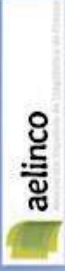




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# Abstracts



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# Gender-based differences in the use of epistemic modals in late Modern English scientific register

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The research conducted has focused on samples from English scientific texts from 1700 to 1900 in order to evaluate epistemic modality as realised by modal verbs. Epistemic modality seems to be strongly connected to the idea of *truth* and the authors' responsibility and commitment regarding their statements (Traugott 1989; Sweetser 1990; Stukker Sanders and Verhagen 2009). We will also discuss some related features, such as evidentiality. Whereas for some scholars evidentiality represents a subdomain of epistemic modality, there are others who consider evidentiality as an independent category. In this context, Dendale and Tasmowski (2001) argue that the relation between these two concepts is divided into disjunction, inclusion, and intersection. We follow the disjunctive approach in this paper in line with Cornillie (2009) who argues that the mode of knowing should not be associated with the degree of authors' commitment towards their texts.

Our interest was to see whether differences in the use of these modals could be detected from a gender perspective. For this, we have interrogated the subcorpus of History of *The Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing*, which contains extracts of several historical texts written between 1700 and 1900, using its own retrieval tool, i.e. the Coruña Corpus Tool. Each occurrence has been categorised according to its contextual meaning following Dixon's description of modal verbs that claims there are modals and what we can call semi-modals, which express the modalities (2009: 172). However, there are also other valuable insightful studies on modals as Coates (1983), Leech (1971) and Palmer (1979), among others, which have served as references for the present study.

The process followed consists basically in the following: firstly, we have produced a list of occurrences in the corpus to check the presence of modal verbs in the history texts available. Secondly, we have interrogated and analysed the corpus to find the pragmatic functions those modals play in the different texts. Finally, we have checked the results to find out if there exist any difference in the use of epistemic modals in late Modern English scientific register regarding the gender of the writers.

Results report on frequency of usage of these modal verbs according to gender, but, most importantly, the different pragmatic functions these modal verbs fulfil in the communicative process. One such pragmatic function is mitigation of claims (Alonso Almeida 2015), and so the modals are used as a negative politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987), to avoid or minimize imposition, to hedge the illocutionary force of a specific statement, or to put social distance in order to save the author's face. In this sense, modals are quite useful as they enable an interactive construction of scientific knowledge giving the chance to the writer and the readers to negotiate meaning.

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