

Epistemic modal adverbs and adjectives and the layered representation of conceptual and linguistic structure¹

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Abstract

This paper attempts to deal with the question of what the differences are between constructions with modal adverbs such as probably and constructions with predicatively used modal adjectives of the type it is probable that ... in the way they express epistemic modal qualifications. The two expression types have several distinctive behavioral properties, and these are explained in terms of three different underlying factors: the discourse functionality of the constructions, the interaction of the epistemic modal qualification with evidential marking, and the performative vs. descriptive nature of the modal expression. The analysis is then used to discuss a number of issues related to the cognitive-conceptual and language-processing structures underlying language use, with special reference to the layered structure of conceptual and linguistic representation and the position of epistemic modality in it.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to get a better understanding of some of the many vexing questions concerning the nature and status of epistemic modality in language and conceptualization, with the aim of contributing to theory formation on the nature of linguistic and conceptual representation and the processes mediating between them. By epistemic modality I mean the speaker's evaluation of a certain state of affairs in terms of the chances that it can (have) occur(red) in some possible world. The first part of the paper will be concerned with data analysis; in the second part the theoretical implications of the analysis will be discussed.

In section 1 I will try to provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between two types of constructions expressing epistemic modality: those with modal sentence adverbs such as *possibly*, *probably*, or *certainly*, and