

# Semantic Extension of Predication Related to Perception:

## The Case of *Clear*

Mika SHINDO

Kyoto University

E-mail: d60x0168@ip.media.kyoto-u.ac.jp

### 1. Introduction

Cognitive linguists have proposed that language is firmly based on human cognition, so that semantic change or extension<sup>1</sup> cannot be explained without a cognitive perspective rooted in bodily experiences. Especially, adjectives or adverbs related to perception bear evidence of how people conceptualize concrete or abstract entities, because descriptions by adjectives or adverbs necessarily and prominently involve the conceptualizers' perspectives besides just mentioning actual facts. In this paper, we will explore conceptualization by examining extensions of the adjective *clear* originating in visual sensation.

This paper has three purposes. The first is to explore how far the word *clear* has extended semantically both in ranges of perception of concrete objects and of consideration of abstract concepts. The second is to confirm the proposal of some researchers, that there are several stages in grammaticalization, and that metaphor is one of the early stages of such semantic extensions. Although I will raise several examples from the OED, I do not aim at going into details about the historical changes of *clear*, but at explicating logical progresses of the semantic values of *clear*. The third is to show that one of the grammatical stages, subjectification, plays a prominent part in the extensions of *clear*.

### 2. Change of conceptualization in perceiving concrete objects

When we consider the following examples, we might regard the latter usage meaning "easy to understand" as one of the expressions conceptualized by the metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING.

- (1) The water was so *clear* that you could see the oysters on the sea bed.  
(COBUILD)
- (2) Mark could not see why Jane could not understand. It seemed *clear* enough

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<sup>1</sup> By the term "semantic extension," I mean increase or transfer of usage events which a linguistic expression designates. This includes both synchronic and diachronic extensions. The term "semantic change" is used chiefly for historical changes of meaning.

to him. (COBUILD)

In fact, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) use the word *clear* in order to explain this metaphor in their section of “Thinking Is Perceiving”: “*Clear* writing is writing that allows readers to know what is being communicated; *unclear* or *murky* writing makes it harder for readers to know what is being said” (*op.cit.*; 239).

However, we cannot include the following example in the same target domain, KNOWING, even though it alludes to apparently similar abstract thinking.

(3) They are faced with *clear* alternatives. (COBUILD)

This *clear* simply heightens the effect of *alternatives*, and means “being definitely judged to be a case of the given abstract category,” quite different from KNOWING. This can be verified by the fact that the sentence above can be rephrased by the following sentences with only slight semantic differences.

(4) They are faced with alternatives.

(5) They are faced with definite alternatives.

How and why has the word *clear* changed to a simple intensifying adjective? If we try to explain several stages of semantic changes or extensions only by metaphor, we have to propose many ad hoc metaphors. Therefore, we should clarify a series of these various meanings of *clear* in terms of other notions of grammaticalization. We will start by exploring the usage describing perception of concrete objects.

## 2.1 Extensions in perceiving concrete objects

### 2.1.1 Vividness or intensity of light

The English word *clear* originates in expressing the vividness or intensity of light, colour, things illuminated. We can find the oldest example in 1297. According to the OED, *clear* originally meant “full of sunshine, bright, serene” weather. It is very natural for human beings to describe the shining sun as *clear*, because the sun is the most prominent object intensely radiating light.

(6) Ther come . . a leme swythe *cler* & bry3te. (1297 R. Glouc. (1724) 416; OED.

s.v. *clear*, adj. 1a.)

(7) the *clear* white morning light (COBUILD)

(8) All colours were *clearer*, the river below her was brilliant blue. (COBUILD)

### 2.1.2 Transparency

Extended from the perception of the sun shining, we also express weather free from clouds, mists, or haze as *clear*, even in the evening when we cannot perceive the sunlight.

- (9) A *clear* frosty evening (1872 E. Peacock Mabel Heron I. ix. 141.; OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 1c.)
- (10) A slender new crescent moon lay on its back high in the *clear* night sky.  
(BNC: CME 1000)

When free from cloud or mist, the air looks transparent. When we say the weather is clear, it also means that the air is transparent so that light can reach distant objects.

- (11) The morning air was still *clear* and fresh (COBUILD)

Therefore, the entity profiled by *clear* when describing a kind of weather shifts from the sun's shining to the air's transparency. Probably from this natural transfer of the profiling, *clear* describes something that allows light to pass through. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this meaning of transparency typically has been used to modify water and other objects such as glass (OED). This usage is now frequent in our daily speech.

- (12) A well vte-brast, wid strem suete, *clere*, and cald. (before 1300 Cursor M. 11705; OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 3a.)
- (13) *clear* plastic bags, a *clear* all-purpose glue, *clear* honey (COBUILD)
- (14) Concentrated, *clear* meat juice, must, it goes without saying, be added.  
(BNC: EFU 1585)

### 2.1.3 Absence of obstructions

Transparent water is ordinarily at the same time fresh, clean, and free from unpleasant substances that make it dirty. From this natural inference, *clear* focuses the meaning on the cleanness of water.

- (15) Sponge the stain immediately with plenty of *clear* cold water. (COBUILD)

The meaning of "free from unpleasant substances" extended from *clear* water's original meaning, "allowing light to pass through," has been applied to many objects. If *clear* is used to modify a person's skin, it means bright, fresh, healthy, and free from spots or rashes.

- (16) Persons of delicate fibres, of smooth, lax, and *clear* skin. (1801 Med. Fml. V. 360.; OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 4d.)
- (17) a shortish man of *clear* complexion (COBUILD)

If a surface or a place is *clear*, the place is empty or is free from things that might cause an obstruction, a blockage, problems, or difficulties<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This meaning of *clear* showing no obstructions has developed and extended to describe a kind of measurement of time. A *clear* day has meant a day with no part occupied or deducted since 1868.

\* There must be a *clear* day ... before he could receive the reply (1868 Yates Rock

- (18) The way was now *clear* to the Jordan. (1862 Stanley Few. Ch. (1877) I. ix. 181; OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 20a.)
- (19) No other cars were involved; the road was *clear* and in good condition. (COBUILD)
- (20) He told me he would get back as soon as the roads were *clear*. (BNC: JXU 2879)
- (21) The lines of approach for infantry units were still *clear*. (COBUILD)

#### 2.1.4 No obstructions in a person's view

Examples from (18) to (21) mean free from obstructions, objectively judging from the ordinary functions of "way," "road," or "lines of approach." Not limited to such objective judgement, a view can be called *clear* if nothing obstructs it.

- (22) It was impossible to get a *clear* look at the princess. (COBUILD)
- (23) I had a *clear* view of the procession from my bedroom window. (COBUILD)

These expressions become possible by transferring the profile designated by *clear* from objectively observed places to subjectively construed views.

Surveying these semantic extensions<sup>3</sup> of *clear*, the object we regard as *clear* has remarkably changed. This change is not a simple transfer of the nouns modified, but a change of conceptualization from an objective relation to a subjective relation. This will be explained in terms of the notion of "subjectification" proposed by Langacker (1990b, 1998, 1999). The next section surveys the nature of this subjectification.

## 2.2 The nature of subjectification

Langacker's subjectification (1990b, 1998, 1999) is a shift from a relatively objective construal of some entity to a more subjective one. (1999. 297) Yet, this subjective component is there all along, being immanent in the objective conception, and simply remains behind when the latter fades away. (*op.cit.*; 298) Briefly, we can view subjectification as a gradual process of progressive attenuation. (1998: 76) This notion of subjectification is represented abstractly in Figure 1.

**Initial Configuration:** an objectively construed, profiled relationship.

**Attenuation:** attenuation involving both the objectively conceived relationship and the trajector's role in it.

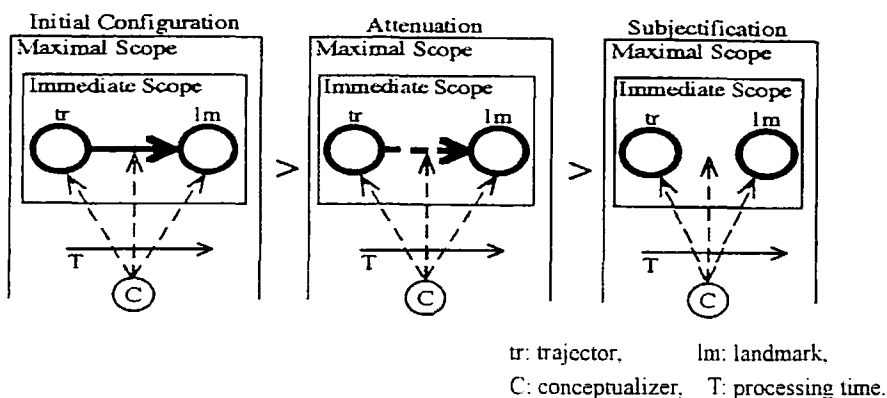
**Subjectification:** the full disappearance of any objective basis for the conceptualizer's

Ahead III.vi.; OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 19c.)

• That gives us four *clear* days to finish the job. (COBUILD)

<sup>3</sup> The usage of the sky free from cloud or mist, of the transparency of water or glass, or of the healthy complexion or skin have examples dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the OED. We can not find examples modifying a place free from obstructions until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

mental scanning. Subjectification per se need not have any effect on the choice of focal participants (trajector/landmark alignment). It merely removes any objective basis for selecting the trajector as initial point of access. (Langacker 1999: 298-299)



[Figure 1] (op.cit.; 298)

To clarify this notion, we will consider some familiar examples involving the preposition *across* illustrated in (24).

- (24) a. The child hurried *across* the busy street. [profiled objective movement by trajector]  
 b. The child is safely *across* the street. [static location resulting from unprofiled, past, actual movement of trajector]  
 c. You need to mail a letter? There's a mailbox just *across* the street. [static location as goal of unprofiled, potential, future movement of addressee]  
 d. A number of shops are conveniently located just *across* the street. [static location as goal of potential movement by a generalized or generic individual]  
 e. Last night there was a fire *across* the street. [static location, no physical movement necessarily envisaged at all]

(op.cit.; 301)

These semantic extensions relating the senses of *across* illustrate attenuation with respect to both the objective relationship and the basis for the choice of trajector<sup>4</sup>.

This attenuation does not occur in a single step. It is more likely a gradual evolutionary process involving small steps along a number of possible parameters. Attenuation can be observed with respect to at least four parameters (the grouping is

<sup>4</sup> From the discussion for preposition *across* in Langacker (1990b), we can see at least two types of subjectification:

- (1) the objectively construed spatial motion is replaced by subjective motion, i.e. mental scanning along a path from a reference point to the trajector's static location,
- (2) the reference point is identified with the ground, subjectively construed.

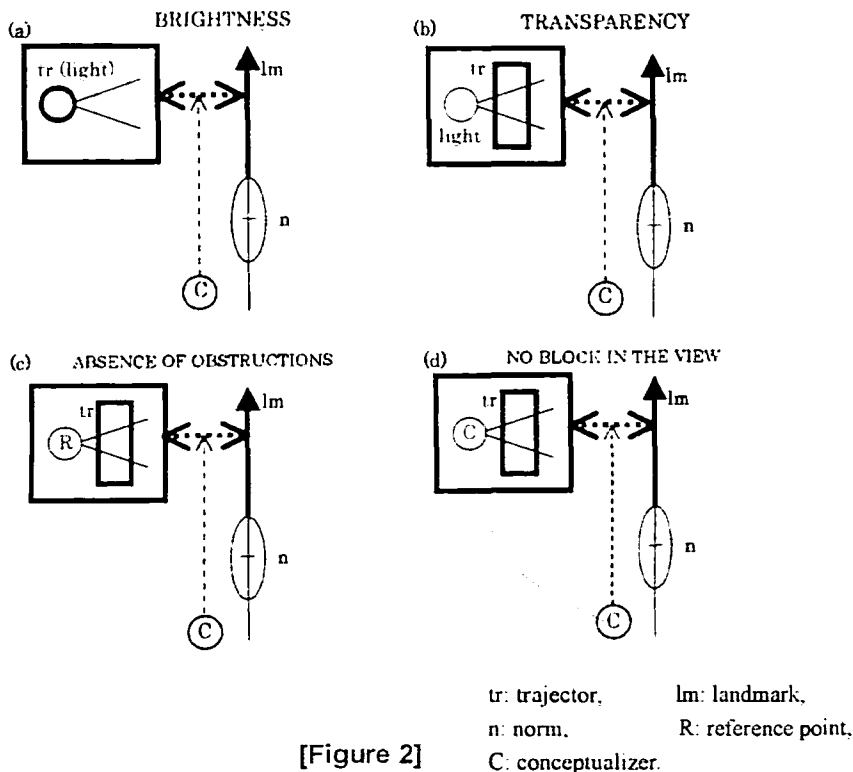
somewhat arbitrary). (*op.cit.*; 301-302)

- (i) change in *status*: from actual to potential, or from specific to generic.
- (ii) change in *focus*: the extent to which particular elements stand out as focus of attention, notably in terms of profiling.
- (iii) shift in *domain*: from a physical interaction to a social or experiential one, as in the evolution of modals.
- (iv) change in the *locus of activity* or *potency*: from a focused onstage participant (the trajector) to an offstage one (the addressee), or from a specific mover to a non-specific, generalized one.

### 2.3 Subjectification in perceiving concrete objects

Now let us return to the four meanings of *clear* prominent in modifying concrete objects:

- (25) a. “intensely bright” (represented by example (7): the *clear* white morning light),
- b. “transparent” (represented by example (13): *clear* plastic bags),
- c. “free from obstructions” (represented by example (19): No other cars were involved; the road was *clear* and in good condition.),
- d. “unblocked in a person’s view” (represented by example (22): It was impossible to get a *clear* look at the princess.)



[Figure 2]

Figure 2(a-d) depicts the situations described in (25a-d) respectively. The original semantic value of the adjective *clear* is taken to be brightness radiating from a light, which is designated by trajector<sup>5</sup> (tr) in (25a). Its domain is the conception of a BRIGHTNESS scale, and the region on this scale that lies beyond the neighborhood of the norm (n) functions as the primary landmark (lm). On the subsequent case of transparency, (25b), the domain which *clear* designates is the concept related to a TRANSPARENCY scale. The trajector in this case is not a light but an object allowing light to pass through it. In the third case, (25c), what an object (commonly a place or a road) allows to pass through is not a light, but rather the speaker's mental scanning, which moves around the trajector. Still in (25c), however, we can interpret the situation as light reaching all over the place, owing to removal of obstructions. Moreover, in the final case, (25d), all objective basis for conceptualizing *clear* has disappeared, and we can easily interpret the reference point as coinciding with the speaker herself, whether explicitly mentioned, as in example (23), or not, as in example (22).

### 3. Change of conceptualization in understanding abstract concepts

#### 3.1 Extension in understanding abstract concepts

##### 3.1.1 Ease of understanding

Subsequently we will observe the use of *clear* designating abstract concepts, not physical objects. One of the abstract meanings of *clear*, "easy to understand free from confusion" has its first example before 1300 (OED), and now this is frequently expressed both attributively and predicatively.

(26) Ðan com þe propheci al *cler*. (before 1300 Cursor M. 11615 (Cott.); OED s.v. *clear*, adj. 7a.)

(27) I gave a *clear*, frank account of the incident. (COBUILD)

(28) Mark could not see why Jane could not understand. It seemed *clear* enough to him. (=2)(COBUILD)

(29) Why bargaining theory helps so little should be *clear* enough from our evidence. (BNC: EEF 1791)

In these examples, *clear* objectively modifies abstract entities such as statements, explanations, and meanings.

##### 3.1.2 Complete understanding by a person

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<sup>5</sup> "In virtually every relational predication, an asymmetry can be observed between the profiled participants. One of them, called the trajector (tr), has special status and is characterized as the figure within a relational profile. ... Other salient entities in a relational predication are referred to as landmarks (lm), so called because they are naturally viewed (in prototypical instances) as providing points of reference for locating the trajector" (Langacker 1987: 217)

Even when connoting a level of understanding, *clear* in the following examples predicates the speaker or the addressee<sup>6</sup>.

- (30) If you are not *clear* about anything in this chapter, ask me. (COBUILD)
- (31) I'm not *clear* from what you said whether you support the idea or not. (COBUILD)
- (32) I'm not entirely *clear* what was said, but erm, they were certainly given no commitment to an an interview. (BNC: JA9 639)

*Clear* in these examples refers to the higher level of a scale showing that the predicated person understands. The entity expressed in this meaning is not objectively construed outside of the conceptualizer, but is subjectively identified with the conceptualizer.

### 3.1.3 Understanding of a person's intentions

There is another case in which the profile designated by *clear* shifts to a person. In this case, a reflexive meaning of understanding something is found: ease of understanding a person's intentions. This frequently appears in the construction of *a person + make + oneself + clear*. *Oneself* can be replaced by one's sayings, wishes, or intentions.

- (33) He seemed to be unable to make himself *clear*. (COBUILD)
- (34) You should make *clear* exactly what you want to know. (COBUILD)
- (35) It is important to make *clear* your wishes about the funeral. (COBUILD)
- (36) All of them made it *clear* they would support my decision. (COBUILD)
- (37) The President approved this measure, but made it *clear* that he would not sign further legislation to keep government going unless a satisfactory agreement was reached on the budget. (BNC: HL0 500)

This meaning is also expressed in both simple attributive and predicative ways.

- (38) Your grandfather's mind was never *clearer* than during the time he made this will. (COBUILD)
- (39) You need *clear* thought and action. (COBUILD)
- (40) Their aim is to promote *clearer* thinking on social policy issues. (COBUILD)

*Clear* in these examples means "reasonable or sensible thinking not upset nor confused." Here, a more evaluative meaning has added reasonability that needs a subjective judgement different from an objectively observable understanding of a statement.

### 3.1.4 Obviousness

Moreover, *clear* means "obvious or evident" accompanied by the construction *it + verb*

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<sup>6</sup> We can find the first example of this type in 1711 (OED).



(*be, become, seem, appear etc.*) + *clear* + *that*-clause.

- (41) It was *clear* from his letter that he was not interested. (COBUILD)
- (42) Each day it was becoming *clearer* to me that our chances of success were very low. (COBUILD)
- (43) It's far from *clear* that they will benefit from it. (COBUILD)
- (44) Whatever role he was playing, however, it is *clear* that the foundation of his success was a reputation for honesty and reliability. (BNC: GTD 770)

### 3.1.5 *Clear* as an emphasizer

We also frequently use *clear* in order to show definiteness in judging an entity to be a member of a given abstract category.

- (45) The letter contained a *clear* commitment to reopen disarmament talks. (COBUILD)
- (46) They are faced with *clear* alternatives. (=3)(COBUILD)
- (47) This is a *clear* case of embezzlement. (COBUILD)
- (48) As this excerpt itself implies, the dynamics of competition may in due course bring producer behaviour into line with the wishes of consumers, since there are *clear* opportunities for profit in being the first to satisfy unmet demand. (BNC: FP2 132)

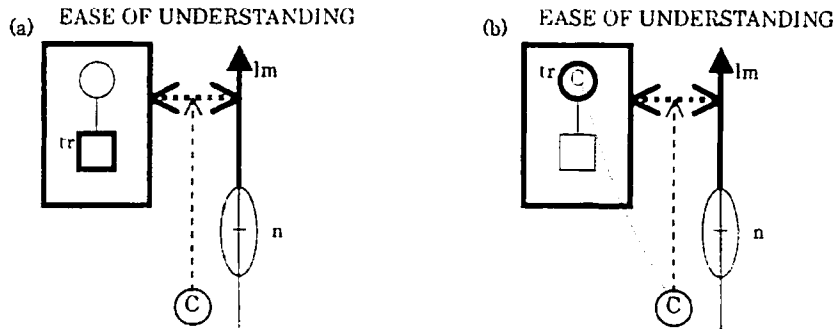
Quirk et al. (1985) classify this usage of *clear* as an emphasizer, one of intensifying adjectives. "Emphasizers have general heightening effect and are generally attributive only: a *true* scholar, a *clear* failure, *pure* fabrication, a *real* hero, a *certain* winner, a *definite* loss ..." (*op.cit.*; 429). Certainly, we feel but slight semantic differences, when the sentences above are rephrased without the word *clear*:

- (45') The letter contained a commitment to reopen disarmament talks.
- (46') They are faced with alternatives.
- (47') This is a case of embezzlement.
- (48') ... since there are opportunities for profit in being the first to satisfy unmet demand.

## 3.2 Subjectification in understanding abstract concepts

The semantic extension from "easy to understand" to "complete understanding by a person" is the kind of subjectification that we reviewed in section 2.2.

- (49) a. Mark could not see why Jane could not understand. It seemed *clear* enough to him. (=28)(COBUILD)
- b. I'm not *clear* from what you said whether you support the idea or not. (=31)(COBUILD)



[Figure 3]

Figures 3(a, b) depict the situations described in (49 a, b) respectively. The scope of (49a) is a scale showing “easy to understand”, and the region on this scale that lies beyond the neighborhood of the norm (n) functions as the primary landmark (lm). Processes can be situated at various points along this scale, and one such process is specified as being situated within the landmark. The trajector (tr) of this predication is an entity understood as an explanation, and participates in one process interacting with this scale. In (49b), the scale of “easy to understand” is similarly relevant as the landmark, but the trajector is not an understood entity. This trajector is the conceptualizer (C), subjectively construed.

### 3.3 Other tendencies of semantic extensions

According to Traugott and König (1991: 208-209), there are three tendencies that have been identified for semantic change in general, both lexical and grammatical:

#### *Semantic-pragmatic Tendency I:*

Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal (evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) situation  
 e.g. after (from spatial to temporal), behind, prefer.

#### *Semantic-pragmatic Tendency II:*

Meanings based in the described external or internal situation > meanings based in the textual situation  
 e.g. after (from temporal to textual),

#### *Semantic-pragmatic Tendency III:*

Meanings tend to become increasingly situated in the speaker’s subjective belief-state/attitude toward the situation  
 e.g. while (from textual to speaker’s attitude)

Considering this theory of unidirectional historical process, we notice that the following meanings discussed from sections 3.1.3 to 3.1.5 bear characteristics of attenuation from “specifically evaluative” to “generically evaluative” to “textual marker (the speaker’s subjective belief-state)”:

- (50) a. “reasonable or sensible thinking so as not to be upset” (represented by example (36): All of them made it *clear* they would support my decision.)  
 b. “obvious or evident” (represented by example (41): It was *clear* from his letter that he was not interested.)  
 c. “an emphasizer” (represented by example (47): This is a *clear* case of embezzlement.)

When we use *clear* in a clause of “make our intentions clear” such as (50a), this does not mean simple ease of understanding, but involves the conceptualizer’s judgement, reasonable thinking so as not to be upset. If this specific judgement showing reasonability is widely recognized, then that concept is regarded as obvious. Therefore, the meaning of (50b) is a generic pattern extended from (50a). Moreover, after attenuation has progressed, this obviousness is not explicit accompanied with an *it-that-clause*, but implied in a simple form of emphasizer such as (50c).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In the early stage of its semantic evolution, the English word *clear*, which originates in expressing the vividness or intensity of light, has extended to mean ease of understanding. This change of reference from concrete objects to abstract concepts is a simple metaphorical extension. That is, when light is intense, we can see things distinctly. When explanations are logical, we can understand statements easily. We can recognize a kind of similarity between these two situations, so we map the domain of light onto the domain of understanding. As the result of this cognitive process, we use the same word *clear* to describe a high level of understanding.

However, as we discussed in section 2, the concrete object we regard as *clear* has changed remarkably: vividness of light, transparency, absence of obstructions, no obstructions in a person’s view. These semantic changes can be explained as a series of subjectifications: attenuation involving both the objectively conceived relationship and the trajector’s role in it. On the other hand, as we surveyed in section 3, the semantic changes have also occurred in reference to abstract concepts described as *clear*. In one abstract meaning of *clear*, ease of understanding, we can also observe a process of subjectification in the transfer of *clear*’s subject. Yet the occurrences of other abstract meanings are plausibly construed as appearances of three tendencies of grammaticalization: from external to internal, from internal to textual, and from textual to the speaker’s attitude.

There are several stages in semantic changes, among which subjectification plays a prominent part, as we have observed in the case of the extension of *clear*.

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