

# Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English



# Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English

By

Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli,  
Ilaria Riccioni and Gill Philip

**Cambridge**  
**Scholars**  
Publishing



Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English

By Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli, Ilaria Riccioni and Gill Philip

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2021 by Andrzej Zuczkowski, Ramona Bongelli,  
Ilaria Riccioni and Gill Philip

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6498-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6498-5

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	xii
List of Figures.....	xiv
Acknowledgements .....	xxi
Introduction .....	1
1. The KUB model .....	1
2. Stivers, Enfield and Levinson's (2010) study on questions and responses .....	2
3. John Heritage's model of epistemic stance .....	3
4. Aims of the book .....	3
5. The Uncertain position .....	5
6. Further aims .....	5
7. Plan of the book .....	7

## **Part 1: KUB Model and Conversational Analysis on Questions and Responses**

Chapter 1 .....	12
Knowing, Unknowing, Not Knowing Whether and Believing	
1.1 Epistemic stance and KUB model.....	12
1.2 The Knowing/Certain position.....	14
1.2.1 Markers .....	14
1.2.2 Knowing .....	15
1.2.3 Certain .....	16
1.3 The Uncertain position.....	16
1.3.1 Two poles of the Uncertainty position: Not Knowing Whether and Believing .....	17
1.3.2 Markers .....	19
1.4 The Unknowing position.....	25
1.5 <i>In the here and now of communication I the speaker tell you the         hearer that.....</i>	26
1.5.1 <i>I tell you that I know...: epistemic stance is a linguistic,             communicative notion, not a mental one .....</i>	27

1.5.2 Lying .....	28
1.5.3 Whose knowledge, un-knowledge and uncertainty .....	28
1.5.4 Certainty/uncertainty and truth/falsehood .....	29
Chapter 2 .....	31
Theoretical Framework, Aims, Methodology	
2.1 Theoretical framework .....	31
2.1.1 Stivers, Enfield and Levinson's (2010) study on questions and responses .....	31
2.1.2 John Heritage's model of epistemic stance .....	32
2.2 Aims .....	34
2.3 Methodology .....	39
2.3.1 Presuppositions .....	41
2.3.2 Question design .....	41
2.3.3 Social action .....	41
2.3.4 Preference organization .....	43
2.3.5 Answer-response, non-answer response, non-response .....	43
<b>Part 2: Unknowing and Uncertain Questions</b>	
Chapter 3 .....	46
Wh-Questions	
3.1 Definition .....	46
3.2 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	48
3.2.1 Excerpt 1 (S3RN 104-130) .....	51
3.2.2 <i>How much did you drink a day?</i> .....	52
3.2.3 The epistemic design of wh-questions .....	53
3.2.4 S0052's answer .....	54
Chapter 4 .....	65
Alternative Questions	
4.1 Definition .....	65
4.2 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	67
4.2.1 Four types of alternative questions .....	67
4.3 Complete alternative questions .....	69
4.3.1 Complete alternative questions with totally or partially different alternatives .....	69
4.3.2 Complete alternative questions with totally different alternatives .....	70
4.3.3 Complete alternative questions with partially different alternatives .....	71

4.4 Incomplete alternative questions.....	76
4.5 Indefinite alternative questions .....	83
4.5.1 <i>Or something</i> .....	84
4.5.2 <i>Or something like that</i> .....	85
4.5.3 <i>Or somewhere</i> .....	85
4.5.4 <i>Or anything</i> .....	85
4.5.5 <i>Or anything like that</i> .....	86
4.5.6 <i>Or anything else</i> .....	87
4.5.7 <i>Or what</i> .....	87
4.5.8 <i>Or whatever</i> .....	88
4.6 Negative alternative questions ( <i>or not</i> questions) .....	88
4.7 Question designs of alternative questions and type-conforming answers .....	89
4.8 Epistemic design of alternative questions .....	93
4.8.1 <i>Shall I put the kettle on or would you prefer coffee?</i> .....	93
4.8.2 A linguistic test for unknowing and uncertain questions ( <i>I don't know</i> versus <i>I don't know whether</i> ) .....	96
4.8.3 <i>Do you wanna make it or do you want me to make it?</i> .....	97
4.8.4 <i>Did you find it in the end or not?</i> .....	101
4.8.5 Responses to alternative questions: alignment, misalignment, partial alignment .....	103
Chapter 5 .....	104
Polar Interrogatives	
5.1 Polar questions: definition and sub-types .....	104
5.2 Polar interrogatives .....	104
5.2.1 Definition .....	104
5.2.2 Presuppositions.....	105
5.3 Coleman's and Bolinger's views on polar interrogatives .....	106
5.4 Neutral (information seeking) and non-neutral (confirmation seeking) polar interrogatives .....	108
5.5 Epistemic design of neutral and non-neutral polar interrogatives .....	109
5.6 An ambiguous question design .....	113
5.7 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	115
5.7.1 Excerpt 41 (S32W 503-527).....	115
5.7.2 <i>Did you say you lived in Barcelona?</i> .....	116
5.7.3 <i>Have you been anywhere else in Spain?</i> .....	119
5.7.4 Excerpt 42 (S28F 2670-2678) .....	121
5.7.5 <i>Do you put it all in your diary?</i> .....	122
5.7.6 <i>Are you gonna go John Lewis now?</i> .....	123

Chapter 6 .....	125
Tag Questions	
6.1 Definition .....	125
6.2 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	125
6.2.1 Excerpt 43 (S7GJ 2640-2647) .....	125
6.2.2 <i>That's not very fair is it?</i> .....	126
6.3 Epistemic design of tag questions .....	128
6.4 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	129
6.4.1 Excerpt 44 (S6W8 1557-1585) .....	129
6.4.2 <i>They're all quite posh though don't you think?</i> .....	130
Chapter 7 .....	133
Declarative Questions	
7.1 Definition .....	133
7.2 Search string: extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	134
7.2.1 Excerpt 45 (S7RW 1084-1103) .....	134
7.2.2 <i>You don't ring them?</i> .....	135
7.3 Epistemic design of declarative questions .....	137
Chapter 8 .....	138
Borderline Questions between Unknowing and Not Knowing Whether	
8.1 The Uncertain continuum .....	138
8.2 The Unknown continuum .....	138
8.3 Dual wh-questions and alternative questions of the first type ....	140
8.3.1 First argument .....	142
8.3.2 Second argument .....	144
8.3.3 Third argument .....	146
8.4 Multiple questions: search string and extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	147
8.4.1 <i>Who</i> .....	148
8.4.2 <i>Which</i> .....	150
8.4.3 <i>Where</i> .....	150
8.4.4 <i>When</i> .....	151
8.4.5 <i>Why</i> .....	151
8.4.6 <i>What</i> .....	152
8.4.7 <i>How</i> .....	153
Chapter 9 .....	155
Questions Addressed toward the Believing Position	
9.1 Introduction .....	155
9.2 Search strings and extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	156



9.2.1 Wh-questions including a modal verb.....	156
9.2.2 Wh-questions including <i>do / don't you think</i> .....	164
9.2.3 Alternative questions including a modal verb .....	168
9.2.4 Polar interrogatives including a modal verb.....	175
9.2.5 Polar interrogatives and tag questions including <i>do / don't you think</i> .....	176
9.2.6 Tag questions including a modal verb.....	178
9.2.7 Declarative questions including a modal verb.....	179
9.3 Conclusions.....	181

### Part 3: More on Uncertain Questions

Chapter 10 .....	184
Dubitative Questions	
10.1 Introduction.....	184
10.1.1 Point 7 of the coding scheme.....	184
10.1.2 Polar interrogatives.....	185
10.1.3 Wh- and alternative questions .....	186
10.1.4 Are dubitative questions more uncertain than plain questions? .....	187
10.2 Research questions.....	187
10.3 Why alternative and polar questions may be dubitative but wh-questions cannot .....	188
10.4 Methodology .....	188
10.5 *Dubitative wh-questions .....	189
10.6 Plain uncertain questions and corresponding dubitative forms: which are more uncertain? .....	190
10.6.1 Dubitative alternative questions .....	191
10.6.2 Dubitative polar interrogatives .....	193
10.6.3 Dubitative tag questions .....	195
10.6.4 Dubitative declarative questions.....	197
10.7 Corpus-based evidence .....	201
10.7.1 <i>I wonder if / whether</i> .....	201
10.7.2 <i>Maybe</i> .....	202
10.7.3 Extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	203
10.7.4 Chi-squared .....	204
10.7.5 Position of <i>maybe</i> in questions .....	204
10.7.6 Chi-squared .....	205
10.7.7 Question types and position of <i>maybe</i> .....	205
10.7.8 Chi-squared .....	206
10.8 Conclusions.....	206

Chapter 11 .....	210
Rhetorical Questions	
11.1 Quirk et al. (1985) on rhetorical questions.....	210
11.2 Quirk et al.'s (1985) examples from the perspective of the KUB model.....	211
11.3 In rhetorical questions, is the speaker's epistemic position always Knowing? .....	214
11.4 Koshik (2005) on rhetorical questions as an expression of the speaker's epistemic stance.....	214
11.5 Do rhetorical questions always convey strong reverse polarity assertions? .....	215
11.6 Heritage (2002) on negative polar interrogatives in news interviews .....	216
11.7 Negative polar interrogatives from the KUB perspective .....	218
11.8 Koshik (2005) on the Thomas-Clinton interview .....	219
11.9 Expression of opinion, accusation or mitigated accusation?.....	219
11.10 Search strings and extracts from Spoken BNC2014 .....	221
11.10.1 Wh-questions.....	222
11.10.2 Polar interrogatives.....	227
Chapter 12 .....	230
Quantitative Analysis of the Speakers' Epistemic Positions in a Dialogue	
12.1 Qualitative analysis.....	230
12.2 Quantitative analysis.....	230
12.3 Procedures for quantitative analysis.....	231
12.4 Quantitative analysis of Excerpt 1 (S3RN 104-130) <i>how much</i> <i>did you drink a day?</i> .....	231
12.4.1 Distribution of words between interlocutors .....	239
12.4.2 Epistemic origin of the interlocutors' words: distribution of Known, Unknown and Uncertain .....	240
12.4.3 Epistemic destination of the interlocutors' words: distribution of Known, Unknown and Uncertain.....	248
Overall Conclusions .....	255
1. Unknowing and uncertain questions .....	255
2. Wh-questions.....	256
3. Alternative questions.....	256
4. Incomplete alternative questions and polar interrogatives .....	258
5. <i>Or not</i> alternative questions and polar interrogatives.....	259
6. Polar interrogatives .....	260
7. An ambiguous question design.....	262

8. Tag and declarative questions .....	262
9. Epistemic design: <i>I do not know</i> versus <i>I do not know whether</i> ..	264
10. Wh-questions and whether-questions.....	268
11. Even the Unknowing position is a continuum.....	268
12. Questions addressed toward the Believing position .....	273
13. Dubitative questions.....	274
14. Rhetorical questions .....	278
15. Quantitative analysis of dialogues.....	281
16. Circles and arrows, partial alignment, non-answer response .....	282
17. Alignment/misalignment, agreement/disagreement .....	288
18. <i>I do not know</i> as a response to unknowing and uncertain questions.....	289
19. Is the epistemic design of questions context-independent? .....	290
20. Epistemic seesaw, epistemic asymmetry, more or less knowledgeable.....	292
References .....	295
KUB Bibliography.....	311

# LIST OF TABLES

## PART 2

### Chapter 4

Table 1. Four types of alternative question.....	68
Table 2. Totally and partially different complete alternative questions....	69
Table 3. Number of alternatives in complete alternative questions.....	70
Table 4. Grammatical components of partially different alternative questions .....	71
Table 5. Types of complement in partially different alternative questions .....	72
Table 6. Number of alternatives in incomplete alternative questions.....	76
Table 7. Incomplete alternative questions with and without overlap.....	77
Table 8. Types of answer to incomplete alternative questions .....	78
Table 9. Types of pronoun in indefinite alternative questions.....	83
Table 10. Number of alternatives in or something questions .....	84
Table 11. Number of alternatives in or anything questions .....	86
Table 12. Number of alternatives in or what questions .....	87
Table 13. Number of alternatives in each type of alternative question.....	88

## PART 3

### Chapter 11

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of question types including <i>maybe</i> .....	202
Table 2. Frequency and percentage of position of <i>maybe</i> in questions .....	205
Table 3. Frequency and percentage of question types in relation to the position of <i>maybe</i> .....	205

## Chapter 12

Table 1. Words and percentages referring to S0052's epistemic positions.....	240
Table 2. Words and percentages referring to S0109's epistemic positions.....	242
Table 3. Words and percentages referring to S0052's + S0109's epistemic positions.....	244
Table 4. Synoptic view of words and percentages referring to S0052's and S0109's epistemic positions. ....	245
Table 5. Words and percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's turns.....	248
Table 6. Words and percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0109's turns.....	250
Table 7. Words and percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's plus S0109's turns .....	251
Table 8. Synoptic view of words and percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's and S0109's turns.....	253

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Table 1. Question type, epistemic design and social action.....	264
---	-----

# LIST OF FIGURES

## PART 1

### Chapter 1

Figure 1. The two poles of the Uncertain position.....	17
Figure 2. Categories of Uncertainty markers.....	19

### Chapter 2

Figure 1. Epistemic gradient (Heritage and Raymond, 2012: 181): Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 represent respectively the above mentioned four examples: wh-question, polar interrogative, tag and declarative question.....	33
Figure 2. The arrows indicate the epistemic origin and destination of the wh-question (U = Unknowing → K = Knowing) and the response (K → U): the expected answer comes from the same epistemic position towards which the question is addressed (alignment, parallel arrows). B (Believing) and NKW (Not Knowing Whether) refer to the two poles of the Uncertain position .....	36
Figure 3. The expected answer comes from the Believing position towards which the question is addressed .....	37
Figure 4. The expected answer, whether affirmative or negative, comes from the Knowing position towards which the question is addressed. <i>Yes</i> means <i>He is at home</i> , <i>No</i> means <i>He is not at home</i> .....	38
Figure 5. The expected answer, whether affirmative or negative, comes from the Believing position towards which the question is addressed. <i>Yes</i> means <i>I think he is at home</i> ; <i>No</i> means <i>I think he is not at home</i> ....	38

## PART 2

### Chapter 3

Figure 1. The arrow indicates that S0109's wh-question comes from the Unknowing and is addressed towards the interlocutor's Knowing .....	53
---	----

Figure 2. Origin and destination of S0109's question and S0052's first TCU. The parallel arrows show that the first TCU, coming from the Knowing position, is an attempt to give an answer-response type to S0109's question, i.e., to align with S0109's expectations .....	55
Figure 3. Differently from the first TCU (Figure 2), this second TCU comes from the Unknowing position, not the Knowing. The arrows are no longer parallel, they now form an acute angle that indicates misalignment.....	56
Figure 4.1. S0052's third TCU read as a (dubitative) declarative question coming from the Believing position. The arrows form a more acute angle than the one in Figure 3, indicating partial alignment.....	58
Figure 4.2. S0052's third TCU read as a (dubitative) polar interrogative coming from the Not Knowing Whether position. Also in this case, the arrows form an angle that is more acute than the one in Figure 3 and indicates partial alignment .....	49
Figure 5. This Figure is similar to Figure 2, since both share the same epistemic positions and alignment. The parallel arrows show that this TCU is an answer-response type aligning with S0109's expectations .....	61
Figure 6. This Figure and the previous Figure 5 show that the whole fourth TCU (TCU 4.1 and 4.2) conveys the same epistemic positions and alignment.....	63
Figure 7. TCU 5, being a mitigated declarative sentence, comes from the Believing position (partial alignment, as in Figure 4.1).....	63
Figure 8. Overview of S0052's six TCUs and four epistemic shifts. The third TCU has been illustrated as coming from either B or NKW.....	64

## Chapter 4

Figure 1. Question designs of alternative questions and their type-conforming answers .....	91
Figure 2. Origin and twofold destination of S0018's alternative question.....	95
Figure 3. Origin and destination of S0018's alternative question and S0049's first TCU. This latter is a non-answer response that misaligns with the question (wider angle).....	97
Figure 4. Origin and destination of S0018's alternative question and S0049's second TCU. This latter is a non-answer response that partially aligns with the question (acute angle).....	98
Figure 5. The respondent's epistemic shift from NKW to B, from misalignment to partial alignment.....	99

Figure 6. Origin and destination of S0049's alternative question and S0018's third TCU: this latter consists of an explicit question NKW→K (continuous arrow) and an implicit answer K→NKW ( <i>I prefer coffee</i> , dotted arrow). The intersection of the two continuous arrows indicates that a question is answered by another question. The dotted arrow, being parallel to the continuous one, signals that S0018's implicit answer is in fact an answer-response that totally aligns with S0049's question .....	100
Figure 7. Origin and destination of S0049's alternative question and S0018's answer .....	100
Figure 8. Origin and destination of S0049's or not question and S0018's answer-response.....	102

## Chapter 5

Figure 1. A polar interrogative read as neutral (information seeking) comes from the Not Knowing Whether pole of the Uncertain position and expects either a yes or a no as a response.....	110
Figure 2. A polar interrogative read as non-neutral (confirmation seeking) comes from the Believing pole of the Uncertain position and expects a confirmative response of the supposition advanced in the question .	111
Figure 3. Questioner's Unknowing and Uncertain position, question types, response types and social actions. While wh-questions come from the Unknowing position, alternative questions and the three sub-types of polar questions come from the Uncertain position. All questions are situated in different points along the epistemic continuum that goes from the Unknowing to the Uncertain position, this latter ranging from the Not Knowing Whether to the Believing pole .....	112
Figure 4. S0007's first polar interrogative read as confirmative .....	117
Figure 5. S0007's second polar interrogative read as informative (NKW→K) .....	120
Figure 6. S0007's second polar interrogative read as confirmative (B→K) .....	121
Figure 7. S0315's first polar interrogative read as confirmative and S0255's answer-response .....	123
Figure 8. S0315's second polar interrogative read as confirmative and S0255's disconfirming answer .....	124
Figure 9. S0315's second polar interrogative read as informative and S0255's negative answer.....	124



## Chapter 6

Figure 1. Origin and destination of S0041's question and S0084's response: epistemic alignment and content agreement .....	127
Figure 2. Origin and destination of S0493's question and S0492's and S0496's responses: epistemic alignment but content disagreement (total disagreement in one case, partial disagreement in the other) ..	132

## Chapter 7

Figure 1. Origin and destination of S0541's declarative question and S0540's answer. The parallel arrows show that the latter is a response aligning with the question .....	136
--	-----

## Chapter 8

Figure 1. The Unknowing continuum within the whole epistemic continuum .....	140
Figure 2. Origin and destination of S0517's questions and S0518's answer .....	149

## Chapter 9

Figure 1. The answer to the wh-question comes from the Believing position to which the question is addressed .....	158
Figure 2. S0441's tag and wh-question and S0439's answer .....	159
Figure 3. S0687's wh-question ( $U \rightarrow B$ ) and S0689's response: the continuous arrow refers to the lexicalised answer <i>god knows</i> ( $K \rightarrow U$ ), the dotted one refers to the implicit assertion <i>I don't know</i> ( $U \rightarrow U$ ) ....	160
Figure 4. S0192's wh-question ( $U \rightarrow B$ ) and S0198's answer shifting from Unknowing (misalignment) to Believing (alignment) .....	161
Figure 5. S0144's wh-question ( $U \rightarrow B$ ) and S0024's answer shifting from Knowing (misalignment) to Believing (alignement) .....	163
Figure 6. S0420's wh-question and S0366's answer .....	164
Figure 7. S0529's wh-question .....	169
Figure 8. S0529's alternative question .....	169
Figure 9. S0529's epistemic shift from U to NKW .....	170
Figure 10. S0530's answer shifting from Unknowing or Not Knowing Whether (1a and 1b) to Believing (2) to Unknowing (3) to Knowing (4) .....	171
Figure 11. The complex epistemic dynamics involved in S0529's questions and S0530's answers .....	171

Figure 12. S0092's wh- and alternative questions and S0018's answer to both of them.....	173
Figure 13. S0493's tag questions and S0492's answers (lines 5 and 7): epistemic alignment but content disagreement .....	178

## PART 3

### Chapter 10

Figure 1. Dubitative questions: alternative questions and neutral polar interrogatives shift from left to right while non-neutral polar interrogatives, tag and declarative questions shift from right to left....	200
Figure 2. Distribution of question types including <i>maybe</i> .....	203

### Chapter 11

Figure 1. The continuous arrow refers to the plain polar interrogatives <i>Is that a reason for despair?</i> / <i>Isn't the answer obvious?</i> and the dotted one to their implicit assertions <i>Surely that is not a reason for despair</i> / <i>Surely the answer is obvious</i> .....	212
Figure 2. The continuous arrow refers to the plain wh-questions <i>What difference does it make?</i> / <i>Who doesn't know?</i> and the dotted one to the implicit assertions <i>It makes no difference</i> / <i>Everybody knows</i> ....	213
Figure 3. Thomas' polar interrogative read as expressing an opinion ( <i>I think that you put...</i> ) and seeking confirmation, and Clinton's disconfirming answer ( <i>I do not think so</i> ) .....	218
Figure 4. S0046's wh-question (continuous arrow) and implicit assertion (dotted arrow) .....	223
Figure 5. S0519's rhetorical question (continuous arrow) and implicit assertion (dotted arrow) + S0520's response .....	226
Figure 6. S0068's rhetorical question: indicative in the wh-question (continuous arrow) and conditional in the implicit assertion (dotted arrow).....	227
Figure 7. S0496's rhetorical question and S0497's response .....	228
Figure 8. Implicit assertions in rhetorical questions can convey the Believing, not only the Knowing position .....	220

### Chapter 12

Figure 1. Percentages of words uttered by each interlocutor .....	239
Figure 2. Percentages referring to S0052's epistemic positions .....	241

Figure 3. Percentages referring to S0109's epistemic positions .....	243
Figure 4. Percentages referring to S0052's + S0109's epistemic positions.....	244
Figure 5. Percentages of S0052's and S0109's epistemic positions .....	246
Figure 6. Percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's turns .....	249
Figure 7. Percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0109's turns .....	250
Figure 8. Percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's plus S0109's turns.....	252
Figure 9. Percentages referring to the epistemic destination of S0052's and S0109's turns.....	253

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Figure 1. Questioner's Unknowing and Uncertain position, question types, response types and social actions. While wh-questions come from the Unknowing position, alternative questions and the three sub-types of polar questions come from the Uncertain position. All questions are situated in different points along the epistemic continuum that goes from the Unknowing to the Uncertain position, this latter ranging from the Not Knowing Whether to the Believing pole.....	266
Figure 2. Epistemic gradient (Heritage and Raymond, 2012: 181): Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 represent respectively wh-question, polar interrogative, tag and declarative question.....	267
Figure 3. Our Unknowing (U) position and the NKW/B poles of the Uncertain position superimposed onto Heritage's K- position. ....	267
Figure 4. The Unknowing continuum within the whole epistemic continuum .....	269
Figure 5. Questions may come from either the Unknowing or Not Knowing Whether or Believing (light grey) and be directed at either the Knowing or Believing (dark grey) .....	274
Figure 6. Dubitative questions: alternative questions and neutral polar interrogatives shift from left to right while non-neutral polar interrogatives, tag and declarative questions shift from right to left ...	277
Figure 7. Vertical representation of the four epistemic positions .....	282
Figure 8. Horizontal representation of the epistemic continuum.....	282
Figure 9. Circular representation of the epistemic continuum.....	283
Figure 10. Alignment (parallel arrows) .....	284

Figure 11.1. The answer is read as a (dubitative) declarative question coming from the Believing position: partial alignment, acute angle ...	276
Figure 11.2. The answer is read as a (dubitative) polar interrogative coming from the Not Knowing Whether position: partial alignment, the angle is slightly wider than the one in Figure 11.1 .....	277
Figure 12. Misalignment: the angle is much wider than those in Figures 11.1 and 11.2.....	285
Figure 13. Alignment (parallel arrows). The dotted arrow refers to the implicit answer <i>I prefer coffee</i> .....	287
Figure 14. Partial alignment (acute angle).....	287
Figure 15. Misalignment (more open acute angle).....	288
Figure 16. Misalignment/non-answer response (the acute angle is more open than that in Figure 15) .....	290
Figure 17. Uninformed questioner and informed answerer .....	292
Figure 18. Epistemic seesaw: the uninformed speaker/information-searcher sits at the lower position (1) while the informed speaker/information-holder sits at the upper position (2) .....	293
Figure 19. Epistemic seesaw: the speakers' roles and positions on the board change: the information-holder now becomes the information-searcher (3) and goes down (dotted arrow) while the information-searcher becomes the information-holder (4) and goes up (dotted arrow).....	294
Figure 20. Epistemic seesaw: the speakers' roles and positions on the board change again, going back to the initial ones in Figure 18 .....	294

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Portions of Chapters 3-7 and 10 of the present book have already been published in the following two papers:

1. Riccioni, Ilaria, Ramona Bongelli, Gill Philip, and Andrzej Zuczkowski. 2018. "Dubitative Questions and Epistemic Stance." *Lingua* 207: 71-95;
2. Bongelli, Ramona, Ilaria Riccioni, Laura Vincze, and Andrzej Zuczkowski. 2018. "Questions and Epistemic Stance: Some Examples from Italian Conversations." *Ampersand* 5: 29-44.

We thank the Publishers for permission to reprint those portions in this manuscript.

We also thank our friend Klaus Hölker, Leibniz Universität Hannover, for his precious comments on the logic underlying the epistemic expressions.



# INTRODUCTION

This book focuses on the relationship between questions and epistemic stance, specifically between wh-, alternative and polar questions (= polar interrogatives, tag and declarative questions) and the epistemic positions those questions come from and are directed at.

The main theoretical framework is given by our KUB model (acronym of Knowing, Unknowing, Believing) and Conversational Analysis, in particular Stivers, Enfield and Levinson's (2010) study on questions and responses and John Heritage's model of epistemic stance (Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Heritage 2012a, 2012b).

As is well known, questions have different functions, can perform different actions (*speech acts* in Austin's (1960) terminology; *social actions* in the Conversational Analysis terminology). The most frequent are (i) request for information and (ii) request for confirmation, so we mainly focus on those questions whose social action is either of the two.

## 1. The KUB model

In a previous book, *Epistemic stance in dialogue: Knowing, Unknowing, Believing* (Zuczkowski, Bongelli and Riccioni 2017), we extensively presented our model of epistemic stance, according to which speakers can communicate each single piece of information either as *known/certain* or *uncertain* or *unknown*. They can of course shift from one position to another not only in each of their turns but even in one and the same turn.

From the KUB perspective, communication may be seen as originating in one of the three epistemic positions of a speaker and being directed at another of the three in the interlocutor who, in turn, can reply from any of the three epistemic positions, by aligning fully, partially, or by misaligning with the speaker's epistemic expectations.

In that book, when describing in detail the three epistemic positions and their lexical and grammatical markers, we touched upon the relationship between epistemic stance and questions (Chapter 3: 66-70), applying our KUB model to questions and arguing that different types of questions convey a questioner's different epistemic positions, either Unknowing or Uncertain.

At around the same time, we published a study (Vincze et al. 2016) in which the KUB model was applied to a particular type of question, which we called *ignorance-unmasking questions*, in a French political debate.

We continued to explore this topic and published other two studies, on questions in English (Riccioni et al. 2018), and in Italian (Bongelli et al. 2018).

Since then on, our attention has focused on (i) alternative questions, (ii) questions addressed toward the Uncertain position and (iii) rhetorical questions, to the point where we have amassed enough material to write a book-length account of the relationship between questions-responses and epistemic stance from the point of view of our KUB model.

## **2. Stivers, Enfield and Levinson's (2010) study on questions and responses**

As far as questions-responses are concerned, our main point of reference and comparison is a special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* edited by Stivers, Enfield and Levinson (2010). This special issue, dedicated to how speakers of ten different languages *design* and *use* questions and responses, presented a qualitative description and quantitative documentation of question-response pairs from a Conversation Analysis perspective (Stivers 2010).

The *definitions* of the question types under analysis in our book, as well as the notions of *question design*, *social action*, *preference organization* (type conforming and non-conforming answers), and *types of responses* (answer-response, non-answer response, non-response), are all taken from the *coding scheme* for question-response sequences (Stivers and Enfield 2010) that was developed and used by the team of ten researchers (each working on a different language) in the papers published in that special issue (Stivers, Enfield and Levinson 2010).

Such notions, well known and established in the literature, allow us to demonstrate something new concerning the relationship between questions and epistemic stance, i.e., to determine and specify which of the three different epistemic positions (Knowing, Unknowing and Uncertain) give rise to different types of questions and responses.

In order to test the theoretical points raised in our book against authentic language data and to subject these latter to quantitative analysis, the American English corpus analysed by Stivers (2010) not being available to other researchers, we chose to use the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (Love, Hawtin and Hardie 2017), the most recently-compiled as well as the largest existing corpus of spoken British English (of any variety).



### 3. John Heritage's model of epistemic stance

In the field of Conversation Analysis, the main frame of reference on epistemic stance is that of John Heritage and colleagues' studies (Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Heritage 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014; Stivers, Mondada and Steensig 2011; Heritage and Raymond 2012, Mondada 2013; Hayano 2014).

Heritage makes a distinction between *epistemic status* and *epistemic stance* and, regarding *questions*, he introduces the concept of *epistemic asymmetry*, claiming that each different type of question—such as wh-questions, polar interrogatives, tag and declarative questions—establishes a different gap in knowledge, i.e., a distinctive *epistemic gradient*, between a *less knowledgeable* questioner (K-) who lacks a piece of information and a *more knowledgeable* respondent (K+) who has or is supposed to have that information.

### 4. Aims of the book

Although we generally agree with Heritage's distinction between *epistemic status* and *epistemic stance* as well as his notion of *epistemic gradient*, we argue that his model including a *less knowledgeable questioner* (K-) and a *more knowledgeable respondent* (K+) could be further developed, following our KUB model, by introducing an explicit distinction within both the K- and K+ positions, as follows:

- (1) within the K- position, a less knowledgeable questioner who asks a question because *s/he does not know* a piece of information (*Where is Ulrich?*), should be distinguished from a less knowledgeable questioner who asks a question because *s/he is uncertain about* a piece of information, i.e., *s/he does not know whether* a piece of information is true (*Is Ulrich at home?*), or *s/he believes that* a piece of information is more likely to be true than not (*Ulrich is at home, isn't he?*).

In other words, we aim to show that questions do not come from an undifferentiated K- position but from two distinct epistemic positions: the *Unknowing* and the *Uncertain*.

Wh-questions (*Where is Ulrich?*) arise from the Unknowing position since they express a *lack of knowledge* (= un-knowledge) concerning the identity of a wh-word (*who, what, where*, etc.), while alternative questions (*Is Ulrich at home or skiing?*), polar interrogatives (*Is Ulrich at home?*), tags (*Ulrich is at home, isn't he?*), and declarative questions (*Ulrich is at home?*) arise from the Uncertain position since they

express a *lack of certainty* (= un-certainty) concerning the truth value either of one complete proposition, as is the case in polar questions, or of two (or more) propositions, as is the case in alternative questions. In this sense, wh-questions are *unknowing questions*, while the other four types of question are *uncertain questions*.

- (2) We also aim to show that uncertain questions convey different degrees of uncertainty, and are thus located at different points along the epistemic continuum of the Uncertain position which ranges between two poles: the Not Knowing Whether (the maximum uncertainty) and the Believing (the minimum uncertainty).

Alternative questions and *neutral* polar interrogatives, which advance a doubt, are closer to the Not Knowing Whether pole and for this reason can be called Not-Knowing-Whether-questions, while *non-neutral* polar interrogatives, tag and declarative questions, which advance a supposition, are closer to the Believing pole and for this reason can be called Believing-questions.

We agree with Heritage that each different type of question (wh-questions included) establishes a different epistemic gradient between the questioner and the respondent, but the *less knowledgeable* questioner (K-) in his model corresponds in our model to a questioner who moves between three different epistemic positions, the Unknowing, the Not Knowing Whether and the Believing.

- (3) According to the KUB model, a distinction analogous to that made within the questioner's K- position (see point 1 above) should be made within the respondent's K+ position, since not all questions are addressed toward the respondent's Knowing position: they can also be addressed toward his/her Believing position, i.e., to a respondent who is not expected to know the answer but is expected to be able to advance a hypothesis, supposition, opinion and so on.

The question *where is Ulrich?* in this respect is very different from *where could Ulrich be?* Both questions come from the Unknowing position but the former is directed at someone who is supposed to *know* where Ulrich is, while the latter is directed at someone who *cannot know* but only *suppose* where Ulrich is.

In this case, questions and answers (when these latter align with the former) concern what the respondent *believes*, not what s/he *knows*: s/he is supposed to *know nothing*, i.e., neither *more* nor *less* than the questioner.

Our third main aim is thus to show that questions are not addressed to an undifferentiated K+ position but to two distinct epistemic positions, either the *Knowing* or the *Believing*.

## 5. The Uncertain position

As an overall result of our study, question-answer sequences are seen as originating either from the questioner's Unknowing position or from his/her Uncertain position (either Not Knowing Whether or Believing) and as being directed not only towards the respondent's Knowing position but also to the Believing pole of the Uncertain.

The inclusion of the Uncertain position is the main difference between Heritage's model and our own. Indeed, in our view, epistemic stance is not only a matter of knowing more or less (K+ or K-) than the interlocutor (in Heritage's terminology), i.e., of *Knowing* and *Un-knowing* (in our terminology), but may also involve *Not Knowing Whether* and *Believing*.

The epistemic expressions *Not Knowing Whether* and *Believing* refer to linguistic phenomena that are different from those referred to by *Knowing* and *Unknowing*. They refer instead to a third epistemic position, the Uncertain, which has an epistemic status of its own and which is separate from Knowing and Unknowing.

## 6. Further aims

Given its relevance, the Uncertain position is also investigated in relation to *dubitative* and *rhetorical* questions.

*Dubitative questions* include a lexical marker of uncertainty such as the adverb *maybe* (Stivers and Enfield 2010), for example *is Ulrich maybe at home?*

We initially ask ourselves why alternative and polar questions may be dubitative while wh-questions cannot (*\*Where is maybe Ulrich?*). We find that the answer lies in the different epistemic positions such questions come from.

Wh-questions cannot include *maybe* since they convey a lack of knowledge: the unknown element cannot be cast into doubt, because it is presupposed to be true (*Ulrich is somewhere*). The definite but unspecified element marked by the wh-word does not allow for un-certainty, only un-knowledge.

In contrast, polar and alternative questions express a lack of certainty concerning the truthfulness of the proposition(s) advanced (one in polar questions, two or more in alternative questions). Their epistemic design is

already uncertain at the grammatical level; for this reason they can include *maybe*, since this adverb is perfectly compatible with the uncertainty already encoded in the plain question form.

Secondly, we wonder what effect, if any, the presence of *maybe* in polar and alternative questions might have on the questioner's epistemic commitment when such questions are compared with their corresponding plain forms. In other words, are dubitative questions more or less uncertain than plain questions?

We will see that, when added to questions coming from the Not Knowing Whether pole where uncertainty is maximal, *maybe* mitigates what it finds there: it finds no certainty, only uncertainty, and as a result it mitigates the uncertainty: such questions are thus *less uncertain* than their plain forms.

On the contrary, when added to questions coming from the Believing pole where the degree of certainty is higher than that of uncertainty, *maybe* mitigates the degree of certainty (the proportion of certainty and uncertainty still remaining in favour of the former), thus these types of dubitative questions are *more uncertain* than their plain forms.

*Rhetorical questions* are asked and understood not as information-seeking but as conveying information to the addressee, specifically a *strong assertion of the opposite polarity* to that of the question (Bolinger 1957, Horn 1978, Quirk et al. 1985, Koshik 2005): *what difference does it make?* is equivalent to the negative assertion *it makes no difference*. This is the traditional view in the literature.

In terms of the KUB model, this means that the assertion implicit in the question conveys the Knowing position. But is it really true that rhetorical questions *always* convey *strong* reverse polarity assertions?

We claim that rhetorical questions featuring a modal conditional can be read as conveying reverse polarity assertions of *mild* strength, i.e., *mitigated* assertions coming from the Believing pole of the Uncertain position, i.e., from a stance which is *less strong* than the Knowing.

Even though the *epistemic strength* of the assertion is downgraded, such questions can still function as rhetorical. *Who would have dreamt of putting this on here?* means *nobody would have dreamt to put this on here*.

The conditional in such questions is not restricted to the meaning of the question posed, but is part of the implicit assertion itself. As a consequence, the implicit assertion cannot originate in the Knowing pole, since Knowing cannot be expressed by conditionals.

Throughout Chapters 3-12, examples from the Spoken BNC2014 are analysed in order to back up our claims with corpus-based evidence.

The initial analysis is *qualitative*: the speakers' epistemic positions are identified by examining the evidential and epistemic markers, both lexical and grammatical, used in the conversational sequences.

This qualitative analysis allows to understand the epistemic dynamics among interlocutors in terms of negotiation, alignment, partial alignment, misalignment, etc.

The last chapter of the book shows how to perform a *quantitative* analysis of the interlocutors' epistemic positions in a dialogue.

The quantitative analysis of any dialogue is based on its previous qualitative analysis and consists in singling out the number of words dominated by their respective evidential and epistemic markers, namely the *scope* (Quirk et al.1985) of such markers, in order to identify how much Known, Unknown and Uncertain there is in each turn and its turn constructional units (TCUs), in each sequence (adjacency pairs, triplets, etc.), in a whole dialogue and also, respectively, for each interlocutor.

In the dialogue analysed in the last chapter we quantify the distribution of Known, Unknown and Uncertain among interlocutors not only regarding the epistemic *origin* but also the epistemic *destination* of their words.

In this way we can draw up a complete quantitative map of the epistemic stance involved in the dialogue as a whole.

## 7. Plan of the book

The book is divided into three parts. In Part 1 (Chapters 1-2) we describe the theoretical framework, methodology and main aims of our research.

The KUB model is presented in a slightly different version from that provided in our previous work (Zuczkowski, Bongelli and Riccioni 2017), in that the difference within the Uncertain position between the Not Knowing Whether and Believing poles is now made more explicit.

To avoid unnecessary confusion, we have not changed the acronym KUB, but stress that the letter B refers not only to Believing but also to Not Knowing Whether, i.e., the other pole of the Uncertain position, as the figures with circles and arrows will show in the next chapters.

In Part 2 (Chapters 3-9) we try to achieve our three main aims, i.e., to show that:

- (1) questions come from two different epistemic positions (the Unknowing and the Uncertain, this latter being further subdivided into the Not Knowing Whether and the Believing poles);
- (2) they are addressed toward two different positions (the Knowing and the Believing);

- (3) they sit at different points along the epistemic continuum which goes from the Unknowing position to the Believing pole of the Uncertain position.

Particular attention is devoted to *alternative questions* and *polar interrogatives*. In the linguistic literature, few studies have examined the relationship between alternative questions and epistemic stance. The best known type of alternative question in the literature, for obvious reasons, is the paradigmatic one in which two alternatives are lexicalised (e.g., *did you have caesareans or natural births?*). Thus Chapter 4 presents a study that we carried out analysing 611 alternative questions extracted from the Spoken BNC2014 in order to find out more about their possible linguistic design as well as to have quantitative data to refer to.

Three research questions are answered: (1) how many alternatives are present in each question (two, three, more?), (2) how such alternatives are expressed from a lexical and grammatical point of view, (3) how such questions are answered.

Four types of linguistic design (*complete, incomplete, indefinite, negative*) and two main epistemic designs are found. Negative alternative questions, i.e., *or not* questions, though less frequent than the other three types, are also interesting from a theoretical point of view, since they are closely related to polar interrogatives.

As for polar interrogatives (Chapter 5), in the linguistic literature there are two contrasting views on their design, that originate in the work of H.O. Coleman (1914) and D. Bolinger (1978) respectively. The former suggested that a polar interrogative is nothing but an incomplete alternative question in which the second alternative (*or not?*) has been suppressed and remains implicit, not lexicalised (we call this type of questions *neutral polar interrogatives*). Bolinger instead claims that polar interrogatives advance a *hypothesis* for confirmation (we call this type of questions *non-neutral polar interrogatives*).

The dispute between Coleman and Bolinger is not idle, since the different ways of reading the linguistic design of polar interrogatives reverberate in the type of *social action* (information vs confirmation seeking) assigned to them and thus in their *epistemic design* as well.

The two different viewpoints on polar interrogatives may well be due to their linguistic design, which (differently from the other question types under analysis) usually gives no lexical or grammatical indication of whether a hypothesis is being advanced or not. The question design of polar interrogatives therefore appears somewhat ambiguous, in that it seems to be open to both Coleman's and Bolinger's readings.