

A semantic map of epistemic expressions – Abstract

Epistemic expressions are defined here as linguistic items and constructions that express either degree of certainty (e.g. certainty, doubt, probability, epistemic necessity, or epistemic possibility) or source of information (e.g. direct, indirect-inferential, or indirect-reportive evidence), or both.

For some time now, epistemic expressions have been intensively studied, and the semantic-map approach has been applied to them. Anderson 1986 provides a semantic map of grammaticalized expressions of source of information (“evidentials”), and van der Auwera & Plungian 1998 provides a semantic map of expressions of epistemic as well as non-epistemic necessity and possibility. However, while it is undisputed that epistemic expressions are semantically closely related to each other, no one has so far provided a semantic map that takes into account both expressions of degree of certainty and expressions of source of information. In a couple of studies (notably, Givón 1982 and Akatsuka 1985) degree of certainty and source of information are related to each other in terms of a scale (an “epistemic scale”), which is not far from being a genuine semantic map. But the relevant studies draw upon data from only three to four languages.

This paper presents a unified semantic map of epistemic expressions – that is, a map which covers both different degrees of certainty and different types of information source. The map is based on a survey of epistemic expressions from more than 50 languages representing geographical as well as genetic diversity. It is compatible moreover with data from an additional great number of languages discussed in Givón 1982, Akatsuka 1985, Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994, and Aikhenvald 2004. The main features of the semantic map are as follows: 1) The meanings (or functions) of epistemic expressions constitute a continuous region – that is, each of the epistemic meanings distinguished is connected to at least one other epistemic meaning by what Haspelmath 2003 refers to as a “connecting line”. 2) Within the overall continuous region, degree-of-certainty meanings make up one continuous subregion, while source-of-information meanings make up another one – that is, it holds for both types of meaning that each meaning distinguished is connected to at least one other meaning of the same type by a connecting line. 3) The two subregions are connected to each other in a systematic way: while high degree of certainty is connected to highly reliable source of information (i.e. direct evidence) by a connecting line, less degree of certainty is connected to less reliable source of information (i.e. indirect evidence).

With these features the semantic map of epistemic expressions has important implications for the discussion of the relationship between ‘epistemic modality’ and ‘evidentiality’. However, the map has implications for ‘semantic-mapping theory’ as well. In a discussion of the different connecting lines of the map the paper argues that a distinction should be made between essentially conceptual and essentially functional connecting lines – thus, one might prefer to talk about ‘functional-conceptual space’ rather than about “conceptual space” (e.g. Croft 2003). Subsequently, in an outline of general properties of epistemic expressions the paper argues that a distinction should be made between connecting lines internal and connecting lines external to a semantic domain.

References

- Aikhenvald, A. Y. 2004. *Evidentiality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Akatsuka, N. 1985. “Conditionals and the epistemic scale”. *Language* 61.3: 625-639.
- Anderson, L. B. 1986. “Evidentials, paths of change, and mental maps: Typologically regular asymmetries”. Chafe & Nichols 1986 (eds.). *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*. Norwood: Ablex. 273-312.
- Bybee, J., Perkins, R. D. & Pagliuca, W. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Croft, W. 2003. *Typology and Universals* [2nd ed]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Givón, T. 1982. “Evidentiality and epistemic space”. *Studies in Language* 6.1. 23-49.
- Haspelmath, M. 2003. “The geometry of grammatical meaning: Semantic maps and cross-linguistic comparison”. Tomasello, M. (ed.). 2003. *The New Psychology of Language* 2. London: Lawrence Erlbaum. 211-242.
- van der Auwera, J. & Plungian, V. A. 1998. “Modality’s semantic map”. *Linguistic Typology* 2. 79-124.