# CONSTRUCTING SELF AND OTHER THROUGH MODALITY: A CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL STYLISTIC STUDY OF PAKISTANI ELECTION MANIFESTOS

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**Abstract**

This study explores the use and function of modality in the 2024 general election manifestos of three major political parties in Pakistan: Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). These parties are selected based on their winning the 2024 general elections. The specialised small-scale corpus of 2024 general election manifestos has been analysed using a mixed-methods mode of inquiry, combining corpus linguistic tools AntConc (4.3.1) and qualitative analysis based on the textual–conceptual function of hypothesising in Jeffries' (2014) Critical Stylistic framework. The modal verbs retrieved through corpus tools have been further analysed with KWIC analysis to find out their frequency and distribution across the selected parties. The data is further examined qualitatively within the purview of the textual-conceptual tool of the Critical Stylistic framework (Jaferries, 2014). The findings reveal a significant contribution of modality in the ideological positioning of the political parties and in their identity construction process. Political narratives are shaped through the strategic use of obligation, prediction, and possibility modals. The study contributes to the growing body of research on Pakistani political discourse focused on the usefulness of analysing ideological meanings in political texts.

**Keywords**: critical stylistics analysis; political discourse; manifestos; identity, hypothesising, modality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The extant literature establishes Election manifestos of political parties as more than a sheer statement of their policies, and plans fulfilling an informational purpose. These multi-purpose documents are crafted meticulously as persuasive texts to mobilise voters by influencing their perceptions and hence to achieve the ultimate goal to secure political power (Arlow, 2024; van Dijk, 2006). In the same vein, Fairclough (2003) mentions the election manifestos as a primary site for examining the interplay between linguistic choices, ideology, and the construction of identity.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) mention modality as a significant linguistic component of grammar that functions to express their judgment, attitude, or commitment regarding the proposition. This aspect of language use is relevant to the election manifestos, which express promise and future action in their text via modal auxiliary verbs. The sub-categories of modality include Epistemic and Deontic Modality. Epistemic modality expresses the speaker's assessment of the probability or certainty of a proposition (e.g., may, must, probably, certainly). Whereas, Deontic Modality is concerned with necessity, obligation, or permission (e.g., must, should, ought to, allowed to) (Jefferies, 2014)

The use of modality in the election manifestos poses a problem in the realization of political issues in linguistic terms. The perceived gap between rhetoric and reality often leads to public skepticism in developing countries, like Pakistan, due to the prevalent political instability, which often undermines long-term policy commitments. This democratic charged environment in Pakistan makes election manifestos an important document for critical inquiry. The bulk of research studies in developing countries have focused on political aims and policies rather than on their underlying discourse structures (van Dijk, 2022). This interplay between linguistic choices, ideology, and the construction of identity is a crucial site for critical investigation (Fairclough, 2003).

The realisation of hypothesising through modality often leaves a gap, which benefits the political parties to strategically hedge their promises or firmly commit to a vision, a strategic ambiguity often exploited for ideological purposes. This study examines the grammar of commitment (modality) in the general elections 2024 manifestos of the major political parties in Pakistan through the textual-conceptual function of Hypothesising from the Critical Stylistics framework proposed by Jeffries (2010). Critical Stylistics offers a systematic and comprehensive toolkit combining the tools from critical linguistics and stylistics. This framework is used not only to identify the linguistic choices of the writers but also the ideological implications of such choices (Jeffries, 2007,

2010). Hence, it effectively maps the linguistic choices with the ideological implications of such choices. The term textual-conceptual refers to the two types of meaning, i.e., textual and conceptual, which are similar to Halliday's concept of ideational function in systemic functional grammar (Jeffries, 2010). Jeffries explains that (2014, p.409), "the conceptual part denotes the way the linguistic tools try to capture what a text is doing conceptually in presenting the world, while the textual part refers to the way these resources are utilised to construct the conceptual meaning".

Jeffries (2014) opines that the stylistic choices encode the textual meaning of the linguistic features which are embedded in a text. These stylistic choices are ideologically manipulative because they are made from an ideological perspective. The present study utilises jafferies concept along with the quantitative power of corpus tools AntConc to contribute to the qualitative stylistic interpretation (Simpson, 2014; Baker, 2006), further adding to the replicability and objectivity of the study. The study aims to investigate the use of modal force in constructing self and other identities in the general election manifestos 2024. The particular focus of the study is to find answers to the following research questions.

1. What is the normalised frequency and distribution of modal auxiliary verbs across the 2024 General Election manifestos of selected Pakistani political parties?
2. How is the modality deployed to construct positive self-identity and negative other-identity in the 2024 election manifestos?
3. What are the ideological consequences of the use of modality in the selected manifestos for political persuasion?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical and empirical foundations of the present study have been systematically reviewed in this section to establish the need for the current analysis. The concept of political discourse is defined in CDA as a social practice instrumental in the reproduction of power and ideology (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2006). The connection between language and politics is inseparable. Linguistic interaction is the primary source through which political activities are enacted. Language as a form of social practice not only reflects but also shapes socio-political realities (Fairclough, 1989). Mey (2001) argues that language acts as a means through which political institutions obtain symbolic representation, while Hall (2001) is of the view that discourse does not merely reflect the meanings of events, rather it produces these meanings.

According to Wodak (2001), in the political domain, the discourse is adjusted in line with audience expectations. This aligns with Habermas's (1987) view of language as a function as a medium of communication and as an instrument of hegemony. In a political context, lexical and syntactic choices have ideological intent contributing to the moral positioning of political actors (Fiske, 1994). As Halliday (1994) observes that social meanings are embodied by the linguistic structures. This language use is most notable in the language of election manifestos, where transitivity patterns, modality, and appraisal resources encode ideological stance and authority. In the vibrant political context of Pakistan, the political legitimacy and the party's credibility are established via the use of language. A key site of this ideological work is visible in the texts of the election manifestos that are characterised by over-persuasion (Wodak, 2021).

Critical Stylistics (CS), a powerful synthesis of formal analysis and critical investigation (Jeffries, 2014), moves beyond traditional aesthetic stylistics to systematically link micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level ideological goals (Simpson, 2014), providing the necessary methodological rigour to the analysis of ideological texts. This framework has compatibility with the corpus tools, which further add to the replicability and rigour of the analysis. In Pakistan, political discourse has largely been analysed through Critical Discourse methods, which have been criticised for their limitations of bias and lack of objectivity (Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). There is limited research on the use of modality in election manifestos in the Pakistani context, particularly from the perspective of self and other identity construction.

Identity has become a core concept in the discipline of linguistics in recent decades, particularly in the sub-disciplines of linguistics, e.g., sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and gender studies (e.g. Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Talbot, 1995; Tajfel, 1982, Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). O v e r the years, there has been a change in the concept of identity, not as essentialist (Joseph, 2004, p. 83). It is a significant core concept in critical stylistics. Another key term related to the current study is Van Dijk (1998) defines ideology as a three-dimensional concept, i.e, sense, society, and discourse. According to this, ideology refers to a set of beliefs that are cognitively perceived and socially practised by a particular language speaker. Fairclough (2003) mentions ideologies as "interpretations of aspects of the world that help to build and sustain power, dominance, and exploitative relations" (p.9). Simpson (2004) explains the concept of ideology as a set of beliefs which is instrumental in understanding and interacting with the world around us.

Modality has been examined across genres for its semantic functions (Lyons, 1981; Palmer, 2001; Leech, 2014) and its use in various discourse settings acting as an indicator of cognitive context (van Dijk, 1997). The role of modality in persuasion, manipulation, and commitment in different political contexts has been established, such as Canadian conservative discourse (Lillian, 2008) and UK parliamentary discourse (Vukovic, 2014). Similarly, modality as a tool of identity construction has also been highlighted in political discourse (van Dijk, 2006; Wodak,

2021). These studies highlight the strategic role of high force assertive modals, indicating political commitment and efficiency of the social actors in political discourse. Hence, the extant literature confirms modality as an ideological apparatus to communicate commitment, obligation and the perceived truth value of propositions (Yunisda & Firmansyah, 2019). Most of the studies conducted in Pakistan are either qualitative in nature, from Critical Discourse analysis or limited in scope. This scholarly gap is filled by the present study, which conducts a systematic analysis of modality from an identity perspective with the assistance of a corpus tool in the selected manifesto discourse.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The discourse of election manifestos has been analysed in the current study by employing a mixed-methods approach. It combines quantitative corpus tools with qualitative critical interpretation through the lens of the textual-conceptual function of Jefferies, Critical Stylistic framework (2014). Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2014) serves as the main analytical framework for the qualitative analysis of the data. Critical Stylistics, in a systematic way, links the formal linguistic choices of Modality to the ideological landscape of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Hence, the framework ensures that critical claims have verifiable and objective textual evidence. The specific tool used for the analysis hypothesising realised through modality. Through this function, political parties' commitment to future actions is examined. Quantitative analysis is conducted by the corpus linguistic tool AntConc (Anthony, 2023) to find out the frequency and distribution pattern of modal auxiliary verbs. According to Baker (2006), quantitative analytical tools assist in the identification of objective, large-scale linguistic patterns necessary for qualitative interpretation (Baker, 2006).

Jeffries' framework is based on Simons' (1993) framework of modality. In her framework, Jefferies proposed three categories of modality in terms of meaning. The first category is Epistemic Modality, which reflects the speaker`s doubt or certainty. The text producers can express a range of strong and weak certainty by different forms of epistemic modality, i.e., might vs sure. The second category, Deontic Modality, refers to the degree of obligation or desirability of the text producer, i.e., should. The second category, Boulomaic Modality, refers to the desire of the speaker to do an action, i.e. wish.

### 3.1 Data Sources and Sample

The study conducts the analysis on the three purposively selected election manifestos of a sample of three major political parties that contested the 2024 general election. The manifestos of those political parties are selected that have contested and won the 2024 general election and got representation in the parliament.

TABLE 2. A Summary of the Data Collected from the 2024 General Election Manifestos

| S. No. | Name of the Political Party | No. of Words |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) | 24411 |
| 2 | Pakistan Peoples Party (PPPP) | 21455 |
| 3 | Pakistan Tehreek-E-Insaf (PTI) | 42013 |
| | Total words | 87879 |

### 3.2 Data Compilation Process

The small-scale, specialised corpus was compiled by retrieving the 2024 general election manifestos of the selected three political parties from their official websites. The identification phase exclusively focused on the linguistic resources that realise the Critical Stylistic function of Hypothesising, primarily the modal auxiliary verbs. These modal verbs directly express the degree of commitment and certainty.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The data is analysed in two sequential and interdependent phases. In the first phase, quantitative analysis is carried out with the help of the corpus tool AntConc (4.3.1) to establish the frequency and distribution of modal auxiliary verbs. To make the under-comparison corpora comparable, Mayer's (2023) criterion regarding the comparison of corpora of unequal sizes was followed. The frequencies of the stylistic strategies identified in each manifesto were normalised per 10000 words. The KWIC analysis was conducted in the second phase to examine the collocates (subjects/verbs) of the modal auxiliary verbs. This collocational examination assisted in identifying whether the commitment/necessity was attributed to the party itself (In-Group) or the opposition/past government (Out-Group).

In the second stage, through the mapping of linguistic realisation to their ideological function, the interpretation within the purview of Jeffries (2014) critical stylistic framework was carried out. The modal auxiliary verb instances were interpreted in the context based on the concordance lines. Each modal auxiliary instance was interpreted in context and categorised according to its function in identity construction.

**4. DATA ANALYSIS**

This section presents a critical stylistic analysis of the 2024 general election manifestos of the selected political parties: Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Jeffries (2014) observes the ideational function of modality in relation to its textual conceptual sense. Modal auxiliary verbs employed by writers in verb phrases are characterised as the typical instances of modality. However, modal verbs are not used in all of the verb phrases. The list of modal verbs in the English language is as follows: 'can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must, dare, ought, and need' (P. 117).

The following tabular presentation shows the frequencies of this stylistic strategy in the general election manifestos. In the given tables, 'Self (n) signifies the normalised frequency of the strategy of modality, 'Others(n)' indicates opposing political leaders and parties, and the sum of the normalised frequencies of 'Self' and 'Others' is presented as 'Total(n)'.

**(i) Pakistan Muslim League (N): Use/ Distribution of Modals in General Election Manifestos 2024**

**Table 5.5** Normalized Frequencies of Modal Verbs in PML-N Manifesto 2024 Per 10000 Words.

| Modals | Self(n) | Others(n) |
|--------|---------|-----------|
| Will | 21 | 01 |
| Would | 02 | - |
| Shall | 02 | 01 |
| Could | - | 02 |
| **Total** | **25** | **04** |

The normalised frequencies of the use of modal auxiliary verbs in the Pakistan Muslim League (N) Manifesto indicate their frequent use for self-representation and a less focus on other references. Contrary to a high frequency for self-reference (n=25), the manifesto text depicts use of infrequent references to others (n=4). This usage pattern implies that the main objective of PML-N has been to showcase its own competence and agendas. The modal auxiliary 'will' has been found in the highest frequency(n=21), followed by the minimal use of 'would' and 'shall'(n=2 and n=2), respectively.
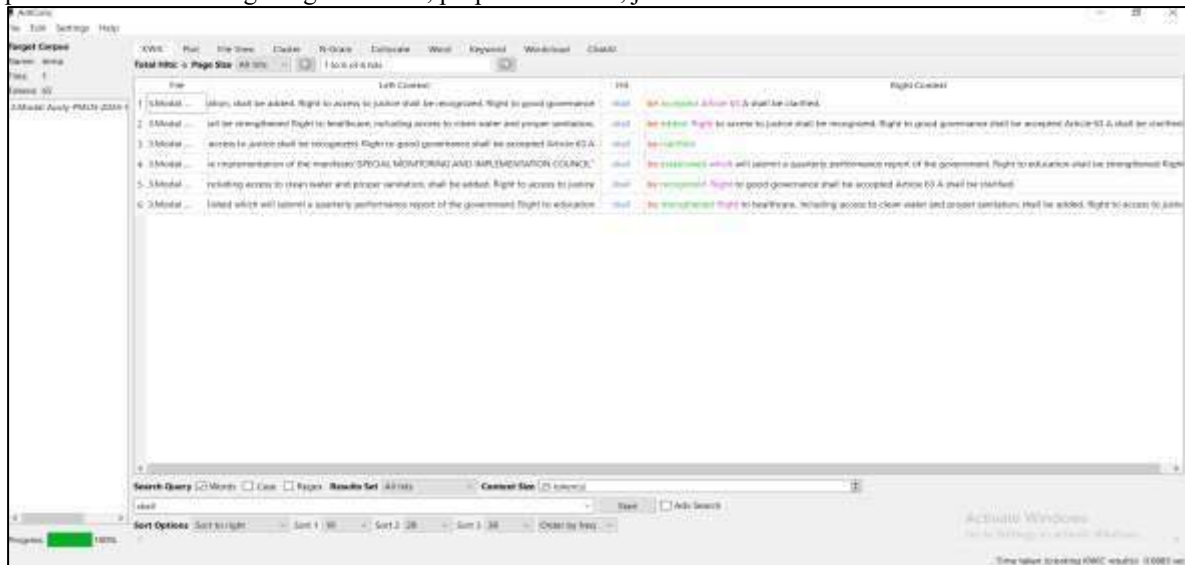
The KWIC analysis presented below highlights that the modal auxiliary 'will' (n=21) collocates with the positive action words as visible in the screenshot. 'ensure, promote, expand' etc., It indicates PML-N's commitment and certitude to plans and actions by employing 'will' strategically. This represents a confident and forward-looking stance of PML (N) leaders to resolve the problems faced by the nation. Other modal verbs, 'would and shall' have been employed in comparatively less frequency (n=2) times each, portraying a positive face of PML-N, showing their future commitment to public welfare projects.



The use of 'will' indicates a commitment and future orientation, constructing the image of PML-N as a visionary and trustworthy party. It showcases proactive intentions and resolve of the party to recover the chronic issues.

The KWIC analysis of modal auxiliary 'shall' presented below suggests the party's intentions concerning certitude and determination of prompt actions in response to the challenges faced by the country. The party resolves to provide the access to 'good governance, proper sanitation, justice and education' to the citizens.



Opposite to this, the use of modal auxiliary verbs referring to the political opponents is less frequent (will(n=1), shall(n=1), could(n=2) suggesting the limited capacity of their rivals in the political domain. The infrequent use of modal verbs shows a strategic move aiming at demeaning the political discrimination of their opponents and representing a positive self-image.
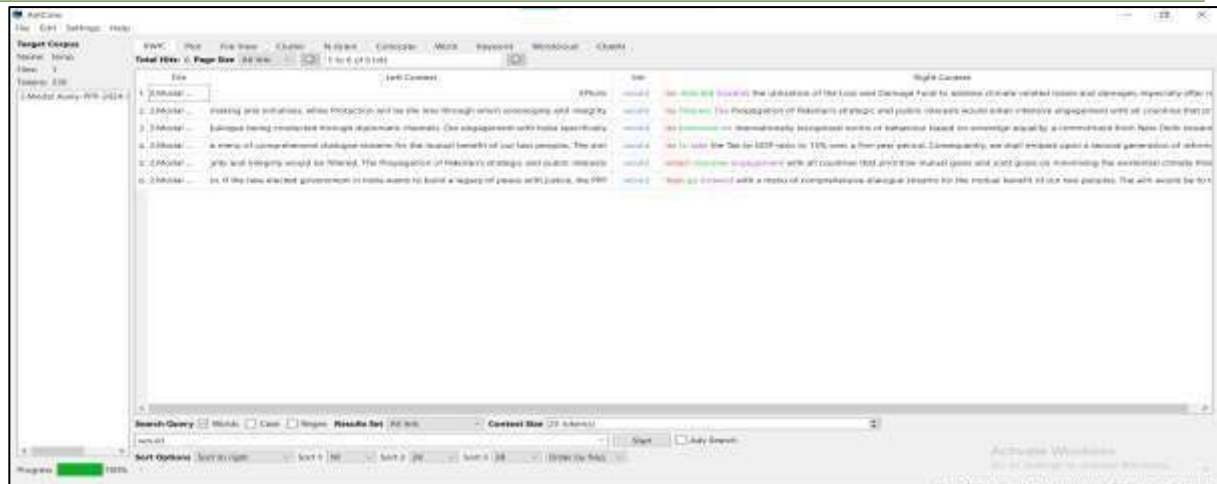
**(ii) Pakistan People's Party(PPP): Use of Modals in General Election Manifestos 2024**

**Table: 5.6** Normalised Frequencies of Modal Verbs in PPP Manifesto 2024 Per 10000 Words.

| Modal Auxiliaries | Self (n) | Others (n) |
|---|---|---|
| Will | 200 | 01 |
| Would | 03 | - |
| Shall | - | 01 |
| Can | 08 | - |
| Could | - | 02 |
| Must | 03 | - |
| **Total** | **214** | **04** |

The table shows a recurrent employment of the modal auxiliary verb in the PPP 2024 manifesto, which constructs its powerful and resourceful political identity. The modal auxiliary "will" (n=200) has been found most frequent. This modal auxiliary emphasises certitude, portraying the party as committed, confident to carry out its agenda once it comes to power. It portrays the PPP leaders as practical and open-minded. It establishes an authoritative and composed stance of PPPP leadership. This implies a self-assured, strong image of PPPP. The KWIC analysis given below indicates the use of the modal auxiliary, presenting PPP as a reliable political party, as in S.No. 76 with the use of 'will', PML-N manifestos show its resolve as, 'our aim will be to set Pakistan's foot as a dynamic power. Similarly, in S.No. 80, 81 and 83 the text utilises the modal auxiliary 'will' expressing its determination to 'dedicated resource will be allocated…" and "a task force will be created" showing commitment of PPP to pro-people policies and agendas. It refers to epistemic meanings and raises hope for a bright future in the electorates.
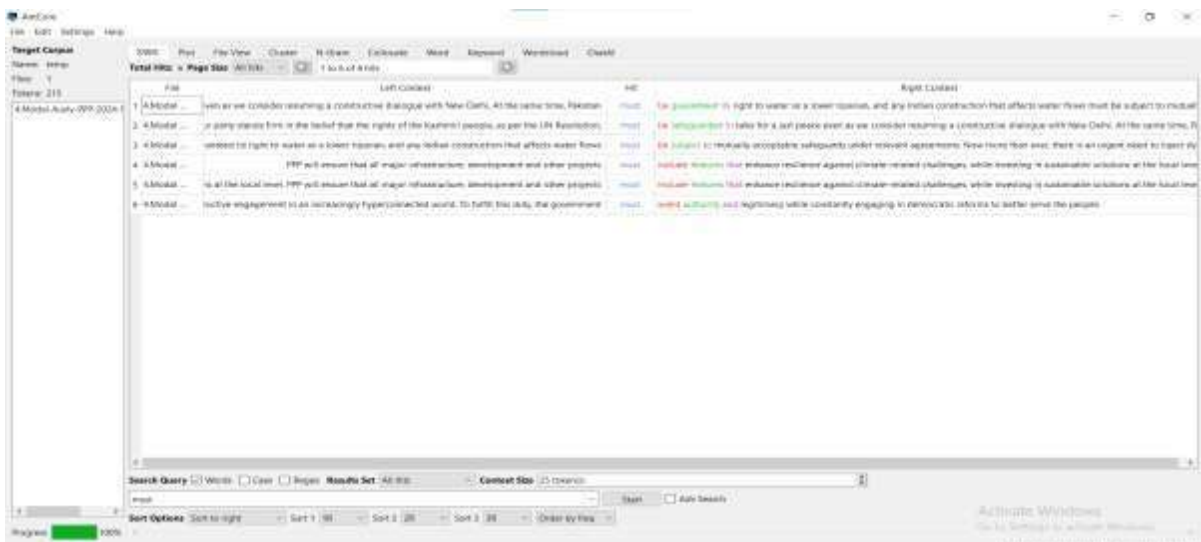
The text of the election manifesto of PPP avoids the use of speculative and conditional language evident in the less rfrequency of the modal auxiliary "would" (n=3).



The use of 'can' (n=8) is less frequent, but it is significant in reinforcing the party image, suggesting its commitment to public welfare and its promises. Its recurrent use foregrounds the party's capacity to act as a harbinger of change in the country. It also highlights that the party is capable and has the potential to effect change where required.

The use of "must" (n=3) constructs a tone of moral responsibility inconsonance with the socialist agenda of the PPP. These modal verbs, "would, can, must", have been used very infrequently, as suggested by their occurrence in the data. These scant references to others shows PPPPs' cautious stance to refer to their political rivals. The overall analysis of the modal verbs reveals the construction of a proactive and positive image of the PPPP. This this the voters are persuaded to support and vote for PPP during the elections.

It is very interesting to find that a minimal reference has been made for rival parties in the under-analysis manifesto. It implies the preference of the party to present internal agency rather than external commitments.

### (iii) Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI): Use of Modals in General Election Manifestos 2024
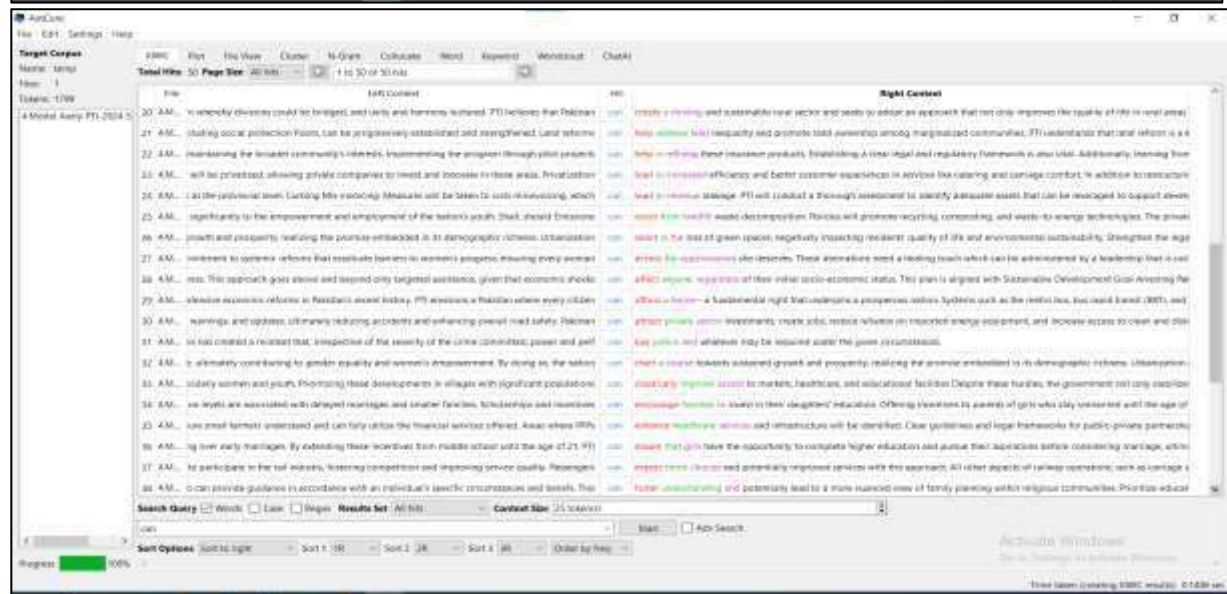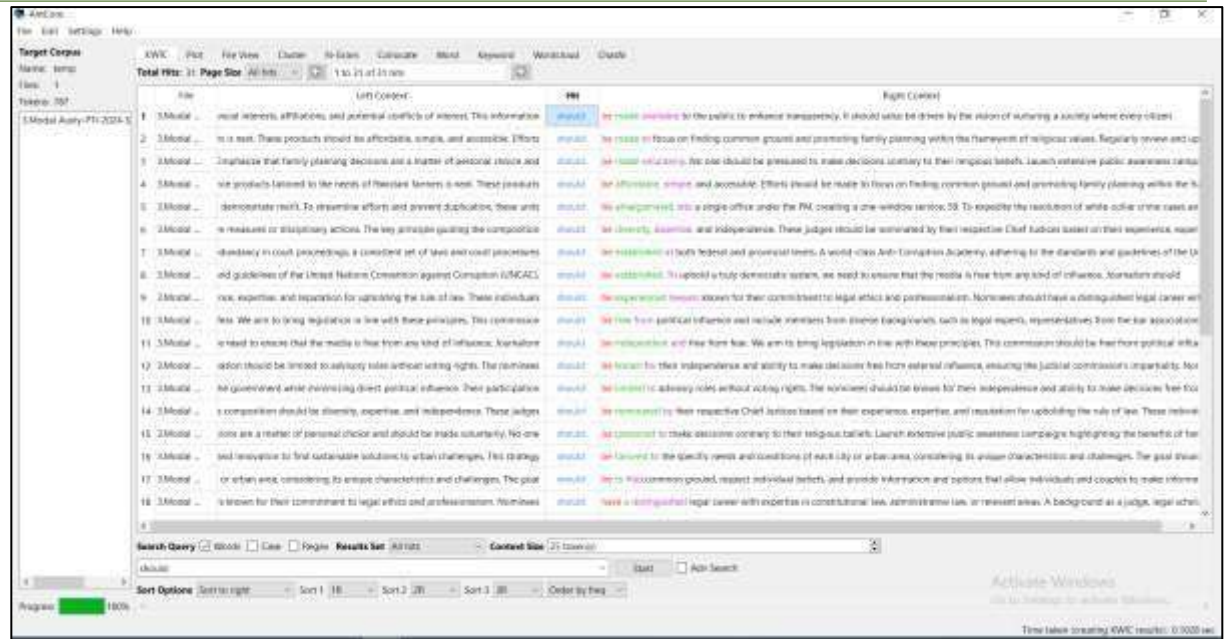
**Table: 5.7** Normalized Frequencies of Modal Verbs in Pakistan PTI Manifesto 2024 Per 10000 Words.

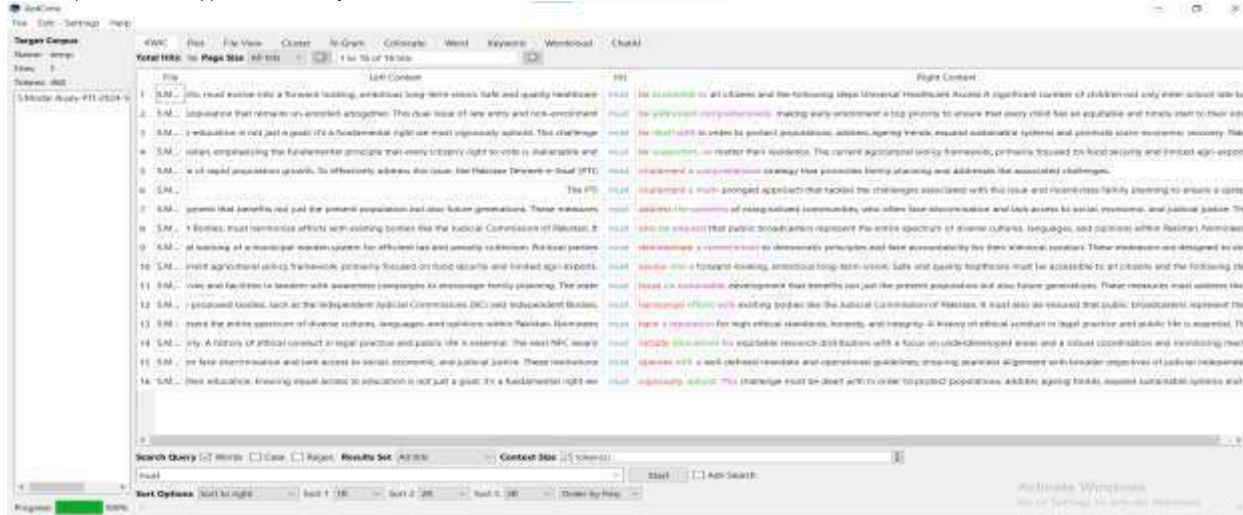| Modals | Self | Others |
|--------|------|--------|
| Will | 152 | - |
| Shall | 16 | - |
| Should | 07 | - |
| Can | 12 | - |
| Could | - | - |
| Must | 04 | 16 |
| **Total** | **191** | **16** |

This table presents the normalised frequencies of the modal auxiliary verbs for self and other references in the 2024 general election manifestos in PTI. The overall frequencies used for 'self' exceed those used for other references, which projects PTI's image as a strong and resourceful political entity. Among the auxiliary verbs, "will' is used in the highest frequency (n= 152), portraying PTI s the flag bearer of change and action. PTI shows its association of certitude, determination and proactivity through the strategic use of the election manifesto. It refers to epistemic meanings and raises a hope for a better future for the masses.

Similarly, PTI has employed modal auxiliary, though comparably less in frequency, but sixzabl e shall (16), should (7), can (12)" invokes the image of the party as responsible as well as aspirational. The KWIC analysis of these modal auxiliaries conveys the meaning of possibility, capability and obligation. The use of the modal auxiliary verb 'must' (n=4) emphasises a sense of duty and moral responsibility, which are linked strategically with the party's goal.
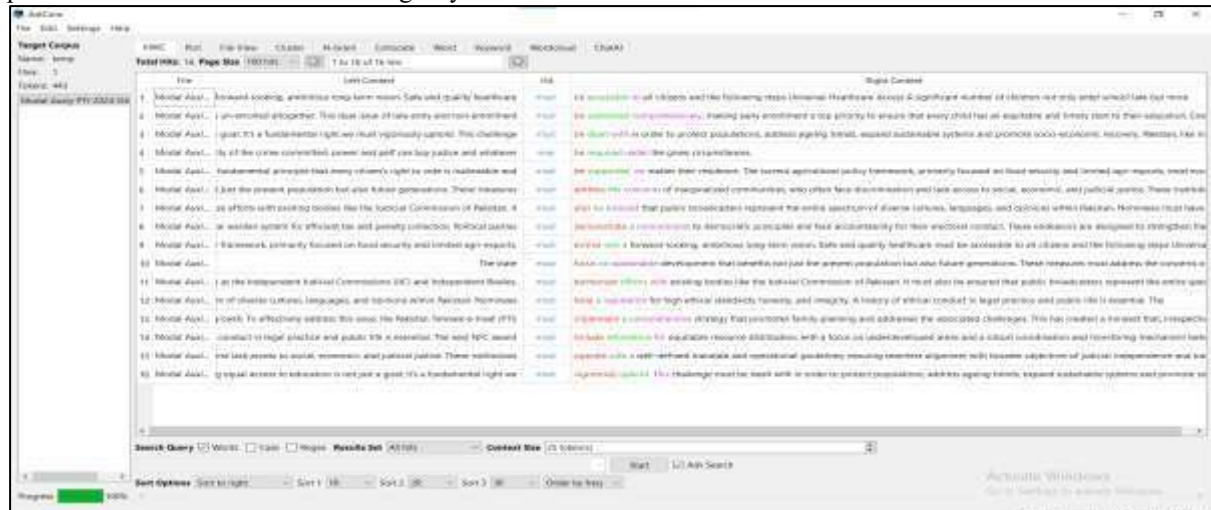
It is an interesting finding that not a single instance of a modal auxiliary other than "must" has been found in the PTI manifesto, indicating the representation of rival political parties as devoid of commitment and competence. Modal auxiliaries have been strategically employed in frequency for self and avoiding modals for the representation of the rival political parties in order to foreground its own ideological agenda of projecting the PTI party's leadership as trustworthy, honest and competent. Through this, the PTI establishes its reliability among its voters, establishing its distinct position.

It is very interesting to find that a minimal reference has been made for rival parties in the under-analysis manifesto. Whereas, in contrast to a high frequency of self-references, the use of modal auxiliaries to refer to political rivals is quite insignificant. There has been identified only a one modal auxiliary 'must(n=16). The sparse other references show that the party's own commitments and agency have been highlighted in the manifesto rather than external obligations. It suggests less preference of the party to point to external potential as well as possibilities and a refers to internal agency rather than external commitments.



## 5. OVERALL DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this section, the data were analysed using corpus-based methodology for the critical discourse analysis of three political parties' manifestos for the election year 2024. ANTCONC 3.4.4. was used to extract the frequencies of modal verbs were and Concordance lines were studied. Based on the linguistic features of the political discourse in the manifestos, the data was interpreted. The quantitative data was complemented with qualitative interpretation which helped to cross-check the validity and credibility of the results. The analysis indicates the ideological intent of the modal auxiliaries in the discourse of the political parties. The frequencies and distribution analysis with the help of the corpus tools has presented a comprehensive picture of how and to what extent different discursive strategies are employed by the selected political parties to construct political identities and ideologies.

It is found that the use of will and shall is predominant in the electioneering campaign manifestos of the selected political parties. The basic purpose these modal auxiliaries serve is to indicate political will and commitment, promises, and pledging. Through these, the political parties attempt to persuade the masses to support these political parties in the elections. As evident by the KWIC analysis, the modal auxiliaries reinforce their individual political ideologies and construct their positive image to elicit public support.

The analysis of the under comparison political parties points to an interesting finding of the use of minimal references for the rival political parties. In the manifestos of PML-N and PPP, the normalised frequencies of the modal auxiliaries in 4, respectively, whereas the PTI election manifesto of 2024 only modal auxiliary 'must' has been employed in the normalised frequency pf 16. In the "others" category, the modal verbs have been found very infrequently. It indicates that the identity of the party has been presented based on its own commitments, capacities, and responsibilities rather than validations from outside.

### 5.1 Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

The present study has examined a small-sized specialised corpus of the 2024 general election manifestos of the three major political parties in Pakistan. The scope of the present study was limited to one aspect of linguistic resources, i.e. modality, in line with the research questions. However, future research can extend and carry forward this groundwork by expanding the corpus to include multiple election cycles, speeches, and televised debates, while also analysing a broader set of linguistic features, offering a nuanced insight into political discourse.

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