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A comparative study of the pragmatic functions of epistemic stance

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# Epistemic stance marking in the use of English as a lingua franca

A comparative study of the pragmatic functions of epistemic stance marking in problem-solving sequences at student project group meetings, with special emphasis on meetings where English is used as a lingua franca

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## Abstract

This PhD thesis explores the pragmatic functions of epistemic expressions in problem-solving sequences at student project group meetings, and investigates the extent to which practices of epistemic stance marking in project groups where English is used as a lingua franca (ELF) can be said to differ from practices in groups in which the speakers use a shared first language (L1).

The data under study consists of video recordings of six student project groups: Two groups from the *International Basic Studies in the Humanities* (HIB), two groups from the *Basic Studies in the Humanities* (HAB), all Roskilde University, and two groups from a module in language and communication at a British University (GB). The HIB groups employ English as a lingua franca, while the HAB and GB groups employ Danish and English, respectively, as a shared first language.

The thesis argues that by using epistemic expressions in interaction, specifically in the form of modal verbs and sentence adverbials, speakers specify various types and degrees of justificatory support for the propositions they put forward, and thereby either open or close the dialogic space around the issue under discussion. In doing so, they position themselves *vis-à-vis* their propositions as well as their interlocutors and display various types of alignment. The analysis shows that epistemic expressions invariably have social meaning, but that their social meaning is variable: Epistemic expressions acquire their full pragmatic and social meaning in a complex interplay between the meaning potential of the linguistic sign, its placement in a particular social activity, as part of a particular social act, under influence of the social role of the speaker who uses the expression. The study finds that there are no marked differences between the practices of epistemic stance marking in the HIB groups and the epistemic stance marking practices in the HAB and GB groups. There are tentative indications that Danish L1 speakers in the HIB groups tend to use a minimally smaller selection of epistemic expressions than the English L1 speakers in the GB groups, but to all intents and purposes, the Danish L1 speakers use epistemic expressions in much the same way and for much the same purposes as the speakers in the HAB and GB groups.

The thesis draws on a number of disciplines, including functional linguistics, polyphony theory, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and social psychology, and it delivers empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions to a number of areas: 1) As a study of the situated, pragmatic meaning of epistemic expressions, the thesis supplements works that approach the study of epistemic meaning from a semantic point of view, and proposes that the two approaches should be seen as complementary rather than competing. 2) By developing an analytical model of 'the problem-solving sequence' the project contributes to the understanding of the communicative practices of student project groups and offers a method for the analysis of functional group roles in project groups. 3) Finally, the thesis argues that it is a pressing issue for the emerging discipline of ELF studies to recognise the sociolinguistic diversity which hides behind the apparent uniformity suggested by the reifying use of the acronym 'ELF'. The use of English as a lingua franca presupposes the existence of a particular type of language scenario, but other than that, ELF speech events can exhibit almost infinite variation, and this variation must be taken seriously in studies of ELF interaction. The thesis illustrates one way in which this can be done by developing a controlled comparative method for the study of the use of English as a lingua franca in a particular socio-cultural setting.