

Cognitive Connotations of Discourse Subjectivity from the Philosophic Perspective

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Discourse serves as a medium through which speakers (or writers) express their stance, affect and intentions, that is, subjectivity. Subjectivity in discourse is omnipresent, meaning that it manifests whenever discourse is generated. Nevertheless, current research lacks a thorough exploration of discourse subjectivity (DS) and its particular cognitive connotations. A framework for analysing the cognitive connotations of DS from the philosophic perspective was constructed to delve deeper into the cognitive aspects of DS. This approach utilised qualitative research and conceptual analysis methods. Using this framework, the cognitive connotations of DS were meticulously examined from two perspectives: speakers' self-ascription to objective events and speakers' concern over the 'self' of the hearers (or readers). The findings reveal that: (1) the constructed framework facilitates a comprehensive analysis of the cognitive connotations of DS, uncovering the inherent links among discourse, speakers, hearers, context and subjectivity; (2) speakers' self-ascription to objective events encompasses their stance, affect and intentions; (3) speakers' concern over the hearers' 'self' specifically includes the hearers' self-image, cognitive state and social identity. This study provides a framework and perspective for further research into DS and discourse analysis, offering insights for exploring subjective phenomena in discourse more deeply.

Keywords: discourse subjectivity (DS), cognitive connotation, speakers, hearers, philosophic perspective

INTRODUCTION

In philosophy, language plays a pivotal role in shaping our worldview. In language use, more emphasis has been placed on the meanings conveyed by language expressions (Austin 1962: 103). Language not only serves as a tool for depicting objective facts but also encompasses the subjective interpretations and perceptions of speakers or writers (S/R) toward objective events, known as linguistic subjectivity. Subjectivity characterises mental processes (Husserl 2012: 118) and language constitutes a unique facet of intellectual creation (Hegel 2022: 31). Heidegger (2010: 51) once questioned the possibility of a language of thought that could express simplicity, thereby revealing the limitations of metaphysical language. The human element in language is profoundly significant, for language carries the thoughts and affect or

emotion of individuals with subjective nuances. Thus, when analysing linguistic meanings, it is essential to consider their philosophical dimensions (Frege 1948: 212). By examining the discourse subjectivity (DS) from the philosophic perspective, we can further elucidate its universality and significance, and explore how discourse shapes humans' cognition, behaviour and experiences. However, philosophic discussions on DS are rare among scholars, hindering a comprehensive understanding of subjective phenomena in discourse and the nature of language itself.

In constructing discourse, speakers (or writers) encode their 'self' and convey it through specific expressions. Discourse represents the highest level of linguistic units, where its production and comprehension are closely intertwined with subjectivity, and speakers typically formulate and articulate discourse to communicate their intentions effectively (Zhao 2022: 85). Regardless of the forms in which language is expressed, speakers invariably aim to express their 'self' and convey their cognition, attitudes and affect to others, reflecting linguistic subjectivity (Gao 2023: 38). Undoubtedly, subjectivity permeates discourse without exception. However, there is a noticeable lack of focused research on the cognitive connotations of DS, which impedes our systematic exploration of DS.

This study utilised qualitative research and conceptual analysis methods to examine the cognitive connotations of DS through the philosophic perspective, using the editorial discourse in *The New York Times* as cases. A framework was developed to analyse DS, focusing on two specific aspects: speakers' self-ascription to objective events and speakers' concern over the 'self' of the hearers (or readers). The findings contribute to a systematic exploration of the subjective elements embedded within discourse, enhancing cognitive research on DS, providing a perspective reference for the philosophic exploration of DS, as well as a research framework for in-depth research on DS and discourse analysis.

STATE OF THE ART

Cognitive Study on Discourse Subjectivity

Regarding subjectivity, scholars have directed their attention towards its various dimensions. Among the most frequently referenced studies are those by Lyons (1977), Finagan (1995) and Shen (2001). According to Lyons, subjectivity is 'the speaker, in making an utterance, simultaneously comments upon that utterance and expresses his attitude to what he is saying' (Lyons 1977: 739). Shen (2001: 268) believed that subjectivity means speakers' self-imprint in utterance, which includes their stance, attitudes and feelings towards the utterance. Finagan (1995: 4–5) explored the subjectivity of language from three aspects, that is, 'speaker's perspective, affect and epistemic modality'. Clearly, these scholars emphasise the speakers' role in language and the expressive functions of language.

Besides, in the process of discourse construction, whether it involves the speakers' use of language, the subjective selection of specific discourse components, the subjective construal of objects, or their attitude, cognition and feelings towards objective events or hearers, it is inherently tied to the speakers' cognition. The speakers' cognition forms the foundation of language use and the meanings conveyed by discourse. Hence, this study regards DS primarily as a cognitive concept.

However, current research on linguistic subjectivity has predominantly focused on key aspects of the speakers' 'self', such as 'position', 'attitude', 'affect', 'perspective', 'emotion' and

'cognition'. These aspects are closely interconnected and interdependent without clear boundaries. Detailed research on the cognitive connotations of subjectivity at the discourse level was not given enough attention.

Discourse Subjectivity and Philosophy

The theme of DS has been central in philosophy (Chen 2024: 1). From the Theory of Language Games (Wittgenstein 1958) to the Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962), language was viewed as a product shaped by both action and meaning within specific social and cultural contexts. It is undeniable that language inevitably carries the subjective imprint of humans. According to Cassirer et al., subjectivity did not relate to something external, but to 'you' or 'he'. Subjectivity was distinguished from 'you' or 'he', on the one hand, and it was also combined with 'you', on the other, and the 'you' or 'he' formed the true opposite that 'I' needed to discover and define 'self' (Cassirer et al. 2020: 175). Foucault claimed that subjectivity could be understood as a social construct, where being a subject implies submission to a particular system of power. Additionally, subjectivity was closely linked to the formation of individual identities (Foucault 1982: 781). The concept of subjectivity highlighted the subjective nature of experiences, bridging the gap between the subjective and objective by rejecting the notion of a first-person perspective (Thorburn, Stolz 2020: 97).

Peng (2022: 216) examined the philosophical and cognitive existence of linguistic subjectivity and its realisation paths from the perspective of the combination of embodied philosophy and cognition. Peng (2023: 58) offered philosophical reflections on DS from three aspects: the experience model, the mental model and the communicative model. Despite these insightful studies on the deep origins of subjectivity in philosophy, research specifically focusing on DS from the philosophic perspective remains relatively scarce. This gap hinders our ability to thoroughly comprehend, understand and explore the subjective phenomena in discourse.

The current study employs qualitative research and conceptual analysis methods, constructs a framework for analysing cognitive connotations of DS from the philosophic perspective, and probes into the cognitive connotations of DS from two aspects: speakers' self-ascription to objective events and speakers' concern over the 'self' of hearers. The study aims to enhance the comprehensive understanding of the subjective characteristics of discourse, delve deeper into the cognitive connotations of subjectivity at the discourse level, and broaden the scope and depth of DS research.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The process of discourse construction is inherently intertwined with the speakers' 'self' and speakers' concern over the hearers' 'self', making the discourse inevitably have some certain degree of a subjective colour. To expand the breadth and depth of the research on DS, the study proposes a framework for analysing the cognitive connotations of DS from the philosophic perspective (Figure). The proposed framework consists of two aspects: speakers' self-ascription to objective events, including the speakers' stance, affect and intentions, emphasising the speakers' subjective construal of the object; and speakers' concern over the hearers' 'self', including the hearers' face image, cognitive state and social identity, focusing on the cognitive interaction or cognitive cooperation between speakers and hearers.

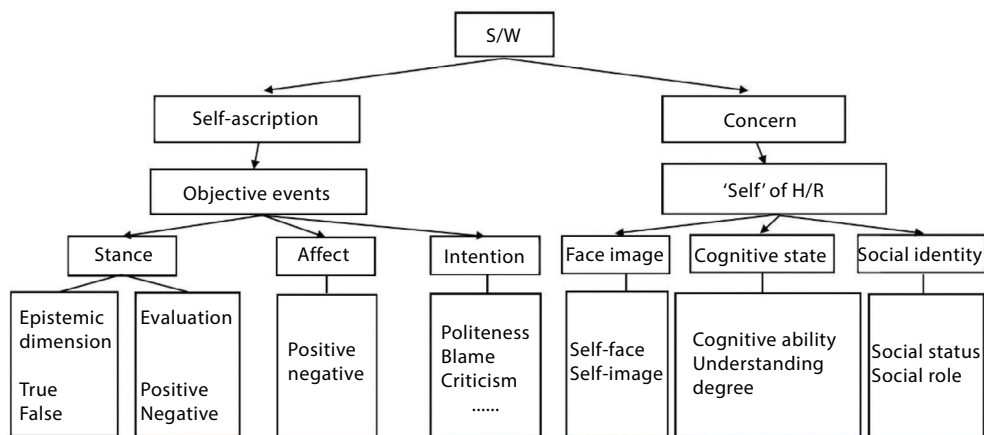


Figure. Framework for analysing cognitive connotations of DS from the philosophic perspective

Notes: S/W: speakers or writers; H/R: hearers or readers; DS: discourse subjectivity.

In the study, speakers' stance consists of two subcategories: epistemic dimension and evaluation. Epistemic dimension refers to the speakers' judgment on whether the content of objective propositions has truth value in the process of constructing discourse. Evaluation contains two sublevels, that is, the speakers' attitude towards objective things, events, or the world, and the speakers' appreciation of the specific nature or value of objective things, events, or the world. The speakers' affect is the speakers' psychological feelings towards objective events, things, or the world when constructing discourse, describing, or narrating events. The speakers' intention, on the one hand, is the speakers' motivation to construct discourse, based on which speakers organise and arrange discourse; on the other hand, is the communicative purpose that speakers want to express or achieve in constructing discourse. Speakers' concern over the hearers' face image can be understood as the hearers' self-face and self-image in social interaction. Speakers' concern over the hearers' cognitive status is mainly concerned with the hearers' cognitive ability and understanding degree of the information in discourse. Speakers' concern over the hearers' social identity refers especially to the status and role of the hearers in society or social interactions.

TWO ASPECTS OF COGNITIVE CONNOTATIONS IN DISCOURSE SUBJECTIVITY

Speakers' Self-ascription to Objective Events

Any form of language can express the speaker's cognitive engagement with objective events, including their attitude and affect (Gao 2023: 38). Within discourse, speakers and writers consistently incorporate their 'self' into objective entities, events, or the world. The study primarily examines the speakers' self-ascription to objective events from three aspects: the speakers' stance, affect and intention.

Speakers' Stance

In the study, speakers' stance encompasses two specific categories: the speakers' epistemic dimension and evaluation. The speakers' epistemic dimension is manifested through modal verbs (such as could, should and may), modal adverbs (such as surely and undoubtedly), and clauses (such as I think and we claim) in discourse. Here, evaluation comprises two aspects: attitude and appreciation. Attitude in evaluation represents a psychological inclination that indicates the speaker's approval or disapproval of a particular entity (Eagly, Chaiken 1993: 1), which can be both positive and negative. Affirmation, support, friendliness and satisfaction fall under a positive attitude, while negation, refutation, unfriendliness and dissatisfaction are categorised as a negative attitude. Similarly, appreciation in evaluation can also be positive and negative. Examples of the positive appreciation include 'perfect', 'simple', 'important' and 'good', while the negative appreciation encompasses 'imperfect', 'difficult', 'unimportant' and 'bad'.

(1) 'Planet Earth is the one thing that **all humans share**. We are often at its mercy. We take its majesty for granted. We **forget** that we **merely** hold it in trust for our children's children, for all those who'll come after us' (A World on Fire, *The New York Times*, January 2, 2022).

In example (1), the speaker states the truth value of the proposition, that is the earth is shared by all humans and we must preserve it for our future generations. Expressions such as 'all humans share' 'forget' and 'merely' demonstrate the speaker's emphasis on preserving the planet and their positive appreciation of its importance. The speaker intends to advocate that humans should take both responsibility and care of the earth for future generations.

Speakers' Affect

Discourse serves as a critical medium through which speakers express, comprehend and convey their affect. It can be argued that expressing, understanding and transmitting speakers' affect is one of the essential functions of discourse. Speakers position themselves as participants in the events or situations they describe, integrating their subjective affect (Dong 2015: 116). Affect is a kind of cognitive experience with its system. The affect system implies that speakers are influenced by the objects during discourse construction and respond emotionally or psychologically through linguistic expressions (Zhao 2022: 87). In this study, the speakers' affect is typically represented through a psychological process involving two sub-categories: the positive affect and the negative affect. The positive affect includes feelings like happiness and excitement, while the negative affect encompasses sensations such as anxiety and boredom. Affect expressions can be explicit or implicit, and can be presented through specific language representations such as verbs, emotional nouns, emotional adjectives and emotional adverbs.

(2) 'Vladimir Putin's **full-scale invasion** of Ukraine is **advancing from the east, the south and toward Kyiv in the north**. **As fighting raged on Thursday**, President Biden ordered a harsh round of sanctions, and a fateful new East-West struggle is underway with no indication of where it might lead or how long it might last' (Mr. Putin Launches a Second Cold War, *The New York Times*, February 25, 2022).

Example (2) illustrates the speaker's negative affect on East-West confrontation. Expressions such as 'full-scale invasion' and 'advancing from the east, the south, and toward Kyiv in the north' describe the urgency and seriousness of the situation from the speaker's perspective. It reflects the speaker's anxiety about the situation in Ukraine at that time. The expression 'As fighting

raged on Thursday' conveys the speaker's concern over the possibility of further escalation of the conflict, which could lead to serious consequences.

Speakers' Intention

The self-ascription of the speakers to objective events in discourse was regarded as their subjective intention (Habermas 1976: 160). During discourse construction, speakers choose various linguistic forms and expressions to meet certain needs, which is called speakers' communicative intention or simply intention. According to its functions, the speakers' intentions in the study include several subcategories, for example, politeness, blame and criticism intentions. Speakers' intention has abundant representational forms in discourse. Also, it can be singular or multiple. In both scenarios, speakers strive to effectively achieve their intentions and foster a positive communication rapport with hearers.

(3) 'There will be **more time** then to develop palliative treatments, and **more time** for the federal government to order up the test kits and ventilators needed nationwide. There will be **more time** to gather data about which regions, and which people, are most at risk' (We Need a National Lockdown, *The New York Times*, March 25, 2020).

The parallelism '*more time... more time...*' in example (3) shows the speaker's emphasis intention and expectation intention. Specifically, the speaker emphasises the importance and scarcity of time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and s/he also expects to have more time to solve problems and improve the current situation in the future. Concerning the whole context, the parallelism reflects the speaker's concern over the health and treatment resources, as well as the pursuit of scientifically based decision-making.

Speakers' Concern over Hearers' 'Self'

Discourse is not only a tool for speakers to interact with objective events but also a channel for them to establish connections with hearers. Speakers' concern over the hearers forms the foundation for effective communication and mutual understanding. Discourse entails cognitive collaboration between speakers and hearers. Therefore, in the process of constructing discourse meanings and expressing their 'self', speakers should also concern the hearers' 'self', such as the hearers' face needs and self-image (Traugott, Dasher 2002: 21–22). In this study, speakers' concern over the hearers' 'self' includes the hearers' face image, cognitive state, and social identity.

Speakers' Concern over Hearers' Face Image

The need of face image is a vital motive for humans in social communication. In some social cultures, face image is regarded as a symbol of personal dignity, social status, and values, which is essential for maintaining good interpersonal relations and social status. Face image in the study includes self-face and self-image. With the hearers' self-face in mind, speakers will consider how to select specific contents and forms of the expressions to describe objective events when constructing discourse, so as to meet the hearers' expectations, and avoid embarrassment, unnecessary disputes or conflict with hearers. Speakers will also enhance the hearers' face image through affirmation, encouragement and support.

(4) 'The key to understanding the Trump administration's approach to policy, it **seems**, is to look at what **most** Americans **want** and then **imagine** the opposite' (Jeff Sessions's Endless War on Marijuana, *The New York Times*, January 8, 2018).

In example (4), the speaker employs hedging words, such as the cognitive verbs *'seem'*, *'want'*, *'imagine'* and the qualifier *'most'* to euphemistically express that the policy of the Trump administration is contrary to what most Americans expect. These hedging words indicate the speaker's satirical condemnation of the Trump administration not considering the interests of the people. In this euphemistic way, the speaker reduces the offense to the hearers and pays attention to the hearers' face image.

Speakers' Concern over Hearers' Cognitive State

Sentence meanings should encompass the interpersonal dynamics between communicative participants, specifically the cognitive state of the speaker and the hearer (Feng 2023: 105). In constructing discourse, speakers need to concern the cognitive state of the hearers, focusing on two subcategories: the hearers' cognitive ability and background knowledge. Specifically, speakers' concern over the hearers' cognitive ability mainly primarily involves the speakers' concern over the hearers' interpretation ability, analysis ability, prediction ability and reasoning ability in discourse, to help hearers recognise speakers' information. Speakers' concern over the hearers' background knowledge is mainly demonstrated by expressions, such as rhetoric, concise and detailed expressions in discourse, facilitating hearers to understand the speakers' information.

(5) 'The United States needs to be **humble** about what it doesn't know and **cautious** about more direct involvement in the country's politics' (Unrest Shows the Iran Deal's Value, *The New York Times*, January 10, 2018).

In example (5), the adjective *'humble'* represents the speaker's concern over the knowledge background of the hearers' cognitive ability and his/her humble attitude towards complexity and unknown areas, that is, the speaker concerns the hearers' knowledge limitations. Additionally, the adjective *'cautious'* reflects that the speaker pays attention to the analytical and predictive abilities of the hearers' cognitive abilities, emphasising that hearers should be able to analyse the political situation and predict the possible consequences, and be cautious about political intervention.

Speakers' Concern over Hearers' Social Status

Social relationships make identity bear a social component. Identity typically denotes the unique characteristics or attributes of a person or entity to identify and distinguish this person or entity from others. Essentially identity is the status and type of the individual within society (Hu 2024: 93). One facet of the communicative participants involves their position in social identity, which pertains to how individuals are identified in various social practices (Hu 2024: 96). Social identity emphasises that within a specific social context, individuals possess identities that prescribe or assess their beliefs, actions and self-perception (Hogg 2016: 6).

Social identity in the study is categorised into a social status and a social role. The social status denotes an individual's position or rank within society. Specifically, speakers' concern over the hearers' social status is that in constructing discourse, speakers pay attention to the hearers' economic status (such as wealth and income), educational and professional status (such as highly educated professionals, skilled workers and unemployed people), and political status (such as political leaders, voters and government officials). The social role is the specific role which an individual plays in society. Speakers' concern over the hearers' social role is that in constructing discourse, speakers emphasise the hearers' gender roles (male

and female), family roles (such as parents, children and spouses), professional roles (such as students, teachers, doctors, employees and bosses) and activity roles (such as volunteers, activity organizers, advocates and speakers).

(6) 'And **prosecutors** who should know better are still using the myth to reduce **women** from human beings with rights to mere vessels for carrying the unborn' (Slandering the Unborn, *The New York Times*, January 6, 2019).

The potential hearers in example (6) include individuals, such as prosecutors and women. The uses of 'prosecutors' and 'women' carry the speaker's concern over the hearers' social roles of, that is, the roles of prosecutors and women, and the speaker's call for prosecutors to correctly view the roles of women: women should not only play a birth role but also have other human rights and play other roles.

CONCLUSIONS

A framework for analysing the cognitive connotations of DS from the philosophic perspective was constructed, and the qualitative research and conceptual analysis methods were employed. Accordingly, the cognitive connotations of DS were extensively investigated. The study enhances both the scope and depth of DS research. The conclusions could be drawn:

(1) Introducing the philosophic perspective into the study of DS, the constructed framework highlights the significant role of communicative participants in social interaction and elucidates the interconnectedness among discourse, speakers, hearers, context and subjectivity. Essentially, speakers encode their subjective 'self' into discourse during communication, imbuing it with a strong subjective colour. Subjectivity serves as a crucial link between speakers and discourse in communication, with discourse serving as a pivotal vehicle for expressing subjectivity.

(2) The speakers' self-ascription to objective events includes the speakers' stance, affect and intention. In the process of constructing discourse, speakers encode their own epistemic stance and evaluation stance, positive affect and negative affect, and specific intentions into discourse to convey their subjective 'self'.

(3) The speakers' concern over the hearers' 'self' consists of the hearers' face image, cognitive state and social identity. In constructing discourse, speakers will choose or adjust the appropriate expressions by considering the hearers' face image, infer their cognitive state, or anticipate their social identity. This approach helps speakers capture the hearers' attention effectively, and convey information more efficiently, thus enhancing communication outcomes.

This study explores the cognitive connotations of DS from the perspective of philosophy with the framework providing both structural and perspective references for in-depth exploration of DS and discourse analysis. It contributes to the effective communication between speakers and hearers, and enriches theoretical research in language philosophy. However, the study focuses solely on the cognitive connotations of DS in monolingual discourse. Future research will analyse and compare subjectivity in bilingual discourse to comprehensively examine subjective phenomena in discourse and promote human communication.

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Diskurso subjektyvumo kognityvinės konotacijos filosofiniu požiūriu

Santrauka

Diskursas yra priemonė, per kurią kalbėtojai (ar rašytojai) išreiškia savo poziciją, poveikį ir ketinimus, t. y. subjektyvumą. Subjektyvumas diskurse yra visur, vadinasi, jis pasireiškia kiekvieną kartą, kai atsiranda diskursas. Nepaisant to, dabartiniams tyrimams trūksta išsamaus diskurso subjektyvumo (DS) ir jo konkrečių pažinimo konotacijų tyrimo. Siekiant labiau įsigilinti į pažintinius DS aspektus, buvo sukurta DS pažintinių konotacijų analizės filosofiniu požiūriu sistema. Taikant šį metodą buvo naudojami kokybiniai tyrimai ir konceptualios analizės metodai. Naudojant šią sistemą, kognityvinės DS konotacijos buvo kruopščiai išnagrinėtos dviem požiūriais: kalbėtojų savęs priskyrimas objektyviems įvykiams ir kalbėtojų rūpestis klausytojų (ar skaitytojų) „aš“. Padarytos šios išvados: 1) sukurta sistema palengvina visapusišką DS pažintinių konotacijų analizę, atskleidžia įgimus ryšius tarp diskurso, kalbėtojų, klausytojų, konteksto ir subjektyvumo; 2) kalbėtojų prisirišimas prie objektyvių įvykių apima jų poziciją, poveikį ir ketinimus; 3) kalbėtojų rūpestis klausytojų „aš“ apima klausytojų savęs įvaizdį, pažintinę būseną ir socialinę tapatybę. Šis tyrimas suteikia pagrindą ir perspektyvą tolesniems DS ir diskurso analizės tyrimams, suteikia įžvalgų, kaip giliau tyrinėti subjektyvius diskurso reiškinius.

Raktažodžiai: diskurso subjektyvumas (DS), kognityvinė konotacija, kalbėtojai, klausytojai, filosofinė perspektyva