

ANALYSING MODALITY IN NAIRALANDERS' DISCOURSE ON THE NON-PASSAGE OF THE GENDER EQUALITY BILL IN NIGERIA

 Adetutu Aragbuwa ¹  Toyese Najeem Dahunsi ²

¹ Ekiti State University (Nigeria)

aragbuwa.adetutu@eksu.edu.ng

² Osun State University (Nigeria)

toyese.dahunsi@uniosun.edu.ng

Abstract. The successive rebuttal of the *Gender and Equality Opportunity Bill* (henceforth, GEO Bill) by members of the upper chamber of Nigeria's legislature has become a discourse object of scholarly enquiry in (non)Nigerian academia. Scholars across disciplines have engaged this pertinent issue using diverse theoretical perspectives. However, scant (or no) attention has been accorded the rejection narratives in linguistic scholarship; hence, the justification for this study. Situated within corpus-assisted critical discourse studies, the study explores the modal resources in *Nairalanders'* discourse on the Nigerian Senate's rejection of the GEO Bill in 2016 and 2021, with a view to critically analysing *Nairalanders'* attitudes to the Bill and its rejection as well as predominant ideologies embedded in the discourse. The data for the study consist of *Nairalanders'* discourse corpora on the non-passage of the Bill in 2016 and 2021 retrieved from www.nairaland.com. A Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) and collocation analysis of the modal resources found in the corpus were also conducted using *AntConc* corpus analysis tool. The results reveal that *Nairalanders* use epistemic and deontic modal resources to dominantly express their two-pronged attitude to the GEO Bill rejection: negativism towards the Bill and positivism to its non-passage. These modal choices tacitly serve ethnic, gender and religious ideological biases that culminate in *Nairalanders'* resistive engagement towards the Bill. By implication, the feasibility of gender equality in Nigeria must transcend legal measures; culture re-evaluation and national re-orientation on gender equality for sustainable development must be prioritised.

Keywords: Corpus linguistics; critical discourse analysis; Gender Equality Bill (the GEO Bill); modality; *Nairaland(er)*

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¹ Corresponding author: Adetutu Aragbuwa
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0879-9027>

1. Introduction

The internet has become an unprecedented prominent site for the discursive (re)construction and shaping of societal discourses in the 21st Century. With it, online users can access diverse social contexts and experiences, and can participate in communication exchanges both synchronically and asynchronously (Cohen, 2017). The social inclusivity engendered by the internet has made language (use) remarkably central in the digital revolution (Crystal, 2004). This development has led to the emergence of computer-mediated discourse (CMD), which is “distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of (critical) discourse analysis to address that focus” (Herring, 2004, p. 612). Ranging from electronic mails, real-time chats to discussion forums and blogospheres, the linguistic properties of these internet genres have facilitated expansive scholarly opportunities to explore the (inter)relations between online participants’ linguo-social engaging attitudes and sociocultural practices (Herring, 2004; Idehen & Taiwo, 2016).

In spite of the ubiquity of these internet genres in Nigeria, discussion forum has gained greater prominence in the country in the past decades owing to its interactive, threaded, inclusive, collaborative, accessible and persistent attributes. Discussion forums are multiparticipant asynchronous online platforms where internet users who share similar interests dialogue and exchange viewpoints on topical issues such as education, politics, ethno-religion, marriage, finance, among others (Herring, 2004; Idehen & Taiwo, 2016). Discussions are usually organised on such forums through threadal development where an initial post on a particular subject attracts (a) series of reactions from other members. The asynchronous system of the genre allows all posts to be persistently accessible to old and new members for further dialogic engagements. The tremendous impact of discussion forum on socio-political processes in Nigeria has resultantly led to the relevance and rapid growth of Nigerian online forums; however, *Nairaland* Forum remains one of the most prominent (Honkanen, 2020).

Nairaland (henceforth, NL), created by a Nigerian, is a prominent virtual platform for discursive engagements for Nigerian internet users, and the online diasporic populations of Nigerian ancestry. It serves as an open discursive site for engaging trending social and political issues affecting Nigeria and Nigerians. NL discourse is typically “pseudonymous, asynchronous communication that is mainly text-based but includes visual elements such as emojis, memes, and photographs” (Chiluwa & Odebunmi, 2016; Honkanen & Müller, 2021, p. 4). Although the English language is largely dominant on the platform, which blurs participants’ linguo-ethnic heterogeneity, discourses on NL exhibit some multilingual blend of Nigerian English and other Nigerian languages (Honkanen, 2020, p. 50). Discursive practices on NL have remarkably facilitated civic engagement for conceptualising its users’ discourses on and attitudes to socio-political issues within the Nigerian polity (Nelson, Loto & Omojola, 2018). This engagement has garnered extensive interest among (non) Nigerian discourse analysts in recent times. In consequence, (critical) discourse-oriented scholars, most especially within Nigerian linguistic scholarship, are increasingly engaging the association between *Nairalanders’* discourses and socio-political practices in Nigeria, with the intent to understand how the platform discursively impacts social and political actions or reforms in Nigeria.

Through the lenses of diverse discourse theoretical paradigms, such scholars have mostly explored *Nairalanders’* discourses on Nigerian politics (Taiwo, Akinwotu & Kpolugbo, 2021), ethno-political and religious conflicts (Ajiboye & Abioye, 2019), secessionist agitations (Osisanwo & Akano, 2023a, 2023b), terrorists’ attacks (Chiluwa &

Odebunmi, 2016) as well as sports, entertainment, health and family (Taiwo, 2011). Other extant studies on *Nairalanders'* discursive foci and interactions have analysed feminised issues that border on women's underwear money ritual syndrome (Akinwande, 2019) and women trying to conceive (TTC) (Taiwo & Adebayo, 2022). Despite this expanding literature, *Nairalanders'* discourse on the Nigerian Senate's non-passage of the GEO Bill in 2016 and 2021 has received scant (or no) attention in (critical) discourse studies. This research paucity informs the current study, which thus marks its novelty and significance in linguistic scholarship.

Drawing on corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, this study aims to examine the modality choices in *Nairalanders'* discourse on Nigerian Senate's rejection of the GEO Bill in 2016 and 2021, as a means to exploring critically *Nairalanders'* attitudes to the bill and its rejection and the ideological values underpinning the attitudes. The study will, therefore, answer the following research questions: a) what are *Nairalanders'* discursive attitudes to the GEO Bill and its rejection; b) what are the dominant ideological perspectival values that undergird the elicited attitudes; c) what is the potential of corpus-driven critical linguistics in interpreting *Nairalanders'* attitudinal stance towards the bill's rejection?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Contextualising the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill within Nigerian Polity

On 15th March, 2016, the 8th Nigerian Senate voted in disfavour of the second reading of the GEO Bill (Goitom, 2016; Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2016a, 2016b; Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon, 2019). This Bill was first presented by Senator Chris Anyanwu (a female member of the 4th Senate) in 2010 and rejected on the Senate floor (Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon, 2019). In 2016, its revised version was sponsored by another female representative, Senator Abiodun Olujimi from Ekiti South Constituency. This version drew its twenty-five (25) clauses from sections within the Nigerian Constitution, the International Covenant against the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Human Rights and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2016a, 2016b). The salient provisions of the Bill prohibit all forms of gender-based violence; advance full development for all women and children in all spheres of public and private life, grant equal socioeconomic, political and educational representation to women to the tune of 35%, provide for women's equal legal capacity and widows' fair share rights, give access to free health care to pregnant women, new mothers and children, etc. (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2016a, 2016b). The Bill also proposes the minimum legal age of 18 years for marriage for Nigerian girls (Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon, 2019). Despite the supposed affirmative implications of the Bill on checking human rights violations against women in Nigeria and closing up gendered gaps, some contentious issues that border on women's matrimonial and inheritance rights, widowhood rights and abortion rights as they relate to ethno-religious divides depopularised it on the Senate floor in 2016 (Goitom, 2016).

Undaunted by the rebuttal, the Senator re-worked the disputed aspects of the 2016's GEO Bill and re-presented it as *Gender and Equality Bill* in November, 2019. The Bill, however, faced stiff opposition again by the Eighth Senate because some male senators see the word "equality" as anti-Islamic with regard to gender; equity was instead proposed. Eventually, the GEO Bill was stepped down in 2021 for additional consultations (Iroanusi, 2021). In view of this background information, the GEO Bill has persistently remained a weighty bone of contention in the Nigerian Senate, which has resultantly generated a glut of reactions from Nigerians, most especially among *Nairalanders* (henceforth, NLers), the NL users. It is on this note that the reactions the GEO Bill's rejection in 2016 and 2021 generated

have become worthy of empirical study in critical linguistics. To this end, aspect of modality as attitudinal indexicals in the Nlers' discourse on the Nigerian Senate's rejection of the Bill in 2016 and 2021 will be critically analysed to determine the participants' discourse stance and ideological biases to the bill and its rejection. This study is of critical importance to the GEO Bill discourse, Nlers' discourse, corpus-based critical studies as well as modality and language.

2.2 *Modality as Attitudinal Indexicals*

Modality has been broadly defined as a symbolic grammatical structure that expresses a speaker's or a writer's attitude towards the situation or point of view about a state of the world (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Iwamoto, 2007). In the Systemic Functional Grammar, it is described as the grammatical resource and "area of meaning that lies between yes and no – intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013, p. 691). It thus depicts the varying ways in "which attitudes can be expressed towards the 'pure' reference-and-predication content of an utterance, signalling factuality, degrees of certainty or doubt, vagueness, possibility, necessity, and even permission and obligation" (Verschueren, 1999, as cited in Fairclough, 2003, p. 165). Though scholars have identified modal auxiliaries, modal verbs, modal adverbs, and modal adjectives as modal categories (Lillian, 2008, p. 1), the analytical focus in this study is modal auxiliaries owing to its primacy.

Modal auxiliaries have been sub-classified to include epistemic, deontic and dynamic modality types and have been explored in different discourse types (Ademilokun, 2019; Afolabi, Dahunsi & Olateju, 2022). Epistemic modality signals a speaker's or writer's judgement on the truth value of propositions relating to certainty, possibility or prediction; and expresses the degrees of speakers' commitment or confidence to the validity or factuality of their propositions (Winiharti, 2012; Vukovic, 2014). It is overtly indexed via such modal verbs as *will, would, ought, can, cannot, could, may, might, must, should*, etc. (Ademilokun, 2019).

Deontic modality (also known as intrinsic modality) allows speakers and writers to influence actions and control events. It brings about changes in their surroundings by obligations which are met, permissions given, promises kept and so on (Downing & Locke, 1995). Hence, the intrinsic values of deontic modality resources grant speakers and writers control over the proposition and/or the circumstantial events (Greenbaum, 1996). Deontic modality is indexed through modal verbs like *may, must, should, need to, have to, ought to*, etc. It must be noted that epistemic and deontic modal verbs, though monosemic, can as well be polysemic and multicategory as modals with epistemic meanings can also be used to express deontic or dynamic meanings depending on the context of usage (Ademilokun, 2019).

Using the scalar system, modal verbs operate in degrees known as (modal) values. The value of a modal verb refers to the degree or force of its strength; hence, the three-dimensional values of modal verbs are: high, median and low (Vukovic, 2014). In the words of Iwamoto (2007, p. 178), a "difference in the degree or value of certainty, probability, or perceptual commitment leads to a different attitudinal stance on that part of (the) speaker or writer." Some classifications of modal values are presented by Cruse (2004, p. 299-300, as cited in Winiharti 2012, p. 537)

High-value modals: *must, ought to, need, have to, is to*

Median-value modals: *will, would, shall, should*

Low-value modals: *may, might, can, could*

The close affinity between modals and speakers'/writers' attitudes has progressively made modal usage an object of exploration in (critical) discourse studies. In the past decades, scholars have examined modality in parliamentary discourse (Vukovic, 2014), media discourse (Iwamoto, 2007), editorial discourse (Bonyadi, 2011), manipulative and persuasive discourses (Lillian, 2008), micro-blogging news discourse (Rui & Jingxia, 2018) and social transformation campaign discourse (Ademilokun, 2019). While the aforementioned studies broadly fall within the purview of political discourses, other studies have investigated modality in academic discourse (Vázquez Orta, 2010), legal discourse (Dong, 2013), workplace discourse (Dajem & Alyousef, 2020), medical discourse (Vilar-Lluch, 2022), gender literary discourse (Tchibozo-Laine, 2019), among others. Notwithstanding the whole gamut of these extant studies, none has explored modality in *Nairaland's* discourse on the Nigerian Senate's rejection of the GEO Bill in 2016 and 2021.

3. Methodology

3.1 Material and Methods

The data for this study comprise NLers' discourse on the Nigerian Senate's non-passage of the GEO Bill in 2016 and 2021. NLers are registered users of NL who engage in dialogues on the forum. The threaded discussions (which are primarily texts) on the GEO Bill form the discourse corpus which comprises small specialised corpora of 48,176 words, 29,333 words from the 2016 thread and 18,843 words from the 2021 thread. The two news reports which generated the (sub) threads used to build the data corpus for this article were posted on NL on March 15, 2016 and December 15, 2021, respectively titled "Nigerian Senate Fails to Pass The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill" and "Gender Equality Bill Anti-Islam — Northern Senators."

The two news reports that opened the threads were purposively selected because they triggered lengthy reactions among *Nairalanders*. The 2016 news report generated 332 replies while that of 2021 generated 310, making a cumulative total of 642 comments. The noticeable time span, 2016 and 2021, in the two news reports marks the two respective periods the initial GEO Bill and its reworked version presented by Senator Abiodun Olujimi were rejected on the floor of the Nigerian Senate. In building the data corpora, only the threads connected to the rejection of the bill were carefully retrieved to ensure data relevance. As regards ethical data collection, NL is a public social media platform; hence, NLers' discourses are public contents freely available to online users. The comments used in the data analysis were largely retained in the original form, only a very few were edited to enhance grammatical clarity. NLers' names or pseudonyms, also displayed publicly, were retained as used. The deliberate attempt to study NLers' discourse on this two-time rejection of the Bill enhances a comprehensive exploration of NLers' attitudes and ideological biases towards its eventual non-passage by the Senators. However, only epistemic and deontic modality types will be deployed in the data analysis in this study owing to space constraints.

For an integration of the quantitative and qualitative approaches in the analysis of the data, corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis was used as analytical framework. The quantitative approach focused on the statistical frequency distributions of the modal variables in the corpus. The corpus linguistic tools of keyword-in-context (KWIC) and collocation were used for further quantitative analysis in order to obtain comprehensive contextual indexing of the usages of the modal resources in the data corpora in relation to their linguistic context and the socio-cultural concepts they portray. While KWIC analysis is a technique used to analyse the meaning and usage of a specific word or phrase within a text, collocation analysis is used for the investigation of the natural patterns of word pairings or sequences within a large body of texts. The corpus was uploaded to the KWIC analyser on *Antconc* as a single file, after all

repetitive and irrelevant comments have been deleted, to get a full concordance display for objective contextual interpretation of the modal usages in relation to the GEO Bill rejection. For the qualitative analysis, relevant comments were purposively culled from the data corpus to showcase threaded fragments and their attitudinal and or ideological imports in relation to the GEO Bill rejection.

3.2 *The Theoretical Framework*

In this study, modality exploration in NLIers' discourse on the GEO Bill rejection will be hinged on corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, a theoretical approach increasingly gaining prominence in critical discourse studies. Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CACDA) is an integrative approach that synergises methods in corpus linguistics (CL) with concepts in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to realise specific evidence-based pro-social critical analysis (Baker, Gabrielatos, Khosravini et al., 2008). Hence, corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis is simply critical discourse analysis carried out using corpus methods. To better understand its subtleties, an attempt will be made to delineate between corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, the two integrated concepts in the framework.

Corpus linguistics can be described as “an approach that aims at investigating language and all its properties by analysing large collections of text samples” (Dash, 2010, p. 1). The term “corpus” refers to a large collection of computer-readable language data primarily compiled for linguistic evaluation. Corpora, the plural form of corpus, are carefully and systematically collated for quantitative and empirical analysis (Dash, 2010). Corpus-based studies in linguistics thus offer quantitative methods which apply computer software such as concordance, collocation, keyness, keyword-in-context (KWIC), frequency, among others, for processing large amount of electronically-sourced dataset known as corpus. However, corpus analysis is not only statistically objective, it also involves subjective analytical input in which the analyst manually interprets the linguistic properties observed via the corpus processes within the purview of some theoretical paradigms (Baker, Gabrielatos, Khosravini et al., 2008).

CDA, on the other hand, is a socio-political theory that studies how unequal power relations, abuses and ideologies are produced, legitimised, sustained or resisted in text and talk for the purpose of achieving fairness in society (van Dijk, 1995). As an offshoot of critical linguistics, CDA has become a cross-disciplinary approach to unmasking the discursivities and ideologies underpinning practices of hegemony, power, control, inequality, consent and resistance in diverse social relations, with the aim of promoting emancipation across social spectra. It “especially focuses on the relations between discourse and society (including social cognition, politics and culture)” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 17). The CDA methods to be applied in this study are drawn from Fairclough's (1989) dialectical-relational procedure to critical language study (CLS) because it demonstrates the interrelations between language, power and ideology, which are the core elements of the social practice of discourse. The procedure distinguishes three stages of doing critical discourse analysis, which are – text description, text interpretation and text explanation (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 26, 109). The descriptive stage identifies and labels in categories the formal features of the text, the interpretative stage analyses the text as an interactive process, while the explanative stage links the interaction to its social context and effect. These three-dimensional CDA-oriented stages will underpin the attitudinal and ideological analyses of the corpus instances of modality resources in the data for this study.

Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis is, therefore, a conjoined social action theory that quantitatively applies suitable corpus-based processes to investigate how social inequalities are normalised or repelled in specific instances of discourse. According to

Ademilokun (2019), the idea underlying corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis is that precepts of both methods should reflect in the analysis for the interpretation of the inherent meanings in the text. With the addition of statistical frequency, corpus-based techniques to be performed on the corpora in this study includes keyword-in-context (KWIC) and collocation, which will all be employed to elicit all corpus instances and statistical significance of modality usages in the discourse corpus.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Comparative Frequencies of Modals in the Corpus

The comparative frequencies of all modal elements found in the corpus are presented in Table 1, with graphical representation in Fig. 1. As evident from the table, the modal *will* has the highest frequency in the two years, with its cumulative frequency of 157 almost tripling *should*, the next modal in the order of frequency. This depicts that *will* has the most statistically significant occurrence in the NLers' discourse on the GEO Bill rejection in both years.

Table 1: Comparative Frequencies of Modal Elements in the Corpus (2016 and 2021)

Modal Elements	Comparative Frequencies		Comparative Percentages	
	2016	2021	2016	2021
<i>Will</i>	87	70	38.84%	37.23%
<i>Should</i>	38	28	16.96%	14.89%
<i>Can</i>	30	39	13.39%	20.74%
<i>Can't</i>	23	18	10.27%	9.57%
<i>Would</i>	21	20	9.38%	10.64%
<i>Cannot</i>	15	7	6.70%	3.72%
<i>Must</i>	10	6	4.46%	3.19%
Total	224	188	100%	100%

Inasmuch as *will* is epistemic in function, its prevalent frequent usage in the discourse signals NLers' high degree of attitudinal commitment to and certainty about the propositions they express on the GEO Bill rejection. Conversely, *would* with a cumulative frequency of 41 (that is, 21 and 20 for the respective years), conveys a lesser degree of NLers' attitudinal commitment towards the propositions they express on the GEO Bill rejection. Another epistemic modal in occurrence in the data corpus is *can* with 69 (30 and 39 for the respective years) aggregate occurrences. The use of *can* in the discourse, with its negative variants *can't* (with a cumulative frequency of 41) and *cannot* (22 occurrences), largely evaluates the workability of the GEO Bill in Nigeria and the possibility of its eventual passage by the Nigerian senators. The deontic modal, *should*, the next in the order of frequency with 66 total occurrences portrays NLers' attempts to influence Nigerians (males and females) to act to either uphold or overturn the typical gender norms. Another deontic modal in the data corpus is *must*, which has the lowest aggregate occurrence of 16. Its low-value in the corpora marks

its insignificance, which demonstrates the lesser aggression of NLers in championing the passage of the GEO Bill.

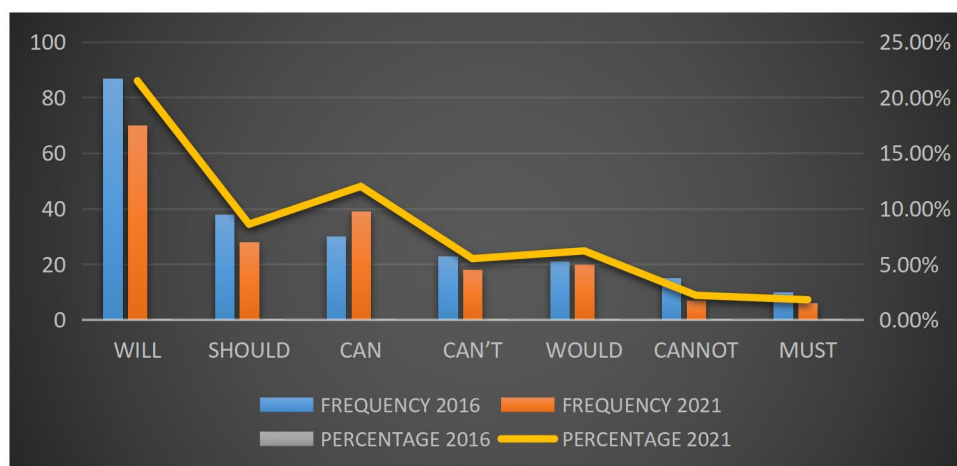


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the Modal Usage per Year

4.2 Epistemic Modality in NLers' Discourse on the GEO Bill Rejection

Epistemic modals convey discourse participants' level of commitment to the truth of the propositions they express. In the corpus, epistemic modals such as *will*, *would*, *can*, *can't* and *cannot* are amply deployed to determine NLers' degree of confidence in the validity of their assertions about the GEO Bill rejection. The usage of each modal is discussed in turn below.

4.2.1 Will/Would

Statistically, *will* is the most dominant epistemic modal in the data corpus; a few instances of its usage are presented below:

Ex 1: I stand with the senate on this oo. Call me misogynist, call me sexist. I don't care!

Believe me if this bill was passed, you *will* start seeing lots of divorce cases from gold digging women as it is applicable to foreign countries!

... There is a reason God made woman from the rib of man and no woman is equal to a man! ...

Ex 2: ... I love my northern brothers for one thing: Westernization i.e satanization *will* never prevail in Nigeria.

Ex 3: Equity *will* handle the above, not necessarily equality...

Ex 4: ... The fact that you insert "gender" equality, totally obliterates your agenda. How on Earth *would* a female gender equal a male gender? A female *will* never be equal to male by gender....

NLers significantly use the modality *will* to strongly express their two-pronged attitudinal disposition to the GEO Bill. The modal verb *will* is broadly used to first judge the moral cum religious validity of the Bill, which most participants elevate above its legal validity; and secondly to show their disapproval of its passage. Hence, NLers use *will* to express both negative and positive attitudes towards the GEO Bill and its rejection, respectively. Ex 1 to 3 express a strong negative stance towards the GEO Bill through the commenters' unanimity that it is inapposite in the Nigerian sociocultural context. The

commenters demonstrate their high-value attitudinal commitment to their assertions by deploying the “us versus them” polarising attitudinal indexicals prevalently in the discourse.

This “us versus them” polarity manifests in three dimensions in the data. Firstly, a large number of the commenters see the Bill as Western infiltration which must be eschewed owing to its threat to the Nigerian cultural heritage. The Nigerian cultural heritage is the “us” which must be preserved while Western infiltration, symbolically represented by the GEO Bill, is the “them”, which must be rejected. This polarisation places Nigeria/Nigerians in one group and the West in another, mainly on the basis of moral sanctity in marriage. In Exs 1, 2 and 3, the posters are certain about the Bill’s potential negative influence of moral decadence on marriage as assumedly prevalent in the West, if endorsed. Many of the commenters are, therefore, highly ideologically biased to the concept of gender equality which they see as unbeneficial (mostly in the aspect of marriage) to the West who has embraced it. This negative attitude and stance about the GEO Bill question permeate the discourse.

Secondly, the “us versus them” dichotomy polarises gender into superior maleness and inferior femaleness, a binary division anchored on the religious myth that “... God made woman from the rib of man” (Ex 1). This polarity runs in the discourse in such a way that the men-commenters typify themselves as “us” and their female participants as “them”, and vice-versa. However, the fact that there is a prevalent negative attitude to the GEO Bill among the commenters reveals that the “us ingroup” is largely dominated by men. This ideologically represents the superiority attitude of the “us ingroup” (men) towards the “them outgroup” (women) as revealed in the use of the modal *will* in Ex 4 that “... A female *will* never be equal to male by gender” which marks a superhigh degree of certainty invalidating the GEO Bill while validating its rejection.

The third “us versus them” polarity manifests in the Northerners versus Southerners’ amenability to Western infiltration – Northerners are the “us” and Southerners are the “them”. In Ex 2, the commenter’s forceful assertion (through the use of *will*) that “... Westernisation *will* not prevail in Nigeria” is justified in the antecedent clause that the Northerners are averse to it owing to their unsympathetic attitude to Western practices unlike the Southerners. Northerners and Southerners are ideologically represented as Muslims and Christians respectively in the discourse to portray the prevalent ethno-religious divisive attitude to the Bill question, although a few participants posit that Northern-Christians and Southern-Muslims also abound in the country. Fig. 2 shows a sample KWIC page with *will* in the corpus:

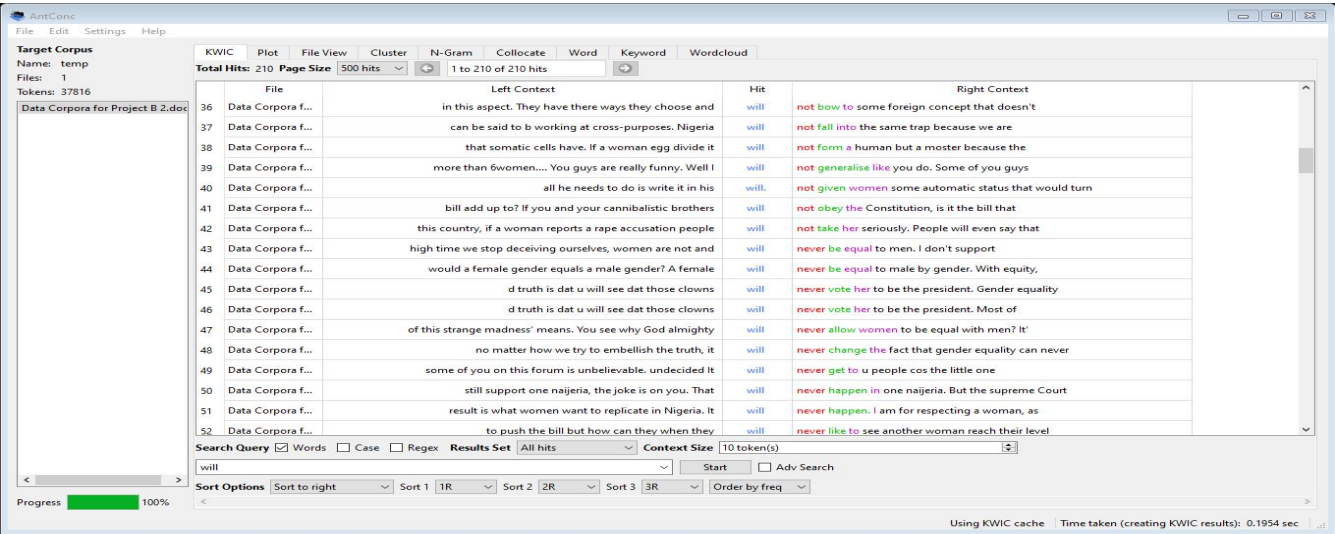


Figure 2: Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) for Will in the Data Corpus

The KWIC analysis for *will* visually portrays nominal collocates like Nigeria, I (referring to a woman), they (Muslims/Northerners or women), his, a female, it (for the passage of the Bill), cannibalistic brothers (refer to the Southerners), among others. These nominal collocates foreground the three dimensional “us versus them” polarities of “Nigerianness vs Westernisation”, “male superiority versus female inferiority” and “Muslims/Northerners versus Christians/Southerners” in the discourse. These nominal collocates have dual functions – the concepts reinforce the anti-Nigerianness of the Bill while simultaneously endorsing the legitimacy of its rejection. As seen from Figure 2, a gamut of the verbal collocates are negative with the repetitiveness of the negation “not be”, “never be”, “never happen” in the verbal groups. The dominant negative verbal collocates further reinforce the prevalent negative attitude to the Bill among the commenters.

4.2.2 *Can/Can't/Cannot*

The discourse participants mainly use *can* and its negative forms *can't/cannot* to express a high-value epistemic impossibility of the suitability, acceptability and workability of the GEO Bill in the Nigerian society, based on religious, biological, moral and sociocultural constraints on gender roles in the country. The great certainty that marks the epistemic impossibility in the discourse largely portrays the participants’ negative attitudinal disposition to the GEO Bill question and their epistemic prediction on its likely negative outcomes on gender relations among Nigerians, if passed. A few excerpts illustrating the use of *can*, *can't* and *cannot* to express epistemic impossibility in the data corpus are shown below:

- Ex 5: ... It's funny how folks think we're equal, yet I always bail out my female colleagues almost everyday whenever they hit a snag. And when it comes to physical attributes, you *can't* compare men and women.
... Not that I'm against the bill, but the noise about equality/inequality is just deafening/nauseating cos both sexes *can* never be equal - that's just the truth...
- Ex 6: I don't want to sound like a misogynist but all I *can* say is that this is Nigeria for crying out loud... No matter how ladies rant and cry, such policy *cannot* work so the earlier the better we stop getting worked up over this gender equality of a thing... Our culture and religion places woman beneath men and nothing *can* change that....
- Ex 7: Thats the time the world will end cos u women are like kids u *cant* develop the world... u *cant* invent, u *can't* create cutting edge breakthroughs, ur brains dont hv the capacity to create or give, u are built to only receive....
- Ex 8: ... i don't know what bible you are talking about. but the bible places men far above women. in fact in the old testament women where basically property and bellow cattle in position. in the new testament it is specifically said women *can not* climb the pulpit in the church....

In Ex 5, *can* and *can't* are used to express strong epistemic impracticability of the bill based on biological determinism. *Can't* in the excerpt indexes the incomparability of male and female relative to their physical attributes and actions; hence, their overt unequal status. *Can* is used to justify the attitudinal stance of the commenter on the unworkability of the bill. The commenter in Ex 6 uses *cannot* to hinge the epistemic impossibility of the Bill on Nigeria’s religious and cultural traditions on gender stereotyping, and the *can* in the last sentence to reinforce the inalterability of this status quo. The *can* in the first sentence in Ex 6 is used moderately to implicitly reference Nigeria as a male chauvinistic society where such a bill is inoperable. The mild usage of the modal is a cautious attempt by the poster to downplay

his identity at the outset of his comment in order not to sound biased in his attempt to amplify the futility of the bill.

In a similar vein, *can not* written separately in Ex 8 ideologically represents male superiority and female inferiority instituted by religion, and Nigeria is regarded as one of the most religious nations in the global ranking (Diamant, 2019). References to religion and cultural practices in the discourse highly evaluate the epistemic impracticability of the bill in the country. The repetitive use of *can't* written ungrammatically twice as *cant* in Ex 7 portrays passionately and with great certainty women's moral, physical and mental deficiencies; hence, their inferior status to men. This portrayal shows the poster's strong attitudinal stance to the epistemic futility of the bill and an exaggerated epistemic prediction of a likely apocalypse to be caused by women if the bill is passed. Fig. 3 shows a sample KWIC page with *can* in the corpus.

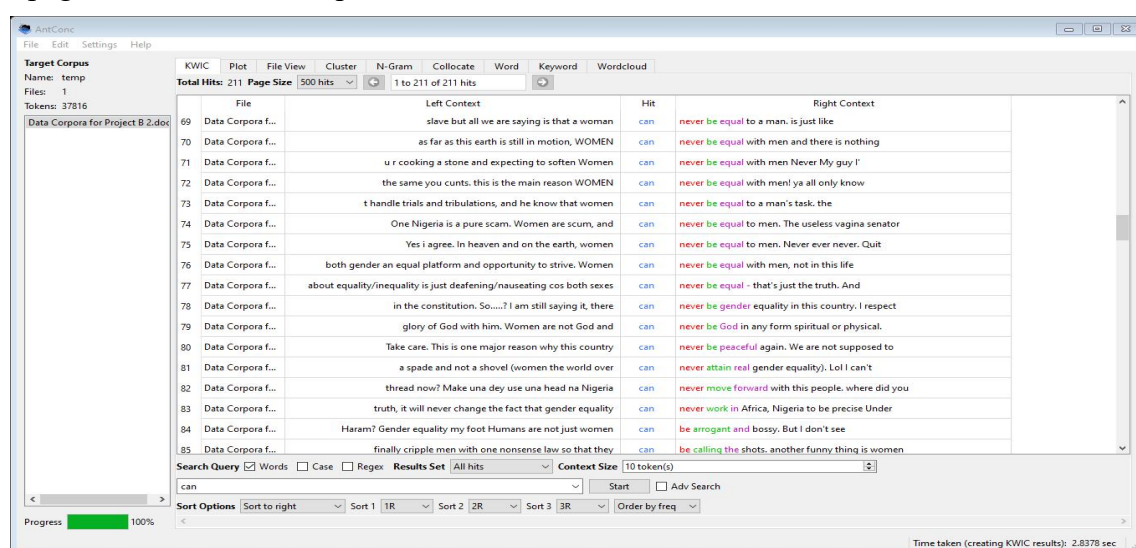


Figure 3: Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) for *Can* in the Data Corpus

As shown in Fig. 3, the dominant nominal collocates of *can* are *woman*, *women*, and their pronominal substitute, *they*. These collocates pitch women against men in a “them versus us” (women vs men) polar structure to position the otherness of the “them” group in stark opposition to their sameness with the “us” group. This polar structure reinforces the epistemic impossibility of the two groups being equal while denouncing passionately the Bill. The nominal collocates *country* and *Nigeria* also feature in the KWIC to show the impracticability of the Bill in the Nigerian social milieu. However, a few instances of the co-occurrence of the lexemes *country* or *Nigeria* with *can* indicate the epistemic impossibility of Nigeria's sustained growth with the discourse participants' opposing stance to the GEO Bill.

This minority group in the discourse hinges the underdevelopment of Nigeria and Nigerians to the people's inability to embrace the Western values, which they consider progressive. Further, high-value negative assertion permeates the KWIC of the modal *can* through the repetitive use of the negative verbal collocates *never be* which accentuate the inequality of the two genders to invalidate the Bill. The frequent use of the adverbial *never* in the verbal group represents a negative collocate emphasising the resistive attitude of the participants to the Bill.

4.3 Deontic Modality in NLers' Discourse on the GEO Bill Rejection

Deontic modals index obligations and permission aimed at influencing actions to effect some social changes. As revealed in the qualitative analysis, *should* and *must* are the two deontic modals deployed in the corpus and they are discussed below.

4.3.1 *Should*

With 66 occurrences, the modal *should* is the second most predominantly used modal element in the discourse, with examples in Ex 9 to Ex 11.

Ex 9: ... The 1999 constitution Nigeria guarantee all the citizen of Nigeria equal right and there is no part of the constitution that is segregating the women. If the right of any woman is been violated, the woman *should* go to the court...

Ex 10: When we were children, the girls helped their mothers in the kitchen, sweep the compound, weed the farm, fetch water and do some low energy consuming work while we the boys, tilled the soil, cleared the bushes on the farm and in the compound ... did all the hard jobs... If women want equal rights, they *should* start treating their children equal so that when that generation comes everything will be done equally....

Ex 11: ... What this senators are saying in summary is a woman is different from a man, they are not equal they are two different creations... **THEY ARE NOT SAYING WOMEN *SHOULD* BE SLAVES OR MALTREATED....**

Exs 9 and 10 portray how the modal verb *should* is used to instruct the womenfolk to behave in some specific ways to curb discrimination against them in the Nigerian society. Ex 9 depicts the use of *should* for giving instructions on seeking redress for gender rights violations as instituted in the 1999 Nigerian constitution while the modal *should* is also used in Ex 10 to educate the womenfolk to upturn the gender role stereotyping through their children's upbringing to effect a generational social impact. Although the two uses of *should* in both excerpts are instructional and helpful on the surface level, they subtly portray the commenters' judgmental and critical attitude towards the Bill and the Nigerian womenfolk. The criticalness of the usage of *should* in Ex 9 hinges on the superfluity of the Bill since the 1999 Constitution has already made provisions for equal rights for all Nigerian citizens. Also, *should* in Ex 10 implicitly evidences women's complicity in enacting gender role stereotypes in early childhood, which is thus sustained not just in adulthood but also perpetuated generationally through familyhood. The commenter thus implies that a reversal of the conventional order lies in the hands of womenfolk, the assumed initiator. The modal *should* in both excerpts portray the commenters' negative attitude to the Bill and positive attitude to its rejection. The use of *should* in Ex 11 is however moderate and non-critical. The commenter, while attempting to implicitly support the senators' rejection of the bill, uses the modal as a pacific gesture to downplay his epistemic assertion of the impossibility of gender equality. Fig. 4 shows a sample KWIC page for *should* in the corpus:

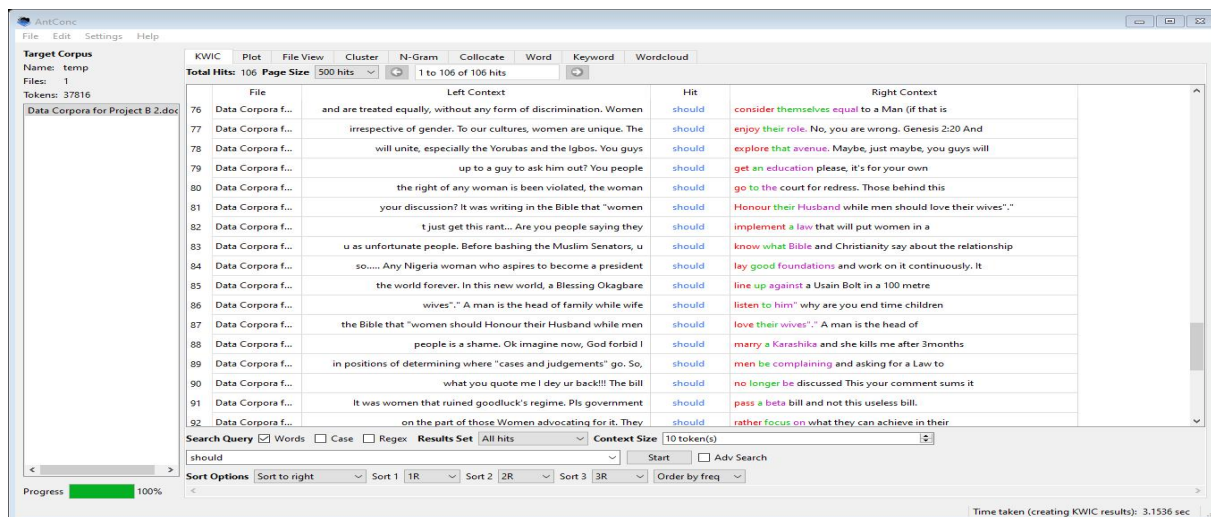


Figure 4: Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) for *Should* in the Data Corpus

The nominal collocates of *should* (Fig. 4) are *woman*, *women*, *wife*, *men*, etc. representing actors who ought to act in line with traditional gender roles and norms in Nigeria. The feminine nominals *woman*, *women* and their pronominal substitute *they* are more frequent in the corpus, a tacit acknowledgement of women's stereotypic gender roles and the need to sustain them to achieve equanimity in familyhood and in the larger society. Although a large number of the collocates lay out positive actions to be performed by the represented actors, they implicitly index the discourse participants' cynical attitude to the GEO Bill.

4.3.2 *Must*

The modal *must* is the least predominantly used modal in the corpus with meagre occurrences of 16 in total with some examples below.

Ex 12: Gender equality is not part of our African tradition. Women *must* be subservient to men cos women are under men....

Ex 13: ... The trap we *must* not fall into is to make separate laws for women and separate laws for men, that in itself will be discriminatory and negates the principle of equality....

Ex 14: ... If a woman does as good a job, she *must* be payed as good as any man is paid for the same job. If a woman holds any position, she *must* be respected like any man in that position. That is EQUITY!

But a woman *must* allow her husband to make final decisions for the family. She *must* respect and obey her husband in all his decisions. She is the weaker vessel and *must* be feminine, NOT FEMINIST....

Although the low occurrence of *must* indexes its insignificance in the discourse, its few instances of occurrence are significant in foregrounding the three-dimensional "us versus them" polarising structures in the discourse. Ex 12 ideologically polarises along the lines of culture and race by using the modal *must* with its verbal collocate *be* to foreground the expediency of women's subservience to men in African culture as against Western culture, with the aim of resisting the Bill and supporting its rejection. The deontic modal *must* collocates with the negative phrasal verb *not fall into* in Ex 13 to metaphorise the Bill as a "trap" for Nigeria. The metaphorisation is a negative representation of the Bill as a snare which Nigeria(ns) must of necessity avoid owing to its assumed gender discrimination against men.

The 5-times repetition of *must* in Ex 14 ideologically polarises gender equity and gender equality. The use of *must* expresses gender fairness in the first paragraph of Ex 14, and conversely reinforces women's stereotypic subservience to men in familyhood in the second paragraph to justify hegemonic masculinity. The usage of the deontic modal *must* in the three excerpts encodes male superiority and unequal power relation in its invalidation of the GEO Bill. Prominent nominal collocates of *must* in the KWIC analysis are *women, woman and she* who all represent female actors with some expected gender roles societally deemed appropriate. The dominance of the verbal collocate *be* with *must* further depicts culturally assigned gender roles expected of women in order not to disrupt the Nigerian traditional values.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the usage of modals in Nlers' discourse on the GEO Bill rejection in 2016 and 2021 by the Nigerian Senate. Anchored on corpus-assisted critical discourse perspectives, the study portrays how the discourse participants assertively and non-assertively deployed the modal resources to demonstrate their attitudes to the Bill and its successive rejection. This portrayal corroborates Ademilokun's (2019) and Afolabi, Dahunsi and Olateju's (2022) viewpoints that modal resources index discussants' attitudes to the discourse and also emphasise the intensity of the discourse. The study further reveals how the participants' discursive attitudes towards the non-passage of the Bill portray ideological biases underlying the dynamics of gender and power relations in Nigeria's social context.

The study's quantitative and corpus analytical perspective substantiates the fact that the modal choices of Nlers interpersonally index their attitudes to the GEO Bill in Nigeria, as the dominant usage of *will* in the discourse demonstrates the participants' high-value commitment to, and certainty about their supportive attitude towards the GEO Bill rejection. The preponderance of *will* in the discourse explicitly conveys the interpersonal meaning that the participants are largely resistant to the GEO Bill. As a consequence, they demonstrate a lesser commitment towards championing the passage of the Bill in the country, leading to the infrequency of the modal *must* in the discourse. This finding aligns with Okongwu's (2021, p. 27) that the "Nigerian cultural system has designed and organized the society based on gender which prescribes that men are heads of families and women are subordinate to them" Hence, the acceptability and feasibility of gender equality in Nigeria have to transcend legal/policy measures; non-policy measures such as grassroots education and social awareness on eradicating gender inequality must be prioritised.

The qualitative analytical approach confirms the resistive engagement of the participants towards the Bill and their simultaneous supportive stance to its rejection through their prevalent usage of the epistemic modals, *will* and *can*. These two modals are significantly used by *Nairaland* discourse participants to express their two-pronged attitude to the Bill – negativism towards its workability in the Nigerian social milieu and positivism towards its rejection by the upper chamber of the Nigerian legislature. These attitudes demonstrate the participants' strong ideological biases to the GEO Bill, and their backing of the retention of male hegemony in Nigeria. These attitudes are also highly instrumental in the participants' identity representation in the discourse. The participants' usage of modals in the discourse largely gives the discussants a misogynistic identity. This thus reveals that the possible passage and broad workability of the GEO Bill in Nigeria would require massive cultural value re-orientation, as broadly suggested by Okongwu (2021).

Overall, the present study adds a new angle to Ademilokun's (2019) view on the analytical potential of corpus linguistics in understanding prevalent attitudes in mediated-discourses focusing on societal reforms such as the GEO Bill and its non-passage by the

Nigeria's legislature. To expand this study, future researchers can compare its findings to similar discourses in other contexts, enlarge the corpus size to possibly identify new patterns and biases, or use non-corpus analytical methods.

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