Exploring the semantic and pragmatic functions of modal auxiliaries: A case study of commencement speeches

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Abstract

The use of modal auxiliaries in research articles and political speeches has been well investigated. The genre of commencement speeches, however, has yet to be investigated as far as the use of modal auxiliaries are concerned. In

addressing the gap, the present study compares the usage of modal auxiliary verbs in commencement speeches of Ghanaian speakers with American speakers, and investigates the semantic contribution of the modal auxiliaries in the speeches. Additionally, the study also explores the speech act performed via the usage of the modal auxiliary verb and their pragmatic nuances in commencement speeches. The dataset for the study is a corpus of 51,447 words obtained from twelve (12) commencement speeches of the Ashesi University (in Ghana) and twelve (12) highly ranked American Universities. The study employed AntConc 4.0 to generate the instances of modal auxiliary usage in the data. Leech's (2004) theory of modal auxiliary meaning and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory were employed to identify modal meanings and speech acts performed in the speeches. The study highlights the vital role of modal auxiliaries and speech acts in encoding actions that speech acts inspire within the Ghanaian and American contexts. These include the *can-do* attitude of Ghanaians, on the one hand, and the *need-to-cherish-family* and *keep close ties* attitude of the Americans, on the other hand. The results show that relatively speaking, American commencement speeches employ more modal auxiliaries than Ghanaian commencement speeches.

Introduction

The form and function of speeches have been extensively studied in the literature from the perspective of different genres such as political (Adjei-Fobi, 2021), rap (Davis, 2011), and gossip and advice (Garvin & Margolis, 2015). Scholars have explored issues such as stylistics (Anderson, 2021), rhetorical features (Dadugblor, 2016), power play (Winter & Gärdenfors, 1994), referential features (Umera-Okeke, 2007), and poly discursivity (Ivanova, 2017). Other scholars have also analyzed speech as an action (Jabber & Jinquan, 2013) and the commitment of speech makers. For English used in Ghana, modal auxiliaries have been explored in personal letters (cf. Owusu Ansah, 1994), research articles (cf. Ngula 2015), and spoken text (cf. Nartey & Ferguson, 2014). Indeed, others have also analyzed speech as the performance of an action while others have tried to scrutinize the commitment of speech makers to whatever assertion they

make (cf. Yamazaki, 2001). Some studies also explored the influence of American English and British English on Ghanaian English (Osei-Tutu, 2021) and the effect of American English on Ghanaian English (Owusu-Ansah, 1994). For instance, the findings from the analysis of Osei-Tutu (2021) based on data from the International Corpus of English (Ghana component – written and spoken; British component – written and spoken; and the American component – written) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) revealed that the Ghanaian English patterns mirror the patterns of American English and British English, but more so British English in the use of modals (Osei-Tutu, 2021)

The present study focuses on commencement speech as a genre. A commencement speech is a speech given to graduating students at universities, secondary education institutions, and similar institutions worldwide. In the Ghanaian context, very little is known about the genre of commencement speech, and the role of modal auxiliaries in commencement speeches, hence, the need for the present work, which compares the use of modal auxiliary verbs in the genre of commencement speeches by Ghanaian and American speakers. In particular, the themes that are projected by the use of modal auxiliaries and the related speech act in commencement speeches are yet to receive any scholarly attention. It is instructive to note that while domains of the use of modal auxiliaries *per se* have been explored in genres such as personal letters (cf. Owusu-Ansah, 1994), research articles (cf. Ngula, 2015), and spoken text (cf. Schneider, 2017), the role of modal auxiliaries in commencement speeches is yet to be explored.

This study examines commencement speeches, and how speakers demonstrate commitment through their choice of modal auxiliaries. It aims to understand the utopian and experiential nature of themes, socio-cultural underpinnings, and the charge placed on the graduating class. It compares the usage of modal auxiliary verbs in Ghanaian commencement speeches

with American commencement speakers, intending to uncover how Ghanaian and American speakers use modal auxiliaries to encode themes in commencement speeches and, address the gap in understanding modal auxiliary usage in commencement speeches.

Review of related literature

Researchers have made in-roads into modality and the use of modal auxiliaries in different text forms. These studies have been aimed at measuring the modal force of the texts and comparing native and non-native usage of modal auxiliaries. While Ngula (2015) and Vazquez (2010) report deviant usage by non-native speakers even in formal academic publications, the same cannot be said of the commencement speech, especially in the Ghanaian context. As far as the genre commencement speech is concerned, very little is known with regard to the use of modal auxiliaries and the comparative usage. Again, the effects of the modal auxiliaries to produce speech acts have also not been explored in the context of the commencement speech. The present study compares the usage of modal auxiliary verbs in commencement speeches by Ghanaian speakers and American speakers and the incidences of speech acts precipitated by them.

Empirical studies on modal auxiliary usage

Epistemic Modality in Political Discourse

Milkovic's (2017) study titled *Epistemic Modality in Political Discourse* analyzed how President George Bush, Prime Minister Tony Blair, and other members of their administration employed the use of epistemic modality in talking about the situation in Iran, which led to the case of a lack of "firm" evidence to link Iran to the attack of terrorism in New York. The study concludes that the speakers herein mentioned used hedging devices such as 'may', 'might', 'can' and 'could' to evade giving straightforward answers. Another observation was that the use of plural pronouns, conditional and hypothetical

clauses as epistemic modality helped the speakers to evade taking personal responsibility (Milkovic, 2017).

Aničić (2014) studied modalised utterances in the Obama-Romney election debate and also explored modalized utterances in the two presidential candidates' speech with the view to analyzing the content of the political statements and messages issued by Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. She identified the modalised utterances and the relative frequencies that were determined. The modals identified were 'will', 'would', 'can', 'could', 'should' and 'must', which appeared marginally. The semi-modals identified were 'going to', 'need to' and 'have to'. The non-factive verbs identified were 'think' and 'believe'. The sensory markers identified were 'see', 'hear' and 'feel'. The findings were that the utterances of critical national interest were found to contain 'be going to' as it denotes the short distance between the speaker's here and now and expressed state of affairs, current orientation and lack of conditionality all of, which contribute to the sense of urgency. It was also found out that there was a preferential use of 'have to'. Aničić notes that the avoidance of 'must' which she considers the "strongest and irresistible force among the modal expressions" and the consistent use of 'have to' in both candidates' speeches as strategic. This paper also gives us another view of modal auxiliaries while highlighting the tendency to have certain types of modal auxiliaries featuring more in an environment based on the subject matter (Aničić, 2014).

Vukovic (2014) also studies strong epistemic modality in parliamentary discourse. The study aims to investigate the linguistic resources used to express a high degree of commitment to the truth of the utterance in political discourse. In other words, he applies the scalarity principle to bring to bear linguistic devices expressing epistemic modality. The data analyzed constitutes transcripts from the first day of the budget debate in the UK House of Commons in March 2010. The total word count was 61,225, and the total number of parliamentarians who participated in the

debate was thirty-three. After manually checking for items that expressed modal certainty, the author uses the Text STAT 2.8 to confirm their frequency. The researcher then sorted the modals into the parts of speech they belong to. The most frequent ones were qualitatively analyzed in their context. This enabled the researcher to characterize the frequency and patterning of strong epistemic modality in the UK. The study states that very few modals were used to express strong epistemic modality. The researcher concludes that their appearances are too low to draw any concrete conclusions (Vukovic, 2014). Vukovic observes that strong epistemic modality is much more frequently expressed through modifying verbs and that this might be a consequence of the characteristics of the English Language and not necessarily a feature of parliamentary language. The author states, however, that what is more parliamentary specific is the overall high presence of adverbs in the debate. It adds that there was a remarkable consistency in the results of strong epistemic nouns, adjectives and adverbs that is, there was more epistemic certainty from the opposition side. The paper contends that when examining modality in political genres, modal adverbs and verbs expressing modality other than the typical modal verbs must particularly be taken into account as they seem to be the most frequent means of expressing it.

Vukovic's (2014) is an interesting study as the research ventures into the field of rhetoric. The methodology adopted is in-depth. The work, however, seemed to overgeneralize the findings. Granted, that for the data analysed there were less encounter of modal verbs cannot be enough grounds to justify that more attention should be given to the other ways of expressing modality to the detriment of modal verbs. This is because modal verbs have their functions in expressing modality.

Epistemic Modality in Academic Discourse

Ngula (2015) using a corpus study, examines the use of epistemic modal verbs in research articles (RAs) written by

Ghanaian and international scholars from the fields of Law, Economics and Sociology. The author tests the hypothesis that there was a non-conformity in the rhetorical patterns and strategies deployed by non-native English-speaking (NNES) writers especially those based in contexts referred to as "off-network" and "peripheral" centers of academic scholarship to the mainstream community practices. The analyses contrived to comprehend how the usage of these devices compares with their usage in RAs of prestigious international Anglophone journals written by native English-speaking scholars. The data for the study is put together by building two corpora; one is composed of RAs of Ghanaian scholars published in local journals in Ghana and the other is made up of RAs of native English-speaking scholars published in reputable Anglophone journals. Each corpus was made up of three fields: Sociology, Economics and Law. The total word size was approximately one million with each corpora having close to equal word count. Using Hyland (2005), the researcher determined a list of modal auxiliaries and came up with eleven of them which would serve as the basis of examining the corpora. The modal verbs included *'could', 'couldn't', 'may', 'might', 'shall', 'shouldn't', 'will', 'won't', 'would', 'wouldn't'* and '*must'*. The modal '*can'* was excluded as it rarely functions as an epistemic modal. He then regrouped the modal auxiliaries on three levels of strong, medium and weak based on the works of Hyland (2005), Milton (1997), and McEnery and Kifle (2002).

Ngula (2015) contends that NNES scholars engage in the misapplication of the rhetorical features of academic writing. This implies the overuse, underuse or misuse of the modals. The researcher notes that the epistemic modals have been considerably underused by the Ghanaian scholars studied. The study also reveals that the rhetorical challenges of academic writing not only affect NNES authors in EFL contexts but also those in ESL contexts (Ngula, 2015).

Empirical studies in commencement speeches

Values and messages conveyed in College Commencement Speeches

Partch and Kinnier (2011) adopted content analysis to investigate the values and messages from ninety American university commencement speeches. The speeches span from 1990 to 2007. The speeches included those delivered by speakers from outside the university. To ensure diversity, no speaker was included twice. The speeches used were also obtained from electronic sources or institutions. Partch and Kinnier employed two readers who read the scripts independently and made a list of themes. They also kept track of recurring themes. The two readers then met to discuss and reached a consensus on the themes of the speeches read. They then employed a team of three raters who read all the speeches while rating the presence or absence of the themes in the speeches. Their ratings were analyzed using the SPSS data editor. The predominant messages were 'help others', which was the highest i.e., 64%, 'do the right thing', which was the next highest i.e., 61%, followed by 'expand your horizons', then 'be true to yourself', 'never give up', 'appreciate diversity', 'cherish special others' and 'seek balance'.

An intercultural analysis of personal metadiscourse in English and Chinese commencement speeches

Zhu (2018) explores the use of personal metadiscourse in English and Chinese commencement speeches based on Adel's reflexive model of metadiscourse and its adaptation. The data for the research was sixty speeches of which thirty were in Chinese and thirty were in English. Zhu (2018) built two corpuses with each containing thirty commencement speeches. The speeches were collected from the website https://www.baidu.com/. All sixty speeches were delivered in Chinese and American Universities including Harvard University, Stanford University and Fudan University. Zhu (2018) used AntConc 3.2.4 to process

the data. Zhu (2018) ran a search for the personal metadiscourse including 'I', 'we', 'you' and their oblique and possessive forms in the linguistic concordance software, AntConc 3.2.4.

The paper looked at the similarities and differences in the use of personal metadiscourse in English and Chinese commencement speeches. The paper also looked at the possible reasons for these differences and similarities. The researcher utilizing quantitative and qualitative analysis, revealed that American speeches featured more personal metadiscourse than the Chinese speeches. It was also through textual analysis that characteristics of the genre under study resulted in the finding of similarities in the American and Chinese speeches while the differences in the speeches were identified as stemming from socio-cultural differences.

Zhu's (2018) work was very instrumental in this study as it provided an avenue for the researchers to adopt one of the tools used in processing and analyzing the data. However, for this study, the researchers used an upgraded version of the same linguistic concordance software i.e., AntConc 4.0.

Research Questions

1. What are the frequencies of modal auxiliaries and speech acts used by Ghanaian and American speakers in their commencement speeches?

2. What are the semantic and pragmatic contributions of the modal auxiliaries to the commencement speeches of the Ghanaian and American speakers?

3. What are the sociolinguistic implications of the use of the modal auxiliaries and speech acts used and performed in commencement speeches of the Ghanaian and American speakers?

Austin (1962) hinges his speech act theory on three facets including the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act has to deal with the act of saying something that makes sense in a language; obeying all phonological and grammatical rules of the language. The illocutionary act, which was later developed by J.R. Searle and considered simultaneous to speech acts is about the use of language in society specifically, the act intended by the speaker. The perlocutionary act is concerned with what follows what is said.

J.R. Searle (1979) develops Austin (1962) and came out with a five-point categorization of speech acts.

- **Representatives**: This commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. In such instances, the speaker makes assertions and draws conclusion.
- **Directives**: These are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something. The speaker who falls in this category will be making requests or questioning.
- **Commissives**: This commits the speaker to some future course of action. The speaker in this category will be making promises, threatening or offering some help.
- **Expressives**: The speaker expresses a psychological state such as thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating, among others.
- **Declaratives**: The speaker in this category effects immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and tends to rely on extralinguistic institutions. Instances of excommunication, declaring war, baptism, marrying, firing from employment etc.

Consequently, scholars in the field of linguistics also agree that the use of modality is the performance of an action (Boicu, 2007; Jabber and Jinquan, 2013; Logogye, 2016). Hence, some scholars have also gone further to look at modality in speeches under the lens of the speech act theory (Safwat, 2015; Rosyida and Fauzi, 2020). This has led to the identification of the speech

act of request by the instances of modal use (Jabber and Jinquan, 2013) while others see the instances of modal use as face saving acts or politeness strategies (Boicu, 2007). Others also record the instances of modal use as performatives (Logogye, 2016).

Data and Methodology

Commencement speeches from Ashesi University and selected speeches from the United States of America served as the data for this study, with a total corpus of 51,447 words. The speeches were extracted from two sources. The speeches of the American University were extracted from www.goskills.com – a website that ranks the top twenty commencement speeches of the year under review while those of Ashesi University were extracted from the official website of the university - www. ashesi.edu.gh. The data, after it was collected, was coded using three alphabetical letters each plus the numerical order. Hence, commencement speeches from the Ashesi University were coded AUS while commencement speeches from the selected American Universities were coded ACS. Ashesi University was chosen for two reasons; first, it is the only University in Ghana, which holds actual Commencement Ceremonies, as in where graduation ceremonies are conceptualized and dubbed "Commencement Ceremony" and this can be confirmed from their webpage; and second reason for selecting Ashesi University was the fact that they had a well-documented record of all their commencement speeches.

The figures were then attached to complete the coding process (i.e., AUS1, AUS2, AUS3, ACS1, ACS2, ACS3, etc.). The data then went through a process of trimming. The introductory part and concluding parts of the data were cut off. This was the case because the introductory part of the speeches contained the speaker's expression of his/her joy or privileged state for having been chosen as a commencement speaker while the concluding part included the last words which often was an admonition to go into the world and make a difference. Hence,

the researchers believed that the two parts were not contents and so could be excluded. The text was then converted from Word format to text (.txt) format with the aid of AntConc file converter. This was done because the software for analysis accepted only text files. The software for analysis was AntConc 4.0. The figure below displays how the software works.
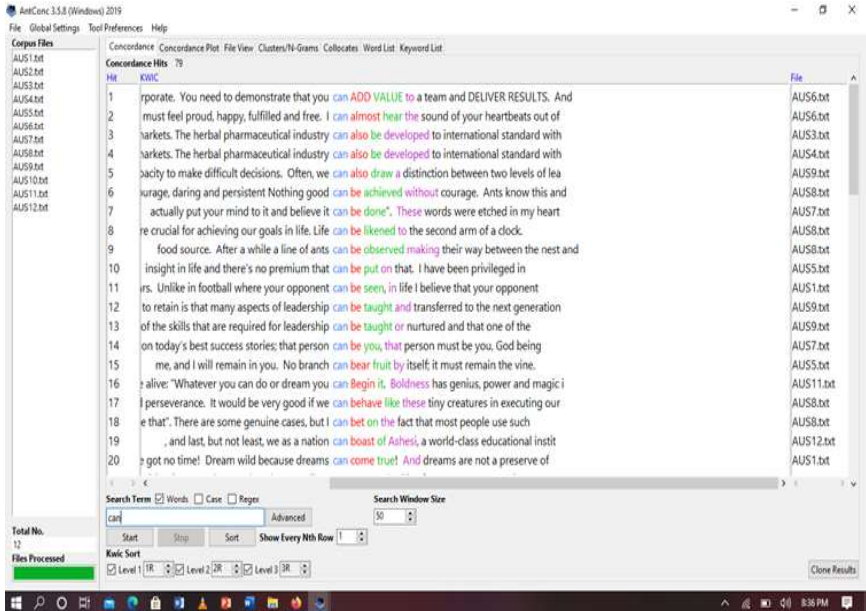

Figure 1: A screenshot of the worksheet of the AntConc 4.0 software for Ashesi University commencement speeches
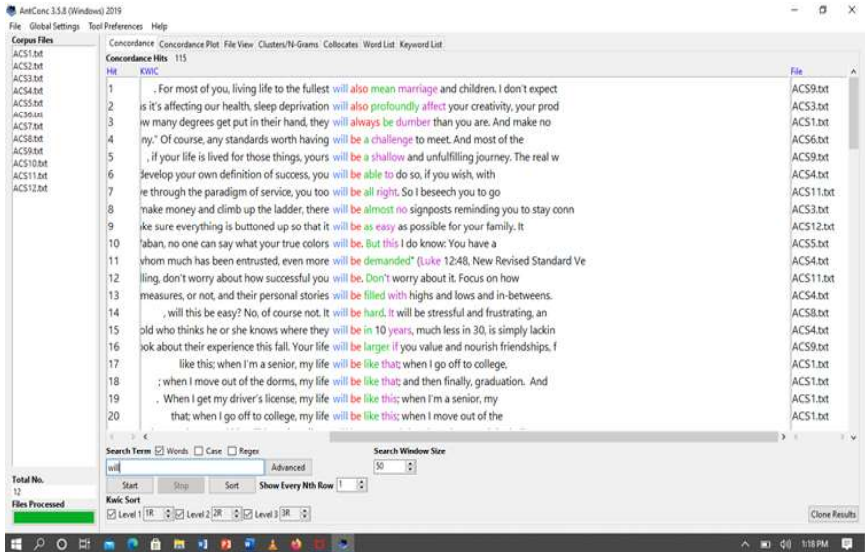
Figure 2: A screenshot of the worksheet of the AntConc 4.0 software for American commencement speeches

The hits (the frequency) of the modal auxiliaries are displayed after the task bar. The files loaded are also displayed in the corpus file task pane. The concordance hits section displays the frequency of the modal auxiliary being analyzed. Beneath the Concordance Hits, there are hits which are coloured blue. Below the Concordance hits again displayed the hits arranged in ordinal terms. The pane on the left displays the speeches in which the modal auxiliaries were used. The constructions displayed, however, are not the full sentences. The modal auxiliary under analysis is colored blue while the first closest word is colored red. The second closest word to the modal auxiliary is colored green while the third closest has a light violet color. This kind of display helps the researcher to identify where modal auxiliary meaning is conveyed. Also, when the modal auxiliary being analyzed which is colored blue is clicked on, the software takes the user to the full sentence where the modal auxiliary was originally used.

As the hits showed, the researcher adjusted the words displayed on either side of the modal auxiliary to get the full sentence. This helped to ascertain whether the modal auxiliary used in that instance had modal force as proposed in Leech (2004). If the construction did not have modal force, it was deleted from the hits displayed. The hits were copied and exported to an excel spreadsheet. The frequencies were also recorded. To find the category under which each modal auxiliary fell, the researcher relied on the criteria of Palmer (1990) and Saeed (2003). Their frequencies were also tallied. Again, the meanings of the modal auxiliaries were also distinguished based on Leech (2004).

The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of speeches, reading them twice to identify themes and patterns. Quantitative results from AntConc 4.0 guided the researcher to identify predominant modal auxiliaries and their role in driving themes. The quantitative analysis revealed the prolific use of modal auxiliaries by American speakers, such as *'must'*, *'will'*, and *'can'*. The study also revealed verbal complementation of modals.

Results and discussion
Modal auxiliaries and speech acts employed

There were a total of seven-hundred and ninety-five modal auxiliaries in the commencement speeches. Out of this figure, the American speakers employed four hundred and thirty-two modal auxiliaries while the Ghanaian speakers employed three hundred and sixty-three. The modal auxiliaries that are featured include *can*, *will*, *must*, *may*, *shall*, *could*, *would*, *might*, *should*, *have to* and *had to*. *Will* was the highest used in both data sets. *Can* was the second highest used modal auxiliary while *shall* was the least used. *Must,* which signifies strong modality was used sparingly in the American speeches but was the third highest in the Ashesi speeches. The pattern of the frequencies for the Ashesi commencement speeches corroborates Leech's classification of the frequency of modals, which indicates that 'will' and 'can'

are among the very frequently used modals while 'must' is part of the quite frequently used modals. However, the frequencies for the modal auxiliaries used in the American commencement speeches did not entirely conform to Leech's classification. This translates as the American commencement speeches conveying a relatively lower obligation than the Ashesi commencement speeches. The modals which recorded the lowest frequency i.e., 'shall' is supported by the earlier stated classification of Leech as infrequently used.

Table 1: Frequencies of modal auxiliaries for Ashesi Commencement Speeches AUS

	Can	Will	Must	May	Shall	Could	Would	Might	Should	Have to	Had to
AUS 1	7	2	1	2	0	5	11	0	4	0	1
AUS 2	1	10	7	0	0	3	7	0	1	3	0
AUS 3	8	3	8	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
AUS 4	6	3	8	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AUS 5	7	17	3	1	0	0	3	0	0	5	0
AUS 6	8	17	2	3	0	0	2	0	1	1	0
AUS 7	3	2	4	0	0	4	1	1	0	0	1
AUS 8	12	11	0	0	0	5	6	0	4	3	0
AUS 9	7	3	8	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
AUS 10	6	7	0	2	0	4	8	1	0	1	2
AUS 11	4	18	12	1	1	1	0	0	2	0	0
AUS 12	7	11	7	2	0	2	6	1	1	1	2

Table 2: Frequencies of Modal Auxiliaries for American Commencement Speeches (ACS)

CODE	Frequencies of Modal Auxiliaries										
	Can	*Will*	*Must*	*May*	*Shall*	*Could*	*Would*	*Might*	*Should*	*Have to*	*Had to*
ACS 1	7	12	0	4	0	4	5	0	0	1	1
ACS 2	7	6	1	1	0	1	8	0	3	3	2
ACS 3	9	7	0	3	0	2	3	4	1	1	1
ACS 4	5	17	0	2	0	0	4	2	2	2	0
ACS 5	2	10	6	2	0	1	2	0	3	3	1
ACS 6	5	14	0	5	0	3	0	2	1	1	0
ACS 7	7	2	0	4	0	2	4	0	0	0	1
ACS 8	8	9	0	3	0	3	4	5	2	2	0
ACS 9	7	10	0	5	0	2	8	2	0	0	1
ACS 10	22	13	2	5	0	1	5	1	9	9	0
ACS 11	17	12	3	3	0	6	4	2	0	0	0
ACS 12	5	3	0	0	0	2	9	2	3	3	0

Table 3: The frequency of modal auxiliaries in Ashesi commencement speeches and the speeches of the American speakers

	Frequency	
Modal Auxiliary	American Speakers	Ashesi Speakers
Can	101	76
Will	115	104
Must	12	60
May	31	16
Shall	3	1
Could	27	24
Would	56	45
Might	20	3
Should	25	14
Have to	35	14
Had to	7	6
Total	432	363
Grand Total	795	

Table 1 shows that the American speakers used more modal auxiliaries than the Ghanaian speakers. This phenomenon is confirmed by Ngula (2015) and Vazquez (2010) as their study revealed that American researchers tend to use more modal auxiliaries than their local contemporaries. However, contrary to these two studies' assertion that non-native researchers overuse or underuse the modal auxiliaries, the present findings does not reveal such in the case of the Ghanaian commencement speakers. The Ghanaian speakers employed the appropriate modal auxiliary usage to convey their message.

It must be noted that in sentences where modal auxiliary usage was apparent, often they were accompanied by other verbs and would rarely stand alone. A verb that seemed to complement almost all the modal auxiliaries was the verb 'be'. Modal

auxiliaries such as 'can', 'will', 'could', 'would', and 'may' were often complemented by the stative verb. For a predictive modal such as 'will' and 'would', the complementation of 'be' helped to drive home the predictive meaning of the modals. The complementation of 'can', often provide the meaning of possibility in both the Ghanaian commencement speeches and the American commencement speeches.

Below are AUS extracts to show the verbal complementation of 'be'

Extract 93: Indeed, having some fear is good for the survival of the human being; of course you _will be_ afraid if someone held a loaded gun to your head.

Extract 94: It therefore means that you need to be sensitive to the cultural differences that you _will be_ confronted with.

Extract 95: I am a firm believer in the idea that many of the skills that are required for leadership _can be_ taught or nurtured and that one of the prime responsibilities of successful leaders is to pass on their experiences and knowledge to the next generation of leaders.

Extract 96: Unlike in football where your opponent _can be_ seen, in life I believe that your opponent is life itself.

Extract 97: Of course, any standards worth having _will be_ a challenge to meet.

Extracts from ACS

Extract 98: If you can get them to open up, they will tell you that today they are happy and satisfied in various measures, or not, and their personal stories _will be_ filled with highs and lows and in-betweens.

Extract 99: The only thing we _can be_ sure will happen in 2016 is that we'll elect a new president.

Extract 100: Focus on how significant you _can be_ in service and the success will take care of itself.

Another verbal complement of 'can' was the verb 'do'. This kind of complementation signalled ability. The very few times 'can' was used as a main verb signalled ability. There are other verbs that accompanied the modal auxiliaries. The modal auxiliaries helped communicate in concrete terms what a speaker wanted to communicate as far as the graduate and that main verb were concerned. It is not surprising that Palmer (2001, p.1) puts it succinctly as "modality is concerned with the status of the proposition that describes the event". Hence, the modal auxiliaries merely described the status of the proposition. That is to say, "is the event possible", "will it happen", "is it obligatory", "does the ability to do exist" etc.

Below are AUS extracts from the text that show the verbal complementation of 'do'

Extract 101: A good and fulfilling life should also revolve around what you _can do_ for your country and continent.

Extract 102: If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you _can do_ nothing"

Extract 103: Through Ashesi you have brought Goethe alive: "Whatever you _can do_ or dream, you can begin it.

Extract 104: Obvious to him that I was awe-struck and deeply impressed by all this, he kept emphasizing to me that "Kwaku, I am sure you _can do_ much more than I have done, if you actually put your mind to it and believe it can be done"

Extracts from ACS

Extract 105: Men often think they _can do_ bad things and get away under the supervision of their female bosses.

Extract 106: And when I saw Sidney Poitier accept his academy award for "Lilies of the Field," I remember sitting on my linoleum floor babysitting for my half sister and brother, saying, if a black man _can do_ that, I wonder what I _can do_.

Extract 107: Don't ever forget that you're a citizen of this world, and there are things you <u>can do</u> to lift the human spirit, things that are easy, things that are free, things that you <u>can do</u> every day.

Table 4: Frequency of Speech Act Categories

Speech Acts	American Speakers	Ashesi Speakers
Representative	391	338
Directives	37	18
Commissives	0	3
Expressives	4	4
Total	432	363
Grand Total	795	

From Table 4, the results for representative speech acts as against directives speech acts show a much higher usage of the former. The representative speech acts primarily imply that a proposition, which describes an event is an assertion. Hence, both American and Ashesi commencement speakers made more assertions than they committed graduates to adhere to directives. Again, from Table 4, it is evident that for both speeches from American commencement speakers and Ashesi University commencement speakers, the representative speech acts was employed most. The directives speech acts recorded the second highest usage. However, the directive speech acts expressed are very minimal relative to the representative speech acts expressed. It must be noted that for American commencement speakers, there was no instance of commissives speech acts recorded in their speeches. On the contrary, the Ashesi University commencement speakers employed the commissives and expressives speech acts in their speeches. Nonetheless, their usage was very low as indicated in Table 4. Also, the fact that the representative speech acts were the highest used in both datasets

confirms that most parts of the commencement speeches fell under the epistemic category.

It is worthy of note that the meaning of the modal auxiliaries in the instance of usage is directly linked to the category it will fall under i.e., epistemic or deontic. This is because the representative speech act is performed when an assertion is made. Assertions are also made from one's evaluation of a phenomenon. Epistemic modal auxiliary also represents a personal evaluation of a matter. Thus, all representative speech acts reveal a usage of an epistemic modal auxiliary. This evaluation therefore makes it hold true that the category the modal auxiliaries fall under has a direct link to the speech act they express. It is therefore not the case that majority of modal auxiliaries fell under the representative speech acts, which stands for assertions. Pertaining to commissives, they appeared only in the Ashesi speeches and non-existent in the American commencement speeches. Hence, in terms of the use of speech acts, Ashesi commencement speeches show some level of commitment compared to the American commencement speeches.

Semantic and pragmatic contributions of the modal auxiliaries to the speeches

To assess the semantic and pragmatic contribution, the framework for meanings of modal auxiliaries as proposed by Leech (2004) was adopted. To this end, the following meanings were extracted from the instances of modal auxiliary usages in the speech – *possibility*, *ability*, *permission*, *prediction*, *intention*, *insistence*, *willingness*, *obligation*, *requirement*, *rules and regulations*, and *logical necessity*.

Table 5: Modal meanings expressed by instances of modal auxiliary usage

	Frequency		
Modal	Meaning	American Speakers	Ashesi Speakers
Can	Possibility	34	14
	Ability	64	62
	Permission	3	0
Will	Prediction	92	94
	Intention 20		6
	Insistence	3	2
	Willingness	0	2
Must	Obligation	10	46
	Logical Necessity	1	12
	Requirement	1	2
May	Possibility	27	12
	Permission	0	0
	Quasi-subjunctive	4	4
Shall	Rules and regulations	3	0
	Prediction	0	1
Could	Ability	10	19
	Possibility	16	5
	Permission	1	0
Would	Prediction	42	30
	Intention	10	14
	Insistence	4	1
	Willingness	0	0
Might	Possibility	20	3
Should	Obligation	19	8

	Logical Necessity	6	6
Have to	Obligation	25	11
	Requirement	5	1
	Logical Necessity	5	2
Had to	Obligation	4	2
	Requirement	3	4
	Logical Necessity	0	
Total		432	363
	795		

From Table 5, it is evident that the ability usage of 'can' was expressed more than its possibility and permission usages in both American and Ashesi commencement speeches. Also, the possibility usage of 'can' was the second highest expressed in both speeches. An aspect worth discussing, which is evident from the meanings the modal auxiliaries conveyed, is the inherent ability of man to do things or to make things happen. This aspect of the commencement speech is communicated using 'can' and 'could'. The usage of 'can' often communicated an ability of the students to overcome life's challenges and problems. The usage of 'can' also gave graduates a list of the things that can be done by the graduates to make life better for themselves, their communities, and their country. Additionally, thematizing the messages that were communicated in all the commencement speeches, it is understood that the entirety of the speeches aimed to motivate.

Again, it is apparent that the predictive usage of 'will' was the highest expressed with the intention usage being the second highest followed by insistence and willingness in both American and Ashesi commencement speeches. This phenomenon conforms to the assertion of Huddleston and Pullum (2005) that the usage of 'will' as a modal auxiliary primarily falls in the domain of the predictive. It is worthy of note that the American

speakers on no account resorted to the willingness usage of 'will'.

Additionally, Table 5 shows that 'must' was the least used by the American speakers but used more frequently by the Ashesi speakers. Despite this fact, both speaker groups utilized the obligation use of 'must' rather than its other meanings of requirement and logical necessity. Also, the possibility usage of 'may' was more frequent than its quasi-subjunctive usage. There was no occurrence of its permissive usage. In the case of 'could', its possibility meaning recorded the highest usage for the American speakers while for the Ghanaian speakers, its ability meaning recorded the highest usage.

As regards the usage of 'would', the predictive meaning recorded the highest usage while its intention meaning recorded the second highest usage, with insistence and willingness being the least. The speeches of the American speakers did not utilize the willingness meaning of 'would'. As far as 'might' was concerned, only its possibility meaning was expressed in both speeches. For 'should', its obligation meaning that was expressed more than its logical necessity usage. The same was true for the case of 'have to'.

While assessing the individual speeches, Joyce Aryee's speech coded AUS 8 recorded the highest usage of the ability meaning of 'can' (See Table 1). Indeed, the main theme of her speech centered on the graduates' ability to do things. She speaks of the inability of people to prevent the graduates from reaching their true potential. She adds that it is impossible to beat time. She also used 'can' to show the qualities of the ant which she used as a model that should be emulated. The following are extracts from her speech to show her usage of 'can'.

Extract 1: No one _can_ rob us of ultimate success but ourselves.

Extract 2: Life can be likened to the second arm of a clock. It keeps ticking whether we are getting somewhere or not.

The events of today and even the future will overcome us. We *cannot* beat time. To keep up with the pace of time, we need to be focused.

On the side of the American commencement speeches, Obama's speech recorded the highest use of 'can' to express ability. In Obama's speech coded ACS10, he discusses the role of government in the development of her people (See Table 2). It is worth noting that this speech was given when Obama was still in office as president. The following are extracts from Obama's speech on the usage of 'can'.

> **Extract 7**: But the other strand is the belief that there are some things we *can* only do together, as one nation - and that our government must keep pace with the times.

> **Extract 8**: The point is, we *can* and should debate the role of government in our lives, but remember, as you are asked to meet the challenges of our time, that the ability for us to adapt our government to the needs of the age has helped make our democracy work since its inception.

Again, there is a principle that all the speakers from both divides acknowledge by their usage of 'can'. This is the ability of the graduate, which is more inherent than external. The Christian writings (the gospel according to Matthew 15:11 and other synoptic gospels) agree to this ideology as it states explicitly that the only thing that can corrupt a person is internal rather than external. Again, psychologists and philosophers believe in the self. On the Abraham Maslow's theory, the identification of self is primary. The extracts above and other instances of the usage of 'can' to express ability hinges on what the graduate can do rather than what can be done for them.

As regards 'will', Ken Ofori Atta's speech coded AUS11 recorded the highest usage of 'will' expressing a prediction into the future. Capt. Budu and Ms. Hazel Barrad-Amuah's

speeches recorded the second highest usage of 'will' expressing a prediction into the future. (See Table 1). In Ken Ofori Atta's speech, he uses 'will' to predict how Ashesi University's modeling of human minds has an impact on the fortunes of entrepreneurs citing Databank as a case in point. He predicts that the entirety of a man's life is to obey God as well as the stewardship role that man has. Among other things, he predicts qualities that will help graduates to succeed in life. Below are extracts from his speech showing how 'will' was used to express prediction into the future.

> **Extract 17:** As we acknowledge the sovereignty of God, our whole duty *will* be to obey Him and therefore become a blessing to our fellow man.

> **Extract 18:** Your life *will* be one of stewardship where you become the mere trustee of your time, talent, and treasure to be deplored for the most beneficial results for the community.

In the American commencement speeches, Bernanke's speech coded ACS4 had the highest usage of predictive 'will' (See Table 2). In his speech, he talks about an unpredictable world. He ends his speech by predicting the demands of marriage and parenting that he believes are vital. Below are extracts from his commencement speech.

> **Extract 31:** Life is amazingly unpredictable; any 22-year-old who thinks he or she knows where they *will* be in 10 years, much less in 30, is simply lacking imagination.

> **Extract 32:** If you can get them to open up, they *will* tell you that today they are happy and satisfied in various measures, or not, and their personal stories *will* be filled with highs and lows and in-betweens. But, I am willing to bet, those life stories *will* in almost all cases be quite different, in large and small ways, from what they expected when they started out.

Another aspect of the commencement speech that is revealed using 'will' is its predictive or preemptive nature. From Table 5, it is apparent that the commencement speech primarily predicts based on experiences of the speakers about what the graduates will face in the real world after school. This was primarily done through the modal auxiliary 'will' and 'would' for both the Ashesi University commencement speakers and the American commencement speakers. This then puts the commencement speech into the genre of the preemptive. Hence, graduates are given a fair idea of what is ahead of them in life.

Another aspect of its feature of predictability of the future is that it makes the commencement speech appropriate for the occasion. For what is the essence of such a speech if it cannot give a sneak peek into the future for the graduates. Nevertheless, as to whether these graduates encounter whatever scenarios given to them by commencement speakers or whether even listen and learn cannot be fully answered in this study. However, the frequent use of 'will' characterizes the commencement speech as a preemptive one cannot be denied.

Sociolinguistic implication of modal auxiliaries and the speech acts

One of the key findings of this study is that the Ghanaian speakers use 'must' a modal auxiliary, which signals strong modality (Leech 2004) more than the American speakers. The use of modals may be partly attributable to the type of cultural system run in the two countries. For instance, Ashesi **University** has its core values rooted in the liberal arts, however, the commencement ceremony speakers are Ghanaian speakers who have undergone the strict cultural system of training where when an authority speaks i.e., the '*opanyin'* (lit. the elder) all other matters must come to rest. The '*opanyin'* concept portrays Ghanaian elders as repositories of wisdom, people who have seen it all and know it all. This kind of mindset may motivate them to want to impose or compel the younger generation to

tow a particular line. The commencement ceremony speakers bring this to bear in their speech when they seem to keep telling graduates what they must do to be successful.

On the contrary, the American culture tends to be very liberal. Children are given the liberty by law and even by conventional parenting to make their own life choices. This is very apparent in the speeches. It must be noted that even the very few times 'must' was used, it referred to what government should do to make life better for the citizenry. At the other few times, it bordered on Oprah Winfrey telling students how they can be more humane while Barbara Bush concentrated on the niceties of life, which should not be taken for granted. Barbara Bush used 'must' more than any of the other American speakers. The messages that 'must' accompanied also showed how the humane connection in the American society was gradually deteriorating and she reminded them to keep upholding these values. Oprah Winfrey also expressed this message with her use of 'must'.

Below are extracts from the commencement speeches that typify the obligatory use of 'must'

Extract 56: There are no guarantees, you *must* earn your keep

Extract 57: In Africa we are faced with structural, social and cultural challenges which we *must* continue to work through

Extract 58: We *must* build upon what we know best.

Extract 59: You *must* bring a new spirit of limitlessness, a can – do spirit which reigned at Independence and most recently when the Black stars shone at the world cup - our boys were mostly in their 20's.

Extract 60: It says, "I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but...with the change of circumstances, institutions *must* advance also to keep pace with the times."

Extract 61: But whatever the era, whatever the times, one thing will never change: fathers and mothers, if you have children, they <u>must</u> come first. You <u>must</u> read to your children, and you <u>must</u> hug your children, and you <u>must</u> love your children.

Extract 62: Your crown has been paid for and so as you walk forth from this place, these hallowed grounds today, the most important lesson I can offer you from my own life is that in order to remain successful, to continue to wear the crown, as you walk the path of privilege, you <u>must</u> not forget the less privileged you left behind.

From the extracts 56-60, which come from the Ashesi setting tends to put a compelling charge on the graduates telling them what they must do to keep their heads afloat in the waters of life. While extract 61-62, which comes from the American perspective focuses not necessarily on how you can make it in life but how life can be made richer.

Another phenomenon that is apparent in this study is the knowledge of how things are and how things ought to be done. It is clear from Table 3 that a greater number of modal auxiliary usage fell under the epistemic category of modality. Palmer (2001) identifies deductive reasoning as one of the features of epistemic category. Palmer (2001) adds that this type of reasoning is based on evidence known to the speaker but cannot be readily called forth in tangible terms. This phenomenon is what the researchers would classify as the depth of experience of the speakers. Often than not, speakers at a commencement ceremony lack the luxury of time and cannot lump the entirety of their life lessons into an anecdote. They can only proffer pieces of advice that mirror some of their lives' experience. They can only hope that graduates buy their level of integrity and apply the advice given.

Below are extracts that show epistemic modal auxiliary usage

Extracts from AUS

Extract 80: You are going to be faced with daily encounters that _would_ test the very foundations of the grooming Ashesi has given you.

Extract 81: Nothing good _can_ be achieved without courage. Ants know this and so _should_ we.

Extract 82: The world out there is like a jungle. It _could_ be fun if you have all your cards right but for most of us, it remains a tough place and I _cannot_ guarantee you any less.

Extract 83: As fresh school leavers, you _must_ be bold, creative, and entrepreneurial in your thinking. Go and create your own job.

Extract 84: But God _could_ dream a bigger dream than you _can_ dream for yourself.

Extracts from ACS

Extract 85: I chose literacy because I honestly believe that if more people _could_ read, write, and comprehend, we _would_ be that much closer to solving so many of the problems that plague our nation and our society. And early on I made another choice, which I hope you_'ll_ make as well. Whether you are talking about education, career, or service, you're talking about life and life really _must_ have joy.

Extract 86: Somebody helped me to get here, just as I know you were helped to get here, Howard, because I know a lot of you came here with only the clothes on your back and a dream for what _could_ be. And so as you have been saved, as you have been liberated, you _must_ liberate others.

Another dimension of the issue of knowledge and social standards is credibility. As stated earlier, the epistemic category dominated the speeches as far as modal auxiliary usage was concerned. It is important to note that for knowledge to be passed on and even social standards asserted and taken by addressees, the condition of trust in the speaker should be fulfilled. This is only done if the speaker has that credibility. This credibility is also borne out of the status of the personality. That is his level of education, experiences in life, the level of success chalked among other things. It is, therefore, not a wonder that personalities chosen as commencement speakers are high achievers. This contributes to the probability of graduates listening and applying whatever the commencement speakers have to say.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the role of modal auxiliaries and the speech acts they encode in the genre of commencement speeches, from the viewpoints of Ghanaian versus American speakers. Cast in Leech's (2004) Modal Auxiliary meaning and Searle's (1969) Speech Act theories, the study among other things found that commencement speeches generally assume preemptive modes and tend to be motivational in subject matter. The study again found that except in the use of the modal auxiliary *must,* American speakers are relatively prolific in their use of the modal auxiliaries than their Ghanaian counterparts. This may be attributed to the dynamics in cultural settings, in that the Ghanaian society could be construed as typically governed by prescriptive set of rules, which obliges children to adhere to rules without complaint. In our view, this accounts for the fact that the Ghanaian speakers resorted to the use 'must' more than their American counterparts.

In future studies, this study may be extended to cover at least two yet to be investigated aspects of the form and function of commencement speeches. Firstly, the relevance and impact of commencement speeches on graduates. Shifting attention from

speaker's meaning to listener's meaning will aid in assessing the impact of the modal auxiliary and the speech act performed on the hearer. Secondly, the usage of modal auxiliaries and the speech acts performed in other contexts such as advertisements, court ruling and sporting analysis should be examined. In terms of pedagogy, this study sought to set the tone for what exactly constitutes abuse (i.e., under use, overuse and wrong use) of modal auxiliary. The study highlights the vital role of modal auxiliaries and speech acts in encoding actions that speech acts inspire within the Ghanaian and American contexts.

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