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

By Walter Barta

University of Houston

January, 2021 (DRAFT)

Attributions of certain speech-acts, like dog-whistling and wolf-crying, have an interesting complementary and antagonistic relationship that creates a kind of hostile dialectic and emergent divergence in political discourse. In the following, we will show how the wolf-cry and the dog-whistle are both epistemically difficult speech-acts to attribute, leading to asymmetric uncertainties in attribution. These uncertainties cause the attribution of wolf-cries and dog-whistles themselves to often be both reasonable but unconfirmable epistemic claims. Then, we will show how these patterns of attributions can lead to a reciprocal dialectic of entrenched and self-amplifying dog-whistling versus wolf-crying, until an unhappy status quo is developed. This leads to a number of problems, including an epistemic standoff of standpoints, the attribution-saturation of the political discourse, and a condition of self-defeating truth-seeking. Seemingly, the only surefire solution is a unanimous alleviation of such attributions, a standard that may seem insurmountable, though other options can be considered.

Keywords: speech-acts, wolf-crying, dog-whistling, political speech, schismogenesis

Ay—in the catalogue ye go for men.

as hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,

shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves are clept

all by the name of dogs.

(Macbeth, Act III, Scene 1)

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 subsect 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. The bill meant for inner city assistance gets muzzled in gridlock. All the while, the perpetrator remains unidentified and on the loose.

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". Likewise, the dog-whistle is a speech-act that communicates two messages at once, one private and another public, maintaining plausible deniability for the private message, with the covert but intended added (perlocutionary) effect of gathering maximum private support while alienating minimum public support, though with the unintended effect of possibly producing distrust in a suspicious public (Saul, 2018). The wolf-cry is a speech-act that rallies a community against a danger privately observed, usually with the covert but intended added (perlocutionary) effect of gaining maximum attention temporarily, but with the unintended effect of engendering future disbelief in the majority through repeated overuse (Breznitz, 2013).

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. In particular, the act of attributing instances of dog-whistling and wolf-crying has long history in contemporary political analysis, both for dog-whistles (Goodin and Saward, 2005; Lopez, 2014; Stanley, 2015) and for wolf-cries (Ely, 1972). And, notably, both of these speech-acts, dog-whistling and wolf-crying, in isolation seem reasonable to attribute in many cases. It seems obvious that some instances of dog-whistling and wolf-crying exist. Few of us have not had the personal experience of finding out that others have been talking in code to avoid detection or have been exaggerating to afford themselves special privileges. As such, it seems to follow that many attributers of dog-whistling and wolf-crying are correct in their attributions of these speech-acts (but also can be incorrect too).

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? Unfortunately, what seems to occur in the Dogetown scenario described above is a situation in which the speech-act attributions—of wolf-crying and dog-whistling as speech-acts—themselves form a dialectic of different epistemic standpoints, different perspectives regarding knowledge. This dialectic cyclically perpetuates into an unproductive political speech environment, a system of mutually reinforcing antagonistic epistemic standpoints. And, this observed dialectic does not merely seem

true of the dog-whistles and wolf-cries of the Dogetown incident in particular (as our case focuses on), but it seems to be generalizable to wider classes of speech-act attributions as well, such that speech-act attribution itself is the mechanism of a general kind of political conflict. But how does a series of relatively understandable speech-acts, seemingly benign in themselves, result in such a perverse and pervasive cumulative outcome? 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).

Dog-whistles

The dog-whistle is always a speech-act occurring between one private party (the whistler) and another private party (the whistled-to) but heard by a third party, the public. The speech-act itself consists of the intention of the whistler to send a private message and the interpretation of the whistled-to in receiving a private message. However, one of the conditions of satisfaction of the dog-whistle speech-act is the encoding of the speech such that the greater public community only knows about the public message and not the private message. Thus, dog-whistling necessarily has an misdirecting ("covert perlocutionary") effect on the audience: the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning of the dog-whistle 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 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 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 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 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 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 likely remains an unverified and unfalsified speech-act.

Wolf-cries

Likewise, the wolf-cry is always a speech-act occurring between a private party (the crier) in a public (the cried-to) about another private party (the alleged wolf), who has not been publicly proven to actually exist. The speech-act itself consists of the intention of the crier to send a public message about a private observation, which itself is presumptively veridical (Descartes 1644/1984: I.66, p. 216). Unlike dog-whistling, wolf-crying is a direct speech-act because the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning "Wolf!" seems to directly correspond to the implied (illocutionary) force "Beware of wolf!", unless the wolf is a lie, in which case the act has the added (perlocutionary) effect of deception, and the publicly stated (locutionary) meaning "Wolf!" does not correspond to the speaker's implied (illocutionary) meaning but instead seems to indirectly imply to something like "Give me attention!", likewise making it something of a *misdirecting speech-act* or "covert perlocution" (Saul, 2018). This ambivalence arises because a condition of satisfaction of the wolf-cry speech-act is that the only information the public community has about the veracity of the cry is the wolf-cry itself, such that any given wolf-cry is auto-verifying. In other words, like the dog-whistle, the wolf-cry is reasonably publicly intercepted, but not definitively confirmed, because it maintains plausible deniability, couched in unverified/unfalsified personal testimony. Like a dog-whistle, this makes a wolf-cry different from straightforward deception, because it is an inherently unclear account about states of affairs privately observed. Barring a disproof via a secondhand observation and verification or falsification (through exhaustive search) of the wolf, a wolf-cry may be reasonably inferred but remains an unverified and unfalsified speech-act.

As we will see, the apparently reasonable but unverifiable/unfalsifiable nature of these misdirecting speech-acts has further ramifications for the political speech community.

<div align="center">

TO SEE A WOLF ABOUT A DOG

</div>

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. Attributers of both speech-acts find themselves only accessing part of the evidence, deprived of the rest; they are in a position not unlike the blindmen and the elephant, looking at a particular aspect of a phenomenon as its whole, while only having access to a part of the whole (Ireland, 2007: 81-84). Thus, like various epistemic standpoint theorists have considered, the complications of the standpoint of the perceivers of the speech-act enter into any given attribution (Haraway, 1988).

Dog-whistle Attributions

First, a logical difficulty arises in dog-whistle attribution: because a dog-whistle is necessarily a secret message, and because attributing a dog-whistle necessarily reveals the message, there is a sense in which attributing dog-whistles is incoherent. After all, a secret ceases to be a secret the moment it is unveiled. This strong sense must be dismissed for a weaker sense that is not logically inconsistent: that the dog-whistles can either be discovered or remain undiscovered.

There is nothing incoherent about a private message inadvertently or intentionally being discovered by the public and thus becoming public in this sense.

Even so, attributing dog-whistling presents further epistemic difficulty. Dog-whistle attribution is a speech act that references itself to an instance of dog-whistling. Thus, any such dog-whistle attribution situation has three participants: the whistler, who sends the public message intending the private message; the whistled-to, who receives the public message interpreting a private message; and, the attributer, who intercepts the public message and interprets the private message and identifies the dog-whistle (See Figure 2).

In this though, attributing dog-whistling seems to be intrinsically epistemically contrarian. Specifically, attributing dog-whistling always places itself in the epistemic position of having to be able to prove that something is a dog-whistle, whereas the dog-whistlers themselves always place themselves in the epistemic position of denying dog-whistling. Thus, the dog-whistle attributer cannot appeal to direct evidence because the dog-whistler by definition does not provide it; the dog-whistle attributer must always appeal to indirect evidence. Whereas, the dog-whistlers themselves can always appeal to the direct evidence of their own intention, but their own conceived intention is by definition against the stated intention in order to conceal the dog-whistle. Thus, a dog-whistle attributer is always in the epistemically disadvantaged position of seeking indirect evidence against the dog-whistler who can appeal exclusively to direct (albeit private) evidence and who has an incentive to misdirect. In this epistemic situation, a secondhand observer must claim to have more authoritative knowledge about the intentions of the firsthand observers than the firsthand observers can claim themselves.

Furthermore, unlike lying, which can presumably be revealed as lying by some reference to shared facts of the matter, a dog-whistle attribution has no reference to facts of the matter because the only facts of the matter it is referencing are facts about the intentions of speakers and interpretations of receivers of the dog-whistle speech-act, which themselves are unavailable by definition.

This is problematic for the dog-whistle attributer because they are constantly in the apparent position of claiming something that they (by definition) cannot prove against the party in the best position to define the terms but who (by definition) is unreliable.

Thus, dog-whistler attributers always appear to be wolf-criers. They are in fact "dog-whistler" criers:

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

Because all dog-whistle attribution ends up having the appearance of dog-whistle crying, the attribution is always contentious. The part of the public speech-act community that fails to hear the dog-whistle will interpret the dog-whistler attributers as making much ado about nothing, crying about wolf that they cannot prove exists.

Wolf-cry Attributions

Attributing wolf-crying presents a similar (complementary) epistemic difficulty. Wolf-crying attribution is a speech act that references itself to an instance of wolf-crying. Thus, any such wolf-cry attribution situation has three participants: the crier, who sends the public message about the privately observed wolf; the wolf, who was the privately observed subject of the public message; and, the attributer, who receives the public message about the private observation and identifies it as a wolf-cry (See Figure 1).

In this though, as with attributing dog-whistling, attributing wolf-crying seems to be inherently epistemically contrarian. Specifically, attributing wolf-crying always places itself in the epistemic position of having to be able to prove that the wolf, the subject matter of the cry, does not exist, against the personal experience of the crier. In contrast, the wolf-crying always places itself in the epistemic position of denying false wolf-crying and affirming the existence of the wolf. Thus, the wolf-cry attributer cannot appeal to direct evidence because the wolf-crier by definition does not provide it, only the opposing evidence; the attributer must always appeal to indirect evidence, the absence of apparent wolf. The 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 wolf-cry. A wolf-cry attributer is always in the epistemically disadvantaged position of seeking evidence of absence against a 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.

Again, unlike lying, which can presumably be revealed as lying by some reference to facts of the matter, a wolf-cry attribution has no reference to facts of the matter because the only facts of the matter it is referencing are facts about the private observations of the speaker which are unverifiable to the receivers by definition.

Furthermore, the wolf-cry attributer is always in the position of denying a danger, whereas the wolf-crier is in the position of asserting a danger. This makes the wolf-crier seem to care about the safety of the community; and in contrast, it makes the wolf-cry attributer seem to not care about the safety of the community and perhaps even sympathize with or cover up the alleged danger. Thus, a wolf-cry attributer is further rhetorically disadvantaged by the appearance of apathy (or complicity) with the wolf, against the wolf-crier's apparent concern.

Thus, 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.

Because all wolf-cry attribution ends up having the appearance of wolf-whistling, the attribution is always contentious. The part of the public that may have thought they saw the wolf interprets

the wolf-cry attributers as downplaying a serious danger, and perhaps even whistling to express their sympathy for and complicity with the lurking wolf.
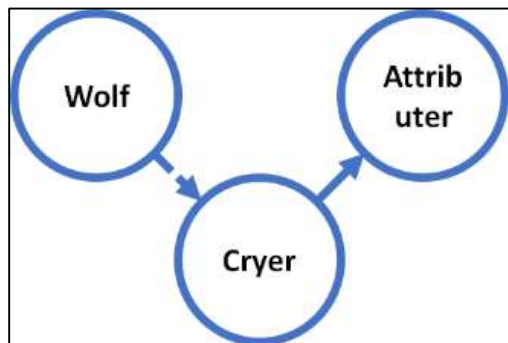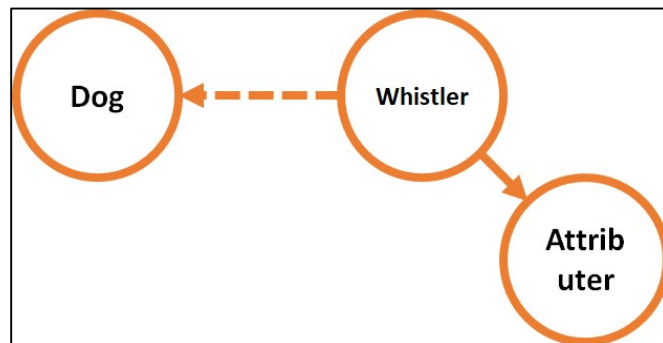

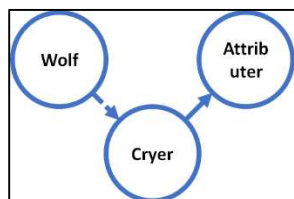*Figure 1: Wolf-Cry Speech-Act*

Figure 2: Dog-Whistle Speech-Act

Figure 3a: Whistle/Cry Dialectic (Step A)
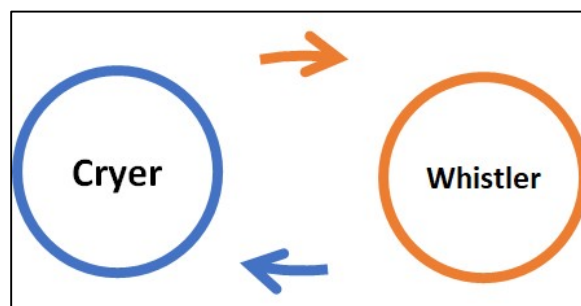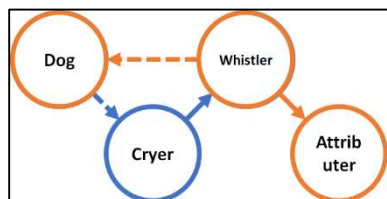
Figure 3b: Attribution Dialectic (Step B)

Figure 3c: Attribution Dialectic (Step C)

Figure 3d: Attribution Dialectic (Step D)

Figure 4: Dog-Whistle/Wolf-Cry Attribution Cycle

Table 1: Speech-Act Attribution Dialectic Steps

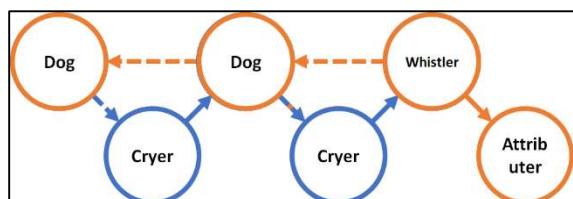| STEP	SPEECH-ACT
A	Attributer A says: There is a Wolf A There is a Cryer A
B	Attributer B says: Wolf A is Dog B Attributer A is Whistler B
C	Attributer C says: Whistler B is Wolf C Attributer B is Cryer C
D	Attributer D says: Wolf C is Dog D Attributer C is Whistler D
ETC.	Ad infinitum…

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, cyclicality, 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). Notably, unlike violence or silence cycles, no animosity or in-grouping need be present in any party for speech-act attribution to go wrong, only a situation of mutual epistemic intractability. As such, we might call this a process of epistemic divergence (or schismogenesis) as facilitated by unverifiable speech-act attributions.

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 attributee, such that the two epistemic positions reinforce each other reciprocally. This is an epistemic tit-for-tat that notices an epistemic quibble and responds with an epistemic counter-quibble, all while the inciting incident is perhaps unconfirmed, becoming a reciprocity of beliefs about each other's beliefs about speech-acts.

We can imagine these cases might also operate in a unipolar reciprocity:

> **Unipolar Speech-Act Attribution Reciprocity**: Attribution of speech-act A can be attributed as an incidence of speech-act A, such that A reciprocally reinforces and amplifies itself.

There are two possible means of unipolar reciprocity:

> **Dog-whistle/Dog-whistle Attribution Reciprocity**: Attribution of a dog-whistle can be attributed as an incidence of a dog-whistle, such that dog-whistles reciprocally reinforce and amplify themselves.

Or:

Wolf-cry/Wolf-Cry Attribution Reciprocity: Attribution of a wolf-cry can be attributed as an incidence of a wolf-cry, such that wolf-cries reciprocally reinforce and amplify themselves.

We can imagine also these cases might also operate in a multipolar reciprocity:

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.

Whether multipolar or unipolar, this reciprocity when iterated over multiple steps leads to a vicious cycle. In terms of Lewis's language-game scorekeeping, such a cycle allows the "conversationalists' scoreboard" to update through indefinite iterations, but with the scoreboard never changing because nothing is ever accommodated as common ground (Lewis, 1979: 344). Particularly the interlocutors behave as in the type of accusation cycles found in cumulative extremism patterns (Eatwell, 2006).

We can imagine these cases might also operate in a unipolar cyclicality:

Unipolar Speech-Act Attribution Cycle: The speech-act A_{n+1} attribution of speech-act A_n is itself open to attribution by speech-act A_{n+2}, such that attribution repeats in a stepwise iteration.

We can also imagine these cases might also operate in a multipolar cyclicality as well:

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 which does not need to provide any advantage, but persists nonetheless, because it also provides no incentive for any particular party to change their rhetorical strategy (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).

Either:

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

Or:

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, they constitute a link, that can extend both directions, into a chain. This chain, extended indefinitely, allows the problem to persist. To the extent that all political problems involve a public problem (wolf/dog) 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, Cyclicality, 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: it neither ensures nor even facilitates the minimal reconciliation of disparate positions, nor does it even prioritize facts of the matter in any given case, nor does it emerge from epistemic vices but the truth-seeking virtues of participants (Yudkowsky, 2017). We will describe these problems in further detail:

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. Thus, the equilibrium seems to be something of an untenable "public sphere", making impossible the production of an "ideal speech situation" that arrives at truth (Payrow Shabani quoting Habermas, 2003: 49). Certain "preconditions for conversation" are not being met (Foss, 1995; 2018).

This is also a potential weakness in certain kinds of epistemic standpoint theories specifically (Haraway). Any epistemology resulting in standoffs certainly has a pragmatic problem, since reconciliation of parties seems perhaps undecidable; it also is potentially self-defeating, if the standoff ends up necessitating two definitions of a given speech-act that are mutually inconsistent. Standoffs are also a problem for peer disagreement in general, if such standoffs can be generated amongst epistemic peers. And standoffs seem to be a special consideration for speech-act theories anytime the attribution of indirect or misdirecting speech-acts become part of the analysis. Furthermore, this is a potential problem even from domains traditionally external to political speech (e.g., literary theory), any discipline that presupposes speech-act attribution as a methodological paradigm.

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.

The speech-act attribution cycle allows for speech-act attribution saturated situations to develop, because speech-act attributions quickly cyclically proliferate far beyond the narrow domain of fact 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. This is because the dubiousness of any given attribution of speech-acts about A may seem more salient than is the inciting incident A itself, such that it is politically more relevant to attempt to clarify the attribution than to clarify the inciting incident itself. Although the inciting incident may be one of epistemic unknowability, the attributions themselves as incidents become more well-documented than the inciting incident itself. And, to the extent that an attribution makes more claims than the inciting incident itself, there may be epistemic baggage that remains unclarified even after the inciting is verified or falsified. Thus, as it seems, fact has nothing to do with it. Once the speech-act attribution saturated situation becomes stable, that can be a fact-independent condition.

Notably, this saturation via metacommunication unfortunately undermines Tannen's advice for using "meta-communication" to resolve conflict, since we have shown that spoken conflict can just as easily be constituted by speech-acts of attribution, especially if those attributions are easily interpretable as misdirecting speech-acts themselves (Tannen, 1987). Indeed, Tannen's advice may resolve first-order conflicts but at the expense of laying the groundwork for second-order conflicts. Furthermore, even applying rhetorical listening tactics may undermine the situation if the listening style requires implicit speech-act attributions to get started (Ratcliffe, 1999; Ratcliffe, 2022).

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 be defeat itself to the extent that this pursuit might counterproductively produce situations unfavorable to truth emerging. Thus, speech-act attribution may exemplify what some authors identify as a self-defeating value system (Parfit, 1984: 55-56). Unfortunately, as shown in the mechanisms above, speech-act attribution equilibriums all may have been produced by a discourse community that is completely truth-seeking, with no need for epistemic vices by any parties. Attribution in any given case may be a reasonable (if not definitive) judgement of the situation from a given epistemic situation. Dog-whistling and wolf-crying may truly be what the speech-act really seems like from respective standpoints. Worse, any given attributer may be correct in their attribution. Dog-whistling and/or wolf-crying may truly be what is happening. Unfortunately, though, with no necessary reference to the truth or falsity of attributions, the attributions themselves participate in the vicious cycles of antagonistic discourse. These reasonable attributions appear unreasonable from another standpoint and thus the attributions themselves become sites of dispute. In any given case of apparent dog-whistling or wolf-crying, even if an attribution is completely reasonable or correct, it may be politically destabilizing to propose these attributions where epistemic uncertainty predominates. So, the truth-conducive impulses of the attributers may themselves be drive the speech-actors into the pitfalls of the bad equilibria. In other words, in an important sense, the vicious cycle may be a result of the truth-conducive purpose of discourse in any given instance.

Counterintuitively, breaking the cycle may require a less truth-conducive (perhaps more rapport-conducive) discourse (Carnegie, 2012).

BONES TO GIVE

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

First, the difficulties presented here seem to be self-organizing social phenomena of mutually reasonable epistemic standpoints and thus are not amenable to individual solutions. In other words, we cannot point at a guilty party as being wholly and especially responsible independent of the speech-act system in the community. Rather, the situation becomes an equilibrium due to a dynamic between parties, all of whom are attempting to uncover the truth in a situation where the truth is difficult. The difficulties are also reciprocal in that they only operate because of an adversarial interaction forming an attributional equilibrium. Worse, although the problem may not be individually solved, it may be individually created, since it seems sufficient that the reciprocity be carried on by a single pair of participants in any given political environment. Thus, to exit the equilibrium would seem to require the unanimous consent of participants in the political community, a solution that seems inherently unstable in the face of powerful dissenter— this is due to what some have called the "unilateralist's curse", the possibility that, given any particular metastable social state, a dissenter might undermine it through non-conformity (Bostrom et al., 2016). Barring total unanimity in abdicating reasonable speech-act attributions, these perverse equilibria may simply be a persistently stable feature of political discourse. That being said, there may be incremental improvements.

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. Furthermore, even verifying an inciting incident may be inadequate to verify the subsequent cascade of participating cries and whistles. So, the better solution might be to reduce speech-act attribution saturation of any given situation, such that questions about facts of the matter become salient once again, not buried beneath speech-act attributions. As such, if certain aspects of the difficulties are rhetorical, not truth-apt, they may only be amenable to a system of rhetorical listening, those special skillsets conducive to better listening (Graff & Birkenstein, 2007; Pittendrigh, 2022). This would require some sort of reorientation of the speech-act environment to facilitate participatory listening by all parties, if only to rhetorically prepare the field to give the facts their fair play.

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. Acknowledging our own part in this way may simply be the self-knowledge required of all parties to improve political discourse. Indeed, as previously noted, this whole analysis itself has been an exercise in speech-act attribution, the very exercise of which is the root of the problem. So, whether these analyses and strategies (can even) catch on, or whether they cause problems of their own, is an open question. Hopefully though, 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.

REFERENCES

Aesop, *"*151. The Boy Who Cried 'Wolf'.*"* Laura Gibbs (trans), from *mythfolklore.net*.

Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to do Things with Words*, 2nd edition, J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisá (eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bateson, G. (1972) Steps to an Ecology of Mind, Chandler Publishing Company.

Bateson, G. (1935) "Culture Contact and Schismogenesis." Man. Vol. 35 (Dec., 1935): pp. 178-183.

Bertolet, R. (1994) 'Are there indirect speech acts?' in in S. Tsohatzidis (ed.) *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives*, London: Routledge: pp. 335–49.

Bertolet, R. (2017) 'On the arguments for indirect speech ats,' *Philosophia*, vol. 45: pp. 533–40.

Bostrom, N., T. Douglas & A. Sandberg (2016) "The unilateralist's curse and the case for a principle of conformity." *Social Epistemology*, vol. 30: pp. 350-371.

Breznitz, S. (1984) *Cry wolf: The psychology of false alarms*. Psychology Press.

Carnegie, Dale, 2012, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Arrow.

de Córdoba, G. F. (1997) "On the existence of a beliefs social equilibrium." *Economics Letters*, Volume 55, Issue 3, 12 September 1997: pp. 431-433

Descartes, R. (1644/1984) "Principles of Philosophy", in Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (trans.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eatwell, R. (2006) "Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism in Contemporary Britain". *The Political Quarterly,* **77** (2): *204–216.*

Ely, J. H. (1973) "The wages of crying wolf: A comment on Roe v. Wade," *Yale Law Journal,* 1973 Apr;82(5):920-49.

Fear, J. (2007) "Under the Radar: Dog-whistle Politics in Australia," *The Australia Institute 96.*

Foss, Sonja K. "Cluster Criticism." Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice. Fifth edition, Waveland Press, Illinois, 2018, p. 61-104.

Foss, Sonja K.; Cindy L. Griffin. "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric." Communication Monographs, volume 62, March 1995.

Goodin, R. and Saward M. (2005) "Dogwhistles and Democratic Mandates", *Political Quarterly* 76(4):471-6.

Graff, G. and Birkenstein C. (2007) *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*. New York: Norton & Company.

Grice, H.P. (1989) *Studies in the Way of Words.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Haraway, D. (1988) "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, 14: 575–599.

John D. Ireland (2007). *Udana and the Itivuttaka: Two Classics from the Pali Canon.* Buddhist Publication Society: pp. 9, 81–84.

King, M. L. Jr. (2011) *Struggle for Equality: Quotes From Martin Luther King, Jr.* Scholastic Inc..

Lewis, D. (1979) 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game,' *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8: 339–59.

Lopez, I. (2014) *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and*

Wrecked the Middle Class. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nash, J. (1951) "Non-Cooperative Games" *The Annals of Mathematics,* 54(2):286-295.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1977) "Turbulences in the climate of opinion: Methodological applications of the spiral of silence theory", *Public Opinion Quarterly, 41 (2): 143–158.*

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984) *The spiral of silence: Public opinion, our social skin.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons.* Oxford University Press.

Payrow Shabani, O. A. (2003) *Democracy, Power and Legitimacy: The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas.* University of Toronto Press.

Pittendrigh, N. "Chapter 5: Whole-Self Rhetoric: Teaching the Justice Situation in the Composition Classroom." Forthcoming.

Ratcliffe, K. (1999) "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct'." *CCC* 51.2, December 1999, pp. 195-224.

Ratcliffe, K., Jensen, K., 2022, *Rhetorical Listening in Action: A Concept-Tactic Approach*, Parlor Press.

Quaranto, A. (2022) "Dog whistles, covertly coded speech, and the practices that enable them.*" Synthese*, 200 (4):1-34.

Safire, W. (2008) *Safire's Political Dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Saul, J, 2018. 'Dogwhistles, political manipulation, and the philosophy of language,' in D. Fogal, D. Harris, and M. Moss (eds.) *New Work on Speech Acts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 360–83.

Searle, J., 1979. 'Indirect speech acts,' in his *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stanley, J. 2015. The Problem of Propaganda. Princeton University Pres..

Tannen, Deborah, 1987, *That's Not What I Meant*. Ballantine Books.

Vidal, José Ramón Torices, THEORIA. An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science, Understanding Dogwhistles Politics (Preprint Version), 2021.

Wheeler, BC, Monkeys crying wolf? Tufted capuchin monkeys use anti-predator calls to usurp resources from conspecifics Proceedings of the Royal Society B …, 2009 - royalsocietypublishing.org

Witten, Kim, Dogwhistle Politics: the New Pitch of an Old Narrative, 2014.

Yudkowsky, Eliezer. *Inadequate Equilibria: Where and How Civilizations Get Stuck*. November 15, 2017 by