

## **EPISTEMIC MODALITY MARKERS AT THE SYNTACTIC LEVEL: THE MODAL PHRASE *I THINK***

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Epistemic modality refers to modal expressions that convey the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by them (Kärkkäinen 2002: 6). This may refer to how certain the speaker feels about the content of their utterance or how likely they think it is, but also in some cases to a process of inference made by the speaker. In spoken interaction, linguistic categories expressing epistemic modality include modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs, modal lexical verbs, parenthetical clauses and, to a lesser extent, modal adjectives, and nouns.

When it comes to the semantic accounts of the linguistic items that serve to express modality in English, a focus on English modal verbs or modals has been surprisingly common (see W. E. Twaddell 1965, M. Ehrman 1966, J. Boyd and J. P. Thome 1969, L. Bouma 1975, L. Hermeren 1966, F. Palmer 1979 and J. Coates 1983 for reviews). As M. Perkins (1983) states, this is understandable in view of the fact that, because the modals are more integrated within the structure of the clause than other modal expressions, they are considered to be more central in the system (Kärkkäinen 2002: 6).

The *ambiguity* of modal expressions has become apparent in many of the semantic studies mentioned above: modal items, especially modal verbs, may express a multitude of meanings. In addition to being capable of expressing both subjective and objective types of meaning, a single modal verb may have both an epistemic meaning and a non-epistemic (or root) meaning, or even several non-epistemic meanings. What is more, it may have these meanings simultaneously, within one and the same utterance, that is, it may be indeterminate between two meanings. The latter phenomenon has not usually been accounted for in semantic analyses, even though F. Palmer (1979) draws attention briefly to the difficulty of distinguishing discrete and clear categories. J. Coates (1983), however, proposes a fuzzy set theory to account for the indeterminacy of modal verb meanings (Kärkkäinen 2002: 7).

She claims that a modal verb *may*, for one thing, be ambiguous, that is, it may not be possible to decide which of two meanings is intended; a modal may be ambiguous even between an epistemic and a non-epistemic meaning, as in the following: *He must understand that we mean business.* ((Epistemic) *Surely he understands that we mean business or* (Root) *It is essential that he understand that we mean business.*)

Despite the growing body of research concerning hedging strategies in academic discourse, the research field suffers from a lack of agreement on important terminological questions (Vold 2006: 4). No adequate and precise definition of the term *hedge* has been agreed upon, and there has been considerable debate on how to understand the term. A commonly used definition is K. Hyland's (1998), which states that hedges are the means by which writers can present a proposition as an opinion rather than a fact. This fairly broad definition, which has been criticised for being too vague (P. Crompton, 1997), allows the inclusion of a series of different types of markers, ranging from markers of uncertainty and pointers to methodological limitations to what F. Salager-Meyer (1994) calls emotionally-charged intensifiers, i.e. expressions like *extremely interesting* and *surprisingly*. Whether one opts for a broad or a restricted definition of the term *hedge*, the group of markers, i.e. *epistemic modality markers* expressing uncertainty, remains a dominant and basic type of hedge.

Inspired by J. Lyon's definition of epistemic modality (1977) as any utterance in which the speaker explicitly qualifies his commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence he utters, E. Thue Vold (2006) defines *epistemic modality markers* as linguistic expressions that qualify the truth value of a propositional content (for example *perhaps, probably*) (Rocq-Migette 2004: 5). Epistemic modality markers thus mark to what extent one can rely on the information which is being conveyed by the proposition. The proposition *Smoking causes lung cancer* can serve as an example. The truth value of this proposition is marked in different ways in (a – c): a) *It is possible that smoking causes lung cancer*, b) *Smoking probably causes lung cancer*, c) *We know that smoking causes lung cancer*.

Using six British and American lexicographic sources (The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Webster Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary, The Newbury Dictionary of American English, The Wordsmyth Dictionary, The Cambridge Dictionary) we aim at singling out the components of semantics of the verb *to think* and basic meanings of these components. On the basis of synonymic sets of these components, we will single out certain semantic fields. The componential analysis of the lexeme "*think*" proved that its semantic structure is based on six components: "*opinion*", "*belief*", "*mind*", "*expect*", "*intend*" and "*imagine*". Component "*opinion*" has eight meanings: "*feeling*", "*thought*", "*belief*", "*view*", "*advice*", "*judgment*", "*conviction*" and "*idea*". The meaning "*belief*" is basic for this component, being fixed in all dictionaries used. Four meanings can be found in four dictionaries. The meaning "*feeling*" is

fixed in The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Webster Dictionary, The Newbury Dictionary of American English and The Wordsmyth Dictionary as well as the meaning "view". The meaning "thought" is fixed in The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary, The Cambridge Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary and meaning "judgment" – in The Webster Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary, The Newbury Dictionary of American English and The Cambridge Dictionary. The meaning "advice" can be found in three dictionaries (The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary).

The meanings "conviction" and "idea" are fixed in two dictionaries ("idea" in The Longman Dictionary and The Newbury Dictionary of American English; "conviction" in The Webster Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary). The component "belief" has eleven meanings: "feeling", "opinion", "faith", "act", "habit", "conviction" "idea", "principle", "standard", "trust" and "certainty". The meaning "faith" can be considered basic for this component as it is fixed in all the used dictionaries. The meaning "feeling" is fixed in three dictionaries: The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary and The Cambridge Dictionary. The meanings "opinion", "idea" and "conviction" can be found in two dictionaries (the meaning "opinion" in The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Webster Dictionary; the meaning "idea" in The Longman Dictionary, The Newbury Dictionary of American English and the meaning "conviction" in The Newbury Dictionary of American English, The Wordsmyth Dictionary). The rest of the components are only met in one dictionary (components "act" and "habit" in The Wordsmyth Dictionary; components "principle", "standard" and "trust" in The Newbury Dictionary of American English; meaning "certainty" in The Webster Dictionary). Component "mind" has fifteen meanings: "think", "inclination", "reason", "person", "thought", "memory", "recollection", "opinion", "mental state", "condition", "idea", "character", "intelligence", "belief" and "feeling". The meaning "think" is basic for this component, being fixed in all the dictionaries. The meaning "person" is excluded only from The Newbury Dictionary of American English and the meaning "mental state" – from The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and The Webster Dictionary. The meanings "thought" and "opinion" are included in three dictionaries (the meaning "thought" – in The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary; the meaning "opinion" – in The Webster Dictionary, The Longman Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary). Some meanings can be found in two dictionaries: the meaning "reason" in The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and in The Newbury Dictionary of American English; the meaning "memory" in Advanced Learner's Dictionary and The Webster Dictionary; the meaning "recollection" in The Webster Dictionary and The Wordsmyth Dictionary as well as the meanings "condition" and "intelligence"; meaning "feeling" in The Newbury Dictionary of American English, The Wordsmyth Dictionary. Other meanings are found only in

one dictionary (the meaning “*inclination*” in The Wordsmyth Dictionary; meaning “*idea*” in The Newbury Dictionary of American English; the meaning “*character*” in The Webster Dictionary; the meaning “*belief*” in The Newbury Dictionary of American English). Component “*imagine*” has eleven meanings: “*impression*”, “*mental picture*”, “*copy*”, “*plan*”, “*scheme*”, “*notion*”, “*imagination*”, “*guess*”, “*conjecture*”, “*surprise*” and “*fantasize*”. The meaning “*mental picture*” is fixed in all dictionaries used and is the basic one for this component. The meanings “*surprise*” and “*fantasize*” can be found in three dictionaries (the meaning “*surprise*” in The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, The Webster Dictionary and The Cambridge Dictionary; meaning “*fantasize*” in The Cambridge and The Longman Dictionaries, The Newbury Dictionary of American English). The meaning “*notion*” is fixed in The Longman and The Wordsmyth Dictionaries. Component “*expect*” has five meanings: “*think*”, “*believe*”, “*demand*”, “*spy*” and “*hope*”. The meaning “*think*” is the basic one for this component as it is fixed in all the dictionaries. The meaning “*believe*” is excluded only from The Longman and The Wordsmyth Dictionaries and component “*demand*” – from “*spy*” and “*hope*” and The Newbury Dictionary of American English. The meanings “*spy*” and “*hope*” can be found only in “*spy*” and “*hope*”. The component “*intend*” has four meanings: “*plan*”, “*mean*”, “*result*” and “*purpose*”. There are two basic meanings for this component – “*plan*” (excluded only from The Webster Dictionary) and “*purpose*” (excluded only from The Newbury Dictionary of American English). The meaning “*mean*” is excluded from The Longman and The Cambridge Dictionaries. The meaning “*result*” is fixed only in The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and in The Longman Dictionary. Analysing synonymic sets of components of the semantic structure of “*probably*” we can single out the core (“*judgment*”, “*idea*”, “*view*”), the first periphery (“*estimation*”, “*assessment*”), the second periphery (“*feeling*”, “*impression*”, “*sentiment*”), the third periphery (“*intelligence*”, “*memory*”), the fourth periphery (“*dogma*”, “*faith*”), the fifth periphery (“*look forward*”, “*anticipate*”, “*await*”), the sixth periphery (“*aim*”, “*purpose*”).

The examination of the occurrences of the phrase *I think* in literature enables us to scrutinize the properties of the epistemic modality markers. For our research, we selected 464 examples using the *Digital Library: English and American Literature from Shakespeare to Mark Twain* by means of representative sample from the works of the British and American authors: Jane Austen, Edward Bellamy, Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce, James Boswell, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Samuel Butler, George Noel Gordon Byron, Lewis Carroll, John Cleland, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Congreve and Joseph Conrad. All the definitions used for the research are taken from The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.

The first thing to be pointed out about the modal phrase *I think* is that it doesn’t always function as epistemic modality marker. This is due to the fact that in such cases it doesn’t express any judgment or assessment what is the primary

feature of epistemic modality markers: *I would wish not to be hasty in censuring any one; but I always speak what I think* [Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*, S. 19. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 621 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 2, S. 14*)].

The modal phrase *I think* as syntactic epistemic modality marker is often combined with lexical epistemic modality markers. In the following examples the modal phrase *I think* is combined with adverbs. The modal phrase *I think* as well as adverbs expresses the speaker's attitude to the facts. It has a shade of assessment (we can draw such a conclusion on the basis of the definition of the verb *to think*: *be of the opinion; judge or consider; form or entertain the idea of; imagine; have a half-formed intention; form a conception of*). Speaking about adverbs we cannot but notice that *certainly* expresses assuredness (*undoubtedly; by all means*), *probably* – expectation (*expected to happen or prove true; likely*), *perhaps* – possibility (*it may be; possibly*) and *hardly* (*scarcely; only just; only with difficulty; surely not*). *Certainly – and I think I may afford to give them five hundred pounds a-piece. As it is, without any addition of mine, they will each have above three thousand pounds on their mother's death – a very comfortable fortune for any young woman* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 12. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 70 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 10*)]. *It will certainly be much the best way. A present of fifty pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 14. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 72 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 11*)]. *But tomorrow I think I shall certainly be able to call in Berkeley-street, and be introduced to your friend Mrs. Jennings* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 315. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 373 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 222*)]. *We have certainly done our best; and most fortunately having it in our power to introduce you to very superior society, and from our connection with Rosings, the frequent means of varying the humble home scene, I think we may flatter ourselves that your Hunsford visit cannot have been entirely irksome* [Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*, S. 317. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 919 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 2, S. 215*)]. *Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite; but I think I shall like your husband quite as well as Jane's* [Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*, S. 554. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 1156 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 2, S. 379*)]. *Nor do I think it a part of Marianne's,*" said Elinor; *"I should hardly call her a lively girl – she is very earnest, very eager in all she does – sometimes talks a great deal and always with animation – but she is not often really merry"* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 133. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 191 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 93*)]. *However I don't think her hardly at all handsomer than you, I assure you; for I think you both excessively pretty, and so does Mr. Palmer too I am sure, though we could not get him to own it last night* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 165. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59:*

*English and American Literature*, S. 223 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 1, S. 116)]. *I can hardly keep my hands warm even in my muff. It was not so yesterday, I think* [*Austen: Sense and Sensibility*, S. 235. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 293 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 1, S. 168)]. perhaps “Perhaps,” continued Elinor, “if I should happen to cut out, I may be of some use to Miss Lucy Steele, in rolling her papers for her; and there is so much still to be done to the basket, that it must be impossible I think for her labour singly, to finish it this evening. I should like the work exceedingly, if she would allow me a share in it” [*Austen: Sense and Sensibility*, S. 202. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 260 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 1, S. 145)]. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed [*Austen: Pride and Prejudice*, S. 94. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 696 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 2, S. 64)]. Well, the jointure may comfort him; and perhaps, between friends, he began to tremble for his credit and his lungs in the Baron, and was not sorry to withdraw; and to make you amends, Yates, I think we must raise a little theatre at Mansfield, and ask you to be our manager [*Austen: Mansfield Park*, S. 180. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 1350 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 3, S. 123)], likely And to be kept back on such a motive! – I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind [*Austen: Pride and Prejudice*, S. 244. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 846 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 2, S. 165)] or probably Elizabeth was again deep in thought, and after a time exclaimed, “To treat in such a manner, the godson, the friend, the favourite of his father!” – She could have added, “A young man too, like you, whose very countenance may vouch for your being amiable” – but she contented herself with “And one, too, who had probably been his own companion from childhood, connected together, as I think you said, in the closest manner!” [*Austen: Pride and Prejudice*, S. 120. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 722 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 2, S. 80-81)]. You have everybody dearest to you always at hand, I, probably, never shall again; and therefore till I have outlived all my affections, a post-office, I think, must always have power to draw me out, in worse weather than today [*Austen: Emma*, S. 429. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 2292 (vgl. *Austen-Novels* vol. 4, S. 294)]. The book cannot, I think, be printed in less than six weeks, nor probably so soon; and I will keep back the title-page, for such an insertion as you seem to promise me [*Boswell: Life of Johnson*, S. 302. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 6331 (vgl. *Boswell-Life*, S. 196)]. So, modal phrase *I think* combined with various adverbs extends its possibilities to express various degrees, shades and nuances of the speaker’s utterance.

The modal phrase *I think* can be combined with another epistemic modality marker at the syntactic level – *be surprised*. If we compare the meanings of the verbs *to think* (*be of the opinion; judge or consider; form or entertain the idea of; imagine; have a half-formed intention; form a conception of*) and *to surprise* (*affect*

with surprise; turn out contrary to the expectations of; shock; capture or attack by surprise), we cannot fail to notice that they both express the speaker's attitude towards some facts or ideas. But in the case of *I think* he/she merely gives the assessment of the situation and in the case of *be surprised* we talk about emotions, feelings. *How surprised you will be, Willoughby, on receiving this; and I think you will feel something more than surprise, when you know that I am in town* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 263. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 321 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 186-187*)]. *I think Mrs. Goddard would be very much surprised if she knew what had happened. I am sure Miss Nash would - for Miss Nash thinks her own sister very well married, and it is only a linen-draper* [Austen: *Emma*, S. 78. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 1941 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 4, S. 55-56*)].

The modal phrase *I think* as syntactic epistemic modality marker can be combined with the modal verb *may* as a lexical epistemic modality marker. In both cases the speaker gives their attitude towards the situation, but *may* express possibility, while *I think* has the shade of assessment. *"It may be so; but Willoughby is capable - at least I think" - he stopped a moment; then added in a voice which seemed to distrust itself, "And your sister - how did she"* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 282. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 340 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 199*)].

Sometimes we encounter three epistemic modality markers within one sentence. In this case we can see that the whole utterance is based on the speaker's suppositions. In the following example we have the combination of two lexical (modal verb *may* and adverb *likely*) and one syntactic (modal phrase *I think*) epistemic modality markers. Though all the markers express attitude towards the situation, facts or events, there is a slight difference between them. While *may* and *likely* have the shade of possibility, *I think* presents the speaker's assessment of the situation. The degree of possibility expressed by *likely* is higher than the one expressed by *may*. This conclusion can be drawn from the use of the intensifier *very* in the definition of *likely* (*very probably*).

*"Aye, aye, the parsonage is but a small one," said she, after the first ebullition of surprise and satisfaction was over," and very likely may be out of repair; but to hear a man apologising, as I thought, for a house that to my knowledge has five sitting rooms on the ground - floor, and I think the housekeeper told me, could make up fifteen beds! - and to you too, that had been used to live in Barton cottage! - It seemed quite ridiculous* [Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*, S. 415. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature*, S. 473 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 1, S. 292*)]. *59: English and American Literature*, S. 2242 (vgl. *Austen-Novels vol. 4, S. 260*)].

The research has revealed that modal phrase *I think* is used parenthetically. On the one hand, such a use reveals the phatic function of language, that is serving as a channel of communication, and on the other hand, bears a definite semantic load. *In the days of the Civil War practical joking had not, I think,*

*fallen into that disrepute which characterizes it now [Bierce: Negligible Tales, S. 50. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 4257 (vgl. Bierce-Writings, S. 752)]. She is the daughter of the insurgent gentleman who owns this house, and has, I think, called to see about its present occupancy [Bierce: Negligible Tales, S. 56. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 4263 (vgl. Bierce-Writings, S. 756)]. Currying cows is not, I think, a common practice, even in Michigan; but as this one had never needed milking, of course she had to be subjected to some equivalent form of persecution; and irritating her skin with a curry-comb was thought as disagreeable an attention as a thoughtful affection could devise [Bierce: Negligible Tales, S. 63. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 4270 (vgl. Bierce-Writings, S. 759-760)]. I have received such information and remarks, as joined to my own inquiries, will, I think, render it at least somewhat doubtful, especially when we consider that it must have originated from the person himself who went by the name of Richard Savage [Boswell: Life of Johnson, S. 195. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 6224 (vgl. Boswell-Life, S. 123-124)].*

Graphical expressive means play an important role in conveying the author's ideas. Dealing with the modal phrase *I think*, we face the examples when it is emphasized by using brackets or hyphens. In such a case we see that the speaker expresses only his thoughts and suppositions and is not completely sure about them. The utterance is then viewed as highly subjective. *If this be true, though neither you nor your father are about to do what is quite right, but as your father violates (I think) the legal succession least, he seems to be nearer the right than yourself [Boswell: Life of Johnson, S. 1033. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 7062 (vgl. Boswell-Life, S. 672)]. There is about her an occasional something – a reserve, I think – which I do not quite like, because it is not sufficiently girlish and submissive; and there are glimpses of an unsettled hurry in her nature, which put me out [Brontë: Shirley, S. 100. Digitale Bibliothek Band 59: English and American Literature, S. 9391 (vgl. Brontë-Shirley vol. 1, S. 72)].*

On examining the occurrences of the modal phrase *I think* in literature we have identified the properties of the epistemic modality markers. They are as follows:

- the modal phrase *I think* doesn't always function as epistemic modality marker;
- the expression of epistemic modality is versatile and has numerous shades and nuances;
- the modal phrase *I think* is combined with other means to express different degrees of assessment and assuredness;
- the modal phrase *I think* is often used parenthetically, on the one hand revealing the phatic function of language and on the other hand bearing a definite semantic load.



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## ABSTRACT

The article “Epistemic modality markers at the syntactic level: the modal phrase *I think*” deals with the expression of the epistemic modality at the syntactic level. An analysis of the functioning of the modal phrase *I think* it is obvious that the expression of epistemic modality is versatile and has numerous shades and nuances.

**Key words:** epistemic modality, modal phrase, marker

## REZUMAT

Articolul de față abordează problema exprimării modalității epistemice la nivel sintactic. O analiză a funcționării expresiei modale *I think* arată că exprimarea modalității epistemice este versatilă și prezintă numeroase nuanțe și trăsături.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** modalitate epistemică, expresie modală, marcator