

The Use of Modal Verbs in the 2016 Manifesto of the National Democratic Congress Party in Ghana: A Semantic Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Political party manifestos are the key policy statements of political parties in an election. Manifestos have become a key feature of Ghana's democratic process since the re-introduction of democratic governance in 1992. Therefore, like elsewhere in the world, manifestos remain vital ingredients for participatory, transparent and accountable governance. Party manifestos are tools for holding political parties to account during their terms in office and therefore very impressive tool for development. This study looks at the semantic value of modal verbs in the 2016 manifesto of the National Democratic Party (NDC) and demonstrates invariably that modal verbs have the potentiality to reveal vivacious meanings of the nature of political discourse. This study is designed within the framework of qualitative research methodology. Content analysis is employed for this study because it is interpretive, involving a close reading of text. The analysis reveals that modal verbs are used predominantly in the manifesto to give the message a sense of intention, promise, obligation and necessity in a conscious and strategic manner to convince the electorate.

KEY WORDS: manifesto, political discourse, modal verbs, political party.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate through language is a yardstick of human competence. Speakers use language to communicate their knowledge and beliefs and to share their community's rules of social order and cultural norms. The citizenry of democratic countries has the option to go to the ballot boxes on election days and vote for one person or one party. Whether their decision goes along with a political conviction or not, it is most likely based on communication through language. In political manifestos ideas and ideologies need to be transported through language and possible to learn more about how perceptions, opinions and individualities are influenced by language.

Charteris-Black (2005:1) has the view that within all types of political system, from autocratic, through oligarchic to democratic, leaders have relied on the spoken word to convince others of the benefits that arise from their leadership.

Van Dijk (2001) also declares that political discourse can be narrowed down to the set of activities politicians engage in. To him, the study of the structures of political discourse may reveal much about the unique character of this discourse.

Klingeman et al. (1994) says that political election manifestos are public declarations of political parties in which they outline their policies and tell electors how the country would be governed if they are given the mandate to assume office and wield power. Political manifestos abound with modal verbs that seek to promote diverse ideologies and reveal particular interests of a political party. and as such this paper understudy abounds with modal verbs and that is the main interest of the researcher.

As Quirk et al. (1973) reveals a modal auxiliary verb is used together with a main verb to express differing attitudes towards a proposition: possibility, certainty, permission, intention, among others. Given this the paper seeks to reveal the indicators of these modal auxiliary verbs used in the manifesto.

II. THE PRESENT STUDY

2.1 The Rationale of the study

A number of researchers have investigated the language of political discourse; for example, Beard (2000) Bista (2009), Fraser (2010), Moks and Vossen (2010), Mihas (2005) and Nartey and Yankson (2014). Most of these studies, however, focused attention on how indirection is depicted in political communication. Mihas (2005), for instance, considered the use of euphemism, metaphor and hedging in political communication. Mihas (2005), for instance, considered the use of euphemisms and metaphors in political

campaigns in America. Bista (2009) also researched into the syntactic and semantic properties of “Yes We Can” as used by Barack Obama, president of the United States. Beard (2000) examines how both politicians and commentators describe political stances. Fraser (2010) examined the use of hedging in political discourse. The semantic implication of modal verbs in political discourse, in particular, political manifestos, though important, remains relatively under researched in the literature, however such verbs have the tendency to reveal very elusive meanings of the nature of political discourse. Besides, not much research has been done in this area under study particularly in Africa. The present study sets out to fill the gap given the scantiness of studies on modality in political manifestos.

I ask the following research questions to clarify the aim of the study:

1. Which modal verbs are dominant in the 2016 manifesto of the NDC?
2. What meanings do the modal verbs bring to bear on the overall message conveyed by the manifesto?

2.2 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is underpinned by the concept of modality. The modal auxiliary verbs are more often than not called ‘helping verbs’.

Modal auxiliary verbs are ‘little’ words that precede the main verb of a sentence, and are largely used across registers to express a speaker’s or writer’s opinion or attitude towards the proposition that the sentence expresses or the situation that the proposition describes (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973). Therefore, modal auxiliary verbs may be involved in the expression of time, necessity, possibility, permission and obligation as well as such grammatical phenomena as negation, affirmation and questioning.

Ehrman (1966:9) explains the meaning of modal auxiliaries as, “that closed class of verbs which may occupy the first position of a verb phrase, which may not be immediately preceded by another verb, which may invert with the subject in interrogation, and which is negated by ‘not’”. Here again, Ehrman intimates that each modal verb has a basic meaning as well as subsidiary meaning- what she refers to as ‘overtones’.

Similarly, Biber, Conrad and Leech (2002:28) consider modal verbs as first verbs in a clause, and are followed by the base form of another verb, usually a main verb.

According to Halliday (1970), the grammar and semantics of modal auxiliary verbs in native English have engaged scholarly attention for a long time; for example, Palmer (1979), Coates (1983), Hudleston (1984), Quirk et al. (1985). Modal auxiliary verbs pose complex problems as far as linguistic description is concerned. Classifying modal auxiliary verbs is by no means unproblematic, since a modal may function in more than one category. Palmer (2001:10), for example, explains that *can* conveys permission in the structure, “John *can* come in now”, but conveys ability in the sentence, “John *can* speak French”. Given the multiplicity of possible meanings that can be presented from a particular modal verb, Branford (1967:144-145) indicated that, “It is probably better to avoid labeling any modal too specifically (e.g. ‘may’= ‘possibility’) but to study each according to the context as one finds it”. It is therefore prudent for one to be cautious about the meaning of modals because the meanings may differ based on the context in which these modal verbs are used. Modality as a linguistic system which expresses the speaker’s judgment toward the topic. It refers to “the validity of what is being predicated stated, questioned, commended or offered within the clause”.

Modality meaning can be considered and presented by looking at the types of modality that can generally be expressed by modal verbs and adjuncts (Fontaine, 2013).

Lyons (1977: 792) classifies them into epistemic and deontic while generative grammarians often deal with them as root and epistemic modals. Lyons (p.793), further, characterizes epistemic modals as concerned with matters of knowledge, belief or opinion, rather than facts while deontic modality, according to him, is characterized with the necessity or possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents (p.823).

Moreover, Palmer (1974) describes the English modals along two axes: i) the inherent property to express a certain degree of knowledge, a guess or a conjecture about a certain event in the present or past time, and ii) the source of their modality, being the subject of the sentence or one of the interlocutors in the discourse. Accordingly, Palmer observes a distinction along two parameters: a) epistemic/non-epistemic (i.e. passing judgment on the proposition of the utterance, or not) and b) orientation (subject or discourse-oriented). Given the lack of stringency of the classification of modals in terms of orientation, Palmer (1979) modified his earlier binary classification of modals into a ternary framework of modals, viz. deontic (pertaining to moral obligation or duty), epistemic (i.e. passing judgment) and dynamic (activity). This new format cuts across two central degrees of modality, namely, possibility and necessity. To these a tertiary degree is added relating to *will* and *shall*.

Abdul-Fattah (2011:57-62) gives us an integrative idea about the anomalous and polysemous linguistic behaviour of the English modals. These modals express a network of different modalities, even with the same modal auxiliary verb, dependent on the different discursal contexts. Among other functions, he demonstrates that *shall* can be contextually used to express futurity (prediction), willingness/undertaking, promise/guarantee, threat/warning and insistence (strong volition). He associates functions such as future prediction, conjectured

future event, cross-reference, future iteration, timeless truth and reasonable inference with *will* and reveals that *would* can be associated with future intention in the past, future likelihood, future conditional, tentativeness in polite requests, inter alia. And he identifies the following functions with *can*: informal request, generalization, general possibility, suggestion by implication, impossibility (when negated), etc.

As far as *could* is concerned, Abdul-Fattah identifies permission, request, offer, tentative invitation, general possibility, suggestion, among others as its salient functions while *may* and *might* have similar functions like (tentative) future possibility, generalization, general possibility and request, their differential functions notwithstanding. *Must*, he explains, expresses present obligation, future obligation, external obligation, prohibition and logical judgment at pre-present whilst *should*, he maintains, denotes and connotes present obligation, future obligation, past obligation, non-actuality, dynamic necessity/advisability, urge/necessity and invitation/request.

2.3 Review of Previous Studies

I look at some reviews on the literature of political discourse with the aim of situating the present study. Boicu (2007) brings a different, but interesting perspective, to bear on studies on modality in political discourse. Analysing Ashley Mote's political speeches, he finds that the speaker's use of modal verbs contributed to the justification or intensification of the illocutionary forces initiated by the speech acts he articulates. The study therefore thoroughly supports the position that modal verbs, depending on their contextual usage, have the disposition to reduce or intensify the proposition of an utterance.

Menezes (2006) also investigates how linguistic expressions of deontic modality act in a sense of making the audience's participation possible in standpoints defended in political speeches, while drawing on a functionalist theory. The findings reveal that politicians use *must* to consolidate their obligations, and when necessary, strategically distance themselves from established deontic values.

Maks and Vossen (2010) examine the saliency of deontic constructions in election manifestos. To them, election manifestos have a predominant use of deontic constructions that seem to fit very well the expression of principles, behaviour and policies as advocated in manifestos. Their study shows that the principles and policy measures captured in a manifesto are often linguistically realized with deontic structures of modal verbs and adjectives. This, according to them, is because the message of a political manifesto is intended to be re-(assuring). Hence, the use of deontic modals seems appropriate since such verbs echo a certain level of commitment, zeal and enthusiasm by the political party.

Bista (2009) considers the syntactic and semantic properties of 'Yes, We Can' as used by US president, Barack Obama. This phrase represents various forms of meaning - challenge, possibility, ability, permission and opportunity - in social, political and linguistics domains alike. A popular repetitive expression in President Obama's speeches, this phrase, supposedly, highlights his political will, audacity and boldness in addressing an alleged despondent American citizenry in a bid to inspire and motivate them along the angles of progress and prosperity. The point to be taken cognizance of is that the use of *can* in 'Yes, We Can' gives the message a serious tone given the senses of promise, possibility and ability that are likely to be elicited by the modal auxiliary verb.

Drawing on a combined framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory, Shayegh (2012) presents a critical discourse analysis of modality in the political discourses of Barack Obama and Martin Luther King. Shayegh's study shows that both speakers preponderantly use the modal *will* as a means of insisting on the validity of information in terms of probability and usability. In a related study, Shayegh and Nabifar (2012) demonstrate that Barack Obama uses modality, among other linguistic resources, to create positive or negative power in his interviews. Again, the potentiality of modal verbs to reflect power and ideology relations is accentuated in Wang's (2010) critical discourse analysis of Barack Obama's speeches.

Nartey and Yankson (2014) in their study, examined the semantic underpinnings of modals in the manifesto of a Ghanaian political party (New Patriotic Party NPP) in 2012. Basically, their study reveals that modal auxiliary verbs are able to unravel the divergent shades of meaning typical of political discourses. They note that modals are deployed in manifestos to indicate 'a sense of intention, promise, obligation and necessity in a conscious and strategic attempt to persuade the electorate' (Nartey and Yankson 2014: 21).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Data

This section looks at the methodological procedures of the study, the data and procedure analysis. I used the 2016 manifesto of the National Democratic Party (NDC), a popular Ghanaian political party and currently the largest political party in opposition, as the primary data for the study. The National Democratic Party is a social democratic political party in Ghana. It was founded by Jerry Rawlings in 28th July, 1992. It is a centre-left, its leading rival being the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana's current governing political party and

it subscribes to the slogan “Unity, Stability and Development”. I downloaded the manifesto online (www.nationaldemocraticparty.org) and I vouched for its authenticity from the party office and sought permission from some party executives. The choice of NDC was informed by their current status as the leading opposition party in Ghana and therefore what led the party to opposition during the 2016 general elections.

3.2 Procedure of Analysis

This study employs the qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is a methodological approach that enables researchers to understand the process and character of social life and arrive at a meaning and it facilitates the understanding of the types, characteristics and organizational aspects of documents as social products in their own right as well as what they claim. Coding is employed by the researcher. Codes as tags, labels were assigned against the data in a bid to assign meaning to the data. I employed open coding to summarize the data by bringing out identifiable patterns in order to find conceptual categories in the data. According to Punch (1998: 210) says that open coding exposes theoretical possibilities in the data. I was also guided by the research questions as I examine the various modal auxiliary verbs, and look at the meaning that could be contextually attributed to them.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

From the analysis, I found that six out of the nine central modal auxiliary verbs established in the grammar of English (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973), were used in different proportions in the manifesto. The modal verbs identified in the data include *will, can, must, shall, would* and *could*. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of the modal auxiliary verbs.

Table 1: Distribution of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in the NDC 2016 Manifesto

Modal Auxiliary Verb	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Would	2	0.35
Shall	6	1.06
Must	5	0.88
Can	10	1.77
could	1	0.18
Will	542	95.76
Total= 566		Total= 100

It is obvious from table 1 above that *will* has the highest frequency of occurrence in the manifesto, occurring 542 times. While four modal verbs are minimally used as compared to the modal *will*. *Can* follows as the second highest frequency of occurrence, with an occurrence rate of 10. *Shall* also (occurring 6 times) in the data. *Must* (occurring 5 times) and (*would* occurring 2 times) and *could* (occurring once) in the manifesto.

The use of certain modal verbs is more frequent than others substantiates the point that modal auxiliary verbs are contextually deployed to achieve specific communicative intents and purposes in different registers. Hence, I maintain that majority or otherwise of specific modals in the NDC 2016 manifesto is neither borne out of coincidence nor randomization, but by the specific objectives of the manifesto genre itself. In a nut shell, I posit that the use of modal auxiliary verbs is selected based on the nature and type of discourse- in this study, political discourse.

Would

Although Newson (2008) posits that *would* is a weak modal verb, the opposite is found in this study. Specifically, *would* is used as a strong verb in the manifesto to express willingness and intention. The example in M1 is an instance where *would is used* to express willingness.

M1. The necessary and prudent steps to mitigate the potential risk that *would* be embedded in current and future borrowing.

The NDC government is willing to take the necessary steps and measures to control or avoid risks that will manifest in current and future borrowing. *Would* is also in the manifesto to express future intention. This function primarily conveys the message to the electorate with the hike in prices which affected Ghana's commodities in terms of export and import negatively affected the achievement of the NDC government.

M2. ...that adversely affected the earnings from Ghana's export commodities and increased the prices of imports; the record of our achievement *would* have even more remarkable.

In the example above, the actual intention of the NDC government of achieving a remarkable feat is foregrounded by the use of the modal *would*.

Shall

In the manifesto, *shall* is used 6 times, representing 1.06%. In all the instances of its usage, *shall*, invariably, expresses intention, thereby confirming Greenbaum's (1996) postulation that of all the meanings that can be attributed to *shall*, the intention function is widespread and most prevalent. The use of *shall* to express intention in the manifesto is illustrated below.

M3. We *shall* prioritize and implement the National Strategic Plan 2016-2020 on HIV/AIDS and work towards achieving the 90-90-90 fast track targets.

M4. The priorities *shall* include strengthening of strategic information and health system community empowerment to scale up HIV testing...

M5. We *shall* prioritize mental health care and ensure strict implementation of the Mental Health Act 2012 (Act 846).

M6. We *shall* also vigorously create national awareness on the need to combat lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and stroke.

M7. We *shall* promote the establishment of Community Residence Health Teams to encourage regular communal physical exercise...

The sentences above express the party's positive intentions when voted into power- showing concern for the welfare and health care of the electorate. These intentions are pre-meditated and hopefully the party would expect that such good intentions would get them a second time into power by the electorate. Though the good intentions expressed by the NDC in the examples above can be considered conjectured future events and therefore could pass off as indefinite intentions of futurity, it still stands to reason that a cross-section of the electorate could accept these intentions as solid promises and subsequently vote for the NDC party.

Could

In the manifesto, *could* is used once, representing 0.18%. *Could* is used to express a strong possibility, specifically to strongly suggest to the electorate the view that there is a high possibility of managing the Ghanaian economy prudently despite the global challenges. The use of *could* in the manifesto buttresses Quirk et al. (1973) assertion that *could* can be used to express a possibility. The sentence below illustrates the use of *could* in the manifesto.

M8. We demonstrated that with prudent management, the negative impact of the global challenges *could* be managed.

In the construction above *could* sends a positive and gives a high hope message to the electorate. Despite the negative impact of the economy globally which has an adverse effect on the Ghanaian economy; the NDC government is highly optimistic of managing the Ghanaian economy prudently which the electorate will not feel the impact. Such a future possibility as expressed by *could* is likely to elicit a good feeling and give a sense of high hope to the electorate and ultimately result into electoral votes.

Must

In the manifesto, *must* is used to express strong obligation or compulsion and logical necessity. In the sentences below, *must* is used to express strong obligation.

M9. We *must* make it a focal point to promote TVET as a means to brighter prospects and employability.

M10. We *must* reverse the concept of TVET as an avenue for school dropouts.

M11. Our vision of a strong and resilient economy is that it *must* lead to increased value addition and job creation.

In 9), *must* is used to strongly affirm that it is extremely important and therefore obligatory for a high premium to be placed on TVET, since such a measure would enable the teeming youth create and get employment because they have acquired the needed skills and this would prevent them from relying on the government for jobs. Also, in 10) *must* is used to opine that all of us should help do away with the mentality that TVET education is meant for dropouts which should not be the case as a nation striving towards a robust economy. I claim that the compulsive meaning *must* brings to bear on the proposition is used by the party to endear itself to the electorate, meaning that the NDC is under future obligation to deliver on these promises if given another opportunity to rule the nation again for another four-year term. At the same time, it connotatively suggests that the NDC government has failed to resource TVET education and given the necessary facelift needed to attract the youth. Again, we see the readiness of the government to see to it that TVET education is given the necessary attention when voted into power again.

Can

Can occurs 10 times in the manifesto, representing 1.77 %. As a modal verb in the NDC manifesto, *can* is used to express ability. In the constructions below, *can* is used to express ability.

M12. We believe we *can* do even better by streamlining our efforts and creating a stronger linkage between our TVET training and industry.

M13. With improved sovereign rating Ghana, the private sector *can* borrow internationally at lower rates to invest and promote job creation.

In 12), *can* is used to question the ability of the government of creating an enabling environment between the industry players and the TVET Training which was not enough while in 13) highlights the need for the private sector has now the ability to borrow money at a lower rate looking at the good at the standing of Ghana abroad. Definitely, it is a remarkable feat chalked by the NDC for creating a resilient economy by protecting the interest of the private sector business to thrive thereby attracting more investors into the country. The use of *can* in the sentences above nullifies any form of uncertainty and emphatically presents the propositions as factual and wholly true. Given this, the message put forward is likely to be taken seriously by the electorate as true.

Will

In the manifesto, *will* is predominantly used modal verb, occurring 542 times representing 95.76%. in the manifesto, there are several instances where *will* is used to express intention, reiterating Quirk et al's (1973) stance that *will* indicates an intention or promise. Examples of sentences are presented below.

M14. We *will* appoint a deputy minister with primary responsibility for TVET and Technical Education at all levels.

M15. We *will* provide accommodation for teachers who accept postings to deprived rural schools.

M16. We *will* encourage more girls to select TVET as a career option.

Greenbaum (1996) postulates that *willis* used to convey certainty is also evident in the manifesto. This construction is illustrated below.

M17. We *will* also continue to invest heavily in Agriculture, manufacturing and mining to provide support to the private sector.

M18. We *will* not renege on our commitment to continuously promote the rule of law, the fight against corruption...

M19. We *will* continue to allocate more resources for the rehabilitation and construction of kindergarten facilities throughout the country.

M20. We *will* support teachers in Science, Mathematics and TVET to upgrade their skills.

Again, in the manifesto, *will* is used to express determination, as shown below.

M21. We *will* empower women to take control of their reproductive health.

M22. We *will* promote population control.

M23. We *will* review the Capitation Grant

M24. We *will* continue to issue financial clearance to employ more graduate teachers as and when appropriate.

M25. We *will* strengthen the National Teaching Council, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the National Inspectorate Board to perform their roles...

M26. We *will* also direct our energies to improving and diversify sports.

Moreover, *will* is used in the manifesto to promise the electorate, as depicted in the examples below.

M27. Incentives *will* be provided to industries and businesses that provide more room for internships.

M28. Additional 20 polyclinics *will* be constructed in Ashanti, Volta, Eastern and Upper East Regions.

M29. We *will* expand the School Feeding Programme to all public basic schools in rural and per-urban communities.

M30. We *will* build two additional psychiatric hospitals in Ashanti and the Northern Regions.

M31. We *will* establish special schools in designated Colleges of Education to train teachers solely for Early Childhood care and Development.

Given that *will* is a strong modal verb (Newson, 2008), it is used in the manifesto to express strong intentions, certainty, determination and promise as has been highlighted in the foregoing paragraphs. Essentially, all the uses of *will* reinforce the particular objective of a political party – to win elections and continue with the governance. The NDC is no exception to this rule; hence, consistently, *will* is used in the manifesto to reassure the electorate of a better country when they (the NDC) are given another mandate to govern. That the manifesto abound with the modal *will* is not surprising. Indeed, it can be considered intentional and strategic given that by giving electors with a number of realistic promises, a political party is likely to be given a chance by the electorate. *Will*, and not the remaining modals, is considerably used to carefully construct the manifesto.

V. Conclusion

The main aim of the present study was to examine the semantics of modal auxiliary verbs in the 2016 political manifesto of the National Democratic Congress Party (NDC), a popular Ghanaian political party. It is obvious that while all modal auxiliary verbs such as 'will', 'can', 'must' and 'shall' are generally used by the politicians in the electioneering campaign manifestos, the modals 'will' and 'can' are more largely employed. This study is premised on the assumption that writers of political manifestos do find modal auxiliary verbs very useful persuasive strategy to employ to transmit the campaign message of their party to the electorate. I set out to show in this study that the use of modal auxiliary verbs in political manifestos is for a purpose. Importantly, these modals are used in the manifesto to indicate political will and commitment, promises, pledging and persuasion, political and manipulation, personal conviction, possibility and appeal. Politicians often use modals to reinforce their individual political ideologies, communicate their political ideas and elicit public support. Given the results of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the six modal auxiliary verbs identified in the political manifesto of the NDC have varying levels of usage; *will* being the most frequently used. Second, the modal auxiliary verbs were carefully selected to positively project the NDC before, while at the same time highlight the feat the party could achieve when given another four-year term in office. Thus, I affirm that modal auxiliary verbs have a different connotation in political discourses, in general, and in political manifestos, in particular. Third, the findings of the study show that modal auxiliary verbs do not have fixed meanings; rather, they are correctly decoded in a given context. Lastly, modal auxiliary verbs are most importantly political devices and ideological tools in political discourses.

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