
Deniable offenses - different ways of communicating controversial messages

Panel contribution

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In the televised coverage of the Swedish elections of 2022 many viewers were surprised - if not shocked - by an utterance by Rebecka Fallénqvist, a representative of the right-wing Swedish Democrat party (SD). She celebrated their victory with the (non idiomatic) phrase “Helg Seger” (weekend victory), which sounds similar to the Swedish version of the Nazi salute “Sieg Heil”, “Hell Seger”. When asked about her behavior she first answered that she did it as a joke aimed at easily provoked leftist media. However, she later claimed that any similarity with the Nazi salute was accidental and unintentional. This is a somewhat spectacular example of how offensive thing can be hinted in a humorous (and a potentially deniable way) - just as a slip of the tongue.

In this work we contrast two ways of communicating offensive things: through hinting and through exaggeration. The Fallénqvist episode is a case of the former. In the latter case, offensive actions are made less offensive by making them harder to believe - for instance in the humorous episode where Sir David Attenborough suggested shooting Donald Trump as a way of influencing American elections. Attenborough’s utterance is supposed to be taken as a joke, while at the same time showing great displeasure with the situation at hand. Franzén et al. (2021) discuss how exaggerated taboo-breaking can bring rage, fear and pleasure in a conversation.

We look at these two ways of communication following the theoretical dialogical account of Maraev et al. (2021) who cast jokes in terms of topoi (as a granular resource to account for different ways of opposing joke scripts) and enthymemes (as an argument occurring in a dialogue or text, and involving one or more topoi; Breitholtz, 2020) that arise from specific interactional experiences. Additionally we claim that hinting share the same inference mechanism with dogwhistles (expressions that are used to communicate different messages to different groups), semantics and pragmatics of which were studied previously (Henderson and McCready, 2017; Breitholtz and Cooper, 2021).

References:

Breitholtz, E. (2020). *Enthymemes and topoi in dialogue: the use of common sense reasoning in conversation* (p. 161). Brill.

Breitholtz, E., & Cooper, R. (2021, October). Dogwhistles as Inferences in Interaction. In *Proceedings of the Reasoning and Interaction Conference (ReInAct 2021)* (pp. 40-46).

And there is one more reference: Anna G. Franzén, Rickard Jonsson, Björn

Sjöblom (2021) Fear, anger, and desire: Affect and the interactional intricacies of rape humor on a live podcast, *Language in Society*.

Henderson, R., & McCready, E. (2017, November). How dogwhistles work. In *JSAI International Symposium on Artificial Intelligence* (pp. 231-240). Springer, Cham.

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