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Citation

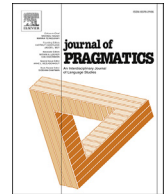
Mosegaard-Hansen, M. -B., & Terkourafi, M. (2023). We need to talk about Hearer's Meaning!. *Journal Of Pragmatics*, 208, 99-114. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2023.02.015

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4210700>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



We need to talk about Hearer's Meaning!

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 11 March 2023

Keywords:

Speaker intentions
Hearer's meaning
Accountability
Framing
Sequential structure
Social relations
Speaker identities
Overhearers

ABSTRACT

Mainstream theories of meaning in communication have traditionally centered the speaker's communicative intention. The centrality of Speaker's Meaning has, however, also been subjected to a great deal of criticism. We argue that it is time to take much more seriously the notion of Hearer's Meaning as distinct from Speaker's Meaning, even where the latter is conceived of as interactionally negotiated. Our principal contention is that, in terms of real-world effects, synchronically but also diachronically, Hearer's Meaning is, in fact, criterial. We propose a model of Hearer's Meaning as derived from seven sources – H's framing(s) of (different parts of) the speech event; H's assumptions about the conventional meanings of words and phrases; the sequential placement of the utterance; H's perception of S's identities; H's social relationship with S; H's social relationships with third parties; and finally, H's assumptions regarding S's intentions (if any) – and exemplify its application with the help of an extended Twitter thread. The contribution of each of these seven sources to Hearer's meaning is not necessarily fixed at the start of a given interactional episode and may vary according to the context of utterance. Moreover, the assessment of each of the sources may not be the same for all participants. As a result, meanings derived by different interactants need not be (near-)identical for them to judge a communicative exchange as having been successful. In other words, multiple parallel meanings are possible.

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1. Introduction

A range of (in many cases well-known) problems with the notion of Speaker's¹ Meaning as a central component of a theory of meaning in communication have been advanced in the literature, not only from within linguistic pragmatics, but also in philosophy, anthropological linguistics, microsociology, and historical linguistics.

In this paper, we argue that it is time for pragmatic theory to take much more seriously the notion of Hearer's Meaning, as distinct from Speaker's Meaning, even where the latter is conceived of as interactionally negotiated. Our central contention is that, in terms of real-world effects, not only synchronic ones, but also diachronic effects in the form of language change, Hearer's Meaning is, in fact, criterial.

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¹ In the context of this paper, the terms "speaker" and "hearer" should be understood as independent of modality. In other words, "speaker" is shorthand for any individual producing an utterance. Similarly, "hearer" designates any individual who interprets an utterance. Whether the utterances in question are spoken, written, signed, etc. is immaterial.

As an alternative to Speaker's Meaning, we propose a model of Hearer's Meaning as derived from seven sources, of which intention attribution is just one (and far from always the most important one), and whose respective contributions may vary according to the context of utterance.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in §2, we summarize what we see as the principal problems for theories that rely on speaker intentions to account for different types of meaning in communication. In §3, we define our alternative notion of Hearer's Meaning and outline the sources from which we hypothesize that it may be derived. The central §4 discusses the role of each of these seven sources in greater detail, and presents empirical support for their relevance, in the form of excerpts from an extended Twitter thread. §5 presents our conclusions and some further, more tentative hypotheses.

2. Problems with speaker intentions as a principal source of meaning in communication

Mainstream pragmatic theories have traditionally centered the speaker's intentions when accounting for meaning in communication. This is true, prominently, of both (neo-)Gricean pragmatics and of Searlean Speech Act Theory (SAT).² Thus, in the former, the speaker's intention is fundamental for determining both “what is said” and “what is meant” (for this distinction, cf. [Grice 1957: 385; 1975: 44](#)):

Perhaps we may sum up what is necessary for A to mean something by x as follows. A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended. But these intentions are not independent; the recognition is intended by A to play its part in inducing the belief ... ([Grice 1957: 383](#))

Meanwhile, in SAT, the speaker's intention uniquely determines the illocution (in the case below that of a promise):

S intends (i-1) to produce in H the knowledge (K) that the utterance of T [i.e. a given sentence] is to count as placing S under an obligation to do A. S intends to produce K by means of the recognition of i-1, and he intends i-1 to be recognized in virtue of (by means of) H's knowledge of the meaning of T. ([Searle 1969: 60](#))

Although Relevance Theorists take a somewhat greater interest in the hearer's perspective, what they call ostensive-inferential communication still relies crucially on the speaker “making manifest” both a communicative and an informative intention ([Sperber and Wilson 1986: 54](#)). We will see in §2.1, however, that no such intentions need be made manifest in order for hearers to interpret a given utterance.

Intention-based accounts of meaning in communication have, however, been subjected to criticism from a wide range of perspectives since at least the 1980s. In this section, we summarize the central arguments against such accounts³ before presenting our model of Hearer's Meaning in sections 3–4.

It must be emphasized from the outset that we are in no way claiming that speakers do not have intentions, nor that they do not choose their words with the aim of reflecting those intentions. On the contrary, introspection strongly suggests that they usually do (see below for some important exceptions and qualifications, however). Nor do we wish to claim that hearers never take what they believe to be speakers' intentions into account when generating interpretations of utterances and discourses. What we will argue is that speaker intentions are not central to those interpretations and that, on at least some occasions, they may play no role at all.

2.1. Psychological and cultural issues with reliance on speaker intentions

The most fundamental problem with making the recognition of speaker intentions the basis for deriving meaning in communication is that language users simply do not have direct access to other people's intentions. In synchronous communication, we may, of course, ask our interlocutors what they intended to communicate in producing a given utterance, but we typically do so only when communication is overtly failing. As pointed out by Gauker (2001: 184), apparent communicative failure affords special reasons for hearers to request that speakers explain what they are trying to achieve. Hence, it cannot be inferred from this type of question that hearers are concerned about speaker intentions by default. Indeed, Leth (2021: 289) argues plausibly that instead of analyzing such questions as information-seeking, it is more accurate to consider them as “an invitation to produce a novel utterance which is to be understood in its own right”. Moreover, neither hearers nor analysts have any means of independently verifying speakers' sincerity in stating their intentions. In other words, when we purport to talk about a given speaker's intentions, what we are really talking about is the hearer's or (more commonly) the analyst's assumptions about those intentions. This not only makes assumptions about speaker's intentions derivative from other information but it also raises a question about the ultimate basis for such assumptions, which is part of what the model proposed in this paper seeks to address.

Theoretical reliance on speaker intentions is further complicated by the existence of (mostly non-Western) cultures in which assumptions regarding other people's intentions are explicitly disallowed as a basis for interpreting their words and behavior. Such cultures operate under the doctrine that other minds are essentially opaque ([Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 408](#)). If mainstream pragmatic assumptions about the indispensability to communication of recognizing speaker intentions were correct, members of such cultures should be incapable of communicating at all, or at least of communicating the kinds of

² This also applies to more recent proposals viewing meaning in terms of speaker commitments, such as [Geurts \(2019\)](#).

³ A preliminary exposition of some of the arguments below can be found in [Terkourafi, 2021](#).

sophisticated content that can be communicated in cultures that do not operate with a similar opacity doctrine. That conclusion strikes us as inherently problematic. A skeptic might argue that while opacity cultures may frown upon the verbalization of assumptions about speaker intentions as evidence in favor of certain interpretations, this does not demonstrate that language users in these cultures do not make such assumptions tacitly. However, the need for such assumptions is queried by the observation that even in cultures where language users are allowed to consider speaker intentions, there are contexts in which they do not do so when interpreting utterances: Cappelen and Dever (2019: 156–157), for instance, point out that 21st c. humans are fully capable of communicating with computerized “speakers”, such as algorithm-based chatbots or voice assistants like Amazon’s Alexa or Apple’s Siri, to which we cannot sensibly attribute any intentions.⁴ Du Bois (1993) adduces examples of ritual contexts where words are spoken and interpreted without any assumption that they reflect the intentions of the person producing the speech sounds (i.e. the “animator” in Goffman’s 1981 terms), but also without being perceived as reflecting a personified divine intention. Finally, we might add that people who believe themselves to be alone or who are talking in their sleep, and who thus do not have communicative (let alone informative) intentions in any meaningful sense, may well produce speech sounds that are interpretable to—and in some cases interpreted by—eavesdroppers. Indeed, in the case of a talking sleeper, and depending on the content of what is said, an eavesdropping intimate partner, for instance, may choose to hold the speaker accountable for what they have said once they wake up.⁵

2.2. Problems relating to “what is said”

At a lower level of granularity, a range of problems with using speaker intentions to determine the meaning of individual utterances have been noted in the literature. In this subsection, we look at how hearers determine what is “said”. We take this notion as equivalent to what Austin (1962: 94) calls a locutionary act, i.e. the utterance of a linguistic string endowed with both sense and reference.

First, Egan (2009) discusses some specific context types where not only is the reception of a message deferred, but its recipients are scattered and their identities unpredictable. When certain deictic items are used in this way, such as ‘you’ in (1) below, it becomes inherently impossible for the speaker’s intention to fix a determinate (set of) proposition(s) which is expressed in such instances:

(1) [Billboard by the side of a motorway] Jesus loves you.

Secondly, even in contexts where speakers would be able to communicate determinate propositions, they do not invariably do so. Instead, the derivation of what is “said” may be left up to the hearer to a greater or lesser extent and may in some cases be demonstrably negotiable. Sperber and Wilson’s (1986: 233–237) notion of “loose talk” comprises cases like (2) (from Ariel 2001: 1012, our emphasis), where it seems doubtful that even the speaker could clearly articulate what precisely is the sense to be attributed to the italicized expression:

(2) Gad Zeevi, I’ve been told he’s *more or less King of Kenya*.

In a similar vein, Haugh (2013: 44) points to examples like (3) (from an episode of the US sitcom *Seinfeld*, our emphases), where speakers deliberately let their utterances trail off, allowing hearers substantial leeway to expand them into full-fledged propositions:

(3) Jerry: You broke up with her just because she cut her hair! How short?
George: Like that. [looking at Jerry]
J: You mean like ... [points to his hair]
G: ... That.
J: So she ...
G: Yes ...
J: And you don’t ...
G: Nooo ...
J: So ...
G: Exactly ...

Streeck (1980: 140–141) observes that the not infrequent conversational phenomenon where two speakers jointly construct a single utterance⁶ as in (4) below, likewise constitutes a problem for theories that rely on individual speakers’ intentions to determine what is “said” (and in this case also what is “meant”, given that the nature of the speech act is arguably modified by the act of co-construction):

(4) Teacher: Now where is—
Carolyn: Ernesto
Teacher: Ernesto.

⁴ A critic might object that intentions can be attributed to chatbots in a derivative manner, by pointing to the intentions of the human programmers behind the algorithm. However, the fact that algorithmic output often goes beyond those intentions in unintended directions easily disarms this objection, cf. Carole Cadwalladr, “Google, democracy and the truth about internet search,” *The Guardian*, 4 September, 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/04/google-democracy-truth-internet-search-facebook> (last accessed 14/2/2022).

⁵ E.g. “Husband goes to police after wife confesses to crime while sleeping”, *The Independent*, 20 January, 2022: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/liverpool-man-wife-sleep-confession-b1996999.html> (last accessed 8/2/2022).

⁶ Known as “collaborative turn construction” or “co-construction” (e.g. Lerner 2004).

With (5) below (our emphases), Clark (1987: 589) shows that, even where a speaker has produced a complete and determinate proposition, they may nevertheless retrospectively accept a hearer's misconstrual as representing what was "said".

(5) Waitress: And what would you like to drink?

Clark: Hot tea, please. Uh, *English Breakfast*.

Waitress: That was *Earl Grey*?

Clark: *Right*.

In many cases, not all aspects of the sentence meaning arrived at by individual interactants may be jointly accepted at all. Discrepancies, however, may not emerge until some time after the exchange has been terminated and thus be difficult to rectify. From a diachronic perspective, (Hansen, 2021: 6–7) argues that what is most plausibly construed as hearers' fairly radical misunderstandings of what was "said" have in some cases resulted in lasting meaning change. That is the case, for instance, with the Danish verb *forfordele*, whose meaning has changed in the past 50 years, from meaning 'to give someone less than their fair share' to meaning more or less the exact opposite, viz. 'to give someone more than their fair share'. Hansen's hypothesis is that around the time of the change, hearers who were unfamiliar with this verb may plausibly have encountered it first in (easily imaginable) contexts that underspecified which of several possible referents was the victim of unfairness. The further fact that *forfordele* consists of the more common verb *fordele* ('to share out') prefixed by *for-*, which in other contexts carries meanings such as 'before', 'in front of', 'of higher status', and that *forfordele* is typically used in the passive voice, will have predisposed hearers to infer that the patient role designated the individual benefitting from the action, rather than its victim.

2.3. Problems relating to "what is meant"

If anything, what is "meant" – understood as the inferences triggered by the uttering of a particular string of words in a particular context, incl. the determination of what social action that utterance might perform – seems intuitively even more hearer-dependent than what is "said".

Thus, certain types of speech act simply cannot be performed in the absence of particular kinds of uptake from hearers. This is prominently the case with bets. Unless A's utterance in (6) below is followed by the type of reaction represented by B's utterance, no bet has been made (Austin 1962: 36–37), and it's likely that A's utterance in isolation will be heard as a prediction rather than as making a bet:

(6) A. I bet you £50 we'll have a general election before the end of the year. – B. You're on.

Arguably even more importantly, in corpora of naturalistic interaction, it is not at all uncommon to find exchanges like that in (7), from Elder and Haugh (2018: 599–600, our emphases). Here, the second half of Michael's reply (T2) to Sirl's initial question in T1 suggests that he may have heard that question as either a pre-request (Levinson 1983: 361) or as an indirect request to use the bathroom first. In T3, Sirl actively resists such an interpretation, claiming that he was merely seeking information about Michael's plans, but in T5 he goes on to accept Michael's subsequent offer (in T4) with a promptness that suggests that this may, in fact, have been what he was trying to achieve all along. This interpretation is further supported by Sirl's addition of *if you don't mind* at the end of his turn:

(7) [Outside the bathroom at Sirl's house, where Michael is a guest]

Sirl: What time are you leaving this morning?

T1

Michael: Oh, in about an hour I suppose. Are you in a hurry to leave?

T2

S: No, no. *Just asking*.

T3

(2.0)

M: Would you like to use the bathroom first?

T4

S: Yeah, sure, *if you don't mind*.

T5

The forms of overt negotiation of different levels of meaning, including illocutionary force, that we see in (4)–(5) and (7) are deeply problematic for intention-based frameworks, as individual speakers' mental states do not seem to be the kind of things that can plausibly be subject to negotiation.

Moreover, Gauker (2001: 169) shows that even in the absence of overt negotiations, scenarios are possible in which interactants reach their respective social goals while strictly speaking mutually misjudging one another's communicative intentions. Thus, in (8) below, B could intend to communicate that they do want to see *Titanic*, but be heard by A as meaning that they do not want to see it. Further, it may be that, in reality, B would prefer to see a different film, but that they interpreted A's question as communicating a desire to see *Titanic* and wanted to please A with their reply. If A, in fact, does not want to see *Titanic* either, and if as a result of A's misinterpretation of B's reply the two of them go to see a different film, both will have got what they wanted despite having misinterpreted one another's intentions. In that sense, both can be content with the outcome of their exchange, and crucially, it is possible that neither will ever discover the mismatch between their respective interpretations of what the other intended and what the other did, in fact, intend.

(8) A. So you don't want to see *Titanic*? – B. Yes.

At the level of what is “meant”, intention-based frameworks are also challenged by the lack of a clear cut-off point between “implicatures”, which are assumed to be strongly backed by the speaker, and other types of (possibly, but not necessarily, weaker) inferences that may be solely the hearer’s responsibility. Sperber and Wilson (1986: 194–197) discuss examples such as (9), where – if heard as a felicitous reply to Peter’s question – Mary’s utterance clearly implicates that she would not drive a Mercedes:

(9) Peter: Would you drive a Mercedes? – Mary: I wouldn’t drive ANY expensive car.

However, Peter may go on to derive further inferences that seem plausible and relevant in the context, such as “Mary would not drive a BMW”, “Mary disapproves of ostentatious displays of wealth”, “Mary is not confident about her driving skills and worries she might total an expensive car” etc., which are less evidently invited by Mary. Nevertheless, she might be prepared to accept at least some of them if they were presented to her.

Finally, certain types of speech acts are wholly reliant on linguistic convention, with no room for intentionality, in the sense that if a particular form of words are spoken, such as the call “Redouble” during a game of bridge, the speech act will be taken to have been performed quite independently of whether the speaker intended to perform it or not (Strawson 1964: 457).

2.4. Problems relating to social accountability

The example of redoubling is relevant not only to an understanding of what is “meant”, but also to the notion of social accountability. Sociologists and pragmatists have repeatedly argued that it is central to the maintenance of social order that interactants are held accountable for what they are taken to mean at all times (e.g. Garfinkel 1984; Heritage 1988; Clark 1996; Haugh 2013). Succinctly put, the social accountability of utterances means that what we say has real-world consequences. Accountability, however, lies firmly with hearers, such that speakers may well find themselves held to account for interpretations and inferences that they never had any intention of triggering, even where the meaning of their actions is not determined purely by convention, as it is in the case of redoubling. Prominently, this kind of unintended accountability may arise when the moral orders of participants diverge to a greater or lesser extent (cf. Haugh 2013: 50). In §4 below, we will see that exemplified by the exchanges in (11) and (15).

3. What is Hearer’s Meaning and how is it derived?

In choosing to put the spotlight on Hearer’s Meaning, we take our point of departure in the work of the pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce, for whom meaning inheres precisely in the practical, real-world consequences of a phenomenon, including (communicative) behaviour (Peirce 1958–66: CP5.2.5.402). Evidently, this view is at odds with the mainstream Gricean view, where the basis of meaning in communication is the speaker’s intention, such that meaning cannot be conceived of independently of that intention. Both the Gricean understanding of meaning and the one proposed here are ultimately axiomatic, as opposed to empirically-based, and they are grounded in fundamentally distinct perspectives on what pragmatics is (or should be). This distinction has been described by Verschueren (1999: 2–6) and Haberland (2010) as one between pragmatics as a component of linguistics (the Gricean view) and pragmatics as a perspective that linguists may take on language use (our view). For us, a theory of meaning in communication ought, among other things, to be able to account for the fact that speakers are held socially accountable for their utterances, and to explain on what basis such accountability is implemented. This, in our view, justifies – indeed arguably requires – that we posit a theoretical hearer-based counterpart to the notion of Speaker’s Meaning.

We define Hearer’s Meaning as comprised of three components:

- (a) what the hearer (H) (purports to) take(s) the speaker (S) to have said in producing the utterance (U);
- (b) what H (purports to) take(s) S to have presupposed and/or implicated by producing U;
- (c) any further socially accountable inferences H (purports to) believe(s) follow from (a)–(b), including, but not limited to, the type of social action that H takes U to count as.

Based on our combined experience of observing naturally occurring interactions, both informally and for specific research purposes, as well as on our knowledge of the relevant literature, we propose, further, that Hearer’s Meaning is derived from a combination of the following seven sources:

1. H’s framing(s) of (different parts of) the speech event;
2. H’s assumptions about the conventional meanings of words and phrases;
3. the sequential placement of the utterance within the discourse;
4. H’s perception of S’s identities;
5. H’s social relationship with S;
6. H’s social relationships with third parties;
7. H’s assumptions regarding S’s intentions (if any).

These sources have been identified inductively, on the basis of textual evidence, but they correspond roughly to the following generally recognized parameters for determining meaning in communication: linguistic meaning (source 2); co-text (source 3); cognitive context (sources 1 and 4); social context (sources 5–6); and speaker intentions (source 7).

Our contention is that source 7, “H’s assumptions regarding S’s intentions”, has no privileged status. In fact, this parameter may not even have independent status, and may thus strictly speaking be theoretically redundant, in so far as any such assumptions must ultimately, it seems to us, be based on information derived from sources 1–6. Furthermore, whether or not a given hearer even bothers to consider what a speaker’s communicative intention may have been on a given occasion may depend crucially on one or more of the other sources, not least 5, i.e. the social relationship between the two interactants (see further §4.7 below).

While source 7 is thus deliberately placed last, the order of mention of sources 1–6 should not be understood to reflect a perceived order of importance. Rather, we conceive of all seven sources metaphorically as constituting a dashboard with knobs, each of which can be dialled up or down depending on the context (see also Terkourafi, 2021: 83, Fig. 2). Furthermore, the ranking and adjustment of the importance of individual sources is not necessarily fixed at the start of a given interactional episode, but is potentially subject to continuous revision. Importantly, the assessment of each of the sources may not be the same for all participants.

In the next section, we discuss and exemplify the role of each of the above sources in turn, supported by examples from a Twitter thread. This particular thread was chosen among several that we considered because it illustrates all at once the features that we wish to discuss. The thread is very long, running to more than 50 screenshots. Due to space restrictions, we reproduce its beginning in §4 below, and in §§4.1–4.7, we follow up with selected excerpts illustrating the phenomena we wish to focus on. The order of presentation of these excerpts follows the order of presentation of the seven meaning sources above and does not necessarily reflect the sequential order in which the excerpts occur in the thread itself.⁷

4. Sources of Hearer’s Meaning: the data

Before moving to the Twitter thread itself, we want to emphasize that our model of Hearer’s Meaning is not intended to apply only to online communication, let alone only to public social media platforms. All of the phenomena discussed in the following sections of the paper are attested in offline exchanges as well, and we see no reason to believe that language users approach online interaction in a qualitatively different way from how they manage offline interpretations of what other people say. That said, the public nature of Twitter communication,⁸ in particular the phenomenon known as “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd 2010), makes this medium a particularly rich source of evidence in favor of the centrality of Hearer’s over Speaker’s Meaning in communication. Context collapse refers to the fact that on social media, diverse social contexts and audiences are collapsed into one. While any interaction requires some degree of negotiation of meanings and interpersonal relations, such negotiations therefore become particularly fraught in public interactive online environments where speakers can be (more or less) aware of addressing multiple audiences at once.

The tweet that kicks off our chosen thread is posted by a woman, Sunny,⁹ who quote-tweets a short video showing a cabinet with some unusually designed drawers. The person who originally tweeted the video has chosen to accompany it with a single word, “Engineering.” Sunny’s tweet is shown as T1 in (10). Her comment clearly suggests a critical stance towards the functionality of the cabinet. In reply, a male user, Kevin, posts T2, in which he appears to disagree with Sunny’s assessment, arguing that the design of the drawers can in fact be seen as functional according to certain criteria. At this point, a third user, Luke, also male, enters the conversation (in T3), ostensibly replying to Kevin with a sequence of two questions that appear most plausibly understood as rhetorical:

- (10) [T1] Sunny
How you know this is REAL engineering: if they’d put in two normal drawers, they’d have vastly more functional space. This is basically the furniture equivalent of using Kubernetes at your startup.
[quoted tweet containing video]
- ↓
- [T2] Kevin [to Sunny]
You don’t have to step as far back to make room for it, making it ideal in confined spaces. There’s space recovered to not having rails on the x, y, and z axes. You’ll never pull it off the rails fishing for something in the back. Also, bonus, neat. This UI dev approves.
- ↓
- [T3] Luke [to Kevin]
Did you consider not saying this? What made you abandon that option?

⁷ Clearly, third-party analysts have no more direct access to hearers’ assumptions and beliefs than they do to speakers’ intentions. Thus, in our discussion below, we necessarily rely on the interpretations formulated by the participants themselves. We cannot judge to what extent those explicitly formulated interpretations accurately reflect hearers’ “truthful understandings” of what has been said. What matters from our perspective is that these are interpretations for which speakers are manifestly held socially accountable in the context of the unfolding interaction.

⁸ For reasons of space and because of its easily accessible, public nature, we do not provide an introduction to how Twitter works but take for granted that readers possess basic knowledge of the platform.

⁹ All names of participants have been changed. Punctuation, capitalizations, diacritics, etc. have been kept as in the original but, unless otherwise specified, italics represent our emphases. A downward arrow (↓) indicates that the tweet below replies directly to the tweet above the arrow.

Even on a rhetorical interpretation, Luke's questions may seem unmotivated until one considers what possible framings the initial exchange between Sunny and Kevin might lend itself to. In what follows, we consider each of the sources of Hearer's Meaning posited above, beginning with framing.

4.1. Framing

Generally speaking, frames are data structures used to connect and interpret the streams of information available in our environment. These data structures are gradually acquired, primarily in the process of socialization, but may be expanded upon throughout an individual's lifetime. The notion of framing in discourse originates with Bateson (1972) and was further developed by Goffman (1974) and Tannen, ed. (1993), among others. Examples of framing in discourse include the classification of a given exchange as, say, an instance of small talk, formal debate, or teasing, or of a monological discourse as a sermon, a conversational narrative, a closing statement in a court of law, etc. In other words, discourse frames can be roughly equated with discourse genres and (sub)types of speech events. As such, they give rise to more or less detailed expectations with respect to the types of behavior (including linguistic behavior) that may be instantiated in different contexts and what those behaviors may mean. In this way, they lead participants to privilege certain interpretations over others.

What is relevant from the point of view of this paper is that different interactants may frame the same activity in different, even incompatible, ways. Although such discrepancies will not necessarily become overt in a given episode of interaction, they can be expected to result in at least somewhat divergent interpretations (occasionally, as the literature on emergency calls has shown, with tragic results, cf. Whalen et al., 1988). When they are perceived, discrepancies will typically lead to attempts to negotiate a mutually agreed frame, but such attempts may fail.

We suggested in §4 that Luke's questions in T3 of (10) above may be justified by a particular framing of the exchange between Sunny and Kevin in T1-2. In (11) below, from further down in the thread, we see two possible framings of that exchange being made more or less explicit: in T2, Kevin characterizes the interaction between Sunny and himself as a "conversation" among people with a shared interest in technology. Anna, on the other hand, suggests in T3 that Kevin's original reply to Sunny is more appropriately framed as an instance of "mansplaining".

- (11) [T1] Luke [to Kevin]
 Kevin I was wondering how self aware you are about these things. Seems like not much. But maybe you can do better in hindsight. I would encourage you to examine what your comment feels like to Sunny. It could also be characterized as an "unexplained dump on her thoughts".
 ↓
 [T2] Kevin
 So now you're saying I'm socially stunted because it didn't occur to me that offering a different POV in a *design conversation among tech people* about something neither of us designed or had a stake in would make somebody feel attacked?
 ↓
 [T3] Anna
 It is important to consider that you're talking to a *woman in tech who gets "well, actually" constantly from men having differing opinions as if just to be contrary*. That context is missing when you just ramble off why you disagree. That's it

Note that Anna does not suggest that Kevin intended to communicate that he was mansplaining. On the contrary, she takes pains to spell out to him a possible understanding of his original tweet (T2 in (10) above), and offers this understanding as an explanation for the negative reactions to that tweet. This exchange thus also illustrates the issue of possibly divergent moral orders: for a growing number of interactants, it is socially unacceptable for a man to contradict a woman who is speaking about a topic on which she is knowledgeable. For other interactants, politely expressed disagreement is acceptable no matter what gender configuration is involved.

Another instance of discrepant framings is seen in (12), where, interestingly, Luke makes explicit, if pre-theoretical, use of the very concept of a frame. These tweets appear at a point where he and a participant named Mike (of whom more below) have engaged in extended verbal conflict. As we see in T1, Mike has characterized their exchange as an "argument" in an earlier, quoted, tweet. Luke, however, suggests that this is not how he sees it, stating in T2 that, for him, their exchange has been a deliberate attempt on his part to get rid of someone he perceives as a busybody, and he provides another quoted tweet in support of that alternative framing. We will see further evidence of this particular framing discrepancy in §4.5 below. Here, it is worth pointing out that Mike seems unable to accept Luke's stated intentions even when they are expressed quite explicitly, as in the quoted tweet in T2 of (12) below. Plausibly, that inability is at least partly due to his having chosen to impose a different, incompatible, frame on their exchange:

- (12) [T1] Luke
 This is worth zeroing in on. *Mike is still stuck in the frame that we are having an "argument"* and I'm trying to "win". He's also desperately trying to win. So I could keep him here all day if I wanted to.
 [Quoted tweet:
 Mike [to Luke]
 Luke feels the best way to win *an argument* is to try and publicly shame his opponent.]
 ↓
 [T2] Luke [continued]
 But here's what I said to Mike directly. Waaaay back when. Before a lot of this foolishness. I told him *I was intentionally being rude in order to make him go away*. He just couldn't accept that.
 [Quoted tweet:
 Luke [to Mike]
 I'm doing fine. I'm being rude so you'll go away.]

In a standard Gricean framework, the absence of a shared goal ought to make communication impossible, given that it implies that the Cooperative Principle (CP), the formulation of which makes direct reference to the “accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [someone] is engaged” (Grice 1975: 45), is not in operation. Terkourafi, 2007 has, nevertheless, argued that Gricean mechanisms for implicature derivation do not have to be abandoned in cases such as this if we acknowledge face-constituting (which includes both face-enhancing and face-threatening, as well as, crucially, enhancing the speaker’s face *via* threatening the hearer’s face) as a default shared goal that interlocutors are always pursuing in interaction. In other words, interlocutors can be motivated by a wish to score interactional “face” points (often in the eyes of others, as in this exchange), and this can prompt them to apply the Gricean maxims not just to what is said (propositions explicitly communicated), but also to what is meant (implicatures) deriving further inferences from them, if they are sufficiently invested in a conversation.¹⁰ That would explain why, despite their divergent framings, participants in this thread engage in sometimes very lengthy exchanges (such as the current one between Luke and Mike), in which individual tweets do not give the impression of being random and unresponsive. It also explains another notable feature of this exchange, namely that neither interlocutor is always addressing the other directly. Rather, they repeatedly speak of each other in the third person, addressing their Twitter audience instead, as if on an interactional stage. This suggests that their goal with this exchange is not so much to convince each other, but rather to score interactional “face” points (each one is interested in having his own face constituted) in the eyes of this audience (see also §4.7). In other words, we contend that communication *is* taking place here, even if it is of an overtly conflictual nature.

4.2. Conventional meanings of linguistic expressions

It is intuitively evident that participants in an interaction may disagree about what words and phrases conventionally mean. Thus, for instance, a speaker of American English may describe someone as “wearing suspenders and a belt” in order to suggest extreme risk aversion on the part of that person, while evoking an altogether different image in the mind of British hearers. Even within a single language variety, different language users may disagree sharply about the nature of the basic descriptive content of certain linguistic items, diverging not only along ethnic or racial lines, but also along ideological ones (cf. the current controversy within Western public discourse regarding the meanings of the words *man*, *woman*, *male*, and *female*).¹¹ Further, as pointed out by Ariel (2001: 1024), inferred content that most pragmaticsians would characterize as only weakly conversationally implicated has, in specific instances, been taken by hearers as part of “what was said” in the truth-conditional sense, and this has notably had real-world consequences for the speakers on those occasions.

Non-descriptive aspects of meaning are possibly even more susceptible to being interpreted differently by different hearers, as theorized in Silverstein’s (2003) work on orders of indexicality. According to Silverstein, discourse is ideologically saturated, endowing many linguistic behaviors with *n*th-order indexical significance that goes beyond what those behaviors appear to denote at a purely descriptive level. Such *n*th-order indexical significance can extend to the attribution, by certain hearers, of very specific meanings to mere sound patterns: thus, in the United States, officials and academics have on occasion found themselves formally sanctioned for using words that phonetically resemble a well-known but semantically and etymologically unrelated racial slur, even where the context did not evidently invite a racially charged interpretation¹² and/or the word spoken was not in fact a word of English.¹³

We find instances of disagreement over both descriptive and non-descriptive meanings in our Twitter data. Both of the cases below involve the same participant, Mike, who originally enters the thread with the tweet in (13) and immediately becomes embroiled in confrontation with other participants, including but not limited to Luke (see further (12) above and §4.5 below):

(13) Mike

Sorry to wade in here but what on earth is happening in this thread?

In (14), we see Mike and a woman named Sally arguing, on the basis of potential semantic contrasts, about the descriptive meaning that is most appropriately attributed to the adjective *kind*. Their different representations of this word have resulted in sharply different interpretations of a couple of utterances previously produced by Luke, and which are quoted by Mike in T1:

(14) [T1] Mike [to Sally]

You think it’s fine for him [i.e. Luke] to say “fuck you” to me twice and actually argue that that’s kind. I have been nowhere near as rude, yet you feel I’m in the wrong. I think you should examine this paradigm.

↓

[T2] Sally

Since we’re being petty with words here (which is something you started so I assume it’s important to you), *the opposite of kind isn’t rude*. He might not have been polite to you but *he was kind*. So yes, I still stand by what I said. Are we ok? I don’t see this going anywhere soon

¹⁰ This is compatible with a broader Peircean account of meaning construction. For an outline, see (Hansen, 2008: 46–50).

¹¹ E.g. “Controversy over PHM’s removal of ‘adult human female’ sticker”, *Museums Association*, 9 June, 2019: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2019/06/04062019-phm-in-sticker-removal-controversy/>. (Last accessed 10/2/2022.)

¹² E.g. “Niggardly attitude to word costs man job”, *The Irish Times*, 30 January, 1999: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/niggardly-attitude-to-word-costs-man-job-1.1258732>. (Last accessed 13/12/2021.)

¹³ Cf. “Investigation into US professor sparks debate over Chinese word”, *BBC*, 11 September, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-54107329>. (Last accessed 13/12/2021.)

At a different point in time, a fairly extended exchange takes place between Mike and a participant called Miles, a part of which is reproduced in (15). This exchange is broadly similar to the one with Sally, except that it centrally features disagreement about the *non*-descriptive conventional meaning of an element of (13), namely the fixed interrogative phrase *what on earth*. Note that, although Mike, who originally produced the offending phrase, attempts to clarify the communicative intention behind his choice of words, Miles does not accept Mike's account, but insists on the validity of his own interpretation:

- (15) [T1] Mike [to Miles]
I genuinely believe that *if we're in a world where "what on earth is going on?" Is [sic] considered rude, then we have collectively lost the plot.*
- ↓
- [T2] Mike [to Miles, continued]
I'm very sorry but *where I'm from that's actually a really innocent turn of phrase. If you feel that's insulting then you're either ignorant of British turns of phrase or looking for confrontation where none exists.*
- ↓
- [T3] Miles
I'm Irish, I know phrase [sic]. *How it comes across is that you found Luke's position so preposterous that you couldn't even figure out what "on earth" could be going on. That's not a good faith way of politely asking a stranger to clarify a position. It's absurd to claim that.*

It is perhaps worth pointing out here that different hearers' reactions to Mike's original tweet and the confrontations that it sets off eventually result in Mike suspending his Twitter account. This development serves to underscore the point made in §3 above, namely that it is Hearer's, rather than Speaker's, Meaning that motivates the further practical consequences of an utterance.

4.3. Sequential placement

Conversation Analysts have observed that the meaning and social import of an utterance is to a large extent determined by its sequential placement, i.e. by the position in which it occurs inside an exchange of turns produced by different speakers (e.g. [Levinson 1983](#): 326–332; [Heritage 1988](#): 129; [Schegloff 2007](#): 251). A simple illustration of this is the very different ways in which one and the same sentence may be interpreted, depending on whether it appears in first or second position in a minimal exchange, cf. (16)–(17):

- (16) A. *Dad, is the Pope Catholic?*
B. Yes dear, he's the head of the Catholic Church.
- (17) A. Do you think Donald Trump deliberately tried to start an insurrection on January 6, 2021?
B. *Dad, is the Pope Catholic?*

The last part of T5 and the following T6 in (18) below illustrate the role of sequential placement. Luke and Anthony are arguing about the nature of the rules of engagement on Twitter, Anthony maintaining that Luke's initial post (T3 of excerpt (10) in §4 above) was inappropriate, given that there are no signs anywhere in the thread that Sunny was offended by Kevin's comment (in T2 of (10)). Luke, predictably, disagrees with Anthony's assessment, suggesting in T3 that he might in principle have obtained knowledge of Sunny's reaction from other sources. Anthony replies in T4 by stipulating that such knowledge must be demonstrated within a thread. In T5, Luke describes Anthony's stance quite bluntly as "bullshit", and follows up with an interrogatively phrased utterance, "Would you be willing to talk about where you got indoctrinated with this foolishness?" The format of this utterance – superficially a question about the hearer's willingness to talk about something – suggests that it might be meant as an indirect request to provide an account of what the source of Anthony's stipulation might be. It is possible that it was intended that way, but given the preceding dialog (supported by the use of the words "indoctrinated" and "foolishness" and the overall sarcastic tone of T5), it is more likely to be heard as a rhetorical question reinforcing his point that the stipulation is nonsense. Similarly, Anthony's reply in T6 could be meant as a conditional acceptance of the request (an interpretation which, in itself, is entirely dependent on the sequential placement of the reply, due to the elliptical format of the utterance), but is arguably more likely to be heard as maintaining the stipulation:

- (18) [T1] Luke [to Anthony]
I'm not blaming you for anything. We're just chatting. I'm trying to learn how the made up internet rules work. That's really why y'all are here right? I didn't follow the made up rules.
- ↓
- [T2] Anthony
Well, the rules are that if you don't specify any knowledge of what the woman you are "defending" here feels about the subject, then the internet assumes that you do not possess any such knowledge, and are literally speaking out of your ass.
- ↓
- [T3] Luke
Yep. That's how I read the made up rules, too. Seems odd don't you think? I mean there are lots of places to talk that people wouldn't be able to see. You should probably justify your claim that I don't possess such knowledge.
- ↓
- [T4] Anthony
I don't need to, as the assumption always requires the positive existence to be demonstrated first. Also, when I make this assumption, it is to the benefit of OP [= "Original Poster", i.e. Sunny].
- ↓
- [T5] Luke
Wow. Yeah that's what I'm talking about. That is some quality made up bullshit. I'm super curious where you learned it. *Would you be willing to talk about where you got indoctrinated with this foolishness?*

[T6] Anthony

After you tell us what OP thinks of this.

Excerpt (19) comes at the end of an extended confrontational exchange between Luke and a participant named George. In the second half of T1, George declares that he will now be leaving the exchange. The reason given could in principle be an earnest and objectively valid one. In this sequential position, however, he may also be heard as having run out of arguments to support his position and, as a result, as “chickening out”. Note that this interpretation could not as easily be attributed to George’s T1 if it had appeared at a different sequential position in the conversation (e.g., if it came after George had successfully fended off Luke’s arguments). Luke’s reply in T2 seems to suggest that he has made exactly that interpretation, and given its own sequential position, the reply can be heard as an attempt to goad George into staying with the exchange. George’s reaction in T3 suggests that he does indeed hear it as such and accepts the challenge. This interpretation is finally confirmed by Luke in T4:

(19) [T1] George [to Luke]

OK then. I hope you feel your day has been productive.

Muting now, as I have a deadline ...

[T2] Luke

Haha. That’s what I thought.

[T3] George

I mean ... *we can come back to this later*, if you like? I thought you were being made weary by all the shitheads? But if you have nothing else to do with your time, I’m happy to pencil it in for another occasion.

[T4] Luke

Successfully baited. [...]

4.4. The hearer’s assumptions about the speaker’s identities

Clark (1997: 580) has pointed out that hearers’ assumptions about a speaker’s identity may determine their interpretation of what that speaker “says”. Clark notes, for instance, that different meanings are likely to be attributed to an adjective like *significant* depending on whether the speaker is known to be a trained statistician or not. The different interpretations that a hearer who is familiar with more than one major variety of English may attribute to the noun *suspenders*, depending on whether they believe the speaker is British or American, is another case in point (cf. §4.2). At the level of what is “meant”, Gibbs et al. (1991) show experimentally that subjects tend to interpret identically phrased metaphorical comparisons as more meaningful when told they were produced by famous poets, than when told they were randomly generated by a computer.

Our proposal builds on this line of thought, making use of Zimmermann’s (1998) model of identities in interaction. Zimmermann posits three types of identities that can be attributed to participants:

- (a) Discursive identity: what a given participant is doing in conversational terms at a given point in an exchange. They may, for instance, be identified as a “current speaker” or “current hearer”, as a “story teller” or a “story recipient”, as a “questioner” or as an “answerer”, etc. Discursive identities are closely tied to the turn-taking system, and may evolve and change many times during a single interactional episode.
- (b) Situated identity: a participant’s predefined role within a given speech event as a whole, or at least within an identifiable subpart of a speech event. For instance, the speech event “service call” involves a “caller”, whose role is that of a customer or citizen claimant, and a “service agent”, whose role is to address and, insofar as possible, solve the issue(s) that prompted the call.
- (c) Transportable identity: more permanent identities that participants carry with them from one interaction to the next. Identities such as “woman”, “professor”, “father of twins”, “redhead”, “jazz lover”, “person of color”, ... fall under this heading. Any individual participant will have multiple transportable identities, some of which may be directly or indirectly relevant to what takes place during any specific interactional episode, while others will remain latent.

Crucially, hearers may derive different interpretations of the same utterance(s) depending on the constellation of relevant identities that they attribute to the speaker. In (20) below, we see Jon asking Luke to state his situational identity, namely whether he has reason to consider himself as a designated spokesperson for the original poster, Sunny. While Jon’s questions can be heard as sarcastically rhetorical, and thus as suggesting that Jon believes that the identity in question does not apply, the very fact that these questions are being asked is an indication that Luke’s perceived situational identity is of relevance to Jon’s interpretation of his tweets:

(20) Jon [to Luke]

Who are you tweeting for? Did Sunny ask for your heroism? You assumed someone was offended when they made no indication of being so.

Much the same line of questioning is subsequently pursued by Anthony in (21). Note that in T4, Anthony states quite explicitly that his interpretation of Luke’s tweet hinges on the nature of Luke’s situational identity:

- (21) [T1] Luke [to third party]
Yeah I think it's totally possible to decide to do something that some other people might hypothetically appreciate at the expense of someone who does not appreciate it. That's a choice one can make. I was wondering if he [i.e. Kevin] made it thoughtfully and intentionally.
- ↓
- [T2] Anthony
How would you know what OP appreciates or does not appreciate? Did you just have a huge debate about her without even **considering** what she might think?
... And you talk about MEN, lol
- ↓
- [T3] Luke
Why do you say I didn't consider it? Of course I did. If you learned that she did in fact have a problem with it, how would that change your view?
- ↓
- [T4] Anthony
What do you mean you considered it? How do you even know what it is? Did you ask her in another forum?
If I learned that you were merely representing her position on this, that would change my view about you misrepresenting her, yes.

Anthony's comment in T2 "... And you talk about MEN, lol" shows that he considers this aspect of Luke's transportable identity relevant to what he claims Luke is doing in this exchange (behaving patronizingly toward Sunny, something that Luke himself denies). Moreover, as already suggested in §4.1, an important source of the controversy in this Twitter thread as a whole is the different assumptions that participants make about the transportable identity that is most relevantly attributable to Sunny. Thus, we saw that in excerpt (11) above, Kevin indirectly characterizes Sunny and himself as "tech people". To Anna, on the other hand, a contextually more salient transportable identity of Sunny's is that of being specifically a "woman in tech", which is what supports her alternative framing of Kevin's original reply to Sunny as an instance of mansplaining.

4.5. The hearer's perceived social relationship with the speaker

A hearer's perception of the social relationship (or lack of it) between themselves and the speaker is likely, we suggest, to influence the hearer's interpretations to a greater or lesser degree. We distinguish three different aspects of this relationship which may be of relevance:

- (a) The existence of any power differential between speaker and hearer.
- (b) The extent to which the hearer expects to interact with the speaker again in the future.
- (c) How well the hearer knows and, not least, likes the speaker.

With respect to (a) and (b), the less power the speaker has over the hearer, the more the latter will be in a position to choose interpretations and framings independently of the speaker. Indeed, Kukla (2014) argues that, by their choice of uptake, hearers belonging to a more powerful social group can effectively transform a disadvantaged speaker's intended speech act into an act of a different nature. For instance, male employees – particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields – can systematically undermine a female manager by choosing to hear her intended orders as mere requests. By the same token, hearers will feel less compelled to be cooperative in their interpretations if they neither expect nor desire future interaction with the speaker.

In (22), partly repeated from (13) above, we see the very beginning of a subthread involving Luke and Mike. There is no reason to believe the two are already acquainted (indeed, as shown in (23), Luke later paraphrases part of T4 in a different tweet, indirectly referring to Mike as a "rando that pop[ped] up"), let alone follow one another. As can be seen in T3, Mike is English, whereas Luke's Twitter biography locates him in the Western United States. There is thus little chance that they will ever need to interact again. Arguably, this is part of what predisposes Luke in T4 to refuse to answer Mike's question from T1, and allows him to deliberately impose an uncooperative, "literal", interpretation on Mike's conventionally polite opening phrase "sorry to wade in here" in T2. As suggested in excerpt (12) above, T2 in (22) below is in fact designed to be heard as a hint for Mike to drop out of the thread; Mike, however, fails to take that hint.

- (22) [T1] Mike
Sorry to wade in here but what on earth is happening in this thread?
- ↓
- [T2] Luke
What are you sorry about Mike?
- ↓
- [T3] Mike
It's a polite turn of phrase, nothing to be read into it. *I'm English*. But I'm confused about what your issue is, would you care to explain?
- ↓
- [T4] Luke
I explained at length in the thread Mike. Did you read it? Or do you feel I should have to have the same conversation with every person who wanders in?
- (23) Luke [to Mike]
I knew we were on different wavelengths way before this tweet Mike. The only challenge is you seem to think that's a problem while I feel really comfortable with it. That's why I asked you questions about why you think I should have to talk to *every rando that pops up*.

As for (c), generally speaking, the better a hearer knows a speaker, the better we may expect them to be able to assess what that speaker's intention may have been in the first place. In addition, and not unimportantly, we may expect hearers to be more inclined towards cooperative or even charitable interpretations of the utterances of speakers towards whom they have positive feelings than they will be if they happen to dislike a speaker.

In (24), we thus see Sally, a Twitter follower of Luke's, express admiration and even a degree of affection for him in T1. In T2, Mike reacts with apparent sarcasm to Sally's positive characterization of Luke, producing as counter-evidence an earlier tweet of Luke's addressed to him. Indeed, by conventional standards, the quoted tweet does not seem to qualify as either kind or seeking to understand; nevertheless, Sally chooses to explicitly defend an interpretation of that tweet as being an expression of kindness towards Mike:

- (24) [T1] Sally [to Luke]
I know this is a bit random but *you are one of my favorite strangers* because through you I often get to see dynamics I kind of "perceived" being explained in crystal clear terms. Also *you are never not kind and seem to argue to understand* rather than to "win".
↓
[T2] Mike
Ah yes, someone who argues in a way that is kind and seeks to understand.
[Quoted tweet:
Luke [to Mike]
Fuck you Mike.]
↓
[T3] Sally
I've read the whole exchange and *yes I believe he was kind to you*. Kindness sometimes takes the form of setting boundaries to prevent someone to further make themselves look bad, and I say this understanding that you're probably not in the position to fully listen now

4.6. Relationships with third parties

Our sixth source is the hearer's relationship with third parties to the interaction. In [Goffman's \(1981\)](#) terms, the latter include both ratified but unaddressed recipients and (actual or assumed) overhearers. The role of third parties in affecting hearers' interpretations is arguably quite generally underestimated in the pragmatics literature and deserves further in-depth study (for a recent example, see [Xia et al., 2021](#)).

First, following [Caplow \(1968\)](#), the presence of third parties may not infrequently, perhaps even typically, result in the formation of coalitions of two or more interactants against one or more others. A hearer's membership of such a coalition, or their desire to join a particular one, may not only be influenced by the interpretations displayed by other members of the same or opposing coalitions, but may directly influence that hearer's own interpretations. In (25) below, partly repeated from (10) above, we see an example of the stepwise formation of two opposing coalitions within our Twitter thread:

- (25) [T1] Kevin [to Sunny]
You don't have to step as far back to make room for it, making it ideal in confined spaces. There's space recovered to not having rails on the x, y, and z axes. You'll never pull it off the rails fishing for something in the back. Also, bonus, neat. This UI dev approves.
↓
[T2] Luke
Did you consider not saying this? What made you abandon that option?
↓
[T3] John
What, counter opinions forbidden?
↓
[T4] Jake
I'm just going to pop in here to say that exercising self-restraint is not the same thing as oppression or censorship or whatever you call it.
↓
[T5] Anthony
why would one need to restrain themselves from making a relevant, constructive comment about a functional subject?

Given our preceding analysis of (10), we may class the interpretation of Kevin's T1 displayed in Luke's T2 in (25) as implicitly establishing a coalition between himself and Sunny, against Kevin. In virtue of its sequential placement, T3, produced by newcomer John, appears to class T1 as simply an opinion disagreeing with the one expressed in Sunny's original post. By rhetorically questioning Luke's implicature that expressing such an opinion is inappropriate, John implicitly takes Kevin's side, establishing a counter-coalition with him. In T4, another newcomer, Jake, joins the Sunny-Luke coalition by classing T2 as calling merely for self-restraint and suggesting an interpretation of T3 as an unwarranted objection. Finally, in T5, newcomer Anthony queries the need for self-restraint on the basis of an implicated interpretation of T1 as "a relevant, constructive comment". In doing so, he joins the counter-coalition with Kevin and John. It is clear in this case that the two opposing coalitions interpret Kevin's reply to Sunny (T1) in different and incompatible ways.

Later in the thread, we find a reply to Kevin in which Luke spontaneously analyzes how his communicative intentions towards overhearers, principally his Twitter followers, may inform how he chooses to interpret, and subsequently react to, other people's tweets. He suggests in the same tweet that, however controversial their nature, at least a subset of overhearers tend to share his interpretations and express approval of them:

- (26) Luke
My problem is inconsiderate internet shitheads.

*I do sometimes enjoy being confrontational depending on the audience. (Seems you [i.e. Kevin] have your own vices in that respect.)
Plenty of people want to hear it. I get a lot of positive feedback from people who aren't internet shitheads.*

Still later, Luke chooses to directly address his followers accompanied by a quoted tweet of one of his earlier replies to Mike. That he chooses to produce this kind of metacomment on an earlier exchange where some (perhaps many) of his current addressees will have played the role of overhearers, in effect analyzing and explaining aspects of his earlier behavior, serves to further underscore that he is conscious of the presence of overhearers on the platform and may in general be more interested in gaining their understanding and approval than that of a direct addressee such as Mike, who is not part of his in-group (cf. §§4.2 and 4.6 above):

- (27) Luke
Some of y'all know that diving into debate twitter is a vice of mine. One of the things that fascinates me is intentionally refusing the rituals people expect that are meant to pull you into useless debate. People get really frustrated. (I wouldn't recommend reading this thread.)
[Quoted tweet of earlier reply to Mike: see (23) in §4.5]

4.7. The hearer's assumptions about the speaker's intentions

We come, finally, to the hearer's assumptions (if any) regarding the speaker's communicative intention. We do not contest that, in many cases, hearers do make some such assumptions, nor do we doubt that they often take those assumptions into account to a certain extent. Indeed, just as some cultures enjoin hearers *not* to speculate about speakers' intentions (cf. §2.1), others may encourage them to do just that. The focus on speaker intentionality in the existing literature suggests that middle-class Anglo cultures may well be among the latter (cf. Morgan 1991). What we are contesting is the notion that such assumptions are criterial for hearers when forming a representation of the meaning of an utterance.

First of all, we suggest that the extent to which hearers are prepared to even consider what the speaker's intentions may have been depends to a not insignificant degree both on the social relation between them (cf. §4.6) and on the type of linguistic expression used (cf. §4.3). With respect to the latter, both anecdotal evidence¹⁴ and academic research (Nunberg 2018: 269; Cappelen and Lepore, 2019: 103) show that, for some types of expressions – saliently slurs – many language users reject the use/mention distinction out of hand, holding speakers who merely cite certain slurs socially accountable in the same way they would if those speakers had actively applied the slur to one or more individuals.

As far as social relations between speaker and hearer are concerned, we argued in §4.5 that, all else being equal, hearers who are positively disposed towards a speaker will be more inclined to consider the speaker's probable or stated intention when interpreting a potentially problematic utterance. In the absence of such a relationship, on the other hand, hearers may more easily jump to negative conclusions about the meaning of that utterance. Moreover, whether or not a close relationship already exists, hearers may on occasion distinguish between the speaker's intended-to-be-recognized communicative intention and what the hearer believes the “real”, underlying intention to be (e.g. Bertucelli Papi 1996; Sperber et al., 2010), as shown in (28):

- (28) Luke
I don't think I'm helping the situation. But really I'm examining stuff like this. *Men understand how to be considerate in the way they approach people. They often *choose* not to*, and instead tell other people the burden is on them.
[Quoted tweet:
Mike [to Luke]
It's just ... you had the option of handling me a lot more politely. But you didn't take that option. [Shrugging emoji]]
↓
Luke [continuing]
Like Mike knows that *he really showed up to admonish me for this*. He **knows** that. But *I was supposed to let him “politely” bait me into a debate before he got to this point*. And because I didn't let him do that, I'm the one that has a problem.

In other words, while assumptions about speakers' communicative intentions may well play a role in interpretation, we believe that, at most, they do so in what Searle (1969: 34) calls a regulative, rather than a constitutive, way (cf. Leth 2021: 281). Thus, the greater the overlap between the speaker's communicative intentions and the hearer's interpretation, the more likely it is that both parties will perceive their communicative exchange as having been successful (see further §5 below).

It is worth pointing out that, even where discrepancies between intentions and interpretation do not surface immediately, a hearer's inaccurate assumptions about a speaker's intentions may inform that hearer's interpretations not just in the moment, but also in future interactions with the same speaker. If discrepancies do surface and the speaker attempts to correct the hearer's assumptions, the latter is under no obligation to accept the speaker's account of what their intention was. In (29), we see an illustration of just such resistance, seemingly on the part of both participants:

- (29) [T1] John [to Luke]
Who are you tweeting for? *Did Sunny ask for your heroism? You assumed someone was offended when they made no indication of being so.*
↓
[T2] Luke
So did you. Did Kevin ask you to show up to make assumptions got [sic] him?
↓

¹⁴ E.g. “Former New York Times reporter breaks silence after being ousted amid racial slur controversy”, CNN, 1 March 2021: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/01/media/donald-mcneil-speaks-out/index.html> (Last accessed 14/12/2021).

[T3] John
Does it look like I'm defending Kevin, or am I just attacking your Twitter etiquette?
You seem like the kind of person to take personal offense to the criticism of someone's ideas.
Ideas are not a person's character. Why do you think a counter point is a personal attack?

↓

[T4] Luke
It looks like you're defending Kevin exactly as much as it looks like I'm defending Sunny. You still seem to want to characterize our interjections differently.
They're really not. If you came to fight, that's fine. But this logic isn't really working for you.

In T1, John attributes to Luke the communicative intention of wanting to defend Sunny. Luke initially appears to accept this attribution in T2, but counters by attributing to John a similar intention to defend Kevin. In T3, John's (rhetorical) question implicitly rejects the intention attributed to him, and suggests that his real intention is to call out Luke for inappropriate behavior. In T4, however, Luke maintains his interpretation, arguing that their respective behaviors are sufficiently similar to have been prompted by similar intentions. Furthermore, the format of his first utterance, repeating the matrix clause "it looks like", and thereby putting emphasis on what appears to be the case (potentially in opposition to what is the case), suggests that he is now implicitly rejecting the intention attributed to him by John in T1.

Not only may hearers insist on their own reconstruction of a speaker's intentions in the face of explicit challenge from that speaker, but as (30) shows, interactants are perfectly conscious that hearers may claim they know best:

- (30) Luke [to Kevin]
What I said to you is not a dump. It's just a question. The reason you received it poorly is probably because *you inferred a lot of things about why I asked it.*
Do you recognize and accept that *others are going to do that about your words regardless of your intent?*

5. Conclusion

The model presented above takes as its point of departure the fact that human beings can at best make hypotheses about what others are thinking, but can never know for sure. As a result, any interaction will centrally feature at least two different sets of assumptions about what the goal of the interaction is at any given point in time, what has been said, and what has been meant. Where there are more than two participants, the number of sets of assumptions at play will rise accordingly.

We suggest that assumptions about other people's contributions to the interaction derive from a mixture of the seven different sources discussed in the preceding section. The importance of any specific source is contextually variable: for instance, source 6, the role of third parties, will presumably be minimized in contexts where no third parties are assumed to have access to the exchange. Analogously, assumptions about transportable identities (as part of source 4), for instance, are likely to play a minimal role in a service context where an agent and a customer, identified only by first names or even initials of their choice, are chatting semi-anonymously online about a purely practical issue. Just as the role of a given source may be minimized in some contexts, it may be amplified in others: thus, the role of overhearers may be higher in some sociocultural contexts (e.g., Xia et al., 2021), and when discussing sensitive topics, for example, participants' interpretations may be informed by their degree of positive vs negative personal affect towards one another (as part of source 5) to a much larger extent than when neutral topics are broached. While source 2, assumptions about the conventional meanings of linguistic expressions, will play a central role by default, it is more likely to produce divergent interpretations in intercultural and/or cross-dialectal, as opposed to monocultural and homodialectal, communication.

Different episodes of interaction, and even different subparts of one and the same interaction, will feature different degrees of overlap between the sets of assumptions held by individual participants. Crucially, each participant has direct access only to their own assumptions and will – as we have seen above – often prioritize those over the verbalized assumptions of other participants. We suggest that communicative success must be gauged, not by whether or not hearers recognize speakers' communicative intentions (which are unverifiable anyway), but rather by the practical consequences of the interaction and different participants' degrees of satisfaction with those consequences. In this context, it is important to realize that just like the assumptions discussed above, that degree of satisfaction may not be the same for all participants. One final example from our Twitter thread serves to drive this point home. In (31), we see Mike assessing his exchange with Luke negatively, describing it as "going nowhere" and Luke's contributions as "unproductive"; Luke, on the other hand, replies that he has got exactly what he was hoping for from Mike and thus considers their exchange to have been productive:

- (31) [T1] Mike
Alright, I guess *this is going nowhere* then. I merely asked for clarification, but your attitude is *unproductively* confrontational so I'll back off. Have a nice day.

↓

[T2] Luke [to Mike]
I disagree Mike. I asked you some questions that would help me understand whether talking to you was worth my time. *You gave me the signals I needed to determine that. So it was quite a productive exchange for me.*

Summing up, we have argued that theories of meaning in communication need to move away from the dominant focus on speaker intentions towards placing center-stage the interpretations derived by hearers. While critiques of the speaker-centered framework are not new (cf. §2), our proposal is innovative by fleshing out, with empirical examples, the main sources that contribute to hearers' interpretations, of which the speaker's presumed intentions are only one among several.

We believe that the nature of digitally mediated communication, which shifts the onus from behavioural in-the-moment clues about a person's mental states (e.g., intonation, body language) to assumptions about who they are, their use of

language, and who else is watching, makes such a model especially relevant. However, we do not see this model as exclusively applicable to DMC, but rather put it forward as a model of communication more generally.

Among other things, we see the data adduced above as evidence that top-down processing plays an important role in meaning generation: language users do not necessarily form their opinions of a speaker and the nature of the context based on what that person says; rather, they will, to a not insignificant extent, derive their interpretations of what a speaker says based on what they believe about that speaker and about the context more broadly. The speaker's intentions may be the last thing they consider in this process, assuming they consider them at all.

In that connection, we make the following tentative hypotheses: Assume an exchange between two participants, A and B. In interactions where no third parties matter to either A or B, the degree of perceived communicative success can be predicted to correlate fairly directly (albeit not invariably, as shown by the example from [Gauker \[2001\]](#) cited in §2.3) with the extent of the overlap between each participant's assumptions about what has been said/meant and the nature of their individual goals. On the other hand, in (quasi-)eristic interactions such as courtroom interaction or formal debate (or indeed, parts of the internet), where the reactions of third parties are more important to both A and B than the latter are to each other, we predict that the degree of overlap between A's assumptions and B's assumptions will be largely immaterial to perceived communicative success. These two scenarios constitute end points on a continuum, such that “mixed-type” interactions, where both the speaker and one or more third parties matter to the hearer, will be located at various points in-between.

At this point, we want to emphasize quite strongly that our model does not imply that “anything goes”. On the contrary, three of the sources we have posited, namely frames, the meanings of linguistic expressions, and sequential placement, are based on convention or, at the very least, on strong regularities of usage and thus pose firm constraints on the kinds of interpretations that hearers can derive. In addition, hearers' freedom of interpretation will in a great many cases be constrained by expectations of future interaction with the speaker or with any third parties to the exchange.

That said, the meanings ultimately derived by different participants do not have to be identical, or even strongly overlapping, for interactants to judge a communicative exchange as having been successful. Even where all participants have reached their interactional goals, they may walk away from an exchange having different understandings of what took place, and each may firmly believe that their understanding is the correct one. In other words, multiple parallel meanings are possible.

Clearly, our use of the word “meaning” in this last sentence is different from that of [Grice \(1957\)](#). For Grice, there is no meaning of interest to pragmatics which is not speaker's meaning. By opening up the scope to consider hearers' non-speaker-meaning-based interpretations as legitimate meanings, as suggested also by [Verschueren's \(1999: 8\)](#) discussion of “meaning generation” vs “meaning construction”, we argue for a theoretical expansion of the meaning of “meaning”.

Conflict of interest statement

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous JoP reviewers, as well as the following colleagues for helpful feedback: Keith Allan, Kent Bach, Anne Bezuidenhout, Chi-Hé Elder, Hartmut Haberland, Michael Haugh, Marco Mazzone, Ken Turner, and Jef Verschueren. The usual disclaimers apply.

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