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The Employment of Modal Verbs in Expressing Empathy and Solidarity in Messages of Condolence

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Abstract

The study of modal verbs and their employment in everyday speech, is a topic that has attracted a great deal of attention in the area of different speech acts. However, investigations of these auxiliary verbs in the speech act of condolence have been limited. In other words, explorations of their use in the context of condolence have not received much attention. Therefore, the present study aims to highlight the use and function of modal verbs in English messages of condolence. Furthermore, the distinction between different modes of modal verbs can be an issue as their use can be considered to be rather foggy. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this investigation to address this problem. The findings reveal two types of modality; epistemic (echoes the probability or possibility of acts) and deontic (denotes necessity, obligation and volition) which serve to convey empathy and respect in utterances of condolence. The results also show that using particular forms of modal verbs in such utterances is a matter of convention to reflect courtesy and solidarity for the bereaved family. The findings suggest that distinguishing meaning of modal verbs from grammatical perspective (i.e. aspect and voice) would contribute to achieve a better understanding and interpretation of these verbs.

Keywords: modal verbs, speech acts, condolence, empathy, epistemic, deontic, solidarity.

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة جانباً مهماً من حيث كيفية توظيف الأفعال الساندة في الحوارات اليومية والتي أخذت جانباً مهماً من الاهتمام في مجال نظرية فعل الكلام ومع هذا لم تعرض الدراسات السابقة في هذا المجال اهتماماً ملحوظاً من حيث تقديم التعليز. وتأسيساً على ذلك تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على كيفية توظيف الأفعال الساندة في تقديم التعازي، وقد يكون هناك نوعاً من الضبابية من حيث التوظيف الأمثل للأفعال الساندة في سياقها الصحيح. لذلك استخدمت كل من الطريقتين النوعية والكمية لمعالجة هذه المشكلة. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى وجود نوعين من الأفعال الساندة وهي الجانب المعرفي والذي يصب في احتمالية فعل الكلام والجانب الآخر يخص الجانب الأخلاقي والذي يتناول الالتزام والسماح والإرادة، وكلاهما يحمل في طياته العاطفة والاحترام في عبارات التعزية. واثبتت الدراسات أيضاً أن توظيف صيغ معينة من الأفعال الساندة في سياق الكلام تعتبر من المعايير الأساسية في التقاليد مثل المجاملة والتكاتف مع عائلة المتوفي. وأوضح النتائج بأن التمييز بين معنى الأفعال الساندة على ضوء الجانب النحوي قد يسهم بشكل أو آخر في تحقيق التفسير والإدراك الأفضل من خلال توظيف نظرية فعل الكلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفعال الساندة، فعل الكلام، التعازي، التعاطف، الجانب المعرفي، الجانب الأخلاقي، التكاتف.

1. Introduction

The study of modal verbs and their employment in everyday speech can be associated with meanings of possibility, probability, obligation, etc. and interpreted in accordance with context of situations. Therefore, investigating these verbs in speech acts would serve to maintain a good understanding of their use and function. Messages of condolence are considered to be one type of speech acts (Searle, 1969) that are commonly written to express their empathy and solidarity for the loss of someone they know. Perhaps, the messages that were sent for the loss of the queen of the United Kingdom, Elizabeth II, can be samples

of these messages. Accordingly, this study aims first to identify the occurrences and distribution of modal verbs, role and functions in these messages, and second to examine the patterns of modal verbs and how they can be combined with specific aspects or voices.

The data of this study has been taken from an online book of condolence created to honour Queen Elizabeth II, upon her death. The book, which was accessible from September 8 to 19, 2022, contained 355 messages of tribute to the late Queen. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used in the data analysis to examine the employment of modal verbs, their meanings and functions in these messages. The qualitative method was used to uncover the modal verbs and their respective meanings. For the quantitative analysis, modal verbs were classified based on how often they appeared and where they were located within the messages.

2. Background

Despite their common usage, modal verbs are employed in different contexts to mean different things. Modal verbs are defined as "a group of auxiliary verbs that we can use with other verbs to say what is possible, permitted, necessary, etc." (Yule, 2006, p. 28). From semantic perspective, Palmer (1979) defined modality as information associated with the speaker's attitude or opinion towards what is spoken. For Quirk, et al. (1985: 219), modality is "the manner in which the meaning of a clause is qualified so as to reflect the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of the proposition it expresses being true".

Different scholars have studied modal verbs in different contexts such as Orlando (2009); Close and Aarts (2010); Feng and Liu (2010); Zelenka (2013); and Al-Issa (2014). However, little attention has been devoted to modals in the context of condolence.

A study of Orlando (2009) examined the employment of modal verbs in written (BNCW) and spoken (BNCS) English corpora. The study showed that 'can' and 'will' were the most frequent modal verbs in the written corpus. However, the researcher found that the frequencies of modal verb patterns in the written corpus matched those in spoken English.

Other forms of modals, such as 'must', 'have to', and 'have got' have been investigated by Close and Aarts (2010) in Present-Day British English (1960s-1990s). In their study, the researchers concluded that a sharp decline was in the frequency of the core modal 'must' and a notable rise in the frequency of the semi-modal 'have to' in the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English.

In political contexts, Feng and Liu (2010) explored the use of modal verbs in the opening speech given by President Obama at a prime-time news conference commemorating his first 100 days in office. The results of the study showed that will was used most frequently, and it was employed to provide information about what would happen in the future and to refer to the intention of Obama's administration based on the speaker's belief and perception. The modal verb 'can' was used to express the expectation that American people should have for their government's efforts, and the use of can indicated the possibility. The modal verb 'have to' expressed obligation from external factors, and 'should' expressed imperative suggestions or commands.

In legal contexts, Zelenka (2013) found that the modal verb 'shall' occurred 384 times out of all 764 verbs, which was a little over 50% of all modal verb occurrences, followed by the modal verb 'may' with 138 occurrences (18%). On the other hand, the least common modals were 'must' and 'can', which had 27 and 21 occurrences, respectively. In the context of condolence, Al-Issa (2014) examined modal verbs and pointed out that the most widely used modal verbs in condolence letters are 'will' and 'may'. These two forms of modals seemed to be employed for conveying feelings, wishes, and consolation.

Although the foregoing review provided the researcher with valuable and sufficient literature for this study, there is still a need to investigate the employment of modal verbs in a more formal context that is the context of condolence. This is because using modals in a language can convey different meanings in highly emotional situations, like when communicating meaningful condolence phrases and sentences. There are situations where individuals want to show their support in a culturally acceptable and linguistically appropriate way. Therefore, there is a necessity to investigate how British people use modal verbs in the context of condolence.

The purpose of paying tributes to the deceased family can be just a conventional one and is related to politeness (Zunin and Zunin, 1992). The point of investigating these verbs is to try to come to an understanding of the regularities and patterns that underlie the actual use of modal verbs in the English

language. Hence, the present study is concerned with examining the way in which these verbs were employed in online English texts of condolence to identify their use, role and contribution in this context.

3. Types of Modality

According to Biber et al (2021: 483), each modal can have two different types of meaning, which can be labeled as 'deontic' and 'epistemic' meanings (also referred to as intrinsic and extrinsic). Deontic modality refers to actions and events that humans (or other agents) directly control: meanings relating to permission, obligation, or volition (or intention) as shown in table 1. Epistemic modality refers to the logical status of events or states, usually relating to assessments of likelihood: possibility, necessity, or prediction (ibid). The distinction between the two types of modality, deontic and epistemic, has also been highlighted by various scholars, including Lyon (1977), Palmer (1979, 1990), Biber (1985), and Quirk et al. (1985).

Table 1: Types of Modality

Modal verb	Deontic meaning	Epistemic meaning
Will/ would	Personal volition	Logical prediction
must	Personal obligation	Logical necessity
can	permission	Ability/Logical possibility
may	permission	Logical possibility
shall	Personal volition	Logical prediction

Deontic modality is concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents. Lyon (1977) defined it as "concerned with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents" (p. 823), while Palmer (1990) refers to it as "subject-oriented," meaning that it is concerned with the ability or volition of the subject of the sentence.

In contrast, epistemic modality is concerned with speaker's evaluation of the proposition (Palmer, 1990). Lyon (1977) defined it as "concerned with matters of knowledge or belief" (p. 793), and Biber (1985) referred to it as "relating to assessments of likelihood: possibility, necessity, or prediction."

Quirk et al. (1985) identified the epistemic possibility of 'may' and 'might', with 'may' indicating "the possibility of a given proposition's being or becoming true" and might being somewhat more tentative.

Overall, the distinction between deontic and epistemic modality is an essential aspect of understanding the use and function of modal verbs in English language. However, the epistemic possibility of 'may' can be replaced by 'can' in auxiliary negation. The difference was highlighted by Quirk et al. (1985: 224), as in: "she *may* not be serious" (it is possible that ...not...) and "she *can't* be serious" (it is not possible that...).

The 'logical necessity' meaning of 'must' is parallel to the use of 'may' in the sense of epistemic possibility; it may, indeed, be called 'epistemic necessity', "since it implies that the speaker judges the proposition expressed by the clause to be necessarily true, or at least to have a high likelihood of being true" (Quirk et al. 225). In addition to epistemic necessity, there is a root necessity meaning of 'must', as in: "To be healthy, a plant *must* receive a good supply of both sunshine and moisture." The meaning of 'must' here can be either 'it is essential for . . .' or 'it is necessary for . . .' however, this example does not indicate human control, and this distinguishes the root necessity use of 'must' from its other root sense of obligation.

Quirk et al. (1985: 233) used the following example to express a tentative opinion:
There *could* be something wrong with the light switch. Of course, I *might* be wrong.

Here, 'could' and 'might' have the same meaning, as they express the epistemic possibility associated with 'may'. This is an exceptional case, in which could is the past tense equivalent of 'may' instead of 'can.'

Epistemic possibility was differentiated from root possibility by Quirk et al. (1985: 1273-1274), as in: *The possibility for man to coexist with man is slight.* [cf: 'It is possible for man to coexist . . .' with subject introduced by for; root possibility]

The possibility of (them/their) coexisting is slight. [cf: 'It is possible that . . .' epistemic possibility]

Jenkins (1972: 73) and Huddleston (1976: 69) suggested that 'will' of futurity is epistemic 'will'. Huddleston deals with epistemic 'will' in terms of predictions about the present.

4. The modal auxiliaries

The modal auxiliaries; 'can', 'may', 'will', 'shall', 'must', 'ought to', 'need', 'dare' and 'used to' present a number of "inflectional and syntactic properties that distinguish them from main, or 'lexical', verbs" (Collins, 2009: 12). 'Can', 'may', 'will' and 'shall' are generally assumed to have preterite forms (could, might, would, and should). 'Need', 'dare' and 'used to' may be auxiliaries (as in Need/Dare/Used she (to) stay away?) or lexical verbs (as in Did she need/dare/used to stay away?). According to Quirk et al. (1985: 137), 'can', 'will', 'may', 'shall', and 'must' are referred to as 'central' modals, whereas 'dare', 'need', 'ought to', 'used to' as 'marginal' modals.

5. Condolences

Condolences are one type of Austin's expressive speech acts. Expressives reveal the speaker's attitude towards events. In other words, they are considered to be expressions of a psychological state which are designed to convey one's sympathy on the occasion of someone's death. According to Mwihake (2004: 133), "in phatic communication the verbal interaction has little information value, but instead plays an essential role in oiling the wheels of social discourse". Social meaning is hence "communicated through ritualistic use of language as found in greetings, apologies, blessings or condolences" (ibid). When you condole someone, you are communicating not only a feeling of sympathy, but also an act of encouragement in the face of adversity (Mwihake, 2004: 134). Therefore, expressive speech acts show a special sincerity condition about a kind of offers which is determined by the propositional content (Searle, 1969: 62-68). However, according to Moghaddam (2013), delivering condolence messages serves to not only expressing sadness but also to show their support in a culturally acceptable and linguistically appropriate way.

6. Utilization of modal verbs in conveying condolences

In the delicate context of conveying condolences, the nuanced use of language plays a pivotal role in expressing empathy and respect towards the bereaved. Modal auxiliary verbs, despite being one of the most challenging grammatical structures in the English language (Collins, 2009), emerge as a critical tool in achieving this delicate balance. Their utilization goes beyond mere grammatical function, serving as a vehicle for cooperative politeness and a means to soften the delivery of messages (Moghaddam, 2012).

7. Results

A. Results and discussion related to the first aim

The research identified seven types of modal verbs, with 'will' being the most common (183 occurrences) and 'may' coming in second (112 occurrences). A case which agrees with Al-Issa's (2014) findings As shown in figure 1 and table 1, the modal verb 'will' ranked the highest in people's attributes to the Queen's loss as it is more commonly used (183 occurrences) than other modal verbs. Throughout the 355 messages, the use of 'will' may be linked to people's willingness to express their love, respect and sympathy for the Queen Elisabeth's loss. Some examples are; 'the Queen *will* be so missed', 'her memories *will* be treasured', 'you *will* be missed so much', 'she *will* not reach this historic milestone in actual life', 'I *will* continue to forever remember our dear queen', 'Who *will* be sadly, precious and full heartedly remembered?', 'I *will* continue to forever remember our dear queen', 'We *will* miss you Queen Elisabeth and your reign', 'I love you and always *will* my queen', 'I *will* personally miss her majesty'. The modal 'may' comes second as it is occurred 112 times in the data. It is mostly used in "formulas for expressing wishes" (Alexander, 1988: 237) as it occurs in fixed phrases like '*May* I express my deepest sympathy to you all', '*May* you rest in eternal peace', '*May* Her soul rest in peace', '*May* her soul rest it peace!', '*May* god bless and keep you', and '*May* The Queen Rest in peace'. Such formulas are used to reveal feelings and words of comfort and support. Although 'rest in peace' is a general expression of sympathy, '*may* he/she rest in peace' can indicate a more specific prayer or wish for the deceased person's peace in the afterlife. In addition, it is used to express a wish or desire that something will be the case in the future. In other word, it is said to express the hope that someone's spirit has found peace after death.

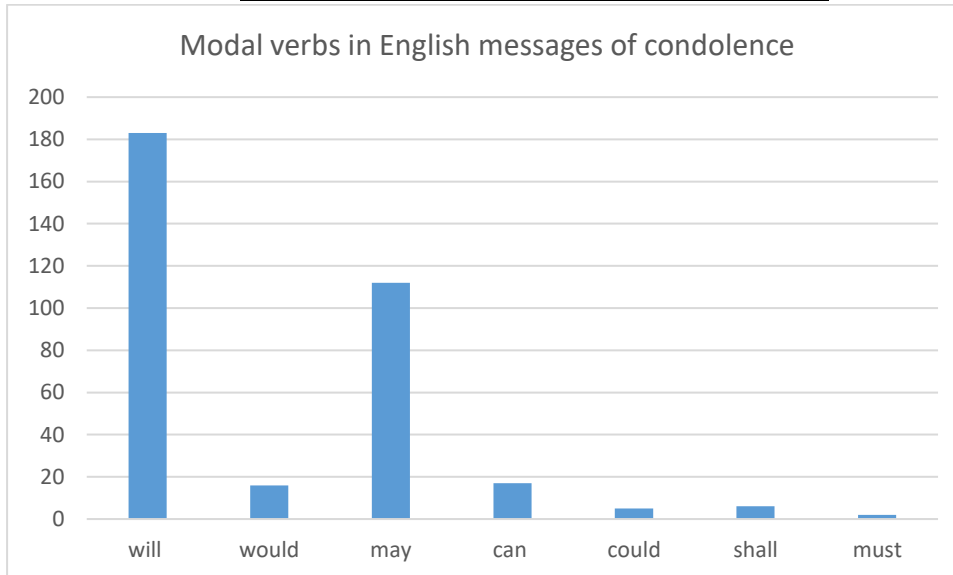


Figure 1 Distribution of Modal Verbs in 355 Messages of Condolence

The occurrences of the modal verbs ‘would’ and ‘can’ are nearly the same (16 and 17 respectively). Examples for the modal verb ‘would’ are ‘there *would* never be a more remarkable woman’, ‘we *would* like to express our sorrow on the passing of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the second’, and ‘I *would* like to pass on my deepest respect and condolences to the whole Royal Family at this extremely sorrowful time’. The modal verb ‘can’ is used in examples like ‘word *cannot* desalinate the enormous loss this country and its people had suffered’, ‘and I *can’t* believe it’, and ‘No words *can* express our pain’.

Table 2 Occurrences of Modal Verbs in 355 messages of Condolence

Modal verbs	Occurrences
will	183
would	16
may	112
can	17
could	5
shall	6
must	2

On the other hand, the modal verbs ‘could’, ‘shall’, and ‘must’ (5, 6, 2, and 1 respectively) were the least frequently used in these messages. The main function of past form of ‘can’ can be related to “speaker’s stance rather than the marking of time distinctions” for it is associated with situations that convey “overtones of tentativeness and politeness” (Biber et al, 2021:483). A possible explanation of using most of these instances is that of talking about general ability in the past (i.e. could), expressing offers and suggestions (i.e. shall) and indicating necessity (i.e. must). However, these forms were found to be less commonly used in communicating sympathy in the event of death. The data revealed no existence to other modal verbs like ‘might’, ‘need to’ and ‘ought to’.

The verbs that were associated with modal verbs were mostly mental verbs (e.g. miss, feel, remember, forget, believe) which can usually be employed to express personal emotions and attitudes. As such they “commonly co-occur with modals expressing a personal stance” (Biber, et al, 2021:489).

The obligation/necessity modal verbs were less common in messages of condolence than other modal categories. The relative rarity of ‘must’ can be attributed to the strong directive force (Biber et al, 2021: 493) that this modal has when used in these messages. The data showed that ‘must’ is only used twice in ‘you have given Charles and William so much insight on the job they *must* go on to do’ which is a case of marking logical necessity. Whereas, it is applied in ‘you looked so beautiful in your green outfit I *must* add my favourite colour’ to indicate personal obligation.

The occurrence of ‘would’ and ‘can’ are nearly the same (16 and 17, respectively), while ‘could’, ‘shall’, and ‘must’ were the least frequently used (5, 6, 2, and 1, respectively). The verbs associated with modal verbs are mostly mental verbs, which express personal emotions and attitudes.

The obligation/necessity modal verbs are less common in messages of condolence, with 'must' being used only twice. The data revealed no existence of other modal verbs like 'might', 'need to' and 'ought to'. In sum, despite the fact that the use of modal verbs in messages of condolence can be interpreted in terms of their deontic and epistemic meanings, the purpose of their use was found to be a conventional one and is related to politeness (Zunin and Zunin, 1992).

B. Results and Discussion Related to the second aim

The second aim has been to examine how modal verbs are combined with specific aspects or voices in condolence messages, in order to determine the impact of these combinations on the meaning and tone of the messages.

Modal verbs can combine with marked voice and aspect. However, they cannot combine with tense. Particular modal verbs show different preferences for these combinations.

a. Modal verbs with passive voice

Some messages showed that 'will' is particularly common with passive voice as in the following examples:

- You *will be truly missed*.
- Your love and dedication *will be remembered* always
- She *will* always be remembered with great love and honour
- I'm sorry and I pray that you *will be comforted* by the knowledge that she loved you so much.
- you *will never be forgotten* (259.15 September 2022 at 5:25PM, *andrew widdicombe wrote, p 37*)
- She served us for 70 years in a totally unselfish manner, and *shall never be replaced*

(309.18 September 2022 at 5:12PM, *Doreen Dentist wrote, p.46*)

The modal verb 'shall' is notably rare with passive voice, as found in the following example:

- I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, *shall be devoted* to your service and the service of our great imperial family. (335.19 September 2022 at 10:00AM, *YAVINAASH NAIDU SARAVANAKUMAR wrote, pp. 49-50*)

b. Modal verbs with perfect aspect

The data presented few instances of perfect tense with modal verbs, as in the following utterance where 'could' is used to express kind of logical possibility:

- You have been the most wonderful Monarch we *could have wished* for (136.11 September 2022 at 12:55PM, *Barbara & Peter Van Schepdael wrote p.18*)

The possibility modal 'may' is used with "the perfect expressing a certain degree of doubt about past events or situations" (Biber et al, 2021: 498), as in the following example:

- The royal void you left *may have been filled* successionaly (282.16 September 2022 at 7:07PM, *Uchenna John wrote, p. 41*).

- She *would have been greatly saddened* by your passing (353.20 September 2022 at 10:50AM, *Chris Lloyd wrote, p.52*)

- I know that the closest I would ever come to that *would have been* an invite to her garden parties (294.17 September 2022 at 8:23PM, *Martin KIRBY wrote, pp. 43-44*).

The patterns presented above (i.e. combination of particular verb phrase aspect and voice) echo a conventionalized way of revealing empathy and solidarity in the context of condolence. These patterns appeared to be employed by general people as they are customized to be using them in such a context.

8. Conclusions

The aim of the present research was to examine the employment of modal verbs, their meaning and function in English messages of condolence. The examination of these verbs has shown that they were employed in condolence texts to express feelings, wishes, and consolation. One of the most significant findings emerged in this study is that there were seven types of modal verbs, with 'will' appearing the most frequently and 'may' coming in second. The modal verb 'will' was often expressing love, respect, and sympathy for the Queen's loss, while 'may' was mostly employed in fixed phrases that express wishes and prayers for the deceased. The current study has also revealed that each form of the modal verb can indicate two meaning; deontic modality refers to actions and events that humans directly control, such as permission, obligation, or volition, while epistemic modality refers to the logical status of events or states, usually relating to assessments of likelihood. Taken together, these findings suggest a role for the modal verbs in promoting empathy and solidarity for the bereaved in the context of condolence. However, the

employment of these verbs seems to become conventionalized as people are accustomed to use specific grammatical combinations to share their feelings and emotions. This study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of the role of modal verbs in revealing politeness and respect.

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