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How expectations of speaker knowledge predict form selection: Epistemic adverbs in contexts of expertise

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How expectations of speaker knowledge predict form selection: Epistemic adverbs in contexts of expertise

Research has shown that expectations of speaker ability affect hearer interpretation in different ways. For example, research on accented speech has found that participants are more forgiving of implausible (Gibson et al. 2017; Hanulíková. et al. 2012) or pragmatically under-informative (Fairchild et al. 2020) utterances when spoken with accented speech.

Within the realm of modal meaning, Tucker (2001) impressionistically noted a preference for *possibly* to be uttered rather than *maybe/perhaps* when the speaker was an expert on the topic at hand (1). He claimed that *possibly* expressed an “implied objectivity” which *maybe/perhaps* did not. The present study operationalizes and tests Tucker’s “implied objectivity” by measuring the effects of *reliability* on the selection of Spanish *posiblemente* and *quizás* among Spanish speakers. Two hypotheses are tested: First, that hearers are sensitive to the **reliability of the evidence** used to make an assessment such that *posiblemente* is preferred when the evidence is more reliable. Second, that hearers are sensitive to the **reliability of the speaker** making the assessment such that *posiblemente* is preferred when the speaker is an expert in the relevant domain.

36 native speakers of Colombian Spanish completed a 20-item contextualized two-alternative forced choice preference task. Each context was manipulated for the type of evidence the speaker had when making their assessment (direct vs. indirect) and for the expertise of the speaker (expert vs. non-expert) in the relevant domain (2).

Results of a generalized mixed-effects linear regression ($p = 0.0013$) indicated that speaker expertise was a significant predictor of adverb selection such that *posiblemente* was preferred in contexts of expertise. Access to evidence had no effect on adverb selection. Speaker reliability thus emerges as an important contextual feature which can distinguish otherwise synonymous forms. In this case, *posiblemente* is perceived as more compatible with the reasonable, well-informed assessments expected from experts, while the speculative *quizás* is compatible with less informed assessments expected from non-experts. These results show that hearers are not only attentive to the semantic content of utterances, but also to whether the language used by the speaker is sufficient and appropriate given the speaker’s presumed capabilities.

References

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- (1) Patient: ...It's rather swollen and hurts quite a bit.
 Doctor: a. Well, *perhaps* you've broken a small bone.
 b. Well, *maybe* you've broken a small bone.
 c. Well, you've *possibly* broken a small bone.
 (Tucker 2001, p.198)

- (2) Silvia está preocupada por la salud de su perro y lo lleva a la clínica veterinaria. En este momento está hablando con **la doctora Díaz**, la veterinaria que usualmente trata a su perro.
 [Silvia is worried about her dog's health and she takes him to the veterinarian's clinic. In this instance, she is speaking with Dr. Díaz, the veterinarian who usually treats her dog.]

Silvia: No sé que ha pasado, pero mi perro tiene varias áreas sin pelo. ¿Las ves?
 [Silvia: I don't know what's happened, but my dog has several bald spots. Do you see them?]

Dra. Díaz : Sí, sí, **las veo**. _____ tiene los folículos inflamados.
 [Dr. Díaz: Yes, yes, I see them. _____ his follicles are inflamed.]

Indique la palabra que prefiere usted en este contexto.

[Select the word that you prefer in this context]

- a. Quizás
 b. Posiblemente

Cross-tabulations for variable *expertise*

	Adverb		Total
	<i>Posiblemente</i>	<i>Quizás</i>	
<i>Expertise</i>			
Expert	83 (57.64%)	61 (42.36%)	144
Non-expert	59 (40.97%)	85 (59.03%)	144
Total	142	146	288