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Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English
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Epistemic modality is a multifaceted domain that has gained significant interest from various scholarly fields, including linguistics, philosophy, and the psychology of communication. These disciplines offer a range of theoretical frameworks and approaches to understanding how individuals express and navigate realms of knowledge, belief, and uncertainty through language, as well as how they convey the likelihood of a state of affairs or event, reflecting their degree of certainty or doubt. Written by scholars of psychology and communication, Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli, Ilaria Riccioni, and corpus linguist Gill Philip, this book demonstrates the applicability of the KUB (Knowing, Unknowing, Believing) model developed by Zuczkowski and his colleagues (see among others: Zuczkowski *et al.* 2017) to explain the relationship between questions and epistemic stance. Through both qualitative and quantitative analyses of data extracted from the *Spoken British National Corpus 2014*, the authors show how questions are not merely tools for seeking information but strategic devices for managing social interactions and negotiating knowledge.

In Part 1, *KUB Model and Conversational Analysis on Questions and Responses*, the authors illustrate the *KUB* model which advances traditional binary distinctions of knowledge by incorporating an intermediary category called *Uncertain*, further subdivided into *Not Knowing Whether* and *Believing*. This nuanced categorization allows for a comprehensive analysis of how speakers navigate knowledge and uncertainty in dialogue.

The *Knowing/Certain* position is addressed first, identifying specific linguistic markers that signal certainty. These markers include definitive statements and confident assertions that reflect a speaker's firm grasp of information. For instance, phrases like *I know* or *It is certain that* indicate a *Knowing* stance. These markers are employed in conversation to assert authority or convey reliable information.

The discussion then transitions to the *Uncertain* position, which includes the subcategories of *Not Knowing Whether* and *Believing*. This position captures the grey areas between knowing and not knowing, where speakers express doubt or tentative belief. Markers for this stance include modal verbs like *might* or *could* and hedging expressions such as *I think* or *possibly*. These linguistic cues indicate that the speaker is unsure or speculative about the information being discussed. For example, the question *Where could Ulrich be?* signals uncertainty and speculation, aligning with the *Uncertain* position. The *Uncertain* position is (represented by) an epistemic continuum with two poles: *Not Knowing Whether* and *Believing*. *Not Knowing Whether* indicates a state of ambiguity or indecision, while *Believing* suggests a tentative acceptance of information without full certainty. The authors provide examples and markers for each pole, demonstrating how these stances manifest in everyday conversation.

The *Unknowing* position is characterized by a lack of knowledge, where speakers explicitly acknowledge their ignorance. Markers for this stance include phrases like *I don't know* or questions seeking information that the speaker does not possess. This position is crucial in dialogues where the exchange of information is necessary, as it

prompts interlocutors to provide the needed knowledge. For example, the question *Where is Ulrich?* clearly indicates a lack of knowledge and a direct request for information.

The exploration of epistemic stance as a linguistic and communicative phenomenon emphasizes the performative aspect of language, where speakers use specific markers to convey their epistemic stance to others. This communicative approach aligns with the work of John Heritage and his colleagues (among others: Heritage 2010; Heritage, Raymond 2012), who have extensively studied epistemic stance in conversational exchanges. Heritage's model focuses on the management of knowledge within interaction, emphasizing how speakers negotiate their epistemic rights and responsibilities. This involves understanding who has the right to know, who has the obligation to inform, and how these roles are communicated and understood in conversation.

The role of social action in conversations is examined, showing that questions are not only tools for information gathering but also perform various social actions. For instance, a speaker might use a question to assert their authority or to express doubt about the information being discussed. The strategic use of different question types helps manage the epistemic stance and perform these social actions effectively. This approach is supported by the articles in Stivers, Enfield, and Levinson (2010), published as a monographic issue (42, No. 10) of the *Journal of Pragmatics*. These papers highlight the diversity of question-response pairs across different languages, emphasizing the universality and variability of conversational strategies. Along with Heritage's studies, this collection provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the complex dynamics of questioning as analyzed in this book.

The second part, *Unknowing and Uncertain Questions*, provides an empirical application of the KUB model, focusing on various types of questions (*wh*- questions, polar, alternative, tag, declarative) and their roles within conversational contexts. The authors aim to categorize questions as either unknowing or uncertain, illustrating different degrees of uncertainty and how these questions interact with the respondent's epistemic positions, either *Knowing* or *Believing*.

Wh-questions like *How much did you drink a day?* are used to elicit specific information and reflect an unknowing stance. This particular question presupposes that the respondent drank a certain amount daily. The initial response may include approximations and expressions of uncertainty (e.g., *about, I don't know, three litres maybe?*), indicating a lack of precise knowledge. Eventually, the respondent provides a more concrete answer (e.g., *But I had a lot*), demonstrating a shift from uncertainty to a clearer epistemic position. This sequence highlights how *wh*-questions drive conversations forward by seeking detailed information and gradually resolving uncertainty.

Polar questions requiring a yes or no response often aim to confirm or disconfirm information. An example like *Is Ulrich here?* implies that the questioner has some prior knowledge or assumption but seeks confirmation. This type of question can align with a tentative *Knowing* position or indicate an *Uncertain* stance, depending on how it is framed and the context of the conversation. If the speaker's intonation suggests doubt, the question shifts towards the *Uncertain* position. In such cases, the speaker's tone and choice of words can significantly impact the interpretation of the question, making it a powerful tool for a subtle negotiation of knowledge states. This ability to convey doubt or certainty through intonation and framing underscores the complexity and flexibility of polar questions in managing epistemic stances.

Alternative questions *present* multiple options and seek clarification or choice among them. For example, *Is Ulrich here or there?* reflects an *Uncertain* stance, as the questioner presents possible alternatives but does not assert any option confidently. The

speaker's uncertainty is clear, and the question structure itself indicates a need for the respondent to provide clarity. These questions can serve to narrow down possibilities and guide the conversation towards a more specific focus, thereby facilitating a more detailed exploration of the topic at hand. By presenting multiple options, alternative questions encourage respondents to engage more deeply with the content, revealing their own epistemic positions and contributing to a richer, more nuanced dialogue.

Tag questions combine a statement with a short question tag like *Ulrich is here, isn't he?* These questions typically function to seek affirmation or agreement, indicating a *Believing* position. The speaker expresses their belief in the statement but seeks the respondent's confirmation to reinforce it. This type of question subtly blends certainty with a request for validation. Tag questions can be particularly effective in reinforcing social bonds and ensuring mutual understanding, as they invite respondents to affirm shared knowledge or perspectives. They can also serve to soften assertions, making them more palatable and less confrontational, thereby promoting a more collaborative and harmonious interaction.

Declarative questions are posed as statements that invite confirmation or agreement. An example such as *Ulrich is here?* shows that the speaker has a strong belief or assumption about the information but seeks confirmation. These questions serve a dual purpose of asserting knowledge while also seeking validation, highlighting a blend of *Knowing* and *Believing* positions, depending on the conversational context. Declarative questions can be particularly effective in testing assumptions and inviting respondents to provide additional information or corrections, thereby enriching the dialogue and promoting a deeper understanding of the topic.

The authors identify also “borderline questions between *Unknowing* and *Not Knowing Whether*” and “questions addressed toward the *Believing* position”. The first type explores the nuances of questions that lie between complete ignorance and partial uncertainty and delves into the *Unknown* continuum, highlighting how *wh*-questions like *How much did you drink a day* can vary widely based on context. Furthermore, it examines dual *wh*-questions and alternative questions, illustrating their interchangeability and the complexities involved in distinguishing between *unknowing* and *uncertain* stances. The section concludes with a discussion on multiple questions, providing examples of various *wh*-questions and their functions within conversational contexts. Questions addressed toward the *Believing* position shift the focus to confirming beliefs rather than seeking new information. This kind of questions can probe hypotheses, suppositions, and opinions rather than just factual knowledge. The analysis illustrates how different types of questions are used to elicit responses based on belief rather than certainty. For example, *wh*-questions including a modal verb like *What could he be thinking?* and questions like *Do you think he's right?* seek to confirm or explore the respondent's beliefs. Tag questions such as *He is coming, isn't he?* and declarative questions with a modal verb like *He must be joking?* show how speakers blend statements with requests for validation, using these questions strategically to manage epistemic stances and navigate conversational dynamics.

The analysis of these question types demonstrates how speakers use them strategically to manage their epistemic stances and perform social actions. For instance, when a speaker moves from asking a *wh*-question like *Where is Ulrich?* to a polar question such as *Is Ulrich here?* and finally to a tag question *Ulrich is here, isn't he?* they navigate from an *unknowing* stance to seeking confirmation and then to seeking affirmation. This sequence shows the fluidity with which speakers manage uncertainty, assert beliefs, and align or misalign with their interlocutors' knowledge positions. The ability to shift between different types of questions allows speakers to adapt to the

evolving dynamics of the conversation, ensuring that their epistemic stances are effectively communicated and understood.

The third part, *More on Uncertain Questions*, delves deeper into the nuances of uncertain questions, highlighting their complexity and the need to distinguish them from unknowing questions. This part further refines the *KUB* model's application to various question types, emphasizing the importance of recognizing different degrees of uncertainty and their implications in conversational contexts.

The authors begin by discussing dubitative questions, which are marked by lexical elements that explicitly indicate doubt or uncertainty. Examples include polar questions introduced by expressions like *I wonder if* or *maybe*. These questions, such as *I wonder if Ulrich is here*, highlight the speaker's uncertainty and invite the respondent to confirm or disconfirm the proposition. The presence of uncertainty markers like *maybe* distinguishes these questions from more straightforward polar questions that seek direct confirmation or denial. By explicitly signaling doubt, dubitative questions create space for respondents to offer their own perspectives and insights, fostering a more collaborative and exploratory dialogue.

The analysis extends to alternative questions, which present multiple options and seek to clarify which one is true. These questions are inherently uncertain because they suggest that the speaker is unsure which of the provided alternatives is correct. For example, *Is Ulrich here or there?* indicates the speaker's uncertainty about the exact location and seeks the respondent's knowledge to resolve this uncertainty. Alternative questions can be particularly useful in complex discussions where multiple possibilities need to be considered, as they encourage respondents to weigh different options and provide explanations for their choices.

Polar questions are also revisited in this part, especially those that can include uncertainty markers. Unlike their more direct counterparts, these polar questions such as *Could Ulrich be here?* imply a degree of uncertainty even as they seek confirmation. The inclusion of modal verbs like *could* or *might* further accentuates the speaker's tentative stance, distinguishing these questions from more assertive forms. These questions can be particularly effective in exploring hypothetical scenarios and testing the plausibility of different possibilities, thereby enriching the dialogue and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

In the context of rhetorical questions, the authors demonstrate how they can convey both the *Believing* and the *Knowing* position. Rhetorical questions such as *Isn't it obvious that Ulrich is here?* are not genuine requests for information but rather statements framed as questions to emphasize a point or express a belief. These questions blend assertion with a form of questioning that implies the speaker's stance is already known or should be accepted by the respondent. Rhetorical questions can be particularly effective in persuasive discourse, as they invite respondents to agree with the speaker's viewpoint while simultaneously reinforcing the speaker's authority and confidence.

Throughout this part, the authors provide conversational examples to illustrate how these different types of uncertain questions function in real dialogues. They emphasize the role of context and how speakers use these questions to manage epistemic stances, negotiate information, and perform social actions within conversations. The analysis of dubitative, alternative, polar, and rhetorical questions, along with the concept of the epistemic continuum, offers valuable insights into how speakers navigate and express uncertainty in everyday interactions.

In conclusion, this book is beneficial for linguists, communication scholars, psychologists, and anyone interested in the mechanics of conversational interactions and

the subtleties of epistemic modality. It provides a robust framework for understanding how questions can influence and reflect social and epistemic dynamics in communication.

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