Epistemic would: a marker of modal remoteness

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INTRODUCTION

In English, *would* – or its contracted form *'d* - is the preterite form of the modal auxiliary *will*, which originally conveyed volition. This volitional component accounts for the dynamic modality that is involved in the prediction expressed by *will* in present-day English, predictive meaning being based on the volition, willingness or propensity of the subject-referent, i.e. on some abstract inherent conformity between subject and predicate. Three uses of the preterite may be distinguished in the case of *would*, as with *could, might* and *should*: past time, backshift and modal remoteness (see Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 196). Modal remoteness is illustrated in:

(1) He'd be about sixty. Huddleston & Pullum (2002 : 197)

In this epistemic use, *would* does not refer to past time. (1) may be construed as an answer to the question *How old **is** he?* (see Huddleston & Pullum (2002 : 200)). The aim of this paper is to account for this epistemic use, which, paradoxically, involves neither uncertainty nor conditionality. According to Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 200), modal remoteness weakens certainty, which produces a tentative effect. Ward & al. (2003: 72), however, argue that epistemic *would* may express an assertion about the present. We show that epistemic *would* always marks modal remoteness, i.e. a modal stance that is compatible with certainty but not with assertion.

1. THE MODAL STATUS OF THE PROPOSITION: CONJECTURE, STOCK-TAKING OR COUNTERFACTUALITY?

Epistemic modality is concerned with « the speaker's attitude to the truth-value or factual status of the proposition » (Palmer 2001: 8). In the case of *will*,

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conjecture is based on the speaker's knowledge and on her repeated experience of similar situations in the past (see Coates 1983: 177):

(2) *A commotion in the hall…* '**That will be Celia**,' said Janet. (ibid: 177)

Celle (2005) argues further that in the absence of complete perception, the speaker avoids assertion and only commits in anticipation to the truth of the proposition. By contrast, the preterite form of the modal may be used where the speaker's perception is both direct and complete:

(3) Dad : Uh… Who's that boy hanging out in our front yard, Danae ?
Danae: **That would be Jeffrey**, my not-so-secret admirer. (Birner & al. 2007 : 320)

Crucially, the preterite form does not express tentativeness here. Birner & al. (2007: 320) claim that *would* "conveys the speaker's high level of confidence in the truth of the proposition ; that is, […] the speaker commits to the truth of the proposition conveyed." Our contention is that the modal judgment expressed by *would* cannot be equated with an assertion. The contextual environment, which implies that the referent is visually perceived and then identified, may create this illusion. However, we show below that *would* may waver between three different modal interpretations. Unlike *will*, *would* is not future-oriented. The preterite form introduces modal remoteness. Thereby, no clear information is provided about the modal orientation of the proposition. The following utterance, for example, is compatible with two readings:

(4) Ben was born in 2006. **He would be five**.
  a) Ben was born in 2006. He would be five if he were still alive.
  b) 'How old is Ben?'
    'He was born in 2006. So he would be five.'

In (4a), the protasis functions as an unreal condition. Consequently the apodosis is interpreted as counterfactual, the implication being that Ben never reached the age of five. In (4b), the reality of the referent 'Ben' is presupposed. His year of birth being known to be 2006, there is objective evidence that he is five years old. *Would* in itself gives no indication about the truth-value of the proposition. It is the context that allows either the unreal or the real interpretation. In the former case, an unreal situation serves as a locator for the epistemic judgment. In the latter case, however, the epistemic judgment is based on verifiable evidence. Modal remoteness may have a tentative effect when the speaker's knowledge does not allow him to produce an assertion as in:

(5) 'My grandma passed.'
'Oh my God. I'm so sorry.'
'He texted that to you?'
'Yeah, they're not the best communicators.'
'Do you need to go home for the funeral?'
'You know what? I'll probably just send flowers.'
'You sure? Toni, **your family would want you in Atlanta**.'

'Nah, I think I'm better off here.' (*She's not there*)

In (5), the speaker cannot have access to Toni's family's inner states and may only conjecture about what they want by drawing upon her knowledge of family customs. Conjecture could also be expressed by *will*, but the present form of the modal would introduce an anticipated assertion. With the preterite form, the utterance is fictitiously disconnected from the situation of utterance, but the frame in which the utterance is valid is not supplied. *I suppose, I assume, I guess* could be added and would reinforce the tentative meaning.

If the time reference of the event is in the past, perfective *have* is required :

(6) 'Did Kathy have a regular route to work?'
'Yes, **she'd have stopped off at the suppliers**.' (*New Tricks*)

The speaker attempts to reconstruct Kathy's timetable by drawing upon her knowledge of Kathy's habits. Interestingly, the speaker's lack of knowledge does not suffice to account for epistemic *would*. Compare the following pair:

(7) Now Miss Fraser was last seen at 8 p.m., when the night nurse took her a glass of hot milk before she retired. The next visit was at two in the morning, just to see that everything was in order. The room was empty. The night nurse gave the alarm and as soon as I was notified, I called the police. **That would have been around two-thirty in the morning**. (Chester, *Murder forestalled*.)

(8) I came to England when I was 9, **that would have been in 1961**, and that's when I saw the world for what it's all about, I was still a child but I saw it, the black and white thing, it was a reality. (Cashmore, *Black sportsmen*)

In (7), the speaker needs to recollect past events and visits before being able to conjecture about the time when she called the police. In (8), however, the sportsman's year of arrival in England is a fact he is necessarily aware of. *Would* allows the speaker to take stock of the different stages in his life. Modal remoteness only produces tentativeness in conjectural uses. In the case of stock-taking, the speaker distances herself from the situation of utterance by forming an evidence-based judgment. This use is analysed in part 2.

2.   EVIDENCE-BASED MODAL REMOTENESS

Birner & al. (2007 : 326-327) argue that the "TWBX[2] " construction meets three "communicative purposes" :
"to convey commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed (via epistemic *would*), to mark the postcopular constituent as instantiating the focus in a salient OP (also via epistemic *would*) and to equate this postcopular focus with either some

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[2] "TWBX" stands for "That would be X". An OP [open proposition] is defined as follows by Ward & al. (2003: 72): "An open proposition is a proposition with one or more underspecified elements."

salient discourse entity or simply with the variable itself (via the demonstrative subject and the equative)."

In part 1, we demonstrated that epistemic *would* is context-dependent and gives no information about the truth of the proposition. Contra Birner & al. (2007: 328), we argue that "That would be me" cannot be taken to be an equivalent of the equative assertion "X is me".

The second communicative purpose suggested by Birner & al. (2007: 327) is also disputable. These authors uphold the view that the TWBX construction requires a salient OP, like clefts and truncated clefts, a requirement that supposedly sets *would* apart from other epistemic modals. They point out that *would* is not felicitous in the following example, in a context where "B is reading the newspaper in the living room when A enters holding an envelope, and interrupts B's reading by uttering (9)":

(9) # This would be my new Visa card. (Birner & al. 2007: 321)

Birner & al. (2007) claim that *would* may become felicitous if the OP, i.e. the envelope, is made salient by way of a preceding question such as *What's that envelope you're holding ?*. We suggest a different explanation, which may also apply to epistemic uses of *would* beyond the TWBX construction (e.g. (4b)). For *would* to be interpreted epistemically, reference must be made to verifiable evidence or to some entity whose existence has been established in the prior discourse. If, as in (9), speaker B is not in a position to identify the referent designated by *this*, *would* is not interpretable. *Would* may only be interpreted epistemically in the equative construction if the reality of the referent designated by the demonstrative is presupposed by speaker and hearer. In this respect, *would* differs from the other modals.

Moving on to the third communicative purpose set out by Birner & al. (2007: 327), we show below that an underspecified variable is not always present. The communicative purpose may also be to specify some prior discourse entity rather than instantiate an underspecified variable, a case that they do not consider.

Let us first discuss the case examined by Birner & al (2007). When the aim of the utterance is to identify some underspecified entity by means of the equative construction, the postcopular constituent does instantiate the focus. More importantly, we argue that *would* activates some inherent conformity between the entities that are equated. The pragmatic implications may vary considerably depending on whether this conformity is accessible to both speaker and hearer. In the following example, two entities (*the square root of 625* and *25*) are being equated by virtue of some mathematic calculus that is "objectively verifiable", as pointed out by Ward & al. (2003: 76):

(10) What's the square root of 625?
That would be 25. (Ward et al. 2003: 76)

The speaker draws upon the objective properties of the entities that are being equated, which explains why she expresses 'absolute certainty'. Similarly, the

speaker's role consists in activating some logical reasoning in (11), where the syllabic choice that governs the formation of one's mother's parents' name conforms to the principle uttered in the first sentence:

> (11) One's mother's mother is simply that, Mormor, and one's mother's father Morfar. Similarly, **the other side would be Farmor and Farfar**. (B. Vine, *Asta's book*)

Even if there is no doubt about the conformity of the properties of the entities that are being equated, the speaker avoids committing to the truth of the utterance, which produces a hedging effect[3]. The link established between the two entities that are equated may be less clear when their inherent conformity is not accessible to both speaker and hearer. In the following examples, an equative assertion (*that's sperm donor, that's me*) would be problematic because the speaker is aware that her answer is going to sound surprising, the entity chosen to instantiate the variable being unexpected to the hearer:

> (12) 'You got a name picked out?'
> 'If it's a boy, I was thinking "David."'
> 'Is that the baby's father?'
> 'No, **that would be sperm donor**. Yeah, Dad's not in the picture. I was a work-at-home interior designer. Figured I could be a work-at-home single mom, too.' (*Falling Skies, Sanctuary*)
> (13) 'Ew, what smells?'
> '**That would be me**, or more specifically, my patient's insides all over me.' (Lextutor)

By putting forward some inherent conformity between the entities that are being equated, the speaker avoids claiming responsibility for the utterance. In (12), the speaker cannot provide a clear answer to the question she is being asked since the baby's father is an anonymous sperm donor. The demonstrative preceding *would* refers back to « the baby's father », not to the name « David », contrary to the demonstrative used in the question. In what follows the equative construction, the speaker makes the inherent conformity between the two entities accessible to the hearer by providing additional information. In (13), a suspicious odor comes from the surgeon who has just been operating on a patient. By using *would*, the speaker draws upon some inherent conformity between this odor and

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[3] Hedging has often been associated with tentativeness. However, recent studies such as Holmes (1995) or Dixon & Foster (1997) have shown that hedging may express either interpersonal concern or tentativeness. In other words, hedges serve either an *affective* function or an *epistemic* one. Dixon & Foster (1997: 3) sum up this two-fold function as follows: "In their affective role, hedges express speakers' desire to create and maintain interpersonal solidarity. In their epistemic role, they express speakers' uncertainty about the validity of particular statements." Modal remoteness consists in disconnecting from the situation of utterance in order for the speaker to adopt an evaluative stance in reaction to a situation assumed to be either hypothetical or confrontational. Hedging may thus be used not only to express tentativeness, but also to attenuate or anticipate potential disagreement or discordance.

me. In these examples, the speaker activates some conformity that is not accessible to the hearer until more information is supplied in the form of an explanation or a justification. Discordance may also be exploited if the speaker's intention is to disturb or provoke the audience:

> (14) 'And what is your vegetable of the day?'
> 'That **would** be the peas.'
> 'Hm. And how are those prepared?'
> 'Those are dumped out of a can into a big pot and heated up. I mean, where do you
>   think you are, lady, Red Lobster?'
> 'Hey, I am paying good money to eat here.' (*True Blood*, Season 3)
> (15) Who your girl made you pay to come see?
> **That would be me!**
> Who the only star on WB?
> **That would be me!**
> Who the mami's think is so sexy?
> **That would be me!**
> Who the illest nigga outta Jersey?
> **That would be me!** […] (*That Would Be Me Lyrics Chino XL*)

In (14) and (15), it is the speaker's intention to provide the hearer with an answer that runs counter to her expectations. In (14), the speaker is well aware that the hearer expects better vegetables. By putting forward some inherent conformity the hearer does not have access to, the speaker imposes on the hearer an equation that turns out to be problematic pragmatically. This provocative attitude is obvious in (15), where questions are a mere pretext for the speaker to present himself as a hero, contrary to what anyone may think. The sense of humour or provocation would be lost in an equative assertion (*that's the peas, that's me*). Pragmatically, an equative assertion would even sound strange in (15) because it would be construed as a genuine answer to a genuine question. It would also fail to mark unexpectedness where the communicative purpose is to surprise the hearer.

Finally, it should be stressed that the postcopular constituent is not necessarily equated with a salient discourse entity. In some cases, there is no variable to be instantiated. The function of epistemic *would* is then to evaluate and comment on the prior discourse:

> (17) Migraineur Joan Didion speaks (in " In Bed ") of the compulsive worker, the
>   perfectionist writer. This is the type who slaves over sentences that
>   nonetheless ooze mediocrity like a bad odor. **That would be me**. A migraine
>   forces you to stop. Your day ends - bam! A migraine performs approximately
>   the same service as being run over by a train. (Coca Corpus)

The variable *me* cannot be said to instantiate *X* in "The type who slaves over sentences that nonetheless ooze mediocrity like a bad odor is *X*". No salient OP is to be found here. The communicative purpose is rather to equate a general case – here "the type who slaves over sentences etc." with a specific case – *me*. The speaker signals that she suddenly becomes aware of the fact that her personal

case conforms to a more general case. Here again, the equative assertion (*that's me*) would fail to mark the equation between the two entities as something new to the speaker. In addition, by disconnecting the modal judgment from the situation of utterance, *would* allows contrasting Joan Didion's voice with the speaker's voice that appears in the form of a comment.

In the following example, it would be possible to recover a salient OP from the prior discourse: "These nice people are X ". However, the communicative purpose is not so much to instantiate a variable as to introduce the speaker's evaluation of the prior discourse, as in (17):

> (18) Granddad lived, I think, in a state of perpetual churning anxiety. He felt it was time to go to work. He felt lost. He wondered out loud who these "nice people" were, sitting in his living room. (**That would be us, his family**.) (Coca Corpus)

That would be us, his family, signals a switch to a metalinguistic comment, implying that the mention "nice people" is wrongly applied to the close family. The demonstrative refers to the mention, not to the plural referent. Note that perfective *have* is not used here, precisely because the equative construction is taken as a comment on the present situation. This comment appears as a parenthetical and is clearly not in focus. Lastly, epistemic *would* is frequent in questions asked in reaction to some unexpected fact:

> (19) ANGEL   I can't think with the fucking racket you're making.
> [Dawn, cleaning up, absently hands the gladstone bag to Angel.]
> **Where'd this** come **from**? (Mainwaring, *Stiffs*)
> (20) 'This church is not yet finished, so God's law has no power here. Seize him.'
> '**What would you know of God's law?**' (*New Tricks*)

The purpose of the question is not to seek information in order to instantiate a variable, but rather to call into question some pre-established conformity. In (19), the presence of the bag is regarded as surprising. In (20), the validity of the speaker's statement is called into question.

CONCLUSION

Epistemic *would* marks modal remoteness, which may produce tentativeness or hedging even if there is no doubt as to the speaker's certainty. When the judgment is evidence-based, epistemic *would* serves to evaluate some inherent conformity and the meaning varies according to whether this conformity is accessible to both speaker and hearer. The communicative purpose may be either to instantiate a variable or to comment on the prior discourse. In any case, the speaker is distancing herself from the situation of utterance, not wishing to ascribe actuality to it for pragmatic reasons.

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New Tricks
Falling Skies, Sanctuary

True Blood, Season 3, I got a right to sing the Blues