

Memory between evidentiality and epistemic uncertainty: the case of Italian *sembrare* ‘seem’

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So far, memory as a source of knowledge has received little attention in research on evidentiality. Ifantidou (2001, pp. 6-7) includes it among the possible ways to acquire information, and states memory can be expressed via a class of lexical strategies (e.g., “I remember that”, “As I recollect”), but her study lacks a precise description of this evidential source. Some studies have also suggested the possibility to mark a mnemonic source of information by using SEEM-verbs, but this option has always been only hinted at and never explored through extensive analysis (cf. Miecznikowski & Musi, 2015 for Italian; Letuchiy, 2010 for Russian).

Therefore, we want to assess whether the Italian verb *sembrare* ‘seem’ can convey that the information possessed by the speaker was gathered from their own memory, and if so, in which constructions. Our aim is twofold: we want to enrich the description of renowned evidential and epistemic strategies, namely SEEM-verbs constructions (Squartini, 2018), but we also intend to give a first, comprehensive account of memory as an evidential source.

In our study, we analysed three constructions with *sembrare*: *sembrare*+infinitive (1a), *sembra che* (1b) and *mi sembra che* (1c).

- (1) a. *Gianni sembra correre.*
‘Gianni seems to be running.’
- b. *Sembra che Gianni corra.*
 ‘It seems that Gianni is running.’
- c. *Mi sembra che Gianni corra.*
 ‘It seems to me that Gianni is running.’

216 total occurrences of the three constructions were extracted from the written Italian corpus CORIS (Rossini Favretti et al., 2002), and 189 occurrences were extracted from the spoken Italian corpora KIParla (Mauri et al., 2019) and LIP (De Mauro et al., 1993). Occurrences were coded for their evidential or epistemic value. The four levels selected were: Inference, Reportive, Belief and Memory - the first three being already attested for these constructions. We followed Cornillie’s (2007) tests for *parecer* ‘seem’ constructions for the assessment of the former three levels, while we coded occurrences as Memory when there was an indication of mnemonic source in the context, or when the sentence was suitable for the addition of the parenthetical *da quel che ricordo* ‘as I recall’. We conducted chi-squared tests with Monte Carlo simulation of p-value to assess significant relationships between the constructions and the evidential or epistemic meanings.

Results show that *mi sembra che*, despite being also associated with Belief, is the only construction associated with Memory (2):

- (2) *non c'ero [...] mi sembra che era alle tre di pomeriggio quindi o giocavo*
‘I wasn’t there [...] it seems to me that it was around three p.m. so I was either playing or’

Instead, *sembra che* and *sembrare*+infinitive almost never express either epistemic values (Belief) or mnemonic sources: they are both significantly associated with the expression of Inference, and *sembra che* also shows a significant association with Reportive, as already noted in literature (Musi, 2015). Furthermore, even though the association between *mi sembra che* and Memory

holds both for written and spoken Italian, memory as a source of information appears mainly in the spoken corpora, and primarily in unplanned speech.

Successively, we focused on the 29 occurrences in which *mi sembra che* marks a mnemonic source by analysing them separately. The analysis revealed that this evidential value has a strong epistemic component: this construction is used to express uncertainty in the retrieval of a state of affairs, and thus it shows an epistemic mitigating function. As a consequence, it can be difficult to distinguish between evidential sources based on memory and epistemic modals, as reported sometimes in literature (Janssen & Nuyts, 2021). This also suggests a relationship between the Memory meaning and the Belief meaning of *mi sembra che*. Said relationship is not new: in fact, verbs of Thinking and Believing are often sources for patterns of lexicalization of memory-related meanings (Fortescue, 2021). Thus, a possibility would be that the Memory meaning of *mi sembra che* developed through an extension of its Belief meaning.

Our findings reveal that this information source in Italian, at least as expressed by SEEM-verbs, is located on the boundary between evidentiality and epistemic modality, thus posing questions about the relationship between these two categories. Moreover, they show that Memory as a source of information is typical of spoken interactions, probably due to its lack of reliability. Finally, they foster further cross-linguistic research to give an adequate description of which strategies are used to convey this meaning and how they emerged.

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