Believe and Epistemic Subjectivity

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Abstract

The attitude verb *believe* conveys some sense of modal weakness. For example, it is compatible with an explicit denial of certainty, knowledge or truth (cf. *I believe it's raining, but I'm not sure that it is*, *Scientists believe there is water on Jupiter, but they don't know it*, *I might be wrong, but I believe the store is closed today*). Given a standard semantic analysis of epistemic modals as quantifiers over a selected set of possibilities, the modal weakness of *believe* could stem from its modal force (strength of quantifier) or its modal content (domain of quantification). I argue, on the basis of its conjunction closure and scale structure, that *believe* has a strong modal force, similar to uncontroversially strong modals like *sure* or *know*. Therefore, the felt weakness of *believe* must be due to its modal content. Drawing on its occurrence in modal context and interaction with other epistemic expressions, I suggest that *believe* has content that is inherently subjective, in the sense of conveying full internal certainty without projecting public commitment, thus leaving room for negotiation regarding the prejacent.

Speaker

Todor Koev is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Foreign Literatures and Linguistics at Ben-Gurion University, a position he has held since the fall of 2024. He earned his PhD in linguistics from Rutgers University in 2013. Following his doctorate, he undertook postdoctoral research at both the University of Stuttgart and the University of Düsseldorf. He further advanced his academic career as an Emmy Noether Fellow, Guest Researcher, and Visiting Professor at the University of Konstanz. His international experience includes appointments as a Visiting Scholar at MIT during the fall semester of 2018 and at Stanford University in the winter quarter of 2023. Todor Koev's research interests lie at the intersection of semantics and pragmatics, from both theoretical and experimental perspective. He has made contributions to the understanding of modality, evidentiality, parentheticality, question bias, indefiniteness and adverbiality. His work often explores how speakers convey and listeners interpret nuanced meanings beyond the literal content of utterances, including non-at-issue meanings, biases, and subjectivity.

All Are Welcome

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