# MODALITY SYSTEM IN THE MEDIA REPORTAGE OF ASUU STRIKE 2018 - 2020: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes modality system in media reportage of 2018-2020 ASUU strike to canvass for the honouring of the 2009 ASUU-Federal government agreement on the running of public universities. Using Halliday's systemic functional approach to critical discourse analysis, the use of temporal and modal operators that carry high-, median- and low-value expressions of modalization and modulation by the media in reporting ASUU strike were critically analyzed. These modals were tested on how the newspaper and government agencies oscillate from explicitly objective/subjective modals to implicitly objective/subjective ones depending on the use that give them advantage in the issue under dispute. Data for the study were collected from *Daily Sun* and *This Day* newspapers reports of ASUU strike between 208 and 2020. Findings suggest that the media make modality expressions of probability that make them appear objective and at the same time detach themselves from the news reports. Direct reports of the speeches made by the federal government representatives contain modality expressions of obligation and inclination. This shows the

exercise of unequal power relationship between the Federal Government of Nigeria and ASUU. This paper therefore concludes that modality choices in media reportage of ASUU strike contribute to prolonged strike actions and recommended that the federal government be sincere in negotiating with ASUU and that news reporters be more objective in their reportage of ASUU strike.

**Keywords:** modality, systemic functional theory, critical discourse analysis,

## Introduction

Language is seen by discourse analysts working in the area of Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) as a social semiotic, a meaning making resource that offers its users the potentials to express meanings differently in different contexts. What this means is that the choice of words that users of a language make is dependent on what meanings they intend to portray. Hence, discourse analysts assume that these choices are not neutral, rather, they are ideological. People choose words in order to emphasize some things and deemphasize others; to highlight certain ideologies and downplay or conceal others and so on. Words can be chosen by users of a language to either assume or shirk responsibility. Words can also be manipulated to impose responsibility on other people. M.A. K. Halliday and the systemic functional linguists see language in terms of the function it performs to its users. Hence, in SFT, both the formal aspects of language and its situational context of use are crucial in analyzing and interpreting language. SFT has been proven to be a veritable tool for discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is defined as any attempt to interpret language in the context in which it is used. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach to discourse analysis that is based on the observed fact that dominant groups in society tend to use language to coerce, control and oppress subordinate groups. Thus, Wodak and Meyer (2001) define CDA as fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of

dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. Critical discourse analysts look out for manipulative and oppressive use of words to achieve negative ends in order to expose and curtail them. Media representation of ASUU strike is replete with manipulative use of expressions of modality that need to be critically analyzed. ASUU strike has become a sore point that has bedeviled the Nigerian university education system since the 1980s. Parents, students and even the lecturers themselves are all negatively affected by these strike actions. National development is in the long run hindered since education is the bedrock of national development. Scholars such as Ezeifeka (2013); Ugwuona (2016); Ogbete, Eke and Ori (2017) Arua and Amuta (2018); and so on have studied this menace of strike actions in our educational system from different critical discourse analysis perspectives all geared towards finding a solution but strike actions by ASUU have persisted. The concern of the present study is a critical analysis of the use of modality by the media in reporting ASUU strike with a focus on ASUU strike of 2018-2020 in an attempt to contribute towards finding a solution to the recurrent ASUU strike. This aspect, as far as the researcher knows, has not been studied. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What modalisation expressions are used by the media in their reportage of ASUU strike?
2. What modulation expressions are used by the media in their reportage of ASUU strike?
3. What are the implications of these choices?

## Literature Review

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach to discourse analysis and is based on the observed fact that dominant groups in society tend to use language to coerce and control subordinate groups. CDA is aimed at locating and exposing opaque power structures and how such power is used and abused by text producers so as to create awareness in writers and readers of the

potentials of texts to conceal dominant ideological positions. CDA according to (Ayoola, 2021) focuses on the objective examination of discourse to expose elements of bias, prejudice, unfairness, injustice, intolerance, distortion of facts manipulative and oppressive use of language and so on. CDA is applied both to spoken and written texts including print media reports that contain evidence of us/them dichotomy (positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation), domination, manipulative use of language, half-truths, lies, deliberate omission of facts, ideological perspectives and power dimensions that have been taken for granted and which appear natural and normal in order expose them and subvert them.

**The Media**

Media refers to communication channels used to reach a large number of people simultaneously. It includes radio, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, films, recordings, books and the internet (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003).

Media discourse refers to interactions that take place through a broadcast platform, in which discourse is oriented towards an absent reader, listener or viewer. These audiences cannot respond instantly to the discourse producers.

Over the years, the media has become indispensable in society. The relationship between people all over the world has become increasingly close through the influence of the media. It is an agency for social mobilization and influences virtually every aspect of society. It has functioned not only as the voice of the oppressed and the suppressed but also as an instrument for influence and control. It helps to shape people's cognition and ideology hence, people's thoughts and actions are greatly influenced by what is said in the media. Media discourse plays an important role in constituting people's reality. Hence, the importance of the media in the modern world cannot be put to question.

News reports, however are not as objective as people believe it to be. They are rather indirect expressions of the attitudes or opinions of the reporters and the authorities behind them. Dijk (1989) asserts that the interests of the power elites which include the journalists, politicians and so on are not usually fundamentally different from the interests of those who pay or support them. Hence, preferential access and coverage of news actors is one factor in the mass mediated reproduction of social power.

Fowler (1991) is of the view that Fowler takes the view that the content of newspapers is not an unbiased recording of hard facts about the world but in a general sense, ideas, beliefs, values, theories, propositions and ideology. He argues that news is a practice, a product of the social and political world on which it reports and claims that it is a representation of the world in language and because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of social, economic and political values on whatever is represented. Events are reported not because they are intrinsically newsworthy but rather, because they are selected through a complex and artificial set of socially constructed criteria that adjudged them newsworthy and even then, they are subjected to a process of transformation and differential treatment in presentation to reflect numerous, economic, political and social factors as they are encoded for publication. These processes of selection and transformation are guided by unconscious reference to ideas and beliefs. He claims that each particular form of linguistic expression in a text whether lexical or syntactic has a reason noting that since there are always different ways of saying the same thing, the chosen alternatives are neither random nor accidental rather, differences in expression are ideological.

From the foregoing, there is need to study newspaper reports in order to expose these ideological stances inherent in them.

## Theoretical Framework

### Systemic Functional Theory

The Systemic Functional Theory is propounded by M.A.K Halliday who sees language as functional. In this theory, language is seen as performing three metafunctions simultaneously. These metafunctions are the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction and the textual metafunction. When language is used to represent or construe people's outer and inner experiences of the world, it is said to be performing the ideational metafunction. When it is used to construct relationships between people, language is said to be performing the interpersonal metafunction. Language is said to perform the textual metafunction when it is used to organize a text, to create discourse; to relate what is said or written to the real world and to other linguistic events. It relates to text construction, the organization of a text into a coherent and cohesive whole. Thompson (2014) summarizes the three metafunctions thus

We use language to talk about our experience of the world including the world in our minds, to describe events and states and entities involved in them. This is the Ideational Metafunction. We also use language to interact with other people, to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behaviour, to express our own viewpoints on things in the world and to elicit or change theirs. This is the Interpersonal Metafunction. In using language, we organize our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing. This is the Textual Metafunction. (p.28)

This work focused on the interpersonal metafunction of language. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) sees the interpersonal metafunction of language as the interaction between the addressee and addresser in a discourse and the addresser's attitude towards what he says (p.30). Daramola (2008) opines that it concerns the participants in discourse and deals with the role relationship among the participants in a universe of discourse. He posits that language

used in a context does something for the participating entities. It exposes who does something to whom and how each participant relates their message to the other. The interpersonal metafunction not only identifies speakers but also expresses the speaker's attitudes, motivation and judgement. Social groups can through the interpersonal functions be separated from each other. Individuals can express and identify themselves, strengthen their relationships with others and attempt to influence the behaviours and attitudes of others. The interpersonal metafunction sees the clause as exchange of commodities which may be either information or goods and services.

Modality is an aspect of the interpersonal metafunction of language. It refers to the attitude or opinion of the speaker with regard to the content and speech function of the clause. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 176) posits that it is the area of meaning between positive and negative poles. It relates to polarity which refers to the opposite poles of positive (yes/is/do) and negative (no/isn't/don't). Thus, modality is the intermediate area of meaning between the two polarities. It construes a region of uncertainty where the speaker can express or ask the hearer to express an assessment of the validity of what is being said. The use of modality shows that the addressee is expressing a personal point of view rather than a fact.

The grammatical system of Mood realizes what Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p.135) termed speech roles. Speech roles involve propositions which use statements and questions to give and demand information respectively (indicative mood – declarative and interrogative) and proposals which use offers and commands to offer goods and services (imperative mood). According to them, a speaker conveys different kinds of commodity exchanged and assigns various speech roles to both sides. If the modality exchanged in a clause is information i.e statement and questions, it is a proposition. If the modality is goods and services, it is a proposal. A proposition is something that can be argued or denied and can be judged in terms of validity

or truth value (true/false). Hence, the meanings of positive and negative polarity are therefore equated with assertion and denial. Hence, positive polarity means 'it is so' while negative polarity means 'it isn't so'. Between these two poles, a speaker can express his/her own opinion or attitude. A proposal, unlike a proposition, cannot be argued or denied rather, it may be accepted or rejected by the addressee. A proposal makes use of the imperative mood to direct offers and commands to the addressee. In this case, the meaning of positive polarity is regulation, 'do it' and the meaning of negative polarity is prohibition, 'don't do it'. Using proposals, the speaker exerts different degrees of obligation on the hearer. Thus, modality represents a speaker's attitude and opinion on the possibility or necessity of a proposition or proposal. The intermediate area of indeterminacy of meaning between absolute assertion and denial, regulation and prohibition is known as modal space where these attitudes and opinions are expressed.

**Table 1: Values of Modality (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014, p.694)**

| | **Probability** | **Usuality** | **Obligation** | **Inclination** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **High** | Certain | Always | Required | determined |
| **Medium** | Probable | Usually | Supposed | Willing |
| **Low** | Possible | Sometimes | Allowed | Keen |

Modality has two aspects according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). These are modalization and modulation. The difference between them is based on the proposition and proposal clauses.

**Modalization**

In a proposition, the meaning of positive and negative pole is asserting and denying (it is so/it isn't so) respectively. In between these, there are two kinds of possibilities: degrees of probability (possibly, probably, certainly) and degrees of usuality (sometimes, usually, always). The degrees of probability are equivalent to 'either yes or no' or 'may be yes, may be no' with different degrees of likelihood attached. The degrees of usuality are

equivalent to 'both yes and no' or 'sometimes yes, sometimes no' with different degrees of oftenness attached. These scales of probability and usuality belong to the aspect of modality which Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 177) refers to as modalization. Both probability and usuality can be expressed in three ways:

*i.* By a finite modal operator in the verbal group, for example *that will be Chioma, she'll stand there all day long.*

*ii.* By a modal adjunct of probability and usuality, for example, *that's probably Chioma, she usually stands there all day long.*

*iii.* By both modal operator and modal adjuncts of probability and usuality together forming a prosody of modalization, for example, *that'll probably be Chioma, she'll usually stand there all day long.* (p.177)

**Table 2: Degrees of Modalization (Halliday 1985, p. 335)**

| | **High** | **Medium** | **Low** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Probability** | must, certainly, sure, believe, definitely, can't, ouldn't, bet, of course | probably, probable, think, will be, won't, should, | May be, possibly, may, perhaps, can, possible |
| **Usuality** | Always | usually, often, frequently | sometimes, occasionally, ever, never, once, rarely, seldom |

**Modulation**

In a proposal, the meaning of the positive and negative poles is prescribing and proscribing (do it/don't do it) respectively. Again, in between these two poles are two kinds of possibilities. The possibilities in this case depends on the speech function, whether it is a command or an offer.

In a command, the intermediate point represents degrees of obligation (allowed to, supposed to, required to) while in an offer,

they represent degrees of inclination (willing to, anxious to, determined to). These scales of obligation and inclination belong to the aspect of modality which Halliday and Matthiessen (2014.p. 177) refer to as modulation.

Both obligation and inclination can be expressed in either of two ways:

i. By a finite modal operator, for example, *you should know that, I'll help them*.
ii. By an expansion of the predicator through verbal group complexing
    a. typically by a passive verb, for example, *you're supposed to know that.*
    *b.* typically by an adjective, for example, *I'm anxious to help them.*(p.178)

Proposals that are clearly positive or negative are goods and services exchanged between the speaker and the hearer in which the speaker is either offering to do something, requesting the hearer to do something or suggesting that they both do something, for example, *shall I go home, go home!, let's go home.* Conversely, modulated clauses though they also occur as offers, commands and suggestions regularly implicate a third person. They are statements of obligation and inclination made in respect of others, for example, *Jack is supposed to know that, Mary will help.* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014.p.178) Such statements of obligation function as propositions since to the hearer, they convey information rather than goods and services. But they still retain their rhetorical force. Hence, if Mary is listening, she can now hardly refuse to help.

Thus, once a proposal becomes discretionary, it shifts into the indicative mood to accommodate the modal operator. This also means that it takes the full indicative person system and not the restricted person system of the imperative. Modal clauses are therefore in principle ambiguous as between proposition and proposal. (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 178)

**Table 3: Degrees of Modulation (Halliday 1985, p. 337)**

| | **High** | **Medium** | **Low** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Obligation** | must, have to, ought to, need to, is to, required to, can't | should, shall, will, would, supposed | may, might, can, could, allowed |
| **Inclination** | determined to, need to, | want to, keen, will, would, won't, ouldn't | willing, can |

## Methodology

The descriptive qualitative research design was adopted for this study. This design is used in analyzing textual data. The source of data for the study was *Daily Sun* and *This Day* newspaper which was purposively selected based on its wide publication of ASUU strike between 2018 and 2020. Five clauses were purposively selected from each of the newspapers making up a total of ten clauses. Their selection was based on the fact that they contain expressions of modality which this study focused on. The quantity of data selected was to suit the scope of this study.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### Modalization: Probability

**Excerpt 1:** The strike embarked upon by the by lecturers in the country's universities **may not** end soon as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) Thursday said the federal government has failed to make fresh offer on funding for the revitalization of public universities in the country. *(This Day, January 25, 2019)*

The use of the negative modal operator 'may not' in the excerpt above indicates negative probability of implicitly subjective orientation. The news reporter's attitude towards the proposition is that of uncertainty. Hence, he used a modal operator of low degree probability which indicates low modal commitment in conveying the information. The information is therefore most likely not to be true.

**Excerpt 2:** President Buhari, last Thursday, declared that only varsity workers on IPPIS **will be**
paid salaries going forward. (*Daily Sun, October 11, 2020*)

The modal operator **'will be'** in the excerpt above is an expression of median degree probability. It is an exchange of information, that is, a proposition which is likely not to happen. Again, the subject of the action of 'paying' was not mentioned. What this implies is that it is not certain that those who are not on IPPIS will not be paid or that those who are on IPPIS will be paid. A proposition that is absolutely certain should indicate an event that has already taken place and not one that is still within the thoughts of the speaker and which is not sure to take place. So its use here is implicitly subjective, existing only within the consciousness of the speaker; in this case, the Federal Government.

**Modulation: Obligation**

**Excerpt 3**: ASUU too **should** be more flexible in their obsession with earned allowances. It portrays their struggles as selfish, he said (*This Day, November, 28, 2018)*

**'Should'** is a median modal operator that indicates obligation. Hence, its use in the report above is implicitly objective indicating that the speaker imposes obligation on ASUU to be more flexible in their obsession with earned allowances. The addresser gives no room for negotiation with the addressee; in this case, ASUU. He goes on to mention that it portrays their struggle as selfish. The statement smacks of the solidarity of the media with the ruling class. This however, is not surprising since the media has the tendency to support the ideology of those who pay them.

**Excerpt 4:** The key issue has been the insistence by members of ASUU that the federal government **should** provide N50 billion as the first tranche of the revitalisation fund meant to address the decaying infrastructure in the nation's public universities. *(This Day, February 1, 2019)*

In the excerpt above, 'should' is used by the reporter to portray implicitly objective obligation. The obligation here, is

imposed by ASUU on the federal government to provide N50 billion as the first tranche of revitalization fund for universities. The reporter claims that ASUU is insistent and this insistence is the key issue and not the revitalization of universities for which this fund is meant. The reporter is obviously trying to portray ASUU as the culprit and the federal government as blameless.

**Excerpt 5:** He warned that any breach of the directive '**would'** be severely sanctioned. (*Daily Sun October 11, 2020)*

The expression **'would'** is a modal operator which signifies median degree obligation of implicitly objective orientation imposed on those concerned to obey the directive. Here, modal commitment is of median degree. The expression which is a subtle command to the addressees to abide by the directive or risk sanction appears in the form of a proposition whereas it is a proposal, a modulated imperative. Hence, it requires action in the form of obedience to the directive. Again, modal responsibility for the verbal group 'sanctioned' was not assigned to anyone in particular since the use of the passive form obscured the subject.

**Modulation: Inclination**

**Excerpt 6: The Minister of Labour and Employment, Dr. Chris Ngige, will today meet with the executives of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in an attempt to end the ongoing strike.** ***( Daily Sun, January 7, 2019)***

**The modal operator 'will' used in the clause above indicates inclination of median value, the willingness on the part of the minister to meet with the executives of the Academic Staff Union of Universities to attempt to bring the ongoing strike to an end. The use reflects implicit subjective orientation as there is no guarantee that the proposal will succeed. Whether the proposed meeting will hold or not is not certain.**

**Excerpt 7:** The Minister, however, said the fund was being worked on and **would** be released as soon as the process was completed. *(This Day, January 11, 2019*).

The modal operator 'would' as used in the clause above indicates implicit subjective orientation of inclination. The Minister only made a proposal implicating an unnamed entity who is working on the fund and who 'would' release it. The proposal is therefore the minister's opinion which cannot be counted on as fact. Modal responsibility is neither on the minister nor on anyone else. Hence, the success of the proposal is questionable.

**Excerpt 8: '**Visitation panels have also been inaugurated and **would** commence work on March 2nd. With that, **we hope** to sanitize the university system', he said. *(This Day, February 8, 2019)*

The modal operator 'would' is again used to indicate inclination. It is another case of making a proposal that implicates a third party. Its use is implicitly subjective as the party implicated may not share the same view with the speaker. Hence, the success of the proposal is not guaranteed. Again, 'we hope' is explicit subjective modality indicating uncertainty. Its use indicates that the speaker is not committed to the certainty of the proposal.

**Excerpt 9:** On the issue of earned allowances, Ngige said the federal government has agreed to add another N5 billion to the N20 billion released earlier to bring it to N25 billion. He also said that the federal government agreed with ASUU to release the N25 billion to the universities in April and that subsequently, the federal government **will** resume the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) reached with ASUU in 2009 on sustainable funding of universities in the country. *(This Day, February 8, 2019)*

The use of 'will' in the excerpt above indicates implicitly subjective inclination of median degree. Here, Ngige makes a proposal implicating the federal government on the performance of a future action. The proposal can be considered a personal opinion of the speaker since there is no guarantee that the entity that is implicated will carry out the proposal. So, whether or not the proposal will be successful is uncertain.

***Excerpt 10***….and after ascertaining its efficacy; it **would** be adopted for the payment of the University staff. (*Daily Sun October 16, 2020)*

'would' here indicates median degree inclination of implicit subjective orientation. It is an opinion epressed by the speaker which truth value cannot be ascertained. Also, the use of the passive form did not reveal the subject of the verbal group 'adopted'. Hence, modal responsibility was placed on no particular entity.

**Discussion of Findings**

The Findings of this study reveals that the media seem to use statements of probability in their reports to distance themselves from such reports or to appear objective even when they express personal or subjective views. They, as gatekeepers of information, decide what to publish and to what extent. Hence, they play the guard dog or the lap dog role in the interest of the dominant group as against the watch dog role they are supposed to play in the interest of the subordinate group who happen to be the poor masses in the nation. The reason for this is not far-fetched as it is he who pays the piper that dictates the tune. Again, federal government representatives who negotiate with ASUU and whose speeches are directly or indirectly reported tend to use modality forms of obligation which are implicitly objective to impose responsibility on ASUU. Statements that employ modal forms that indicate obligation such as 'should' and 'would' which are modalities of median value are modulated imperatives. They are commands in the form of statements. Dominant groups use such forms to exercise power over the subordinate groups. Federal government representatives use them to impose obligation on ASUU. This is to make them responsible for actions or consequences that may not be their fault. They also tend to use statements of inclination of implicitly subjective orientation involving modal finites such as will, would etc to make promises that are not certain to be fulfilled in order to make the public believe that ASUU is the villain and

not the federal government. These uses enable them also to evade their responsibilities. This is also supported by the media who seem to directly or indirectly support the dominant group against the subordinate group. These manipulative uses of language cannot solve the problem of strikes in the nation's university system. There is need for all stakeholders to take proactive measures to bring an end to prolonged and incessant strike actions in Nigerian universities.

## Conclusion

Based on the modality analysis done above, it can be concluded that the use of modal expressions by federal government officials in ASUU strike negotiations is not neutral rather, it is loaded with meanings that cannot be grasped by a casual reader. However, critical analysis reveals such hidden meanings aimed at exercising power by the federal government over ASUU as well as evading responsibility for the strike actions.

It therefore, the position of this paper that the federal government should see ASUU not as a subordinate over whom to lord it but as a partner in progress as far as nation building is concerned as no nation can develop beyond the level of its education system. To avoid prolonged and recurrent strike actions, negotiations should be sincere and not filled with modality forms that help the avoidance or shirking of responsibility on the part of the federal government. The media should not only appear objective but actually be objective in their news reportage in the interest of the poor masses. The public, especially news readers should be more conscious of the use of these modality expressions and bring this consciousness to bear on their interpretation of the news they read. This way, they will become more critical in news interpretation especially with regard to ASUU.

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