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MODALITY IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: MODALISED UTTERANCES IN THE OBAMA-ROMNEY ELECTION DEBATE

Abstract: This paper explores modal expressions and modalised utterances in the narratives of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the debate on foreign policy held during the 2012 election campaign. The theoretical framework of the analysis is based on Palmer's (1979; 2001) description and classification of modality as well as on Frawley's (1992) view of modality as epistemic deixis. The initial aim is to analysethe frequency of occurrence, distribution and meaning of the modal expressions in both candidates' narratives viewing modalised utterances as political statements and to offer a tentative suggestion of how modality seen as epistemic version of deixis can be a tool in interpreting political statements in election debates.

Key words: modality, modal expressions, epistemic deixis, election debates

1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyse modalised utterances in a specific type of political discourse, namely the political campaign debate. The language sample selected for the analysis is a two-party US presidential election debate conducted on 22 October 2012 during the presidential campaign between the Republican candidate, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, and the Democratic nominee, incumbent President Barack Obama. This was the third and final presidential debate in the campaign, with foreign policy as the central topic.

Electoral debates represent a specific type of political discourse in which two or more candidates for a given position engage in a conflictual interaction simultaneously debating opponents and persuading the audience to give them votes. This „double vision" reflects debaters' statements and the political messages they send in the course of a debate. This paper explores modalised utterances in the two presidential candidates' narratives with a view towards analysing the content of the political statements and messages issued by Mitt Romney and Barrack Obama. The theoretical framework of the analysis is predominantly based on Palmer's (1979, 2001) description and classification of modality and modal meanings as well asthe theoretical approaches underlying the conceptual unity of epistemic and root modal domains, drawing primarily on Frawley's (1992) interpretation of modality as epistemic deixis.

The selected debate and the topic of foreign policy with its worldwide perspective was conveniently associative of viewing modality as epistemic deixis,

encoding the likelihood of the convergence between the actual and the expressed world, even more so since the debaters' narratives are expressive of the desired worlds that they committed to realize once they are elected. My initial aim is to analyse the frequency of occurrence, distribution and meaning of the modal expressions in both candidates' narratives and to analyse the political statements issued through modalised utterances. Also, this paper will posit a tentative suggestion of how modality seen as epistemic version of deixis can be a tool in interpreting statements in political debates. Significant attention is devoted to the issue of defining modality and the theoretical setup of modality as epistemic deixis. The discussion proceeds to account for the nature of political debates and to present the results of the research.

2. Defining modality

There are several approaches to classifying modality according to the meaning it conveys. The most general one is the binary distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic modality, the latter often termed „root" modality (Sweetser, 1990; Trbojević, 2004). Non-epistemic modality further divides into deontic and dynamic, yielding the most common tripartite classification of modal meanings, epistemic, deontic and dynamic. The terms come from a seminal work on modal logic by Von Wright who, among the basic four modes, not only defines epistemic modes, or modes of knowing, and deontic modes, or modes of obligation, but also recognizes dynamic modality concerned with ability and disposition (Palmer, 1979: 3).

Palmer (1986, cited in Frawley, 1992: 385) defines modality as semantic information associated with the speaker's attitude or opinion about what is said. Building on Palmer's definition, Frawley defines modality as a semantic phenomenon that concerns the factual status of information. „It signals the relative actuality, validity and believability of the content of an expression. It is the content of the expression that reflects the speaker's attitude or state of knowledge about a proposition" (Frawley, 1992: 385). A proposition is what an utterance tells about the world or a given state of affairs. The meaning of a proposition is inextricably connected to the notion of *possible worlds*. In formal logic, the term *possible worlds* refers to the various ways we can talk about what the world could be like (Trbojević, 2004: 67). In this respect, modality is „world creating" and „belief-contextinducing" (Frawley, 1992: 390). By issuing a modalised utterance, a speaker is expressing a world shaped by their attitudes and beliefs.

Modality viewed as epistemic deixis denotes the opposition of the two parameters - the actual/ reference world and the non-actual/expressed world. More specifically, it encodes the likelihood of the convergence of the reference and the expressed world. The explanatory framework for the relation between the reference and the expressed world is structured around three notions underlying the phenomenon of deixis: deictic points (the reference point and deictic located point), remoteness or distance between them, and the direction of the fictive motion between them. The reference world or the actual world of speech is „the modal counterpart

of the spatial and temporal reference point, the 'here-and-now'" (Frawley, 1992: 396). Remoteness and direction likewise have epistemic value. Thus, in a sentence *Romney may be wrong* a speaker indicates that there is distance between the actual/reference world (the present) and the non-actual/expressed world (Romney is wrong) and that this expressed world is *away* from the actual. If we replace MAY with MUST, the difference in the deictic reading of the two modals would be on the degree of epistemic removal between the actual and non-actual world. In other words, the difference lies in the strength of the conclusion about the factual status of the proposition, or in deictic terms, in the likelihood of the convergence of the reference and the expressed world. While epistemic modality denotes the *possible* convergence between the reference and the expressed world, deontic modality relates to the *imposed* convergence between the two worlds.

3. Political debates

Political debates constitute an antagonistic, confrontational type of interaction. García-Pastor (2007) defines political debates as a particular type of trilogic persuasive discourse. She further argues that

> „the trilogic nature of contenders' interchange lies in the simultaneous action of persuading the audience and debating the opponent in such a way that the contenders pay the audience face considerations in trying to persuade it at the same time that they indirectly damage the opponents image, and vice versa".

The principal function of the interaction that ensues is the display rather than an exchange of information (Taylor, 2009: 211). Building on Wagenaar (1995, cited in Taylor, 2009) Taylor identifies this kind of antagonistic interaction[1] as a „battle of narratives", as each candidate attempts within the constraints of the communicative event, „to present their macro-narrative to the beneficiaries of the discourse" (Taylor, 2009: 211). The beneficiaries of political debates are the audience, the voters to be persuaded that only one of the narratives wins and „saves the world". Since modality is „world-creating" and „belief-context setting", in the investigation of modalised utterances it is interesting to read the persuasive battle of narratives as a battle of competing worlds configured in each debater's talk.

4. Results and discussion

The investigation of modality in the debate begins with identifying modalised utterances in both candidates' narratives and determining their frequency. The repertoire of the modal expressions in the debate was found to consist of the following:

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[1] In her research Taylor addresses courtroom examinations, but her remark is fully applicable to the present analysis as it focuses on an adversarial discourse type.

1. Central modal verbs and their distal forms: WILL, WOULD, CAN, COULD, SHOULD (MUST appearing only marginally)
2. Semi-modals (GOING TO, NEED TO, HAVE TO)
3. Non-factive verbs (THINK, BELIEVE)
4. Sensory markers (SEE, HEAR and FEEL)

The graph shows the number of instances of the most frequent modal expressions in the debate.[2]
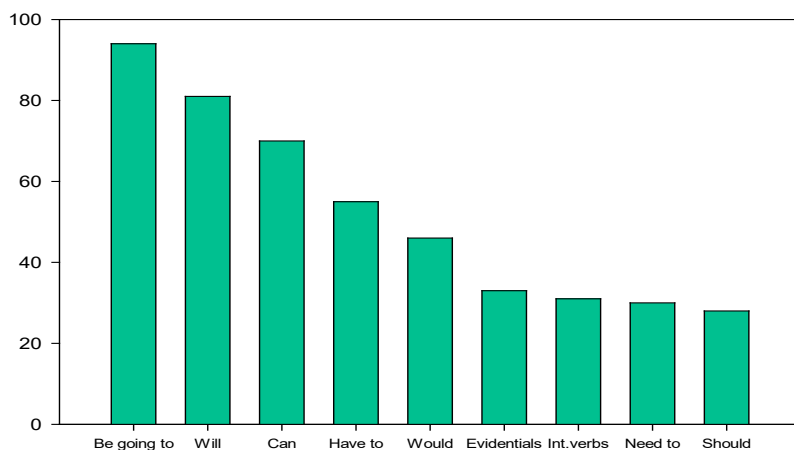
Due to the limited scope of the present paper, the analysis of the utterances modalised with WOULD, NEED TO, and SHOULD will not be presented.

4.1. BE GOING TO

This expression was found to be the most frequent modal occurrence in the Obama-Romney debate as 94 instances of BE GOING TO were identified.

Palmer (1979) distinguishes between modal and temporal futurity, whereby WILLand SHALL denote the modal and BE GOING TO temporal futurity. BE GOING TO does not simply refer to the future, but rather to the future from the standpoint of the present, in this respect representing a marker of the 'future in the present' (1979: 121). It is used to suggest that there are features of the present time that willdetermine future events. Palmer terms this 'Current Orientation', which renders the event more immediate or more certain. One of the main contrasts this modal exhibits with WILL and SHALL is its complete lack of conditionality, that is, it suggests that the future is in no way conditional.

> Obama: What we're seeing taking place in Syria is heartbreaking, and that's why we *are going to* do everything we can to make sure that we are helping the opposition.
> And we *are going to* continue to keep the pressure on to make sure that they (Iran) do not get a nuclear weapon. That's in America's national interest, and that will be the case so long as I'm president.

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[2] In the graph the abbreviation Int. verbs stands for the non-factive verbs BELIEVE and THINK.

Romney: *I'm not going to* wear rose-colored glasses when it comes to Russia or Mr. Putin.

Obama explicitly mentions America's national interest in preventing Iran from pursuing the nuclear arms programme, the fear of the nuclear threat figuring prominently throughout the debate. This may justify the supposition that in the debates BE GOING TO is used to enhance the sense of urgency.

My findings run contrary to Palmer's in that he argues that WILL and SHALL are more common in combination with HAVE TO than BE GOING TO. Careful analysis yielded 17 instances of BE GOING TO HAVE TO, as opposed to only one WILL HAVE TO. A plausible reason for the preferential use of BE GOING TO with HAVE TO could be the exigency of action signaled by this modal expression via its „current orientation", and the lack of conditionality, as WILL HAVE TO denotes conditional necessity. Deictically speaking, we CAN interpret BE GOING TO with the deontic HAVE TO as a „vehicle" for transferring the reference point into the future most vitally and immediately connected to the present moment. In this deictic centre transferred into the immediate future (reference point 2), the action in the proposition (the expressed world) then obligatorily converges with the reference point 2 due to the use of HAVE TO. In other words, the speaker is imposing the convergence of the reference point 2 and the expressed world from the reference point 1, the here-and-now via the semi-modal BE GOING TO.

Obama:…but *we're* always also *going to have to* maintain vigilance when it comes to terrorist attacks**.**
In order for us to be competitive, *we're going to have to* make some smart choices
Romney: *We're going to have to* do more than just going after leaders and – and killing bad guys, important as it is**.**
(...) but the key that *we're going to have to* pursue is a — is a pathway to — to get the Muslim world to be able to reject extremism on its own
And then *we're going to have to* get to a balanced budget.

Bearing in mind that the main goal behind each utterance is the audience's persuasion, we may expect that some of the utterances modalised with this expression denoting close connection between the present and future (or in deictic terms, short distance between the speaker's here-and-now and the expressed state of affairs) contain some vital national interests viewed as such by each candidate.

Indeed, both candidates' utterances containing this modal expression relate either to the economic strategies that would offer a way out of the crisis or to the strategies for mitigating the threat of terrorism and conflicts generating crises in the referenced Muslim countries. The region of the Middle East seems to be the „neuralgic point" of the US foreign policy for a number of reasons, as it is most intimately related to Israel's security, the closest friend and ally in both candidates' narratives, to mention one.

4.2. WILL

Alongside CAN and COULD, the modal WILL has been identified as the most frequent of the central modal verbs (Biber et al., 1999: 486). In the present corpus it was found the second most frequent among the modal expressions with 81 instances in both narratives. Quirk et al. (1985: 228) define WILL as a modal of volition and prediction. In the present language sample, however, WILL predominantly occurs in commissives, speech acts by means of which the speakers commit themselves to future action (Searle, 1979: 22). As such, these instances of WILL denote root modality, since promise is essentially deontic (Palmer, 1979: 112). Promises constitute a common and effective tool at politicians' disposal in an effort to enhance the credibility of their parties' programmes. In a communicative event whose main purpose is to confront (two) competing worlds, the most assuring commitments to future action will considerably affect the audience's persuasion. Thus, not surprisingly, in the deontic sense, WILL occurs approximately in half of the utterances containing the verb:

> Obama**:** As long as I'm president of the United States, Iran *will* not get a nuclear weapon. I *will* stand with Israel if they are attacked.
> As commander in chief, I *will* maintain the strongest military in the world
> Romney: I *will* get America working. If I'm president, America *will* be very strong.
> I'*ll* work with you. I'*ll* lead you in an open and honest way.
> After the election he'*ll* (Putin) get more backbone.

These commissives are typical of electoral discourse and the interplay of politicians' strategies and the audiences' expectations. If we attempt to read election promises in terms of epistemic deixis, we can say that the speakers explicitly commit themselves to the convergence of the reference world, the here-and-now and the expressed world. In the expressed worlds in both narratives the US military is strong, Iran's nuclear armament is prevented, Israel is safe and the country is economically recovering. Since the proclaimed national interests do not differ drastically in the two narratives, the battle between them decides which candidate is more confident of the convergence between the desirable and the actual state of affairs.

4.3. CAN

This modal verb denotes possibility in all three domains, epistemic, deontic and dynamic. In her study on epistemic modality, Trbojević notes that CAN indicates epistemic possibility of medium level of certainty, and if it is used in epistemic sense, it is synonymous with MAY (Trbojević, 2004: 77). Analysis yielded 70 occurrences of CAN, which makes it the third most frequent modal expression in the debate. In the majority of the occurrences, CAN is clearly dynamic, denoting ability or disposition.

Particularly interesting are examples where CAN could be assigned epistemic sense since it is interchangeable with MAY. In the first of the following sentences, the epistemic indication of CAN is supported by the non-factive verb BELIEVE.

Obama**:** And we believe China *can* be a partner, but we're also sending a very clear signal that America is a Pacific power(...)
Romney: And so we *can* be a partner with China. We *can* work with them. We can collaborate with them if they're willing to be responsible.

Both candidates employ epistemic reading of the modal when referring to China. Palmer (1979) notes that the distal forms COULD and MIGHT are interchangeable, but with a slight difference with respect to the speaker's commitment. MIGHT commits the speaker to a judgment about the possibility of the truth of the proposition, whereas COULD merely says that it is theoretically possible. A parallel interpretation of the use of CAN instead of MAY in the previous examples seems plausible, since in both candidates' narratives, due to complicated economic and security relations, China is perceived both as a potential adversary and an unavoidable economic partner. Therefore, a statement about what is *theoretically* and conditionally possible instead of a *commitment* to the possibility seems like a careful choice in an election debate

The present tense negative form of CAN occurs in more than a third of the overall instances of the modal. Palmer (1979: 151□152) provides an account of what he terms „rational modality", in which the speaker refers to states of affairs that they find quite unacceptable, unreasonable and that are, in that sense, not possible. Besides the sense of „unreasonable" this modality also suggests that the speaker is unwilling to accept some situation.

Obama: But what you *can't* do is spend $2 trillion in additional military spending that the military is not asking for (...)
What we *can't* do is go back to the same policies that got us into such difficulty in the first place.
Romney: But we *can't* kill our wayout of this mess.
You *can't* have 23 million people struggling to get a job. You — you *can't* have an economy that over the last three years keeps slowing down its growth rate. You *can't* have kids coming out of college, half of whom *can't* find a job today, or a job that's commensurate with their college degree

Palmer further notes that in all of the examples of rational modality the subject is either in the first person, the impersonal *you,* or something with which the speaker identifies himself (1979: 156).

We can't is a frequent formulation in the debate, in which the choice of the first person plural pronominal serves as a means of building solidarity with the audience, and a persuasive tool *par excellence*. Moreover, by associating the opponent with an unfavourable social situation assigning responsibility for it to the contender, the speaker simultaneously distances himself and the audience from the contender, thus explicitly exhibiting the trilogic nature of the political debate. Romney employs this strategy to emphasise the negative economic aspects of Obama's administration and the inefficient coping with the crisis. In fact, as regards the distribution of the present negative form of CAN, out of 26 instances identified in the debate, 20 were found in Romney's utterances. This ratio is not surprising, since Governor Romney's

main goal is to discredit the incumbent President and his policies by denouncing the present social situation. Thus, voicing the audience's concerns, he expresses critical attitude towards the President's economic policies. Similarly, Obama raises common ground with the audience by criticising Romney's military agenda and associating him with the compromising aspects of the Bush administration.

4.4. HAVE TO

The frequency of the semi-modal HAVE TO in the present corpus was found considerably high, much higher than that of the central modal MUST, which occurs only 5 times. As opposed to the central modal MUST, HAVE TO is never deontic since it specifically denies any involvement by the speaker (Palmer, 1979: 58). Palmer states that in expressing obligation HAVE TO is an alternative to MUST, which generally indicates that the speaker takes no responsibility for the obligation, and that there is some compelling reason for imposing the obligation independent of the speaker (Palmer, 2001: 75). This expression is often felt to be more impersonal than MUST, in that it lacks the implication that the speaker is in authority. The following are some examples from the corpus.

> Obama:We absolutely *have to* make more progress, and that's why we're going to keep on pressing.
> We *have to* remain vigilant, as I just said. (*referring to the threat of terrorism*)
> But we also *have to* recognize that, you know, for us to get more entangled militarily in Syria is a serious step.
> We also *have to* develop clean energy technologies that will allow us to cut our exports in half by 2020.
> Romney: Number four, the rule of law. We *have to* help these nations create civil societies.
> And finally, we *have to* stand by our principles.
> And for that to happen, we *have to* strengthen our economy here at home.
> We *have to* get our economy going.
> And our military — *we've got to* strengthen our military long-term.

Although it has been noted that HAVE TO is more frequent in American English (Quirk et al., 1985: 226), such predominance of this expression over MUST in the utterances in which the candidates lay obligations or report on necessities can nonetheless be interpreted as a strategic choice. In deictic terms, the speaker is less accountable for the imposition of the convergence of the reference and the expressed world. The frequent use of inclusive *we* can be interpreted as transforming the speaker's personal deictic centre into the collective reference point, thus shifting the responsibility for the outcome of the convergence between the present and the desirable conditions to the population at large. The expressed world in both candidates' utterances, the strengthening of the military and economy, helping the MENA countries reach democratic standards, etc., have critical importance viewed as such by the candidates voicing the national concerns. In pragmatic terms, the preferential use of HAVE TO in a political debate can be a sign of evading responsibility and

softening the imposition in compelling the voters towards an act which is considered by the contenders to be in the common interest. Viewing modality in terms of forces and barriers, Sweetser (1990) provides a distinction between MUST and HAVE TO that might as well explain the prevalent use of the latter in a political debate. She views MUST as an irresistible force compelling a subject towards an act, while the force that HAVE TO represents can be resisted.

The central modal MUST occurs only in Romney's utterances. Interestingly, they do not function as an incentive towards an action.

Romney: America *must* be strong. America *must* lead.

In these utterances Romney is not laying an obligation on anyone. Rather, they are felt as general statements about commonly accepted necessities, which is why the choice of MUST as an irresistible force is safe. Moreover, as MUST is felt to be more personal, the statement seems to carry an undertone of a heart-felt aspiration of a good presidential candidate.

4.5. Evidentials

Palmer (2001) argues that epistemic modality subsumes two basic categories: judgments and evidentials. In contrast to judgments, evidentials indicate the evidence that a speaker takes for making an assertion. He argues that visual evidence takes precedence over all other categories in sensory evidence, they carry the main weight in terms of certainty thus „attesting to the priority of visual perception as the arbiter of epistemic judgment" (Frawley, 1992: 409).

Regarding the verbs SEE, HEAR, FEEL, there were 33 instances of sensory evidential, the great majority of which (24 occurrences) are represented by the sensory marker SEE, the verbs HEAR and FEEL appearing only marginally.

Romney*:* And it's widely reported that drones are being used in drone strikes, and I support that entirely and *feel* the president was right to up the usage of that technology (...)

Romney is in favour of the use of drones, which his contender's administration has intensified. Frawley (1992) notes that feelings carry the least weight among sensory evidentials. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Governor should use this verb to express (the least evident) support for his adversary.

The following examples illustrate the debaters' use of the sensory marker SEE.

Romney: Look, I — I look at what's happening around the world and I *see* Iran four years closer to a bomb. I *see* the Middle East with a rising tide of violence, chaos, tumult. I *see* jihadists continuing to spread.

I *see* Syria with 30,000 civilians dead, Assad still in power. I *see* our trade deficit with China larger than it's — growing larger every year as a matter of fact.

(…) you*see* North Korea continuing to export their nuclear technology.

I *see* our influence receding, in part because of the failure of the president to deal with our economic challenges at home*,* in part because of our withdrawal from our commitment to our military

Obama:Now, this — what we're *seeing* taking place in Syria is heartbreaking, and that's why we are going to do everything we can to make sure that we are helping the opposition
We've *seen* progress and gains in schools that were having a terrible time, and they're starting to finally make progress

In the examples, we can see how the debaters marshal sensory evidence to support their stances. In contrast to Romney's rhetorical strategy, in which the verb occurs often, Obama's narrative is not heavily supported with visual evidence. The converging expressed world in the Governor's utterances is an apocalyptic one in which irrational powers are getting closer to a weapon of mass destruction, civilians are getting killed by the thousand and the whole world is on the verge of disaster. The likelihood of the convergence between the expressed world and the present moment is high, as the choice of the sensory modality indicates. The responsibility for this alarming likelihood lies with the Obama administration that has weakened the American influenceand, consequently, led to such a state of affairs. It could be argued that Romney's insistence on the verb SEE in these examples serves the main purpose of intimidating the audience and spreading fear among the voters.

Conversely, Obama does not employ the same strategy of marshalling visual evidence to achieve the sense of urgency, which is reasonable, since his goal is to stay in power. In fact, when he does, he uses inclusive *we*, by means of which he imposes his perspective as a collective reference point, which undoubtedly carries persuasive and homogenising potential. In the example relating to Syria, we can say that the strength of visual evidence justifies the use of *going to* which lacks conditionality. However, the fact that the situation in Syria is heartbreaking does not necessarily entail that the opposition must be helped.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to offer a tentative suggestion of how an analysis of the frequency and meaning of modal expressions and modalised utterances in an electoral debate can be a way of interpreting debaters' political statements and strategies employed with a view to achieving the audience's persuasion.

Focusing on modality as epistemic deixis, the author sought to analyse the content of the expressed worlds in the utterances as well as the likelihood and the strength of the imposition of their convergence with the present moment in both candidates' narratives. In the context of the present electoral presidential debate, these insights revealed some of the explicit and implicit aspects of the political programmes and foreign policy strategies advocated by the contenders. Thus, it was observed, for instance, that some of the critical national interests were found in utterances containing the semi-modal BE GOING TO as it denotes short distance between the speaker's here-and-now and the expressed state of affairs, current orientation and lack of conditionality, all of which contribute to the enhancement

of the sense of urgency. Similarly, the choice of certain modal expressions and the particular formulation of modalised utterances (inclusive *we*, rational modality, etc.) were considered as indicative of pragmatic strategies attesting to the trilogic nature of the political debate. In the same vein, the striking avoidance of the central modal MUST denoting the strongest, irresistible force among the modal expressions, and the consistent use of HAVE TO in both candidates' narratives was observed as strategic, notwithstanding the preferential use of HAVE TO in American English.

After the mechanism of the convergence between the expressed and the actual state of affairs is effectively deconstructed, the conclusion is that the desirable state of affairs differs only slightly in the two opponents' narratives. With the exception of the issue of the military budget, the Republican and the Democratic candidates' visions of the USA's foreign policy, somewhat predictably, do not differ much if we set national interests and the traditional friends and foes as parameters. This is why it seems that this battle of narratives is not won with a particular vision of the world that „saves the world". Rather, it seems that confidence, big promises and a set of convenient circumstances decide the winner of the debate, and most likely, the election.

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MODALNOST U POLITIČKOM DISKURSU: MODALIZOVANI ISKAZI U PREDIZBORNOJ DEBATI IZMEĐU PREDSEDNIČKIH KANDIDATA OBAME I ROMNIJA

Rezime

Cilj ovog rada je analiza modalnih izraza i modalizovanih iskaza u narativima predsedničkih kandidata Baraka Obame i Mita Romnija u toku predizborne kampanje u SAD 2012. godine u debati čija je centralna tema bila spoljnja politika. Teorijski okvir analize modalnosti zasniva se na Palmerovom opisu i klasifikaciji modalnosti, kao i na Frolijevom tumačenju modalnosti kao epistemičke deikse. Analiza je usmerena ka tumačenju modalizovanih iskaza kao nosilaca političkih poruka u predizbornoj debati. Rad ima za cilj da ispita učestalost, distribuciju i značenje modalnih izraza i da ponudi interpretaciju modalizovanih iskaza u političkoj debati, posmatrajući modalnost kao epistemičku deiksu.

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