



# Insinuation is committing

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## ABSTRACT

Since insinuation – through which speakers implicitly convey negative ascriptions non-overtly (Bell, 1997) – is in theory plausibly deniable, many scholars who have tried to account for the phenomenon (e.g., Fricker, 2012, Bell, 1997, Bertucelli Papi, 2014) have concluded that insinulators cannot be taken to be committed to the content of what they insinuate. Against this classical view, Fraser (2001) and Camp (2018) consider that insinuation is committing, i.e., meant to be recognised as being meant to be recognised. In this paper, I start by providing an overview of the classical and the modern account of insinuation by highlighting and discussing their differences. I then tackle the problem of properly accounting for insinuation in terms of the relationship between commitment and plausible deniability, and outline a relevance-theoretic account, compatible with the modern account, with arguments to justify that contextually relevant insinuations are indeed committing.

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## 1. Introduction

On 4 July 1967, the House of Lords approved the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK. The bill was promoted by Lord Arthur Gore, 8th Earl of Arran, conservative whip in the House of Lords; Gore was known both for the promotion of this bill and for his unsuccessful yet relentless efforts to reform laws for the protection of badgers, of which he and his wife were very fond. When he was asked why his bill on homosexuality succeeded, while his effort to protect badgers had failed, he allegedly replied: “There are not many badgers in the House of Lords” (Preston, 2016). It is not hard to infer here that the 8th Earl of Arran has perhaps *insinuated* that there were many gay men in the House of Lords.

Insinuation – or innuendo –<sup>1</sup> has been classically defined as “a non-overt intentional negative ascription, whether true or false, usually in the form of an implicature, which is understood as a charge or accusation against what is, for the most part, a non-present party” (Bell, 1997, p. 36). One of the main – and largely agreed-upon – features of insinuation is the fact that it can be plausibly denied (see Mazzearella, 2021; Pinker, 2007 for a discussion of plausible deniability). This, in turn, explains why it has traditionally been categorised as being labelled as an *off-record* communicative strategy (Gibbs, 1999, pp. 167–171), or as a *collateral* speech act (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p. 101). Consensus thus has it that insinuated contents are always conveyed somehow under the radar.

Since its inception, pragmatic research has been interested in such problematic communicative phenomena, which do not seem to clearly fall within existing categories. Already mentioned in Austin's seminal work on speech acts (Austin, 1962), the

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<sup>1</sup> The related terms insinuation and innuendo have both been used in the literature to refer to the kind of phenomenon with which this paper is concerned. The distinction is inconsequential to the points made here, and I opted to keep the term insinuation throughout this paper, but the reader can be referred to (Bell, 1997) and (Fraser, 2001) for a discussion of their differences.

pragmatic status of insinuation has sparked some controversy, as a classical and a modern account have developed opposing views over the years. The bone of contention between these two views concerns the communicative nature of insinuation: while the classical account holds that insinuation is not meant to be recognised as being meant to be recognised, this possibility is perfectly viable under the modern account.

In this paper, I start with an overview of both the classical (Section 2) and the modern account (Section 3) of insinuation, by highlighting their differences and assessing their relevance for pragmatic research. I then (Section 4) discuss the intricate relationship between insinuation, (epistemic and communicative) commitment, and plausible deniability in order to better understand the pragmatic constraints that bear on successful insinuation. Based on this discussion, I finally sketch a relevance-theoretic account of insinuation that construes it, just like any other communicative phenomenon, as a content that speakers are in fact committed to (Section 5). In so doing, I am led to conclude that the size of the space of plausible deniability, in insinuations, is inversely proportional to their contextual relevance.

## 2. The classical account of insinuation

### 2.1. On the non-overtness of insinuation

Classical accounts of insinuation have all highlighted its particularly problematic status when it comes to classifying it as an illocutionary act. Austin for one, in his seminal William James lectures (Austin, 1962), already portrayed insinuation as a speech act which eludes classification:

(...) there may be some things we ‘do’ in some connexion with saying something which do not seem to fall, intuitively at least, exactly into any of these roughly defined classes [i.e., locution, illocution, perlocution], or else seem to fall vaguely into more than one. For example, *insinuating*, as when we insinuate something in or by issuing some utterance, seems to involve some convention, as in the illocutionary act; but we cannot say ‘I insinuate...’, and it seems like implying to be a clever effect rather than a mere act (Austin, 1962, pp. 104–105).

Under this lens, insinuation cannot be considered as an illocutionary act. In fact, unlike other speech acts which can be prefaced with an explicit performative, insinuation collapses when it is made explicit. A speaker uttering “I insinuate that Laszlo is dishonest” might still convey the negative ascription, but as a plain assertion – and, crucially, not as an insinuation. Strawson’s account of the relationship between intention and illocutionary acts makes this point even more explicit:

An essential feature of the intentions which make up the illocutionary complex is their overtness. They have, one might say, essential avowability. This is, in one respect, a logically embarrassing feature. (...) At the same time it [the criterion of avowability] enables us easily to dispose of insinuating as a candidate for the status of a type of illocutionary act (Strawson, 1964, p. 454).

This suggests that insinuation does not share a truly *communicative* status with speech acts that can be explicitly prefaced with their corresponding performative verb. Récanati explores the same idea in his discussion of insinuation by claiming that “a secret illocutionary intention is a contradiction in terms” (Récanati, 1979, p. 98, my translation): in this sense, a non-avowable (i.e., secret) intention cannot be associated to an illocutionary act, as the latter needs to be overt. In their work on indirectness and what they call *collateral acts*, Bach and Harnish resort to the Gricean model of nonnatural meaning (meaning<sub>NN</sub> (Grice, 1957)) to argue that innuendo indeed belongs to the class of covert speech acts, which are “performed with intentions that are intended not to be recognised” (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p. 101). In an effort to pin down the main feature of innuendo, they add that.

[w]hereas an indirect act is performed with an intention that can be reasonably expected to be recognized (on the basis of the utterance and the context), so that the speaker cannot, if challenged, plausibly deny that he intended the hearer to infer his intention, the key to innuendo is deniability. (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p. 101)

Two features of insinuation thus emerge from these classical accounts:

- (i) insinuation is not an illocutionary act by virtue of its doubtful communicative status
- (ii) insinuation is deniable

Feature (i) can be best captured by describing how insinuation fails to fit Grice’s definition of nonnatural meaning, whereby

‘U meant something by uttering x’ is true iff, for some audience A, U uttered x intending:

- (1) A to produce a particular response r
- (2) A to think (recognize) that U intends (1)
- (3) A to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2) (Grice, 1969, p. 151)

This model, which was later refined by Sperber & Wilson through the notions of informative and communicative intention (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), accounts for the communicative status of meaning in *overt* communication. Yet, the classical account of insinuation holds that insinuation fails to satisfy conditions (2) and (3) above: indeed, the insinuating speaker does not mean the audience of the insinuation to produce the response on the basis of their fulfilment of (2) – that is, the audience is not meant to recognise the content of the insinuation by means of the recognition that the speaker is insinuating it. Thus defined, insinuation, as Bach & Harnish have it, is a covert speech act which consequently does not bear any R-intention (reflexive intention), and, thus, which has no communicative status. Insinuation, under the classical view, is not meant to be recognised as being meant to be recognised (Bell, 1997, p. 37).

Feature (ii) is intimately related to feature (i), as deniability emerges thanks to the non-overt character of the insinuating intention. If a speaker gives up non-overtness, by asserting something and thus making it clear that they mean the addressee to recognise the content of the assertion as being meant to be recognised, then they give up their deniability options, as denying the content of an assertion one has just made yields a contradiction.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate the deniability feature of insinuation, imagine a situation in which Winston and Nina have each brought a cake they have baked to Laszlo's party. As they are both engaged in conversation, Laszlo, the host, joins them and utters (1):

(1) Nina, your cake was delicious!

Depending on the relationship between the three participants and contingent contextual features, it is easy to imagine that in praising Nina's cake in (1), Laszlo could also be insinuating (2)<sup>3</sup>

(2) Winston is a bad cook

All it takes to increase the contextual relevance of (2) is the presence of some contextual assumptions like knowing that Laszlo does not like Winston very much, or that for some reason he wants Nina and Winston to compete. Now, in the context in which (1) is uttered and (2) is insinuated – i.e., meant to be recognised but not meant to be recognised as being meant to be recognised – if challenged by Winston for insinuating that the latter is a bad cook, Laszlo can always answer along the lines of “I was just saying that I really liked Nina's cake, but yours was good too”, thus denying (2). Should Laszlo have uttered an explicit version of (2) as an assertion, the option of denying that content would most likely have vanished. This shows a crucial feature of insinuation, to which we will return, which requires it to always be accompanied by an alternative contextually plausible meaning – which Bell calls the *pseudo-overt meaning* (Bell, 1997, p. 43).

Non-overt speech acts such as insinuation obviously pose a great challenge for the Gricean – and, more generally, any inferential – model of overt communication. Put simply, how can we account for a *communicative* phenomenon (the contents of insinuation are indeed routinely successfully identified by their audiences, so there seems to be some form of communication in insinuation) which requires its constitutive intention not to be recognised within a pragmatic model which precisely holds that successful meaning exchanges rest on processes of intention recognition?

This problem can be addressed in two ways: the first makes it irrelevant, while the second genuinely attempts to solve it. The first option is simply to consider that non-overt speech acts fall outside of the scope of pragmatic frameworks which are designed to account for overt communication. The implication, thus, is that we no longer have a problem, because, by definition, we should not try to apply said models to non-overt communicative phenomena. Yet, this feels a bit like cheating, since we are not really addressing the issue, but merely dodging it. The second option is to acknowledge that, while non-overt, these are still cases of communication, and thus that there is still a pragmatic story to be told. Strawson opened a door to a work-around to the problem by considering that the audience of an insinuation can still work out its meaning by *suspecting* that the intention is there:

The whole point of insinuating is that the audience is to suspect but not more than suspect, the intention, for example to induce or disclose a certain belief. The intention one has in insinuating is essentially non-avowable (Strawson, 1964, p. 454).

With this argument, still compatible with the classical account, Strawson expresses the idea that just because the insinuating intention is non-avowable does not mean that it must be altogether absent from the interpretative picture. Instead, what matters is that the addressee should be undecided about whether there is such an intention or not – and this, crucially, means that the audience is licensed to consider that the speaker *might* have an insinuating intention. Thus, *suspecting* an R-intention suffices to fulfil the conditions for Grice's meaning<sub>NN</sub>: one can presumably process an utterance with the suspicion, yet without the certainty, that the insinuating intention exists and work out the corresponding speaker meaning. With this solution, Grice's account of meaning can be preserved to deal with insinuation, the only difference being that we allow for some degree of undecidedness as to the actual presence of the insinuating intention.

<sup>2</sup> Moorean sentences, such as 'I'm Swiss but I don't believe I'm Swiss' illustrate the impossibility of asserting P and our belief in non-P at the same time. See Marsili (2020) for an up to date discussion of assertoric commitment, Morency et al. (2008) for a discussion of the difference between explicature and implicature denial, and Boogaart et al. (2021) for an empirical study of commitment deniability.

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that many cases of insinuation draw on scenarios in which some comparison or contrast is made, as in examples (1), (6) and (9) below. All of them, and many more, rely on the presence of an 'as opposed to' clause that becomes relevant in the context of insinuation.

Several contemporary accounts of insinuation and off-record communication more generally (e.g., Bell, 1997; Bertuccelli Papi, 2014; Fricker, 2012; Gibbs, 1999) largely draw on the classical account and accordingly also consider that insinuation is a non-overt intentional act that is not meant to be recognised as being meant to be recognised. As a consequence, the classical account considers that insinuation is non-committing.

## 2.2. On the pragmatic nature of insinuation

Both classical and modern accounts of insinuation converge on its *implicit* pragmatic nature, as the content of insinuation is neither linguistically coded nor derived in the absence of contextual assumptions. Yet, given the rich literature on the semantic and pragmatic interface (e.g., Carston, 1999, 2002; Schlenker, 2016; Stojanovic, 2008; Turner, 1999) and on the different types of meaning concerned by this distinction, consensus as to what kind of content insinuation is has not been reached yet.

Most classical accounts and several contemporary accounts, who all take on board the deniability feature of insinuation, tend to draw on this feature to indicate that insinuation many times comes under the guise of an *implicature* – usually a particularised conversational implicature, whose features include cancellability (Grice, 1975). While she refrains from formulating a definition of insinuation and does not endorse the classical account, Camp still summarises the majority view when she argues that the “phenomenon of implicature with deniability clearly lies at its [insinuation’s] core” (Camp, 2018, p. 46).

These accounts thus seem to conform for the most part to Bell’s definition of innuendo (see introduction above). Indeed, just like implicature, insinuation is cancellable, calculable (hearers are supposed to incur cognitive effort to supply appropriate and relevant contextual assumptions to work out its meaning) and emerges alongside the utterance’s explicit content (namely Grice’s *what is said*).

Yet, at least four reasons support the view that implicature and insinuation are not co-extensive. First, while it is vital for the success of insinuation that its pseudo-overt meaning remain plausible, this is not the case for the pseudo-overt meaning of indirect speech acts (which are typical examples of implicatures). Under a Gricean account, it is precisely because the literal meaning of an indirect speech act is contextually highly unlikely that addressees engage in further processing and end up identifying the implicature; in a relevance-theoretic framework (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), the implicature is contextually more relevant (i.e., cost-effective in terms of its processing) than the literal meaning of the utterance – which is why it is more likely to be taken as the content representing speaker meaning. In example (3), Nina might thus recognise that (3b) is literally an irrelevant answer to her invitation in (3a), and this should cause her to draw the implicature in (3c):

- (3) a. Nina: “Do you want to come to the movies with us tonight?”  
 b. Laszlo: “I have to study for my finals.”  
 c. I can’t come to the movies tonight.

This does not happen with insinuations, as the contextual relevance of their pseudo-overt meaning is a necessary condition for their plausible deniability. For instance, in example (1), it is not because the literal/explicit (i.e., pseudo-overt) meaning of (1) is found to be irrelevant that addressees can derive the insinuated content in (2) above. Quite the contrary, the pseudo-overt meaning of (1) must remain plausible, i.e., contextually relevant, for the insinuated content in (2) to be plausibly denied, so that Laszlo can argue that he really only meant to compliment Nina. In other words, deniability is more plausible in insinuation than in implicature, which is why indirect speech acts are felt to be more direct than insinuations (Bell, 1997, p. 43). A second argument supporting the view that insinuation is not equivalent to implicature stems from the implications of their cancellation, which are arguably different. This is how Bell summarises this point:

Whereas cancelling a conversational implicature may involve the articulation of what is already considered to be mutually manifest, the cancellation or denial of an innuendo articulates and so makes more explicit what is considered to be non-mutually manifest (Bell, 1997, p. 46).

Under Bell’s account, insinuation is covert; thus, explicitly cancelling the insinuated meaning would defeat the purpose of insinuation by making it overt: the speaker can thus no longer play the deniability card, since they would be bringing themselves to the conversational record the insinuated content – even if it would be to cancel it. A third difference is to be found in the discursive scope of insinuation, which may exceed the boundaries of the utterance<sup>4</sup>: while canonical implicatures are usually discussed as propositions that either represent an alternative interpretation or add to the literal proposition encoded by the utterance – in the example above, the implicature (3c) is meant to supplant proposition (3b) as the relevant answer to (3a), while simultaneously offering the literal meaning as a reason for the refusal –, insinuations can sometimes be drawn as an interpretative conclusion of a set of several utterances (see Bell, 1997, pp. 47–48).

A fourth reason, related to the second reason seen above, has to do with the assumption that the deniability of insinuation follows from the cancellability of implicature. Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz (2021) contend that provocative insinuations are not implicatures, with the example of headlines with racist undertones such as “Iraqi Refugee is convicted in Germany of raping and murdering teenage girl” (Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz, 2021, p. 64). This headline, according to the authors, insinuates that Iraqi refugees are despicable/dangerous/malicious; they also argue that this content is different from implicature in that its cancellability does not make the speaker look retrospectively uncooperative, while cancelling an

<sup>4</sup> Think of sexual innuendo, which is not exclusively attached to one utterance in a flirtatious communicative exchange.

implicature would (Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz, 2021, pp. 69–72). Indeed, the newspaper can still cancel the insinuation and argue that they did not intend the derogatory content to go through. By contrast, a speaker who, in saying ‘there is a garage around the corner’ implies ‘it sells petrol’ (see Grice, 1975, p. 51 for the original example) will be deemed retrospectively uncooperative in case they answer the addressee’s subsequent question ‘do they sell petrol there?’ by saying ‘no, they don’t’. As noted by the authors, this would make the speaker’s original contribution uncooperative in terms of its irrelevance in the conversation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, insinuation differs from implicature in that its denial does not make the speaker retrospectively appear to be uncooperative, while implicature does.

Despite these differences, much of the literature on insinuation links it to implicature. Modern accounts usually follow suit, although some room is made to accommodate insinuation as *conversational eliciture*, a type of inference drawn on the basis of specific predicates (Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz, 2021).

### 3. The modern account of insinuation

Among modern attempts to tackle insinuation, some accounts depart from the classical account, such as Fraser’s (2001), Camp’s (2018) and Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz’s (2021). These put forward an alternative that either fundamentally disagrees with the classical account in terms of the communicative nature of insinuating intentions or refines it significantly in terms of the pragmatic nature of insinuation.

Probably the most interesting development in the study of insinuation, which has general implications for the study of meaning at large, emerges from contemporary discussions about insinuation’s peculiar and complicated relationship to commitment (see Camp (2018) for an illuminating discussion). Speakers insinuate in order not to be liable to disclose sensitive or normatively problematic contents on the record, which would suggest that they do not commit to the negative ascription conveyed. However, when they are called out regarding the latter and deny having meant it, many times they are perceived as speaking in bad faith, which suggests that the story is not as clear-cut as the Gricean account would suggest. In what follows, I first discuss the modern account of insinuation and then examine the relationship between commitment and insinuation to better characterise this elusive communicative phenomenon.

#### 3.1. Fraser’s attack on the classical account

According to Fraser, the intentional feature of insinuation is uncontroversial, while its communicative status is not: “[t]here is no disagreement among researchers that the act of insinuation is intentional, but there is a question of whether or not it is an implication, and hence communicative” (Fraser, 2001, p. 327). *Pace* the classical account, Fraser holds that insinuation is overt: “[t]hose hearing an insinuation are expected to do more than suspect; they are expected to recognize an insinuation as a type of implication” (Fraser, 2001, p. 330). Probably the strongest argument for this claim comes from the observation that in a case where the speaker directs an insinuation at its target, in a one-to-one communicative scenario, the speaker must mean the addressee to work out the content of the insinuation, and thus to grant it communicative status. If such were not the case, that is, if the addressee was not meant to catch the insinuation, why bother insinuating at all? For Fraser, thus, insinuation is, in Gricean parlance, R-intended. Accordingly, in terms of its pragmatic nature, insinuation falls under the category of implicature. Moreover, looking at it from a speech act-theoretic perspective, Fraser considers that the absence of an explicit performative verb for insinuation is unproblematic, as he notes that other speech acts, such as criticising, blaming, admonishing, or complaining, for instance, still have illocutionary forces despite not having any associated explicit performative verb. What happens with insinuation is simply that it is always performed by implication, and never directly. Crucially, this does not strip insinuation from its communicative status.

How, then, can we accommodate the fact that insinuations are plausibly deniable with the assumption that they are R-intended? Here Fraser introduces a nuance that will need to be further examined:

Of course, because of unwanted import the speaker may not want to take responsibility for the insinuation. Rejection of this responsibility is within the speaker’s ability. (...) It is an issue separate from that of the communicative status of an insinuation if, for political or other reasons, the speaker does [not] wish to be explicit and direct with the content of the insinuation and takes the implied route (Fraser, 2001, pp. 330–331).

Fraser does not put on a par the overtness of a communicative intention with what he calls the responsibility for an insinuation. As puzzling as this may sound, the distinction can become clear and relevant once we distinguish different forms of commitment and responsibility at play in communicative exchanges.

#### 3.2. Camp on conversational liability

Although Camp does not wish to offer a definition of insinuation, owing to its blurry communicative boundaries, she still associates it with the phenomenon of “implicature with deniability” (Camp, 2018, p. 46). However, instead of

<sup>5</sup> The authors note that while the newspaper might appear to be hypocritical in cancelling the insinuation, it can still be deemed to be conversationally cooperative. One can be hypocritical and still cooperate at the conversational level, as these seem to be two different things.

straightforwardly considering, somehow like the classical account does, that the cancellability of implicatures translates into a purported and problematic lack of communicative status, she considers, just like Fraser, that insinuation does have a communicative status (in the following quote,  $M(Q)$  refers to the insinuated content,  $S$  to the speaker and  $H$  to the hearer):

Indeed, an insinuating speaker typically intends  $H$  to recognize their intention that  $M(Q)$  be off-record, and that they are prepared to deny having meant  $M(Q)$  if challenged. If and when  $S$  does deny having meant  $M(Q)$ , they don't typically expect  $H$  to believe that they actually meant  $M(Q)$  rather than  $M(Q)$ ; they merely hope to avoid conversational liability for it (Camp, 2018, p. 55).

In other words, speakers who insinuate and who are called for it do two things: first, they intend their addressees to recognise that the target content is conveyed off-record. Second, when they deny having insinuated that content, they are not actually trying to convince their addressees that they were going for a different content altogether. Rather, they want to avoid *conversational liability*. This is where Camp's account differs from the classical account: one can insinuate  $P$ , intend  $P$  to be recognised as being meant to be recognised (that is,  $R$ -intend  $P$ ), albeit covertly, but, crucially, not accept the responsibility of having introduced  $P$  in the conversational record. Thus, *committing* to a communicative intention is not quite the same as *being liable* for it. The idea is not so much to make people think you did not mean something, but rather to make an assumption mutually manifest in a way that still affords the possibility of not owning up to this conversational move. One may want others to 'catch one's drift' without risking any sanction for it. In Camp's terms, "deep" insinuation is designed to make a fact, desire, or commitment manifest, and actively guides communication and action going forward, while still remaining unacknowledgable" (Camp, 2018, p. 58).

The modern account of insinuation thus sees insinuation as a conversational move that essentially has a rhetorical advantage: it mitigates communicative risk. And while a speaker may well commit both to the truth of the content of the insinuation and to the communicative intention of wanting their addressee to recognise that the insinuation is  $R$ -intended, this still does not make the speaker conversationally liable for introducing the content into the conversational record.<sup>6</sup> This is because successful insinuations are intrinsically plausibly deniable. The modern account of insinuation thus stands in sharp contradiction with the classical account because it seems to allow for the possibility that insinuation is committing. I contend that this discrepancy needs to be further examined, and that for this we need a more fine-grained account of plausible deniability and of its relationship with commitment.

#### 4. Insinuation, commitment, and plausible deniability

The main difference between the classical and the modern account of insinuation concerns the communicative status of insinuation – specifically the issue of whether it is  $R$ -intended or not. The former construes it as a non-overt, and thus non-committing, phenomenon, while the latter sees it as likely to commit the speaker. In this section I argue that a closer look at types of commitment and at their relationship with plausible deniability would lend support to the modern account.

##### 4.1. Commitment and commitment attribution

Linguistic and philosophy of language scholarship has amply discussed how the notion of commitment is likely to cover a range of different things (see e.g., Boulat, 2016; De Brabanter and Dendale, 2008; Morency et al., 2008 for an overview), from truth in propositional contents to responsibility for the communication of intentions and illocutionary forces. Such a variety in the nature of commitment is evident in speech act theory, where, for instance, assertions typically commit the speaker to the truth of the content asserted (see Marsili, 2020 for a discussion), promises typically commit the speaker to engaging in a course of action related to the content of the promise (Searle, 1969), requests typically commit speakers to wanting something done (Searle, 1969), etc. In other words, verbal utterances are likely to carry a host of different types of commitments. Now, crucially, all these commitments are related to *speaker meaning*. In fact, the term *meaning* itself, because it includes a semantic component of intentionality that is at the core of communicative exchanges, bears an important relationship with commitment.

The idea is the following: if, like Grice, we take communication to refer to successful exchanges of meaning between interlocutors, it follows that communication is successful when the speaker's meaning has successfully been identified by the addressee. In such cases, the addressee considers that what they understood corresponds (i.e., is highly similar in content) to what the speaker meant. Put differently, in successful communication, an addressee rightly ends up considering that the speaker has meant precisely what they have understood. This in turn can be taken to mean that understanding speaker meaning comes with an attribution of commitment on behalf of addressees (Morency et al., 2008; Oswald, 2016). This is important because this characterisation, while obviously applying to overt communication, may also cover more problematic cases where the addressee does not have a guarantee that the content they inferred was  $R$ -intended by the speaker.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See also Haugh's (2013) notion of accountability, which covers similar ground.

<sup>7</sup> We will see further along that impressions of bad faith, upon a speaker's attempt to deny an insinuation, are indications that addressees do attribute commitments to speakers even though they cannot rely on any conversational warrant for them.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to distinguish two types of speaker commitment: epistemic and communicative commitment. Epistemic commitment refers to the speaker's attitude towards the truth of a content P. Through assertions, speakers typically express their epistemic commitment to the truth of the propositional content of the assertion. In insinuation, the speaker's epistemic commitment targets the speaker's belief that the negative ascription conveyed is true. Communicative commitment relates to the overt nature of communicative intentions and denotes the speaker's intention to have their R-intention recognised. In standard cases of overt communication, thus, an utterance realising an assertion will trigger processes of epistemic and communicative commitment *attribution* on behalf of the addressee. Coming back to example (1), assuming that (1) takes place in a one-to-one context in which Nina is the only addressee, she will attribute Laszlo the epistemic commitment of believing that her cake was delicious and the communicative commitment of wanting her to recognise that he meant her to recognise that he believes her cake was delicious. Note that a speaker's communicative commitment is not necessarily correlated with their actual epistemic commitment, in the sense that wanting someone to recognise one of our R-intentions does not automatically imply that we are *privately* committed to the truth of the propositional content associated to that intention – we could still privately not be committed to that truth, while behaving conversationally like we are. This is what typically happens in cases of lying, as if, for example, Laszlo hated Nina's cake but wanted to compliment her anyway by uttering (1).

If we now return to insinuation, it seems that the classical account would rule out the possibility of attributing any communicative commitment to an insinuating speaker, by virtue of insinuation's lack of communicative status. The modern account, on the other hand, would hold that addressees do attribute a communicative commitment to an insinuating speaker. In what follows, I argue that one way of assessing these opposing claims is to mobilise the notion of commitment, as just discussed, to look at cases in which a speaker attempts to deny an insinuation.

#### 4.2. What can we deny?

Our discussion of deniability has not so far distinguished what happens at the level of communicative intentions from what happens at the level of propositional contents. More precisely, I contend, following Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz's proposal (2021), that an account of conversational denial must distinguish *cancelling* from *disavowing*. In a nutshell, “[t]o cancel an implicature is to deny its content; to disavow it is to deny having intended to communicate it” (Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz, 2021, p. 71). This view draws on the notions of implicature cancellability (Grice, 1989)<sup>8</sup> and of disavowing (Fricker, 2012). Both of these phenomena, in turn, qualify as types of denial.

Accordingly, cancellation is used to deny one's belief in the truth of a propositional content that was inferred from one's utterance. Going back to example (1), Laszlo may attempt to deny his belief in the truth of (2) ('Winston is a bad cook') after being challenged by Winston, by replying (4):

(4) I don't believe you're a bad cook, Winston.

In this case, Laszlo is cancelling an implicature that Winston drew based on (1) and the context, thereby denying his *epistemic commitment* to (2). However, the same example can be used to illustrate that Laszlo could attempt to reply to the challenge by disavowing the fact that he meant (2) to go through in the first place, for instance by uttering (5).

(5) I did not mean to imply that you are a bad cook, Winston.

In this case, deniability amounts to clarifying that Laszlo did not have the intention to communicate (2). Note that, in principle, one can disavow without cancelling: Laszlo can deny having meant to imply that Winston is a bad cook, and still genuinely believe that he is. All the same, one can cancel without disavowing: Laszlo can deny that he believes that Winston is a bad cook and still mean to imply that he is. What this shows, thus, is that deniability covers both epistemic and communicative matters. In line with the discussion in the previous sub-section, I will consider that cancellability is used to deny a speaker's epistemic commitments ('I do not believe that P'), and that disavowing is used to deny communicative commitments ('I did not mean to communicate that P').

#### 4.3. Degrees of plausible deniability

In a recent paper, Mazzarella (2021) offers a relevance-theoretic account of plausible deniability which links the plausibility of implicit meaning denial to the relevance of the alternative context summoned by the denial.<sup>9</sup> She convincingly shows

<sup>8</sup> Note that Grice's discussion of cancelling conflates these two types of denial: “a putative conversational implicature that p is explicitly cancelable if, to the form of words the utterance of which putatively implicates that p, it is admissible to add *but not p*, or *I do not mean to imply that p*” (Grice, 1989, p. 44). Saying 'not p' amounts to denying one's belief that p, while saying 'I do not mean to imply that p' amounts to denying one's intention to communicate p. I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the potential confusion. Here I adopt the view that denial can be subdivided into cancellation and disavowal.

<sup>9</sup> I am here concerned with the constraints that make denial of implicit meaning possible, with a focus on insinuation, but it must be noted that speakers may attempt to deny many more types of meaning – even literal meaning. For a detailed and rich discussion of commitment deniability of different types of pragmatic meaning, see Boogaart et al. (2021).

that considerations of cognitive utility (construed in terms of cognitive costs and cognitive effects, in line with relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995)) are crucial to determine whether a denial of implicit meaning is *plausible* rather than merely *possible*. With the understanding that the account presented here is in line with Mazzarella's, I will now consider two examples of insinuation to try to illustrate the different constraints bearing on the plausibility of insinuation denial. Example (6) can be taken to be the canonical example of insinuation, given that it is discussed by various authors (Bell, 1997; Fraser, 2001; Gibbs, 1999; Macagno, 2012; Walton, 1996).

- (6) Captain L. had a first mate who was at times addicted to the use of strong drink, and occasionally, as the slang saying has it, "got full". The ship was lying in a port in China, and the mate had been on shore and had there indulged rather freely in some of the vile compounds common in Chinese ports. He came on board, "drunk as a lord", and thought he had a mortgage on the whole world. The captain, who rarely ever touched liquors himself, was greatly disturbed by the disgraceful conduct of his officer, particularly as the crew had all observed his condition. One of the duties of the first officer is to write up the "log" each day, but as that worthy was not able to do it, the captain made the proper entry, but added: "The mate drunk all day". The ship left port the next day and the mate got "sobered off". He attended to his writing at the proper time, but was appalled when he saw what the captain had done. He went on deck, and soon after the following colloquy took place:  
 "Cap'n, why did you write in the log yesterday that I was drunk all day?"  
 "It was true, wasn't it?"  
 "Well, 'lowing 't was, it was a bad thing to say about me."  
 "It was true, wasn't it?"  
 "Yes, but what will the owners say if they see it? 'T will hurt me with them".  
 But the mate could get nothing more from the captain than, "It was true, wasn't it?"  
 The next day, when the captain was examining the book, he found at the bottom of the mate's entry of observation, course, winds, and tides: "The captain was sober all day". He went on deck in high dudgeon, met the mate – who saw that a storm was brewing – and then another dialogue took place as follows:  
 "What did you mean, you rascal, by writing in the log that I was 'sober all day', yesterday?"  
 "It was true, wasn't it, Cap'n?"  
 "You know I never drink liquors, and am always sober, and of course it was true."  
 The captain, upon second thought, realized that the whole thing was a huge joke, and his cooler judgment reasserting itself, he desisted from further questioning of the mate (Trow, 1905, pp. 14–16).<sup>10</sup>

The insinuation, here made explicit by the narrator reporting this story, is that the captain is drunk most of the time. Classical accounts highlight that the first mate can deny both his epistemic commitment (which he does) and, of course, his communicative commitment (which is not given in the first place, as insinuation, under the classical account, is non-overt), but usually refrain from assessing whether the denial is plausible. And in this case, even if Bell suggests a potential line of denial as he mentions that the first mate could reply something like (7),

- (7) I meant that you were sober as opposed to the rest of the crew (see Bell, 1997, p. 50),

the denial is hardly plausible, given the context at hand and what we know about the first mate's drinking habits. Another possible line of denial could be for the first mate to argue something like (8):

- (8) I meant that you were sober all day, as opposed to the night, during which you are allowed to drink some alcohol, as you are off duty.

Yet, again, this interpretation fails to be plausible, because no available contextual information makes it relevant. Thus, while this example is routinely used to illustrate insinuation, I argue that this is not a successful case of insinuation, because the context at hand, in which the first mate's entry must be interpreted, does not make the alternative meaning more plausible than the implicit one. In other words, (6) is an example in which the speaker's attempt to deny the insinuation is not plausible, and in which the first mate's bad faith is quite blatant (as understood by the captain, who gives up in the end).

The next example, (9), is more representative of what a successful insinuation could look like, and is taken from the TV show *Peaky Blinders*, which is about a family gang operating in Birmingham in the 1920s. In this scene, Chester Campbell, an Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary who has been dispatched by Churchill to deal with the Peaky Blinders gang and its purported gun dealings with the IRA, complains to Sergeant Moss that a female spy working undercover at the Black Swan pub has achieved more in the investigation than the police officers under Moss' command. To fully grasp the implicit import of (9), it is important to know that in this episode, before this scene, we learn that while Moss and his men have served their country by fighting in France during WWI, Campbell has not.

- (9) Campbell: One female operative has proved more useful than any of you great lumps of men.  
 Moss: We are regular police officers, sir. Not spies. We can only act when a crime has been committed. Perhaps I should send some men down to The Black Swan to ask questions.

<sup>10</sup> An anonymous reviewer highlights, with reason, that this example has also been discussed as an example of false implicature or indirect lie. While I will not explore the connection between insinuation and deception for reasons of space, I refer the reader to Bertuccelli Papi (2014), who discusses the deceptive and manipulative features of insinuation.

Campbell: And scare them all into hiding? Not the best of tactics, Sergeant.

Moss: My tactics come from my experiences in France. Most of my great lumps of men served in France too, Sir.

Campbell: I serve my country every day. That will be all, Sergeant.<sup>11</sup>

Moss' last comment insinuates a negative ascription akin to (10) and could be said to be part of Moss' attempt to defend his men along the lines of (11):

(10) Campbell is a coward.

(11) Since Moss' men have fought the war, they can be considered as brave patriots. Campbell did not, and as such he can be considered to be a coward, so he is not in a legitimate position to criticise them.

(10), which Campbell manages to draw, as evidenced by his response (“I serve my country every day”), is drawn from the mention of the participation of Moss' men in the war, combined with an implicit appeal to the contextual assumption that Campbell has not fought WWI. In other words, the contrast is what sparks the inferential process that leads to interpreting the negative ascription. Now, if we imagine how Moss might attempt to deny the insinuation if directly challenged, plausible deniability seems much more within his reach than it was for the 1st mate in example (6): after all, the situation is one in which Campbell has harshly criticised Moss' men, and any piece of information that informationally feeds a defence is accordingly likely to be found contextually relevant. In particular, claiming that they fought WWI, as Moss does, is likely to convey that these men are good patriots, and that in itself could be put forward as a reason not to incriminate or blame them beyond reason for underperforming, compared to Campbell's female spy. In other words, (12) below could very well constitute a plausible denial of both Moss' epistemic and communicative commitments related to (10), in light of a potential challenge:

(12) Of course, I don't think you are a coward; I meant that you should go easy on my men, seeing as they are good patriots.

By cancelling the implicature, Moss would simultaneously disavow his communicative commitment to (10), but in this case, I would argue that his chances of succeeding are higher, as the alternative meaning of (10), made explicit in the denial (12), is also contextually relevant. In other words, (9) can plausibly be interpreted as an example in which an addressee has misunderstood a speaker, rather than as an example in which a speaker has implicitly disparaged his addressee. Because of plausible deniability, in turn, (9) can be construed as a rhetorically successful insinuation. I take the comparison of these two examples to illustrate very relevant features about insinuation and its relationship with deniability, which I discuss in the next section.

## 5. Towards a relevance-theoretic account of insinuation

The comparison between examples (6) and (9) yields several relevant observations. First, it shows that insinuation conveys at least two simultaneous (explicit or implicit) meanings – Bell's pseudo-overt and non-overt meanings (Bell, 1997, p. 47), which I here respectively call the alternative meaning and the insinuated meaning. This is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for successful insinuation: I have argued that the implausibility of the first mate's denial in (6) illustrates this. Second, the comparison shows that insinuations can be rhetorically successful, and that this property follows from how plausible their denial is. Some insinuations are thus more deniable than others (this is in line with Bell, 1997 and Mazzarella, 2021). Third, the plausibility of insinuation denial is constrained by considerations of relevance. Specifically, what drives the plausibility of denial, and thus whether the insinuation is rhetorically successful, is the extent to which the alternative meaning is found to be contextually relevant, as seen in the analysis of examples (6) and (9). Thus:

- if the interpretative context contains assumptions that make the alternative meaning as relevant as (or even more relevant than) the insinuated meaning, then the insinuated meaning is more likely to be plausibly denied, and the insinuation is more likely to be rhetorically successful
- if, on the other hand, the interpretative context contains assumptions that make the insinuated meaning more relevant than the alternative meaning, then the insinuated meaning is less likely to be plausibly denied, and the insinuation is less likely to be rhetorically successful

To this, we should add that the success of insinuation increases when the speaker does not supply any hints that would decrease the contextual relevance of the insinuated content. Additionally, rhetorical successfulness here has to do with the idea that plausibly deniable insinuations allow the speaker to reasonably claim that they meant something else, without being accused of denying in bad faith.

Now, in terms of commitment, these two constraints translate into the following claims:

- the more we consider that the speaker is epistemically/communicatively committed to an assumption, the less we are likely to perceive its denial as plausible

<sup>11</sup> *Peaky Blinders*, season 01 episode 03.

- the less we consider that the speaker is epistemically/communicatively committed to an assumption, the more we are likely to perceive its denial as plausible

From a pragmatic perspective, the main mechanism behind insinuation, lies in the speaker's ability to manage their addressee's processes of commitment attribution. These, in turn, are driven by considerations of relevance. This claim can be supported in different ways.

The account presented above draws on the relevance-theoretic account of communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012b), which provides the necessary cognitive pragmatic framework to explain the success of insinuation in terms of considerations of relevance. Relevance theory postulates two general cognitive principles assumed to regulate information-processing. According to the *cognitive principle of relevance*, which applies to cognitive activity at large, “[h]uman cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 260). Under this view, our information-processing mechanisms, whatever their scope and function, are guided by considerations of relevance and follow a cost-effective procedure in processing stimuli: the relevance of stimuli is accordingly defined as an optimal balance between the amount of effort it takes our cognitive system to process them (cognitive effort) and the effects said processing achieves in the individual's cognitive environment (cognitive effect). In communicative practices, this principle translates into a *communicative principle of relevance*, according to which “[e]very act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). The relevance-theoretic account of communication holds, as a consequence, that the search for relevance regulates our communicative encounters. Speakers are taken to be naturally driven to produce relevant stimuli (the ones that contextually satisfy the effort-effect ratio referred to above), and addressees are taken to be naturally geared towards looking for relevant stimuli thus defined.

Crucially, these are not construed as principles that communicators *ought* to observe in order to communicate successfully (as Grice would have it with the cooperative principle), but as *biological facts* about human nature. Given the above, and recalling our earlier discussion of commitment, it follows that the assumptions that best satisfy the effort-effect ratio will be the ones that the addressees will take speakers to have communicated: namely, these are also the ones that the addressees will take the speaker to be committed to. Thus, if the insinuated content is recognised as being the most contextually relevant one (among other possible interpretations), then the addressee is licensed to consider that the speaker is committed to it, thereby making deniability less plausible. This is why, in example (6), I surmise that the insinuation is unsuccessful: the implicit meaning is, given the context of the example, clearly more relevant than any of the two alternative meanings identified in either (7) or (8). It is not, incidentally, difficult to see how this would be different if somewhere in the context the assumption that the first mate has an ongoing conflict with the rest of the crew was accessible: in such a scenario, the relevance of (7) would dramatically increase, while the insinuation initially drawn in (6) about the captain's drinking behaviour would bear practically no relevance at all. A relevance-theoretic account of insinuation just treats it as any other communicative phenomenon and the interpretation of insinuation is then simply driven by considerations of relevance.

Anecdotal evidence about how we tend to react to speakers who have attempted to deny their epistemic and communicative commitments can serve to support the relevance of the account defended here. In her discussion of disavowing, Fricker notes that “[i]nsinuations and hints are deniable (albeit maybe only in bad faith)” (2012, p. 68) and that “[d]isavowing replies (...) are often made in bad faith” (Fricker, 2012, p. 85). While she sides with the classical account in considering that insinuation is not committing, Fricker's observations on bad faith remain valid: implausible insinuation denials routinely trigger an ascription of bad faith to the speaker. When the addressee's comprehension mechanisms yielded the insinuated content as the most relevant one – or at least as more relevant than the alternative (socially innocuous) meaning –, the addressee will presumably indeed experience some form of cognitive dissonance about the correct intended interpretation: on the one hand, they are told that their interpretation is inaccurate, and on the other their own inferential mechanisms tell them that they are right. Because addressees are unlikely to call into question the results of their own inferential mechanisms (Sperber et al., 1995), they could also be led to postulate that the speaker's denial of the insinuated content is formulated in bad faith. This feeling could be reinforced in case the alternative contextual reconstruction put forward by the speaker to promote the alternative meaning as the one corresponding to the original speaker's intention is not plausible enough to warrant an optimal balance between effort and effect (as per Mazzarella, 2021). Incidentally, impressions of bad faith highlight the prominent role of interpretative contexts in the success of insinuation, as the absence or presence of contextual assumptions determines the relevance of an interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

Recent experimental evidence on promises would tend to support the view presented here. In their study, Bonalumi et al. (2019) found that more than the explicit vs. implicit nature of a promise, it is the promise's contextual relevance that drives processes of commitment attribution. Their results “suggest that audiences take speakers to be committed to ‘what is meant’ rather than ‘what is said’” (Bonalumi et al., 2019, p. 382). Addressees are therefore likely to attribute commitment to explicit and implicit contents indifferently; instead, what drives their attribution is the contextual relevance of the content. This finding would also support the idea that deniability is felt to be less plausible when the speaker attempts to deny contents which are perceived as being highly contextually relevant. Crucially, these contents might also include assumptions about the speaker's (un)cooperative intentions or (in)sincerity in denying the insinuated content.

<sup>12</sup> See the earlier discussion, in 4.3, of the relevance of alternative meanings for example (6).

Finally, a closer cognitive pragmatic analysis of example (9) can illustrate how a relevance-theoretic account of insinuation may justify that a speaker can indeed commit to an insinuated content. The goal of such an analysis would be to show that the interpretation proposed in (12), which denies the insinuated content, is contextually less relevant than (10) – in terms of processing effort and/or cognitive effect. Let us first observe that in (9), Moss refers, somewhat oddly, to his own men by quoting Campbell *verbatim*: when he says that his “great lumps of men” got their tactics from wartime, he is thus merely echoing, rather than using, Campbell's attack, as he cannot be taken to endorse the descriptive content (they are his men, and it is clear in the episode that Moss stands up for them). Thus, Moss conveys a dissociative attitude towards Campbell's description: he does obviously not commit to the description, which leaves it to the interpreter to figure out in what way the mention is supposed to be relevant. I hypothesise that in this case, Moss is using irony (Wilson and Sperber, 2012a) and the recognition of his dissociative attitude is subsequently used as a trigger to expect a defence of his men in what follows. Given the contextual accessibility, and thus salience, in what preceded the scene, of the assumption that Campbell did not fight WWI, such a defence can easily be construed as taking the shape of a counter-attack. Knowing that Campbell did not fight the war and stating that Moss' men did is an ideal starting point to insinuate that Campbell is a coward. Crucially, it is the presence of that contextual assumption that tips the scale in favour of attributing Moss an epistemic commitment to the insinuated content. And because this content is contextually relevant, it also prompts us to attribute Moss a communicative commitment to (9). By comparison, while (12) does bear contextual relevance, it is missing a clear link with the salient contextual assumption concerning Campbell's absence on the WWI front – which (9) conveniently has. An analysis conducted along these lines would therefore suggest that Moss commits to the insinuated content.

## 6. Conclusion: insinuation is committing, but is it an implicature after all?

In this paper I have discussed both the classical account and the modern account of insinuation, which diverge on the communicative nature of this phenomenon: while the classical account considers insinuation not to be committing, the modern account affords this possibility. Based on theoretical and empirical work, and through a detailed discussion of the intricate relationship between insinuation, commitment, and plausible deniability, I presented an account compatible with the modern take on insinuation that grants the possibility that insinuation, in the end, is committing – that is, that addressees are perfectly legitimate in holding the speaker epistemically and communicatively committed to an insinuated content, despite insinuation being theoretically plausibly deniable. The account leading to this conclusion is hosted within a relevance-theoretic framework and treats insinuation like any other communicative phenomenon whose contextual relevance is worked out inferentially. In particular, I have tried to show that contextual relevance is inversely proportional to plausible deniability: the more the contextual relevance of a given insinuation, the smaller its space of plausible deniability. In line with the theoretical choices made throughout this paper, this is a quite unsurprising conclusion: just like for any other type of communicative meaning, high contextual relevance leads to strong commitment attribution and is thus likely to result in low plausible deniability.

Under these conditions, one question remains: given their proximity, wouldn't insinuation, after all, merely be a type of (derogatory) implicature? We have reviewed some arguments above (in 2.2), which show that the overlap between the two notions is unclear, and thus that the two notions are not co-extensive (see also Bell, 1997, pp. 46–47; and Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz, 2021, pp. 69–72). Accordingly, and following the above discussion (Section 5), there might be room to outline an even more precise definition of insinuation, based on the plausibility of its denial, and which would set it apart from implicature. Let us go back to my opening example, in which the 8th Earl of Arran both stated that there aren't any badgers in the House of Lords and implicitly conveyed that there are many gay men in the House of Lords. This cannot count as a 'good' example of insinuation, or as a rhetorically successful one, given the lack of a contextually plausible alternative meaning: it seems indeed difficult to identify any other proposition that the Earl of Arran could have plausibly and relevantly meant in that context (the literal meaning, while true, is itself irrelevant to the question of explaining his failure in the promotion of badger rights - as there simply *cannot* be any badgers in the House of Lords). Thus, the Earl of Arran's implicit meaning would qualify as implicature, not as insinuation. Similarly, in the context of example (6), as there does not seem to be any other contextually relevant plausible interpretation, the implicit meaning conveyed by the 1st mate (i.e., 'the captain is usually drunk') would qualify as an implicature, not as an insinuation. In example (9), however, the story is different, in so far as Moss still has a contextually plausible alternative meaning (12) that he can fall back on. Under the definition proposed here, his implicit meaning does qualify as insinuation, as it can be plausibly denied. The emerging picture consequently suggests that implicatures and insinuations are both committing and deniable, with the crucial difference that insinuations are *plausibly* deniable, while implicatures are not. In other words, I venture that insinuations are weaker than implicatures on the scale of inference strength, owing to their higher plausible deniability.<sup>13</sup> The advantage of this characterisation is that it is in line with Domínguez Armas and Soria Ruiz's (2021) account (see 2.2 above)

<sup>13</sup> For reasons of space, I must leave the follow-up question of whether insinuations are a special type of weak implicatures (in the sense of Sperber and Wilson, 1995) for another occasion.

and that it simultaneously does justice to the consensual idea that insinuation is mostly used for its main rhetorical appeal, namely plausible deniability.<sup>14</sup>

Future directions of research abound, and while the existing pragmatic literature on insinuation is rather theoretical, many of its observations lend themselves to experimental testing. One example would be the staining effect noted by both Bell and Fraser, which is even said to remain after the content of the insinuation has been publicly denied. Yet, no empirical evidence, as far as I know, has been offered to support this claim. Judging by Donald Trump's propensity to use insinuation during the 2016 presidential campaign,<sup>15</sup> and by the fact that this did not seem to hurt his chances of getting elected, it would seem that either plausible deniability works, or that insinuation is not as reputationally costly as claimed when it is exposed.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this remains to be determined empirically. What is encouraging, though, is that the kind of account outlined here is compatible with the range of experimental pragmatic research available nowadays, and that the issues expounded in what precedes are in principle likely to be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed.<sup>17</sup>

## Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>14</sup> Let us also note that under this account, the problem is not as much one of commitment (both implicatures and insinuations are committing) as one of plausible deniability. Thus, Mazzarella's convincing assumption that commitment attribution processes take place in both weak and strong communication (Mazzarella, 2021) is preserved.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.npr.org/2016/03/29/472232836/donald-trump-s-word-choices-parsed-by-fans-and-critics?t=1635275772684>. Last accessed 26.10.2021.

<sup>16</sup> Or, even, that reputation is not a decisive factor in an election, as noted by an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>17</sup> The author's research team is currently preparing experimental designs meant to test some of the assumptions made in this paper regarding the use of insinuation in *ad hominem* arguments.

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