The Speaking Subject in Communication: ‘Subjectivity’ and the (Gendered) Self

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The present research is theoretically oriented aiming at revealing the relationship between two notions closely associated with the speaking subject, i.e. ‘subjectivity’ and (emotional) ‘involvement’. Tracing back to the major approaches of the two notions I try to detect the reasons for their being disconnected. At the same time, I propose a revised conception of ‘subjectivity’ which encompasses ‘involvement’ in its content and covers every aspect of self. Moreover, I argue that the dimensions of ‘subjectivity’ (the cognitive and the affective) are almost indistinguishable in language use, where linguistic signs are multifunctional and cognition blends with emotion. The above hypothesis is checked and confirmed in informal conversations, where the use of personal pronouns is examined. Finally, some preliminary and tentative remarks about the interplay of gender and personal pronouns are attempted.

1 INTRODUCTION

Grasping the concept of ‘subjectivity’ entails a linguistic view which ‘understands language as something living and behind the words feels the speaker or writer, whose intention prompted these words’ (Mathesious 1971 cited in Daneš 1994: 252). In the beginning of the 20th century such a view was rather on the margins of linguistic interest which focused on propositional thought. The most extreme version of mainstream linguistics until the early 70s viewed language as a formal abstract system analyzed separately from its speaking subject and his/her interactant in discourse. No attention was paid to the speaker himself/herself and to his/her communicative needs during the interaction.

Without ignoring the referential function of language –i.e. the exchange of information– we cannot overlook the fact that through the manner of presenting a proposition we reveal ourselves, leaving our personal imprint in discourse. The speaking subject is not an external observer of the facts that he/she describes, but a person who thinks, speaks, interacts, and feels. In other words, language is a tool we also use for presenting ourselves and, as such, it is imbued with ‘subjectivity’.

My aim in the present paper is to examine the relationship between two notions closely associated with the speaking subject, i.e. ‘subjectivity’ and (emotional) ‘involvement’, in an attempt to critically assess the content ascribed to them. In my view, the two notions cover a range of phenomena and are intimately related to each other.

2 THE CONCEPT OF SUBJECTIVITY

Broadly speaking, ‘subjectivity’ in language concerns the expression of self and the representation of a speaker’s (or more generally a locutionary agent’s) perspective or point of view in discourse –what has been called a speaker’s imprint (Finegan 1995: 1). The first who introduced the term was E. Benveniste (1958) in his article ‘Subjectivity in language’.1 Benveniste defines ‘subjectivity’ as the capacity of the speaker to posit himself/herself as a

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1 The article was later (1966) reprinted in his book “Problèmes de linguistique générale”.

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subject. As he writes, ‘it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject because language alone establishes the concept of “ego” in reality, in its reality which is that of the being’. It is he who combines ‘subjectivity’ with language usage, claiming that ‘ego’ is the one who says ‘ego’. Language for Benveniste is possible only because each speaker sets himself/herself up as a subject by referring to himself/herself as ‘I’ in his/her discourse (Benveniste 1971: 224). Benveniste does not confine himself to arguing how deeply marked language is by the expression of ‘subjectivity’. He also seeks the expressions that reveal it. Beginning from the personal pronouns he remarks that they are never missing among the signs of language, no matter what its type, epoch or region may be (1971: 225). Language is, accordingly, the possibility of ‘subjectivity’, because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to its expression, and discourse provokes the emergence of ‘subjectivity’ because it consists of discrete instances (1971: 227).

Based on Benveniste’s position, Lyons’ ‘subjectivity’ refers ‘to the way in which natural languages, in their structure and their normal manner of operation, provide for the locutionary agent’s expression of himself and of his own attitudes and beliefs’ (Lyons 1982: 102). More specifically, Lyons proposes the notion of ‘locutionary subjectivism’ which presupposes the following:

i) that the term ‘self-expression’ is to be taken literally and cannot be reduced to the assertion of a set of propositions, and

ii) that there is a distinction to be drawn, in the structure and use of language, between the subjective component in which the speaker expresses himself/herself and an objective component comprising a set of communicable propositions

As far as i) is concerned, Lyons emphasizes two points: first, that the self is not to be understood as being logically and psychologically distinguishable from the beliefs, attitudes and emotions of which it is the seat or location, and second, that the self which the locutionary agent expresses is the product of the social and interpersonal roles that he has played in the past and it manifests itself in a socially identifiable way in the role that he is playing in the context of utterance (Lyons 1981: 240). With regard to ii) Lyons argues first, that the distinction between the subjective and the objective is gradual, rather than absolute, and second, that what is here described as objective is in origin intersubjective, so that language is even more deeply imbued with ‘subjectivity’ than he is supposing (1982: 105).

These two broad but also encompassing delineations of ‘subjectivity’ will be my starting point for the examination of the concept. I will only mention that ‘subjectivity’ has also met with a growing interest as a phenomenon in the procedure of grammaticalization and as a basic conception in the framework of cognitive grammar (cf. Traugott 1995; Langacker 1990). Although both approaches shed light to interesting facets of the notion, I will not draw upon their definitions because they are very technical and concern mainly the cognitive construction of the subject, leaving aside the human factors involved.

Finally, an overlooked and often not acknowledged aspect of ‘subjectivity’ is the one related with the affective dimension of the speaker. Maynard’s work belongs in this framework based mainly on the Japanese tradition which has always recognized the non-referential nature of language. According to Maynard, ‘subjectivity’ is one of the modal characteristics of language ‘as reflected in the expression of his or her personal attitude and feelings’ (Maynard 1993: 12). The expression and displaying of ‘affect’ in language is also an important topic in E. Ochs and B. Schieffelin’s work, who prefer ‘affect’ as a broader term than ‘emotion’ which includes feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes (1989: 7). However, the two researchers do not raise the issue of the relationship between ‘affect’ and ‘subjectivity’.

I will not further amplify on approaches of ‘subjectivity’ but I will attempt to account for their differences. First of all, each approach illuminates a different aspect of the speaking subject and, consequently, of ‘subjectivity’. In some definitions ‘subjectivity’ is identified with the cognitive dimension of the speaker (manifested through deixis, epistemic modality,
etc.), while in others the emotional nature of the speaker is projected (manifested through emotive, evaluative components, etc). However, studies dealing with the emotional aspect of the speaking subject are not directly related to the concept of subjectivity, despite the fact that emotion, and more broadly ‘affect’, is one of the most typical ways of self-expression. Moreover, a general observation that applies is that the notion of subjectivity has experienced a gradual limitation and has been almost identified with ‘logical involvement’ (that is, the extent to which the speaker is part of the meaning of the linguistic expression). However, such a restricted interest in ‘subjectivity’ cannot offer any insight into the full concept and, of course, cannot account for the multiple dimensions of the speaking subject.

Therefore, I shall adopt a view of ‘subjectivity’ that can be summarized as follows: ‘subjectivity’, as the expression of self in discourse, concerns every manifestation of the speaker’s presence in language and covers the logical as well as the emotional dimension of the subject. In other words, I argue that a comprehensive delineation of ‘subjectivity’ should not only consider the traditionally acknowledged facets of ‘subjectivity’ (‘modality’, ‘perspective’) but also incorporate the emotionality of the speaking subject which equally contributes in its constitution. Thus, following Finegan’s categorization (1995: 4), we have to examine three different areas in order to capture the content of ‘subjectivity’: i) ‘perspective’ shaping linguistic expression, ii) ‘modality’ or ‘epistemic status’ of the proposition contained in utterances and iii) ‘affect’ towards the propositions contained in utterances.

3 The Concept of Involvement

The systematic study of ‘involvement’ began with the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman argues that ‘when an individual becomes engaged in an activity, whether shared or not, it is possible for him to become caught by it, carried away by it, engrossed in it – to be, as we say, spontaneously involved in it’ (Goffman 1961: 35). As we can infer, Goffman ascribes both a cognitive and an affective aspect to the notion of involvement, although, in the years that followed, the cognitive dimension was lost and ‘involvement’ has been described as belonging to emotive communication and used as a more specific term of ‘affect’.

After Goffman’s introduction, ‘involvement’ was invoked systematically as an analytic category in two research areas, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. In the framework of interactional sociolinguistics, Gumperz refers to ‘conversational involvement’ as the presupposition of understanding rendered possible by virtue of the shared linguistic and sociocultural knowledge. In other words, ‘involvement’ is the result of conversational inference (Gumperz 1982: 1-4). The second area of research, discourse analysis, examines ‘involvement’ mainly on the basis of structural and stylistic differences between written and spoken language. In this domain, Chafe has conducted extensive research, concluding that the prototypical spoken genre is characterized by ‘fragmentation’ and ‘involvement’, whereas the prototypical written genre by ‘integration’ and ‘detachment’ (Chafe 1985: 116).

Drawing both upon Gumperz and Chafe, Tannen defines ‘involvement’ as an internal, even emotional, connection individuals feel which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words (Tannen 1989: 12). Tannen is among the few researchers who explicitly discuss the relationship between ‘linguistic form’ and ‘involvement’. In fact, she highlights three spontaneous and pervasive linguistic strategies in conversation, which create involvement in discourse: ‘repetition’ (of phonemes, words, and phrases), ‘constructed dialogue’ and ‘imagery’ (1989: 17-29). Similar to Tannen’s definition is also that of Lakoff’s, who furthermore foregrounds another issue, that of power relations, and points out how ‘involvement’ interweaves with power (Lakoff 1990: 49-50).

Another attempt towards the clarification of the notion of involvement is made by Katriel and Dascal, who seek to theoretically distinguish ‘involvement’ from the concept of
The speaking subject in communication: ‘subjectivity’ and the (gendered) self

‘commitment’ (Katriel & Dascal 1989). According to these writers, ‘involvement’ and ‘commitment’ belong to two quite different kinds of concepts – ‘degree’ and ‘absolute’ concepts respectively – and stand in complementary relation to each other.

Despite the theoretical clarifications, ‘involvement’ still remained a problematic notion. The conceptual problems and the vagueness of the definitions as well as the variety of the related terms used (cf. ‘affect’, ‘engagement’, ‘emotion’, etc.) have been pinned down by Besnier. As he remarks, the problems associated with the notion result from the fact that its current definitions are rooted in a Western ethnopsychological understanding of social interaction (1994: 279-281). His proposal aims at a refinement of the concept, in which the relationship between emotionality and linguistic practices is grounded in the critical examination of the cultural and social dynamics of human interaction. Finally, the lack of a unified conceptual framework has also been noted by Caffi and Janney, who work towards a pragmatics of emotive communication. As far as ‘involvement’ is concerned, Caffi and Janney observe that the notion is used in widely different ways, revealing great heterogeneity. Generally, in the definitions of the notion, a movement is noticed from an individual ‘psychological’ orientation to an interpersonal ‘social’ orientation via a ‘rhetorical-stylistic’ orientation (1994: 345).

The described heterogeneity had another unremarked consequence as well: it further obscured the relationship between ‘involvement’ and ‘subjectivity’, making any correlation between them impossible. In my view, if we follow the majority of the literature and ascribe only affective content to ‘involvement’, then we have to subsume it under the ‘umbrella’ of ‘subjectivity’. In other words, ‘subjectivity’ (or self-expression) cannot be limited to our rational thinking but should also accommodate our emotional nature. Otherwise, if we adopt Goffman’s view of ‘involvement’, the differences between the two notions are almost erased.

However, the distinction between the logical and emotional facets of ‘subjectivity’ proves more difficult than it seems at first sight, because there is no clear cut dividing line between thoughts and feelings; what actually occurs is a blending of cognition and emotion. As has been argued, a high degree of logical involvement entails emotional involvement as well, and the reverse. Therefore, it is rather preferable to treat them as complementary than conflicting aspects of ‘subjectivity’.

In the next section, I will attempt to explore this interweaving by examining the prototypical markers of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘involvement’. If indeed the speaking subject is both cognitively and emotionally involved most of the time, then the markers of the two notions should be multifunctional.

4 THE EXAMINATION OF THE DATA

My data consist of five mixed casual conversations among friends and relatives. Informal interaction was actually preferred to formal talk on the assumption that this context of situation favours the expression of emotion, which is generally considered scarce in more formal contexts. More specifically, among a great variety of linguistic features, I chose to examine first person personal pronouns in subject position. The reason for this choice is that personal pronouns are described as the prototypical marker of ‘subjectivity’ in language (in its traditional conception). At the same time, personal pronouns appear in almost all approaches of ‘involvement’ as indexing the emotional engagement of the speaker.

There is one more reason which justifies the examination of personal pronouns: for the language under consideration, namely Greek, personal pronouns do not seem to add any referential information to what is already known from the verb ending. The referent of the pronoun is identified through morphology making the personal pronoun redundant. This explains the fact that personal pronouns are usually omitted since person and number features
are already given. In Greek, three persons and two numbers are morphologically distinguished in all tenses of the indicative mood through verb inflection. Therefore, in cases where the personal pronoun is simultaneously used with the verb ending, it cannot simply clarify who is talking but it must have a special meaning.

The quantitative analysis of my data has shown that in 82.2% of the cases, the verb (in singular and plural as well) is used alone without the personal pronoun. However, in 17.8% of the cases, the personal pronoun also appears. But for what reason and under what conditions? If we look more closely at how personal pronouns are used in discourse, we may find an answer.

The most common function of the personal pronoun accompanying the verb is ‘emphasis’ which usually coexists with that of ‘contrast’. When the personal pronoun is used, the speaker is not simply denoted but emphatically projected or contrasted to someone else. A characteristic example is the following where Π, following Α’s refusal to smoke, declares that he himself will smoke. He uses the personal pronoun to emphatically project his identity and to differentiate it from that of his conversationalist.

(1)  

Π Καπνίζω πού και πού [εδώ.]  
“I smoke here from time to time”

Π [Κάνε] δοκιμάστε [στικά ένα τσιγάρο.]  
“Have a test a cigarette”

Ρ [Σ’ αυτό το γραφείο.]  
“In this office”

Λ = [Μετά μετά.]  
“Later, later”

Π ➔ [°Κάνε πούρο:] >Θα καπνίσω εγώ.<=  
“Will smoke I”

Π [° Α cigar? ] ➔ > Will smoke I <=  
“(Would you like) a cigar? I will smoke”

Personal pronouns are also used when the speaker claims the right to speak or cedes the floor to someone else (in this case the 2nd person is used). This function has been called ‘metalinguistic’ (Davidson 1996) and described as ensuring smooth interaction. It is often combined with the function of ‘reinforcing’ an argument, because the presence of the personal pronoun strengthens speaker’s argumentation adding ‘weight’ to his/her point. In this usage, personal pronouns usually appear with epistemic verbs (‘I think’, ‘I believe’, etc.). In the example that follows, the speaker, by using the personal pronoun, claims the right to speak – although someone else already holds the floor – and strengthens the argumentative force of his position, and at the same time differentiates his view from that expressed previously.

(2)  

Μ Αλλά ούτως ἢ άλλως καὶ να μὴν (. ) σχέσει αυτό,    αν σχέσει γι’ αυτές,  
But someway or other and to not (.) holds this-NEUT, if holds for them-FEM PLUR  
αυτό εἶναι που [(μας ενδιαφέρει)]  
this-NEUT is that [(us interests.)]

2 However, in the third person the pronoun provides information about the sex of the speaker, which is not indexed by the verb ending.
“But, either way, even if this doesn’t hold, if it holds for them, this is what interests us”.

Finally, personal pronouns can be used in the framework of politeness theory covering face needs. In this case, the use of personal pronouns can be ambiguous regarding politeness: it can claim the authority of the speaker, helping him/her to construct his/her identity (protect his/her negative face) or it can hedge his/her argument, softening his/her position (protecting, thus, the positive face of the hearer). The ambiguity is normally resolved with the contribution of context. In the following example, the personal pronoun hedges the claim of the speaker, a fact that is confirmed by the simultaneous presence of the adverb ‘τουλάχιστον’ (‘for my part’).

(3)

Α πήγαμε να φάς:με, ε πηγαίναμε για πρώτη φορά ουσιαστικά (we) went to eat, e-ADVERS INTERJ (we) were going for first time actually

στον Όρμο Παναγιάς, εγώ τουλάχιστον είχα πάει πριν από πολλά χρόνια // [για και ξαναπήγα τώρα.] (I) went again now.

“We went to eat, actually we were going for the first time to Panagias bay, I, for my part, had been there many years ago and I went again now.”

Summing up, the qualitative analysis has indicated that first person subject pronouns, in a pro-drop language like Greek, undertake many pragmatic/discourse functions (emphasis/contrast, metalinguistic function, reinforcement of an argument, face needs/politeness), besides their referential use. Moreover, all these functions are associated with the interpersonal dynamics of interaction and, indirectly, with the emotive nature of the speaking subject. In other words, we could argue that personal pronouns convey ‘social meaning’ (cf. Duranti 1984). Finally, the described functions can and actually do coexist, thus proving that personal pronouns are multifunctional, or in Davidson’s (1996) words, give ‘pragmatic weight’ to the utterance; and this ‘weight’ stems from the fact that utterances with personal pronouns are more personal and invested with emotion.

Of course, the functions personal pronouns can have are not restricted to those appearing in my sample. However, even in these five conversations it is shown that personal pronouns do not simply ‘point’ to the speaker but also contribute to the manifestation of his/her emotional state. In support of this assumption is also the observation that the context in which they appear usually contains many markers of ‘affect’ ranging from intonation to overlaps and back-channels. Finally, the multifunctionality of personal pronouns proves that the cognitive and the affective facets of ‘subjectivity’ are so closely related to each other that it is almost impossible to distinguish them.

5 PERSONAL PRONOUNS AND GENDER

At this point, I will attempt some tentative and preliminary remarks on the interplay of gender and personal pronouns. Based on quantitative results, I have found that women seem to prefer explicit reference to self – that is, the use of personal pronoun simultaneously with the verb ending – a little bit more than men (in 19.1% of the cases vs. 16.7% of the cases). I will just
remind the reader that the conversations I examined were all mixed with equal distribution of men and women (2 vs. 2). How can we interpret this slight difference?

I will not argue that we can regard this small difference as evidence of the different way women and men constitute themselves as subjects. In order to support such an argument, we have firstly to quantitatively extend the research. More quantitative results from similar and different settings are a necessary prerequisite to the formulation of our first interpretation. The findings, for example, from different settings could shed light to the role context plays in our presentations, on the assumption that the formality or informality of an encounter affects the way both women and men tend to construct their subjectivities.

Moreover, qualitative analysis is undoubtedly crucial to the interpretation of any quantitative result. In this case, there is an additional reason: in order to escape from reproducing gender stereotypes we have to examine the emergent dynamics of interaction. Echoing M. Goodwin (1998: 44), ‘to avoid dichotomies that essentialize gender differences we need to look ethnographically at the diverse ways that language is used in a range of natural settings’. Ethnographic research will reveal how men and women present themselves in actual conversations conforming to or diverging from gender stereotypes.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have tried to critically assess the content that was ascribed to two notions closely associated with the speaking subject. Noting problems invoked by the inadequate ways in which ‘subjectivity’ and ‘involvement’ were defined, I proposed a revised conception of the two notions, which are linked to each other in a hyponymic relationship. That is, if we conceive of ‘subjectivity’ as the expression of the thinking/perceiving, feeling and interactional self, then one of its aspects should be ‘involvement’ which refers to the emotional nature of the speaker. Thus, ‘subjectivity’ has as many facets as the speaking subject.

Furthermore, I have argued that the cognitive and the affective dimension of ‘subjectivity’ are actually interwoven in language use, where the same linguistic features undertake many different functions and where cognition and emotion can hardly be separated.

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