



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

Eriola Qafzezi

Fan S. Noli University , Albania

Abstract

This paper explores how epistemic modality functions as a key linguistic resource in shaping trust, credibility, and stigma in media discourse. Grounded in research conducted within the framework of the national project STI(G)MA – Linguistic patterns of stigmatization in media discourse in Albanian and English, 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, the study highlights the role of epistemic modality in encoding ideological positioning and reinforcing stigmatizing representations. The analysis is based on a 2023 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