Analysis Donald Trump's Speech on The New Us-China Trade Deal: Study of Modality

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Abstract. Language plays a vital role in expressing emotions, facilitating communication, and conveying a speaker's stance through modality. This study analyzes the use of modality in a political speech by Donald Trump regarding a new U.S.-China trade deal, delivered on May 12, 2025. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research investigates how modality reflects Trump's intentions, beliefs, and authority. Data were collected through indirect observation of a YouTube video titled "President Trump touts new US-China trade deal: We Opened Up China", followed by transcription, identification, and categorization of modality types based on Palmer's (2013) framework: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality. The findings reveal that Trump uses epistemic modality to express speculation, deontic modality to convey obligation and prohibition, and dynamic modality to demonstrate capability and initiative. These elements function strategically to shape his image as a decisive and persuasive leader. The study supports previous findings that modality serves as a rhetorical device in political discourse, contributing to influence and narrative construction.

Keywords: Modality, Political speech, Donald Trump

1. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a crucial medium for expressing emotions, self-expression, facilitating human communication as social beings, and functioning as a key aspect of communicative activity (Tarigan et al., 2024). The way individuals express themselves through language is often manifested in their speech. When a speaker addresses a large audience, they naturally convey expressions that carry implicit meanings within their words. The audience does not merely listen; they actively seek to interpret the underlying meaning and intent behind the speaker's message. They aim to discern the speaker's stance, level of involvement, or perspective on the truth or likelihood of the propositions presented. This aspect of language is referred to as modality. According to Martirosyan (2022), modality is a linguistic domain that examines the speaker's perspective in expressing obligation, permission, probability, and possibility. Modality refers to the manner in which language is used to convey possibility, necessity, or belief (Agustina et al., 2023). It can thus be said that modality functions as a speaker's technique to articulate their stance in relation to possibility, obligation, or conviction.

Speakers frequently utilize modality in their speeches to capture the audience's attention. One prominent figure known for this is Donald Trump, the 45th and 47th President of the United States. This is evidenced by Laksana (2023), who in his research on Trump's 2020 Republican National Convention (RNC) speech, found that Trump's speech contained a high degree of modality, reflecting strong conviction in his message and a deliberate intention to influence his audience. The intention to influence is crucial for any speaker to assert their presence, particularly in the case of Donald Trump, who is widely recognized for his controversial rhetoric. Recently, Trump stirred controversy by proposing substantial tariffs on various foreign products in the United States, including Chinese imports, some reaching hundreds of percent. This created public unrest, prompting Trump to revise his decision through a new trade agreement with China, which he addressed in a public speech. The speech was delivered at the White House, Washington D.C., and was uploaded to the WCNC YouTube channel on May 12, 2025, under the title President Trump touts new US-China trade deal: We Opened Up China . Given Trump's controversial reputation, this speech presents a compelling subject for analyzing the modality he employed.

This study aims to analyze the use of modality in Donald Trump's speech regarding the new trade deal between the United States and China. Specifically, the research is guided by two main questions: (1) How does the use of modality appear in Donald Trump's speech on the New US-China Trade Deal? and (2) How does modality reflect Donald Trump's stance or position in that speech? To address these questions, this study adopts a qualitative linguistic approach, focusing on the types and functions of modality—epistemic, deontic, and dynamic— used in selected segments of the speech. The analysis is limited to linguistic aspects relevant to modality without delving into non-linguistic dimensions such as economic policy, and it does not quantify the frequency of modality use, but rather emphasizes its function in political discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modality is a semantic phenomenon that focuses on the meaning of expressions that reflect the speaker's attitude or the state of knowledge regarding a given proposition (Frawley, 1992). It is closely related to the speaker's or writer's stance and their involvement in the proposition conveyed in an utterance (Eryon, 2011). Palmer (2013) defines modality as a semantic category that concerns the speaker's attitude toward a situation or the proposition

being expressed. Similarly, Martirosyan (2022) describes modality as a linguistic discipline that investigates how speakers convey obligation, permission, probability, and possibility. From these four perspectives, it can be concluded that modality is a component of semantic study in language that reflects the speaker's or writer's attitude, viewpoint, or judgment regarding a proposition or situation, whether expressed through obligation, permission, possibility, or probability.

Previous research on this topic includes the study by Kurniawan et al. (2024) in *Analisis Modalitas dalam Pidato Menteri Pertahanan Prabowo Subianto 'Forum IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2024: Singgung Serangan di Rafah': Linguistik Fungsional Sistemik.* This study utilized Halliday and Matthiessen's theory of modality and found that Prabowo employed various modalities to convey certainty, concern, and commitment to the issues discussed. Probabilistic modality was frequently used to highlight the uncertainty and complexity of the situation in Rafah. Deontic modality was employed to emphasize Indonesia's commitment to conflict resolution and international cooperation. The use of these modalities reflected a rhetorical strategy aimed at balancing deep concern with a call for collective action from the international community. In this way, Prabowo was able to deliver a strong diplomatic message without appearing overly aggressive or defensive. Modality in Prabowo's speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2024 played a crucial role in expressing Indonesia's stance on the issue of the Rafah attacks. The varied use of modality demonstrated Prabowo's ability to use language as a tool of diplomacy and political influence. Another study was conducted by Reskiana et al. (2024) titled *Modalitas dalam Teks Pidato Nadiem Makarim pada Hari Guru Nasional Periode 2020–2022 Perspektif Halliday.* This research applied Halliday's theory of modality and revealed that the modalities used by Nadiem Makarim were dominated by high-level modalization. Syartanti (2022), in *Modalitas dalam Pidato Kenegaraan Joko Widodo: Analisis Wacana Berbasis Korpus*, employed Alwi's theory of modality and found that the keywords consistently appearing were harus (must) as an indicator of epistemic modality, and bisa (can) as an indicator of dynamic modality, reflecting the meaning of capability. The necessity and possibility expressed by the government through President Joko Widodo's state address reflected the government's optimistic attitude in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, even though the number of positive cases was rising at the time. This optimism was demonstrated by the initiation of the COVID-19 vaccination program in January 2021, seven months prior to the delivery of the state address.

Previous research also includes a study by Hayati et al. (2021) titled *Modalitas Tuturan Mahasiswa dalam Presentasi,* which used the Indonesian modality framework and found that students used intentional modality, epistemic modality, dynamic modality, and deontic modality in expressing opinions during class presentations. Agustina et al. (2023), in *Modalitas dalam Teks Pidato Joe Biden Election Speech,* adopted Palmer's theory of modality and discovered that Biden used modality to construct a narrative of victory, foster national unity, and articulate a future vision. This highlighted rhetorical strategies aimed at achieving political and social impact in public communication. Based on these five previous studies, it is evident that most utilized Halliday's theory or the Indonesian modality framework. Therefore, the researcher is interested in conducting an analysis using Palmer's theory. According to Palmer (2013), modality is not a standalone concept but consists of several branches. He categorizes modality into three main types:

Epistemic modality

Concerned with knowledge, belief, or inference. It expresses the speaker's judgment regarding the truth of a proposition.

Deontic modality

Concerned with permission, obligation, or prohibition. It expresses authority, rules, or moral judgment.

Dynamic modality

Related to ability, willingness, or volition. It reflects the internal conditions or capacities of the subject.

3. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method. Qualitative research focuses on describing the object under study and can be conducted through various models such as case studies, text analysis, contextual analysis, and others (Muhammad, 2011). The descriptive method is a type of research aimed at portraying or explaining a phenomenon or event using natural procedures to address an actual problem (Sutedi, 2009). Therefore, it can

be concluded that descriptive qualitative research is a method used to describe a phenomenon through procedures and theories to answer a specific problem.

The data collection technique used in this study is indirect observation, in which the researcher analyzes a YouTube video from the WCNC channel titled *"President Trump touts new US-China trade deal: We Opened Up China."* According to Laksana (2024), to obtain accurate data, the researcher follows several steps: 1) Listening to the speech: the researcher carefully listens to the speeches delivered by both presidential candidates. 2) Transcribing the speech: the researcher creates a transcript or written copy of the speech to facilitate analysis. 3) Noting modality: the researcher identifies and records the use of modality (words or phrases expressing the speaker's attitude or judgment) in each speech. 4) Categorizing modality: the researcher groups the various types of modality found in the speech. In this study, the researcher will analyze with descriptive qualitative. The researcher collect data by listening to speeches, then categorize, then analyze how the meaning of the use of each type of modality is contained in the speech, then finally draw conclusions.

4. RESULT

A. Epistemic Modality

No	Phrases	Explanation
1	"I think we're gonna stop."	"I think" expresses Trump's belief or prediction about future behavior
2	"I think it would have, it could have been a bad nuclear war."	"Would have" and "could have" words express hypothetical possibilities and potential consequences, while the words "I think" add to Trump's personal judgment.
3	"I think even up his numbers $500 billion."	"I think" from Trump's speech indicates belief or speculation about what someone else (Tim Cook) will do.
4	"I think to me, some people would disagree."	This phrase includes "I think," showing Trump's evaluation or interpretation that people will disagree about his opinion or state. Meanwhile, the word "Would" is used hypothetically to indicate a possibility based on assumptions.

5	"Some people would say we're getting a lot of money with tariffs or whatever,..."	The modal "would" expresses Trump's opinion or claim made by others, not a fact.
6	"I think it would be fantastic for our businesses if we could go in and compete."	The words "I think" from Trump's speech video can be a signal of his belief. "Would be" itself reflects a non-actual, future hypothetical.
7	"I think it would have brought unity between China, better unity between China"	"Would have" signals an unrealized potential, and "I think" shows Trump's subjective view.
8	"I think it's gonna be fantastic for China."	"I think" means Trump's belief for China, meanwhile "It's gonna be" shows that was his prediction.
9	"... It would be a lot of jobs for China."	"Would be" indicates Trump's hypothetical or potential result of China if they compete with the US.
10	"They would be able to see things that they haven't seen. They would be able to buy products that they have never been able to buy would have been great for American business."	"Would be able to" suggests what China might happen under certain conditions about the business that will happen.

B. <u>Deontic Modality</u>

No	Phrases	Explanation
1	"You gotta get 50."	Gotta (got to) expressed a strong obligation to impose partners to request $ 50 billion, instead of the original $ 15 billion.
2	"We have to get it papered."	The expression "have to" indicates the need to officialize ("paper") agreed upon signed in Geneva.
3	"We're not gonna do any trade."	This conditional statement acts as a ban unless the other party continues the dispute and trade action will be banned.
4	"I think to me, some people would disagree."	This phrase includes "I think," showing Trump's evaluation or interpretation that people will disagree about his opinion or state. Meanwhile, the word "Would" is used hypothetically to indicate a possibility based on assumptions.

5	"I said to them, 'Buy more land and bigger tractors.'"	This is required to order US farmers to invest in land and equipment, imposing a strong obligation or advice.
6	"We're not gonna do any trade [if you don't stop it]."	This conditional statement acts as a ban unless the other side continues "it", trade will be banned.
7	"Come on, we're gonna do a lot of trade with you guys."	The expression "come on" here is hindering the encouragement of the public to act - entering a strong transaction.
8	"If you stop it, we'll do a trade."	This conditional condition provides authorization the frame will only be authorized if the other side terminates the allocated action.
9	"They've let it be known that they're not gonna be firing at American ships anymore, not gonna be firing at Americans anymore."	Houthis's statement supervised the automatic ban They committed to a ceasefire.
10	"You can add that."	Here, "can" authorize to include 50% existing in calculations, showing what is authorized.

C. **Dynamic Modality**

No	Phrases	Explanation
1	"People have never really used trade the way I used it."	Claims personal ability or capacity in trade negotiation.
2	"We're negotiating with India right now."	Indicates current effort (still on-going) and the active involvement.
3	"We're gonna be soon negotiating with Pakistan."	Shows intended future actic.
4	"Nobody was able to do what we did."	Expresses capability or what has been achieved
5	"We were satisfied with that."	Reflects personal judgment and internal stance
6	"I want to tell you that..."	Shows willingness and intention to communicate.
7	"I spoke to Tim Cook... he's gonna be building..."	Describes planned or intend actions.
8	"I would call on an average of once every 2 weeks..."	Indicates consistent voluntary effort.

9	"I get a little angry…"	Shows personal emotional response and willingness to react.
10	They've agreed to open up China…"	Highlights willingness from another party.

Researchers found that Donald Trump used various forms of modality in his speech to convey attitudes, beliefs, and to influence his audience. The use of this modality is seen in the way Trump expresses possibility, certainty, obligation, and permission on the issues he raises, especially regarding the new trade deal between the United States and China. Through word choices and sentence structures that reflect epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality, Trump shows his position as a firm and convincing leader.

5. DISCUSSION

In Donald Trump's speech on the New US-China Trade Deal, modality plays an important role in showing Trump's attitude, belief, and intention towards the agreement. According to Palmer (2013), there are three types of modality, namely epistemic, deontic, and dynamic, and all three are present in this speech. Epistemic modality, such as the phrases "I think," "would," and "could have," is used by Trump to express personal opinions, assumptions, and speculations about future or past conditions that did not occur. For example, in "I think it would have brought unity…," Trump conveys a personal view of a hypothetical positive impact, emphasizing his belief without stating certainty.

Then, deontic modality reflects Trump's authoritative and normative attitude. Phrases such as "You gotta get 50," "We have to get it papered," and "We're not gonna do any trade" show an emphasis on imperatives, prohibitions, and permissions in the negotiation framework. This shows that Trump is not only expressing his opinion, but also setting boundaries and expectations for other parties, including China and US domestic economic actors. This type of modality shows Trump's active role as a policy director and negotiator.

And finally, there is dynamic modality which reveals the capacity, willingness, and efforts of both Trump himself and other parties. For example, "People have never really used trade the way I used it" and "We're negotiating with India right now" show the intention, ability, and active actions that are being or will be taken. This strengthens Trump's image as a proactive figure who has control over the direction of foreign policy and the world economy. This type of modality also highlights Trump's personal and emotional dimensions, such as in the phrase "I get a little angry."

Overall, the use of modality in Trump's speech illustrates his firm but speculative position and attitude. Epistemic modality shows that he often conveys personal views and assumptions rather than definite facts, which provides flexibility in his arguments. Deontic modality shows a dominant and directional position, showing Trump as the controller of the situation. Meanwhile, dynamic modality builds his image as an active, empowered, and strong-willed leader. These three types of modality contribute to framing Trump's position on trade agreements as a confident, normative, and initiative leader. So that can concluded that Donald Trump used modality in his speech about the New US-China Trade Deal as an important tool to build his self-image, strengthen his negotiating position, and direct public perception of the policies he has

6. CONCLUSION

Analysis of Donald Trump's speech in the New US-China Trade Deal shows that he uses three types of modality according to Palmer's theory (2013): epistemic, deontic, and dynamic. Epistemic modality appears in expressions such as "I think" and "would," which indicate personal opinion and speculation. Deontic modality appears in statements such as "We have to" or "We're not gonna do," which contain elements of obligation and prohibition, emphasizing Trump's authoritative attitude in negotiations. Meanwhile, dynamic modality is used to convey ability, intention, and action, which forms his image as an active leader and is able to control the direction of economic policy. The use of these three types of modality plays an important role in building Trump's position as a confident and initiative leader.Reflecting on previous research, this study is in line with the findings of Agustina et al. (2023) who also used Palmer's theory in studying Joe Biden's speech. The results also show that modality is used as a strategy to shape political narratives and public influence. This is also in accordance with Kurniawan et al. (2024) and Reskiana et al. (2024) who used a different theory but the same result, namely that modality can function to convey diplomatic attitudes and persuasion strategies in the context of political speeches. Thus, this study does not contradict, but rather broadens insight by using a different theoretical perspective but still focuses on the function of modality in political discourse and its influence on the public.

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