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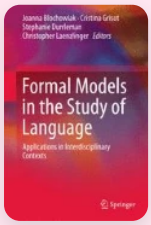

Formal Models in the Study of Language

Andrea Rocci & Elena Musi

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the interface between the semantics and the discourse functions of the Italian modal adjective *possibile* (‘possible’) in a corpus of economic-financial news. The aim is to show how a context-dependent semantic analysis of the adjective sheds light on the distinctive role played by *possibile* at a discourse level, in particular with respect to the inference of argumentative rhetorical relations. Adopting the framework of Relative Modality we have analysed *possibile* through the annotation of 222 occurrences as a relational operator linking the prejacent proposition to another set of propositions

(conversational backgrounds) which is saturated in the situational or discourse context of utterance focusing on the different roles played by its predicative and attributive constructions. It has turned out that the two constructions impose different constraints on the saturation of the conversational backgrounds.

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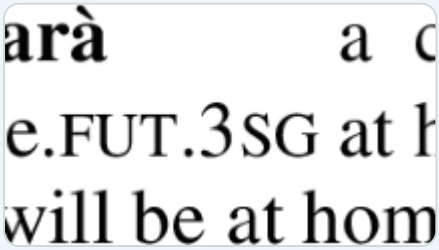

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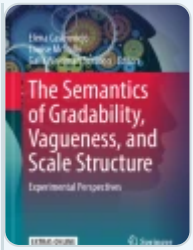

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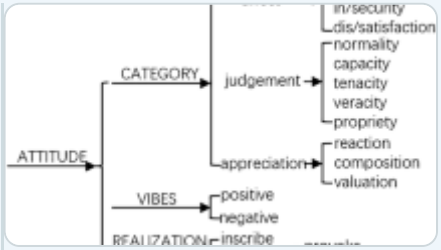

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Notes

1. The project entitled “Modality in argumentation. A semantic argumentative study of predictions in Italian economic-financial newspapers” has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant: 100012-120740/1) from 2008 to 2011. Although the whole paper has been the result of a continuous process of interaction between the two authors, Andrea Rocci is the main responsible of Sects. 1, 2 and 4.1–4.3, while Elena Musi of Sects. 3, 4.4, 4.5 and 5.

2. The ample gamut of discourse analytical works broadly based on Systemic-Functional Linguistic are the typical example of this paradigm-based strategy, a very successful illustration being Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory. While these works can still provide valuable insights for understanding communicative strategies in discourse, we believe that they suffer, in terms of depth and precision, because of the lack of consideration for the contextual processes of meaning construction that bridges the gulf between linguistic meanings and discourse representations. Such a limitation seems to be inherent to the design of these studies.

3. On the corpus annotation of modal conversational backgrounds see Rubinstein et al. (2013).

4. The main reason why the tri-partition is imperfect is the possibility of *anankastic* readings of necessity modals that we find, for instance, in (a) *To be elected president of the USA, one must be a’ natural born citizen’* or (b) *Plants need light and water to survive*. Anankastic necessity concerns the *necessary conditions* of the realization either of a possible institutional state of affairs, as in (a), or of a possible natural state of affairs, as in (b). They do not fit either alethic or deontic modality, despite being related to both. It is unclear whether it makes sense to speak of *anankastic possibility* (a term in itself oxymoric sounding). We leave the issue to a future in depth discussion and ignore anakastics for the purposes of this paper.

5. Consider purely institutional states of affairs (like ‘being elected President of the USA’) and the constitutive rules that put them into being (as opposed to the regulative rules that can lead natural actions). Suppose that it turns out that someone was not eligible as U.S. president, because he/she was not a natural born citizen. In this context, the election is not simply *illegal*, it is also *null*. In a sense, the “elected” has never been truly elected. In these cases there seem to be a complete coincidence of deontic and alethic modalities.

6. Financial news reports are, for the most part, written in what Martin and White (2005: 168–169) call a *reporter voice*: that is they do not contain explicit judgment, unless this judgment is attributed to external sources. Financial news articles are not strictly speaking, *news reports*, as they routinely exhibit the kind of complex argumentative structures we have exemplified in Fig. 1 in Sect. 4.3 in order to support evaluative and predictive opinions (cf. Miecznikowski et al. 2011). Yet, they sharply differ from *editorials* and other opinion pieces characterized by a *commentator voice* (Martin and White 2005: 173) because financial reporters never take explicit and full responsibility for the opinions being upheld nor for the arguments upholding them, attributing them instead to expert sources, to insiders, to the common *doxa* of investors, or to the unfathomable hive-mind of The Market.

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