

## The Interrelation of Epistemic Distance with the Expression of Doubt in Discourse

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**Abstract.** The article investigates the correlation between the level of epistemic distance and the degree of doubt expressed by discourse participants. The research is based on the main postulates of the mental space construction theory as well as broadens it. The article provides research results and illustrations on how the increase or decrease of epistemic distance by the interlocutor influences the degree of doubt he expresses. As the result of the research, the correlation between epistemic distance and the level of expressed doubt in discourse is determined, which unexpectedly doesn't presuppose the growth of the doubt level synchronically with the growth of the dimension of epistemic distance.

**Keywords:** *epistemic distance, doubt, mental spaces, space builders, elements, conditionals*

In order to establish interdependence between the level of expressed doubt and the dimension of epistemic distance, the research proceeds into the theory of mental space construction. According to this theory, doubt may be expressed by the speaker with the help of such linguistic category as epistemic distance. Epistemic distance is the speaker's assessment of likelihood of a particular situation. The term 'epistemic' relates to the speaker's knowledge or opinion concerning likelihood, possibility, certainty or doubt, and the terms 'epistemic stance' and 'epistemic distance' both rely on the speaker's metaphorical 'distance' from a particular state of affairs: the speaker's 'position' or judgement regarding the likelihood of a particular situation coming about" [2, p. 395]. Depending on the context, the referential meaning of doubt, related with the epistemic distance, may vary from strong to vaguely expressed [5, p. 177].

The goal of the article is to investigate the correlation between the level of epistemic distance and the degree of doubt expressed by discourse participants. The research is made on the material of contemporary English-language fictional discourse.

The main method used in the research is the method of contextual analysis, which allows identifying lingual and extralingual factors that influence the expression of doubt in discourse.

In this article, we shall consider the main postulates of the mental space construction theory, provide illustrations on how the increase or decrease of epistemic distance by the interlocutor influences the degree of doubt he expresses.

Mental space is temporary conceptual domain constructed during ongoing discourse, but is not the result of the discourse. Mental spaces are created by the individual during conversation or contemplations. Mental space architecture presupposes the presence of such components in its structure: elements (represented by noun phrases), space builders (prepositional phrases, adverbs, subject-verb combinations, etc.) and epistemic distance. Mental space elements are entities created in the ongoing discourse or those existing in the conceptual system long before the discourse started [1, p. 29; 2, p. 371–395].

Space builders serve to build mental spaces. They are actually "linguistic units that prompt the construction of a new mental space or shift attention back and forth between previously constructed mental spaces" [2, p. 371]. Space builders may be presented by adverbs (*theoretically, probably, really*), connectives (*if... then...; either...or...; neither...nor...*) and a large variety of combinations. Those are prepositional phrases (*at school, at 5 o'clock, in 2011, to my surprise*), subject-predicate combinations in complex sentences, which are followed by an embedded sentence (*Johnattan hopes*

*(Katherine likes his project), Nickolas assumes..., Sarah believes...*). The peculiar feature of mental space builders is that they stimulate the addressee for creating a scenario outside the boundaries of actual time and place. This new scenario reflects the reality of the future or past, takes place in the other location, contains hypothetical situations and embodies certain ideas or convictions [1, p. 111–112; 2, p. 371].

In order to create epistemic distance, which serves for expression of doubt, mental constructor "if" is used in combination with the category of tense. As a result, such combination gives rise to the appearance of conditional sentences of different types. These conditionals disclose various degrees of doubt of discourse participant [1, p. 57–58; 2, p. 394–396].

Let's follow the mentioned tendency on the example of the extract from fiction literature. The discourse material is an abstract from the fantasy novel by Stephenie Meyer "The Host". As the action in the novel takes place in the non-existing reality, its fictional discourse is abundant in dialogues, where doubt is expressed particularly by means of conditional sentences and epistemic distance, created by them.

(1) "The Seeker scowled at me and smoothed the front of her outfit. "*You're not well.* and I suppose I startled you."

"I wasn't expecting to see you," I whispered. "Why are you here?"

"Let's get you to a Healing facility before we speak. *If you have a flu, you should get it healed.* There's no point in letting it wear your body down." (Meyer) [6, p. 94]

The complex sentence with Conditional I "*If you have a flu, you should get it healed*" consists of two propositions: A (antecedent) "*If you have a flu,...*" and proposition B (consequent) "*...you should get it healed*".

According to the mental spaces theory [3; 4], hypothetical constructions of the type "if A then B", create two successive spaces in addition to the reality space which is a base. Those additional spaces are namely foundation space and expansion space.

Foundation space is determined as a hypothetical space, constructed by means of a space builder "if". Expansion space is a hypothetical space, which arises as a logical continuation of the foundation space. Expansion space can also, but not necessarily, be introduced into the sentence by space builders (for example, "then"). Simultaneously, as foundation space (A-antecedent) appears to be hypothetical in relation to basic reality space, not dependent from the context of expansion space (B-consequent), the latter (expansion space B) depends on the meaning expressed in foundation space. In other words, B develops A, logically comes out of A and continues A. Speaker's assessment of accordance in succes-

sion “foundation A – expansion B – basic reality” creates epistemic distance [2, p. 394–396].

In the sentence *“If you have a flu, you should get it healed”* the speaker’s assessment of the possibility of his interlocutor’s sickness is neutral. In the condition of reality space, the addressee looks really like a person, that doesn’t feel well (*“You’re not well”*), and thus needs to be cured. The sentence is a vivid example of maximum concordance between reality space (*“You’re not well”*) – foundation space A (*“If you have a flu”*) – and expansion space B (*“You should get it healed”*), which is logical continuation of A. Epistemic distance in such case is neutral, or may even occur to be minimal on condition, that the sickness of the addressee is caused by other reasons, then flu.

The next fragment of the fiction literature shows how other type of conditional sentences (Conditional II) is implemented in the flow of discourse.

(2) “You’re struggling so hard with your problem that it’s all you can concentrate on. Maybe one answer is to not concentrate quite so hard. You said Melanie grows bored during your working hours... that she is more dormant. *Perhaps if you developed some peer relationships, those would bore her also.*” (Meyer) [6, p. 89]

The sentence *“Perhaps if you developed some peer relationships, those would bore her also”* is hypothetical, but the speaker creates epistemic distance by using the Past Simple Tense in antecedent *“if you developed some peer relationships”*. The sentence would be true to life if the other scenario took place. That is, if the addressee couldn’t possibly create equal-right relationship, and the addresser evaluated his chances for success as minimal or non-existent, obviously expressing his doubt this way. The type of the sentence described above “if...(then)”, which relates to non-existing situation, is known as “contrafactual” [1, p. 57–58].

Let’s consider one more discourse example with a contrafactual conditional sentence (Conditional III).

(3) “Jared grins, still studying the lines. And then his voice is heavier. “People like my father. *If he and my brothers had hidden rather than fought... well, they’d still be here.*”

My tone is softer, hearing the pain in his. “Okay, I agree with the theory. (Meyer) [6, p. 138]

The sentence antecedent *“If he and my brothers had hidden rather than fought... well, they’d still be here.”* is

used in the Past Perfect Tense, and therefore is marked for the past tense and the perfect aspect, which results in the growth of the epistemic distance. The example contains contrafactuality and is suitable only in case, if the people mentioned in the discourse tried but failed to survive, because they chose to fight instead of hiding (*“If they had hidden rather than fought”*).

In this case, epistemic distance reaches its maximum. The sentence analyzed is the judgment of the communicant, his evaluation of the situation, which took place in the past and thus is impossible to change. The sentence embodies assertion of unwanted results, it confirms the appropriateness of doubt towards inexpedient behaviour of people described.

The interlocutor contemplates about the fate of his father and other people like him: what would it be like if the circumstances changed? The contemplations about actions in the long forgotten past give birth to the new wave of doubt. Though, to our opinion, the nature of doubt expressed in the latest analyzed sentence (Conditional III) is more vague and weaker than in the previous example with Conditional II *“Perhaps if you developed some peer relationships, those would bore her also”*, as the speaker’s main position here (*“If he and my brothers had hidden rather than fought... well, they’d still be here.”*) is acknowledging of the tragic outcome of past events.

As examples prove it, the tense system is not merely exploited for time reference, but also for signaling the epistemic distance. A conclusion is drawn on the basis of this research, that tree types of conditional sentences (Conditional I, Conditional II, Conditional III) are characterized by different level of epistemic distance they create, as well as by various extent of doubt expressed.

We define epistemic distance in Conditional I sentences as neutral or minimum with the meaning of doubt being either merely expressed or not presented at all. Conditionals II possess the medium level of epistemic distance and the highest degree of doubt. Acknowledgement of unwanted results, getting the previous doubts proved and giving rise to new uncertainties is distinguishing feature of Conditional III sentences. Epistemic distance in Conditional III reaches its maximum, though the degree of doubt is assessed as medium. The results of this analysis are presented in the table 1.

As we may conclude, speaker’s enlargement of epistemic distance doesn’t presuppose the growth of his doubt.

Table 1. Expression of Epistemic Distance and Doubt in Conditionals

Type of Conditional	Epistemic distance	Degree of doubt
Conditional I	neutral – minimum	neutral – 0
Conditional II	medium	high
Conditional III	high	medium

The degree of doubt doesn’t rise simultaneously with the growth of the gap between the basic reality space, foundation space and expansion space. The highest degree of doubt takes place when the incongruity between such spaces is medium.

As a result of the research we determined correlation between epistemic distance and the level of expressed doubt in discourse, which unexpectedly doesn’t presuppose the growth of the doubt level synchronically with the growth of the dimension of epistemic distance.

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