

THE USE OF MODAL VERBS IN ENGLISH NOTARIAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This study examines the functional-pragmatic role of modal verbs in English notarial discourse. By analyzing a corpus of 150 notarial documents from a variety of sources, including public records and notary offices, the study identifies patterns in the use of modal verbs and their implications for the authority, obligation, and certainty conveyed in notarial communications. Qualitative content analysis and quantitative frequency analysis were used to examine the data. The results show that modal verbs such as “shall,” “must,” “may,” and “can” are used strategically to express legal obligations, permissions, and possibilities, contributing to the authoritative nature of notarial discourse. This study expands our understanding of legal-linguistic communication and has practical implications for notarial practice and teaching.

Keywords:

Notarial discourse, modal verbs, functional, pragmatic, frequency, analysis, implications, legal weight

Notarial discourse is a specialized genre in the legal field that refers to structured texts and statements created by notaries that use specific grammatical markers to convey legally significant information. These texts are often characterized by a formal style and precision, which is important for their legal validity.

Notarial discourse plays a crucial role in authenticating documents and transactions, ensuring compliance with legal rules, and providing evidentiary support. The language used in notarial documents must be precise, authoritative, and unambiguous to fulfill its legal functions. Modal verbs, in particular, play an important role in conveying the concepts of obligation, permission, possibility, and necessity, making them a critical component of notarial discourse.

Despite the importance of notarial discourse, the linguistic features and pragmatic strategies used in this genre have received limited attention in academic

research, especially in English. The specific role of modal verbs in constructing the authority and legal weight of notarial documents remains understudied. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a targeted analysis of the use of modal verbs in notarial discourse.

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyze the patterns and functions of modal verbs in English notarial discourse. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Determine the **frequency** and **distribution of different modal verbs** in notarial documents.
2. Explore the **functional roles of modal verbs** in conveying authority, commitment, permission, and opportunity.
3. Assess the **pragmatic implications of modal verb use** for the tone, formality, and legal weight of notarial discourse.

This study contributes to the fields of legal linguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics by providing information on the linguistic construction of authority and obligation in notarial discourse. The results may be useful for training notaries, improving the clarity and effectiveness of notarial documents, and standardizing notarial practice.

The following methods were used for this study:

Corpus collection: A corpus of 150 English notarial documents was compiled from various sources, including public records, notary offices, and legal databases. The documents covered various types of notarial acts, such as affidavits, powers of attorney, and certificates, to allow for a comprehensive analysis.

Data analysis:

1. Qualitative analysis: Each document was subjected to qualitative content analysis to determine the use and functions of modal verbs. The analysis focused on the context, co-text, and pragmatic force of the modal verbs in the documents.
2. Quantitative Analysis: Frequency analysis was conducted to determine the distribution of different modal verbs (e.g. shall, must, may, can) across the corpus. This quantitative approach complemented the qualitative results by providing a broader perspective on modal verb usage.

Analytical Framework:

The theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis included functional linguistics, which provided insights into the grammatical and semantic functions of

modal verbs, and pragmatics, which focused on the communicative intentions and contextual implications of modal verb usage.

Ethical Considerations:

All documents were analyzed anonymously and no personal or confidential information was included in the analysis to ensure ethical standards were met.

Frequency analysis revealed that 'shall' and 'must' were the most frequently used modal verbs, followed by 'may' and 'can'. "Shall" was used primarily in contexts requiring legal obligations and future intentions, while "must" indicated obligatory actions and requirements. "May" and "can" were used to express permission and possibility, respectively.

Functional analysis revealed that modal verbs serve several functions in notarial discourse:

1. Authority and obligation: "Shall" and "must" were used to establish the notary's authority and impose legal obligations on the parties involved.
2. Permission and possibility: "May" and "can" were used to grant permission and indicate what is legally or practically possible.

Pragmatic analysis revealed that the use of modal verbs significantly affects the tone and formality of notarial documents. The choice of modal verb can either enhance or soften the legal weight of statements, influencing how readers perceive them. Here are some examples illustrating these pragmatic consequences:

1. Tone: The choice of modal verbs can make the language more assertive or vaguer. For example, using "shall" instead of "may" in a notarial document can convey a stronger sense of obligation, making the tone more authoritative.

- Affirmative: "The parties shall abide by the terms and conditions set forth in this document." - Preliminary: "The parties may abide by the terms and conditions set forth in this document."

2. Formality: Modal verbs can also affect the formality of language. "Must" and "have to" are less formal than "shall" or "will," which are typically used in legal and notarial contexts to maintain a formal tone.

- Formal: "The document must be signed in the presence of a notary."

- Less formal: "The document must be signed in the presence of a notary."

3. Legal Weight: The legal implications of modal verbs are important in notarial discourse. "Shall" generally denotes a mandatory action, while "may" suggests permission or an optional action. The wrong choice of modal verb can change the legal obligations or rights of the parties involved.

- Mandatory: "The notary must verify the identity of the signatory." -
Permissive: "The notary may verify the identity of the signatory."

The findings suggest that modal verbs are strategically deployed in notarial discourse to achieve specific communicative goals. The prevalence of "shall" and "must" underscores the importance of establishing legal obligations and authority, while "may" and "can" facilitate the expression of permissions and possibilities.

Compared to existing research on legal and official discourse, this study provides novel insights into the specific use of modal verbs in notarial contexts. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of modal verbs in legal communication but have not focused on their role in notarial discourse.

The findings have practical implications for notarial practice and training. By understanding the functional-pragmatic roles of modal verbs, notaries can enhance the clarity and effectiveness of their documents, ensuring they meet legal standards and communicative goals.

The study is limited by its focus on English notarial discourse and the specific types of documents analyzed. Future research could expand the corpus to include a wider range of notarial documents and explore modal verb use in other languages. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how changes in legal practices and technologies affect notarial discourse over time.

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the use of modal verbs in English notarial discourse, revealing their critical role in conveying authority, obligation, permission, and possibility. The findings contribute to the understanding of legal-linguistic communication and have practical applications for notarial practice and training. Further research is needed to explore modal verb use in different linguistic and cultural contexts, enhancing our understanding of notarial discourse as a specialized genre within the legal domain.

In summary, the use of modal verbs in notarial discourse must be carefully considered to ensure that the intended tone, formality, and legal weight are accurately conveyed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table A: Frequency of Modal Verbs in the Notarial Corpus

Modal Verb	Frequency	Percentage
Shall	250	35.7%
Must	180	25.7%
May	100	14.3%
Can	70	10.0%
Will	50	7.1%
Should	30	4.3%
Would	20	2.9%
Could	10	1.4%

Might	10	1.4%
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Table B: Functional Roles of Modal Verbs

Modal Verb	Functional Role	Example
Shall	Legal Obligation	"The parties shall appear before the notary to execute the document."
Must	Mandatory Action/Requirement	"The document must be signed in the presence of the notary."
May	Permission	"The party may request a copy of the notarized document."
Can	Possibility/ Ability	"The notary can certify the authenticity of the signature."
Will	Future Intention	"The notary will ensure that all parties are present."
Should	Recommendation/Expectation	"The document should be reviewed before notarization."
Would	Conditional Action	"The notary would need to verify the identity of all parties."
Could	Potential Ability	"The parties could face legal consequences if the document is not properly notarized."
Might	Possibility (less certain)	"The notary might request additional documentation."

Appendix 2: Additional Examples from the Corpus

- "The affiant shall swear or affirm that the contents of the affidavit are true and correct to the best of their knowledge."

- "The notary must verify the identity of the signer using a government-issued photo ID."

- "The signer may choose to have a witness present during the notarization."

- "The notary can refuse to notarize a document if they have any doubts about the signer's identity or the document's authenticity."
- "The parties will need to provide their full legal names for the notarized document."
- "The notary should keep a record of all notarizations performed."
- "The signer would need to sign the document in the notary's presence."
- "The notary could face legal repercussions if they fail to follow proper notarization procedures."
- "The signer might need to provide additional documentation if the notary deems it necessary."