Dogwhistles:
Masking,
Vigilance, and
Unmasking

Elin McCready
AGU/ZAS

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This talk presents joint work with Robert Henderson.

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George Bush's 2003 State of the Union address contains the following line.

(1)   Yet there's power—wonder-working power—in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.

To most people this sounds like, at worst, a civil-religious banality, but to a certain segment of the population the phrase *wonder-working power* is intimately connected to their conception and worship of Jesus. When someone says (1), they hear (2).

(2)   Yet there's power—Christian power—in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.

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On a 2014 radio program, Representative Paul Ryan said the following.

(3) We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work.

He was criticized shortly after for making a "thinly veiled racial attack": the phrase *inner-city* is code or euphemism for African American neighborhoods (especially stereotypically racialized views of such neighborhoods).

(4) We have got this tailspin of culture, in our African American neighborhoods in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work.

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These examples illustrate the notion of a *dogwhistle*—that is, language that sends one message to an outgroup while at the same time sending a second (often taboo, controversial, or inflammatory) message to an ingroup.

- There are proposals re DWs coming from philosophy:
- Stanley (2015) provides a semantic / pragmatic proposal, where dogwhistles are Pottsian CIs, contributing an at-issue component for the outgroup audience and a non-at-issue component that potentially only the ingroup is sensitive to.
- Khoo (2017) provides a purely pragmatic account, where dogwhistles involve certain default inferences.

Also proposals (e.g., Saul (2018)), which takes dogwhistles to be simple Gricean implicatures.. [redacted: time]

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We think none of these proposals is correct, though exploring them is important because they expose certain tensions.

- ► We will see that dogwhistles cannot involve conventionalized TC-meaning (either at-issue or not-at-issue)
- ► but also that dogwhistles require some kind of conventionalization.

After exploring these previous accounts, we propose our own combining aspects of McCready (2012), Burnett (2016, 2017) which we think better accounts for their core properties, while resolving this tension about conventionalization.

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In broad strokes, we make the novel proposal that dogwhistles come in two types.

- The first type—*identifying dogwhistles*—concerns covert signals that the speaker has a certain persona, which we model by extending the *Sociolinguistic Signaling Games* of Burnett (2016, 2017).

- Today's main focus: the second type—*enriching dogwhistles*—involves sending a message with an enriched meaning whose recovery is contingent on recognizing the speaker's covertly signaled persona, which requires a further extension.

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Plan:

- Briefly sketch the accounts of Stanley and Khoo, and our own
- Provide a formal theory of ideology and show how it induces enrichment in DWs
- Epistemic vigilance and hypervigilance via ideology matching
- Unmasking: when is it rational to stop dogwhistling?

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The conventional implicature account

Stanley (2015) argues that dogwhistle language involves a conventional non-at-issue component along the lines of more familiar expressions like slurs, honorifics, etc.

- A slur like *limey* would have AI-component "English" and a NAI-component "I hate the English".
- A dogwhistle like *welfare* would have AI-component "the SNAP program" and a NAI-component "African Americans are lazy".

We disagree with this characterization.

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'What is said' by a dogwhistle?

- ▶ The use of dogwhistles is prompted by a desire to 'veil' a bit of content, but still to convey it in some manner. Deniability is essential.

- ▶ If a bit of content is conventional, it's not deniable any longer. This can be seen with pejoratives, which clearly carry conventional NAI content.

(5)   A: Boris Johnson is a limey.
       B: What do you have against English people?
       A: # I don't have anything against them. I'm just talking about his nationality.

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Such dialogues are fine with dogwhistles; in the following, there seems to be no entailment that A has the relevant attitude.

(6)   A: Elin is living high on the hog on welfare again.
      B: What do you have against poor people?
      A: I don't have anything against poor people. I'm just saying Elin is on welfare and I saw her buying steak at the store.

- ▶ By this test, dogwhistles can be concluded not to be conventional.

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The inferentialist account

Khoo 2017 argues that dogwhistles involve default inferences:

- ► Speaker claims that x is C and the interpreter believes that C's are R's, then the interpreter will conclude that x is R; it's this kind of inference that Khoo thinks that dogwhistles license.

- ► If the interpreter believes that *inner-city* neighborhoods are African American neighborhoods. Then the speaker saying that people who live in inner-city neighborhoods lack a culture of work licenses the inference that people who live in African American neighborhoods lack a culture of work.

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Non-substitutability argument

Problem: Khoo's inference follows from the expression TCs. Thus, any expression with the same TCs should dogwhistle.

► This is not true. A phrase like *downtown neighborhoods* doesn't dogwhistle like *inner city* does. The same for *welfare* and paraphrases like *assistance to the poor*

This suggests that while dogwhistles must not bear conventionalized content, some expressions are singled out as something like "dogwhistle expressions", and so there is some kind of conventionalization.

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Core properties to be accounted for:

- ▶ Dogwhistles are not part of conventional content, so speakers are able to avoid (complete) responsibility for what they convey.

- ▶ Dogwhistles can be identified as such, even if not bearing conventional content.

And further:

- ▶ Dogwhistles are semi-cooperative—that is, they are meant to be under-informative to one segment of the audience, while communicating a particular message to another.

- ▶ While deniable, dogwhistles are risky. Being detected using a dogwhistle by the wrong party should be costly.

In recent work, Burnett (2016, 2017) pioneers the use of Bayesian signaling games to model identity construction through sociolinguistic variation.

- ▶ We take identifying dogwhistles to be only slightly more complex versions of sociolinguistic identity construction through variation of the kind Burnett (2016, 2017) discuss;

- ▶ enriching DWs are a special sort of identifying DW which interact with ideological background.

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Burnett's Social Meaning Games which have the following
simplified architecture (which we modify / elaborate further below):

- ► Players: a speaker *S*, a listener *L*
- ► Actions for players
  - ▸ The speaker chooses a persona *p* from the space of personas
    P
  - ▸ Based on their persona, the speaker chooses a message
    $m \in M$ to send to the listener.
  - ▸ Based on the message, the listener chooses a response
    $r \in R$, which in the simplest case we can identify with
    selecting an element of *P*—i.e., identifying the speaker's
    persona.

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Utility functions for players: U_S/U_R—functions from $P \times M \times R$ to $\mathbb{R}$, which represents payoffs for every possible combination of actions.

- ▶ The speaker's utility is maximized by picking a message that sends the most information to the listener about the persona they want them to assign to them.
- ▶ The listener's utility is maximized if they extract the most information they can about a speaker's persona given their message.

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We want the dogwhistle effect to arise from listeners being
unaware (or uncertain) about the close connection between some
bit of language an a persona.

$\implies$ We want listeners to have beliefs about a speaker's
persona. . .

- . . . but also beliefs about how personas and messages are
connected.

That is, listeners have prior over P, but also beliefs about
$P(m|p)$—namely how closely messages are linked to particular
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We can now update a listener's belief about the speaker's persona given their message by doing bayesian inference.

(7) $P(p|m) \propto P(p)P(m|p)$

'The probability of a persona given a message is proportional to prior probability of the persona and the likelihood of sending that message given that persona'

▶ This is a extension of Burnett (2016, 2017), who takes social meanings to be fully lexicalized, i.e., the likelihood $P(m|p) = 1$ when p and m are consistent.

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The final ingredient we need to provide utility functions.

▶ **listener** is straightforward—utility is maximized by extracting as much information from a message as possible about a speaker's persona—that is, by doing doing bayesian inference as just described.

▶ **speakers**: utility is more complex because unlike in many signaling games, the speaker doesn't just pick messages based on some type assigned by nature—i.e., they don't just *report* their personas.

▶ Instead, speakers have preferences for different personas, some of which may be dependent on how the listener would react to that persona.

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Thus, we must allow for speakers to "construct" a persona in concert with their listeners.

- ▶ Speakers want to present themselves in a certain way.
- ▶ Speakers will also be sensitive to whether listeners will approve of that persona or not.
- ▶ In adversarial contexts, a speaker might have to juggle presenting a safe persona with a persona they might prefer to present (or prefer to present to another audience that might be listening)—this is when dogwhistle language become useful.

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Along these lines, we follow Burnett (2017); Yoon et al. (2016) in assuming that the utility calculation takes into account the message's social value, which is given by two functions:

- The speaker has a function ν_S that assigns a positive real number to each persona representing their preferences.
- The listener has a function ν_L that assigns a real number (positive or negative) to each persona representing their (dis)approval.

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We can now calculate the speaker's utility.

(8) $U_S^{Soc}(m, L) = \sum_{p \in [m]} P(p|m) + \nu_S(p)P(p|m) + \nu_L(p)P(p|m)$

Thus: the utility is dependent on the affective values of the range of personas consistent with the message and the likelihood that the particular persona is recovered given the message.

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When only one listener is addressed, dogwhistles reduce to ordinary social meaning; the speaker should choose a signal which maximizes U_S^{Soc}.

- ▶ Dogwhistles come into their own when speakers address groups of individuals with mixed preference over personas, different priors for the speaker's persona, and different experiences about the likelihood of a persona given a message.

- ▶ The simplest way to assign utilities to the group case is to sum over all listeners; we will assume this metric in the following.

(9) $\quad U_S^{Soc}(m, G) = \sum_{L \in G} U_S^{Soc}(m, L)$

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With this utility function, the basic prediction is:

- ► Speakers will use language that maximizes their social utility wrt a group of listeners.
- ► For the dogwhistle case, this happens when using the dogwhistle allows gain of higher social utility than otherwise wrt the entire group,
- ► i.e., when the dogwhistle gives benefit for some 'savvy' listeners while avoiding deficits that would come from speakers disliking the persona but oblivious to the dogwhistle.

Detailed formal example redacted for time reasons.

To deal with enriching dogwhistles, we believe that we must achieve a new kind of synthesis.

► We think the Khoo-style account we critiqued earlier, which focuses on enriching dogwhistles, fails short for not social meanings, and for not building off a social meaning account of identifying dogwhistles.

► At the same time, our previous account of enriching dogwhistles in terms of pragmatic enrichments falls short as it failed to make the precise connection between enrichment and personas clear.

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We take enriching dogwhistles to be *identifying dogwhistle*$^+$ in the following sense:

- ► On use, a savvy listener detects the dogwhistle and assigns the speaker a relevant persona.
- ► Those personas are associated with ideologies, which come with background assumptions.
- ► The listener, consciously or not, learns what ideological grounds the speaker is speaking on.
- ► The savvy listener can then draw inferences about the speaker's intended content.

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Our task is to:

- make clear, and work into our formal model, what ideologies are and how they can be entangled with personas.
- "bridge the gap" between speaker and hearer, that is, understand how recognizing the ideological grounds on which the speaker is speaking can cause the listener to make inferences about the speaker's communicative intent, and, sometimes, influence listener behavior.

Ideologies: formal treatment

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What do ideologies do? And what happens when we recognize a persona associated with an ideology?

► Ideologies indicate affect and (dis)approval of various actions or people, but also bring in more global assumptions about the world.

► Thus, to understand what effects assigning personas to discourse agents has, we need at minimum:

1. a way of valuating actions and individuals and
2. a way of introducing beliefs and world knowledge to our models.

Assigning affective values

We need a function that can assign affective values to objects relevant to ideologies and personas.

- We will use ρ ('rate') for our new function.
- This function takes individuals as input and yields real number as value: we allow both positive and negative real numbers here, as with the listener valuation function ν_L on personas.

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Values to ρ: attitudes toward particular individuals (Trump), but also attitudes toward behaviors, groups of people, and properties.

- We can treat these as individuals by making use of the kind-mapping function '$^\cap$' (Chierchia and Turner (1988); Chierchia (1998)).
    - standard: nominalizations (self-predication), bare nominals (Chinese/Japanese)

(10)   Being nice is nice.
         $nice(^\cap nice)$

We use $^\cap$ to produce kinds for behaviors/groups/properties in general.

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Ideologies: epistemic bases

Ideologies assign value; they also comprise sets of beliefs about how the world is:

- the kinds of things that make it up, the properties of kinds of people, systems, and objects, and the causal elements that induce and condition change.

The truth-evaluable elements which make up an ideology are modelable as sets of such propositions.

- We call each set of this kind the *basis* of an ideology.

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What sorts of propositions form the basis of ideologies? The answers to this question are as various as ideologies themselves.

- QAnon ideology takes the existence of a conspiracy with bizarre goals as a given.
- Racist ideologies involve beliefs about the relative value and superiority of ethnic groups, and so on.
- We use the notation $\mathcal{B}$ for ideological bases.

All these beliefs can function to bridge gaps in reasoning and connect things that without the ideology would be nonobvious.

- We will argue that it is these sorts of beliefs, and ideological bases in general, that trigger enriching dogwhistles.

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Upshot: the ideologies related to personas have the form
$\iota = \langle \rho, \mathcal{B} \rangle$ and so consist of pairs of affect-assigning functions and
ideological bases.

- ▶ The propositions comprising the basis of an ideology can be
  somewhat indeterminate and vary from individual to individual
  depending on where they have acquired their ideological
  beliefs.

- ▶ So we must think in terms of related but possibly non-identical
  ideologies, which we can view as ideological equivalence
  classes.

- ▶ We thus define the basis of an ideology as the set of beliefs
  common to all its variants (here Π is a projection function).

(11) $\Pi_2(\iota) =_{df} \bigcap \Pi_2(\iota')$, where $\iota' \sim \iota$.

Social sincerity

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We need to make one assumption about the relation between persona and belief.

- ▶ What kind of personas are available for an individual? That is, in a linguistic context, what kinds of personas can a speaker assume or signal?

- ▶ We assume here that speaker personas are required to be sincerely assumed, ie that the basis of that persona correlates with the speaker's actual beliefs.

- ▶ This is an analogue of Gricean Quality for the domain of social meaning, which we will call *Social Sincerity*.

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Formally speaking, this amounts to requiring the personas compatible with the speaker's utterance, **emf**(u), to associate with bases which have some relationship to the speaker's beliefs.

(12)   *Social Sincerity*
       $\forall s, u, \pi[utter(s)(u) \wedge \pi \in \mathbf{emf}(u) \wedge \iota_\pi \rightarrow MOST(p \in \Pi_2(\iota_\pi))(Bel(s, p))]$
       'If a speaker utters a sentence compatible with persona π, they believe a significant number of the propositions comprising the basis for π.'

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Two comments on this principle.

- It is relatively weak in the sense that it simply requires the speaker to hold most of the beliefs associated with the ideology. Possible modifications:
    - use a different quantifier
    - use different underlying theory, eg use a contextually determined parameter for sincerity in the manner of Kennedy (2007) on vague predicates or McCready (2015) for reliability of information source.
- It also treats all beliefs in $\Pi_2(\iota)$ identically, but likely some of these beliefs are more 'core' to the ideology than others. which could be modeled by weighting them as in e.g. the belief revision literature on entrenchment (Gärdenfors, 1988)

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With these formal elements, we can return to enrichment.

► We argue that enrichment is a multistep process, the first part
  of which is shared with identifying dogwhistles.
    1. Listener identifies speaker's persona on the basis of their
       utterance [IDs]
    2. Listener calls up basis of ideology associated with that
       persona
    3. If the basis, plus the utterance content, allows inferences to
       be drawn: enrichment.

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Case.

inner city:

- ▶ Suppose, for the (quasi)racist persona and corresponding ideology ι communicated by this DW to a savvy listener, *live_inner_city*$(x) > $*black*$(x) \in \Pi_2(\iota)$.

- ▶ This extra premise licenses an inference from 'inner city people don't work' to 'Black people living in cities don't work', which is the enriched meaning.

This statement of course can then be used to understand the speaker's political views, draw conclusions about their policy decisions, etc.

- ▶ Note: *social sincerity* assumption is necessary here.

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We can already see how this view improves on Khoo and our previous work.

- Khoo: the inference depends purely on semantic content.
    - No way to explain how semantically coextensive terms trigger/don't trigger these inferences;
    - for us, the mediation through persona, which is only enabled by DWs for savvy listeners, makes coextensive phrases act differently in the inferences they trigger via ideologies.
- Old us: mediated by DWs, but how?
    - Now us: principled explanation available of how dogwhistles trigger conclusions about personas, and thus ideologies, and thus inferences.

Taking the relation between persona and ideology seriously gives the necessary ingredients for an explanation that satisfies our desiderata.

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Epistemic vigilance and hypervigilance.
When observing a speaker using an expression we know to be a dogwhistle, what is the proper reaction?

- ▶ It is possible that the expression is being used innocently: speakers often hear dogwhistles without recognizing them, and may pick up expressions from political discourse without knowing their dogwhistley quality.

- ▶ Some uses of dogwhistles, then, are innocent.

- ▶ How can these be distinguished from cases where dogwhistles are genuinely used to deceive, as covert signals of identity?

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For a dogwhistle to be useful, the speaker must judge the speech situation to be one in which it is to their advantage to covertly signal.

- ie. a context which is, at least potentially, one where revealing their true identity could have negative effects.

A (partial) zero-sum situation is required for DW to be useful.

- A consequence of this observation is that, for a listener to judge a particular use of an expression as a dogwhistle, she must think that the speaker is intending to deceive.

- She must take the speaker to believe the interests of some discourse participants not to be aligned.

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The result is that judging an expression a dogwhistle already imputes hostile intent to the speaker.

- ▶ If this is wrong, it can both create arguments and disagreement where there might have been none.
- ▶ It can also dispose the hearer to systematically misconstrue other utterances of the speaker due to shifts in the probabilities she assigns to speaker personas and consequently to what she guesses the speaker's intentions to be (as in discussion of *fucking* in mcc).

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Thus: while it is important to be epistemically vigilant about dogwhistles, it is also important not to be hypervigilant.

- Under what conditions does hypervigilance arise?
- Experience: the buildup of bad interactions which get associated with a particular term (Twitter).
  - This boils down to shifts in priors, which is already expressed in our model.
- Value: sometimes, it is beneficial to the speaker to search out dogwhistles.

We want to look at the latter case in a bit more detail now.

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- ▶ Recall that utilities are assigned, in our theory, via a combination of informative content and value assigned to particular social meanings. On what basis?
- ▶ Many possibilities, but many are ideological in a broad sense (tradition/radicalness, political views, social groupings).
- ▶ One metric is similarity: 'I like people who are like me.'
- ▶ If so: we can assign affective values on the basis of similarity metrics between speaker and hearer personas (proposed in Henderson and McCready (2019)).

(of course, only one aspect of value assignment)

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Idea: people are sensitive to dogwhistles to precisely the degree they have strong feelings about the ideology.

► If highly positive, listener can learn that the speaker is sympathetic;

► if highly negative, that the speaker is to be avoided, or even combatted.

► This follows pretty directly from our theory: once affective value is incorporated into utilities, learning someone holds a high pos/neg utility ideology is useful to know.

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So to the extent that speaker persona is similar/dissimilar to
listener persona, utility is high.

- The result can be hypervigilance.
- We think there is a mathematical result to be found here,
  somewhat akin to the credibility result for cheap talk games of
  Farrell (1993), where a signal is credible to the degree that
  the interests of the sender align with that of the receiver:
- here, perhaps, listeners interpret possible dogwhistles as
  dogwhistles to the degree that doing so reflects a utility
  change, ie to the extent that personas are (dis)similar along
  some dimension.
- This is ongoing work.

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So far we have:

- ▶ Argued against several existing accounts of dogwhistles
- ▶ Distinguished two types of dogwhistle, both of which convey social personas but only one of which has at-issue content which is influenced by the persona recovered
- ▶ Modeled the two types using an extension and variant of Burnett's social meaning games
- ▶ Briefly discussed some implications for unconscious bias and vigilance about dogwhistles.

So far: clean explanation of speaker behavior when dogwhistles are used.

▶ But no story about why a speaker may choose to abandon the use of a dogwhistles and instead make an overt appeal that, without a doubt, allows listeners to detect they bear the taboo persona.

These "mask off" moments require a novel explanation.

Typology of unmasking

What situations might one choose to abandon dogwhistles in?
Proposal: unmasking tracks several factors related to political
polarization:

1. change in the speaker's beliefs about the way their audience
   is understanding their social persona
2. change in who they take themselves to be addressing
3. and change in the value the speaker assigns to presenting
   with that persona.

The H&M model predicts this typology as certain model
parameters are set to extreme values.

Recall: utility of a message m sent to speaker L_0 is computed via the likelihood L_0 takes the speaker to bear p given m,

▶ modified by the the speaker and listener's affective values for p, which are weighted by the likelihood the listener believes the speaker has that persona given the message.

▶ When addressing an audience, utility is calculated by averaging over audience members.

▶ Additionally, H&M take personas to be linked to ideologies, in the simplest case, sets of propositions.

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Key point: Detecting that a speaker bears a persona related to an ideology allows the listener to infer speaker beliefs.

► If a speaker is called out for expressing an ideological belief linked to a persona then other conversational agents will increase their priors the speaker bears that persona.

This kind of thing can contribute to unmasking.

Mask-off moments, reliability and ideology

Dogwhistle use is prompted by the attempt to maximize utility with respect to a mixed audience.

- ▶ Utility maximization pushes the speaker toward the abandonment of dogwhistling in some circumstances,
- ▶ all involving fairly radical parameter setting—in particular, of
  - ▶ (i) the speaker's beliefs about hearer priors for their persona
  - ▶ (ii) the speaker's affective value function v_{S_1}.

Claim: radical changes in the communication model that lead to such situations result in mask-off moments, and are likely to arise under political polarization.

(In)effectiveness

Case 1: speaker no longer believes that dogwhistling is going to be effective.

▶ One way in which this can happen is when the speaker's audience already believes that she has the persona in question, or when the speaker believes that they do.

More technically: if the priors the audience has for the speaker's personas (or that she believes they have) are unbalanced enough that they will assign her the persona she's trying to hide regardless of whether she used the dogwhistle.

Vigilance and 'cancellation'

The speaker might come to think this for various reasons.

- ▶ A common cause is being called out for more subtle signals of negatively viewed social personas or ideologies, which leads to increased scrutiny of further speech.
    - ▶ Clear negative consequence of hypervigilance
- ▶ This drive to monitor and expose ideological adversaries we take to be an effect of political polarization.
- ▶ Speakers often seem to conclude that they might just as well double down.

In a slogan: 'if I think I'm already canceled, I'll just speak my mind (= not dogwhistle anymore).'

Unmasking can be rational

Ultimately, this is rational behavior.

► Suppose my probability assignment leads to the belief that I'm going to be assigned negative utility no matter what I say.

► Then it's best for me to focus on appealing to the people who I know approve of my views, even if only a small amount of utility is extracted from making an overt appeal (instead of using a dogwhistle which they will also likely detect).

Valuation

Case 2: change in the way one assigns value to social personas by increasing the affective value assigned to the dogwhistle persona.

- As $v_{S_1}(p)$ for some persona p tends to ∞, dogwhistling becomes non-optimal.
- It is better to make an overt appeal and ensure all audience members assign you p, even if they don't like p.
- The speaker's own affective value for p will swamp whatever the audience values.

Such a speaker's slogan is 'I don't care what you think of me if you don't think like me.'

- This evaluative shift results in the formation of communities in which extreme and explicit speech is valued.
- It represents a move toward overt extremism and consequent polarization around the topics associated with the ideology.

Speaker beliefs about audience composition

Case 3: change in speaker beliefs about on the audience.

- ▶ If she comes to view the group she is addressing as one composed of same-believers, she won't have incentive any longer to use dogwhistles.
  - ▶ (Compare shifts in the group used for determining the truth value of epistemic modals, e.g. DeRose 1991)
- ▶ Again, the result is ideological polarization, especially on the internet where one can't see who one's statements is reaching.

Slogan: 'I'm not talking to you anymore!'

- ▶ Social media like Twitter likely support this sort of shift, as one starts to pay more attention to likes (which are assigned mostly on ideological lines) than comments (which might be combative).

Conclusions

One can think of dogwhistle abandonment as a defensive reaction.

- ▶ The abandonment of dogwhistles indicates the speaker's belief that she's no longer addressing a mixed audience.
- ▶ As such, it's a way of constructing and delimiting such polarized communities via linguistic methods.

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What does this mean for (hyper)vigilance?

- ▶ Arguably: we should be more concerned when people *stop* dogwhistling then when they dogwhistle.
- ▶ If they dogwhistle, it means they care about what others think, and they think others haven't already written them off.
- ▶ Ceasing to dogwhistle means they have given up on everyone outside their bubble.

Pace: Jenny Saul's *figleaves*, etc; but dogwhistles in politics might be signs of a healthy discursive environment, at least if they are likely to arise in the first place.

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THANK YOU!!!!!!!!!!!

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