

# Relevance Theory & the Social Realities of Communication

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# What I Will Argue

A central tenet of theories of meaning in the Gricean tradition—such as Relevance Theory—is that others will come to believe certain things simply by recognizing our intentions to communicate.

# What I Will Argue

Of course some reject an intentionalist account of meaning.

I will assume an intentionalist account of meaning as a starting place for this talk and argue from there.

# What I Will Argue

I will argue that those working in the Gricean tradition (here my focus is Relevance Theory) need to consider the additional burden that is borne by some interlocutors in getting others to come to believe some content  $p$ .

# What I Will Argue

In particular, I demonstrate how a response to persistent testimonial injustice can be understood in terms of Sperber & Wilson's 2015 distinction between meaning-that and showing-that (which they presented at this conference and then published in *The Croatian Journal of Philosophy* as “Beyond Speaker's Meaning”).

# What I Will Argue

I argue that a speaker who experiences repeated Testimonial Injustice will move down Sperber & Wilson's meaning vs. showing continuum.

This explains an additional downstream effect of Testimonial Injustice not explicitly discussed by Fricker in her work.

# What I Will Argue

Overall, by bringing Fricker's notion of Testimonial Injustice to bear on Relevance Theory, I draw attention to one way that social factors affect the reality of how interlocutors communicate.

# What I Will Argue

I see this talk not as a criticism of either the Sperber & Wilson or Fricker position--but as a fruitful way of uniting and building on both of their theories.

[Just as some context: this paper is invited for a special issue of a psychology journal on Relevance Theory, so that's the audience I have in mind.]



# What I Will Argue

A “big picture” point about social factors and language:

to be sure—to an extent we must abstract away from the details of particular exchanges to develop coherent theories of meaning.

But at a certain point these social realities of communication need to be accounted for.

# What I Will Argue

The social realities I discuss here are an important aspect of communicative exchanges that should not be always overlooked by philosophers of language—especially those who wish to not abstract away from but to capture what we actually do with language in the world.

# Outline

I. Meaning & Showing

II. Some Motivating Examples

III. Social Interpretation

IV. Takeaways

## Meaning & Showing

In their paper “Beyond Speaker’s Meaning” Sperber & Wilson argue that Relevance Theory best captures what we want from a theory of communication—i.e. is more “conceptually unified” (117), picks out “the proper object of a philosophical definition or a scientific theory” (117), and “makes good sense of our fuzzy intuitions about speaker meaning” (117).

## Meaning & Showing

“In characterising ostensive communication, we built on the first two clauses of Grice’s definition and dropped the third. This was not because we were willing to broaden the definition of utterer’s meaning—we agreed with Grice that talk of ‘meaning’ is awkward in certain cases—but because it seemed obvious that there is a continuum of cases between ‘meaning that’ (typically achieved by the use of language) and displaying evidence that (in other words, showing) and we wanted our account of communication to cover both” (119)

# Meaning & Showing

Sperber & Wilson write that meaning that (MT) is “typically achieved by the use of language” and that showing that (ST) is “displaying evidence that” (Sperber & Wilson 2015: 119).

“What time is the next  
train to Oxford?”

“12.48”

Meaning



Showing

Determinate

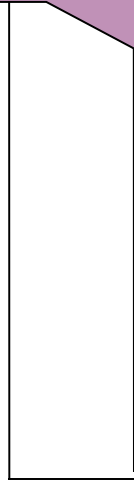
Meaning

“Who is the tallest pupil  
in the class?”

Pointing, “He is”



Showing





Determinate

Meaning



“What is the time?”

Points to a clock

Showing

## Meaning & Showing

By dropping the third clause--that the recognition of the speaker's intention be *the basis* for a hearer to produce some response--their account covers a wide range of communicative acts.

For instance, when presented with direct evidence of some fact, such as that I have a bad leg, recognition of my intention is no longer a *reason* to come to believe some proposition, such as that I cannot play squash.

In such cases the intention is superseded by the direct evidence.

## Meaning & Showing

In other words, their account can be understood as explaining the various ways to get others to believe certain things or behave in certain ways.

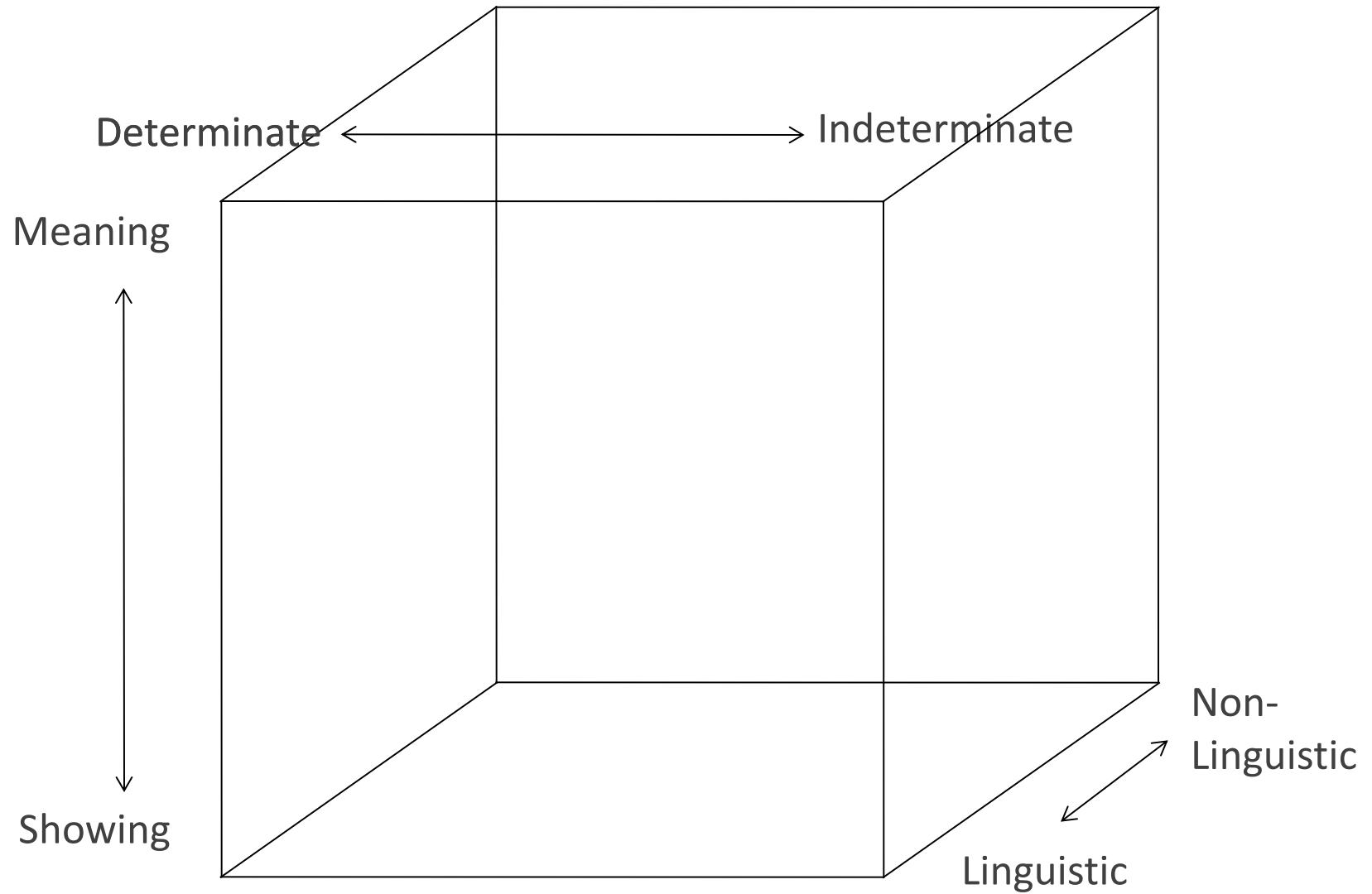
Sometimes we do this with MT utterances, and sometimes with ST displaying direct evidence, as the Sperber & Wilson MT-ST continuum makes explicit.

# Meaning & Showing

I should also just note that in their 2015 paper Sperber & Wilson distinguish not only between meaning and showing but also between determinate and indeterminate content.

For my purposes, I will be focusing on just determinate content, because otherwise the details of the theory become unwieldy.

For further discussion of the Sperber & Wilson  
continua in all its glory see Johnson 2019.



# Meaning & Showing

Sperber and Wilson present their account in terms of manifestness

When some content  $p$  is shown or meant, this is the sort of thing that makes  $p$  more manifest on the Sperber & Wilson picture.

# Meaning & Showing

Manifestness is a combination of epistemic strength and salience

'Salience' here is what they called 'accessibility' in *Relevance* (133)

# Meaning & Showing

Manifestness is the extent to which, for any given proposition, the interlocutor “is likely to some positive degree to entertain it and accept it as true” (134)



## Some Motivating Examples

Let me now give 3 anecdotes that illustrate the difference between meaning that (MT) and showing that (ST).

This first example has me as the hearer/one being persuaded that  $p$  in the exchange.

This second and third examples have me as the speaker/one wishing to persuade that  $p$  in the exchange.

# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 1 – Jury Duty



# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 1 – Jury Duty

A few years ago, I received an email from a student saying that she could not come to class because she had jury duty.

Any professor is familiar with emails of this sort and we get many of them each week.

My standard response, as I believe is the case for many others, is to tell the student that they should get the notes from another student.

# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 1 – Jury Duty

If the student says they are sick I also tell them I hope they feel better soon.

It frankly does not matter to me if they are lying, and realistically I know a certain percentage will be.

I emailed this standard response to the student who said she had jury duty.

# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 1 – Jury Duty

My student then replied again with a photo of her jury summons.

I had not asked her for it.

“Professor I can’t come  
to class because I  
have jury duty”

Meaning



Showing

## Case 1 – Jury Duty



Determinate

Meaning



Sends photo of jury  
summons

Showing

## Case 1 – Jury Duty



# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 2 - Bracelet





## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 2 - Bracelet

This spring I ordered a bracelet online.

The package came on time as expected.

I opened the sealed shipping box. There was no indication it had been opened.

The shipping box contained a velvety bag, which contained a small padded box.

## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 2 - Bracelet

The small padded box was empty.

Strangely, it contained the price tag that should have been attached to the bracelet.

The box had apparently not been tampered with so it seemed like the issue originated when it was packed.

## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 2 - Bracelet

I wanted my bracelet or a refund for the money.

I called and described the situation to them. I knew it sounded strange—because it was in fact strange.

The person I spoke with on the phone asked me to send them a picture as evidence.

I asked what I can send as evidence—all I have is an empty box.

## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 2 - Bracelet

She told me to send a picture of the empty box and I did.

(Obviously this proves nothing.)

But they accepted this and sent me a new bracelet.

“The bracelet I ordered  
didn’t come in the box  
that was delivered”

Meaning



Showing

## Case 2 – Bracelet



Determinate

Meaning



Showing

Sends photo of empty  
box

## Case 2 – Bracelet



# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 3 - Dresses



# Some Motivating Examples:

## Case 3 - Dresses

About a month ago I ordered 6 dresses online.

I happened to be outside for the delivery and I accepted the box directly from FedEx.



## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 3 - Dresses

When I got inside I saw that the box was very squished.

The original brown tape was opened and it had been haphazardly taped again with clear tape.

I opened the box to find 2 of the 6 dresses inside.

## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 3 - Dresses

My thinking here was shaped by my previous experience.

I saved the box—now at least I had some evidence that could show it had been opened and then resealed.

I called customer service and explained the situation.

They said there would be an “investigation”.

It didn't sound promising.

## Some Motivating Examples:

### Case 3 - Dresses

Next thing I knew I had a refund for the full price to my credit card—so I ended up getting 2 dresses for free.

I never needed the damaged box as evidence so I recycled it.

“4 of the 6 dresses I  
ordered didn’t come.  
The box was opened”

Meaning



Showing

## Case 3 – Dresses



Determinate

Meaning



Prepared to show a  
photo of the box  
(anticipated but not  
needed here)

Showing

## Case 3 – Dresses



## Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

In Case 2, I tried to get the customer service agent to believe that my item had been missing from the package.

I told her this verbally—a case of MT.

This was not sufficient and she asked me to ST—provide “evidence”—and so I sent the photo of the empty box.

## Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

In Case 3 I again tried to get the customer service agent to believe that 4 of my items had been missing from the package.

I told her this verbally—a case of MT.

This was sufficient and I was not asked to ST—to send a photo of the box.

## Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

However, in Case 3 I still incurred the cost of saving the box. I was less confident that I would be believed just on the basis of my word.

My expectation had been shaped by my previous experience where I first tried to get the agent to believe something with my word alone.

Since this wasn't enough I prepared to show evidence in a similar interaction in the future.



# Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

In Case 1 the student first MT when she told me she had jury duty.

The student ST when she sent the photo, providing me with direct evidence.

I hadn't asked her for this photo.

# Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

What exactly had caused her to make this shift?

Did she send me the picture of her jury summons because she thought I believed she way lying?

## Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

Just like me with the customer service agents, she likely had experienced a similar situation in the past.

She likely had had a professor or teacher who didn't accept her word as enough and asked for direct evidence.

She evidently thought that my response meant that I needed further evidence and thus provided it.

## Some Motivating Examples

Moving down the meaning-showing continuum is a result of a speaker learning that recognition of her intention has not in her experience been sufficient to induce the intended response in the hearer.

This was seen in Cases 1, 2, and 3.

## Some Motivating Examples: Takeaways

The costs of communication are not equal for all interlocutors—they are greater for those who must show what they wish to make manifest to their hearers.

# Social Interpretation

Why would someone, on an occasion, choose to provide direct evidence of some fact rather than expect that their communicative intention alone would be enough to make some content manifest in the hearer?

The answer has to do with how they expect they will be interpreted.

# Social Interpretation

If we reflect on social realities it becomes clear that manifestness—the extent to which, for any given proposition, an interlocutor “is likely to...accept it as true” (134) depends not just on the proposition itself but on *who says* that statement to us.

# Social Interpretation

In “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” Davidson at one point draws our attention to certain socially-relevant features of a speaker: “character, dress, role, sex, of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by the speaker’s behavior, linguistic or otherwise”.

As he writes an interpreter “alters his theory” in light of these factors. (Neale’s epistemic/interpretive question)



# Social Interpretation

An interpreter has, at any moment of a speech transaction, what I persist in calling a theory. (I call it a theory, as remarked before, only because a description of the interpreter's competence requires a recursive account.) I assume that the interpreter's theory has been adjusted to the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex, of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by the speaker's behavior, linguistic or otherwise. As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory.

-Davidson in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" 260

# Social Interpretation

Davidson does not specify exactly how an interpreter would alter his theory in light of each of these factors, but we can turn to Fricker to consider some specific relevant examples of just this very thing.

# Social Interpretation

In her work Fricker presents a “socially situated account”, which she defines as “an account such that the participants are conceived not in abstraction from relations of social power...but as operating as social types who stand in relations of power to one another” (Fricker 2007: 3).

## Social Interpretation

“We are picturing hearers as confronted with the immediate task of gauging how likely it is that what a speaker has said is true. Barring a wealth of personal knowledge of the speaker as an individual, such a judgment of credibility must reflect some kind of social generalization about the epistemic trustworthiness—the competence and sincerity—of people of the speaker’s social type, so that it is inevitable (and desirable) that the hearer should spontaneously avail himself of the relevant generalizations in the shorthand form of (reliable) stereotypes”

# Social Interpretation

“In face-to-face testimonial exchanges the hearer must make some attribution of *credibility* regarding the speaker. Such attributions are surely governed by no precise science, but clearly there can be error in the direction of excess or deficit”

-Fricker *Epistemic Injustice* 18

# Social Interpretation

Fricker has us consider a case of the dependable family doctor (32).

Consider the following utterance said by a family doctor:

“You will be at increased risk of heart attack if you get the new covid-19 booster”.

And consider again the utterance said by the person sitting next to you on the airplane you took to this conference.

# Social Interpretation

Manifestness in the Sperber & Wilson sense clearly isn't just a matter of the content of some proposition—it also depends who asserts this content to us.

And it should: we should not take all people to be equally reliable sources of information, indiscriminately changing our beliefs regardless of who is the source.

# Social Interpretation

“Much of everyday testimony requires the hearer to engage in a social categorization of speakers, and this is how stereotypes oil the wheels of testimonial exchange”  
(Fricker 32)

Picture again that reliable family doctor. Get a clear mental picture.



# Social Interpretation

Consider now the gender, race, and accent of the family doctor you were picturing.

What Fricker draws particular attention to in her work is the way that identity prejudice can be present in otherwise rational assessments of speaker credibility.

# Social Interpretation

“Many of the stereotypes of historically powerless groups such as women, black people, or working-class people variously involve an association with some attribute inversely related to competence or sincerity or both: over-emotionality, illogicality, inferior intelligence..” (32)

# Social Interpretation

Fricker calls “testimonial injustice” when “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (2007: 1)

# Social Interpretation

Fricker vividly illustrates what Testimonial Injustice looks like with a discussion of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## Social Interpretation

“The year is 1935, and the scene a courtroom in Maycomb County, Alabama. The defendant is a young black man named Tom Robinson. He is charged with raping a white girl, Mayella Ewell, whose family’s run-down house he passes every day on his way to work, situated as it is on the outskirts of town in the borderlands that divide where whites and blacks live. It is obvious to any reader, and to any relatively unprejudiced person in the courtroom, that Tom Robinson is entirely innocent...”

## Social Interpretation

“...For Atticus Finch, our politely spoken counsel for the defense, has proved beyond doubt that Robinson could not have beaten the Ewell girl so as to cause the sorts of cuts and bruises she sustained that day, since whoever gave her the beating led with his left fist, whereas Tom Robinson’s left arm is disabled, having been injured in a machinery accident when he was a boy. The trial proceedings enact what is in one sense a straightforward struggle between the power of evidence and the power of racial prejudice, with the all-white jury’s judgment ultimately succumbing to the latter.” (23)

# Social Interpretation

Fricker presents this case as a “struggle between the power of evidence and the power of racial prejudice”.

We also see illustrated in this case a struggle between MT and ST.

# Social Interpretation

In claiming that Tom Robinson raped her Mayella Ewell is able to MT and be believed.

Tom Robinson, through his lawyer Atticus Finch, knows that to simply MT in reply will not lead the jury to believe that Tom is innocent.



## Social Interpretation

Lawyers in presenting their cases do sometimes rely on MT. They coach witnesses on how to appear credible and bring in expert witnesses.

But in Tom's case—given how he will be perceived as an African American man at this time in America—ST is needed.

Atticus in representing his client moves down the MT-ST continuum.

# Social Interpretation

As readers who know his innocence we hope this will be enough. But it still is not.

As Fricker writes, “They fail, as Atticus Finch feared, precisely in their duty to believe Tom Robinson” (26).

# Social Interpretation

Of course, most situations in which we try to convince someone of something are not played out in the court of law, but in more informal circumstances.

We do see parallels however in “the court of the professor’s decision” and “the court of the customer service representative”.

# Social Interpretation

Depending on the stereotypes we have about a speaker they will sometimes be able to persuade with MT, sometimes with ramping things up to ST, and sometimes not even ST will be enough.

# Social Interpretation

Fricker's observations, as she notes, are borne out not just by fictions such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but by social psychology research as well.

As Fricker cites Shelley E. Taylor (1982) “Empirical work on non-social judgments indicates that the perceiver employs shortcuts or heuristics to free capacity and transmit information as quickly as possible”.

She notes that this need not be conscious or deliberate, citing Kahneman and Tversky (1973).

# Social Interpretation

“Speakers of low prestige varieties [of language] frequently face prejudice and discrimination” (Dragojevic et al 67)

# Social Interpretation

## High Prestige Varieties of Language:

“Research shows that language varieties within a given society can be ordered on a hierarchy of prestige, typically corresponding to the socioeconomic status of the social groups they are associated with. Varieties associated with socioeconomically dominant groups tend to carry high prestige; these typically include majority group languages, standard varieties—namely those that have been codified” (Dragojevic et al. 63)

# Social Interpretation

## Low Prestige Varieties of Language:

“Varieties associated with socioeconomically subordinate groups tend to carry low prestige; these typically include minority group language, nonstandard varieties—namely those that diverge from codified norms, including most regional and ethnic dialects and foreign accents—and other forms linked to stigmatized groups (e.g. gay/lesbian speech)” (Dragojevic et al. 63)



# Social Interpretation

At 5 months old infants can distinguish between native and foreign accents (Kinzler et al., 2007)

“Infants express a clear social preference for native- over foreign-language speakers, without any knowledge of specific linguistic stereotypes” (Dragojevic et al. 63)

At age 10 to 12 months infants are “more likely to accept toys from native over foreign language speakers” (Kinzler et al., 2007)

# Social Interpretation

Preschoolers trust native-language friends more than foreign-language friends (Kinzler et al., 2007)

In media, “standard speakers tend to be portrayed in positive roles, whereas nonstandard speakers—particularly foreign-accented speakers—in negative roles” This is seen in Disney movies, cartoons, and primetime television (Dragojevic et al. 67)

# Social Interpretation

Nonstandard speakers “tend to be judged as less credible, truthful, and accurate eyewitnesses” (Dragojevic et al 68).

“In simulated criminal proceedings, nonstandard speakers are often judged as more guilty than standard speakers...and as more likely to be re-accused of a crime, regardless of the quality of the evidence presented against them” (Dragojevic et al 68)

# Social Interpretation

Accent cues are one way that a speaker can have a “credibility excess” or “credibility deficit”.

There are many others in addition.

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PMID: [24785596](#)

## The Attractiveness Halo Effect and the Babyface Stereotype in Older and Younger Adults: Similarities, Own-Age Accentuation, and OA Positivity Effects

[Leslie A Zebrowitz](#) and [Robert G. Franklin, Jr.](#)

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### Abstract

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### Background

Two well-documented phenomena in person perception are the attractiveness halo effect (more positive impressions of more attractive people), and the babyface stereotype (more childlike impressions of more babyfaced people), shown by children, young adults (YA) and people from diverse cultures. This is the first study to systematically investigate these face stereotypes in older adults (OA) and to compare effects for younger and older adult faces.

### Method

YA and OA judges rated competence, health, hostility, untrustworthiness, attractiveness, and babyfacedness of older and younger neutral expression faces. Multilevel modeling assessed effects of rater age and face age on appearance stereotypes.




## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Looking the Part: Social Status Cues Shape Race Perception

Jonathan B. Freeman , Andrew M. Penner, Aliya Saperstein, Matthias Scheutz, Nalini Ambady

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Article	Authors	Metrics	Comments	Media Coverage
				

## Abstract

Introduction

Results

Discussion

Materials and Methods

Supporting Information

Acknowledgments

Author Contributions

References

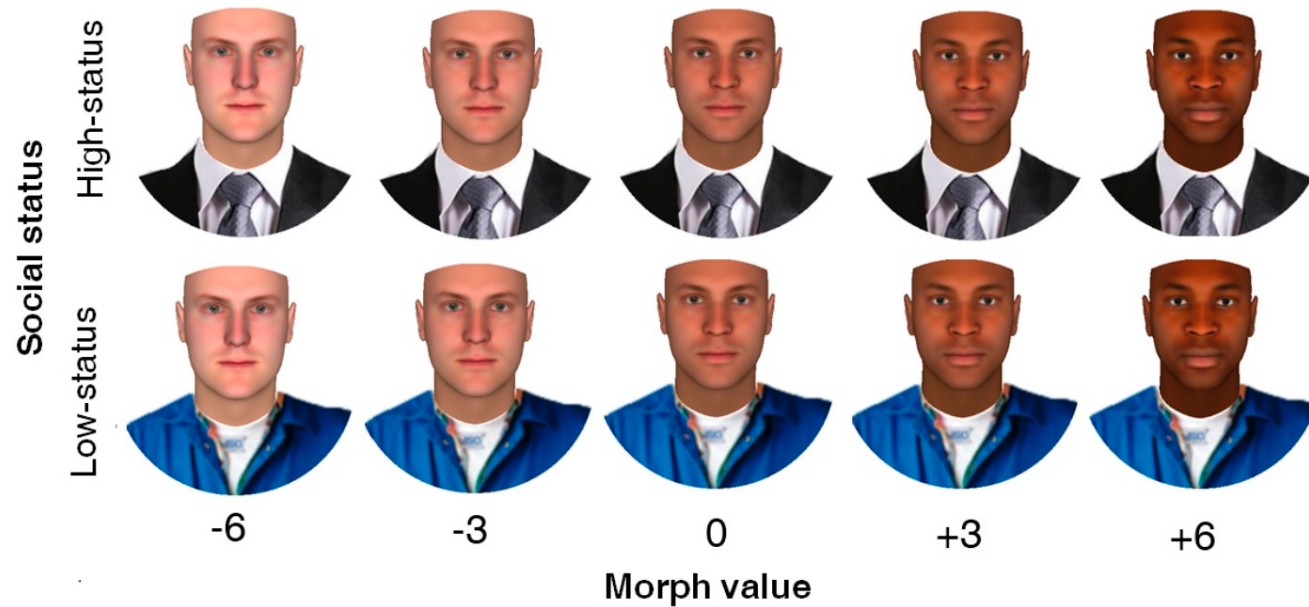
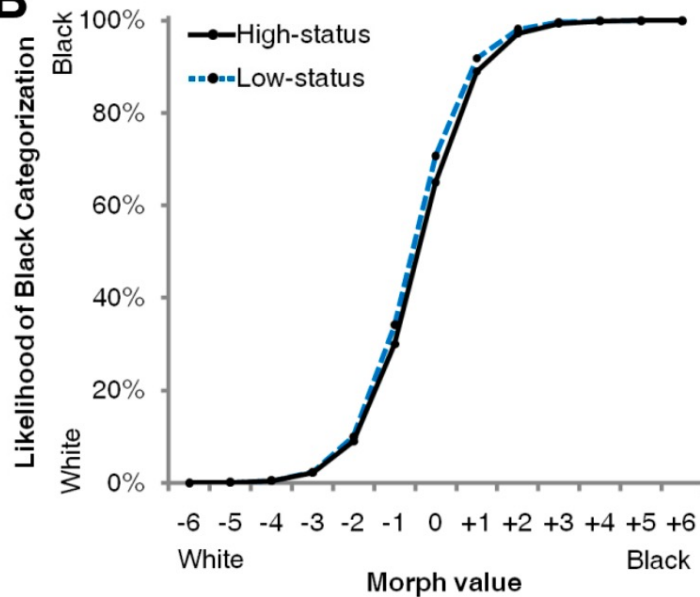
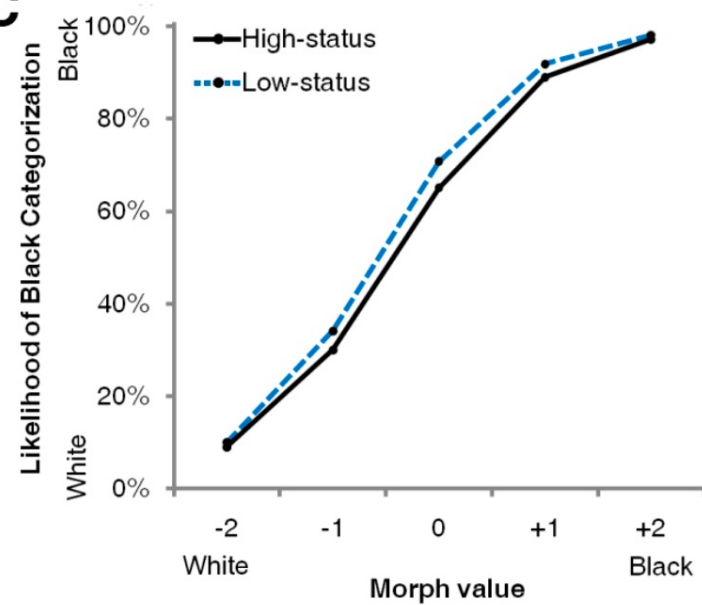
Reader Comments

Figures

## Abstract

It is commonly believed that race is perceived through another's facial features, such as skin color. In the present research, we demonstrate that cues to social status that often surround a face systematically change the perception of its race. Participants categorized the race of faces that varied along White–Black morph continua and that were presented with high-status or low-status attire. Low-status attire increased the likelihood of categorization as Black, whereas high-status attire increased the likelihood of categorization as White; and this influence grew stronger as race became more ambiguous (Experiment 1). When faces with high-status attire were categorized as Black or faces with low-status attire were categorized as White, participants' hand movements nevertheless revealed a simultaneous attraction to select the other race-category response (stereotypically tied to the status cue) before arriving at a final categorization. Further, this attraction effect grew as race became more ambiguous (Experiment 2). Computational simulations then demonstrated that these effects may be accounted for by a neurally plausible person categorization system, in which contextual cues come to trigger stereotypes that in turn influence race perception. Together, the findings show how stereotypes interact with physical cues to shape person categorization, and suggest that social and contextual factors guide the perception of race.

## Figures

**A****B****C**

# Social Interpretation

When speakers are perceived to have a certain “*dress, role, sex... behavior, linguistic or otherwise*” (Davidson) that makes them less likely to be believed, it is rational to do a number of things to lessen these effects.

These can include working to change one’s accent or style of dress.





# Social Interpretation

Many of these efforts will be quite taxing.

Presenting ones self in certain ways can to a lessen the effect of the credibility deficit but it will usually not be fully eradicated.

It also can lead to other costs: charges of being a traitor to one's community (possibly labeled with class-traitor terms such as “uppity” or race-traitor terms such as “oreo”).

# Social Interpretation

On top of making these very rational efforts, when a speaker is systematically not taken to be credible he or she will move from meaning to showing

# Social Interpretation

Recall that manifestness is an explicitly epistemic notion, the extent to which, for any given proposition, the interlocutor “is likely to some positive degree to entertain it and accept it as true” (Sperber and Wilson 2015: 134)

# Social Interpretation

Through this discussion we see a specific type of testimonial injustice emerge—understood here as a move down the showing vs. meaning continuum—is an instance of a speaker learning that recognition of her intention has not in her experience been sufficient to induce the intended response in the hearer

# Social Interpretation

We see the following categories emerge:

**MT Testimonial Injustice** – of the sort that Fricker discusses at length—when “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word”

# Social Interpretation

We also see:

**ST Testimonial Injustice** – when a communicator expends extra time and resources presenting an interlocutor with direct evidence for some proposition that—barring prejudice—they would accept without such direct evidence. On the part of the speaker this is an automatic and rational response to past MT testimonial injustice.

# Social Interpretation

The potential for Fricker's epistemic injustice theory to be applied to language is made evident by Sperber and Wilson's framework, as well as by their clear spelling out of manifestness as an explicitly *epistemic* notion



# Takeaways

Many explanations of why we engage in communicative acts attempt to account for the cost of communication to speaker and hearer—an assumption that underpins Sperber and Wilson's presumption of relevance.

# Takeaways

“The key problem for efficient short-term information processing is to achieve an optimal allocation of central processing resources. Resources have to be allocated to the processing of information which is likely to bring about the greatest contribution to the mind’s general cognitive goals at the smallest processing cost...Our claim is that all human beings automatically aim at the most efficient information processing possible.”

-Sperber & Wilson 1986: 48-49

# Takeaways

One of the types of moves we automatically take in processing information is to use stereotypes and heuristics of the type that Fricker draws attention to in her work.

This leads to discrepancies in the effort that different types of speakers have to expend in making their meanings manifest to interpreters.

# Takeaways

We should ask not only *how* but *why* we engage in certain forms of communicative behavior, such as why do we sometimes show and other times mean content.

We should not ignore how this differs based on the power dynamics at play between interlocutors.

It is important to develop theories of meaning that can account for the social realities of communication.

# Hvala

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