

## Modal Verbs for the Advice Move in Advice Columns\*

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**Abstract.** The present study investigates how advice writers employ move sequences and modal verbs to achieve intended discourse functions. This paper aims to testify two research hypotheses: 1. Advice writers of different topics employ different moves and modal verbs to achieve discourse function, and 2. The differences may imply writers' intentions, emotion and expectancy of effects on the readers to interpret. The corpus of five advice columns for investigation is collected from the website *Creators.com*. Locher's (2006) ten moves for advice columns and Leech (2005)'s proposal of discourse function of modals are the frameworks for data analysis. The results indicate four frequent moves: advice, assessment, explanation, and general information. In addition, the columnists use different modal verbs in dealing with different issues. This study has shed light on language learning about the discourse function realized by moves and modals.

**Keywords:** advice column, discourse function, moves, modal verbs.

### 1 Introduction

Giving advice has been recognized as a common discourse function. Advice givers express their opinion to influence addressees' behaviors or decisions. According to Morrow (2006), to achieve discourse function, advice-givers have employed strategies in various contexts to make advice acceptable. Previous research has focused on oral discourse, including clinical interaction (Heritage and Sefi, 1992), radio call-in programs (Green and Kupferberg, 2000), or daily interaction (Jefferson and Lee, 1992). However, the written discourse has been less discussed.

For the written discourse, advice columns in magazines have been the major concern. The research has focused on underlying social norms or values (Currie, 2001; Mutongi, 2000; Stoll, 1998) or linguistic strategies (Thibault, 1988). Though the research has provided insights for psychology and sociology, van Dijk (1997) stated that the study was not suitable for linguistics. The reason was that different writers might view the world differently and appeal to different readers. Thus in linguistics, underlying social norms/values is not the major focus but complex structures, interaction, social practices, the functions in context, society, and culture.

Furthermore, there are few studies on the strategies employed by different columnists for different issues. This present study would investigate use of modal verbs as one linguistic strategy applied by different columnists. The reason for this focus was that language users

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could usually deliver information more than the literal meaning of modals. Modals have varieties of communicative functions. Since advice columns have provided social norms and values, modal uses also need to be explored for better understanding of their grammatical, pragmatic, and contextual functions in the advice columns.

Therefore, this paper aims to identify the moves and realization of modal verbs. To achieve the research purpose, ten discursive moves proposed by Locher's (2006) for advice columns was adopted to examine the corpus. In addition, to deal with the modal verbs for lexical strategy, the three discourse functions of modal verbs proposed by Biber et al. (1999) and Leech's (2005) were based on. To achieve the research purpose, two research questions were raised to answer:

(1) What are the move sequences in different advice columns?

(2) How is modal verb as linguistic strategy realized in the move of advice?

This research hypothesized that advice writers of different topics apply different move sequences and modal verbs to achieve discourse function and the differences imply writers' intentions, emotion and expectancy of the effects on readers to interpret.

## 2 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Previous Studies of Advice Columns

There has been research on advice columns in magazines to deal with the social norms and values provided by advice columns (Currie, 2001; Mutongi, 2000; Stoll, 1998) and linguistic strategies (Thibault, 1988). What followed was research on the advice columns online (Locher, 2006; Morrow, 2006; Yan, 2008). Investigating messages posted to an Internet discussion forum, Morrow (2006) identified salient discourse features of problem, advice, and thank messages. The advice messages were delivered with "casual style" and varieties of discourse patterns to express positive regard and solidarity.

In addition, Locher (2006) has analyzed *Lucy Answers*, an American Internet advice column in 2006. She proposed ten discursive moves for advice columns, namely the moves of advice, assessment, disclaimer, explanation, farewell, general information, metacomment, open category, own experience, and referral. She also found linguistic realization in different moves. Declaratives, imperatives, and interrogative sentences were found in the move of advice. Agentive and non-agentive sentences were found in the move of referral. Locher only focused on one advice column, so that there were no conclusive findings regarding how advice givers dealing with different issues employ strategies to achieve discourse function.

### 2.2 Discourse Function of Modal Verbs

Different from the focus on sentence patterns for each move found by Locher (2006), the present study aims to examine the use of modal verbs, as one kind of linguistic realization to achieve discourse function. Through modal verbs, language users could usually deliver information more than the literal meaning. The modals have varieties of communicative functions. They are culture and topic dependent. They are affected by contexts, different cultural values, expectations of discourse, and persuasion. The use of modals needs to be further explored for better understanding of their grammatical, pragmatic, and contextual functions.

Hoye (1997) & Hinkel (2009) have stated that there are two kinds of modals, principal modals and semi-modals. Both modals provide two kinds of meaning for addressers' intention: root and epistemic meaning (Palmer, 1986). The root meaning conveys the intention of volition, permission, and obligation, such as: "You *must* leave now". *Must* here displays that the addressers' strongly require the addressee to leave. The epistemic meaning is concerned with the truth of proposition of utterances, such as: "You *must* be starving". *Must* here shows that it is necessarily the case that the addressee is starving.

In addition, Biber et al. (1999) and Leech (2005) have proposed three discourse functions of modals, obligation/necessity modals (must, should), permission/possibility/ability modals (can, could, may, might), and volition/prediction modals (will, would, shall). The discourse functions realized by modal verbs manifest advice givers' intentions to influence addressees' decision or action. According to Sweester (1999), the obligation/necessity modals emphasize social obligation to compel the addressees to react. Meyer (1997) maintained that the obligation/necessity modals strengthened the writers' statement to establish an element of objectivity. According to Hoyer (1997), the permission/possibility/ability modals express the writers' judgment. As for the volition/prediction modals, Biber et al. (1999) and Coates (1983) suggested that the modals emphasized the interlocutors' willingness to overcome problems.

Furthermore, McCarthy (1991) noted that the modals carried important information about the senders' attitude to the message and other interpersonal meanings. Through exploration of modal uses and functions, advice givers' stance can be identified.

### 3 Methodology

This paper aimed to identify the moves and the use of modal verbs. This research is based on text data taken from five advice columns. Locher's (2006) proposal of ten discursive moves was adopted as the analysis framework. Ratio of the moves would be dealt with to understand the structures of advice columns. Furthermore, the use of modal verbs would be discussed. This section would introduce the corpus and data analysis for this current study.

#### 3.1 The Corpus

The corpus was collected from the website, <http://www.creators.com/advice.html>. This is a Los Angeles-based syndicate website founded in 1987. This website presents more than two hundred of the most talented writers and artists in the world. In order to investigate advice givers' choice of moves and modal verbs in dealing with different life issues, this study focused on five columns, namely the *Classic Ann Landers* by Ann Landers, *At Work* by Lindsey Novak, *Ethnically Speaking* by Larry Meeks, *Mars and Venus* by John Gray, and *'Tween 12 and 20* by Robert Wallace. The corpus was collected from February 21 to May 7 in 2009. Table 1 displays the details of the five advice columns.

**Table 1:** Description of the advice columns

<b>Columns description items</b>	<b>Classic Ann Landers</b>	<b>At Work</b>	<b>Ethnically Speaking</b>	<b>Mars and Venus</b>	<b>'Tween 12 and 20</b>
<b>Topic</b>	General	Work	Ethnic	Gender	Juvenile
<b>Author (gender)</b>	Ann Landers(F)	Lindsey Novak (F)	Larry Meeks (M)	John Gray (M)	Robert Wallace(M)
<b>Published Days</b>	weekly Sundays	Weekly Thursdays	Weekly Saturdays	Thursdays & Sundays	daily, except Sun.
<b>Data collected</b>	Mar. 29 → April 26	Apr. 9 → May 7	Feb. 21 → April 25	Apr. 19 → May 3	Apr. 29 → May 2
<b>Total pieces</b>	10	10	10	10	10
<b>Total sentences</b>	37	84	183	68	64
<b>Total Words</b>	477	1739	2725	1237	1031

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

To investigate the move sequences, ten discursive moves of advice columns proposed by Locher's (2006) were adopted as the analysis framework. Ratio of the moves would be dealt with to understand the general structures of different advice columns. Frequency of modal verbs was conducted utilizing AntConc. With the information of frequency, the researcher

would discuss the discourse functions achieved by the choices in different columns based on the three discourse functions of modal verbs proposed by Biber et al. (1999) and Leech's (2005).

## 4 Results

In this section we report the results on the move analysis of the five columns based on Locher's (2006) proposal of discursive moves for advice columns. A further discussion would focus on advice writers' use of modal verbs. Differences and similarities among the columns would be investigated and discussed.

### 4.1 Moves Employed in Advice Columns

Here, we discuss the moves contributing to the advice writers' responses. Generally speaking, most writers tended to assess the questioners' situations, to provide advice, or to give explanation for the assessment.

#### *General Findings of the Moves Employed*

Based on the ten discursive moves proposed by Locher, the five advice writers investigated in this study employed more than five of them. Table 2 displayed the percentage for each move employed by different columns. It shows that the core move of advice giving is the most employed by all advice writers (36.93%) in the corpus. In terms of syntactic types for the move for giving advice, they preferred to use imperative sentence inviting an action (20.92%). The second most employed move was assessment (26.80%). The least employed were moves of disclaimer (0.33%), referral (0.65%), offering own experience (1.63%), and farewell notes (1.63%). The move of disclaimer was only employed in *Mars and Venus* while the moves of offering own experience and farewell notes were employed in *Ethnically Speaking*. The referral move was employed by the columns of *Classic Ann Landers* and *At Work*.

**Table 2:** Percentage of each move for the columns (%)

Column → Move ↓	Ann Landers	At Work	Ethnically Speaking	Mars and Venus	'Tween 12 and 20	Total Moves in Advice Columns
<b>advice</b>	47.06	41.94	35.51	37.5	25.53	36.93
decl	1.96	3.92	3.92	1.96	2.29	14.05
int-a	0	0	0	0.33	0	0.33
int-I	0.65	0	0.33	0	0	0.98
imp-a	2.29	4.58	7.84	4.58	1.63	20.92
imp-i	0.33	0	0.33	0	0	0.65
<b>assessment</b>	32.35	38.71	19.63	26.79	23.40	26.80
<b>disclaimer</b>	0	0	0	1.79	0	0.33
<b>explanation</b>	14.71	9.68	9.35	14.29	14.89	11.76
<b>general info</b>	2.94	6.45	9.35	10.71	17.02	9.48
<b>metacomment</b>	0	0	9.35	8.93	10.64	6.54
<b>own experience</b>	0	0	4.67	0	0	1.63
<b>referral</b>	2.94	1.61	0	0	0	0.65
<b>farewell</b>	0	0	4.67	0	0	1.63
<b>open category</b>	0	1.61	7.48	0	8.51	4.25

In terms of advice columns, the column of *Classic Ann Landers* employed the least moves (only five), including advice, assessment, explanation, general information, and referral. The column of *Ethnically Speaking* employed the most moves (eight), including advice, assessment, explanation, general information, metacomment, own experience, farewell, and open category. The other three columns all employed six moves. All employed moves of advice, assessment,

explanation, and general information. Differently, the move of referral was employed in *At Work*; the move of disclaimer was employed in *Mars and Venus*; the move of open category was employed in *At Work* and *'Tween 12 and 20*.

#### Moves Employed in Each Advice Column

The analysis results of move sequences employed in advice columns demonstrated that all advice writers have employed four moves, namely advice, assessment, explanation, and general information. Among the four moves, the authors have employed the move of advice the most: *Classic Ann Landers* (47.06%), *At Work* (41.94%), *Ethnically Speaking* (35.51%), *Mars and Venus* (37.5%), and *'Tween 12 and 20* (25.53%). They tended to use imperative sentences inviting the questioners for giving advice. In order to support their advice, all writers mostly employed the move of assessment: *Classic Ann Landers* (32.35%), *At Work* (38.71%), *Ethnically Speaking* (19.63%), *Mars and Venus* (26.79%), and *'Tween 12 and 20* (23.40%). In addition to the assessment move, all advice writers employ the moves of explanation and general information. Explanation is the third most employed by four advice columns: *Classic Ann Landers* (14.71%), *At Work* (9.68%), *Ethnically Speaking* (9.35%), *Mars and Venus* (14.29%). The third most employed by the column of *'Tween 12 and 20* was the move of general information (17.02%). The fourth was the move of general information: *Classic Ann Landers* (2.94%), *At Work* (6.45%), *Ethnically Speaking* (9.35%), *Mars and Venus* (10.71%). The fourth one for the column of *'Tween 12 and 20* was the move of explanation (14.89%).

In addition to the four moves employed by all advice columns, different writers used different additional moves to support their advice giving to deal with different issues. For the column of *Classic Ann Landers*, the author used referral (2.94%). For the column of *At Work*, in addition to the above-mentioned four moves, the author also used referral (1.61%) and open category (1.61%). For the column of *Ethnically Speaking*, the author also employed four other moves, metacomment (9.35%), own experience (4.67%), farewell (4.67%), and open category (7.48%). For the column of *Mars and Venus*, the author also employed the moves of disclaimer and (1.79%) and metacomment (8.93%). For the column of *'Tween 12 and 20*, the author additionally employed the moves of metacomment (10.64%) and open category (8.51%).

#### 4.2 Modal Verbs in Advice Columns

This section reports the use of modal verbs by the advice writers for the moves, especially the move of advice. In the core move of giving advice, the writers appeared to use more modal verbs than in other moves. Table 3 displays the distribution of modals and Table 4 shows the ratio of modals in the columns.

**Table 3:** Frequency of modal verbs in different advice columns.

Modals Frequency Columns	Obligation/necessity		Permission/possibility/ability				Volition/prediction	
	Must	Should	Can	Could	May	Might	Will	Would
Ann Landers	1	5	3	1	0	2	1	0
At Work	4	12	10	4	10	2	6	6
Ethnically S.	1	6	9	5	1	0	9	10
Mars&Venus	1	2	8	2	4	0	5	2
'Tween 12&20	3	2	4	1	1	1	10	2

**Table 4:** Ratio of modals in different advice columns

Columns	Ann Landers	At Work	Ethnically Speaking	Mars and Venus	'Tween 12 and 20
Total Modals Total Words	13/477(2.7%)	54/1739(3.1%)	41/2725(1.5%)	24/1237(1.9%)	24/1031(2.3%)

### *Frequency of Modal Uses in Advice Columns*

Based on the information provided by Table 4, the column of *At Work* dealing with workplace issues used most modal verbs (3.1%) to provide ideas and opinions, followed by the columns of *Classic Ann Landers* (2.7%), *'Tween 12 and 20* (2.3%), *Mars and Venus* (1.9%), and *Ethnically Speaking* (1.5%). Among the collected 1739 words, the advice writer of *At Work* column used 54 modals. The author tended to use modality to express her opinions to influence readers. The column of *Classic Ann Landers* used 13 modals among the collected 477 total words. Compared to the other three columns, these two columns showed more frequent use of modals in giving advice, which might be due to the authority of the columnist and the professional arena of the topics. Through modality, they can directly express the force to influence readers. It appears that the two columnists provide their suggestion more directly than the others.

Different columnists applied modal verbs differently. In *Classic Ann Landers*, 'should' is the most frequently used, followed by *can, might, must, could, will*. In *At Work*, 'should' is most frequently used, followed by *can, may, will, would, must, could, and might*. In *Ethnically Speaking*, the modal 'would' is most frequently used, followed by *can, will, should, could, must, and may*. In *Mars and Venus*, the modal 'can' is most frequently used, followed by *will, may, should, would, could, must, and might*. In *'Tween 12 and 20* the modal 'will' is most frequently used, followed by *can, must, should, would, may, might, and could*.

### *Summary*

Generally speaking, modals are used in advice columns to achieve the function of volition/prediction. However, modals are used differently to achieve different discourse functions in dealing with different issues. Dealing with general issues in life and occupational issues, the writers use *should* to achieve obligation/necessity function. Dealing with Ethnic issues, the author uses *would* to achieve volition/prediction function. Dealing with gender issues, the writer use *can* to achieve permission/possibility/ability function. Dealing with teenager issues, the writer use *will* to achieve volition/prediction function.

## **5 Conclusion and Discussion**

The study results imply that four common moves employed by all advice writers in advice columns regardless of the kinds of issues they dealt with, namely the moves of advice giving, assessment, explanation, and general information. Specifically speaking, the advice writers devote themselves to employ the move of advice the most with the supportive move of assessment, followed by explanation and general information. On the other hand, the authors rarely employed the moves of disclaimer, referral, own experience, and farewell notes.

In addition to the four commonly employed moves, the advice writers dealing with different issues employed different other moves to support their claims and advice giving. The different moves employed in different columns might imply the underlying intention of the writers, in terms of their attitude towards the questioners and the issues, especially the advice writer for the column of *Ethnically Speaking*. In addition to the core of advice giving, compared to other four advice columns, the writer of the column of *Ethnically Speaking* has employed more moves to elaborate his advice to the questioners, especially his own experiences and farewell notes which were not used in any other column. With his own experiences and sincere farewell notes, the writer seemed to try to get intimate with the questioners by direct talk through providing his own experiences and farewell notes.

The result indicated that when dealing with a more controversial topic, the ethnic issues, the advice writer tended to employ more moves. The purpose might be to soften the tension in discussing such a topic regarding stereotype or racism. In addition, the author also applies politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to save his face sometimes or the questioner's face at other times. In order to save the questioner's face, the author tended to employ the

moves of providing his own experiences and metacomment. In order to save his own face, he tended to employ the moves of providing his own experiences and general information.

Compared to the column of *Ethnically Speaking*, the writer *Classic Ann Landers* appeared to deliver her advice with less elaboration by other moves. In addition to the four comment moves, she only employed one other move, referral, for once. This finding verified the most generally-identified professionalism of Ann Landers. She has been long recognized as the authority to give advice. Compared to others, she directly gives advice with less moves. Furthermore, the moves of disclaimer and referral were the least for employment. The results showed that all writers were the experts for the issues, so they have possessed expertise to help the questioners with giving advice. The advice givers have provided their opinions to influence readers' mind and behaviors. Through exploration of their use of modals, researchers can examine their attitude toward the message and the readers. Generally speaking, the function of advice columns is to provide readers with insightful suggestions to predict what will happen in the future depending on whether the addressees would follow the suggestions or not. This present study has found that the volition/prediction discourse function is the most frequently achieved.

Dealing with different issues, the advice writers employed different modal verbs to achieve distinct discourse functions. Based on the force-dynamic analysis of modality proposed by Talmy (1988), the modal-verb choices can display the speakers'/writers' attitudes toward the message they have provided. The study findings have evidenced different levels of advice givers' expectation and possible influence on readers. They employed different modal verbs to achieve functions of discourse. The differences in choices of modal verbs also imply the advice writers' intentions, emotion, and expectancy to influence addressees' decision.

## 6 Further Research and Educational Implications

Though this present study has provided baseline information for researchers and language instructors with the move sequences and linguistic strategies to achieve discourse function by advice givers, there needs further exploration for comprehensive investigation. First of all, other variables need to be considered in further research, such as genders of advice writers. In dealing with the same issue, do men and women employ different strategies to achieve discourse function? The further investigation is expected to find the answers and then to provide resource corpus for language learners to refer to.

Besides, the uses of modal verbs have evidenced as function of the language users' intentions, emotion, and expectancy to influence addressees' decision through language. Language learners/teachers are encouraged to pay attention to modal-verb usage. Leech (2003) found L2 learners' socio-linguistic change associated with modal verbs. The trends of colloquialization and Americanization have influenced L2 writers' use of modals. The learners tended to avoid use of *must* and shifted it to *should*; they have less use of *may* but favor *can*. Leech's findings have manifested the importance to notice language learners' modal uses. Language learners' language production also needs to be investigated to examine their interlanguage performance. In grammar instruction, learners also need to be informed about how to employ the modal verbs to express their intention to influence readers'/listeners' mind, action, or behaviors. In addition, further research needs to explore a comprehensive framework for modal-verb usage to achieve discourse functions. Starting from the advice columns in this present study, other discourse patterns (i.e. horoscopes) in different media deserve further exploration.

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