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Constructions of Intersubjectivity: Discourse, Syntax, and Cognition

By Arie Verhagen

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Reviewed by Steve Nicolle

BTL (East Africa)

Subjective and intersubjective

Subjectivity is a notion which is associated with Cognitive Grammar (see Langacker 1985, 1990, 1999, 2000). A subjective construal of an event arises when the perspective of the conceptualizer of an event (typically the speaker) is incorporated into the description of the event. For example, (1a) is objectively construed in that the child moves, whereas (1b) is subjectively construed because it is the speaker's point of view rather than the mailbox which is conceived of as moving; as Radden (1996:450) puts it, "the conception of motion is still preserved in the directionality of the conceptualizer's mental scanning along the path of an extended surface."

(1a) The child is hurrying across the street.

(1b) There is a mailbox across the street.

The cognitive approach to language description is far from uniform however, and the term 'subjectivity' has been used in different ways. In Traugott's use of the term, subjectivity is primarily concerned with the way in which a speaker's psychological or emotional perspective is incorporated into the description of a situation or event (Traugott 1989, 1995, 1999a, 1999b) as, for example, in the performative uses of locutionary verbs such as *I promise* and the use of discourse markers such as *after all*. This is similar to Lyon's (1982:102) conception of subjectivity as "the locutionary agent's expression of himself and his own attitudes and beliefs." For Nuyts (2001a, 2001b), subjectivity is a characteristic of mental-state predicates such as *think* which indicate that the speaker has access to certain evidence which has a bearing on the situation being described.

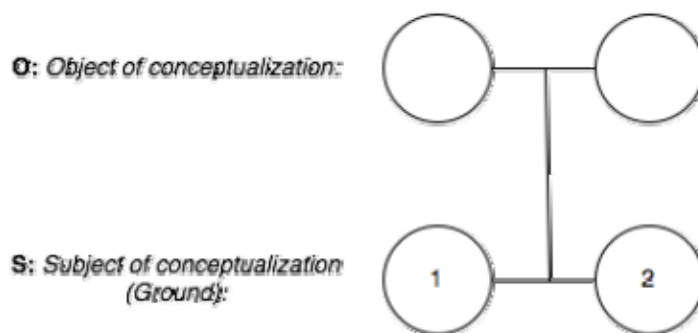
The derivative notion of intersubjectivity is concerned not just with the speaker's perspective but with the way in which the speaker attempts to take the perspective of the addressee or to coordinate his or her own perspective with that of the addressee; that is, "Intersubjectivity crucially involves [the speaker's] attention to [the addressee] as a participant in the speech event, not in the world talked about" (Traugott 1999b). Thus for Traugott intersubjectivity includes honorifics, and expressions such as *actually*, which anticipate some objection on the part of the addressee. For Nuyts (2001a, 2001b) intersubjectivity describes evidential markers,

such as the epistemic adjective *probably*, that indicate that some evidence which has a bearing on the situation being described is accessible to both the addressee and the speaker.

For Verhagen, however, intersubjectivity is not a derivative concept, or one which can only be understood in opposition to subjectivity; rather, it describes a central characteristic of human communication. Verhagen's thesis is that language is not only (and perhaps not primarily) a tool for exchanging information about the world, but is fundamentally concerned with "connecting, differentiating, and 'tailoring' the contents of points of view with respect to each other (rather than organizing a connection to the world)" (p. 4). In other words, the primary role of language is to establish or modify the way in which individuals relate to each other, and only derivatively to express how individuals perceive and understand the world.¹ This role of coordinating the points of view of different 'conceptualizers' (prototypically a speaker and an addressee) is what Verhagen means by intersubjectivity.

Whereas most modern semantic theories are primarily concerned with the way in which language represents the world, represented in Figure 1 by the vertical line connecting the conceptualizers' common ground and the object(s) of conceptualization, Verhagen is primarily concerned with the way in which language represents the relations between conceptualizers, represented by the line connecting conceptualizer 1 and conceptualizer 2.

Figure 1: The construal configuration and its basic elements (p. 7)

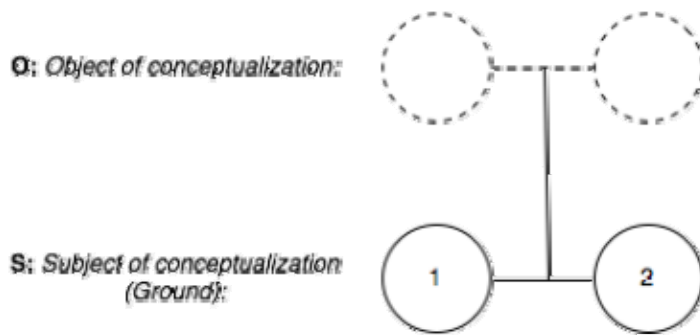


In support of his thesis, Verhagen shows how the notion of intersubjectivity helps to explain both the semantics and the syntax of three kinds of natural language constructions: negation and negation-related constructions, concessive and causal discourse connectives, and finite complements.²

Negation and discourse connectives

Verhagen presents a wide range of data in support of the claim that "the primary conventional function of [sentential] negation is to cancel inferences — guiding the addressee's cognitive processes — not to report something about the world... [S]entential negation operates primarily in the dimension of intersubjective coordination, level S of the construal configuration in [Figure 1], while morphological negation operates primarily at level O" (p. 75). What this means is that expressions such as *not*, *barely*, *almost*, and *let alone* "operate directly on the relation of intersubjective coordination as represented by the heavy lines in [Figure 2]" (p. 49).

Figure 2: Conventional function of 'argumentative operators' located in dimension of intersubjective coordination (p. 50)

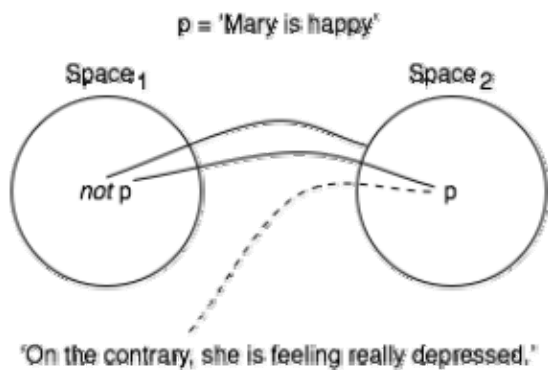


The distinction between expressions which operate at the intersubjective level and those which operate at the objective level is illustrated by the following examples.

- (2a) Mary is not happy. On the contrary, she is feeling really depressed.
- (2b) # Mary is a bit sad. On the contrary, she is feeling really depressed.
- (2c) # Mary is unhappy. On the contrary, she is feeling really depressed.

In each of these examples, the contrary of ‘feeling really depressed’ in the second sentence is not the proposition expressed by the first sentence (that Mary is not happy/a bit sad/unhappy) but its counterpart (that Mary is happy). That is, the second sentence is opposed to what Verhagen (p. 32) calls an ‘evoked mental space’. Example (2a) can be represented by Figure 3, in which the two mental spaces (Space₁ and Space₂) correspond to the two conceptualizers in Figure 2, and Space₂ is an evoked mental space (i.e. one attributed by the speaker to the addressee). Neither (2b) nor (2c) evoke this alternative mental space and are therefore infelicitous.

Figure 3: ‘On the contrary’ relates to evoked mental space (\neq Space₁) (p. 32)



The notion of an evoked mental space is also used to explain the difference in acceptability between the following examples. (3b) with *barely* is unacceptable despite the fact that ‘He barely passed’ entails ‘He passed’; and (3d) is acceptable despite the fact that ‘He almost passed’ entails ‘He did not pass’.

- (3a) He passed his first statistics course. So there’s hope.
- (3b) # He barely passed his first statistics course. So there’s hope.
- (3c) # He did not pass his first statistics course. So there’s hope.

(3d) He almost passed his first statistics course. So there's hope.

If the examples in (3) were simply descriptions of situations in the world, (3b) should provide more grounds for hope that the subject will complete his studies than (3d), but that is not how these examples are understood. This leads Verhagen to conclude that, just like sentential negation, “*barely* and *almost* operate *directly on inferences* associated with the concepts they modify, not indirectly via the descriptive contents of the terms as such” (p. 49, original emphasis). This is possible because the meaning of *barely* and *almost* at the intersubjective level is independent of their meanings at the objective level; thus, even though *barely* $p \neq \text{not } p$ and *almost* p entails *not* p as far as descriptions of the world are concerned (e.g. a fuel tank that is barely full is nonetheless full whereas a fuel tank that is almost full is still not full), at the level of intersubjective coordination *barely* and *not* share the same orientation, which is the opposite of that expressed by *almost*. This is represented as follows:

Figure 4: Negation and *barely* share orientation for intersubjective coordination (p. 57)

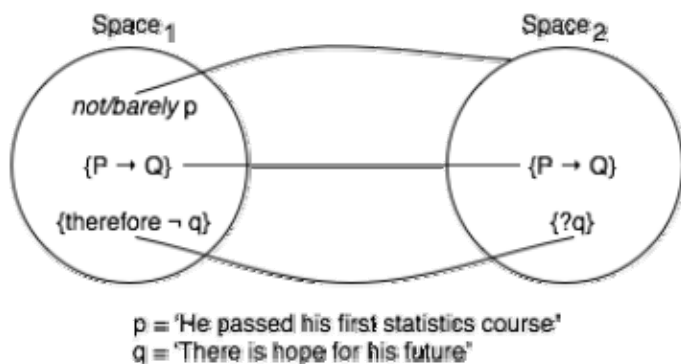


Figure 4 illustrates how the speaker attributes a thought q ('There is hope for his future') to the addressee, represented by $\{?q\}$ in Space₂, and how she shares with the addressee a cultural model represented by $\{P \rightarrow Q\}$. The use of both *not* p and *barely* p invalidates q at the intersubjective level, represented by $\{\text{therefore } \neg q\}$, leading the addressee to reject q . Verhagen comments, “The activation of such structures and processes in Space₂ is conventionally associated with the use of an element from the negation system such as *not* or *barely*. The speaker/writer has to assume, for example, that the relevant topos³ $\{P \rightarrow Q\}$ can be activated in Space₂ to license an inference q (if p), or otherwise his utterance of *not/barely* p would not make sense” (p. 58).

One consequence of this analysis is that it complements a cognitive analysis of the discourse connectives *so* and *but*. Verhagen writes, “*so* instructs the addressee to interpret the clause it introduces as an inference licensed by the preceding discourse given relevant topoi (and possibly ‘intermediate’ inferences). Thus the connective relates to the level S of intersubjective coordination already because it invokes knowledge (the topos) on the part of the addressee that is not part of the object of conceptualization... The reverse of *so* in English is *but*. Rather than marking an explicit discourse segment as an inference licensed by the previous discourse [like *so*], *but* marks a discrepancy between the next segment and such inferences from the preceding discourse” (p. 52-53). This is illustrated by the following examples:

(4a) Our two sons Charles and George were playing a game. Halfway through, Charles had barely sixty points. So the youngest was probably going to win

again.

- (4b) Our two sons Charles and George were playing a game. Halfway through, Charles had barely sixty points. But the youngest was probably going to win again.

In (4a) *the youngest* is interpreted as George but in (4b) as Charles. The use of *barely* invites the inference that Charles is not likely to win (on the assumption that the person with more points is the winner) and whereas *so* in (4a) confirms this inference *but* in (4b) cancels this inference (perhaps George had even fewer points).

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, Verhagen conceives of the meaning of expressions such as *not*, *barely*, *almost*, and *but* in terms of ‘guiding inferences’ or ‘constraints on interpretation’ (p. 44, n.12), which resembles the Relevance Theory notion of procedural information. It is instructive to compare Verhagen’s account of *but* with Relevance Theory accounts of *but* as a procedural marker.

According to Blakemore (2000, 2002) *but* indicates that the clause it introduces contradicts and eliminates an assumption that is manifest in the context (including but not restricted to the preceding clause). Iten (2000:228) modifies Blakemore’s account to say that the contradicted and eliminated assumption must merely be accessible rather than manifest to the hearer. An assumption is manifest to an individual if he is capable of representing it mentally and accepting it as true or probably true (Sperber and Wilson 1986:39) whereas an assumption is accessible to an individual if he is merely capable of representing it mentally, without necessarily accepting it as true or probably true. Hall (2004:235) weakens Blakemore’s account still further by arguing that “*but* encodes a procedure that involves suspending an inference that would lead to a contradiction if it went through.” According to Hall, this inference is not necessarily one that the addressee would be expected to make, it merely has to be a potential inference, such that “*but* can be perfectly acceptable without the hearer needing to recognize what particular conclusions he is being diverted from” (*ibid.* 231). This seems to be a very similar conception of the meaning of *but* to that proposed by Verhagen, since in Verhagen’s model the inference which is cancelled by *but* is merely licensed by the evoked mental space (Space₂) which the speaker attributes to the addressee, rather than being an inference that the addressee is assumed to have actually made.

Hall mentions one difficulty which none of the Relevance Theory accounts has so far managed to address satisfactorily. Compare (5a) and (5b):

(5a) She’s not my sister but my mother.

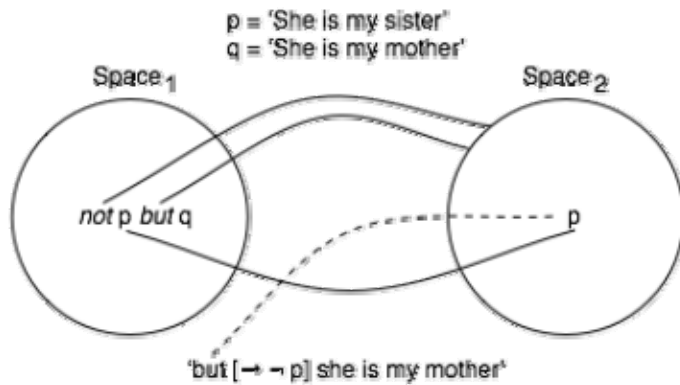
(5b) She’s not my sister but she is my mother.

Example (5b) can be interpreted as cancelling the conclusion ‘She’s not related’ which is a possible implicature of ‘She’s not my sister’, but this reading is impossible with (5a). As Hall (2004:232) notes, in (5a) “the *but*-clause isn’t denying anything communicated by the first clause. The relation instead seems to be between the *but*-clause and the assumption (*She is my sister*) already negated by the first clause.” She continues: “To preserve a unitary analysis, an explanation is going to have to say that there is something about the *not X but Y* construction that allows this.”

Hall is correct that the *but*-clause in (5a) isn’t denying anything communicated by the first

clause; what it is denying is an assumption in the evoked mental space (Space₂), as Figure 5 (based on Verhagen's Figure 3 above) illustrates. Note that in Figure 5, as in Figure 6, negation and *but* relate to the same evoked mental space (Space₂), as Verhagen notes in relation to sentences containing *although* and sentential negation (discussed below).

Figure 5: Mental space configuration for *She's not my sister but my mother*. *But* relates to evoked mental space (Space₂)

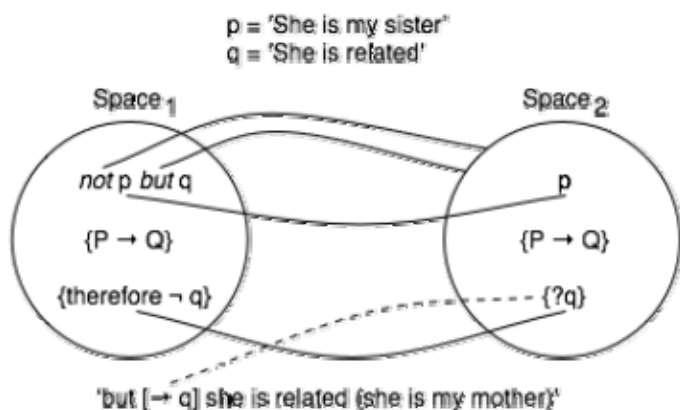


This account correctly predicts that only (6a) is felicitous, since only sentential negation evokes a mental space (Space₂).

- (6a) Mary is not happy but really depressed.
- (6b) # Mary is a bit sad but really depressed.
- (6c) # Mary is unhappy but really depressed.

However, *not* also operates on *inferences* associated with the concept it modifies, and it is the inference (She is not related) associated with 'She's not my sister' which the *but*-clause in (5b) denies. The relevant topos is $\{P \rightarrow Q\}$, where $p =$ 'She is my sister' and $q =$ 'She is related'; *not p* invalidates q at the intersubjective level, represented by $\{\text{therefore } \neg q\}$ leading to the conclusion 'She is not related' and it is this assumption which *but* eliminates ($[\neg \neg q] = q$). This is illustrated in Figure 6:

Figure 6: Mental space configuration for *She's not my sister but she is my mother*. *But* relates to an inference in evoked mental space (Space₂)



If this analysis is correct, it means that Verhagen's account of *but* will also have to be modified. Rather than marking a discrepancy between the following segment and an *inference* licensed by the preceding discourse, *but* marks a discrepancy between the following segment and some element of *the evoked mental space* licensed by the preceding discourse, either an inference (q) or some other element such as whatever is within the scope of sentential negation (p). The fact that *but* in (5a) operates on p while *but* in (5b) operates on q (obtained via the topos $\{P \rightarrow Q\}$, which is absent from Figure 5) obviously relates to the fact that *but* introduces a noun phrase in (5a) and a clause in (5b), but precisely how these facts are related is beyond the scope of this review.

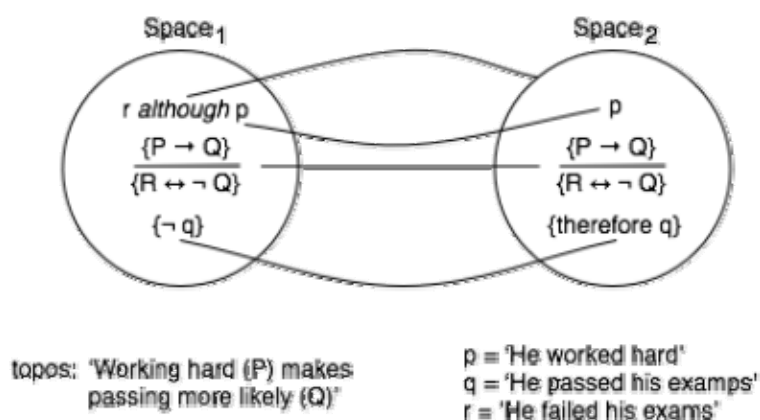
Verhagen provides more detailed analyses of causal discourse connectives such as *because*, and concessive discourse connectives such as *although* and their Dutch counterparts. *But* is also concessive, but Verhagen notes (p. 170) that whereas *r but p* cancels the conclusions associated with r (we would say it cancels some element of an evoked mental space associated with r), *r although p* cancels the conclusions associated with p. Consider (7) and (8):

(7) John failed his exams, but he worked hard. So let's give him his birthday present anyway.

(8) ??John failed his exams, although he worked hard. So let's give him his birthday present anyway.

The underlying topos here is that a person who fails his exams (= r) does not deserve a present. Example (7) with *but* cancels the conclusion associated with r, i.e. that John does not deserve a present, but (8) with *although* does not. This is because *although* cancels a conclusion associated with 'he worked hard' and so is at best irrelevant or at worst contradictory (assuming a topos such as 'a person who works hard deserves a present'). This is illustrated in Figure 7, in which, "while the speaker/writer acknowledges that given p there may be good reasons to adopt q [represented by Space2 in which q goes through], she nevertheless invites the addressee to adopt r, which is incompatible with q [represented by Space1 in which r overrides q]" (p. 169).

Figure 7: Mental space configuration for *He failed his exams although he worked hard* (p.169)



The crucial point about Verhagen's analysis of concessive conjunctions (which is also applied to epistemically used causal conjunctions), is that "they activate a mental space configuration with two conceptualizers, the second of which contains an epistemic stance towards some idea that is different from the one that is being entertained by conceptualizer 1" (p. 180). This approach is certainly refreshing and on the whole convincing, and is developed in some detail,

although space precludes a detailed discussion of his arguments here.

Finite complements

The longest chapter of the book concerns finite complements. Finite complements have traditionally been analysed as elements of transitive structures, based on the apparently analogous structure of (9a) and (9b).

(9a) George saw that his opponent was closing in.

(9b) George saw his opponent.

There are various well-known problems with this approach, which I won't describe in detail here but which include problems categorising finite complements as syntactic arguments (direct object or oblique object, subject or predicate), and the fact that prototypical transitive verbs (e.g. *make*, *build*) do not take complement clauses. In light of these problems, Verhagen proposes that grammatical relations such as subject and object are irrelevant for describing finite complementation; instead, he argues that the matrix clause (or, following Diessel and Tomasello (2001) and Thompson (2002), the 'complement-taking clause' or 'CT-clause') functions at level S (the intersubjective dimension of the construal dimension) while the finite complement functions at level O.

In support of his claims Verhagen looks at data from corpora and at the function of complementation in discourse. This reveals that (in Dutch) complement-taking verbs, with the exception of verbs denoting causation, "all evoke a mental state or process of a subject of consciousness" (p. 100), that is, they are what Fauconnier (1994 (1985)) calls 'mental-space builders'. From this, Verhagen concludes that "CT-clauses can thus be seen as specifying, in some respect, the relationship between the onstage conceptualizer's mental space and the Ground, thereby managing the coordination relationship between speaker/writer and addressee" (p. 118). How this works out in practice is shown through examples such as the following:

(10)	Complement-taking clauses	Finite complement clauses
	I have reported before that	there has already been success in breeding clones of mammalian embryos.
	From the above it may now be concluded that	it will become possible in the near future to make new embryos with the DNA of full-grown animals as well.
	The director of GenTech even expects that	this will happen as soon as next year.
	Others believe that	it may take somewhat longer
	but nobody doubts that	the cloning of a full-grown sheep or horse will be a reality within ten years.

In this example, the basic content of the discourse is carried by the finite complement clauses; this is the level O of the construal dimension. The CT-clauses do not relate to the informational content of the passage so much as to the perspective of the conceptualizers involved in producing and interpreting the passage, that is, level S where the intersubjective coordination of cognitive systems occurs.⁴ "The basic function of complementation constructions is that of connecting these two intrinsic dimensions of language use" (p. 150).

Evaluation

This book is an excellent example of a cognitive and functional approach to linguistic analysis. Practitioners of Cognitive Grammar will, I am sure, love it. This could be taken to imply that practitioners of structurally-oriented approaches will hate it, but I hope that will not be the case. Verhagen sets himself two main goals (p. 26): “to convince grammarians that a fundamentally different approach is worth pursuing, and discourse analysts that syntax may be more directly connected to their object of study than they might have thought.” In both of these goals he succeeded as far as I am concerned, and I would encourage others working in the fields of syntax and discourse analysis to read this book with an open mind as well.

Notes

- 1 A similar position can be found in the writings of Donald Davidson. Davidson (2001:128) claims that for either thought or language to exist, there must first be a situation, which he calls ‘triangulation’, “that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share.” In triangulation, “two (or more) creatures each correlate their own reactions to external phenomena with the reactions of the other” (*ibid.* 129). Language, according to Davidson, is essential to thought because “unless the base line of the triangle, the line between the two agents, is strengthened to the point where it can implement the communication of propositional contents, there is no way the agents can make use of the triangular situation to form judgements about the world. Only when language is in place can creatures appreciate the concept of objective truth” (*ibid.* 130). In other words, the ability to communicate with other people through language underlies the capacity to have thoughts about the world. The ability to describe the world (at an objective level) is therefore dependent on the ability to communicate with others (at an intersubjective level).
- 2 Verhagen treats these topics in the order: negation and negation-related constructions, finite complements, and concessive and causal discourse connectives. Because much of his analysis of discourse connectives is derived from his analysis of negation, I will discuss these together.
- 3 Verhagen (p. 168) defines topoi as “default rules, laying down what is normally the case; that is, rules such as ‘Normally, working hard increases your chances of passing your exams’.”
- 4 Verhagen notes that this is not a general property of main and subordinate clauses; when the main and subordinate clauses are linked hypotactically, as in ‘Student fraternities are prospering again // after they went through a serious decline in the eighties’, the main clauses (‘Student fraternities are prospering again’) determine the overall structure of the discourse while the subordinate clauses (‘after they went through a serious decline in the eighties’) provide additional information.

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