

## **Modality of Discourse Functionality: Letters-to-the-Editor**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aims to investigate the discursual value of functionality of modality of letters-to-the-editor. It sheds light on the function of modality and its variants in the act of communication. Letters-to-the-editor is a linguistic case in which the letter writer expresses a specific type of mode related to previous issue that needs to be well interpreted by the editor as well as the third reader. To convey the communicative value of modality utilised in letters-to-the-editor of *The Times*, the study adopts Halliday's SFG to present a statistic of modality types. The analysis requires CDA since letters-to-the-editor is one of newspaper genera. The study presents some conclusions which reflect the communicative value of modality of letters-to-the-editor. The discourse functions of modality types realised in the selected samples of letters-to-the-editor are variant, depending on the ideological significance, social power and text type.

### **1. Introduction**

Modality functions to express producer's attitude, comment, or judgment rather than representation in letters-to-the-editor. It refers to the writer's attitude towards the truth of proposition expressed by a structure. In analysing letters-to-the-editor, modality serves to show that there are not only links between form and content but also between content and function (John E. Ritchardson 59). The different forms of modality can have striking effects on shaping the interpretation of readers since letters-to-the-editor reflects a viewpoint which reinforces or weakens the previously discussed idea. The viewpoint of reinforcement or weakness corresponds to the news values. So the choices of modality constitute a major exponent of the interpersonal function of language.

Interpersonal metafunction is related to the aspect of tenor which concerns with participants and reflects the communicative values. In letters-to-the-editor, the participants make judgments about the usefulness or interest of texts by engaging with them. They, firstly, interpret texts in order to understand them (Victoria L.

Rubin 533). The discursual values realised in letters-to-the-editor are variant according to modality types utilised.

## 2. Modality in Systemic Functional Linguistics

M. A. K. Halliday deals with the system of modality as the interpersonal communicative function of language in exchanged talks or texts. The participants' attitude, comment, or judgement about what is exchanged would perform a particular function rather than the content. This function is appropriate in a particular context of situation in which the exchange is performed. In SFL, the clause as exchange is related to interpersonal function of language in which modality is realised. Modality represents the intermediate degrees between positive and negative poles ("1985", 86). The system of modality consists of two main types: modality/modalization, including *probability* and *usuality*, and modulation, including *inclination* and *obligation*. Semantically, modalization is referred to as "epistemic" modality and modulation as "deontic" modality (ibid., 363).

Text as written discourse has a further function rather than the representation of events. It shows the attitude, comment, or judgement of the writer about the events represented beside the representation of events, i.e. the writer's attitude, comment, or judgement which is so called "modality" and the proposition identified (David Crystal 295). The communicative function of texts would be performed by the content and modal function of these texts used in a particular context related to the social and ideological values (H. G. Widdowson 7). Systemic functional theory is applied to a structure of much larger stretches of language. Text is composed of paragraphs structured consequently by sentences constituting textual patterns of discourse. The communicative function fulfilled by a text depends on the communicative competence of participants and the context to which a text is performed accordingly.

The three aspects of context are recognised respectively by three metafunctions. Halliday's SFG studies the functional as situational organisation of language in the social context (Halliday, "1985", 11). It is concerned with how speakers/writers produce utterances/texts to convey their intended meanings through the metafunctions that relate language to the outside world where participants and their social roles are. According to SFL, language has three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Halliday figures these metafunctions as the types of meaning embodied in human language to form the basis of the semantic organisation of all natural languages (ibid., 53).

These metafunctions are the manifestations in the linguistic system of two functions which identify all uses of language: ideational (understanding the environment), and interpersonal (acting on the others in it). Textual is the third metafunction related to the other two mentioned (Halliday "1994", xiii). The ideational function expresses the experiential and the logical content of the text;

whereas interpersonal function deals with the social and power relations among the users of language and relates participant's situational roles to the discourse performed. Then, the textual function is language-oriented that deals with production of cohesive and coherent text by organising and structuring the linguistic information (Halliday and J. Martin 328). Farzaneh Haratyan states that metafunctions can be paralleled to grammatical categories of context of situation like:

1. Ideational Transitivity Field.
2. Interpersonal Mood Tenor.
3. Textual Theme Mode (261).

Saliently, the concern of this part of the study is on "Interpersonal Metafunction" since it is related to the system of modality.

### **2.1 Ideational Metafunction and Modality System**

Halliday states that interpersonal metafunction means a form of action through which the producer (speaker/writer) would do something to the receiver (listener/reader) by means of language. The interpersonal function of language is that of exchanging roles in rhetorical interaction such as statements, questions, offers, and commands identified together with accompanying modalities ("1985", 53). The system of modality is related closely to the exchanging roles since the participants' attitude, comment, or judgement would be existed through the exchanging.

The interpersonal metafunction is related to a text's aspect of tenor which is the social relationship between the participants distinguished through the type of modality. C. Coffin argues that tenor comprises three component areas: the producer (speaker/writer) persona, the social distance, and the relative social status (11). The first concerns the personalisation and standing of the producer. It involves recognising whether the producer has a neutral attitude which can be realised through the use of positive or negative language. The second refers to how close the participants are. The third asks whether they are equal in terms of power and knowledge on a subject, i.e. who chooses the topic, turn management, and how capable both participants are of evaluating the subject (*ibid.*, 23).

Haratyan defines mood parallel to interpersonal communication which embraces three grammatical categories of speech function, modality, and tone(262). SFG helps to express the speech functions such as persuading, enticing, demanding, recommending, ...etc. through a set of mood clause systems. In mood system, the clause can be indicative or imperative (*ibid.*, 263). What is involved in exchanging communication would be the interactants questioning or indicating to perform modalization on the one hand, and commanding or offering to perform modulation on the other.

### 3. Letters-to-the-Editor

Letters-to-the-editor, as a genre, being one of editorial texts represents an example of written discourse but not the same as any other discourse genera since the “generic structure potential” identified by lexico-grammatical variation in letters-to-the-editor is different from other genera (Hosseini Shokouhi and Forough Amin 390). Letters-to-the-editor reflects critical issues related to political, economic, and judicial power (Richardson 76-77). Angela Alameda-Hernandez discusses that media discourse is a powerful means in ideological construction and maintenance in contemporary society. It becomes useful in the study of issues of national identity and the formation of public opinion (164). Letters-to-the-editor is influenced by social and ideological contexts formed by the society and its culture that enable the writer what and how to write. The concern of letters-to-the-editor involves critical analysis that relates letters-to-the-editor to CDA.

Ten samples of letters-to-the-editor of *The Times*, as the corpus of this study, are selected to be analysed in relation to modality system. Wober argues that the letters’ page of *The Times* is dominated by members of the social elites, i.e. “professors, officers of associations, and people in organisations” (qtd. in Richardson 153). Letters-to-the-editor is a powerful feature of newspaper discourse. The letters are short articles used for two purposes: to show agreement or disagreement with respect to previously published articles, and to explain brief information that does need the detail of the original article (E. V. del Arbol 148). Richardson states that letters-to-the-editor is primarily argumentative and their significance is in (re)shaping public opinion but they are not representative of public opinion (150).

K. Wahl-Jorgensen suggests four criteria used by editors to select or reject readers’ letters to be published (73). The first is the rule of relevance which prefers topics that have a legitimate place in the public debate. The second is the rule of entertainment. Notions of what is entertaining differ according to taste. All newspapers try to “turn on readers by offering more sparkly, entertaining op-ed pages and letters sections” (ibid., 74). This is the case when letters argue about disempowered, discriminated or otherwise harassed issues of the public. The rule of brevity, which is the third, prefers the succinct and punchy letters not lengthy deliberation. This means that discussion tends to fall within the bounds of “thinkable thought” (Richardson 153). Finally, the rule of authority which is displayed in two ways: as textual competence and as personal character. It is not enough for the letter writer to have something to say but the on-odds letter writer knows how to say it. Also what gives authority to letters is their writers even though personal authority alters between newspapers (Wahl-Jorgensen 77).

To sum up, letters-to-the-editor reflects an interpersonal function of thought, in terms of modality system, that shows a reader’s attitude about or towards the previous discussed proposition. Modality system is well dealt with in Halliday’s SFG which would be a workable model for this system.

#### 4. Methodology

This study conveys the discursual value of each type that reflects the communicative value of persuasion in letters-to-the-editor as modality types are variant depending on social relations and ideological significance. Ten samples of letters-to-the-editor of *The Times* are selected for the sake of analysis adopting Halliday's model of analysis as being the most comprehensive treatment of the subject and a standard model in this area.

#### 5. Analysis of the Selected Letters

##### Analysis of Letter (1)

###### Scottish independence

Geographic realities mean that an independent Scotland would always be overshadowed by its neighbour. No land routes go anywhere without long (potentially toll-incurring) travel across the UK. It is too small and remote to run large merchant fleets, ports or major international airports.

Larry Rushton, Maignaut Tauzia, France

(Friday January 13 2012, No 70468)

The letter writer expresses his objection to an independent Scotland exposing some real or natural obstacles towards the independence of Scotland. The interpersonal metafunction is represented in two modalized clauses and one modulated clause. The finite modal operator and modal adjunct "would always" modalize the clause "an independent Scotland would always be ..." presented as information. In this clause the finite modal operator and modal adjunct "would always" express the writer's viewpoint of the expected frequency of overshadowing "an independent Scotland" because of "Geographic realities". This clause expresses *usuality* which is a part of modality (modalization).

The clause "No land routes go ..." is modalized by the modal adjunct "potentially". The "potentially" indicates the probability of "toll-incurring" if Scotland would be independent. The clause exposes the impossibility of establishing Scotland as state because of the expected troubles. The *probability* represented in this clause shows modality (modalization).

"It is too small and remote ..." is presented as a proposal. The clause is modulated by the adjective predicator "too small and remote" which identifies the features of "It" referring to Scotland. The clause states the writer's suggestion, expressing *inclination*, of preventing Scotland to be independent because of its disability "to run large merchant fleets, ports or major international airports". The three modality clauses express the writer's objection to establishing "an independent Scotland".

## Analysis of Letter (2)

### High-speed rail line

Sir, You say (leading article, Jan 11) that HS2 will be extended to the North East and Scotland. If Scotland is by then independent, how will its share of the total coast of the line from London be calculated?

David Cockerham, Bearsted, Kent

(Saturday January 14 2012, No 70469)

The letter writer argues calculating the coast of “HS2” line which will be extended to Scotland, in case of establishing Scotland as an independent state. In letter (2), there are two modalized clauses. The clause “HS2 will be extended ...” is modalized by the finite modal operator “will”. This structure expresses the certainty, which is a type of *probability*, of extending “HS2” since the idea is stated by the editor in a previous essay.

The clause “how will ...” is also modalized by the finite modal operator “will” which indicates *probability*. This clause expresses the writer’s wondering of calculating “its share of the total coast ...” in case of Scotland being “independent”. The letter writer’s wondering shows the impossibility of calculating and indicates his objection to the independence of Scotland.

## Analysis of Letter (3)

### Trial by jury

Sir, There is a simple way to save money where a defendant elects jury trial on a minor offence. Cut the jury to seven, allowing a 6-1 majority verdict. Seven is a more practicable number for making decisions on committees. It is also considerably cheaper and worked during the Second World War.

Philip Levy, London EC4

(Tuesday January 17 2012, No 70471)

The letter writer exposes the merits of the committee or “jury” which consists of seven members. He reinforces his viewpoint by an already experience “during the Second World War”. In modality analysis, there are three modulated clauses. The first clause is modulated by an adjective predicator since it represents a proposal. The letter writer suggests an existed “way” which is “simple”. The suggestion is presented “to save money”. The structure of this clause shows the use of *inclination* as a part of modulation to perform a suggestion.

“Seven is a more practicable number ...” is also modulated by an adjective predicator “a more practicable ...”. The clause is an offer to perform committee which would consist of “Seven” members. The clause represents an *inclination* since the features of committee contained seven members are said to have been reported.

In the clause “It is also considerably cheaper and worked ...”, an adjective predicator “cheaper and worked” is used to modulate the clause. The letter writer offers an experienced number “Seven” which is “cheaper and worked”. The letter

writer presents an already experience “during the Second World war” to persuade the others. This proposal states the offer which is a part of *inclination*.

#### Analysis of Letter (4)

##### Communications breakdown

Matthew Parris blames the lack of electronic communications from Costa Concordia passengers on their age. I was told by my mobile network supplier that on no account should I use the e-mail facility during my cruise as even if it was just switched on, never mind used, I would incur massive bills.

James Crane, Fareham, Hants

(Friday January 20 2012, No 70474)

The letter writer discloses his personal experience of the lack of electronic communications during a cruise to reinforce Matthew Parris’ viewpoint reported previously. The interpersonal metafunction is indicated in two clauses; one expresses *probability* and the other expresses *inclination*. The clause “that on no account should I use the e-mail facility ...” is modulated by the finite modal operator “should”. This clause expresses an offer by “mobile network supplier” to the customers. The offer presented is a proposal which is a part of *inclination*.

The clause “I would incur massive bills” shows modality (modalization). It is modalized by the finite modal operator “would” which expresses the *probability* of incurring “massive bills”. The letter writer, in these two clauses “that on no account should I use the e-mail facility ...” and “I would incur massive bills”, indicates the reinforcement of Matthew Parris’ viewpoint about “lack electronic communications” in which though there is an offer to use “e-mail facility without any account, the “massive bills” may be incurred by the customer.

#### Analysis of Letter (5)

Can I suggest that the best and most appropriate [sic] permanent home for David Hockney’s remarkable exhibition should be at Saltaire Mill in Shipley, near Bradford, where he already exhibits many of his works.

Linda Hartley, Ilkley, West Yorkshire

(Saturday January 28 2012, No 70481)

The letter writer suggests an appropriate location to exhibit David Hockney’s works where he already exhibited his works. The three clauses of letter (5) express the interpersonal metafunction: two clauses represent *inclination* and one clause *usuality*. The first clause “Can I suggest that ...” is modulated by the finite modal operator “Can”. In this clause, the writer requests to offer his suggestion which is a part of *inclination*.

The clause “the best and more appropriate [sic] permanent home ...” is also modulated by the finite modal operator “should”. The letter writer suggests “Saltaire

Mill ...” to be the location of “David Hockney’s remarkable exhibition”. It is a proposal which is a part of *inclination*.

The last clause “where he already exhibits many of his works” is modalized by the modal adjunct “already”. The letter writer expresses the frequency of an event of exhibition which is “already” done “many” times. This structure represents *usuality* which is a part of modality (modalization).

### Analysis of Letter (6)

#### The going rate

Sir, The UK has internationally sought-after scientists, surgeons and other top professionals who work here despite being paid a fraction of what some bankers are awarded. Are we really a society that values financial acumen more than anything else that contributes to the quality of our lives?

Peter Hare, Deal, Kent

(Wednesday February 1 2012, No 70484)

The letter writer holds the view that UK society values what “contributes to the quality of ... lives” more than “financial acumen”. These values lead to the low going rate. The modality system is expressed in letter (6) by only one modalized clause realised in table (1). “Are we really a society ...” is modalized by a modal adjunct “really” which shows the assertion of being “a society that values financial acumen ...”. The letter writer is wondering of being a society that “values financial acumen”. This wondering indicates the negation of being such a society. The assertion used is a kind of *probability* that represents modality (modalization).

### Analysis of Letter (7)

#### Dishonourable business

Sir, If members of the Government, for example, offer awards of distinction to those who either have already been rewarded financially or who in the public mind do not deserve it, then the guilty party is the Government, not the recipient who may not be modest enough to decline it.

John Preston, Croydon, Surrey

(Thursday February 2 2012, No 70485)

The letter writer argues honouring the awards of distinction and identifying the guilty party when these awards are being presented to the wrong ones. The interpersonal metafunction is represented in three modalized clauses, showing *probability*, in this letter. The clause “who ... have already been rewarded financially” is modalized by the modal adjunct “already”. The modal adjunct “already” expresses the certainty of rewarding them. The certainty is a kind of *probability* which represents modality (modalization).

The relative clause “who in the public mind do not deserve it” expresses modality (modalization). The modal adjunct “in the public mind” modalizes the clause to



indicate *probability*. The clause shows an attitude presented by “the public” about deserving the award.

The clause “who may not be modest enough ...” is modalized by the finite modal operator “may” which shows the *probability*. The letter writer presents “the recipient” to be probably “modest enough to decline” the award. The *probability* indicated in this clause expresses modality (modalization).

### Analysis of Letter (8)

#### National Marriage Week

Sir, empirical evidence shows that couples who marry are more likely to enjoy durable relationships than cohabiting couples. As headlines are dominated by the fallibility of our economies, surely marriage is the greatest investment that any of us can make?

(Monday February 6 2012, No 70488)

The letter writer presents an invitation of marriage and exposes evidently the enjoyment of married couples more than corrupted ones. The interpersonal metafunction is represented in two modalized clauses and one modulated clause. The *probability* is shown in the clause “that couples ... are more likely ...” since the modal adjunct modalizes the clause. The clause expresses “couples who marry” through the *probability* of being “likely to enjoy...”.

The clause “surely marriage is the greatest investment ...” is modalized by the modal adjunct “surely” which expresses certainty. The letter writer tends to discuss “marriage” by the certainty of being “the greatest investment” in terms of economy. The certainty is a part of *probability* that expresses modality (modalization).

The last clause “that any of us can make” is modalized by the finite modal operator “can” that expresses the probable ability of marriage. In this clause, the letter writer suggests the marriage to be invested since it is available to everybody. The modality (modalization) is realised by the *probability* of investing marriage.

### Analysis of Letter (9)

#### NHS ‘solutions’

Sir, David Cameron stated before the last election that the last thing the NHS needed was a major top to bottom re-arrangement. Shame he has not heeded his own advice. I do not think the profession is against change per se, just change that is ill-conceived and not “road tested”.

Professor David Isenberg,  
University College London

(Thursday February 9 2012, No 70491)

The letter writer argues the solutions, needed for NHS, which should be conceived and “road tested”. The interpersonal metafunction is expressed by two clauses: one modalized and the other is modulated. *Inclination* is indicated in the clause “Shame he has not heeded his own advice”. This clause is modulated by “Shame” which is the adjective predicator of the ellipted structure *it is “shame” that* understood from the

discoursal context. The letter writer suggests that “David Cameron” should heed “his own advice”. The proposal, indicated in this clause, expresses the writer’s suggestion which is a part of *inclination*.

The other clause “I do not think the profession is ...” is modalized by the metaphorical variant “I do not think” which corresponds the form “It probably does/is not” (Halliday, “1985”, 333). This variant expresses *probability* since it can be interpreted as “*the profession probably is not “against change ...”*”.

### **Analysis of Letter (10)**

#### **Commonwealth?**

It is sad that no Commonwealth turns will perform at the Diamond Jubilee concert. The Queen is the head of more nations than just the UK; and it would have been appropriate to invite some of those countries’ stars – eg, Michael Buble from Canada – to appear rather than just a few British acts.

Neil Jones, London SE24

**(Friday February 10 2012, No 70492)**

The letter writer argues two required arrangements for performing Commonwealth turns which are the concert and the attendance of “countries’ stars”. Letter (10) shows the interpersonal metafunction by two modulated clauses and one modalized clause. The first clause “It is sad that ...” is modulated by the adjective predicator “sad”. The adjective predicator “sad” indicates a suggestion of performing “Commonwealth turns ... at the Diamond Jubilee concert”. The suggestion is a kind of *inclination* which expresses modulation.

*Probability* is realised in the clause “that no Commonwealth turns will perform at ...” by the polarity “no” and the finite modal operator “will”. The polarity and the finite modal operator express the certainty of “no Commonwealth turns” will be performed “at the Diamond Jubilee concert”. *Probability* realised here represents modality (modalization).

The last clause “it would have been appropriate to invite ...” indicates a suggestion of inviting “some of those countries’ stars ...”. The clause is modulated by the finite modal operator “would”. The suggestion indicated represents a kind of *inclination* which shows modulation.

The graphical representation below shows the recurrences of modality types which are realised in the selected samples of letters-to-the-editor.

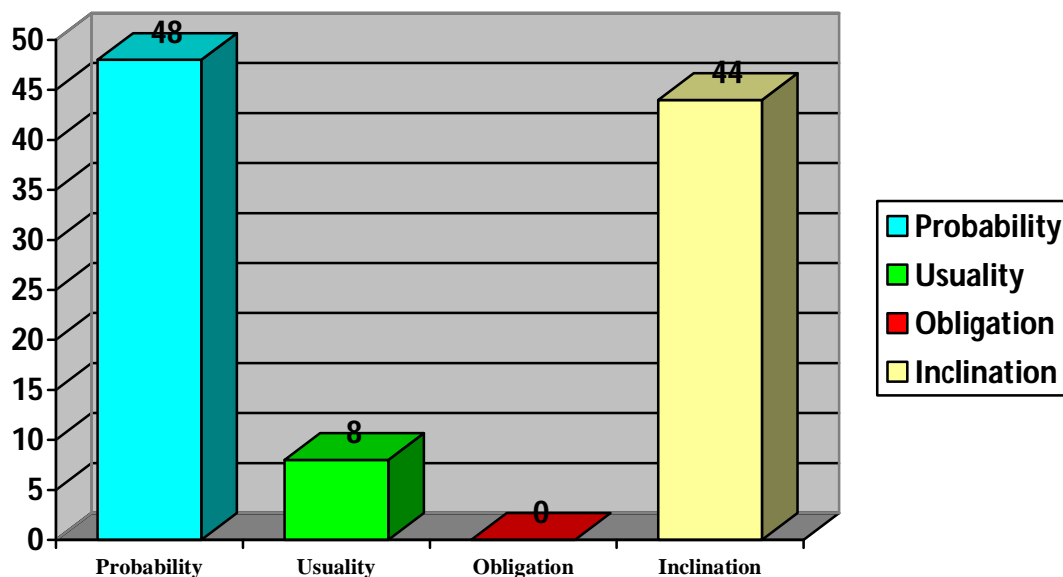


Figure (1) Graphical Representation of Modality Types

## 6. Conclusions

In letters-to-the-editor, Modality (modalization) relates to how valid the information is. *Probability* expressing how likely it is to be true highly recurs with an average of 48%, while *usuality* identifying how frequent it is true recurs twice with an average of 8% as shown in table (1). In letters-to-the-editor, *probability* conveys a statement to imply whether it is possible to accept the letter writer's imparted view, while *usuality* reveals one of persuasive means to make the reader more easily understand and accept the letter writer's view. It shows the letter writer's power to identify the truth frequency of something. Both *probability* and *usuality* reflect one of the communicative values of letters-to-the-editor.

Modulation relates to how confident the letter writer can be in the eventual success of exchange. *Inclination*, identified by an offer or suggestion reflecting the communicative value of letters-to-the-editor, recurs ten times with a 44% average, whereas *obligation* has no occurrence in these letters shown in table (1). *Inclination* is utilised to signal willingness, wish or determination of letter writer's side by offering or suggesting a certain proposal to establish good interpersonal relations between the letter writer and the reader.

Table (1) Recurrences and Percentage of Modality Types in The Selected Samples of Letters-to-the-editor

System Type	Modality			
	Modality		Modulation	
	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
Recurrences in Letter 1	1	1	-	1
Recurrences in Letter 2	2	-	-	-
Recurrences in Letter 3	-	-	-	3
Recurrences in Letter 4	1	-	-	1
Recurrences in Letter 5	-	1	-	2
Recurrences in Letter 6	1	-	-	-
Recurrences in Letter 7	3	-	-	-
Recurrences in Letter 8	2	-	-	1
Recurrences in Letter 9	1	-	-	1
Recurrences in Letter 10	1	-	-	2
<b>Total Recurrences</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>44%</b>

Finally, The present study is significant to the EFL and ESL learners as being concerned with language in use. It sheds light on the notionality and functionality of written phase of language. As such, learners would meet a number of different typical discursal problems of writing: an absent addressee, detachment from the relevant physical environment as a shared context for writer and reader and the resultant need to be explicit, and the choice of how to stage the text.

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