STUDIA SEMIOTYCZNE (SEMIOTIC STUDIES), 36(2), 47–62
ISSN 0137-6608, e-ISSN 2544-073X
DOI: 10.26333/sts.xxxvi2.03

Article

ANTONIO MONACO *

INSINUATIONS, INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS, AND DENIABILITY

SUMMARY: Insinuations are indirect speech acts done for various reasons: a speaker *S* may insinuate *P* (i) because an insinuation is more polite, and *S* can save face by non-explicitly saying *P* (Brown, Levinson, 1987; Searle, 1975), (ii) because *S* can deny having insinuated *P* and avoid the responsibility of explicitly stating *P*, or (iii) because *S* perceives herself to be in a competitive rather than cooperative conversation, and she wants to pursue her interests strategically (Asher, Lascarides, 2013; Camp, 2018; Lee, Pinker, 2010; Pinker et al., 2008). These views assume that to insinuate *P*, *S* must also *intend to use* the deniability of *P* for dealing with a possible non-cooperative hearer. I argue that this requirement is too strong and falls short of accounting for cases in which *S* intentionally performs a deniable indirect speech act, but *S* has no intention to use that deniability.

KEYWORDS: insinuation, indirect speech act, strategic conversation, deniability, implicature, politeness theory.

1. Insinuations as Indirect Speech Acts

Insinuations are a familiar linguistic phenomenon that serve multiple purposes. Suppose a speaker *S* wants to threaten a hearer *H*, or suggest an illicit action, make a derogatory comment, or ask an embarrassing question. In that case, *S* may decide not to explicitly state what they want to say. Instead, *S* will use another question, statement, or comment to only allude to the meaning *S* wants to

* Georgia State University, Department of Philosophy. E-mail: amonaco2@student.gsu.edu. ORCID: 0009-0002-9174-2191.

convey, but in such a way that *H* will understand the true meaning of *S*'s words. Such situations raise at least two questions. How is it possible to convey a meaning without explicitly stating it? Why does *S* decide to insinuate instead of explicitly expressing what they want to say? These questions must be taken into account when we try to characterize the notion of insinuation.

Before considering what contemporary scholars have said about insinuations, it is useful to mention a difference between a common-sense definition of insinuation and the discussion of insinuations in philosophy of language. Usually, the word "insinuation" refers to something unpleasant, denigrating, or derogatory. However, such reference is not a necessary part of an insinuation. Consider a case where *S* insinuates she is willing to bribe *H*: even if an illicit action is being suggested, there is no denigration taking place. In the following discussion, I will focus on a wider notion of insinuation that is not limited to unpleasant comments.

Let us consider the question of how it is possible to convey a meaning without explicitly stating it. This question can find an answer by situating insinuations in the field of *indirect speech acts*. Searle (1975) defines indirect speech acts as "cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another" (p. 60). For example, suppose *S* says to *H*, "can you reach for the salt?". The speech act explicitly performed by *S* is a question, but the indirect speech act performed by *S* is a request.

Searle uses the category of illocutionary act, which goes back to Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Austin, 1962). Take Austin's example of a speaker *A* saying to me, "shoot her". By uttering something meaningful, *A* performs a locutionary act: the speaker means "by 'shoot' shoot" and refers "by 'her' to her". At the same time, in saying "shoot her", *A* is suggesting or ordering me to shoot her, i.e., *A* performs an illocutionary act. Ordering and suggesting are different acts, and Austin describes this contrast by saying that they have a different illocutionary force. Finally, by ordering me to shoot her, *A* achieves the result of persuading me to do so, i.e., *A* performs a perlocutionary act: an intentional causal consequence of *A*'s illocutionary act (for a more detailed discussion of Austin's distinction, see Ball, 2022).

When Searle suggests that insinuations are indirect speech acts, he means that whenever we have an insinuation, we are performing two illocutionary acts at the same time. Searle calls them the primary and secondary illocutionary acts. In the example of "can you reach for the salt?" the primary illocutionary act is a request for the salt, and the secondary illocutionary act is a question about the hearer's ability to reach for the salt, which has not to be taken literally but as a means to express the primary illocutionary act. So, if I say, "do you not have any other dress outside this one?" my primary illocutionary act is the assertion "you always wear the same dress", and the secondary illocutionary act is the question of whether the hearer possesses other dresses. What is insinuated then is the primary illocutionary act.

It has been suggested that insinuations are not a form of illocutionary act. Strawson (1964) argues that insinuations are not illocutionary acts because the speaker does not want their intention to insinuate to be recognizable but only to be suspected. Bach and Harnish (1979) also suggest the intention to insinuate has to remain unrecognized, and therefore they are not illocutionary acts. Bell (1997) also defines innuendos by following Bach and Harnish on the same point (see Fraser, 2001 for a detailed discussion of these three accounts).

I think these scholars are mistaken in thinking that the speakers do not intend their intention to insinuate to be recognized. As noted by Fraser (2001), the speaker successfully insinuates something if the hearer understands the intention of the speaker as an intention to perform the primary illocutionary act in addition to the second illocutionary act. As we will see in the next section, in insinuations, the speaker wants the primary illocutionary act to be deniable and, therefore, the possibility to claim that what she meant was just what she said. But the deniability of the insinuated meaning is compatible with the recognition of the intention of the speaker to insinuate. In the example of my saying, "do you not have any other dress outside this one?" my intention to insinuate is perfectly recognizable, and if I assume the hearer is merely suspecting I am insinuating, I consider my hearer naïve. Yet, if I am accused by my hearer of insinuating, I can still try to deny my primary illocutionary act by saying, "I was genuinely just asking". Whether my denial is implausible does not prevent me from trying to deny my insinuation.

Bell (1993) presents rumours as an example of innuendo, which may clarify why one may think insinuations are not illocutionary acts. For example, suppose speaker *S* reports a rumour to hearer *H* about her partner's infidelity. The perlocutionary effect *S* aims to reach is to make *H* worried about her partner. *S*'s intention can be perfectly hidden: *S* may say she reported the rumour to *H* because they are friends, and *H* may very well believe this. If this is a case of innuendo, I would suggest innuendo and insinuations are then not synonymous. Reporting rumours or news with the aim to produce in the hearer a certain reaction is not the kind of insinuation I am interested in. One may call reporting rumours an "innuendo" and keep the name "insinuations" for a form of indirect illocutionary act.

Bertuccelli Papi (1996) puts at the center of her discussion on insinuations a scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*, where Iago reports a rumour to Othello about a relationship between Othello's wife, Desdemona, and Cassius. Iago's intention to manipulate Othello is hidden and intended not to be recognizable, and not surprisingly, Bertuccelli Papi also rejects the idea of insinuations as illocutionary acts.

Bertuccelli Papi is interested in *Othello*'s scene because she sees insinuations as a form of manipulation. She takes this idea from Parret (1993), who also takes insinuation to be manipulative in nature. I think this is another misunderstanding. According to Parret, agent *A* tries to manipulate agent *B* if *A* intentionally acts with the intent to persuade *B* to perform a certain action *without A's intention being recognized*. If manipulation is understood in this way, then most cases of

insinuation are not forms of manipulation. If I try to bribe the waiter to get served earlier than other customers by saying, "I am very hungry, you know. I am sure they do not tip you very well here", my insinuation may very well be an attempt to get the waiter to perform a certain action, but my bribe is successful only if the waiter understands my intention to bribe him.

If one recognizes the speaker's intention to play a crucial role in insinuations, then a mechanism that makes indirect speech acts possible is the *conversational implicature* (Grice, 1975). By hearing *S*'s question, *H* assumes that *S* is observing the "Cooperative Principle" by which *S*'s contribution to the conversation is intelligible given the accepted purposes and direction of the conversation between *S* and *H*. To make *S*'s question cohere with the direction of the conversation, *H* assumes *S* is performing a polite request for the salt. In the case of the insinuation "do you not have any other dress outside this one?", the hearer assumes the speaker is not asking a genuine question because it is clear to the hearer that *S* knows *H* possesses more than one dress.[1]

Insinuations work as indirect speech acts, and this may suggest that the two notions are equivalent. Once we drop the derogatory element and exclude rumour-like innuendo, one can argue that insinuations are another name for indirect speech acts. This is the direction that Pinker, Nowak and Lee (2007) seem to take when they introduce the notion of indirect speech acts.

One reason to resist reducing insinuations to indirect speech acts is that insinuations are strongly connected with deniability, and some indirect speech acts are not deniable. Consider the mentioned case of *S* asking for the salt. *S* and *H* are having a diner together; *S* moves her hand toward the salt without being able to reach it, and she goes with question (1):

(1) Can you reach the salt?

Polite requests take the form of questions so often that, in the appropriate context, *S* cannot deny she was asking for the salt. At the same time, if *H*, instead of passing the salt, said, "yes, I can reach the salt", without passing it and completely ignoring that *S* was making a request, we would be inclined to say *H* lacks an understanding of social conventions. I think we should not consider as insinuations these cases of polite conversations where the indirect speech act works through conventionally stereotyped phrasing that does not display the possibility for the speaker to deny what she was saying.

The first characterization of the concept of insinuation, then, is the following:

[1] In Section 4, I discuss a relevance-theory framework as an alternative to the Gricean approach I use in the paper. For an overview of others general accounts on speech acts, see (Harris, Fogal, Moss, 2018).

Definition 1. *S*'s utterance *U* is an insinuation if and only if

(i) *U* is an indirect speech act,

(ii) by uttering *U*, *S* means *I*,

(iii) *S* intends the meaning *I* to be deniable.

We can now consider the other question mentioned at the beginning of this section: why did *S* decide to insinuate instead of explicitly expressing what she wanted to say? In the next section, I will consider different answers to this puzzle.

2. Insinuations and Deniability

Why do we insinuate? An initial answer is that insinuations happen in "strategic" conversations, i.e., conversations where the participants' motives do not align (Asher, Lascarides, 2013; Lee, Pinker, 2010; Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008). Strategic conversations are frequent in antagonistic contexts or in situations where it is uncertain if the hearer is cooperative. These conversations are supposed to be a counterexample to Grice's Cooperation Principle precisely because the speakers are not cooperative and refuse to make their intentions fully explicit and public. However, as Terkourafi (2011) observed, strategic conversations are not a counterexample to the Cooperative Principle. According to Terkourafi, one should avoid confusing locutionary cooperation with perlocutionary cooperation (a distinction made in Attardo, 1997). Even if the speakers' extra-linguistic goals do not align (i.e., lack of perlocutionary cooperation), locutionary cooperation is still required: for *S* to successfully insinuate *X*, *H* must be able to retrieve *X*, and therefore it is still required that *H* considers *S*'s contribution to the conversation to be relevant. Camp (2018) prefers to speak of "minimal standards of cooperation", by which she means not the violation of the Cooperative Principle but the refusal to go beyond the minimal norms of cooperation.

However, even assuming that insinuations are more common in less cooperative contexts, why does the speaker decide to insinuate in these contexts? Pinker, Nowak and Lee (2008; also Lee, Pinker, 2010) present a convincing explanation of why a speaker uses insinuations. Minimally cooperative contexts, where insinuations are prevalent, are characterized by the *Identification Problem*, which is roughly a situation in which *S* does not know if *H* is collaborative or not, so *S* wants to avoid running into sanctions, disapproval, or embarrassment. Consider the following example where a driver *S* is stopped for exceeding the speed limit, and he says (2) to bribe a police officer *H* (from Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008; also Camp, 2018):

(2) I am in a bit of a hurry. Is there any way we can settle this right now?

With (2), *S* is insinuating he wants to bribe *H*. *S* does not know if the officer is honest, and if *H* is indeed honest, by explicitly proposing a bribe, *S* may face

the charge of bribery (Identification Problem). So, *S* opts for an insinuation: if *H* is honest and accuses *S* of trying to bribe him, *S* can deny (2) was uttered with the intent to offer a bribe, and he can will say that he was suggesting paying the fine immediately. Pinker, Nowak and Lee offer a game-theoretic framework to describe how the speaker minimizes his risk by insinuating the bribe: if the officer is dishonest, the payoff of the insinuation is high; if the officer is honest, the penalty is smaller than that of an explicit bribe.[2]

The deniability of insinuations is a crucial factor in explaining why it is rational to prefer them in minimally cooperative contexts. But how does the denial work? In the previous example, I noted that if *S* is accused of bribery by *H*, he can pretend he was suggesting paying the fine immediately rather than later. This is a crucial feature of the insinuation denial: speakers offer another interpretation of their utterance. Camp (2018) describes how "implicature with deniability" works. Let us consider two interpretations of (2):

(2.1) I will pay you if you let me go.

(2.2) Can I pay the fine for exceeding the speed limit right now?

(2.1) is the interpretation that the driver wants to communicate to the dishonest officer; (2.2) is the backup interpretation of (2) in case the officer is honest. Camp suggests that the shift from (2.1), which is the most obvious interpretation of (2), to (2.2) depends on exploiting the gap "between what is in fact mutually obvious to the speaker and hearer, on the one hand, and what both parties are prepared to *acknowledge* as mutually obvious, on the other" (Camp, 2018, p. 48). Assume C_1 is the conversational context where (2.1) is the obvious interpretation of (2) given the implicit assumptions A_1, and C_2 is a slightly different conversational context where another set of assumptions A_2 is in place such that (2.2) is the obvious interpretation of (2). When challenged, the driver pretends to be in the context C_2. This is possible because, despite being obvious to both the driver and the officer that the conversational context is C_1, the driver is not prepared to acknowledge C_1 as the mutually obvious context.

The game-theoretic model of Pinker, Nowak and Lee, and Camp's explanation of the implicature with deniability work well together when the deniability is plausible. However, there are other cases where the two accounts enter into conflict. Consider the following example of a conversation between Harry and Sally, where Harry says (3) as a sexual come-on:

(3) Would you like to come up and see my etchings? (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008, p. 833)

[2] Pinker, Nowak and Lee are also assuming that an honest officer may be reluctant to pursue a non-explicit bribe because the "officer knows that he could not make a bribery charge stick in court because the ambiguous wording would prevent a prosecutor from proving his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt" (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008, p. 834).

Suppose there are contextual elements that make the sexual meaning of (3) even more explicit, like Harry's attitude and tone of voice; we can even imagine that Sally remembers Harry saying in a previous conversation that he had no etchings. In these cases, the gap between what is mutually obvious and what both parties are prepared to *acknowledge* as mutually obvious seems to be closed. In contrast with Pinker, Nowak and Lee (2008), Lee and Pinker (2010), and Fricker (2012), Camp argues that deniability has its limits: sometimes the denial "falls flat" because the "intended meaning is too obvious" and the "preferred alternatives too ridiculous" (Camp, 2018, p. 48). If this is true, the insinuation does not offer any solution to the Identification Problem: only one interpretation is available. In this case, the Identification Problem is given by the fact that if Sally is not cooperative (i.e., she has no interest in Harry) and rejects him, Harry has to pay the costs in terms of awkwardness (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008). Awkwardness can be a strong motivation for indirect speech. In the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), insinuations are an example of an *off-record* (i.e., indirect) politeness strategy used to protect the speaker's "positive face" by removing the impression of an imposition. For example, by using a polite request formulated as a question, the speaker avoids using the imperative mode that may sound like an imposition to the hearer. However, in example (3), the speaker is not just trying to be polite. Harry is also trying to minimize the risk of awkwardness by solving the Identification Problem. If there is no alternative interpretation of utterance (3) other than a sexual come-on, Harry risks losing face anyway.

Pinker, Nowak and Lee (2008) make a distinction between plausible deniability and possible deniability. The case of plausible deniability is what we discussed with Camp's account of implicature with deniability, and it depends upon the availability of an alternative set of assumptions in an alternative conversational context where the speaker pretends to be. In the case of merely possible deniability, the speaker exploits the nature of language as a "digital medium" (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008). In other words, we perceive as undeniable only what is said, and any indirect speech act, implicature, or off-record strategy is perceived as possibly deniable. I take the idea of possible deniability to be a psychological description of what the speaker feels certain about and has not to do with the actual possibility of working out an alternative interpretation. Pinker, Nowak and Lee try to characterize the language-as-a-digital-medium theory (LDM) in different ways. First, they say an indirect speech act can be possibly deniable because it is plausibly deniable in front of a virtual audience rather than the actual speaker. I do not think this way of characterizing the notion of LDM works. The denial may be implausible even in front of a merely possible audience. As Camp points out, if the gap between what is obvious and what we are ready to acknowledge as obvious is too small, the denial may be implausible even for a hypothetical, virtual audience. Another way to characterize the idea of merely possible deniability is through the distinction between "shared individual knowledge" and "common knowledge". Harry and Sally know each other's intentions (shared individual knowledge): "Sally knows that she has turned down

an overture, and Harry knows that she has turned down an overture". However, they do not know what the other knows (lack of common knowledge): "Sally does not necessarily know that Harry knows; she might think to herself, 'Maybe Harry thinks I am naive'. In addition, Harry does not necessarily know that Sally knows that he knows; he might think to himself, 'Maybe Sally thinks I am obtuse'" (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008, p. 837). Harry and Sally can play dumb about the common knowledge (knowing what the other person knows) even if the sexual come-on is not truly denied. In this example, we have second-order deniability.

Even if Camp does not use the word "possible deniability", some of her remarks about the limit of deniability are directed precisely against this notion. In particular, she notes that (1) it is not true that every direct speech is perceived as certain,[3] and (2) not every indirect speech act is deniable, or we would not have denials that fall flat. I think that both (1) and (2) do not really undermine the idea of possible deniability. Regarding (1), even if not every on-record speech act is perceived as certain, is sufficient that off-record speech acts are never perceived as completely certain. The point of the LDM theory is that only on-record communication can be perceived as certain (not that, in fact, it is certain every time) and that off-record communication cannot have this status. Regarding (2), the possible deniability hypothesis does not claim that if Harry did attempt to present an alternative interpretation of (3), his denial would have been successful. On the contrary, a merely possible denial is just possible precisely because it is not plausible, i.e., if the denial is explicitly stated, I will fall flat. The reference to a virtual audience aims to show that only a non-actual audience, which cannot challenge the denial, would be appropriate for merely possible deniability.

Although Camp's objections to mere possible deniability are not successful, I agree with her that not every indirect speech act is possibly deniable. In the last section, I argued that there is no room for merely possible deniability with respect to conventional polite requests. If I request the salt by asking you if you are capable of reaching it, we do not only have shared individual knowledge but also common knowledge: I know you know I intended to request the salt. This may be a problem for the claim that that only direct speech acts can be explicit, but this is not a problem for their treatment of insinuations in general. In what follows, I will assume a weaker version of the LDM thesis:

[3] "Lee and Pinker (2010, p. 801) suggest that 'there is a qualitative psychological difference between a direct proposition and even the most obvious indirect one' […]. Elizabeth Fricker claims that 'a speaker can never be incontrovertibly nailed with commitment to a mere conversational implication E of what she stated' (2012, p. 89)—in effect, that it is in the nature of conversational implicature in general *that denial is always possible. But this can't be right*. For one thing, even (6.2) [a direct speech act] is not fully explicit as a bribe. Indeed, most 'direct' speech involves context-sensitive expressions and other determinants of meaning that are not fully explicit and determinate, which also produce some degree of deniability" (Camp 2018, p. 48, my emphasis).

Weaker LDM Thesis. Indirect speech acts are generally (but not always) perceived as possibly deniable, while direct speech acts are generally (but not always) perceived as certain.

The discussion on the mechanism of deniability aims to show two elements of how scholars think the notion of insinuation should be characterized. First, an insinuation must display plausible deniability (that works according to the mechanism described by Camp) or possible deniability (that works in virtue of the weaker LDM thesis). Second, an intention is something used in order to take advantage of its deniability (plausible or possible). This is clear by the fact that an insinuation, for Pinker, Nowak and Lee, has the purpose of solving the Identification Problem. Even Camp agrees that an insinuation has no other use if not to avoid paying the "conversational cost" of being explicit: "insinuation constitutes a kind of communicative bluff: an attempt to make a conversational move without paying the conversational cost" (Camp, 2018, p. 47). The intention to use the insinuation in virtue of its deniability is then part of what makes an utterance an insinuation. Here is a new definition of insinuation that aims to capture these features:

Definition 2. *S*'s utterance *U* is an insinuation if and only if

(i) *U* is an indirect speech act,

(ii) by uttering *U*, *S* means *I*,

(iii) *S* intends the meaning *I* to be (at least) possibly deniable,

(iv) *S* intends to use *I*'s deniability to solve an Identification Problem.

By "intentionally deniable" in (iii), I mean that the speaker wants U to be deniable, i.e., it is not mere luck that U is deniable. I take conditions (i) to (iii) together to generate the minimal cooperation effect in the conversation. In the next section, I consider some cases of insinuations that this definition does not cover.

3. Accidental Insinuations

In the cases of insinuation presented so far, speakers aimed for some sort of deniability to protect themselves from the possibility of a non-cooperative hearer. The speaker must realize she finds herself facing an Identification Problem; otherwise, she would not insinuate or leave open that deniability door. This is why condition (iv) of Definition 2 was required. In the present section, I want to show that this condition makes Definition 2 too restrictive.

Consider the following example. Two kids, Tom and Alfred, love spy movies, and they love to act and talk like spies in real life. They develop a personal way of speaking inspired by the cryptic language used in spy movies. It turns out Tom and Alfred are also two bullies, and they love to beat up their classmate Fred. So Tom tells Alfred the following:

(4) Tomorrow, after school, we will show Fred how fun it is to mess with our business.

What Tom means by (4) is:

(4.1) Do you want to beat up Fred after school tomorrow?

Now, unbeknownst to Tom and Alfred, Tom's mother hears their conversation from another room, so she goes to Tom and Alfred and says, "are you insinuating you want to do something bad to Fred?". Tom is very surprised that his mother is in the house, but he promptly pretends the meaning of (4) is (4.2):

(4.2) Tomorrow, after school, we will play a game with Fred where he pretends to be the bad guy that messes with our business.

In this example, Tom and Alfred are using off-record communication which is plausibly deniable. The fact that it is deniable is not accidental. They are intentionally imitating deniable and indirect language (spy language), and so the deniability of (4) is intentional. Therefore, I take conditions (i), (ii), and (iii) of Definition 2 to be satisfied. However, condition (iv) is not satisfied because when Tom uttered (4), he had no intention to use the deniability of (4). First, Tom was not thinking of himself to be in a non-cooperative context: Alfred wants to bully Fred as much as Tom. Second, Tom did not know his mother was in the house at that moment, so he had no concerns about being heard by anyone other than Alfred. Third, Tom is not just saying (4) because he is pretending to be in a fictional game with Alfred; he wants to bully Fred in real life. Nevertheless, when Tom's mother hears Tom, she rightly assumes Tom is insinuating something. Tom accidentally insinuated (4.1) to his mother. Alfred knew exactly what they were talking about. For Alfred, the meaning of (4) was common knowledge given their previous misdeeds and the agreement to talk like spies.

Other examples can be constructed in the same way. Imagine two members of the mafia *S* and *H*, who speak to each other in non-explicit language even when they are completely alone and they have no reason to think anyone is listening to them. *S* tells *H*:

(5) Tomorrow, we will take a little trip to the sea with Mr. Monaco.

What *S* means is (5.1):

(5.1) Tomorrow, we will kidnap Mr. Monaco and bring him to a hidden place near the sea.

Suppose that, unbeknownst to *S* and *H*, a hidden cop hears them from behind a corner and says, "are you insinuating that you will kidnap Mr. Monaco?". Then, *S* replies that what he meant was:

(5.2) Tomorrow, we will take a little trip to the sea with Mr. Monaco, my dog.

As in the earlier case, *S* was communicating with *H* using deniable language not because *H* was a non-collaborative hearer but because *S* was used to speaking in that way. One can argue that this second case is different from the previous one because mafia members use non-explicit language precisely because the police might hear them. Even granted that the non-explicit language of the mafia is due to the necessity of hiding their intentions, and therefore was intentionally created for this reason, once it becomes a habit, the mafia members do not have to form any intention to use language in that way when they speak. In the same way, biting my nails is an intentional action, but once it becomes a habit, I do not need to form any intention to bite my nails because I inadvertently do so. What is sufficient for an insinuation to be formed is the *disposition* to use the deniability of the indirect speech act, not the intention to do so.[4] Here then is my final characterization:

Definition 3. *S*'s utterance *U* is an insinuation if and only if

(i) *U* is an indirect speech act,

(ii) by uttering *U*, *S* means *I*,

(iii) *S* intends the meaning *I* to be (at least) possibly deniable,

(iv) *S* has the disposition to deny she meant *I* in case a non-cooperative hearer argues the meaning of *U* is *I*.

Definition 3 is able to account for the standard case of insinuations where the speaker intends to deny the insinuation since the intention to deny the insinuation entails the disposition to deny it. In addition, it can explain why utterances (4) and (5) are a form of insinuation.

Definition 3 can play a role in the understanding of ironic speech acts. For example, suppose I say to my friend Sara "Wow, this party is amazing", in an ironic way. Suppose the organizer of the party hears me, and he tells me, "So you do not like the party". At that point, I can deny the intended irony and pretend that I truly meant the party was great. It seems that I insinuated something, but it is unclear if condition (iii) is met: did I intend my ironic utterance to be possibly deniable? I think this case depends on a more detailed account of ironic speech acts. However, one can argue that some ironic speech acts have intended denia-

[4] The dispositions under discussion are what has been called "canonical dispositions" (Choi, Fara, 2021), i.e., dispositions that can be clearly identified by the type of stimulus they respond to and the manifestation they display. In the case of the disposition to deny the insinuation, the stimulus is an accusation from a possibly non-collaborative hearer, and the manifestation is the denial of the insinuated meaning. These elements can be expressed via conditional analysis following Lewis's example (Lewis, 1997). My account remains neutral regarding the metaphysics of dispositions mostly because I do not think it is necessary to endorse a specific metaphysics to make my definition work.

bility insofar as the speaker has the disposition to deny it. If I am a comedian and I say something ironic on a Netflix standup comedy show, there is no chance for me to play dumb about what I ironically meant; I am fully committed to it. Instead, in many other real-life examples, I may intend my ironic speech acts to be deniable. In this sense, deniability is also intended in ironic speech acts, and so condition (iii) is met.

4. Objections and Replies

In this section, I want to consider two possible objections that can be raised against the definition of insinuation I proposed. The first objection to my account may regard the Gricean approach I endorsed. In a recent paper, Oswald (2022) proposes a relevance-theoretic explanation of the deniability of insinuations as an alternative to the Gricean one. According to relevance theory (Sperber, Wilson, 1995), human communication tends to maximize relevance: the relevance of what you communicate depends on the balance between the effort to process what you communicated to me and the benefits of having that information in my cognitive environment. In other words, I assume what you communicated is worth my effort to understand. In the case of an insinuation, the hearer is presented with two possible meanings: the literal meaning of the sentence and the insinuated meaning. If the insinuated meaning is much more relevant than the literal meaning, Oswald suggests, not only will the hearer naturally take the insinuated meaning to be what has been communicated, but the insinuation will will also not be plausibly deniable, and the speaker will be committed to what she has insinuated. If the literal meaning is still relevant, the speaker's insinuation can more plausibly be denied.

Oswald's proposal, as just presented, is an interesting account of the phenomenon of plausible deniability, just as the one proposed by Camp (2018). However, Oswald also wants to defend the claim that the relevance-theoretic approach works better than the Gricean one. It seems to me that he presents two arguments for this claim. First, he argues that insinuation and implicature are two distinct phenomena and should not be linked to each other. Second, he thinks that his approach promises a better definition of insinuation.

Regarding the first argument, he claims that "at least four reasons support the view that implicature and insinuation are not co-extensive" (Oswald, 2022, p. 161). These reasons are that 1) "deniability is more plausible in insinuation than in implicature", 2) unlike other forms of implicature, "cancelling the insinuated meaning would defeat the purpose of insinuation by making it overt", 3) "insinuations can sometimes be drawn as an interpretative conclusion of a set of several utterances", and 4) "the deniability of insinuation follows from the cancellability of implicature" (Oswald, 2022, p. 161). Oswald concludes in a polemic way by saying that "despite these differences, much of the literature on insinuation links it to implicature" (Oswald, 2022, p. 162).

In Section 1, I discussed whether we should consider implicature and insinuation co-extensive, and I ultimately rejected this idea; Oswald strengthens this point. Does this imply that insinuations are not implicatures? It does not seem so. All that matters in considering insinuations to be implicatures is the mechanism by which the hearer goes from what has been said to the speaker's meaning. The fact that insinuations do not work like other forms of implicature is a good reason to assume insinuations are not synonymous with implicature. However, none of the reasons provided by Oswald rules out seeing insinuations as implicatures. Oswald himself seems to think that this argument is not ultimately conclusive and that it only makes his second argument more persuasive.

Oswald's second argument is that his approach promises a better definition of insinuation. The evidence theoretic approach would put the plausibility of the deniability at the center of the definition of insinuation: "implicatures and insinuations are both committing and deniable, with the crucial difference that insinuations are plausibly deniable, while implicatures are not" (Oswald, 2022, p. 168). According to Oswald, when the insinuated meaning is much more relevant than the literal meaning, and the insinuation is not plausibly deniable, the insinuation is not only unsuccessful but not even an insinuation: it is just a form of implicature: the "implicit meaning would qualify as implicature, not as insinuation". One thing to notice is that Oswald is cautious in proposing a definition, so he seems just to advance a first tentative characterization: "I venture that insinuations are weaker than implicatures on the scale of inference strength, owing to their higher plausible deniability" (Oswald, 2022, p. 168).

There are two comments to be made about this proposal. First, if we take Oswald's account to be correct, merely possible deniability ceases to generate an insinuation, instead rendering an implicature of the same sort as polite requests. However, as we noted, the phenomenon of merely possible deniability shares interesting relevant parallels with the other forms of insinuation since it serves the purpose of solving an Identification Problem through an indirect speech action, while the same is not true for polite requests.

Second, Oswald measures the "success" of the insinuation given the plausibility of its denial. However, consider the case of the attempted bribe to the police officer. In that context, the insinuated meaning seems much more relevant than the literal meaning. Nevertheless, the insinuation is successful not because the deniability is plausible but because an honest officer may be reluctant to pursue a non-explicit bribe since the "officer knows that he could not make a bribery charge stick in court because the ambiguous wording would prevent a prosecutor from proving his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt" (Pinker, Nowak, Lee, 2008, p. 834). The success of an insinuation must be measured along different dimensions and not only for the plausibility of its denial.

In conclusion, I think that Oswald's arguments to tell apart insinuations and implicatures are unsuccessful. At best, Oswald's contribution can be taken as a promising way to explain the phenomenon of deniability of insinuation. However, if his ideas are taken to be the basis for a definition, the only parameter to

characterize insinuation insinuation is the different conditions relating to deniability, while the phenomenon of insulation has different dimensions that are not captured by these conditions.

The second objection concerns the idea of accidental insinuation. In the example of the two kids using spy-movie language, Tom suggested to Alfred to beat Fred up and accidentally insinuated the same message to his mother. One may argue that what matters when it comes to evaluating Tom's speech act is only what happens between him and Alfred and that the existence of a hidden third party is irrelevant. For any conversation, there may be the possibility of eavesdroppers who overhear what has been said, but since the speaker is unaware of them, they play no role in evaluating the speaker's intention.[5]

I want to underline two points in response to this objection. First, it is not necessarily true that a hidden third party reveals nothing about the speaker's intention. When Tom's mother breaks into Tom and Alfred's conversation and prompts Tom to deny the insinuated meaning, her intrusion reveals at least that Tom intended his speech act to be possibly deniable. Her intrusion also brings out Tom's disposition to deny the speech act in the appropriate context. In other words, it reveals something about the speaker's intention and disposition in conversation. Second, it can be the case that a third hidden party's interpretation of the utterance does not help to reveal anything about the speaker's intention. Consider, for example, any case of a misunderstanding where the hidden hearer lacks relevant information and context and therefore misinterprets the speaker. However, in the examples I provided of accidental insinuations, there is no erroneous understanding of the utterance.

These two reasons suggest that the phenomenon of overhearing has a role in pragmatics that varies between contexts but is not irrelevant to the understanding of certain linguistic issues.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a new characterization of insinuations, according to which insinuations are indirect speech acts that the speaker has the disposition to deny given a context in which an Identification Problem arises.

In Section 1, I argued for the idea that insinuations are indirect speech acts distinct from other forms of innuendo (like reporting rumours). In insinuations, the speaker intends their intention to be recognized but deniable, and in Section 2, I discussed how the phenomenon of deniability is possible and how it allows the speaker to solve Identification Problems. In Section 3, I discussed two cases of accidental insinuations to show that a disposition to deny the indirect speech act is sufficient to generate a successful insinuation rather than needing to appeal to an intention. Finally, I showed why two objections to my definition are unsuccessful. In conclusion, I defended a Gricean approach to insinuations that con-

[5] I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

sider the presence of hidden third parties, in the appropriate context, as revelatory of the speaker's intentions and dispositions in conversation.

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