

A Speech Act Perspective on the Survey Response

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Abstract: Survey researchers try to avoid error by accounting for ‘pragmatics.’ That is, researchers suppose that respondents may discern the interviewer’s intent, and react in ways that divert answers away from their “true” attitudes. This *error perspective* on the survey response leads to both a mistake and a missed opportunity. First, researchers may ignore pragmatic effects stemming from the respondent’s intent in *answering* questions. Similarly the error perspective tempts us to regard pragmatic effects as merely the source of semantic noise, missing how such deviations are often theoretically important in their own right. We introduce a *speech act perspective* on the survey response that puts pragmatics on an equal footing with semantics. We then show how that perspective: 1) organizes disparate research findings under one theoretical umbrella, 2) adjudicates ongoing controversies, 3) orients us toward new research opportunities, and 4) better connects public opinion to an appealing vision of democratic accountability.

*When a diplomat says yes, he means 'perhaps';
When he says perhaps, he means 'no';
When he says no, he is not a diplomat.*

— Voltaire (attributed)

People do things with language beyond merely conveying the standard meaning of the words they use. When a diplomat says “perhaps” but means “no,” they are trying to preserve a relationship or help someone save face. When a lawyer asks a leading question, they are not merely requesting information but trying to get the respondent to say something that will be useful to their case. In most social situations we intuitively understand the difference between the surface meaning of words and what people intend to do with them. Sometimes they only intend to convey information. But oftentimes they accomplish much more. The field of *pragmatics* seeks to analyze and systematize our intuitive grasp of how the context, intention, and consequences of utterances go beyond just the conventional meaning of groups of words (the field of *semantics*).

While public opinion scholars, and survey researchers more generally, incorporate some important insights from the pragmatics of the survey response into their work, we argue that they do not go nearly far enough. The dominant “error” perspective heavily privileges semantics at the expense of pragmatics. We introduce a “speech act” perspective on the survey response that puts semantics and pragmatics on an equal footing. We do not analyze any new data here. Our contribution, rather, is to show how adopting the speech act perspective presents at least four significant advantages for survey research scholars as they gather and use evidence.

First, we show how giving pragmatics its due allows us to organize otherwise disparate survey research phenomena under one theoretical framework. We note several and discuss three in some depth: non-separable preferences, expressive partisanship, and cultural cognition. Without

a unifying perspective like that from speech acts, individual sub-literatures such as these have effectively had to re-litigate species of the same general case repeatedly. Second, we show how the speech act perspective can adjudicate between ongoing controversies in how we measure and interpret survey responses, focusing on two cases: the role of emotions in political attitudes and behavior, and the ongoing debate over the meaning of racial attitudes in the U.S. In this context, we introduce the concept of *measurement displacement*—the way that systematic measurement “errors” generally point toward different, but relevant and unintended constructs. The speech act perspective, then, can point the way to new and as yet unexplored research areas. Third, we extend this concept by considering how such a posture of “learning from our errors” reveals a number of practical opportunities for improving and supplementing standard survey methods. Finally, we close by discussing how the speech act perspective better comports with an attractive vision of the connection between public opinion and democratic accountability. In short, speech act perspective provides us with a set of conceptual tools to improve how we theorize, design, analyze, interpret, and use survey research.

Pragmatics in Practice

Early survey research did not pay much heed to the pragmatics of the survey response. We assumed that careful attention to semantics would do the trick—that there was a more or less unproblematic correspondence between pre-existing beliefs and attitudes in people’s heads and their responses to survey questions. Indeed, the use of the word “survey” in the context of public opinion research derives from its earlier cartographic meaning: “to examine and record the features of an area of land so as to construct a map or description.” For example, “they surveyed the coasts of New Zealand.” Opinions were like geographic features—stable objects just waiting to be

discovered and described. Attending to pragmatics, however, reminds us of a different meaning of the word “survey” that may actually be more apt: “To survey” can also mean “to look carefully at someone, especially so as to appraise them.” For example, “I surveyed their face for traces of insincerity.” This definition reminds us that unlike coastlines, respondents have intentions of their own that interact with their surveyors’ intentions.

Sophisticated theories of the survey response explicitly try to account for some such complications. Tourangeau, for example, explains that “Pragmatics involves respondents identifying the underlying intent of the question. Listeners follow various strategies to ferret out the intent behind the question” (2000: 171). But he also cautions that “[W]e currently have no method for predicting which elements of a question will produce a pragmatic effect. And without predictability, it is a little too easy to assign survey errors to pragmatic factors” (2000: 54).

Pragmatics is of limited use, for Tourangeau and others (e.g., Conrad, Schober, and Schwarz 2014). The worry over pragmatics is about communicating something to the respondent that the interviewer did not intend (or did not want the respondent to know that they intended). And the goal is to avoid *error* in survey responses—i.e., to get closer to the “true” belief or attitude. From this perspective, attending to the pragmatics of questions is only a tool to achieve responses with better semantic properties. Tourangeau’s worries about predictability and generalizability in attributing error call to mind a third meaning of the word survey: “a general examination or description of something that covers a large subject briefly.” For example, “I recently read a short survey of the history of public opinion research.” This definition reminds us that survey techniques typically abstract away from much richer networks of significance.

Seeking better semantics makes good sense, so far as it goes. We typically want to avoid reactivity from respondents sussing out the intention of an experiment, for example. The standard

perspective, however, fails to capture the pragmatics flowing in the other direction—i.e., the respondents’ intent in *answering* questions, not just interpreting them. Moreover the standard perspective tends to screen off theoretically interesting questions by regarding most pragmatically induced “errors” as mere noise, rather than phenomena that are often just as (or even more) important than the “true” attitude the survey was designed to elicit.

For example, Schaffner and Luks (2017) famously showed survey respondents a picture of the crowd at President Obama’s inauguration next to one of President Trump’s. The pictures clearly showed that Obama had a larger crowd. Yet, when asked which president had more people in their crowd, 15 percent of those who voted for Trump said that he did, echoing his own claims. We can interpret this evidence in at least two ways. Such responses may bespeak partisan motivated reasoning overwhelming the plain evidence of our senses, or they may be an example of pragmatically induced “error.” Respondents who supported Trump may have inferred that the interviewers were trying to humiliate the new president in asking the question, and so they responded in a way that pushed back against this slight to their leader, rather than simply conveying their true beliefs.

Applying the error perspective on the survey response to this example risks both making a mistake and missing an opportunity. The mistake would be to interpret the responses at face value and gape aghast at partisanship’s ability to distort judgments about even clear matters of fact. The missed opportunity would be to focus on such reports as uninteresting deviations from true beliefs rather than as politically significant actions of defiance, identity expression, or defense of a leader. Indeed, the actions taken in conveying (or not) a response are often more interesting and important than the responses themselves. To help avoid such missed opportunities and outright mistakes, we next develop a *speech act* perspective on the survey response that puts pragmatics on equal footing,

rather than using it as a mere adjunct for better semantics.

Survey Questions and Responses as Speech Acts

In *How to Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin (1962) introduced Speech Act Theory (SAT) to linguistics.¹ He begins with the observation that when someone speaks, the utterance often carries a pragmatic function. For example, when a colleague says “Congratulations on your new publication,” the very action of speaking those words “does the work” of congratulating. When a minister says “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the addressees are married. Further examples of speech acts include promising, ordering, hoping, protesting, and betting.

Speech acts are not always as straightforward as a colleague offering earnest congratulations. Take, for example, Donald Trump’s statement to former FBI director James Comey in regards to Comey investigating then-National Security Advisor Michael Flynn: “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.” During a subsequent Congressional hearing, the former director was asked precisely what Trump was doing by using the words “I hope.” Perhaps President Trump was literally expressing the hope that Comey could let it go. But, perhaps when stated by your boss in a private setting, the performative act of saying “I hope” is really an order (Curzan 2017). As Comey explained during the hearing, that is what he understood Trump’s statement to be doing.

Speech acts have three components, which Austen calls *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary*. The *locutionary* component of the utterance amounts to the raw materials of the statement—the ostensible meaning of its words. The *illocutionary* component refers to the speaker’s intent by uttering specific words. Finally, the *perlocutionary* component refers to any

¹ Searle (1969) develops his own influential speech act theory. The differences between his and Austin’s are tangential for our discussion here.

changes in the world that occur as a consequence of the statement.

Context matters for deciphering the illocutionary force of a particular utterance. When we hear a friend casually say “I bet you a thousand dollars the Yankees lose today,” it is unlikely that they actually intend to put money on the line. But if someone said the same thing at a casino in Las Vegas, they may actually be expected to take out their checkbook. The inferences we make as to the speaker’s intentions are based on context, tone, and other factors that interact with the literal meaning of the words. What we infer the speaker to mean will structure how we respond—the perlocutionary force of the speech act.

We suggest that a survey question and response is best understood as a pair of speech acts. In the first act, each survey item is composed of particular words chosen by the researcher (locution). The question is typically constructed with the intent of eliciting specific information from the respondent (illocution). That question then changes something in the world by requesting information from the respondent (perlocution). However, the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the survey question do not necessarily match; what the researcher *asks* from the researcher’s point of view and what the respondent *is asked* from the respondent’s point of view are not always the same. No matter what information the researcher intended to request by constructing a particular question with a particular set of words, the meaning of survey items is co-created through an interaction between the words the researcher puts on the page and inferences the respondent makes as to what those words mean in their particular context.

The second speech act begins with the words of the response (locution). Based on what the respondent understands themselves to have been asked, they may attempt to convey certain information in answering the question (illocution), which may or may not match what the researcher understands a particular response to mean (perlocution). The vocabulary available to

the respondent is often highly constrained by the response options, meaning that the response's illocutionary and perlocutionary forces will not perfectly match. The gap between the two typically widens as questions become more complex. Moreover, even if the respondent correctly understands the interviewer's request, they may choose to do something else with their response than convey the requested information. In short, the response is not merely a report, especially in the context of politics. It can be an expression of solidarity, an attempt at persuasion, a protest against the question, an attempt to make some quick money, or something else apart from the mere definition of the response option selected. Some of these illocutions are uninteresting. Many contain important political content.

A Speech Act Perspective on the Standard Model of the Survey Response

Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski (2000) elaborate a widely used four stage model of the survey response, in which respondents 1) comprehend a survey item, 2) retrieve information from long-term memory, 3) collapse this information into a single judgment, and 4) select and report an answer out of the available response options. In the comprehension stage respondents attempt to understand the meaning of the question and any instructions that go along with it. As the authors note, at this stage a variety of problems may arise from vague wording, double-barreled questions, or unfamiliar jargon.

Our Speech Act Perspective (SAP) foregrounds that respondents not only attempt to understand the literal meaning of a question's words, but also draw inferences as to why the question was asked or what the researcher intends to gain by asking it. For example, a respondent could reasonably infer that a question asking whether they support the "DREAM Act" is effectively about their views on immigration, especially if they have already been asked a series

of questions about immigration. The congruence of these inferences will partially determine how closely the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the survey question match.

In the retrieval stage of the standard four stage model, respondents are conceptualized as pulling the information from long-term memory that is relevant to what they have comprehended. Put in terms of the SAP, the respondent will conduct their information search based on the question they understand themselves to have been asked. The perlocutionary force of the survey question, then, structures the retrieval process, leading the respondent down a particular informational and motivational path. Once the respondent has embarked on their search for information, what they retrieve will further depend on the context in which the survey question is asked, as well as the individual respondent's broader social world. However, the SAP places particular emphasis on the way in which a respondent's networked meaning-structures will influence their retrieval process. This, in turn, will influence what information comes to mind, whether it is considered relevant to the question, and whether respondents want to use it as the basis for their answers.

In the standard model, respondents combine retrieved information with meta-information about the retrieval process in order to produce a single summary judgment. However, as is the case in normal conversation, our judgments exist alongside inferences regarding what sort of information particular utterances would convey about ourselves, and what sort of judgments are appropriate in the given context. Being diplomatic is not the sole purview of diplomats. Under the SAP, the respondent's judgment does not necessarily reduce to a "true attitude," nor even a reasonable approximation. Instead, the respondent's integration process includes a network of related judgments regarding what their attitudes and beliefs mean to them and what they want to communicate back to the researcher. This intended communication forms the eventual illocutionary force of their response.

In the final stage of the standard model, the respondent translates their judgment into a response. In most cases, the vocabulary available to the respondent is highly constrained by the question's response options. As such, the respondent must pick the option that best approximates the information they want to convey. However, much in the same way that the perlocutionary force of the survey question depends on the respondent's interpretation of what they have been asked, the perlocutionary force of the survey response depends on the researcher's interpretation of what has been answered.

A wide range of "errors" in the survey response can then be reinterpreted and subsumed in the SAP as types of mismatches between the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the survey response. Certain mismatches are predictable and measurable, such as self-reported voter turnout (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). In other cases, however, the mismatches are more complex. Some only apply to certain subsets of the population (e.g., the politically disengaged), as well as mismatches that run in opposite directions for different subsets of people (e.g., liberals v. conservatives). We can even understand satisficing as a mismatch between the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the survey response: the respondent does not really mean much of anything, but the researcher interprets the responses as meaningful.

The Speech Act Perspective as Umbrella

Most survey researchers seem to implicitly know that the social construction of the survey response can lead to misinterpretation, and some have sought to account explicitly for these possibilities. Instead of dismissing problematic survey questions because they do not measure what they purport to measure, some have sought to specify what these seemingly "poor" survey questions are actually measuring. Research of this kind has yielded a host of important findings

that can be subsumed under a single heading of the SAP. We focus on three cases: non-separable preferences (Lacy 2001), expressive partisanship (e.g., Schaffner and Luks 2017), and cultural cognition (Kahan 2015). The SAP ties these disparate cases together as mismatches between what the respondent is conveying (the illocutionary force) and a researcher’s “face-value” interpretation (the perlocutionary force). As such, the SAP generalizes these more specific findings, subsuming their individual explanations into a broader perspective.

Non-separable Preferences: Lacy (2001) develops a theory of non-separable preferences to highlight and account for the highly conditional nature of many political attitudes. Non-separable preferences exist when a respondent’s opinion on Proposition A depends on the status of Condition B. For instance, someone might support creating a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants only if that policy is coupled with stricter border enforcement. People frequently make these sorts of qualifications when they deliberate amongst themselves, but they are rarely given the opportunity to do so on surveys (c.f. Schuman and Bobo 1988). Indeed, to provide such opportunities in the survey context often requires writing double-barreled questions. As such, when respondents are simply asked whether they support or oppose a path to citizenship, they will be left to infer whether their conditions for support have been met—an inference that will be influenced by context such as question order and wording. Popular rhetoric about “amnesty” may lead the respondent to infer that creating a path to citizenship would be accompanied by loose border enforcement; a question about “earned citizenship” might lead that same respondent to infer that we are not creating perverse incentives by letting undocumented immigrants cut the queue.

The theory of non-separable preferences focuses on inferences about the conditions implied by a specific proposition, and how people’s support for policies differs based on these inferences. The SAP accounts for these sorts of inferences on the comprehension side (the meaning going in),

but also takes into account inferences about what sort of information a respondent is communicating by selecting a certain response (the meaning going out).

Partisan Expressive Responding: Research on public opinion has shown that absent an explicit incentive to be accurate (Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015), partisan respondents will use political surveys as an opportunity to express and protect their partisan identities. As noted above, simple factual questions such as asking respondents to choose which picture, out of two, depicts a larger crowd (Schaffner and Luks 2017), or whether a far-fetched conspiracy theory is true (Oliver and Wood 2014; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016), can polarize along partisan lines if respondents interpret the questions as implicating those political identities (Bullock and Lenz 2019).

Findings of “expressive partisanship” have led to a cottage industry of searching for ridiculous things to get strong partisans to endorse. It seems highly likely that such findings often entail something other than sincere expressions of belief. For instance, it was not likely that over 60 percent of Americans with a favorable view of Donald Trump sincerely believed that Barack Obama was a Muslim (Public Policy Polling 2016). However, dismissing such a finding as simply “error” or even mere expression is equally unsatisfactory. Regardless of whether respondents genuinely believed Obama was a Muslim, they were still doing something politically important in saying they did.

The current explanation for why respondents endorse factual statements they do not genuinely believe is that they are proclaiming and defending their partisan identities (Bullock et al. 2015). Again, the SAP subsumes such phenomena since a respondent’s *illocution* need not be limited to expressing what they actually believe. Signaling and defending their partisan identities is an eminently political action worthy of analysis.

Cultural Cognition: The theory of cultural cognition argues that, “culture is prior to facts in the cognitive sense that what citizens believe about the empirical consequences of those policies derives from their cultural worldviews” (Kahan and Braman 2006, p. 150). Based on a variety of psychological mechanisms, individuals accept or reject empirical claims about the consequences of policies based on their vision of a good society. Kahan and coauthors have found evidence for this theory across several policy domains, including gun control (Kahan and Braman 2003) and climate change (Kahan 2015). Cultural identities affect both how people process information and the formation of their corresponding policy preferences.

More importantly for our purposes, cultural cognition findings show that when people answer factual questions, their “knowledge” is entangled with their cultural commitments (Kahan 2015). Take the question, “Human beings, as we know them today, developed from earlier species of animals. (True/False).” For less religious people, those who score higher on a scientific sophistication scale are much more likely to answer “True.” For highly religious people, in contrast, those who score higher on the scale are *less* likely to answer “True.” The difference between them disappears, however, when the clause “According to the theory of evolution,” is added to the beginning of the question. In answering the initial question, religious people are often witnessing to their beliefs, rather than what they know about scientific findings. They are engaging in a different speech act.

When applied to the survey response, the theory of cultural cognition focuses on inferences about group identities implied by individual responses, and the risk inherent in misunderstanding those responses—the *perlocution*. Mistaking one for the other matters because of the implications for science communication. For example, if climate science denial is caused by a lack of scientific sophistication, then scientists should work to disseminate empirical results more widely. But if

such denial is caused by group commitments, then such dissemination efforts may themselves be misinterpreted as sharpening the distinction between their group and those whose identity is bound up in the acceptance of “science.”

Again, the SAP provides a generalized framework that unifies established findings like non-separable preferences, expressive partisanship, and culturally-motivated responses to surveys.² In the next section, we shift to show how the SAP can help resolve debates where widespread *disagreement* on the interpretation of such phenomena persists.

The Speech Act Perspective as Adjudicator

Without the perspective from speech acts, scholarly investigations into important political phenomena can become mired in circular arguments between conflicting interpretations of survey evidence. Often, each side of a debate will rely on holding fixed some aspects of survey responses, while problematizing other aspects that are focal for their opponents’ claims. However, if we dial back to the perspective from speech acts, we often see that in these cases, both sides can sometimes be right—about different political acts.

The SAP reveals how disjunctures between the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of responses can produce *measurement displacements*—patterned differences between the information that respondents report and the latent construct that scholars intend to measure. We use the term “displacement” rather than “error” for two related reasons. First, measurement error implies that the respondent’s answer is incorrect relative to an objective fact about the respondent’s belief, opinion, or action. While this happens sometimes—self-reported voter turnout, e.g.—we

² These three examples hardly exhaust the list of phenomena that the SAP can illuminate and organize under a single heading. For example, Differential Item Functioning (Brady 1985; King et al. 2004), trolling (Lopez and Hillygus 2018), reactance (Kornberg, Linder, and Cooper 1970), list experiments (Glyn 2013), inter alia.

do not always have such objective measures with which to validate. Measurement displacement, instead, merely requires a systematic gap between the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of a response. Second, framing these gaps as displacements instead of errors suggests that they are political phenomena to be explored in and of themselves, rather than problems to eliminate. As such, we argue that the SAP adds value to our understanding of the survey response in part by turning what would otherwise be considered measurement error into substantive areas of research. Here, we apply the SAP and the concept of measurement displacement to two controversies: how best to measure politically relevant emotions, and the ongoing debate about interpreting racial attitudes in the U.S.

Emotions in Politics: What information is a researcher looking for when she asks respondents, “How often does Donald Trump make you angry?” Many scholars who study emotions think of them as automatic, physiological reactions to stimuli (Damasio et al. 2000; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000). Some political scientists ask frequency questions like these to measure both how often a respondent experiences these reactions to particular political objects, and how those reactions correlate with political attitudes and behaviors (Marcus 2000; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). However, another camp of political scientists, while agreeing that emotions are physiological reactions, argues that survey questions do a very poor job of measuring these reactions. On this view, the words we assign to specific emotions are simply post-hoc rationalizations we use to make sense of physical sensations (Lodge and Taber 2013). If the emotion-words that appear on surveys are “cold” stand-ins for the real construct, then why bother with surveys when more direct measures are available?

While we agree that surveys are imperfect measures of physiological reactions, we disagree that this is all we should be interested in when we think of the interaction between emotions and

politics. The *experience* of emotion may be physical, but the *expression* of emotion is necessarily social. So while it does not make sense to treat the responses to emotions questions on a survey as if they accurately mapped onto physiological experiences, it makes equally little sense to discard expressed reports of emotions simply because we have other ways of accessing those experiences.

Under the SAP, the survey respondent's comprehension of questions about politically relevant emotions will be influenced by an inference about what sort of information the researcher is trying to get from them by asking the question. While the researcher may have a clear understanding of what anger means, that understanding will not necessarily match the respondent's interpretation. And even if the researcher and respondent mean the same thing when they talk about specific emotions, the perlocutionary force of an emotion question can diverge from its illocutionary force. Such divergence will have effects that reverberate throughout the rest of the response process.

These effects begin by influencing how respondents retrieve information. For example, if someone understands an emotions question to be asking about their general negative or positive affect, they are likely to retrieve more general information rather than instances in which they have experienced particular physical sensations. These respondents will not attempt to remember if they have ever whooped or ranted at their TV in response to Donald Trump, but they will likely remember some things he has done that they liked or disliked, and will certainly have a good idea of how they feel about him generally. Alternatively, if the respondent does understand the question to be asking about a specific emotion and its associated physical sensations, they will likely focus more on instances in which they have felt the emotion in question.

Once the respondent has retrieved relevant information, they must organize it into a judgment. This judgment will be structured by the respondent's retrieved information and goals in

answering the question. The respondent may want to answer as quickly as possible, genuinely report their attitude, protect their political identities, etc. Politically relevant emotions are social phenomena. The researcher asks respondents about sensations they may or may not have felt, but some respondents (effectively) *are asked* about social expressions they may or may not have performed. Someone who comments on a Facebook post that Donald Trump “makes me so proud” has performed politically relevant pride even if they have not experienced the physical sensations associated with pride. It would seem strange to say that they are incorrect when they judge themselves to have experienced pride in Donald Trump and treat the response as error.

When respondents attempt to translate their judgment into a response, they are trying to execute a speech act with a highly constrained vocabulary. Two respondents who both mark that they “very often” feel angry towards Donald Trump—identical perlocutionary (and locutionary) forces—may have been trying to convey different sorts of information about themselves in their response, creating a disjuncture. This is true even if the two respondents interpret the question in exactly the same way and retrieve similar information from memory. One respondent may have experienced the physical sensations they associate with anger toward the president, while the other simply considered themselves to be the kind of person for whom anger is an appropriate emotion to feel toward Donald Trump. The results will thus be *displaced* from the notion of anger the researchers aimed to measure in that it will combine reports of physically felt and socially constructed experiences of anger—even, and especially, if all respondents answered the question sincerely.

There are clear strategies for measuring and interpreting this displacement. For example, a researcher could survey people about emotions felt toward political candidates and issues, and then measure physiological responses to those same candidates and issues with a skin galvanometer or

fMRI machine. However, doing so would only begin to address the more substantively interesting question of the information being conveyed by respondents who report an emotion without “feeling” it. Using skin galvanometers may tell us a lot about which political objects generate particular physical sensations that correspond to anger, but this is far from the complete story of what people mean when they say they are angry at a politician. Shoehorning the respondent into the felt emotions framework and dismissing the rest as measurement error, then, discards a wide array of meaningful political information. This debate has resulted in two distinctive, but valid, research tracks talking past each other.

Racial Attitudes: Scholars have debated the meaning of racial attitudes in American politics intensely and for a long time. What factors drive differences in racial attitudes, and which methods are best used to measure them? Disputants variously conceive of racial attitudes as being about individual-level aversion (Greenwald et al. 2009; Payne et al. 2010), intergroup conflict (Bobo 1983, 1998), symbolic identity (Kinder and Sears 1981; Henry and Sears 2002), targeted public policy (Sniderman et al. 2000), systemic biases in political and cultural institutions (Bonilla-Silva 2003), or some combination thereof (Neblo 2009b).

Given these different ways of thinking about racial attitudes, it is no surprise that political scientists have yet to settle the decades-long debate over how best to measure and interpret them. The American National Election Studies has used some variant of the Racial Resentment scale since 1986. While the scale powerfully predicts political attitudes and behaviors, critics have argued that such predictive power does not necessarily mean that the scale is measuring what it purports to measure—or that it means the same thing for all respondents. Higher scores on the Racial Resentment scale could correspond to actual racial prejudices (Tarman and Sears 2005), but they could be tapping into attitudes about public policy (Huddy and Feldman 2009; Carmines,

Sniderman, and Easter 2011) or just world beliefs (Carney and Enos 2017). The scale could also activate different attitudinal dimensions for different types of respondents (Neblo 2009b). For example, it might measure ideological principles for conservatives but racial prejudices for liberals (Feldman and Huddy 2005). Opportunities for measurement displacement are legion.

This debate is complicated by changes in the expression of racial attitudes in the United States over time, with overt expressions of racism being replaced by more subtle “colorblind” racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Such changes have led scholars who think of racism in terms of individual-level animus to turn to alternative methods such as the Implicit Associations Test (Perez 2016) in an attempt to bypass people’s conscious awareness and take away their ability to edit bias out of their responses.³ Viewed from the SAP, however, social scientists cannot hope to fully understand a social construct like racial attitudes by bracketing the social world. A participant in a study may exhibit high levels of implicit bias, but actively attempt to overcome such a bias both individually and in social interactions. While it can certainly be useful for social scientists to measure implicit attitudes, they are politically consequential to the extent to which they affect social life. As such, they must exist alongside and cannot claim primacy over instruments that do not attempt to bypass conscious awareness—including surveys.

With all of this in mind, we apply the SAP to the Racial Resentment scale, demonstrating how this perspective can help move forward the longstanding debate over how people think about and communicate racial attitudes. Reimagining racial attitudes questions and responses as speech acts helps reconcile competing findings in the literature and opens a window into a broader deliberative system.

³ This approach has been criticized by some on methodological grounds (Arkes and Tetlock 2004; Fiedler, Messner, and Bluemke 2006). But, for our purposes, we take the IAT to be a valid measure of automaticity, and we accept that measures of non-conscious racial bias are useful for some purposes.

The current version of the Racial Resentment scale usually asks respondents to agree or disagree with the following statements on a 5-point scale (with items 1 and 4 reverse-coded):

- 1) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
- 2) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
- 3) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
- 4) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

As with asking all such questions, the researcher here performs speech acts with locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary components. The words comprising the questions form the locutions and the researcher's intended meaning in asking the questions form the illocutions. But what the respondent comprehends—a combination of what the respondent understands the words to mean and how the respondent interprets what the researcher is actually asking them—amounts to the perlocutionary forces of the questions. Sometimes this amounts to the (correct) inference that the researcher is trying to determine whether they are racist.

The perlocutionary forces of the battery's questions will structure the respondent's retrieval process. For instance, if people understand the scale to be measuring their individual level of racism then the respondent may simply ask: "Am I a racist?" If the answer is no, but the respondent still agrees that "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites," then they may actively generate arguments that reframe the statement to preserve their colorblind status (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The researcher's illocution may have pertained to racial attitudes, and the respondent may know it, but the

respondent could still retrieve information to form their response based on economic individualism or opposition to the welfare state, in line with Sniderman and colleagues' Principled Conservatism hypothesis (Sniderman and Tetlock 1986; Sniderman et al 2000).⁴ The fact that many respondents structure their responses to the racial resentment scale in this way is frequently cited as one of the scale's more pressing shortcomings (Huddy and Feldman 2005; Wilson and Davis 2011). From the SAP, however, such pivots are expected and interesting.

Once the respondent has retrieved information relevant to the question, they must use it to form a judgment of not only what they think—whether they agree that “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class”—but also what additional information will be conveyed about them by indicating agreement or disagreement. For example, a person may interpret this item as asking if they are a racist and retrieve considerations that they know would be interpreted as racist—considerations that they are reluctant to express for that very reason. Another respondent who interprets the item in the same way and retrieves identical information may not care as much about presenting themselves in a positive light. This sort of editing for social desirability is well documented in the survey literature; we would only add here that this is the same sort of editing for social desirability that people do in normal conversation, and happens (or does not) for the same reasons (Presser and Schuman 1996). This is why, for complex constructs such as racial attitudes, the best survey items are often those that mirror statements or arguments that are prevalent in public discourse. Asking respondents if they agree that “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors” is useful precisely

⁴ This possibility is especially interesting because the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the question match—the respondent comprehends what the researchers mean to ask by including the Racial Resentment battery—and yet the respondent's illocutions contain much more than simple levels of agreement with each statement in the battery. Instead, levels of agreement with the statements are coupled with a rejection of the battery's premise.

to the extent that it is a claim that the respondent might encounter and respond to in day-to-day political discussion (which may change over time).

The *responses* to items on the racial resentment scale should also be interpreted as speech acts with their own locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions. Again, the locutions are simply the words in the response options that the respondents select, corresponding to each statement in the battery. But those selections can represent an effort on the part of the respondent to articulate something much more detailed, conveying information about how they interpreted the item and the kind of person they are. Especially for racial attitudes, respondents are far from homogeneous (Neblo 2009a; Neblo 2009b). Not only are there various levels of agreement or disagreement as dictated by the scale options, but there are specific reasons for selecting certain responses based on several inferences a respondent makes during the response process. Sometimes agreement with statements indicating higher levels of racial resentment will correspond to more explicit forms of racism, such as affective aversion or a true belief that black people are genetically inferior. But they can also indicate beliefs about economic individualism or political equality. They also signal group identity. This is all to say that each response to the scale is less a semantically constant “true” attitude than (at best) an inference drawn from an integrated network of considerations. If there are a variety of ways in which people interpret the question, retrieve information, form summary judgments, and even decide what they are trying to do with their reply, then identical answers can mean wildly different things.

This conclusion may be unsatisfying for those who wish to construct batteries that tap into the same dimensions for all respondents so as to identify their true racial attitudes. However, the upshot of taking the speech act perspective is that responses to racial attitudes questions are actually *more* interesting and may convey *more* information about the respondent than is presently

assumed. This is not to say that it is never useful to aggregate these responses to make claims about patterns in racial attitudes, but it is to say that survey researchers should be mindful of how the survey response is a special case of speech acts the respondent might otherwise make in normal conversation (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Thus the speech act perspective can not only help to resolve some of the existing debate; it can also generate new research questions about how people define, think about, and communicate about racial politics.

Learning from Our Errors

As we have noted, many survey researchers approach their work from a purely semantic perspective, assuming that respondents have true attitudes, and that the sole purpose of a survey question is to draw them out by minimizing error. The speech act perspective enriches this conception by accounting for the larger communication system in which respondents are embedded, and from which they can never be fully extricated. Gaps between what the respondent means and what they say within the limited vocabulary afforded them by the survey instrument often carry political content to go alongside their recorded responses. We contend that instead of discarding this content as random noise or even systematic error, survey researchers should look for and embrace it under a theory of the survey response that is based on speech acts.

Indeed, the decision to respond (or not) to a survey is itself a politically interesting question, and one with significant consequences for representation in the normative sense, not just representativeness in the scientific sense. If declining to take a position is not random with respect to policy preferences, estimates of public opinion will disadvantage some at the expense of others (Althaus 1998). Recent methodological advances (Bagozzi and Mukherjee 2012) have provided analysts with tools for addressing these systematic differences somewhat. From the perspective of

the standard model of the survey response, though, survey rejection is a problem to be corrected through improved sampling and weighting. From the SAP perspective it is a scientifically central and practically urgent political action in itself.

The SAP carries at least three more important implications for the relationship between public opinion research and democratic theory. First, public opinion research should augment current survey-based work with measurement tools that allow researchers to more closely match their interpretation of responses to the range of illocutionary forces respondents convey. Second, the SAP changes how we ought to think about the concept of *public opinion* itself. Finally, the SAP should inform our estimation of democratic citizens' competence. We consider each in turn.

Expanding Our Toolbox: The SAP suggests that we should change and augment how much survey research is done. These changes need not be radical, but they will allow researchers to more adequately capture the information respondents are trying to convey through their interactions with the survey. For example, Klar and Krupnikov (2016) do notably careful survey-based research by the standards of the SAP by including items that attempt to identify the various actions and goals that respondents might be pursuing. In addition to deploying such items, survey researchers should more extensively embrace mixed-method techniques such as combining surveys with in-depth interviews (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Strolovitch 2008). Similarly, Cramer (2016) asks questions about politics in naturally existing discussion groups using a semi-structured, conversational manner. Her justly celebrated work illustrates our point about speech acts in that her techniques shift the focus from semantics to pragmatics—not merely what people have to say, but what they are *doing* when they talk politics. Researchers might also combine surveys with intensive (Fishkin 1991) or brief (Druckman 2004) political discussion. Alternatively, even using more traditional techniques, survey researchers can account for the embeddedness of the survey response by approaching the

same construct from different angles (Neblo 2009b) or by asking respondents to give reasons for their positions (Price and Cappella 2002). These techniques may require more time-consuming work on the front end, but they will generate data that captures what citizens actually think, feel, and do about politics much more adequately.

Putting the Public Back in Public Opinion: The SAP counsels more than just building a better tool box, however. Measurement in line with the SAP changes how we conceive of and constitute public opinion itself. Currently, aggregated responses to policy questions on public opinion surveys are often taken as constitutive of the democratic will. Political scientists evaluate democratic governments based on how often the policies they enact reflect majority opinion—*congruence*—and the extent to which policy changes as a function of changes in public opinion—*responsiveness* (Canes-Wrone 2015; Druckman and Jacobs 2017). For both, we use traditional survey instruments to establish these standards to which democratic governments can be held. However, as we have argued throughout, there are good reasons to believe that current models of the survey response are not up to the task. Political practitioners intuitively understand this, and often use it as an excuse to discount or disregard those surveys' results (Herbst 1998).

Instead, the SAP suggests that scholars of public opinion should re-imagine the construct in two ways. First, individual-level attitudes should be conceived as having a networked, contextual, speech act structure. Second, as such attitudes are expressed to others, they are (and should be thought of as being) forged and transformed through people's interactions with each other. These key assumptions about the nature of public opinion faded during what Jürgen Habermas called the structural transformation of the public sphere (1962). As Habermas argues, one can trace the somewhat ironic conception of public opinion as the aggregation of private individual preferences to the primacy of the individual in certain forms of liberal democracy.

Relatedly, Blumer (1948) attributes what we have called the *measurement displacement* of public opinion to the emergence of the poll as a research tool, and the operational definitions available in using that tool. No matter the mechanism, dubbing an aggregation of private, individual answers to a single survey question as public opinion severs the links both within and between individuals' networks of attitudes and beliefs; it is certainly not public and sometimes not even opinion from the speech act perspective.

Continuing to operate under this framework actually performs the structural transformation that Habermas originally outlined. By adopting a theory of the survey response that isolates individuals and their considerations, and then defining public opinion as a collection of those responses, we transform the meaning of public opinion itself. Doing so changes the kinds of demands citizens can make of their leaders and vice versa. A purely semantic theory of the survey response based on true reports of individual, private preferences has led to a paradigm in public opinion research that focuses on asking citizens, "What do you want?" It does not do as good of a job at asking them the more civically oriented question, "What should we do?" This subtle reframing of the core question democratic governments pose to democratic citizens can have far-reaching effects (Neblo, et al 2017).

Framing Citizens: Finally, the SAP also suggests a more optimistic understanding of survey respondents qua citizens. Many critics of democracy -- both empirically oriented (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016) and normative-theoretical (e.g., Brennan 2016) -- cite response instability, framing effects, and a litany of horrors as evidence for the gross ignorance and lack of sophistication in the general public. If the respondent does not care about the issue or does not know enough to form a true opinion, then their response to survey questions about the issue will be highly variable—perhaps to the point of being completely random (Converse 1964). But when

one relaxes the assumption that true attitudes can typically be measured unproblematically by standard surveys, then variation in responses—both within and between subjects—becomes more interesting and more useful. The SAP reframes framing effects and response instability as evidence of political attitudes being embedded within particular meaning structures. As such, quantitative differences in the public’s support for “welfare” versus “assistance to the poor” (Rasinski 1989) might not highlight respondents’ ignorance of the consequences that follow from the available response options so much as it highlights the different contexts in which those terms are embedded (Neblo 2015; Minozzi and Neblo 2020).

This sort of contextualism is explicitly written out of leading work in political science in the name of scientific efficiency. For example, John Zaller’s canonical (R)eceive, (A)ccept, (S)ample model, conceives of considerations as discrete pieces of information that, when made salient, compete with each other to summarize an attitude. Zaller concedes that the idea of new considerations being tossed into “a mental ‘bin’ full of such atomized cognitions,” is “obviously a drastic simplification” (Zaller 1992, pg. 280). We know that considerations are really integrated into belief and attitude networks from which they draw their meaning. Zaller’s reason for not attending to such context—his reason for not proposing a “(R)eceive, (A)ccept, (*I*)ntegrate, (S)ample” model—is that the simpler version is good enough. As he continues, “The reasons that I have left so much that I believe to be true out of the RAS model is, quite simply, that there has been no pressing need to include it” (Ibid). But “needed” for what purpose? Assessing the quality of democratic responsiveness? We lose a lot of politically consequential information (in both the descriptive and normative sense) by not including an integrative step into the model.

Conclusion

We run the risk of missing crucial phenomena by sticking with models of the survey response that focus on semantics to the neglect of the pragmatics. By generalizing the gap between what a respondent intends to communicate and what they effectively do by selecting a particular response option, researchers discard meaningful information that could have produced that gap in the first place—often chalking it up to random noise or systematic error. This leads to both unwarranted inferences and missed opportunities.

Though some of the implications of the speech act perspective may seem obvious in retrospect, it amounts to more than merely a call for common sense. Rather, adopting the SAP provides a vocabulary and a set of conceptual tools to augment how we theorize, design, analyze, interpret, and use survey research in importantly different ways.

Theoretically the SAP subsumes, under a single framework, a host of otherwise disparate phenomena like non-separable preferences, expressive partisanship, cultural cognition, trolling, differential item functioning, among many others. In *designing* our research the SAP prompts us to consider things like including items to measure intentions, prompting intra-personal consideration or interpersonal discussion, eliciting reasons, approaching a construct from different angles, pairing surveys with individual interviews or discussion in naturalistic settings, etc., again, under a common framework. When we *analyze* survey responses we should be attentive to the possibility of measurement displacement, and the potential it creates for both misinterpretation and richer interpretations, to say nothing of organizing further research. When we *interpret* our results the SAP provides guidance on how to frame responses as actions, and so anticipate the ways that our interpretations may need to go beyond mere conveyance of information. And, finally, the SAP alters the way that we can *use* public opinion research to promote democratic accountability.

If we change over to a perspective on the survey response that puts pragmatics on an equal

footing with semantics—that systematically accounts for the networked, socially contingent, and intentional nature of our considerations—we can move the discussion forward on longstanding debates in political science. By emphasizing that each respondent is *doing* things, not merely *saying* things, through the limited vocabulary afforded to them by a survey’s response options, the speech act perspective organizes many disparate findings, helps adjudicate long-standing debates, reveals important questions for future research, and better connects to an appealing vision of democratic accountability.

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