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6 Subjectification, syntax, and communication

Arie Verhagen

1 Introduction¹

The notion of subjectification has arisen, and is mostly used, in the context of the study of semantic change through time (cf. Traugott 1989, this volume; Langacker 1990). My purpose in the present chapter is to apply the notion to certain phenomena of synchronic variation (in modern Dutch, but also observable in modern English) which look very similar to diachronic subjectification. In particular, I will examine the use of the predicates *promise*, *threaten*, and *refuse* in Dutch and English, focussing on the relation between descriptive ('objective') applications (as in *He promised to defend the constitution*) and modal ('subjective') uses (as in *Thursday promises to be a very fine day. The incident threatened to ruin his chances*).

Whereas some other chapters in this volume (for example, by Elizabeth Traugott and Kathleen Carey) discuss details of the conceptual content of subjectification, the aim of this chapter is to extend the scope of this notion to new domains. Therefore I will not be concerned here with distinctions between different construals of the notion of subjectification (important as the issue may be), but rather start from what they have in common.

I will try to show that an approach in terms of subjectification supplies us with a coherent conceptual framework for an integrated description of the use of the predicates mentioned above, provided that we are willing to take syntactic and discourse analytic considerations into account as well. Firstly, I will argue that the semantic analysis implicitly imposes certain structural differences on subjective versus objective uses of the verbs involved (which in a language like Dutch correlate with formal structural differences in certain contexts); thus syntactic considerations turn out to be an integral part of the semantic analysis. Secondly, a specific way of construing the relationship between subjective and objective uses also appears to shed light on varying uses of

different syntactic constructions in actual discourse, which in turn seem to provide motivation for the existence of the constructions.

Thus the goals of this chapter are in one sense restricted, and in another somewhat ambitious. On the one hand, I will be concerned only with certain aspects of the use of three words, claiming that their analysis is properly included in an analysis of subjectification. But on the other hand, I am trying to justify an integration of the research perspectives of semantics, grammar (in particular phrase structure syntax), and discourse analysis. Put radically: I will be pursuing the idea that one cannot be an optimal semanticist without also doing syntax and discourse analysis – with similar comments applying, *mutatis mutandis*, to the syntactician and the discourse analyst. The main ‘programmatic’ point of this chapter is that these different points of view should be integrated in a linguistic analysis of subjectification (at least as a synchronic phenomenon): semantic, syntactic, and discourse analysis can each be enriched by integration.

2 Subjectification of *promise*

First, let us see why it makes sense to apply the concept of subjectification to a verb like *promise*. Consider the examples in (1)–(4).

- (1) *Hij beloofde de grondwet te verdedigen*
He promised the constitution to defend
‘He promised to defend the constitution’
- (2) *Het debat belooft spannend te worden*
The debate promises exciting to become
‘The debate promises to be exciting’ <ec> (cf. note 1)
- (3) *Tomorrow promises to be a fine day*
- (4) *Het beloofde een mooie dag te worden*
It promised a fine day to become
‘It promised to be a fine day’

Sentence (1) (both in Dutch and in English) ascribes an act of promising to the referent of the subject (‘He’); the infinitival complement (‘to defend the constitution’) represents the propositional content of the speech-act being reported. An expectation on the part of the audience that the referent of ‘He’ will indeed carry out this activity may thus be justified by the fact of the commitment undertaken by this referent. The basis for such an expectation is referred to in the sentence, it is, in the terminology of Langacker (1990), ‘on-stage’.

Sentence (2), on the other hand, does not ascribe an act of promising

to the referent of its subject ('The debate'). Any sense of expectation it induces cannot be justified in terms of something referred to in the sentence, but must be attributed to a subjective evaluation by the conceptualiser, who is not referred to in the sentence; he is 'off-stage'. Similar comments apply to the weather-sentences (3) and (4): whether the subject is a noun or a 'dummy' pronoun, the expectation that it will be a fine day cannot, in either case, be justified by reference to something mentioned in the sentence, but must be taken as a judgement by the conceptualiser.

The difference between (1) and (2)–(4) can be described in terms of subjectification. In terms of Traugott (1989:35), the interpretation of the element *promise* in (2)–(4) is much more 'based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition' than in (1). I have already used Langacker's (1990) terms 'off-stage' and 'on-stage' to refer to the same difference, and other characterisations by Langacker also have immediate parallels for these cases. For example, Langacker describes the subjective meaning in examples like *Beyond the 2000 meter level, the trail {rises/falls/ascends/descends} quite steeply* in the following terms:

The directionality inherent in these latter expressions, and the sense of 'movement' they inspire, can only be attributed to subjective motion by the conceptualizer, who traces a mental path by scanning in a particular direction along the subject's expanse. (p. 19)

And on the 'future senses of "go"' (as in the French *Elle va fermer la porte*), he comments as follows:

Observe, for example, that with the spatial reading [i.e. with the *Elle* moving through space in the direction of the door – AV] the subject necessarily intends to carry out the infinitival process. However the temporal reading carries no such implication – instead we find a generalized conception of imminence or predictability, such that the *speaker* (as opposed to the *subject*) foretells the event's occurrence. (p. 23)

These descriptions allow analogous application to the difference between example (1) and those in (2)–(4); we may say that the sense of expectation inspired by (2)–(4) can only be attributed to a subjective evaluation by the conceptualiser, and that he, rather than the subject of the sentence, foretells the event's occurrence.² The fact that these characterisations – in terms of Traugott as well as Langacker – can be used to describe adequately the meaning differences involved here, clearly shows that a similar semantic mechanism is involved. That does not mean that there are no differences between subjectification of *promise* and that of a case like French *aller*; for example, *promise* suggests

evaluation, normally positive. But the notions that are central in the concept of subjectification carry over directly to *promise*.

As I said before, I will not be concerned with differences between details of Traugott's and Langacker's elaborations of the concept of subjectification, but rather take it as established that they overlap to a large extent, and sufficiently so in order to proceed on the assumption that the discussion to follow is relevant to both approaches. The first point I want to turn to is that of the relation between subjectification in verb meaning and syntax.

3 Subjectification and syntax

3.1 *Interpretation structure*

One of the important features that the characterisations of subjectification above have in common is the idea that the two readings differ in the relations between the verb and the subject of the sentence. In one case the verb meaning is related directly to the referent of the subject: In (1), it is effectively taken as specifying an action emanating from that referent, or, to put it another way, *promise* is located in the subject's sphere of influence. In the other cases, there is no such direct relation between the verb and the subject: In (2)–(4), *promise* is not located in the subject's sphere of influence (but rather in the conceptualiser's state of mind). In other words, the *semantic* characterisation of the difference between (1) and (2)–(4) in terms of subjectification in fact imposes two different *structures* on the interpretation of the sentences involved: one with a direct link between verb and subject, the other with no such direct link.

Another way of showing the structural component of subjectification in the sentences involved is the following. Sentences like (1), with *promise* used objectively, can be paraphrased by means of a series of answers to gradually more specific questions. The first element of the sentence is taken as the answer to the question what the topic of discussion is, the verb is taken as an immediate answer to the question what kind of activity or process the subject originated (which represents the direct link between subject and verb), and the infinite complement is taken as the answer to the question what constituted the content or object of that process. Schematically:

- (1)' – 'What about?' – *He*
 – 'What did he do?' – *promised*
 – 'What did he promise?' – *to defend the constitution*

Specifically, we can take the element *promise* on its own as it denotes a certain concept independently of other elements in the sentence, and relate it interpretively to the subject. The idea of 'promise' is conceptualised independently of a particular content of the promise as an act of a particular kind, the content of which is only specified subsequently. Following suggestions by Daalder (1989), and Pardoën (1993, in preparation), this structural aspect of the interpretation can be depicted graphically as a kind of phrase structure (with the condition that it is to be read from left to right) specifying how the interpretation of the sentence is built up gradually, by sequential addition of elements to the interpretation built up 'so far'. I call such a representation the 'interpretation structure' of a sentence; for example (1)''³

(1)'' He promised to defend the constitution

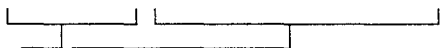


The interpretation structure connected with subjective *promise* is different. The finite verb in *The debate promises to be exciting* cannot be paraphrased as an answer to a question of the type 'What did the debate do?' It cannot be paraphrased as providing a specification of the subject independently, for that would amount to describing the sentence as stating that the debate made a promise, the propositional content of which was to be a fine day – and that is utterly inadequate. Rather, an adequate way of paraphrasing (3) is as in (3)':

(3)' – 'What about?' – *The debate*
 – 'What about the debate?' – *promises to be exciting*

The corresponding interpretation structure is given in (3)'':

(3)'' The debate promises to be exciting



It appears that we have to use two different 'schemas' for sentence interpretation: X-Y-Z and X-Y, the former interpreted as 'X – What did X do? → Y – What did X Y? → Z' (a 'transitive-event-schema'), the latter as 'X – What about X? → Y' (a 'subject-predicate-schema'). Application of the first schema corresponds to the objective reading of a verb, for it is taken as denoting a concept independently of other elements in the sentence, and construed as originating from the subject. The verb in turn assigns the role of promiser to its subject, and may assign the role of promisee to another participant, both independently of the contents of the promise. The second schema corresponds to the subjective reading, in which the verb does not denote a concept that

could be construed as independently denoting some activity or process emanating from the subject; it does not assign roles of promiser and promisee. The subject is not a promiser, but rather a 'theme' being located in a certain conceptual space, essentially denoted by the copular construction, and a promisee is excluded in such cases. In other words, rather than being conceptualised independently, the verb evaluates the applicability of the rest of the predicate, i.e. it is a subjective modifier of the complement. As indicated in (3)", it is only this complex expression that can be taken as providing a specification of the subject *The debate*.

One of the merits of viewing things this way is that it actually *explicitates* what is different in these cases, rather than merely labelling it in terms of 'literal' vs. 'figurative' or 'metaphorical'. This is not, however, to say that such labels are incorrect, but rather that such categorisations do not in themselves provide as much insight as is both needed and possible. As will become clear in section 4, the present approach provides a much better basis for a comprehensive explanatory analysis of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of the phenomena involved.

3.2 *Verb ordering in Dutch subordinate clauses*

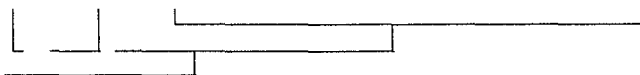
The concepts introduced so far apply equally to the English and the Dutch examples. All of the sentences considered so far lack systematic formal indications for the semantic differences; it is the semantic combination, and (in)compatibilities involved in it, that give rise to one interpretation rather than another. In particular, the differences between the *interpretive* orderings are not formally indicated in the *linear* order of the words. However, in *subordinate* clauses in Dutch, we do find a systematic formal distinction. With nominal objects, subordinate clauses in Dutch exhibit SOV-order, but with other complements things are more variable. It is here that we may find different patterns corresponding to objective versus subjective readings. With objective readings we typically find patterns of the type $S(O)V_1-OV_2$, i.e. with *promise* separated from the non-finite verb V_2 , while with subjective readings we find $S(O)-V_1V_2$, i.e. with the two verbs constituting a cluster. Consider (5) and (6), which contain subordinate variants of (1) and (2), respectively.

- (5) [Er klonk applaus] toen hij beloofde de grondwet
 [There sounded applause] when he promised the constitution
te zullen verdedigen
 to shall defend
 '[Applause resounded] when he promised to defend the constitution'

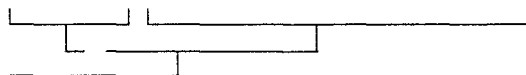
- (6) [*We gaan naar de Kamer*] *omdat het debat spannend belooft*
 [We go to the Chamber] because the debate exciting promises
te worden
 to become
 '[We will go to the House] because the debate promises to be
 exciting'

Note that in (5) *beloofde*, denoting an act of promising by the subject, precedes all of the complement, i.e. it precedes the whole specification of the contents of the promise. But in (6), the predicate nominal precedes *beloofde* (which forms a verbal cluster with the copula). In accordance with the theory of functional word order outlined in Verhagen (1986, to appear) and especially Pardoën (1993, in preparation), *beloofde* in (6) is not conceptualised independently of the predicate nominal 'to be exciting', since the former does not precede the latter (linear precedence being a necessary condition for independent conceptualisation). So the element *beloofde* can only be integrated into the interpretation of the entire sentence as a part of the entire complex 'promise to be exciting' – which is in fact the reading we need. In cases like these, we may conclude that there is a formal indication of the interpretative difference between subjective and objective readings of a verb like *beloven*, since an objective reading is conceptually independent of the complement and may therefore precede it. That is, the linear order in subordinate clauses provides an indication of the required interpretation structures; compare (5)' and (6)' with (1)" and (3)", respectively.

- (5)' *toen hij beloofde de grondwet te zullen verdedigen*
 when he promised the constitution to shall defend



- (6)' *omdat het debat spannend beloofde te worden*
 because the debate exciting promised to become



An interpretation structure of the type in (5)"/(1)" is excluded by the linear order of (6), since in the latter case, the element *beloofde* is located, so to speak, in the middle of the complement. Cases like (6) are sometimes described in terms of an assumed syntactic process of clause union. What I am claiming here is that the occurrence of such a phenomenon is perfectly understandable in terms of concepts that we have to use anyhow in a semantic analysis.

Actually, the relations between form (order) and interpretation (objective/subjective) are asymmetric. Clustering is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a subjective reading of *promise* (objective use of the verb is not disallowed in the order (O)- V_1V_2), while the 'disjoint' order V_1 - OV_2 imposes an objective reading on the verb (this order is a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition for an objective reading). This difference can be exploited in discourse, as we shall see in section 4; for the moment, however, we may abstract from this asymmetry.

Another example exhibiting this syntactic phenomenon is (7):

- (7) [*Er wacht hem een nieuwe taak,*] *die tijdrovend*
 [There awaits him a new task,] which time-consuming
belooft te zijn
 promises to be
 'He has the prospect of a new task] which promises to be time-consuming' <ec>

Notice that (7) and the other examples of subjective *promise* given so far have infinitival complements denoting states, while the complement of objective *promise* in (1) and (5) denotes an activity. This difference in aspectual type correlates (in terms of frequency) with the difference between subjective and objective, but what is really crucial is the relation between the subject and the verb. We do find examples like (8), with a stative complement and an objective promise, and also cases like (9), with a non-stative complement and a subjective promise. What matters is the nature of the subject; the question is: can it be thought to be capable of committing itself to actively producing the result specified in the complement?

- (8) *Zij beloofde haar moeder een goede verpleegster te worden*
 She promised her mother a good nurse to become
 'She promised her mother to be a good nurse'

- (9) *De twaalfde Jumping-Amsterdam belooft al zijn voorgangers te overtreffen*
 The twelfth Jumping-Amsterdam promises all its predecessors to surpass
 'The 12th Jumping-Amsterdam [tournament] promises to surpass all its predecessors' <ec>

In fact, an objective interpretation of (8) is required because of the presence of 'her mother'. This participant needs a semantic role, and the only plausible one is that of promisee, which imposes an objective reading on the verb. Without that participant, the sentence would allow both a subjective and an objective reading, which confirms that the

aspectual type of the complement does not itself indicate a particular construal of the relation between finite verb and subject (a particular interpretation structure). In a subordinate clause, however, the interpretation structure can be reflected linguistically whether a promisee is present or not. With *beloven* preceding the entire complement (as in (10)), it is construed objectively, while the subjective reading requires verb-clustering (as in (11) – the asymmetry in the formulation here relates to the asymmetry alluded to above).

- (10) ... *omdat zij beloofde een goede verpleegster te worden*
 ... because she promised a good nurse to become
 '... because she promised [= made the promise] to be a good nurse'
- (11) ... *omdat zij een goede verpleegster beloofde te worden*
 ... because she a good nurse promised to become
 '... because it looked like she would be a good nurse'

So we seem to have a systematic connection between semantics and syntax involving subjectification. The lack of conceptual independence implied by a subjective construal of a verb requires it to follow non-verbal elements of its complement in subordinate clauses, i.e. to take the position of V_1 in the schema $S(O)-V_1V_2$ rather than in the schema $S(O)V_1-OV_2$.

3.3 Extending the description

Before moving on to further questions of explanation, it is useful to point out that the semantic and syntactic phenomena illustrated above are not restricted to the verb *promise* and its Dutch counterpart *beloven*. They may also be observed with the (related) verb *threaten*, Dutch *dreigen*. Consider (12)–(14):

- (12) *De rector dreigde het onderwijs voor onbepaalde*
 The headmaster threatened the instruction for indefinite
tijd te staken
 time to suspend
 'The headmaster threatened to suspend teaching for an indefinite period of time' <ec>
- (13) *The incident threatened to ruin his chances*
- (14) *Het incident dreigde zijn kansen teniet te doen*
 The incident threatened his chances to-null to do
 'The incident threatened to destroy his chances'

Sentence (12) reports an act of threatening by the headmaster; i.e. *dreigen*, as well as *threaten* in the English translation, is construed objectively. But *threaten* and *dreigen* in (13) and (14) are construed subjectively, completely parallel to the cases with *promise* discussed above. The syntax also works analogously in these cases: subjective *dreigen* does not precede the complement, but forms a cluster with the other, non-finite verb, as illustrated in (15):

- (15) [*Het is een*
prestigeslag] *waarvan vooral de kleuter* *het*
 [It is a battle-
 of prestige,] where-of for-all the pre-schooler the
slachtoffer dreigt *te worden*
 victim threatens to become
 '[This is a fight for prestige,] from which especially small children
 threaten to become victims' <ec>

Here, a subjective reading of *dreigt* is required and the verb may appear only 'in the middle' of the complement, adjacent to the complement verb. In an objective reading, however, it is typically separated from the complement verb, especially when the matrix clause entails that *dreigen* must refer to an utterance by its subject (cf. *ANS* 1984:584). Putting the verbs in (16) in a cluster would remove the sense that 'he' is actually uttering threats:

- (16) *De agent hoorde hoe hij dreigde de gijzelaar neer*
 The officer heard how he threatened the hostage down
te schieten
 to shoot
 'The officer heard how he threatened to shoot the hostage'

The verb *refuse*, Dutch *weigeren*, exhibits a similar pattern: (17) is a case of a refusal construed objectively, whereas (18) contains a case of subjective *refuse*.⁴

- (17) *De president weigerde haar tot premier* *te benoemen*
 The president refused her to prime-minister to appoint
 'The president refused to appoint her as prime minister'
- (18) *De motor weigerde warm te worden*
 The engine refused warm to become
 'The engine refused to get warm'

The syntax seems to work differently here, though. The ordering in (18)' and that in (18)" allow for a subjective reading, while a subjective

construal of *beloven* or *dreigen*, as we observed above, does not permit the second type of ordering:

(18)' ... *dat de motor warm weigerde te worden*
... that the engine warm refused to become

(18)" ... *dat de motor weigerde warm te worden*
... that the engine refused warm to become

The most reasonable explanation for this difference seems to be that *weigeren* and *refuse*, unlike *beloven* and *dreigen* and their English counterparts, allow for a subjective reading even without a complement. In other words, a clause like *De motor weigerde* ('The engine refused') is itself a well-formed expression (conveying the message that the engine did not start), while phrases like *Het debat beloofde* ('The debate promised') and *Het incident dreigde* ('The incident threatened') simply do not constitute well-formed expressions by themselves. In principle then, the difference between subjective and objective construal does not have to correlate (precisely) with conceptual dependence and independence in the case of *weigeren*, allowing both (18)' and (18)". However, I will suggest below that *in actual usage* the difference between *beloven* and *dreigen* on the one hand, and *weigeren* on the other, is not as great as these intuitive judgements suggest.

In fact, there is another issue which makes the difference smaller than it might seem – one that will take us into the area of discourse considerations. As I suggested above, there is an asymmetry in the relations between linear order and interpretation. Note that we have in fact two such relations: one between objective, independent construal of the verb and its preceding the complement, and one between subjective, non-independent construal of the verb and its not preceding the complement. As it turns out, the logical properties of the relations are not exactly the same in the two cases. In the former, the precise statement of the relation must be that precedence imposes objective construal, while, in the latter case, the precise statement is that subjective construal requires non-precedence. That is, *beloven* in its subjective sense may not precede its complement (**dat het debat beloofde spannend te worden*, lit.: 'that the debate promised exciting to become'), but in its objective sense it does sometimes occur in a verbal cluster, to the right of (part of) the complement (cf. also *ANS* 1984:585):

(19) ... *omdat hij het tekort beloofde aan te zuiveren*
... because he the deficit promised up to make
'... because he promised to make up the deficit'

The 'reverse' situation (putting a case of subjective *beloven* to the front

of the complement as in (20)) always results in the odd reading in which the subject is assigned the role of promiser:

- (20) ... *omdat het debat beloofde spannend te worden*
 ... because the debate promised exciting to become
 '... because the debate promised [= made the promise] to be exciting'

So the question is: whence this asymmetry? I want to suggest below that the answer may come from considering the role of the verbs involved, in both their objective and their subjective senses, in connected discourse.

4 Argumentation and coherence

4.1 Argumentational orientation

Clearly, one wants the different uses of the verbs discussed to be related. An analysis that would imply the necessity of assuming homonyms of subjective and objective *promise*, *threaten*, and *refuse*, would surely be missing a generalisation (to put it mildly). So how could one undertake an analysis that relates the uses discussed, and still accounts for the differences? More precisely, how exactly should we conceive of the mechanism of subjectification in these cases? While we are not discussing diachronic developments,⁵ but rather synchronic variation, it is still possible to construe the relationship between the two variants in different ways. Assuming there to be *some* kind of overlap, there are still different ways of conceiving what is common and what is distinct. One way might be to assume that subjectification involves the *addition* of subjectivity to the meaning; or it might be construed as a *replacement* of objectivity by subjectivity while retaining certain structural semantic features (as a kind of metaphorical mapping from the domain of describing reality to the domain of predicting it). Here I want to argue for another assumption, viz. that the subjective use of *promise*, *threaten*, and *refuse* is related to the objective use in the sense that it in fact *shares* subjective elements of meaning with the objective use, but *lacks* elements of objectivity. In other words: what is called objective use does not differ from subjective use in that subjectivity (of the relevant kind) is lacking, but rather in that it exhibits a certain descriptive objectivity that is absent from the subjective use. I will try to argue that the role of the objective sense of *promise*, etc. in connected discourse in fact incorporates certain features that are definitional of the subjective sense.

The central concept in this approach is argumentation. In a developing discourse, the interpreter (short for 'reader or hearer') has a certain

representation of what the discourse is about, and, in particular, of the direction it is taking at that precise point in time. A new utterance is firstly interpreted with respect to his understanding of the discourse so far, and then, more importantly, construed as providing a coherent *next step* in the process of constructing the discourse representation. As is generally assumed in discourse studies, understanding a discourse is an incremental process. Coherence may be taken to mean that the interpreter can establish a conceptual link between the segments of a discourse (notably clauses), but the link does not, of course, have to be one that simply continues the direction the discourse was already taking. On the contrary, a very important coherence relation is that of Contrast (cf. Spooren, 1989), which in fact involves a reversal of the direction a discourse is taking.⁶ It is useful to elaborate this point somewhat further before discussing how *promise*, *threaten*, and *refuse* fit into this framework. Consider a simple case like (21).

(21) This room has a nice view, but it is very expensive.

In terms of incremental discourse understanding, this sequence can be analysed as follows. The first clause contains information supporting the conclusion that the room should be hired. It counts as an argument towards conclusions of that type, so by the end of that clause it has oriented the interpreter towards such a conclusion. Then the next segment arrives, introduced by *but*, and this contains information supporting the opposite conclusion that the room should not be hired. At the end of that clause, the interpreter is oriented towards the latter type of conclusion (in terms of Spooren (1989) the orientation of the second clause in a pair connected by *but* is dominant). So whatever the position of the (assumed) producer of the discourse at the beginning of his utterance (or, for that matter, at the end), the sequence of discourse segments provides a series of argumentational steps, first orienting an interpreter towards a positive conclusion, and then subsequently reversing it.

Anscombe and Ducrot (1989) emphasise that many ordinary expressions in natural languages have the function of orienting an interpreter, at the point in the discourse where they occur, towards conclusions of a particular type. Everyday expressions like *expensive*, *tall*, etc., have some particular argumentational force, and are never (in their terms) 'purely' informative. One can make 'purely' descriptive phrases, like *costs £50* and *is 1.80m*, but they must be constructed *ad hoc*, and in an everyday discourse an interpreter must still find out (in some other way) whether these are to count as (respectively) expensive and tall or not before he knows what he can *do* with the information. This illustrates

that the presence of some argumentational orientation is the default situation in natural language, 'pure' informativity being the exception.⁷

Now notice that the report of an act of promising, at the point in the discourse where it is reported, also has a certain argumentational force. That is, it does not merely describe an event, it also orients the interpreter towards conclusions of a particular type. The report that someone promised X counts as an argument in favour of the conclusion that X will occur; it strengthens the assumption that X will actually happen. Consider the exchange in (22).

(22) A: *Is Peter coming to the party?*

B: *Sure – he promised.*

Interpreting B's utterance coherently requires taking the report of Peter's promise to come as an argument supporting the conclusion that he will indeed come, and such an interpretation is in fact established automatically. This view is confirmed when we consider the use of connectives like *so* and *but*, which mark argumentational relations between discourse segments in an explicit way. Consider (22a and b) as alternative answers to A's query in (22):

(22) a. *He promised to come, so he could be here any minute*

b. *He promised to come, but I'm not entirely confident*

So marks the next step in the interpretation of a discourse as a conclusion licensed by the previous segment, so the naturalness of (22a) confirms the idea that the report of his promise to come counts as an argument for the conclusion that he will in fact come. In (22b), the first segment of course orients the addressee towards precisely the same conclusion, and this explains why in this case the next step, reversing the argumentational orientation, is introduced by the contrastive connective *but*.

It should be stressed once more that this analysis is in no way intended to reflect the conceptualiser's *mental state* in the production of the utterance – it is quite conceivable (perhaps even natural) that B has reached the conclusion that Peter will not be coming to the party even before A asks the question. Rather, what is at stake is the *route*, that is, the successive steps, by which the producer of the discourse is trying to *change* the cognitive state of the *addressee*, in other words, the way communication is taking place.

This perspective on the function of *promise* in connected discourse is also corroborated by the behaviour of linguistic elements that weaken the argumentational force of an expression (argumentational operators in the sense of Anscombe and Ducrot 1989). For example, introducing

a statement with *Well* and/or uttering it with a somewhat rising intonation, has the effect of weakening the force with which the addressee is oriented towards the relevant conclusions (compare *Well, the room has a nice view . . .*).⁸

(23) A: *Is Peter coming to the party?*

B: *Well – he promised . . .*

Having an operator change the argumentational force of an expression presupposes that the expression has a particular force to begin with. Furthermore, notice that the direction of the argumentational orientation is not changed. In terms of incremental interpretation of the discourse, the addressee is oriented towards the same type of conclusions at the end of B's utterance in (23) as was the case in (22) (albeit with less force). Thus, the same pattern of use of connectives shows up here as in (22a and b):

(23) a. *Well – he promised to come, so I guess he might be here any minute*

b. *Well – he promised to come, but you know Peter: he might just forget*

The use of *promise* not only counts as strengthening the assumption that the event denoted by the complement of the verb will occur, it also indicates a positive evaluation of this event (in other words, the discourse orients the addressee towards a positive evaluation). The second segment in (24) is explicitly positive and it is introduced by *so*, which illustrates that the first segment, with *promise*, does have a positive orientation. This is also confirmed by the fact that in (25), a clearly negative second segment is introduced by *but*:⁹

(24) A: *Is Peter coming to the party?*

B: *He promised; so let's hope he'll be on time*

(25) A: *Is Peter coming to the party?*

B: *He promised; but I wouldn't care if he changed his mind*

Thus we have suggested a particular answer to the question 'What is the function of *promise* in communication?' that is, 'How does it contribute to changing the cognitive state of an interpreter in an ongoing discourse?' The answer consists of two parts: first, at the point in the discourse where it occurs, *promise* counts as strengthening some assumption (given contextually and/or denoted by the complement) that a certain event will actually occur; second, it indicates positive evaluation of this event.

Note now that the subjective use of *promise* shows exactly the same argumentational orientation, in both respects. Uttering *Tomorrow promises to be a fine day* orients the addressee towards the conclusion that it will actually be a fine day, and it is also clear that this is evaluated positively. In fact, this describes the function of the verb in such a case *exhaustively*. In its subjective use, orienting the interpreter towards expecting the event denoted in the complement and indicating positive evaluation is *all* that the verb contributes to the meaning of the sentence. In its objective use it does the same. But it also does something else; namely reporting a particular event, i.e. the act of promising performed by the referent of the subject (which justifies the argumentational orientation). It is precisely this aspect of the denotation of an independently conceptualised event that is lacking in the subjective use (and that we therefore still invoke as motivation for calling this use 'subjective').

So I am suggesting that from the point of view of argumentation (in incrementally interpreting a discourse), objective and subjective uses do not really differ. The difference is rather that in the objective uses evidence for the argumentational orientation is given in the sentence itself, while in the subjective uses it is not. This amounts to assuming that subjectification in these cases can be construed as a lack of objective features: 'subjective' and 'objective' use share features of subjectivity, but it is the former only that is *purely* subjective.

Notice that we have now constructed a *conceptual* asymmetry between subjective and objective senses of the verbs: semantic aspects of the objective sense are lacking in the subjective sense, but not vice versa. We will see later how this may serve as the basis for explaining the *syntactic* asymmetry noted at the end of section 3.3. But first, let us extend the analysis in this section to *threaten* and *refuse*. This can in fact be done in a straightforward manner.

Note that *threaten* is parallel to *promise* in that it also strengthens a (contextually given) assumption. Exchanges like those in (26) and (27) are exactly parallel to those given above for *promise*:

- (26) A: *Are they really going to freeze the budget?*
 B: *Well, they did threaten to do so.*
- (27) a. *He threatened to come, so be prepared that he could appear any minute*
 b. *He threatened to fire us, but things might not be as black as they look*

So, like the use of *promise*, the use of *threaten* at a particular point in a discourse orients the interpreter towards the conclusion that some event

will actually come about. But, unlike *promise*, *threaten* indicates negative, rather than positive evaluation (the conclusion drawn from the first segment in (27a) is a warning; the second segment in (27b) suggests reassurance given to contrast with the first segment which is clearly evaluated negatively). The use of *threaten* in an example like *The incident threatened to ruin his chances* shares the argumentational orientation with the objective uses, while lacking the denotation of an independently conceptualised event justifying the conclusion indicated.

The verb *refuse* displays an argumentational orientation opposite to both *promise* and *threaten*, in that it *decreases* the strength of an assumption, in particular one that would otherwise be *expected* to come true. Again, this can be demonstrated in a manner similar to the discussion of *promise* and *threaten* above. Consider (28) and (29):¹⁰

(28) A: *Would John accept a decoration?*

B: *Definitely not – he has always refused one*

(29) a. *He refuses to come, so we will have to do without him*

b. *So far he has refused to come, but he might have a surprise for us*

Again, the subjective sense of *refuse* as in *The engine refused to get warm*, shares precisely the same argumentational orientation with the objective sense. The subjective sense is exhausted by this argumentational orientation, while the objective sense additionally denotes an independently conceptualised event justifying the relevant conclusion. Thus, the analysis of both *threaten* and *refuse* can clearly proceed along the same lines as that of *promise*.

This approach not only has the advantage that it provides an integrated analysis of objective and subjective senses of the same verbs; it also puts some other issues in a new light. For example, at least *beloven* in Dutch is sometimes also used in an 'objective' sense which nevertheless does *not* report an actual act of promising. Consider the following fragment:

(30) '*Gelukkig gaan zulke galbulten vaak vanzelf weer weg.*'

'Maar als u niet weet hoe ik er aan kom, hoe kan ik er dan afkomen?'
merkte Annelies op.

'Wacht maar af', beloofde ik haar. 'Je krijgt tabletten van me.'

'Fortunately, such hives often just disappear spontaneously.'

'But if you don't know how I got them, how can I get rid of them?', Annelies observed.

'Just wait and see', I promised her. 'You'll get tablets from me.'

< ec: margri 8-5-6-cgbl >

An approach according to which 'objective' *promise* would denote a particular type of commissive speech-act only would have difficulty

analysing the expression '*Just wait and see*,' I promised her, for the doctor's utterance *Just wait and see* would in itself count as an instruction, or perhaps an advice, but not at all as a promise. In the context, however, it is obvious that the relevance of the entire expression is that the reader should understand that confidence in a good outcome is justified: a contextually given assumption should be strengthened. In actual discourse, such a difference between what the referent of a subject (whether also 'first person' or not) strictly speaking can commit himself to, and what he ultimately wants his addressee to conclude, is not rare at all (compare routine utterances like *He won't come back* – *I promise/she promised*). As another example, consider the following text from an advertisement for a firm transporting parcels, in which a third person is introduced, recommending this firm in the following way:

(31) '*Ze weten dat het vertrouwelijk is.*

Echt, je kunt dit met een gerust hart aan ze toevertrouwen.

Nee, je betaalt iets meer, maar ik weet uit ervaring dat zij hun werk goed doen.

En snel.

Beloofd.

'They know it is confidential.

Really, you can safely trust them with this.

No, you pay a bit more, but I know from experience that they do the job well.

And fast.

Promised.'

The alleged speaker does not commit *himself* to deliver the parcels well and fast, as is made abundantly clear by the statement from the company (outside the quotation marks) following the text cited: *Wij doen wat u belooft* ('we do what you promise'). Still, the text as produced is not at all deviant, so that we may once more conclude that this use of *beloven* simply counts as an attempt to strengthen the addressee's belief in a positive result.

Related to the previous point is the following. According to our analysis the difference between first-person present tense use of *promise* (so-called performative use) and its use in other grammatical contexts (for example, third person, and/or past tense) is only a matter of degree. Both aim at a change in the cognitive state of the interpreter, resulting in a certain expectation being strengthened; the direction of the argumentational orientation is the same (though not its force). Thus they do not belong to *completely* distinct categories of communication. In view of the fact that the linguistic expression of performative and non-

performative promise overlap to a very large extent, I find this consequence attractive.

Finally, the approach sketched above also allows us to explain *why* it is that an utterance of *I threaten* does not count as the performance of an illocutionary act in the way *I promise* does, and in fact sounds strange. Suppose we assume, contrary to what I am claiming here, that the negative evaluation of the complement of *threaten* is actually an object-oriented rather than a speaker/hearer-oriented feature; i.e. that it is evaluated negatively from the point of view of an (explicit or implicit) person threatened, rather than from the point of view of speaker and addressee. Then it would remain unclear why it is that it is strange to say something like *I threaten to ruin your party*, for why couldn't I say that I was going to do something that is evaluated negatively by someone else (for example you)? But this is explained easily under the assumption that it is the speaker who orients the addressee towards a negative evaluation of the complement-event: committing oneself to something while at the same time judging this undesirable amounts to inconsistency, at least communicatively.

We may take the fact that the approach proposed here allows for such generalisations and explanations as additional evidence that it is correct to attribute features of subjectivity to so-called objective senses of the verbs involved too.

4.2 *Discourse coherence*

As pointed out above, our analysis entails a conceptual asymmetry between subjective and objective senses of the verbs: semantic aspects of the objective sense are lacking in the subjective sense, but not vice versa. The objective sense, unlike the subjective one, denotes some independently conceptualised event that justifies the argumentational orientation. Now can we relate this conceptual asymmetry to the syntactic asymmetry observed in section 3.3?

In the subjective sense, the verb does not denote an independently conceptualised event, and serves only to indicate a particular argumentational orientation. In the objective sense it both indicates some argumentational orientation and denotes an independently conceptualised event. But it might very well be, in a specific context, that the fact of someone actually performing an act of, say, threatening, is not at all relevant, that the speaker/writer is actually concerned only with the conclusions suggested by the sentence, i.e. the consequences of the act, rather than its being an act of threatening. In our analysis, objective and subjective senses share features that exhaustively characterise subjec-

tivity, while the objective sense also has some additional features. We might expect, then, that both senses also share the *syntactic* possibilities that are specific for the subjective sense, with the objective sense having additional possibilities. More specifically, we may expect that when the verbs in their objective sense show up in final position (in the pattern S(O)-V₁V₂, characterising V₁ as not conceptualised independently of the complement), they do not constitute a possible separate step in the reasoning developed in the discourse at that point.

It is hard, if not impossible, to explicate the linguistic content of this argument in vacuo; so let us turn to an actual example, both in order to make the argument more concrete and to provide evidence for it. Consider the clause in (32), and the fragment it is taken from in (33).

- (32) *Wanneer de arts de vrouw weigert te helpen*
 When the doctor the woman refuses to help
 'When the doctor denies the woman treatment'

- (33) *Steeds meer vrouwen die ongewenst zwanger zijn geraakt, wenden zich tot de NVSH-consultatiebureaus om hulp. Of die hulp gegeven wordt is afhankelijk van de instelling van de arts. Wanneer de arts van het consultatiebureau de vrouw weigert te helpen, kan zij zich nog wenden tot de afdeling hulpverlening van het centraal bureau van de NVSH.*

De hulpverlening bij ongewenste zwangerschap is pas dit jaar op gang gekomen. [. . .]

'More and more women who have become pregnant unwantedly, turn to the NVSH clinics for help. Whether aid is supplied or not depends on the doctor's attitude. When the doctor of the clinic denies the woman treatment, she may still turn to the support department of the central bureau of the NVSH.

Assistance in case of unwanted pregnancy has only just started this year. [. . .]' <ec: sextan 12-12-8-cgbl>

Sentence (32) contains an occurrence of the verb *weigeren* ('to refuse') that describes an act of refusal by a doctor, but in the position that is characteristic for subjective use. However, it does not refer to a particular act by one particular doctor. More importantly, as is evident from (33), the sentence follows the remark that the help a woman will get 'depends on the doctor's attitude', and is followed by a description of what she can do in case she does not get help from a doctor (she may then turn to the central bureau). The point that some doctor might perform an act of refusal is not communicatively important here, but the conclusion that as a consequence of such a refusal a woman might not get help, clearly is. The entire text is about the question of women getting help, and the non-independent position of the verb denoting a

doctor's refusal guarantees that this main thread of the discourse is not broken in this particular clause. Even while denoting an act of refusal, the sole function of the verb in this context is to evoke the conclusion that a woman might sometimes not get the help she needs in order to allow the text to continue with a discussion of how that problem (not the problem of the doctor's refusal) might be resolved.

Similarly, (34) displays clustering of a verb denoting an act performed by the subject (in this case, threatening):

- (34) *nu religieus Scherpenzeel hier een persoonlijke rel van*
 now religious Scherpenzeel here a personal fight of
dreigt te maken
 threatens to make
 'now that [the] religious [party of] Scherpenzeel threatens to turn
 this into a personal dispute'

This occurs in a context where it is the consequences rather than the act as such that constitute the topic of the discussion (cf. (35): there is a conflict between two Labour Party officials. The first, De Jonge, has been discharged as alderman of the town of Scherpenzeel by his own party under the leadership of the second, Van Bruggen; the latter also became the new alderman, while the religious party had wanted De Jonge to keep this position).¹¹

- (35) *Of zijn 'Fatsoen' het zwaarstwegende argument voor zijn partijgenoten was hem zondermeer uit te rangeren, vooral nu religieus Scherpenzeel hier een persoonlijke rel van dreigt te maken? De Jonge: 'natuurlijk moesten er ook nog een paar nieuwelingen op die lijst, van die jonge snuiters. Die begonnen al direct van de hoge toren af te blazen, meer openbare scholen en zo.'*

v. Bruggen: 'Er is niets aan de hand, ze hebben het allemaal verschrikkelijk zitten opblazen. De Jonge heeft een denkfout gemaakt; op die bewuste partijvergadering heeft hij me over dat geritsel met die papieren verteld dat-ie er uiteindelijk hetzelfde over dacht als ik. De zaak is trouwens weer voor mekaar. Hij heeft ons een briefje geschreven met de beste wensen voor het nieuwe gemeentebestuur.'

'Whether his "Decency" was the most important argument for his fellow party-members to put him off side, especially now that the religious party of Scherpenzeel threatens to turn this into a personal dispute? De Jonge: "Of course a couple of newcomers had to be on the list as well, those young customers. They immediately began beating the drums, you know, more public schools and things like that."

v. Bruggen: "There is really nothing the matter, they've all been

exaggerating tremendously. De Jonge made an error; in that particular party meeting he told me about this rustling with those papers, that he ultimately felt the same about it as I did. Anyway, the case has been settled. He wrote us a note, wishing us the best with the new city council.'" < ec: vne 12-9-3-cobl >

Note that in the text following (34) neither of the interviewees discusses the acts of the religious party in Schwerpenzeel; for what counts is the possible consequences for the positions of the old and new aldermen. Van Bruggen (the second interviewee) in particular suggests that a real dispute has actually been prevented, and he ends with the conclusion that 'things have been settled'. Clearly then, what the interviewees (are reported to) respond to is the issue of a threatening dispute, not an act of threatening to create a dispute – which fits the non-independent status of 'refuse' in the actual order of (34).

These cases can be contrasted with examples such as (36), occurring in the context (37).

- (36) [Ik moet hem drie keer opbellen,]
 '[I have to call him three times,]
omdat hij weigert zijn bed uit te komen [en onze twee kinderen naar school te helpen]
 because he refuses his bed out to come [and our two children to school to help]
 'because he refuses to get out of bed and help our two children to get to school'

- (37) *Haal je echter niet in je hoofd dat ik thuis de broek aan heb, die heeft mijn man. Zelfs toen ik hem de bons gaf, betaalde hij me mijn huishoudgeld en de huishoudrekening, al wist ik dat het geld uit de zaak kwam. Ik ben geen voorvechtster van vrouwengelijkheid. Ik geloof niet in dat soort onzin. Ik mag dan ettelijke keren meer verdienen dan mijn echtgenoot, dat maakt me nog niet de baas in huis. Als we echter naar kantoor gaan, zal hij toch precies moeten doen wat ik zeg. Als ik 's morgens heel vroeg weg moet, is het geen doen als ik hem vanaf de zaak drie keer op moet bellen, omdat hij weigert zijn bed uit te komen en onze twee kinderen naar school te helpen.*

'But don't imagine that I'm in charge at home, for my husband is. Even when I brushed him off, he paid me my allowance and the bills, even though I knew the money came from the company. I'm not a fighter for women's equality. I don't believe in that kind of nonsense. I may make several times more money than my husband, that still doesn't make me the boss at home. But when we go to

work, he'll just have to do exactly what I tell him. When I have to be away very early in the morning, it's just impossible when I have to call him from the office three times, because he refuses to get out of bed and help our two children to get to school.' <ec: libell 15-5-4-cgbl >

This fragment stems from an interview with a woman about the distribution of responsibilities between her and her husband at home. In this case, the conclusion that the children might not get to school is just an *example* of the important things that might go wrong if the husband does not do what his wife tells him to do. The sentence very strongly makes the point that the husband is fully responsible for such behaviour and its consequences. It is this type of behaviour – behaviour of refusing – that is the topic of the woman's discourse here: the husband shouldn't exhibit behaviour of that *type*. So here too, the position of the verb, this time allowing for independent conceptualisation, is entirely coherent with the overall character of the discourse.

Thus, not only is the conceptual asymmetry we have argued for further confirmed by the fact that the syntactic asymmetry runs parallel, but examination of actual occurrences of the different orderings in their contexts also supports our proposal on the precise nature of the asymmetry. Sometimes the subjective element present even in 'objective' senses of the verbs (that of orienting an interpreter towards conclusions of a particular type at a particular point in a discourse) completely outweighs the denotation of a speech-act.

5 Conclusion

In the preceding sections we have been adopting points of view in linguistic analysis that are not frequently integrated fully: semantic (how to describe the relation between different senses of the verbs *promise*, *threaten*, and *refuse*?), syntactic (how to explain the different ordering possibilities – in Dutch – of these verbs in subordinate clauses?), and discourse analytic (how to analyse the communicative function of both the verbs themselves, and the different syntactic patterns that they occur in?). In each case, the analysis derived support from considerations arising within other perspectives; within each perspective taken in isolation, the analysis does not stand as strong as on the level where these analytic perspectives are integrated. Precisely the fact that integration of these perspectives allows for deeper understanding of the phenomena involved in turn constitutes a strong argument for a view of language that makes such an integration natural. Speaker/hearer-subjectivity appears to be one very important concept encompassing semantics, syntax, and communication.

NOTES

- 1 This chapter has profited from responses by the participants in the Cambridge Seminar on Language, Subjectivity, and Subjectivisation. In particular, I want to thank Elizabeth Traugott for very useful comments on another presentation of some of these ideas, and Saskia van As, Frank Jansen, and Ted Sanders for comments on a draft version. Naturally, I am solely responsible for any remaining errors. One of the main sources for this research has been the so-called Eindhoven Corpus (Uit den Boogaart 1975), in the version available from the Free University in Amsterdam; examples that stem from that corpus are marked with 'ec'. Terms like *conceptualiser*, *addressee*, etc., and pronouns referring to them, are to be read as indications of roles and functions, and thus gender-neutral.
- 2 Note that in (1) and (2), the difference between objective and subjective corresponds with, respectively, past and present tense. In the corpus used for this study, this is evidently a frequent correlation (not an obligatory one; cf. (4)), and one which seems only natural, given the nature of 'reporting' inherent in the past tense, and the connection between subjectivity and the 'here-and-now'. I hope to come back to this issue elsewhere, as well as to other issues – for example, the facts that the distribution of negation and adverbials differs in the two types of constructions, that asking *Why?* in response to an objective case of *promise* means asking for the subject's motives for promising, whereas it means asking for the conceptualiser's motives for his utterance in a subjective case, etcetera. Here, I confine myself to issues immediately relevant to the main topic.
- 3 For the view of phrase structure as a way to divide a clause in pieces that can each be construed as an answer to a question based on the preceding part, see Winter (1982). The leftward orientation of the lines connecting a unit to a preceding one in the interpretation structure is intended to indicate the incremental nature of interpretation. The structure is to be read as a result of a series of steps: (1) Interpretation of *He* (possibly with respect to context); (2) interpretation of *promised*, joining it with the result of step 1; (3) interpretation of *to defend the constitution*, joining it with the result of step 2, i.e. with the interpretation for *He promised*. The unit used in step 3 can itself also be viewed as the result of a series of interpretative steps, i.e. as having internal structure (see also Daalder 1989, Pardoën 1993, in preparation), but this is not relevant for present purposes. For other applications, see the references cited, and Verhagen (1993; to appear).
- 4 The fact that in Dutch one does not normally hear things like *Het weer weigerde op te knappen* ('The weather refused to get better'), even though it does not sound impossible, might be attributable to the existence of *niet willen* ('not want to') as a standard way of expressing such messages, as in *Het weer wilde maar niet opknappen* ('The weather wouldn't get any better').
- 5 In this particular case, it seems plausible that the subjective uses of the verbs are later than the objective ones. Cf. Traugott (1993).
- 6 Cf. Sanders et al. (1992), for a discussion of several types of fundamental coherence relations.

- 7 See also Nølke (1992) for an introduction into the theory of linguistic argumentation by Ducrot and Anscombre. Another approach that is worth mentioning here is that of Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), since this is also explicitly concerned with mechanisms by which inferences are licensed. Especially their notion of 'strengthening of an (accessible) assumption' seems to be applicable to at least some of the issues raised in this chapter; on a theoretical level, it is not clear though, that their views are compatible with the other theoretical approaches mentioned in the text.
- 8 These brief remarks, of course, in no way constitute an *analysis* of the meaning of particles like *well*. I only use them here as evidence for the applicability of the concept of argumentation.
- 9 The (conceptual) presence of a promisee allows for differences between evaluation by the conceptualiser and by the promisee. Imagine the sentence *John promised his mother to be home early* being produced as an explanation of John's leaving early by someone who actually regrets this event. Then the event is presented as positive for the promisee, but less so with respect to producer and addressee. Similarly, a particular event may also be interpreted as negative for the promisee, but positive from the point of view of the promiser (and the conceptualiser), as in *She promised (him) to make him regret his unfaithfulness for the rest of his life*. Without a promisee, the addressee is generally oriented towards a positive evaluation of the event unequivocally.
- 10 Whether evaluation plays a role in the argumentational orientation of *refuse* is not so clear. The naturalness of both (i) and (ii) suggests that it does not:
 - (i) *Unfortunately, he refuses to accept my invitation*
 - (ii) *Fortunately, he still refuses to betray the hiding-place of his comrades*
 On the other hand, especially *subjective* use of *weigeren* seems to suggest that the thing not happening is something desirable (cf. the presupposition with the objective use, that the act refused had actually been requested from the subject). It is somewhat strange to say something like *Fortunately, the engine refused to get warm*. This implies *two* subjects of consciousness: one evaluating the event negatively (for *refuse*), and one evaluating it positively (for *fortunately*).
- 11 I want to thank Luuk Lagerwerf for helping me find out the context of this particular fragment.

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