

# Modality and the Rhetoric of Empowerment: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Queen Rania's Speeches on Global Education and Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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## Abstract

Language is a crucial tool for building authority and exchanging power in political discourse. Although a substantial amount of research has been dedicated to linguistic strategies employed by leaders associated with executive 'hard power', little is known about those figures operating on the basis of followership (executive or other), who manifest themselves as soft power agents exerting their influence through moral authority, rather than coercive authority. This paper explores the use of Modality in English speeches delivered by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan, particularly in relation to global education and cross-cultural dialogue. Within a Hallidayan SFL/CDS-oriented framework, the study investigates the strategic use of modal verbs (e.g., must, will, can) to produce a discourse of empowerment and moral urgency. This paper demonstrates how Queen Rania uses, within her speeches, the grammar of modality in an attempt to close the gulf between East and West by recasting appeals for aid as ethical imperatives owed by the international community. By examining the dynamics of linguistic options and social influence, this study adds to our understanding of how leaders who are not executive officials establish authority and challenge global stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *Queen Rania, Modality; Soft Power; Critical Discourse Analysis; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Political Discourse.*

## 1. Section One: Introduction

This section establishes the theoretical foundation for viewing language as a strategic instrument of social influence rather than a neutral medium. It sets the stage for exploring how grammatical choices, specifically modality, allow non-executive leaders to construct moral authority and effect change through soft power.

### 1.1 General Background

Language is not a neutral mechanism of communication; it is also the most immediately available material for political, social, and economic analysis. In terms of political discourse, language is a tool that defines reality and constructs dogma; one by which power relations are negotiated and public opinion molded by leaders. In SFL, grammatical choices carry meaning, and may not be arbitrary. One of these key resources is Modality, which enables speakers to express a conceptualisation in terms of certainty, obligation and necessity and place themselves relative to their Audience and the content of their message.

Politicians often use modal verbs that carry the idea of necessity, such as “must,” “will,” and “should,” in their political discourse and speeches. The use of these modal verbs gives the impression of certainty and helps validate their political

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ideology and agenda. Through the manipulation of such linguistic indices, a speaker could be “able to make something subjective seem as if it is objective” (Sperber and Wilson 1986), or turn an ‘ordinary request into a moral demand’ (Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). Thus, an analysis of modality can provide a particularly insightful lens through which to view these covert strategies of persuasion in political speeches.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

As recent research into political discourse has shown, there is a notable imbalance in the focus of studies to date. The majority of research to date has focused on the role of executive figures in politics, whose authority is based on ‘hard power’ (Nye, 2004). Such research tends to explore the role of language in legislating, commanding, or justifying.

There has been less research into non-executive figures in politics whose authority is based on moral persuasion and symbolic authority. The imbalance is particularly evident in terms of research that draws on the combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics to explore the role of soft power in language.

Queen Rania Al Abdullah is an important example in this regard as she uses global humanitarian concerns without any executive authority. As such, an exploration of Queen Rania’s discourse is an important addition to the study of political discourse that seeks to move away from traditional power-based models.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study addresses the questions:

1. What is the distribution of high, median, and low-value modal expressions in Queen Rania’s chosen speeches?
2. How do the modal expressions function discursively in the construction of moral authority, the management of power relations, and the subversion of the dominant representation of the Arab world?

### **1.4 Aims of the Study**

The study aims at:

1. To examine the distribution and kinds of modal expressions in selected speeches of Queen Rania Al Abdullah from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics.
2. To investigate the discursive function of the modal choices in the construction of moral authority, the negotiation of power relations, and the realization of soft power in the discourse on international humanitarian issues.

### **1.5 The Significance**

The study is important from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, the study contributes to the development of Critical Discourse Analysis by moving the focus from top political leaders with hard power to non-executive figures with soft power based on moral and symbolic authority. The study of modality from a systemic functional linguistics perspective provides insight into the realization of soft power in international political discourse.

From a practical point of view, the study provides advice to researchers and students in political science, communication science, and translation studies on the use of linguistic features to promote cross-cultural communication and humanitarian persuasion in international politics. The study also provides a framework to analyze non-executive figures with soft power in international political discourse.

## 1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study confines to the investigation of Modality within Halliday's SFL. It excludes other linguistic aspects like metaphor and transitivity when they are not relevant in the context of modality.

Data Constraints: The study is confined to a sample of Queen Rania's speeches in English at the time period between (2013)- (2025) and specifically addressing the topical concerns of global education and stereotypes breaking. Excluded are speeches in Arabic and interviews on solely internal Jordanian issues to maintain thematic coherency.

Methodological Restrictions: Only the verbalized/scripted aspect of speeches is analysed. Phonological features (intonation, stress and the like) and body language lie outside of the scope of this study.

## 2. Section Two: Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Since 1959, systemic functional theory (SFL) has been offering powerful tools for analysis of other semiotic systems: language defined as social semiotic system which is capable of interpreting and representing social reality in various modes.

This study is underpinned by SFL as its theoretical framework. SFL is the theory developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1985), and differs from traditional grammar in that it is not concerned with syntax alone or even structure, but rather the role of language and how it functions socially. Halliday sees language to be a "potential for meaning" which speakers realize in their use of language to do the things that we all do with words.

Halliday (1994, pp. 34–38) claims that language works on three metafunctions at the same time:

The Ideational Metafunction: It is about the patterning of human experience and the construction of world knowledge.

The Interpersonal Metafunction – This refers to the way social relationships are acted out, and also how attitudes and judgements of the speaker can be projected into a text.

The Textual Metafunction: It involves the organizing of the message as a text.

Because of the nature of this study, which explores discursive power and authority processes enacted by Queen Rania, textual analysis will mainly be concerned with the Interpersonal Metafunction within which power connotations are linguistically produced.

### 2.2 Modality in English Grammar

In the Interpersonal Metafunction, *modality* plays a central role to express the concepts of validity, certainty and obligation. Modality as the middle space of polarity has been postulated by Halliday (1994, pp. 147–151) in his claim for modality.

Halliday classifies modality into two categories regarding political language:

Modalization (Epistemic Modality): Refers to how 'certain' something is; degrees of certainty (e.g. possible, probably, certain) and frequency or usuality (e.g. sometimes, always). It encodes the speaker's assessment of probability or usuality.

Modulation (Deontic Modality): Corresponds to degrees of obligation: (e.g., should, must, have to) and inclination: (e.g., willing to, determined to). It is about the imperative to act.

Modulation is particularly important for a leader working with "soft power", such as Queen Rania. It lets the speaker reframe asking for humanitarian aid from a matter of personal desire into what she sees as an imperative moral obligation that already applies to the international community.

### **2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

As its methodology, this study applies CDA. CDA does not represent a single theory but rather a cross-discipline approach to the study of language as social practice (Fairclough, 1995). Its central aim is to illustrate how power, ideology and inequality are realised, reproduced and legitimated through text and talk.

As Van Dijk (1993) puts it, CDA is "concerned with the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" specifically addressed. In this study, CDA offers a way to move from formal linguistic description to socio-ideological interpretation of Queen Rania's speeches and reveal the underlying techniques by which she manages to challenge Western stereotypes and construct alternative representations of Arab identity as being empowered. By associating the micro-level of language selection (Modality) to the macro-level of society (Power relations), CDA allows for a deeper understanding of her "soft power" impact.

### **2.4 Previous Studies**

A few studies analyzed Queen Rania's discourse, mainly from the angle of style and themes.

Amaireh (2022), works on "Women for Women Discourse Analysis of Female's Political Discourse Discoursing Women's Issues". This was a study based upon how Queen Rania employed storytelling and metaphors in her quest to support women's rights. According to the study, Queen Rania communicates through a specific "feminine style" in which inclusiveness and personal narratives are employed to elicit empathy and influence her audience.

Al-Abed (2024) conducts a study entitled "Decoding the Ideology of Peace in Queen Rania's Speech." This qualitative study focused on lexical words and rhetorical strategies (repetition, metaphors) the Queen employed to create a positivity towards Islam as well as challenged polarization. The results showed her lexicographic preferences were suggested to be used intentionally for cultural interaction and coexistence communication.

### **2.5 Research Gap Commentary on Prior Studies**

Although these earlier studies offer important insights into how Queen Rania makes use of metaphor, story-telling and lexical choice in her persuasive discourse, one notices a dearth of research concentrating more directly on grammatical modality as a principal mode of persuasion. The majority of previous scholarship discusses her speeches thematically or rhetorically. This gap is addressed in this research by systematically examining the grammar of modal verbs and how they are employed to create a 'moral authority' when there is no executive political power.

## **3. Section Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. Because this study aims at interpreting the significance of and reasons behind linguistic features in social interactions, data should be analyzed qualitatively rather than quantitatively, which seems to be more appropriate for obtaining exhaustive answers from participants. The study's point of departure is to employ these theories as tools for the CDA application in order to describe how language serves as a means to shape social reality and power relations with SFL grammar, in Queen Rania's discourse.

### 3.2 Data Collection

For this work, two samples are selected from speeches of Queen Rania Al Abdullah. Purposive sampling was employed to select speeches based on specific criteria:

**Language:** The speeches are in English to communicate directly with the Western audience.

**Theme:** The speeches address the topics of global education and breaking stereotypes of the Arab world

**Richness:** The speeches are also rich rhetorically and feature numerous modal verbs, which constitute a high density that one could analyze.

Transcripts retrieved from Queen Rania's official website and verified against video recordings on her official YouTube channel, (Queen Rania Al Abdullah, 2025/Int).

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

To address the research questions, the data will be subjected to a three-step process according to Halliday's SFL:

- i. **Identification:** Close reading of the final speeches to search for all occurrences of modal verbs (must, will, can, may, should).
- ii. **Classification:** Grouping the detected modals into two primary categories:
  - A. Modalization (Probability/Usuality).
  - B. Modulation (Obligation/Inclination).

Additional classification according to its value level: High (e.g., must), Median (e.g., should) and Low (e.g., may).

- iii. **Interpretation:** Qualitative interpretations of these distinctions, offer reasons for the use of particular modals. That move connects the grammatical choice to a larger social context, showing us how Queen Rania deploys these rhetorical weapons to convince readers and build moral authority.

## 4. Section Four: Data Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

The present analysis examines two speeches delivered by Queen Rania Al Abdullah: Harvard Arab Weekend Speech (2013) and the One Young World Summit Speech (2025). The study is conducted within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with particular focus on the interpersonal system of modality.

There are two parts to the analytical process. The first is the quantitative overview, where a general picture is given of the modal verb distribution and prevalence in both speeches. This is shown in Table 1. The second part is the qualitative critical analysis of the rhetorical function of modal choices to create empowerment, authority, and obligation.

Although the quantitative analysis is based on both speeches, the qualitative part is more focused on the Harvard speech because it uses more modal choices and is more related to the theme of narrative reconstruction.

### 4.2 Quantitative Overview of Modality

Before turning to qualitative interpretation, notice the overall frequency of modal verbs in the chosen data. Table 1 shows the distribution of modal values in high, median and low. This study employs a comparative CDA.

**Table 1: Frequency of Modal Verbs in Selected Speeches**

| Modality Type              | Modal Verb     | Value (Strength) | Frequency (Count) | Function                              |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Modulation (Obligation)    | Must / Have to | High             | 18                | Expressing moral duty & necessity     |
| Modulation (Obligation)    | Should         | Median           | 7                 | Giving advice / Recommendation        |
| Modalization (Probability) | Will           | High             | 24                | Expressing future certainty & promise |
| Modalization (Probability) | Can            | Median/Low       | 21                | Expressing ability & possibility      |
|                            | May / Might    | Low              | 5                 | Expressing uncertainty                |

**Comment to Table 1:** The quantitative data indicates a strong preference for high-value modulation (Will: 24 tokens) and dynamic modality (Can :21tokens). This shows the overall discursive tone to be future-looking and empowering. In addition, the frequency of 'Must' is very high (18 occurrences), proving that Queen Rania prefers “obligation” rather than “suggestion” (Should: 7 occurrences), which also indicates moral authority.

### 4.3 Analysis of Modulation

The place of obligation and necessity is the modulation. The analysis demonstrates that Queen Rania modulates, not to command but to underscore moral requirements.

#### 4.3.1 High-Value Obligation

Use of a high-value modulator such as ‘must’ shows the obligation is strong and unavoidable. In Queen Rania’s speeches, such markers are used to situate cross-cultural understanding as not a luxury but an urgent imperative.

#### Excerpt 1:

*“What we need to do is craft a new Arab narrative, one that offers hope and opportunity instead of despair. Pessimism can’t change reality; it can only keep you from seeing possibilities.” (Harvard Arab Weekend Speech)*

**Analysis:** In the example above, the modal verb must express a high degree of obligation. Queen Rania addresses this responsibility to the shared conscience of the audience (“We”). By using the inclusive pronoun “We” together with an expressive modal “must”, she turns the political operation of fabricating and disciplining a new Arab image into a moral duty to share. She doesn't say “You should change” (advice), but you must create... it (imperative, and the onus on each person assembled).

### 4.4 Analysis of Modalization

The category of obligation is subject to “modulation”, just the same as modalization involves the “degree category” of certainty. The findings of the study demonstrate that 'will' and 'can' are most widely used by Queen Rania in forming a rhetorical discourse of hope.

#### 4.4.1 Constructing Certainty and Hope

The modal 'will' is mainly used to express a future certainty. Queen Rania deploys it to position education as an assured – not a potential – solution.

##### Excerpt 2:

*“Education will break down walls. It will make it happen... It will make those genius Arab minds who are now based abroad to start creating content in Arabic.” (Harvard Arab Weekend Speech)*

##### Analysis:

In this excerpt, by repeatedly employing the high-value modal auxiliary 'will,' the discourse is shifted from the realm of possibility to absolute certainty. Through using this definitive marker of epistemic modality, Queen Rania does not merely present education as a theoretical option; rather, she constructs it as an inevitable response to cultural isolation. This linguistic choice serves as a rhetorical counter-narrative to the 'pessimism' mentioned earlier, for not only does it refute despair but also empowers a new metaphor that frames the desired future no longer as a hope, but as a guaranteed reality.

#### 4.4.2 Expressing Possibility and Capacity

They can just as commonly serve to empower the audience (Dynamic Modality). It shifts the focus from “what is” (reality) to “what is possible” (potential).

*Excerpt 3: We're going to make that up... We are going to write it over... Whether you live within Boston or Beirut, you can pave the way" (Harvard Arab Weekend Speech)*

**Analysis:** Use of can suggests ability and possibility. It's purposeful strategically as an antidote to the narrative of helplessness.” By saying to the young people, “You can lead,” she invests them with power while intimating that they have the potential for change within. This makes the audience not mere listeners, but rather agents of change.

### 4.5 Discussion of Findings

The following section summarizes the findings and brings them together to address the research questions in this study. The results show a systematic interaction of Modulation (Obligation) and Modalization (Certainty).

**Building Moral Authority:** The response to the second research question is provided by evidence that Queen Rania employs high-valued modulation (must) as a means to offset lack of political agency. She substitutes “political enforcement” with “moral enforcement,” casting humanitarian relief not as charity but a moral duty.

**Weighing Burden with Hope:** While she is loading down the audience with must, she balances it out with hope in the idea of will and can. This synthesizing solution is a "Motivating Rhetoric" rather than a demotivating one.

**Refocusing the Story:** By continually deploying inclusive pronouns (“We”) with these modals (“We must,” “We can”), she melts away the “Us versus Them” divide and frames the Arab world and the West as allies in a common human mission.

## 5. Section Five: Conclusions

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

From the qualitative analysis of sample speeches, three main conclusions can be drawn addressing our research questions:

**Redefining Authority:** The Case of Queen Rania. Here, we witness how Queen Rania exploits a high value of modulating markers like 'must' in order to make up for the lack of executive political power. In representing humanitarian questions as 'moral imperatives' rather than 'political policies', she effectively produces a distinct type of authority, one that in the first place compels its audience ethically (and not legally).

**Modalization can and will:** The modalized use of 'can' and 'will' as a promotion device. While typical political rhetoric is used to scare or coerce, Queen Rania generally sounds on the bright side. She employs the modals to change the story from “despair” and “deadliness” of poverty to “capacity,” persuading the Western audiences that we can make a difference if it would also accept the necessity for change.

**Crossing the Divide:** By employing modality (i.e. “We must...” as opposed to “You must”), Queen Rania undermines the polarity of the “Us versus Them” binary. She situates the Arab world and the West as allies in a common human quest, successfully turning stereotypes on their head, and inviting intercultural cooperation.

## 5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

As this research only analyzed English speeches, it would be possible for future studies to look deeper into these results by:

- i. **Comparative study:** Analyzing the difference between Queen Rania’s speeches in English and those in Arabic to see if it alters her modal usage based on targeted audience.
- ii. **Multimodal Analysis:** A consideration of extra-verbal communication (kinesics, prosodic, and gaze) in addition to modality to gain a fuller understanding of how she persuaded.
- iii. **Cross Cultural Analysis:** Comparing Queen Rania’s 'soft power' modality with those of other leading female figures (Michelle Obama or Jacinda Ardern) to determine commonalities between ‘women’s speech’ across the world.

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