

# The Transformation of Subjective and Objective Modality in English News Discourse from the Global Perspective——taking the US Media Reports on Japan's Discharge of Nuclear Waste Water into the Sea as the Example

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**Abstract:** Modality system, an important part of the interpersonal function of discourse, is generally used to indicate the author's cognition and attitude, which contributes the basic representation of subjectivization. Meanwhile, news discourse generally emphasizes the objectivity principle and the author's subjective standpoint and opinion should be avoided. As the modality system may involve the modal meaning of objectivity in different contexts, it has the characteristic of subjective-objective transformation in discourse. Therefore, the modality system in the news text can be used to hide the author's subjective ideology, but also can express its objectivity. Taking American media related reports on Japan's nuclear waste water discharge into the sea as examples, this thesis explores the subjective-objective transformation of modality system in news reports.

**Keywords:** Modality System; News Discourse; Systemic Functional Linguistics

## 1. Introduction

The Japanese government announced on April 3, 2021 that it would discharge the nuclear waste water in Fukushima main to the ocean in two years. Japan's neighbors, in particular, hold that the action poses a serious threat to ocean and human security. However, the United States has publicly expressed its support for Japan's action. As media have the function of social coordination, they should play the role as the communicating bridge to build consensus on global issues, such as Marine environmental protection. Moreover, especially the media with a broad range of voice around the world, such as Britain and America, should utter the voice on issues closely linked to human fate, such as marine protection, and hold the authenticity and objectivity principle based on fact when reporting.

Within the English news text, the objectivity of news discourse is closely related to the use of modality system. In academic circle, the researches on modality system mainly focus on how to convey emotion and message and enhance persuasiveness in discourse through interpersonal function, with few studies on the subjectivity and objective analysis of news discourse through modality system. At the same time, as coverage on global issues involves global public interests, its objectivity should be widely concerned. Therefore, taking two American media articles that respectively supports and opposes to the Japanese nuclear waste disposal into sea as examples, this thesis aims to explore the transformation of modal subjectivity and objectivity in news discourse under different contexts by probing into the modality, meaning, modal auxiliary and modal adjunct in the modality system.

## 2. Theory background

### 2.1 Interpersonal function and modality system

Systemic functional linguistics has three meta-functions: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. Interpersonal function mainly focuses on the dialogic relationship between speakers and readers, which is how speakers impose their own positions on readers through the construction of discourse, so as to influence readers' cognition, attitude and behavior. The modality system is an important part of interpersonal meaning, which mainly reflects the speaker's judgments on the trend of propositions, as well as the tendency and willingness expressed by the speaker himself or the obligations he requires others to undertake.

The modality system is mainly divided into modality and mood. Modality are mainly used to indicate different probabilities or frequency. Mood is used to express intentionism: obligation, and willingness, which are mainly

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expressed by finite modal verbs and passive word phrases. Meanwhile, Halliday also put forward the concept of modality orientation and value when analyzing the modality system. The former can be divided into the subjective, the objective, the explicit and the ambiguity, while the latter can be divided into medium, high and low values. Halliday and others also hold that modal auxiliary, modal adjunct and modal metaphor can all express modal meaning in different degrees and aspects, which will be discussed in the text analysis based on corpus cases below.

## **2.2 The subjectivity and objectivity modality in news discourse**

As modality is the representation of the author's cognition, it often hides or expresses ideology with subjectivization and subjectivity being its basic characteristics. However, news discourse emphasizes objective narration and requires avoiding reflecting the author's subjective opinion and tendency. But in the language application of English discourse, modality system is one of the basic components of interpersonal function, playing an inescapable important role in information transmission.

On the surface, the subjective tendency of modality system is in contradiction with the objective principle of news discourse. However, scholars believe that the subjectivity and objectivity of verbs such as modals will change according to context changes, which is the characteristic of dynamic transformation. At the same time, some scholars also believe that speakers will avoid absolute words due to the lack of sufficient evidence and other reasons when judging whether a proposition is right or wrong. Instead, the speakers will use the expression involving both "yes" and "no", whose degree is the modal meaning. Therefore, it is of certain value to explore the rational usage of modality system to express the news objectivity under the background that modality system has the characteristic of dynamic transformation of subjectivity and objectivity and that news emphasizes the objectivity principle.

## **3. Text analysis**

### **3.1 Modal auxiliary**

English and Chinese mainly express subjectivity through modal words. And modal auxiliary, the most typical words to judge the degree of personal wishes and the probability and possibility of events, often contains humans' emotion and will with strong subjective judgment. The subjective degree of modal auxiliary can be judged from modal orientation and value. For example, as in the American media the hill s related report: The danger of Japan dumping Fukushima wastewater into the ocean:

(1) The Biden administration must urge Japan to abandon this unnecessary and dangerous plan.

(2) The era of intentionally dumping toxic waste in our one global ocean is, or should be over.

(3) This effort will take hundreds of billions of dollars, over many decades, and the U.S. and other G20 nations must step up and help both financially and technically.

In (1), (2) and (3), the high-value modal auxiliary must and the median one should are used to express the necessity and obligation respectively, which includes the American government as the speaker, Japan as the recipient, and the specific necessary event that the plan is prohibited, expressing a strong modal. (2) only mentions and emphasizes the event body, which uses the passive phrases to express obligation, indicating the use of "should" to express strong modal judgment is based on the evaluation of the event significance. (3) only indicates the action implementer—the United States and G20 using the strong "must" as the modal verb to emphasize the subject of the obligation. The most definite judgement in text on modality is (1), which is Japan should be responsible for the proper disposal of nuclear waste water while the U.S. government should be the main promoter.

This text uses the medium and high value modal verbs with strong subjective judgment. In the specific context, it gives concrete evidence to prove that Japan, the United States and other countries "must" bear the responsibility. First, it's based on facts and logic to judge that Japan should not discharge nuclear waste into the sea. Second, for the global marine ecological protection, the proposed advocacy to strictly regulate the subjects that are harmful to the common interests of all mankind is of high necessity. Therefore, the usage of this modal verb puts subjectivity in objectivity, reflecting a dynamic transformation of modal subjectivity and objectivity.

### **3.2 Modal adjuncts**

Modal adjunct also indicates interpersonal function, which is used to express the speaker's subjective wishes, attitude or probability in modal meaning. However, it's different from the main clause as it lacks the function of the main clause, usually formed by prepositional phrases or adverb phrases. Furthermore, it's mainly divided into mood adjuncts and comment adjuncts with the former closely related to the mood element, generally classified as the mood element (such as actually, suddenly, etc.), and the latter generally located among information units, similar to textual function but mood element in sense (such as unfortunately at the beginning of the sentence, etc.).

The comment adjunct has more obvious evaluation meaning, sometimes used to express the inference and evaluation of the topic while sometimes also used to indicate the opinions holders and information sources. For the study on subjective and objective expression of modal adjuncts, this thesis conduct the analysis with Frobes's reports on Japan's nuclear waste disposal into sea, Japan will release radioactive fukushima water into the Ocean, and why that's ok, as the example:

(5) Putting this water into the ocean is without doubt the best way to get rid of it.

(6) Japan will soon begin releasing 250 million gallons of Fukushima nuclear plant. And that' s exactly what they should do.

(7) Although not intuitive, this is a very good idea.

The "is without doubt" in (5) and "exactly" in (6) are served as mood adjuncts indicating the obviousness in modality, which expresses the certainty. In addition, as the speaker shows the strong intervention, the adjunct also implies strong

appraisal meaning to judge the necessity of Japan's nuclear waste water discharge into the sea, which is a kind of subjective judgment with emphasis. Besides, "this is a very good idea" in (7) is served as the evaluation adjunct, indicating the positive judgment for the discharge of nuclear waste water into the sea. Meanwhile, Halliday holds that polar form is more affirmative than high-value modal as that's John is more definite than that's certainly John. Therefore, this is... in (7) expresses more the strong affirmation to the issue as a polar form.

However, Forbes used more objective and implicit mood adjuncts and evaluation adjuncts, which are used to express the frequency and subjective evaluation, to describe the harm of nuclear waste water in the same report:

(8) Critics, like Greenpeace, weighed in with the usual every-atom-is-dangerous nonsense and seems to think this water should be stored and treated forever. They don't seem to understand the radiation, or the chemistry of tritium.

(9) but Tritium is just assumed to be carcinogenic to humans at extremely high levels, although that claim is only hypothetical since adverse health effects from tritium have never appeared.

In text (8) and (9), "don't seem to" and "just assumed to be" are respectively used to express a possibility and assumption, reflecting a kind of non-explicit subjectivity in the orientation system proposed by Halliday, which actually objectifies subjective assertions. The hidden meaning is uncertain that nuclear waste water is harmful to human beings, which seems to be a non-absolute objective expression with implicit characteristic. In specific context, the reporter uses oceans of strongly positive adjuncts when explaining the harmlessness of nuclear waste water and the rationality of discharge into the sea. However, the modal adjuncts of uncertainty are used to express the harm of nuclear waste water. The contrast between before and after indicates that the reporter intends to impose the subjective attitude of rationalization the nuclear waste water discharge into the sea on the readers, and meanwhile weaken its irrationality, ultimately influencing the readers' judgment on this issue.

According to the above analysis, when reporting Japan's discharge of nuclear waste water into the sea, Forbes injects a strengthened positive judgment on that disposal through modal adjuncts, and meanwhile imposes a vague and implicit judgment on the harm of it. The former reflects the non-objectivity of using a lot of subjective modals in news texts, while the latter is superficial objectivity, actually hiding subjective judgment, which reflects the dynamic transformation of the subjective and objective in the modality system.

#### 4. Social practice analysis

According to studies above, the use of modal verbs in language combined with the context has an impact on the subjectivity and objectivity of an article. Philosopher Habermas believes that interaction activity with language as the core has the function of social regulation.

According to today's global situation, the outbreak of COVID-19 as a "black swan" event brings long-time global secondary crises involving politic, economy, culture and other aspects. Media, "the fourth power" of public society, has the function of social coordination, which should promote the collaborative understanding and interactions among subjects such as countries under the perspective of human community with a shared future. Moreover, especially the media with the great influence on both global information order and society, such as the United States, should uphold the objectivity principle, which means reporting in the face of international issues, rather than silence or subjective biased reports on some issues.

#### 5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it's obvious that the subjective and objective in the modal system have the characteristics of dynamic transformation depending on different context. In addition, language text ultimately forms the influence on social practice through the interaction with discourse. This thesis holds that when the media use language to construct news reports, they need a guiding principle with more broad consensus, so as to promote the objectivity and publicity of news reports and further realize its multiple positive meanings in reality.

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