

(Strategic) miscommunication on the hearer side

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Discussions on controversial issues tend to go wrong. This is of interest for pragmatics because of the conspicuous absence of charitable interpretation, and also because at first sight, it does not seem to follow Bayesian procedures of inference. We will focus on the issue of a hearer overshooting a speaker's intended discourse goal.

Following Merin (1999), we consider that asserting an utterance u creates a relevance-cone of propositions u is an argument for. The elements in this cone are not necessarily incompatible: many arguments for (moderate) right/left positions will also be (weaker) arguments for more extreme right/left positions. We consider the choice of a goal as a Bayesian process, maximizing the hearer's utility. In adversarial conversation, the aim of the hearer should be to pick the goal that benefits them the most, i.e. disfavors the speaker (and hence a tendency to exaggerate goals).

The same outcome occurs if the hearer has the goal already set, and interprets the message in the light of that goal they attribute to the speaker. Here, the set of necessary assumptions are abduced to make the literal content of the message consistent with the assumed goal. Borrowing terms from the literature on social meaning (e.g. Burnett 2017), the hearer attributes a given persona to the speaker and interprets all signals sent by the speaker in a way that is consistent with that persona, rather than interpreting the persona on the basis of the signal. The issue can be also be seen as the ascription of the equivalent of a dog whistle (see, e.g., Henderson and McCready, to appear) to the speaker, based on some choice of argumentation or of words, even when the speaker did not attempt one.

References: • Burnett, H. 2017. Sociolinguistic interaction and identity construction: The view from game-theoretic pragmatics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 21(2), 238–271. • Henderson, R. & E. McCready. to appear. How dogwhistles work. *Proceedings of LENLS*. • Merin, A. 1999. Information, relevance, and social decision making: Some principles and results of decision-theoretic semantics. In S. Moss et al.(eds.), *Logic, language, and computation*. Vol. 2, 179–221. Stanford: CSLI Publications.