MANIFESTATION OF NATIONAL MENTALITY THROUGH EPISTEMIC MODALITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract

This paper examines how national mentality is reflected through epistemic modality by comparing English and Uzbek. Epistemic markers encode a speaker's assessment of certainty, doubt, and probability, thereby revealing culturally preferred ways of presenting knowledge. Using descriptive and contrastive analysis, the study outlines key epistemic resources in English (modal verbs and stance adverbs such as must, may/might, probably, perhaps) and in Uzbek (modal words such as ehtimol, balki, chamasi, shekilli, as well as grammatical constructions and suffixes including -sa kerak, -dir, -ekan/-kan, and -ibdi). The comparison suggests that English typically expresses epistemic stance through separate lexical items, whereas Uzbek often integrates evidential and epistemic nuances into verbal morphology. These differences align with discourse norms: English favors explicit speaker positioning, while Uzbek commonly employs mitigated, context-sensitive formulations that support politeness and social harmony. The article argues that epistemic modal analysis provides a productive route for linking linguistic form with culturally shaped worldviews.

Keywords

epistemic modality, evidentiality, national mentality, contrastive linguistics, modal verbs, modal particles, English, Uzbek

1. Introduction

Languages do not only serve as tools of communication; they also encode habitual ways of perceiving and evaluating reality. In this sense, linguistic choices can be treated as indirect evidence of a community's worldview and culturally shared norms. Following the tradition that associates language with a "national spirit" or collective mentality, the present study focuses on epistemic modality—expressions that signal how strongly a speaker commits to the truth of a proposition (Humboldt, 2000).

Epistemic modality is especially relevant in intercultural settings because it affects how statements are interpreted as firm claims, cautious suggestions, or mere conjectures. In the context of globalization and intensified cross-cultural contact, differences in the ways languages encode certainty, doubt, and information source may lead to pragmatic misunderstandings. English and Uzbek provide an instructive pair for comparison: they belong to different language families and display different typological profiles, yet both have rich inventories of epistemic expressions.

Although modality has been widely discussed in general linguistics, comparative linguocultural work on epistemic modality in English and Uzbek is still developing. Recent discussions emphasize the need to analyze not only formal markers but also the cultural and pragmatic factors that motivate their use (Matyakubov, 2024; Turakulova, 2025).

The aim of this article is to identify major epistemic modal units in English and Uzbek and to explain how their use may reflect culturally preferred communicative strategies. The study pursues the following objectives: (1) to outline theoretical approaches to modality and epistemic modality; (2) to describe key epistemic resources in English; (3) to describe key epistemic resources in Uzbek; and (4) to compare the two systems with attention to evidentiality, degrees of commitment, and discourse norms.

2. Theoretical Background: Modality and Epistemic Meaning

In linguistics, modality is commonly defined as the semantic category that relates a proposition to reality and to the speaker's attitude toward that proposition. A long-standing distinction separates objective modality (linked to the status of the described situation as real, hypothetical, or desired) from subjective modality (linked to the speaker's evaluation and stance). This view is clearly articulated in Russian and Uzbek linguistic traditions, where modality is treated as a broad functional-semantic category present in every utterance (Vinogradov, 1975; Eshqubov, 2005).

From this perspective, epistemic modality belongs to the domain of subjective modality because it expresses a speaker's knowledge-based assessment of a statement—confidence, probability, or doubt. In Western scholarship, epistemic modality is often contrasted with deontic modality (obligation, permission) and is analyzed as a system for grading commitment to truth (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986). Epistemic markers also function pragmatically: they allow speakers to hedge, to strengthen an inference, to attribute information to a source, and to manage interpersonal relations in conversation and writing.

Within a functional approach, epistemic modality is not restricted to a single grammatical form. It can be realized by auxiliary verbs, particles, adverbs, clause-level constructions, and intonation. Kolshanskiy (1975) emphasizes that modal meanings arise through the interaction of lexical, grammatical, and prosodic resources. This multifaceted nature makes epistemic modality a productive domain for contrastive and linguocultural analysis.

3. Epistemic Modality in English

English is an analytic language, and epistemic meanings are typically expressed through separate lexical items or multiword constructions. A central role is played by modal auxiliaries such as may, might, must, can/could, should, will/would, and ought to. Depending on context, these forms can encode different degrees of epistemic commitment.

For example, must in an inferential use signals a strong conclusion based on evidence available to the speaker: It must be raining outside. In contrast, may or might expresses weaker possibility: It may/might be raining. The choice between these forms allows speakers to calibrate how strongly they endorse a proposition.

In addition to modal auxiliaries, English frequently employs stance adverbs and evidential adverbs, including probably, possibly, perhaps, certainly, apparently, and reportedly. Stance verbs and parenthetical constructions (I think, I guess, I suppose) further signal that the proposition is offered as the speaker's assessment rather than as an unquestionable fact. Such devices are common in both everyday interaction and academic writing, where cautious phrasing helps to avoid overclaiming and supports polite disagreement (Palmer, 1986).

Importantly, English tends to make epistemic stance explicit at the clause level: speakers may overtly index themselves as the source of evaluation (e.g., I think…, I'm not sure, but…). This pattern is compatible with communication norms that value clear attribution of opinions and transparent marking of certainty levels. At the same time, English also has conventional hedging strategies that soften statements in sensitive contexts.

4. Epistemic Modality in Uzbek

Uzbek is an agglutinative language with a rich system of suffixes and auxiliary constructions, and epistemic meanings are often integrated into verbal morphology. Uzbek also has a set of modal words and particles that directly express probability and doubt. Common lexical markers include ehtimol 'perhaps', balki 'maybe', chamasi 'apparently/roughly', and shekilli 'it seems' (Eshqubov, 2005).

Examples illustrate how these items function in discourse: Ehtimol, ertaga kelar ('Perhaps he/she will come tomorrow'). Here, the modal word ehtimol signals that the speaker does not fully commit to the proposition.

A characteristic Uzbek construction for epistemic inference combines a conditional form with a modal predicate: -sa kerak. For instance, U kishi o'zbek bo'lsa kerak ('That person must be Uzbek / is probably Uzbek'). The construction conveys a reasoned guess, but it often sounds less categorical than the English must, since the conditional component can introduce a nuance of tentativeness.

Uzbek also uses suffixes and analytic forms that carry evidential and epistemic overtones. Forms such as -ibdi and -ekan/-kan frequently indicate that information is reported, newly learned, or not directly witnessed by the speaker. For example, U ketibdi can be rendered as 'He has left, apparently / (I've heard) he left', where the Uzbek form compresses both past reference and an evidential stance into a single verbal complex. Another device is the suffix -dir, which can mark inference or assumption (e.g., U keldir 'He must have come / he has probably come'). Descriptions of Uzbek semantics and syntax point out that such forms systematically contribute to the speaker's epistemic positioning (Makhmudov & Nurmonov, 1992).

In many interactional settings, Uzbek speakers use epistemic markers to reduce categorical force, especially in disagreement or when addressing interlocutors of higher status. Rather than issuing a blunt assessment, speakers may prefer mitigated formulations (e.g., Ehtimol…, … bo'lsa kerak) that preserve politeness and social harmony. This pragmatic preference can be interpreted as part of a broader communicative style where indirectness and consideration of context are valued.

5. Comparative Discussion: Form, Function, and Cultural Interpretation

The contrastive overview highlights both functional parallels and typological differences. In both languages, epistemic modality serves a universal communicative purpose: it helps speakers represent uncertainty, probability, and degrees of belief. However, English and Uzbek differ in how these meanings are packaged in grammar.

First, the formal distribution of epistemic meaning differs. English primarily relies on modal auxiliaries and adverbial markers that remain separate words within the clause. Uzbek, by contrast, frequently integrates epistemic and evidential nuances into suffixes and auxiliary constructions. This difference follows from typological profiles (analytic vs. agglutinative) and

439

results in different surface patterns: a short Uzbek verbal form may correspond to a longer English paraphrase.

Second, the two languages differ in the prominence of evidentiality-related meanings. Uzbek forms such as -ibdi and -ekan/-kan allow speakers to signal that information is hearsay or newly discovered, thereby distancing themselves from full responsibility for truth. English can express similar meanings, but typically does so lexically (e.g., apparently, reportedly, I heard that…), making evidential stance a more optional layer rather than an obligatory part of verbal morphology. These contrasts can matter in translation, where a straightforward tense conversion may fail to reproduce the original speaker's epistemic distance.

Third, the two systems differ in perceived intensity. In English, must (in an epistemic sense) often implies near-certainty as an inference; Uzbek -sa kerak can express a comparable inference but may sound more cautious, especially in everyday speech. Conversely, Uzbek frequently employs epistemic devices to soften the categorical tone of evaluations, which aligns with interactional norms that discourage overly direct judgments in certain social contexts.

To summarize the comparison, Table 1 provides a compact mapping between recurrent epistemic functions and their typical realizations in the two languages. The examples are illustrative and are drawn from the descriptive patterns discussed above.

Table 1. Typical epistemic functions and markers in English and Uzbek.

Function	English (typical forms)	Uzbek (typical forms)
High confidence / strong inference	must + infinitive (e.g., It must be …)	-sa kerak; kerak (e.g., … bo'lsa kerak)
Possibility / weak probability	may/might + infinitive; perhaps; possibly	ehtimol; balki; chamasi; shekilli
Speaker's stance verb	I think / I suppose / I guess	menimcha (less frequent in some contexts); … deb o'ylayman
Reported information (lexical)	apparently; reportedly; I heard that …	-ibdi; -ekan/-kan (hearsay / newly learned)
Inference based on evidence	evidently; apparently; it seems	ko'rinadi; …ga o'xshaydi; -dir
Negative inference / probability	may not; probably not	-magandir; -masa kerak
Mitigation in disagreement	It seems that…; I'm not sure, but…	Ehtimol…; … bo'lsa kerak (softening)
Conditional / hypothetical guess	might have + past participle	… bo'lsa kerak edi; … gandir

Overall, the analysis suggests that epistemic modality is a promising locus for connecting linguistic structure with culturally shaped discourse habits. English patterns encourage explicit marking of individual stance (e.g., I think…, probably…), whereas Uzbek often encodes epistemic distance and mitigation through morphology and clause-final particles, enabling nuanced, context-sensitive communication.

6. Conclusion

This article compared epistemic modal units in English and Uzbek and discussed how their use can reflect culturally preferred communicative strategies. Building on established approaches to modality (Lyons, 1977; Palmer, 1986) and on modality research in Uzbek and Russian linguistic traditions (Vinogradov, 1975; Kolshanskiy, 1975; Eshqubov, 2005), the study highlighted key differences in form and distribution.

The main findings can be summarized as follows: (1) both languages possess comparable epistemic functions (certainty, probability, doubt), but they employ different formal resources; (2) Uzbek systematically integrates evidential and epistemic meanings into verbal morphology more than English does; and (3) these formal options correlate with discourse preferences—explicit stance marking in English and frequent mitigation in Uzbek.

From an applied perspective, the results are relevant for translation and intercultural communication. Accurate rendering of epistemic stance requires attention not only to modal meanings but also to evidential distance and pragmatic force. Further research may expand the analysis with corpus-based frequency evidence and genre-specific comparisons, especially across academic, media, and conversational registers (Matyakubov, 2024; Turakulova, 2025).

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