

# Expressing (Un)certainty through Modal Verbs in Advance Fee Fraud Emails

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**Abstract:** Advanced fee fraud is a common form of online financial scam on the Internet. Previous researchers have attempted a broad study of the nature and narrative features of this scam. The current study attempts a linguistic analysis of 200 samples of advanced fee scam emails and examines specifically how modal auxiliary verbs are used to express certainty or uncertainty in the scam. For instance, modal verbs are commonly used to direct, promise, threaten and even serve politeness functions in scam emails. Deontic modal verbs such as “will” is found to be the most frequent verb in the data and is manipulatively deployed at speaker-oriented level of discourse to express commitment on the part of the speaker and impose some obligation such as ensuring the interaction proposed in the letters remain secret. Findings from the study reveal that the manipulative use of modal verbs contributes to the success of the proposed scam.

**Keywords:** Deontic modality, epistemic modality, scam emails, Internet, deception.

## 1. Introduction

Deception has been generally defined as a communicative act that is intended to elicit a certain type of belief in the listener with the intention of manipulating truth and falsifying information (Galanski, 2000). At the thrust of deceptive practice is language use whether verbal or non-verbal. Language including other forms of non-

verbal behaviours can influence a change in people. Bizzell & Herzberg (1990) notes that language is defined by the meaning attached to it, and involves social context and events. Thus, if language is properly utilized by an individual in a given speech situation, he/she possesses the ability to change the thought patterns or will of his/her listeners.

Very often, deceivers use language to manipulate or coerce their victims (Oswald, 2014); however, this form of deception could be regarded as mere persuasive skills embellished in oratory. For instance, in scam mail, a conman sends a letter requesting the recipient to respond to a business proposal. While the letter does not compel the recipient to reply, certain linguistic strategies like emotive appeals, appeal to urgency and even scarcity of financial resources implied in such messages could indirectly prompt response and possibly deceive. Van Dijk (2006) gives a distinction between persuasion and manipulation, noting that an individual is given a choice to make a decision or take an action during persuasion, but is made passive during manipulation. These distinction between persuasion and deception may seem fuzzy within the context of fraudulent emails, because at first recipients have the option to read the email, and disregard the information it contains. However, the content of these emails might prompt their addressees to act either out of sympathy or greed. This is because language used in these emails influence readers' perception and conduct. This study takes a different approach to examining deceptive discourse in scam emails by looking at modal expressions as deceptive strategies that express strong or weak stance they contribute to the likelihood of deception.

## 2. Modality

The term modality has received attention in the field of philosophy and linguistics. In philosophy and logic, modality refers to notions of possibility and necessity in a proposition and

basically excludes non-propositions (Skorasinski, 2019). In linguistics, modality is described as a semantic category that expresses possibility, probability, obligation, volition, and in recent studies extends to other notions such as doubt, wish, regret and desire (Downing & Locke, 2002, p. 382). However Salkie (2009) notes that the meaning of modals cannot be inferred from loan words but are defined in relation to their context of use. Modality in addition to expressing beliefs and judgements involves a commitment by a speaker in a pragmatic process of speaking.

Several scholars have attempted the categorization of modality; hence there is no unanimous classification or list of categories (See Nuyt, 2006; Coates, 2015; Palmer, 2001). The two most common classifications include the deontic and epistemic modality. *Epistemic* modality refers to belief, knowledge or truth that a speaker holds in regard to a proposition. *Deontic* modality concerns expressions that indicate necessity, obligation, possibility and even inclination (Skorasinski, 2019). Palmer (2001) further notes that it is difficult to classify a modal as belonging to a specific category since their meanings can only be inferred from their contexts. Modality can be expressed through modal verbs, particles and other linguistic forms that include adjectives, nouns phrases and lexical verbs.

This study focuses on the English modal auxiliary verbs can/could, may/might, will/would, shall/should, and must (Coates, 2015) as verbs that express speakers' attitudes in discourse. The

modal verb *can* for instance, expresses ability in the example *I can move all the boxes* or request in the expression *Can I get the microphone?* In the second case, the request might also be an obligation where asymmetric power relations exist. Generally, modals verbs show the speaker's attitude to actualizing future situation. The verbs *shall* and *will* express predictive future, *would* expresses uncertainty or request and *should* expresses a logical necessity. The functions of these verbs in relation to their context of use are by no means exhaustive. This study however, focuses mainly on how modal verbs act as forms of manipulative discourse in scam mail.

Some studies have examined the functions of modal verbs in persuasion and deception with major interest in the discursive functions of modal verbs in political discourse. Hadjantou and Madja (2019) observe that modal verbs including other modal markers are common in political speeches for rhetoric purposes. In their study of selected campaign speeches of Justin Trudeau - the Canadian Prime Minister, epistemic verbs serve politeness and face-saving purposes. In another study of the influence of modal verbs on political speeches, Boicu (2007) also adds that modal verbs like *should* expresses medium politeness while *must* might index indirect coercion. The study further adds that when the obligatory modal *must* is associated with the collective pronoun *we*, it tends to motivate collectivity and patriotism.

There are conflicting studies regarding the role of modal verbs in deceptive communication. Newman, Pennebaker, Berry & Richards, (2003), in their

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linguistic analysis of truthful versus false conversations argue that liars use fewer modal verbs when compared to truth tellers. In contrast, Zhou, Burgoon, Nunamaker, & Twitchel, (2004) in a study of modal verb use among truth tellers and liars in computer mediated communication, suggest that liars used more modal verbs like "maybe" and "could" in deceptive communication when compared to truth tellers. These verbs tend to distant the speakers from their words. Other uses of modal verbs especially during email communication are common. Modal verbs serve as hedges in business emails to soften the tone of conversation and interact with their respondents as well as evade responsibilities in cases of sales marketing emails (Wang & Yue, 2016).

While there is plentiful evidence on the use of modal verbs to express lies and hedges in email communication, this study takes on another form of email communication, the advanced fee fraud. In the advanced fee fraud (also referred to as scam emails in this study), the goal of the discourse is to persuade or cajole their addressees to believe that the information communicated is genuine. As a result, the writers of the emails use different linguistic strategies to commit to their propositions in a bid to appear genuine. This study extends the research into persuasion and deception using modals, and takes on another aspect of computer-mediated communication to explore how scammers use modal verbs to express certainty or uncertainty in their scam emails.

### **3. Online Advance Fee Fraud**

Online fraud is described as the use of online facilities to carry out dubious activities (Alanezi, 2015). It involves soliciting for funds and or illegal business transactions targeted at vulnerable individuals. Online advance fee fraud can be described as mass marketing scam, a fraud that exploits electronic communication techniques such as emails, instant messages and social networking sites to defraud others (Whitty, 2015). This crime of persuasion or crime of trust occurs in the form of fake services, or fraudulent investment scams, and advance fee business proposals that deceive individuals (Chiluwu, 2009; Alanezi, 2015). Online transactions which occur between two or more parties that are not in a face to face contact promote this type of crime, as individuals sometimes use fake documents and identities that cannot be verified to perpetrate fraudulent acts.

Advanced fee fraud (AFF) or fake business unsolicited email is one of the most prevalent forms of online fraud. It is a type of fraud that requires their victims to send a little amount of money in anticipation of a huge sum of money through inheritance, or deposited in a dormant account payable to the victim. Other types of the AFF include: the fortune bequeathing scam, charity donation, business proposal, inheritance, contract/over invoiced scams and lottery scams (Chiluwu, 2009). In the fortune bequeathing scam, the conman in the guise of an accountant or bank manager claims to be in possession of a huge sum of money belonging to a deceased

client, who has no beneficiary. The conman writes to a foreigner requesting that the fund be transferred to the foreigner's account to prevent the government from confiscating the funds and offers a particular percentage to the recipient. Alternatively, the fraudster claims that the addressee had been chosen as a lucky beneficiary of a deceased client's wealth. The amount supposedly deposited in a foreign bank is huge and difficult to access without the help of the addressee. When the recipient accepts the offer, he later receives a mail instructing him to send his personal details and pay a fee in order to access the money. The scammer fabricates very convincing stories with urgency that lures victims to respond without verifying the claims (Whitty, 2015).

Another form of the advanced fee fraud is the business proposal scam. In this type of scam, the victim receives a request from a supposed government official who suggests a business idea. In the business proposal scam, the scammer sends an initial letter without details. This is done to initiate communication between the sender and the receiver. The nature of the proposed businesses could include oil and gas, infrastructure development contracts with outrageous benefits, or sales of government owned properties such as airport or refinery somewhere in Africa. The scammer urges the victim to respond urgently in order to receive further information. When this is done, they begin to build a social relationship. The scammer makes his story more persuasive by sending a breakdown of the expenses as well as benefits to be

received by the collaborator/victim once the deal has been concluded. The receiver is expected to send a “processing fee” for the business transaction, which is usually followed by the receipt of some forged business documents.

In *the charity donation scam*, the scammer impersonating as a dying Christian - mostly a female, solicits the support of a reliable individual from a foreign country to help distribute her wealth. When the receiver responds, the scammer gradually extorts money from the victim as fee to help retrieve the will and subsequent monetary donation for charity. *The lottery scam* is written to individuals informing them they had won lottery they never applied for. The recipient is expected to pay a processing fee to access the funds. The *contract/over-invoiced scam* relates to fraudsters impersonating a top government official in an African country. The recipient is told that he has been awarded a contract or is expected to collaborate to transfer over-invoiced fund out of the country. In the case of *inheritance scam*, the fraudster claims to possess some inherited funds and seeks the help of a foreigner to move the funds to another country suitable for investment. In all the narratives, the recipient is often offered a huge amount of money in exchange for their participation.

Several studies have examined the nature, structure and narrative patterns of email scams. From a sociological viewpoint, Smith (2009) observes that contemporary media coverage of certain events and ignorance of the real state of events in Africa predisposes

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individuals to being scammed. In one of the samples of the email, the writer assumes the identity of Aisha Gaddafi, the daughter of the late President of Libya - Muammar Gaddafi to defraud the victim. In the sample, the narrator recounts the Libya of 2011, and the conflict between the Algerian President and Aisha Gaddafi reported in mainstream media (*The Telegraph* April 13, 2013) as narrative frame for the scam to request for assistance.

Hiss (2015) notes that the narratives of email scams are written according to different cultures. In addition to the African setting prevalent in some samples, the messages are also akin to traditional folklores and Western practices like the wicked step-mother fairy tales. Hiss (2015) further notes that there is usually a mismatch between identities assumed in the texts and the indexical used to represent the persona. The result is similar to earlier findings that email scams are globalized forms of communication that begin somewhere in Africa and extend to other regions of the world (Blommaert, 2010). Their features resemble those of conventional business emails with opening greetings and request, apology, introduction, body of the message and closing remarks. Scam emails use identity categories that relate to gender, origin, age and even profession to create a supposed mutual relationship between the sender and the receiver (Hiss 2015). Schaffner (2012) in a linguistic study of the scam emails, notes the use of first second and third person pronouns as linguistic choices that attempt to legitimize the stories portrayed in the mail.

In addition to the few studies regarding email scams, the way scammers express their views and judgement contributes greatly to the success of the scam. This study builds on the existing literature reviewed here to explore modal verbs common in the emails and how these linguistic units are likely to influence recipients of email scams.

**4. Methods**

This study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches - the quantitative method identifies linguistic features and their relevance in texts. The qualitative analysis attempts to explain how the identified data are used discursively in the text. The data for this study consist of 100 samples of emails randomly

selected from two scam-baiting sites: (i.e. www.hoaxslayer.com and www.scamdex.com). 20 mail samples were obtained from hoaxslayers, while 80 were from scamdex). All samples were selected from the advance fee fraud navigation bar section of both websites. The emails were manually coded to identify the narrative themes of the samples. To identify the frequency and occurrence of each modal verb (i.e. can/could, may/might, will/would and must), the data were coded into the *AntConc* software. Table 1 is the summary of the frequency of the modal verbs in the two data sets obtained from the *AntConc* analysis.

Table 1: Comparative Frequencies of Modals in the Scam Mail Corpora

Rank	Modal verb	Number of hits	Frequency % (n-449)
1	Will	268	59.6
2	May	44	9.7
3	Can	43	9.5
4	Shall	21	4.6
5	Should	19	4.2
6	Would	17	3.7
6	Could	17	3.7
7	Must	10	2.2
7	Might	10	2.2
Total words	26000	449	100 (Approx.)
Total modals	449		
Total			

The data represented in Table 1 shows the frequency of modal verbs used in the entire data. From the analysis, *will* is the most frequently used modal verb in the sample and the fourth most frequent

lexical items in the data with 268 hits representing approximately 60% of the modal verbs used in the text. One of the limitations of the automated frequency is its inability to distinguish the

grammatical functions of a verb (e.g. *will* as modal verb, and *will* as noun). However, further n-gram cluster analysis reveals the frequency of this modal associated with verbs that direct, instruct, predict and even express wishes seen in the table 1.1 and 1.2. The epistemic *may* and *can* also occur frequently when compared to other verb forms with a percentage mean of 9.7 and 9.5 respectively. The frequency of these three verbs illustrate that scam emails use strong epistemic and deontic modal forms in their writings. The contextual meanings of these verbs are further explained in the sub sections.

### 5.2 Modal Verbs in Scam Mails

Modal verbs are relevant in discourse as they express a state of event - past present or future (Palmer, 2014). In email narratives, these verbs can express permission, and obligation in which case they compel recipients to act in a certain way. In addition, other pragmatic functions identified through the use of modal verbs in the emails include hedging and reinforcing authorial identity. The n-gram analysis of the modal verb *will*, shows its interaction with self- referential and direct pronouns.

1	above requested information,	I will furnish you with fi
2	at made to send this to you.	I will introduce myself +
3	my name appearing any where.	I will have to let you kn
4	s this one. Talk to me 1-on-	1. I will be waiting for y
5	for your full co-operation.	I will give you details ar
6	kCA hamidoukader1@gmail.com	I will be waiting for you
7	profitable business venture.	I will be ready to comper
8	ure that you will assist me,	I will let you know were :
9	personal notice.\$18.5Million?	i will offer you 40%. You
10	really need your assistance.	I will be waiting for you

Figure 1.1 screenshot of collocates/ n gram analysis of modal auxiliary verb “will” with the personal pronoun I

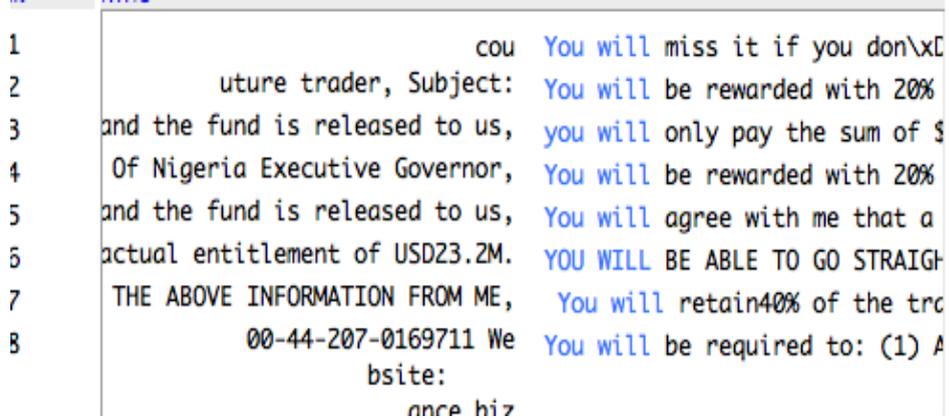


Figure 1.2 screenshot of collocates/ n gram analysis of modal auxiliary verb “will” with the personal pronoun I

The screenshots above represent the collocates of the modal verb with 77 hits for the singular personal pronoun *I + will* and 8 hits for the direct pronoun *You + will*. The disparity in frequency in the dataset shows the functions of the modal verb where the writer of the mail assumes authorial position by giving directives and also making commitments to the writer that would perceive him as really involved in the business proposals made.

### Expressing Authority through Conviction Rhetoric

Conviction rhetoric is a term that expresses a speaker’s ability to provide a powerful and convincing image (Chataris-Black, 2013) and can be expressed through modal verbs that make promises, threaten or declare a state of event. In the context under study where the hearer relies on the information provided by the speaker, conviction rhetoric are expressed by making categorical statements, predictions and promises that convey both the speaker and the information

presented as authentic. Some deontic and epistemic use of *shall*, *will* and *should* are explained in the samples below:

- (1) ...i need an investment Partner, however, I am curious in you for an investment project assistance in your country I am willing to negotiate Management Sharing Percentage after the confirmation of the funds in your account. I **shall** expect to hear from you urgently as this is of high Priority. I **shall** make available to you all necessary documentations, directives and possibly arrange a meeting prior to the commencement of the transaction at the bank where the funds is deposited. **your urgent reply will be needed** Take note; After the whole deal and the fund is released to us, You will be rewarded with 20% of the total amount for your participation and also be rewarded with 10%

of any profit we invest the money into. I **shall** tell you more about this transaction as soon as i get your readiness concerning this transaction. Waiting for your reply, (ex 69)

(2) My Beloved, I was informed by my doctor that I got poisoned and it affected my liver, and I can only live for some few days... I have a little adopted child named David Vennie that I adopted in this Country when my late Father was alive and \$3.5 million Dollars I inherited from my late Father. Give 20% of the money to handicap people and charity organization. The remaining 50% should be yours for your help to David. Note; *This should be a code between you and my son David in this transaction "Hospital" any mail from him, the Lawyer he will direct you to, without this code "Hospital" then it is not from David, the Lawyer or myself as i don't know what will happen to me in the next few hours.* Finally, write me back urgent so that David will send you his pictures and his international passport to be sure of whom you are dealing with. David is 14years of age, therefore guide him. *Again if i don't hear from you i will look for another person or any organization.* May Almighty God bless you and use you to accomplish my wish. Pray for me always. Ms Susan Vennie

The repetition of *shall/should* in examples 1 and 2 serves different pragmatic functions. In the first instance,

- a. I **shall** expect to hear from you urgently as this is of high priority (1); This should be a code between you and my son David in this transaction (2)
- b. I shall make available to you all necessary documentation/ I shall tell you more about this transaction.

In the first instance of *shall*, the speaker makes a wish by using the strong obligatory verb 'shall'. In this context, the speaker does not just express a desire to receive a response from the recipient but subtly initiates an obligation on the receiver to respond. Unfortunately, the authors of scam emails are predators and the success of their operations rests solely on the ability of the recipients to respond to such mail. The demand for response is strengthened by the expression *high priority* that leaves the speaker no other choice than to respond. Again the use of the obligatory *should* attempts to establish the writer as a credible person giving instructions that the speaker is expected to respond to. Again, there is a sense of commitment initiated by the speaker to express authority in the second instances through personal pronouns. Dontcheva-Navratilova (2012) notes that the interaction of deontic verbs and self-referential pronouns emphasizes the presence of the speaker in discourse. The speaker attempts to commit to the recipient even though the mail is fraudulent by imposing a responsibility on himself through the verb *shall*. Such strong

commitments help to reduce doubts in the recipients who would tend to rely on the speaker's stance.

- a. You **will** be rewarded with 20% of the total amount for your participation the Lawyer he **will** direct you (1)
- b. if I don't hear from you, I **will** look for another person or any organization (2)

In Example 1, the modal verb *will* expresses epistemic stance in certain samples showing a sense of commitment to the expression. The first two representation of *will* in the samples above expresses a deontic commitment of promising. There is a shift from the first person to second person directive pronoun in the examples 1 and 2 diverting the focus of discourse to the recipient. The writers of both emails by using the direct pronoun, ascribes authorial position to themselves and through the directive verb expresses their ability to reward and even direct the affairs in the text. The mail proposal (Ex. 1) is a request for a foreigner to transfer a non-existent inheritance to a foreign account. Although the addressee had not accepted the deal, the speaker expresses a sense of commitment in sorting out all challenges that may transpire during the transfer of the funds. This adoption of certainty is relevant as it is targeted at portraying the speaker as legitimate. The inclusion of a legal backing also attempts to prove that the proposed transaction is genuine when in reality, it is not. While the story itself is distorted with poor linguistic expressions typical of scam emails (Hiss, 2015), the speaker's commitment to his statements are reinforced by

strategic choices of modal verbs that show a commitment to honesty (providing documents) and fair deal (rewarding the recipient). The pragmatic function of threatening using modal verbs is expressed in the example 2 above. The writer uses the *if*-conditional and the deontic verb to emphasize the consequence of the recipient's refusal to comply with the proposal, making the proposal seem genuine and urgent. The author takes an authorial stance by suggesting his ability to leave out the speaker supposing he was not interested in the deal. This indirectly shows an obligatory position that would motivate the addressee to take action immediately.

In addition to the expression of authorial stance, modal verbs serve coercive functions in discourse. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) notes that tag questions and declarative questions are biased towards specific answers making them coercive. The modal auxiliary verbs that reinforce the speaker's position and moral responsibility that must be taken by the recipient are *must* (not), *should* (not) and *will*. The following examples illustrate how scam emails covertly use modal verbs to coerce their recipients to act in a certain way.

(3) Attn: Beneficiary,

This is to let you know that your case has repeatedly coming to my Office every day and all the complain that I have been getting all in regards to your payment with the Federal Government which the CBN has been involved to pay to you...you will only pay the sum of \$580.00 for your payment to be paid to you...

Please if you are not ready to receive your payment and you cannot pay this fee, I guess you shouldn't write me as I will not entertain any unpleasant response from you.

(4) Dear friend

I am working with one of the bank of Africa (BOA) here in Burkina Faso, can you help me repatriate the sum of US\$10.5million dollars to your overseas Account Based on percentage. Can you handle this project? Can I give you this trust? I expect your urgent response if you can handle this project, Or kindly reply to my alternative email address below.

Example 3 is a letter supposedly coming from the office of the Central Bank of Nigeria. Given such pretext, there is a need to express the authority that the institution represents. Modal verb of obligation *should not* serves the pragmatic function of warning the recipient on what not to do. The verb expresses a status quo that must be adhered to and attempts to incite fear in the recipient who might not want to offend the writer. Again, while the instruction to the recipient is not to reply, there is also an indirect action that the message attempts to elicit - a situation the writer might want to reply to understand the implication of the message or even the true identity of the sender. The tone of the message is formal depicting the institutional authority the mail claims to represent.

Modal verb of coercion in example 3 can be seen in the inverted use of *can*. The sample is a request for the recipient to participate in a business proposal

involving huge 'task.' By using the interrogative, *can you handle it?* the expression no longer expresses the basic function of a modal verb in the example but reorients the conversation toward the recipient. The discourse now directed to the recipient only, compels him to question his inner ability to carry out the task of handling the proposal. While the act of coercion is not explicitly expressed in the question, there is a form of mind manipulation realized as the question appeals to the mental models of the recipient (van Dijk, 2006) who might want to prove his ability.

Discourse of scam emails in examples (3) and (4) are supposedly dialogic, meaning that they elicit interaction by asking recipients to respond or carry out specific actions. While sample (3) tries to imitate formal business mails, the language structure is poor, contradicting the identity of the Governor of Central Bank depicted in the text. This form of inconsistency in narration supports the findings that these emails are in some cases, written by inexperienced, non-English speaking individuals (Blommaert, (2010). Another deontic use of modal verb can be seen in sample 5 below.

(5) I brought you a business proposal worth twelve million five hundred thousand US dollars only. If you know that you are able to involve and participate in this business transaction, let me know before i come back to you with more details. Be assured that I will provide you with forms and

details you need to know about the origin of this fund *and you must promise to keep everything confidential until the fund get to your bank account there.*

In example 5 above, the speaker invokes some moral obligation of secrecy towards the business. Secrecy by convention is a moral duty that binds certain groups, professions or parties. The strong deontic modal *must* in example 5 attempts to establish a moral premise where the business transaction supposedly a secret, must be kept within the parties involved. Bliss (2005) notes that deontic verbs have manipulative effects, because they presuppose a moral belief system. If something is a *must*, there is an underlying moral obligation that must be adhered to. In the case of the sample above, the scam narrator draws on this conventional premise of the moral perception of secrecy to coerce victims into hiding information. The implication of this obligation is that once the scam victims expose the information, the plans might fail. Previous studies regarding scam emails reveal that one of the features of such fraudulent schemes is that they require their victims to remain silent (See Dion, 2010). As the scam begins to succeed, the victim finds it difficult to talk to anyone with the hope that the actions are genuine.

### Expressing Solidarity

Modal auxiliary verbs as category of modality can contribute to expressing solidarity and in-group relations. The choice of the collective pronoun *we* identifies the speaker as a member of common group with the same goals. The interaction of modal verbs and

collective pronouns in political discourse are persuasive strategies that implore audience to accept the speaker's point of view as *we* specifically suggests the possibility of deliberation, cooperation and collective good (Bramley, 2001). When interacting with epistemic or deontic modals that shows judgement, possibility or even certainty, collective pronouns can trigger manipulation and deception. In the case of deceptive communication, modal verbs express solidarity and attempt to reawaken a desire for cooperation. The epistemic use of *can* to express possibility in the example below is subtly constructed to influence the interlocutor.

(6) I am Mrs. Juliet Annita Khubeka, am the wife of late Mr. John Khubeka who was murdered by the Zimbabwean veterans and irate black people along with other members of the family... Since the death of my husband, there have been threat to our lives, but I and my only son Frank Numa Khubeka succeeded to work for our escape to South Africa as political asylum seekers. In view of this development, our position in South Africa do not<sup>[sic]</sup> permit us to normalize this fund for any meaningful business transaction in South. That is why I want this fund to be transferred into your Nominated account so that you will assist us to invest it in your country in any meaningful business venture. Hence, if you agree to assist us, we have two options for you, *we can go into partnership with you and your family the moment this fund is moved or transferred out of South Africa* or in the alternative, we

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offer you 25% of the money for your assistance.

The collective pronoun *we* interacting with the epistemic verb *can* in example 6 expresses a desire that signals a mutual interest and the desire for cooperation. While the story illustrated is completely untrue, the speaker's involvement in sharing the claimed money goes to indicate a lack of greed on the part of the speaker. The letter is intended to elicit cooperation from the recipient and using collective pronoun *we* advances commitment moves on the part of the writer and also indirectly suggests a strong possibility of achieving success through cooperation. Again, the modal *can* suggest a strong possibility that the deal would come through and masks the fraudulent intentions of the writer. Although *can* does not out rightly express certainty in the example, it strengthens the content of the message by indicating that the funds may be realistic dependent on the cooperation of the recipient.

### Expressing desires

Modal verbs serve as volitives in which case they express desires. Verbs that express desire serve manipulative functions as they implore the hearer to accept events based on the speaker's own perception.

(7) I am the Credit Manager A. D. B Bank of Burkina Faso Ouagadougou and in one way or the *other was hoping you will cooperate with me as a partner* in a project of transferring an abandoned fund of a late customer of the bank worth of \$18,000,000 (Eighteen Million Dollars US). (Ex2)

(8) I am sure that this letter will come to you as a surprise, *but I shall be*

*grateful if you would read with the interest of assisting in this proposal* tendered herein. My name is Barrister ADAMU IBRAHIM, Attorney at Law and Legal advisor to Mr.ISSAH LONTHAN a lebaneses by nationality.

(9) I am Willian Joseph. I have emailed you earlier few weeks ago without any response from you. On my first email I mentioned about my late client whose relatives I cannot get in touch with. But both of you have the same last name so it will be very easy to front you as his official next of kin. *I am compelled to do this because I would not want the bank to push my clients funds into their treasury* as unclaimed funds. If you are interested you do let me know so that I can give you Comprehensive details on what we are to do.

Modal verbs *will* and *shall* also serve predictive and volitive functions in discourse. In examples 7 and 8, the modal verbs *will* and *shall* are used to express the desire of the speaker and serve as face saving strategy. In example 7 specifically, the writer acknowledges that the mail is obtrusive and uses the volitive to save face while imploring the recipient not to discard the mail. Politeness strategies are indirectly represented in both samples in an attempt to create a mutual relationship with their addresses.

In the example 9, *would* signals a state of concern that is not obviously in the interest of the addressee but the speaker. Epistemic modals are believed to construct manipulative information or

propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnel, 2018). A propagandist discourse may seem like an interaction that promotes the interest of the parties during communication when in reality they serve the interest of the speaker. The ultimate goal of any scam email is to extort money from their preys or instruct them to provide their personal details that may be used for phishing. In the narratives embedded with soft words and pathetic stories common to inheritance and charity scams, the underlying intention of the scammer is hidden here through manipulative verb forms that expresses the writer's desire to cooperate with the addressee. *Would* is an example of epistemic modal that suggests a strong desire in sample 9 to save a deceased client's funds when in reality it is aimed at defrauding the addressee. Just like propagandist discourses, scam emails use informative communication that makes it difficult to identify fraud.

### Evasive Strategies

Modal verbs in addition to their obligatory functions also show commitment or lack of commitment to certain discourse using expressions that indicate possibility or uncertainty. Like hedging, these strategies show a lack of commitment but are used to build relationship with the speaker. *May* is the second most frequent modal in the scam email samples and serves the function of suggesting a possibility, a probability or evading responsibility. Hyland, (1998) suggests that *may/might* are considered prototypical hedging devices that reduce the speaker's commitment to a proposition. The pragmatic functions of modal verbs as hedging devices are found in scam emails.

(11) Dear Friend/Partner,  
This message may come to you as a surprise, but be assured it is in good faith from a widow in need.

(12) Compliment to you and your family, My name is Amos Majola the elder son of Mr. David Majola, from the Republic of Zimbabwe. It might be a surprise to you where I got your contact address. I got your contact from the South African Chamber of Commerce in Johannesburg

(13) I trust that, you and your family are well. I hope my request will find favour with you but under any circumstances will appreciate to have sufficient time to talk with you about this matter. *I know, you may or may not be related to Richard Kellam who unfortunately died with no written specification about his country of origin as all the information related to him was pointing to his address locally here, I have no specific target where I could get useful information about him hence I make a choice from a range of possibilities to use google archive where the description I got revealed your contact and I thought I could share this information with you with the impression to present you to the bank as the family relative to claim the \$7,597,000.00 he left in a bank...*

In the first instance of *may* in sample 11, the speaker is unsure of the recipient's reaction and adopts a hedging device *may* to create to request the addressee's indulgence. A weaker epistemic verb *might* in example 12 also serves a hedging function where the outcome of the addressee's reaction to such an obtrusive letter is unknown.

In example 13, the writer is completely aware that the recipient is unknown, and uses a deontic *may/may* not to shield his knowledge of events. Scam emails are chain letters written to others and in the context of example 13, the addressee is presumed to bear similar surname with a deceased “Richard Kellan.” The addressee is indeed not expected to know Richard Kellan since there may be a lot of people bearing such name. The hedging device in this context is a disclaimer that the writer may not know the addressee. In addition to the verb *may*, other verb forms such as *can/could* are used in the samples as hedging device to indicate possibility, ability or generally as politeness strategy.

(14) I want to transfer this fund into your bank account in your country, so

that **we could** invest it wisely. I have contacted the Director of the bank where the fund is deposited in Burkina Faso, and asked if the fund could

be loaded into an ATM VISA CARD and he said it is possible to load some of the funds into an ATM VISA CARD, while most of it will be wired to your account via online bank transfer.

(15) I am the only Son/Child of my parents. My Mother and Father died during the escalation and climax of the Syrian war. **As you may know, or may not know**, the monetary sanctions imposed on Syria, and the ongoing war have made it nearly impossible to successfully operate any type of investment here in Syria, or to even transfer money from here to other parts of the world. For this reason, I am contacting you in great

confidence, with the hope that you could help me, and get this money into your country, for investment purposes. **I believe I can trust you?** I will give you 20% of the total money (\$5.8 Million US Dollars) for your assistance, I hope, I'm fair with the offer? Right now, **Where I am now, we can only communicate through the Red Cross communication facilities**, Please, you are in a position, to help me start a new life, and I would owe you my life, if you help me. I wait for your fast response, so i can give you further details, upon hearing from you. Please consider my request for our mutual benefit, and life ahead.

The verbs *can* and *could* are used in example 15 to solicit support and as hedging devices. The hedging device of *could* serves two functions in this context; first as a politeness strategy and the second is to show the writer's lack of commitment to the proposal given the nature. While the writer strongly desires that the recipient believes the story, he shields his intention by using a weak epistemic stance that portray him as desperate. In the second instance, the writer uses the verb *could* as emotive appeal to request the help of the addressee. The interaction is further strengthened by the epistemic verb *can* again used in this context to show not just certainty but the possibility of future interactions.

## Conclusion

This study examines the use of modal auxiliary verbs as manipulative and deceptive strategies in scam emails. Modal verbs contribute significantly to the success of these scams as they serve to direct, promise, threaten and even

serve politeness functions. Deontic verbs such as *must*, *will* and *shall* are used at speaker oriented levels to show some level of commitment on the part of the speaker and impose some obligation on the addressee. These manipulative use of deontic modal verbs attempts to suggest that the transactions offered in the emails are genuine.

In addition, epistemic positions are also reproduced in scam mails. The second most frequent verb *may* from the study, serve as hedging strategies to signal politeness, and ensure the writer refrains from making factual statements when

the email writer is unsure of the speaker's reaction. Epistemic verbs also strongly suggest the possibility of the success of the proposals and serve as emotional appeals to demand help from the recipients. Generally, modal verbs in scam emails serve as subtle linguistic devices that shield the main intention of the email by reinforcing authorial identity of speakers and in other cases portray the writers as weak. The present study paves way for further investigation on other forms of expressing modality in scam emails.

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### **Appendices**

[www.hoaxslayer.com/advancedfeefrauds](http://www.hoaxslayer.com/advancedfeefrauds)

[www.scamdex.com/advancedfeefrauds](http://www.scamdex.com/advancedfeefrauds)

### **Notes**

1. The email samples are reproduced with the poor grammatical structures of their writers.

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