

Intentions in communication

A workshop organized by Ronny Boogaart and Marina Terkourafi

Leiden University Centre for Linguistics | 20 May 2026

10.00-15.00: Lipsius 2.11 | 15.30-17.30 Lipsius 1.48



Universiteit Leiden

Presentation abstracts

Steve Levinson (MPI Nijmegen/Cambridge): "Humans as obligate mind-readers"

There have been serious challenges to the belief-desire model of human psychology and its role in communication that comes out of philosophy and linguistics: there are ethnographic reports of other folk psychologies, conversation analysts hold all you need are 'practices' (scripts), and worst of all LLMs are an existence proof of the power of mindless Markov processes.

I will counter that for good evolutionary reasons we just are obligate 'mind-readers', and there's plenty of evidence that we do ascribe intentions to speakers – it's quite hard to account for e.g. speech act ascription or other inferences without such an account.

Turning to Maj-Britt and Marina's 'Hearer's Meaning', this might suggest a symmetry with Speaker Meaning, whereas all that seems to be involved is some latitude of interpretation. Actually, most of the cases they seem to have in mind stem from various sources, e.g. (a) the serious/non-serious dimension, (b) the special circumstances of public or institutional discourse, sometimes inadvertent (as with 'hot mike' misadventures) and most importantly (c) failure to decompose the notion of Hearer and Speaker (see Goffman 1981, Levinson 1988).

References

Goffman, E. 1981. 'Footing' in *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press.

Levinson, S. C. 1988. Putting linguistics on a proper footing: Explorations in Goffman's participation framework. In P. Drew, & A. Wootton (Eds.), *Goffman: Exploring the interaction order* (pp. 161-227). Oxford: Polity Press. (downloadable from <https://www.mpi.nl/publications/item66709/putting-linguistics-proper-footing-explorations-goffmans-participation>)

Richard Moore (Warrick): "Communicative intentions in the development of language"

The idea that communicative intentions (i.e. those with a Gricean structure) can play a role in language development is controversial. That's because Gricean communication is often thought to implicate cognitive abilities (including propositional structure, mental state concepts, and higher order metarepresentations) not found in young children. Consequently some (e.g. Millikan, 2017; Bar-On, in press) have sought to defend accounts of language development that do not depend on the attribution of communicative intentions. I will argue that this rejection is premature, and that it deprives developmentalists of an essential resource for explaining language development - namely, interlocutors' capacities for making inferences about speakers' goals. Building on previously published work, I argue that communicative intentions can have simple contents that are easily interpreted, while remaining Gricean in structure; and that these intentions can plausibly explain both language development, and the acquisition of the more complex forms of cognition sometimes thought necessary for Gricean communication. Time permitting, I'll also consider the implications of my view for the claim that communicative intentions play a pervasive role in adult human communication.

Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen (Manchester): "Does a socially responsible theory of meaning need to center speaker intentions? (And why not.)"

This paper builds on Hansen & Terkourafi's (2023) model of Hearer's Meaning. H&T argue for a paradigm shift in pragmatics, away from reliance on speaker intentions in favor of a focus on hearers' interpretations, as displayed in subsequent discourse and reflected in participant behavior more broadly, and on the diverse sources of those interpretations.

In a related vein, parts of the philosophical literature on Speech Act Theory have proposed that uptake is central to determining illocutionary force. The details of these proposals differ, but critiques have been put forward suggesting that uptake-based theories potentially allow for coercion and silencing of some (groups of) speakers by perverse and/or more powerful hearers. The theoretical upshot is that a socially responsible model of meaning in communication could not forgo speaker intentions.

In my talk, I will argue that the fact that H&T's model explicitly relies on Peircean pragmatist semiotics insulates our model from the above critique. My argument hinges on Peirce's distinction between a so-called Dynamic Interpretant (what a current hearer purports to understand in a given context where a sign is produced), and a (virtual) Final Interpretant, defined as the effect that would be produced by the sign on any hearer whose circumstances were such that he was able to grasp its full meaning. Importantly, the Final Interpretant can only be reached (to the extent it is ever fully reached) through a – potentially quite protracted – process of intersubjective negotiation, which will normally involve input from additional hearers. Both the Dynamic and the Final Interpretant are instantiations of Hearer's Meaning. I will show how applying this distinction allows us to maintain the primacy of Hearer's Meaning without sacrificing social responsibility.

A further advantage of incorporating the distinction between the Dynamic and the Final Interpretant into the model of Hearer's Meaning is that it allows us to account for other communicative phenomena that contributed to the development of the Hearer's Meaning model in the first place. In other words, the distinction has relevance beyond the specific issue of silencing.

Reference

Hansen M.B.M., Terkourafi M. 2023. We need to talk about Hearer's Meaning! *Journal of Pragmatics* 208: 99-114.

Marina Terkourafi (Leiden): "Some notes on Hearer's Meaning"

We are hardly ever agnostic about the people we interact with. Minimally, material aspects of the interaction license expectations about what they're like, even before interaction has taken place. These expectations (part of larger hearer agendas, which include hearer goals) channel how we interpret what they say irrespective of what they want us to understand (S's r-intention). This is because the goal of communication is not to understand what OTHERS want us to understand but to make the most of the information around us (including linguistic input by the speaker) to prepare our next move. When speaking, others may, after all, be trying to mask their REAL intentions (which are ontologically different from their r-intentions), when it is those REAL intentions that will be helpful to us in preparing our next move. So, when "mind-reading", it is not what speakers MEAN_{NN} (=want us to understand) but what they are REALLY thinking that we are trying to find out, using their words (alongside other information) as input.

This radically different, hearer-based view of communication is, in a way, also presaged in Grice's work. In *Utterer's Meaning and Intention* (1969) and in *Logic & Conversation* (1975), he charted two different paths to meaning: from the speaker's side (what S wants H to think and to attribute back to S) and from the hearer's side (what H will infer based on the information available to them). What Grice is silent about, and what Hansen & Terkourafi (2023) focus on, is the possibility that these two paths can come apart, and that this happens because interpretation (too) is agentive and *not* disinterested -- something which extends to ascriptions of speaker and hearer roles, that are not decided by the speaker alone. Starting from such cases, we claim that H's meaning takes priority because, once enabled by our listed (2023: 103; and possibly more) sources of H's meaning, hearer inferences cannot be undone: they are real-world consequences of the speaker's utterance. These ideas receive empirical support by experimental results with children and non-neurotypical populations

(summarized in Katsos & Kissine 2025) and by a critique of the Rational Speech Act approach to politeness (Terkourafi 2023), which show that active inference about S's intention is not always necessary to arrive at an interpretation of S's utterance, which can build instead on a variety of contextual factors.

References

- Katsos, N., Kissine M. 2025. No one-to-one mapping between typologies of pragmatic relations and models of pragmatic processing: a case study with mentalizing. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 380: 20230501.
- Terkourafi, M. 2023. Reconfiguring the strategic/non-strategic binary in im/politeness research. *Journal of Politeness Research* 20(1), 111–134.

Bart Geurts (Radboud): "Beliefs and intentions in normative pragmatics"

The central tenet of normative pragmatics is that we treat each other as having commitments and that the primary function of communication is to negotiate commitments (Geurts 2019a). Commitments are, first and foremost, social relations, which come in various types. Fred's promise to do the dishes, for example, is a bid to establish an agentive commitment for himself, i.e. a commitment to doing the dishes. Beliefs and intentions are reflexive commitments: commitments to oneself, which we attribute to others and ourselves. Evolutionarily as well as developmentally, the practice of attributing reflexive commitments derives from the more fundamental practice of attributing social commitments (Geurts 2021). It is therefore a bit of a sideshow. The practice of attributing communicative intentions is a sideshow of a sideshow.

References

- Geurts, B. (2019a). Communication as commitment sharing: speech acts, implicatures, common ground. *Theoretical Linguistics* 45: 1–30.
- Geurts, B. (2019b). What's wrong with Gricean pragmatics. In: A. Botinis (ed.), *ExLing 2019: Proceedings of the 10th international conference of Experimental Linguistics*, Lisbon, pp. 1–8.
- Geurts, B. (2021). First saying, then believing: the pragmatic roots of folk psychology. *Mind & Language* 36: 515–532.

Wouter Wolf (Utrecht): "Communicative intent, ostensive feedback and the resolution of interpretative indeterminacy: The psychology of (dis)agreement"

Mental state alignment is crucial for many facets of human sociality, including communication, cooperation, teaching and social bonding. Fortunately, humans are highly skilled at establishing mental alignment through communication. Paradoxically, however, the arbitrary nature of human communication (i.e., symbols, conventions) seems ill-equipped to achieve alignment. After all, how can humans successfully infer the intended meaning of communicative signals amid an almost infinite space of possible interpretations and referents? Recently, scholars have argued that the capacity to signal communicative intent through ostension facilitates mental state alignment by constraining the interpretation of communicative expressions to a domain of mutual relevance. Although this constraint is likely an important facilitator of communication, it is unlikely to completely resolve all interpretation problems, as evidenced by the fact that communicative repair through negotiation is often necessary. The question thus remains: how are humans capable of doing this so effectively? Here, I argue that understanding communicative intent facilitates mental state alignment in a crucial, previously underappreciated way. Specifically, as ostension is inherently cooperative, it constrains the interpretation of emotional signals in response to communicative acts to be about the content of what was communicated (rather than the communicator). Consequently, ostensive negative feedback facilitates the negotiation of mental states during perceived mental misalignment (disagreement) until both individuals use positive ostensive feedback (affirmation) to indicate that they deem their mental states sufficiently aligned for the purposes of their interaction (agreement). I argue that this capacity to (dis)agree facilitates much of humans' sociality and has potentially shaped their representational psychology.

Samira Ibnelkaid (Radboud): Meaning and Machines: Intention Ascription in Human-‘AI’ Interactions

This contribution examines how social media users dynamically attribute intentions to generative ‘AI’ systems while simultaneously acknowledging that such systems lack consciousness, subjectivity, agency, or intentional states. Drawing on a corpus of Instagram reels (short form videos) in which users capture, reenact, narrate, or comment on their interactions with voice-based “Large Language Models” (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, I analyze how communicative intentionality becomes an interactional enactment rather than a fixed ontological property.

Using phenomenologically informed multimodal interaction analysis, I focus on moments where users orient to “LLM” outputs as unexpected, inappropriate, manipulative, problematic, or emotionally charged. In these moments, communicative intentionality emerges through interactional practices, affective stances, and meta-commentary. These practices reveal a tension between rational perspective (“the ‘AI’ has no intentions”) and situated interactional experience (“it produces deceptive outputs”).

By integrating micro-interactional and macro-social perspectives, I argue that such user-generated analyses are not merely derivative commentaries but sites of epistemic production. They contribute to the ongoing co-construction of language technology’s ontology in the doxa—how ‘AI’ is collectively imagined, moralized, and contested.

Ronny Boogaart (Leiden): "Just asking questions! When speaker intentions are crucial, and when they are not"

After being accused of saying something false or inappropriate, speakers often defend themselves by accepting commitment only for the literal contents of what they said and not for its alleged controversial (e.g. racist) implicatures (Boogaart, Jansen & Van Leeuwen 2021; see Saul’s 2024 Literal Truth Figleaf). From the point of view of linguistic pragmatics, including theories of argumentation, this is typically an unreasonable type of defence, but it may still be an effective move especially in court or in the political arena; in fact, speakers may anticipate such discussions by aiming for *plausible deniability* in their choice of words (also sometimes named *calculated ambivalence*). If the general public is to pick up anything from theoretical pragmatics since Grice (1957), it should be that in such instances denial is implausible: ultimately it is the speakers intention rather than the context-independent literal meaning that determines the interpretation of an utterance and the commitments that go with it. Speakers can be held accountable not only for what they say but also for what a *reasonable* hearer infers from this given their knowledge of the context and the speaker. (Following Mosegaard Hansen & Terkourafi 2023, the latter may be called *Hearer’s Meaning*, the crucial question being then to what extent this meaning still is a hypothesis about Speaker’s Meaning and how exactly it relates to the speakers accountability for what is said or implicated.)

The general public was the intended readership of our book *Maar zo bedoelde ik het niet!* (But that’s not what I meant!) (Boogaart, Jansen & Van Leeuwen 2024). In the corpus of actual defences from politics and media that we compiled for this purpose, there were, indeed, quite a few where the speaker could not reasonably deny triggering the controversial implicature that the accusation pertained to since it must have been intended for the utterance to be relevant in any way (which is not to say that it was not an effective strategy). However, we also encountered cases where the speaker’s intention made much less of a difference to our interpretation and evaluation of the utterance under dispute. Specifically, this was the case for certain *dog whistles* and for speakers using discriminatory (racist, sexist, homophobic) language or jokes without (allegedly) intending to discriminate. In the latter type of cases we even claim that intention does not matter: words and jokes can be racist etc, independent of the speakers personality or intention. Interestingly, this accords with recent publications in pragmatics and philosophy where the significance of speaker intentions for communication is diminished or denied. (In addition to Mosegaard Hansen & Terkourafi 2023, see especially Saul 2024 on dogwhistles and Beaver & Stanley 2023 on presupposition and slurs.)

An interesting question raised by all this is whether we can make a distinction between cases in which speaker intention is crucial and cases in which it is not, or less so. And crucial *in what way* and *to whom* anyway? And what about the danger of throwing out the baby (of speaker intention) with the bath water? Just asking questions!