

Reassessing and Separating Subjectivity and Performativity of Modals: With Central Focus on English Epistemic Modals

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The aim of this paper is twofold. First, we reassess Lyons's (1977) notion of subjectivity and the notion of performativity from speech act theory (Austin 1962) in comparison with Verstraete's (2001) notions of these two concepts. Second, we argue that subjectivity and performativity should be seen as separate notions, and that one is not reducible to the other.

First, we will take a brief look at previous notions. Lyons refers to "subjectivity" as the speaker's "opinion or attitude towards the proposition that the sentence expresses or the situation that the proposition describes" (1977: 452). For example, an epistemic modal is subjective if an epistemic judgment is based on some fact, while it is objective if the judgment is based on the speaker's own opinion. Next, "performativity" in speech act theory refers to a state in which the speaker utters a sentence and at the same time, by doing so, does something (achieves some action) other than uttering it. For example, inferences or conclusions expressed by epistemic modals are performative in that they "are actually made by the speaker, at the time of speaking" (Palmer 2001: 33).

Verstraete (2001) presents his own definitions of subjectivity and performativity. His subjectivity is characterized as modally performative, reflecting a particular position of commitment with respect to the propositional content. Note that this definition virtually reduces subjectivity to modal performativity. Verstraete then argues, contrary to Lyons, that epistemic modals can only be subjective and that the subjective—objective distinction is not reflected in the linguistic behavior of epistemic modals. For example, these modals are subjective even in interrogatives, where the speaker is concerned with the hearer's position toward the propositional content. Verstraete thus argues that epistemic modals, which are subjective, can also occur in interrogatives (with some echoic interpretation), although Lyons argues that they cannot.

This paper critically assesses Verstraete's framework in relation to the following three kinds of phenomena. First are those that can be described well by Lyons's subjectivity but not by Verstraete's. For example, in Verstraete's framework, both epistemic *must* and epistemic *have to* could occur in interrogatives, since both are subjective. In fact, however, epistemic *have to* hardly occurs in interrogatives (Sanada 2007), and we argue that this fact is well accounted for by Lyons's subjectivity. Epistemic *have to* is objective in that a conclusion expressed by a *have to*-sentence is based on some external fact and there is little or no room for doubting such an objective conclusion.

Second are phenomena that can be described well by speech act theory's version of performativity but not by Verstraete's. Consider that epistemic *can* is acceptable in interrogatives while epistemic *have to* is not (or almost always not). This behavioral difference would not be captured by Verstraete, who would regard both of the modals modally performative (and thus subjective) and therefore acceptable in interrogatives. We suggest that this difference can be captured by speech act theory's notion of performativity. Specifically, epistemic *can* is non-performative in that the speaker of *can*-sentences merely states some possibility, without any commitment by the speaker. In contrast, *have to* is performative in that the speaker actually makes conclusions at the time of utterance.

Finally, we point out certain phenomena that show that subjectivity should not be reduced to performativity. Instead, we propose a separated view of subjectivity and performativity. For example, epistemic *can* and epistemic *have to* are both objective in Lyons's sense, but they are different in terms of performativity; epistemic *can* is non-performative while epistemic *have to* is performative, as shown by the (un)acceptability in interrogatives. These phenomena will support our view.

References

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