TRUTHS, LIES, AND EQUIVOCATIONS.
THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICTING GOALS ON DISCOURSE

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Abstract  This article proposes a situational and discourse-oriented view of a
particular class of messages, equivocations, that have usually been dismissed as
ineffective or even deceptive. We distinguish between — and measure indepen-
dently — what a message says (whether it is true or false) and how it is said
(whether it is clear or equivocal), and we propose that the nature of the
communicative situation determines the position of messages on these two
coordinates. Specifically, situations can create external goals or consequences of
messages, and these consequences can be positive or negative. There exists a class
of situations in which all direct messages (true or false) have negative con-
sequences. We predict that in these avoidance-avoidance conflicts, direct
messages will be avoided and indirect, but true, equivocations should occur
instead. Using hypothetical scenarios, the first four experiments confirmed that,
in such conflicts but not in control conditions, people make their messages
equivocal but true. A fifth experiment elicited false messages as well and showed
that these could be distinguished from both clear and equivocal truths. Additional
analyses showed that equivocations are not lies of omission and that nonverbal
leakage did not occur in either equivocal or false messages.

Henry II is said to have exclaimed, during his dispute with Thomas à Becket, ‘Will
no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?’ Superficially, this is simply a rhetorical
question, requiring neither answer nor action; but it can also be seen as an indirect
request, even a command — which is how it was taken and acted upon. Yet the
king could always say, correctly, that he had never asked anyone to kill the priest.
His message was therefore equivocal, ‘having two or more significations equally
appropriate; capable of double interpretation; ambiguous; of uncertain nature;
undecided’ (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). Consider also this reply, given in
one of our experiments:

Question: Was Pat a good employee?
Answer: Well, um, that’s DEPENDS on what y’ call a good EMPLOYEE.

This equivocal response implies — but does not say — that Pat is a good employee
only if ‘what y’ call a good employee’ is not very exacting. On the other hand, it
does not say outright that Pat is *not* a good employee, much less that Pat is a bad employee. Such a reply may lead us to conclude that Pat was not a good employee but that the speaker does not wish to say this directly.

We will describe here the final phase of almost ten years of experimental work on equivocation, research that has led us to admire these slippery statements and to see them as the best way to handle certain conflicting goals in interpersonal interactions: When all direct replies are proscribed, equivocation becomes a good solution.

**A Goal-Conflict Theory of Equivocation**

In contrast to theorists who focus more on processes inside the sender than on the message or its eliciting situation, our approach has a great deal in common with language theorists who advocate an exacting analysis of messages in the context of the communicants' social situation (Austin, 1962; Forgas, 1985; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959; Hymes, 1974a, 1974b; Pike, 1966; Robinson, 1984; Sacks, 1984; Sapir, 1949a, 1949b). Because of this situational focus, the reader will notice several fundamental differences between our view and other goal theories (and, indeed, between our view and many current approaches to discourse). We are seeking to treat discourse entirely 'from the outside' — as a public event rather than a private mental process. We analyse and describe messages in terms of their impact on receivers or decoders, rather than making inferences about what the sender intended or meant by the message. Similarly, like Lewin (1935), Tolman (1932), and other early goal theorists, we treat goals as external, that is, as occurring in the situation rather than in the person. We take this position *not* because we deny that internal mental processes exist or that they are interesting for their own sake but for two other reasons. First, and most important, the dominant focus on mental processes has, in our opinion, led to a relative neglect of situational and social processes; in practice, it seems that only by resisting the former can we even begin to see the latter. Second, a situational theory (if it works) has empirical advantages over a theory that invokes inferred constructs, because the observable or consensual aspects of discourse and its surrounding situation can be measured and tested more directly. (Cf. Discussion, below, and Bavelas, in press.)

Specifically, we began with the proposal by Watyzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967) that the source of equivocation is a defect in the situation rather than in the individual; equivocation 'may be the only possible reaction to an absurd or untenable communication context' (p. 78). We have formalised this by adapting Lewin's (1938) goal-conflict model to communicative situations (Bavelas, 1983, 1985; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, in press). We see messages as paths or options within a social psychological field. The messages available at a given moment have positive or negative consequences (valences), which arise from their potential impact on the social field. For example, telling a friend good news has a positive valence and is therefore a goal to be approached, whereas telling a friend bad news has a negative valence and is therefore a 'negative goal', to be avoided. These consequences, or goals, affect the choice of message; they are the characteristics of the communicative situation that shape the discourse occurring
within it. In particular, we propose that there exist some communicative situations that create *avoidance-avoidance conflicts* because all direct messages lead to negative outcomes.

One large set of such situations involves a conflict between a kind but false message and telling a hurtful truth (e.g., writing a thank-you note for an awful gift from a well-liked friend or relative). As Turner, Edgley & Olmstead (1975) emphasized, telling a hurtful truth to a person one cares about is a relationship lie: it conveys, falsely, that one does not mind hurting this person. Full candour about the gift in this common dilemma may be one kind of truth, but it is not the truth in the situation. On the other hand, lying may not be the answer either, because of personal values or fear of detection. Other scenarios can present communicative *avoidance-avoidance conflicts* of different kinds. When asked to provide a reference for a nice but incompetent person, the sender is caught between hurting that person’s chances with a truthful reply or misleading the receiver with an untruthful reply. Or, when an owner is describing a car that is in bad condition but that must be sold, a truth would hurt the seller’s own self-interest, whereas a false representation would hurt the potential buyer (and might rebound on the seller).

In all of these conflicts, the individual turns away from one negative goal only to face the other, caught ‘between a rock and a hard place’, between Scylla and Charybdis. Making the message indirect or equivocal is a way of ‘leaving the field’ or at least avoiding the unpalatable, direct alternatives. To understand the communicative solution to this conflict, it is necessary to look more closely at the dimensions on which messages can vary. We make a distinction between what a message says, which determines whether it is true or false, and how it is said, that is, whether it is clear or equivocal (see Figure 1a). If false messages of any kind, as well as clear truths, have negative valences, then the only option is an equivocal truth (see Figure 1b). In other words, when any clear and direct response, true or false, would lead to negative consequences, and yet a reply is required, it is possible to leave the field by ‘saying something without really saying it’—by equivocating. In particular, we propose that people in such dilemmas will avoid both false and clear messages and tell equivocal truths instead, that is, true statements that have been ‘softened’ to avoid clarity. Notice the difference in impact between ‘I thought you gave a poor presentation’ and ‘It just needed more work, why don’t we talk about it over lunch?’—a difference in how the bad news is delivered, not in whether it is delivered. Equivocation may blunt the impact of a message, but we do not expect it to change the denotative meaning. Like any other indirect speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Grice, 1975; Nofsginer, 1974; Searle, 1975), the meaning of an equivocal message should be clear to competent speakers of the language.

We obtained initial evidence for our theory by using forced-choice among experimenter-written messages (Bavelas, 1983). The results showed that, as predicted, subjects chose equivocal messages only in avoidance-avoidance conflicts and not in approach-approach conflicts or in merely unpleasant, nonconflictual situations. Also, in three experiments offering a total of 335 subjects a choice between two negative options (a hurtful truth or a false message) and an equivocation, 3.5% of subjects chose the true message, 6.2% chose the false message, and 90.2% chose the equivocation.
Figure 1a  Proposed coordinates of truthfulness and equivocation

Figure 1b  A conflict model of truthfulness and equivocation
Measuring equivocation and truthfulness

Testing the theory schematised in Figure 1b requires independent, empirical measures of both equivocation and truthfulness. We had already developed a measure of equivocation (Bavelas & Smith, 1982), because none existed when our project began. There were several descriptive definitions in the clinical literature (where the phenomenon was called 'disqualification' or 'incongruent communication'). Most of these were taxonomic; for example, Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967) included:

- self-contradictions,
- inconsistencies,
- subject switches,
- tangentializations,
- incomplete sentences,
- misunderstandings,
- obscure style or mannerisms of speech,
- the literal interpretation of metaphor and the metaphorical interpretation of literal remarks, etc. (p. 76)

None of the clinical approaches, nor the methods previously used to identify similar phenomena (e.g. Bowers, Elliott & Desmond, 1977; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968) met our measurement criteria, which were as follows:

First, we wanted a definition and measurement procedure based on a communicative principle, rather than on lists and examples. The latter are both atheoretical and necessarily incomplete: one can always find new instances. The primary property of equivocation, in our theory, is its avoidance of directness, and we wanted an operational definition based on this principle. Second, we wanted to identify equivocation by its impact on lay receivers rather than by expert judgement. For many theories, this distinction would not matter, but it is implicit in our theory that both senders and receivers use the dimension we call equivocation, so it cannot be a characteristic only experts can identify. Lay receivers must be able to discern its presence in ordinary messages. Third, we wanted to measure the degree of equivocation, rather than just its presence or absence. This would permit maximally precise tests of our theory, which predicts quite subtle shifting of messages on this dimension.

The groundwork for such a measure was laid by Haley (1959), who pointed out that one of the truisms of communication is at stake here, namely, that all messages take the implicit form, 'I am saying this to you in this situation'. Messages are supposed to convey clearly who is the sender, what is the content, who is the receiver, and what is the context. The following answers are examples of such messages:

- Question: Was Pat a good employee?
- Answer: I think Pat was a good employee, and you would be wise to hire him.

or

- Answer: I think Pat was not a good employee, and you should not hire him.

If an ideal message is clear in all four respects, then departures from this ideal can be identified as equivocations. Equivocal messages render at least one of the four elements ambiguous. They are messages that, to some degree, do not give the sender's own opinion, are not clear in content, are not addressed to the appropriate receiver, or do not answer the question asked. For example,
Answer: Well, um, that’s DEPENDS on what y’ call a good EMPLOYEE
does not give the sender’s opinion; the content is not clear; and it is not responsive
to the context, that is, it does not answer the question asked.

We have assumed, not that these four aspects of a message are the substantive
essence of equivocation, but that they can serve as a filter for identifying equivocation
in terms of what it avoids doing. As described in Bavelas & Smith (1982) and
Bavelas et al. (in press), we train 8 to 12 lay judges, individually, to use a magni-
tude estimation scale to answer four questions (given in Figure 2) about each mes-
sage. Then the scale values from the individual judgements are standardised and
averaged across judges for each of the four dimensions. The resulting numbers are
standard scores with intraclass reliabilities of 0.90 and above, as long as variance
is uncurtailed. This procedure produces not only reliable but often quite subtle
numbers representing degrees of equivocation. In this article, we will focus on the
simple sum of the four dimensions, which represents the total equivocation in a
message.

1. **Sender**
   To what extent is this message the speaker’s own opinion?
   Definitely ................................................................. Not at all

2. **Content**
   How clear is this message, in terms of just what is being said?
   Completely clear ........................................... Completely unclear

3. **Receiver**
   To what extent is this message addressed to the other person in the situation?
   Definitely ................................................................. Not at all

4. **Context**
   To what extent is this a direct answer to the question just asked?
   Definitely ................................................................. Not at all

*Figure 2* Four dimensions of equivocation

We also needed a measure of the *truthfulness* of a message that met the same
tree criteria as our equivocation measure. Because, compared to equivocation,
there has been much more research on lying and deception (cf. reviews by Ekman,
1985; Knapp & Comadena, 1979; Miller & Burgoon, 1981; Zuckerman, DePaulo
& Rosenthal, 1981), we had hoped to find in that literature an objective measure
of truth or falsity. Surprisingly, no one had developed such a measure; there was
not even a clear-cut definition on which we could base a measure.

The problem, as summarised by Knapp & Comadena (1979), does not arise
from disagreement about the primary characteristic of a lie:
Many of the studies of lying and deception seem to operationalize the act as: *the conscious alteration of information a person believes to be true in order to significantly change another's perception from what the deceiver thought they would be without the alteration.* (p. 271, italics original)

The problem, rather, was that

a central component of this perspective is the treatment of information — adding or subtracting from the perceived truth. But as the following review of related lines of research suggests, *information treatment is not always a distinguishing factor for identifying lies and truth.* (p. 271, italics added)

In other words, secondary (non-informational) criteria such as motivation, awareness, and effect are also applied. For example, Knapp & Comadena pointed out that, for many deception theorists, 'where there is little or no perceived harm . . . , the act may not even be considered a lie' (p. 276). Definitions qualified in this way confound what the message says with whether we would condemn it and therefore cannot function to identify lies in a reliable and objective way.

(The apparent necessity to make a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable lies arises at least in part from the use of everyday terms such as 'lie' and 'deception'. These terms are saturated with moral connotations on which there is probably little consensus; for example, what is a 'white lie'? We propose that these colloquialisms should be abandoned as technical terms, to be replaced by conceptually and empirically clearer specifications, beginning with the primary and defining characteristic, which is whether the information the message conveys is true or false. Then other interesting dimensions, such as 'harmfulness', 'perceived justification', or 'intention to mislead', could be added — as long as these could be empirically defined and reliably measured. Here, though, our focus is only on the primary criterion.)

Our procedure for measuring truthfulness (described in the next section) assumes a fundamental property of messages: They represent realities to receivers. A truthful message portrays reality accurately (or as the sender believes it to be). Therefore, we ask people what a given message tells them and later compare this decoded meaning to the reality the message should represent. The farther the decoded meaning is from the true state of affairs, the more false the message is. It is important to emphasise that we do not even mention the possibility of deception to these decoders. They are to treat the messages as both true and real and to tell us what they mean, because our model is one of decoding, not detection. The truth or falsity of the message is not judged directly but by a comparison of its decoded meaning with the meaning it should have, that is, with the reality it should represent.

**Experimental Evidence**

Our overall strategy has been one of varied replication with relatively small N's (Winer, 1962: 213) in which we move from highly limited to more complex situations. At each level, we have used several different scenarios to create avoidance—
avoidance conflicts, usually repeating some earlier scenarios as well as adding new ones. In addition to the forced-choice experiments summarised above, we have asked subjects to write their own replies in conflict and control conditions (Bavelas & Chovil, 1986) and have conducted a field experiment at a political convention (Bavelas, Black, Bryson & Mullett, 1988). In both settings, the spontaneous messages of subjects in an avoidance–avoidance conflict were significantly more equivocal than the nonconflict messages.

We returned to the lab for the experiments to be described here, which included spoken and face-to-face communication so that both verbal and nonverbal aspects were available to the senders. All messages were decoded for truthfulness as well as scaled for equivocation in order to test our predictions about these two aspects of messages. The first four experiments to be described here created a conflict condition and a nonconflict, control condition in imaginary scenarios. Experiments 1A and 1B opened up paralinguistic possibilities by using a telephone, which also required the subjects to reply immediately, in real time. In addition, in Experiments 2 and 3, the experimental conditions were created more indirectly; subjects were given information from which they might infer a conflict (or not). Experiments 4A and 4B elicited messages face-to-face so that visual as well as auditory nonverbal communication was possible. Finally, Experiment 5 had a third experimental condition, one designed to evoke false messages.

**Procedure**

All experiments followed the same general format. Experimenter 1 met the subject and explained that he or she would be having a (recorded) telephone or face-to-face conversation with another person in the context of an imaginary situation and was to reply briefly to the other person’s question. Then Experimenter 1 explained the scenario and asked the subject to act as if it were real. After Experimenter 1 left, Experimenter 2 called (or came in) and, playing the part of the other person in the scenario, asked the key question. After the subject’s initial reply, which was the message of interest, the conversation continued, in role, to a natural conclusion. Then Experimenter 1 returned to explain the study and answer the subject’s questions.

Some comment should be made on our use of hypothetical situations. Like most deception researchers (who instruct subjects to make counter-attitudinal statements more frequently than they entrap them into false statements), we have not often used ‘real’ conflicts for ethical reasons. There is, however, one important distinction: Whereas the usual practice is to tell the subject what to say (e.g. that he dislikes a person he likes or that she is watching something pleasant rather than unpleasant), we did not. Because the nature and form of the message are our primary interest, we simply told the subject to imagine a situation and answer a question, with no further constraint on their communication. Thus, our situations were not ‘real’ — but the messages were.

**Scaling and decoding the messages**

The messages were scaled for equivocation by up to 10 trained, individual judges, who volunteered from English and Linguistics classes and were paid for
their assistance. They had no information on the purpose of the experiments or
the project until after they had finished. The procedures for training, scaling, and
deriving equivocation values are described in Bavelas & Smith (1982) and Bavelas et al. (in press). After training, a reliability trial established intraclass \( R \)'s exceeding 0.90. The reliabilities for each set of experimental messages are reported with
the other results in Table 1.

The messages were later independently decoded by five to eight individual paid
volunteers from Linguistics and Psychology classes, who were also kept ‘blind’
during the study. The details are given in Bavelas et al. (in press) and are also
available from the authors. In synopsis, decoders were told the question to which
the messages were responding and asked to indicate the message's meaning to
them by marking a point on an undivided line on a sheet of paper. The verbal
labels at each end of this line were taken directly from the experimental instruc-
tions for each condition. For example, when a class presentation (Experiment 4B)
was being described, 0 cm = 'well organised and well delivered' and 16 cm =
'poorly organised and badly delivered'. Decoders were asked to make minimal
inferences and to put a message off the scale, on a shorter line below, if too much
inference was required. The intraclass reliabilities for decoded meaning in each
experiment are given in Table 1.

These ratings can be used directly to describe the decoded meaning of the mes-
 sage, in the sense of what particular information is being conveyed; for example,
a low rating indicates that the message says the class presentation was good, and
a high rating indicates that the presentation was described as bad. These decoded
meanings can then be transformed into truthfulness scores by taking the absolute
difference between the decoded meaning value and the true endpoint for that mes-
 sage. If, in the example given above, the speaker thought the presentation was
poorly done, the true endpoint would be 16 cm, and a message rated at 1 cm would
be very distant (15 cm) from the truth. If the speaker thought the presentation was
well done, the true endpoint would be 0 cm, and a message rated at 1 cm would
be very close to the truth.

**Experiment 1A: The Bizarre Gift (by telephone)**

**Method**

**Subjects**
The participants were 12 volunteers from Psychology classes, who were randomly
assigned to the conflict or nonconflict conditions (\( n = 6 \)).

**Scenario**
Experiment 1 gave the following instructions:

Imagine the person on the telephone is a friend who has sent you a gift for your
birthday. You received the gift a few days ago, but you are not sure if it is meant
as a joke or if it is to be taken seriously, as it is quite bizarre. *(Or, in the non-
conflict version: You can tell that it was carefully selected with your tastes and
interests in mind.)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Sender</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Receiver</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Equivocation Values</th>
<th>Decoded Meaning</th>
<th>Distance in cm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A (Gift)</td>
<td>Nonconflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>-1.93**</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B (Meat)</td>
<td>Nonconflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (Employer)</td>
<td>Nonconflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>4.7**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>4.7**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Car Ad)</td>
<td>Nonconflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.47</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B (Class)</td>
<td>Nonconflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equivocation values are standard scores, so that positive numbers indicate above-average equivocation and negative numbers indicate below-average equivocation from the mean relative to the person. Note that the conflict and nonconflict conditions are mean relative to the person. Note also that the conflict and nonconflict means tend to mirror each other, within rounding errors, because the same conditions were arranged in the conflict and nonconflict conditions. The low reliability was due to the variance in the range. Differences between conditions are significant at p < 0.05 (one-tailed). Differences between conditions are significant at p < 0.01 (one-tailed).
Experimenter 1 explained that this friend would be calling and left the room. When the subject picked up the phone and said ‘Hello’, Experimenter 2 said, enthusiastically,

Hi, this is [first name]. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to see you on your birthday. I was just wondering, how did you like the gift I sent you?

The conflict was between the two negative goals of treating the gift as serious when it was a joke and treating it as a joke when it was serious, either of which might be offensive.

**Results**

The values for equivocation and decoded meaning are given in Table 1. (The end points for the decoders were 0 cm = ‘carefully selected with the speaker’s tastes and interests in mind’ and 16 cm = ‘the gift is quite bizarre, so the speaker isn’t clear if it’s meant as a joke or to be taken seriously’.) The conflict and nonconflict conditions differed significantly on all four dimensions of equivocation, their sum, and the decoded meaning. Thus, the conflict messages were more equivocal than the nonconflict messages, but they did not represent the gift as well come and well suited. An example of an equivocal (but not false) message was

(Sounding puzzled:) Ah? . . . (Slight laugh, which slurs into the first word:) It’s quite INTRUIGING.

This message can ‘go either way’, in that it is suitable for either a serious or a joking gift. Notice that the paralinguistic components are as ambiguous as the verbal content.

The means of the two conditions can also be presented in a form that connects them directly to our overall theory, using the two coordinates of truthfulness and equivocation that were set out in Figure 1, above. A truthfulness value is obtained by converting the decoded meaning in to a distance from the truth, as described earlier. That is, the mean for the conflict condition is subtracted from the right-hand endpoint (16 cm) and the mean for the nonconflict condition is subtracted from the left-hand endpoint (0 cm), ignoring the sign. The mean equivocation value used is the sum across the four dimensions; these are standard scores in which positive values indicate above-average equivocation and negative values reflect clarity. The position, on both coordinates, of the means of the two conditions in this experiment is represented in Figure 3, which shows the conflict and nonconflict conditions in their predicted quadrants.

**Experiment 1B: The Meat Sale (by telephone)**

This was a back-to-back’ experiment with 1A, in that the same subjects participated immediately after finishing the procedure described above, but with experimental condition reversed. Participants who had been randomly assigned to the conflict condition in 1A were in the nonconflict condition in 1B, and vice versa. This was done to test our theory that the situation (not the individual) creates equivocation; we expected participants to change the clarity of their communication when an avoidance–avoidance conflict was introduced or removed.
Figure 3  Truthfulness and equivocation in experiments 1A to 4B

Method

Scenario

Experimenter 1 returned and explained that the next procedure would be the same except that the situation had changed:

You work in a grocery store, and you know that Tuesday is the day they sell off all the old meat at a reduced price. Some of it is very old and poor quality. (Or, in the nonconflict version: Tuesday is the day that they sell the meat at a reduced price, just to make sure it doesn’t accumulate. It is all fresh and good quality meat.)

On this particular Tuesday, the telephone rings. You answer it, and it is someone who saw the sale of meat at a reduced price advertised in the newspaper. They have never shopped at your store, so they have called to get some information before coming to the store.

When the participant answered the phone, a different Experimenter 2 (than in 1A) said:

Hello, I’ve never been to your store before, and I was wondering — the meat that is on sale today, is it good?

The conflict was between being untruthful to the customer and being truthful at the cost of losing business (and perhaps a job).
Results

As predicted, there were significant differences between conditions in both equivocation and decoded meaning: see Table 1. Subjects who had given clear and articulate replies in the nonconflict condition in Experiment 1A now produced messages such as

(Sounding rattled:) UMM . . . AH-no-- the REASON why they're selling it is because it's, um . . . it's a little bit OLD.

This message does not misrepresent the quality of the meat; to the question 'Is it good?' the speaker replies 'no'. Instead, it minimises or 'softens' the truth by equivocation in both words and delivery. It avoids misleading the customer but also avoids putting the store in a bad light.

The means for the two conditions are also entered on the two coordinates of equivocation and truthfulness in Figure 3.

Experiment 2: The Employee Reference (by telephone)

In most of our previous experiments, such as 1A and 1B, we had created the conflict and nonconflict conditions by simply telling subjects that the meat was good or bad, the gift was suitable or bizarre, etc. The purpose of the next two experiments was to give subjects 'raw data' from which they would have to form their own opinions and infer a conflict (or not). Here, we gave them detailed information on an 'Employee Appraisal Form', containing several evaluations of an employee in each of six different areas of performance. In the conflict condition, the ratings were in the categories 'borderline' or 'poor' in virtually all areas, while in the nonconflict condition they were all 'excellent' or 'good'. (The same Appraisal Forms were used as defining endpoints for the decoders, in place of verbal labels.)

Method

Subjects

Thirteen volunteers from Psychology classes participated; data from one were replaced because of failure to understand the instructions, leaving the planned n of 6 per condition.

Scenario

Experimenter 1 gave the following instructions:

You work for the government as a personnel officer, and every three months you receive employee evaluations. This month, an evaluation on Pat Green (a friend of yours) was sent over to you. Pat has applied for another position in the government. In a few minutes, you will receive a phone call from another friend regarding this application. So in this situation, both Pat and the person calling you are good friends of yours. Any questions?
Then the subject was given one of the (randomly assigned) version of the form. When the subject had read the material, Experimenter 1 told him or her to expect a phone call and left the room. Experimenter 2 called and said,

Hi, is this [subject's first name]? This is [own first name]. I'm calling because Pat Green has applied for a job here and used your name as a reference. Is Pat a good employee?

Results

As shown in Table 1, the overall effect was weak, but there were the predicted differences on one dimension of equivocation and the decoded meanings. A typical conflict condition message was

*(As if forcing himself to speak:) Ah... He's a... FAIRLY good employee.*

'Fairly good' is an elastic descriptor, especially with the paralinguistic emphasis on 'fairly'. The speaker does not say Pat is a good employee (which would betray the friend thinking of hiring Pat), nor does he say clearly that Pat should not be hired (which would betray Pat). Instead, he says ambiguously that Pat is not top material. (The message given at the beginning of this article is another from the conflict condition in this experiment.) The condition means for equivocation and distance-from-the-truth are entered in Figure 3.

Experiment 3: Car for Sale (by telephone)

In this experiment, we gave participants detailed information about a car they were selling. The information included a photograph and a 55-item mechanical checklist about its condition. In the conflict condition, the photo showed an old car with considerable body damage, and the checklist revealed numerous major problems. The nonconflict photo showed a much newer car with a good appearance, and the checklist showed only two minor problems. (The decoders were given the two checklists for the endpoints of their scale but not the photo, year, or make of car, because this would have identified the car, and therefore condition, in some of the messages.)

Method

Subjects

Thirteen volunteers from Psychology classes participated; data from one participant were replaced because of failure to understand the instructions, leaving the planned n of 6 per condition.

Scenario

After the usual introduction and explanation, Experimenter 1 said,

You have a car that you're trying to sell because you need the money. I'm going to give you a picture of the car and a mechanical checklist of its condition that I'd like you to read over.

After the subject had studied a (randomly assigned) version of the information, Experimenter 1 continued:
Your brother has told a friend of his that you are selling your car. This friend will be calling you in a few minutes and will ask you a question which we'd like you to respond to . . .

Experimenter 2 then called,

Hello, is this [subject's first name]? Your brother told me you have a car for sale. What kind of shape is the car in?

The conflict is between saying the car is in bad shape, thereby reducing the chances of selling it, and saying it is in good shape, which would be dishonest and might rebound because of the indirect relationship via the brother.

Results

The two conditions differed significantly on two dimensions of equivocation, the sum, and decoded meaning (see Table 1). As in Experiment 2, the subjects had inferred a conflict from the material given and spontaneously produced equivocal but true messages. One of our favourite equivocal messages was particularly vacuous:

\[\text{(With some authority:) Well-it NEEDS-- ah, a little bit of MINOR repairs-- ah. Basically it RUNS, ah-- I-- that's what I USE it for . . . So, ah, otherwise it's-- it needs a FEW minor repairs you know, I-- . . . it's not in PERFECT condition.}\]

Figure 3 contains the means of the two conditions in terms of the two coordinates.

Experiment 4A: Car for Sale (face-to-face)

The previous experiment was replicated with the participant and experimenter videotaped while talking in person, in order to establish generalisability to communication with all verbal and nonverbal aspects. Also, two different experimenters played the role of the friend; they were randomly assigned and blind to condition.

Method

Subjects

Seventeen volunteers from Psychology classes participated. Data from five participants were replaced, using the same random assignment (one because of experimenter error and the others because of 'subject error' in either 4A or 4B, e.g. starting to talk before Experimenter 2 had asked the question); this left the planned N of 12.

Scenario

After an explanation about the videotaping, Experimenter 1 presented the same situation as in Experiment 3, except that the brother's friend was going to come in person rather than calling.
Results

The two conditions differed significantly on two equivocation dimensions, the sum, and decoded meaning (see Table 1). There was no effect of Experimenter 2 or any interaction of experimenter with condition. The most equivocal message was

(\textit{Looking at the other person with glances to the side; somewhat concerned facial expression; head nodding and moving increasingly; in an apologetic, reassuring tone:}) WELL-- WHEN you SEE it, you'll SEE that it-- the BODY needs-- . . . um, a lot-of-- . . . a LITTLE work. But if you're HANDY, or you know someone that's handy, you know . . . wash up, paint job 'n? . . . (\textit{Quietly, then sounding pleased:}) You'd probably LIKE it, IF IT'S what you're looking for. ('Posed' smile at end.)

The data for this experiment are also represented in Figure 3.

Experiment 4B: The Class Presentation (face-to-face)

This was another 'back-to-back' experiment in which experimental condition was reversed for the second scenario. Participants who had been randomly assigned to the nonconflict condition in 4A were now in the conflict condition, and vice versa.

Method

\textit{Scenario}

After the conversation about the car finished naturally, Experimenter 2 left and Experimenter 1 returned to describe a new scenario in which the person who was going to come in was a fellow student:

The two of you have a class that meets three times a week for the entire year. Each student has to make an individual presentation to the class. Today this other student gave her presentation. You had helped her by supplying reference material. Unfortunately, her presentation was poorly organised and badly delivered. (\textit{Or, in the nonconflict condition:} Her presentation was well organised and well delivered.) The class ended late, and you didn't get a chance to talk, so the other student is going to drop by now.

Then the other Experimenter 2 came in and said,

\textit{Hi!} I didn't get a chance to talk to you after class, and I just wanted to ask, how did I do on my presentation?

This is a classic conflict between a hurtful truth and a kind falsehood.

Results

The two conditions differed significantly on all four dimensions of equivocation, their sum, and rated meaning; see Table 1. No experimenter effects or interactions were significant. A sample message from the conflict condition is
(Sighs; then in descending pitch:) AAAHN . . . 'tsk' . . . (Sighs.) . . . (Very long pause; then smiles and sighs again; very long pause; then looks at the other person and in a warm but reluctant tone:) I-I NOTICED that-ah that it wasn't-ah, THAT well RECEIVED. . . . (Then, very softly:) And-it-ah-- it-- (then, sounding curious, almost questioning:) S-SOME of the REFERENCES I GAVE you, you DIDN'T-- you didn't seem to have looked UP.

Besides its obviously reluctant start, there are several subtleties in this message. The speaker reports she only 'noticed how it was received', which puts distance between herself and the evaluation. The evaluation itself is phrased as 'not that well received', an inverted description that relies on the receiver's inference. Finally, the speaker shifts to the side topic of the references she had provided, which also provides a possible excuse for the quality of the presentation.

These are the final data points in Figure 3, which shows a consistent pattern of equivocal truths in the conflict condition, as predicted by our theory. Using the same method, we also obtained truthfulness values for the messages from three of our written-message experiments, which had previously been scaled only for equivocation (Bavelas & Chovil, 1986); see Figure 4, which provides further evidence for the predicted pattern.

![Figure 4](image-url)  
Figure 4  Truthfulness and equivocation in written experiments (re-analysis of Bavelas & Chovil, 1986)
Possible Alternative Explanations

Nonverbal leakage

In a classic article, Ekman & Friesen (1969) proposed that verbal lies may be accompanied by nonverbal leakage, that is, by nonverbal indications of the speaker's true opinion, or by deception clues, which are indications that the speaker is lying but without any indication of his or her true opinion. We are concerned here with the first class, nonverbal leakage of the information being concealed. It could be quite plausibly argued that what we are calling equivocal messages are simply verbal lies plus nonverbal leakage. The result would be a message that would be scaled as equivocal (because of the verbal–nonverbal contradiction) but from which decoders might be able to infer the truth, primarily from nonverbal information. If this were so, then the above evidence for our theory would have an alternative explanation.

One advantage of having an independent measure of truthfulness is that such an hypothesis can be tested empirically. We did so (using the data from one of the face-to-face experiments, 4B, the Class Presentation) by varying the availability of nonverbal information to those who decoded the meaning of the message. We created seven different versions of the messages from 4B, ranging from purely verbal to purely nonverbal, to be decoded by seven different groups. If the subjects had lied verbally, the decoding of the verbal versions should reveal this (that is, the decoders should infer a message that is not true). If leakage occurred, there should also be a systematic change in decoding meaning over the seven versions, with the ratings moving toward the true meaning as nonverbal information was added.

Method

Decoders

Thirty-six decoders from Psychology and Linguistics classes were paid for their participation and randomly assigned to the seven different versions. One was replaced because she forgot to rate one message, leaving the planned n of 5 per condition.

Versions

The seven sets of messages formed a continuum defined by the availability of nonverbal information:

1. **Verbal, Edited.** All messages were transcribed, and then paralinguistic disfluencies were edited out. The resulting messages had complete sentences and no hesitations or stammering.

2. **Verbal, Transcribed.** The messages were transcribed literally, including paralinguistic aspects.

3. **Audio without Latency.** The video message was copied onto audiotape. Because hesitancy before answering has been described as a major paralinguistic clue that deception is occurring, response latency was removed in this version by removing the preceding question.

4. **Audio with Latency.** Same as above, but the latency was included.
(5) **Video without Latency.** The videotape of the message was used but with the latency removed as above.

(6) **Video with Latency.** The videotape of the actual message was presented. (This was the version for which rating data were presented in Table 1.)

(7) **Video without Sound.** Only visual nonverbal information was available, with no verbal content.

**Results**

One message (in the conflict condition) was deleted from further analysis because the majority of decoders found it uninterpretable regardless of the version in which they read, heard, or saw it. For the rated messages, the reliabilities of the first six versions ranged from 0.86 to 0.98. The reliability of the Video without Sound version was 0.33; no systematic meaning could be decoded from purely visual information, so this version was excluded from further analysis.

If the equivocal messages obtained in Experiment 4B are really "leaky lies", then the decoded meaning would change as more nonverbal information was added. This hypotheses was tested by ANOVA contrasts (on the Conflict condition messages only) in the form of a monotonic decline; \( F(1,24) = 0.001, p = \text{n.s.} \). Our own prediction that both the conflict and nonconflict condition messages are truthful was tested as a main effect of condition. This analysis revealed a strong effect of experimental condition \( F(1,24) = 612.26, p < 0.001; \) eta squared = 0.91), no effect of version, and no interaction. The messages were true in every version, verbally and nonverbally.

**Lies of omission**

The message that was put off the scale in the above ratings draws attention to the possibility that equivocations might really be lies of omission (cf. Miller, 1983). As the reader would expect, we are not comfortable with that term, because it is both prejorative and an oxymoron, and will translate it into an empirical description here: It is possible that, while the equivocating speaker does not misrepresent information, he or she responds with irrelevant information, thereby avoiding the unpleasant information altogether.

Again, this is a question that can be answered by our decoding method. The decoders had been instructed to put messages off the scale if they could not find the relevant information in them. Therefore, the number of times a message was put off the scale can be used to identify possible lies of omission. The 4B message that was put off the scale by the majority of decoders was, in answer to the question, "How did I do on my presentation?"

*(Looking at the other person, with head very tilted; raises and lowers head in a patronizing way while answering in a pleasant but brittle, 'teacher' tone:) Well HOW do you THINK you DID?*

The total number of such decisions was extremely low. For Experiments 1A to 4A, the eight decoders and 60 messages produced a total of 480 decisions. Only 11 times (2.3%) was the decision to place a message off the scale, and one decoder accounted for almost half of these decisions. Using the message as the unit of
analysis, in no case did more than two of the eight decoders find the same message unrateable.

The five decoders who saw the full version (Video with Latency) of the 12 messages from Experiment 4B made 60 decisions, of which four were to put the message off the scale. In three instances, this was the message given above, which answered a question with a question; the majority found this message unrateable.

Thus, of the 36 conflict-condition messages in these six scenarios, only one did not give the information asked for. Equivocations are not characterised by avoiding the relevant information; what is said is both true and responsive. Instead, they alter a different characteristic of the information, namely, how this information is conveyed.

**Experiment 5: The Local Musical (face-to-face)**

The purpose of this final experiment was to elicit false messages, primarily so that we could validate our measures by requiring them to distinguish between false and true messages. We were also interested in checking for nonverbal leakage in both false and equivocal messages, using different versions of an originally videotaped message, as described above.

We chose a 'surprise party' scenario as one in which people are likely to produce false messages spontaneously. The truth spoils the surprise whereas a false message preserves the surprise and even adds to the fun when later revealed. In other words, this is a nonconflict situation in which a false message becomes a positive goal. By appropriate variations in the situation, we created our usual conflict and nonconflict conditions as well; the latter will now be called the nonconflict-true condition, to distinguish it from the new, nonconflict-false condition. In addition to the three experimental conditions, there were seven decoding conditions (the same versions as were used for Experiment 4B, above). We predicted that decoding and scaling of the resulting messages should reveal three groups: false messages, equivocal truths, and clear truths, regardless of what verbal of nonverbal information was available for decoders.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Twenty-two (paid) participants were recruited by posters around campus. Data from four were replaced because two did not understand the instructions and two were truthful in the nonconflict-false condition. (The latter two were excluded because we were more interested in how people would lie than in whether they would lie.) This left the planned N of 18, with 6 people randomly assigned to each condition. In addition, 35 students from Linguistics and Psychology classes were paid to decode the messages; they were randomly assigned to the seven different versions (n = 5). Six trained judges were paid to scale the messages for equivocation.

**Scenario**

After the usual introduction, the experimenter gave the key information which, for the nonconflict-false condition, was
You saw a local performance of the musical, ‘Cats’, and you really enjoyed it — the singing, the dancing, the whole production was just great. Your favourite cousin’s birthday is on Saturday, and you decided this would make a great surprise party. So you got all of his friends to go along, you bought a whole block of tickets, and everyone is excited about the surprise.

That is the situation. Now I’m going to leave the room, and someone else will come in. Imagine that the person who is entering the room is the cousin you are having the surprise party for. He is on his way to pick up a ticket to the Friday performance (which is the day before you bought the tickets for), and he wants to ask you how you liked it.

When Experimenter 2 entered, he said,

Hi, [subject’s first name]. I’m on my way downtown to get a ticket for ‘Cats’. How did you like the performance?

In the nonconflict-true condition, there was no birthday party for the cousin. Instead, after the production was described as great, Experimenter 1 said,

Your favorite cousin is dating the director but hasn’t seen it yet. That is the situation. Now I’m going to leave the room and someone else will come in. Imagine that the person who is entering the room is the cousin who is dating the director. He is on his way to get a ticket to the Friday performance, and he wants to ask you how you liked it.

The conflict condition was the same as the nonconflict-true condition, except that the participant was told

... you really hated it — the singing, the dancing, the whole production was just awful. Your favourite cousin is dating the director but hasn’t seen it yet ...

As usual, what Experimenter 2 said and asked was the same in all conditions; the difference was the situational information given by Experimenter 1. Thus the subjects had to respond spontaneously to a situation in which a false message was appropriate, or a true message was appropriate, or where both true and false messages were problematic. There was no mention of lying (or being truthful or equivocal).

Results

The messages were scaled for equivocation (in their actual version only) over two sessions, with half of the messages from each condition in each session (intraclass $R$’s, calculated for each session, for the four dimensions were 0.97/0.93, 0.74/0.90, 0.76/0.89, and 0.96/0.98). Our prediction that the messages in the conflict condition would be more equivocal than those in the nonconflict-true and nonconflict-false conditions was tested on the sum of the four dimensions by contrasts ($+2, -1, -1$); $F(1,15) = 16.51, p < 0.0001$. The same result was obtained for the four separate dimensions, with $p$’s = 0.055 or less. (It was also true that, using bivariate comparisons, the nonconflict-false messages were in the middle of
the scale on two dimensions, significantly more equivocal than the nonconflict-
true messages.)

The reliabilities for decoded meaning in the first six versions ranged from 0.97
to 0.99; the Video without Sound version had a reliability of 0.88, so it was
included in the analysis. Messages were put off the scale between zero and nine
times in each set of 90 ratings (5 judges × 18 messages). This included one mes-
sage, in the nonconflict-false condition, that was excluded from analysis in three
versions because it was put off the scale by a majority three out of five decoders.
This message was

*(Pursing lips in an exaggerated manner and moving head side to side; in a rising
pitch, almost a question:) MMMH. (Starts smiling and looks at the other person;
them in a rapid staccato:) I don’t KNOW. (Even more rapidly:) I thought it
PROBABLY wasn’t worth GOING to.*

The decoded meanings were transformed to distances-from-the-truth in the usual
way, and the results are summarised on the truthfulness and equivocation co-
ordinates in Figure 5. The three condition means fell in three different quadrants,
as predicted.

Some examples will illustrate the kinds of messages we obtained. One in the
nonconflict-true condition was

*(Mostly looking at the other person and either smiling or looking ready to smile
most of the time. Shakes head to emphasise every word; her gestures flow from

![Figure 5 Truthfulness and equivocation in Experiment 5](image-url)
one into the next, and they too 'beat' in time with her speech, which is intense and enthusiastic.) Ah! FANTASTIC (flings fingers towards the other person) . . . singing, dancing (moves hand back and forth like a conductor) just GREAT (moves fingers smoothly towards the other person; then in a tone almost overcome with emotion:) Just-- RIGHT ON! (shakes closed fist).

A message from the nonconflict-false condition was

(Begins by looking up to one side, then closes her eyes and swings her head down to the other side, with a very broad grimace; speaks very fast and confidently throughout:) Well I'll TELL you you know (now looking directly at the other person, but with face still turned aside; smiling slightly:) I didn't THINK it was THAT GOOD (nods very slightly in emphasis; then mouth turns down but expression is not unpleasant:) I mean I-- (looks upwards then back at the other person:) I thought it was really OVERRATED. (Then, as if debating what to advise:) AHM . . . PROBABLY? . . . (Turning head away with exaggerated scowl:) I WOULDN'T BOTHER GOING-- if I were YOU.

It was typical of the messages in this condition that they conveyed a credibly reluctant negative evaluation coupled with an apparently off-hand recommendation not to attend. (We think that this tactic accounts for their somewhat higher equivocation values.)

An example of a message in the conflict condition was

(Eyes roll up, shift, then almost close; starts confidently, then stops abruptly:) WELL, I-- . . . (looks at the other person, while nodding and smiling, in a somewhat reluctant tone:) IT was pretty GOOD overall. (Looks away then back; slight sneer; almost as if confiding a secret:) AHHH, there's a FEW things-- a few ROUGH edges that need-- . . . HONING UP. (Then, while looking down, said as if stalling:) AHHHM . . . I would SAY that-ah, (then, looking back, nodding frequently; speeds up and sounds more confident:) IT'll probably get BETTER with TIME, in FACT YOU'LL probably . . . ah . . . (looks away) YOU'LL probably go to a BETTER SHOWING than I did (smiles). (Shrugs; then smiling more, sounding reassuring and still confident:) I was DISAPPOINTED, but that doesn't MEAN that, you know, that YOU'LL be left out in the COLD.

Finally, the truthfulness values are plotted by rating condition in Figure 6. A leakage model must predict that the nonconflict-false messages would drop from false towards true as nonverbal information was added. This hypothesis was tested and rejected by applying a set of ANOVA contrasts to this condition that described a monotonic decline over the seven versions; \( F(1,32) = 1.17, p = \text{n.s.} \) Thus there was no effect of the availability of nonverbal information in the nonconflict-false condition. (Indeed, the decoders decoded a false meaning even in the Video without Sound version, whereas in the other two conditions the averages for this version went to the center of the scale, i.e. had no systematic meaning.) Our prediction that there would be a strong effect of goal-condition, regardless of rating version, was tested by the appropriate contrasts \((-1, -1, +2); \ F(1,102) = 393.52, p < 0.0001\), accounting for 79% of the variance.
Figure 6 Experiment 5: Mean truthfulness ratings

Discussion

At the outset, we explicitly advocated a shift away from hypothesised mental processes to a more public view of discourse. The data presented here suggest that a careful focus on both the properties of messages and their evoking situations can reveal precise and clear-cut relationships between the two. It is possible to identify a class of messages that are true and equivocal and to manipulate situations to evoke such messages.

We should point out several differences between our approach and traditional 'behaviourism'. First, we acknowledge that mental processes exist and that they are interesting and valuable to study; we merely choose to study other processes, equally interesting to us. Second, and perhaps ironically, our approach is more behaviourally oriented than traditional behaviourism. Most behaviourist theories have been content to find behavioural labels for internal processes (e.g. ‘hours of deprivation’ as a euphemism for ‘hunger’ or ‘motivation’). We are searching for processes entirely outside, on the assumption that discourse is observable to its participants and so must be understandable to us at this level as well. Third, we have no simple and sovereign theory comparable to the behaviourist’s use of
stimulus-response-reinforcement links. Moreover, we consider such an approach to language (e.g. Skinner, 1957) to be particularly inappropriate because it hides rather than reveals the subtlety and complexity of discourse processes.

In contrast, we are letting discourse tell us how complex it is. We have identified here a class of situations that systematically evoke an interesting kind of communication, that is, avoidance-avoidance conflicts which give rise to equivocation. Rather than explaining all communication, we have limited ourselves to enfranchising a kind of communication too easily dismissed. Equivocation may be ‘poor’ communication by some standards, but it is a precise and effective solution when its full context is examined. We question the monolithic virtue of clear, direct communication on the grounds that it only makes sense when situations are equally clear and direct. In many other situations, equivocation is a good solution to a bad situation.

If we have a general credo, it is this: people interact socially mostly by communication, and communication (verbal and nonverbal) is both precise and highly dependent on the social situation. Fortunately, the precision of discourse and its situational causes can be studied empirically. Indeed, our experience is that social phenomena become much clearer when examined as discourse in a specific social context.

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