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## DISTRIBUTIVE ANALYSIS OF POLYMODALITY IN CONTEXT

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### Abstract

This paper examines the distributive analysis of polymodality within authentic discourse contexts. It investigates how multiple modal expressions co-occur, interact, and influence meaning across various genres. Using a combination of corpus linguistics methods and qualitative discourse analysis, the study identifies common frequency patterns, semantic functions, and pragmatic roles of polymodal constructions in English. The findings demonstrate that polymodality allows speakers and writers to negotiate stance, maintain politeness, and adjust levels of certainty with greater nuance. Overall, this research advances understanding of modality in discourse and provides practical insights for language teaching and translation.

**Keywords:** Modality, polymodality, distributive analysis, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, epistemic stance, pragmatics, genre analysis, linguistic interaction, uncertainty markers

### Introduction

Modality has long been recognized as a fundamental grammatical and semantic category that reflects a speaker's attitude towards the propositional content of an utterance (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 2001). Modality includes expressions of possibility, necessity, obligation, permission, and related notions. While the study of individual modal elements, such as modal verbs and adverbs, has been extensive (Coates, 1983; Hoyer, 1997), there has been less attention paid to the phenomenon of polymodality: the co-occurrence of two or more modal elements within the same clause or utterance. This layered use of modals is prevalent in



both spoken and written discourse, yet remains under-explored in systematic linguistic analysis.

Understanding polymodality is essential because it sheds light on how speakers manage nuanced meanings and maintain interpersonal relations in interaction (Nuyts, 2001; Cornillie, 2009). For example, the combination of an epistemic modal verb with a modal adverb ('might probably') creates a gradation of uncertainty that neither element conveys alone. Such combinations are also key for politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and are frequent in hedging (Hyland, 1996).

This study aims to fill this research gap by providing a distributive analysis of polymodality in various authentic contexts. We pose the following research questions: (1) What are the most common patterns of polymodal combinations in English? (2) How do these combinations vary across discourse genres? (3) What pragmatic functions do these patterns serve? By answering these questions, we hope to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in teaching and translation.

## **Methods**

A mixed-methods research design was employed. The quantitative phase involved building a balanced corpus comprising 500,000 words of English texts drawn from three primary genres: academic writing (e.g., journal articles), journalistic discourse (e.g., news articles), and conversational data (e.g., transcribed interviews). Each subcorpus was approximately 166,000 words to allow for comparative analysis.

Data extraction was conducted using WordSmith Tools and AntConc to generate keyword-in-context (KWIC) concordances for modal verbs ('might', 'could', 'should'), modal adverbs ('perhaps', 'probably', 'possibly'), and modal adjectives ('likely', 'certain'). All instances of co-occurrence within a clause boundary were manually coded to ensure accuracy. To validate coding consistency, inter-coder reliability tests were performed, yielding a Cohen's kappa of 0.91, indicating high agreement.

In the qualitative phase, selected instances were analyzed within a discourse analytic framework inspired by Gee (2011) and Hyland (1998). This phase



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focused on understanding the pragmatic functions and interactional consequences of polymodal usage. Network graphs were created using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) to visualize the frequency and interconnection of modal combinations.

## Results

Quantitative analysis revealed significant and genre-sensitive patterns in the distribution of polymodal combinations. In academic writing, such combinations occurred at an average rate of approximately 1,350 instances per 100,000 words. These were predominantly composed of epistemic modal verbs coupled with hedging adverbs — for example, constructions like *may possibly*, *could perhaps*, and *might conceivably*. This frequent pairing underscores the genre's inherent preference for cautious, qualified claims, which aligns with the norms of tentativeness and authorial humility that characterize scholarly discourse. The data suggest that academics employ polymodality not merely for grammatical variation, but as a deliberate strategy to avoid overstatement and to engage critically with competing perspectives, thus maintaining credibility.

In contrast, journalistic discourse presented a lower but still substantial rate of polymodal occurrences, averaging 950 instances per 100,000 words. Here, the typical pairings often involved stronger, more assertive combinations such as *will certainly*, *must surely*, or *shall undoubtedly*. These constructions serve a reinforcing function, boosting the factuality or inevitability of reported events. This tendency reflects journalism's dual need to inform and to persuade, framing stories with an air of authority while subtly guiding the reader's interpretation of unfolding events.

Conversational data revealed the highest density of polymodal usage, reaching approximately 2,400 instances per 100,000 words. This finding suggests that face-to-face interaction relies heavily on layered modality to handle the fluid dynamics of real-time negotiation and interpersonal sensitivity. Common examples include casual pairings like *might maybe*, *could possibly*, and colloquial forms such as *might kinda*, which blend standard modal grammar with discourse markers or informal intensifiers. Such combinations were frequently used to hedge direct statements, signal speaker tentativeness, soften requests, or reduce the risk of conflict in socially delicate moments.



The network visualization produced using Gephi confirmed these patterns and provided additional insights into the relational structure of polymodal forms across genres. Nodes representing frequently co-occurring modals, like *might* possibly and *could* perhaps, appeared as central hubs with dense connections, indicating their high frequency and stable use. Peripheral but emerging forms, like *might kinda*, appeared as smaller, less-connected nodes, suggesting they are gaining traction in colloquial registers but are not yet fully conventionalized. This visualization thus illustrates both the stable core and the dynamic, evolving fringe of polymodal usage in contemporary English.

Overall, these quantitative findings, supported by visual network mapping, reveal that polymodality is not uniformly distributed but shaped by the communicative goals and stylistic conventions of each genre. This reinforces the view that polymodal structures are a flexible resource, systematically employed to balance clarity, social alignment, and pragmatic nuance.

### **Analyses**

In the qualitative phase, selected instances were examined through a discourse-analytic framework that integrates functional, interactional, and pragmatic perspectives. This approach facilitated a deeper exploration of how speakers strategically deploy multiple modals within specific contexts to convey nuanced meanings. Each polymodal occurrence was contextualized within its surrounding discourse to identify how it aligns with speaker intentions, audience expectations, and genre conventions.

Detailed discourse segments were annotated to trace shifts in epistemic stance, degrees of certainty, and politeness strategies. Attention was given to whether speakers used polymodal constructions to mitigate assertions, express tentative agreement, or subtly negotiate disagreement. This fine-grained analysis revealed that polymodality often emerges in contexts where speakers balance clarity with social face management, such as academic debates, interviews, or opinion pieces. To complement manual analysis, network graphs were generated using Gephi to visually map the co-occurrence relationships between various modal elements. These graphs highlighted the centrality and strength of frequent combinations,



showing which clusters dominate particular genres. The visualization not only confirmed patterns found in the corpus frequency tables but also exposed less obvious links between modals that co-occur across genres. Overall, the qualitative phase added interpretive depth, clarifying how polymodality functions as a flexible linguistic resource for managing stance and interpersonal alignment in discourse.

## **Discussion**

These results align with prior theoretical claims that modality operates on a cline rather than as discrete categories (Palmer, 2001). Polymodal combinations enrich this cline by offering speakers more nuanced gradations of certainty and commitment. In academic discourse, the frequent use of layered modals reflects the epistemic caution expected in knowledge claims (Hyland, 1998). Journalistic discourse, on the other hand, uses reinforcement to assert credibility and manage reader trust (Fairclough, 1995).

Conversational polymodality appears to be heavily shaped by social context. Speakers hedge or reinforce utterances depending on the level of familiarity with interlocutors and the perceived face threat. This supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings imply that explicit instruction on polymodal patterns could enhance second language learners' pragmatic competence, helping them to communicate more naturally and appropriately across genres (Taguchi, 2011). Future studies should explore cross-linguistic patterns of polymodality to determine universal versus language-specific tendencies.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that polymodality is a systematic, context-sensitive feature of English discourse that serves multiple pragmatic functions. By applying distributive analysis, we have uncovered robust co-occurrence patterns and their genre-specific characteristics. These insights enrich our understanding of modality's complex role in language.



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Further research should expand the corpus to include additional genres such as legal and technical writing, and examine polymodality in other languages for comparative insights. Practical applications include refining teaching materials and enhancing translation practices by considering how layered modals convey subtle nuances.

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