

Modality Analysis in Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris' Campaign Speeches in 2024 U.S Presidential Election: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze and compare the use of modality in Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris' campaign speeches during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. The study categorizes modality into three types: epistemic (certainty), deontic (obligation or permission), and dynamic (ability or willingness). Adopting a qualitative method with a semantic-pragmatic approach, the analysis focuses on the first 15 minutes of the core speech segments of both candidates. The findings reveal that Trump predominantly uses epistemic modality to assert certainty and authority, while Harris tends to employ deontic modality to convey moral responsibility and inclusiveness. In total, Trump used modality 117 times compared to Harris's 52, reflecting differing rhetorical strategies and leadership styles. This study concludes that modality functions as a crucial linguistic tool in constructing political identity, establishing credibility, and influencing public perception. The abstract should concisely describe the content and scope of

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1. INTRODUCTION

In political communication, language functions not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a tool for persuasion, image construction, and ideological representation. One critical linguistic feature within political discourse is modality, which reflects a speaker's degree of certainty, obligation, or ability. This study focuses on the use of modality in the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign speeches of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, analyzing how their use of modality both explicit and implicit reveals differences in rhetorical strategy, political identity, and leadership style.

Academically, the study contributes to the field of critical discourse analysis and political linguistics by examining modality through a semantic-pragmatic lens. It expands the understanding of how language operates in campaign rhetoric, especially by incorporating both modal verbs and contextual expressions. Practically, this research helps audiences, educators, and political analysts better interpret political speeches, uncover persuasive techniques, and critically assess how leaders project authority, capability, or inclusiveness.

Previous research has extensively explored modality in political communication. Brown (2022) examined how epistemic modality helps political leaders assert authority and gain legitimacy in public discourse. Evans & Martin (2021) analyzed the rhetorical function of modality in progressive speeches, emphasizing its use in inclusive and value-driven political messaging. Clark & Thompson (2022) further emphasized the strategic use of modality across different genres of political discourse, highlighting its role in constructing persuasive narratives tailored to audience expectations. Meanwhile, Davis (2020) noted how modality operates as a

reflection of leadership persona, suggesting that leaders adopt varying degrees of certainty and obligation based on situational demands. Foster (2020) contributed to the analysis of modality across political ideologies, observing how language choices align with either populist or institutional discourse. Finally, Kranich's (2013) classification of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, while Halliday (2021) and Fetzer (2021) highlight the interpersonal and pragmatic functions of modality in shaping speaker stance and identity.

To address the gap in comparative studies that explore modality as a persuasive tool across political figures with differing ideological and experiential backgrounds, the present study investigates the use of modality in two 2024 U.S. presidential campaign speeches: one by Donald Trump and one by Kamala Harris. Unlike previous studies that focused on a single political figure or purely grammatical modality, this research adopts a broader analytical scope by incorporating both explicit (modal verbs) and implicit (semantic and contextual) expressions of modality. Drawing on Kranich's (2013) classification such as epistemic, deontic, and dynamic then grounded in semantic-pragmatic analysis, the study offers insights into how modality is used not only to express stance but also to construct leadership identity and appeal to voter sentiment. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of Modality both explicit (modal verbs) and implicit (contextual and semantics expressions) are used in Donald Trump's speech?
2. What types of Modality both explicit (modal verbs) and implicit (contextual and semantics expressions) are used in Kamala Harris' speech?
3. What are the similarities and differences between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris?

The findings are expected to contribute to the limited body of research on modality in political campaign discourse by offering a comparative perspective between two ideologically different candidates, and to provide practical insights for discourse analysts, political communication scholars, and educators seeking to understand how language reflects leadership style, experience, and persuasive strategy in political speeches.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to investigate the use of modality in the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign speeches of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. This method was appropriate for uncovering not only the types and frequencies of modality but also their functions and contextual meanings in discourse. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the researcher to explore both explicit and implicit modality expressions, following a semantic-pragmatic approach that emphasizes meaning over numerical measurement.

The research data consisted of one campaign speech by Donald Trump and one by Kamala Harris, both delivered during their initial campaign events for the 2024 U.S. presidential election. These speeches were selected using purposive sampling, as they were considered representative of each candidate's rhetorical style, ideological stance, and leadership identity. The selected speeches were also similar in length (approximately 15 minutes), making them suitable for comparative analysis. The campaign speeches were obtained from publicly available and verified sources: Trump's speech from his rally in Waco, Texas, and Harris's speech from a campaign event in Wisconsin. Both speeches were manually transcribed by the researcher to ensure accuracy and understanding of the context. Transcription included all verbal elements and was followed by segmentation into clauses.

Each clause was examined for expressions of modality, which included not only modal verbs (e.g., *must*, *can*, *should*) but also other linguistic elements such as adverbs (e.g., *probably*, *clearly*), adjectives (e.g., *likely*, *important*), and modal phrases (e.g., *have to*, *be able to*). This broader view of modality followed the semantic-pragmatic framework outlined in your thesis, recognizing that modality is not limited to grammatical forms but also shaped by contextual and interpretive meaning. The data were analyzed using Kranich's (2013) classification of modality, which divides modality into three main types:

- Epistemic Modality, which indicates the speaker's level of certainty, belief, or knowledge.
- Deontic Modality, which expresses obligation, necessity, or permission.
- Dynamic Modality, which reflects ability, capacity, or volition.

Each instance of modality was identified, categorized, and analyzed based on its type, linguistic form (explicit or implicit), and semantic function in the speech. Explicit modality refers to clear grammatical markers such as modal verbs (*must*, *might*, *can*), while implicit modality involves expressions where modality is embedded in adjectives, adverbs, or the larger discourse context. The analysis process included:

1. Identifying modality expressions.

2. classifying each instance according to Kranich's three modality types.
3. Interpreting Contextual and Semantic Interpretation function of each modality type in both speeches.
4. Comparing the analysis.
5. Drawing conclusion regarding how modality contributes to each candidate's persuasive strategy.

This classification and analysis allowed the researcher to investigate how modality was used not only as a linguistic element, but as a rhetorical tool to construct political identity, assert leadership, and appeal to the audience. The semantic-pragmatic approach ensured that modality was interpreted within its context, considering how meaning is shaped by what is said, how it is said, and who says it. This method was effective for answering the research questions because it enabled systematic, context-based exploration of how modality differs between two political figures with contrasting ideologies and political backgrounds. By combining frequency analysis with functional interpretation, the study offers both descriptive and explanatory insights into how modality operates in political campaign discourse.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Modality in Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris' Campaign Speeches

1. Modality in Donald Trump's Campaign Speech

Table 1. Modality in Donald Trump's Campaign Speech

No	Types of Modality	Frequency
1.	Epistemic	72
2.	Deontic	20
3.	Dynamic	25
	Total	117

Donald Trump's campaign speech reveals a dominant use of epistemic modality (72 instances), reflecting his assertive and authoritative rhetorical style. Epistemic expressions such as *will*, *must*, and *we know* indicate strong certainty and high commitment, aligning with Kranich's (2013) explanation that epistemic modality signals belief and factuality. These choices emphasize Trump's past achievements and confidence in future outcomes, strengthening his persona as a competent and decisive leader. The following excerpts illustrate how Trump expresses varying degrees of certainty, from firm conviction to speculative judgment, often positioning himself as a knowledgeable and authoritative figure. According to Halliday (2021), modality is part of the interpersonal metafunction of language, used to project authority and align the speaker's stance with the audience. Trump's language illustrates this principle through categorical declarations and confident predictions. For example, expressions like "We will rebuild the economy" do not invite discussion but assert a non-negotiable future. His reliance on epistemic modality aligns with Palmer's (2001) view that modality is often used to build speaker credibility by expressing certainty and expertise.

In addition, dynamic modality appears 25 times in his speech, marking his emphasis on personal and national *ability*. Statements like "We can do it again" or "Our team knows how to win" highlight Trump's intention to portray himself as an experienced, action-oriented leader. This echoes Brown (2022), who notes that dynamic modality reinforces a candidate's capability and self-reliance, especially in campaign contexts that demand proof of past success. The following excerpts show how Trump uses dynamic expressions to portray himself as a capable leader and position his administration as effective and action-oriented.

Deontic modality (20 instances), while least used, reflects Trump's top-down communication style. With commands like "we must secure our borders," he projects himself as the sole authority capable of enforcing necessity and control. His modality choices mirror what Wodak & Meyer (2023) describe as political discourse that legitimizes power through strong imperatives and directives. His rhetorical strategy is thus grounded less in dialogue and more in unilateral assertion, which matches his populist-nationalist ideology and prior experience as president. The following excerpts illustrate how Trump uses deontic expressions not only to assert control, but also to emphasize civic responsibility and national priorities.

Rather than simply reflecting masculine language as discussed by Lakoff (1975) and Holmes (1995), Trump's modality use is more effectively explained by his *political status* and *executive experience*, which afford him the confidence to make definitive, high-certainty claims. As Foster (2020) and Clark & Thompson (2022) explain, leaders who speak from positions of proven authority often exhibit more dominant modality features in their rhetoric. This is evident in Trump's frequency and strength of modality use across all three types.

2. Modality in Kamala Harris' Campaign speech

Table 2. Modality in Kamala Harris' Campaign Speech

No	Types of Modality	Frequency
1.	Epistemic	23
2.	Deontic	16
3.	Dynamic	13
	Total	52

Kamala Harris uses significantly fewer modality expressions (52) than Trump, even though both speeches were taken from equal 15-minute portions. Her modality style reflects *inclusivity*, *shared conviction*, and *progressive values*, using expressions like *I believe*, *we can*, and *we should*. Unlike Trump, Harris does not speak from a position of prior presidential authority, and this difference in political experience notably affects her modality choices. Wodak & Meyer (2023) explain that political rhetoric often reflects the speaker's institutional role and degree of power, which in Harris's case leads to a more cautious and community-oriented rhetorical stance.

Kamala Harris' epistemic modality (23 instances) focuses on belief and optimism rather than certainty. Examples such as "I think we can make this country better" reflect Kranich's (2013) notion that epistemic modality can express varying degrees of confidence. Harris's use of hedged certainty is also supported by Holmes (1995), who found that female politicians often use modality to foster connection and build rapport. While her gender may influence her linguistic strategy, this study highlights her political role as the stronger determinant unlike Trump, Harris has not held the highest executive office and therefore builds ethos more cautiously.

Her deontic modality (16 instances), the second most frequent, signals ethical urgency and moral responsibility. Statements like "We must protect our rights" convey commitment not through control but through collective obligation. Evans & Martin (2021) note that progressive leaders often employ deontic modality to encourage civic participation rather than command obedience. Harris uses this modality to frame her leadership as value-based, guiding action through shared principles rather than unilateral decision-making. The following excerpts illustrate how Harris employs deontic modality to inspire participation, emphasize urgency, and promote justice-oriented causes.

Dynamic modality (13 instances) further reveals her tendency to highlight *collective capacity*. For instance, phrases like "we can create change" express readiness but are often linked to group effort. This fits Sihombing et al. (2024)'s view that Harris uses empowering rhetoric, shaped by her role as a representative of progressive coalitions. The lower frequency of dynamic modality, compared to Trump, may also reflect her rhetorical strategy to highlight others' capability rather than individualize leadership as Trump does.

The relatively softer modality use by Harris should not be misinterpreted as weakness. Instead, it reflects a leadership approach centered on empathy, collaboration, and shared accountability traits that are especially strategic for a candidate who has yet to fully consolidate executive power. Davis (2020) argues that politicians adapt modality to fit their perceived role and audience expectations, and Harris's rhetorical style is clearly influenced by her need to appeal broadly while navigating complex political and social landscapes.

The Similarities and Differences in The Use of Modality

1. The Similarities

Both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris utilize all three major types of modality such as epistemic, deontic, and dynamic in their campaign speeches. This indicates that each candidate constructs their rhetorical messages through a combination of belief, obligation, and ability. The presence of all types shows that their political communication is not limited to one single mode of persuasion, but rather reflects a comprehensive strategy aimed at building trust, asserting values, and projecting competence. Through epistemic modality, they express certainty and belief in their political stance; through deontic modality, they convey duties, commitments, and responsibilities; and through dynamic modality, they illustrate capability, whether personal or collective. The inclusion of all three types reinforces the depth and complexity of their persuasive efforts.

Modality plays an essential role in shaping the image and rhetorical identity of both candidates. Donald Trump primarily uses modality to portray himself as a strong, decisive, and authoritative leader. His modality choices often convey confidence, control, and action, aligning with his political persona as a leader who promises to "get things done" and reclaim national strength. On the other hand, Kamala Harris employs modality to establish herself as a collaborative, empathetic, and morally driven figure. Her use of modality reflects a leadership style rooted in inclusiveness and shared values, often appealing to collective responsibility

and emotional resonance. Thus, both use modality not just to deliver content, but to craft and project a particular image of leadership that aligns with their political vision.

Among the three types, epistemic modality emerges as the most frequently used by both candidates. Although the number of occurrences varies significantly Trump using it more than Harris, it remains the dominant form for each. This reflects the importance of expressing belief, certainty, and conviction in political speech, especially when attempting to influence public perception and gain voter trust. Epistemic modality allows both candidates to present their claims with a sense of factuality and assurance, whether they are highlighting past achievements, outlining future visions, or countering opposing narratives. The dominance of this modality type underscores its effectiveness in constructing credibility and persuading audiences through perceived truth and reliability.

2. Differences

In Donald Trump's speech, epistemic modality functions as a tool to express certainty, authority, and factual assertion. He often uses strong modal expressions like "will," "must," and definitive statements such as "We built the greatest economy" to present his claims as undeniable truths. The function of epistemic modality here is to project confidence, reinforce his dominant leadership persona, and convince the audience that his past actions and future promises are both reliable and inevitable. By minimizing uncertainty, Trump uses epistemic modality to control the narrative and appear as a figure who speaks in facts, not opinions. Trump uses epistemic modality to reinforce his authority and leadership. Those can be seen in the following excerpts below:

In contrast, Kamala Harris uses epistemic modality to express belief, conviction, and shared optimism. Modal expressions such as "I believe" or "we will" reflect a tone that is more inclusive and empathetic. Instead of asserting facts, Harris uses epistemic modality to connect emotionally with her audience, showing that her statements are grounded in personal and collective values. The function of epistemic modality in her speech is to build trust, foster solidarity, and convey a sense of hopeful certainty, rather than absolute dominance. Her use of epistemic modality reflects a collaborative leadership style, encouraging audiences to believe in the future alongside.

The second key difference lies in the second most frequently used modality by each candidate. Donald Trump uses dynamic modality more than deontic, emphasizing personal and national capability to act—highlighting proven leadership and strength. This aligns with Brown's (2022) idea that dynamic modality reinforces authority and achievement. In contrast, Kamala Harris prioritizes deontic modality, focusing on shared responsibility and moral obligation. Expressions like "We must act now" reflect her value-driven leadership style, consistent with Holmes's (1995) view of collaborative political discourse. While Trump underscores what he can do, Harris emphasizes what should be done, revealing contrasting rhetorical strategies and leadership identities.

Discussion

This study examined the use of modality both explicit (modal verbs) and implicit (contextual and semantic expressions) in the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign speeches of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Using Kranich's (2013) classification of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality, the research aimed to explore how these linguistic choices reflected each candidate's rhetorical style, political identity, and leadership stance. The study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a comparative analysis that not only considers grammatical structures but also emphasizes semantic-pragmatic and contextual functions.

The findings revealed that both Trump and Harris predominantly employed epistemic modality, indicating its central role in constructing credibility and presenting persuasive arguments. However, significant differences emerged in frequency and function. Trump used modality more frequently (117 instances) than Harris (52), with epistemic modality dominating his speech (72 occurrences). This reflects a rhetorical strategy grounded in certainty, authority, and political experience. In contrast, Harris used epistemic modality 25 times, with an emphasis on belief, shared values, and possibility. Her speech highlighted inclusivity and moral appeal rather than assertive certainty. Additionally, while Trump used dynamic modality as his second most frequent category, Harris used more deontic expressions, pointing to differences in how each candidate communicates leadership and responsibility. The observed modality use aligns with Kranich's (2013) theory that modality functions as a means to express belief, obligation, and ability. Trump's reliance on epistemic modality supports Halliday's (2021) interpersonal metafunction, where language constructs social roles and relationships. His use of "will" and "must" signals certainty and authority, positioning himself as a competent and experienced leader consistent with Palmer's (2001) view that epistemic modality reinforces the speaker's credibility when presenting outcomes as facts. This also echoes Brown (2022) and Davis (2020), who assert that political leaders often use high-certainty language to legitimize their authority and leadership effectiveness. Meanwhile,

Trump's frequent dynamic modality usage (e.g., "can," "able to," "knows how to") demonstrates what Clark & Thompson (2022) describe as a performance-driven rhetoric emphasizing past achievements and capability.

Harris's modality, on the other hand, aligns more closely with Holmes (1995) and Lakoff (1975), who observed that women in political communication often employ more inclusive and empathetic linguistic styles. Her epistemic expressions such as "I believe" or "we think" reflect personal conviction rather than assertive declarations. Furthermore, Wodak & Meyer (2023) emphasize that a speaker's political position shapes their discourse, and Harris's current role as Vice President means her language must carefully balance leadership and humility. Harris's use of deontic modality (e.g., "we must act now") also mirrors Evans & Martin's (2021) findings that progressive politicians frame moral appeals as collective duties, particularly in social justice contexts. Her use of dynamic modality to highlight collective capacity ("we can lead") reinforces Sihombing et al. (2024)'s argument that Harris promotes empowerment and shared leadership rather than personal authority.

The difference in modality use between the two figures can be attributed primarily to differences in political experience and leadership roles, more so than gender alone. Trump's former role as U.S. President affords him the confidence to use high-frequency, high-certainty language, presenting himself as an authoritative and capable decision-maker. His use of epistemic and dynamic modality serves to affirm his track record and promise future results, an approach that resonates with voters looking for certainty in uncertain times. Harris, by contrast, communicates from a position of aspiration rather than experience. Her rhetorical strategy leans more heavily on building solidarity and shared commitment, which explains her greater use of deontic modality. Rather than issuing commands, she appeals to moral values and collective effort. While gendered communication tendencies may influence this style, the study emphasizes that her position as a non-presidential candidate plays a stronger role in shaping her modality choices.

Trump's lower use of deontic modality suggests a leadership style that focuses less on shared obligation and more on self-assured action. Harris's prioritization of deontic over dynamic modality, on the other hand, reflects a value-driven leadership style that seeks audience collaboration rather than unilateral control. This distinction reflects broader ideological orientations as well, Trump's populist-nationalist stance contrasts with Harris's progressive, community-based appeal.

This study's novelty lies in its integration of implicit modality markers (semantic and contextual expressions) alongside explicit ones, offering a more comprehensive look at how politicians subtly craft persuasive messages. Most previous studies, including Brown (2022) and Foster (2020), focused primarily on modal verbs and single political figures. This research extends that work by providing a comparative analysis between two ideologically and experientially distinct candidates, examining how modality functions as a persuasive, ideological, and strategic tool in modern political discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of modality in the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign speeches of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. By applying Kranich's (2013) framework, the analysis revealed that both candidates employed epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality, with epistemic being the most dominant in both speeches. However, Donald Trump used modality more frequently than Kamala Harris, which reflects his confident, assertive, and authoritative rhetorical style. Trump's use of modality emphasized certainty and capability, aligning with his identity as a former president with extensive political experience. His speech conveyed strong leadership and control, using language that minimized uncertainty and projected power. In contrast, Harris used modality to express belief, moral responsibility, and hope, which contributed to a more inclusive and collaborative tone. Her speech highlighted collective action and shared values rather than absolute certainty. These differences indicate that modality is not only a grammatical tool but also a rhetorical strategy to build political identity and persuade audiences. Political experience played a key role in shaping how each candidate used modality, with Trump drawing on his past leadership and Harris focusing on future vision and inclusivity. Gender may also influence these patterns, though political context and role were more dominant factors in this study.

While the study offers valuable insights, it is limited to one speech from each candidate and uses only Kranich's classification of modality. Future research should expand the dataset, examine different political contexts, and integrate additional theories or frameworks to deepen the understanding of how modality functions across political discourse. Based on the findings, this study offers several practical contributions. For the general public, it is hoped that the research will help raise awareness of how politicians use language particularly modality to shape perception, build credibility, and persuade. By understanding the role of modality in campaign speeches, audiences can become more critical and informed in interpreting political rhetoric. For students, especially those studying linguistics, communication, or political science, this research

may serve as a useful reference to understand how modality functions in political discourse. It demonstrates how language can be strategically used to express certainty, obligation, and ability, all of which contribute to constructing a speaker's rhetorical stance and leadership image. For future researchers, it is suggested that similar studies be expanded to include more speech samples from a variety of political figures, contexts, and election periods. Incorporating broader theoretical frameworks and multimodal analysis would also enrich the findings, offering deeper insight into how modality operates across different styles of political communication.

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