Clarity and the grammar of skepticism

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Abstract. Why ever assert clarity? If *It is clear that* \( p \) is true, then saying so seems at best superfluous. Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006) suggest that asserting clarity reveals information about the beliefs of the discourse participants, specifically, that they both believe that \( p \). The belief theory of clarity makes a number of accurate predictions, including that *It is clear that* \( p \) fails to entail \( p \) (perhaps contrary to initial impressions). However, the belief theory is both too weak and too strong: belief is not sufficient to guarantee clarity (*It is clear that God exists*), and clarity is possible without belief (*It is reasonably clear that* \( p \)). I will suggest that *It is clear that* \( p \) means instead (roughly) ‘the publicly available evidence justifies concluding that \( p \)’. What asserting clarity reveals is information concerning the prevailing epistemic standard that determines whether a body of evidence is sufficient to justify a claim. If so, then the semantics of clarity constitutes a grammatical window into the discourse dynamics of knowledge and skepticism.

1. THE PARADOX OF ASSERTING CLARITY

Imagine a photograph of a woman wearing a white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck, and then consider uttering either (1) or (2):

(1) *It is clear that* Abby is a doctor.
(2) Abby is a doctor.

Why ever assert (1) instead of (2)?
One key factor is that in order for a proposition to qualify as clear, not only must there be sufficient evidence supporting the truth of that proposition, that evidence must be available to all the parties concerned. For instance, if we had in common only a picture of Abby wind-surfing, then (1) would be at best false—the speaker may very well be justified in claiming that Abby is a doctor based on private knowledge, but it would not be clear that she is a doctor. In contrast, (2) can be asserted based on private knowledge. So using (1) makes explicit that the desired conclusion follows from publicly available evidence.

But this observation creates a new puzzle: if the evidence supporting the conclusion in (1) is public, and if that evidence is sufficient to support the conclusion that Abby is a doctor, then the proposition in question should already be obvious to everyone, and hardly needs stating. So if (1) is true, it is at best superfluous!

One clue to the solution of this puzzle is that assertions of clarity are typically used when the evidence is not overwhelmingly compelling. It would be odd to say, for instance, based on the same photograph, It is clear that Abby is wearing a stethoscope, since that is simply too clear to bear asserting clarity. This last requirement is not a general ban on stating the obvious, since we can perfectly felicitously state Abbey is wearing a stethoscope if we want to draw the attention of our addressee to some important fact (perhaps, for instance, in preparation for an utterance of (1)). Another way to put it is that the evidence cannot be too direct: there must be some non-trivial inference involved in moving from the evidence (the stethoscope) to the desired conclusion (that Abby is a doctor). Somewhat paradoxically, then, clarity is best asserted only when the proposition in question is in genuine doubt.

In particular, it is not appropriate to assert clarity as the result of direct linguistic evidence.

(3) a. Guess what? It turns out that Abby is a doctor!

b. #Now that you’ve told me this, it’s clear that Abby is a doctor.

The reason (3b) is odd is that after the utterance of (3a), assuming of course that (3a) is sincerely asserted by the speaker and accepted by the addressee, is that the fact that Abby is a doctor is already reflected in the common ground. Apparently, then, the use of a clarity attribution requires
that the proposition in question not be entailed by the evaluation context. In the analysis below, this observation will follow from general constraints on the nature of discourse (specifically, that an assertion is felicitous only if it has a non-trivial update effect).

Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006:91) develop a theory on which “clarity depends directly on belief, and only indirectly on truth”. On their view, (1) can be paraphrased roughly as follows: ‘based on publicly available evidence, the discourse participants believe that Abby is a doctor’. If so, then an assertion of clarity reveals nothing new about the world under discussion (i.e., whether Abby is or is not a doctor), but does reveal something new about the beliefs of the discourse participants.

One prediction of the belief theory of clarity is that it predicts, perhaps surprisingly, that asserting (1) does not entail (2). This is for the simple reason that believing that \( p \) does not guarantee that \( p \) is true. On the implementation of the belief account in Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006), the truth conditions of *It is clear that* \( p \) would guarantee that all of the discourse participants believed that \( p \), at the same time that updated discourse context would include worlds in which \( p \) was false. In a similar spirit, *We both believe that humans and chimps evolved from a common ancestor, but it is possible that that is false* is not a contradiction.

However, the belief theory is both too weak and too strong.

(4) It is clear that God exists.

We can both believe with all our hearts that God exists without guaranteeing that (4) is true. In order to be clear, there must be evidence supporting the conclusion. If so, then belief is not sufficient for clarity.

In order to see that the belief theory is too strong, consider:

(5) It is reasonably clear that Mars is barren of life.

If the evidence justifies concluding (however marginally) that Mars is barren, then it is only rational to believe (however weakly) that Mars is barren. But nothing in the grammar guarantees rational behavior, and it is all too humanly possible to assent to (5) while nonetheless harboring a clairvoyant belief that life exists on Mars.
In view of these criticisms of the belief theory of clarity, I will offer here a different analysis on which clarity depends directly on justification, without the mediation of belief. This will result in a cleaner model of discourse update, and will provide a more accurate characterization of the semantic relationship between (1) to (2).

Because *clear* is a gradable adjective, it participates in what Kennedy (2006) calls the grammar of vagueness, in the same way that the grammatical behavior of *tall* depends on a contextually-specified standard for tallness. And because clarity deals with propositions rather than with individuals, the contextually-determined standard for clarity tells us not about the nature of the world (e.g., who is tall and who is not), but rather about ourselves, the discourse participants. More specifically, the standard for clarity reveals information about the relevant prevailing standard for epistemic justification.

2. **Dynamic update: main effects and side effects**

In order to make the discussion somewhat more theoretically concrete, I will adopt a simple Stalnaker-style dynamic view of how asserting a sentence updates the common ground with new information. On this approach, a proposition is a set of worlds, the set of all worlds in which the proposition is true. At any given moment in a conversation, there is a specific set of worlds representing all of the propositions held in common by the speaker and the addressee called the *common ground*.

On some dynamic theories of meaning (e.g., Heim 1983), an expression’s truth conditions are equated with its context update potential. On this sort of view, the meaning of a sentence is a recipe for updating the common ground. For instance, the assertion of a declarative sentence will normally cause the discourse participants to update the common ground in light of the new information provided by the statement. Roughly, all those worlds in the common ground that are inconsistent with the truth conditions of the statement will be eliminated.

I will take a more conservative stance here, and assume that a sentence has truth conditions independently of its update effect. The update effect will depend strongly on truth conditions, obviously, but it will not be identical to them.
2.1. Main effects versus side effects. Modeling a discourse context as a set of worlds is simple and elegant, but Kamp (1988) argues that worlds alone are not enough. In addition, context update will depend on the state of the discourse. I will make a similar point using a variation due to Beaver (2000) of Kamp’s original example (in turn based on the famous marble example due to Partee):

(6) a. Exactly two of the three frogs are in the pond.
    b. One of the frogs is not in the pond.
    c. It is in a tree.

(6a) entails (6b). Therefore (6b) adds no new information. More technically, every world consistent with (6a) will be consistent with (6b), so if a context is nothing more than a set of worlds, then update with (6b) will have no effect whatsoever on any context that has already been updated with (6a).

However, (6b) clearly does useful work, since it provides a discourse referent to serve as the antecedent of the pronoun in (6c). If (6b) is omitted from the discourse, (6c) becomes infelicitous (on the intended interpretation). Therefore, reasons Kamp, there must be more to updating context than keeping track of possible worlds.

Let the update effect that follows from the truth conditions of a sentence be the main effect of asserting a sentence. Update with (6b) changes the context in other ways (it creates a discourse referent). Let any update effect other than those that follow from truth conditions be a side effect. Then the point of the example in (6) is that (6b) is asserted purely for the sake of its side effects. It is possible to devise a theory on which the distinction between a main effect and a side effect can be stated far more precisely and explicitly (see, e.g., Barker 2002, Potts 2005, Shan and Barker 2006, Shan 2006, etc.), but an informal development should suffice here.

Other utterance types have different main effects: the parts of a question contribute to answerhood conditions, the parts of an imperative contribute to fulfilment conditions, and so on. But for the discussion here, we can assume that main effects amount to truth conditions.

In order to track side effects, we will continue to evaluate a sentence relative to each point in the context set, except that now each such evaluation point will contain two coordinates, \( \langle d, w \rangle \), where
d is a discourse state and w is a world. This is similar to Heim’s (1983) CCP semantics, except that her evaluation points consist of an assignment function paired with a world. Since we will need to keep track of more aspects of the discourse than just variable assignments (in particular, we will need to keep track of vague standards), a discourse model d will contain not only information about variable assignments, but other information as well. You can think of d as a little mini-world containing only the discourse underway. Perhaps d could be a situation (a partial world) in the sense of Kratzer (1989). Just as we can peer into a world w and determine whether it is raining or whether Abby is a doctor in that world, we will peer into a discourse situation d in order to see whether a certain index refers to a man or a woman, or what the height cutoff for counting as tall happens to be in d. Crucially, we will be able to see what the common ground happens to be in that world’s version of the discourse. This will enable a context to not only answer questions about the world (is Abby a doctor?), but to answer questions about the discourse (is it clear that Abby is a doctor?).

It is not strictly necessary to articulate evaluation points into two components. Commenting on the argument of Kamp’s given just above, Stalnaker (1998:6) points out that “Every proposition, relevant or not, that is taken for granted by the participants in a conversation will be true in all of the possible worlds that define the context. Within each possible world in the context set, a discourse is taking place...” If so, then each world will contain within it a version of the discourse underway. Then worlds can be identical with respect to the issues under discussion (such as whether or not Abby is a doctor), yet still differ with respect to details of the discourse (such as whether a certain variable index refers to a frog or not). If so, then we can return to the conception of a context as a simple set of worlds, on the understanding that we will be able to recover any detail about the state of the discourse we like merely by examining a particular world closely enough. In general, I am a fan of this move, and Barker (2002), Barker and Taranto (2003), and Taranto (2006) all make use of this technique. However, it is not necessary for our purposes here, and retaining two-dimensional evaluation points will help keep main effects and side effects separate.
2.2. **A near-solution: missing entailments.** Perhaps clarity assertions merely direct the attention of the addressee to facts already present in the common ground that have somehow escaped attention. Hmmm...Abby is wearing a lab coat, she is holding a stethoscope, what’s going on here? *Clearly, you idiot, Abby is a doctor.*

This would explain why it is inappropriate to assert clarity immediately after a simple assertion. *(I just learned that Abby is a doctor. #*Clearly, then, Abby is a doctor*.) Since there is no need to draw attention to what has just been explicitly stated, the clarity assertion is pragmatically useless.

However, if clarity merely emphasized the already known, it would remain puzzling why it is odd to assert clarity for some piece of information that is known, but not salient *(#*Clearly, bachelors are unmarried males*).* Even if such a fact becomes highly relevant, it is inappropriate to bring it to the attention of your addressee by means of a clarity assertion.

Perhaps there is an additional requirement that the clarity proposition cannot be *too* obvious. Maybe clarity assertions are an attempt on the part of the speaker to help the addressee with a difficult computation. The evidence is available, but for some reason the addressee seems to be hesitating to make that last step to the final conclusion. Perhaps they have a logic deficit, and can’t compute the consequences of their own beliefs. Then an assertion of clarity merely identifies propositions that are already entailed, but which have somehow not been reflected in the common ground.

There are two serious problems with this “missing entailment” hypothesis. The first is that it is not appropriate to assert clarity of a proposition when the proposition is a genuine entailment of information already present in the common ground. *(I just found out that John is a bachelor. ?*It is clear, then, that he is unmarried.* )

The second, even more serious, objection is that, as noted above, clarity is asserted precisely when the proposition in question is not in fact entailed. That Abby is wearing a white coat and carrying a stethoscope certainly supports the claim that she is a doctor, but it does not entail that she is a doctor. She might be an actor in a commercial, or else she might be a fraud, or any of a thousand even more outlandish—but certainly not impossible—explanations.
The failure of the missing-entailment theory is good news for the Stalnaker model of discourse update. The reason is that it is not possible to update a context with some proposition without simultaneously updating it with all of that proposition’s entailments. For instance, the proposition that John is a bachelor will be true only in those worlds in which John is male and unmarried. Therefore any context that has been updated with \textit{John is a bachelor} will necessarily contain only worlds in which \textit{John is unmarried} is true, and similarly for any other entailment of the original sentence.

Nevertheless, the missing-entailment hypothesis expresses a core aspect of clarity. Clarity is predicated of propositions that follow from facts already present, in some looser sense of ‘follow’ than entailments. Another way of putting it is that propositions are clear if they are all-but-entailments. In order to make sense out of what a near-entailment could possibly be from a theoretical point of view, we must first talk about vagueness.

3. Update with Vague Predicates

The analysis of clarity below builds on a particular view of the interaction of update with vague predicates developed in Barker (2002).

Whether a sentence such as \textit{John is tall} is true depends on a number of factors, including the maximal degree of John’s height, and the prevailing standard for tallness. It also depends on the comparison set (compared to basketball players or jockeys), but the dependence on the comparison set will not concern us in this paper; see, e.g., Kennedy (2006) for discussion.

What is of particular interest here is that the standard for tallness depends in part on the discourse situation, and not just on the world at large. That is, whether John counts as tall (say, for a basketball player) depends in part on how tall basketball players are, but especially in borderline cases, the line between tall and not tall depends on prevailing conventions, on the judgment of the discourse participants, and even on the goals of the conversation (see Kyburg and Morreau 2002, Graff 2000).
This dependence on properties of the discourse gives rise to two different ways for an assertion containing a vague predicate to contribute information. First, assume for the sake of argument that people count as tall if they are taller than six feet.

(7) a. I’ve never met Bill. What’s he like?
   b. Bill is tall.

In this use, the assertion of (7b) adds information about the world under discussion. In particular, we learn that Bill’s height is at least 6 feet. The update effect will be to eliminate all those worlds from the initial evaluation context in which Bill’s height fails to exceed 6 feet. This, of course, is a main effect, since updating with the truth conditions of (7b) tells us something new about the part of the world that is under discussion.

But there is another way that such a sentence can be used.

(8) a. I’m new in town. What counts as tall around here?
   b. See Bill over there? Bill is tall.

In this situation, there is no uncertainty concerning Bill’s height. Perhaps he is standing in front of us at a party. Imagine even that we just measured Bill’s height with a tape measure. Then asserting Bill is tall reveals no new information about Bill’s height. Instead, in this use, it communicates something about the prevailing standard for tallness in the community in which the discourse is taking place. More technically, the discourse effect is to eliminate all those worlds in which the standard for tallness in this discourse is less than Bill’s height.

In this use, update with the sentence adds information by means of a side effect. That is, the standard for tallness is a part of the discourse, not of the world under discussion. Because the special context in (8) eliminates the possibility of learning anything new about the world under discussion, the only thing left for the update of (8) to achieve is by means of side effects, in this case, updating our knowledge of the prevailing standard for tallness.

3.1. **Relative stupidity: update as pure side effect.** Typically, a use of a vague predicate gives rise to main effects and side effect simultaneously. Barker (2002) argues that some expressions
have no update effect apart from update of a vague standard. Since I will claim below that *It is clear that* \( p \) is such a construction, I will briefly describe the main case studied in Barker (2002).

(9) a. Rumsfeld is stupid.
   
   b. Rumsfeld is stupid to defend torture.

In addition to dispositional (individual-level) stupidity, as in (9a), there is stupidity relative to a specific event, as in (9b). The class of adjectives that participate in this per-event evaluation (including *stupid, smart, lucky, rude*, etc.) are discussed by Wilkinson (1970, 1976), Rivi`{e}re (1983), Barker (2002) and Kertz (2005). Note that (9a) may very well be false at the same time that (9b) is true.

Clearly part of the update effect of (9b) is to eliminate all worlds in which the standard for per-event stupidity exceeds the degree of stupidity of Rumsfeld’s defending torture. I argued in Barker (2002) at some length that there are no other update effects.

To see this, first note that the entailment that Rumsfeld defended torture is a presupposition:

(10) a. Rumsfeld was stupid to defend torture.
   
   b. Rumsfeld wasn’t stupid to defend torture.

Whether affirmed or denied, both forms in (10) entail that Rumsfeld defended torture, which is the hallmark of presupposition.

There is in addition a presupposition that the subject of the sentence is sentient:

(11) *The carpet was(n’t) stupid to be cleaned before the party.*

Whether affirmed or denied, (11) is odd unless we assume that the carpet is volitionally involved in the cleaning event.

Furthermore, there are no other entailments beyond these two presuppositions. In particular, there are no entailments concerning the mental state of the subject (in contrast with, say, *eager*, as in *Rumsfeld was eager to answer questions*).

According to Barker (2002), then, the only update effect of asserting relative stupidity is to ensure that the degree of stupidity of Rumsfeld’s actions exceeds the prevailing standard for relative stupidity. In other words, the only purpose in uttering a sentence like (9b) is in order to negotiate
constraints on the standard for a vague predicate. If so, then an utterance of (9b) provides no new information (i.e., no non-presupposed information) about the events under discussion, and instead provides new information only concerning the nature of the discourse underway.

Another expression type that may share this property is *You did well to hide the evidence*. Another candidate, of course, as suggested by Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006), is asserting clarity.

4. THE VAGUENESS OF CLARITY

Following Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006), I will suggest here that it is crucial to appreciate that clarity is a matter of degree. *Clear* (and its cohorts, *obvious, evident, apparent*, etc.) is a gradable adjective, of course: the proposition that Abby is a doctor can be very clear, sort of clear, not very clear, clear enough, or all too clear. Comparatives are marginally ok (*It is clearer that p than that q*), though superlatives may be somewhat problematic (*Of all the claims we have considered, it is clearest that Abby is a doctor*).

However, it is far from obvious what it is that *clear* measures degrees of. Certainly clarity does not involve degrees of probability, as shown by the standard lottery scenario (Kyburg 1961). If your chances of winning a lottery are 1 out of the total number of tickets, I cannot appropriately say *You will lose*, no matter how many other lottery tickets have been sold. Nor can I appropriately say *It is clear that you will lose*, even if you and I both believe that you will lose (contrary to the predictions of the belief theory of clarity, incidentally).

My main claim is that clarity concerns degrees of justification. A proposition p is clear if the evidence supporting the likelihood of p justifies the decision that p is true.

One argument that clarity deals in degrees of justification is that it is possible to explicitly state the source of the evidence that justifies the assertion of clarity, usually with a *from* phrase:

(12) It is clear from the look on your face that you don’t agree.

The *from* phrase describes some source of evidence that is sufficient to justify the claim that the *that*-proposition is true.
A more compelling argument that clarity is about degrees of justification is what it means for a claim to become clear. A couple of naturally-occurring examples will illustrate the claim:

(13) From observations of its behavior in captivity and in the wild, it is becoming clear that the White Shark, too, needs its large, complex brain to function effectively in its day-to-day life.

(14) With the publication of the DART study and more recently the GISSI-Prevenzione Study, it is becoming clear that small intakes of omega-3FAs can significantly impact CHD risk.

In each case, the degree to which the conclusion is probable or true does not change. That is, the degree to which the shark needs its brain, and the degree to which omega acids impact CHD risk remains constant. Rather, what changes is the degree of justification we have for each of these claims. Clarity is achieved when our epistemic state reaches a sufficiently high degree of justification for the claim in question.

Now, we can never have enough evidence to be absolutely sure of any contingent fact. Nevertheless, we must boldly decide that some propositions are true anyway, or else allow ourselves to be paralyzed by skepticism. Evidence can take us most of the way towards belief in some proposition, but the last little step will always be a leap of faith. Asserting clarity is a way of announcing that it’s time to take that leap, and inviting the addressee to make the leap with you.

4.1. **Epistemic ignorance versus epistemic uncertainty.** The problem, of course, is to figure out how to think about degrees of justification in terms of context update. As a starting point, consider Williamson’s (1994) epistemic theory of vagueness. Williamson claims that if John is borderline tall, there is a fact of the matter: either John is tall, or he is not. However, our knowledge of the exact location of the cutoff point for tallness is incomplete, and we may not (and indeed, perhaps will never) be able to discover which side of the line John falls on. Thus vagueness is a kind of incomplete knowledge (more specifically, incomplete knowledge about the state of our discourse, and the standard for tallness in that discourse).
Perhaps, then, the common ground should be thought of as a set of worlds with a crisp, clear boundary: a world is either in the common ground, or is not. However, our knowledge about where precisely that boundary falls is incomplete. After all, what is in the common ground depends on what information is shared with your interlocutor, and it is difficult to know what assumptions are held in common with complete precision.

Uncertainty about the membership of the common ground leads to uncertainty about which propositions follow from the common ground. I intend to make a distinction here between ignorance and uncertainty. If we don’t know whether a woman will be president of the US before 2020, there will be worlds in our common ground that make that proposition true, and other worlds that do not. We are sure that it might happen, and we are equally sure that it might not happen (given our current state of knowledge). We are ignorant about the truth of the proposition, and we are sure that we are ignorant.

On the other hand, if we have a certain body of evidence already present in the common ground that supports the claim that Abby is a doctor, we may wonder whether there are any worlds in the common ground in which she is not a doctor. They will be unlikely worlds, worlds in which something unexpected or unsuspected is taking place. If we are unsure about exactly which assumptions we share with our interlocutor, we may be uncertain which worlds are present in the common ground. And of course, the more unlikely the worlds we are actively considering in our discourse, the more skeptical we are being. So uncertainty about the boundaries of the common ground amounts to uncertainty about the precise degree of skepticism required for present conversational purposes. This, in turn, depends on our level of interest in the outcome, and in particular the consequences for guessing wrong. If we are deliberating over allegations in a serious criminal investigation, for instance, we may be more inclined to wonder whether the lab coat and the stethoscope are conclusive indications, or merely circumstantial evidence.

In the same way described above that *Bill is tall* can be used (solely) to reduce uncertainty concerning the boundary between tall and not-tall, assertions of clarity can be used to reduce uncertainty concerning the boundary between what is known (mutually assumed) and what is not known.
4.2. **Degrees of justification.** It remains only to figure out how to model the degree to which a proposition follows from a body of knowledge.

One way forward is to think of Taranto’s so-called discourse adjectives, such as *clear, obvious,* etc., as a variety of modal adjective, along with *possible, necessary,* etc. There are significant differences in argument structure: we have *It is clear to me that* \( p \) but not *It is probable to me that* \( p \), and we have *It is clear from the way Abby is dressed that* \( p \), but not *?It is probable from the way Abby is dressed that* \( p \). Nevertheless, it is useful to compare my analysis here with a treatment of modals in, say, Kratzer’s (1991) doubly-relative theory of modality. Consider the sentence *Abby must be a doctor.* Using the technical machinery of Kratzer’s theory, if we assume an epistemic modal base with a stereotypical ordering source, given that *must* conveys the modal force of modal necessity, then on its epistemic reading this sentence is predicted to mean something tantalizingly close to *It is clear that Abby is a doctor.*

One difference between *clear* and *must* is that *must* can rely on private knowledge (Kratzer 1991:645). In Kratzer’s theory, the set of propositions assigned to each world by the modal base can reflect an epistemic body of knowledge possessed by the speaker but not by the addressee. To handle *clear,* we would have to stipulate that the modal base maps each world onto the body of knowledge shared by both the discourse participants—that is, it would map each world onto the common ground in that world’s version of the discourse underway.

One thing that *clear* and *must* have in common is a reliance on stereotypical reasoning, what Kratzer calls “the normal course of events” in a world. Crucially, just because a conclusion follows from stereotypical reasoning doesn’t make it so. As Kratzer puts it (p. 645), “there are worlds \( w \) such that among all the worlds which are compatible with what we know in \( w \), those which come closest to the normal course of events in \( w \) don’t include \( w \) itself.” In other words, just because Abby is wearing a lab coat and a stethoscope, it remains possible that she is not in fact a doctor.

This approach allows us to better understand a situation in which *clear(\( p \))* fails to entail \( p \). If further investigation reveals that Abby is not a doctor, then two things will have happened: first, we will have increased our mutual knowledge, since we have come to know that Abby is not a doctor;
and second, some of our new knowledge will violate our assumptions about the normal course of events.

Is this a good model of clarity? One virtue is that it predicts that *It is clear that Abby is a doctor* entails the epistemic reading of *Abby must be a doctor*, though not the other way around. This seems to be a pretty good prediction.

But there is one major element missing from the Kratzer-style account just sketched: gradability. For epistemic *must*, either a proposition is a modal necessity (relative to a modal base and an ordering source), or it is not. For *clear*, however, as already noted, a proposition can be reasonably clear, clear, very clear, and so on.

The most direct way of accounting for this gradable behavior is to posit a function that maps worlds onto degrees of justification. Let \( f \) be an epistemic modal base that maps each world \( w \) onto the common ground in \( w \). Then \( \cap f(w) \) will be the set of all worlds that are consistent with the common ground in \( w \). Let \( g \) be a stereotypical ordering source that maps each world \( w \) onto a set of assumptions about the normal course of events in \( w \). Then \( g(w) \) imposes a partial order on \( \cap f(w) \) in the way described by Kratzer: \( w \preceq g(w) w' \)—a world \( w \) is at least as normal as a world \( w' \)—just in case \( w \) satisfies at least as many of assumptions in \( g(w) \) as \( w' \) does. Then let \( \mu \) be a function mapping worlds to degrees that is consistent with \( g \) in the following sense: \( \mu(w) \leq \mu(w') \) only if \( w \preceq g(w) w' \). Then *It is clear that* \( p \) will be true at an evaluation point \( \langle d, w \rangle \) just in case every world \( x \in \cap f(w) \) such that \( \mu(x) \leq d(\text{clear}) \) is a world that satisfies \( p \), where \( d(\text{clear}) \) is the operative standard for skepticism at that evaluation point.

For instance, *It is clear that Abby is a doctor* will be true of those evaluation points \( \langle d, w \rangle \) when all those worlds consistent with the common ground in \( d \) that are sufficiently normal are also worlds in which Abby is a doctor. Here, a world is “sufficiently normal” if the degree to which it agrees with stereotypical assumptions exceeds the standard assigned to \( \text{clear} \) at that evaluation point.
5. PERSONAL CLARITY AND UNILATERAL SKEPTICAL DISARMAMENT

One of the startling properties of adjectives like clear is that they can take modifiers restricting the scope of the clarity to a specific person (or group of people):

(17) a. It is clear that Abby is a doctor.
   b. It is clear to me that Abby is a doctor.
   c. Is it clear to you that Abby is a doctor?

I’ll call (17b) and (17c) expressions of personal clarity, as opposed to simple clarity in (17a).

Barker and Taranto (2003) and Taranto (2006) suggest that It is clear to x that p means that the degree to which x believes that p exceeds the vague standard associated with clear in the discourse underway. The difference between personal clarity and simple clarity is that personal clarity explicitly declares who x is, but for simple clarity, x defaults to the speaker and the addressee.

I will take a similar tack, except of course that I will substitute degrees of justification for degrees of belief.

Note that it is perfect possible to follow an assertion of personal clarity with a question such as Is it clear to you?. Since “no” is a legitimate answer, we must consider how it could be possible for a proposition to be clear to the speaker but not for the addressee.

On the analysis proposed here, there are two (non-exclusive) possibilities. The first is that the speaker is explicitly allowing that the speaker and the addressee may have different epistemic standards: I can be in a credulous mood without assuming that you will be so easy to convince. This is not the way vagueness normally works. If the standard of tallness is uncertain enough, I can point to Bill and ask you whether he is tall. But if I first assert Bill is tall, immediately asking Is Bill tall? is inconsistent in a way that differs from the situation with personal clarity.

There are some vague predicates that appear to allow discourse participants to maintain different standards, the ones that Lasersohn (2005) calls predicates of personal taste. According to Lasersohn, it is perfectly consistent for one person to declare This chili is tasty, and for another person to declare This chili isn’t tasty. If personal clarity is a good candidate for a predicate of personal
taste, then we can adopt the judge-relative semantics of Lasersohn, or perhaps the modal approach of MacFarlane (2006).

The second possibility is that personal clarity differs from simple clarity primarily or entirely in who is entailed to have access to the relevant evidence. For simple clarity, the evidence must be available to the speaker and the addressee alike. But if I assert *It is clear to me*, then I do not assume that you have encountered the same set of evidence. I am claiming, then, that if you knew what I knew—both in knowing the evidence in favor of the conclusion, and in failing to know any countervailing evidence that you might be aware of that I am not—then you would come to the same conclusion I have.

The way that personal clarity depends on a body of evidence makes assertions of personal clarity immune to certain kinds of error:

(18) A. Abby is a doctor.
   B. No, she’s just an actor.
   A. Oh, I must have been mistaken.

If I assert Abby is a doctor, and you contradict me, then I must admit that I have made a mistake.

(19) A. It is clear to me that Abby is a doctor.
   B. No, actually, I asked her, and she said she’s just an actor.
   A. #Oh, I must have been mistaken.

But if I assert personal clarity, and you provide new information, then I have come to an erroneous conclusion. But it doesn’t follow that I made a mistake: based on the evidence I had available to me at the time, I made an inference in line with the appropriate epistemic standard in force at that point in the conversation. So I must admit that I arrived at a conclusion that turned out to be incorrect (Abby is not a doctor), but I was right in asserting that it was clear to me that Abby was a doctor. I spoke truly and accurately, and I do not need to retract my assertion of clarity.

I have, however, committed a different kind of error: I have set my epistemic standard too low. By relaxing my epistemic standards too far, I have reached a conclusion that is not sufficiently reliable for present conversational purposes. As a consequence, the standard for clarity will increase,
and I would no longer be willing to assert (19A) even in the absence of the new information in (19B).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Why ever assert clarity? Because doing so reveals information about the epistemic standard of evidence that is operative in a discourse.

Like assertions of relative stupidity, asserting clarity does not have any at-issue entailments that concern the world under discussion. Clarity may depend indirectly on background assumptions about what is the normal course of events in a world (usually, only doctors wear stethoscopes), but precisely because these are background assumptions, they are not what is at issue. As a result, assertions of clarity are used primarily or entirely for the sake of their side effects, namely, providing constraints on the location of a vague standard.

More technically, an evaluation point will satisfy a claim of clarity for a proposition $p$ just in case all of the normal worlds that are epistemically accessible from that evaluation point are worlds in which $p$ obtains. ‘Normal’ means satisfying the expectations about the normal course of events in the evaluation point to a degree that exceeds the contextually-determined standard associated with the adjective *clear* relative to that evaluation point. As a result, asserting clarity does not reveal anything new about the fact of the matter under discussion; rather, it distinguishes among possible states for the discourse. More specifically, it excludes from further consideration evaluation points at which the discourse has an inappropriately stringent epistemic standard.

Put more bluntly: asserting clarity rejects excessive skepticism.
References


