

# **Indicating Uncertainty in English and Swedish Conversation**

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## **0. Background Info**

In linguistics, uncertainty is described in a framework called “epistemic modality.” This is a type of modality that often subsumes evidentiality in most linguistic literature. More recent work on this topic by scholars such as Ferdinand De Haan, argue for a separation between evidentiality and epistemic modality as in De Haan (1999), but for the purposes of this paper I will consider evidentiality a form of epistemic modality as found in F.R. Palmer’s (1986) model. Palmer is referenced in both De Haan (1999) and Aijmer (1996). The two models for uncertainty I will use in this paper can be found in appendices A and B. Another framework that will be described in this study is the scalar organization of epistemic modals taken from Wårnsby (2006) found in section 4.

## **1. Introduction**

This comparative study of English and Swedish will focus on words and phrases that indicate low levels of certainty and indicate weak evidence for propositions made in utterances, both in English and Swedish. For data, I will be looking at several example sentences and a dialogue in Swedish and English that have elements of uncertainty in them. I am mostly concerned with the semantics of words and phrases that indicate uncertainty, some of which have the added element of polysemy. This paper will focus on the spoken linguistic methods of epistemic modality, but according to Aijmer (1996) epistemic modality alone cannot explain some of the features of Swedish uncertainty, so we will also consider some of the pragmatic aspects of modality, such as the relation between the speaker and the hearer. For some parts of the Swedish examples, we will have to regard modals as discourse markers.

## **2. Epistemic Modality: A framework for uncertainty**

According to SIL International's linguistic glossary (2004), epistemic modality is a "modality that connotes how much certainty or evidence a speaker has for the proposition expressed by his or her utterance." This serves as a framework in which a speaker or listener's method of knowing can be described. The SIL divides these modes into two parts: judgment modality and evidentiality. Judgment modality is described as "an epistemic modality that connotes the speaker's strength of inference or degree of confidence in the reality of the proposition expressed by his or her utterance" (SIL International, 2004). Judgment modality can be broken down into a variety of different moods, such as interrogative or declarative, but I will not explore mood in this study. Evidentiality is described as "an epistemic modality that connotes the speaker's assessment of the evidence for his or her statement." (SIL International 2004). The SIL then states two kinds of evidentiality; these are quotative and sensory evidentials. Quotative evidentials are those that signal that someone else is the source of a statement. Sensory evidentials signal that "the speaker's evidence for the truth of his or her statement is derived from the speaker's own sensory experience" (SIL International, 2004). These divisions in the epistemic modality model are important to note because they help to differentiate between the semantics of polysemous words. Swedish modal particles are notorious for having multiple conflicting meanings.

### **3. Swedish modal particles *väl*, *nog*, and *visst***

The following sections 3.1 through 3.3 will discuss the fuzzy meanings of Swedish modal particles *väl*, *nog*, and *visst* considering the categorization of these words in the expanded epistemic modality model found in Appendix B. Each pair of examples come from a contrastive study of Swedish modal particles done by Karin Aijmer (1996). Her study was confined to a corpus of fourteen texts of Swedish originals (SO) and their English translations (ET). The texts

were mainly taken from works of fiction and from children's books to ensure a large amount of dialogue. This corpus consists of about 10,000 words containing a total of 775 modal particles.

### 3.1 Swedish modal particle: *väl*

Aijmer's (1996) study found the Swedish modal particle *väl* to have 31 different English translations in her corpus. *Väl* was observed to have appeared 211 times and was most commonly translated as "I suppose," which is categorized as an evidential because the speaker has some degree of evidence to make an assertion. Consider the following example:

- a) Snickarungarna var *väl* inte så aktsamma. (SO)
- b) *I suppose* the carpenter's children could not always have been so very good. (ET)

In some cases, *väl* was considered a discourse marker and was not translated because it simply serves to mark the interpersonal and colloquial nature of the statement.

- a) Du behöver *väl* inte bry dej om. Det är *väl* inte din Pelle heller. (SO)
- b) It's nothing to do with you. Pelle isn't yours. (ET)

In other cases, *väl* is translated as "surely" and has the function of emphasis or concession:

- a) Inte ska du *väl* försvinna helt och hållet, lilla humla? (SO)
- b) *Surely* you won't disappear altogether, little Bumble? (ET)

Further translations of *väl* include: "might," "would," "as you see," "I'm sure," "I guess," and "I hope," and among others. Clearly, Swedish modal particles are tricky words that depend on context. In general, *väl* communicates an interactive and colloquial style. Another Swedish modal particle worth noting is *nog*.

### 3.2 Swedish modal particle: *nog*

The Swedish modal particle *nog* is very interesting. *Nog* occurred 165 times in Aijmer's ~10,000 word corpus and had 30 different translations. The most popular translation into English was "probably." Further translations included: "I think," "must," "would," "certainly,"

“really,” and “might well,” among others. When the meaning of *nog* is translated as “probably,” it indicates judgment. This is illustrated in the following example:

- a) Hade han några syskon. Det hade han *nog*. (SO)
- b) Did he have any sisters or brothers? *Probably*. (ET)

This is judgment because the speaker is weighing the validity of the statement with what is generally known, without evidence. *Nog* could also be used as an evidential.

- a) Och han hade *nog* just en sådan här koja. (SO)
- b) He *must* have had a hut just like this one. (ET)

The above usage indicates evidentiality because the speaker is basing his statement on a piece of evidence (the hut). Other translations of *nog* include “I think,” “I suppose,” “I am sure,” “would,” “no doubt,” “perhaps,” and “certainly.”

### 3.3 Swedish modal particle: *visst*

Swedish has another modal particle *visst* that has many different meanings. It was found 89 times in Aijmer’s corpus and had 31 different translations. The most popular translation into English was “of course.” Other translations included: “seem,” “certainly,” “must,” and “I think.” When the meaning of *visst* is translated as “of course,” it is explained as a stressed discourse feature. This is illustrated in the following example:

- a) Vi kan *visst* komma härifrån. (SO)
- b) *Of course* we can get away from here. (ET)

Oddly enough, *visst* can also be used to indicate hearsay, which signifies a much lower level of confidence than the previous stressed version. The following demonstrates hearsay and is a quotative evidential.

- a) Han var ju gammal i kåren, var *visst* kommissarie redan när jag började för tolv år sedan.
- b) He’s been around a long time. He was already an inspector when I started, twelve years ago.

Notice here that *visst* is not being translated. Because of this, the English version loses the hearsay nature of the Swedish original.

#### 4. Scalar organization of English and Swedish epistemic modals

In an attempt to organize epistemic modals, I've recreated two figures that Anna Wärensby presents in her book: (De)coding Modality (2006). These figures show a scalar representation of English and Swedish epistemic modals with words that indicate the most confident inference on the left fading to words indicating the least confident suppositions on the right. Wärensby (2006) explains in her book that she excludes the vertical lines in these charts to highlight the fact that these scales are like a continuum, meaning that the edges of each category are hard to define. By comparing English to Swedish, you can see that Swedish has many more epistemic modals and some of them occur in more than one category, like *bör* (found both in reasonable inference and tentative inference in figure 2).

Figure 1. The scalar organization of English epistemic modals (Wärensby, 2006)

<b>CONFIDENT INFERENCE</b>	<b>REASONABLE INFERENCE</b>	<b>TENTATIVE INFERENCE</b>	<b>POSSIBLE CONCLUSION</b>
<i>must</i>	<i>will</i>	<i>should</i>	<i>may might can could</i>

Figure 2. The scalar organization of Swedish epistemic modals (Wärensby, 2006)

<b>CONFIDENT INFERENCE</b>	<b>REASONABLE INFERENCE</b>	<b>TENTATIVE INFERENCE</b>	<b>POSSIBLE CONCLUSION</b>	<b>HEARSAY</b>	<b>SHARED BELIEF</b>
<i>måste</i>	<i>bör</i> <i>lära</i>	<i>bör borde må</i> <i>torde måtte</i>	<i>kan kunde</i>	<i>lära</i> <i>ska</i>	<i>torde</i>

This is a useful model, but words like *väl*, *nog* and *visst* would have to be entered multiple times in this scale because their meanings cover a wide range of inference. *Väl* meaning “I’m sure” might be placed as a confident inference, but would also have to be included under possible conclusion because of the usage when *väl* means “I guess.” Similarly, *nog* with

its most common usage as “probably” might be placed under tentative inference, but *nog* meaning “certainly” might be placed as a confident inference. *Visst*, most commonly used to mean “of course” might be considered a reasonable or confident inference, but when used to indicate hearsay, would be categorized under hearsay. The fact that Swedish modal particles can be categorized under headings that aren’t near each other on Wårnsby’s scale shows how a single word can represent multiple lexical entries.

## 5. Dialogue Comparison

Below in section 5.1, I have included an excerpt from a Swedish dialogue in which two people (Lotta and Tommy) are interacting with a waiter (*servitören*) at a restaurant. The situation is that Lotta and Tommy are trying to decide what to eat and drink, and the waiter is taking their order. This is a classic case where people are uncertain and their uncertainty is reflected in the language. All of the bolded words are those that indicate uncertainty. Section 5.2 is my English translation.

### 5.1 Swedish dialogue example

*Servitören:* ‘Jaha. Vill ni beställa, **eller** ...?’

*Lotta:* ‘**Nja**, vi väntar **nog** lite.’

*Servitören:* ‘Javisst. **Kanske** ni önskar något att dricka före maten?’

*Lotta:* ‘Vill du ha nåt, Tommy?’

*Tommy:* ‘Ska vi ta en drink, **tycker du**?’

*Lotta:* ‘Nej, jag tror det är bra för min del. **Förresten**. Ett glas vitt vin, **kanske**. Det vore gott. Ja, det tar jag.’

### 5.2 English translation

*Waiter:* ‘Ah. Do you(pl.) want to order, **or**...’

*Lotta:* ‘**Well**, I **think** we’ll wait a little’

*Waiter:* ‘Of course. **Maybe** you want something to drink before the main course?’

*Lotta:* ‘Do you want something, Tommy?’

*Tommy:* ‘Do *you* **think** we should have a drink?’

*Lotta:* ‘No, I’m fine. **Well**... A glass of white wine, **maybe**. It was good (previously). Yeah, I’ll take it.’

### 5.3 Explication of dialogues

In the Swedish dialogue, the waiter's first line ends with the word *eller*. This translates to "or" in English. Including 'or/*eller*' followed by an ellipse may indicate that the waiter's turn was cut off, but it could also have been a way for the waiter to care for the negative face of the Lotta and Tommy, by suggesting that they have other options. In fact, Lotta takes this opportunity to be uncertain by saying *nja*, which is a portmanteau of *nej* (no) and *ja* (yes). She then uses the modal particle *nog* to help her emphasize the fact that she and Tommy will wait before ordering. This dialogue was preceded by a debate between Lotta and Tommy over what they want for an appetizer ending with Lotta observing that Tommy has only decided upon an appetizer. Lotta has evidence then that Tommy is not ready to order a main course, so *nog* in this case is being used as an evidential. I've translated this as unstressed "will," which aligns with 8 of 165 translations of *nog* in Aijmer's (1996) contrastive corpus study.

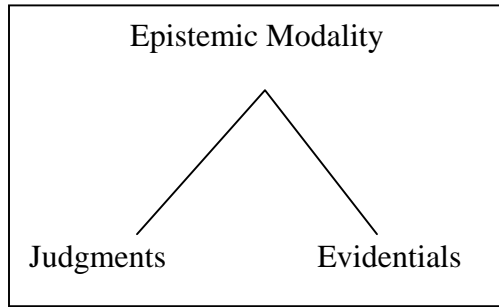
In the next line, the waiter uses the word 'maybe/*kanske*' to hedge his suggestion, which he frames as a question. The next line of interest is Tommy's line: 'Ska vi ta en drink, **tycker du?** / Do you **think** we should have a drink?' Here, Tommy is taking Lotta's feelings into consideration by participating in negotiation over drink orders, because at this point Lotta has already asked Tommy if he wants something. He doesn't say yes or no, but rather asks Lotta what she thinks on the matter.

In the last line of the dialogue, Lotta says initially that she doesn't want a drink, but convinces herself that she will by the end of her line. I've translated two different words (*nja* and *förresten*) as English discourse marker "well," even though Swedish has no direct translation for "well," because these words are serving the same purpose that English "well" would.

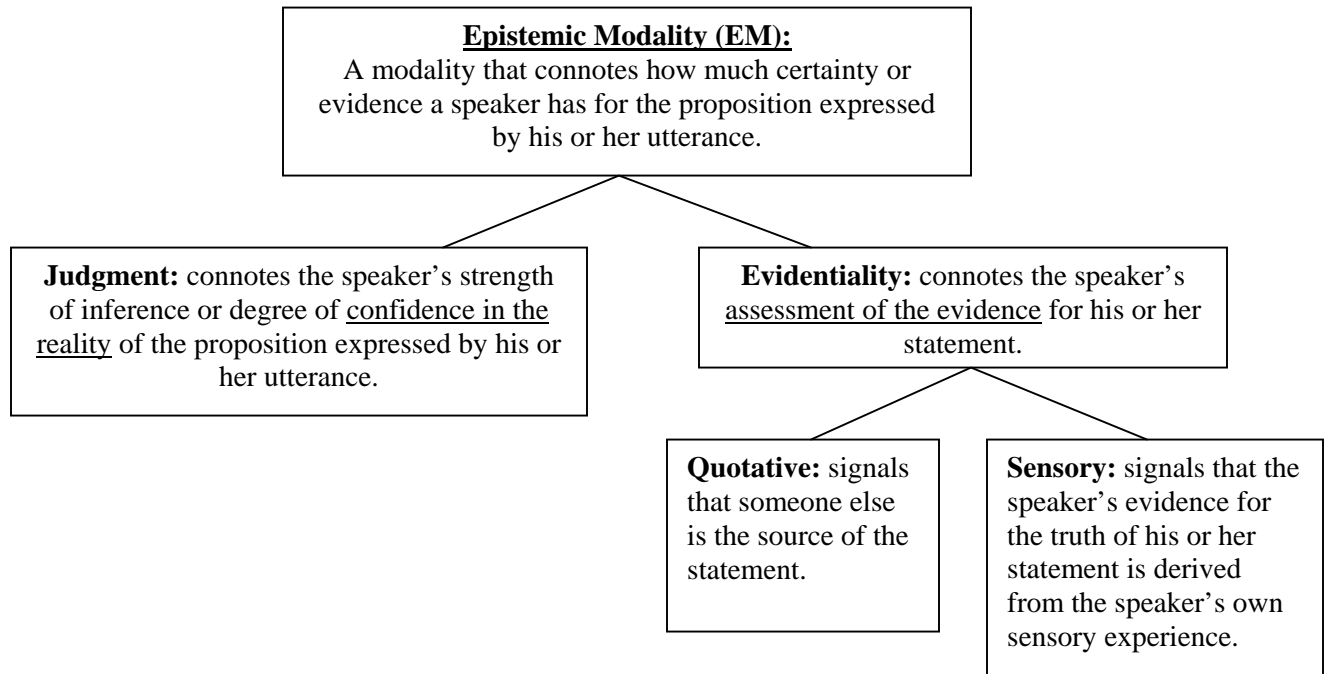
## 6. Conclusion

The primary way for Swedish and English speakers to indicate uncertainty linguistically is by use of epistemic modal words. The difference is that the Swedish language has many more of these words as shown by figures one and two in section four. On top of that, Swedish has a number of special modal particles as described in section three. These add a level of fuzzy meaning to the sentences in which they occur because of their polysemous nature. Context is key in deciphering sentences that use these words, but a lot of context is lost in translations from Swedish to English.

Appendix A: Palmer's (1986) model of epistemic modality.



Appendix B: The expanded model, based on SIL International's glossary of linguistic terms (2004).



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