



Arie Verhagen, *Constructions of Intersubjectivity. Discourse, Syntax, and Cognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, xvi + 244 pages. ISBN 0-19-927384-7

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Being able to take another's perspective and being able to make a shrewd guess at what other persons believe are human faculties that play an important role in the development of human cultures and societies. As language probably evolved on the basis of the capacity to make inferences about other minds and as lan-

guage is the single most important factor in creating and maintaining intersubjectivity, it makes sense to ask if and in what way this function of language is embedded in linguistic usage. This is the central topic of the book under review.

Starting from the assumption that “an important part of the *semantics* of basic linguistic units should specifically involve the cognitive handling of people’s understanding of their own and other ‘selves’” (p. 4) and that this also extends to syntax as well, the author proposes to provide the “linguistic part of the story about humans’ ability to engage in deep cognitive coordination with others” (p. 4). A similar view has recently been put forward by Givón (2005: 111): “Grammar, the most complex and sophisticated — and most likely the most recent — evolutionary addition to the tool-kit of human representation and communication, is by and large a subconscious, automated processor of our mental models of other minds”.

The idea that mutual knowledge and the reference to such knowledge play a fundamental role in communication has of course been one of the basic tenets of pragmatics for a long time. It lies at the heart of Grice’s theory of meaning (cf. Grice 1957; Schiffer 1972) and it was used by Strawson in a paper written in 1964, where he introduced the notion of “identifying knowledge” for his analysis of the use of definite descriptions in “identifying reference” (Strawson 1971). In this paper Strawson explained identifying reference “as essentially involving a presumption, on the speaker’s part, of the possession by the audience of identifying knowledge of a particular item” (Strawson 1971: 79). What is new in recent work is the attempt to try and survey in detail which aspects of grammar and the lexicon have a special function in this particular dimension of communication.

According to Verhagen, many unsatisfactory descriptions of the meaning of linguistic expressions (words and constructions) are “based on the neglect of the dual structure of normal language use, which involves not only the construction of an object of conceptualization, but always also an addressee coordinating cognitively with another subject of conceptualization” (p. 154). In other words, speakers/writers do not only speak about the world as they see it but they also signal their own assumptions and attitudes, take into consideration the perspective of their hearers, and attempt to influence them. Linguistic utterances have “recipient design”, as ethnomethodologists would put it, and many linguistic expressions are conventionally used to signal aspects of this coordination task. In order to remedy the unsatisfactory research situation, as he sees it, the author proposes to develop a specific analytical framework, of which I shall now give a brief sketch, and to analyze empirical data in order to prove the usefulness of this framework.

As a model on which to base his analyses he takes the so-called “construal configuration” which consists of two levels, the level O (= objects of conceptualization) and the level S (= subjects of conceptualization). On the level S he posits two conceptualizers (i.e., speaker and hearer), each of which is characterized by a separate “mental space”. Within this framework, intersubjectivity consists in the coordination of cognitive systems of conceptualizers and their respective mental spaces. In a way, this is a cognitivist version of the idea of common or mutual knowledge as used in Lewis’ theory of convention (Lewis 1969) and in Gricean semantics, as mentioned before.

As for theoretical background, Verhagen mainly relies on work in cognitive linguistics, especially mental-space theory, as developed by Langacker (1987), Fauconnier (1994) and others, various strands of pragmatics, and recent developments in construction grammar (e.g., Fillmore et al. 1988, Goldberg 1995). In developing his theoretical views he opposes what, following Lakoff (1987), he calls “objectivist” theories of language and meaning, e.g., truth-functional semantics, and an autonomy view of syntax, like in standard generative grammar. He does acknowledge that recent criticism of “objectivist” theories of meaning mainly goes back to Wittgenstein, but he obviously doesn’t consider a Wittgensteinian use theory of meaning, as represented by Gloning (1996), Keller (1998) and others, as a possible competitor to his own views.

The kind of concept of meaning he has in mind is indicated by the following statement: “Linguistic expressions are primarily cues for making inferences, and understanding does not primarily consist in decoding the precise content of the expressions, but in making inferences that lead to adequate next (cognitive, conversational, behavioural) moves” (p. 22). But, apart from passing remarks, he is not very explicit about his theory of meaning (cf. the heading “argumentative orientation as linguistic meaning”, p. 41 and a longish footnote on p. 44). It is therefore probably not just an oversight that “meaning” is not an entry in the otherwise very useful index at the end of the book. As is the case for any linguistic description of meaning, a thorny problem consists in determining what belongs to the conventional meaning of an expression and what is contributed by the context of use. This problem also arises in Verhagen’s analyses, and, generally speaking, he holds a rather liberal view of conventional meaning, as the following example shows: “Saying that there are seats in a room orients an addressee to positive conclusions about the degree of comfort of the room, by the conventional meaning of the words” (p. 42). Here one might object that he attributes an aspect of the possible utterance meaning to the conventional meaning of the words, which could easily be cancelled and should therefore be considered a conversational implicature — or whatever

the equivalent to conversational implicatures in his theory is. A liberal attitude in including aspects of utterance meaning in the description of conventional meaning also shows in some of his judgements of coherence, where sequences of utterances he considers incoherent can very well be understood as coherent, given the right kind of background assumptions. But, to be fair, there are also passages where he explicitly reflects on this problem (e.g., p. 49).

As his theory is not just intended as part of a general theory of communication but also as the basis for the syntactic and semantic description of grammatical constructions and lexical items, he goes on to analyze a selection of linguistic items that in his view contribute to the signalling of intersubjectivity. The main body of the book consists of three case studies dealing with the form and function of negation, finite complements, and discourse connectors like *because* and *although* and their counterparts and relations in Dutch. Empirical data are mainly taken from a corpus of Dutch texts, the Eindhoven corpus (85 percent of which is written text), and from a corpus of the Dutch newspaper “de Volkskrant”. So this book is also a contribution to Dutch grammar and lexicology. As dialogue is the natural habitat of intersubjectivity, one would have expected the book to emphasize dialogic interaction, but, surprisingly, dialogue does not figure prominently in Verhagen’s treatment of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 2, the first case study (“Negation and virtual argumentation”) starts from the assumption “that the presence of sentential negation [...] has the effect that the speaker/writer is taken to instruct the addressee to entertain *two* distinct cognitive representations, or two ‘mental spaces’ in the sense of Fauconnier (1994), and to adopt one and abandon the other” (p. 29). “Operating on intersubjective coordination is then seen as the primary conventional function of negation, while operating on the relationship between subject and object of conceptualization is secondary” (p. 42, cf. p.72). This view is opposed to the truth-functional account that the function of negation is to change the truth conditions of a sentence in a certain way. It also differs from the common-sense view found in many grammars that “clausal negation is used to deny or reject a proposition” (Biber et al. 1999: 158).

In the course of this chapter, Verhagen’s strategy is to start with items of vocabulary that are good candidates for an analysis in terms of intersubjectivity and to generalize from there. Expressions like *little chance* or *barely half full* tend to be used differently from truth-functionally closely related expressions like *a small chance* or *almost half full*. By a detailed analysis he shows that they are routinely used to signal a negative or sceptical attitude of the speaker and thereby to invalidate a relevant positive proposition the hearer might entertain. The next step in his argumentation is to generalize this result by claiming that

the class of elements that function primarily in the dimension of intersubjectivity includes straightforward negation (p. 56). Now, whereas it can certainly be granted that clausal negation — as opposed to morphological negation (as in *unkind*) — is often used in such a fashion, it does remain doubtful if his generalization can be upheld in the face of examples like (1), where specific reference to intersubjectivity doesn't seem to come into play:

- (1) If the book is not brown, it is blue

Uses of clausal negation in conditional clauses do not seem to fit his favourite description very well, as the function of negation in this case is surely not “instruct the addressee [...] to adopt one cognitive representation and to abandon the other”. So the question remains if his description captures all uses of negation. In the course of this chapter he also gives detailed analyses of the function of *let alone* (following Fillmore et al. 1988) and its Dutch counterpart *lat staan* as well as the function of double negation as in *not impossible*.

Chapter 3, the second case study, deals with clausal complementation, i.e., with sentence structures like (2):

- (2) George saw that his opponent was closing in

Following Verhagen, clausal complementation should be strictly kept apart from structures with nominal complements like (3):

- (3) George saw something

Whereas, according to Verhagen, sentences like (3) are typically used as descriptions of events — i.e., on the object level of his model —, in clausal complementation “the matrix clause of a complementation sentence invites an addressee to identify with a particular perspective on an object of conceptualization that itself is represented in the embedded clause” (p. 78). Thus “matrix clauses differ systematically from complements in that the former operate in the intersubjective dimension of the construal configuration” (p. 118). At a certain level this is not so very different from the traditional assumption in speech act theory that for explicit performatives the matrix clause essentially carries the illocutionary act indicating device and the clausal complement acts as the proposition indicating device. But of course Verhagen does not restrict his analysis to the form of explicit performatives but also deals with structures like *He knows that*, *He fears that*, *It is a fact that*.

In his view, clausal complementation constitutes “a prototypical construction in the sense of construction grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2003)” with properties that are not derivable from general principles that hold for all sentences,

including “transitive” constructions with noun complement like sentence (3). This functional view also carries over into syntactic analysis, where the author opposes the view that sentences with nominal and clausal complements basically represent the same structure. He also challenges the traditional view that complement clauses are ‘subordinate’ to the matrix clause. He shows that traditional subordinate clauses form a heterogeneous group, with adjunct clauses like *because he laughed* having a different function from that of clausal complements. “Whereas ‘clause combining’ constructions with adverbial clauses may be viewed as grammaticalized expressions for rhetorical relations [e.g., causal relations][...], complementation constructions may be viewed as general grammaticalized expressions for intersubjective coordination” (p. 98). He then goes on to argue that in many cases the propositions expressed in the complement clause “represent the basic content of the discourse” (p. 96), so that in these cases they are not pragmatically subordinate. While this is certainly true, the argument does smack a bit of a straw-man argument, as structural linguists for the last 60 years or so usually defined the concept of subordination in terms of distributional properties and not in terms of pragmatic relevance.

Although the chapter contains many interesting arguments and perceptive observations — e.g., on *Wh*-extraction — the general result still seems doubtful to me. In the first place, to my mind, his analysis does not prove that it is the clausal-complement construction that carries the intersubjectivity signal and not the predicate of the matrix clause like *promise, know, fear, is a fact, is afraid*. Secondly, against the view that clausal complements and nominal complements necessarily differ in function one could adduce examples of the following type (cf. Vendler 1967: 122ff.),

- (4) He mentioned that Peter arrived
- (5) He mentioned Peter’s arrival
- (6) John’s death surprised me
- (7) That John died surprised me

In these cases the two structures (clausal complement and nominal complement) obviously have the same function. Thirdly, in order to disprove the assumption that the matrix clause in such a construction does generally not present a certain informational content one could adduce examples of reported speech where the point of the utterance is to focus on the kind of speech event reported. This is particularly obvious in contrastive uses like the following:

- (8) He didn’t *ask* me if I could do that, he *insisted* that I should do it

The third and final case study (Chapter 4) concerns discourse connectives like *because* and *although* and their Dutch counterparts and relatives like *want*, *omdat* and *hoewel*. Connected discourse — with or without discourse connectors — essentially relies on shared knowledge to functionally bridge the utterances in a sequence of utterances. It is therefore not surprising that at least some connectives have as part of their *raison d'être* the function to evoke certain aspects of shared knowledge. A case in point is that of the German modal particles like *ja* which serve to signal that shared knowledge concerning the proposition expressed is assumed by the speaker. Verhagen assumes this kind of function also for concessive connectives like *although*:

(9) John failed his exams although he worked hard

The generally accepted view is that concessives connect two propositions against the background of a contrasting assumption like “Normally, if you work hard, you have a better chance of passing your exams”. This kind of assumption is sometimes called a “topos”. Verhagen now further specifies this basic description by introducing the perspective of an interlocutor. On the basis of this assumption, the description of the concessive sequence is as follows: In uttering (9) the speaker/writer

- i. envisages the possibility, given that John worked hard, that someone might make the inference ‘therefore, John must have passed his exams,’ on the basis of a mutually shared topos;
- ii. acknowledges the basic validity of the inference but overrides the conclusion (p. 168).

Therefore, according to Verhagen, using the concessive connective “is also a matter of managing the relation between the perspectives, or mental spaces, of two distinct conceptualizers” (p. 169). For many cases this is certainly a reasonable description. Maybe it even describes the prototypical situation. One could, however, doubt if the second “mental space” is generally necessary to explain what is going on. It is conceivable that only the speaker himself has in mind the contrasting assumption when asserting (9) and uses *although* to signal to his interlocutor that he himself is aware of this “topos”.

Causal connectives show a slightly different behaviour. There are at least two different uses of *because*, i.e., the use for signalling a causal relation like in (10) and the use for signalling a background of abductive reasoning like in (11):

(10) John passed his exams because he worked hard

(11) John worked hard, because he passed his exams

In the latter case, which he calls an “epistemic use”, Verhagen assumes that “the causal conjunction activates a mental-space configuration with two conceptualizers” (p. 180), whereas in the former case, which is the standard causal connection (a “content reading”), there is no construction of a second mental space. In Dutch there are, according to Verhagen, two different causal connectives, *omdat* and *want*, of which *want* can mark both the content and the epistemic reading, whereas *omdat* only serves to mark the content reading. After analyzing further causal connectives in Dutch, e.g., *dus*, *daroom* and *dardoor*, he comes to the conclusion that “several causal connectives are adequately distinguished from others in terms of the difference between the levels of subjects and objects of conceptualization in the basic construal configuration” (p. 208) and that generally “discourse connectives serve the management of inferences across different perspectives” (p. 209).

Summing up, this is a thought-provoking book containing highly interesting data, perceptive observations and subtle arguments for the general perspective advocated in these pages. The present reader feels that the author tends to slightly overstate his case now and then, and it also took this reader some time to adapt to some of the author’s cognitivist *façons de parler*. But, generally speaking, this is an important book on a fascinating topic in the field of pragmatics and cognition, well worth reading for readers of *Pragmatics & Cognition*.

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See P&C 13:2

