

How Discourse Adjectives Synchronize The Speaker and The Listener's Beliefs

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The Problem: I show that Discourse Adjectives, including *clear*, *apparent*, *evident* and *obvious* are a natural class both syntactically and semantically.

(1) It is clear that Briscoe is a detective.

Presumably, (1) is true only if the speaker and the addressee already believe that Briscoe is a detective (otherwise, the proposition that Briscoe is a detective would not be clear at all). But if so, what could be the point in asserting (1)? After all, it would contribute no new information, in violation of Stalnaker's (1975) Informativeness Constraint ("assertions must be informative").

I show that Discourse Adjectives are in fact informative: they provide information about the organization of the Common Ground of a discourse, even though they do not provide descriptive information about the world. The use of a Discourse Adjective synchronizes the Common Ground of a discourse by elevating what might be shared private beliefs of the discourse participants to the status of mutual, public beliefs.

The Data – Factivity, Implicit Experiencers and Gradability: (1) seems to entail that Briscoe is a detective. Despite initial appearances, Discourse Adjectives are not factive, since the implication that Briscoe is a detective does not survive under negation (2a) or in questions (2b).

- (2) a. It isn't clear that Briscoe is a detective, because he's not a detective.
b. Is it clear that Briscoe is a detective?

This is an important clue to solving the semantics of Discourse Adjectives: I suggest the truth conditions of Discourse Adjectives depend solely on the judgments of the interlocutors, not on the facts about what is the case in any part of the world under discussion.

A key to understanding how Discourse Adjectives work is the observation that implicit experiencers of clarity, as in (1), are interpreted as the conjunction of (3a) and (3b): if it is clear that Briscoe is a detective, then it is clear to the discourse participants that Briscoe is a detective.

- (3) a. It is clear to me that Briscoe is a detective.
b. It is clear to you that Briscoe is a detective.

Also important is the fact that Discourse Adjectives are gradable: they may co-occur with *rather* (4a) and occur in comparative constructions (4b).

- (4) a. It is rather clear that Briscoe is a detective.
b. It's more clear today that Briscoe is a detective than it was yesterday.

The Solution: I begin with Gunlogson's 2001 model of the Common Ground, a variation of a Stalnakerian model that includes a finely articulated representation of the public Commitments of individual discourse participants. Two innovations are proposed. First, while Gunlogson relied on the separation of individual Discourse Commitments to characterize contextual states in order to formalize felicity conditions on the use of particular sentences in English, the semantics of Discourse Adjectives suggest that access to individual Commitment Sets is necessary to allow the elimination of possible words from the Commitment sets of all discourse participants, not just the speaker's. Thus, an accurate characterization of Discourse Adjectives requires more than a felicity condition on its utterance. The second crucial innovation involves incorporating recent work on vagueness (Williamson 1994, 1999, Kennedy 1997, Kyburg and Morreau 2000, Barker 2002). This is necessary to reflect the fact that belief is a gradient attitude about a proposition p 's probability, and behaves in many respects like any other vague predicate.

- (5) $cs_x + [[it\ is\ clear\ that\ p]] = \{w \in cs_x : \text{the maximal degree to which } p \text{ is likely to be true is at least as great as } \mathbf{d}(c)([[clear]]) \text{ in } w\}$

A semantics for *clear* is in (5), which states that updating the commitment set of a discourse

participant x with the information expressed by *it is clear that p* yields a set of worlds in which the maximal degree to which p is likely to be true is at least as great as the delineation function requires in that world. The function ($\mathbf{d}(c)([[\text{clear}]])$) takes a situation and adjective meaning and returns the vague standard for the adjective in the given situation. The x argument is interpreted as referring to the discourse participants, so an utterance of (1) removes from the Commitment Sets of both participants those worlds in which either believes that Briscoe is not a detective.

(6) Conversants must provide evidence of a discrepancy in belief as soon as possible.

I invoke Walker's (1992:6) Collaborative Principle (6), to ensure that if the addressee does not object to a speaker's assertion of clarity, then an update effect will occur in her commitment set, as well as the speakers. Thus, silence on the part of the addressee will result in her public commitment to a proposition over which clarity is predicated. An example is provided in (6), which considers a set of three possible worlds which have the following properties: in w_1 both A and B believe that Briscoe is a detective; in w_2 neither A nor B believes that Briscoe is a detective; in w_3 only A believes that Briscoe is a detective.

	CS _A	CS _B
a. Input Context C	{ w_1, w_2, w_3 }	{ w_1, w_2, w_3 }
b. C + A" "(1)"	{ w_1 }	{ w_1, w_2, w_3 }
c. No objection from B:	{ w_1 }	{ w_1 }

The update effect is modeled in two parts. The first stage (6b) shows the update effect on A's Commitment Set only: eliminated from this are the two worlds in which the discourse participants do not each believe that Briscoe is a detective. The second stage (6c) models what occurs when B does not immediately object to a discrepancy in beliefs: the two worlds in which the discourse participants do not believe that Briscoe is a detective are eliminated from her commitment set as well. The result is a context which includes only worlds in which both participants believe that Briscoe is a detective, w_1 .

Ramifications: My proposal explains the ability of Discourse Adjectives to appear to be factive (since their successful utterance licenses the discourse participants to proceed as if the proposition in question is true, as it is believed to be true by both discourse participants in all worlds in the Common Ground). The analysis also provides a theoretical apparatus for modeling degrees of commitment (by updating Gunlogson's model to handle degrees). Finally, the analysis shows how a speaker is able to signal commitment on behalf of both herself and the addressee to a designated proposition p , in order to synchronize the Common Ground of a discourse, thereby fostering more effective communication. Specifically, I show that an addressee's failure to immediately and overtly object to a speaker's assertion of clarity results in an updated context that licenses the interlocutors to proceed as if both discourse participants are committed to the truth of p .

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