Milkovich M., Sitarica A. Epistemic modality in political discourse //
Research Result. Social Studies and Humanities. – Vol. 3, № 1, 2017. P. 75-79.

75

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EPISTEMIC MODALITY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the use of epistemic modality in political statements by analyzing the political statements of the American and British administration concerning the military campaign in Iraq in 2003 and afterwards, as well as the situation with Iran sanctions. Without any intention of a political argumentation, it is usually considered that, especially the US President, did not have any firm evidence which could show the link between the Iraqi government and the attacks on New York and, before all, their weapons of mass destruction (chemical and biological). By analyzing the statements of the US president Bush, the British PM Blair and other members of their administration, the aim of this paper is to show how politicians use epistemic modality to express their assumptions or the truth of the way they interpret some information regarding the situation in Iraq or Iran, which in this case may be caused by the lack of firm evidence.
Key words: verb; knowledge; auxiliary; analyses; speaker.

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ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКАЯ МОДАЛЬНОСТЬ В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

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Аннотация. Содержанием работы является анализ использования эпистемической модальности в политических заявлениях американской и британской администраций по поводу военной кампании в Ираке в 2003 году и позже, а также в связи с санкциями в отношении Ирана. Принято считать, что президент США, вне сферы политической аргументации, не имел каких-либо твердых доказательств, указывающих на связь между иракским правительством и нападением на Нью-Йорк и, прежде всего, доказывающих наличие у него оружия массового поражения (химического и биологического). Цель данной работы – показать, опираясь на анализ заявлений президента Буша, британского премьер-министра Блэра и членов их администраций, каким образом политики, выражая свои предположения или уверенность, интерпретируя информацию о ситуации в Ираке или Иране, используют эпистемическую модальность, что в данном случае может быть обусловлено отсутствием у них твердых доказательств.
Ключевые слова: глагол; знания; вспомогательный глагол; анализ; говорящий.

Theoretical background

According to Coates [1], epistemic modality is concerned with the assumptions of the speaker or assessment of possibilitiesб and in most cases it demonstrates the speaker's confidence, or lack of confidence, in the truth of the proposition expressed [1, p. 18]. Furthermore, Palmer [10] states that with epistemic modality speakers express their judgments about the factual status of the proposition, whereas with evidential modality, they indicate the evidence they have for its factual status [10, p. 8]. Modality is an important linguistic tool for realizing the interpersonal function and expressing social roles between the addresser and the addressee. It is a broad expression of a speaker's attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence or about the proposition expressed by the sentence [4]. Epistemic modality indicates the means by which speakers express judgment on the truth of the propositions they utter. Traditionally, the term epistemic modality is related to the use of modal verbs and modal auxiliaries, when a speaker expresses an opinion about a statement. More exactly, as the Greek word 'episteme' means

НАУЧНЫЙ РЕЗУЛЬТАТ
RESEARCH RESULT

Milkovich M., Sitarica A. Epistemic modality in political discourse //
Research Result. Social Studies and Humanities. – Vol. 3, № 1, 2017. P. 75-79.

76

'knowledge', the term refers to „matters of knowledge, belief or opinion rather than fact» [9].

Modality represents means of expressing indirectness as a face-saving strategy, as politicians frequently say much less than they actually mean and in this way they are indirect. The main reason for this is the fact that speakers or writers communicate not only bare facts but also their own stance toward the proposition. Speakers often qualify their statements with respect to believability, reliability, and general compatibility with accepted fact [3]. The notional content of modality highlights its association with entire statements. Modality concerns the factual status of information; it signals the relative actuality, validity, or believability of the content of an expression. Modality affects „...the overall assertability of an expression and thus takes the entire proposition within its scope» [3, p. 385].

Within discourse analysis, modality is understood as encompassing much more than simply the occurrence of overt modal auxiliaries. Rather, modality concerns the speaker's attitude toward and/or confidence in the proposition being presented. Modality is primarily located in the interpersonal component of the grammar and choices in this component are independent of grammatical choices in other components. Modality may be expressed through certain types of main verbs, as well as through adjectives, adverbs, and certain nominalizations. Modal adjectives and adverbs, modal auxiliary verbs in an epistemic modal function, and pragmatic particles are, apart from expressing modality, also used to express various pragmatic functions which depend on their use either as a boosting device or as a hedging device. Lexical means that are used to express modality and which often occur in political speech are:

1) modal auxiliary verbs - *must*, *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*,

2) modal adjectives - *possible*, *probable*, *likely*, *certain*, *sure*,

3) modal adverbs - *perhaps*, *possibly*, *probably*, *maybe*, *certainly*, *actually,* and

4) pragmatic particles - *I think*, *I mean*, *I guess.*

Epistemic modality expresses the degree of probability including the logical possibility, necessity, hypothetical meaning, beliefs and predictability. Epistemic modality is concerned with matters of knowledge or belief on which basis speakers express their judgments about states of affairs, events or actions [5]. In other words, it concerns the speaker's attitude to the factuality of past or present time situations [6]. Thus, in the modalized proposition *Something may*, or *might*, *must*, *could be*, the speaker communicates his or her

subjective attitude to the proposition and so s/he modifies the illocutionary force of the utterance. It is often claimed in the linguistics literature that epistemic modality, unlike other kinds of modality, does not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance. Relatedly, several authors argue that epistemic modality expresses a comment on the proposition expressed by the rest of the utterance.

Corpus analysis

By using epistemic modality, the speakers in the following examples often do not make a firm assertion about the views expressed and it seems that they do not want to take full responsibility for their claims or the claims of others:

BLAIR: No, I don't think again that is right. I think what he said was that the evidence that he had indicated that the Iraqis were not cooperating properly and that, he thought that the nerve agent VX *may* have been weaponised[1].

As it will be shown in many examples, this viewing stance is often characterized by the use of *verba sentiendi*, which are words that express feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, such as *feel* or *think*, and these are mental process verbs in transitivity, to use Halliday's terms [4]. In these examples can be also find some other linguistic means in order for the speaker to weaken the force of their utterances, which hedge the illocutionary force of a speech act. Typical examples of such device are phrases like I think or I mean.

BLAIR: And he also said that the discovery of the war heads might be – I think I'm quoting here – *may* be the tip of an iceberg. I think you'll find that in that report[2].

By using the modal *may* or *might*, obviously the speaker wants to gain detachment from his assertions. In the example above, the speaker clearly does not want to be responsible for the claims of somebody else. In the following example, Mr. Blair uses modal forms to mitigate the fact that the allies oppose the actions of the UK and US:

BLAIR: To be fair to France and Germany, France and Germany *may* have a difference about how we're tackling this problem but they don't have any difference with us in that it is a problem[3].

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[1] *Transcript of Blair's Iraq interview*: 6 February, 2003. [Online} URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/-newsnight/2732979. stm
[2] Ibid.
[3] *Transcript of Blair's Iraq interview*: 6 February, 2003. [Online} URL:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/273297 9. stm

НАУЧНЫЙ РЕЗУЛЬТАТ
RESEARCH RESULT

Milkovich M., Sitarica A. Epistemic modality in political discourse //
Research Result. Social Studies and Humanities. – Vol. 3, № 1, 2017. P. 75-79.

77

It is also specific when using this device in political discourse to evade personal responsibility, when making statements or announcing decisions, that the interviewee transfers liability to an inclusive and/or exclusive, fairly 'fuzzy' *we*, or *us*, which refers, for instance, to the government, the political parties, or the people in general („difference with us»).

BLAIR: I'm sorry, it is absolutely clear what has been happening over the past few months, which is of course, *I mean* the moment we mentioned those in our intelligence reports we were aware of the fact that the Iraqis *would* then have a significant period of time in which they *could* conceal these weapons[4].

As we can see from the use of the modals *would* and *could*, modals are used as a hedging device, while in this example the speaker is making just an assumption about how the situation can develop. Similar situation can be found in the case of Iran and its nuclear program which is the topic of the interview with the American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, where epistemic modality is used to indicate the possibility (in her opinion) for Iran to have a nuclear weapon on condition that it gains the technology for constructing it.

RICE: There's a reason to worry about an Iran that is trying to gain the technology that *could* lead to a nuclear weapon, because enrichment and reprocessing capability, which is what the world is trying to stop, is a technology that if used in certain ways *can* lead to a nuclear weapon.

<...>

RICE: Now, what were we looking at? We were looking at key judgments by the intelligence community that he had indeed reconstituted his biological and chemical weapons program, that he *could* have a nuclear weapon within one year to several years[5].

The example above demonstrate that the reason why the speaker uses the modal forms *can and could* with this meaning may as well be due to making detachment from her statements and to take off the responsibility. Furthermore, in such cases, it can be judged as a strategy for maintaining a good image, because the speaker is not sure if the particular event happens or not, so she describes it as possible, but only under certain circumstances.

The same strategies can be seen in the 2002 speech of President Bush on Iraq and the same situation happened in 2007, regarding the Iran debate,

but Mr. Bush also uses the modal form *will*, which in a lesser extent shows the detachment and it is more a sign of his certainty about the future situation:

BUSH: If the government falls apart and there is sectarian enclaves and violence, it'*ll* invite Iran into the Shia neighborhoods, Sunni extremists into the Sunni neighborhoods, Kurdish separatist movements. All of which *would* threaten moderate people, moderate governments, and all of which *will* end up creating conditions that could lead to attacks here in America[6].

The speaker makes several assumptions about what could happen in Iraq. He cannot know for certain, and that is why he uses the phrase *I think*, which stresses his own opinion and at the same time, expresses his uncertainty about the future situation in Iraq. In this case, it cannot be taken as a weakness of the speaker or indication that he wants to be evasive. He uses these assumptions because he simply cannot be sure what will happen, and can only make predictions.

Most of the examples represent epistemic speculative modality, which is expressed by the modal verb *may*, *might*, *could*, that convey a possible conclusion. On the other hand, The modal verb *will* in the case above is employed for the expression of epistemic deductive modality and it conveys the only possible conclusion. The previous example demonstrates that also conditional clauses and especially hypothetical if-statements are a common characteristic hedging and „resort» device of political rhetoric. Moreover, in the same interview, concerning the comparison between the past and possible future actions of his administration in the similar situation, the president uses modal forms as a mitigation means, but also detaches from the claims of others, in order to avoid responsibility:

BUSH: You know, we've been through this before. Abu Ghraib was a mistake. Using bad language like, you know, „bring them on» was a mistake. I think history is gonna look back and see a lot of ways we could have done things better. No question about it.

<...>

PELLEY: The troop levels
BUSH: *Could* have been a mistake.
PELLEY: *Could* have been a mistake?[7]

Much less certainty was evident in the US vice-president Cheney interview from 2003, where his use of modal forms *may* and *would* shows his assumptions about the developments of the events, but only in certain circumstances and under some conditions:

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[4] Ibid.

[5] *Transcript*: *Cynthia's McFadden's Interview with Condoleezza Rice.* By ABC News Nov. 28, 2007. [Online] URL:
http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=3927548&page=1

[6] *President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat*: For Immediate Release Office of the Press Secretary October 7, 2002 [Online] URL: http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/-releases/2002/10/20021007-8.html

[7] Ibid.

НАУЧНЫЙ РЕЗУЛЬТАТ
R E S E A R C H   R E S U L T

Milkovich M., Sitarica A. Epistemic modality in political discourse //
Research Result. Social Studies and Humanities. – Vol. 3, № 1, 2017. P. 75-79.

78

CHENEY: The judgment in the NIE was that if Saddam could acquire fissile material, weapons-grade material, that he *would* have a nuclear weapon within a few months to a year[8].

CHENEY: Well, there are technologies available. They are extremely expensive if you're going to put them on every airliner. You've got to make choices here about, you know, when you're dealing with a risk, there *may* be certain aircraft flying into certain locales that are especially vulnerable that you *may* want to deal with[9].

The examples illustrate the pragmatic importance of hedging as a resource for expressing uncertainty, skepticism and deference, and, as for the previous researches, Hyland [7] found that *may*, *would*, and *possible* were mostly used as hedges, as opposed to will, show and the fact that, which were the most frequent boosters in his corpus. The modal verbs *might* and *could* belong to epistemic possibility, and modal verbs *can* and *may* expresses circumstantial possibility. Furthermore, certain epistemic verbs (*suggest*, *indicate*, *assume*, *seem*) often serve to hedge statements. According to Fraser [2], hedging in discourse can be reduced to two characteristic purposes. The first is to mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer, thereby rendering the message more polite, and the second, which was of main relevance for the corpus analysis, is to avoid providing the information which is expected or required in the speaker's contribution, thereby creating vagueness and/or evasion.

Hedging patterns in political discourse strongly depend on face and politeness strategies [11], and not least on the changing and fluid political dynamics that every politician is subject to. Finally, it is evident that possible reasons for choosing a certain hedging device are mainly rhetorical tactics of purposeful evasion or an effort to avoid having to give an outright answer to a question put forward by the interviewer. If we addressed the political aspects of the subject, which is not the intention, we could conclude that providing all the information to the public and not going to war basing on speculations is a more democratic way, but the following example describes the use of modals in order to avoid the responsibility to show the evidence:

MR. RUSSERT: There are reports that the investigation Congress did does show a link between the Saudi government and the hijackers but that it *will* not be released to the public.

VICE PRES. CHENEY: I don't know want to speculate on that, Tim, partly because I was involved in reviewing those pages. It was the judgment of our senior intelligence officials, both CIA and FBI that that material needed to remain classified. At some point, we *may* be able to declassify it, but there are ongoing investigations that *might* be affected by that release, and for that reason, we kept it classified[10].

Modal verbs *may* and *might*, like the modal adverb *maybe*, indicate uncertainty and assumption of the speaker. Modal verbs may, might or could represent content-oriented hedges. When using a content-oriented hedging device, the force of the speech act is attenuated and thus it indicates uncertainty and evasiveness of the speaker.

In the corpus, there are mostly present modal auxiliaries. Modal auxiliaries also referred to as modal verbs or simply modals create a relatively small and closed group of verbs that significantly differ from other „ordinary» verbs. Regarding the semantic, in contrast to lexical verbs, the meaning of modals depends on context. Epistemic possibility *could* expresses the speaker's assessment of the possibility of something being true. In addition to *may* and *might* used in the sense of possibility, stressed could is increasingly used. Although *could* is historically the past tense form of *can*, it refers to either the present state of affairs or it can be used in order to asses the possibility in the future.

Although the possibility meaning of *can* and *may* can be basically considered overlapping, it is possible distinguish between factual (*may*) immediate and theoretical (*can*) possibility. *Can* is also more common to be used in statements of a general value, based on observation or experience, while *may* in this situation implies a sense of warning. The authority of the speaker giving permission in statements is transferred to the hearer in question. From the historical point of view, *might* is a past form of *may*. Its epistemic meaning is parallel with meaning of *could*. Finally, there is a wide range of meanings that can be expressed by *will*: prediction/predictability, intention, willingness and insistence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the corpus analyzed in this paper brings us to the conclusion that the politicians involved in the political crisis in the Middle East use epistemic modality as the means for explaining their politics

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[8] Cheney Claims Again Iraq Tried To Acquire Uranium From Niger: *Democracy Now*. September 16, 2003. [Online] URL:
http://www.democracynow.org/2003/9/16/cheney_claims_again_iraq_tried_to
[9] Ibid.

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Milkovich M., Sitarica A. Epistemic modality in political discourse //
Research Result. Social Studies and Humanities. – Vol. 3, № 1, 2017. P. 75-79.

79

concerning the situation in Iraq or Iran, without taking full responsibility for the situation and their own claims. The speakers often do not make a firm assertion about the views expressed and it is noticeable the use of *verba sentiendi* and especially modals *may, might, can, could* as a hedging device. It is evident that possible reasons for choosing this hedging device are strategies of an effort to avoid having to give an outright answer to a question put forward by the interviewer. It is also specific when using epistemic modality in political discourse to evade personal responsibility by using plural pronouns and also conditional and hypothetical („if») clauses.

We can conclude that, from the pragmatic point of view, the speakers/politicians use epistemic modality in order to persuade the hearers, or the voters, that what they do is right and reasonable, even though there often are no firm evidence which would support their claims. Jowett and O'Donnell [8] distinguish between informative discourse that counts as persuasion on the one hand and propaganda on the other hand. Both informative discourses and persuasion share a focus on the recipient by allowing them to acquire information, understand the environment, and learn. While the speakers of persuasive messages clearly have an interest in having recipients come to agree with their point of view, their interests are in line with those of the recipients. In contrast, propaganda is meant to secure the interests of the propagandist, whether or not those interests coincide with those of the recipients.

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