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PASCALE LECLERCQ

## **L2 acquisition of epistemic/evidential stance-marking by French learners of English: the case of 'I think'**<sup>1</sup>

### ***Abstract***

Speaking about things involves taking a stance towards those things. To express their subjectivity, speakers use a variety of stance-markers, with different discursive functions. For L2 learners, acquiring a relevant repertoire of stance-markers, and making context-appropriate choices, is a crucial process. However, epistemic stance is generally observed to emerge at a late stage of L2 acquisition.

In this study, we adopt a functional and developmental perspective to determine to what extent intermediate and advanced French learners of English use 'I think' in oral narratives and interviews, and to what extent this reveals learner style.

We use two oral discursive tasks: an oral narrative (ten upper intermediate and ten advanced learners, plus a control group of ten English native speakers), where learners are recorded in a French context, and a longitudinal oral interview task (n=5), where intermediate and advanced learners are recorded in a study abroad context on three occasions, plus pre-departure, and post-return.

Our study provides evidence of the influence of the type of discursive task in the way 'I think' is used by French learners of English, while contributing to illustrate the links between the linguistic choices of learners and their study-abroad experience.

***Keywords:*** *I think, French, English, second language acquisition, type of discourse, evidentiality, functional approach, longitudinal study, epistemic stance, learner style*

### **Introduction**

Speaking about a given topic often involves conveying personal feelings, making claims about this topic, evaluating it, or expressing how access to the information

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was gained. This is what Biber (2006: 99) refers to as the “personal stance of the speaker or writer”. Stance-taking is inherent to human speech. It is related to speaker style and identity insofar as it allows the speakers to express their positions and their level of confidence towards a given propositional content (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). For L2 speakers, whose second language identity and style are under construction (see Coupland 1985; Kirkham 2011; Liao 2009; Mullan, 2010, 2012; Grieve 2013, 2015; Compiegne 2020), choice of stance markers and their intended functional load may vary according to proficiency level and discursive situation.

Among the many English verbal stance markers, ‘I think’ appears as one of the most frequent, and also one of the most polyfunctional. It is often considered as an epistemic/evidential stance marker, but also as a discourse marker. According to the discursive context, it can be used to express epistemic stance, i.e., how certain a speaker is about a state of affairs (Kiesling, 2009; Marín Arrese, 2015), to express an opinion, to indicate an inference based on the observation of some facts, to mitigate the strength of an assertion, or even to signal a topic shift in conversation.

Epistemic stance is often considered as pertaining to the domain of evaluative discourse; according to Gablasova, Brezina, Mcenery & Boyd (2017:614), speakers’ epistemic stance ‘fulfils three major interconnected functions in the interaction: (i) expressing opinion, (ii) maintaining relations between the interlocutors, and (iii) discourse organization.’ Another closely related domain is that of evidentiality, a semantic concept which refers to the expression of the mode of access to a given piece of information (Aikhenvald 2004). In certain languages such as Turkish or Tibetan, it is an obligatory grammatical category and it is expressed through highly grammaticized morphemes, with specific suffixes for the expression of direct evidentiality (the speaker has witnessed a given state of affairs), hearsay (the speaker has heard about a given state of affairs), or inference (the speaker infers what the given state of affairs might be based on circumstantial evidence or on reasoning). In Romance and Germanic languages, however, evidentiality is an optional category, which can be expressed through a variety of linguistic markers, ranging from lexical means (adverbials, discourse markers) to verbal means (perception and cognition verbs such as ‘I think’ or ‘I guess’, modals, verbal morphology such as the conditional in Spanish) (see, among others, Marín-Arrese, 2015; Hassler, 2015; Leclercq 2021, Leclercq & Mélac 2021). In French and in English, some of these markers can also express epistemicity. In particular, the domain of inference sits at the crossroads between indirect evidentiality and epistemic modality, while permitting the expression of the speakers’ stance (Hassler, 2015; Guentchéva, 2018).

Since the expression of epistemic stance or evidentiality is by no means compulsory, the use of such markers can to some extent be seen as the linguistic expression of speaker style, which can be considered as a linguistic operationalization of the identity concept, insofar as expressing stance reflects the speakers’ subjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, Coupland 2007).

Previous research has shown that evidentiality and epistemicity are developed quite late by second language learners of French and English, with large inter-individual variation (Baumgarten & House, 2010; Leclercq & Edmonds, 2017; Leclercq & Mélaç, 2021; Mifka-Profozic 2017; Gablasova et al. 2017). It is interesting to see how advanced learners develop the use of 'I think', a polyfunctional verbal marker, in different discursive contexts.

We adopt a functional and developmental perspective to determine how the stance marker 'I think' is used at two different proficiency levels (intermediate and advanced) by French learners of English, and with which discursive functions, in two oral discursive tasks: a cross-sectional oral narrative (10 upper intermediate, 10 advanced learners, plus a control group of 10 English native speakers), where learners are recorded in a French institutional context, and a longitudinal oral interview task (n=5), where learners are recorded in a study abroad context on three occasions, plus pre-departure, and post-return. We also seek to find out to what extent the use of the 'I think' evidential/epistemic stance-marker reflects learner style.

## **Theoretical Background**

As pointed out by Thompson (2002:138), Baumgarten & House (2000), Kärkkäinen (2006) and Aijmer (2009), 'I think' is one of the most frequent epistemic/evidential stance markers in the English language. It is often considered as 'a prototype of subjective language, because it contains reference to the speaker (the first-person pronoun) and a verb that denotes a private or interior cognitive process' (Kärkkäinen 2006: 700). It is particularly frequent in conversation, but it is also found in monologic productions to express speaker's stance. We present the main syntactic structures in which it is found, followed by its main discursive functions.

### *Syntax*

'I think' can be found in three main types of constructions: independent clauses, matrix clauses, and parentheticals (see also Leclercq 2021 for a comparison with the syntactic use of *je pense* 'I think' by French natives).

- *Independent clause construction (IC)*. This type of construction includes independent clauses such as (1), in which the speaker states that he or she is engaged in a reflective cognitive process; and short answers, such as (2), in which learner M uses 'I think so' to express her agreement with the interviewer, although the use of 'I think' also functions as a hedge to mitigate her assertion.

- (1) *I think about the Chinese people.* (Baumgarten & House 2010: 1187)
- (2) \*INT1: *So hum let's take things back to the second interview right? You met Amanda here heu in November right?*  
\*M: *Yeah I think so.* (MT3, PROLINGSA)

• *Matrix clause construction (MC).* Within this type of construction, 'I think' is a matrix clause followed a complement clause, as in (3) and (4). It generally permits the speaker to express 'epistemic, evidential, or evaluative stance' (Thompson, 2002:131).

(3) *and ehm the dog wakes up in the morning and it's quite ehm it's quite sunny but I think it's frost or ice outside his kennel especially.* (E06, Reksio)

(4) \*Y: *and I think I'm going to re(ad) to write a lot .* (YT1, PROLINGSA)

• *Parenthetical (P).* The last type of construction is the adverbial phrase, or parenthetical (Thompson 2002:134, also called 'verbal routine' by Baumgarten & House 2010). Parentheticals can take a variety of positions in the sentence, which we will subsume into two subcategories: medial position (5), or final position (6).

(5) *The dog at this point I think got a bit upset with her.* (E07, Reksio)

(6) *So ehm the little girl gets ehm some dirt I think.* (E07, Reksio)

We will now present the different discourse functions that 'I think' can take.

### *Discursive functions*

While its prototypical meaning refers to 'cogitation' as in (1), it has other uses, namely as an evidential marker as in (3), in which the English speaker indicates that he/she infers, based on observation, that there is frost outside the dog's kennel; as an epistemic marker referring to 'belief', 'opinion' and 'subjective evaluation', as in (5) (Baumgarten & House 2010:1189). It can also be used with a bleached referential meaning (Local 2003) and a pragmatic function of gaining time for online planning, or to keep the speaking turn.

• *Evidential uses.* Evidentiality, often defined as the expression of the mode of access to a given piece of information, includes direct perception, hearsay, or inference. According to Squartini (2008, p. 925), there are three subcategories of inference: circumstantial inferences, generic inferences and conjectures (5). He states

that all three are 'products of the speaker's reasoning process and therefore inferential processes'. Circumstantial inferences are based on 'external sensory evidence', generic inferences are made based on the speaker's world knowledge, while conjectures are pure reasoning ('all external evidence is missing'). 'I think' may be used as an evidential marker, to express the speaker's inferential reasoning. In (3), the speaker uses 'I think' in a complement clause to indicate that the provided information was inferred from what the speaker remembers viewing in the cartoon (circumstantial evidence), while in (6), the speaker infers, based on their world knowledge and their viewing of the cartoon, that what the character threw on the ground to melt the ice was dirt (generic inference). In (7) however, the conjecture is based on the speaker's reasoning, not on any perceptual evidence. There were no instances of conjectures in our database.

(7) *[The doorbell rings] I was not expecting anybody. It might be Gianni.* (Squartini 2008: 924)

- *Epistemic uses.* Epistemic stance generally refers to the speaker's expression of his or her belief, opinion or evaluation of a given state of affairs. It is considered as part of the modality domain, through which the speaker expresses a degree of certainty concerning a proposition content. We include in this category the expression of opinion and hedging. Expressing an opinion implies to a fairly high degree of assertiveness, as in (8), whereas a lesser degree of certainty suggests hedging on the part of the speaker (see Vincze 2013 on discourse-level uncertainty), as in (9), where Y asserts that he will take part in five dance competitions for his university, before mitigating this claim with a parenthetical 'I think'.

(8) \*Y: *And uh i think that London is a good place uh is a good place to learn.* (YT1, PROLINGSA)

(9) \*Y: *Er we will represent like the university in the national level so we'll do like &uh five competitions I think in the year.* (YT2, PROLINGSA)

- *Pragmatic uses.* In addition to its use as a hedging device as in (9), 'I think' may be used in conversation to mark online planning, to indicate the end of a speaking turn, to express agreement or negotiate a common stance (Kärkkäinen 2006; Baumgarten & House 2010: 1189), as illustrated in (10), where the American interviewer INT2 uses 'I think' to gain time to decide whether she can wrap up the conversation, or whether she has other questions to ask, as well as to signal alignment with learner A's position.

(10) \*A: *It's ok for me.*

\*INT2: *OK well I thi(nk) yeah I think it's ok for us.* (AT2, PROLINGSA)

In (11), the American interviewer INT2 uses ‘I think’ as a hedge after a long digression from the participant to politely signal that time is running out.

(11) \*INT2: *okay that's fine okay I think we're going to move on. (YT5, PROLINGSA)*

As acknowledged by Baumgarten & House (2010), differentiating between the epistemic, evidential and pragmatic functions of ‘I think’ is not an easy task, especially since they are often overlapping: examples (3), (6) and (9) all express the speaker’s inferences based on perceptual evidence or reasoning, but they also express the speaker’s opinion, and/or mitigate a claim (hedging).

As for the frequency of use of those different functions, Aijmer (2009), Thompson (2002), Baumgarten & House (2010) concur to say that most uses are epistemic, while in her conversation data Mullan (2010: 119–23) found that two thirds of her occurrences were discourse markers with a pragmatic function, with the remaining occurrences as epistemic instances, mostly to express speaker opinion. Mullan’s work suggests the type of discourse (monologic vs dialogic) might orient the semantic value and discursive function of ‘I think’. Mullan (2010, 2012) also attributes speakers’ choices to ingrained cultural values. For example, she observes that French speakers have a confrontational conversational style (see also Béal 2010), and that it is important for them to express their opinions and feelings, while Australian speakers are described as ‘wishy-washy’ by their French counterparts as they often refrain from expressing their opinion. According to Mullan (2012: 203), Australian speakers favour the use of ‘I think’ as a hedge to mitigate the strength of an assertion.

To sum up, ‘I think’ appears as a high frequency verbal marker with often overlapping epistemic, pragmatic and evidential values, used in a variety of functions and discursive contexts. The question of how L2 learners of English appropriate this marker at different proficiency levels will now be considered.

### *‘I think’ in L2 English*

Research on the L2 acquisition of verbal stance markers is scarce, but a few studies on the acquisition of modality and evidentiality provide information as to the way learners use ‘I think’ in a variety of written and oral tasks, at different proficiency levels.

To start with, research on the L2 acquisition of modality has highlighted the fact that lower-level learners express epistemic stance through cognitive verbs and adverbials rather than modals (Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig 2000, Fordyce 2009, 2014,

Leclercq & Edmonds, 2017), generally through 'I think' and 'maybe'. Aijmer (2002:71), in her study of modality in advanced Swedish learners' written interlanguage, finds that non-native speakers overuse epistemic modal verbs 'I think' and 'I believe' compared to native speakers. She argues that this might be due to the influence of spoken English.

Taking a developmental approach to the L2 acquisition of the evidentiality, Leclercq & Mélaç (2021) show that the use of evidential markers strongly increases with proficiency level in an oral narrative task, with advanced learners slightly overusing evidentials compared to native speakers. At lower intermediate level, French learners of English mostly use perception verbs to express direct perception, while at the upper intermediate level, 'maybe' is the most frequent evidential. At advanced level, 'I think' and 'I guess' are the two most frequently used evidential markers by learners of English in an oral narrative task, while English natives almost never use 'I guess' in their oral narratives. The authors conclude that advanced learners use evidential markers in a similar way to native speakers as regards frequency of use, but that they display different stylistic preferences.

While many of the afore-mentioned studies were based on monologic data, Baumgarten & House (2010) explored the use of 'I think' and 'I don't know' as markers of stance-taking based on elicited conversation data from four English native speakers and eight speakers of English as a lingua franca (i.e., speakers of English whose mother tongue is another language) with various L1s (Indonesian, German, Chinese, Korean, German, French, Nepali and Gujrati). They show that L1 and L2 speakers of English use those two stance markers with high frequency, but L2 speakers use 'I think' in a much larger range of discursive contexts than native speakers. They also observe that, contrary to L1 speakers, L2 speakers often use 'I think' in utterances containing other stance markers, so that it appears as an "additional, overt marker of the speaker's perspective" (2010:1197). As for Zhang & Sabet 2016, they tap into classroom interaction data from L1 American English speakers, and Chinese and Persian-speaking learners of English, to show that L2 speakers use 'I think' more frequently than native speakers, but with different stylistic preferences (while L1 speakers use 'I think that' the least, it is Persian learners' favourite expression). Unfortunately, no mention is made of the proficiency level of L2 participants in Baumgarten & House (2010) nor in Zhang & Sabet (2016), which makes their results difficult to interpret from a developmental perspective.

Using a social perspective on language use, Gablasova et al. (2017) provide a very innovative account of the use of epistemic stance in spoken L2 English. They use data from the Trinity Lancaster Corpus (TLC), more specifically oral productions from four speaking tasks accomplished by advanced English learners from different L1s and cultural backgrounds. One task involved monologic oral production while the other three tasks elicited interactional discourse. They identified epistemic items



in the data, which they classified in three large categories: adverbial expressions (apparently, certainly...), adjectival expressions (likely, possible) and verbal expressions (I think, I believe, I know...). Their results confirm previous findings that 'I think' is the most frequently used marker, accounting for 42.5% of all epistemic markers. They also show that the monologic task elicits a much lower frequency of epistemic markers (including 'I think') compared with the interactional tasks, probably because expressing subjectivity and managing intersubjective relations is more typical of such tasks. Finally, the authors concluded that advanced learners of English adjusted their style to the requirements of the task as regards the use of epistemic markers.

In a study based on conversation data between Australian and French speakers, either in French or in English, Mullan (2012:216) observed that L2 French speakers most often used "*je pense*" with a pragmatic function (87%), just like Australian English natives with 'I think', when French natives use "*je pense*" in a more balanced way to either express their opinion (47%) or for pragmatic purposes (53%). She suggests this illustrates to what extent L2 speakers are influenced by the pragmatolinguistic patterns of their L1, even at an advanced level.

Leclercq (2021) analysed the link between the development of assertiveness and pragmatolinguistic competence among L2 learners in a study abroad context. Based on the LANGSNAP data (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura & McManus 2017), she analysed the use of stance marker "*je pense*" in interview data from 26 Anglophone learners of French, who spent nine months in France, and 10 French native speakers. Her results confirm Mullan's and show that learners are globally less assertive in their use of "*je pense*" than native speakers, particularly at the beginning of their stay abroad, and that they develop pragmatic uses of "*je pense*". She points out that there is a lot of variability in learners' use of "*je pense*", and highlights the importance of personal style.

In short, Aijmer (2002) and Zhang & Sabet (2016) concur in their finding that L2 speakers of different mother tongues use 'I think' much more than L1 speakers in their productions, while Baumgarten & House (2010), Mullan (2010, 2012), Gablasova et al. (2017), Leclercq (2021) and Leclercq & Mélaç (2021) observe different stylistic preferences in the choices of native speakers, and advanced learners, with Gablasova et al. (2017) showing that advanced learners are sensitive to the discursive contexts in which 'I think' is used, and Mullan (2012) and Leclercq (2021) illustrating how L1 patterns influence L2 choices.

## **Research questions**

In this study, we seek to complement existing research on the use of epistemic stance markers by advanced French learners of English by comparing the use of 'I think' by learners of two proficiency levels (upper intermediate and advanced) in two oral discursive tasks (oral narrative and semi-guided interview). Indeed, as pointed out by Coupland (2007), Gablasova et al. (2017), Baumgarten & House (2010) and Neary-Sundquist (2013), speakers' stylistic choices are intimately linked to discursive context.

While most existing studies have relied on a cross-sectional design, we include longitudinal data from the PROLINGSA (Linguistic Progress during Study Abroad) project to assess:

- (A) whether the type of discursive task has an impact on the functions native speakers and learners attribute to the verbal epistemic stance marker 'I think';
- (B) to what extent the use of such a marker illustrates the evolution of individual speaker style over the course of a nine-month study abroad programme.

## **Data and Method**

In this section, we present the design of our two separate studies, based on the Reksio database (Study 1) and the PROLINGSA project (Study 2).

### *Study 1 Reksio*

The first study presents a cross-sectional oral narrative task based on the Reksio stimulus (Watorek 2004), in which speakers are presented with a five-minute long cartoon featuring a little white dog, Reksio, and his master (a curly-haired blond little boy). The cartoon features background music and barking sounds, but no speech, which makes it appropriate for a verbalization task performed by speakers of different proficiency levels and language combinations. Once they had finished watching the movie, speakers were invited by the interviewer to tell them what had happened. In spite of this, the task is mostly monologic, as the interviewers almost never intervene in the narration.

*Participants.* Our database includes 10 English native speakers (E), 10 upper intermediate (UI) and 10 advanced (A) French learners of English. E speakers came

from a variety of English-speaking countries, and were recorded on a UK campus, while the L2 recordings were performed on a French campus, where learner participants were enrolled in English studies. Table 1 presents the database and the participants.

Table 1. Task 1 – Reksio narrative participants and database description

Group	N=	Mean Age	Gender	Proficiency test scores** (out of 60)	Length of productions (number of utterances)
UI	10	21	2M, 8F	M 43.9 SD 2.3 Range 40-47	M 41.6 SD 14.1 Range 30-64
A	10	27	7M, 3F	M 54.9 SD 3.17 Range 53-59	M 57.9 SD 26.2 Range 21-113
E	10	25.4*	5M, 5F	/	M 115.6 SD 29.7 Range 82-169

\*Mean age for NS was calculated on 9 participants as one did not specify their age.

\*\* A version of the Oxford Quick Placement test was used.

### *Study 2 PROLINGSA (Linguistic Progress during Study Abroad)*

The second study is based on the longitudinal PROLINGSA project (Leclercq, Edmonds & Sneed German, 2021)<sup>2</sup>, which consists in a series of five filmed interviews performed before (Time 1), during (Time 2, 3 and 4) and after (Time 5) a nine-month Erasmus+ stay in the British Isles, with five undergraduate students in Applied Languages, majoring in English and Chinese, Arabic, Italian or Spanish. We will henceforth refer to Time 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5. Individual interviews will be referred to through the participant's initial, followed by interview time. For example, participant A's first interview will be labeled AT. Questions focused on the aims pursued by the participants during their Erasmus+ stay, their linguistic experiences, their daily life, their social networking, and their opinion on a variety of topics<sup>3</sup>. This type of conversational data is bound to elicit a large quantity of stance markers, among which 'I think' should feature highly.

<sup>2</sup> The PROLINGSA database is being deposited on the <https://hdl.handle.net/11403/prolingsa/v1> repository and the full data set is available upon request.

<sup>3</sup> The detailed protocols, including interview questions for the five interview sessions, are available on Ortolang.

Task 2 also enabled us to track the evolution in the use of such markers by five advanced learners, over the course of an academic year abroad. The whole database, presented in Table 2, comprises over twelve hours of videos (total number of words 68,725).

Table 2. Task 2 – PROLINGSA database description

Participant	Duration of recording	Length of productions # utterances*
A	T1 27:00	645
	T2 35:03	1410
	T3 24:38	734
	T4 17:13	581
	T5 34:16	1189
	Total 2h 18mn 10 s	4559
C	T1 26:49	711
	T2 26:40	805
	T3 12 :18	408
	T4 12 :51	365
	T5 23 :27	579
	Total 1h 42mn 05s	2868
M	T1 18:34	484
	T2 15:39	729
	T3 13:47	392
	T4 15:20	464
	T5 20:51	719
	Total 1h 24mn 11s	2788
N	T1 23:55	605
	T2 44:24	1831

	T3 23:40	781
	T4 22:12	612
	T5 37:21	1249
	Total 2h 31mn 29s	5078
Y	T1 44:24	1524
	T2 56:11	1968
	T3 48:20	1537
	T4 43:48	1426
	T5 53:47	1633
	Total 4h 06mn 30s	8088
Total duration	12h 05mn 35s	

\* # of utterances includes learner and interviewer speech

*Participants.* All five participants were francophone and had learned English for over 10 years, mostly in a guided context (see Table 3 for a presentation of the participants). Participant Y was an early bilingual in French and Turkish. Depending on the interview, the participants were interviewed by one or two investigators (INT1: French with a C2 command of English, INT2: American native speaker), who followed them over the course of their academic year abroad. The relationship between the investigators and the participants was asymmetrical as the investigators were teachers in the participants' home university, yet the exchanges were warm and relaxed. Table 3. Task 2 - PROLINGSAs participants

Participant code	Gender	Age at T1	OQPT score/level at T1	OQPT score/level at T5	Host university location
A	F	19	36/LI	45/UI	Ireland
C	F	18	28/LI	40/UI	Ireland
Y	M	19	63/A	48/A	UK
N	M	19	67/A	54/A	Ireland
M	F	19	57/A	48/A	Ireland

### *Proficiency assessment*

For both projects, L2 proficiency was assessed through a version of the Oxford Quick Placement test, a standardized test that taps into grammatical and collocational competence. In the Reksio task, 10 participants had reached UI level, and 10 were advanced (A). As for the PROLINGSA project, it witnessed the progression of two participants from lower intermediate (LI) to UI (see Table 3). The three advanced participants, while remaining in the advanced range as defined by OQPT, saw their scores decrease after their 9 months Erasmus+ stay abroad. However, the five participants increased their overall lexical range and fluency from T1 to T5 (Gilyuk, Edmonds & Sneed German 2021).

### *Transcriptions*

For Task 1 and 2, all recordings were transcribed using CLAN procedures (McWhinney, 2000). The transcriptions were performed by a team of investigators, and each transcription was reviewed by an expert transcriber. Utterances were segmented on the principle that an utterance can only contain a single verb, except when modal or temporo-aspectual verbs form part of the verb phrase.

### *Coding scheme*

In both datasets, 'I think' occurrences were coded according to their main discursive function (evidential, opinion, hedge, pragmatic) and syntactic construction (independent clause, matrix clause, parenthetical).

- *Evidential*: in this category, we grouped all instances of circumstantial or generic inference, as in (14), where learner Y ironically inferred, based on his observation of a cluttered kitchen, that the real explanation was that his roommate had been quite busy and therefore unable to do the dishes.

(14) \*INT2: *He keeps the kitchen clean.*

\*Y: *Yeah er yeah.* [looks unconvinced and laughs]

\*Y: *Well I think he was busy that er yesterday.* (YT2, PROLINGSA)

- *Opinion*: in this category, we grouped all the instances in which the speaker expressed an opinion, as in (15):

(15) \*INT1: *What do you think this heu stay abroad experience is going to bring to you?*

\*A: *Heu I mean I still live heu with heu my mother.*

\*A: *So I think it will be a good experience to live alone.* (AT1, PROLINGSA)

- *Hedging*: we included in this category occurrences in which the speaker used ‘I think’ to take a less assertive stance towards the adjacent propositional content, either because of a lack of certainty (16), or to mitigate the strength of the assertion.  
 (16) *And the owner helped the dog with covering the ground with some leaves like I think and then I’m not sure* (Reksio, AFE07)
- *Pragmatic marker*: in this category, we included instances of ‘I think’ which were used by the speaker for discourse management, such as to keep the conversation going, or keeping their speaking turn, as in (17), where learner Y tries to gain time and retain his speaking turn while looking for something to say.  
 (17) \*Y: *That would be like yeah challenge.*  
 \*INT2: *Uhuh.*  
 \*Y: *Er if you say challenge like on the level **I think** yeah i just have like just wait a minute you know we have this book in university.* (YT2, PROLINGSA)

We also coded for syntactic position, in order to more fully investigate the degree of pragmalinguistic competence of our participants:

- *Parenthetical (P)*: this category includes occurrences of ‘I think’ in middle position as in (16), and in final position as in (6).
- *Independent clauses (IC)*: this category groups short answers as in (1) and independent clauses such as (2).
- *Matrix clause (MC)*: in this category ‘I think’ features as a matrix clause followed by a complement clause as in (15).

## Data analysis

### *Task 1 Cross-sectional oral narrative (Reksio)*

First, we would like to point out that there is a very restricted number of occurrences of ‘I think’ markers in the Reksio database (E: 16, UI: 2, A: 10), as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Use of ‘I think’ in Reksio database

Participant category	‘I think’ #, SD, range	Syntactic structures % (#)	Semantic function % (#)

*L2 Acquisition of Epistemic/Evidential Stance-marking by French Llearners of English: the Case of 'I think'*

E N=10	18 2.15 0-7 7 users	MC 72% (13) P 29% (5): Incl. Middle position 6% (1) Sentence final 23% (4)	Evidential 94.44% (17) Epistemic 5.56% (1)
UI N=10	2 0.42 0-1 2 users	MC 100% (2)	Evidential 100% (2) Epistemic /
A N=10	10 1.88 0-6 4 users	MC 80% (8) P 20% (2) Incl. Sentence final 100% (2)	Evidential 80% (8) Epistemic 20% (2)

Most utterances describe the actions of the main characters, and the expression of personal subjectivity is limited to inferences based on visual perception and world knowledge (12), or metacognitive comments on forgotten episodes (13).

- (12) *He realizes that he can't walk because er because the ground is all icy I think.* (Reksio, E07, line 10)
- (13) *After that I think they I don't remember what happens but I know that they are getting the skating shoes.* (Reksio, AFE01, line 28)

'I think' is almost exclusively used by native speakers and learners with an evidential meaning, to express the speaker's inferences based on memories of the visualization of the Reksio cartoon.

All groups of speakers favour the use of 'I think' as a matrix clause, but English natives allow more flexibility in the way they position it in the utterance, as they use it as a parenthetical adverbial in middle and final position on five occasions. It is also interesting to note that 7/10 English speakers use 'I think' at least once in their narrative, while this is only the case for 4 A and 2 UI: 'I think' therefore appears as a regular stance-marking option for English natives, while its use is much less homogeneous among learners.



To sum up, native speakers and learners mostly use ‘I think’ as a main clause followed by a complement clause, to convey an evidential meaning, in the Reksio oral narrative. This is probably due to the fact that oral narratives are a monologic type of discourse, and one in which narrated events do not concern the participant directly. Affordances of the speaker’s subjectivity are consequently limited and ‘I think’ appears in contexts in which speakers indicate the retrieval of memorized evidence based on visual perception (the viewing of the film), through inferential processes, together with relative uncertainty about the related events.

Finally, while ‘I think’ appears as a regular stylistic feature of native discourse, it is only used by a few learner participants, even at the advanced level. We will now look at the interview data to find out how learners use ‘I think’ in interactional discourse before, during and after a nine month stay abroad in Ireland or in the UK.

#### *Task 2 Longitudinal oral interview task - PROLINGSA database*

We will first provide a quantitative description of our database, before adopting a more qualitative approach to assess the linguistic changes two learner participants experienced during the PROLINGSA project.

*Quantitative analysis.* Our analysis reveals different patterns of use of ‘I think’ in the interview data compared to the narrative data from the Reksio task. Graph 1 sums up the total number of ‘I think’ occurrences used by the five learners over the five interviews. Note that in this analysis, opinion and hedge values have been subsumed under the Epistemic category, as they both reflect the speaker’s degree of certainty towards the propositional content.

Graph 1. Distribution of ‘I think’ in PROLINGSA database, T1 to T5

*Insert graph 1*

It shows that three participants make a relatively moderate use of the ‘I think’ stance marker: A (34, 0.75%); C (23, 0.80%) and N (41, 0.81%) of total database (Percentages were calculated based on the total number of utterances of the five interviews for all five participants). As for M and Y, they use it more frequently (M: 77, 2.76%; Y: 174, 2.15% of total database). All participants use it predominantly with epistemic values, but evidential uses are also frequent (A: 9 (26%), C: 10 (43%),

M: 13 (17%), N: 9 (22%) and Y: 41 (24%). Only two participants use 'I think' with a pragmatic meaning (A: 1, Y: 22). The interview task therefore elicits three main types of semantic values, with epistemic values largely outnumbering evidential and pragmatic values, in line with previous research results (Baumgarten & House 2010).

Regarding syntax (see Graph 2), all five participants predominantly use 'I think' as a matrix clause introducing a complement clause, followed by 'I think' as a parenthetical, either mid-clause (MP) or in a final position (SF). We also find a few occurrences of 'I think' as a short answer or an independent clause in the productions of all participants. However, while the productions of the three more advanced participants (M, N and Y) display a high proportion of MC (>70% of the examples for each of these participants), illustrating the use of more complex syntactic structures, intermediate learners tend to use parentheticals more often (A: 43%, C:42%). Style therefore appears to be constrained by proficiency, with advanced learners packaging information in syntactically complex utterances, while intermediate learners use a large proportion of parentheticals.

Graph 2. Percentage of syntactic constructions for 'I think' per participant, T1 to T5

*Insert Graph 2*

We will now provide a qualitative analysis of the way M and Y, our two frequent users, use 'I think' to track the way their use evolved over the course of their nine-month stay-abroad in the British Isles.

*Case studies: evolution of speaker style for M and Y - Case study 1 (M).* M, despite her advanced level in English, was neither confident in nor particularly satisfied with the way she spoke English, particularly at T1. Asked by the interviewer how she felt about her English at T1, she replied: '&uh I don 't feel very comfortable speaking English because I know that's &uh that <my> [x2] grammar is not quite good no neither is my accent but as a whole I think I feel yeah not very comfortable but not &uh actually uncomfortable' (AT1). At T4, she declared herself not satisfied with her progress in English: 'I'm not satisfied. I expected so much and it won't be as I expected.'

Graph 3. M's syntactic choices for 'I think' – T1 to T5

*Insert Graph3*

However, Graph 3 shows that M developed greater syntactic complexity with the use of 'I think' during and after her nine-month sojourn: at T1 and T2, she uses only

a few ‘I think’, with no specific preference for a type of syntactic structure: she uses it as an independent clause (mostly in short answers), as a sentence final parenthetical, or as a matrix clause in a fairly similar way. From T3 on, her use of ‘I think’ globally increases, with ‘I think’ as MC culminating at T5. Graph 3 therefore clearly illustrates the development of syntactic complexity in M’s speech, together with an enhanced expression of subjectivity. Let us now focus on the evolution of the way M uses the different semantic values of ‘I think’ in the five interviews. In this analysis, we included all evidential and epistemic values, which we subcategorized into hedge and opinion, in order to have an insight into the evolution of the speaker’s assertivity.

Graph 4. M’s choice of semantic values for ‘I think’ - T1 to T5

*Insert Graph4*

At T1, M uses ‘I think’ as an evidential marker and as an epistemic marker (hedge or opinion) in a balanced way. At T2, T3 and T4, M mostly uses ‘I think’ as a hedging device as in (18).

- (18) \*INT1: *Um and so what in your opinion what are your next challenges with respect to English?*  
\*M: *Um.*  
\*INT1: *Or the next things that you want to try to do.*  
\*M: *Um I think I want to improve my understanding of the Irish accent because sometimes it’s so difficult for me . (MT2, PROLINGSA)*

In this example, the use of ‘I think’ to mitigate her claim that she wants to improve her understanding of the Irish accent indicates that at T2 she does not have a clear idea of what her learning priorities are, or that she lacks the self-confidence to assert them. From T4 however, it becomes clear she uses ‘I think’ predominantly to express her opinion, suggesting that she took a more assertive stance after a few months in Ireland (T4 took place at the end of March 2019, roughly a month before M’s return to France). This is illustrated in (19), where M has been asked to comment on the impact of Brexit on Ireland and uses ‘I think’ to state her opinion on that matter, while aligning with her interlocutor by responding to their cue (‘what do you think’) with an immediate uptake (‘I think...’) (pragmatic function).

- (19) \*INT1: *ok what do you think about it [Brexit]?*  
\*M: *I think for here it’s concerning and I’m very curious about what is going to happen with the north and the border and the good Friday agreement and everything. (PROLINGSA, MT4)*

In brief, our data suggests that M's nine-month Erasmus+ stay in Ireland consolidated her linguistic competence, as illustrated through the development of syntactic complexity with 'I think', while her choice of semantic values for this marker suggests that she gained confidence in her linguistic capacities as well as on her entitlement to give her opinion on a variety of topics. At T5, the interviewers had M watch an extract of the T1 interview to reflect on her linguistic progress: her reaction, transcribed in (20), shows M's surprise at the realization of her progress.

- (20) \*M: *so <I'm> [/] I'm happy.*  
\*M: *and I'm really surprised.*  
\*M: *I think I didn't know how much I improved my confidence when I speak English. (PROLINGSA, MT5)*

Taken together, M's case study confirms previous research results on the impact of study abroad on the individual's perception of self (see, among others, Papatsiba 2005; Milstein 2005 on self-perceived growth in autonomy and self-efficacy; Grieve 2013, 2015; Compiegne 2020).

*Case studies: evolution of speaker style for M and Y - Case study 2 (Y).* Let us now analyse the developmental trajectory of Y's use of 'I think', as regards syntactic choices and semantic distribution. Y is a very talkative individual, who enjoys reflecting on his study abroad experience, and speaking about his life as an Erasmus+ student in a UK university. His interviews last much longer than the other participants' (see Table 3), thereby yielding affordances for the use of numerous 'I think' stance markers.

Graph 5 shows that Y has a preference for 'I think' as a matrix clause: it is his favourite option even at T1, before departure. His use of 'I think' globally increases over time, and peaks at T5 with a total of 54 occurrences.

Graph 5. Y's syntactic choices – T1 to T5

*Insert Graph5*

Let us now turn to the semantic analysis presented in Graph 6.

Graph 6. Y's choice semantic values for 'I think' - T1 to T5

*Insert Graph6*

At T1, before departure, Y mainly uses 'I think' in its more literal meaning: the expression of opinion, as in (21), where Y uses 'I think' to state that his teacher was particularly inspirational.

- (21) \*INT1: *So you had a great English teacher?*  
\*INT1: *So someone who inspired you?*  
\*Y: *I think she's one of the most inspirational teacher that I ever had.* (YT1, PROLINGSA)

The relatively small percentage of hedging (14%) indicates he mainly uses 'I think' with a fairly high degree of certainty, to express his perspective on events (opinion or source of information). This changes at T2, which took place at the end of October, roughly six weeks after his arrival in the UK: during this interview, 38% of Ys uses of 'I think' are as hedges, while incorporating pragmatic uses (11%), signalling a shift to a more intersubjective perspective. In (22), his use of 'I think' suggests a less assertive stance, and corresponds to a hedging value.

- (22) \*Y: *We have this book (laughs) in Paul Valéry [University].*  
\*INT1: *Oh.*  
\*Y: *I still have it so yeah um I think I'll see like all the vocabulary but...*  
*From T2 on, pragmatic values enter Y's stance marking repertoire and he makes good use of them at T2, T3, T4 and T5. This is illustrated in (23) where Y uses 'I think', but also 'yeah', 'but' and 'I don't know' to keep his speaking turn.* (YT2, PROLINGSA)

- (23) \*Y: *Your accent is changing in a weird way.*  
\*Y: *I don't it's just like you know like social instincts.*  
\*Y: *You just get to okay this is just how things are.*  
\*Y: *So just trying to int(egrate) integrate to the group.*  
\*Y: *And so everything's all right.*  
\*INT1: *Mmmm.*  
\*Y: *Uh so yeah but yeah I think yeah yeah I don't know.* (YT3, PROLINGSA)

The proportion of pragmatic occurrences remains fairly constant (10 to 16%) from T2 to T4. Finally, Y's use of evidential values increases from T1 (23%) to T2 and T3 (38%), before falling to 16% at T4 and 15% at T5.

Taken together, these results suggest that Y has a globally assertive style, as shown by the high proportion of opinion occurrences (T1: 64%, T2: 14%, T3: 41%, T4: 39%, T5: 52%). Moreover, he uses 'I think' with a pragmatic value for discourse management purposes, a type of use he incorporated in his repertoire at T2, after

six weeks of immersion. This confirms previous results on gains in pragmalinguistic competence during study abroad (see, for example, Kinginger 2013, Grieve 2013, 2015, Pérez Vidal & Shively 2019; Howard 2021; Leclercq 2021).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this paper, we sought to complement existing research on the acquisition of verbal stance markers. In particular, we wanted to find out whether intermediate and advanced French learners of English were sensitive to the type of discursive context in their choice of semantic values and syntactic preferences for 'I think'. We discuss our main findings in relation to previous research.

*Does the type of discursive task have an impact of the way native speakers and learners use verbal stance marker 'I think'?*

Our data clearly shows that narratives and interview data do not provide the same affordances regarding the use of 'I think'. Whereas narratives elicit the marking of evidential inference based on visual perception of a set of events, and invite speakers to reconstruct the story based on their memories of the viewing, oral interview data, where the interviewers ask the participants questions about their life abroad, provide speakers with more opportunities to express their subjectivity. In conversational contexts, our analysis shows that 'I think' is predominantly used as an epistemic stance-marker, to indicate the degree of certainty with which a speaker relates to a given propositional content, and more specifically to signal the expression of the speaker's opinion, or to mitigate a claim. The two main other uses are evidential and pragmatic, when a speaker seeks to gain time for online planification, or to keep a speaking turn. Our analysis therefore confirms the findings from Gablasova et al. (2017), who found differences in learners' stance-taking choices in monologic and dialogic tasks.

*Does the use of 'I think' illustrate individual speaker style?*

It is difficult to answer this question based on the Reksio data, but the PROLINGSA dataset provides us with a glimpse into how the stylistic preferences of five learners of English evolved over the course of an academic year abroad.

First of all, 'I think' is used by all five learners, although in different proportions according to the participant and to the interview session. On the whole, two profiles emerge: moderate users (A, C and N) and more intensive users (M and Y).

Both M and Y developed greater syntactic complexity in their use of ‘I think’ from T1 to T5. However, a close analysis of the data reveals that while Y is a very self-confident and highly reflexive speaker, feeling entitled to express his stance and opinion on a large variety of topics, M mostly uses those epistemic verbal markers as hedges, to mark her lack of certainty/self-assurance on topics that closely concern her. However, the MT5 data seems to suggest that she gained confidence over the course of her academic year abroad, as reflected in the frequent use of ‘I think’ to express her opinion. Our two case-studies therefore confirm previous research results on the importance of personal style (Kirkham 2011; Leclercq 2021) and validates Gablasova et al. (2017)’s observation that there is quite a lot of individual variation in the way advanced L2 speakers of English use epistemic stance markers. They called for more fine-grained studies which could “more firmly connect the micro-level linguistic structures (e.g. stance markers) with the higher-order categories such as social identities” (p631). We hope to have shown that learners’ style, i.e., the way they use ‘I think’, reveals something about their degree of assertiveness, and the way they position themselves in discourse relative to others.

To conclude, our study provides evidence of the influence of the type of discursive task in the way ‘I think’ is used by French learners of English, while contributing to examining the links between the linguistic choices of learners and their study-abroad experience. Our data confirms previous research results that studying abroad permits linguistic development, as regards syntactic complexity, but also the possibility to expand self-confidence in one’s linguistic abilities (Papatsiba 2005; Milstein 2005; Kinginger 2013; Compiègne 2020). Each speaker has their own personality, and this is reflected in the way they use verbal epistemic stance markers.

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