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The “Paradox of Asserting Clarity”

According to [1, 2], it is clear that p is true only if:

- There is evidence supporting p.
- The evidence supporting p is publicly available (i.e., available to all discourse participants).

It follows that if it is clear that p is true, all discourse participants should have concluded p on basis of evidence. But then asserting it is clear that p should be uninformative [1, 2].

Paradox: Any true assertion of the form It is clear that p is necessarily uninformative.

The Semantics of Clear

It is clear to x from e that p is true if e causes x to believe p to a sufficiently high degree. Let P_e^x be i’s subjective probability distribution over propositions in c, E_i be i’s total body of evidence in c, and θ^clear be a contextually-relevant threshold for clarity.

\[ \text{It is clear to } x \text{ from } e \text{ that } p \text{ is clear} \iff \forall i \in x \left( (P_e^x(p|E_i)) > \theta^\text{clear} \land (P_e^x(p|E_i \cap c) \not= \theta^\text{clear}) \right) \]

When implicit, x is a contextually relevant set of experiencers and e receives existential closure (cf. [4]).

Informatively Clarity Assertions

When the addressee is not included in the contextually relevant set of experiencers, the evidence may be private and the addressee may not already believe the prejacent. See attested examples below.

1. It is clear that Maliki has come out as the winner in the political crisis he provoked. He has made it more difficult for his Shia rivals to dissent while simultaneously confining his Sunni opponents in a position suitable for exerting pressure and exploiting divisions within their ranks.

2. But look closer at the China model, and it is clear that it is not so easily replicated. Most developing countries do not have China’s bureaucratic depth and tradition, nor do they have the ability to mobilize resources and control personnel in the way that China’s party structure allows.

Previous Proposals

In other cases, the addressee can be taken to be part of the experiencer and to possess the relevant evidence. Previous proposals argue that in these cases, asserting clarity…

- …sets the contextual standard for clear [2]. This account cannot explain assertions of clarity of necessarily true propositions or repeated clarity assertions of propositions that rely on similar bodies of evidence [3].
- …informs us about expert opinions [6]. How do expert opinions enter the semantics for clear? On plausible assumptions about expert opinions, we again cannot explain repeated assertions of the clarity of propositions that rely on similar bodies of evidence.
- …highlights an inference available to addressees which the addressee has not yet performed [3]. Similar to present proposal, but notion of inference is too strong and formalism of is inconsistent.

We need an account similar to [3], but which uses a notion weaker than inference and is formally consistent.

Assenting Clarity to Raise Awareness

When addressee (L) is in a state of unawareness, speaker’s (S) assertion that p is clear can have a number of pragmatics effects.

- Unaware of Evidence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implicit Assumption?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>If L infers that S does not possess private evidence, L must be ignoring public evidence. L searches for available evidence.</td>
<td>L’s implicit assumption is overturned. L’s subject probability distribution changes. L becomes aware of prejacent, which can be used for further reasoning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>L becomes aware of prejacent, which can be used for further reasoning.</td>
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Why clarity? Assertions other than It is clear that p may raise awareness of p. However, a clarity assertion in which the addressee is included in the experience is necessarily uninformative (see paradox). L reasons that S’s assertion is meant only to raise awareness, rather than inform. Assertions of You know that p, We (inclusive) know that p, and Needless to say, p are likewise uninformative and may play a similar role.

We must recognize the pragmatic role not only of informative utterances, but also those that modify awareness despite being uninformative.

References


Contact

Questions? Comments?
All feedback is greatly appreciated. You may contact me at pcrone@stanford.edu.