

## Inception: How the Unsaid May Become Public Knowledge\*

*This paper is a case study of how language may be used by a politician in ways apt to make people believe propositions that have not been made, and which may be highly controversial or debatable. The corpus from which the examples are drawn is President George W. Bush's public speeches during the months before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the controversial but implicit proposition that they may have helped putting over to many Americans is that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had some complicity in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. To analyze the linguistic mechanisms that may have allowed this to happen, the paper invokes H.P. Grice's notion of "conversational implicature," but also two other mechanisms that may work in similar ways, and which are, it seems, less explored in linguistics pragmatics and rhetoric.*

### Introduction

Arguably, the discipline of rhetoric can be defined as the study of communication as it impacts on the minds of audiences. This paper will look at examples of one category of such impact: it will study how utterances by a speaker may—more or less strongly—invite audiences to interpret them as conveying semantic content that is not explicitly expressed. In other words, some people in the audience take that content as part of what the speaker meant to say, yet it is not manifestly there in the speaker's utterances.

It is of course a trivial insight that speakers' utterances imply more than they explicitly state. There have been insightful studies of how politicians

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implicitly convey views they want their audiences to accept, as for example the rhetorician Anders Sigrell's study of persuasion "between the lines" in modern political argumentation (1995), or the discourse analyst Teun van Dijk's study of "political implicatures" in Spanish Prime Minister Aznar's rhetoric on his country's participation in the Iraq war (2005). The views conveyed in these ways generally are ones that the speakers in question *also* state explicitly, and indeed in any way they can; however, what is common to the phenomena I will look at below is that they may, in the understanding of some hearers, convey content that the speaker a) is *not* willing to state explicitly, and b) would deny if asked point-blank whether he intended to convey it. In fact, in the case studied, the speaker did deny it.

The case concerns public speeches given by President George W. Bush during the half year that preceded the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the particular notion that I believe some hearers believed he meant to convey, but which he did not assert, was that Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein had somehow been involved in the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001.

Without discussing whether Bush and his speechwriters deliberately intended their words to convey this notion, I wish to emphasize that there may be the following advantages for a public speaker in conveying certain notions in this manner. First, the speaker cannot be held responsible for them since he did not state them or otherwise convey them in a manner that is manifest and unquestionable (e.g., by direct assertion or by presupposition). Second, these notions are likely to "fly under the radar" of many in the speaker's audience, since non-explicit semantic content is ubiquitous in human communication. In the standard case, it helps securing speedy and unimpeded communication between people, and hence it is normally processed rather automatically by hearers and out of their mental focus; for these reasons at least some hearers are likely to accept such content unreflectingly as being part of the speaker's meaning, and maybe even as being true. Third, for the same reasons, the speaker is not so likely to be expected to offer argumentation in their support. Because of these potential advantages a public speaker may have a strong motive for using language inviting hearers to imply views that the speaker does not wish to state or to argue for—views that he does not want to be consciously processed, questioned or scrutinized. To the extent the speaker is successful in this, such views may become part of what many in the audience consider public, shared knowledge.

An important pioneer in the study of implicit semantic meaning is the philosopher H. Paul Grice. The first of three phenomena that I will exemplify belongs to the category he, in a celebrated paper, called *conversational implicature* (1975; 1989). I will then discuss examples of two related concepts inspired by his approach; I call them *fuzzy reference* and *suggestive sentence collocation*. I will discuss these three mechanisms in descending order of what we may call “suggestive force.” Conversational implicature is the type I think most likely to suggest unasserted ideas in hearers’ minds; hence these are the ones that make it most relevant to blame the speaker for manipulation. The other two types may also act suggestively and automatically in varying degrees, but here a smaller part of the blame may be laid to the speaker and a correspondingly larger part to the carelessness of hearers.

In my rhetorical analysis, I will specifically suggest that several pronouncements by President George W. Bush shortly before the invasion of Iraq had the capacity to prompt, invite or sustain in the minds of hearers the idea that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was somehow complicit in the terrorist acts of September 11. This idea, which Bush never explicitly asserted, became widespread in the US population in the months preceding the invasion of Iraq, concurrent with the rhetorical campaign by the Bush administration from which I draw my examples.

More generally, I will suggest that an explicit and nuanced awareness of such phenomena can help rhetoricians and other students of public and political communication expose and illuminate phenomena that deserve such exposure. Because they work the way they do, many hearers may accept ideas conveyed in this way without reasons for them being asked, or given. Moreover, I believe much of the mental work in the minds of hearers who accept these ideas is automatic and subliminal; and that is another reason why it is useful to be distinctly aware of what goes on. Hence it is particularly useful to know these devices and to be able to distinguish between them. That way we citizens, and also the media, may better recognize them and engage in analysis and deliberation when we hear them; and we may consider to what degree politicians who use such devices are to blame for it, and to what degree we should blame ourselves for letting them work on our minds without giving them proper attention.

In this analysis concepts and approaches drawn from linguistic pragmatics are adduced to provide a more explicit conceptual understanding of the mechanisms involved; on the other hand, the understanding and assessment of precisely how these mechanism function and are used (or

exploited) in actual political rhetoric in a specific historical context is a task for rhetorical criticism. The two disciplines may thus mutually aid and supplement each other.

### **Conversational implicature**

First, the mechanism that H.P. Grice has called *conversational implicature*. An implicature of an utterance is the hearers' understanding of something that is not said, but which the hearers believe the speaker *means* them to understand. Grice thinks implicatures arise because of what he calls the "Cooperative Principle" underlying all normal conversations. It states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1989, p. 26). Speakers (and writers) are normally expected to adhere to this principle, and hearers' (and readers') implicit awareness of this may cause them to assume, often inadvertently, that certain ideas are implicated as part of the speaker's intended meaning—because if they were not, the speaker would be perceived as violating the Cooperative Principle.

From this principle Grice infers a set of "conversational maxims" (Grice 1989, pp. 26–27). At issue in the present context is, primarily, the second "maxim of Quantity," which says: "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required." Because our default expectation is that speakers will obey this rule, we tend, in the default case, to automatically believe that all the information they put into their utterance and all the choices it reflects have meanings that they intend us to grasp.

There is also the "maxim of Relation," which says, simply: "Be relevant." This makes us automatically expect that speakers *intend* everything in their utterances to be relevant; for example, conjoined sentences should be relevant to each other somehow, that is, have some semantic coherence. This will be in evidence in some of the examples discussed below.

The first example comes from Bush's "State of the Union" speech shortly before the invasion of Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

(1) Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained.

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<sup>21</sup> Held in Congress on January 28, 2003. All quotations from the documents discussed have been taken from the site <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/archive.html>.

Example (1) has the implicature that those who believed, before 9/11, that Saddam could be contained, stopped believing it that day—otherwise it would be pointless to say that they believed it *before* 9/11, and (1) would be “more informative than required.” But *why* did they stop believing it after that day? Bush does not state the reason explicitly. But surely the minds of many hearers would automatically have set to work on it. If 9/11 changed people’s view of Saddam, then the most obvious reason would be that Saddam was involved in 9/11. There may be other reasons, as we shall see, but none as obvious.

Now consider the next sentence in the speech:

(2) But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained.

Here, new implicatures may arise. The preferred one will probably be that Saddam *has* these agents and viruses and *supports* these networks; otherwise (2) also would be “more informative than required.”

If, then, (1) invites an implicature that Saddam was indeed involved in 9/11, then (2) coheres with that idea since the phrase *shadowy terrorist networks* could now be heard as referring to the same terrorist network(s) that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. However, the chemical agents and viruses cannot connect with this idea, since nothing of those kinds was involved in the attacks. The two sentences together, including their implicatures, may then be heard as implicating that Saddam was involved in 9/11 through his connection with terrorist networks, and that he *also* has chemical and biological weapons that he may lend to a new attack.

However, Bush’s official reason why 9/11 should make Americans change their view of Saddam only contained the second idea: that Saddam might equip a new terrorist attack, not that he was involved in the first one. Consider this passage from a press release:

(3) We felt secure here in the country. There's no way we could have possibly envisioned that the battlefield would change. And it has. And that's why we've got to deal with all the threats. That's why Americans must understand that when a tyrant like Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction (...).<sup>22</sup>

In other words, we now know that terrorists can attack the mainland, and all villainous dictators like Saddam who could equip them with WMD’s should therefore be seen as threats that we must deal with.

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<sup>22</sup> “Bush, Prime Minister Blair Discuss Keeping the Peace,” September 7, 2002.

But surely this reason for connecting Saddam and 9/11 is less plausible than the simple idea that he was *involved* in 9/11. First, the need to deal with *all* threats from villainous dictators who might act like this does not explain why Saddam in particular is such an urgent concern, or why Saddam is singled out for mention in (1) there rather than *all* villainous dictators. Secondly, as for terrorists bringing WMD's to America, nothing really seems to have changed. For them to bring nuclear weapons is probably out of the question, and always has been; as for chemical and biological WMD's, these can be so small that it has always been possible to bring them into the US, so here too there is nothing new. Moreover, terrorists can probably get these things elsewhere if Saddam is deposed. So Bush's reasoning as to why 9/11 suddenly reveals the necessity of deposing Saddam is much more complex than the idea that Saddam was involved in 9/11, and also rather implausible. Thus the most natural implicature in (1) and (2) is still that Saddam was involved in 9/11.

On January 31, 2003, Bush received British Prime Minister Blair, and in a joint press conference a journalist asked them: "Do you believe that there is a link between Saddam Hussein, a direct link, and the men who attacked on September the 11th?" Bush replied:

(4) I can't make that claim.

And he never did.<sup>23</sup> Yet when the invasion of Iraq was begun in March 2003, and for some time after, most Americans had come to believe that there was such a link. I am arguing that several public utterances by Bush and his staff in the months before the invasion were apt to suggest or sustain the idea in hearers' minds that Bush believed in this link. Is this denial such an utterance?

At any rate Bush's denial of the claim about the direct link between Saddam and 9/11 is worded in a peculiar way. The default wording of a denial when asked whether one believes something that one in fact does not believe would be something like *No, I don't*. The linguist and social anthropologist Stephen Levinson proposes a heuristic for what he calls "marked" formulations, based on Grice's maxim of Quantity (i.e., that one should not be more informative than required): "What's said in an abnormal way, isn't normal; or Marked message indicates marked situation" (2000, p.

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<sup>23</sup> As late as 2009, former Vice President Dick Cheney also denied the Saddam-9/11 link, see "Cheney: No link between Saddam Hussein, 9/11," <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/06/01/cheney.speech/>.

33). Hearers' minds, using this heuristic, may automatically proceed to interpret Bush's "abnormally" worded denial as implicating that even though he *cannot* make the claim, he would still *like* to, perhaps because he believes it to be true but just does not (yet) have the evidence that would allow him to do make it (thus obeying Grice's second "maxim of Quality": "Do not say that for which you lack evidence.") The rhetorician Jeanne Fahnestock, in a paper on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's view of style as argument, makes a similar observation about "the marked term being the less expected choice that can draw attention to itself and initiate a Gricean implicature to detect intentions behind its use" ("No neutral choices," 2011, p. 36). On that principle, some hearers might reason that Bush intended them to understand that he holds the claim to be true.

Concluding on the examples considered so far, Bush bears a responsibility for speaking in ways that are apt to mislead hearers as to his intended meaning—and understanding a speaker's intended meaning is, according to another seminal insight by Grice (1957, 1969), the criterion for understanding what someone's utterance means. Bush probably made a number of Americans take him to mean something that he neither asserted nor gave reasons for. And the people that were thus duped are only partly to be blamed for it.

### Fuzzy reference

Our second suggestive mechanism is "fuzzy reference." Certain phrases in Bush's speeches may be heard as having *either* a relatively vague reference, *or* a more specific one that suggests a connection between Saddam and 9/11; both interpretations are possible and natural. On the vague interpretation, Bush's sentences do not violate any maxims of conversation and do not become pointless. Hearers in whose minds the more specific interpretation pops up thus have themselves to blame in a higher degree than in the examples we have seen so far.

In a long speech on "the Iraqi threat" we get this passage:

(5) We've experienced the horror of September the 11th. We have seen that those who hate America are willing to crash airplanes into buildings full of innocent people. Our enemies would be no less willing, in fact, they would be eager, to use biological or chemical, or a nuclear weapon.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat," October 7, 2002.

Whom do the phrases *those who hate America* and *our enemies* refer to? Here contextual information must help the hearer work that out. Surely Saddam must belong to at least one of these sets, or be connected with it, since the passage is part of a speech in which “President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat.” Are the referents of these two phrases the same sets of people? If we expect a “rich” coherence between sentences we might take Bush to mean just that. Saddam is clearly cast as America’s central enemy in this speech, and it is also natural to accept that he is among *those who hate America* (although in the eighties, during the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam was a friend of the US and was visited by US officials like later Defense Secretary Rumsfeld); but if he is among *those who hate America*, then he is also among those we know are *willing to crash airplanes*. We have seen them do so, so the nominal phrase must include the perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist acts. In other words, Saddam must somehow be connected with this lot. That is a line of automatic reasoning that may easily be triggered by this passage.

Later in the speech we have this:

(6) The attacks of September the 11th showed our country that vast oceans no longer protect us from danger. Before that tragic date, we had only hints of al Qaeda's plans and designs. Today in Iraq, we see a threat whose outlines are far more clearly defined, and whose consequences could be far more deadly. Saddam Hussein’s actions have put us on notice, and there is no refuge from our responsibilities.

Again, an impulse to hear a “rich” connection between sentences might make hearers assume that what connects the terrorists referred to in the first two sentences of (6) and the agents named in the last two sentences (Iraq and Saddam) is not only that they threaten Americans, but also that there is a *personal* overlap between them. This understanding may be strengthened by the phrase *Saddam Hussein's actions*, since it is plausible, in the context, to hear this phrase as referring to Saddam’s supposed part in 9/11.

The last two examples demonstrate that *definite nominal phrases* are potent devices for suggestion. In the following passage too a definite nominal phrase may put a hearer’s mind to work to identify a specific referent:



(7) ... the best way to secure the homeland is to chase the killers down, one at a time, and bring them to justice. (Applause.) And that's what we're going to do.<sup>25</sup>

The date is December 2002; Bush and his staff are campaigning for an invasion of Iraq. That makes it natural for hearers to assume that the proposed invasion is the same as the plan to *chase the killers down*, since that is *what we're going to do*. But then Saddam and Iraq become in some sense co-referential with the definite noun phrase *the killers*. The definite article, as used here, normally requires that the killers are already *known* to hearers as killers. Where would hearers have that knowledge from? An obvious answer is: from 9/11.

Later we get this:

(8) (...) out of the evil done to this country, is going to come incredible good (...)

The *evil done to this country* surely refers to 9/11; the *good* probably refers to the imagined results of a war against Saddam. The causal claim that *this* good comes out of *that* evil makes much more sense to hearers if they assume that the phrase about evil also refers to something Saddam was involved in—in this case, 9/11.

On February 13, Bush said this:

(9) The terrorists brought this war to us—and now we're taking it back to them. (Applause.)<sup>26</sup>

Here, *the terrorists* and *them* are surely coreferential; *them* is anaphoric, as Halliday and Hasan (1976) would say. Since *them*, uttered at this point in time, clearly means Saddam and his regime, whom the US is preparing to attack, it also seems natural to hear the phrase about the terrorists as referring to, or including, Saddam—unless both *the terrorists* and *them* are taken to refer very broadly to, say, all terrorists in the world.

In all these examples of fuzzy reference, and many similar ones, we find ambiguous nominal phrases which may or may not be taken to identify Saddam as involved in 9/11; another term for the same phenomenon might be “semantical underdeterminacy” (Atlas 2000). Even when these phrases are interpreted in the vague sense they do not flout any conversational

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<sup>25</sup> “Remarks by the President in Terrell for Senate and Louisiana Republican Party Luncheon,” December 3, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> “President Salutes Sailors at Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville,” February 13, 2003.

maxims; so hearers who hear a more specific reference to Saddam should realize that they are letting themselves be duped.

### **Suggestive sentence collocation**

Jeanne Fahnestock devotes the fourth section of her monograph on *Rhetorical Style* to “passage construction.” This term comprises concepts such as coherence and cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976), “given/new,” and “topic/comment.” As a motto for the section she quotes the 18th Century rhetorician George Campbell’s classic work *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) as saying that “as there should always be a natural connexion in the sentiments of a discourse, there should generally be corresponding to this, an artificial connexion in the signs. Without such a connexion the whole will appear a sort of patchwork and not a uniform piece” (from the chapter on “Connectives Employed in Combining the Sentences in a Discourse”; Fahnestock 2011, p. 345).

This is a clear anticipation of Grice’s thinking about implicatures—the point being that if hearers (or readers) do not perceive an “artificial connexion,” i.e., explicit “connectives” (coherence-signaling devices) in a text, then it will be natural for them to try to construct a “natural connexion in the sentiments” (i.e., in the semantic meaning) of the discourse because if such connection is absent, the text will appear a “patchwork and not a uniform piece.”

This is in fact an apt description of the third type I will discuss of suggestive mechanisms in Bush’s rhetoric on Iraq. Here, where we have to do with “passage construction,” i.e., with collocations of sentences, the hearer bears even more responsibility for hearing what is not said than in the first two types. It is a default expectation, as both Campbell, Grice and Fahnestock are aware, that collocated sentences in well-written texts cohere semantically; but just *how* much coherence across sentences and what *specific* semantic ties the speaker has intended is partly guesswork on the hearer’s part.

Consider these sentences:

(10) The entire world has witnessed Iraq’s eleven-year history of defiance, deception and bad faith.

We also must never forget the most vivid events of recent history. On September the 11th, 2001, America felt its vulnerability—even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth.<sup>27</sup>

It is a clear possibility to hear all three sentences as describing the actions of the same agent, namely Saddam's Iraq; on the other hand, the passage does not violate any conversational maxims when not heard like this. In the same speech, we get this:

(11) We've learned that Iraq has trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases. And we know that after September the 11<sup>th</sup>, Saddam Hussein's regime gleefully celebrated the terrorist attacks on America.

Here two sentences are not just collocated but conjoined with *and*. That conjunction is rich in potential meanings. One might say, for example, that Grice's Maxim of Relevance prompts us to hear conjoined sentences as maximally relevant to each other, and/or jointly relevant to some encompassing purpose or direction. But a hearer's mind is likely to wonder: relevant in what way, for what purpose, in what direction?

Levinson states that "when events are conjoined, they tend to be read as temporally successive and, if at all plausible, as causally connected" (2000, p. 122). In fact, a temporal reading of *and* is clearly possible; moreover, one may read both sentences as relevant support for an unsaid conclusion to the effect, for example, that Saddam is a villain. But a causal reading is also inviting: Iraq has been training terrorists; the 9/11 terrorists were among them, and *that* caused Saddam's regime to celebrate their act—this is how such an interpretation might go. On the other hand the passage is still meaningful when not heard like this.

George W. Bush's speeches before the Iraq invasion contain many passages where similar phenomena are in evidence. Sentences referring to 9/11 repeatedly rub shoulders with sentences referring to Saddam. Those who heard these statements as implicating that Saddam was involved in 9/11 bamboozled themselves; but Bush and his speechwriters gave them ample opportunities to do so.

## Conclusion

In 2007, a group of communication scholars (John *et al.*, 2007) issued a call that has not yet, I believe, been adequately answered:

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<sup>27</sup> "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat."

Research that examines with analytical precision the specific mechanisms of Implication of September 11, al Qaeda, and Saddam used by Bush in his public communications, as well as how these implications were buttressed by public claims of other administration members, is an important task for future scholarship. (p. 207)

More specifically, John *et al.* said: “Using threat rhetoric, Bush over time adroitly associated terrorists such as al Qaeda, which evoked the horrors of September 11, with Saddam and Iraq, without necessarily connecting the two directly” (2007, p. 207). Also they pointed out:

In 2006, two national polls showed that more than 40 Percent of American adults still believed Saddam was involved in September 11. The president and his administration denied ever making any such claim, and nowhere in these texts did Bush *directly* say Saddam supported either the September 11 attacks or al Qaeda. However, our findings confirm the view expressed by growing numbers of critics that the impression was conveyed, even implied, by the rhetoric of Bush and his administration. The result was a political advantage for the administration and Republicans, but the cost was a misinformed public and a political discourse that pushed—largely unchecked by those in the mainstream—toward war with Iraq. (John *et al.* 2007, p. 212)

What is said here clearly motivates studies like the present one. Many have felt that the Bush administration’s public communications *somehow* conveyed the assumption that Saddam was involved in 9/11, although he never made that direct claim (declaring that he couldn’t); but the exact mechanisms by which they did it have remained less illuminated.

Steuter & Wills (2008) report that Frank Luntz, a communication consultant for the Bush administration, wrote a memo in June 2004, advising Bush to justify the war in Iraq indirectly, rather than directly, avoiding arguments about preemption and relying instead on references to 9/11. The memo was titled *Communicating the Principles of Prevention & Protection in the War on Terror* and offered advice on what language to use in referring to the war in Iraq:

His advice was to connect the war on terror to the war in Iraq by ensuring that “no speech about homeland security or Iraq should begin without a reference to 9/11.” Luntz’s recommended phrases such as “It is better to fight the War on Terror on the streets of Baghdad than on the streets of New York or Washington” and “9/11 changed everything,” became staples of Republican rhetoric. (Steuter and Wills 2008, p. 14)

The examples in this paper provide good reasons why citizens in a democracy should learn about the automatic (or if you prefer, “subliminal”) impact of political discourse on audiences’ minds. There are several rhetorical devices that depend on automatic cognitive mechanisms in audiences. Practicing rhetors (such as Presidents and speechwriters) use them routinely and skillfully; rhetorical critics may notice them and point them out, and they should. Concepts and insights inspired by work in other disciplines such as linguistic pragmatics may help them do so more explicitly and with more nuance and a better basis for pronouncing critique and caution. The devices studied above are apt to create phony public “knowledge” in our minds, or as rhetoricians might say, dubious *doxai*—without our conscious knowledge.

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