

OBJECTIVE DEONTIC MODALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY IN KENYAN COUNTY ASSEMBLY DEBATES

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Abstract:

This study examines the realization of objective deontic modality in Kenyan County Assembly debates and its role in constructing institutional authority within devolved legislative governance. Drawing on Kratzer's (1991) Contextual Dependency Theory and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the study examines how Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) employ explicit and implicit objective deontic modality to encode obligation, permission, and prohibition as institutionally grounded rather than personally imposed. Data were drawn from all accessible Hansard reports of Kisii, Nairobi, and Isiolo County Assemblies during the First Assembly (2013–2017). This yielded a corpus of 579 debates (Kisii = 268; Nairobi = 183; Isiolo = 128), comprising 3,097,238 word tokens. Adopting a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, modal expressions were identified, classified according to modality orientation, and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings reveal that objective deontic modality is predominantly realized through modal auxiliaries, semi-modals, and lexical verbs, with explicit objective forms occurring substantially more frequently than implicit objective forms. Explicit objective deontic modality recorded 20,881 (80.93%) instances, while implicit objective deontic modality accounted for 4,919 (19.07%) instances. Explicit objective deontic modality primarily invokes procedural obligations, legitimizes institutional actions, and enforces compliance by presenting obligations as externally mandated. By contrast, implicit objective deontic modality presents obligations and permissions as institutionally grounded, reducing overt imposition while maintaining regulatory authority. Across both orientations, MCAs rely on objective deontic expressions to negotiate accountability, reinforce procedural legitimacy, and regulate legislative conduct. These findings indicate that objective deontic modality constitutes a significant linguistic resource through which institutional authority is enacted and maintained in County Assembly discourse. By distinguishing between explicit and implicit objective deontic orientations, the study extends scholarship on modality orientation and demonstrates how objective deontic modality functions as a sema-pragmatic resource for constructing institutional authority in an under-researched African legislative context.

Keywords: Objective deontic modality, institutional authority, modality orientation, legislative discourse, County Assembly debates, devolved governance, Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Modality constitutes an important linguistic resource through which speakers express judgments concerning obligation, permission, possibility, necessity, and certainty (Palmer, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within political and institutional discourse, modal expressions play a particularly significant role because they enable speakers to negotiate authority, construct legitimacy, and regulate social action. Legislative debates are especially dependent on modal resources since parliamentary actors routinely invoke rules, procedures, and institutional responsibilities while participating in decision-making processes.

Among the various modal categories, deontic modality is centrally concerned with obligation, permission, and prohibition. Through deontic expressions, speakers represent actions as required, permitted, or restricted according to social, legal, or institutional norms (Palmer, 2001; Nuyts, 2001). In parliamentary settings, such meanings are particularly important because legislators operate within highly regulated institutional environments where authority is frequently exercised through procedural requirements and formal rules.

A further dimension of deontic meaning concerns modality orientation. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) distinguish between subjective and objective orientations as well as explicit and implicit realizations. Objective modality presents modal meanings as deriving from external sources rather than from the speaker's personal judgment. Within legislative discourse, objective deontic modality allows obligations and permissions to be represented as institutionally grounded, thereby reinforcing procedural legitimacy and reducing personal responsibility for directives.

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of modality in political and parliamentary discourse, particularly in relation to political persuasion, rhetorical authority, ideological positioning, and parliamentary interaction (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2013; Vuković-Stamatović, 2016). However, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to modality orientation, and more specifically to objective deontic modality as a distinct linguistic resource in legislative discourse. Existing research has largely examined modality in broad political or institutional terms, with relatively few studies investigating how explicit and implicit objective deontic meanings contribute to the construction of institutional authority in parliamentary settings. Consequently, limited

scholarship has examined how legislators employ objective deontic modality to construct procedural legitimacy and regulate institutional conduct within African legislative institutions.

This study addresses this gap by examining explicit and implicit objective deontic modality in Kenyan County Assembly debates. Drawing on Kratzer's (1991) Contextual Dependency Theory and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study investigates how Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) construct obligation, permission, and institutional authority through objective deontic expressions. It argues that objective deontic modality functions as an important semo-pragmatic resource through which MCAs legitimize legislative action, negotiate procedural compliance, and reinforce institutional authority within devolved governance structures. By distinguishing between explicit and implicit objective deontic orientations, the study contributes to scholarship on modality orientation while extending research on legislative discourse in an underexplored African context.

Beyond contributing to scholarship on modality orientation, the study provides insight into how institutional authority and procedural legitimacy are linguistically negotiated within devolved governance structures. By focusing on County Assembly debates, the study extends research on parliamentary discourse to an underexplored African legislative context and demonstrates how modal resources contribute to the enactment of institutional control, accountability, and legislative order in contemporary governance processes. By examining objective deontic modality in County Assembly debates, the study contributes to understanding how institutional authority is linguistically constructed within devolved governance structures.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Modality and Deontic Meaning

Modality is a linguistic resource through which speakers express attitudes, judgments, and assessments regarding the likelihood, necessity, desirability, or permissibility of events and actions (Palmer, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Rather than representing situations as absolute facts, modal expressions enable speakers to qualify propositions and actions by indicating varying degrees of certainty, obligation, possibility, or capability. As such, modality constitutes an important interpersonal mechanism through which social relations, authority, and speaker stance are negotiated in discourse.

Among the major modal categories, deontic modality concerns meanings associated with obligation, permission, and prohibition. Palmer (2001) describes deontic modality as the linguistic expression of socially or institutionally sanctioned norms governing human behaviour, while Nuyts (2001) similarly views it as relating to evaluations of what is required, permitted, or forbidden within a particular social context. Through deontic expressions, speakers present actions as necessary, allowable, or restricted according to externally recognized systems of authority, including legal regulations, institutional procedures, and social conventions.

Deontic modality is particularly significant in institutional discourse because institutions routinely operate through systems of rules, obligations, and permissions. Legislative bodies, courts, government agencies, and other formal organizations depend on linguistic resources that regulate conduct and authorize action. In such settings, deontic expressions function not merely as grammatical forms but as mechanisms for establishing procedural legitimacy, directing behaviour, and reinforcing institutional norms. Through modal choices, speakers are able to invoke obligations and permissions while simultaneously positioning themselves in relation to the authority from which such directives derive (Palmer, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Within legislative discourse, deontic modality plays a central role in the enactment of institutional responsibilities and procedural governance. Parliamentary actors frequently employ modal expressions to formulate rules, authorize actions, regulate participation, and justify decision-making processes. Consequently, the study of deontic modality provides valuable insights into how authority and institutional control are linguistically constructed and maintained in deliberative settings (Ilie, 2010; Fairclough, 2013). Understanding these functions is particularly important for examining how Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) negotiate legislative responsibilities and procedural expectations within Kenya's devolved governance system.

2.2 Modality Orientation: Subjective and Objective Perspectives

Beyond the distinction between modal types, modality may also be analysed in terms of orientation. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics, orientation indicates the linguistic forms through which modality is expressed and the extent to which speakers assume personal responsibility for the modal judgment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 1996). It centers on the source of evaluation, focusing on whether a judgment is attributed to the speaker's internal stance or to external circumstances, rules, and norms.

According to Halliday (1994), this distinction is realized through grammatical metaphor, whereby modal meanings are encoded in either explicit or implicit forms, allowing speakers to vary their degree of overt commitment to a proposition (Yuyun, 2010). Subjective modality arises when the speaker is explicitly presented as the internal source of the possibility or necessity expressed. This orientation relies heavily on first-person references or projecting mental clauses such as "I think" or "I guess," making the speaker's personal opinion and involvement highly visible (Depraetere, 2017; Pricilia, 2018).

Conversely, objective modality presents the modal meaning as existing independently of the speaker's personal viewpoint. Here, necessity or possibility is attributed entirely to external factors, such as institutional arrangements, laws, evidence, or situational constraints (Depraetere, 2017; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). By employing impersonal or generalized constructions (e.g., it is believed, it seems), the speaker effectively distances themselves from individual responsibility for the judgment (Pricilia, 2018).

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) further distinguish between explicit and implicit realizations of modal meaning. Explicit realizations overtly track the source of the modal assessment through identifiable linguistic structures, whereas implicit realizations leave the source backgrounded and more dependent on contextual interpretation. This distinction is highly functional in institutional discourse, as obligations and permissions can be framed either as directly grounded in formal protocols or as assumptions that are procedurally self-evident (Fairclough, 2013).

The concept of modality orientation is closely related to contextual approaches to modality. Kratzer (1991) argues that modal interpretations are fundamentally context-dependent, relying on conversational backgrounds that determine the conditions under which a proposition is evaluated. In legislative settings, these backgrounds consist of procedural regulations, organizational norms, and legal frameworks (Kratzer, 1991).

By synthesizing Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) interpersonal framework with Kratzer's (1991) contextual model, researchers gain a complementary analytical apparatus. SFL accounts for how speakers linguistically position obligations through subjective and objective orientations, while the contextual model explains how those modal meanings derive their ultimate authority from specific institutional environments. Together, they explain how objective deontic modality allows legislators to invoke structural authority while minimizing personal accountability for directives.

2.3 Objective Deontic Modality and Institutional Authority

Institutional discourse is characterized by the exercise and negotiation of authority through language. In formal settings such as legislative assemblies, speakers frequently rely on linguistic resources that enable them to invoke rules, procedures, and organizational responsibilities while legitimizing institutional action. Deontic modality is particularly significant in this regard because it provides a means of expressing obligations, permissions, and restrictions that regulate institutional conduct (Palmer, 2001; Nuyts, 2001).

Objective deontic modality is especially relevant to the construction of institutional authority because it presents obligations and permissions as deriving from external sources rather than from individual preference. When deontic meanings are grounded in established procedures, legal frameworks, or organizational norms, authority is represented as residing in the institution rather than in individual actors. Speakers are therefore able to invoke obligations while reducing the appearance of personal imposition and foregrounding procedural legitimacy (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Nuyts, 2001).

Studies of political and institutional discourse have consistently demonstrated that language plays an important role in the legitimization of authority and the maintenance of institutional practices (Fairclough, 2013; Chilton, 2004). Within such contexts, modal expressions contribute to the representation of actions as necessary, appropriate, or procedurally sanctioned. However, while existing research has examined the role of language in political persuasion, institutional control, and ideological positioning, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to objective deontic modality as a distinct linguistic mechanism through which institutional authority is constructed and maintained in legislative interaction. Objective deontic constructions are particularly significant because they enable speakers to frame directives and requirements as matters of institutional necessity rather than individual preference (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Nuyts, 2001).

The relationship between objective modality and institutional authority can also be understood through contextual approaches to meaning. Kratzer (1991) argues that modal interpretations depend on contextual conditions that determine the source and force of modal meanings. In legislative environments, these conditions frequently include standing orders, procedural regulations, constitutional provisions, and parliamentary conventions that shape how obligations and permissions are interpreted. Such frameworks provide the contextual basis through which deontic meanings acquire institutional legitimacy and authority.

Viewed together, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) interpersonal approach and Kratzer's (1991) contextual model offer complementary perspectives on objective deontic modality. Whereas Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain how modal meanings are linguistically realized through objective orientations, Kratzer (1991) accounts for the contextual conditions that give those meanings institutional force. This combination is particularly useful for analysing legislative discourse because it explains both how obligations are represented as externally grounded and how they derive authority from procedural and institutional frameworks. Objective deontic modality therefore provides an important analytical lens for examining how institutional authority is enacted, negotiated, and legitimized in parliamentary debate.

2.4 Objective Deontic Modality in Legislative Discourse

Legislative discourse is inherently concerned with the regulation of institutional conduct through rules, procedures, and formal responsibilities. Within parliamentary settings, speakers frequently invoke obligations, permissions, prohibitions, and procedural requirements while participating in deliberation and decision-making processes. Consequently, deontic modality constitutes an important linguistic resource in legislative discourse because it enables political actors to present actions as required, authorized, or restricted within established institutional frameworks (Palmer, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Studies of political and parliamentary communication further demonstrate that modal expressions play an important role in the construction of authority, the legitimization of institutional action, and the maintenance of procedural order within deliberative institutions (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2013).

Within legislative environments, objective deontic modality is particularly significant because parliamentary authority is typically grounded in external frameworks such as standing orders, constitutional provisions, legal regulations, and institutional conventions. Objective modality presents obligations and permissions as deriving from these external structures rather than from

the speaker's personal judgment. In this way, directives may be represented as institutionally mandated rather than individually imposed, thereby reinforcing procedural legitimacy while minimizing overt personal responsibility for authoritative statements (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Such forms are especially useful in parliamentary discourse, where speakers are often required to balance institutional authority with collegial interaction and procedural neutrality.

Parliamentary debates also provide a context in which both explicit and implicit realizations of objective deontic modality frequently occur. Explicit objective forms overtly invoke obligation, necessity, and permission through identifiable modal structures, whereas implicit objective forms background the source of obligation and allow it to be inferred from institutional context and established legislative practice. The coexistence of these alternative realizations suggests that institutional authority in parliamentary discourse is not uniformly expressed but may be calibrated according to the interactional demands of debate. Consequently, legislators can regulate participation, justify procedural actions, and negotiate compliance while varying the visibility of institutional authority according to communicative context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Studies of parliamentary discourse similarly indicate that modal expressions contribute not only to procedural regulation but also to the maintenance of collegiality and institutional order within deliberative interaction (Ilie, 2010; Vuković-Stamatović, 2016).

Although previous studies have examined modality in relation to political persuasion, rhetorical authority, and parliamentary interaction (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 2013; Vuković-Stamatović, 2016), comparatively little attention has been devoted to objective deontic modality as a distinct orientation through which institutional authority is linguistically constructed in legislative discourse. Consequently, limited research has examined how explicit and implicit objective deontic meanings are realized in parliamentary debates, particularly within African devolved governance institutions. The present study addresses this gap by examining the realization of objective deontic modality in Kenyan County Assembly debates and its role in the construction of institutional authority and procedural legitimacy.

2.5 County Assembly Debates and Devolved Governance in Kenya

The promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 introduced a devolved system of governance intended to promote democratic participation, accountability, and equitable distribution of resources across the country. Under this constitutional framework, forty-seven County Governments and County Assemblies were established to facilitate local governance and representation (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). County Assemblies perform legislative, representative, and oversight functions, including debating policies, approving budgets, enacting county legislation, and monitoring executive implementation. These responsibilities position County Assembly debates as important sites of institutional interaction and political negotiation within Kenya's contemporary governance system.

County Assembly debates are characterized by highly procedural and formally regulated interaction. MCAs participate in deliberations governed by standing orders, constitutional provisions, and parliamentary conventions that structure debate and decision-making processes. Within such settings, linguistic choices become important resources for negotiating authority, enforcing procedure, advancing arguments, and legitimizing legislative action. Modal expressions are particularly significant because they enable legislators to formulate obligations, permissions, procedural requirements, and institutional expectations while maintaining the conventions associated with parliamentary discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Ilie, 2010).

While studies of parliamentary and institutional discourse have expanded in a variety of contexts, linguistic research focusing specifically on Kenyan County Assembly debates remains relatively limited. Existing Kenyan studies have examined modality in legal and institutional discourse (Ndumia & Ireri, 2022), but comparatively little attention has been devoted to modality orientation within devolved legislative interaction. As a result, limited scholarship has examined how objective deontic modality contributes to the construction of authority, procedural legitimacy, and institutional expectations in County Assembly debates.

County Assembly debates provide a particularly revealing site for examining objective deontic modality because devolved governance creates a distinctive legislative environment in which authority, accountability, and procedural legitimacy are continually negotiated. Examining objective deontic modality in this context provides insight into how obligations and permissions are represented as procedurally grounded within devolved governance processes. By focusing on Kisii, Nairobi, and Isiolo County Assemblies, the present study contributes to scholarship on modality, parliamentary discourse, and African legislative communication by demonstrating how MCAs employ explicit and implicit objective deontic constructions to enact and negotiate legislative authority.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Kratzer's (1991) Contextual Dependency Theory of Modality and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Kratzer conceptualizes modality as context-dependent, arguing that modal interpretations derive from contextual backgrounds that determine the conditions under which propositions are evaluated. Within this framework, deontic modality is understood in relation to socially and institutionally grounded norms, obligations, and permissions rather than as a purely speaker-dependent phenomenon. The theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it explains how modal meanings in County Assembly debates are shaped by procedural regulations, institutional expectations, and legislative conventions. Kratzer's contextual approach therefore provides a useful basis for examining how objective deontic meanings derive their force and legitimacy from external institutional authority within parliamentary discourse.

Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL complements this contextual-semantic perspective by explaining how modality functions interpersonally within discourse. Within the interpersonal metafunction, modality enables speakers to negotiate authority, enact social relationships, and position themselves in relation to propositions and actions. SFL is particularly significant to this study

because it distinguishes between subjective and objective orientations as well as between explicit and implicit realizations of modality. These distinctions provide analytical tools for examining how Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) linguistically represent obligations and permissions as institutionally grounded rather than personally imposed and how varying modal orientations contribute to the enactment of authority within legislative interaction.

Although the two frameworks emerge from different theoretical traditions, they are complementary for the purposes of this study. Kratzer (1991) explains the contextual conditions that determine the interpretation and force of modal meanings, whereas Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain how those meanings are linguistically realized and negotiated in discourse. Together, the two frameworks provide an integrated sema-pragmatic approach that accounts both for the institutional contexts that give rise to objective deontic meanings and for the linguistic resources through which such meanings are enacted in County Assembly debates. The combined framework therefore offers an appropriate basis for analysing how objective deontic modality contributes to the construction and negotiation of institutional authority in Kenyan legislative discourse.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design combining quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative semantic-pragmatic interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were drawn from Hansard reports of Kisii, Nairobi, and Isiolo County Assemblies during the First Assembly (2013–2017). The three Assemblies were purposively selected to reflect diverse socio-political and geographical contexts within Kenya, namely rural, urban, and arid regions respectively. All accessible Hansard reports covering plenary debates within the study period were included, yielding a corpus of 579 debates (Kisii = 268; Nairobi = 183; Isiolo = 128). This comprised 3,097,238 word tokens.

The Hansard reports were retrieved from County Assembly records and converted into plain text format for analysis. Modal expressions were identified using a structured document analysis checklist and retrieved through corpus-assisted analysis using AntConc version 3.5.0 (Anthony, 2019). Retrieved expressions were manually classified according to modality type first, after which instances of objective deontic modality were isolated and further coded according to modal form and orientation. Frequencies and percentages were computed using Microsoft Excel to establish the distribution of explicit and implicit objective deontic modality across the corpus.

The qualitative phase involved close contextual analysis of concordance lines and selected debate excerpts to examine how objective deontic modality contributes to the construction of institutional authority. The analysis focused specifically on how obligations, permissions, and prohibitions were represented as deriving from institutional procedures, legal frameworks, and external authority structures rather than from personal speaker judgment. Modal expressions were therefore analysed within their immediate and extended co-text in order to establish the contextual conditions governing their interpretation and pragmatic functions within legislative interaction.

The qualitative interpretation was guided by Kratzer's (1991) Contextual Dependency Theory of Modality and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) Systemic Functional Linguistics. Whereas Kratzer's framework explains how modal meanings derive from contextual and institutional conditions, SFL provides analytical tools for examining how such meanings are linguistically realized through objective orientations and explicit or implicit modal forms. Together, the two frameworks provided an integrated sema-pragmatic basis for analysing objective deontic modality in Kenyan legislative discourse.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview of Objective Deontic Modality

The analysis revealed that objective deontic modality constitutes a prominent linguistic resource in County Assembly debates, where Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) frequently construct obligations, permissions, and procedural requirements as institutionally grounded rather than personally imposed. The findings further show that both explicit and implicit orientations of objective deontic modality occur across the corpus, although explicit forms are considerably more dominant than implicit ones.

Overall, explicit objective deontic modality recorded 20,881 (80.93%) instances, while implicit objective deontic modality accounted for 4,919 (19.07%) instances. This distribution indicates that MCAs predominantly prefer overt and direct expressions of institutional obligation and procedural authority. Nevertheless, the substantial presence of implicit objective deontic forms demonstrates that legislators also rely on indirect and backgrounded expressions of obligation in order to maintain collegiality and reduce overt imposition within parliamentary interaction.

Across both orientations, modal auxiliaries, semi-modals, and lexical verbs emerged as the dominant grammatical resources. In explicit objective deontic modality, modal auxiliaries accounted for the highest frequency (65.13%), followed by semi-modals (17.98%) and lexical verbs (14.13%). In implicit objective deontic modality, however, semi-modals were most dominant (44.22%), followed by lexical verbs (32.57%) and modal auxiliaries (19.90%). This contrast suggests that while explicit authority is primarily realized through direct grammatical obligation, implicit authority is more frequently negotiated through less overt verbal constructions.

5.2 Explicit Objective Deontic Modality

Explicit objective deontic modality occurs when obligations, permissions, or prohibitions are overtly represented as deriving from institutional authority, procedural regulations, or external rules rather than from the speaker's personal judgment. The distribution of explicit objective deontic modality is as presented in Table 1. Hereafter, Kisii County Assembly (KCA), Nairobi County Assembly (NCA), and Isiolo County Assembly (ICA) are referred to by their respective acronyms.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Explicit Objective Deontic Modality

DEONTIC					
MODAL FORM	KCA	NCA	ICA	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE (%)
	EXP OBJ	EXP OBJ	EXP OBJ		
Modal auxiliaries	7617	4999	984	13600	65.13%
Semi-modals	2096	1029	629	3754	17.98%
Discourse markers	0	0	0	0	0.00%
Modal adverbs	0	0	0	0	0.00%
Modal adjectives	162	85	35	282	1.35%
Modal nouns	95	156	43	294	1.41%
Lexical verbs	1474	1204	273	2951	14.13%
TOTAL	11444	7473	1964	20881	100.00%
PERCENTAGE (%)	54.81%	35.79%	9.41%	100.00%	

The findings indicate that explicit objective deontic modality is heavily dominated by modal auxiliaries (65.13%). Semi-modals (17.98%) and lexical verbs (14.13%) also occur prominently, while modal adjectives and nouns appear only minimally. Kisii County Assembly recorded the highest proportion of explicit objective deontic forms (54.81%), followed by Nairobi (35.79%) and Isiolo (9.41%). This pattern indicates that MCAs predominantly rely on direct grammatical expressions of obligation and necessity when regulating debate procedures and legislative conduct.

The following excerpts demonstrate how explicit objective deontic modality functions textually to express institutional authority:

1.

- (a) ...and by the way Honourable Speaker I also thank you that the Assembly has been recalled and we shall have an opportunity to ask all those concerned where the projects went and that is what we are starting today. **(KCA- 14th June, 2016 afternoon)**

In Excerpt (1a), the modal auxiliary “shall” expresses an explicit objective deontic obligation by presenting the proposed oversight action as procedurally expected within the Assembly’s institutional mandate rather than as a personal initiative. The utterance frames the investigation as part of the Assembly’s collective legislative responsibility, thereby reinforcing procedural legitimacy and backgrounding individual authority. In this way, the obligation is construed as arising from the institutional role of the Assembly rather than from the personal will of the speaker.

- (b) ...he cannot purport to lay that document without first moving a Motion. The House must be addressed through whatever he wants to do through a Notice. **(NCA- 10th June, 2015 afternoon)**

In Excerpt (1b), the high-value modal auxiliary “must” expresses explicit objective deontic obligation by construing compliance as a procedural requirement rather than a matter of individual discretion. The obligation is attributed to the institutional authority of the Assembly, as reinforced by the reference to The House, rather than to the speaker’s personal will. Consequently, adherence to parliamentary procedure is presented as a necessary condition for legitimate legislative action.

- (c) You have seen their leaders talking on television saying Isiolo people are invading them. For us we have to sit down, call the meeting, tell the County Commissioner to speak out. We are the ones who are feel the pain. **(ICA-13th Sep, 2016 afternoon)**

In Excerpt (1c), the semi-modal “have to” conveys explicit objective deontic necessity by presenting the proposed action as a response required by prevailing circumstances rather than by the speaker’s personal preference. Within Kratzer’s (1991) contextual framework, the obligation arises from the conversational background created by the reported security concerns facing the community. Furthermore, the inclusive pronoun “we” distributes the obligation collectively, construing the proposed response as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individually imposed directive.

Although comparatively infrequent, modal adjectives and modal nouns also contributed to the realization of explicit objective deontic modality. In such contexts, these forms framed obligations, procedural expectations, and institutional requirements as formally grounded within legislative practice. Their occurrence demonstrates that explicit objective deontic meanings in County Assembly debates are realized not only through core verbal modal constructions, but also through broader evaluative and nominal resources that reinforce institutional authority.

These findings align with studies of parliamentary and institutional discourse which show that explicit deontic constructions frequently function to legitimize authority, regulate institutional conduct, and reinforce procedural expectations (Fairclough, 2013; Vuković-Stamatović, 2016). The findings further suggest that Kenyan County Assembly debates rely heavily on overt grammatical forms, particularly modal auxiliaries, in projecting procedural authority and institutional legitimacy.

Overall, explicit objective deontic modality enables MCAs to formulate obligations, permissions, and procedural requirements as externally grounded and institutionally sanctioned. Through these constructions, MCAs reinforce procedural authority, regulate debate conduct, and maintain legislative order while minimizing personal imposition.

5.3 Implicit Objective Deontic Modality

Implicit objective deontic modality occurs when obligations, permissions, or prohibitions are conveyed indirectly yet remain grounded in institutional or procedural expectations. Unlike explicit objective forms, which overtly encode authority through identifiable modal constructions, implicit objective deontic modality backgrounds the source of obligation and allows it to be inferred from context, institutional norms, or procedural assumptions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Nuyts, 2001). From a contextual perspective, such meanings depend on the interpretive conditions operating within a particular discourse environment (Kratzer, 1991).

Table 2: Frequency of Implicit Objective Deontic Modality

DEONTIC					
MODAL FORM	KCA	NCA	ICA	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE (%)
	IMPL OBJ	IMPL OBJ	IMPL OBJ		
Modal auxiliaries	578	356	45	979	19.90%
Semi-modals	1419	728	28	2175	44.22%
Discourse markers	0	0	0	0	0.00%
Modal adverbs	0	0	0	0	0.00%
Modal adjectives	27	17	15	59	1.20%
Modal nouns	57	40	14	104	2.11%
Lexical verbs	1150	376	76	1602	32.57%
TOTAL	3230	1513	176	4919	100.00%
PERCENTAGE (%)	65.66%	30.76%	3.58%	100.00%	

The findings show that implicit objective deontic modality occurs less frequently than explicit objective forms but remains a significant resource in County Assembly debates. The corpus reveals that semi-modals constitute the dominant grammatical resource for implicit orientation (44.22%), followed by lexical verbs (32.57%) and modal auxiliaries (19.90%). Kisii County Assembly exhibits the highest proportion (65.66%), followed by Nairobi (30.76%) and Isiolo (3.58%). This distribution suggests that MCAs frequently rely on indirect linguistic strategies to invoke obligation and procedural expectation while minimizing overt imposition.

The following excerpts illustrate how implicit objective deontic modality minimizes face-threatening impositions while preserving institutional control:

2.

- (a) When someone is over sighting it doesn't mean that he or she has to receive threats. Let us apply the right methodology to avoid this tension amongst honourable members (**KCA- 15th Oct, 2014 afternoon**)

In Excerpt (2a), the semi-modal “has to” occurs within a negated construction that rejects threats as a legitimate consequence of oversight activities. Although the obligation is conveyed implicitly, its source is not attributed to the speaker but is instead grounded in accepted parliamentary norms governing legislative oversight. Consequently, appropriate conduct is presented as an institutional expectation rather than a personal demand, allowing the speaker to discourage inappropriate behaviour while minimizing direct interpersonal confrontation.

- (b) I'm assuming that this is not a bible, anytime we shall discover some loopholes and we want to have some changes. Is a Member allowed to bring in a Motion in that regard? (NCA- 21st August, 2014 afternoon)

In Excerpt (2b), the expression “allowed to” encodes permission by attributing authorization to institutional procedure rather than to the speaker’s personal authority. Framed as an interrogative, the utterance indirectly invokes Assembly rules while avoiding a direct assertion about what members may or may not do. Consequently, procedural authority is foregrounded, allowing the speaker to seek clarification while minimizing the face-threatening potential of issuing a personal directive.

- (c) The National Government has Solid waste management policy in place. Tomorrow at Serena Hotel they require all the Chairperson of Environment Committee, Neema (ICA-21st Sep, 2016 morning)

In Excerpt (2c), the lexical verb “require” expresses implicit objective deontic obligation by presenting the obligation as originating from an external institutional authority. Rather than imposing the obligation personally, the speaker reports it as an established administrative requirement issued by the National Government. Consequently, the deontic force is construed as externally grounded, with the speaker acting as a transmitter rather than the source of the obligation.

Less frequent realizations through modal adjectives and modal nouns similarly contributed to implicit objective deontic modality by presenting procedural expectations and institutional obligations as contextually assumed rather than overtly imposed. These forms further illustrate how MCAs background the source of authority while maintaining procedural legitimacy in debate.

These findings support observations that institutional discourse frequently presents obligations as deriving from procedural or organizational norms rather than from personal authority (Fairclough, 2013). The findings further suggest that MCAs often rely on indirect deontic constructions to maintain procedural legitimacy while reducing the interpersonal force of directives within debate.

Overall, implicit objective deontic modality enables MCAs to represent obligations and permissions as institutionally assumed rather than overtly imposed. Through semi-modals, lexical verbs, and modal auxiliaries, speakers construct procedural expectations in ways that maintain legislative authority while simultaneously preserving collegiality and interactional balance within parliamentary discourse.

5.4 Objective Deontic Modality and Institutional Authority

The findings demonstrate that explicit and implicit objective deontic modality perform complementary functions within County Assembly debates. Explicit objective forms foreground procedural obligation through overt markers such as “must”, “shall”, and “have to”, thereby allowing MCAs to invoke Assembly rules, constitutional expectations, and institutional responsibilities in direct and authoritative ways. Through such constructions, procedural compliance is represented as formally binding and institutionally sanctioned.

Conversely, implicit objective deontic expressions background the source of obligation and present procedural expectations as contextually assumed or institutionally grounded. Constructions such as “allowed to”, “require”, and context-dependent uses of semi-modals enable MCAs to invoke authority indirectly while reducing the interpersonal force of directives. This indirectness is particularly significant in parliamentary interaction because it allows legislators to maintain collegiality and procedural decorum while still reinforcing institutional expectations.

The contrast between explicit and implicit orientations demonstrates that institutional authority in legislative discourse is negotiated through varying degrees of modal visibility. Whereas explicit forms reinforce procedural order through overt obligation, implicit forms sustain institutional legitimacy through backgrounded representations of procedural expectation. The findings suggest that objective deontic modality functions as an important sema-pragmatic resource through which MCAs regulate participation, legitimize institutional conduct, and negotiate governance responsibilities within devolved legislative structures.

These findings support Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2014) distinction between explicit and implicit orientations of modality while also reflecting Kratzer’s (1991) view that modal meanings derive from contextual and institutional conditions. The study therefore demonstrates that objective deontic modality operates not only as a grammatical category but also as a sema-pragmatic resource through which institutional authority is enacted and maintained in parliamentary discourse.

The study is limited to debates from three County Assemblies during the First Assembly (2013–2017). While the findings provide insight into the role of objective deontic modality in the construction of institutional authority within Kenyan legislative discourse, future research may examine a wider range of County Assemblies, parliamentary institutions, and time periods to determine whether similar modal patterns occur across different legislative contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

The study has shown that objective deontic modality constitutes a central linguistic resource for constructing institutional authority in Kenyan County Assembly debates. Although explicit forms dominate quantitatively, both explicit and implicit orientations contribute to representing obligation, permission, and procedural necessity as institutionally grounded rather than personally imposed. In doing so, the study addresses its objective of explaining how objective deontic modality functions in the construction of institutional authority within Kenyan County Assembly debates. The findings extend research on modality orientation by demonstrating how explicit and implicit orientations of deontic modality operate within the contextual conditions of devolved legislative discourse and by revealing the linguistic strategies through which MCAs legitimize authority, regulate

institutional conduct, and negotiate procedural compliance in parliamentary interaction. Overall, the study contributes to scholarship on modality and legislative discourse by demonstrating that objective deontic modality functions not only as a grammatical resource but also as a sema-pragmatic mechanism through which institutional authority is constructed, negotiated, and maintained within an underexplored African parliamentary context.

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