

The Dog-whistle/Wolf-cry Dialectic: Political Divergence via Speech-Act Attribution

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WHY DOES BARK BITE?

The political speech scenario:

Someone in Dogetown files a police report that a dog-bite has been committed. A public news anchor Alpha on a popular but partisan-leaning media platform Hound News uses the ambiguous but associative term “pitiful” to refer to a subset of the problems that the canine country is facing. A news anchor for Canine News Network, another partisan leaning media platform, Buddy, hears Alpha’s report, identifies the word as a breedist encoding for “pitbull” and concludes that Alpha, the station, the audience and/or all involved are incorrigible breedists.

An independent political commentator Charlie hears Buddy’s report, identifies the interpretation of “pitbull” from the word “pitiful” as a willful misunderstanding, and concludes that Buddy, her station, her audience and all are incorrigible anti-breedists. Another political commentator Duke hears Charlie’s report, identifies Charlie’s rejection of Buddy’s interpretation as itself sympathy for Alpha’s interpretation, which is construed then as expressing sympathy for a breedist position. Political disagreement bristles.

In this scenario, all too common in the contemporary media environment, we observe a catastrophe of political speech seeming to emerge from a relatively unremarkable set of initial circumstances. Specifically, we observe two covert speech-acts interacting. First, we observe apparent dog-whistling (Morin 1988, quoted in Safire 2008: 190):

Dog-whistling: the speech-act of sending of a controversial hidden message imbedded in an uncontroversial public message.

In the Dogetown scenario we can observe candidates for dog-whistling in Alpha and Charlie's speech-acts. Second, we also observe apparent wolf-crying (Aesop):

Wolf-crying: the speech-act of claiming a danger exists when danger either does not really exist or cannot be proven.

In the Dogetown scenario we can observe candidates for wolf-crying in Buddy and Duke's speech-acts.

Both of these two types of speech-acts, dog-whistling and wolf-crying alike, are acts of political speech in that they have particular effects in the political environment and constitute a political discourse. Dog-whistling has been recently studied as a form of political speech (Witten, 2014; Saul, 2018; Vidal, 2021; Quaranto, 2022). Wolf-crying has an older conceptual history, studied in biology and psychology, though equally applicable as a form of political speech (Wheeler, 2019; Breznitz, 2013).

Dog-whistling and wolf-crying are also both speech-acts, forms of speech that are also acts, in the sense that they have some kind of speaker's indirectly implied (illocutionary) force and/or some added (perlocutionary) force in its interaction with the world, outside of the speaker's directly stated (locutionary) meaning (Austin, 1962). To use the classic example, the sentence "I promise" is a speech-act in that it has an indirect implied effect of the sentence itself enacting a promise, and the perlocutionary effect of instilling an expectation in the receiver of said promise, in addition to the direct literal meaning of the words "I" and "promise."

In addition, associated with these two to first-order speech-acts, we also observe the second-order speech-act of attribution:

Speech-Act Attribution: the speech-act of regarding another speech-act as a speech-act.

In the Dogetown scenario, every speech-actor (perhaps with the exception of Alpha) has committed the speech-act of speech-act attribution; they are attributing a speech-act to another member of the community.

Speech-act attribution has two properties: 1) pointing at another speech-act

and 2) being speech-act itself. This dual role of speech-act attribution will be pivotal in the following analysis.

First, the act of attributing has the property of pointing to other acts. Attribution can be directed towards simple actions. One can observe that the sheep are eaten and attribute the action to a wolf as a wolf-attack. Attribution can also be directed towards simple utterances. One might hear a howl and attribute that howl to a wolf as a wolf-howl. Attribution can also be directed towards complex utterances. One might hear a someone cry “wolf” and attribute that cry to a crier as a wolf-cry. Thus, in general, one might perform the act of attributing another party with a speech- act.

Second, the act of attribution itself is also worth considering as a second-order speech-act, a speech-act about other speech-acts, with its own unique added (perlocutionary) effects. Attributions of speech-acts are a common part of political discourse. It seems to be what the various speech-actors of Dogetown are doing in our example, and attributing speech-acts is also what *we* are doing in our present analysis of speech-acts. We are analyzing Dogetown and attributing speech-acts to its inhabitants. This higher-order speech-act of attribution is also a subclass of Bateson and Tannen have referred to as meta-communicating: communication that involves identifying and engaging not the first-order explicit literal (locutionary) meaning of an utterance but the first-order implicit (illocutionary) effects and/or the added (perlocutionary) effects (Bateson, 1972; Tannen, 1987).

Descriptively, this process of attribution is not particularly controversial, however, if such attributions are truly reasonable, then why does the result, as illustrated by the Dogetown scenario (and the real-world political climate), seem like such a problem? We will attempt to explain this problem’s development from the underlying epistemic situation, the blind-spots and truth-seeking behaviors of the participants in a given speech-act community; to show how attributions themselves contribute to a reciprocity of dog-whistling/wolf-crying; and how this leads to a vicious cycle and stable (albeit unhappy) social equilibrium.

MISDIRECTING CRIES AND WHISTLES

The problem begins with the observation that dog-whistling and wolf-crying as speech-acts seem to be by definition indirect and covert speech acts (Searle, 1979; Saul, 2018).

The dog-whistle/wolf-cry is always a speech-act occurring between one private party (the whistler/crier) and another private party/subject (the dog/wolf) but heard by a third party, the public (the non-dogs/non-wolves). The dog-whistling speech-act consists of the intention of the whistler to send a private message and the interpretation of the whistled-to in receiving a private message. The wolf-crying speech-act itself consists of the intention of the crier to send a public message to the cried-to about a publicly unverified cried-about. However,

one of the conditions of satisfaction of the dog-whistle/wolf-cry speech-act is the encoding of the speech such that the greater public community only knows about the public message and not the private intent. Thus, dog-whistling/wolf-crying necessarily has an misdirecting (“covert perlocutionary”) effect on the audience: the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning of the dog-whistle/wolf-cry is not necessarily identical to the privately implied (illocutionary) meaning, as in a direct speech-act; rather, the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning is different from the privately implied (illocutionary) meaning, an indirect speech-act; and indeed, in the dog-whistle/wolf-cry case, it actually seems that the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning is *necessarily* different from the privately implied (illocutionary) meaning, because the public and private messages are necessarily different, something we might dub a *misdirecting speech-act*, or which Saul has called “covert perlocutionary acts” (Saul, 2018: 377). As such, dog-whistling/wolf-cry can be either partially constituted by a private implicature (Grice, 1989), or, as some have pointed out, a private contextualized indication of intention (Bertolet, 1994; 2017). In this multi-layered indirectness comes epistemic trouble because the intention and interpretation are by definition private. The problem is that a dog-whistle/wolf-cry is reasonably publicly intercepted, but is not definitively publicly verified or falsified, but by definition are specified as inherently unclear to the wider world through misdirection, the plausible deniability in public of the private being a condition of satisfaction (Fear, 2007). This makes a dog-whistle/wolf-cry subtler than a straightforward deceptive speech-act, because it can reasonably be inferred, but cannot definitively be verified or falsified by the states of affairs in the world but only by the states of affairs inside the other minds producing the speech-act. A dog-whistle/wolf-cry is only auto-verifiable, only verifiable according to its speaker, but also auto-denying, denied according to its speaker. Barring confession or perhaps extensive overdetermination by psychological and sociological data, a dog-whistle/wolf-cry likely remains an unverified and unfalsified speech-act.

TO SEE A WOLF ABOUT A DOG

Because of the misdirection discussed above, attribution of either dog-whistling or wolf-crying is inherently epistemically difficult: these speech-acts are reasonably suspected but not verifiable.

Attributing dog-whistling/wolf-crying presents epistemic difficulty. Dog-whistling/wolf-crying attribution is a speech act that references itself to an instance of dog-whistling/wolf-crying. Thus, any such dog-whistle/wolf-cry attribution situation has three participants: the whistler/crier, who sends the public message to/about the privately observed dog/wolf; the dog/wolf, who was the private receiver/subject of the message; and, the attributer, who receives the public message about the private observation and identifies it as a dog-whistle/wolf-cry

(See Figure 1).

In this, attributing dog-whistling/wolf-crying seems to be inherently epistemically contrarian. Specifically, attributing dog-whistling/wolf-crying always places itself in the epistemic position of having to be able to prove that the dog/wolf, the receiver/subject of the whistler/cry, does or does not exist, against the personal experience of the whistler/crier. In contrast, the dog-whistling/wolf-crying always places itself in the epistemic position of denying false dog-whistling/wolf-crying. Thus, the dog-whistle/wolf-cry attributer cannot appeal to direct evidence because the dog-whistler/wolf-crier by definition does not provide it, only the opposing evidence; the attributer must always appeal to indirect evidence, the presence/absence of apparent dog/wolf. The dog-whistlers/wolf-criers themselves can always appeal to the direct evidence of their own stated observation, and their own internal intention is by definition against confessing to a falsified observation, in order to conceal a false dog-whistle/wolf-cry. A dog-whistle/wolf-cry attributer is always in the epistemically disadvantaged position of seeking evidence of absence against a dog-whistler/wolf-crier who can appeal to an instance of direct (albeit private) evidence and who has an incentive to misdirect. In this epistemic situation, a self-admitted non-observer is claiming to have more authoritative knowledge than the firsthand observers can claim themselves.

Thus, dog-whistler attributers always appear to be wolf-criers. They are in fact “dog-whistler” criers, claiming that a dog-whistler exists, like the wolf-crier is claiming a wolf exists:

Dog-whistle Crying: claiming the danger of dog-whistling exists when the danger either does not really exist or cannot be proven.

And, wolf-cry attributers always appear to be dog-whistling. They are whistling to the “wolf”, telling the community to not worry about the “wolf”, discrediting those who cry about the “wolf”, claiming that the “wolf” is not a real problem, thus enabling a would-be “wolf”, all without being able to prove that the “wolf” does not in fact exist:

Wolf-Whistling: appearing to send a controversial hidden message enabling a problem imbedded in an uncontroversial public doubt about the apparent problem.

A DOG-CRY-DOG WORLD

So, what is the result of this reinforcing attribution pattern? A dialectic of dog-whistle attribution and wolf-cry attribution emerges that involves a perverse attribution, reciprocity, cyclicity, and equilibrium. This is similar to other social

phenomena that proceed via these cyclic steps—like violence cycles (King, 2011) and silence cycles (Neumann, 1977; 1988), perhaps most like those of complementary schismogenesis, the creation of division, described by Bateson (Bateson, 1932).

Observe the pattern with reference to the original scenario about Dogetown. The inciting incident occurs and a police report is filed, which may or may not itself be a wolf-cry. Alpha picks up the story with an infelicitous phrase. Buddy picks up the story with dog-whistle attribution, interpreting Alpha as dog-whistling. Charlie picks up the story with wolf-cry attribution, interpreting Buddy as wolf-crying. Duke picks up the story, again with dog-whistle attribution, interpreting Charlie as dog-whistling. And the cycle continues indefinitely.

As can be observed, the basic unit of interaction is the event when a speech-act of one kind is attributed as a speech-act of another kind. The process continues then because attribution is itself a speech-act, and thus attribution can be applied recursively to itself:

Speech-Act Attribution-Attribution: the speech-act of attributing an attribution of a speech-act as a speech-act.

This is exemplified above, both in dog-whistle attribution and wolf-cry attribution cases of dog-whistle-crying and wolf-whistling. However, the attribution-attributions involved in these cases, can be generalized to a wide range of speech-act attributions of a similar epistemic character.

Next, because of the recursive nature of attribution-attributions, the situation becomes dynamic when speech-act attribution pairs are formed through mutually reciprocal feedback. In each interaction the attributer can become the addressee, such that the two epistemic positions reinforce each other reciprocally.

Multipolar Speech-Act Attribution Reciprocity: Attribution of speech-act A can be attributed as an incidence of Speech-Act B and attribution of speech-act B can be attributed as an incidence of speech-act A, such that A and B reciprocally reinforce and amplify each other.

In this case, specifically, we have a multipolar reciprocity (See Figures 3a-d):

Dog-whistle/Wolf-cry Attribution Reciprocity: Attribution of a dog-whistle can be attributed as an incidence of a wolf-cry and attribution of a wolf-cry can be attributed as an incidence of a dog-whistle, such that dog-whistles and wolf-cries reciprocally reinforce and amplify each other.

This reciprocity when iterated over multiple steps leads to a vicious cycle. Particularly the interlocutors behave as in the type of accusation cycles found

in cumulative extremism patterns (Eatwell, 2006).

Multipolar Speech-Act Attribution Cycle: The speech-act B_n attribution of speech-act A_n is itself open to attribution by speech-act A_{n+1} , such that speech-act attribution repeats in a stepwise iteration.

In this case, specifically (See Figure 4):

Dog-whistle/Wolf-cry Attribution Cycle: The attribution of dog-whistle/wolf-cry is itself open to attribution as wolf-cry/ dog-whistle, such that speech-act attribution repeats in a stepwise iteration.

Presumably, the steps in this vicious cycle can be extended indefinitely, such that the back-and-forth attribution reciprocity becomes an emergent status quo that is presumptive of both dog-whistling and wolf-crying. When this cycle itself becomes the rhetorical norm, stabilizing within a domain of political discourse, a steady-state equilibrium emerges (Nash, 1951). This seems to be a special case of a “belief equilibrium” in that it is composed of reciprocal conflicting beliefs about the states of affairs, including beliefs of other parties’ beliefs (de Córdoba, 1997).

Multipolar Speech-Act Attribution Equilibrium: The speech-act attribution cycle continues such that everyone identifies everyone else as either speech-act A or speech-act B by default.

In this case specifically:

Dog-whistle/Wolf-cry Attribution Equilibrium: The dog-whistle/wolf-cry attribution cycle continues such that everyone identifies everyone else as either a dog-whistle or a wolf-cry by default, in a multipolar steady-state political speech equilibrium.

The existence of such equilibria seems to simply be describable as an emergent epistemic effect in terms of unit interactions of speech-act attributions. We can admit that the whistling/crying status quo seems to describe the condition of much contemporary political speech as the presumption of dog-whistling and presumption of wolf-crying becomes more and more of the norm.

This whole process, what might call the Speech-Act Attribution Dialectic, is generalizable beyond wolf-cries and dog-whistles to the extent that speech act attributions both point to and constitute speech acts. To the extent that all political problems involve a public problem (dog/wolf) of some uncertainty, all political problems can follow this pattern, and the pattern almost certainly exists in domains outside of political speech as well. And, the steps described—Attribution,

Reciprocity, Cyclicity, and Equilibrium—presumably can be generalized and exemplified in more speech-acts as they interact in various speech environments.

BONES TO PICK

Notably, any given speech-act attribution does not necessarily but may result in an unhappy equilibrium for at least three reasons:

Epistemic Standoffs

The first problem for the epistemology of the speech-act attribution equilibrium is that, rather than being a situation of complementary epistemic standpoints, what has developed is a system of irresolvable and conflicting epistemic standpoints:

Epistemic Standoff: a situation involving two mutually epistemically reinforcing and yet mutually epistemically incompatible standpoints.

What makes this an epistemic problem, not necessarily an ethical or rhetorical problem, is that a given covert speech-act, like a dog-whistle or a wolf-cry, may be a reasonable but undefinitive attribution. There remains an epistemic gap, between reasonability and definitiveness, which allows for mutually reasonable but contrarian stances to develop and equilibrate unresolved.

Attribution Saturation

The second problem for the epistemology of the speech-act attribution equilibrium is that, in any such situation, speech-act attributions predominate over fact-of-the-matter attributions, to the point that the facts of the matter no longer matter:

Speech-Act Attribution Saturation: a situation where attributions of speech-acts have come to predominate over attributions of facts of the matter, such that the content of the political discourse contains mostly speech-act attributions, few fact-of-the-matter attributions.

Unfortunately, because the speech-act attributions come to predominate far and away over the fact attributions, this process of attributional equilibration can continue even after the facts regarding the inciting incident itself are forgotten or irrelevant or resolved, as emergence happens in spite of there being no initial fact of the matter.

Self-Defeating Truth-Seeking

The third problem for the epistemology of the speech-act attribution equilibrium is that, in any such situation, the attributer's epistemological virtue is sufficient to describe the problem. The motive of truth seeking itself may be self-defeating to

the extent that it produces speech-act attribution equilibriums that do not actually arrive at truth:

Self-Defeating Truth-Seeking: the truth-seeking of any given epistemic agent may actually not be the best way to find the truth in all cases, and in certain cases may even foreclose certain truths.

The pursuit of truth in certain cases, like unfavorable equilibriums, might actually defeat itself to the extent that this pursuit might counterproductively produce situations unfavorable to truth emerging.

BONES TO GIVE

So, how do we correct for the political impasse that the Dog-whistle/Wolf-cry Equilibrium implies?

Cycle Abortion

One modest proposal: injecting cycle-aborting, rather than cycle-gestating, speech-acts into the discourse in order to cut short the attribution propagation. For instance, in order to shut down epistemically uncertain information cycles before their birth, one solution might simply be to hold all parties to higher standards of verification and falsification for their initial attributions. Unfortunately, as discussed, although parties committed to truth-oriented discourse may be receptive to such standards, the misdirecting speech-act is such that the conditions of satisfaction foreclose simple verification or falsification, such that this may not be a generalizable solution.

Cycle Termination

Another modest proposal: injecting cycle-terminating, rather than cycle-propagating, speech-acts into the discourse in order to dampen the amplification cycle. This requires the adoption of new terms that recognize these attributive pitfalls and terminate them. Examples of such terms might include:

- A term like “wolf-washing” or “sheep-tailoring” (drawing upon Aesop’s fable of the “wolf in sheep’s clothing”) to be used to describe someone who seems callus enough to over-attribute wolf-crying to the point of potentially downplaying reported problems.
- A term like “dog-whispering” or “Dolittling” (drawing upon the quasi-mystical claims made by some allegedly mind-reading animal-trainers) to be used to describe someone who seems presumptive enough to over-attribute dog-whistling to the point of seemingly exaggerating the problems of actual covert speech-acts.

It would be hoped that these speech-act attributions terminate the cycle by delegitimizing other overzealous speech-act attributions thus neutralizing the force of the other speech-acts at play, though it is also plausible that these labels, themselves speech-act attributions, would themselves contribute to the cycle.

Serious Self-Doubt

Regardless, to those who truly want to solve the problem, it seems that it surely requires the painful acknowledgement that our speech-act attributions themselves can cause (and constitute) the problem:

- If we attribute dog-whistling, it is likely that we appear to be wolf-criers.
- If we attribute wolf-crying, it is likely that we appear to be dog-whistlers.

This leads to a somewhat tragic view of the situation: if we are attributing dog-whistling and wolf-crying, our very attempts at virtuous attributions may be the very thing contributing to the vicious cycle that results in an unhappy equilibrium. Hopefully, recognition of the mechanism of the vicious cycle of political speech-act attribution can help its alleviation, not just contribute more speech-act attributions to the problem.

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FIGURES

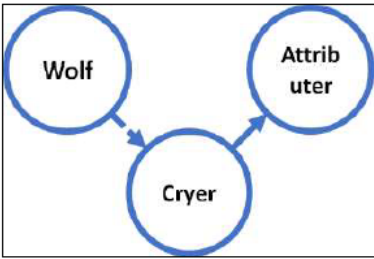


Fig. 1: Wolf-Cry Speech-Act

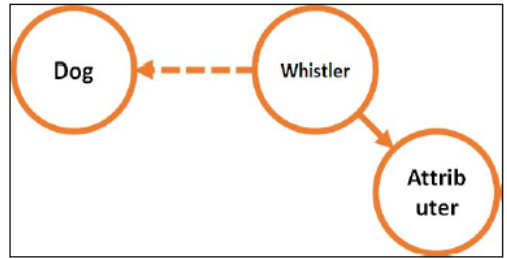


Fig. 2: Dog-Whistle Speech-Act

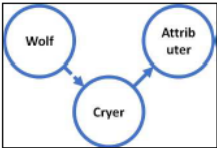


Fig. 3a: Whistle/Cry Dialectic (Step A)

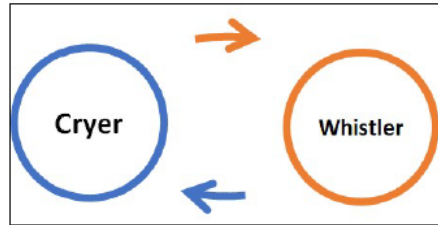


Fig. 4: Dog-Whistle/Wolf-Cry Attribution Cycle

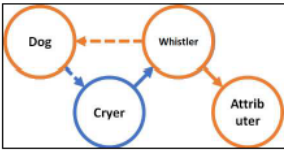


Fig. 3b: Attribution Dialectic (Step B)

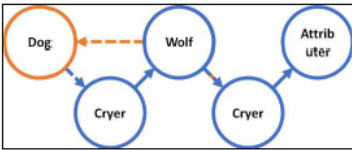


Fig. 3c: Attribution Dialectic (Step C)

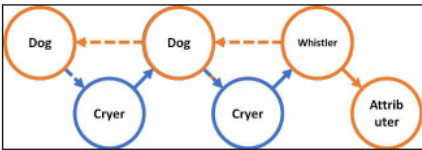


Fig. 3d: Attribution Dialectic (Step D)

Table 1: Speech-Act Attribution Dialectic Steps

STEP	SPEECH-ACT
A	<u>Attributer A says:</u> There is a Wolf A There is a Cryer A
B	<u>Attributer B says:</u> Wolf A is Dog B Attributer A is Whistler B
C	<u>Attributer C says:</u> Whistler B is Wolf C Attributer B is Cryer C
D	<u>Attributer D says:</u> Wolf C is Dog D Attributer C is Whistler D
ETC.	Ad infinitum...

