

Subjective and Objective

Subjective and objective

There is no agreement about what “subjective” and “objective” do or should mean.¹ But whether classifying claims, propositions, judgments, attitudes, or interpretations, all seem to begin with the following assumptions.

Minds and what is subjective

There are minds in the world that think, particularly human minds.

There is a world independent of such minds.

What is subjective is what is mind-dependent.

What is objective is what is not subjective: independent of mind.

Some do not accept such a distinction. The pyrrhonist skeptic says that he or she does not understand what is meant by objective and makes claims only about what seems to be the case to him or her. Solipsists have no room for such a distinction. Others say that there is mind, not minds, the world-spirit of which we are all emanations.

Still, the distinction based on roughly these assumptions has been a major concern of Western philosophy.² I will show here that such a distinction is shaped by if not entirely determined by our Western language cultures. People in other language cultures either cannot or do not make such a distinction, or if they do then they classify quite differently their experience and talk.

Western language cultures are thing-oriented

Thing-languages are those based on a conception of the world as made up of individual things that persist in time through their changes. English is a thing-language; German is a thing-language; French, Spanish, and Italian are thing-languages. This is reflected in the grammar of these languages.

The basic structure of a claim in a thing-language is subject-predicate.³ The subject word or phrase tells what the claim is about, the predicate gives some characterization of it in time. Thus “Arfito is a dog” is about whatever the name “Arfito ” is meant to pick out (if there is such a thing), and “is a dog” indicates what is meant to be a property of Arfito in the present. “Arfito was hit by a car and now limps” is meant to be about Arfito and describes him/it in the past and in the present.

This conception of individual things persisting in time through their changes

¹ See “Subjective Claims” by Fred Kroon, William S. Robinson, and me for a short survey.

² And is important in teaching how to reason well by Western standards: see my *Critical Thinking*.

Dick: Vaccines don’t cause autism.

Suzy: That’s just what you think.

³ I speak of claims, which are spoken or written utterances meant to be judged as true or false. If you like, you can view those as representatives of or as pointing to abstract propositions.

has led to perplexity in Western philosophy. What is the thing that persists in time? Would that thing still be Arfido if he had not been hit by a car? Would that thing be Arfido if he had been a cat? Would that thing have been Arfido if he could speak good English? Some divide the “properties” of the individual thing into those that are essential to it being that thing and those that are not. So some would say that the property of being a dog is essential: “Arfido was, is, and will be a dog” is true, while Arfido being hit by a car is not an essential property of him. However, it’s not made clear on what basis such a division between essential and inessential properties is made. Others say that every property of an individual thing is essential to it. So if Arfido were different in any way, he, it, that individual thing would not be Arfido. Others say that there are no essential properties: a thing is independent of all its properties, but what that thing-in-itself is, they cannot say.

For those of us raised speaking a thing-language, the world is made up of things: rocks, tables, dogs, people, trees. Of this we are sure, for we have words for all these and many more. We also recognize that the world has masses, such as mud and snow, and processes, such as running and eating. But masses and processes are assimilated in our talk to our conception of the world as made up of things, as you can find in my essay “Language and the World”.

The distinction between objective and subjective depends on each mind being an individual thing that is distinct from what is not mind. So, for example, “There are three cats in the street” as spoken by Dick is objective: it is true or false independently of what he or anyone else thinks. If Dick were to say, “I think there that are three cats in the street”, that would be subjective. Any claim about what a person (or creature) thinks, believes, or feels is subjective. Any claim about how we interpret what we see, or hear, or sense is subjective. So “Dick interprets what he sees as a picture of a duck” is subjective.

Flow-of-all language cultures

Many languages are based on a conception of the world as the flow of all, with no idea of a thing persisting in time, or only a quite secondary one. Among such languages are native American languages, Chinese, and languages of the Pacific Ocean such as Tongan and Maori. These languages use no subject-predicate form. To explain the grammar of such languages and how they direct their speakers to see the world as the flow of all, distinguishing but not partitioning, is what the essays in *Language and the World: Essays new and old* are meant to do.

But to give you some idea, consider “It is raining” as said by Dick looking out the window in his home. This claim has the required subject-predicate form, but there is no subject, no thing that it is about: Dick might as well have said “Raining, outside, now”. We might translate what someone says in such a flow-of-all language as “Running (there, then)” or “Speaking and gesticulating (there, now)”. There is no subject, no predicate, no “talk” of individual things.

In a flow-of-all language culture such as classical Chinese or Wintu, the language does not allow or at least does not facilitate thinking of oneself as an object,

distinguishing between oneself and the world as distinct, taking oneself as a thing that persists in time through its changes. “Zoe-ing (here, now)” is how we would understand. Here is what Dorothy Demetracopoulou Lee says about a Native American language-culture in “Linguistic Reflection of Wintu Thought”.

Recurring through all this is the attitude of humility and respect toward reality, toward nature and society. I cannot find an adequate English term to apply to a habit of thought which is so alien to our culture. We are aggressive toward reality. We say, This is bread; we do not say like the Wintu, *I call this bread*, or *I feel* or *taste* or *see it to be bread*. The Wintu never says starkly *this is*; if he speaks of reality which is not within his own restricting experience, he does not affirm it, he only implies it. If he speaks of his experience, he does not express it as categorically true. p. 156

An example

Dick and Snurgy are standing in front of Dick’s house. Dick says to Snurgy, who is a native speaker of a flow-of-all language:

There are three cats in the street that were here yesterday.

Snurgy is bewildered. Three individual things persisting in time through their changes? That’s mysticism to him. He asserts instead (translating):

Same cat-ing here-now and here-yesterday.

Dick is bewildered. Seeing cat-ing in some mass way seems like mysticism to him.

If Snurgy were to adopt our subjective-objective distinction, he would say that what Dick said is subjective: it gives Dick’s interpretation of the flow-of-all. Dick says that what Snurgy says is subjective: it gives Snurgy’s interpretation of the world as it is.

What is objective depends on the language we speak which colors if not determines how we view, describe, partition, conceive of what we encounter. I do not see how there can be a language-independent way to classify what is objective, one that thing-talk speakers and flow-of-all speakers can use. We have not objectivity but intersubjectivity, shared ways we reckon describe “what is there” according to our language culture. This becomes even more stark when we try to give a systematic analysis of how to reason in a flow-of-all language, as I do in *Reasoning about the World as the Flow of All*.

As Benjamin Lee Whorf says in “Science and Linguistics”,

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way—an agreement that holds throughout the speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. p. 194

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I am grateful to Juan Francisco Rizzo for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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December, 2025