Asserting Clarity as Managing Awareness
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Barker and Taranto (2003) present the following paradox regarding assertions of clarity. Intuitively, if *It is clear that p* is true, then all discourse participants must possess the knowledge needed in order to conclude that *p*. However, if all discourse participants possess the knowledge needed to conclude that *p*, then asserting the clarity of *p* should be uninformative. Thus, any true assertion of clarity is necessarily uninformative. So, what is the purpose of asserting clarity? I propose that assertions of clarity can be used to draw an addressee’s attention to some conclusion justified by the common ground, but which the addressee does not recognize due to unawareness.

This approach resembles one presented in Bronnikov (2008) that captures two phenomena that are unexplained by Barker and Taranto (2003) and Barker (2009): repeated clarity assertions and assertions of the clarity of necessarily true propositions. However, on Bronnikov’s analysis, *It is clear that p* entails the existence of a non-trivial inference needed to conclude that *p* from the common ground. This fails to predict that the clarity of *p* can be asserted when an addressee is unaware of *p*, but does not need to infer *p*. Example (1), from COCA, was produced in a context in which the addressee was assumed to have already reached the conclusion in the embedded clause; the speaker simply wished to ensure that the addressee was attending to this conclusion.

(1) It is clear that we have a highly polarized, very sharp, and I think at times, too sharp level of anger expressed across the political aisles in this country. (COCA)

Similarly, there is often no inference needed to reach a conclusion about trivial epistemic possibilities. Nonetheless, such possibilities may be embedded under *clear*. Suppose (2) is uttered in a context in which no participant has any reason to believe or disbelieve that it is raining in Topeka.

(2) It is clear that it might be raining in Topeka at the moment. In this context, the epistemic possibility of it raining in Topeka does not follow from any explicit inference, and (2) may be uttered just to make an addressee aware of this possibility. These data, along with data highlighted by Bronnikov, are explained by recognizing the use of asserting clarity in managing addressees’ awareness.

I adopt a semantics for clarity based on Wolf and Cohen (2011) and the model of awareness of Franke and de Jager (2011). Let *P* be an ideal reasoner’s subjective probability distribution over propositions, *CG* be a set of propositions in the common ground, and *θ* be some minimum threshold of subjective probability necessary for belief. Then *It is clear that p* is true iff *P(p|CG) > θ*, i.e. iff an ideal reasoner would believe *p* after conditioning on the common ground. Following Franke and de Jager (2011), an agent *i*’s awareness state is represented by a set *Uj* of unmentionable propositions, which *i* cannot reason about or use in their own language. Unawareness is easily overturned if another agent *j* explicitly uses one of *i*’s unmentionables.

Suppose a speaker *i* asserts the clarity of *p* to addressee *j* where initially *p* ∈ *Uj*. In virtue of this assertion, *Uj* is updated so that *p* /∈ *Uj*. If the clarity assertion is accepted, the proposition that *p* is a rational conclusion enters the common ground. This does not guarantee that either participant believes *p*, but failure to believe *p* implies irrationality on the part of the disbeliever. This follows Barker (2009) and Wolf and Cohen (2011), who argue for such a relationship between clarity, belief, and rationality. Assuming that discourse participants are rational, *p* enters the common ground and is a premise for further discussion. By adopting a view of clarity assertions giving awareness a central role, Barker and Taranto’s paradox of asserting clarity is resolved and a wide range of data regarding clarity assertions is explained.
References


