

# A Survey of Engagement, Subjectivity and Inter-subjectivity

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Engagement and subjectivity focus on the non-propositional meaning of discourse, and inter-subjectivity is concerned with the relationship between a writer/speaker and his potential readers/addressees. This article first introduces the definitions of engagement, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and then attempts to discuss the relationships among them. The analysis shows that subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are closely related and that the process of engagement is an interaction of speaking subject and his/her potential readers and social behavior of inter-subjectivity and social practice as well.

*Keywords:* engagement, subjectivity, dialogue, inter-subjectivity

## Introduction

With the rapid development of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics, the study of engagement and subjectivity of language in linguistic circle has increasingly become more and more popular (Martin & White, 2005; Lyons, 1982; Benveniste, 1971), and many fruitful achievements have been achieved up to now. However, the internal relationships between engagement and subjectivity as well as inter-subjectivity have seldom been touched. In view of this vacancy in this field, this paper makes an attempt to the introduction of engagement, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and focuses on the internal relationships between them.

## Engagement, Subjectivity and Inter-subjectivity

### Engagement

Engagement is one of the three parts of Appraisal Theory, which studies those linguistic resources that concern the source of the textual and the author's or speaker's voices, and can be regarded as the rhetorical potential of texts. It concentrates on the negotiation manner of interpersonal and ideational meaning in a text. In terms of lexico-grammar, it includes various resources: projection and the direct speech structure which signifies the sources of the textual voices; modal verbs; modality and commentary adjuncts; real phase (the classification of verb phrases); disclaim; the connectives and conjunctions that mean "expectedness" and "unexpectedness". As we all know, engagement is used to explore the functionality of interpersonal linguistic resources within the dialogistic and heteroglossic backdrop, thereby containing "dialogic contraction" and "dialogic expansion" (Martin & White, 2005).

"Dialogic contraction" refers to those linguistic resources that act to challenge, fend off or restrict the scope

of such utterance, which includes “disclaim” and “proclaim”. “Disclaim” concerns the textual voice positions itself as at odds with, or rejecting some contrary position, which can be divided into “denial” and “counter” in accordance with its meaning. “Denial” contains negation, and “counter” contains concession and counter expectation. In dialogic contraction, there is a category of “proclaim”, which represents the position as highly warrantable (compelling, valid, plausible, well-founded, generally agreed, reliable, etc.), hence suppressing or ruling out alternative positions. According to its meaning, it can be divided into “concur”, “pronounce” and “endorse”. For example:

- A. I contend that Bakhtin’s dialogism is far-reaching.
- B. This has demonstrated that this substance is effective in curing-cancer.
- C. What is surprising is to find such offensive opinions in The Guardian.
- D. The premier, of course, wants us to think what a fine anti-racist fellow he is.

The underlined parts in the clauses above are all the typical examples of “dialogic contraction” in engagement system. Example A means “pronounce”, example B “endorse”, example C “counter” and example D “concur” respectively.

“Dialogic expansion” refers to an utterance that makes allowances for dialogically alternative positions and voices by dint of some locutions, which includes “entertain” and “attribute”. “Entertain” means that by explicitly presenting the position as grounded in its own contingent, individual subjectivity, the authorial voice represents the position as but one of a range of possible positions—it thereby entertains or invokes other dialogic alternatives. The following linguistic devices can perform such function: *it seems, I hear, probably, perhaps*, etc. “Attribute” means that by representing proposition as grounded in the subjectivity of an external voice, the textual voice represents the proposition as but one of a range of possible positions—it thereby entertains or invokes some other dialogic alternatives, which can be further divided into “acknowledge” and “distance”. “Acknowledge” includes the following linguistic devices such as *X said, X believes..., in X’s view*, etc. “Distance” includes such linguistic devices as *X claims that, it is rumored that* and so on. For instance:

- E. Probably it will rain tomorrow.
- F. He argues that it is beneficial to do that.
- G. It is rumored that the suspected criminal has committed suicide.

The underlined parts in the examples above are rather typical in “dialogic expansion”. Example E expresses “entertain”, example F expresses “acknowledge” and example G expresses “distance”.

### Subjectivity and Inter-subjectivity

Structuralism and Formalism, which are influenced by positivism, only regard language as a tool of expressing proposition, which neglect the fact that language can only reflect the objective world through persons, that the usage of language and person’s feelings and minds are inseparable. In view of this deficiency, as well as the background of the recovery of “humanism”, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics realize that language, in addition to expressing proposition, is subjective. That is, it can express not only the propositional ideas objectively but also the speaker’s viewpoints, feelings and attitude (SHENG, 2001). Stubbs insists that whenever speakers (or writers) say anything, they encode their point of view towards it (1996, p. 197). Benveniste (1971) argues that the subjectivity of language means that the speaker regards himself as the

capability of the subject, which is a representation of self-consciousness. Lyons (1982) holds that language performs two main functions. One is referential and the other is expressive. He further points out that the expressive function fairly embodies the subjectivity of language. Finegan also argues that subjectivity of language is a relative concept against objectivity, which refers to the language user's self expression, attitude and viewpoint in his discourse, or a self-imprint of the language user (1995, p. 1). Today it is generally believed and accepted that language is not merely a tool of communication but a thinking model as well. Therefore it is natural that it carries the trait of subjectivity. The subjectivity of language can mainly be embodied by linguistic subjectification. As for subjectification, it refers to the corresponding form of language in order to express "subjectivity" or the evolution processes that language has gone through.

Although the earliest study of inter-subjectivity stems from philosophy (Husserl, 1970), the fruitful study resides in linguistics. In this field, the scholars make their research mainly from the following perspective: Verhagean (2005) studies inter-subjectivity from the perspective of cognition, Du Bois (2007) studies it from the perspective of communicative theory and Traugott (2010) studies the subjectification of inter-subjectivity from the perspective of diachronic linguistics. The various perspectives mentioned above mean different interpretations and definitions of inter-subjectivity and different interests of scholars as well. It is insisted that inter-subjectivity is "the indirect control over the degree of participation of participants, the concerns and the social conventions that suit the specific cultural context" (Traugott, 2010).

### **Engagement and Subjectivity**

Engagement theory refers to the linguistic resources that concern the sources of textual and authorial voices, which focuses on the negotiation manner of interpersonal or ideational meaning in a text. If the speaker doesn't make allowances for alternative positions in a text, he will take "dialogic contraction" to restrict and narrow down the dialogic space of other positions; if the speaker makes allowance for alternative positions, he will take "dialogic expansion" to expand the dialogic space so as to accept other different voices. Obviously, whether the speaker takes "dialogic contraction" or "dialogic expansion", it is inevitable that the speaker must carry the meaning of subjectivity more or less. Therefore, engagement is bound to carry the imprint of subjectivity and the relationship between them is closely connected.

The paper argues that engagement has the feature of subjectivity, and that engagement and subjectivity have the following similar points.

The first point is that engagement and subjectivity are the universal characteristics of all human languages. So long as the human language exists, it unavoidably concerns these two aspects. Since engagement explores those linguistic resources that concern the sources of textual and authorial voices and concentrate on the negotiation manner of interpersonal and ideational meanings in a text, it can be said that wherever human language is used, engagement exists in that Systemic Functional Grammar studies and explains language in the context of society and culture. Seen from this view, language usage must be closely related to language users, hence involving engagement. In our society, people communicate and exchange their ideas mainly through language, which itself is a process that the speaker employs language.

As indicated above, subjectivity of language mainly refers to the language user's self-expression, attitudes or self-imprint. Therefore it can be believed that so long as people use language, their speech must carry the

component of subjectivity. Benveniste holds a similar viewpoint: “The subjectivity of language is so impressive that persons can’t help asking whether language is truly language if it is not constructed in such a way” (1971, pp. 225-226). It is unbelievable that if the human language is without human expressions. Similarly, Lyons points out that comparatively speaking, the daily discourse or utterance is rarely neutral, impartial or absolutely non-subjective (1995, p. 331). In other words, so long as language is used, it must be involved with language users. There is no doubt that language users are subjective to a certain degree, so is their language.

The second one is that engagement and epistemic modality are closely related to each other. As is mentioned above, language is not only a tool of communication but also a way of thinking model if seen from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Now that it is a way of thinking model, it is bound to possess the features of epistemology. Modality contains many categories. According to Palmer (1990), modality can be divided into deontic modality, epistemic modality and dynamic modality, in which deontic modality refers to the subjective attitudes of speakers towards proposition and the subjective attitudes are closely connected with permission and obligation such as *must* in *everyone must go to school on time* and *can* in *we can have five days off if conditions permits*, epistemic modality focuses on epistemic or cognitive activities of the physical world in terms of probability, possibility and necessity such as *may* in *it may be at home* and *must* in *Jane must be waiting for us at this moment* and the dynamic modality refers to the willingness and capability of the subject such as *can* in *we can finish the work in five days* and *will* in *if you ask Tom, he will help you*. From the definition of modality made by Palmer it can be seen that epistemic modality actually refers to the subjective judgment and inference of speakers.

It can be easily figured out that engagement is closely connected with epistemic modality. For instance, engagement strategies such as *it is possible that*, *perhaps*, *probably* and *must* are typical epistemic modalities in that these engagement strategies signify the speaker’s judgment of the factual states and probabilities. If the speaker employs the strategy such as *it is possible*, *perhaps*, it shows that he is not so sure about the probability of the propositions, and if the speaker employs the strategy of *probably*, it suggests that he is sure about his propositions, and if the speaker takes the strategy of *must*, it suggests that he is quite so sure about the judgment of his propositions. It is not difficult to find out that these engagement strategies are actually epistemic modality if they are seen from the perspective of modality.

In addition, subjectivity is also closely related to epistemic modality. Finegan points out that subjectivity of language is mainly embodied in the following aspects: the first one is the speaker’s perspective, the second one is the speaker’s affection and the third one is the speaker’s epistemic status of proposition (1995, p. 4). From the analysis of subjectivity made by Finegan, it is reasonable and obvious that the third point proposed is actually epistemic modality. Therefore, we can reasonably draw the conclusion that the subjectivity of language has a close relationship with epistemic modality. For example:

H. It will rain tomorrow.

I. He may come back next week.

J. They must have finished their homework because they are playing football at this moment.

K. It is possible that a more terrible financial crisis will happen in a few years to come.

In view of Palmer (1990), *will* in *it will rain tomorrow*, *may* in *he may come back next week*, *must* in *they must have finished their homework because they are playing football at this moment* and *possible* and *will* in *it is possible that a more terrible financial crisis will happen in a few years to come* are categorized into epistemic

modality in that they all express the speaker's subjective judgment, conjecture and inference of what they state. It goes without saying that these epistemic modalities are closely linked to subjectivity.

The third one is that engagement and subjectivity both revolve around the study of non-proposition. Roughly speaking, engagement mainly involves the ways in which resources such as projection, modality, polarity, concession and various comment adverbials position the speaker/writer with respect to potential responses to that value position by means of reporting or quoting, acknowledging a possibility, countering, affirming and denying and so on and so forth (Martin & White, 2005, p. 36). From this statement made by Martin and White, we can see that engagement belongs to interpersonal meaning in Systemic Functional Grammar. Therefore it concentrates not on the truth value but on the interpersonal meaning of a discourse, namely, the non-propositional meaning of language. Similarly, subjectivity of language also focuses on the non-propositional meaning of language. As stated before, the study of subjectivity emerges under the background of recovery of "humanism" in linguistics, which goes against the abstract structuralism and formalism paying no attention to semantics. It is argued that it is not advisable and acceptable if people only study those pure and abstract linguistic structures. Language (utterance) can only have meaning when it is used. The study of subjectivity of language carries a clear semantic and pragmatic imprint.

### **Engagement and Inter-subjectivity**

As we all know, engagement is based on the dialogism made by Bakhtin (1981). According to Bakhtin's dialogism, all verbal communication, whether spoken or written, is "dialogic" in that to speak or write is always to reveal the influence of, refer to, or to take up in some way, what has been said/written before, and simultaneously to anticipate the responses of actual, potential or imagined readers/listeners. The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances. The dialogic perspective leads us to care for the nature of the relationship which the speaker/writer is presented as entering into with prior utterances in the same sphere—with those other speakers who have previously taken a stand with respect to the issue under consideration, especially when they have established some socially significant community of shared belief or value. That is to say, engagement originates from dialogism, and deals with the speaker's positioning of inter-subjectivity against a backdrop of heteroglossia. The speaker or writer makes a dialogue with the imagined readers in a text, and responds to the potential viewpoints, various expected positions, including the potential attitude of the imagined readers.

From the definition of inter-subjectivity proposed by Traugott (2010), we can draw the following three conclusions. First, inter-subjectivity concerns the bilateral relationship between the speaker and listeners in an utterance. Second, language user can take a conscious control over the bilateral relationships between the speaker and listeners. Third, the control of language user concerns not only the participants in an utterance but also social and cultural factors.

The statement and argument listed above tell us that engagement system stems from the theory of dialogism. Without dialogism, engagement system cannot exist. It is obvious that dialogue can only take place between two speaking subjects or two parties. That is, dialogue is a behavior of inter-subjectivity. In other words, engagement is the interaction between the speaker and his potential listeners and it is social practice of inter-subjectivity, in

which the speaker can take “dialogic expansion” or “dialogic contraction” to present his value position according to the current social linguistic environment, including the bilateral relations of speaking subjects and the concrete social and cultural factors. We point out that the process of engagement is a process of interaction between the two sides in a discourse/utterance, and it is social practice. Engagement and inter-subjectivity are of coexistence and inseparable.

### Conclusion

This paper makes an attempt to explore the relationships among engagement, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. The analysis shows that engagement is sure to carry the characteristics of subjectivity. Simultaneously, engagement and inter-subjectivity are also intimately related to each other and inseparable. The process of engagement is actually a process of interaction between speaking subjects. Engagement, subjectivity as well as inter-subjectivity are closely related with one another.

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