

# **SITUATION OF UNCERTAINTY: PRAGMATIC, SEMANTIC, AND SYNTACTIC ASPECTS OF INVESTIGATION**

***Larisa V. Topka, PhD***

Associate Professor, Irkutsk State Linguistic University, Irkutsk, Russia

---

## **Abstract**

The paper focuses on uncertainty as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which is analyzed from the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic points of view, therefore in the semiotic domain of language.

Pragmatic aspect of the investigation of uncertainty phenomenon displays the regulation of speech behaviour with the help of a tactics-situational approach to describing the communicative interactions.

Semantic aspect of the research indicates uncertainty as an abstract semantic formation (conceptual structure) or, in terms of cognitive linguistics, a prototypical situation made by a definite number of semantic segments as its components.

Syntactic aspect of the investigation presents means of its (uncertainty) linguistic representation – an uncertain statement which rests on a particular bulk of lingual means of expression that are perfectly adapted to its realization and affects the addressee's behaviour with the help of hesitancy, courtesy, understatement, and unpredictability.

---

**Keywords:** Uncertainty, speech-behavioural situation, tactics, semantic segment

## **Introduction**

Uncertainty as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon can be analyzed from the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic points of view, therefore in the semiotic domain of language (de Saussure Ferdinand, Pierce Charles, Morris Charles, Lotman Yuri).

The aim of the investigation is to explore this phenomenon in functional linguistics, which is concerned with the language as an instrument of social interaction and studies the way the individual as a social being uses it in order to communicate with others, and in psycho- and socio-linguistics as well, where the influence of internal psycho-physiological and external

social factors on the process of communication is considered (Topka Larisa V. 2008 and 2009 (a)).

The speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty can be estimated on the basis of the social distance between the participants, on the power of one of them over the other, and on the degree of the speaker's plunging into the addressee's sphere. The situation is socially conditioned as it depends on status-role relations between the participants and on a socio-psychological distance between them. Such personal factors as the characteristics of the individual as such (traits of character, age, sex, education, emotional state, etc.) and of the individual as a member of a social group (level of upbringing, morality, etc.) must be noted as well.

The semantic basis of the speech-behavioural situation is uncertainty as a category of broad semantics and egocentric orientation which is formed by a definite number of semantic segments. This semantic model aims at an integrated description of units of different levels on the basis of the sameness of their categorial meaning – the meaning of uncertainty.

#### **Uncertainty: speech-behavioural situation**

The regulation of speech behaviour is realized with the help of various tactical devices. Pragmatic aspect of the investigation of uncertainty phenomenon displays the regulation of speech behaviour with the help of a tactics-situational approach to describing the communicative interactions (Vereščagin Eugeny and Kostomarov Vitaly 1980 and 1988, Arskiy Alexander 1998, Topka Larisa V. 2000 and 2009 (b), and 2012 (a)).

This approach makes it possible to unite speech actions or, to be more precise, their pragma-semantic correlates (macroacts and microacts), in the lingual formation of which an uncertain statement takes part, in speech-behavioural tactics' forming. Since the microact is a pragma-semantic correlate of speech action as an individual phenomenon – the tactics presents a sort of invariant.

It means that the pragmatics-semantics distinction can be characterized in terms of “context dependence versus context independence” where the linguistic phenomenon is the concern of semantics when it is invariant with respect to context and, vice versa, if it is sensitive to context, then it is a topic within pragmatics (Huang Yan 2007, p. 214-215) or in terms of “narrow context and broad context” (Bach Kent 1999, Recanati François 2004).

The choice of the term ‘tactics’ is caused by its function – the formation of the overall super-task, or, in other words, of the “strategy”; “tactics function” – its ability to act as a component of units of a higher level. In this case, the tactics is a semantic segment (invariant unit) of the semantic domain of the phenomenon in question.

Tactics are realized in a number of speech actions that express a general sense, a general intention of the speaker. The number of tactics that constitute any speech-behavioural situation can be defined, whereas the number of speech actions that form each of the tactics is countless and variably endless because they are realized by the speaker on the spur of the moment. Tactics of behaviour can be personal and social, the latter are divided into interlingual (general – common to all mankind, and regional) and national-cultural (Vereščagin Eugeny and Kostomarov Vitaly 1980 and 1999, Topka Larisa V. 2009 (b) and 2011).

“But no pragmatics without semantics” (Groenendijk Jeroen and Stokhof Martin 1984), so a definite number of speech-behavioural tactics forms a definite speech-behavioural situation, in this case – the speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty the semantic basis of which is uncertainty as a category of broad semantics and egocentric orientation (about the categories of broad semantics and egocentric orientation see also: Maria V. Malinovich and Yury M. Malinovich 2003, Topka Larisa V. 2000 and 2009 (a)). This semantic model aims at an integrated description of units of different levels on the basis of the sameness of their categorial meaning, so, semantic aspect of the research displays uncertainty as an abstract semantic formation (conceptual structure) or, in terms of cognitive linguistics, a prototypical situation (Topka Larisa V. 2012 (b)) made by a definite number of semantic segments as its components.

Thus, the speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty consists of some elements that comprise verbal and non-verbal clichés, which express the same sense – a general semantic segment. Each tactic is included in a speech-behavioural situation in the same way as a semantic segment is included in a lexical area, if to draw an analogy between a speech-behavioural situation and a word (lexeme) on the one hand, and between a tactic of behaviour and a semantic segment on the other one.

One should differentiate the sense of a concrete speech act and the sense of some synonymous units (acts, texts) – the invariant sense where the sense as a definite abstraction from the real cognitive-linguistic facts is considered. The given sense “remains invariant in all the text transformations” (Lotman Yury 1999, p. 12).

Taking into consideration the importance of the linguistic means of expression, one can realize that “a speech act begins with sense (...) and ends with sense (...). The linguistic means of expression – grammatical, lexical, lexico-grammatical – present a sort of intermediate stage. It is quite typical of the language entity as the means of communication, and the means of formation and expression of thought” (Bondarko Alexander 1978, p. 126-127; see also: Bondarko Alexander 2002 and 2003).

Each constituent of the uncertainty domain has its own plane of content (its meaning and function) and the plane of expression (means of formal structural organization). The plane of content is expressed by semantic spheres (zones) that can be distinguished by the analysis of the domain's components. The plane of expression is represented by the dominant element which is situated in its (domain) kernel part and transfers all the shades of its meaning. The plane of expression can be rendered by not only this element but also by the elements of the domain's periphery.

Therefore, if the speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty can be seen as a phenomenon that has a field structure, then each of its tactics will be the semantic segment – invariant, forming a field of this situation, and each individual act of speech, in the lingual formation of which an uncertain statement takes part, – a variant of this semantic segment.

### **Uncertainty: semantic segments**

The semantic field of uncertainty consists of the centre, some kernel elements revealing the main features of the given phenomenon, and the periphery, where the features obtain new characteristics. Here are three tactics or, in other words, semantic segments of the kernel part of the uncertainty domain:

#### ***I. The speaker's uncertainty in respect to some event, fact or circumstances.***

*“You may think me a foolish, credulous woman, but Monsieur Poirot, I am afraid. Supposing that the spirit of the dead kind is not yet appeased? Perhaps to you I seem to be thinking nonsense.”*

The speaker's uncertainty seems to be understandable, the reaction of the addressee is quite positive:

*“No, indeed, Lady Willard,” said Poirot quickly. “I too, believe in the force of superstition, one of the greatest forces the world has even known.” (A. Christie)*

#### ***II. The speaker's uncertainty in respect to the third person that has a consultative character (an appeal to the addressee's opinion).***

*“I wouldn't say that ... I just – don't know. Anthony was in the habit of taking arsenic. His wife got it for him. One day, by mistake, he takes far too much. Was the mistake his or his wife's? Nobody could tell, and the jury very properly gave her the benefit of the doubt. That's all quite right and I'm not finding fault with it. All the same – I'd like to know.”*

Although this example shows the expression of the speaker's opinion, thoughts just for himself to be sure, it also displays his appeal to the addressee's point of view.

The reaction of his communication partner does not bring a desirable answer to him:

*“It's none of our business.” (W.S. Maugham)*

### **III. The speaker's uncertainty about propriety, timeliness of his or her further actions that has the form of reservation.**

*"I should go to some city. Perhaps I can get a job on some newspaper," he thought, and then his mind turned to the girl with whom he was to have spent this evening and again he was half-angry at the turn of events that had prevented his going to her. "But, my mother...", he whispered to himself and again his body shook with fright and uncertainty.*" (Sh. Anderson)

Thus, the uncertainty domain reflects such a situation where the speaker expresses his/her attitude to some fact or event; the absence of full information, its inaccuracy or untrustworthiness condition the contradiction and polysemy of the speaker's statement (Topka Larisa V. 2008). Uncertainty can also be expressed in respect to the addressee, the third person, and to the speaker him/herself, where the latter is caused by the peculiarities of his/her character or by the situation itself (Topka Larisa V. 2009(a)).

#### **Uncertainty: linguistic means of expression**

Uncertainty appears in communication and is realized on all levels of linguistic system, so syntactic aspect of its investigation displays the means of its textual representation – an uncertain statement which rests on a particular bulk of linguistic means of expression that are perfectly adapted to its realization and affects the addressee's behaviour with the help of unpredictability, hesitancy, courtesy, understatement, and the like:

**Introductory words with modal shade of meaning** which belong to the semantic class expressing uncertainty and doubt (*perhaps, maybe*, etc.):

*"Perhaps, if you're doing that, it might be refilled."* (A. Christie)

**Indicators of the logical beginning of a phrase** (*so, as far as I know, to my knowledge*, etc.):

*"To my knowledge, it has not been cleared yet."* (S. Sheldon)

They are introductory units as functional elements which do not suppose any morphological limitations. To this class of units adverbs of personal (individual) estimation, of the degree of authenticity expression (*frankly, really, actually*, etc.) and nominal-prepositional combinations expressing supposition (*in fact, in all probability*, etc.) may be referred:

*"That's very interesting and important point to me. In fact, it's invaluable."* (A. Christie)

**Reverse constructions** where the principle clause is included in the subordinate one which not only gains the main role in the expression but becomes syntactically independent:

*"I'm afraid, you know, I haven't moved with the times."* (A. Christie)

**Constructions with verbs of perception and mental activity.** These so-called ‘conversational expressions’ reflect the speaker’s subjective attitude to the utterance (*I think, I believe, I hope, I feel, I presume, etc.*):

“*Mr. Heathcliff, you must excuse me for troubling you – I presume, because, with that face, I’m sure you cannot help being good-hearted.*” (E. Bronte)

In American English these are *I guess, I figure*. In scientific conversation the above-mentioned verbs may be accompanied by the expressions *be inclined, be disinclined*.

**Modal verbs** of uncertainty and doubt (*may, might, etc.*):

“(…), *but I was in hopes you might have some good news from town.*” (J. Austen)

**Constructions with the predicate of fear** (*I am afraid*) in its secondary meaning – to express the meaning of understatement (Semionova Tatiana 1993) and, consequently, uncertainty and supposition (Topka Larisa V. 2000 and 2012(b)):

“*I’m afraid we can’t pay very much at the beginning.*” (S. Sheldon)

**Parenthesis** (parenteza) as a phenomenon which covers classes of words, word-combinations, and even sentences, and which is opposed to the rest of the sentence as having difference in meaning:

“(…) *and perhaps your papa and mamma would think so too, if they thought much about it.*” (A. Bronte)

**Forms of the Subjunctive Mood** which serve to show the unfinished statements and make the utterance milder. Some of them may be clichés (*I should like to, I would like to, I would venture to say, etc.*):

“*I would like to disagree with that slightly.*” (W.S. Maugham)

Very often they are used in interrogative sentences:

“*But wouldn’t that mean you’d be living in Greece?*” (S. Sheldon)

**Elliptical constructions:**

“*I expect ... no, he wouldn’t go into the forest by himself, would he?*” (W.G. Golding)

**Constructions with emotive predicates** which point to ‘the character’ of speech actions (*looking doubtfully, hesitatingly replied, etc.*):

“*That’s not my mother. That’s not my mother in there,*” he whispered to himself and again his body shook with fright and uncertainty.” (Sh. Anderson)

“*Well, I wish I were strong. I only wish I were strong,*” he said hesitatingly and turning walked away along the path toward the house. (Sh. Anderson)

**General questions in the negative form:**

“Then don’t you think you might reconsider your decision about Gladys. She really is a nice girl. I know all her family; very honest and superior.” Miss Lavinia shook her head. (A. Christie)

**Tag-questions:**

“Gladys has changed places rather often before, though, hasn’t she, my dear?” (A. Christie)

**Adverbs of degree** (*hardly, rather, pretty, quite, yet, a bit, a little, etc.*) and double-adverbs (*rather too, not quite too, a little bit, etc.*):

“I am afraid, Mr. Darsy,” observed Miss Bingley in a half whisper, “that this adventure has rather affected your admiration of her fine eyes.” (J. Austen)

**Repetition of the meaningful parts of the utterance:**

“Perhaps you mean – my brother – you mean Mrs. – Mrs. Robert Ferrars.” (J. Austen)

**The use of the interjection well:**

“Well, my young friend, you are going to have a good breakfast and get off to the city.” (A. Christie)

Frequently, in one utterance there may be several means of expression of uncertainty phenomenon to intensify the effect of it:

“Oh, I wish I hadn’t sent him that letter telling him to take care of himself. **Maybe** I shouldn’t do this. **Perhaps** I never ought to write letters on Sunday evenings – I always let myself go so. I can’t think why Sunday evenings always have such a funny effect on me. I simply yearn to have someone to write to or – to love. But I shouldn’t write to him again, **should I?** And besides, what would be the use? I **might** get really keen on him and he’d never care a straw for me. I should become a different person, **shouldn’t I?** Oh, **I don’t know myself.**” (K. Mansfield)

The most frequently used means of uncertainty expression are the modal verbs *may, might*, the introductory words with modal shade of meaning *maybe, perhaps*, the negative form of a general question with verbs of mental activity *Don’t you think...?*, and the use of the interjection *well*.

**Concluding remarks**

The uncertainty domain reflects such a situation where the speaker expresses his/her attitude to some fact or event, to the addressee, the third person, and to the speaker him/herself; the absence of full information, its inaccuracy or untrustworthiness condition the contradiction and polysemy of the speaker’s statement.

Uncertainty can be investigated in the semiotic domain of language through the study of interactions, through the classification (synthesis) of the given interactions as particular reality phenomena, because the correlation between language and speech (de Saussure Ferdinand 2006) is merely the

relation between scientific analysis, abstraction, classification (in other words – the interpretation of scientific facts) on the one hand, and particular reality phenomena, which constitute the object of this analysis, abstraction and the like – on the other one.

The speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty, on the basis of which the definite linguistic means of expression are considered, implies the complex system of personal and social situations of reality. The situation is socially conditioned as it depends on status-role relations between the participants and on a socio-psychological distance between them.

The speech-behavioural situation of uncertainty is a phenomenon that has a field structure, where each of its tactics is a semantic segment which forms its area. The semantic domain of uncertainty consists of the centre – some kernel elements (nuclear semantic segments) revealing the main features of the phenomenon, and the periphery where the features obtain new characteristics, and where the uncertainty domain forms zones of confluence with other areas (with the domain of certainty, for instance).

Uncertainty appears in communication and is realized on all levels of linguistic system. The main characteristic of the uncertainty domain is the general semantic function as an integral nucleus that brings together many linguistic elements (lexical, morphological, syntactic) that are perfectly adapted to the realization of an uncertain statement, which affects the addressee's behaviour with the help of hesitancy, courtesy, understatement, and unpredictability.

### References:

- Arskiy, Alexander A. 1998. Semanticheskiye kategorii ugrozy i predosterezheniya i ikh verbal'naya realizatsiya v sovremennom nemetskom yazyke (taktiko-situativnyy podkhod): avtoreferat dis. ... kand. filol. nauk. Irkutsk: IGLU.
- Bach, Kent. 1999. The semantic-pragmatic distinction: what it is and why it matters. In Ken Turner (ed.), *The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface From Different Points of View. Current Research in the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface*, vol. 1). Oxford: Elsevier, P. 65-84.
- Bondarko, Alexander V. 1978. *Grammaticheskoe znachenie i smysl*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Bondarko, Alexander V. 2002. *Teorija znachenija v sisteme funkcional'noj grammatiki: na materiale russkogo jazyka*. Rossijskaja akademija nauk. Institut lingvisticheskikh issledovanij. Moskva: Jazyki slavjanskoj kul'tury.
- Bondarko, Alexander V. 2003. Invarianty i prototipy v sisteme funkcional'noj grammatiki // *Problemy funkcional'noj grammatiki: Semanticheskaja invariantnost' / variativnost'*. / Otv. red. A.V. Bondarko, S.A. Shubik. SPb.: «Nauka», S. 5–36.



- Groenendijk, Jeroen A.G., and Stokhof, Martin J.B. 1984. Studies on the semantics of questions and the pragmatics of answers. PhD Thesis, University, Amsterdam.
- Huang, Yan. 2007. Pragmatics. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Lotman, Jury M. 1999. Vnutri mysljashhiv mirov. Chelovek – tekst – semiosfera – istorija. Moskva: Jazyki russkoj kul'tury.
- Malinovich, Maria V. and Malinovich, Jury M. 2003. Antropologicheskaja lingvistika kak integral'naja nauka // Antropologicheskaja lingvistika: Koncepty. Kategorii : kollektivnaja monografija pod red. prof. Ju.M. Malinovicha. Moskva-Irkutsk, S. 7-28.
- Recanati, François. 2004. Pragmatics and semantics. In Horn Laurence R. and Gregory Ward (eds.), The Handbook of Pragmatics. Oxford: Blackwell, P. 442-462.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de 2006. Writings in General Linguistics. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Semjonova, Tatiana I. 1993. Semantika i sintaksis konstrukcij s predikatami straha v sovremennom anglijskom jazyke: avtoref. dis. ... kand. filol. nauk. Irkutsk: IGLU.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2000. Pragma-semanticheskaja kategorija nekategorichnosti v sovremennom anglijskom jazyke: dis. ... kand. filol. nauk. Irkutsk: IGLU.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2008. Chelovek neuverennyj: pragma-semanticheskij aspekt issledovanija // Sovremennye lingvisticheskie teorii: problemy slova, predlozhenija, teksta: sbornik nauchnyh statej / otv. red. prof. M.V. Malinovich. Irkutsk: IGLU, S. 170-180.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2009 (a). Antropocentricheskij podhod k issledovaniju cheloveka neuverennogo // Podgotovka kadrov dlja silovyh struktur: sovremennye napravlenija i obrazovatel'nye tehnologii: Materialy 14 Vserossijskoj nauchno.-metod. konf. Irkutsk: FGOU VPO VSI MVD Rossii, S. 457-461.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2009 (b). Rechepovedencheskaja situacija: universal'noe i jetnospecificheskoe // Vestnik Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvisticheskogo universiteta Serija Filologija. Irkutsk: IGLU, № 2 (6), S. 111-116.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2011. Mezh"jazykovoe i nacional'no-kul'turnoe prostranstvo rechepovedencheskoj situacii // Vestnik LGU im. Pushkina Serija Filologija. Sankt-Peterburg: LGU, № 4. T. 1, S. 201-210.
- Topka, Larisa V. 2012 (a). Uncertainty: pragma-semantic aspect of research // International Conference «The Communication of Certainty and Uncertainty Linguistic, Psychological, Philosophical Aspects» October 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> 2012: Book of Abstracts. University of Macerata, University of Verona, University of Würzburg. Italy, P. 106.

Topka, Larisa V. 2012 (b). Nekategorichnost': opyt pragma-semanticheskogo issledovanija: monografija. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing GmbH & Co. KG. Heinrich-Böcking Str. 6-8, 66121 Saarbrücken, Deutschland.

Vereshhagin, Eugeny M. and Kostomarov, Vitaly G. 1980. Lingvostranovedcheskaja teorija slova. Moskva: Russkij jazyk.

Vereshhagin, Eugeny M. and Kostomarov, Vitaly G. 1988. Predmety vremeni i mesta v idiomatike rechemyslitel'noj dejatel'nosti // Jazyk: sistema i funkcionirovanie. Moskva, S. 54-61.

Vereshhagin, Eugeny M. and Kostomarov, Vitaly G. 1999. Vpoiskah novyh putej razvitija lingvostranovedenija: koncepcija reche-povedencheskih taktik. Moskva: Gosudarstvennyj institut russkogo jazyka im. A.S. Pushkina.