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Subjectivity in modality, and beyond

Jan Nuyts

University of Antwerp

Abstract

This conceptual paper reflects on the role of ‘subjectivity’ in the analysis of the semantic domain of modality. It offers a critical review of the traditional notions of subjectivity vs. objectivity (including Lyons’ 1977), and it elaborates further on an alternative notion, labeled (inter)subjectivity, as proposed in earlier work (Nuyts 2001b, 2012). The paper spends particular attention to the question of the precise range of applicability of the category of (inter)subjectivity (which extends beyond the modal categories), and to the question of its status in a cognitive semantic theory.

0. Introduction¹

At least since Benveniste (1958), there is a growing awareness among language researchers of the crucial role of the speaking subject in the ‘shaping’ of language. It is increasingly clear that very many grammatical, semantic, and discursive/interactional phenomena in language structure and language use cannot be explained properly without reference to the speaker and his/her ‘subjective’ position in communication.

Hence, not surprisingly, the notion of subjectivity has received considerable attention in the linguistic literature in the last few decades, and this has resulted in several different

formulations of it, proposed in different contexts of linguistic analysis. The most widely known are the concept of objectivity vs. subjectivity and intersubjectivity underlying the processes of subjectification and intersubjectification in diachronic semantic change, as proposed by Traugott (1989; 2010; Traugott and Dasher 2002), and the concept of subjective vs. objective construal, as a type of perspectivization in conceptualization, developed by Langacker (1990; 1999) in the context of his cognitive semantic theory. But the notion is also prominently present in the literature on modality: many authors make a distinction between subjective and objective or intersubjective epistemic, and sometimes also deontic, modality (e.g. Lyons 1977; Palmer 1986; Hengeveld 1989; Nuyts 2001a; 2001b; 2012).

There is a growing consensus in the literature that these different concepts of subjectivity are not just alternative formulations of the same ‘thing’, but that they concern basically different linguistic phenomena (Langacker 1999; Traugott and Dasher 2002; De Smet and Verstraete 2006; Traugott 2010; López-Couso 2010). What they share is that they all address aspects of ‘speaker presence’ in language – and so it is fully understandable that all of them use the term ‘subjectivity’. But, as argued at length in Nuyts (2012), they differ in that they concern very different facets of the way the speaker is present in language (even if they may occasionally and partly ‘intersect’ in some linguistic domains, including the domain of modality) – and in that respect their shared use of the term ‘subjectivity’ is actually highly confusing.

The present paper, then, focuses entirely on the notion of subjectivity as originally introduced in the literature on modality. Even within this domain, there are competing definitions of the notion, and it is not a priori clear whether we are dealing here, again, with different ways in which the speaking subject affects the expression of modal judgments (in which case the alternative notions are complementary and mutually compatible), or whether

these alternative definitions involve mutually incompatible accounts of the same phenomena. This matter is addressed in sections 1 and 2: section 1 offers a critical reflection on the traditional analysis of the dimension, usually labeled ‘subjective vs. objective modality’, and section 2 sketches an alternative perspective, labeled subjectivity vs. intersubjectivity, which however, extends beyond the traditional domain of modality. Section 3, then, elaborates further on the latter notion: it focuses on the cognitive status of the concept of (inter)subjectivity, and specifically on the question how this dimension ‘conceptually’ relates to qualificational dimensions such as the modal ones.

1. The ‘traditional’ analysis of subjectivity in modality

The notion of subjectivity has been prominently present in the literature on modality at least since Lyons (1977, 787ff). He introduced the distinction between subjective and objective modality in order to account for the intuition that some modal expressions are more strongly speaker-related and others less so (see below for illustrations). The ‘feeling’ addressed by Lyons’ distinction is hardly escapable for anyone engaging in the study of modality. Consequently, many authors have adopted this concept in their analysis of modal categories (cf. e.g. Palmer 1986; Hengeveld 1989; and see below). But it is fair to say that this has not resulted in a clear picture of what the dimension involves (see Nuyts 2001b; 2012 for more elaborate discussion).

Thus, most authors remain vague about the definition of the notion, drawing heavily on intuition for an understanding of what is involved. Presumably, many or most of them silently assume Lyons’ original characterization, which remains one of the most explicit ones to date –

though it, too, is far from absolutely obvious.² Lyons (1977, 797ff) articulates the distinction most clearly in the epistemic sphere.³ He formally defines it in terms of the ‘I say so’ (subjective) vs. ‘it is so’ (objective) ‘layers’ in the semantic representation of an utterance. But in more mundane terms he characterizes it as follows: Subjective epistemic modality involves a purely personal guess regarding whether the state of affairs under consideration is true or not, while objective epistemic modality expresses an objectively measurable chance that it is true or not. Lyons illustrates this among others by means of the utterance in (1).

(1) Alfred may be unmarried

By uttering (1), the speaker can either indicate that (s)he simply feels uncertain about whether Alfred is unmarried – i.e. subjective modality. Or the speaker may mean to indicate that there is a mathematically computable chance that Alfred is unmarried, for example because (s)he knows that Alfred belongs to a community of ninety people, of which thirty are unmarried, hence there is one chance in three that he is unmarried – i.e. objective modality.

In the deontic sphere, Lyons (1977, 841ff) is far less explicit about the definition of the distinction (and he does not illustrate it very clearly, by means of examples comparable to (1)). But it looks like here he relates it to a difference in the ‘moral’ source for the deontic statement (which in his analysis involves categories such as obligation, interdiction and permission). If the source of the obligation, permission, etc. is the speaker him/herself, i.e. if it involves the speaker’s personal deontic assessment, as in (2a), we are dealing with subjective deontic modality. But if the source is some general societal principle (e.g. as rendered in a law), or another person, but not the speaker personally, as in (2b), we have objective deontic modality. (See also, e.g., Matthews 2003, 53; Verstraete 2007, 32ff.)

- (2) a. You may go now
- b. You may not smoke in a public place

Hence, Lyons appears to define the distinction differently in the two modality types (cf. also Verstraete 2007). In the epistemic sphere it essentially seems a matter of a difference in the quality of the evidence leading the speaker to the modal judgment: ‘intuition’ vs. quantifiable/measurable facts. But in the deontic sphere it is a matter of whether the speaker is responsible him/herself for the modal statement or not. And so one may wonder whether we are dealing with the same concept of subjectivity vs. objectivity in both cases.

Correlated with the definitorial unclarity, also the ‘conceptual’ status of the category of subjectivity vs. objectivity remains un(der)determined in the work of most authors. Some explicitly consider the dimension to be inherent in the modal categories themselves (i.e., an epistemic or deontic assessment is inherently subjective or objective), thus assuming separate categories of, e.g., subjective epistemic modality and objective epistemic modality (e.g. Hengeveld 1988, and probably also Lyons 1977) – although this raises the unanswered question what this then means for the conceptual status of epistemic and deontic modality as such (this analysis would seem to imply that these are not coherent basic notions anymore). But most authors leave the issue of the status of subjectivity vs. objectivity entirely open.

Last but not least, also in terms of the ‘implementation’ of the dimension in the range of modal expressions, the traditional analyses remain fuzzy. Lyons seems to assume that one and the same modal expression (cf. *may* in (1) and (2)), and sometimes even one and the same utterance (cf. (1)), can express either ‘value’, the context being the only criterion to decide which is at stake. In other words, he seems to assume that the distinction does not get overt marking. In line with this is his statement (Lyons 1977, 797) that “[t]his is not a distinction

that can be drawn sharply in the everyday use of language”. But if so, this makes one wonder whether it is a relevant category in the speaker’s use, and in the language researcher’s analysis, of modal expressions. Not all authors share Lyons’ view on this matter, however: many have tried to link each of the two ‘poles’ of the distinction with specific expressive devices (e.g., the auxiliaries are subjective, the adverbs are objective) – but again, there is no consistency in the analyses emerging from these attempts (cf. e.g. Palmer 1979; 1986; Coates 1983; Perkins 1983; Kiefer 1984; Watts 1984; Hengeveld 1988).

In sum, there are several puzzling elements in the traditional analysis of the dimension of subjectivity vs. objectivity in the modal categories. Significant in this regards is the fact that even Lyons (1977, 797) himself admits that “its epistemological justification is, to say the least, uncertain”. This makes one wonder whether the traditional analysis is adequate. The apparent difficulty in ‘operationalizing’ the distinction in terms of how it is coded in the system of modal expressions is no doubt symptomatic for its conceptual unclarity. And the latter may be a signal that the traditional analysis is not hitting the nail on the head in attempting to grasp the nature of the – as such intuitively plausible – difference between modal expressions in terms of their ‘subjectivity’.

In any case, as already suggested above, Lyons’ analysis of the nature of the distinction arguably invokes fundamentally different issues in the epistemic vs. the deontic domains, which cannot be covered under the same flag. The distinction as he appears to be making it in the deontic sphere fully corresponds to what elsewhere in the literature is handled under the issue of ‘performativity’, i.e. the matter of the presence of speaker commitment (see, e.g., Nuyts 2001a, 39ff; in print). In his ‘subjective deontic modality’ there is speaker commitment to the deontic expression, i.e. the latter is performative. In his ‘objective deontic modality’, however, there is no speaker commitment to the deontic expression, the speaker is only

reporting on an obligation, permission etc. issued by someone else, i.e. the expression is not performative but ‘descriptive’. This distinction has nothing to do with ‘quality of evidence’, however, i.e. the issue at stake in Lyons’ definition of subjectivity vs. objectivity in the epistemic sphere. In fact, the performativity vs. descriptivity issue also applies to epistemic modal expressions: cf. *it seems quite likely to me that he is the murderer* (performative) vs. *the police considers it likely that he committed the murder* (descriptive) – but this contrast is clearly very different from what Lyons aims at with his explanation of the two readings of (1) above, which are both performative (in both cases, the speaker is committed to the epistemic assessment). Vice versa, it is hard to see how the matter of quality of the evidence for an assessment, of the kind involved in Lyons’ account of (1), would apply to deontic modality: what should having better or worse evidence for issuing an obligation or a permission mean?

That quality of evidence is an important element in the ‘epistemic sphere’, broadly speaking, stands beyond doubt. All assessments of the existential status of a state of affairs are based on evidence of some kind – and this evidence can obviously be better (e.g. computable facts) or worse (e.g. pure intuition). But the question is whether this is the element triggering the intuition that some epistemic expressions are more subjective than others. (If it were, then this intuition would have to be different from the ‘parallel’ intuition in the deontic sphere, in which, as indicated, quality of evidence can hardly be considered an element – but see section 2.) No doubt, the quality of one’s evidence for an existential assessment will on occasion be relevant to be communicated. But doing so would seem to be the province of evidential expressions, most notably of inferential ones. Inference not only code that the postulated state of affairs is derived from other information. Probably more importantly, they also code the degree of confidence with which the speaker makes the inference. Or in other words, they code the degree of reliability of the information on the basis of which the existence (or non-

existence) of the state of affairs is hypothesized: e.g., *seemingly* or *it seems* indicate low confidence/reliability, *apparently* or *it appears* code medium confidence/reliability, and *clearly* or *obviously* mark high confidence/reliability. Epistemic expressions, however, only code the resulting assessment of the existential status of the state of affairs, not the reliability of the process leading to the conclusion. And so one may really wonder whether quality of the evidence plays any direct role in the use of epistemic modal expressions as such, hence whether it makes any sense to make a distinction between subjective and objective epistemic expressions in these terms. The odds are that it does not.⁴

2. Subjectivity vs. intersubjectivity, in modality and beyond

But then, how to account for this pervasive intuition that there is a difference between more and less subjective modal expressions? Consider the examples in (3) and (4).

- (3) a. It is *unlikely* that he will win the elections
- b. I *doubt* that he will win the elections

- (4) a. It is *good* that you went to that staff meeting
- b. I *am glad* you went to that staff meeting

Both italicized expressions in (3) express epistemic modality: both indicate that the chances that the state of affairs applies are fairly low. And both italicized expressions in (4) express deontic modality: both indicate that the state of affairs is morally desirable.⁵ Yet one will

immediately ‘feel’, intuitively, that in both cases the alternatives express their meaning in a different way. Moreover, the difference seems to be of the same nature in both pairs, i.e. it applies to both epistemic and deontic modality. And it does seem to have to do with the position of the speaking subject, i.e. with the ‘subjectivity’ of the expression.

There is, in fact, a way to interpret this intuitive feeling which is perfectly in line with the common sense meaning of ‘subjectivity’ (cf. Nuyts 2001a, 33ff; 2001b; 2012). This interpretation concerns the matter of who is ‘responsible’ for the modal evaluation, as seen from the perspective of the ‘source’ of that evaluation, i.e. the ‘assessor’ (typically, but not necessarily the speaker him/herself – see below). The assessor always is, of course, but the relevant question is whether others are presented as being co-responsible. This alternative concept of the dimension is labeled ‘subjectivity vs. intersubjectivity’, not only in order to avoid confusion with the traditional notions of subjectivity vs. objectivity as discussed in section 1, but also because this label matches better what the present concept is about: ‘objectivity’ is not at stake at all, in any relevant sense of the word, in this alternative analysis.

The ‘values’ of the dimension can then be defined as follows: an evaluation is ‘subjective’ if it is presented as being strictly the assessor’s sole responsibility; it is ‘intersubjective’ if it is presented as being shared between the assessor and a wider group of people, possibly, but not necessarily, including the hearer. In other words, in these terms this distinction is a matter of indicating whether the modal judgment is common ground between the assessor and others, or not.⁶

The dimension so defined also seems linkable to formal properties of the modal expressions – or in other words, it does seem to get overt marking. As demonstrated in Nuyts (2001a; 2001b) for epistemic modal expressions in particular, the coding of the dimension is not actually due to the modal marker itself, but to the syntactic pattern in which the latter

appears (and as such it is indirectly due to the modal marker, since the latter triggers these syntactic conditions). Specifically, expression of the category depends on the possibility to code the issuer of the evaluation on the modal marker, i.e. it is particularly linked to predicative (verbal or adjectival) modal expression forms. If, for the sake of simplicity, we focus on performative cases (i.e. when the assessor is the speaker), then in these predicative forms a first person subject codes subjectivity (cf. (3b) above), while an impersonal subject codes intersubjectivity (cf. (3a) above).⁷ Adverbial and grammatical (auxiliary) epistemic expression forms, however, cannot code the dimension (since they do not control the subject), hence in principle they are neutral. The range of coding possibilities in epistemic expressions is illustrated in (5). The situation seems perfectly comparable in the range of deontic modal expressions, as illustrated in (6).

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| (5) | a. <i>I think</i> they left already | = subjective |
| | b. <i>It is quite probable</i> that they left already | = intersubjective |
| | c. They <i>probably</i> left already | = neutral |
| | d. They <i>may well</i> have left already | = neutral |
| (6) | a. <i>I really regret</i> that they left already | = subjective |
| | b. <i>It is unacceptable</i> that they left already | = intersubjective |
| | c. <i>Unfortunately</i> they left already | = neutral |
| | d. They <i>must</i> leave right away | = neutral |

As argued in Nuyts (2001b), at least for epistemic modality, the actual ‘behavior’ of the different alternative expression types in corpus data (in terms of the types of contexts in which

they are used) is perfectly compatible with this analysis. In fact, the behavior of the forms in real life data seems much better explicable along these lines than along the lines of Lyons' definition of subjectivity vs. objectivity in terms of quality of the evidence for the modal assessment.

In the light of the discussion in section 1 regarding Lyons' interpretation of his subjectivity vs. objectivity distinction in the deontic sphere, it is important to stress that intersubjectivity in the present sense should not be confused with 'absence of commitment' on the part of the assessor. As indicated above, even in an intersubjective modal expression – epistemic and deontic alike – the assessor remains an assessor (jointly with other assessors), who is thus fully (co-)responsible for the modal evaluation. Subjectivity vs. intersubjectivity should thus not be confused with (respectively) performativity vs. descriptivity – these two dimensions are orthogonal: both subjective and intersubjective modal expressions can be either performative or descriptive, and vice versa. Although, given the 'interpersonal' nature of (inter)subjectivity (in the sense of it concerning the mutual positions of interlocutors – see below) one would expect it to be more commonly rendered in performative than in descriptive expressions – but that is an issue which is in need of empirical investigation.

That (inter)subjectivity in this sense would play a role in how speakers use epistemic or deontic expressions (among others, see below) in actual communicative circumstances, would seem perfectly natural. Modal categories, at least the 'attitudinal' ones, involving speaker assessments or evaluations of states of affairs (Nuyts 2005),⁸ are inherently 'considerative' in nature, they signal that the speaker is 'struggling' with the status of things in the world, e.g. in terms of whether they exist or not, or are acceptable or desirable or not. And so it is only to be expected that in actual interactions this inherently brings up the issue of whether the interlocutors agree or not on an assessment – or in other words, of whether they

intersubjectively share views vs. are opposing different subjective positions.

In line with this, one would typically expect a marking of subjectivity in communicative circumstances in which the assessor feels like (s)he should not imply anyone else in his/her modal evaluation, e.g. because (s)he does not know about the position/view of others, or in situations in which the assessor's position is clearly in opposition to the view of others (directly or indirectly) involved in the discourse. And one would typically expect a marking of intersubjectivity, either if the assessor wants to indicate, contra the hearer, that his/her (the assessor's) position is not an isolated, strictly personal (hence possibly arbitrary) one, or if the assessor assumes that (s)he and the hearer are in mutual agreement and wishes to explicitly indicate this. In actual practice, then, this dimension will no doubt often be used as a 'discursive tool', i.e. as an element in the 'negotiation' of the mutual positions of the interlocutors in a conversational interaction.

But in this perspective one may also assume that speakers will want to code (inter)subjectivity only if it is conversationally necessary or relevant. Hence the observation above (cf. (5) and (6)) that the dimension is not present in all modal expressions, and that some categories of expressive devices are neutral in these terms, fits naturally into the present definition of the category: it is perfectly normal that language would offer means to express the modal categories in a (in terms of this dimension) neutral way, without the speaker having to imply anything along these lines.

Of course, in the light of the above explanation of the rationale behind the dimension in its present definition, one may wonder whether it is confined to the categories of epistemic and deontic modality. There are no doubt yet other 'considerative' semantic categories, which may thus trigger concern with the relative position of the interlocutors – and so if the above account of the dimension is plausible then one would expect it to apply to these categories as

well. In fact, it probably does. Thus, it looks like the dimension extends at least to other traditional ‘attitudinal’ categories (in terms of the analysis in Nuyts 2005), such as ‘boulomaic attitude’, marking an assessment of the degree to which a state of affairs is ‘likable’ (cf. *I hate it that I have to go now*), or inferential evidentiality (cf. section 1) – and its expression in these categories is probably parallel to that in deontic and epistemic modality, as illustrated for inferential evidentiality in (7).

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| (7) | a. <i>I strongly suspect</i> he is the murderer | = subjective |
| | b. <i>It is obvious</i> that he is the murderer | = intersubjective |
| | c. He is <i>obviously</i> the murderer | = neutral |
| | d. He <i>must</i> be the murderer | = neutral |

But, especially if we also consider other ways to code the dimension, its range appears to extend even further. In all the illustrations above, the coding of the dimension is ‘syntactic’, i.e. through the grammatical format of the clause headed by the (predicative) attitudinal marker. But there are clearly also ‘independent’, lexical, markers of subjectivity. For example, *think*, which in (5a) expresses subjective epistemic modality, can also be used without an epistemic meaning, to express ‘pure’ subjectivity, as in (8a) and (8b): *I think* here does not mean that the chances are very high that ‘we should help him’ or that ‘that is an excellent plan’, it simply means that ‘in my view’ we should do so/it is so. Dutch even has a verb that (apart from its ‘literal’, ‘objective’ meaning) is dedicated to the expression of subjectivity, viz. *vinden* ‘find’ (it does not have an epistemic use, e.g.), as in (8c). And in English, the prepositional phrase *to me* is also often used as a subjectivity marker, as illustrated in (8d) and (8e).

- (8) a. *I think* we should help him, he deserves it
 b. *I think* that is an excellent plan
 c. *Dat is, vind ik, niet erg verstandig van je*
 that is, find I, not very clever of you
 ‘I don’t think that’s very clever of you’
 d. Sounds like a stupid question *to me*
 e. *To me* you are really driving too fast

In each of these cases, the subjectivity marker then concerns a semantic element expressed elsewhere in the utterance. While in (8a) the latter still clearly involves a modal category (viz. deontic modality, as expressed by the modal *should*),⁹ in all other examples in (8) the affected category can broadly be classified as involving a quality assessment (e.g. being good in a non-deontic sense, or being clever or stupid, to some degree), i.e. something which is not traditionally covered under the label of ‘modality’, or even of ‘attitudes’.¹⁰

There are, however, clear limits to the kinds of semantic dimensions that can be covered by such an independent subjectivizer. E.g., in (9a) *think* cannot be read as a pure subjectivizer, but only as an epistemic marker (it means ‘I am quite certain that it is 9 o’clock’, not ‘in my view it is 9 o’clock’).¹¹ (9b) and (9c) are simply semantically unacceptable. And in (9d) the prepositional phrase may, marginally, allow a reading as a spatial direction marker (‘towards me’), but reading it as a marker of subjectivity appears very difficult.

- (9) a. **I think* it is 9 o’clock [with *think* meaning ‘in my view’]
 b. **Ik vind dat hij in Frankrijk is*
 I find that he in France is

‘In my opinion he is in France’

c. *To me he is leaving on a holiday to France

d. ??You are driving fast *to me* [with *to me* as a subjectivity marker]

Clearly, only semantic categories which can somehow be considered to involve a speaker evaluation or assessment are open to subjectivity coding. And as the contrast between (8e) and (9d) illustrates, this does not cover just any kind of quality indication – although the precise delimitation is not a priori obvious (the evaluative element in (8e) may in fact be due to the grade marker *too*, rather than to the quality marker *fast*).¹²

These observations raise a number of interesting issues which cannot be addressed in the present context. This includes the question precisely which semantic dimensions are vulnerable to subjectivity marking, and the question what this implies for the analysis of modality and/or of the category of ‘attitudinal meanings’. (Should the latter notion be set wider than traditionally, in order to cover meanings of the kind in (8)?) But in any case, it is very obvious that the dimension of (inter)subjectivity does extend far beyond the categories of epistemic and deontic modality, and that the grammatical coding of the dimension as illustrated in (5) and (6) is a ‘special case’ of a wider phenomenon.

3. The cognitive status of (inter)subjectivity

Another question that needs to be raised is: what is the status of the dimension of (inter)subjectivity in a semantic theory, specifically vis-a-vis the modal – or, more broadly, the ‘attitudinal’ – categories? The modal/attitudinal categories form part of the system of ‘tense-

aspect-mood/modality’ (‘TAM’) or ‘qualificational’ dimensions modifying states of affairs. There is a growing consensus in functional-cognitive linguistics that these categories can be modeled in terms of a hierarchical system, roughly of the kind in (10) (the formats in different theories differ wildly though – see Nuyts 2001a for discussion), in which they are ordered in terms of the extension of their semantic scope (higher in the system means wider scope).¹³ The attitudinal categories are situated highest in this system, from deontic modality upwards.

- (10) > inferential evidentiality
 - > epistemic modality
 - > deontic modality
 - > time
 - > quantitative aspect
 - > phasal aspect
 - > state of affairs

As argued in Nuyts (2001a; 2009; in prep), a system of this kind may be considered part, in one way or another, of our conceptual system, i.e. of the way we organize our ‘store’ of world knowledge.

The question is, then, where the dimension of subjectivity fits in. At least some authors assuming the traditional division between subjective and objective modality consider this category to be part of the qualificational hierarchy – even if only ‘indirectly’ so, in the sense that (cf. section 1 above) they consider the dimension to be inherent in (some of) the modal categories, and that the subjective and objective variants of these figure at different levels in the system. For the dimension in its present analysis, however, this kind of approach is not

very plausible.

First of all, it is quite obvious that the category must be assumed to have an independent status as a semantic dimension, and can in any case not be considered inherent in the modal categories in particular. This is not only suggested by its definition as such. It also nearly inevitably follows from the facts (see section 2) that it is not necessarily present in modal statements (i.e., modal expressions can be neutral in terms of the dimension), that it can be expressed independently of modal expressions, and that it is relevant for several semantic categories, including non-modal ones. No need, then, to give up the ‘conceptual unity’ of categories such as deontic and epistemic modality (by splitting them up in subjective and objective variants; cf. section 1).

But if (inter)subjectivity is an independent dimension, what is its status then, relative to (10)? In Nuyts (2001b) it was suggested that it is an evidential category, and this could be taken to mean that it constitutes a separate layer in the hierarchy, somewhere high up, in the range of the attitudinal categories in the system, near inferential evidentiality. But there are a few arguments against this analysis, too.

First of all, linguistic expressions of (inter)subjectivity ‘behave’ quite differently from expressions of the other attitudinal categories. While in general there are heavy restrictions on the co-occurrence of attitudinal categories in a clause (e.g. of deontic and epistemic forms, or of epistemic and inferential forms; see Nuyts 2009), expressions of (inter)subjectivity combine freely and frequently – in a very integrated way, cf. (5)-(7) above – with any of the attitudinal categories. This even appears to be one of their predominant ‘habitats’, if not their exclusive one (depending on what a thorough analysis of examples of the kind in (8)-(9) above will reveal), i.e. (inter)subjectivity prototypically behaves as an ‘extra’ assessment (if one can call it such) on top of an attitudinal one.

But also the nature of the category would seem to go against simply assigning it a slot in the hierarchy in (10). As argued in Nuyts (2001b; 2012), (inter)subjectivity is clearly akin to, hence might form a semantic group with, among others, the category labeled ‘mirativity’ (short for ‘admirativity’) in the literature (cf. e.g. DeLancey 1997; 2001; Aikhenvald 2004; see Nuyts 2001b for other related notions). Mirativity codes the fact that the information provided in the utterance is new and surprising or unexpected for the speaker. (11) offers an illustration (adapted from DeLancey 2001, 375) from Hare (Athapaskan): while (11a) is a neutral statement, (11b) indicates that the speaker is surprised to see that a bear has been walking around the house, for example because the house is in an area where normally there are no bears. This element of surprise is coded by the mirative marker *lō*.

(11) a. *júhye sa k'inayeda*

hereabout bear sg.go.around/3sg subj/PERF

‘There was a bear walking around here.’

b. *júhye sa k'inayeda lō*

‘Gee, I see there was a bear walking around here!’

DeLancey (2001) also considers mirativity to be related to evidential, and specifically inferential. But he calls it “an odd appendage to evidentiality” (DeLancey 2001, 370). And he admits that the semantic nature of mirativity is quite different from that of (inferential) evidentiality, witness (among others) the fact that he had to use quite different ‘elicitation strategies’ to evoke evidential vs. mirative forms in informants during fieldwork on Tibetan and Athapaskan languages – a sure sign that these forms ‘do’ quite different things for their speakers.

(Inter)subjectivity is not entirely the same as mirativity, of course, at least in the sense that the former does not code ‘being new and surprising’ to the speaker in any direct sense. (At best, subjectivity holds the potential of coding something which is new and surprising to the *hearer*.)¹⁴ But what the two categories share is that they mark, in different ways, the status of the information in the utterance (i.e., of the state of affairs) in terms of the interlocutors’ ‘position in the world’ (see below). And as such, they would seem to involve something quite different from what is traditionally covered under (inferential) ‘evidentiality’ (cf. Willett 1988; Aikhenvald 2004). They are really not about kinds of sources of evidence, or (as is the case in inferentials, cf. section 1) about the ‘reliability’ of the source information, for postulating a state of affairs. Even more generally, unlike epistemic modality and inferentiality, these categories do not concern an assessment of the existential status of the state of affairs. They are not even about the extent to which the assessor can commit him/herself to the state of affairs, in whichever way (cf. Nuyts 2001a; 2009), unlike what is the case in ‘attitudinal’ categories such as inferentiality or epistemic modality (existential commitment) and deontic modality (moral commitment).

(Inter)subjectivity and mirativity (pace DeLancey’s 2001, 379-380 view of the latter), then, appear to be categories of a fundamentally different kind. They obviously do relate to a specific state of affairs. But they do not really involve a ‘qualification’ of that state of affairs as such (unlike what is the case for all categories in the hierarchy in (10)). Rather, they both characterize, each in a different way, the position/status of the ‘assessor’ or ‘qualifier’ (at least in the case of (inter)subjectivity, also vis-a-vis others), with relevance to the state of affairs and – at least in the case of (inter)subjectivity – to its qualifications (or, in any case, the attitudinal ones). In other words, they are more about the individuals dealing with states of affairs than about those states of affairs themselves. As such, then, these categories would

seem to occupy a completely separate position in a semantic theory, outside the qualificational hierarchy in (10), even if somehow associated with it. But how should one conceive of this?

The discussion of the discursive role of the marking of (inter)subjectivity in section 2 might make one wonder whether this dimension could be a ‘communicative’ or ‘interactive’ one. (One could imagine comparable discursive uses of mirative marking – but I am not aware of any investigations into that.) As mentioned above, the hierarchy in (10) may be taken to reflect a dimension of our conceptualization of the world, i.e. of the way we represent and handle (or ‘reason with’) our knowledge of the world. In other words, in terms of a language processing model, it is an aspect of conceptual-semantic representation. But there are of course also numerous categories in language which have nothing to do with our representation of knowledge of the world as such, but which concern the way we plan and organize our communication about that knowledge with interlocutors in actual circumstances. This includes, e.g., action oriented categories such as intention, volition, or directivity (cf. footnote 5 above) and other illocutionary types (cf. Nuyts 2001a; 2008 on the theoretical status of the latter, also in relation to the conceptual qualificational hierarchy), but also text and interaction organizational elements (e.g. sentence connectors, politeness markers, etc.).

In spite of the important discursive function of (inter)subjectivity marking, however, this dimension cannot be considered an action oriented or a text/interaction organizational one. (The same applies for mirativity.) Epistemic modal markers, e.g., are also known to play an important discursive role, among others in the context of politeness strategies (cf. Nuyts 2001a), but nevertheless epistemic modality is not a communicative but a conceptual category (which can be exploited communicatively). As argued, (inter)subjectivity, and mirativity, are about the way the state of affairs (and its qualifications) fit(s) into speaker’s (and, in the case of (inter)subjectivity, others’) conceptual views of and assumptions about the world – and as

such, they must be considered to be elements of conceptual-semantic representation.

So the question remains how these notions should be integrated in a model of conceptualization, relative to the qualificational hierarchy in (10). Possibly, they must be considered some kind of satellites to, or shells around, the hierarchy. But admittedly, this is a very vague characterization, for lack of a better understanding at present. This matter, then, is a subject for further research.

4. Conclusion

In this brief conceptual paper I have tried to clarify a few aspects of the analysis of the dimension of subjectivity in the range of the modal categories. On the one hand, I have tried to point out conceptual problems with the traditional views, and specifically with Lyons' (1977) analysis of subjective vs. objective epistemic and deontic modality: without denying the relevance of dimensions such as performativity vs. descriptivity, or, specifically in the range of 'existential judgments', the quality of the evidence for a modal judgment, one may have doubts whether these dimensions can account for the linguistic facts and intuitions which they set out to explain. On the other hand, this paper has elaborated on an alternative concept of (inter)subjectivity, defined in terms of the presence or absence of common ground, which would seem to fare better in accounting for the usage properties of modal expressions. It has ventured into the question of the actual extension of this dimension, also beyond the modal categories, and into its possible position in a semantic theory, thereby raising several issues and questions which point the way towards future research.

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Notes

1. This research was supported by a LP-BOF grant awarded by the University of Antwerp
Research Council.

2. Lyons (e.g. 1982) also uses the notion of subjectivity in his analysis of (among others)
deixis, but this appears to involve a quite different concept, as compared to the notion he
applies in the modal sphere. Space limits prevent discussion of this matter here.

3. For an introductory overview of analyses of the dimension of modality and related
categories, see Nuyts (2006; in print). In this paper I will adopt the analysis of the modal
categories in Nuyts (2005; in prep).

4. This discussion should, thus, not be misinterpreted as involving the assumption that
inferentiality is actually the same thing as epistemic modality. As I have argued elsewhere
(Nuyts 2005; in prep.), and as the above also implies, it is not. But this discussion does
demonstrate how the two relate, and it explains why they are so close together, semantically:

they both pertain to assessing the existential status of a state of affairs. Also, given the above observation that quality of evidence would only seem relevant to assess the existential status of a state of affairs, but not the deontic status, it is not surprising to find (trivial as it may seem) that there is only inferential evidentiality pertaining to ‘existential’ judgments, not to moral ones.

5. An issue which, due to space limits, I cannot go into thoroughly, concerns the matter of how to define deontic modality, and how this affects the present discussion. For reasons explained among others in Nuyts et al. (2010), deontic modality is defined here purely in terms of ‘an estimation of the degree of moral acceptability of a state of affairs’. Pace common practice in the literature, notions such as obligation, permission, etc., are not considered deontic modal, but ‘directive’. (Note that the examples in (4) express degrees of moral acceptability, i.e. deontic modality in the present sense, without this also involving anything in terms of obligations or permissions.) And the semantic status of directivity is considered to be fundamentally different from that of ‘true’ deontic modality: it is an illocutionary category (exactly the same one as involved in imperatives), while ‘true’ deontic modality is a ‘qualificational’ category (marking the conceptual status of a state of affairs) quite like (e.g.) epistemic modality (see also section 3 below). This fact complicates the comparison with Lyons’ analysis, since Lyons does define deontic modality in terms of orders, permissions etc. (cf. (2) above). The concept of (inter)subjectivity to be defined below does not seem to apply to directive expressions, hence in this regards does not seem to fare better than Lyons’ distinction in terms of quality of evidence. But on the other hand, quality of evidence remains irrelevant also for the concept of deontic modality as defined above, while the concept of (inter)subjectivity to be defined below *is* relevant for it.

6. This notion of intersubjectivity is, in a way, a direct instantiation (a ‘semantization’) of the

concern with subjective positions vs. intersubjective common ground in the ‘mutual management of cognitive states’ (Verhagen 2005, 1), which no doubt pervades all our behavior, linguistic and other.

7. The latter simplifies the situation somewhat: in *it seems quite unlikely to me that so and so*, there is an impersonal subject but the expression is nevertheless subjective due to the coding of the speaker in the adverbial prepositional phrase *to me*.

8. This characterization excludes dynamic modality, which is very different in nature as compared to e.g. epistemic and deontic modality – see Nuyts (2005) for arguments. It is no accident that the traditional subjective vs. objective distinction, too, has been introduced in the first place for epistemic modality, and has been extended to deontic modality, but does not seem to have ever been applied to dynamic modality.

9. Thus, the subjectivity marker here subjectivizes a deontic marker which in itself (cf. its grammatical properties) is neutral in terms of the dimension – cf. (6d).

10. The examples in (8) only feature independent subjectivity markers. It is not immediately obvious whether there are also independent intersubjectivity markers. Possibly, the use of a ‘bare’ adjectival expression of the kind *it is ADJ* often serves as the intersubjective variant: e.g., compare (8d) and *that is a stupid question* or *it is stupid to ask such a question*. But that is grammatical marking, of course. This matter is in need of further investigation.

11. Of course, the verb *is*, due to its grammatical pattern, an inherently subjective epistemic marker – cf. (5a) and the above discussion. But the subjectivity concerns the epistemic assessment here, not another element in the utterance.

12. Some authors – e.g. Meier (2003), Fortuin (2008), Schwarzschild (2008) – have even associated this meaning element of the grade marker *too* with the category of modality.

Discussion of this matter is beyond the space limits of this paper.

13. For reasons of space, the very complex matter of ‘extension of semantic scope’ cannot be elaborated here (see the references in the discussion above and below for more information). But briefly, it concerns the fact that each qualificational category semantically does affect certain other qualificational dimensions (those situated lower in the hierarchy), but leaves yet others ‘untouched’ (those higher in the hierarchy). For example, in *John will probably leave tomorrow*, the time situation ‘tomorrow’ is affected by the epistemic probability judgment (the temporal situation of the state of affairs is part of what is considered probable), but the epistemic judgment is not affected by the temporal situation (it is not situated tomorrow, it is valid at the moment of speech). Therefore, epistemic modality is higher in the hierarchy than time.

14. A question is also whether mirativity, like (inter)subjectivity, prototypically co-occurs with other attitudinal categories. DeLancey’s (2001) examples, at least, indicate that they do combine, and probably quite frequently. This is an issue for further investigation.