

Dynamic modality and its relation to politeness in Late Modern English women's instructive writing

Modalidade dinâmica e sua relação com a polidez na escrita instrutiva de mulheres no inglês moderno tardio

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Abstract: This study examines how dynamic modality, specifically the auxiliaries *may* and *can*, conveys politeness in nineteenth-century English instructive prose. A typology and the semantics of modality in English have been widely described, with particular emphasis on epistemic and deontic readings (Bybee et al., 1994; Coates, 1983; Høye, 1997; Nuyts, 2016; Palmer, 2001; van der Auwera & Plungian, 1998). Within politeness research, modals figure centrally among mitigation strategies in requests and directives (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014). In instructive and household-hygiene genres, especially recipe books and manuals, work in the history of discourse shows how gendered and period-specific conventions condition grammatical and relational choices (Alonso-Almeida, 2013; Taavitsainen & Pahta, 2011). In contrast to the prevailing focus on epistemic and deontic meanings, dynamic modality (e.g., *can*, *may* as resources of ability/possibility used to soften directives) remains comparatively underexplored in women's historical writing, a gap the present study addresses. It uses query-driven concordance searches and normalised frequency profiling, followed by full-context manual reading to disambiguate dynamic, deontic, and epistemic uses in the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, 1800–1899* (CoWITE19). It finds that *may* and *can* routinely soften directives by framing options and capacities rather than commands; in this corpus, *can* often presents circumstantial ability and procedural affordances, whereas *may* licenses alternatives for the reader. It concludes that dynamic modals function as a subtle yet power-



ful resource that enables women authors to manage authorial persona, maintain politeness, and instruct effectively within nineteenth-century social constraints.

Keywords: dynamic modality, (im)politeness, 19th-century women's writing, recipe texts, corpus linguistics, gendered language use.

Resumo: Este estudo examina como a modalidade dinâmica, especificamente os auxiliares *may* e *can*, veicula polidez na prosa instrutiva em inglês do século XIX. A tipologia e a semântica da modalidade em inglês foram amplamente descritas, com ênfase nas leituras epistêmicas e deônticas (Bybee et al., 1994; Coates, 1983; Hoyer, 1997; Nuyts, 2016; Palmer, 2001; van der Auwera & Plungian, 1998). No âmbito da polidez, os modais integram estratégias de mitigação em pedidos e diretivas (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014). Em textos instrutivos/higiênico-domésticos, especialmente receitas e manuais, estudos de história do discurso mostram como convenções de gênero e de época condicionam escolhas gramaticais e relacionais (Alonso-Almeida, 2013; Taavitsainen & Pahta, 2011). Em contraste com o foco predominante no epistêmico e no deôntico, a modalidade dinâmica (e.g., *can*, *may* como recursos de habilidade/possibilidade para suavizar diretivas) permanece menos explorada em escrita histórica de mulheres, lacuna que o presente estudo procura endereçar. O trabalho utiliza buscas de concordância e perfis de frequência normalizada, seguidas de leitura pelo pesquisador dos dados em sua integralidade, para desambiguar usos dinâmicos, deônticos e epistêmicos no *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, 1800–1899* (CoWITE19). Constata que *can* tende a expressar possibilidade circunstancial e affordances procedimentais, enquanto *may* licencia alternativas ao leitor; em ambos os casos, os modais atenuam a imposição ao enquadrar opções e capacidades em lugar de comandos. O estudo conclui que a modalidade dinâmica funciona como recurso sutil e eficaz de gestão da persona autoral feminina sob expectativas sociais oitocentistas, permitindo instruções claras, polidas e sensíveis às condições do leitor.

Palavras-chave: modalidade dinâmica, (im)polidez, escrita feminina do século XIX, textos de receitas, linguística de corpus, uso de linguagem com base no gênero.

1 Introduction

This study considers the role that dynamic modals have in conveying politeness within a corpus of English-language instructive texts authored by women during the 19th century. Dynamic modals, as a specific type of modality, seem to serve as linguistic cues that may indicate levels of (inter)subjectivity between the speaker and the proposition being articulated, as noted by Álvarez-Gil (2021). These modal devices are essential to formalising the speaker's conception of ability, willingness and potentiality, as noted in Vetter (2015), as regards the realisation of certain actions or the endorsement of particular statements. The discourse and pragmatic function of dynamic modality may be that it contributes to mitigating the broader communicative intent of a text. Within this conception of modality, as we shall conclude following our inspection of the sample texts, dynamic modals can be understood as deliberate manifestations of linguistic politeness. By attenuating a proposition, such modals help to manage social interactions, maintaining the necessary balance between authority and modesty, as discussed by scholars such as Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (2014). This idea is further elaborated on by Palmer's (2001, p. 10) observations that dynamic modals are inherently tied to the speaker's or writer's personal agency, reflecting their internal dispositions and circumstances and/or their external enablement.

However, it is important to recognise that the inherent semantic value of potential possibility (Vetter, 2020) encoded in these modal forms might indicate that they do not always directly modulate the proposition being framed. This can render them seemingly superfluous in certain communicative contexts in which the intended meaning or action is already clear (see Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil, 2021). This superfluity can occur even if we contend, as a premise, that dynamic modals are neither random nor gratuitous. Despite such a potential redundancy, our study posits that dynamic modals are far from dispensable; rather, they perform the essential pragmatic function of conveying (im)politeness. Even when they do not suggest explicit nuances of obligation or likelihood, dynamic modals can still play a crucial role in shaping the tone and relational dynamics of a discourse. Using the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, 1800–1899* (CoWITE19) (Alonso-Almeida *et al.*, 2025), we investigate dynamic modality as both a grammatical resource and a relational marker in women's nineteenth-century instructive/technical prose. Our design is explicitly synchronic: we model practices specific to Late Modern English rather than generalising diachronically. We therefore flag diachronic extension (e.g., 1900–1950 instructional prose) as planned future work. This analysis contributes to an understanding of how women were able to cope in the male-dominated spheres of education and literature; that is, by using language both to instruct and to position themselves within the broader social context.

Our research methodology is grounded in corpus linguistics, combining automated concordance searches with frequency counts (raw and normalised) and dispersion measures; subsequent qualitative analysis of KWIC lines identifies how *can* and *may* enact politeness through mitigation. This approach is particularly well-suited to the study of historical texts, in which the meaning and function of linguistic features such as dynamic modals may not be immediately apparent. In this study, automated concordance queries are supplemented with full-context manual reading of every occurrence. By context we mean (i) the immediate clause and sentence in which the modal appears and (ii) the relevant discourse unit for

the genre, namely, the entire recipe entry (title, ingredients, and method) or, in manuals, the paragraph/section in which the directive sequence unfolds. This integral reading enables us to disambiguate dynamic uses of *can* and *may* (ability/possibility that affords reader agency) from epistemic and deontic readings, and to identify politeness functions such as mitigation of directives, lowered imposition, and offer-like formulations. This mixed method provides broad coverage with fine-grained functional interpretation, clarifying how form (modal choice) relates to function (relational work) in nineteenth-century women's instructive/technical prose. We do not claim these functions are unique to 1800–1899 or to these genres; rather, we model how they operate in this period and dataset. Where relevant, we note contrasts with a male-authored control set, while broader diachronic generalisations remain outside our scope. In doing so, we offer a historically situated account of how women negotiated authority and politeness under the social expectations of the time.

We begin the remainder of this paper, in Section 2, by exploring the concept of modality. We discuss its various forms and functions, paying particular attention to dynamic modality. Section 2 lays the groundwork for an understanding of how modality operates within language to convey different levels of certainty, obligation, potentiality, enablement and (even) interpersonal alignment. Following this theoretical foundation, Section 3 contains our methodological approach; we explain how we combine corpus linguistics and a manual inspection to analyse the selected texts. Section 3 also addresses the challenges and considerations involved in working with historical corpora, such as the need for careful contextual interpretation. Section 4 offers an analysis of the modals in the corpus, detailing their use and distribution and analysing modal meanings to isolate those that denote dynamic modality. In Section 5, we examine more specific examples that reveal patterns of usage where dynamic modals indicate politeness. These patterns are not explicitly tied to gendered politeness strategies, but they do highlight how modals can be employed to soften directives and maintain interpersonal rapport. We also compare our findings with previous research on dynamic modality in Late Modern English. Finally, in Section 6, we conclude our report by summarising our main findings and suggesting directions for future research.

2 Dynamic modality and (im)politeness

Dynamic modality occupies a significant, though often underexplored, role within the broader linguistic framework of modality, particularly in its relation to (im)politeness. Modality, as described by Palmer (1986, 2001), refers to the expression of a speaker's attitudes and opinions. It encompasses various grammatical devices such as modal verbs and periphrases, as well as certain lexical items such as adverbs. Modality serves to modulate propositional content, indicating subjective or intersubjective perspectives on the truth or likelihood (Frawley, 1992) of a given state of affairs. As explained by Depraetere (2015), modality must be understood both by categorising the lexical devices used and through each category's inherent semantic distinctions – epistemic, deontic or dynamic, for example – which blur and shift boundaries based on context. Dynamic modality is distinguished by its focus on expressing ability, willingness, potentiality and necessity; these are concepts that are closely tied to the speaker's or writer's own capacities and intentions, as noted by Palmer (2001) and Nuyts (2001). This internal focus on personal agency makes dynamic modality particularly relevant

to an understanding of interpersonal dynamics, as this modal category directly relates to how individuals express their capacity to act within specific contexts.

Vetter's (2015, 2020) work on dynamic modality represents a significant departure from the more traditionally discussed epistemic and deontic modalities. Her analysis emphasises the capacity and potentiality inherent in human actions and events, focusing on what agents or situations are inherently capable of doing based on their abilities, dispositions and powers. This distinction is fundamental because it shifts the focus from external factors such as knowledge and duty to the internal capacities of the agent, thereby emphasising the potentiality and inherent possibilities within any given situation. Vetter's exploration aligns with the broader framework of dynamic modality by highlighting how the modality directly reflects the speaker's or writer's internal capacities and potential actions. When we say, 'John can swim', for instance, this statement reflects John's inherent ability to perform the action of swimming, this ability being a manifestation of dynamic modality. This perspective is echoed by Sweetser (1990), who argues that modality in language often reflects the speaker's internal perspective – their belief in the feasibility of an action. More recent studies, such as that by Nuyts (2016), further support this view by emphasising how modality often integrates cognitive and contextual factors, thus demonstrating the flexibility of dynamic modality in linguistic expression.

Dynamic modality is treated by Palmer (2001) as part of event modality, in contrast to propositional modality. While propositional modality concerns a speaker's evaluation of the truth of a proposition (epistemic) or the nature of its evidential support, event modality encodes stances toward actions and events. Within the deontic domain, traditionally characterised as obligation and permission, obligation itself can be subdivided into internal/mental versus external/material sources (Neves, 2006), the former reflecting subject-internal normative pressure and the latter norms imposed by institutions, rules or other agents. Against this backdrop, dynamic modality is distinctive in that it profiles a participant's capacity, disposition, or willingness without invoking a normative source. As Nuyts (2001, p. 25) notes, it involves an "ascription of capacity or need to the subject-participant," which may extend to inanimate subjects under certain conditions. This aligns with Vetter's (2015, p. 216) characterisation of dynamic meaning as potentiality-based semantics, setting it apart from more overtly normative or evaluative modalities.

The main analytical difficulty is not identifying modal forms but drawing boundaries between dynamic, deontic and epistemic readings when co-textual cues are underspecified – that is, when the surrounding discourse provides no explicit indicators of permission/obligation (e.g., *allowed*, *required*, source attributions) or epistemic evaluation. In such underspecified contexts, *can* may be compatible with ability/circumstantial possibility (dynamic) or permission (deontic): compare recipe-like statements such as "You can add a little water" (ability/option afforded by the procedure) versus signage-like "You can park here" (permission). Likewise, "The mixture can thicken overnight" illustrates circumstantial possibility with an inanimate subject. Precisely because these boundaries blur, we follow Depraetere (2015) and Depraetere & Reed (2011) in using source (participant-internal vs external) and potential barriers (ability, circumstantial conditions, rules) as systematic diagnostics, rather than assuming a single default reading (see also Palmer, 1990).

Vetter (2020) emphasised the context-dependent nature of dynamic modality, observing that the meaning of modal expressions such as 'can', 'could', 'might' and 'may' can vary significantly depending on the circumstances in which they are used. The phrase 'John can swim'

typically implies that John possesses the skill to swim. However, in a different context, the same expression might imply a conditional ability, such as 'John can swim if the water is warm', thus illustrating the flexibility and contextual nature of dynamic modality. This view is supported by Palmer (2001), who explained the importance of context in interpreting modality, noting that the same modal verb can convey different meanings depending on situational factors. Gisborne (2007) expanded on this by arguing that while the dynamic *can*, for instance, is often seen as expressing ability, its semantic development from Old English means that it retains elements of knowledge or competence that contribute to modern interpretations of ability. More recent work by Boye (2012) emphasises how context and communicative intent shape the interpretation of modal verbs, aligning closely with Vetter's emphasis on flexibility and situational dependency.

Vetter (2020) also contrasts dynamic modality with the concept of necessity, explaining that while dynamic modality focuses on what is possible, it does not concern itself with what must happen. This distinction is inherently tied to the idea of contingency, thus emphasising that dynamic modality is about what could happen under certain conditions, rather than what is inevitable. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of actions and events and an acknowledgment that multiple possibilities can coexist, depending on the specific capacities and circumstances involved (Vetter, 2020). The diachronic changes in modal expressions, particularly those seen through grammaticalisation, reflect the evolving use of dynamic modality in various contexts (Hilpert et al., 2021), and this evolution may include dynamic modality's role in (im)politeness. According to Gisborne (2007), this contingent nature is key to understanding the development of dynamic meanings in English modal verbs, particularly the evolution of 'can' and 'will,' through which dynamic senses reflect the internal properties of the subject rather than any external obligations. This emphasis on possibility and contingency resonates with Kratzer's (1981) modal semantics, which also highlights how the interpretation of modals depends on the interplay between contextual factors and the potential states of the world. Pietrandrea (2012) have extended this discussion by exploring how modal expressions interact with different layers of meaning, including necessity and possibility, further underscoring the complex interplay between modality and context. The conveyance of (im)politeness is an example of such an interaction.

Politeness, as conceptualised by Leech (2014), is a form of communicative behaviour that generally prioritises the value or benefit to others over that to oneself. It is a pervasive phenomenon across cultures and languages. The relational nature of politeness involves maintaining face, negotiating power relations and adhering to cultural norms that dictate appropriate behaviour in various social contexts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2008; Lakoff, 2005). Dynamic modality interacts with these relational aspects of politeness by modulating the force of statements concerning the speaker's abilities or intentions. One obvious instance is the use of the modal verb 'can' in 'I can help you with that'. Through its use, the statement represents not simply a straightforward assertion of ability but a potential act of politeness, as it offers assistance without imposing it. Here, the dynamic modal functions to align the speaker's intentions with the needs or desires of the listener, thereby reinforcing positive social relations and enhancing the politeness of the interaction.

However, the context in which dynamic modality is used can significantly influence its interpretation as polite or impolite. Politeness, as Lakoff (1973) and others have argued, is context-dependent, and what might be considered polite in one situation could be seen as impolite in another. An assertive use of dynamic modality, such as 'I can do this now',

might be interpreted as impolite or overbearing in a hierarchical setting where deference is expected, as explained in Alonso-Almeida and Álvarez-Gil (2021). Conversely, in a context where decisiveness and leadership are valued, we contend that the same statement might be seen as appropriately assertive and polite. Thus, dynamic modality's role in politeness is closely tied to the expectations and norms of the specific communicative context in which it appears. Impoliteness is not merely the absence or opposite of polite behaviour but a distinct communicative strategy with its own functions and effects, as Culpeper (2011) explained. Impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996, 2009) arises when behaviours deviate from the expected norms of interaction, causing offense or discomfort. Dynamic modality seems to play a role in the construction of impoliteness; it usually does so through the assertive or confrontational use of modal expressions that emphasise the speaker's capability or intent in ways that may challenge social norms or hierarchies. The use of dynamic modality in a statement like 'I can do this better than you', for instance, explicitly asserts the speaker's superior ability. This can be perceived as impolite, especially in contexts where modesty or equality is expected. Such statements highlight the speaker's capabilities, while they also implicitly devalue the abilities of the listener, thereby threatening their face in the sense in Brown & Levinson (1987). This face-threatening move can lead to various perlocutionary effects, such as resentment, anger or a defensive response (Culpeper, 2011); exactly which effect results depends on the relational context and the perceived intentions behind the statement.

The strategic use of (im)politeness in academic and professional discourse, as noted by Myers (1989) and Hyland (2005), further illustrates how dynamic modality can be deployed to assert dominance, challenge opposing views or resist impositions. In scientific writing (Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2009), where politeness strategies often exist to maintain academic decorum, impolite strategies (including, we contend, those involving dynamic modality) may surface as calculated moves designed to establish authority or appraise others' work. This is particularly evident in cases where the power relationship between interlocutors is imbalanced, for example, between established experts and newer scholars or when historically marginalised groups assert their place within the academic community. The use of dynamic modality in these contexts can thus be seen as a rhetorical tool that both conveys ability and negotiates the speaker's or writer's position within the discourse, sometimes at the expense of politeness. In the instructional texts we analysed, we did not identify any instances where dynamic modal verbs alone were used to express impoliteness, suggesting a strong genre-based association with their use. However, impoliteness may emerge in certain cases from the combination of dynamic modals with specific linguistic elements, a point we will explore in detail later.

Gender seems to play a significant role in the perception and use of dynamic modality in relation to (im)politeness. Historical analyses, such as those conducted by Lakoff (1975) and Mills (2005), suggest that women's speech has often been characterised by deference and a lack of assertiveness, thereby reflecting broader social expectations of gender-appropriate behaviour. However, more recent studies, including those by Leaper and Robnett (2010), indicate that the differences between men's and women's use of assertive language, including dynamic modality, are not as pronounced as once thought, although they do exist in certain contexts. In the context of 17th-century English utilitarian prose, for example, female writers seem to have often used dynamic modality strategically to skilfully accommodate the requirements of male-dominated academic and professional spheres, as explained and exemplified in Jucker (2020) and Alonso-Almeida and Álvarez-Gil (2021). As Mills (2005) and Peters (2003) have suggested, the

use of impolite strategies, including those involving dynamic modality, allowed these women to assert their authority, defend their positions and challenge the social norms that constrained their participation in public discourse. Such strategies could involve the use of self-deprecation to pre-empt criticism or of assertive language to claim intellectual space (cf. Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil, 2021). Both of these approaches suggest a nuanced understanding of how dynamic modality can be used to manage face and negotiate power in gendered interactions.

The concept of a community of practice, as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), provides a useful framework for understanding the role of dynamic modality in the construction of (im)politeness within specific social and professional contexts. A community of practice is a group of individuals who share a common set of activities, goals and practices; this includes the linguistic practices that shape their interactions and the norms of behaviour within the group (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). Within such communities, the use of dynamic modality can signal a member's alignment with or deviation from the community's norms, thereby contributing to the construction of (im)politeness. In academic communities, for example, where collaboration and mutual respect are highly valued, the use of dynamic modality to assert one's own abilities might be seen as impolite or arrogant if it were to disrupt the expected egalitarian ethos. Conversely, in more competitive environments, such as certain professional or academic settings, the same use of dynamic modality might be seen as necessary and even polite, as it demonstrates confidence and competence. Mills (2003) noted that communities of practice are not monolithic; they allow for both consensus and conflict, and members often belong to multiple overlapping communities with varying norms. This variability further complicates the relationship between dynamic modality and (im)politeness, as what is considered polite or impolite can shift depending on the specific community of practice and the participants' particular interactional goals. During our analysis of the corpus, the notion of community and the need to create association and rapport is patent, to the extent that a sense of allowance and confidence in the other's judgement and decision-making capabilities seem to contribute to the dissemination and acceptance of the technical knowledge being sequentially itemised.

Recent research has continued to build on and refine the understanding of dynamic modality. Portner (2018), for example, expanded on the interaction between modality and discourse. He explored how dynamic modality operates in conversational contexts, particularly in how speakers negotiate meaning in real-time interactions. Similarly, Gianollo (2020) examined the diachronic development of modal verbs, offering insights into how dynamic modality has evolved in different languages over time, thereby highlighting the fluid nature of modal meanings. Other studies, such as that by Bybee and Fleischman (1995), have used cross-linguistic data to explore the cognitive underpinnings of dynamic modality, arguing that the flexibility seen in dynamic modals reflects deeper cognitive structures that guide human reasoning and decision-making. Altogether, dynamic modality, as a linguistic device that reflects the speaker's or writer's internal capacities and intentions, may play a critical role in the expression of (im)politeness. Its relevance is evident and lies in its ability to modulate propositions (cf. Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014 for the concept of modulation) in ways that can either align with or challenge social norms.

In the upcoming sections, we present the results of our study on the relationship between dynamic modality and (im)politeness in 19th-century technical instructive texts written by women. As we shall see, there is a strong association between the genre under examination and the use of dynamic modals as (im)politeness devices.

3 Method and evidence

The methodology employed in this study was rooted in the principles of corpus linguistics, with computational tools used to systematically analyse linguistic patterns within a specialised historical corpus. The primary source of data for this research was the 19th-century section of the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English* (CoWITE19), which is a carefully curated collection of texts compiled at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Alonso-Almeida *et al.*, 2025). The 19th century was a transformative period for women's writing, particularly in the domestic sphere. It was a time when women's roles were shifting due to broader social and economic changes, including the rise of the middle class, increased literacy rates, and the emergence of women as authors of published works. Recipe books were a common medium through which women could assert themselves as authorities in domestic matters, while still adhering to social expectations of modesty and deference. During this time, women were expected to conform to norms of politeness, modesty, and deference, especially in public or semi-public discourse like published writing. Recipe books, often probably intended for other women, required female authors to use polite strategies to maintain their social credibility. These norms of politeness are crucial to understanding why certain modal verbs or other modal language structures are used more frequently and in specific ways in 19th-century instructive texts. The 19th century certainly saw a rise in women's contributions to the literary and instructive genres, with women becoming more visible as authors. However, they were still operating within a male-dominated society where their authority in writing had to be carefully negotiated.

This section of the corpus, currently in its actual version, i.e. February 2023, is a substantial body of approximately 500,000 words, all of which are authored exclusively by women. The texts within CoWITE19 were drawn from printed and manuscript recipe books that were produced in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or the United States of America between 1800 and 1899. This time frame means that the corpus is able to capture the linguistic features characteristic of Late Modern English and as used in instructive texts by female authors. As such, it appears as a rich source of data for an examination of the use of dynamic modals in these contexts.

The selection of texts for inclusion in CoWITE19 was guided by a set of criteria designed to ensure the representativeness and reliability of the data. First and foremost, all texts included in the corpus are instructive in nature, meaning they were specifically written to provide guidance or to give instructions on how to perform particular tasks. This focus on instructive texts aligned with the text-type classification provided by Werlich (1976), which defines such texts as those intended to direct the reader's actions according to the author's instructions. The emphasis on instructive content ensured that the corpus reflects the practical, didactic purposes for which these texts were originally created. Instructive texts, such as recipes, are inherently directive genres, which naturally lend themselves to the study of politeness strategies. These texts aim to guide readers in performing specific tasks (e.g., cooking or preparing remedies) while balancing the authoritative tone of the instructions with the need to maintain rapport and avoid imposing strict authority on the reader. Recipe books provide a unique lens through which to observe how politeness is encoded because they require authors to both instruct and offer flexibility to the reader. Recipe books and instructive texts stand in contrast to more narrative or personal genres (e.g., letters or diaries), where the use

of modals may not reflect the same tension between authority and politeness. Letters or diaries might prioritize personal reflection or emotional expression, while recipe texts are more task-oriented, making them rich sources for analysing how writers balance giving orders with maintaining politeness. Additional criteria include that the authors of the texts in CoWITE19 meet specific linguistic and demographic criteria: women whose first language was English (British or American). These criteria ensured that the corpus accurately represents the linguistic practices of English-speaking women during the 19th century.

The corpus only includes texts from the earliest available edition of each work, provided that the author was alive in the 19th century. This requirement was implemented to exclude any reprints or new editions of material originally published in the 18th century or earlier, thereby maintaining the temporal integrity of the corpus. Another important aspect of the corpus compilation was the need to achieve a balanced representation of texts across the entire 19th century. To this end, the corpus contains approximately 50,000 words for each decade between 1800 and 1899. This balanced distribution was carefully managed through the selection of texts from different parts of various volumes; in this way, we ensured that there was no content repetition that might skew the representativeness of the data, given that the majority of the volumes are recipe books. The diverse range of instructive content included in the corpus, including culinary, medical and pharmaceutical information, further enhanced its value as a resource for studying women's linguistic practices during this period.

The details of CoWITE19, including the number of files, tokens, types and lemmas, are summarised in Table 1, which provides a snapshot of the corpus's scope and scale.

Table 1 – CoWITE19 statistics

Files	Tokens	Types	Lemmas
31	487,136	12,142	15,374

Source: the author.

To carry out the analysis, the study focused on the use of dynamic modal verbs within the corpus, specifically targeting central modals such as 'can', 'could', 'may', 'might', 'shall', 'should', 'will', 'would' and 'must'. These modals were identified and extracted through computational searches using the CasualConc tool, a piece of software developed by Yasu Imao that allows for the precise and efficient retrieval of concordances within large text corpora. The CoWITE19 corpus, having been tagged for parts of speech, facilitated the required complex searches by enabling CasualConc to identify and isolate specific linguistic constructions such as stance matrices that license 'that' clauses (Alonso-Almeida, 2023), as well as other relevant syntactic structures. This computational approach allowed us to efficiently process the data within the corpus and to ensure that all relevant instances of dynamic modals were captured for analysis.

Once the relevant concordances were extracted, we conducted a full-context manual reading of each token to establish its modal type and function. To make the categorisation replicable, we defined a set of syntactic – semantic factors: (i) subject type and control (animate/agentive vs. inanimate; compatibility with the paraphrase *be able/capable to*), (ii) paraphrase tests (dynamic \approx *be able/capable to*; deontic \approx *be allowed/permitted to*; epistemic \approx *it is possible that*), (iii) source of modality and barriers – participant-internal ability/disposition or circumstantial affordances vs. external norms/authority and explicit constraint mark-

ers (e.g., *allowed, required, forbidden, rule, permission*), (iv) clausal environment (imperatives and directive sequences; conditional/procedural framing with *if/when*, purpose clauses), (v) polarity and focus items (*only, just, even*, negation) and co-occurring adverbs (*physically, easily* → dynamic; *legally, formally* → deontic; *probably, perhaps* → epistemic), and (vi) inanimate-subject diagnostics signalling circumstantial dynamic possibility (e.g., *The mixture can thicken overnight*). Ambiguous cases were double-coded and resolved by consensus. On this basis, only tokens with dynamic readings, ability, disposition, or circumstantial possibility affording options to the addressee were retained for quantification; deontic and epistemic readings were excluded (see also Depraetere & Reed, 2011; Nuyts, 2001; Palmer, 2001).

Beyond identifying modal tokens, each instance of *may* and *can* was annotated for a set of syntactic – semantic factors that plausibly constrain the choice of dynamic modal: (i) subject type/control (animate agent vs. inanimate/circumstantial), (ii) directive adjacency (imperatives, LET-constructions, procedural sequences), (iii) degree-of-adjective frame (e.g., *the largest/finest you can get; as thin as you can...*), (iv) optionality markers (e.g., *as/if you please; as you like; if preferred*), (v) disjunctive/contrastive operators (*or, but*), (vi) clause environment (conditionals and manner adverbials), and (vii) polarity/focus items and co-occurring adverbs (e.g., *only, possibly, easily, legally*). We then asked whether modal choice correlates with these factors: we cross-tabulated modal form (*may* vs. *can*) by factor, inspected odds ratios/log-odds, and used χ^2 or Fisher's exact tests where appropriate. Section 5 reports the qualitative patterns aligned with these factors.

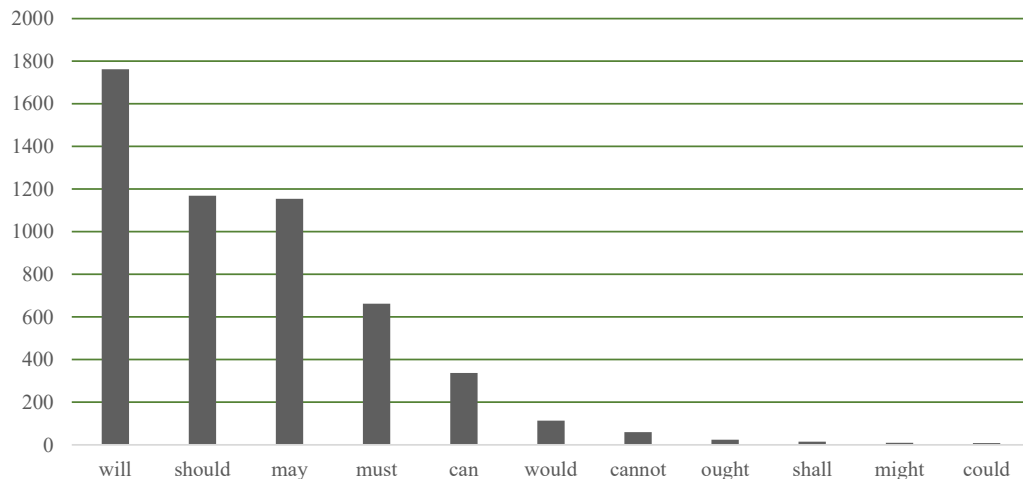
The results obtained from this analysis were then compared with findings from previous studies that have examined the use of modal verbs in written material by both men and women from the same time period, excluding recipe texts. This comparative analysis provided a broader perspective on how dynamic modals were employed across different genres and by different genders, thus allowing the study to explore potential gender-based differences in the use of these linguistic forms. Such comparisons allow us to explore the broader linguistic and social relations that were held at the time, particularly in regard to how women's language use in instructive texts might differ from or align with that of men.

In addition to the computational and manual analyses, the findings from the corpus inquiry were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. A 50-word context window was included on either side of each modal verb occurrence. This extended context window ensured that each instance of a dynamic modal could be accurately described and categorised according to its form, meaning and function. The Excel sheet also stored the factor codes described above and served as the basis for the cross-tabulations between modal choice and contextual factor.

4 Results

In this study, a total of 5,315 central modal verbs were identified within the corpus, distributed among dynamic, deontic and epistemic modalities, in the raw frequencies exhibited in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Distribution of modal verbs according to form



Source: the author.

The distribution, variance and likelihood ratios of these modals according to modal categories are given in Table 2, below. Dynamic modality in the corpus accounts for 28.05% of the total number of occurrences in the corpus. While dynamic modality does not exhibit the highest incidence – falling behind deontic modality, which comprises 68.33% of the cases – it still holds considerable importance within the corpus. Deontic modality, which is more prevalent, has a central part in making the assertive statements that are vital to the successful execution of recipes. This type of modality is particularly effective in instructive texts, where clarity and authority are required to ensure that readers follow instructions precisely and thereby achieve the intended results.

Table 2 – Distribution, variance and likelihood ratios of central modal verbs across modal categories

Modality Type	Observed frequency	Percentage	Expected Frequency	Variance	Likelihood Ratio
DynamicModality	1,491	28.05	1,771.67	46.45	0.841
Deontic Modality	3,632	68.33	1,771.67	1,575.07	2.048
Epistemic Modality	192	3.61	1,771.67	1,343.69	0.108
Total	5,315	100	5,315		

Source: the author.

As shown in Table 2, epistemic modality makes up only 3.61% of the cases. Dynamic modality, however, has a critical but subtler function, as they do not assert obligation as directly as deontic modals. Instead, they implicitly convey authority by enabling actions and suggesting possibilities. This aspect of dynamic modality is especially relevant in instructive texts, in which authors must balance authoritative guidance with reader autonomy. In our corpus, dynamic modality, as also seen in Table 2, has a variance of 46.45, indicating a smaller deviation from the expected frequency. The likelihood ratio of 0.841 suggests that dynamic modality is used somewhat less than anticipated; however, it remains a significant feature in the corpus. This modal meaning is primarily expressed through the verbs ‘can’ and ‘may’, being the latter more common, with a ratio of approximately 3:1 in favour of ‘may’ compared to ‘can’. The use of these modals in the texts underscores their role in enabling the presentation of suggestions and options without sounding overly prescriptive.

In contrast, deontic modality, as exhibited in ‘You must not let the steaks dry over the fire’ (Mrs. Bliss of Boston, 1850), is encoded in the modal form ‘must’; other forms in the corpus being ‘will’ and ‘should’, for instance. Deontic modality emerges as the most dominant type in the corpus, constituting 68.33% of the total modal occurrences. With a much higher variance of 1,575.07 and a likelihood ratio of 2.048, it is clear that deontic modality is overrepresented. This reflects the nature of our instructive texts, where guidance is provided primarily through the use of congruent or modulated directives. As these texts aim to guide the reader in completing specific tasks, they naturally necessitate the use of modals like *must*, and *should*.

Epistemic modality is seen in instances such as: ‘Then came rice porridge eaten with cream and jam and a series of toasts. This might have been thought the end, but at 1 P.M. *bret* again appeared’ (Campbell, 1893). This type of modality, encoded in the modal form ‘might’, is the least frequent, making up only 3.61% of the corpus. It shows a variance of 1,343.69 and a likelihood ratio of 0.108, indicating that its occurrence is significantly lower than expected. The minimal use of epistemic modality reinforces the corpus’s purpose of guiding readers through the required actions, rather than engaging in speculative or evaluative discourse.

In terms of the specific dynamic modals ‘may’ and ‘can’, ‘may’ is used more frequently, accounting for 1,045 occurrences, while ‘can’ appears only 245 times. This distribution suggests that ‘may’ serves as the more common means of expressing dynamic modality, likely due to its more polite and formal connotations in historical discourse. The use of dynamic modals such as ‘may’ and ‘can’ is further detailed in Table 3, which gives their distribution, variance and likelihood ratios.

Table 3 – ‘May’ and ‘can’ distribution with variance and likelihood ratios

Modal verb	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	variance	Likelihood ratio
may	1,045	745.5	123.54	1.403
can	245	745.5	326.34	0.329

Source: the author.

As deduced from this table, ‘may’ accounts for 73% of the dynamic modality instances in our analysis. The variance for ‘may’ is 123.54, indicating that its usage is slightly higher than

expected. Additionally, the likelihood ratio of 1.403 suggests that ‘may’ was favoured as a way of expressing dynamic potentiality, aligning with the formal and polite tone typical of historical instructive texts. ‘Can’ accounts for 27% of the dynamic modality cases. The variance for ‘can’ is higher than that for ‘may’, at 326.34, with a likelihood ratio of 0.329, indicating its usage is lower than expected. This suggests that ‘can’, with its more straightforward and direct connotations, is less frequently used than ‘may’. The relatively lower frequency of ‘can’ might be said to reflect its more assertive tone. This distribution is intriguing, given that previous research suggests that ‘CAN is the only modal which clearly retains a dynamic sense’ (Gisborne, 2007, p. 45). However, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) observe that ‘may’ can serve as a substitute for ‘can’ in more formal registers, a trend that appears to be supported by the usage patterns in this corpus. This is also attested in Alonso-Almeida and Cruz-García (2011). Interestingly, focusing on most prominent presence of modal meanings, The dominance of deontic modality does not undermine the role of dynamic modality, but rather provides a contrast. Dynamic modality (28.05% of the total) serves a complementary function – offering flexibility and allowing the reader autonomy. This combination of directive and flexible language is essential in maintaining a balance between authority and politeness. In contrast, the low frequency of epistemic modality (e.g., *might*, *could*) can be explained by the genre’s focus on certainty and precision. Instructive texts are not primarily concerned with expressing uncertainty or probability, which may explain the minimal presence of epistemic modals.

5 Discussion

This section examines the use of dynamic modals ‘may’ and ‘can’ in 19th-century women’s instructive writing and makes sense of the data collected under a set of uses that justify the presence of dynamic modality in recipe writing. We now interpret the *may/can* contrast through the factor scheme introduced in Section 3, showing how modal choice aligns with optionality markers and disjunctive structures (*may*) versus degree-of-adjective frames and circumstantial ability with inanimate subjects (*can*).

5.1 Context similarity and dynamic modality

A careful analysis of instances where ‘may’ and ‘can’ appear reveals that these modals often occur in similar contexts, suggesting that they could be interchangeable, albeit with distinct nuances that subtly influence the interaction between the author and the reader. The below examples are illustrative of this. In our factor coding, these are the CONTEXT-SIMILARITY and DIRECTIVE-ADJACENCY environments; the association with modal choice is argued qualitatively here:

- (1) and you may add half a dozen blades of mace (Leslie, 1854).
- (2) and you can add to it rice, barley, or vermicelli, whichever is the most approved (Cust, 1853).

Both ‘may’ and ‘can’ are used to grant permission or, seemingly, to indicate the potential possibility of action, thereby providing the reader with flexibility when following the

recipe. The modal ‘may’ in (1) serves to further soften the directive and align with broader politeness strategies that aim to preserve the reader’s autonomy. This tendency toward mitigation suggests that this modal form is not merely a vehicle for granting permission but a means of avoiding the forceful imposition of the author’s authority. This is particularly relevant in domestic genres like recipe writing, where the relationship between the author and reader is inherently instructional but must also accommodate the reader’s autonomy and preferences. By using ‘may’, the author subtly negotiates this balance, offering advice that is authoritative but not overbearing. In contrast, ‘can’ seems to convey a more straightforward and practical approach. In Example (2), the use of ‘can’ indicates a feasible action without the additional layer of politeness that ‘may’ might overtly and conventionally imply. While ‘can’ still seems to grant permission and to suggest a possible action, it does so in a manner that is seemingly more direct (Biber et al., 2002; Curzan, 2014; Thompson & Thetela, 1995) and less concerned with mitigating the author’s authority. This directness can be seen as aligning more closely with a factual statement, in which the author is simply presenting a possible course of action rather than delicately negotiating the reader’s response. The straightforward nature of ‘can’ implies a certain level of confidence in the reader’s ability to make decisions, offering a practical option without the need for additional polite cushioning.

5.2 Dynamic modality and the distinct degrees of adjectives

In comparison to ‘may’, ‘can’ seems to be more direct and less concerned with mitigating the instruction in the vicinity of adjectives. This can be seen in the following examples:

- (3) Take three or five of the smallest pullet eggs you can get, fill them with flummery, and when they are stiff and cold, peel off the shells (Haslehurst, 1814).
- (4) To dress Mutton venison-fashion. Take the largest and fattest leg of mutton you can get, cut out like a haunch of venison, as soon as it is killed, while it is warm, it will eat the tenderer (A Lady, 1818).
- (5) Cut off half the stalk of the largest ripe cherries you can get; roll them, one by one, in beaten white of egg, and then lightly in sifted sugar (Corbet, 1835).
- (6) Let the slices be as thin as you can possibly cut them (Hill, 1863).
- (7) Take a leg of the finest beef you can get, split it in half, from the knuckle to the thigh-joint, that is, longitudinally; wash it well, so that it is free from blood (Mason, 1871).

The structure of combining ‘can’ with superlative and comparative adjectives, as in ‘the smallest you can get’ or ‘as thin as you can possibly cut’, presents a distinctive linguistic pattern within the corpus. This construction functions by providing a flexible guideline that suggests an ideal, but without enforcing a strict standard. The use of ‘can’ in these contexts highlights the reader’s capability to act according to their own circumstances, allowing for adaptability in following instructions. Interestingly, this structure does not appear with the modal ‘may’. The absence of ‘may’ in combination with degrees of adjectives suggests a significant restriction in the use of dynamic ‘may’ within this corpus. This restriction may imply that ‘may’, which often introduces a layer of politeness or hypotheticality, is not suited to the direct,

action-oriented nature of the instructions in these texts. The form ‘can’, by contrast, is more pragmatically aligned with the practical guidance typical of recipe instructions, where flexibility is necessary, but ambiguity or excessive politeness might detract from clarity and efficacy. Functionally, ‘can’ serves to communicate a sense of capability without imposing rigid expectations, thus fostering a cooperative and accessible interaction between the writer and the reader. This use of dynamic modality respects the reader’s autonomy while maintaining the instructional clarity necessary for the genre, balancing both flexibility and precision in a way that makes the guidance practical and adaptable to real-life situations.

In short, the above is evidence of the role the form ‘can’ plays as a marker of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as also seen in example (8), where it is used to suggest optimal actions while leaving room for the reader’s discretion:

- (8) Take the largest and fattest leg of mutton you can get, cut out like a haunch of venison, as soon as it is killed, while it is warm, it will eat the tenderer (A Lady, 1818).

The use of ‘can’ in these examples enables the reader to make the best choice possible without feeling pressured to meet an unattainable standard. This use aligns with the concept of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), where the speaker seeks to minimise the imposition on the listener or reader. By choosing ‘can’, the author offers guidance that is firm yet flexible, leaving room for personal discretion in executing the instructions. In the context of 19th-century instructive writing, this strategy reflects an important balance: it allows women authors to assert their expertise while adhering to the social expectations of deference and modesty (Fitzpatrick, 2015; Schneider, 2005).

5.3 Dynamic modality and conditional or manner clauses

The inclusion of conditional or manner clauses, exclusively in sentences featuring ‘may’, emphasises the author’s intent to avoid a direct imposition:

- (9) You may add a little juice of a lemon, catchup, red wine, and walnut liquor, just as you please (Holland, 1825).
- (10) You may add red wine or vinegar as you like (Smith, 1831).
- (11) Let the whole boil until the vegetables are pulp; then you may add, if you like, dumplings, made of flour and butter (Bliss of Boston, 1850).

In these examples, the use of ‘may’ combined with phrases like ‘just as you please’, ‘as you like’, ‘and if you like’ suggests a polite, non-presumptive approach to giving instructions. The author is clearly offering guidance, yet deliberately avoids imposing any strictures, thereby allowing the reader the freedom to modify the recipe according to their personal preferences or the availability of ingredients. These assumptions may vary according to the contextual circumstances. This approach is significant, as it reflects the social norms and etiquette of the time (Jucker, 2020); these valued politeness and deference, particularly in written communication. By using ‘may’ in conjunction with conditional phrases, the author is providing options, and she is also signalling respect for the reader’s autonomy, acknowledging that the reader has the authority

to make decisions based on their own judgment. The conditional clauses serve an important function in softening the directive nature of the instruction. In example (9), the phrase ‘just as you please’ directly invites the reader to make a choice that suits their tastes or needs, effectively transferring some of the decision-making power from the author to the reader. Similarly, ‘you may add... as you like’ in (10) and ‘you may add, if you like’ in (11) both further reinforce this non-imposing stance by explicitly stating that the reader’s preferences should guide the final decision based on the potential for different and tailored outcomes (see Vetter, 2013, 2020). This use of ‘may’ to encode politeness through optionality ensures that the instructions are perceived as suggestions rather than commands, thereby creating a more collaborative and respectful interaction between the author and the reader. Besides, this approach acknowledges the reader’s expertise and/or preferences, noting that potential readers’ backgrounds might range anywhere from novice to experienced cook (cf. Alonso-Almeida, 2024).

5.4 Dynamic modality and disjunctive expressions

The following examples illustrate how ‘may’ combines with disjunctive expressions to seemingly entail politeness:

- (12) You may fry the carp first, if you please, but the above is the most modern way (Holland, 1825).
- (13) You may leave out the flour if you do not like it, and instead of it put in a little spinage and cabbage-lettuce, cut small, which must be first fried in butter, and well mixed with the broth (Smith, 1831).
- (14) When cold, decorate it with neatly-cut pieces of pistachio nuts; or you may put it into your ice-pot and freeze it if preferred (Hill, 1863).

The examples provided demonstrate how the dynamic modal ‘may’ functions as a politeness strategy that offers alternatives, allowing the reader to adjust the instructions based on their preferences or circumstances. In example (12), the dynamic modal may functions as a politeness strategy by offering the reader flexibility in how to proceed with the recipe. The reader is provided with an alternative method (‘You may fry the carp first, if you please’), which signals respect for their autonomy and personal preferences. However, the subsequent use of the disjunctive *but* introduces a contrast that subtly undermines this politeness by framing the alternative as less desirable. The phrase ‘but the above is the most modern way’ introduces an evaluative judgment, positioning the author’s preferred method as superior or more sophisticated.

This structure, while outwardly polite through the use of ‘may’, conveys an implicit critique through ‘but’, as it subtly suggests that adhering to the alternative would mark the reader as less “modern” or even less sophisticated. This shift from politeness to potential condescension aligns with Culpeper’s (1996) *off-record impoliteness strategy*, where the author implies something negative indirectly, allowing room for plausible deniability. The reader is ostensibly given freedom to choose, but the contrasting conjunction implies that one choice is clearly favoured over the other, subtly belittling any deviation from the author’s preferred method. Thus, the combination of ‘may’ with ‘but’ reflects a tension between politeness and

impoliteness, as the author uses 'may' to offer discretion while 'but' undermines it by casting doubt on the reader's alternative choice.

In this case, the use of 'may' introduces the alternative of omitting the flour, respecting the reader's personal taste preferences ('if you do not like it'). This brings into line a politeness strategy that mitigates imposition by allowing the reader to make a subjective choice without judgment, thus positioning them with full authority to decide whether or not to follow the suggestion. However, after offering this choice, the phrase 'must be' introduces a more prescriptive tone regarding the alternative ingredients ('spinage and cabbage-lettuce'). The obligatory 'must' shifts the tone from the flexibility implied by 'may' to a more assertive directive. This shift limits the reader's autonomy by reasserting the author's control over the process, especially in terms of how the substitution should be executed. Nevertheless, distinct from previous instances, the introduction of the impoliteness marker 'must' does not negate the polite function of 'may'; it simply narrows the range of acceptable actions once a choice has been made. In (14), 'may' is once again employed to offer the reader a choice between two possible finishing steps – decorating the dish or freezing it. The use of 'if preferred' further softens the instruction, giving the reader the freedom to decide based on their own preferences. Unlike (12), where the contrast with 'but' implicitly privileged one method over the other, the conjunction 'or' presents the alternatives neutrally in this case, without evaluative commentary.

6 Comparison of findings with existing evidence from Late Modern English

Previous research by Alonso-Almeida (2021) has investigated dynamic modality in historical texts, with a particular focus on the *Coruña Corpus of English Scientific Writing* (CHET) subcorpus of history texts, which includes samples from the 18th and 19th centuries. CHET includes such genres as treatises, essays, textbooks, lectures, travelogues, dictionaries, letters and biographies. As such, it contains both argumentative and expository texts (in contrast with CoWITE, which only comprises instructive texts). Alonso-Almeida explored the role that dynamic modality has in shaping historical discourse, examining how central modals function within distinct genres. By employing a corpus-based methodology, his study provides a quantitative and qualitative analysis of dynamic modality, revealing how these modals serve both to describe abilities and potentialities and to construct arguments, particularly in scientific and historical narratives. Alonso-Almeida's study explores the pragmatic function of dynamic modals in shaping interpersonal relationships through language; as such, his findings are directly comparable to those of the present study.

In historical texts, dynamic modals like 'can' and 'could' appear to play a central role in expressing personal capacity, potentiality, or limitations. The form 'could' is frequently used to express the absence of ability or possibility; this is particularly evident in negative contexts, in which it is used to denote the inability to perform an action based on external circumstances. This certainly supports our findings in women's instructive writing, where dynamic modals also serve to acknowledge limitations. In the context of recipe writing, however, the emphasis is more on offering guidance that contains flexibility, using 'can' and 'may' to suggest possible actions rather than fixed outcomes. This comparison between the different genres reveals

how the texts in CHET and CoWITE take advantage of dynamic modality to negotiate the boundaries of capability and suggestion even though the genres' foci diverge: historical texts focus on external limitations, while recipes prioritise flexibility and reader autonomy.

Both the present analysis and that by Alonso-Almeida (2021) demonstrate how dynamic modality is closely tied to politeness strategies. In historical texts, 'may' and 'can' often mitigate the authority of the author by softening directives and allowing for more tentative claims, thus reinforcing a polite, cooperative tone. This is particularly important in the scientific and historical genres, where authors are expected to present evidence while maintaining a certain level of academic modesty. Similarly, in women's instructive writing, particularly in recipe texts, dynamic modals like 'may' are used to soften the illocutionary force of directives; by considering contextual factors, the text offers suggestions, rather than strict instructions. In both historical and recipe writing, 'may' and 'can' serve to grant flexibility, allowing the reader to interpret and adapt the information based on their own needs or limitations.

One key divergence between the findings for CHET and those for CoWITE lies in the role of impoliteness and assertiveness in the use of dynamic modality. In Alonso-Almeida's (2021) evidence, dynamic modals are sometimes linked to strategies of impoliteness or assertion, especially in argumentative or competitive academic texts. The use of 'may' in CHET serves to assert the author's authority and expertise, especially when combined with other deictic devices. This can be seen in a sentence like:

- (15) ... in the ensuing elections of senators, I think, we may very fairly presume, that they continued to exercise the same right, in every subsequent instance, which we have already shewn them to have done, in the first (Chapman, 1750, as cited in Alonso-Almeida, 2021, p. 543).

Importantly, *I think* in (15) **reasserts rather than attenuates**: it subjectifies the proposition and marks authorial ownership of the inference, signalling that the writer relies on his/her own expertise and world knowledge; together with the booster *very fairly* and the inclusive *we*, it functions as an author-owned, reinforced assertion (not a softened directive). In this context, the use of dynamic modality as a means of asserting dominance is more commonly found in male-authored texts, reflecting their more competitive tone in academic discourse. In contrast, the corpus of women's recipe writing reveals no such instances of impoliteness or confrontation. The use of dynamic modals in recipes is almost exclusively tied to politeness strategies; it is aimed at offering flexible advice without imposing strict authority. This lack of assertiveness and impoliteness aligns with the traditionally gendered expectations of women's language, as discussed by Lakoff (1975) and Mills (2005). Women's instructive writing, particularly in the domestic genre of recipe texts, prioritises politeness, flexibility and reader autonomy over the more assertive or competitive tones found in historical and academic genres.

Another area of divergence between the two corpora lies in the contextual dependence of dynamic modality. In historical texts, the use of dynamic modals often reflects a more rigid interpretative framework, with the modals functioning to present logical or factual constraints. As noted in Alonso-Almeida's (2021) work, historical writers often employ dynamic modality to express what is possible or impossible in a specific historical context, thus reflecting the author's interpretation of historical evidence. In contrast, the present study shows a stronger focus on negotiating reader autonomy in instructional texts. Recipe

writers frequently use dynamic modals to acknowledge potential limitations in the reader's resources or preferences, thereby offering a more flexible approach to their instructions. This reflects a key difference in how a genre shapes the use and function of dynamic modality. In historical writing, dynamic modals help authors assert their interpretations; in recipe writing, in contrast, these modals are used to foster a sense of partnership between the author and the reader, giving the reader the freedom to adapt the instructions as needed.

7 Conclusion

In this article, we have aimed to demonstrate that dynamic modality serves a crucial and multi-faceted pragmatic function in avoiding imposition and softening the author's directives within 19th-century women's instructive texts. These texts, which were often written with the dual purpose of educating and guiding the reader through various domestic tasks, reveal a sophisticated use of language where the nuances of modal verbs such as 'can' and 'may' play central roles. This analysis has allowed us to arrive at a tentative conclusion concerning the notion of dynamic modality as exhibited in the evidence analysed. Dynamic modality functions merely as an ostensive cue to convey the additional pragmatic meaning of politeness based on both an individual and a mutual understanding, belief and acceptance of factual truth concerning the capabilities, abilities and potentialities, either circumstantial or permanent, of given actors or processes. While epistemic modality refers to a specific cline or gradation concerning the resolution of the *p(roposition)*, dynamic modality may likely imply only polarised events of *p*. This follows from the fact that dynamic modality seems to primarily rely on previous known judgement to pre-evaluate possible scenarios that are neither probable nor obligatory. Dynamic modality refers to factual scenarios whose realisation depends on internal and external considerations, rather than on ungrounded expectations and hypothetical reasoning.

Our careful analysis of a specialised corpus has shown that dynamic modality, as expressed through modal verbs (especially 'can' and 'may'), is not merely a lexico-morphological feature, even though it is often regarded as a non-modal particle due to its association with factuality (Gisborne, 2007). Instead, this modality is a strategic device that authors could use to manage the delicate balance between offering clear, authoritative instructions and maintaining a respectful, non-imposing tone, in the sense given by Leech (2014). This balance is particularly evident in contexts where, although the didactic nature of the content requires the use of obligation and necessity devices, the authors still strive to respect the reader's autonomy and decision-making capabilities.

When examining the specific uses of 'can' and 'may' (in particular – these modals being the most representative of the modal category), it becomes evident that these terms, while rooted in conveying potentiality, contextual feasibility and disposition, possess distinct meanings that reflect the underlying general meanings of enablement and agency. The form 'can' often emerges in contexts where the potentiality is driven by external forces, as described in van der Auwera *et al.* (1998) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). Its use suggests that the reader's actions are somehow influenced by factors beyond their immediate control. This is particularly apparent when 'can' is paired with comparative and superlative structures, such as in phrases like 'the largest you can get' or 'the finest you can find'. These constructions subtly communicate that, while the reader is encouraged to aim for the best possible outcome,

there is an inherent understanding that circumstances may limit their ability to achieve the ideal. This use of 'can' thus functions as a form of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), where the author avoids imposing strict requirements and instead offers guidance that is aspirational but flexible. In this way, the author respects the reader's situation, acknowledging that they (the reader) may need to make do with what is available while still striving for the best possible result.

This approach to using 'can' is particularly significant in the context of 19th-century domestic writing, where the availability of ingredients (cf. Ortega-Barrera, 2024) or tools could vary greatly depending on the reader's socioeconomic status or geographic location. The author's choice to use 'can' in this way mitigates any potential burden on the reader to meet an unattainable standard, and it also reinforces a sense of intragender (women-to-women) empathy within the domestic reading community. This empathetic tone (Mills, 2003) fosters a cooperative relationship between the author and the reader, one in which the reader feels guided rather than judged and where their efforts, regardless of the outcome, are validated. As Palmer (2001) notes, dynamic modality, by focusing on the capacities and possibilities available to the subject, effectively bridges the gap between prescriptive authority and reader autonomy.

The modal form 'may' is frequently used in the corpus to convey a sense of internally motivated potentiality, whereby the reader is granted a significant degree of choice and flexibility. This modal is often accompanied by clausal mitigators or downtoners (using the terminology in Hyland [2005]), such as 'if you please' or 'if preferred'; these serve to further soften the directive (cf. Leech, 2014) and emphasise the non-presumptive nature of the instruction. This use of 'may' reflects a deliberate effort by the authors to create a dialogic interaction with readers, one in which their preferences, tastes, abilities, dispositions and circumstances are given due consideration. This strategy both enhances the politeness of the communication and aligns with the deference and respect (in both written and spoken interactions) expected by the broader cultural norms of the period (Jucker, 2020). The frequent pairing of 'may' with such attenuating phrases suggests that the permission it conveys is less about external conditions and more about encouraging the reader to make choices based on their own judgment and preferences. This internal motivation is particularly evident in contexts where the author offers alternatives or suggests modifications to the recipe or task at hand. In phrases like 'you may fry the carp first, if you please' or 'you may leave out the flour if you do not like it', for instance, the reader is given options while being subtly reassured that their choices may be valid. This use of 'may' thus functions as a politeness strategy that prioritises the reader's comfort and autonomy, thereby creating a sense of collaboration (Mills, 2005), rather than command.

In brief, the use of 'can' and 'may' in women's instructive texts from the 19th century reflects a conscious and deliberate effort by these authors to manage the delicate relationship between authority and politeness. The modals used are not simply tools for conveying potentiality; they are integral to the way these authors manage their relationship with the reader, allowing them to offer guidance that is authoritative yet flexible and respectful of the reader's autonomy. The nuanced differences between 'can' and 'may' underscore the authors' sensitivity to the social norms of their time, according to which the need to instruct was balanced with the equally important need to maintain a polite and considerate tone. Interestingly, when comparing these findings with data from Late Modern English technical writing (see Alonso-Almeida [forthcoming] on modalisation and modulation devices from a gendered perspec-

tive), a clear distinction emerges in how men and women employed these dynamic modals. In male-authored texts, 'can' and 'may' often function as alternative strategies for conveying politeness, with 'may' being less frequently used. This contrast suggests that women, in their instructive texts, were more attuned to the subtleties of politeness (Leaper & Robnett, 2010) and to the importance of offering choice and flexibility to their readers.

This observation raises intriguing questions about the role of gender in shaping language use, particularly in genres where the relationship between the author and the reader is inherently instructional. It also highlights the potential influence of genre on modal usage, as the domestic focus of the women's texts may have necessitated a greater emphasis on politeness and flexibility compared to the more rigid and objective tone (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 2005) often found in scientific and technical writing. These findings invite further exploration, particularly in terms of examining how these patterns of modal use might reflect broader social and cultural attitudes towards gender, authority and communication in the 19th century. By continuing to analyse these aspects within the corpus, future research can deepen our view on how language functions both as a medium for instruction and as a reflection of the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. This analysis of dynamic modality, therefore, has been conducted with the dual aims of filling a gap in the literature concerning the role of these modals in earlier English texts and contributing to the understanding of the intersection between language, gender and social norms in historical discourse.

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