

Subjectivity as a Scalar and Context-Dependent Semantic Category in Persian Modality

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Abstract

Subjectivity (the presence of a thinking agent in utterances) as an ever-eluding dimension is an essential and inseparable part of language and communication. Especially, subjectivity in modal notions has attracted the attention of many researchers. Modality, in general, and epistemic and deontic modal notions, in particular, have to do with the expression of the speaker's comments about the (truth or falsity of) propositional content of an utterance. Based on a thorough review of the existing literature three different approaches to subjectivity in modality notions were identified. The first group of researchers believes that subjectivity and objectivity (as its opposite notion) are the inherent properties of certain modal types (i.e., dynamic, epistemic, and deontic modality). Another group of scholars is on the opinion that subjectivity is an intrinsic feature of certain modality forms. The third group of researchers (including some Persian researchers), however, maintain that subjectivity neither does reside in certain modal forms nor modal types, but rather is a much more subtle and context-dependent semantic dimension. Despite the fact that this latter group of researchers is on the right track regarding the realization of subjectivity in the modal notions, they have not offered any operational models for systematic identification and/or assessment of subjectivity yet. Thus, in this paper, the researcher tried to fill this gap in research by offering a synthetic operational model for definition and assessment of subjectivity in the main modal notions and, then, apply the model to gauge the degree of subjectivity of modal notions expressed by various Persian modality markers.

The operational model proposed here is based on the primary distinction that Halliday (1970) makes between the ideational and interpersonal functions of modal notions and the Nuyts' (2006) distinction between the attitudinal and non-attitudinal modal categories. According to the model, since dynamic and alethic modality (as two, obviously, non-attitudinal semantic categories) enjoy an ideational function in the economy of the Persian language, they are always objective. For example, the modal auxiliaries *توانستن* (literally, *can*) and *بایستن* (literally, *must*) in the sentences

express اگر دو ساعت زیر آب بوده است باید مرده باشد and علی می تواند طول استخر را شنا کند

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dynamic possibility and alethic necessity, respectively. In addition, these notions have nothing to do with the speaker's comment or attitude regarding the propositional content of the sentences in which they have been used. In sharp contrast, epistemic and deontic modality (as the two main attitudinal modal categories) always bear a degree of subjectivity. For example, in the sentences فرد باید the modal auxiliary verb باید (literally, *must*) expresses epistemic necessity and deontic necessity, respectively. Both of these modal notions have to do with the speaker's attitude and/or comments about a certain state of affairs and, thus, have a degree of subjectivity.

In the model, what determines the extent of the subjectivity of an epistemic or deontic modal notion is the degree to which a judgment and its related evidence or deontic source are shared among people. Therefore, when more people have access and/or are responsible for the judgment expressed, the degree of its intersubjectivity will be higher. In addition, the degree of subjectivity of a modal notion is, to a great extent, not a function of its intrinsic semantics but is determined more or less through three non-lexical/context-dependent elements (i.e., syntactic structure, linguistic and non-linguistic context).

Thus, in the model, unlike most views on subjectivity, the researcher proposes a distinction between objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. Furthermore, subjectivity in Persian epistemic and deontic modal notions is viewed as a scalar semantic category which (at one end) begins with total speaker-orientedness (pure subjectivity) and ends with absolute unanimity (i.e., total intersubjectivity). Our operational definition for subjectivity is: an epistemic or deontic modal notion is subjective if and only if it is related to and its evidence or deontic source originates in the speaker of a modeled utterance. Otherwise, it is viewed as more or less intersubjective.

As performativity, which is the commitment of the speaker to what he says at the moment of speaking, is independent of the subjectivity dimension, it does not have any role in the expression and realization of subjectivity in modal notions. As a result, both performative and descriptive epistemic and deontic notions can be investigated in terms of the degree of subjectivity. For example, in the sentence مدیر the modal notion expressed by مدیر (literally, *may/might*) is descriptive because, here, the speaker is reporting another person's attitude regarding a certain state of affairs and not his view. However, one can still analyze the degree of the subjectivity of بودن ممکن regardless of its descriptivity.

Finally, the model was employed for analyzing several Persian modeled sentences taken randomly from Persian websites and blogs. These Persian sentences contained various forms of Persian modality markers such as modal auxiliary verbs, modal adverbs, modal adjectives, etc. Upon analysis of the modalized sentences through the definitions and mechanisms of the proposed model, the researcher witnessed that the proposed model could, indeed, be an efficient tool in the identification and assessment of the degree of subjectivity that the epistemic and deontic modal notions express.

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