

This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Subjectivity : between discourse and conceptualization

Reference:

Nuyts Jan.- Subjectivity : between discourse and conceptualization
Journal of pragmatics: an interdisciplinary quarterly of language studies - ISSN 0378-2166 - 86(2015), p. 106-110
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2015.05.015>

Subjectivity: Between discourse and conceptualization

Jan Nuyts
University of Antwerp

0. Introduction¹

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 & 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.

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's (1989, Traugott & 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

¹ This research was made possible by a LP-BOF grant from the University of Antwerp Research Council.

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 & Dasher 2002, De Smet & Verstraete 2006, Traugott 2010, López-Couso 2010), these notions 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.²

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.

² 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.

- (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').³ 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,

³ 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.

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 (Nuyts 2005) – and which can be expressed by predicative means (such as full verbs and predicative adjectives). Next to deontic and epistemic modality this covers at least inferential evidentiality (indicating the degree of reliability of an inference from facts to a hypothetical state of affairs – cf. subjective *I gather (that)* vs. intersubjective *it appears that* vs. neutral *apparently*),⁴ and what may be called 'boulomaic' attitude (indicating the degree of 'likability' of a state of affairs – cf. subjective *I am delighted (that)* vs. intersubjective *it is great that* vs. neutral *fortunately*).

But the linguistic means for expressing the dimension extend beyond the grammatical pattern of an attitudinal expression. Languages typically also feature independent expressive devices for marking subjectivity. For example, Dutch has a few full verbs which can be used for this purpose. Thus, *denken* 'think' is not only used for expressing a subjective epistemic evaluation of a state of affairs, as in (2a) above, but can also be used as a pure subjectivity marker, without involving any epistemic meaning, as in (3) (cf. Janssens & Nuyts 2014; no doubt the same is true for English *think*).

(3) Ik denk dat dat een uitstekend voorstel is.

⁴ It probably does not include hearsay and experiential evidentiality though, for reasons discussed in Nuyts (2014b).

'I think that is an excellent proposal.'

Denken in (3) does not mean 'I consider it likely that that is an excellent proposal', it means 'I personally consider that an excellent proposal'. And as such it marks the subjectivity of another aspect of the expression in which it appears – in this case: the assessment of the proposal as being excellent. Another Dutch verb which is clearly and very frequently used as a pure subjectivity marker without it involving any epistemic meaning, is *vinden* 'find', as in (4a) (*vinden* is never epistemic, in any of its uses). But also adverbial elements can figure as subjectivity markers, such as English *to me* as in (4b), or *in my view* as in (4c) – and it is not difficult to imagine many more (*if you ask me, as far as I'm concerned, etc.*).

- (4) a. Ik vind dat een uitstekend voorstel.
[literally] 'I find that an excellent proposal.'
b. Sounds like an excellent proposal to me.
c. In my view that's an excellent proposal.

Interestingly, there also appear to be limits as to when such autonomous pure subjectivity markers can be used. Usage in contexts such as in (5) are more or less out of the question.

- (5) a. *Ik vind dat hij nu in Parijs is.
[literally] 'I find that he is in Paris now.'
b. *To me this tree will be full of flowers again next spring.
c. *In my view he is eating his lunch quickly.

As soon as one inserts, for instance, a deontic expression in the clause, however – when that is possible, as in (5a) – the utterance is fine, as (6a) shows. Or when one adds a grading expression to the 'quality' marking in (5c), subjectivity marking is perfectly fine, as appears in (6b).

- (6) a. Ik vind dat hij nu naar Parijs zou moeten gaan.
[literally] 'I find that he should go to Paris now.'
b. In my view he is eating his lunch too quickly.

In general, the use of these independent markers appears to be more or less restricted to utterance contexts which contain an 'evaluative' meaning element – although the precise definition of what counts as 'evaluative' is not immediately obvious. Semantic dimensions such as situation of a state of affairs in time or space, as in (5a), or (non-epistemic) future projection of a state of affairs, as in

(5b), or simple marking of the 'quality' of a state of affairs, as in (5c), normally do not qualify as such. But it is not immediately obvious whether the category of 'evaluative meanings' corresponds to the category of attitudinal meanings also attracting grammatical marking of (inter)subjectivity mentioned above (including deontic modality, as in (6a)), or whether it is wider, as the issue of non-graded vs. graded quality marking in (5c)-(6b) illustrates. Incidentally, some authors – including Meier (2003), Fortuin (2008), and Schwarzschild (2008) – have associated grade markers such as *too* with the semantic domain of modality, which might bring them within the category of attitudinal markers. Whether that is maintainable, and more generally, what may count as an evaluative meaning, is in need of further investigation.

Whatever the outcome of this may be, that the coding of (inter)subjectivity should typically, if not more or less exclusively, occur in combination with (what for the sake of convenience I'll now just call) attitudinal meanings should not come as a surprise. Attitudinal meanings are inherently 'considerative' in nature. They all concern dimensions in which the status of a state of affairs is at stake, e.g. in terms of whether it exists or not, or is morally acceptable or not, or is 'agreeable' or not. And the fact that one of these is being brought up in an utterance by the speaker signals that s/he and/or his/her interlocutor is/are 'struggling' with it and possibly want(s) to submit it to deliberation in the conversation. But that will of course very often bring up the issue of whether the interlocutors agree or not on the assessment of the status of the state of affairs, and may result in argumentation to that effect. And that, in turn, may explain why these categories typically 'attract' (inter)subjectivity marking, and how this dimensions is actually used in conversation.

This is again an issue which deserves elaborate empirical investigation,⁵ but subjectivity markers will probably typically be used when the speaker does not want to imply the interlocutor or anyone else in his/her 'attitudinal evaluation', for example because s/he does not know about their view, or when the speaker's position is clearly in opposition to the view of the interlocutor and/or others. And one would typically expect the marking of intersubjectivity if the speaker assumes

⁵ There is of course quite some research on the discursive status of what is often called, in broad terms, 'epistemics' (in Conversation Analysis) or 'stance' (e.g. Biber & Finegan 1989, Ochs 1996, Scheibman 2002, Kärkkäinen 2003, Heritage 2012a, b). A problem in relation to the present issue is that this literature usually does not differentiate between meaning types such as epistemic modality and subjectivity, within the very broad category of 'stance' or 'epistemics'.

and wants to signal that s/he and the interlocutor are in mutual agreement, or if the speaker disagrees with the interlocutor but wants to signal to him/her that others do share his/her (the speaker's) view. This dimension is thus no doubt an important discursive tool in the negotiation of the interlocutors' mutual positions regarding states of affairs in the world in (especially argumentative) conversational interaction.

If the mutual position of the interlocutors and others in matters of attitude towards a state of affairs is not at stake in a conversation, however, there is obviously no need to code (inter)subjectivity, and so it is only natural to find that there are attitudinal expressions which are 'grammatically' inherently neutral in terms of the dimension (non-predicative ones, as in (2c)), and that otherwise not all utterances with an attitudinal meaning element carry an independent marker of it.

3. Subjectivity at the intersection of the conceptual and communicative dimensions of language

These observations regarding the rationale for subjectivity marking in terms of the 'interactive effect' of attitudinal categories bring us straight back to the issue of the relationship between this notion and those defined by Traugott and Langacker.

Obviously, not only epistemic modality (cf. section 1) but all attitudinal meanings of the kind mentioned in section 2 are highly subjective in Traugott's sense of the notion. It is inherent in their nature, as characterized in section 2, that 'forming' an attitude of any of the subtypes requires considerable speaker input, which is precisely what subjectivity à la Traugott involves.⁶ And so one can 'translate' the discussion in section 2 as stating that it is the subjectivity of these categories in Traugott's sense which triggers the systematic possibility for (inter)subjectivity

⁶ Arguably, Traugott's notion of subjectification – or increasing subjectivity – can be related to the concept of the hierarchical organization of 'qualificational' categories in terms of their semantic scope (a quite common notion in the functional linguistic and typological literature, cf. e.g. Bybee 1985, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997, Dik 1997, Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008, Narrog 2009, Malchukov 2011), which can in turn be correlated with degrees of 'work load' and 'interpretational space' for the assessor/speaker: the higher in the hierarchy, the higher the work load, and (thus) the more subjective in Traugott's sense. Not surprisingly, all categories covered under the label 'attitudinal' are very high in this qualificational hierarchy. See Nuyts (2009, 2012, 2014b) for elaboration.

marking.

And, of course, if it is the subjectivity à la Traugott, or in other words the amount of speaker involvement, which triggers (inter)subjectivity marking, it makes sense to do the latter by using explicit presence vs. absence of the speaking subject in relation to the attitudinal element in the utterance as the critical tool – which provides the link with Langacker’s notion of subjectivity.⁷

And as the discussion in section 2 then also implies, the crux of an explanation of the correlations between these notions lies in the combination of the conceptual and the discursive status of the phenomena to which they apply. Obviously, all these notions refer to aspects of how we conceptualize the world: they all concern issues of how we perceive things in the world in terms of their existence, or their being good or bad, or likable or not, including a meta-level dimension of how we see ourselves in conceiving these issues. But precisely because of the often ‘problematic’ nature of our struggle with the world in these terms, these notions also inherently imply a very strong interactive dimension, as elaborated in section 2. In other words, we are touching here upon a domain in which the ‘borders’ between the two basic dimensions of language use – conceptualization and communication – get blurred, and which cannot be properly understood without drawing in both simultaneously (a wisdom which is not always put into practice in the literature dealing with these notions, which tends to focus on the conceptual part of the story). And that, in turn, should not come as a surprise either: as mentioned in the introduction, what unifies these notions is that they all crucially concern systematic ways in which the speaking subject manifests him/herself in language, and the speaking subject is of course a cognizer and communicator simultaneously, who thus inherently integrates the conceptual and communicative dimensions in cognition and behavior.

References

⁷ The matching with Langacker’s notion is only partial though. Subjectivity marking correlates with Langacker’s subjective construal, both in the grammatical and the autonomous expressive devices: it always hinges on the explicit coding of the speaker in relation to the attitudinal meaning element, which is therefore ‘subjectively construed’. But Langacker’s notion does not appear to allow one to distinguish between neutral and intersubjective marking (the latter requiring the explicit signaling of ‘impersonality’ in relation to the attitude, at least in the range of grammatical coding): they both involve objective construal in Langacker’s sense. Going into the implications of this is beyond the present scope though.

- Benveniste, Émile (1958). De la subjectivité dans le langage. *Journal de Psychologie normale et pathologique* 55: 257–265.
- Biber, Douglas & Edward Finegan (1989). Styles of stance in English: Lexical and grammatical marking of evidentiality and affect. *Text* 9: 93-124.
- Bybee, Joan (1985). *Morphology*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Dik, Simon (1997). *The theory of functional grammar*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Fortuin, Egbert (2008). The construction of degree in Russian. In P. Houtzagers, J. Kalsbeek & J. Schaeken (eds.), *Dutch contributions to the Fourteenth International Congress of Slavists*, 45-108. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Hengeveld, Kees & Lachlan Mackenzie (2008). *Functional discourse grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heritage, John (2012a). Epistemics in conversation. In: J. Sidnell & T. Stivers (eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis*, 370-394. Chichester: Wiley.
- Heritage, John (2012b). Epistemics in action: Action formation and territories of knowledge. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 45: 1–29,
- Janssens, Karolien & Jan Nuyts (2014). How did we *think*? In: M. de los Ángeles Gómez González, F. Ruíz de Mendoza Ibañez, F. González García, A. Downing (eds.), *The functional perspective on language and discourse*, 149-167. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Kärkkäinen, Elise (2003). *Epistemic stance in English conversation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Langacker, Ronald (1990). Subjectification. *Cognitive Linguistics* 1: 5-38.
- Langacker, Ronald (1999). *Grammar and conceptualization*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Langacker, Ronald (2008). *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- López-Couso, María José (2010). Subjectification and intersubjectification. In A. Jucker, I. Taavitsainen (eds.), *Historical pragmatics*, 127-163. Berlin: De Gruyter.

- Lyons, John (1977). *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malchukov, Andrej (2011). Interaction of verbal categories. *Linguistics* 49: 229–282.
- Meier, Cecile (2003). The meaning of *too*, *enough* and *so...that*. *Natural Language Semantics* 11: 69-107.
- Narrog, Heiko (2009). *Modality in Japanese*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Nuyts, Jan (1992). Subjective vs. objective modality. In M. Fortescue, P. Harder, L. Kristoffersen (eds.), *Layered structure and reference in a functional perspective*, 73-98. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Nuyts, Jan (2001). Subjectivity as an evidential dimension in epistemic modal expressions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33: 383-400.
- Nuyts, Jan (2005). The modal confusion: On terminology and the concepts behind it. In: A. Klinge, H. Müller (eds.), *Modality: Studies in form and function*, 5-38. London: Equinox.
- Nuyts, Jan (2009). The 'one-commitment-per-clause' principle and the cognitive status of qualificational categories. *Linguistics* 47: 141-171.
- Nuyts, Jan (2012). Notions of (inter)subjectivity. *English Text Construction* 5: 53-76.
- Nuyts, Jan (2014a). Subjectivity in modality, and beyond. In: A. Zuczkowski, R. Bongelli, I. Riccioni, C. Canestrari (eds.), *Communicating certainty and uncertainty in medical, supportive and scientific contexts*, 13-30. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Nuyts, Jan (2014b). Deconstructing evidentiality. Keynote lecture at the International Conference on Evidentiality and Modality in European Languages, Madrid.
- Ochs, Elinor (1996). Linguistic resources for socializing humanity. In J. Gumperz, S. Levinson (eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity*, 407-437. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheibman, Joanne (2002). *Point of view and grammar: Structural patterns of*

subjectivity in American English conversation. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Schwarzschild, Roger (2008). The semantics of comparatives and other degree constructions. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2: 308-331.

Smet, Hendrik De & Jean-Christophe Verstraete (2006). Coming to terms with subjectivity. *Cognitive Linguistics* 17: 365-392

Traugott, Elizabeth (1989). On the rise of epistemic meanings in English. *Language* 65: 31-55.

Traugott, Elizabeth (2010). (Inter)subjectivity and (inter)subjectification. In K. Davidse, L. Vandelanotte, H. Cuyckens (eds.), *Subjectification, intersubjectification and grammaticalization*, 29-71. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Traugott, Elizabeth & Richard Dasher (2002). *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Valin, Robert Van & Randy LaPolla (1997). *Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.