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Evaluating Qualified Standpoints

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that an account of the effect that the use of adverbials such as ‘actually, in fact, clearly, obviously, perhaps, probably’ has, when qualifying an utterance that is reconstructed as a standpoint, contributes to a context-sensitive evaluation of argumentative discourse. The account provided draws from the concept of strategic manoeuvring developed within Pragmatics-dialectics. The effect of qualified standpoints on argumentative discussions is specified in terms of the protagonist’s management of the burden of proof.

KEYWORDS: epistemic adverbials, management of the burden of proof, obligation to defend, pragmatic status quo, presumptive status, qualification of standpoints, stance adverbials, starting points, strategic manoeuvring

INTRODUCTION

In pragmatics and linguistics literature the use of such words as “certainly, clearly, obviously, perhaps, probably, technically, theoretically, frankly, honestly, actually, fortunately, surprisingly” to qualify an utterance is accounted for in terms of lowering the speaker’s commitments, expressing an attitude towards the proposition, or modifying the illocutionary force of the speech act performed (Lakoff 1980; Holmes 1984; Hoyo 1997; Conrad and Biber 2000). Qualifying an utterance is perceived in communicative, Gricean terms, as being more informative, thus violating the maxim of manner, something which invites the addressee to infer that the speaker may not have as much epistemic warrant for what he asserts as he would be taken to have if he had not qualified his statement (Lyons 1977). Consider the following qualified utterances collected from the British National Corpus¹ with the adverbial in the parenthesis and without:

- (1) (*Clearly*) a great variety of difficulty could be introduced into the tests. [A75 708]
- (2) (*Evidently*), there are many aspects to the question of integration. [EES 2119]
- (3) (*Fortunately*), these sorts of incidents are not common. [CBW 1838]
- (4) It was bloody exhausting, (*frankly*). [A8F 127]
- (5) You ought to read about him, (*honestly*). [HRA 1926]
- (6) (*Obviously*) some situations are much more serious and therefore more difficult to resolve than a dispute over an untidy room. [B10 1943]

¹ A sample of the British National Corpus can be publicly accessed at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>. For more search options of the BNC corpus see the interface that Prof. Mark Davies offers online at <http://view.byu.edu/>.

- (7) (*Perhaps*) it is not so much that police behaviour has deteriorated as that public expectations have risen. [AS6 785]
- (8) (*Surely*) tearing up the Pope's picture was meant as a symbolic gesture, not a personal affront. [CEK 4822]
- (9) (*Technically speaking*) as long as nobody was hurt, no injuries, no damage to the other vehicle, this is not an accident. [A5Y]
- (10) (*Unfortunately*), the real world of cable commerce is far from perfect. [B7M 1093]

The effect of the use of an adverbial to qualify the whole utterance, as in the examples above, has been explained in terms of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), of hedging as a strategy to negotiate the exchange of information between authors and readers (Hyland 1998) or as an intrinsic property of language that contributes not only to interpersonal meaning but also to textual meaning (Hunston and Thompson 2000; Martin and White 2005).

When these words appear qualifying an utterance that functions as the standpoint in an argumentative discourse, reconstructed along the lines of the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), an account of their effect in terms of lowering the protagonist's commitments becomes insufficient.

Suppose that an utterance such as "Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" initiates an argumentative discussion between speaker A who uttered it and speaker B who asks for reasons that support A's point of view. In the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, speaker A is obliged to respond to speaker B's challenge not because his utterance constitutes an evaluative claim, or because in uttering it he has offended speaker B who comes from Paris, or because his claim goes counter to what is established as the list of the top ten cities of Europe in a recent survey. Speaker A goes on adducing arguments in support of his point of view because that is what this form of communication, that argumentation is, requires and because it is to his best interest as a rational human being to engage in such a discussion with another party in order to test by critical means whether his point of view is tenable or not. From the moment he responds to the other party's challenge, speaker A accepts his engagement in a critical discussion and is committed to supporting the tenability of the standpoint in the course of that discussion.

Whether the argumentative discussion gets started after speaker A uttered "Clearly Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" or "Perhaps Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" instead of the unqualified utterance above, does not alter the fact that he is obliged to answer speaker B's challenges by adducing arguments in support of his point of view.² His utterance functions as a standpoint not because of the way it is formulated but because a context of doubt can be established and because the utterances preceding or following it can be identified as arguments in support of it. The difference between the utterance qualified by 'clearly' and the utterance qualified by 'perhaps' would not be that the speaker is committed more to the tenability of the standpoint in the first case and less in the second. The difference

² Whether it would be more likely that an argumentative discussion starts after someone utters "Clearly, Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" instead of "Perhaps, Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" or the unqualified "Amsterdam is the most beautiful city in Europe" is an empirical question worth investigating, which falls outside the interests of this paper. For what I am presenting here I assume that arguments in support of the point of view that is advanced follow irrespective of what the kind of the qualifier is.

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would be that while he is in both cases committed to the tenability of the standpoint, in the first case he appears to be sure about the existence of enough common ground on the basis of which he can provide support for the tenability of the standpoint, while in the second case he appears as not being sure about this. Nevertheless, and this is the interesting part, in both cases he undertakes the obligation to defend the standpoint that he has advanced.

In this paper, I propose a systematic account of the use of stance adverbials when they appear qualifying the utterance that functions as a standpoint. By considering qualification by means of stance adverbials as a presentational device for the formulation of standpoints, and by relating the effect of their use to the concept of the burden of proof, a better understanding can be reached regarding the question: when may a qualified standpoint obstruct the progress of the critical discussion?

QUALIFIED STANDPOINTS

A standpoint, according to the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, is defined as the externalised position that a party in a real or implicit discussion assumes over a disputed issue, that is the expressed opinion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, Houtlosser 2001). It is analysed in illocutionary terms as the speech act of advancing a standpoint, whereby the protagonist asserts a positive (or negative) position over the tenability of the speech act performed at the sentence level. A standpoint is reconstructed from the piece of argumentative discourse under study either directly pertaining to an utterance or utterances that have been produced in that discourse (explicit standpoint) or indirectly from what the analyst can plausibly assume to have been the arguer's point of view given the discourse at hand (implicit standpoint). Qualified standpoints are explicit standpoints reconstructed from an utterance that is qualified.

An utterance can be qualified by means of single word adverbs known as stance adverbials. In the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, Biber et al. (1999, p. 853) describe stance adverbials as single word adverbs or adverbial expressions that "have the primary function of commenting on the content or style of a clause or a particular part of a clause". While there is no established agreement about the groups under which stance adverbials fall, let alone about their names, there exist some consensus in the literature regarding the following large groups: a) epistemic adverbials (*possibly, perhaps, probably, arguably, clearly, certainly, obviously*), b) domain adverbials (*technically, theoretically, logically, morally*), c) evaluative adverbials (*fortunately, ironically, paradoxically, unfortunately*), and d) illocutionary adverbials (*frankly, seriously, honestly*).³

Of these, epistemic and domain adverbials affect the truth conditions of the utterance in the sense that their presence alters the conditions under which the proposition expressed in the utterance can be considered to be true. Evaluative and illocutionary adverbials do not affect the truth conditions of the utterance in which they occur. Nevertheless, the function of the adverbials from all four groups can be understood as framing the utterance in which they occur, in the sense that they convey a comment that is to be added to what the meaning of the rest of the utterance is. Epistemic adverbials convey a comment about the degree of probability, while domain adverbials specify the field in which the speaker's commitment holds.

³ Different names have been given to the groups described here by different authors (Bellert 1977; Biber et al. 1999; Fraser 1996; Huddleston and Pullum 2001). The labels that I am using occur the most frequently in the literature.

Evaluative adverbials add a comment concerning the speaker's evaluation of the event that is described in the utterance and illocutionary adverbials convey a comment concerning the speech act that is performed by means of uttering the sentence in which they occur.

However, not all qualified utterances that are reconstructed as standpoints count as *qualified* standpoints, too. Consider the following two dialogues:

- (11) A: Unfortunately, John is not coming tonight.
B: Why do you say that?
A: The trains are not running and he does not have a car.
- (12) A: Unfortunately, John is not coming tonight.
B: Why do you say that?
A: He always brings me some small present when we meet.

In both dialogues, A's utterance is qualified by the adverbial 'unfortunately' that appears at sentence initial position. Nevertheless, while in response to B's challenge in the dialogue at (11) speaker A provides support for the proposition "John is not coming", in the dialogue at (12) A gives reasons for the choice of the evaluative adverbial. While the argument that "the trains are not running and he does not have a car" would still be relevant support for the standpoint had it been qualified by 'fortunately', the argument "he always brings me some small present when we meet" could not count as relevant or acceptable support for a standpoint qualified by 'fortunately'.

It is only in the first dialogue, where the argument supports the proposition and not the evaluative adverbial, that the reconstructed standpoint can be considered as a qualified standpoint. In the second dialogue, the adverbial does not count as qualifying the standpoint because it is part of what the reconstructed standpoint actually is. Here are the standpoints that are reconstructed from the two dialogues, respectively:

My point of view is that John is not coming tonight
My point of view is that it is an unfortunate fact that John is not coming tonight

A qualified utterance counts as a qualified standpoint when the hearer's challenge and the speaker's argumentation concern the proposition that falls under the scope of the adverbial, and not the choice of the particular adverbial in the given discourse.

WHAT COMMENT DO STANCE ADVERBIALS ADD? 'CLEARLY' AND 'PERHAPS'

The comment that the adverbials from the various groups distinguished above add to the act of advancing a standpoint is a result of the interpretation of their semantic content against the background of the context of doubt and of the critical discussion in which a standpoint is advanced and tested. Consider the epistemic adverbials such as 'clearly' and 'perhaps'. It is not enough to know that epistemic adverbials convey a degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed in order to interpret the comment that they add to the act of advancing a standpoint that is reconstructed from the utterance in which they appear.

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In the pragma-dialectical analysis of argumentative discourse, the truth conditions of an utterance do not play the primary role. As van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) stress, utterances which express an evaluation or judgement can also be reconstructed as a standpoint even though the truth conditions of an assertion such as “Carmiggelt is Holland’s most entertaining writer” or “You had no right to put me on that list” cannot be verified. Testing the tenability of a standpoint in a critical discussion does not amount to establishing the truth conditions of the proposition that is asserted in it. The tenability of a standpoint is considered tested when the two parties agree at the end of the discussion that the doubt or the standpoint should be retracted. The standpoint advanced is not rendered ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ because a ‘strong’ or a ‘weak’ adverbial qualify the utterance from where it is reconstructed.⁴ A standpoint can be considered strong or weak only after argumentation in support of it has been advanced and after it is agreed whether the arguments adduced constitute conclusive defence or not. The presence of a strong or a weak adverbial in the formulation of a standpoint is a presentational device that the protagonist may choose in anticipation of a conclusive defence of the standpoint but not a guarantee of the final outcome.

The comment that epistemic adverbials add to the act of advancing a standpoint concerns not the committedness of the protagonist, because this is a prerequisite for the utterance to count as a standpoint in the first place, but the acknowledgement that there is common ground established already or not. If the use of weak epistemic adverbials were to be interpreted as indicating weak commitment to the standpoint, it could not be explained why the speaker would still be obliged to defend it. And if the use of strong epistemic adverbials were to be interpreted as indicating strong commitment to the standpoint, it could not be explained why the speaker would find it necessary to go on defending it.

By using strong epistemic adverbials such as “clearly, obviously, certainly, surely”, the protagonist indicates to the antagonist that there is common ground, which is already established, on the basis of which the content and justificatory potential of the arguments adduced can be accepted. By using weak epistemic adverbials such as “probably, perhaps, possibly, presumably, arguably”, the protagonist indicates to the antagonist that there may be no common ground that is already agreed upon between the two of them, on the basis of which the content and the potential of the arguments adduced could be accepted. In both cases, the protagonist goes on adducing arguments, with the only difference that in the first case he presents his argumentation as more conclusive than in the second case.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE BURDEN OF PROOF

In order to be in a position to assess whether the choice of a particular adverbial in a given discourse has obstructed the dispute resolution process, we need to postulate what the intended effect of their use in an argumentative discussion is. The strategic manoeuvring approach that is being developed within Pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) opens some space for accounting for the way discourse is shaped, by interpreting it not only as a result of observing dialectical rules but also as a result of the arguers’ attempt to have the dispute resolved in their favour; namely the protagonist to have the standpoint accepted, while

⁴ In pragma-linguistic literature on such epistemic adverbials as ‘clearly’ and ‘perhaps’ it is also observed that they do not always and in all contexts convey strong and weak degrees respectively (Stubbs 1986; Nuyts 1993; Palmer 2001).

the antagonist to have the doubt accepted. In this view, the qualification of standpoints can be interpreted as a strategic choice from the presentational devices at the protagonist's disposal when advancing it. The effect that qualification has should then be understood in terms of the burden of proof that is incurred by advancing a standpoint.

Advancing a standpoint incurs an obligation to defend it, in the sense that the one who advances it should be ready to adduce arguments in response to the other party's challenges. The other party is entitled to ask for arguments in support of the standpoint because it is assumed that the pragmatic status quo is challenged. According to van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003, p. 128), the pragmatic status quo is defined as: "The list of premises that the particular parties involved in the dispute explicitly or implicitly accept and that define their interactional relationship in the interactional situation at hand". It is to the protagonist's interest to assume the obligation because it is only by adducing argumentation that he has chances of removing the antagonist's doubt for the standpoint and thereby having it accepted at the end of the discussion. Necessary condition for a successful discharge of the burden of proof is that the arguments adduced in support of the standpoint are accepted by the antagonist both in terms of their propositional content and in terms of their potential in justifying (or refuting) the particular standpoint.

The management of the burden of proof is a normative assumption regarding the choices that the protagonist of a standpoint makes in his attempt to strike a successful discharge of the burden of proof. To that end he seeks to downplay the challenge to the pragmatic status quo that advancing the standpoint constitutes and to enhance the presumptive status of the arguments he adduces in support of it. The presence of a particular adverbial qualifying the utterance that functions as a standpoint is then to be interpreted as the protagonist's strategic choice to manage the burden of proof in the given discourse.

Whether the choice of the particular adverbial in the particular discourse has contributed to the obstruction of the critical testing procedure is a matter of the interpretation that the analyst can make in the light of the assumption about the management of the burden of proof that I have formulated above.

IN SEARCH OF CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF QUALIFIED STANDPOINTS

So far, I have argued that the use of epistemic adverbials such as 'clearly' and 'perhaps' does not hedge the commitment that the speaker takes upon himself when he advances a standpoint. While such adverbials convey a degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed at the sentence level, their use does not directly affect the commitment that the arguer assumes at the illocutionary level, where the utterance is reconstructed as a standpoint at the confrontation stage of a critical discussion. At this level, the arguer is considered fully committed to the tenability of the standpoint he has advanced and thereby obliged to advance arguments in support of it. The use of epistemic adverbials affects the way the procedure of testing the tenability of a standpoint develops by paving a way for the successful discharge of the burden of proof.⁵ Epistemic adverbials as well as the rest of the adverbials from the large group of stance adverbials are thus treated as presentational devices for the

⁵ The use of adverbials from the other groups of stance adverbials has the same effect but the way in which it is achieved differs given the different semantics of the various groups. For evaluative adverbials see Tseronis (to appear).

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qualification of standpoints at the protagonist's attempt to manage the burden of proof. The question to answer in this last section is: how can managing the burden of proof by means of qualifying the standpoint (using stance adverbials such as 'clearly' and 'perhaps') derail?

By qualifying the standpoint using epistemic adverbials, the protagonist seeks to downplay the challenge to the pragmatic status quo that advancing a standpoint constitutes. This is achieved by the effect that epistemic adverbials have of creating a distance between the standpoint and the one advancing it. Strong epistemic adverbials create such a distance by presenting the standpoint as relying on strong evidence that is known to the audience already, while weak epistemic adverbials achieve the same effect by presenting the standpoint as resulting from evidence that is not yet known to the audience. In both cases, the protagonist appears taking a distance because the utterance that functions as a standpoint is presented either as a fact or as a mere conjecture.

The protagonist could abuse the potential of these adverbials in order to evade assuming his obligation to defend right from the start as the following dialogues illustrate:

- (13) A: Clearly Clark Kent is Superman
B: Why do you think that?
A: Don't tell me you cannot see that!
- (14) A: Perhaps Clark Kent is Superman
B: Why do you think that?
A: It's just a hunch, that's all.

Nonetheless, these are not cases that I am interested in, since no argumentation is provided in support of the standpoint advanced and thereby it cannot be said that the protagonist has assumed the obligation to defend, let alone that he seeks to manage it. Consider the following texts instead:⁶

- (15) The main thing to realise with trailer driving is that it only takes one mistake to wreck the trailer and a nice glider, as well as possibly writing off a new car. *Clearly*, it is important to consider each of the ways in which you can safeguard your equipment because it is no use avoiding all the flying hazards if you are going to write off your glider on the ground. Repairs take time and money to carry out and if they can be avoided gliding will be less expensive in the future. [A0H]
- (16) There is always a problem with education providing for skills in information technology. It has always been noticed that information technology skills, of which we shall need more and more in the coming years, have tended to lag behind the demand for those skills. *Perhaps* it is not surprising, because those demands change so much and so often. [HHX]

Here the use of a strong or a weak adverbial did not absolve the protagonist from the obligation to defend the standpoint he has advanced.

⁶ Both texts are taken from the BNC corpus, see note 1 above.

In the first text, ‘clearly’ appears qualifying the standpoint: “it is important to consider each of the ways in which you can safeguard your gliding equipment when you transport it on a trailer”. Three arguments can be reconstructed from the text in support of this standpoint: “one mistake is enough to wreck the trailer and the glider, or even the car”, “a glider damaged already on the ground will spoil the fun of flying” and “repairing a damaged glider will cost time and money”. The choice of ‘clearly’ indicates that the protagonist treats the starting points for this discussion as already agreed upon between him and the implicit antagonist. Namely that it is easy to make some mistake when driving with a trailer, that gliders are sensitive equipment, that a damaged glider cannot fly at all, that it takes long and it is expensive to repair a damaged glider. Given that the text comes from an information leaflet addressing an audience of people who practice gliding as a hobby, it is expected that the content of the above propositions is accepted by all those who know what the sport of gliding involves. Similarly their potential in supporting the standpoint is also expected to be accepted even for such arguments as “a glider damaged already on the ground will spoil the fun of flying”, since the argumentation addresses an implicit antagonist who shares the same interests in gliding as the protagonist of the standpoint. Had the standpoint addressed a general audience, the justificatory potential of such an argument would not have been obvious and thereby not strong. In this latter case, the use of ‘clearly’ would be considered as the protagonist’s attempt to impose a starting point in the discussion seeking thus an easy way to have the burden of proof discharged.

In the second text, ‘perhaps’ appears qualifying the standpoint: “It is not surprising that the offer of information technology skills lags behind the demand for those skills”. One argument is adduced in support of it, namely “the demands for information technology skills change so much and so often”. The choice of ‘perhaps’ indicates that the protagonist signals to the antagonist that the starting points for this discussion have not yet been established between the two of them and thereby only tentatively suggests to consider such propositions “the offer follows the demand”, “the offer satisfies the demand at a slow pace” as part of them. The protagonist leaves it open whether there can be agreement about the content of the argument “information technology skills change so much and so often” and the extent to which it may conclusively justify the particular standpoint. The reason for this may be that the protagonist does not wish to impose a specific starting point on the antagonist, but it may also be that the protagonist does not wish to be openly committed to a specific starting point either, especially to one that could have implications for the way the protagonist plans to go on defending the standpoint. In this latter case, the choice of a weak epistemic adverbial would count as obstructing the critical testing of the standpoint because it would allow the space for the protagonist not to commit himself to starting points from where the antagonist could draw his attacking moves in the discussion.

As the discussion of the texts at (15) and (16) shows, the use of an adverbial such as ‘clearly’ or ‘perhaps’ does not instantly immunize the standpoint. The choice of the one or the other adverbial cannot guarantee a certain effect and does not necessarily impose a certain reaction on the antagonist. It is a presentational means at the protagonist’s disposal to take a distance from the standpoint he is advancing. The interpretation of the comment that the adverbial adds to the act of advancing a standpoint in the light of information that the analyst can draw from the particular context can provide an informed evaluation of the argumentative discussion under study.

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Using an adverbial that presupposes established agreement about starting points in a discussion where no clue confirms that this is so would count as an illicit attempt by the protagonist to impose a starting point in order to have the burden of proof discharged in his favour and thereby obstructs the testing of the standpoint.

Using an adverbial that acknowledges the lack of established common ground and being reluctant to commit oneself to some proposition as part of the common ground of the discussion would count as an illicit attempt by the protagonist to exploit the vagueness about starting points in order to have the burden of proof discharged in his favour and thus obstructs the testing of the standpoint.

The result in both cases would be that the standpoint becomes immune to criticism because the utterance by means of which the act of advancing it is performed appears as self evident and the propositions following it as providing a mere explanation but no argumentation in support of it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the choice of the language user to qualify the utterance that counts as advancing a standpoint in an argumentative discourse does not lead by definition to an obstruction of the procedure for the critical testing of that standpoint. It is a matter of the interpretation of the choice of a particular way to qualify the standpoint in a given discourse that can help the analyst reach an informed evaluation of it. To this direction, I have proposed a theoretical explanation of the use of stance adverbials to qualify standpoints, namely as presentational devices in the protagonist's attempt to manage the burden of proof. In this view, by choosing an adverbial from a particular group the protagonist ideally seeks to downplay the challenge to the pragmatic status quo that advancing a standpoint constitutes. The use of epistemic adverbials helps downplaying the challenge by creating a certain distance between the speaker and the point of view that he advances. Abusing the semantic potential that these adverbials have by creating such a distance that the standpoint appears as self-evident constitutes a derailment of the protagonist's attempt to manage the burden of proof by qualifying and only then counts as an obstruction to the critical testing procedure.

[link to commentary](#)

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