Modality and Generic Features in Chinese EFL Writings*

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Abstract

There are epistemic modals and deontic modals in the modality system. Epistemic modals are thought to be learned later, yet used more in novels and academic writings (Glottis, 2003; Li, 2001; Liang, 2008) while demonic modals tend to be more subjective and imperative and, therefore, are favored in instruction brochures or expository essays. However, such a distinction is not unconditionally fixed. This study employs corpus analysis techniques to reveal the characteristics of modality in academic papers and newspaper editorials, and then compares Chinese students’ essays with these two genres in order to reveal language learners’ patterns of modality in generic terms. The findings of this study indicate: (1) Academic papers show more consultative tendencies and analytical features with the use of “can” and “may”; (2) Newspaper editorials present de facto judgments over issues, foregrounding high modality value; (3) Chinese students, when asked to write argumentative essays, tend to follow some generic features of editorials and also have a negative transfer in the use of “should” and “can”, which is not typical in either academic writing or editorials. Such preferences for deontic modality reflect a limited knowledge of genre and a lack of appropriate consideration of different voices.

Key words: academic; editorials; genre; modality

1. Introduction

Studies on modality have been developing widely, ranging from grammatical categorization to cognitive process (Biber, 1999; Sweetser, 1990). Modality, according to Halliday (2000: 75), refers to “the speaker’s judgment of the probabilities, or the

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obligations, involved in what he is saying”. In this sense, modality is closely related to interpersonal meta-function, where communication parties recognize and construct social relationships. Like other meta-functions, interpersonal “meaning-potential” is realized by using a delicate modality system, by which something can be affirmed or denied, doubted or contradicted, insisted on or accepted with reservation, etc. What stance a speaker or a writer takes depends largely on the modality system underlying the clauses. Thus from a systemic functional point of view, modality is also considered as an indicator of attitude, a source for negotiation and a sign of heteroglossia.

F. R. Palmer did fundamental work in the study of mood and modality in a typological way (Palmer, 2007). He emphasized the lexical forms of modality and various modal expressions across languages. Based on previous works on realis and irrealis, he pointed out that modality can be classified into two groups, namely, propositional modality and event modality. To put it a step further, he combined the classic dichotomy of epistemic and deontic modalities. That is to say, propositional modality includes epistemic and evidential modality while event modality covers deontic and dynamic modal types (see Table 1).

According to Palmer (2007: 8-10), epistemic modality shows the speaker’s “judgments about the factual status of the proposition”, while evidential modality reflects “the evidence” the speaker has for its “factual status”. When we are concerned about the possibility and necessity of an issue, we tend to use epistemic modality, which is also regarded as “inference” in a cognitive sense. On the other hand, deontic modality relates to “obligation or permission”, a force from the external world, whereas dynamic modality conveys the “ability or willingness”, one of the inner feelings.

Table 1. Palmer’s classification of modality in modal systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic</td>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Perhaps this book will be useful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidential</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>He is said to be extremely rich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontic</td>
<td>External conditions</td>
<td>John must come in now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td>Internal conditions</td>
<td>Mary can speak French.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be inferred from the table that not only modal verbs play the role of negotiation, but other forms, such as adjuncts, degree adverbs, projection, etc., also function effectively as modal expressions. Aijmer (2002: 57) also points out that modality could “be expressed by functionally equivalent adverbs (probably, possibly) and lexical verbs with modal meaning (I think, I feel)” as well as modal auxiliaries.

Halliday (2000) considers the mood system as a crucial and inseparable part of the interpersonal meta-function, in which modality and polarity are closely related. Polarity is “the choice between positive and negative”, as in yes or no, and modality has more
to do with the “intermediate degrees” between the positive and negative poles, such as sometimes or maybe (Halliday, 2000: 88). By four sub-categories of type, orientation, value and polarity, the modality system can be generated into 144 categories and they could specifically describe all the variants occurring in the mood system. However, as far as this paper is concerned, a general distinction is made on type only; that is, modalization and modulation are two basic concerns in the current study, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Halliday’s modality system of modalization and modulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Modality</th>
<th>Tendency</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modalization</td>
<td>Probability</td>
<td>They may have known it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They certainly knew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Usuality</td>
<td>It sometimes happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modulation</td>
<td>Obligation</td>
<td>You are required to do so!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>You should be patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inclination</td>
<td>She can perform Beijing opera.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>She wants to perform Beijing opera.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Palmer’s classification puts more emphasis on the semantic meaning and lexical expressions of modality, but multi-functionality of modality is more related to discourse and textual structure. Halliday, in this regard, defines modality as the interpersonal component of a dynamic discourse, from which a speaker’s attitude or judgment is exposed, be it an inclination or obligation. When a certain type of modality is chosen, a speaker or writer is not only expressing an attitude or demanding an action, a bigger concern is also taken to enhance interpersonal relationship and invite discussion from other discoursal parties. For example, a scientific journal paper is written for both publication of some achievements and debate of the current study, or for modification of further studies. Thus the modality system used in a scientific paper is different from those used in fairy tales, or those in legal documents. According to Yang (2006), shall and may take 74% of the modal verbs used in legal documents, and this demonstrates a sharp generic distinction from scientific papers. In his study, will and can are two of the most frequently used modal verbs in scientific papers.

2. Method and research questions

2.1 Research questions

Modal expressions vary among text types, both in terms of function and frequency. Gotti (2003: 271) studied the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts and found that shall was “commonly used in speech-based prose” in contrast to a “very low normalized figures for SHALL-forms in scientific texts”. Smith (2003: 252) studied the diachronic development of have to and pointed out that the use of have to was “most concentrated in the fiction and press genres, with growth being most significant in the press reportage section”. Both of these studies show that modality may reflect generic features and in turn influence
generic structures. In second language learning, a rough description of modality is given as a rule of thumb, stating that *shall* is used for request and *can* is describing order and *may* is related to possibility (Swan, 1993). However, when it comes to specific genre writing, such as writing an application letter, it is not surprising to find that learners may inappropriately use a lot of modalities of ability (*can*) or subjective judgment (*I think*). Will native speakers use similar patterns of modal expressions? How do patterns of modal expressions differ across genres? In order to answer these questions, I put forward more specific ones in the following:

1. What generic features do modal expressions have in scientific writings and newspaper editorials?
2. What are the differences between modal expressions used in learners’ argumentative essays and those used in scientific writings and newspaper editorials?

### 2.2 Classifications of modality
Halliday and Palmer’s classifications, overlapping in some sense, are incorporated in this study to construct four types of modal expressions, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Classifications of modality in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Modal Expressions</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic Modality</td>
<td>Probability</td>
<td>perhaps, may, possible, I think, surely</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Usuality</td>
<td>usually, sometimes, often</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontic Modality</td>
<td>Inclination</td>
<td>can, might, could</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obligation</td>
<td>must, should, ought</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first type is epistemic modality, similar to modalization in Halliday’s modality system, referring to an uncertainty or lack of commitment on the part of the speaker. Modal expressions of this type not only display probability or usuality, but also uncover a speaker’s engagement in a discourse, or quotation of other factual statements (Li, 2001; Liang, 2008).

The second type is deontic modality, which is thought to add obligation or inclination to a proposition. Although some modal expressions may function in both deontic and epistemic ways, I take their root meanings as the basic function; that is to say, obligation is considered as the root modal function of *must* and the following research will be based on this function. If meanings other than root ones are used, for example, when *must* is used in *He must be there* to indicate probability, or *may* is used in *You may go now* to express permission, they are not deleted for purification of functions because the overall frequencies are more significant than these differences. Further analyses of *may* and *must* are shown in Section 3.

### 2.3 Selection of corpora and analyzing tools
When choosing a corpus for study, I found contemporary English very different from
English used decades ago. Therefore, I set up my own corpus on newspaper editorials (ED for short), in which 150 editorials were chosen from *New York Times*, *Economists*, and *Los Angeles Times* published in 2009, the token number being 82,478. In addition, 20 scientific papers were chosen from *Elsevier* published in 2004 (SI for short). All scientific papers come from high impact factor journals and vary widely from biology to geology to physics. Because scientific papers (with word tokens of 99,383) are relatively longer than editorials, normalized ratios are used to show the frequency of each modal expression.

With the above corpora as native speakers’ use of the modality system, I then choose 360 argumentative essays from SWECCCL (2nd edition) as Chinese EFL learners’ corpus (CL for short). Those essays were written in 2007 by Chinese English learners, who were non-English majors and would possibly engage in scientific writings in the near future. The total number of word tokens is 97,190.

Some modal expressions in SWECCCL may have wrong spelt forms (*often* or *migh*) or homographic words (*can* as a container; or *May* as a month in spring time); hence these forms are deleted by manual work. They are not counted as appropriately used modal expressions. Automatic analyzing tool Antconc 3.2.1 was used to search concordance lines and keywords.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 The distribution of modal expressions in three corpora

The frequencies of 14 modals mentioned above (see Table 3) were counted and converted into normalized numbers, that is, the occurrence of modals in 1000 words. After the first automatic search the concordance lines for each corpus were 534 (SI), 829 (ED) and 2571 (CL). Then some non-modal uses were deleted by manual work, for example, *many* was spelt wrongly as *may*, *must* and *ought* are used as nouns (*Doing homework is a must.*), *can* means a container of food or drinks, *May* refers to a month in spring time, etc. Thus the total numbers of modal uses are 532 (SI), 826 (ED) and 2568 (CL) respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Modals</th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>ED</th>
<th>CL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>Norm. (%)</td>
<td>Freq.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>might</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>could</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>must</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>should</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ought</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Distribution of modality in three corpora
The table shows that *can* and *may* are frequently used in scientific writings, with proportions of 2.05 and 1.39. In newspaper editorials and learners’ writings, *can* also demonstrates high frequency, except for the fact that learners tend to overuse this modal verb, a similar result was found by Liang (2008) and Liu (2004). There are two possible reasons. First, *can* is followed by the base form of a verb, and thus is easily acquired by learners. Second, *can* is emphasized in beginners’ textbooks, where learners start describing their abilities and ego-identities.

In scientific writings, an objective view is emphasized, thus epistemic modals *I think* and *surely* are avoided. Usually these modal expressions relate to an arbitrary and presumptuous attitude, and some linguists hold that these expressions are used more frequently in spoken languages (Aijmer, 2002). Apart from being objective, scientific writings also justify their findings in an assertive, consistent and reasonable way; therefore the occurrence of *often* is higher than the appearances of *usually* and *sometimes*. The same pattern can be found in newspaper editorials. But second language learners seem to have problems in identifying the functions of these three expressions.

Another thing to be noticed from the table is the use of *possible*, which presents similar occurrence in three corpora. However, when this word is linked to the “as...as...” sequence, it has no modal indications. There are 9 concordance lines in CL using “as soon/little/long...as possible” while there are only 1 and 7 concordances lines in SI and ED. Some typical modal sequences “it is possible that” or “make it possible” can rarely be found in the learner corpus.

In general, modal expressions in Group A (deontic modality) have higher frequency than those in Group B (epistemic modality). In cognitive perspective, Sweetser (1990: 56) regards deontic modality as the root modality and the epistemic is the semantic extension of the root modality; therefore, deontic modality is acquired and exercised more easily than the epistemic one.
3.2 Generic features and the modality system

Martin (1985: 250) mentions that genres are “how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them”. Using a certain genre implies a tendency to follow some text structure, realizing a “recurrent configuration of meanings”, and achieving communicative goals. In this sense, though both scientific papers and newspaper editorials are argumentative essays, they serve different purposes. Readers of scientific papers are researchers, referees and reviewers in the same field, and they may focus on one or two parts of the paper, yet few of them will read the whole article from the beginning to the end. That is why many journals ask their contributors to follow the format of IMReD, namely, the introduction, methods and materials, results and discussion. However, newspaper editorials may not be directed towards experts or researchers; instead, they expect an audience as large as possible, in which instruction and readability are the priorities. Editorials are regarded as “the heart of a newspaper”, which serves to reveal the stance and style of that newspaper.

Keyness parameters are calculated to compare scientific writings and newspaper editorials:

Table 5. Comparison of modality between SI and ED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modals</th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>ED</th>
<th>Keyness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>105.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>81.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>53.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>31.846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perhaps</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought</td>
<td>\</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>-6.696</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) According to Table 5, *should* and *could* are prominent features in editorials (*can* takes a higher proportion in both corpora, thus makes no prominent difference), with proportions of 20.3% and 18.6% of all modal expressions used. A possible reason is that most editorials are commenting on events which have already happened, thus the past tense is preferred. On the other hand, though editorial writers are likely to show their stance in an unambiguous way, and they do not intend to offend readers; therefore, mitigating modal verbs *could* and *might* are preferred.

To put the study one step further, all clusters with a center word of *should* were analyzed, with one to two words set to the left. Searching results shows that in editorial writings *should* frequently follows personal and institutional expressions, indicating an emphasis on demand and obligation. For example, in 154 tokens of clusters, there are 10 clusters beginning with *Mr. Obama, Obama, Barack Obama* or *Obama Administration*; in addition, over half of the clusters use *Congress, policymakers, government, it, and they in*
initial places. These expressions demonstrate a tendency to put other people or parties in salient positions and stress their responsibilities. Editorial writers are only responsible for commenting on the issues discussed, but not for handling those issues. In contrast, even if writers of scientific papers are responsible for all the findings announced, they seldom use first person pronouns or personal expressions as agents before should. Some inanimate subjects, such as chemistry, or programs, are preferred. Because science is intended to discover natural and objective laws of the world, personal interference is generally reduced or avoided in research; therefore, should is often preceded by factual matters or non-person subjects. The same generic difference can be shown for the use of must and ought as well.

(2) Perhaps and may are both related to the epistemic modality, representing possibility or potential tendency. Nevertheless, their occurrences in the two corpora are almost exactly opposite. Editorial writings have more uses of perhaps while scientific papers tend to use may more frequently. When tracing the semantic meanings of these two words, I found that perhaps indicates more of uncertainty about the truth value of a proposition, and collocations containing may express inference or reasoning, as shown in the following examples.

**Perhaps** future space probes will be plastered in logos, as Formula One racers are now.

**Perhaps** CIA Director Leon Panetta had that in mind when he canceled the assassination program.

Improvements in mechanical properties **may** be attributed to differences in the quantity and morphology of the crystalline regions within UHMWPE.

For biologists who **may** want to determine the evolutionary history of up to 10,000 species on a single tree, the efficiency of this algorithm has important practical implications.

With the use of perhaps, editorial writers are presenting a fuzzy semantic stance to shun possible criticism. If scientific writers use this word more frequently, the objectivity and truth value of their scientific findings would become doubtful.

Next, a contrastive study on clusters of may in two corpora was conducted in order to reveal more generic features. The results are shown in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>ED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>may be</strong> (done, doing, adj.)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>may have</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>other collocates</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from frequent occurrences of other collocates, most of which are “may + verb” collocates, both SI and ED present higher frequencies of the may be (done, doing, adj.) cluster, but in SI may be done/adj. constitutes an overwhelming part, for example, may be linked/maintained/related/necessary/exponential. In ED another structure, the cluster may
be doing/adj. takes the prominent role, such as may be embarking/happening/stabilizing/dropping/ending/easier, etc. This point of difference again proves the subjective and objective stances that the two genres take in argumentation. When using the cluster may be done/adj., scientific authors use the passive voice, the subjects being facts or objective things. However, editorial writers, when using it, put personal nouns or institutions as subjects, adopting the active voice. The following two sentences illustrate this difference:

The sensors may be fabricated in array configurations and coated to include a variety of available materials for sensing films.

Thus the federal government may be embarking on a very expensive course—all to head off a threat that many Americans don’t understand or don’t believe to be a threat at all.

This point also corresponds to other linguists’ statements that scientific papers tend to have such modal verbs as may to avoid an arbitrary or imposing attitude (Yang, 2006). A further examination of CL found 44 out of the 243 may be done/adj. clusters, with no case of may be doing. In these 44 cases, most of the words following may be are past participles or adjective forms, for example, may be depressed/dismayed/excited/ill/confused/isolated. Chinese English learners have acquired the basic form of may + verb or may be done/adj., but they lack the awareness of using may be doing to consider other voices or describe the underlying process.

3.3 Generic features in the learner corpus and their tendencies

There have been studies on learners’ acquisition of the English modality system. Some linguists found that non-native writers (Asian learners) overuse must and should in essays on education, whereas must is not used in writing about politics (Hinkel, 1995, cited in Aijmer, 2002). Other linguists argued that deontic modality was acquired earlier than epistemic modality, which led to a narrative tone commonly revealed in learners’ writing (Liang, 2008). Still others held the view that the overuse of I think is “an example of the overuse of features indicating Writer/Reader visibility (involvement)”, and they demonstrated that there are “more features of Writer/Reader visibility” in four learner corpora (French, Dutch, Swedish and Finnish) (Petch-Tyson, 1998, cited in Aijmer, 2002: 71).

In the current study, SI and ED are taken as reference corpora to compare with Chinese learners’ use of modal expressions. Statistics show that some modal auxiliaries are overused in learners’ corpus, while others are underused or neglected (see Table 4).

(1) I think. This phrase is apparently overused by Chinese learners, with a proportion of 1.85 per 1000 words. Not a single case of this expression was found in SI and only 1 case in ED. Aijmer (2002) argues that the overuse of I think is “due to influence from spoken language”. “I think was one of the most frequent phrases in the London-Lund Corpus occurring 51 times per 10,000 words” (Aijmer, 2002: 71). Interestingly, Wen (2003) demonstrated that advanced Chinese learners “clearly employed a spoken type of discourse in their English writing as EFL learners from other countries do” (Wen, 2003: 275). Language learners may not understand clearly the spoken generic tendency of this phrase and thus fail to shift the usage from spoken to written forms.
(2) *should*. The overuse of this modal verb has something to do with first language transfer and mode of thinking. In argumentative essays, students tend to promote and impose what they take for granted as brilliant ideas, rarely considering “the possibilities of heteroglossia between different stances” (Li, 2001: 400). For example:

> When you reach a new place, will you be a little unhappy? Or will you miss home very much? If so, you *should* change yourself and the university education will help you. Adapt to it no matter what it happened.
> In my opinion, we *should* balance the two ways of giving holiday greetings properly.
> This job is more complicated than of living on campus in that one *should* attend to the cleanliness and tidiness of the apartment alone and pay attention to the water, electricity fees when these can be shared by 4 or 5 roommates.

A further examination of the clusters shows that modal verbs in CL tend to be preceded by personal nouns, such as *we*, *you*, *they*, *people*, etc. Among them the clusters of *we should* are as high as 197 times. Biber et al. (1999) pointed out that modal auxiliaries *must* and *should* were used to indicate collective obligation, followed by passive voice. Such collocation can purposefully avoid mentioning responsibility of agents. In contrast, in either SI or ED the cluster *we should* was used only once.

(3) *might* and *could*. Although *can*, *might* and *could* are epistemic modal verbs, expressing the speaker’s or writer’s inclination, learners overuse can but underuse *might* and *could* in contrast with editorial writings. *Might* and *could* are past tense verb forms and indicate a tone of negotiation, which is not acquired in learners’ interlanguage.

(4) *must*. The use of *must* has been changed significantly over time. Smith (2003) demonstrates that “the decline of *must* in its root sense is pronounced in written and spoken modes and across all genres” (Smith, 2003: 263). Since this modal verb shows a highly subjective and insistent attitude, even an authoritative stance, it is less favored in a culture where “overt markers of power or hierarchy are much less in favor” (Fairclough, 1992, cited in Smith, 2003: 263). It can be inferred that language learners only master the root sense of *must* and fail to notice the requirements among genres (Some instruction brochure may still hold on to the use of *must* while political speeches may not).

4. Conclusion

In this study, materials from three genres were chosen to compare modality systems. The study is not exhaustive on functions of modal expressions, and manual work has to be combined with automatic search; thus the number of essays have to be limited. However, some conclusions can be safely drawn:

(1) Deontic modality is commonly used in newspaper editorials, taking the instances of *can*, *could* and *should*. Writers in this genre tend to use third person pronouns, names or institutions in front of these modal verbs to emphasize responsibilities of other parties. The high proportion of *could* reflects the possibility of negotiation between writers and
readers, giving writers space to refute.

(2) Scientific writings show more consultative tendencies and analytical features by the use of \textit{can} (2.05), \textit{may} (1.39) and the passive voice. A less frequent use of other deontic modal expressions indicates a factual reasoning instead of a persuasive one. Hedges such as \textit{possible}, \textit{might} and \textit{perhaps} are rare because they are markers of the writer’s “reluctance to present or evaluate propositional information categorically” (Hyland, 1998, cited in Xu, 2007: 42). In scientific writings, the word sequences preceding modal expressions are frequently objective things, representing findings of natural processes.

(3) Language learners lack the awareness of generic features attached to modal expressions, for example, \textit{should} is used frequently in newspaper editorials, following personal and institutional expressions, while \textit{may} is a prominent modal verb in scientific writings. Without such awareness, learners tend to mismatch the modal meanings with their functions, either overuse (such as \textit{should}, \textit{must} or \textit{often}) or underuse (for example, \textit{might} and \textit{could}) them in argumentative essays. Interestingly, learners tend to prefer \textit{may}, but seldom compose the sequence of \textit{may be done/doing} to present a consideration of other parties involved or a face-saving action. All these findings indicate that pedagogical methods have to be taken to increase the awareness of modal multifunctionality and generic differences in using modal expressions.

\textbf{Note}

1 According to Biber et al. (2009: 485), modal expressions are grouped into three categories: (1) permission/possibility/ability (2) obligation/necessity (3) volition/prediction. In this paper only modal expressions functioning in these three ways are considered. The word \textit{can}, for example, works only as a likelihood/probability/prediction lexical word instead of a container for drinks.

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