CREATING COMMON EPISTEMIC SPACES
THROUGH MULTIMODAL STANCETAKING PRACTICES

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The chapter, written by Valentyna Ushchyna, stands out in this volume, as it deals rather with real-life online communication than with artistic discourse. The author shows the linguistic ways epistemic stancetaking becomes an integral part of the shared epistemic spaces creation, where the dynamics and ecology of meaning-making presupposes interaction and collaboration. To be more specific, the focus of this study is on the epistemic stancetaking in COVID-19 discourse. Because knowledge concerning COVID-19 is insufficient, epistemic possibilities build upon uncertainty and unpredictability. The study uses objective hermeneutic approach as the methodological framework that allows disclosing of the concealed structures of discourse and enables explanation of the complex processes of social semiosis in post-modern computerized society. Within objective hermeneutic paradigm, analysis of stancetaking presupposes taking into account personal attitudes of individual speakers (stance-takers) along with the domineering social structures framing their discursive actions and interactions.

Key words: stance, stancetaking, epistemic stance, epistemic space, modality, evidentiality

Lately, stancetaking as a multifaceted and multilayered discursive activity has gained an unprecedented attention of the researchers from all over the world. In the last few decades, stance has been studied from different angles and perspectives – as a way of expressing the speaker's / writer's opinion on a certain problem, as a means the users of language use to position themselves in conversation in terms of certainty or emotion, as a linguistic expression of the speaker's / writer's attitude towards the object of communication, his / her likes or dislikes and knowledge of the discussed topic. But most importantly, stance has become a focal notion of the studies concerned with the discursive construction of social meanings in language and by means of language.

Many researchers noted that "stance" is inseparably connected with

"persona" (Eckert 2012), "style" (Johnstone 2009), or "identity" (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) of the speakers. Manifold of stances reflect the consistent patterns of individuals' speech behavior, or their linguistic selves. Moreover, stance is not only agentive discursive-semiotic practice, it is also inherently intersubjective. To find their existential places in society, to grasp their social space and "social orientation" (Langlotz 2015, p. 1), people often rely on their mental representations about the world, theirs and their interlocutors', basing their knowledge on their stances, interactively constructed in various situations of life.

Stance cannot be studied without referring to the notion of "stancetaking". Some researchers treat them as close equivalents but I believe stance can be seen as a result (though never finite) of stancetaking – a continuous intersubjective process of stance construction and stance negotiation in discursive interaction. According to Scott Kiesling (2021, p. 410), the most important difference between stance and stancetaking is that "stancetaking moves the focus of the term from static noun to a dynamic verb". Stance and stancetaking, as explained by Kiesling, are "related concepts that help to explain patterning of language and the motivations for the use of lexical items, constructions, and discourse markers" (ibid, p. 409). These linguistic means of marking stances are indicating the relationships of the speaker to other participants of conversation, as well as the content of the interaction. Therefore, stancetaking is always indexical. In Michael Silverstein's terms, it indicates "momentary relational attitudes and affects" (Silverstein 2021, p. 13), and, thus, it's situationally and contextually bound.

Stancetaking activities are traditionally viewed as a unity of knowledge of speakers about the objects of stancetaking (epistemic stance) and their feelings and emotions concerning it (affective stance). Stances are

formed and later formulated on the basis of epistemic and affective evaluations of various discursive dimensions (including sociocultural, conversational, and sociolinguistic variables) that the stance-takers have in their disposal. In this chapter, I will mainly concentrate my attention on the epistemic dimension of stancetaking in an attempt to explain how the level of knowledge (or a lack of it) influences the ways people express their attitudes towards the problem they discuss. Consequently, I will demonstrate that individual epistemic stances do not only reflect the epistemic spaces they represent but they also shape these spaces. Due to their active circulation in virtual (Internet) discourse, individual stances mold certain ideological planes, recognizable by the in- and out-group members. They oftentimes serve as indexical signs of certain socio-cultural communities, united by similar views, values and beliefs – the so-called 'ideological bubbles', existing in such social networks as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. In such bubbles, people have their own order of "semiotic dialectic" (Silverstein 2021, p. 13), reflecting certain epistemic spaces.

According to David Chalmers, epistemic space consists of imaginative space of possible scenarios (Chalmer 2011, p. 61):

> "If a subject did not know anything, all scenarios would be epistemically possible for the subject. When a subject knows something, some scenarios are excluded. Every piece of substantive knowledge corresponds to a division in epistemic space: some scenarios are excluded out as epistemically impossible for the subject, while others are left open. More specifically, it is natural to hold that for a given p, there may be scenarios in which p is the case, and scenarios in which p is not the case. Then when a subject knows that p, scenarios in which p is not the case are excluded, while others are left open. The scenarios that are epistemically possible for a subject are those that are not excluded by any knowledge of the subject".

Hence, people build their stances based on the scenarios that are epistemically possible for them, on the scenarios that are not eliminated due to their knowledge of the subject matter. Following D. Chalmers who

writes, "there are many ways things might be. …[I]t might be there is life on Jupiter, and it might be that there is not" (ibid), we may presume that it might be that COVID-19 vaccines will kill you or it might be that they will not. Or even better: it might be that COVID-19 vaccines will poison you, or implant the chips into your bodies or it might be that they will not. So, to make this picture complete, we might suppose that epistemic spaces are not only "the spaces of ways things might be" (Chalmers 2011, p. 63), but also the ways things might have been (Jago 2009, p. 327). Or in other words, they include counterfactual spaces with epistemic possibilities of possible (sometimes unreal) worlds. Epistemic possibilities as well as truth conditions and (un-)certainty in the expressed propositions comprise epistemic stances and can be accessed via words, word combinations, and / or sentences that served the basis for our further analysis.

2. Data and Methods

The data for this study were gathered from the blogs of popular Ukrainian bloggers Karl Volokh and Garik Korogodski, published on Facebook during the period of three months: from December 2021 till February 2022. Both of these bloggers are well-known in Ukraine and can be considered Ukrainian opinion-makers. The average number of their followers is around 100000 people (as of August 2022, Karl Volokh had 90597 subscribers, while Garik Korogodski had 153000 followers). Karl Volokh leads his blog in Ukrainian, while Garik Korogodski usually wrote in Russian before Russia launched its war on Ukraine, lately he often resorts to the Ukrainian language in his blog. They have different political views, support different political parties and political actors, though both of them take very patriotic pro-Ukrainian positions.

As is well-known, before February 24, 2022 – the date that had

drastically changed the lives of all Ukrainian people, - the most topical issue that had been actively communicated around the globe with a fare level of intensity was COVID-19 pandemic. So, the main object of stancetaking in the texts that have been analyzed in this study, is COVID-19 and vaccination against it, which was profusely discussed at the period of data gathering not only on Facebook and other social media, but also in public discourse and mass media.

General methodological framework for this study was offered by objective hermeneutics – an approach that allows reconstruction of the hidden structures of discourse. Theoretical development of objective hermeneutics as the method of textual analysis is connected with the need of giving explanations to the processes of social semiosis in post-modern, heavily computerized and highly virtualized world. Representatives of objective hermeneutics support the idea that meaning is a social category (Ley 2010; Oevermann 2002; Wagner 2001). Because objective hermeneutics assumes that speech behavior of individuals depends on interactively shared rules and, therefore, meanings are rather intersubjective than subjective, it can serve a good instrument for the reconstruction of the discourse stances, built in online communication. Moreover, in contrast to other qualitative methods of discourse analysis (e. g., critical discourse analysis or narrative studies), objective hermeneutics is not about reproducing a meaning intended by the author, but rather about determining the latent (i.e. unconscious) meanings of the text.

Objective hermeneutics offers a peculiar view of the relationships between a person and a society, which is based upon the balancing between the subjectivity of individual positioning and objectivity of social interaction. Within the framework of objective hermeneutics, analysis of stancetaking presupposes taking into account personal attitudes of a stance-

taker (including his / her knowledge of the stance object and emotions concerning it), along with the domineering social structures framing his / her discursive actions and interactions with others.

As it was already mentioned earlier, the focus of this study is on the epistemic component of stance, because knowledge (or a lack of it) plays an exclusively prominent role in COVID-19 discourse. Moreover, knowledge concerning COVID-19 is *a priori* insufficient, due to novelty of the disease and, therefore, limited amount of checked and scientifically proven data that would be a reliable source of information about it. Such insufficiency creates epistemic spaces with numerous epistemic possibilities of possible (sometimes unreal) worlds, for instance attempts to explain the essence of COVID-19 by various conspiracy theories or mysterious intentions of secret elites. Besides, everything that has been discussed in this thematic realm is associated with lots of uncertainty and necessity of decision-making: be it the decision to wear a mask or the decision to be vaccinated. And as it happens, uncertainty usually motivates engaged and opinionated discussions where epistemic stances are formed, expressed, and negotiated.

3. Linguistic expression of epistemic stance

Whether during face-to-face encounter or in online conversations, discourse subjects represent their knowledge of the situation in which they find themselves, while constructing their epistemic status in discursive interaction. Consequently, they inform their interlocutors of: a) the ways information had been obtained; b) their certainty in the truthfulness of the utterance, and c) their commitment to the validity of the proposition. Besides, they evaluate epistemic status(-es) of their interlocutor(s) and formulate their utterances accordingly.

Thus, while stance in general embraces such categories as emotions and feelings (affective stance), as well as attitudes and evaluations (attitudional stance), its epistemic part relates to the speaker's knowledge and his / her commitment to the propositional content of the utterance (Hyland 1999, p. 101). The researchers' attention to the ways knowledge or a lack of it is expressed by means of language is as old as linguistics itself, but particular interest to epistemic stance (Biber & Finegan 1989; Biber 2004) was ignited by the attempts to grasp the interrelation between the speakers' pragmatic attitude (i.e. their own motivations in the process of knowledge processing and the evaluation of their interlocutors' knowledge and motivations) with propositional attitude (i.e. internal structure of information conceptualization and verbalizing by means of language).

Epistemic component of stance is marked in discourse by means of linguistic tools that indicate the speaker's commitment to the truthfulness of the offered proposition, the source of information, and the level of his / her certainty in the validity of his / her own judgement (Chafe 1986, p. 264). Therefore, epistemic stance comprises information about the source from which the knowledge was obtained (evidentiality) and the stance-taker's subjective reflections based upon the parameters of current situational context (modality).

3.1. Modality

The concept of modality (from Latin *modus* – mode, measure) has been studied within the framework of formal logic (Kripke 1963; Garson 2021; Magnus 2012), philosophy (Markus 1993; Wright 1989), and linguistics (Alexander 1988; Fintel 2002; Lyons 1977; Palmer 1979, 1986). Modality reflects subjective aspects of human thinking. While

cognizing the world around them, people make their own judgments about it and express their personal attitudes towards it, which is later objectivized in language as a category of modality. The relationship between modality and stance is determined by their correlation with the ways the speaker presents himself and his attitude to the referential situation in communicative interaction. As M. A. K. Halliday (1994, p. 88) stated, modality is the intermediate point between the positive or the negative poles. He further mentioned that it refers to the area of meaning that lies between 'yes' and 'no' – the intermediate ground between positive and negative attitude (ibid., p.356). Similarly, linguistic expression of modality marks positive and negative stances built in discursive interaction.

Usually, modal expressions are considered to have two types of meaning: epistemic and deontic. Epistemic is "concerned with matters of knowledge or beliefs on which basis speakers express their judgements about state of affairs, events or actions" (Hoye 1997, p. 42), while deontic refers to the "necessity of acts in terms of which the speaker gives permission or lays and obligation for the performance of actions at some time in the future" (Hoye 1997, p. 43). In this chapter, I will mainly focus on epistemic modality as a part of epistemic positioning in discourse.

Epistemic modality relates to propositional attitude of the speakers and, thus, serves a basis for their stances. It appertains their commitment to the truthfulness of the expressed propositions (Kärkkäinen 2003, p. 150). Reflecting the degree of completeness of the speaker's knowledge of the event, epistemic modality is associated with the assessment by the speaker of his capabilities and the identification of the degree of confidence in his own assumptions (Thornborrow 2005, p. 18).

Being a key feature of epistemic modality, subjectivity underlies the design of stancetaking in discourse. It is associated with the very

definition of epistemic modality as the expression of the speaker's attitude to his / her own utterance (Palmer 1979, p. 3). Subjectivity is the background for stances that a discourse subject occupies in relation to (a) his / her knowledge of the discussed matter, (b) the reliability of the information offered by him, and (c) his certainty / uncertainty in the truthfulness of the proposition. Such positions are treated as epistemic stances. They usually reflect the subjective inferencing of the speaker rather than an objective reality. E.g. *'I mean, I don't think the lions had much to chat about with the lambs'* (Segal 1988, p. 41).

In the above sentence, the speaker does not affirm the fact that the lions did not have "*much to chat about with the lambs*", but he metaphorically expresses his disbelief in the communicative ability of people of different psycho-types and with different social statuses to find their common ground in conversation. Subjective attitude of the speaker is marked by the personal pronoun *I* and the verb *mean*, which is later intensified by the stance phrase *"I think"*, used in a negative grammatical form.

In any utterance, there is always a subjective variable, even if the proposition contains an objective information, independent from the communicative situation or from the participants of this situation. Such variables concern the evaluation of the information validity by the speaker, his / her beliefs, attitudes and intentions, and, thus, they serve the basis for epistemic stance-taking. It is an evaluation of a possibility that a certain hypothetical state of affairs is untrue or probably true (as well as true or definitely true). In the above-mentioned example, the speaker uses double stance markers (*I mean* and *I don't think*), which can be interpreted as his uncertainty in the truthfulness of the expressed proposition, and is seen as a modality of unsure knowledge, which is characteristic for constructing

epistemic stance of uncertainty.

Hence, any verbalized statement is not only a speech materialisation of speakers' mental representations but also his / her actualization of discursive, and, consequently, social activity. An inseparable part of such activities consists in subjects' construing their discursive positions concerning their certainty or uncertainty in the validity of the utterance contents, or epistemic stances, which are expressed through epistemic modality. English, as it were, has a quite ramified system of language means for expressing epistemic modality that can be ranged in the scale from "*I know*" via "*I suppose*" to "*I don't know*". Modal expressions include lexical (e.g. modal words, evaluative adgectives, interjections), syntactic (specific syntactic structures, e.g. cleft sentences or ellipsis), pragmatic (e.g. different discourse markers), and phonetic (intonation, volume, prosody etc.) means. Modal expressions create a range of modal meanings – certain modal metatext, by means of which the stances of discursive subject (speaker or writer) are explicated. Fairly often, linguistically objectivized modality enables the listeners' perception of the speaking subject's mental representations. Modality as a part of the stance-taking activities is characterized by linguistic variability and depends on social and psychological factors. Here are some of the English means for expressing epistemic stance: modal verbs (e. g. *must / can / may / should / might / may / could / would*); semi-modal verbs (Bybee 1995) (e.g. *have (to) /ought (to) /need (to)*); suppletive substitutes of modal verbs (e.g. *be (to) / be able(to) / used (to) / be going (to)*); adverbial discourse stance markers (e. g. *perhaps / maybe / probably / certainly / actually / likely / possibly/ seemingly*); nouns (e. g. *possibility / necessity / certainty / probability*); adjectives (e. g. *necessary / possible / certain / probable / important*); verbal predicates of propositional relation (e. g. *I think / believe*

/ *mean / know / suggest / want / wish / like*); non-verbal inserted phrases, explicating the speaker's attitude to the validity of the verbalized proposition (e.g. *In my view / It's my personal view / it's my opinion / I'm inclined*) etc.

The semantics of modal and semimodal verbs is not limited to the expression of epistemic modality. However, in this work, I focused on the meanings relevant to my research: 'possibility' – 'impossibility', 'possibility' – 'coercion', 'possibility' – 'logical necessity'. By linguistic means of expressing the epistemic modality, speakers index their epistemic stances, as well as mark the amount of their knowledge about the stance objects. They range from confidence and certainty to doubt and uncertainty, which can be depicted on the geometric axis on which we place these positions:

Uncertainty stances | Certainty stances

modality of | modality of

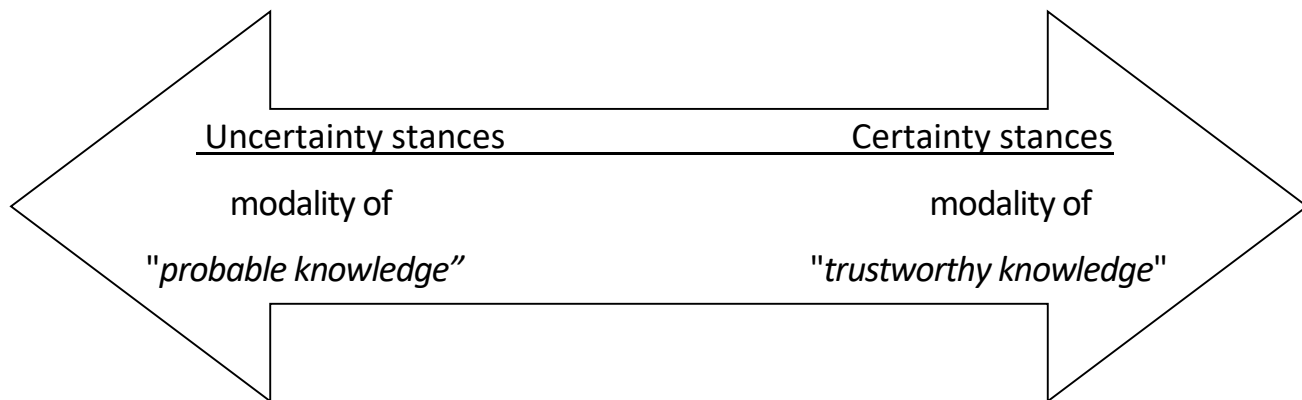"*probable knowledge*" | "*trustworthy knowledge*"

Fig. 1. Modality on the axe of epistemic stancetaking

Therefore, epistemic modality expresses the relation of the content of the statement to reality, established by the speaker in terms of its reliability. Because of this, along with the term "epistemic modality", the term "modality of truthfullness" (Peacocke 1978) is also used, which indicates the evaluative nature of this category, and reflects the semantic basis of the assessment – the degree of awareness and the nature of the subject's knowledge about reality. The modality of truthfullness is in a

complex relationship with the structurally semantic basis of the sentence. From a logical point of view, the semantics of truthfulness / authenticity turns out to be a "modal framework", within which a proposition is evaluated in a modus, related to the speaker's knowledge (Wierzbicka 1972).

The speaker's assessment of the degree of truthfullness is included in the modal part of the statement and expresses attitude of the speaker to reality in terms of reliability / unreliability, confidence / doubt, certainty / uncertainty, as well as associates modality with evidentiality that together make up the epistemic stance of the subject. In other words, speech behavior of the discourse subjects during their stancetaking activities is determined by their knowledge about the situation and their assuredness in the validity of this knowledge (modality), as well as by the source of this knowledge (evidentiality).

3.2 Evidentiality

Many world languages have specific linguistic tools for indication an information source, or *evidentiality*. In some languages, evidentiality is grammaticalized via particular grammatical elements (affixes, clitics, or particles), in other languages (including English) evidentiality is expressed through various lexical means that usually are optional. In linguistics, evidentiality has been recognized since Boas (1938), but only recently it has come to attention of a larger number of linguists (Narrog 2004). The best known monograph on linguistics of evidentiality was written by Alexandra Aikhenvald, who defines this concept as "a grammatical category that has source of information as its primary meaning" (Aikhenvald 2006, p. 320). Following Aikhenvald, we will treat evidentiality as a set of grammatical or lexical means that serve to index the

source of information the speaker / writer mentions in their utterances.

Researchers studying evidentiality (Aikhenvald 2006, 2015; Bybee 1995; Chafe 1986; Chung 1985; Willet 1988), categorize it in different ways, but almost all of them agree that evidential meanings can be classified based on the ways speakers accessed information – directly or indirectly. Direct evidentiality presupposes that the speaker bases his statements on his own experience. Either he / she has seen the situation with his / her own eyes (visual evidence), has heard what happened (auditory evidence), or attested to the events in any other way (e.g. somatic bodily reactions). In the fragment of the Facebook post by Garik Korogodski, the author describes his being sick with COVID-19 as a ground for his stance on vaccination boosters (the original text is in Russian, translation is mine):

"Второй ковид намного легче первого. Но – внимание – это не простуда, хуже. Перенес легко, посмотрим, как пойдет восстановление. Неделю отсидел в изоляции. Две вакцины, третью не успел." [Second COVID is much easier than the first one. But – attention – this is not a flu, it's much worse. I endured it easily. Let's see how recovery will go. I was in isolation for a week. Two vaccines, the third was not got yet.]

As we may see, the author bases his judgments on his own experience: he himself was sick with COVID twice and compares the severity of his encounters with the disease (*Second COVID is much easier than the first one*), as well as he evaluates the severity of the illness with the reference to a regular flu (*But – attention – this is not a flu, it's much worse)*, and, finally, comes to a conclusion that he "*endured it easily*" due to two vaccines he received earlier.

Indirect evidentiality or indirect evidence means that the speaker was

not an immediate participant of a situation but obtained his information about it in a different way – by reported evidence or hearsay. This means that his / her judgments are based on somebody else's evidence or on inferences (based on background knowledge, available proofs or intuition).

In the following example we can find the reference to information which is commonly available in the media. Garik Korogodski offers a reported evidence about successful results of vaccination experience in Great Britain:

> *"Пример Англии, которая достигла уровня вакцинации 85% с двумя дозами и 66 с тремя и сняла все ограничения, включая маски, перед глазами"* ["In front of your eyes there is an example of England that could lift all the restrictions because it reached 85% of vaccination by two doses, and 66% by three doses."]

Further he explicitly criticizes evidential "hearsay": "*Да, и рассказы, что от вакцины на лбу может вырасти нечто. к сожалению, так и остались рассказами*" [*So, the stories about the possibility of the vaccines to grow horns on one's forehead, unfortunately, remain just the stories*].

Thus, in the given fragment the blogger uses all known types of evidentiality – starting from his perceptual experience (direct evidentiality) through the reported evidence up to hearsay (indirect evidentiality) or no evidence at all.

4. Sequential dynamics of epistemic stancetaking and creating common epistemic spaces in online interaction

The stancetaking process requires from the stance-takers cognitive

conceptualization of the situation in which they find themselves. Such conceptualization includes not only framing of the situation by its subjects and further construing its prototypical script or scenario, but also imagining their possible actions in the situational conditions, "trying on" different alternative results of these actions. It's obvious that such 'trying on" greatly depends upon the level of knowledge stance-takers possess about the situation in general and about the object of their stancetaking in particular. They cognitively build possible futures that serve as a foundation for their stances. In communicative situations where vaccination against COVID-19 is the object of stancetaking, the discussion has a prognostic character where epistemic stances constitute the problematic nature of proclaimed judgments. In other words, stances are verbalized in statements, based on assumptions rather than on reliable knowledge. Hypothetical and epistemically unjustified character of judgments is actualized through uncertain modality and indirect evidentiality. It is determined not by epistemic but by ontic possibility of some events' future realization (Heidegger's "ontic possibility").

Therefore, an individual's ability to imagine the consequences of different ways events might develop in the future, underlies his / her stances taken in certain situational conditions. Depending on what they know about the situation they are in, on the level of their confidence in their knowledge and on the reliability of the information available to them, the participants construct possible scenarios of their behavior in this situation, contemplating their possible actions and their consequences, which eventually cannot be fully foreseeable or clear. According to John Heritage, the "states of knowledge can range from circumstances in which speaker A may have absolute knowledge of some item, while speaker B has none, to those in which both speakers may have exactly equal information, as well

as every point in between" (Heritage 2012, p. 4). Consequently, the level of knowledge can be assessed via "the informative sequences" or manifested stances. These are the sequences in which the interlocutors show different degrees of knowledge concerning some item and drive their talk in order to rebalance the initial epistemic imbalance (ibid). Usually, their knowledge determines their epistemic stances and/or their attitudes.

Let me illustrate the dynamics of epistemic stancetaking on the example of reaction to the Facebook post by Karl Volokh concerning "omicron" and COVID-19 vaccines. The given fragment is a chain of comments made by six different people, marked as Subject$_{1,2…n}$. All comments were made either in Ukrainian or in Russian. The English translation is mine:

- Subject 1: <u>The bad thing about this omicron is</u> that it spreads very, very quickly. You can "pick it up" with lightning speed, even if someone sneezed on the other side of the road. <u>According to my personal experience</u>, people do not do tests, do not go to the doctors, if the course of the disease is within the limits of "can be sustained". <u>My son brought omicron from a trip after the New Year</u>. His wife's test showed nothing, but their symptoms were the same. by frivolity, all the relatives around him, of course, fell ill. none of us went to the doctors. based on our family statistics, the incidence rate can be safely multiplied by 5. <u>And we are all vaccinated with 2 doses</u> [*паршиве в цьому омікроні те що він дуже-дуже швидко поширюється. "підхопити" його можна блискавично, навіть якщо хтось чихнув з іншої сторони дороги. По особистому досвіду - люди не роблять тестів, не йдуть до лікарів, якщо перебіг хвороби в межах "можна витримати". Мій син привіз омікрон з мандрівки після Нового року. у дружини його тест нічого не показав, але симптоми у них були однакові. по легковажності всі родичі кругом нього звісно захворіли. ніхто з нас до лікарів не ходив. виходячи з нашої сімейної статистики показник захворюваності можна сміливо множити на 5. І ми всі вакциновані 2-ма дозам*]
- Subject 2: If you continue to call a spade a spade, then vaccination is not needed for those who are already sick, but is needed for the risk group. [*Якщо продовжити називати речі своїми іменами, то вакцинація не потрібна тим, хто вже хворів, але потрібна для групи ризику.*]
- Subject 1: (addresses Subject 2 by name): I've been fully vaccinated, and I've been sick FOUR times but mildly! It's complete nonsense that those who had

been sick don't need to be vaccinated!! That is a suicidal position [*Я вакцинована повністю, перехворіла ЧОТИРИ рази, в легкій формі! Повна ДУРНЯ, що перехворівшим не потрібна вакцинація!! то є позиція самовбивці*].

- **Subject 3 (addresses Subject 1 by name):** Just another proof that this vaccine is like a Band-aid. [*Лишнее доказательство того, что эта вакцинация - как мёртвому припарка*].
- **Subject 1 (addresses Subject 3 by name):** Then don't use it! And you'll be a handsome band-less dead. [*Не припарюйтесь, будете красивим мертвим*]
- **Subject 4:** Similarly – three times. [*аналогічно – тричі*].
- **Subject 5**: They kind of predict an omicron peak at the end of February in our country, at least that's what Mr. Liashko said. [*Наче прогнозують у нас пік "омікрона" у кінці лютого, принаймні так сказав пан Ляшко*].
- **Subject 6.** Vaccination is not a panacea, it is only a training for the body, it teaches you to fight. This is what I say to all anti-vaxxers. [*Вакцинація не панацея, вона є лише тренінгом для організму, вона вчить боротися. Таке я кажу всім антиваксам*].

Reading the above excerpt, taken from the thread of commentaries reacting to Karl Volokh's post on Facebook published in early February 2022, it is easy to recognize COVID-19 as the situational context for the given act of stancetaking. The stance object is explicitly outlined in the very first line. It's 'omicron' – the then-new variety of COVID-19 virus, as well as vaccination against it. Following the "stance triangle" methodology by John Du Bois (Du Bois 2007, p. 163), we can identify three main vectors in the stancetaking activities: evaluation, stance choice and stance alignment. The act of evaluation is inseparably connected to epistemic stance, and thus, is often expressed through the linguistic means of modality and evidentiality. For instance, Subject₁ uses explicitly evaluative statement *the bad thing* in their comment "*The bad thing about this omicron is that it spreads very, very quickly*". She intensifies her stance by hyperbolizing the virus's ability to spread through the use of a) consecutively repeated lexeme *very*, b) metaphoric epithet *lightning* ("*with lightning speed*"), and c) unreal conditional "*if someone sneezed on the other side of the road*", emphasized by *even*. To justify the validity of their own judgement, the commenter

refers to direct evidentiality in their next statement *"According to my personal experience"*. Pursuing the same pragmatic aim, she later resorts to reported evidentiality and describes the experience of her son and her daughter-in-law in the next sentences. And, finally, she mentions that all the members of her family including herself were vaccinated twice: "*And we are all vaccinated with 2 doses*". There is a possibility of two different interpretations of this statement: 1) vaccination is important because it helps to tolerate the disease in a mild form; 2) vaccination is not important as it does not protect from infection. And further we can see this discrepancy of meaning-making in the process of sequential online stance alignment and stance adjustment.

In the above thread, alignment is realized through mentioning the names of Subject-addressee, as well as through using reference to previously formulated stances or mentioned judgments. For example, Subject$_2$ refers to the part of previous comment where Subject$_1$ mentioned her vaccination. And his comment is based on the interpretation where vaccination is not helpful in protecting against omicron: *"If you continue to call a spade a spade, then vaccination is not needed for those who are already sick, but is needed for the risk group"*. However, in the following reply where Subject$_1$ explicitly addresses Subject$_2$, we find a contradictory statement by which she disagrees with her interlocutor. She not only offers an explanation to her otherwise unclear and therefore misinterpreted stance towards vaccination (*I've been fully vaccinated, and I've been sick FOUR times but mildly!*), but she also negatively evaluates Subject$_2$'s statement, calling it a "nonsense" (*It's complete nonsense that those who had been sick don't need to be vaccinated!!*) and explicitly labels his stance as dangerous for himself (*That is a suicidal position*).

The discussion is developed in the next comment where Subject$_3$ joins the conversation addressing Subject$_1$ but supporting the stance of Subject$_2$. They proclaim futility of vaccination in a categorical statement with deployment of the rhetorical device of simile: *Just another proof that this vaccine is like a Band-aid*. The beginning of this sentence "*Just another proof*" implies that there supposedly exist more facts proving the ineffectiveness of the vaccine. Besides, the commenter explicitly expresses his view of vaccination as ineffective comparing it to '*a Band-aid*'. So, the given utterance allows to decode the speaker's stance towards vaccination as negative – anti-vaccine.

However, it's interesting to trace how stance alignment is dynamically unfolding in the direction of pro-vaccination attitude. Subject$_1$ immediately reacts to a new comment by an imperative construction (*Then don't use it!*) and offers a doom prognosis for her vis-a-vis' reckless actions (*And you'll be a handsome band-less dead*). In the following comment, the object of stancetaking is not clear – it may be either a vaccination or a disease itself. Subject$_4$ only mentions the quantity of "something unspecified", without direct naming what they mean ("*Similarly – three times*"). Further, Subject$_5$ resorts to an authoritative evidentialty, starting with nameless "*They*" and finishing with mentioning the name of Ukrainian Minister of Health (*They kind of predict an omicron peak at the end of February in our country, at least that's what Mr. Liashko said*). It is worth noting that collocation "*kind of*" expresses modality "I suppose" or epistemic stance of UNCERTAINTY, which is characteristic for the given context. Finally, Subject$_6$ winds up this discussion by giving an unbiased evaluation of vaccine efficiency (*Vaccination is not a panacea, it is only a training for the body, it teaches you to fight*) and outlining their own stance as different from "anti-vaxxers" (*This is what I say to all anti-vaxxers*).

As the stancetaking activity associated with the stance-choosing and stance-alignment is characterized by interactivity and intersubjectivity, its implementation depends on multiple cognitive representations and pragmatic expectations of all the communication participants. Fairly often stances do not coincide as they are based on different or even opposite epistemic and emotional assessments of the stance object. Aligning their stances, participants of online interaction create common discursive interactional environment, where its epistemic part is decisively important.

5. Conclusions.

The study illustrates how common epistemic space is created in online interaction through discursive activity of stancetaking. Different stances are constructed, adjusted and re-constructed in interaction that takes place in the discursive environment of an Internet blog. On the one hand, followers of a certain blogger construct common epistemic space, having similar views and values, exchanging knowledge concerning certain problems, supporting or disagreeing with each other's stances. On the other hand, their stances reflect their identities, their belonging to certain social groups, having certain worldviews, and following certain ideologies. In the above-described case, the collective stance of the discussion group towards COVID-19 as the object of stancetaking, underlying their discussion, can be formulated as follows: "COVID-19 is a dangerous disease; 'omicron' is a specific variety of COVID-19 virus and it is very infectious; vaccination does not solve all the COVID-19 problems but plays an important role in fighting this disease". Speaking of its epistemic component, it is rather a stance of CAUTIOUS CERTAINTY, expressed through modality I SUPPOSE and direct (experiential) and indirect (reported and authoritative) evidentiality.

If we place evidentiality and modality onto the axis of epistemic

spaces (Fig. 2), built in discursive interaction, then direct (experiential) evidentiality which is based on the stance subject's personal perceptual and cognitive experience, will be located closer to the "I KNOW" modality and therefore, can be treated as the representation of epistemic stance of CERTAINTY. At the same time, indirect (reported or hearsay) evidentiality must be placed closer to "I DON'T KNOW" modality, which is characteristic for building epistemic stances of UNCERTAINTY.

Uncertainty stance
indirect evidentiality
modality "*I don't know*"   modality "*I suppose*"   Certainty stance
direct evidentiality
modality "*I know*"
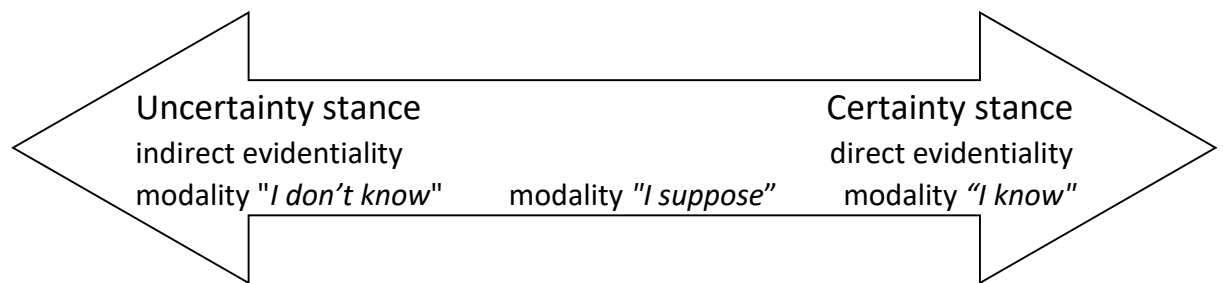
Fig. 2. Axe of epistemic stancetaking (modality+evidentiality)

Thus, building common epistemic spaces online is based on the ability of the stance subjects to cognitively structure the virtual world around them, similar to the possibility of their sensory orientation in real (physical) time and space. Accordingly, their epistemic statuses are co-constructed and co-determined in discursive interaction of all discursive activity participants. By building their own status in discourse, people simultaneously build statuses of those with whom they communicate, marking them through their stancetaking. Therefore, on the one hand, the design of epistemic spaces built in discursive interaction depends on the knowledge possessed by all of its participants. On the other hand, epistemic spaces influence their epistemic statuses, molding and changing them. So, building common epistemic spaces in online discourse interaction is sociosemiotic process of constructing meanings that reflect the surrounding social reality.

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