On the modality of modal particles – the case of Norwegian jo

Norwegian sentence internal jo is often called a ‘modal particle’ (e.g. Fretheim, 1993; Andvik, 1992), and this term is also applied to similar particles in other languages (e.g. Abraham, 1991; Aijmer, 1996). However, the modal meaning properties of so-called ‘modal particles’ are often opaque in the literature dealing with the meaning of those expressions. Furthermore, some authors, e.g. Thurmail (1989:3), doubt that the term ‘modality’ contributes to the characterization of so-called ‘modal particles’ at all (see also Waltereit, 2001:1394). This paper discusses empirical and theoretical bases for categorizing jo as a modal expression with brief comparisons to English must and may and Norwegian visst. While the latter three come out as modal expressions on most accounts of modality, jo’s semantics makes jo modal on some accounts though not on others.

Öhlschläger (1989) and Lyons (1977) distinguish between subjective and objective epistemic modality. Subjectively epistemically modalized utterances present p as a conclusion from a subjective inference. Objectively epistemically modalized utterances present p as being necessarily true from an objective point of view (Öhlschläger, 1989). I argue that the semantics of jo is indeed modal, and that jo is an ‘objective epistemic necessity modal’ expression, since this categorization is compatible with the epistemic meaning aspects of utterances with jo. I conclude that jo lexically restricts objective epistemic modality, while visst is restricted to subjective epistemic modality, and must and may have objective and subjective epistemic uses (in addition to root-reading).

Analysis of 150 natural occurrences of jo shows that jo encodes the following evidential restriction: p is mutually manifest (Berthelin, Borthen & Knudsen, 2013), i.e. the hearer and speaker both have access to all the evidence required for entertaining p as true (see Blass, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). This encoded constraint comes close to Nuyts’ (2001) notion of ‘intersubjectivity’. When jo is used, p is communicated as true about the actual world, and in some contexts jo may even increase the epistemic status of p. Jo would thus be excluded from the semantic category of modality on accounts like Maché’s (to appear:6) and Narrog’s (2005:184; 2009:18) who define modality as undetermined factuality. However, the literature on modality also counts approaches where this is not a defining property of modality (e.g. von Fintel and Gillies, 2010; Matthewsson, in press).

The semantics of jo appears to fit the notion of ‘objective epistemic necessity modality’ because jo makes reference to a body of evidence and communicates it as an objective necessity that the truth of p follows from that evidence. Norwegian visst and jo both encode epistemic necessity. But the speaker who utters a sentence of the form visst(p) is not committed to the truth of p, and the epistemic constraint encoded by visst (see Borthen & Knudsen, to appear:29) prevents objective epistemic interpretations of visst while jo is lexically restricted to objective epistemic modality. A distinction between objective and subjective epistemic modality thus proves relevant in accounts of at least some modal particles.

References


