF	LL	Hits	NF	LL
possible	23	13.7	254.48	5	1.4	32.82
clear	14	8.3	144.69	34	9.8	361.57
sure	7	4.2	65.65	6	1.7	45.64
necessary	6	3.6	57.88	6	1.7	49.08
impossible	4	2.4	43.03	1	0.3	6.54
convinced	3	1.8	37.45	0	0	0.01
certain	2	1.2	14.14	1	0.3	4.28
likely	1	0.6	5.59	7	2	55.87
supposed	0	0	0.01	1	0.3	7.12
bound	0	0	0.01	1	0.3	6.82
uncertain	0	0	0.00	1	0.3	9.01
unlikely	0	0	0.01	1	0.3	6.94
unnecessary	0	0	0.00	1	0.3	9.16

Table 4. Number of hits, normalised frequency and log-likelihood results of lexical modal adjectives

The analysis reveals that *possible* is the most frequently used adjective by Johnson, with a log-likelihood result of 254.48. In addition, Johnson employs other adjectives with regularity, including *clear* (144.69), *sure* (65.65), *necessary* (57.88) and *impossible* (43.03). In contrast, *clear* is the adjective with the greatest log-likelihood result in Corbyn's sub-corpus (361.57). It may be worth noting that the use of *likely* (55.87), *necessary* (49.08) and *sure* (45.64) are also

significant. Another remarkable aspect of Corbyn's speech is that certain adjectives are absent from Johnson's sub-corpus, such as *supposed*, *bound*, *uncertain*, *unlikely* and *unnecessary*. In the same vein, *impossible*, *certain* and *convinced*, though retrieving hits in Corbyn's sub-corpus, are not statistically significant, as the result is less than 6.63 in the first two cases and less than 3.84 in the last one.

Adverbs are the third most frequently used word class in Johnson (17.55 per cent) but the least used in Corbyn (9.2 per cent). Therefore, Corbyn infrequently uses adverbs to express modality in his speeches. The results can be seen in Table 5.

	Boris Johnson			**Jeremy Corbyn**		
Adverb	Hits	NF	LL	Hits	NF	LL
indeed	14	8.3	157.89	0	0	0.07
perhaps	6	3.6	50.36	3	0.9	16.70
truly	4	2.4	49.29	10	2.9	126.78
actually	5	3	42.9	7	2	54.49
necessarily	2	1.2	19.54	0	0	0.00
certainly	2	1.2	14.87	1	0.3	4.63
maybe	0	0	0.02	2	0.6	14.29
surely	0	0	0.01	1	0.3	6.78

Table 5. Number of hits, normalised frequency and log-likelihood results of lexical modal adverbs

Table 5 shows that, although Corbyn uses this resource less, the variety of adverbs is more extensive than in Johnson's case. The most widely used modal adverbs in Johnson's sub-corpus are *indeed* (157.89), *perhaps* (50.36) and *truly* (49.29). However, in the case of Corbyn, the most prevalent are *truly* (126.78) and *actually* (54.49). As in previous categories, some adverbs do not retrieve hits in either corpus. For instance, *maybe* and *surely* do not appear in Johnson's sub-corpus, whereas *indeed* and *necessarily* do not appear in Corbyn's. The case of *indeed* is also remarkable, as it is the most significant item in Johnson's adverbs, but does not occur in Corbyn's sub-corpus.

The last word category to comment on is lexical modal nouns. As previously stated, these nouns are the least used resource by Johnson (10.11 per cent), but they are used by Corbyn more than his opponent (19.54 per cent). Table 6 summarises the results of both sub-corpora.

	Boris Johnson			Jeremy Corbyn		
Nouns	Hits	NF	LL	Hits	NF	LL
promise	6	3.6	77.85	12	3.5	154.63
proposal	5	3	51.24	18	5.2	203.98
permission	3	1.8	34.8	0	0	0.01
certainty	2	1.2	24.83	3	0.9	35.26
possibility	2	1.2	17.48	2	0.6	14.55
uncertainty	1	0.6	9.92	7	2	86.34
intention	0	0	0.01	4	1.2	37.93
assurance	0	0	0.00	2	0.6	21.11
reassurance	0	0	0.00	2	0.6	26.02
necessity	0	0	0.00	1	0.3	8.96

Table 6. Number of hits, normalised frequency and log-likelihood results of lexical modal nouns

As Table 6 shows, the noun *proposal* (203.98) is Corbyn's most frequently used noun, whereas *promise* is the most used by Johnson (77.85), making his political commitment explicit. Although Corbyn also uses the noun *promise* (154.63) to express modality, Johnson, on the other hand, favours the use of *proposal* (51.24) and *permission* (34.8). As expected, Corbyn makes use of a wider variety of nouns. For this reason, many nouns do not retrieve hits in Johnson's sub-corpus: *intention*, *assurance*, *reassurance* and *necessity*. Similarly, the noun *permission*, which occurs in Johnson's texts (34.8), does not appear in Corbyn's.

RQ2 compares the frequency of lexical modals to (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. For this question, the results of each word class will be compared with a previous study on (semi)auxiliary modal verbs using the same corpus (Orrequia-Barea and Almazán-Ruiz 2021). In addition, results for each politician regarding the expression of modality will be contrasted with how modality is expressed in a reference corpus such as the BNC. The results of this analysis will provide information about whether modality is a resource typically used by politicians in their speeches.

Results were similar in both politicians in the case of (semi)auxiliary verbs. Whereas Johnson's most frequently used (semi)auxiliary modal verbs are *will*, *can*, *going to*, *would* and *should*, Corbyn coincides in the first two, *will* and *can*, but the following ones are *would*, *should* and *could*. Regarding the semantic implications, both politicians use the modal verbs similarly: the epistemic readings of *will* and *can* and

the deontic use of *will*. It makes sense that the most recurrent meaning is epistemic rather than deontic since the former implies possibility, whereas the latter, obligation. Politicians are not expected to place obligations on their electorate if they want to win votes. As previously stated, *will* is also used in this reading to express promises regarding the deontic modality (Orrequia-Barea and Almazán-Ruiz 2021).

In this context, (semi)auxiliary modal verbs are used more commonly by politicians than lexical modals. Johnson's use of (semi)auxiliary modal verbs represents 14.55 per cent of the words in the corpus, whereas the one referring to lexical modals is 1.11 per cent. In this regard, Corbyn uses (semi)auxiliary modal verbs slightly more than Johnson, with a result of 15.2 per cent, while he uses lexical modals less than his opponent, 0.74 per cent (Orrequia-Barea and Almazán-Ruiz 2021). As can be seen, in the political arena of Brexit, (semi)auxiliary modal verbs are the most widely used resource to express modality. This result was expected, as (semi) auxiliary modal verbs are the words expressing modality par excellence in the English language.

Nevertheless, the comparison is not complete unless we check how modality is expressed in a reference corpus, that is, how frequently speakers use the different ways of expressing modality. To do so, (semi)auxiliary modal verbs and lexical modals have been queried in the BNC.

The results retrieved in the reference corpus show that (semi)auxiliary modal verbs are used less frequently (1.3 per cent). As mentioned above, Johnson's and Corbyn's percentages were 14.55 and 15.2 per cent, respectively. Therefore, we can see that (semi)auxiliary modal verbs as a resource to express modality are overused in the context of Brexit, as politicians used this strategy twice as much as the language speakers, showing their stance, against or in favour, in the discourse.

Concerning lexical modals, it is unsurprising that these items (1.11 vs 0.74 per cent) are not used as frequently by politicians as (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. As previously mentioned, the latter has been traditionally considered the resource used to express modality par excellence. However, when comparing the lexical modal results obtained in this study with the BNC occurrences, the BNC results are closer to Corbyn's use of lexical modals than Johnson's. In fact, lexical modals have a 0.28 per cent presence in the BNC, whereas Cobyn's is 0.74 per cent. In the case of Johnson, the use of lexical modals is 1.11 per cent. The data indicate an overuse of lexical modals by Johnson. Table 7 summarises the comparisons.

	Boris Johnson	Jeremy Corbyn	BNC
(Semi)auxiliary modal verbs	14.55	15.2	1.3
Lexical modals	1.11	0.74	0.28

Table 7. Use of (semi)auxiliary modal verbs and lexical modals expressed in percentages

The data in Table 7 answer the third research question, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 6. As can be seen, Johnson uses modality more frequently in his discourse. Even though Corbyn uses (semi)auxiliary modal verbs more than the Conservative leader, lexical modals are more recurrent in Johnson's discourse. It is noteworthy that modality occurs more frequently in the analysed corpus than in the BNC. As shown in Table 7, lexical modals are a more prominent resource in the political discourse than in general language. However, in the literature, more attention has been given to (semi)auxiliary modal verbs than to this linguistic device. In this sense, this study contributes to emphasising their importance in presenting facts to the audience.

6. Modelling Lexical Modals

This discussion section presents concrete examples from both sub-corpora and describes the modality types established in the theoretical framework used. Thus, this section aims to answer RQ3 from a qualitative perspective, considering the different degrees of modality and the various lexical modals used to express it. In the political context under discussion, lexical modality can reveal framing strategies, that is, the speaker's stance and viewpoint in presenting events and arguing for or against them (Cheng 2016).

As described in section 3 above, epistemic modality connects the speaker's knowledge and the referenced facts or actions presented in the discourse. According to Rozumko, certainty is not an absolute category but can be expressed according to a scale which establishes the degree of certainty (2019: 37); therefore, a distinction can be made between strong, medium and neutral modality. Thus, examples from the corpus will be used to discuss their semantic implications and politicians' viewpoints when presenting facts regarding Brexit.

The adverb *necessarily* mainly expresses the epistemic meaning of necessity. However, the syntactic polarity changes when combined with *not*, and it is used to express that what is said is possibly but not definitely true. This adverb falls within the strong modality scale according to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 207), and in the corpus, only Johnson uses this formula, as shown in Examples 1 and 2.

(1) That is *not necessarily* the case in the digital age.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

(2) When I fully intend to be around, though *not necessarily* in this job, we will look back on this period, this extraordinary period, as the beginning of a new golden age for our United Kingdom.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

Other adverbs, such as *certainly*, are also used to express necessity. As seen in the following examples, both politicians use the word to indicate that what is stated must necessarily be so. Besides, it should be considered that even though "epistemic *certainly* belongs with the strong modals", it "does not suggest any reasoning from evidence" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 207).

(3) It isn't really the fault of the places and it *certainly* isn't the fault of the people growing up there.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

(4) That must be followed by radical and decisive action that will only be delivered by a Labour government. It *certainly* won't come from the Tories.

(JC - epistemic necessity)

As Rozumko points out, this epistemic adverb implies a restricted knowledge of the facts on the speaker's behalf (2019: 440). Despite this, it is used to emphasise what appears true from their perspective, as demonstrated in Examples 3 and 4. According to Simon-Vandenbergen, expressions of certainty are a "tactic strategy" to "persuade the audience of the essential rightness of their claims" (1996: 408). Through this adverb, both politicians establish the essential accuracy of their assertions, communicating their confidence in the validity of their arguments.

Similarly, the speaker's degree of conviction is made evident by the adjective *certain*, which determines their position on the events described. The meaning of Examples 5 and 6 are closely related to the use of the modal verb *must* when expressing logical necessity, since the speaker expresses that given the evidence, no other conclusion can be inferred from it.

(5) I'm absolutely *certain* there will be displays celebrating the dawn of a new age of electric vehicles, not just cars or buses, but electric planes, made possible with battery technology being developed now in the UK.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

(6) That is why Labour will not support this Bill, as we remain *certain* there is a better and fairer way for this country to leave the EU.

(JC - epistemic necessity)

It is important to note that the use of these linguistic devices indicates a high level of confidence in the speaker's position, which is clearly emphasised in Example 5 through the adverb *absolutely*. Johnson uses this adverb to add force to his degree of certainty. In fact, the degree of certainty becomes clearer and more assertive when the noun category is used because the noun *certainty* formulates the facts in the utterance, indicating confidence and assertiveness in the speaker's perspective. "It creates the image of a knowledgeable person who knows what he or she is talking about and who therefore deserves public trust and political power" (Simon-Vandenbergen 1996: 390). Thus, it inspires confidence, as the speaker seems to be committed to the truth of their claims (Simon-Vandenbergen 1996: 390).

(7) I can assure them that under this government, they will have the absolute *certainty* of the right to leave and remain.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

Once more, the Conservative leader emphasises his speech by highlighting the degree of certainty with the premodifying adjective *absolute*. This strategy makes his discourse more assertive, making it easier for him to influence the audience, persuade them to trust his arguments and establish a greater sense of credibility and authority. Interestingly, the Tory leader is the only one who introduces the adjective *convinced* in his speech, thus demonstrating that he is entirely certain about the facts to which he refers, which must necessarily be so, as Example 8 shows.

(8) I am *convinced* that an overwhelming majority in this House, regardless of our personal views, wishes to see Brexit delivered in accordance with the referendum.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

Likewise, the certainty of what is expressed in a statement can be shown using the adjective *clear* and the adverb *clearly*. In any context, the speaker could denote a high level of confidence in a statement when using them. This linguistic strategy can be considered a means of emphasising one's conviction and conveying a sense of clarity in the message. The speaker can enhance the persuasiveness of their argument and establish a greater sense of credibility and authority, as the following examples show:

(9) If an agreement is to be reached, it must be *clearly* understood that the way to the deal goes by way of the abolition of the backstop.

Our vision is *clear*: to unite and level up across the whole United Kingdom.

(BJ - epistemic necessity)

(10) It is becoming increasingly *clear* that this reckless government only has one plan, to crash out of the EU without a deal.

It is *clear* they have tried to hide the truth of a no deal Brexit.

(JC - epistemic necessity)

Nevertheless, the adjective *necessary* can also be interpreted from the perspective of deontic modality, as it presents the facts as requirements. According to Huddleston and Pullum, deontic necessity is very close to obligation, and the adjective mentioned above usually "takes a mandative or infinitival complement" (2002: 207). In Example 11, the Labour leader steadfastly commits himself to take all necessary measures to avoid a no-deal departure from the EU.

(11) We will do everything *necessary* to stop a disastrous No Deal for which this government has no mandate.

(JC - deontic necessity)

Deontic necessity is also expressed in the corpus by means of lexical verbs such as *require*, which is more recurrent in Corbyn's speeches than in Johnson's. From Corbyn's point of view, the country requires and demands certain conditions regarding Brexit, as shown in Example 12.

(12) The office of the Prime Minister *requires* integrity and honesty. This inequality is unsustainable and immoral. Ending it *requires* government action.

(JC - deontic necessity)

While necessity and certainty correspond to strong modality, the medium degree corresponds to the meaning of probability (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). However, in the corpus analysed in this study, there were no hits for uncertain terms such as *probably* or *probable*. As a result, politicians presented their discourse as factual. This absence indicates that both leaders were confident in their assertions and did not feel the need to rely on speculative language. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that weak modality does appear in the corpus through lexical modals such as *possible*, *perhaps* or *maybe*.

The adjective *possible* presents events as likely to occur. Both politicians use this item in the analysed corpus, though Johnson does so more frequently. When a statement expresses the possibility of a fact, the speaker presents it as potentially happening but not entirely certain of its fulfilment. In Example 13, Johnson presents the facts as a probable occurrence that is further emphasised by the comparative form. This construction makes him add emphasis and significance to the possibility, lending greater credence to the argument presented. Using the comparative form highlights the likelihood of the event, resulting in a more compelling and impactful presentation than when using only the adjective in its base form. Overall, Johnson's linguistic choice in this example appears to be discoursally effective in conveying the importance of the presented information.

(13) By 2050, it is more than *possible* that the United Kingdom will be the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe.

(BJ - epistemic possibility)

Similarly, in Example 14, Corbyn expresses his factual appraisal. In his view, the achievement of a positive goal, such as reducing carbon emissions, would imply a necessary increase in public spending, which he perceives as an unfavourable outcome, explicitly manifest with the premodification (*massive*) of the head noun.

(14) Bringing our carbon emissions down [...] will only be *possible* with massive public investment in renewable energy and green technology.

(JC - epistemic possibility)

The adverbs *perhaps* and *maybe* are used when the speaker intends to express that events are possible despite their uncertainty about them (Rozumko 2019: 443). According to the author, the use of *perhaps* "signals that an opinion or interpretation is offered to the addressee(s) for consideration" (444). The following example illustrates how the Tory leader presents the possibility that what is stated can be considered from a different perspective.

(15) They can see that we have a clear vision for our future relationship with the EU - something that has *perhaps* not always been the case.

(BJ - epistemic possibility)

However, this epistemic adverb is also used from a concessive perspective; when it is uttered, the speaker presents a counterpoint to the facts stated. This use of *perhaps* can be observed in Example 16 and, as Rozumko notes, "the concessions marked by *perhaps* emphasise the positive aspects of the situations, and signal solidarity with the addressee" (2019: 445).

(16) I don't think I've heard a single member call for an ever closer union or ever deeper integration or a federal destiny [...] *perhaps* I've missed it but I don't think I've heard much of it Mr Speaker.

(BJ - epistemic possibility)

The adverb *perhaps* is also used to express a polite request. In the corpus, Corbyn uses it to indirectly invite the Prime Minister to explain some issues he does not consider entirely clear, as the examples in 17 show. This adverb leaves open the possibility that Johnson is not, in fact, capable of explaining what Corbyn is demanding of him. Through this discursive strategy inherent to the engagement system (Martin and White 2007: 105), Corbyn adeptly aligns with a section of the audience that echoes his doubts about Johnson's inability to offer a satisfactory response.

(17) *Perhaps* he'd like to explain why these documents confirm the US is demanding the NHS is on the table in the trade talks?

Perhaps he can tell us what has changed?

(JC - deontic possibility)

Huddleston and Pullum also observe that certain lexical verbs such as *allow* and *permit* "can express deontic possibility, permission" (2002: 208). In the analysed corpus, the verb 'allow' is one of the most frequent lexical modal items used by both politicians. As Examples 18 and 19 show, both politicians use it to present a plausible situation:

(18) A deal that *allows* us to create a new shared destiny with them.

(BJ - deontic possibility)

(19) We can create natural solutions to bring down emissions and *allow* our wildlife to flourish, because currently wildlife is in crisis.

(JC - deontic possibility)

However, the verb *allow* is also used to clarify what both leaders are reluctant to accept. The following examples show that the two politicians' clashing positions express a lack of permission from a deontic perspective.

(20) Leaving the EU is a massive economic opportunity - to do the things we've not been *allowed* to do for decades.

(BJ - deontic permission)

(21) They're not *allowed* to pledge not to sell out our NHS in a trade deal with Donald Trump.

(JC - deontic permission)

In both cases, *allow* is used in passive structures, thus emphasising that the patient subjects of the sentence receive the action of the verb and avoid mentioning the agent subject. However, while Johnson focuses on things the UK has been unable to do because of the EU, Corbyn highlights the aspects his party will not permit the government to do.

As previously mentioned, deontic modality is also concerned with expressing other meanings such as prohibition, desires or promises. In the political context analysed here, Johnson's most frequent noun is *promise*. As is known, a promise entails that one will certainly do something for somebody else, and frequently, politicians show the audience their intentions as promises, as Johnson does in Example 22.

(22) We are going to fulfil the repeated *promises* of parliament to the people.

We will not accept any attempt to go back on our *promises* or scrub that referendum.

(BJ - deontic volition- promise)

As observed, the Prime Minister combines the lexical modal *promise* with (semi) auxiliary modal verbs —*be going to* and *will*— which allows him to emphasise and reinforce the idea of volition and his implication of acting. However, this noun allows Corbyn to criticise his opponent by mentioning all the promises the Tory

government has failed to keep regarding Brexit. The political confrontation is evident in the Labour leader's statements, as observed in Examples in 23:

(23) Johnson's deal will be just the beginning of years more painful negotiations and broken *promises*.

Who cannot tell the truth about the Brexit negotiations that he has so far failed to deliver on, or one who keeps on making *promises* that turn out to be a mirage the following day.

(JC - deontic volition - promise)

Although both politicians use the verb *promise*, it is worth mentioning that when this happens, the Conservative leader commits to doing what they say they will do and will give the people what they commit to. This is part of the framing strategy of Brexit, as Examples in 24 illustrate:

(24) Mr Speaker, we *promised* the people we would get Brexit done.

So I have *promised* to find a long term solution to social care once and for all. And that is what we will do.

(BJ - deontic volition- promise)

Once again, Corbyn uses this lexical modal verb —*promise*— to criticise the Conservative government's performance and directly accuses its leader of failing to deliver on his promises. In the examples in 25, Corbyn highlights the Conservative government's failure to uphold their promises and fulfil their commitment. From them, it can be inferred that such inconsistency can lead to a loss of confidence and trust from the British people.

(25) His predecessor *promised* to end austerity but spectacularly failed to deliver.

Friends, today is the 31st of October, the day Boris Johnson *promised* we would leave the EU. [...] But he has failed. And that failure is his alone.

(JC - deontic volition - promise)

Interestingly enough, the Labour leader prefers to introduce the noun *proposal* in his speeches and uses this noun more frequently than Johnson. The difference in meaning between the two nouns —*promise* and *proposal*— is rather evident since a proposal should be understood as a plan or idea that is suggested. Corbyn uses this noun to criticise the Tory government's actions again and question whether its ideas for a successful Brexit could be effective, as shown by examples in 26.

(26) These *proposals* are nothing more than a cynical attempt by the Prime Minister to shift the blame for his failure to deliver.

Mr Speaker, the Government's *proposals* are neither serious nor credible.

(JC - deontic volition - suggestion)

In Example 27, the Labour leader shows his sharpest criticism when he emphasises that the Conservative government's proposals are unrealistic and will, therefore, be rejected in Brussels. The tone of the speech becomes more assertive when he alludes to the Prime Minister to criticise his lack of involvement even though he is aware of the facts.

(27) The current *proposals* would damage the whole UK economy.

> The *proposals* are unrealistic and damaging and will —as I think the Prime Minister knows— be rejected in Brussels, in this House, and in the country.
>
> (JC - deontic volition - suggestion)

The empirical data and corpus analysis illustrate how modality is strategically employed as a "linguistic and ideological tool" to "frame their argument in a purpose of persuading the electorate and soliciting their support" (Cheng 2016: 172). In this sense, it can be seen how lexical modals are as effective as (semi)auxiliary modal verbs when conveying modality. The speaker reveals his position to the audience through modality since epistemic modality presents the facts as necessary or likely to happen. On the other hand, deontic modality, which is much more complex because it involves the speaker's perspective on what is to be done, allows them to suggest, recommend or propose something. Either type of modality shows the speaker's perspective and degree of involvement in the events expressed in the statement.

7. Conclusions

This corpus-based study has analysed the Brexit political discourse of the then UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, from the Labour Party. The results have been shown from two perspectives: quantitatively, we have presented the data regarding the frequency of occurrences of lexical modals of both politicians when discussing Brexit in the corpus. On the other hand, qualitative interpretation has made it possible to show a semantic analysis of the lexical modals found in the corpus, thus distinguishing between epistemic and deontic modality.

As far as RQ1 is concerned, the corpus analysis has shown that lexical modals are a prominent resource employed by politicians. Adjectives and verbs are the most common words used by both politicians. However, nouns are Johnson's least frequently used word class, and adverbs are the least frequently used by Corbyn. In the case of Brexit, as illustrated, this strategy has been used more frequently than in other contexts of the English language, which reveals the significance of lexical modals in political discourse.

However, when comparing lexical modals with (semi)auxiliary modal verbs (RQ2), the latter are still the items used par excellence when expressing modality, as the answer to the second research question has shown. The quantitative analysis has revealed that politicians employ lexical modals as a prominent resource. When compared with a reference corpus, Johnson and Corbyn use lexical modals with a higher frequency than in the BNC. (Semi)auxiliary modal verbs are used twice in the discourse of Brexit. In contrast, lexical modals are used similarly in Corbyn's case but are far more frequent in Johnson's corpus.

Finally, the qualitative analysis has focused on a semantic analysis of the lexical modals found in the corpus. The discussion to answer RQ3 has revealed that politicians employ lexical modals to present factual information with high assertiveness. In a sense, lexical modals help politicians to establish a tone of confidence in their statements. This is evident in Johnson's use of the (semi) auxiliary modal verb *will* or the lexical modal *promise* to discuss Brexit, which effectively enhances the credibility of his claims to voters. The analysis demonstrated that the use of lexical modals is more common in Johnson's speech than in Corbyn's. This linguistic resource serves as an effective tactic to obscure a clear position regarding the facts. Thus, it becomes an advantageous strategy for the speaker to refrain from (not) subtly committing himself. As a result, this article contributes to research on modality in the English language, as it delves into examining parts of speech other than (semi)auxiliary modal verbs in political discourse. This study sheds light on the complexity of modality and its expression through various lexical words and their use in the political context.

So far, lexical modals have been neglected in the literature, as studies on this phenomenon are rather scarce as opposed to (semi)auxiliary modal verbs. However, as this study shows, lexical modals are another resource used by politicians, which should also be explored since they serve to convey the meanings of modality. This study is original not only in highlighting the importance of these particular words but also in encouraging other researchers to look into modality from this perspective and the implications these lexical modals may have when expressing modality.

Contribution of the Authors

The present paper is the outcome of the coordinated and collaborative work by the two authors. Author 1 was in charge of the theoretical part of the work, while Author 2 was responsible for compiling the corpus as well as quantitative analysis and processing. Both authors actively participated in the study planning, manuscript writing, and qualitative analysis, as well as reviewing and revising the entire work.

Notes

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

2. In the literature (Palmer 2001; Nuyts 2016), a third type associated with ability is distinguished: dynamic modality; however, since it is not related to the speaker's attitude to a given situation or event (Huddleston and Pullum 2002; Gisborne 2007), this type of modality lies beyond the scope of this study.

3. We used the script by Fradejas Rueda (2019) that can be accessed at: https://www.aic.uva.es/cuentapalabras/cosechar-textos.html

4. Accessible at: https://www.gov.uk/

5. Accessible at: https://labour.org.uk/

6. Accessible at: http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html

7. For more information see: https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws6tags.html

8. Corbyn announced his plans to resign as leader of the Labour Party on December 12, after the 2019 election results.

https://www.businessinsider.com/jeremy-corbyn-resigns-as-labour-party-leader-after-election-defeat-2019-12

9. Results in the tables are ordered according to Johnson's result in the likelihood test.

10. Items which did not retrieve any hits in the corpora have not been included in the tables due to space limitations.

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