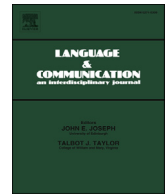




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Content deafness: When coherent talk just doesn't matter

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ABSTRACT

Common intuition suggests that, when people are engaged in face-to-face conversation, they diligently monitor the coherence of the messages they exchange. We present evidence showing that, contrary to this intuition, people often fail to notice cases of blatant conversational incoherence.

Thirty participants engaged in spontaneous face-to-face conversations with a confederate who, 8 min into the conversation, uttered the nonsensical sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously”. The sentence was uttered with a clear voice when participants were silent. A minute later the conversation was ended and participants were asked if they had noticed the sentence. Remarkably, only 10 participants noticed.

This newly uncovered phenomenon—which we label content deafness—corroborates and extends previous findings with online instant messaging.

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In a popular American television show, pedestrians on the streets of Los Angeles are asked questions which have no conceivable meaning. For example, in an episode from 2013 the question was:

“In light of Beyonce and Jay-Z’s recent trip to Cuba, do you support President Obama’s plan to allocate 5% of federal tax dollars to protect John Kerry from South Koreans should Ahmadinejad move forward with his nuclear program?”

Much to the amusement of the audience, most pedestrians did not ask for clarifications as to the meaning of the question but rather provided definite answers, delivering them with little hesitation and elaborating on their rationale. Is this apparently bizarre behavior simply an artefact caused by the presence of a professional camera team? Or is there more to it?

To be sure, that language can be used for interactions in which the coherence of the exchanged messages has little, if any, importance has been long documented in work on what has been called *Phatic Communion* (Malinowski, 1923; see also Laver, 1975; Senft, 2009). When engaged in phatic communion, people are more focused on broad interactional goals such as establishing a mood of sociability than on maintaining conversational coherence. But the question asked to the Californian pedestrians does not seem to call for a moment of phatic communion. Rather, it seems to call for the hearer to initiate repair (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Jefferson, 1972; Kendrick, 2014; Schegloff, 2000; Schegloff et al., 1977), deploying conversational routines which are considered universal hallmarks of human communication (Dingemanse et al., 2015). Yet, to the benefit of the show’s producers, the call for repair is often ignored. Could this be an indication that people’s low sensitivity for incoherent exchanges is not necessarily confined within the realm of phatic communion?

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To answer this question, we recently ran two studies aimed at determining the extent to which people engaged in spontaneous task-oriented conversations were sensitive to the coherence of the messages they exchanged (Galantucci and Roberts, 2014; Roberts et al., 2016).

In the first study (Galantucci and Roberts, 2014), pairs of participants chatted with each other for 15 min, using online instant messaging, about a cartoon image of five celebrities. Unbeknown to the participants, incoherence was introduced into these conversations by crossing them four times (for a total duration of 2 min) with other conversations in which different participants chatted about a different cartoon, depicting different celebrities. In other words, participants ended up chatting multiple times with a stranger, who was involved in a different conversation focused on a different cartoon. The logic of the study was straightforward: If people do not carefully monitor the coherence of the messages they exchange, they might not detect the crossing of the conversations. This prediction was tested in two experiments involving task-oriented conversations. In the first, intended to investigate narrowly-focused conversations, each participant was told that their partner had the same picture, colored differently, and that their task was to find the color differences. A third of the participants for whom the crossings had indeed created conversational incoherence¹ completely failed to notice it.

In a second experiment, intended to investigate more broadly focused conversations, participants were told that their task was to discuss which of the celebrities depicted in the cartoon they would most and least like to spend a day with. 27.3% of the participants for whom the crossings had indeed created conversational incoherence completely failed to notice it.

The second study (Roberts et al., 2016) replicated the second experiment by Galantucci and Roberts (2014) with a tighter manipulation of conversational coherence. Again unbeknown to the participants, we swapped two messages in their conversation for messages of our own. These swaps were designed to consistently generate obvious incoherence. They also allowed us to manipulate the kind of incoherence encountered by the participants. In one experiment, the incoherent message concerned a celebrity who was not in the cartoon and was not mentioned before in the conversation. For example, while Oprah was not in the cartoon and was not mentioned before in the conversation, the manipulated message would read: "Of these five, Oprah is kind of an icon for people like me". 42.86% of the participants completely failed to notice the incoherent message.

In a second experiment, the incoherent message implied that its sender was of a different gender from the gender expected by the receiver. For example, if the receiver's partner was a man, the manipulated message would read: "Hillary Clinton is an icon for women like me" (Hillary Clinton was one of the celebrities depicted in the cartoon). Participants met their partners at the start of the experiment and were in no doubt as to who they would be chatting to, yet a third of them completely failed to notice the incoherent message.

Taken together, these two studies suggest a striking conclusion: People engaged in spontaneous conversations easily overlook obvious incoherence. However, considering that in both studies people conversed through online instant messaging, there are important limitations to the scope of this conclusion. Instant messaging differs from natural face-to-face conversation in many ways and it is considered a poorer medium for maintaining conversational coherence than natural face-to-face conversation (Clark and Brennan, 1991; McCarthy et al., 1992). In consequence, it is unclear whether studies conducted with instant messaging can be used to make sound inferences concerning the monitoring of coherence in face-to-face conversation. The study presented here addresses this issue by focusing on precisely that. In particular, we had participants converse with a confederate who, at a certain point of the conversation, uttered a sentence which was bound to generate severe conversational incoherence: the famously nonsensical sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky, 1957). Consistent with the results of the two studies presented above, we predicted that the incoherent sentence would often go unnoticed.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants

30 native English-speaking students from New York City, with no deficits in communicative ability, participated for \$20 each. The average age was 24.73 years ($SD = 6.43$) and there were 16 female participants and 14 male participants.

1.2. Ethical statement

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Yeshiva University. All participants gave written consent to participate.

1.3. Communication task

In order to elicit a spontaneous and yet task-oriented conversation, we asked pairs of individuals (one a naïve participant, the other a confederate) to discuss five thought-provoking questions such as "Would you rather live the rest of your life on a

¹ This was determined through line-by-line analyses of the transcripts.

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