Constructing social relations in an online community: Social rank and intersubjective effects on stance

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of (inter)subjectivity in epistemic and evidential expressions, more specifically, in the epistemic mental predicate think and the evidential perception verb seem. We claim that the lexicogrammatical choices that encode epistemic stance are determined, in part, by intersubjective sensitivity of the social roles of the speaker and the addressee. In other words, subjectivity is partially determined by intersubjectivity.

The degree of subjectivity in an expression of stance is dependent on a range of factors. One factor is the presence or absence of an evidential qualification. Perhaps the most salient example is I think (Persson 1993, Aijmer 1997, Kärkkäinen 2003). Consider the following examples:

(1) I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration.
(2) I think only one person on here has got tickets to the AA final.

Nuyts (2012) would argue that in expressions like (1), the primary reading is subjective rather than some estimation of commitment, which is present in (2). In addition, what makes (2) less subjective than (1), is the presence of an evidential qualification, which indicates that the speaker has some grounds for assessment. In such evidential verbs as seem, subjectivity is even more reduced, as these expressions are primarily associated with the type of evidence speakers have for what they are saying. This study accepts such notions, but seeks to show that speakers’ awareness of the effects social hierarchy has upon the expression of stance plays a crucial role. Evidence for this will be found in such factors as the constructional choice of the verb, degree of commitment of the complement clause, and most importantly, in the differences between social ranks. In concrete terms, the hypothesis predicts that higher social rank motivates greater attention to evidence as a marker of reliability, while lower rank prompts increased subjectivity.

The corpus for the present study is compiled from an online bulletin board. In order to permit the investigation of the relationship between (inter)subjectivity and social power, members of the community are divided into three hierarchical ranks based on their activity and status on the board. Consequently, 754 examples of think and seem are extracted from the board. The examples are then annotated for a range of semantic, pragmatic and social factors. With the adoption of profile-based usage-feature analysis (Geeraerts et al. 1994, Gries 2003), it is possible to capture the interdependency of these factors and determine the degree of subjectivity across three different ranks. The study also employs mixed-effects ordinal logistic regression analysis to model the interaction of these factors.

The initial results of the study demonstrate that social rank is closely correlated with degree of subjectivity, and that the sender-addressee relationship is an important factor in determining the subjective dimension of epistemic and evidential verbs. In other words, the degree of subjectivity of a given proposition is encoded differently, depending on the relative social rank of the interlocutors. This effect of social rank on subjectivity strongly suggests that it is an intersubjective effect, and that although such factors as epistemicity and evidentiality play a part in the degree of subjectivity, this is relative to the intersubjective sensitivity of the speaker-addressee dyad.

References