

# Norm Conflicts and Epistemic Modals

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Upon publication, the supplemental materials including all stimulus materials, screen shots, data, and R-scripts will be made available on the *osf* project page: ....

## Abstract

Statements containing epistemic modals (e.g. “by autumn 2022 most European countries may have the Covid-19 pandemic under control”) are common expressions of epistemic uncertainty. In this paper, previous published findings (Knobe & Yalcin, 2014; Khoo & Phillips, 2018) on the opposition between Contextualism and Relativism for epistemic modals are re-examined. It is found that these findings contain a substantial degree of individual variation. To investigate whether participants differ in their interpretation of epistemic modals, an experiment with multiple phases and sessions is used to classify participants according to the three semantic theories of Relativism, Contextualism, and Objectivism. Through this study, some of the first empirical evidence for the kind of truth value shifts postulated by semantic Relativism is presented. It is furthermore found that participants’ disagreement judgments match their truth evaluations and that participants are capable of distinguishing between truth and justification. In a second experimental session, it is investigated whether participants thus classified follow the norm of retraction which Relativism uses to account for argumentation with epistemic modals. Here the results are less favorable for Relativism. In a second experiment, these results are replicated and the normative beliefs of participants concerning the norm of retraction are investigated following work on measuring norms by Bicchieri (2017). Again, it is found that on average participants show no strong preferences concerning the norm of retraction for epistemic modals, yet participants who had committed to Objectivism and had training in logics applied the norm of retraction to might-statements. These results present a substantial challenge to the account of argumentation with epistemic modals presented in MacFarlane (2014), as discussed.

*Keywords:* Epistemic Modals, Relativism, Norm Conflicts, Retraction, Semantics, Truth Conditions, Argumentation.