



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Conceptual Competence Injustice and Relevance Theory, a Reply to Derek Anderson

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Cruz, Manuel Padilla. "Conceptual Competence Injustice and Relevance Theory, A Reply to Derek Anderson." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6, no. 12 (2017): 39-50.

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Derek Anderson (2017a) has recently differentiated *conceptual competence injustice* and characterised it as the wrong done when, on the grounds of the vocabulary used in interaction, a person is believed not to have a sophisticated or rich conceptual repertoire. His most interesting, insightful and illuminating work induced me to propose incorporating this notion to the field of linguistic pragmatics as a way of conceptualising an undesired and unexpected perlocutionary effect: attribution of lower level of communicative or linguistic competence. These may be drawn from a perception of seemingly poor performance stemming from lack of the words necessary to refer to specific elements of reality or misuse of the adequate ones (Padilla Cruz 2017a).

Relying on the cognitive pragmatic framework of *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004), I also argued that such perlocutionary effect would be an unfortunate by-product of the constant tendency to search for the *optimal relevance* of intentional stimuli like single utterances or longer stretches of discourse. More specifically, while aiming for maximum cognitive gain in exchange for a reasonable amount of cognitive effort, the human mind may activate or access assumptions about a language user's linguistic or communicative performance, and feed them as *implicated premises* into inferential computations.

Although those assumptions might not really have been intended by the language user, they are made *manifest* by her¹ behaviour and may be exploited in inference, even if at the hearer's sole responsibility and risk. Those assumptions are *weak implicated premises* and their interaction with other mentally stored information yields *weakly implicated conclusions* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004). Since their content pertains to the speaker's behaviour, they are *behavioural implicatures* (Jary 2013); since they negatively impact on an individual's reputation as a language user, they turn out to be *detrimental implicatures* (Jary 1998).

My proposal about the benefits of the notion of conceptual competence injustice to linguistic pragmatics was immediately replied by Anderson (2017b). He considers that the intention underlying my comment on his work was “[...] to model conceptual competence injustice within relevance theory” and points out that my proposal “[...] must be tempered with the proper understanding of that phenomenon as a *structural* injustice” (Anderson 2017b: 36; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, he also claims that relevance theory “[...] does not intrinsically have the resources to identify instances of conceptual competence injustice” (Anderson 2017b: 36).

In what follows, I purport to clarify two issues. Firstly, my suggestion to incorporate conceptual competence injustice into linguistic pragmatics necessarily relies on a much broader, more general and loosened understanding of this notion. Even if such an understanding deprives it of some of its essential, defining conditions –namely, existence of

¹ Following a relevance-theoretic convention, reference to the speaker will be made through the feminine third person singular personal pronoun, while reference to the hearer will be made through its masculine counterpart.

different social identities and of matrices of domination— it may somehow capture the ontology of the unexpected effects that communicative performance may result in: an unfair appraisal of capacities.

Secondly, my intention when commenting on Anderson's (2017a) work was not actually to model conceptual competence injustice within relevance theory, but to show that this pragmatic framework is well equipped and most appropriate in order to account for the cognitive processes and the reasons underlying the unfortunate negative effects that may be alluded to with the notion I am advocating for. Therefore, I will argue that relevance theory does in fact have the resources to explain why some injustices stemming from communicative performance may originate. To conclude, I will elaborate on the factors why wrong ascriptions of conceptual and lexical competence may be made.

What Is Conceptual Competence Injustice

As a sub-type of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), conceptual competence injustice arises in scenarios where there are privileged epistemic agents who (i) are prejudiced against members of specific social groups, identities or minorities, and (ii) exert power as a way of oppression. Such agents make “[...] false judgments of incompetence [which] function as part of a broader, reliable pattern of marginalization that systematically undermines the epistemic agency of members of an oppressed social identity” (Anderson 2017b: 36). Therefore, conceptual competence injustice is a way of denigrating individuals as knowers of specific domains of reality and ultimately disempowering, discriminating and excluding them, so it “[...] is a form of epistemic oppression [...]” (Anderson 2017b: 36).

Lack or misuse of vocabulary may result in wronging if hearers conclude that certain concepts denoting specific elements of reality –objects, animals, actions, events, etc.– are not available to particular speakers or that they have erroneously mapped those concepts onto lexical items. When this happens, speakers' conceptualising and lexical capacities could be deemed to be below alleged or actual standards. Since lexical competence is one of the pillars of communicative competence (Hymes 1972; Canale 1983; Bachman 1991; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995), that judgement could contribute to downgrading speakers in an alleged scale of communicative competence and, consequently, to regarding them as partially or fully incompetent.

According to Medina (2011), competence is a *comparative* and *contrastive* property. On the one hand, skilfulness in some domain may be compared to that in (an)other domain(s), so a person may be very skilled in areas like languages, drawing, football, etc., but not in others like mathematics, oil painting, basketball, etc. On the other hand, knowledge of and abilities in some matters may be greater or lesser than those of other individuals. Competence, moreover, may be characterised as *gradual* and *context-dependent*. Degree of competence –i.e. its depth and width, so to say– normally increases because of age, maturity, personal circumstances and experience, or factors such as instruction and subsequent learning, needs, interests, motivation, etc. In turn, the way in which competence surfaces may be affected by a variety of intertwined factors, which include (Mustajoki 2012; Padilla Cruz 2017b).

Factors Affecting Competence in Communication

Internal factors –i.e. person-related– among which feature:

Relatively *stable* factors, such as (i) other knowledge and abilities, regardless of their actual relatedness to a particular competence, and (ii) cognitive styles –i.e. patterns of accessing and using knowledge items, among which are concepts and words used to name them.

Relatively *unstable* factors, such as (i) psychological states like nervousness, concentration, absent-mindedness, emotional override, or simply experiencing feelings like happiness, sadness, depression, etc.; (ii) physiological conditions like tiredness, drowsiness, drunkenness, etc., or (iii) performance of actions necessary for physiological functions like swallowing, sipping, sneezing, etc. These may facilitate or hinder access to and usage of knowledge items including concepts and words.

External –i.e. situation-related– factors, which encompass (i) the spatio-temporal circumstances where encounters take place, and (ii) the social relations with other participants in an encounter. For instance, haste, urgency or (un)familiarity with a setting may ease or impede access to and usage of knowledge items, as may experiencing *social distance* and/or more or less *power* with respect to another individual (Brown and Levinson 1987).

While ‘social distance’ refers to (un)acquaintance with other people and (dis)similarity with them as a result of perceptions of membership to a social group, ‘power’ does not simply allude to the possibility of imposing upon others and conditioning their behaviour as a consequence of differing positions in a particular hierarchy within a specific social institution. ‘Power’ also refers to the likelihood to impose upon other people owing to perceived or supposed expertise in a field –i.e. *expert power*, like that exerted by, for instance, a professor over students– or to admiration of diverse personal attributes –i.e. *referent power*, like that exerted by, for example, a pop idol over fans (Spencer-Oatey 1996).

There Must Be Some Misunderstanding

Conceptualising capacities, conceptual inventories and lexical competence also partake of the four features listed above: gradualness, comparativeness, contrastiveness and context-dependence. Needless to say, all three of them obviously increase as a consequence of growth and exposure to or participation in a plethora of situations and events, among which education or training are fundamental. Conceptualising capacities and lexical competence may be more or less developed or accurate than other abilities, among which are the other sub-competences upon which communicative competence depends –i.e. phonetics, morphology, syntax and pragmatics (Hymes 1972; Canale 1983; Bachman 1991; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995).

Additionally, conceptual inventories enabling lexical performance may be rather complex in some domains but not in others –e.g. a person may store many concepts and possess a rich vocabulary pertaining to, for instance, linguistics, but lack or have rudimentary ones about sports. Finally, lexical competence may appear to be higher or lower than that of other individuals under specific spatio-temporal and social circumstances, or because of the influence of the aforesaid psychological and physiological factors, or actions performed while speaking.

Apparent knowledge and usage of general or domain-specific vocabulary may be assessed and compared to those of other people, but performance may be hindered or fail to meet expectations because of the aforementioned factors. If it was considered deficient, inferior or lower than that of other individuals, such consideration should only concern knowledge and usage of vocabulary concerning a specific domain, and be only relative to a particular moment, maybe under specific circumstances.

Unfortunately, people often extrapolate and (over)generalise, so they may take (seeming) lexical gaps at a particular time in a speaker's life or one-off, occasional or momentary lexical infelicities to suggest or unveil more global and overarching conceptualising handicaps or lexical deficits. This does not only lead people to doubt the richness and broadness of that speaker's conceptual inventory and lexical repertoire, but also to question her conceptualising abilities and what may be labelled her *conceptual accuracy* –i.e. the capacity to create concepts that adequately capture nuances in elements of reality and facilitate correct reference to those elements– as well as her *lexical efficiency* or *lexical reliability* –i.e. the ability to use vocabulary appropriately.

As long as doubts are cast about the amount and accuracy of the concepts available to a speaker and her ability to verbalise them, there arises an unwarranted and unfair wronging which would count as an injustice about that speaker's conceptualising skills, amount of concepts and expressive abilities. The loosened notion of conceptual competence injustice whose incorporation into the field of linguistic pragmatics I advocated does not necessarily presuppose a previous discrimination or prejudice negatively biasing hegemonic, privileged or empowered individuals against minorities or identities.

Wrong is done, and an epistemic injustice is therefore inflicted, because another person's conceptual inventory, lexical repertoire and expressive skills are underestimated or negatively evaluated because of (i) perception of a communicative behaviour that is felt not to meet expectations or to be below alleged standards, (ii) tenacious adherence to those expectations or standards, and (iii) unawareness of the likely influence of various factors on performance. This wronging may nonetheless lead to subsequently downgrading that person as regards her communicative competence, discrediting her conceptual accuracy and lexical efficiency/reliability, and denigrating her as a speaker of a language, and, therefore, as an epistemic agent. Relying on all this, further discrimination on other grounds may ensue or an already existing one may be strengthened and perpetuated.

Relevance Theory and Conceptual Competence Injustice

Initially put forth in 1986, and slightly refined almost ten years later, relevance theory is a pragmatic framework that aims to explain (i) why hearers select particular interpretations out of the various possible ones that utterances may have –all of which are compatible with the linguistically encoded and communicated information– (ii) how hearers process utterances, and (iii) how and why utterances and discourse give rise to a plethora of effects (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). Accordingly, it concentrates on the cognitive side of communication: comprehension and the mental processes intervening in it.

Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) reacted against the so-called *code model of communication*, which was deeply entrenched in western linguistics. According to this model, communication merely consists of encoding thoughts or messages into utterances, and decoding these in order to arrive at speaker meaning. Since speakers cannot encode everything they intend to communicate and absolute explicitness is practically unattainable, relevance theory portrays communication as an *ostensive-inferential* process where speakers draw the audience's attention by means of intentional stimuli. On some occasions these amount to direct evidence –i.e. *showing*– of what speakers mean, so their processing requires inference; on other occasions, intentional stimuli amount to indirect –i.e. encoded– evidence of speaker meaning, so their processing relies on decoding.

However, in most cases the stimuli produced in communication combine direct with indirect evidence, so their processing depends on both inference and decoding (Sperber and Wilson 2015). Intentional stimuli make manifest speakers' *informative intention* –i.e. the intention that the audience create a mental representation of the intended message, or, in other words, a plausible interpretative hypothesis– and their *communicative intention* –i.e. the intention that the audience recognise that speakers do have a particular informative intention. The role of hearers, then, is to arrive at speaker meaning by means of both decoding and inference (but see below).

Relevance theory also reacted against philosopher Herbert P. Grice's (1975) view of communication as a joint endeavour where interlocutors identify a common purpose and may abide by, disobey or flout a series of maxims pertaining to communicative behaviour – those of *quantity*, *quality*, *relation* and *manner*– which articulate the so-called *cooperative principle*. Although Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) seriously question the existence of such principle, they nevertheless rest squarely on a notion already present in Grice's work, but which he unfortunately left undefined: *relevance*. This becomes the corner stone in their framework. Relevance is claimed to be a property of intentional stimuli and characterised on the basis of two factors:

Cognitive effects, or the gains resulting from the processing of utterances: (i) strengthening of old information, (ii) contradiction and rejection of old information, and (iii) derivation of new information.

Cognitive or *processing effort*, which is the effort of memory to select or construct a suitable mental context for processing utterances and to carry out a series of simultaneous tasks that involve the operation of a number of mental mechanisms or modules: (i) the language module, which decodes and parses utterances; (ii) the inferential module, which relates information encoded and made manifest by utterances to already stored information; (iii) the emotion-reading module, which identifies emotional states; (iv) the mindreading module, which attributes mental states, and (v) vigilance mechanisms, which assess the reliability of informers and the believability of information (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004; Sperber et al. 2010).

Relevance is a scalar property that is directly proportionate to the amount of cognitive effects that an interpretation gives rise to, but inversely proportionate to the expenditure of cognitive effort required. Interpretations are relevant if they yield cognitive effects in return for the cognitive effort invested. *Optimal relevance* emerges when the effect-effort balance is satisfactory. If an interpretation is found to be optimally relevant, it is chosen by the hearer and thought to be the intended interpretation. Hence, optimal relevance is the property determining the selection of interpretations.

The Power of Relevance Theory

Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) ideas and claims originated a whole branch in cognitive pragmatics that is now known as *relevance-theoretic pragmatics*. After years of intense, illuminating and fruitful work, relevance theorists have offered a plausible model for comprehension. In it, interpretative hypotheses –i.e. likely interpretations– are said to be formulated during a process of *mutual parallel adjustment* of the explicit and implicit content of utterances, where the said modules and mechanisms perform a series of simultaneous, incredibly fast tasks at a subconscious level (Carston 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2004).

Decoding only yields a minimally parsed chunk of concepts that is not yet fully propositional, so it cannot be truth-evaluable: the *logical form*. This form needs pragmatic or contextual enrichment by means of additional tasks wherein the inferential module relies on contextual information and is sometimes constrained by the *procedural meaning* –i.e. processing instructions– encoded by some linguistic elements.

Those tasks include (i) disambiguation of syntactic constituents; (ii) assignment of reference to words like personal pronouns, proper names, deictics, etc.; (iii) adjustment of the conceptual content encoded by words like nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, and (iv) recovery of unarticulated constituents. Completion of these tasks results in the *lower-level explicature* of an utterance, which is a truth-evaluable propositional form amounting to the explicit content of an utterance. Construction of lower-level explicatures depends on decoding and inference, so that the more decoding involved, the more explicit or *strong* these explicatures are and, conversely, the more inference needed, the less explicit and *weaker* these explicatures are (Wilson and Sperber 2004).

A lower-level explicature may further be embedded into a conceptual schema that captures the speaker's attitude(s) towards the proposition expressed, her emotion(s) or feeling(s) when saying what she says, or the action that she intends or expects the hearer to perform by saying what she says. This schema is the *higher-level explicature* and is also part of the explicit content of an utterance.

It is sometimes built through decoding some of the elements in an utterance –e.g. *attitudinal adverbs* like ‘happily’ or ‘unfortunately’ (Ifantidou 1992) or *performative* verbs like ‘order’, ‘apologise’ or ‘thank’ (Austin 1962)– and other times through inference, emotion-reading and mindreading –as in the case of, for instance, interjections, intonation or paralanguage (Wilson and Wharton 2006; Wharton 2009, 2016) or indirect speech acts (Searle 1969; Grice 1975). As in the case of lower-level explicatures, higher-level ones may also be strong or weak depending on the amount of decoding, emotion-reading and mindreading involved in their construction.

The explicit content of utterances may additionally be related to information stored in the mind or perceptible from the environment. Those information items act as *implicated premises* in inferential processes. If the hearer has enough evidence that the speaker intended or expected him to resort to and use those premises in inference, they are *strong*, but, if he does so at his own risk and responsibility, they are *weak*. Interaction of the explicit content with implicated premises yields *implicated conclusions*. Altogether, implicated premises and implicated conclusions make up the implicit content of an utterance. Arriving at the implicit content completes mutual parallel adjustment, which is a process constantly driven by expectations of relevance, in which the more plausible, less effort-demanding and more effect-yielding possibilities are normally chosen.

The Limits of Relevance Theory

As a model centred on comprehension and interpretation of ostensive stimuli, relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) does not need to be able to identify instances of conceptual competence injustice, as Anderson (2017b) remarks, nor even instances of the negative consequences of communicative behaviour that may be alluded to by means of the broader, loosened notion of conceptual competence injustice I argued for. Rather, as a cognitive framework, its role is to explain why and how these originate. And, certainly, its notional apparatus and the cognitive machinery intervening in comprehension which it describes can satisfactorily account for (i) the ontology of unwarranted judgements of lexical and conceptual (in)competence, (ii) their origin and (iii) some of the reasons why they are made.

Accordingly, those judgements (i) are implicated conclusions which (ii) are derived during mutual parallel adjustment as a result of (iii) accessing some manifest assumptions and using these as implicated premises in inference. Obviously, the implicated premises that yield the negative conclusions about (in)competence might not have been intended by the speaker, who would not be interested in the hearer accessing and using them. However, her

communicative performance makes manifest assumptions alluding to her lexical lacunae and mistakes and these lead the hearer to draw undesired conclusions.

Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) is powerful enough to offer a cognitive explanation of the said three issues. And this alone was what I aimed to show in my comment to Anderson's (2017a) work. Two different issues, nevertheless, are (i) the reasons why certain prejudicial assumptions become manifest to an audience and (ii) why those assumptions end up being distributed across the members of certain wide social groups.

As Anderson (2017b) underlines, conceptual competence injustices must necessarily be contextualised in situations where privileged and empowered social groups are negatively-biased or prejudiced against other identities and create patterns of marginalisation. Prejudice may be argued to bring to the fore a variety of negative assumptions about the members of the identities against whom it is held. Using Giora's (1997) terminology, prejudice makes certain detrimental assumptions very *salient* or increases the *salience* of those assumptions.

Consequently, they are amenable to being promptly accessed and effortlessly used as implicated premises in deductions, from which negative conclusions are straightforwardly and effortlessly derived. Those premises and conclusions spread throughout the members of the prejudiced and hegemonic group because, according to Sperber's (1996) *epidemiological* model of culture, they are repeatedly transmitted or made public. This is possible thanks to two types of factors (Sperber 1996: 84):

Psychological factors, such as their relative easiness of storage, the existence of other knowledge with which they can interact in order to generate cognitive effects –e.g. additional negative conclusions pertaining to the members of the marginalised identity– or existence of compelling reasons to make the individuals in the group willing to transmit them –e.g. desire to disempower and/or marginalise the members of an unprivileged group, to exclude them from certain domains of human activity, to secure a privileged position, etc.

Ecological factors, such as the repetition of the circumstances under which those premises and conclusions result in certain actions –e.g. denigration, disempowerment, marginalisation, exclusion, etc.– availability of storage mechanisms other than the mind –e.g. written documents– or the existence of institutions that transmit and perpetuate those premises and conclusions, thus ensuring their continuity and availability.

Since the members of the dominating biased group find those premises and conclusions useful to their purposes and interests, they constantly reproduce them and, so to say, pass them on to the other members of the group or even on to individuals who do not belong to it. Using Sperber's (1996) metaphor, repeated production and internalisation of those representations resembles the contagion of illnesses. As a result, those representations end up being part of the pool of cultural representations shared by the members of the group in question or other individuals.

The Imperative to Get Competence Correct

In social groups with an interest in denigrating and marginalising an identity, certain assumptions regarding the lexical inventories and conceptualising abilities of the epistemic agents with that identity may be very salient, or purposefully made very salient, with a view to ensuring that they are inferentially exploited as implicated premises that easily yield negative conclusions. In the case of average speakers' lexical gaps and mistakes, assumptions concerning their performance and infelicities may also become very salient, be fed into inferential processes and result in prejudicial conclusions about their lexical and conceptual (in)competence.

Although utterance comprehension and information processing end upon completion of mutual parallel adjustment, for the informational load of utterances and the conclusions derivable from them to be added to an individual's universe of beliefs, information must pass the filters of a series of mental mechanisms that target both informers and information itself, and check their believability and reliability. These mechanisms scrutinise various sources determining trust allocation, such as signs indicating certainty and trustworthiness – e.g. gestures, hesitation, nervousness, rephrasing, stuttering, eye contact, gaze direction, etc.– the appropriateness, coherence and relevance of the dispensed information; (previous) assumptions about speakers' expertise or authoritativeness in some domain; the socially distributed reputation of informers, and emotions, prejudices and biases (Origg 2013: 227-233).

As a result, these mechanisms trigger a cautious and sceptic attitude known as *epistemic vigilance*, which in some cases enables individuals to avoid blind gullibility and deception (Sperber et al. 2010). In addition, these mechanisms monitor the correctness and adequateness of the interpretative steps taken and the inferential routes followed while processing utterances and information, and check for possible flaws at any of the tasks in mutual parallel adjustment –e.g. wrong assignment of reference, supply of erroneous implicated premises, etc.– which would prevent individuals from arriving at actually intended interpretations. Consequently, another cautious and sceptical attitude is triggered towards interpretations, which may be labelled *hermeneutical vigilance* (Padilla Cruz 2016).

If individuals do not perceive risks of malevolence or deception, or do not sense that they might have made interpretative mistakes, vigilance mechanisms are weakly or moderately activated (Michaelian 2013: 46; Sperber 2013: 64). However, their level of activation may be raised so that individuals exercise *external* and/or *internal vigilance*. While the former facilitates higher awareness of external factors determining trust allocation –e.g. cultural norms, contextual information, biases, prejudices, etc.– the latter facilitates distancing from conclusions drawn at a particular moment, backtracking with a view to tracing their origin – i.e. the interpretative steps taken, the assumptions fed into inference and assessment of their potential consequences (Origg 2013: 224-227).

Exercising weak or moderate vigilance of the conclusions drawn upon perception of lexical lacunae or mistakes may account for their unfairness and the subsequent wronging of

individuals as regards their actual conceptual and lexical competence. Unawareness of the internal and external factors that may momentarily have hindered competence and ensuing performance, may cause perceivers of lexical gaps and errors to unquestioningly trust assumptions that their interlocutors' allegedly poor performance makes manifest, rely on them, supply them as implicated premises, derive conclusions that do not do any justice to their actual level of conceptual and lexical competence, and eventually trust their appropriateness, adequacy or accuracy.

A higher alertness to the potential influence of those factors on performance would block access to the detrimental assumptions made manifest by their interlocutors' performance or make perceivers of lexical infelicities reconsider the convenience of using those assumptions in deductions. If this was actually the case, perceivers would be deploying the processing strategy labelled *cautious optimism*, which enables them to question the suitability of certain deductions and to make alternative ones (Sperber 1994).

Conclusion

Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004) does not need to be able to identify cases of conceptual competence injustice, but its notional apparatus and the machinery that it describes can satisfactorily account for the cognitive processes whereby conceptual competence injustices originate. In essence, prejudice and interests in denigrating members of specific identities or minorities favour the saliency of certain assumptions about their incompetence, which, for a variety of psychological and ecological reasons, may already be part of the cultural knowledge of the members of prejudiced empowered groups. Those assumptions are subsequently supplied as implicated premises to deductions, which yield conclusions that undermine the reputation of the members of the identities or minorities in question. Ultimately, such conclusions may in turn be added to the cultural knowledge of the members of the biased hegemonic group.

The same process would apply to those cases wherein hearers unfairly wrong their interlocutors on the grounds of performance below alleged or expected standards, and are not vigilant enough of the factors that could have impeded it. That wronging may be alluded to by means of a somewhat loosened, broadened notion of 'conceptual competence injustice' which deprives it of one of its quintessential conditions: the existence of prejudice and interests in marginalising other individuals. Inasmuch as apparently poor performance may give rise to unfortunate unfair judgements of speakers' overall level of competence, those judgements could count as injustices. In a nutshell, this was the reason why I advocated for the incorporation of a 'decaffeinated' version of Anderson's (2017a) notion into the field of linguistic pragmatics.

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