

# Stupefying

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

My claim: stupefying is an important means both for good (cooperative, jointly rational inquiry) and bad (manipulation of others against their own interest), in ways that current models of conversation exclude. So we need to revise these models.

## 1 Adding to Common Ground

Common ground (CG): the body of information publicly and jointly accepted or committed to by the interlocutors. (Stalnaker (1978), and many others)

Assertions as proposals to add to CG. Proposals can be accepted, rejected, or questioned by the addressees.

What's in CG need not be believed, but rather accepted—interlocutors act as if it's true for the purposes of the conversation.

A complication: utterances often express multiple contents of different statuses. Some is the main point (*at-issue*), others are backgrounded (*not-at-issue*).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. The modern antivaccine movement can be traced to a paper published 16 years ago in *The Lancet*, a respected medical journal.<sup>2</sup>  
b. *The Lancet*, which published a paper 16 years ago to which the modern antivaccine movement can be traced, is a respected medical journal.
- (2) Lea has saved up a lot of money since she stopped smoking.

Assertions propose to add *at-issue* content to CG. But not-at-issue content gets in the CG too, usually by default (Lewis 1979). Even rejecting (2) with (3) can leave the presupposition that Lea smoked at some point.

- (3) No, she says she's broke!

<sup>1</sup>Potts (2005), Simons et al. (2010)

<sup>2</sup>From the COCA corpus: <https://corpus.byu.edu/COCA>.

## 2 Attention and the Manipulation of CG

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, which is what is predicted by recent work on the dynamics of attention in conversation.

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

Everyone who has written about this,<sup>3</sup> as far as I know, accepts 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 predicted that the relevant kind of CG manipulation can't happen with at-issue content.

## 3 Stupefying (or, Taking the Front Door)

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:

- (4) 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.<sup>4</sup>

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:

- (5) Its pizer is all whopperjawed.

<sup>3</sup>Ciardelli, Groenendijk, and Roelofsen (2009), Farkas and Bruce (2010), Franke and de Jager (2011), Bledin and Rawlins (2016), and Crone (2017)

<sup>4</sup>Morris (1926, p. 183).

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*)

Do these contents really go into CG?

Yes: assertion/confirmation pattern, presupposition licensing.

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

So the At-issue/Attention Link is false.

Why did everyone accept it?

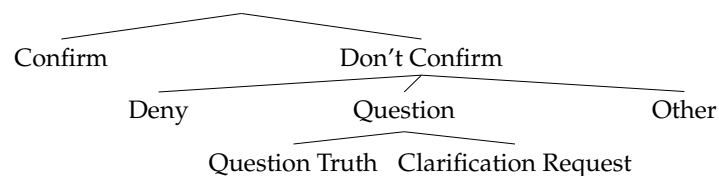
Gricean-ish norms often *require* one to attend to the at-issue content before accepting.

## 4 Why Does Stupefying Happen?

Why do speakers say what their addressees won't understand?

Lots of reasons—possibly with malign intent (manipulating you to buy something bad for you, e.g.), but not necessarily (unintentionally, manipulating you to do something in your interest, showing off, etc.)

Why do addressees accept what they don't understand?



In particular, why not request clarification?

Because (expected) cost of confirmation is often low, and clarification requests have costs: (i) they take time, (ii) they express ignorance, and (iii) they can challenge authority.

From a study of consent to participation in medical research:

... [Mrs. B.] complained in her interview with me that she lacked knowledge about the purpose of Dr. A.'s study, and that she had difficulty understanding the technical parts. When I reminded her that she did have ample opportunity in the consent process to ask such questions of Dr. A., she said "Well, I didn't want him to think I was stupid!" She had pretended to understand some things and did not question Dr. A. as much as she wanted.

Fletcher (1976, p. 270)

## 5 Stupefying and Conceptual Expansion

Conversation is a central means of human instruction and learning.

One kind of learning, well captured by current models: possibility elimination.

Another kind, not well captured: conceptual expansion.

How? Starting with very partially interpreted 'placeholder', adding to it through use. (from developmental psych: Carey (2009), from phil of science: Strevens (2012))

This process is not only done in isolation, but takes place in conversations.

ARISTES: ... It seems that you excite sensations in me instead of producing clear ideas. I am using your language. In all honesty, I do not understand everything you are telling me. I see it, and a moment later I no longer see it. For I still only glimpse it. It seems to me you are right, but I am not understanding you too well.

Malebranche (1688/1997, §III.viii)

Stupefying may be essential to conversations that promote conceptual expansion.

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