

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

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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	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

Theoretical framework

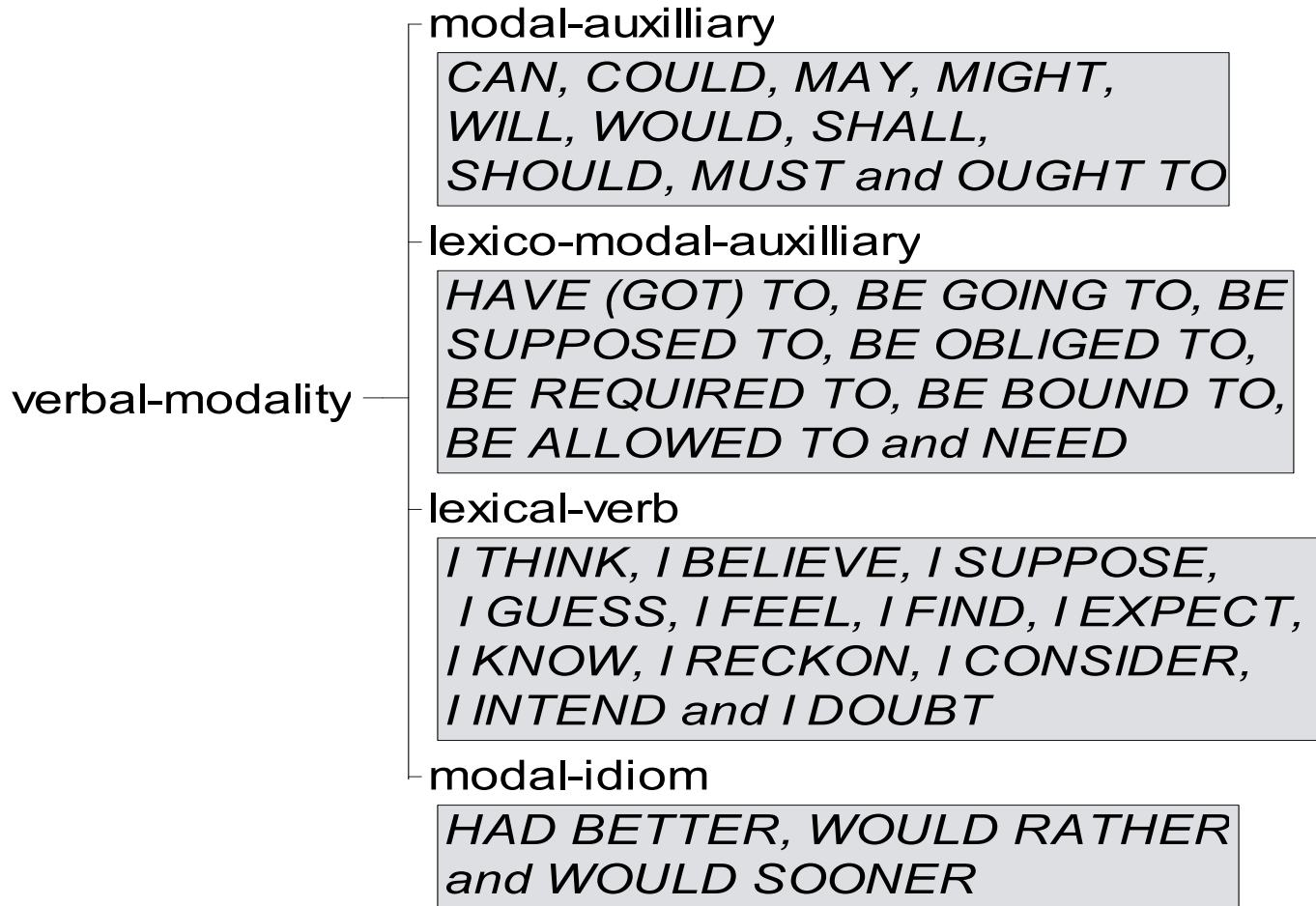
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Corpus and methodology

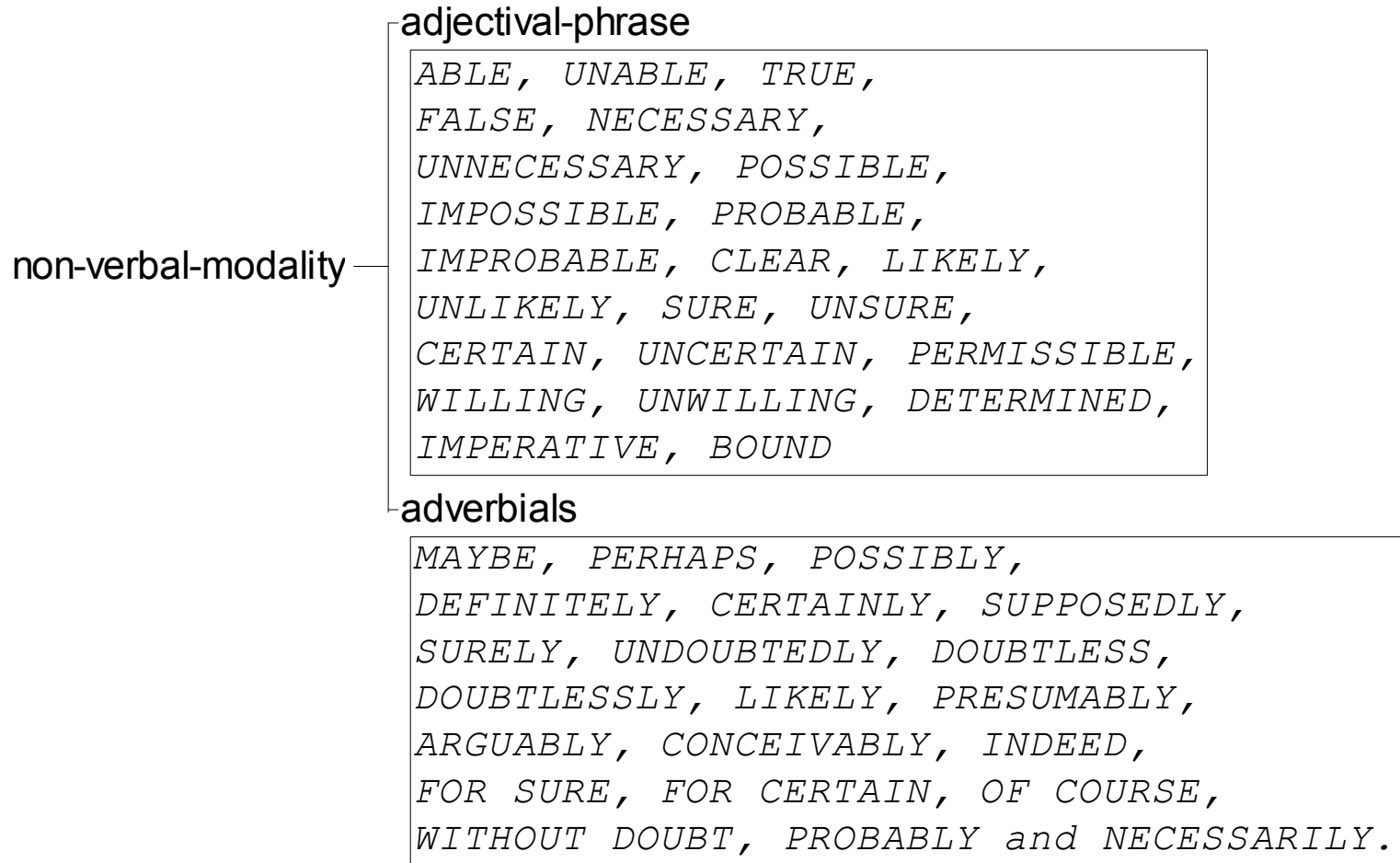
- The **WriCLE** corpus: a **learner corpus** of Spanish university students (Rollinson and Mendikoetxea, 2010)
- A section of **458 essays** analyzed (450,000 words)
- Learner Profile includes **students' proficiency level**
 - Oxford Quick Placement Test, UCLES (2001)
 - from **A2 to C2** (CEFRL. Council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

Verbal modal elements



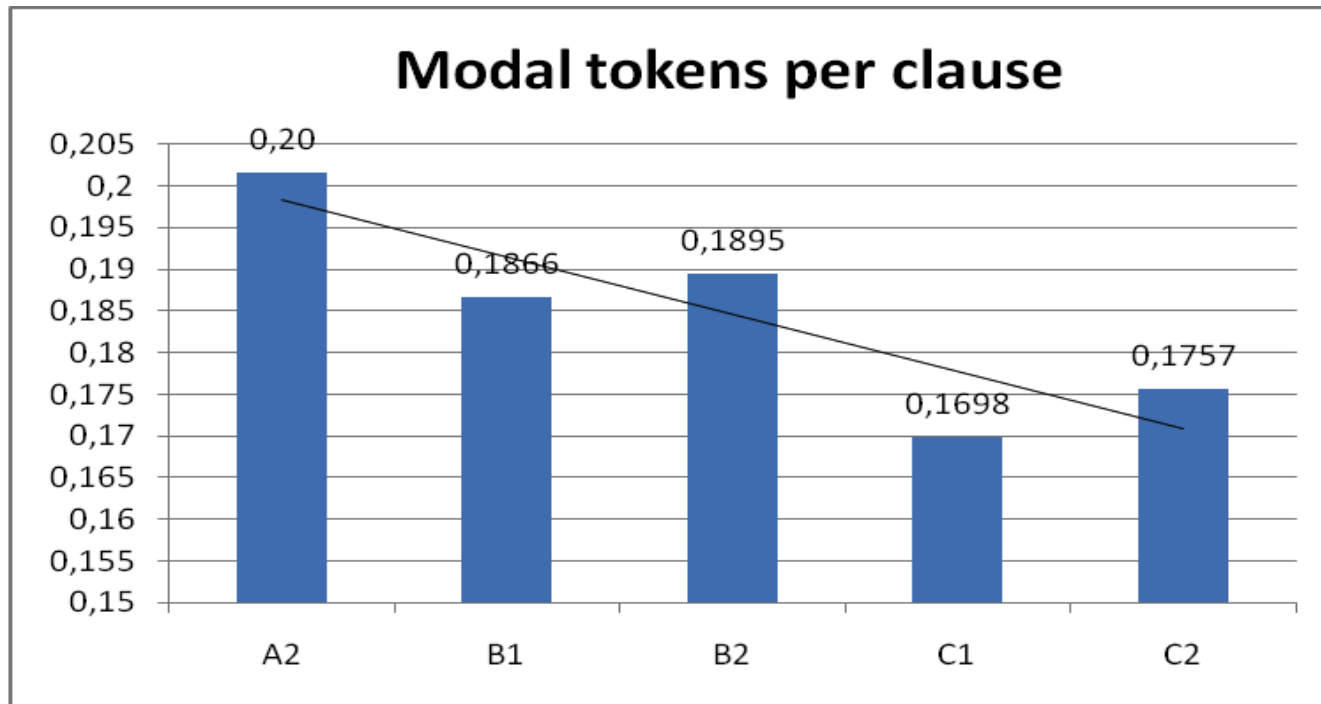
(adapted from Greenbaum et al., 1985)

Non-verbal modal elements:



(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

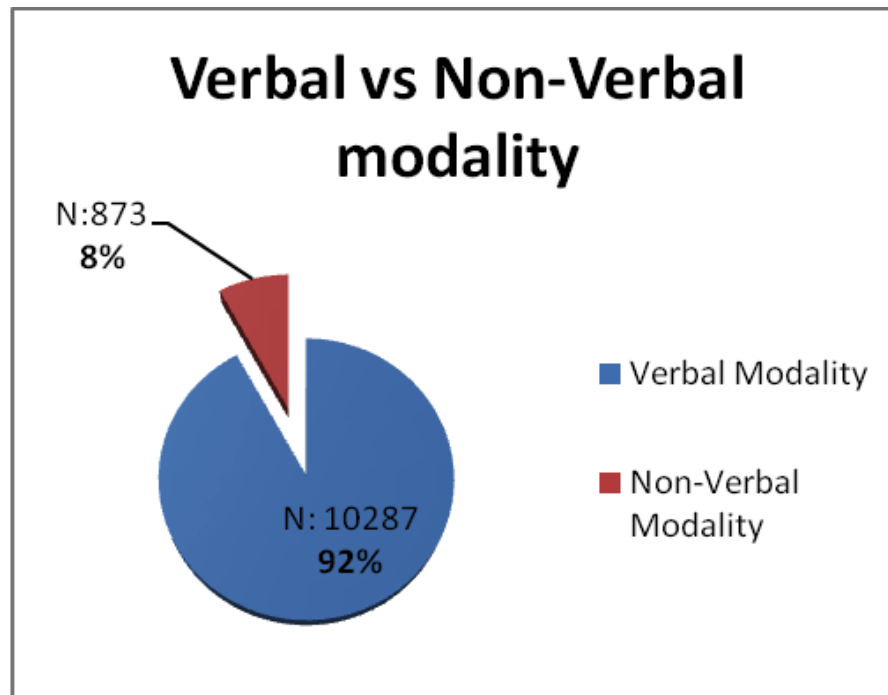
- Increasing use of non-verbal modality
- More variety of tokens within each category.

prove it RIGHT

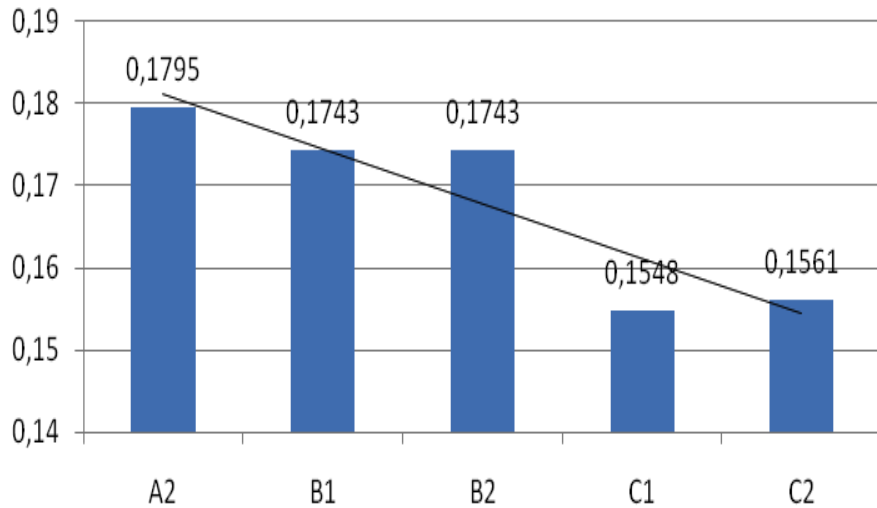


Hypothesis 3:

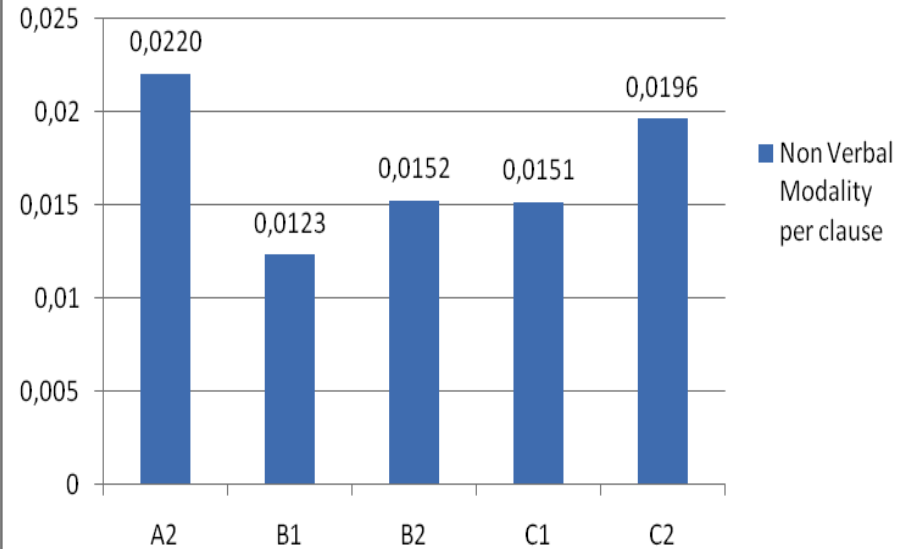
As students' level of proficiency rises, there will be a movement away from *verbal* to *non-verbal* modal means



Verbal modality per clause



Non Verbal Modality per clause



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!

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