

# Modal verbs indicating politeness in business correspondence

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*Politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is supposed to be universally valid for every culture and language. It is generally acknowledged that language is not only an instrument for communicating information, it also marks identity, helps establish and maintain social relationships. Naturally, politeness plays an essential role in international business writing as well. The appropriate use of polite forms is particularly effective, practical and necessary in business letters and can lead to either to business success or its failure.*

*The paper aims to focus on the use of modal verbs in business correspondence. The practical part is focused on the analysis of the modal verbs in samples of business correspondence. In the presented paper the use of modal verbs in a corpus of 47 English business letters written by II year (B2 level) Georgian non-native students is analyzed. It may serve as a resource of linguistic realizations of politeness in English to native speakers of other languages.*

**Key words:** politeness, correspondence, modal verbs, letters.

## Introduction

With the globalization of world economy, business communication is becoming increasingly important. Business letters are a major form of communication in the commercial world. Consequently, they play an essential role in administration and operation of a business. The necessity to know politeness strategies and the ability to use appropriately the corresponding speech structures have gained practical value for maintaining business transactions. Writers of business letters usually write with definite purposes to the specific readers. To reach the intended goal, writers should always remember readers' needs and expectations and write in a polite and tactful way.

Politeness is considered to be one of the essential means of communication. Being polite is a complicated matter in any language as it involves both social and cultural values of the community. Business English is characterized by a high frequency of modal verbs and they are considered to be one of the most important component of business English vocabulary.

Modal verbs have widely been studied theoretically and empirically in English. The current study aims to find out which modal verbs are used most frequently in business correspondence expressing politeness.

## **Literature Review**

### **Leech's Politeness Principle**

By putting forward his Politeness Principle, Leech establishes himself as a key contributor to the research on politeness. He regards politeness as forms of behavior and a phenomenon existing in all languages aiming to establish and maintain comity and harmony (Leech, 1983). Leech's Politeness Principle can be demonstrated as follows: other things being equal, minimize the expression of beliefs which are unfavorable to the hearer and at the same time (less important) maximize the expression of beliefs which are favorable to the hearer (Leech, 1983). Modeling himself after Grice's Cooperative Principle, Leech sums up six maxims of the Politeness Principle (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, Sympathy).

On the whole, Leech's six maxims of politeness demonstrate that the most important principle to become polite is to minimize the expression of opinions which are unfavorable to the hearer and simultaneously maximize the expression of beliefs which are favorable to the hearer, i.e., to maximize benefit to others and maximize cost to the self.

### **Brown and Levinson's Face Theory**

Many academics have critiqued that many cultures use politeness strategies differently than how Brown and Levinson theorized, but the face-saving view of politeness suggested by them (1987) is still one of the most influential works on politeness up till now. According to this theory, the face here refers to 'public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' and 'something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction' (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A model person who has both a negative face and a positive face thinks strategically and is conscious of his language choice. In order to achieve his own goals in interactions, the model person also assumes that other people are also endowed with positive and negative face and takes other people's face wants into consideration. Usually rational people tend to avoid disagreement and minimize their loss of face. Hence, Brown and Levinson argue that both the speaker and the hearer (or the writer and the reader) have an interest in maintaining each other's face, but often have to commit face-threatening acts (FTAs). These FTAs can threaten the independence aspects of the hearer's face, the involvement aspect of the hearer's face and the speaker's own face wants.

It is generally agreed that most of the time modal verbs can be used to show politeness in request in business letters. In linguistic literature modal verbs have been thoroughly discussed and analyzed and they are regarded as the main source of expressing modality.

Generally, in linguistics there are certain types of modality. Scholars have different ideas about the types of modality.

Von Wright, in what was a pioneering work on modal logic, distinguishes among four modes. These are: The alethic modes or modes of truth, the epistemic modes or modes of knowing, the deontic modes or modes of obligation and the existential modes or modes of existence. Von Wright admits that the last, which belongs to qualification theory, is often not regarded as a branch of modal logic, but adds that there are essential similarities between it and the other modes. Lyons noted three "scales" of modality, those of "wish" and "intention", of "necessity" and "obligation", and of "certainty" and "possibility". (Lyons, 1979) A rather different approach is taken by Leech (1983), who offers what he calls a "structural and componential description". This involves seven systems: Causation, Actuality, Constraint, Authority, Volition, Ability, Probability.

Palmer earlier made the threefold distinction between epistemic, subject oriented and discourse oriented modals. He used the distinction between subject oriented and discourse oriented to classify the modals themselves. Later he rejected his classification and suggested three basic kinds of modality which for convenience were labeled "epistemic", "deontic" and "dynamic" in Von Wright's terms (Palmer, 1976).

## **Methodology**

The current study mainly adopted a corpus-based approach. A corpus-based analysis was conducted to identify the use of modal verbs in business communication. A corpus of 47 English business letters was collected written by Georgian students at Akaki Tsetereli State University, Kutaisi, Georgia. Students include both males and females within the age range of 18-22. The students are non-native English speakers and their level of English equals to B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The students were informed that the business letters would be used in the study and expressed their consent through filling a special form. Students were given two fictional situations and they were asked to respond. The fictional situations required the student to write a letter of request and a letter of complaint. These two types of letters were chosen with a special focus since expressing politeness is critical in both situations.

The politeness strategies employed by the senders of the letters were examined. The frequency of usage for various politeness strategies was calculated.

## **Case study**

It is generally agreed that most of the time modal verbs can be used to show politeness in business letters. Modal verbs, as we have already mentioned, often indicate request, possibility, probability, permission, necessity, etc. We can use them in different business situations. In the article we analyze the use of modals in written communication.

It is clear from the students' letters that they try not to be too direct. So, the use of certain modal verbs, especially the past forms of the modal verbs *can*, *may*,

*shall* and *will* (*could*, *might*, *should* and *would*), is noticeable and they are used to be more polite or less direct.

*At last could you let me know if you could change these TV sets in another ones?*

*I would appreciate it if you could replace the missing part by next week.*

*I would appreciate keeping this enquiry confidential.*

*I would bring a focus on quality of the brand.*

*It should be good if you not only work all the time, but also seek satisfaction.*

*Sorry, I should have let you known that I was not coming.*

*You might also find it useful to know that some of the members won't be able to attend the meeting.*

When the present tense is needed, the past tense of modal verbs such as 'should', 'could' and 'might' can make the tone more relaxed and acceptable, and consequently realizing ideal business communication. The writer should correctly use every modal verb according to the degree of politeness and different situation. Besides the fact that modal verb **might** is considered to be a politeness marker, there was only one case of its usage – *I wonder if it might be possible to arrange the conference in two months' time*. **Might** in this case can be understood as – I politely say to you that.

As it is known, indirect question is a polite and formal way to express politeness. The indirect question is polite as it is expressed by means of modality. Students used indirect questions using Wh- Words and indirect questions with yes/no questions.

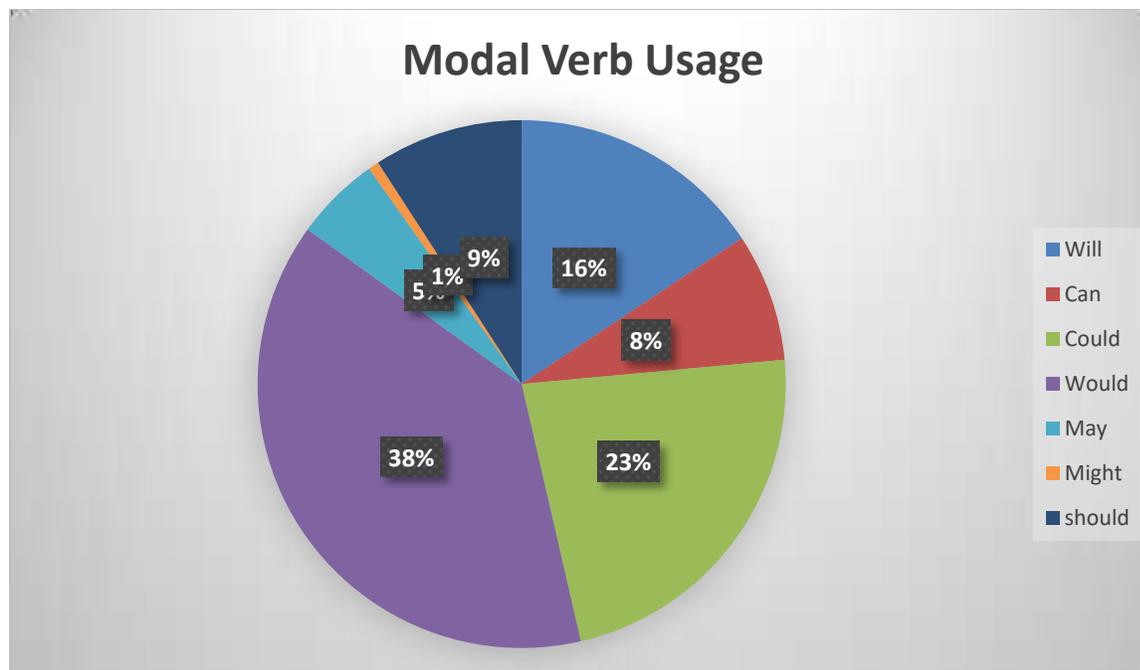
*Could you tell me where I can find -----?*

*Could you tell me if/whether we are launching a new product---*

The frequency of the usage of each modal verb has arisen great interest in the research. In the letters written by the students most frequently are use the modal verbs **could**, **will** and **would**.

According to the Collins Cobuild English Grammar (2011) the past tense request modals like **could** and **would** are more polite ways of asking than their non-past forms. In most cases the modal verb **will** stands for polite requests, appeals and asking for favour. **Will** in the examined letters expresses willingness in suggestions and offers.

The chart shows the frequency of the usage of modal verbs used by students in the context of politeness. As it can be seen **would** tends to be used as politeness marker **in most of the cases 38%**. The highest proportion of the use of **would** is caused due its function to expresses the willingness, and the desire something to be done. There were no cases of using modal verbs **shall** and **must**. The absence of **must** is due to its core meaning expressing obligation and necessity and students seem to avoid to be direct and not to be impolite.



## Conclusion

We used business letters because, it was interesting to find out what students consider to be efficient and effective ways to communicate and conduct correspondence in business world in the context of politeness. Analysis of the gathered data revealed that appropriate forms of politeness strategies are used in the letters. The investigation of the business letters indicated several findings: the past forms of the modal verbs and indirect questions using Wh- Words and indirect questions with yes/no questions are used more often to indicate politeness. There was the difference in the frequency of the usage of different modal verbs and the use of the modal verb *would* was noticeable in the analyzed examples. Thus, the analysis of business letters indicated that students tend to use appropriate forms of politeness. It is vitally significant as the necessity to know politeness strategies and the ability to use appropriately the corresponding speech structures have gained practical value for maintaining business transactions

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თავაზიანობის გამომხატველი მოდალური ზმნები ინგლისურ ენაში  
რეზიუმე

ბრაუნისა და ლევინსონის თავაზიანობის თეორია საყოველთაოდ აღიარებულია ყველა კულტურისა და ენისათვის. ენა არ არის მხოლოდ ინფორმაციის გადაცემის ინსტრუმენტი, ის ასევე სოციალური ურთიერთობის დამყარებისა და შენარჩუნების საშუალებაა. ბუნებრივია, რომ თავაზიანობა მნიშვნელოვან როლს ასრულებს საერთაშორისო ბიზნესის სფეროში. თავაზიანი ფორმების სათანადო გამოყენება განსაკუთრებით ეფექტური და აუცილებელია საქმიან კორესპონდენციაში. აღნიშნულ ნაშრომში ყურადღება გამახვილებულია მოდალური ზმნების გამოყენებაზე ბიზნეს წერილებში. კვლევის პრაქტიკული ნაწილი ორიენტირებულია სტუდენტთა მიერ შესრულებულ წერილებში ამა თუ იმ მოდალური ზმნის გამოყენებაზე და მათი გამოყენების სიხშირეზე.