

Nothing to claim: *claim* reports and non-endorsement¹

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Abstract. While there has been much research on the typology of speech reports, the variety of communicative predicates has remained largely understudied. In line with the growing body of work on the fine-grained semantics of clause-taking predicates, we explore possible distinctions within the communicative group by zooming in on the behavior of the English verb *claim*. Our main focus is what we call the NON-ENDORSEMENT PUZZLE: a distinct sense that the speaker is not fully on board with the content of a *claim* report. We ruminate on possible sources of this effect, such as the speaker’s doxastic state or insufficient evidence, and conclude that non-endorsement is not conventionally encoded, but arises due to the properties of discourses described by *claim*. We argue that it reports assertions that have not been accepted (yet) and that the gap between the proposal and its possible acceptance is responsible for the sense that *claim* reports something less than an ideal Gricean assertion.

Keywords: assertion, attitudes, semantics/pragmatics division of labor, speech reports

We would hesitate to claim that the concept of saying generalizes to do-in-future. Clearly, ‘saying’ is not just a more specific variant of ‘intending to do in the future’ because a person can say a lot of things without any intentions for future action.

—Regine Eckardt, *Meaning Change In Grammaticalization*

1. Introduction

There has been much research on the typology of various linguistic constructions that deal with reported speech (see the overviews in Bary and Maier 2021; Spronck and Nikitina 2019).² In this paper, we want to bring attention back to the meaning of communicative predicates—*assert, admit, propose, report, state*—speech reports par excellence, which, we will show, are surprisingly understudied.

¹Our work is fully collaborative. The order of authors is alphabetical in odd-numbered publications and reverse-alphabetical in even-numbered publications. For comments on our thinking about claims, we would like to thank Deniz Rudin, Simon Wimmer, Igor Yanovich, the audiences of “Speech reports” (ESSLLI 2019) and “Foundations of rhetoric” (University College Utrecht), as well as this volume’s editors. We claim all remaining errors.

²In addition to classic indirect discourse, linguists and philosophers talk about varieties of quotation (Capellen and Lepore 1997, 2003; Davidson 1979; Maier 2014; Pagin and Westerstahl 2010; Partee 1973; Potts 2007); free indirect discourse (Doron 1991; Eckardt 2014; Sharvit 2008); *say*-complementizers (Koopman and Sportiche 1989; Major 2024); *according to* (Kaufmann and Kaufmann 2020; Semeijn 2024); reportative mood (Fabricius-Hansen and Sæbø 2004; Sode 2023); hearsay evidentiality (AnderBois 2017; Korotkova 2017; Schenner 2019; Schwager 2010; Tonhauser 2013); and role shift in sign languages (Davidson 2015; Quer 2011; Schlenker 2017).

Communicative predicates have much in common with mental attitude predicates both syntactically (e.g., they take CP complements; Wurmbrand and Lohninger 2023) and semantically (e.g., they give rise to *de re/de dicto* ambiguities). At the same time, communicative predicates (or, more specifically, *say*)—but not other clause-taking predicates—have been shown to be consistently special across languages, e.g., with respect to the range of phenomena they allow in their complements (Deal 2020) or the types of subjects they combine with (Anand and Hacquard 2014). However, with few exceptions (Anand, Grimshaw, and Hacquard 2017; Grimshaw 2015), these predicates have often been treated as a monolithic group. Grimshaw (2015) takes all of these verbs to report a previous utterance and shows that they differ in argument structure, complement selection or additional aspects such as manner (e.g., *mutter* or *whisper* are taken to describe events of saying performed in a specific fashion). Our suspicion is that there is more to the story. In line with the growing body of research on the fine-grained semantics of attitude predicates, we would like to explore possible distinctions within the communicative group by zooming in on the behavior of the English verb *claim*.³

Our main focus is what we call the NON-ENDORSEMENT PUZZLE. Consider (1) and (2).

- (1) Dr. Harvey Kellogg invented cornflakes, but during the late 1800s he was more famous as a physician. The good doctor **claimed** he could cure virtually any disease, from ulcers and schizophrenia to acne. All it took, he said, was a dose of yogurt.
(“Fix it With Food”, *Men’s Health* 16(7), 2001)
- (2) Historically marginalized people wish for greater consideration in language, and feel their own “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” may be imperiled by verbal denigration. But opponents of PC [politically-correct] language **claim** they feel oppressed themselves.
(McIntosh 2020: 12)

We get a distinct sense that the speaker is not fully on board with the content of the claims reported in (1) and (2). In general, *claim* is often used to convey something contested or controversial, and the Merriam-Webster dictionary of English even defines our *claim* as ‘to assert in the face of possible contradiction’. Where does non-endorsement come from? Is it conventionally encoded, as it has been argued for the German reportative subjunctive (Fabricius-Hansen and Sæbø 2004) and some hearsay evidentials (Murray 2014; Faller 2019), or can it be derived from general pragmatic mechanisms (cf. AnderBois 2014; Korotkova 2025; Pancheva and Rudin 2019 on evidentiality)?

In Section 2, we ruminate on the possible sources of this effect for *claim*, such as doxastic state or insufficient evidence. We conclude that non-endorsement is not conventionally encoded, but arises due to the properties of discourses described by *claim*. In Section 3 we argue that it reports assertions that have not been accepted (yet) and that the gap between the proposal and its possible acceptance is responsible for the sense that *claim* reports something less than an ideal Gricean assertion.

2. Possible sources of non-endorsement

³We limit ourselves to *that*-complements of *claim* with non-parenthetical syntax (cf. Hunter 2016), without considering infinitival complements, or the noun *claim* (cf. Moltmann 2020). We also put aside other senses of *claim* (e.g., *claim Bajoran ancestry* or *claim the reward*).

2.1. Doxastic distance

One natural way to characterize non-endorsement is in terms of the speaker's—or, in case of multiple embedding, the higher attitude's subject's—doxastic state⁴. Such distinctions are familiar from the literature on modality, and many languages have doxastic verbs that explicitly mark the prejacent as false/unlikely (see overview in Strohmaier and Wimmer 2022). One may consider at least three ways of operationalizing non-endorsement via doxastic distance:

(3) DOXASTIC NON-ENDORSEMENT

- a. **Opinionated speaker (strong):**
Sp believes $\neg p$
- b. **Opinionated speaker (weak):**
Sp believes p is less likely than $\neg p$ ⁵
- c. **Undecided speaker:**
Sp believes $\diamond p$ and Sp believes $\diamond \neg p$

If *claim* lexicalizes any of those options, non-endorsement will follow. However, as we show below, *claim* reports are in fact compatible with various degrees of belief on part of the speaker: overt denial (4), doubt (5), leaning towards p (6), as well as full endorsement (7).

- (4) a. Pérez (1990) **erroneously claims** that French has a *venir de faire* future, and those acquainted with her paper might be tempted to see an instance of some kind of borrowing here. (Eckardt 2006: p.128, note 1)
- b. Rick Santorum **incorrectly claimed** that “one of three children drop out of school” in the United States.
(The Center for Public Integrity, <https://shorturl.at/HgU3F>)
- (5) He **claims** he isn't superstitious, but if I ever saw an adult look as scared as he did then, call me rookie. (Isaac Azimov, *The Foundation*)
- (6) Socrates **seems correct** when he **claims** that deliberative partners need knowledge, goodwill, and frankness in order to discover the truth about how to live.
(Markovits 2008: 96)
- (7) a. [Goethe] **correctly claimed** that all of the results of Newton's prism experiments fit a theoretical alternative equally well.
 (“Prismatic equivalence”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24(2), 2016)
- b. For years women have **very rightly claimed** that the economic value of a nonemployed wife is not zero.
(Letters to the editor, February 18, 2000, the *San Francisco Chronicle*)

To sum up, *claim* does not directly encode anything about the speaker's doxastic stance on the prejacent.

⁴We stick to a purely doxastic characterization in terms of an agent's private beliefs about the prejacent, but one could easily reformulate this idea by appealing to discourse commitments. One might also appeal to truth of the prejacent relative to the evaluation world for *claim*, saying that *claim* is anti-veridical (in analogue to (3a)) or non-veridical (somewhat in the spirit of (3c)).

⁵This is roughly the semantics for *doubt* (Anand and Hacquard 2013).

2.2. Evidential distance

Another way to characterize non-endorsement is in terms of evidence. Here, again, a parallel with doxastic verbs is useful, as some of them have been argued to encode evidential notions (Korotkova and Anand 2024; Rosina and Liefke forth.). One might consider the following ways of operationalizing non-endorsement via evidential distance:

(8) EVIDENTIAL NON-ENDORSEMENT

- a. **Insufficient evidence (own):**
Sp does not have enough evidence to justify a belief that p
- b. **Flawed evidence (other):**
Claimer does not have enough evidence to produce a belief that p
- c. **Insufficient evidence (other):**
Claimer has not (yet) provided sufficient evidence to produce a belief that p

The strength of evidence is intrinsically linked to the credence it produces. If *claim* lexicalizes insufficient evidence (a notion we will not further elaborate on in this paper; cf. discussion in Harman 1968; Hawthorne 2004; Smith 2016), it would follow that the speaker does not endorse the content of a *claim* report. However, as we show below, *claim* is unselective with respect to evidence.

(8a) is unviable, given that *claim* is compatible with the univocal assessment of the truth of a claim report using modifiers such as (*in*)*correctly*, *falsely*, *rightly* (cf. 4,7). We assume something like the assertion norm here (Lackey 2007; Marsili 2024; Williamson 2000): in order to assert that a previous claim is definitely true or definitely false, one must have good justification for it, which in turn contradicts the idea of having insufficient evidence.

(8b) is more tricky. It is true that *claim* is naturally used in cases where the speaker challenges the claimer's grounds without in fact arguing with the truth of the prejacent. Consider (9): it agrees with the content of the claim, but challenges the overall reasoning behind it.

- (9) ... the paper **rightly claims** that leopards ... are not necessarily a threat to human safety. At this point, the paper ... makes a series of unsupported claims, starting with “This study shows that leopards can persist in the human-modified landscapes and is possibly dependent mainly on the social tolerance”. There is nothing in the paper to indicate any degree of social tolerance.

(comment on “Big Cats in Our Backyards”, *PLoS One* 3(8), 2013)⁶

However, *claim* does not require the evidence to be weak. Consider (10):

- (10) Galileo **claimed** that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and was imprisoned for it, despite his unimpeachable evidence.

Finally, (8c) presents an interesting case. While the rhetorical function of *claim* is often to present information prior to providing a justification, this is not required. (11) illustrates: here, *claim* is used after the case was made and is nearly synonymous to *conclude*.

⁶<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/comment?id=10.1371/annotation/5f6db59b-b8fc-47f7-a942-437422759264>

- (11) However we took the time to show the following: If we assume that causation has something to do with counterfactual reasoning . . . and if we spell out this assumption along the lines set by Lewis and Dowty, then we end up with a notion of “event” where each event necessarily comes along with all its causes and effects. We can, however, easily imagine an event occurring without certain of its causes and effects. Therefore, I **claim**, the hope to treat all sentences including “to cause” on the basis of sufficiently fine grained events was in vain. (Eckardt 1998: 70)

To sum up, *claim* does not directly encode evidential restrictions (at least not in any straightforward way).

3. Proposal about proposal

Many cases discussed so far suggest that *claim* often reports a non-ideal assertion. It is compatible with the information that the speaker doubts or knows to be false, as well as with the speaker’s skepticism about the claimer’s grounds, be it flawed reasoning or insufficient evidence. However, as we have shown, none of this is lexicalized: *claim* can also report the information that the speaker endorses, from sources they trust. In line with a number of recent theories that explicitly decompose the classic Stalnakerian notion of assertion into a proposal to update the common ground and its acceptance (Farkas and Bruce 2010; Ginzburg 2012; Lauer 2013; Murray 2014; Roberts 2012, among others), we propose that *claim* reports proposals that have not been accepted (yet) by the relevant community.

Say, when combined with quoted complements, can report any type of linguistic material regardless of communicative intentions (see recent overview in Rudin forth). *Claim* is more picky (pace Anand and Hacquard 2014). Even with quotations, it does not take non-assertoric speech acts or utterances without semantic content (12). Furthermore, unlike *say*, it only takes declarative, but not interrogative, non-quoted complements (13).

- (12) Kira ✓**said/#claimed**:
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| a. . . .“Ouch!” | [expressive] |
| b. . . .“What a beautiful day!” | [exclamative] |
| c. . . .“Does Saturn have 95 moons?” | [interrogative] |
| d. . . .“Please open the window”. | [imperative] |

- (13) Kira ✓**said/#claimed** whether Saturn has 95 moons.

Combined with declarative material, *claim* only reports those speech acts whose goal is to make an informative update.⁷ Thus, it is compatible with insincere assertions and outright lies (14), but not with jokes or pretense (15).

- (14) Trump has lied about matters both trivial (e.g., **claiming** it didn’t rain during his inaugural address [Dale 2017]) and profound (e.g., **claiming** the United States has the world’s cleanest air and water [Meyer 2019]). (McIntosh 2020: 19)

⁷Nothing hinges on the notion of common ground per se, and our view is compatible with theories that construe shared knowledge and publicly available information in other ways (see discussion and references in Simons forth).

- (15) A. [*pretending toddler*] I'm a tiger!
 B. Did you ✓*say*/**#claim** that you're a tiger?

We argue that *claim* always reports an information exchange⁸ and singles out a particular stage in the progression of discourse, a point at which a proposal has been made but at which acceptance may not have taken place yet. Thus, *claim* in the present tense is often odd with widely accepted information:

- (16) *Uttered by the authors of this paper:*
 #Doctors **claim** that vaccines work.

This property also explains why *claim* is good in cases like (10). The speaker simply isn't part of the relevant community, so their attitude towards Galileo's evidence does not determine acceptance. A similar situation arises when the speaker disagrees with their own earlier views (17):⁹

- (17) *Written by someone who wasn't a generative linguist earlier in their career:*
 I now **claim** that Chomsky is right. (example due to Simon Wimmer, p.c.)

We propose that the temporal gap between proposal and acceptance is at the heart of the non-endorsement puzzle. If *claim* conventionally encodes only that a proposal has been made, the lack of explicit acceptance may be taken to implicate that the assertion was somehow deficient.¹⁰ However, we want to emphasize that *claim* is not always used this way. In contexts where standards for acceptance are more stringent than in everyday speech, such as legal or scientific discourse, *claim* is nearly synonymous with *posit* or *put forth*. (18) illustrates.

- (18) In a study published last month in the journal "Plos One," Caleb Everett, an anthropological linguist at the University of Miami, **claims** that a special class of sounds occurring in almost all of the languages of the Caucasus may be due to "the direct influence" of the region's high altitude. ("Do High Altitudes Shape Languages?", *The Atlantic*, 2013)

(18) does not signal that the speaker does not endorse the reported information, it merely indicates that this new theory is not part of the linguistic mainstream yet. We believe that this is the core semantics of *claim* and that non-endorsement can be derived from it via Gricean reasoning.

4. Outlook

We started with an observation that communicative predicates merit semantic scrutiny. Just like doxastic predicates can track subtle differences in mental attitudes (e.g., even *think* and

⁸We remain agnostic about the exact nature of speech acts *claim* is compatible with, as it depends on the specific assumptions about assertion and on whether, say, lying (Jary 2018) or bullshitting (Kotzee 2019) instantiate assertions.

⁹Cases like (10) and (17) can be easily formalized using contexts of assessment that differentiate between the speaker and another party, including the speaker's past self (MacFarlane 2014). We believe that *claim* ultimately tracks conversational moves and not perspectives, thus being significantly different from phenomena that are used to motivate relativist semantics, such as MacFarlane's. *Claim* instead calls for a framework that can differentiate between different discourse communities, a formalization of which we leave for future research.

¹⁰In this way, we expect that non-endorsement should likewise be communicated by *propose*, which we believe is the case:

(i) Harvey Kellogg proposed that yogurt could cure virtually any disease.

believe are not fully synonymous; Koev 2025), we expect that communicative predicates might track different conversational moves. Here, we make our case based on *claim*. Unlike *say*, which can omnivorously report any utterance when combined with quotations (Grimshaw 2015, Rudin forth.), *claim* only reports assertions with quoted and non-quoted complements alike. We propose that it encodes a particular stage in the progression of discourse, a point when a proposal was put forth, but hasn't been accepted (yet), and argue that this discourse-structural property explains the non-endorsement puzzle. A fully articulated formal analysis requires a theory of discourse dynamics that makes a formal distinction between a proposal and its acceptance. We leave developing such an analysis for future research, in hopes that our present proposal might successfully reach the acceptance stage in the meantime.

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