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Modality or how to personalize a nationalistic discourse

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Modality is a linguistic means which attenuates and models the straightforwardness of one's intention (Palmer, 1986) due to either politeness or secrecy. With interesting implications at the morphologic level and vital determinations at the discursive level (Bybee & Fleischman, 1995), modality stands out as a major criterion in the encryption and decryption of the message beyond words. Provided with a generous array of signified items, modality plays a crucial role in the construction of the political message which requires convincing arguments when building up a political vision. Given a politically heated context, modality demonstrates its power in political debates by going far beyond its linguistic context and well into audience's mental. Fears, tensions, conflicts are awakened in shrewdly modalized messages meant to convince people of the truthfulness of one's vision. Consequently, this piece of research aims at identifying the modalizers in the discourse of the main two supporters of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union: Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson by highlighting the role the modal structures play in the rounding up of the "leave" message.

Key-words*: modality, ideology, representation*

1. Introduction

My interest in the topic of the United Kingdom's remain in or leave the European Union was stirred by the huge media attention it was given, by the support of certain personalities for one or another of the sides and by the interesting, socially speaking, British people that are famous for their abhorrence of foreigners (actually, one of the campaign's main subjects). Starting from Fairclough's opinion that "modality helps in texturing self-identity" in this article I intend to check the existence of modal markers in the nationalistic discourses of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson and their contribution to the texturing of a British identity as opposed to the identity of the others (in this particular case "the others" is represented by the European Union). The dispute related to the United Kingdom's vote to leave or remain in the European Union was voiced by the Independence Party that was favorable to the country's leaving the Union and the Conservative Party that pleaded for continuity in the

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relationship to the European Union. Consequently, the leaders built up their discourses reflecting their political options easily identifiable by the audience capable to identify and decrypt the ideological markers in their discourses. For example, David Cameron's discourse is Europe-oriented, highlighting the advantages of the kingdom's remaining in the European Union. On the other hand, the Leave campaign brings to the prime a nationalist discourse characterized by lamentations of what the United Kingdom has to pay to the union and what it gets in exchange, by the abuses it is submitted to, by the foreigners that shrewdly live on the British social and medical services.

In this tensioned political context modality played the key role in the building of the political vision by a number of structures that prove their effectiveness by the success it had in convincing the electors. According to Gramatica Limbii Române (2005:673) modality is a "semantic category, partially grammatized, which expresses the stand of the locutor to a content". Palmer (1986:1) claims that "modality is concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event" in terms of *"Realis"* (the Indicative) and *"Irrealis"* (the Subjunctive). The two stands, far from being contrastive, emphasize their complementary as modality impregnates the discourse both from the position of the locutor and from the perspective of the text structure as well. A similar definition is provided by Verschueren (1999) who argues that modality "involves the many ways in which attitudes can be expressed towards the pure reference-and-prediction content of an utterance, signaling factuality, degrees of certainty or doubt, vagueness, possibility, necessity, and even permission and obligation". For Bybee and Fleischman (1995, 2) modality is "a supplement or overlay of meaning to the most neutral semantic value of the proposition of an utterance, namely factual or declarative". In line with the focus on locutor and locutor's perception, modality is equally characterized by a high subjectivity which reduces the objective, external perspective to the internal, subjective perspective on an event. An important aspect that has been correctly emphasized by Rodica Zafiu in Gramatica Limbii Române (2005:674) is that modality can also have apparently objective stances of the type: "it seems", "it appears", "it is likely", which strengthen the idea of objectivity. On the other hand, Fairclough (2003, 117) claims that "modality helps in texturing self-identity", namely, it contributes to one's definition by contrast to the others (l'autrui) who represents the embodiment of Western Europeans' fears from possible invadors from the East. From this it results that the others are not what we are and consequently they should be rejected. In the same line, Antony Miall (1993) argues that the English traditionally identify the other as the source of all evil in their country "as far as the English are concerned, all of life's greatest problems can be summed up in one word – foreigners". It thus follows that the Great Britain's intention to leave the European Union is foremost aimed at getting back control over their territories and decisions, but also at keeping foreigner far from their kingdom. And the way in which they do so is strongly marked by the use of modal markers.

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The analysis was carried out on a number of two interviews and a statement delivered in the European Parliament. The interviews were taken by the same journalist, Andrew Marr, shortly before the referendum (June 5th – Boris Johnson and June 12th – Nigel Farage), whereas the statement was delivered by Nigel Farage in the European Parliament the day after the English had decided that their country should leave the European Union.

As for the way in which I organize my research, I need to highlight the dual character of the information provided by the modal markers; firstly, the modal markers carry morphological value in the text and secondly, they carry ideological value at the level of the discourse. The ideological value of the discourse has represented a major interest of social studies due to its overwhelming importance in the establishment of human attitudes and mental skemata. Van Dijk (2006) defines ideology as "a special form of social cognition shared by social groups. Ideologies thus form the basis of the social representations and practices of group members 'including their discourse, which at the same time serves as the means of ideological production, reproduction and challenge". If for their morphological value the modal markers need to be identified according to grammar books, their ideological value is made explicit by the CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) which proposes a critical view, as the name says it, on the way language is used for creating ideology-laden texts and messages. CDA does not criticize the message, but what is hidden behind it as it attempts at revealing the hide-outs of messages (Vâlcea 2015, 20).

2. Analysis

Of the many recurrent items with modal value I have stopped upon the situations that I considered relevant to my study, given the cultural, national and political context. A remark that I need to make is that most of the modal markers were frequent in the interviews of both representatives of the "Leave" campaign. Besides their primary morphological value, the modal markers are interpreted in context in order to observe the influence that they have on discourse and whether they play any role in the persuasion of the English to vote to leave the European Union. I paid a special attention to the contribution of the modal markers in the construction of self-representation (the English) and other-representation (the Brussel's authorities) as this turned out to be a major topic in the dispute related to Brexit. By representing the English as the "oppressed" and "the subordinates" to a foreign power the English no longer identify with, the 'Leave' leaders stir in their co-nationals a strong feeling of rebellion against the European Union.

To begin with, the element that predominates the interviews of the two leaders is the parenthetical "I think"/ "I believe" which are lexical verbs with epistemic modal value from the group of verbs: to know, to believe, to consider, to presuppose. As Rodica Zafiu (2005, 677) maintains about the verbs in this category

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"they function as modalizers when they express an attitude of the locator". These parenthetical structures, when used at the 1st person singular, "signal a halving of the universe of knowledge, by the difference between the locutor (I know) and the epistemic subject (I believe)" Zafiu (2005, 682). The parenthetical structures are used to mark the certitude of the speaker about the topic in discussion. Symbolically, it transmits to interlocutors the fact that what the locutor claims is very likely to be so and all doubts should be removed. In the case under analysis, both Farage and Johnson extensively use theses parenthetical structures which indicate that their opinions are based on knowledge (professional-like, expert-like knowledge which can be trusted and accepted as it was actually the case).

(1) "And ***I think*** that everyone knows that when it comes to family reunion that some of the boundaries have been perhaps stretched"
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

(2) "Well, I do dismiss it in a way because ***I think*** that you've got a very short time now to go until this referendum and ***I think*** what people want to hear are the arguments, and what we're setting out on the Leave side of the campaign is ***I think*** an agenda for the government to take back control on June 23rd of a lot of things that really matter to the people of this country"
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Boris Johnson, June 5th 2016)

Secondly, another element that is omnipresent in the interviews of the 'Leave' campaign is "we want" which indicates a volitive deontic modality expressed by means of a lexical verb that stands for the expression of strong volition. The preference for "*we"* in "we want" at the detriment of *"I"* in "I want" as in the case of the epistemic modality above, stands for a wise switch from *"me"* to *"us"* and an extension of volition to a whole nation as in *"I think, but we want"* which is a transfer of responsibility between "*I*" as initiator and *"we"* as executors.

(3) ***"We want*** our country back, ***we want*** our fishing waters back, ***we want*** our borders back"" (The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

(4) "Yes, there's our borders but there's also very, very important aspects of our economic life that invisibly we can no longer control, and ***we want*** to take them back and we think it will be great for our country and great for democracy".
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Boris Johnson, June 5th 2016)

Maybe not incidentally, the two British leaders make extensive use of the epistemic modality as they want to linguistically symbolize the degree of certitude they have in relation to their statements. In fact, they use "categorical" epistemic modal markers such as verbs at the Indicative Mood due to the fact that being unmarked

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grammatically, there is no possibility to contradict it or to doubt it. (Zafiu 2005, 679) claims that the "categorical statements" express a "maximal degree of certitude", therefore it cannot be contradicted. Thus, the modalizing item "will" is preferred by both interviewees as it illustrates their "strong commitment to the truth value of the statement that contains it" (Fairclough 2003, 118). In this particular case "will" stands for a very strong prediction of how events will unfold in the future and the way it is presented it excludes all possible doubts.

(5) "The United Kingdom ***will not be*** the last member state to leave the European Union"
(*Nigel Farage's full speech to the European Parliament on June 28th 2016*)

(6) "We think it ***will be*** great for our country and great for democracy" (The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Boris Johnson, June 5th 2016)

Within the epistemic modality the shades of certitude are various indicating different intermediate degrees such as *certain – probable – possible – uncertain – improbable – impossible* (Zafiu 2005, 678). In fact, these degrees of certitude that speakers use transmit to interlocutors how likely it is for a certain action to happen. Within this continuum, possibility is after certainty and probability which means that a particular action is possible, not really probable and under no circumstances certain. Therefore, when expressing possibility, the locutor shows doubt about the chances that an action could actually take place. In the interviews under study, possibility is equally invoked by the interviewees who, by using the modal verb *may* suggest a high degree of doubt in the capacity of the Remain campaign to find solutions for the problem of the immigrants. In this way they signal to audience their distrust of the Remain campaign.

(7) "Where are they – it may be a great vision for Britain by the way, it may be a positive thing, but where are they going to build the homes?"
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Boris Johnson, June 5th 2016)

Depending on the claims that they make and on the points of view that they back up in concordance with their political ideology, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson switch smoothly from epistemic modality to deontic modality or vice versa. After expressing their strong predictions in relation to the intention of other European countries of leaving the EU or after expressing their certainty that the UK heads in the right direction by using epistemic modality, they switch to deontic modality as they intend to demonstrate that their country is in the control of the European authorities and that they are imposed policies that otherwise they would not implement. Actually, deontic modality is based on "external laws" (Zafiu, 2005:689) and it indicates "the obligation in the form of order, warning, advice, invitation,

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wish" (Borchin 2009, 383). To exemplify, the structure "have to", signaling an external obligation which is forced upon the British and against their will, is a marker of deontic modality which indicates that the current state of affairs is not as it ought to have been, therefore the implication is that it needs to change.

(8) "… we ***have to pay*** a net membership fee of £34 million a day. We ***have to accept*** regulation of the 88 per cent of our economy that is not exports to European countries. We ***have to accept*** unlimited free movement of people." (The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

A marked difference is to be noticed when the two leaders emphasize external obligation (have to) and internal obligation (need to). In fact, the "need to" construction type is categorized by Zafiu (2005, 693) as having "objective characteristics that refer to the agent of the action or to the situation itself. … or the imposition of an external, objective situation". When switching the focus from what the British have to do because the Europeans say so to what the British need to do in a possible post-exit vote, Nigel Farage wisely changes the verb and uses "need to" to indicate that even if, in the likelihood of exit, they have obstacles to fight against, it is worth fighting because the obstacles are objective or they are self-imposed. For example, the modal element "need" indicates an objective compulsion that is inner-oriented rather than outer-oriented (in other words it is in their power to change this situation).

(9) "It ***needs*** two things: it ***needs*** a government, a government led by people with resolve, and it ***needs*** us to stop the open door to over 500 million people from across the European Union."
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

Besides modal and lexical verbs, there are other means that help express modal meanings. For example, the adverbs and adverbial phrases do express modal meanings by impacting whole sentences or only certain elements. By their higher or lower degree of certitude, the majority of adverbs fall into the category of epistemic modality contributing decisively to the construction of the intended meaning and message. At times, though rarely, the interviewees use other modal means than the verbs, regularly, adverbs/ markers. So is the case of Farage who doubts the laziness, uselessness and drunkenness of his co-nationals, accusations that might have been reviled against by other nationalities, by the use of the modal marker "maybe". Ironically, Farage emphasizes the possible negative sides of his co-nationals in order to create an evident contrast between the country, that is referred to as an El Dorado and its inhabitants that are believed to be far inferior to the country by foreigners.

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(10) ***"Maybe*** they're all lazy, ***maybe*** they're all useless, ***maybe*** they're all drunk permanently, but I don't think so".
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

One last element that I intend to refer to may be apparently surprising, because it actually checks for the confirmation of the interlocutor which circumscribes it to the semantic area of modality. It is about tag questions. By using a tag question the locutor signals his doubt which needs confirmation on the part of the interlocutor. Equally possible, the tag questions simply look for the opinion of the interlocutor as the statement of the locutor is not the outcome of doubt. In this case, the interlocutor is challenged to confirm the hypothesis of the locutor. So is the case with the tag question that Nigel Farage addresses in the European Parliament the day after the United Kingdom voted to leave the Union. When Nigel Farage used the tag question he had no doubt about what the Europeans felt about the vote the day before. He was actually challenging the European parliamentarians to confirm his hypothesis and to check the truth value of the statement of the speaker against the opinion or judgment of the parliamentarians.

(11) "When I came here 17 years ago and I said that I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the European Union, you all laughed at me – well I have to say, you're not laughing now, ***are you***?"
(The Andrew Marr Show, interview: Nigel Farage, June 12th 2016)

3. Conclusions

After analyzing some of the modal markers that I have identified in the political interviews of the two "Leave" leaders I can safely claim that the modal markers that have been used were meant to build up the nationalistic discourse of its leaders who intended to convince the British to leave the European Union. In order to do so they retorted to a number of modal markers which I have analyzed and which lead to an ideologically-laden message for the British voters. Firstly, the discourse indicates the knowledgeable nature of the partisans of the Leave campaign (I think/ I believe). The implication might be that the other party does not know/ or they know less. Secondly, it illustrates the wishes of the entire British nation (we want) and it has a mobilizing value as it could help the British identify with the discourse and act consequently (Vote Leave). Thirdly, it contains modal markers of strong prediction (will) which are meant to prove the vision of the speakers based on the current situation (Britain's vote for Leave). At the same time, it contains markers that suggest the United Kingdom's ordeal of being in the EU (has to/ have to). It also suggests what the United Kingdom should do after the Leave, an objective necessity is used (need) which does not stand for an imposition on the part of the Leave

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leaders. Similarly, it contains modal adverbs/ markers whose role is to emphasize the trust of the Leave politicians in the British people in general and their refusal to accept foreign labels for the British (lazy, useless, drunk). Eventually, it suggests mistrust in the promises of the Remain party as they cannot prove the viability of their proposals.

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