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Epistemic constructions at work. A corpus study on spoken Italian dialogues[☆]

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Abstract

This article describes a theoretical framework for modelling the epistemic constructions occurring in Italian spoken dialogues. Having assessed the traditional notion of commitment used in the literature on epistemicity on spoken data, we propose to revisit it within the framework of a dynamic, interactional, communitarian semantics. Having refined the functional definition of the domain, we single out, through a corpus-driven methodology, the functional and formal properties that characterize epistemic constructions. On this ground, we define an annotation scheme for epistemicity. We apply such a scheme to a large sample of Italian dialogic spoken data. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the annotated corpus, we start to sketch out a new grammar of Italian dialogic epistemic constructions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The general objective

This article describes a theoretical framework – established through a corpus driven procedure – for modelling the formal and functional properties of the epistemic constructions occurring in Italian spoken dialogues.

We borrow the term ‘epistemicity’ from [Boye \(2012\)](#) to refer to the linguistic category that expresses the validation of the truth-value of a linguistic representation. Epistemicity is comprised of the two subcategories of evidential justification and epistemic support: evidential justification is the mention of the evidential source that justifies the validation of the truth of a linguistic representation, epistemic support is the indication of the degree of certainty for the validation of the truth of a linguistic representation.

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In our perspective, epistemicity is not only the supercategory comprised of epistemic support and evidential justification, but also one of the subcategories of the more general category of modality. Modality is defined by Gosselin (2010) as the category that expresses the validation of a linguistic representation. A linguistic representation can be validated under different respects by different subtypes of modality: the aesthetic value of the state of affairs represented is validated by appreciative modality; the moral value of the state of affairs represented is validated by axiological modality; the will that the state of affairs represented be realized is validated by volitional modality; the opportunity that an agent realize the state of affairs represented is validated by deontic modality; the truth-value of the proposition¹ represented is validated by epistemicity.²

1.2. Motivations

The modelling described in this article was developed within the framework of the annotation of the Modal Corpus. The Modal Corpus consists of three equivalent resources of English, French and Italian dialogues drawn, respectively, from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (for English), the ESLO Corpus, plus the OTG Corpus and the Accueil UBS Corpus (for French), the VoLip Corpus (for Italian) annotated for epistemicity and freely distributed (<http://modal.msh-vdl.fr>). We annotated about 20,000 words per language for a total amount of 2824 epistemic constructions (833 for the English Corpus, 1271 for the French Corpus, 720 for the Italian Corpus).

The present article was written when only the Italian resource was entirely annotated and it focusses therefore only on Italian data.

We decided to build the Modal Corpus because we deemed it crucial to study epistemicity on data and specifically on spoken dialogic data. The body of knowledge established in Corpus Linguistics shows, indeed, that, far from being a mere “performance” phenomenon, language usage is endowed with its own grammar, a grammar that needs to be studied and modelled. Studies conducted on spoken language have shown, moreover, that spoken language, and in particular spoken interactions, constitutes a privileged vantage point for the observation of language usage. Indeed, the relevance of spoken interactions for language suggests that a model of language established through the observation of spoken interaction would be more general and comprehensive than models of language that do not include this dimension. If this is true for the study of any linguistic notion, this is particularly true for the study of epistemicity. Spoken interactional situations are situations in which the speaker has a relation of contiguity with her own speech and the contiguity between the speaker and her speech is a privileged situation for the emergence of epistemicity.

1.3. Approach

In order to attain the objective of modelling epistemicity in spoken dialogues, we adopted a (i) functional (ii) corpus-driven approach. This means two things. (i) We decided not to study the properties of a predetermined list of epistemic constructions; rather, we sought to provide a theoretically meaningful definition of the functional domain of our analysis, i. e., epistemicity, and we then identified in corpora the constructions that express this domain. (ii) Both the definition of the domain of analysis and the identification of its relevant properties were established incrementally through progressive refinements of the traditional theories of epistemicity in the light of corpus data. It was only after having identified our observables through data that we applied a corpus-based methodology, by studying their distribution in the corpus.

In concrete terms, the analysis started from an assessment of the definition of commitment, a key notion for the identification of epistemicity in cognitive-functional approaches to modality. We first tested the definition of commitment used in the literature on epistemicity on corpus data. This led us to propose a reappraisal of the notion of epistemic commitment within the framework of a dynamic, interactional, communitarian semantics. This reappraisal allowed us to broaden the scope of epistemic constructions to include some epistemic constructions typical of spoken dialogues (section 2).

Having refined the functional definition of the domain, we singled out the functional and formal properties that characterize these constructions through the observation of a small data sample (sections 3 through 6). This enabled the development of an annotation scheme that we applied to a larger sample of dialogic spoken data drawn from the VoLip Corpus (section 7). Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the annotated corpus, we are now in a position to sketch a new grammar of Italian dialogic epistemic constructions (section 8).

¹ Please note that we claim that epistemicity validates propositions, whereas other types of modality validate states of affairs. A full explanation of this distinction is in Pietrandrea (2005) and Boye (2012), among others.

² For the sake of terminological clarity, I will use henceforth the adjective “modal” to refer to what is related to the whole supercategory of modality, the adjective “epistemic” to refer to what is generally related to epistemicity, the adjective “evidential” to refer to what is specifically related to evidentiality and the noun phrase modifier “epistemic support” to refer to what is specifically related to epistemic support.

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