Getting it Straight about Equivocation

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The Equivocation Project
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• The phenomenon:
  • Thank you note: “It’s very interesting”; “It’s intriguing”
  • Car ad: “Person who likes working on cars would be wise to buy this car”
  • Work reference: “Um, well, it depends on what y’call a good employee”

• The objective: capturing slippery communication
  Clear and precise definition, theory, and measurement

• First grant in 1977
• 19 experiments up to Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett (1990)
  • Written, spoken, and face-to-face lab experiments
• Three field studies:
  Legal judgments; public apologies; medical bad news
• Over 200 citations of 1990 book
Three Unique Features

1. Definition: What is equivocation

2. Theory: What causes it. Applications of theory

3. Measurement: Operational definition

- What we mean and what we have done-- **NOT** what everyone should
1. Our definition: Equivocation is language (not a mental state or moral issue)

- A message that “says something without really saying it” (Pragmatics of Human Communication)

- A message “having two or more significations equally appropriate; capable of double interpretation; ambiguous; ... of uncertain nature; undecided” (Shorter Oxford)

- “An indirect speech act” (Equivocal Communication)
  - multiplicity = overt and implied messages
  - relies on conversational implicature (Del Vento, Bavelas, et al., 2009)
NOT our definition of equivocation

• Lying; deception
  ▫ lies of commission, omission, and other moral judgments
Equivocal ≠ false (11 experiments)

The model

Written

Spoken

Spoken

Face-to-face

Equivocation vs. lies

Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett (1990)
NOT our definition of equivocation

- Lying; deception
  - lies of commission, omission, and other moral judgments

- Incongruence
  - E.g., verbal/nonverbal
  - Applied same “truth scaling” to different versions (e.g., written \(\rightarrow\) video, no sound)
  - No change in truth value.
No evidence of nonverbal “leakage”
NOT our definition of equivocation

• Lying; deception
  ▫ lies of commission, omission, and other moral judgments

• Incongruence
  ▫ E.g., verbal/nonverbal

• A motivation (versus language)
  ▫ \textit{intentional} use of imprecise language
  ▫ \textit{strategic} ambiguity
  ▫ politeness; face work
2. Theory: A broad situational cause

- Not error, deviousness, incompetence, or any characteristic of individual

- Equivocation is a response to a class of situations in which all direct messages would have negative consequences.
  - Communicative avoidance-avoidance conflicts lead to equivocation

- Many specific situations fit in this class.
### Examples of communicative avoidance-avoidance conflicts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>One negative alternative</th>
<th>The other negative alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tact; ongoing relationship</td>
<td>Telling a hurtful truth</td>
<td>Lying (unethical; getting caught)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political; social;</td>
<td>Offending one recipient</td>
<td>Offending another recipient</td>
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<tr>
<td>sales; employment</td>
<td>Hurting one’s self-interest</td>
<td>Deceiving another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgments in abuse trials</td>
<td>“Obscene” language</td>
<td>Neglecting one’s legal duty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apologizing (with responsibility)</td>
<td>Incurring legal liability</td>
<td>Criticism; no reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delivering bad news (medical)</td>
<td>Destroying a patient’s hope</td>
<td>Violating informed consent</td>
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3. Measuring equivocation: Departure from a standard

• Interpersonal:
  ▫ The standard: Sender, Content, Receiver, Context
    • “I am saying this to you in this situation”
  ▫ E.g., “I think you did great!” versus “Not bad”

• Legal judgments, public apologies:
  ▫ The standard: Grammatical agent + Active voice
    • “He/she/I/we did this”
  ▫ E.g., “He feels great remorse for the offense”

• Medical bad news:
  ▫ The standard: Source, Term, Evaluation, Certainty, Recipient
  ▫ E.g., “I find that you have cancer in your liver”
  ▫ Versus “The news is not great; it looks like a type of cancer in the liver”
Equally important: precise measurement

- Used and reported clear operational definitions and procedures
- High independent reliability

- Not
  - unchecked personal opinion
  - colleagues’ opinion
  - modified, uncalibrated scales
  - substantially new definitions
Getting it Straight about Equivocation

- We aimed for
  - clear definition
  - explicit theory
  - precise measurement
  - extensive empirical support

Thank you!