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## **Insinuation as a speech act**

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## *Aims*

to offer a critical discussion of “Gricean” models of insinuation  
(Fraser 2001; Camp 2018, Oswald 2022, Dinges & Zakkou 2023);

to develop an alternative, speech act-based approach  
→ insinuating as a socially-constituted practice.

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*Claim:* Insinuated contents are not conversationally implicated.

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*Claim:* Insinuated contents are not conversationally implicated.

*Question:* How to account for the indirectness characteristic of insinuating?

*Claim:* The insinuator is not committed to having and conveying the insinuated belief.

*Question:* How does an act of insinuation affect the normative situation of the speaker and the hearer?

## *Content*

1. Examples and their characterisation  
→ *classical / modern accounts (Oswald 2022)*
2. Critical part  
→ *speaker-meaning, conversational implicature, commitment*
3. Constructive part: towards a speech act-based approach  
→ *off-record context, showing, procedure for insinuating*

## 1. Examples and their characterisation

### *Letter of Recommendation*

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

$F(P)_1$  The **opinion** that *Mr. X's command...*

$M(Q)_1$  The **opinion** that *Mr. X is not a good candidate for the job.*

Grice 1975; Camp 2018

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### *Speedy Driver*

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

$F(P)_2$  The driver's **question** whether *there is any way the issue can be settled right now.*

$M(Q)_2$  The driver's **offering** the officer a **bribe** (i.e., that he pay the police officer to let him off the hook).

Pinker et al. 2008; Terkourafi 2011; Camp 2018



## 1. Examples and their characterisation

### *Tipsy Spouse*

(3) Wow, it's late! The party must have been really fun, huh?

$F(P)_3$  Jane's **rhetorical question** whether **the party have been really fun**.

$M(Q)_3$  Jane's **suspicion** that **Ross has been engaged in illicit postparty gallivanting**.

Camp 2018

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### *Tipsy Spouse*

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Camp 2018

### *Sober Captain*

(4) The captain was sober all day.

$F(P)_4$  The First Mate's **assertion** that the captain was sober all day.

$M(Q)_4$  The First Mate's **suggestion** that the captain is usually drunk.

Fraser 2001; Oswald 2022

## 1. Examples and their characterisation

### *Theoretically neutral description*

- The insinuator directly and explicitly conveys  $F(P)$  and indirectly and implicitly conveys  $M(Q)$ .
- $M(Q)$  is risky, troublesome, or *unwanted* (Fraser 2001); therefore, it remains unstated.
- The insinuator retains deniability with respect to having conveyed  $M(Q)$ .

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### *Janus-faced nature of successful insinuation*

- On the one hand, the speaker succeeds in getting the addressees to entertain  $M(Q)$  or *at least* in getting them to believe that she entertains and conveys  $M(Q)$ ;
  - on the other hand, the addressees are *not in a position to prove* that the speaker has and conveys  $M(Q)$ .
- perlocutionary / ‘illocutionary’ effect of insinuating

# 1. Examples and their characterisation

Oswald 2022: *Classical / Modern Accounts*

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### *Classical accounts*

— Insinuating utterances are covert speech acts “performed with intentions that are intended not to be recognized. (...) [They] succeed (the intention with which they are performed is fulfilled) only if their intent is not recognized, or at least not recognized as intended to be recognized.” (Bach and Harnish 1979: 101)

→ *uncommitting, deniability*

Cf. Strawson 1964; Bell 1997; Attardo 1999

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→ *uncommitting, deniability*

Cf. Strawson 1964; Bell 1997; Attardo 1999

### *Modern accounts*

— Insinuating utterances are acts of overt communication;  
insinuated contents are speaker-meant  
and communicated as conversational implicatures;  
the insinuator is committed to having and communicating  $M(Q)$ .

Fraser 2001; Camp 2018; Oswald 2022; Dirges & Zakkou 2023

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning



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→ Strawson (1964) on the Gricean notions of *communication* and *understanding*

*S communicates* something to *A* by an utterance *x* if *S* intends:

(*i*<sub>1</sub>) to produce by uttering *x* a certain response *r* in *A*;

(*i*<sub>2</sub>) to get *A* recognize intention (*i*<sub>1</sub>);

(*i*<sub>3</sub>) that this recognition on the part of *A* of intention (*i*<sub>1</sub>) shall function as *A*'s reason, or a part of his reason, for his response *r*;

(*i*<sub>4</sub>) that *A* should recognize intention (*i*<sub>2</sub>);

...

(*i*<sub>*n*+1</sub>) that *A* should recognize intention (*i*<sub>*n*</sub>).

In short: (*i*<sub>1</sub>) is intended to be recognized as intended to be recognized (as intended to be recognized and so on...).

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Camp 2018 and Oswald 2022 embrace the four-conditions analysis:

— the insinuating *S* intends *A* to recognize her intention to convey *M(Q)* as a communicative (i.e., *reflexive*) intention.

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*Understanding:*

— *A* recognizes *S*'s intention (*i*<sub>1</sub>) as intended to be recognized (as intended to be recognized, and so on...).

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***Successful communication:***

— *A* and *S* are aligned in their representations of *S*'s intentions.

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### 2.1. Speaker meaning

→ Strawson (1964) on the availability of explicit performative formulas (EPFs)

“The speaker (...) has a motive, inseparable from the nature of his act, for making that intention [i.e., intention ( $i_2$ ) to have her intention ( $i_1$ ) recognized] clear.” (Strawson 1964: 450) “For using such phrases [i.e., explicit performative formulas], I repeat, the speaker has (...) the *motive* that I have tried to show is inseparable from an act of communication.” (*Ibid.*: 451)

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### 2.1. Speaker meaning

→ Strawson (1964) on the availability of explicit performative formulas (EPFs)

Austin (1975: 88): One cannot insinuate in saying “I insinuate that”.

Fraser (2001: 303): There are other acts for which there are no EPFs.

MW: It is not only the case that there *is no* EPF for insinuating;  
the point is that there *cannot be* one.

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the point is that there *cannot be* one.

Communicative intentions are **essentially overt**; that is to say, they have **essential avowability**: essentially capable of being openly acknowledge with confidence.

“The whole point of insinuating is that the audience is to *suspect*, but not more than suspect, the intention, for example, to induce or disclose a certain belief [or, more generally, attitude  $M(Q)$ ]. The intention one has in insinuating is **essentially nonavowable.**” (Strawson 1964: 454)

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

#### ***Dilemma:***

*Either* the insinuating utterance is an act of *overt* communication,  
i.e., an act of *speaker-meaning* (Fraser 2001; Camp 2018; Oswald 2022),  
*or* it is an instance of non-overt *showing* (Lepore & Stone 2010, 2015).



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***According to Camp***, the insinuating utterance is a (*peculiar*) act of speaker-meaning.

“(...) an insinuating speaker typically intends *H* to recognize their intention

[a] that *M(Q)* be off-record, and

[b] that they are prepared to deny having meant *M(Q)* if challenged.”

(Camp 2018: 55)

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i.e., an act of *speaker-meaning* (Fraser 2001; Camp 2018; Oswald 2022),  
*or* it is an instance of non-overt *showing* (Lepore & Stone 2010, 2015).

#### ***But:***

— there is a third option: insinuating as a *half-covert speech act*.

Covert speech acts “succeed (the intention with which they are performed is fulfilled) only if their intent is not recognized [ $\rightarrow$  *fully-covert*], or at least not recognized as intended to be recognized [ $\rightarrow$  *half-covert or half-overt*].”

(Bach and Harnish 1979: 101)

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

#### *Half-covert speech acts*

— Strawson's counterexample to Grice's original three-condition analyses, *e.g.* the Giveaway Smile (Grice 1989: 94-95) and the River Rat (Schiffer 1972: 17-18; cf. Green 2007: 63-64).

*S half-covertly communicates* something to *A* by an utterance *x* if *S* intends:

(*i*<sub>1</sub>) to produce by uttering *x* a certain response *r* in *A*;

(*i*<sub>2</sub>) to get *A* recognize intention (*i*<sub>1</sub>);

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(*i*<sub>4</sub>)' that *A* should *not* recognize intention (*i*<sub>2</sub>).

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

***Common Belief or Mutual Belief (MB) as the model for Common Ground (CG)***

— *MB* registers self-manifest events (*E*) (Stalnaker 2002, 2014).

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

#### *Mutual Belief (MB) as a model for Common Ground (CG)*

*E*: John is entering Jane's house.

*MB* can be represented as an endless cascade of pairs of beliefs (Geurts 2019):

$$\begin{aligned} & B_S E \quad \& \quad B_A E \\ & B_S B_A E \quad \& \quad B_A B_S E \\ & B_S B_A B_S E \quad \& \quad B_A B_S B_A E \\ & \dots \quad \& \quad \dots \end{aligned}$$

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#### *Lewis:*

The iterative structure of MB “is a chain of implications, not steps in anyone’s actual reasoning. Therefore there is nothing improper about its infinite length.” (Lewis 2002: 53; cf. Geurts 2019: 16).

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#### ***Key Requirement:***

*A* and *S* are appropriately *epistemically* related to each other.

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

#### *Two-Way Mirror*

Key Requirement is not met,

*e.g.*, *S* knows that *A* is not aware of the fact that *S* knows that *A* sees that *S* sees *E*.

$$B_S E \ \& \ B_A E$$

$$B_S B_A E \ \& \ B_A B_S E$$

$$B_S B_A B_S E \ \& \ \sim B_A B_S B_A E$$

$$B_S \sim B_A B_S B_A E \ \& \ \text{---}$$



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#### *In short:*

The cascade is *blocked*, and  $E$  does not update  $MB$  between  $A$  and  $S$ .

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

*Speech acts are self-manifest events*

*E: S is conveying  $F(P)$ .*

$B_S E$  &  $B_A E$

$B_S B_A E$  &  $B_A B_S E$

$B_S B_A B_S E$  &  $B_A B_S B_A E$

...

...

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### 2.1. Speaker meaning

#### *Speech acts are self-manifest events*

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...

...

$I_S F(P)$  — *S* intends to convey *F(P)*

*S*'s self-knowledge of ( $i_1$ )

$B_S I_S F(P) \ \& \ B_A I_S F(P)$

Fulfilment of ( $i_2$ )

*S*'s self-knowledge of ( $i_2$ )

$B_S I_S B_A I_S F(P) \ \& \ B_A I_S B_A I_S F(P)$

Fulfilment of ( $i_4$ )

*S*'s self-knowledge of ( $i_4$ )

$B_S I_S B_A I_S B_A I_S F(P) \ \& \ B_A I_S B_A I_S B_A I_S F(P)$

Fulfilment of ( $i_5$ )

...

...

...

...

## 2. Critical part

### 2.1. Speaker meaning

*Acts of insinuating are not self-manifest events*

*E: S is conveying  $M(Q)$ .*

$B_S E \ \& \ B_A E$

$B_S B_A E \ \& \ B_A B_S E$

$B_S B_A B_S E \ \& \ \sim B_A B_S B_A E$

$B_S \sim B_A B_S B_A E$  .

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*Acts of insinuating are not self-manifest events*

*E: S is conveying M(Q).*

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$I_S M(Q)$  — *S* intends to convey  $M(Q)$

*S*'s self-knowledge of ( $i_1$ )

$$B_S I_S M(Q) \ \& \ B_A I_S M(Q)$$

Fulfilment of ( $i_2$ )

*S*'s self-knowledge of ( $i_2$ )

$$B_S I_S B_A I_S M(Q) \ \& \ \sim B_A I_S B_A I_S M(Q)$$

Fulfilment of ( $i_4$ )'

— No successful *Gricean* communication!

— What plays the role of a ‘communicative two-way mirror’ in this case?

2. Critical part

2.2. Conversational implicature

## 2. Critical part

### 2.2. Conversational implicature

#### ***Modern account:***

- (A) Insinuated contents are conversationally implicated.
- (B) The *deniability* of insinuated contents piggybacks on the *cancellability* of implicatures.

## 2. Critical part

### 2.2. Conversational implicature

#### ***Modern account:***

(A) Insinuated contents are conversationally implicated.

(B) The *deniability* of insinuated contents piggybacks on the *cancellability* of implicatures.

#### **(A) is problematic:**

— implicatures, unlike insinuations, are reinforceable;

weak reinforceability: implicatures can be reinforced without producing a sense of anomalous redundancy (Sadock 1978: 294-295);

strong reinforceability: they can be reinforced without thwarting the speaker's communicative plan;



## 2. Critical part

### 2.2. Conversational implicature

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— implicatures, unlike insinuations, are reinforceable;

weak reinforceability: implicatures can be reinforced without producing a sense of anomalous redundancy (Sadock 1978: 294-295);

strong reinforceability: they can be reinforced without thwarting the speaker's communicative plan;

— implicatures function in the context of cooperative transactions, whereas the insinuator is strategic about her conversational goals.

## 2. Critical part

### 2.2. Conversational implicature

#### ***Modern account:***

(A) Insinuated contents are conversationally implicated.

(B) The *deniability* of insinuated contents piggybacks on the *cancellability* of implicatures.

#### **(B) is problematic, too:**

— *cancellability* is a property of *putative* or *potential* implicatures of situated speech acts (→ explicit cancellability) or sentences (→ contextual cancellability), see Jaszczolt 2009; *cancellation* is felicitous if the addition of the cancelling phrase does not engender a sense of contradiction (→ Coherence).

## 2. Critical part

### 2.2. Conversational implicature

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#### **(B) is problematic, too:**

- *cancellability* is a property of *putative* or *potential* implicatures of situated speech acts (→ explicit cancellability) or sentences (→ contextual cancellability), see Jaszczolt 2009; *cancellation* is felicitous if the addition of the cancelling phrase does not engender a sense of contradiction (→ Coherence).
- *deniability* is a property of *intended* and *actual* ‘implications’; the felicity of a *denial* requires more than Coherence (e.g., an appropriate conversational occasion, Epistemic Plausibility).

2. Critical part

2.3. Commitment

***Modern account:***

Insinuation is committing.

2. Critical part

2.3. Commitment

***Modern account:***

Insinuation is committing.

**MW:**

This idea is true as far as it goes.

However, we should go further and be more specific about the notion of *commitment* that pertains to insinuation.

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2.3. Commitment

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Insinuation is committing.

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This idea is true as far as it goes.

However, we should go further and be more specific about the notion of *commitment* that pertains to insinuation.

**Marsili 2021:**

Assertoric commitment: accountability and discursive responsibility.

**Oswald 2022:**

Epistemic commitment / communicative commitment

**MW:**

Insinuatory commitment: no accountability,

but new conversational permissibility facts (McGowan 2019).

### 3. Constructive part: towards a speech act-based approach

#### ***Three ideas:***

- *off-record context;*
- *Self-expression* (Green 2007, 2009);
- *procedure for insinuating.*

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The on-record effect of a speech act:

- (a) is recognizable to every hearer who shares our conversational standards,
- (b) puts constraints on the scope of available subsequent conversational moves,
- (c) can become the topic of conversation (i.e., can be explicitly stated),
- (d) the speaker can be held accountable for it.

The effects of acts of insinuating (which are registered by the off-record context):

- (a) & (b), but not-(c) & not-(d)



### 3. Constructive part: towards a speech act-based approach

#### ***Three ideas:***

- *off-record context*;
- *Self-expression* (Green 2007, 2009);
- *procedure for insinuating*.

To express a mental state = to show and signal it. (Green 2007, 2009)

The insinuating utterance *express* or *is expressive of*  $M(Q)$ ;  
in particular it makes it recognizable to an appropriately situated and endowed A.

The mechanisms of *showing* piggyback on  
the mechanisms of inferential communication.

### 3. Constructive part: towards a speech act-based approach

Given that  $S$  utters  $U$  in the presence of  $H$  in context  $C$ ,  $S$  insinuates  $M(Q)$  only if the following conditions obtain:

- (Con<sub>1</sub>) In uttering  $U$ ,  $S$  communicates  $F(P)$ .
- (Con<sub>2</sub>) Communicating  $F(P)$  is not a sufficient basis to consider the utterance  $U$  in context  $C$  as a conversationally appropriate move.
- (Con<sub>3</sub>) Communicating  $F(P)$  through  $U$  in  $C$  is conversationally appropriate if  $S$  conversationally implicates  $M(Q)$ .
- (Con<sub>4</sub>) Communicating  $M(Q)$  is unwanted in  $C$ .
- (Con<sub>5</sub>) There is an available context  $C'$ , which slightly differs from  $C$ , such that communicating  $F(P)$  through  $U$  in  $C'$  is conversationally appropriate if  $S$  conversationally implicates  $M(Q)'$ .
- (Con<sub>6</sub>) Communicating  $M(Q)'$  is not unwanted in  $C'$ .
- (Con<sub>7</sub>)  $S$  has a mental state  $M(Q)$ .
- (Con<sub>8</sub>)  $S$  contributes  $M(Q)$  to the off-record context of conversation.
- (Con<sub>9</sub>) Uttering  $U$  and communicating  $F(P)$  in context  $C$  is seen as an attempt to shift responsibility onto  $H$  for introducing  $M(Q)$  into the conversation.
- (Con<sub>10</sub>) Conditions (Con<sub>8</sub>) and (Con<sub>9</sub>) are met, in part, because  $U$  expresses  $M(Q)$ .

**THANK YOU**

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