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COMMUNICATION, COOPERATION AND CONFLICT

Steffen Borge

Abstract:

According to Steven Pinker and his associates the cooperative model of human communication fails, because evolutionary biology teaches us that most social relationships, including talk-exchange, involve combinations of cooperation and conflict. In particular, the phenomenon of the strategic speaker who uses indirect speech in order to be able to deny what he meant by a speech act (deniability of conversational implicatures) challenges the model. In reply I point out that interlocutors can aim at understanding each other (cooperation), while being in conflict. Furthermore, Pinker's strategic speaker relies on the Cooperative Principle when conveying a conversational implicature, and so non-cooperative behaviour (denial) only emerges as a response to a negative reaction from the audience. It is also doubtful in the cases Pinker presents whether a denial will successfully cancel the conversational implicature – change the audience's interpretation of speaker's meaning. I also argue that a strategic speaker might choose indirect speech due to the ignorability of conversational implicatures, in which case the strategic speaker can be highly cooperative.

1. Introduction

Previously evolutionary psychologists understood the evolutionary idea of “natural selection” or “the survival of the fittest” as meaning that every human being ultimately stands alone in constant competition with others for resources in the battle of life.¹ Though Darwin had a much more nuanced view (Darwin 1871), orthodoxy in social darwinism was that our natural state is a state of dog eat dog. Today the academic tide has turned and many scholars argue that man is an essentially cooperative creature (Henrich and Henrich 2006, Tomasello 2009, Bowles and Gintis 2011). Our natural disposition is towards cooperation, not competition (Keltner and Anderson 2000, Thoits and Hewitt 2001, Fehr and Fischbacher 2003, Bowles 2006). This line sits well with the so-called cooperative model of human communication. The model was first

1 The notion of the survival of the fittest was not introduced by Charles Darwin in his *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 1859), but by Herbert Spencer (see Paul for a discussion of when Spencer first used the expression, Paul 1988: 412–413). Darwin himself added the phrase to the text in the fifth edition of *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 1869: 22).

introduced by Paul Grice (Grice 1975) and later developed by various scholars, including Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), and, within a broader evolutionary perspective Michael Tomasello (Tomasello 2006). Steven Pinker and his associates, however, have recently argued that both Grice's theory of conversation and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory are badly equipped to explain human communication, and their reasons for rejecting the cooperative model of human communication are based on evolutionary biology (Pinker, Nowak and Lee 2008). According to Pinker et al. the cooperative model of human communication assumes that communication is only a question of cooperation, but evolutionary biology teaches us that most social relationships, including talk-exchange, involve combinations of cooperation and conflict. In the present paper I show how to understand the critique from Pinker and associates within the cooperative model of human communication.

2. The Cooperative Model of Human Communication

Language use, Grice observed, is not merely a question of saying true things; it is essentially a cooperative enterprise with a purpose and a direction. As Grice has it, "[o]ur talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks", but are instead "to some degree at least, cooperative efforts" (Grice 1975: 26). As a general principle of conversation, Grice suggested the Cooperative Principle:

We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe, namely: Make your conversational 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. One might label this the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975: 26).

Grice then explicated the Cooperative Principle as a set of conversational maxims (Grice 1975: 26–27). In the present paper I will not engage in the question of which formulations of the maxims are the correct ones. My concern is with the cooperative model of human communication's core idea; that communication is a cooperative enterprise. An important corollary to this idea is the idea that assumed observance of some such maxims is the basis for crediting a speaker with having meant more, or something other, than one can read off an utterance's semantic or truth-functional content. It is to explain this extra content or meaning that Grice introduced the notion of "conversational im-

plicature". As will be apparent, this notion is key in the Pinker group's critique of the cooperative model of human communication.

According to the standard picture a conversational implicature is generated in the following manner. A hearer credits a speaker that has uttered or said that *p* with (also) meaning *q* on the basis of assuming that (1) the speaker observes the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims, (2) the speaker could not be observing the Cooperative Principle and the conversational maxims unless he by saying *p* (also) meant *q* and (3) the speaker knowing that his audience will think along these lines has done nothing to prevent the hearer from drawing the conclusion that the speaker (also) means *q* (see Grice 1975: 31). Here's a classic example from Grice:

A is standing by an obviously immobilized car and is approached by B; the following exchange takes place:

A: *I am out of petrol.*

B: *There is a garage round the corner.*

B would be infringing the maxim "Be relevant" unless he thinks, or think it possible, that the garage is open, and has petrol to sell; so he implicates that the garage is, or at least may be open, etc. (...) [T]he speaker implicates that which he must be assumed to believe in order to preserve the assumption that he is observing the maxim of Relation (Grice 1975: 32).

Orthodoxy has it that a conversational implicature is generated by a speaker taking advantage of the fact that his audience will generally regard him as cooperative in order to mean or communicate something more than, or different from, the literal meaning of the words he uttered. The speaker does not make what he means fully explicit by what he says, and relies on the audience to fill in the gap in accordance with what it is most reasonable to assume that the speaker means under the assumption that he is cooperating, and given the context of communication. The speaker intends the audience to draw these contextual inferences about what he means, and he is accordingly in a position to cancel or defeat any putative conversational implicature.

A familiar critique of Grice's way of stating his theory has been that it is merely valid for Western cultures (Fitch and Sanders 1994). Elinor Keenan, for example, famously argued that in the Malagasy community, speakers would often withhold information – they regard information as a valuable asset, which is not freely shared. She argues that this is in stark contrast to Grice's maxims of quantity (Keenan 1976). Grice's maxims of quantity states you should give the amount of information you assume your addressee wants – not too little and not too much (Grice 1975: 26). However, among the people of Malagasy, a speaker that is reluctant to fully answer a question by not giving all the informa-

tion that one assumes the questioner wants will not be perceived as implicating anything. This is an important observation, not because it invalidates the cooperative model of communication, but because it shows that maxims of conversation can and will vary across cultures. The latter, however, is no hinder for thinking that in every culture there will be some such maxims that guide the way conversational participants view each other. Different cultures can have different takes on what is required by conversational contributions, while still adhering to the principle that speakers should make their “conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [they] are engaged” (Grice 1975: 26).

A further issue for Grice’s formulation of the cooperative model of human communication is that language use does not take place in isolation from other social concerns. An example of this is that while Grice’s theory of conversation can accommodate the fact that one can use a formal question to issue a request (“Can you close the window?”), an offer (“Would you like a lift?”), a challenge (“Would I lie to you?”), etc. it remains silent as to why a speaker chooses such indirect forms instead of direct ones. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson have combined Grice’s theory of conversation and its various conversational principles and maxims (in particular his Cooperative Principle), with Erving Goffman’s classical theory of face, in order to meet this challenge (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). For Goffman, *face* is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1955: 213). As a starting point it is, more or less, a theoretical take on the folk notion of “face” as it appears in expressions such as “losing face”. Face is something in which we have an emotional investment; it can be lost, changed, strengthened, and so on; we can also influence others’ face by what we say and do. According to Brown and Levinson’s understanding of face, face has two components: positive and negative. ‘Face’, they write, is:

[T]he public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects:

- (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
- (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

Concerns about face, according to Brown and Levinson, are among the reasons that ordinary speakers sometimes deviate from the standards or norms of the

Gricean maxims of conversation. Grice's theory claims that speak-exchanges are universally rational, purposeful and goal-directed discourse, while the introduction of the notion of "face" in politeness theory incorporates the wider concerns of sociality and the ways the conversational partners are placed in their various social contexts when interacting linguistically and communicatively. Drawing on empirical studies, Brown and Levinson argue that our polite conversing can explain why speakers sometimes stray from the Gricean principles, since polite form is a way to mitigate or minimize potential face-threatening consequences of certain speech exchanges. A speaker might violate one of the Gricean maxims, for example, that of Manner ("Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)" Grice 1975: 27), if the speaker regards a brief utterance as being potentially more face-threatening than a longer, more elaborated one. A speaker that wants to know how to get to the Brooklyn Bridge might choose to say "You wouldn't know where the Brooklyn Bridge is by any chance?" instead of the shorter "Where's the Brooklyn Bridge?" Politeness is a socially motivated deviation from the Gricean maxims of conversation; "no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5).

3. The Pinker Group's Critique

Pinker et al. suggest "that human communication involves a mixture of cooperation and conflict" and this idea, they claim, is at odds with much of the current thinking on human communication (Pinker et al. 2008: 833). Pinker et al. writes:

Existing theories of indirect speech are based on the premise that human conversation is an exercise in pure cooperation, in which conversational partners work together towards a common goal – the efficient exchange of information, in the influential theory of H.P. Grice, or the maintenance of "face" (esteem and autonomy) in Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's Politeness Theory. Yet a fundamental insight from evolutionary biology is that most social relationships involve combinations of cooperation *and* conflict. (...) In the human case, one has to think only of threats (the proverbial "offer you can't refuse") (Pinker et al. 2008: 833).

Pinker and associates portrait the cooperative model of human communication as a theory that "assume that people in conversation always cooperate" (Pinker 2007: 437). The cooperate model of communication sees communication as an "implementation of pure cooperation" (Pinker et al. 2008: 834), where this is

to be understood as “perfect overlap of interests (and hence full cooperation)” (Lee and Pinker 2010: 786). The Pinker group is not alone in launching this complaint. Jeremy Campbell also seems to think that the cooperative model of human communication entails some utopian paradise without rivalry and conflict (Campbell 2001: 256), while Wayne Davis dismisses the model by noting that “[i]t would be naïve for us or the hearer to suppose that the speaker is always so altruistic” (Davis 1998: 119).

4. Communication and Conflict

Talk of pure cooperation as perfect overlap of interests with regard to human conversations is a red herring. There are two reasons for this. First, communicating by talking, apart from getting things done, is also a matter of making oneself understood and that is not a matter of sharing all interests. As noted by Marina Terkourafi, the Pinker group seems to equate what Salvatore Attardo calls “locutionary cooperation” with “perlocutionary cooperation” (Terkourafi 2011a: 2863, Attardo 1997).² The former type of cooperation is about the speaker trying to make himself understood and for the addressee to understand what the speaker tries to convey. That is, understanding the speaker’s “intended meaning” (Attardo 1997: 756). There is nothing in the cooperative model of human communication that forces one to claim that people always share all the same aims, even if they speak to each other. In talk-exchanges we generally aim at making ourselves understood and that is seen as a cooperative enterprise, but that might be as far as the cooperation goes. You can make yourself understood without sharing all interests with your interlocutors.

Attardo writes:

[I]t appears that every sentence requires two “passages” of the Cooperative Principle, a first one to ensure that the intended meaning is decoded at the locutionary level, and a second to ensure that the intended effect is achieved at a perlocutionary level (Attardo 1997: 758).

The locutionary level means understanding the speaker’s meaning as opposed to merely understanding what the sentence means. Furthermore, we can distinguish between illocutionary acts, that which is done in speaking and perlo-

2 Pinker acknowledges this point in his response to Terkourafi (Pinker 2011: 2867). One should be careful not to confuse or assimilate Attardo’s notion of “locutionary cooperation” with John Austin’s notion of “locutionary acts” (Austin 1962: 94).

cutionary acts, that which is done by speaking. If a speaker utters the sentence “Barack Obama is doing a great job” with an assertoric force, then he has in saying that told his audience that Barack Obama is doing a great job. This is an illocutionary effect. The further effect of making the audience believe that Barack Obama is doing a great job has traditionally been regarded as a perlocutionary effect. Another effect is that an audience in the normal case will come to believe that the speaker believes that Barack Obama is doing a great job. According to John Searle, it is a condition of asserting that the speaker believes what he says. Searle calls this the sincerity condition (Searle 1969: 66). Is this also a perlocutionary effect? Attardo sees “locutionary and perlocutionary cooperation” as “applying to linguistic and extra-linguistic goals, respectively”, where the latter is typically understood as a “kind of cooperation towards a purposive behavior” (Attardo 1997: 753, 759). If Searle is right, then believing what you say belongs to the linguistic side of things and should be included at the locutinary level. However, in the normal case it seems odd to count the sincerity of the speaker as one of the speaker’s linguistic goals. We might say that in speaking the sincerity of the speaker is expressed, though the speaker is not aiming at expressing that sincerity when speaking. If the speaker’s sincerity when speaking is not in question, then stating that the speaker also means what he says is superfluous (and perhaps will even throw that assumption into doubt). Rather, it is a presupposition of assertions that the speaker believes what he asserts and in speaking that presupposition is triggered.

Secondly, you might communicate while having conflicting interests and thus have no perlocutionary cooperation. Grice notes that:

The participants have some common immediate aim, like getting a car mended; their ultimate aims may, of course, be independent and even in conflict – each may want to get the car mended in order to drive off, leaving the other stranded (Grice 1975: 29).

Cooperation at the level of communication does not rule out conflict at some other level. One way to read the Pinker group’s claim that most social relationships involve combinations of cooperation and conflict would be to say that all activities that essentially rely on such relationships can promote both cooperation and conflict. That does not mean that the activity itself cannot be essentially cooperative.

Take the activity of walking together. Here is an activity that essentially involves a social relationship, which can promote both cooperation and conflict. Still, it might be that walking together is an essentially cooperative enterprise. Consider Raimo Tuomela’s take on the social activity of walking together.

According to Tuomela “walking together” is a “joint action” and that “joint action has a cooperative element in that the participants are jointly committed to acting together and to relying on the other participants’ performing their own parts” (Tuomela 2000: 7). In other words, if we walk together and not merely accidentally walk side by side, then if either slows down or speeds up, the other will follow suit in order to walk together. The activity is cooperative, but might still promote conflict – we walk together in order to reach the place where we fight a duel. Or, we might walk together in order to build a house, which we disagree on how to build or what to do with after it is built. We might walk together and quarrel. In the latter case our relationship is one of both cooperation and conflict. However, the activity of walking together – which is not a social relationship but an activity – is not a mixture of cooperation and conflict. A further thing to notice, which will be of some importance in the next section, is the deniability of walking together. Two people who walk together might deny that they did – think of secret lovers that steal a moment of walking together – and instead claim that they were only accidentally walking side by side. Here, there is no temptation to say that the pair didn’t walk together even if they can plausibly deny that they did. One would not want to say that the deniability of walking together gives us reason not to think of the activity as a cooperative enterprise.

There are cases of communication, which promote conflict. The speech act of threatening someone clearly belongs to the conflict side of humans’ social relationships, but still sits well with the cooperative model of human communication. Grice writes about conversations as rational and purposive behaviour, but that does not exclude a speaker from, let us say, exerting dominance over one or more of his conversational partners. Threats show this clearly. If you want to exert dominance over someone by threatening him, then you want to tailor your threat in order to fulfil your communicative aim, and that, of course, means considerations about the addressee. Presumably, you want your threat to induce the right amount of fear; not too little and not too much. In order to do that you would have to “[m]ake your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)” (Grice 1975: 26), which is Grice’s first maxim of quantity. Furthermore, two firms of football hooligans that want to bash each others’ heads in, while avoiding the local police, would need to somehow coordinate their actions. One very efficient way to do that would be to speak to each other on the telephone and agree to a meeting place.³

3 Here is an excerpt from a newspaper; “The last time I was out it was towards Surrey Quays, Millwall vs West Ham,” says Ian (...) member of West Ham’s Inter City Firm (ICF). When he says Millwall vs West Ham, he’s not talking about the teams on the pitch, he’s describing

The latter kind of coordination depends on cooperation (in Grice's sense), but does not seem to exclude conflict (or any other lesson we might have learned from evolutionary biology).

5. Indirect Speech and Deniability

Even though Pinker et al. write as if all communication *qua* communication is a mixture of cooperation and conflict – this being the lesson to be learned from evolutionary biology – it turns out that it is the phenomenon of indirect speech that is troublesome for the cooperative model of human communication. The Pinker group argues that in indirect speech there is a communicative competitive element that is intrinsic to this form, the form embodies “adversarial dynamics” (Pinker et al. 2008: 833). The Pinker group suggests a “three-part theory of indirect speech”, where “[t]he first part is the logic of plausible deniability” of what is allegedly communicated indirectly, i.e. alleged conversational implicatures (Pinker et al. 2008: 833). This is the key part of their line of argument and it connects to the other two parts, which are “relationship negotiation” and “language as a digital medium”. I will focus on the logic of plausible deniability.

Here are two examples from the Pinker group (Pinker et al. 2008: 833):

1. Would you like to come up and see my etchings? [a sexual come-on]
2. Gee, officer, is there some way we could take care of the ticket here? [a bribe]⁴

Let us look at the case of using indirect speech to pick up someone. The formulation above is a bit artificial and in an earlier paper Pinker mentions the more plausible “Would you like to come upstairs for some coffee?” as a sexual

the hooligan clash. ‘We’d arranged to meet. The boys phoned each other and agreed on this car park in an industrial estate’ (Armstrong 2012).

- 4 Both cases are introduced in the first paragraph of Pinker et al. 2008. The Pinker group discuss the bribe case under the heading “Plausible Deniability”, but also under the other two parts of their theory (relationship negotiation and language as a digital medium), whereas the sexual come-on is mostly discussed under the headings “Relationship Negotiation” and “Language as a Digital Medium”. All their examples, however, boil down to deniability (see also Terkourafi’s comment that the Pinker group’s cases are “not all that different” (Terkourafi 2011a: 2864).

come-on (Pinker 2007: 443). The mechanics of the situation is Gricean. The speaker asks the addressee whether she would like to come up for a cup of coffee, while conversationally implicating that he is offering her sex. According to Pinker “[t]he examples with (...) sexual come-ons (...) are hardly examples of a speaker being *polite*” (Pinker 2007: 443). Instead, the logic of indirect speech tells us that the speaker is being strategic, not cooperative, since he chooses the indirect form in order to be able to deny that he offered sex, should the addressee take offence.

When a sexual offer can have negative legal consequences for the person offering, then it seems likely that the indirect form is chosen due to the deniability of conversational implicatures. The case of sexual harassment springs to mind. If a sexual overture is inappropriate and the response is “But Professor, you’re not coming on to me, are you?”, then the indirectness of the sexual come-on makes it possible for the speaker to deny that any such lewd invitation was made. Of course, that something has been denied does not mean that it did not happen. Recall the case of walking together. You cannot undo the fact that you walked together, if that is what you did, even if you can deny it. The same goes for veiled sexual come-ons. That an utterance like the one above is a sexual come-on is a question of what the speaker meant by it, i.e. the speaker’s communicative intentions. The deniability of an indirect sexual come-on is grounded in our access to the speaker’s communicative intentions and not as such in that speech act’s status as a sexual come-on. Also, Grice’s Cooperative Principle is still in play in this example. The Professor that indirectly comes on to his student by asking her in for a coffee exploits the Cooperative Principle in order to have her understand that he is conversationally implicating a sexual offer (see section 2). The student that understands that her professor is hitting on her also relies on the Cooperative Principle. The two outcomes of such a scenario is that either the addressee accepts the invitation or that she rejects it, but “in both types of situation these stakes come into play only if the listener correctly identifies the speaker’s indirect message in the first place” (Terkourafi 2011a: 2863). The student that rejects her Professor is correct in interpreting the invitation to come upstairs for a cup of coffee as sexual come-on. Due to the overture’s indirect form, the Professor can deny that the correct interpretation of his utterance is the correct interpretation of his utterance. Call this the *deniability of interpretation*.⁵ The conflict of interpretation that occurs at this stage

5 One might complain that deniability is always about deniability of the interpretation. In a rather trivial sense that is true. To cancel an alleged conversational implicature is to deny that the speaker had such-and-such communicative intentions when speaking. The speaker wants to make sure that the hearer does not misunderstand or misinterpret him. The cancellation,

is made possible by the basic cooperative enterprise of correctly identifying the original message. The strategic speaker in our example, though not cooperative or, perhaps, not polite, on the level of interpretation, still builds on the Cooperative Principle, and so does the addressee.

The Pinker group writes as if it is the case that the strategic speaker always chooses indirect speech due to the deniability of conversational implicatures. This is not necessarily the case and probably often not the case. The Pinker group's take on what they call "the logic of indirect speech" is incomplete. The flip-side of the deniability of conversational implicatures is the ignorability of conversational implicatures. The logic of indirect speech or indirect discourse is two-way street. Indirect speech makes it possible for a speaker to come-on to the addressee, while denying the fact that he did – denying the conversational implicature. This is mirrored on the addressee side. Indirect speech makes it possible for the addressee to understand that the speaker comes on to her, while ignoring the fact that he did – ignoring the conversational implicature. Call this the *ignorability of interpretation*. An addressee can understand that a veiled sexual invitation has been given, but choose to ignore it by saying "Oh, no, thanks. I can't drink coffee late, it keeps me up". The phenomenon of the ignorability of conversational implicatures, I suggest, is another reason why people sometimes engage in indirect speech.

Consider again a sexual come-on. Recall Brown and Levinson's dictum of "no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5). In the case of inappropriate sexual overtures, i.e. sexual harassment, deniability of interpretation gives us that reason. The sexual harasser can lose his position, get fined, go to prison, etc. and attempts to cover his back by indirect speech. If we remove those sorts of negative legal ramifications from our conversational equation, then what would make a speaker choose indirect speech? First, a direct invitation or request for sex imposes upon the addressee, committing her to respond to the sexual come-on, and, as such, may be face-threatening. The face-threatening potential of a sexual come-on can be mitigated by the speaker using an indirect form that allows the addressee to ignore the request and to pretend that it did not happen by answering "Oh, no, thanks. I can't drink coffee late, it keeps me up". Secondly, a speaker that directly communicates a sexual interest to his addressee runs the risk of rejection and loss of positive face. A direct request forces the issue, whereas an

however, need not be prompted by the hearer's interpretation, whereas with strategic speaker as envisaged by Pinker et al., it is. Pinker's strategic speaker only denies an alleged conversational implicature when his hearer interprets him correctly, but is unwilling to cooperate at the perlocutinary level.

indirect request leaves room for the addressee to “let the speaker down gently” by ignoring the speaker’s communicative intentions should the addressee not be interested. Deniability only enters such a communicative transaction the moment the addressee explicitly challenges the indirect speech act. At that point face damage has already been done. A strategic speaker in this scenario would rationally prefer ignorability over deniability.⁶ Thirdly, if we add to our scenario that the two conversational participants already know each other, then ignorability is a better strategy for preventing “emotional costs of a mismatch in the assumed relationship type” than deniability (Pinker et al. 2008: 833). If the speaker at one point in a conversation must deny that he implicated a sexual come-on, then some damage is already inflicted on both the speaker as well as the conversational participants’ relationship. Their relationship has changed or is in danger of changing. In the scenario I have sketched, the speaker uses indirect speech – “Would you like to come upstairs for some coffee?” – in order not to impose on the addressee (concern for the addressee’s face), while allowing the addressee to be able to ignore the real request (concern for the speaker’s face). The addressee that takes advantage of the ignorability of conversational implicatures, i.e. ignoring the real request – “Oh, no, thanks. I can’t drink coffee late, it keeps me up” – allows the speaker to keep face, while also avoiding the emotional costs of a mismatch and/or change in the relationship between the speaker and addressee.⁷ This envisaged exchange is highly cooperative and that runs contrary to the claim that “[t]he examples with (...) sexual come-ons (...) are hardly examples of a speaker being *polite*” or the idea that strategically using indirect speech is always un-cooperative (Pinker 2007: 443).⁸

6 Both Lee and Pinker (Lee and Pinker 2010: 796) and Terkourafi (Terkourafi 2011a: 2864) touch upon the case where an indirect sexual advance is rebuked without being addressed explicitly, but neither sees that this should be treated as on par with the speaker’s possibility of denying an alleged conversational implicature. Whenever a speaker can possibly deny a conversational implicature (whether this is plausible or not), then the hearer can ignore it (again, whether this is plausible or not). Furthermore, none of these writers consider the possibility that a strategic speaker might choose indirect speech in order to make room for the hearer to ignore the conveyed conversational implicature.

7 Terkourafi argues that there is yet another reason for speaking indirectly, which are not due to the deniability of conversational implicatures or, I suspect, the ignorability of conversational implicatures. Sometimes the function of indirect speech is to “underline the interlocutors’ common ground” (Terkourafi 2011a: 2864). And following that line; “indirect speech can sometimes be convenient shorthand for an entire array of meanings that may be too cumbersome, or even impossible, to spell out fully. This is especially true between intimates” (Terkourafi 2011b: 2870).

8 This is not to suggest that any addressee that exploits the ignorability of conversational implicatures does so due to face concerns, i.e. politeness. An addressee can choose to ignore or pretend he does not understand the communicated conversational implicature in order

In contexts with no legal ramifications, i.e. where the speaker has no need to go on an official record with a certain interpretation of his speech act, it seems an open question whether it is the ignorability or deniability of conversational implicatures that motivates indirect speech in general and veiled sexual come-ons in particular. Further empirical research is needed to decide that question. Still, both phenomena are part of the logic of indirect speech or indirect discourse. That shows that the logic of indirect speech can be just as cooperative as any other speech exchange, and we are left with the conclusion that indirect speech, like direct speech (see section 4), can promote both conflict and cooperation.

The example of the strategic speaker that speaks indirectly in order to be able to deny a particular conversational implicature does not undermine the cooperative model of human communication, but it does show that the politeness theory is not the complete story of indirect speech. “This finding is” as Terkourafi points out, “not new”, since “[p]revious research has shown that hints (i.e. off-record indirectness) are not universally or uncontroversially perceived as polite” (Terkourafi 2011a: 2862, see Blum-Kulka 1987: 136, Holtgraves and Yang 1990: 724, Weizman 1993: 125, Turner 1996: 5–6, Marquez Reiter 2000 and Terkourafi 2002). Sometimes people speak indirectly due to face concerns, which may or may not include considerations about ignorability of interpretation, while other times the venue of indirect speech are chosen because it enables the speaker to deny that he meant what he actually did mean. However, one thing is to deny that you meant something – to cancel a conversational implicature – another is for that cancelation to take hold or go through, i.e. make the addressee believe that the speaker did not intend to communicate the conversational implicature.

Let us return to the example of the veiled bribe. Here is what Pinker writes:

Implicature Man (...) knows how to implicate an ambiguous bribe, as in “So maybe the best thing would be to take care of it here.” (...) he knows that the officer can work through the implicature and recognize it as an intended bribe (Pinker 2007: 444, see also Pinker et al. 2008: 834).⁹

The story of the veiled bribe (Implicature Man) is a standard Gricean story of

to force the speaker to become explicit, i.e. speak directly. The latter can obviously be face threatening, if we assume that the speaker originally used the indirect form due to face concerns.

9 There is a small mistake here. In the conversational implicature story of indirect speech, a speaker does not conversationally implicate an ambiguous bribe, rather the speaker offers a bribe, but chooses to utter a sentence that can be interpreted differently.

conversational implicatures, which rest on the Cooperative Principle, but the gist of the example is that the speaker can plausibly deny that he ever offered a bribe. But what does “plausible deniability” amount to? With regard to this example the Pinker group write as if they regard “plausible deniability” to be whatever you can get away with in court, since the police officer “knows that he couldn’t make a bribery charge stick in court” (Pinker et al. 2008: 834). This is misguided as an approach to understanding speech in general and indirect speech in particular. Surely, no-one would start an analysis of what it is to promise by making it central to the explanation that a court would find the promise legally binding. The same should hold when analysing indirect speech. One thing is what will or will not stick in court; another is what the addressee believes the speaker meant by his utterance. If one takes plausible deniability to mean that the speaker has a chance of convincing the hearer that he did not mean to suggest a bribe, then the conversationally implicated bribe in our example is deniable, but not plausibly deniable (at least not without further stage setting). The Pinker group is not clear on what it is for a conversational implicature to be plausibly deniable as opposed to merely deniable, or which cases count as plausibly deniable and why. They admit that with regard to “the etchings [a sexual come-on], the offer to ‘settle it here’ [a bribe] (...) [a]ny ‘deniability’ in these cases is really not so plausible after all”, but then it is not clear how they want to understand the notion of “plausible deniability” (Pinker et al. 2008: 836).¹⁰

The confusion in the Pinker group’s approach to plausible deniability as opposed to mere deniability has its background in the fact that the Gricean notion of “cancellability” has remained underspecified. Grice told us that “all conversational implicatures are cancelable” and that a test for cancellability is that “to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that *p*, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*” (Grice 1978: 44). Also, Savas Tsohatzidis has reminded us in a discussion of, among others, Borge 2009, that “cancellability is not optional for those employing the notion of conversational implicature” (Tsohatzidis: 2012:457). In its most minimal form the cancellability requirement amounts to mere deniability. That is, mere deniability understood as it being possible to deny the conversational

10 To add to the confusion, the Pinker group sees this sort of deniability (the not so plausible deniability) as connected to their idea of language as a digital medium. But since it is the language-form of indirect speech that allows for both plausible deniability and mere deniability, i.e. not so plausible deniability, then language-form cannot explain the difference between the two. Notice also that that both deniability and ignorability are reactions to specific interpretations of the speaker’s utterance.

implicature without creating a non sequitur or a contradiction. Any inference about what a speaker means that goes beyond the literal meaning of what he said and that, which is entailed by that, is pragmatic and can be denied without contradiction. This is *cancellation as denial of speaker's meaning* (CDS). A speaker can achieve this in total disregard of his audience, since the focus is on what you can say without contradicting yourself and not what seems reasonable to suppose that the speaker originally meant under "the assumption that the conversational game is still being played" (Grice 1975: 35). CDS is not only not the whole story of cancellability; it is not even the central story.

Recall that the motivation for an addressee to credit a speaker with intending to communicate some conversational implicature q was that unless the speaker by saying p also meant that q , the addressee could no longer see the speaker as cooperative. We go to great length before we give up the assumption of cooperativity (Larson et al.: 2009: 91). Attributing conversational implicatures to a speaker is to attribute to the speaker having meant something other or different than the mere literal meaning of the words uttered under the assumption that the conversational game is still being played. Conversational implicatures track speaker's meaning. If a speaker gives his addressee reason to believe the speaker meant (also) q by saying p , when this is not the case, then the addressee fails to track speaker's meaning and the speaker fails to get his communicative purpose across. Given that the speaker is still playing the conversational game in a sincere manner, he now needs to cancel the alleged implicature.¹¹ Not merely because he can without contradiction, but as a way to make sure the addressee tracks speaker's meaning correctly. Call this *cancellation as tracking of speaker's meaning* (CTS).¹² This, of course, a speaker cannot achieve in disregard of his audience, because the addressee must be given reasons to believe that some other interpretation of speaker's meaning can be provided without giving up the assumption that the speaker is cooperative – why it was not the case that the speaker by p , meant q . If locutionary cooperation means getting an intended meaning across (as opposed to merely understanding the meaning of the words uttered) and a cancellation leaves the audience without a viable interpretation of the speaker's meaning, then the speaker's locutionary cooperativity is in question.

In general, that is, outside legal settings and other special circumstances,

11 Sincerity, of course, cannot be guaranteed, but it is a presupposition that drives or motivates the very process of attributing conversational implicatures to a speaker.

12 Notice that a CTS is also simultaneously a CDS, since in the case of CTS the speaker by cancelling denies that a certain interpretation of the speaker's meaning is true in order to make the addressee arrive at the correct interpretation.

speakers do not talk for the record but to other people. Insofar as talking to each other is a way to make ourselves understood and get things done (as opposed to merely not saying anything contradictory or legally binding), then CTS is the proper or main function of conversational implicature cancellation.¹³ When the speaker in our example cancels the conversational implicature that *q*, the addressee will look for a new interpretation of the speaker's utterance or some other explanation for why the speaker can still be regarded as cooperative even if he only meant *p* by saying *p*. Sometimes context provides the material for understanding the original utterance without attributing the speaker with having meant that *q*, other times the speaker must provide this himself. The oddness of the bribing case is that no such explanation seems to be forthcoming, which is why the speaker only manages to achieve CDS, but not CTS. I suspect that the addressee in this and other such cases will not give up the assumption that the speaker was cooperative and tried to get some communicative purpose across (that a bribe was being offered) by his first utterance, but rather come to believe that the cancellation is false, the speaker did mean to offer a bribe. The cancellation does not take hold or go through as CTS, that is, it fails to give/help/instigate/etc. a revision of the addressee's theory of what the speaker meant. The cancellation as CDS in such an example is the conversational implicature version of a barefaced lie. The speaker knows that the addressee will not believe the cancellation, i.e. that he didn't mean to bribe the officer by saying "Gee, officer, is there some way we could take care of the ticket here?" The speaker knows that the officer knows this and the officer knows that the speaker lives under no illusion of making him revise his theory of what the speaker meant with his original utterance, and so on in the obvious fashion. It seems clear to me that in such a case, the addressee will give up the assumption that the conversational game is still being played and that should count as a type of misfire

6. Conclusion

The cooperative model of human communication allows that both direct and indirect speech can promote both cooperation and conflict. The logic of indirect speech or indirect discourse relies on the Cooperative Principle in order to correctly identify the speaker's intended meaning. In the case of the strategic

13 This is not to deny that CDS functions as a test for whether something is an implicature or not.

speaker, such a speaker can choose to speak indirectly due to the ignorability of conversational implicatures, in which case the speaker seems highly cooperative, or due to the deniability of conversational implicatures, in which case the un-cooperativeness lies at the level of interpretation of the speech act. When we remind ourselves that the basis of the model of conversational implicatures is the tracking of speaker's meaning under the assumption of cooperation, then we see that even though a speaker can always deny that he conversationally implicated such-and-such (CDS), that cancellation will not necessarily take hold or go through (CTS). Sometimes cancellations don't take hold or go through, because addressees are more likely to believe that the speaker was originally cooperative (intended to communicate such-and-such, i.e. had a communicative purpose with his utterance) and that the speaker subsequently (at the level of interpretation) tells a barefaced and self-serving lie, than to think of the speaker's original conversational contribution as an un-cooperative and purposeless communicative act.

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