

# Modality in Political Speech: the case of pseudo-deontic *prepi*

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## Περίληψη

*Η εργασία εξετάζει δεδομένα του τροπικού ρήματος πρέπει στον πολιτικό λόγο, όπως καταγράφονται σε σώματα κειμένων αποτελούμενα από πρακτικά του ελληνικού κοινοβουλίου κατά το διάστημα 1989-2019. Μετά από μια σύντομη αναφορά στην κατηγορία της τροπικότητας και στα χαρακτηριστικά του πρέπει, εστιάζουμε στην ψευδο-δεοντική χρήση του, αναδεικνύοντας την ανάγκη να συνυπολογιστούν αρκετοί πραγματολογικοί παράγοντες κατά την ανάλυση.*

*Λέξεις - κλειδιά: τροπικότητα, επιστημική/δεοντική, ψευδο-δεοντική, σώματα κειμένων, πολιτικός λόγος*

## 1 Introduction

Combining the fuzzy domain of modality with the equally vague field of politics, seems to be quite a challenging task. Political discourse, as we shall see below is expected to be closely intertwined to the art of persuasion, and so the language employed is purposefully selected.

This combination initiates a demanding task, taken on by various researchers. For want of space, only some will be presented and only those pertaining to political discourse and modality exclusively. Simon-Vandenberg's research (1997, 2000) is particularly worth noting, as well as a very recent paper by Nemickienė (2019). The former investigated epistemic modality and more particularly (un)certainly expressed by politicians in interviews (1997: 341); she also looked into *I think* juxtaposing its use in casual conversation and political interviews, after compiling her own sample corpora (2000). The latter on the other hand, investigates epistemic modality within the context of "contemporary Russian political discourse, using mainly quantitative methods of analysis" (19). Vukovic (2014) also systematically presented linguistic devices expressing strong epistemic modality in a 2010 parliamentary debate. A qualitative analysis of modality is also worth mentioning, performed by Boicu (2007); she observes both the deontic and the epistemic uses of modal verbs employed in one political speech, observing how their "intentional selection" on behalf of the politician may "attenuate the illocutionary force of the directive speech acts" (1,2). As expected, Critical Discourse Analysis has focused on political speech, as in Lillian (2008), who analyses two political texts written by two Canadian Conservative politicians and examines modality as a means of persuasion and manipulation.

It is evident that we are talking about a cornucopian, multidisciplinary field of interest, that bursts with even more questions as current socio-political affairs unfold continuously.

## 2 Modality in Greek

Modality has been defined in different ways, depending on the focus and the data addressed in various analyses. In the Greek context the discussion starts with comparing the notions expressed by the different inflectional moods in earlier times and the corresponding analytic forms in the modern language. Moreover, in view of the situation attested in other languages, the description of modality tends to focus on the deontic/epistemic distinction in the case of modal verbs of necessity and possibility.

As is generally accepted (whether explicitly or implicitly), “modality is the conceptual domain, and mood is its inflectional expression” (Bybee et al. 1994: 181). Thus, the study of modality in Greek needs to address the ways the modern system has replaced the long lost distinctions in the grammatical expression of Mood: the Subjunctive and Optative inflections are no longer to be found in the language and the Imperative paradigm has been reduced to 2nd person only and has lost the ability to negate. These developments are in themselves extremely interesting from the point of view of (de-)grammaticalization (e.g. Tsangalidis 2004b) but they are also indicative of the bulk and the complexity of the notions involved.

From a different perspective, the close investigation of modal verbs expressing possibility and necessity also raises important questions as to which notions may be included in the area of modality in general (e.g. Palmer 1986, 2001). Interestingly, the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic modality (which is often further oversimplified into a distinction between epistemic vs deontic modality) seems to be extremely important for the description of modality in Greek as in many languages. European languages are often noted for the property of using the same markers for both notions in the case of necessity and possibility (van der Auwera and Ammann 2013) and indeed Greek is often mentioned in this connection specifically (e.g. Palmer 1986: 19-20). Thus, to use a very simple case, the same marker *prepi* can express obligation (as in (1)): this is usually called the *deontic* sense, and the use of a sentence like (1) may be ambiguous between the mere report of an obligation and its use as a directive speech act. Moreover, the same marker *prepi* can be found in the assertion that the speaker believes that the content of the sentence is necessarily the case, “relative to some information or knowledge” (as in (2)):

- (1) *prepi na fjis*  
‘You must go’
- (2) *prepi na ine anglos*  
‘He must be English’

An example like (2) is normally described as *epistemic*, as it relates to the speaker’s knowledge; in practice, it could be neutrally inferential (‘on the basis of available evidence the speaker is forced to conclude that X’). Yet, it could also be used as a hedging device, in that the speaker avoids the responsibility of a full assertion (as in the corresponding unqualified *ine anglos* ‘He is English’, which encodes ‘zero-modality’).

Although there have been various attempts to classify modal meanings in different ways, for the purposes of this paper we only need to focus on deontic modality in the case of necessity. This is the meaning expressed by examples like (1) above, but also in cases like (3) and (4):

- (3) *prepi na fiyo*  
 ‘I must go’  
 (4) *eprepe na fiyo*  
 ‘I had to go’

The example in (1) is a prototypical example of deontic (or non-epistemic) modality, in that it can be used not only to report the existence of an obligation, but also to issue a directive. In this sense, it can express both Agent-oriented and Speaker-oriented modality (in Bybee et al.’s terms). The example in (3) can also be considered deontic, but it seems hard to find situations in which it could be used as a directive; it can be seen mostly as an instance of Agent-oriented modality; i.e. the speaker reports the existence of an obligation – but normally is not expected to issue a command addressed to themselves. Likewise, the temporal location of the obligation in the past does not allow example (4) to be used as a directive, and it can only report the existence of an obligation in the past.

The complexity of the issue and the various factors involved could be multiplied if we were to explore the coding of the deontic source (in the sense of Lyons 1977): who is the authority that imposes the obligation in each case? And, then, of course, how do speakers know how to encode and decode the various details? It should be clear then, even in view of this very brief presentation, that the description of modal categories as a choice between epistemic and deontic is no more than an extreme oversimplification (for further details see Bybee et al. 1994, Palmer 1986, 2001, Tsangalidis 2004, 2009, Sophiadi forthcoming).

The focus of this paper will be on a special use of *prepi* which has also been noted in other languages, where it seems to share all formal properties of deontic necessity, but which functions in a way that makes it rather similar to epistemic necessity, specifically in its use as a hedging device.

What all types of modality arguably share is the non-factuality of the event they modify (e.g. Palmer 1986: 96). However, as Heine (1995: 29) argues, the epistemic and non-epistemic senses may be distinguished on the basis of the following conceptual properties; the reader is advised to think of them in relation to any non-epistemic example (e.g. (1), (3) or (4) above):

- a. There is some force that is characterized by an “element of will” [...], i.e., that has an interest in an event either occurring or not occurring.
- b. The event is to be performed typically by a controlling agent.
- c. The event is dynamic, i.e. it involves the manipulation of a situation and is conceived of typically as leading to a change of state.
- d. The event has not yet taken place at reference time, i.e., its occurrence, if it does in fact take place, will be *later than the reference time*.

Furthermore, Heine identified a number of “factors affecting modal interpretation” in English and German, and a similar list has been proposed for the corresponding facts in Greek (Tsangalidis 2004a). In the case of Greek and for the purposes of this paper, it is the following factors that tend to exclude the epistemic interpretation:

- (a) when the main verb is dynamic rather than stative (*prepi na fiyi* ‘he must go’: necessarily non-epistemic vs *prepi na ine anglos* ‘he must be English’: ambiguous between epistemic and non-epistemic)

- (b) when the modal is inflected for tense or mood (*tha* (FUT) *prepi* / *na* (SUBJV) *prepi* / *eprepe* (PST) *na fiji*; the epistemic sense is excluded)
- (c) when the main verb is non-past, and more clearly, perfective non-past, the preferred interpretation is non-epistemic (*prepi na fiji* (PFV NPST) cannot be epistemic; *prepi na fevji* (IPFV NPST) may or may not be epistemic; *prepi na efije* (PFV PST) can only be epistemic)
- (d) the person of the subject marked on the main verb seems to follow the hierarchy proposed by Heine: the epistemic reading is best correlated with 3<sup>rd</sup> person and least so with 1<sup>st</sup> (3<2<1). Obviously, in the case of directive deontic uses, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person would be mostly expected and 1<sup>st</sup> person deontics would only be marginally available.

Although each of these factors seems to describe a tendency rather than a rigid rule, it will be crucial in our discussion of the pseudo-deontic examples below that they seem to share all the properties that tend to exclude the epistemic sense. Thus, indeed the term ‘pseudo-deontic’ is aptly applied to them, in that they are grouped together with all instances that exclude the epistemic sense.

### 3 Political Discourse

Political discourse and its analysis have raised various points of multidisciplinary interest, especially in approaches that fall under Critical Discourse Analysis. Van Dijk (1997: 44) talks about the investigation of political discourse as a form of actual political analysis, and this is indeed undeniable. Language and politics are strongly interconnected: politics is –to a great extent- based on the use of language (Chilton 2004: 14) and at the same time, language is “perhaps the primary medium of social control and power” (Fairclough 1989: 2). In other words, it constitutes a powerful tool for persuasion, which is, after all, the cardinal need within a political context.

Political discourse constitutes the quintessence of language in use for many reasons: it represents a type of discourse that encompasses most reasons why we use language, employing pragmatic practices of persuasion, evasion, euphemizing, expressing solidarity and exclusion (Chilton 2004: 40), along with politeness strategies both of the negative and the positive persuasion (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62, Sifianou 2010: 42, Lees 2014: 167), or even populism. Political discourse employs certain typological structures and follows certain “stylistic constraints” (Van Dijk 1997: 24). However, these structures may also satisfy criteria of effectiveness and persuasion, ergo the reason for their presence is not merely one of decorum (Ibid. 25); they have an important, pragmatic role, as politics have an “inherent deliberative nature” (Polymeneas 2018: 6).

Moreover, members of the Parliament (are supposed to) represent the majority of the people; this representativeness is an inherent characteristic to the organization of the Western polity (Polymeneas 2018: 89) and one may also suggest that politicians have influence over the language of the people too. Bearing this in mind, as well as the fact that the discourse employed in a Parliamentary context is widely reproduced verbatim by the media, and subsequently is received and processed by the public, one can easily assume that by observing linguistic tendencies in the language of politicians one may –more easily- observe new uses to already existing structures, or even language change to come.

Accordingly, language in the hands of politicians constitutes a priceless tool, used to persuade not only for their defense but also against their possible misdoings and even to conceal their pretense. This becomes even more interesting when this political discourse is observed within the gloomy, scandalous and turbulent socio-economic and political contexts of the “dirty 1989”, which involved a bank scandal implicating a number of politicians and from 2018 and on, in the backwash of the Greek debt crisis starting around 2009<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4 Problems – Methodology – Corpora

The inherent polysemy of the Greek *prepi*, along with the need for further information in order for a semantic and pragmatic analysis to be conducted, do not offer a plethora of methodologies to follow. Rather, for the investigation of the diachronic behavior of any linguistic element, there is no other way than the corpus-based way (Sophiadi 2017: 650). Corpus linguistics constitutes an invaluable methodological tool because its results are objectively verifiable (McEnery and Wilson 2001) due to the fact that they involve real life language use in context. Especially for short period diachronic research it “offers rewarding insights into the dynamic ways societies take up new forms of language while [gradually] discarding others” (Baker 2010: 79-80).

There is currently a relative abundance of Modern Greek Corpora<sup>2</sup>, but, unfortunately, there are no available corpora of political discourse to be used effectively in diachronic research. Thankfully, the library of the Parliament offers free access to all Parliament Proceedings from 1990<sup>3</sup> onwards. Considering the vast amount both of parliamentary sessions and the actual number of words in each session, sampling was deemed necessary, in order to have a smaller, manageable sample that “will reproduce the characteristics of the population, especially those of interest” (Yates 1965: 9), but also one that gives access to a smooth and less time-consuming semantic analysis of the verb in question.

Accordingly, two large sample corpora were compiled by randomly selecting 30 Parliamentary sessions. More particularly, the first corpus consists of around 1,6 million-word tokens from Parliamentary minutes from 1989, whereas the second one comprises approximately 1,8 million-word tokens from 2018 and 2019<sup>4</sup>.

#### 5 Interrogating the corpora – Results, comments and examples

##### 5.1 Frequency trends of *prepi* in the corpora: General comments

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<sup>1</sup> The thirty-year gap was intentional, following Leech’s work on modals, however for future study, one would need to create corpora with “samples from multiple time periods that were closer together” (Baker, 2010: 67), in order to further validate the results.

<sup>2</sup> See Sophiadi (2017) and Arkhangelskiy and Kisilier (2018) for an overview of the Greek corpora available.

<sup>3</sup> Upon request they were very eager to help and send all the available minutes from past years.

<sup>4</sup> After the collection of the sample, its processing was conducted with the use of a concordancing software, AntConC 3.5.8, which is a freeware available online at <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconcl/>.

The results seem to agree with the current trend observed in other studies as well, employing however general corpora and not specific discourse types (Leech 2003: 234-235, Sophiadi 2017: 655). As seen in the table below, there is a downward trend in the frequency of use of *prepi*. A semantic analysis of the instances of *prepi* throughout the corpora reveals that most, if not all, are deontic, which, as already mentioned, projects the authority claims of the political actors; (Fairclough 2001: 106). The observed drop may be indicative of what Leech (2003: 237) calls a democratization trend, an attempt to express avoidance of absolute claims to power and authority. Moreover, the authority claims through the use of *prepi* may be mitigated in the second corpus, because of the political context: The debt crisis is conveyed as imposed by external powers, therefore the politicians' claims to power and authority are less assertive.

Corpora	1989	2018/19
Overall instances of <i>prepi</i> –frequency rank	4395 #37	3787 #48
Overall instances of <i>eprepe</i>	1037	747
<b>Overall normalized frequency</b>	3,44‰	2,5‰
Instances of <b>pseudo-deontic <i>prepi</i></b> ( <i>πρέπει να (σας) πω/πούμε/τονίσω –I must tell (you)/point out</i> )	222	113
<b>% out of overall instances</b>	5,05%	2,9%
Number of parliamentary sessions	30	30
Total word tokens	1.575.949	1.800.496

**Table 1 | Overall instances of *prepi* in both corpora as well as indicative instances of pseudo-deontic *prepi***

## 5.2 The pseudo-deontic *prepi*

The corpora also reveal an obvious downward trend in the number of instances of the pseudo-deontic *prepi*. These results, however, should be seen as approximate, as semantic analysis may be open to multiple readings; moreover, there are definitely more pseudo-deontic sequences with *prepi*, which may be detected after manual processing.

This presence in the corpora indicates its almost fully conventionalized nature as pseudo-deontic fillers and its pragmatic function in terms of politeness. Such expressions are indeed formulaic in form and found in most languages; they most definitely don't express "any kind of objectively existing necessity", but rather they offer justification for the act that may inconvenience the audience or verbalizing the urge of the speaker to share the utterance (Narrog 2012: 26, 255).

As will become obvious from the examples below, they seem to be non-epistemic, according to the criteria discussed in section 2 above; however, they do share a characteristic of epistemic modality: their role as hedges. As already mentioned, there is a strong connection between epistemic modality and hedging (Coates 1983: 49, Nemickienė 2019: 20), however, these non-epistemic/pseudo-deontic structures may also be employed as standardized hedges as well. They operate as a means to "disguise" the speaker's "involvement" -stance- especially in first person singular constructions (example (5)), but also to engage them, by "including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations" (Hyland 2005: 176), in first person plural constructions, when they operate inclusively, rather than exclusively.

Going back to the definitional properties of the relevant distinctions: if epistemic modality relates to the speaker's commitment to the validity of the proposition, and deontic modality to an agent's obligation to get involved in the realization of that proposition, then this pseudo-deontic modality seems to involve an ultimate level of commitment, in that the speaker actually performs the proposition introduced by the modal (see the reference to Coates below), while pretending that there is a deontic source which, although unnamed, necessitates its performance.

This assumption may be of particular interest within a political context; *prepi* seems to be moving towards monosemy (Sophiadi 2017: 654-656), or at least away from epistemic modality, which means, as far as politicians -as *dominant speakers of a language*- are concerned, that they gradually have access to fewer epistemic legitimization strategies. This can be displayed in the recent political situation (2009-2019), which is mainly projected and therefore conceived as deriving from outside; the MPs express less epistemic commitment to the knowledge they communicate. Their ostensibly low entitlement to knowledge gives them fewer "epistemic rights" (Polymeneas 2018: 63) with respect to what they communicate, and subsequently, lower accountability. This is inevitably intertwined with the also decreasing-yet still present- pseudo-deontic *prepi* as its use shifts the weight of the utterance from the shoulders of the speakers/MPs. They do not wish to inconvenience the speaker - (members of) an opposing party, usually- but they are urged to do so, as seen in the examples below:

- (5) Σήμερα **πρέπει να σας πω** ότι έκλεισε η πετυχημένη μας έκδοση. Βγάλαμε από τις αγορές ένα πενταετές ομόλογο 2,5 εκατομμυρίων...  
Today I **must say to you** that our successful issue has closed. We have drawn from the markets a five-year bond of 2,5 million...'
- (6) **Πρέπει να πούμε** ότι δεν μπορείτε να πείσετε κανέναν μ' όλον αυτόν τον απολογισμό που κάνετε, ότι δήθεν η θέση των εργαζομένων έχει αλλάξει και έχει βελτιωθεί.  
**We must say** that you can't convince anyone with your report that the workers' condition has changed and improved.
- (7) Εδώ όμως, **πρέπει να ειπωθεί** και μία πικρή αλήθεια: Η Ελληνική αστική τάξη ποτέ δε νοιάστηκε πραγματικά για τη διεκδίκηση των γερμανικών αποζημιώσεων.  
At this point, however, the bitter truth **must be told**: The Greek bourgeoisie never really cared about claiming German compensations.

Examples (5), (6) and (7) constitute three distinct versions of pseudo-deontic structures with *prepi*, – all in accordance to the description in section 2 above. The corpora revealed no pseudo-deontic examples with question or negation and are representative of the overall presence, the first person singular being more prevalent.

Obviously, a detailed analysis of each example cannot be attempted here (but see Sophiadi forthcoming). What we have managed to present in this paper surely unfolds the pragmatic load of the pseudo-deontic *prepi*. What needs to be stressed, however, is that the property they share is precisely what Coates (1983: 34-36) describes as "odd in that the speaker is actually performing what he is in the act of urging himself to do; that is *I must admit* means *I admit*," while choosing to mitigate or disclaiming responsibility of the act. Indeed, this seems to be the special feature of pseudo-deontic constructions. Moreover, although also available in all kinds of discourse (Coates

notes that “such examples” “are used holophrastically in everyday language”) it should be clear that it is especially expected in the area of political discourse.

## 6 Conclusion

Semantic categorization is a challenging task when it comes to the Greek modal verb *prepi*, especially within the context of political discourse. The overall drop in its use attested in our corpora follows the general trend observed in research on the English modal system. We have focused on the use of the pseudo-deontic *prepi* and attempted to clarify its apparent connection to epistemic modality, especially since they both appear to function as hedging devices. In terms of pragmatics and discourse analysis, the issues to be investigated further include the different strategies employed by politicians of different party affiliations and ideologies. Finally, the need for further research on modality and political discourse is stressed once again, as it may be of interest to investigate the linguistic choices made by political actors in order to express modality, while everyday life becomes more and more saturated with necessities and possibilities officially set and presented by public affairs.

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