

Modality and Ideology - A Systemic Functional Linguistics Study

Dr. Charanjit Singh, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Lyallpur Khalsa College
Jalandhar - 144001
miltonjohn@rediffmail.com
Ph. 09878058630

Abstract

The use of language is seldom neutral. Gunther Kress (1989: v) argues, “Language is itself not only a part of experience, but intimately involved in the manner in which we construct and organize our experience. As such, it is never neutral, but deeply implicated in building meaning.” Similar is the view of Paul Simpson (1993: 6), “As an integrated form of social behaviour, language will be inevitably and inextricably tied up with the socio-political context in which it functions. Language is not used in a contextless vacuum; rather, it is used in a host of discourse contexts, contexts which are impregnated with the ideology of social systems and institutions. Because language operates within this social dimension, it must, of necessity reflect, and some would argue, construct ideology.” Keeping harmony with Kress and Simpson, Spender (1980: 139) opines, “It is language which determines the limits of our world, which constructs our reality.” Obviously, there is an intimate relationship between language and ideology and this intimacy indicates that a careful and comprehensive scrutiny of the language of any discourse would result into the revelation of the ideology of the discourse-maker (Barrett 1991, Dijk 1998, Beard 2000, Barry 2007). Since SFL provides the tools to undertake a careful and comprehensive scrutiny of the language of any discourse, it can be used as an effective tool to unearth the ideology embedded in a discourse. SFL recognizes three function of language – ideational, interpersonal and textual. So far as interpersonal function is concerned, it is grammaticalized in a text basically through three resources – Mood Block, Modality and Appraisal. Here it is to be noted that Modality refers to the speaker/writer’s degree of commitment, knowledge or certainty in the propositions and proposals that are made in a text. The present paper through an analysis of modality in the language of selected editorials aims to ascertain the validity of the SFL model of modality to comprehend ideology in a discourse.

Keywords: SFL, Halliday, ideational, interpersonal, textual, modality, modalisation, modulation and ideology.

SFL Model of Modality

The SFL model of modality specifies its two variants – modalisation and modulation. Modalisation refers to the expressions of probability, certainty or usuality. Likewise, modulation

concerns with the scales of obligation, inclination, ability or potentiality. Next, both modalisation and modulation involve three degrees – high, median and low (Halliday and Matthiesson 2004: 148). In addition, the SFL model of *modality* is sensitized to yet another aspect of modality, it is *modal* responsibility. Geoff Thompson (1996: 70) puts it, “Speakers may express their point of view in a way that makes it clear that this is their subjective point of view; or they may do it in a way that ‘objectivizes’ the point of view by making it appear to be a quality of the event itself.” In SFL, *modal* elements are graded according to how far the speaker overtly accepts responsibility for the attitude being communicated. The four gradations are identified in terms of *modal* responsibility – *subjective implicit*, *objective implicit*, *subjective explicit* and *objective explicit*.

Data

The data for the present study comprises thirty editorials taken from the three Indian newspapers (*The Indian Express*, *The Statesman* and *The Hindu*) and the three British newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian*). These editorials concern five international issues viz. Post-election violence in Kenya published between 31 Dec. 2007 to 02 Jan. 2008, the assassination of Benazir on 28 Dec. 2007; Robert Mugabe losing majority in Zimbabwean Parliament in published between 02 April 2008 to 04 April 2008; Obama’s victory in the US presidential election of 2008 published on 05 Nov. 2008; 26/11 terror attack in Mumbai published between 29-11-2008 to 30-11-2008.

Discussion and Findings

As regards the editorials related to *Post-election violence in Kenya*, the Indian and the British editorials vary in more than one way. First, apprehensions regarding Kenya’s future in the post-election era found in the editorials taken from the Indian newspapers are less in number and milder in nature than those found in the editorials taken from the British newspapers. The British editorials predict a sort of doom or disaster in Kenya in the wake of disputed elections, while the Indian editorials are not so pessimistic and hint at the probability of it getting “hugely difficult” to broker a peace deal or bring about some political settlement in Kenya. On the whole, there are two authorial *modalised* clauses in the Indian editorials voicing apprehensions regarding Kenya’s future; in the British editorials, this number shoots up to five. Second, there are two authorial *modalised* clauses in the Indian editorials writing about the probability of a huge electoral fraud in the recently concluded presidential elections in Kenya, while in the British editorials there is no such clause. Third, the obligations that the Indian editorials lay down for the world community aim at a healing touch for Kenya by doing the wrongs right, while those laid down in the British editorials are punitive in nature.

1. At this vital moment for democracy in Africa, the African Union, the European Union, and the Commonwealth need to do all they can to help Kenya come out of this crisis with its head held high. (*The Hindu*)
2. All the violence should certainly be condemned... (*The Indian Express*)

3. ...but most of the diplomatic pressure should be exerted on Mr Kibaki's supposed new Government to annul the results and organise a recount — or a new vote. (*The Indian Express*)
4. Commonwealth should take lead against Kenya. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
5. No, if there is to be practical action against President Kibaki, it must be concerted and multilateral. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
6. Commonwealth leaders should suspend Kenya from their ranks and retain the option of further sanctions unless the election is re-run. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

And finally, in the Indian editorials the stepping down of President Kibaki and conducting the presidential election process all over again are presented as obligations (*The Hindu*), while in the British editorials there is no mention of such obligations.

In case of the editorials related to *Benazir's assassination*, the Indian and the British newspapers again vary ideologically. First, the British editorials are more recurrent and frightening in voicing the probabilities of grave consequences of Benazir's assassination in Pakistan. In total, there are nine authorial *modalised* clauses in the British editorials voicing such probabilities, whereas in the Indian editorials there are merely three authorial *modalised* clauses voicing similar probabilities.

1. ...the consequences can only be unpredictable and highly dangerous. (*The Independent*)
2. It seems unlikely that any of the gains of recent months can be maintained. (*The Independent*)
3. These will be perilous days for Pakistan. (*The Independent*)
4. Those hopes (of a stable Pakistan and a rapid transition to democracy) now appear wildly unrealistic. (*The Independent*)
5. The return to civilian rule and the parliamentary elections, now less than two weeks away, are both surely threatened. (*The Independent*)
6. The deep, seething resentment in Sindh may not be a passing phenomenon. (*The Guardian*)
7. In such circumstances, Gen Musharraf may decide to postpone or cancel parliamentary elections due on January 8. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
8. The situation may deteriorate to the extent that the army decides once again to intervene, this time removing the author of the 1999 coup, Gen Musharraf. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

9. A nuclear-armed, fundamentalist-threatened Pakistan will continue to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
10. ...it will have dangerously destabilizing consequences. (*The Hindu*)
11. Irreparable must be the country's moral defeat. (*The Statesman*)
12. Certainly, the general election slated for January 8 has now been rendered devoid of all meaning. (*The Indian Express*)

Needless to say, the British editorials construct a more hopeless picture of post-Benazir Pakistan than that is constructed in the Indian editorials. Second, the Indian editorials are more indirect, less specific and less frequent in voicing opinion regarding the identity of those responsible for Benazir's assassination than the British editorials. Specifically speaking, there is merely one authorial *modalised* clause in the Indian editorials writing about the probability of "the end of the movement towards democracy" (signified by Benazir's assassination) suiting "the military establishment as well as the Islamists" (*The Hindu*). Thus, this proposition does not name Pervez Musharaff or Baitullah Mesud directly, but only alludes to them by the use of phrases like "military establishment" and "the Islamists". In sharp contrast, there are four authorial *modalised* clauses in the British editorials voicing varied probabilities in relation to the killers of Benazir and all these probabilities are direct and specific.

1. And even if, as is probable, he (Pervez Musharraf). had no part whatever in her death, (*The Independent*)
2. He (Pervez Musharraf) may have had no personal hand in the killing of Pakistan's most popular politician. (*The Guardian*)
3. This (That Baitullah Mehsud is behind the assassination) could well be the case. (*The Guardian*)
4. but it (That Baitullah Mehsud is behind the assassination) will not be the full story. (*The Guardian*)

Third, the British editorials are more demanding, and their demands are of more radical nature as the obligations laid by them for Pervez Musharraf, the west, the Pakistani army and the political parties of Pakistan signify.

1. He (Pervez Musharraf) should go. (*The Guardian*)
2. The west should stop supporting him (Pervez Musharraf). (*The Guardian*)
3. The army should guarantee the stability of the country and its nuclear arsenal, if necessary under foreign supervision. (*The Guardian*)
4. All political parties should be invited to convene a national conference whose task would be to form a government of national unity. (*The Guardian*)

In contrast, the Indian editorials are not only less demanding, but their demands are also milder and of more palatable nature. For instance, their only demand from Pervez Musharraf is to “accept total responsibility” for Benazir’s assassination (*The Statesman*). Similarly, all that they expect from all those who care for Pakistan is to “join hands to ensure it is pulled back from the edge” (*The Hindu*).

Next, there are editorials related to *Robert Mugabe losing majority in Zimbabwean Parliament*. Concerning this theme, in both the Indian and the British editorials there are authorial *modalised* clauses writing about the probability of an electoral defeat for Robert Mugabe. The only difference is that the British editorials are more repetitive in pronouncing this probability than the Indian editorials. In total, there are three authorial *modalised* clauses in the Indian editorials voicing such probability, while in the British editorials the count of such clauses is six. Second, in the Indian editorials there are two authorial *modalised* clauses hinting at the probability of a foul play on the part of the Zimbabwean Election commission. In the British editorials, there is one such clause. Third, in the Indian editorials there are two authorial *modalised* clauses writing about the probability of some evil-doing by the ruling ZANU-PF. In the British editorials, there is one such clause (*The Independent*). Besides, in the British editorials, there is also an authorial *modalised* clause that voices a probability which builds up a positive image of the ruling party. The clause is as follows:

Or it might be that the ruling elite is engaged in a frantic process of negotiation over who will tell the ageing despot that the time has come when he really does have to step down. (*The Independent*)

Fourth, in the Indian editorials there is one authorial *modalised* clause writing about the probability of life becoming unbearable in Zimbabwe without remittances from the hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans who have fled to other countries (*The Hindu*). Needless to say, this probability results in a thoroughly negative evaluation of Zimbabwe. Fifth, in the Indian editorials there is one authorial *modalised* clause writing about the probability of the people of Zimbabwe rising to the occasion to “wrest their well-being back” (*The Indian Express*). Obviously, such a probability builds up hope for Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans. Sixth, in the British editorials there are two authorial *modalised* clauses voicing fears of violence in the second round of presidential elections in Zimbabwe (*The Guardian*), thus sounding a note of caution. However, there is no such clause in the Indian editorials. And finally, the Indian editorials write about the ability of South Africa and other neighboring countries to exert “some constructive pressure” on Mr. Mugabe (*The Hindu*), and further lay down an obligation, obviously for these nations, to persuade Mr. Mugabe “to bow out with a shred of dignity” (*The Hindu*). Likewise, the British editorials make it obligatory for Mr. Mugabe himself to “listen to the verdict of the people” (*The Independent*). They also make it obligatory for the leaders of the neighboring African countries and the Zimbabwean army chiefs to make efforts to uphold the will of the people in Zimbabwe (*The Independent*). Not only this, the British editorials lay down an obligation, obviously for the leaders of the neighboring African countries, not to persuade the Zimbabwean opposition to go to courts against the electoral fraud committed by the ruling party (*The Independent*), a strategy that the opposition used in the last presidential elections and that failed miserably.

In relation to the editorials related to *Barack Obama winning the US presidential election*, the Indian and the British editorials hold almost different ideological grounds, though there exists between them some similarities too. First of all, the editorials taken from the British newspapers hang up a long list of obligations for the incoming president. Almost all these obligations are made to sound most urgent by using authorial *modulated* clauses of high value. Some of these are as follows:

1. Yet an economic crisis with few precedents must be confronted. (*The Independent*)
2. two unpopular wars must be resolved. (*The Independent*)
3. A healthcare system needs to be rebuilt, (*The Independent*)
4. while social security must be shored up (*The Independent*)
5. Yet it must not distract him from that other piece of unfinished business, the Middle East peace process. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
6. The president-elect must engage immediately and not allow the issue to slip off his radar. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

Thus, by listing up a number of specific areas that demand immediate attention and action, the British editorials depict a state of emergency that the incoming president has to confront and resolve. In contrast, in the Indian editorials there is merely one obligation for Barack Obama. Though like those in the British editorials this obligation is made to sound most urgent by using authorial *modulated* clause of high value.

Domestically, Mr. Obama has to deal with unemployment, and deliver on the welfare measures. (*The Statesman*)

Further, in the British editorials there are ten authorial modalised clauses, mostly of median value and subjective implicit orientation, that pronounce the probabilities of a dismal and bleak future for the incoming president:

1. But Barack Obama will face immense challenges in the White House. (*The Independent*)
2. This time however, the US may be entering a long and deep recession, with only sluggish growth to follow. (*The Independent*)
3. This will change the social and geopolitical landscape in which President Obama (and probably his successors) will operate. (*The Independent*)
4. Mr Obama will take office in January amid massive unrealizable expectations and facing a daunting list of problems - the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the broken healthcare system, the spiraling federal budget and America's profligate energy regime all prominent among them (*The Guardian*)
5. he will be only too aware that he is entering into the bleakest legacy to face any incoming Commander-in-Chief since Ronald Reagan in 1980, with an economy in recession, two unfinished foreign wars, and America's standing in the world brought low by the Bush presidency. (*The Daily Telegraph*)

6. It is going to be uphill all the way. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
7. But the memories of the campaign, be they ever so uplifting, will fade swiftly enough as hard reality bears in. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
8. On November 15, there will be an emergency Washington summit which will try to forestall a full-blown global depression. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
9. And the slump will colour everything. (*The Daily Telegraph*)
10. the new president will have scant resources to meet them (the electorate's great expectations of change). (*The Daily Telegraph*)

In contrast, in the Indian editorials, there is no such authorial *modalised* clause, that paints a picture of gloom and pessimism for Obama. Next, in the Indian editorials there are two authorial *modalised* clauses of high value and *subjective implicit* orientation that write about the ability of Obama to bring a change (*The Hindu* and *The Statesman*). Obviously, these clauses offer a positive image of Obama. Contrarily, in the British editorials there is an authorial *modalised* clause, however of low value, that voices the probability of Obama proving “a disappointment” (*The Independent*). Keeping aside these differences, one similarity that exists between the Indian and the British editorials is that both the categories of editorials are almost equally hopeful of the positive developments that an Obama presidency has the potential to bring. Specifically speaking, there are two authorial *modalised* clauses of median value and *subjective implicit* orientation each in the Indian and the British editorials pronouncing such probabilities:

1. the international community will be mightily relieved. (*The Hindu*)
2. However, the hope is that his unique personal history will make him understand better than his predecessors that other countries too have their special character. (*The Hindu*)
3. The impact (of Obama’s ‘exceptional’ upbringing) will be most evident in his foreign policy. (*The Independent*)
4. diplomacy will make a welcome return as America's preferred method of conducting foreign policy. (*The Independent*)

As regards the editorials related to the terror attack in Mumbai on 26-11-2008, there is one authorial *modalised* clause of median value each in the Indian and the British newspapers writing about the probability of the Government of Pakistan’s seriousness in the drive against terrorism.

1. While the Government of Pakistan appears to be serious in putting any form of support that its Inter-Services Intelligence provided for terrorism behind and in its pursuit of improved relations with India. (*The Hindu*)
2. President Asif Zardari's administration in Islamabad seems sincere in its determination to crush the militants in its lawless western territories. (*The Independent*)

Second, both the Indian and the British editorials voice the probability of pressure upon the Congress party led UPA government to act against terrorism in the wake of Mumbai attack. There is

one authorial *modalised* clause of median value each in both the categories of newspapers communicating this probability.

1. The Maharashtra and central governments will obviously come under pressure to act decisively on the terrorism front. (*The Hindu*)
2. The Congress Party, already criticized for failing to get a grip on the insurgent threat, will be desperate to show it is making progress by next year's general election. (*The Independent*)

Further, in the British editorials there are authorial *modalised* clauses of median value voicing fears of communal clashes in India in the wake of Mumbai attack (*The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*). In contrast, there is no authorial *modalised* clause in the Indian editorials voicing such fears. However, they have one authorial *modulated* clause of median value that makes the avoidance of “the bitterness of religious politics” and promotion of “harmony among different sections” an obligation (*The Hindu*). Undoubtedly, the British editorials highlight the danger of communalism in India by showing it vulnerable to communal disturbances, while the Indian editorials opt to remain silent in this regard. Further, in the Indian editorials there is one authorial *modalised* clause of median value and *subjective implicit* orientation expressing hope regarding India overcoming the crisis posed to it by the Mumbai attack (*The Indian Express*). In contrast, in the British editorials median value authorial *modalised* clause expressing hope for India is of *objective implicit* orientation. (*The Independent*). Besides, they also have one median value authorial *modalised* clause and that too of *subjective implicit* orientation expressing a cause of serious concern for India.

But there is a danger that outside investors will be scared off. (*The Independent*)

This shows that authors of the Indian editorials float a resilient image of India and assume the full responsibility of floating this image by using the *subjective implicit* orientation of *modalisation*, whereas the authors of the British editorials while floating a resilient image of India attempt to evade the responsibility of floating it by using the *objective implicit* orientation of *modalisation*. On the other hand, while sounding a note of serious concern for India they personalize their proposition by using the *subjective implicit* orientation of *modalisation*. Next, in the British editorials, there is one median value authorial *modalised* clause of *subjective implicit* orientation that shows skepticism in diplomacy or negotiation as a means for battling terrorism (*The Daily Telegraph*). Besides, they have one authorial *modulated* clause of high value and *subjective implicit* orientation laying down the obligation for “hunting down the Islamist terrorists” (*The Daily Telegraph*). Interestingly, in the Indian editorials there is neither any authorial *modalised* clause that shows skepticism in diplomacy or negotiation nor any authorial *modulated* clause that expresses the obligation to hunt down the Islamist terrorists. Obviously, the British editorials seem to be in tune with the ideology of the US led western forces that preferred a military option in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another interesting aspect is that the Indian editorials turn out to be more balanced and mature while voicing opinions regarding the identity of Mumbai attackers. For instance, in the Indian editorials, there are three authorial *modalised* clause of *subjective implicit* orientation touching this issue. Out of these, two clauses

write about the probability of things getting clear after the investigation (*The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*). The third one voices the probability of the militants landing on “a small boat from out of a larger vessel in the high seas off the coast of Mumbai” (*The Hindu*). Thus, none of the three clauses puts a finger of suspicion upon any organization or nation as the perpetrator of the attack. However, there are two authorial *modalised* clauses of low value and *subjective implicit* orientation in the British editorials that do so (*The Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*). The first clause voices the probability of an al-Qa’ida hand in the attack and the second one doubts this probability. Next, in the Indian editorials there are three authorial *modulated* clauses of *subjective implicit* orientation that write about certain inabilities, the purpose of which is to bring the Indian state or the establishment including the Indian PM in the dock.

1. He (the Prime Minister of India) couldn’t even replace his utterly inept and equally shameless home minister. (*The Statesman*)
2. he (the Prime Minister of India) certainly cannot expect that the people will respond positively to the pleas and promises made during his post-Mumbai address to the nation. (*The Statesman*)
3. the state cannot take credit for that (the countless exhibitions of valour, humaneness and brotherhood during the Mumbai terror attack). (*The Statesman*)

In addition to these, they have a number of authorial *modulated* clauses, mostly of high value and *subjective implicit* orientation that lay down certain obligations for the govt. of India, the Indian politics and the people of India, the purpose of which is to make them act to build a secure India.

1. The immediate task before the Maharashtra government should be to remove the sense of insecurity. (*The Hindu*)
2. The Government of India should come to the aid of the State in a massive way in creating a sense of security in the immediate term... (*The Hindu*)
3. The focus instead should be on strengthening security through surveillance of public places, screening of entry, and more policemen on the ground. (*The Hindu*)
4. The long term task should of course be to avoid the bitterness of religious politics and promote harmony among different sections. (*The Hindu*)
5. Owners of public places such as hotels need also to step up their vigil and put stronger security and screening measures in place. (*The Hindu*)
6. Politics has to rise to the occasion. (*The Indian Express*)

In contrast, the British editorials do not write about any such inadequacy and do not lay down any such obligation that alludes to a necessity or requirement hitherto unattended in India and that resulted in a major security lapse signified by the Mumbai terror attack. Thus, the Indian editorials are categorical and blunt in criticizing the Indian state or the establishment and in laying down certain dos and don’ts for the stakeholders involved, whereas the British editorials are cautious in this regard and do not meddle with what is termed as *internal affairs of a nation* in the diplomatic jargon.

In summing up, it is stated that the present paper began with the objective of ascertaining the viability of the SFL model of modality as a tool to decode the ideology in a discourse by applying this theory to the language of selected editorials. The above discussion certainly testifies this viability. It shows that the expressions of commitment, knowledge or certainty that the modal resources stand for can be read as indeterminacy, lack of belief, fear, prediction, demand, etc. and thus speak of the ideology of the producer of the text.

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