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The Pragmatics of Political Deception

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"Every government is run by liars, and nothing they say should be believed." —I.F. Stone

I. Introduction. Some questions:

- How (if at all) can the linguistic approach to language be *usefully* applied to political discourse?
- Can the linguistic approach to pragmatics help the general public understand mechanisms of political deception?
- Are those mechanisms linguistically interesting?

II. Kind of Meaning

A. Entailments ('what is said', 'what is asserted', etc.)

(1) *John owns a poodle.* entails *John owns a dog.*

Given two sentences S1 and S2, if any world condition which makes S1 true also makes S2 true, then S1 **entails** S2.

(Potts 2003 further distinguishes two subtypes of entailment: *at-issue entailments* (see (1)) vs. *conventional implicatures*. Examples of the latter include non-restrictive (appositive) relative clauses: *John, who lives in Phoenix, owns a poodle.* A conventional implicature: John lives in Phoenix.)

B. Presuppositions

Content that needs to be true at the point of utterance ('backgrounded') for the expression to mean anything. Presuppositions have a linguistic origin, in particular words and grammar rules. *The clutch broke again.* presupposes *The clutch broke at least once before.*

John realizes that it is raining in Boston. —> presupposes that it is raining in Boston.
John thinks that it is raining in Boston. (does not presuppose that it is raining in Boston)

John thinks that it is raining in Boston. Actually it is not raining in Boston.
John realizes that it is raining in Boston. #Actually it is not raining in Boston.

Presuppositions often survive even when embedded in modal contexts:

If [John realizes that it is raining in Boston] then he took his umbrella.
—> presupposes that it is raining in Boston.
If [John thinks that it is raining in Boston] then he took his umbrella.
(does not presuppose that it is raining in Boston)
If [it is raining] then he is carrying his umbrella.
(does not presuppose that it is raining in Boston)

Contrast (at-issue) entailments:

If [John owns a poodle] then he must be a nice guy.
(does not entail that John owns a dog)

Factive verbs: realize, regret, be aware, grasp, comprehend, take into consideration, take into account, bear in mind, learn, make clear, mind, figure out, ...

Non-factive verbs: think, suppose, assert, allege, assume, claim, charge, maintain, believe, conclude, conjecture, figure, ...

C. Conversational implicature (H.P. Grice 1975 ‘Logic and Conversation’). The hearer makes inferences based on the assumption that the speaker is following certain rules of conversation. These are rules of cooperative social interaction, not attached to specific grammatical properties

Cooperative principle: Make your contribution to the conversation appropriate; i.e. make it such as is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(i) Maxim of Quantity: Say as much and no more than is required.

Some of our planes were shot down in the battle.

inference: Some of our planes were not shot down in the battle.

I will give you five dollars if you mow the lawn.

inference: The speaker will not give me five dollars if I do not mow the lawn.

(ii) Quality: Say only what you believe to be true.

There is chalk in the drawer.

inference: The speaker thinks (has evidence) that there is chalk in the drawer.

(iii) Maxim of Relation: Make your contribution relevant to the conversational topic.

Al: Does Bob have a new girlfriend?

Bill: Well, he went on a camping trip with Helena last weekend.

inference: The answer is yes (this is just one possible inference).

(iv) Manner: Be orderly, brief, and clear.

I don’t think she is very sympathetic.

inference: The speaker doesn’t think she is compassionate (rather than congenial)

Summary:

	deniable?	origin
entailments	no	linguistic
presuppositions	yes	linguistic
conversational implicatures	yes	social

III. The plan.

Examine false or misleading statements by Pres. George W. Bush and his administration, with a focus on *factual information* (not emotive techniques, style, settings, etc.). Classify the falsehoods into the different kinds of meaning; see whether this correlates with discourse mode (scripted speech, interview, etc.) or with anything else.

‘George W. Bush is a liar. He has lied large and small. He has lied directly and by omission. He has misstated facts, knowingly or not. He has misled. He has broken promises, been unfaithful to political vows. Through his campaign for the presidency and his first years in the White House, he has mugged the truth—not merely in honest error, but deliberately, consistently, and repeatedly to advance his career and his agenda. Lying greased his path toward the White House; it has been one of the essential tools of his

presidency. To call the 43rd president of the United States a prevaricator is not an exercise of opinion, not an inflammatory talk-radio device. This insult is supported by an all too extensive record of self-serving falsifications. So constant is his fibbing that a history of his lies offers a close approximation of the history of his presidential tenure.'

—David Corn (2003, p. 1)

IV. Data.

Uranium from Africa

Jan. 28, 2003 State of the Union address: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

The Bush administration's evidence: a half dozen letters and other communications between Iraqi and Niger officials concerning uranium sales. But when these documents were examined by the International Atomic Energy Agency, they quickly determined that they were clumsy forgeries. At this point no one denies that they are fakes.

Mechanism: *learn* is a factive verb; hence this sentence commits Bush to the presupposition expressed by the subordinate clause.

Sample reactions:¹

- David Martin, *CBS Evening News* (7/10/03): "The statement in the president's speech was technically correct since it accurately quoted the British paper."
- Michael Kinsley, *Slate* (7/14/03): "it certainly is not possible to say that someone has 'learned' a piece of information without clearly intending to imply that you, the speaker, wish the listener to accept it as true."

poisons factory

Colin Powell's Feb. 5, 2003 presentation to UN included a satellite photo of a compound in northern Iraq. Powell claimed it was a poisons and explosives factory supported by both Baghdad and Al Qaeda.

After his presentation about a dozen reporters visited the actual compound. They not find a factory; in fact there was no plumbing and no power grid. Half the buildings were civilian homes, the others were barracks, plus a makeshift TV/radio station running off a small generator.

When asked about it, a senior State Department official explained that "a poison factory is a term of art, and it doesn't necessarily mean that people are pumping out thousands of gallons a year." (New York Times, 2/9/03).

Mechanism (generously assuming that any poison production took place there) : Maxim of manner (definition of *factory*).

Patients' bill of rights

In the third Presidential debate in 2000, Bush stated that he supported a "Patients' Bill of Rights" allowing patients to sue HMOs and insurance companies; and that as governor he had worked to secure a Patients' Bill of Rights for Texas. President Clinton reportedly said he "almost gagged"

¹ Cited in *Extra! Update*, August 2003 (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting).

when he heard Bush claim to have supported the effort in Texas, since the record seems to show the opposite (see below).

In response to questions from a reporter (CNBC's Ron Insana), Bush said that he had vetoed

“...a bill, because it was a lousy piece of legislation. I got my insurance commissioner to write a series of rules and regulations that then became the law — because of leadership. I signed it into law. We're one of the first states in the union to allow a patient to sue an insurance company after there's an internal review process. Now, we've got a good piece of legislation, and so the president needs to take a look at the facts.”

The facts: Bush never signed a right-to-sue law, and actively opposed it. He vetoed a patient's bill of rights, one offered by a conservative Republican, primarily because it contained a right-to-sue provision. Bush did instruct his insurance commissioner to enact by regulation other, less controversial, provisions of the bill, such as allowing a woman to use her OB-GYN as her primary care physician. But when the right to sue came up once again in 1997, Bush had one of his aides do everything he could to sabotage the bill. (Two Republican state senators complained about it on the floor of the state Senate.) Then, when the bill passed regardless— with what looked to be veto-proof support— Bush let the bill become law without his signature, as something of a protest. (see also Corn 17, 49)

Mechanism: Maxim of Relation.

Defund family-planning

On his first day in office, Bush signed an order prohibiting U.S. government funds from going to overseas family planning groups that advocate abortion rights, counsel pregnant women about abortion, or provide abortions. At stake was \$425 million. Bush: “It is my conviction that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions or advocate or actively promote abortion, either here or abroad.” Press secretary Ari Fleischer reiterated at least three times that Bush did not “support the use of taxpayer dollars to fund abortion abroad.”

But under a 1973 law, U.S. funding for abortions abroad was already banned. Hence the executive order affected only the other above-named activities. (Corn 68-9)

Mechanism: Maxims of Relation and Quantity.

Estate tax

Bush: “To keep family farms in the family, we're going to get rid of the death tax.”

Under then-current law, estate taxes only applied to estates valued over \$675,000 (scheduled to rise to \$1 million); and spouses could inherit estates of any size, tax-free. Hence Bush's proposal affected the wealthy. But it did not affect farmers; (virtually) no family farm owners owed or paid any estate tax (sources: 1999 IRS study; Iowa State U. economist Neil Harl; Hertz Farm Management; etc.). Fleischer's response, when confronted with this contradiction: “You shouldn't have to get an estate planner just because you work the land. ... If you abolish the death tax, people won't have to hire all those planners to help them keep the land that's rightfully theirs.” (Corn 84-6)

Mechanism: Entailment. (?)

Ken Lay

Enron was the most generous patron of Bush's entire career, with donations in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. When Enron tanked, Bush said this about his relation to Ken Lay: “First of all, Ken Lay is a supporter, and I got to know Ken Lay when he was a head of the, what they call

the Governor's Business Council in Texas. He was a supporter of Ann Richards in my run [against her] in 1994, and she had named him to head the Governor's Business Council, and I decided to leave him in place, for the sake of continuity. And that's when I first got to know Ken..." (Corn 176-7)

Lay was a 'a supporter of Ann Richards' (\$12,500 personal + \$19,500 Enron PAC)— but he was more of a supporter of Bush (\$47, 500 + \$146,500 Enron PAC). (Also, according to various sources, including Lay himself, Lay's relation with Bush goes back further than 1994.)

Mechanism: Maxim of quantity.

75% of Al Qaeda

In the first 2004 debate, Bush said twice that "75 percent" of al Qaeda leaders have been "brought to justice." But as *The Associated Press* reported Oct. 1, Bush was referring to the deaths or arrests of 75 percent of bin Laden's network at the time of the September 11 attacks— not those who are running the terrorist organization today. *The AP* also reported that the CIA said earlier in the year two-thirds of those leaders are gone; at his acceptance speech in September, Bush increased his count to three-fourths based on unreleased intelligence data.

Furthermore, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies reported May 25 that the occupation of Iraq has helped al Qaeda recruit more members. The institute quoted "conservative" intelligence estimates as saying that al Qaeda has 18,000 potential operatives and is present in more than 60 countries. (quoted from factcheck.org)

Mechanism: Ambiguity due to semantics of NP temporality.

Bush in the Air Force

The AP discovered that a 1978 *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* ad for Bush in his unsuccessful bid for Congress said Bush had served "in the U.S. Air Force and the Texas Air National Guard where he piloted F-102 aircraft." In fact Bush was never in the Air Force. Asked in 2000 about this, Bush insisted that "I was in the Air Force for over 600 days." Karen Hughes also insisted it was accurate, claiming that his National Guard duty counted as Air Force duty: "As an officer he was serving on active duty in the Air Force." But according to the Air Force itself, this is just false. (Corn 23)

Mechanism: Maxim of manner. (?) (Word meaning)

Bob Jones University

During the 2000 primaries Bush spoke at Bob Jones University, an evangelical Christian school that banned interracial dating and is a hotbed of anti-Catholic bigotry. Asked about it, he defended his decision to speak there, telling CNN "I denounced the policy at Bob Jones."

Actually his speech at Bob Jones University did not criticize his hosts' policies. (Corn)

A bad call? Structural ambiguity:

I denounced [the policy at BJ]. I denounced [the policy] [at BJ]

Summary.

<u>Deceptive statement</u>	<u>pragmatic/semantic mechanism</u>	<u>mode</u>
Iraq / Al Qaeda / 9-11 connection	maxim of relation	extended propaganda campaign
defund family-planning	maxim of relation	scripted speech; press briefing
Patients' bill of rights	maxim of relation	interview
poison factory	maxim of manner (word meaning)	interview
Bush in the Air Force	maxim of manner (word meaning)	repair
Ken Lay	maxim of quantity	interview
Uranium from Africa	presupposition (factivity)	formal scripted speech
estate tax	entailment	scripted speech; press briefing
75% of Al Qaeda	entailment (ambiguity re temporal semantics of NPs)	debate

V. Why facts matter in electoral politics

Perceptions and misperceptions about the facts on the ground drive political allegiances. (N.b. This contradicts the common view expressed by pundits and commentators that voters are mainly affected by style, personality, etc. of candidates.)

Evidence from scientific polling (Program on International Policy Attitudes, <http://www.pipa.org/> *Misperceptions, The Media and The Iraq War A PIPA/Knowledge Networks Study* [Oct. 2, 2003])

PIPA looked at three misperceptions related to the war :

1. That the U.S. has clear evidence of an Iraq-al Qaeda link
2. That WMDs were found in Iraq (during the current war)
3. That most people worldwide support US war in Iraq

They correlated these misperceptions with other factors, including who they support for president, which news channels they watch, and how closely they follow events.

Result: Misperceptions affect voting plans.

Support for president and frequency of 3 key misperceptions:

	<u>Bush supporters</u>	<u>Dem. supporters</u>
Evidence of Iraq-al Qaeda links	68%	31%
WMD found	31%	10%
World public opinion favorable	36%	11%

Summary: Bush supporters have more misperceptions than Democratic nominee supporters.

Average frequency of misperception among Democratic nominee supporters who follow the news...

Not closely at all	22%
Not very closely	20%
Somewhat closely	16%
Very closely	11%

Average frequency of misperception among Bush supporters who follow the news...

Not closely at all	40%
Not very closely	43%
Somewhat closely	44%
Very closely	54%

Summary: Following the news in America gives Bush opponents a more accurate view of the world, but gives Bush supporters a less accurate view.

Appendix: Lie trackers

- FactCheck.org
- www.misleader.org
- blushlies.com

Barrett, Jerry (ed.) 2004. *Big Bush Lies—20 essays and a list of the 50 most telling lies of George W. Bush*. RiverWood Books, Ashland OR.

Corn, David 2003. *The Lies of George W. Bush— Mastering the Politics of Deception*. Three Rivers Press, N.Y.

Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber 2003. *Weapons of Mass Deception*. Tarcher/Penguin, N.Y.