

Stupefying

Mike Deigan
michael.deigan@yale.edu

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S stupefies A when *A* accepts *S*'s assertion without understanding it.

Recent work suggests a certain kind of manipulative speech can only through not-at-issue content.

My claim: stupefying shows this is mistaken.

1 Attention and the Manipulation of Common Ground

One canonical way propositions get into common ground (CG):¹

- (i) a speaker asserts *p*, explicitly proposing that *p* be added to CG.
- (ii) addressees consider *p* and whether it should go into CG.
- (iii) addressees confirm *p*, explicitly or implicitly.

But this is not the only way things get into CG. Sometimes not-at-issue content gets added. Presupposition accommodation, direct imposition, indirect CG updates.

Stanley (2015), Langton (2018), and others: one can use not-at-issue content to get content into the CG through the back door, without one's interlocutors properly considering it.

They seem to think this happens *only* with not-at-issue content. And this is what is predicted by recent work on the dynamics of attention in conversation.

A lot of interesting work appealing to attention to explain various phenomena: Ciardelli, Groenendijk, and Roelofsen (2009), Franke and de Jager (2011), Roelofsen (2013), Bledin and Rawlins (2016), Crone (2017), Crone (2018), and Bledin and Rawlins (forthcoming).

¹See Farkas and Bruce (2010), among others.

'Attention' to *p* requires that one is actively entertaining *p*.
(Contrast with entertaining whether "*p*" is true)

All of these authors accept some form of

At-issue/Attention Link: At-issue content of an utterance is always attended to by each interlocutor before being added to common ground.

No such link between attention and not-issue content, so it's predicted that the relevant kind of CG manipulation can't happen with at-issue content.

2 Stupefying (or, Hiding Content in Plain Sight)

But it *can* happen with at-issue content, as stupefying shows.

Stupefying *by content*: when someone accepts an assertion whose content they don't have the right concepts to grasp.

Promoters of the Radithor (water with radium in it) would say things like this:

- (1) The ionizing process of the Alpha rays sets up revitalizing forces in these glands [of aging], pouring renewed streams of hormones into the blood and bringing about the most astonishing results.²

Having no idea of what alpha rays, etc., are, people like Eben Byers would accept it, then go on to drink Radithor daily.

Stupefying *by form*: content is graspable, but addressee doesn't understand the assertion because of some aspect of its form, but accepts it anyways.

Suppose you go to Ocracoke Island and someone tells you not to stay at some cottage you're considering. You ask why, and they reply:

- (2) Its pizer is all whopperjawed.

You might ask what on Earth this means, but you might also just go along with it. (*pizer* means *porch*, *whopperjawed* means *crooked* or *misaligned*)³

Do these contents really go into CG?

Note: CG contents need not be believed. On a public commitments picture, this is clear. On Stalnakerian picture, we just need 'acceptance', which can include pretense.

²Morris (1926, p. 183).

³See Wolfram and Reaser (2014, Ch. 5).

Reasons to think they do get into CG: assertion/confirmation pattern, presupposition licensing.

(3) Does the house down that way have a whopperjawed pizer too?

So the At-issue/Attention Link is false.

3 Cooperative Attention

Why did the At-issue/Attention Link seem plausible?

In confirming, one typically does act *as if* one understands.

Compare: in asserting one acts *as if* one believes.

Perhaps there is a norm requiring attention to what one confirms, as there is a norm requiring that one believe what one asserts?

Not quite. Contrast explicit violations:

- (4) a. Hm, I don't think I understand what that means, but okay.
b. #It's raining but I don't believe it is.

In many cases, (4-a) is perfectly fine.

Alternative, Gricean proposal:⁴

Attentional Cooperative Principle: Apportion your attention as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Like Grice's Cooperative Principle, this is very general and rather vague.

But the hope is that it could explain why usually one is expected to attend before confirming, but why (4-a) can sometimes be okay.

⁴Based on the Cooperative Principle from Grice (1967, p. 26): "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". We could derive our attention principle from the Cooperative Principle if we make the somewhat unnatural move of taking one's attention to be a 'conversational contribution'. I take it, though, that Grice's principle is about how to be a good speaker. Our principle, by contrast, is primarily about how to be a good listener.

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