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Modal Verb Usage in Tourism Discourse

An Analysis of a Corpus of Websites Promoting the City of Verona

Abstract

*The present contribution examines the use of modal verbs in specialised tourism discourse, with a focus on the Verona Corpus. Modal verbs play a crucial role in expressing modality and conveying information about necessity, possibility, and permission (Maci 2020; Palmer 1990). Through a comprehensive analysis of the Verona Corpus, a corpus of websites promoting the city of Verona (Italy) as a destination, this study categorises modal verbs into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities (see Palmer 1990) and investigates their relative frequencies. Non-parametric statistical tests (Kruskal-Wallis) are employed to determine the significance of differences in modal verb usage, followed by a qualitative analysis. The results show statistically significant differences among the three categories of modality used in the texts: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic, whereas there are no **differences** between the verb groups (e.g., can, could, may, might, etc.) within the same type of modality. In addition, the use of pronouns shows an attempt at establishing an empathic relationship with the tourists but risks coming across as too artificial and persuasive.*

Keywords: *tourism discourse, modality, modal verbs, specialised discourse*

I n the field of specialised tourism discourse, the role of modal verbs emerges as a distinct and interesting subject of analysis. The present contribution sets out to explore the extent and nuances of the communicative functions of modal verbs in a corpus of English-language tourist promotional texts related to the destination of Verona—the Verona Corpus—exploring their roles as tools to convey necessity, possibility, and permission (Maci 2020; Palmer 1990).

The Verona Corpus serves as the starting point for this investigation, allowing us to observe modal verb usage within the specific domain of tourism discourse. Indeed, the present analysis exploits a corpus of written texts extracted from institutional and non-institutional tourist websites promoting Verona as a tourist destination. A premise should be made regarding the texts of the corpus: although no formal verification was carried out, a closer inspection of the

texts reveals that the majority of these are translations from L1 Italian to L2 English by non-native speakers. As a native speaker of Italian, it is easy to recognise the literal translations of the texts with clear L1 transfers in sentences such as: "The <u>touched topics</u> will probably be the following" (V189; "Gli <u>argomenti toccati</u> saranno probabilmente i seguenti") or "The typical guided tour of Verona lasts 2 hours circa and <u>allows to</u> see all main monuments and squares of the old city" (V107; "Il tipico tour guidato di Verona dura 2 ore circa e <u>permette di vedere</u> tutti i monumenti principali e le piazze della vecchia città"). Such examples are widely noticeable in the corpus also as a result of the process of corpus compilation which led the author to a visual inspection of each corpus text. This is an essential point that filters the present analysis through the lens of English as a Lingua Franca (Taviano 2013; Jenkins et al. 2011; Firth 2009; Jenkins 2009; 2007) rather than the use of modals in tourism discourse by L1 English native speakers. The study goes beyond simple frequency counts by engaging in an in-depth qualitative perspective on the lexico-grammatical dynamics of modal verbs. It explores the distribution and functions of the modals, shedding light on the nuances that underpin these linguistic items. The research addresses the following research questions:

1) To what extent and in what ways do modal verbs function as communicative tools in English-language tourist promotional texts for the destination of Verona?
2) How do the frequency and distribution of these modal verbs contribute to genre-specific discourse strategies in institutional and non-institutional websites?
3) What can these findings reveal about the preferences and communication styles in this context?

Thus, the contribution aims to provide genre-dependent insights that have the potential to inform and enhance the efficacy of communication strategies employed on websites dedicated to promoting Verona. It is grounded in the understanding that modal verbs in Verona's tourism discourse play a pivotal role in shaping the perceptions, expectations, and, ultimately, decisions of prospective tourists. Through thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis, we attempt to gain insight into the discourse strategies inherent to this genre, thus shedding light on the choices made by the creators of these websites to captivate their audience.

Sections 1 and 2 provide an overview of the main features of tourism discourse and modality in English, while the corpus and the method of analysis are described in Section 3, followed by the analysis, discussion, and conclusion in Sections 4, 5, and 6.

1. Tourism discourse

In Europe, mass tourism became a booming industry during the 1950s and 1960s, riding the wave of economic liberalisation, growth, and a burgeoning desire for travel (Maci 2020, ix). This surge was particularly fuelled by the increasing demand for holidays in Northern European countries during the 1960s, which led to the creation of local seaside resorts. Soon, this trend extended to other Mediterranean coastlines (Middleton 2007). Since then, tourism has evolved into a significant economic force, outstripping industries like oil exports, food products, and automobiles. This rapid growth has transformed tourism into a key driver of socio-economic development (Maci 2020, ix; Cardenas Garcia 2012).

Over the last few decades, the tourism industry has undergone a profound transformation, shifting its focus from treating tourists as passive consumers to recognising them as informed, independent, destination-focused travellers (Diallo et al. 2015; Cho and Fesenmaier 2001). With holiday experiences being inherently uncertain and shaped by travellers' expectations, tourists actively seek information to bridge the gap between anticipation and reality (O'Connor et al. 2001, 333). The internet has become a primary source for such information, offering interactive multimedia platforms where tourists can explore their desired destinations virtually (Maci 2020, ix; Cho and Fesenmaier 2001).

Indeed, websites can help tourists imagine the destination and go through the process of preparation and anticipation (Jack and Phipps 2005). In particular, the pictures provided on websites, together with the text, can shape the tourists' expectations, creating the identity of a destination, which is both indicative of the destination itself and inviting for the prospective tourists (Hallet and Kaplan-Weinger 2010). Hallet and Kaplan-Weinger (2010) indeed state that the interaction between the web user, the web text, and the website creator generates the text promoting the destination.

In specialised discourse, tourism occupies a position of its own by featuring specific lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and semantic characteristics (Gotti 2006, 19). Moreover, as a highly specialised language, it reflects the specific knowledge and standardised procedures in that domain. Gotti (2006, 20) applies Widdowson's (1979) model of *scientific exposition* to tourism discourse and posits that when it comes to interactions between specialists and non-specialists, the language takes on a more general tone, albeit retaining the vocabulary specific to the domain. This is true for printed material (such as newspaper articles, tourist guides, emails, etc.) and oral communicative events (Gotti 2006, 21), but also, we argue, for promotional website texts since they address a generally non-specialist audience.

Tourism texts can be divided into different genres according to the communicative context and the status of their interlocutors (Castello 2021, 3). Among the many attempts to provide a comprehensive list of tourism text genres (see Dann 1996; 2012), Calvi (2010, 22-23) has suggested the following: editorial (e.g., travel guides, tourist magazines); institutional (e.g., official leaflets and brochures); commercial (e.g., travel agent websites, hotel brochures); organisational (e.g., tickets, bookings); legal (e.g., regulations, norms); scientific and academic (e.g., critical volumes, articles); and informal genre families (e.g., travel blogs, travel chats).

Although there may be different genres stemming from all sorts of new and innovative changes in communication (e.g., social media, digital travel guides; see Maci 2013), we can state that most tourism texts essentially fulfil two pragmatic communication functions, namely, providing information and promotion (Calvi 2010). The latter lies behind the prominence of modality markers in the discourse and on which we will focus in the present work.

Indeed, tourism discourse relies on the combination of textual and visual elements to attract the attention of the public and direct their "gaze"[1] (Urry and Larsen 2011; Urry 1990), inviting them to act and consume a tourist product (Suau-Jiménez 2012). The commercial goal of reaching the maximum number of potential visitors and turning them into actual consumers, that is, tourists, embodies persuasion at its finest (Sulaiman and Wilson 2019; Calvi 2016; Manca 2016).

As a consequence, persuasion, as tourism discourse's primary function, becomes apparent in its usage of various linguistic means, among which are adjectives (Edo-Marzá 2012), verbs, nouns (Manca 2016), and modality markers (Suau-Jiménez 2012). These markers are skilfully employed to entice the audience, directing their attention and encouraging them to engage and make choices.

In conclusion, in specialised discourse, tourism language stands out as a persuasive entity with a unique goal—to sell a product by portraying it as authentic, exclusive, and capable of fulfilling tourists' optimistic expectations (Gotti 2006). The language of tourism excels in weaving verbal and visual elements, which is evident in tourist guides and brochures and is further amplified when these texts transition to the internet as hypertexts (Crystal 2006).

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[1] The concept of "gaze" is mentioned here, considering the perspective first introduced by the sociologist Urry (1990) which refers to how people look at and perceive the world around them, particularly regarding the context of tourism and leisure activities. The "tourist gaze" is not a physical gaze towards a specific direction but rather the idea that tourism shapes both the destinations and the experiences of the tourists.

2. Modal verbs in tourism discourse

Modality is a linguistic concept that holds a significant place in both specialised discourses and other linguistic contexts, such as, for example, language learning (McEnery and Kifle 2002; Dittmar and Terborg 1991), journalism discourse (Rui and Jingxia 2018), political discourse (Simon-Vandenbergen 1997), legal discourse (Cheng and Wang 2017; Vass 2017; Garzone 2013), and its intricate role in such diverse yet interconnected domains offers a fascinating area of exploration.

Tourism discourse harnesses modality for a specific purpose—persuasion (Maci 2013). In this context, modality becomes a persuasive tool, shaping the expectations and decisions of travellers. Tourism discourse is an arena where modality manipulation is evident, particularly in promotional materials. Here, modality is employed to promote and influence specific courses of action, embodying ways of behaving and promoting activities that tourists are encouraged to undertake (Maci 2013). These promotional materials rely heavily on core modal verbs like *can* and *will* to convey possibilities and certainties, frequently involving the tourist directly (Manca 2016). The choice of modal verbs significantly impacts the tourist's perception of the experience, presenting it as highly probable and certain. In essence, the subtle nuances of modality in these promotional materials are one of the driving forces behind a tourist's decision-making process.

Moreover, the study of modality reveals its prevalence in other specialised genres. In airport ground staff communication, modality becomes an essential linguistic resource. Modal verbs like *will*, *can*, *could*, and even semi-modals like *have to* are frequently used in dialogues between travellers and security guards, ground handlers, and bus drivers (Cutting 2012). In these contexts, modality is employed to convey regulations, offer assistance, and make requests.

The application of modality varies depending on the professional and audience's specific role, indicating this linguistic tool's flexibility and adaptability. Its multifaceted nature, with its varied forms and functions, is a pivotal concept that bridges the realms of language learning (Larsen-Freeman et al. 2016; Palmer 2003), specialised discourse (Gabrielatos and McEnery 2005; Hyland 2005), and professional interactions (Alonso-Almeida and González-Cruz 2012). Whether in the classroom, where English for Tourism students strive to master its usage or within tourism discourse, where modality serves as a persuasive tool to influence travellers, it plays an intricate role in communication and understanding its nuances in different contexts, whether in language learning, persuasive communication, or professional interactions, is essential for effective communication, persuasion, and the shaping of expectations. Consequently, the study of modality becomes invaluable, revealing its dynamic and multifaceted nature in diverse communicative contexts.

2.1 Modality in English

In the study of modality within the English language, fundamental concepts encompassing aspects like classification, taxonomy, and the terminology of modal meanings remain somewhat subjective and are influenced by the theorists' perspectives. However, the core elements of this "notional" category, as articulated by Palmer (1990), are more straightforward to comprehend. English features a well-established set of modal forms constituting a modal system, with modal auxiliary verbs playing a central role (Palmer 2003, 2).

As regards linguistic theory, modality in English is traditionally centred around the concepts of possibility and necessity, described as "central to modality in English" and "core modal concepts" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 175; Palmer 1990, 9). It reflects the speaker's stance regarding the certainty or uncertainty of a proposition and conveys meanings like permission, obligation, or necessity and can be categorised into three major functional groups: permission/possibility/ability, obligation/necessity, and volition/prediction (Biber et al. 1999, 457).

Theoretical perspectives, as laid out by Palmer (1990), have significantly influenced descriptive accounts of modals. Palmer distinguishes between "kinds" of modality, including epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities, and "degrees" of modality, involving possibility and necessity. Epistemic modality pertains to the speaker's assessment of the truth or factual status of a proposition (Palmer 2001; 1990, 50). In contrast, deontic modality deals with obligations or permissions from external sources, while dynamic modality relates to the ability or willingness of individuals (Palmer 2001, 9-10).

To sum up, modality in English relies heavily on modal verbs, core and semi-modals (*must, will, should* and *have to, be able to* among others), which play a key role in expressing various modal meanings, including those related to possibility, necessity, permission, obligation, prediction, and volition. These modals provide linguistic tools for expressing the speaker's attitude toward different situations or propositions, as classified into epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities. The terminology, classification, and theoretical underpinnings of modality continue to evolve, reflecting scholars' perspectives and the diverse contexts in which modality operates within the English language.

In the present work, we will rely on Palmer's (1990) conceptual distinction of modality between epistemic, deontic, and dynamic. The choice is made in order to simplify the analysis and we are aware that there may be some limitations to this choice; for example, when it comes to *must*, it is often difficult to distinguish between its deontic and dynamic necessity (Palmer 1990, 69). Precaution has been taken to ensure the correct interpretation of modality in the occurrences.

In particular, in case of ambiguous interpretation, the extended context was verified, and another researcher was consulted to disambiguate the occurrence. In addition, as mentioned in the Introduction, the majority of texts in the corpus seem to be translations from Italian provided by non-native speakers (see Introduction); thus, in this regard, it is also worth mentioning that the researcher consulted for the disambiguation task is a native speaker of Italian.

3. Data and materials

As mentioned in the Introduction, the present research relies on the Verona Corpus, a corpus of English-language institutional and non-institutional tourist website texts promoting the city of Verona.

The corpus was compiled within a broader study which included the compilation of another corpus of tourist discourse, namely the Dolomites Corpus. This collects English-language institutional and non-institutional tourist website texts promoting the Veneto Dolomites.

3.1 The Verona Corpus

The Verona Corpus is a specialised discourse corpus of 207,151 tokens consisting of 234 texts collected from the Internet through the aid of BootCaT (Baroni and Bernardini 2004). The texts were collected and prepared for use with the corpus analysis software between July 2023 and September 2023. Each text contains information regarding the type of website (institutional vs. non-institutional) and a unique identification code. The information is provided in the XML code preamble.

The texts were downloaded by BootCaT after providing the following seeds: *Attractions*, *Do*, *Eat*, *Food*, *Monuments*, *Museums*, *See*, *Things*, *Tour*, *Verona*, *Visit*, *Visiting*, *What*, *Where*.

The seeds were collected following a survey administered to five researchers who worked in the same department as the author and agreed to participate in the present study. The survey enquired what the interviewees would look up online if they were tourists searching for information about a trip to Verona.[2] The researchers are all female native Italian speakers with

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[2] The prompt is the following: "You're an English-speaking tourist looking to spend your holidays in Italy. You will be spending some time touring the country and you have heard so many nice things about the city of Verona. However, you don't know much except that it was the city of Romeo and Juliet. You decide to take it to Google to find out more about Verona—what you can see, what you can do, what you can eat—so that you can better organise your trip. Think about as many words/sentences/phrases/questions as possible that you could use on Google to find out whatever you need to know to plan your trip in the city.

no significant experience living abroad in an English-speaking country, they are familiar with Verona and its cultural relevance, and their ages range from 32 to 50. It is worth mentioning that the survey was chosen instead of an arbitrary Google search to limit the number of biases that may be generated by solely relying on a search run by the researcher conducting this experiment, who had already largely explored most of the available websites. The participation of L1 Italian researchers is also not ideal, especially since all of them are familiar with the city of Verona. Still, it guarantees a diversity of prompts that could be used to generate tuples in BootCat.

The choice of the survey stemmed from the wish not to influence the choice of seeds. Since the author had already performed several searches on the search engine to explore the available online tourist material on Verona, the survey proved to be the most unbiased way of proceeding with the search.

The seeds collected from the participants (minimum distribution frequency of two) were then fed into BootCaT, and the following selections and parameters were applied. A Simple Query was launched to generate the corpus, and the seeds were manually inserted. The maximum tuple length was set to 3, and the number of tuples was set to the maximum number available, that is 364. PDF documents were excluded from the crawl, and the maximum number of URLs to return for each tuple was set to 50. The extraction yielded a total of 317 texts, which were then manually cleaned and sorted, excluding texts that were not relevant to the topic or that came from personal blogs, social media, or reviews.

In addition to the texts, 1,478 images overall were also considered. The images were collected for a future multimodality-based study. For each website whose text was downloaded, a description of the images in the text was embedded via an XML string. The selected tags allow us to identify the texts based on their type (e.g., institutional vs non-institutional) and describe the images based on *The Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

The texts were then uploaded to the SketchEngine corpus query system, which automatically Part-Of-Speech-tagged and lemmatised them (Kilgariff et al. 2014).

Ex.: I want to find out more about Japanese cuisine. I'm going to Google: *Japanese cuisine; best recipes in Japanese cuisine; Japanese cuisine sushi; what do Japanese people eat?; is Japanese cooking difficult?; etc...*
Please use one line for each prompt (word/phrases/sentences/questions)."

3.2 The extraction

Modal verbs were extracted from the corpus by searching for their tag *MD*. The results were then manually cleaned and sorted into three main categories: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic (Palmer 1990). Manual cleaning was necessary albeit limited to a few occurrences of wrong tagging. Once the modal verbs were extracted and sorted, we proceeded first with a visual inspection by plotting the data in RStudio (RStudio Team 2023), followed by statistical tests to verify whether there were any differences between the groups. In the case of *can* and *will*, a random sample of 200 occurrences was selected for each of the verbs due to their high frequency, especially compared to the others. Each test was followed by post-hoc pairwise tests calculating the effect size, when needed.

Following on from this more quantitative analysis, five random occurrences from each verb were extracted and analysed by looking at the context and their collocates through the SketchEngine KeyWord-In-Context (KWIC) and Collocations functions.

4. Analysis

The modal verbs extraction from the corpus retrieved a raw total of 1,879 verbs, with a relative frequency of 9,070.68 (per million words), equal to 0.91% of the total number of words in the corpus. After manual cleaning, the number went down to 1,869 verbs to a relative frequency of 9,022.40 per million words, equal to 0.90% of the total number of words in the corpus.

A breakdown of the verbs is provided in Table 1 below:

	Raw frequency	Relative frequency (pmw)	Percentage in corpus
Can	829	4,001.91	0.4%
Could	55	265.51	0.027%
May	51	246.20	0.024%
Might	16	77.24	0.007%
Must	81	391.02	0.039%
Shall	1	4.83	0.0005%
Should	49	236.54	0.024%
Will	727	3,509.52	0.35%
Would	77	371.71	0.037%

Tab. 1: Breakdown of modal verbs in the Verona Corpus
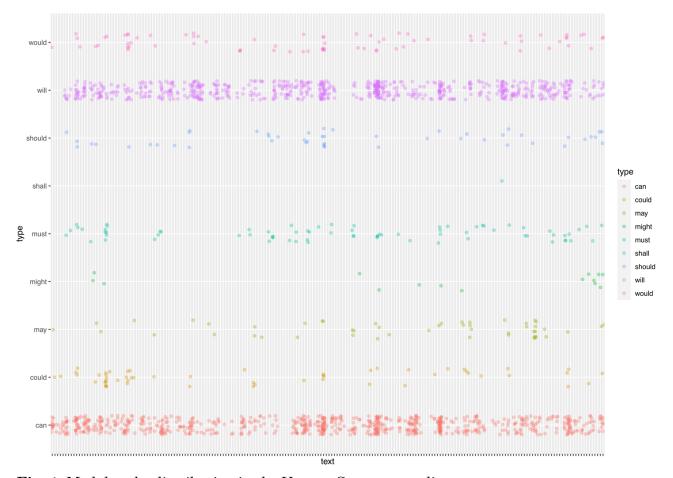
The same data was then visually plotted as shown in Figure 1:

Fig. 1: Modal verbs distribution in the Verona Corpus according to type

Figure 1 shows that *can* and *will* are the most frequent modals in the corpus, followed by *could, must, should,* and *would,* which share approximately the same frequencies (see Table 1). On the *x* axis, all the 234 texts in the corpus are plotted, and each vertical grey line represents one text. The *y* axis displays each modal verb; while each dot in the graph indicates an occurrence of the verb.

The number of modal verbs received a score of 0.8 for the simple maths calculation method used on Sketch Engine for the keyness analysis. The latter relies on a comparison between the target corpus (the Verona Corpus) and a reference corpus chosen by the user among the ones available on the platform. In this case, the reference corpus selected was the English Web 2021 (enTenTen21), which was deemed appropriate since it collects texts from the Internet across a wide range of topics.

The score provided by the keyness analysis indicates that modal verbs are not over- or underrepresented in the target corpus compared to enTenTen21, although they are more widely distributed in the Verona Corpus, being present in 97.01% of texts compared to 66.04% of enTenTen21. Despite the greater number of texts in the reference corpus, the lack of difference

between the number of modal verbs does not come as a surprise since tourism discourse, when instanced in specialist-to-non-specialist contexts, behaves as general discourse (Gotti 2006). The choice of which types of modal verbs and how they are used, on the other hand, is a much more interesting and intricate question to answer.

Next, modal verbs were categorised, based on their modality type according to Palmer's (1990) classification, into epistemic, deontic, or dynamic. Epistemic modality expresses the way the speaker judges the truth of a proposition based on evidence and knowledge. Thus, it involves the speaker's judgement. Deontic modality expresses the way in which people should behave in the world. Thus, it refers to what is obligatory, permitted, or forbidden, and indicates the speaker's judgement towards actions. Conversely, dynamic modality expresses the abilities and willingness that people have in general (e.g., *John can swim in the ocean*; *John will not swim in the ocean*).

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the verb categorisation according to modality:[3]

	Epistemic (%)	Deontic (%)	Dynamic (%)
Can*	5 (2.5)	10 (5)	183 (91.5)
Could	10 (18.18)	2 (3.64)	43 (78.18)
May	2 (3.64)	2 (3.64)	46 (83.64)
Might	2 (12.5)	0	13 (81.25)
Must	15 (18.52)	49 (60.49)	0
Shall	0	0	1 (100)
Should	3 (6.12)	44 (89.90)	0
Will*	3 (1.5)	0	196 (98)
Would	2 (2.6)	0	70 (90.90)
TOTAL	42 (5.75%)	107 (14.66)	552 (75.62)

Tab. 2: Modality categorisation

Figure 2 shows the visual representation of these results with normalised frequency:

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[3] The asterisks for *can* and *will* remind the readers that a random sample of 200 occurrences was extracted for both verbs.
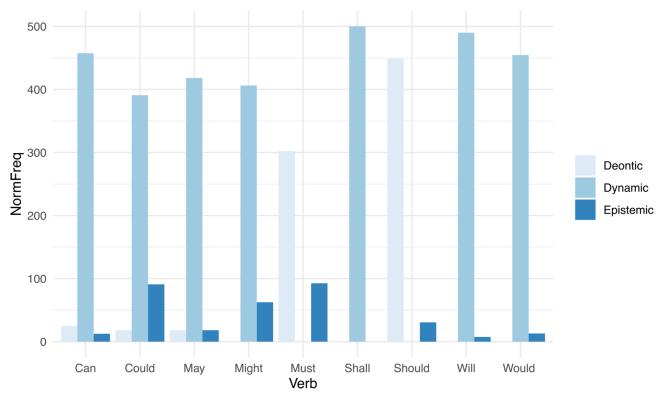
Fig. 2: Modality types of modal verbs in the Verona Corpus with normalised frequency per million words

Looking at the graph in Fig. 2, we can spot some interesting patterns and differences in modality distribution. As Table 1 pointed out, the majority of the occurrences in the corpus can be classified as dynamic, followed by deontic, and then epistemic. Within each set of modality, there are also internal differences; for example, *must* does not occur under the dynamic form and *will* does not appear as a deontic modal.

The predominance of dynamic modality aligns with Radovanović's (2020) study in which she found that modal verbs were rarely used in the epistemic modality.

4.1 Intragroup variability

In order to verify whether there are any internal differences in the distribution of the type of modality across the different verb groups, we computed the percentages of each modal in each text and checked whether the differences in percentages were due to chance or actual usage of this modality. *Must* and *shall* were excluded from the dynamic modality calculation as they had zero or one occurrence respectively.

All the seven verb groups violated the assumption of normality (all p values were < 0.0001) and any data transformation did not solve the issues of skewedness; thus, we proceeded with the

non-parametric version of ANOVA, the Kruskal-Wallis test. The computation was performed in RStudio (RStudio Team 2023).

The test revealed significant differences between the groups, $H(7) = 16.83$, $p = 0.019$. However, on detailed exploration through post hoc multiple comparison tests, no differences emerged. Table 3 presents the multiple comparison test results after the Kruskal-Wallis.

Observations	Dif. critical	Dif stat.	Signif.
Can-could	33.234343	54.83081	FALSE
Can-may	2.118251	55.55158	FALSE
Can-might	7.267677	80.41949	FALSE
Can-will	16.861355	37.99265	FALSE
Can-would	13.430905	46.60344	FALSE
Could-may	31.116092	68.51323	FALSE
Could-might	25.966667	89.86311	FALSE
Could-will	50.095699	55.24061	FALSE
Could-would	46.665248	61.48141	FALSE
May-might	5.149425	90.30470	FALSE
May-will	18.979607	55.95611	FALSE
May-would	15.549156	62.12507	FALSE
Might-will	24.129032	80.69945	FALSE
Might-would	20.698582	85.09313	FALSE
Would-will	3.430451	47.08490	FALSE

Tab. 3: Multiple comparison test results on Kruskal-Wallis test on dynamic modality with alpha set at 0.5

Even though the results may seem to contradict one another, this could be explained by the fact that the model created by the Kruskal-Wallis test may represent a significant difference in a more complicated contrast rather than simple pairwise comparisons which were tested. For example, it could be that the difference between the single entities *can-could* and *can-might* (that is, *can* and *could* are not perceived as two different verbs that need to be tested, but as a single unit which is tested against another unit, such as *can-might*) is significant, but this was not tested in the post-hoc tests.

The same process was repeated for the means of the modal verbs in terms of their epistemic modality. In this case too, the assumptions of normality were violated by all the sets of data (*p*

< 0.0001); thus, we conducted a Kruskal-Wallis test on the modal verbs (*shall* was excluded due to its limited occurrence). The results showed that there are no significant differences between the groups, $H(8) = 8.29$, $p = 0.4$.

In sum, there are no statistical differences within the groups; there is consistency in the way the texts use each modality. This is an interesting aspect since there are 234 texts in the corpus and not finding any significant differences means that this is a pattern.

4.2 Intergroup variability

Another Kruskal-Wallis test was computed to verify whether, more generally, there are significant differences between the three modalities in terms of percentages in the texts. Indeed, the bar chart in Fig. 2 clearly shows visual differences in the normalised frequency counts between epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modalities.

As in the previous cases, the non-parametric version of the ANOVA test was chosen as the data violated the assumptions of normality ($p < 0.0001$ in all three groups). The results indicate that there are differences between the modalities: $H(2) = 467.37$, $p < 0.00001$.

Focused comparisons of the mean ranks between groups showed that the percentage of modality (difference = 340.47 for dynamic, difference = 70.06 for epistemic) in the texts was significantly different when one type of modality was taken into account. In the deontic-dynamic comparison, the critical difference ($a = 0.5$ corrected for the number of tests) was 58.57, while for the deontic-epistemic comparison, it was 58.42 and lastly, for the dynamic-epistemic comparison, it was 58.86.

Observations	Dif. critical	Dif. Stat.	Signif.
Deontic-dynamic	340.46731	58.57357	TRUE
Deontic-epistemic	70.05926	58.42401	TRUE
Dynamic-epistemic	410.52657	58.86278	TRUE

Tab. 4: Multiple comparison test results on Kruskal-Wallis test on modality with alpha set at 0.5

The tests indicate that there are differences between the percentages of modality used in the texts. This is an important datum since, to the author's knowledge, these kinds of differences have not been previously tested via statistical testing.

Therefore, the quantitative analysis has shown that, regarding intragroup variability, all modal verbs present consistency and no statistical differences; while, in terms of intergroup variability,

there are statistical differences among all groups. These results highlight two interesting patterns: the former that all texts display similar usage of the same modal verb and the latter that the use of modality (epistemic, deontic, or dynamic) is not due to chance but rather a planned communicative intention.

The following section will qualitatively explore the lexico-grammatical patterns of the modal verbs, especially focusing on their use in the dynamic modality.

4.3 Qualitative analysis

A qualitative analysis of the context of the verbs, and especially of the collocations, enables us to identify some patterns. The Log Dice measure has been selected for the identification and measure of collocations. Log Dice is computed by taking "the harmonic mean [...] of two proportions that express the tendency of two words to co-occur relative to the frequency of these words in the corpus" (Gablasova, Brezina and McEnery 2017, 164). The Log Dice practically replaces the MI or MI2 association measures because it highlights the exclusivity of the combination. However, it is preferable as it is a standardised measure which functions on a scale of maximum 14. This means that it is possible to compare its score across different corpora, just as in the present case.

First of all, regarding *can*, the favourite pronoun associated with this modal is *you* (Log Dice = 10.59), which occurs before *can* 112 out of 200 occurrences of the *can* sample.

It is the most frequent and strongly associated preceding collocate, followed only by *where* (Log Dice = 9.36). By looking at the following collocates, the most frequent and strongly associated is *be* (Log Dice = 10.92), indicating the cluster *can be*, which is naturally followed by a series of past participle verbs like *reached* (Log Dice = 10.19), *found* (Log Dice = 9.63), *seen* (Log Dice = 9.17), and *visited* (Log Dice = 9.04). As for active verbs instead, the highest ranking in terms of Log Dice is *choose* (Log Dice = 10.10), followed by *admire* (Log Dice = 10.08), *enjoy* (Log Dice = 9.61), *miss* (Log Dice = 9.57), and *see* (Log Dice = 9.56).

It is easy to pinpoint a call-to-action pattern with this dynamic use of *can* which is exploited to encourage the prospective tourist to *choose*, *admire*, *enjoy* and *not miss* the city of Verona. The examples below clarify this use:

(1) Anyone, even if not a university student, *can* enjoy the ESU's extremely convenient restaurants, at the incredible price of € 8.00 for a full meal. (V130)

(2) Credits: Henrique Ferreira HOW TO VISIT VERONA IN ONE DAY: BUS TOUR FROM
LAKE GARDA Verona is about 35 km from Lake Garda and *can* be easily reached by car
or public transport. (V138)

(3) If instead, you want to go with a traditional Italian meal, you *can* choose "Locanda di
Castelvecchio" and have a coffee at Vittorio Emanuele bar, located in Piazza Brà. (V117)

Moving on to the second verb in our analysis, *could* is primarily used in its dynamic modality
and preceded by the pronoun *it* (Log Dice = 8.65) or *that* (Log Dice = 8.27). Whereas, looking at
the following collocates, the most strongly associated one (although not very frequent, $t = 1.73$)
is *accommodate* (Log Dice = 10.58), followed by *be* (Log Dice = 10.18), which is instead fairly
frequent with 23 occurrences out of 55 overall *could* items. Some examples include the following
sentences:

(4) Its maximum dimensions, 123 x 152 m, make it the fourth largest amphitheatre in
ancient Italy, and the eighth largest in the ancient world: it *could* accommodate about
30,000 spectators. (V039)

(5) The public nature of the exhibition, not just in terms of its legal status but also for the
way it *could* be used was a novelty at the time it was first established. (V004)

(6) Plastic bottles larger than 0.5 litres and any other bottle, container or glass/plastic
objects are forbidden, as are any other blunt instruments that *could* cause damage to
oneself or others. </s><s> Can I bring a camera? (V109)

In the first two instances, *could* seems to be a direct translation of Italian "poteva," that is, the
past tense of *potere* (*can*); while in the third instance, it seems to be the direct translation of
Italian "potrebbe," that is, the conditional of *potere* (*can*).

The following verb is *may*, which again is another modal whose predominant modality is
dynamic. By looking at its occurrences in context and checking collocations, it is easy to identify
that *may* is normally preceded by *you* (Log Dice = 9.45) and *it* (Log Dice = 7.58); whereas the
following collocates are *be* (Log Dice = 10.36) and *added* (Log Dice = 10.36). The first position of
the right collocates is actually occupied by *vary,* which obtained the highest Log Dice score
(10.65). However, this is because *vary* appears six times in the corpus and in three cases it is

associated with *could* (as also indicated by its strong MI score of 10.88). Some examples of sentences below:

(7) The Museo Lapidario Maffeiano is an unusual and evocative place but, if you are not you are not [sic] a scholar of classical subjects, it *may* be difficult to fully appreciate it, unearth the most significant finds and decipher them. (V032)

(8) Whatever your choice *may* be, Verona will always surprise you and leave in your heart remarkable memories. (V106)

(9) Dates *may* vary from year to year. (V018)

Must is the first verb in the list which is predominantly used in its deontic modality. In terms of collocations, it is often preceded by the intensifier *absolutely* (Log Dice = 11.54) and the adjective *important* (Log Dice = 10.16), followed by *notes* (Log Dice = 10.13), and *what* (Log Dice = 8.80). The adjective *important* is used in three different texts in association with *notes* preceding the verb *must*; such as in,

(10) Important notes Minors *must* be accompanied by at least one adult This tour is guaranteed with a minimum number of 2 participants In case of delay, contact the emergency number Cancellation Policy Full refund for cancellations at least 7 days before the Tour, read more (V208)

The most frequent pronoun is *you* (Log Dice = 8.12), followed by *that* (Log Dice = 7.59). Some sentences are provided below as examples of use in (11) and (12):

(11) But what are the typical dishes of Verona that you absolutely *must* taste when visiting?

(12) To take part in the event, you *must* make a reservation at the Educational Secretariat of the Civic Museums of Verona. (V234)

Lastly, the two modal verbs *will* and *would* were analysed in their contexts and were found to be both predominantly used in the dynamic modality. Following the pattern that we have so far identified, even *will* is preceded by the pronoun *you* (Log Dice = 11.61); as a preceding collocate,

we find also *tour* (Log Dice = 10.70), and, for the first time, the pronoun *we* (Log Dice = 10.20). Another interesting noun that is found in the list is *guide* (Log Dice = 10.32). Observing the following collocates of the node, *be* (Log Dice = 11.84) occupies the first position, similarly to the previous modals. It is followed by *find* (Log Dice = 11.58), *you* (Log Dice = 10.66), *have* (Log Dice = 10.41), *take* (Log Dice = 10.17), and, interestingly, *able* (Log Dice = 10.01). It is easy to predict that there is a pattern of *will be able to* in the texts, as the sentences in Figure 3 confirm:
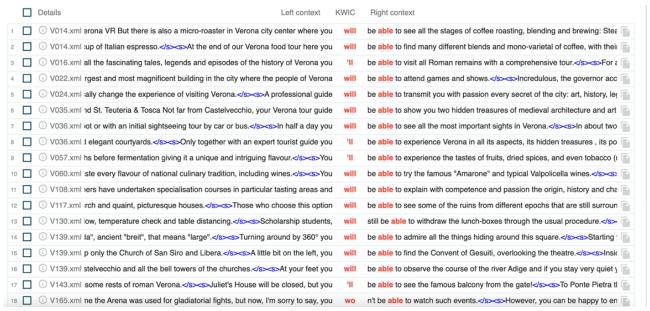

Fig. 3: KWIC results of *will* in SketchEngine (Kilgariff et al. 2014)

As regards *would*, an interesting pattern emerges: the preceding collocate pronoun is *I* (Log Dice = 10.20), followed by *we* (Log Dice = 9.03), and *they* (Log Dice = 8.80). The use of *I* is rather surprising and can be found in sentences such as those showed in Figure 4.

Fig. 4: KWIC results of *would* preceded by *I* in SketchEngine (Kilgariff et al. 2014)

This is the first instance of significant use of the personal pronoun *I* in the present analysis; the pronoun has been used in association with the other modals (e.g., *can*, *must*, *will*) but its use did not demonstrate any collocationality.

A closer look at the texts showed that the majority of these come from non-institutional website pages, except V011, V109 and V228. V063 is the only text where there is explicit reference to the author of the text (*"My name is Rick and I'm your personal guide"*), which accounts for the use of the pronoun *I*; in V109, the pronoun is used to formulate a question mimicking what a prospective tourist would ask, and it is found in the FAQ section of the website page[4]; in V197, it becomes clear, by exploring the text, that the pronoun is used within the reported narrative of a tourist used as a review of the tour guide service advertised on the website. The use of the pronoun finds no practical explanation in two institutional texts starting from V011: it is the only instance of the personal pronoun, and it immediately presents with a clash as the sentence reads "*I* would suggest that you follow *us*." Thus, the agent is a singular individual, but the object of the action *follow* is a plural. Similarly, in V228, *I* occurs only once, and the rest of the text uses the impersonal form to provide information and instructions to the readers. In the remaining texts, V054, V085 and V139, the use of the personal pronoun becomes clear on further exploration of the texts; the pages promote tourist services created by freelancers (e.g., guided tours), and the use of the pronoun makes sense as the writer is instancing their presence in the text. The pronoun *I* reminds the readers that there is a real person behind the text and is addressing them directly in order to establish rapport.

The collocates following the node are *like* (Log Dice = 11.67), *bring* (Log Dice = 9.71), *have* (Log Dice = 9.61), *take* (Log Dice = 9.15), and *be* (Log Dice = 8.78). It is easy to anticipate the use of *would* in combination with *like*:
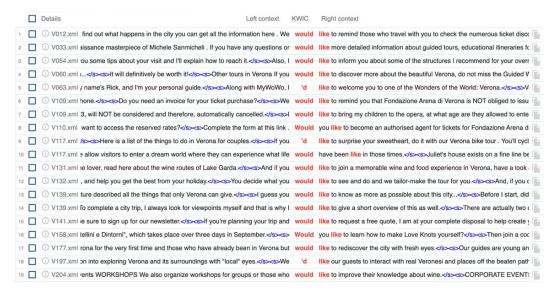

Fig. 5: KWIC results of would followed by *like* in SketchEngine (Kilgariff et al. 2014)

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[4] This was also found by Maci (2020, 201) in her analysis of digital communication in tourism where the personal pronoun *I* usually coincides with the narrative voice of the reader (like in the FAQ sections).

Overall, the qualitative analysis reveals patterns regarding the use of pronouns in terms of preceding collocates and of various other structures in terms of following collocates. The latter highlights a call-to-action pattern expressed by the modal verbs and, unsurprisingly, the following verbs are eminently positive and attract the attention of the prospective tourist towards the destination (e.g., *admire*, *enjoy*, *find*, *guide*, etc.). Instead, the former can offer an interpretative lens as to the type of relationship the websites are attempting to build with the readers. Indeed, in tourism specialised discourse, Maci (2020, 22-23) suggests that the use of the pronouns *we* and *you* helps establish rapport and a sense of empathy between the tourist and the message sender. In the Verona Corpus, there are 1,990 instances of *you* and 448 occurrences of *we*; by taking a further look at the corpus, we notice that 881 *you* collocate with modal verbs as opposed to 95 *we*. It seems that there is a preference for the use of ego-targeting *you* in the corpus rather than a focus on the actions of those that promote their services at the destination.

5. Discussion

The research on modality in tourism discourse is scarce (see Radovanović 2020, 277-278; Manca 2016). Generally, all researchers agree that tourism discourse is characterised by persuasion (Maci 2020; 2018; 2007; Manca 2016, among others) and that normally, tourist texts attempt to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of the readers in order to captivate them and convince to interact with the tourist services they are promoting. One way of doing this is through the use of modals, especially *can* and *will*, as found by Radovanović (2022), which appear more frequently in English tourism discourse compared to general language (Maci 2018). However, this does not seem to be case in the present work, where actually the total number of modals used in the Verona corpus is not statistically higher than in general language. Evidence is found by running a keyword analysis in SketchEngine,[5] which displays that modals are not more frequent than what can be commonly observed in general language. This is not a surprising result, since tourism discourse, when instanced as specialist-to-non-specialist text follows the model of general language and differs only when it comes to vocabulary (Maci 2020; Gotti 2006). What is more interesting is the use of modal verbs from a lexico-grammatical perspective since they are exploited to express subjective positioning in tourism discourse (Suau-Jiménez 2019; 2012; Incelli 2017).

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[5] In addition, another keyness analysis conducted in WMatrix5 (Rayson 2005) revealed that modal verbs (tagged as MD) scored LL = 9.25 compared to a written sample of the BNC, thus attesting to their actual equal use in the Verona Corpus as compared to a reference corpus.

Previous findings (Huschová 2015; Collins 2009; Biber et al. 1999) show that the use of *can* and *could* is usually categorised into either the dynamic or deontic modality, while *may* and *might* occur both as epistemic, deontic or dynamic.

In the Verona Corpus, the majority of modals are used in the dynamic modality, with few occurrences of epistemic (5.75%) covered by *could*, *might*, and *must*, and deontic (14.66%) covered by *must* and *should*. This very limited use of the epistemic function is to be expected as there is no need to express relative certainty about propositions or statements; similarly, Maci (2020) warns that the deontic modality is not frequent in tourism discourse as the main goal of the texts is that of inciting the prospective tourist to action. This is done mainly (and almost solely) by relying on dynamic modality. However, this is in contrast with Manca (2016) who found that both the British and Australian official websites made a preponderant use of imperatives to call the prospective tourists to action and establish a dialogic relationship. The lack of similar methodologies and the small samples used may be the reasons why the authors suggest different usages of deontic modality. Interestingly though, Manca (2016, 45) points out that, on the official Italian tourist website, sentences like *"I visitatori potranno partire da…"* where the use of "potranno," the author argues, is a rare representation of a command, can often be found.

The qualitative analysis has revealed a tendency in the usage patterns of personal pronouns: *you* is the most frequent (and strongly associated) collocate for *can*, *may*, *must*, and *will*. The personal and demonstrative pronouns *it/that* are the most frequent for *could*, while *we/they* are the most strongly associated pronouns for *would*. As mentioned in the Analysis section, Maci (2020, 24-25) suggests that the use of the *we* and *you* pronouns helps establish rapport and a sense of empathy between the tourist and the sender of the message. Indeed, the predominant use of *you* with very limited instances of *we* in our corpus, in particular in association with the modal verbs, seems to suggest a sense of an overfocus on prospective tourists without encouraging them to realise that there are people on the other side, at the destination. This may be explained by the particular text type analysed here, whose main function is calling tourists to action (persuasive function). However, the scarce use of *we* with modal verbs (e.g., "you must visit us," "you should try our delicacies," "you can find us") suggests an artificial and mere commercial atmosphere around the destination which could also be detrimental to sales. It is true that the readers perceive *we* as the pronoun used by the local industry to address themselves as the individuals welcoming the tourists to their regions as that is precisely what is behind these texts: businesses readying for prospective tourists. However, it might also be effective not to forget that the readers need to empathise and establish a relationship with the

we that goes beyond the solely commercial purpose of the authors of these texts. When *we* is used, it is mainly in association with *recommend, will, suggest, are, offer,* which are all verbs that are not describing a personal experience of the sender, but rather another way of inviting the prospective tourist. Even in the case of *are*, this is not followed by an adjective expressing the thrill or excitement of the locals to welcome the tourists, but rather a description of the sender (i.e., *we are not scholars; we are not interpreters*). The combination of *we will* then, further strengthens the call-to-action of the other modal verbs, which may leave tourists pressured for a decision, rather than contemplating any similarities or point of anchor between themselves and the local people.

Lastly, the preponderance of dynamic modality and the scarcity of deontic modality seems in line with Maci's (2020) findings of modality in official UK tourist boards websites, but in contrast with Manca's (2016) extensive use of imperatives in her sample. An interesting analysis would be to compare the Verona Corpus with Maci's corpus in order to surface any similar or different modality patterns that could be accounted for by the fact that the Verona Corpus largely comprises L1-translated texts into English L2. The deontic modality is lacking in Manca's (2016) study when it comes to the Italian official tourist website, but commands are expressed with the use of dynamic modality, such as with *"I visitatori potranno partire…"*. Since the Verona Corpus texts are not English L1, one could even venture to hypothesise that the scarcity of deontic modality is not a conscious linguistic strategy, but rather a subconscious L1 (negative) transfer from Italian (Schoonen and van Vuuren 2021; Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse 2017; Lado 1994; Corder 1974). This could be supported by the numerous examples of sentences expressed with "potere" (*can*), whose actual meaning is a command, rather than an offer.

6. Conclusion

The present study is one of the few corpus-driven studies on modality in tourism discourse (see Castello 2021; Manca 2016) followed by a qualitative analysis which improves the accuracy of the investigation and provides a context-based interpretative lens. It is hoped that more studies on modality in tourism discourse may be carried out to verify and consolidate the distinction between modality categories as presented above. In particular, the methodology proposed here can overcome some of the diverse results that have stemmed from different studies and increase the comparability among future research works.

In addition, as mentioned in Section 3, the use of modal verbs can be exploited in various linguistic fields; for instance, in English language learning modality can pose a formidable challenge, particularly for students studying English for Tourism (Godnič Vičič 2008). Modal

verbs are essential components of communicative competence, enabling learners to express various meanings such as possibility, necessity, permission, obligation, prediction, and volition. However, their multifunctional nature can make them particularly troublesome for those who seek to master the language (Larsen-Freeman et al. 2016). For educators, teaching modality effectively is a vital aspect of pedagogy, as they must equip students with the tools to navigate the nuances and complexities of modal usage. The Verona Corpus' peculiarity is that the majority of its texts have been translated from L1 Italian into English L2, and thus the language they provide for analysis and learning purposes is incredibly interesting as it can be compared to English L1 tourism discourse and offer a baseline for data-driven learning activities targeting the specific L1 transfer structures, such as modal verbs.

Moreover, since tourism discourse is a form of advertising and, as such it fulfils a persuasive function, it is extremely important that the message communicated is correctly encoded by the sender so that the reader can also correctly recognise it (Maci 2020, 89). The preferred use of one type of modality over the other is not a mere choice but can greatly impact the meaning conveyed to the prospective tourists. These findings cannot be generalised to English tourism discourse, but they can be generalised to the population of which the Verona Corpus is representative, namely Italian tourist destination websites which have been translated into English by non-native speakers. However, the readers are not Italian tourists, but native (and less so non-native) English speakers who need to be able to understand the message and identify its intention. Thus, this study can contribute to all the stakeholders involved in the promotion of Italian tourist destinations to English-speaking prospective tourists by reminding them that "the main requisite of a successful advertisement is immediate comprehension of the text. If this does not occur, the communicative purpose of the ad – that is, the modification of the consumer's behaviour related to his or her choice of product or service, has failed" (Maci 2020, 89).

Lastly, the present study is not free from limitations, especially in relation to the distinction of modality which relies on Palmer's (1990) standard notions. As mentioned in Section 2.1, modality can be much more intricate, and the distinction is not always clear cut. This approach might nonetheless be effective as it allows us to comply with the set aims. Following on from this, Radovanović (2023; 2020) carried out two studies on modal verbs and applied a similar distinction based on Palmer (1990), but with a correction as regards dynamic and deontic modalities, which she grouped under *root modality* (Coates 1983). The rationale behind this choice is that root possibility (which includes cognition and action) is highly heterogeneous and difficult to categorise. Moreover, in tourism discourse, the use of root possibility and dynamic

modality in particular, seems to be very genre-specific and related to the call-to-action of the tourist. We suggest a new categorisation for the field of tourism that is comprehensive of this particular use, namely *action modality*.

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