

A sociobiological account of indirect speech

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Indirect speech is a remarkable trait of human communication. The present paper tackles the sociobiological underpinnings of communicative indirectness discussing both socio-interactive and cognitive rationales behind its manifestation in discourse. From a social perspective, the use of indirect forms in interactions can be regarded as an adaptive response to the epistemic implications of transacted new information in small primary groups, representing – in Givón’s terms – our “bio-cultural” descent. The design features of indirect strategies today may therefore be explained in terms of a form-function mapping in which indirect communicative expressions allowed a “safer” transaction of contents and a more cooperative attitude of speakers in both face-to-face and public contexts of communication. The unchallengeability effects notably induced by underencoded meanings have now received extensive experimental backing, unveiling intriguing underlying cognitive mechanisms such as the well-known cognitive illusions or fallacies.

Keywords: Theory of Mind, exaptation, political discourse, cognitive fallacies

1. Introduction

Indirect speech is a remarkable trait of human communication, yet its appearance in man’s verbal behavior has never been extensively tackled in linguistics and related disciplines. This paper puts forward a discussion on the sociobiological underpinnings of indirect communication debating its functions and implications in present-day contexts of language use. In this view, both social and cognitive issues will be broached that bear upon the small-scale structure of early human societies, on the one hand, and the cognitive prerequisites for processing under-specified meanings in discourse, on the other. The paper is organized as follows.

Section 2 brings home to the interactional dynamics regulating conversations in today’s *societies of intimates* (Givón 2002), laid out by Givón as our bio-cultural descent. Section 3 outlines the cognitive endowment allowing humans to decipher

implicit contents in discourse. Section 4 accounts for the reasons why speakers often resort to indirection and describes its most salient linguistic manifestations. Section 5 comments on some compelling examples of the use of indirect communication in political discourse and discusses its effects in sentence processing and comprehension. It is argued that the reason for massively using indirect strategies in these contexts is contingent on the cognitive effects they trigger and, precisely, on their capability of inducing *cognitive illusions* or *fallacies*.

Building on the foregoing assumptions, it is hypothesized that the purposes indirectness serves (today) in these and other domains of language use epitomise a *functional “spandrel”* of the role it played in governing interpersonal interactions within ancestral communicative ecologies.

2. Societies of intimates

In his Santa Barbara lectures, Givón (2002) describes some salient socio-cultural features of present-day primary social groups, which he calls *societies of intimates*. Societies of intimates are small-sized communities seldom exceeding 100/150 members. They are characterized by a foraging economy, a restricted territorial distribution, and a restricted gene pool. A consequence of this is their relatively high cultural homogeneity and informational stability. Givón (2009, p. 309) contends that the small-scale character of these societies easily conducts to familiarity and a high frequency of personal interactions. This, in turn, leads all members to rapidly share the same cultural assumptions and background knowledge. He notices that, in these dimensions, social behaviour is highly predictable, and group members' world-view is on the whole uniform. He explains this condition as the result of the rapidity with which new information spreads among members, thus soon becoming universal (Givón, 2002, p. 307).

In societies of intimates, individuals share almost all private and public contexts, because the group itself is the social world: the people you work with are also the people you tend to live with, the people you are related to, the people you worship with, the people you celebrate with and the people you grieve with (Cooley 1897, 1909).

In small primary groups, informational predictability is either the upshot of intensive daily contact between group members, and a strict proviso each member must abide by and preserve in order to avoid social splintering. What is more, sharing information and cultural values is a hallmark of identity within the community, and whoever cannot be identified as a depositary of the same values and genealogies shared by the others is not a member of the community either. Accordingly, if an individual's behaviour threatens the informational stability or

cultural uniformity of his group, he risks to fall into disrepute in the opinion of others. This is why, in societies of intimates like these, speakers are often forced into painstaking evaluations of the social repercussions of their communicative behaviours, especially when new contents are exchanged.

In another monograph, Givón (2009) argues that small-scale communities today represent a cogent piece of evidence of how early hominids' communicative ecologies might have looked like; he indeed portrays present-day societies of intimates as "our bio-cultural descent" (Givón, 2002, p. 301):

The territorial stability, genetic homogeneity, cultural homogeneity and great cultural stability of pre-human primate societies, taken together, point to the most-important parameter of pre-human and early-hominid communicative ecology – informational stability and homogeneity. When all members of the social group know each other intimately, when the terrain is stable and well-known to everybody, and when the culture is time-stable and cultural diversity is minimal, then the bulk of relevant generic knowledge – the conceptual-semantic map of the physical, social and mental universe – is equally shared by all group members and requires no elaboration. In the intimate social unit, *day-to-day specific episodic information is also largely shared, by virtue of the ever-shared immediate situation. The communication system that springs out of such social ecology is neigh predictable.* [italics mine]

Investigating the conversational dynamics in North American Indian contexts, Philips (1976) detects six (almost prescriptive) rules regulating caution, circumspection and avoidance in the transaction of new information. These rules essentially warn speakers to: (a) avoid explicit information about past events; (b) avoid identifying participants by name; (c) avoid being identified as source of information; (d) avoid being identified as author of prediction; (e) avoid citing your source of knowledge; and (f) avoid using explicit negative statements. Philips remarks that what pushes speakers in North American speech communities to cleave to these rules is the risk of *social alienation*. As already said, in societies of intimates the members know each other well, and new information about someone may soon reach its subject. Consequently, any information about a third party should be communicated without exposing oneself or any other member as its direct source (especially if proofs or certainty about the truth of the information cannot be relied on). From a pragmatic perspective, these attitudes towards knowledge are barely cooperative, because they entail flouting norms of explicitness, relevance, truthfulness and avoidance of redundancy. However, their uncooperativeness turns out to be a *sine qua non* condition for socially cooperative attitudes.¹

1. As highlighted by Coolidge & Wynn (2012, p. 217), in primary groups, social hierarchies are reduced to a minimum, and interactions between members typically come about on a peer-to-peer scale. The use of indirect forms of speech in these social realities may thus have extended

Two cases worth discussing in this respect are represented by the Ute and Ngóbe communities, established in Colorado and Panama, respectively. Observing the unfolding of public forums in these societies, Givón (2002) noticed that speakers are generally reluctant to publicly challenge other members' views.

One may allude obliquely to another person's position, but direct criticism is socially unacceptable. The cultural norms dictate an atmosphere of mutual respect and solidarity despite what may be real and serious differences.

(Givón, 2002, p. 318)

He points up that, among the Ute and Ngóbe, blunt imposition and direct verbal hostility have often eventuated in social disruption (Givón, 2002, p. 308), and one way to avoid this is by dodging any form of competition with potential opponents. A strategy public speakers resort to in the attempt to tone down one's speech is what Givón (2002) termed *irrelevance of relevance*. According to this strategy, during public speeches, speakers are advised to go around the central topic without bringing it up in the discussion. Public talks have far-reaching effects in small groups, therefore they should be filled with topics that are anything but germane to the intended message of the speaker who, in this way, more easily reaffirms commonality and trust, which are indispensable requirements to build up and maintain spiritual consensus. What makes consensual (and not imposed) action adaptive in these communities is its power to foster group cohesion, thereby discouraging dissention on the part of other members. So, indirection – whatever its forms – seems to be the best remedy to attain this goal.

Pinker (2007) highlights that indirectness or other forms of attenuated communication become particularly relevant in “arenas of conflict”. Yet, due to the number of contexts shared, in societies of intimates indirect communication becomes adaptive in many other private and public communicative situations. This has to be so because, in face-to-face groups, incautious conversational moves taken by a speaker are likely to resound in the entire speech community. In an old ethnological record, Grottanelli Vinigi (1966, p. 323) states that a condition of “demographic exiguity entails that the individual is known by the majority of the people surrounding him, meaning that his behavior and actions never elude the other members' vigilance”. Therefore, if a speaker turns out to be an unreliable source of information, his socio-interactive status is also more easily subject to

cooperative effects to the entire community. Obviously, indirectness may turn out to be cooperative even between two people or within single groups in a single community. But in smaller and socially unstructured ones, it becomes a regulating principle of interactions in a far larger number of contexts. Needless to say, the likelihood of speakers in small-scale social groups to opt for indirect communicative strategies also bears upon the large amount of contextual information already shared by interactants (cf. Tomasello, 2008).

other members' challenging behaviour. Needless to say, all this does not amount to banning the transaction of new contents – as this would deprive communication of its primary reason (i.e. that of transferring new information constructing common ground knowledge) – but it may induce speakers to “detach” from their truth value in some contexts. So, what probably distinguishes small-scale communities from the bigger social dimensions we live in is precisely the suitability of either one or the other epistemic attitude towards information in compliance with the constraints posed by contingent communicative needs.

Notwithstanding, many of the above considerations seem to hold also for public communication in what Givón (2002) called “small-town America”.

Small town America retains many of the salient features of Amerindian public discourse. It frowns on verbal confrontation, it skimps on negation, it encourages indirection. There is remarkably little competition for the floor, and speakers are allowed their long-winded say. Above all, when one aims to conduct business, even urgent business, one better visit first – gossip, re-establish social intimacy, reaffirm the bonds of commonality and trust. Only then can one transact business. (Givón, 2002, p. 319)

Interestingly enough, indirect speech is also widely typified by big-town public discourse. In what follows, I argue that this is an *exaptive* outcome of its functions and main determinants in early small human societies. (Used for the first time by Gould and Vrba (1982), the term *exaptation* refers to a process by which a particular feature acquires a function that was not originally selected by evolution.) This issue will be duly enlarged upon later on, yet a preliminary outline of the cognitive scaffolding that makes the interpretation of implicit meanings possible is in order.

3. Pragmatic foundations and cognitive prerequisites for indirect communication

Since Grice (1975), it is well established that communication entails the recognition of *intentions*. As is known, intentions may be overtly expressed, as is the case of (1)

- (1) A: Where's your mother?
B: She's at the tennis club

or they may be conveyed by means of alternative states of affairs, as exemplified in (2):

- (2) A: Where's your mother?
B: She has taken her tennis racket

In (1), B's answer is aligned with A's request, and the intention to say where the mother is is entirely available on surface structure. By contrast, in (2), B is apparently not aligned with A's request and provides a different answer. However, assuming B's cooperative behaviour, A capitalizes on the literal level of the sentence uttered, as well as on general background knowledge, to infer that the mother has gone playing tennis at the tennis club. Now, if B's conversational move in (2) is relevant and cooperative, what underlies its comprehension in the exchange?

Since Premack & Woodruff's (1978) seminal paper, it is now widely agreed upon that interactions like (2) cause no hindrance to comprehension because they are regulated by our ability to attribute mental states to individuals, what is known as *Theory of Mind* (ToM) or Mentalization. Earlier inquiries have found the neural correlates of this capacity in the well-known mirror system (Rizzolatti & Arbib, 1998). ToM is a meta-representational device (Baron-Cohen, 1991) by which we infer intentional or belief states of others on the basis of situational or world knowledge assumptions. Evolutionarily, the ToM system raised to guide the interpretation of social behaviors, with no particular specialization for verbal communication (Ferretti, 2010). Its involvement in decoding linguistic meanings can therefore be explained in *exaptive* terms. Since human communication, as a whole, runs on the reconstruction of speakers' intentions (Grice 1975), such intentions must always be computed, whether they are overtly or indirectly expressed, in order for communication to function effectively.

A compelling piece of evidence of the relation of ToM abilities to the detection of implicit intentions is offered by studies on autistic patients. In a pioneering volume on the communicative reflexes of autism, Frith (2003) argued that autistic people lack ToM abilities and, for this reason, cannot infer the speakers' communicative intentions when they are not on display in the utterance. In this sense, an exchange like (2) would impose an inferential step beyond the literal level of the message, which an autistic person would not be able to make. So, human ability to mentally represent intentional states of others is an essential requirement to cope with implicit meanings in a conversation. (On this account, it must be highlighted that languages' grammar in general can be conceived as stemming from the speaker's representation of the interlocutors' mental model of the ongoing discourse, which could also explain why presupposition-projecting constructions or other units of information structure are so relevant to the structure of present-day languages. For a more detailed discussion on this issue, cf. Givón 1973, 2005.)²

2. Givón (2005: 101): "[...] grammar is used systematically, during on-line communication, to activate mental representations of the interlocutor's current states of belief and intention. The more traditional pragmatic terminology for tapping into the mind of the interlocutor is that of

However, the rationale behind underencoding contents instead of explicitly verbalizing them has little to do with cognition or processing constraints – since, as some experimental studies (Bambini *et al.*, 2011; Jang *et al.*, 2013) revealed, the computation of implicit communicative intentions is much costlier than decoding overt intentions. Rather, its explanation resides in socio-interactional biases driving speakers to leave some contents underspecified in order to safeguard their status as cooperative communicators (In this particular context, “cooperative” must not be intended only in a conversational, but also in a socio-interactional, sense; i.e. as hinting at the speaker’s likelihood or ability to choose the most suitable communicative strategy with respect to the situation and the communicative task at hand.)

4. Reasons and linguistic manifestations of indirect communication

As put by Pinker (2007), communication is all about engaging speakers in different issuable tasks:

The mere act of initiating a conversation imposes a demand on the hearer’s time and attention. Issuing an imperative challenges her status and autonomy. Making a request puts her in the position where she might have to refuse, earning her a reputation as stingy or selfish. Telling something to someone implies that she was ignorant of the fact in the first place. And then, there are criticisms, boasts, interruptions, outbursts, and telling of bad news, and the broaching of divisive topics, all of which can injure the hearer’s face directly. (Pinker, 2007, p. 440)

In several contexts of private and public communication, the speaker may incur the risk of appearing a potential liar or a despotic communicator. In all these situations, safeguarding his face and that of the hearer is always a stringent preoccupation. Brown & Levinson (1987) hold that success in this attempt can be achieved through *politeness* which, in the most typical cases, finds expression in non-direct conversational moves. The literature so far has classified a number of strategies realizing indirection in different ways and with different levels of implicitness of the contents conveyed (Sbisà, 2007; Lombardi Vallauri, 2009; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia, 2014). In this section, I will briefly remind the reader of some of them, discussing the scope and effects of their use in communication.

When exemplifying strategies of underencoded meaning, scholars often hint at cases like (2) above, that is, at the use of *implicatures*. As is known, implicatures affect the literal content of an utterance in different ways, depending on

shared context. That is, the assumption that the mental representation that is currently activated in my mind is also currently activated in yours”.

their degree of implicitness (Bianchi, 2003). For convenience, I recall *conventional* implicatures, arising from inferences hinging on features which are conventionally associated with an expression (e.g. She is ugly *but* clever); *conversational* implicatures, originating from the indirect communication of speakers' intentional meanings, which can be tracked down only on the basis of specific contextual cues (cf. (2)); and *generalized conversational* implicatures, placed in-between the two former types, because their computation is based on both linguistically and contextually available information (e.g. *John has three children* = he might also have four or five). Conversational implicatures have also been associated with the conveyance of ironical meanings, as irony often stems from the use of indirect speech acts (Chen, 1990).³

Another level of indirectness is also epitomised by figurative language. It is by now concurred with that figurative expressions are so common that the bulk of natural languages' vocabulary is characterized by non-literal meanings, not to mention the fact that a large number of our literal words are dead metaphors.⁴ Nonetheless, the indirect nature of contents conveyed by means of – say – metaphors or metonymies relies on the required receiver's ability to understand conceptual associations of semantic similarity (metaphor) or physical contiguity (metonymy) which are not linguistically explicit (cf., for example, *He is a Peter Pan* vs. *He is childish and immature*; *The White House has signed the Washington Emergency Declaration* vs. *President Obama has signed the Washington Emergency Declaration*) but are expected to be reconstructed by the receiver in order to make sense of the non-literal expression in the context within which it is used.

A widespread phenomenon of indirect speech is *presupposition*. Its relation to the underencoding of sentence meanings has been the core of much discussion in philosophy of language and linguistics (Sbisà, 2007; Lombardi Vallauri, 2009; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia, 2014). The implicitness instantiated by presuppositions is however less tightly associated with the content level; rather, it affects the speaker's responsibility and commitment to truth. In this sense, they feature a somewhat different kind of presumptive meaning, in which to be implicit is not the literal proposition but a particular communicative attitude of the speaker (i.e. the attitude of committing to the truth of the uttered sentence).⁵ In presupposing

3. Imagine that in a rainy day speaker A says to speaker B: "What a beautiful day for a picnic!". By virtue of cooperational biases, the shared contextual background will lead speaker B to get to the opposite interpretation, namely, that it is not the right day to plan a picnic outdoor.

4. I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for pointing out this aspect.

5. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, presuppositions are a pervasive component of all natural languages' grammar and are most of the times encoded by linguistically explicit devices, which, to a certain extent, make them less likely characterizable as implicit communicative

a content, the speaker presents it as already shared at the moment the utterance is produced, which means that no further truth value assessment on the part of the receiver is called for. In some recent works (Saussure, 2013; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia, 2014), it has been suggested that the implicitness effected by presupposition derives from its property to escape relevance- and consistency-checking parameters. So, as no commitment is on display in the speaker's message, the presupposed content passes "implicitly" into the receiver's mind, thus being tacitly accepted as true. Earlier and current literature on the subject (Kiparsky & Kiparsky 1971, Lombardi Vallauri 2009) discusses this effect to be triggered mainly by the use of definite descriptions, factive predicates, defining relative clauses, change-of-state predicates and focus-sensitive adverbial operators. Some examples are given below:

- (3) a. DEFINITE DESCRIPTION
They have become one of *the most notorious and alarming stripes of evil*.⁶
- b. DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSE
They have been asked about *the man who killed nine people in a church in Charleston*, South Carolina, in June.
- c. CHANGE-OF-STATE PREDICATE
in the meantime objectors *continue* to go to prison, or to leave South Korea for other countries.
- d. FOCUS-SENSITIVE OPERATOR
Conflicts between church and state are *also* sometimes settled in a prison cell
- e. SUBORDINATE ADVERBIAL CLAUSE
The episode happened in 1966, *when Charles Whitman climbed a tower at the University of Texas at Austin and killed 16 people*.
- f. FACTIVE PREDICATE
Whenever I roam through Sarajevo's labyrinthine streets, I am amazed *that it is not overrun with more tourists*.

In (3a), the existence of "notorious and alarming stripes of evil" is taken for granted by means of the definite phrase *the most notorious and alarming stripes of evil*. In (3b), the defining relative clause (*the man who killed nine people in a church in Charleston*) presupposes that "the man" in question killed nine people in a church

strategies. However, if conceived as "hiding" the speaker's commitment to some information, rather than its truth, they may be thought to affect a level of indirectness that bears on speakers' degrees of commitment, rather than on truth-conditional values of contents (cf. also Givón 2005 on this account).

6. All Examples in (3) have been taken from *The New York Times*.

in Charleston. The change-of-state predicate *continue* in (3c) presupposes that objectors were used to being locked in jail before. In (3d), *also* projects the presupposition that conflicts between church and state are settled also in places other than a prison cell. The subordinate clause in (3e) presents as to be taken for granted that Charles Whitman climbed a tower at the University of Texas; and, finally, the factive predicate in (3f) generates the presupposition that Sarajevo's labyrinthine streets are not overrun with more tourists.

In all these cases, some content is treated as already shared by the receiver prior to the communicative act. But, it may well be the case that the receiver's knowledge state does not support the presupposition whatsoever, and that the presupposed content must be, so to say, *accommodated* (Lewis 1979) by the receiver.

Whether achieved by means of presuppositions, implicatures, or the like, indirect communication characterizes a large slice of our ordinary interactions, despite the cognitive costs of dealing with it. Notably, a bunch of experimental studies (Bambini *et al.* 2011, Jang *et al.* 2013) demonstrated that processing under-encoded contents imposes additional effort manifested in more extended neural activations – when fMRI patterns are observed – or in modulations of negative or positive components, if Event-Related Potentials (ERP) are recorded through electroencephalographic techniques.⁷ The fact that cognitively costlier strategies are so frequent in communication suggests that they might serve some other useful purpose, which I believe to be represented by the attainment of politeness and face-saving effects in conversation.⁸

On this account, it can be surmised that cognitive costs are overridden by social costs, in that between choosing a direct strategy – allowing a more immediate decoding of relevant content – and an indirect one – imposing major effort due to the additional inferential steps required – the second strategy, however costlier, better succeeds in attaining the receiver's epistemic vigilance (Sperber *et al.* 2010) on the content conveyed, and reduces challenging reactions on its truth value. If something that is said is overtly available to the receiver's critical judgment, he is less likely to assess it as true or false; therefore, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that content is more easily ratified as true.

7. In the neurolinguistic literature, these components are traditionally known as N400 and P600, whose involvement in language processing has been at the center of much earlier and recent investigation (cf. Kutas & Federmeier, 2000; Burkhardt, 2006; Wang & Schumacher, 2013, *inter alia*).

8. Hagoort & Levinson (2014, p. 669): "One of the major motivations for speakers to reply indirectly in conversations is to mutually protect one another's public self". However, it must not be forgotten that, in some cases, indirect strategies also turn out to be useful in conveying additional information than what overtly expressed propositions can do.

Another point to consider is that indirection also becomes effective when it comes to forging collective consensus, which – as already said – is one of the conditions of internal cohesion in primary social groups. The idea that consensus is better reached through less direct communicative strategies is however not unknown to public speakers in big modern societies, where ideological agreement and persuasive aims are the base ingredients of political speech (see also Brocca *et al.*, 2016, for a discussion on politicians' persuasive use of implicit communication in Twitter). Indeed, one of the most striking features of political speeches is the high amount of contents left underspecified by speakers. This trend is characteristic of political communication in different languages, which grounds for the assumption that some rhetorical benefits must derive from communicating contents in this way.

A tentative, though plausible, hypothesis is that these uses of implicit communication may represent a relic of ancestral interactional dynamics in which indirectness turned out to be an adaptive solution to create and preserve cultural and ideological commonality in a way that hindered receivers from challenging exchanged information (thus forestalling potential social estrangement of communicators). Arguably, the design features of present-day indirect strategies reflect their adaptiveness in these primeval communicative environments. Due to their adaptive character, these features were retained in human communication also when the societal structure of human communities expanded, and were also exploited in contexts in which a peaceful construction of consensus represented a compelling goal, as is the case of political speeches today. In this perspective, communication in political discourse – typically targeted at forging beliefs in potential voters – may have *exapted* indirect strategies, together with their pragmatic functions, to subtly tune the addressees' thoughts and intentions with those of the speakers. So, indirect communication allowed pursuing this by reducing the challengeability of the speaker's messages, thus increasing his rate of credibility and trustworthiness.

5. Indirect communication in political speeches

With a view to substantiating the considerations made so far, it would be interesting to observe how indirection operates in today's political discourse and how it affects the interpretation of sentence meaning. To this end, I will show excerpts from English, French, Italian and Spanish political speeches in which a good number of indirect strategies are used to convey contents that – in a more honest and transparent communication – should be communicated as overt statements. As we will see, what characterizes this use of indirectness is that it often involves

contents which the receiver should be given the opportunity to “weigh up” and critically evaluate. In most cases, these contents are presupposed or implicated by the speaker.

The four texts below have been extracted from speeches held during presidential campaigns run between 2009 and 2014.⁹ A short discussion of some relevant occurrences will follow.¹⁰

From Mitt Romney’s speech (2012):

President Obama wants to “fundamentally transform” America. We want to **restore America to the founding principles that made this country great**_[Pres]. Our plans protect freedom and opportunity, and **our blueprint**_[Pres] is the Constitution of the United States. Together, we will build an America where “hope” is a new job with a paycheck, **not a faded word on an old bumper sticker**_[Impl]. The path I lay out is **not one paved with ever increasing government checks and cradle-to-grave assurances that government will always be the solution**_[Impl]. If this election is a bidding war for who can promise more benefits, then I’m not your President.

From Marine Le Pen’s speech (2012):

Vous aimez la politique, vous aimez le débat, vous aimez le combat pour vos idéaux! Parce que c’est ainsi que vous voulez changer le monde, et défendre votre pays. Alors je ne m’abaisserai pas, je ne vous abaisserai pas, à vous parler de la petite politique, celle qui s’étale vulgairement tous les jours dans vos journaux, celle qui au fond n’intéresse plus grand monde tant elle est méprisables_[Impl]. Je ne vous parlerai pas de ces petites combines, de ces guéguerres, de ces spectacles minables auxquels on nous donne chaque jour la peine d’assister_[Pres]. Les partis politiques en déroute qui s’enfoncent dans la désunion et les combats de coqs_[Pres], ça ne m’intéresse pas! Les responsables politiques d’une droite qui cherchent à masquer le vide de leur projet, la mollesse de leurs convictions, leur absence de vision, derrière une guerre des chefs qui s’affichent sans vergogne aux yeux des Français_[Impl].

From Matteo Renzi’s speech (2014):

Il **punto centrale**_[Pres] è che noi oggi non abbiamo l’esigenza di far festa perché avvertiamo **lo straordinario compito a cui i nostri concittadini ci hanno chiamato**_[Pres], che è quello di **togliere ogni alibi**_[Pres]. A Roma, nei palazzi della

9. Marine Le Pen: www.frontnational.com/videos/udt-2012-la-baule-intervention-de-marine-le-pen/

Luís Zapatero: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eq65prDi27I

Mitt Romney: www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/post/mitt-romneysflorida-republican-primary-speech-full-text/2012/01/31/gIQA8tYKgQ_blog.html

10. For greater convenience, the relevant occurrences have been bold-typed and their categorization in terms of Implicature ([Impl]) or Presupposition ([Pres]) appears subscripted.

politica, nessuno ha più alibi. **Non c'è più spazio per rinviare le riforme, quelle istituzionali, costituzionali, elettorali, del lavoro, della pubblica amministrazione, della giustizia, del fisco**_[Impl]. Noi vogliamo arrivare all'appuntamento del primo di luglio con grande umiltà, con grande responsabilità, ma anche con grande decisione. Perché il semestre europeo che inizierà il primo luglio è un semestre nel quale noi abbiamo il compito di mostrare un'Italia che sia leader e non follower in Europa_[Impl].

From Luís Zapatero's speech (2009):

Hoy se trata de hacer el primer acto de **la gran propuesta de renovación de nuestra economía**_[Pres], de la gran propuesta de renovación de la economía **que el partido socialista y el gobierno van hacer a la sociedad española**_[Pres], para que España **vuelva a crecer con fuerza**_[Pres] de manera más sostenible, cree más empleo, y llegamos a una sociedad más equitativa que mantenga y desarrolle la cohesión y el bienestar social. Para eso os he convocado hoy aquí: para empezar, con **nueva energía**_[Pres], **una nueva etapa**_[Pres] de la economía española. [...] El partido popular, cuando se reúne, **siempre sale con lo mismo**_[Pres]: con que han cerrado la crisis y con que han formado el liderazgo. ¿Sabéis por qué? Porque **siempre hablan de sus problemas internos, de sus líos, de sus crisis**_[Pres].

In Romney's speech, the verb *restore* projects the presupposition that the "founding principles that made America great" have been neglected by previous governments, whereas with the utterance *not a faded word on an old bumper sticker* it is implicated that previous presidents have only worried about printing the word "hope" on old bumper stickers, instead of making it real for the American people. In both cases, the implicit content is not asserted, but rather presented as shared knowledge or as information to be inferred on the basis of common ground assumptions.

In the French text, Marine Le Pen implicates that other politicians have spoken about "petite politique" and presupposes that there are *combines* (ploys), *guéguerres* (spats), *spectacles minables* (pathetic shows), without previously asserting their existence. In the same way, with the defining relative clause *qui cherchent à masquer le vide de leur projet, la mollesse de leurs convictions, leur absence de vision*, Le Pen presents as already known that the politicians of the right party mask the emptiness of their project, the weakness of their beliefs, their lack of perspective, etc.

The Italian President uses an implicature (*non c'è più spazio per rinviare le riforme*, tr. "there is no time to postpone reforms anymore") to let infer that other governments have always postponed reforms in many fields. Similarly, by saying *togliere ogni alibi* ("removing all alibis"), he presupposes that there are alibis left by other ruling parties or by previous administrations.

Finally, Zapatero conveys the presupposition that his *gran propuesta* is aimed at renovating the Spanish economy. By the same token, in *vuelva a crecer con fuerza* the change-of-state predicate *volver* presupposes that, in some time before the government in charge, Spain used to be stronger.

All in all, the impression one has with these communicative strategies is that the contents the speakers want to convince the audience about are treated as if their truth is already agreed upon. Among other reasons, by implicating or presupposing the contents featuring the real “object of persuasion”, the speakers show to have no urgent need to bluntly assert them and, in so doing, they induce receivers not to care too much about their veracity. The effect resulting from this mechanism strongly impinges on the degree of challengeability of the contents conveyed, which are therefore more likely accepted with a lesser attentive evaluation on the part of the addressees.

Another insightful interpretation of the effects of indirect communication – and more particularly of conversational implicatures – has been proposed in the philosophical field by Kierkegaard (1972, 3rd ed., p. 124). According to Kierkegaard, in communicating something indirectly, the speaker composes a “knot” that must be undone in order for the message to be understood. If the receiver is to gain some benefits from understanding the message conveyed he must undo the knot by himself, and this places him in a position in which he cannot assess whether the speaker has taken an attacking or a defending attitude. The speaker thus becomes “an objective something, not a personal man”, which makes him less likely challengeable in the ongoing interaction.

6. Indirect communication and cognitive fallacies

From a biological point of view, it can be speculated that one of the reasons why indirect speech proves so effective in achieving cooperation in conversations – and was possibly selected by human verbal behavior – is conditional upon effects known as *cognitive illusions* or *fallacies*. Scholars in the field of argumentation theory (Hamblin, 1970; Walton, 1996; Saussure & Oswald, 2009) use these terms to refer to misrepresentations of discourse contents induced by the use of particular linguistic devices. Such devices are often opted for in order to encourage deceptive interpretations of some meanings.

Most of the times, deception is pursued with the precise intent to pre-empt the addressee from becoming entirely aware of the speaker’s intention to communicate some information. For this to come about, the addressee’s attention must be diverted from the content at issue and brought onto some other (Oswald et al., 2016). This cognitive and epistemic move wields a strong influence on the

addressee's ability to assess the speaker's source of evidence and spot the deceptive nature of some information.¹¹

As far as some deceptive strategies may be used to alter discourse representations in the addressee's mind, the adoption and/or discarding of given linguistic devices is ideologically relevant. By way of illustration, Oswald et al. (2016, p. 513) discuss the following example:

(4) Eleven African were shot dead and fifteen wounded

Here, the passive voice removes any reference to the police (having perpetrated the acts described). Such an argumentative move reduces "the perceived responsibility of the police in the violent events. In turn, this can be interpreted as a "pro-police" ideological choice".

Basically, deception is believed to operate on a level of verbal information processing, and the mechanisms involved in it are often a question of structural properties of messages, and more particularly, of the way information is packaged through them. Indeed, indirectness in discourse is in most cases a matter of packaging constraints rather than of notional contents. To date, the experimental field has provided us with a vast body of evidence of how differences in packaging underlie differences in conceptual representations, due to the interference of cognitive biases. Presupposition has been described as one of the most powerful devices to induce this effect. Since Peter Hornby's investigations on presupposition processing (Hornby, 1973, 1974), false information recognition studies highlighted the subjects' difficulty in detecting false information when it was presupposed in an utterance. Subsequent inquiries along the same lines have further confirmed this trend, which research strands espousing a Relevance Theory tack of presupposition processing have called *presupposition bias* (Saussure, 2013). According to these views, the receiver's likelihood to accept presupposed contents as true is first of all dictated by the need to comply with the truth of the proposition as a whole and, more precisely, with the utterance's being relevant to the communicative task at hand.¹²

As rightfully pointed out by Saussure (2014), the relevance of presuppositions is grounded in the fact that they "épargnent à la cognition le recours à un processus profond d'évaluation critique" (Ibid. p. 288). However intriguing, though, this hypothesis calls for some stronger empirically-based reflection, given that some

11. Oswald et al. (2016, p. 3): "deception constrains verbal comprehension so as to divert the target's attention from mobilising information that would allow them to identify the deceptive intent".

12. An earliest account of how some contents are retained by the mind only subconsciously can be found in Tversky & Kahneman's 1974 contribution on judgments under uncertainty.

later neurolinguistic studies (Hertrich *et al.*, 2015) revealed increasing effort while processing new presuppositions as compared to new assertions. These deflecting trends may also be accounted for as a further confirmation of the cognitive biases effected by presupposition. Put another way, a presupposition bears the instruction to look for an antecedent in previous discourse, which is absent in the case of new presuppositions to be accommodated. So, being language processing rates very fast in discourse (Givón 1991, 2002), and new presuppositions costlier to process, there is not enough time to fully evaluate the truth value of a new presupposition, because this would eventuate in a more time-consuming operation. So, when a presupposition has no discourse antecedent, its truth value is only “shallowly processed”, leading the addressee to (partly or completely) skip the most relevant aspects of the content it conveys. Moreover, if some semantic incongruity is involved between the presupposition and an already established model of discourse, this incongruity tends to be noticed less straightforwardly by the message receiver, because little time is available to him to run a thorough analysis of the utterance.

7. Concluding remarks

On balance, in any form of interaction, humans “explore the boundaries of relationship types” (Pinker *et al.* 2008:838) and, in this way, they anticipate what other humans think about the relationship. I believe that it is precisely this evaluation that makes them capable of assessing all the risks and advantages of their actions and plan their (communicative) behaviors accordingly. The domain of public communication is just an example of speakers’ awareness of the power of indirection. Yet, the use people make of indirection in these contexts may be a reflection of the use early humans made of it in smaller and structurally simpler communicative ecologies where evaluations on the “relationship type” in ordinary conversations were a *desideratum* for a safe transaction and diffusion of contents in the community. In this view, the design features and functions of indirect communication, as they appear today, may have been shaped and fine-tuned in small societal dimensions where they proved to be adaptive in regulating cooperative interactions between individuals. Upon this assumption, the most relevant features (and functions) of indirect communication today can be regarded as an *exaptive* upshot of communicative strategies possibly originated for other purposes. At any rate, the adaptive character of indirect communication made it indispensable in many other contexts in which maintenance of one’s status and credibility in the society turned out to be a relevant concern. Public speeches embody a domain where this concern becomes an (almost) regulating principle of interactions, since

it fosters speakers to hide, misdirect and subtly manipulate the others in compliance with the “benefits” of the language user.

Earlier and recent experimental studies have been discussed that have shed light on the representational biases induced by indirect forms of communication. These studies have shown that in most cases what is not explicitly said in an utterance can have even stronger effects on human cognition than verbally expressed contents, since – whether for cognitive or socio-interactional reasons – indirect communication strongly impinges on the rejection rate of (potentially challengeable) contents conveyed by the speaker, preserving his reputation in the opinion of others and increasing his cooperativeness in the interactional process.

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