

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. Thurmair (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 epistemicity, and *must* and *may* have objective and subjective epistemic uses (in addition to root-readings).

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 Stechow 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.

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