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Mitigating acceptance and resistance in the fatwas on the ruling of learning English

The current study investigated fatwa discourse to reveal the attitudes and rulings of scholars towards English. In doing so, English and Arabic fatwas were analyzed employing modality. It was found that deontic auxiliary modals and similarly functioning markers were utilized to represent acceptance through median value modals to express obligation, for example, "should," often followed by a justification, and low value modals to express permissibility, for example, "may." Modality is also used to show resistance through a median value modal, such as "should" and "can." The manipulation and power of such discourse are evident in the use of modality markers, including auxiliary, semi-auxiliary, and conditional modals. They function on the opposite poles of rulings, permissible and impermissible, to hedge permission and cast hesitation or uncertainty; yet, they show a lack of commitment on the part of the scholars to their fatwa, thus mitigating acceptance and resistance.

Key words: fatwas; religious discourse; mitigation; modality; learning English

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Religious discourse is one of the most influential discourses. As "a type of persuasive discourse," according to Adam (2017, p. 22), it can "both create and reflect ideology," and "serve several specific purposes realized in a number of discursive practices" (Pievskaya, 2010, p. 42). As an institutional discourse, as Bobyrev (2007) argues, religious discourse aims at preserving and maintaining religious knowledge and enforcing accepted behavioral norms and rules (cited in Pievskaya, 2010, p. 42). In addition, one of the goals of religious discourse is to shape attitudes and "adherence to the established norms, rules, and requirements" (p. 43). In Islam, *fatwa* discourse is considered one of the crucial religious discourses. *Fatwas* are "[a] published opinion or decision regarding religious doctrine or law made by a recognized authority" (Glassé, 1989, p. 125). They express an informed yet nonbinding opinion. However, Muslims are not obliged to accept any *fatwas*. Issuing *fatwas* is not a new phenomenon, as it was enacted in the Quran (Mehmood, 2015, p. 1) as a common practice since the Prophet's time. The Quran is considered as "the primary discursive source for *fatwa* [and] the prophetic practice was instrumental in establishing [the practice of issuing *fatwas*] as a legal practice in Islam" (Mehmood et al., 2015, p. 47). In the Quran, *fatwas* signify, "asking for a definitive answer" and "giving a definitive answer" (Masud et al., 2019, p. 1). When a scholar provides a *fatwa* of approval or disapproval, justification such as "quotes from the Koran, Sunnah, or the Ijtihad of other religious scholars" is provided (Al-Kandaria & Dashti, 2015, p. 130). Yet, it has been argued that *fatwas* have been "given more legal weight than the Quran intended them to have" (Badar et al., 2017, p. 143).

As Masud et al. (2019, p. 1) argue, *fatwa* content depends on the scholar's competence level and the questioner's status and, as Calder et al. (2003, p. 255) explain, it is a result of *ijtihad*, that is, deduction. Accordingly, certain rulings can be specific to a certain time and place. That is, "the same [scholar or] mufti may answer the same question at two different times, and from two different people, . . . based on their intentions and specific context" (Drennan, 2013, p. 54). As a practice, *fatwas* are usually revised when the context changes or when scholars gain a better understanding of a specific issue.

Traditionally, a *fatwa* is a means and instrument to cope with modern developments (Black & Hosen, 2009, pp. 423-424). These days, issuing *fatwas* has become crucial to "the Muslim societies to resolve the contemporary issues" (Mehmood, 2015, p. 1). Caeiro acknowledges the importance of *fatwas*, as it led to the stability of Muslim society by educating Muslims on new issues and their rulings (Caeiro, 2006, p. 661). It is also a significant legal genre that clarifies the ruling of specific actions and issues and simultaneously protects the identity of Muslims (Fakhri, 2014, p. 6). In addition, *fatwas* address the inquirer's question and need to function as an observant Muslim (Drennan, 2013, p. 54). Muslims often feel the need to abide by these *fatwas* because it is believed that they "provide guidance on what Allah accepts or rejects as an action" (p. 130). Hence, "*fatwa* collections exist both printed and online in almost every conceivable Muslim language" (Drennan,

2013, p. 53). Mehmood (2015, p. 1) explains, “[m]any of the Muslim governments appoint religious scholars on the reserve seats in their legislative bodies.”

In this study, *fatwa* is viewed as a religious discourse and “a meeting point between legal theory and social practice” (Caeiro, 2006, p. 661). It is “the most dynamic genre of Islamic legal literature” (Monawer et al., 2019, p. 235). Therefore, through these *fatwas*, one can decode the feelings, concerns, thoughts, and perspectives of scholars (Mathee, 2011, p. 85). By resisting or accepting emerging issues, *fatwas* can “hinder or facilitate the adoption of innovation” (Al-Kandaria & Dashti, 2015, p. 127). It is worth noting that modernity and globalization have often been viewed as problematic in the Muslim world and have challenged Islam and Muslim identity. One of the aspects (or dimensions) of globalization that poses a threat to Muslim identity is the English language. Nevertheless, similar to other Arab countries, the Saudi government has recognized the importance of English as a lingua franca. Hence, they encouraged and promoted learning English, spending billions of dollars “for English teachers’ recruitment, language labs, curriculum development, and teachers’ training” (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013, p. 114). Due to this increase of the importance of English in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, anti-English attitudes have developed. This is evident in the anti-English *fatwas* that were issued, causing uncertainty among Muslims concerning the permissibility of learning English and thus creating a dichotomy between acceptance and resistance. Elyas and Picard (2010, pp. 34-35) believe that such a discourse resulted in a negative attitude and debates on “how English should be taught and for what purposes.” Such an attitude is not unique to Muslim or Arab countries. This has also been witnessed in European countries, which viewed English as a threat to their national heritage, identity, and culture. This sentiment is explained by studies on bilingualism that suggest that it is “the first step towards language shift, that is, the process whereby a group of people will move from one language to another” (Brown & Attardo, 2008, p. 90).

It is worth noting that the context in the Middle East in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, has been changing. The introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, which promises a series of reforms, has changed Saudis’ attitudes towards English as a foreign language and culture. Therefore, since *fatwas* are a discursive tool for (re)shaping society, this study is interested in investigating and scrutinizing the old *fatwa* discourse on the ruling of learning and speaking English to reveal how acceptance and resistance were subtly encoded and achieved.

Modality

Halmari and Virtanen (2005) specify four aspects of persuasion, namely, linguistic choices, readers’ prior beliefs, authors’ prior beliefs and behaviors, and the effect of the text itself. With reference to *fatwa* discourse, it is a site of power, authority, acceptance, and resistance. *Fatwas* can provide legitimacy to certain things or actions and undermine others. Accordingly, the linguistic choices of

the scholars are more powerful and persuasive than those in other texts and discourses. However, the influence of the beliefs and behaviors of the scholars prior to the *fatwa* cannot be discounted and leave the acceptance of their *fatwas* at the discretion of the readers and their prior beliefs. That is, there is an ongoing conversation between the text, previous texts, scholars, readers, and the context. Therefore, Drennan (2013, p. 58) divided studies on *fatwas* into “studies that focus on the textual content of *fatwas* and those that study the social and virtual environments in which they are found and published.” This study is interested in examining *fatwa* discourse as a discursive and persuasive social tool for (re) shaping society and reframing attitudes. Attitudes and perceptions are pivotal to understanding how scholars encode their attitudes in such discourse. Hyland (2005, p. 174) argues that, in the literature, linguistic choices that refer to speakers’ feelings, perspectives, and their own personal judgements about a topic or an object are referred to using various terms. Among these terms are attitude (Halliday, 1994) and epistemic modality (Hyland, 1998; Palmer, 2001), which are central to the interpersonal dimension of discourse and systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1970). Perloff (2017, p. 89) argues that “[h]aving an attitude means that you have categorized something and made a judgment of its net value or worth. It means that you are no longer neutral about the topic.”

There are various rhetorical and linguistic means to express attitudes and persuade readers/audiences. According to Hyland (1995, 2005), such linguistic features, as modality markers, highlight how the relationship between speakers’ comments and subjective assessment of their own propositions is created. Halliday and Matthiessen (2006, p. 526) also contend that modality expresses the attitude of the speaker towards a subject or a state of affairs, as “modality is a rich resource for speakers to intrude their own views into the discourse.” Attitude is the “indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, and idea) is good or bad” (Thompson, 1996, p. 80). In that respect, while polarity is expressing either a “good” or “bad,” “yes” or a “no,” and “positive” or “negative” evaluation, modality construes the region of uncertainty that lies between them (Halliday, 1968, p. 172). Hyland (2014, p. 5) states that modality expressed in various modal verbs and auxiliaries have various pragmatic persuasive functions, depending on whether they are used as hedges (to express caution) or boosters (to express certainty). “Together they offer the writer a chance to either expand the dialogue by opening up an argument to different viewpoints or contract it by closing off other voices” (p. 5). In the current study, it was viewed as a persuasive tool that functions to mitigate resistance and acceptance in the selected *fatwas*. Accordingly, such tools can be used to direct people’s behavior (Bonyadi, 2011, p. 2).

Palmer (2001, pp. 8-10) distinguishes between two types of modalities to express the speakers’ attitudes: epistemic modality, which “express[es] their judgements about the factual status of the proposition,” and deontic modality, which “stems from some kind of external authority such as rules or the law, ... the au-

thority is the actual speaker, who gives permission to, or lays an obligation on, the addressee.”

Extensive scholarly work has been conducted on modalities that consider the domains of possibility, necessity, and prediction as epistemic modalities, and permission, obligation, and volition as deontic modalities. Palmer (2001, p. 102) added a third type of modality, dynamic modality, which is not speaker but rather subject-oriented (their ability and willingness). Several manifestations of modality in clauses have been discussed and examined in the literature, including auxiliary modals, certain types of main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and nominalizations. However, categories expressing “modality” are difficult to pin down. To express the speaker’s judgment or evaluation, modality also may be implicated by lexical items, or what is called “modal adjuncts,” including verbs, for example, “predict,” adjectives, for example, “necessary,” adverbs, for example, “probably,” and formulaic expressions, such as “by all means” (Fontaine, 2013, p. 34). In addition, modality may be implicated in the semantic structure of the clause itself without any linguistic markers (González García, 2000, p. 331).

The current study adopted a discourse-oriented approach to modality which was interested in how modality devices in selected Arabic and English *fatwas* on the rule of learning English interact with the broader context to acquire attitudinal meanings and convey the scholars’ subjective involvement and positioning (on both semantic and pragmatic levels).

Methodology

The primary purpose of the current study is to uncover linguistic devices that can be considered carriers of modal meanings and how they function in discourse. Our concern here was not in the reactions of the audience, but rather in the speaker’s use of modality as a persuasive means, mainly because in religious discourse, the persuader (the preacher) is given a certain amount of authority (which is why questions of *fatwa* are directed to him; Holíčková, 2019, p. 20). Their authority manifests itself in their choice of language, the kind of rhetoric they present, and how their answers are disseminated online and offline. To do that, qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were used to understand the roles of the selected modals and the prevalence of one type over another, which is likely to be ideologically motivated.

Data

The data of the current study comprised 24 representative *fatwas* that are available online (see the Appendix). These *fatwas* were published on scholars’ websites and religious forums. The publication dates varied from 2008 to 2018. Using the Google search engine, several Arabic and English keywords were used to collect all the available *fatwas*. The keywords were *fatwas*, learning English, speaking

English, ruling, permissibility, and Islam. The number of *fatwas* that were collected was distributed as follows: (n = 6) English *fatwas* and (n = 18) Arabic *fatwas*. Because a *fatwa* is dialogic, that is, it “consists of a question. . .addressed to a jurisconsult (mufti), together with an answer. . .provided by that jurisconsult” (Hallaq, 1994, p. 31), the current study examined the answers that address the ruling of learning and speaking English. When Arabic examples are provided, the interlinear Leipzig glosses of the relevant parts of the *fatwas* are underlined and provided. However, the entire text of the *fatwas* is provided in the transcription and translation to provide examples within their contexts for a better understanding.

Pilot Analysis

The analysis adopted an eclectic approach using Fowler’s (1985, p. 73) broad understanding of the systemic functional linguistics analytical framework, which is suitable as a persuasive tool for the analysis of modality, in addition to Hyland (1998, 2005, 2014), Halmari and Virtanen (2005), and Perloff (2017). According to Fowler (1985, p. 73), modality may be expressed in a range of linguistic forms, including modal auxiliary verbs, sentence adverbs, adjectives, verbs, and many nominalizations. After the first pilot analysis, it was found that modality was also marked by some Arabic particles such as the conditional “if” (إِذَا، إِنْ، لَوْ); therefore, conditionals that express modality are also examined in the current analysis. These linguistic forms were coded in the data under examination, with a further distinction between auxiliary modals, semi-auxiliary modals, and conditional modality. Because the scholars employed different Quranic verses and hadiths to support their opinions, modals in these quotes, as well as the ritualistic expressions of starting and ending the *fatwas*, were excluded from the analysis because the focus of this study was the scholars’ own use of modals to mitigate acceptance and resistance to the topic at hand.

Procedures

Three Muslim Arab coders, who are qualified, bilingual discourse analysts, coded the *fatwas*. Three rounds of coding and discussion rounds between the coding rounds were conducted to compare the results and discuss or resolve discrepancies. In the first round of independent coding, agreement among the three raters was 77%. However, this rate improved to 100% after the third round of separate coding. After the *fatwas* were coded, a table of frequency counts was generated and reviewed to identify patterns and trends.

Translating qualitative data has always been problematic. One of the risks “in data translation relates to potential loss or alteration of original meanings and emphases in translated text” (McKenna, 2022, p. 2). Therefore, the researchers decided to eliminate such issues by avoiding translating the Arabic *fatwas* when possible, to minimize the researchers’ interference and maintain the validity of

the analysis in this study. It is worth noting that the illustrative examples below will be given mainly from the English *fatwas*, as long as they echo the Arabic *fatwas*. However, examples from the Arabic *fatwas* will be given when needed. Brill's simple Arabic transliteration system was consistently used to transliterate the selected Arabic examples. Owing to space limitations, four examples were provided for each subcategory unless more examples were needed.

Data Analysis

In the selected *fatwas*, scholars quoted Quranic verses and hadiths to increase the validity of their judgments, opinions, and attitudes towards the issue under investigation. The analysis does not examine such aspects; it scrutinizes the different manifestations of modality, as specified above, providing illustrative examples to show how the struggle between acceptance and resistance was constructed in the *fatwa* discourse. The analysis was divided into four sections: (a) auxiliary modals, including Arabic negation-based modal markers, (b) semi-auxiliary modals, and (c) conditional modality.

Auxiliary Modality

In this section, the analysis uncovered regular auxiliary modal verbs as well as Arabic-specific modal markers that are negation-based and have similar semantic modal meanings, namely, permission, probability, and obligation.

Auxiliary Modal Verbs

Auxiliary modal verbs in the current study were examined in terms of two of their semantic meanings, namely, probability or "epistemic" modality and obligation or necessity, that is, "deontic" modality. It has been noted that the auxiliaries that were employed in the selected *fatwas* are "may," "should," "can," "will," "would," and "must." These modal auxiliaries were used in their negated and non-negated forms. Table 1 presents an overview of the frequency of the modals employed in the Arabic and English data.

It is evident that "should" and "may," as "authoritative," deontic modality, have the highest frequency of occurrence in the data, occurring 36% and 32% respectively, in relation to the other auxiliary modals found in the data. The frequencies of the other modal auxiliaries plunge to half of the occurrences of the first two modal auxiliaries. The frequent use of these two modal verbs substantiates the fact that they are contextually utilized to achieve specific paralinguistic goals. Therefore, the analysis below scrutinizes only the first two auxiliaries as they show how the data mitigate acceptance and resistance to learning English.

The uses of the first most frequently used auxiliary modal, "should," are exemplified below:

Table 1. *Modal Auxiliary Frequency*

Modal auxiliary in Arabic data	Frequency	Modal auxiliary in English data	Frequency	Modality value	Modal function	Total	%
ينبغي /yanbaghī/	4	Should (not)	11	Median	Obligation	18	36%
يجب /yajīb/	3						
يمكن /yumkin/	1	May	7	Low	Possibility	16	32%
قد /qadd/	1						
قد يكون/قد تكون /qad (ya/ta) kūwnu/	5						
لعله/la' allahu/	2						
يستطيع /yastati' u/	1	can (not)	5	Median	Obligation	8	16%
يقدر /yaqdiru/	2						
سوف/sawfa/	1	will	2	High	Prediction	7	14%
ستكون /satakūnu/	1	would	3	Median			
فاعليهم /fa' alayhim/	1	Must	0	High	Obligation	1	2%
Total						50	100%

- (1) The Muslim should not speak in a language other than Arabic without need. (*Fatwa* 3)
- (2) When a Muslim does not speak the native language of his country, he should speak in Arabic, because the Arabic language is the symbol of Islam and the Muslims. (*Fatwa* 4)
- (3) Thus, it is worth pointing out that learning the foreigner's language should be for the previously mentioned reasons, but to become a part of the Muslims' life in their discussions and mails in all their way of life cannot be allowed at all. (*Fatwa* 5)
- (4) At any rate, the Muslim should have a good intention in acquiring knowledge and learning; he should intend to serve his religion and the Muslim nation so as to attain success and happiness in the worldly life and the Hereafter. (*Fatwa* 6)

In Examples (1-4), the auxiliary “should” is utilized to give a strong recommendation and advice and express duty and moral obligation regarding the realization of that advice. In Examples (1) and (2), the speaker advises against speaking a language other than Arabic. This is legitimated in Example (1) by the lack of need and in Example (2) by strongly advising the inquirer not to speak another language, as Arabic symbolizes Islam and Muslims. In turn, he mitigated rejection and at the same resisted the acceptance of foreign languages by discouraging the inquirer from speaking any language other than Arabic. Hence, he promoted and highlighted the importance of Arabic. Although the inquirer asked about the ruling of speaking English, the response was constructed to discourage English and promote Arabic. In Example (3), the speaker limited the cases in which learning a language other than Arabic was recommended. He explained that learning

a language should be done for specific reasons, such as calling people to Islam, transferring Western scientific knowledge, and understanding it to reveal their intentions. In Example (4), the same idea/opinion is repeated. In other words, learners should learn anything to serve their religion. It should be noted that “should” is more frequent than “should not,” which indicates that these scholars often refrained from advising people against learning English, as they do not have a valid Islamic justification. In contrast, they advise the audience to speak and learn Arabic. As explained earlier, this strategy is one of the sources of mitigating acceptance and resistance by utilizing such modals.

The second most frequently employed auxiliary modal “may,” on the other hand, is used to express permissibility or possibility as follows:

(5) Learning English is one of the means which, if you need it, you **may** learn it, and if you do not need it, then do not waste your time with it. (*Fatwa* 1)

(6) It **may** even be compulsory if it is the only means in [sic] calling a non-Arabic speaker to Islam – meaning we are unable to call him to Islam unless we learn his language in order to be able to communicate with him. (*Fatwa* 2)

(7) Therefore, sometimes learning a foreign language **may** be obligatory if the only way you can give da'wah to the people is by learning their language. (*Fatwa* 2)

(8)

(*Fatwa* 8). وقد يكون واجبا حسب اختلاف مقتضيات الأحوال والأزمنة والأمكنة والأشخاص والنيات

CONJ. may be.PST.2SG. must.SG.M.

/wa qad yakūnu wajiban hasaba ikhtilāfi moqtadayati -l-ahwāli wa -l-'azmi-nati wa -l-'amkinati wa -l-'ashkhāsi wa -l-niyyāti/

Translation: It **may** be a **must**, depending on the requirements of time, needs, place, people, and intentions.

(9)

(*Fatwa* 18) وقد يكون وسيلة لواجب كالذي يريد أن يدعو غير المسلمين أو المسلمين الناطقين بغير اللغة العربية

And may be.PST.2SG means.SG.F duty.SG.M

/wa qad yakūnu wasilatan liwajibin kalladhī yurīdu 'an yad'ū ghayra almuslimīn aw almuslimīn alnatiqīn bighayri -l-lughati -l-'arabiyyati/

Translation: It **may** be a **means to a duty**, such as that who wants to call non-Muslims or guide those non-Arabic speaking Muslims.

In Examples (5-9), the auxiliary “may,” as a prototypical hedging device (Hyland, 1998, p. 116), was employed to show the possibility and give permission and freedom to the hearer to learn English. That is, the speaker (the scholar) took into consideration the desire of the interlocutor/hearer if they wanted to learn English. Accordingly, the hearer would and could resolve the issue by themselves based on their own desires and circumstances. In Example (8), the modal of permissibility was intensified by the nominalized modal “a must” to show cases where learning English is a necessity. In Examples (5) and (9), the modal “may” expresses intensified permissibility as well, collocated by the nouns “need” and “means.” Thus, the

permissibility of learning English has not been resolved or finalized by scholars in the given *fatwas*.

The modal verbs of “should” and “may” are both modals of probability. They differ in the degree of strength of the proposition towards the positive or negative poles (polarity). That is, “should” is of medium strength, whereas the modal verb “may” is of low strength. Moreover, regarding obligation and interpretation, these two modal verbs differ in degree as well. The modal verb “should” is deontic while that of “may” is epistemic. However, when median degree modality is used in religious discourse, it may gain more strength and value. Accordingly, the audience will feel obliged to learn Arabic (and, to a lesser degree, not to learn English), and they will not think that they are required or allowed to learn English.

Arabic Negation-Based Modal Markers

During the analysis phase, the researchers noticed some markers in Arabic that seemed to express modality but that did not correspond with the existing English classifications of modality. These emphatic markers function as deontic modalities, since they express obligation and permission, and as epistemic modalities, when they express probability. Although they are mostly negation-based markers, that is, /lā / لا (no) or laysa/ ليس (not) accompanied by a negative word, they function as affirmative auxiliary modals to mitigate meanings. Table 2 shows a list of Arabic modality markers associated with the negative form.

Table 2 illustrates that لا بأس /lā ba'sa/, which is deontic and of low value in expressing permission, has the highest frequency of these markers in the Arabic samples with 40%. Together with the other permissibility modals, it amounts to 57% of the negation-based modals in the data. Next, لا ريب /lā rayba/ and لا شك /lā shakka/ occur almost half the times to ascertain, with high strength, the improbability of any other judgement except the one expressed towards learning English in the *fatwa*(s). With only two counts (7%) of occurrence, the high obligation negative marker لا بد /lā budda/ was rarely used compared to the other negative markers and, it contrasts with the frequent use of median obligation modals, that is, يجب /yajib/, ينبغي /yanbaghi/ (should; see Table 1). The following are illustrative examples of how these markers express modality meanings in Arabic for permissibility, probability, and obligation and are used to mitigate acceptance and resistance to the ruling of learning/speaking English.

(10)

9 (Fatwa) فلا بأس بذلك عند الحاجة، ... لا بأس بتعلمها للمصلحة، لا للرغبة فيها

PREP.no problem.SG.M PREP.this.SG.M. ... no problem.SG.M.

/falā ba'sa bidhālīka 'inda alhājati, ... la ba'sa bita'allumaha lilmaṣlahah, lā lilraghbati fiha/

Translation: There is no problem when there is a need ... There is **no problem** in learning it to benefit from it not because you desire it.

Table 2. *Negation-Based Modal Markers Frequency*

Arabic Modal Auxiliary	English Meaning	Frequency	Modality Value	Modal Function	Percentage
لا بأس /lā ba'sa/	No problem with (It is permissible)	12	Low	Permission	40%
لا حرج /lā ḥaraja/	No problem with (It is permissible)	2	Low	Permission	7%
ليس فيه إشكال /laysa fihi ishkalun/	No problem with (It is permissible)	1	Low	Permission	3%
لا مانع /lā māni'a/	No objection	2	Low	Permission	7%
لا ريب /lā rayba/	Undoubtedly	6	High	Probability	20%
لا شك /lā shakka/	No doubt, undoubtedly	5	High	Probability	17%
لا بد /lā budda/	Must	2	High	Obligation	7%
Total		30	Total		100%

(11)

وأما اعتياد الخطاب بغير العربية التي هي شعار الإسلام ولغة القرآن، حتى يصير ذلك عادة للمصر وأهله، ولأهل (Fatwa 15) وللرجل مع صاحبه، ولأهل السوق، أو للأمراء، أو لأهل الديوان، أو لأهل الفقه، فلا ريب أن هذا مكرهه PREP.no doubt.SG.M PART. this.SG.M hated.SG.M.PASS /wa 'amma i 'tiyādi alkhiṭābi bighayri al'arabiyyati allati hiya shi'āru -l-'islā-mi wa lughatu -l-qur'āni, ḥatta yaṣīru dhālika 'ādatan lilmiṣri wa 'ahlahu, wa li 'ahli -l-dāri, wa lilrajuli ma'a ṣāhibihi, wa li 'ahl alsūqi, 'aw li -l-'umarā'i, 'aw li 'ahl -l-diwāni, 'aw li 'ahli -l-fiḥi, falā rayba 'anna hadhā makrūhun/ Translation: As for getting used to speaking in a language other than Arabic, which is the language of Islam and the Quran, until it becomes a habit for a country and its people, the people of the house, the man and his friend, for the people in the marketplace, the rulers, the people of the court, or those of the *fiqh* (jurisprudence), then **undoubtedly** this is hated.

(12)

أما مسألة جواز تعلمها، فإن تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية من حيث الأصل أصبح ضرورة لا بد منها؛ لأنها لغة العلم والحضارة في هذا العصر، فهي في أيديهم، وهذا أمر لا يماري فيه أحد، فمن احتاج إلى تعلمها لمثل ذلك، للتواصل، أو للاطلاع، أو للمعرفة فلا بأس. أما أن يتشدد الإنسان بهذه اللغة، معتقداً أن تعلمها هو مفخر وفضيلة ومزية، مزدرياً لغة العرب، فلا شك أن هذا (Fatwa 17). أمر خطير، يدل على هزيمة نفسية عند صاحبها.

CONJ. knowledge.PREP.SG.F. PREP.no problem.SG.F. . . . PREP.no doubt. SG.M. PART. this.SG.M. matter.SG.M. danger.SG.M.

/ 'amma mas'alatu jawazi ta'allumihā fa'inna ta'alluma -l-lughati al'injil-iziyati min ḥaythi al'ṣli 'aṣbaḥa ḍarūratan lābudda minha li'annahā lughata-ta -l-'ilmi wa alḥaḍarati fi hātha -l-'aṣri, fahiya fi 'aydihim, wa hāthā 'amrun lā yumāri fihī 'a ḥadun, fa-man iḥtāja 'ilā ta'allumaha limithli dhalikā, lit-tawāṣul, 'aw lil'itṭilā'i, 'aw lilma'rifati falā ba'sa. 'amma 'an yatashaddaqa al'insāna bihāthihi illughati, mu'taqidan 'anna ta'allumaha huwa mafkharatun wa faḍīlatun wa mizyatun, muzdariyan lughata -l-'arabi, falā shakka 'anna hātha khaṭīrun, yadullu 'alā hazīmatun nafsīyatun 'inda ṣāhibihā/

Translation: As for the issue of permitting learning it, the learning of the English language essentially became a necessity and **a must**, because it is the language of science and civilization in this age, so it is in their (the West's) hands, and this is undeniable. Therefore, whoever needs to learn it for that, for communication, or for reading or education, then **it is permissible**. However, if a human being is bragging by using this language, assuming that learning it is a source of pride, virtue, or privilege, looking down on the language of the Arabs in disdain, then **this is no doubt a dangerous matter** that illustrates a deep psychological defeat with that person.

The examples above illustrate the three modal meanings that Arabic negation markers express: permissibility, probability, and obligation. In Example (10), the marker, لا بأس /lā ba' sa/, a low strength value, is a hedging device that was utilized by the speaker to give permission to the hearer to learn English. The speaker affirmed the permissibility by negating it only when there is a benefit. Hence, the hearer had to resolve the issue himself based on their intentions. Meanings expressed through a negative modal are weaker than those affirmed by positive word choices. Accordingly, the speaker casts hesitation and uncertainty over his opinion, and successfully avoids committing himself to his *fatwa*. On the other hand, Example (11), لا ريب /lā rayba/, which is a median strength value, is emphatic but it conveys probability. In this example, the speaker emphasized that if English became a daily language, then it would be disliked or hated. The mitigation in Example (12) is interesting. The scholar addressed the issue of learning English as a foreign language as necessary and obligatory, through the use of the high strength value marker /lā budda/. Nevertheless, he later used a low strength value, /lā ba' sa/, as a hedging device to give permission to learn it. The scholar used a median strength value marker to mitigate and emphasize the dangers of daily English use. The contrast in this example shows how scholars resist and mitigate both permissibility and impermissibility using low- and high-strength value markers, respectively.

Semi-Auxiliary Modals

The second modality subtype was the semi-auxiliary modality, which is a multi-word construction that expresses meanings similar to those of auxiliary modals, such as typicality, ability, necessity, prediction, and inclination. Thus, it serves as the focus of the current study to examine how scholars use them to mitigate acceptance of and resistance to speaking and learning English.

Table 3 shows the frequency of semi-auxiliary modals in the Arabic and English data under examination. The most frequent modal meaning is typicality (a past habit by the first generation of Muslims invoked to validate a practice), which was expressed by 58% of the total semi-auxiliary modals found in the data. This is not surprising, as issuing *fatwas* is heavily reliant on past traditions and practices. In other words, past actions and practices are presented as case laws that scholars

Table 3. *Semi-Auxiliary Modals in Arabic and English Data*

Semi-auxiliary modals (in the language they appeared in the data)	Frequency	Modal meaning	Total	Percentage
used to	1			
كان/كانوا /kāna/ or /kānū/	14	Usuality	19	58%
اعتاد/اعتادوا /i' tādā/ or /i' tādū/	4			
able/unable/enable to	5	Ability	7	21%
managed to	2			
need to	2	Necessity	2	6%
view to be hazardous	2	Prediction	2	6%
try to	1			
intend to	1	Inclination	3	9%
desire to	1			
Total			33	100%

can cite when issuing *fatwas*. The second most frequent semi-auxiliary modals were those expressing ability (21%) and then inclination (9%). Prediction and necessity were ranked low in frequency. While prediction is interesting because it uses the discursive strategy of association to express the disapproval of something, necessity was invoked frequently through other modality markers, particularly verbs and nominalizations, which will be explored later. The following are illustrative examples.

(13)

قول شيخ الإسلام ابن تيمية: وفي الجملة فالكلمة بعد الكلمة من العجمية أمرها قريب، وأكثر ما كانوا يفعلون إما لكون
المخاطب أعجمياً، أو قد اعتاد العجمية، يريدون تقريب الأفهام عليه (Fatwa 13)

CONJ. PART. used.3SG.M.PST. Nonarabic.SG.F.

/qawlu shaykhu il' islāmi ibni taymiyah: "wa fi aljumlati falkalimatu ba'da al-kalimati min al' ajamiyyati 'amruha qaribun, wa 'aktharu mā kānū yaf'alūna 'immā likawn ilmukhātābi 'a' jamiyyan, 'aw qad i' tād al' ajamiyyati, yurīdūna taqrīb al' afhami 'alayhi"/

Translation: The saying of Shaikh of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah: "and in a sentence, a non-Arabic word after an Arabic word were easily mixed, and they used to do that more either because the addressee was non-Arab or because he is used to speaking the foreign language in order to help him understand clearly.

(14) The Muslim should not speak in a language other than Arabic without need if he **is able to** speak Arabic (Fatwa 3)

(15) However, what I disapprove and **view to be hazardous** is teaching our young children at the age of 5 or 4, the English language so that it becomes their first language, this is what I object to. (Fatwa 2)

In Example (13), the emphasis on typicality is clear, referring to what the

pioneers of Islam did, recommended, and approved to legitimize and normalize the recommendation proposed in the *fatwa*. This is an attempt to establish and enforce the idea that previous generations' practices were flawless, and any deviations from previous practices and thoughts were rejected. Such a perspective and discourse are limiting and distorting and have the propensity to exclude the current context and the inquirer's changing needs. In Example (14), the condition of ability that is expressed through the semi-auxiliary modal "able," was utilized to limit the context of speaking a foreign language. That is, Muslims who are able to speak Arabic should not speak any other language. In Example (15), the speaker cautioned against teaching English to young children, based on the prediction that it might replace their first language, Arabic. Describing such a situation as possibly "hazardous" in the future from this perspective mitigated the strength of the auxiliary modal "should not," which was used to express disapproval and an objection.

Conditional Modality

Concerning modality, conditional clauses "may carry the meaning of modality to express probability" (Suhadi, 2011, p. 160). In the selected *fatwas*, several conditional clauses were used to express the scholars' opinions and attitudes. There were 40 conditional clauses, either zero conditional, which refer to general truths and facts, or repeated actions (Herring, 2016), or first conditional clauses, which indicate possible outcomes in the present or future, to support other auxiliary modals to mitigate acceptance and resistance to English.

Remarkably, Table 4 shows that scholars utilized first conditionals more often than zero conditionals. Some illustrative examples are provided below.

(16) If there is no need to learn it, then do not occupy your time with that or let it distract you from things which are more important and more beneficial.

(*Fatwa* 1)

(17) The Muslim should not speak in a language other than Arabic without need if he is able to speak Arabic. (*Fatwa* 3)

(18)

أما إذا كان من غير حاجة فهذا لا يجوز

COND. COND. Was.SG.M. PREP. need.SG.F. PREP.this.SG.M. not permissible.SG.M.

/ 'amma idhā kāāna min ghayri ḥajatin fa ḥādhā lā yajūz/

Table 4. *Conditional Modality Frequency*

Conditional Clause Types	Frequency	Percentage
Zero conditional	19	47.5%
First conditional	21	52.5%
Total	40	100%

Translation: If it is not needed, **it is not permissible**.

(19) Learning English is one of the means which, **if** you need it, you **may** learn it, and if you do not need it, then **do not** waste your time with it. (*Fatwa* 1)

(20) **If** there is a need for it as a means of calling people to Allah, then learning it **may** be obligatory. (*Fatwa* 1)

(21) Therefore, sometimes learning a foreign language **may** be obligatory **if** the only way you can give *da'wah* to the people is by learning their language. (*Fatwa* 2)

On the one hand, zero conditional clauses, which function as deontic modality, were employed to reinforce an obligation to Arabic in case there is no need to learn English. They present the recommendations found in Examples (16), (17), (18) and (19), namely, “do not occupy your time with that or let it distract you from things which are more important and more beneficial,” “you should not speak in a language other than Arabic,” “it is not permissible,” and “do not waste your time with it.” Here, the scholars were assertive using high-value auxiliary modals (“should” in its negated form to discourage them from learning it) or utilizing third-person imperative forms (“do” in its negated form to demand the inquirer not to waste or occupy their time). Hence, mitigating resistance and rejection when one is able to speak Arabic or does not need to speak English.

On the other hand, first conditional clauses were utilized to express permission in case one needed to learn English. In Example (19), the permission “you may learn it” was granted in the first sentence with the condition of necessity, otherwise, the basic ruling is the strong command “do not waste your time.” However, Examples (20) and (21) blur the line between permission and obligation since learning English “may be obligatory,” “as a means of calling people to Allah,” and “the only way you can give *da'wah*.” As such, the scholars used “may,” which is a low value auxiliary modal, in order not to show overt commitment to their *fatwas*. It is worth noting that “need,” which was frequently invoked in these and similar examples to express necessity, also expresses epistemic modality. The phrase “if there is no need” conveys the message explicitly to the audience that a necessity or legitimate reason was needed to learn English. Although this modal expression appears to be objective, it indirectly expresses the scholar’s attitude towards learning English. Such an implicit expression found in the conditional form helped the scholar avoid any responsibility and made his statement sound like objective evaluation.

Therefore, conditional modality presents a good case for uncovering the dichotomy that exists in such a discourse. There is a dichotomy between rejecting and accepting learning a second language other than Arabic. Briefly, in zero conditional examples, the ruling sounded more imperative, factual, and conclusive, declaring learning English as “not permissible when it is not needed.” The sequence of the clauses is also interesting. When there was no need, the scholars showed more commitment to their ruling, and they were more decisive, employing “sho-

uld” or the third person imperative “do not” to mitigate resistance. Conversely, when there was a need, the scholar distanced himself from the ruling by utilizing “may” to resist acceptance.

Discussion

Religious discourse, including *fatwas*, is a tool for prescribing and expressing religious obligations, duties, and permissions. Hence, to express Islamic obligations and give permission, the *fatwas* under investigation mitigated acceptance and resistance to learning and speaking English, as a foreign language, through modality. As noted earlier, modality, which is the opposite of polarity, refers to the “indeterminacy that falls in between . . . [that construes] the region of uncertainty that lies between ‘yes’ and ‘no’” (Halliday, 1968, p. 176). As Palmer (2001) argued, modal verbs are inappropriate when facts are known. Hence, they express opinions. The use of modality in *fatwas* is significant because it indicates that speakers do not know the truth of the matter at hand and lack facts to declare their commitment to their rulings. They also redefined the trajectory of possible actions that the audience could take concerning the issue of learning English.

First, the modal auxiliary verbs “should” and “may” were strategically utilized as persuasive strategies to indirectly and subtly encode speakers’ attitudes and opinions. On the one hand, “should,” as deontic modality, serves to give directives, based on rules and laws, expresses obligation, and advises on what action needs to be realized or is supposed to be taken. It also expresses the speaker’s attitude towards a possible action and the degree of obligation (median strength). On the other hand, “may,” as epistemic modality, expresses a judgment about the truth of the proposition of a sentence, that is possibly true, and allows for the possibility of action to be realized. In other words, it reveals information concerning the degree of the speaker’s commitment to the truth of what he says. The auxiliary “may” also expresses uncertainty and lesser confidence in the truth of one’s own proposition; the speaker is not sure if the hearer should learn English or not. However, it encodes possibility and opinion, that is, the degree of obligation (weak strength). Hence, it is safe to say that the speaker is not fully committed to what he is saying; he just rules it as allowed.

Second, conditional clauses reveal an imbalance in such discourse and the dichotomy between acceptance and resistance. In the data under investigation, zero and first conditional clauses were also strategically employed to modulate the speaker’s involvement in the text, that is, “subjectivity,” through the distinction between two situations. Hence, as a fact, one does not need to learn English, and as a possibility, one may learn English. Conditional modality enables the speaker to distance himself from advising the inquirer to learn English, yet simultaneously presents subjective advice not to learn English. This is a good representation of the dilemma of scholars accepting and rejecting English as a language and culture.

Third, Arabic negation-based modal markers were utilized to achieve the same modality meanings as “may” and “should,” that is, permissibility, probability, and obligation. The Arabic marker of a low strength value (لا بأس/lā ba’ sa/), for example, was used to give permission by negative impermissibility. Accordingly, scholars mitigated and resisted acceptance through such a strategy and shifted the burden to the inquirer to decide what to do, because of the scholars’ lack of commitment. Nonetheless, the scholars utilized a high strength value, (لا شك/lā shakka/) for example, as an emphatic marker of probability to cast no doubt about the ruling of learning foreign languages as disliked or hated in certain contexts.

Fourth, the semi-auxiliary modals used to mitigate acceptance and resistance manifested in the use of multi-word expressions of modal meanings. They echoed and encoded some positive and negative attitudes towards learning English: emphasizing “usuality,” and “typicality” to support the scholars’ opinion by evoking tradition, past habits, and practices of the first generation of Muslims, “ability” to permit it only when there is a “need,” and “prediction” to warn against teaching English to young children, projecting it as a “hazard” because it may lead to loss of their Islamic Arabic identity. However, both discourses, namely, acceptance and rejection, seem to exclude possible contextual factors related to time, generation, technology, and human abilities.

It has been noted that scholars sometimes deflected the focus away from the inquirers’ questions about English to encourage people to learn the language of the Quran and Muslims, that is, Arabic, which is represented as a religious duty and an obligation. This was a form of resistance. In addition, often in the data, an association was established between necessity and learning or speaking of English. Therefore, if not required, it is not permissible or hated. This justifies why Muslims have a strong sense of obligation towards Arabic and the preservation of their Islamic identity. This shows that, to these scholars, speaking English meant the abandonment of Arabic, an integral part of their identities.

At the discourse level, the utilization of well-established modality topics, such as the importance of Arabic and Islamic rulings on imitating non-Muslims, allowed scholars to achieve a discourse that mitigates rejection and resists learning foreign languages. The current study shows that in the selected *fatwas*, scholars utilized acceptance through low-value modals and expressed resistance through median-value modals. This pattern of resistance and acceptance in the *fatwas* on the ruling of learning and speaking English was documented by Alharbi (2020), who found that in these *fatwas*, there were two main ideological overarching frames: an anti-English frame and a pro-English frame. Interestingly, imitation, which is one of the anti-English frames, was decoded in the data of this study as modal expressions that were used by scholars to impose conditions that limit the permissibility of learning English.

Similar to Almahmoud (2015), the *fatwas* were found to express and support an opinion more than they provide evidence from the Quran and the Sunnah to convince hearers and answer their questions. Intertextuality with these canonical

sources was surprisingly rare in the selected *fatwas* in this study, and the scholars merely expressed their attitude towards English with the reproduction and translation of older *fatwas* as they are, and exploited the respect the hearers have of the Council of Senior Scholars, whose *fatwas* were also not well supported.

This discursive pattern is also shown by their use of modality in the current research and how the hearers are sometimes left with unsatisfactory answers, as the responsibility of making the choice of learning/speaking English is transferred to them, and the answerer is avoiding commitment to a ruling. This approach defeats the purpose of *fatwas* as the focus shifts from answering questions about English to emphasizing the importance of Arabic. High-value modality markers were used to support arguments against learning/speaking English, but such resistance was mitigated by the use of low-value modality where learning or speaking English is permitted, provided there is a “need” only.

In line with Fakhri (2014), *fatwas* exhibited tension between modern and traditional opinions, and this is best shown in the use of modality markers. This may help explain why the answers in the selected *fatwas* seem to accommodate the questioners by providing them with a space to practice their own judgement by shifting responsibility. It is also worth mentioning that once these *fatwas* are published online, they have a new, larger, and diverse audience on the Internet, especially when expanded by translation. This audience may disagree with the traditional stance towards English and the protective ideology towards the Arabic language, claimed as the language of Islam.

In brief, the use of the auxiliary modals, “may” and “should,” and other modals that are similar in function, in sentences and conditional clauses, unravel the scholars’ struggle between accepting and rejecting learning and speaking English. They also symbolize the power such *fatwas* have on inquirers, which may not only aim to influence and persuade but also to manipulate. These manipulative strategies draw on the opposite poles of rulings, namely permissible and impermissible. As a permissible practice, scholars use low-value modals, hedging permission, casting hesitation, projecting uncertainty, and lack of commitment to their *fatwa*. On the other hand, resistance was encoded using median value modals as implicit tools to advise inquirers and address their questions. Through these median and weak value markers, scholars have subtly mitigated and resisted impermissibility and permissibility, respectively. In conclusion, the *fatwas* under examination (conditionally) approve and disapprove of learning and speaking foreign languages in general and English in specific, and the final ruling on the subject is left to the audience’s consciousness of the issues raised by scholars to allow or disallow it.

Conclusion

In the current study, the evaluation of these *fatwas* on the ruling of learning and speaking English in terms of (semi)auxiliary modals revealed that none of these *fatwas* indicated that learning English was forbidden. On the contrary,

many *fatwas* argued that learning per se and learning English or any other foreign language are permissible. Nevertheless, these *fatwas* strengthened rejection and weakened acceptance by using modality. Low modality indicates less certainty, obligation, probability, importance, emphasis, intensity, and confidence. On the other hand, median and high modality encode median and high degrees of attitude such as commitment, emphasis, intensity, and obligation. Because *fatwas* are opinions resulting from *ijtihad* (i.e., legal reasoning/deduction), scholars manipulated their opinions by employing modalities of low and medium value. However, the modality of median and low values may gain high value in religious discourse.

These modality markers are not specific to the *fatwas* under investigation alone. In contrast, they are an essential part of the *fatwa* discourse. Hence, more research needs to be conducted to uncover the discursive practices of *fatwa* as a discourse and its subtle persuasive strategies. It is worth noting that *fatwa* as a discourse and social practice has not been systematically scrutinized from a discursive perspective. This is evident from the lack of relevant studies in the literature review of the current study. Hence, its discursive power has not been deconstructed to offer both scholars and inquirers a better understanding of this crucial discourse. Such studies can also provide valuable insights into language and *fatwa* discourse, the cultural and Islamic values of scholars, how these scholars' authorial identities and attitudes are constructed, the implicit process of production, and the requirements for a clearer and more empowering discourse. Equally important, studying this type of discourse can help scholars understand their opinions and attitudes, and how they are structured and represented in their *fatwas*. Therefore, they can structure their *fatwas* in a manner that allows inquirers to fully understand them accurately and decide what they need to do accordingly.

During the analysis of the data in the current study, it was noticed that adverbs, adjectives, verbs, and nominalizations carried in the *fatwas* modal meanings similar to the modals under investigation. Due to space limitations, this part of the analysis is left for further research in this area. In conclusion, religious discourse in general, and *fatwa* discourse in particular, are distinguished by their constant negotiation between what is permissible and impermissible. Hence, they can shape and be reshaped by such negotiations. It is among the most important multidisciplinary discourses because of its relations with other existing discourses, such as modernity and technological, scientific, and educational discourse, in correspondence with the changing worldly needs of people.

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Research Ethics Statement

No ethics approval was sought for the current study.

Data Availability Statement

The data set analyzed in this study are openly available and can be accessed using the hyperlinks provided in the appendix below.

Authorship Details

Alham Alharbi: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article. Lubna Bahammam: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article. Tahani Almansour: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the article.

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Appendix

1. [*Fatwa no. 1*](#)
2. [*Fatwa no. 2*](#)
3. [*Fatwa no. 3*](#)
4. [*Fatwa no. 4*](#)
5. [*Fatwa no. 5*](#)
6. [*Fatwa no. 6*](#)
7. [*Fatwa no. 7*](#)
8. [*Fatwa no. 8*](#)
9. [*Fatwa no. 9*](#)
10. [*Fatwa no. 10*](#)
11. [*Fatwa no. 11*](#)
12. [*Fatwa no. 12*](#)
13. [*Fatwa no. 13*](#)
14. [*Fatwa no. 14*](#)
15. [*Fatwa no. 15*](#)
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19. [*Fatwa no. 19*](#)
20. [*Fatwa no. 20*](#)
21. [*Fatwa no. 21*](#)
22. [*Fatwa no. 22*](#)
23. [*Fatwa no. 23*](#)
24. [*Fatwa no. 24*](#)