

# Veiling with Multiple Audiences: Cooperative Communication in Speech and Fashion

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and Language





## Pinker on Veiled Speech

“Even in the bluntest societies, people don’t just blurt out what they mean but **cloak** their intentions in various forms of politeness, evasion, and euphemism” (374)

“The concept of a **veiled** threat also has a stereotype: the Mafia wise guy offering protection with the soft sell, ‘Nice store you got there. Would be a real shame if something happened to it’” (374).

# Pinker on Veiled Speech

## Pinker's Framework: Explicit Bribe

	Honest Officer	Dishonest Officer
Don't bribe	Ticket	Ticket
Bribe	Arrest for bribe	Pay bribe; go free

## Pinker's Framework: Veiled Bribe

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Don't bribe	Ticket	Ticket
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Implicate bribe	Ticket	Pay bribe; go free



# Grice on Veiled Speech

**Grice does *not* demand all conversational maxims (Cooperative Principle) be followed at all times (flouting central to implicature)**

*How do I exploit, for the purposes of communication, a deliberate and overt violation of the requirement that I should avoid obscurity? Obviously if the Cooperative Principle is to operate I must intend my partner to understand what I am saying despite the obscurity I import into my utterance. Suppose that A and B are having a conversation in the presence of a third party, for example, a child, then A might be deliberately obscure, though not too obscure, in the hope that B would understand and the third party not.*

Grice 1989: 37 “Logic & Conversation”



For illustration of such a scenario, we can consider a scene from a fiction (King 2008), which Grice seems to have anticipated almost exactly. In this scene, four women—Miranda, Carrie, Charlotte, and Samantha—are meeting for brunch. Charlotte has brought along her young daughter, Lily. Carrie and Lily are coloring at the table.

Miranda: How often do you guys have sex?

Lily: Sex!

Charlotte: Miranda, please! (Points to her daughter, Lily)

Miranda: What? She's 3! She doesn't know what it means. I'm 41 and I still don't know what it means.

Charlotte: I know, but she is repeating everything.

Samantha: If I had known that girl talk was going to be on lockdown I wouldn't have flown 3,000 miles.

Charlotte: No, we can talk. Let's just not use the word.

Miranda: Fine. How often do you guys ...

Carrie: (looks up from coloring) ... color?

Charlotte: Thank you!

Samantha: Well, I can't color enough. I could color all day, every day, if I had my way. I would use every crayon in my box.

Carrie: We get it. You love to color. (Turns to Miranda.) Why are you asking? (King 2008)

M. Johnson, *Cooperation with Multiple Audiences* 217

We see in this example exactly the sort of case Grice mentions as a hypothetical. In this interaction there is intentional and careful obscurity used in the conversation in the form of the adoption of a new word in place of an ordinary word, and we see novel, metaphorical riffs off the new word by Samantha. The speakers in this conversation are being intentionally obscure in the hopes that the other women at the table will understand their meaning and the child will not.

# Communicative Cooperation

If the speaker **correctly** gauges the background knowledge of her audience she will

- 1) produce an utterance that the child does not understand and
- 2) produce an utterance that the adults do understand.

# Communicative Cooperation

If the speaker **incorrectly** gauges the background knowledge of her audience she may

- 1) produce an utterance that the child understands or/and
- 2) produce an utterance that the adults do not understand.

# Takeaway

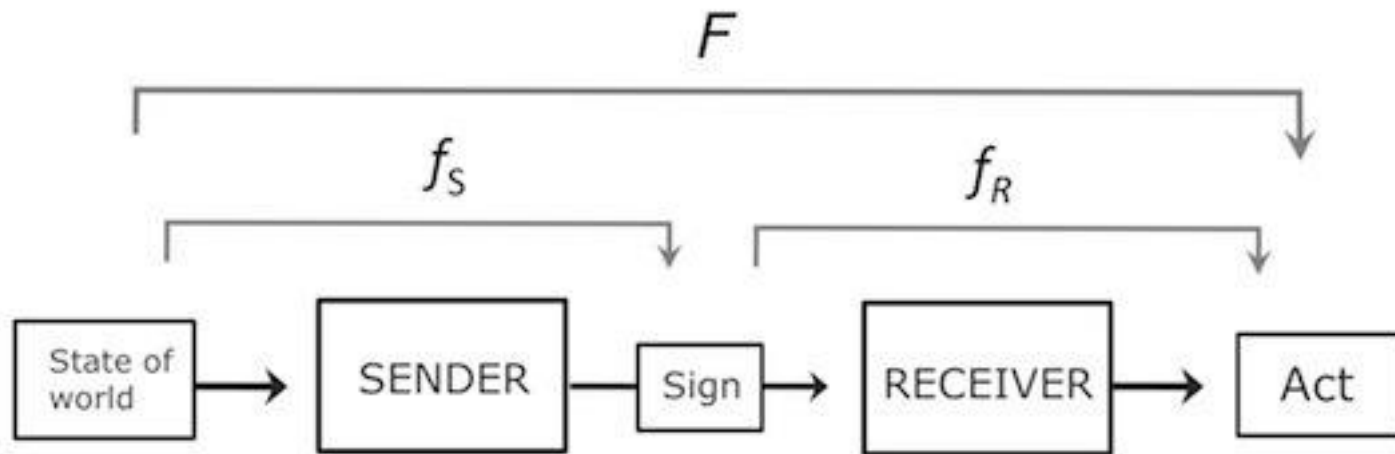
Pinker's treatment of veiled speech in terms of maximizing game theory payoffs is a helpful one, that I will come back to at the end of this talk.

Also, Pinker's point that veiled/indirect speech is inefficient is important.

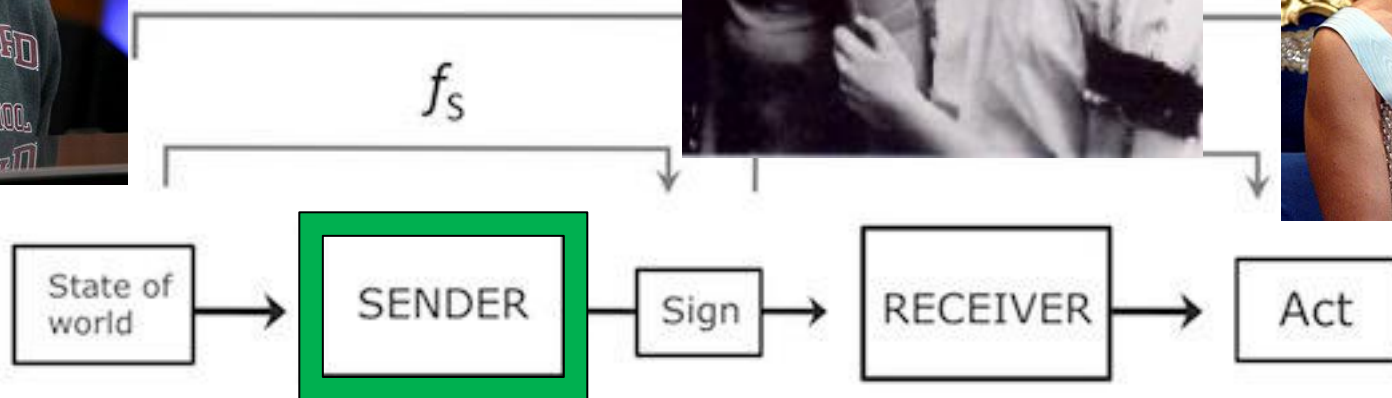
Because of this inefficiency, in cases of indirect speech we ought to seek an explanation for why the speaker chose to use an implicature rather than state the content literally.

# Fashion & Game Theory

With this framing, let me now turn to consider how these ideas of veiled messages and game theory apply to fashion.



Source: Peter Godfrey Smith, who draws on Shannon, Lewis, & Skyrms



# Fashion & Game Theory

## Existing Literature on Fashion & Game Theory

Other discussions of game theory and fashion in the literature take a different focus than I do here, focusing more on business decisions rather than consumer/adorner decisions.

For example, one study pertains to the legal incentives and consequences of fast fashion copies of high fashion designs (Wong 2012), another to the positive effects of digital gaming fashion partnerships on brand perception (Alanadoly & Salem 2023),

In contrast, my discussion today focuses not on business decisions of companies, but on the decisions of individuals on what they wear into the world.

# Costs & Payoffs of Adorning Practices

To consider fashion within a game-theoretic framework we can now turn to consider the costs and payoffs of adorning practices.

When we are considering a person in the morning encountering his or her closet there is no added financial cost to wearing any particular garment on that day.

How are we to begin to think about costs to the wearer? What sort of physical constraints or social norms are relevant here?

# This Artist Spent Two Years Wearing as Many Clothes as Possible



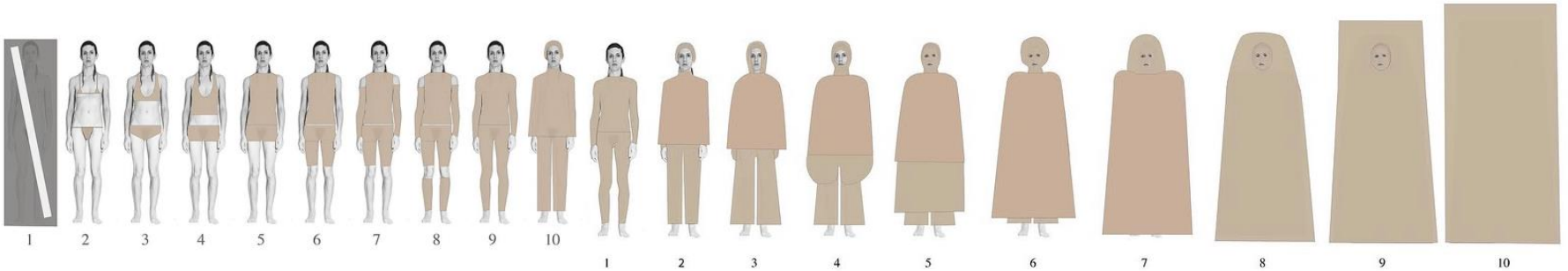
BAZAAR



**Camilla Carper**  
*Artist and educator,  
Carroll Gardens*

## Tell me about your outfit.

“Twice a year, I make a set of dressing restrictions — rules that dictate how I move through the world. This season, the rules are that I’m making all my own clothes and I’m trying to wear as much as possible. I use an equation based on volume and weight. So today I’m wearing a lot of layers — two full-body jumpsuits, followed by two pairs of bloomers, then a pair of harem pants, then a smocked shirt with sleeves.”



\* 35 LB suggested  
max daily weight by  
Dr. Heiman Poon

\* 80 LB suggested  
max weight by  
Dr. Heiman Poon

Source: Camilla Carper

# Costs & Payoffs of Adorning Practices

In their work, philosophers Benjamin Simmenauer and Leo Migotti Ramponi have considered the costs of adorning practices.

For Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi, the meaning of some garment on some occasion is a function of its cost. In work presented at this conference last year, they used the idea of cost as *perceived* cost, which was measured experimentally by asking participants to rate how difficult some garment would be to wear.

# Costs & Payoffs of Adorning Practices

In other work, Simmenauer (2025) defines cost of a garment as:

“a way to quantify the amount of effort (time, energy, strength, will...) it requires from an average sender” (8).

He later seems to change this definition writing,

“the cost of fashion would therefore weigh on the maker and not the wearer, or only indirectly so” (167).

He gives the example of a pink Valentino suit which he sees as being “significantly higher than the cost of an alternative” Versace suit (160).

FIGURE 3.17: On the left, a look from Versace Spring Summer 2022, and on the right, a look from Valentino Fall Winter 2022

**Versace Less Costly**



**Valentino Significantly More Costly**



# Costs & Payoffs of Adorning Practices

I will consider cost not in the way Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi do (perceived cost, cost of production, e.g.) but instead will focus here on the wearer's experienced *social costs* which I believe are the most important costs shaping everyday adorning decisions.

(A fully fleshed out picture here would likely balance social costs with other costs to the sender.)

Although we diverge on the relevant notion of cost (due perhaps to different aims) I will draw on Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi's helpful notion of ambiguous fashion.

# STIMULI

A



Condition: long dress, short

## Meanings

Express religious affiliation

Hide body

Source: Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi (in progress)

B

STIMULI



Condition: long dress, long

**Meanings**

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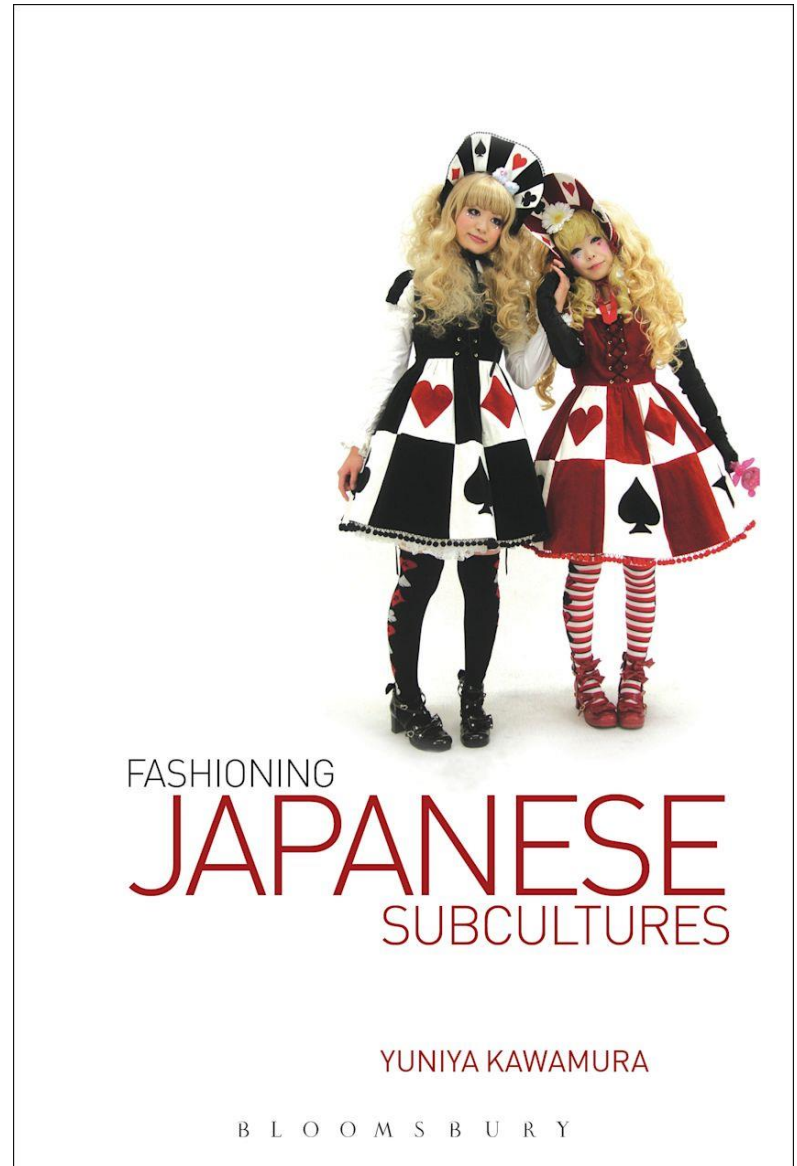
Condition: long dress, long

Source: Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi (in progress)

# Fashion Subcultures

In her work on fashion subcultures Yuniya Kawamura defines a subculture as distinct “from the dominant or mainstream society” (7) “constituted by groups of individuals who share distinct values and norms” (7).

She writes, “Members often create their own symbols (verbal or nonverbal) that are comprehensible only to the inside members” (7).





Images courtesy of philosopher Ley Cray.

# Fashion Subcultures

*What we communicate about ourselves through donning a punk jacket will in large part depend upon the audience. To those not familiar with the vocabulary of punk jackets or punk aesthetics more broadly, all that wearing a jacket might communicate is “the person wearing this is a punk.” To the trained eye, however, very fine-grained information can be passed along.*

Cray (in progress)

# Fashion Subcultures

*The wearing of a punk jacket, then, constitutes a form of costly signaling.*

*In attracting both potential mates and predators, a peacock's elaborate tail feathers signal potential connection at the cost of increased visibility and vulnerability.*

*Punk jackets function much the same: in communicating community, connection, and potential safety to like-minded persons, we also risk inviting the disdain and judgment of those inclined toward antagonism. Jackets open certain social doors while closing (and potentially locking or booby trapping) others.*

Cray (in progress)

# Subcultures & Common Knowledge

Think of a punk jacket with a number of patches from different bands—this is a statement about bands the wearer knows well—if they do not this is seen as a real violation of norms (Cray).

To connect with the notion of common knowledge (Lewis, Aumann)—fashion subcultures are not just communities with shared common adornment but with *shared common knowledge signaled through fashion*.

# Pinker on Veiled Speech

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# Veiled Fashion

## Fashion Framework: Explicit Punk

	Punk	Non-Punk
Punk Jacket	Social connection	Judgment, disdain
Neutral Attire	Missed connection	Normal treatment

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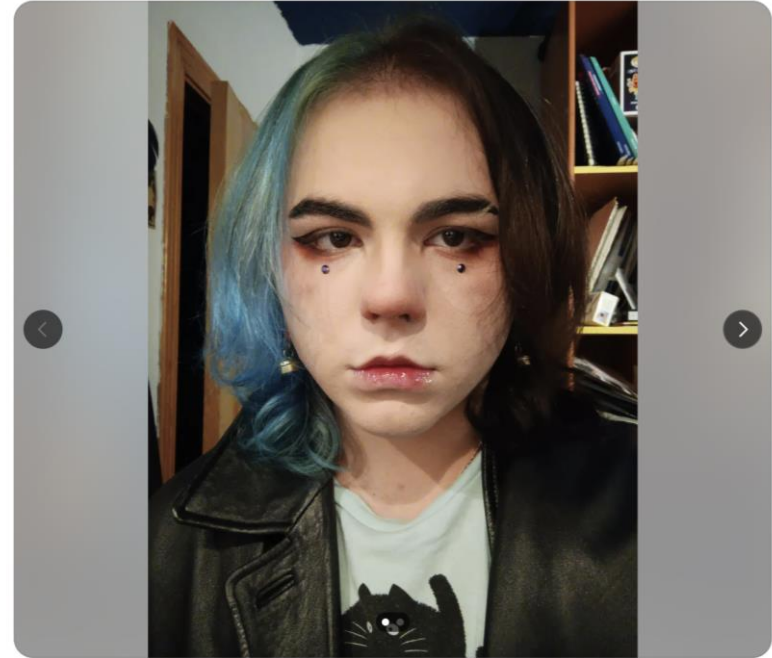
## Fashion Framework: Veiled/Ambiguous Punk

	Honest Officer	Dishonest Officer
Punk Jacket	Social connection	Judgment, disdain
Neutral Attire	Missed connection	Normal treatment
Veiled Punk	Social connection	Normal treatment





### Going for that subtle punk/clown aesthetic



independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/safety-pin-punk-relevant-diy-anarchy-alexander-mcqueen-vivienne-westwood-a7357661.html

Sarah Jones  
Monday 17 October 2016 09:54 BST

🔗 📌 💬 Comments

# Subtle Punk/Grunge

#fashion #goth #street style #vintage #bohemian #grunge  
#aesthetic #90s aesthetic #alternative aesthetic #alternative



The safety pin trend can be subtle or full-blown (Rex)



3,664 74 4 214

eastcoasttags Y'all say queer clothing is ugly and cringy? Here's the alternative. What do you think... more



EAST COAST TAGS

## Colorless Pride Apparel

Fashion, Function, Conversation

Shop T-shirts

Shop Hoodies

East Coast Tags LLC is an LGBTQ+ retail clothing brand. We provide subtle Pride gear with American Traditionally Tattoo style prints. Our mission is to fight against Rainbow Washing and offer an alternative to clique thoughtless rainbow designs. We understand the queer community is not just a marketing demographic to be taken advantage of during Pride Month. We are a loving community that deserves stylish prints we can comfortably wear all year round.

A

STIMULI



Condition: long dress, short

B

STIMULI



Condition: long dress, long

Source: Simmenauer & Migotti Ramponi (in progress)

# Final Thoughts

A final question that we should consider is if the speaker is really cooperating with both the in-group and the out-group members.

We can consider what cooperation might mean in this context.

To go back to the “coloring” example, we might say in this case the the adults are cooperating with the child in a way because they are protecting her from information she should not hear, while also not overtly excluding her in a way that is obvious and offensive.

# Final Thoughts

We might say that it is a form of cooperation to not confront an out-group member with a message that will challenge them.

Consider here the subtle political t-shirts versus the more overt ones.

We could also add to this spectrum adorning practices that are intended to provoke and possibly disturb out-group members, such as certain punk attire.

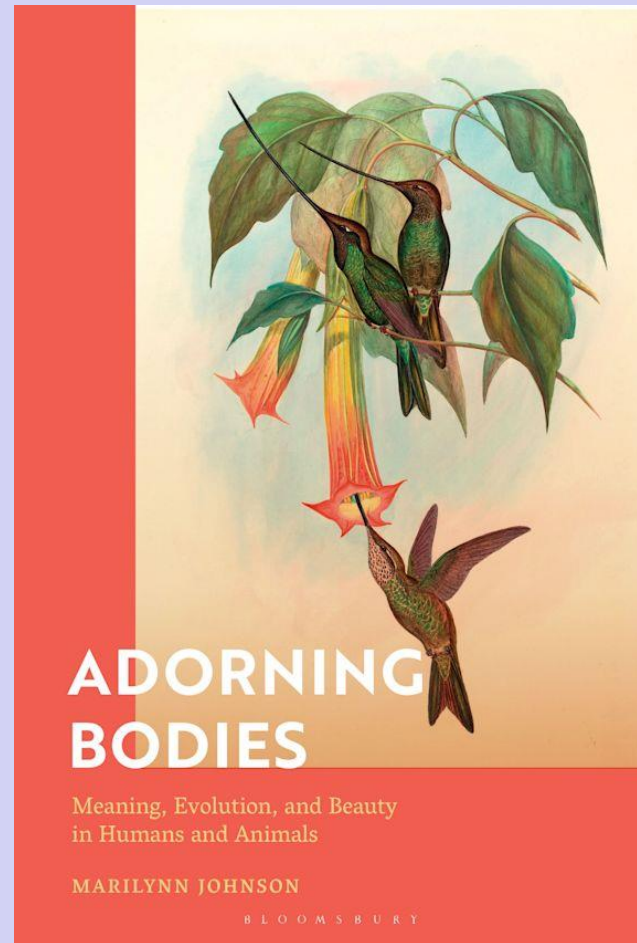
(Consider also on this end of the spectrum events such as Slutwalks and the Million Hoodie March.)

A group of people are seated at tables in a restaurant or cafe. In the foreground, a woman with short red hair is talking to a woman with long blonde hair. In the background, a man in a grey shirt is talking to a woman in a blue and white striped top. The word "Summary" is overlaid in the center of the image.

# Summary

Thank you!

Merci



If you are interested in speaking with me further I'd be happy to (or email: [marilynnjohnson@sandiego.edu](mailto:marilynnjohnson@sandiego.edu))

You can follow me on twitter @marilynnjohnsn or bluesky @marilynnjohnson

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Roy D. Adams and Ken McCormick 1992 “Fashion Dynamics and the Economic Theory of Clubs” *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 50, No. 1. pp. 24-39

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# Pinker on Veiled Speech

This is presented as a response to what Pinker sees as Grice's failure to recognize that speakers and hearers are not always cooperating (Pinker 2007: 392; Pinker, Nowak, & Lee 2008: 833).

Pinker characterizes the Gricean picture as being a “Spock-like” “theory from the philosophy of language that tries to ground indirect speech in pure rationality”, coming from the “bloodless world of logic” (Pinker 2007: 375; 379).

# Pinker on Veiled Speech

“Grice...proposed that the use of language in conversation has a rationality all its own, rooted in the needs of conversational partners to cooperate to get their messages across. Speakers tacitly adhere to a ‘cooperative principle,’ he said: they tailor their utterances to the momentary purpose and direction of the conversation” (Pinker 2007: 376).

# Pinker on Veiled Speech

“Existing theories of indirect speech are based on the premise that human conversation partners work together toward a common goal – the efficient exchange of information, in the influential theory of H. P. Grice...Yet a fundamental insight from evolutionary biology is that most social relationships involve combinations of cooperation and conflict” Pinker, Nowak, & Lee (2008) 833

“Our theory of the Strategic Speaker supplements the traditional approaches with the insight from evolutionary psychology that most social interaction involves mixtures of cooperation and conflict rather than pure cooperation” Pinker (2011: 2866)

# Communicative Cooperation

**Pinker mischaracterizes Grice's views on cooperation. Grice does *not* demand full cooperation:**

“Our talk exchanges **do not normally** consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are **characteristically, to some degree at least,** cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, **to some extent,** a common purpose or set of purposes, **or at least** a mutually accepted direction...at each stage, **some possible conversational moves would be excluded** as conversationally unsuitable” (26)

## Communicative Cooperation

Let's get Grice's exact wording on the table. On the fifth page of "Logic and Conversation" Grice writes,

*We might then formulate a **rough general principle** which **participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe**, namely: **Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the Cooperative Principle. On the assumption that some such general principle as this is acceptable, one may perhaps distinguish four categories under one or another of which will fall certain more specific maxims and submaxims, the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle.** (26)*

# Fashion & Game Theory

## Existing Literature on Fashion & Game Theory

In their work Adams & McCormick (1992) consider fashion as a “club good” (a pool, e.g.) that presents a sort of middle ground between a dichotomy of public (the radio, e.g.)-or-private goods (an apple, e.g.) (Adams & McCormick 1992), where the good can be shared and enjoyed only up to a point, after which enjoyment begins to decrease with each new consumer. This is a helpful and intuitive notion related to trends.

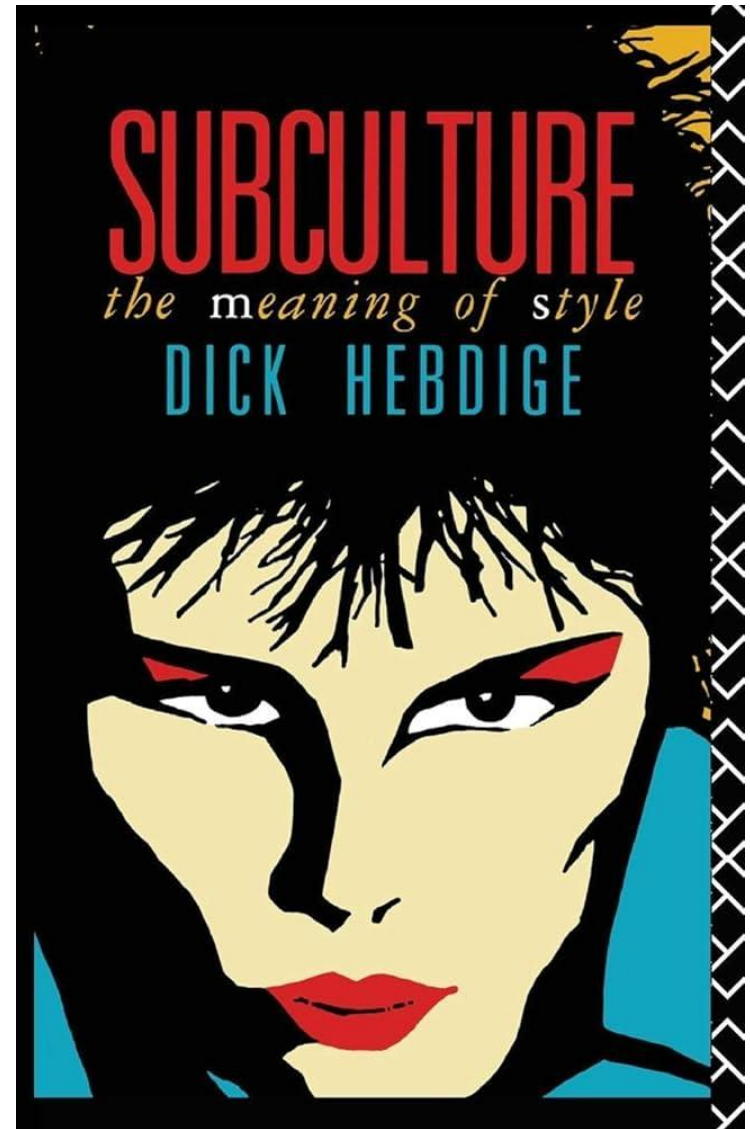
“The key idea is that the satisfaction that people get from consuming a good (or sporting a fashion) is affected by the number of other people consuming the good (or fashion).” (Adams & McCormick 1992: 27)

Adams & McCormick discuss “clubs” as a “club” of wearing a certain individual garment which has some payoff. Here I will not focus on individual garments but will use the term fashion subculture for the communities that can signal membership with wearing certain types of adornment: “runner”, “punk”, “LGBT+”, “Muslim”, “Lolita”, “Swiftie” etc.

# Fashion Subcultures

For instance, Kawamura discusses Dick Hebdige's 1979 study of Britain's punk subculture, a group that has a unique fashion and whose members espouse anti-capitalist positions, along with their own genre of music.

We might understand the punk community to be founded on “*a DIY ethos, a focus on individuality-in-community, and a constructive antagonism toward power-over*” (Cray, in progress), which is reflected in the fashion.





Similar scenarios can be imagined between two allies in a war, who wish to understand each other but not have their messages be understood by enemy spies, who they know are listening.

Let's say, for example, they use 'The dice is on the red carpet' to mean 'Destroy trains and railway lines'

In such a context, the allies would be acting in a *highly* Communicatively Cooperative way with respect to each other although they are certainly using veiled speech and such communication requires more effort on both side.

They are, of course, not being Communicatively Cooperative with the enemy.