



A DIACHRONIC CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF MODAL VERB USAGE IN PAKISTANI ENGLISH BUSINESS SPEECHES

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Abstract

The current study is a diachronic investigation on the use of modal verbs in Pakistani business speeches between the years 2001 and 2020. The methodology used in this research paper involves the approach of corpus-based study, which is aimed at identifying the frequency and distribution of nine modal verbs (will, would, can, could, may, might, must, should, and shall). The data for this research paper have been extracted from a specially made corpus consisting of speeches delivered by Pakistani business persons. In order to conduct the quantitative and qualitative analyses of modal verbs, AntConc (Version 3.5.9) software was used. The diachronic approach shows that there is an increasing occurrence of epistemic modals such as ‘may’ and ‘would’ throughout the subsequent eras, indicating an increased sense of uncertainty and risk management among professionals. The functional approach demonstrates how the modal verbs are used as important instruments in stance construction, persuading management, and institution identification. These trends identify recurring patterns in the present corpus and demonstrate how the use of modal verbs is influenced by different purposes of communication throughout time. Rather than making comparisons across varieties, the study situates itself in corpus linguistics research and empirically illustrates changes in the use of modality in Pakistani business discourse.

Keywords: *Business Speeches, Corpus-Based Analysis, Diachronic Study, Hedging, Modal Verbs, Pakistani English, Stance.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, corpus linguistics has come to be regarded as a powerful approach to studying language in its actual usage through communication. The use of corpus linguistics allows for an organized analysis of massive corpora, which helps in discovering recurring patterns of lexicogrammatical and discourse structures in different genres and registers (Biber et al., 2008; Flowerdew, 2013). These methods have also been extensively applied in discourse analysis to analyze the role of linguistic means in the construction of meaning, identities, stance, and interaction in professional settings, such as business discourse (Upton & Cohen, 2009; Flowerdew, 2014).

Modal verbs, including can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, and must, are essential to language use in this context as the main way through which speakers convey their attitude towards propositions in relation to certainty, obligation, permission, and possibility. In other words, modal verbs play a crucial role in constructing the meaning and positioning the speakers. Numerous studies have shown that modality is an important aspect in stance negotiation and engagement (Nelson, 2006; Yang, 2018).

In business communication, modals serve as rhetorical tools that allow the speakers to exercise control over their institutional power, express commitments, and gauge their persuasion intentions. Business speeches, in turn, belong to the very rhetorical domain in which speakers have to strike a balance between boldness and restraint. For example, will is often linked to futurity, commitment, and the expression of organizational certainty, while can expresses possibility and ability. On the other hand, modal verbs like would, could, and may are usually used for hedge purposes and permit speakers to qualify their statements (De Felice, 2013; Fuoli, 2018; Sznajder & Piqué-Angordans, 2005).

Although there has been a considerable amount of research done on modality in professional communication and World Englishes, little has been done regarding Pakistani English, especially when it comes to spoken business discourse. As a variety of English, Pakistani English can be seen as part of the broader field of World Englishes, which implies that it involves linguistic behavior that is contextually bound based on sociocultural, institutional, and pragmatic considerations. Previous research indicates that modal behavior could be context-bound in Pakistani English; however, most of this work has concentrated on written forms of discourse such as academic and business writing (Naz & Hussain, 2024; Khan & Mahmood, 2024).

Moreover, studies of business discourse conducted through corpus linguistics have primarily employed synchronic methodologies, thus providing little understanding of the development of linguistic elements in terms of time. It is important to conduct a diachronic study since it allows understanding of changes in communication patterns in terms of shifting socio-economic conditions that define professional language. The significance of

diachronic research for analyzing changes in stance and modality has been highlighted by recent researchers (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Li & Xu, 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

To address these gaps, this current study utilizes a corpus-based diachronic methodology to analyze modal verb use in a corpus of Pakistani English business speeches from the year 2001 through to 2020. The current study focuses on exploring the use of modal verbs in terms of their frequency, distribution, and function particularly within the framework of stancetaking, persuasion, and institution building. Using the diachronic approach, this study endeavors to investigate the way of using modal verbs through time and the relationship between these changes in usage and communicative needs of the corpus under analysis. Instead of conducting the cross-varietal comparison, the results will be situated in relation to the previously conducted studies on modal verb use.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the frequency and distribution of modal verbs in Pakistani English business speeches from 2001 to 2020.
2. To analyze the functional roles of modal verbs in terms of epistemic and deontic modality within the corpus.
3. To investigate how modal verbs contribute to the construction of interpersonal meaning, persuasion, and institutional stance in the selected speeches.
4. To explore diachronic variation in modal verb usage across the specified time period.
5. To identify emerging patterns of modal usage that reflect evolving communicative practices within Pakistani English business discourse.

1.2. Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the frequency and distribution patterns of modal verbs in Pakistani English business speeches from 2001 to 2020?
2. How are modal verbs functionally distributed between epistemic and deontic meanings within the corpus?
3. How do modal verbs contribute to persuasion, politeness, and institutional identity construction in the selected speeches?
4. What diachronic shifts can be observed in modal verb usage over the specified period?
5. How do these patterns reflect changing communicative strategies within Pakistani English business discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Corpus Linguistics and Discourse Analysis

The field of corpus linguistics has become an acknowledged research tool that enables studying the use of language within a natural environment. Due to the possibility of systematically analyzing extensive and properly structured data sets, this approach allows the process of moving from intuition to identifying lexico-grammatical patterns that repeat within various genres and registers (Biber et al., 2008; McEnery & Hardie, 2012). In discourse analysis, corpora has proved extremely useful in researching the role linguistic materials play in building stances, identities, and interpersonal meanings through language use (Flowerdew, 2013, 2014).

The use of corpus methods has also enhanced the investigation of rhetoric structure and genres within professional discourse. For example, Upton and Cohen (2009) show how corpus-driven move analysis can be used to identify linguistic structures in professional discourse, providing an approach that is easily replicable in the examination of linguistic elements such as modals. This highlights the appropriateness of using corpus linguistics for studying modality in situational discourse, including business discourse.

2.2. Modal Verbs: Theoretical Foundations

The study of modals has been widely discussed as important linguistic means of conveying modality, stance, and interpersonal positioning. According to Palmer (2001), modality is concerned with speakers' attitudes towards statements in terms of necessity, possibility, obligation, and certainty. In the context of corpus linguistics, modal auxiliaries including may, might, can, could, will, and would have been recognized as critical in interpersonal management in terms of hedging, intensification, and stance-taking (Hyland, 1998, 2005).

The key difference is usually made between epistemic modality, which deals with expressions of certainty or possibility (may, might), and deontic modality, which expresses obligation, necessity, or permission (must, should). The distinction becomes crucial in professional communication, when the speaker has to combine informative and directive functions.

One of the most popular models used to analyze the use of modality is the stance and engagement approach developed by Ken Hyland in 2005. The modal verbs, in accordance with this theory, are an important way of conveying stance and expressing degrees of commitment. The high-value modals include verbs such as 'will' and 'must', which convey a sense of higher commitment, while the low-value modals include verbs such as 'may' and 'might'.

2.3. Modal Verbs in Business and Professional Discourse

Modal auxiliaries are significant in terms of discourse within business contexts, considering that they perform certain rhetorical and pragmatic functions. As pointed out by Nelson (2006), there is always a predictability about the use of modal auxiliaries in

relation to business English, whereby modal auxiliaries like 'will' are likely to co-occur with commitment and futurity while 'can' has to do with possibility and capability.

In addition, as noted by Sznajder and Piqué-Angordans (2005), the role of modality in creating an evaluative and metaphorical meaning in professional discourse cannot be ignored, since this influences the perception of business-related concepts. Similarly, de Felice (2013) classifies modal verbs used in business situations based on degrees of commitment, whereby modal verbs of high commitment (will and must) are differentiated from low commitment (might and may).

In addition, corpus-based research has revealed the significance of modality in the process of building institutional credibility and organizational identity. For instance, Fuoli (2018) illustrates the use of modal verbs as elements of larger stance strategies employed in corporate communication that help organizations appear competent and credible. Similarly, Vogel (2023) highlights the importance of modalization in forming persuasive speech acts in business communication contexts.

Similarly, the importance of modal verbs is also evident in spoken business genres. According to Xu (2023), in the genre of marketing speech discourse, low value modals are used quite often to make the text more persuasive through hedging and audience engagement. In their study on the use of modality in multimodal interactional data, O'Keeffe et al. (2024) have observed that digital spoken business discourse involves the frequent use of hedging and politeness. Although these researches have brought useful findings about the modality of professional speech discourses, there is still scope for more corpus-based research in this field as they discuss contexts other than Pakistani English business speech discourses.

2.4. Modal Verbs in Second Language and World Englishes Contexts

Modal verbs have also been studied in relation to second language (L2) environments and World Englishes. In this regard, Yang (2018) shows that L2 learners sometimes display an imbalance in their use of modal verbs. Specifically, these individuals tend to use modal verbs like *can* and *will* excessively while using modal verbs like *may* and *could* rarely.

Linguistic variations have been noticed recently in Pakistani English language. According to Naz and Hussain (2024), who have made a comparative analysis of grammar used by speakers of both British and Pakistani English language through literary corpus, there exists some linguistic variation, thus implying contextual variation in Pakistani English language. Nevertheless, it should be noted that their study is confined to literary corpus only.

Other research offers indirect evidence regarding Pakistani business speech. In his work on lexical bundles in banking speech, Qayyum (2022) emphasizes the role played by institutional and ideological forces in shaping language use. Moavia, Malik, and Fazal

(2023) analyze hedges and boosters in Pakistani English newspapers, thus illustrating differences between genres in terms of stance markers. These studies advance knowledge about linguistic practices in Pakistan; however, they pay no attention to the use of modal verbs in business speeches.

2.5. Identification of Research Gaps

Several gaps are still identifiable regarding the topic of modality. For one thing, the majority of corpus-based studies on modal verbs have concentrated on written genres such as academic writing, business reports, and news texts. While there have been investigations into spoken business discourse, for instance, Xu (2023) and O’Keeffe et al. (2024), this study of business speeches by business actors has not received much attention.

Secondly, most of the existing research on the subject employs a synchronic analysis which does not provide much information about temporal changes in the use of modality over time. There needs to be a diachronic examination to understand changes in terms of frequency and function, especially given communicative needs.

Thirdly, there has been inadequate corpus-based research that focuses specifically on modal verb use in Pakistani business speeches. Even though past researches have looked into related aspects such as hedging and lexical bundles (Qayyum, 2022; Moavia et al., 2023) in the Pakistani context, there is still inadequate focus on modal verbs in business speech.

Lastly, even though many studies involving comparisons between various dialects of English have been carried out, this research is not a comparative one. The objective here is to provide an analysis of the usage of modal verbs in one particular variety of English, which makes its contribution to existing knowledge by shedding some light on the diachronic and functional aspect of modal verbs in Pakistani business English.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to fill the gap, the current study has adopted the framework suggested by Ken Hyland (2005), which considers modals as major resources of stance, allowing speakers to indicate their level of commitment to their propositions.

In this model, modal verbs have been placed on a scale where they are perceived from one end which is strong commitment such as ‘will’ and ‘must’ to another end which is hesitant or tentative such as ‘may,’ ‘might,’ and ‘could.’ Additionally, epistemic and deontic modality have been considered in this model.

This framework has successfully been implemented in different discourse contexts, such as academic discourse (Hyland, 1998), organizational discourse (Vogel, 2023), and Pakistani English newspaper discourse (Moavia et al., 2023). For this study, this framework will be utilized to explore patterns of use of modal verbs in the chosen corpus of Pakistani English business speeches in terms of frequency, functions, and diachrony.

However, it should be noted that the framework will be used in analyzing patterns in the chosen corpus without making any cross-varietal comparisons.

Thus, this study takes its place in the overlapping area between corpus linguistics and studies of modality and adds to the existing corpus of literature on Pakistani English by offering a diachronic corpus analysis of the usage of modal verbs in business discourse.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

In this study, a historical corpus approach is employed to examine the employment of modal verbs in Pakistani English business discourse delivered from 2001 to 2020. The use of corpus linguistics offers an empirical approach to studying naturally occurring language data and the identification of recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns throughout time (Biber et al., 2008; McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

A diachronic approach proves to be especially suitable for achieving the goals of this research, because this methodology can help to examine the modifications that have taken place regarding the use of frequency, distribution, and functions of modal verbs in the chosen corpus within twenty years.

4.2. Corpus Compilation

For this study, a corpus of speeches by Pakistani business people between 2001 to 2020 has been created using speeches that are readily available and have been provided in trustworthy sources. Some examples of the sources used include the State Bank of Pakistan, and speeches by various economists like Ishrat Hussain.

Speeches by Pakistani speakers only were considered for inclusion in the corpus, thus eliminating any potential for cross-variety comparisons and securing the homogeneity of Pakistani English in the business context. The corpus was limited to formal spoken discourse pertaining to economic and business topics.

All speeches were recorded and arranged chronologically for a historical analysis. This created the data set, which is the artificially constructed speech corpus for studying modal verbs in Pakistani English business communication.

4.3. Data Collection and Preprocessing

The data was collected in the format of PDFs and scans, after which it was translated into a text format using OCR tools, such as Google Docs OCR and Ant Converter. After the translation process, a proper data preprocessing technique was employed.

All non-linguistic features like headings, footnotes, page numbers, figures, tables, and other annotations have been removed from the files to keep only the main text. The converted files have been manually checked for linguistic consistency.

Moreover, metadata information regarding each of the speeches delivered in the year was compiled with the help of Microsoft Excel, which included date of speech, person

giving the speech, URL source, and type of speech. Standardized naming of files was ensured via batch renaming process.

4.4. Corpus Analysis Tools

The corpus was analyzed with the help of AntConc (Version 3.5.9), a popular computer program for corpus linguistic research. It helped produce frequency lists, concordances, and distributions of the modal verbs chosen.

This research focused on nine basic modal auxiliaries, which include will, would, can, could, may, might, must, should, and shall. The nine modal auxiliaries were selected since they have been recognized to play an essential role in modality studies and professional settings.

4.5. Analytical Procedure

The analytical process involved two complementary stages, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive account of modal verb usage within the corpus.

4.6. Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis entailed determining the frequency of occurrence for each modal verb throughout the corpus, focusing especially on how these modal verbs occurred through time. Yearly frequency counts were produced for the purpose of recognizing any diachronic trends in modal verb usage, with normalized frequencies determined whenever necessary for comparative purposes due to differing corpus size among the subsets. Furthermore, range analysis was carried out to determine how modal verbs dispersed across individual speeches as well as time periods, after which trend analysis was performed in order to determine any diachronic trends.

4.7. Qualitative Concordance Analysis

In addition to the above quantitative results, concordance lines that had been created using AntConc were also qualitatively analyzed to identify the meanings embedded within the modal verbs used in the corpus. Two main aspects of modality were considered for analysis; epistemic modality, which included the aspect of possibility, probability, and inference, as well as deontic modality, which included obligation, necessity, and permission. This qualitative aspect of modality helped provide a better insight into the usage of modal verbs as discoursal resources, especially in terms of stance, persuasive negotiation, and institutional identity.

4.8. Research Validity and Design Rationale

The use of a diachronic corpus-based approach in this study is necessary because the aim of this research is to investigate the evolution of language behavior in time, especially concerning modal verbs. By concentrating on one particular corpus, the researcher can maintain a consistent methodology and perform a detailed investigation of variation in one particular discourse community. Furthermore, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods of research will allow the researcher to identify the

most common patterns of modal verb usage in addition to their interpretation. However, it should be noted that the results of this study apply only to the chosen corpus and cannot be generalized across various varieties. This study provides an empirically sound investigation of modal verb usage in Pakistani English business speeches.

5. Results

The findings of the corpus-based investigation of the modal verbs used in Pakistani business English from 2001 to 2020 are presented in this part. The section not only presents the statistical outcomes but also interprets their functionality and situates them within the context of other studies.

5.1. Overview of Modal Verb Distribution (2001–2020)

In this case, there were nine main modal verbs found in the corpus, namely *will*, *would*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *should*, and *shall*, although their frequencies and distributions were very inconsistent through time. In this respect, it appears that there was a distinct pattern throughout time wherein early language was dominated by assertive modalities, especially *will*, while more recent language contained more hedging modalities, such as *would* and *may*. Thus, the development in this case suggests a gradual progression from certainty-based language to risk-aware discourse. At the same time, it was noted that the normal frequencies per 10,000 words were rather consistent throughout the corpus, regardless of varying frequencies. Therefore, this implies that the modification was not in the frequency of modal verbs but in their distribution patterns and purposes.

5.2. Early Phase (2001–2005): Certainty and Corporate Assertiveness

Table 1: Modal Verbs in Pakistani English Business Speeches (2001)

Modal	Raw Frequency	Normalized (per 10k)	Range	%
Will	247	38.0	20	38
Can	115	17.7	19	18
Should	102	15.7	19	16
Would	100	15.4	18	15
May	53	8.2	14	8
Could	17	2.6	10	3
Must	16	2.5	7	2
Shall	3	0.5	1	0
Total	653	100.6	108	100

Overall, the findings in Table 4.1 are consistent with previous research regarding language use in business and institutional discourse, wherein *will* is found to be predominant in early and formal stages of business interaction as an indicator of certainty, commitment, and future orientation (e.g., Hyland, 2005; Biber et al., 1999). The occurrence of *can* and *should* also conforms to patterns found in prior literature, wherein ability and advisability modalities are commonly used to establish a cooperative but authoritative business posture.

On the other hand, the lower occurrence of hedge modals, including *may* and *could*, is in line with studies reporting that the early corporate communication favors assertion over mitigation, particularly where there is an emphasis on showing confidence and control. Likewise, the infrequent occurrence of the strong deontics, which include *must* and *shall*, aligns with the existing literature that shows that obligation markers tend to occur less frequently in oral business communication.

Overall, the distribution supports established literature suggesting that early corporate discourse is characterized by certainty-driven modality, with limited hedging, and a stronger orientation toward assertive futurity and institutional confidence.

Table 2: Summary (2002–2005)

Year	Total	Norm (per 10k)	Dominant	%	Trend
2002	716	102.3	Will	45	Strong certainty
2003	424	106.0	Will	40	Stable assertion
2004	786	112.3	Will	38	Expansion
2005	966	120.8	Will	40	Peak usage

The time frame is marked by a continuous dominance of ‘will’ which serves as a measure of commitment, reliability, and a future-oriented approach. This is in line with Nelson (2006), who points out that ‘will’ serves as one of the indicators of futurity in business language. The use of ‘can’ to a certain extent denotes possibility, whereas ‘should’ conveys the sense of advisability and obligation. At the same time, the infrequent usage of ‘must’ reveals a trend toward more moderate approaches to expressing authority, which is confirmed by Hyland (1998).

5.3. Transitional Phase (2006–2010): Emergence of Hedging

Table 3: Summary (2006–2010)

Year	Total	Norm (per 10k)	Dominant	%	Trend
2006	506	101.2	Will/Would	38/26	Hedging emerges
2007	374	93.5	Will	38	Decline begins
2009	34	85.0	Can/Would	37/30	Variation
2010	88	88.0	Would	47	Hedging peak

Indeed, an important trend is clearly visible here, particularly when we focus on the employment of *would* in the year 2010. Firstly, the modal verb *would* could possibly be viewed in relation to such interpersonal usages of politeness, hypotheticality and strategic distance, which shows that there is a new less confrontational attitude towards communication. As a result, the frequent use of the ‘*would*’ verb may prove that corporate communication tends to become increasingly diplomatic. Such a trend is closely connected to Hyland’s (2005) model of interactional metadiscourse, where hedging and engagement serve as the main tools for interaction management.

Also, such a trend can be considered against the backdrop of socio-economic factors, especially the economic crisis that occurred after 2008, which probably pushed communicators towards adopting a cautious language style. Most importantly, despite the

functions being changed, the normalized frequency remains constant throughout the period. Thus, it shows that the change over time does not arise from a decrease in the use of modality, but rather from an internal re-arrangement of the functions of modal verbs.

5.4. Later Phase (2011–2020): Uncertainty and Strategic Hedging

Table 4: Summary (2011–2015)

Year	Total	Norm	Dominant	%
2011	215	86.0	Will	35
2012	400	100.0	Will	43
2013	290	96.7	Will/Can	43/34
2014	43	86.0	Will	44
2015	155	86.1	Will	40

Based on the data in Table 4.4, one can observe that in the initial years of the latter period (2011-2015), the *will* modal verb continues to be the most predominant in usage, with relatively consistent proportions of occurrence ranging from 35%-44%. The use of *will* thus implies that assertiveness and futurity have continued to play an essential role in Pakistani English business speech. Nevertheless, the gradual rise of *can* as another form of dominance since 2013 may suggest a subtle diversification of modal usage towards ability and possibility.

Considering other scholarly works regarding professional and institutional discourse (Hyland, 2005; Biber et al., 1999), this finding can be viewed as an intermediary phase rather than a full shift in modal ideology. Previous studies have demonstrated that business discourse is traditionally marked by the use of high assertiveness, while subsequent phases involve the employment of interactive and cautious approaches. Thus, the partial increase in the use of *can* along with *will* can be interpreted as such.

However, the continued predominance of *will* through all periods implies that there is no total implementation of hedging or uncertainty-related modality. The results rather indicate that this stage is characterized by assertive futurity but with growing use of modal verbs, which signify the inclusion of negotiations into the picture.

Table 5: Summary (2016–2020)

Year	Total	Norm	Dominant	%
2016	117	90.0	Would	30
2017	191	95.5	Will	33
2018	288	96.0	Will	51
2019	222	88.8	Will	43
2020	101	101.0	May	42

The use of modal verbs is illustrated by Table 4.5 below and shows an evident trend from the dominance of *will* to a greater instability in its frequency. Instead, the usage of *would* increases in 2016 and is followed by the increase in the frequency of *may* in 2020. Therefore, there is evidence of the shift from an assertive style of communication

towards one that involves more tentativeness. The trend is consistent with what has been found by other researchers (Hyland, 2005; Biber et al., 1999). It is expected for professional and business communication to develop along this path due to the increasing sensitivity of communication towards potential risks and diplomacy.

Table 6: Detailed Distribution (2020)

Modal	Raw	Norm	Range	%
May	43	43.0	1	42
Will	34	34.0	1	34
Shall	8	8.0	1	8
Would	8	8.0	1	8
Can	7	7.0	1	7
Could	1	1.0	1	1

The most important change can be seen from the year 2020, when *may* surpasses *will*, clearly indicating a move towards epistemic uncertainty in the business world. Such an indication shows a clear preference for conservative and probability language, indicating that the use of caution has risen among firms in their communication. Such changes can reasonably be attributed to the disruption witnessed across the globe owing to the COVID pandemic.

5.5. Functional Distribution of Modal Verbs

Table 7: Functional Distribution and Trends of Modal Verbs

Function	Modals	Trend
Epistemic (possibility)	may, might, could	Increasing
Epistemic (certainty)	will, would	Decreasing
Deontic (obligation)	should, must	Stable
Dynamic (ability)	can, could	Stable

This is consistent with Hyland's (2005) stance framework in which there is a shift to risk-sensitive and audience-oriented communication. On the other hand, the use of *should* rather than *must* strengthens the preference for softer authority in Pakistani professional writing.

5.6. Diachronic Interpretation

Table 8: Diachronic Trends in Modal Verb Usage and Functional Shifts

Period	Dominant	Style	Context
2001–2005	Will	Assertive	Economic growth
2006–2010	Will/Would	Transitional	Financial crisis
2011–2015	Will	Balanced	Recovery
2016–2019	Mixed	Hedged	Instability
2020	May	Uncertain	Pandemic

These changes indicate that there is an intimate connection between the use of modal verbs and the wider socio-economic environment, supporting the corpus-based view that linguistic phenomena always correspond to real-world situations (McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

5.7. Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of the current research generally support the patterns found in previous studies dealing with the role of modality in professional discourse. First, the stable predominance of *will* throughout most years can be explained by the ideas put forward by Michael Nelson (2006), who states that *will* is one of the most important markers of prediction and organizational commitment within business discourse. Second, the progressive growth of hedging strategies, especially *would* and *may*, is consistent with the arguments proposed by Ken Hyland (1998, 2005), who stresses the significance of hedging in interpersonal relationships and claim reduction in professional discourse.

In addition, the diachronic changes found in the dataset, particularly during times of economic turmoil, coincide with those discussed by Matteo Fuoli (2018) and reveal that uncertainty leads firms to enhance their credibility and build trust through the utilization of epistemic modality. The variations in the Pakistani version of English further echo the work of Zainab Naz and Rashid Hussain (2024).

Nonetheless, the dramatic increase in the use of *may* in the year 2020 represents one of the most notable contributions of the present study. Different from previously seen trends, this indicates an increased tendency towards managing uncertainty and risks, highlighting once again the extent to which modal verbs are sensitive to global events. In other words, this means that, compared to previous studies, the role of modality in business discourse appears more crisis-dependent.

6. Summary of Key Findings

The results of the current study confirm and further expand the scope of the previous research done in this area of modality in business discourse. On one hand, the frequent predominance of the *will* verb over the years demonstrates that businesses adopt a very assertive and futuristic attitude, which has already been noted by Michael Nelson (2006). In particular, *will* is recognized as one of the most important verbs used for prediction and commitment.

Secondly, the clear trend towards *may* as the most prevalent epistemic modality in 2020 indicates an orientation toward epistemic uncertainty and risk-sensitive language use. This finding is consistent with studies done by Fuoli (2018), which show that during times of instability, corporate language uses increasing amounts of epistemic modality.

In addition to this, although the total density of the modal verbs stays fairly steady within the corpus, there is a large shift in the functional distribution of the same over the time period observed. This supports the arguments of McEnery and Hardie (2012) concerning the use of functional distribution over frequency for studying diachronic variation.

Fourthly, the progressive use of hedging devices such as *would* and *may* reflects the importance of mitigations and negotiation in professional communication, as pointed

out by Hyland (1998, 2005). This is more pronounced during periods of crisis when communicators seek to strike a balance between authority and caution.

Lastly, the greater occurrence of *should* than *must* shows an inclination towards softer obligations and indirectness, which is linked to politeness culture ingrained within society. This is in consonance with findings reported by Naz and Hussain (2024), which point out unique pragmatic elements of Pakistani English influenced by indigenous socio-cultural conventions.

Furthermore, it is evident through the historical development of modal use that the linguistic phenomena present in business communication are inherently linked to wider socio-economic changes. The transition from assertive to hedged modality, especially during times of global unrest, advances prior knowledge on the topic by suggesting that modality is not just an important part of language but also a reflection of socio-economic change.

7. Discussion

This study of modal verbs in Pakistani business discourse (2001-2020) shows that modality is an important means through which stance is conveyed, future economic growth is predicted, and institutional power is managed. In comparison with prior research conducted in the fields of finance and institutions, it is seen that there are both similarities and differences specific to Pakistani English discourse.

A salient feature in the entire corpus is that of *will*, which denotes certainty, future projection, and institutional confidence. To illustrate, in the corpus it can be seen that: “it is envisaged that the commercial banks will play an important role in providing credit to the SME sector.” As noted by Nelson (2006), this observation is in complete agreement with the view that institutional economic discourse extensively uses *will* as a means of constructing confident predictions and assurances in policy. Likewise, Hyland (2005) argues that predictive modality is the cornerstone of both academic and professional discourse, where the use of *will* signifies controlled certainty.

The modal **can** is frequently used to express possibility, capability, and systemic potential. Examples include: “*Financial sector development can lead to improved income distribution...*”, “*Government-imposed restrictions... can be a major hindrance...*”, and “*Post offices can be used as an outpost...*”. This aligns with Hyland (1998, 2005), who argues that **can** is a primary hedging device in academic and institutional discourse, allowing claims to remain open to negotiation. The findings also support Baker (2006), who highlights that economic discourse often relies on modality to present outcomes as conditional rather than absolute.

The modal **should** appears in advisory and policy-oriented contexts, as in: “*they should diversify both in product lines as well as in geographical coverage.*” This reflects Hyland’s (2005) stance framework, where **should** functions as a mitigated directive that

balances authority with politeness. Compared with Western institutional discourse, the present study shows a similar pattern but with a stronger orientation toward indirect recommendation, which is consistent with the socio-pragmatic tendencies of Pakistani English described by Naz and Hussain (2024), where politeness and indirectness are prominent features.

On the other hand, *would* is either present in minimal frequency or completely absent from the database. The significance of this lies in its comparison with Hyland (1998), who considers *would* to be a primary hedge in academic writing. It serves the purpose of expressing hypothetical or conditional statements. The limited presence of *would* in this corpus indicates that the speakers prefer to express their predictions in a straightforward manner using *will* or *can*.

The modal *may* occurs in contexts of uncertainty and risk mitigation, particularly in relation to vulnerable populations. For instance: “*they may seek recourse to this Fund under adverse circumstances beyond their control.*” This supports Fuoli (2018), who demonstrates that crisis and risk discourse increases epistemic modality and hedging through markers like *may*. The present study extends this finding by showing that Pakistani institutional discourse intensifies such hedging in socially sensitive or economically uncertain contexts.

The modality *could* is found only a few times and is marginal in the data set. When found, it serves as a possibility marker, but because of its infrequency, there is an indication that there is a tendency to use more robust modals like *can*. This differs from Hyland (2005) who found *could* being used as a hedge in academic texts.

Modals like *must* and *shall* are conspicuously missing. The lack of these modal verbs is in direct contrast to the tradition of earlier institutional or legalistic discourse systems, which relied on *must* and *shall* to indicate obligation. As observed by Hyland (2005), *must* usually conveys an indication of firm commitment and authoritative force. However, their omission from the current data implies that there is no desire to impose anything directly. Likewise, Baker (2006) highlights a worldwide trend towards the omission of *shall* in professional English. These findings support the current trend but also exhibit a pragmatic choice made at the local level, as pointed out by Naz and Hussain (2024).

One such diachronic trend can be noted in the use of *may* in 2020, which suggests greater uncertainty on the part of speakers. This finding corresponds with Fuoli’s (2018) suggestion that in crisis situations, there is a tendency for epistemic distancing and hedging to occur. In this corpus, crisis rhetoric (especially in 2020) demonstrates a definite transition from *will* (assertiveness) to *may* (cautiousness).

8. Conclusion

This current research is an attempt to examine the frequency and functional uses of modals in Pakistani business speeches from the year 2001 till 2020 through posing pertinent questions such as the following: (i) Which modal verbs occur with high frequency in these speeches? (ii) What is the distribution pattern of these verbs within the corpus? (iii) What functions do these modals serve in discourse?

According to the results obtained through the corpus-driven approach conducted by means of AntConc software, *will* stands out among all other modal verbs as the most frequent one, which shows an inclination for future orientation, institutionally backed certainty, and economic prediction. In this way, the first research question is addressed since the use of *will* as the key modality indicator was identified in the course of the analysis of the business English language corpus. Apart from *will*, *can* and *should* modals also tend to appear quite often; they serve important communicative purposes.

On the contrary, the frequency of the modals *would*, *could*, *must*, and *shall* is notably low, reflecting a decrease in the use of obligation and hypothesis, and formal modality as well. The result addresses the posed problem of modal variability, which can be considered to be a preference in Pakistani business speeches.

Pragmatically, the study reveals that the use of modal verbs is not arbitrary but rather performs certain discursive functions. The use of *will* creates certainty and forecasts, *can* creates institutional possibility, and *should* creates obligation. The creation of *may*, especially in 2020, highlights the existence of uncertainties. All of the above directly address the question raised about the pragmatic value of modality within institutional stance.

In regard to larger socio-economic and pragmatic tendencies, the investigation reveals that modal preferences depend on economic changes and shifting institutional priorities at different points in time. The greater preference for hedging techniques in addition to dominant predictive modality implies a mix of certainty and uncertainty in financial speech. This finding addresses the last research question by proving that modals are affected by linguistic factors as well as economic policies, globalism, and crises.

In summary, this research finds that modal use in Pakistani business speech combines features of assertiveness (*will*), qualification of possibilities (*can*), soft obligations (*should*), and crisis-related hedging (*may*). These features are seen to combine characteristics of worldwide patterns of institutional discourse with those unique to Pakistani English, notably in pragmatic flexibility and lack of obligation. Thus modal verbs are clearly used in a sociologically and economically contextualized way in this corpus.

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