

On Manipulative Underspecification

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The Project: 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 harm.

- But the philosophy of language has no general account of what manipulative speech is, how it works, or the variety of forms it can take.

What is Manipulative Speech?

Manipulative speech is speech that is *covertly strategic*.

- Conversation is standardly treated as a joint activity in which interlocutors cooperatively pursue the goal of sharing knowledge.
- 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**.
- But manipulative speech is *covertly* strategic: a manipulative speaker aims to *appear* fully cooperative.

The Plan:

1. Examples of Manipulative Underspecification
2. Strategic Advantages of Underspecification
3. Hiding Underspecification through Reading-In
4. A Pragmatics for Manipulative Underspecification

Criminal Uncertainty You're my younger sibling, and you and I both know that there's criminal mischief scheduled to go down at the Capitol at 9 o'clock tonight. I'm planning to be involved, but I don't know whether you're interested in participating. I want to avoid being shamed by my parents, and creating a rift in the family, so I want to invite you—and so reveal that I'm going—if and only if you share my tendencies and will either come, or at least keep my secret.

I ask: 'What are you up to later?'

Electoral Strategy I am a politician, you are a member of my constituency, and we meet at a town hall. Your goal is to come to have knowledge about my policies and plans, and whether you vote for me will be determined by whether you think our positions are aligned. My only goal is to get you to vote for me. You ask me about my views on gun control, but I have no knowledge of what your views on the subject are.

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

Common Structure

1. There is some non-communicative goal you want to achieve: avoiding conflict or shame, manufacturing perceived agreement or assent, or minimizing negative reactions (among many others).
2. You lack a key piece of information about your audience.
3. What to say to achieve your goal depends on that information.
4. So you deliberately underspecify what you mean in order to help you achieve your goal.

Pressure to Assent: Underspecification makes rejection difficult, and puts pressure on an audience to accept or assent to a speaker's speech acts.

Invites Reading In: Done well, underspecification will leave open a reading consistent with the audience's views or preferences, and so invites them to read in their preferred interpretation.

Draw Out Info: Underspecification allows speakers to draw out information about their interlocutors, which allows them to calibrate their utterances in subsequent conversation.

Accommodate Conflicting Views: Underspecification allows for acceptance or assent from members of a mass audience that have conflicting views.

Insulate the Speaker: Underspecification insulates the speaker from commitment, and so allows them to avoid the costs of having broken a commitment.

Succeed in Ignorance: Underspecification allows speakers to realise their goals in ignorance of their audience's beliefs and preferences.

Covert Underspecification

Underspecification functions best when it goes undetected—when the speaker gets the audience to *read in*.

- In ordinary communication, underspecification is *pervasive* and *felicitous*. [King, 2014, 2018, MacFarlane, 2020a,b]
- In non-strategic communication, audiences will standardly be uncertain about which of many precise intentions a speaker has, and formulate hypotheses about these intentions—they will *try to read in*.
- The manipulative speaker exploits this feature of how audiences standardly interpret speakers in the presence of underspecification.

Covert Underspecification

- The manipulative speaker also aims to get the audience to read in a *plausible* or *preferred* interpretation.
- In order to do this, the speaker cultivates the audience's linguistic trust—she aims to strengthen their presumption that she is fully cooperative.
- But the speaker can always insist, in downstream conversation, that she meant one fully specific thing or another. [Weiser, 1974, 1975]

In cases of underspecification, it is standard to take speakers to express *clouds* of fully precise contents [Braun and Sider, 2007, Buchanan, 2010]. Here I'll likewise start from this idea.

But we now need to answer several questions.

- What are the intentions of speakers who manipulatively underspecify their speech acts?
- What do such speakers mean, if anything?
- What speech act are they engaged in?
- How does this speech act affect the common ground?

A Preliminary Pragmatics

Non-Communicative Goal: Speakers who manipulatively underspecify the features of their speech acts are aiming to bring about a certain perlocutionary effect.

Underspecification as Means: In order to maximise the chance of bringing about this effect, the speaker underspecifies, so expressing a cloud of contents.

Hidden Underspecification: But the speaker also aims to get the audience to take her as having meant one particular, preferred content that leads to realisation of the speaker's goals.

No Speaker Meaning

When a speaker underspecifies in this way, she does not speaker-mean anything by her utterance. Why not?

Speaker Meaning To speaker-mean that P by an utterance U is, minimally, to intend for one's audience to entertain that P on the basis of hearing U , partly in virtue of their recognizing this very intention. (adapted from Grice [1957, 1969])

No Speaker Meaning

- Since the speaker is ignorant of which interpretation will realise her goal, there is no particular content she wants to get the audience to entertain.
- She doesn't want to be recognised as meaning a cloud of contents.
- But she also does not want to be recognised as merely intending to bring about the perlocutionary effect.

Manipulative Linguistic Intentions

A speaker S utters U to an audience A with a **manipulative linguistic intention** iff

M1 S utters U intending that A interpret U in some way that leads to a desired perlocutionary effect.

M2 In order to fulfill the intention in M1, S deliberately underspecifies the content of U.

M3 S intends that A not recognise that M2.

When a speaker utters words with a manipulative linguistic intention, I'll say that they are **pied piping**.

Deception about the Conversation

I claim that in pied piping, a speaker does not engage in an illocutionary act.

But when pied piping is successful, the audience takes the speaker to have engaged in a fully determinate illocutionary act.

- The pied piper thus deceives audiences about what has been said, and whether a speech act has occurred.

Common Ground and The Fragmentation of Conversation

- On Stalnaker's [2014] model of conversation, speech acts are proposals to update the common ground.
- In pied piping, an audience takes the speaker to have proposed a particular update that is neither intended by nor transparent to the speaker.
- Pied piping thus *fragments* interlocutors' conceptions of the conversation, and gives them divergent beliefs about the common ground.

Consequences for Public Discourse

- Manipulative underspecification can create the **illusion of agreement**.
- This can lead audiences—for instance, voters—to act in ways that conflict with their interests.
- Paying close attention to underspecification can attune us to how much genuine agreement and disagreement there is in political speech and public discourse.

Thanks very much!

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