Linguistic modality and self-expression in digital discourse: a qualitative study of Whatsapp responses in Yochi village, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of linguistic modality in self-expression among residents of Yochi Village in Zambia. Modality is a semantic feature that reflects a speaker's attitude or opinion toward a propositions, assertions, desires, hypotheses, and obligations. The study analyzes 29 participants' WhatsApp reactions to a local radio report about the fatal shooting of a notorious thief by police. An exploratory qualitative design coupled with a thematic and contextual analysis revealed that participants primarily employed deontic, epistemic, bouletic, and teleological modalities, further categorized into necessity, possibility, obligation, desire, and opinion. Findings indicate that opinion and desire were the most frequent modal expressions, highlighting modality's role in shaping social interactions and truth-value negotiations. Generalizability requires further research in diverse contexts within and beyond Zambia.

Keywords: Linguistic modality, self-expression, attitude, possibility, necessity, desire

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic modality is a vital aspect of language that allows speakers to convey their personal attitudes, levels of certainty, obligations, and intentions. Using modal verbs like 'should', 'might', or 'must', and adverbials such as 'probably' or 'certainly', speakers can present their views, express emotions, or manage interpersonal relationships. Modal verbs such as "can," "could," "may," "might," "shall," "should," "will," "would," "must," are specifically dedicated to expressing modal concepts. These verbs can directly indicate the speaker's attitude toward the proposition or the likelihood of an event occurring. For instance, "Mary can swim" implies her ability, while "He might come" suggests a possibility.

These expressions play a fundamental role in how individuals express themselves. More than just grammatical tools, modals are key in shaping how speakers and writers project themselves. Palmer (2020) emphasizes that modality enables individuals to communicate what they believe, know, or feel obliged to do, forming a core component of self-representation and social interaction.

However, it is important to remember that modality functions beyond grammatical necessity, as it also conveys interpersonal meanings that are central to identity construction and self-representation. According to Palmer (2020), modality allows speakers to indicate their stance and engage with listeners or readers on epistemic and deontic grounds of expressing what is known,

believed, or required. These expressions are integral to personal voice and the negotiation of meaning in discourse.

Linguistic modality, therefore. is essential for expressing individual thoughts, emotions, and social relationships. It allows people to negotiate meaning, show subjectivity, and construct their identities in both spoken and written forms of communication. Its versatility makes it a crucial resource for meaningful self-expression. Modal verbs such as "can," "could," "may," "might," "shall," "should," "will," "would," "must," are specifically dedicated to expressing modal concepts. These verbs can directly indicate the speaker's attitude toward the proposition or the likelihood of an event occurring. For instance, "Mary can swim" implies her ability, while "He might come" suggests a possibility.

This study is based on the following story that was published by a community radio station on 22nd September, 2022 on WhatsApp:

> *Man in Monze District dies after being shot by police*
>
> *"Police in Monze last night shot a suspected criminal who is reported to have been behind a spate of aggravated robberies around the district.*
>
> *The Commanding Officer confirmed with the Community Radio News that the suspect was shot on Wednesday at a local market in around 18.00 hours after he tried to flee from the officers.*
>
> *The commanding Officer said the suspect allegedly ran away after noticing the police and the officers responded by firing warning shots which the suspect ignored, forcing the police to shoot him in the leg.*
>
> *He explained that the aim was to cripple the suspect but he kept*

> *running prompting the men in uniform to fire more shots.*
>
> *The suspect was rushed to the mission hospital where he died about an hour after arrival. The body was taken to another mission hospital mortuary (22nd September, 2022).*

After the news of how the notorious thief of Yochi Village was killed spread, different people expressed their feelings towards the killing using various expressions. The researcher took interest in the flow of the conversation on one of the WhatsApp groups and decided to undertake an analysis of the discourse as different people shared their feelings, wishes and aspirations with regard to the killing. This study was meant to determine how an event could affect people differently and how, using this language, people could express their belief systems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In exploring the role of linguistic modality in self-expression, an effective theoretical foundation was built by integrating Speech Act Theory and Modality Theory. Together, these theories offer valuable insights into how individuals communicate intentions and emotions through language. The Speech Act Through understanding how speakers use modal verbs and expressions, researchers can explore... Theory was developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle. This theory emphasizes various functions of language beyond mere representation of facts. In other words, the Speech Act Theory embraces the pragmatic use of language in a given context. It analyzes how people's utterances perform actions in specific contexts. Such utterances include asserting beliefs, asking questions, or issuing commands. In the context of self-expression, modality plays a crucial role in shaping these speech acts. *Through understanding how speakers use modal verbs and expressions, researchers can explore* the

subtlety of language as speakers articulate their identities and perspectives.

Modality Theory on the other hand focuses on linguistic expressions that convey concepts such as necessity, possibility, permission, and ability. This theory analyzes speaker attitudes towards events and actions using modal verbs and phrases. The knowledge of speaker attitude is crucial for the understanding self-expression because it allows individuals to negotiate personal and social limitations in communication. The way speakers employ modality can reflect their self-perception and social dynamics.

Modal semantics distinguishes the different categories of modality. Epistemic Modality for instance is concerned with Knowledge or belief and modal expressions like 'might' as well as 'probably' are used to express this type of modality. Under deontic modality, speakers express obligation or permission through the use of modal verbs like must or should. Whereas bouletic modality expresses desire or preference through the use of wish, want, desire, and many such modal verbs, teleological modality expresses goals or intentions through expressions such as 'in order to' or 'so that. These frameworks align with Portner's (2009) assertion that modality evaluates propositions against possible worlds, reflecting speakers' subjective commitments to these truth values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic modality has become a critical area of inquiry in recent studies focused on the interplay between language, identity, and social interaction. Modality refers to a linguistic mechanism, primarily modal verbs, adverbs, and expressions that allow speakers to express attitudes, assumptions, obligations, and possibilities (Haugh, 2023). Recent work by Egan (2021) demonstrates that modality enables individuals to convey subjective perspectives and emotional states, thereby functioning as a tool for self-

expression in both spoken and written discourse.

Haugh and Kádár (2021) demonstrate that speakers often use modality to influence politeness and manage relational dynamics. By softening statements with hedging, for instance, individuals appear more tentative or open, while using strong modality may indicate assertiveness or authority. These choices contribute significantly to how the self is constructed in communication.

In the context of digital communication, modality helps individuals articulate subtle meanings where facial cues are absent. Tagg and Seargeant (2021) point out that people use modal verbs and related structures in messaging apps to express doubt, emotion, and specificity. In this way, modality supports identity and self-expression in virtual spaces.

A study by Biber and Gray (2022) shows that informal communication, including blogs and personal emails, contains a higher frequency of modal verbs compared to academic writing. This reflects the need for more personal and subjective language in contexts where self-expression is central.

From a cross-cultural standpoint, Dendale and Tasmowski (2020) explore how various languages employ modality to reflect cultural expectations and social norms. For instance, languages like Japanese and Turkish use modal forms to encode politeness or authority, revealing that modality choices are also influenced by social and cultural values.

On the cognitive level, Dancygier and Sweetser (2021) argue that modality helps individuals frame alternative realities, obligations, or beliefs. They view modality as a window into how speakers position themselves in relation to possibilities, anchoring self-expression in personal perspective and interpretation.

Modality is also strongly tied to interpersonal and pragmatic functions in discourse. Kallen (2020) explores the pragmatics of modality, noting that speakers employ modal expressions to manage politeness, assert stance, or soften assertions in sensitive contexts as in the current study where a mixture of anger towards the criminal who was gunned down, as viewed by the victims and empathy by those of his family and close allies. This flexibility underscores modality's role in navigating power, identity, and emotional resonance. Biber and Conrad (2019) provide a typological perspective, linking register and genre with stylistic uses of modality in formal and informal communication.

The online space has also provided fertile ground for examining self-expression through modality. Patten (2022) explores how digital communication, particularly on social media platforms, showcases speakers' strategic use of modality to manage self-presentation. In digital contexts, speakers negotiate personal and social identities through epistemic and deontic modality. This highlights how modality operates beyond grammar to serve sociolinguistic functions. Thus, emerging literature recognizes the importance of modality in expressing the self across different interactional settings.

In short, linguistic modality serves various purposes in speech, allowing speakers to express certainty, possibility, necessity, and other subjective elements. By modalizing their language, individuals can convey particular meanings, express degrees of certainty or doubt, soften assertions, hedge claims, and enhance persuasive communication.

The use of modal auxiliaries and expressions is not unique to the English language. All languages have several ways of expressing modality. This study examines the modal expressions both in Tonga and English as the speakers used both languages during their conversation. All the hypothetical states of affairs that people express through speech may never come to be, yet we are able to talk about them by using modal words.

There are many different types of modality, some of which are Bouletic, Epistemic, Deontic and Teleological. Others are associated with logic. Modality, according to Kearns (2000), examines the possible truth or necessity of a proposition according to the relationship between specific events, situations or objects and the inevitable consequences of the way these interact. This particular piece of work, did not delve into logic. Instead, the relationship between the real world and possible worlds in association with personal values, were discussed by illustrations from Deontic, Epistemic, Bouletic and Teleological Modalities. The data were then presented in terms of necessity, possibility, opinion, obligation and desire by the participants in the study.

In summary, linguistic modality is essential for expressing individual thoughts, emotions, and social relationships. It allows people to negotiate meaning, show subjectivity, and construct their identities in both spoken and written forms of communication. Its versatility makes it a crucial resource for meaningful self-expression.

However, modalization extends beyond modal verbs. Other linguistic devices, such as adverbs, adjectives, and verb phrases, contribute to expressing modal meanings. Considering the following examples, we discover that, adverbs like "possibly," "probably," "certainly," "likely," and "surely" contribute to modalization. For instance, "He will likely win the race" expresses a high degree of probability. Adjectives can also convey modal meanings. For example, "It is necessary to attend the meeting" employs the adjective "necessary" to indicate obligation. Certain verb phrases can express modality without the use of modal verbs. For instance, "She needs to finish her homework" conveys an element of obligation using the verb phrase "needs to."

In addition to these linguistic devices, intonation, tone, context, and other pragmatic factors also play a role in modalization. The overall effect of these various linguistic tools contributes to conveying modal meanings in a subtle and context-dependent manner as illustrated by the following examples.

Adverb usage: "Perhaps he will arrive later." [1] Here, the adverb "perhaps" modalizes the sentence, indicating a possibility.

Adjective usage: "It is crucial that you meet the deadline." [2] The adjective "crucial" modalizes the sentence, emphasizing the importance of meeting the deadline.

Verb phrase usage: "You should apologize for your mistake." [3] The verb phrase "should apologize" indicates obligation, contributing to the modalization of the sentence.

In summary, while modal verbs are commonly associated with expressing modality, linguistic modalization encompasses a broader range of devices and strategies. Adverbs, adjectives, verb phrases, intonation, tone, and contextual factors all contribute to conveying modal meanings in language. So self-expression can cover all or any of these devises to express the speaker intended meaning.

The purpose of modalized conversations is to provide a consistent and efficient way to communicate with users, ensuring that their needs are addressed in a structured manner. By employing predefined modes, organizations can streamline interactions and deliver accurate and relevant information to users.

Modalized conversations can include menus with numbered options, multiple-choice questions, or branching paths based on user responses. These modalities help to create a clear and straightforward interaction that guides users towards their desired outcome.

Modalized conversations can be implemented through various mediums, such as text-based interfaces, voice assistants, or interactive web forms. They are designed to enhance user experience by providing a systematic approach to communication and ensuring that important information is gathered or conveyed effectively.

This qualitative study aimed to identify and categorize the WhatsApp conversation about the gunning down of a notorious thief according to various parts of linguistic modality. Linguistic modality refers to the expression of attitudes, possibilities, obligations, and other subjective elements in language. Modal verbs and adverbs are commonly used to convey modality, indicating the speaker's degree of certainty, probability, necessity, or desirability regarding a particular proposition or action. The use of linguistic modality serves several purposes and can be beneficial in speech for various reasons. Linguistic modality can be used for some of the aspects discussed in this paper. This study revealed some of the functions of linguistic modality.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design through discourse and document analysis to investigate how linguistic modality functions as a tool for self-expression in contemporary discourse. The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes the subjective construction of meaning through language. By examining naturally occurring language in various contexts, qualitative research allows for an elaborate understanding of how modality is used to articulate identity, intention, and emotional stance (Kallen, 2020). All respondents exhibited varying degrees of emotional attachment in their utterances, which reflected notions of necessity, possibility, opinion, obligation, and desire.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study are based on the social media story or report published by a community radio station. This story is in the public domain and can be openly accessed by all. The main focus of this study is not the story itself, but the linguistic aspect of the participants' utterances as they expressed their personal views on the gunning down of a notorious thief that terrorized the residents for over 20 years. The radio report and the different opinions and utterances of the participants have been quoted and explained in the light of linguistic modality. Although the story is in public domain, this study has used pseudo names where necessary or completely left out some names for ethical reasons. The whole analysis is based on the following community radio report:

Man in Monze District dies after being shot by police

"Police in Monze last night shot a suspected criminal who is reported to have been behind a spate of aggravated robberies around the district.

The Commanding Office, confirmed with the Community Radio News that the suspect was shot on Wednesday at a local market in around 18.00 hours after he tried to flee from the officers.

The commanding Officer said the suspect allegedly ran away after noticing the police and the officers responded by firing warning shots which the suspect ignored, forcing the police to shoot him in the leg.

He explained that the aim was to cripple the suspect but he kept running prompting the men in uniform to fire more shots.

The suspect was rushed to the mission hospital where he died about an hour after arrival. The body was taken to another mission hospital mortuary. (22nd September, 2022)

Participants' reactions

The participant reactions have been categorized and discussed according to the identified linguistic modality types of deontic, epistemic, teleological and bouletic modalities. In this paper, the WhatsApp reactions or entries are treated as spoken discourse or utterances of the participants and not written discourse.

Deontic Modality

Deontic modality pertains to expressions that convey permission, obligation, prohibition, or necessity. It focuses on norms, duties, and obligations within a given context. Deontic modality describes what is morally or legally required, permitted, or forbidden. For instance, phrases like "should," "must," "ought to," and "may not" are used to express moral or legal obligations. Deontic modality provides guidance on how individuals should behave or act in accordance with societal norms or rules.

Reacting to the news of the gunning down incident of the notorious criminal,

PMC: *I remember listening to news about unknown people stealing PA System and a buffalo bicycle at a church meeting in Rusangu Mission, a place closer to chikuni!! Furthermore, there has been cases of armed robberies in ufwenuka chiefdom done both in daylight and at night. Let the police do their job.*

Following the last sentence, "*Let the police do their job*" in the reaction above, one can deduce that the speaker approves of the action of the police as he takes it as a need to safeguard the area in question and bring sanity. This conclusion is in line with the views of Kearns (2000) who examined the possible truth or necessity of a proposition according to the relationship between specific events, situations or objects and the inevitable consequences of the way these interact. The speaker in the reaction made a number of logical cues that led to the conclusion that the gunned down thief could have been the one or one of the people that stole the PA system and the buffalo bicycle. He or she finally made a

logical conclusion that the police were in order to kill the thief.

Other similar deontic reactions that express necessity and need of police action continue below.

KS: *Well done ba Police. We are now more safer than living with a criminal*
WS: *As for me job well done continue with your good job ba police*
MS: *For that, let them do more and more! Good job BWANA!*
TS: *Congratulation to the cop behind the barrel 👏👏👏 I have lived in many parts of Zambia, but so far Monze is the worst place i have ever lived in terms of theft.*

In the utterances above, the speakers are operating in the realm of logic; for what one does, he or she must be ready to bear the consequences. So the police, according to the reactions of the speakers, took the correct course of action to bring sanity to the area. Modality is closely related to utterances of logic like the conversation below".

MC: *If anyone has a problem with his death he /she has a right to go and mourn him don't even complain about what the officers did just go kudilwe camana.*

RL: *Finally they have gunned him down, this person gave people sleepless nights. Well done mwami bazungu.*

FN: *Well done ZP👏👏 at least you have reduced the number of these criminals*

HM: *Finally..Aggravated armed robber,DOWN. Kudos Monze Police.u have halted a 20yrs period of spates of aggravated robberies.*

MM: *Well done zp again we were afraid of that person the way he was. every one ripe what he so. rest in peace .*

VM: *I'm very impressed with what the police did. Infact let them gun down all the mambalaz so as to bring sanity to our own Chikuni.*

All the utterances listed above go to prove that the producers used deontic modality to express the obligation and necessity that was upon the police to fulfill a societal need of the majority freedom and that they were right. Though the utterances are presented as opinions, they carry with them a high degree of correctness and conviction. The producers of these utterances were not looking for sympathy, empathy or solidarity but instead were just stating what they felt were contextual and logical facts and perceptions.

It was also interesting to discover that one of the respondents associated the good work of the Zambia Police with the leadership of the country at the time;

PM: *The officers in New Dawn Government, they mean business, they don't tolerate nonsense.*

This is a reminder that there is a close link between language and power or authority. People can use language to uphold or discredit a leader. The utterance above clearly indicates that the speaker is speaking in favour of the government of the day. This argument is in line with Jannatussholihah & Triyono (2020) quoting Fowler (1985:61) who wrote,

> *People understand that language is the basis of their social construction and their individual or group relationships. In this sense, language is seen as an instrument for consolidating and manipulating concepts and relationships in the field of power and control.*

Thus, certain written or spoken language style can come from various sources, such as cultural/social background, power, ideology, social status, or region.

There is indeed a relationship between modality and authority, although it is not a

direct or inherent connection. The relationship between these two concepts is very subtle and can vary depending on the context in which they are considered. Sometimes, the subtle relationship between modality and authority is reflected in a speaker's attitude or the degree of certainty expressed in a statement

Let us consider the following deontic utterance from one of the participants in the research.

> **DC:** *Let LOPRED lead. What is Logical must be Practical and what is Practical, must be Right, What is Right must be Ethical, what is Ethical must be Desired and what is Desired must be Logical. In short I'm saying, no amount of leniencies must be exercised on such people. Keep on clear them.*

The discourse used by DC above is very authoritative expressing a very high degree of conviction and belief in a proposition. Authority, on the other hand, relates to the power or expertise a person holds in a particular domain. When an authoritative figure speaks, their speech may often exhibit a high degree of certainty or assertiveness, which can be considered a form of strong modality. The authoritative tone can influence how their statements are perceived and can enhance their credibility. Therefore, we can conclude that DC's utterance is characterized by deontic modality, as it highlights the duties and obligations

 Harguaart (2015) defines authority as a form of power that usually goes with an office or position. There are different modality associations with authority. As Perniss (2018) and Holler & Levinson (2019) put it, it is important to note that actual instances of communication are often multimodal**,** with language users making use of the resources of more than one modality at a time.

Modalities of Communication and Authority

There is authority in communication. Different modalities of communication, such as written text, spoken word, or visual media, can play a role in establishing and maintaining authority. For example, in traditional academic settings, scholarly articles published in reputable journals are often considered authoritative sources due to the rigorous review process and established conventions of academic writing. Similarly, authoritative figures who are effective public speakers may use the spoken modality to convey their expertise, influence public opinion, or establish their authority. DC, through deontic modality, brought out the relationship between communication and authority.

Modalities of Power and Authority

The relationship between modalities of power and authority is complex. Different modalities, such as legal authority, political authority, or moral authority, can coexist and influence each other. Power structures and systems of authority can determine which modalities are considered legitimate and hold sway in a given context. For instance, in democratic societies, political authority is often derived from the consent of the governed, while legal authority stems from established laws and regulations.

It is important to note that the relationship between modality and authority is multifaceted and can vary across cultures, domains, and contexts. The specific dynamics and connections may differ depending on the specific circumstances in which these concepts are examined. DC acknowledged and upheld the authority of the police officers through modalization.

Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality refers to the expressions or linguistic devices used to indicate the speaker's or writer's assessment of the likelihood or certainty of a proposition being true or false. It deals with knowledge, beliefs,

and uncertainty. For example, phrases such as "might," "could," "likely," "probably," and "certainly" are used to express degrees of certainty or possibility. Epistemic modality is often used to convey subjective judgments or opinions.

EM, in his utterance,

Am not praising police. The man was at Mundale, doing   what drinking? If the community knew he was the one involved in robberies why have they been keeping him for 20 years! He was more useful alive than dead.

CM: *People Of Chikuni and surrounding areas are the best to comment on this matter, as for us we can only say too bad for the life that has been lost, <u>maybe</u> he was a family man despite being a criminal .*

These extracts express epistemic thoughts of doubt that convey subjective judgements and opinions because of the long period of time the police took to act in the case of EM and in terms of CM and convey epistemic modality through the lower degree of belief in police action. "...This extract expresses epistemic thoughts that convey subjective judgement and opinion because of the long period of time the police took to act. CM further expressed epistemic possibility through the statement,

"… **<u>maybe</u>** *he was a family man despite being a criminal."*

Through this utterance, CM was showing that he was uncertain or ignorant of the actual truth yet at the same time, he expressed the possibility of the thief having been a family man thus bringing out the feeling of empathy. Different modalities can impact our ability to empathize and sympatize with others. Verbal and nonverbal cues, which are present in face-to-face interactions, tend to enhance empathy by providing more information about a person's emotional state. Conversely, written communication may be less effective

in conveying and perceiving empathy due to the absence of nonverbal cues. However, it is important to note that empathy can still be expressed and understood across different modalities though with varying degrees of effectiveness.

The following extract*"After noticing the police and the officers "*😊😊😊😊*"* by SM portrays a situation of uncertainty coupled with a rumor that the thief had been using charms instead of physical eyes to detect the presence of the law enforcers who failed to capture him for a good 20 years. It was believed that at this particular time, something went wrong in the realm of intangible heritage hence the capture.

Teleological Modality

Teleological modality involves expressions that relate to goals, purposes, or intentions. It emphasizes the ends or outcomes of an action or event. Teleological modality considers the broader context and the consequences of an action. It explores the reasons behind an action and evaluates it based on its intended purpose or goal. Teleological modality can be observed in phrases such as "in order to," "for the purpose of," and "to achieve." It highlights the intentionality and the desired outcomes of an action. The highlighted parts in CM and JM's extracts show the intentionality and desired outcomes through the use of the phrases 'must be' 'and intends' respectively.

CM: it's good news indeed, criminals **must be gunned down***!*

JM: *When police* **intends to kill** *someone they will just shoot you and then justify it this way. And that's how police system just works. Those in C5 or other anti robbery squad* **would relate** *to what I mean. These are special operations for suspected notorious criminals.* **Even if** *you are not running u* **could be told** *to go away and immediately you give them a back you are shot at.*

'Would and 'could be' also point to the use of epistemic modality in a personal expression in the given contexts.

CM and JM believed the action of the police was deliberate and pre-meditated; it was their wish and desire to kill the criminal thus the teleological categorization of CM and JM's utterances.

> **MC:** *You successfully shoot to cripple and failed to catch him so you shoot to kill.* **Couldn't officers run?** *Regardless,* **I guess** *they did what they thought was best considering that the man was not armed.*

The above extracts account for the perceived actual intention of the police officers which still remains an unverified perception.

Bouletic modality

Bouletic modality refers to expressions or linguistic devices that convey volition, desires, or preferences. It focuses on the speaker's or writer's attitudes, wishes, or intentions. Bouletic modality is concerned with personal choices and subjective preferences. It describes what individuals want, desire, or prefer. Phrases like "want to," "prefer," "wish," and "desire" are commonly used to express bouletic modality. It captures the individual's subjective perspective and their inclination towards certain actions or outcomes.

Let us consider the following comments from different participants:

MSK: **Wages of sin is death.** *I know we don't have to judge but the questions are, why did he fail to comply Why did he run away upon seeing the police officers,*

Why did he not stop upon hearing a warning shot?
Questions are a lot but rest in peace man 😵😵

From the above comments, bouletic modality is expressed through desire. Even if questions were asked, the speaker did not need answers. They questions were being used to cement the first statement of the utterance

'the wages of sin is death'
The first statement has already indicated the position of the speaker which was the wish to have him prosecuted in whatever way. EH also re-echoed MSK's position by desiring that the police visit many other places in the district to rid them of the criminals who were terrorizing people. Consider the following:

EH: *Next let it be in Monze West or South (St Mary's, Namuseba, Chisekesi, Silwiili, Namilongwe Farms Area, Hamapande etc) where we have a lot of cattle, goats, pigs, chickens, house hold thieves. There days are numbered too.*

From the above, wish and desire are expressed in terms of bouletic modality. The speaker wishes and desires to have the police catch more thieves in the mentioned areas.

> **I M:** *Kamulila basa tuli busy (Those who can mourn him can go ahead. Some of us are too busy to do that.)*

In the above extracts speakers concluded that the action of the police was justified and right. This was expressed through the speaker's desire to have criminals prosecuted. For instance, IM, although he or she acknowledges that there would be people who would be emotionally attached to the thief as is the case for any human being, explained that for him or her, even going for the funeral was a waste of time because of the conviction that the thief deserved the punishment. Other examples that strengthen the use of bouletic linguistics by participants are listed below:

EC: Keep up the good work police officers.... Finally we can live peacefully

TDMC: Well done Monze police for the wonderful job

CCBB: Good job ba Zambia Police. I hope those who used to work with him have learnt a lesson now.

CC: Thumbs up zp and job well done, we work lungs out for our own things then these idiots wants to be getting our things for free, in fact shoot more

MD: The wages of sin is death can't wait for choma criminals who have been involved in criminal activities especially kozo area too much

RS: Very good basa and let him go back to sleep for ever

KM: If only you knew you wouldn't blame the police for the action, this man has caused misery to a lot of people in that area and other surrounding areas

KM's comment brings in the relationship that exist between linguistic modality and conditional structures in language use; ***If only you knew you wouldn't blame the police for the action.***

The results are only expected if a condition is fulfilled. As Breeze (2009) mentioned, Modality can help present arguments, proposals, or requests in a more persuasive and flexible manner, accommodating the potential concerns or objections of the audience. So conditional sentences can persuade someone to abide by the presented conditions for propositions to be viewed as fulfilled.

Through this utterance, the speaker has revealed her wish to have the one she is conversing with share her view of the need to thank and praise the police for getting rid of a problem. Such a construction portrays the use of bouletic modality which focuses on the speaker or writer's attitudes and wishes. It describes what individuals want, desire or prefer. So KM had a desire to have the problem of the thief solved by the police.

MM: Those people are trained, why not chasing him? That's been lazy ba minister fire them, they can't even show there skills of there training ☹☹☹☹☹

Contrary to KM's wishes, MM in the above utterance seems to have had a desire to have the police capture the thief alive and not dead. This seems to be the reason why statements like ...' Why not chase...that's being lazy...they can't even show the skills of their training.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

Modalities of Communication and Authority
The WhatsApp exchanges reveal how speakers use linguistic modality to affirm institutional authority and express collective sentiments. For instance,

KS praises the police: *"Well done ba Police. We are now more safer than living with a criminal."*

This utterance aligns with deontic modality, which highlights obligations and permissions (Biber & Conrad, 2019). The expression implicitly confirms or authorizes the police action as a necessary intervention, reinforcing communal norms and values. Similarly, MS declares: *"Good job BWANA!"* and HM exclaims, *"Kudos Monze Police!"* which reinforce the authoritative role of the state. These modal constructions reflect the performative aspects of speech acts, as theorized by Austin and Searle, where

expressions not only communicate but enact social roles and authority.

Modalities of Power and Authority

Participants also used modality to reinforce or challenge societal power structures. VM's for instance commented, *"Let them gun down all the mambalaz (criminals) so as to bring sanity."* *the statement* demonstrates bouletic modality, expressing a strong personal desire to get rid of troublesome criminals. This aligns with Patten's (2022) findings on how modality constructs identity and ideological alignment in online discourse. The normalization of violence as a tool of state power illustrates how modality embeds social hierarchies and moral perspectives in everyday language.

Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality appears where participants express beliefs or speculate on the police's actions or the suspect's identity. KM's comment, *"If only you knew you wouldn't blame the police,"* introduces a conditional epistemic structure. From this utterance, we can conclude that the speaker possesses a certain negative experience of the criminal in the given setting which some of the members of the whatsApp group did not share or had no idea of, thus their sympathy. An example of CM's remark; *"maybe he was a family man despite being a criminal,"* further shows the use of modality to negotiate moral uncertainty and social empathy. As Kallen (2020) states, epistemic modality functions to hedge, justify, or present belief with varying degrees of certainty. These utterances illustrate the cognitive space speakers occupy while navigating ambiguous social realities. From interviews, some members felt that the community had lost a guard for their village. One interviewee (PP) revealed that the criminal used to say, *"I cannot steal from this village because you have nothing attractive to me. Moreover, who dare bite the finger that feeds him?"* The deceased would attack anybody who disturbed his home village and his relatives. His biggest enemy were the police and anyone who tried to cooperate with them in their quest to arrest him, he would eliminate immediately without wasting any

time. In one recording, he was heard telling one man who had talked to the police about him that he would *"eliminate"* him. At the same time he was heard warning two other criminals who were disturbing one family within his village over land to stop or else they would have to face him. He advised them to respect the people of the village and live peacefully with everyone.

Bouletic Modality

Desire and affect dominate the whatsApp conversation through bouletic modality. DC writes a long statement culminating in, "no amount of leniency must be exercised on such people," reflecting a deep-seated wish for justice through strict action.

EH adds, "Next let it be in Monze West," expressing future-oriented hopes for similar actions in order to end criminal activities in Yochi Village and beyond. Such constructions express moral judgments and emotional investments, linking to Egan's (2021) view of modality as a self-expressive tool in digital discourse.

Teleological Modality

Teleological modality, which is concerned with goals and intended outcomes, appears in VM's comment, "So as to bring sanity to our home town called Chikuni." This indicates an instrumental logic where actions such as police shootings are justified by their anticipated societal benefits. The Speech Act Theory also supports such a stance as it reveals that language can perform desired actions. According to Biber and Conrad (2019), this modality helps speakers communicate purpose and planning, highlighting how individuals legitimize institutional actions through a goal-oriented frame. The use of such modality reveals how ideological aims shape discursive constructions of justice for individuals and society in general.

Moral and Existential Judgments through Modality

Statements such as MSK's "Wages of sin is death" whose source is the Bible and MD's

"can't wait for Choma criminals" showcase religious and existential moralizing through modality. These expressions rely on a cultural script where justice is absolute and final, using deontic and bouletic modality to assert normative claims. Such expressions reinforce community standards and social belonging, resonating with Haugh's (2023) theory of modality as interactionally constructed. Michael Haugh, in his 2023 work, offers a multifaceted view of modality that goes beyond traditional grammatical or semantic frameworks. Instead of treating modality merely as a set of fixed linguistic markers indicating speaker attitude (e.g., *must*, *might*, *should*), Haugh frames it as something constructed dynamically through interaction. This means that modality is not simply encoded in what people say but is also shaped and reshaped as they engage with others in e**xpressing certainty and uncertainty**: Modality allows speakers to indicate their level of confidence or doubt about a statement. By using modal verbs like "may," "might," "could," or "must," speakers can convey different degrees of certainty, adding nuance (a subtle difference in or shade of meaning, expression, or sound) to their statements and acknowledging the possibility of alternative interpretations or outcomes (Coates, 1983).

Conveying possibility and probability: According to Huddleston & Pullum (2002), modal verbs such as "can," "could," "may," and "might" are used to express the likelihood or possibility of an event or situation. Modality helps speakers communicate speculative or hypothetical scenarios, enabling them to discuss potential outcomes and explore alternative perspectives.

Expressing necessity and obligation: Modal verbs like "should," "must," and "have to" are used to convey varying degrees of obligation, necessity, or advice. Modality helps speakers indicate what is expected, required, or recommended, allowing them to express norms, rules, or personal judgments (Quirk et al., 1985).

Softening assertions: Modal verbs can be used to soften the tone of a statement or make it less direct. For example, using "could you" instead of "can you" in a request can make it sound more polite and less demanding. Modalization can help maintain politeness, mitigate potential conflicts, and enhance social interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Hedging and mitigating claims: Hyland (1996) explains modality provides a way to hedge or mitigate the strength of a claim or statement. By using modal verbs or adverbs, speakers can introduce qualifiers and express caution, skepticism, or reservations. This allows for more nuanced and balanced communication, considering different perspectives and acknowledging the limitations of knowledge or evidence (Hyland, 1996).

Persuasion and negotiation: Modal language can be useful in persuasive speech or negotiation. By carefully choosing modal expressions, a speaker can influence the listener's perception of certainty, desirability, or feasibility. Modality can help present arguments, proposals, or requests in a more persuasive and flexible manner, accommodating the potential concerns or objections of the audience (Breeze, 2009).

In other words, persuasive communication through linguistic modality enables speakers to express themselves in various ways as they portray different degrees of certainty, possibility, necessity, and other subjective elements.

Narrog (2012) defines modality as a linguistic category that refers to the factual status of a proposition. Narrog (Ibid:6) further states, "A proposition is modalized if it is marked for being undetermined with respect to its factual status." Generally, linguists have agreed that modality covers the basic modal meanings of obligation, necessity, possibility or probability. Linguistic modality allows speakers to attach expressions of belief, attitude and obligation to statements. Therefore, we can safely say

that modality in semantics is concerned with the expression of possibility or necessity. Portner (2009) explains that modality has to do with things which are true in other possible worlds and how they relate to what is true in reality. Modality is what makes the difference between a factual assertion like *"Mwaba is a dull boy."* and a more guarded view such as *"Mwaba seems to be a slow learner"* or a bolder negative claim, like *"That Mwaba passed the exam must have been a myth".* It is important to note that actual instances of communication are often multimodal**,** with language users making use of the resources of more than one modality at a time (Perniss 2018, Holler and Levinson 2019). Modality allows speakers and writers to formulate different types of claims such as qualified assertions, opinions, hypotheses and speculations. Using modality, they indicate how committed they are to such claims (Cameron, 2007). In simple terms, linguistic modality refers to the expression of attitudes, beliefs, and degrees of certainty or obligation in language.

Modality then allows speakers and writers to formulate different types of claims such as qualified assertions, opinions, hypotheses and speculations. Using modality, they indicate how committed they are to such claims (Cameron, 2007).

In short, linguistic modality serves various purposes in speech, allowing speakers to express certainty, possibility, necessity, and other subjective elements. By modalizing their language, individuals can convey individualised meanings, express degrees of certainty or doubt, soften assertions, hedge claims, and enhance persuasive communication.

The concept of modal auxiliaries and expressions is not peculiar to the English language. All languages have several ways of expressing modality. This study examines the modal expressions both in Tonga and English as the speakers used both languages during their conversation. Hypothetical statements expressed through speech may never materialize, yet language allows us to conceptualize them using modal expressions.

There are many different types of modality, some of which are Bouletic, Epistemic, Deontic and Teleological. Others are associated with logic. Modality, according to Kearns (2000), examines the possible truth or necessity of a proposition according to the relationship between specific events, situations or objects and the inevitable consequences of the way these interact. This study does not delve into logical modality but focuses instead on socially constructed modal expressions. Instead, the relationship between the real world and possible worlds in association with personal values, will be discussed by illustrations from Deontic, Epistemic, Bouletic and Teleological Modalities. These in turn will be presented in terms of necessity, possibility, opinion, obligation and desire by the participants in the study.

Conditional and Counterfactual Expressions

KM's statement, "If only you knew you wouldn't blame the police," and MC's critique, "You successfully shoot to cripple and failed to catch him so you shoot to kill," reflect how modality is deployed to express hypothetical and counterfactual reasoning. These forms of modality contribute to framing arguments, exploring alternative moral outcomes, and questioning institutional logic. They also highlight tensions between public perception and legal-ethical expectations, central to modality theory (Kallen, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The data show that modality plays a vital role in shaping individual and collective self-expression in contexts of moral, legal, and emotional tension. Participants used epistemic, bouletic, deontic, and teleological

modalities to justify, critique, or emotionally navigate the police shooting incident. These modalities also helped construct identities, reinforce societal norms, and evaluate institutional actions. The discussion reinforces the claim by Egan (2021) that modality is a core device for expressing self and social stance in mediated interactions. It also illustrates the dynamic intersection between power, emotion, and communication in everyday discourse. Following the findings and discussion above, we can conclude that indeed linguistic modality in its various forms plays a major role in self-expression directly or indirectly. The conversation undertaken by a group of people reacting to the community news involving a notorious thief and the police provided a suitable platform for the use of modality in self-expression. Speakers expressed their degrees of belief to different propositions in the conversation. Four main categories of modality namely, deontic, epistemic, teleological and bouletic modalities were identified in the conversations. The participants used these categories to express necessity, possibility, obligation, desire and opinion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in the use of modality in digital communication, especially in crisis discourse.
2. More attention should be paid to gendered expressions of modality to understand if men and women differ in expressing authority or vulnerability.
3. A comparative study between WhatsApp and other platforms (like Facebook or Twitter) could reveal platform-specific discursive tendencies in modality use.
4. Finally, further inquiry could incorporate corpus-based methods to quantify modality patterns across larger data sets.

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