

Epistemic evaluation in a cross-linguistic perspective: Marking (un)certainty in English and Polish linguistics articles

Krystyna WARCHAL
University of Silesia, Poland
krystyna.warchal@us.edu.pl

Being certain, at least in science, requires giving specific reasons which should be backed by data collected in the course of observation or experimentation. The status of these data and methods of their analysis is connected with the particular social context where they are collected and applied. As shown by Berger and Luckmann (1967), knowledge is relative to the communities which produce it and this applies not only to what a given community is prepared to accept as “facts of the matter” but also to what it considers an appropriate object of scientific inquiry, a valid method of analysis and a meaningful academic contribution. This social context of knowledge and academicity implies that signals of epistemic stance in academic discourse — expressions of certainty and doubt — reflect not only the author’s personal commitment to the truth of the proposition but also his or her awareness of other members of the community, of the state of the art in the discipline, and of the established pattern of interaction with others. Epistemic modality markers may thus serve as important clues in studying academic practices of various academic communities.

This paper reports on the results of research carried out into epistemic modality markers in English and Polish peer-reviewed journal articles in the field of linguistics. The study is based on two hundred English and two hundred Polish texts, which together form a corpus of approximately three million running words. The paper will address the following questions: i) Are high, middle and low degrees of confidence marked with a similar frequency in English and Polish linguistics articles? and ii) Is there any tendency for epistemic markers to cluster in particular sections of text and are there any differences in their distribution that can be related to the modal value? It is hoped that the results may help better understand culture-based argumentation patterns in academic discourse and serve as a point of reference for further disciplinary analyses.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1967 [1966]. *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Penguin Books.