

## SUBJECTIVE VS. OBJECTIVE VIEWING OF *THINK* IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

Subjectivity in language and the process of subjectification have been widely discussed over the last few decades in cognitive grammar. By means of the Langacker's subjectification theory the author analysed the subjective and objective viewing of the English mental verb *think*. The present study corroborates the hypothesis that in English the act of thinking is conceptualised mainly in such a way that the speaker is objectified by putting himself on stage.

Keywords: subjectification, subjectivity, objectivity

### 1. Introduction

Each speaker acts as a conceptualiser and, hence, has inexhaustible possibilities to construe a scene in a chosen way. Subjective/objective viewing is one of the construal operations, as understood in the cognitive approach to semantics and discourse analysis, which give the speaker such an opportunity (Langacker 1990: 5). The disparity between the objective and subjective viewing, and the process of subjectification, have been widely discussed by linguists over the last few decades. Athanasiadou et al. (2006: 1) point out that among those who first considered the notion of subjectivity were European linguists such as Bréal ([1900] 1964) and Bühler ([1934] 1990). Afterwards it was Benveniste ([1958] 1971) who went on to claim that subjectivity is one of the most obvious and, hence,

ubiquitous functions of language. In his research, he distinguished between “sujet d’enoncé”, the syntactic subject and “sujet d’énonciation” understood as the speaking subject. However, the approach to subjectivity in language which has recently gained great popularity and, thus, cannot go unmentioned is that of Langacker’s.

## 2. Langacker’s subjectification theory

Contrary to what might be expected, Langacker’s view of subjectivity does not refer to the meaning which is based on the speaker’s subjective opinion. For him, the notion of subjectivity is related to “the relative positions of the *subject and object of conception*” (Langacker 1999: 149). The subject of conception, as understood by Langacker, is the conceptualiser of the scene, while the scene or entity which is conceptualised constitutes the object of conception. Langacker (1990: 7) juxtaposes two basic viewing arrangements: the optimal and the egocentric. In the case of the former, the boundary between the conceptualiser and what is conceptualised is definite and the subject of conception is “totally absorbed in apprehending the onstage situation” (Langacker 2006: 18). However, this does not always have to be the case. It is possible for a conceptualiser to linguistically profile himself. In such a case, he becomes part of the scene which is conceptualised. In such egocentric viewing arrangement the inherent boundaries between the subjective speaker and the objective scene blur and the speaker, as part of the object of conception, is construed objectively (Langacker 1990: 8).

Langacker (1990: 6f.) provides an example in order to demonstrate the way the scene may be construed either subjectively or objectively in a real-life situation. When a man wears glasses, he may take them off, put them on the table and look at them carefully. In this case, their construal is maximally objective. The man (who serves as the subject of conception) is fully detached from the scene. The glasses, on the other hand, function only as the object of perception. This arrangement, however, may easily be modified, resulting in the *optimal viewing arrangement* evolving into the *egocentric viewing arrangement*. When the man wears the glasses, they become “part of the perceiving apparatus” and, simultaneously, any other object may be observed. In such a case, the function of the glasses is to be a part of the subject of conception.

The process of subjectification refers to the relationship between the optimal viewing arrangement and the egocentric viewing arrangement. As Kövecses explains, “the construal of a situation depends on whether an element of the speech event (subjective construal) or an objective element (objective construal) is utilised in describing a scene” (2006: 238). Hence, the presence of the pronouns such as *I* or *me* in a particular sentence puts the speaker on stage and makes the conceptualiser linguistically profiled. The fact that the scene gains subjectivity and the speaker is conceptualised in a more objective way cannot nevertheless be referred to as subjectification, as understood by Langacker. Subjectification can only be achieved when the speaking subject is present in the construal but is not profiled linguistically.

### 3. Subjectification theory in application

Langacker’s theory of subjectification inspired the author to conduct a study concerning the subjective and objective viewing of the English verb *think*. In other words, subjectivity and subjectification theories served as a tool to disclose any regularities and tendencies in the level of subjectivity of the conceptualisation of the act of thinking. The analysis has been fully presented in Korpál (2011) and, due to word limit imposed, the present description constitutes only a tentative adumbration of the topic and a summary of the main results.

The author predicts that in the case of psychological verbs objectification of the speaker prevails. Hence, the instances of use of the verb *think* with the 1<sup>st</sup> person should outnumber the instances of its use with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. When the mental verb *think* is the predicate of a given sentence, then it is likely that the speaker would objectify himself by putting himself on stage. In other words, focusing on oneself when construing the act of thinking is a pragmatic convention. This was the author’s hypothesis which was to be corroborated in the study.

A thousand of examples of the use of the verb *think* have been chosen at random from the British National Corpus and analysed in order to examine whether it is true that the verb is mainly used with the 1<sup>st</sup> person subject. The results of the analysis are summarised in Table 1.

1st person sg/pl	2nd person sg/pl	3rd person sg/pl
609 (541/68)	158	233

Table 1. The frequency of the occurrence of the possible subjects of *think* (from Korpál 2011: 18)

The comparison of the figures from Table 1 confirms the author's hypothesis. In the statistically significant majority of the instances analysed, the verb *think* is used with 1<sup>st</sup> person. Out of 1000 clauses with the verb *think* as a predicate 541 contained the pronoun *I* as the subject. Hence, it is more natural in English to say *I think* than to say *He/She thinks*. When conceptualising the mental process, there is a strong tendency for a speaker to treat himself as the object of conception (Korpál 2011). Goddard (2003: 132) is of the opinion that this is no coincidence, since "*I think* serves a range of conventionalised conversational and illocutionary functions – e.g. to make suggestions or mitigate disagreement".

Nevertheless, the question is: can we talk about the typological approach to subjectivity in language? Uehara's (2006: 76ff.) comparative analysis of English and Japanese corroborates the claim that there exist cross-language differences in the conceptualisation. This would suggest that the typological approach to subjectivity in language appears relevant. Uehara states that languages may be placed on the subjectivity scale, depending on explicitness or implicitness of the subject. He examines the issue of conceptualisation of mental acts in both English and Japanese. He is of the opinion that in Japanese the subjective construal prevails since "the first person pronoun subject of internal state predicates is usually omitted in Japanese discourse" (Uehara 2006: 104). Due to the lack of obligatoriness of the subject Langacker's full subjectification can be achieved in most instances. In comparison, in English the subject has to be explicitly expressed. The conceptualiser is profiled linguistically and maximal linguistic subjectivity cannot take place. As Uehara (2006: 111) concludes, "Japanese appears to represent the subjective frame (or speaker-oriented) language type and English the objective frame type". Uehara's analysis, hence, manifests that the typological approach to grammar should be applied (Korpál 2011).

However, it should again be made clear that the description of the results presented here constitutes a condensed summary of a much more

complicated issue. The extensive coverage of the issue of Langacker's full subjectification, when the conceptualiser is unselfconscious, has been given in Korpál (2011). Some other issues, i.e. the notion of pragmatic strengthening of the *I think* expression (Traugott 1995: 38f.), the comparison of English and Polish mental verbs and further details concerning the typological approach to subjectivity in language, have also been touched upon therein.

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