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"The use of the epistemic and deontic modality in the modal verb "can" between English native and Spanish non-native students in the written discourse"

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Abstract: Modality has been a field of deep study by semantictians and pragmatists. This field has been of interest for professors of Complutense University of Madrid as Marta Carretero (1995) and Angela Downing (2015), among others. The present study aims to analyze the use of the modal verb "can" and its counterparts "could", "cannot" and "could not" in written texts by English native students (NS) and Spanish non-native students of English (NNS). More specifically, the study tries to answer the following research questions: (1) Are the modals under analysis used more frequently by NS or NNS? and (2), Do NS or NNS use modality differently regarding the degree of formality? To this purpose, two subcorpora (academic and informal texts) were gathered by means of analyzing online journals and online chats, rendering a total of 243 modals in NS and 282 in NNS texts. The analysis of the data reveals that a high frequency of modality depends on a high degree of formality.

John Fredy GIL BONILLA

The use of the epistemic and deontic modality in the modal verb "can" between English native and Spanish non-native students in the written discourse

0. Introduction

As modality has been of interest for many semantictians and pragmatists along the time, this research is relevant as I offer a detailed study of the semantic use of the modal verb "can" including its counterparts "cannot", "could" and "could not" and how these modals are more or less influential in English native students (NS) or Spanish non native students (NNS) and how such use may be different in relation to the degree of formality. The modals are scrutinized in both academic and informal texts in order to create a corpus following Downing's notion of deontic and epistemic semantic functions (2015, p.343). The texts are analysed and the modals found in each case are classified into deontic or epistemic modality uses. Also, frequencies are normed and counted. The purpose is to know if NS and NNS use the modal "can" with the same semantic functions in academic and informal texts and if the frequencies are similar or not regarding the degree of formality.

In this corpus-based analysis some procedures are applied: an initial qualitative study which consists of the semantic analysis of both deontic and epistemic functions (Downing, 2015, p.343). In other words, texts are analysed and, thus, the modals are classified into one of Downing's semantic functions, as previously mentioned. Then, a quantitative analysis is accomplished, which consists of the quantification and classification of the modals depending on their semantic functions (Downing, 2015, p.343). The modals are scrutinized to see if they are used differently in their frequency and modality, if this is the case, the purpose is to evaluate if such difference has some relation with the degree of formality.

In conclusion, academic and informal texts are analysed and the modal verb "can" and its counterparts are classified following Downing's notion of deonticity and epistemicity to see if either NS or NNS are more likely to use either one or the other modality. Also frequencies are normed and counted. The results obtained are shown in graphs and analysed. For this, Downing (2015) and Downing & Locke (1992) are relevant in this research as the paper is mainly based on the terminology and descriptions they give in their *English Grammar Book,* Biber (1999) is also as relevant as Carretero (1995), Palmer (1979) and Schmied (2006). They offer further explanations of the semantic functions of the modals. The explanations given in works such as *La Prágmatica de las Expresiones de Modalidad Epistémica en el Inglés Hablado* by Marta Carretero (1995), *Grammar of Spoken and Written English* by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999), *Modality and the English Modals* (1979), *The English Verb* (1974) by Palmer and *Epistemic & Deontic* powerpoint presentation by proffessor Schmied (2006) have been of high influence in this research proposal as their varied cooperation has been important to go further with my analysis.

The quantitative and qualitative procedures are further explained in the "methodology" section where it is explained in detail how the corpus has been collected and analysed. The results obtained from the analysis of the texts are depicted in graphs and tabs in the "results" section so as to show the frequencies and the semantic use of the modal verb "can" by English native students and Spanish non-native students in both academic and informal texts. The graphs are provided in order to contrast data and give a further understanding of the results obtained. In the last section, the conclusions attained from the analysis are supplied. In the following"background" section, all references and sources used are given.

1. Background

A six-month research is conducted with both English native and Spanish non-native speakers/writers. The purpose of the research is to evaluate how the modal verbs "can" and "could" and the negative counterparts "cannot" and couldn't" are used. In terms of their basic functional distinctions, deontic and epistemic modality are considered for such analysis. According to Downing (2015), the epistemic meaning "is used by a speaker to assess the possibility, probability or otherwise of a state of affairs, according to the speaker's limited

knowledge or belief" (p.343). With regard to deontic modality, "the speaker brings about an action, using modals to express different degrees of obligation, advisability or permission" (p.344). Downing (2015) also explains that epistemic meanings "tend to correlate with stative verbs and can take non-human subjects" and deontic "correlate with human subjects as agents of dynamic verbs". (p.344). As in the following examples:

(1)   That man over there could be the Queen's bodyguard (possibility)
(2)   The rest of you can stay (permission)

As Downing explains, example (1) would be epistemic as it indicates mainly possibility but also it is correlated by a stative verb "be" and a non-human subject "there". In example (2), "can" is deontic as it expresses permission as well as it is formed by a dynamic verb "stay" (2015, p.343).

In the explanation given, it can be seen that Downing uses deontic and epistemic terminology as in Palmer (1974) and Carretero (1995) (further explained below) but others, such as Biber (1999) uses a different terminology: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic modality to refer to the "logical status of events and states" (p.485), and is based on the reality outside of the inner reality of the text. These extrinsic meanings (commonly called epistemic modals) have a function which consists of making judgements about the possibility. But also, it is related to the subjective viewpoint of the speaker with regard to doubt or certainty of a proposition (Palmer, 1979, p. 41-42). These verbs suggest likelihood, possibility or prediction of a proposition (Biber et al, 1999). Regarding intrinsic modality Biber (1999) speaks about agent-controlled actions and events. These verbs express obligation, volition, permission, and ability (Biber, 1999, p.485; Palmer, 1979). Biber's work is relevant in my research proposal as the author offers a further explanation to distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic modality, also known as epistemic and deontic modality.

Biber (1999), Palmer (1974) and Schmied (2006) are as relevant as Downing (2015) given the fact that they offer detailed descriptions of the semantic functions of the modal verb "can". The following interpretations are useful to plainly distinguish the different uses of the modal verb "can" and its counterparts in the texts under analysis:

- The modal verb "can"[1] means ability in both tenses either present or past, but also, in its negative form "can't". In some other cases, the modal expresses willingness/volition (Palmer, 1974, p.116) and permission as in Schmied (2006, slides. 15-16). For instance:

(3) I can swim.
(4) I could lift a hundredweight when I was younger.
(5) I can't swim.
(6) You can leave.
(7) I could walk fifty miles tomorrow

As already explained, "can" means ability in both tenses present, as in the example (3), past as in (4), but also in its negative form as in (5), and permission as in (6). In the case of example (7) something else is present, usually characterised by conditional ability" (Carretero, 1995, p.49) That is to say, the cases from (3) to (7) are deontic.

- The modal may have other meanings, as in Palmer "some modals indicate probability and possibility" (Palmer,1974, p.135 & Schmied, 2006, slides. 17-18). For example:

(8)   Peter can't have been there
(9)   Joseph could be lying

The examples given in (8) and (9) indicate possibility, probability and certainty. In each case, (8) expresses certainty as the agent is sure that "Peter" can't have been there and (9) expresses some possibility. Example (9) has been taken from *La Prágmatica de las Expresiones de Modalidad Epistémica en el Inglés Hablado* by Marta Carretero (1995), where the author explains that (9) is intended to illustrate an interpretation of the modal that is simply predictive or conjectural (p. 49). Examples (8) and (9) are epistemic.

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[1] In the case of "can", Carretero compares the modal "can" with "may" as both imply the same function of possibility. But it is important to clarify that this paper is based just on the analysis of the modal "can". The modal "may" is just taken as a contrastive example in order to offer a clear distinction between both. "May" normally expresses epistemic and deontic modality and "can" deontic. In other words, "can" is usually found as deontic. (Carretero, 1992, p. 85).

Carretero (1995) mentions: "could" is used for future, it means deontic modality but it also might imply epistemic modality. If "could" is used in present tenses, it has an epistemic function. In the case of referring to a past action, its function might be deontic or present an epistemic function (p.43).

More specifically, intrinsic modality means that the speaker "intervene[s] in the speech event by laying obligations or giving permission" (Downing & Locke, 1992, p. 383), as in "I could walk fifty miles tomorrow". On the other hand, extrinsic modality involves that participants "comment on and evaluate an interpretation of reality" (Downing & Locke, 1992) as in "he could be lying". The terms deontic and epistemic are the ones consistently used in this research paper. These terms are mainly used to classify the modal verb "can" and its counterparts. The manner in which these modals will be analyzed and how the results will be collected are explained in the following "methodology" section.

2. Methodology

As it has been mentioned previously, the main aim of this corpus-based analysis is to see how native speakers of English "NS" and Spanish non-native speakers of English "NNS" use the modal verb "can" and its different forms (could, cannot, could not) and how the semantic functions of "can" differ depending on the speakers' uses. For this, Downing's notions of deontic and epistemic semantic functions are considered (2015, p. 343-344)

Firstly, it is important to explain how the corpus was compiled before discussing the procedures applied. In the compilation of the corpora two types of materials were needed: firstly, academic papers and, secondly, informal letters and online conversations. Academic texts were taken from online journals such as UCM *JACRL*, in the case of NNS, and Harvard University *Ash Center*, in the case of NS. Meanwhile, informal texts were self-compiled from old American class-mates with whom I used to study for several years and my own English students.

In this corpus-based analysis it is important to bear in mind both deontic and epistemic functions (Downing, 2015, p. 343-344) which are scrutinized in academic and informal texts. The purpose of the analysis is to see if the use of deontic and epistemic modality is related to the degree of formality. To this end, 60 texts have been taken from both NS and NNS, which have been divided into 30 by NS and 30 by NNS. At the same time, those texts provided by NS have been divided into 15 informal and 15 formal papers as in those by NNS, which have been divided in the same manner. It is also important to consider that in this research proposal the number of words is not similar and, therefore, comparing the raw counts does not give an accurate account of the relative frequencies of the modal. "Normalization" is a way to adjust raw frequency counts from texts of different lengths so that they can be compared accurately (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998, p. 263). The total number of words in each text must be taken into consideration when norming frequency counts. Specifically, the raw frequency count should be divided by the number of words in the text, and then multiplied by whatever basis is chosen for norming. This means, the number of modals found in each text is divided by the number of words per text and later, multiplied by the normed basis chosen. In the case of academic texts the normed is 8.500 and in the informal texts 300[2].

For the analysis of these corpora the following procedures are utilized: quantitative research method, which consists in representing frequencies of the results obtained, and qualitative, which consists in the organization of the data collected in the corpora (Acaps, 2012, p. 12). In the qualitative research method, the purpose is to gain an understanding of how NS and NNS use the modal verb "can" and its other forms such as "cannot", "could" and "could not" considering Downing's epistemic and deontic modality. That is to say, whether NS or NNS tend to use modality in the same manner in the genres analysed: formal and informal. For this, the semantic functions are classified from the more to the less characteristic. In other words, whether deontic or epistemic modality are the ones most distinctive in academic or informal texts. In the analysis "normalization" is useful as a way to adjust more precise frequencies and to quantify data and generalize results accurately from those academic and informal samples taken from online sources, as in the case of journals and texts handed out by

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[2] The appendix is found in the end of the paper in a CD format where the corpus is included.

students. These results increase regarding the range and frequency of use of the modal. In other words, the more students use the modal "can", the higher the frequencies obtained are in each cluster. In this way, frequencies are analyzed and results are taken as a sample of how NS and NNS use the modal.

In short, both quantitative and qualitative research methods are of a high value in the methodology applied in this research, as the results obtained from this analysis are used as a sample. In other words, the results obtained are an instance of how both NS and NNS tend to use modality. Also, the type of genre: academic or informal is important for such analysis, as the use of either epistemic or deontic modality may depend on the genre used as such. That is to say, the purpose is to see if both the frequency of the use of the modals and the semantic functions vary between NS and NNS depending on the degree of formality.

3. Results

As previously mentioned, this study consists of the analysis of the modal verb "can" and its counterparts "could" "cannot" and "could not". The results from the modals analyzed are summarized in tables and graphs, in which the data retrieved from the two corpora (NS and NNS) are shown, along with the totals of both deontic and epistemic modalities. I have found a total of 193 instances in the academic papers collected from NS and a total of 244 in NNS. In the case of informal papers the scope of modals analyzed vary as they are composed of fewer words. In NS the number of modals found is 50 and in NNS is 38. It is true that in the texts analyzed the number of words per text is different, so results are given using "normalization" as already mentioned. The academic texts are normed to a basis of 8,500 and in the informal texts to a basis of 300. The normalization is calculated depending on the range of words. In the case of academic texts is from 7,000 to 10,100 words and in the informal papers is from 230 to 330 words. These ranges are divided by the number of modals found in each text and multiplied by the normed chosen.

Firstly, frequencies are provided in tabs so as to assess how the use of the modal "can" and its other forms (cannot, could and could not) vary between NS and NNS. In TAB 1a below, it can be seen that Spanish non-native students overuse the modals in comparison to native students. As already mentioned, normalization is considered so as to have more precise results. In the case of the texts collected from NS the overall frequency is 205 modals per 127,500 words and in the case of NNS the results slightly change as the modals are used 249,5 times per 127,500 words. Therefore, NNS use the modals 44,5 more times in texts composed by 127,500 words than natives. In contrast to TAB 1b, it is seen that NNS use the modal verb less than NS in informal texts. In NS the modals are found with a frequency_of 55,79 modals per 4,500 words in comparison to NNS, with a frequency of 38,3 modals. The results obtained show that NS use the modals 17,49 more frequently than NNS in texts composed by 4,500 words.

The results provided above have been taken adding up, on the one hand, the totals obtained from the normalization in each of the 15 texts collected from each cluster and, on the other hand, the normed basis chosen. In other words, it is known that from each cluster were collected 15 informal and 15 formal texts and from each genre was taken a normalization. Hence, the normalization taken from each has been added up the number of texts collected in order to provide more precise results. In the case of the normed basis, it is known that in the academic papers was taken a normed basis of 8.500 and in the informal of 300. That is to say, in the academic texts the normed "8.500" has been added up 15 times, the number of papers collected and in the informal texts the same happens with the normed basis chosen "300".

Academic texts

Native speakers

Frequencies (193 modals)	
Epistemic	120
Deontic	73

Total	193

Spanish non-native students

Frequencies (244 modals)	
Epistemic	147
Deontic	97
Total	244

TAB 1a
Informal texts

Native speakers

Frequencies (50 modals)	
Epistemic	15
Deontic	35
Total	50

Spanish non-native students

Frequencies (38 modals)	
Epistemic	18
Deontic	20
Total	38

TAB 1b
As frequencies have been firstly shown from a general perspective in the TABs provided above, now I will further explain how the modal verb "can" and its counterparts are used between natives and Spanish non-native students considering both deontic and epistemic modality.
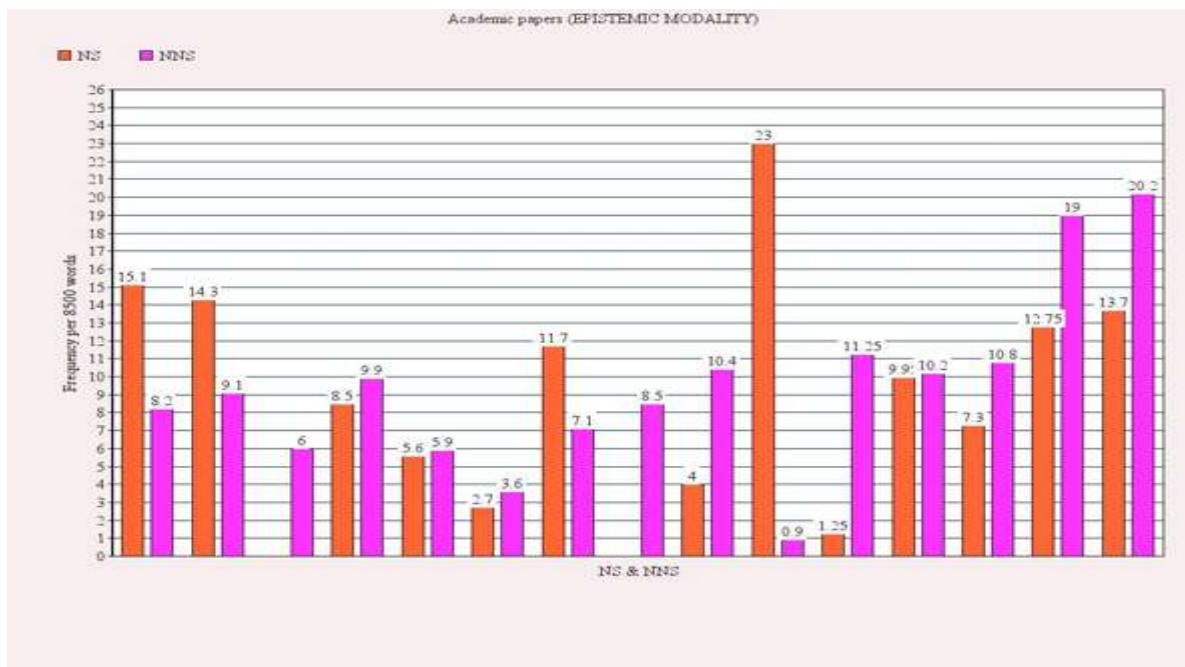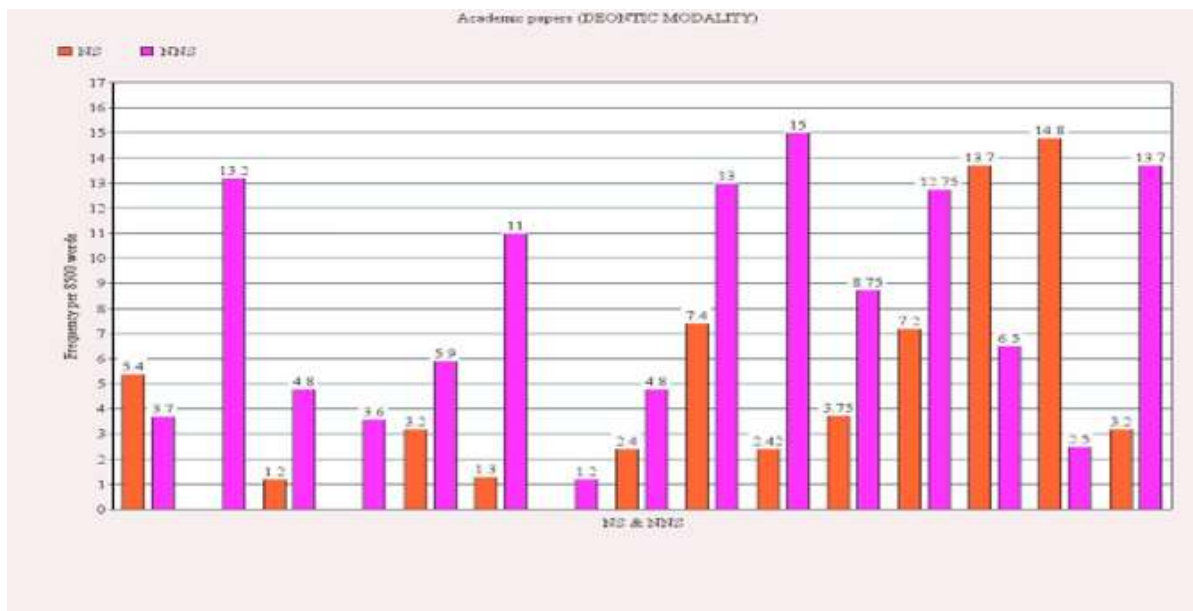
GRAPH 1

In this graph are depicted the epistemic uses in academic texts by NS and NNS. In the case of NS are represented in "orange" and NNS in "purple", each column symbolizes each of the texts analyzed. The frequencies given are normed to a basis of 8.500 words.

In the graph can be seen that NS did not use any epistemic modal in two of the papers while NNS use epistemic modality in all of them, reaching the lowest frequency at 1.25 epistemic modals per 8.500 words. Also, in contrast to these results, it can be analyzed that NS use of epistemic modality suddenly shot up to 23 modals per 8.500 words surpassing the maximum use of the NNS, who reached the highest level at 20.2. Despite the steeply rise of NS, it is seen that NNS continue overusing the modals with a difference of 13.5%. The following examples illustrate the use of the modal verb "can" in academic papers with epistemic function:

> (1) **NNS:** that the righteousness of the restrictive Victorian morals *could* be called into question.
> (2) **NNS:** As a matter of fact, Thatcher's insensitivity towards any kind of theatrical performance which *could not* be classified as musicals.
> (3) **NS**: To assess how these potential changes *could* or *could not* be affecting the results.

It can be seen that from the examples given, (1) and (2) are by NNS and (3) by NS. All of the examples provided are epistemic. In other words, the speaker assesses possibility or probability as Downing states (2015, p. 342). In the example (3), the modal does not deny the possibility, probability, certainty, but affirm the possibility, probability, certainty of the negation of the proposition. In (1), (3), as already mentioned, the modal is referring to possibility or perhaps probability. In all of these cases, they share the same function which consists of assessing or making judgments about the possibility.

GRAPH 2

In graph 2, the analysis is focused on the deontic modality of the modal verb "can" and its other counterparts in academic texts, results are later compared with those obtained from epistemic modality. As already mentioned, frequencies provided are per 8.500 words and each column represents each text.

In graph 2, it can be seen that NNS remain constant in the overusing of the modal verb, as in graph 1. In this sample NS do not use any deontic modal in three of the texts analyzed whereas NNS use the modal "can" and its counterparts in each of the texts. However, the results obtained in this graph reveal a similar performance between NS and NNS when using deontic modality in comparison to graph 1, where frequencies remarkably change. For instance, it is seen that in some of the texts analyzed frequencies are steady. In other words, two of the texts by NS and NNS remain at 1.2 modals. Similarly, in the highest frequencies NNS rocketed till reaching 15 modals and approached by NS with 14.8 modals. Other instances between NS and NNS are akin as in 2.42 modals by natives and 2.5 by non-natives.

It is also relevant to remark that four of the NNS used deontic modality in a similar way with an approximate frequency of 13 per 8.500 words. The same happens with NS who used the modals with an approximate frequency of 7. Despite that NNS use the deontic modal similarly to NS, they continue using the modals more frequently. Some examples of deontic modality between NS and NNS are the following:

> (4) **NNS:** He is a supporter of artistic productions and we *can* find several allusions to the pop culture.
> (5) **NNS:** I saw that my life was a vast glowing empty life and I *could* do anything I wanted.
> (6) **NNS:** One *can* reasonably surmise that the rating of Primer Minister Modi is…
> (7) **NS:** We *can* observe the same phenomenon with respect to the confidence citizens have.
> (8) **NS:** We looked at it every way we *could*.
> (9) **NS:** We just *couldn't* figure out how you made the program successful.

It can be seen that (4), (5), (6) instances are by NNS and (7), (8), (9) are by NS. All cases are agent-controlled actions, they indicate ability in both its past as in (5), (8), (9) examples and present forms as in (4), (6), (7).

In the following graphs the frequencies of the informal texts compiled from NS and NNS are depicted.

Informal texts (Epistemic modality)
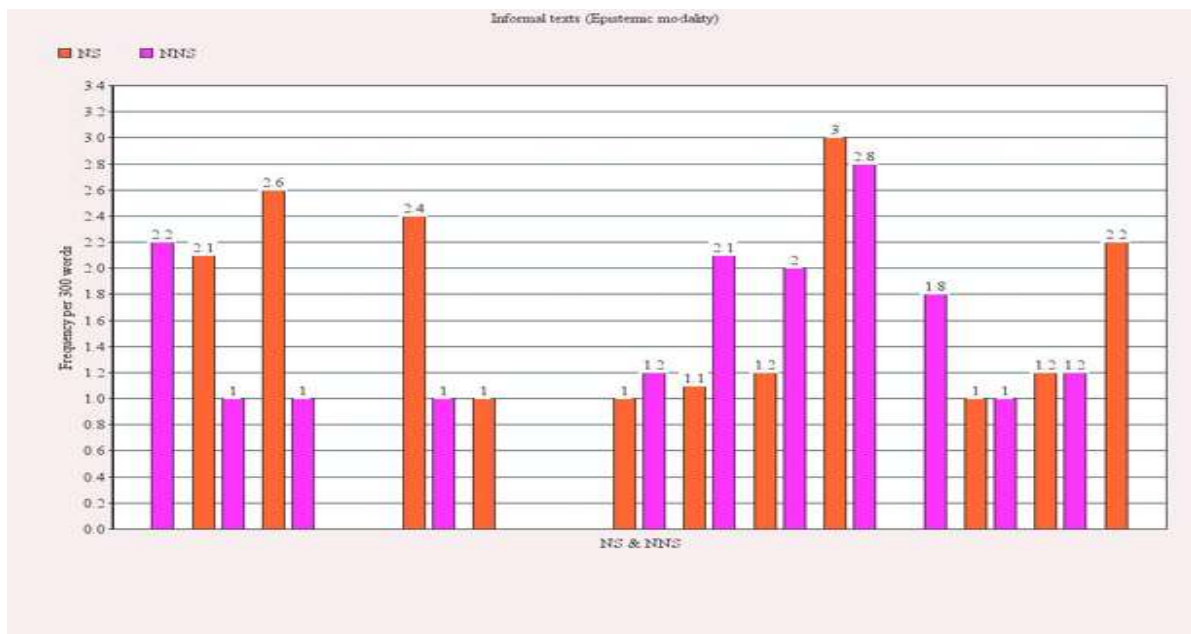
GRAPH 3

This graph shows the epistemic uses of the informal texts. The frequencies are normed to a basis of 300 words. NS represented in "orange" and NNS in "purple" as in the previous graphs.

In the graph, it is seen that NS did not use any epistemic modal in four of the texts analyzed, in the same way as NNS. In the case of NNS, it is seen that they use the modal "can" and its other forms 3% more prevalently than NS. The difference is not as sharp as in the analysis of the academic texts. It is illustrated that both NS and NNS use the modals nearly in the same range. In most of the cases, they use the modals 1 (once) and 2 (twice) per 300 words. The highest use of the modals is 3 in NS and 2.8 in NNS. In other words, they nearly overlap in most of the cases. Some examples of epistemic modality are:

(10) **NNS:** Visiting the waterpark *can* be a nice opportunity to relax
(11) **NNS:** He *can't* have been there.
(12) **NS:** You *could* perhaps pass.
(13) **NS:** Maybe he *can* get cooky.

In the examples, the speaker assesses possibility, probability and certainty. Most of the examples show possibility except (11), which expresses certainty negating the modal verb "can" (it is not possible that he is there).

In the following graph is depicted how NS and NNS use deontic modality in informal texts.
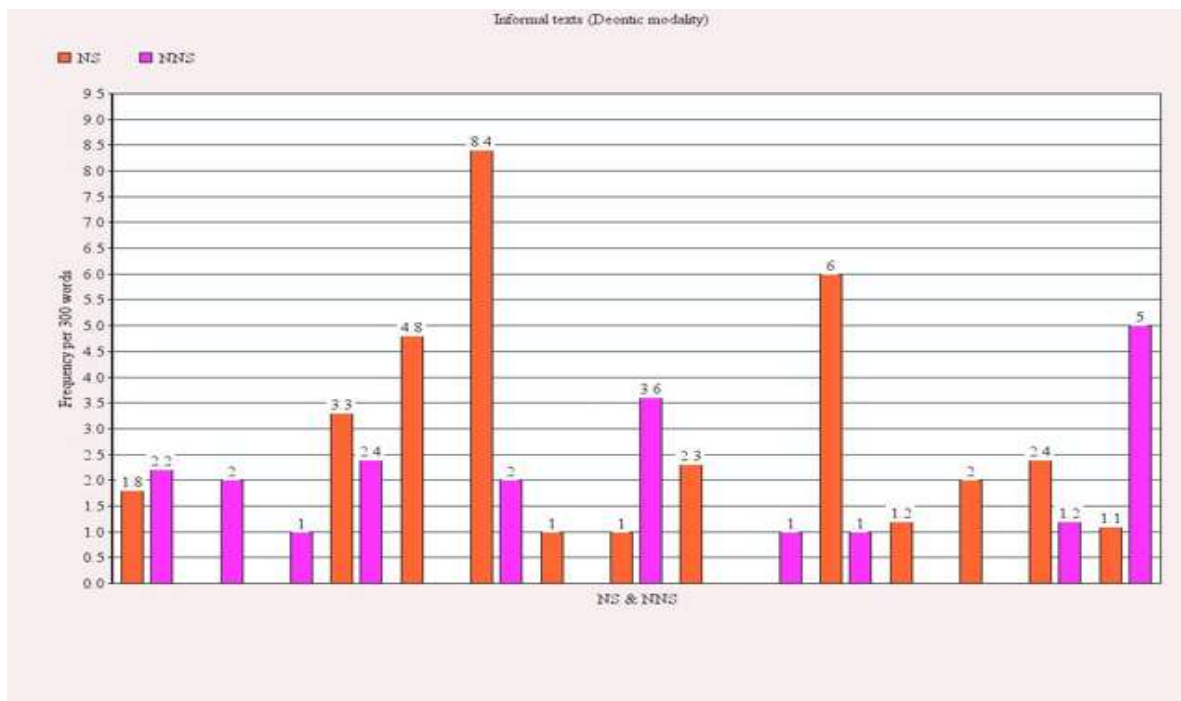
GRAPH 4

In graph 4 is seen that NS use the modal verb more frequently than NNS in informal texts. This result can be contrasted to graphs 1,2 and 3, as in the other graphs NNS were the cluster who tended to use modality surpassing NS. However, in this graph, it can be seen that NS use the modals more frequently than NNS. In other words, NS use the modal less times than NNS in both epistemic and deontic modality regarding academic texts. Nevertheless, in the informal texts NS overuse a 15% more times the modal verb than NNS.

In this graph some of the modals appear 1 (once) or 2 (twice) per 300 words as in graph 3. Nonetheless, this constant changes when the deontic modal remarkably surged until reaching the highest level at 8.4 in NS and 5 in NNS. That is to say, NS use of the modals more frequently until surpassing NNS, who fall to a low of 5.

To conclude, texts compiled in this research paper show that NNS use epistemic modality more frequently in both academic and informal texts. In relation to deontic modality, NNS remarkably plunged in the use of the modals in regard to informal texts. Some examples of deontic modality in informal text are the following:

> (14) **NNS:** I *can't* bring it with me to Scotland
> (15) **NNS:** Sorry, I *could not* write sooner like you requested
> (16) **NNS:** In the future I want a job where I *can* travel for my work
> (17) **NS:** I know I *can* do it
> (18) **NS:** You *can't* go
> (19) **NS:** I *couldn't* sleep properly last night

In the examples given can be seen that in the (14) and (18), the speaker/writer is negating permission. In the (15) and (19) the modals are in past and negated by the s/w . In the examples (16) and (17), it might be found a difference as in (17) where the s/w expresses ability that shows that the subject "I" is able to do something. However, in (20) the subject says that something is present, characterized by terms like conditional ability. The example (20) can be contrasted with the example given by Marta Carretero (1992) previously "I could walk fifty miles tomorrow" as in both examples there is a future marker "tomorrow" and "in the future" which indicate "condition". Thus, Carretero characterizes those instances as "conditional ability", "conditional volition".

4. Conclusion

22

The modal verb "can" and its counterparts are used differently by speakers/writers depending on the type of modality: deontic or epistemic. Speakers/writers may prefer to use one or another regarding the type of written discourse, either academic or informal. I also think that the selection of one specific type of modality is a matter of the type of genre: formal or informal. In other words, speaker/writer writes using one type of modality or another depending on the degree of formality. In the academic texts the most frequent modality is epistemic rather than deontic. Nevertheless, the most relevant modality in informal texts is deontic, as in the case of modals of permission which are not so frequent in academic texts.

My results suggest that NNS and NS use epistemic modality more frequently in academic texts than in informal texts, as already stated. It has also been observed that NNS tend to surpass NS in most of the cases. In other words, they overuse the modals in epistemic and deontic cases with regard to academic texts. However, NS surpass NNS in the use of deontic modality in relation to informal texts.

To sum up, epistemic modality is mainly used in academic texts while deontic modality is preferred in informal texts. In other words, the speakers/writers tend to use modality of probability and certainty in formal genres and ability and permission in informal genres.

5. Limitations of the research

This research study has come up with some limitations: the number of words per text, modals analysed, Spanish students level of English and the time needed.

As firstly mentioned the number of words per text was one of the limitations. It is acknowledged that each text was composed by a different scope of words. Therefore, I had to find a way to show results in a more precise and accurate form. The method chosen was "normalization" which consists in dividing the number of modals found by the number of words in each paper, and later multiply it by the normed basis chosen.

Another additional point is that in the course of my investigation I found some other modals such as "be able to", "may" and "might" unlike "can", the main focus on my research. In other words, the modal chosen to be analysed in the very beginning was the modal "can". Despite of finding some other possible modals which had the same meaning or a close meaning to"can". In the end I decided to analyse only the modal verb "can" and its other counterparts "cannot", "could not" and "could". I did not include "be able to" as it is not considered as an absolute modal, it is a semi modal. In the case of "may" and "might" could have been useful for my investigation as they could have been prototypical examples of epistemicity, since "may" and "might" are not real counterparts of the modal "can" I decided not to include them. Instead, the counterparts of the modal "can" as "could", "cannot" and "could not" were included. That is to say, the counterparts of the modal "can" have been preferred as they are more prototypical examples of epistemic modality than "can". If I had focused my analysis only on the modal "can", the paper would have lacked of representativity. It is relevant to mention that the other modals have been preferred to be under analyses in a further research.

There were more limitations, as in the case of the level of English, particularly in Spanish non-native students. It is true that the level of English could have been a problem for the analysis and thus, for the results obtained. I realized that low levels of English were prone to overusing the modal so frequently, more frequently than high levels. I decided to analyze texts written by high levels of English. It was not an easy matter to find a high representativity and even high levels of English in Spain. I compiled some of the texts from Complutense University journal *JACRL,* texts written by bilingual and proficiency students. Some other texts were taken from my own high level English students.

The time is another influential factor. It is a fact that the more time a researcher has to develop an investigation, the more texts or information could be compiled and thus the representativity would be higher. In other words, the more time for the investigation, the more possibility for compiling a bigger amount of texts and hence, having more precise results.

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