Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English
Questions and Epistemic Stance in Contemporary Spoken British English

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


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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* (= uncertainty) 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 I (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);
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.