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Elena Musi

*Università della Svizzera italiana*

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# Strategies of Objectification in Opinion Articles: the Case of Evidentials<sup>1</sup>

ELENA MUSI

Center for computational learning systems  
Columbia University  
475 Riverside Drive Address 10115 NY  
USA  
em3202@columbia.edu

**Abstract:** This paper investigates lexical evidentials in an English corpus of opinion articles about oil drilling issues in USA. It will be shown through multilevel annotation that evidentials, depending on their lexical semantics, indicate specific types of standpoints and premises as far as (inter)subjectivity and objectivity are concerned.

**Keywords:** lexical evidentials, argumentative indicators, (inter)subjectivity, opinion articles, oil drilling, multilevel annotation scheme

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the management of subjectivity and objectivity through a semantic-argumentative analysis of lexical evidentials in a corpus of opinion articles centered on oil drilling issues. The aims of the study are twofold: the first one is to propose systematic criteria to identify strategies of objectification combining the folk notion of objectivity with the linguistic notion of (inter)subjectivity. The second is to provide an example of the argumentative role played by the evidentials in presenting subjective/objective premises-conclusion relations in social debates involving different stakeholders.

Lexical evidentials (see for example Bybee 1985, Anderson 1986, Cornillie 2009) are constructions that can be used to signal the presence and the type of source of information supporting a statement both in English and in Italian (e.g. “[Mark’s car is not in the parking lot anymore]*source of info*. “He must have left/evidently he has left”). They can be direct, when relying on data attested through perception (e.g. *see*), or indirect, when implying inferences (e.g. *must*, *seem*) or hearsay/report (e.g. *apparently*) as an information source (Willett 1988, p. 57).

The affinity between the linguistic category of evidentiality and argumentation, a mode of communication in which “arguments succeed when the persons to whom they are addressed accept their conclusions on the basis of their premises” (Pinto 2001, p. 37), has recently brought scholars to focus on the role of evidentials in argumentative contexts. Taking a context dependent semantic approach, recent qualitative studies have investigated predictions in a corpus of Italian economic-financial news. These studies have shown that evidentials indicate and constrain argumentative discourse relations, working as argumentative indicators (van Eemeren et al. 2007) useful for the analyst at different levels. In particular, drawing from the framework of *Relative Modality* (Kratzer 1981) Rocci (2009, 2012, 2013) claims that the modal verb *dovere* (‘must’) works as a relational operator. It links the propositions in its scope to a set of anaphorically contextual and co-textual propositions functioning as a conversational background. Likewise, Miecznikowski’s (2011) study of the conditional form *potrebbe* (‘could’) highlights the relevance of construction types in

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constraining the possible set of conversational backgrounds for interpreting sentences. In other words, both verbs, in specific syntactic constructions, behave as inferential evidentials signaling the presence of a premises-standpoint relation. The same applies for appearance verbs (e.g. *seem*, *appear*) which have also turned out to impose constraints at the level of argument schemes (Musi 2014, Miecznikowski and Musi 2015, Musi 2015).

The verbs *must*, *can* and other linguistic items (cf. section 3) assume, both in English and Italian, an evidential function only in m-performative constructions, “which express the speaker’s current attitude towards the state of affairs [...]” (Nuyts 2001, p. 40). A necessary condition for linguistic constructions to express evidentiality is, therefore, that of expressing subjectivity, defined as “the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject’” (Benveniste 1958, p. 224).

However, beside prompting the recovery of premises and indicating the speakers’ commitment towards standpoints, evidentials match with specific polyphonic patterns: they are not primarily used to assess the speaker’s knowledge but have an interpersonal function operating “rhetorically to influence beliefs, attitudes, expectations and modes of interrelating” (White 2003, p. 259). In particular, when the sources of information are textually expressed or verbalized, evidentials realize the argumentative act of effecting “an inference in the person to whom it is addressed” (Pinto 1996, p. 168). They instruct the interlocutor on how to recover the speaker’s premises in order to consciously reach agreement or disagreement. In doing so, evidentials provide information on how the relationship between the speaker and the advanced epistemic judgment is presented and, therefore, perceived by the interlocutor on a scale having at its extremes subjectivity and objectivity.

As clarified in section 2., an epistemic statement can be both subjective or objective depending on the nature of the premises it is drawn from. In this regard, direct evidentials like perception verbs are good candidates to encode objective premises since they presuppose the presence of potentially measurable events of a sensorial nature. Other evidential strategies, characterized by more vague lexical semantic features (see section 3) are compatible with a wide range of premises which can be difficult to position on the subjectivity/objectivity axis. They call for a more fine-grained notion such as that of (inter)subjectivity. Although evidentials scales and degrees of certainty are for sure connected (see Pietrandrea 2005), lexical evidentials expressing a high modal force do not necessarily presuppose objective premises. They simply signal a high degree of commitment on the speaker’s part.

The above-mentioned semantic and pragmatic features make evidentials a privileged viewpoint for the analysis of premises-conclusion relations in terms of the subjectivity-objectivity distinction: i) they introduce the presence of a statement to which the speaker is committed as an aware subject ii) they constrain the type of state of affairs functioning as premises iii) they provide hints on how the speaker wants to present his statement to the interlocutor.

The study will be structured as follows: in section 2. some preliminary theoretical issues will be discussed, with particular reference to the linguistic notion of (inter)subjectivity and its relevance for the analysis of subjective vs. objective arguments. In section 3. the collected data and the set of selected evidential strategies will be presented. In section 4. the layers considered in the performed annotation will be justified and described. Section 5. will be devoted to the presentation of the annotation results.

## **2. Theoretical issues: from subjectivity/objectivity to (inter)subjectivity**

As sketched out in the introduction, evidentials are core strategies for the *mise en discours* of the

pragmatic category of subjectivity. The scholarly debate in the linguistic literature on the dimension of subjectivity, as pointed out by a recent special issue of *English Text Constructions* (2012), has given rise to various non overlapping definitions of the category pointing to semantic as well as pragmatic or cognitive features. In this section, I will tackle only those definitions that are relevant for the study of evidentials and their discursive functions.

Lyons (1977, pp. 797-798) makes reference to the dichotomy subjectivity/objectivity primarily to distinguish between two types of epistemic modalities: according to the scholar subjective epistemic modality indicates the speaker's conjecture regarding the truth of the proposition in the modal's scope, while objective epistemic modality expresses the objectively measurable possibility that it is true. Lyons himself recognizes that there are no systematic criteria for deciding out of context if the epistemic modality expressed by a construction is subjective or objective. The following same sentence could be, for example, interpreted both as subjective or objective:

1) "Alfred may be unmarried" (Lyons 1977: 797)

In a first interpretation, the sentence in 1) indicates that the speaker is uncertain about Alfred being a bachelor. In this case, the sentence can be paraphrased as "Perhaps Alfred is unmarried," constituting an example of subjective modality. In a second interpretation, the modal *may* expresses a mathematically computable probability (objective epistemic modality) that Alfred is unmarried, given that the speaker knows that Alfred is part of a community of 90 people, 30 of which are married.

Despite efforts in the literature to associate the traits of subjectivity and objectivity to specific modal types (Palmer 1979, Coates 1983, Kiefer 1984), the lack of systematic criteria to define the objectivity of a statement has not allowed scholars to operationalize these concepts for the analysis of sentences in oral communication or *corpora*.

A possible solution to this *impasse* has been proposed by Nuyts (2001). He has anchored the dimension of subjectivity to the reliability of evidential sources of information available to the speaker when making an epistemic judgement. In particular, Nuyts (2001) considers most reliable those sources of information accessible not only to the speaker, but to the entire speech community. More specifically, the two 'poles' of the dimension of subjectivity have been defined as follows:

[...] does the speaker suggest that she alone knows the evidence and draws a conclusion from it; or does (s)he indicates that the evidence is known to (or accessible by) a larger group of people who share the conclusion based on it. In the former case the speaker assumes strictly the responsibility for the epistemic qualification, in the latter case (s)he assumes a shared responsibility for it (although (s)he remains corresponsable too, of course) (Nuyts 2001, p. 393).

Since this definition focuses on the interacting participants in the communicative situation, Nuyts (2001) has replaced the vague notion of objectivity with that of intersubjectivity. The basic assumption underlying (inter)subjectivity is an intuitive one: shared access to sources of information is likely to ensure a greater reliability of the statements they justify.

However, it is often a hard task to identify the set of sources of information available to the speaker, and to interpret them as more or less accessible to the other participants (see e.g 1). In light of this, more recently Nuyts (2012) has situated subjectivity and intersubjectivity at the level

of the modal evaluation:

- A modal evaluation is ‘subjective’ if it is presented as being strictly the assessor’s sole responsibility
- A modal evaluation is ‘intersubjective’ if it is presented as being shared between the assessor and a wider group of people, possibly (but not necessarily) including the speaker. (Nuyts 2012, p. 58)

In the present study both notions of (inter)subjectivity are taken into account. Corpus analysis has revealed that for the majority of evidential strategies the precise level at which subjectivity and intersubjectivity are encoded cannot be determined in a general manner, but has to be decided in context. Therefore, at a first level of analysis, personal responsibility of the assessor or, at the contrary, wider sharedness is taken into consideration. At a second level, premises, where textually expressed, are analysed in terms of sharedness. In this way, it is possible to keep track of correlations between the quality of evidence and the modal evaluation expressed by evidentials.

### 3. Data

Lexical evidentials as strategies of subjectification and objectification have been investigated in an English corpus of opinion articles (30 texts) regarding oil drilling in the USA. Opinion articles are a prototypical argumentative text genre since they express the journalist’s argued *prise de position* about a specific issue of public interest (Gauthier 2007, p. 322). More specifically, they presuppose a particular rhetorical situation in which the writer takes up the double task of giving structure to a debate in the public sphere and of taking part in this debate by defending a standpoint. In articles about oil drilling issues the first task is a hard one due to the presence of numerous stakeholders involved (e.g. local communities, oil companies, environmentalists, federal regulators). For this reason, in some of the collected articles the journalist’s opinion is left implicit, though inferable from the newspaper’s orientation. The majority of space is devoted to evoke and update a common ground (Clark 1996) shareable by the newspaper’s audience and in which the necessarily compressed argumentative development of the opinion piece can be rooted.

The articles have been selected looking at the *urls* of a large set of tweets, automatically collected with the help of the *Osservatorio di Pavia*. The tweets have been retrieved searching a set of keywords, chosen as to include the widest range of possible sentiments towards oil drilling: e.g. ‘notriv’, ‘no AND drilling’, ‘oil AND USA’. This method has been chosen since it has two advantages: it allows i) to recover a varied set of opinion articles both from national, local or thematic newspapers ii) to select the most visible opinion articles in the public sphere which correspond to the most tweeted ones.

Lexical evidentials in English are evidential strategies (Aikhenvald 2004) – differently from grammatical evidentials, they are not specialised in the expression of sources of information, but convey a range of functions depending on syntactic and pragmatic features. Modal items as well as items expressing perception function cross-linguistically as evidential strategies in those constructions in which they have scope over propositions and events. The overlap between the categories of modality, perception and evidentiality has been investigated throughout (see Pietrandrea 2005, Musi 2015 for a summary), even though their closeness is intuitive: the conceptual activity of thinking that things might be otherwise (modality) implies having some reasons to believe so (evidentiality), while perception is our first means of knowledge.

The lexical semantics of different linguistic items constrains their evidential function: modals can work as inferential evidentials (Rocci 2012) or express, especially when at the conditional mode, hearsay and report (cf. Miecznikowski 2011). Perception-related items cover the whole range of evidential types: items lexically specific as to the sense modality (e.g. *see, hear, taste*) tend to express direct evidentiality, while those items in which the modality of perception is more vague (e.g. *seem, apparently*) generally express indirect evidence of the inferential or reportative type (Miecznikowski and Musi 2015).

The class of evidentials considered in this study has been formed collecting those modals and perception-related items so far investigated in the linguistic literature as evidential strategies (e.g. see Usoniene 1999, Simon-Vanderbergen and Aijmer 2007). However, due to the lack of a complete lexicon of evidentials, the initial set has been increased during corpus analysis; the linguistic constructions which recurrently have the function of pointing to the presence and/or the type of sources of information have been added to the list. The considered set of lexical evidentials, divided according to the part of speech evidentials belong to, is the following:

Verbs: *can* (could), *must* (should), *may* (might) *would, see, sound, appear, evidence, seem, result, find, reveal, prove*

Noun: *evidence*

Predicative constructions: *(to be) possible/impossible/likely/unlikely/clear/evident/obvious*

Adverbs: *obviously, clearly, plainly, evidently, manifestly, patently, apparently, surely.*

#### 4. Annotation

The occurrences of lexical evidentials have been annotated through the web based annotation tool *Brat* (<http://brat.nlplab.org>) which enables entirely user-based annotation schemes. The proposed annotation scheme encompasses four main layers which are described here in detail.

1) The first layer concerns the identification of lexical evidentials with specification of their part of speech (verbs, nouns, adverbs, predicative constructions) and the type of evidence they express. As clarified in section 2., it is not sufficient to retrieve modal or perceptual lexemes to identify evidential strategies, but it is necessary to recognize their m-performative constructions. In this regard, a necessary condition is the presence of a proposition, namely an entity that can be judged as true or false (Lyons 1977, pp. 438-442), on which the evidential has scope. In a sentence like “I see they are drilling offshore”, the speaker communicates that he knows, thanks to his sense of sight, that the proposition “they are drilling offshore” is true, while a sentence like “I see the pipeline” simply encodes a perceptual event.

In operational terms, other criteria to identify m-performative constructions may vary depending on the lexemes under investigation. Morpho-syntactic past tense *reveal*, for example, can have m-performative evidential readings, while past tense *seem* is semantically past and non m-performative: given a sentence like “it seemed that drilling was not regulated” it is plausible that the speaker does not still believe at the moment of utterance that drilling was not regulated, while through a sentence like “inspections revealed that drilling was not regulated” the speaker’s commitment towards *p* is still valid. Generally speaking, constructions are considered m-performative when expressing an assessor’s attitude towards a proposition which is still valid at the article’s moment of discourse. The *assessor* does not have to coincide with the journalist: in the collected opinion articles various voices are put ‘on stage’ in a fictive dialogical situation where a network of speakers are involved.

To annotate the types of evidence the traditional taxonomy proposed by Willett 1988 (see introduction) has been followed. Due to the presence of multiple voices, particular attention has been devoted to the distinction between inference and report in occurrences of indirect reported discourse. In these cases, the presence of a modal verb at the conditional mode does not always indicate report, but frequently signals the presence of an inference: in the sentence “Knudsen thinks those spills could be reduced by frequent monitoring” (opinion article, *Climate Press*), the verb *could* indicates an inference drawn by Knudsen starting from a set of contextual information sources; the conditional mode signals posteriority of the event “to reduce spills through frequent monitoring” with respect to the moment of utterance as well the presence of a conditional restrictor, namely the will of oil companies to finance monitorings. To distinguish cases of this kind from cases in which the conditional mode has a reportative value, a possible test is that of transforming the sentence into direct reported discourse and observe if the conditional mode would be maintained (inferential value) or not (reportative value).

2) The second layer corresponds to the semantic type of propositions evidentials have scope on. The adopted typology stems from that proposed by Freeman (2000) based on the dichotomy between broadly logically determinate statements, which are necessary true or false (e.g. “either it is raining or it is not”), and broadly logically contingent statements. Among contingent statements evaluations are distinguished from natural non evaluative statements. Evaluations are those propositions which contain an axiological predicate, e.g. “Bringing fracking to the Everglades would be highly **irresponsible**” (opinion article, *The Guardian*), or implicitly express it, e.g. “These areas are special to us and should never have been put on the table in the first place” (opinion article, *Bloomberg Business Innovator*). Natural non evaluative statements are in turn divided into descriptions and interpretations. Descriptions are extensional statements since specifying the conditions under which they are true we do not make any reference to other possible worlds: in a sentence like “An investigation by the Associated Press revealed that were more than 200 instances of fracking operations in state and federal waters off California which were all unknown to the state agency [...]” (opinion article, *Climate Press*) the embedded proposition constitutes an unassailable fact. Intensional statements are included under the label ‘interpretations’. This latter label has been enriched with two other more subtle distinctions which have been turned out to be highly relevant during the annotation, namely interpretations which are at the same time predictions (e.g. “But one company is putting technology to use that it says could end up making the process a lot safer,” opinion article, *ClimatePress*) and interpretations which encode a directive speech act (e.g. “we should moving forwards with a policy that ensures we have reliable supplies of oil and gas for decades to come,” opinion article, *Bloomgerg Business Innovators*).

3) The third layer makes reference to the type of modal evaluation. The major distinction is that between subjective vs. intersubjective statements. As explained by Nuyts (2012, see section 2.), (inter)subjectivity is a matter of how statements are presented in terms of shared or personal commitment to their truth. In some occurrences in which the identity of the assessors is explicit, the annotation task is straightforward (e.g. “Experts [...] suggest the critical habitat designation is more likely to affect development of offshore wind than oil and gas”, opinion article, *The State*). In the other occurrences, morpho-syntactic clues can be exploited in the annotation process. In particular, with m-performative uses of perception verbs (e.g. *see, hear, seem, look like*) and verbs of thinking (e.g. *find*), assessors feature as one of the obligatory participants in the verbs’ argument structure. However, there is variation at the syntactic level as to the manner assessors are encoded: some perception verbs (e.g. *seem, sound, look like*) attribute a grammatical subject role to a

perceived/conceived object, while assessors can either be left implicit or be overtly expressed in the syntactic function of an indirect object, allowing to trace (inter)subjectivity. Other agent-oriented perception verbs (e.g. *see, hear*) and cognitive verbs are even more informative since they locate assessors in subject position, making it easy for the annotator to label the evidential construction as subjective or (inter)subjective. The same applies for those occurrences in which modal verbs/adverbs appear in a proposition subordinate to cognitive predicate, as in “we believe that [...] many yield mandated investors who hold PGF may be force to liquidate” (opinion article, *CalgaryHerald*).

However, the situation is more blurred when modal verbs appear in the main statement, since the entity in subject position does not provide any information about the assessor, but works as a participant (agent or patient) of the event expressed by the embedded proposition: the sentence “We need a clear commitment from the federal government on revenue sharing” (opinion article, *Center for American Progress*) would, for example, be roughly equivalent to the sentence “it is necessary that [we]<sub>agent</sub> obtain a clear commitment from the federal government on revenue sharing,” compatible both with subjective or (inter)subjective responsibility. These kinds of contexts, in absence of further clues, have been annotated as subjective, unless contextual information clarifies that the assessor works as spokesman for a community.

Statements annotated as ‘subjective’ are further divided into those in which the assessor coincides with the journalist and those in which a third party is the origin and the responsible of a given discourse: “While it is possible [that the offshore industry will reach this same ultimate drop in rigs]<sub>singular-journalist</sub>, Deloitte believes [it is unlikely]<sub>singular-third party</sub>” (opinion article, *Offshore*).

Similarly, among (inter)subjective statements a distinction is made depending on the epistemic position of the journalist which can or cannot be one of the assessors.

4) The fourth layer addresses sources of information which function, in an argumentative perspective, as premises, and their accessibility. Sources of information have been annotated as ‘singular’ when available to the assessor only. A typical example is when premises make reference to the assessor’s feelings or memories, per definition not accessible to anybody else. However, such a situation is not congruent with the text genre of opinion articles. In the present study, premises have been annotated as ‘singular’ when left textually implicit. As it will be explained in the next section, implicitness happens to correlate with peculiar rhetorical situations. When textually expressed, premises have been annotated either as ‘shared’ or ‘shareable’. The first label refers to those cases in which premises are known by a group of people, such as a local community, or constitute facts which could be verified by people other than the assessor. The second label refers to those cases in which premises are predictions or interpretations with which a larger audience could agree or disagree.

## 5. Annotation results

The first level of annotation has revealed that evidential strategies are relevant clues for the study of (inter)subjectivity since they occur in any of the considered texts. Their distribution according to the part of speech they belong to and to the type of evidence expressed is visualized in the following table:

	Types of evidence				
POS	Direct	Inference	Report	Hearsay	TOT

Verbs	12	70	8	0	90
Predicative constructions	1	12	0	0	13
Adverbs	0	6	0	0	6
Nouns	1	0	0	0	1
TOT	14	88	8	0	110

Fig1. Distribution of lexical evidentials in the corpus

As shown in Fig. 1. the majority of evidential strategies encode inference as an information source, while hearsay is not expressed by any of them. Inferential evidentials are both modals and perception/cognition related items belonging to different parts of speech. Reportative and direct evidentials are more restricted. The only strategy signalling that the proposition it has scope on originates in a discourse different from the journalist's is the conditional form *would*, e.g. "The bill's sponsor, Republican state senator Garrett Richter, argues that his proposal **would** actually protect Florida's residents by introducing safeguards not yet in existence" (opinion article, *The Guardian*).

Direct evidentials encompass the perception verbs *see*, *reveal* (in the past tense), the noun *evidence* and the cognition verb *prove*:

2) "BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico **proved** that an entire coastline could be affected by a massive oil spill" Pallone said. "We know what happens, we **saw** what happened with BP," he said. "The spill was off of Louisiana, but it went all the way around the east coast of Florida. So if someone says to me, 'Oh, we're going to do it in Virginia, that doesn't impact New Jersey,' that is totally false: It will impact the entire East Coast." (opinion article, *NJ.com*)

In example 2) the journalist quotes US Representative Frank Pallone's arguments against off-shore drilling in the Atlantic. Pallone argues through a reasoning from analogy that drilling off Virginia could have an impact on New Jersey, as drilling off Louisiana had an impact on the Florida coast. Using the evidential verb *prove* he explicitly states that what happened in concomitance with the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, here playing the role of grammatical subject, shows the truth of the statement "an entire coastline could be affected by a massive oil spill." The reasoning leading to the truth of the proposition is a rhetorical induction (generalization starting from a single case) presented, through the use of the verb *prove*. This verb semantically entails the truth of the proposition it has scope on, as non defeasible and objectively true. The spill in the gulf of Mexico is, in fact, not a random case, but constitutes what Aristotle would have called a *paradeigma* (*Rhet.* I.2, 1357b25ff), namely an exemplar case. The validity of this process of generalization is reaffirmed by Pallone through the juxtaposition of the two sentences "[we know what happens]<sub>generalization</sub> (since) [we saw what happened with BP]<sub>exemplar case</sub>", which could be linked by a causal explicit connective. The verb *know* is a factive verb (Beaver and Geurts 2011) that presupposes the truth of the embedded proposition. The premise supporting it is, in fact, presented as a non assailable basic premise (Freeman 2005): the verb *see* in the past tense specifies that the consequences of that spill were attestable through sight, the most reliable among our senses, and could have been objectively measured, by anyone, as expressed by the first person pronoun *we*.

Similarly to the verb *prove*, the verb *reveal* semantically entails that the proposition it has scope on is a basic premise. The verb *reveal*, at the past tense, is a dynamic perception verb which encodes a shift from subjectivity to (inter)subjectivity since it signals that the entity in subject position makes known to other people (lit. ‘remove the veil’) a real state of affairs that was previously unknown:

3) “In 2013, an investigation by the Associated Press revealed that there were more than 200 instances of fracking operations in state and federal waters off California which were all unknown to the state agency that oversees offshore oil and gas” (opinion article, *ClimateProgress*).

To summarize, direct evidentials work in opinion articles as strategies of objectification since they implicitly frame the embedded propositions as true. As to the semantic type of proposition is concerned, they introduce descriptions. At the level of argumentation structure, descriptions are good candidates to work as premises but they do not meet the key felicity condition of assertives functioning as standpoints, namely that “the speaker supposes that the assertive is not immediately acceptable to the listener” (Van Eemeren et al. 2007, p. 29).

On the other hand, inferential evidentials are not compatible with extensional statements since they express a modal evaluation, while they can introduce both interpretations and evaluations. The presence of an evidential of the inferential type presupposes the existence of a set of premises in support of the truth of the embedded proposition. In other words, inferential evidentials are indicators at a micro-argumentative level since they mark the presence of premise-conclusion relations. The proposition they introduce can be both the main standpoint or a local standpoint playing the role of a non-basic assailable premise in the whole argumentative structure.

The distribution of the semantic types of proposition introduced by evidentials in the considered corpus is represented in the following table:

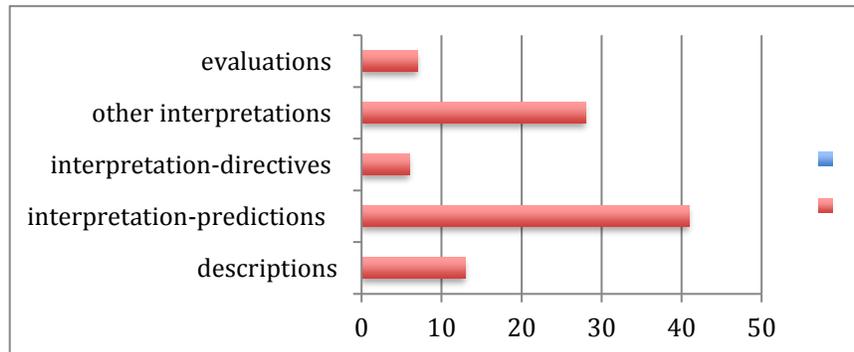


Fig. 2. Distribution of types of semantic propositions in the evidentials' scope

As shown in Fig. 2 interpretations of the prediction type are the most frequent ones. This is consistent with the argumentative context the collected articles are framed in: arguments pro and cons oil drilling, regardless the specific perspective (e.g. economy, sustainability), point to future consequences as reasons that should guide decision makers. Predictions co-occur in the corpus with textually expressed premises, a part from 5 cases in which the source is a ‘third party’ and the proposition in the evidential’s scope constitutes an argument from expert opinion (Walton and Reed 2003):

4) “ ‘When we look at our demand for natural gas, we’re **probably** going to be another 5-10 bcf (billion cubic feet) per day of demand for the next 10 years’, Proctor said” (opinion article, *The Tribune*)

In example 4), as well as in the other cases, the assessor is an expert, namely a senior market analyst with Ponderosa Energy in Denver. Even if the premises supporting Proctor’s predictions would have been expressed, the audience would have not had the competences to judge their soundness. Therefore, shared access to sources of information and (inter)subjectivity is necessary blocked. That of giving voice to experts can be considered another strategy of objectification: experts are, according to our encyclopaedic knowledge, reliable and they strongly recall the frame of science which is associated to the realm of objectivity.

Turning to the third level of annotation, predictions and other kinds of interpretations have resulted to convey either a subjective or an (inter)subjective modal qualification (ca. 60%), while evaluations only subjective ones. Due to the restricted size of the corpus, it is not possible to draw any generalization concerning associations between semantic type of standpoints ad degrees of (inter)subjectivity.

A clearer pattern concerns, instead, premises’ accessibility signalled by different evidential lexemes. From the analyzed data it appears that lexemes which express a strong stance are those more frequently associated with premises textually expressed and easily recoverable, as in the following example:

5) “it is **clearer** than ever that oil and gas are the wrong energy sources to pursue along the Atlantic coast. [Not only does offshore hydrocarbon development jeopardize recreation, tourism, wildlife, and fisheries from the explosive underwater blasting of seismic surveying to the inevitable leaks and spills that accompany production]<sub>premise 1</sub> but [independent analysis shows that drilling is far from the economic cure-all that Big Oil is advocates have made it out to be ]<sub>premise 2</sub>. In a January 2015 report, Oceana compared a conservative estimate of developable Atlantic coast offshore wind resources with the oil industry is own estimates for economically recoverable oil and gas reserves in the same area and found that offshore wind would generate substantially more energy and employment over the same 20-year time horizon, without the risks to water quality and coastal communities” (opinion article, *American Progress*)

The impersonal evidential predicative construction *it is clearer than ever* in 5) expresses a high degree of epistemic commitment on the part of the journalist: the adjective *clear* marks the truth proposition “oil and gas are the wrong energy sources to pursue along the Atlantic coast” as (inter)subjectively apparent and the superlative absolute form further increases the modal force conveyed by the adjective’s lexical semantics. The premises supporting the statement appear immediately afterwards in adjacent position. Their function as coordinated arguments is signalled by the presence of the correlative conjunction *not only...but also* that, a part from clarifying the discourse relation between the two premises, establishes an ascendent climax in argumentative force since the second argument constitutes at the same time a refutation of the argument generally exploited by oil drilling supporters. Furthermore, as to accessibility, both premises are shared: the drawbacks listed in *premise 1* are called upon by entire local communities, while the responsible and the results of the “independent analysis” are explicitly stated in the following text.

It has to be noticed that inferential lexical evidentials presuppose the presence of a set of premises  $a_1$ - $a_2$  but do not impose constraints, differently from lexical connectives (e.g. *because*), on the premises' position which can, in fact, occur before or after the proposition on which the evidential has scope on and be frequently in a non adjacent position (see Musi 2015, pp. 338-343). The recurrent association between inferential evidentials expressing a high degree of epistemic commitment with premises textually adjacent and (inter)subjective is, thus, meaningful.

A possible explanation lies in the known correlation between the acceptability of premises and the acceptability of standpoints (Freeman 2005): when taking a decisive stand on issue journalists are more inclined to stress the presence of premises and to present them as highly acceptable. To this aim, they provide readers with premises that are i) easily recoverable ii) (inter)subjectively accessible and, hence, potentially acceptable.

Looking at the correlations between different levels of analysis, it has emerged that third parties' statements tend to be backed up by textually expressed premises preferably when the journalist agrees with the reported evaluation/interpretation. This recurrent association has a rhetorical justification since it constitute a means for the journalist to implicitly undermines the reasonableness of their antagonists: when the premises supporting both the protagonist's and the antagonist's statements are expressed, readers can trace back the followed inferential paths and consciously reach agreement with one of the parties; when, instead, the premises supporting the antagonist's standpoint are left unexpressed readers will plausibly align themselves to justified standpoint of the protagonist.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has focused on lexical evidentials as clues for the study of subjectivity and objectivity at a semantic-argumentative level. Lexical evidentials, working as argumentative indicators of premises-conclusion relations, allow to look at the correlations between the subjective-objective status of a statement in relation to that of its premises. The followed method of analysis has been corpus based. I started from theoretical considerations on the dimension of subjectivity and objectivity in a linguistic perspective and from previous studies about the discursive functions of evidentials. On these grounds, I have investigated how lexical evidentials pattern with the expression of subjectivity and objectivity in a corpus of opinion articles about oil drilling issues, through a multilevel syntactic, semantic and pragmatic annotation.

The obtained results provide insights both as to the methodology used to investigate subjectivity and objectivity and as to the role played by lexical evidentials as strategies of objectification in opinion articles.

With regard to methodology, as it has been already noticed in the linguistic literature, there are not systematic criteria available to the analyst to decide if a statement is objective. However, it is possible, thanks to the privileged viewpoint offered by evidentials, to investigate the degree of objectivity with which a statement is presented, integrating the notion of (inter)subjectivity.

Data analysis has shown that direct evidentials work as strategies of objectification since they frame the proposition they have scope on as factual. These propositions, according to Freeman's typology (2000), are descriptions which play the argumentative role of basic unassailable premises. Assuming that the acceptability of standpoints depends on the acceptability of premises, the standpoints supported by premises that are marked by direct evidentials are presented as objective.

On the other hand, inferential and reportative evidentials introduce intensional statements,

namely evaluations and interpretations whose truth cannot be objectively measured. The envisaged solution is that of singling out the (inter)subjectivity of the modal qualification expressed by the evidential from the (inter)subjectivity of the propositions functioning as premises, when textually expressed. Applying this analytical method, it has emerged that evidentials which signal a high degree of commitment recurrently match with textually expressed adjacent premises of the (inter)subjective type which constitute an attempt of desubjectification on the part of the assessor. Even the lack of textually expressed premises has turned out to play a rhetorical function: in articles featuring multiple voices journalist are more inclined to report the premises of those participants to the discussion they agree with, presenting them as more reasonable.

The elaborated methodology will be applied in future work to annotate evidentials' discursive functions in a quantitatively bigger corpus in order to verify the attested trends and identify which features have to be ascribed to the specific context of oil drilling debates.

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