

Epistemic Modality as a Bridge Between Syntax and Pragmatics: The Grammaticalisation of Speech Acts in Polar Questions. Evidence from Spanish.

Oscar Garcia Marchena
University Paris Cité
6marchena@gmail.com

Epistemic modality constitutes a formal bridge between syntax and pragmatics and plays a central role in the grammaticalisation of speech acts. More specifically, this study proposes that the degree of speaker commitment encoded by specific syntactic constructions determines the illocutionary value associated with polar questions. The study develops a cross-linguistically oriented analysis based on a corpus-driven typology of Spanish polar questions and a comparison with Mandarin Chinese question types.

The proposal builds on the “speech act assignment problem” (Gazdar 1981; Beyssade & Marandin 2006): how grammatical structure constrains the interpretation of speech acts. Rather than treating questions as a purely pragmatic phenomenon, we argue that particular syntactic-semantic constructions conventionally encode different degrees of epistemic commitment, which in turn license specific speech acts. Therefore, some speech acts seem to result from the grammaticalisation of epistemic modality.

The empirical basis of the study is a corpus analysis of 915 polar questions extracted from spontaneous Peninsular Spanish dialogue. The data reveal that Spanish polar questions form a structured typology in which specific constructions correlate with distinct speech-acts. The resulting classification suggests that speech acts in polar questions are dependent on syntactic-semantic constructions, as well as on the speaker’s epistemic stance toward the propositional content.

The analysis identifies several constructional types: first, unmarked polar questions (1) express information requests and correspond to a neutral epistemic stance. Second, declarative questions with tags (2) encode a stronger commitment to the proposition and function as confirmation requests. Third, questions introduced by the SP *a que* (3) express maximal commitment and grammaticalise agreement requests. Fourth, reprise questions marked by initial complementizer *que* (4) suspend speaker commitment and function as verification requests. Five, anaphoric fragment questions encode partial commitment and function as clarification requests, while constructions with the final adverb *acaso* grammaticalise challenge or rhetorical readings through commitment to the falsity of the proposition.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. ¿Va a venir María? | ‘Is María coming?’ |
| 2. Va a venir María, ¿no? | ‘María is coming, isn’t she?’ |
| 3. ¿A que es verdad? | ‘It’s true, right?’ |
| 4. ¿Que no viene? | (Did you say) ‘he/she isn’t coming?’ |

These constructions can be organised along a gradient of epistemic modality ranging from commitment to p , through neutral or suspended commitment, to commitment to $\neg p$. The proposal therefore argues that speech acts emerge from grammatically encoded differences in

speaker commitment. Illocutionary force does not result from contextually dependent inferences, but they are constrained by constructional meaning.

The idea that the degree in the expression of epistemic modality is responsible for the speech act, as it results from the taxonomy of Spanish polar questions, seems to be a constant in an interlinguistic level. Languages may differ on the number and nature of constructions that grammaticalize speech acts, but they seem to have at least some of them. This can be illustrated by comparing the different constructions for polar question in Mandarin Chinese: Chinese polar questions marked by sentence-final *ma* or disjunctive forms primarily grammaticalise information requests, corresponding to low or neutral epistemic commitment. By contrast, declarative questions with sentence-final *ba* express confirmation-seeking meanings associated with stronger speaker commitment. This parallelism suggests that the mapping between epistemic modality and speech-act type may represent a broader linguistic tendency rather than a language-specific phenomenon.

The paper contributes to current research on clause types, speech acts, and the syntax–pragmatics interface by proposing that syntactic constructions encode graded epistemic modality that systematically constrains illocutionary interpretation. These findings support a model in which some speech acts are partially grammaticalised through construction-specific markers of speaker commitment.

References

- Beyssade, C., & Marandin, J.-M. (2006). The speech act assignment problem revisited: Disentangling speaker commitment from speaker call on addressee. In *Empirical issues in syntax and semantics* (Vol. 6, pp. 37–68).
- Heim, J., & Wiltschko, M. (2020). Deconstructing questions. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 11(1), 56–82.
- Heim, J., Wiltschko, M., & Chen, H. (2016). Intonation and particles as speech act modifiers: A syntactic analysis. *Studies in Chinese Linguistics*, 37(2), 109–129.
- Her, O.-S., Che, D., & Bodomo, A. (2022). On a dichotomy of question types. *The Linguistic Review*, 39(2), 257–291.
- Huddleston, R. (1994). The contrast between interrogatives and questions. *Journal of Linguistics*, 30(2), 411–439.
- Lizardi Ituarte, A. (2022). Clause type vs. speech act. *Linguistics*, 1–27.
- Searle, J. R. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), 1–23.
- Stalnaker, R. C. (1978). Assertion. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 9: Pragmatics, pp. 315–322). Academic Press.
- Tang, T.-C. (1981). A study on Mandarin questions. *Journal of National Taiwan Normal University*, 26, 219–277.