

# 2

## Insinuation, Common Ground, and the Conversational Record

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### 2.1 Cooperation and Conflict

Most theorizing about linguistic communication assumes that conversation is a cooperative enterprise—specifically, one in which parties contribute information to a joint project of figuring out how the world is.<sup>1,2</sup> There are many reasons to adopt an assumption of cooperativity. First, simply as an empirical generalization, many conversations are cooperative; and it's methodologically wise to start with common, simple cases. Second, the fundamental nature of language as a conventional representational system requires a significant degree of cooperation for linguistic communication to occur at all. As Locke says, because the association between linguistic sign and signified is voluntary and arbitrary, each person has an “inviolable liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases”; it is only a desire to be understood that produces a “tacit consent” to go along with “common use” (1689, III.2). These features, of voluntariness and arbitrariness, render it very natural to model linguistic meaning as a set of conventions for solving a coordination problem, which builds in cooperativity (Lewis 1969, Skyrms 2010). Third, the fundamental nature of conversation involves coordination on and joint contributions to a common topic (Clark and Brennan 1991, Roberts 1996). Finally, much communicated is not explicitly articulated; to determine these contents, whether they are triggered by specific expressions or by the overall utterance in context, a hearer must consider what would make the utterance a cooperative contribution to the conversation (Grice 1975).

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to audiences at Cambridge University, the Columbia-CUNY conference ‘*New Work on Speech Acts*’, MIT, the New Mexico Texas Philosophical Society, Notre Dame University, the 2013 Rutgers Semantics Workshop, Tufts University, Université Libre de Bruxelles, University of Michigan, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas Austin, and Yale University for very helpful discussion. Special thanks to Kent Bach, David Beaver, Daniel Harris, Claire Horisk, Jeff King, Eliot Michaelson, Andy Rogers, and Lynne Tirrell for extensive comments and discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Many conversations also aim to achieve agreement about practical, evaluative, and interpretive matters, and it is not obvious that these are appropriately analyzed in informational terms I largely leave this concern aside for current purposes; see Camp 2017c for general discussion, and Camp 2017b for discussion of non-information-driven conversational contributions within Stalnaker’s model.

So the cooperative model is highly intuitive and theoretically fruitful. However, its plausibility has led theorists to largely ignore the range of cases and ways in which communication is less than fully cooperative. Many, even most conversations involve only partial alignment in interlocutors' interests, either in ultimate goals or in which information they prefer to share. The most obvious examples of non-aligned conversations are formally antagonistic interactions, such as courtroom cross-examination, or insurance contracts and settlements. But a wide range of business negotiations and personal interactions—including between intimate partners—are at least somewhat conflictual. In other cases, the parties' interests do align, at least in relevant respects; but there is some significant uncertainty about the degree of alignment. And in yet other cases, such as political speech, the speaker directs their utterance at, or knows it may be received by, multiple hearers with divergent assumptions and goals.

In all such contexts, an actual or epistemically possible conflict motivates at least one interlocutor to be *strategic* about their conversational contributions, by minimizing their overall commitments and/or by directing the conversation toward some contents and away from others. (In the structurally analogous case of badinage or witty banter, there is no substantive conflict, but a positive pleasure in interpretive strategy as an aesthetic end.) Further, at least in the cases I'll be discussing, both parties are, or should be, aware that the conversation is partially and/or potentially strategic in this way.<sup>3</sup>

Strategic conversations are not pure coordination problems in Lewis's (1969) sense. But they are still substantively cooperative enterprises, characterized by the same basic discourse structure and semantic and pragmatic principles as fully cooperative conversations. Interlocutors still employ linguistic conventions to undertake speech acts in a joint project of establishing a consistent set of claims and other commitments; and they still take turns and obey basic conversational principles. Irrelevant non-sequiturs, false statements, and 'Humpty Dumptyism'—unmarked abrogations of the 'tacit consent' to use words in their conventional sense—are all treated by participants as transgressing the conversational norms in a way that merely guarded or potentially misleading utterances are not.

The key difference from more standard conversations is that at least one party takes themselves to be bound only to *minimal* standards of cooperation. That is, rather than aiming to produce utterances that are maximally informative given minimal interpretive effort (Sperber and Wilson 1995), speakers may aim to ensure only that there is *some* accessible interpretation of their utterance which makes *some* relevant, true contribution to the question(s) under discussion. Correlatively, hearers may aim only to recover *some* interpretation that *some* audience might reasonably take the speaker to have intended. As we might put it, at least one side is prepared to 'work to conversational rule'<sup>2</sup>—to refuse to go above and beyond the minimal norms of conversational duty. Thus, I take it that in addition to their practical importance, such conversations are theoretically interesting, because they reveal the conversational

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the cases I'm concerned with differ importantly from at least many cases of propaganda as discussed by Stanley (2015) and of dogwhistles as discussed by Saul (this volume).

gears and cogs whose operations can be occluded when they are immersed in a sludge of charitable good-feeling and fully collaborative effort.

Some theorists have recently attended to strategic contexts, exploring the ways in which mutual awareness of conflictual or risky communication drives the production of phenomena like politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), vagueness (Blume and Board 2013) and scalar implicature (Jäger 2013). Here, I focus on *insinuation*: the communication of beliefs, requests, and other attitudes ‘off-record,’ so that the speaker’s main communicative point remains unstated.<sup>4</sup>

Before delving into more theoretical discussion, it will be useful to have some concrete examples in hand. A paradigmatic example of implicature from Grice (1975) also provides an elegant illustration of insinuation. Thus, when a professor writes:

- (1) Mr. X’s command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.

as the entirety of a letter of recommendation, their reticence effectively communicates that Mr. X is a poor candidate, even though the letter’s explicit content is innocuous. In some cases, such as insinuating ‘telling details,’ the speaker may overtly disavow the intention to communicate anything more than this uncontroversial explicit content. For instance, by uttering:

- (2) You know that Obama’s middle name is Hussein. I’m just saying.

the speaker conjures up a host of associated but unarticulated images and ideas in a way that shifts responsibility for recovering them onto the hearer, or perhaps onto the broader culture (Camp 2008).

While the insinuation in (2) is quite open-ended, the message in other cases is more specific. Thus, consider (3), uttered by George W. Bush during the second debate with Al Gore in the 2004 presidential election, when asked about his criteria for Supreme Court appointees:

- (3) I would pick somebody who would not allow their personal opinion to get in the way of the law. . . . Another example would be the Dred Scott case, which is where judges, years ago, said that the Constitution allowed slavery because of personal property rights. That’s a personal opinion. That’s not what the Constitution says. It doesn’t speak to the equality of America.

Here, as in (1), the explicit claim is uncontroversial, even banal. However, where the main communicative work of the explicit content in (1) was simply *not* being more relevantly substantive, the specific content in (3) plays a more specific role in generating the insinuated meaning. By explicitly criticizing a judicial decision that turned on ‘personal rights,’ Bush implicitly rejects other judicial decisions that have likewise invoked ‘personal rights’ in order to deny rights to other persons—thereby insinuating the intention to appoint a Justice who would vote to overturn the legalization of abortion effected by *Roe v. Wade*. For Bush, (3) thus functions as

<sup>4</sup> For other discussions of insinuation, see especially Solan and Tiersma 2005, Pinker et al. 2008, Lee and Pinker 2010, Terkourafi 2011, Fricker 2012, and Asher and Lascarides 2013. Godfrey-Smith and Martinez (2013) argue that honest informational signaling can arise in cases of limited common interest, including zero common interest, and even when dishonesty is cheap rather than costly.

a ‘dogwhistle’ (Saul, this volume) to those with the ears to hear, while explicitly he rejects any “litmus test” on abortion for judicial appointees.

The utterances in (1) through (3) are directed toward a public audience, so that the speaker either cannot know who will receive it, or knows that its recipients will have divergent perspectives. We’ll see in §2.2 that there is a sense in which hearer multiplicity is indeed a key ingredient in insinuation more generally. However, many insinuations are addressed to specific audiences. Thus, consider (4), addressed to potential buyers from a different racial or religious background or sexual orientation than the local majority:

- (4) Perhaps you would feel more comfortable locating in a more . . . transitional neighborhood, like Ashwood?

Here although the (nearly) explicit suggestion is just that the hearers themselves would be more comfortable elsewhere, the implicit imputation is that the hearers should feel uncomfortable in the current locale, by virtue of not ‘belonging’ to the majority group. The utterance is thereby intended to *make* its addressees uncomfortable; but the Realtor carefully avoids liability for discriminatory housing practices by framing her utterance as a perky, positive suggestion. Although in this case the interlocutors are relative strangers, insinuations can also arise between intimates. Thus, a spouse who utters:

- (5) Wow, it’s late! The party must have been really fun, huh?

to their tipsy partner ostensibly returning from an obligatory annual office party might thereby insinuate a suspicion that their partner has been engaged in illicit post-party gallivanting.

Finally, we should note that insinuations can communicate contents with various types of attitude or force. Thus, while (1) is overtly a statement and (4) is a question, both generate implicit directives; and (2) undertakes an implicit commitment to action. Other insinuations produce implicit requests. Thus, a driver stopped for speeding might utter (6) in order to suggest a bribe (Pinker et al. 2008, Lee and Pinker 2010):

- (6) I’m in a bit of a hurry. Is there any way we can settle this right now?

Similarly, Henry II is reputed to have uttered something like (7) as a veiled command to assassinate Thomas Becket (thanks to Barry Smith for having suggested this example):<sup>5</sup>

- (7) What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and brought up in my household, who let their Lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric?

In sum, these examples are diverse along multiple dimensions: the specificity of their implicit message and/or their intended audience; their communicative force; the conversational stakes; and the degree of common background and shared interest between interlocutors. What they share is that the speaker has crafted their utterance in a way that minimizes conversational risk: their explicit, on-record content is unobjectionable, and their riskier conversational point or move is implicit.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Barry Smith for the example.

Mitigating communicative risk by leaving contents unstated is a distinctive rhetorical advantage of insinuation. Specifically, it allows speakers to get contents and commitments across while preserving *deniability* about those contents, shifting responsibility for those contents away from themselves, onto either the hearer or else a more amorphous, putative collective intentionality—what ‘people say’.

Risk-mitigation is far from the only reason for speaking indirectly; and insinuation is far from the only way to depart from fully explicit articulation.<sup>6</sup> Just as there are importantly different ways to be indirect and/or inexplicit, including implicature, figurative speech, loose talk, explicature, and ellipsis, there are also importantly different reasons why speakers choose not to be fully direct and explicit, including politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987); efficiency in transmitting complex contents through the ‘articulatory bottleneck’ of language’s linear format (Levinson 2000, 28); preservation of vagueness and indeterminacy in the attitudes the speaker wants to communicate (Dennett 1981); and transcendence of expressive limitations, especially in referring to experiential states (Pugmire 1998, Camp 2006a).

However, risk-mitigation is indeed *a* key reason for communicative indirection, and one that insinuation is especially effective at achieving. In §2.2, I explain how insinuation can exhibit the crucial but puzzling feature of deniability, given the obvious fact that communication does succeed in these cases. In §2.3, I offer a theoretical characterization of insinuation and explore its consequences for our theoretical understanding the speaker’s meaning, common ground and the conversational record.

## 2.2 Deniability and Its Limits

### 2.2.1 *How Insinuation Works*

Although the basic phenomenon of insinuation is familiar enough, its workings are more theoretically puzzling. To see why, and how it works, we need a slightly more general characterization of cases like (1)–(7) above.

In these cases, a speaker *S* produces an utterance *U* of a sentence *L* whose conventional function is to present a proposition *P* with illocutionary force *F*. (*U* might also have the conventional function of committing the speaker to a non-cognitive attitude. Although such utterances may be used to insinuate, I ignore them here.) *S* locutes *F*(*P*): they intend to be recognized as producing an utterance with that conventional function. Further, *S* illocutes *F*(*P*): they intend to be recognized as asserting, or asking, or commanding, or promising *P*. (In other cases, such as figurative speech and loose talk, *S* intends to be recognized as illocuting a proposition *P*’ not conventionally associated with *L*. Although such utterances may be used to insinuate, I ignore them here.) In addition, *S* also intends to be recognized as presenting a distinct proposition, *Q*, in a mode *M*: as a contribution of information, a query, a directive, etc. (That is, these ‘modes’ have the same “essential effect” (Stalnaker 1978, 86) as assertions, questions,

<sup>6</sup> Pinker and colleagues present risk-mitigation as a general explanation for communicative indirection; specifically, they claim that speakers employ indirection in order to mitigate the risk involved in renegotiating the type of relationship operative between speaker and hearer: in switching among communal sharing, authority ranking, and equality matching (Lee and Pinker 2010, 794).

and commands, though they may differ from them in detail.) Finally, in all of these cases, communication is successful in the sense that the hearer *H* recognizes all of these intentions. Indeed, in many (though not all) cases, communication succeeds in the more robust sense that *H* doesn't merely come to believe that *S* intended to communicate  $M(Q)$ , or that *S* believes, desires, or intends *Q*, but themselves come to believe, desire, or intend *Q* (or an appropriate correlate thereof).

So far, nothing distinguishes *U* from standard cases of implicature, as in (8):

- (8) A (standing by car on the side of the road): I'm out of gas.  
B: There's a service station two blocks up State Street.

where *B* implicates, but does not say or assert, that the closest gas station is two blocks away, and that it is currently open, sells gas, and will otherwise address *A*'s obvious but unstated needs. What is distinctive of insinuation is that if *H*, or someone else who overhears the conversation or hears an indirect report of *U*, explicitly attributes  $M(Q)$  to *S*, then *S* is prepared and able to coherently deny  $M(Q)$ .

The most straightforward and minimal such denial merely insists on a narrow literal construal of *L*. Thus, in response to an accusation like:

- (1.1) Hey wait a minute! Do you mean that Mr. X is a bad philosopher?

or a report like:

- (1.2) George told us Mr. X is a bad philosopher.

the writer of the pallid letter in (1) might utter something like:

- (1.3) I didn't say that.  
(1.4) All I said was that Mr. X is punctual and has good handwriting. And that he does!

So long as  $F(P)$  on its own would constitute at least a minimally cooperative contribution to the conversation, narrowly focusing on  $F(P)$  may suffice as a rebuttal of the attribution of  $M(Q)$ . (Indeed, given this, *S* may need to rely on non-verbal cues like body language, along with verbal cues like tone and manner, to get *H* to recognize that they intended more than  $F(P)$ , but in a way that preserves deniability.)<sup>7</sup> However, in many cases of insinuation,  $F(P)$  is so anodyne that it does not meet even minimal standards of conversational relevance. Especially in such cases, the denying speaker may offer an alternative content  $M(Q)'$  as their putatively intended communicative contribution, which would render *U* cooperative.

<sup>7</sup> The need to provide an additional positive indication of the speaker's intention to communicate something more or other than the conventional meaning  $F(P)$  in cases where  $F(P)$  suffices as a minimally cooperative conversational contribution also arises in non-insinuating cases, especially with manner implicatures. Thus, the proposition expressed by 'She produced a series of notes closely corresponding to the Star Spangled Banner' suffices informationally as a response to 'What did Jane sing?', but implicates that she did a bad job of it. 'Twice-apt' metaphors, like 'Jesus was a carpenter' or 'There are storm clouds on the horizon', may be conversationally appropriate on their literal interpretation; it may only be their occurrence within a poem, or their accompaniment by an arched eyebrow, which indicates an additional layer of meaning (Searle 1979).

Of course, these claims by *S* about their communicative intentions, in the face of an explicit attribution of *M(Q)*, would be disingenuous. Further, in most successful cases of insinuation, *H* realizes this (and *S* realizes that *H* realizes this). Nonetheless, when an insinuation is properly executed, the denial sticks: *H* lacks the resources to rebut *S*'s denial of having meant *M(Q)*. I am hesitant to offer a definition of insinuation, partly because it is by its nature a murky phenomenon that pushes the boundaries of communication. But this phenomenon of *implicature with deniability* clearly lies at its core: it is what makes insinuation practically useful for speakers, and theoretically interesting for philosophers and linguists.<sup>8</sup>

Not all cases of insinuation involve the speaker insidiously attempting to further their own goals at the hearer's expense, although it is obviously ripe for this. Some insinuations probe the extent of alignment between speaker and hearer; while others aim to protect the hearer, or a third party, from the shame of explicit accusation or the pain of explicit acknowledgment. Given this variety, not all hearers will always want to resist the speaker's conversational move. However, a speaker's use of insinuation puts a hearer who *does* want to resist in a frustrating position, insofar as a commitment they want to reject has been thrust into the conversation, but in a way that escapes easy response. That is, a direct negation, along the lines of:

(1.5) That's not true.

(1.6) No, he doesn't.

will target *U*'s explicit, anodyne content, and leave the troublesome message untouched. But an explicit query or accusation about the speaker's insinuated message, as in (1.1), both disrupts the ordinary conversational flow and invites speaker denial of having meant this. The same difficulties beset an explicit retort such as:

(1.7) I believe that Mr. X is an excellent philosopher.

Worse, in at least some cases an explicit query, accusation or response, like:

(2.1) Are you suggesting that Barack Obama is a radical Islamist?

can actually lend credence to *Q*, by demonstrating that *Q* is something someone might plausibly think on the basis of *P*, thereby inviting *S* to respond with a follow-up like:

(2.2) You said it, not me; but now that you mention it...

<sup>8</sup> In introducing insinuation in §2.1, I said that the explicit literal content is 'designedly' uncontentious; and in the previous paragraph, I described deniability in terms of a speaker's being 'prepared' to deny having meant *M(Q)*. How much explicit foresight does insinuation require? Most of the time, insinuating speakers presumably hope communication goes smoothly, so that the need for denial never arises. Nonetheless, in many cases of insinuation, especially with high stakes, speakers do formulate their words carefully, planning for downstream conversational contingencies. In other cases, speakers minimize their conversational commitments with a merely intuitive feel for the possible conversational openings they could duck into. Finally, in still other cases, a speaker may initially intend to straightforwardly implicate *M(Q)*, and realize its conversational costliness and the availability of a conversational out only when challenged. I am unsure whether to count these last cases as insinuations. I take clarifying the commonalities and differences in operative interpretive mechanisms to be more important than taxonomizing the range of cases for its own sake.

At the same time, even as insinuations do place resistant hearers in a rhetorically frustrating position, it's not as if speakers hold all the communicative cards. Insinuation constitutes a kind of communicative bluff: an attempt to make a conversational move without paying the conversational cost. An explicit attribution of  $M(Q)$  attempts to call that bluff; and a speaker denial doubles down on it. However, the speaker's use of insinuation also renders them vulnerable to a commensurate form of interpretive foot-dragging by the hearer, in the form of *pedantry*: a refusal by  $H$  to pick up on and respond to  $M(Q)$  despite recognizing it as having been intended.<sup>9</sup>

Hearer pedantry takes two main forms. In *flat-footed pedantry*—especially beloved of philosophers— $H$  insists on construing  $U$  as simply meaning  $F(P)$ , and balks at  $F(P)$ 's conversational insufficiency. Thus,  $H$  might respond to (1), not with an explicit attribution as in (1.1), but with something like:

- (1.8) Why should we care about Mr. X's elocutionary abilities? We want to know how he is as a philosopher.

Alternatively, in *cunning pedantry*,  $H$  twists  $U$  to serve their own conversational ends; thus,  $H$  might respond to (1) with something like:

- (1.9) Well, people always say that anyone who can speak clearly can think clearly, so I guess you're saying that we should hire him.

With both forms of pedantry,  $H$ 's refusal to pick up the conversational ball at the point where  $S$  had hoped to roll it forces  $S$  to either shoulder the responsibility for introducing  $M(Q)$  overtly, or else abandon the attempt to make  $M(Q)$  as a conversational move altogether. The accompanying risk is that with both speaker and hearer dragging their interpretive feet, conversation slows to an unproductive literalistic crawl.

### 2.2.2 *Plausible Deniability and Its Limits*

Deniability and pedantry are flip sides of a common conversational coin, which interlocutors can deploy to achieve their respective conversational aims with minimal conversational liability. It is, I take it, an empirical fact that insinuated speech is often deniable, and that hearers sometimes retaliate with pedantry. We observe both denial and pedantry in operation in political speech, courtroom testimony, business negotiations, and conversations among intimates. They often provide grist for witty banter in romcoms, and for intrigue in spy flicks. Even the plots in children's books—for instance, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *A Bargain for Frances*—sometimes hinge on insinuation, denial, and pedantry. But how is deniability even possible? After all,  $S$  intends to communicate  $M(Q)$  by getting  $H$  to recognize this communicative intention, and  $H$  successfully recognizes this. Further, if  $S$  does claim to have meant  $M(Q)'$  instead of  $M(Q)$ , she lies about her communicative intentions; and that lie is often a bald-faced one. How does the speaker get away with it? It's clear enough why speakers would *want* to communicate without assuming conversational liability; but why would hearers go along?

<sup>9</sup> I discuss deniability and pedantry in connection with figurative speech in Camp 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2012, and 2017b.

Insinuation is not a fully uniform phenomenon. It comes in degrees of obscurity; and speakers vary in their brazenness. But even highly transparent insinuations still admit at least some deniability. Thus, for instance, Lee and Pinker (2010) found that subjects estimated the probability that a speaker meant to offer a bribe with the obvious insinuation:

- (6.1) I'm very sorry, officer. But I'm actually in the middle of something right now, sort of an emergency. So maybe the best thing would be to take care of this here . . . without going to court or doing any paperwork.

as extremely high, but still short of full certainty, while they did report certainty about the overt statement:

- (6.2) I'm very sorry, officer. If I give you a fifty, will you just let me go?

(Lee and Pinker 2010, 800).<sup>10</sup> As Pinker et al. (2008, 836) put it, “Any ‘deniability’ in these cases is really not so plausible after all.” And yet—it is *possible*. ‘Plausible deniability’ is usually quite *implausible*; but it is an all-too-familiar feature of strategic communicative contexts.

The contrast between (6.1) and (6.2) might suggest that the crucial difference is between explicit, primary messages and implicit, secondary ones. Thus, Lee and Pinker (2010, 801) suggest that “there is a qualitative psychological difference between a direct proposition and even the most obvious indirect one . . . with direct speech, no uncertainty exists in any direction: Present and absent parties are both completely certain of the intent, and the speaker knows it.” Similarly, Elizabeth Fricker claims that “a speaker can never be incontrovertibly nailed with commitment to a mere conversational implicature *E* of what she stated” (2012, 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) 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 (Hawthorne 2012, King 2014).

More importantly for current purposes, deniability does have its limits. Sometimes a politician's, or a spouse's, denial falls flat: his intended meaning was just too obvious, and his proffered alternative just too ridiculous. Thus, we need to understand both how deniability is possible even when it's not plausible, and also what its limits are.

The key feature of denial, I think, is that it trades on 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.<sup>11</sup> In cases like (1) through (7), *S* intends for *H* to take the fact that she uttered *U* in *C* as evidence that she means *M(Q)*. Further, *S* intends *H* to arrive at *M(Q)* by relying on a set

<sup>10</sup> “Whereas the direct bribe was judged by all the participants but one as 100% certain, the thinly veiled bribe was judged by most of them as exactly one percentage point less certain: The mode, median, and 75th percentile of responses were at exactly 99%.” They also found that subjects preferred more indirect statements for communicating riskier contents in higher-stakes contexts.

<sup>11</sup> Although it differs in some important details, and although we disagree significantly about the theoretical upshot, my explanation in this section is largely compatible with that in Fricker (2012), and overlaps in important ways with that of Lee and Pinker (2010).

of interpretive presuppositions, *I*, that are in fact mutually salient to *S* and *H* in *C*. Finally, in cases of successful insinuation, *H* recovers all of these intentions. The crucial feature exploited by speaker denial is that the presuppositions *I* that generate *M(Q)* on the basis of *U* are context-specific and merely implicit. In actual fact, these presuppositions really are mutually obvious to *S* and *H*. But when *S* is challenged about what she meant, she pretends that this is not the case. In effect, she pretends to be in a slightly different conversational context *C'*, governed by an alternative set of interpretive assumptions *I'*, which differ from *I* in crucial but relatively intangible ways, such as the relative ranking of salience among features or objects, or the relative probabilities of various counterfactual possibilities. Given these differences, the calculation of *U* plus *I'* delivers *M(Q)'* rather than *M(Q)* as *U*'s implicated content.

Thus, for instance, if the Realtor who uttered (4) were accused bigotry, she might respond with a denial like:

- (4.1) Oh dear me, I didn't mean to suggest anything like that. I only meant that with so many families with young children here, you might not find as many people to socialize with as in a more up-and-coming neighborhood.

In (4.1), *S* suggests that the 'comfort' the addressees might not feel in the local neighborhood derives from being childless rather than from racial or other demographic difference, and that Ashwood's being 'transitional' consists in its being on an upward trajectory, rather than from its being further from amenities like parks and museums. While these are indeed factors that someone might consider in deciding where to live, by fixing on them *S* conveniently pretends to ignore other factors which are in fact more obvious to both parties.

Speaker denials are so annoying because it is obvious to *H* not just that *I* constitutes the actually operative set of presuppositions, but also that *S* is in fact exploiting *I* in communicating—indeed, *S* may have constituted *I* as presupposed by uttering *U*. But speaker denial is still possible because those presuppositions are merely implicit, and because identifying them requires a nuanced sensitivity to interpretive salience and relevance. Most of us are in fact remarkably sensitive to such interpretive nuances. We effortlessly, even automatically pick up on fine-grained conversational cues, including a host of non-verbal and quasi-verbal signals like bodily stance, gesture, facial expression, discourse speed, prosody, register, and tone; and we fluidly adjust our mindsets to match the speaker's in light of these cues. From a theoretical perspective, though, our ability to coordinate on these highly specific conversational details often appears miraculous: it involves abductive identification of just the right premises at just the right moment, in a way that makes many Gricean appeals to 'calculability' look like *post hoc* rationalizations, and confounds much computational AI processing of natural discourse. More importantly, insofar as the resulting presuppositions aren't mandated either by direct anaphoric reference to previous linguistic context or by explicit appeal to concrete, objective, discrete features of the extralinguistic conversational context, *S* can pretend to be relying on slightly but crucially different presuppositions without overtly violating basic communicative principles.

Hearer pedantry is underwritten by this same gap between in-fact mutually obvious interpretive presuppositions and mutually acknowledged presuppositions. Faced with an insinuation, *H* can pretend either to have failed to identify any plausible set of

unstated interpretive assumptions that could render *U* conversationally cooperative, as in flat-footed pedantry; or else invoke an alternative set of unarticulated assumptions *I''* to derive *Q''* as the purported implicature, as in cunning pedantry.

The gap between interpretive assumptions that are in fact mutually obvious and those that are mutually acknowledged as being obvious also explains the *limits* of deniability. That is, in all cases, a speaker who exploits deniability ‘plays to a virtual audience’ (Goffman 1967; Lee and Pinker 2010, 7896), pretending to address *U* to a possible hearer *H<sub>P</sub>* who would sincerely employ the alternative assumptions *I'* to derive *M(Q)'*. For the alternative interpretation *M(Q)'* to be *admissible*—or above the threshold of ‘plausible deniability’—it must be *reasonable* to calculate *M(Q)'* on the basis of the uttered sentence’s conventional meaning *F(P)*, the commitments undertaken in the conversation to this point, and some set *I'* of epistemically accessible presuppositions consistent with those commitments, in a way that renders *U* at least minimally conversationally cooperative.

Fricker is correct that what she aptly calls the “dodgy epistemics” of pragmatic interpretation (2012, 89) guarantees that there will virtually always be at least some leeway among admissible interpretations. However, the range of presuppositions that are accessible, and the stringency of what counts as reasonable, varies by context. Both Lee and Pinker and Fricker assume a cross-contextually stable—and universally high—standard for deniability. But an interpretation *M(Q)'* might be grudgingly admissible in one context and not in another, depending on which interpretive assumptions are epistemically accessible and reasonably relevant in that context.

One factor affecting admissibility is how wide a range of alternative assumptions can be ruled out as not actually *accessible* in *C*. A speaker’s denial of *M(Q)* may be directed either at the original interlocutor *H*, or at a third party who overhears *U* or who makes or hears an indirect report of *U*. Often, speakers directing denials at third parties will be able to invoke a wider range of possible alternatives: because the third party lacks full access to the immediate context *C*, they don’t know what spoken and unspoken assumptions were actually operative in *C*. By contrast, *H* is more likely to be in a position to invoke a richer body of explicit and implicit commitments, which *S* would not be prepared to repudiate if pressed directly, and which could militate in favor of *M(Q)* over *M(Q)'*.

However, even a denial directed at the actual hearer in a conversation between long-term intimates about familiar topics may still be able to exploit significant latitude in accessible presuppositions. For instance, while the imagined speaker of:

- (5) Wow, it’s late! The party must have been really fun, huh?

actually insinuated that their tipsy spouse was out gallivanting after a party they both know to have been dreary, the stay-at-home partner might respond to an accusation of having meant this by offering specific reasons that they are purportedly happy that the party-goer is apparently forging better collegial ties. In the imagined scenario, such an innocent expression of optimism is in fact less plausible than resentful accusation. But the putative optimistic interpretation impersonates a sunnier incarnation of the speaker, one he might still manage to instantiate on his better days, and that the hearer might have to admit could have been actual on this occasion.

In addition to variability in the accessibility of alternative interpretive assumptions, conversations also vary in the stringency of the operative standard of *reasonableness*,

in at least two ways. First, the more there is a known likelihood of conflict or other motivation for strategic interpretation, the more reasonable it is to be actively on one's interpretive guard. And this in turn widens the scope of deniability (and cunning pedantry), by increasing the range of alternative assumptions one must be able to rule out to eliminate a putative alternative interpretation. Second, interlocutors' willingness to push the bounds of reasonable reinterpretation depends on their willingness to bear larger social costs. A speaker who expects future interactions with *H* to be quite limited may be more prepared to offer an alternative interpretation  $M(Q)'$  at the outer bounds of admissibility; while a speaker who is concerned to preserve the relationship, or their own reputation going forward, may be less inclined to invoke minimally credible reinterpretations. Thus, a tourist trying to avoid paying the fine for having failed to pre-purchase a metro ticket may be more likely to double down on insisting that they didn't intend a bribe by (6) than a driver stopped by a cop in their hometown; and the resentful stay-at-home partner who utters (5) will be more or less likely to admit his insinuated suspicions when challenged, depending on whether he hopes that the relationship can be still salvaged.

We can observe all these factors in operation, in sometimes cross-cutting ways, in public discussions of what speakers have insinuated and the legitimacy of their attempted denials, for instance in talk-show debates about a politician's latest controversial tweet and attempted 'walk-back'. Speakers do regularly push the bounds of deniability, claiming to have been quoted out of context and insisting that their utterance was innocuous, or just a joke. And often they do get away with denying something they obviously did mean: the recipients of the denial roll their eyes but acquiesce. But speakers are also sometimes held legally, administratively and politically responsible for content they have merely insinuated, on the ground that any reasonable person would have taken them to have meant  $M(Q)$ , or something else equally damning, given what else is known about the conversation and surrounding context.

One particularly fraught class of cases concern sexual harassment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission includes merely implicit threats to continued employment within the scope of "Quid pro quo" sexual harassment.<sup>12</sup> Many employers' HR policies follow suit, prohibiting the "direct or indirect request" for sexual favors, as well as repeated suggestions of sexual interest, whether direct or indirect, after the subordinate has "shown," again either directly or indirectly, lack of interest in a sexual relationship.<sup>13</sup> Thus, legal and administrative standards recognize that even indirect, insinuated contents can be genuinely meant, and that speakers can sometimes be held liable even for statements designed to be deniable—so long as the plaintiff can demonstrate that the relevant suggestions and refusals were in fact made. At the same time, in applying these clauses, the operative standard is not how the actual supervisor or subordinate actually interpreted the utterance, but how a

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/upload/currentissues.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Muse (1996, 79). Pinker et al. (2008, 785) cite the 2008 arrest of Massachusetts State Senator Dianne Wilkerson, whose acceptance of \$2,000 "in appreciation of her efforts" to obtain a liquor license for a client was treated as a case of bribery; and the 2009 arrest of Robert Halderman for attempted blackmail after he attempted to "sell a screenplay" to David Letterman depicting Letterman's sexual relationships with staffers.

“reasonable person” would have, or could only have, interpreted that utterance in that context. And demonstrating this requires establishing, to a sufficiently robust degree, the limits of reasonable interpretation in that particular conversational context—something that is often difficult to do in practice. Thus, these policies confirm simultaneously that insinuation affords a significant degree of protection against conversational liability and consequent testimonial report; but also that it does not confer blanket immunity. Sometimes speakers are “nailed” for what they insinuate, because their proffered reinterpretations fail to meet a standard of reasonableness.

## 2.3 Common Ground, Mutual Knowledge, and the Conversational Record

In §2.2, I described the workings of insinuation, focusing on the twin interpretive weapons of speaker deniability and hearer pedantry, and explaining the puzzling phenomenon of implausible “plausible deniability” as exploitation of the interpretive leeway generated by the “doggy epistemics” of pragmatics. In this section, I explore the theoretical implications of insinuation, deniability and pedantry for our understanding of meaning and communication more generally.

I began §2.1 by alluding to an intuitive, informally assumed model of communication in terms of cooperative contributions to a common epistemic (and sometimes practical) enterprise. A maximally straightforward implementation of that model is represented in Figure 2.1.

On this simple version, a speaker *S* who produces an utterance *U* thereby *says* or *asserts* the content *P* that is compositionally determined by the conventional meanings of the words they utter. Saying/asserting is a proposal to add the proposition *P*

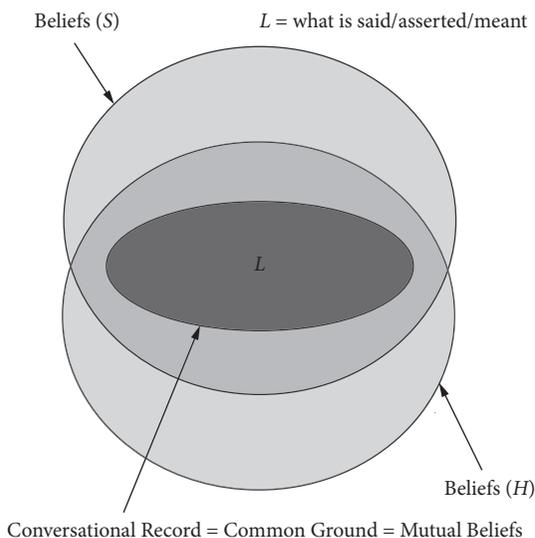


Figure 2.1 Intuitive, simplistic model of cooperative communication.

conventionally associated with the uttered sentence  $L$  to the *conversational score* or *common ground*, where saying is equivalent to asserting and the conversational score is a record of contributions to the common ground, which is in turn a matter of what is mutually believed. If the hearer  $H$  does not object,  $S$ 's utterance makes  $P$  common ground between  $S$  and  $H$ ; the overall goal of communication is to enlarge the common ground until the set of possibilities that could be actual is reduced to a singleton, or at least a relevantly sufficiently restricted set.

This simplistic version of the cooperative model is a mash-up of three strands of contemporary theorizing about linguistic communication. It implements the basic outlines of a broadly Gricean story about speaker's meaning, as the attempt to change another's mind by giving them a reason to do so, within a broadly Stalnakerian framework, of conversation as an evolving pool of mutual information, by employing a broadly Lewisian (1979) notion of conversational score to track the evolution of that common ground, and a broadly Lewisian (1969) notion of convention to fix the contents of speakers' contributions to it.

I doubt any theorist accepts this simple version in its entirety. For one thing, some theorists deny the existence or theoretical relevance of some of the relevant terms. To take just one recent lively debate, Lepore and Stone (2015) argue for a thoroughly conventionalist, neo-Lewisian view of meaning, while Bach and Harnish (1979), Neale (2005), and Harris (2016), among others, argue for the neo-Gricean view that meaning is always ultimately a matter of speakers' intention, with Davidson (1986) rejecting any substantive theoretical role for convention in theories of communication and meaning. More relevantly, many theorists already insist on refinements and distinctions among the various terms equated in Figure 2.1. However, many of these same theorists also appear to accept the simple model as a decent starting point, and frequently employ it in practice. In this section, I aim to remind them, and to convince others, of the need to distinguish its various terms. Specifically, I use insinuation to argue that Gricean speaker's meaning, contributions to the Stalnakerian common ground, and updates to the Lewisian score are all distinct. (Indeed, we will find reason to distinguish conversational record from conversational score.) One can successfully mean, and communicate, something without entering it onto the score or even the common ground.

### 2.3.1 *Speaker's Meaning*

Why should we think that in successful cases of insinuation,  $M(Q)$  is part of what  $S$  means by  $U$ ? Although an impeccable appeal to authority is available, given that our initial example is both a paradigmatic case of Gricean implicature and a paradigmatic case of insinuation, it is not very satisfying. The core of Grice's notion of non-natural meaning is that it is an attitude that  $H$  comes to entertain at least partly in virtue of recognizing  $S$ 's intention that  $H$  recognize  $S$  as intending that  $H$  entertain it. This entails two features: first, that  $S$  have an intention which plays a significant role in getting  $H$  to entertain that attitude; and second, that  $S$ 's intention to get  $H$  to entertain it be open and overt. I'll take the two conditions in turn.

First, why think an insinuating speaker  $S$  intends to get  $H$  to entertain some content, such that this intention is not just a cause but a reason for  $H$ 's entertaining it? One might deny this, as Lepore and Stone (2010, 2015) do for hints and innuendos; instead,

they think, hints are cases of merely natural meaning, akin to one parent leaving a vase broken by their child out for the other to see (Grice 1957, 440). One thread of their complaint is that a hinting speaker *S* lacks an appropriately determinate communicative intention. I think we should reject any determinacy requirement on meaning. As Grice pointed out (1975, 58), most implicatures are indeterminate; indeed, this can be an important expressive advantage, even in fully cooperative contexts. Further, many straightforwardly literal utterances lack determinate communicative contents (Camp 2006a, Buchanan 2010). But in any case, a requirement of determinacy can't be wielded against insinuation as a class of speaker's meaning. It is true that some insinuations, like (2), are determinedly indeterminate, conjuring up an amorphous cloud of unspecified associations; perhaps most or all hints and innuendoes are like this. But in many other cases of insinuation, the range of what *S* means is just as bounded as in uncontroversial cases of meaning. Thus, within their respective imagined contexts, the speaker's actual insinuated messages in (1), (3), (4), (6), and (7) are close to the following:

- (1.10) Mr. X is not a good candidate for a job in philosophy.
- (3.1) I will appoint a Supreme Court Justice who will vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.
- (4.2) People like you aren't welcome here.
- (6.3) Can I pay you to let me off the hook?
- (7.1) Kill Thomas Becket.

A second part of Lepore and Stone's complaint against counting hints and innuendos as speaker's meaning is that recognition of *S*'s intention fails to play a sufficiently central role in *H*'s identification of  $M(Q)$ . When Salome showed Herod the head of St. John the Baptist on a charger, this communicated that John was dead, but by *showing* this rather than telling it (Grice 1957, 382). Perhaps likewise in (1) through (7), *S* simply 'lets it be known,' or 'puts it out there' that  $F(P)$ , while leaving the hearer to arrive at the insinuated attitude  $M(Q)$  on their own.

This is indeed the avowed strategy in (2). But even in this case, the connection between explicit and insinuated content depends on recognition of the speaker's intentions, in at least two ways. First, as we saw in §2.2, the connection is underwritten by a rich set of assumptions *I* about how the world is, and about how objective facts and interpretive opinions are connected—assumptions the hearer may otherwise fail to entertain, and may actively reject. Even for 'telling details' like (2), the connection between  $F(P)$  and  $M(Q)$  only takes on a semblance of 'naturalness' relative to a certain cognitive perspective. This is illustrated by the fact that although the literal content of a telling detail, as in (2), is assumed to be uncontroversially true, the insinuated content *Q* may be false—and *H* may know this. But a *sine qua non* of natural meaning is that if *P* obtains, then *Q* does too: *P* merely 'indicates' or 'shows' *Q*.

Second, even if we include the interpretive assumptions *I* as part of the 'natural environment' of *U*, typically  $M(Q)$  still does not follow 'naturally' from  $F(P)$ , or even from the fact that *S* believes or desires *P*; instead, it follows from the fact that *S* has uttered *L*, with  $F(P)$  as its conventional content, to *H* in this context *C*. Simply

overhearing *S* enunciating any of (1) through (7), or knowing that *S* was entertaining (1) through (7), would not suffice to lead *H* to (1.10) through (7.1). The fact that *S* is not simply manifesting a state of the world or of her own mind, which *H* then picks up on, is especially obvious when we recall that the insinuations in (1) through (7) involve suggestions, commissions, and directives: that is, contents presented in a certain mode, and not just bare propositions.

Thus, it appears that insinuating speakers do intend to produce cognitive effects in their hearers, and that these intentions play some sort of important role in getting the hearer to entertain  $M(Q)$ . What about the second condition for speaker's meaning: that *S*'s intentions be overt and open rather than duplicitous? Communicative signals that lack this feature—such as Iago's surreptitiously leaving Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's apartment, or a man *M* who is playing bridge with his boss *B*, and who smiles in an almost-natural way, because *M* wants *B* to think that he wants *B* to recognize that *M* is bluffing, but not for *B* to recognize that *M* wants *B* to recognize this intention (Strawson 1964, Grice 1969, Schiffer 1972)—are classic counterexamples to Grice's original analysis. And it might seem that communication that is 'off-record' or 'under the table' must not be overt and open in the relevant way. Thus, Bach and Harnish (1979, 101) hold that "devious acts" of "innuendo, deliberate ambiguity, and sneaky presupposition" do not count as cases of speaker's meaning, precisely because they are designed to preserve deniability. The only way to achieve deniability, they think, is for *S* to intend that her intention that *H* entertain *Q* should fail to be recognized by *H* as *S*'s communicative intention—in which case the intention would lack the appropriate reflexive Gricean structure.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, some "devious acts" of idea transmission, such as subliminal advertising and covert dogwhistles (Saul, this volume), do lack the right sort of reflexive intentions. Perhaps some of these cases might intuitively be called 'insinuations.' However, in cases like (1) through (7) and other typical cases of insinuation, *S* does intend for their communicative intention to be *manifest* to *H*, in the sense of being "obviously evident" to both of them (Stalnaker 2014, 47). That is, *S* does want *H* to recognize, by means of this utterance, that she intends for him to take her to be suggesting *Q* (or suggesting that she, or the hearer, will, or should *Q*), just as in standard cases of meaning. Furthermore, *H* does recognize this intention, and *S* knows this. *S*'s deviousness consists only in being unwilling to own up to those intentions explicitly, whether directly to *H* or to some third party. This is the sense in which the speaker is engaged in a communicative bluff. But there are no veiled higher-order intentions. Indeed, an insinuating speaker typically intends *H* to recognize their intention that  $M(Q)$  be off-record, and that they are prepared to deny having meant  $M(Q)$  if challenged. If and when *S* does deny having meant  $M(Q)$ , they don't typically expect *H* to believe that they actually meant  $M(Q)$ ' rather than  $M(Q)$ ; they merely hope to avoid conversational liability for it.

Thus, paradigmatic cases of insinuation involve at least as much determinacy, dependency, and clarity in the speaker's communicative intentions as standard cases

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Strawson (1964, 454) denies that insinuation is an illocutionary act, because "overtiness" is "an essential feature of the intentions which make up the illocutionary complex. . . . They have, one might say, essential avowability."

of communication—including not just implicature but also many cases involving the pragmatic determination and modulation of literal content (Hawthorne 2012, King 2014). If we raise the standard for what counts as successful intention-recognition to rule out insinuation as a case of speaker's meaning, we thereby rule out many ordinary, intuitively successful cases of communication as well.

### 2.3.2 *Common Ground*

If insinuations are a form of speaker's meaning, in which a speaker makes their communicative intentions manifest to their hearer, it might seem to follow directly that insinuated attitudes must become part of the common ground, in Stalnaker's sense of "common background knowledge shared by the participants in a conversation" (2014, 36). After all, if *H* recognizes *S*'s intention to communicate  $M(Q)$ , how can it not become mutual knowledge that *S* meant this? Of course *H* always has the option of rejecting  $M(Q)$  itself, but surely at a minimum, if it is manifest to both parties that *S* meant  $M(Q)$ , then this fact becomes part of what is mutually assumed in *C*. And on many natural continuations of (1) through (7), *H* does actually acquiesce in  $M(Q)$  or an appropriate correlative of it: *H* decides that it's not worth buying a house in an unwelcoming neighborhood, or to go kill Thomas Becket. Communication then succeeds in the strong sense that the speaker's illocutionary and perlocutionary aims are not just recognized but achieved. How could the common ground not be altered accordingly?

The notion of common ground is closely connected to mutual belief or knowledge, and some theorists do sometimes use them interchangeably. But Stalnaker is consistently careful to distinguish them (e.g., 1978, 321; 2002, 704; 2014, 45). Mutual belief is defined in terms of the transitive closure of accessibility relations among the belief states of the relevant individuals, where individual beliefs are themselves defined in terms of epistemically accessible possibilities (2014, 44). Common ground is defined in a way that is structurally parallel, but based on mutual *acceptance*, for which actual belief is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Stalnaker's primary motivation for grounding common ground in acceptance rather than belief is to allow assumptions that are not believed but merely conjectured, or pretended, or otherwise adopted for the purposes of conversation, into the common ground. I think insinuation demonstrates the need to distinguish them in the opposite direction as well.<sup>15</sup> That is, I argued in §2.2 that deniability trades on the gap between what is actually manifest to both parties and what one or the other party is willing to acknowledge as manifest; but this is precisely the difference between mutual belief and acceptance.

Not all insinuating speakers aim to exclude communicated contents from the common ground. Often, *S* is willing for  $M(Q)$  to become an established assumption; their motivation for insinuating is just to avoid assuming liability for defending or executing it themselves. Many cases of insinuated bigotry work like this: thus, in (2), *S* would be delighted for *H* to follow up by enumerating some of the many

<sup>15</sup> Stalnaker (2014, 46) agrees.

sinister features purportedly possessed by people named ‘Hussein,’ and by Barack Obama in particular. Such insinuations function as probes of perspectival alignment; as interpretive harmony becomes more firmly established, *S* may feel increasingly free to overtly assert claims that would be controversial or repugnant in other contexts. But again, similar dynamics can also obtain even among intimates: thus, the resentful stay-at-home partner who utters (5) might be relieved if his utterance prompted *H* to own up to his after-party gallivanting, followed either by an apology or a final blow-out argument.

In these cases, if *H* does explicitly articulate  $M(Q)$  in response to *U*, *S* will then grant its truth or desirability—perhaps prefaced by a cautionary ‘You said it, not me.’ In other cases, neither interlocutor may want to assume liability for  $M(Q)$  themselves, but at least one party still wants the conversation to include an infeasible commitment to  $M(Q)$ . If so, each participant may frame their contribution in a way that comes increasingly close to entailing  $M(Q)$ , hoping that the other party will tip over into explicit avowal. Thus, the speeding driver and the patrol officer may employ increasingly obvious winks, nudges, and euphemisms to inch toward open acknowledgment that they are exchanging a bribe, even as each also tries to lob the hot potato of conversational responsibility back at the other.

Both of these classes of cases involve jockeying over how  $M(Q)$  enters the common ground, rather than whether it enters at all. For especially volatile contents, however, *S* may be unwilling even to allow *H* to avow  $M(Q)$ , or to make a conversational move that entails it. In such cases, it may still become mutually believed between *S* and *H* not just that *S* meant  $M(Q)$ , but that  $Q$  itself is true or desirable. But even so, *S* may insist on keeping  $Q$  in ‘deep shadow’—while simultaneously seeking confirmation from the way *H* crafts their response that they have indeed picked up on, and tacitly accepted,  $M(Q)$ . The insinuated command to kill Thomas Becket in (7) seems likely to have taken this form. But again, conversations between intimates can follow this pattern as well. Thus, the party-attending addressee of (5) might respond to the insinuation of having been out gallivanting with:

- (5.1) Oh, I just got a quick drink with John after the party to discuss a killer presentation we have next week.

*H* might thereby implicitly admit to socializing with John while overtly retaining the excuse of engaging in professional business. As the relationship deteriorates, and such putative business meetings become more frequent, it may become increasingly manifest that *H* is having an affair, although neither *H* nor *S* are willing to openly admit as much, because such direct face-to-face acknowledgment would be too painful. (Even their final separation might be couched in terms of *H*’s needing a *pièd-a-terre* to “minimize the commute.”) In effect, in such cases a shadow conversation emerges, with overt claims serving as proxies for a series of commitments that one or both parties are unwilling to bring into the conversational light.

The phenomenon of refusing to overtly acknowledge assumptions about facts that are actually manifest to all parties isn’t limited to insinuation. Many conversations, even healthy ones, occur against the background of various sorts of ‘unmentionables,’ including differences in social status, and bodily and other handicaps, challenges, and realities. What’s distinctive about ‘deep’ insinuation is that it doesn’t merely navigate around or depend upon manifest facts that one or both parties would prefer to avoid mentioning, or even would strenuously deny if made explicit. Rather,

‘deep’ insinuation is designed to *make* a fact, desire, or commitment manifest, and actively guides communication and action going forward, while still remaining unacknowledgable.

### 2.3.3 *Conversational Record*

The final notion I want to use insinuation to clarify is that of the conversational record or score, based on Lewis’s (1979) metaphor of conversation as a language game. Lewis analogizes conversation, not to the looser-form games invoked by Wittgenstein (1953), but to the highly structured, conventionalized game of baseball, in which certain moves are permissible at certain points and the effect of a move depends on the score to that point. Because, as we saw in §2.3.2, the common ground is defined in terms of acceptance rather than mutual belief, it might seem that we could simply identify the common ground with the conversational score or record. The intuitive characterization of insinuation as ‘off-record’ speech would then be a reflection of the central point of §2.3.2, that insinuation can successfully communicate contents while keeping them out of the common ground. Both Lee and Pinker (2010) and Asher and Lascarides (2013) in effect treat the phenomenon of deniability through indirect speech as demonstrating just this.

A simple equation between common ground and conversational record cannot be right. The common ground encompasses an indefinitely large class of substantive empirical and evaluative assumptions that are so deeply engrained and/or so obvious that they don’t require or perhaps even permit articulation. By contrast, the record or score is highly structured. Most obviously, it specifies the claims, questions, promises and instructions issued by each interlocutor. But these are not merely listed in temporal sequence: they are embedded within a more complex discourse structure, which guides and constrains interpretation. This discourse structure includes, most notably, the Question Under Discussion, often along with a stack of sub-questions (Roberts 1996/2012). There are also various discourse referents and accessible possibilities (Heim 1990), ranked in salience, which play a crucial role in phenomena like resolution of ellipsis and anaphora, presupposition projection, and prosodic focus (Roberts 2015). Further, utterances of sentences and sub-clauses are linked to one another and to the QUD by rhetorical relations like explanation, elaboration, and contrast (Hobbs 1985, Kehler 2002, Asher and Lascarides 2003).

These differences in structure and content don’t yet force a fundamental distinction between conversational record or score and common ground, though. Depending on one’s theoretical proclivities, one might subsume the common ground as an element within the record or score (e.g. Roberts 2015), or else subsume the score as a subset of discourse-related assumptions within the common ground (Stalnaker 2014). However, a deeper difference lurks.

Lewis (1979) worried about whether to define conversational ‘kinematics’ and score in objective or subjective terms. On the one hand, the score needs to provide a norm governing the evolution of conversations, specifying what moves can be made and their constitutive effects at any given point. On the other hand, it also needs to track and describe conversations as they actually evolve; and if all parties take a certain move to have been made, or to have been permissible, then at a certain point it seems that the move *has* been made or was permissible. To reconcile this tension, Lewis proposes a “middle way” on which the conversational score is causally guided and normatively governed by the rules that specify the scoreboard’s functional role,

but where the actual conversational score is, “by definition, whatever the mental scoreboards say it is” (1979).

Whatever the merits of this compromise in resolving the tension that worried Lewis, I think insinuation pushes us toward a more objective, normatively constrained view of the record or score than Lewis wants because it shows us that there is a substantive difference between the commitments the interlocutors have actually made themselves liable for defending, on the one hand, and either the sets of attitudes they attribute to themselves and the other, or the pool of assumptions they mutually take to be conversationally available, on the other.<sup>16</sup>

Better, I think it pushes us to distinguish the record from the score in a way that most theorists don’t explicitly do. Many aspects of the score as usually understood, including the relative salience of potential discourse referents and relative accessibility of possibilities, are transient states that evolve continuously through a conversation. And often enough, a given conversational move matters only because and to the extent that it affects the conversation going forward. For these purposes, it makes sense to treat these dimensions of the conversation in terms of their dynamic effects, and specifically as updates to the common ground.

But the current context, with its particular common ground, is not the only factor to be explained. Stalnaker (2014, 162) resists thoroughly dynamic analyses of phenomena like modals and conditionals on the ground that they express contents which are “detachable” from their current contexts. He is primarily thinking of cases where a hearer acquires a belief from an utterance and then deploys it in some other context. As we saw in §2.3.1, most insinuations are detachable or cross-contextually stable in this sense: that is, *S* successfully communicates *M(Q)*, in the fullest sense of producing in *H* a belief, desire, or intention that appropriately correlates to *M(Q)*, and which *H* can use in their own reasoning elsewhere. But insinuation aims to achieve this sort of coordination while avoiding the distinctive species of cross-contextual stability that is generated by on-record speech, in the form of indirect reports. And such reports matter, most obviously because they play a central role in the testimonial acquisition of knowledge (Fricker 2012, Lackey 2008).

Our theory of meaning thus needs a way to track and explain commitments that interlocutors undertake in conversations which they are liable for defending or executing in other contexts. Interpreting the conversational record as the record of public speech acts, along the pragmatist lines articulated by Peirce (1934), Brandom (1983), and MacFarlane (2011), is a promising way to do this. Of course, in actual fact hearers and reporters often lack the evidentiary basis that would enable them to hold speakers responsible for their on-record conversational commitments, just as they lack the evidentiary basis to hold them responsible for off-record insinuations. But this doesn’t undermine the fact that certain aspects of utterances do function to undertake such infeasible commitments, in such a way *if* a transcription or video footage were available, then they *would* undeniably be liable for them, in a way they are not for insinuated attitudes.

One might think that such a restricted notion of the conversational record will be theoretically otiose because it will end up being purely disquotational—in the case

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Langton (this volume) for discussion of distinct but related reasons to distinguish common ground from conversational score.

of assertion, amounting to the claim that *S* commits themselves to the attitude  $F(P)$  determined by the conventional compositional meaning of the uttered sentence *L*. This is emphatically not the case, for multiple reasons. First, a speaker who utters *L* may commit, with the force of assertion, question, or directive, to some content  $F(R)$  *other* than, and not merely in addition, to  $F(P)$ , most obviously by speaking figuratively (Camp 2008, 2012, 2017a) or by other forms of meaning modulation. Second, a speaker may undertake an on-record commitment to  $F(R)$  without any direct articulation, literal or figurative, of  $F(R)$ , for instance in response to an explicit question or as a result of enrichment. Third, a speaker who asserts or otherwise illocutes  $F(P)$  also thereby commits herself to a host of other contents. These include (at least some) logical, nomological, and material consequences of  $F(P)$  (Stalnaker 1978, Soames 2008). But they also include presuppositions and implicatures that are generated, not by  $F(P)$  in isolation, but by the fact that *S* has committed to  $F(P)$  at this point in this context *C*—and specifically by the location of the uttered sentence *L*, and its sub-sentential elements, within the overall discourse structure (Asher and Lascarides 2013). Thus, while direct, explicit articulation is the simplest, most reliable and forceful way to place contents on the record, it is far from the only one. What matters for on-record status is not the mechanism by which an attitude is contributed, but its status as a commitment the speaker is liable for defending or executing.

If we understand the conversational *record* in this cross-contextually stable way, then we might want to reserve the notion of conversational *score* for those evolving assumptions which govern the permissibility, relevance, and interpretation of sentences within the dynamic discourse structure: for features like the partitioning and relative accessibility of possibilities, and the existence and relative salience of discourse referents. I won't press this distinction further here. More importantly for current purposes, as noted in §2.2.2, many of these context-local features of the score have the same sort of unarticulated, nuanced, but in-fact-coordinated character as the interpretive assumptions that drive the interpretation of implicature in general and insinuation in particular. Aspects of on-record speech that depend upon these features, such as domain restriction and anaphora resolution, also engage the “dodgy epistemics” of pragmatic interpretation. This means that even contextually-determined semantic contents can exhibit some degree of deniability, as when Athanasius purportedly answered the question “Where is Athanasius?” with:

(8) The man you seek is not far from here.

or Bill Clinton said:

(9) There is no sexual relationship.

when asked whether he had had an affair with Monica Lewinsky (Saul 2000, 2013).

The pervasive role of epistemically dodgy interpretation in communication renders the distinction between explicit on-record commitments and implicit off-record communication less sharp than Lee and Pinker (2010) and Fricker (2012), among others, assume, insofar as not all apparently on-record content is ‘safe’ for contextual exportation. At the same time, there are still important differences in the way those dodgy epistemics play out in negotiations over meaning. Although a full discussion is beyond our current scope, deniability appears to be significantly more restricted, and

pedantry to be nearly eliminated, in on-record speech like (8) and (9) as compared to implicature.

So far in this section, I have focused on distinguishing the conversational record from the common ground in terms of contextual relativity and stability. We saw in §2.3.2 that insinuation can at least sometimes achieve coordination between interlocutors without entering the insinuated attitude into the common ground. And of course, insinuation is designed to be off-record. Thus, we might think that despite the differences just surveyed in cross-contextual stability, the common ground and conversational record are still on a par in having a public status that successful Gricean communication lacks. And if that is right, then perhaps insinuation as a private, off-record form of communication, *always* falls outside the common ground, as Lee and Pinker (2010) and Asher and Lascarides (2013) maintain. Or more radically, perhaps the notion of common ground falls away as otiose, its explanatory work divvied up between a public conversational record and a private Gricean exchange of attitudes.

All three of these conclusions are unwarranted. First, while the common ground is indeed an essentially social phenomenon, it is not a public one. Publicity just is a matter of being available to a range of audiences, across a range of contexts, and this is precisely the feature that the conversational common ground lacks. As we just saw, publicity matters, most obviously in the form of testimonial reports. But the common ground matters too. Its dual functions—as a set of background assumptions which interlocutors draw on in framing and interpreting utterances, and as a set of possibilities among which they navigate as the conversation evolves (Stalnaker 2014, 36)—are theoretically powerful, especially in explaining the intimate interplay between semantics and pragmatics. But beyond this, one lesson not just of insinuation but also of exploratory conjecture and polite chat, is that conversation often involves performing a role or inhabiting a persona that does not fully reflect one's private attitudes. The contributions and commitments of such conversational personae are restricted to the current context in a way that neither public on-record commitments nor private Gricean coordination are. We need a mechanism for tracking and explaining this level of communication, in just the way the common ground does.

Finally, and most importantly for current purposes, insinuations do often function to alter the common ground. As I noted in §2.3.2, speakers are often happy for  $M(Q)$  to enter the common ground; they simply want to avoid the risk and liability of introducing it themselves. Cases of 'deeply shadowed' insinuation are an extreme, if theoretically and practically important, subclass of the more general phenomenon. We can hold on to the claim that insinuated content always falls outside the common ground only if we exclude all attitudes that are not explicitly articulated or mandated in connection with on-record contents. But this would dramatically distort the actual function and usual theoretical understanding of the common ground. It would also impose a sharper dichotomy between insinuation and other forms of implicature than is warranted—especially given that insinuating speakers have not always determined in advance just how staunchly they will resist acknowledging  $M(Q)$  as the conversation evolves. Instead, we should accept that the boundaries between both on-record and off-record content, and between common ground and mutually obvious but

unacknowledged assumptions, are blurry. Deniability straddles both boundaries. But those boundaries do matter, both for explaining how insinuation and deniability play out in actual conversations, and for making sense of communication more generally.

## 2.4 Conclusion

I have argued that understanding the ways in which ordinary speakers and hearers employ insinuation to navigate the strategic communication of risky contents pushes us to refine theoretical notions that it is easy to run together in more fully cooperative contexts. In particular, I argued in §2.2 that insinuation's twin characteristics of deniability and pedantry exploit a gap between interpretive assumptions that are mutually obvious and those that are mutually acknowledged as such. The “dodgy epistemics” of pragmatic interpretation guarantee that there will typically be at least some such gap; but this gap is limited, insofar as a ‘plausible’ denial of having meant  $M(Q)$  must be supportable by a reasonable interpretation based on accessible interpretive assumptions. In §2.3 I used this gap to argue that each of Gricean speaker's meaning, Stalnakerian common ground, and Lewisian scoreboard—or better, conversational record and score—carve out distinct categories of meaning and serve distinct explanatory functions.

Thus, in lieu of the simple set of relations in Figure 2.1, we now have the multi-layered convolution of Figure 2.2. We retain the basic contrast between overlapping beliefs and mutual beliefs. (In the interest of simplicity, I suppress attitudes other than belief here.) But mutual beliefs and common ground are now also distinct though overlapping. In a well-formed conversation, all elements of the conversational record are in the common ground; but contents can enter the common ground without going on the record. What a speaker actually says—their semantically encoded content—may differ both from what they assert and from what they otherwise mean. And they

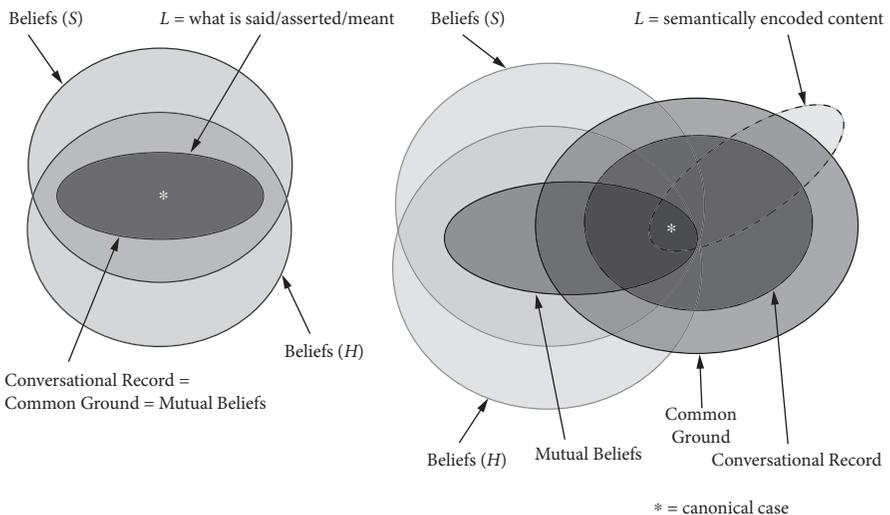


Figure 2.2 Multi-layered sets of attitudes and meanings.

may mean, and successfully communicate, contents without entering them into either the record or the common ground.

This picture is complex. But as we've seen, the distinctions it encodes are accessible to and exploited by ordinary speakers in everyday conversations. In one-off exchanges with strangers, in tussles and tender moments between intimates and colleagues, and in depositions and political speeches, speakers regularly frame their own utterances and respond to others in ways that display a nuanced sensitivity to these distinct varieties of meaning and the different norms they entail. I have focused on insinuation here, because it throws those differences in to especially sharp relief. But we see them at work in other ways as well, including in more fully cooperative contexts.

Both speaker's meaning and contributions to the common ground are fundamentally medium-neutral, non-conventional modes of communication: ways of coordinating on common attitudes by exploiting and creating manifest facts in the environment (Stalnaker 2014). One key difference is that speaker's meaning can be private, in the sense of coordinating between two individual persons, while the common ground is constructed by personae, who may not directly reflect their enactors' actual attitudes. (Of course, speaker's meaning is also operative in contexts where the utterer's actual intentions are inaccessible or irrelevant. The most obvious example is literature, where the narrator or author is best understood as a character postulated in the course of interpretation (Nehamas 1987, Camp 2015).) While the private coordination of attitudes and the performative coordination of assumptions often coincide, they can also come apart—again, not just in insinuation, but also in exploratory conjecture and polite chat.

By contrast, the conversational record is essentially public, and essentially linguistic. It is public insofar as it involves a cross-contextual liability for the commitments it records. And it is linguistic insofar as the kind of commitment one undertakes by an utterance depends in part on the language game in which it is generated. Utterance-types, such as assertion, presupposition, and conventional implicature, can have the same "essential effect" on the common ground but differ in their specific on-record status, in ways that are indicated by specific sub-sentential structures. And some utterance-types, such as promises and conditional commands, arguably cannot be undertaken without some conventional way of marking their status (Camp 2017b).

The conversational record is also the species of meaning most closely connected to conventional semantic meaning. Conventional semantic meaning, in virtue of its public status, provides a stable common explanatory and justificatory factor which reporters can cite and interpreters can employ across contexts (Camp 2016). As we've seen, deniability and pedantry often trade on the difference between narrow semantic meaning and various species of looser, enriched pragmatic meaning. However, we've also seen that there is no easy equation between semantic contents and on-record commitments: commitments can enter the record without being semantically articulated, and semantic articulation need not generate an on-record commitment. In typical conversations between interlocutors who share a language, all three varieties of meaning—speaker's meaning, common ground, and conversational record—exploit both linguistic conventions and reflexive intention-recognition in order to coordinate on attitudes toward contents. Where the varieties of meaning differ is not the mechanisms by which they are generated, or the types of attitudes they communicate, but in the status of the commitments they entail: in when and how they are liable to be defended.

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