

## Epistemic modality and spoken discourse: an English-Portuguese cross-linguistic investigation

(Modalidade epistêmica e discurso oral: um estudo  
contrastivo entre inglês e português)

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*ABSTRACT: This article compares the use of the epistemic modality in informal conversations involving British and Brazilian native speakers. The British dialogue corpus (110,000 words) was extracted from the spoken component of the British National Corpus and the Portuguese corpus (110,000 words) consists of conversations extracted from Projeto da Norma Urbana Oral Culta do Rio de Janeiro (NURC-RJ). Initially, I review the literature on the concept and the use of epistemic modality. Then, I try to find evidences of equivalent forms and functions between the two languages on the use of I think, you know and tag questions. Results suggest that, in conversations, the establishment and maintenance of good social relations are of paramount importance, and, for this reason, the speakers rarely use categorical statements.*

*RESUMO: Este artigo compara o emprego de modalidade epistêmica em conversas informais envolvendo falantes na-*

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*tivos britânicos e brasileiros. O corpus de diálogos em inglês (110 mil palavras) foi extraído do componente falado do British National Corpus Sample e o corpus de diálogos em português (110 mil palavras) foi compilado com base no Projeto da Norma Urbana Oral Culta do Rio de Janeiro (NURC-RJ). Inicialmente, o artigo revisa diversas vertentes da literatura envolvendo o conceito e emprego de modalidade epistêmica. A seguir, o artigo procura evidenciar equivalências de formas e funções entre as duas línguas, centralizando a discussão no emprego das frases I think – eu acho, dos marcadores discursivos you know – sabe, e de perguntas de confirmação ou tag questions. Os resultados indicam que, em diálogos, o estabelecimento e manutenção de relações sociais são de vital importância e que por esta razão os interlocutores raramente empregam afirmações categóricas.*

*KEY-WORDS: epistemic modality, contrastive analysis, corpus linguistics, oral discourse.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: modalidade epistêmica, análise contrastiva, lingüística de corpus, discurso oral.*

It is in spontaneous, operational speech that the grammatical system of a language is most fully exploited, such that its semantic frontiers expand and its potential for meaning is enhanced. This is why we have to look at spoken discourse for at least some of the evidence on which to base our theory of the language. (Halliday, 1994, p.xxiv)

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## INTRODUCTION

For anyone interested in cross-linguistic research, modality provides an almost irresistible challenge because of the differences in “how languages carve up the modal pie” (Aijmer & Simon-Vanderbergen, 2004, p.1784). However, modality is a difficult notion to identify and describe. The emphasis in the present discussion will therefore be on defining epistemic modality and on proposing a range of epistemic modal categories which can be compared in English and Portuguese.

In cross-linguistic studies, it is normally taken for granted that one can identify the ways in which a linguistic phenomenon is realized and establish translation equivalents between similar expressions in two or more languages. However, there are several reasons why cross-linguistic comparisons of modality present a problem as Bybee and Fleischman (1995, p.3) point out:

First, because the semantic/functional domain of modality is so broad; second, because modality, as we have discovered,... lends itself best to investigation in social, interactive contexts....; third, and conceivably most important, because of the extent to which languages differ in their mapping of the relevant semantic content onto linguistic form.

As appears from the quotation, modality is more pervasive in spoken interaction where it may be textualized by a wide range of linguistic devices associated with a number of discourse functions in addition to purely modal ones. As a result, a modal taxonomy based on form-function correlations is difficult to establish. I shall argue in this article that a discourse analysis of epistemic modality makes it possible to uncover a number of interesting similarities between Portuguese and English.

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The reason I have chosen to study spoken texts, specifically conversational ones, is that such face-to-face interaction is in some senses prototypical – it is the form in which we are all first exposed to language. Similarly to Halliday's (1994) quote at the very beginning of the paper, I should think that the study of spoken discourse should be a priority for linguists. Moreover, I suspect that conversations would be a fruitful environment in which to explore the complex and subtle patterns of modality produced by speakers. Why the analysis of conversational interactions in both Portuguese and English should be a suitable locus for this interplay of form-function will, I hope, become clear in the course of this paper.

The data which form the basis for the comparison are face-to-face conversations in Portuguese and English. The English texts (roughly 110.000 words) come from the spoken component of the *British National Corpus Sample*<sup>1</sup>; the comparable Portuguese corpus (also roughly 110.000 words) consists of conversations extracted from *Projeto da Norma Urbana Oral Culta do Rio de Janeiro* (NURC-RJ)<sup>2</sup>.

### WHAT IS EPISTEMIC MODALITY?

It has long been recognized that the distinction between epistemic and deontic modality<sup>3</sup> is useful when modality is

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<sup>1</sup> For further details please access [http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/what/spok\\_design.html](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/what/spok_design.html)

<sup>2</sup> For further information please access <http://www.letras.ufrj.br/nurc-rj/projnurc.html>

<sup>3</sup> In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), epistemic and deontic modalities are respectively referred to as *modalization* and *modulation*.

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analyzed. However, it is difficult to give a clearcut description of epistemic modality. Here are some of the definitions offered in the literature:

Epistemic modality is concerned with matters of knowledge, belief, or opinion rather than fact (Lyons, 1977, p.793).

Any utterance in which the speaker explicitly qualifies his commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence he utters, whether this qualification is made explicit in the verbal component ... or in the prosodic or paralinguistic component, is an epistemical modal, or modalized, utterance (Lyons, 1977, p.797).

[it] is concerned with the speaker's assumptions or assessment of possibilities and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence (or lack of confidence) in the truth of the proposition expressed (Coates, 1983, p.18).

the term 'epistemic' should apply not simply to modal systems that basically involve notions of possibility and necessity, but to any modal system that indicates the degree of commitment by the speaker to what he says. ... [it] is to be interpreted as showing the status of the speaker's understanding or knowledge; this clearly includes both his own judgments and the kind of warrant he has for what he says (Palmer, 1986, p.51).

In modal logic, epistemic modality has been defined as a linguistic subjective notion and as a discourse category. It will be argued that while we can describe epistemic modality semantically, it is useful to have a broader outlook in order to describe some of the pragmatic functions associated with it in Portuguese and English. The notion of epistemic modality in natural language is closely linked to the speaker and to

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subjectivity (Coates, 1983). In addition the hearer can be drawn into the interaction, be appealed to or be deferred to. Discourse modality (Maynard, 1993) includes the hearer and extends modality across the sentence boundary. Comparing discourse modality in two or more languages is an interesting step in contrastive studies even though different contexts of situation encompassing epistemic modality might differ from one culture to another.

### *The logical analysis of epistemic modality*

Philosophers have constructed neat logical systems of modality where necessity and possibility figure as key notions. In this framework, epistemic modality has to do with the possibility or necessity of the truth of propositions and with knowledge and belief (cf. Perkins, 1983, p.9). The modal auxiliaries *may-pode* and *must-deve* are good examples of epistemic possibility and necessity respectively (examples extracted from the *BNC-Sample* and *NURC-RJ*):

- 1a. What we **MAY** have to do is actually balance the air conditioning's needs ... (*epistemic possibility*)
- 1b. ...mobilizando sabe, as pessoas, profissionais, pra fazer um bom trabalho, pra apresentar esse trabalho pro mundo, né, eu acho que isso **PODE** ser muito positivo, né, a nível de circulação também de capital. (*epistemic possibility*)
- 2a. Well, he **MUST** have done it. (*epistemic necessity*)
- 2b. Nova Trento é um município pequeno, de Santa Catarina, que **DEVE** ter de onze, doze mil habitantes atualmente, e... (*epistemic necessity*)

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The usefulness of these two notions is shown by the fact that there is a large number of devices which can be analyzed in terms of possibility and necessity (or a degree of possibility) including modal adverbs (*probably, possibly*), adjectives (*sure, certain*), nouns (*possibility*), etc. Nevertheless, “the logical definition of modality has but little to say about modality in linguistics” (Kiefer, 1987, p.73). The reason appears to be that no overt recognition is given to the speaker and to the interactive role of epistemic modality.

Epistemic modality may be taken to include evidential categories such as hearsay or inference besides possibility and necessity. Below I shall discuss the linguistic definition of epistemic modality in terms of subjective attitude and extensions of this description to include evidentiality.

### *Epistemic qualifications*

The redefinition of modality from a logical notion to a subjective and interactive concept is described by Maynard (1993, p.37) as follows:

Obviously any departure from modal logic as a primary source of analysis creates the possibility for opening up modality research and making it perhaps even chaotic. The neatness and comfortable order imposed by traditional analysis of modal logic is replaced by often muddled and sometimes confusing explanations. Here we must remind ourselves that one must not celebrate a neat and tidy analysis merely because its neatness. For, when faced with the untidiness of real life use of language, we are compelled to acknowledge the limitations of a cleanly definable modal logic.

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The result of “resurrecting the speaking self” and recognizing the use of language as “a self-expression negotiated in intricately complex multi-level actual human interaction” is a pragmatic-oriented concept of modality (cf. Lyons, 1977, p.800; Palmer 1986, p.16).

In Recski (2004, p.53), I considered epistemic modality to be the speaker’s qualification of the truth of what is said, and this seems to me to be a good description of epistemic modality in natural language. *I think, probably, possibly, perhaps, may*, etc are good examples of epistemic markers signaling the speaker’s cognitive attitude to the propositions. Kiefer (1987, p.76) uses the term “speaker attitude” to describe modal adverbials such as *perhaps* and *probably*, parenthetical clauses (*I believe*), subjective epistemic readings of *may* and *must*, words such as *really, actually, just, well, indeed*, etc. In such an open-ended framework, at least some of the modal categories are discourse markers since their scope is not restricted to the sentence but they point to information in the preceding or following discourse (cf. *well, actually, after all*) (Recski, in press; Schifffrin, 1987; Schourup, 2001; Norrick, 2001; Jucker et al., 2003).

### *Epistemic modality and evidentiality*

It is clear that many epistemic modal phenomena do not only involve opinions or judgments about truth. *Must*, for example, signals inference (invented example<sup>4</sup>):

(3) It **MUST** have rained

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<sup>4</sup> This type of inference has no cropped up in my entire corpus and I am, therefore, relying on an invented example for the sake of argumentation.



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The state of the ground is perceived by the speaker as an indication that it rained. Such examples show that the speaker may refer to the type of evidence. Palmer (1986, p.51) recognizes two types of epistemic modality or types of commitment: judgments and evidentials. Judgments refer to opinions and conclusions. For example, by saying that something is possible or probable, the speaker commits himself (at least partially) to whether what is said is true or not. Evidentials are the means by which any alleged matter or fact whose truth is investigated is established or disproved. As shown in Figure 1, judgments contrast with evidentials which have meanings such as inference, belief, conjecture, hearsay, report, etc which express commitment as well as provide the speaker's warrant for what is claimed<sup>5</sup>.

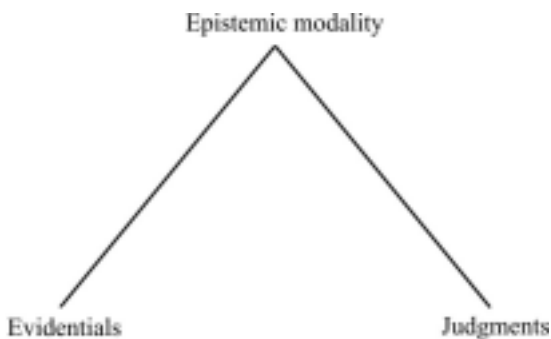


Figure 1 – Palmer's model of epistemic modality

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<sup>5</sup> In Palmer (1986, p.59), inferentials are not a special category. *Must* is, for example, analyzed as 'deduction' and as distinct from 'speculation' (*may*). However, later on in the same book Palmer suggests that *must* could be analyzed as inferential (1986, p. 70).

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In this article I make no distinction between evidentials and judgments but both are included under epistemic modality ('evidentiality' in the broad sense of Chafe, 1986). Epistemic modality is thus understood as an umbrella term for notions like reliability, deduction, inference, etc. referring to the mode of knowledge and the source of evidence. Chafe's typology includes the following categories:

- (i) Belief (e.g. *I think, I guess*)  
Knowledge arrived at in the form of belief, a guess or a hypothesis
- (ii) Hearsay (e.g. *be supposed to, they say, a word says*)  
Knowledge acquired through what people say
- (iii) Deduction (e.g. *should, presumably, can<sup>6</sup>, could*)  
Knowledge based on hypothesis from which a conclusion about evidence can be drawn.
- (iv) Induction (e.g. *obviously, must, seem*)  
Knowledge based on inference from evidence
- (v) Sensory evidence (e.g. *see, hear, looks like*)  
Knowledge acquired by a specific kind of (sensory or perceptual) evidence

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<sup>6</sup> The use of *can* in the following example (extracted from the *BNC-Sample*) where two friends are talking about sports is analyzed as deduction:

A: Well they start, it it's the same way that er very young people er start playing snooker don't they?

B: Well I play snooker.

A: By the time they get to about sixteen or seventeen you know they CAN be up in the top players.

- (vi) Degrees of reliability (e.g. *maybe, probably*)  
Knowledge qualified by the speaker's assessment  
of the degree of reliability of a proposition

There is little consensus concerning the boundaries of Chafe's use of the concept of evidentiality or the distinctions which need to be drawn in this semantic domain. According to Chafe, also hedges (*sort of, kind of, about*) are evidentials, which indicate how the speakers match their ideational content against their knowledge of categories, and expectation markers like *actually, in fact, after all* are evidentials signaling "expectations of some kind, against which knowledge may be matched" (Chafe, 1986, p.270).

Sensory evidence, hearsay, belief, etc are notional evidential categories. In addition, scales and continua are needed to describe that not all knowledge is equally reliable (Westney, 1986, Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). To give an example, *I am certain that Bush will lose the elections in the US* expresses a higher degree of certainty (commitment) than *I think that Bush will lose the elections in the US*. But we could also compare *must* (evidential) with *may* (epistemic) in terms of degrees of modality (cf. Palmer, 1986, p.57). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.620) distinguish between three modality values: high (*certainly*), median (*probably*), and low (*possibly*). Similarly, Westney (1986, p.315) distinguishes three levels of strength:

There are good practical reasons for talking of three general 'strength' levels: strong values (e.g. *I know, I'm sure/certain, it's certain, must, will*), weak values (e.g. *possible that, perhaps, may and might*), and intermediate values (e.g. *probably, likely and I think*)

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Both evidentials and judgments involve degrees of certainty. As a result, a large number of complex modalities can be distinguished such as:

Belief + certainty (e.g. *I'm sure*)

Belief + uncertainty (e.g. *I guess*)

Inferential + certainty (e.g. *must*)

Inferential + uncertainty (e.g. *seem*)

### *Discourse modality*

It is well known that meanings are not fully transparent in the lexicogrammar<sup>7</sup>. We need also to take into account meanings which arise in the situation and depend on principles of language use. The way in which the linguistic study of epistemic modality seems to be heading integrates it into a discourse analytical perspective. The pragmatic notion of “discourse modality” (Maynard, 1993; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) includes not only epistemic modality as a subjective notion but also other interpersonal aspects of the interaction and the social goals of the participants.

Studies on the interactive meanings of discourse markers and adverbs are of great interest in a cross linguistic perspective. By studying discourse modality in two languages we can, for instance, discover general constraints characterizing epistemic modality. In a wider perspective, contrastive studies of discourse modality are of interest because they might provide a window on different world views and might reflect how languages divide up or construct reality differently. However, as Stubbs almost two decades ago pointed out, studying modality

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<sup>7</sup> See Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) sections 10.3.1 and 10.4.1 for an account of interpersonal metaphors.

in interaction is “a matter of prolonged fieldwork” even when only a single language is involved.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN  
PORTUGUESE AND ENGLISH EPISTEMIC  
MODALITY

*Form-function equivalents in the area of epistemic  
modality*

Epistemic modality can be realized by a variety of different devices in English and in Portuguese. In both languages we have modal auxiliary verbs, adverbs, adjectives, etc. Some lexicogrammatical realizations of epistemic modality in English and Portuguese are:

- (a) Modal adverbs (e.g. *certainly* - *certamente*, *obviously* - *obviamente*)
- (b) Modal auxiliaries (e.g. *may* - *pode*, *must* - *deve*)
- (c) Modal verbs (e.g. *I think* - *Eu acho*, *seem* - *parece*)
- (d) Modal adjectives (e.g. *certain* – *certo*, *possible* – *possível*)
- (e) Modal nouns (e.g. *possibility* – *possibilidade*)

If we analyze the function of epistemic modality in interaction, a wider and much less precise set of markers needs to be taken into account. Epistemic modality can be associated with a grammatical construction (e.g. question tags, *if*-clauses, etc), be expressed by the prosodic system or by a whole string of modal markers (e.g., modal adverbs and adjectives, modal auxiliary verbs, parenthetical verbs, etc.).

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Epistemic modality in spoken English is seldom expressed by adjectives and nouns (81 occurrences or 7%), an observation which also holds true for Portuguese (97 occurrences or 9%). Roughly 60% of both the English and Portuguese examples were verbs (parentheticals like *I think/eu acho* or verbs like *seem/parece*).

### *Epistemic modal equivalents in Portuguese and English*

As summed up by Westney “it seems that some epistemic uses are well defined, [...] while others are far from distinct, merge easily, and in some cases have doubtful epistemic status. The third point concerns the potentially vast number of exponents” (Westney, 1986, p.312). This becomes clear as we use the corpus to identify the form-function equivalences. Table 1 shows the form-function equivalences in the BNC-Sample and the NURC-RJ databases in some areas of epistemic modality (evidentials and judgments).

All the uses of epistemic modals cannot be defined in this framework. Thus, in spoken interaction, the epistemic meaning may be overlaid with functions which do not concern epistemic matters. The high frequency of the interpersonal metaphors (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) *I (don't) think – eu (não) acho* (339 and 392 occurrences respectively) reflects the important discursive function of the phrase. To give an example, *I think* is used to soften criticism, to facilitate the introduction of a topic which may be offensive to the hearer, etc:

- (4) **I THINK** perhaps that can be thrown out because otherwise it's going to scratch that that nice tin. (BNC-Sample)

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The discourse functions associated with epistemic modality are of different kinds. *Eu acho* and *I think* may also serve as fillers or planners facilitating the processing of thought units further ahead as in (5), (6) and (7).

- (5) olha... economiza tempo né... economiza porque... é... isso aí acaba sendo também em dinheiro mas... **EU ACHO** que... porque veja bem... se eu sair daqui em cinco minutinhos estourando uns dez minutos... eu estou na escola... se o trânsito estiver bom...
- (6) não **EU ACHO** que... bom éh::... o calor humano **EU ACHO** que:: éh/éh::... o carioca... éh::... tem um calor humano melhor não só::... em relação ao mundo mas até...
- (7) If I don't want anything I, I just go in there and **I THINK**... well I'll just go and see I may see something which catches my eye.

The verb phrases *eu acho* and *I think* can occur either in clause-initial or in clause-final position in both Portuguese and English. Perkins (1983, p.147) sums up *I think* as follows: "its primary function appears to be to express simple subjective uncertainty or politeness/deference". Perkins explicitly comments on the syntactic versatility of *I think* and related expressions such as *I presume* and *I suppose*, and argues that they have a close affinity with the class of modal adverbs, as in (8) below:

- (8) (a) He's drunk again, **I PRESUME**.  
(b) He's drunk again, **PRESUMABLY**. (Perkins, 1983, p.98)

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*Table 1 - Notional categories of epistemic modality in the English and Portuguese databases*

<b>Subtype</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Portuguese</b>	<b>n</b>
BELIEF	<i>I know, I don't know</i>	345	<i>I know, I don't know</i>	82
	<i>I think, I don't think, I should think</i>	211	<i>eu acho, eu não acho, eu penso</i>	384
	<i>I am sure, I am not sure</i>	28	<i>(eu) tenho certeza, (eu) não tenho certeza, com certeza</i>	13
	<i>I feel, I've got a feeling</i>	14	-	
	<i>I understand, I can't understand, I don't understand</i>	10	<i>(eu) entendo, (eu) não entendo, no meu entender, eu compreendo</i>	12
	<i>I believe, I don't believe</i>	10	<i>(eu) acredito, (eu) não acredito</i>	14
	<i>I doubt, I don't doubt, no doubt</i>	6	<i>(eu) duvido, (eu) não duvido, sem dúvida, não tem/há dúvida</i>	9
	<i>I expect, I don't expect</i>	3	<i>(eu) espero, (eu) não espero</i>	8
	<i>I realize<sup>8</sup></i>	2	-	
	<i>I am convinced, I am not convinced</i>	2	-	
	<i>I expect, I don't expect</i>	3	<i>(eu) espero, (eu) não espero</i>	8
	<i>I guess</i>	2	<i>(eu) suponho</i>	3
	<i>I must say</i>	1	<i>eu devo dizer</i>	1
	<i>I presume</i>	1	-	
	<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>635</b>	
INDUCTION	<i>must</i>	65	<i>deve</i>	19
	<i>seem</i>	24	<i>parece, parecem</i>	37
	<i>obviously</i>	10	<i>obviamente</i>	1
	<i>should</i>	10	-	
	<i>will</i>	9	-	
	<i>apparently</i>	6	-	
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>124</b>		<b>57</b>

<sup>8</sup> *I realize* is included in the Portuguese examples *(eu) entendo, (eu) não entendo, no meu entender, eu compreendo*.



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HEARSAY	X say(s), I was told	7	X disse, dizem, ouvi dizer, me contaram/disseram/falaram	24
	according to	5	-	
	be supposed to	3	-	
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>15</b>		<b>24</b>
RELIABILITY	probably	73	provavelmente	5
	might	66	pode <sup>9</sup>	40
	really	34	realmente	46
	perhaps	33	talvez	66
	may	22	pode	
	likely	13	é possível	12
	certainly	12	certamente <sup>10</sup>	12
	surely	10		
	indeed	6	de fato	1
	possibly	5	possivelmente	4
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>274</b>		<b>186</b>

In examples (9) and (10), *I think* and *eu acho* clearly express simple subjective uncertainty:

(9) eu após a operação engordei terrivelmente... tendo agora que::: diminuir o peso e/é tudo light... margarina light... éh/essas carnes que eu te falei do feijão eu estou diminuindo embora... ah/éh:: faça uso... feijão a gente consome mais o feijão:: preto... né o carioca é mais do feijão preto **EU ACHO**...

(10) I know how a basic computer works **I THINK**.

However, they can also be used to express confidence rather than doubt in the proposition:

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<sup>9</sup> *Pode* and *talvez* may be used indistinctly in Portuguese as equivalents to *might*, *may* and *perhaps*.

<sup>10</sup> *Certamente* is taken here as an equivalent of both *surely* and *certainly*.

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(11) por causa da base que eu tinha do, do primário e ginásio  
que **EU ACHO** fundamental né, porque você chega no...

(12) Well erm **I THINK** it's dead interesting actually!

*I think* and *eu acho* are mental clauses of cognition which, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.199) “are able to set up another clause or set of clauses as the content of thinking – as the ideas created by the cognition”. Even though the pragmatic effect achieved in (9) and (10) differs from that of (11) and (12), it should be remembered that, whatever the effect of *I think* or *eu acho*, their use essentially qualifies the proposition expressed in the clause containing ‘the content of thinking’. Only naked assertions imply total commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed; modalized assertions do not. This is exactly the view shared by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.625) when they state that “we only say we are certain when we are not”.

*Eu acho* and *I think* are subject to transferred negation when they occur in initial position. This is illustrated in examples (13) and (14)

(13) **EU NÃO ACHO** que casar e ter filhos seja uma coisa natural, da vida. É uma coisa assim, quer dizer, é natural porque é comum né, as pessoas se casam, têm filhos, mas **EU NÃO ACHO** que você tenha obrigação: Oh! Vou ficar pra tia, vou ficar solteirona, não, pô...

(14) A: Phil's not two faced.

B: Is he not?

A: No.

B: **I DON'T THINK** he's very genuine.

The proposition in (13) is ‘casar e ter filhos não é uma coisa natural’, but the negation of the complement clause is

transferred to the initial verb phrase. A rough paraphrase would be ‘Estou razoavelmente convencida que casar e ter filhos não é uma coisa natural’. Similarly in (14), the proposition is ‘he’s not very genuine’.

The discourse markers *sabe* and *you know* constitute another interesting modal category frequently found in the conversations at hand. They refer to what the speaker thinks is shared knowledge and express one of the highest possible degrees of subjective certainty. These discourse markers function as connectives with emphatic meaning. It might be argued that *sabe* (169 occurrences) and *you know* (193 occurrences) are not only emphatic discourse markers but that they have grammaticalized an interpersonal function associated with the speaker inviting the addressees’ inferences (cf. Tree & Schrock, 2002; Macaulay, 2002). Some examples may help clarify this point.

The last epistemic device I would like to explore in this paper is the interpersonal character of tag questions (Perkins, 1983; Holmes, 1986, Heberle, 1997). Perkins (1983, p.111) argues that “since questions qualify the truth of a proposition by making it relative to the speaker’s uncertainty, they may be regarded as expressing epistemic modality”. Tag questions, i.e., phrases like *isn’t it* as in *That’s the choice they have isn’t it?*, or the Portuguese *né* as in *O Bob’s monopolizou a Tijuca né?*, effectively turn statements into questions. They have been singled out as markers of tentativeness by some linguists (e.g. Lakoff, 1972), but in fact, like *I think* and *eu acho*, tag questions can be used to express both the confidence and the lack of confidence in the propositions expressed (i.e. tentativeness) and also the speaker’s commitment to the proposition.

<p>brasileiro ele tem uma, grave doença que é a inércia          tem lances positivos aí, coisas boas, e, mobilizando          á que ia vingar? Loc - Eu acho que se for bem feito,          em empregada fica com preguiça de lavar as coisas,          ar muito em ter uma, um grande centro universitário,          ens lindos, corados, com essa calça que usam agora          enozinho tem dois anos, então é muito balanceada,          u adoro comer lá. Ela faz uns peixes maravilhosos,          o tem essa sensualidade, ele não valoriza isso, não,          marido dela que eu não aturaria de um inimigo meu,          estão, [ parte]?, a nível de educação das pessoas</p>	<p><b>sabe</b>, ah, o lance do, não fede mas também não cheira, n  <b>sabe</b>, as pessoas, profissionais, pra fazer um bom traba  <b>sabe</b>, bem divulgado eu acho que pega, a nível de mer  <b>sabe</b>, cansa. DOC - Dá muito trabalho, né, você passa o  <b>sabe</b>, cê, sei lá, por por exemplo na na cidade que eu ti  <b>sabe</b>, cinza de listinha preta. Eles vinham com aquele, b  <b>sabe</b>, com proteínas e tudo, DOC - E como é que eles faze  <b>sabe</b>, com tudo natural. Ela me explica, como é, mas eu  <b>sabe</b>, de chamar atenção, de ser notado, entendeu, pelo men  <b>sabe</b>, de não poder fazer isso, não quero você conversando c  <b>sabe</b>, de como, estar dentro dessas situações, de aglomeraç</p> <p>booked something else, er but I'm leaving it sort of, <b>you know</b>, sort of three, four days maybe before we depart...          That, that is certainly, <b>you know</b>, it, that can be, and, and it's something which...          nd they go on holiday and they're not supposed to, <b>you know</b>, they neither of them of told their boyfriend they go in          elley, cos first of all I didn't want to talk in it, <b>you know</b>, I just went like yeah, yeah, yeah, no, sort of...          you can't tell her to get off cos it's so cute, <b>you know</b>, she's sitting there she's going like...          rip it! I'd sit and watch it, <b>you know</b>, just put it there, sit and watch it. ...          That's quite high that, <b>you know</b>, seventy five percent! Well it's got ...          I backed up onto it I backed up onto it, <b>you know</b>, when I was do ta and I were ...          ot now probably in the new order or whatever it is, <b>you know</b>, we might require a different sort of flesh m          ere they got their beliefs from, from them thinking, <b>you know</b>, they've mixed men's thinking with, with biologi</p>
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Figure 2 – Partial concordance of the discourse markers *sabe* and *you know*

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In example (15), the tag *can she* expresses confidence rather than doubt in the proposition that it is possible that a certain woman will not ignore the speaker in case they are at the same place; the correctness of this reading is confirmed by the addressee's response:

- (15) A: Well certainly if I'm there and I'm a guest if she cooked for her and Martin she can't just ignore me, CAN SHE?  
B: No, certainly not.

Intonation seems to play a crucial role in such examples. Example (16) below is another where the speaker expresses confidence rather than doubt:

- (16) Você estava falando em relevo, eu me lembrei de uma cidade que tem um relevo lindo, é que a história do rio....Recife...Recife é atravessada por dois rios, né, e isso torna a cidade muito bonita, ela inegavelmente é a cidade mais bonita do Nordeste.

The tag is used here to underline the obviousness of the statement; the addressee is expected to agree.

However, tag questions are commonly found where the speaker is clearly not committed to the truth of the proposition. The tag questions are found with rising rather than falling intonation.

- (17) [two friends talking about a writer]  
A: about, you know with the same writer, I always buy Sackville, something to do with Sackville, you know the erm, er, what they call it?  
B: the Sackville West?  
A: that's right, that's, that, I think it was so, I mean that

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she was so it must be just something to do with gardens  
as well, cos she was a gardener *WASN'T SHE?*

This means something like “I’m not sure she was a gardener”. In example (18) the speaker’s uncertainty arises directly out of the interaction:

(18) [a woman describing her experience as a student in the US]

então a gente tinha que passar três ou quatro horas na biblioteca, todo dia até onze horas da noite... depois... onze horas da noite você tinha que fazer o trabalho em casa até duas horas da manhã pra poder trabalhar... terrível...e... ( ) ao mesmo tempo muito agradável porque realmente morar em Nova Iorque é um privilégio que é dado a poucos... e... então eu fiquei lá um ano, fiz concurso pra ( )... passei mas não fiquei porque... eu disse *NÉ?* depois eu fui mesmo... fui de carro atravessei os Estados Unidos todo de carro e conheci várias cidades... Los Angeles... Washington...

## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions I reach after slicing just a tiny piece of this ‘cross-linguistic modal pie’ are inevitably tentative. In conversation, it seems that the establishment and maintenance of good social relations are of paramount importance. As a result, speakers rarely state simple facts or make naked assertions. My analysis of the conversations in both languages suggests that the epistemic modals are a significant resource for the speakers: they are used to convey the speakers’ attitude to the proposition being expressed, to express the speakers’

sensibility to the addressee, to negotiate sensitive topics, and in general to facilitate open discussion.

In his analysis of transcriptions of dissertation defenses Recski (2005) points to the fact that epistemic modality “habitually spreads [...] through the clauses functioning rather as a means to announce the tonality and force of the propositions that are being made as well as to foreground the attitudinally salient information and background ideational content”. I would like to elaborate on the proposition above, suggesting that this ‘prosodic scope’ appears to be directly related to certain stretches of *any* type of spoken interaction. Hence, narrative sections of a text, where one speaker holds the floor, are likely to contain a lower proportion of epistemic content. Evaluative sectors, on the other hand, where all participants in the interaction express their views, probably have a much higher proportion of epistemic modal forms. In addition to this, it is not difficult to envisage that there might be a direct correlation between the topic under discussion and the number of epistemic devices found. Sensitive topics, which potentially involve the speaker talking about him/herself and/or controversial points of view, are probably correlated with high usage of epistemic modals.

Last but not least, a point which I believe deserves mentioning – and in fact deserves a great deal of attention – is the dexterity revealed by native speakers in conversations such as these in using the whole array of epistemic modal forms in complex and subtle combinations in both languages. For example, the speaker in the example (19) combined *I mean* and *I think* as well as using a tag question. In example (20), the speaker combines *eu acho* with *certamente* and ends with *não tem dúvida, né*.

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- (19) [mother talking to son about school affairs]  
I'm pissed off, I tell you what, I MEAN I THINK, you've  
been alright throughout your school more or less  
HAVEN'T YA?
- (20) [duas pessoas conversando sobre preconceito racial]  
EU ACHO que CERTAMENTE existe essa diferença, entre  
bairros e entre regiões do país, e aqui mesmo no Rio EU  
ACHO que NÃO TEM DÚVIDA, NÉ, isso.

In the real world, such combinations occur commonly; it is only in the invented examples of linguists that tokens appear in tidy isolation.

While it is important to stress that epistemic modals do express, whether in English or Portuguese, the speakers' attitude to propositions and addressees, and even the speakers' sources of evidence, I am not sure that it is possible to say exactly what every single modal form *means* on any particular context of situation. In informal conversations, such as the ones analyzed here, where the participants are trying to achieve, simultaneously, the goals of saying something on the topic discussed; being sensitive to the face-needs of the various addressees; qualifying assertions to avoid total commitment to a point of view which they may want to withdraw from; qualifying assertions to encourage the flow of discussion, then it does not seem feasible to conclude that 'this form expresses A and that form expresses B', regardless of the language. Speakers may make use of the polypragmatic nature of epistemic modals to say many things at once.



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