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CONTENTS

1. Joseph Lough: A DEADLY SILENCE: SPIVAK'S SUBALTERN IN CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES.....	6
2. Katarina Držajić: THE KEY TO THE TREASURE IS THE TREASURE: BARTH'S METAFICTION IN <i>CHIMERA</i>	30
3. Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija: DE-MYTHOLOGIZING THE BARD: APPROPRIATION OF SHAKESPEARE IN TOM STOPPARD'S DOGG'S HAMLET, CAHOOT'S MACBETH.....	43
4. Olivera Mišnić: TRANSGRESSION OU « ÉLOGE DE LA FOLIE » DANS LES ROMANS DE MICHEL TOURNIER.....	57
5. Sonja Špadijer: EXPRESSIONS IDIOMATIQUES (IMAGES LIÉES AU CORPS HUMAIN) ET LEUR FIGEMENT.....	68
6. Miodarka Tepavčević: POLITICAL DISCOURSE – A SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC ANALYSIS.....	93
7. Milica Vuković: WEAK EPISTEMIC MODALITY IN THE UK PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE.....	121



WEAK EPISTEMIC MODALITY IN THE UK PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE

Abstract. *Discourse strategies of boosting and downtoning seem to play a paramount role in political discourse – persuading the electorate and defending one own’s position when ‘attacked’ liken the political battle to an actual war battle, whereby going on offensive and ducking into a trench, when the occasion demands it, may be linguistically effectuated through an array of linguistic means. Acting in defense in the context of political combat will be the focus of this paper, explored on a corpus taken from the 2010 UK parliamentary budget debate. Weak epistemic modality or hedging is studied through the use of weak epistemic adverbs, verbs, adjectives and nouns, its presence is measured through normalised frequencies and where possible compared to the BNC frequencies. The results point to a low presence of hedging in parliamentary discourse, both in comparison with strong epistemic modality in the same corpus and with the general everyday language.*

Key words: *weak epistemic modality, parliamentary language, hedging, discourse*

Introduction

Understatement represents a rhetorical strategy applied and accomplished at several discourse levels. In this study we take the term to mean decreasing, diminishing, softening or subtracting from the full strength of the utterance. In addition, we shall consider it different from the term *hedging* or *mitigation*, whereby we take understatement to refer to any decreasing or softening of the utterance meaning and hedging to refer to non-commitment of the speaker to the truth value of the utterance. The two strategies are very similar and all-pervasive in political discourse, however, only the latter belongs to the realm of

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epistemic modality, i.e. modality conveying speaker's evaluation of degree of confidence in, or belief of the knowledge upon which the meaning of the utterance is based.

Theoretical background

In our theoretical review, we shall briefly outline weak epistemic modality and linguistic research on parliamentary discourse.

Weak epistemic modality

Systematic reviews of hedging, i.e. all devices and substrategies used to accomplish it are non-existent, which should not surprise given the fact that it is difficult to pin it down and that it is a productive category.

Epistemic modality is considered part of the modal system which also comprises *deontic modality*, expressing obligations, commands, permissions and grants, and *dynamic modality*, expressing ability.

Epistemicity may simply be defined as modification of the utterance to express confidence or lack thereof, truthfulness and probability. This may be accomplished prosodically (intonation suggesting certainty or uncertainty), semantically (by using words suggesting a degree of certainty or uncertainty, such as *definitely, undoubtedly, possibly, may*, etc.), syntactically (using a certain word order) or pragmatically and discoursally (through a paralinguistic component signalling the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence).

As epistemic modality refers to the degree of certainty in the truth of the speaker's utterance (de Haan, 2005: 29), in cases where the speaker is little sure of it, we frequently encounter hedging strategies, i.e. what we might refer to as *weak epistemic modality*, relating to a *low epistemic value* and *weak* or *tentative commitment*, as opposed to utterances with strong commitment (high value) and neutral utterances in which there is no commitment (median value) (Simon-Vandenberg, 1997: 344). Or, as Cornillie puts it, "the result of the evaluation goes from

absolute certainty that a state of affairs is real to absolute certainty that it is not real. In between these two extremes there is a continuum including probability to possibility” (2009: 46). The focus of our paper would then pertain to the low possibility dimension, i.e. weak epistemic modality, in which the speaker’s level of commitment to the truth is obviously low (de Haan, 2000: 203).

The paper does not aim to offer an exhaustive list of items used to accomplish weak epistemic modality in our corpus, but solely to focus on some of the most prominent and pervasive devices used to such purposes at the level of words and phrases.

Research on parliamentary discourse

Parliamentary debate is said to be a prototypical instance of *deliberative* genre, whose aim is to persuade the addressee to take action, although it is mixed with *forensic* genres (asserting guilt or innocence) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, *epideictic* genres (ceremonial discourse) (Ilie, 2004: 46). The genre is considered to be “an influential and authoritative genre” (van der Valk, 2003: 315) and its research is becoming ever more abundant (Gelabert-Desnoyer, 2008: 410) in the context of the increasingly significant role that politics plays in societies in general.

In the research conducted so far, most of the attention has been devoted to the UK House of Commons (Ilie, 2003b: 73); however, more national parliaments have received attention as of late (among others – Ensink, 1997; Frumuselu and Ilie, 2010; Sauer, 1997; Elspass, 2002; Bijeikiene and Utke, 2007), whereby various aspects have been analysed, such as use of key words (for example, Bayley, Bevitori and Zoni, 2004), various argumentation discourse strategies (for example, Van Dijk, 2000; van der Valk, 2003), and pragmatic aspects including politeness (for example, Ilie, 2004; 2005; David et al., 2009), interruptions (for example Bevitori, 2004; Carbo, 2004;), metadiscourse (Ilie, 2000; 2003) etc.

Epistemic modality has not been studied directly within the context of parliamentary discourse, which is why this paper aims to provide a modest contribution to the study of the topic.

Data and method

The corpus for this study comprises the transcripts of the first day of the budget debate conducted in the House of Commons in March 2010, edited on the basis of the video available on the website of the UK parliament. The details of this part of the corpus follow:

Parliamentary session	Session 2009-2010
Debate	Budget debate for 2010
Corpus source	Hansard ²
Date	24/03/2010
Duration	6h 30min
Word count	61,255
Page count	137
Number of exchanges	136
MP's who participated	33

Table 1. The UK corpus

² Taken from:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100324/debindx/100324-x.htm>

The method we applied consisted of the following:

- identification of the words and phrases conveying weak epistemic modality in the corpus, through the categories stated above;
- determining the frequency of the tokens concerned, using the software *AntConc 3.2.1*® (Anthony, 2007);
- normalising the frequency, i.e. calculating the frequency per 1,000 words of the corpus;
- qualitative analysis of the most frequent tokens in the co-text they were used in.

Analysis and results

The use of weak epistemic modality was analysed through weak epistemic adverbials, weak epistemic verbs and verb phrases, weak epistemic nouns and weak epistemic adjectives.

Weak epistemic adverbs and their equivalents

In the literature surveyed, a broad array of weak epistemic adverbs was found to exist in the English language: *conceivably, maybe, possibly, potentially, hypothetically, presumptively, allegedly, reportedly, doubtfully, supposedly, indeterminately, ostensibly, questionably, suspiciously, seemingly, vaguely, obscurely, ambiguously, indefinitely, purportedly, perhaps, professedly, unclearly, speciously, outwardly, supposably, tentatively, hesitantly, uncertainly, imaginably, assumably, arguably, by allegation, to my knowledge, to all appearances, on the face of it* etc.). However, the search for these adverbs in our corpus yielded very few hits – only five of these adverbs were found and they featured very low frequencies. In table 2, we also included two clauses functioning as adverbials:

WEAK EPISTEMIC MODALITY

MODAL ADVERBS	Total	
	RF	NF
perhaps	17	0.28
Maybe	5	0.08
possibly	3	0.05
potentially	1	0.02
vaguely	1	0.02
CLAUSES EQUIVALENT TO MODAL ADVERBS		
as far as I know	1	0.02
as far as I am aware	1	0.02
Total	29	0.48

Table 2

The first conclusion is that the use of weak epistemic adverbs is more or less avoided in parliamentary discourse. However, the most frequently used items from this group merit a more in-depth analysis.

The most frequent weak epistemic adverbs in the UK parliament are two synonyms *perhaps* and *maybe*. The former is much more common than the latter, probably due to the fact that it belongs to a more formal register which is typical of parliament. They are primarily used for hedging:

- (1) REDWOOD: ... And he was absolutely right that the UK Government football club, under its current management, has slipped down several divisions and is facing further relegation. He is absolutely right that there are no star players who can win matches. He is also absolutely right that the wage bill is bloated and gross, and that the club is facing

bankruptcy. I think, the club has all the conditions, *which the hon. Gentleman perhaps did not have in mind*, for better and new management...

(2) TAYLOR: ... Indeed, it is likely that we are going to be importing more than 60 per cent of our gas and oil requirements *within a very short time – perhaps by the end of the decade* – from unstable countries such as Russia...

(3) TYRIE: ... Of course, the boom and bust rhetoric has been abandoned. So, incidentally, has the word "stability". This was mentioned on average 11 times in every Budget speech that the Prime Minister made when he was Chancellor. In the past two Budget speeches – I listened carefully to this one – I did not hear, I haven't heard the word mentioned once. Not once. Stability is out. **Perhaps** *it was in there somewhere*, but if so it passed me by...

In the examples 1-3, *perhaps* is used as a hedge. In example 1, direct threat to the face of the MP Redwood's collocutor is mitigated with *perhaps* as well as indirect addressing in the third person, typical of the UK parliament. Then, in example 2, MP Taylor uses *perhaps* to hedge from his doom and gloom estimate sending a message that the grounds that the estimate rests on may not be that solid after all. Further on (example 3), MP Tyrie gives an interesting metalinguistic analysis of the Prime Minister's Budget speech, noting that the Labour have eliminated their key word *stability*, however, as it was later hedged with *perhaps*, the hearer may conclude that Tyrie is not fully convinced of this and might be in error. By employing *perhaps*, the MP's reduce the possibility for their claims to be attacked and countered – their hedging makes too weak a target for such an offensive.

But how frequently are these weak epistemic adverbs used in the parliamentary language as opposed to everyday language? Let us compare the normalised frequencies from our corpus to our search results from the British National Corpus (table 3):

WEAK EPISTEMIC ADVERBS AND THEIR EQUIVALENTS	UK PARLIAMENT		BNC	
	RF	NF	RF	NF
perhaps	17	0.28	33576	0.34
maybe	5	0.08	10023	0.10
possibly	3	0.05	7046	0.07
potentially	1	0.02	2426	0.02
vaguely	1	0.02	935	0.01
as far as I know	1	0.02	216	0.00
as far as I am aware	1	0.02	70	0.00
Total	29	0.48	54292	0.54

Table 3

The results are surprisingly similar. However, we must note that in everyday language there would be more epistemic adverbs and their equivalents than the list made based on our corpus could offer, which would presumably ultimately raise the frequency of weak epistemic modality in everyday language as opposed to the parliament.

Weak epistemic verbs

A wider range of weak epistemic verbs was found in the UK parliament in comparison to the findings relating to the corresponding adverbs. The list features several modal verbs (*might, may, could*), a couple of semi-modals (*seem, appear* etc.), whereas the others are lexical verbs, mostly verbs of thinking (*suppose, assume, suspect* itd.), which assume a modal function (table 4):

WEAK EPISTEMIC VERBS AND VERB PHRASES	Total	
	SF	NF
might	32	0.52
may	22	0.36
seem	18	0.29
suggest	14	0.23
could	10	0.16
(I) would say	6	0.09
assume	5	0.08
suppose	5	0.08
look	3	0.05
(I) would argue	4	0.07
suspect	3	0.05
presume	2	0.03
appear	2	0.03
tend	1	0.02
Total	127	2.07

Table 4

Central epistemic modal verbs expressing weak force are *may*, *might* and *could*, whereas there are disagreements in the literature regarding the status of the verb *can* and whether it falls within this category or not. Examples from our corpus featuring the said verb did not convey weak epistemic modality, which is why in our overview we shall exclude it, thus agreeing with Varttala, who deems it incompatible with this type of modality

(1999: 185). On the other hand, *may* and *might* are widely considered prototypical hedges (Hyland, 1998: 116), *might* being the distant counter of *may* (Trbojević-Milošević, 2004), thus conveying even weaker epistemic modality, i.e. the most tentative among modal verbs (Brewer, 1987: 80).

In our corpus, *might*, *may* and *could* were found in obviously hedging contexts, most commonly in situations where an MP has to distance himself/herself from the truth of the estimate he/she has given, thus reducing the chances of being criticised and the estimate countered:

- (4) MAIN: ... He was very business-unfriendly in the good times, and they are fearful for their businesses now that *there may be bad times ahead...*
- (5) TYRIE: ... Today, the Chancellor announced his forecast for growth, above trend – 3 to 3.5 per cent. for 2011. *It may happen*, but it is well above the average of independent forecasts. I hope it happens, but I cannot help feeling uneasy about relying on it, as he has...
- (6) LILLEY: ... The best way is to encourage growth. *Raising taxes might be unavoidable*, but if we are elected to government, we will do all we can to avoid raising taxes...
- (7) DARLING: ... In the absence of Government action to support the economy, *the weakness in some of our overseas markets, particularly Europe, could result in a substantial downward revision of our growth prospects*, but because of the action we have taken through the recession, and the measures that I am announcing today, I believe that only a small reduction is needed...

As can be seen, these modal verbs are mostly used when giving forecasts for economic trends in the upcoming period. The use of weak epistemic adverbs is completely natural to such contexts, i.e. distancing is not employed to manipulative purposes, but as consequence of the natural unreliability of predicting future events. Still, we must bear in mind that MP's give only those estimates suiting their point and aims.

It is different with semi-modals *seem*, *appear* and *look*, verbs of perception which can be said to be near-synonyms in certain contexts. The MP definitely hedges from the content of the utterance, thus suggesting that the content is experienced from a possibly skewed perspective and is just an impression allowing for objective reality to be different:

- (8) REDWOOD: ... When I asked the Prime Minister about that recently in Prime Minister's questions, *he **seemed** to be completely unaware of that fact*. You would have thought that it was the dominant economic fact that might concern him and his colleagues...
- (9) GARDINER: ... We should be incentivising and rewarding companies for increasing their per capita output, for example, and *it **seems** to me a failure of this House* and the Treasury that we have not been able to do so...
- (10) BELL: ... I am making an important point, *but Conservative Members do not **seem** to get it...*
- (11) TODD: Did not the right hon. Gentleman find surprising the comments of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), *who **appeared** also to share the view of my hon. Friend* the Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon) that we should keep these banks for a considerable time longer, and actually be active in their direct management?
- (12) TYRIE: ... But of course each individual spending measure could have some merit, but *it **looks** as if this Budget, in any case, has just given us more of the same: meddling in the economy with taxpayers' money...*

What the MP's here do is amplifying and mitigating the utterance at the same time – thus, for example, they combine hedges and maximisers in the same utterance (e.g. maximiser *completely*, emphasiser *in any case* and semantically strong vocabulary: *failure, they do not get it*). In fact, in such cases we are dealing with disharmonious propositions, not due to the MP's not knowing what to say, but on account of the fact that the hedges

are there precisely because of the amplified propositions. Such examples with the verbs in question are not rare:

- (13) TYRIE: ... The extra money comes out of a slight improvement, which the Chancellor also announced today, in overall public finances since the pre-Budget report, but whatever the merits of the measures *it seems highly irresponsible* to use that small amount of extra room to start spending more...
- (14) JACK: ... the Chancellor of the day should be required at least to put on public record why he disagrees with advice *which would seem to be profound commonsense*: the advice that when the economy is expanding and there is no need to increase public expenditure, we should pay down debt...
- (15) FABRICANT: Does he agree that *it always seemed very strange* when the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, the present Prime Minister, used to talk of balancing the books in the course of a cycle – thus recognising that there was indeed a cycle – while, often in the same sentence, saying that he has done away with boom and bust?

Interestingly enough, other weak epistemic modal verbs may not be found in such contexts. However, *seem*, *appear* and *look* are basically here substitutes for the verb *to be*, which is why they are frequently listed as semi-copulative verbs.

The last group studied in this section relates to verbs and verb phrases expressing hypotheses and cognition (*assume*, *suppose*, *suspect*, *presume*, *(I) would say*, *(I) would argue*). They are similar to the verbs *think* and *believe*, but are in fact their distant pairs as they contain more hedging semantically. They are usually used in the first person singular in combination with other hedges:

- (16) BELL: If I may say so, it is a bit offensive for the hon. Gentleman, in this House of Commons, to read from a Red Book – which **I assume** is the Red Book for this Budget – and expect me to have read it, given that I have been sitting here since 11 am and the document has only just been made public...
- ... And he was making this statement, which, **I suppose**, after nine or so years in that post it is understandable if he has become a little

conventional in his thinking, he said that we have to satisfy the markets...

(17) TODD: I am intrigued by the right hon. Gentleman's analysis. I share some of his thoughts, but by extension ***I am assuming*** that he is suggesting that we should have a much more directive role in running RBS and Lloyds, and should seek to, perhaps, foster an underpricing of credit to the business sector. Is that, is that what he is really thinking?

... ***I would say*** that, as far as I know, he is a UK taxpayer, and that is excellent...

(18) JACK: ... And therefore ***I would say*** that perhaps we need to look again at the Bank of England Act 1998, and at the Bank's remit...

The phrases function as modal frameworks signaling how the epistemic qualification of the utterance should be understood – the source of the information is the MP himself/herself, his cognitive stance is uttered, however, it is not proposed with confidence but carefulness. In relation to other earlier presented categories of weak epistemic verbs, they are used much less often – probably due to the fact that they convey more uncertainty and unreliability in the proposition, thus weakening the speaker's authority.

Comparison with the BNC results was not possible with many of the verbs presented in this section – namely, many of the verbs in question can be used to purposes other than just conveying weak epistemic modality, whereby, due to the sheer largeness of the BNC, manual extracting of such epistemic uses was not a viable option. Such was the case with *may*, for example, which can additionally convey deontic modality (giving permissions) or *could*, which additionally expresses dynamic modality (ability in the past).

We shall conclude our overview of weak epistemic modality with weak epistemic adjectives and nouns.

Weak epistemic adjectives and nouns

The number of weak epistemic adjectives is very limited and so were their normalised frequencies in our corpus (table 5):

WEAK EPISTEMIC ADJECTIVES	Total	
	SF	NF
possible	9	0.15
uncertain	2	0.03
vague	1	0.02
Total	12	0.20

Table 5

The first conclusion from the findings presented in table 5 is that weak epistemic modality is more expressed through verbs than other parts of speech.

The most frequent among such adjectives, however, was *possible*, an adjective that points to hypothetical scenarios, which is often used together with other devices indicating epistemic possibility:

- (19) McFALL: ... The important thing is that we help people after six months, but *if it was possible* and it were felt that there was a detrimental effect after three months, and *if it were possible* to implement the proposal, I would quite happily support the hon. Gentleman's suggestion...

Still, we are dealing only with 9 uses of this adjective, as we have excluded its occurrences in the phrases *as soon as possible*, *as much as possible* and *as wisely as possible*, in which *possible* functions differently, as an amplifier.

Similar can be said of weak epistemic nouns, whereby only four were found in the UK parliamentary debate (table 6):

WEAK EPISTEMIC NOUNS	Total	
	RF	NF
uncertainty	6	0.10
assumption	3	0.05
possibility	1	0.02
doubt ³	1	0.02
Total	11	0.18

Table 6

None of these measured any significant frequencies, which is why we shall not analyse their uses in detail. We shall, however, compare the BNC frequencies with our results for weak epistemic adjectives and nouns found in our corpus (table 7):

³ We excluded its occurrences in the phrase *no doubt*, which carries strong epistemic meaning.

WEAK EPISTEMIC ADJECTIVES AND NOUNS	UK PARLIAMENT		BNC	
	RF	NF	RF	NF
possible	9	0.15	3339	0.03
uncertain	2	0.03	1952	0.02
vague	1	0.02	1432	0.01
uncertainty	6	0.10	2145	0.02
assumption	3	0.05	3032	0.03
possibility	1	0.02	6937	0.07
doubt	1	0.02	5887	0.06
Total	24	0.39	24724	0.24

Table 7

As with weak epistemic adverbs, the results are surprisingly similar, although the prevalence is slightly on the side of the parliamentary language. However, what we must bear in mind is that in everyday language there are other weak epistemic adjectives, nouns and adverbs which were not employed in corpus, which would mean that there should be more weak epistemic modality, i.e. more hedging in everyday language than in the parliament.

Conclusion

Our results point in the direction that there is more hedging in everyday discourse than in parliamentary language – defending is not a favoured tactic in political discourse, so often likened to war through the use of the corresponding metaphors, as has been heavily the case in our paper as well. A useful comparison would be that the analysis of strong epistemic

modality on the same corpus and using the same method resulted in 9.68 words per 1,000 words of the corpus, as opposed to 2.93 measured for weak epistemic modality, as can be seen in table 8:

WEAK EPISTEMIC MODALITY	Total	
	RF	NF
Weak epistemic adverbs and their equivalents	29	0.48
Weak epistemic verbs and verb phrases	127	2.07
Weak epistemic adjectives	12	0.20
Weak epistemic nouns	11	0.18
Total	179	2.93

Table 8

Persuasion and sounding convincing are three times as often favoured in political language as hedging and mitigation – results which are unsurprising having in mind the aims of political discourse – projecting firm and confident authority and strong personality so as to persuade the electorate to allow the speaker to be their leader.

What merits additional comment is the fact that weak epistemic modality is mostly expressed through verbs and adverbs in the UK parliament, which is probably the case with the English language in general, whereas nouns and adjectives seem to play a peripheral role.

This methodology of analysing weak epistemic modality, despite all its limitations, could be reproduced to other corpora taken from different genres, thus giving us useful and interpretable results of how present hedging is across various discourses.

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