

**Actas del IX Congreso de la Sociedad de
Lógica, Metodología y Filosofía de la Ciencia en
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Madrid, 13–16 de noviembre de 2018



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Editado por:

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Maquetación: José Ángel Gascón

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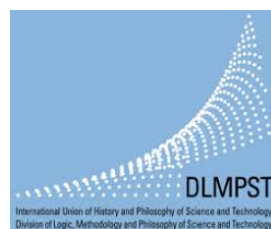
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The nature of (covert) dogwhistles¹

Manuel Almagro
José R. Torices

University of Granada, Department of Philosophy I
malmagro@ugr.es
jrtorices@ugr.es

Introduction

‘Dogwhistle’ refers to a kind of political manipulation that some people carry out for political gains. According to Saul (2018), dogwhistles can be either *intentional* or *unintentional* depending on whether the speaker carried out the dogwhistle deliberately or not—although one cannot always recognize whether a particular case was intentional. In addition to being intentional or not, dogwhistles can also be *overt* or *covert* depending on whether the audience is aware or not of the dogwhistle.² In the case of overt dogwhistles, the speaker addresses a message to an audience with two possible interpretations. One of these is coded and affects only a subset the audience (Witten 2014). Covert dogwhistles, on the other hand, are not really about sending a “coded message.” Instead, they raise attitudes to salience, so people will act on them without realizing they are being moved on them. As Stanley (2015) points out, these kinds of dogwhistles work as a strategy for undermining democratic ideals without immediate rejection. Our key question is whether covert dogwhistles constitute a special form of implicit communication or whether they can be reduced to already existing forms of implicit communication such as presuppositions or implicatures. We will focus on covert dogwhistles because they seem more difficult to accommodate within the traditional categories of presuppositions and implicatures. To carry out this task, we compare the features of each of the mentioned phenomena and analyse how they behave in the face of retraction.

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²The audience to which the dogwhistle is addressed is not necessarily *homogeneous*. Within the audience, we can find subgroups of hearers. That is why it is at least conceptually possible to think that the same dogwhistle can be *overt* and *covert* at the same time for the different groups that constitute the audience.

The Food Stamp President

According to Neubeck and Cazenave (2001, p. 3), American politicians have long “forged and exploited the link between ‘race’ and ‘welfare’ [or ‘food stamp’]³ to such a degree that the two terms are now politically and culturally inextricable.” Other authors have also echoed the hidden racial dimension behind the use of the term ‘welfare’, as well as its possible effects on the political attitudes of both African American and White American voters (see e.g. Quadagno 1994, Gilens 1996, Mendelberg 2001, Valentino et al. 2002). They consistently conclude that the expression ‘welfare’ and ‘food stamp’ has racial connotations, mostly for White American voters, which affect their political attitudes without them noticing.

In 2012, Newt Gingrich, one of the candidates for the Republican Party presidential nomination, had to deal with the accusations of racism that a lot of people levelled at him for calling President Obama “the most successful *food stamp president* in American history.” Here’s what he literally said in one of his speeches during the campaign:

Over here you have a policy which, with Reagan and me as speaker, created millions of jobs—it’s called paychecks. Over [t]here you have the most successful *food stamp president* in American history, Barack Obama. (Newt Gingrich, quoted in Elliott, 2012)

Weeks after his statements, the American civil rights activist Al Sharpton, who hosts the political talk show *PoliticsNation with Al Sharpton*, interviewed Newt Gingrich. In the interview, Al Sharpton accuses Gingrich of making a racist use of language in his criticism of President Obama’s social policies, calling Barack Obama the “food stamp president”:

Mr. Gingrich, [...] I have to ask you this kind of talk, this kind of language you use, is it just playing to the right wing, just playing to the far-right as David Gregory ask you with racially tinged language? Do you still defend now what you said? (Al Sharpton, 2012, MSNBC)

Let us put Gingrich’s words into context to understand why the accusations made against him, in this particular case by Al Sharpton, make sense. Although the data show the opposite, a significant portion of the White American population thinks that those who benefit most from food stamps are African Americans.⁴ This general misperception serves as a ground for Gingrich’s statements to trigger the implicit biases of that part of the audience that is unknowingly racist. But there are not only implicit biases at work here, there are also many explicit racial prejudices that are simply not seen as such by those who harbour them.

³“Food stamps” is the popular term for what is currently known in the United States as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

⁴According to survey data from Delaney and Edwards-Levy for HuffPost, in 2018, 59% of Americans thought that the most significant welfare recipients were either African Americans or Whites and African Americans alike. However, according to data provided by the same article, 36.2% of the recipients were white, compared to 25.6% who were African American. In Al Sharpton’s interview with Gingrich, the data that appear are those provided by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2012. According to this study, 46% of food stamp recipients are White, compared to 26% who are African American and 20% who are Hispanic.

As Henry and Sears (2002) note, the racism of those who believed that African Americans were biologically inferior and supported segregation, lynching and others forms of racial discrimination is virtually non-existent in the United States.⁵ However, this old-fashioned racism has been replaced by new forms of racism that Henry and Sears (2002) call *symbolic racism*.⁶ They characterise it in the following way:

[A] coherent belief system combining the following ideas: that racial discrimination is no longer a serious obstacle to blacks' prospects for a good life; that blacks' continuing disadvantages are due to their own unwillingness to take responsibility for their lives; and that, as a result, blacks' continuing anger about their own treatment, their demands for better treatment, and the various kinds of special attention given to them are not truly justified. (Henry and Sears, 2002, p. 254)

In such a context, a significant part of Gingrich's audience either endorses symbolic racism or harbours implicit racial biases or both. These attitudes, therefore, are the driving force behind the mobilization of the conservative vote for racist reasons even when this happens, as we have said, surreptitiously. So, this is a clear case of a covert dogwhistle.

Presuppositions and Implicatures

Covert dogwhistles seem to convey a kind of *not-at-issue* information, i.e., a sort of information that is not explicitly uttered by the speaker (Tonhauser 2011, Stanley 2015). Commonly, presuppositions and implicatures are conceptual tools used to account for how different kinds of implicit communication work. Let's then see whether dogwhistles are reducible to any of them.

A presupposition is a proposition implicitly assumed by uttering a sentence. The truth of the implicit assumption is taken for granted in uttering the sentence that triggers it, and that proposition implicitly assumed is not part of the main propositional content of the speech act (Stalnaker 1973, von Stechow 2004, Potts 2005). For instance, the utterance of sentence **(1)** presupposes the proposition expressed by **(2)**, and normally the later cannot be rejected without affecting the meaning of the former. It is important to note that negating **(1)** does not change its presupposition. \neg **(1)** also presupposes the proposition expressed by **(2)**.

- (1)** Gingrich's speech has nothing to do with race.
- (2)** Gingrich made a speech.

On the other hand, implicatures are propositions suggested, but not strictly implied, by an utterance. For example, the utterance of **(3)** suggests that Gingrich

⁵After Trump's victory in the last election, this assertion may no longer be accurate as explicit racism in the United States has grown notoriously.

⁶Symbolic racism or racial resentment, as Mendelberg (2001) calls it, are forms of racism that find support and justification in the ideology of colorblindness.

made those two assertions in that very same order, but **(3)** would still be true even if Gingrich had made them in the opposite order.

- (3)** Gingrich said that the best way to help others is to teach them to support themselves and that there are people that accept public welfare as a way of life.

Grice (1975/1989) distinguishes three kinds of implicatures, namely: *conventional implicatures*, and *particularized* and *generalized conversational implicatures*. The first are propositions suggested by the meaning of the words used in an utterance. In this sense, conventional implicatures are very similar to presuppositions, that is, they cannot be cancelled without oddity. For example, **(5)** cannot be rejected (it is not cancellable) without affecting the meaning conveyed uttering **(4)**.

- (4)** Gingrich is a politician but honest.

- (5)** Politicians are not honest.

The meaning of the word ‘but’ in **(4)** triggers the implicature **(5)**. To reject **(5)** after uttering **(4)** produces oddity, given the linguistic meaning of ‘but’. The two further types of implicatures, particularized and generalized conversational implicatures, are propositions suggested in exploiting conversational rules. The only difference between them is the degree of context-dependence of each one. Unlike conventional implicatures (and presuppositions), both particularized and generalized conversational implicatures are *cancellable*, *calculable* and *non-detachable*. For example, if **(7)** is a possible conversational implicature of **(6)**, then a speaker can cancel **(7)** after uttering **(6)** without affecting the truth of **(6)**, **(7)** can be calculated from the utterance of **(6)** in virtue of contextual elements of the conversation, and the substitution of the expression ‘mute’ for ‘unable to speak’ in **(6)** does not affect what is implicated by uttering it, that is, **(7)**.

- (6)** Gingrich was mute.

- (7)** Gingrich did not participate in the annual debating competition.

How (not) to Explain Covert Dogwhistles

In the above quotation, Gingrich’s speech apparently suggests something like African Americans are lazy. Even so he can explicitly reject that African Americans are lazy without obvious contradiction and without seemingly affecting the meaning of what he said. However, both presuppositions and conventional implicatures cannot be rejected without producing a certain oddity in the hearers. Besides, presuppositions and conventional implicatures are semantically linked to the meanings of the words such that it is practically impossible for their contents to be captured only by a selected part of the audience.

On the other hand, conversational implicatures are cancellable and can be rejected without affecting the main content asserted. So, it seems plausible to argue that Gingrich exploits conversational rules and contextual factors to influence a

subset of his audience sending the implicated message that African Americans are lazy.

Nevertheless, assuming that in using the term ‘food stamp’ Gingrich is suggesting that African Americans are lazy is troubling. A notable feature of covert dogwhistles, as we have seen, is their ability to affect a part of the audience without their awareness—that is, without the latter being aware that they are being moved for racist reasons. In the case of implicatures in general, speaker and hearer engage in a game of mutual recognition of intentions, without which the implicated content cannot be successfully captured by the hearer. In the case of dogwhistles, however, the success rests precisely because the hearer does not recognize the speaker’s intention yet is still mobilised for specific political purposes. The type of contribution the speaker makes through a covert dogwhistle instead seems to produce a certain effect on the audience rather than to communicate propositionally articulated content. The effect is not exactly about the recognition of *what is said*, but about *how what is said is said*, that is, how the words used influence the audience, and this is neither cancellable nor truth-apt. One way to confirm this is by analysing the behaviour of the implicated content and the “dogwhistled content” concerning retraction. Consider the following dialogues, the first is a case of retraction of a conversational implicature and the second is an alleged case of retraction of a covert dogwhistle:

- (8) A: Sam does not like to work.
B: Well, she is African American.
(Implicature: African Americans are lazy).
B: Wait, wait! Sorry, I was wrong, not all African Americans are lazy. **(B’s retraction)**
A: Exactly.
- (9) A: Over here you have a policy which, with Reagan and me as speaker, created millions of jobs—it’s called paychecks. Over there you have the most successful *food stamp president* in American history, Barack Obama.
(Dogwhistle: African Americans are lazy)
B: Well, food stamp recipients are a tiny minority.
A: It is true, I was wrong, not all African American are lazy. **(A’s retraction)**
B: Wait, I did not know that you were referring to African Americans.

As we can see, in case (8) the retraction of B does not produce surprise to A, in case (9), however, the retraction of A does produce surprise to B, because A’s retraction in (9) reveals to B something that had previously remained hidden. In fact, as Mendelberg (2001) and Saul (2018) show, when the covert dogwhistle becomes explicit the effect produced begins to change. Therefore, covert dogwhistles cannot be propositional because they lose their persuasive power when translated into a propositionally articulated statement.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, presuppositions and implicatures are not quite suitable for explaining covert dogwhistles.⁷ Presuppositions and conventional implicatures cannot be rejected without affecting the meaning of the utterances that trigger them (let’s call this feature *deniability without oddity*) and are closely linked to the linguistic meaning of the words uttered (*linked to linguistic meaning*). However, part of the information conveyed by a covert dogwhistle can be rejected without affecting the meaning of the speech, and covert dogwhistles exploit associations and social meanings, not linguistic meaning (although they share with conventional implicatures that changing the words of the expression asserted removes the implicit—they are *not interchangeable*—, that is, the conventional implicature or part of the dogwhistle). Therefore, covert dogwhistles are neither presuppositions nor conventional implicatures. Conversational implicatures, on the other hand, can be rejected and exploit contextual factors, like dogwhistles. However, unlike covert dogwhistles, the success of a conversational implicature depends on the recognition of it by the audience (*successful yet unrecognized*), and retraction of the implicated proposition does not produce a kind of surprise in the audience (*retraction with oddity*). The following table shows the features pointed out.

	Covert Dogwhistles	Presuppositions	Conventional implicatures	Conversational implicatures
Not interchangeable	✓		✓	
Deniability without oddity	✓			✓
Successful yet unrecognized	✓			
Retraction with oddity	✓			
Linked to linguistic meaning		✓	✓	

It can be argued that, in cases of covert dogwhistles, retraction is in fact impossible. In case (9), for example, it can be argued that the speaker A is making explicit something that remained hidden and denying it, rather than retracting. This can be explained by appealing to Charlow’s distinction between *locational* and *orientational* information (Charlow 2014). According to Charlow (and Lewis 1979), locational information is information that enables “an agent to self-locate in a space of relevant possibilities” (Charlow 2014: 640) by ruling out some of them. On the other hand, orientational information is information that ranks the relevant possibilities, allowing the agent to form intentions (Charlow 2014: 640). Covert dogwhistles do not convey information which is recognized by the audience, and in this sense, they do not enable the audience to rule out possibilities. Rather, it can be argued that they rank the relevant possibilities, putting some of them as more likely than others, and this is what produces the effect that mobilizes the audience for specific political purposes. Since covert

⁷The arguments advanced by Stanley (2015) and Saul (2018) also support this thesis.

dogwhistles do not convey information that rule out possibilities, they are not propositional. If covert dogwhistles are not propositional, one cannot retract a dogwhistle, strictly speaking, because what characterizes a covert dogwhistle is its implicit and unaware persuasive power.

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