William: Hello, and welcome to How to… Your handy guide to handy English

My name’s William Kremer…. and you’re studying English… aren’t you?

Do I sound a little uncertain? – do I sound like I’m not sure if you’re studying English? Well, in today’s programme we’ll be looking at ways for you to show that you’re not sure of something. But it’s more complicated than showing certainty or uncertainty - there are different levels of certainty. English speakers demonstrate how sure they are of something by using words and phrases – and also by using different intonation, by saying things differently.

You may have noticed that on the How To webpage on BBC Learning English dot com, there is a large picture of a beautiful pair of eyes. But whose eyes are they? Well, that’s the question I asked my colleagues Catherine and Elena earlier on…

Catherine: She looks like a film star.
Elena: I don’t recognise her at all.
Catherine: She looks really glamorous though, she’s got kind of almond eyes and… quite a lot of nice make up…. But who is it? Who can it be? Does she look like an actress? It’s not Shilpa Shetty is it?
Elena: No… no, Shilpa Shetty’s got slightly darker, more sultry looks, I don’t think it could be…
Catherine: Yeah, that’s true…
Elena: …Shilpa.
Catherine: She looks like she might be Asian or poss –
Elena:  … she looks possibly South American.
Catherine:  Yeah, she could be. I don’t know.
Will:  Well, the rule is that you have to make a guess…
Catherine:  OK, my guess is …erm… I think it’s … Hips don’t lie – what’s her name?
Elena:  Shakira?
Catherine:  Yeah, I think it might be Shakira.
Elena:  Yeah… or, I think I might go with Salma Hayek.

William:  Well, Catherine and Elena don’t seem very sure about who owns that beautiful pair of eyes. Maybe you’ve got a clearer idea!

But let’s now take a look at some of the language they used in that clip.

William:  Catherine used a very useful device called a question tag. You can make a question tag by putting a positive question on the end of a negative statement.

Catherine:  It’s not Shilpa Shetty, is it?

William:  We can use this structure with this intonation to express uncertainty and also sometimes surprise. But now listen to the same sentence but with a different intonation.

Anna:  It’s not Shilpa Shetty, is it?

William:  This speaker’s voice goes down at the end of her question. She’s more certain of the answer than Catherine. She sounds like she’s stating a fact or maybe checking something with the person she’s talking to. Now listen to both intonation patterns again:

Anna:  It’s not Shilpa Shetty, is it?
William: Elena says ‘no’ – this is how English speakers agree with negative questions – so she’s saying it isn’t Shilpa Shetty.

We can also make question tags by putting a negative question on the end of a positive sentence.

William: This sentence has more certainty, but we can tell from the speaker’s intonation that he’s still unsure whether it’s true or not.

William: Right, enough about Shilpa Shetty – it’s not her anyway! We’ve talked about questions tags and intonation – but what other ways can English speakers express uncertainty?

Catherine: She looks like she might be Asian or poss –
Elena: … she looks possibly South American.
Catherine: Yeah, she could be.

We can use modals like ‘might’ ‘could’ and ‘may’ to show different levels of certainty, with ‘might’ being the least certain.

Matt: She might be a film star…
Vicky: She could be a film star…
William: We often use the words ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’ without a modal to express uncertainty.

Matt: Maybe she’s a film star.
Vicky: Perhaps she’s a film star.

William: If you have more certainty, you can say ‘I think’ before the modal:

Catherine: I think it might be Shakira.
Elena: Yeah… or, I think I might go with Salma Hayek.

William: But again, intonation is very important – this next speaker sounds much less sure of what she’s saying:

Matt: I think it might be Shakira.

William: Well, I can now reveal that those beautiful eyes belong neither to Shakira nor Salma Hayek. So whose are they? Well, let me just say that Elena and Catherine are right to think that they are looking at a Latin lady…

But the correct answer is at the very bottom of the How To webpage on BBC Learning English dot com. Goodbye!