



## Book review

### **Constructions of Intersubjectivity: Discourse, Syntax, and Cognition**

Verhagen Arie, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. GBP 70 (hb), 22.99 (pb). xv + 244 pp.<sup>☆</sup>

*Constructions of Intersubjectivity* by Arie Verhagen is very much an intellectual product of our times. Combining current concerns in cognitive and evolutionary linguistics, and capitalizing—more, or less, explicitly—on a pragmatic lineage that goes back to H.P. Grice's (1957) notion of reflexive intentions (i.e., intentions whose fulfillment consists in their recognition) and Anscombe and Ducrot's (1983) theory of argumentation (i.e., the pervasiveness of the persuasive use of linguistic expressions), *Constructions of Intersubjectivity* takes these ideas to their natural conclusion, by proposing that “[l]inguistic expressions are primarily cues for making inferences . . . that lead to adequate next (cognitive, conversational, behavioral) moves” (p. 22). That is, unlike mere bundles of descriptive content, linguistic expressions function above all to coordinate the cognitive stances of speaker/writer and addressee toward some object of conceptualization. Or, in Verhagen's words, “[t]he default condition for ordinary expressions is that they provide an argument for some conclusion, and this argumentative orientation is what is constant in the function of the expression, while its information value is more variable” (p. 10).

This view of linguistic expressions as coordination devices turns (at least some) received views about language on their head: no longer an instrument for describing the world (whereby linguistic expressions inherit their meanings from the states of affairs they correspond to, as in the truth-conditional semantic tradition), neither a tool for communicating about the world (at least not if communication is programmatically restricted to “maximally efficient exchange of information,” as in Grice, 1975), language is now primarily a means for influencing each other's cognitive states, a skill for representing the world as we see it, and, crucially, inviting others to see it through our eyes. Clearly, this conceptual shift from the ‘what’ (is talked about) of language to the ‘who’ (is talking) and ‘why’ is a far cry from current concerns in formal grammar and semantics. Yet, it comes naturally in the context of the cognitive linguistic tradition, in which this book is placed.

The book is structured in four main chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the main theoretical components of the intersubjectivity approach and provides some definitions of basic terms, while chapters 2–4 deal with particular phenomena—negation, clausal complementation, and discourse connectives, respectively—which serve to flesh out the intersubjectivity approach,

<sup>☆</sup> The paperback edition appeared in 2007, and includes in addition a “Further reading” section and new references. This review is based on the earlier hardback edition.

at once providing arguments for it and illustrating its application. A short concluding section returns to the big picture, summarizing the common threads of the previous chapters and placing the intersubjectivity approach in the broader fields of (social) human cognition and linguistic theory.

Chapter 1, “Intersubjectivity—mutual management of cognitive states,” weaves several strands of cognitive linguistic theorizing into a grand programmatic synthesis that provides a rough sketch of Verhagen’s approach, leaving the details to be worked out in the following chapters. The starting point is Tomasello’s work on social cognition, specifically his account of the emergence of a theory of mind in ontogenesis as a prerequisite for social, and in particular language, learning. The conclusion is not hard to draw: “knowledge of language is indeed mutually shared, and cannot be transmitted otherwise than by social learning” (p. 3). Coupled with the usage-based claim that “if grammars encode best what speakers do most [. . .], and if coordinating cognitively with others is so basic a component of human practices, then we should expect to see it reflected in more than one area of grammar, including basic ones” (p. 4), this leads to stating the purpose of the book as “to provide the linguistic part of the story about humans’ ability to engage in deep cognitive coordination with others” (p. 4).

Given that for many a linguist both the degree and type of learning involved in language acquisition remain contentious matters, these programmatic statements contribute to feeling right from the start that the author is preaching to the choir—a practice by no means uncommon these days, within both the cognitivist and the formalist camps. Exactly because of that, however, the challenge would be to use one’s arguments to initiate a dialogue with the opposing camp, rather than stating them as foregone conclusions—a tall order by any measure, and perhaps not one that falls within the scope of the present work. Be that as it may, these opening ‘credits’ make clear the orientation of the book, as well as circumscribe its intended audience.

This trend continues as the tools used in the analyses of the ensuing chapters are introduced, most prominently Langacker’s (1987) notion of construal, and Fauconnier’s (1994) theory of mental spaces. A diagrammatic representation of Langacker’s notion of construal (p. 5) serves as the basis for developing the schema in Fig. 1, which recurs in several adaptations throughout the book.

This schema aptly illustrates the location of linguistic meaning simultaneously on two planes, that of the Object (O) and that of the Subject (S) of conceptualization, allowing us to visualize the current author’s emphasis on intersubjectivity as a shift of focus from O to S, now consisting, not of one, but of two, subjects of conceptualization—the speaker/writer (1) and the addressee (2)—cognitive coordination between them (as represented in a single line of construal running from S to O) being the topic of this book. This schema can also be adduced to explain the two senses of

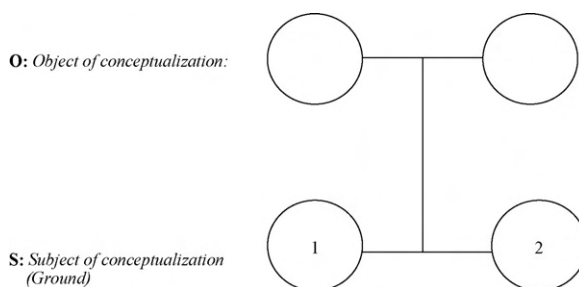


Fig. 1. The construal configuration and its basic elements (Verhagen, 2005:7, Fig. 1.2).

subjectivity distinguished in this chapter (pp. 4–5)—one contrasting one’s take on reality to that reality itself, i.e., focusing on the vertical S–O axis, and another contrasting different subjects’ takes on reality, i.e., focusing on the horizontal S axis. Both senses are said to be relevant to intersubjectivity, although the latter is eventually given priority (p. 28).

This basic schema serves the author well as a common denominator visually linking together the analyses of different expressions while highlighting subtle differences in meaning between them. Yet, exactly because of its centrality to the theme of the book, a slightly fuller explication of its elements from the outset may have been desirable. Specifically, while a significant amount of explanation is devoted to plane S (pp. 6–8)—after all, this constitutes the book’s focus—hardly anything is said about plane O, whose duality remains unacknowledged in the text, references being instead to “a/some/the object of conceptualization” (pp. 6–8), and seemingly unmotivated—at least in a theory-neutral way—until chapter 4, where the focus explicitly shifts to “linguistic expressions connecting at least *two* situations in dimension O” (p. 156; original emphasis). A further misgiving, this time of a somewhat philosophical nature, concerns the possibility “to distinguish sufficiently sharply between these levels [O and S] and their features” (p. 25). Given that S is no less multi-faceted than O, insistence on a sharp distinction between S and O may be slightly misleading, inasmuch as S may be interdependent with O, different takes on O in turn profiling *S* in different ways—as when, e.g., one speaks of ‘terrorists’ as opposed to ‘freedom fighters’ revealing something of one’s own allegiances, which may in turn affect (if not determine) the persuasive effect of one’s words on one’s interlocutor.

In addition to the schema in Fig. 1, chapter 1 introduces another notion central to the intersubjectivity thesis, that of ‘topos’ (Greek for ‘location, place’, cf. Latin *locus*), also adapted from Anscombe and Ducrot’s terminology (p. 12). This is now defined as a kind of “default rule, not a universally valid one,” a “shared model in which the object of conceptualization figures,” “mutually known to the members of the culture” (p. 12). Subsequent chapters elaborate on this definition, by speaking of a topos as “knowledge on the part of the addressee that is not part of the object of conceptualization” (p. 53), a “cultural (cognitive) model” (pp. 54, 56, 57), “laying down what is *normally* the case” (p. 58; original emphasis), a “background assumption [which is] some kind of generalization” (p. 168). The importance of topoi for the intersubjectivity thesis is that it is precisely such topoi that are cued by linguistic expressions in the process of achieving cognitive coordination between interlocutors. In other words, the existence of a relevant topos is a prerequisite for intersubjectivity, inasmuch as topoi serve as mental ‘reference points’ with respect to which interlocutors seek to harmonize their perspectives on the object of conceptualization. Conversely, lack of such a topos may be a source of conversational incoherence, which accounts for the unacceptability of specific examples (p. 46). Once more, given its importance, some further elaboration of this notion and comparison with related notions such as, e.g., Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs; Lakoff, 1987) earlier on in the book, may have been desirable.

Following the introduction of the main components of the theory, chapter 1 goes on to outline the methodology that will be adopted (pp. 24–25). In view of the work’s stated usage-based orientation (p. 24), this methodology can be no less empirically driven. Thus, much of the evidence adduced in the ensuing chapters comes from corpus data, Dutch as well as English, with comparisons between corpora offering the opportunity of further insights. Examples drawn from the Internet and newspaper excerpts, though not explicitly mentioned in this context, are also frequently drawn upon. However, although certainly instructive, the former’s usefulness is compromised by the lack of any citation information for them (i.e., site and date accessed) that would allow one to ascertain the (geographical/social) origin and context of specific examples.

A final source of information are constructed examples and intuitions, which are not discarded, but roped in as a complementary source of data “if there is consensus about them among native speakers” (p. 25)—a proviso, which, unfortunately, is not further elaborated for what such consensus may consist in and how it may be empirically assessed, points which would have greatly enhanced the present work’s contribution on the methodological level as well. This omission is especially frustrating in light of subsequent comments on, e.g., multiple wh-extraction, as “not instantiated in actual usage . . . and [hence] appear[ing] artificial” (p. 127), where it remains unclear whether ‘artificial’ also entails ungrammatical, or alternatively hints at a more shaded view of grammaticality judgments.

As has already been hinted above, an aspect that may have been usefully elaborated on in this introductory chapter concerns commonalities between the current approach and other (cognitive) approaches currently on the market, such as Relevance Theory. Links between the intersubjectivity approach and Relevance Theory come readily to mind, as for instance, when linguistic expressions are defined as “cues for making inferences” (p. 22), reminding one of the latter’s analysis of utterances as a kind of ‘behavioral stimuli’ calling for interpretation; or, when communication is said to involve “always engaging in cognitive coordination with *some* subject of conceptualization” (p. 7; original emphasis), paralleling the latter’s thesis that communication occurs only when a change occurs in the communicators’ mutual cognitive environments—both of these points adding up to the relevance-theoretic definition of communication as “ostensive-inferential” (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995:64).

Failure to draw such links is indeed not limited to this chapter, or to links with Relevance Theory alone. For instance, the argumentative function of linguistic expressions as “*instruction[s]* to engage in a reasoning process” (pp. 12–13; emphasis added) and “orienting an addressee to certain conclusions” (p. 43), although reminiscent of the relevance-theoretic notion of procedural meaning (Blakemore, 1987), is never discussed in those terms. And whereas one may feel that reference to the originator of these ideas, Ducrot, is sufficient, in this case, the same cannot be said about the distinction between “author” and “onstage conceptualizer,” introduced in chapter 3 (p. 114) to tackle phenomena previously analyzed under the title of ‘footing’ by Goffman (1981), and of ‘heteroglossia’ by Bakhtin (1981). Although in both of these cases the relevant notions of ‘argumentativity’ and ‘polyphony’, respectively, from Ducrot’s work are heavily drawn upon, highlighting similarities with—and, where necessary, differences from—theories occasionally beyond mainstream cognitive linguistic theorizing could lend welcome support to, as well as enhance the impact of, the ideas put forward in this book.

Following the outline of the theory in chapter 1, chapter 2 initiates the nitty-gritty work of detailed linguistic analysis which makes up the bulk of the book. Under the title “Negation and virtual argumentation,” the author tackles here a range of expressions traditionally subsumed under the label of ‘negative polarity items’ (NPIs), including sentential negation with *not*, which is contrasted with morphological negation involving the prefixes *in/m-* or *un-*, the construction *let alone*, various constructions with (*a*) *chance*, and adverbial modification via *barely* and *almost*. The methodology adopted, here and throughout the book, is explicitly informed by the principles of structural linguistics. Specifically, both paradigmatic (substitutability) and syntagmatic (co-occurrence) relations are drawn upon to help analyze the meaning of negative expressions and account for (un)acceptability judgments.

The principal insight put forward in this chapter is that the point of (sentential) negation is not to describe some situation in the world, reversing the truth value of an utterance (p. 32), although it may fulfill such a truth-conditional function secondarily (p. 42). Rather, its point is to instruct

the addressee, first, to construct two mental spaces representing distinct epistemic stances toward the same idea, and, subsequently, to cancel inferences associated with this idea (p. 72)—an insight emphatically repeated in chapter 4 as “[n]egation only adds a mental space, it does not remove one” (p. 187), and which gains support from recent psycholinguistic evidence that information within the scope of negation is not automatically suppressed but may well remain salient and be exploited in subsequent processing (Giora, 2007). In terms of this book, negation operates primarily not on the vertical relation between a subject S and an object of conceptualization O, but on the horizontal relation between conceptualizers at level S. Moreover, negation not only affects inferences at this level directly rather than mediated by the descriptive contents of expressions at level O (p. 49), but such inferences may even in turn *determine* the descriptive contents of expressions at O (pp. 51–52), both points supporting the primacy of the intersubjective plane for the semantics of negation. Things are different with morphological negation which involves a single mental space and operates primarily at level O, where it reverses the scale associated with the adjective to which it is attached (p. 32). This allows for a unified treatment of litotes, such as ‘not unhappy,’ and straightforward sentential negation in this framework (pp. 70–75). Finally, chapter 2 introduces the notions of ‘argumentative orientation,’ which is binary between positive and negative values, and ‘argumentative strength,’ which ranges across a continuum from maximal to minimal, both viewed as central to a unified treatment of polarity items at large. [‘Argumentative orientation’ is the term that recurs throughout the book and in the index, although the relevant section heading on p. 44 refers to ‘argumentative *direction*’ instead.]

The analyses in this chapter are detailed and convincing, and the author finds himself returning to negation in subsequent chapters as the phenomenon *par excellence* supporting the intersubjectivity thesis. Nevertheless, despite the rigorousness of the analyses, some minor issues remain. One such issue concerns the import of the indefinite article ‘a’ to the positive and negative argumentative orientation respectively of the expressions ‘a small chance’ and ‘little chance’ (p. 43), which would seem to parallel presence vs. absence of the indefinite in the upward and downward entailing expressions ‘a few’ and ‘few,’ already pointed out by Jespersen (1917:40–41) and previously discussed in the literature on polarity and scales (e.g., Horn, 1989:237; Rivero, 1971 reported in Horn, 1978:141). Expanding on this parallel would help to create bridges with alternative approaches to the same phenomena, as well as explicate potential differences that could contribute to a fuller appreciation of the current author’s contribution. A similar issue arises in chapter 4, with respect to the import of the modal ‘must’ which seems to be doing most of the epistemic work in example (26) on p. 177 (“It must have been raining a lot because the tennis court is unplayable on”), contrary to (13) on p.165 (“John worked hard, because he passed his exams”), where this role is taken up by ‘because’ alone, and to which (26) is nevertheless offered as a parallel without further comment. Addressing these issues could help settle any lingering doubt concerning the adequacy of the framework put forward in this book.

Chapter 3, “Finite complements—putting conceptualizers on stage,” tackles another phenomenon central to syntactic theory, clausal complementation. The problem now is identified as emanating from the current premium placed on abstractness in grammar, which necessitates minimizing differences between phenomena in order to treat them as expressions of the same, overarching abstract principles. This leads to a top-down view of complementation, which at once conflates clausal with nominal complements (p. 79), and treats clausal complements as a subcategory of subordinate clauses (p. 82). Instead, building on known asymmetries between nominal and clausal complements which are left unaccounted for in the standard approach,

Verhagen puts forward what he calls a “bottom-up view of complementation” according to which the point of a complementation sentence is to invite the addressee “to identify with a particular perspective [expressed by way of a matrix clause; MT] on an object of conceptualization that is itself represented in the embedded clause” (p. 79). Elsewhere, complementation is viewed as “a form of grammaticalization of a dimension of discourse structure that is ‘orthogonal’ to its informational content” (p. 97), while later (p. 150) the two dimensions are identified as the familiar “intersubjective” (S) and “object” (O) dimensions, respectively, introduced in chapter 1 (see Fig. 1). Complementation thus emerges as a prototypical construction with its own irreducible form and meaning, inherited by the linguistic expressions that instantiate it, witness both the interpretation of novel Complement-Taking (CT) verbs (p. 102), and the high frequency of this construction type in corpora overall, though not of particular token CT verbs therein (p. 102).

By charting type and token frequencies of complementation constructions in corpora, Verhagen is moreover in a position to propose a network of Dutch complementation constructions, held together by “the specification of some aspect of intersubjective coordination” (p. 111). At the center of this network lie CT verbs which are ‘mental-space builders,’ evoking “a mental state or process of a subject of consciousness” (p. 100), while CT verbs expressing causality constitute extreme extensions from this core class of verbs, causality being considered a special case of perspectivization (pp. 141–146).

Returning to the core class of mental-space builders, its centrality follows from the human cognitive ability for a theory of mind (as established in, e.g., Tomasello’s work referred to in chapter 1), which predicts that, if humans can conceptualize each other as conceptualizers, this ability should also be expressed linguistically via constructions putting different conceptualizers on stage, and that such constructions should exhibit recursion (p. 99). Complementation thus invites cognitive coordination with an onstage conceptualizer, who may be 1st or 3rd person, or non-perspectivized, in which case the speaker is the default onstage conceptualizer with whom the addressee cognitively coordinates (p. 133). While argumentative orientation across these different perspectives is held constant, argumentative strength varies: embedding the object of conceptualization into another’s perspective highlights the potential subjectivity of this perspective, decreasing argumentative strength, unlike non-perspectivized sentences, in which the object of conceptualization is introduced ‘unqualified,’ so to speak, into the shared mental spaces of speaker and addressee (p. 107).

Overall, chapter 3 makes a compelling case for an intersubjectivity approach to clausal complementation. If any misgivings remain, these concern once more the failure to draw links with literature beyond the immediate cognitive linguistic interest of the book. For instance, the analysis of the meaning of complementation sentences as involving both an intersubjective and an object dimension cannot but remind one of Searle’s analysis of the meaning of all utterances as involving both an illocutionary force and a propositional content component, captured in the expression  $F(p)$  (Searle, 1979:1). As this is presumed to underlie all utterances, not just complement-taking ones, a comparison of Searle’s schema with the current proposal would help clarify what is new about the current proposal, possibly leading to interesting insights, and perhaps even novel extensions.

The next chapter, chapter 4: “Discourse connections—managing inferences across perspectives,” is dedicated to discourse connectives, encompassing both traditional ‘conjunctions’ (expressing primarily grammatical meaning; e.g., *but*, *because*, *although*, etc.) and ‘adverbs’ (expressing primarily lexical meaning; e.g., *therefore*, *consequently*, etc.). In consonance with the continuity between grammar and the lexicon advocated within cognitive

linguistic approaches, these are viewed as constituting a single category and analyzed jointly on the basis of their common function, which is to “conventionally establish a conceptual relationship to another discourse segment” (p. 158).

What is distinctive about connectives, as opposed to the phenomena analyzed in the previous two chapters—negation and clausal complementation—is that connectives refer to, not one, but two situations at level O, which they relate to one another. These two situations are actually entertained by two distinct conceptualizers (pp. 168–169, 174), which makes for the unique contribution of connectives to relationship management (p. 183): by acknowledging another’s—typically, the addressee’s—perspective, which may itself be identified with a widely accepted topos, the speaker can simultaneously pay homage to this topos, and express a different perspective. In this way, connectives offer yet another instance of simultaneously entertaining multiple perspectives, a possibility first discussed with respect to the notion of ‘onstage conceptualizer’ and recursion in clausal complementation in the previous chapter.

Centering around detailed analyses of English *although*, *but*, *because* and Dutch *dus/want*, *daarom/omdat* and *aangezien*, the bulk of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of concessivity, and to distinguishing this from causality. In terms of the analysis outlined above, use of a concessive amounts to making a potentially valid inference (given a topos) in one mental space, while simultaneously invalidating the consequence of that inference in another space (the one associated with the speaker). This analysis provides a natural explanation as to why concessives cannot be in the scope of negation: in that case, a conflict would arise in the space of one and the same conceptualizer (the speaker), who would appear to be at once invalidating the inference (as per the concessive), and negating its invalidation (as per the negation). It is, then, precisely in contrasting different conceptualizers’ perspectives on the relation between two situations that concessivity differs from causality, which merely relates two situations at O, without for that matter introducing a contrast between perspectives.

After successively tackling negation, finite complementation, and discourse connectives, three indisputably major foci of grammatical theorizing, making each time a compelling case for analyzing them as constructions of intersubjectivity, in the final, and shortest, chapter of the book, Verhagen returns to the big picture, and the place of intersubjectivity in linguistic explanation. Here, we are reminded of the point of the painstaking analyses of the previous chapters: “there is a strong ‘dialectics’ between specific, sometimes minute problems of linguistic analysis and very general views of the function and structure of language” (p. 210). The point is that we should let the phenomena speak for themselves: preconceived ideas about how language works (sometimes inherited by traditional grammar) may obscure the underlying principles at work; detailed analyses of particular expressions, on the other hand, may allow previously unnoticed connections between them to emerge in a bottom-up fashion.

True to this empiricist stance, in *Constructions of Intersubjectivity*, Verhagen manages to go beyond the individual properties of particular expressions and motivate both similarities and differences in their behavior with respect to a deeper underlying principle, intersubjectivity. Despite his success at providing a unified account of different phenomena, and doing away with some unresolved puzzles and inconsistencies of previous approaches in the process, Verhagen nevertheless does not wish to claim that intersubjectivity accounts for all of language: “not everything is intersubjectivity” (p. 210). While the proposed link with broader evolutionary concerns (pp. 212–214) stands to be usefully elucidated by future research, the attempt to work out the implications of this link for the structure of language is certainly a welcome addition to the cognitive linguistics literature, and an original new proposal for linguistic theory at large.

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**Marina Terkourafi** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Linguistics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include post-Gricean pragmatics, theories of (im)politeness, language contact and change, and construction grammar(s). She has also collaborated on projects in computational pragmatics and the language of emotions. She has published widely in these areas in journals such as *Cognition & Emotion*, *Diachronica*, *The Journal of Politeness Research*, and *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, as well as in edited collections.

Marina Terkourafi  
 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,  
 707, S. Mathews Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, United States  
 E-mail address: [mt217@uiuc.edu](mailto:mt217@uiuc.edu)