

**THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF MODAL VERBS IN DISCOURSE:  
A CORPUS-BASED STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Modal verbs are essential linguistic devices that play a crucial role in shaping discourse coherence, politeness strategies, and speaker stance across various communicative contexts. This article presents a corpus-based study that delves into the pragmatic functions of modal verbs in discourse, exploring how these linguistic markers contribute to the coherence, politeness, and interpersonal dynamics of language use. By analyzing a diverse range of corpora, this study aims to unveil the nuanced ways in which modal verbs operate in conveying meanings, attitudes, and social relationships in spoken and written discourse.

**Keywords:** *Modal verbs, pragmatic functions, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, coherence, politeness strategies.*

**Introduction**

The pragmatic functions of modal verbs in discourse are central to understanding how speakers navigate complex communicative interactions, convey politeness, and negotiate meanings in language use. Modal verbs, such as 'can,' 'may,' 'must,' 'should,' among others, serve various functions beyond mere modality, encompassing the expression of attitudes, speaker stance, and social relationships in discourse. This article presents a corpus-based study that delves into the pragmatic functions of modal verbs, examining their role in discourse coherence, politeness strategies, and interpersonal dynamics across diverse contexts. By drawing on corpus data, this study aims to shed light on the nuanced ways in which modal verbs contribute to the fabric of discourse and shape communicative strategies in contemporary language use.

Modal verbs play a pivotal role in discourse by contributing to coherence, politeness, and speaker stance in varied communicative contexts. In discourse coherence, modal verbs serve as markers that establish logical connections, signal relationships between propositions, and guide the flow of information in spoken and written interactions [4, 80]. For instance, modal verbs like 'might' or 'could' are often used to introduce hypothetical scenarios, express uncertainty, or suggest possible outcomes, thereby enhancing the coherence and logical progression of discourse. By providing signals of conditionality, probability, or necessity, modal verbs help speakers organize their ideas, structure their arguments, and maintain coherence in complex communicative exchanges.

Moreover, the pragmatic functions of modal verbs extend to the realm of politeness strategies, where these linguistic markers play a crucial role in managing social relationships, mitigating face-threatening acts, and expressing politeness in language use [5, 25]. Modal verbs such as 'would,' 'should,' or 'could' are commonly employed to soften requests, make suggestions, or offer advice in a polite and diplomatic manner. By modulating the force of speech acts, expressing deference, or conveying indirectness, modal verbs contribute to the establishment of rapport, the negotiation of power dynamics, and the maintenance of social harmony in communicative interactions. The strategic use of modal verbs allows speakers to navigate delicate social situations, convey respect, and uphold social norms of politeness in diverse communicative contexts.

Furthermore, modal verbs play a crucial role in shaping speaker stance and interpersonal meanings in discourse, reflecting the attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of speakers towards the propositions they express [3, 90]. Modal verbs like 'must,' 'might,' or 'ought to' are employed to convey speaker certainty, hedged claims, or evaluative judgments, thereby signaling the speaker's epistemic stance, commitment to propositions, and subjective viewpoints. By manipulating modal verbs, speakers can assert authority, express humility, or negotiate intersubjective meanings, shaping the interpretation of their utterances and influencing the perception of their communicative intentions [2, 56]. The nuanced use of modal verbs enables speakers to position themselves within discourse, project their attitudes, and engage in persuasive or argumentative strategies that align with their communicative goals and social identities.

Modal verbs are also crucial for expressing politeness and mitigating potential confrontations. For instance, 'may' can be used to seek permission politely, as in, "May I have a moment of your time?" This usage conveys respect for the listener's time and positions the interaction as polite and considerate. In negotiations, 'would' is often utilized to make requests in a courteous manner, such as "Would you mind sending me the report by the end of the day?" By framing the request with 'would,' the speaker adopts a polite tone that enhances the likelihood of a positive response.

Moreover, modal verbs play an essential role in expressing degrees of certainty or probability. 'Must' is employed to convey strong conviction or logical necessity, as seen in the statement, "She must be at home by now." Here, 'must' indicates a high degree of certainty based on evidence or inference. Conversely, 'might' introduces a sense of uncertainty or possibility, as in, "He might attend the conference next week." This usage suggests a likelihood but leaves room for alternative outcomes, thus demonstrating the speaker's awareness of uncertainty.

In expressing obligation or necessity, modal verbs like 'have to' or 'need to' are frequently utilized [1, 45]. For instance, "I have to finish this report by the end of the

day" conveys a sense of obligation or requirement. Similarly, 'need to' emphasizes necessity, as in "We need to address this issue urgently." These modal verbs underscore the importance of certain actions or responsibilities, highlighting the speaker's recognition of duties or essential tasks.

Furthermore, modal verbs are instrumental in indicating ability or permission. 'Can' and 'could' are commonly used for expressing capabilities or opportunities, such as in the phrases "She can speak multiple languages" or "Could you pass me the salt, please?" These modal verbs enable speakers to communicate skills, capacities, or requests effectively.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the pragmatic functions of modal verbs in discourse play a pivotal role in enhancing coherence, managing politeness, and shaping speaker stance across diverse communicative contexts. Modal verbs serve as versatile linguistic tools that contribute to the organization of information, the management of social relationships, and the expression of interpersonal meanings within language use. By analyzing the pragmatic functions of modal verbs in discourse through a corpus-based study, we gain valuable insights into how these linguistic markers operate in conveying meanings, attitudes, and social dynamics in spoken and written interactions. Understanding the intricate ways in which modal verbs shape discourse coherence, politeness strategies, and speaker stance enriches our comprehension of language use, facilitates effective communication strategies, and deepens our understanding of the complexity of interpersonal interactions in contemporary language contexts.

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