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## **Epistemic Words on the Confidence Scale**

### **Abstract**

The article examines a group of 107 epistemic words in order to determine their integral and differential semes and place them on the confidence scale. The relevance of the study is conditioned by the interest in studying the stance of a speaker's utterance. The article analyses the notion of epistemic words, their linguistic and non-linguistic properties. As a result of definition and semantic analyses of epistemic words, epistemic words with high, medium and low modal strength were singled out. Such a categorization is possible, because epistemic words have the same integral semes but various differential semes. Epistemic words have a scalar nature and the level of their modal strength reflects the speaker's commitment to the utterance that ranges from confidence to uncertainty.

**Keywords:** epistemic words, modal strength, level of confidence, confidence scale, component analysis

### **Introduction**

Linguistic ways of expressing personal feelings and assessments have been the focus of many studies. Thus, the speaker's position is conveyed through various markers of epistemic modality, among which epistemic words occupy a prominent place. Epistemic words have been studied by many linguists (Leo Hoyo, Rodney Huddleston, George Lakoff, Frank Palmer, Geoffrey Pullum, Anna Wierzbicka), psycholinguists (Daniel Kahneman, Karl Teigen, Amos Tversky), sociolinguists (Janet Holmes, Robin Lakoff) that indicates a comprehensive and synergistic approach to the study of this speech phenomenon.

Understanding the semantics of epistemic words is based on the semantic components "I think" and "I do not say that I know" (Wierzbicka 2006: 204). Epistemic words convey the speaker's attitude to the proposition of the utterance. According to their place in the utterance, epistemic words are divided into those that have a definite position and are used before its proposition (epistemic verbs, nouns and adjectives) and those that do not have a definite place (epistemic adverbs, parentheses or phrases). Usually,

epistemic words are used in the main part of the utterance before the subordinate part and are connected with it by the conjunctions *that*, *to* or without a conjunction, and in the structure of the statement refer to the pronoun in the first person singular or plural. Also, there is an opinion (Biber 2006: 99) that epistemic words refer to pronouns in any person if they convey a stance to what is said. Anna Wierzbicka (2006: 204) studies epistemic verbs in phrases with the personal pronoun *I*.

### Properties of epistemic words

At the present stage of studying lexical markers of epistemic modality, the following linguistic properties are distinguished for epistemic words and phrases - modal strength, degree of modality, subjectivity / objectivity of modality (Collins 2009, Hoyer 1997, Huddleston & Pullum 2002). In addition, psycholinguistic studies analyze probabilistic terms according to five semantic dimensions: probability level, valence of the expected events (positive or negative), locus of uncertainty (internal or external), intended vagueness (degree of non-commitment), direction of uncertainty (Kahneman & Tversky 1982, Teigen 1988). The properties relevant to this study are discussed below.

The strength of modality is “the strength of commitment (prototypically the speaker’s commitment) to the factuality or actualization of the situation” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 175). As epistemic words convey a different level of commitment to what is said, this property is used to place epistemic words on a scale according to the strength they semantically convey. Scholars (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, Hoyer 1997, Huddleston & Pullum 2002) have already attempted to categorize epistemic adverbs into strong, medium, and weak by modal strength.

Subjectivity and objectivity of modality (Palmer 1990, Huddleston & Pullum 2002, Collins 2009) indicate the internal or external orientation of modality. Subjective modality is intrinsic and indicates the speaker’s confidence / uncertainty (e.g. *I believe it’s true*). Objective modality is external and indicates a probability that is not linked to the speaker’s opinion (e.g. *the tea appears to be hot*). Some words convey both internal and external modality (e.g. *He will possibly come*).

Kahneman D. and Tversky A. (1982) talk about internal and external uncertainty, which differ depending on whether we describe the subjective states of incomplete knowledge or uncertainty associated with external sources. Internal uncertainty stems from ignorance, and external – from the tendency to certain thoughts. These types of uncertainties may depend on the time frame. Uncertainty about past events will be interpreted as ignorance, especially if the truth is known to someone else, while uncertainty about the future comes from a tendency to a certain opinion.

Probability level (Teigen 1988) is inherent for the terms of probability and may have a number equivalent from 0 to 100% (e.g. *There is a 50% chance that he took after his father*). In language this level of probability is reflected through quantifiers. Rubin V. (Rubin 2010: 536) talks about the scalar model of the continuum of confidence, which includes five levels: absolute confidence, high confidence, moderate confidence, low confidence and uncertainty.

Valence of the expected events (positive or negative) or positive and negative meanings are characteristic for terms and expressions of probability (Teigen & Brun 1999). Meanings can be called positive when they ask the listener to take into account the described result, for example *likely*, while negative meanings imply a denial of the described result, for example *unlikely*.

Terms and expressions of probability are characterized by intentional vagueness (Teigen 1988). Absolute certainty and impossibility cannot vary and they have definite meanings, while probability and uncertainty can vary, as evidenced by the large number of words to denote them. Fuzziness is a “type of internally determined uncertainty in meaning with an external linguistic counterpart” (Li 2011: 811). One of the important features of fuzziness is the lack of a clearly defined boundary.

Mostly, the concepts of probability and certainty coincide, but sometimes they are heterogeneous. On the probability scale “possibly” indicates a small probability, while on the confidence scale “possibly” indicates uncertainty. “Impossible” denotes no probability, but a manifestation of confidence and conviction. The probability corresponds to 100% confidence, but 0% probability does not correspond to uncertainty, because uncertainty involves a certain low percentage of probability. The fact that the speaker reports his uncertainty in the proposition does not equate to a complete rejection of the proposition. Uncertainties may vary with the confidence with which they are evaluated.

### **Confidence scale**

The fact that epistemic words have features such as modal strength and level of probability makes it possible to place them on a scale, which allows the gradation of these words according to the order of decreasing or increasing the level of confidence / probability. The concepts studied by epistemic logic can be located on a scale whose extreme points are knowledge and ignorance (Dotsenko 2006), confidence and doubt (Wesson and Pulford 2009), faith and doubt (Junge 1985), confidence and impossibility (Renooij and Witteman 1999), yes and no (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Knowledge, unlike beliefs, is always true, and beliefs can be both true and false. The state of confidence / uncertainty of the speaker varies depending on his belief in the truth of the information he reports. The scale for ranking the terms of epistemic modality is called the continuum of confidence / uncertainty (Fabre 1991), the probability scale (Renooij and Witteman 1999), the reliability scale (Halliday 2004).

The scalar view of epistemic modality is unanimous among scholars and is the subject of discussion in pragmatics, functional linguistics and formal semantic circles. According to Nuyts (2001: 22), it is more common for people to place their judgments on a scale than to place them in terms of discrete categories of certainty and doubt: “from a cognitive and functional point of view, there is good reason to think in terms of the scale, although people highlight only inaccurate positions on it”. Although key positions on the epistemic spectrum may correspond to probability, possibility, confidence, and lack of probability or possibility, the fact that speakers can scalarize these positions using a series of “evaluative expressions” suggests that spectrum terms are not discrete categories.

The confidence scale is used to indicate the modal nuances in the truth of the content of the utterance. This scale is used to describe the strength of belief in terms of accuracy or quality of prediction, judgment, or choice, and is described through a continuum ranging from complete certainty to complete doubt or impossibility (Wesson & Pulford 2009: 151). Strong epistemic values of this scale indicate the truth of the existence of someone / something and weak values indicate doubts. Scholars usually do not distinguish “confidence” from “probability” and place them along the same scale.

### Methodology of word grouping of different modal strength

Definition analysis belongs to the traditional methods of semantic research, which allows correlating the meanings of certain lexical items using dictionary definitions. Dictionary definitions are considered as a complete and objective source of formalization of the semantic structure of the word. Analysis of the definitions of lexical units of explanatory dictionaries allows us to identify the semes required for a component analysis. For the definition analysis we use the definitions of 5 explanatory dictionaries (American Heritage Dictionary, Collins English Dictionary, Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's most trusted online dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Oxford Dictionaries: English Dictionary, Thesaurus, Grammar help). Table 1 shows the definition analysis of the verb "assume".

Table 1. Definition of the verb "assume" in explanatory dictionaries.

assume	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. to think or accept that something is true but without having proof of it (5);</li> <li>2. to suppose (2);</li> <li>3. if you assume that something is true, you imagine that it is true, sometimes wrongly (1);</li> <li>4. (formal) to take or begin to have power or responsibility (3);</li> <li>5. (formal) to begin to have a particular quality or appearance (3);</li> <li>6. (formal) to pretend to have a particular feeling or quality (3);</li> <li>7. to take over without justification; seize (3);</li> <li>8. to clothe oneself in (2);</li> <li>9. to take up or receive into heaven (1);</li> <li>10. to take to or upon oneself : UNDERTAKE (1);</li> <li>11. to place oneself in (1);</li> <li>12. to take over (the debts of another) as one's own (1);</li> <li>13. to take up or in : RECEIVE (1);</li> <li>14. to take into partnership, employment, or use (1).</li> </ol>
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Out of these definitions of "assume", only the first three are epistemic, i.e. those that describe mental processes, so they are relevant for the research.

The method of seme analysis is a description of the meaning as a set of semes (Sternin 2008). Seme - a component of meaning that reflects the distinctive feature of the denotation of the word (object, phenomenon, process) and can distinguish the meaning of words. Seme is the smallest, finite, indivisible particle of content, elementary content.

Component analysis is the distinction of integral and differential semes in the meanings of words by their pairwise comparison within a group of lexical units close in meaning. When comparing semantically similar words, there are always the same semes in the compared words. Such semes are called integral. The semes that distinguish the meanings of the compared words are called differential. Component analysis of meaning aims to identify all components of the meanings of comparable words and is made for large arrays of vocabulary - synonymous arrays, lexical-semantic groups and fields (Sternin 2008). Component analysis allows a comprehensive description of the basic integral semes of semantically similar words and differentiate comparable words by semes.

Component analysis of epistemic words showed that they have semes, denoting:

- truthfulness, correctness "sth. is true, right" and untruthfulness "sth. is not true / right";

- the fact “sth. is a fact”, probability “sth. is likely, possible” and negative improbability “sth. might not be true or genuine”;
- certainty “sure”, intermediate certainty “not completely certain” and denial of certainty “uncertain, not certain”;
- predictions that something will happen “sth. will happen”, “not to be avoided” or “not having a chance to happen”;
- the presence of evidence “with proof”, “according to what is said, heard or seen”, “according to the way sth. appears”, “based on facts” in the formation of opinion and its absence “without proof”;
- clarity “easy to see or understand” and ambiguity “difficult to understand”;
- accuracy “accurate” and inaccuracy “not exactly”.

Epistemic words also have semes connected to mental processes “to think, to believe”, “belief, opinion, feeling”, “understanding”, “sth. is believed”.

### Gradation of epistemic words

The modal strength in most cases correlates with the level of confidence / uncertainty. Epistemic words of high modal strength have a high level of confidence / uncertainty, epistemic words of medium modal strength have a medium level, and epistemic words of low modal strength have a low level of confidence / uncertainty. *Sure* in “I’m sure he didn’t do it” statement has a high level of confidence and conveys a high modal strength; *think* in “I think you ought to phone the constable” has an average level of confidence and conveys a medium modal strength; *doubtful* in “It is doubtful that she has transformed the role of a woman in her family” has a low level of confidence and conveys a low modal strength.

The group of epistemic verbs in this study covers 30 verbs *appear, assume, believe, bet, doubt, expect, feel, find, gather, guess, hope, hypothesize, imagine, know, mean, predict, presuppose, presume, reckon, see, seem, suppose, suspect, swear, take, think, trust, understand, wonder*.

The epistemic verbs of high modal strength include *bet, expect, hope, know, mean, predict, see, trust*. These words denote knowledge, faith, expectations, hope, seriousness, statements with them have a positive meaning. They convey a subjective modality, because they indicate a personal attitude to what is said. These words have semes “to think, to believe, to have an opinion”, “sth. is true, right”, “sth. will happen”, “sth. is accurate”, “certain”, “be serious”, “for granted”. Some of these words (*hope, predict, expect*) are directed to the future. Here are examples of the use of epistemic verbs of high modal strength: e.g. It was pouring rain, I *know* that. My hair was all boofy (Moriarty 2014: 24).

The verbs *assume, believe, feel, find, guess, imagine, presuppose, presume, reckon, suppose, think, seem, appear, gather, hypothesize, take, understand* belong to the epistemic verbs of medium modal strength. This group of words is characterized by the following semes of meaning “to think, to believe, to have an opinion”, “to conclude, to understand”, “sth. is true, right”, “not completely certain”, “not exactly”, “have proof”, “without proof”. These words denote a thought, an impression, a feeling, a probable thought about which no confidence has been formed. Such a subjective opinion can be formed indirectly on the basis of information heard from various sources or groundlessly. What a person learns by gathering information through observation and reflection is hypothetical, not real knowledge (Wierzbicka 2006: 222). Reliable

knowledge is in the source of information, not in the result of its processing. The use of epistemic verbs of medium modal strength is shown in the following example: e.g. “And not a moment too soon. I *think* those were the words you used yesterday on the phone to your mother” (Moriarty 2014: 100).

*Seem, appear* are used to denote external aleatory probability (e.g. The weather *seems* to be fine) and internal epistemic uncertainty (e.g. It *seems* to me that if you place music at the center of your being, then you can't afford to sort out your love life).

The verbs *doubt, suspect, wonder* belong to the epistemic verbs of the low modal strength. They are characterized by semes “to think, to believe, to have an opinion”, “sth. might not be true or genuine”, “feel uncertain”. Further, uncertainty is expressed explicitly by the semantics of the corresponding verb: e.g. I *doubt* my sister will ever marry: If she's sad or upset or angry, she needs to be alone – she fears a man dismissing her womanly tears (Flynn 2012: 62).

Component analysis of 25 epistemic adjectives showed the following. Epistemic adjectives of confidence include *apparent, certain, clear, confident, convinced, correct, evident, inevitable, obvious, positive, right, sure, true, well-known*. Epistemic adjectives of confidence belong to the adjectives of high modal strength and have semes of meanings “easy to see or understand”, “sth. is true or right”, “sth. will happen”, “sth. is accurate”, “sure, certain”, “generally known”, “based on facts”. Some of them are subjective (confident, convicted) and some are objective (positive, inevitable). Objective epistemic adjectives have a high level of probability. Epistemic adjectives belong to the means of nominating confidence. When a person is confident in something, he speaks of his confidence: e.g. “I'm *sure* he didn't do it. He seems like a gentle child.” “I'm one hundred percent *positive*,” said Jane. “Well, I'm ninety-nine percent *positive*. I'm . . .” (Moriarty 2014: 80).

Epistemic adjectives of medium modal strength include *likely* and *probable* which have a “positive meaning” (Teigen 1988, Wierzbicka 2006) and express the probability that something will happen. Both words have the same meaning as “sth. is likely”, “sth. is true, right”. In the following example there are certain grounds for the assumption with *likely*: e.g. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with public high schools per se, I just think your children are more *likely* to interact with, you know, a better class of person (Moriarty 2014: 274).

Epistemic adjectives of low modal strength include *doubtful, possible, uncertain, unclear, unconvinced, unsure, unlikely, improbable*. All of these epistemic adjectives have a “negative meaning” because they deny confidence, clarity, and probability. They have semes “feel doubt, not certain”, “not having a chance to happen”, “sth. is not true, right”, “difficult to understand”: e.g. He'd never actually mentioned playing with Amabella before, which was part of the reason it had seemed so *unlikely* that he'd been bullying her (Moriarty 2014: 275).

Epistemic nouns of confidence include *assertion, belief, conviction, fact, knowledge*, which are characterized by such semes of meaning as “belief, opinion”, “understanding”, “statement”, “sth. is true or right”, “sure”. They convey a strong belief in the truth of what is being said and a sense of confidence. Epistemic nouns are mostly used in indirect speech in a certain reflection of characters or description of events: e.g. She had never even properly registered the *fact* that the two Toms had the same name, they were so different (Moriarty 2014: 311).

*Assumption, chance, claim, hypothesis, idea, impression, feeling, opinion, possibility, suggestion* belong to a subgroup of epistemic nouns of medium modal strength with the semes “belief, opinion”, “sth. is true or right”, “without proof”, indicating a probable opinion. Such an opinion is different from knowledge

and subjective, it is not what is said with conviction and confidence: e.g. She liked the *idea* that he only married me for my money (Flynn 2012: 260).

The epistemic nouns of the low modal strength include *doubt* with the meaning “not certain”, “sth. is true or right”. In the example below the speaker expresses strong doubts about the things being discussed: e.g. I have serious *doubts* that several of the frameworks here are more popular (Palahniuk 1999: 25).

Modal adverbs are considered “the most accurate expression of epistemic modality, in the sense that they are accurate means of indicating the degree of probability of the state of affairs” (Nuyts 2001: 55). A wide range of epistemic adverbs allows a speaker to partially “objectify” his position, to hint at some good reason for it, to express the hope that a certain position will be perceived by other people as justified (Wierzbicka 2006: 259).

The analysis of 32 epistemic adverbs showed that epistemic adverbs of confidence (*actually, assuredly, certainly, clearly, definitely, indubitably, ineluctably, inescapably, manifestly, obviously, really, surely, truly, unarguably, unavoidable, undeniably, undoubtedly, unquestionably*) have semes “sth. is true”, “sth. is a fact”, “certain, sure”, “easy to see or understand”, “not to be avoided”, they are epistemic adverbs of high modal strength and, in addition to confidence, convey factuality, certainty, clarity and indisputability. e.g. They didn’t talk for a month. *Clearly*, they’ve made up (Flynn 2012: 349).

Adverbs of medium modal strength (*apparently, kind of, predictably, probably, sort of, supposedly, allegedly, reportedly, evidently*) include a subgroup of epistemic adverbs with semes “sth. is true”, “sth. is a fact”, “according to what is heard or seen”, “according to the way sth. appears”, “sth. is believed”, “sth. is likely”, “with proof”, “without proof”, “not exactly”. In the example below the speaker expresses his subjective opinion, he is not categorical in his statement, because he understands that he may be wrong: e.g. Everyone was *kind of* mad at me, but they’re the ones who never let me pay for movers (Moriarty 2014: 79).

Hearsay adverbs (*allegedly, apparently, evidently, reportedly, supposedly*) are distinguished by Wierzbicka (2006: 281) to denote knowledge that has been learned from various sources. They denote something that is known and expected. The integral seme for understanding the words of this subgroup is “according to sources”, i.e. the knowledge that is learned indirectly through certain sources. These adverbs belong to epistemic words of medium modal strength. Using epistemic adverbs, the speaker refers to what he has said neither trustingly nor skeptically, he does not commit to what is said. Such statements do not express confidence, but convey only indirect, heard knowledge or assumptions that can be believed: e.g. “*Apparently* poor little Ziggy isn’t invited to that party,” Jane’s mother said in a lowered voice (Moriarty 2014: 96).

*Perhaps, maybe, possibly, conceivably* refer to epistemic adverbs of low modal strength, because they convey the possibility that something will happen or not. Wierzbicka A. (2006: 276) refers *conceivably* and *possibly* to “uncertain” adverbs. They are possibly speaker-oriented, express the speaker’s assessment of the possibility, reflect the speaker’s desire not to say more than necessary, and are cautious and reflective in nature. Whereas, *conceivably* includes very low confidence in the veracity of the statement made. These words are characterized by semes “sth. is true”, “sth. is believed”, “sth. is likely”, “not certain”, so they are used to convey uncertainty: e.g. So *maybe* there was no good end for me (Flynn 2012: 385).

## Conclusion

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Epistemic words are comparatively new for linguistic study. In this study a set of epistemic words have been categorized by modal strength. Component analysis of 30 epistemic verbs, 25 epistemic adjectives, 20 epistemic nouns and 32 epistemic adverbs allowed their division into groups of words of high, medium and low modal strength. Integral semes for epistemic words are “to think, to believe, to have an opinion”, “to conclude, to understand”, “sth. is true, right”, “sth. is likely”. Differential semes for epistemic words of high modal strength are “sth. is a fact”, “sth. is accurate”, “sth. will happen”, “certain, sure”, “be serious”, “for granted”, “easy to see or understand”, “generally known”, “based on facts”, “not to be avoided”, for epistemic word of medium modal strength differential semes are “not completely certain”, “not exactly”, “have proof”, “without proof”, “according to what is heard or seen”, “according to the way sth. appears”, for modal words of low modal strength differential semes are “feel doubt, not certain”, “not having a chance to happen”, “sth. is not true, right”, “difficult to understand”, “sth. might not be true or genuine”. Separating these semes allows placing epistemic words on a scale of confidence according to the level of confidence they convey.

Linguistic and non-linguistic properties of epistemic words allow studying different aspects of the confidence scale. Epistemic words are placed along this scale according to the modal strength and probability level. They have a positive and negative valence. Epistemic words have a vague position on the scale and can change it, as they can be modified by adjectives or quantifiers and become closer to certainty or uncertainty, taking some direction.

The choice of epistemic words can influence the level of confidence expressed in the utterance. Their use is also connected to the functions the utterance conveys. The speaker not only expresses the confidence or uncertainty in sth., but also uses a set of epistemic words to ensure stable and harmonious communication, to present information, to ask for sth., to show empathy, to give positive evaluation or for discreditation. Further, the connection between the modal strength of epistemic words and their functional use will be studied.

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