# Epistemic Modality Spoken by Japanese Learners of English: A Corpus-based Study of Adverbial Epistemic Markers

*Daisuke Suzuki*

*Abstract*
This case study explores the use of adverbial epistemic markers (AEMs, e.g. *kind of*), by Japanese learners of English (JLE), compared to that of native speakers of American English (NS). The primary purpose is to examine the role played by AEMs in different tasks in a speaking test taken by both JLE and NS.
The findings show that both JLE and NS use more AEMs, which convey uncertainty, such as *maybe*, more than certainty, such as *definitely*, especially in a descriptive task designed to speculate on the situation depicted in the tests. In addition, it indicates that AEMs such as *kind of* are also used in dialogues to mitigate speakers' opinions, which shows that JLE have pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. However, NS employ this usage more frequently than JLE. This study therefore shows the importance the role of task effects has in assessing learner performance, as different linguistic resources will be more or less appropriate in different contexts.

*Key-words*: adverbial epistemic markers, task effects, L2 pragmatic knowledge.

## 1. Introduction

For decades learner corpora have been widely used to analyse the use of lexico-grammar by learners to understand trends and patterns in second language (L2) speakers' language use and/or errors (e.g. Fung and Carter 2007). As is often the case, first language (L1) data are compared to L2 data to analyse particular features of language use. However, not much attention has been paid to differences in task type, which could influence the use of particular features. In recent years, there has been greater focus on the task types that provide interaction with L2 speakers, such as interview,


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presentation, role-play and narration. For example, Gablasova, Brezina, McEnery, Boyd (2017) examined L2 use of epistemic stance markers in spoken English. The findings indicate that advanced L2 speakers use epistemic modalities in dialogic tasks more frequently than in monologic tasks such as presentations. Thus, it can be said that advanced L2 speakers can adjust their way of speaking not only to fulfil the requirements of individual tasks but to pay attention to social aspects as well.

This type of study elucidates not only the learners' linguistic skills, but a more complete picture of their competences, such as pragmatic competence. It consists of pragmalinguistic knowledge, which is the ability to choose proper linguistic items to mitigate their utterance (for example, by using epistemic stance markers), and sociopragmatic knowledge, which is the knowledge to discern which social contexts they need to use (Leech 1983).

### 1.1. Epistemic stance

Epistemic stance refers to linguistic choices "concerned with the speaker's assumptions, or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed" (Coates 1995: 55).

For example, the adverb *probably* in a) below shows the speaker's lack of confidence about the exact period the person has been working for the company. In contrast, *definitely* in b) fortifies the speaker's view towards the proposition.

a) He has *probably* been with his company for 13 years and in his present job for four.
b) It was *definitely* a case of exploiting child labour.

(Biber *et al.* 1999: 972ff)

The epistemic stance in these examples demonstrates a subjective stance of feelings, attitudes, or assessments towards propositions. This is an important function because not only do we convey our propositional content, but also a range of subjective meanings reflecting our value systems, identity, confidence and so forth by using these epistemic forms (Gablasova, Brezina, McEnery, Boyd 2017).

In addition, the epistemic stance is used in intersubjectivity (Gablasova, Brezina, McEnery, Boyd 2017; Hunston and Thompson 2000; Kärkkäinen 2006). Intersubjective use of epistemic stance is intended to manage interpersonal relationships among speakers and it allows them not only to demonstrate their position (certainty or uncertainty) towards a statement, but also to express their position towards other interlocutors, e.g. to mitigate strong assertions (Gablasova and Brezina 2015: 117). For instance, in c), a lecturer gives advice to an undergraduate.

c) I mean I've told you this before the way you write is *sort of* chatty… you can't let your argument *kind of* disappear as you *kind of* tell me this little story.
(Poos and Simpson 2002: 16, emphasis original)

In this example, whilst the speaker is socially in a higher position, using *kind of* and *sort of* in this context as a hedging device mitigates the impact of a potentially face-threatening move. However, in a contrary situation to example c), the use of a hedging device is even more vital when another face-threatening move, such as a request, is made by a speaker in a lower position to a speaker in a higher one, and previous studies suggest that a bare assertion could be considered inappropriate in this context (e.g. Chojnicka 2015).

In this regard, the knowledge and use of epistemic modality demonstrate the pragmatic aspects of communication (Hyland 1994). For example, in academic disciplines, appropriate use of epistemic modality makes it possible for academics to take a rhetorical stance to adjust their statements by controlling the degree of certainty they give to their claims. Epistemic modality is thus essential in academic discourse as it is a "central rhetorical means of gaining communal adherence to knowledge claims" (Hyland 1994: 241). These adjustments are critical outside academia as well, for instance at work (e.g. reporting news, giving work-related information, and so on).

However, previous studies have demonstrated the difficulties L2 learners encounter in using epistemic stance markers. It is challenging for them to use epistemic forms appropriately when speaking, as processing complex linguistic forms can be challenging due to time constraints (Fordyce 2009). In addition, thus far, the focus of research has been on academic writing (Chen

2010; Hyland 1994; McEnery and Kifle 2002). Therefore, it is essential to further extend the research area into the spoken data of learners' use of epistemic modality. As well as filling a research gap, the current research contributes to a better understanding of learners' use of epistemic forms in different tasks because L2 English speakers are expected to use them in different ways due to their genre awareness (Yasuda 2011). Both in test settings and in the real world, task types such as *presentation*, *discussion*, and *interactive task* could affect the linguistic choices of users irrespective of their L1 or L2 background (Gablasova and Brezina 2015).

Bearing these backgrounds in mind, the purpose of this paper is to examine the use of epistemic forms by Japanese learners of English in spoken data, comparing L1 speakers' data with that of the Japanese learners' development according to their L2 proficiency levels, focusing on task effects if present. The focus is solely on epistemic adverbs, which "arguably, are relatively stable from the functional perspective" (Gablasova and Brezina 2015: 118), which means L2 learners tend to use them more frequently than other syntactically complex epistemic devices such as modal verbs (e.g. *I could*).

### 1.2. Research Questions

This research is led by the following three research questions.

1. To what extent do Japanese learners of English (JLE) use adverbial epistemic stance markers (AEMs) similarly or differently in spoken language, compared with native speakers of English?
2. Do different speaking tasks affect JLE use of AEMs?
3. Do JLE show evidence of developing pragmatic knowledge in L2 speaking with increasing language proficiency level?

## 2. Data and Methods

### 2.1. Contrastive interlanguage analysis

The current study positions itself in the domain of learner corpus research, adopting a corpus-based approach (McEnery and Hardie 2011), as well as contrastive interlanguage analysis

(hereafter CIA). Linguistic investigation of learner corpora in most cases involves one of the following two methodological approaches: CIA and computer-aided error analysis (Granger 2002). The focus of this study is on the method of CIA, which is "contrastive, and consists in carrying out quantitative and qualitative comparisons between native (NS) and non-native (NNS) data" (Granger 2002: 8). The aim of the comparison is to uncover the "characteristics and patterns of use that distinguish learners from native speakers" (Callies 2015: 40).

This is not to say that CIA has not been subjected to criticism. For example, Hunston (2002) argues that CIA assumes that L2 learners have native-speakers' norm as a target. However, in terms of pedagogical implication, uncovering such characteristics is of use for language teachers and material developers because the results indicate "what native/expert speakers actually do rather than what reference books say they do" (Hunston 2002: 212). For instance, Suzuki (2018) explored L1 English speakers' use of the request expression *could you kindly*, which is used by Japanese learners and frequently appears in English textbooks in Japan. Compared with the typical usage in textbooks, i.e. a straightforward, polite request, the examples extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British Web 2007 (ukWaC) demonstrate a limited range of use by L1 speakers, such as in a request that contains irritation or irony, or an official request by an organisation.

In addition, CIA offers interlanguage researchers a window to examine and identify learners' acquisition sequences throughout different stages of language learning or across different proficiency levels (Chen 2010).

### 2.2. Spoken data

The data are extracted from the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology Japanese Learner English (NICT JLE) Corpus (Izumi, Uchimoto, Isahara 2004).

TABLE 1
Details of five task stages of SST

| | |
|---|---|
| Stage 1 | Warm-up (an examiner and examinee exchange greetings and some information e.g. where s/he lives, etc.) |
| Stage 2 | Description of a picture (the examinee is asked to describe a picture on the task card provided by the examiner. Topics: classroom, electric shop, skiing, etc.) |
| Follow-up for Stage 2 | Interview related to the topic in Stage 2 |
| Stage 3 | Role-play (the examinee is asked to play a role, which is described on the task card provided by the examiner. Topics: invitation, shopping, travel, etc.) |
| Follow-up for Stage 3 | Interview related to the topic in Stage 3 |
| Stage 4 | Narrative of a series of four or six pictures (the examinee is asked to tell a story following the sequence of the pictures on the task card. Topics included: car accident, department store, grocery store, movie, etc.) |
| Follow-up for Stage 4 | Interview related to the topic in Stage 4 |
| Stage 5 | Closing (the examiner asks the examinee some questions, e.g. a plan after the SST ends. The test is closed with farewells.) |

This corpus is employed as it has three significant advantages for the study: it includes four types of tasks; it contains L1 speakers' data; and it is of a relatively large size for a spoken corpus.

First, the corpus data collected through particular tasks suit the purpose of the current study. Details are shown in Table 1. The Standard Speaking Test (henceforth, SST), through which the data were collected, is a 15-minute, one-to-one interview test comprising five tasks: 1. Interview, 2. Description, 3. Role-play, 4. Narrative, 5. Interview. There are topic-related interviews between tasks 2 and 3, 3 and 4, as well as 4 and 5.

Second, it is a relatively large spoken corpus, which contains approximately 1.3 million words. It is well-balanced because the data

were gathered from 1,281 (643 males and 638 females) JLE, and their average age is 29.5 (ranging from 15 to 70 years old). In this study, since the lower group does not frequently use AEMs, learner data were extracted from a total of 1021 participants, which comprised 848 intermediate and 173 advanced learners (Table 2). Their proficiency level is described using the SST level, ranging from 1 for the lowest, to 9 for the highest.

TABLE 2
The number of SST examinees in the NICT JLE Corpus (Watanabe 2015)

| Level categorised in this study | No. of examinees | SST band description | No. of examinees |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lower | 260 | Novice-low-1 | 3 |
| | | Novice-mid-2 | 35 |
| | | Novice-high-3 | 222 |
| Intermediate | 848 | Intermediate-low-4 | 482 |
| | | Intermediate-low-plus-5 | 236 |
| | | Intermediate-mid-6 | 130 |
| Higher | 173 | Intermediate-mid-plus-7 | 77 |
| | | Intermediate-high-8 | 56 |
| | | Advanced-9 | 40 |
| Total | 1281 | Total | 1281 |

Third, it has a subcorpus collected from NS who performed the same tasks as JLE in the SST. The data contain 101,728 running words spoken by 20 NS, aged 20 to 25. Given my research focus on the role of task effect, employing this subcorpus is advantageous in that the data collection was conducted through the same tasks.

TABLE 3
Total running words in the examinees' spoken texts in the NICT JLE Corpus

| Test tasks | Lower | Intermediate | Higher | NS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview | 95,551 | 530,608 | 222,243 | 71,621 |
| Description | 15,087 | 86,703 | 6,272 | 6,674 |
| Role-play | 26,949 | 146,826 | 14,320 | 15,351 |
| Narrative | 24,973 | 135,329 | 7,794 | 8,082 |
| Total | 162,560 | 899,466 | 250,629 | 101,728 |

In this study, Stages 1 and 5, and the follow-up for stages 2, 3, and 4 are counted as interviews. The number of running words in each stage is shown in Table 3[1].

### 2.3. Target epistemic devices

The target list of epistemic devices follows Gablasova *et al*'s (2017) list, as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Target AEMs

| |
|---|
| maybe; kind of; actually; probably; sort of; perhaps; obviously; definitely; surely; possibly; for sure; certainly; apparently; no doubt |

This is because the list covers the epistemic forms, which, according to their research, are frequently used by L2 users. Furthermore, the adoption of the same list makes a comparison of the results possible. For data extraction, NICT JLE Corpus Analysis Tool 1.0 was used to search for the target forms in the NICT JLE corpus. This tool not only allows the data to be extracted from examiners and examinees

[1] However, for Table 9 and Figures 1 to 3, which present frequency per SST level, the number of running words is based on Abe (2015: 62) below, as the official source of information does not provide the number broken down per each SST level. Lv4: 308,544. Lv5: 204,048. Lv6: 130,678. Lv:7 85,395. Lv8: 68,539. Lv9: 54,394. NS: 84,774.

separately, but it also allows the data to be extracted from each task. This is critical because the target in the current study is only the data from the examinees and the focus is on the task effects.

## 3. Results

A total of 14 target items were extracted from the corpus across all four tasks. To ensure fair comparison, data were normalised to the basis of 10000. In order to understand the overall picture, Table 5 shows the frequencies of all 14 AEMs across four tasks: *interview* (INT), *role-play* (RP), *description* (DES), and *narrative* (NAR). The JLE results are divided into two groups, Intermediate (lv 4, 5, 6), and High (lv 7, 8, 9) so they can be analysed whilst paying attention to the difference in their proficiency levels.

TABLE 5
Frequency of AEMs across four tasks per group

| | JLE INT | | JLE High | | NS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Task type | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % |
| Interview | 25.6 | 0.3 | 34.5 | 0.3 | 113.9 | 1.1 |
| Description | 69.4 | 0.7 | 250.3 | 2.5 | 40.5 | 0.4 |
| Role-play | 16.3 | 0.2 | 144.1 | 1.4 | 30.1 | 0.3 |
| Narrative | 15.0 | 0.2 | 116.8 | 1.2 | 1.6 | 0.1 |

*Note*: The % sign indicates the percentage of AEMs in the number of utterances.

As expected, all the frequencies across the four tasks in the higher-level group outweigh those of the intermediate group. In addition, a salient feature in INT is that NS use AEMs more frequently than both groups of JLE, whereas in the remainder of the tasks, JLE use AEMs more than NS, except in the case of RP in the intermediate JLE group.

However, the adverbs contain both those that show certainty and uncertainty. To better understand the nature of AEMs used by both groups, the frequency of use of expressing (un)certainty is distinguished and compared. The following forms are taken

as being indicative of certainty: *certainly, definitely, for sure, no doubt, obviously,* and *surely*. In contrast, the following markers are regarded as conveying uncertainty: *maybe, perhaps, possibly,* and *probably*. The remainder of the items, *kind of*, *sort of*, *actually*, fall into the *other* category. The categorisation follows Gablasova, Brezina, McEnery, Boyd (2017). The results are presented in Tables 6 to 8. The % sign indicates the percentage of each category in the number of AEMs.

TABLE 6
Indexing (un)certainty: JLE Intermediate

| | Certainty | | Uncertainty | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Task type | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % |
| Interview | 0.3 | 1.2 | 17.4 | 67.7 | 8.0 | 31.1 |
| Description | 0.3 | 0.4 | 66.5 | 96.0 | 2.5 | 3.6 |
| Role-play | 0.8 | 4.9 | 10.4 | 63.4 | 5.2 | 31.7 |
| Narrative | 0.6 | 4.0 | 12.0 | 80.0 | 2.4 | 16.0 |

TABLE 7
Indexing (un)certainty: JLE Higher

| | Certainty | | Uncertainty | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Task type | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % |
| Interview | 0.5 | 1.4 | 16.9 | 49.0 | 17.1 | 49.6 |
| Description | 4.8 | 1.9 | 197.7 | 79.0 | 47.8 | 19.1 |
| Role-play | 6.3 | 4.5 | 72.6 | 51.5 | 62.2 | 44.1 |
| Narrative | 2.6 | 2.2 | 56.5 | 48.4 | 57.7 | 49.4 |

TABLE 8
Indexing (un)certainty: NS

| | Certainty | | Uncertainty | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Task type | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % | Per 10000 | % |
| Interview | 5.7 | 5.0 | 39.1 | 34.3 | 69.1 | 60.7 |
| Description | 0 | 0 | 30.0 | 74.1 | 10.5 | 25.9 |
| Role-play | 0 | 0 | 19.0 | 63.1 | 11.1 | 36.9 |
| Narrative | 0.1 | 6.3 | 0.5 | 31.3 | 1.0 | 62.5 |

Looking generally at the difference between certainty and uncertainty, all three groups primarily use AEMs to express uncertainty. This is not unexpected because in the test setting, participants are required to describe the photo provided in DES or make up an imaginary story in NAR, both of which are likely to require some guesswork and uncertainty.

Following the analysis of the overall tendency, the focus now shifts to each AEM. Table 9 shows the frequency of each of the target items across six different proficiency levels from SST levels 4 to 9 and NS.

It presents different patterns of development of language use. When taking the items used more than once on average at each level, the results show some patterns as the levels increase.

TABLE 9
Comparison between JLE and NS on the use of epistemic modalities

| | Lv4 | Lv5 | Lv6 | Lv7 | Lv8 | Lv9 | NS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| maybe | 22.8 | 27.5 | 29.6 | 22 | 23.9 | 24.8 | 21.9 |
| actually | 2.9 | 9.0 | 14.5 | 18 | 24.1 | 11.6 | 29.1 |
| kind of | 1.0 | 1.2 | 2.8 | 8 | 7.6 | 7.4 | 23.0 |
| probably | 1.1 | 1.8 | 3.4 | 6.6 | 7.6 | 8.6 | 14.2 |
| sort of | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0.4 | 1.9 | 2.2 | 10.4 |
| perhaps | 1.0 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0 | 0 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| definitely | 0 | 0.1 | 0.6 | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0.4 | 3.3 |
| surely | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0 | 0 |
| certainly | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0 | 0.1 | 0.6 | 0 | 0.4 |
| obviously | 0 | 0 | 0.3 | 0 | 0.4 | 0.9 | 1.1 |
| possibly | 0.1 | 0 | 0.2 | 0 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 2.2 |
| for sure | 0 | 0 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| apparently | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0.6 | 0.4 |
| no doubt | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*Note*: Relative frequency per 10000.

For example, *maybe*, the most frequently used adverb in this study, is used more frequently as the speakers' level increases from 4 to 6, and then it declines. JLE use it with almost the same frequency as NS from level 7 onwards. In contrast, the frequency of *probably*

and *kind of* gradually increases as the learners' level rises, but even at its highest level, there is still a large gap between its frequency at that level and that of NS. The frequency of *actually* follows a similar trajectory but it drops at level 9. Among these frequently used AEMs, *maybe, probably,* and *kind of*, which indicate uncertainty and show characteristic behaviour, are analysed in more detail in the following sections.

### 3.1. The case of *maybe*

As many previous studies, such as that of Fordyce (2009), show, *maybe* dominates learners' expressions of stance in their earlier stages of language learning. The result of the present study supports these findings. Figure 1 shows how, overall, the intermediate JLE group uses it more, while the higher proficiency groups use it at a frequency closer to that of NS. The percentage shows how the frequency of *maybe* accounts for the total number of AEMs. It decreases as their proficiency level develops, except in the highest-level group (43%), but the NS percentage is even lower (20%). It is possible that the small sample size (this level has the lowest number of examinees, only 40 participants) might have affected this result. The possible reason for this change is that JLE expand the variation of their stance-taking without using *maybe*. For example, the frequency of *probably* quite clearly rises along with the rise in the level of proficiency. This is discussed in more detail in the next section. It is also possible that JLE start using other, more syntactically elaborate, epistemic devices than adverbial expressions, such as modal verbs (e.g. *could*), which are beyond the scope of the current study.

There is no significant difference in the frequency of *maybe* if compared across the total number of occurrences. However, if its use is broken down by task type, it shows that NS use *maybe* significantly more frequently than JLE in INT, as shown in Table 10. In contrast, JLE use it far more frequently than NS in DES, RP, and NAR, with the exception of RP at an intermediate level. It is in line with the overall tendency of both JLE and NS use of other AEMs.

FIGURE 1
Developmental pattern of 'maybe' among JLE and NS: the bars show the frequency of occurrences, and the line illustrates how the frequency accounts for the total number of uses of AEMs

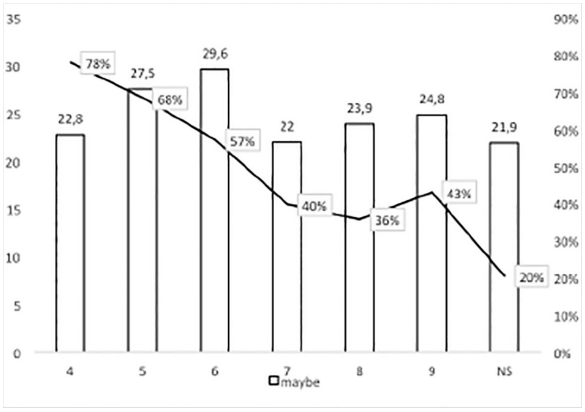



TABLE 10
Use of *maybe* across four tasks

| Task type | Interactiveness | Intermediate | Higher | NS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview | dialogic | 16.1 | 13.0 | 22.1 |
| Description | monologic | 59.2 | 133.9 | 18.0 |
| Role-play | dialogic | 9.4 | 58.7 | 9.8 |
| Narrative | monologic | 11.0 | 39.8 | 0.1 |

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary [10th Edition], *maybe* is defined as 1.) "when you are not certain that sth will happen or that sth is true or is a correct number" and 2.) "making a suggestion" (p. 969). The possible reason NS use *maybe* more frequently than JLE in INT is to mitigate their suggestions or requests.

The trend can be seen in RP, as making a suggestion or request is required in tasks in d) and e). By contrast, JLE usage is relatively limited to showing uncertainty such as in f).

d) <B>[2][...] But they feel *maybe* just a little bit too big. So can I

[2] <B> represents an examinee. <F> is a filler or filled pause. <SC> is self-correction, and <OL> is overlapping of the conversation between examiner and examinee.

try on another pair? <SC>Do you have may</SC>do you *maybe* have a size smaller <OL>perhaps</OL>?</B> (00005, NS, RP[3])

e) <B>[...] Is there a way we could *maybe* package this so it would be a little cheaper?</B> (00005, NS, RP)

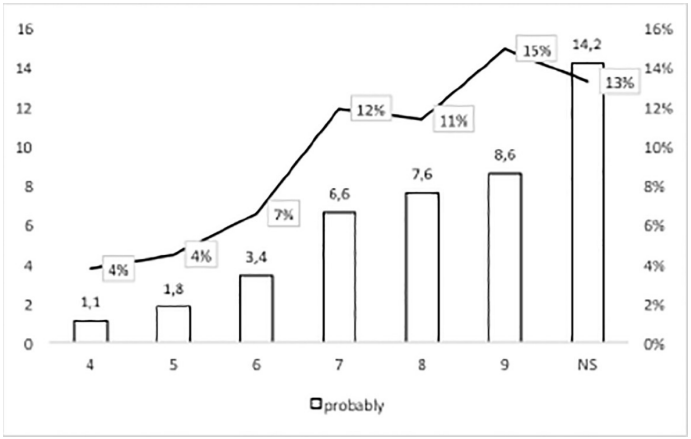
f) <B>[...] I bought <SC>a</SC> this <F>erm</F> <R?>vinyl</R?> <F>erm</F> <?>vinyl wrap</?> <F>ah</F> today <F>erm</F> at your shop, <F>well</F> *maybe* <F>err</F> <R>two hours</R>two hours ago.</B> (00838, JLE8, RP)

This brief case study has shown how the same lexical items can be deployed differently in different communicative situations, emphasising the importance of including task type when assessing performance differences between L1 and L2.

### 3.2. The case of *probably*

As Figure 2 shows, the developmental pattern of the use of *probably* is relatively straightforward. The higher the proficiency level, the more the frequency of utterance increases.

FIGURE 2
Developmental pattern of 'probably' among JLE and NS: the bars show the frequency of occurrences, and the line illustrates how the frequency accounts for the total number of uses of AEMs




[3] (File number, NS or JLE with SST level, Task type).

TABLE 11
Use of *probably* across four tasks

| Task type | Interactiveness | Intermediate | Higher | NS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview | dialogic | 0.8 | 4.0 | 14.7 |
| Description | monologic | 6.2 | 59.0 | 9.0 |
| Role-play | dialogic | 0.7 | 11.9 | 4.6 |
| Narrative | monologic | 0.5 | 16.7 | 0.3 |

*Note*: Relative frequency per 10000.

g) <B>But then I think my host sister *probably* gets <laughter>inpatient <R>if</R> if I don't</laughter> know what she's talking about. [...]
<SC>Maybe</SC> <F>er</F> *probably* the luau because I've never been to one before. So <R>that was</R> that was pretty fun. [...] </B> (00019, NS, INT)

The literature suggests that *probably* tends to be used in a formal setting and/or with a higher probability compared to *maybe* (e.g. Ozaki 2012). In g), her self-correction, at first *maybe* and then *probably*, makes sense if she is more certain and has a good reason for her choice of *the luau*, as is described in the subsequent clause. Similarly, JLE show that they understand the definition shown in h). Further investigation is needed to see whether they use it with an understanding of the higher probability if the proficiency level rises.

h) <A>[4]Why do you already know you are going to work at <H pn="others6">XXX09</H>?</A>
<B>Because the human resource people told me that <F>um</F> <R>you</R> you're working in
<F>um</F> International Sales Division. You *probably* <F>er</F> work in Kansai area. [...]</B> (00554, JLE7, INT)

The fact that NS use *probably* more than JLE, although the percentage is lower (for example, lv9, 15%; NS, 13%), indicates

[4] <A> represents an examiner. <H> is Hidden, used to conceal a proper noun.

that NS use other AEMs in addition to *probably*, as NS overall use AEMs more than JLE. *Kind of* will now be discussed in the next section.

### 3.3. The case of *kind of*

Before exploring *kind of*, the difference between epistemic and non-epistemic use needs to be defined. The majority of uses by JLE can be categorised as non-epistemic because they are used as a substitute for *type of* (e.g. *what kind of…?*). These have been excluded from the results. In addition, if they are part of a noun phrase and not an adverb, even if the example is a type of hedging (e.g. *it is a kind of*), they were not counted. Finally, the examples which have a semantically different meaning (e.g. *it is kind of you to*) and the abbreviation, *kinda*, were taken out. Figure 3 and Table 12 show the results following this process of data cleaning.

FIGURE 3
Developmental pattern of 'kind of' among JLE and NS: the bars show the frequency of occurrences, and the line illustrates how the frequency accounts for the total number of uses of AEMs

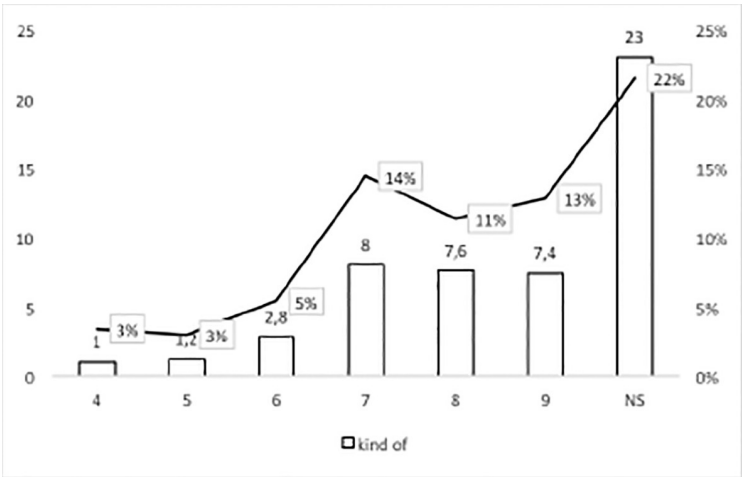


TABLE 12
Use of *kind of* across four tasks

| Task type | Interactiveness | Intermediate | Higher | NS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interview | dialogic | 1.4 | 5.4 | 25.1 |
| Description | monologic | 0.9 | 14.3 | 4.5 |
| Role-play | dialogic | 0.3 | 13.3 | 2.0 |
| Narrative | monologic | 0.4 | 14.1 | 0.3 |

*Note*: Relative frequency per 10000.

The overall trend is similar to the case studies in previous sections, in that NS use it mostly in INT and JLE Higher use it in the other tasks. Admitting the difficulty in clear-cut categorisation, Poos and Simpson (2002) explore the pragmatic function of *kind of* and *sort of* in terms of expressing inexactitude, softening the force of a stance or opinion, and mitigating criticism or a request. If the categorisation is applied, its use by JLE is primarily to express inexactitude, such as in i):

i) <B>So <laughter>I think it's</laughter> *kind of* interesting <OL>classroom</OL>.</B> (01227, JLE8, DES)

In contrast, example j) by the NS shows that the person attempts to mitigate his/her opinion, i.e. the town is boring, using *maybe* and *kind of* in terms of politeness, or to save either his/her positive face or the examiner's negative face. This is inferred on the basis of the fact that the town the NS is referring to is somewhere in Japan, from where the examiner comes.

j) <A>What's your <R>impre</R> impression of this town?</A> <B>My impression of this town? It looks pretty small. It looks like it's maybe *kind of* boring. There's not a lot to do. [...] </B> (00013, NS, INT)
k) <B>[...] I don't like running or you know, sports gym. It's boring. [...] </B> (00791, JLE7, INT)

In k) the speaker expresses his/her opinion rather directly with the adjective boring which has a negative connotation. This is not a problem if the person meant it. However, it could be softened using

*kind of* or *sort of*. Therefore, the difference between JLE and NS seems to lie in this type of direct or indirect choice.

## 4. Discussion

The analysis in the previous section and the three case studies show that there is a complex picture of the use of AEMs both by JLE and NS, as well as of the developmental pattern of JLE. The results demonstrate that JLE use differs in task types beyond that of a simple dichotomy of dialogic and monologic. In every target AEM examined in the case studies, JLE show the same tendency: they use AEMs more frequently in DES, RP, and NAR, whereas there is less use in INT.

In the INT task, participants are required to communicate with the examiners, answering their questions in casual ice-breaking talk or topic-related casual discussion. Therefore, the main use of AEMs is to show subjectivity (Gablasova, Brezina, McEnery, Boyd 2017), which conveys the speaker's (un)certainty towards the proposition they are making, such as in g) or h) above irrespective of either NS or JLE. However, the difference in the frequency between them lies in the fact that NS use AEMs more frequently than JLE to manage interpersonal relationships or to downplay strong assertions, (i.e. intersubjectively), such as *kind of* to soften the speaker's opinion in j).

This trend can be seen in RP, where participants are required to make a suggestion or request as part of the task; for example, *maybe* in e). It is true that some examples suggest that JLE have pragmalinguistic and/or sociopragmatic knowledge such as in example l), which downplays the assertion that the train is very slow and therefore inconvenient. The numbers of these cases, however, are limited.

l) <B>But <F>ur</F> train service <SC>is</SC> <F>ur</F> yeah, is just <SC?>a one some</SC?> an hour. So and it's <R>ka</R> *kind of* very slow train. [...] So it's not really convenient.</B> (01244, JLE8, INT)

As a monologic task, in DES, JLE demonstrate the most frequent use of AEMs as Table 5 illustrates. It is understandable that JLE take an epistemic stance when describing the photo provided in the task

as they attempt to avoid making a mistake or take time to process what to say next while speaking.

In contrast, the NAR monologic task varies, in that intermediate JLE do not use AEMs, whereas the higher proficiency group uses them with the second highest frequency after DES. Interestingly, NS do not choose to use them compared to the other three tasks. The possible explanation of this is that NS did not feel the necessity to use AEMs as they just told their own story, as they imagined it, with confidence. In this regard, NAR indicates a different task effect on NS than DES, which requires them to speculate on the situation. However, for JLE, there might not be a significant difference between these two monologic tasks, in that JLE still need to process their utterances in an L2 English-speaking test.

Across the four tasks, the higher-level group uses AEMs more frequently than the intermediate group. However, the percentage, which accounts for the use of AEMs in all the utterances, shows that there is no increase in the rate in INT (see Table 5). In contrast, in DES, there is a four-fold difference between intermediate and higher groups. The percentage of the higher group is six times that of NS. Similarly, in RP, the higher group uses it seven times more frequently than NS, although the intermediate group uses it less than NS. The high rate used by JLE in the DES, RP, and NAR tasks can be described by the increase in frequency of specific expressions, such as *probably* or *kind of,* whereas the frequency of *maybe* decreases as the level rises. The increase in frequency of the hedging expression *kind of* can be evidence of the fact that JLE gain pragmatic knowledge along with an increase in their level of proficiency.

The findings show that JLE, and especially the higher proficiency group, use AEMs much more frequently than NS in DES, RP, and NAR. An important point raised by the results is whether this is a completely positive sign of progress for learners. One of the critical functions of epistemic stance is to adjust speakers' statements according to their certainty or uncertainty towards the proposition. Having good command over epistemic stance markers would encourage learners to formulate a speech in a test setting such as the SST test. However, too many AEMs could make their address ambiguous such as in m).

m) <B>[...]<SC>*maybe* we haven't *maybe*</SC> usually so we haven't *maybe* <R>some</R> some <R>board</R> board <SC>and</SC> or something. [...]</B> (00789, JLE6, INT)

It might cause a lower score in a language assessment or, outside of the test setting, it could lead to difficulty in communication. Therefore, it is essential to further examine their use by JLE by focusing not only on the frequency of use in corpora, but also on the examples of use.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has discussed the use of AEMs by JLE in different proficiency groups in comparison with that of NS, and the effect that the task types have on their use of AEMs. The results demonstrate that JLE at a higher proficiency level use AEMs more frequently in description, role-play, and narrative tasks than NS. The disparity could be due to the fact that JLE tend to form inferences with less confidence than NS when responding to the hypothetical circumstance posed in the language assessment test. NS, on the other hand, use AEMs in the interview tasks more frequently than JLE. It is probable that NS place a greater emphasis on the intersubjective use of AEMs such as hedging in the dialogic task of conversing with an examiner.

It should be noted that AEMs are not the only choice for taking a stance. Other epistemic stance markers, which fall into other word class categories, such as verbs (e.g. *I think*), modal verbs (e.g. *it can be*), and adjectives (e.g. *it is possible*), need to be investigated to understand the trends and patterns in their use by JLE.

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