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Epistemic and evidential markers in the rhetorical context of concession

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence and degree of stabilisation of the contextual values developed by epistemic and evidential markers in the polyphonic sequence of concession. By investigating a Romanian oral and written corpus, we analyse the concessive and/or reportative values firstly of two epistemic adverbs used to express the high/low degree of the speaker's formal commitment (*desigur* 'of course', and *poate* 'maybe'), and subsequently of the epistemic (evidential) future (the Romanian 'presumptive mood'). The latter expresses an intermediate (and variable) degree of commitment, and is a typically inferential evidential that switches to the status of a reportative evidential. The conclusion is that the concessive context (marked by contrast connectors) is a discourse factor which systematically implies an ambiguous commitment, giving rise to a reportative interpretation of epistemic and inferential markers.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon which we intend to examine concerns the systematic change in value of epistemic and evidential markers within the typically polyphonic context of rhetorical concession: a change which may be interpreted as a 'weakening' of the dominant meaning of these markers, as well as a change in commitment. Our aim is to verify the effects of the concessive context on some prototypical epistemic and evidential markers in Romanian, both lexical and grammatical: an adverb of certainty (*desigur* 'of course'), an adverb of possibility/uncertainty (*poate* 'maybe'), and the quasi-grammaticalized "epistemic" (inferential) future. Within a concessive context (i.e. in a contrastive structure, where they are in a sentence followed by an adversative marker), there is a change to the prototypical values of these markers, which may be described as acquiring the value of concession markers and/or of evidential reportative markers. The cases under scrutiny illustrate patterns which, although similar, have not been systematically compared.

The interaction between the concessive context and epistemic or evidential markers has been observed on various occasions in relation to adverbs of modal certainty: it has been described for the particular cases of the English *certainly*, *no doubt* (Simon-Vandenberg and Aijmer, 2007: 95, 126, and ff.), for the French *certes* (Rodríguez Somolinos, 1992; Rodríguez Somolinos, 1995; Adam, 1997; Ducrot, 1984; Burston, 2006; Garnier and Sitri, 2009), and for the Italian *certainmente*, *sicuramente* (Pietrandrea, 2008). The effect of the concessive context on adverbs of modal possibility has also been studied – for instance for the Fr. *peut-être* (Nølke, 2013) and It. *forse* (Miecznikowski et al., 2013). Other observations have been made about the Romance "concessive future" (Berretta, 1997; Rocci, 2000; Squartini, 2001, 2004, 2005; Barcelo, 2007); it appears as a variant of the "epistemic future" in the same type of concessive contexts (Rocci, 2000; Squartini, 2012). We ask if there is a common principle underlying all these situations, as well as a common direction of change; if this apparently extensive phenomenon allows for theoretical generalizations, with corresponding consequences for the description of epistemic and evidential markers.

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By *rhetorical concession* (Bertocchi and Maraldi, 2011: 173; also *prolepsis* or *procatalepsis*, cf. Beeching, 2009) we will understand in what follows the typical sequence of an argument (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; Mann and Thompson, 1988; Taboada and Mann, 2006; Van Eemeren et al., 2007; Rossari, 2014) where the point of view of the opponent is expressed in a limited and provisional way, and is obligatorily followed by a sequence surpassing the concession and advancing the opinion favoured by the speaker. Typically, concession is a rhetorical device (which may involve several textual units), achieved through adversative *but*-constructions (the ‘denial of expectation’ type, cf. Lakoff, 1971; Anscombe and Ducrot, 1977; Rudolph, 1996; Barth, 2000) where only the second segment is marked; this triggers the reinterpretation of the first segment. A subtype of the adversative contrast (‘A, but B’) is semantically equivalent to the concessive subordination (‘although A, B’); but the adversative construction allows a rhetorical scenario (assertion followed by reinterpretation), while the grammatical concessive construction announces from the first moment the irrelevance of the concessive sentence.

Rhetorical concession represents a typical case of interactive (Coupler-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2000), intersubjective (Traugott, 2010; Nuyts, 2001; Cornillie, 2010)¹ and polyphonic structure (Ducrot, 1984; Iten, 2005). Polyphony and intersubjectivity do not overlap: the first is the discursive result of evoking more voices and perspectives; the latter is oriented towards the interlocutors, anticipating and determining their reactions.

As “markers of argumentative moves” or “argumentative indicators” (Van Eemeren et al., 2007; Cornillie and Pietrandrea, 2012), which function interactionally, the adverbs and the verbal forms signal the concession, anticipating, as correlatives do, a second move (the *but*-assertion). When the concession is based on an explicit mention of a previously cited opinion, their function is very close to that of reportative evidentials (a description attested in Berretta, 1997; Squartini, 2012: 2123). However, it would be difficult to interpret the indicators as autonomous reportative markers, because they do not seem to have this value outside the concessive context.

Through a corpus investigation, we will observe the extent of the concessive use of these markers in Romanian and we will attempt to identify whether they reach² a degree of grammaticalization/pragmaticalization which might cause them to function as autonomous triggers of concessive or reportative values, or if these values remain dependent on the context (Saussure, 2012). At the same time, we intend to see if there is a common direction (similar for epistemic and evidential markers) of semantic change and to interpret its relationship with the speaker's commitment. Our investigation is exclusively synchronic; for evidence of a grammaticalization process, further diachronic research would be necessary.

After presenting our corpus (2), we will introduce a preliminary discussion of the relationship between epistemic modality, evidentiality and commitment (3), in order to establish the nature of the markers to be analysed. In the subsequent chapters, we present statistical data which indicate the frequency of the concessive value of each marker (*desigur* and *poate*, 4; the inferential future, 5) and of their epistemic or evidential values. Section 6 presents our conclusions.

2. Data and methodology

The concessive uses of the two selected epistemic adverbs and of the evidential verbal form are examined on the basis of an oral and written corpus of contemporary Romanian.

The corpus, containing examples of the current language, consists of approx. 1,600,000 words and has been built especially for this research, using the electronic versions of several volumes issued during the last three decades (see *Corpus*, p. 14). It is organised into two, roughly equal, parts: (a) an oral corpus (c. 673,088 words), (b) a written corpus (c. 732,903 words). The oral corpus includes transcriptions of spontaneous conversations and public discourses recorded and published between 2001 and 2013 (CLRV, CORV, ROVA, IMLRA, SCI, VV) and verbatim reports of the debates in the Chamber of Deputies, published on the Romanian Parliament's website over the course of one month (March 2014: PC). The data pertain mainly to the standard register, and only to some extent to the colloquial one. The written corpus contains the texts of 8 books, published between 1988 and 2008 (LU; MM; BIM; CI; PN; JT; PO; CN). They have been chosen in order to display a standard, non-specialised register and an argumentative structure.

The corpus has been automatically processed in a first phase, but only the individual interpretation of each token in its context enabled the identification of their semantic and pragmatic values.

Our intention has been to select prototypical markers, likely to appear in both oral and written texts. The choice was easy for *poate* ‘maybe’, the most frequent possibility adverb in all registers, and for the epistemic future, with its various

¹ Squartini (2012) evokes two meanings of *intersubjectivity*: one which is used in the functional grammaticalization model (Traugott, 2010) and the other which appears in some descriptions of epistemic modality (Nuyts, 2001; Cornillie, 2010) and notes that “concessivity would be considered intersubjective in both accounts” (2012: 2023).

² Rossari (2014: 238) notes that the concessive value of the adverbial is grammaticalized through its repeated occurrence in the same type of context, the inference from the context becoming part of its lexical meaning.

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