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Dismissive Incomprehension Revis(it)ed: Testimonial Injustice, Competence, Face and Silence—A New Reply to Cull

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In addition to welcoming Matthew Cull's (2019) identification and characterisation of dismissive incomprehension, in a previous comment I raised a series of issues and made a number of suggestions for further research aimed at shedding more light onto this devastating act (Padilla Cruz 2019).

Initially, I pointed out that the relationship between dismissive incomprehension and testimonial injustice could be reconsidered if the association between the latter and identity prejudice as its essential motivating factor was overlooked.

Moreover, I argued that the detrimental effects of acts of dismissive incomprehension stem from their nature as *conflictive* verbal actions (Leech 1983), which overtly damage an individual's *quality face* as a knower and informer (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2008). In other words, dismissive incomprehension undermines an epistemic agent's self-awareness of their knowledge in a domain, as well as their skills to accomplish certain actions and be engaged in practices of an epistemic nature and/or with an epistemic goal.

Finally, among the issues concerning dismissive incomprehension that still deserve consideration—perhaps from a multidisciplinary perspective bringing together approaches and insights from disciplines like linguistic pragmatics, conversation analysis and, obviously, social epistemology—I proposed to examine possible formulas to dismiss an informer's testimony and reduce their credibility, as well as conversational patterns and reactions following acts of dismissive incomprehension, regardless of whether they are expected or preferred by the attacker.

My comments and suggestions have recently been replied to by Cull (2020). In a most clear and explanatory piece, they take my intention to be conflating dismissive incomprehension with testimonial injustice. They also consider that “[...] acts of dismissive incomprehension need not affect self-image to be felicitous” (Cull 2020, 60) because what really matters is the reactions and thoughts of the audience in front of whom such acts are performed. Finally, regarding the reactions to them, Cull considers that a twofold distinction should be made, depending on whether they come from the audience or from the person whose epistemic personhood and authority are challenged.

I will seek to develop my viewpoints and ideas about this damaging practice in more detail as follows.

- I will comment on the potential formal factors that may prompt an individual to dismiss another individual's testimony.
- I will address the relationship between dismissive incomprehension and competence.
- I will discuss the potential usefulness of a loosened version of testimonial injustice.

- I will explain the effects of dismissive incomprehension on face.
- I will reflect on the feasibility that silence is always the expected or preferred reaction to an act of dismissive incomprehension.

On the Factors Favouring Dismissive Incomprehension

Reconsidering the relationship between dismissive incomprehension and testimonial injustice needs not conflate the two phenomena. They are related to the extent that the former may result in the latter or be a factor favouring it. I certainly agree with Cull in that “[...] dismissive incomprehension should not be conflated with testimonial injustice [...]” because “[...] an act of dismissive incomprehension might cause or be caused by a testimonial injustice, or exploit an underlying testimonial injustice” (2020, 56). In this regard, testimonial injustice may be the undesired perlocutionary effect, *pace* Cull (2019, 2020).

However, testimonial injustice may arise as a consequence of an act that needs not always be motivated by a prejudice or bias. As Cull (2019, 2020) rightly argues, dismissive incomprehension may originate testimonial injustice if there is an underlying negative identity prejudice that encourages an individual to state, in front of an audience, that another individual’s testimony is incomprehensible with a view to undermining their epistemic personhood and agency. Yet, an individual’s testimony may be equally dismissed, and their epistemic personhood and agency eroded, in the absence of such a prejudice.

Perhaps the reason why dismissive incomprehension is enacted is not a negative predisposition to an individual because of their race, ethnicity, gender or membership to some sociocultural group. Rather, the motivation could be their shabby, scruffy or excessively elegant or posh appearance; their overall behaviour—gestures, poses, gaze, etc.—but, most importantly, the manner in which they speak and impart information, and/or unawareness of certain formal or stylistic conventions or failure to meet certain expectations.

Some of the said features or factors could certainly be connected with the individual’s identity, but they could also be occasional or incidental. They might be motivated by circumstances such as time pressure, psychological states like sadness, euphoria, depression, absent-mindedness, nervousness, anxiety, etc.; physiological conditions like drowsiness, tiredness, drunkenness, etc., or even the setting or medium where interaction takes place (Mustajoki 2012; Padilla Cruz 2017a, in press).

What matters is that those factors could influence an informer’s performance and prevent it from meeting cultural expectations pertaining to the quantity, quality and relevance of the information about an issue to be dispensed in a particular context, and/or the manner in which that information should be presented—i.e., clearly, concisely, briefly and perspicuously, *à la* Grice (1975). Moreover, those factors could also cause their performance to deviate from tacitly assumed conventions about the range of permitted or expectable figures of speech—e.g., irony, metaphor, synecdoche, etc.—and/or rhetorical strategies—e.g., expounding arguments, adding examples, using illustrative and supportive devices like images or videos, interacting with the audience, etc.

Failure to meet such expectations and to abide by such conventions could impact an audience's comprehension and their subsequent evaluation of the informer's behaviour. Undoubtedly, dismissive incomprehension may be performed because of an identity prejudice, but a (mis)judgement or (mis)appraisal of the comprehensibility of information—and, ultimately, of the informer's knowledgeability in some domain and capacity as an informer—could also be motivated by the characteristics of their speech or discourse. Alleged or actual divergence from contextual expectations and/or formal or stylistic conventions pertaining to a particular genre or text type could cause the informer to have their speech dismissed, be unwarrantedly deemed an unskilled informer and even have their knowledge in some domain questioned.

Consider the case of a tour guide whom you hire to explore a city or visit an attraction. Imagine that the guide does not interact with you and does not ask what you know about the city or the attraction, what a particular building or ornament is, what happened during a certain historical period, if you are enjoying the tour or visit, if you have questions or doubts or if everything is clear. On the contrary, the guide simply opts for a *report style* (Tannen 1990) and concentrates on commenting on facts, giving data or explaining as many details as possible.

If you expected the opposite *rapport style* (Tannen 1990), you could probably regard the guide as boring, dull or detached, ignore their explanations during the visit, and/or even conclude that they lack skills. You would do this because you do not like their style, regardless of their actual knowledge about the city or attraction and the amount, quality and relevance of the information that he gives. In this case, you would probably wrong the guide. The same could happen with acts of dismissive incomprehension. Individuals who claim to be in a position of epistemic authority could perform them not simply because an informer belongs to a particular racial, ethnic or gender group, but because they do not like the informer's choices about what to say and how to say it, and, ultimately, their style.

Dismissive Incomprehension and Competence

Cull (2019, 266; 2020, 56) emphasises that dismissive incomprehension amounts to a misrepresentation of an epistemic agent's speech or utterances, which eventually involves questioning their knowledge. Hence, such a misrepresentation may contribute to testimonial injustice, so the latter may be caused by dismissive incomprehension. I also agree with Cull in that testimonial injustice “[...] is a state of affairs” (2020, 57) in which there is a credibility deficit. However, dismissive incomprehension could also involve a(n) (mis)attribution of lack of informative skills or insufficient *communicative competence*.

Communicative competence is the quintessential capacity on which the ability to communicate relies. It is organised around a series of interrelated, more specialised sets of knowledge. These include knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a natural language, its conventions to perform a variety of actions, how to generate coherent and cohesive discourse, or the means to avoid or overcome possible problems (Canale 1983; Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995).

Like any other competence, communicative competence is *gradual*, as it develops with growth and acculturation. It is also *contrastive*, as individuals may be more competent in a specific area than in another, and *comparative*, as individuals' communicative skills may be more sophisticated than those of other individuals. Finally, communicative competence is also *context-dependent*, as it may be affected by external factors like the interactive setting or time availability, and/or person-related factors like experiencing the said psychological and/or physiological conditions (Medina 2011; Padilla Cruz 2018a, 2018b).

An act of dismissive incomprehension could suggest, or overtly affirm, that the reason why an individual's information should not be heeded is their unsatisfactory or inefficient informative or communicative skills. These yield an allegedly defective product and are hence considered to be below a desirable average level and/or fail to meet certain standards. Since communicative skills depend on knowledge, the performer of act of dismissive incomprehension could ultimately be moved by the intention to challenge the victim's knowledge or competence enabling communication and, therefore, impartation of information. The reason why some information could be dismissed and judged as incomprehensible could be communicative preferences, likes or habits.

A person may be the victim of dismissive incomprehension because of their style, which a person in a position of epistemic authority might not like and consider responsible for their nonunderstanding the information. As a result, the epistemic authority disdains, objects to, criticises, challenges or utterly disregards it, and, in so doing, they misjudge the information and the informer, and do not appreciate them. The issue here is that something very personal like habits or idiosyncrasies when informing might not receive a fair or adequate assessment, but be misrepresented, and that misrepresentation leads a supposed epistemic authority to dismiss information as incomprehensible and to question the knowledge enabling its impartation.

On the Usefulness of a Modified Version of Testimonial Injustice

By arguing that a negative reaction to habits, customs or idiosyncrasies could prompt dismissive incomprehension, my aim was certainly not to question the validity of Fricker's (1998, 2003, 2006, 2007) notion of testimonial injustice, which is undeniable. It does capture a harm to a person "[...] as a knower on the grounds of some aspects of their social identity", as Cull (2020, 58-59) rightly points out. It is the person's identity that becomes the reason for wronging them and questioning their knowledgeability in front of others. Certainly, this is absolutely essential in areas and/or disciplines concerned with fighting against inequalities, discrimination, stigmatisation, degradation and marginalisation, where Fricker's notion has proved to be helpful and rather fruitful.

However, a loosened understanding of testimonial injustice where what matters is the characteristics of a person's product—i.e., how they impart information—may be helpful and fruitful in other areas like pragmatics. This is typically concerned with how people speak as a result of a variety of psychosocial factors, how they process discourse and come to specific interpretations, and why they think that those interpretations could have been intended. Unfortunately, pragmatics has not paid as much attention to the consequences or perlocutionary effects of communicative behaviour, except for those of speech acts.

The preferred perlocutionary effect of a request for a glass of water may be that the requestee passes it to you or that he verbally indicates his willingness or readiness to do so. That of a compliment on your interlocutor having completed his studies could be that the complimentee thanks you or comments on his achievement. The dispreferred response to the request would be a denial to provide you with the glass of water, while that to the compliment could be showing incredulity or questioning the achievement. However, dispreferred responses may be given not only because of the performed action and what it involves, but because of the manner in which it was performed. In the case of a request, think of features such as the tone of voice, pitch or a direct—and perhaps abrupt—form like an imperative.

Imparting information may also trigger a cascade of reactions. Depending on its amount, quality or relevance, these may include improved worldview, increased sets of beliefs, awareness of an issue, risen critical attitude towards it, enjoyment, entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, misguidance, deception, etc. Some of them could arise because of the very manner in which information is dispensed, which might obviously receive a negative evaluation impacting the informer. Just in the same way that a person may appreciate it, that person may equally judge that it was infelicitous, unsatisfactory or deficient, even if that might in fact not be the case. But he comes to that conclusion from his own viewpoint, value scale, beliefs, ideas or estimates about what would be satisfactory, desirable and acceptable, to which that person tenaciously adheres. Reticence to alter or abandon them causes him to wrong the informer, question their abilities and eventually challenge the knowledge enabling their performance. If the loosened version of testimonial injustice purported something, it was to conceptualise and/or label that wrongdoing. Or would it not count as an injustice inflicted to a person's testimony because of the manner in which they dispensed it?

Imagine you are invited to a meal. After the delicious and abundant appetisers and dishes, you would probably thank your host, praise their cooking abilities or compliment them on the presentation and combination of textures and tastes in order to show that you really enjoyed them. Imagine that, as in some cultures people reportedly do, you instead burped because that is the habit in order to show that you very much enjoyed a meal—and the higher and stronger the burp, the more you love the food. Your host might be astonished and could negatively evaluate your behaviour. Would they be astonished by who you are or by what you did and how you did it? If they were unaware of your customs, would your host's reaction not feature as a misjudgement or misappraisal? The proposed loosened notion of testimonial injustice aimed to cover this. Not because of who a person is, but because of their abidance by differing conventions to dispense information or failure to meet an audience's expectations, their testimony might be dismissed, the person could be wronged and their knowledge could be misrepresented.

Such a notion was suggested in an analogous way to a modified version of Anderson's (2017) *conceptual competence injustice*, which also deprived it of a connection with identity prejudice (Padilla Cruz 2017b). It could loosely describe the unfair appraisal of a person who misuses vocabulary and is hence deemed not to master it and to lack the corresponding concepts customarily or conventionally encoded by it in a natural language. The incorporation of that less restrictive understanding of that injustice to the field of pragmatics

was also suggested as a way of conceptualising and labelling a harm done to an individual because of perceptions of supposed lacunae in their linguistic production and negative conclusions about their lexical and conceptual repertoires.

Likewise, a loosened, less demanding, vaguer or incomplete notion of testimonial injustice could be useful to pragmatics as a way of alluding to a detrimental effect that arises not necessarily because of an identity prejudice, but because of perceived or supposed deficiencies in an informer's performance. Just as speakers may be thought not to be competent enough in a specific semantic field or to have conceptual lacunae, informers could similarly be regarded as unskilled or unsuccessful owing to deviations, supposed deficiencies or infelicities when dispensing information and have their testimony dismissed. To my mind, these loosened notions of conceptual competence injustice and testimonial injustice could do their work in the field of pragmatics by facilitating conceptualisation and reference to those judgements, thoughts or conclusions.

Dismissive Incomprehension and Face

My characterisation of dismissive incomprehension as a face threatening act along the lines of the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008) has also raised comments. Cull considers that “[...] we should not think that face is the whole story when it comes to dismissive incomprehension” because “[...] face is a *self-image* and acts of dismissive incomprehension need not affect a self-image in order to be felicitous” (2020, 60). They rightly add that acts of dismissive incomprehension performed face-to-face, with the physical co-presence of the attacker and the victim, must be differentiated from those in which the victim's testimony is challenged in their absence: “A [the victim] need not encounter B's [the attacker] act of incomprehension” (Cull 2020, 60).

This notwithstanding, would the latter acts not damage the victim's reputation as informer and, hence, their quality face as such? To my mind, they would. Indeed, for acts to threaten another individual's face, they need not be confined to situations where a damager is physically in front of their victim, but may be directed to absent third parties. In any case, the absent third party has their value or reputation undermined and perhaps diminished. As Cull aptly clarifies, what matters “[...] is that audience C does hear B [the attacker]” (2020, 60). This is the key issue: the attacker must have a victim, a target, and portray them as speaking nonsense and, therefore, as not deserving credibility in front of the audience, so that its members agree that the victim certainly does not deserve it.

Acts of dismissive incomprehension question self-perceptions and/or ideas about skillfulness and knowledge, but also those perceptions or ideas that the audience may have about the person whose testimony is dismissed. Undeniably, that is a damage to the victim's face, no matter whether victims are present or absent, and no matter whether what is questioned is the victim's own perceptions or ideas, or those of the audience about the victim. Furthermore, in so doing, the attacker might not simply pursue damaging the victim's self-perceptions or estimates, or those of the audience about the victim. The attacker might have a hidden agenda: they might also seek to enhance or boost their own quality face as epistemic agent and reinforce their epistemic authority. Dismissive incomprehension would then fulfil a twofold function; it would be a double-edged sword: in addition to being a face threatening act targeted at the victim, it would be a *face boosting* or *face enhancing* act that the

attacker targets at themselves (Bayraktaroglu 1991; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992, 1997; Sifianou 1995, 1997).

Silence as a Response to Dismissive Incomprehension

My reply to Cull (2019) called for more research on responses to acts of dismissive incomprehension, above all when they are performed in virtual environments through the new information technologies (Padilla Cruz 2019). However, I only suggested that studies could be made about the victim's reactions. In their ensuing reply, Cull (2020) very opportunely points out that such an investigation should differentiate between the responses that the attacker could expect from the victim or from the audience in front of whom the damaging act is performed.

Concerning responses from the audience, Cull thinks that the attacker would expect and prefer silent acceptance of their attack, while “[...] counter-arguments to their claims” (2020, 61) would count as dispreferred and unexpected responses, as they would put into question the attacker's own reasons for performing the act and the act itself. Silence would then work as a *negative-politeness strategy* (Brown and Levinson 1987) by means of which the audience of the act exhibits respect, deference or considerateness to the attacker, or even tacitly acknowledges their role of epistemic authority (Tannen 1985, 98; Sifianou 1995, 104-106, 1997, 72-74). As for responses from the victim, when this is absent, the attacker might not have a preference, as “[...] there is no way that [the victim] could have heard or responded to [the attacker's] utterances” (Cull 2020, 62). Indeed, the victim could be dead, which automatically precludes uptake and responses, as well as any risk of conflict (Cull 2020, 60).

In online environments like *Twitter*, if the victim did not participate, the attacker would expect “[...] silent approval [...]”, but not “[...] responses [...] from each of [their] twitter followers to [their] utterance” (Cull 2020, 62). Alternatively, the attacker could also expect “[...] likes, retweets, and even some tweets of agreement and tweets offering other putative examples of [the victim] uttering nonsense” (Cull 2020, 62). Dispreferred reactions would comprise “[...] tweets offering obviously interpretable translations of [the victim's] writing, criticisms and insults suggesting that he should understand [the victim's] writing, and examples of [their] own writing that are difficult to understand” (Cull 2020, 62). If the victim saw the attack, the attacker could also expect silent acceptance and no attempt at challenging or counteracting the damage inflicted to them. Indeed, Cull considers that dismissive incomprehension “[...] is partly aimed at just *shutting people up*” (2020, 62, emphasis in the original).

Now, could we really say that silence is always to be a preferred response, regardless of the victim's (un)awareness of the act of dismissive incomprehension? I do not think so, as it is extremely ambiguous (Kurzon 1992). Silence involves absence of words and, although it may work as a stimulus, it does not rely on linguistic encoding. On plenty of occasions it cannot be used as more or less reliable indirect evidence for an easily identifiable *informative intention*, or the intention to make manifest a particular set of assumptions to an individual—in other words, that an individual constructs a mental representation of a message, in Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) relevance-theoretic terminology.

For silence to communicate, it must be perceived as an *ostensive* and *intentional* act with which its producer makes manifest a *communicative intention* to its perceiver—or the intention that the perceiver mentally represents the fact the producer has some informative intention. Since the perceiver subsequently has to infer the producer's informative intention and there is no encoded input, that inferential work may yield an inadequate or wrong output: an erroneous interpretation liable to originate misunderstanding (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

Silence does communicate when it is ostensively and intentionally produced, and thus makes manifest a communicative intention. It may be a means to avoid a conflict (Tannen 1990; Jaworski 1993; Sifianou 1995, 1997). As a response to an action involving some imposition, like a request, silence excludes a negative response, like non-compliance. Yet, the perceiver might still prefer a verbal action, no matter whether it is negative, as it reduces their inferential work and provides them with much clearer evidence for its producer's intention (Sifianou 1995, 100; 1997, 71).

Owing to its ambivalence, silence may similarly be a response aimed at putting the attacker down. Through it, the victim of an act of dismissive incomprehension would be implicitly communicating something like “So he thinks that what I say/write is incomprehensible. Don't you think he is stupid/Can't you see his stupidity?” In other words, by remaining silent in front of an act of dismissive incomprehension the victim, far from accepting the act itself, might question the legitimacy of the act, which they consider gratuitous or unwarranted, and ultimately the attacker. Obviously, for silence to achieve this, it would need to be accompanied by other paralinguistic clues, such as a sneer, a scornful or sarcastic look, or frowning. Silence would thus facilitate replacement of an expression of disagreement, disapproval or disdain likely to threaten the attacker's positive or quality face. It could count as a polite response (Sifianou 1995, 102), as it enables refrainment from overt questioning, challenge or counter-attack while simultaneously, and implicitly, doing any of these to the attacker. Even if dismissive incomprehension attempts to damage the victim's quality face, by remaining silent the victim seeks to regain, enhance or boost their quality face.

Finally, and also owing to its ambiguity, silence needs not always mean that the victim accepts the detrimental act, but that they are annoyed, irritated or shy enough to not respond to it, or that they do not even care about responding to it because they think that doing so is not worth the effort. In this way, silence may work as a strategy to show indifference, reclaim power over the attacker (Kurzon 1992) by suggesting the victim's actual role as a credible and comprehensible epistemic agent (Watts 1997). All in all, its ambivalence renders silence an “[...] extreme manifestation of indirectness” (Tannen 1985, 97) because what is at stake is not saying something and meaning the opposite or something different, but not saying something and meaning something that may be incredibly difficult to pin down.

Conclusion

I hope to have clarified my viewpoints and ideas about dismissive incomprehension. In addition to being an extremely prejudicial action, it is very complex and does not simply affect self-perceptions, but also those of the people in front of whom the act is performed. Its contribution to causing or furthering testimonial injustice is obvious. Although reacting to it by means of silence could mean tacitly accepting the act, silence might communicate

many other things, so it should not automatically be seen as an expected or preferable response. Lastly, a lighter version of testimonial injustice in the field of pragmatics could be used as a way of conceptualising and labelling a negative effect of informing. However, it is still too soon to conclude. Further reflection, research and collaboration will no doubt help us understand dismissive incomprehension and have a more thorough appraisal of the epistemic dynamics in which individuals may engage.

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