

Use of Some Features of Epistemic Modality Among Arab Men and Women

Dr. Mahmoud Ali Kanakri*

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□ ABSTRACT □

The present paper focuses on a very rich and complex area of grammar related to epistemic modals. It endeavors to account for the differences in occurrence of certain epistemic modal forms in the speech of Jordanian men and women. Some researchers maintain that epistemic forms signal women's lack of confidence and assertiveness. The present author found that some epistemic forms had higher frequency in men's speech to which the above account cannot be accurate. Men were found using more of 'I think' and 'I mean' and as such forms are associated with the first person singular pronoun, they indicate that men care more about the clarification of their speech and could also reveal their superior social status. However, other epistemic forms that women use express their social status. It was also found that some epistemic words are used for decoration of one's style of speech, in the sense of adding variety to one's speech.

*Associate Prof., English Dept., Faculty of Art, Mu'ta University, Kerak, Jordan.

استخدام بعض مظاهر الشروط المعرفية بين الرجال والنساء العرب

الدكتور محمود كناكري*

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□ الملخص □

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة ظاهرة لغوية بـ epistemic modality حيث أظهرت الدراسات اللغوية وجود فرق كبير بين الرجال والنساء في استخدام هذه الأشكال اللغوية، واستخدم الباحث المنهج الكمي والكيفي لجمع معلوماته وتحليلها وتفسيرها، وصنف الأوضاع اللغوية إلى ثلاثة أوضاع حتى يمكن التعرف على زمان ومكان استخدام هذه الأشكال اللغوية. واستخلص الباحث أن كلا من الرجال والنساء يستخدم epistemic modality مع وجود فرق في درجة وعدد هذه الأشكال، وتوصل أيضاً إلى أن استخدام هذه الأشكال اللغوية مرتبط بعوامل اجتماعية مثل الجنس وموضوع الحديث والوضع الاجتماعي. ولاحظ الباحث أيضاً وجود تفاوت في عدد هذه الأشكال اللغوية بين الرجال والنساء، وتبين أن استخدام هذه الأشكال اللغوية يمكن أن يضيف نوعاً من الجودة أو التغيير في أسلوب الحديث .

*استاذ مشارك في قسم اللغة الانكليزية -كلية الآداب - جامعة مؤتة/ الكرك - الأردن

Introduction:

'Epistemic' modals are often defined as terms that are used to indicate the "speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed in the utterance".³⁰ The term can also be interpreted as signaling the degree of the speaker's understanding or knowledge.³¹ Palmer (1990:51) states that epistemic modals are used to make judgement about whether something is possible or not. He cites *may* as an example. He adds (p. 52) that epistemic modals are subjective, in the sense that 'the epistemic judgement rests with the speaker'. Coates (1983:131) defines *may* and *might* as those words that express 'the speaker's lack of confidence in the proposition expressed'. Halliday (1994:354) calls these words 'metaphorical variants' of modals because the proposition does not include the matrix verb *think* as in (I think that it is so), but it is indeed in the embedded clause 'it is so'.³² Words such as *may*, *sort of*, *think*, *guess*, *just*, *mean* are often given as examples of this type of modality. Such words are manipulated by speakers, mainly women as the pervading belief says, as hedging devices to protect one's face.³³ The above statements advocate the position of many semanticists who emphasize the fact that words cannot be merely descriptive. They may further carry expressive connotations. Thus a speaker's choice of a certain word could indicate a lot about his attitudes, views and matters of knowledge and belief.³⁴

It is believed that women, rather than men, resort to such forms due to their lack of certainty and confidence and to their subordinate position in society. Such a view has its reflection in others' work; Lakoff (1973) notices that women's style of speech is deficient in the sense that it lacks authority and assertiveness. A common stereotype is that speech events associated with women are not viewed as legitimate objects of study. On the other hand, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) believe that the term 'women's language' is itself a misnomer. Sub-cultural theorists, such as Jones (1980), believe that women's style of speech is different and may indeed possess virtues of its own. Such theorists maintain that miscommunication and interactional conflicts may arise due to the different subcultures men and women belong to.

The present paper aims at scrutinizing the occurrence of epistemic modal forms in the speech of Jordanian Arabic men and women and endeavors to offer a reasonable account of such occurrence. To my knowledge this seems to be the first study that handles epistemic modals in Arabic.

Epistemic modal forms perform various functions.³⁵ They are used to 'mitigate the force of an utterance in order to respect addressee's face needs'. Secondly, epistemic modals can also be used to save the speaker's face when he/she is uncertain of what he says and thus 'can retreat from the proposition expressed there if it turned out to be unacceptable'.³⁶ Thirdly, epistemic modals are triggered when the topic of discussion is sensitive, such as talking about politics and marriage. Fourthly, epistemic modal forms can be used as facilitator, in the sense of encouraging addressees to participate in a discussion. Question tags can also function as epistemic modals when they signal the speaker's lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition of his speech.

The Data:

³⁰. Coates (1988:113). See also Quirk et al. (1985:219-220) who used the same term and also another term, which is 'extrinsic modality'

³¹. *ibid*, p. 51.

³². I will maintain the use of 'epistemic modals' in this paper because this term is more common than 'metaphors of modality'.

³³. See Brown and Levinson (1978).

³⁴. See Lyons (1977:63,793).

³⁵. See Coates (1988:114) and Coates (1987:129) for a detailed discussion of these functions.

³⁶. Coates, (1987)

Feminists always complain about the methods employed in handling topics that pertain to feminist research. They have severely criticized the Quantitative Method while they support the use of the Qualitative Method, which they think can better describe women and matters related to them. There are still some feminists who propound the use of the two methods together.³⁷ In the present paper I have employed the two methods.

Nine students were employed to collect relevant data on epistemic modal forms. The collected data covers three settings: single-women group, single-men group, and a mixed group of men and women. The main objective of having three different conversational situations is to find out whether the participation of the other sex in speech affects the frequency of occurrences of epistemic modal forms. For explicative purposes, I will refer to the first situation as **Situation One** and to the second situation as **Situation Two** and to the third situation as **Situation Three**.

Situation One covered the recorded speech of some female friends in one of my informant's living room. There were eight participants. Their ages ranged from 18-25. The participants were talking about various topics, such as, wedding parties, marriage, new ways of establishing friendship and new restaurants.

Situation Two included a recording of men's speech (here school teachers) over a span of six weeks during the months of October and November of 1997. During the recording these informants were teaching in two different schools for boys in a small town in the south of Jordan (Tafilah). My informant was able to record the speech of these teachers as he used to teach in the two schools. Twenty of such teachers were from the north of Jordan, and due to this, they were forced to stay in a lodging with our informant. This was an advantage because my informant managed to record the teachers' speech at school where the situation was formal (formal meeting) and at the lodging where the situation was more relaxing (informal). The topics discussed at school were relevant to the school system: educational problems, teachers' duties, while in the informal situation the teachers were talking about TV programs, political issues, cooking and eating (since they were single), buying and selling, money and football.

Situation Three covered conversation of both sexes, men and women, mainly family members discussing family affairs, the World Football Cup, the completion of a family house, cooking, importance of computers to family life and other topics. The size of the family varies from one place to another, but we could say that the average number is between 5-6.

Speech in the three situations was recorded. Sometimes the data was collected by paying attention to a conversation between speakers in different milieus, such as while waiting for the lecturer, in vehicles, and while watching TV. In all the speech settings above speakers were not informed that their speech was recorded or listened to. The primary goal was to collect data where epistemic modal forms are naturally and simultaneously used.

Analysis of the Data:

In Situation One and by focusing on one conversation I found that the frequency of epistemic modal forms is as the table shows below. Some epistemic forms, such as I mean and just, have high frequency, while other forms such as well and sort of have lower frequency.

Table (1): The frequency of epistemic modals in female groups while conversing alone about friendship

epistemic modality	Frequency	topic	total time
I mean	20	Friendship	2-3
well	0		

³⁷. See Jayaratne and Stewart (1995:218-222) for a detailed discussion of the assets and liabilities of the two methods.

just	15		
I think	15		
sort of	3		
may	12		

The frequency of epistemic modal forms seems to vary when speakers shift from one topic to another. For instance, when such female speakers talked about psychology and psychological problems, the frequency of epistemic forms changed as Table (2) shows below. This table clearly indicates that the frequency of epistemic modal forms is related to the topic of interaction.

Table (2) The Frequency of epistemic modal forms while conversing about psychological problems.

epistemic forms	Frequency	Time
I mean	24	1-2 p.m.
Well	5	
Just	4	
I think	8	
sort of	2	
May	4	

In Situation Two, where men were conversing alone, the frequency of epistemic forms in formal and informal situations is as follows:

Table (3):The frequency of epistemic forms in the speech of single-male groups.

epistemic forms	Formal	Informal	Time
I mean	39	13	110 minutes
Well	27	8	
Just	24	11	
I think	30	13	
sort of	17	7	

A noticeable point about Table (3) is the different frequencies of epistemic modal forms in formal and informal situations. This can be interpreted as saying that male speakers employ a form such as I mean to ensure that the message is clear or to avoid vagueness of meaning as the following example shows:

The Principal of the school: Your exams should be clear and comprehensive; I mean your exams. On the other hand, the high frequency of well can be interpreted by saying that this word was employed to guarantee a successful interruption. Thus they were able to save their faces (i.e. the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself)³⁸ and that of the addressee. Consider this example:

³⁸. See Brown and Levinson for a discussion of the term 'face'.

A: We have to improve our students' abilities in math and languages.

B: Well, but how can we achieve this successfully?

Well can also be interpreted as a strategy to save the speaker and the addressee's face. It is favored to saying 'no' or 'this is not true'.

In other situations well stands for another meaning. It is used to offer support to a statement being said to mean 'Ok, I agree with you.'

Situation Three involves the speech of a number of speakers, some of whom were family members discussing a number of topics, such as, house furniture, eating, and travelling. The frequency of epistemic modal forms appears in Table (4) below:

I will argue below that the frequency of epistemic modal forms is complex due to a number of factors, such as, the sex of the speaker, the topic of discussion, and the relationship among speakers. It was also noticed that they were utilized as a strategy when people like to interrupt others and take part in a discussion, as the following examples show:

Table (4): The frequency of epistemic modal forms in mixed-sex groups (family members)

epistemic modality	Male	Female	Topics
I mean	25	18	Story, arrivall of a person
Well	22	34	A quarrel, money
Just	13	19	Proposing to a woman
I think	29	17	University matters
Sort of	16	24	A story
May	3	14	Clothes

Situation three involves the speech of a number of speakers, some of whom were traveling. The frequency of epistemic modal forms in their speech appears in Table (4) above.

I will argue below that the frequency of epistemic modal forms is complex due to a number of factors, such as, the sex of the speaker, the topic of discussion and the relationship among speakers. It was also noticed that epistemic modal forms were utilized as a strategy when people like to interpret others and take part in a discussion, as the following examples show below:

A) kaan izzalameh lahi?ni
was the-man chasing-me
'The man was chasing me'

B) Tayyib shoo sar ba^Cdayn
Well what happened afterwards
'Well, what happened afterwards?'

A) ?ana kont badrus lamma fathat ?il-radio
I was studying when she-switched on the-radio
'I was studying when she switched on the radio'

B) Bas mumkin t?uuliili leysh darabtiini?

but could you-tell-me why you-hit-me
`Could you just tell me why you hit me?

It is now an established fact that men and women employ different styles of speech which are heavily determined by a number of factors. In the discussion below I will furnish substantial evidence that supports this thesis which refutes the point of view of Hirschman (1974) who abandoned the thesis that men or women may employ more than one single style in speech.

There are two conflicting views that have been offered to account for the diverse communicative behavior of both men and women. The first view explicates such differences in terms of dominance, in the sense that men and women's different styles are bound to their social status; men occupy a dominating position and women a subordinate one. Williams and Best (1982) found in a study of gender traits in twenty-nine nations that people associated men with a style that is characterized as forceful, strong and willed and associated women with a style described as emotional and submissive. The second view interprets sex differences of spoken interaction by the fact that both men and women are socialized in different sociolinguistic subcultures. Many researchers, among which are Maltz and Borker (1982), Jones (1980), Goodwin (1980), support the latter view. This paper supports a position that incorporates the two views.³⁹

In the tables above it is so apparent that both men and women employ epistemic modal forms, but with different frequency of occurrence. The epistemic modal forms I mean has been noticed to be used more by men, specially in formal situations. This could indicate that, due to men's dominating social status, they participate more heavily in formal situations than women. The use of I mean is indeed important to guarantee that the message has been fully understood and as a stylistic strategy to avoid vagueness of meaning, since their social status allows them to speak without fully considering what they are saying, and therefore have to clarify what they say. Coates (1983:77-83) believes that speakers sometimes modify their epistemic modals by the use of `more tentative ' forms in English., I mean is just one example. Other examples are I think, I suppose, I fancy.⁴⁰ I mean is a form of modals that Halliday (1994:355) believes to express a probability that is explicitly subjective.

The other epistemic modal form that shows higher frequency in men's speech is `I think'. This could be accounted for by saying that the use of the pronoun I or we, as contrasted with `he' and `you', expresses confidence and courage.⁴¹ This is inscribed to women's secondary position in the Arabic culture as verified in a number of studies, such as Kanakri (1984) and Abdel-Jawad (1981). In a study of the different academic achievements of white and black children, Bernstein found that while white children freely use the pronoun I and we, black children avoid them and use he or you instead. Bernstein associated the utility of such pronouns with the social status and the type of family each group of people has.⁴²

The other epistemic words, well, just, sort of show a higher frequency in the speech of women. Beside interpreting these words (especially well and just) as a signal of giving oneself the right to interrupt the ongoing conversation, such words signal women's lack of confidence and courage to encounter male speakers or challenge what they say. They also signal women's supportive role in speech. The latter statement supports the line of inquiry that Woods (1989:157) developed,

¹⁰. See Coates, (1989:64) who took a similar position.

⁴⁰. See also Coates (1983:46,138) and also Halliday (1970:331).

⁴¹. See Bernstein (1972) in the use of the Elaborated code and the Restricted code in Trudgill (1974:51-54). See also Brown and Gilman (1960). One has to be careful how to interpret the results of this study for it has been discredited for its overgeneralisation. Obeidat, N. cited evidence in a lecture at Mu'ta University in Nov. 1997 that this is really the case.

⁴². For more details, see Trudgill (1974:51-54).

which states that the overriding influence of gender is not merely due to male dominance, but also to the supporting role that women play in mixed-sex interaction. It was also found that some epistemic modals were utilized as a decoration (variety) of style by both male and female speakers, as the examples show below:

A: kayf shayf il-dinya?

how see the-life

`How do you see life?'

B: ya^cni, mashi haalha

mean ok condition-it

`It is ok'

A: ?init lonti bitfakri rah tursubi?

you was you-thought will fail

`Did you think that you will fail?'

B: hayk shii

`sort of'

In these examples the epistemic modals ya^cni and heyk shii cannot be said to bear a `real' meaning and as such can be claimed to be used to decorate one's style of speech.

Women show higher frequency of these expressions due to their social status in the Arabic culture where women have been oppressed for many years.⁴³ As any human culture⁴⁴ Arabic culture draws clear distinctions between male and female roles from an early stage. However women's oppression cannot be understood without locating it in a concrete historical or social context.

Islam has been fair enough to all women, including Arab women, especially when we know women's position before the advent of Islam. The Holy Koran describes this position in meticulous terms:

`When news is brought to one of him of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on?'⁴⁵

Islam puts women on an equal footing with men. The Prophet (P.B.U.H) said that `women are men's sister'.⁴⁶ I strongly believe that women's suffering mainly emanated from the deviation of the whole society from the path of Allah.⁴⁷ In this regard I reject Al-Sadaawi's allegation that religion, in addition to class and the patriarchal system, helped men to exploit and oppress women.⁴⁸ But due to numerous social, political and economical changes that have taken place in the Arab World, Muslims' sense of commitment to their religion has been weakened. Therefore, men have used them for their own advantage. However, due to the spread of the mass media and

⁴³. One is forced to make use of western terminology that describe the cultural and social position of Arab women. Arab linguists are called to coin or create new terminology that better describes the Arabic culture and the position of Arab women.

⁴⁴. See Beal (1994:4)

⁴⁵. The Holy Koran, Surrah 16:Al-Nahl, 58-59.

⁴⁶. Sahih (book of) Abu Dawoud, Al-tarmithi and Ibn Maja.

⁴⁷. Qutub (No Date:46)

⁴⁸. See Al-Sadaawi (1997).

other means of information, women now are acutely aware of the ways in which the dominant society shapes their senses of who they are and what they feel. Arab feminist call for a change of all living conditions which emanated from those old structures of oppression. They also believe as Lorde⁴⁹ does that first they have to challenge the oppressor within themselves. Despite the success that women have recently achieved, much of their efforts still encounters stumbling blocks.

I would also like to maintain that women's style enjoys virtues of its own. Linguistic features that characterize female's discourse have to be understood within the framework of the goals that their speech is intended to serve. Unlike men who tend to argue with each other, women tend to adopt a style that maintains good social relationship. This elucidates the reason why they usually opt for linguistic forms that promote a joint activity (a style of building upon a previous talk). Despite the `overt'⁵⁰ prestige that is often associated with men's speech, we do not allege that women's style is perceived in the Arab World as degraded, but is indeed viewed as a beautiful and `adorable' style that appropriately fits women and their social roles. This supports the statement of Tannen (1982:229) that whenever people communicate, they convey not only the content of their message, but an image of themselves. Thus it is unlikely that women would quit their own style in favor of men's style. This statement answers the inquiry raised by Swann (1988:140):

`If girls are encouraged to become more assertive, and to adopt conversational tactics more commonly associated with boys, will such behavior be tolerated by others or regarded as deviant?'

Conclusion:

This paper has illustrated that epistemic modal forms can be employed by both men and women but with different degrees of frequency. The frequency of epistemic modals depends on a number of factors such as sex, topic of discussion, situation (formal and informal). Men have been observed using `I mean' and `I think' more than women whose style is characterized by their tendency to use words such as may, well, just and sort of. My account for such variation lies in the social position of each group in the Arab World; men tend to use epistemic modal that could express their dominant position and women tend to employ epistemic forms that express their subordinate position. Although differences in patterns of variation (regarding epistemic modals) occur between sex groups, they indeed occur within every sex group. Epistemic modals could serve as a decoration of one's style. Here, epistemic modal forms have no `real' meaning and thus may be interpreted as adding a new `flavor' or a `variety' to one's style.

It should also be pointed out that both styles of men and women possess different types of prestige.⁵¹ Thus it is unlikely that each sex group (especially men) would quit using its style in favor of that of the other sex group, specially in a culture like Arabic where masculinity is highly esteemed.

There are a number of disadvantages the present study suffers from. First, Arab women tend to be silent in mixed-sex interaction. Thus it would be hard in such situations to measure the frequency of epistemic modals in women's speech. Second, the frequency of epistemic modals in women's formal style was not studied, since we had no chance to record women's speech in such situations. Third, I did not measure the frequency of epistemic modals in the speech of old Arab women and men. Fourth, other epistemic modals, such as, be bound to⁵², did not appear in our data and are thus excluded from our discussion.

⁴⁹. Lorde (1984)

⁵⁰. See `overt' and `covert' prestige categories as discussed by Trudgill (1974:96-97).

⁵¹. See `over' and `covert' prestige codes as discussed by Trudgill (1974:96-97).

⁵². See Coates (1983:42-43)

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