Variable epistemic commitment in expert speech

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Epistemic stance can be realised via a range of linguistic strategies in English, including lexical and modal verbs and adverbs (e.g. Kärkkäinen, 2003), hedgers and boosters (Holmes, 1990), and tag questions (e.g. Schleef, 2009). This morphological diversity has made the quantitative study of epistemic stance difficult; it is not clear for instance whether surface forms having approximately equal effects in terms of epistemic stance (e.g. maybe and might) can be treated as variants of the same underlying variable. Additionally, epistemic language carries a heavy burden of polysemy including e.g. deontic/bouletic modality and politeness. In spite of these complexities, I show in this paper that it is possible to develop an index of epistemic commitment that captures both inter- and intra-speaker variation.

Modified sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with 33 academics from a range of disciplines including critical studies, geography, law and physics. Participants were classified into two types according to their epistemic policies (Teller, 2004), i.e. their beliefs about knowledge: narrow (having a restricted range of methodologies constrained by a monolithic theory of knowledge; and wide (using a diversified range of methodologies informed by multiple non-contiguous epistemologies). Interviews covered a range of topics including personal biography, "impact," and research. The topics were chosen to elicit diverse epistemic stances, e.g. recounting first-hand experience versus disciplinary consensus.

Speakers’ variable use of six different epistemic markers was used to calculate an index of epistemic commitment for each clause uttered (cf. the dialect density measure of van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010). Linear regression analysis revealed that traditional sociolinguistic variables remarkably including the speaker’s L1 were less useful predictors of epistemic index than the speaker’s epistemic policy range.

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