 POSITION AND SCOPE OF EPISTEMIC PHRASES IN PLANNED AND UNPLANNED AMERICAN ENGLISH

Elise Kärkkäinen

ABSTRACT

High-frequency epistemic phrases like *I think, I don’t know, I guess, I thought,* and *I remember* have received considerable attention in linguistic research on different varieties of English. This chapter offers a quantitative survey of their occurrence in American English conversation, in a large database of almost 23 hours, with special reference to the semantic-pragmatic scope of these items. The chapter explores whether their scope extends over something yet to be verbalized in the turn-in-progress (forward scope), as opposed to having something in their scope that was just verbalized in the immediately preceding turn-so-far (backward scope). These issues will be examined primarily in two varieties of spoken American English, unplanned everyday speech and planned institutional speech, with a third variety, task-related talk, as a reference point in between. It is established that in all three data sets, there is a clear prevalence of clausal over phrasal scope and a prevalence of a forward-looking scope over scope pointing back in the immediately preceding discourse. The chapter further argues that the differences in scope observed between British English and American English are not really due to different types of data (i.e. that planned and/or monologic speech types in general manifest a different pattern from everyday dialogic speech), but more likely reflect a deeper grammaticization difference between the two varieties of English.
1. Introduction

This chapter examines the scope of high-frequency epistemic phrases like *I think, I don’t know, I guess, I thought,* and *I remember* in spoken American English. More specifically, the chapter explores whether their scope extends over something yet to be verbalized in the turn-in-progress (forward scope), as opposed to having something in their scope that was just verbalized in the immediately preceding turn-so-far (backward scope). A further focus of attention will be to what extent these phrases can have phrasal as opposed to clausal scope in American English. These issues will be examined primarily in two varieties of spoken American English, unplanned everyday speech and planned institutional speech, with a third variety, task-related talk, as a reference point in between.

The determination of the scope of an epistemic phrase deserves some attention here. It is important to point out that I do not refer to a strictly syntactic scope, as in most cases the utterances in question do not contain any elements of syntactic subordination or superordination (such as the subordinator/complementizer *that*). By scope, then, I primarily understand semantic-pragmatic scope (see Kaltenböck, 2007 for a similar view), or “the stretch of language affected by the meaning of a particular form, even if it does not coincide with the scope of that form as just defined” (Crystal, 2003: 407). In most cases epistemic phrases can be seen to be doing very local work in conversational interaction and commonly have only one clause or phrase in their scope, and their pragmatic scope is then also in most cases quite local. In the case of some epistemic phrases, however, the pragmatic scope has been shown to extend beyond the associated clause; for example in multi-clause turns *I think* may project forward beyond the clause or utterance that it occurs in and thereby have more global pragmatic scope (Kärkkäinen, 2003), whereas *I don’t know* may mark topic closing when it appears at the end of an extended turn or of a sub-sequence in the turn (Scheibman, 2000). But such functions can only be determined through a careful functional analysis of the sequential context in which an item occurs, and in this chapter, we confine ourselves to clausal and phrasal scope only. Very often turns also consist of only one clause, in which case even the pragmatic scope can really extend only over the associated clause.

However, the scope of epistemic phrases is shaped not only by their position in clause, sentence, conversational turn, or sequence of turns but also by the prosodic realization of the phrase and of the associated utterance as a whole. Kaltenböck (2007, 2008) establishes four types of prosodic binding between comment clauses (cf. epistemic phrases) and their host constructions in British English: in descending order of frequency these are left-binding, prosodically independent, left-right binding, and right-binding comment clauses. In contrast to this, Kärkkäinen (2003) found that the right-binding prosody was by far the most frequent in everyday unplanned speech, that is the epistemic phrase was prosodically integrated into the pitch contour of the following intonation unit (IU), most commonly a clausal one, whereas prosodically independent phrases were the next most frequent category, and the two others hardly occurred at all. An attempt is made here to find further evidence