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Gender and Age Aspects within the Pragmatic Potential of the Epistemic Modality Markers

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Abstract

It is well known that the representatives of a certain gender and age groups are distinguished by various perceptions of the world, evaluation of the objective reality events as well as by operating facts as reliable. The purpose of the research is to reveal the speaker's gender and age characteristics affecting the confidence level in reliability of facts provided and as such the epistemic modal markers (modal words and modal verbs) chosen by him or her. To achieve the objective of the research there were used some linguistic methods such as a communicative-pragmatic and the descriptive ones. The illustrative basis consists of the situations expressing the meanings of epistemic possibility and epistemic necessity. Two types of literary characters from two fiction resources (J. Banville «The Sea» and M. Zusak «The Book Thief») were chosen to analyse: a middle-aged man and a teenage girl. The research identifies that the man mostly deals with markers of epistemic possibility if his statement is based on retrospection, intuition, or faith / conjecture (unlike a girl), an assumption (similar to a girl). In case of having a convincing evidence base, the man uses epistemic necessity markers. The girl demonstrates the usage of modal markers of epistemic necessity if her statements are based on faith, desire to benefit or "female logic". The desire to attract attention of the opposite sex interlocutor is marked by the usage of modal markers of epistemic possibility. It is also worth noting that strong emotions, which are common to a teenage girl rather than a mature man, can distort the reliability of the statements. The content of the article is of practical value for the further epistemic modality researches in the field of linguistic pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

Keywords: Epistemic modality, Epistemic possibility, Epistemic necessity, Modal verbs, Modal words, Gender-age aspect, Pragmatics, Anthropocentric approach.

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Introduction

Linguistics at the modern stage of its development is characterized by the anthropocentric approach, i.e. orientation on the personality of the participant of communication as the creator of the speech product. The shift of the linguistic-centred paradigm to the anthropocentric one did not occur by a chance: the rapid development of pragmatics clearly demonstrates the existence of the human factor, which has a significant impact on the development and functioning of the language; the object of the pragmatics study is the participant of communication who satisfies his or her needs, motives, intentions and carries out certain communicative actions in the context of a communicative situation.

Due to the peculiarities of the thinking, cognising and self-knowing personality, contextual interpretation and transformation of the lexical meaning take place. In the consciousness of a person there exists the refraction of the data coming from outside via the sense organs that is subsequently subject to the logical processing, comprehension, and transmission. It is the linguistic personality who imparts a high, medium or low degree of confidence to the statement, provides the listener with reliable or unreliable information. Y.N. Karaulov (2010) states that it is impossible to comprehend the language itself unless one goes beyond it and turns to its creator, native speaker, user, i.e. the individual or the specific linguistic personality. It is worth emphasizing that the listener is rather an active than a passive participant of communication, whose task is to provide a responding speech to the interlocutor. Lithuanian researcher R.I. Pavilionis (1983) submits the idea that a person is not just a passive referent of the language expressions, but an active interpreter of those, not just a native speaker but above all a carrier of a certain conceptual system which makes him understand the language, learn the world and communicate with other native speakers.

The proposed article aims at revealing the reliance of the choice of epistemic modality markers on the gender and age characteristics of the speaker. While interpreting the nature of the epistemic modality certain view point discrepancies among the linguists can be noted (Shakirova et al., 2016). Epistemic modality (further on – EM) implies the communicative and pragmatic category, which is based on the concept of authenticity, reflecting the speaker's extent of awareness of the objective reality phenomena. Within the framework of EM, we distinguish semantic zones of epistemic necessity (further on – EN) and epistemic possibility (further on – EP). Following J. van der Auwera and V.A. Plungyan's (1998) point of view the article deals with the EP considered identically to the speaker's uncertainty, while EN implies the speaker's confidence and the relatively high degree of the proposition possibility. As F.R. Palmer claims, EP indicates one of the possible conclusions, as for EN the only possible conclusion comes from the observed evidence (2001). In other words, EP indicates the reliability of the proposition in one of the possible worlds while EN does it in all possible worlds.

Methods

Currently anthropocentrism is a leading approach in linguistics developing the communicative-pragmatic method. It considers the personality of a native speaker and his or her position in the intercultural communication process. The research uses the communicative-pragmatic method enhancing nowadays aims at studying the functioning of a language in the process of communication, including the pragmatic features of the language units. At the same time the relevant issues are both the certain speech situation itself and the success of communication and the communicative behaviour of the speakers, as well as participants of communication and their gender-age characteristics. In this work the descriptive method focuses on discovering and demonstrating the phenomena of the English language by observing specific language units, mostly modal verbs (further on – MV) and modal words (further on – MW) on the basis of speech situations from two fiction resources (J. Banville «The Sea» and M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Results

While examining the communicants' gender and age characteristics as a choice of the pragmatic factor of the MV and MW with the EM semantics, we selected two types of the positive characters in the fiction resources: a middle-aged man and a teenage girl. Chosen examples led to the conclusion that a girl is more inclined to intentionally increase or decrease her confidence in the provided information due to positive or negative emotions, statements based on intuition, certain irrationality and illogical assertions, a desire to benefit, a coquetry or a desire to attract man's attention. As for an adult man he would rather provide no information at all than mislead the interlocutor therefore the MV and MW of the EN are used only if the man has a convincing evidence base. On the contrary a man would operate with the markers of EP in situations where his assertions are based on intuition or retrospection. If the speaker's assertions are based on an assumption, operating with the markers of EP is the case for both the man and the girl.

Discussion

1. Introductory remarks

The speaker and the listener are active participants in the speech interaction, in which, the exchange of remarks results in the constant changing of roles. M.Y. Oleshkov describes this process as follows: to keep the communicative balance while communicating, the interlocutors change their roles and interact with each other, controlling the communicative situation parameters and reveal their reaction according to the changes emerging in that situation (2006). A schematic representation of the structure of the communicative situation is presented in the research of P. Brown and C. Fraser who generally identify the situation (communication circumstances), participants of speech interaction and their interpersonal relationships as well as their illocutionary intentions and the ultimate perlocutionary goal of communication (1979), which includes the impact on the addressee's informative state, mood, plans, desires and will (Susov, 2006).

At the same time the speaker acts as a subject transmitting reliable or unreliable information which contains the subjective imprint of his or her opinion, while the listener acts as a subject receiving the information, certain communicative strategies and tactics contributing to achievement of the interlocutors' communicative intentions in particular communicative situations. The starting point of a communicative situation with the EM semantics is the speaker's intention to inform the interlocutor about the objective reality situation based on the degree of his confidence in the reliability of the information provided. Thus, the actualization of the communicative situation is impossible without the initial embodiment in reality of the communicants' illocutionary intention.

The interaction between the speaker and the listener is a complex system of relationships which take place at the emotional, social and cultural and national levels. Communication can be interpreted as some interaction and relationship of at least two individuals and hence two holistic worlds. Awareness of *who* is your interlocutor provides an important prerequisite for pursuing communication. Concerning the personality of the participants of communication who make a subjective assessment of the reality phenomena, it is important to consider his or her social characteristics, including age and gender we are interested in as well as the interlocutors' social status, the social distance between them, the race identity and emotional and psychological specifications. V.I. Karasik (2002), following M. Zeldich, adds such features as the interlocutors' nationality and cultural origin to the above list of independent characteristics; moreover he highlights education, profession and the language skill level as the learned characteristics.

The above characteristics surely determine the choice of certain epistemic modal markers while communicating. It should be underlined that this process takes place not only through the refraction involving the speaker's personality who using a certain means of conveying the EM seeks to express *his or her self* and to explicate confidence or doubt in the reliability of the statement proposition, but also through

his conception of the listener as an individual, his or her attitude toward the listener and through his or her desire to provide reliable or deliberately unreliable, doubtful or false information.

2. Remarks on the gender and age characteristics of communicants

According to A.V. Kirillina (1999), modern linguistic studies on gender affect two groups of problems: 1. Language and the reflection of gender in it (researches on the nominative system, lexicon, syntax, the gender category and other linguistic facets). The purpose is to describe and explain how the presence of people of different gender is manifested in the language, what assessments are ascribed to men and women and in which semantic areas they are most common. 2. Speech actions of men and women, where typical strategies and tactics are being distinguished, gender-specific choice of lexicon units, ways to achieve success in communication, in other words, the specifics of male and female speaking.

D. Maltz and R. Borker (1982), following R. Lakoff, mention that women are taught to speak and behave like a “lady”, which leads them to become shy and insecure. The incompatibility of adulthood and femininity saps women’s confidence and strength since their speech is designed to meet gender role requirements, but fits the actual personalities developed as a consequence of such requirements. Consequently in the process of socialization, men and women assimilate certain standards and rules of speech conduct, which are determined by their gender identity, and as a result formulate their own statements and perceive the statements of others “as a man” or “as a woman”. The authors introduce the concept of *gender-specific cultures*, as an explanation of the complex process of mastering the characteristics for a certain gender speech and behaviour examples of students (Maltz & Borker, 1982). According to D. Maltz and R. Borker as a result of this process, men and women are forming different models; consequently there exists some misunderstanding in communication due to different expectations of the communicants. In the process of assimilating gender roles, gender stereotypes are important, which are particular cases of the stereotype. Following A.V. Kirillina (1999) gender stereotypes are defined by us as the culturally and socially determined opinions and presuppositions of the qualities, attributes, and standards of behaviour of both sexes and their reflection in the language.

The study of gender linguistic specifics seems to be the most successful in the framework of pragma-linguistics which explores the specifics of the linguistic units in a certain communicative and pragmatic field. E.S. Gritsenko (2005) notes that in order to establish the causes of linguistic variability it is necessary to study the distinct speech practices which make the gender roles emerge rather than to rely on the roles themselves.

In the work of D. Tannen (1990), the differences between men and women communicative styles are presented in terms of binary oppositions. D. Tannen argues that women mostly share their problems, do not hesitate to ask for help or clarify any information, they appreciate sympathy and support. Men prefer to solve their problems instead of discussing them, they reluctantly ask for help or information, often try to be the experts and are more informed in the situation than women. For most women, communication is the way to achieve mutual understanding: a method to establish relationships and to build relationships. In this case, the emphasis is placed on similarities and coincidental experience, and preference is given to communication in informal setting. On the contrary, for most men communication is the way to keep independence, create and maintain social status by demonstrating their knowledge and skills the preference being given to communication in public.

A.V. Plusnina (2012) rightly notes, that at the present stage, linguistic gender science questions what language means and what pragmatic and communicative contexts involve the gender development, how extralinguistic and intralinguistic factors impact this issue. Nowadays scientists investigate the ways, speech resources, tactics and strategies designing the gender identity. Statements are not just words and speech acts, but methods used by communicants in order to build their own image and the image of the interlocutor. A.V. Plusnina points out that “language development of gender is an activity based on

correlating language forms with gender representations that are part of the Universum of common meanings of the culture representatives" (2012).

Referring to the notion of age, it is necessary to focus on its polysemy. According to A.V. Miklyaeva and P.V. Rumyantseva, in terms of biology, age is a person's feature which describes ontogenetically dependent regularity of his or her maturing. In social terms, social age can be defined as a package of "normative-role characteristics" formed due to the division of labour and the social structure of society that predetermines various forms of social activity of people of a certain chronological age. There is also a third interpretation of this notion concerning the statement that any person agrees with the values of a certain age-related subculture and relates himself or herself to any age category based on the subjectively experienced age. Every age phase represents a specific cultural and historical phenomenon and the understanding of the phenomenon content contributes to the analysis of the age symbolism system in a given culture which conveys ways of awareness of human background and the society age stratification. Thus, A.V. Miklyaeva and P.V. Rumyantseva basing their theoretical views and empirical researches on the social constructionism consider age as a "socially constructed phenomenon" and reflection of the age relations developed and prevailed in a particular society. Age identity is perceived as a consequence of the person identification with a certain age group accompanied by the acceptance of its standards and rules fully or partially, in other words, as leverage for someone's behaviour. Hence, the age identity is formed in the process of human interpretation of his chronological age by means of age-related social constructs under the influence of age-related stereotypes and on the basis of knowledge of social reality acquired by a person (Miklyaeva & Rumyantseva, 2008). According to N.A. Kurakina (2015), age identity is developed not only in the manner of the individual's behaviour but also in the speech: the speech of people being representatives of various age groups differs.

Thus, each person has his or her own style of communication depending on a lot of factors among which gender and age can be distinguished.

3. Gender and age characteristics of communicants as a pragmatic factor in choice of epistemic modality markers

Within this article the extent of confidence of communicants is considered in terms of MV and MW explicating the semantics of EP or EM. For comparison we take two completely different positive fiction characters: a middle-aged man and a teenage girl.

Describing retrospection from the viewpoint of a man, the earlier the event took place and the longer time passed up to the moment the speaker remembers that event, the less confidence in reliability of his statements he provides. The example below presents a man recalling his childhood, the narrator's insecurity being marked with MV of EP *may*:

As I walked slowly past, and indeed I *may* even have paused, or faltered, rather, he stuck the toe of his plimsoll into the gravel to stop the swinging gate...(J. Banville «The Sea»).

A girl is also characterized by some doubts about the reliability of the information, but this is due not to the number of past years, but to the feelings that were overwhelming her at that moment. Small details that are not particularly significant for giving a statement as reliable can be erased from memory if a person was in a state of thrill and excitement. In the following example, the happiness and delight of a daughter, who saw her father after a long separation, do not allow her to adequately perceive what is happening. That makes her exaggerate all the events taking place, and is marked with MV of EN *must*:

«Papa, Papa.» She *must* have said it a hundred times as she hugged him in the kitchen and wouldn't let go (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Traditionally man is often thought to be a protector and a person capable of guarding his beloved woman, either his mother or wife or daughter. At the same time to achieve his goal, he is ready to do everything and if he fails, he is ready to bring reasonable evidence and prove his case, for example:

Having persuaded her to throw up what *should* have been her life's work in favour of a futile social gesture, the blackguard absconded, leaving my misfortunate girl in the lurch (J. Banville «The Sea»).

The following example, on the contrary, dispels the existing belief about men as a strong gender, which representatives are not able to experience pain and suffer, endure all life's difficulties and are ready to withstand any hardship and loss. MW of EN *of course* marks the lack of the speaker's doubts of his wife's correctness, however, he is ready to admit that only after his wife's death:

She was right, *of course*, I have always been a moaner, fussing over every slightest twinge or ache (J. Banville «The Sea»).

A girl is often ready to panic exaggerating her fears, putting in markers of EN, providing as reliable information something that actually has no place to exist:

That meant that if the mayor himself used the library, he *must* have seen them. He *must* have asked why they were there (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

However, women learn to deal with their fears as they get older that can be illustrated by the following example where Liesel says with confidence that she is old enough to cope on her own with nightmares. The use of MV of EP *should*, close to the markers of EN in its semantics, convinces of the reliability and awareness of her words:

The only thing that changed was that Liesel told her papa that she *should* be old enough now to cope on her own with the dreams (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Female rather than male is commonly considered to have intuition as the specific quality. The examples below confirm the well-established point of view. A man does not tend to insist on his assumptions and provide them as the reliable information (MV of EP *may* and MW of EP *possibly*), while a girl is more straightforward in her judgments and has only a small space for doubt (MV of EP *should* and MW of EN *certainly*):

Her friend Serge, who at one time in the far past *may possibly* have been more than a friend... (J. Banville «The Sea»).

Certainly, she *should* have known this might happen, but she could not hide the shock... (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Girls tend to believe in the existence of supernatural powers or something that help them in difficult life situations (example (a)), making their faith as a kind of confidence and explicating it with EN markers, while men (example (b)) refuse to insist on the reliability of events they have not witnessed or do not have the objective evidence or they do it in a less straightforward manner, using mainly EP markers:

(a) Rosa would never tell Hans about these moments, but Liesel believed that it *must* have been those prayers that helped Papa survive the LSE's accident in Essen (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

(b) She *may* have been there all that time, watching me watching the others (J. Banville «The Sea»).

A girl is capable of lying and providing inaccurate information for her own benefit while insisting on the reliability of her statement. For example, Liesel decides to make a gift for herself on New Year's Eve and to spend the part of the bed money in the foster family so she can send letters to her mother. When asked by the adoptive mother about why some of the money is missing, the girl with confidence, marked by MV of EN *must*, claims that customers have paid them less than usual:

«Some of it's missing. What happened, Liesel?»

«They *must* have given me less than usual» (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Men, on the contrary, have an inviolable moral regulations that do not allow them to provide unambiguous inaccurate information:

We *might* be criminals, but we're not totally immoral (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Both male and female confidence based on assumption is marked by modal markers with the semantics of possibility, for example, MW *perhaps* and MV *might* in the examples below:

He... told the girl to keep reading in the bomb shelter. *Perhaps* if he didn't, she might not have ended up writing in the basement (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Whenever she walked to and from school now, Liesel was on the lookout for discarded items that *might* be valuable to a dying man (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

The cause of the assumption may be jealousy but the man as a rule does not provide categorical information casting a shadow over the name of the woman, without being completely sure of his authenticity:

He always called her Annie, which no one else did; ...it *might* have been his old love name for her (J. Banville «The Sea»).

We also face “female logic” phenomenon which implies women thoughts being less rational and more emotional and intuitive that distinguishes them from men in some situations.

In the example given below, despite the fact that the girl saw the photos of the neighbours' sons, she takes a completely unfamiliar man for one of them, and her guess is expressed in a rather categorical form, explicating that with MV of EN *must*:

Her first thought was that the man *must* have been one of her sons, but he did not look like either of the brothers in the framed photos by the door (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

The following example reflects the desire of men to commit rash actions that do not fit into the context of the situation. For the emotionally mature and successful man such behaviour is not peculiar therefore hiding the attack of momentary weakness, his assertion implies complete confidence and becomes less categorical. The speaker intentionally questions his statements by propositioning MV of EP *may*:

It was not the damp and the chill... but a determination to get closer to those lights...; I *may* even have had some idea of wading into the sea and swimming out to meet them (J. Banville «The Sea»).

Sometimes a girl's behaviour has a certain amount of coquetry and a desire to attract the attention of the opposite gender interlocutor, so she does not insist on her point of view, allowing the man to decide for himself whether she was right or not:

«I thought,» she told him, «you *might* like to do the crossword to pass the time» (M. Zusak «The Book Thief»).

Regarding the representatives of the male gender it can be emphasized that they have their own perception of the female beauty, which should not be doubted because it is the man who is a veritable admirer of it:

Behind me Rose sat down..., leaning on a braced arm, her cheek almost resting on her shoulder, her legs folded off to the side, in a pose that *should* have been awkward but was not (J. Banville «The Sea»).

Conclusion

The anthropocentric orientation of the modern linguistic studies determines the relevance of the research, gender and age being the key characteristics for determining the linguistic personality's impact on the choice of EM markers. The analysis of modern linguistic approaches leads to the conclusion as follows: the speech of people from various gender-age groups is different.

As a result of studying and analysing examples from the fiction resources, we found that a mature man with a firm life position typically provides information reliable from his point of view. If the information does not have a sufficient amount of evidence, then the man would prefer to make a statement using the markers

of EP. A girl (due to the youth outburst and specifics of a female nature) tends to operate the modality markers of EN even in the situations where the reliability of the information provided can be questioned and requires more convincing evidence base.

The aim of further studies could be the comparative research concerning the use of epistemic modal markers by the individuals of all age groups.

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