

Pragmatic functions: expressing certainty and uncertainty

At Trinity College London, we have studied the scripts from hundreds of our speaking and listening exams. This data shows us the range of language that test takers use for different pragmatic functions.

Activity 1

Read this exam extract of a discussion between a test taker <TT> and an examiner <E> about new anti-smoking legislation in Spain

Corpus extract

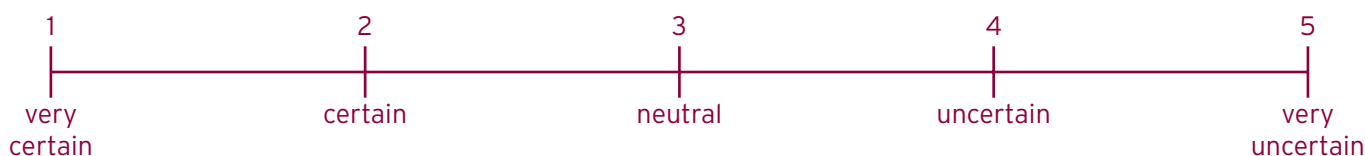
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p><E> Okay erm <pause> do you not think that perhaps the pendulum has swung a little bit too far and that now smokers feel like victims and that they feel guilty that they feel ostracised and they feel outside society?</p> <p><TT> Erm probably I mean I I can understand that erm of course I'm not a smoker but I of course I I know that they they are persons just like everybody else they have rights and maybe this law is too extreme maybe there should be a way for them to smoke</p> <p><E> Can you think of a way to compromise?</p> <p><TT> Well for example I think the the ancient law the former law before this one wasn't that bad because there was a place for smokers and a place for non-smokers</p> | <p><E> Yeah</p> <p><TT> And that was it and <.> also I don't think that smoking is an activity you have to do twenty four seven I mean maybe you can spend half hour with your friends and then go out and smoke</p> <p><E> Yeah so y-you would've been happy for that intermediate stage to remain permanent?</p> <p><TT> Yes</p> <p><E> So you think that the current situation is too extreme then?</p> <p><TT> Well I support the law but I can understand the people they feel that it's too extreme</p> |
|---|---|

Underline all expressions the test taker <TT> uses to express certainty and uncertainty.

Overall, is the test taker <TT> confident with what they are saying?

Activity 2

Read the extracts below aloud. Underline the expressions of certainty and uncertainty, and decide how certain (or uncertain) each expression is. Use the following scale:



- a) It's my favourite area in New York definitely
- b) Erm erm no I don't know I don't think so
- c) So er it's easier for us to remember and erm nightmares [that] take place in the early hours of the morning shortly before we get up so they are more likely to be remembered erm then erm
- d) I might want to live in Australia
- e) I surely don't want my parents to give up their pension
- f) And perhaps next er year I will

- g) And I think there must be some people with who er who can speak English
- h) I would probably go
- i) So maybe I can er I can be an engineer erm but I will erm paint at the same time
- j) I wanna be a lawyer possibly get to be a judge but just be in the law field
- k) And erm I think I'm sort of shy to go in front of the camera and you know so er to be you know an actress there should be a should be a particular training I mean you should go undergo a few things and learn [a] few things
- l) Well to be honest I'm not sure but I'm sure there's a reason behind but...

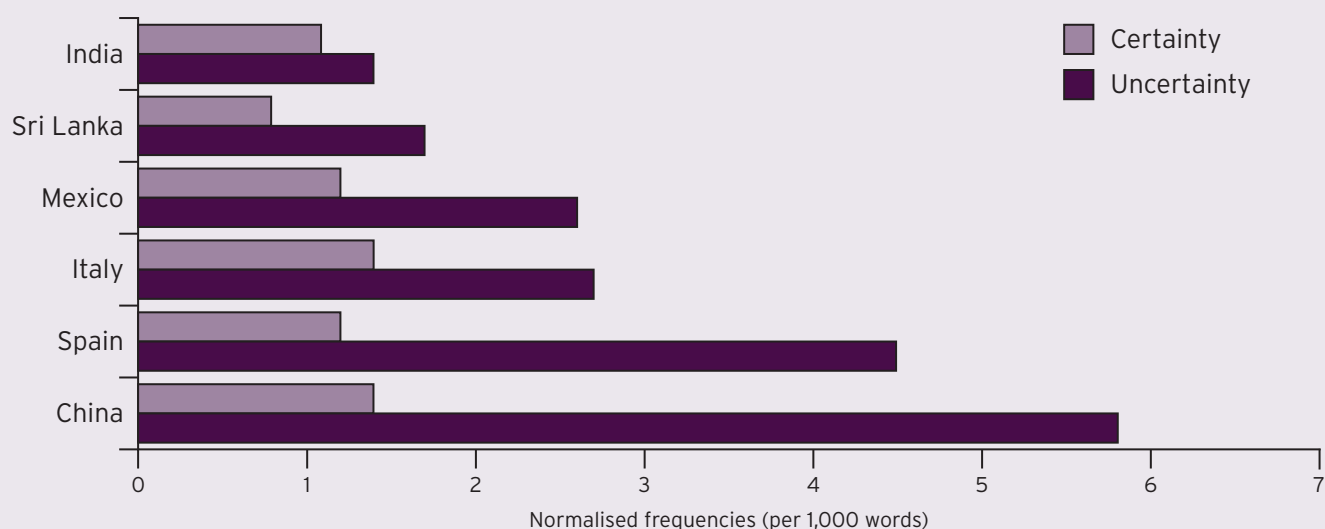
Activity 3

Discuss the statements below with a partner, using some of the expressions of certainty and uncertainty from activity 2.

- a) It is going to be a sunny day tomorrow.
- b) In twenty years' time, people will be able to choose Mars as their holiday destination.
- c) There is a prehistoric reptile in Loch Ness (lake in Scotland).

Corpus findings

Look at how much certainty and uncertainty L2 speakers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds express:



While expressing certainty seems to be fairly consistent, uncertainty, varies considerably depending on the speaker's background.