High-frequency epistemic phrases like I think, I don’t know, I guess, I thought, and I remember have received considerable attention in recent linguistic research on different varieties of English. This paper has two related objectives. First, it offers a quantitative survey of the occurrence of these items in American English conversation, in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (in all almost 23 hours of data), with special reference to their semantic-pragmatic scope: the paper explores whether their scope extends over something yet to be verbalized in the turn-in-progress (forward scope), as opposed to having something in their scope that was just verbalized in the immediately preceding turn-so-far (backward scope). The scope will be examined primarily in two varieties, in unplanned everyday speech and in planned institutional speech (with a third variety, task-related talk, as a reference point in between). It will be established that in all three data sets there is a clear prevalence of clausal over phrasal scope, and a prevalence of a forward-looking scope over scope pointing back in the immediately preceding discourse.

Secondly, the paper gives a functional explanation for one item, I thought, whose semantic-pragmatic scope also conforms to the above pattern, as in: (H) <F But I thought it was very pragmatic of her to ask about that in June F>. There is already a great deal of evidence in the literature that initial epistemic phrases have become relatively fixed epistemic formulas and are used to provide a stance frame on what follows (Scheibman 2000, 2001, Thompson 2002; Kärkkäinen 2003, 2008). A further finding on the interactional functions of I thought emerges from the data. I thought is frequently part of a social action format or a recurrent linguistic routine or conversational pattern, used by speakers for taking a stance: in 68 cases out of a total of 146 in everyday speech it is followed by an explicitly stanced phrase or clause such as it was funny, it was pretty neat, or it was beautiful, or by direct reported speech or thought embodying a clear speaker stance.

References


