

Preface

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Certainty and uncertainty in communication: defining terms and tracing a semantic field¹

Information can be communicated by a speaker (S) /writer (W) either as certain or uncertain. There is no in-between, *tertium non datur*.

What does certainty/uncertainty mean at the communicative level?

Certainty means that, in the Here and Now of communication, i.e. in the place where and at the time when communication occurs, S/W's commitment to the truth of the information s/he is giving is at the maximum or high level, such as in the utterances *He is on the beach* or *He is surely on the beach* etc. answering the question *Where is John?* in a plausible context.

Vice versa, Uncertainty means that S/W's commitment to the truth of the information is at the minimum or low level, such as in the examples *Perhaps John is on the beach* or *He may be on the beach* or *He's likely to be on the beach* etc.

Certainty/uncertainty vs truth/falsehood

Certainty/uncertainty are very different from truth/falsehood: these latter, in everyday communication, have to do usually with the result of a comparison between what S/W says/writes and the state of affairs s/he refers to: for example, when S/W states *John is on the beach* (= p), both S/W and hearer (H) /reader (R) will evaluate p as true if John is indeed on the beach, i.e. if the utterance corresponds to the communicated state of affairs. If this is not the case, then the utterance is evaluated as false. Irrespective of p being true or false, p is communicated as if it were true, therefore as a certain statement. This certainty is conveyed by the declarative structure in the indicative mood, which, as we will see, is the main morphosyntactic marker of certainty.

We want to stress that, in this example, S/W communicates certainty also when s/he intentionally tells H/R a lie or when, subsequently to the Here and Now of communication, p might result as false.

Usually, in order to know whether the information provided by a S/W is either true or false, H/R will need further and successive proof (especially when the information is really new to her/him).

In order to know whether the information is communicated as certain or uncertain, H/R needs no further and successive proof.

In contrast with truth/falsehood, certainty and uncertainty are *encoded* within the communication, *inherent* in it, *intrinsic* to it: this means that certainty and uncertainty cannot not be communicated, while truth and falsehood are extrinsic, external to communication, in the sense that they cannot be simply verified by communication alone.

Whose certainty /uncertainty and when?

Both in written and spoken communication, certainty/uncertainty can refer either to S/W or to somebody else, different from S/W. Both types of certainty/uncertainty can refer to the present, past or future.

An essential point in our research was that we specifically decided to focus on S/W's certainty/uncertainty in the Here and Now of her/his communication (*I'm certain/uncertain that...*).

We excluded from our analysis 1) S/W's certainty/uncertainty in the past (*I was certain/uncertain...*) and future (*I'll be certain/uncertain...*) and 2) somebody else's certainty/uncertainty in the present, past or future (*Ann is/was/will be certain/uncertain...*).

How certainty and uncertainty are communicated?

Certainty and uncertainty are communicated through what in linguistics are called *epistemic* and *evidential* markers, both lexical and morphosyntactic.

Epistemicity, which refer to linguistic markers such as, for example, the adverbs *sure*, *undoubtedly*, *certainly*, *perhaps*, *probably* etc., has different definitions in literature, some authors referring to S/W's *attitude regarding the reliability of the information* (Dendale & Tasmowski, 2001; González, 2005), others to the *judgment of the likelihood of the proposition* (Nuyts, 2001a 2001b; Plungian, 2001; Cornillie, 2007), and yet others to the *commitment to the truth of the message* (Sanders & Spooren, 1996; De Haan, 1999; González , 2005).

On the basis of the results of our research, we think that the above mentioned definitions can all be reconceptualised in terms of S/W's certainty or uncertainty

regarding the information that is being communicated as shown above in our definitions.

Evidentiality basically refers to markers that reveal how S/W gains access to the information s/he is communicating. Two main types of definitions are provided in the literature: the first considers evidentiality in terms of linguistic devices that refer to *sources of information* (see, for example, De Haan 1999; Fitneva, 2001); the second one considers evidentiality in a broader sense including *modes of knowing* (see, for example, Chafe, 1986; Willett, 1988; Cornillie, 2007).

From the psychological point of view, the mental process S/W activates to gain access to the piece of information s/he is communicating is simultaneous with (and not previous to or following) the act of communicating, i.e. with the time when (=Now) and the place where (=Here) communication occurs, as said above. In other words, the source of information is always led back to S/W at the precise moment in which s/he is speaking/writing.

Furthermore, from the psychological viewpoint, S/W's access to the information can only be perceptual or cognitive. As a matter of fact, human beings acquire information through perception and cognition. The former term refers to the five senses and proprioception; the latter refers to thought, memory, imagination etc. Therefore, we consider not only verbal expressions like *I see/remember/know...* but also *I think/believe/imagine/suppose...* to be *modes of knowing* (Willett, 1988).

The former type of verbs (*I see/remember/know...*) normally communicate certainty: in saying, e.g. *I see that John is on the beach*, the information source *I see* is explicitly communicated; though in the utterance there is no epistemic marker, certainty is simultaneously communicated through the evidential (perceptual) verb and the declarative syntactic structure.

The latter type of verbs (*I think/believe/imagine/suppose...*), on the contrary, normally communicate uncertainty. Thus in saying *I think that John is on the beach*, through the cognitive marker *I think*, S/W is indicating that s/he knows that the situation is possible and/or likely, but does not know whether it is actually true.

Quite curiously, more than through lexical markers, certainty is communicated through grammatical devices, as when somebody says *Martha will be back home at five* or *Last night I ate a whole roasted chicken* or *Our lift is arriving*. In these examples, there is no certainty lexical marker; the declarative structure of the sentences and their verbs in the indicative (future, past, present) are enough to communicate certainty. There is no need for lexical markers. ‘Grammatical’, therefore, means ‘morphosyntactic’, i.e. verb mood and tense plus sentence syntactic type.

Morphosyntactically, uncertainty is usually communicated by modal verbs in conditional and subjunctive moods, if clauses and epistemic future (i.e. the conjectural use of future).

Lexically, in addition to the above mentioned verbs, uncertain is normally communicated by verbal expressions like *it is probable*, *it is possible*, *I am not sure...*; adjectives and adverbs like *possible*, *likely*, *probably*, *perhaps...*; expressions of subjectivity like *according to me*, *in my opinion ...* and by modal verbs like *can* and *must* (when used in their epistemic functions and not in the deontic ones).

Relations between evidentiality/epistemicity and certainty/uncertainty

Given the range of applications of the terms evidentiality and epistemicity, it should hardly come as a surprise that the relationship between them has also been the object of much debate. The literature of the field (Dendale & Tasmowski 2001; González, 2005; Cornillie, 2007) identifies three broad types of relationship: disjunction (De Haan, 1999; Aikhenvald, 2003; 2004), inclusion (Givón, 1982; Chafe, 1986; Palmer, 1986; Willett, 1988; Papafragou, 2000; Mushin, 2001; Ifantidou, 2001), and overlap (Van Der Auwera & Plungian, 1998; Plungian, 2001).

As a result of our previous studies (Bongelli & Zuczkowski 2008)², we have come to the conclusion that they can be considered as two sides of the same coin. In fact, when a piece of information is communicated as certain (epistemicity) by S/W, at the same time it is also communicated as known (evidentiality) to her/him (and vice versa); on the contrary, when a piece of information is communicated as uncertain, at the same time it is also communicated as not known to her/him, but only believed by her/him (and vice versa): S/W does not know whether the information is true or false, s/he only believes it to be true.

In our terminology, at the communicative level “knowing the information p” means that p is communicated as true for S/W; “believing that p” means that S/W does not know whether p is true or false.

Notes

¹ The statements in this introduction are based on the results coming from the studies carried out at the Research Centre for Psychology of Communication, University of Macerata, since 2007.

² The results of that previous study (Bongelli and Zuczkowski 2008) have been subsequently applied to and tested in the analysis of Italian political speeches and dialogues (Riccioni et al. 2013; Bongelli et al. 2013), English and German scientific biomedical texts (Bongelli et al. 2012; Bongelli et al. submitted; Bucciarelli et al. submitted); English narratives (Philip et al. 2013) and Italian natural occurring conversations (Riccioni et al. submitted).

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