

THE USE OF MODALS BY POLITICIANS

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ABSTRACT

Political speeches, no doubt, carry both locutionary and illocutionary forces of announcing verdicts, responding to questions, revealing the speaker's state of mind, evasion of responsibilities and an expression of certainties as well as uncertainties; others are expressions of doubts, facts, simple futurity, obligations, necessities, possibilities, appeal to emotions and reasoning so as to exert authority and command. A careful perusal of the use of certain modals by politicians reveals that the use of such auxiliary verbs is irresistible by this category of people due to the nature of their calling, power relationship and their political aspirations. Ethnographical data which are equally informative reveal that the use and meaning of a modal could as well be culture bound, as informed by Hymes (1964).

Sources of data for this paper constitute documented speeches in texts, dailies and creative works. Analyses of the intended meanings and functions of the modals such as will, should, must, may, would, might, etc are provided. The work draws its theoretical frameworks from Austin's (1962) use of performatives to realize locutionary and illocutionary acts, as expounded by Lyons (1979) and Palmer (2002).

INTRODUCTION

Modals, othewise called modal auxiliaries or modal auxiliary verbs, are a certain category of verbs that convey certain linguistic expressions and perform nuances of functions other verbs like the lexical ones may not be capable of handling. This is because, according to Palmer (2002), language is not just concerned about providing information or mere statements but also used to ask questions, give commands, express commitments and obligations, issue threats and warnings, wishes, promises, etc. In this light, it is patently obvious that the English modals which include *can, could, may, might, shall*

and others perform the above enumerated functions and over.

It is no longer axiomatic that the modals are sine qua non in the speeches of lay and professional politicians alike in order to perform certain illocutionary functions. This paper examines some modal auxiliaries employed by some politicians in their political discourses. Such politicians include Barry Goldwater, a Republican Senator and candidate in the 1964 US Presidential election as well as political speeches of Adolf Hitler of Germany. Others include speeches of some Nigerian political leaders and other high profile politicians.

It may not be rewarding in this context to begin defining the term, 'politician' or 'politics' since with the benefit of intuition, it is believed that every human being is a politician, although not a professional one, hence the Oxford **Advanced Learner's Dictionary** (7th Edition) says that a politician is one whose job is concerned with the activities involved in getting and using power in public life and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society. In the light of this definition, I believe that it is the category of professional politicians to which this lexicon refers. It is for this reason that only the speeches of the career politicians and political office holders constitute the main thrust of this paper.

SEMANTICS OF MODAL AUXILIARIES

Typologically, the English modals which are functionally synonymous with the modal auxiliary verbs belong to a special category of verbs that collocate with the lexical verbs. The modals commonly function with the main verbs via the process of inflection to change the form and meaning of the lexical counterparts. The cardinal role of this class of verbs is to denote the mood of the speaker, albeit that some of them such as will and shall are temporal, denoting the future, despite that Lyons (1979) argues that even *will* and *shall* "are most appropriately described as modals" (p. 306).

An insightful question here in discussing the semantics of modals, I believe, is: what mood and grammatical functions do these verbs portary in speehes? These moods include indicative which grammatically functions in declarative sentences. In a

related manner, there is as well the interrogative mood, although the label may sound bizarre to some grammarians. Lyons (1979) subscribes to this label because interrogative sentences show the expectation of the speaker from his audience. It is commonplace to realize that some modals used by speakers communicate wishes and intentions as in, 'May God Bless You', and 'It is pertinent that you (should) define the key words before going to the next step in the lesson'. These sentences exemplify the optative and subjunctive moods, respectively. In certain contexts, some modals denote assumptions, hence putative in contrast with certainty and are referred to as inductive, often used by those in power to give a note of finality as in 'You must conform to the principles of democracy'.

Generally, the English modals, besides uttering a simple statement, asking questions, conveying expressions of wishes and intentions, assumptions and finality, also communicate feelings of logical necessity, promises, doubts, possibilities, uncertainties, etc.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

Language, being a channel of communication in intrapersonal and interpersonal milieu cannot be divorced from politics. Politics serves as a function, and one of the cardinal realizations of language. Jabber and Jinquan (2013) make a strong case about the relationship these mutual entities share thus:

Language and politics are extremely interrelated and intermingled. Due to the significance of language in

politics, politicians tend to use special forms of language to give their discourse charm and influence which enable them to send different messages to different people of different orientations and level.

This observation made by these two scholars is a corroboration of the importance politics attaches to language, for the varied messages of appeal, coercion, persuasion, lobby and support sent by politicians and political leaders are stylistically garnished with language and medium of language. Small wonder the linguistic expressions of well informed and well groomed political class are preponderant with scholarly rhetoric and compositions, aimed at appealing to the reasoning and sensibilities of the audience and the electorate. Given the roles the modals play in communicating different views and positions of politicians to their audience, they become indispensable in the language of politicians.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES OF DATA

Principally, political speeches that feature in the dailies, creative works and a corpus of other political discourses constitute the sources of data of this work. Frequency of use of such modals as *will*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *may*, etc is highlighted. The illocutionary force or the intended meaning or rationale for the use of such modals in such speeches is, as well, investigated.

EXTRACTS OF POLITICAL SPEECHES AND THEIR ANALYSES

WILL

1. “The transfer of power from West to East is gathering place and soon will dramatically change the context for dealing with international challenges.” – by James F. Hoge

Analysis: The Modal, will in this political speech of F. Hoge, JR is an expression of intent of what is likely to happen in the future; that is, a change in global politics and power which will eventually change the political landscape. This, he enunciates in his article “Is the US Ready?” (p.3), despite that Lyon (1968) opines that such statements with will and shall do not necessarily refer to the future.

2. “Today, the transformation of the international system will be even bigger and will require the assimilation markedly different political and cultural traditions” (P.3) by Barry Goldwater in Shadegg (1965).

Analysis: According to Quirk and Greenbaum (2000), the use of *will* in this manner in American English, not only denotes non – volitional future, but also conveys the mood of helplessness and perplexity. Therefore in extract, no. 2, it is ethnolinguistically relevant that the politician here lacks the free will power to say categorically and with certainty what the nature of the transformations of the international system looks like.

3. "This will not be an engagement of personality.

It will be an engagement of principle" by Barry Goldwater

Analysis: In this utterance, the speaker makes a projection with some traces of certainty and assurance. This is to say that he agrees that the entire society is to be held culpable, should a definite and right choice not be made. This reasoning and prediction agrees with that of Lyons (1968) who instructively comments that while using the modals shall and will, that "the politician puts himself forward as a guarantor of the truth or occurrence of the event he refers to."

4. "2013 will be a good year for Nigerians" by President Jonathan, Daily Trust, Monday Dec, 31, 2012.

5. "God has been kind to us... I know we will get there" by former President Obasanjo, Daily Trust, Monday December 24, 2012.

Analysis: In the extracts Nos. 4 and 5, the illocutionary acts being performed in these two speech acts are not far from that of awakening a sense of optimism and positivism in the subjects. It should be highlighted that at the time and in the circumstances the two political figures spoke, only the use of will modal was appropriate to communicate their feelings to their audience. For this reason, the incumbent goes on to say, "Let me assure all of you and indeed all Nigerians, that 2013 will be better for us than 2012."

6. "It is not true that I' m resigning. Resign for what? We will continue to run the PDP" - by Alh. Bamanga Tukur, PDP Chairman, on "PDP Crisis, Daily Trust, June, 2013, p.4

7. "I will inaugurate another pension committee to reconcile liabilities ... It will be done within Six months ... We will be part of it" by Governor Ibrahim Dankwanbo in Daily Trust, June 19, 2013.

8. "Instead of getting the cotton in grade A, it will now be in grade D, instead of you getting 10 per ton, you will now get N2.

Analysis: Extracts 6, 7 and 8 suggest intention, willingness, desire as well as a prediction of what these politicians wish the future holds for their people and what they intend to actualize, but with no definite time stated.

Can and Could

9. "The regime in Pyongyang could collapse without necessarily its army corps and brigades collapsing" by Col. Maxwell David, the Chief of Staff for US Special Operations in South Korea, in Purkitt (ed) (2008) on "How to Prevent Another Iraq" (p. 37).

10. "It Could be the mother of all humanitarian relief operations" _ by Col. Maxwell David, on North Korea's Aggression towards the South Korea" in Purkitt (ed) (2008)

Analysis: In the two utterances from extracts 9 and 10, the modal could in this context of political tension and situation suggests possibility of the occurrence of a regime collapse in Pyongyang and the critical and unpleasant nature of the humanitarian relief which according to Quirk and Greenbaum (2000) is an expression of possibility which is either theoretical or factual.

Could in Political discourses is as well used in order not to sound or appear too committal unlike deontic modals which denote certainty, undertaking and obligations with regard to the future (Palmer 1979) as in the speech of Goldwater's opponent, Ray Wilkins and a Negro leader thus: "If Gold Water is President, it could lead to a Police State" (P211). Another instructive insight on the possible reason for the use of this modal by the political class is provided by Twaddell (1960) and Joos (1964) where their categorization of modals places could in the casual class or non – committal category.

11. "We can't win, but we might make a respectable showing" by Barry Goldwater.
12. "Certainly, no political effort can be successful unless it is supported with adequate financial resources" (p. 90) by Barry Goldwater in Shadegg (1965).

Analysis: The modal can which features in the two extracts, 11 and 12, acquires the sentence structures of Compound and Complex respectively while functionally, they are declaratives employed by Senator Goldwater in addressing his visitors and audience (in extract II) and declaring the inability of their party to win the election, and at the same time taking a defeatist position, while in extract 12, *can* is used to imply concession of success of *political* effort to adequate financial resources. This follows that the use of **can** in the declarative sentences is suggestive of both ability and possibility of the two political events referred to in the two extracts; this perlocutionary force in **can** equally applies to the following political utterances by Senator Goldwater in his presidential

campaign speech in Washington DC thus: "We **can** start at once to foster an economy that will provide jobs for our growing population" and "We can and will see to it that the job making sector of the economy... flourishes" (Shadegg, 1965 : 205).

May & Might

According to Lyons (1968) a sentence containing **may** is ambiguous, little wonder, it is often used to account for uncertainty and doubtful possibilities, despite that both **may** and **might** are also used to denote permission or excessive permission and possibility while **might** can also be used to express remote possibility as exemplified in the following extracts:

12. "We can't win, but we **might** make a respectable showing" (p. 32), by Goldwater.
13. "We are conservatives. This great Republican party is our historic house ... but I **might** remind you, this is always true in every platform of an American Political Party", by Goldwater.
14. "The fact that we didn't pay our National Chairman **might** be a part of our problem" (p. 38), by Gold water.
15. "We cannot guarantee basic crops here because it is a distorted market. You **may** decide to buy, you **may** decide not to buy" by Governor Ibrahim Dankwanbo, *Daily Trust* Wednesday, June 19, 2003.

Analysis: The use of **may** and **might** in the four preceding extracts is quite apt, for it has been observed that it could be used in the political milieu to evade responsibility

of an act. This follows that **may** or **might** could be employed so as not to be held accountable should the act or event be infelicitous or it goes awry(borrowing Austin's (1962) registers); that is, in case the result is unsuccessful, the politician should not be held culpable. In this light, it is insightful to deduce that in extract 12, Senator Gold water pragmatically implies that much as there is no same hope of winning in the election, there are as more equal chances of putting up a respectable showing as there are no chances of putting up *such* at all.

Must

Grammatically, as a modal auxiliary, *must* functionally expresses insistence, compulsion and obligation. It is, as well, used to denote logical necessity. It is one modal out of so many that those in power and authority find unavoidably attractive and as such use it as a matter of exigency to communicate compulsion or obligation. Jabber and Jinquan (2013) argue that the use of **must** shows rigidity and that implies that "the consequences of not doing a **must** are much more severe than the consequences for not doing should". The following political extracts aptly capture this idea:

16. "Peace is a worthy objective. But if we **must** choose between peace and keeping the communists out of Berlin, then we **must** fight" __ by Goldwater. The speech was part of his lengthy discourse on "Foreign Policy", which implies that both peace and war are a logical necessity for his state in order for them to realize their objective of pushing the communists out of

Berlin. This Type of construction is a clear way of reasoning as it obtains in argumentations, rhetoric and compositions so as to persuade the audience to take a particular course of action. This type of appeal is not uncharacteristic of politicians who are always hell bent on having their ways. This level of semantics of **must** equally applies to Adolph Hitler's political speech in his Party's convention on 23rd November, 1926. Extracts below:

17. "... To ensure that Parteitag should on principle never be used for the settlement of personal disputes. Such disputes **must** certainly be settled in one way or another".
18. "And it **must** never be forgotten that in all such cases or those similar to them great decisions have not been made at such councils".

The implicature, quoting Grice (1975) of Hitler's speeches is to win the people to his side by using **must** to appeal to both reason and emotion and impressing it on them, the logical necessity in listening and reasoning with an individual or individuals instead of adopting the decision of the majority, which he believed and was strongly certain would work against his personal agenda.

On the other hand, **must** used by politicians implies insistence as well as compulsion in order to get the led comply and cooperate with those in authority. Therefore, in this context of use, politicians in the corridors of power and

authority appropriate this modal to dish out orders or commands and strong advice to their subjects. This function agrees with the popular belief that power relationships can influence the use of modal auxiliaries because the right to give rules and strong advice is attached to a political office.

This pragmatic function of certain modals like **must** is re-echoed by Muriel (2003) who avers that modals are linguistic elements a speaker can employ as a sign of power and authority". Other modals akin to **must** functionally are **have to** and **have got to** which, more often, characterize the elocution of totalitarian and belligerent regimes in a bellicose posture as borne out in the speeches of the US Presidents, Robert Kennedy to his Admiral, trying to execute the invasion of Cuba and Lyndon Johnson, in his presidential speech during the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. President Robert Kennedy, in his belligerence during the Cuban crisis replied to his admiral: "But I don't want the US involved in this". *We've got to* do something, we *'ve got to* do something" (Bailey, 1992:15). This utterance marks and captures the mood of a fascist leader and invader, poised to deal with a defenseless and powerless nation, hence the use of **have got to** repeated in quick succession.

Must, as a modal that appears indispensable in the language of use by those who possess political powers, its use by them makes them to sound authoritative to their subjects who acknowledge their right to such powers. President Lyndon Johnson's speech on July 21, while signing the Civil Rights Act of

1964, proposed by President Kennedy, is an embodiment and demonstration of authority in elocution:

Americans believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of Liberty – yet millions are being deprived of those blessings, not because of their own failures but because of the Colour of their skin... my fellow citizens, we have come now to time of testing. We **must** not fail.

In Achebe's *A Man of the People*, the late literary icon imbues his protagonist, Chief the Honorable M.A. Nanga, M.P., with the speeches of one who is in authority and hell bent on getting his subject and constituents do his bidding with the appropriation of the modal **must**. One of the scenes that bear out this position is the Hon. Minister's interaction with Jalio, a journalist and President of the Writers' Society where the Minister roundly expresses his dislike for the journalists' dress code; this, he asserts authoritatively thus:

"Let me tell you, ... if you want me to attend any of your functions you **must** wear a proper dress. Either you wear a suit... if you don't like it you can wear our national costume. That is correct protocol" (p. 67)

This is not far from the rationale behind Martin Luther King's political, argumentative and rhetorical addresses, aimed at having his ways by extricating himself from the malicious clutches of racism. These speeches are a replica of what an astute politician delivers so as to win the sympathy of the electorate, in this context, the sympathy of his fellow

brethren in bondage. The use of the modal **must**, no doubt, is very instrumental in driving home his message of **Scorn** and apparently inexhaustible forbearance” as Bailey (1992) puts it:

Alabama has tried to nurture and defend evil but the evil is choking to death in the dusty roads and streets of the state... Our aim **must** never be to defeat or humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding. We **must** see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself (p. 52)

Moving away from this scene to another episode that attracted and moved the crowd, Luther King’s diction does not exclude the modal auxiliary **must**.

According to Bailey, the text was aimed at “causing a crisis that would dramatize the Negroes’ Plight and galvanize the national conscience’. Extract below:

19. “I must confess that over the last few years, I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderates. I had hoped that white moderates would reject the myth of time... actually, time is neutral ... we **must** come to see that human progress never rolls on wheels of inevitability’ (p. 48).

It is incontestable that those 2 last speeches are moving ones, capable of inciting the audience against the white supremacists at the time they were made. What is of more concern and interesting in the extracts is the illocutionary force of the modal on the listeners and readers in that spatio – temporal setting. The semantics of the modal here implies that if his brethren failed to see the evil of racial segregation the way he saw it or failed to act the way he wanted them to act, that

they were plunging dangerously into annihilation (in the strictest sense of the circumstance). On the strength of these galvanizing and sensationalist presentations, Luther King’s stance was to win the war against racism, as much as a politician would like to win an election and seize governmental powers and influence the decisions of his society.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analyses of the use of modals by politicians, it is observed that this category of verbs occupies a significant and pragmatic position in the linguistic repertoire of political figures and their likes, even when these verbs are employed implicitly as they occur in the subjunctive moods. The penchant for the use of modals by the political class could be ascribed to the nature of their status and their ultimate goal as politicians.

It is in this light that one can’t wish away, but expect statements of promises, certainty and uncertainty, doubts, Commands, possibilities, appeals and authority, which the modals convey from the politicians and those who assume their positions. This follows that the employment of modals by this said class is sociolinguistically imperative because their actions and perlocution range from declaration, ability, persuasion, determination to coercion.

It is quite imperative to assert that the use of modals and the meanings they generate could as well be ethno-linguistically conditioned, for according to Hinkel (1995), it is possible that a US Politician can use a weaker modal that has a much stronger meaning to communicate a more grievous position.

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