

The Nature of Clear and Ambiguous Responses in Dialogue: A Research Proposal towards "I Never Said That": A dataset, taxonomy and baselines on response clarity classification.

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Abstract. The clarity of answers represents an essential element of efficient communication, especially in contexts like political interviews, public communication, but also in daily interactions. However, the answers are not always clear, and, the speakers can be ambiguous or avoid the responsibility of providing an answer in certain positions. The paper „I Never Said That”: A dataset, taxonomy and baselines on response clarity classification [TFL⁺24], proposes a taxonomy of the clarity of the answers and works around this concept. This report extends the section of related works by analyzing additional research towards, equivocation, strategic ambiguity and the interpretation of answers. The existing methods are analyzed, new limitation are identified and new ways of research are proposed. The aim of this research proposal is propose new questions and future application.

Keywords: Ambiguity · Answer Clarity · Equivocation · Avoidance · Political Discourse · Interpretation

1 Introduction

Communication is often perceived like a simple process of transmitting information through questions and answers. However, in practice, answers do not always offer clear and direct information. The speakers may respond indirectly, incompletely or ambiguously.

This phenomenon is frequently found in political interviews, where the interviewee avoid sometimes offering a clear answer, in order to avoid negative consequences or to maintain their flexibility.

The paper presented introduces a concept of clarity of the answer and proposes a classification of it, having the following objectives:

- Presentation and analysis of the base paper
- Extending the analysis of the current literature
- Identifying limitations
- Proposing future research topics

1.1 Studied Topic

The paper introduces the concept of clarity of the answer as an formal object of analysis. The authors are stating that, in many situations of communication, especially in political discourse, the given answers are not always clear or direct, even though they apparently are given an answer.

The taxonomy proposed by the authors in the first phase is the following:

Table 1. 1st phase taxonomy for clarity level

Answer Type	Description
Clear Reply	Answers the question directly
Clear Non-Reply	Explicit refusal
Ambivalent Reply	Apparently gives an answer but it is ambiguous

After defining the first level of clarity, the authors extend further their analysis into a more detailed level, which captures specific types of ambiguity and evasion. The goal of this is to not treat ambivalent answers like an uniform block, but to identify recurrent patterns in which real communication is shown.

This is much needed, as the first level is just a general classification, useful only for evaluating the clarity level, but lacking in explaining the ambivalent category, not allowing fine-grained analysis for comparative research (not every ambiguous answer is the same type of ambiguous) and overall, it does not help us understand the avoidance methods used by the speakers. Therefore, a second level of clarity is being introduced, in which every answer type mentioned in Table 1 has sub-categories, offering a wider range of understanding:

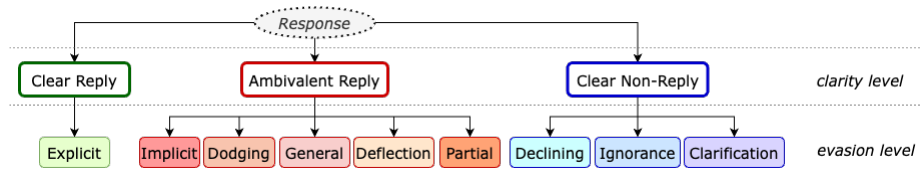


Fig 1: Full branch of response classification categories

This issue is relevant, because, in a traditional manner, communication analysis is based on the informational content of the answer, without taking into consideration the degree of clarity or the degree of evasiveness. The authors are stating that two answers can contain information, but can differ by a huge margin in the sense of clarity and evasion.

1.2 Concept of clarity in an answer

The paper is defining the clarity of the answer as the degree in which an answers offers a unique and direct interpretation, in accordance to the question given.

A clear answer allows the receptor to understand without ambiguity the position of the speaker. But, an ambiguous answer may allow multiple interpretations:

Table 2. Clarity Example

Question	Answer	Clarity Level
Will you raise taxes?	Yes	Clear Reply
Will you raise taxes?	I cannot comment	Clear Non-Reply
Will you raise taxes?	We are analyzing more options	Ambivalent

1.3 The importance of ambivalent replies and its connection with evasiveness

The authors state that ambiguous responses are not only unclear, but they represent an intentional evasion strategy.

The importance of ambivalence lies primarily on how this reply is interpreted, and what it is highlighting. At first, an ambivalent answer may look like an answer, but it does not engage the speaker directly, this allows us to differentiate between informative replies and answers that avoid the subject.

As shown in Figure ?? the focus is on the type of evasion, thus we can narrow down, what does it mean when an answer is ambiguous,

- Deflection: change of subject
- Implicit Reply: suggesting an answer without explicitly enunciating it
- Partial Answer: offering just a part of information
- Strategic Ambiguity: using ambiguity as a strategy to help the overall conversation

Thus, ambivalence is not random, it reflects the real intentions of avoiding a clear answer.

Whilst this paper is only focused on political discourse, its importance can be applied the same in everyday conversations where the public image may not be that significant.

Table 3. Evasion Example

Question	Answer	Level 1	Level 2
Will you raise taxes?	We are analyzing more options because we want to be responsible	Ambivalent	Strategic Ambiguity + Partial Answer

Obs. Although the reply uses informative words, it does not engage the speaker to offer a clear **yes** or **no**. This represents exactly the evasion level the paper is measuring.

2 Current State of the Art

2.1 The theory of conversational implication

The idea that Paul Grice is following is that majority of the conversations that take place, should respect some cooperative margins: **Quantity**, offering sufficient information, but not more than needed; **Quality**, tell the truth; **Relevance**, your information should be relevant to the discussion; **Manner**, be clear [Nea92].

Ambivalent answers, especially those that avoid details, violate, most importantly, the manner margin; here Grice offers a conceptual space to highlight the deconstruction of 'clarity' in speech.

Whilst providing a fundamental base, his analysis is general and theoretical, not providing an applicable set for automating the classification or data labeling, thus making the current paper much more important.

2.2 Strategic Equivocation

Equivocation is communication strategy, where the speaker often uses techniques in order to facilitate generic or vague expressions, basically avoiding explicit engagement by maintaining deliberate ambiguity. The paper states that the most important part of it is the ambivalent category, thus the question given; Why are most answers ambiguous? Well, Bull and Mayer reflect on this question and take a deeper dive, where they are interpreting answers based on a strategic level; What is the speaker's goal out of this? Therefore there must be an intent to be ambiguous as to not give away its position.

Ambiguity may be intentional, not an error of communication [Bul98].

2.3 Analysis of political discourse

In terms of political interviews, the stakes are higher and more important. Harris analyzes politicians answers in interviews, identifying techniques like, **change of subject**, **vague phrasing** or **changing the question given**.

It shows how examples from real discourse appear and how frequent they are in public communication; A valuable paper, limited by a specific domain (political discourse).

The same is applied in Overholser study where avoiding responsibility and creating an impression of clarity is the easiest way a politician can deflect ambiguity [Ove06]. This overall completes linguistic perspective with observation from journalism and political science

3 Research extension proposal for clarity and evasion in answers

Whilst the paper proposes a taxonomy for classifying clarity and evasion level in answers, offering a helpful conceptual approach for discourse analysis, it can be extended in multiple ways, conceptually and also experimentally.

The main areas which should be provided more attention, has this research been supplementary funded, it would be **investigating the purpose of the context, the interpretation of the speaker and applying taxonomy in different domains, rather the political one.**

3.1 Research questions proposed

One of the key contributions of a possible extension would be creating a new set of research questions:

- To what extent does the interpretation of clarity depend of the characteristics of the speaker?
- Can the same position be classified differently based on context?
- What is the relation between the intention of the speaker and the clarity perceived?
- Are there any differences between areas of expertise (political, educational, professional)?
- Can ambiguity be used as a optimal communication strategy?

Question → Answer → Context → Interpretation → Classification

3.2 Proposed Experiments

The original paper is classifying the answers, but it is not investigating the way these are perceived by people.

Experiment 1 - Evaluate the impact of context towards the clarity of an answer

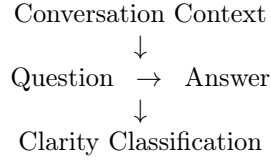
Goal - Determine if access to anterior context modifies the perception of clarity in an answer. This experiment will use the Cornell ConvoKit Corpus database. In order to establish this, the 'Tennis Interviews' transcript will have a better effect as tennis players tend to give away answering techniques based on results in previous matches.

Experimental Design - Establish the main two conditions of the experiment:

Table 4. Experiment design for context

Condition	Available Information
Without context	Question & Answer
With context	Question, Answer & Previous conversation

The procedure is simple, participants will classify the answers based on the 1st level taxonomy, and then the classifications will be compared between conditions.

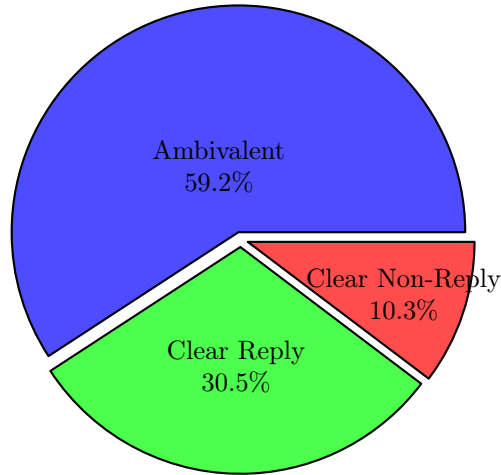


This experiment will evaluate the role of context, which is not yet analyzed in the original paper.

Experiment 2 - Evaluating human perception towards clarity

Goal - Proposing to evaluate how people perceive clarity, as after all, the human is the best judge. In the original paper, the clarity reflected is objective, it does not take into consideration any type of subjective thoughts.

The dataset was labeled between 3 human annotators and one experts in communication, in which information of previous questions was provided. So, is there consensus between participants in clarity classification? - Well, as the study showed, ambivalent answers are more difficult to classify, thus being the most of the latter three:



So again the proposal is to assign one different person per Q/A pair, in order to keep subjectivity in the classification.

Experiment 3 - Introducing a new metric: Clarity Score

Goal - Propose a new quantitative metric

A third metric which should be defined solely from a score of 1-100, should by no means solve this classification issue. "When measuring what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, your knowledge becomes an unsatisfactory kind" [CBK⁺48]

4 Conclusions

"I never said that" paper study, proposes a taxonomy to classify answers in a matter of clarity and evasion, this being an important contribution in discourse analysis and communication. In the analysis of this paper, a conceptual approach was followed, having the main focus point to the **1st taxonomy level**, and how it can be improved and applied in different contexts, rather than the technical implementation of a NLP model or to follow algorithmic details.

4.1 Implications

The conceptual contributions and observations from this paper have significant implications in many other areas:

- **Linguistic & Communication** - understanding the way messages can be perceived differently and how ambiguity can be used strategically
- **AI³ & NLP⁴** - proposed metrics and taxonomy can be integrated in automatic classification systems, but conceptual approach allows choosing optimal technique for each application
- **Education & Customer Service** - improving clarity of replies may reduce confusion and may improve efficiency of communication
- **Political Analysis & Media** - identifying evasive answers, thus the analysis of communication strategies become more systematic

This focus on conceptual improving allows a greater flexibility in choosing technical methods and applicable contexts, which makes this overall a more adaptable research in different scenarios.

4.2 Limitations

Even though conceptual and experimental proposals offer a solid base, there are some limitations that occur. Experiments remain proposed, only, practical validation needs implementation and new data collection, as old data remains objective, interpretation of clarity becomes subjective. A greater amount of participants is required to obtain significant results.

Also, adapting to other languages, cultures or domains may need adjustments of the classification criteria and the evaluation method.

4.3 Final words

In conclusion, this research paper is focusing on the conceptual improvement of clarity and evasion taxonomy, proposing an experimental scope and research directions, which can be applied in multiple domains. Because the technical implementation is not specified, it does not devalue the contribution made: it actually offers freedom and flexibility to researchers to choose the most suitable techniques for testing and applying taxonomy.

³ *AI* = short version for 'Artificial Intelligence'

⁴ *NLP* = short version for 'Natural Language Processing'

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