Modelling through Modality: (Re)shaping Brexit

Modelar a través de la modalidad: (re)formando el Brexit

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Abstract: Due to Brexit, the UK has been involved in a continuous political debate between Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, and Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition. This paper compares and analyses the modality used in a corpus consisting of their political speeches until Brexit day. Modal verbs are used to express ability, possibility, willingness, certainty, obligation and necessity. Politicians' choice of certain words can be a useful tool to affect voters' decisions and modality is a resource which reinforces that influence. The findings show remarkable similarities between both politicians and reveal that possibility is the most frequent meaning of the modal verbs used in the corpus.
Keywords: Brexit; modal verbs; modality; political discourse; corpus linguistics.
Summary: Introduction. Theoretical Background. The Corpus. Methodology. Findings and Discussion. Conclusions.

Resumen: En los últimos años, debido al Brexit, el Reino Unido ha presenciado un profundo debate político entre el primer ministro, Boris Johnson y el líder de la oposición, Jeremy Corbyn. Este artículo compara y analiza la modalidad usada en un corpus que recopila los discursos políticos de ambos hasta el día del Brexit. Los verbos modales se usan para expresar habilidad, posibilidad, voluntad, certeza, obligación o necesidad. La elección léxica de los políticos resulta útil para influir en la decisión del electorado y la modalidad es un recurso que refuerza esa influencia. Los resultados muestran interesantes similitudes entre ambos políticos y revelan que la posibilidad es la interpretación semántica más frecuente en el corpus.
Palabras clave: Brexit; verbos modales; modalidad; discurso político; lingüística de corpus.

Sumario: Introducción. Marco teórico. El corpus. Metodología. Resultados y análisis. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, language is used as a means of communication; through language, people can communicate their ideas and express their opinions. Besides, we can convey an idea and try to influence the addressee. As is well-known, in any political speech, language plays an essential role since, in this context, the main goal is to persuade and convince the audience. Thus, politicians use a wide range of linguistic devices in order to be as compelling as possible to achieve good election results. As a matter of fact, "language is not always neutral but can reflect or create power" (Ekawati 5).

Some years ago, the United Kingdom started a process to leave the European Union (henceforth the UK and EU, respectively). Although the UK began to be part of the EU in 1973, it has always been Eurosceptical. In June 2016, the British people voted in a referendum to leave the EU, although the result in favour of doing so was quite tight, obtaining 52% compared to 48%, who preferred to stay. Then, the Brexit process started.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word "Brexit" is the short form for "British exit" ("Brexit"). The word was formed using a blending process and has been documented since 2012 (Lalić-Kristin and Silaški 3). From a political point of view, the term conveys a series of political, social and economic changes with an impact worldwide.

Due to Brexit, in the last few years, the UK has been in a continuous political debate between the two most important politicians, namely Boris Johnson from the Conservative Party, Prime Minister and leader of the Brexit movement, and Jeremy Corbyn, from the Labour Party, leader of the opposition and not clearly in favour of Brexit. Although Brexit was not a fact until 31 January 2020, Johnson presented this scheme as very likely since he became the Prime Minister on 24 July 2019.

This paper aims to compare and analyse the use of modal verbs as a way of expressing modality in both politicians' speeches during the last months of the Brexit process. As stated in the literature (Downing and Locke 382; Zhang 880), modal verbs are used by the speaker to express ability, possibility, willingness, certainty, obligation and necessity, among other meanings. Consequently, in general terms, a politician's choice of

certain modal verbs can be a significant and powerful tool to affect the voters' decision. The question is to analyse the semantic implications conveyed when using different modal verbs to verify whether modality can be considered a resource to influence the audience, focusing on political discourse about Brexit.

The article is organised as follows. Section 1 depicts the theoretical background focusing on the types of modality and political discourse. Section 2 describes the corpus and Section 3 details the methodology used to compile and annotate it. In Section 4, we present the analysis of the results and discuss how modality shapes the political discourse on Brexit. Finally, the most relevant conclusions are drawn.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Modality and Mood

Even though modality is a highly researched aspect of grammar, it remains both a controversial and interesting topic, involving a wide variety of semantic nuances that remain worthy of study.

From a linguistic perspective, modality is considered a semantic category, which can be expressed in language through different linguistic devices, not only lexical and grammatical but also prosodic ones. According to Huddleston (*English Grammar* 79–80), the speaker can express modality by including modal verbs (*can*, *may*, *must*, *will*, among others) in the utterance or even a lexical verb such as *allow*, *command* or *permit*. Besides, the use of modal adverbs such as *perhaps*, *maybe* or *possibly*, modal adjectives such as *necessary*, *likely*, or *certain*, and even nouns such as *duty* or *possibility*, can also express modality in English. Likewise, intonation can also be a clear realisation of modality. As Huddleston explains, the rising intonation on a declarative sentence can make it be interpreted as a question rather than a factual statement.

Additionally, this notional category is understood as the speaker's perspective when expressing "the relation of the utterance to reality" (Khomutova 400), and it is traditionally connected with the implication of several semantic notions such as possibility, necessity, obligation, desire and permission (Downing and Locke 382).

The term mood, on the other hand, refers to one of the grammatical properties which characterise the verb phrase (Huddleston, *English Grammar* 79; Huddleston, *Introduction to Grammar* 164; Quereda

Rodríguez-Navarro 4) and must be understood as a formally grammaticalised property of the verb phrase (Bybee and Fleischman 2). Huddleston (*English Grammar* 80) states that "mood involves the grammaticalisation of modality" and it applies to the verb phrase. In the English verb system, mood "is basically expressed . . . by modal auxiliary verbs and modal semiauxiliary verbs" (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 99). According to this scholar, the presence or absence of the modal form in the verb group will determine the marked mood form, realised by a modal verb, and the unmarked one, realised by the absence of modal verbs. Likewise, Palmer distinguishes between an unmarked declarative sentence and the construction in which a modal verb appears (187).

All the stated above determines the main difference between modality and mood. Whereas modality is a semantic notion that can be expressed through various linguistic devices, mood is a grammatical property that only concerns the verb phrase. As a result, the English verb system distinguishes between the modal or marked forms (*will work*, *should work*, for instance) and the unmarked or non-modal forms (*works*, *was working*) (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 90–91).

Although the imperative and the subjunctive are the marked inflectional forms, they are outside the scope of this study since (semi)modal auxiliaries represent the most definite way of expressing the grammatical property of mood in English. Consequently, this study will focus on the presence of modal verbs in the verb phrase and their semantic implications in the political speeches regarding Brexit.

1.2 Types of Modality

Conventionally, modality has been divided into two types, receiving different names in the literature. Whereas Quirk et al. use the terminology "intrinsic and extrinsic modality" (219), Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro, following Young's *Structure of English Clauses*, prefers *knowledge* and *influence* modality (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 184). However, the most widely-used terms are *epistemic* and *deontic* modality (Bybee and Fleischman; Huddleston; Palmer; Zhang) and we will use them because they are the most accepted terms among scholars.

Epistemic modality is defined in terms of possibility and necessity, and it is related to the speaker's subjectivity expressing the theoretical truth status of a proposition (Huddleston, *Introduction to Grammar* 167; Palmer 7). This type of modality presents the utterance as something certain or

(un)likely to happen and the speaker does not affirm anything but only expresses a prediction (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 184). Consequently, it implies a clear degree of how much certainty or evidence a speaker has for the proposition expressed by their statement (Zhang 880).

Following Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro, within epistemic modality, two subcategories are found: logical possibility and logical necessity. The first subclass is related to the semantic implications of the modal verbs: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* and *must*; according to this scholar, it is related to the concepts of conjecture and deduction (186). The second subcategory, logical necessity, is connected with "the idea of self-confidence and certainty" since the proposition is presented as necessarily true. As the scholar explains, when dealing with modal verbs, certainty should not be considered as a "factual assertion." However high the degree of certainty, the proposition is presented not as a fact but as something predicted (196). The (semi)modal verbs included in this subgroup are: *must*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *have to*, *be going to* and *is to*.

On the other hand, deontic modality is related to the general term of compulsion and involves the semantic interpretations of obligation, desire and permission (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 213). What is stated has nothing to do with the truthfulness of a statement but is related to whether something will be done or not (186). As the speaker's degree of requirement, desire or commitment is involved in the proposition (Zhang 881), it is stated that deontic modality is more complex than epistemic modality. In fact, various elements contribute to the semantic interpretation from the perspective of deontic modality: the decider, the performer and the action itself. In contrast, only two elements are usually involved in epistemic modality: the speaker making the prediction and the proposition itself (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 213).

As far as the types of modality are concerned, it is worth mentioning that some scholars also distinguish dynamic modality, which has traditionally been related to ability (Palmer 10). As a matter of fact, dynamic modality is usually discussed within deontic modality. Nonetheless, some scholars state that dynamic modality should not be considered as a type of modality since it does not involve the speaker's attitude in any sense (Huddleston and Pullum 179). Likewise, Gisborne presents an interesting study regarding the issue of considering dynamic modality a proper type. After offering a well-argued discussion, the author states that dynamic modality, usually related to the ability and capacity implications, "is not a modal meaning, but rather is simply the retention of

an earlier sense which persists after can has joined the modal verb system of English" (45). Consequently, dynamic modality should be considered apart from deontic modality because, as Gisborne affirms, "dynamic meaning is not a variety of modality" (59).

According to all that has been argued in the previous paragraph, we will not investigate the meaning of ability in this study as it does not involve the speaker's attitude towards the proposition. Therefore, we will only consider as varieties of modality the two types previously described, that is, epistemic and deontic.

1.3 Political Discourse

When talking about politics, language and communication are essential elements. In a sense, politics means "*reconciling differences* through discussion and persuasion" (Chilton 6) and to carry out these two tasks, language is crucial. In fact, politics could not exist without the use of language since, to do politics, communication is necessary (Chilton 6). According to Chilton, "only through language tied into social and political institutions can one declare war, declare guilty or not guilty, prorogue parliaments, or raise or lower taxes" (30).

As Ekawati states, language is never unintentional in political speeches; through language, politicians convey specific ideas and purposes, which are not necessarily clearly stated (6). For this reason, it is essential to pay attention to the context and the co-text in which the linguistic expressions take place (Ekawati 7). The discipline that traditionally studies "language above the sentence or above the clause" (Stubbs 1) is Discourse Analysis and this is the framework used in this paper to analyse some political speeches about Brexit.

Although the term *discourse* can be hard to define, in this work, we will consider Baker's words: "around any given object, or concept there are likely to be multiple ways of constructing it, reflecting the fact that humans are diverse creatures; we tend to perceive aspects of the world in different ways, depending on a range of factors" (4). It makes sense to talk about *discourses* as a countable noun. Discourses may explain people's contradictions and changes in positions. We cannot take discourses as descriptions of people's beliefs, but rather, "they are connected to practices and structures that are lived out in society from day to day" (Baker 4).

Discourses are not only confined to language as they are also instantiated using other means. The social conditions of production and

interpretations also need to be considered. However, this research is only restricted to the verbal domain. According to Baker, "the task of discourse analysts is to uncover how language is employed, often in quite subtle ways, to reveal underlying discourses" (13). In fact, what is said is not the most important thing, but the research must also consider what is not said as this can reveal traces of ideologies. According to Jabber and Jinquan,

> [p]oliticians tend to use special forms of language to give their discourse charm and influence which enable them to send different messages to different people of different orientations and levels at one time and within one piece of discourse, to achieve these functions they use language in a subtle, manipulative and convincing way. (2)

The analysis of the meanings of modal verbs is a way of interpreting political statements and the strategies employed by politicians to persuade the audience.

1.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is a branch of Discourse Analysis used for the research carried out in this study. When examining a text, the researcher has to explain the patterns uncovered during the analysis, bearing in mind the social and political context. As Rogers states, discourses are considered to be "politically, racially and economically loaded" (qtd. in Paltridge 186), and there is a branch of Discourse Analysis that pays special attention to this, that is, Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach researches discourse, considering the relation between the use of language and the society and culture, which is mediated by discourse practice. Therefore, "it aims to unpack what people say and do in their use of discourse in relation to their views of the world, themselves and the relationships with each other" (Paltridge 191). It examines why the discourse is shaped in a certain way and the connotations that it may have. In such a view, the relationship between language and meaning is not considered arbitrary since the use of particular strategies "brings with it particular presuppositions, meanings, ideologies and intentions" (Paltridge 186). Critical Discourse Analysis aims at investigating "ways in which language constructs and is constructed by social relationships" (Paltridge 186). The diagram in figure 1 shows the relationship between texts, discourse and social practices from a critical perspective.

Fig. 1. The relationship between texts, discourse practices
and sociocultural practices in a critical perspective
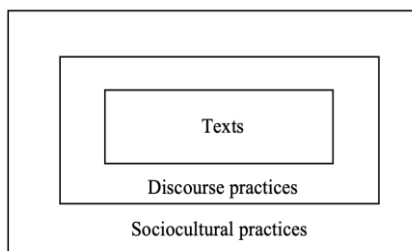
Source: Paltridge (193); adapted from
Fairclough's *Discourse and Social Change* (1992).

As previously stated, a critical analysis includes a textual analysis, which means identifying underlying ideologies in the linguistic devices used in the texts and analysing biased and ideological presuppositions or assumptions that are entailed in the text, but it also needs to explain and interpret that linguistic analysis. In any critical analysis, it is necessary to frame the text, that is, how the context is presented in the text, from whose perspective it is written and the participants included so as to see *agent-patient relations* in discourse. On the other hand, the *foregrounding* is also an interesting way of analysis since the main concepts of the text are explored, paying attention to the register, connotations of certain words or word choice, among others. Last but not least, the background knowledge also needs to be analysed in order to determine attitudes and perspectives that can be present in the text (Paltridge 194). Regarding these aspects, Critical Discourse Analysis attempts to challenge covered ideologies that are present in texts (van Dijk, qtd. in Paltridge 194). In this paper, we focus on the *foregrounding* and the *background*. Firstly, the modal verbs presented in the text are analysed. Secondly, the information obtained through the analysis is studied and explained, considering the background in which the political speeches took place.

2. THE CORPUS

The corpus we are analysing in this paper consists of a compilation of the speeches of the two most influential politicians during the six months before Brexit, that is, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. We are focusing here on the speeches delivered from 24 July 2019, the day when Boris

Johnson was appointed Prime Minister, until 31 January 2020, the so-called "Brexit day," when the UK entered the transition period to reach a deal after leaving the EU. The corpus consists of 51,491 tokens. Johnson's speeches have been downloaded from the British Government official website (GOV.UK). Firstly, in the *government* section, we typed the keywords *PM* (Prime Minister) and *speech* in the search option, as these words are frequent in the headlines of the speeches. Afterwards, we set the dates from 24 July 2019 until 31 January 2020. Within this selection, we chose the speeches delivered by Johnson and, then, we looked for the word *Brexit* in every speech since the Brexit process was not mentioned in all of them. We obtained eleven speeches comprising a corpus of 16,834 words and its distribution can be seen in table 1:

Table 1. Boris Johnson's speeches by date

Date	Title
24 July 2019	Boris Johnson's first speech as Prime Minister
25 July 2019	PM statement on priorities for the government
27 July 2019	PM speech at Manchester Science and Industry Museum
2 Sep. 2019	Prime Minister's statement
3 Sep. 2019	PM statement on G7 Summit
24 Sep. 2019	PM speech to the UN General Assembly
17 Oct. 2019	PM press conference at EU Council
19 Oct. 2019	PM statement in the House of Commons
13 Dec. 2019	PM statement in Downing Street
31 Dec. 2019	Prime Minister's New Year's message
31 Jan. 2020	PM address to the nation

Source: Prepared by the authors from data in GOV.UK.

As the official website of the Labour Party compiles, among other information, their leader's speeches, Corbyn's speeches could be retrieved from it (The Jeremy Corbyn Archives). We set the same criteria to discard those speeches that were related to other topics. Twenty-eight speeches were obtained, forming a corpus of 34,657 tokens that are distributed as shown in table 2:

Table 2. Jeremy Corbyn's speeches by date

Date	Title
25 July 2019	Jeremy Corbyn responds to Boris Johnson's first statement in the House as Prime Minister
19 Aug. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn speech in Corby today
2 Sep. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn speech in Salford today
3 Sep. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn responding to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the House today
3 Sep. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's emergency debate statement
10 Sep. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn speech to TUC Congress
25 Sep. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's response to Boris Johnson in parliament
3 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn responds to the Prime Minister's Brexit statement
10 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech in Northampton
17 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn responds to Brexit Deal
19 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's response to the Prime Minister's statement
22 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech on the Withdrawal Agreement Bill 2nd reading
29 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's early election statement
31 Oct. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's first major speech of the General Election campaign
5 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's Brexit speech in Harlow
6 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech in Telford on leadership and what a Labour government will achieve
18 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech at the Confederation of British Industry
24 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn responds to the Conservative manifesto
26 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn on the final day of voter registration
27 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn reveals unredacted documents about secret US-UK trade talks
28 Nov. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech on Labour's environmental policies

1 Dec. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's speech in York
6 Dec. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn reveals leaked Brexit documents
7 Dec. 2019	On December 12th, people have the chance to vote for the most ambitious plan to transform our country in decades – Jeremy Corbyn
10 Dec. 2019	Corbyn's message to undecided voters
11 Dec. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn speaking on the campaign trail
20 Dec. 2019	Jeremy Corbyn's response to the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill
30 Jan. 2020	Jeremy Corbyn comment on the UK's exit from the EU

Source: Prepared by the authors from data in
The Jeremy Corbyn Archives.

As can be seen in both tables, the corpora size is not balanced. Therefore, we used normalized frequency[1] to present the results in the subsequent sections.

3. METHODOLOGY

To compile the corpus, we used a scraping technique, which consists of automatically extracting information from websites, by means of the programming language R.

We have used two approaches to carry out this study: Corpus Linguistics on the one hand and Discourse Analysis on the other, particularly Critical Discourse Analysis. The combination of both will allow us to deepen the analysis and obtain more conclusive findings.

Corpus Linguistics is a necessary methodology in this study since we deal with a linguistic analysis of two corpora. *Sketch Engine* (Kilgariff et al.) is the tool chosen to carry out this study because it allows users to manage their corpora and analyse texts. Specifically, we employed the concordance function, which helps the user see the word in co-text and study that surrounding co-text, which is paramount in our research.

Two different people, namely the authors, manually annotated the modal verbs appearing in the corpora, considering Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro's classification (186). After proceeding with this annotation

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[1] Due to the corpus size, the frequency is calculated per 10,000 words.

process, a feedback session was conducted to revise the results and check whether the authors were doubtful about any examples. As previously mentioned, every modal verb can have an epistemic or a deontic meaning; therefore, the co-texts play an essential role in determining which particular meaning they have in the texts.

This study is descriptive-interpretative and the frequency of the modal verbs will provide us with a general overview; however, we will not focus on every occurrence of the modals but only highlight representative cases of each category to illustrate the different aspects described. Consequently, we examined the data to reach our objective and explain linguistic modality in its social and political context, particularly in the Brexit scenario.

Two main research questions have been raised to carry out this study. They will lead us to present and interpret the data clearly and orderly, thus facilitating its discussion:

1. Which modal verbs are used by each politician?
2. Which meanings of the modal verbs used are the most recurrent regarding each type of modality?

The findings regarding each research question are presented hereafter. Moreover, not only will we present possible explanations for the results obtained, but we will also try to interpret the semantic connotations each speaker seeks to express and relate them to what was previously stated in the theoretical background.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Modal Verbs Used by Each Politician

The main goal in posing this research question was to determine which modal verbs are the most frequent ones in both corpora. Besides, this would lead us to compare if both politicians coincide in using the same modal verbs or if, on the contrary, certain modal verbs are relatively more frequent in one corpus than in the other. As stated in the literature (Downing and Locke 383), modality is related to the level of knowledge, or even the lack of it, that the speaker may have regarding a proposition. Therefore, including modal verbs as modality markers can reveal

connotative meanings on the part of the speaker who can be presented as an actor or as a mere spectator in the utterance.

As we needed to determine the modal verbs that will be studied in this paper, we followed Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro's classification, which divides them into three types (56–63):

a) Central modal verbs: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *shall*, *should*, *would*, *must*, *ought to*.
b) Marginal modals: *used to*, *dare*, *need*.
c) Modal semiauxiliaries:
    a. With *be*: *is to*,[2] *be going to*.
    b. With *have*: *have to*, *have got to*, *had better*.

However, only the central modal verbs will be within the scope of these pages since, as figure 2 below shows, they occur most frequently in the corpus.[3]

According to it, central modals, the marginal *need* and the semiauxiliaries *be going to* and *have to* are most frequently used by both politicians. However, this is not enough to reach a conclusion. Basically, almost all the modal verbs can have a twofold interpretation as they can convey either the speaker's knowledge regarding the truth of a proposition or the fact that something will be done or not, that is, epistemic and deontic modality, respectively (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 185–86). For this reason, it is necessary to explore particular examples from the corpora to see which of the two modalities are employed by these two politicians.

On the one hand, paying attention to the epistemic reading of the aforementioned verbs, the modal verbs *can*, *may*, *might* and *could* express possibility, neutral in the former two but tentative in the latter two. Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro states that the distinction between neutral and tentative concerns the grammatical category of tense. As a result, non-remote forms such as *can* and *may* "present a neutral prediction." Likewise, remote forms *might* and *could* "present the possibility as more remote, more tentative" (186). Following this classification, the modals *will*, *must*, *be going to*, *have to*, *should* and *would* express necessity, neutral in the first four cases and tentative in the last two.

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[2] *Is to* is used as the representation of this modal, but the rest of the present and past tense forms are also included in the search.

[3] Modals which did not return any hits have not been included in figure 2.

On the other hand, considering the deontic reading, the aforesaid modals cover the three semantic fields within this type of modality: *can*, *may*, *might* and *could* convey permission, *must* and *need* indicate obligation and *will*, *be going to* and *should* show desire, in the form of volition in the first two cases and as advice in the last one.

Fig. 2. Frequency of use of modal verbs
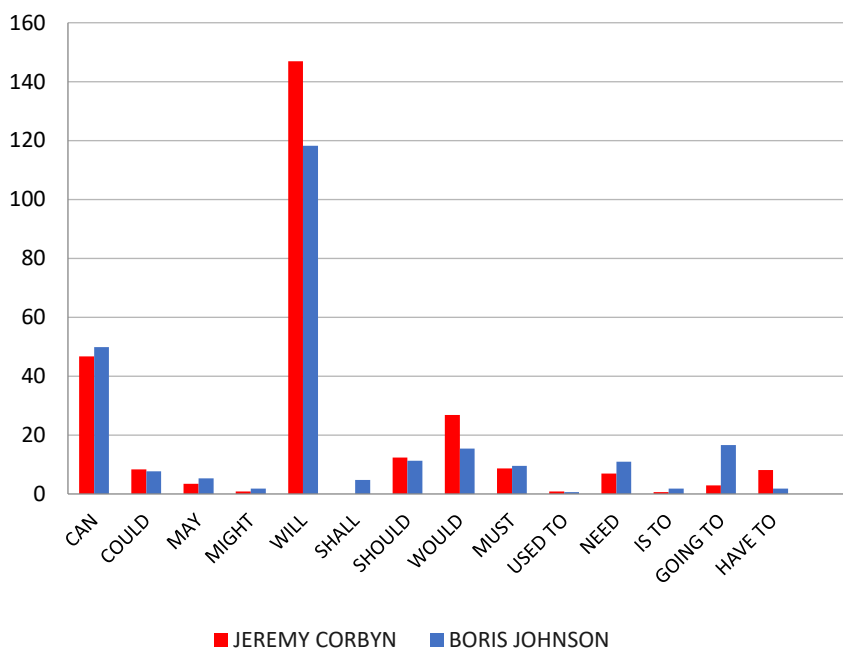
Source: Prepared by the authors from the data compiled.

Our hypothesis is that regarding the semantic implications of the modal verbs, epistemic modality will be more frequent in the corpus than deontic modality. At first sight, it can be inferred from the semantic interpretation of some modal verbs such as *can*, *may* and *could*, since it is more likely that politicians express possibility (epistemic) in their speeches than permission (deontic). Similarly, for the modals *will*, *must*, *would* and *should*, the meaning of necessity (epistemic) is more plausible than the one of obligation or desire (deontic).

4.2 Most Recurrent Meanings Regarding Each Type of Modality

In this section, the research focuses on the central modal verbs, since they are the most frequent ones, and on the semantic implications they may have when used in political discourse. In table 3, the results of the occurrence and the normalised frequency of the most recurrent central modal verbs in the corpus are shown:

Table 3. The meanings of the modal verbs used

Modals		Boris Johnson		Jeremy Corbyn	
		Tokens	NF	Tokens	NF
WILL	E	148	42.7	406	78.8
	D	51	14.7	103	20
WOULD	E	26	7.5	83	16.1
	D	0	0	10	2
CAN	E	84	49.9	159	45.9
	D	0	0	2	0.57
MAY	E	9	5.3	12	3.4
	D	0	0	0	0
COULD	E	12	7.1	29	8.4
	D	1	0.6	0	0
MUST	E	1	0.6	1	0.3
	D	15	9	29	8.3
SHOULD	E	7	4.1	13	3.75
	D	12	7.1	30	8.6

Source: Prepared by the authors from the data compiled.

As far as epistemic modality is concerned, the corpus analysis reveals that WILL is used in the corpus to express neutral logical necessity. Within this semantic distinction, general predictions and consequences of conditional clauses appear to be regular occurrences. In table 3 above, we can see and contrast the results obtained regarding this type of modality. Moreover, it shows that both politicians are rather likely to make

predictions about possible consequences or outcomes of the Brexit process.

According to Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro, *will* is "the typical modal verb used to express conjecture in logical necessity" (197). When the speaker uses this central modal, (s)he "presents the prediction as something which is expected to happen" (197). Therefore, the prediction conveys the speaker's belief about the likelihood of the proposition as is shown in (1) with an example by Johnson and in (2) by Corbyn:

(1) I believe we *will get* a deal at that crucial summit in October. (BJ, 2 Sep. 2019)

(2) Johnson's deal *will be* disastrous for businesses and jobs across the whole UK. (JC, 6 Dec. 2019)

Both politicians use *will* to express their predictions regarding the Brexit process. Although Johnson admits difficulties, he presents the propositions as positive and likely to happen. On Corbyn's side, the probability is also expressed but the negative meanings are included due to the negative lexis used (*unrealistic*, *damaging*, *disastrous*). From Ekawati's perspective, this modal verb can be considered convincing, notwithstanding being a future prediction (12).

Apart from conjectures and general predictions, Corbyn also uses *will* to express the consequence of a conditional clause as is shown in (3):

(3) If we support their deal, it *will* get Brexit done. (JC, 19 Aug. 2019)

Even though *will* appears in the superordinate clause, the idea of conditionality is not inherent in the modal verb but rather it is encoded in the if-clause (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 198). In fact, the previous example expresses present predictions of future events.

Regarding deontic modality, *will* is mainly used in the corpus to express volition and the speaker's willingness to act is involved in the proposition. Needless to say, the context plays a crucial role in interpreting the verb in one way or another.

As table 3 shows, the deontic interpretation of *will* is relatively less frequent. As a result, it can be inferred that the two leaders have tried not to be overtly engaged in their speeches. Nevertheless, both politicians use *will* from a deontic perspective to express promises rather than threats or orders to act. The forthcoming examples can be interpreted as promises

since the idea of volition is implicit in the speaker's implication of acting and "that action is beneficial to the addressee" (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 223):

(4) We *will announce* investment in vital infrastructure. (BJ, 25 July 2019)

(5) We *will transform* our communities with investment. (JC, 19 Aug. 2019)

Even though contextualisation is crucial, as stated above, there are other grammatical peculiarities which favour the deontic reading of this modal verb. According to Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro, volition is usually connected with first-person subjects because, pragmatically, intentions and desires are related. However, prediction is associated with third-person subjects since the speaker does not control others' intention (222).

The central modal WOULD is considered the remote form of *will*. From the epistemic perspective, it is used both to express a past prediction that appears distant in time, as well as an unlikely or tentative present prediction (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 203). In the corpus, the use of *would* is more frequent from an epistemic perspective than from a deontic one, which is mainly reduced to expressing requests in interrogative sentences (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 223). The incidence of this modal verb in the corpus is more frequent in Corbyn's speeches than in those of the conservative leader, as shown in table 3.

The following examples illustrate how it is used to report a past prediction about an event that was thought would not come and yet it did. Johnson makes it clear to the audience that despite the remoteness of Brexit in the past, the critical moment is already a reality:

(6) For many people this is an astonishing moment of hope, a moment they thought *would* never come. (BJ, 31 Jan. 2020)

Likewise, the Labour leader uses *would* to express tentative predictions concerning the effects or consequences of Brexit:

(7) The Prime Minister has put forward proposals that *would damage* UK industry, people's jobs and living standards. (JC, 3 Oct. 2019)

As shown in figure 2, CAN is the second most frequent modal verb used by both politicians. On its epistemic reading, *can* indicates neutral

logical possibility since it normally "provides one of the possibilities according to the speaker's assumption" (Zhang 880). In both corpora, the predominant interpretation of *can* is that of possibility to show facts as possibly true. As shown in table 3, the use of *can* in its epistemic reading is very similar in the discourse of both leaders.[4]

The epistemic instances of the modal verb *can* are used mainly to express the theoretical possibility that what is stated in the proposition may occur. *Can* as an epistemic modal verb is "typically used for general predictions" (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 187), as shown in (8):

(8)   There are practical arrangements that we *can find* which avoid anyone putting infrastructure on the Irish border. (BJ, 3 Sep. 2019)

In the previous example, Boris Johnson is stating that there are clear possibilities for reaching agreements. Likewise, he assumes that given the circumstances, the condition of finding those practical agreements that he refers to in the proposition is fulfilled.

Not only does this central modal appear in affirmative sentences, but also in interrogative and negative ones. When the latter occurs, the sentences can be paraphrased as "it is not possible that" or "it is impossible/unlikely that," as happens in the following examples:

(9)   The government *can't claim* to be building a "Midlands Engine," and then follow a policy that trashes the car industry. (JC, 2 Sep. 2019)

(10) Whatever letters they may seek to force the government to write, it *cannot change* my judgement that further delay is pointless, expensive and deeply corrosive of public trust. (BJ, 19 Oct. 2019)

Regarding negation, some noteworthy aspects arise because of the presence of the two elements involved in the sentence: modality and the proposition. Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro explains that syntactically, the focus of *not* is on the modality and not on the proposition (243). However, semantically, the focus of *not* can be on either of the elements (246). Therefore, negative examples with modal verbs can be interpreted in two ways: when the focus of the negation affects the modality, example (9) could be paraphrased as "it is not possible that the government claims to

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[4] As previously mentioned, the dynamic interpretation of *can* is excluded from this analysis.

be building a 'Midlands Engine'." On the contrary, when the focus is on the proposition, the paraphrase could be "it is possible that the government does not claim to be building a 'Midlands Engine'." According to Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro, the most plausible interpretation concerning modal verbs is to consider that the focus of the negation is on the proposition since the speaker makes theoretical assumptions about the possibility or impossibility of an event (246).

As for the deontic reading, there were no instances in Johnson's corpus and only two hits were returned in Corbyn's, (11) and (12). These results are derived from the meaning that this modal has in a deontic interpretation, that of permission. From a political perspective, we can assume that politicians are unlikely to ask or give permission while delivering a speech.

(11) *Can* I *ask* the Prime Minister why he believes Mr Barnier has this view? (JC, 25 Sep. 2019)

(12) So *can* I *ask* the Prime Minister instead of entrenching non-regression Environmental standards into this Bill and their deal, why has he instead taken out level playing field commitments? (JC, 22 Oct. 2019)

As previously mentioned, context plays an essential role and this is why this deontic reading makes sense. Since they are in Parliament, we can infer that Corbyn is asking the Speaker for permission to question the PM.

The modal verb MAY behaves similarly to the modal *can*. Its epistemic reading refers to factual possibilities, although alluding to specific situations, whereas in its deontic interpretation, it is also associated with the concept of permission. As expected, no hits of the latter were found in any of the corpora; therefore, the epistemic interpretation is the predominant one.

In comparison to the previously analysed modal verbs, *may* is rarely used by either politician. This modal verb is considered to be a weak modal and is frequently used when the speaker is not completely sure about the truth of the proposition, that is, the speaker does not have enough evidence or experience on the issue (Ekawati 24). Politicians tend to use *may* when commenting on a topic from their own perspective and based on their own assumptions; this is why not so many examples are found in the corpora, as they try to avoid committing. According to Ekawati, "assuming something without evidences . . . requires others' approval" and this can

be "an indication that the speaker is less powerful than the audience" (24). This reservation when talking is found in both Johnson's and Corbyn's speeches because the use of this modal verb may imply that they are not exercising their power (Ekawati 10), as the examples below show:

(13) I know that many of you do not consider yourself natural Tories and *may* only *have lent* me your vote. (BJ, 31 Dec. 2019)

(14) Mr Speaker, that isn't all. What *may be* the most concerning aspect for many in this Bill comes in Clause 30. (JC, 22 Oct. 2019)

The modal verb COULD, in its epistemic interpretation, also belongs to the logical possibility group. However, unlike the previous ones, it alludes to a tentative logical possibility, which conveys a more hypothetical possibility than the one expressed by *can* or *may*. Particularly, the modal *could* refers to a tentative inference, that is, "the speaker tentatively predicts that something is theoretically possible, although the possibility or prediction is remote" (Quereda Rodríguez-Navarro 194). In the negative form, it indicates impossibility (Ekawati 14). Nonetheless, it has a twofold interpretation in its deontic reading: asking for permission and suggesting.

In the corpora, the most frequent use of the modal verb *could* is the epistemic interpretation and we retrieved the two most common uses of this reading. On the one hand, the two politicians use the meaning of remote predictions, as shown in (15) and (16).

(15) The consequences of "no deal" *could have* potentially catastrophic consequences for patients. (JC, 3 Sep. 2019)

(16) And we *could achieve* even more in our trade with the United States. (BJ, 3 Sep. 2019)

As far as the semantic implication of possibility is concerned, it is much more used throughout the corpus. The forthcoming examples show representative cases by both leaders:

(17) First, we must come together to stop No Deal. This week *could be* our last chance. (JC, 2 Sep. 2019)

(18) It will leave the British people wondering whether their politicians *could* ever *be trusted* again. (BJ, 25 July 2019)

As previously said, the meaning of asking for permission seems not to be very common in a politician's discourse. However, as previously mentioned, there is one more interpretation of *could* in the deontic reading, namely that of suggesting. In Corbyn's corpus, no samples were retrieved but we found the following example in Johnson's:

> (19) Mr Speaker, today there are very many brilliant officials trapped in meeting after meeting in Brussels and Luxembourg when they *could be* better deploying their talents in preparing to pioneer new trade deals and promoting a truly Global Britain. (BJ, 25 July 2019)

In this example, Johnson suggests something that is remotely likely to happen in case Brexit becomes a reality and he uses that as a kind of argument to support the Brexit movement.

In its epistemic reading, the modal verb MUST refers to neutral logical necessity, that is, something that is necessarily true. This modal verb refers to an inference on behalf of the speaker in which they have full confidence. However, in its deontic interpretation, this modal expresses a strong obligation or a strong necessity from an external source. In fact, *must* is classified as strong modality (Ekawati 10). In the negative, in its deontic reading, *must* alludes to prohibition.

Unlike the previously analysed modals, the prevailing interpretation of *must* is the deontic one in the corpora. Both politicians used the modal *must* to express that something "is necessary to do, an obligation for achieving a certain goal" (Ekawati 15). However, it is common to find this type of obligation with the subject called "inclusive *we*," that is, by including themselves in the obligation, politicians try to reduce the impact of such a strong expression, as shown in (20) and (21):

> (20) And we *must make* our voices heard more loudly in the standard bodies that write the rules. (BJ, 24 Sep. 2019)

> (21) It is now, more than ever, that we *must come* together in our communities. (JC, 1 Dec. 2019)

Interestingly, in Johnson's corpus, we also found three examples of the modal *must* in the first person of the singular, as can be seen in (22):

> (22) I *must tell* the House that with this new deal the scope for fruitful negotiation has run its course. (BJ, 19 Oct. 2019)

It seems that as Johnson delivers this speech in the House of Commons, he must somehow be accountable to its members because he is the Prime Minister. Therefore, example (22) suggests inner compulsion.

Regarding the epistemic reading, one instance was retrieved in each corpus, (23) and (24), expressing neutral logical necessity. In example (23) the speaker infers that "given the situation, it is necessarily true that the change gives power to the workers." Likewise, in example (24) *must* indicates full confidence, expressing that "it is necessary to understand that the deal is only possible by abolishing the backstop." According to Ekawati, "the use of the modal *must* confirm[s] the speaker's confidence in concluding and providing solutions or ways for addressing certain issues" (16).

(23) It *must be* the change that gives power to the true wealth creators— the workers. (JC, 10 Sep. 2019)

(24) It *must be* clearly understood that the way to the deal goes by way of the abolition of the backstop. (BJ, 25 July 2019)

The modal verb SHOULD is found in both corpora in its two interpretations. On the one hand, in its epistemic reading, *should* belongs to the group of tentative logical necessity, that is, it refers to a weaker necessity than *must*. In fact, as *must* does not have a remote form, *should* is used to cover this gap. Therefore, the politicians used this interpretation of the modal when they lacked confidence in their assumptions, as shown in examples (25) and (26):

(25) The Prime Minister's deal *should go* back to the people and give them, not just the member of this House, the final say. (JC, 22 Oct. 2019)

(26) I have asked the Cabinet Secretary to mobilise the Civil Service to deliver this outcome *should* it *become* necessary. (BJ, 25 July 2019)

In both examples, the leaders allude to a necessity that is posed tentatively. In fact, in example (25) Corbyn presents the facts as necessary and not as a piece of advice. From his perspective, it is necessary to give the floor again to the people because the Prime Minister's agreement is not achieving Brexit but "a deeply damaging deal" (Corbyn's words on 22 October's speech). Likewise, in example (26) the meaning of necessity is reinforced by using the adjective *necessary*.

On the other hand, regarding its deontic rendering, *should* conveys advisability, which is a softer obligation. Although both interpretations are present in the corpora, the latter is the prevailing one, as can be seen in table 3. *Should* expresses "the desirability of an action, deriving not from the speaker or from some moral or legal consideration but from the situation" (Ekawati 18). Examples of the deontic reading of *should* can be seen in (27) and (28):

(27) The UK *should be* using its position in the G7 to promote policies to tackle the climate emergency. (JC, 3 Sep. 2019)

(28) Parliament *should be* at the heart of the decision-making as we develop our approach. (BJ, 19 Oct. 2019)

As in the case of *must*, the "inclusive *we*" subject is employed more frequently by the Conservative leader than by the Labour one. Unlike *must*, however, *should* lacks an authoritarian tone (Ekawati 18). Such a strategy makes sense as Johnson is the one governing and including himself in the obligation works as a mitigation strategy, hence reducing the impact that imposing an obligation can have on the population, as can be seen in (29).

(29) Why *should* we not aspire to the same status for our further education institutions, to allow people to express their talents? (BJ, 27 July 2019)

4.3 Modality in the Discourse on Brexit

As previously mentioned, modality is conceived as a semantic category that covers notions such as possibility, necessity, desire and obligation, among others. Consequently, through modality, the speaker can express attitudes towards the event contained in the utterance. In the preceding pages, the different interpretations of the meaning of the most frequent central modal verbs in the corpora have been presented. Likewise, it has been shown how each modal verb can be interpreted regarding the two types of modality that this study has considered. In fact, the corpus analysis reveals that this linguistic resource does not have a very high frequency compared to the whole number of verbs used in both corpora. In Johnson's corpus, 14.5% of the verb phrases include a modal verb. Similarly, in Corbyn's, modal verbs appear in 15.2% of the verb phrases.

As is well known, Brexit has been a controversial political issue from the beginning as it has had both detractors and supporters. It could be said

that through modality the speaker intervenes in the narration of the events because they show their attitude towards them. As Downing and Locke suggest, "in very general terms, modality may be taken to express a relationship with reality, whereas a non-modal utterance treats the process as reality" (382). As a result, we can infer that politicians try to avoid direct involvement in the different political issues. The reason seems quite evident since the greater the involvement, the greater the commitment to the electorate, which may not always be convenient.

Both leaders resort to epistemic modality more frequently than to the deontic one, although the latter is slightly more frequent with certain verbs such as *should* and *must*. Nonetheless, that epistemic is more frequent than deontic modality fulfils expectations, since both politicians are inclined to present the facts as possibilities rather than as obligations. The goal of political discourse is none other than trying to catch the potential voter's attention to convince them of an argument and influence their opinions and (voting) behaviour. According to Ekawati, language can be used to convey power and "the projection of power may depend on the presence or absence of particular linguistic features" (6). Needless to say, central modal verbs are used to express this political power because, by means of them, politicians have included their own perspective and attitudes towards the event expressed in the proposition.

On the other hand, the absence of modality is convenient in political discourse because, in this way, politicians are more assertive in their speech, trying to influence the audience without being personally involved when referring to events. Presenting them as facts and not as mere conjectures implies certain security in what is being said and this is rather advantageous when trying to influence potential voters.

CONCLUSIONS

In this research, we have analysed the incidence that modal verbs have in political speeches on Brexit. In doing so, we have compared such incidence in the case of the two main political leaders in the UK. Modality has been studied considering the traditional division into the epistemic and deontic interpretation. Modal verbs only comprise 15% of the total number of verbs in each corpus, which indicates a lack of commitment on behalf of the speakers, in this case, the politicians.

When using modal verbs in their speech, the leaders employ the epistemic interpretation, which refers to the concept of possibilities. It

makes sense that they used a wide range of modals depending on the degree of certainty they have of the truth of the propositions. Additionally, we have seen that some modal verbs, such as *should* and *must*, are more frequently used in its deontic interpretation. In this case, these modal verbs refer to obligations. The concept of obligation is too strong for a politician to place onto the electorate and this is why they used mitigation strategies to minimise the effect of such obligations.

On the one hand, the verb *should*, which is weaker than *must*, is more present in both corpora to refer to a softer kind of obligation or to present a piece of advice. On the other hand, when the Prime Minister uses the modal *must*, he also uses the first person of the plural subject, "inclusive *we*," to include himself in the obligation and give an impression of closeness to the voters. Whether epistemic or deontic modality is concerned, we can conclude that not only the presence of modal verbs leaves traces of politicians' purposes but that also the absence of them can be significant in the discourse.

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