

A Theory of Manipulative Speech

Justin D'Ambrosio

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Australian National University
justin.z.dambrosio@gmail.com

Manipulative Speech

We know that much of the speech we encounter, especially in public discourse, aims to manipulate us.

We also know that manipulative speech can cause serious social harm.

- But neither the philosophy of language nor linguistics has a general account of what manipulative speech is, how it works, or the variety of forms it can take.

Conversation

Conversation is standardly treated as a joint activity in which interlocutors cooperatively and publicly pursue the goal of sharing knowledge.

Manipulation

Manipulation is standardly seen as a way of influencing people against their own interests, and it is often seen as operating **covertly**, or by means of deception.

The Project

- Develop a general theory of what manipulative speech is and how it operates.
- Investigate the variety of forms that manipulative speech can take.
- Construct models of manipulative speech and its varieties using the tools of formal pragmatics.
- Examine the consequences of this view for our understanding of propaganda in public discourse.

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3. Strategic Speech
4. Manipulative Speech
5. Manipulative Speech and Public Discourse
6. Modelling Manipulative Speech

Manipulation and the Gricean Model of Conversation

What is Manipulation?

[M]anipulation, unlike coercion, does not interfere with a person's options. Instead it perverts the way that person reaches decisions, forms preferences, or adopts goals. [Raz, 1988]

We might say, then, that manipulation in some way purports to be offering good reasons, when in fact it does not. A manipulator tries to change another's beliefs and desires by offering her bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound—where the manipulator himself knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments. [Mills, 1995, p. 100]

An Initial Proposal

- Manipulation is a form of influence that poses as being in someone's interest, but in fact is not.
- This yields an initial, rough proposal: manipulation is influence that is **covertly non-cooperative**.
- On this view, manipulators are like false friends—they aim to appear cooperative, but in fact pursue their own, ulterior, conflicting goals.

The Gricean Model of Conversation

Reflexive Intentions A speaker means something by an utterance just in case they utter those words intending to bring about a certain effect, partly on the basis of being recognized as so-intending.

Intention Recognition Communication is successful if the audience recognizes this intention.

Implicature Sometimes, speakers mean things that differ from what they say, and in such cases, what they mean is recoverable by audiences through reasoning about the goals of rational agents engaged in conversation.

Grice's Cooperative Principle

“Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

[Grice, 1989, p. 26]

The Maxims

Quality : Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- (i) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (ii) Do not say that for which you lack evidence

Quantity :

- (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
- (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Relation : Be relevant.

Manner : Be perspicuous.

- (i) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- (ii) Avoid ambiguity.
- (iii) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- (iv) Be orderly.

[Grice, 1989, pp. 26-27]

Cooperativity: Ensure that your speech acts in the conversation contribute optimally to the goal of the conversation.

Publicity: Ensure that it is common knowledge what speech acts are performed in the conversation and what the goal of the conversation is. [Szabó, 2020]

Shared Knowledge: The goal of conversation is to share private knowledge pertaining to a topic of common concern. [Szabó, 2020]

Strategic Speech

Strategic Situation 1: Politics

***Town Hall:** A politician speaks to his constituency at a town hall. The people in his constituency are interested in getting straight answers concerning his policies and positions, so they can evaluate whether his actions will further their interests. His interest, however, is in getting his constituents—as many of them as possible—to vote for him, while also keeping his policy options open once in office, and limiting his accountability for lies. The politician wishes to speak in a way that maximizes votes and minimizes commitments.*

Strategic Situation 2: Sales

Antique Sale: I am selling you an antique. You want me to share my knowledge concerning the value of the antique, because you want to pay me only as much as the antique is worth. But I want you to pay me more than the item is worth—I want you to pay me as much as I can get you to pay. In such a case, my monetary goal makes it so that it is not rational for me to be fully cooperative with respect to the goal of sharing knowledge concerning the antique's value. Rather, it is rational for me to speak in a way that gets to you give me as much money as possible.

Strategic Situation 3: The Courtroom

Cross-Exam:

Prosecutor: Do you have any Swiss bank accounts, Mr. Bronston?

Bronston: No, sir.

Prosecutor: Have you ever?

Bronston: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Mr. Bronston. [Solan and Tiersma, 2005], as quoted in [Asher, 2012]

*Strategic Situation 4: Jealousy **Jealous Inquiry:***

Justin: Have you been seeing Valentino this past week?

*Janet: Valentino has mononucleosis. [Asher and
Lascarides, 2013]*

What is Strategic Speech?

Strategic Speech

Strategic speech is speech that is deliberately less-than-fully cooperative with the goal of sharing knowledge, because it pursues some conflicting goal—a **non-communicative goal**.

Strategic Linguistic Intentions

A speaker S utters U to an audience R with a **strategic linguistic intention** if and only if:

- S1 S intends that U cause R to undertake some course of action A;
- S2 In order to fulfill the intention in S1, S utters U intending to be less than fully cooperative with respect to the goal of the conversation, G; and
- S3 S intends S1 and S2 because S has goal G* that conflicts with G.

Manipulative Speech

Overt vs. Covert Strategic Speech

- Each of the situations above involve strategic speech.
- But strategic speech will often be most effective when it is not recognised as strategic—when strategic speech is hidden.

Covert Speech v. 1

A **covert speech act** is a speech act that can bring about its perlocutionary aim only if it is not recognized by the audience as being that speech act.

[Saul, 2018]

Covert Speech v. 2

A token speech act is **covert** if and only if it can bring about its perlocutionary aim only if the goal with which that speech act is undertaken is not recognized by the audience.

Manipulative Speech

Manipulative speech is speech that is *covertly strategic*—a manipulative speaker pursues a non-communicative goal, but aims to *appear* fully cooperative, and so hide the true goal of her speech.

Manipulative Linguistic Intentions

A speaker S utters U to R with a **manipulative linguistic intention** if and only if:

- M1 S intends that U cause R to undertake some course of action A;
- M2 In order to fulfill the intention in S1, S utters U intending
 - (a) to be less than fully cooperative with respect to the goal of the conversation, G, and
 - (b) that R believe that in uttering U, S is being fully cooperative with respect to G; and
- M3 S intends M1 and M2 because S has goal G* that conflicts with G.

Manipulative Speech, Cooperativity, Publicity

Manipulative speech involves a deliberate, coordinated violation of the two core Gricean norms governing conversation.

- It involves strategically) violating the principle of Cooperativity, and so saying something not optimal for the goal of the conversation.
- And it involves a violation of Publicity, because it involves an attempt to hide one's true goal, and appear to be in conformity with Cooperativity.

A Formula for Manipulative Speech

- Any form of strategic speech that is intended to appear fully cooperative will qualify as an instance of manipulative speech.
- Any way of deliberately violating a Gricean maxim will qualify as an instance of strategic speech.
- Whenever such speech is hidden, it will qualify as manipulative.

You: How much is the table worth?

Me: At least \$500, and even that is a steal—it's sure to appreciate.

You: How much do you think it's worth?

Me: It's the best work of the head carpenter in the court of Louis XV, and other pieces of his go for at least \$500.

Cross-Exam:

Prosecutor: Do you have any Swiss bank accounts, Mr. Bronston?

Bronston: No, sir.

Prosecutor: Have you ever?

Bronston: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Mr. Bronston. [Solan and Tiersma, 2005], as quoted in [Asher, 2012]

Jealous Inquiry:

Justin: Have you been seeing Valentino this past week?

*Janet: Valentino has mononucleosis. [Asher and
Lascarides, 2013]*

You: How much do you think it's worth?

Me: This is an extraordinarily valuable mid 18th-century French Gueridon from the Chateau Chambertin, in the style of Pierre de Saint Laurent, with ornamental carvings by the illustrious Louis Carbonneaux, charpentier première in the royal court of Louis XV.

'Yet there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.'
—George W. Bush

Manipulative Underspecification

‘I think we should do everything in our power to keep guns out of the hands of the wrong people.’

‘The Democrats and Republicans are like Coke and Pepsi—they come in different packaging, but on the inside they’re the same.’

'We can't let the huge progress that we've made with North Korea be ruined by the Democrats—they're trying to undo a great deal.'

Linguistic Trust

The key mechanism by means of which manipulative speech operates is by exploiting *linguistic trust*.

Linguistic trust can lead us to:

- accept lies and claims that are not adequately justified (when we don't know the facts).
- interpret utterances in ways that are overly charitable (when we do know the facts).
- calculate implicatures where we shouldn't.
- treat deliberately vague statements as expressing something precise.
- accept claims that we don't fully understand.
- accommodate presuppositions where we shouldn't.

How can speakers maximise and exploit linguistic trust?

- Take advantage of the default presumption of cooperativity.
- Use forms of speech that increase linguistic trust.
- Take advantage of differentials in power, authority, and expertise.

Manipulative Speech and Public Discourse

What is Propaganda?

Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.

[Lasswell, 1927]

Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.

[Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986]

[Propaganda is m]ass suggestion or influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual.

[Pratkanis and Aronson, 1992]

What is Propaganda?

[Propaganda is] the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment.

[Marlin, 2013]

Propaganda is manipulation of the rational will to close off debate.

[Stanley, 2015]

Propaganda, v. 1: Propaganda is manipulative speech directed toward a mass audience.

Propaganda, v. 2: Propaganda is a manipulative contribution to public discourse.

Modelling Manipulative Speech

Signalling Games

Formally, a signalling game is a tuple:

$$\langle \{S, R\}, T, Pr, M, \llbracket \cdot \rrbracket, A, U_S, U_R \rangle$$

- Sender S and receiver R are players of the game;
- T is a set of states of the world;
- $Pr \in \Delta(T)$ is a full-support probability distribution over T , which represents the receiver's priors over which state in T is actual;
- M is a set of messages that the sender can send;

Signalling Games, Continued

- $[[\cdot]] : M \rightarrow \mathcal{P}(T)$ is a denotation function that gives the semantic meaning of a message as the set of all states where the message is true;
- A is the set of response actions available to the receiver;
- $U_{S,R} : T \times M \times A \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ are utility functions for both sender and receiver.

Signalling Games as Models of Context

| | $\Pr(t)$ | $a_{\exists \rightarrow \forall}$ | a_{\forall} | m_{some} | m_{all} |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| $t_{\exists \rightarrow \forall}$ | $1 - p$ | 1, 1 | 0, 0 | \checkmark | — |
| t_{\forall} | p | 0, 0 | 1, 1 | \checkmark | \checkmark |

Table 1: The some-all game

This game is meant to capture the context of a scalar implicature. When I say (1) I implicate (2):

- (1) I saw some of Bob's children at the market.
- (2) I did not see all of Bob's children at the market.

The basic idea is that the game indicates how the hearer thinks of the context of utterance. The hearer reasons as follows.

The speaker is being cooperative and wants to be understood—this is indicated by the aligned payoffs. The payoff for me to take the speaker to mean “some but not all” in $t_{\exists-\forall}$ is high. Therefore, the speaker says this only if the $t_{\exists-\forall}$ is actual.

| | $\Pr(t)$ | $a_{\exists \rightarrow \forall}$ | a_{\forall} | m_{some} | m_{all} |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| $t_{\exists \rightarrow \forall}$ | $1 - p$ | 1, 1 | 0, 0 | \checkmark | – |
| t_{\forall} | p | 1, 0 | 0, 1 | \checkmark | \checkmark |

Table 2: The manipulative some-all game

Thanks very much!

Contact details:

justin.z.dambrosio@gmail.com

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