

**Context and Community**  
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**On ideologies (as I think of them)**

- An ideology is a cluster of mutually supporting beliefs, aliefs, interests, norms, values, ideals, institutions, practices, scripts, structures, affective dispositions, ways of seeing, interpreting, and interacting with the world, ... (Gramsci, Du Bois).
- Ideologies needn't be articulated by or visible to those who believe in them.
- Ideologies (and their components) needn't represent the world as being one way or another.
- We may not be able to achieve an ideology-free perspective.

**'Shared information' views of communication**

Grice, Lewis, Stalnaker, Clark and Marshall: communication depends on information *shared* by conversational participants. Perhaps this information must be common knowledge, common belief, common ground, etc.

"...we show that common knowledge is a necessary and sometimes even sufficient condition for reaching agreement and for coordinating actions" (Fagin et al, *Reasoning About Knowledge*, 189).

Shared information views are very fruitful! But they might encourage us to overlook some phenomena.

**What might we overlook? Aspects of ...**

- Propaganda

Jason Stanley suggests that there is a very tight connection between shared information and propaganda. E.g.: "Propaganda characteristically involves attaching problematic social meanings to seemingly innocuous words that are used to describe policy, in effect making the word 'welfare' like the word 'prostitution.' The social meanings of these words are not-at-issue content. Because they are not-at-issue contents, they are 'not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and are added [to the common ground] even if the at-issue proposition is rejected'" (*How Propaganda Works*, 157-158).

I worry that this distances not-at-issue content from ideology, and thus distances propaganda from ideology.

"Bernanke's goal in using the phrase 'fiscal cliff' was laudable: to move public opinion to avoid a devastating loss of jobs. But in so doing, he relied on false ideological beliefs about the economy, rather than lucid explanation. Bernanke thus set the stage for the subsequent irrational public deliberation..." (86).

Later public deliberation was irrational in part because 'fiscal cliff' did not create shared information.

- Slurring

The relationships between slurs and ideologies often aren't shared information. For example, the victims of an ideology cued by a slur may have much more relevant information about the ideology than other conversational participants do. More generally, slurring and non-slurring speech acts interact with a broad ideological background, which often is not shared information.

Mikhail Bakhtin: “what matters is ... the actual and always self-interested *use* to which ... meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker’s position (profession, social class, etc.) and by the concrete situation. *Who* speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word’s actual meaning” (“Discourse in the Novel” (1934–1935), 401).

– ‘Dog whistles’

Dog whistles are standardly thought of as *coded* speech (Haney López, Witten, some others). On this view there’s a difference between the content an addressee with the cipher will pick up, and the content other addressees will pick up. But some dog whistles coordinate action (without relevant shared information) by in effect requiring multiple ciphers, unbeknownst to the addressees.

John Ehrlichman: “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. ... by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.”

– Omissive implicatures

It’s possible to implicate without saying anything—to implicate that one agrees, consents, cannot overtly disagree, cannot overtly withhold consent, etc. But the content of such implicatures is often so underdetermined that little becomes shared information.

Ishani Maitra: “An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says ‘F\*\*\*in’ terrorist, go home. We don’t need your kind here.’ He continues speaking in this manner to the woman, who doesn’t respond. He speaks loudly enough that everyone else in the subway car hears his words clearly. All other conversations cease. Many of the passengers turn to look at the speaker, but no one interferes” (“Subordinating Speech,” 101).

Hannah Arendt: “...[The Nazis] always admitted [their political crimes] publicly, never apologized for ‘excesses of the lower ranks’—such apologies were used only by Nazi sympathizers—and impressed the population as being very different from the ‘idle talkers’ of other parties” (*Origins of Totalitarianism*, 344).

**There is *ethical* pressure to create shared information that clarifies the force of language**

At our best we are often aiming to create shared information, and indeed to create shared information that is relevant to the force and interpretation of language. (Public apologies, weddings, toasts, conventionalized celebrations of births, ribbon cuttings, award ceremonies, retirement conferences, ...)

I propose that there is ethical pressure to create shared information that clarifies the force of language. Think of Bob’s shared information picture not just descriptively, or instrumentally, but also *prescriptively*.

Such pressure provides *prima facie* reasons to make the connections between language and ideology explicit, part of shared information; to make the content conveyed by ‘dog whistle’ speech explicit; to make it safe and safe feeling for people to speak up in situations where they might otherwise feel safest remaining silent.

On my view we can have community even in the face of “conflicts which cannot have a rational solution.” But community depends on our thinking of each other not through “a friend/enemy relation” but as “adversaries who recognize the legitimacy of the demands of their opponent” (Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 138). Making information relevant to the force of language *shared* information helps us toward such recognition. Deficiencies in the context tend to undermine community; filling in the context tends to strengthen it.