Covert Speech Acts and their Meaning

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Covert Speech Acts and their Meaning

Salvatore Attardo

This paper defines a class of speech acts which have as one of their felicity conditions that the hearer not be aware of the speaker's intention to achieve the speech act in question. Examples of these speech acts are "insinuate," "flatter," "brainwash," etc. These speech acts differ both from explicit assertives, such as "say" or "affirm," and from implicit assertives, such as "hint," "allude," "imply," "suggest," etc. Covert speech acts share with implicit assertives the fact that they cannot explicitly state the propositional content of the assertion, but they differ in that implicit assertives can be overt. The analysis of covert speech acts will allow us to determine the general conditions for this class of speech acts. Finally, we will turn to considering the implications of our definition for the intentionality-based theories of meaning and in particular for Grice's MeaningNN and Relevance Theory (RT), and especially the problem that covert speech acts present for the so-called "communicative intention" (Sperber and Wilson 1986), which stipulates that communication (and cooperation) presuppose overtness in communication. In fact, our conclusion will be that the category of covert communication proves to be highly problematic for theories based on communicative intention and that in any case, the very category of covert communication needs to be radically reconsidered.

We will approach the issue from two different ends: deductively and inductively, i.e., starting from the theory and starting from the data.

1 Covert Communication

It will be useful to begin our discussion by quoting Grice's definition of MeaningNN in a slightly streamlined version.

(1) S intends the utterance of u to produce in H an effect by means of H's recognition of S's intention (Grice 1957, 442).

The recognition of S's intention by H is called the "reflexive intention" (Searle 1969: 47).

The significance of Grice's definition will become apparent further on, but for the time being, we can turn our attention to the definition of covert communication. Covert communication has received comparatively less attention than overt communication, of which Grice's definition is a prime example. One definition comes from Tanaka (1994):

(2) A case of communication where the intention of the speaker is to alter the cognitive environment of the hearer, i.e., to make a set of assumptions more manifest to her, without making this intention mutually manifest (41).

Making a set of assumptions manifest is RT terminology for having an effect on H, and making an intention mutually manifest is RT for reflexive intention.

For our purposes, we can essentially accept the above definition by noting that covert communication is simply communication in which S does not want H to become aware of S's intention to
communicate the meaning attached to \( u \), which we will indicate by \( p \).

1.1 A formal definition

We may, however, provide a more formal definition by making use of the concept of goals (Attardo 1997). Castelfranchi and Parisi (1980:328; see below, note 5) define a class of linguistic acts in which the "supergoal" is different than the immediate goal. In the terminology introduced in Attardo (1997), this is equivalent to claiming that S has a goal \( (G) \) that is different than the subgoal \( (g_s) \) for which the utterance is produced. In overt communication, one of the subgoals of \( G \) is the reflexive intention, which we may label \( g_r \), whereas in covert communication such as a subgoal is explicitly excluded. If we consider \( G \) as a set of its subgoals\(^2\), we have

\[
\begin{align*}
g_r & \notin G \\
g & \in G
\end{align*}
\]

1.2 Beyond the reflexive intention

The reflexive intention as postulated by Grice is in need of some elaboration. Specifically, we identify two possibilities: one which, as per Grice, S intends or does not intend for H to be aware of \( p \), and the other in which S intends or does not intend for H to be aware of \( p \). In other words, we are claiming that the two aspects of reflexive intention (the overtness of S's intention and the content of the intention, namely that H be aware) are independent and can be arranged in a two by two, as follows (the numbers refer to the examples in Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>H is aware</th>
<th>H is not aware</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>overt</td>
<td>3, 4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>covert</td>
<td>5, 6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

In other words, it is possible for S to intend that H be aware of \( p \) and that H be aware of S’s intention. But it is also possible for S to intend that H not be aware of \( p \), and the other in which S intends or does not intend for H not to be aware of \( p \) and that H be aware of S’s intention. Conversely, it is possible for S not to intend that H be aware of \( p \), and that H be aware of S’s intention, as well as for S not to intend that H be aware of \( p \) and to intend that H be aware of S’s intention.

Another way to conceptualize this maze of positive and negative intention is Communication \( \copyright \) is overt iff S intends for H to be aware that S intends H to be aware of S's intention.

1.3 Examples

Communication is overt if S’s intention that H be aware of \( p \).

(3) If S wants to be aware that S has read *Das Kapital*, any utterance that can be paraphrased can be paraphrased as “I have read *Das Kapital*” is acceptable.

(4) In the same situation, any indirect reference to the above paraphrase that would presuppose that the speaker has read *Das Kapital*, such as “The theory of plus-value is fascinating reading,” is acceptable.
Communication is covert if S does not intend for H to be aware of S's intention for H to be aware of \( p \).

(5) Your wife has been out with Bob quite often recently (Bertuccelli Papi 1996:198).

Example (5) insinuates that "the wife in question has betrayed the husband/listener with a certain Bob" (Ibid.).

(6) Dear Dr. Attardo, I have the honor to write to an eminent scholar such as you ( . . . ) I am very much impressed by your ideas and genius ( . . . ) (personal communication by an Iraqi colleague asking for reprints)

In example (6), S's intent is to please H by attributing him positive qualifications. This is a prime example of failed flattery (because H became aware of S's intent).

Communication is overt if the speaker intends for H to be aware of S's intention for H not to be aware of \( p \).

(7) I know what you’re getting for your birthday, but I’m not telling.

In example (7), S is privy to \( p \) and knows that H is not aware of \( p \), mentions this to H, and yet refuses to share \( p \).

Communication is covert if S does not intend for H to be aware of S's intention for H not to understand \( p \).

(8) Rimbaud's *Je est un autre* brilliantly summarizes a poetics of self-alienation.

In (8), a hypothetical French literature professor deliberately speaks condescendingly above the head of any member of the audience who does not speak French and/or has not read Rimbaud's letters.

2 Inductive Approach

We can approach the issues of covert communication inductively, so to speak, by looking at different speech acts and trying to differentiate among them. Let us assume, as we have done above, that \( p \) stands for some knowledge (propositional or not) that S and H may or may not have, independently of one another. Thus, if utterance \( u \) conventionally means \( p \), saying \( p \) (i.e., uttering \( u \)) means to state explicitly this bit of knowledge. Therefore, in what follows we will simplify the discussion by using "saying \( p \)” to mean “uttering \( u \), which conventionally means \( p \).”

2.01. Hinting

Let us now compare saying and hinting: the difference between the two is that, whereas in saying S explicitly says \( p \), in hinting S cannot state \( p \), but must provide H with "clues" that will lead H to knowing that S meant to communicate \( p \) (and hence also knowing that \( p \) is the case in S's mind).

Parret (1993:232) defines hinting as to overtly display one's intention to let [H] know that the proposition expressed contains information that will allow [H] to find an answer to the problem he/she is facing, assuming that [H] has access to additional information. (. . .) the act of hinting, moreover, uses conventional means, which are accepted by all language users and make sure that the act is easily detectable and clearly recognizable.
It should be noted that hinting is an overt speech act. Hinting differs from suggesting since, according to Parret (Ibid.), S is committed to the truth of what one hints at, whereas one is only committed to the "likely truth" of one's suggestion. There seems to be no reason to question this perceptive analysis. There seems to be no reason to question this perceptive analysis. We could, however, add this add that suggestions can also take the form of explicitly saying that \( p \), i.e., one can say "I suggest that \( p \)," whereas one cannot say "I hint that \( p \)."

Hinting does not differ from implying, insofar as they both presuppose that S not say \( p \). However, hinting differs from implying: basically, a hint requires explicit clues to H that the meaning hinted at is. Implying may be done without any explicit, let alone thematized, clues.

### 2.02 Suggesting

Suggesting is similar to hinting, insofar as both verbs require that one not explicitly say \( p \). An interesting difference between suggesting and hinting is revealed by Vanderveken (1990:172), who notes that

\[
\text{to suggest something is to bring it to of the mind of the hearer without necessarily explicitly affirming it and without a strong commitment to its truth.}
\]

Vanderveken's position is incorrect insofar as he seems to be arguing that one can explicitly affirm something and be suggesting, but he is undeniably right in claiming that S is not committed as strongly to the truth of a suggestion as one is to the truth of a hint (cf. also Searle and Vanderveken 1985:187). Suppose that a teacher put in one of the questions of the final exam of one of his/her classes a hint that would turn out to be wrong; the students would rightly be upset. However, they would have much less reason to do so if he/she had suggested the same.

Let us return for an instant to the claim that one can say \( p \) and still be suggesting. Vanderveken notes that this is a lent credence by the fact that "suggest" can be used performatively (i.e., its utterance causes the situation described in the verb to be the case, e.g., baptize, check-mate, etc.), as in the following example:

\[
(9) \text{I suggest you are in error (Vanderveken 1990:172).}
\]

Consider that in (9) S has said \( p \) and therefore can hardly be suggesting it. Therefore, such uses are likely to be metaphorical and meant more as face-saving techniques: to say that one suggests \( p \) would be equivalent of saying "I weakly say that \( p \)." The face-saving aspect of such a use relies on the difference in strength of the assertion, already noted in Searle and Vanderveken (1985:187).

### 2.03 Insinuating

Hinting differs from insinuating in that, whereas H is aware of S's intention to hint, H must not be aware of S's intention when S insinuates. On the difference between hinting and insinuating, see Holdcroft (1978:61-63), who distinguishes between them on the grounds that one must not "intend to conceal the fact that this is what one is trying to do" (62), as is the case in insinuating, "an essentially covert act" (Ibid.). Parret (1933:233) concurs:
INSINUATION, just like manipulation, cannot come about openly and explicitly: [S] cannot reveal his/her intentions by adding, for instance, the performative prefix “I am insinuating”. (…) insinuation is an attempt by [S] to make something understood to [H], even if covertly so. The act of insinuation seems to take place when [S] wants [H] to know that p, without [S] wanting [H] to judge that [S] wanted him/her to know that p.

Parret argues that one need not necessarily insinuate something “reprehensible,” and therefore that it is not the reason for not wanting to explicitly say p. His example is that of a doctor trying to insinuate to a patient that he/she should go on a diet. Bertuccelli-Papi (1996:197) claims that, on the contrary, insinuating necessarily implies a negative emotive or evaluative “attitude” of H towards p. She argues that in Parret’s example

what is being insinuated is not the advice itself, but on the contrary the indirect charge of being too fat, which is generally accompanied by a negative ATT[itude]
(Ibid.).

What is, then, the correct position? It seems that the reason S insinuates p is the fact that he/she believes that something bad⁴ may happen as a result of his/her saying p, while S still wants to make p known. If this general premisse to S’s goals in insinuating is correct, then it follows that the negative evaluation or reprehensibility of p is not a necessary and sufficient condition for compelling S’s choice of speech act.

Basically, any time that S fears consequences of his/her saying p, regardless of the nature of p, he/she may opt for insinuating p.

Consider Grice’s well-known example of a professor writing a letter of recommendation of a less-than-brilliant student. In today’s litigation-happy environment, one may be understandably wary of saying out-and-out that one thinks that a given student is not worthy of a job (=p). Therefore, one may choose to insinuate this idea. Note that neither S nor H have any great emotional/evaluative investment in this fact. If anything, S would be ashamed of having had such a student, but H would be completely unconcerned about S saying p, and in fact would welcome S explicitly saying so because it would not require any processing and would lead to the consideration of other candidates, or whatever other perlocutionary effects S saying p would have.

2.0.4 Flattering

Insinuating and flattering pattern together, in requiring that the intention of S to accomplish the speech act has to be kept covert for this goal to succeed. Conversely, hinting and alluding have no such requirement. Flattering is, of course, a fairly complex speech act, but it has been analyzed brilliantly by Castelfranchi and Parisi (1980).⁵ It breaks down into two goals -- an immediate subgoal, which is to provide H with a positive evaluation of his/her person, behavior, etc., and an ultimate goal, which is to achieve some benefit (most likely from H).

Commonly, it is taken for granted that when S flatters H, S does not believe p. However, this is partially in error. One can flatter by saying p, while believing p to be
true (c.f. Verschueren 1985:124). Suppose that S introduces Noam Chomsky, who is about to address an audience by saying “Professor Chomsky is the most influential living linguist,” and assume that Noam Chomsky believes that the above utterance is, if not true, reasonably close to the truth; assume further that S wants to reap some benefit by so introducing Chomsky (i.e., that Chomsky like him/her). Then whether S believes \( p \) to be true or false is immaterial, since the perlocutionary effect of flattering will be achieved. Obviously, one could argue that in the case that S believes \( p \) to be true, he/she incidentally flatters H, whereas S deliberately flatters H iff S believes \( p \) to be false; but at this point the issue seems definitional.

Finally, let me point out that, in order to be successful, flattery must be reasonably close to what H believes to be the truth, as example (6) shows: by addressing this writer as a genius, S fails to successfully flatter, since H does not believe \( p \) to be reasonably true, and hence cannot believe S does.  

2.0.5 Allusion
Allusion shares with flattering, insinuating, and hinting the requirement that it not say explicitly \( p \) (see Perri 1978:92). Consider the ill-formedness of the following examples:

\[
(10) * \text{Mary alluded to John by pointing at him and saying “John, over there.”}
\]

As pointed out above, allusions and hints are overt (i.e., S wants H to recognize his/her intention to refer (indirectly) to \( p \)). It is not clear that at the level that concerns us there is a difference between hinting and alluding. Perri (1978) treats allusion as a case of intertextuality, which could constitute grounds for distinguishing between allusion and hinting, since the latter is not intertextual. However, it seems to me that one can very well allude at something besides another text.

2.0.6 Manipulation and seduction
Parret (1993) analyzes manipulation and seduction, and as can be gathered from the quote mentioned above, sees manipulation as a covert act, whereas he sees seduction as an act that flaunts itself (“seduction presupposes the stageing and dramatization of the secret” 231). It is hard to follow Parret’s point, especially when he denies the intentionality of the seducer (Ibid.). Seduction is a subclass of manipulation, at least when it is not confused with winning someone over. The latter may be admitted to, the former cannot.  

2.07 Lies
This is not the place to sum up the literature on lies, which is, moreover, mostly concerned with the ethical aspects of the issue, which need not detain us in this context (see a review in Robinson 1996). The most famous treatment of lies is Coleman and Kay’s (1981:28), which can be summed up in the following three aspects:

1. S believes \( p \) to be false
2. In saying \( p \), S intends to deceive \( H \)
3. \( p \) is false

which basically encode a “folk” view of lies (see Sweetser 1987). However, it can be
shown that points 1 and 3 do not hold. Consider the following definition of lies, from Rasking (1987:459):

\[
\text{LIE (S, H, p)} = (\exists q)(\text{BELIEVE (S, FALSE (q) \& p \Rightarrow q)}),
\]

which may be paraphrased as

A lie has three arguments -- S, H, and p -- and consists of the following specifications: there is a proposition q such that S believes q to be false and S believes that p implies q

or, in other words, S can lie by saying p if he/she believes that by saying p he/she will make H infer that q, assuming that S believes q to be false.\(^8\) The somewhat startling consequence of this point is that one may lie by telling the literal truth while one believes it to be true (contra point 1 above). Note that this is different from the (relatively uninteresting) fact that one may lie by uttering p while p is true, but S mistakenly believes that p is false. This invalidates point 3 above: lies are exclusively a matter of S's beliefs; the objective truth of p is irrelevant.

Consider Raskin's example, here augmented by answer (iii):

(11) Q: Are Jack and Jill having an affair?
   Ai: No (direct lie).
   Aii: They are both too busy for that.
       (indirect lie)
   Aiii: Yes, they are having sex every hour on the hour.

Assume that the respondent knows that Jack and Jill are having an affair. Answer (I) is the paradigmatic case of a lie and answer (ii) is an indirect lie because the utterance of the sentence “They are both too busy for that” implies, “therefore they are too busy for having an affair.” Answer (iii) is the statement of truth, enriched by the (relatively obvious) exaggeration concerning the frequency of their extramarital encounters. S can utter (iii) with the reasonable expectations that H will detect the violation of the CP in the second part of the sentence and will extend it to the first part. The absurdity of the second part of the utterance can obviously be reinforced by intonation and appropriate proxemic behavior (e.g., rolling the eyes, smiling, winking, etc.).

Examples of this kind of lie are more frequent than one would believe: in the movie Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead, a teenager tells his mother on the phone that he and his sister are having a wild party and the sister is about to leave with her boyfriend. The mother assumes, naturally, that her son is joking (since it would be very stupid to tell one's mother that one is disobeying her orders about not having parties or going out with boyfriends). In one episode of the sitcom Cybill, the main character is reconciling with her former husband; as they are about to have sex, the main character's daughters, a friend (Marianne), and the other husband arrive and knock at the door. The former husband hides in the closet. After a brief dialogue, Cybill ushers everybody out. While leaving, Marianne asks “Really, what were you doing?” and the following dialogue ensues.

(12) Cybill: “Oh, OK, my former husband is hiding naked in the closet.”
    Marianne: “Fine, don't tell me.”

Other examples can be found in Ekman (1985[1992]: 37-38).
2.1 Summing up the discussion
The results of this discussion can be summarized in a chart. The nested intentions are represented by a predicate calculus-like notation. We posit an intention predicate (I) which takes two arguments, the agent (who intends) and the object of the intention, which has to be a predicate (and can obviously be another intention predicate). So Is(Ksh) would read as “the speaker intends to kiss the hearer.” “R” stands for recognize, be aware of. Note that because of predicate calculus’ convention to represent predicates in upercases and arguments in lowercase, we have to change the notation used so far in the text, whereby S and H were in uppercase.

We can define the top three speech acts in Table 2 (below) as overt, while the bottom three are covert. Thus the criterion for overttness is S’s intention for H to recognize his/her intention for H to be aware of p. Let us recall that this is what has been called “reflexive intention.” Therefore, the above analysis is perfectly in line with Tanaka’s definition of covert communication above.

We can therefore define a bit more formally a class of “covert speech acts” such that one of the subgoals of S in performing that speech act is that H be unaware that S is performing that speech act. Perhaps more effectively, we can also define this class of verbs as speech acts in which the reflexive intention is absent.

2.11 Other Covert Speech Acts
Needless to say, the examples in Table 2 are not the only examples of this class of covert speech acts. We can list a few other covert speech acts which seem to be variants of others already discussed. The following verbs, gathered through a cursory search in a thesaurus, will give an idea of the number of these verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>say p</th>
<th>Is(Rhp)</th>
<th>Is(Rh(Is(Rhp)))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>say</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allude</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hint</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insinuate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lie</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flatter</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

It should be noted that we are not claiming that in all instances these verbs presuppose their covertness, but rather the much weaker claim that in some situations they do. Of course, for some of these the claim that they always do is probably true, thus limiting ourselves to examples not previously discussed; this seems true of brainwash, put
a bug in someone's ear, and manipulate someone's opinion.

Entice: “to allure, lead on” (Webster), inveigle: “to lead on with deception” (Ibid.), wheedle: “to entice by soft words” (Ibid.), angle for something, gaslight (after the movie starring Ingrid Bergman), impress smn, move, sway, bend, influence, win over, bring round, bedazzle, convince⁹, make smn see the light, bring to reason, talk smn into, bring smn around, win over, sell smn on, jawbone, reassure, persuade, talk smn Into smt, manipulate smn’s opinion, propangle, brainwash, indoctrinate, instill, imply, intimate, suggest, infer, hint, give to understand, insinuate, allude to, put a bug in smn’s ear, bamboozle, hoodwink, seduce, tempt, lure, enrapture, enthral, ensnare, entrap, sweet-talk, discourage, dishearten, dispirit, dampen smn’s spirits, intimidate, throw suspicion on smn (e.g., covertly incriminate)

3 Meaning and anti-reflexive intentional verbs

It will be interesting at this point to return to the definition of covertness presented in Attardo (1997a:27), which is here reproduced for the readers’ convenience:

The overt or covert nature of the symmetrical/asymmetrical status of the exchange, concerns either the mutual knowledge of the goals of the speakers or their mutual knowledge of their access to information. A situation will be termed “covert” if either of the participants has access to knowledge (concerning the goals of the interaction or the information which is relevant to it) to which the other participant does not have access and he/she keeps this concealed from the other participant.

As we can see, the class of covert speech acts that has been defined above is indeed a special case of covert communication, in which S happens to have a perlocutionary goals, Gs (Attardo 1997b), which has as one of its subgoals that Gs be kept hidden from H. Since Grice’s stipulation within the definition of meaningNN that S’s intention of making H aware of the intention to communicate be overt has been called the “reflexive intention,” we can label this class of speech acts as having an anti-reflexive intention.

We now turn to the philosophical problem which anti-reflexive intentional verbs (ARI-verbs, for short) bring up. In short, ARI-verbs present a problem for the meaningNN theory, since as per Grice’s definition of meaningNN (which has not been substantially altered by the further specifications, c.f. Strawson 1964, Schiffer 1972, Grice 1989), it presupposes a reflexive intention. Therefore, it would counterintuitively follow that ARI-verbs are meaningless!

Clearly, so we will examine some strategies that a meaningNN semanticist might want to use to overcome this problem. It seems that the following strategies are available:

1. deny the ARI analysis of the verbs;

2. concede that ARI-verbs do not meanNN, but argue that they mean naturally;
3. concede that ARI-verbs do not mean, but argue that they mean via conventional implicatures;

4. concede that ARI-verbs do not mean, but argue that they mean via conversational implicatures;

5. abandon or revise the theory (or at least expunge the reflexive intention from within it).

'We will not consider strategy (1) until the end of the discussion, since it seems quite counterintuitive, although the counterintuitiveness has different sources. Strategies (3) and (4) are probably strengthened by being considered together (and possibly as hybrid strategies blending aspects of each), and I will turn to those next. We will not address point (5) directly in this paper, as it would entail a discussion too complex and far afield from the present issues (but see Ziff 1967 and Searle 1969).

3.1 ARI-verbs as implicature-only speech acts

Essentially, this approach to ARI-verbs consists in saying that an S engages in one of the speech acts that we have classified as ARI-verb, he/she is not saying (meaning) p, but rather he/she is implying (conventionally or conversationally) p.

As it stands, this strategy could work, since it gets rid of the problem of meaning in ARI-verbs.

Let us consider an example of insinuation:

(13) "I wonder how John has been able to solve those algebra problems."

In (13), S is not saying that Mary has helped John (or even that John has plagiarized Mary’s work), but he/she is insinuating it. The insinuated meaning is arrived at inferentially, i.e., it is an implicature.

While this is undeniably true, it has the unwanted effect of establishing a chasm between ARI-verbs and other speech acts, such as alluding or hinting, which do not have an ARI condition. It would follow that in the following example,

(14) I know you’ve been wondering how John has been able to solve those algebra problems. Here’s a hint: he’s been hanging out with Mary a lot lately.

which differs (in its relevant speech) from (13) exclusively in the performative prefix which qualifies it as a hint, a radically different mode of meaning would be in effect. This is clearly counterintuitive, since (13) and (14) differ only in the presence of the performative prefix, which does not alter the semantics of the sentence.

This difficulty can be avoided at the price of denying the availability of meaning to all non-explicit speech-act verbs. In other words, when hinting, alluding, insinuating, etc., S does not mean p, but implies it. S would mean some accessory meaning that is used to guide the implicature.

However, one could argue against this solution on the basis of the fact that if an ARI-verb does not have a literal meaning, it cannot generate implicatures. This seems to confuse the issue somewhat. When S insinuates in (13), he/she does so by saying the literal meaning of (13) (i.e., stating (13))
and assuming that H will be able to infer the insinuated meaning. So there is a literal meaning in an allusion/insinuation, etc., except it is not the content of the allusion/insinuation, etc.

There is a residual problem, however, in those theories which make the RI the foundation of meaning. In order to address it we will need to review some of the tenets of Relevance Theory (RT).

4 RT

It will be necessary to introduce a little of RT's extensive terminology, in order for the reader to be able to interpret literal quotations from Sperber and Wilson (1986).

RT takes that people have thoughts, i.e., conceptual representations (1986:3). Among thoughts, a subclass are assumptions, which are those thoughts “treated by the individual as representations of the actual world” (1986:2).

A context is thus defined as “a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world” (1986:15). RT is interested in the notion of context because it is the “set of premises used in interpreting an utterance” (1986:15).

A fact is manifest if an individual may be “capable (. . .) of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true” (1986:39). To be noted is the claim that manifestation is not equal to knowledge or assumption, which are both stronger notions (i.e., something may be manifest to me without it being known or assumed to by me, e.g., Julius Caesar never had lunch with Napoleon).

The cognitive environment of an individual is “the set of facts that are manifest to him[her]” (1986:39). Mutual manifestness is defined simply as a (set of) facts that are in the mutual cognitive environment (1986:41).

Coming now to communication, Sperber and Wilson distinguish two intentions within the communicative act:

- Informative intention, i.e., the intention to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions I (1986:58)
- Communicative intention, i.e., the intention to make it mutually manifest to [H and S] that the communicator has this informative intention (1986:61)

and on this basis define ostensive-inferential communication as

the production by [S] of a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to [S and H] that [S] intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to [H] a set of assumptions [I] (1986:63)

Ostensive communication is thus to be taken as synonymous with communication, such that it reveals its reflexive intention (cf. 1986:49).

5 RT and ARI-verbs

This creates a major problem in an RT account of communication: since the presumption of relevance is guaranteed only to those utterances which include reflexive intention (RI), it follows that if covert communication does not include RI, it cannot be governed by the principle of relevance. This, of course, has the counterintuitive consequence that if S were to covertly communicate p, H could not
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draw any implications from the fact. In other words, what would be covertly communicated could only mean what it literally means.\(^{12}\) Thus, for example, suppose that S covertly conveys to H the assumption that S is trustworthy, in the hope that H will be swayed by this knowledge into assigning S a given task requiring trust. S reasons that if H assumes that S is trustworthy, H will have a good reason to assign to S the task. However, within an RT framework, since H is, by definition, not aware of S’s RI, it follows that H has no reason to assume that this bit of information is in any way relevant and, therefore, \textit{a fortiori} that H should base any decision on this information.

Let us recall Tanaka’s definition, here repeated for the convenience of the reader,

\[(15) \text{A case of communication where the intention of the speaker is to alter the cognitive environment of the hearer, i.e., to make a set of assumptions more manifest to her, without making this intention mutually manifest (1994:41).}\]

Tanaka’s way out of the problem is to claim that “other stimuli can be used to overcome” the absence of the “guarantee of optimal relevance” (1994:41). Given that Tanaka’s work deals with advertising, she can claim with a degree of plausibility that at least two of these stimuli are sex and food (41). Basically, her claim, which repeats Sperber and Wilson’s (1986:151-155), is that “the cognitive system of human beings is organized in such a way that it is more susceptible to this kind of information [i.e., sex and food S.A.] that it is more susceptible to this kind of information [i.e., sex and food S.A.] than to other kinds” (54).

While this author has been known to enjoy both, he regretfully has to note that, while there are certainly plenty of situations in which H could use sex and food as guidelines to establish the relevance of \(p\), there are bound to be many situations in which S is not talking about sex and/or food, nor are sex and/or food anywhere in the relevant context. For example, one may wish to covertly convey to a colleague that his/her hour-long digression on his/her dissertation topic is boring one to tears, without necessarily offering him/her a sandwich and/or sexual favors (although presumably both would cause him/her to stop speaking, at least briefly).

Leaving irony aside, no explanation of the inferential process which has to rely on the inherent “relevance” of stimuli can hope to go beyond a naive mechanical stimulus-response model. The power of Grice’s CP (and RT’s relevance principle) lies precisely in that it is a functional law that does not have any substantive “baggage.”

To be fair to Tanaka, she does broaden her scope with the claim that “generally, covert communication manipulates triggers to which the human mind is highly susceptible” (1994:54). However, the argument developed above stands. It is doubtful that the fact that a colleague’s misguided ramblings about his/her dissertation are boring is a “trigger to which the human mind is highly susceptible.”

RT’s account of covert communication (or rather, “information transmission,” as communication presupposes the RI) is based on the assumption that covert communication is a radically different mode of operation, in which the CP/Relevance is not available for
inferencing. This is not an uncommon stance; for example, Searle (1969) speaks of "parasitic" modes (e.g., play acting) in which the speech acts' felicity conditions are not applicable.

6 There are no covert speech acts
We will argue in what follows that the idea of covert speech acts or covert communication as envisioned above is, in fact, in error. Or, to put it differently, there are no covert speech acts, but only regular overt speech acts which are performed unfelicitously or otherwise inappropriately.

Consider that when S flatters H, S wants H to think that S is sincerely complimenting H for his/her achievements, looks, etc. Should H get wind of S's ultimate intention, S's goal would fail. Note that from H's point of view, if S is successful, a perfectly ordinary speech act took place, and hence there is no need to postulate anything beyond the regular CP/relevance principle to guide H's inferences. In other words, from S's point of view, only the regular CP may be postulated to be in effect, as H will only have access to it. Let us consider what happens if the covert speech act fails, i.e., H realizes that S has an ulterior motive. From S's point of view, no planning for that possibility is possible, since it would entail planning for one's intentions to fail (since S does not want H to be aware of the covert nature of the act). From H's point of view, the situation is more complex, as he/she must now take into account two goals that S had in uttering the covert speech act, and the fact that G included S's deceptive intention. However, again, nothing in H's reasoning requires anything but the assumption that S would have expected H to use the CP to draw inferences.

From what we have just said, it follows that we need not postulate different modes of communication, nor anything but the regular CP to guide the inferential processes of the speakers, provided we admit that they do so to achieve goals which may be conflicting and/or hidden to each other.

6.1 Advantages

6.1.1 Simplicity
Basically, this explanation exempts us from postulating a variety of modes of communication and instead relies only on the regular bona-fide mode with the proviso that the reflexive intention (and indeed any other goal) of S may be different and, in fact, opposed, in the case of lies, to the communication of p.

6.12 Expandability
As the previous section implies, the following reasoning may be extended to any mode of communication (e.g., lies, play acting, humor, etc.), since in covert communication S has a goal G such that there is a g_i which is the utterance of u (where p is the proposition expressed in u);
and there is a $g_n$ which is the reflexive intention that H believe that S wants H to know of $g_n$. Obviously, nothing in the above formulation guarantee to H that $(g_n \cap g_r) \Rightarrow G^{14}$; in fact, $g_n$ may merely be a decoy for S’s covert goals (flattering, deceiving, persuading, amusing, entertaining, etc.) As the list shows, this reasoning may be easily extended to covert speech acts, advertising, joke telling, play acting, etc.

7 Conclusion

We started out by defining a class of speech acts which have as one of their felicity conditions that the hearer not be aware of the speaker’s intention to achieve the speech act in question. The implications of our definition for the intentionality-based theories of meaning and, in particular, for Grice’s MeaningNN and Relevance Theory (RT), turned out to be momentous. While the MeaningNN and Relevance Theory (RT), turned out to be momentous. While the MeaningNN may be salvaged by the consideration that covert speech acts implicate their meaning, such an escape is impossible in the case of relevance-theoretic accounts, which build in the reflexive intention in their definition of implicature.

This conclusion led us to consider the possibility that the whole concept of covert communication, or of covert speech acts as a distinct category, is to be rejected, where we define “distinct” as operating in a different mode of communication, either governed by a different CP or not so governed. In its place, it is argued that a simpler approach needs only to postulate the CP and admit that the speakers’ goals in the interaction, broadly construed, may differ and be hidden from one another. The advantages of such an approach are found to lie in its simplicity and in its expandability to other phenomena.

Works Cited


Sperber, Dan, and Wilson, Deirdre. (1986). Relevance. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

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End Notes
1p can be taken to be a proposition, as is standard usage (although we may not wish to claim that all knowledge is propositional). Alternatively, one could take p as a bit of knowledge that S or H have.

2This is probably an oversimplification, but likely a benign one. Note that the claim is that G is a set of the union of its subgoal sets, i.e., \( g_j \cup g_k \cup g_k \in G \).

3This is not to say that H will believe p. It is perfectly possible that S hints at something, and H understands the hint but does not believe what has been hinted. For example, S may hint at having been abducted by aliens, and S’s H would (rightfully) discount this belief.

4"Something bad" is shorthand for "an event E may take place, such that Swould evaluate/judge E as falling on the negative side of a euphoric/dysphoric scale." The abbreviation in the text justifies itself.

5The text is worth quoting in the original:

quando si dice una frase per adulare lo scopo direttamente espresso è dare una qualche valutazione positiva dell’ascoltatore, mentre il sovrascopo è ottenere dei vantaggi dall’ascoltatore. Tuttavia l’ascoltatore non deve scoprire tale sovrascopo. Difatti, se lo scopre, tale sovrascopo non sarà più raggiunto, cioè I vantaggi non saranno più ottenuti (Catelfranchi and Parisi 1980:328)

(When one says a sentence to adulate, the goal directly expressed is to give a positive
evaluation of the hearer, while the supergoal is to gain benefits from the hearer. However, the hearer must not discover this supergoal. Indeed, if he/she discovers it, this supergoal will no longer be achieved, i.e., the benefits will no longer be gained.)

Needless to say, the above is probably a failure to communicate, due to different rhetorical styles. The interpretation in the text is, however, vastly more entertaining.

It should be noted that the cheesy line “Are you trying to seduce me?” spoken by a dazzled victim can be answered in the positive only because in some cultural niches “reprehensible” behavior is considered seductive.

Note that in the case in which \( p = q \), then trivially \( p \supseteq q \), which corresponds to the Coleman and Kay definition, in which S states \( p \). Some have distinguished between lying and misleading, cf. Davis (1988:6).

In some cases only, mostly when Gs go against some of the goals of H.

Sperber and Wilson make much of their rejection of the concept of mutual knowledge, first introduced (Strawson 1964) to handle the problem presented by the fact that the reflexive intention of S must be known to H, this latter fact must be known to S, etc., ad infinitum. Their main objection to mutual knowledge is precisely that it is psychologically implausible, since it requires the postulation of an infinity of known facts. Sperber and Wilson replace the notion of mutual knowledge with that of mutual manifestness. However, some recent lines of argument have made the substitution more or less moot. Clark (1996:92-100) has argued convincingly that the infinite regression of mutual knowledge is not pernicious, as Sperber and Wilson (and everybody else) thought. Searle, who in 1969 had coined the term “reflexive intention,” has more recently (1998) argued for the dismissal of the issue of mutual knowledge on the basis of the claim that mutual knowledge consists of a proposition having the form We know that \( p \), which of course removes the problem created by the cascade of “I-know-that-p”s. Furthermore, several critics of RT have voiced the objection that manifestness and knowledge are mere notational variants (cf. Talbot 1994 for a discussion).

Consider the following remark --

[ostensive] communication should be distinguished from covert forms of information transmission (Sperber and Wilson 1986:30)

-- which makes it clear that RT assumes that S may convey information covertly.

Actually, not even that. Increasingly, pragmatic accounts are reclaiming some of the space of semantics. The interface between the two fields is increasingly hard to map (not that it has been easy historically, let me add. The seminal paper is Carston (1988), and see also Recanati (1993). However, for the present discussion this issue is not germane.

Note that this is not to say that S may not have contingency plans in case of the failure of his/her intention, but only that these plans cannot involve the intention for his/her intention to fail, lest his/her planning be contradictory.

Or, in other words, there is no guarantee that H will be able to infer from \( g_n \) and \( g \), S’s ultimate goal.