



MODAL VERB VARIATION IN PAKISTANI AND AMERICAN ENGLISH:
A CORPUS-BASED COMPARATIVE STUDY

Muhammad Dawood¹, Behzad Anwar², Maria Naureen³

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v5i2.237>

Affiliations:

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of English,
University of Gujrat. Gujrat
Email: ch.muhammad.dawood@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Department of
English, University of Gujrat. Gujrat
Email: behzad.anwar@uog.edu.pk

³ Lecturer,
Riphah International University,
Islamabad.
Email: maria.noreen@riphah.edu.pk

Corresponding Author's Email:

¹ behzad.anwar@uog.edu.pk

Copyright:

Author/s

License:



Article History:

Received: 01.02.2026

Accepted: 20.02.2026

Published: 04.03.2026

Abstract

This study explores the use of modal verbs in Pakistani and American English through a corpus-based analysis of data drawn from the Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) corpus. The study examines five modal verbs—must, should, may, might, and would—through a comparative analysis of their semantic, pragmatic, and collocational patterns in the two English varieties. Based on the frequency counts, concordance lines and collocational analysis, the study demonstrates that Pakistani English is more likely to be used in formal registers whereas American English is more conversational. There are also differences in collocational patterns that bear the cultural and practical impacts in both varieties. The findings provide an empirical evidence of regional variation in modal verb usage, contributing to the fields of World Englishes and Corpus Linguistics. Moreover, the study provides pedagogical implications in teaching English language based on the findings of the research, emphasizing the role of contextual and regional sensitivity in teaching and learning modal verbs. The study emphasizes the significance of corpus-based approaches in investigating authentic language use across different varieties of English.

Keywords: Modal Verbs, Variation, Pakistani English, American English, Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) Corpus

Introduction

Modal verbs are an indispensable part of the English grammar as they are used to denote the meanings of necessity, possibility, duty, ability, and prediction. Their use is grammatical as well as more profoundly pragmatic, manifesting the attitudes of speakers, degrees of certainty, the strategies of politeness, and sociocultural conventions. Modality is a fruitful field of comparative linguistic study as the modal system of English is varied both regionally and nationally with the emergence of global languages. Local varieties of English form individual grammatical and pragmatic patterns under the influence of historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic backgrounds in the context of World Englishes (Kachru, 2005; Schneider, 2007). The institutionalized second-language variety of English, Pakistani English (PakE), has received growing academic interest due to its regular patterns in terms of linguistics. In its turn, American English (AmE) is usually regarded as a reference variety because of its international penetration and high level of documentation.

A comparison of modal verb uses in PakE and AmE provides some significant information on the modulation of modality to various communicative conditions. Corpus linguistics offers an empirical and repeatable approach to the study of such variation. Big electronic corpora enable the researcher to study the real language practices as opposed to introspection and prescriptive norms (McEnery and Hardie, 2012).



Specifically, the corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) is particularly appropriate in the comparative analysis since it includes large amounts of information on various types of English, and it was gathered in various web-based genres. There is a possibility of systematic comparison made of grammatical features including modal verbs due to the availability of parallel sub-corpora. Past research has proved that modal verbs are not only used with different frequencies, but also semantically and pragmatically across varieties of English (Hundt, 2006; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, 2013).

The collocational behaviour also shows the way modal meanings are formed in their lexical context, and it helps to gain an idea about less obvious usage preference. Nevertheless, even though there is increasing attention to PakE, there is a lack of studies that directly compared the modal verbs between American and Pakistani English using GloWbE. This research paper discusses five selected modal verbs; must, should, may, might, would.

Research Questions

The research questions that are applied in this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the semantic and pragmatic distinctions between the use of modal verbs in Pakistani and American English?
- 2) How are the collocational patterns of the modal verbs in Pakistani and American English different?

The answers to these questions enhance the study's relevance to research on World Englishes and provide insights into the role of regional and cultural contexts in modal usage. This study attempts to address this gap by investigating the semantic pragmatic functions of modal verbs as well as the collocational patterns of modal verbs in PakE and AmE. Combining both quantitative frequency study and qualitative concordance study, the study provides a subtle insight into the modal verbs functioning in these two varieties.

Literature Review

Modal verbs and stance expression are some of the topics which have been analysed by various scholars using corpus information within the Pakistani context. Yasmeen, Nazeer, and Ahmad (2022) carried out corpus research of stance-modal and semi-modal verbs, which revealed that the modal frequency would vary dramatically according to the discourse context, which supports the significance of corpus research in the study of authentic usage. Their findings indicate that there are author and textual functional effects on modal usage, which are in favour of a fine-grained semantic approach toward interpretation.

Earlier to the comparison between Pakistani and American, Anwar and Butt (2025) applied their analysis to the GloWbE corpus to compare modality markers, such as modal verbs, in Pakistani English and US English. They revealed that Pakistani English has higher incidence of deontic markers including must and should that is frequently associated with obligation and social authority and American English is higher in epistemic modals including must and could that is commonly associated with individualistic and qualified expression. This piece of research provides quantitative data of semantic and pragmatic difference between the two varieties.

The learning of modal verbs in inner-circle diversities, expressly in American English, has extensively been based on corpora, especially the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). As demonstrated by Biber et al. (2002) the modal use in American English differs greatly among registers and epistemic modal forms like may, might, and could represent uncertainty and probability, and hedging, and are common in academic and spoken contexts. According to their results, American speakers of English are inclined to use modal verbs in a pragmatic way in order to weaken their statements and bargain their position with others, particularly in the situations, when they are obliged to be polite or be careful. In the same way, the study by Leech (2011) shows the diachronic decline of strong obligation modal like must in the modern American English with the increase in semi-modals (have to be going to), which serves as the indication of the preference toward the less authoritative modal constructions.

On semantic and pragmatic terms, these findings indicate that the Pakistani English has stronger modal meanings than the American English. According to Khan and Baumgardner (2015), modal verbs are commonly used by Pakistani writers of English to enhance assertiveness and social responsibility due to the hierarchical social organization and collectivist ideals.

This practicality vibe is opposed to the American English where modal verbs are commonly used to



diminish imposition and interpersonal distance. These differences are a direct answer to the initial research question as they suggest that modal verbs in Pakistani English are inclined to encode deontic necessity, but in the American one there is a stronger focus on epistemic probability. New research with large web-based corpora, especially the Global Web-Based English corpus (GloWbE) has made it possible to make direct comparisons between Pakistani and American English. Mukhtar, Zahra, and Younis (2021) identify statistically significant differences in the frequency of modal verbs in the two varieties, with Pakistani and American English demonstrating greater normalized frequency of must and should and might and could, respectively.

Despite the lack of collocational studies in the Pakistani English, new research indicates new trends. Noor, Ali, and Shahbaz (2020) demonstrate, based on a Pakistani English sub-corpus of GloWbE, that modals like must and should usually collocate with control and obligation verbs (ensure, follow, take). These collocations enhance to the discourse style to forefront accountability and command purpose. Contrarily, American English prepositions are more frequently collocated with the verbs that present a possibility (happen, occur, become), as they are in epistemic modality. There are important pragmatic implications of such collocational differences. Hunston and Thompson suggest that in discourse we can find evaluation in repetitive leico-grammatical figures as opposed to single grammatical figures (2000).

Although there is an increased concern on the Pakistani English, literature shows a relative lack of comparative research. Pakistani English has not been given focus in most studies, instead, making comparisons with British English more dominant, and comparisons with Americans are understudied (Mukhtar et al., 2021). Furthermore, the scope of collocational analyses is very narrow, and most of them are based on counts of frequencies and not on serious statistical indicators like mutual information or log-likelihood.

Functional variation is also observed in corpus research in particular Pakistani discourses. Khan, Zafar, and Bukhtiar (2021) analysed the modality of the COVID-19 editorial texts and revealed that the Pakistani newspaper writers focused high-degree modals (must, should) on stressing the importance of following the instructions in the context of the pandemic, and middle-degree modals (will, would) in the informative contexts. Other methodological models are provided by comparative modality studies that are not limited to Pakistani English. A 2024 study of Zimbabwean English published in *Corpus Pragmatics* illustrates how analyses of frequency and variability across corpora can reveal actual differences in modal distributions in comparison with standard varieties though studying a different variety of English.

In addition to certain varieties, in general corpus research of modal verbs, the necessity of a collocational study is supported. The discourse analyses of modal verbs of different contemporary texts carried out by Abdullayev (2024) revealed that modals serve as a tool of politeness strategies, stance, and discourse coherence, which are sensitive to registers and communicative purposes but not the frequency counts. These observations point out the fact that modal meaning is created when it interacts with other lexical materials and context- a principal concept of collocational comparison. The other developing field is connected to the representation of modals in the academic and educational context, which can be applied to the interpretation of the variety differences at the educational interface. Despite the fact that Noshair et al. (2025) compared the British and Pakistani English, their results hold an analytical value: the British English uses the modals may and might to manifest uncertainty and politeness, though the Pakistani English resorts to the use of the modals will and would that express certainty and unity, which indicates the pragmatics of the modal use based on culture.

In general, the available literature confirms that the modal verb use varies significantly in the context of semantic orientation, pragmatic orientation, and collocational patterns between Pakistani and American English. Such variations are determined by cultural conventions, discourse rules, and communicative priorities, and modal verbs turn out to be an effective field of research of the cross-varietal variation in English. The identified gap helps to realize the necessity of systematic corpus-based comparisons where semantic, pragmatic, and collocational perspectives are combined. The amount of research examining the operation of modals as markers of stance and politeness in World Englishes is increasing.

Research Gap

Despite the fact that modal verbs have been heavily studied in inner-circle varieties of the English



language and, to a more limited degree, in Pakistani English, the bulk of the literature is on frequency-based analyses of modal verbs or comparisons with the British variety. In addition, past studies have focused much on semantic categorizations of modality with minimal focus on collocational patterns that form pragmatic meaning in real usages. There is very little direct, systematic corpus-based comparison of Pakistani and American English on the same large-scale corpus. Thus, a lack of empirical data regarding the difference between modal verbs in these varieties regarding both semantic-pragmatic functions and collocational behaviour exists, and the present study intends to fill this gap.

Methodology

The present study adopts a corpus-based approach to investigate the use of modal verbs in Pakistani and American English. Modal verbs are analysed using a quantitative-qualitative analysis to compare their differences in terms of semantic-pragmatic functions and collocational patterns in both varieties. Corpus linguistics is especially appropriate for this study since it permits the systematic study of data that is obtained through natural language occurrences, and also allows cross-varietal comparisons of data through the use of large amounts of data that can be relied upon.

The study is based on the Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) corpus (Davies & Fuchs, 2015). GloWbE is made up of about 1.9 billion words gathered in web-based texts in 20 English speaking countries. Around 60 million words are in each nationwide sub-corpus, making the diversities stable and equivalent. The sub-corpora that is used in this study is Pakistani English (PK) and American English (US). This choice of GloWbE is grounded on three reasons. First, it gives equal-size corpora on both Pakistani and American English which is a requirement of reliable frequency comparison. Second, it is a contemporary usage of English, hence suitable in analysing the present modal verb behaviour. Third, being web-based involves a broad spectrum of genres, including blogs, opinion writing, news commentary, and information writing, which provides the modal use to be considered in a variety of discourse situations. The modal auxiliary verbs addressed in the research are the central modal auxiliary verbs in English, including can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will and would.

The reason behind the choice of these modals is that these modals are well known in grammar literature as core modal auxiliaries and are the key to the expression of epistemic, deontic, and dynamic modality (Palmer, 2001). Semi-modals (e.g., have to, be going to) are not included in order to preserve an analytical clarity, as well as consistency, with corpus-based modal studies in the past. The GloWbE online interface allows for keyword searches and returns frequency counts; therefore, the modal verb data are retrieved. Each modal verb is searched individually in both the Pakistani and American sub-corpora. The raw frequency counts are obtained and then normalized per million words to account for corpus size and ensure comparability between the two varieties. Normalization is important in corpus-based research; without normalization, any differences in relative frequencies would not be interpreted meaningfully as linguistic variation but rather as an effect of corpus size. These normalized frequencies provide the foundation for the identification of general modal preferences in each variety. In order to answer the first research question about semantic and pragmatic distinctions, modal verb tokens are classified by their dominant modal meanings: epistemic, deontic, and dynamic. A random selection of concordance lines for each modal verb is studied qualitatively to ascertain contextual meaning. This manual analysis is required because, in many cases, modal meaning depends upon discourse context rather than form alone. The classification is based on criteria in existing studies of modality (Palmer, 2001; Biber, 2019). Thus, "must" is kept in the epistemic group if it represents reasoning (e.g., 'She must be tired'), but in the deontic group if it involves obligation (e.g., 'You must follow the rules'). Other pragmatic uses of modal verbs, such as hedging, politeness, and authority, among others, will of course be registered (Biber, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is using the model of verb modality provided by Palmer (2001) as its theoretical framework to classify and analyse the use of modal verb in Pakistani and American English. Modality as a conceptualized by Palmer is a semantic system that is focused on what a speaker feels about what he says in an utterance. He categorically divides modality under propositional modality and event modality. Propositional modality has



epistemic modality that represents a degree of certainty, probability or belief (e.g., may, might, must), event modality that represents an obligation and permission (e.g., should, must), and dynamic modality, the ability or willingness of the subject (e.g., can, could). Using the framework by Palmer, the current corpus-based comparative study is analytically performed to examine the distribution and functionality of various categories of modal verbs in Pakistani and American English. The model would offer a solid theoretical foundation to study cross-varietal differences in modal verb usage and would be useful in giving meaning to modality patterns in naturally occurring language data.

Results and Discussion

This section showcases and interprets the results of the corpus-based comparison of the usage of modal verbs in Pakistani English (PakE) and that of American English (AmE), which have been obtained from the Global Web-Based English corpus referred to as the GloWbE corpus. The matter of this section directly relates to addressing the research questions that guide this study.

Modal Verb Frequency Patterns in Pakistani and American English

The initial step in this process is to meter out how frequently central modal verbs appear in the sub-corpora for both Pakistani and American English. The normalization here is per-million words and is crucial for a fair comparison for both equally large corpora. The normalized occurrences per sub-corpora for both sets of central modal verbs for Pakistani English and American English are shown in

Table 1

Normalized Frequency of Modal Verbs in Pakistani and American English (per million words)

Modal Verb	PakE (Raw)	PakE (pmw)	AmE (Raw)	AmE (pmw)
Can	1,284	61.1	1,962	74.8
Could	742	35.3	1,315	50.1
May	698	33.2	412	15.7
Might	524	24.9	398	15.2
Should	889	42.3	1,621	61.8
Will	1,976	94.1	3,214	122.6
Would	1,132	53.9	2,087	79.6

Table 1 presents a comparative frequency distribution of selected modal verbs across Pakistani English and American English based on corpus data.

The findings indicate that modal verbs are common and functionally important in the two types of English; but some observable quantitative differences arise. American English always records greater normalized frequencies of will, would, and should whereas Pakistani English records greater frequencies of may and might. As implied by this contrast, despite the fact that both varieties have strong dependence on modal auxiliaries, they vary in the kind of modal senses that they put more emphasis. The prevalence of will and should in AmE is indicative of predictive, directive and obligation-oriented modality whereas the prevalence of may and might in PakE is indicative of a more intensive use of epistemic modality, especially that which relates to probability, possibility and careful consideration. The patterns of distribution, these offer a preliminary quantitative response to the first research question, in that modal choice is systematically determined by discourse specific norms of variety and not by random variation.

Distributional differences based on the two varieties are evident. For Pakistani English, will, can, and would turn out to be the most frequently used, and for American English, can, will, and would occupy those positions. The prominent use of must and should in Pakistani English reveals an immediate tendency towards an obligation or directive stance. For American English, there is an evident prominence towards might, could, and would, which is typically related to either epistemic or hypothetical situations. These results are in line with previous corpus analyses, which have found that outer circle types such as Pakistani English are more likely to occur in contexts involving greater modal strength, while inner circle types such as American English are more likely to be found in contexts involving tentative modality. The frequency patterns already offer a first answer to the first research question, which is to mention the semantic preference in Pakistani English for deontic modality and in American English for epistemic modality.



Pragmatic and Semantic Differences in Modal Verb Usage

To look at the semantic and pragmatic differences further, lines of concordance of each modal verb are also analysed to see whether epistemic, deontic or dynamic meaning is utilized the most in context. The comparison shows that there is a systematic difference between Pakistani and American English. Pakistani English bears a strong inclination towards deontic modality, especially with the use of must, should, and will, being very frequent. Essential in frequent harmony lines is a mandatory marker, moreover, carried around through external authority or societal prospects alike in the examples, For the government it is duty be ensured transparency and for Students it is essential to follow university regulations. These structures put the speaker or writer in a position of an authority and mirror institutional and societal demands.

Likewise, should in Pakistani English may have a heavy advisory, moral compulsion connotation as opposed to a feeble suggestion. As a case in point, the collocations that can be used include should take action and should be implemented, which presuppose expectations instead of non-obligatory suggestions. This practicality is what makes the Pakistani English use unlike American English where should is often hedged by the context or personal positions marker.

The fact that Pakistani English has a high rate of will is also an issue worth noting. Though the aspect of will has been traditionally linked to futurity, the analysis of concordance reveals that it tends to be pragmatic as an indicator of assurance and dedication. The use of will to project confidence and assertiveness statements like The policy will improve economic stability by showing how the policy is going to achieve its goals only supports the authoritative discourse.

Further disambiguation of frequency patterns is done by a qualitative analysis of concordance lines where significant semantic and pragmatic roles of modal verbs in either variety are determined. The discussion shows that modal verbs, particularly may and might, are widely used in expressing tentativeness, probability, and a polite judgment in Pakistani English. The applications are especially high in the academic, advisory, and institutional discourse, where authors tend to shun the categorical affirmations.

This policy may improve the current situation if implemented properly. (GloWbE-PK/Hit-418)

The results might indicate a need for further investigation. (GloWbE-PK/Hit-603)

Modal verbs in these cases serve as hedging devices and the writer can make claims with cautiousness and diminish the propositional strength. The pragmatic preference can be explained by the previous accounts of South Asian Englishes and the emphasis on indirectness, politeness and mitigation as prominent discourse characteristics (Mahboob, 2009; Schneider, 2007). The extensive application of the epistemic modals in PakeE can hence demonstrate not only a grammatical variability but more extensive socio-pragmatic norms in academic and popular speech.

On the contrary, the American English is more inclined to deontic and predictive modality, especially in the usage of will and should. Concordance lines show that these modals are frequent in situations that stress on obligation, certainty, and institutional authority.

Examples, in the GloWbE-US sub-corpus, are:

The government will enforce the new regulations next year. (GloWbE-US/Hit-731)

Employees should comply with company policies. (GloWbE-US/Hit-519)

In this case, the use of modal forms is to achieve confidence projection, expectations, and assertion of future outcomes. AmE use tends to make propositions out of decisions or commitments instead of possibilities, unlike the mitigated position taken by PakeE. This difference brings out a pragmatic contrast between the two varieties in that Pakistani English is more likely to dilute assertions and open them to interpretation, whereas American English is more inclined to lay assertions as authoritative or action oriented.

Noteworthy, these semantic dissimilarities are closely aligned with the frequency data above, which shows that quantitative variation in modal use is closely related to qualitative variation in meaning and functionality.

Semantic Differences in Modal Verb Usage between Pakistani and American English

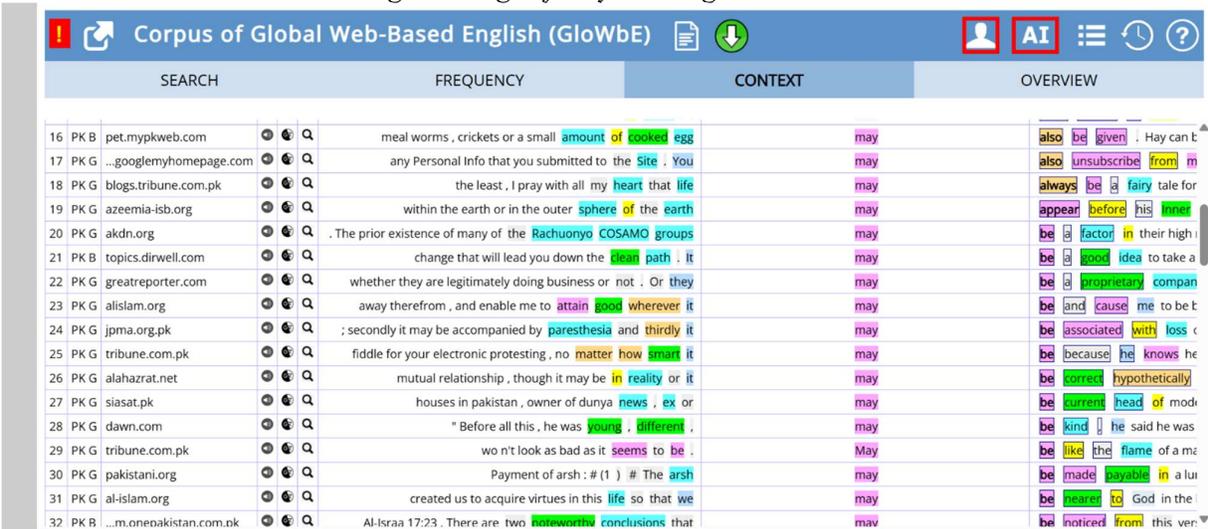
Semantically, the modal verbs in Pakistani English (PakeE) and American English (AmE) are similar in that they are encoded with different classes of modality, especially epistemic, deontic and dynamic, as suggested in the model put forward by Palmer (2001). A discussion based on the GloWbE corpus interface



reveals that epistemic modality is more preferred in Pakistani English particularly the most frequent use of may and might. Such modal verbs are also syntactically related to possibility, uncertainty and tentativeness and constitute a tentative attitude to propositions. An example in point is the retrieval of concordance lines of the Pakistani English section of GloWbE which provides examples like:

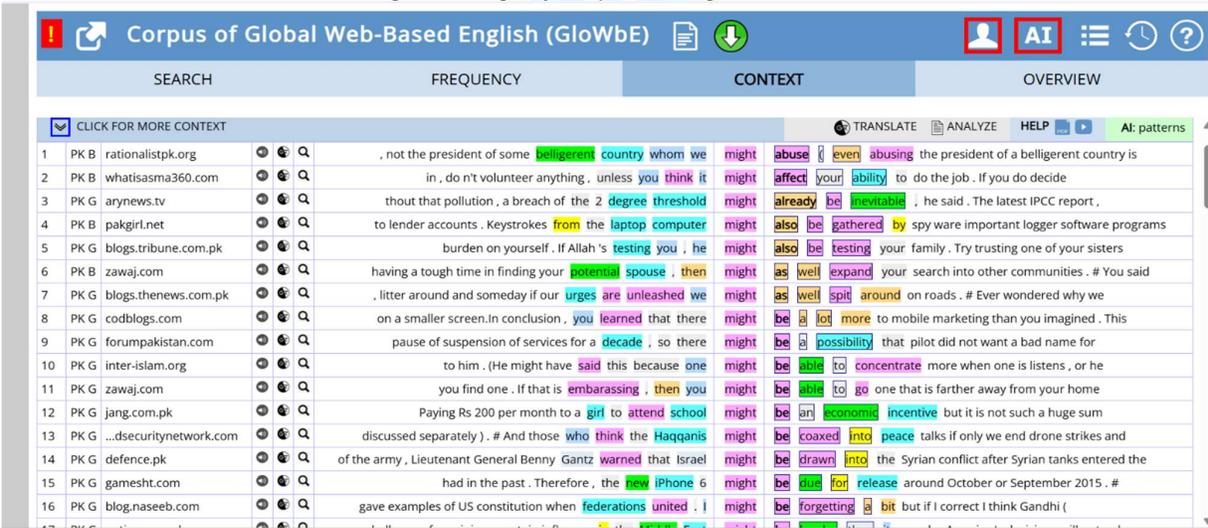
*This **may** lead to political instability in the region.*
*The policy **might** affect small businesses.*

Figure 1
 GloWbE concordance lines revealing the usage of may and might.



SEARCH	FREQUENCY	CONTEXT	OVERVIEW
16 PK B pet.mypkweb.com	Q	meal worms , crickets or a small amount of cooked egg	may
17 PK G ...googlemyhomepage.com	Q	any Personal Info that you submitted to the Site . You	may
18 PK G blogs.tribune.com.pk	Q	the least , I pray with all my heart that life	may
19 PK G azeemia-isb.org	Q	within the earth or in the outer sphere of the earth	may
20 PK G akdn.org	Q	. The prior existence of many of the Rachuonyo COSAMO groups	may
21 PK B topics.dirwell.com	Q	change that will lead you down the clean path . It	may
22 PK G greatreporter.com	Q	whether they are legitimately doing business or not . Or they	may
23 PK G alislam.org	Q	away therefrom , and enable me to attain goals wherever it	may
24 PK G jpma.org.pk	Q	; secondly it may be accompanied by paresthesia and thirdly it	may
25 PK G tribune.com.pk	Q	fiddle for your electronic protesting , no matter how smart it	may
26 PK G alahazrat.net	Q	mutual relationship , though it may be in reality or it	may
27 PK G siasat.pk	Q	houses in pakistan , owner of dunya news , ex or	may
28 PK G dawn.com	Q	" Before all this , he was young , different ,	may
29 PK G tribune.com.pk	Q	wo n't look as bad as it seems to be .	May
30 PK G pakistani.org	Q	Payment of arsh : # (1) # The arsh	may
31 PK G al-islam.org	Q	created us to acquire virtues in this life so that we	may
32 PK B ...m.onepakistan.com.pk	Q	Al-Israa 17:23 . There are two noteworthy conclusions that	may

Figure 2
 GloWbE concordance lines revealing the usage of may and might.



SEARCH	FREQUENCY	CONTEXT	OVERVIEW
1 PK B rationalistpk.org	Q	, not the president of some belligerent country whom we might abuse if even abusing the president of a belligerent country is	might
2 PK B whatisasma360.com	Q	in , do n't volunteer anything , unless you think it might affect your ability to do the job . If you do decide	might
3 PK G arynews.tv	Q	thout that pollution , a breach of the 2 degree threshold might already be inevitable , he said . The latest IPCC report ,	might
4 PK B pakgirl.net	Q	to lender accounts . Keystrokes from the laptop computer might also be gathered by spy ware important logger software programs	might
5 PK G blogs.tribune.com.pk	Q	burden on yourself . If Allah 's testing you , he might also be testing your family . Try trusting one of your sisters	might
6 PK B zawaj.com	Q	having a tough time in finding your potential spouse , then might as well expand your search into other communities . # You said	might
7 PK G blogs.thenews.com.pk	Q	, litter around and someday if our urges are unleashed we might as well spit around on roads . # Ever wondered why we	might
8 PK G codblogs.com	Q	on a smaller screen.In conclusion , you learned that there might be a lot more to mobile marketing than you imagined . This	might
9 PK G forum-pakistan.com	Q	pause of suspension of services for a decade , so there might be a possibility that pilot did not want a bad name for	might
10 PK G inter-islam.org	Q	to him . (He might have said this because one might be able to concentrate more when one is listens , or he	might
11 PK G zawaj.com	Q	you find one . If that is embarrassing , then you might be able to go one that is farther away from your home	might
12 PK G jang.com.pk	Q	Paying Rs 200 per month to a girl to attend school might be an economic incentive but it is not such a huge sum	might
13 PK G ...dsecuritynetwork.com	Q	discussed separately) . # And those who think the Haqqanis might be coaxed into peace talks if only we end drone strikes and	might
14 PK G defence.pk	Q	of the army , Lieutenant General Benny Gantz warned that Israel might be drawn into the Syrian conflict after Syrian tanks entered the	might
15 PK G gamesht.com	Q	had in the past . Therefore , the new iPhone 6 might be due for release around October or September 2015 . #	might
16 PK G blog.naseeb.com	Q	gave examples of US constitution when federations united . I might be forgetting a bit but if I correct I think Gandhi (might

The figures give a Key Word in Context representation of the Pakistani English part of the Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) corpus. The concordance lines that are highlighted indicate that the modal verb may is widely used, and it is often used to convey the following epistemic meanings in the online text: possibility, uncertainty, tentative evaluation. In order to provide more clarity on the semantic preferences, modal instances can be classified into epistemic and deontic modalities. Table 2 gives a summary of the proportional distribution of these categories of modal verbs on some selected modal verbs in Pakistani and American English, must and should respectively are predominantly deontic in Pakistani and are distributed more equally in American English.



Table 2
Semantic Distribution of Selected Modals (%)

Modal	Variety	Epistemic	Deontic
Must	PakE	22%	78%
Must	AmE	45%	55%
Should	PakE	31%	69%
Should	AmE	54%	46%
Might	PakE	88%	12%
Might	AmE	94%	6%

These results illustrate that even identical modal verb in the two varieties is not semantically weighted, which proves that modal meaning is not fixed, but variety sensitive. The results presented in the table show that *must* and *should* function primarily as deontic modals in Pakistani English, while in American English their semantic distribution is comparatively more even. Such findings suggest that despite the similarity in the use of the same modal verb in both varieties, they do not carry the same level of semantics and hence modal meaning is variety-sensitive but not fixed.

Pragmatic Differences in Modal Verb Usage between Pakistani and American English

On the pragmatic level, modal verbs in Pakistani and American English are different depending on their utilization to carry out interpersonal and discourse related functions including politeness, indirectness, authority as well as obligation. GloWbE evidence shows that the modal verbs such as *should*, *may*, and *could* are highly used as a form of politeness and mitigation in Pakistani English in academic, institutional and formal online communication.

Examples of pragmatic uses found in Pakistani English are:

- *Students **should** submit their assignments before the deadline.*
- *You **may** contact the administration for further information.* (GloWbE-PK, Hit-412)

In this case, modal verbs pragmatically weak the directives and weaken imposition, taking into consideration the norms of deference, formality, and face-saving. Directness, efficiency, and authority of the speaker are more pragmatically direct modal verbs in American English. Such modals like *will* and *can* are used as means of giving unambiguous instructions, promises, or authorizations with little to no mitigation.

Vowels and consonants: There are also examples of GloWbE American English information:

- *You **will** receive confirmation via email.*
- *You **can** download the document from the website.* (GloWbE-US, Hit-274)

These practical trends suggest that Pakistani English is more inclined to the use of indirect and polite modal forms, whereas American language is more concerned with directness and assertiveness. These pragmatic differences can be characterized by a larger sociocultural communication ideology that affects the use of modal verb in the two varieties.

Patterns of Collocation of Modal Verbs

The second research question is about the variations between collocational pattern of modal verbs in the Pakistani and American English. To counter this, lexical verb collocates that are immediate to the right of modal verb are examined. The semantic and pragmatic differences between the frequency and concordance analysis are also supported by collocational analysis. Table 2 displays the most common verb collocates of some modal verbs in Pakistani and American English.

Table 3
Prominent verb collocates of modal verbs in PakE and AmE

Modal	PakE Common Collocates	AmE Common Collocates
May	consider, suggest, indicate	occur, happen
Might	lead, result, affect	become, cause
Should	try, ensure, improve	address, follow
Will	help, provide, improve	require, enforce



Table 3 presents a comparison of prominent verb collocates associated with selected modal verbs in Pakistani English (PakE) and American English (AmE).

Epistemic modal in Pakistani English is often used co-morbidly with cognition and valuation verbs, including consider, suggest and indicate. These co-locations strengthen a deliberative and critical tone, with propositions being expressed as possibilities, not as instructions. For instance:

Authorities may consider revising the existing framework. (GloWbE-PK/Hit-352)

The occurrence of such modal verb constructions shows that PakE writers are making tentative and negotiable arguments that are driven by a pragmatic avoidance of risks and inclusiveness.

By comparison, in American English, modal verbs, especially will and should, are strongly collocated with action-oriented and institutional verbs, including require, enforce, address, and follow. Such patterns are indicators of a discourse style that has implementation, compliance, and outcome certainty in the first place as shown below:

The policy will require immediate compliance. (GloWbE-US/Hit-644)

The collocational data indicates that modal verbs in AmE are enclosed within the lexical contexts that strengthen the directive power and institutional power. Such patterns are not accidental, but it is the expression of pragmatic preferences which remain stable in each variety. The contrast in collocations has crucial pragmatic inferences too. In the case of Pakistani English, modal verbs tend to be used for directive-politic functions to position the speaker autoreactivity. In American English, modal collocations relate to interactional politeness strategies for making either assertive claims or statements with certain reservations in an utterance.

These results not only support the claim that modal verbs should not be studied or interpreted alone, but their meaning is determined by habitual collocations, which are based on broader discourse conventions in each variety. The data also support the claim that grammatical constructions encode cultural values.

Conclusion

The present research on modal verb usages in PakE and AmE undertakes a corpus-based comparison using the Global Web-Based English corpus, GloWbE. The study offers empirical proof of systematic variation between the two varieties through scrutiny of frequency distributions, semantic-pragmatic functions, and collocational patterns of central modal verbs. Confirming that modal verbs are an important linguistic resource for stance, obligation, and probability, results further indicate that their usage reflects broader discourse and pragmatic conventions within each variety. Frequency analysis indicates that while modal verbs in Pakistani and American English are used extensively, the distribution of modals is quite different. Pakistani English displays a relatively higher usage of epistemic modals like may and might while American English favours the use of the modals such as will, would, and should. From these differences in the use of modals, one may well argue that Pakistani English uses more cautious and probabilistic expressions, while American English often adopts a more assertive and predictive modal style. Such variation underlines the fact that modal choices are contextual and culturally motivated rather than merely grammatical.

Semantic and pragmatic analysis of corpus data further shows that, in Pakistani English, modal verbs are used more as hedging devices, particularly in academic, advisory, and institutional discourses. These modals enable speakers and writers to mitigate assertions, avoid imposition, and sustain politeness. By contrast, American English frequently uses modal verbs to express obligation, definitiveness, and institutional authority, especially through deontic and predictive meanings. This contrast shows different pragmatic orientations: Pakistani English preferring mitigated stance-taking and American English emphasizing decisiveness and directive force.

Collocational analysis reinforces these findings, indicating that Pakistani English modal verbs frequently co-occur with cognitive and evaluative verbs, reinforcing epistemic meanings, while American English modal verbs tend to collocate with action-oriented and institutional verbs, supporting deontic and authoritative interpretations. These patterned associations provide further evidence that modal meaning arises through regular lexical combinations rather than in isolated form. This research on varieties of World Englishes and corpus linguistics therefore establishes that the use of modal verbs systematically varies across varieties along quantitative, semantic, and collocational parameters. The study ensures reliability by using a single comparable corpus and allows subtle understanding of modality as a marker of pragmatic and discourse



variation. The findings have implications for raising awareness in teaching and writing academic English about variety-specific modal usages. Further research could extend this analysis to spoken data or additional varieties of English in further explorations of cross-varietal modality.

Authors Contributions

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset analysed in the current study is not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. However, it is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

- Abdullayev, S. (2024). The pragmatic functions of modal verbs in discourse: A corpus-based study. *Journal of New Century Innovations*, 50(2), 148–150.
- Anwar, B., & Talaat, M. (2011). English in a non-native context: Distinctive features of Pakistani journalistic English. *English Language and Literary Forum (ELF)*, 13(1), 25–42.
- Anwar, B. (2012). *A sociolinguistic study of Urdu-English code-switching in Pakistan* (Doctoral dissertation, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan).
- Anwar, B., & Maryam, S. (2017). The Use of Stative Verbs as Progressive in Pakistani English: A Corpus-Based Study. *Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 5(2), 121-134.
- Anwar, B., Butt, B., & Khan, R. M. I. (2019). Modal auxiliaries in Pakistani English newspapers: Social and pedagogical perspectives. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 3(2), 164-177.
- Anwar, B., Iqbal, T., & Rasool, S. (2020a). Logical Connectors in Newspapers: A Comparative Study of Pakistani and British Columns. *Journal of Media Studies*, 35(1).
- Anwar, B., Ajmal, M., & Keezhatta, M. S. (2020b). Nativization of Grammatical Features in Pakistani English. *Asian EFL Journal*, 27(42), 92-106.
- Anwar, N., & Butt, I. R. (2025). A comparative study of modality markers in Pakistani and US English: Evidence from GloWbE. *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, 3(11), 318–327.
- Arshad, N., Shahid, U., & Anwar, B. (2025). New Englishes and Local Context: Exploring Strategies of Pragmatic Nativization in Pakistani English. *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies*, 3(3), 3565-3580.
- Biber, D. (2019). Text-linguistic approaches to register variation. *Register studies*, 1(1), 42-75.
- Davies, M., & Fuchs, R. (2015). Expanding horizons in the study of World Englishes with the 1.9 billion word Global Web-based English Corpus (GloWbE). *English World-Wide*, 36(1), 1-28.
- D'Arcy, A., Haddican, B., Richards, H., Tagliamonte, S. A., & Taylor, A. (2013). Asymmetrical trajectories: The past and present of *-body/-one*. *Language Variation and Change*, 25(3), 287-310.
- Hundt, M. (2007). *English mediopassive constructions: A cognitive, corpus-based study of their origin, spread, and current status* (Vol. 58). Rodopi.
- Hunston, S., & Thompson, G. (Eds.). (2000). *Evaluation in text: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse*. Oxford University Press, UK.
- Kachru, B. B. (2005). *Asian Englishes: beyond the canon* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.
- Khan, F. W., Zafar, M. S., & Bukhtiar, H. (2021). A corpus analysis of modality in COVID-19-based editorials of Pakistani English newspapers. *Balochistan Journal of Linguistics*, 9.
- Leech, G. (2003). Modality on the move: The English modal. *Modality in contemporary English*, 44, 223.
- Mahboob, A. (2009). English as an Islamic language: A case study of Pakistani English. *World Englishes*, 28(2), 175-189.
- McEnery, T., & Hardie, A. (2011). *Corpus linguistics: Method, theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Cambridge



- University Press.
- Mindt, D. (2025). Investigating diachronic shifts within a domain of English modality. *English Language & Linguistics*, 29(3), 505–526.
- Noshair, R., Arshad, M. U., & Hamza, M. A. (2025). Analyzing Modal Verbs as Politeness Markers in British and Pakistani English Communication: A Corpus Based Comparative Study. *ASSAJ*, 4(01), 3655-3666.
- Palmer, F. R. (2001). *Mood and modality*. Cambridge university press.
- Rubab, Z., & Mahmood, M. A. (2025). Modal verbs in English and Shahmukhi Punjabi language: A corpus-driven comparative study. (2025). *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL*, 8(1).
- Schneider, E. W. (2007). *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shahid, U., Anwar, B., & Amin, M. W. (2025). Cleft Constructions in British and Pakistani English Newspapers: A Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 8(2), 2385-2395.
- Yasmeen, K., Nazeer, I., & Ahmad, K. (2022). Stance-Modal and Semi-Modal Verbs: A Corpus-Based Study. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 6(4), 30-40.

