

# Modality Metaphor in German and American Political Discourse

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## Abstract

Modality metaphor, as an essential part of grammatical metaphor in Systemic Functional Linguistics, is of great significance to the speaker's attitude and judgment. Based on the modality metaphor theory of functional grammar, this study aims to take the opening remarks of the foreign ministers of Germany and the United States on the anti-terrorism as the research subject. The dimension for measurement mainly involves three aspects: modality type, modality orientation, and modality value. This study also summarizes the similarities and differences between the two languages and points the possible reasons behind the results. Meanwhile, this study demonstrates the influence and function of modality metaphor on the construction of political stand and attitude. The statistical analysis and comparison illustrate that the modality metaphor expressions in English primarily focus on indicating the explicit subjectivity which shows obligation, while in German, it's preferable to speculate the probability using explicit subjective and explicit objective attitudes. As for the value, English expressions distribute relative evenly in three levels. On the contrary, German expressions manifest a concentrated distribution, namely, they use a language structure with high value to express modality, which is influenced by the different occasions and roles of speakers as well as the different use of language.

**Keywords:** systemic functional linguistics; modality metaphor; political discourse

## I. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor, as a significant linguistic phenomenon, occupies a vital position in our daily life and its research history could trace back to Ancient Athens. In the long process, its meaning has extended from a mere rhetorical device, which means a figure of speech by borrowing the concept of one thing to substitute that of another through similarity, into diverse conceptions and domains, especially in Linguistics and Philosophy.

It is worth noting that since the 1960s, the research on metaphor has gone gradually deep into different linguistic fields especially in cognitive linguistics. Lakoff & Johnson firstly put forward the idea in *Metaphor we live by* (1980) that besides a rhetorical device to achieve modification, the metaphor is equipped with the tight connection with the formation of the human cognitive system, reflecting the relationship between language and people's thinking as well as the transformation from one domain to another.

Afterward, Halliday (1985) approached metaphor from another point of view and developed it from lexicogrammatical level to grammatical level, which is named "grammatical metaphor," making a momentous contribution to the study of metaphor's function and signification. Subsequently, many systemic functional linguists such as Martin (1992), Ravelli (1985, 1998), Goatly (1993, 1997), Matthiessen (1993, 1995, 1998) have devoted themselves to the intensive study of the grammatical metaphor. Meanwhile, this field has also attracted the attention of so many linguists in China from the end of the century such as Zhu(1994), Hu (1994) and Yan (2003).

According to the linguistic metafunction proposed by Halliday (1985), the grammatical metaphor is further divided into ideational metaphor and interpersonal metaphor, while modality metaphor is one of the two subcategories of interpersonal metaphor. Due to its tight connection of individuals' opinion and attitude towards the truth of a proposition, modality metaphor has appealed a lot of linguists in theoretical and practical fields. But as a whole, the comparative studies between English and other languages as well as applied studies are relatively insufficient. Consequently, this research tends to compare the use of modality metaphor in German and American political discourse from three dimensions, which are the type, orientation, and value.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. *Modality and Modality Metaphor*

Modality is an important grammar concept as well as a complicated function field. According to the systematic functional linguistics, Halliday (1994) claimed that modality is an important part of interpersonal function, indicating the language user's own assessment and uncertainty of affairs. Halliday (2004) also pointed out that modality represents the speaker's perspective and the attitude towards assertion and correctness. Halliday (2004) associated modality with polarity, arguing that modality refers to the intermediate state of meaning between "yes" and "no", namely, the area between positive and negative meaning. To be specific, the speaker can use different modality methods to reach the goal of communication, for example, grammatical metaphor, nominalization and passage logic. At this point, it can be seen that modality is a complicated concept. Modality is usually expressed by modal verbs, modal adverbs and the extensions of the predicate. Besides, short sentences

can also be used to indicate modality, which is named by Halliday(1994) as “modality metaphor.” The emergence of the concept widens the research scope immensely.

### **B. Modal Parameters—Type, Orientation and Value**

Halliday (1994) divided modality into two parts: modalization and modulation. Modalization means the speaker’s judgment over the likelihood and frequency of something, while modulation refers to the duty or obligation of the speaker, or the inclination or intention towards certain deeds (Zhang, 2009: 113). Martin (1992)classified further the categories of modality into obligation, intention, probability, and frequency, which can be distinguished by the responses to the tag questions.

The orientation of modality, according to Halliday (1992), can be divided into four categories: explicit subjectivity, implicit subjectivity, implicit objectivity and explicit objectivity. Among them, explicit subjectivity and explicit objectivity are metaphorical, which are expressed by short sentences. Whereas implicit subjectivity and implicit objectivity are not metaphorical and their meaning is realized by a restrictive modal verb or modal adverb.

**TABLE 1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TYPE AND ORIENTATION**

| <b>Orientation</b><br><b>Type</b> | <b>Subjective: explicit</b> | <b>Subjective: implicit</b> | <b>Objective:implicit</b>      | <b>Objective:explicit</b>               |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Modalization:<br>Probability      | I think Mary knows.         | Mary’ll know.               | Mary probably knows.           | It’s likely that Mary knows.            |
| Modalization:<br>Usuality         |                             | Fred’ll sit quite quiet.    | Fred usually sits quite quiet. | It’s usual for Fred to sit quite quiet. |
| Modulation:<br>Obligation         | I want John to go.          | John should go.             | John’s supposed to go.         | It’s expected that John goes.           |
| Modulation:<br>Inclination        |                             | Jane’ll help.               | Jane’s keen to help.           |                                         |

Adopted from Halliday (1994: 358)

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the type and the orientation of modality by giving the concrete examples. Another parameter is the value of modality, which is divided by Halliday (1994) into three categories: high, median and low in order to show the degree of modality. For example, *certain*, *probable*, *possible* represent high, median and low degree of modality respectively by describing probability.

**TABLE 2 THE VALUE OF MODALITY**

| <b>Type</b><br><b>Value</b> | <b>Probability</b> | <b>Usuality</b> | <b>Obligation</b> | <b>Inclination</b> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| High                        | certain            | always          | required          | determined         |
| Median                      | probable           | usually         | supposed          | keen               |
| Low                         | possible           | sometimes       | allowed           | willing            |

Adopted from Halliday (1994: 358)

This research will mainly investigate the opening remarks of the Foreign Ministers of the US and Germany from the perspective of the type, orientation and value of the modality.

### ***C. Studies on Modality Metaphor***

Modality as one of the focuses of linguistic research, has appealed a great deal of attention all in the level of the definition, scope, as well as modality characteristics and applications. Linguists in these areas have made numerous researches:

Scholars abroad (Lyons, 1977; Holmes, 1984; Narrog, 2005) mainly probed into the modality from the following several perspectives: semantics, pragmatics, functional grammar, typology and so on. Martin (1992) has carried on the classification of modality from the perspective of functional linguistics, while Halliday (1985) considered the modality as an important part of the interpersonal function, showing the speculations and uncertainties of the language users towards understanding the events.

As for the research area in China, Wang (2007: 448) put forward that “grammar is implicit like other metaphors, while metaphor has the ability to reflect and reshape human’s experience, which serves as a significant strategy to understand the whole world”. According to Wen (2001: 178), speakers often use words to express their thoughts and exchange information, when they are dominated by a specific speech environment as well as the speaker’s subjective feelings. These subjective and objective factors reflected in the discourse are the tone and composition of the speaker’s feelings. Based on the classification raised by Halliday, Fan (2001) gave detailed expressions from typical realization to metaphorical realization of modality. Zhu & Yan (2001), Peng (2001) and Luo (2001) compared the different uses of modality in English and Chinese by applying Halliday’s functional linguistics theory.

To sum up, both scholars abroad and at home have done a great deal of study of modality metaphor from the perspective of theory and its application, giving us sufficient theoretical basis. But on the other hand, there exist still some limitations like the lack of comparative research and empirical research in the area of political remarks, which provides the practical requirement for this study.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### ***A. Research Subjects***

Considering that the corpus of political discourse analysis is mainly political news, political debate and campaign speech, this research focuses primarily on the speeches of the Foreign Ministers. The author selects a public speech of the Foreign Minister from the official website of the US and Germany, namely, the two opening remarks at the Global Conference on Counter-terrorism and Counter-nuclear terrorism, with their words limited in 1000 and 1500.

### ***B. Research Questions***

This study tries to analyze the stand and attitude hidden behind the words, at the same time to summarize the similarities and differences through comparing the modality metaphor used in two separate languages. Specific problems are as follows:

- 1) What is the frequency of the modality metaphor in two languages in the dimension of orientation and value?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences of the modality metaphor in two languages?
- 3) What is the function of the modality metaphor in political discourses?

### C. Research Procedure

Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, this study aims to discover the similarities and differences of the modality metaphor in two languages, as well as to reveal the function of modality metaphor in political discourses. There are primarily four steps to conduct the research. Firstly, based on the definition and classification proposed by Halliday (1994), the concrete expressions of modality from the perspective of the type, orientation and value are sorted manually. Secondly, the frequencies in each category are counted respectively. Thirdly, the comparison between English and Chinese is made to conclude the feature of modality metaphor. Fourthly, the functions by applying modality metaphor are analyzed, aimed to provide better ways of understanding political discourse for learners.

### D. Operational Definitions

Modality bears mainly the function of expressing the judgment on the success and validity of the proposition described by one speaker, or the obligation of what other listeners should be undertaken, or the individual willingness to be expressed in the proposal (Hu, 2005). Zhu & Yan (2001) pointed out that it is an indisputable fact that grammatical metaphor is widely used in various discourses. Modality metaphor is not a peculiar phenomenon in English, but is ubiquitous in other languages.

According to the theory raised by Halliday (1994), modality metaphor refers to the linguistic phenomenon that the clauses are used to substitute the typical realization of modality, such as modal verbs, modal adverbs and extensions of predicates. For example, in the following sentence, the clause *I don't believe that...* in sentence (b) and the clause *It is likely that...* in sentence (c) are the metaphorical expressions for the typical one of *probably*.

- (1) a. **Probably** that pudding never will be cooked.
- b. **I don't believe** that pudding ever will be cooked.
- c. **It is likely** that that pudding never will be cooked

It is noted that the realization of modality metaphor is characteristic with the use of clause. When the personal pronoun appears at the beginning of the sentence, it is acknowledged as subjective modality metaphor, while the application of pronoun *it* is the typical symbol of objective expression.

Based on the classification and examples in table 1 and 2 given by Halliday (1994), the relationship among three dimensions and concrete examples for modality metaphor in German are demonstrated as follows:

**TABLE 3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TYPE AND ORIENTATION IN GERMAN**

| <b>Orientierung</b><br><b>Typ</b> | <b>Subjektiv: explizit</b>          | <b>Subjektiv: implizit</b>   | <b>Objektiv: implizit</b>                | <b>Objektiv: explizit</b>                          |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Modale:<br>Probabilität           | <b>Ich denke</b> , Mary weiß es.    | Mary wird es wissen.         | Mary weiß es wahrscheinlich.             | <b>Es ist wahrscheinlich</b> , dass Mary es weiß.  |
| Modale:<br>Frequenz               |                                     | Fred wird ganz ruhig sitzen. | Fred sitzt normalerweise ziemlich ruhig. | <b>Es ist üblich</b> , dass Fred ganz ruhig sitzt. |
| Modulation:<br>Pflicht            | <b>Ich möchte</b> , dass John geht. | John solltegehen.            | John ist zum Gehen verpflichtet.         | <b>Es wird erwartet</b> , dass John geht.          |
| Modulation:<br>Wunsch             |                                     | Jane wirdhelfen.             | Jane ist sehr bemüht zu helfen.          |                                                    |

Referred to the German grammatical dictionary

From table 3, we can distinctly conclude that compared with the typical expression of modality, the metaphorical expression adds the clause before the proposition, such as *Ich denke* (I think), *Ich möchte* (I want to) in the subjective modality, as well as *Es istwahrscheinlich*(it is likely) and *Es istüblich*(it's usual) in the objective modality.

**TABLE 4 THE VALUE OF MODALITY IN GERMAN**

| <b>Typ</b><br><b>Wert</b> | <b>Probabilität</b> | <b>Frequenz</b> | <b>Pflicht</b> | <b>Wunsch</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|
| Hoch                      | sicher              | immer           | erforderlich   | entschlossen  |
| Mittel                    | wahrscheinlich      | meistens        | verpflichtet   | interessiert  |
| Niedrig                   | möglich             | manchmal        | erlaubt        | bereit        |

Referred to the German grammatical dictionary

Table 4 demonstrates the examples for the degree of value in German. For instance, in the German sentence *Es istwahrscheinlich, dasswirganzeigene und besondere Ansätzebrauchen, die unsnochnichtmit Erfahrungswertenzur Verfügungstehen*(It is likely that we need very private and special approaches that are not yet available to us in the experience.), the structure *es istwahrscheinlich, dass...* belongs to the median degree of modality metaphor.

On the basis of the classification by Halliday (1994) and the conversion referred to the German dictionary, the following analysis is conducted.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Overall Frequency of Modality Metaphor in two Languages

Through analyzing the concept of type and orientation of modality proposed by Halliday (1994), Martin (1992), Hu, Zhu, & Zhang (1989), this study selects the typical patterns of manifestation. The frequency of modality metaphor in English text is calculated in the following table:

**TABLE 5: THE FREQUENCY OF MODALITY METAPHOR IN ENGLISH TEXT**

| <b>Orientation</b><br><b>Type</b> | <b>Subjective: explicit</b> | <b>Objective: explicit</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Modalization: Probability         | 1                           | 1                          | 2            |
| Modalization: Usuality            |                             |                            |              |
| Modulation: Obligation            | 5                           | 1                          | 6            |
| Modulation: Inclination           |                             |                            |              |
| Total                             | 6                           | 2                          | 8            |

Table 5 enumerates the modality metaphor used in English political discourse, with the total frequency of 8 times. It is worth noting that the amount of frequency is concentrated on the orientation of explicit subjectivity to express the obligation. From the statistics we can see that the American Secretary of State is inclined to use subjective expressions to emphasize the obligations the listeners should undertake. Through the occurrence of first personal pronoun, the explicit attitude and stand are clearly conveyed in the remarks.

**TABLE 6 THE FREQUENCY OF MODALITY METAPHOR IN GERMAN TEXT**

| <b>Orientation</b><br><b>Type</b> | <b>Subjective: explicit</b> | <b>Objective: explicit</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Modalization: Probability         | 6                           | 5                          | 11           |
| Modalization: Usuality            |                             |                            |              |
| Modulation: Obligation            |                             | 1                          | 1            |
| Modulation: Inclination           |                             |                            |              |
| Total                             | 6                           | 6                          | 12           |

In table 6, we can see that the metaphorical expressions appear totally 12 times in German political discourse. The explicit subjectivity and objectivity are counterparts, each occurring 6 times. However, the modality metaphor is chiefly used to deliver the probability and speculation. Only one expression is applied in the field of obligation. Compared with the focus on the responsibility, German Foreign Minister tends to show the speculation and personal feelings.

##### B. The Distribution of Modality Value in two Languages

In this part, the distributions in three different degrees of value are calculated based on the theory raised by Halliday (1994).

**TABLE 7 THE DISTRIBUTION OF MODALITY VALUE IN ENGLISH TEXT**

| Type \ Value | Probability | Usuality | Obligation | Inclination | Total |
|--------------|-------------|----------|------------|-------------|-------|
| High         | 1           |          | 1          |             | 2     |
| Median       |             |          | 3          |             | 3     |
| Low          | 1           |          | 2          |             | 3     |
| Total        | 2           |          | 6          |             | 8     |

Table 7 demonstrates that the distribution of modality value is relative balanced in three degrees, with the amount of 2, 3 and 3 respectively. Specifically speaking, Secretary of the United States chooses high and low degree to express probability. By showing the obligation the listeners should undertake, the degrees are distributed into three levels. We can conclude from these statistics that the degrees of modality in English political discourse are varied, and its application is flexible.

**TABLE 8: THE DISTRIBUTION OF MODALITY VALUE IN GERMAN TEXT**

| Type \ Value | Probability | Usuality | Obligation | Inclination | Total |
|--------------|-------------|----------|------------|-------------|-------|
| High         | 10          |          | 1          |             | 11    |
| Median       | 1           |          |            |             | 1     |
| Low          |             |          |            |             |       |
| Total        | 11          |          | 1          |             | 12    |

From table 8, it can be seen that the majority of the modality value is concentrated on the high degree, with the amount of 11. On the contrary, nearly no expression of modality appears in the field of median and low degree. It reveals that German Foreign Minister tends to use a great deal of modality metaphors with high value, which mainly focuses on speculating the probability of certain matters, at the same time manifesting intense affirmation and confidence. In expressing obligations, words with high value showing tough attitudes are chosen, conveying that the special attention the speaker paid to the urgency and necessity of shouldering responsibilities.

### ***C. The Comparison between English and German***

In order to compare the usage of modality metaphors in English and German, this study conducts a well-rounded comparison from three dimensions: type, orientation and value.



**TABLE 9: THE COMPARISON BETWEEN ENGLISH AND GERMAN IN TERMS OF THREE DIMENSIONS**

| Language | Type                         | Orientation                    |                               | Value |        |     | Total |
|----------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|--------|-----|-------|
|          |                              | Subjective:<br><i>explicit</i> | Objective:<br><i>explicit</i> | High  | Median | Low |       |
| English  | Modalization:<br>Probability | 1                              | 1                             | 1     |        | 1   | 8     |
|          | Modulation:<br>Obligation    | 5                              | 1                             | 1     | 3      | 2   |       |
| German   | Modalization:<br>Probability | 6                              | 5                             | 10    | 1      |     | 12    |
|          | Modulation:<br>Obligation    |                                | 1                             | 1     |        |     |       |

We can see clearly from the table above that the modality metaphor expressions in English are slightly less than those in German. The modality metaphor expressions in English mainly focus on indicating the explicit subjectivity which shows obligation. On the contrary, in German, it's preferable to speculate the probability using explicit subjective and explicit objective attitudes. As for the value, English expressions distribute relative evenly in three levels, while German expressions manifest a concentrated distribution, namely, the speaker tend to use a modality structure with high value to express probability

#### ***D. The Function of Modality Metaphor on Political Discourses***

The proper use of modality metaphor is significant in showing the speaker's point of view and judgment. This is manifested in the following two points:

##### 1) Stress personal attitude and political stand

The explicit subjective orientation serves to highlight the prominent role of the speaker and formulate the attitude and stand so that the audience can ascertain the speaker's intention.

For example, in the English text: *In that spirit, I **urge** you to commit to other national actions that promote national or international capacity-building in other areas of nuclear security related to the GICNT Statement of Principles*, the use of "urge" illuminates the Secretary's stand and makes it clear that countries are suggested to put forward the construction of nuclear security.

##### 2) Hide personal identity and make political stand more objective

The explicit objective use of modal metaphor can hide the identity of the speaker and make the viewpoint objective, so the audience can feel more natural and acceptable.

In the German text: *Aber, auch **das ist unklar**: allein auf staatlicher Ebenewird dieser Kampf nicht zugewinnen sein* (But, it is clear to us: this fight will not be won at the state level alone). The use of short sentences hides the speaker's identity and makes the content an acknowledged fact and sounds more real.

Through choosing explicit subjective or objective modal structure and leveraging the method of maximizing or minimizing person pronoun, the speaker can achieve different aims or effects. This is of vital importance in political speeches.

## V. CONCLUSION

The wide application of modality metaphors can not only contribute to a more varied modal system in language structure, but can highlight or hide the speaker's intention through different modal types and inclinations, so as to achieve different effects. This study mainly analyzes the usage of modality metaphors in English and German from three dimensions, namely, type, orientation and value. It concludes the similarities and differences of modality metaphor in two languages, meanwhile, generalizes the effects and functions modality metaphors have on political stand and attitude, which avails the audience to understand the real intentions of the speaker from political passages.

In the further, the researchers could pay more attention to the comparative study and do more practical researches. At the same time, the corpus should be enlarged to reveal the more general rule, which can provide more suggestions and pedagogical implications for learners.

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