

Epistemic stance and public discourse on irregular migration in one of Europe's outermost regions

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This article falls within the conceptual framework of critical discourse studies and cognitive linguistics whose attention has focused on the discourse found in the public sphere on the topic of migration. I will demonstrate the results of my analysis of a corpus composed of 74 opinion articles that were published in a Spanish regional newspaper between August 2020 and February 2021. All of them focus on the same issue: the mass arrival of irregular migrants at one of Europe's outermost borders, the Canary Islands, and the social, political and economic strain that this is generating. The results of this analysis indicate that the periphrastic auxiliary verb *poder* (can/could/might) constitutes an essential resource for the way in which knowledge is managed by the authors whose intention is to fuel the debate by guiding the conceptualisation of reality of readers who do not have perceptual access to the events described.

Keywords: discriminatory discourse, cognitive grammar, modality, stance, epistemic control

1. Introduction

The Canary Islands, one of the 27 autonomous regions of Spain, is distinct from other territories of the European Union in its classification as an Outermost Region and its geographical position in the Atlantic Ocean, close to the coasts of Morocco and the northern part of Western Sahara. This has led to a huge influx of irregular migrants into the Islands which they perceive as the first European border on their journey to other EU countries. This Atlantic route into Europe is dominated by mafia groups which have prospered in the light of tightened security at other borders much closer to continental Spain, impeding the clandestine entry of migrants. This migratory movement is, moreover, an ongoing focus of

attention in both the local and national press, due to the dangers faced by people in the precarious boats provided by people traffickers, and also the overwhelming demands placed on the social and health care services when they eventually disembark in the archipelago.

When this transit migration (Collyer et al. 2014, 1) undergoes one of its periodic increases, local media usually take a negative stance, categorising it in a way that creates alarm, as a migration crisis (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018, 3). Using the lexeme *crisis*, the Canary Island press gives its discourse a political frame, a political schema of interpretation (Hart 2023, 247) of an economic nature (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2018, 5) which provokes a feeling of fear and insecurity (Buonfino 2004, 33; Krzyżanowski 2020, 506) in a region that derives its resources mainly from tourism. Along with the topos of irregular migration as an economic threat, in order to validate its arguments against the massive arrival of undocumented people in the islands, the local press also use other topoi usually associated with discriminatory discourse, such as the huge number of migrants, the poor management of a migratory movement that is out of control and pressure from the EU (Van Dijk 2000; Wodak 2003; Krzyżanowski 2018; Rausis 2023). It is noteworthy, on the other hand, that these texts categorise migration mainly with the lexeme *irregular*. Thus, its authors make use of an ideological strategy whose objective is precisely to mitigate the negative image that their discriminatory discourse offers of the social group they are part of (Zapata-Barrero and Van Dijk 2007, 12).

Throughout 2020, and the first two months of 2021, the Atlantic route brought nearly 30,000 people from the coasts of Mauritania and Morocco to the southern border of Europe. This mass arrival of migrants also highlighted the excessive strain on the resources of both the regional and state governments in providing adequate assistance to those who were arriving unstoppably on the Canary Island coasts. The images of thousands of people crammed into makeshift camps and prevented from continuing on their way to the European continent travelled around the world, and the press spoke not only of human drama and collective failure, but also of the negative consequences these images would have for an archipelago that had become a prison, a stopper used by Europe and its border control policies to stem the flow of migrants to the continent.

In this context, between 29 August 2020 and 21 February 2021, 74 opinion articles were published in the regional newspaper *Canarias*⁷. The corpus is therefore made up of texts belonging to a genre that is often at the service of social control, and of shaping of public will (Reisigl 2008, 247; Wodak 2008, 299). They all deal with the issue of the mass arrival of irregular migrants during that period, at Europe's outermost border, the Canary Islands. In short, it is a corpus defined by

a common theme, an original event limited in time and with a differentiated set of actors (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018, 16).

As will be seen in the following sections, and in accordance with all that has been said so far, the aim of this paper is to present the results of an interdisciplinary study which draws on the conceptual framework provided by critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics, and which participates in a line of research focused on public discourse on migration (Wodak 2006; Charteris-Black 2006; Musolff 2011, 2015; Santa Ana 1999, 2019; Santa Ana et al. 2020; Hart 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2021; Krzyżanowski 2018, 2020, etc.). Specifically, I will show how the authors of the 74 articles in the corpus, as prestigious writers in the regional social and political context with the power to indirectly influence the minds and actions of others (Van Dijk 2016, 208), use certain grammatical units. Guided by their stance, these units construct and transmit knowledge (Wodak 2006, 182; Baker et al. 2008, 280) about the events described and the actors involved in them, with the aim of influencing the way their readers interpret and judge the phenomenon of transit migration (Van Dijk 2001b, 357, 2016, 208).

In accordance with Hawkins (2001, 22), I understand that cognitive grammar, grounded in experiential realism and focusing on the pragmatic basis of linguistic structures, provides useful insights for the analysis of the patterns of knowledge, values and judgements that inform any discursive representation of reality (Van Dijk 2000, 22). Equally, the contribution of the socio-cognitive approach to the study of texts has been highlighted by several authors (Koller 2005; Charteris-Black 2018; etc.) who show the cognitive link between society and discourse. This socio-cognitive approach, which has its origins in the idea that it is the members of a society who construct their political reality (Van Dijk 2018, 28), postulates that many discursive structures can only be fully explained by taking into account cognitive notions such as the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of speakers (Van Dijk 2008).

My main focus is an analysis of epistemic modality, which is one of the strategies used to indicate the stance that has been adopted in the construal of the mass arrival of irregular migrants by a number of authors whose political writings aim to influence the way in which their readers conceptualise reality. These readers, when they lack perceptual access to the situations and events described (Hart 2010, 16; 2011a, 754; 2011b, 184), interact with the semantic structure of the texts (Van Dijk 2001a, 74), in order to achieve, among other things, a furthering of their knowledge of that reality, that is, their epistemic control (Langacker 2009, 212; 2013, 10). For, as Van Dijk (2011a, 27) asserts, I acquire most of our knowledge of the world through communication and discursive interaction.

2. Theoretical framework

The stance –a cognitive and social phenomenon that is instantiated in the meaning of certain linguistic structures and includes concepts such as evaluation, judgement, commitment, alignment and intentionality (Dubois 2007, 162; Biber and Finegan 1989, 93)– is an essential notion in explaining how language, adapting to the context model of the speakers (Van Dijk 2001a, 80), functions as an instrument of communication, manipulation, expressivity and participation in social life (Langacker 2010, 31; Simaki et al. 2019, 380).

This intersubjective function of language, essential to human experience, corresponds to the control cycle (Langacker 2009, 130), a basic idealised cognitive model composed of grammatical units and structures which, by linking the communicative goals and interests of the sender with the social conditions of the situation and its recipient (Wodak and Reisigl 2001, 379), incorporate into discourse particular forms of mental access to what is being described (Langacker 2001, 145–146). Moreover, this basic idealised cognitive model represents the effort of the interacting participants in the communicative event to achieve, among other things, the epistemic control, the knowledge of the world mentioned above. As Van Dijk (2016, 207) explains, when senders of texts construct an event model that allows their audience to conceive a situational context that they have not personally experienced, their texts establish a real mental connection between the discourse and the social event they are communicating. The sender furthermore shapes the event according to their own perspective, their interests, their own value system, their emotions; in short, according to their personal history or subjective experience (Van Dijk 2011a, 2014).

With this aim in mind, text producers select for their discourse certain linguistic units with which the addressees perceive not only the content of the conceptualisation, but also the sender's stance with respect to what is conceptualised (Wodak and Reisigl 2001, 386; Langacker 2009, 294). Thus, in the struggle to construct a coherent view of their experience (Langacker 2008, 297), authors generate construal by employing various grammatical units and structures that discursively build how they situate themselves in relation to the conceptualised event and consequently how they evaluate its existential status (Du Bois 2007, 139; Marín-Arrese 2011, 195), as well as other strategies that suggest a particular stance such as framing by specific lexical units (Hart 2023, 252).

Of particular relevance to my study, therefore, is the concept of subjectivity, understood from a socio-cognitive perspective as the way in which discourse is produced and understood by individual language users as members of linguistic, epistemic and social communities (Martín Rojo 2000, 123; Van Dijk 2014, 123). The relationship between the concept of subjectivity and other notions, such as

frame and framing, used by the socio-cognitive approach to explain the conceptualisations of events evoked by certain linguistic expressions and their ideological functions is unquestionable.

Cognitive grammar, for its part, uses the term subjectivity in connection with other concepts which are, as will be seen below, key for this analysis: perspective and grounding. The term perspective refers to the position from which the subject observes the object of the conceptualisation (Langacker 1987, 113) and is closely related to the concept of subjectivity. Subjectivity presupposes the optimal viewing arrangement (Langacker 1987, 129) of the conceptualiser who –situated outside the scene being observed and without being aware of their implicit conceptualising presence– concentrates on the observed entity or process, which is constructed with maximal objectivity (Langacker 1990, 316).

This asymmetry between the conceptualiser, subjectively construed, and the conceptualised, construed with objectivity, is also reflected in grounding (Langacker 2008, 10). Grounding is achieved through the linguistic units and structures in the clause which confer communicative value and indicate how the subject of the conception, in an effort to direct the attention of the interlocutor towards a certain discursive referent and to coordinate the way they conceptualise it, sees the entity or process outlined in relation to the context (Van Dijk 2000, 96): on the one hand, the place and time of the communicative interaction; and, on the other hand, their own physical, mental, social and cultural circumstances. In other words, grounding acts as a link between the linguistic system itself and the circumstances of its use (Pelyvás 2001, 107). In addition to the time and place of enunciation, from a socio-cognitive perspective these circumstances include the participants, with their different communicative, social or institutional roles, and with their goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and ideologies (Baker et al. 2008, 281; Van Dijk 2016, 209).

As Langacker (2008, 259; 2009, 150) explains, the processes or events profiled in a clause occur in time. They are transitory, so it is essential to be able to determine their existence in order for them to acquire a discernible place in the mental model (Van Dijk 2000, 96) of speakers if they are to become a discursive referent (Van Dijk 2001a, 72). This is why the grounding elements of verb tense and modality are so important; they are the grammaticalisation of the speaker's attitudes and subjective opinions (Palmer 2001, 16). Morphemes of both tense and mode grammatically specify (Langacker 2001, 156) the status of the events profiled, in accordance with the present moment of the communicative act and with what the individual accepts to be their known or immediate reality and therefore adopts as a starting point for their conceptualisation of the meaning of a clause (Langacker 1991, 243). As Chilton (2004, 59) states in his analysis of political discourse, the

conceptualiser constitutes the origin of the epistemic truth; that is, the status of the referent of the clause with respect to reality.

Therefore, for cognitive grammar, subjectivity is one of the keys to the construal operation which relates the profiled clausal process to the here and now of enunciation and to what the speaker considers to be real, and under control, in their epistemic domain (Langacker 2019).

Some researchers, such as Sanders and Spoore (1997, 91), consider that grounding predications which allow the expression of the speaker's conscience involve the objectification of the conceptualiser; the latter's evaluation of the existential status of what is communicated by the clause brings it to the foreground and causes it to become the focus of attention. However, according to Pelyvás (2019, 312), in the case of modal grounding, only the grounded process itself constitutes the focus of attention. The conceptualiser, established as the point of reference or the origin of epistemic truth, remains outside the picture and unprofiled (Langacker 1991, 297). In other words, through the use of the modal, the conceptualiser momentarily becomes the point of reference, facilitating mental access to the object of conceptualisation designated by the clause. Once the receiver has established a mental connection with what is evaluated through the event model constructed by the sender, this point of reference fades to the background (Pelyvás 2001, 119), to act as the implicit conceptualising presence (Langacker 2013, 20–21), thus allowing the profiled clausal process to acquire prominence.

The epistemic modal specifically locates the propositional content of the clause in the realm of unreality, as the profiled process is evaluated simply as a probability (Langacker 1991, 245). In the words of Nuyt (2016, 38), epistemic expressions encode the result of the interlocutors' evaluation of the existential situation of the state of affairs described in the clause. As characterised by Langacker (2008, 2013, 2019) in accordance with the force dynamic model (Talmy 1988; Sweetser 1982), this evaluation involves the conceptualiser's mental effort to extrapolate a conception of the current reality, to imagine how it will evolve, and the possibility or probability that it will incorporate the profiled clausal process (Langacker 1990, 337; 2008, 306).

The meaning of the modal construction that instantiates in the discourse the epistemic stance of the conceptualiser, shows a reservation, a desire not to commit to a categorical statement regarding the existence of what is being communicated (Coates 1983, 235–236). This explains why epistemic modality is the object of study in analyses (Hart 2011a, 2011b, for example) focusing on public discourse with political content on the highly contentious topic of migration.

It is important to note that receivers usually participate in a communicative act on issues such as this in order to gain an understanding of events to which they have not had direct perceptual access and which are therefore not under con-

trol in their epistemic domain (Langacker 2013, 15). Thus, the production and diffusion of symbolic representations of events and subjects by the media plays an essential role, as the media are the main channel for the public definition of reality (Casero 2007, 70).

In this context, epistemic modals, grammatical units of an evidently dialogic nature and an expression of speaker subjectivity, constitute a particularly important resource (Hart 2011b, 183). These modals allow the sender of a text, invested in the interlocutor's acceptance, to attempt to persuade the receiver by qualifying the degree of certainty (Palmer 2001, 24) attributed to the conceptual content of the clause in the discourse.

In written public discourse with political content such as that analysed below, the authors qualify the information they communicate by using their reputation as a reliable source of information with privileged access to certain facts (Chilton 2004, 114; Hart 2011a, 759). Therefore, the writer's subjective assessment of the existential status of the profiled process, together with the possible developments they envisage for it, are instantiated in epistemic modal predicates which frequently present the assessment as solely the sender's responsibility (Nuyts 2012, 58).

In short, the use of epistemic modality, which is linked to notions of knowledge, belief and probability, builds in discourse the position adopted by the conceptualiser in relation to the propositional content they intend to communicate. The evaluation implicit in the modal means that the sender momentarily becomes the point of reference that allows readers, in their effort to achieve epistemic control of the world around them, to establish a mental connection with events to which they have not had personal perceptual access. Through the use of their power as an authoritative source of knowledge, the sender uses in the discourse these epistemic modals –obviously dialogic in nature, since they elaborate public opinion or stance– with the purpose of indirectly guiding the way in which the receiver conceives the events. In order to do this, the writer carries out a cognitive evaluation of what is communicated and signals a conditional, but not absolute, epistemic commitment (Lyons 1977, 354) to the propositional content of the clause. In this way, the receivers of the text are led to conceptualise the designated event according to the sender's subjective assessment of the probability that what is communicated falls within the sphere of reality.

3. Analysis

Below, I present results from the analysis of 74 opinion articles, comprising at total of 39,447 words, published in the regional newspaper *Canarias*⁷ between

29 August 2020 and 21 February 2021. As mentioned above, all of them deal with the arrival during this particular period of approximately 30,000 migrants who departed in small open boats from the coasts of Mauritania and Morocco, to arrive at Europe's outermost border which has effectively become a detention centre preventing them from either continuing on their journey to Europe, or from returning to their place of origin.

In line with other authors (Nuyts 2001, 384; Pelyvás 2001, 108; Cornillie 2005, 56–57; 2007, 231; Boogart and Fortuin 2016, 522; etc.), I consider that modal grounding systems incorporate not only highly grammaticalised and semantically schematic linguistic units (Langacker 2008, 304). I also believe that the symbolic relation that epistemic grounding establishes between discourse and reality, as conceived by the sender of a text, is a matter of function, not form (Cornillie 2005, 59).

The analysis of the corpus therefore aims to locate, identify and study all the linguistic units and structures whose conceptual meaning corresponds to epistemic modals as they are described in cognitive grammar, i.e. the expression of the speaker's probability judgements about how the existential status of the process profiled by the clause will evolve (Pelyvás 2019, 309).

With this objective in mind, I took into consideration various studies of the use of this device in the Spanish language, such as Fuentes (1991); Silva-Corvalán (1995); Gómez Torrego (1999); RAE (2009), Cornillie (2005, 2007, 2010), among others.

Van Dijk (2011a, 38) claims that the qualification of the media through their use of modal elements, is an essential strategy for knowledge management in public discourse. However, I have detected a total of only 90 epistemic expressions in my corpus (0.22% of the 39,447 words in the corpus). They are nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs that allow readers to acquire a vision of an event, of a process whose reality is presented to them as potential or projected (Cornillie 2005, 64).

Below, I present some examples of the linguistic unit whose 40 appearances in the corpus (44.4% of the total number of epistemic modals) make it the grounding element most frequently used by writers with the purpose of inducing in the receiver a conditional epistemic commitment (Lyons 1977, 354) to what is communicated: the periphrastic auxiliary *poder* (can/could/might).

3.1 The periphrastic auxiliary *poder* (can/could/might)

When readers consider the sender to be an authoritative and trustworthy source of knowledge (Hart 2010, 173), they economise on cognitive resources by accepting the evaluations of the sender (Fitneva 2001, 403). It is evident that readers who interact with the type of texts that constitute the corpus do so with the aim of

seeking the opinions of their authors on the degree of veracity that can be given to what is communicated. The use of epistemic modals is part of the various strategies followed by writers in their attempt to influence the reasoning of the reader who accepts the author's legitimacy as a source of epistemic truth.

It is the epistemic *poder* (can/could/might) that instantiates in the text the sender's own – i.e. belief-based – evaluation of the possibility that what is denoted by the clause corresponds to reality (Cornillie 2007, 186). Therefore, the interpretation of *poder* (can/could/might) as a grounding predication which situates the profiled clausal process in the realm of potential reality (Langacker 2008, 307) requires the absence of any mention of a source of information external to the speaker themselves (Silva-Corvalán 1995, 83).

As well as this first restriction that affects the content of the clause, it is essential to establish other contextual conditions that allow the identification of the epistemic modal function of the periphrastic auxiliary *poder* (can/could/might) even when its form varies to signify grammatical content of time, person, number, mood, voice and aspect.

In this sense, Spanish grammar (Gómez Torrego 1999, 3345–3346) ensures that any conjugated verb that acts as an auxiliary in a periphrastic structure is simply a morphosyntactic tool whose function, among others, is to provide modal information that qualifies the meaning or content of the verb in a non-personal form. By using *poder* (can/could/might), under certain contextual conditions, the speaker succinctly expresses a possibility (Gómez Torrego 1999, 3351).

By using an epistemic modal, the conceptualiser, in Langacker's words (1990, 333), becomes the epicentre of a certain potentiality that facilitates a mental simulation of what can be conceived of as reality and how this reality may evolve. The presence in the text of the modal verb *poder* (can/could/might) as an auxiliary of the periphrastic unit means that the grounded process, denoted by the infinitive, forms a part of what the conceptualiser qualifies as potential reality. Although there is no overt commitment to any single outcome (Langacker 2008, 306–307), given the dialogic nature of the modal, the author does not explicitly reject any alternative either. By selecting the modal auxiliary, the sender intends to direct receivers' own process of reasoning from the premises available in the co-text, leading them to the conclusion contained in the clause qualified by the modal verb (Sweetser 1982, 494) to accept a given manifestation as appropriate or reasonable (Boogaart and Fortuin 2016, 517–518).

When the verb *poder* (can/could/might), followed by an infinitive, has an epistemic interpretation, certain combinatory patterns can be observed (Silva-Corvalán 1995, 82–83; Gómez Torrego 1999, 3333–3334; Cornillie 2007, 214–215). As will be seen below, these are present to a greater or lesser extent in the fragments I have extracted from the corpus:

- a. Predominance of zero subject, inanimate subject and non-specific subject.
- b. Predominance of stative auxiliary verbs.
- c. May precede the compound infinitive.
- d. May be accompanied by the adverb *no* (not), so that what is meant by the predicate has a negative consequence for the subject.

3.2 Data analysis

The mass arrival in the Canary Islands of migrants who were given no alternative from either Spain or the EU other than to remain within the geographical limits of the archipelago brought, as the following excerpt (1) shows, an unexpected consequence that made the situation in the islands even more troubling: the appearance of xenophobic reactions in some sectors of a native population that has always considered itself to be open and hospitable.

- (1) Vivimos en una sociedad frustrada en la que *cualquiera puede ser enemigo*. Más si es extraño y tiene otro tono de piel. [...]. Buscar un chivo expiatorio en el inmigrante para proyectar nuestros errores y sentimientos frustrados es la constatación del fracaso social de un pueblo que presumía de ser abierto y hospitalario. (Canarias7, 28 January, 2021)
- We are living in a frustrated society where *anyone might be the enemy*. Even more so if they are different or have a different skin colour. [...] Making a scapegoat of a migrant in order to project our errors and frustrations is proof of the failure of a society that has always considered itself to be open and hospitable.

In this first excerpt (1), *puede* (might) is an auxiliary of the stative infinitive *ser* (*be*), which does not include any reference to either the beginning or the end of the process. On the other hand, the indefinite quantifier *cualquiera* (*anyone*), normally absent from factual contexts, acts as the subject of the clause whose content is cognitively evaluated by the sender. This quantifier, in the absence of a common noun that specifies its domain of quantification, acquires here the universal meaning, ‘any person.’

It is obvious that both contextual elements reinforce the interpretation of the auxiliary *puede* (might) as a grounding element intended to focus the reader’s attention on the event profiled by the clause *cualquiera puede ser enemigo* (anyone might be an enemy), for whose future development the sender imagines the multiple potential outcomes (Cornillie 2015, 64). Readers, for their part, can draw the conclusion inferred from the modal clause by starting from the premise embedded in the co-text by the writer as a respected member of the linguistic, epistemic and social community: xenophobic reactions occur because the current frustration of a society that used to pride itself on its hospitality has driven it to conceptualise the arrival of any stranger as a potential state of affairs counter to its

interests. The use of the epistemic modal with its meaning of possibility is therefore part of a discursive strategy followed by the writer of the text to mitigate a negative topos about the social self (Martín Rojo 2000, 133; Zapata-Barrero and Van Dijk 2007, 11; Van Dijk 2011b, 110): its racism.

The same contextual characteristics described above are found in excerpt 2, published a few days after excerpt 1. It also deals with reactions against the mass arrival of migrants. Thus, starting from the sender's personally understood, immediate reality –the xenophobia comes from a tiny percentage of Canary Island society– the sender expresses a conditional epistemic commitment, also indicated by the adverb *probablemente* (probably) in the co-text, to the propositional content of the clause *a lo que puede encontrarse en cualquier otro lugar del mundo* (any that could be found elsewhere in the world). As I have seen above, the purpose of this is to coordinate the way in which the process profiled by the verb in the infinitive is conceptualised, while at the same time allowing the existence of other possible realities evoked by the same communicative situation and which mitigate the negative effect produced by the event described above. It is plausible, although not certain and therefore not stated that given the very small number of people who have participated in these xenophobic acts the racist response to the drama of migration in the Canary Islands is, like in other parts of the world, not truly worrying.

- (2) La presencia de algunas actitudes xenófobas en una población tan grande como la canaria no tiene por qué encender con especial urgencia las luces de alarma. Al menos hasta la fecha solo hemos visto manifestaciones testimoniales que vienen a representar un porcentaje tan ínfimo de la población que, probablemente, es equiparable a lo *que puede encontrarse en cualquier otro lugar del mundo*. (Canarias7, 7 February, 2021)

The existence of some xenophobic attitudes in a population as large as that of the Canary Islands should not necessarily set urgent alarm bells ringing. For the moment, at least, we have only witnessed minimal demonstrations that represent such a tiny percentage of the population, *they are probably comparable to any that could be found elsewhere in the world*.

In the following example (3), the writer expresses an opinion on the declarations made by the Home Affairs minister of the Spanish government about the highly polemical issue that is causing the racist response, usually justified in these texts in economic terms (Wodak 2008, 293): the length of time that the migrants are confined in the places where they disembark. These are mostly in the tourist areas that conform the principal driver of the Canary Island economy. Again, the presence of the modal *pudo* (could) instantiates the reservations of the conceptualiser in categorically recognising the reality of what he or she communicates:

other people also thought that the minister was lying about an event for which he was responsible, that is, the mismanagement of the migrants' arrival on the island and its consequences for tourism. Thus, the epistemic modal participates in an argumentative strategy already described in other analyses of political discourse (Wodak 2003, 115, for example), the attribution of treatment responsibility (Iyengar 1996, 60). This topos is focused on who or what, in the judgement of the sender, has the capacity to alleviate the problem described. The use of this topos indicates, I believe, the desire of the author to position their own social group in relation to the others (Krzyżanowski 2020, 506), that is, the Spanish government. President Sánchez and his ministers are responsible for the crisis that the Canary Islands are experiencing and, consequently, for the xenophobic reactions of a population frightened for their economy.

- (3) [...] que [un ministro] no cuente la verdad, no tiene excusa. O que lo que cuente se parezca como un huevo a una castaña a la realidad. Y que lo haga en directo, en un programa de máxima audiencia y sin que se le altere el rictus ya es cosa preocupante. *Es lo que pudo pensar ayer más de uno* viendo con qué contundencia afirmaba el ministro del Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, que los inmigrantes solo están 72 horas en el muelle [...].

(Canarias7, 17 November, 2020)

[...] there is no excuse for [a government minister] not telling the truth. Or that what he says is as similar to reality as chalk is to cheese. And that he should say it live, on prime-time television, without batting an eyelid is very worrying. *This is what more than one person might have thought yesterday* if they saw the Home Affairs minister, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, state with total assurance that the migrants only remain in the harbour for 72 hours.

The aim of the writer in this excerpt (3) is to get the reader to adhere to their epistemic posture using the modal *pudo* (might) in a grammatical context which creates what Nuyt (2015, 21) calls “an intersubjective evaluation”, that is, one that is shared by the sender and a wider unspecified group.

In this way, in the periphrastic unit, the modal verb acts as an auxiliary to the stative verb *pensar* (have thought) whose subject, the indefinite subject *más de uno* (more than one person), is common in predicates that express the experiences, knowledge or feelings of the speaker who assumes these to be translatable to others.

The use of an intersubjective epistemic modal expression does not imply that the author is not fully responsible for the evaluation made (Nuyts 2015, 23). However, in this excerpt (3), which judges the action of a Spanish government minister, the intersubjective modality avoids the justification (Hart 2011b, 184) for certain debatable statements, by inferring that the minister has publicly and

deliberately given a distorted version of reality. However, the suggestion of co-responsibility for such statements diminishes the reliability of the author's assessment and, consequently, their power to influence the epistemic stance of the receivers.

In truth, not only are the migrants indefinitely held in the tourist harbour where they arrived, they are also objectified and crammed together in a small space. In the description of this overcrowding, the author of the following excerpt (4) employs an epistemic modal which, on this occasion, provides a subjective opinion about a past situation which the cited extract presents as potentially true.

- (4) [...] en un espacio reducido llegaron a hacinar a más de 2.600 personas, hasta el punto de que hubo un momento que 'echaron' a más de 200 porque la presión era tal que *podían empezar a caer al mar* [...].

(Canarias7, 19 December, 2020)

[...] they crammed more than 2,600 people into such a small area until there came a point where more than 200 were 'thrown out' because they were so squashed in that *they might have started falling into the sea* [...].

The use of *podían* (they might), applied in the auxiliary chain to the second, aspectual, verb *empezar* (have started) and the accompanying preposition *a* (to), encodes the viewpoint of the conceptualiser, signifying a potential reality. The writer concentrates on the inchoative phase of the process designated by *caer* (falling), whose meaning does not include any reference to the end point of the event. The verb *caer* (falling) is the grounded nucleus which provides the conceptual basis for the periphrastic unit (García-Miguel 2005, 406–408). It comes to the fore as the focus of attention and main reference point (Cornillie 2007, 248) in order for readers to establish a mental link with a situation that is outside their experience, enabling them to come to a conclusion about the magnitude of the shamefulfulness described. The writer achieves this by connecting the epistemic modal to a periphrastic unit with other verb forms, leaving the door open to the idea that, due to the overcrowding described, which led to the evacuation of 200 people, any future development of the process profiled by the clause *podían empezar a caer* (they might have started falling) was foreseeable. In this way, the modal contributes to the conceptualisation of events that, on the one hand, reflect the mistreatment of migrants and, on the other, an image that goes against the interests of the island. In other words, the modal is one of the linguistic resources selected by the author of the text for a construal operation that undoubtedly reflects what Bañón (2007, 45) describes as the ethical and socio-cognitive complexity of the migratory phenomenon.

The situation in which migrants arriving in the Canary Islands, the new Lampedusa of Europe, find themselves, leads the author of extract (5) to conclude that *no se puede mirar hacia otro lado* (we cannot look away).

- (5) Ya *no se puede mirar hacia otro lado*. Gran Canaria, la nueva Lampedusa de Europa, debe alzar la voz con firmeza antes de que sea tarde porque seguir ‘plantando’ carpas no es la solución. (Canarias7, 27 January, 2021)
We cannot look away. Gran Canaria, Europe’s new Lampedusa, must raise its voice firmly before it is too late, because sticking up more tents is not a solution.

Once again, I find that the need to highlight the authority of the sender of the text guarantees the presence of a modal whose function is to specify the epistemic status of the process profiled by the infinitive (Boogaart and Fortuin 2016, 522). The negated auxiliary *no se puede* (we cannot) indicates that the message communicated by the clause does not coincide with the author’s perception of reality (Sánchez 1999, 2563) and its presence evokes any potential development of the infinitive *mirar* (look away).

In the writer’s opinion, the failure of Canary Island society to react to a central government which has allowed this situation to become chronic has led to the political and social circumstances that make up the context. The sender’s personal and subjective representation of the relevant characteristics of the social situation described (Van Dijk 2000, 96) justify the use of negation. By using the negated auxiliary *no se puede* (we cannot), the writer intends to evoke (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2014, 149) alternative situations to the one communicated by the clause, in this case, that Canary Island society prefers not to know, prefers to look the other way and remain indifferent to the ongoing mismanagement of the crisis.

In the following extract (6) I again find the epistemic modal preceded by negation in a new argument of attribution of treatment responsibility. Once again, the use of this topos responds to the author’s intention to negatively categorise the others, the members of Sánchez’s government, who are acting under pressure from the EU. Starting from what the author considers is under control in their epistemic domain, the text presents the negated auxiliary *no puede* (cannot) to evoke in the minds of readers different options about the possibility of the clausal process profiled by the infinitive *alegar* (allege). As far as the author is concerned, the Spanish Government’s ineffectiveness permits conjecture about the arguments it will use to justify the fact that it has placed the Canary Islands in an untenable situation.

- (6) El Gobierno de Sánchez *no puede alegar* que no conocía los análisis sobre los movimientos de las mafias del tráfico de personas en distintos países africanos y especialmente en Marruecos. (Canarias7, 22 November, 2020)
 President Sánchez's government *cannot allege* that they knew nothing about the activities of the people trafficking mafias in different African countries, especially Morocco.

Occasionally, through its integration in the content of a previous discursive event, a non-immediacy of the epistemic judgement is derived from the conditional form of the modal (Langacker, 2009, 203). This can be observed in excerpts (7) and (8) below; in both extracts, the modal acts as an auxiliary of a stative infinitive verb –*permanecer* (end up) and *ser* (being), respectively– whose unspecified subjects in the previous discursive activity signify a possible future existence.

In the first of these extracts (7), the author mentions a proposal, prior to the present moment in the discourse, made by the European Commission for a new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, which would replace the current one. Importantly, this is used to explain the actions of the Spanish government in the migratory crisis in the Canary Islands, under pressure from the EU to use Europe's outer borders as detention centres.

- (7) Pero es que, además, en dicho documento también se establece que [...] las personas deben permanecer en las « fronteras exteriores de la UE » (es decir territorios como Canarias) hasta que sean devueltas a sus países. En conjunto las mujeres y hombres migrantes *podrían permanecer* varios meses *retenidos* en las islas en contra de su voluntad. (Canarias7, 20 February, 2021)
 However, the fact is that, in this document it also states that [...] people must remain at “the outer borders of the EU” (that is, in places such as the Canary Islands) until they are returned to their country of origin. Altogether, these migrant women and men *might end up being detained* for several months on the islands against their will.

The author of the following Extract (8) refers to a news item that was published prior to the time of writing of the article. The attitude towards the potential reality of the state of affairs communicated in this news article by the clause *podrían ser yihadistas* (they might be jihadists), is expressed in the construction of a sentence that discursively opposes the previous one (*O podrían no serlo* / Or they might not be) and in which the epistemic auxiliary is followed by the infinitive *ser* (*be*) whose meaning is denied; in this way, the stative event that it profiles is presented to the reader as unreal.

- (8) También por vía telefónica me mandaron la publicación de un supuesto periódico según el cual los 227 inmigrantes que Interior abandonó a su suerte el pasado martes en el muelle de Arguineguín « *podrían ser yihadistas* ». O *podrían no serlo*. Claro que también *podrían ser del Barça* [...].
(Canarias7, 20 November, 2020)

I also received an article on my phone from a so-called news outlet according to which 227 migrants which the Home Office abandoned to their fate last Tuesday in the harbour in Arguineguin “*might be jihadists*”. Or *they might not be*. Of course, *they could also be Barcelona FC supporters* [...].

In the final sentence of the excerpt (8), the author, once again positioned in the ‘now’ of the communicative act, uses an epistemic auxiliary to grammatically construct in conditional form a personal judgement on the reality of the fact profiled by the clause *podrían ser del Barça* (they might also be Barcelona FC supporters).

This will lead the reader of the text to infer that, as far as the conceptualiser is concerned, the circumstances which characterise the communicative context and which constitute the starting point for this evaluation are such that the situation described by the clause falls within the realm of potential reality. In this context, the use of *podrían* (they could) causes the evaluation of a potential reality to become weaker; the auxiliary conveys an even lesser degree of epistemic certainty (Boogaart and Fortuin 2016, 521–526), and an even greater distance is created between what is conceptualised and the position the conceptualiser occupies in the immediate, known reality (Langacker 1991, 246). This is in line with the idea that the conditional mood *podrían* (they might) also constitutes a marker of the intention of the writer to construct an utterance whose irony stems from the incongruity (Burgers et al. 2012) of mentioning a Spanish football team in a space for debate of the potential link between migration and Islamic terrorism, a frequent argument in political discourse that incites discrimination and hatred (Krzyżanowski 2018, 2020).

4. Conclusions

The dangerous Atlantic route is a constant focus of media interest, especially when it brings tens of thousands of undocumented people to the coasts of the Canary Islands in a short period of time. When this happens, the regional press builds a clearly discriminatory discourse that presents migrants as a threat to the Islands’ main source of income, tourism. It also attributes the responsibility for this threat to the Spanish government’s mismanagement of the situation, brought about by pressure from EU impositions to make its outer borders function as effective

detention centres for this transit migration that comes to the Canary Islands only because the archipelago is a gateway to the European continent.

There are several resources used by the writers of these texts to signal their stance against the migratory movement. My analysis has focused on one of the essential strategies for the management of knowledge in public discourse with political content, the use of the epistemic modal *poder* (can/could/might). I have specifically analysed the 74 opinion articles published by a regional newspaper in one of the periods, (29 August 2020 to 21 February 2021) in which the Atlantic migration route underwent one of its most striking increases.





In a textual genre with which readers, attracted by the writer's reputation, interact precisely because of their desire for epistemic control over events to which they have no direct perceptual access, the presence of the modal auxiliary in the periphrastic unit is a clear indication of the author's stance, of their intention to remain at a distance from what is conceptualised, and not to commit to a firm declaration of any of the alternatives that the situational context for the described event evokes. The epistemic modal, as part of the construal operation of the migratory crisis, presents the reality as merely potential. The syntactic contexts in which it appears support this interpretation of the use of the modal auxiliary. Thus, verbs that signify stative events, or dynamic verbs that do not include any reference to the end of the action described, provide the conceptual basis of the periphrastic unit. In addition, such verbs select unspecified, indefinite or universally signified subjects. All these grammatical units, together with the use of other resources such as the adverb of negation, create the necessary discursive conditions for the reader to understand that the writer, whose extensive knowledge of the context is a given, has a single objective: to generate confrontation and to fuel the polemic on which public opinion feeds. The grounding element attempts to do this by focusing the attention of the interlocutors on a particular discursive referent in order to coordinate its conceptualisation.

In all the samples I have presented, the epistemic modal auxiliary is just one of the linguistic resources that build in the discourse the topoi used to direct the reasoning process of the recipients. The auxiliary *poder* (can/could/might) appears in texts justifying the xenophobic reactions of part of the population fearful that the presence of irregular migrants will lead to a worsening of the archipelago's economic situation, or identifying President Sánchez and his ministers as the main actors in the chaos produced by the arrival of almost 30,000 people in a few months, or conjecturing that inhabitants of the Canary Islands might prefer to remain indifferent to EU border policies that turn the islands into just another of Europe's refugee camps.










I have shown that, under certain contextual conditions, the speaker succinctly expresses a possibility with *poder* (can/could/might); this conceptual content of the periphrastic verb leaves the door open to any possible future development of the questions that have been dealt with in the texts analysed. This use of the periphrastic modal means that, on occasion, the counterproductive effect that the discourse may have on the image of the social group to which the author belongs is attenuated; at other times, it is precisely the conjectures produced by the presence of the epistemic modal that accentuate the negative representation of the other, responsible for the chaos, fear and racist reactions.

In short, in the corpus examined, the epistemic modal is one of several linguistic resources involved in the construal operation of what has been described as the ethical and socio-cognitive complexity of the migratory phenomenon.

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