Modal Verbs in COVID-19 News Reports

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Abstract

COVID-19 has been rampant all over the world since 2019. As the main means of spreading effective information related to COVID-19, news reports play a very important role to raise public awareness. Modal verbs are common in English expressions. News media is apt to use modal verbs to convey known facts or reasonable speculations. Exploring modal verbs in COVID-19 news reports is beneficial to understand the usage of modal verbs as well as the intentions of the reporters. This paper collected news reports related to COVID-19 in China Daily, The New York Times, and Global Times since the beginning of 2020 and explored the frequency of central modal verbs and the differences of news discourse and other types of discourse in terms of central modal verbs. It found out that there are some differences between them. It is hoped that this paper can help people better understand the modality in news reports and can provide some help for pandemic news reports writing.

Keywords

COVID-19; News report; Modal verbs; Modality.

1. Introduction

COVID-19, also known as Corona Virus Disease 2019, first appeared in Wuhan, Hubei Province in the end of 2019. The death toll caused by its serious contagiousness struck panic in the hearts of people all over the world. In mid-January 2020, considering the virus was deadly harmful as well as the large number of Chinese coinciding with the Spring Festival travel rush, China made a series of emergency response measures, such as canceling railway and air operations, advocating staying put for the lunar new year, etc. Subsequently, the coronavirus spread across the globe, causing massive infections and deaths around the world. Until now, the corona virus has remained the focus of China's epidemic prevention work. In the process of the spreading of COVID-19 around the world, the reporting of the pandemic related to it is particularly important. By reading these reports, people can learn in real time about the current situation of COVID-19, how countries are responding to it, and the attitudes of all the countries towards it.

Modality system has been a focus of linguists' research since it was proposed. Halliday (2004) proposed that modality is an important way to express interpersonal meaning of language, and modal verbs are important means of expressing modality (Yang, 2006). Palmer (1986) argued that modal verbs can express four modal meanings: epistemic, denotic, dynamic, and evidential meanings. Biber (1999) divided English modal verbs into three types: central modal verbs, marginal modal verbs, and semi-modal verbs. This article focuses on the use of central modal verbs in COVID-19 news discourses. English modal verbs show different distributions and characteristics in different discourse types. For example, in legal discourses, the proportion of "shall", which is a central modal verb in English, is particularly prominent. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the frequency and characteristics of English modal verbs in domestic

and foreign reports on the coronavirus pandemic, hoping to provide some help for news report writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Modal Verbs

Traditionally, modal verbs have been categorized as auxiliary verbs to express corresponding modal meanings. In systemic functional linguistics, Halliday regards modal verbs as subjective and implicit means to express probability, usuality, obligation and inclination. Modal verbs have three levels of value: high, middle and low. Palmer (1986) proposed that different modal verbs can express different meanings. For example, "may" can express possible judgement, showing a low confidence in the proposition; "will" can express reasonable judgement according to known facts; "must" can express the only possible judgement according to known facts. Biber et al (1999) divided English modal verbs into three types according to their usage: central modal verbs, marginal modal verbs and semi-modal verbs.

Table 1. Categorization of Modal Verbs by Biber et al (1999)

Central modal verbs	Can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would
Marginal modal verbs	Dare (to), need (to), ought (to), used to
Semi-modal verbs	Have (got) to, (had) better, be supposed to, be going to

According to their main meanings, Biber et al (1999) divided them into three types:

Table 2. Categorization of Modal Verbs According to meanings

Modality meaning	examples
Permission/possibility/ability	Can, could, may, might
Obligation/necessity	Must, should, (had) better, have (got) to, need to, ought to, be supposed to
Inclination/prediction	Will, would, shall, be going to

However, the meanings of modal verbs are complicated. The borderline between these modal verbs cannot be easily define. For example, "can", "may" and "could" all express the ability to do something, but many people cannot clearly tell the differences among them. These words are usually be generalized to express possibility and prediction. English learners are infused with rigid rules about these modal verbs. They hardly know how to use these modal verbs to express their own opinions.

2.2. Research at home and Abroad

English modal verbs would appear in different discourse types such as news discourse, advertising discourse, literary discourse, legal discourse, academic discourse, business discourse, and so on. Many scholars at home and abroad have explored the frequency and distribution of modal verbs in these different discourses, such as Fowler (1965) explored the frequency and expression meaning of "shall" and "will" in legal discourse; Zhao (2002) compared and analyzed the use of Chinese and English modal verbs in legal discourse, news discourse, academic discourse and literary discourse to grasp the role of modal verbs in different discourse types; Ye (2003) analyzed the use of modal verbs in academic book reviews and their interpersonal meaning functions and discourse meaning functions; Ma (2003) explored the frequency of modal verbs in advertising discourse and the meaning expression of

these modal verbs; Ignacio (2010) analyzed the cognitive meaning of modal verbs in business discourse; Eman (2020) explored the use of modal verbs in corpus-based academic discourses, etc. From the previous research of scholars at home and abroad, it can be seen that modal verbs in different discourses are still the focus of research. News reports about COVID-19 also belong to news discourse. However, since it is an outbreak that has only occurred in the past two years, there is less analysis of the news discourse about coronavirus pandemic. Most research on the reports of coronavirus pandemic were from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. For example, Hu (2021) selected and analyzed the news reports about coronavirus pandemic in The New York Times and China Daily, revealing the fact that the US media wanted to defame the image of the Chinese government through news reports rather than paying attention to the pandemic itself; Liu (2021) conducted a diachronic analysis of the US media's reports about coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, discovering the shameful behavior of US media to politicize the pandemic and stigmatize Chinese government which violates the norms of news media. Also, there were research on Chinese and foreign news reports about coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of the metaphorical analysis, such as Li (2021) explored the role of the metaphor "war" in raising people's awareness of this pandemic, through analyzing the metaphor "war" used in the reports about coronavirus pandemic in Global Times and The New York Times. There has been little research on modal verbs in the news reports about coronavirus pandemic. This paper hopes to focus on the use of the central modal verbs in English in COVID-19 news reports at home and abroad, rather than exploring the differences between Chinese and foreign media reporting on the pandemic. It is hoped that this paper can help journalists to use modal verbs more accurately. This article is devoted to analyzing the frequency and distribution of English central modal verbs in COVID-19 news reports. It compares COVID-19 news reports with other types of news discourses to explore the differences between them. Meanwhile, it explores the meanings expressed by different central English modal verbs in this discourse, so as to help readers better master the use of modal verbs. Therefore, this paper raises two research questions:

1. What is the distribution of central English modal verbs in the news discourse about COVID-19 news reports, and what are the outstanding characteristics?

2. What are the similarities or differences of the distribution and characteristic of the central English modal verbs between COVID-19 news reports and other types of news discourses?

3. Methodology

This paper uses quantitative analysis through collecting news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in mainstream media such as China Daily, The New York Times, and Global Times since the beginning of 2020. Since many reports on the COVID-19 pandemic are not closely related to it, so the reports still needed to be screened. After being screened, 100 news reports which are closely relevant to COVID-19 are retained, including reports about the progress of the pandemic, the difficulties caused by the pandemic, and the improvement of the pandemic and so on. With the assistance of AntConc 4.0.3 (a corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis), it retrieves the nine central English modal verbs in the text: can, could, may, might, must, shall, and would. Then the index lines in the discourse can be presented. Through the analysis of the index lines, the frequency and prominent characteristics of the central English modal verbs in the collected reports are obtained. The index lines obtained by this software can be transferred to the Excel table, making the contents of the index lines clearer. For the second research question, the author collects other types of news discourses (also 100 articles) in the mainstream media mentioned above, such as political news, economic news, science and technology news, etc. After the same steps mentioned above, qualitative analysis was

conducted on these discourses and the collected COVID-19 reports to compare the similarities and differences of the usage of core English modal verbs.

4. Discusson and Result

For RQ1, central modal verbs do not appear frequently in these texts. English central modal verbs only account for 1.44%. (The total word counts are 35,432. The shortest passage has 151 words while the longest one has 1211 words. And central modal verbs only occur 511 times.)

Table 3. Distributions of Central Modal Verbs in COVID-19 News Reports

will	can	should	could	would	must	may	might	shall	total
213	103	53	44	42	28	15	8	5	511
41.7%	20.2%	10.4%	8.7%	8.2%	5.5%	2.9%	1.6%	1.0%	100%

This table illustrates the distribution of central modal verbs in COVID-19 news reports. The modal words are organized according to their frequency. The results show that "will" is the most widely used modal verb in this discourse. "Will" and "Can" account for 61.9% central modal verbs in these reports. It can be seen that these two words show the prominent characteristic of this discourse. The least widely used one is "shall".

For RQ2, the author selected 100 news reports (including entertainment news, business news, political news, science and technology news, etc.,) with total word counts 38,297 (The shortest one has 121 words while the longest one has 1311 words. The total word counts of two different types of news report are close.). In this discourse, the central modal verbs account for 1.25% with 479 words. Table 4 shows the exact word counts for each central modal verb.

Table 4. Distributions of Central Modal Verbs in Other News Discourse

would	will	can	could	may	should	might	must	shall	total
144	120	56	42	35	31	24	22	5	479
30.1%	25.1%	11.7%	8.8%	7.3%	6.8%	5.0%	4.6%	1.0%	100%

As a whole, the usage of "should", "could", "may", "must", "might", "shall" in other news discourse is not different from that in COVID-19 news reports. In news discourse, "would" and "will" are widely used since they account for more than half of the usage of all central modal verbs. And the data here correspond with Hao (2008). However, the data shown in Table 3 disobeys the result that achieved by Gotti in 2003. He found that "will" in news discourse averagely appear 35 times for 10,000 words. In this paper, the result should be 60 times for 10,000, which is more than that of Gotti's research. Comparing Table 3 to Table 4, we can find that "will" is more widely used in COVID-19 news reports and "would" occur more frequently in news discourse than in COVID-19 news reports. Therefore, analysis on "will" and "would" is conducted:

4.1. Will

"Will" is usually used to express a presumption for the future and also a relatively affirmative claim. In COVID-19 news reports, "will" is mostly used to express the prediction of the situation or action in the future or a promise which corresponds with its defined meaning.

E.g., "To reach the goal, the office will fully support the Hong Kong government's efforts to rein in the situation." (a promise)

"The city's current capacity allows for conducting only 100,000 COVID-19 tests per day, which means it will take a total of 75 days to perform a citywide virus screening campaign for all of its

7.5 million residents, rendering the process useless in stopping the spread of the virus." (a presumption based on known facts)

Its frequent occurrence could be attributed to the preciseness of news reports editing. And in most COVID-19 news reports, editors want to express the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic situation and actions will be immediately taken so as to relieve the anxiety of people. Therefore, "will" occur much more frequently than in other news discourse.

4.2. Would

"Would" actually has similar meaning with "will", expressing one's willingness, desire to do something but in a more euphemistic tone. In collected data, "would" is usually used in direct or indirect speech. As a matter of fact, editors of news media are more apt to use indirect speech in their reports to blur the boundary between interviewees and interviewers so as to make their words more acceptable to the public. Generally speaking, direct speech makes the report more precise and real for it can present the time, space and exact events in order to persuade the readers. Indirect speech usually includes the reporters' subjective ideas and attitudes. Therefore, "would" occur frequently for its euphemistic expressions.

E.g., Proponents argue that this would boost production globally and help address the glaring inequity in access between rich and poor nations. (indirect speech)

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the central modal verbs in COVID-19 news reports and other news discourse, finding that: 1) in COVID-19 news reports, "will" is most widely used, which is different from previous research. It can be attributed to the emergency of COVID-19 pandemic. This discourse usually expresses immediate actions taken by the government or institutes, as well as a prediction of the future. 2) "will" occur much more frequently in COVID-19 news reports while "would" occur much more frequently in other news discourse. It can be attributed to the direct speech or indirect speech used in reports. Generally speaking, COVID-19 news reports need to be more real and precise for they are related to serious events. Reporters cannot add their own ideas or attitudes to the news reports. However, in other news reports, the preciseness is less required than in pandemic reports. Therefore, indirect speech is more frequent. Reporters can express their ideas in the reports in a more euphemistic way which means "would" can perform better.

This research still needs to be improved because it does not analyze other central modal verbs considering that the results are similar with previous work. However, there are still differences in details such as the usage of "can". Therefore, it is hoped that more work can be made on these modal verbs.

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