Reconsidering Dismissive Incomprehension—Its Relation to Epistemic Injustices, Its Damaging Nature, and a Research Agenda: A Reply to Cull

Manuel Padilla Cruz, Universidad de Sevilla, mpadillacruz@us.es

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Dismissive Incomprehension

Matthew J. Cull (2019) has recently identified *dismissive incomprehension* and described it as an epistemically demolishing verbal action. It consists of a (fake) expression of ignorance or non-understanding of some information by a receiver who happens to be in a privileged epistemic position. Its purpose is no other than presenting the information as absurd or meaningless with a view to denigrating the original informer who dispensed it in the eyes of an audience.

Three issues are essential in this phenomenon: (i) there must be a negative public assessment of information as unworthy of attention, nonsensical or incomprehensible; (ii) such an assessment must come from an individual considered an epistemic authority, and (iii) an audience must make an ensuing similar judgement (Cull 2019, 264-265). The audience's subsequent evaluation is biased by the one made by the epistemic authority, so the audience does not blame them for not having understood the information in question, but the informer for having said something that cannot allegedly be understood by the epistemic authority and could consequently imply their ignorance (Cull 2019, 265).

The felicitousness of dismissive incomprehension, Cull (2019, 265) also explains, is contingent on two factors. On the one hand, the receiver, and first evaluator, of the information must (have) present(ed) themselves as an epistemic authority. On the other hand, the audience must certainly treat them as such and see them in a position to competently and reliably determine the meaningfulness of information.

As regards its effects, three are relevant from an epistemic standpoint (Cull 2019, 266):

> a) *Credibility reduction* of the informer because the dispensed information is (arguably) gibberish and this hints probable propensity to speak nonsense in the future.

> b) *Silencing* the informer and dismissing their speech as unworthy of attention owing to their (alleged) inability to properly assert something.

> c) *Pathologisation* of the informer as an irrational individual.

Cull (2019, 266-267) argues that dismissive incomprehension is not a case of what Fricker (2007) terms *testimonial injustice*, as long as this unfairness involves a credibility reduction mainly motivated by identity. Rather, what is at stake is the supposed quality of information as assessed by an epistemic authority, but not identity. Yet, dismissive incomprehension may contribute to strengthening or perpetuating a testimonial injustice already perpetrated. Moreover, it may undermine the epistemic resources of marginalised epistemic communities and perpetuate what Anderson (2017) labels *conceptual competence injustice*. It is only when the evaluator's role of epistemic authority is questioned or denied, and/or the informer's authority is demonstrated, either by themselves or some ally, that dismissive incomprehension may be counteracted (Cull 2019, 268-269).

The author also clarifies that dismissive incomprehension needs not always be negative, but may be considered just, or not unjust, when there is an inflated credence in someone who is proved or suspected to be deceitful or malevolent. This notwithstanding, they emphasise that dismissive incomprehension is "[…] a powerful tool that can further epistemic oppression" (Cull 2019, 268). It resembles *gaslighting* in that, when it is repeated, it causes an individual to doubt themselves and question their sanity (Cull 2019, 268).

Dismissive Incomprehension and Epistemic Injustices

Cull's (2019) characterisation of this epistemically devastating phenomenon is rather valuable and illuminating, as they clearly delimit the conditions that must apply for it to occur, explains its consequences and exemplifies verbal practices conducive to stigmatisation. Perhaps the contribution of dismissive incomprehension to testimonial injustice might be reconsidered if the definition of this unfairness was loosened and slightly modified. Was it deprived of the requisite pertaining to identity prejudice, testimonial injustice could be broadly understood as an unfairness sustained against an epistemic agent as a result of deficiencies perceived in their testimony.

Such deficiencies may stem, following the well-known maxims governing communication proposed by philosopher Herbert P. Grice (1975), from its quality—i.e., truthfulness— quantity and relevance, as well as the clarity, conciseness, perspicuity and orderliness with which the information is dispensed (Padilla Cruz 2018a). If an epistemic authority presented the alleged absurdity, incomprehensibility or nonsensicality of an informer's testimony as originating from its scarcity, irrelevance, obscurity, prolixity, ambiguity or disorderliness, they would also be questioning the informer's capacity and abilities to adequately impart information and, therefore, they would ultimately be perpetrating a testimonial injustice against the informer.

Moreover, in addition to instigating testimonial injustice, dismissive incomprehension could also trigger another epistemic injustice: *pragmatic competence injustice* (Padilla Cruz 2018b). This is perpetrated when a communicator, among other problems, does not deploy the pragmalinguistic strategies conventionalised in, or recurrently used by, a community of practice in order to accomplish specific verbal actions, or when the communicator does not abide by the sociocultural norms and conventions operative in that community pertaining to the range of verbal actions that are allowed in specific circumstances and with particular interlocutors. In other words, a pragmatic competence injustice is inflicted when a communicator, among other things, makes what Jenny Thomas (1983) named *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic failures*. As a consequence of a communicative behaviour that appears odd to the members of that community of practice because of a deviation from their standards, the communicator is deemed pragmatically incompetent: she is thought to ignore what she can do with certain people, when and how.

When undermining an informer, an epistemic authority might also claim that the incomprehensibility of their testimony or information is due to failure to obey specific genre conventions. These include, among other things, the sort of topics amenable to discussion, the appropriate expressions used to touch upon them—e.g., (in)formal, specialised/lay terminology, etc.—the adequate audience, settings or venues to deal with them—e.g.,

lectures, classes, papers, informal conversations, etc.—the manner in which they should be tackled—i.e., superficially, in detail, with examples, adding quotations, etc.—or the sort of practices that should be followed when addressing them—e.g., giving arguments when asserting, giving reasons to support or refute arguments, etc.—to name but some (Paltridge 1995; Bhatia 2008). Genre conventions involve pragmatic decisions about what to do, when, where, how and with whom, which individuals may fail, or be judged to fail, to make correctly. If the epistemic authority related the absurdity or unworthiness of attention of an informer to an (alleged) inability to address an adequate topic through correct expressions, at the right level, in front of the adequate audience and/or in the expected manner, they would be questioning the informer's pragmatic abilities, a first step to perpetrating a pragmatic competence injustice.

The Damage of Dismissive Incomprehension

Cull (2019, 266) names three epistemically prejudicial consequences of dismissive incomprehension: credibility reduction, silencing and pathologisation. However, a more thorough appraisal of the damaging power of dismissive comprehension requires unraveling what exactly this detrimental practice attacks. Pragmatists working through the lenses of (im)politeness theories[1] have classified verbal actions on the grounds of their consequences on social interaction and relations. Assuming that the (im)politeness of verbal actions is sometimes determined by the interactive situation, but also by the nature of the very acts themselves, linguist Geoffrey Leech (1983) sorted out verbal actions into:

> a) *Competitive acts*, which are considered inherently impolite because they challenge social relations: e.g., requesting, ordering, commanding or demanding.
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> b) *Convivial acts*, which are regarded as inherently polite because they benefit hearers and thus foster social relations: e.g., offering, inviting or congratulating.
>
> c) *Collaborative acts*, which are treated as indifferent as regards politeness because they involve no challenge to social relations: e.g., stating, informing or announcing.
>
> d) *Conflictive acts*, in which "[…] politeness is out of question, because [they] are, by their very nature, designed to cause offence […]" (Leech 1983, 105). Instances of this type gather threatening, accusing or insulting.

Dismissive incomprehension could certainly be considered a conflictive act. Like an insult, and following Allan (2015, 187), it deliberately sullies, besmirches or slights its target by portraying them as a misinformed, unreliable, deceitful or unskilled informer. Hence, it amounts to a determined aggression that may spark off interactive conflict, revive a dormant

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[1] This is a research strand that takes verbal action to involve personal risks and the aim of much of what speakers say to be the mitigation of those risks.

one or fuel a latent one. But why does dismissive incomprehension eventually do so? What does this affront actually attack?

Anthropologist Penelope Brown and linguist Stephen C. Levinson, the founders of probably the most influential and often-quoted politeness model (Brown and Levinson 1987), assume that every competent individual is rational and is endowed with a quintessential personal attribute: *face*. They followed the seminal work of another anthropologist, Erving Goffman, for whom face was "[…] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact"; or, to put it differently, "[…] an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attitudes" (Goffman 1955, 319). To Brown and Levinson, face is "[…] the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself" (1987, 61). It has two components:

> a) *Positive* face, or the desire of every competent member of a sociocultural group "[…] that his wants be desirable to at least some others (Brown and Levinson 1987, 62) or "[…] his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 101).

> b) *Negative* face, or the want of every competent member of a sociocultural group "[…] that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 62) or "[…] to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 129).

Face is vulnerable owing to the many threats arising from social interaction, which Brown and Levinson (1987) labelled *face threatening acts*. These damage either the speaker's positive or negative face, or those of the hearer. Among the acts threatening the speaker's positive face, Brown and Levinson (1987) listed apologising, admitting something or accepting compliments, while among those damaging her negative face, they included accepting offers, promises or expressions of gratitude. In turn, among those challenging the hearer's positive face, they gathered complaining, criticising, insulting, showing disagreement or talking about taboo topics, while among those hurting his negative face they grouped commanding, ordering, advising, threatening or warning.

Cull (2019, 270) is right to point out, even if as an endnote, that dismissive incomprehension threatens the target's positive face because it induces the audience to disapprove of them as an informer or testifier. They are also right to point out that it can also damage their negative face because it curtails the informer's freedom of action to dispense information. However, the key point of dismissive incomprehension is that it seeks to defy the informer's epistemic authority and, in so doing, it ultimately purports to erode not only their epistemic agency, but, more importantly, their *epistemic personhood*. According to Borgwald, this is "[…] the ability to think autonomously, reflect on and evaluate one's emotions, beliefs, desires, and to trust those judgements rather than deferring to others" (2012, 73). As Thorson and Baker put it, it is "[…] the ability to author knowledge […]" and amounts to "[…] having ontological standing as a knower" (2019, 102). Obviously, this ability becomes evident through imparted information or testimony. If it is dismissed as nonsensical, absurd or irrelevant by an epistemic authority, what they do is to question the target's knowledgeability.

Pragmatist Helen D. Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008) has also broken down face into two components. As opposed to Brown and Levinson (1987), these are *identity face* and *quality face*. The former is a self-image resulting from perceptions of one's dignity, honour, status, reputation, identity, membership to a sociocultural group and social relations. The latter, in contrast, is a self-image resulting from beliefs and/or estimations about competence or skillfulness in some domain. Certainly, having ontological standing as a knower or being knowledgeable about something equates to being competent in that domain, so having information or testimony utterly dismissed may essentially be regarded as a threat to the individual's quality face as an informer and/or knower.

As described by Goffman (1955, 1959, 1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987), face depends on possibilities or limitations to act, and encompasses desires not to have the personal territory invaded and wants to be respected. Because of the presence of and association with others, it also includes expectations to belong to their group and the need to be admired, liked or found similar to other members of the group in some respects. However, face is also contingent on individual ideas about very intricate personal attributes such as identity and quality.

Although the complex notion of face is still amenable to further elaboration and refinement by considering and determining additional factors of an epistemic nature sustaining and articulating both its identity and quality components, a candidate factor upon which quality face might be argued to rest would be epistemic personhood. Accordingly, by claiming the unintelligibility or absurdity of information, epistemic authorities dismiss informers' knowledge and question their knowledgeability about the issue or domain in question, thus challenging their competence therein. Ultimately, what they threaten is their epistemic personhood and, hence, their quality face as epistemic sources or knowers.

Performing Dismissive Incomprehension: A Research Agenda

Pragmatists working in the tradition of Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1975) have looked into the verbal actions performed through verbal means and classified them on the grounds of various criteria. A first taxonomy of such actions was proposed by philosopher of language John L. Austin (1962), who is traditionally regarded as the founding father of modern pragmatics. He distinguished five broad types of speech acts:

> a) *Expositives*, which present or report on facts.
>
> b) *Exercitives*, whereby a speaker seeks to influence the hearer's action in some way.
>
> c) *Commissives*, with which the speaker commits herself to some future course of action.
>
> d) *Behabitives*, which pertain to the speaker's behaviour or psychological states.

e) *Verdictives*, which create or modify states of affairs.

Quite similarly, philosopher of language John Searle (1969, 1975) differentiated (i) *assertives*, which commit the speaker to something being the case—expositives in the previous taxonomy—(ii) *directives*, which attempt to cause the hearer to perform some action—exercitives in Austin's (1962) terms—(iii) *commissives*, which commit the speaker to doing something in the future; (iv) *expressives*, which unveil how the speaker feels—behabitives—and (v) *declaratives*, which change the state of the world in an immediate way—i.e., Austin's verdictives.

With a view to refining these two initial classifications, Vendler (1972, 16-25) added *interrogatives* and *operatives* to the list; Bach and Harnish (1979, 40-41) identified *effectives*, and Allan (1994) reduced the number of speech acts to four. In contrast, Edmondson and House (1981) developed a fine-grained taxonomy comprising twenty-five verbal actions. These are differentiated depending on whether they are *ritual* actions opening or closing conversations—greetings, farewells, etc.—or *substantial* actions whose content pertains to (i) more or less relevant information—opinions, business talk, phatic remarks or personal discloses—(ii) the speaker's intention to cause someone to perform some future action—requests, suggestions, invitations, resolutions, giving permission or expressing willingness—or (iii) the speaker's attitudes—complaints, apologies, excuses, forgiving, thanking, minimizing the impact of something, expressing sympathy or congratulating.

The criteria on which these classifications rely are varied and are inspired by diverse assumptions. For instance, Searle (1975) listed twelve, of which the following were considered essential: (i) the speaker's *illocutionary point*, or her intention; (ii) the *direction of fit*, or the match between uttered words and the world; (iii) the *expressed psychological state* and (iv) the *propositional content* of the illocution. The importance of these classifications, nevertheless, resides in the distinctions made in the number and kinds of actions that may be accomplished through words, which were thought worthy of more detailed formal analysis. Consequently, many practitioners of Speech Act Theory subsequently undertook explorations of the semantico-syntactic structures employed when performing certain verbal actions with the assumption that such structures somehow unveil the speaker's intent and facilitate their understanding. A case in point, as far back as the eighties, is the work by Wolfson and Manes (1980) and Manes and Wolfson (1981), to give but one example. Using data-collection techniques, they elicited the pragmalinguistic routines commonly used to pay compliments in various geographically distant varieties of English. Their findings revealed that complimenters recurrently resorted to six major strategies, but three of them outscored the others.

Cull (2019) addresses dismissive incomprehension *in toto*, as if it were a single action, but acknowledges that they have not examined the linguistic structures by means of which it is accomplished and, more importantly, possible patterns of actions in so doing (Cull 2019, 269). Future research from linguistic, pragmatic, ethnographic, conversation-analytic or anthropological perspectives should investigate what epistemic authorities do exactly when verbally dismissing informers. More precisely, it would be illuminating to unravel if the expression of dismissive incomprehension as a whole is articulated upon the performance of individual verbal actions, such as expressing certain feelings or attitudes, giving negative opinions, making disparaging or denigrating other-oriented comments, asserting specific

things, etc., as well as if those individual actions are recurrently assembled into specific patterns facilitating both expression and interpretation of the authority's detrimental intentions. Likewise, formal linguists, pragmatists and conversation analysts should also examine the linguistic structures employed in the performance of each of those actions and which of them more easily enable recognition of the speaker's intention and, therefore, succeed in the achievement of her goals.

Criticism levelled against speech act-theoretic analyses often contended that verbal acts like complaints, requests, critiques, etc., are not solely realised by means of just a single utterance produced in a *conversational turn*—i.e., the time during which a speaker speaks—but through various utterances, in one or different turns, each of them serving a single purpose while simultaneously contributing to an overall or overarching one. In most cases, there may certainly be a main utterance that clearly reveals the speaker's fundamental intention, the so-called *core act*. This is possible thanks in part to the usage of a more or less conventionalised linguistic formula. But that utterance is often accompanied by additional utterances or *moves* that draw the hearer's attention—*alerters*—give reasons for the act or elaborate on it—*supportive moves*—or present it in a (slightly) different manner, either (more) directly or indirectly. To put it differently, verbal actions are frequently performed by means of sequences of utterances that are intertwined in one or different conversational turns (Cutting 2005; Padilla Cruz 2015). Future research could elucidate the existence of recurrent combinations of utterances fulfilling functions of core act or supportive moves in order to ascertain not only the discursive dynamics of dismissive incomprehension, but also whether its severity or success depends on such combinations or they somehow condition the victim's subsequent reactions.

Too Soon to Conclude: What about Reactions to Dismissive Incomprehension?

Despite speakers' intentions and the more or less conventionalised nature of the proffered words, on most occasions an utterance only counts as a particular act if the hearer recognises the speaker's intention and indicates this by means of a specific response. For example, an utterance only constitutes a compliment if it is accepted, agreed with, deferred or rejected because of modesty, among other factors. Although Cull's (2019) intention is clearly to identify and describe a phenomenon with negative epistemic consequences, our understanding of it will certainly increase and widen if attention is paid to the reactions that it generates.

Conversational analysts like Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) realised that on various occasions institutionalised discourse, like that in classrooms, follows a pattern of initiation, response and follow up. Responses, as Anita Pomerantz (1978) showed, may be expected or *preferred*, or unexpected or *dispreferred*. In the case of compliments, for instance, preferred responses would include expressing gratitude or explaining the reasons why something is worthy of praise, while dispreferred one would comprise rejections or denials. Furthermore, while preferred responses to socially-beneficial acts like compliments do not tend to be redressed by other acts compensating for any potential damage to their performer, dispreferred ones are often accompanied by diverse actions aimed at softening disagreement with the performer and restoring social harmony.

Research on reactions has shed much light onto the dynamics of social interaction in general, but also onto that of conflictive or aggressive actions in particular. A case in point is that of insults, which have raised the interest not only of linguists and pragmatists, but also of psychologists, anthropologists and ethnographers of speaking. Besides tackling the factors contributing to their offensiveness (Jay 1992, 2000, 2009; Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Neu 2008; O'Dea et al. 2015; Bergen 2016), they have examined the tactics deployed by their targets in order to minimise or play them down (Rahman 2015), counterbalance social disharmony or augment their aggressive potential with a view to generating or exacerbating interactive conflict (Saucier et al. 2015; Fägersten and Stapleton 2017).

Regardless of whether dismissive incomprehension is an initiation likely to receive a response from the attacked person or the reaction to the information dispensed by the informer who is about to be undermined, the attacker's preferred reaction could be silence and lack of response, even if unlikely. On the other hand, dispreferred ones could be disagreement, questioning or attacks by the victim in order to reclaim epistemic authority and restore epistemic personhood. In any case, delving into the discourse or conversational dynamics that dismissive incomprehension actually gives rise to could unveil if victims merely strive to assert or reclaim their epistemic authority by alluding to or proving it, how they do that, or if they do other things like counterattacking and undermining the opponent, their tactics, the effectiveness of those actions, if they also organise those actions into specific patterns, or if failure to react is motivated by particular features of the tokens of dismissive incomprehension which, so to speak, soundly knock victims down and definitely preclude potential responses. That type of examination should also show whether victims mitigate their responses depending on their attacker's identity or intensify their strength as a way of regaining their authority, the techniques or strategies—not only verbal, but also thematic or argumentative—they deploy in so doing, or the number of turns or the effort that responding to dismissive incomprehension requires depending on factors such as the attack itself, the attacker's identity or her arguments. Surely, this research would provide those in risky positions with valuable tools and cues to react to possible challenges.

By Way of Conclusion

This reply purported to point out a series of issues raised by Cull's (2019) identification and description of a phenomenon with an incredible damaging potential. These issues deserve reconsideration or much attention from linguistic, pragmatic, anthropologic, ethnographic or conversational-analytic angles in order to have a better appraisal of dismissive incomprehension. In so doing, this reply has not only sought to suggest new avenues for future research, but also to point out possible lines of cooperation between practitioners in those disciplines and social epistemologists.

The issues in question obviously pertain to dismissive incomprehension as performed by an epistemic authority who attacks an informer in the eyes of an audience, i.e., in face-to-face interaction. Now that social interaction is quite often mediated through new communication technologies and takes place in virtual environments like social networks or blogs, which facilitate exposure of phenomena to an uncontrollable number of observers and their participation, future studies should necessarily address dismissive incomprehension and responses to it when they are deprived of defining characteristics of face-to-face interaction such as physical co-presence, sequentiality or synchronicity. Thus, revealing insights could be

gained into their peculiarities in mediated contexts or the use of resources enabled by such technologies, like audiovisual postings, as ways of increasing severity, boldness or soundness, and their resulting impact and effectiveness.

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