

Epistemic Modality: a Comparative Analysis of Subjective and Objective Expressions

Turakulova Dilafruz Mamatsoli qizi ¹

¹ Doctoral student Uzbekistan State World Languages University,
dilimturakulova1309@gmail.com

Abstract:

Epistemic modality (EM) plays a crucial role in linguistic theory, distinguishing between subjective and objective assessments of truth and probability. This paper explores the categorization of epistemic modality, highlighting the differentiation between subjective epistemic modality (SEM) and objective epistemic modality (OEM). Drawing from various linguistic theories, including those of J. Lyons and M. Halliday, we examine the role of modal markers in conveying certainty, probability, doubt, and belief. The paper further classifies EM markers into explicit and implicit categories, analyzing their syntactic and semantic functions in discourse. The findings underscore the dynamic nature of epistemic evaluation, demonstrating how linguistic structures shape speaker intent and audience interpretation.

Keywords: Epistemic modality, subjective modality, objective modality, linguistic evaluation, modal markers, probability, certainty.

Introduction

Epistemic modality (EM) plays a crucial role in linguistic theory, distinguishing between subjective and objective assessments of truth and probability. [1] This paper explores the categorization of epistemic modality, highlighting the differentiation between subjective epistemic modality (SEM) and objective epistemic modality (OEM). Drawing from various linguistic theories, including those of J. Lyons and M. Halliday, we examine the role of modal markers in conveying certainty, probability, doubt, and belief. The study further classifies EM markers into explicit and implicit categories, analyzing their syntactic and semantic functions in discourse. [2] Understanding these distinctions contributes to a broader comprehension of how linguistic structures shape speaker intent and audience interpretation.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the categorization and functional role of epistemic modality (EM) in linguistic discourse.[3] The research is based on a comparative analysis of theoretical frameworks and existing literature on epistemic modality, with a focus on subjective epistemic modality (SEM) and objective epistemic modality (OEM).

The data for this study were collected from various linguistic sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and established linguistic theories by scholars such as J. Lyons, M. Halliday, and V.V. Vinogradov. Additionally, examples from different linguistic corpora were examined to illustrate the usage of EM markers in both written and spoken discourse.

The study utilizes a discourse analysis approach, categorizing epistemic modality markers into explicit and implicit forms. [4] Explicit markers include modal words (e.g., probably, certainly) and modal phrases (e.g., it is likely, it seems that), while implicit markers involve verbs of perception and cognition (e.g., think, believe, appear).

A comparative method was applied to examine the distinctions between SEM and OEM by analyzing their syntactic and semantic properties. The study also investigates the relationship between epistemic certainty and degrees of probability in modal expressions.

In any statement, two structural components can be distinguished: the modus and the propositional element. Based on this, communicative modality always presupposes the presence of an evaluative subject making the statement and the statement itself, which includes the propositional component.

The term “proposition” was introduced into linguistics from logic. B. Russell conceptualized a proposition as "the content of belief," meaning what we think about when we consider something as true or false. At the same time, he distinguished between the subjective component and the objective content of a sentence, linking the latter directly to reality.[5]

The concept of modality, in turn, encompasses a variety of meanings, including reality, expressiveness, intention, desire, information, questions, causal relationships, and other related notions. Academician V.V. Vinogradov, based on the idea that the speaker functions as both subject and object, identified two types of modality within the general category of modality: objective modality (OM) and subjective modality (SM).

According to V.V. Vinogradov, objective modality (OM) expresses the relationship of the narrative to reality, thereby indicating the factuality of the statement (Vinogradov-2, 1975: 55). Simultaneously, a given sentence may acquire an additional subjective-modal meaning (SM), forming a secondary layer of modality that conveys the speaker’s particular attitude towards reality (Vinogradov-3, 1975: 256). [6] The authors of the grammar of the modern Russian literary language, published under the editorship of N.Yu. Shvedova, also follow Vinogradov’s view by distinguishing two types of modality:

“In addition to the obligatory objective-modal meaning inherent in every sentence, a sentence may also express a personal-modal meaning, that is, the speaker’s attitude toward the reported content as a whole or to a specific part of it” (see Figure 76). This approach is also reflected in a number of works dedicated to modality (e.g., E.E. Grauberg, 1978; N.V. Gusarova, 1990, among others).

Results and Analysis

Further research suggests that opposing objective-modal evaluation to subjective-modal evaluation is incorrect since linguistic modality always coexists with the object of modality. The division of modality into objective and subjective reflects the introduction of logical concepts into the study of communicative modality (N.E. Petrov, 1982: 14-16). On the other hand, subjective modality (SM) also includes the communicant’s action-based relationship to reality, which is realized through

directive, mediative, and other speech acts. The interrelation of epistemic modality (EM) and actional modality forms the basis for a broader understanding of SM. The reliability of EM is contrasted with the semantics of knowledge: the former establishes various zones of certainty, while the latter delineates empirically verifiable knowledge zones.[7]

Narrowly defined subjective or epistemic modality (EM):

1. Represents an evaluation of probabilistic events and is functionally considered a fundamental modality.
2. Includes the following components:
 - a) The semantics of doubt and hesitation.
 - b) The semantics of certainty, confidence, and hope.

Epistemic semantics, as a field of study, addresses the following issues:

1. Problems of reliability, probability, certainty, and trustworthiness.
2. Problems of doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity, and skepticism.

Research in this area is divided into two main directions:

1. Studying the means of expressing certainty, confidence, and hope:
 - Analyzing how these means function in dialogic and monologic speech.
2. Studying the means of expressing uncertainty, doubt, and skepticism:
 - Examining the contextual operation of these means.

The first direction remains insufficiently explored, despite significant contributions from both international and domestic scholars such as S.I. Buglak, M.A. Dmitrovskaya, A.A. Kornilov, E. Salamin, D. Feher, Ye.S. Yakovleva, D. Davidson, B. Russell, G.H. Wright, among others. As for the second direction, it is only beginning to take shape within the framework of EM theory, and many studies do not yet distinguish issues related to epistemic uncertainty.[8]

In practice, this means that the means of expressing various degrees of probability often also encompass the means of expressing uncertainty, doubt, and skepticism.

Positive epistemic modality, as an element of EM, has been underexplored in Germanic, Romance, and Russian linguistics. The role of this modality within the EM system remains undefined. The linguistic means of expressing positive outcomes, hope, and confidence have not yet been systematically identified or described.

The Need to Study Positive Epistemic Modality

At the same time, positive epistemic modality, that is, the modality of confidence, is considered an integral component of EM. Therefore, an analysis of the existing literature provides a categorical basis for an analytical review of works on positive epistemic modality.

Accordingly, in the review section, we will first present an analytical overview of EM, followed by a focused discussion of studies dedicated to describing hope, expectation, and confidence in English and Russian.

The theory of epistemic semantics, or EM, includes positive epistemic semantics (goodness, hope, clarity, confidence) on one hand and negative epistemic modality (uncertainty, distrust, doubt, badness) on the other. This field developed in philosophy, logic, and linguistics during the second half of the 20th century.

In domestic linguistics, several monographs, articles, and dissertations have been devoted to EM. These works have studied lexical, grammatical, and prosodic means of expressing EM.

Thus, reliability is a concept that characterizes the degree of alignment between a judgment's content and objective reality, reflecting the subject's (speaker, thinker, or writer) awareness of these objective connections.

Linguists studying the problem of determining the reliability of epistemic statements have found it necessary to distinguish reliability when describing the internal structure of epistemic modality. A widely accepted approach divides epistemic modality into simple, problematic, and categorical reliability. Modal words and phrases are commonly used to express problematic and categorical reliability.

Categorical reliability markers express the speaker's firm belief in the content of the message. This confidence arises as a result of overcoming previous doubts or affirming earlier statements. Such markers are used to assert a fact as legally, naturally, and indisputably valid. The speaker approaches this statement with absolute certainty.[9]

Problematic reliability has been extensively studied in V.N. Tarasenko's (1998) dissertation, which examines dubious or dubitative modality. This study investigates the transition from positive confidence to doubt, conceptualizing negative confidence as a distinct form.

Tarasenko concludes that equating the category of doubt with that of uncertainty leads to theoretical contradictions. He defines doubt and uncertainty as heterogeneous, partially overlapping, and complementary concepts.

Expressions of Doubt, Uncertainty, and Hesitation

Expressions of doubt, uncertainty, and hesitation include modalities of distrust, pessimism, and other negative emotional evaluations. In other words, within the realm of problematic certainty, the scope of emotional modality varies.

Furthermore, doubt, uncertainty, and hesitation represent different degrees of problematic certainty but are tinged with negative emotional connotations. Thus, the means of expressing problematic certainty are contrasting from an emotional modality perspective yet similar in their degrees of problematicity.

Scholars argue that this definition emphasizes not the objective possibility of verification based on existing facts in epistemic evaluation but rather the speaker's subjective conclusions.

The issue lies in the distinction between subjective epistemic modality (SEM) and objective epistemic modality (OEM) within EM (Lens, 1995), as well as the differentiation of subjective and objective types of expression (Halliday, 1970). This division may not be uniform across different linguistic traditions.

Additionally, EM markers express explicit (I think, It seems to me) and implicit (It is likely) subjectivity (Belyayeva, 1985: 143).

Discussion

According to J. Lyons, OEM markers do not refer to the speaker or draw conclusions but are instead based solely on the facts that must be present within the stated proposition. He argues that the verb "must" can be used both in objective and subjective epistemic senses.

For example: "Alfred must be unmarried" can be used in two ways:

- **Objective usage:** The speaker's reasoning can be described as follows: based on known facts, it is undoubtedly true that Alfred is unmarried.

- **Subjective usage:** The speaker's conclusion is based on personal assumptions.

J. Lyons' Approach

J. Lyons argues that the distinction between objective and subjective EM is somewhat artificial. He suggests that epistemic markers such as *It is likely*, *I think*, *probably*, *possibly*, *must* belong to the same category and should be classified as subjective.[10]

A slightly different classification of epistemic markers was proposed by M. Halliday, who distinguishes:

Objective markers, such as “probably” and “it is likely”.

Subjective markers, such as “I think” and “I believe” (Halliday, 1970).

Overall, M. Halliday views modality as a form of speaker participation in speech acts and includes it in a broader category of “speaker's commentary.” This category encompasses not only probability and possibility markers but also various adverbs like “frankly” and “fortunately” (Halliday, 1970).

Classification of Epistemic Modality (EM) Markers

EM markers can be divided into two major groups:

1. First group:

- Includes modal words such as *probably*, *possibly*, *certainly*, and phrases like *it is likely*, *it is probable*. These tools directly describe a situation, defining it with a certain degree of probability.

2. Second group:

- Includes verbs of thought and perception, such as *think*, *believe*, *suppose*, *seem*, and *appear*. These tools alter the denotative content of statements, representing reality not as direct depiction but as its reflection in the subject's mind.

Modal Words and Verbs

Modal words and verbs of thought-perception influence the reliability of statements (Caton, 1966; Belyaeva, 1985). Modal words are more objective and impersonal, whereas verbs tend to be more personal.

M. Furberg's conclusions:

- I believe indicates that the speaker lacks sufficient grounds for a categorical statement.
- Probably suggests disagreement among experts, independent of the speaker's personal shortcomings (e.g., poor memory).

Thus, I believe carries an autobiographical nuance linked to the speaker, whereas *probably* does not (Furberg, 1963: 244).

Bibliography

1. R. Ismoilova, «Digital Reading vs. Traditional Reading: A Comparative Analysis», Mod. Educ. Res., т. 15, вып. 4, сс. 66–79, 2023.
2. N. Nurmatova, «Encouraging Reading Culture through Community Programs», Soc. Innov. J., т. 10, вып. 1, сс. 33–48, 2020.
3. F. Rustamov, «Psychological Aspects of Reading Motivation in Adolescents», Psychol. Educ., т. 9, вып. 5, сс. 120–135, 2021.
4. Sh. Yunusova, Reading and Social Responsibility. 2023.

5. Sh. To‘xtasinov, «The Culture of Reading and Its Role in Society», Collect. Sci. Artic., 2021.
6. M. Tursunov, «The Impact of Book Clubs on Literacy Development», Lit. Stud. Rev., т. 14, вып. 3, сс. 77–90, 2023.
7. J. Karimov, «The Influence of Reading Habits on Critical Thinking», J. Educ. Stud., т. 12, вып. 3, сс. 45–57, 2021.
8. T. Abdurakhmanov, «The Role of Libraries in Promoting a Reading Culture Among Youth», Libr. Sci. Rev., т. 8, вып. 2, сс. 89–102, 2022.
9. U. Hasanov, Youth and Book Reading. Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 2020.
10. M. Avezov, Youth and Reading. 2022.