# A corpus-based grammatical analysis of modality in the writing of Spanish university students of English

Rebeca García González



# Introduction

### Aim of paper:

To explore how Spanish university students express modality in their academic writing across proficiency levels

### Research hypotheses:

As students' level of proficiency rises, I expect:

- 1. A higher quantity of modal markers
- 2. A wider variety of modal markers
- 3. A movement away from *verbal* to *non-verbal* modal means

# Theoretical framework

- Modality: A semantic category
- English grammatical realization: a modal system
- Halliday's model (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004)

SEMANTIC TYPES OF MODALITY		TYPICAL REALIZATION
Modalization		-Finite Modal Operator
	Probability	-Modal Adjunct
		-Both the above combined
		-Finite Modal Operator
	Frequency	-Modal Adjunct
		-Both the above combined
Modulation		-Finite Modal Operator
	Obligation	-Passive Verb Predicator
		-Finite Modal Operator
	Inclination	-Adjective Predicator

# Theoretical framework

- Modality: A semantic category
- English grammatical realization: a modal system
- Halliday's model (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004)

SEMANTIC TYPES OF MODALITY		TYPICAL REALIZATION
Modalization	Probability	-Finite Modal Operator -Modal Adjunct -Both the above combined
	Frequency	-Finite Modal Operator -Modal Adjunct -Both the above combined
Modulation	Obligation	-Finite Modal Operator -Passive Verb Predicator
	Inclination	-Finite Modal Operator -Adjective Predicator

# Corpus and methodology

- The WriCLE corpus: a learner corpus of Spanish university students (Rollinson and Mendikoetxea, 2010)
- A section of **458 essays** analyzed (450,000 words)
- Learner Profile includes students' proficiency level
  - Oxford Quick Placement Test, UCLES (2001)
  - from A2 to C2 (CEFRL. Council of Europe, 2001)
- Procedures: **UAM CorpusTool** (O'Donnell, 2008)
- Unit of analysis: the clause

# Verbal modal elements

### modal-auxilliary

CAN, COULD, MAY, MIGHT, WILL, WOULD, SHALL, SHOULD, MUST and OUGHT TO

lexico-modal-auxilliary

HAVE (GOT) TO, BE GOING TO, BE SUPPOSED TO, BE OBLIGED TO, BE REQUIRED TO, BE BOUND TO, BE ALLOWED TO and NEED

verbal-modality

lexical-verb

I THINK, I BELIEVE, I SUPPOSE, I GUESS, I FEEL, I FIND, I EXPECT, I KNOW, I RECKON, I CONSIDER, I INTEND and I DOUBT

modal-idiom

HAD BETTER, WOULD RATHER and WOULD SOONER

(adapted from Greenbaum et al., 1985)

# Non-verbal modal elements:

### -adjectival-phrase

non-verbal-modality -

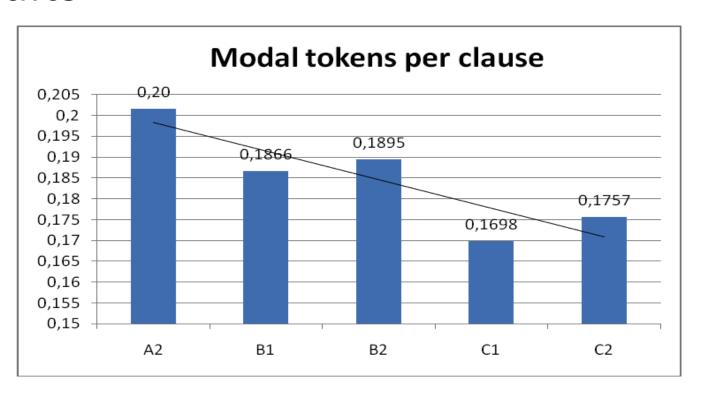
ABLE, UNABLE, TRUE,
FALSE, NECESSARY,
UNNECESSARY, POSSIBLE,
IMPOSSIBLE, PROBABLE,
IMPROBABLE, CLEAR, LIKELY,
UNLIKELY, SURE, UNSURE,
CERTAIN, UNCERTAIN, PERMISSIBLE,
WILLING, UNWILLING, DETERMINED,
IMPERATIVE, BOUND

### adverbials

```
MAYBE, PERHAPS, POSSIBLY,
DEFINITELY, CERTAINLY, SUPPOSEDLY,
SURELY, UNDOUBTEDLY, DOUBTLESS,
DOUBTLESSLY, LIKELY, PRESUMABLY,
ARGUABLY, CONCEIVABLY, INDEED,
FOR SURE, FOR CERTAIN, OF COURSE,
WITHOUT DOUBT, PROBABLY and NECESSARILY.
```

(adapted from Greenbaum et al., 1985)

# Results



# **Hypothesis 1**

As students' level of proficiency rises, they will use a higher quantity of modal markers:

PROVEN WRONG

# Hypothesis 2:

As students' level of proficiency rises, students will display a wider variety of modal markers

- ➤ No clear patterns; all the grammatical categories established as modal are used to some degree at all levels.
- ➤ However, the more advanced levels, especially B2 and C1, use a wider range of tokens within each of these categories

# Hypothesis 2:

As students' level of proficiency rises, students will display a wider variety of modal markers

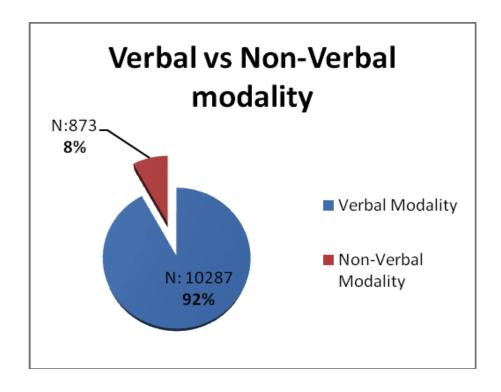


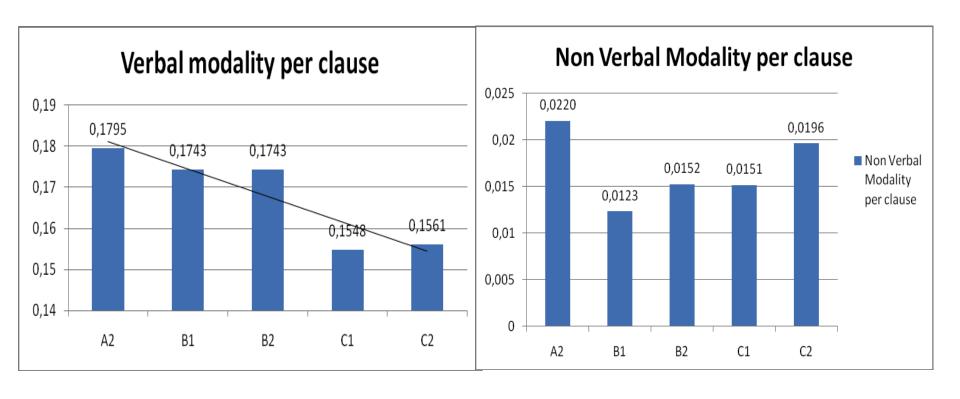
- Increasing use of non-verbal modality
- More variety of tokens within each category.

prove it RIGHT

# Hypothesis 3:

As students' level of proficiency rises, there will be a movement away from *verbal* to *non-verbal* modal means





These results show that hypothesis 3 is **RIGHT** although the proportion of verbal modality is always higher

# Conclusions

As students' proficiency level rises,

- A fall in the total use of modal markers:
  - Verbal modal elements: decreasing presence
  - Non-verbal modal elements: increasing presence

 A wider range of tokens within each grammatical class as level of proficiency rises (except for C2 students) More quantity does not mean more quality,
 e.g. decreasing use of be going to

More grammatical and pragmatic accuracy in the advanced levels

 A movement towards categories not included in my taxonomy? (i.e. evidentiality, frequency, reporting verbs, mental verbs different from the ones included)

# Thank you!

Rebeca García González rebeca.garciagonzalez@estudiante.uam.es