



From Possibility to Necessity: Modality as a Rhetorical Weapon in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate

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Abstract

Presidential debates is a political event that can be considered linguistic performances. The speakers' lexical choice shows how they convey their thoughts and stances to convince voters. To understand this, modality is one of the key elements in debates. Although several studies examined modality in political, none have explored the eight subtypes identified by Palmer (2001) and their functions in presidential debate using a qualitative method. Based on this theoretical framework, that is why this paper is going to fill in, the types and functions of modality in the arguments of Kamala and Trump during presidential election debates transcript from the official ABC News webpage U.S. that held on September 10, 2024. Using discourse-analytic approach, this research follows Creswell's (2014) qualitative research design, which prioritizes in-depth interpretation of meaning. These studies found 205 occurrences of modal verbs delivered by both candidates, which the most significant findings is predominant type of modality was the Epistemic Assumptive modality, comprised of 82 modal verbs. Then, Epistemic Deductive modality appeared exclusively in Trump's utterance, while Harris produced none, revealing in how each candidate demonstrated clearly different modal profiles to constructs argumentative authority, with implications for political discourse and political communication research.

Keywords: modality; modal verb; political discourse; presidential debate; Palmer (2001)



INTRODUCTION

Presidential debates have a special place within the political process. Unlike prepared statements and official statements, debates require candidates to interact in an authentic manner in front of the nation, making arguments, responding, and adapting their language as needed. As Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) note, debates serve as situations in which candidates can demonstrate the necessary qualities and attributes that voters require in deciding who will become president, representing, as they call it, "a chance to see them side by side, in the raw". As such, presidential debate language assumes added importance. According to Fairclough (1995), political discourse does not merely reflect reality; instead, it creates reality. From the range of possible linguistic devices available for political discourse, modality stands out as particularly significant, modal verbs can be used to show speakers' level of commitment and certainty. Palmer (2001) explains that modality can be considered a linguistic phenomenon expressing how the speaker evaluates what is being said and his/her attitude to this action. It is upon this system that this research is based. The author distinguishes between two overarching categories of modality. One is Propositional Modality that involves attitudes toward the truthfulness and probability of propositions. The other is Event Modality that deals with attitudes toward events and actions that someone is required to do, allowed to do, capable of doing, and willing to do. In these two categories, Palmer distinguishes between various types, namely epistemic, deontic, and dynamic, followed by sub-types of modality totaling 8.

Previous researches offer important insights, but there are still areas that need further investigation. For instance, Hamdanur and Pulungan (2018) conducted their research by examining modality in terms of hedging in the Trump-Clinton debate. Epistemic modality emerged as the predominant type, while 'will' and 'would' were the two modal verbs which showed up most frequently. On the other hand, modality is viewed mainly as an instrument used for hedging and signaling uncertainty, with the consequence that their analysis is restricted to one function only while leaves the full range of modal verb use unexplored. In relation to this, Sumari (2025) made use of a corpus-based study on the Indonesian presidential debates, where epistemic modality was found to constitute about 48% of all instances of modality, but the quantitative orientation of that study left limited room for interpreting how individual modal choices function within specific argumentative moments. Desilia et al. (2026) who made a comparison between the use of modality in the speech delivered by both Trump and Harris in their campaigns, observed that there was greater orientation towards obligatory language on the part of Harris whereas Trump preferred epistemic assertion. However, their studies are based on scripted speeches by candidates and not actual debates, in other words, they have not analyzed the interactive and confrontational aspects inherent in debate language. All in all, these papers show that modality can indeed be an interesting topic when researching political speech, yet all of them have one thing in common none of them uses Palmer's (2001) classification of modal verbs in its full eight-subtype complexity (namely, Epistemic Speculative, Deductive, and Assumptive; Deontic Permissive, Obligative, and Commissive; and Dynamic Abilitive and Volitive) on the material of an actual debate.

Theoretical significance of the gap lies in the fact that treating all kinds of epistemic modality as one category hides important differences between them, each having a certain value. According to Palmer (2001), for example, there is a difference between the use of Epistemic Deductive modality, when the speaker draws conclusions about the

meaning of the information provided and concludes that there can be no other interpretation and Epistemic Assumptive modality when the speaker makes a prediction about the future based on certain assumptions. In this sense, one 'must' statement by a political candidate should not be equated with one 'will' statement; they serve a different purpose in debates and have different implications. In terms of methodology, there is no doubt that qualitative analysis of modal verbs in their context is crucial for understanding what kind of meaning certain modal verbs are used to convey. The modal 'will' can mean an assumptive statement of facts, a policy pledge, or an expression of the speaker's volition, and this kind of analysis cannot be done by frequency counts nor the literal meaning alone. Context on who the speaker, whom the speaker talk to, what meaning intended through the talk should be taken into consideration.

Based on this gaps, this study examines the types and functions of modality in the debate arguments of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate, broadcast by ABC News on September 10, 2024. Two questions guide the analysis: (1) What are the types of Modalities that appear in the USA 2024 presidential election debates made by Kamala and Trump?, (2) What is the function of modality in the arguments of Kamala and Trump during the USA 2024 presidential election debates?. The analysis follows a qualitative descriptive approach. In contrast to previous studies, what sets apart the present study can be outlined in three main aspects. First, this paper studies the debate between two candidates based on a live debate rather than an individual political speech. In debate, spontaneous nature of the speakers' responses are taken into analysis since the candidates must react directly to their opponents under the pressure of the debate. Second, there has been no previous research has addressed the 2024 Trump vs. Harris debate within the framework developed by Palmer, specifically involve eight subtypes of modality. Therefore, this research aim to gain a better insight into the way modality works.

METHOD

A descriptive qualitative research method is used in this paper. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research involves interpreting a social phenomenon through the lens of the participants' subjective experience. It emphasizes description over quantification and thus aligns well with the current project, as the modality interpretation is an inherently subjective process. For example, counting the number of occurrences of the word 'will' in a transcript can easily be achieved using any search engine. However, knowing the reasons for choosing 'will' rather than 'might' in one sentence in a debate requires another set of analytical skills.

First, the data collection process, the researcher viewed the entire debate of 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate Kamala Harris and Donald Trump that took place on September 10, 2024, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, through the official YouTube channel of ABC News in order to understand the issue or context of the debate. Subsequently, the researcher downloaded the official transcript of the debate from ABC News [READ: Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript - ABC News](#). Then, the researcher crosschecked the transcripts with the official video of the debate posted on the official YouTube channel of ABC News to ensure the validity of data. Second, researcher read carefully the transcript, identify, and highlight the utterances that contained modal verbs, such as can, could, may, might, must, should, will, and would as per the categories established by Palmer (2001). Greetings and unrelated utterance, were not included in the analysis, leading to a total of 205 utterances containing modal verbs: 111 from Trump and 94 from Harris.

Third, the data was analysed in a form of a table in which all information about speaker, utterance, modal verb, modality type, subtype, and function was included. In this phase, where each instance was categorized based on the classifications of Palmer (2001) including Propositional Modality (Epistemic speculative, deductive and assumptive) and Event Modality (Deontic permissive, obligative, commissive; Dynamic abilitive and volitive). Since the same modal verb can have a different function due to context dependency, the categorization was carried out using the entire sentence rather than the word itself only. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability of data categorization, the researcher collaborated with other researcher who independently analysed the same set of data. In case of uncertainty regarding the category, the researchers would held discussion to ensure that the identification was not subjective. Fourth, in the interpretation stage the focus was determining function of each modal expression in the particular context of utterance. Last, in the conclusion phase, comparison and interpretation of the patterns found from both candidates were conducted so as to come up with overall findings regarding their respective modal usage pattern and communicative function. The focus of this study is limited to modality at the level of literal and contextual meaning. In other words, this paper only concentrates on the literal meanings of modal forms and their function relative to the speaker, audience, and subject matter of the debate.

RESULT AND DISSCUSIUON

Result

The total of 205 modal verbs were identified, consisting of 111 instances by Trump and 94 by Harris. All of the modality subcategories proposed by Palmer (2001) were found in the data set. This distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Modality Types: Donald Trump and Kamala Harris

Speaker	Epistemic			Deontic			Dynamic		Total
	Spc	Ded	Asm	Prm	Obl	Com	Abl	Vol	
Trump	4	7	45	0	10	9	17	19	111
Harris	1	0	37	1	15	8	19	13	94
Total	5	7	82	1	25	17	36	32	205

Note: Spc;Speculative, Ded;Deductive, Asm;Assumptive, Prm;Permissive, Obl;Obligative, Com;Commissive, Abl;Abilitive, Vol;Volitive.

Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality is about how certain or uncertain speakers are about what they claim their judgment about the truth or likelihood of a proposition. Palmer (2001) divides this into three subtypes: Speculative, Deductive, and Assumptive. To begin with, based on the Table 1, the five occurrences of epistemic speculative Modality include four from Trump and one from Harris. As described by Palmer (2001), in speculative is a possibility which the speaker recognizes but does not commit himself or herself to is expressed, usually using the words 'may', 'might', and 'could'. This is consistent because in debates between candidates, assertiveness pays off and hedging appears weak. However, when it is used, speculation does particular jobs. First, in Harris this type only appears one, it expressed by using 'might'. Harris articulates the concerns of health care providers who believe that "health care providers are afraid they might go to jail and she's bleeding out in a car in the parking lot" (Harris, Data No. 29), In this context, 'might' is classified as

speculative because the speaker is referring to a possible, but uncertain outcome the fear of criminal prosecution as interpreted by healthcare workers. Therefore, Trump tends to use the modal verb 'may' and 'could', for instance "and it may take a little time, but for 52 years this issue has torn our country apart" (Trump, Data No. 36). This utterance does not involve a commitment to a specific time frame by the speaker, so 'may' is classified as Epistemic Speculative. He can achieve this without making a firm commitment by using 'may'. As Palmer (2001) observes, speculative modals afford speakers a chance to present disturbing ideas without getting involved directly.

Next, as indicated in Table 1, the seven cases of epistemic deductive modalities belong to Trump, none of them are used by Harris. According to Palmer (2001), epistemic deductive involves the conclusion based on logical observation rather than mere guesswork. Usually, this deductive type occurs with the help of modal verb 'must' or its negative variants 'can't'/'couldn't' which imply logical impossibility of certain statements made by the speaker. In Trump, he tends to use modal verb 'couldn't', for instance, "They couldn't get -- they didn't even come close to getting student loans." (Trump, Data No. 44). In this utterance, 'couldn't' can be classified as deductive, cause to draw a powerful inference based on the facts and the legislative record of Harris. The speaker does not refer to the competence of Harris or some rule or ban, but simply makes what he believes and a logical inference. For another example, trump used 'must' to draw conclusions based on his observations when speaking about the behavior of Putin: "I saw Putin after I left...I said oh, he must be negotiating" (Trump, Data No. 134). The given sentence does not reflect any instructions from Trump, but represents an inference made by him. Both examples demonstrate the same tendency: namely, Trump's judgments about the situation are represented in logical terms.

The last part in Epistemic category, as shown from Table 1, assumptive represents the dominant category throughout the dataset which occurs 82 times include 45 by Trump and 37 by Harris. According to Palmer (2001), this modality consists of a high confidence assumption about a future or hypothetical event drawn from general knowledge, mostly expressed using 'will' and 'would' modal verbs but occasionally 'won't' and 'wouldn't' are used in an assumptive depending on the context. While the two candidates both rely on this subtype frequently, each for their own functions. In Trump, he tends to use 'will' to forecast catastrophic outcomes should his opponent win: "And it will be the end of our country" (Trump, Data No. 19) and "If she won the election, fracking in Pennsylvania will end on day one" (Trump, Data No. 87). In this utterance, including assumptive because this is not something that could be proved or verified, rather, these are predictions that he makes with great confidence, based on his personal perception of the situation. While Harris tends uses 'would', for instance "If Donald Trump were president, Putin would be sitting in Kyiv right now." (Data No. 140, Harris). In this utterance, Harris uses would describe a situation that is not real but imagined as happening in the present. She argues that Trump's leadership would have already caused a serious geopolitical problem. This reflects epistemic assumptive modality, where the speaker presents an imagined situation as highly likely. As Palmer (2001) said, 'will' in an assumptive modality conveys the highest degree of epistemic confidence in what the speaker assumes to take place. This strategy of using modality enables the two candidates to critique each other in the absence of factual evidence. The only notable difference between them is that Harris uses would 27 times as compared to Trump's 19 times. Besides, Harris uses it to project hypothetical dangers, while Trump uses would in self-defense.

Deontic Modality

Deontic modality deals with obligations, permissions and commitments regardless of whether such are imposed externally or by oneself through language. Palmer (2001) classifies deontic modality into three subcategories: Permissive, Obligative, and Commissive. To begin with, the permissive modality only features once within the whole data set, and that is in the case of Harris's utterance. This is the least common type overall, and this does not come as a surprise since debate is confrontational, and the candidates rarely have much time for permitting actions. According to Palmer (2001), the permissive modality occurs as the use of 'may' and 'can' when the speaker permits the action. In the case of Harris, the permissive modality is achieved indirectly, as the candidate quotes Trump who says about Putin: "He said of Putin that he can do whatever the hell he wants and go into Ukraine" (Harris, Data No. 124). In this utterance, 'can' here is categorized as deontic permissive, as Harris is quoting a situation where Donald Trump gave Putin the permission to act without any boundaries.

Next, deontic obligative modality is used 25 times, out of which 15 occur within the speech of Harris and 10 by Trump. Here, obligative can be expressed through modal verb 'must', 'can' and 'should'. The most interesting result is that deontic 'must' is used solely by Harris in her speech seven times and Trump not even once in that capacity. According to Palmer (2001), the deontic 'must' occurs in cases where there is an unconditional obligation something that has to be done regardless of its probability. Using 'must', the speaker indicates non-negotiable obligations. In Harris, such phrases "What we know is that this war must end" (Harris, Data No. 111) and "It must end immediately" (Harris, Data No. 112). In this utterance, 'must' considered to be an example of Deontic Obligative, meaning that the necessity for an action is strongly emphasized in these phrases since ending a war is a duty rather than an option. Besides, 'should not' and 'cannot' are used by Harris in terms of prohibitions: "the government, and Donald Trump certainly, should not be telling a woman what to do with her body" (Harris, Data No. 28) and "we cannot afford to have a president of the United States who attempts...to upend the will of the voters" (Harris, Data No. 108). All these statements are based on the principles of duty. For Trump, he only tends to use modal verb 'should' in retrospect to judge people's past actions "they should have gone out, and they should have immediately cut the tariffs" (Trump, Data Nos. 15-16). The term 'should' in this utterance is categorized as deontic obligative (past unfulfilled) since the speaker judges the past event in terms of the normative criterion of requirement. According to Palmer (2001), such structures as 'should' with past participle belong to deontic past modality, which reflects an unfulfilled obligation. Repeating what others should have done, Trump shows that he had known from the beginning what was the right thing to do.

Therefore, the last for Deontic category, based on the Table 1, deontic commissive modality is found in 17 instances nine in Trump's and eight in Harris's speeches. According to Palmer (2001), commissive modality is the binding of speakers to a future action by speaking. This modality implies a binding self-directed commitment as opposed to an obligation directed at others. Though Palmer describes 'shall' as the main modal verb for this type, but 'will' can also serve the purpose in certain contexts. 'Shall' is a term that is hardly ever used by Americans instead, both 'will' substitute it whenever a speaker wants to make a commitment instead of providing a forecast of the future. In Harris, 'will' serves to reinforce her promises in policy issues: "I will proudly sign it into law" (Harris, Data No. 30) and "I will be a president that will protect our fundamental rights and freedoms" (Harris, Data No. 195). In this context, 'will' is classified as deontic commissive because the adverb 'proudly' reinforces that this is not merely a conditional

intention but a firm and personally meaningful commitment. Similarly, Trump tends to use 'will' as a commissive, for instance "If I win, when I'm president-elect, and what I'll do is I'll speak to one, I'll speak to the other, I'll get them together" (Trump, Data No. 131). His expression of "I'll" (I will) constructions to make promises to conduct some diplomatic actions personally. Every occurrence of "I'll" represents a separate commissive speech act; collectively, they create the image of Trump being a person who will personally solve the issue. The distinction between these two speakers lies more in their speech direction than in their speech frequency.

Dynamic Modality

Dynamic modality refers to the characteristics of the subject ability and willingness as opposed to obligations or epistemic modalities imposed externally. Palmer (2001) categorizes dynamic modality into two subtypes, namely: Abilitive and Volitive. TOO begin with, from the Table 1, Dynamic Abilitive modality is found 36 times in Harris's speech while 17 instances of the same are in Trump's speech. Dynamic Abilitive Modality refers to the actual ability of the subject to take a particular course of action and is manifest in English through 'can', 'can't', 'could', and 'couldn't'. The point that most distinguishes the two politicians is the use of polarity. Harris predominantly employs positive 'can', for examples of such include "we can chart a new way forward" (Harris, Data No. 194) and "I believe in what we can do together" (Harris, Data No. 197). The 'can' here suggests national optimism and capacity that progress is possible when people make efforts for it. In other words, speaker states the actual ability of the group (the American people and their government) to realize certain achievements. Therefore, Trump tends to use 'can't' more than Harris. For instance "People can't go out and buy cereal, bacon or eggs or anything else" (Trump, Data No. 17) and "They can't even speak English" (Trump, Data No. 107). 'can't' is classified as dynamic abilitive (negative) because the speaker asserts that the described group lacks the linguistic capacity to communicate in English. According to Palmer (2001), the negative dynamic abilitive modality indicates the total lack of ability. Trump's use of the can't formulates a scenario of the complete breakdown of the system under the present government an exact opposite of the language of possibilities used by Harris.

Lastly, based on the table 1, dynamic volitive modality is found 32 times, 19 in Trump's while 13 instances of the same are in Harris's. Volitive modality refers to the subject's internal state and includes willingness, desire, and intentional refusals to perform a particular task. Unlike commissive modality, the latter does not involve public commitment and is expressed in English through 'will', 'won't', 'would', and 'wouldn't'. In Trump, tends to uses both 'will' and 'would', for example "I'll do it again and even better" (Trump, Data No. 8) and "I'll win the rest on appeal" (Trump, Data No. 73). In this utterance, "I'll" (I will) to show personal determination, to expressing strong personal willingness to act. Therefore, Harris also tends to use 'will', but it does not use volitive modality the same way Trump did. For instance, the phrase: "I will never forget the early morning hours when it was up for a vote in the United States Senate" (Harris, Data No. 162) represents more of a statement of political affiliation rather than a policy proposal.

Functions of Modality

Expression of Possibility has been done on five occasions using 'may', 'might', and 'could', four of them by Trump and one by Harris. According to Palmer (2001), expression of possibility shows acceptance of something without commitment. Expressing possibility is used sparingly by both candidates, mainly to surface alarming scenarios

without full commitment. In this context, Speculative modality one of these functions, which is used in an open-ended manner to cast doubt on the policy boundaries of the opponent, to cast doubt on the policy boundaries of the opponent.

Certain expressions occur only seven times in the speech, in the utterances of Trump. According to Palmer (2001), deduction in modality is an absolute conclusion drawn from facts, not speculation. The Epistemic Deductive modality corresponds to the role of expressing certainty (Palmer, 2001). This function takes place when the speaker presents the claim as something that inevitably follows from what is previously known, drawing a firm and logical conclusion from the data at hand.

Reasonable assumption is related to Epistemic Assumptive modality (Palmer, 2001) and it is the category that occurs the highest number of times at 82 in the two speaker. This is not hard to understand, considering the nature of a presidential debate is highly assumptive, as candidates spend a lot of time telling their audience what will happen if the opponent were elected into office. Both speakers' arguments contain the if X, then Y will occur formula, thus making assumptive modality the rhetorical cornerstone of the debate. This function is fulfilled when the speaker makes a confident statement about a future event, a hypothetical situation or an expected behavioral pattern based on his general knowledge or assessment of a situation.

Obligation is expressed 25 times, 15 by Harris and 10 by Trump. Harris uses the deontic must seven times in expressing the non-negotiability of policy requirements. According to Palmer (2001), the function of expressing obligation is associated with Deontic Obligative modality, making it the second most frequent function in the Event Modality category. This 'must' express an unconditional requirement which is founded on ethical or political principles. From the Trump data, his obligative language looks backward, as he uses the modal 'should' to refer to something the current administration failed to accomplish. In other word, the function is used when the speaker asserts that an action is required, expected, or normatively necessary something that must or should be done based on a moral, social, or political standard.

The function of expressing permission is related to Deontic Permissive modality (Palmer, 2001). It is expressed once, by Harris. It is reporting of how Trump spoke about Putin a single instance, but one that carries real rhetorical weight. In this context, based on the data, by the modal verb 'can', it is reported permission used in characterizing opponent which is Trump foreign policy as giving immunity to an authoritarian leader. In other word, the function is performed when the speaker gives, attributes or recognizes authorization to carry out an action.

The ability mode is used 36 times in 'can', 'can't', and 'could'. According to Palmer (2001), abilitive modality is the ability of the subject. Based on data, Harris uses 'can' to refer to what is attainable together. Next, the can't of Trump is used to show economic failures. Harris also uses the past tense 'could' to help the audience remember what insurance companies 'could' once do. In this context, it function is performed when the speaker confirms or denies the real possibility of a subject to do a specified action.

Expression of willingness and intention amounts to 32 instances through 'will', 'would', 'won't', and 'wouldn't. Palmer (2001) differentiates it from commissive modality volitive modality represents the speaker's internal condition rather than an irrevocable promise. In his speech, based on data, Trump utilizes 'I'll' (I will) to express personal determination: "I'll do it again and even better" (Data No. 8) and wouldn't to represent the Democrats' inability to alter the situation as a voluntary decision. While Harris makes more personal use of this category expresses identity rather than policy.

The use of commissive and guarantee is found 17 times, with Trump using them nine times while Harris uses them eight times. According to Palmer (2001), the function of commissive modality is to bind the speaker by the promise to perform a certain action in the future. With modal verb 'will', Harris commits to some policies and Trump to describe a process of diplomacy. This function is fulfilled when the speaker explicitly pledges to execute a particular activity in the future.

Implications of Research Findings

By far, the prevalent category is that of Epistemic Assumptive, which covers up to 82 cases out of 205 (Trump: 45, Harris: 37). The candidates seem to rely on 'will' and 'would' a lot in order to express certainty about the future developments. Thus, Trump relies on 'will' while constructing the scenarios in question: "And it will be the end of our country" (Data No. 19), "If she won the election, fracking in Pennsylvania will end on day one" (Data No. 87). Meanwhile, Harris also utilizes 'will' when making certain economic statements: "His plan... which will result in \$5 trillion to America's deficit" (Data No. 2). Furthermore, both candidates apply the use of 'would' in order to support counterfactual statements. For instance, Trump expresses that "If I were president it would have never started" (Data No. 121), whereas Harris explains that "If Donald Trump were president, Putin would be sitting in Kyiv right now" (Data No. 140).

The second pattern worthy of note is that Epistemic Deductive modality is used exclusively by Trump in all seven cases. Harris does not use any such modality in his utterances. When Trump wishes to make his judgment a logical conclusion rather than an opinion, he uses 'must', 'can't', and 'couldn't': "In fact, they never took the tariff off because it was so much money, they can't" (Data No. 6) and "I said oh, he must be negotiating" (Data No. 134). As Palmer notes, deductive modality shows that the speaker believes his conclusion is the only one possible under the circumstances. For Trump, this strategy is useful in making political criticism seem more like an objective observation than personal opinion. The third pattern is associated with Dynamic modality. Both Abilitive (36 instances) and Volitive (32 instances) are frequently used; however, these modalities have opposite polarities in the two speeches. Harris uses 'can' positively to indicate collective achievements that are possible: "we can chart a new way forward" (Data No. 194). Meanwhile, Trump uses 'can't' to refer to things that cannot be done anymore: "People can't go out and buy cereal, bacon or eggs or anything else" (Data No. 17).

Factors that Influence

These patterns are not coincidental; they are a logical result of the purpose for which each candidate entered the debate. Harris came into the debate as the vice president of the incumbent administration. In order to argue in favor of the incumbent and state policy positions, it is inevitable that she would utilize obligative and commissive language. This involved making statements such as that the war "must end" (Data No. 111) and stating that she will "proudly sign it into law" (Data No. 30). On the other hand, Trump entered the debate as the candidate challenging the incumbent. To criticize the administration, foretell what its policies will entail, and portray the administration's record as utterly unimpeachable, it is natural that he would employ deductive certainty, use assumptive 'will' in warning statements, and use retrospective should in discussing the economy. As Palmer (2001) points out, modality choice is tied to authority, not just intentions.

The context or topic of the speeches was also a factor. The economic issue elicited deductive and negative abilitive modalities from Trump: "People can't go out and buy cereal" (Data No. 17); "they can't" take down the tariff (Data No. 6). The abortion and foreign policy issues elicited obligative and commissive modality from Harris: "the government... should not be telling a woman what to do with her body" (Data No. 28); "I will always give Israel the ability to defend itself" (Data Nos. 117-118). The genre of debate itself also matters, in contrast to a speech that may be carefully planned, debate requires live responses to opponents' comments. Trump's frequent use of 'wouldn't' to describe what the Democrats refused to do in order to avoid doing something quickly allows for an immediate response in a debate situation.

What becomes apparent from this analysis is that both speakers' use of their favored modal verbs was not an accident but rather a carefully constructed strategy. Harris used *must* as the marker of a moral imperative, *'will'* as a commissive verb to support her policy claims, and *'can'* in collective expressions. Trump used *'will'* as a predictive verb to issue warnings, *'can't'* and *'couldn't'* in a deductive sense to question the credentials of his rival, and *'should'* to criticize the mistakes made by the current administration.

An example worth highlighting is that of deontic *'must'*, which is used seven times by Harris but not even once by Trump in this context. Where deontic *'must'* expresses a duty and obligation for action, Trump uses either deductive *'must'*, that is where he draws conclusions from facts presented to him or *should*, where he passes judgment on someone else's past actions and regrets. This has great implications as it defines where both speakers stand in relation to their duty to act. While Harris is seen as an individual who acts based on a sense of duty, Trump appears to be one who stands outside passing judgment on what others should do.

Discussion

Epistemic Assumptive modality stands as the most predominant modality with a total number of 82, which occur in both candidate's discourse. This modality occurs in the form of *'will'* and *'would'*. In this modality, both candidates apply the modals to express their confidence about their predictions on each other's policies and the future that the country will encounter under the presidency of their opponents. Epistemic Deductive is the second most common modality in this speech, occurring in seven instances in Trump's speech only, while not a single instance occurs in Harris' speech. Deontic Obligative Event Modality, on the other hand, takes the lead with 25 instances in the two speeches.

The over-reliance on deontic modals by Harris is attributable to the fact that she is the defending candidate. The candidate needs to emphasize her need for the achievement of certain policy outcomes and, as such, it is imperative that they are presented as obligations and not preferences. In saying, "this war must end" (Data No. 111) or, "we cannot afford to have a president" who undermines the elections (Data No. 108), Harris is putting political decisions into context as obligations, not preferences. This was similarly confirmed by Desilia et al. (2026) during their analysis of Harris's speeches during her campaign. For Trump, the situation is different. His use of exclusive epistemic deduction, where he says, "they can't" remove the tariff (Data No. 6) and "he must be negotiating" (Data No. 134), allows him to criticize the opponent's performance without assuming a moral high ground.

What becomes apparent in Palmer's (2001) analysis is how each candidate creates their own rhetoric identity through modal selection. For Harris, her rhetoric is built on moral obligation (*must*, *should not*), policy commitment (*commissive will*), and collective

competence (positive can). For Trump, his rhetoric is built on confident forecasting (assumptive will, would), deductive criticism (can't, couldn't), and past ineptitude (should have). The difference between volitive and commissive 'will' is what separates the two modal uses, which is why context is important. Trump's "I'll do it again and even better" (Data No. 8) is a personal promise, whereas Harris's "I will proudly sign it into law" (Data No. 30) is an official declaration.

The prevalence of epistemic modality coincides with the results obtained by Hamdanur and Pulungan (2018), which identify 'will' and 'would' to be the two most frequently used modals in the Trump-Clinton debate. However, in contrast to Hamdanur and Pulungan (2018), who interpret their findings in terms of the candidates' hedging, the current data clearly indicate that the modals in question are used to make strong predictions in both instances. Furthermore, the presence of a cross-linguistic equivalent in Sumari (2025)'s analysis of Indonesian presidential debate, which shows epistemic modality dominating at about 48%, suggests that this might be characteristic of the genre in general. The obligative bias of Harris is consistent with Desilia et al. (2026)'s results in regard to her campaign speeches, providing evidence of intentional modal usage. The unique occurrence of Epistemic Deductive in Trump, on the other hand, seems to be this study's most novel contribution.

Future studies examining modality over several debate rounds could reveal whether these tendencies recur or vary according to circumstance. A cross-linguistic investigation applying Palmer's (2001) complete model to debates in other languages, extending Sumari's (2025) findings, would determine whether epistemic dominance is a property of genre or culture-specific. Future investigations should consider modal verbs in their contextual environment rather than their surface realization because, as seen here, the same can be assumptive, commissive, or volitive at any given point. In the realm of English language education, the discrepancy between the modal verbs used by Trump and Harris provides easily accessible material for demonstrating to students how modal verbs function in practical argumentation.

CONCLUSION

In this study, reveals 205 modal verbs out of 111 by Trump and 94 by Harris, where all eight subtypes of modality identified by Palmer (2001) occur. Under Propositional Modality, Epistemic Assumptive occurred most often, a total of 82 times using 'will' and 'would', whereas Epistemic Deductive occurred exclusively in Trump's utterances in 'must', 'can't', and 'couldn't' forms, with little use of Epistemic Speculative in both speaker utterances. In terms of Event Modality, Deontic Obligative showed the clearest direction of usage where Harris used 'must' seven times for future action and obligations, while Trump used 'must' 0 times, using 'should' for past actions. Under Deontic Commissive, 'will' used in both speaker utterances represented personal promises, Deontic Permissive used only once in Harris', while Dynamic Abilitive contrasted Harris' positive 'can' and Trump's negative 'can't'. For the second research, eight functions of communication were found. The first function, which is used the most often, is expressing assumptions or predictions. This function is employed by Trump to give catastrophic warnings and by Harris to demonstrate expertise and hold Trump accountable. Two functions, ability and willingness, indicate a direction among the candidates, while obligation contrasts between the two in terms of a future or a past orientation. Commissive 'will' was found as a way of expressing commitment by both the candidates, while expressing certainty is found exclusively in Trump's discourse.

The contribution comes in the form of specification, since applying all the eight Palmer subtypes of modality to a live debate highlights the fact that Epistemic Deductive modality is unique to Trump only, which had not been observed before in previous literature regarding both candidates. The obligative orientation that Harris exhibits through this paper and the analysis of campaign speeches conducted by Desilia et al. (2026) supports the fact that there is a strategic use of rhetoric and not merely an adaptation to the situation. Then, there are two major limitations in this study: it involves the analysis of only one debate by kamala and trump 2024 Presidential debate, and it limits itself to modal auxiliaries, thus excluding adverbs, verbs, and adjectives. Further research should broaden the boundaries of modality studies in political discourse. It would be comparison of modal patterns across multiple debate cycles; press-conferences, campaigning events, or social media posts, might show the role of the context in the use of modality in political discourse. Cross-linguistic studies applying Palmer's model might demonstrate whether there are similar trends in other languages or cultures. Future studies may also incorporate multimodal analysis, including tone, gestures, and body language, as well as AI-assisted discourse analysis tools to examine larger political debate corpora.

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