



THE USE OF 'I THINK' AND 'I BELIEVE' IN GHANAIAN PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE

Cynthia Logogyeⁱ

University of Education,

Winneba, Ghana

Abstract:

The current study explores the varied uses of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in expressing modality in parliamentary debates in Ghana using Context-Dependency and Lexical Specialisation theory by Angelika Kratzer (1981, 1991) and modality under the interpersonal metafunction of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The study is a summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that employs the qualitative research design in analysing the data. The data for the study has been collected from the Hansard online from www.parliament.gh/publications/49, the official website of Ghana's Parliament for the period of five months, from November 2016 to March 2017. In all, 300 clauses containing the lexical verbs of interest were purposefully sampled. The paper is in response to an existing claim that the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* express uncertainty. Though this is true, however, the technicality of political discourse renders this assertion not generally true. The current study finds that in parliamentary discourse, although the two modal lexical verbs express uncertainty to some extent, they are mostly employed as emphasisers to express a sense of urgency and to show a higher sense of validity in propositions participants make. As emphasisers, they serve a useful tool for the audience's persuasion. The study concludes with some pedagogical implications that border on the teaching of the lexical modals.

Keywords: lexical modals, parliamentary debates, modality

1. Background to the Study

It is generally perceived that the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* express uncertainty. Though this is true in some contexts, the technicality of political discourse may render them with a different meaning.

The present study agrees with (Syal, 1994, p.6) that political discourse is "*ideologically constituted to make certain kinds of statements or transport meanings of particular social, cultural and political value.*" This implies that the meaning that a discourse projects

ⁱ Correspondence: email clogogy@gmail.com

will always reflect a particular perspective of the speaker. Such a perspective may depend on the social, political, cultural, and historical background of the speaker.

The modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* are generally perceived to express uncertainty in a discourse. This perception is even upheld by some scholars. The two lexical verbs are usually reported in studies of modality as epistemic modals expressing uncertainty. Erhman (1966, p.10) even reports that each of the modals has a 'basic meaning.'

However, I find that the technicality of political discourse makes that assertion different.

One fundamental point that is made in many discussions of modal semantics is that the same modal auxiliary can be used in varied ways with varied meanings. Palmer (1965), for instance, reports that the modal verb *can* has six uses, namely ability, characteristic, permission, possibility, willingness, and sensation.

Because of the many possible meanings that can be derived from a particular modal auxiliary, Branford (1967, pp. 144-145) points out that "*it is probably better to avoid labelling any modal too specifically (e.g. 'may' = 'possibility') but to study each according to the context as one finds it.*"

Another point that can be found in the literature is that different modal verbs can be used to express the same meaning concept. For example, in the view of Palmer (1979), it is possible to indicate the concept of possibility using the modal verbs MAY and MIGHT. He illustrates this point with the following sentences:

- 1) He may be hiding somewhere.
- 2) He might be hiding somewhere.

He indicates that the main modal meaning conveyed by the modals in these two sentences is one of possibility even though each sentence is slightly different in meaning. In his own words, "*might' is used exactly as 'may' is. It merely indicates a little less certainty about the possibility*" Palmer (1979, p.48). For this reason, Palmer objects to the analysis of the modals reported by Erhman (1966, p.10) where she establishes that each of the modals has a 'basic meaning' in all its occurrences plus "*subsidiary meanings which drive from the basic meaning but which add something of their own.*" It seems that Palmer's objection to the analysis provided by Erhman is supported by Huddleston (1971, p.294) who asserts that "*there is often a greater difference between two uses of a single modal than between one use of one modal and a similar use of another modal.*" The point that therefore appears to be largely supported is that different modal verbs express similar modal meanings and that the same modal verb may have varied functions.

It is from this background that the present study investigates the different uses of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* and establishes their varied usage in expressing epistemic modality in parliamentary debates other than the general meanings associated with them in most studies of modality as devices of uncertainty. The work seeks to support Kratzer's (1981, 1991) argument that modal meanings should not be treated as "*a case of (accidental) polysemy*". Rather, modal meanings should be conceived as the product of 'context-dependency; they express varied meanings in different contexts.

More recently, the dialogic functions of 'I think' and 'I believe' have been the focus of an investigation by scholars. The advanced argument is that 'I think' and 'I believe' may not only attenuate but also boost the pragmatic force of an utterance, i.e. those modal lexical verbs may express possibility and probability on one hand and certainty on the other hand (Fetzer 2008; Simom-Vandenberg 2000).

The current study seeks to explore their different functions in the context of parliamentary debates in Ghana.

2. Parliamentary Discourse and Epistemic Modality

Considerable effort has been made to explore parliamentary language as a sub-domain of political discourse. Among the most significant recent contributions to the field are those by Ilie (2000; 2003; 2006, 2010), Bayley (2004), Van Dijk (2000; 2004, 2010), and Steiner (2004), as well as the compilation of research articles edited by Alvarez-Benito, Fernandez-Diaz, Ma Inigo-Mora (2009). Apart from the much-studied British parliamentary discourse (Bayley 2004; Chilton, Schäffner 2002; Van Dijk 2004; Ilie 2000; 2003, van der Valk 2003), studies of the features of Italian, Swedish, German, and France parliamentary languages (Bayley 2004), parliamentary language in Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Steiner 2004), Brussels (Alvarez-Benito *et al.* 2009) as well as that of Ghana (Sarfo 2016) have been carried out.

The majority of the studies done in parliamentary debates in the literature take a cross-cultural perspective, highlighting the peculiarities of the national parliamentary language. However, just a few of those studied modalities in parliamentary debates and more specifically epistemic modality since the modals of focus 'think' and 'believe' fall under epistemic modality. Some quite recent studies in this area include van der Lee (2016) who studied how cultural differences are reflected in the use of language by politicians. The study focused on the use of epistemic modality (the expression of certainty) in political speeches in the European Parliament, specifically to find out whether there were traits of national or party (political) or cultural differences in the use of modal adverbs as well as dismissive adjectives. Ultimately, the finding was that populist parties deplored the extensive use of dismissive adjectives in the expression of epistemic modality. However, between the other political parties, there was no clear trend for all three-word categories - dismissive, sure, and unsure - in all three countries.

Other studies in the area of epistemic modality and parliamentary discourse include Vukovic (2014) who examined the linguistic choices employed in the expression of certainty and commitment in UK parliamentary discourse. The study examined the use of strong epistemic adverbs, verbs, adjectives, and nouns in the Labour and opposition discourses both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results pointed to a relatively strong presence of strong epistemic modality in parliamentary discourse and the conclusion drawn was that this type of modality pervades political discourse in general and parliamentary discourse in particular and presents politicians the opportunity to express a great degree of commitment to the truth of utterances they make.

Lilian (2008) studied modality in the speeches of Canadian conservatives following Fowler's (1985) five categories of modality as predictability, validity, obligation, permission, and desirability. The conclusion drawn was that the overwhelming number of clauses fell into the categories of predictability and validity.

Marin Arrese (2007, 23) differentiates between effective and epistemic stances, drawing on Langacker (2009). The latter refers to the knowledge of the speaker regarding the realisation of the event and his or her evaluation of the validity of the proposition (Marin Arrese *ibid*).

In the view of Vasilescu (2010), epistemic modality is an expression of the speaker's stance and it is part of persuasion, intended to construct a competent, trustworthy, powerful, professional identity that can influence the deliberative and decision-making process. This assertion supports Chilton's finding (2004, 111-117), which identifies two basic types of legitimisation in political discourse, epistemic and deontic. The former is related to the speaker's claim to have better knowledge, recognition of the real facts, the claim to be more rational, more objective, and "*even more advanced in his mode of thought than rivals or adversaries*". As legitimisation is the core activity of members of parliament, studying epistemic modality as one of its main instruments may prove useful in understanding parliamentary debates.

Ngular (2017) reports the use of epistemic modals used as rhetorical devices in academic writing among Ghanaian students. In his view, the use of epistemic modal verbs stems from the notion that in scholarly communication, writers do not simply report some ideas about some reality in the world, but more crucially engage in an interaction with readers-especially those readers who are peers of the writer and core members of the discourse community in which the writer is contributing. Ngular's assertion follows Hyland (2004:89) who points out that the heart of persuasion in academic discourse writing is the effort by writers to negotiate meaning with readers in ways that will "*convey their credibility by establishing a professionally acceptable persona and an appropriate attitude both to their readers and their argument*" for this reason, such writers usually employ epistemic modality which enables them to persuade their readers to accept their views.

Ngular (2017) and Hyland's (2004) views on academic discourse writing relate to parliamentary discourse in the sense that parliament is perceived as "*the principal icon of high politics*" (Gelabert-Desnoyer 2008, 409) where participants seek to convince and persuade others into accepting their points of view.

It, therefore, makes sense to assume that strong epistemic modality, i.e. certainty, prevails over weak epistemic modality, i.e. doubt, in parliamentary discourse, having in mind that participants in this type of discourse aim to convince colleagues on the floor of parliament as well as the public.

The present study, therefore, investigates the use of *think* and *believe* as epistemic modal markers in parliamentary debates viewed through modality lenses; how members of parliament adopt them as devices to show commitment and not merely to express doubt.

Essentially, the paper investigates how those modal elements serve as a useful tool for the manifestation of participants' commitment to the validity of propositions they make.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1 Context-Dependency and Lexical Specialisation

Context-Dependency and Lexical Specialisation theory appears in the works of Angelika Kratzer (1981, 1991) on modality. This is a pragmatic approach to the study of modality. This theory features in von Stechow (2006). Stechow quotes Kratzer's argument that modal meanings should not be treated as a case of (accidental) polysemy. Rather, modal meanings should be conceived as the product of 'context-dependency'. This means that modal elements are in themselves skeletal out of context. Whether they are epistemic or deontic depends largely on the linguistic environment. For instance, in the following examples, *should* shifts between epistemic and deontic meanings depending on the context:

- 1) It **should** be the Hon Chief Whip of the majority as chairman, and probably the Hon Chief Whip of the minority side as the Vice Chairman. (27-1-17 pg 565) SUGGESTION
- 2) He **should** guide us with the financial implications, such that when the government is going to take such major decisions on borrowing, it **must** be on the recommendation of parliament. (2-08-2016, pg 5569) OBLIGATION

Whereas *should* expresses epistemic suggestion in example 1, it expresses deontic obligation in example 2. It implies that within one modality sub-type, an expression can exude different meanings depending on the context of use. Thus, it will be misleading to consider this phenomenon as a case of polysemy. This means that, though modal auxiliaries, especially, come along with specific meanings, the particular meaning expressed in a particular speech situation is determined only within a context.

The assumption in this discussion is that all modal auxiliaries pick up meanings according to their environment of use. Within the context of use, their meaning will be categorized.

This being the case, any classification of the semantic scope of the modal auxiliaries of focus, for example, will be facilitated by the application of this theory.

Modal expressions in English, for instance, are universal. But their meanings, for obvious pragmatic reasons, are relative to context. And what specific meanings are realized with these universal linguistic units in parliamentary discourse in Ghana is the aim of this paper.

An extension to the Context-Dependency and Lexical Specialization theory will be to look at degrees of modal values by Halliday (1994) and how modal degrees affect modal meaning. According to Halliday, there are degrees of certainty, probability, or obligation in modal operators respectively as presented by Halliday (ibid). These are termed values and can be classified into high, median, and low values, as shown in Table 1 below of modal operators.

Table 1: Values in modality

High value	must, should, ought to, need to, has to, is to
Median value	will, would, shall
Low value	may, might, can, could

Halliday 1994:362, Tatsuki 2006:76

3.2 Modal Lexical Verbs and Modality in the Debates

In English, certain lexical verbs have inherent modal meanings. This means that these verbs express epistemic or deontic meanings. The modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* are usually epistemic modal markers.

The modal lexical verbs will however be analysed based on their context of occurrence as Verhulst and Heyvaert (2015) posit that the interpretation of sentences with a modal verb is highly context-dependent. This position is supported by Parina and De Leon (2014, p.98) who also maintain that “*modal lexical verbs are known for their versatile nature in expressing modality*” therefore their analysis should be context based especially in parliamentary debates. The table below presents the modal lexical verbs of focus and their modality type as well as their frequency of occurrence in the debates.

Table 2: Modal Lexical Verbs and Modality Type

Modal Lexical verbs	Epistemic	Modality
Think	144	
Believe	120	
Total	264	

From Table 2 above, there is a higher frequency of the pragmatic marker, *I think* in the data, which is due to its indexical reference to the interactional plane of discourse and its function in the negotiation-of-meaning processes.

I believe functions more as a booster, intensifying the pragmatic force of an argument but does not fulfill any function on the interactional plane of discourse. Parliamentary discourse given its interactional nature, perhaps, accounts for the more frequent use of *I think* than *I believe* in the data. This observation finds support in Fertzer (2008).

4. Methodology

The current study explores the varied uses of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in expressing modality in parliamentary debates in Ghana.

The qualitative research design is employed for the study. Specifically, summative content analysis procedures were adopted. The two keywords of interest to the researcher “*think*” and “*believe*” were extracted from the data and their frequencies were noted. The context in which they occurred was taken into consideration to provide interpretations of their use. This design is appropriate because the present study is interested in investigating the meanings of parliamentary discourse and how members

of parliament make sense of their life experiences, and their structures of the world. According to Creswell (1994, p. 145), the focus of qualitative research is on meaning. Qualitative research is also descriptive as the researcher is concerned with making meaning of a phenomenon and understanding a process by analysing words. This approach is adopted to see how speakers on the floor of parliament claim to have better knowledge, and 'real' facts, they claim to be more rational, more objective, and "*even more advanced in their mode of thought than rivals or adversaries*" (Chilton 2004, 117) through the use of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe*.

4.1 Data Collection Procedure

The data for the study has been collected from the Hansard online from www.parliament.gh/publications/49, the official website of Ghana's Parliament as part of a larger study on the use of modality in political discourse in Ghana. This website provides a news and information database with comprehensive content which is easy and convenient to access.

The debates are transcribed on this website after each sitting. The transcriptions include oral answers and questions, businesses, debates, and voting results. The study explores the use of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in 7 debates within the period of five months, before and after the 2016 general election, from November 2016 to March 2017. The settings of this period were considered because it happened to be the time the idea was conceived to investigate parliamentary debates. In all, 4 topics were purposefully sampled from the 7 debates. These topics were topical issues at the time and contained most of the modal elements of interest the present study investigates. The topics under discussion include floods, Agreements between Karpower Ghana Company Limited and Electricity Company of Ghana, the ministry of gender, children and social protection, and the right to information bill.

These topics were chosen because they were more engaging. A good number of participants were involved hence, the varied use of the modals of focus was eminent. The involvement of more participants also revealed that those topics were of more national importance.

4.2 Sampling

The purposive sampling technique is used to select samples of each category of text. In all, 4 topics have been purposefully sampled from the 7 debates.

The motions selected were purposely selected for reason that they were more engaging and would have varied uses of the modal lexical verbs; *think* and *believe*.

In all, 300 clauses containing the lexical verbs of interest were sampled for the study. The clauses were printed out and studied thoroughly. The study only considers the modal lexical verbs; *think* and *believe* in response to an existing claim that the basic meaning that those verbs express is uncertainty. Though this may be true, I find that the technicality of political discourse makes this different.

5. Results and Discussion

From the parliamentary data, *think* and *believe* serve as dual markers (deliberative and tentative). One, to express certainty and the other to hedge and mitigate. This observation is attested in Holmes (1990) and Karkkainen (2003) who are of the opinion that these markers do not only convey uncertainty and a lack of confidence but also carry other pragmatic meanings depending on context.

5.1 Degrees of Modal Value

The degrees of modal values are determined by the type of modal that accompanies the modals of focus. The determination is done following the categorisation of modals into values according to Halliday (1994).

In the debates, the modal lexical verbs under discussion are considered to convey strong epistemic modality when expressed with high-value modals, such as *must*, *should*, *have to*, and *need to*, etc. This opinion finds support in Fetzer (2008, 393) who is also of the view that in English, the phrase *I believe* combined with high-value modals expresses even greater certainty on the part of the speaker. The modal lexical verbs are considered to convey medium value when expressed with the modal auxiliary *would* and other such devices meant to hedge, and they are considered as expressing weak epistemic modality when they are expressed with weak modal auxiliaries as *may*, *might* and other such devices meant to express uncertainty and lack of commitment.

Table 3: Degrees of Modal Values in the Debate

Modal value	No. of occurrence	Percentage
Strong epistemic modality	151	57.2
Medium epistemic modality	70	26.5
Weak epistemic modality	43	16.3
Total	264	100

In the debates, there seems to be a cline of modal meaning ranging from strong, medium, and weak epistemic modality with the use of the modal lexical verbs, 'think' and 'believe'. The modal lexical verbs express various epistemic senses of confidence based on the speakers' knowledge of facts. The epistemic modals express meanings ranging from slight possibility to absolute certainty. It is obvious from Table 3 above that the MPs employ the modal lexical verbs I 'think' and I 'believe' to express strong epistemic modality the most.

In the discussions that follow, we shall see how participants on the floor of the house claim to have better knowledge, and recognition of the real facts, how they claim to be more rational, more objective, and even more advanced in their mode of thought than rivals or adversaries through the use of strong epistemic modality.

5.2 Think and Believe as Strong Epistemic Modals

In the debates, the modal lexical verbs, *I think, I believe* do not automatically nor typically express a lack of commitment or are simply used as hedges as opined in other studies. The view that these modals mostly function as booster/emphasisers in political discourse by Simon-Vandenberg (1996) is upheld in this work. From my observation of the data, they are mostly used as emphasisers when they are employed with high-value modals. Such expressions are often meant to boost the pragmatic force of an argument in order to express certainty. In such usage, they either express a sense of urgency or show a higher sense of validity in propositions participants make, as politicians make strenuous efforts to convince others.

The following are some examples of how the lexical verbs are commonly used as emphasisers where participants claim to have better knowledge and recognition of the real facts than rivals,

- 1) I **think** *we know* the kind of report we are expecting from them if we *should* approve this proposed amendment. (2-08-16, p. 5644)
- 2) This is because ECG will soon have private participation and *we* do not **think** that when there is leverage it *should* go into a private hand instead of the state. (1-11-16)
- 3) I **think** that we *should* also bear in mind that there have been lots of debts that are on the Government as a result of the activities of ECG (1-11-16)
- 4) 16)
- 5) That will settle this argument once and for all. I **think** that we *need to* pursue that line. (22-2-17)
- 6) I **believe** we *need to* change the structure of our economy from one that depends on the export of raw materials to an economy that is powered by the export of industrial goods and services. (23-3-17)
- 7) Mr Speaker, I **believe** the Hon Chairman is wrong. It *should* be the opposite of what he is saying. (2/11/2016).
- 8) Mr Speaker, I **think** something *must* be done to help ex-Members of Parliament who have undoubtedly contributed to the development of our country. (2/11/2016).

The use of the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* expressed with high-value modals, *Should, must, and need to* in examples 1 to 7 above express strong argumentation with a high level of confidence on the part of the MPs towards the propositions they make. The use of the lexical modals employed with high-value modals expressing strong argumentation finds support in Fetzer (2008, 393) who opines that in English, the phrase *I believe* combined with high-value modals expresses even greater certainty on the part of the speaker.

The observation of the lexical modals combined with high-value modals to express certainty also finds support in Verhulst and Heyvaert (2015) position that *should* expresses personal opinion and argumentation. From sentences 5-6 above, *I believe* encodes the speaker's true believes. *I believe* is the most straightforward construction of the two lexical verbs. This may be because of its determinate meaning, encoding the

speakers' own beliefs (Fertzer 2014). Accordingly, its prime function in the sentences above is that of a booster, intensifying the pragmatic force of those arguments (Fertzer 2008).

The combination of the two lexical modals, *I think*, *I believe* with the high-value modals, *should*, *need to*, and *must* in the examples above, also signals the superior knowledge of the speakers and strengthens the epistemic certainty in the propositions in a highly argumentative context as parliament. In example 1 above, the speaker makes reference to some shared knowledge: he indexes it with a collective-referential 'we know', spelling out the relevance in his argument and introducing it with a stronger force.

A discourse of this nature sends a strong message to the 'overhearing' audience that the speaker is right in his mode of thinking which is effective in persuasive discourse as parliamentary debates (Vukovic 2014). The lexical modals combined with the high-value modals, and other lexical verbs such as 'know' indicating the explicit state of knowledge, therefore, serve as a useful tool for the manifestation of a speaker's commitment to the validity of propositions they make in the chamber and tend to boost the force of the arguments the participants make.

The trend of prefacing arguments with the phrases, *I think*, *I believe* finds support in Holmes (1990, p.187) that when *I think* occupies the initial position in an utterance, it gets level stress and expresses emphasis and confidence. While Vukovic (2014) opines that the only time the phrase *I think* performs certainty is when it is used with the first-person subject.

I hereby, take into account the findings of Simon-Vandenberg (1996) who opines that *I think* does not automatically nor typically express a lack of commitment but its meaning be determined according to context. In the context in which the phrases, *I think*, *I believe* combine with high-value modals *should*, *must*, and *need to*, as well as other lexical verbs that make reference to participants' state of knowledge as 'we know, or 'I know' boosting the lexical modals *I think*, *I believe*, the lexical modals are rendered with the epistemic modal meaning of certainty rather than uncertainty and portray the speakers as even more advanced in their mode of thought than rivals or adversaries.

Fetzer (2008, 393), also opines that in English, the phrase *I believe* combined with high-value modals expresses even greater certainty on the part of the speaker. This leads me to support Vukovic (2014) who concludes that the macromodality of parliamentary discourse is certainty and self-confidence and, in this context, the phrases, *I think* and *I believe* combined with epistemic high-value modals in most cases in parliamentary debates express precisely this meaning.

The finding also finds support with Simon-Vandenberg (1998a) who contends that in parliamentary discourse, *I think* tends to be 'deliberative' rather than 'tentative' and 'authoritative' (Macauley 1995).

Therefore, based on the data, it is my conviction that in parliamentary discourse, most occurrences of *I think* and *I believe* express certainty and self-confidence and they serve as emphasisers, a useful tool, aimed at the audience's persuasion.

5.3 Think and Believe as Medium Value Modals

From the data, aside from the lexical verbs *think* and *believe* serving as deliberative markers, they also serve as tentative markers meant to hedge and mitigate. Submissions classified as conveying medium value degrees are expressed tentatively. Such submissions fall under intermediary degree, they neither express certainty nor uncertainty. In some cases, in the data, the MPs preface their assertions using the lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in order not to make any unqualified assertions, thus employing them as hedging devices. This observation is attested in Holmes (1990) and Karkkainen (2003). Generally, such linguistic choices serve as persuasive tools in convincing fellow participants to perform certain actions desired by the speaker.

The following are some examples,

- 1) We **believe** this project, which is expected to start this year, *would* create more jobs and also create the opportunity for us to take off some of the goods that are currently being transported towards the northern part of the country by road. (29/3/2017)
- 2) The Committee has duly scrutinised the Annual Budget Estimates of the Judiciary and the Judicial Service and **believes** that the approval of same *would* enable the Service to deliver on its core mandate of delivering justice to all manner of persons without fear or favour. (29/3/2017)
- 3) The next is that I **believe** that it *would* do us all some good if we are able to give some indication to the House as to the percentage of the Budget Statement that goes to the Judiciary and also Parliament. It *would* do us some good, not only the House but also the whole country. (29/3/2017)
- 4) This year that the Judiciary and the Judicial Service are being allocated much more money, I **think** it *would* be necessary and advisable that the "Justice for all" Programme is replicated in many more prisons, so that we *could* reduce the congestion in the prisons, particularly of those on remand. (29/3/2017)
- 5) Finally, I **think** that if the Judiciary and the Judicial Service *would* religiously pursue their programme of automation of the courts, it *would* help us together with the Registrar's Summons which has just been reduced to curb delays in the conduct of cases before the law courts. (29/3/2017)

All the above are expressed rather tentatively. There is preponderant use of tentative *would* rendering the submissions tentative. Therefore, in my opinion, an intermediary degree is expressed where the submissions encode neither certainty nor uncertainty.

In the given examples, the phrases *I believe, I think, we think* are used to hedge and mitigate the utterances given the fact that they are not separated from the clauses by any pause (Vukovic 2014, p.46). Apart from *would* which serves as a tentative marker, there are deintensifiers and other hedges such as *could* in example 4 above, hence, the submissions can be paraphrased as *perhaps, probably, it is possible*. The fact that such combinations are found in most parts of the data drives me to the conclusion that the lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in such context are employed as hedging devices, hence, a case of an intermediary epistemic modality. Halliday refers to such uses as 'modified'

(Halliday 1970, p.334) i.e where the proposition made is not straight. A closer look at the propositions in the Ghanaian context lends credence to my observations. The speakers in the examples given were expressing wishes that they do not have direct responsibilities for carrying them out. Most of the responsibilities fall within the domain of some ministry or judicial service. The use of a medium-level epistemic modal hedges the proposition and also provides an avenue to absolve the speakers from blame in the unlikely event that the propositions made about the futuristic potential of their utterances tend out to be false and their constituents demand accountability from the speakers.

5.4 Think and Believe as Low-Value Modals

'Think' and 'believe' as weak epistemic modals were few in the data accounting for 16.3% however, they are found to perform an important pragmatic function. They are used to show that the participants tacitly agree they have little or no information to make categorical assertions. Such submissions usually sound more deliberative and tentative showing less speaker commitment and responsibility as a result of a lack of confidence in the propositions expressed.

The following are some examples of the lexical modals expressing weak epistemic modality,

- 1) I **believe** that *we may have* to relook at the Constitution. It is whether we *may* substitute ex-gratia for job creation grants that would help us, it would be better (2/11/2016)
- 2) I **think** that we need as a House, to *see* what we *can* do even if we need to start at a certain modest level, let us *see* what we *can* start. (22/2/2017)
- 3) I **think** we *may* need to have a second look at the headnote —Independence. (1-11-16).

All the above submissions sound deliberative. The deliberative feature inherent in the low epistemic submissions falls in line with Simpson's assertion that generally, epistemic modal markers are used for signaling judgments of beliefs, certainty, or truth and for foregrounding a speaker's efforts to interpret and make sense of what he sees and hear (Simpson 2004, p. 125). This assertion is apparent in the uncertainty shown in the use of weaker epistemic modals in the submissions in a bid to explore options.

From the examples above, there is the use of such weaker epistemic modal auxiliaries as *may* reinforcing the weakness in epistemic *believe* in example 1, the perception modal phrase, *see what we can do* in example 2, and the preponderant use of the low value modal *may* in all three examples above.

Such a combination of weak epistemic modals shows uncertainty and lower commitment to responsibilities on the part of the participants.

Again, such combinations show that the speakers do not seem to have the epistemic warrant to express any certainty regarding the propositions they make, thus, they are merely exploring options and trading cautiously in expressing their opinion. The general tone of a discourse of this type connotes uncertainty and lack of commitment on the part of the speaker, therefore, such submissions may not carry value for audience persuasion in an argumentative discourse as parliamentary debates.

6. Conclusion and Implication

This work has investigated the modal lexical verbs *think* and *believe* in parliamentary debates and concludes that those verbs do not automatically nor typically express a lack of commitment or are simply used as hedges as opined in other studies which is also true in parliamentary debates to some extent. However, the lexical verbs *think* and *believe* mostly function as booster/emphasisers in parliamentary debates. They are mostly employed as emphasisers with high-value modals either to express a sense of urgency or to show a higher sense of validity in propositions participants make since politicians make strenuous efforts to convince others. As emphasisers, they serve a useful tool for the audience's persuasion.

I am therefore of the opinion that their meaning is determined in context as they occur as both weak and mostly strong modals in parliamentary debates depending on a participant's point of view. This opinion finds support in Fetzer (2008, 393) who is also of the view that in English, the phrase *I believe* combined with high-value modals expresses even greater certainty on the part of the speaker.

The study has some pedagogical implications which border on the teaching of those lexical modals. The teaching of their functions should be done in context and not be treated as a case of accidental polysemy where they are labelled with some specific meaning; pragmatic markers of uncertainty. In reading political discourse, learners need to use contextual clues, and teachers using the English for specific purposes approach will have to be mindful of how utterances in politics have multiple meanings.

The data for the present study reveals that *I think* and *I believe* may not only attenuate but also boost the pragmatic force of an utterance, i.e those modal lexical verbs may express possibility and probability on one hand and certainty on the other hand.

Generally, the use of *I think* and *I believe* in the Ghanaian parliamentary discourse is intended to construct a competent, trustworthy, powerful, professional identity that can influence the deliberative and decision-making process. In such usage, speakers claim to have better knowledge, and recognition of the real facts, they claim to be more rational, and even more advanced in their mode of thought than opponents. The use of the two lexical verbs in focus is therefore mostly employed to make strong argumentation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Cynthia Logogye is a lecturer at the Department of English, University of Education, Winneba. She is a PhD Candidate in the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. She has published several research papers in referred academic journals. She is also linked to academia.edu.

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