Saying, presupposing and implicating: How pragmatics modulates commitment

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ABSTRACT

Commitment plays a crucial role in the stabilization of communication. While commitment increases the acceptance of the message communicated, it comes with a price: the greater the commitment, the greater the cost (direct or reputational) the speakers incur if the message is found unreliable (Vullioud et al., 2017). This opens up the question of which linguistic cues hearers deploy in order to infer speaker commitment in communication. We present a series of empirical studies to test the hypothesis that distinct meaning-relations — *saying*, *presupposing* and *implicating* — act as pragmatic cues of speaker commitment. Our results demonstrate that, after a message *p* is found to be false, speakers incur different reputational costs as a function of whether *p* had been explicitly stated, presupposed, or implicated. All else being equal, participants are significantly more likely to selectively trust the speaker who implicated *p* than the speaker who asserted or presupposed *p*. These results provide the first empirical evidence that commitment is modulated by different meaning-relations, and shed a new light on the strategic advantages of implicit communication. Speakers can decrease the reputational damages they incur by conveying unreliable messages when these are implicitly communicated.

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1. Introduction

On June 1st, 2016, during a rally in Sacramento, Donald Trump accused his Democratic rival, Hilary Clinton, of telling "such lies about his foreign policy." The issue at stake concerned his position on nuclear weapons and Japan, and he forcefully denied having claimed that Japan should obtain nuclear power. In fact, Trump had expressed his opinion in two distinct interviews. In a first interview at a CNN town hall in March, he had said that "At some point we have to say, you know what, we're better off if Japan protects itself against this maniac in North Korea". Clearly, while he had not explicitly stated it, Trump had (strongly) suggested the idea of Japan getting nuclear power. However, in a second interview with Fox News Sunday a few days later, he claimed: "Maybe they would in fact be better off if they defend themselves from North Korea […] Maybe they would be better off — including with nukes, yes, including with nukes." The difference between Trump's statements relies on the fact that while the former merely implicates that Japan should get nuclear power, the latter explicitly states it (Grice, 1989). The intuition here is that Trump's *commitment* to what he communicated — and his accountability for it — increased from the first to the second interview. Consequently, his denial appeared not only implausible but also illegitimate.

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The notion of commitment, widely employed in the linguistic literature, aims at capturing the fact that senders can endorse or distance themselves to differing degrees from what they communicate (for a review see Boulat and Maillat, 2017; Brabanter and Dendale, 2008). The study of commitment has traditionally focused on a variety of linguistic devices — evidentials, epistemic modals, verbal expressions of confidence, as well as reported speech — whose semantics constrains the attribution of speaker commitment (e.g., see Lyons, 1977; Ifantidou, 2001; Noveck et al., 1996; Palmer, 1986; Papafragou, 2000, 2006; among many others). More recently, however, linguists have started investigating the ways in which commitment can be pragmatically modulated (Moeschler, 2013; Morency et al., 2008; Saussure and Oswald, 2009). This research has opened up the question of whether a communicated assumption carries distinct degrees of speaker's commitment depending on its relation to the semantic content of the utterance as well as on the role it plays in the overall interpretation of the speaker meaning.

In what follows, we address the question of whether the meaning relations of *saying*, *presupposing*, and *implicating* are pragmatic cues of the degree to which a speaker is committed to the proposition conveyed. Our goal is two-fold: on the one hand, we aim to provide a theoretical framework in which one can investigate the pragmatic modulation of commitment; on the other hand, we explore this modulation in a series of empirical studies. We approach this linguistic endeavour by borrowing theoretical and methodological tools from evolutionary and cognitive psychology (Vullioud et al., 2017, see also, e.g., Anderson et al., 2012; Fusaroli et al., 2012; Tenney et al., 2007; Tenney et al., 2008)).

2. Commitment across meaning-relations

In this section, we introduce the notion of *saying*, *implicating*, and *presupposing* and discuss different theoretical proposals regarding their relative degree of commitment. The obvious starting point of this investigation is the Gricean distinction between 'what is said' and 'what is implicated' (Grice, 1989). Grice argued that speakers typically communicate more than they linguistically encode. That is, a speaker can *say* something while *implicating* further propositional contents. Crucially, implicatures are by definition cancellable, either explicitly or implicitly:

> […] a putative conversational implicature that *p* is explicitly cancelable if, 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*, and it is contextually cancelable if one can find situations in which the utterance of the form of words would simply not carry the implicature. (Grice, 1989, p. 44)

Several authors maintain that, because of the cancellability of 'what is implicated,' *implicating* is non-committal, or at least less committal than *saying*. Cancellability is described as closely intertwined with the following notions: (i) non truth-conditionality, (ii) deniability, and (iii) certainty about the intended interpretation. All these are relevant to the study of commitment. Implicatures are non truth-conditional content, that is, their truth-value has no bearing on the truth of the utterance that carries them: if they are false, the utterance is odd, but not necessarily false (Carston, 2004). According to Moeschler (2013), this makes *implicating* a weak meaning-relation, "which means that the commitment of the speaker is not as strong as with the other relations" (Moeschler, 2013, p. 96), such as *saying*.

Furthermore, the cancellability of 'what is implicated' opens the door to its deniability (Pinker, 2007; Lee and Pinker, 2010). A content is deniable if the speaker can deny (when openly challenged) to have had the intention to communicate it in the first place. Deniability and cancellability do not overlap: what is deniable is cancellable, but what is cancellable is not necessarily deniable (at least not plausibly). Consider the following example adapted from Grice (1989). Mary is worried that her husband might be having an extra-marital affair and asks her friend Susy what she thinks about it. Susy replies:

(1) I saw your husband with a woman the other day at the cinema.

Mary interprets Susy's utterance as implicating that her husband is indeed likely to be having an affair. It turns out that Mary's husband was at the cinema, but in the company of his sister, whom Susy knows very well. When confronted with this, Susy defends herself by claiming: "I didn't mean to suggest that he had an affair. In fact, the woman he was with was his sister." In this case, the implicature is cancellable but hardly deniable, as suggested by the fact that Susy's defense is very much unlikely to convince Mary. While cancellability is a binary category (cancellable/non-cancellable), deniability is a matter of degree and it is a function of the discourse-related properties of the context of utterance (see, e.g., Sternau et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). Importantly, Pinker (2007) suggests that the deniability of 'what is implicated' allows a speaker to convey some content (sexual innuendos, bribes, threats, etc.), without running into the risk of paying its potential cost (direct and/or reputational). For instance, by implicating a bribe to a police officer ("So maybe the best thing would be to take care of it here"), a speaker can avoid the risk of being arrested for bribery by an honest cop or a speaker can avoid the embarrassment of having a sexual advance turned down, if it had been merely implicated. That is, in social interactions, *implicating* is reputationally less costly for the speaker than *saying*.

Finally, the cancellability of 'what is implicated' depends on its context-dependency: 'what is implicated' is cancellable because it is possible to find contexts in which the speaker could use the same utterance without conveying the same set of implicatures. Implicatures are the result of an inferential process that takes 'what is said' as a premise, and together with available contextual assumptions, leads to an implicated conclusion or implicature (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). The selection