

Subjectification may result from ‘mind-reading’

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Subjectifications are semantic changes that involve an “increase in ‘expressiveness’, [or] subjectivity” (Traugott 1982: 257, see also Langacker 2006). Well-known cases include the rise of epistemic modals (encoding speakers’ assessment of the probability of a proposition) from root modals (encoding objective relations of permission, necessity, etc.), or the development of evaluative meanings (as in Old French *villain* ‘scoundrel’ < Lat. *villanus* ‘someone bound to a villa’). – Our paper challenges the view that subjectifications are driven by speakers and serve their need for self-expression, thus fulfilling the expressive function of language (Jakobson 1960, Bühler 1965, Halliday & Hasan 1976). On the other hand, it may result from listeners’ attempts to ‘read the minds’ of speakers, because they may be more interested in the perspective of their interlocutors than in the propositional content (Krebs & Dawkins 1984, Dennett 1987, Tomasello & Carpenter 2007).

We tested the listener-driven hypothesis in an experiment where participants had to pose nine simple quiz-like questions to what they thought was another participant in a different room, with whom they interacted online. Really, however, they interacted with a computer. Questions were predetermined, but participants had to choose between different versions, which differed in terms of formality, verbosity, etc.. After a few seconds, they would see the typed response of their ‘partner’, and had to rate – on Likert scales – how good it was, whether they thought that their partner found the question easy and interesting, and whether s/he liked the way in which it was put. Crucially, five of the prefabricated answers we confronted them with, contained elements that could be given more or less subjective readings. For example, the answer to the question what the biggest challenge for future generations would be, was *That will be climate change*. Here, *will* could be read as a simple future of prediction, or epistemically, i.e. referencing speakers’ degree of certainty.

To determine to what extent participants’ assessments of answers reflected their active interpretations, we divided them into a ‘powerful’ and a ‘powerless’ group (25 participants each). The former were told they were helping us assess the quality of their partners’ answers. The latter were told to choose the best version of each question, and that their partners would evaluate their choices. We predicted ‘powerless’ participants to be more concerned about their partners’ attitudes towards their choices, and to read more speaker subjectivity into the answers they saw.

Our results did indeed reveal differences between the groups, which we interpret as mild support for a listener-driven view of subjectification. For example, ‘powerless’ participants interpreted ambiguous modals more often as indicating speaker uncertainty than ‘powerful’ ones, and more of them interpreted a post-poned *really* as a negative comment on their question. At the same time, our explorative study revealed a number of methodological issues, which our paper will discuss and which we intend to deal with in another version of the experiment.

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