

## Lecture 6: Modals, hedging and overlexicalisation

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### Modals

Hodge and Kress (1993) and Fairclough (2003) discuss a characteristic of language that tells us about people's commitments to what they say and also about their own sense of perceived status. In language we must have ways of determining what level of commitment people have to what they are saying and ways to communicate our own levels of certainty. But since language is about concealing as well as revealing, to deceive as well as inform there will be components of grammar that will help to facilitate this (Hodge and Kress, 1979). In English we have a system called the modal auxiliaries. Modals allow us to express degrees of certainty. These are verbs such as 'may', 'will' and 'must' and adjectives such as 'possible', 'probable' and 'certain'. We use them all the time when we speak. They indicate our judgement of probabilities and obligations, signal factuality, certainty and doubt. We now see how these work in the following example:

*I will have a beer tonight*  
*I may have a beer tonight*

This is a trivial example. But they can be used strategically along with other lexical choices to both enhance and conceal what we will actually do. We come on to this shortly.

Modality can also be associated with hedging terms such as 'I think' or 'kind of/sort of'. What modals do is set up a relationship between the author and the author's representations - in other words what we commit ourselves to in terms of truth. This is clear in the difference between:

*This is the correct procedure*  
*I think this might be the correct procedure*

The use of modals also tells us something of the author's identity. Some people feel they are in a position to be so certain and others less so. If we read a document from our employers saying we 'will' do something rather than we 'should' or they 'think we should do it', these will give us very different sense of the power that they believe they have over us.

Modals expressing high degrees of certainty might be used in order to convince people. We can see this in an excerpt from a speech on multiculturalism by British Conservative leader David Cameron

*We must not fall for the illusion that the problems of community cohesion can be solved simply through top-down, quick-fix state action. State action is certainly necessary today, but it is not sufficient. But it must also be the right kind of action, expressed in a calm, thoughtful and reasonable way.*

Here he uses the modal 'must' frequently asserting his certainty and confidence. Imagine if he said in the last sentence: 'It should be the right kind of action' or 'It might be the right kind of action'. Where we find texts filled with uncertainty and lack of commitment we are dealing with an author who feels much less confident. Later in Cameron's speech we do find lower commitment:

*But I don't believe this should mean any abandonment of the fundamental principle of one people under one law. Religious freedom is a cardinal principle of the British liberal tradition. But liberalism also means this: that there is a limit to the role of religion in public life.*  
*February 26, 2008*

Here while there is certainty about what liberalism means he slightly reduces his commitment with 'I believe' in the first line. This is clearly not the same as saying 'I think' as it shows slightly more of a commitment. And clearly it is important for the opposition leader to talk

about beliefs where possible. But we can still look at where and how he uses them. In this case it allows him to not appear too much like he is laying out commandments. In this sentence he could have just said 'This will not mean any abandonment...'

Finally we can see how Cameron attributes less certainty and commitment to others:

*Some say the risk is inflation. Others say it's recession. So some think there should be more intervention by the Government in the financial markets. Some say there should be less.*

He does not specify who the some are, anonymising them, but they are not described as 'knowing' or even 'believing' there should be more intervention by Government but only 'think' it. This is a technique often used to detract from what others hold to be the case.

Murray (2002) gives an example of speech that shows a lack in confidence through use of modals. This is from a nurse:

*Yeah. I think it, sort of, provided very holistic care for the elderly lady coming through the unit, who actually gained more benefits than simply having a wound dressed on 'er leg. Erm, I think that had it, had she 'a' been seen in an ordinary unit without nurse practitioner cover, the chances are that the, er, medical staff there would've dealt with 'er leg. ..*

Such use of modals would not be found for example in the speech of a doctor even though the doctor may have no more knowledge than the nurse.

Modals are also important as they express an ambiguity over power. 'She may talk' either gives permission or suggest a possibility. Again a speaker can use this to build up a sense of power where it can always be denied. So coercion can be masked in surface forms of rationality. In some cases there is no ambiguity but this is rare. This suggests that the ambiguity is highly functional.

*You cannot swim here*

*You may do any of the essay questions*

The first might be legal, for safety, or placed there by an annoyed neighbor. The second suggests both a sense of having an option but also that you are being *allowed* to do so. We can see the same ambiguity in a political speech:

*We must take globalization as an opportunity...*

Again we have the sense of rationality against an order.

*We cannot avoid the fact that we are now part of a global economic order...*

Does cannot here mean that since national economies are now subordinate to the WTO and World Bank there is legal reasons we cannot? Or does it mean that it would not be reasonable? In the following we can see descending order of power by the speaker:

*You will come with me*

*You must come with me*

*The authorities order you must come with me*

In the first the speaker has the power. In the second they appeal to some unmentioned power. In the last one their own power is so weak that they have to name the authority. We often hear children use this last one when they say to a sibling 'You've got to come – No, I won't – Mummy says you've got to' .

We often find that pop psychologists and style gurus on TV and in lifestyle magazines use modals like 'will' and 'is' to create a sense of their own authority over knowledge.

*People who are successful in life are those who can adapt quickly. I call these 'adaptors'. The next category are those that worry... blah blah...*

Importantly modal auxiliaries are ambiguous over temporality.

*We must adapt to changes in global markets through building a knowledge based economy that is dynamic and versatile.*

Is this referring to the future? Is it a statement about what will happen or is a general law that applies right now? This indeterminacy is useful for speakers who have the contradictory task of portraying a specific issue giving a sense of addressing it, without actually making clear what they will in fact do.

Of course and finally we can use modals to protect our utterances from criticism:

*Teacher: do you understand this process?*

*Student: Yes, I think I can. I'm sort of realising its perhaps the key part of the course.*

### **Hedging**

As well as modality authors can use hedging in order to create a strategic ambiguity within their claims (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Hedging simply means where a speaker avoids commitment to something, or directness, although as will see this can often be used to give the impression of being detailed and precise. For example, the Daily Mail anti-immigration article we looked at previously stated:

*Some people say that multiculturalism is outmoded, but, in fact, it is still orthodox thinking.*

These all allow avoidance of being specific. In the same article we find hedging the words 'quite often'

Politicians of course are masters of hedging. Some examples from Resche (2004):

*Some recent evidence suggests* that the labor markets bear *especially* careful watching for signs that the return to *more* normal patterns *may* be in process. The Bureau of Labor Statistics *reports* that people were *somewhat more* willing to quit their jobs to seek other employment *in January* than previously.

What we have here is a whole range of hedging features that allow this simple statement to be dressed up. It allows cushioning from the impact of what is being said and also gives the impression of expertise through technical language. Drawing on the work of Resche (2004) Evans 1994, Rounds 1982 Banks 1994 (Selinker, 1979) we can identify just what these features are and show how they can be used to dress up the following statement:

*There are many deadlines at this time of year so I was not able to complete my assignments*

- Long noun phrases

*A lot of similarly timed deadlines at this time of year all which show a lack of coordination between staff, prevented successful completion of my assignments*

Here we can see that the actual process of not handing in the assignment has been pushed to the back of the sentence into the subordinate clause behind the long noun phrase. Van Dijk (1993) has given extensive discussion of the way this is one grammatical technique for backgrounding information.

- Modal verbs such as ‘may’, ‘perhaps’ and auxiliary verbs such as ‘seems to’ and adverbs such as especially

*It **seems to be the case** that lot of similarly timed deadlines at this time of year **perhaps** all which show a lack of coordination between staff, could **especially** have tended to prevent successful completion of my assignments*

Here the speaker lowers the certainty of what they say and hides behind the lowered modality.

- Approximators ‘some’, ‘somewhat’ and the compounding of these ‘to a somewhat lesser extent’.

***Some** similarly timed deadlines at this time of year **perhaps** all which show a lack of coordination between staff, could **somewhat** have tended to prevent successful completion of my assignments.*

We can see here that these allow the speaker to conceal exactly how many deadlines fall at the same time and to distance themselves from the commitment to the fact that they did prevent assignment completion.

- None factive verbs such as ‘report’, ‘suggest’

*Some students seem to be **reporting** that it may be the case the case that lot of similarly timed deadlines at this time of year, perhaps **suggesting** a lack of coordination between staff, could **especially** have tended to prevent successful completion of my assignments.*

Again we can see how this allows a sense of vagueness about what is exactly said and levels of evidence, but nevertheless brings a sense of evidence being considered.

- Comparative forms of adverbs ‘more concerned *than* before’ can be used to suggest precision

*Some students seem to be reporting that that it may be the case that there are **more** similarly timed deadlines at this time of year **than before**, perhaps suggesting a lack of coordination between staff, that could have tended to prevent successful completion of my assignments*

Again here we are given an increased sense of precision, of research and evidence as comparisons are made. This can be increased further with the following:

- Specific times and referral to history such as ‘since last year’, ‘in 1998’, ‘previously’.

*Some students have **on numerous occasions** reported that that it may be the case that there are more similarly timed deadlines at this time of year than the **same date last year**, perhaps suggesting less coordination between staff than in **previous years**, that could have tended to prevent successful completion of my **November** assignments*

Here the speaker is able to use times to bring a sense of precision, continuity and convey a sense that they have an awareness of the broader picture. Mention of history and time in speeches can also suggest wisdom. A speaker might say ‘over the last half century’, ‘the last two generations have known’.

- Reference to an official body, report, person or expert

*Historically there has been **much better** coordination between staff as regards coordination of essay deadlines **than we now experience**. Official departmental documentation appears to have **traditionally** supported the idea of responding to student suggestions that might assist in learning and assessment processes, **especially** where **there might** be an issue of impeding assignment submission. Will **this generation** of students have to tolerate different levels of respect that in this **former age**.*

Amongst the highlighted hedging here we find appeals to history, tradition and also importantly ‘official departmental documentation’, although exactly what evidence this provides is very vague and this could be referring simply to a course handbook or webpage. Politicians especially will even add references to previous kinds of policy or political personalities, although quotes will often be conveniently altered paraphrases or much vaguer references.

*Historically there has been much better coordination between staff as regards coordination of essay deadlines than we now experience. Official departmental documentation appears to have traditionally supported the idea of responding to student suggestions that might assist in learning and assessment processes. Since the times when **Plato** was engaging with his pupils in **ancient Greece** scholarly thinking has always been based on certain levels of acceptable mutual respect between the taught and the teacher especially where there might be an issue of impeding assignment submission.*

Of course we are entering the realm of the absurd here in terms of the student’s excuse for not submitting their essay. But this is in fact not atypical of how politicians use such references.

- connectors such as ‘while’, ‘although’, ‘nonetheless’, ‘moreover’ are important to convey that the speaker is covering all the options and alternative explanations. This can be important where speakers are required to appear cautious (Selinker, 1979)

*Some staff might consider it somewhat convenient to place assignment deadlines without attention to broader degree timetable matters as found outlined in official University documentation. **Nonetheless**, as Winston Churchill always reminded us, we must be mindful of how history will judge us, and they might therefore want to accept the suggestion that they have been instrumental in damaging the fluency of student essay submission precisely in this last semester.*

- Excessive defining of concepts and terms

*Essay submission deadlines, **that point at which learners are tested on curricula contents**, have been placed around similar dates this semester, **what we might want to call, drawing inspiration from the educationalist Roan Bruner, as ‘heavy clustering’**, which has placed a somewhat onerous load on students concerned to submit their work precisely on time, **meaning that date and time specifically documented in individual course material supplied by tutors**.*

### Overlexicalization

Teo (2000: 20) explains that overlexicalisation:

results when a surfeit of repetitious, quasi-synonymous terms is woven in to the fabric of news discourse, giving rise to a sense of overcompleteness.

Overlexicalisation gives a sense of overpersuasion and is normally evidence that something is problematic or of ideological contention. So in our analysis of a text we would find

overlexicalisation where there was an abundance of particular words and their synonyms. This would point to where the persuasion was taking place and the area of ideological contention. Two simple example are:

*Male nurse*

*Female doctor*

We can ask why these functionalisations also require further elaboration in terms of gender. In this case of course it signals a deviation from social convention or expectation. But these are always cues to the dominant ideology. In other words it is still expected that men are doctors and women are nurses.

Achugar (2007) gives a typical example of the way that enemies can be overlexicalised

*Certainly our Armed Forces victorious in the battle against the unpatriotic forces of Marxist subversion were accused of supposed violations to human rights. . .*  
(*El Soldado*, April 1989)

Here the 'other' becomes an emblematic symbol of a group rather than identifiable actors. So they become generic and collectivised. But this overuse of such classifications immediately tells us of their contentious nature.

Teo carries out an analysis of the representation of drug dealers in the press. He found that there was an overlexicalisation of words for youth.

*'looks and sounds like is he is about 13', 'The 16 year old', 'five other youths', 'two young Asian gang members', 'some as young as 12', 'these kids', 'their leader at 13', 'had beaten two murder charges by 17', 'at least two of the accomplices were of the same age (13 and 14)'*

Teo says that of course such facts about age would be expected as the basic information of reporting. But why this excessive use of such terms? Emphasising youth in this way could be seen as one way to get sympathy. But he rejects this being young is not a mitigating factor here. Rather this adds to the moral panic. 'The kids are out of control'. 'What is society coming to?' 'We need greater discipline law and order in this society'. All these are common news themes that of course distract from broader social changes and the causes of what we call criminal behaviour.

Teo points out that there is also overlexicalisation of terms of disfavour.

*'The cult of extreme violence', 'Extreme youth and extreme violence', 'Hacked and stabbed 11 times with machetes'*

That we are continually told it is extreme must be for a reason. Why can we not be left to judge this ourselves?

In 10 newspaper articles he finds overlexicalisation of epithets having the effect of dehumanisation:

*'Angry', 'resentful', 'cruel', 'unfathomable', 'viscious', 'evil', 'frenzied', 'animal like', 'corrupting'.*

Is this really the language of news reporting that explains things to us? In the 1930s sociologists found that street gangs are made up of young people who had no future in the mainstream society. So they developed their own systems of esteem. Such demonising reporting conceals the actual sociological reality.