

# Subjectivity: Between discourse and conceptualization<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This brief 'conceptual' paper offers some reflections on the status of 'subjectivity' in language. Section 1 highlights the differences and correlations between a few of the major current concepts of subjectivity, notably the 'general' ones by Traugott (1989), Traugott and Dasher, 2002) and Langacker (1990, 1999, 2008), and the specific one(s) as postulated in the context of the analysis of modal expressions (Nuyts, 2001, 2012). Section 2 then zooms in on the 'functional' role in language use of the modality-related – or probably more accurately, attitude-related – dimension, focusing on its discursive status. Section 3, finally, returns to the issue of how the major notions of subjectivity discussed in Section 1 relate, and how this can only be understood with reference to both the conceptual and the discursive status of the phenomena at stake.

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## 1. Different notions of subjectivity

The notion of subjectivity is a hot topic in some branches of current linguistics. In general terms, the concept refers to 'speaker presence' in language and language use (cf. Benveniste, 1958). But the speaker is of course 'omnipresent' in linguistic behavior, hence may show up in it in numerous places and ways. And so it is not surprising that there are a few variants of the notion of subjectivity circulating in the current linguistic literature, all of them referring to systematic ways in which the speaking subject manifests itself in language.

Among the most cited ones are no doubt Traugott (1989), Traugott and Dasher, 2002), as implied in her notion of subjectification as a process of diachronic language change, and Langacker's (1990, 1999, 2008), as an element of his view of conceptual construal of 'the world' – both notions with 'general' applicability to linguistic expression (in principle all linguistic forms or utterances can be characterized in terms of them). But there are also notions with narrower applicability (but see Section 2), including a few which have emerged specifically within the domain of studies of modality, and have been applied to deontic modality (indicating the degree of moral acceptability of a state of affairs) and epistemic modality (marking the degree of likelihood of a state of affairs) – this covers especially the somewhat older but still very influential one by Lyons (1977), but also my own, proposed in reaction to Lyons' (Nuyts, 1992, 2001, 2012).

One often notes a tendency in the literature to consider these different notions (especially Traugott's and Langacker's, but sometimes also the modality-related ones), either as alternative formulations of essentially the same basic phenomenon between which one can simply switch back and forth when analyzing linguistic facts, or as competitors of which one must be correct and the other(s) wrong. But neither assumption is adequate: as argued by Nuyts (2012); along with several other authors before, including some of the proposers of the notions themselves, see e.g. Langacker, 1999, Traugott and Dasher, 2002, De Smet and Jean-Christophe, 2006, Traugott, 2010, López-Couso, 2010), these notions

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refer to very different linguistic phenomena, which have to be kept apart, and which all need to be part (in some form, even if not necessarily the current one – but that is another debate) of a comprehensive account of (the relevant dimensions of) language use.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Traugott's notion refers to an inherent 'semantic' property of linguistic forms (morphemes or morpheme clusters). Some have an inherently more objective meaning – they refer to 'things' in the world around us: objects, events, and their properties. Others are inherently more subjective – they refer, for instance, to speaker evaluations of things in the world.

Langacker's notion, however, refers to the question whether the speaker is 'formally' present in an utterance, in the sense of her/him being explicitly coded in it or not. The more explicit the speaker, the more subjectively construed is the event referred at. Thus, (1a) is an objective construal of the event since the speaker is completely backstage, but (1b) is a subjective construal of it since the speaker is fully onstage.

- (1) a. Mary is sitting at the table.
- b. I see Mary sitting at the table.

The notion as proposed in the context of the analysis of modality, finally, at least in my own definition of it, concerns a distinct semantic dimension which may (but need not) be coded on (among others, see Section 2) deontic or epistemic modal expressions, and which involves the signaling of who is responsible for the deontic or epistemic assessment. The assessment is subjective if the speaker assumes sole responsibility for it, it is intersubjective if the speaker indicates that s/he shares the assessment with others (i.e., if it is presented as common ground between a wider group of 'subjects/assessors').<sup>2</sup> This dimension can be coded on (among others, see Section 2) deontic and epistemic modal forms through their 'syntactic shape', and doing so requires a 'predicative' type of modal expression. In the range of epistemic expressions, for example, (2a) is subjective due to the speaker-related first person singular form of the main clause verb expressing the epistemic assessment, while (2b) is intersubjective due to the impersonal form of the predicatively used epistemic adjective. The distinction is not coded on, for instance, epistemic adverbs, as in (2c), because they do not allow direct signaling of speaker-relatedness vs. impersonality of the meaning expressed by it.

- (2) a. I think he's the murderer.
- b. It is probable that he's the murderer.
- c. He probably did it.

So this dimension is not necessarily present in linguistic expression (not even in modal expressions), unlike the phenomena covered by Traugott's and Langacker's notions which, as indicated, can essentially be applied to all linguistic forms or expressions.

From these characterizations it will be obvious that these notions all concern linguistic issues of a very different basic nature, and that they should therefore not be conflated in linguistic analysis. Still, they all three do bear on each other, in the sense that they tend to correlate in certain linguistic phenomena – which suggests that at a sufficiently elementary level they do have something in common. Thus, it is no accident that Traugott (1989) refers to epistemic modality as a typical case to illustrate an inherently subjective type of meaning (in her sense of 'subjective'). And it is, likewise, no accident that Langacker's (1990, 2008) notion is closely related to his concept of 'grounding', which also involves modality as a crucial component.

The question is: what is it that binds these different notions together? A closer look at the modality related one – as the most 'narrow', but also as the probably least obvious/explored among the three – leads the way to an answer.

## 2. (Inter)subjectivity, attitudinal categories, and interactive stance

Since the original formulation of the concept of (inter)subjectivity (as rendered in the previous section), it has become obvious that its range of applicability actually extends far beyond the semantic categories of deontic and epistemic modality, and that its coding possibilities are much wider than just the grammatical pattern of the 'affected' expression.

The coding of the dimension through grammatical means extends to a range of semantic categories which can all be considered types of speaker evaluations or assessments of states of affairs – what one can call 'attitudinal' categories

<sup>1</sup> This is true at least for most of these notions. Lyons' and my own notions, however, essentially refer to the same linguistic facts and arguably offer conflicting analyses of them, even if it is not clear cut whether this means that they are really mutually exclusive – see Nuyts (2014a) for elaborate discussion. I will not reflect on Lyons' notion any further below.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'objective' (as used in Traugott's and Langacker's notions, e.g.) is not very appropriate in this context, whence the use of 'intersubjective' to label the counter pole of the dimension.

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