

'The Alleged Fraud': Modality in a Corpus of Corporate Fraud News

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Abstract

This paper presents a section of my ongoing PhD research, which investigates the reporting of corporate fraud by UK newspapers, in particular with regard to criminalisation and legitimisation. This paper explores modality present in a corpus of corporate fraud news, using methods from corpus linguistics. The corpus consists of articles taken from seven mainstream newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid, over the period 2004-2014. The overall methodological framework of my PhD research is corpus-supported Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA has been criticised since its inception, in particular for researcher bias and the lack of representativeness of the texts investigated. However, both critics and proponents of CDA (Widdowson, 2004; Fairclough, 2015) agree that corpus linguistics can offer a suitable solution to these criticisms.

Investigating modality using corpus linguistics is not a particularly straightforward method. While software can list modal verbs in the corpus, and the corresponding frequencies of these modal verbs, other indicators of modality (adverbs, adjectives) are less straightforwardly uncovered.

Newspapers employ a relatively large amount of epistemic modality to describe the actions of corporations implicated in corporate fraud suits, which shows a particular constraint in accusing these corporations. This restraint may not always be shown to other parties.

Keywords: *modality, corporate fraud, critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics*

1. Introduction

This paper discusses modality in a corpus of corporate fraud news. In particular, it examines how adjectives are used to communicate epistemic modality. It argues that the modality used by newspapers indicates that they distance themselves from accusations. Newspapers also distance themselves from indicating what (institutional and corporate) responses *should be*. Instead, newspapers report accusations *as* accusations and focus, very simply, on how corporations and institutions are responding to the consequences of corporate fraud.

Previous research into representations of corporate wrongdoing suggests that the responsibility for this wrongdoing is often presented as somewhat muddled. Wright, Cullen

and Blankenship (1995), for instance, concluded that newspapers are very hesitant to accuse any corporate party of a crime. These newspapers will report on accusations made by third parties, but distance themselves from these accusations (*ibid.*). This is rather different from these newspapers' reporting on other forms of crime, where accusations are readily made – newspapers have no qualms about labelling an (comparatively disadvantaged) individual as a thief or rapist even if these individuals have 'only' been accused (*ibid.*). Indeed *The Daily Mail*, for instance, appears to find no issue with labelling Syrian refugees as (potential) terrorists (Drury, 2015). McMullan and McClung (2006) investigated reports of the Westray Disaster, which is a case of corporate violence, and found that this event was never reported as criminal. Instead, responsibility was reframed as (immoral, not criminal) negligence on the part of management and inspectors (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Jewkes (2011) as well as Machin and Mayr (2013) found that cases of corporate crime are often treated as though they were natural disasters, rather than events caused by human actions. For instance, as Machin and Mayr's research into the coverage of the Paddington rail crash (2013) indicates, there is a focus on heroes, suffering, and the general dramatic impact of these events. According to their research, responsibility was not assigned until later, after the causes of the Paddington rail crash were investigated and reported by investigators (*ibid.*). However, even then responsibility is generally attributed to objects and processes, rather than human actors, and there is no vilification of any humans (potentially) responsible – which is contrary to what occurs in the reporting of other forms of crime. Corporate crime is then not treated as crime at all, but as the (unfortunate) consequences to human and procedural failings.

This paper first covers the relevant methodology, detailing the use of corpus linguistic techniques to find modal constructions. Modality, in particular epistemic modality, is excellently suited to examining whether newspapers are indeed distancing themselves from the acts of corporate fraud. The Results-section discusses, firstly, the argument that newspapers

shy away from writing about how institutions *should* respond to corporate fraud, and instead focus on how these institutions *do* respond. Secondly, the results section examines the argument that newspapers distance themselves from accusations through (epistemic) modality.

2. Methodology

To emphasise the importance of studying modality in CDA, Fairclough (1992) writes that news media often transform complex, ambiguous events into categorical fact. Despite their disagreement about the merits of CDA, both Widdowson (2004) and Fairclough (2015) indicate that corpus linguistics are potentially able to counter some CDA criticisms, in particular those of researcher bias and lack of representativeness. Seven newspapers were selected which covered a variety of mainstream political views, and which were collectively read by a significant proportion of the British population (approximately 25%) (see Cole and Harcup, 2010). For practical reasons, the publication cut-off date was 31 December 2014. The start date was chosen to be 1 January 2004, to capture an adequate variety of articles published pre-, mid-, and post-global financial crisis (insofar the post-crisis period may be assumed to exist). A definition of corporate fraud, generated by an earlier literature review, was used to exclude articles published in this decade that did not report on corporate fraud. This definition is as follows:

‘Corporate fraud’ indicates those cases in which a corporation or a (number of) employee(s) or member(s) of a corporation, for the benefit and on behalf of said corporation, act(s) in a manner that conceals or misrepresents the status or situation of a good, service or case, resulting in negative consequences for other individuals, legal persons or for society as a whole.

The process of exclusion was performed manually. At this point in the data collection, the corpus consisted of about 2,500 news articles, published between 1 January 2004 and 31 December 2014 by *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Times*, as well as their respective Sunday editions. This corpus consisted of approximately two million tokens.

This paper relies largely on Simpson’s (1993) authoritative categorisation of modality. Simpson’s model differentiates between four forms of modality (1993). The first, *deontic*, indicates a scale of obligations and commitment; the second, *boulomaic*, indicates desire; the

third, *epistemic*, communicates the author's attitude toward the truth of their utterance (*ibid.*). The fourth category, *perception*, could potentially be viewed as a sub-category of epistemic modality (*ibid.*) and as such has not been considered a stand-alone category in this paper. Several researchers have, over the years, suggested adding a category for those words and phrases which are necessarily vague, such as *can* and *need*. This has been labelled the *dynamic* category (Machin and Mayr, 2012). There is also need for examining negation as well as positive statements. This follows Halliday's (1994, 2014) description of modality, which includes the idea that positive and negative categorical statements are the extremes of the continuum of modality. Forms of modality between these extremes indicate the various gradations (low, medium, high) (*ibid.*).

As Jeffries (2010) writes, there are several text elements which may indicate modality. These include modal auxiliaries, adverbs, adjectives, as well as less well-defined parts-of-speech (*ibid.*). In this paper, only auxiliaries, adverbs and adjectives have been considered. Modal auxiliaries are particularly straightforwardly extracted from the corpus, given that they are a closed class. Woolls's CFL Lexical Feature Marker (2011) indeed has this specific function, which automatically produces all modal auxiliaries and their raw and normalised frequencies in the corpus. A particular drawback of Lexical Feature Marker is that, when used on 'ordinary' desktop computers, it cannot speedily process larger corpora. It is, however, perfectly suited to indexing sub-corpora (depending on size). One solution to this problem was to use Wmatrix 3 (2009) instead. The benefit of Wmatrix is that it is capable of handling a corpus of two million tokens and that it can compare this to the BNC Written Sampler, so as to see which modal auxiliaries are statistically significant – that is, to see which modal auxiliaries have been used significantly more or less often in the corpus of corporate fraud when compared to the BNC Written Sampler sub-corpus of the BNC (2007).

As indicated, modality can also be found in adverbs and adjectives. Wmatrix offers the function of tagging parts-of-speech (POS). It is this functionality in particular that yields results. The POS-tag in Wmatrix for adverbs is R*, where the asterisk indicates the wildcard. RR in particular, which indicates general adverbs, gives useful results. It must be noted that when compared to the BNC Written Sampler, RR-category types, i.e. general adverbs, are very much underused. In fact, all adverbs (R*) are underused, and most of them significantly so. Wmatrix indicates significance through the log-likelihood value (LL-value), which at 6.63 is equal to $p = 0.01$. This means that at an LL-value greater than 6.63, the probability (p) of the difference of frequency being coincidental is smaller than 1%. In other words, this means that at an LL-value greater than 6.63, the probability is greater than 99% that the different frequencies are due not to chance, but to a particular external factor, i.e. due to differences in the use of adverbs per corpus. Similarly significant negative results are found for the tag J*, which indicates adjectives. As such, it can be said that adjectives and adverbs are comparatively underused in the corporate fraud corpus, and this underuse is highly unlikely to be coincidental. This lack of use may point to Fairclough's (1992) assertion that newspapers simplify, or perhaps oversimplify, ambiguous events.

A particular issue here is that while Wmatrix can generate an output of the types categorised as adverb (R*) and adjectives (J*), as well as an output of the LL-values of each type, the latter in fact is an output of **all** types in the corpus. This was solved by exporting both outputs to an Excel-workbook, on two different sheets. Using Excel's VLookup-function, the LL-values could be added to the types (R* and J*) in the first worksheet, thus eliminating all types not tagged either R* or J*. Non-significant items ($LL < 6.63$) and explicitly non-modal items were then manually removed from this worksheet. This rendered an output as shown in Table 1. The first column indicates (a selection of) relevant types after filtering; the second column indicates how these types have been tagged (R* or J*); the third column shows the raw

frequency of each type with the relevant tag (ergo, this does not show how often, *alleged* appears in the corpus, but it shows how often *alleged* tagged JJ appears in the corpus), and columns four and five show the LL-value and whether this is positive (significantly overused) or negative (significantly underused).

Type	Tag	Frequency	+ or -	LL-value
alleged	JJ	571	+	816.41
accused	JJ	21	+	694.39
false	JJ	270	+	191.97
fraudulent	JJ	150	+	161.68
potential	JJ	343	+	134.35
uncovered	JJ	1	+	102.42
reported	JJ	50	+	88
necessary	JJ	119	-	56.73
controversial	JJ	114	+	55.57
credible	JJ	36	+	43.15
falsified	JJ	7	+	41.95
suspected	JJ	58	+	41.38
fake	JJ	42	+	39.47
defrauded	JJ	3	+	38.36
fictitious	JJ	31	+	37.16
possible	JJ	253	-	36.72
confident	JJ	85	+	31.5
confidential	JJ	38	+	28.86
confirmed	JJ	1	+	26.49
suspect	JJ	3	+	24.8
unclear	JJ	53	+	24.33
bogus	JJ	29	+	23.11
true	JJ	156	-	21.71

Table 1: Excel Worksheet

There were over 100,000 adjectives in the corpus, neatly sorted into almost 10,000 types. This output of nearly 10,000 types has been manually sorted, leaving about 230 types which are clearly modal. This is about 4,000 tokens. Mind that it must be noted that excluded types can potentially be used in modal constructions, too. This research, however, only selected those adjectives whose use is predominantly and explicitly modal. Of these 230 types, about a fourth, 60, had a statistically significant frequency when compared to the BNC Written Sampler. It is these 60 types that have been investigated using concordances and collocates. The top modal

adjective is *alleged* with a frequency of 571. Compared to the BNC Written Sampler, this is a positive key word.

In short, it is certainly not impossible to investigate modality in a corpus for the purposes of Critical Discourse Analysis, and one is not even restricted to just modal auxiliaries. Nevertheless, regardless of the sophistication of contemporary computer programs, and even regardless of the sophistication of as-of-yet non-existent software, a certain amount of researcher input remains necessary, and certainly these programs cannot uncover all instances of modality, or all nuances of the uncovered instances of modality. However, given that the size of a corpus may diminish the practicality of examining modality in-text, the efficiency of corpus techniques is certainly an important benefit. As indicated, this research examines mainly auxiliaries, adverbs, and adjectives.

3. Results

This section argues, firstly, that newspapers shy away from strongly deontic statements. It secondly argues that newspapers distance themselves from accusations of corporate fraud by including epistemic constructions. This leads to a conclusion that newspapers are rather hesitant to report corporate fraud.

One question that must be asked here is if newspapers do not want to report on corporate fraud, why do they do so anyway? The answer is fairly straightforward: these cases are too big to be ignored. Comparative and superlative adjectives and adverbs generally have a positive log-likelihood score, even if they are not statistically significant. So even despite the general lack of modifiers, there is a sense that what is reported is somehow bigger, bolder, biggest yet – cases worth reporting because despite the general lack of interest in reporting and reading about corporate fraud, these cases rather exceed the minimum threshold value (see Galtung and Ruge, 1965). These are stories of America's biggest mortgage companies, Europe's largest financial institutions, superlatively wealthy clients, and the most exceedingly dramatic cases of fraud and general corporate wrongdoing.

3.1. Lack of strongly deontic statements

In the corpus as a whole, there are only five modal verbs with a LL-value > 6.63 . These are therefore statistically significant when compared to the BNC Written Sampler. Four of these modal verbs are in fact significantly **underused**. This general lack of modal auxiliaries could indicate a move toward the categorical, in that newspapers prefer to report the facts of what companies and investigators *are* doing, rather than offer a more explicitly subjective, potentially moral evaluation of what newspapers *should* be doing. It also follows Fairclough's (1992) assertion that newspapers aim to make complex, ambiguous events into simple fact. Table 2 shows the log-likelihood values of these modal auxiliaries. As these values are all over 6.63, this indicates that their over- or underuse is significant, as this indicates $p < .01$.

Modal auxiliary	Negative or positive?	LL-value
Can	-	200.02
Cannot		
Can't		
Could	+	19.37
Couldn't		
May		
Might		
Must	-	89.13
Need		
Needs		
Ought		
Shall	-	206.13
Should	-	24.29
Shouldn't		
Will		
Would		
Wouldn't		

Table 2: Key modal auxiliaries

The use of these modal verbs in the corpus was examined using the traditional corpus linguistics techniques of generating concordances and collocate lists. Despite the overall lack of deontic modality, two sets of obligations have become clear. One set of obligations exist for the parties on either side of a case – the accused and the accusers. The question is: what are these obligations? As deontic modal auxiliaries occur less often than in the reference corpus, it is fair to say that obligations are not as large a part of the discourse on corporate fraud as they might be in other texts. However, when obligations are outlined, they are very clear on either side.

The first obligations are those companies have. These appear on a continuum: those most under-used, *shall* and *must*, are also most deontically strong, whereas the least deontically strong *could*, is actually significantly overused. *Can* is the most underused of all modal auxiliaries. As a dynamic modal auxiliary, it is even less strongly deontic than *should*, as it indicates the possibility for any party to carry out a particular act, rather than that this party actually should – although this obligation is somewhat implied. Although absolutely speaking, *can* occurs very often in this corpus; comparatively speaking it is much underused. The fact

that businesses have the opportunity to adhere to their obligation to communicate responsibly and be held liable for acts of corporate misconduct re-occurs often in concordances for *can*. *Shall* has a very low frequency, of 6. It is mainly used self-referentially, with one Biblical reference (example (i)). Generally, *shall* is used by spokespeople to indicate a promise of their companies to look into their affairs and, where possible, ‘do better’, after allegations of corporate fraud.

- (i) The Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth (...)

Must has a frequency of 409, and is again used self-referentially, as in ‘we must’. It indicates that corporations have the obligation of communicating transparently, following regulations, and taking responsibility when they do not adhere to the rules, to the point of literally paying for their mistakes. *Should* is slightly less deontically strong than *must* and is perhaps used more often, both absolutely and relatively speaking, for that particular reason. The only positively key modal auxiliary is *could*, which occurs 1759 times. Like *can*, *could* shows the possibility of certain actions, but has less deontic imperative. *Could*, too, largely marks the possible legal consequences to companies which do not live up to their obligations. In short, while corporations are expected to have obligations – to communicate responsibly and transparently, to follow regulations, and to be subject to the consequences of their actions – these obligations are only rarely made this explicit, and certainly are not strong.

The second set of obligations consists of the obligations regulators have, in particular with regard to acting fairly. Governments, regulators and prosecutors have the obligation to regulate fairly, sufficiently, and to make use of the existing rules to actually crack down on instances of corporate wrongdoing. They are furthermore obliged to conduct thorough investigations to actually prove accusations of corporate misconduct. This is somewhat in line with McMullan and McClung’s (2006) and Machin and Mayr’s (2013) findings that the cause

of ‘failings’ is attributed to managerial negligence rather than criminal negligence or even intent. Things that *can* be done include compensating whistle-blowers, seeking justice, imposing penalties, naming and shaming, and holding responsible. It must be noted that in general, the modal auxiliaries show that there is a sense that companies and regulators have obligations. However, the modality is very weak – on the continuum ranging from strongly deontic *shall* to weakly deontic *could*, both in absolute and relative terms, newspapers shy away from strongly deontic statements, preferring to express themselves in possibilities for action –epistemically deontic, as indicated by the dynamic *can* and *could* – instead.

Additionally, newspapers tend to use euphemistic deontic adjectives to point out the illegality of this corporate wrongdoing. Generally, adjectives are a negatively key grammatical group. However, only one third of the modal adjectives which are significantly under- or overused compared to the BNC Written Sampler are actually negatively key, i.e. with a LL-value > 6.63. The remaining two-thirds, or forty, are positively key, so comparatively overused. This is unexpected. Possibly then, while the use of general adjectives is limited, **modal** adjectives are actually overused. This corpus could then be more modal than the reference corpus of the BNC Written Sampler. These sixty key modal adjectives were then sorted into deontic, boulomaic, and epistemic categories. There was only one boulomaic adjective – *necessary*. This word occurs 120 times, and at that frequency is negatively key. Six types were deontic – *approved* (+, 5), *banned* (+, 1), *compliant* (+, 11), *pressured* (+, 1), *prohibited* (-, 2), and *unauthorised* (+, 21). The frequencies for these are very small, ranging from 1 to 21, and so one might wonder whether any conclusions can be drawn from these frequencies at all. Combined, however, these frequencies have some statistical value. Except for *prohibited*, all key deontic adjectives are used in a euphemistic manner. *Unauthorised*, for instance, points out the generally unacceptable nature of a particular act without actually calling it illegal. It is in that way used euphemistically. *Approved* and *compliant* are used in

similar manners and are often negated. The only word which outright declares an act to be illegal, *prohibited*, is less often used than in the BNC Written Sampler. As such, in terms of deontic adjectives, newspapers tend to only euphemistically point out the illegality of corporate fraud acts.

In terms of deontic modality, then, newspapers use, when they do, limited, low-level modal auxiliaries, and generally euphemistic adverbs and adjectives. This means that newspapers write little about the obligations of both companies and regulators, and underplay the illegality of corporate fraud. As such, there appears to be very little authorial judgement in these news reports, which may be an act of self-preservation on the part of the newspapers.

3.2. Use of epistemic constructions

This section argues that the use of epistemic adverb and adjectives indicates that newspapers attempt to distance themselves from accusations made against corporations.

Key adverb categories are locatives, which are not indicative of modality unless used metaphorically. There is, for instance, the epistemic expression ‘there is no escaping the fact that’. Indeed ‘there is’ often forms part of an epistemic construction, creating phrases like ‘there is strong evidence’, ‘there is no chance’, ‘there appear to be’, ‘there is growing evidence’. However, while the potential for modal constructions created through metaphor must be acknowledged, this paper only focuses on explicitly modal auxiliaries, adjectives and adverbs.

By far the biggest category of modality in adjectives was epistemic. Of course ‘truth’ is at the heart of any criminal case, especially in cases of fraud, so perhaps this result is not unexpected. There are 51 epistemic types, with a combined frequency of 2071. Of these 51 types, 14 are negative; these have a sum frequency of 486, so approximately a quarter of the total number of epistemically modal adjectives in the corpus as listed by Wmatrix. These negatively key epistemically modal adjectives tend to be negated, over the whole, and

generally indicate the precision or exactness, or the negation thereof, of facts and figures. The remaining epistemically modal adjectives generally communicate a step away from accusations of corporate fraud by emphasising the epistemic nature of these accusations. Some adjectives euphemise fraud by using colloquialisms such as *sham*, *bogus* and *fake*. A large number of these adjectives, 146 in frequency, are employed by company spokespeople to contraindicate accusations of fraud and other financial wrongdoing. Furthermore, the adjective *false*, with a frequency of 270, is used in a variety of ways. One use adds to the spokespeople frequencies by allowing companies to claim accusations and allegations as *false*. In general, epistemically modal adverbs are used to evaluate and judge the veracity and clarity of statements made by the involved parties and to underplay the gravity of corporate fraud.

The greatest frequency remains that of *alleged*, at a frequency of 571. This word is often used in jargon-constructions, in a legal-technical manner which could possibly confuse the reader. Mind that these constructions do not actually indicate that a crime has happened, but rather that Party A has accused Party B of a technically *unauthorised* act. This alleging is done by regulatory parties, the SEC in particular. Table 3 shows, in the first column, a sample list of collocates to *alleged*, measured from 0 to 4R. The second column shows the frequencies of these collocates. The third column shows collocates to these words in turn, measured from 4L to 4R.

Collocate	Freq.	Use
Fraud	97	Serious Fraud Office; accounting fraud; corporate fraud; fraud charges; fraud cases; alleged fraud; securities fraud; fraud case; company fraud; fraud investigation; allegations [of] fraud; accused [of] fraud; ...
Accounting	54	Accounting scandal; accounting fraud; accounting improprieties; accounting irregularities; accounting rules; accounting practices; accounting scandals; alleged accounting; accounting investigation; ...
Manipulation	28	Market manipulation; alleged manipulation; price manipulation; manipulation investigation; manipulation allegations

Wrongdoing	26	Denied and denying wrongdoing; admitting wrongdoing; corporate wrongdoing; alleged wrongdoing; accused [of] wrongdoing; ...
Bribery	24	Bribery allegations; bribery scandal; bribery investigation; alleged bribery; bribery claims
Improprieties	20	Accounting improprieties; allegations [of] improprieties; alleging improprieties
Irregularities	18	Accounting irregularities; alleged irregularities; financial irregularities; discovered and uncovered irregularities; irregularities investigation
Corruption	15	Corporate corruption; bribery corruption; fraud corruption; corruption cases; corruption allegations; corruption scandal; alleged corruption
Price fixing	14	Price fixing scandal; alleged price fixing; price fixing investigation
Price rigging	10	Price rigging investigators; price rigging fears and concerns; alleged price fixing; accusations [of] price fixing

Table 3: Collocates to 'alleged'

Clearly, while these acts may generally be written about categorically, there certainly is a high level of epistemic modality attached to them, too. Many newspapers insist on pointing out that allegations and accusations have been made. For instance, *alleged* is positively key. Compared to the BNC Written Sampler, *alleged* is overused in this corpus. One may comment that the BNC Sampler includes texts from a variety of sources, and so a specialised corpus will always have key items regarding the topic of the corpus itself. This is a corpus of criminal acts – allegations may be overrepresented anyway, as they are central to criminal cases in general. However, *alleged* has a keyness value of 816.41, which equates to a *p*-value of well under 0.001. One cannot but conclude that yes, newspapers do refrain from categorically stating a criminal act has occurred when a company is accused of corporate fraud.

4. Conclusion

There is definitely a sense that corporate fraud is contrary to rule and regulations. However, there is also clearly a sense that newspapers are particularly hesitant in reporting corporate fraud. While they will report cases of corporate fraud, as they are too large to ignore, newspapers try to avoid making outright statements about the obligations companies and institutions may have. Similarly, the exploration of mainly epistemic modality in mainly modal adjectives show that there is a definite tendency among newspapers to maintain the fact that companies have been accused, fraud has been alleged, rather than that this has clearly occurred. Furthermore, rather than outright calling these acts criminal, newspapers prefer euphemisms.

One potential reason here is the power corporations have to bring lawsuits for defamation. Wright *et al.* (1995) pointed out that newspapers are far less hesitant to label comparatively less powerful, or indeed deprived, parties as criminal, potentially for this reason. While this paper cannot make any conclusions about the portrayal of individuals accused of crime, it can certainly be concluded that newspapers are very careful in their portrayal of corporations accused of fraud.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisors, Dr Christiana Gregoriou and Professor Tony Crowley, for their continued support of my doctoral research. My thanks also to those who attended our Crime Writing SIG panel, for their invaluable suggestions and questions.