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Epistemic Stance in Italian and in the Mind

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Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli, Ilaria Riccioni. 2017. *Epistemic stance in dialogue: Knowing, unknowing, believing*, (Dialogue studies 29). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

1. Introduction

"Epistemic stance in dialogue: Knowing, unknowing, believing" is a joint publication by Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli, and Ilaria Riccioni, who are all members of the research center *Psicologia della comunicazione e semiotica del testo J.S. Petoefi* at the University of Macerata, Italy. Its overall structure is divided into three major parts: the first introduces the theoretical background and the model of Knowing, Unknowing, and Believing (KUB) throughout chapter 1-4, the second applies the KUB model to three different dialogue corpora in chapter 5-7 (troubles talk, clairvoyant-journalist interviews, and crime case talk-shows). The third concludes with a comparison of the KUB model and those of Akio Kamio (The theory of territories of information) and John Heritage (The epistemic management of conversational interactions) in chapter 8, and an outlook on future perspectives follows in chapter 9.

This review provides a brief summary of each chapter before concluding with an overall evaluation of the book as a contribution to research on epistemic stance in general linguistics. Readers with a primary interest in a purchase recommendation might want to jump directly to the last section.

2. Summary

2.1 Chapter 1

The psychological background of the KUB model, outlined in chapter 1, can be summed up in a concept of human *experiencing*, an activity that encompasses both *perceiving* and *cognizing*. In line with Metzger (1975), the authors attribute a level of reality to each of these activities. They distinguish an *experiential reality* from the *physical reality*, and then further divide the former into a *perceptual* and a *cognitive reality*. The five senses, plus proprioception, feed into our *perceptual reality*, which interacts with but does not limit our *cognitive* construction of memory, thought, and imagination. All contribute gradually to our experience of reality, giving rise to different degrees of certainty about states of affairs.

2.2 Chapter 2

Language, in turn, is thought of as a means of referring to the *experiential* reality of interlocutors. In chapter 2, the authors build upon the *Atomic Text* model (Petöfi 1973) to conceptualize the linguistic mechanisms that allow interlocutors to verbalize these perceptual and cognitive processes. It assumes three hierarchically ordered propositions to be present in every Atomic Text: a *performative proposition* (*pp*) akin to the concept of *illocutionary force* in Austin (1962), a *world-constitutive proposition* (*wcp*) that refers to the means of access to reality (evidentiality) and the commitment to its truth (epistemicity), and a *descriptive proposition* (*dp*). An Atomic Text is a deep structure, so a schematic representation of (1) would also include those propositions that are not overtly expressed:

(1)   Alex was on the beach

pp: Here and Now I (S/W) tell you (H/R) that
wcp: Here and Now *I remember* that
dp: (There and Then) Alex was on the beach

Evidentiality is defined as a linguistic device that refers to *source of information*, while other possible definitions (*source of knowledge, modes of knowing*) are rejected due to a lack of clarity about the notion of *knowledge* (as opposed to belief, imagination, etc.). Moreover, the authors reject the applicability of experiential evidential categories (i.e. reported/hearsay) to past events. Instead, they include cognitive processes (i.e. think, believe, imagine, remember) as modes of acquiring information, some of which are linked to specific temporal relations (remember-past, imagine-future).

The wide range of possible definitions for epistemicity (*reliability of information*, *judgement of likelihood* of the proposition, *commitment to the truth* of a message) are reduced to *degrees of certainty*. The authors postulate that certainty and uncertainty are communicated through both *epistemic* and *evidential* markers. Unfortunately, they fail to define *certainty* beyond the claim that it is independent of the notion of *truth,* which they attribute to an extra-linguistic process of corroboration. This leaves us with two negative definitions: *epistemicity* as a contribution to *certainty* that is not *evidential*, and *certainty* as a claim to truth that has to be verified extra-linguistically in order to become *true*.

2.3 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is internally divided into six parts spread across 40 pages. Subsection 3.1 gives a summary of Bongelli and Zuczkowski (2008), a study on lexical and morphosyntactic

markers of evidentiality and epistemicity in a corpus of 780 written texts obtained during a video-description task where participants were asked to describe what they had *seen and felt* (ital.: '*visto e sentito*') when watching three recordings of different dances (dervishes and acrobatic contemporary dances). The texts were qualitatively evaluated sentence by sentence for epistemic markers. The authors opt for an exemplification of their methodology with three text examples from the corpus, two of which show no *world-constitutive* (wc) markers. The first text (T1) is written in the past tense and mentions *seeing* and *hearing* as source of information, so the authors attribute it a *chain of worlds* as in (2):

(2) [I REMEMBER [I have seen and heard [T1]$_{dp}$]$_{wcp}$]$_{pp}$

Whereas the second text does not contain wc-markers either, the third contains five types of world-constitutive markers (4 verbs: *penso* 'I think'*, credo* 'I believe'*, ritengo* 'I think'*, mi sembra* 'it seems to me'; 1 adverb: *forse* 'perhaps'). It thereby illustrates some lexical possibilities for expressing epistemic meanings in Italian and gives the reader an idea of what forms of expression are relevant for the KUB model.

Subsection 3.2 continues the discussion of the three corpus texts as well as made-up examples, but now with the goal of introducing the relation between evidential and epistemic worlds and the KUB model. Its main proposal is to interpret *certainty* as a form of communicating a *Knowing position*, *uncertainty* as a form of communicating a *Believing position,* and *wh-questions* as a form of communicating an *Unknowing position.*

Subsections 3.3 to 3.6 are dedicated to a summary of the respective markers of these positions. The *Knowing position* is attributed to verbs of knowing in the 1.PERS.PRST.IND. (such as *ricordo* 'I remember', *sento* 'I hear/feel', *vedo* 'I see', *so* 'I know') and in the 3.PERS.PRST.IND. (as in *immagini che **richiamano** alla mente I vortici corporali di Aldo Mondino* 'images that **recall** the whirling bodies of Aldo Mondino'). Moreover, verbal expressions such as *sono certo* 'I am sure' or *non ho dubbi* 'I have no doubt', as well as adverbs and adjectives such as *indubbiamente* 'undoubtedly', *sicuramente* 'surely', *certo* 'certain' etc., are subsumed under the *Knowing position.* The *Unknowing position* is attributed to *indirect wh-questions* as in (3), negations of *verbs of the Known* (4), and positive forms of *ignorare* (5). It is moreover associated with adjectives like *sconosciuto* 'unknown', *ignoto* 'unknown', *a me incomprensibile* 'incomprehensible to me'.

(3) **T13**: *Poi ho visto il ballerina in rosso e **non so perché** ma mi ha ricordado l'elemento fuoco*

> Then I saw the dancer in red and **I don't know why but** he made me think of the element of fire

The *Believing position* covers a particularly large set of expressions, the categories of which are reproduced here:

- Lexical markers
  - Verbs (*suppongo* 'I suppose', *potere* 'can', *dovere* 'may/must')
  - Adjectives and adverbs (*probabile* 'likely', *possibile* 'possible', *forse* 'perhaps' etc.)
  - Nouns (*imperssione* 'impression', *dubbio* 'doubt' etc.)
  - Noun expressions (*secondo me* 'In my opinion', *a mio parere* 'in my view' etc.)
- Morphosyntactic markers
  - Verbs in the conditional mood (*potrei* 'could', *dovrei* 'should', *vorrei* 'would' etc.)
  - Uncertain questions (*È forse X?* 'Is it maybe X?')
  - If-clauses and *congiuntivo trapassato*
  - Epistemic future

Finally, we also learn that, in total, about 13 percent of the words in the dervishes sub-corpus were syntactically dominated by a marker of *Belief*, 2 percent of markers of *Unknowing*, and the rest was communicated from a *Knowing position*.

2.4 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 aims at an experimental evaluation of the question if *certain* and *uncertain* are not just terminologically opposed (antonyms), but psychological contraries that are experienced as opposite ends of a single perceptual continuum. Based on an approach developed by Bianchi et al. 2013, they check whether two poles are inverse measurements of the same characteristics or rather measure different characteristics of a particular object. The chapter describes two successive experiments aimed at testing both the gradedness and unidimensionality of expressions used to refer to *certainty* and *uncertainty*.

The first experiment included 18 university students and two tasks. First, an individual production task had participants produce sentences that were in some way certain or uncertain. This method obtained 23 ways of expressing degrees of certainty and 22 ways of expressing degrees of uncertainty. Then, an inter-observation task asked the participants to discuss and collectively order the sentences along a horizontal bar (printed on paper)

according to their degree of certainty. Finally, the participants concluded the task by drawing a perpendicular line to indicate a division between certainty and uncertainty that would divide the entire set of expressions. The results show that both certainty and uncertainty are perceived as graded, though uncertainty receives a much higher degree of gradedness than certainty (with 2 out of 6 groups of participants considering it a point, that is, not gradable).

The second experiment involved 120 university students who had to rate the degree of certainty in 12 sentences on a 7-point Likert scale. The stimuli consisted of 6 pairs of sentences corresponding to the following categories of markers: (i) *sentence structure*: declarative – interrogative; (ii) *knowing – not knowing whether*: I know – I don't know whether; (iii) *doubt – absence of doubt*: undoubtedly – I doubt; (iv) *certainty – uncertainty*: I'm certain – I'm not certain; (v) *belief*: I believe – I think; (vi) *probability*: probably – perhaps. All these markers were combined with a carrier sentence about catching the 3 pm train, as in (4):

 (4) *Prenderò il treno delle 15*
   I'll catch the 3 pm train

The results are evaluated by means of Guttman's deterministic scalogram (1950) and an Extended Logistic Model of the Rasch Model family (see e.g. Andrich 1978a; Andrich 1978b; 2010 among others). They show that all 12 sentences express *uncertainty* on a single continuum, whereas the interrogative sentence does not lie on a continuum of *certainty* with the other 11 sentences. The rest of the examples yield continuums for both dimensions with an 'item separation index' of 0.69, i.e. 'good' (Wright and Masters 1982; Embretson and Reise 2009). Moreover, the function obtained by combining the ratings for the two scales yields an identity function, which means that the two questionnaires measure one latent construct (Bond and Fox 2001).

2.5 Chapter 5
Chapter 5 explores advice giving activities in sequences of troubles talk. Its total length of 46 pages can roughly be divided into a short introduction and a summary of a previous study by the authors on troubles talk in 30 sequences from natural conversation (Riccioni, Bongelli and Zuczkowski 2014; subsection 5.1 and 5.2), an application of the KUB model to the same data (5.3 and 5.4).

In their previous study, the authors tried to capture the dynamics of troubles talk by focusing on the complementary roles of the *confider* (the party who talks about their own trouble) and

the *confidant* (the receiver of confidence) in what they see as an advice-giving triplet: *Initiation – Advice – Reaction* (IAR)*.* Each position in the triplet has a certain paradigm of forms it can take (see Table 1 for forms and their number of occurrences in a total of 124 triplets).

Initiation	Requested (explicitly)	35
	Solicited (implicitly, by expressing doubt etc.)	9
	Unrequested (only problem mentioned)	80
Advice	Mitigated	49
	Unmitigated	75
Reaction	Alignment (endorsement of advice/roles)	34
	Partial alignment	30
	Misalignment	36

Table 1. Occurrences of advice giving strategies in troubles talk in Riccioni et al. (2014)

The three possible reaction categories do not sum up to the total of 124 because in 24 cases, there was no clear reaction by the confidants. Instead, they often ignored unrequested and unmitigated advice and simply continued their line of thought (a reaction coined *self-continuity*). Only seven combinations of IAR-triplets reached a frequency of above 5 percent. They are presented in Table 2.

IAR Triplet Types	N. IAR	%
UNREQUESTED—UNMITIGATED—MISALIGNED	21	16.9 %
REQUESTED—UNMITIGATED—ALIGNED	14	11.3 %
UNREQUESTED—UNMITIGATED—SELF-CONTINUITY	14	11.3 %
UNREQUESTED—MITIGATED—MISALIGNED	12	9.7 %
UNREQUESTED—MITIGATED—PARTIALLY ALIGNED	9	7.3 %
UNREQUESTED—UNMITIGATED—PARTIALLY ALIGNED	9	7.3 %
UNREQUESTED—MITIGATED—ALIGNED	7	5.6 %

Table 2. IAR triplet types in Riccioni et al. (2014) with frequency above 5 %

The core tendency is that unrequested advice will lead to misalignment in reactions, with mitigation playing a role in aligning the interlocutors' stances in some cases. The KUB model is then used as a means of explaining this tendency in the analysis of seven dialogues. They showcase a strong misalignment effect in one case of advice giving where confider and confidant both operate from a *Knowing* position, whereas different degrees of epistemic negotiation take place in the six other configurations of *Knowing*, *Believing*, and *Unknowing* confider and confidants.

2.6 Chapter 6

Chapter 6 investigates two interviews broadcast on an Italian TV-channel in the context of a case of homicide; the interview takes place between two journalists and a person who considers herself to be a clairvoyant. The first interview takes place while the victim is still considered missing, while the second takes place after the discovery of the corpse in a place and manner very similar to the one indicated by the supposed clairvoyant. Two excerpts from the first interview and four excerpts from the second interview are qualitatively and quantitatively compared in order to demonstrate the means by which the interlocutors attribute different epistemic statuses to each other and to themselves.

In sum, the journalists play two different roles, one displaying trust in the clairvoyant and the other showing skepticism, while the clairvoyant positions herself in a knowing position and aligns her answers only with the trustful interlocutor.

2.7 Chapter 7

Chapter 7 investigates a true crime-based talkshow on the murder of a child. Five participants of this show (a defense attorney, two psychiatrists, and two journalists) discuss evidence in a homicide case against the child's mother. Six excerpts were transcribed and annotated according to the KUB model and evaluated in terms of epistemic position and scope of the respective linguistic markers.

The quantitative evaluation of the annotated excerpts shows that the participants live up to their roles by assuming different epistemic positions. The attorney puts himself in a *Knowing position* by means of declarative sentences and the use of adverbs (*absolutely, completely, unequivocally*). The journalists, in turn, use a *Believing position* (consisting of hypotheses and 'hostile, hyperbolic rhetorical questions') to raise doubts about the attorney's view. Finally, the two psychiatrists build up a *Believing position* using counter-argumentation.

2.8 Chapter 8

After the three case studies in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, the authors turn to a comparison of their KUB model with Akio Kamio's theory of *Territories of information* (cf., e.g., (Kamio 1997a; Kamio 1997b)) and John Heritage's epistemic model (cf., e.g., (Heritage 2012a; Heritage 2012b). As for Kamio's theory, its main point of divergence from the KUB model is the absence of an explicit *Unknowing position* and the conceptualization of information as belonging to either the speaker's or the hearer's informational territory. Moreover, the theory intends to give an account of the functional relationship between evidentiality and politeness in Japanese and English, an aspect not directly addressed in the KUB model.

Building on Kamio's theory, Heritage established the distinction between *epistemic status* and *epistemic stance*. The former is a role associated with responsibilities and rights in the social construction of truth, while the latter is a position an interlocutor can take in a conversation by choosing specific linguistic forms. Incongruence between the epistemic statuses of interlocutors are then seen as the driving force (the '*epistemic engine*') behind conversations in which the participants, who can occupy either a *more knowledgeable (K+)* or a *less knowledgeable (K-)* position, try to reach an informational equilibrium. The main difference between Heritage's theory and the KUB model is the absence of a *Believing position*, represented only in terms of degrees of knowledge on an assumed epistemic gradient between speaker and hearer.

2.9 Chapter 9

The outlook in Chapter 9 puts the KUB model into a disciplinary perspective, positioning it in between psychology and linguistics. The authors emphasize the highly unequal distribution of the three epistemic positions of the model in their empirical investigation, with high percentages of *Knowing* and *Believing*, whereas the *Unknowing position* only rarely occurred in the type of data analyzed. Based on the observation that forms of expressing the *Believed* are more numerous and varied cross-linguistically than markers of the other two epistemic positions, they argue for an investigation of such markers that take into account three levels: illocutionary forces, evidential-epistemic aspects, and propositional contents. Such a future scientific endeavors, they propose, should be based on combinatorics that link two KUB positions (speaker, hearer) and model the possible epistemic relations that arise. To give an example, see the combinations of KUB provenance and destination for wh-questions, yes-no questions, and rhetorical questions in Figure 1.
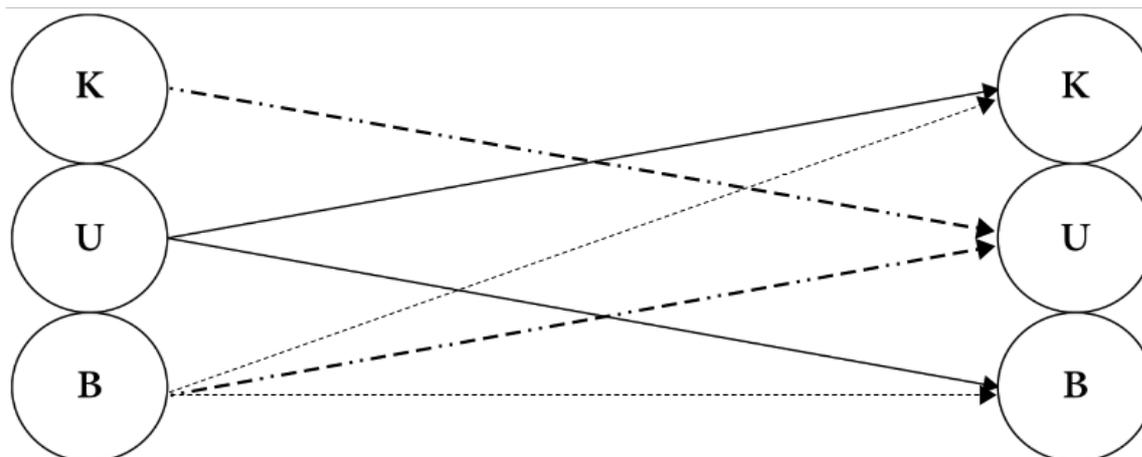
Figure 1. KUB provenance and destination of wh-questions (solid line), yes-no questions (dashed line), and rhetorical questions (dash-dotted line).

3. Evaluation

Only seldom does linguistic research combine the observation of a functional paradigm in natural language with an empirical investigation of the uni- or multidimensionality of the related psychological domain. Chapter 4 is therefore particularly innovative in the context of grammatical investigations in the field of conversation analysis and speech act theory. It is likewise of the utmost importance to have an explicit theory of both individual knowledge (Chapter 1) and interactional attribution of epistemic status and stance (Chapter 8) when analyzing such linguistic and psychological phenomena in dialogue data. Otherwise, the grammatical terminology all too often becomes a holistic label for a deeply structured phenomenon.

When dealing with the terminological pitfalls in the domain of evidentiality, epistemicity, speaker certainty, modality, attenuation, politeness, etc., it is moreover crucial to define every notion in terms of its relation to the other terms involved (level of analysis, implicational relations, interdependency, epiphenomena). As mentioned above (2.2), the authors define epistemicity only negatively as a contribution to certainty that is not evidential, but then fail to give an explicit account of (communicative) certainty in its own right. Given that the authors explicitly refer to Heritage's knowledge gradient (Heritage (2012b:32)), they could have enhanced their definition of certainty by linking the two approaches. Certainty, defined as a stance based on a high position on the knowledge gradient in a conversation, could be observed in longer sequences of dialogue and would then form a point of departure for a narrower view on the epistemic forms used in specific utterances or turns.

The analysis of individual utterances or sentences in transcriptions from dialogue corpora, in turn, demands a fine-grained labelling and glossing of the lexical, morphological, and syntactic strategies that contribute to these levels of meaning. Zuczkowski, Bongelli, and Riccioni aim at accounting for both lexical and morphological forms, while taking into account the scope of these markers within specific sentences. In the discussion of specific examples, though, only passages of text are highlighted, without any further information on the grammatical mechanisms involved. From the perspective of linguistics, this reduces the cross-linguistic and theoretical comparability of the phenomena analyzed. From a typological perspective, a higher degree of consciousness about the specific language that forms the object of study, Italian, would also have made it easier to tie the results of this research to other investigations of epistemic and interactional phenomena in Italian (cf. (Portner and Zanuttini 2003); (Squartini 2010); (Cruschina 2011)), Romance languages (Cornillie 2010; Diewald and Smirnova 2010; Haßler 2010), and genetically unrelated languages (van der Auwera and Ammann 2013).

Finally, the authors make frequent use of prosodic cues to disambiguate the epistemic meanings of the sentences they analyze. The reader can only guess the specific acoustic form of what they call "*hostile hyperbolic rhetorical questions*" (Zuczkowski, Bongelli and Riccioni 2017:254) and has to believe the authors when they claim that "*from the tone with which the question is uttered it is impossible to assume that it is a challenge question (Koshik 2003) or an unmasking question (Vincze et al. 2016).*" (Zuczkowski et al. 2017:173). Given the recent surge of interest in epistemic prosody, a more explicit account of such cues would be a next step in this promising line of research (cf. Savino and Grice 2011, Vanrell et al. 2013, Moraes and Rilliard 2014; Frota and Prieto 2015; Bianchi, Bocci and Cruschina 2016; Reich in press).

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