

MODALITY IN CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE BY GREENPEACE AUSTRALIA PACIFIC

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Abstract: *The issue of climate change poses a serious challenge to the world we live in. People's concerns with the issue of climate change and environmental agenda are echoed by a number of nongovernmental organisations, for instance, Greenpeace Australia Pacific (GAP), which communicates its views on the matter to the public and selected target groups on Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook. Currently, however, there is insufficient scholarship on GAP's communication on SNSs. In particular, little is known about the role of modality in GAP's climate change and environmental discourse on Facebook. The article presents a mixed-methods study that investigates how modality, which is often associated with modal verbs, is used by GAP in its communication on Facebook. The study involves a corpus of GAP's status updates on Facebook that are investigated for the frequency of the occurrence of modal verbs and their pragmatic roles. The results of the analysis reveal that the most frequently occurring modal verbs in the corpus are can, will, and would, which perform a range of pragmatic roles that are further discussed in the article.*

Keywords: *discourse, Greenpeace, modality, modal verbs, modals*

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Introduction

Currently, in 2024, the issue of climate change represents a challenge that affects business, political, and societal actors worldwide (Baquero & Monsalve, 2024; Hale, 2024; Kapranov, 2022a, 2024). The problems that are posed by climate change reverberate with civil society (Bulkeley & Newell, 2010; Kapranov, 2017a) and, more specifically, with a number of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), such as Greenpeace Australia Pacific, which is “an independent environmental campaigning organisation that uses non-violent direct action to work for solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future” (Greenpeace Australia Pacific, 2024). In its climate change- and environment-related activities, Greenpeace Australia Pacific (further in the article – GAP) relies heavily on Social Networking Sites (SNSs), for instance Facebook, in order to communicate with its supporters, disseminate its policies, calls for action and news, engage in fundraising, and raise people’s awareness of climate change, environmental protection, and sustainability (Ballew et al., 2015; Özgen et al., 2015; Silva, 2012). In this regard, the literature contends that SNSs (inclusive of Facebook) are regarded as a soft power tool that environmental NGOs (e.g., GAP) utilise in their communication with the public (Mavrodieva et al., 2019; Robelia et al., 2011). Therefore, it seems relevant to shed light on how GAP presents the issues of climate change and environment on Facebook and what kind of linguistic means are employed in representing these issues.

To-date, however, too little attention has been paid in the literature to the linguistic means of climate change and environmental communication by GAP on SNSs, especially on Facebook. Furthermore, there are no published studies that illuminate the use of modality, which is often represented by modal verbs, in climate change and environmental communication by GAP on Facebook. Seeking to address this understudied research facet, the article introduces and discusses a mixed-methods study that looks into the frequency and pragmatic use of modal verbs in a corpus of GAP’s Facebook status updates on the issues of climate change and environment. The focus on modality that is manifested by modal verbs is explained by the important pragmatic role that they play in climate change communication (Fløttum, 2010, 2014). Compare, for instance, the following two clauses that deal with the issue of climate change, whose pragmatic meanings depend critically on modality, which is manifested by the modal verbs *must* and *should*, respectively:

- (a) Municipal governments must be included in global efforts to mitigate climate change. (Betsill, 2001)
- (b) Municipal governments should be included in global efforts to mitigate climate change. (Adapted from Betsill (2001))

The critical difference between (a) and (b), as shown above, rests with the expression of necessity and, most likely, a strong recommendation in (a), whereas in (b) we can observe a situation that is associated with desirability and, perhaps, a mild suggestion. Taking into account the role of modal verbs in discourse, the aim of the study is to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What are the frequently occurring modal verbs in the corpus of Facebook status updates by GAP?

RQ 2: What are pragmatic roles and types of modality that the frequently occurring modal verbs in the corpus associated with?

Setting the scene: A literature review on Greenpeace's discourse

Prior to addressing the RQs in the study, it seems pertinent to set the scene by acquainting the readers with an outline of the literature on Greenpeace and its climate change- and environment-related discourse. Founded in Canada in 1971, Greenpeace is considered one of the largest environmental NGOs worldwide (Gkotsis et al., 2006). Its branches are found in the major developed countries, inclusive of Australia (Eden, 2004). As a leading NGO that focuses on the issues of the environment, climate change, and environmental sustainability, Greenpeace has gained political and societal weight as a beacon of “an ecological sensibility that indirectly influences behavior at multiple scales, from individuals, to governments, to multilateral organizations” (Zelko, 2017, p. 319). Globally, Greenpeace is renowned for its social activism, which, typically, aims to “demand corporate change to tackle many issues, from the companies’ lack of attention to social problems to global climate demands” (Siedschlag & Lana, 2024, p. 1). The literature contends that Greenpeace’s discourse in general is (a) anti-corporate (Azpíroz, 2019), (b) anti-authoritarian, yet populist in tonality (Haig, 2001), and (c) science-based (Price, 2023).

In terms of communicating its environmental and climate change agenda, the literature indicates that Greenpeace’s discourse, or rather discourses, are reflective of the following challenge. Given that Greenpeace’s discourses pertain to global issues (e.g., climate change) that require local solutions carried out by local actors, the literature points to a certain degree of duality in environmental and climate change-related discourses by Greenpeace due to a global perspective on the one hand and a local fragmentation of the global issues and respective global discourses by its respective national branches on the other hand (Heinz et al., 2007). The literature, however, posits that despite the fragmentation of Greenpeace’s global discourses (Heinz et al., 2007), Greenpeace strives to portray itself globally in a positive light (Bennie, 1998; Gueterbock, 2004). In particular, in its climate change-related and environmental discourses Greenpeace seeks to capitalise on its successful environmental campaigns,

which facilitate the image of Greenpeace as an efficient and influential actor on the global environmental arena (Doyle, 2007; Kapranov, 2017a, 2017b; Katz-Kimchi & Manosevitch, 2019; Niceforo, 2021).

Despite a seemingly divergent array of fragmented discourses by the local branches of Greenpeace, the literature, however, demonstrates a surprising unity of Greenpeace discourses on climate change and environment, at least as far as the discursive means of multimodality (e.g., photos) are concerned (Doyle, 2007). Specifically, the literature posits that the iconic photos of polar bears without their natural sea ice habitat form an easy-to-understand visual metaphor of climate change, which is utilised quite successfully by Greenpeace and its branches in numerous environmental campaigns (Davis et al., 2016; Tsoukas, 1999). The extensive and pragmatically motivated use of multimodality is supported by fairly recent research findings, which reveal that Greenpeace, in particular, GAP, often resort to communicating their stance on environmental issues by such multimodal means as emojis and photos, which impart a visual dimension to GAP's online discourse that is critical to its environmental campaigns (Kapranov, 2023a).

Another multimodal means of environmental communication by Greenpeace involves an ample use of apps (e.g., *Plastic Radar*) and SNSs (for instance, Instagram) that facilitate its engagement with the public at large (Niceforo, 2021; Pramana et al., 2021). Furthermore, the literature reports that Greenpeace exploits video-narratives on sustainability on both YouTube and its official websites, which are characterised by a striking affinity with the language of advertising (Abbamonte, 2021). In particular, Greenpeace's video-narratives on sustainability often feature an idyllic landscape in conjunction with the behind-scenes narration that capitalises on implicit intertextual messages, which are conducive to creating an idealised, almost bucolic, eco-friendly image (ibid.). Given that Greenpeace utilises SNSs and multimodality rather generously, it seems logical to provide the readers with an outline of SNS-based discourse.

SNS-based discourse: Theoretical considerations

SNSs have become a part of people's daily reality (Sauter, 2014). In computer-mediated communication (CMC), an SNS is regarded as a communication system that involves registered participants and affords them digital tools for interaction and representation of their actions and thoughts (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Kapranov, 2016; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos, 2012). Given the pervasiveness of SNSs, at least in the Anglophone discursive space, SNS-based discourse has attracted research interest in CMC, discourse and media studies (Androutsopoulos, 2014, 2015, 2017; Kapranov, 2019).

The literature is indicative of several specific features that underlie SNS-based discourse. First of all, it is argued in the literature that one of the features

that determines the specificity of SNS-based discourse involves sharing. It is seen as an inherent, in-built component of SNS-based discourse (John, 2013). Specifically, sharing in the SNS-based discursive context presupposes (i) the distribution of digital content (e.g., hyperlinks) and (ii) communication as story-telling (e.g., a Facebook status update), which may involve people's locations, opinions of current events, and their quotidian activities (John, 2013). On Facebook, sharing can be regarded as discursive practices that take place in CMC contexts (John, 2013), such as the transformation of orally delivered discourse to its written form, which rather often includes multimodal elements, for instance hashtags, hyperlinks, videos, etc. (Androutsopoulos, 2011, 2013; Kapranov, 2014; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos, 2012).

Another feature of SNS-based discourse involves its participatory character (Androutsopoulos, 2015, 2017). This feature consists in assembling public and/or private audiences, who can be referred to as the recipients of sharing (John, 2013). They also can be seen in terms of Facebook as friends, followers, and subscribers. Typically, the recipients of sharing form a rather mosaic group or even groups of people, whose co-occurrence on a given SNS is known in the literature as “context collapse” (Androutsopoulos, 2014). “Context collapse” can be defined as a process of merging of diverse social contexts and their representatives into a common SNS-based context (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In other words, SNSs tend to merge (i.e., collapse) those users, who would not share much in common in their offline lives, whilst their online presence could be marked by the “people they do not normally bring together, such as acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

In addition to the aforementioned construal of “context collapse”, SNS-based discourse is argued to involve the notion of “significant moments” (Androutsopoulos, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017). It is posited in the literature that “significant moments” seem to be semiotically significant to the SNS users and their online activities (Androutsopoulos, 2014, 2015). Within the context of Facebook, for instance, “significant moments” are problematised as communicative acts that represent an important event to the user and their Facebook friends (Androutsopoulos et al., 2013). Obviously, only those Facebook friends that are privy to the background knowledge associated with a significant moment could understand and, if necessary, share the moment with other Facebook users and friends (Androutsopoulos & Tereick, 2015).

Finally, one of the salient features of SNS-based discourse involves the construal of “linguistic repertoire”, which is theorised to be an individualised, even SNS-specific, norm of the particular speech community that utilises CMC on SNSs (Androutsopoulos, 2007a, 2007b). The construal of “linguistic repertoire” in digital CMC contexts is argued to be associated with the specificity of different multimedia and digital communicative practices (Androutsopoulos, 2015, 2017).

In SNS-based discourse, linguistic repertoires seem to be determined and, to an extent, constrained by the users' flow of communication in space and time (Androutsopoulos, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017).

Having outlined the specificity of SNS-based discourse, it seems logical to proceed to the theoretical premises of the present study, which involve modality.

The present study and its theoretical premises that concern modality

As previously mentioned, there are no published studies on modality in GAP's discourse. In this regard, it should be emphasised that modality is rarely addressed in research on climate change- and environment-related discourses (Fløttum, 2010; Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b). The present study aims to fill in the current gap in scholarship by shedding light on the use of modality that is manifested by the central modal verbs in GAP's online communication on Facebook. Prior to doing so, let us consider the theoretical framework of the study that is based, predominantly, on the approach to modality formulated and developed by Palmer (1990).

Whilst there are multiple approaches to modality (Depraetere & Reed, 2006; Kapranov, 2022b; Payne, 2011; Skorasińska, 2014, 2019), the theoretical premises found in Palmer (1990) provide a solid theoretical background that facilitates the analysis of modality in written discourse produced by English native speakers (L1). Palmer's (1990) theoretical framework, which focuses on modality in English L1, is relevant in the context of the study, given that the corpus is comprised of Facebook status updates written by Australian Facebook users in Australia, i.e. in the country, where English is spoken as L1.

According to Palmer (1990), modality in English is "a broad notional area that may involve various kinds of linguistic expressions" (Tsangalidis & Facchinetti, 2009, p.19). Whilst modality is not clearly definable, it is, mostly, rendered by modal auxiliary verbs as well as other grammatical and semantic categories (Palmer, 1990). Furthermore, Palmer (1990) argues that a certain degree of vagueness associated with modality in English

gives the investigator no very clear guidelines concerning where to set the limits. Thus in English, although there are six modal verbs that must certainly be included (WILL, SHALL, MAY, CAN, MUST and OUGHT TO), there are two (DARE and NEED) that are more marginal; moreover, some of the meanings of these verbs are 'more modal' than others. Then there are several others of varying status: USED TO is formally within the system, but semantically has virtually nothing in common with the others, and will not be considered in this book. Have To, Be Able To, Be Willing To, Be Bound To and Be Going To

are closely related semantically (though with some significant differences), but formally outside the system, while *Is To* is problematic. (Palmer, 1990, p. 3)

Palmer (1990) distinguishes three main types of modality, namely (i) epistemic, (ii) deontic, and (iii) dynamic. According to Palmer (1990, p. 50), epistemic modality is subjective, given that the epistemic judgment rests with the speaker. Deontic modality is typically manifested by the modals that denote permission, obligation, and even a threat (Palmer, 1990, p. 69). Dynamic type of modality, as explained by Palmer (1990, p. 83), refers to the ability or volition of the subject in a clause. The types of modality in accordance with Palmer (1990) are further specified and illustrated in Table 1 below. It should be emphasised that all the examples and explanations in Table 1 are taken from Palmer (1990).

Table 1. *The Types of Modality According to Palmer (1990)*

#	The Type of Modality	Explanation According to Plamer (1990)
1	Epistemic modality renders	<p>possibility, which is associated with <i>may</i>. It can be paraphrased as ‘possible that’. Under the heading of epistemic possibility the ‘concessive’ use of <i>may</i> might also be handled (e.g., “Whatever John may say ...”);</p> <p>a judgment, and/or a stronger claim than the strongest of all epistemic judgments;</p> <p>possibility expressed by <i>will</i>, however, it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to distinguish epistemic <i>will</i> from the <i>will</i> of futurity (e.g., John will go to London tomorrow). In case of epistemic <i>will</i>, the progressive form of the following verb is often used, where there is no duration, to indicate an epistemic sense (e.g., John <i>will</i> be going to London tomorrow);</p> <p>uncertainty and vagueness by the tentative forms <i>might</i> and <i>would</i>, which are the relevant forms of <i>may</i> and <i>will</i>; additionally, there are cases of <i>should</i> being used in what appears to be an epistemic sense (e.g., Well both of them should be on the Board).</p>

#	The Type of Modality	Explanation According to Plamer (1990)
2	Deontic modality renders	<p>possibility, which is marked by <i>may</i> and <i>can</i>. In particular, the occurrence or potential occurrence of <i>may</i> will usually distinguish this kind of modality from the other non-epistemic kinds. Deontic necessity involves <i>must</i>, but there is no clear line between its uses for deontic and neutral dynamic necessity;</p> <p>permission (<i>may, can</i>), an obligation (<i>must</i>), a promise or threat (<i>shall</i>). <i>May</i>, if not epistemic, is usually clearly performative; it gives permission. Unlike <i>can</i> it is not also used normally for dynamic possibility;</p> <p>necessity, which is associated with <i>must</i>, in which the speaker clearly takes responsibility for the imposing of the necessity (e.g., I've been telling Peter, as I've been telling several people, you know, 'You must get into permanent jobs);</p> <p>an undertaking or guarantees that the event will take place, which is associated with <i>shall</i>. <i>Shall</i> does not merely lay an obligation, but actually guarantees that the action will occur (e.g., You shall have it tomorrow).</p>
3	Dynamic modality renders	<p>the ability of the subject (e.g., He's one of the senior referees in the league, fairly strict disciplinarian, can handle games of this nature). Subject orientation should not, however be simply and strictly defined in terms of ability. Only animate creatures may have ability, but subject orientation is possible with inanimates, where it indicates that they have the necessary qualities to cause the event to take place (e.g., Religion can summate, epitomize, relate, and conserve all highest ideals and values). Can in the aforementioned example implies positive qualities of religion.</p>

In addition to Palmer's (1990) approach to modality, the study is informed by the consideration of pragmatic roles of modal verbs in climate change- and environment-related discourse, which are described in Kapranov (2023b, 2023c) and Fløttum (2010, 2014). Specifically, they argue that modal verbs are amply utilised in corporate and political discourses in order to facilitate the creation of a positive image vis-à-vis the issues of climate change and environmental

sustainability. According to Fløttum (2010, 2014) and Kapranov (2023b, 2023c), the central modals, in particular *will*, are quite productively used as boosters in climate change discourse, in which they tend to express certainty and, less commonly, assertion. In line with Fløttum (2010, 2014) and Kapranov (2023d), the central modals (for instance, *would*) are regarded as a valuable pragmatic means of hedging that helps eschew an impression of being too authoritative or domineering, which, in turn, contributes discursively to positive image-building by a politician, a corporate and/or a public body. In light of the approach to the pragmatic roles of the central modals that is found in Fløttum (2010, 2014) and Kapranov (2023c), hedging in climate change discourse as well as environmental sustainability discourses is associated with *may*, *might*, *could*, *would*, and *should*, whereas boosting is typically expressed by *must*, *can*, and *will*. It should be noted that a similar approach to the pragmatic roles of the central modals is found in Hyland (1994, 2000), whose research, however, does not address climate change- and environment-related discourse.

It should be made clear, however, that whereas Fløttum's (2010, 2014) and Kapranov's (2023b, 2023c) views of the pragmatic roles of modals as a discursive image-building device form one of the cornerstones of this investigation, the central modals in the study are assumed to play an array of polyfunctional roles (Atsuko, 2001; Facchinetti, 2003). Arguably, a central modal verb may be associated with several pragmatic roles, which are actualised in the stretch of discourse and may contribute not only to positive image-building as indicated by Fløttum (2010, 2014) and Kapranov (2023c), but also to ascribing negative roles to discursive actors, depending on the communicative situation at hand.

The present study: Its specific research aims and corpus

Aided by the aforementioned theoretical considerations, the specific aims of the study are threefold: (i) to collect a corpus of GAP's status updates on Facebook; (ii) to establish the frequency of the central modal verbs in the corpus; (iii) to identify possible pragmatic roles, which the most frequently occurring modals play in the corpus; and (iv) to specify the types of modality the most frequently occurring modals in the corpus are associated with. In harmony with the research aims, the RQs have been formulated (see the introductory part of the article).

The corpus of the study is comprised of GAP's Facebook status updates posted online from 1 June 2023 to 30 November 2023 (i.e., six months in total). Following the literature (Kapranov, 2014, 2019, 2022a), the cut-off of six months is considered sufficient for the corpus collection. Hence, the corpus involves GAP's Facebook status updates downloaded from its official Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/greenpeaceaustraliapacific>, converted into Word files and processed in the statistical program Statistical Package for Social

Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 (IBM, 2011). The application of SPSS to the corpus has revealed that it is comprised of 147 status updates and 7 385 words in total (mean 50.2, standard deviation 40.9).

Methodology

From the vantage point of methodology, the study is informed by the quantitative and qualitative considerations. The quantitative part is facilitated by the computer program AntConc (Anthony, 2022). Specifically, the quantitative corpus analysis in AntConc consists in computing the frequency of the central modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would*). Thereafter, the frequency of the occurrence of each central modal verb is processed in SPSS (IBM, 2011) in order to calculate its mean, standard deviation, and the margin of error. In addition, the ratio of each central modal verb in relation to the total number of modals in the corpus is also calculated in SPSS.

The qualitative part involves the identification of pragmatic roles that the central modal verbs play in the corpus. The identification of the roles is based upon the theoretical premises outlined in Fløttum (2010) and Kapranov (2023c). In line with them, each central modal verb in the corpus is examined for its possible participation in creating (i) a positive image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders; (ii) a negative image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders; (iii) a negative image of GAP's opponents; (iv) a positive image of GAP's opponents; (v) an objective neutral role associated with stating and reporting facts, data, etc.; and (vi) a subjective role associated with expressing uncertainty, doubt and a vague opinion. In addition, the qualitative part of the analysis involves a manual investigation of the types of modality in accordance with Palmer (1990). Specifically, I analyse how the most frequently occurring modals in the corpus are associated with the types of modality postulated by Palmer (1990).

Results and discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis reveal that in total there are 56 occurrences (i.e., 100%) of the central modals in the corpus. Their descriptive statistics are given in Table 2, which summarises the total number (N) of the modals in absolute values, their means (M), standard deviations (SD), and the margin of error (ME) based upon the 95% confidence interval. Moreover, Table 2 involves the frequency of the occurrence of the modals normalised per 1000 words. In addition, Table 2 summarises the ratio (as percentage) of the specific modal verb relative to the total number of modals in the corpus.

Table 2. *The Frequency of the Central Modal Verbs in the Corpus*

#	Modals	Absolute Frequency	Normalised Frequency per 1000 words	The Ratio (in %) of the Specific Modal Relative to the Total N of Modals
1	<i>Can</i>	Total N = 22 M = 1.1 SD = 0.3 ME = 1.1 ± 0.131 (± 11.95%)	3.0	39.3 %
2	<i>Could</i>	Total N = 2 M = 1.0 SD = 0 ME = 1 ± 0 (± 0.00%)	0.3	3.6 %
3	<i>May</i>	Total N = 3 M = 1.5 SD = 0.5 ME = 1.5 ± 0.693 (± 46.20%)	0.4	5.4 %
4	<i>Might</i>	-	-	-
5	<i>Must</i>	Total N = 2 M = 1.0 SD = 0 ME = 1 ± 0 (± 0.00%)	0.3	3.6 %
6	<i>Shall</i>	-	-	-
7	<i>Should</i>	Total N = 1 M = 0 SD = 0 ME = 0	0.1	1.8 %
8	<i>Will</i>	Total N = 15 M = 1.3 SD = 0.8 ME = 1.25 ± 0.469 (± 37.53%)	2.0	26.8 %
9	<i>Would</i>	Total N = 11 M = 1.2 SD = 0.4 ME = 1.22 ± 0.272 (± 22.22%)	1.5	19.6 %

Let us discuss the findings, which are presented in Table 2, in conjunction with the RQs in the study.

Discussing RQ 1: The most frequently used modal verbs in the corpus

As indicated in the introduction, RQ 1 in the study seeks to learn about the most frequently occurring modal verbs in the corpus. It is seen in Table 2 that the most frequently occurring modals in the corpus are represented by *can*, *will*, and *would*. In this regard, the frequent occurrence of *can* and *will* in the corpus lends support to the literature, which indicates that they are utilised rather frequently in climate change discourse (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b). Specifically, it has been found in the study by Kapranov (2023b) that *can* is the most frequent modal verb in academic discourse on climate change and climate-change-related health issues. Its frequency in normalised values in Kapranov's study (2023b) is rather similar to the normalised frequency in the present corpus.

Additionally, the present findings buttress the prior study by Kapranov (2023c), in which *can* is demonstrated to occur frequently in the discourses on environmental sustainability by two well-known British retailers. In particular, the normalised frequencies of *can* that are reported in Kapranov (2023c) and in the present corpus, respectively, are similar. These findings suggest that the frequent use of *can* in climate change discourse forms part of what Androutsopoulos (2007a, 2007b) refers to as “linguistic repertoire” in SNS-based communication. Arguably, it seems quite possible that climate change discourses, in particular SNS-based ones, may employ *can* rather frequently due to the specificity of SNS-bounded communication that is reflective of SNS users' proclivity to use a certain modal verb (Androutsopoulos, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017). At the same time, however, it appears feasible that *can* might be one of the frequently occurring modal verbs in climate change discourses irrespective of their media. Obviously, these contentions should be treated with caution, since more data are needed to glean a more profound insight into the frequency of *can* in climate change discourses on SNSs.

The high frequency of *will* in the corpus supports the literature (Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b), which posits that it is often employed in climate change discourse. In particular, the high frequency of *will*, which is reported in the literature (Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023c), is explained by political and corporate actors' confidence and certainty of what they communicate to their stakeholders as far as the issues of climate change and environmental sustainability are concerned. In other words, the literature (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b, 2023c) suggests that the frequent use of *will* in climate change and environmental discourses correlates with the corporate and/or political actors' intentions to construe their positive image in

relation to the issue of climate change. Additionally, the high frequency of *will* in the corpus can be accounted by the contention found in the prior studies (Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b, 2023c), which point to the rather frequent occurrence of *will* in expressing judgements and opinions on the issues of climate change and environmental sustainability.

As mentioned, *would* is another frequently occurring modal in the corpus. However, its high frequency of occurrence is not reported in the literature on climate change discourse (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Fløttum & Dahl, 2012; Kapranov, 2023b, 2023c). In particular, whereas in academic discourse on climate change and health the occurrence of *would* appears to be rather low (Kapranov, 2023b), *would* seems to be marginally present in corporate and political discourses on the issue of climate change (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Fløttum & Dahl, 2012). A relatively high frequency of the occurrence of *would* in the present corpus can be accounted, arguably, by its pragmatic roles that are associated with tentativeness and uncertainty (Kapranov, 2023d). This observation leads us to the discussion of RQ 2 in the study, which looks into the pragmatic roles of the frequently occurring modals in the corpus.

Discussing RQ 2: The pragmatic roles and types of modality of the most frequently occurring modal verbs in the corpus

It is stated in the introductory part of the article that RQ 2 is concerned with the pragmatic roles and types of modality that are associated with the frequently occurring modals in the corpus. Given that the results of the corpus analysis have revealed that the most frequently used modal verbs are *can*, *will*, and *would* (see Table 2), let us focus the discussion on them, paying attention to their pragmatic roles.

Prior to proceeding to the pragmatic roles of *can*, *will*, and *would*, however, it seems reasonable to revisit the construal of sharing in the sense postulated by Androutsopoulos (2011, 2013). To reiterate, as a feature of SNS-based discursive practices, sharing presupposes online storytelling that involves people's opinions and reflects their quotidian activities (Androutsopoulos, 2011, 2013; John, 2013). We may argue that sharing in the context of climate change and environmental communication on Facebook by Greenpeace in general and GAP in particular would be characterised by a pragmatic tendency to focus on climate change-related environmental activism, which, typically, aims at presenting Greenpeace and its respective national branches in a positive light (Siedschlag & Lana, 2024) concurrently with creating a negative, or at least, less favourable image of corporations and authorities that are responsible for the negative consequences of climate change and environmental pollution (Azpíroz, 2019; Bennie, 1998; Doyle, 2007; Gueterbock, 2004; Haig, 2001; Kapranov, 2017a, 2017b, 2023a; Katz-Kimchi & Manosevitch, 2019; Niceforo, 2021; Price,

2023). In other words, Greenpeace and GAP, respectively, are likely to share positive news and storylines about themselves on Facebook.

Indeed, our reasoning that concerns GAP's pragmatic strategy of sharing positive status updates on Facebook is supported by the results of the qualitative analysis of the corpus. Specifically, the results have revealed that the frequently occurring modal verb *can* is involved, predominantly, in GAP's positive image-building, as evident from Table 3 below.

Table 3. *The Pragmatic Roles of 'Can' in the Corpus*


#	Pragmatic Roles of Can	Percentage
1	A positive image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	68.2 %
2	A negative image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	-
3	A negative image of GAP's opponents	9.1 %
4	A positive image of GAP's opponents	-
5	An objective neutral role associated with stating the facts	22.7 %
6	A subjective role associated with expressing uncertainty, doubt and a vague opinion	-

Judging from Table 3, the majority of the occurrences of *can* are associated with positive image-building by GAP (68.2%). This finding supports the literature (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Kapranov, 2023b, 2023c), which demonstrates that *can* is involved in facilitating a positive image of corporate actors in climate change discourse. In the corpus, the utilisation of *can* seems to contribute discursively to the creation of positivity and affection that celebrate the GAP's flagship vessel The Rainbow Warrior, as exemplified by excerpt (1).

Today marks 38 years since the bombing and sinking of the original #RainbowWarrior in New Zealand. Today we remember our crew member, photographer and dear friend, Fernando Pereira, who was killed, and the spirit that still lives on nearly 40 years later as we continue our mission for #ClimateJustice in the Pacific. You can't sink a rainbow. (GAP, 2023)

Whilst in (1) we observe the occurrence of *can* in a negative clause (e.g., You can't sink a rainbow), *can*, nevertheless, conveys a strong message of positivity and GAP's optimistic perspective on its future, which is rendered by the reference to the rainbow that, in turn, serves as an allusion to the original vessel The Rainbow Warrior that had been sunk in New Zealand in 1985.

Just like (1), excerpt (2) emblematises the occurrence of *can* in a negative clause, which, however, is deployed to exhibit GAP's willingness and enthusiasm to involve its supporters and stakeholders in a journey across the Pacific Ocean.

Thank you for the warm welcome, Vanuatu!  Our crew onboard the Rainbow Warrior are feeling very humbled and overwhelmed after this week's warm

‘welcome home’ by civil society groups, local communities and government representatives in Port Vila, Vanuatu. ♥ We can’t wait to take you along with us over the next few weeks on our [#ClimateJustice](#) journey across the Pacific. (GAP, 2023)

In addition to the facilitation of positive image-building illustrated by (1) and (2), *can* is used in the corpus in the neutral pragmatic role (22.7%), which is associated with stating the facts, as seen in excerpt (3).

Today, we have already used all the resources the Earth can renew this year. Let that sink in. (GAP, 2023)

Unlike the positive image of GAP (inclusive of its supporters and stakeholders), *can* is also involved in creating a negative image (9.1%) of GAP’s opponents, which, rather frequently, are represented by international fossil fuel corporations, as demonstrated in excerpt (4).

(4) Climate leaders across the Pacific are urging you to make a strong submission to the International Court of Justice so that the world’s biggest polluters can be held accountable. (GAP, 2023)

In terms of the discussion of *can* in the corpus, it should be noted that *can* is associated with the dynamic type of modality. As mentioned earlier in the article, the dynamic type of modality according to Palmer (1990) is, typically, manifested by *can*, which denotes ability and possibility, respectively, and expresses judgments about the degree that an action is possible. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis indicates that *can* in the present corpus is associated with dynamic modality, which comprises ability and extrinsic possibility (i.e., the occurrence of an event is possible for the reason that external circumstances do not prevent it from occurring).

Another frequently occurring modal in the corpus is *will*, whose pragmatic roles are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. *The Pragmatic Roles of 'Will' in the Corpus*

#	Pragmatic Roles of Will	Percentage
1	A positive image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	80.0 %
2	A negative image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	-
3	A negative image of GAP’s opponents	-
4	A positive image of GAP’s opponents	-
5	An objective neutral role associated with stating the facts	13.3 %
6	A subjective role associated with expressing uncertainty, doubt and a vague opinion	6.7%

It is seen in Table 4 that the major pragmatic role of *will* in the corpus is associated with the positive image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders (80.0%). This finding is encapsulated by excerpt (5).

(5) We will nurse. We will teach. We will look after. We care. And we will lead. ♥🙌 (GAP, 2023)

In contrast to the pragmatic roles of positive image-building in (5), *will* is less commonly engaged in the neutral pragmatic role associated with presenting facts (13.3%), as seen in excerpt (6).

(6) “Vanuatu belongs to me” ♥♥♥ As part of our visit to Vanuatu, the [#RainbowWarrior](#) hosted a special Art Exhibition onboard the helideck, curated with communities from across the world to build solidarity through demonstration that the fight to protect tradition and culture in the face of [#climatechange](#) is one that is global. 🌍👉 These precious cultural relics will be transported with us to Canberra and then to the Hague to confront decision makers with the stories of communities that stand to be impacted by political discussions about climate change. (GAP, 2023)

In addition to the neutral pragmatic role, *will* in the corpus seems to be involved in the pragmatic role of expressing a subjective opinion that is rather vague in nature, as seen in excerpt (7) below.

(7) Greenpeace’s mission is to secure an earth capable of nurturing life in all of its magnificent diversity. Our campaign work is motivated by a deep love of nature and humanity, and we believe that a flourishing earth will only be secured if fairness, justice and equality are at the heart of our decision-making. (GAP, 2023)

Contrary to *will* in (5), in which *will* clearly serves as a booster whose pragmatic role consists in amplifying the main message in one of GAP’s environmental campaigns (GAP, 2023), *will* in excerpt (7) renders an uncertain possibility, e.g. “a flourishing earth will only be secured if fairness...” (GAP, 2023). This finding is not reported in the prior studies on the use of modals in climate change discourse (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Kapranov, 2023b, 2023c). Presumably, the pragmatic role of *will* in (7) is determined, to an extent, by the epistemic type of modality in the sense found in Palmer (1990). According to Palmer (1990), the epistemic *will* in (7) is associated with possibility, which can be paraphrased as “something that might happen, but is unlikely or unknown”. Judging from the data, *will* in the corpus is, primarily, epistemic.

Similarly to the epistemic *will* in the corpus, the qualitative analysis indicates that the modal *would* appears to be associated with the epistemic type of modality in Palmer’s (1990) typology. It should be, perhaps, reminded that *would* is the third frequently occurring modal in the corpus. Its pragmatic roles are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *The Pragmatic Roles of 'Would' in the Corpus*

#	Pragmatic Roles of <i>Would</i>	Percentage
1	A positive image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	18.1 %
2	A negative image of GAP, its supporters and stakeholders	-
3	A negative image of GAP's opponents	36.4 %
4	A positive image of GAP's opponents	-
5	An objective neutral role associated with stating the facts	9.1 %
6	A subjective role associated with expressing uncertainty, doubt and a vague opinion	36.4 %

It follows from Table 5 that *would* is involved in playing two major pragmatic roles in the corpus. The first one consists in the subjective role, which manifests a vague opinion (36.4 %), i.e., the opinion that lacks determination and precision, as seen in excerpt (8).

(8) From whale habitats to rare ocean ecosystems, deep sea mining would have devastating consequences. 📍 (GAP, 2023)

The second one is represented by *would* that is actively involved in constructing a negative image of GAP's opponents (36.4 %), as illustrated by excerpt (9).

(9) [#BREAKING](#) 📍 Woodside has announced its plans to start seismic blasting near UNESCO-protected Ningaloo Reef for up to 80 days from TOMORROW.

...Despite an ongoing legal action filed in court challenging the regulator's decision to approve the work. 📍 Next door to a whale migration superhighway - including for endangered pygmy blue whales - the seismic blasting is to assess for climate-wrecking gas as part of Woodside's Burrup Hub development - the most polluting fossil fuel project currently proposed in Australia that would produce over 6 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions over its lifetime until 2070. 😡 [#WhalesNotWoodside](#)

Given that *would* in the corpus is associated with the epistemic type of modality, it could be posited that its pragmatic use lessens the intensity of negativity that is aimed at GAP's opponents, which are usually represented by big fossil fuel corporations. In other words, we may contend that *would* in the corpus, at least in its role of the negative image-builder of fossil fuel corporations (e.g., Woodside), is utilised as a hedging device. As far as *would* as a hedging device is concerned, it can be argued that its relatively high frequency in the corpus could be accounted for by fairly recent rules on Facebook that aim at preventing hate speech and minimising uncivil comments (Kalsnes & Ihlebæk, 2021). It is quite feasible that GAP, being aware of Facebook regulations, self-moderates its online debates with its opponents, for instance, fossil fuel corporations, and uses *would* as a hedging device in order to present its discourse in a more restrained

manner. This finding is in contrast to Haig (2001), who argues that discourses by Greenpeace are assertive and even brash.

Summarising the discussion of RQ 2, it seems possible to indicate that the high frequencies of *will* and *can* and their respective pragmatic roles in the corpus lend support to the literature (Fløttum, 2010, 2014; Kapranov, 2023c), which reports that the aforementioned modals constitute a recurrent discursive means of positive image-building in climate change-related and environmental discourses. Furthermore, the present findings, especially those that involve the modal verb *can*, buttress a number of prior studies (Azpíroz, 2019; Heinz et al., 2007; Siedschlag & Lana, 2024), which demonstrate that Greenpeace (inclusive of GAP) foregrounds its positive image and, concurrently, portrays fossil fuel corporations rather negatively.

Conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for future research

The article introduces a mixed-methods study on the frequency of the central modal verbs and their pragmatic roles in the corpus of GAP's status updates on Facebook. The study shows that GAP utilises modality, which is manifested by the central modals, quite amply in its communication on Facebook. It has been established in the present study that GAP's discourse on Facebook is marked by a distinct tendency to use the frequently occurring modals *can*, *will*, and *would*, which are associated, predominantly, with facilitating the construction of GAP's positive image. This finding is novel in the context of climate change- and environment-related discourse by Greenpeace. Another novel finding consists in a relatively high frequency of the modal verb *would*. This finding is in contrast with the literature, which demonstrates that the occurrence of *would* in climate change and environmental discourse is low. In the present corpus, however, the high frequency of *would* is accounted by its pragmatic roles that convey uncertainty and vague opinions, as well as mitigate the criticism of GAP's opponents, which are typically represented by fossil fuel corporations.

Obviously, the aforementioned findings should be regarded with caution due to the limitations of the present corpus. Another limitation of the study rests with its exclusive focus on the central modal verbs as the manifestation of modality. However, modality is not confined exclusively to modal verbs. Hence, the limitation of the study consists in the lack of attention to other linguistic means of expressing modality, for instance, semantic categories and different word classes.

Taking the limitations of the study into account, we contend, however, that the findings offer a promising direction to be explored in future research. One of the possible research directions that may eventuate from the present study could involve an investigation of modality in conjunction with multimodal means, such as photos and videos in Greenpeace discourse on SNSs. Another viable

direction that can capitalise on the findings in this study could be related to shedding light onto potential differences in the frequency of the occurrence of modal verbs in online discourses by various branches of Greenpeace, where English is the first language (for instance, Canada) and English as a foreign language (for example, Indonesia). The juxtaposition of the frequencies and use of the modal verbs by different national branches of Greenpeace could be reflective of the local realities of using English, which could be studied in more depth in future research endeavours.

Primary Sources

<https://www.facebook.com/greenpeaceaustraliapacific>

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