

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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When clients (or psychotherapists) say “I don’t know”: unknowledge or uncertainty?

1. Introduction

From the linguistic communication point of view, psychotherapy sessions can be considered as a specific type of professional *conversations* and, as such, they can be studied from an *epistemic* perspective by analysing how psychotherapist and client navigate their *knowledge*, handle their insufficient knowledge (*uncertainty*) and address their lack of knowledge (*unknowledge*) (Stemberger and Zuczkowski 2023; Zuczkowski 2024).

Psychotherapy conversations, similar to other professional interactions, have an *asymmetrical* epistemic nature since the epistemic statuses, rights and responsibilities of psychotherapists and clients with respect to their specific domains of knowledge are very different.

Clients are typically expected to assume a *less knowledgeable* position (Heritage 2012a, 2012b) on psychological issues, concerning, for example, the attribution of meaning to symptoms etc. Conversely, they have epistemic rights, priority and authority over their own experiences (feelings, thoughts, memories, perceptions etc.), i.e., over their inner, private phenomenal world, to which they only have direct access.

Psychotherapists are instead commonly expected to be *more knowledgeable* on psychological issues, i.e. to have psychological and professional competence, over which they have epistemic rights, priority and authority.

Taking an epistemic perspective on psychotherapy conversations involves paying attention not only to what speakers claim they know but also to what they claim as uncertain or unknown, which in the literature are referred to as *epistemic disclaimers*, the most studied of which is *I don’t know* (abbreviated as IDK) and equivalent expressions in other languages (e.g., Kärkkäinen 2003; Keevallik 2011, 2016; Doehler 2016; Helmer et al. 2016; Lindström and Karlsson 2016; Menichetti et al. 2021; van der Meij et al. 2022).

In the international literature there seems to be a general agreement on the fact that IDK can communicate unknowledge or uncertainty (e.g., Keevallik 2011;

Helmer et al. 2016) and that some linguistic, basically co-textual, criteria can help in determining when it does communicate either the former or the latter. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, no explicit epistemic theory has been applied to disambiguate the use of IDK.

While a rigorous linguistic co-textual analysis is essential, it may not be sufficient to disambiguate a given occurrence of IDK and provide the analyst with a clear understanding of *whether* and *why* a specific use of IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge. An epistemic theory is required to assist in making this determination. Our perspective is that a bottom-up approach, which involves a linguistic co-textual analysis, should be combined with a top-down approach based on an explicit epistemic theory.

In this paper, we apply such a mixed approach to a corpus of English psychotherapy conversations. The explicit epistemic theory we refer to is the Knowing, Unknowing, Believing (KUB) model (Zuczkowski et al. 2017; Zuczkowski et al. 2021).

The main aims, both qualitative and quantitative, are to identify the syntactic and pragmatic manifestations of IDK in the corpus (linguistic analysis), which of them express unknowledge or uncertainty and why (epistemic analysis), how many of them are used by client and psychotherapist respectively.

2. Aims

As said above, sometimes, during psychotherapy sessions, clients (but also psychotherapists) say “I don’t know” (abbreviated as IDK) or similar expressions, like *I don’t know that*, etc. The linguistic rules that govern the English expression IDK are similar to those of the equivalent German expression *Ich weiß nicht* (Helmer, Reineke & Deppermann 2016), of the Italian *Non so* (Menichetti et al. 2021) and of other languages. In the international literature, it is well known that, from the SEMANTIC point of view, such expressions communicate either *unknowledge* or *uncertainty*, but it is not as well known *when* and *why* they communicate one or the other (Bongelli, Zuczkowski & Riccioni 2023).

In previous works, we attempted to answer this question by studying both the English expression IDK and the Italian expression *Non so* in corpora of both ordinary and professional, but not psychotherapeutic, conversations (see for instance Zuczkowski, Bongelli, Riccioni & Philip 2021, Riccioni, Zuczkowski, Burro & Bongelli 2022; Bongelli, Zuczkowski & Riccioni 2023).

In the present article, we wish to apply the same methodology used in those works to a small corpus of English psychotherapeutic sessions.

The main research questions (RQ) are both qualitative and quantitative:

RQ1: how IDK manifests itself syntactically and pragmatically in the corpus (linguistic analysis);

RQ2: when and why IDK communicates either uncertainty or unknowledge (epistemic analysis);

RQ3: how many IDK communicate uncertainty, how many unknowledge, and by whom (client or therapist) they are said.

The *practical* aim of this article is therefore for those (psychotherapists, counselors, clients, etc.) who are interested in knowing *when* and *why* IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge, i.e. for those who want to have a few easy *criteria* for establishing each time which of the two is.

3. Corpus

The linguistic corpus is made up of the transcripts of three psychotherapy sessions (total words approximately 14.756) held by Carl Rogers, Albert Ellis and Frederick Perls respectively, in order to “show” some aspects of their theories and techniques; the transcripts of these sessions were later published in a volume edited by Moses Makhmalbaf (2020). The ‘client’ in the three psychotherapy sessions is always the same person, Mrs Gloria.

4. Methodology

A qualitative (linguistic and epistemic) analysis (RQs 1 and 2) is followed by a quantitative one (RQ3). The former is presented in Section 5, the latter in Section 6.

5. Qualitative analysis

Two criteria, linguistic and theoretical-epistemic

In order to determine whether IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge, we need to combine two different approaches to our object of study. The first approach cannot but be linguistic: we need to see how IDK manifests itself in the transcripts, i.e. we need to use a bottom-up approach, a linguistic phenomenology of IDK.

The linguistic manifestations of IDK can be considered both from the SYNTACTIC and PRAGMATIC point of view, but the former is more important to our purposes.

Syntactically, in the three psychotherapy sessions (as well as in any kind of conversations) IDK manifests itself either

- as a complete expression, i.e., followed by a proposition (i.e., “I don’t know where John was”), or
- alone, as an incomplete expression, i.e., without being followed by any (explicit) proposition (i.e., “I don’t know”).

Obviously, it is easier to determine whether IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge when it manifests itself as a complete than as an incomplete expression. When IDK is incomplete, the implicit proposition that follows it must be made explicit.

Fortunately, the explicit or implicit propositions following IDK can basically be reduced to only two main types.

As we will see by analysing 5 examples from the corpus, the type of proposition that follows IDK explicitly or implicitly is crucial but not sufficient to determine whether IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge. Indeed, even when IDK is complete, i.e. followed by a proposition, the bottom-up linguistic approach, by itself, is not enough to establish if IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge. We also need a top-down approach, i.e. an epistemic theory that tells us what is what.

The epistemic theory we refer to is the KUB model (acronym of the English *Knowing, Unknowing, Believing*; Zuczkowski, Bongelli & Riccioni 2017; Zuczkowski, Bongelli, Riccioni & Philip 2021; Stemberger & Zuczkowski 2023) according to which any piece of information p (for instance, John’s being at home yesterday) can be communicated by a speaker as certain/known, uncertain or unknown to her/him, i.e. from the following *epistemic positions*:

- Certain/Knowing position (K): p is communicated as certain, as something the speaker says to know to be true, e.g., *Yesterday John was at home*;
- Uncertain position, which includes two sub-positions:
- Not-Knowing-Whether (NKW), which basically refers to the doubt position, when the speaker says to be equally uncertain whether p is true or false, e.g., *I don’t remember if John was at home*;
- Believing (B) denotes the belief position, when the speaker says to believe that p is true, e.g. *I think that John was at home*. This means that Uncertainty is an epistemic continuum which ranges between two poles, NKW (maximum Uncertainty) and B (minimum Uncertainty).
- Unknowing (U): p is communicated as neither certain nor uncertain but simply as missing, absent, unknown to the speaker, e.g. *I have no idea about where John was*, see Figures 1-4.

Depending on the type of proposition that follows IDK (bottom-up approach), the theory is able to tell us when IDK communicates uncertainty or unknowledge (top-down approach).

As mentioned above, the linguistic manifestations of IDK can also be considered from the PRAGMATIC point of view, i.e. from the point of view of their FUNCTION, their USE in a conversation. In this sense, IDK can perform many different LINGUISTIC ACTIONS, depending of the co-text in which it occurs (= the co-text of IDK is given by the other linguistic expressions that precede and follow it) and on how the interlocutor takes it, how s/he linguistically reacts to it. In our corpus, IDK (either syntactically complete or incomplete) basically is used as an indirect question or as an answer to a question or simply as an assertion among other assertions.

Syntactic and pragmatic manifestations of IDK: examples from psychotherapy sessions

We said that the linguistic manifestations of IDK are simultaneously both syntactic (IDK complete and incomplete) and pragmatic (IDK as an indirect question, answer and assertion, at least in our corpus), resulting in 12 possible combinations, since, as we will see in a moment, the propositions following IDK are of two main types. We limit ourselves to analysing 5 examples extracted from the corpus: IDK as a complete indirect question (Examples 1 and 2), as an incomplete answer to a question (Examples 3 and 4), as an incomplete assertion among other assertions (Example 5). These five examples are enough to reach our purposes.

Examples 1 and 2: IDK as a COMPLETE INDIRECT QUESTION (from Rogers-Gloria session)

30. Gloria: [...] I want you to help me get rid of my guilt feeling; if I can get rid of my guilt feeling about lying or going to bed with a man, any of that, just so I can feel more comfortable.

31. Carl Rogers: I feel that this is the kind of very private thing that I couldn't possibly answer for you, but I sure, as anything will try to help you work toward your own answer. **I don't know if that makes any sense to you** but I mean it.

32. Gloria: Well, I appreciate you saying that; you sound like you mean it but **I don't know where to go; I don't begin to know where to go** I thought that I'd pretty well worked over most of my guilt and now that this is coming up I'm disappointed in myself; [...] = 126 words follow, with which Gloria keeps talking about her feelings of guilt].

In these three conversational turns (a “conversational turn” is defined as whatever an interlocutor says, before and after which there is silence on the part of that interlocutor), there are three complete IDK, i.e. all three are followed by a proposition.

Example 1: IDK + IF

In the first manifestation (Rogers’ turn 31, *I don’t know if that makes any sense to you*), the proposition following IDK is introduced by the conjunction IF (in English also WHETHER can be used instead of IF), equivalent to the German OB and the Italian SE.

From the SYNTACTIC point of view, IDK + IF + proposition is a (negative) declarative sentence. From the PRAGMATIC point of view, i.e. of the LINGUISTIC ACTION it performs, here it seems to be interpreted by Gloria as an indirect question, probably because it is situated at the end of Rogers’ conversational turn but mainly because she replies to it in her subsequent turn 32. The corresponding direct question is the Polar Interrogative *Does that make any sense to you?*¹

Both indirect and direct question presuppose (Heritage 2010) as *possibly true* that either what I (Rogers) told you (Gloria) makes SOME sense to you or what I told you makes NO sense to you.

The first proposition (what I told you makes SOME sense to you) is positive, affirmative (p); the second (what I told you makes NO sense to you) is its negative contrary (non p). Thus, the indirect question *I don’t know if p* (as well as the direct question *p?*) leaves two possibilities open, i.e., two alternatives, p or non p: the first is explicit, the second remains implicit.

Both alternatives are communicated as having the same probability to be true. It is thus a matter of doubt for Rogers, in the sense that he communicates to be in doubt between p and non p. Which one is true? Therefore, *I don’t know if p* conveys Rogers’ uncertainty about p: he does not know, cannot know, if what he told Gloria makes any sense to her or not.

That is the reason why, in the KUB model, the indirect question *I don’t know if that makes any sense to you*, as well as the corresponding direct question *Does that make any sense to you?*, communicate Rogers’ Uncertain position, specifically the Not-Knowing-Whether position, the doubt position (Figure 1).

¹ Following Stivers and Enfield’s (2010) terminology and definitions, plain questions are of the following primary types: wh-questions (also called content questions), alternative questions, and polar questions (also called yes-no questions). Polar questions are divided into three subtypes: polar interrogatives, tag-questions and declarative questions. See also Zuczkowski, Bongelli, Riccioni & Philip 2021; Stemberger & Zuczkowski (2023).

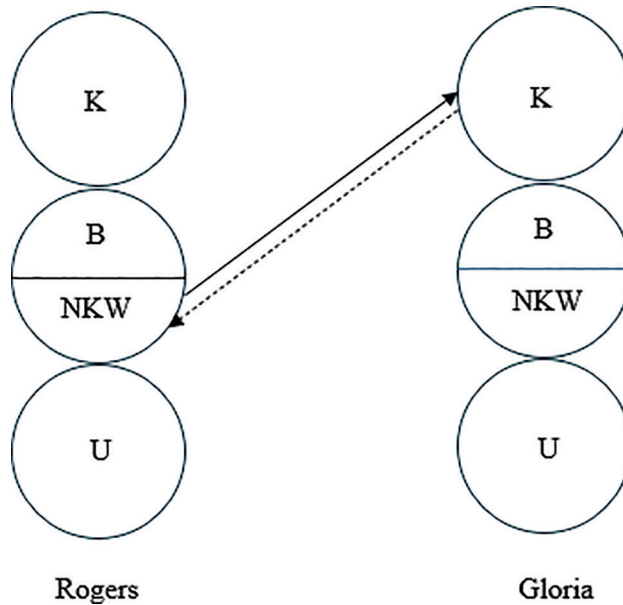


Fig. 1. The continuous arrow indicates the epistemic origin and destination of Rogers’ indirect question *I don’t know if that makes any sense to you* and of the corresponding direct question *Does that make any sense to you?*. The expected answer (dotted arrow) is either a yes or a no or something equivalent from Gloria’s K position.

It is worth adding that IDK + IF + p is the indirect formulation not only of Polar Interrogatives but also of Alternative questions (*Was John at home or at the university?*), Tag questions (*John was at home, wasn’t he?*) and Declarative questions (*So John was at home...*).

For this reason, such questions can all be called **WHETHER** questions or **Uncertain questions**: they communicate different degrees of uncertainty along the continuum ranging from the Not-Knowing-Whether position to the Believing position (Stemberger & Zuczkowski 2023).

This means that IDK+IF communicates uncertainty either as a doubt (Not-Knowing-Whether position) or as a supposition etc. (Believing position).

Example 2: IDK + W-WORT

Rogers’ indirect question *I don’t know if that makes any sense to you*, being a Polar Interrogative, expects as an answer from Gloria either a yes (= that makes **SOME** sense to me) or a no (= that makes **NO** sense to me) or something equivalent.

Indeed Gloria begins her turn 32 by answering Rogers in a confirmative way; then she adds two IDK both followed by the adverb **WHERE** plus proposition.

Gloria's sentence *I don't know where to go*, which of course is not to be taken literally but in a metaphorical sense, concerns an inner direction to an inner place (Lewin 1936), where Gloria can reach understanding and solution of the problem concerning her feeling of guilt.

From the PRAGMATIC point of view, the sentence *I don't know where to go* manifests itself as an assertion among other assertions, but it could be read by the therapist also as an indirect question, i.e., as the indirect formulation of the corresponding direct question *Where to go?*, in Gloria's case equivalent to *Where do I go?*

All three (one indirect question and two direct questions) presuppose (Heritage 2010; Stivers & Enfield 2010) as *true* the existence of a "where" to go to. Gloria does not know what this "where" is and how to get there. This seems to be the help Gloria is asking from Rogers.

Therefore, *I do not know where to go* communicates Gloria's lack of knowledge about the meaning of the only "element" (*where*) which is unknown to her within a single proposition presupposed as true and known to her: there is a place to go, a place where I can go, but I don't know where this place is. The word *where* is a pro-form for the missing information.

That is the reason why, in the KUB epistemic model, the indirect question *I do not know where to go*, as well as the corresponding direct questions *Where to go?*, *Where do I go?*, communicate Gloria's Unknowing position (Figure 2).

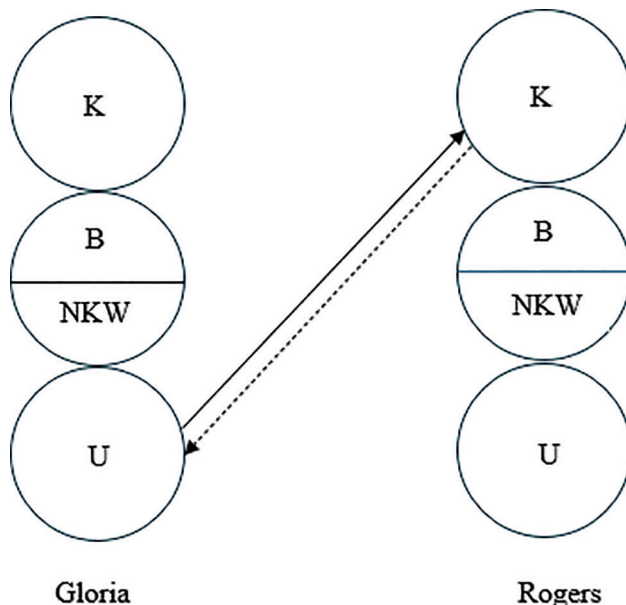


Fig. 2. The continuous arrow indicates the epistemic origin and destination of Gloria's indirect question *I don't know where to go* and of the direct questions *Where to go?*, *Where do I go?*. Being her therapist, Rogers is supposed by Gloria to know (K position, dotted arrow) the answer.

Also in Gloria's next sentence (*I don't begin to know where to go*) the verb *know* is followed by the adverb *where* and therefore the above comments apply to this sentence as well.

Generalising, in any conversation, IDK can be followed by other words that in English begin with WH like WHERE (for this reason they are called WH-words): the interrogative adverbs WHEN, WHY, and the interrogative pronouns or adjectives WHO, WHAT, WHICH. To these must be added HOW, the only word that does not begin with WH but only with H. These 7 are the basic WH-words in English (in German and Italian they are 8).

When IDK is followed by one of these WH-words, it communicates the Unknowing position.

So, this epistemic position is not a generic or vague Unknowing, but it can be specified by saying that it is an Unknowing WHERE, WHAT, WHO, WHICH, WHEN, WHY, HOW position.

To sum up the results of the qualitative analysis of Examples 1 and 2: the syntactic rules that govern the English language (as well as the German and Italian) involve that the proposition *p*, which follows the expression IDK when it manifests itself in a complete way, is normally introduced either by IF/WHETHER or by a WH-word (linguistic bottom-up approach). A third possibility is not given, is excluded, or can be traced back to one of these two (see Example 3).

From the KUB epistemic model, IDK + IF/WHETHER communicates the Uncertain position, while IDK + WH-word communicates the Unknowing position. Uncertainty concerns (at least) two opposite, contrary propositions (*p* and non *p*), while Unknowledge regards only one single element (the WH-word) within an only and the same proposition *p*.

We have also seen that, from the pragmatic point of view, IDK + IF/WHETHER or WH-word can both function (= can both be taken by the two interlocutors or by only one of them) as indirect questions corresponding to two different types of direct questions, either WHETHER questions communicating Uncertainty or WH-word questions communicating Unknowledge. Now we are going to see that IDK can also function as an answer to such questions.

Examples 3 and 4: IDK as an INCOMPLETE ANSWER to a question

When IDK is incomplete, i.e., not followed by a proposition, in order to establish if it communicates uncertainty or unknowledge, of course it has to be completed by adding a proposition beginning with either IF/WHETHER or a WH-word. How can we establish which is the appropriate proposition? The co-text of IDK can help us, i.e., the conversational turn(s) that precede(s) and/or follow(s) the one in which IDK manifests itself, as shown by the following Examples 3 and 4.

Example 3: IDK as an incomplete answer to a WH-WORD-question (from Perls-Gloria session)

95. Frederick Perls: how do you feel now?

96. Gloria: **I don't know.**

In turn 96, from the PRAGMATIC point of view *I don't know* is Gloria's answer to Perls' question *how do you feel now?* i.e. to a question introduced by the adverb HOW, i.e. a WH-word. Therefore such a question belongs to the same type of questions mentioned in the previous Example 2 (*Where to go?* / *Where do I go?*) and communicates unknowledge: Perls does not know how Gloria feels now and aims at knowing.

Gloria's answer is incomplete: the proposition that could follow IDK remains implicit. So IDK has to be completed by adding an explicit proposition beginning with either IF/WHETHER or a WH-word.

The intuitive linguistic-communicative competence we have of our language as native speakers tells us that such a proposition can only be *how I feel*. Thus, Gloria's complete, explicit answer is *I don't know how I feel*. The KUB model tells us that *I don't know how I feel*, as *I don't know where to go* (Example 1), communicates Gloria's Unknowing position, since the proposition *how I feel* begins with a WH-word (Figure 3).

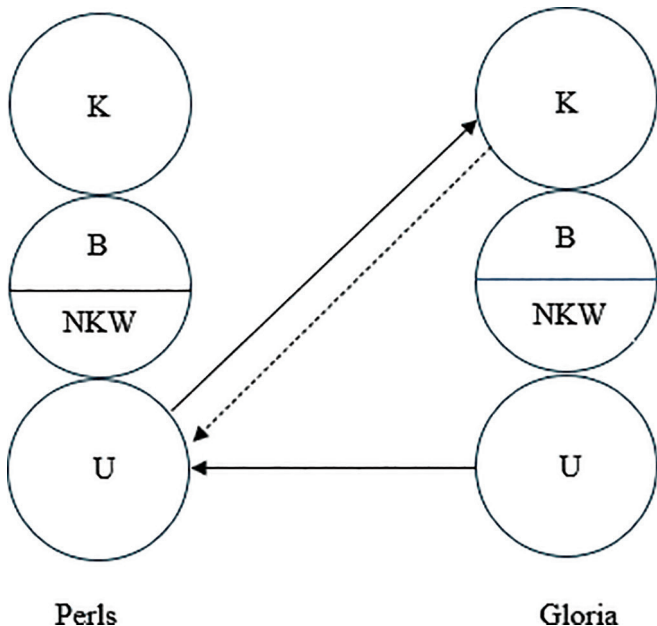


Fig. 3. The continuous arrows indicate the epistemic origin and destination of Perls' WH-word question *how do you feel now?* and of Gloria's answer *I don't know (how I feel now)* respectively.

Gloria fails to directly answer the question from her Knowing position (as expected by Perls, dotted arrow), she gives him no information about her feelings (Unknowing position) and therefore her answer does not align with Perls’ question, i.e. the continuous arrows are not parallel.

The transcript of the session goes on as follows:

97. Perls: [Are you] Playing stupid?

98. Gloria: I’m NOT playing stupid. **I don’t know the correct answers.**

99. Perls: this is plain stupid... [...]

In turn 97, Perls asks the Polar Interrogative [*are you*] *playing stupid*? Such a question does not begin with a WH-word, so it belongs to the type of questions called WHETHER questions or Uncertain questions, as we have seen in Example 1. But here, rather than expressing a doubt (Not-Knowing-Whether position), the question seems to express an assumption, a supposition (Believing position: I don’t know if you are playing stupid or not but I’m inclined to believe that you are).

Gloria is supposed by Perls to play stupid (they have already talked about this issue in the previous turns 30-38), a supposition that Gloria hastens to strongly deny in the next turn 98: *I’m NOT playing stupid*, to which she adds *I don’t know the correct answers*.

In this case, IDK is followed neither by IF/WHETHER nor by a WH-word but by a noun phrase (article + adjective + noun). It might seem to be a third way in which IDK can manifest itself, and this is partially true, but actually *I don’t know the correct answers* can be traced back to *I don’t know WHICH answers are correct* or to *I don’t know WHAT are the correct answers*. *Which* and *What* are WH-words. So, generalizing, the manifestation *I don’t know* + *noun phrase* falls within the type of manifestation *I don’t know* + *WH-word* and communicates Unknowledge.

In turn 98, Gloria is thus making a distinction between playing stupid and not knowing the correct answers; for her they are two different matters. In turn 99, Perls replies that the two are not different: saying not knowing the correct answers is simply stupid... Their communication seems here again a little conflictual...

Example 4 : IDK as an incomplete answer to a WHETHER question (from Perls-Gloria session)

137. Perls: [...] I think I touched you – did I not?

138. Gloria: of course you did.

In turn 137, Perls asks a Tag-question consisting of a declarative component (*I think I touched you*) and an interrogative component (the tag *did I not?*). With this question Perls puts forward another supposition (I don’t know if I

touched you or not, but I think I did, Believing position) and seeks confirmation, which Gloria gives in the next turn 138 (*of course you did*).

139. Perls: and I think I hit the bull's eye, do you feel that?

140. Gloria: **I don't know**, all I know is when somebody, when I feel the way I feel with you right now. It's like you don't have feelings.

In turn 139, Perls adds a further supposition (*and I think I hit the bull's eye*) and closes the turn with the Polar Interrogative *do you feel that?* where “that” refers to *I hit the bull's eye*. So, the question *do you feel that?* is to be understood as *do you feel that I hit the bull's eye?*

In Gloria's answer (turn 140), IDK is incomplete and must be completed by adding the implicit proposition, that intuitively is IF/WHETHER *I feel that you hit the bull's eye* or simply IF/WHETHER *you hit the bull's eye*. The proposition begins with IF/WHETHER and thus communicates her Not-Knowing-Whether position (Figure 4):

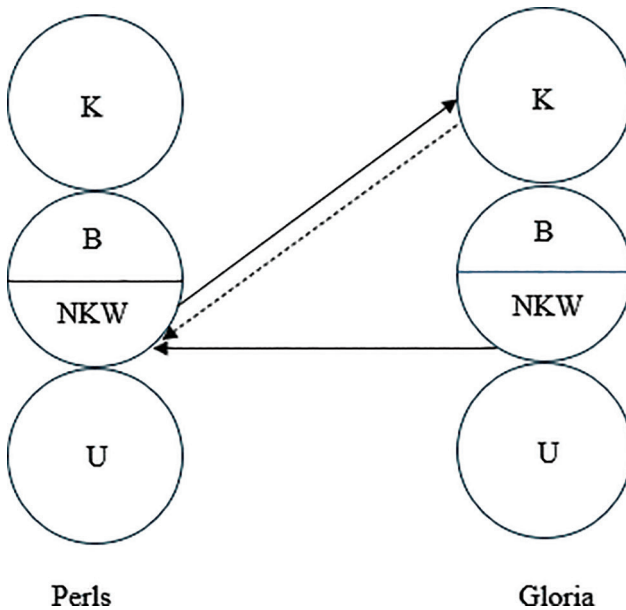


Fig. 4. The continuous arrows indicate the epistemic origin and destination of Perls' Polar Interrogative *do you feel that I hit the bull's eye?* and of Gloria's answer *I don't know* (*if I feel that you hit the bull's eye*), i.e., a response that fails to directly answer the question from her Knowing position (as expected by Perls, dotted arrow) and therefore her answer (Not-Knowing-Whether position) does not align with Perls' question, i.e. the continuous arrows are not parallel.

To sum up Examples 3 and 4: IDK as an incomplete answer to a WH-word question communicates unknowledge, since it is completed by a proposition introduced

by a WH-word (Example 3), while as an incomplete answer to a WHETHER question communicates uncertainty, since it is completed by a proposition introduced by IF/WHETHER (Example 4).

Example 5: IWN as an INCOMPLETE ASSERTION among other assertions (from Perls-Gloria session)

We have seen that pragmatically IDK can function as an indirect question (Examples 1 and 2) as well as an answer to a question (Examples 3 and 4). Now we are going to see (Example 5) that it can also function as a simple assertion among other assertions.

When the assertion is complete, it is easy to determine whether it communicates uncertainty or unknowledge (Examples 1 and 2). But when the assertion is incomplete, it can be the most difficult to be epistemically labelled as uncertain or unknown, since sometimes even the co-text gives little or no help in disambiguating the assertion, just because it manifests itself together with other assertions.

In this case, the psychotherapists' subjectivity plays a greater role than in the other types of manifestations; sometimes psychotherapists cannot be as sure of their epistemic interpretation as they are of other types of manifestation, i.e., they can only formulate assumptions and put forward arguments in favour of them. The alternative is to have the client complete the assertion.

202. Gloria: [...] I'm thinking when I am really hurt and really upset about something and I want someone to love me, like my girlfriend will do it a lot, and she'll come up to hug me. I don't... I don't want it

203. Perls: Exactly. This is what I'm talking about you cannot sustain contact okay... what will happen if you become too close to your girlfriend and if you let her hug you

204. Gloria: the only thing I'm aware of is like when I perspire it embarrasses me that should feel how wet I am and she would hold my body up close and **I don't know...**

205. Perls: Are you finished with closeness, a kind of disgust ...

206. Gloria: yeah yes I am (she shows a disgusted face and makes a disgusted sound)

Gloria ends turn 204 with an incomplete IDK left pending at the end of the turn (see the three dots). In this case, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make plausible assumptions as to which proposition completes IDK. The co-text, in fact, does not help, i.e. neither Gloria's assertions preceding IDK in the same turn 204 nor the preceding turns 202 and 203.

In turn 205, Perls does not seem interested in Gloria's IDK. He could take it as an indirect question and try with her help to understand if it refers to uncertainty or unknowledge and deepen that topic. Instead, he returns to Gloria the leading motif (*Are you finished with closeness, a kind of disgust ...*) of what he has heard from her in turns 202 and 204, a leading motif which Gloria confirms in turn 206.

Summary of the qualitative analysis

Five examples have been analysed from both a syntactic and pragmatic perspective and have shown the following main points:

- (1) from the syntactic point of view, IDK manifests itself as a complete or incomplete expression;
- (2) when it manifests itself in a complete way, it is followed by a proposition introduced either by IF/WHETHER (Example 1) or a WH-word (Example 2);
- (3) in the former case, following the KUB epistemic model, IDK communicates uncertainty (either the Not-Knowing-Wether or Believing position), in the latter unknowledge;
- (4) when IDK manifests itself as incomplete (Examples 3 and 4), it can be completed with the help of the co-text, resulting in the above-mentioned points (2) and (3);
- (5) sometimes (Example 5) the co-text is unable to complete the missing proposition after an incomplete IDK; in this case, the psychotherapist can only make assumptions or have the client complete the IDK.

From the pragmatic point of view, in our corpus IDK (either complete or incomplete) manifests itself basically as an indirect question (Examples 1 and 2), an answer to a question (Examples 3 and 4), a simple assertion among other assertions (Example 5).

The pragmatic point of view highlights the tight relationship between IDK and direct questions, which are of two types: WH-word questions and WHETHER questions.

I don't know if that makes any sense to you (Example 1) is the indirect formulation of the corresponding direct WHETHER question *Does that make any sense to you?* Both communicate the questioner's Uncertain position.

I don't know where to go (Example 2) is the indirect formulation of the corresponding direct WH-word question *Where to go?* or *Where do I go?*. All three communicate the questioner's Unknowing position.

Similarly, IDK as an answer to a WH-word question communicates unknowledge (Example 3), while as an answer to a WHETHER question (Example 4) communicates uncertainty.

When IDK functions as an assertion among other assertions (Example 5), see the above listed point (5).

6. Quantitative analysis

Now all three psychotherapy sessions (Ellis-Gloria, Rogers-Gloria, Perls-Gloria) transcribed in the book edited by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (2020) are analysed quantitatively, answering the following research questions:

- (1) how many IDK there are and by whom (client or therapist) they are said;
- (2) how many are complete and how many are incomplete (syntactic point of view);
- (3) how many communicate Not-Knowing-Whether and how many Unknowing (epistemic point of view);
- (4) how many are used as Assertion among other assertions, Indirect Question, Answer to a question (pragmatic point of view).

The answers to these research questions are shown in the following Table 1, which can be read both vertically and horizontally.

The first column indicates whether an IDK is complete or incomplete and whether it communicates Unknowing (U) or Not-Knowing-Whether (NKW). “Undecidable” means that the co-text does not make it possible to determine whether an incomplete IDK communicates U or NKW. “Total” indicate the IDK said by each participant in the three sessions. The last three entries specify how many of the IDK mentioned before the entry ‘Total’ are pragmatically used as Assertion, Indirect Question or Answer to a question.

Table 1. Quantitative results.

IDK	ELLIS	GLORIA	ROGERS	GLORIA	PERLS	GLORIA	TOTAL
Complete U	1	1	1	8		1	12
Complete NKW		3	1	2			6
Incomplete U		1				3	4
Incomplete NKW		1		1		4	6
Undecidable				1		2	3
TOTAL	1	6	2	12	0	10	31
Assertion	1	4	1	10		5	21
Indirect Question			1	2			3
Answer		2				5	7

The second and third columns concern Ellis-Gloria's transcript (Total number of conversational turns= 104; Total number of Ellis' words= 1.257; Total number of Gloria's words 2.616): Ellis says 1 complete IDK communicating Unknowledge and pragmatically used as an Assertion, while Gloria says 6 IDK (1 complete U + 3 complete NKW + 1 incomplete U +1 incomplete NKW), 4 of which are pragmatically used as Assertions and 2 as Answers. As an overall result, it is worth noting that Gloria uses six times more IDK (6) than Ellis (1) and that, out of her 6 IDK, 4 are NKW and 2 are U. So here NKW is the double of U.

The fourth and fifth columns refer to Rogers-Gloria's transcript (Total turns= 133; Total Rogers' words= 1.686; Total Gloria's words 3.970): even in this transcript Gloria uses six times more IDK (12) than the therapist (2) and, out of her 12 IDK, 8 are U, 3 are NKW, 1 is undecidable. In this case, U is almost three times NKW.

The sixth and seventh columns refer to Perls-Gloria's transcript (Total turns =234; Total Perls' words= 2.896; Total Gloria's words 2.331): in this transcript Gloria uses 10 IDK and Perls none (0), and, out of her 10 IDK, 4 are U, 4 are NKW, 2 are undecidable. In this case, U and NKW are of equal quantity.

The eighth and final column indicate all the IDK said in the three sessions: 12 complete U, 6 complete NKW, 4 incomplete U, 6 incomplete NKW, 3 undecidable, making a total of 31 IDK, of which 21 are pragmatically used as Assertions, 3 as Indirect Questions and 7 as Answers.

The Totals indicate that

- complete IDK ($12+6= 18$) are used almost two times more than incompletes ($4+6= 10$);
- Unknowledge ($12+4=16$) is communicated a little more than Uncertainty ($6+6=12$);
- Assertions (21) are used three times more than Answers (7) and seven times more than Indirect Questions (3).

Comments on the quantitative results

The corpus that was analysed consists of only three psychotherapy sessions and it is therefore too small to allow for statistical analyses and generalisations. However, the quantitative results can be taken as *indicative* of how the management of unknowledge and uncertainty works in psychotherapy sessions as far as IDK is concerned.

In this respect, 4 are the most macroscopic results to be considered:

- (1) only 3 IDK are said by the therapists (actually only by two of them, as Perls says none), whereas Gloria says 28, i.e. on average Gloria uses IDK nine times more than the therapists;

- (2) complete IDK are almost two times more than incompletes;
- (3) unknowledge is communicated a little more than uncertainty;
- (4) IDK as an Assertion is much more used than as an Answer to a question or as an Indirect Question.

These results seem to be in line with the epistemic expectations related to psychotherapy sessions, i.e. conversations that have an asymmetrical epistemic nature since the epistemic statuses, rights and responsibilities of psychotherapists and clients with respect to their specific domains of knowledge are very different. Clients, who are expected to be competent about their own feelings, thoughts, memories, perceptions etc., actually use IDK much more often than psychotherapists, who are instead commonly expected to have psychological and professional competence.

In other terms, psychotherapists and clients use IDK to communicate both their lack of knowledge and their lack of certainty, but the quantitative difference between the two interlocutors is significant.

As for the PRAGMATIC function of IDK, it is worth noting that they are much more used as Assertions among other assertions than as Answers to questions and Indirect Questions. This seems to suggest, on the one hand, the clients’ need to reveal their doubts and lack of knowledge in a setting that is in itself characterised by a high level of uncertainty and knowledge limitations and by unpredictable and sensitive topics that are under discussion, and, on the other hand, the clients’ involvement in the communicative dynamics of the interaction, that does not relegate them to the position of mere responders to psychotherapists’ requests or of mere questioners.

Such four macroscopic results are similar to those we found in a previous study of the Italian expression *Non so* in the medical field, specifically in a larger corpus of 12 Italian gynaecological consultations between a male doctor and 11 of his pregnant patients (Bongelli, Zuczkowski & Riccioni 2023).

7. Overall conclusions

The qualitative analysis of five examples of IDK extracted from psychotherapy sessions aimed at giving psychotherapists and clients a few easy criteria to determine when IDK communicates unknowledge or uncertainty and what to do when it manifests itself as incomplete.

The four macroscopic results of the quantitative analysis are indicative but useful, in our opinion, for psychotherapeutic practice: Gloria uses IDK nine times more than the therapists; most IDK are complete and used as assertions communicating unknowledge a little more than uncertainty.

The three therapists in our corpus do not seem interested in investigating IDK as complete assertions, probably because they are used as assertions among other assertions (a sort of camouflage, mimicry?) and not as indirect questions. But we know from the qualitative analysis of Examples 1 and 2 that IDK + IF/WHETHER and IDK + a WH-word are always the indirect formulation of two different types of direct questions, either WHETHER questions communicating uncertainty or WH-word questions communicating unknowledge. So, it is up to the therapist to remember this and to take such assertions as potential indirect questions to be answered. A client's assertion remains an assertion as long as the therapist treats it as an indirect question, worthy of an answer.

Summary

Viewing psychotherapy conversations from an epistemic perspective involves analysing how psychotherapist and client manage their knowledge, insufficient knowledge (uncertainty) and lack of knowledge (unknowledge). This article focuses on the use of the epistemic disclaimer "*I don't know*", i.e., a linguistic expressions that speakers employ to indicate uncertainty or unknowledge, in a corpus of psychotherapy sessions. The main aims, both qualitative and quantitative, are to identify the syntactic and pragmatic manifestations of "*I don't know*" in the corpus (linguistic analysis), which of them express unknowledge or uncertainty and why (epistemic analysis), how many of them are used by client and psychotherapist respectively. The practical purpose of this study is to give psychotherapists, counselors, clients etc. a few easy criteria for establishing when and why *I don't know* communicates uncertainty or unknowledge.

Keywords: psychotherapy conversations, epistemic disclaimer *I don't know*, knowledge, uncertainty, unknowledge, KUB model.

Zusammenfassung

Die Untersuchung von Psychotherapiesprachen aus einer epistemischen Perspektive erfordert eine Analyse des Umgangs von Psychotherapeuten und Klienten mit ihrem Wissen, unzureichendem Wissen (Unsicherheit) und fehlendem Wissen (Nicht-Wissen). Dieser Artikel fokussiert auf die Verwendung des epistemischen Disclaimers „Ich weiß nicht“ in einem Korpus von Psychotherapiesitzungen, d.h. auf eine sprachliche Äußerung, die verwendet wird, um Unsicherheit oder Nicht-Wissen zu signalisieren. Die Hauptziele, sowohl qualitativ als auch quantitativ, bestehen dabei darin, die syntaktischen und pragmatischen Erscheinungsformen von „Ich weiß nicht“ im Korpus zu identifizieren (linguistische Analyse), welche von ihnen Nicht-Wissen oder Unsicherheit ausdrücken und warum (epistemische Analyse), und wie häufig sie auf Klienten- bzw. Therapeutenseite verwendet werden. Das praktische Ziel dieser Studie ist es, Psychotherapeuten, Beratern, Klienten usw. einige einfache Kriterien an die Hand zu geben, mit denen sie feststellen können, wann und warum die Formulierung „Ich weiß nicht“ Unsicherheit oder Nicht-Wissen signalisiert.

Keywords: Psychotherapiegespräch, epistemischer Disclaimer “Ich weiß nicht”, Wissen, Unsicherheit, Nicht-Wissen, KUB-Modell.

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