



Language, Trust, and Stigma: Epistemic Modality in Media Discourse and its Role in Shaping Public Perception

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Abstract

This paper explores how epistemic modality functions as a key linguistic resource in shaping trust, credibility, and stigma in media discourse. The study examines how expressions of (un)certainly, such as modal verbs, adverbs, hedging constructions, and evidential markers, mediate the reader's interpretation of reported events and socially sensitive topics. Through a comparative analysis of English and Albanian media texts, it highlights the role of epistemic modality in encoding ideological positioning and reinforcing stigmatizing representations. The analysis draws on a media corpus, focusing on how news articles negotiate truth claims, suggest distance or doubt, and foreground implicit evaluative stances. Findings reveal that epistemic modality does not reflect journalistic neutrality but often subtly contributes to the marginalization of certain social groups, particularly those associated with mental health, ethnicity, or political dissent. By integrating corpus-assisted methods with critical discourse analysis, the study sheds light on the rhetorical and cognitive mechanisms through which language shapes perception and constructs stigma. The paper argues for greater awareness of modality in media literacy education and advocates for a more critically engaged readership capable of identifying and challenging ideologically loaded narratives.

Keywords: Albanian, discourse, English, media, modality, stigma

1. Introduction

Living in an era marked by overload of information, we are always witnessing the power of language used in media to shape public opinion and trust. Within this discursive landscape, epistemic modality, the linguistic encoding of diverse degrees of certainty and belief, has a decisive role in the framing and interpretation of events. Modal verbs, nouns, adverbs and adjectives guide the readers' perception of credibility and objectivity in media discourse. One significant dimension of epistemic modality is its role in the discursive construction of stigma, particularly with reference to how the media frames topics such as political dissent, ethnicity, mental health, etc., since stigmatizing discourse may not always rely on explicit labeling and

loaded words, but also on covert strategies of doubt and generalization, with epistemic markers implying deviance and abnormality.

This study is an output of the national research project *STI(G)MA – A Comparative Study of Stigmatization Patterns in Albanian and English Media Discourse through Information Technology and Digitalization*, which aims to investigate how language functions as a vehicle of power, exclusion and derogation. By exploring epistemic modality as a linguistic resource for expressing (un)certainly, the current paper highlights patterns of discursive construction of credibility and trust around socially sensitive topics in both Albanian and English media. The researcher has adapted a comparative corpus-assisted discourse approach, drawing on two 2023 subcorpora of online articles, respectively constructed in Albanian and English, in order to analyze the rhetorical, ideological, and pragmatic functions of epistemic modality in media discourse, with a particular focus on patterns of stigmatization.

We intended to investigate the specific role played by epistemicity in shaping public perception related to stigmatization in media discourse. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated: RQ1. *How is epistemic modality used to express (un)certainly in media discourse that stigmatizes individuals and/or groups?* RQ2. *What cross-linguistic similarities emerge in the use of epistemic modality to express commitment in Albanian and English media discourse?*

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 briefly describes the theoretical framework, integrating epistemic modality studies with corpus-assisted discourse analysis, and discursive construction of stigma. Section 3 describes the methodology and data collection, together with the procedures of corpus compilation. Section 4 outlines findings of the current research by commenting on illustrative examples from the Albanian and English corpora, brought within a tentative taxonomy of diverse patterns of epistemic modality witnessed in both languages. The final sections offers conclusions and suggestions for future research.

1.1 Theoretical Framework: Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, Stigmatizing Discourse and Modality

This study aims to present a modest contribution to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), aided by the assistance of corpora to witness recurring linguistic patterns that contribute to stigmatization in media discourse.

Following the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), our research is founded upon the belief that discourse does not merely reflect reality, it constructs the reality. Language, especially in media contexts, plays an essential role in shaping public opinion, reinforcing social hierarchies, and (re)creating stigma. As Titscher et al. (2000, p. 158) emphasize, CDA starts from the assumption that inequality and injustice are repeatedly reproduced and legitimized through language. In order to make such patterns of language visible, we adopt a corpus-assisted methodology. As pointed out by Bednarek and Carr, corpora can be used to detect preferred and dispreferred language for specific groups of people, who could be indigenous minorities, religious groups, people with mental or physical abilities, people living with certain health conditions, or any other group...and it is often possible to use corpus linguistics to identify how the media refer to such groups (Bednarek & Carr, 2021, p. 134). Employing techniques such as frequency analysis, keyword extraction, and concordance lines, we can easily identify recurrent linguistic expressions or patterns that refer to stigmatized groups. This fusion of CDA with quantitative techniques of corpus linguistics as well as detailed qualitative textual analysis reflects Flowerdew's argument that quantitative methods, when complemented with qualitative interpretation, can uncover the nonobvious meaning, unavailable to conscious awareness, in the discourse under investigation (Flowerdew, 2012, p.

179). Furthermore, our approach in this study aligns with van Leeuwen's (2009, p. 277) view that CDA is based on the idea that text and talk play a key role in maintaining and legitimizing inequality, injustice and oppression in society.

For the purposes of this research, we confine ourselves to the definition of stigma according to the renewed sociologist Erving Goffman. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (2022) refers to stigma as the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance, and traces the roots of the word to Greek language, discovering the origins of stigma as bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. Such signs (cuts or burns in the body) advertised that the bearer was a slave, criminal or traitor, a blemished person to be avoided, especially in public places (Goffman, 2022, p.1). "The term stigma...will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes is really needed...a stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype" (Goffman, 2022, p. 3). Goffman mentions three main types of stigma: abominations of the body (various physical deformities), blemishes of the individual character (weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, dishonesty, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior), and the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion. (Goffman, 2022, p. 4).

While stigma operates on the level of social meaning, the linguistic encoding of epistemic modality enables us to trace how such meanings are expressed, reinforced, or questioned in discourse. From a linguistic point of view, modality refers to the speaker's stance, point of view, and the degree of commitment to a specific utterance. Biber et al., list modals as one of the five most common grammatical devices used to express stance, together with stance adverbials, stance complement clauses, premodifying stance adverbials and stance nouns followed by prepositional phrases (Biber et al. 2007, p. 62). In analyzing discourse, from the perspective of Fairclough, modality can be seen as initially to do with 'commitments', 'attitudes', 'judgements', 'stances' and therefore with identification, but it is also to do with action and social relations, and representation (Fairclough, 2004, p. 166). Epistemic modality, in particular, refers to the level of commitment a speaker can express in relation to the truth, accuracy or certainty of what he or she is saying. It is concerned with how possible or probable or likely it is that something has happened, is happening or will happen (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 121), while it also indicates the speaker's confidence (or lack of confidence) in the truth of the proposition expressed (Coates, 1983, p. 18).

The interaction between stigmatization and modality becomes evident when the media frames a marginalized group using speculative language, which can either reinforce suspicion or create distance between the journalist and the claim. Thus, epistemic modality functions not only as a grammatical phenomenon, but as a discursive strategy that subtly moderates the impact of bias and stigma, without explicit accusation.

In different languages there are different ways and different degrees to express epistemic modality grammatically (Palmer, 1986; De Haan, 1997). In English language, strong epistemic modality is expressed through modal verbs like *must* or *will*, while weak epistemic modality can be conveyed by *may* or *could*, with other modals that encode intermediate levels of certainty (*should*). Epistemic modality can also be linguistically encoded by lexical means such as verbs (*imagine*), adverbials (*certainly*), adjectives (*clear*), and relative constructions (*it is clear that...*) (Borghetti & Pano Alamán, 2021, p. 83). Moreover, Ilie has also classified rhetorical questions as mental as mental-response-eliciting questions, as they require a cognitive response linked to the interlocutor's acceptance of the answer implied by the speaker,

so eliciting a mental recognition of its certainty or validity (Ilie, 1994, as cited in Borghetti & Pano Alamán, 2021, p. 97).

Albanian language also provides us with comparable examples. In her study “*Epistemic and deontic modality in Albanian*”, Hasimja explains that modality in Albanian can be expressed through different moods of the verb, through verbs that contain modal value, through modal particles, as well as lexical verbs that contain a semi-modal function such as: “*le, lejon, bën, di dhe guxoj*” (Eng. *let, allow, do, know and dare*); through modal adverbs such as “*ndoshta, patjetër, me siguri*” (*maybe, definitely, undoubtedly*); through modal adjectives such as “*e sigurt, e dyshimtë, e detyruar*” (*certain, doubtful, necessary*); modal nouns such as “*gjasë, aftësi, siguri, urdhër, këshillë, lutje, kërkesë*” (*probability, certainty, advice, plea, request*); the auxiliary verb “*kam*” (*have*) when it is used in verbal structures to express future tense “*kam me punu(e)*” or “*kam për të punuar*” (*I will work*), with the last two examples usually expressing deontic modality, in the form of a necessity or obligation (Hasimja, 2020, p. 224-5).

Overall, the intersection of epistemic modality and stigmatized discourse, analyzed through the lens of corpus-assisted CDA, provide a promising area of research to uncover how degrees of certainty and doubt contribute to (re)production of stigma in media discourse.

2 Methodology and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative, corpus-assisted discourse analytical approach, combining systematic corpus queries with close interpretive reading. Corpus tools were used to locate recurring patterns of epistemic modality in contexts involving socially sensitive or potentially stigmatized groups, while the analysis itself remains primarily qualitative and interpretive.

Two purpose-built subcorpora were compiled. The Albanian dataset consists of 101 articles published in *Gazeta Shqip* between January and December 2023 (approximately 110,740 tokens). Articles were selected for their relevance to public debates involving vulnerable or marginalized communities, including topics such as crime, migration, mental health, ethnicity, and political dissent. Only full-length news reports and commentaries were included, while short notices, sport items, and entertainment material were excluded (Gazeta Shqip, 2023).

The English subcorpus was extracted from the *English Trends* corpus available in *Sketch Engine*. To ensure temporal comparability, only texts from 2023 were considered (Kilgarrieff et al., 2014). Because *English Trends* is considerably broader in scope, additional filtering was performed using CQL (Corpus Query Language) and topic keywords (e.g., immigrant, mentally ill, offender, extremist), allowing the construction of a thematically focused subset comparable to the Albanian dataset. As with the Albanian corpus, irrelevant genres (e.g., lifestyle, short briefs) were removed. Both corpora are therefore purpose-built and aligned in thematic focus, though not quantitatively balanced, an acknowledged limitation in the design.

Epistemic modality was examined across five linguistic categories commonly identified in prior research:

1. Epistemic modal verbs (e.g., duhet, mund; must, may, might)
2. Epistemic adverbs (e.g., ndoshta, me sa duket; probably, allegedly)
3. Epistemic adjectives (e.g., i sigurt, i mundshëm; certain, possible)
4. Epistemic nouns (e.g., dyshim, siguri; doubt, certainty)
5. Other epistemic constructions, such as hedging frames, evidential expressions, and rhetorical questions implying uncertainty or stance.

Concordance lines were retrieved using both string-based searches and CQL patterns tailored to each category. Illustrative examples include: [word="duhet|mund"], [word="ndoshta|me\ sa\ duket"], [word="must|may|might"], [word="probably|possibly|allegedly"]. These were combined with topic filters associated with stigmatization to ensure that instances of epistemic modality were examined within relevant social contexts.

All concordance lines were then manually reviewed by the author to confirm contextual relevance and to classify the function of the epistemic expression. As the study employs a qualitative analytical approach, no statistical data have been collected; however, consistency was maintained through iterative checking and repeated verification of coding decisions. Cross-linguistic comparison was conducted by examining how epistemic forms in each language function to frame similar thematic domains, rather than by comparing raw frequencies. The analysis focuses on discursive tendencies, for example, degrees of hedging, strength of commitment, or the rhetorical role of speculation, allowing the identification of convergences and divergences in epistemic framing across Albanian and English media discourse.

As a qualitative CDA-oriented study, the findings are interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The corpora differ in size and reflect different media ecosystems, and representativeness is understood primarily in thematic terms. These limitations are consistent with the goals of critical discourse analysis, which prioritizes ideological and rhetorical interpretation over numerical measurement.

3 Findings: Examples of Epistemic Modality in Our Corpus of Media Discourse

This section presents a corpus-assisted analysis of epistemic modality as a vehicle for stigmatization in contemporary media discourse in both Albanian and English. The findings are organized into five categories based on the grammatical and rhetorical realization of epistemic stance: *modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, and other constructions such as rhetorical questions and evaluative statements*. By examining how these features function within real examples drawn from both subcorpora, the analysis points out how seemingly neutral or factual language often carries hidden epistemic judgments, reinforcing stigmatization and bias.

3.1 Epistemic Modal Verbs

The examples presented in this section reveal how epistemic modality, particularly through modal verbs such as *mund* ("can/may"), *duhet* ("must"), is used to frame individuals or groups in ways that suggest deviance, danger, or irrationality, often without overt accusation. In both Albanian and English examples, modal verbs subtly construct degrees of (un)certainly around stigmatized identities or acts, which contributes to their delegitimization or marginalization.

Examples from the Albanian subcorpus

Ajo që të bën përshtypje në krimin mbi televizionin Top Chanel është se cilido që të jetë motivi nuk ka asnjë klasifikim ku *mund* ta futësh atë, sepse të shkosh të qëllosh me dy karikatore automatiku mbi godinën e një Televizioni dhe mbi vendrojnë e tij *duhet* të jesh ose i *çmendur* ose *barbar* në kuptimin primitiv, njeri që jeton në kohën parake. (What strikes you about the crime against the TOP CHANNEL television is that, whatever the motive may be, there is no classification where you can place it, because going and firing two automatic rifles at the building of a television station and its guard, you must either be insane or a barbarian in the primitive sense, a person living in a prehistoric era.) (March, 2023)

Pikërisht për këtë, sado e çuditshme që të **duket**, qëndrimi më i drejtë në konfliktin aktual është që edhe të denoncosh qëndrimin **grek** ndaj Himarës, apo **minoritetit** në përgjithësi, por edhe të ngresh zërin ndaj kurthit politik që i bënë Fredi Belerit. Qasja e parë nuk **mund** të shërbejë kurrë si alibi për të mbrojtur të dytën. (Precisely for this reason, no matter how strange it may seem, the most reasonable stance in the current conflict is to both denounce Greece’s attitude toward Himara and the minority in general, and also to raise your voice against the political trap set for Fredi Beleri. The first approach can never serve as an alibi for defending the second.) (September, 2023)

Examples from the English subcorpus

But above all a year dominated by the devastating decision by Putin to invade Ukraine in February. Hard to believe that the decision of **one crazy person can** bring about widespread deaths, misery and disruption to millions of ordinary people. (January, 2023)

But beneath the golden facade, social tensions are mounting, segregation, inequality, and corruption run rampant. A civil war is looming. **One single immigrant might** tip the balance and decide the fate of this world. (August, 2023)

In the Albanian examples, the use of **duhet të jesh i çmendur** (“you must be insane”) and **nuk mund të shërbejë** (“cannot serve”) encode moral judgments and exclusion, suggesting a framework where certain behaviors or political stances are incomprehensible unless pathologized or morally condemned. Similarly, the English examples illustrate modal amplification of fear and responsibility: framing Putin as “**one crazy person**” whose decision can cause global catastrophe, or suggesting that “**one single immigrant might tip the balance**” and lead to civil war. Here, modality fuses with stigmatizing referents (e.g., **crazy, immigrant**) to heighten perceived threat.

Across both corpora, modal verbs are not only grammatical devices of epistemic stance, but also tools for discursive othering, moralizing uncertainty, and rhetorically constructing the boundaries of social normalcy and deviance.

3.2 Epistemic Adverbs

In parallel with the use of modal verbs, epistemic adverbs also function as significant carriers of (un)certainly and evaluative stance within stigmatizing media discourse. These adverbs subtly influence how events and individuals are framed, often allowing the author or speaker to express skepticism, distance, or implied judgment without resorting to overt labeling.

Examples from the Albanian subcorpus

Por **ndoshta** vetëm një **budalla** do të vinte bast kundër suksesit të tyre, sepse shumë njerëz patën të njëjtat parashikime të çuditshme për fatin e Teslës në fillimet e saj. (But perhaps only a fool would bet against their success, because many people had the same strange predictions about Tesla’s fate in its early days) (May, 2023)

Ashtu siç mund të pritej, më shumë ka marrë rëndësi interesi për shortin e Shqipërisë në Kampionatin Evropian “Gjermani 2024” sesa ky aktivitet politik, që sot dhe de jure e ndau treshazi **PD**-në. Më keq se kaq nuk mund të ndodhte, pasi **mund** ta linin gjendjen e brendshme, që të dukej sikur ishte thjesht **dyshazi**, derisa Gjykata të vendoste. (As could have been expected, more attention was paid to Albania’s draw in the European Championship ‘Germany 2024’ than to this political event, which today and de jure split the Democratic Party into three. It couldn’t have gotten worse, as they could have left the internal situation to appear as if it were merely a duality, until the court decided) (December, 2023).

Examples from the English subcorpus

The narrative follows US Army officer Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), who is sent on a mission to Cambodia to assassinate the *allegedly insane* renegade Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). Kurtz is said to have killed countless innocents, set up his own dominion within the jungle, and revered as a demi-god by the indigenous people. (September, 2023)

Here's Trump this Saturday touting the policy again, along with a huge heaping helping of projection about how *supposedly stupid, incompetent* and *corrupt* Joe Biden is: TRUMP: I can't think of one thing in three years that these people have done that is good. (November, 2023)

In the Albanian examples, *ndoshta* (perhaps) and *siç mund të pritej* (as could be expected) are used to hedge strong assertions while simultaneously introducing ridicule or pessimism. The example referring to Tesla juxtaposes epistemic hesitation with derogatory labeling (*vetëm një budalla* – “only a fool”), creating a discursive space where stigmatization is softened but still present. In English, adverbs such as *allegedly* and *supposedly* perform similar discursive work: they mark information as secondhand or questionable, yet enable the propagation of judgmental content, such as *insane*, *stupid*, or *incompetent*.

In both languages, epistemic adverbs offer a linguistic shield, enabling media actors to circulate stigmatizing language while subtly maintaining impression of neutrality or objectivity. This rhetorical maneuver expands the reach of stigma through implication and ambiguity rather than overt accusation.

3.3 Epistemic Adjectives

A recurring pattern in both Albanian and English media discourse is the use of epistemic adjectives to hedge evaluations while still forwarding judgments that stigmatize actors or groups. Adjectives such as *supposed*, *potential*, and *apparent*, function as linguistic markers of uncertainty or attributed judgment, allowing authors to imply doubt or contestation while reproducing negative characterizations.

Examples from the Albanian subcorpus

Ai asnjëherë nuk e ka pranuar as për së largu, idenë e ndërtimit të një pasardhësi, në të vërtetë duke i prerë kokat një nga një të gjithë “delfinëve” *të mundshëm*, dhe kështu me sa duket do të marrë përfundimisht me vete krijesën e tij, Forza Italia. (He has never accepted, even remotely, the idea of building a successor, in fact, he has metaphorically beheaded all potential ‘dolphins’ one by one. And so, apparently, he will finally take his own creation, Forza Italia, with him) (June, 2023)

Ajo që duhet të shqetësojë këtë *grup politik* [do të jetë e tillë derisa të legalizohet, (nëse?!)] është se jo vetëm Kuvendi nuk ka marrë rëndësinë e duhur, por as nuk e ka trandur *Partinë Socialiste*, që përshfaq jo thjesht një kapitull *të qartë* të forcës së numrave, por edhe të arrogancës së pushtetit, sa i përket së fundmi edhe ngritjes së Komisioneve Hetimor. (What should worry this political group (and it will remain so until legalized—if ever?!) is not only that Parliament hasn't been given the importance it deserves, but that it hasn't even shaken the Socialist Party, which demonstrates not just a clear chapter of strength in numbers, but also of power arrogance, most recently in the matter of setting up Inquiry Committees.) (December, 2023).

Examples from the English subcorpus

When an influencer tweeted the videos on X, a moral panic erupted around *supposed terrorist rhetoric* going viral on TikTok, despite the videos never having received all that many views to begin with. (December, 2023)

The NYPD said there were no specific threats but ‘out of an abundance of caution, the Department will deploy additional resources to sensitive locations, including houses of worship, throughout the weekend.’ The *potential threat* for protests and violence came after a group of neo-Nazis harassed theatergoers as they were lined up ahead of a showing of Broadway musical, *Parade*, on Tuesday night. (February, 2023)

In the Albanian examples, epistemic adjectives like *i mundshëm* (potential), complemented by the expression *me sa duket* (apparently) are embedded in political commentary to signal speculation, distance the speaker from direct accusation, or foreground the implicit failures of power. For instance, the phrase “*delfinëve të mundshëm*” (potential ‘dolphins’) hints at a stigmatizing dynamic of elimination, while “*me sa duket do të marrë përfundimisht me vete krijesën e tij*” (apparently, he will finally take his own creation) implies a judgment masked as observation.

In English, adjectives like *supposed* and *potential* are often used in discourses around terrorism or protest to delegitimize claims or label actors with suspicion. The phrase “*supposed terrorist rhetoric*” discredits the content while still indexing it under a threatening frame, whereas “*potential threat*” justifies security responses while foregrounding uncertainty. Both instances reflect a rhetorical strategy where epistemic adjectives mediate stigmatization through suggestion rather than assertion.

Across both corpora, such adjectives subtly reinforce discourses of exclusion, political distrust, or securitization, highlighting how epistemic positioning can function as a strategic vehicle for the circulation of stigma.

3.4 Epistemic Nouns

This category captures how epistemic nouns, such as *assumption*, *premise*, or *certainty*, act as lexical anchors for beliefs or presuppositions that reinforce stigmatizing narratives. Unlike modal verbs or adverbs, which hedge or project possibility, epistemic nouns often function metadiscursively: they name the very frameworks of belief through which individuals or groups are judged, categorized, or discredited. As such, they are powerful tools in the reification of stigma, embedding judgment within the structure of language itself.

Examples from the Albanian subcorpus

Ndaj dëmit financiar të ketë shpagim financiar deri në sekuestrim të të mirave që gëzojnë këta *politikanë* dhe që me *siguri*, i kanë krijuar falë një jete politike me *allishverishe* të kamufluara pas votës së shqiptarëve. Duhet një revolucion penal në Shqipëri ku tolerancës “zero” ndaj krimeve financiare të politikanëve t’u bashkëngjiten gjopa maksimaliste. (In response to the financial damage, there should be financial compensation, even up to the confiscation of the assets these politicians enjoy, which they have surely created thanks to a political life filled with shady dealings camouflaged behind the Albanian people's vote. There must be a penal revolution in Albania, where ‘zero’ tolerance for financial crimes by politicians is joined by maximalist fines.) (June, 2023)

Kushdo që vë në *dyshim* metodën, denoncohet si një *agjent* që mbështet një *statuskuo* të kalbur, apo si një *tradhtar* që synon të pengojë rilindjen kombëtare. (Anyone who questions

the method is denounced as either an agent supporting a rotten status quo, or as a traitor seeking to hinder national rebirth.) (April, 2023).

Examples from the English subcorpus

Four in 10 also believe women exaggerate abuse to better former partners in custody disputes. All wrong. People roll their eyes when the phrase "believe women" is aired, for fear it implies an **assumption of guilt**, when in fact it means that the **claims** of women should be investigated, interrogated, taken seriously. It means we should not begin with the **premise**, or **posture**, of **disbelief**. We must get angry when women are automatically disbelieved, discredited, shut out of a system that has long denied them justice. (November, 2023)

In the Albanian subcorpus, the noun **siguri** (certainty) reveals a presupposition of guilt regarding corrupt politicians ("**me siguri i kanë krijuar...**" / "they have surely created..."), legitimizing calls for a "penal revolution" and the confiscation of their assets. This creates a semantic fusion of epistemic confidence and moral condemnation. Similarly, in the phrase **kushdo që vë në dyshim metodën** ("anyone who questions the method"), **dyshim** (doubt) is presented as an illegitimate stance, stigmatizing dissenters as "traitors" or enablers of a "rotten status quo." These examples showcase how belief systems are regulated through epistemic vocabulary, foreclosing alternative interpretations and marking deviance as betrayal.

The English subcorpus offers a particularly rich example with the phrase **assumption of guilt**, found in a discussion about the disbelief faced by women reporting abuse. Here, the author exposes the epistemic double standard embedded in public discourse: rather than starting from a premise of credibility, women are met with default suspicion. The nouns **assumption** and **premise** directly highlight the cognitive scaffolding of stigma, the tacit beliefs that delegitimize claims and deny justice. This example is especially potent because it not only illustrates stigma, but also critiques the epistemic injustice that sustains it.

Together, these examples show how epistemic nouns structure the plausibility of social narratives, often embedding stigma in the architecture of what is considered believable, credible, or knowable.

3.5 Other Epistemic Constructions

In addition to the more conventional markers of epistemic modality such as modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and nouns, the corpus also revealed rhetorical constructions and evaluative assertions that carry epistemic weight. These constructions often appear in emotionally charged, judgmental, or ideologically framed commentary that contributes to the stigmatization of individuals or groups.

Examples from the Albanian subcorpus

Por Greqia që i shtyn këta **injorantë**, është mirë që ta shfletojë historinë për ta kujtuar edhe një herë forcën e madhe të Shqipërisë së Jugut: Gjirokastrë, Vlorë, Himarë. **Po Athina, a ka zënë mend?** Që të zësh mend në çështje të tilla me pamundësi arritjeje, duhet që, së pari, të kesh mend. (But Greece, which is pushing these ignorant ones, would do well to leaf through history again to be reminded of the great strength of Southern Albania: Gjirokastrë, Vlorë, Himarë. And Athens, has it learned its lesson? To learn your lesson in such matters of unattainable goals, first of all, you must have a mind.) (September, 2023)

Pse nuk ndodh dot që vjetërsia historike të marrë sot armët me ata pak laro që ka rreth vetes? (Why can't it happen that historical legacy today arms itself alongside the few street thugs it has around?) (December, 2023).

Arrestimi i tij, po tregon sot forcën e Shqipërisë kundër *terroristëve* të Greqisë dhe vetë *politikës skizofrenike* të Greqisë me *të ashtuquajturin* Vorio-Epir. (His arrest today shows Albania's strength against the terrorists of Greece and the schizophrenic politics of Greece regarding the so-called Northern Epirus.) (September, 2023)

Examples from the English subcorpus

People shouldn't be disenfranchised threatened, bullied and their livelihood destroyed all because they don't support your party? Why should an aspiring leader do that? And why would they get backings for doing that? *What kind of people would support such violent inhuman behaviour in this day and age?* Because it says a lot about you as a person. (May, 2023)

As Yves notes, blockaid of Israeli shipping was what the Houthis actually intended. *Does it look like the US and their obedient press lackies have conflated this action directed against Israel into a supposed terrorist act directed against global peace and prosperity?* (December, 2023)

In the Albanian subcorpus, rhetorical questions are used to convey mockery, disbelief, or moral superiority. For example, the sarcastic inquiry "*Po Athina, a ka zënë mend?*" (And Athens, has it learned its lesson?) functions not as a genuine question but as an accusatory remark implying stubbornness or ignorance. Similarly, the conditional clause "*Që të zësh mend... duhet që të kesh mend*" (To learn your lesson... you must have a mind) ironically underscores a presumed lack of rational capacity, thereby reinforcing cultural or national othering. The use of terms like "*injorantë*" (ignorant ones), "*laro*" (street thugs), and psychiatric labels such as "*politikës skizofrenike të Greqisë*" (Greece's schizophrenic politics) reflect a blend of rhetorical aggression and epistemic judgment, where the writer claims to know the truth and discredits the target through both logic and affect.

The English subcorpus similarly exhibits rhetorical epistemic constructions. The example "*Why should an aspiring leader do that?... What kind of people would support such violent inhuman behaviour?*" illustrates the use of rhetorical questioning to express outrage, disbelief, and moral condemnation, constructing the targeted political actors as irrational and dangerous. Moreover, the phrase "*have conflated this action... into a supposed terrorist act*" suggests intentional manipulation of truth by political and media elites, reinforcing the speaker's epistemic authority while delegitimizing others' narratives.

These constructions serve not only as indirect expressions of certainty or knowledge but also as tools of ideological polarization, framing social or political opponents as either willfully ignorant or morally corrupt. As such, they represent powerful vehicles for stigmatization that operate beyond formal grammatical structures, relying instead on rhetorical implication and affective resonance.

3.6 Cross-Linguistic Contrastive Interpretation

Although the study focuses on qualitative discourse tendencies rather than numerical comparison, several broader cross-linguistic patterns emerge from the analysis. In the Albanian corpus, epistemic modality is frequently used to create distance between the journalist and the claim, often through verbs such as *mund*, *duket* (can, seem) and adverbs like *ndoshta* (probably). These forms soften responsibility and shift interpretive agency to the reader, a strategy particularly visible in reports involving crime, political actors, or marginalized groups. By contrast, the English corpus tends to employ epistemic modality in ways that frame uncertainty as part of an institutional process of verification. Forms such as *may*, *might*, *allegedly*, and *according to* position the journalist within a system of evidential accountability. This results in epistemic expressions functioning less as distancing devices and more as markers of procedural reporting. A further divergence lies in the rhetorical function of

epistemic stance: English texts frequently use epistemic markers to avoid liability, while Albanian texts often use them to imply suspicion, subtly inviting the reader to adopt evaluative stances. These contrastive tendencies highlight how linguistic choices intersect with distinct journalistic cultures, narrative conventions, and ideological framing practices.

4 4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As outlined in the methodology section, this study adopts a qualitative approach, enriched by quantitative techniques such as keyword and pattern queries to extract examples of epistemic modality from corpora in Albanian and English. While these digital techniques allow for systematic retrieval and categorization of epistemic constructions, the present analysis does not include statistical data or frequency analysis, which would enable broader generalizations. Such aspects as the distribution, prevalence, or collocational behavior of epistemic markers remain beyond the scope of this paper and are intended for exploration in future research. Additionally, future work may benefit from expanding the corpora across more genres, time periods, or media platforms to enhance representativeness and allow for diachronic comparisons.

5 Conclusions

This study investigated how epistemic modality contributes to stigmatization of individuals and groups within Albanian and English media discourse. Addressing RQ1, the analysis revealed that epistemic modality, expressed through verbs, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, and rhetorical constructions, is frequently used not just to signal degrees of (un)certainty, but to encode evaluative judgment and signal bias. Modal verbs, as shown through the examples extracted from subcorpora, often frame stigmatized behavior as self-evident or irrational; epistemic adverbs enable the speaker to distance themselves from overt accusations while still implying suspicion; adjectives and nouns are also used to mark contested or discredited claims while reinforcing dominant ideologies. Finally, rhetorical questions and affect-laden constructions serve as implicit assertions of truth, while, at times, suppressing alternative viewpoints.

Regarding RQ2, the comparative analysis revealed clear cross-linguistic similarities in how epistemic modality encodes commitment to stigmatizing frames. In both languages, epistemic markers operate not as neutral expressions of knowledge or doubt, but as ideological tools that reinforce exclusion, justify skepticism, and signal epistemic authority. While the Albanian discourse tends to feature more direct political labeling and nationalistic tone, and English examples more frequently mobilize irony or moral outrage, both corpora converge in their use of epistemic language to frame stigmatization as logical, justified, or commonsensical.

The findings have direct relevance for EFL pedagogy and media literacy education. First, the cross-linguistic contrasts observed in epistemic modality provide a valuable basis for classroom activities that develop critical language awareness. Students can be invited to compare Albanian and English news articles by identifying epistemic markers, discussing their pragmatic functions, and evaluating how they shape perceptions of credibility, doubt, or stigma. Such tasks help students recognize linguistic bias and engage more reflexively with media texts. Second, epistemic modality can be incorporated into media-literacy modules where learners analyze how journalists construct authority, distance, and evidentiality. Activities may include rewriting news leads with different epistemic strengths, annotating articles for hedging devices, or assessing how uncertainty is used to frame sensitive issues such as mental health, immigration, or political dissent. Third, teacher-education programs can

include assessment rubrics that evaluate students' ability to detect stance, identify hedging, recognize ideologically loaded language, and justify interpretations with textual evidence. These rubrics support the development of critical reading competencies, which are increasingly essential in digital information environments. Overall, integrating epistemic modality into pedagogical practice strengthens both linguistic competence and critical media awareness, preparing learners to navigate complex discourses with greater sensitivity and analytical depth.

Ultimately, this study, supported by authentic examples extracted from subcorpora of media discourse, demonstrates that epistemic modality is deeply implicated in the ideological work of media texts. Far from being neutral indicators of (un)certainly, such linguistic features construct credibility and legitimacy in ways that sustain stigma, normalize dissent, and shape public discourse.

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