

Being clear – the politician’s riposte?

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In this paper, I explore the use of the adjective lemma *clear* in political and media-political discourse in the United Kingdom, flitting between corpus-based and text-analytic approaches in my analytical procedure. Taking first a corpus approach, I show that *clear*'s use in such political and media-political contexts increases diachronically over time towards the present day – particularly over recent time. This can be observed, for example, by studying the lemma’s attested use in The Hansard Corpus (Alexander & Davies, 2015), a diachronic corpus of UK parliamentary debates:

Decade sub-corpus	Proportional frequency (instances per million words)
1800s	105.52
1810s	101.76
1820s	138.71
1830s	114.33
1840s	127.08
1850s	141.00
1860s	148.54
1870s	143.07
1880s	150.08
1890s	157.00
1900s	188.34
1910s	221.95
1920s	234.96
1930s	278.43
1940s	336.47
1950s	367.29
1960s	421.85
1970s	451.08
1980s	495.54
1990s	584.49
2000s	661.20

Table 1: Frequency of lemma adjective ‘clear’ in The Hansard corpus

Evidence to support the claim that this appears to be a trend specific to political discourse is offered by the fact that the lemma’s increase across time is only very moderate when studied in The Corpus of Historical American English (Davies, 2012), a corpus comprised of a number of different text genres concerning various subject-matter:

Decade sub-corpus	Proportional frequency (instances per million words)
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1810s	108.36
1820s	109.86
1830s	140.55
1840s	162.07
1850s	159.07
1860s	150.40
1870s	148.91
1880s	156.58
1890s	156.70
1900s	160.65
1910s	169.65
1920s	147.42
1930s	160.56
1940s	174.47
1950s	174.58
1960s	176.37
1970s	160.40
1980s	170.88
1990s	162.95
2000s	151.75

Table 2: Frequency of lemma adjective 'clear' in The Corpus of Historical American English

Moving to a text-analytic approach to *clear's* use in present-day UK political contexts, I offer an analysis of BBC Radio 4 Today programme's interview (14-06-2016) of the then Employment Minister, Priti Patel (IE below) by host Mishal Husain (IR below), shortly before the UK's EU Referendum. I identify a seemingly emergent sense of *clear* as frequently used by Patel in this interview. The following are illustrative examples:

(1)

IR: how can you say as you do in this letter that (.) .hh that you would ensure that universities scientists er farmers regional funds cultural organisations and others would continue to get the money that they get from the EU?

IE: .hh well we've been **clear** that we would– we know that there'd be more than enough money to ensure that those .hh who currently get .hh that funding from the European Union would– that money would exist and it could still go there to those priorities

(2)

IR: the question I asked you was not about the contribution was– it was on what authority .h you as the Leave campaign make this promise it is (.) governments who make decisions on spending

IE: well we are saying that obviously .h government can choose after the referendum in terms of how it would .hh spend the money if we take back control of our money from the European Union .hh and we have been abundantly clear that there would be more than enough money .hh to ensure that those who now get funding from the EU including universities scientists farmers .h regional (funds) .h erm would continue to [get] money

This use of *clear* is characterised by the combination of a number of particular lexicogrammatical and wider discursive features: a first person grammatical Subject; a past perfect main verb phrase; 'that' relativiser in R1 position which therefore introduces an embedded clause as an adjective phrase post-modifier; reference in the immediately preceding discourse (often of the IR) to the IE's past communicative acts – or those of the party or the collective that the IE represents (e.g. *say, this letter, the question I asked you, this promise*); etc. Especially, *clear* in this relational: attributive transitivity construction, in Halliday's (1994) terms, seems marked where used with an animate grammatical Subject and post-modified with a 'that'-relative clause.

The aforementioned findings from this close, textual analysis are used to inform subsequent diachronic corpus inquiries using The News on the Web Corpus (NoW), a monitor corpus of online news starting in 2010. This second-step corpus analysis reveals that the particular aforementioned use of *clear* is indeed a very recent language phenomenon (see Arts et al., 2013 on short-term diachrony; cf. what is revealed by the earlier Hansard Corpus analysis), all but exclusively used in the NoW corpus in news texts with a political subject-matter.

In bringing the paper to a close, I speculate that the general increase in the use of *clear* – and particularly the specific sense focused on in my paper – functions for politicians as a push-back against claims of their evasiveness in response to direct questioning in public-facing discourse (Harris, 1991; Bull, 2008) as well as against other events which have undermined the public trust in politicians (e.g. the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009: The Telegraph, 2009). In order to do so, I consider the wide-span collocational behaviour of *I/we + have been + clear that + CLAUSE* sense of *clear* when in use, which attests collocates indexing past communicative activity.

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