


# Epistemic Verbs and the Expression of Knowledge in English and Mandarin

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## ABSTRACT

Language and knowledge are fundamentally intertwined, shaping how individuals perceive, interpret, and express reality. This study investigates epistemic verbs as linguistic indicators of knowledge and belief within two distinct epistemological and cultural frameworks: English and Mandarin Chinese. By adopting a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach, grounded in functional linguistics and epistemic discourse analysis, this research explores how epistemic verbs reflect the ways speakers conceptualize truth, certainty, and cognition. The data were collected from authentic corpora—including dialogues, news articles, academic essays, and conversational transcripts—and analyzed through semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions using triangulated methods. Findings reveal that English epistemic verbs (e.g., know, believe, think, guess) form a hierarchical and explicit epistemic system, emphasizing rational certainty, empirical evidence, and individual cognition, consistent with Western philosophical traditions. In contrast, Mandarin epistemic verbs (e.g., 知道 zhīdào, 认为 rènwéi, 觉得 juéde, 相信 xiāngxìn) display contextual, relational, and affective orientations, integrating emotion and social harmony in the expression of knowledge, reflecting an Eastern holistic worldview. Comparative analysis demonstrates that English expresses epistemic stance vertically, based on degrees of certainty, while Mandarin expresses it horizontally, emphasizing social context and relational appropriateness. These contrasts highlight deeper philosophical divides between Western rationalism and Eastern relational holism, suggesting that linguistic forms mirror epistemological ideologies. The study concludes that epistemic verbs are not mere grammatical categories but cognitive-cultural constructs that embody each society's way of "knowing" and "believing." Understanding these differences is vital for intercultural communication, as epistemic misalignment often leads to pragmatic misunderstanding between English and Mandarin speakers. This research contributes to the emerging field of cross-cultural epistemic linguistics, offering insights into how language, cognition, and culture collectively shape the human expression of knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Epistemic Verbs, Knowledge Expression, English, Mandarin, Cross-Cultural Epistemology, Linguistic Cognition*

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## INTRODUCTION

In human life, language and knowledge are two inseparable elements. Language serves as the primary medium through which humans express, interpret, and construct knowledge, while knowledge itself determines how language is used to comprehend reality (Liu, 2024). The dialectical interaction between the two forms the foundation of what is known as *linguistic epistemology* the study of how linguistic structures and meanings reflect the processes of human cognition in understanding the world.

Within this framework, epistemic verbs play a crucial role. They are not merely grammatical elements that indicate cognitive activities such as "to know," "to believe," "to think," or "to suppose," but also indicators of how speakers evaluate the certainty and truth value of a proposition. In other words, epistemic verbs express the speaker's *epistemic stance* toward the information conveyed. A speaker who uses verbs such as *I know*, *I think*, or *I guess* is revealing their epistemic position regarding the truth of what is being stated (Chuey, A., Luo, Y., & Markman, 2024).

In English, such epistemic structures are explicit and systematic. The degree of certainty held by the speaker can be clearly inferred from their choice of verbs. For instance, *know* denotes definite, evidence based knowledge; *believe* and *think* represent moderate personal conviction; while *guess* and *suppose* indicate uncertainty or speculation. This shows that the English epistemic system is hierarchically rational, where each expression of knowledge is evaluated according to its degree of truth. Such a structure aligns with the Western epistemological paradigm, which emphasizes rationality, logic, and individual objectivity. In English-speaking cultures, truth is often associated with one's ability to justify a knowledge claim through logical reasoning and empirical verification (Zhou, J., & Xia, 2024).

In contrast, the Mandarin epistemic verb system exhibits a more contextual and relational nature. Verbs such as 知道 (*zhīdào*), 认为 (*rènwéi*), 觉得 (*juéde*), and 相信 (*xiāngxìn*) not only indicate levels of knowledge but also carry emotional and social dimensions (J. Lin, 2023). For instance, the sentence “我知道他是对的 (Wǒ zhīdào tā shì duì de)” expresses factual certainty, while “我觉得他是对的 (Wǒ juéde tā shì duì de)” conveys a subjective opinion rooted in feeling and intuition. In Chinese culture, the concept of “knowing” (知 *zhī*) is inseparable from “feeling” (感 *gǎn*), making Mandarin epistemology holistic and harmonious, blending cognitive and affective elements.

The fundamental difference between the two languages shows that a society's way of understanding and expressing knowledge is profoundly influenced by its cultural worldview. English reflects an individualistic and empirical paradigm, whereas Mandarin reflects a relational and contextual one (Ma, C., 2025). Therefore, a comparative analysis of epistemic verbs in both languages reveals not only linguistic structural differences but also philosophical divergences in ways of thinking and perceiving reality.

Moreover, in the current era of globalization and cross-cultural communication, understanding epistemic systems has become increasingly important. Many misunderstandings between English and Mandarin speakers stem from differences in how knowledge and belief are expressed (Yang, Wenxing; Gu, Yiting; Fang, Ying; Sun, 2022). For example, a Mandarin speaker using “我觉得 (*wǒ juéde*)” to express an opinion may be perceived as “uncertain” by an English speaker, whereas in Chinese culture, such an expression signifies humility and social harmony. Conversely, frequent use of *I know* by English speakers may be seen as “too direct” or “impolite” in Mandarin communication.

This phenomenon illustrates that epistemic verbs serve as an intersection between language, cognition, and culture, and are key to understanding the cognitive differences between East and West. Consequently, this study aims to examine epistemic verbs not merely as linguistic structures but as reflections of *cultural epistemology* the way in which societies conceptualize the nature of knowledge and truth.

Based on this background, the main research questions of this study are as follows: 1. How do epistemic verbs in English express the speaker's degree of certainty toward a proposition?, 2. How do epistemic verbs in Mandarin function, and how are they influenced by sociocultural context?, 3. What epistemological differences between English and Mandarin epistemic systems reflect the philosophical divide between Western and Eastern thought?, 4. What are the linguistic and philosophical implications of these differences for cross-cultural understanding and communication?

### Literature Review

The study of epistemic verbs occupies an essential position in both linguistic and cognitive sciences, as these verbs encode a speaker's stance toward the truth value of a proposition (Palmer, 2001). Traditionally associated with modality, epistemic verbs such as *know*, *believe*, and *think* express various degrees of commitment to the truth of a statement (Lyons, 1977). In recent years, increasing scholarly attention has focused on how different languages utilize these verbs, revealing key insights into the interaction between language, thought, and culture.

### Epistemic Modality in Linguistics

Epistemic modality, a subcategory of linguistic modality, concerns itself with expressions of knowledge, belief, and certainty. Scholars like Palmer (2001) have categorized epistemic expressions into gradable scales—ranging from certainty to uncertainty—often marked by specific verbs, adverbs, or modal auxiliaries. In English, for example, know represents epistemic certainty, while suppose or guess imply uncertainty. These distinctions are not merely syntactic but also reflect underlying cultural attitudes toward evidence, justification, and truth.

### **English Epistemic Verbs and Rationalist Epistemology**

English, as a language grounded in Western analytic traditions, emphasizes objectivity and individual reasoning in the expression of knowledge (Chafe, 1986). According to Nuyts (2001), English epistemic markers tend to be explicit, discrete, and rationally ordered. The hierarchical structure of English epistemic verbs corresponds with Western epistemological assumptions that privilege empirical evidence and deductive reasoning. This rationalist orientation is also apparent in academic discourse, where degrees of certainty are explicitly marked to justify knowledge claims (Hyland, 2005).

### **Mandarin Epistemic Verbs and Contextual Epistemology**

In contrast, Mandarin Chinese encodes epistemic stance through a more fluid and context-sensitive system. Verbs like 知道 (zhīdào, to know), 觉得 (juéde, to feel/think), and 相信 (xiāngxìn, to believe) are not only epistemic markers but also carry affective and interpersonal nuances (Lee, 2006). Mandarin discourse often blurs the boundaries between knowing and feeling, reflecting the holistic nature of Chinese epistemology rooted in Confucian and Daoist thought (Zhang, 2012). As Liu and Tao (2020) observe, epistemic expressions in Mandarin are more likely to reflect relational and emotional awareness than empirical objectivity.

### **Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Perspectives**

Cross-linguistic studies have highlighted striking differences between English and Mandarin epistemic systems. Wierzbicka (2006) argues that while English epistemic verbs emphasize individual certainty, Chinese epistemic expressions often prioritize social harmony and politeness. For example, the frequent use of I think in English may signal personal authority, whereas the Mandarin equivalent 我觉得 (wǒ juéde) functions as a softener that mitigates assertiveness (Chen, 2011). These divergences point to broader cultural differences in the valuation of knowledge: the Western focus on logical reasoning versus the Eastern emphasis on contextual sensitivity.

Moreover, research in intercultural pragmatics has shown that misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication often stem from differing uses of epistemic verbs. Yang et al. (2022) found that Mandarin speakers may interpret English expressions of certainty as overly direct or even arrogant, while English speakers may perceive Mandarin expressions as ambiguous or indecisive. These differences highlight the importance of epistemic awareness in intercultural contexts.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite growing interest in epistemic modality, existing research tends to treat English and Mandarin systems in isolation or within narrow syntactic frameworks. Few studies have conducted comparative analyses that connect epistemic verb usage to underlying philosophical worldviews. There remains a need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate linguistic analysis with cultural epistemology to better understand how languages encode culturally shaped notions of truth, belief, and knowledge. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring not only structural differences but also the cognitive and philosophical dimensions of epistemic verbs in English and Mandarin.

## **METHOD**

### **Approach and Type of Research**

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive comparative approach based on functional linguistic analysis and epistemic discourse analysis. This approach was chosen because the focus is not on the frequency of linguistic elements, but on the meanings, functions,

and epistemological values embedded in the use of epistemic verbs in two culturally distinct languages English and Mandarin.

A qualitative approach allows for deep interpretation of meaning within the social and cultural contexts surrounding language use (Moleong, 2019). Meanwhile, the comparative approach seeks to identify conceptual similarities and differences between the English and Mandarin epistemic systems. In cross-cultural linguistic research, such comparison extends beyond grammatical and lexical levels to pragmatic, semantic, and cognitive dimensions, reflecting differing worldviews between the two linguistic communities.

### Data Sources and Types

The data for this study consist of epistemic verbs and epistemic clauses found in English and Mandarin text corpora.

Data were categorized into two main types:

**Primary Data:** collected directly from authentic corpora and discourse sources such as:

*Dialogues in films and dramas*

*Opinion news articles*

*Academic essays or popular writings expressing viewpoints*

*Natural conversations or interview transcripts from online sources*

**Secondary Data:** conceptual and theoretical references supporting analysis, such as:

*Dictionaries and lexicons of epistemic verbs (Oxford English Dictionary, 现代汉语词典 Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn)*

*Cultural and philosophical references on Western and Eastern epistemologies*

This variety of sources aims to depict epistemic verb usage in both English and Mandarin in a contextual and representative manner.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through several systematic steps:

*Corpus Identification, Selecting various texts containing natural speaker interactions in spoken or written form from online and official sources.*

*Epistemic Verb Filtering, Extracting sentences containing epistemic verbs such* as:

*English: know, believe, think, suppose, guess, assume, consider, realize, understand*

*Mandarin: 知道 (zhīdào), 认为 (rènwéi), 觉得 (juéde), 相信 (xiāngxìn), 以为 (yǐwéi), 了解 (liǎojiě)*

*Functional and Contextual Classification, Analyzing data based on situational context to determine epistemic function: certainty, belief, opinion, speculation, or empirical knowledge.*

*Data Coding and Documentation, Each item was systematically coded for further analysis.*

### Data Analysis Techniques

Three main analytical stages were applied:

*Semantic Analysis, to identify lexical and relational meanings of each epistemic verb (e.g., differentiating know as evidence based knowledge from believe as personal conviction, or 认为 rènwéi as rational judgment from 觉得 juéde as emotional evaluation).*

*Pragmatic and Contextual Analysis, Examining utterances in their sociocultural contexts using the Epistemic Stance Theory (Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, 1999) and the Appraisal Framework (Martin, J. R., & White, 2005).*

*Comparative Cultural Analysis, Comparing both linguistic systems to reveal epistemic patterns and cognitive orientations:*

*In English: individual certainty dominates.*

*In Mandarin: relational and contextual knowledge prevails. These findings are interpreted through the lens of cultural epistemology to explain how each language constructs its own mode of knowing.*

**Data Validity (Reliability and Triangulation)**

To ensure validity, multiple triangulation strategies were applied (Flick, 2018):

*Source Triangulation: comparing data from diverse text genres (films, news, academic writings).*

*Theoretical Triangulation: combining semantic-pragmatic, systemic-functional, and cross-cultural epistemological frameworks (Halliday, 1994).*

*Researcher Triangulation: validation through consultation with English linguists and sinologists.*

These strategies establish conceptual validity and interpretative reliability for scientifically credible results.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION****Epistemic Verbs in English**

Analysis shows that English epistemic verbs are systematic, hierarchical, and explicit in expressing the speaker's degree of certainty toward propositions. This reflects a Western empirical-rational tradition that treats knowledge as the outcome of logical verification and individual experience.

Main epistemic verbs can be grouped by degree of certainty:

*High certainty: know, realize, understand, prove*

*Medium certainty: believe, think, consider, assume*

*Low certainty: guess, suppose, imagine, suspect*

For example:

*I know she is right. → factual, evidence-based knowledge*

*I think she is right. → moderate personal belief*

*I guess she is right. → tentative speculation*

English thus positions *knowing* at the top of the epistemic hierarchy, aligning with Cartesian and Kantian philosophy that distinguishes between knowledge (rationally demonstrable) and belief (subjective). Pragmatically, epistemic verbs also serve as politeness strategies *I think* softens assertions, while *I know* and *prove* reinforce argumentative authority. Hence, English epistemic verbs are not only grammatical but ideological, reflecting Western values of rationality, verification, and epistemic individualism.

**Epistemic Verbs in Mandarin**

In contrast, Mandarin epistemic verbs exhibit concrete, contextual, and relational features. The language does not sharply separate knowledge, belief, and feeling; rather, these are integrated as parts of a unified cognitive affective experience.

Core verbs include:

知道 (zhīdào) — *to know factually*

认为 (rènwéi) — *to hold a rational opinion*

觉得 (juéde) — *to feel or think intuitively*

相信 (xiāngxìn) — *to believe (interpersonal trust)*

Examples:

“我知道他来了 (Wǒ zhīdào tā lái le)” → *I know he has come (factual certainty)*

“我认为他是对的 (Wǒ rènwéi tā shì duì de)” → *I think he is right (rational judgment)*

“我觉得他会来 (Wǒ juéde tā huì lái)” → *I feel he will come (subjective intuition)*

“我相信他会成功 (Wǒ xiāngxìn tā huì chénggōng)” → *I believe he will succeed (trust-based confidence)*

These verbs reveal that Mandarin epistemology is *holistic* integrating cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Knowledge is relational and situational rather than purely individual. Expressions like 觉得 (*juéde*) convey modesty and harmony, aligning with Confucian principles that value indirectness and balance in interpersonal communication.

**Comparative Epistemic Framework**

Table 1. Aspects of English and Mandarin as comparison

Aspect	English	Mandarin
Epistemological basis	Rational–empirical (objective, individual)	Holistic–relational (contextual, social)
Function of epistemic verbs	Indicate degree of propositional certainty	Express emotional stance and social relation
Cognitive orientation	Analytical, logical, hierarchical	Integrative, intuitive, harmonious
Legitimacy of knowledge	Empirical evidence and logic	Social consensus and emotional experience
Dominant examples	<i>know, think, guess</i>	知道, 认为, 觉得

English expresses knowledge *vertically* (degree of certainty), whereas Mandarin expresses knowledge *horizontally* (social and contextual relations). Philosophically, this contrast mirrors Western epistemology—focusing on the subject–object dichotomy—and Eastern epistemology—emphasizing interconnectedness between humans, nature, and society.

**Linguistic and Philosophical Implications**

These findings carry significant implications in linguistics, philosophy of language, and intercultural communication.

*Linguistically, epistemic verbs demonstrate that grammatical structures mirror cognitive and cultural epistemologies.*

*Philosophically, they reveal that each language embodies an epistemic ideology: English foregrounds rational objectivity, Mandarin social harmony.*

*Interculturally, misunderstanding often arises not from linguistic error but from epistemic orientation differences. For instance, “我觉得 (wǒ juéde)” may be misinterpreted by English speakers as uncertainty, though it functions as a politeness marker in Mandarin.*

Ultimately, epistemic verbs constitute a multidimensional phenomenon bridging language, cognition, and culture, and should be studied within the framework of *cross-cultural epistemology*.

**CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that epistemic verbs in English and Mandarin are not merely grammatical elements but representations of distinct worldviews and systems of thought, reflecting the deeper philosophical orientations of Western rationalism and Eastern relational holism. In English, epistemic verbs such as *know, think, believe, and guess* are rational, explicit, and hierarchical, expressing individual certainty grounded in evidence and logic, whereas in Mandarin, verbs like 知道 (*zhīdào*), 认为 (*rènwéi*), 觉得 (*juéde*), and 相信 (*xiāngxìn*) form a holistic and context-sensitive system that merges cognition with emotion and social harmony. Linguistically, English embodies a vertical epistemic orientation that views truth as a hierarchy of certainty, while Mandarin follows a horizontal orientation that perceives truth through relational and contextual balance. Philosophically, this contrast mirrors the Western view of knowledge as an individual rational product versus the Eastern understanding of knowledge as collective consciousness intertwined with human, social, and natural harmony. These insights underscore the importance of epistemic awareness in cross-cultural communication, as differing conceptions of “knowing” and “believing” often underlie pragmatic misunderstandings. Thus, epistemic verbs function as a vital bridge between language, culture, and philosophy, revealing that linguistic analysis must be grounded in epistemological and cultural understanding to enrich global communication and deepen our comprehension of how humanity constructs and expresses knowledge..

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