

# Certainty and doubt in academic discourse:

Epistemic modality markers in English and Polish linguistics articles

*For Hania and Jasio*

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UNIWERSYTETU  
ŚLĄSKIEGO  
W KATOWICACH

NR 3375

# **Certainty and doubt in academic discourse:**

**Epistemic modality markers  
in English and Polish linguistics articles**

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Editor of the series: Językoznawstwo Neofilologiczne  
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## Introduction

When people say that they know something, they have their reasons to feel certain that something is the case. Scientific knowledge requires that these reasons be of a specific kind, that they be backed by data collected in the course of observation and systematic experimentation. Moreover, as the developments brought by social constructionism have shown, the status of these data as the empirical basis of knowledge is sanctioned by the particular social context where knowledge is generated, as is the value of observation and experiment as legitimate scientific procedures (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In this perspective, knowledge is relative to the communities which produce it and emerges in a complex process of negotiating a shared vision of the world and a shared understanding of what constitutes an appropriate object of scientific inquiry, a valid scientific method, and a meaningful academic contribution. Thus, rather than a faithful representation of an objectively given reality, scientific knowledge can be viewed as a product of society, created according to the principles a particular community judges appropriate and aiming to explain this reality which is available to and agreed upon by this particular group. It is then to a large extent a matter of social consensus.

The consensual nature of scientific knowledge and the fact that it is generated in interaction between community members implies that signals of epistemic stance in academic discourse will reflect not only the degree of the author's personal commitment to the truth of a proposition, but also the author's awareness of other members of the discourse community, of the state of the art in the discipline, and of the established patterns of interaction with others. For example, an expression of certainty may convey information about the author's commitment deriving from the amount, distribution, and consistency of the data gathered, thus being a direct claim to expertise; it may indicate that the information presented has already been accepted by the discourse

community as a fact and granted the status of knowledge; or it may emphasise the rigour and cogency of argumentation by showing that the author (with the readers) has reached an undeniable conclusion which deserves promotion to the status of fact. And conversely, an expression which limits or qualifies the author's commitment to the proposition may reflect the author's lack of certainty, possibly related to the type of evidence insufficient to sustain the claim; it may signal that the proposition is a new claim offered for evaluation by the discourse community and awaiting the community's approval rather than part of the already established consensus over what is known; or it may convey the author's awareness of the norms and values professed by the community, such as accepted ways of showing respect for and disagreeing with other authors and the preferable degree of autonomy left to the readers. In this perspective, a study of epistemic markers in academic texts originating in a particular community may provide some insight into its academic practices: the specific mechanisms of knowledge generation and sharing which function within this community.

Possible differences in academic practices may be related to various community-defining elements, of which language is perhaps the most salient. Languages have developed their own rhetorical patterns, which reflect their internal organisation, the responsibilities of and the preferred degree of solidarity between interactants, and the intellectual tradition in which they grow and to which they contribute (Kaplan, 1987; Connor and Kaplan, 1987; Connor, 1996). These culture-specific features will contribute to the ways in which members of communities talk about, generate and disseminate knowledge. Another important element which defines a particular scientific community is the discipline. Disciplines have given rise to text types and evolved stylistic features which best correspond to their specific needs, including recognisable argumentation patterns and expected degree of interpersonal involvement (Melander et al., 1997; Hyland, 1999a, 2000, 2008a; Dahl, 2004; Hyland and Bondi, 2006; Fløttum et al., 2006a; Vold, 2006a; Yakhontova, 2006). These discipline-related characteristics will be responsible for much of the variation observed in the area of academic communication. As powerful factors influencing communication patterns on various levels — from the choice of genre, through the degree of dialogicality, to phraseological decisions — both cultural and disciplinary background may also influence the ways in which signals of epistemic evaluation are used in the text: their frequency, the degrees of commitment which tend to be marked more often than others, and the part of text in which they tend to appear. This book is concerned with potential differences related to the first of these two factors.



This book examines the use of epistemic modality markers in two sets of peer-reviewed journal articles in the field of linguistics published in the years 2001-2006. The first set comprises two hundred articles written in English and drawn from five international linguistics journals: *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Language and Communication*, *Language Sciences*, *Lingua*, and *Linguistics and Philosophy*. The second set consists of two hundred articles written in Polish and published in eight Polish journals, all of which were included in the 2003 list of recognised scientific journals released by the Polish Committee for Scientific Research. The analysis seeks answers to the following questions:

- Is the epistemic evaluation marked with the same frequency in English and Polish linguistics articles?
- Are high, middle and low degrees of confidence marked with a similar frequency?
- What categories of markers prevail as exponents of particular modal value in the two sets of texts?
- Do epistemic markers tend to cluster in particular article sections? Are there any differences in their distribution that might be related to the value of the marker?
- Is there any indication of potential differences in what tends to be epistemically qualified in these two sets of texts?

I hope that the data presented here may be of interest to scholars who study culture-based and discipline-based argumentation patterns in academic discourse, including those concerned with the use of English as an Additional Language and English as a Lingua Franca, and to researchers who investigate epistemic modality and evidentiality in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective. They might also be of some value to scholars who are concerned with how language reflects the community-based mechanisms of knowledge generation and sharing.

Chapter 1 discusses the internal variation of academic discourse resulting from disciplinary divisions, the complex system of genres, multiple audiences, and cultural diversity, provides a short overview of the main lines of research that have been undertaken into academic communication, and reports on the existing research into Polish academic discourse. Chapter 2 is devoted to linguistic modality and outlines the main approaches to the concept, discusses modality types and values, and focuses of epistemicity to present its markers in English and in Polish. The chapter closes with an overview of previous research into modality in academic discourse. Chapter 3 describes in more detail the aims of the present study, introduces the corpus which is the source of data, and explains the procedures applied in the analysis. Chapter 4 presents

and discusses the collected data in three main sections, each of which is devoted to one modal value — high, middle and low — and its representation in the English and Polish part of the corpus and closes with a discussion summarizing the information for both languages. Chapter 5 offers some concluding remarks.

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Krystyna Warchał

**Pewność i wątpliwość w dyskursie akademickim:  
Wykładowi modalności epistemicznej w angielsko- i polskojęzycznych  
artykułach naukowych z dziedziny językoznawstwa**

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem pracy są językowe wykładowi stopnia pewności sądów w artykułach naukowych z dziedziny językoznawstwa w języku angielskim i polskim. Punktem wyjścia podjętych badań jest przekonanie, że różne tradycje intelektualne, w jakich kształtowała się polska i angielska komunikacja akademicka – tradycje odmiennie postrzegające status wiedzy naukowej i proces jej tworzenia, relację między autorem i czytelnikiem, czy wreszcie sam akt pisania i stopień dialogowości tekstu naukowego – mogą znajdować odzwierciedlenie w różnych przeświadczeniach dotyczących tego, czym jest fakt naukowy, a co pozostaje w sferze hipotez, założeń i propozycji oczekujących na potwierdzenie i akceptację środowiska akademickiego. Różnice te z kolei sugerowałyby, iż autorzy wywodzący się z tych dwóch kręgów kulturowych mogą przywiązywać różną wagę do wyraźnego oznaczania treści hipotetycznych oraz sądów, którym towarzyszy wysoki stopień pewności, oznaczać je w różny sposób, z różną częstotliwością i w różnych miejscach wywodu. Niniejsza praca podejmuje próbę ustalenia, czy różnice takie istnieją i, jeśli tak, których wykładowi modalności epistemicznej dotyczą i jak przebiegają.

Praca zbudowana jest z czterech rozdziałów, z których pierwszy dotyczy badań nad dyskursem akademickim i jego retoryką, drugi poświęcony jest modalności językowej, trzeci opisuje cel pracy, materiał badawczy oraz sposób jego analizowania, czwarty zaś przedstawia i omawia wyniki badania dla trzech wartości modalnych w obu językach. Pracę zamyka zwięzłe podsumowanie.

Angielskojęzyczną część materiału badawczego stanowi 200 artykułów opublikowanych w latach 2001–2006 w naukowych czasopismach językoznawczych o zasięgu międzynarodowym: *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Language and Communication*, *Language Sciences*, *Lingua* i *Linguistics and Philosophy*. Polskojęzyczną część analizy oparto na danych zaczerpniętych z 200 artykułów opublikowanych w tym samym przedziale czasowym w polskich czasopismach językoznawczych, których tytuły znalazły się na liście czasopism punktowanych, opublikowanej w roku 2003 przez Komitet Badań Naukowych: *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, *Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Językoznawczego*, *Etnolingwistyka*, *Język a Kultura*, *Onomastica*, *Poradnik Językowy*, *Slavia Meridionalis* oraz *Studia z Filologii Polskiej i Słowiańskiej*. Obie części składają się na korpus o wielkości ok. trzech milionów słów. Analizę przeprowadzono na materiale zdigitalizowanym i oznaczonym (otagowanym) pod względem segmentów tekstu przy pomocy programu *Oxford WordSmith Tools 5* jako narzędzia wspomagającego. W badaniu

wzięto pod uwagę następujące kategorie wykładników: epistemiczne użycia czasowników modalnych (wraz z epistemicznymi użyciami czasu przyszłego w języku polskim), przysłówki epistemiczne, przymiotniki i rzeczowniki, które niosą znaczenia epistemiczne i wprowadzają zdania podrzędne, oraz epistemiczne czasowniki leksykalne.

Najistotniejsze wyniki badania można streścić w następujących punktach:

- Artykuły anglojęzyczne zawierają prawie dwukrotnie więcej wykładników modalności epistemicznej niż artykuły polskojęzyczne; w tekstach angielskich ponad dwukrotnie częściej spotyka się orientację subiektywną niż obiektywną, w tekstach polskich zaś przeważa orientacja obiektywna.
- W tekstach anglojęzycznych najczęściej spotyka się niskie wartości modalne, drugą pod względem częstości występowania grupę stanowią wartości wysokie, wartości średnie występują zaś najrzadziej. W tekstach polskich autorów najczęściej wyrażane są średnie wartości modalne, najrzadziej natomiast spotyka się wartości wysokie.
- Pod względem kategorii wykładników modalności epistemicznej, w anglojęzycznej części korpusu przeważają czasowniki modalne, w polskiej zaś przysłówki epistemiczne.
- W obu grupach tekstów wykładniki sądów epistemicznych występują częściej w zakończeniu niż w innych segmentach; obserwacja ta dotyczy wszystkich wartości modalnych w języku angielskim oraz niskich i średnich wartości modalnych w języku polskim; wysoki stopień pewności odnotowywany jest w języku polskim z równą (niską) częstotliwością we wstępie i w zakończeniu.

Praca może stanowić głos w dyskusji nad różnicami w stylach argumentacji akademickiej charakterystycznych dla poszczególnych kultur i dyscyplin, wniesić dane do badań porównawczych nad znaczeniami epistemicznymi i ich funkcją w różnych typach dyskursu oraz być punktem odniesienia dla dalszych analiz uwzględniających inne języki, gatunki i dyscypliny.

Krystyna Warchał

## **Gewissheit und Zweifel im akademischen Diskurs. Anzeichen epistemischer Modalität in englisch- u. polnischsprachigen Zeitungsartikeln auf dem Gebiet der Sprachwissenschaft**

### Zusammenfassung

Zum Gegenstand der Abhandlung werden Anzeichen der Gewissheit in den wissenschaftlichen Artikeln auf dem Gebiet der Sprachwissenschaft im Englischen und Polnischen. Der Ausgangspunkt für vorliegende Studie ist die Überzeugung davon, dass unterschiedliche intellektuelle Traditionen, in denen sich polnische und englische akademische Kommunikation bildeten – Traditionen, die den Status des Wissens und dessen Bildung, die Relation zwischen dem Verfasser und dem Leser und schließlich den Schreibakt selbst und den Dialogcharakter des wissenschaftlichen Textes ganz anders betrachten — können ihre Widerspiegelung finden in unterschiedlicher Beurteilung dessen, was in der Wissenschaft ein Fakt und was lediglich eine Hypothese ist, die von akademischen Kreisen noch bestätigt und akzeptiert werden muss. Diese Unterschiede ließen vermuten, dass die von zwei Kulturkreisen abstammenden Verfasser werden eine andere Meinung davon haben, auf welche Weise, wie oft und an welchen Stellen der Argumentation ganz hypothetische Inhalte und Behauptungen mit hohem Sicherheitsgrad hervorgehoben werden sollten. In vorliegender Abhandlung hat man sich Mühe gegeben, nachzuweisen, ob es diese Unterschiede gibt und wenn ja – welche Anzeichen der epistemischen Modalität sie betreffen und worauf sie beruhen.

Die Arbeit besteht aus vier Kapiteln; das erste von ihnen betrifft die Forschungen über den akademischen Diskurs und dessen Rhetorik, das zweite ist der Sprachmodalität gewidmet, das dritte erläutert das Ziel der Abhandlung, das Forschungsmaterial und dessen Beurteilung und das vierte Kapitel präsentiert und analysiert die Forschungsergebnisse für drei Modalwerten in beiden Sprachen. Am Ende der Arbeit befindet sich ein knappes Resümee.

Den englischsprachigen Teil des Forschungsmaterials bilden 200 Artikel, die in den Jahren 2001–2006 in sprachwissenschaftlichen Zeitschriften von weltweiter Bedeutung: *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Language and Communication*, *Language Sciences*, *Lingua* und *Linguistic and Philosophy* veröffentlicht wurden. Polnischsprachiger Teil der Analyse basierte auf den in demselben Zeitraum veröffentlichten 200 polnischen sprachwissenschaftlichen Artikeln, deren Titel auf die im Jahre 2003 von dem Komitee für Wissenschaftliche Forschungen veröffentlichten Liste der anerkannten Zeitschriften kamen: *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, *Poradnik Językowy*, *Slavia Meridionalis* und *Studia z Filologii Polskiej i Słowiańskiej*. Beide Teile bilden das Korpus von ca. drei Millionen Wörtern. Analysiert wurden Texte, die digitalisiert und mit Tags hinsichtlich der Textsegmente mittels des Programms *Oxford WordSmith Tools 5* ausgezeichnet wur-

den. In der Forschung berücksichtigte man folgende Kategorien der Anzeichen: den epistemischen Gebrauch von Modalverben (samt epistemischem Gebrauch des Futurs im Polnischen), epistemische Adverbien, die die Nebensätze einleitenden Adjektive und Substantive mit epistemischer Bedeutung und epistemische lexikale Verben.

Die wichtigsten Forschungsergebnisse lassen sich in folgenden Punkten zusammenfassen:

- Englischsprachige Artikel beinhalten fast doppelt so viel Anzeichen der epistemischen Modalität als polnische Artikel; in englischen Texten ist die subjektive Orientierung fast doppelt so häufig als die objektive, in polnischen Texten dagegen überwiegt die objektive Orientierung
- In englischen Texten treten am häufigsten niedrige Modalwerte auf, zweithäufigste Gruppe bilden hohe Werte und Mittelwerte kommen am seltensten vor
- Hinsichtlich der Kategorie der epistemischen Modalität überwiegen im englischen Teil des Korpus Modalverben und im polnischen dagegen epistemische Adverbien
- In beiden Textgruppen kommen die Anzeichen der epistemischen Urteile häufiger im Schlussteil als in anderen Segmenten vor. Diese Bemerkung betrifft alle Modalwerte im Englischen und niedrige und mittlere Modalwerte im Polnischen; ein hoher Sicherheitsgrad wird im Polnischen genauso selten in der Einleitung und im Abschluss festgestellt.

Die Arbeit kann zur Diskussion über unterschiedliche Stile der für die einzelnen Kulturen und Disziplinen charakteristischen akademischen Argumentation beitragen und zum Bezugspunkt für weitere Analysen in Bezug auf andere Sprachen, Gattungen und Disziplinen werden.



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Copy editor  
Michał Pelczar

Cover design  
Agata Augustynik

Technical editor  
Małgorzata Pleśniar

Proofreader  
Danuta Stencel

Typesetting  
Hanna Olsza

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Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego  
Wszelkie prawa zastrzeżone

ISSN 0208-6336  
ISBN 978-83-8012-455-4  
(print edition)  
ISBN 978-83-8012-456-1  
(digital edition)

Publisher  
Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego  
ul. Bankowa 12B, 40-007 Katowice  
[www.wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl](http://www.wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl)  
e-mail: [wydawus@us.edu.pl](mailto:wydawus@us.edu.pl)

First impression. Printed sheets 19,5. Publishing sheets 21,5.  
Offset paper grade III 90 g  
Price 40 zł (+ VAT)  
Printing and binding: EXPOL, P. Rybiński, J. Dąbek, Spółka Jawna  
ul. Brzeska 4, 87-800 Włocławek