



SINCERITY: TEXTUAL CLAIMS TO VALIDATION

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Sincerity emerges in modernity as a moral quality in which the avoidance of dissembling is a positive virtue associated with plain speaking. Sincerity is congruence between avowal and actual feeling or a number of other definitions [1], ranging from a mere trustworthiness claim to the mapping of text onto thoughts. A possible framing of the whole issue is the *interior state* of S (the abbreviation to be read further down as sender/speaker of a message) *matching* an outward textual *form* to be decoded by R (the abbreviation henceforth for recipient/reader of the encoded message). Problems connected with the not-exactly-linguistic notion of sincerity (except for pragmatic areas) are of a diverse nature.

Sincerity is more easily discussed in public discourse, being based on solid textual evidence. For ordinary verbal intercourse, it is ungraspable, unless paralinguistic factors contribute to guesswork in this respect. For the text of newspaper articles, there are additional difficulties of diagnosis, unless we pick on some more special manifestations, such as, let us say, scare-quotes. As for who they are intended to scare, an example will suffice: “[...] explicit, analytical, retrievable and ‘scientific’ procedures”. If they are intentional and strategically placed, the single quotes around one particular attribute will cast doubt on the truthful content thus marked off, and one can even suspect irony. Actually, when a writer disagrees, (s)he should stand by what they write and be sincere with no need for words in quotation marks, except the convention to underline by means of them.

In prose literature, the printed word amounts to nothing more than a mimetic illusion of speech and thought. Biber and Finegan [2] state that they have chosen to exclude third person reference when analysing affective language to convey the emotion at hand. They claim the third person presentation is primarily *descriptive* rather than directly *expressive* of the speaker’s own feelings. It seems, however, reasonable to avoid making such a distinction with prose literature, as all the utterances or thoughts of the characters, be they presented in first or third person, are an artifice, an expression of the author’s ‘intent’, not that of the character at hand.

Maybe it is not misplaced to attempt a precis of more recent research on sincerity values in literary or non-literary communication. The co-authors cited above have studied the lexical and grammatical marking of two concepts: *evidentiality* and *affect*. By the former term, they refer to a speaker’s attitude to knowledge and its reliability. They use the latter term in the same way as in another co-authored study of the same year [3], which makes a powerful plea for the emotive force of language, without offering, however, a model of application. Affect - Ochs and Schieffelin explain - is broader in meaning than emotion. Affect includes feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes with persons or situations. The authors are mainly concerned with the display of affect through linguistic means, preferring not to take into account whether the affective expression is sincere or

not. Their main thesis entails an argument that “almost any aspect of the linguistic system that is variable is a candidate for expressing affect: in other words, language has a heart as well as a mind of its own” [ibidem].

The kind of performance that will be credited as sincere is generally assessed as such or as its opposite by some common-sense criteria that cannot also perform linguistic work. It is only for pragmatics to say that (a) an utterance can be deemed valid or invalid, and (b) validity will be judged in terms of three claims: (1) truth; (2) appropriateness; (3) sincerity. At this point, in the relation between S and R, one takes into account the display of *trustworthiness*. Claims to sincerity are the most difficult to guarantee since they implicate a match between the outward form of the utterance and the speaker’s interior state.

Habermas [4] comments that truth and appropriateness may be validated implicitly or explicitly by negotiation through discursive activity, while sincerity has to be taken on trust – it is vindicated or validated only by the subsequent behaviour of S.

Halliday [5] continues Habermas’s distinctions, and, by combining the findings of both linguists, here is a summary model of how the conduct of reason in social life functions towards communication. Inside we can see the way *sincerity* fits.

1) Domain of reality: *external nature*; mode of communication: *cognitive*; validity claim: *truth*; general function: *representation of facts*.

2) Domain of reality: *social world*; mode of communication: *interactive*; validity claim: *appropriateness / felicity*; general function: *establishment and maintenance of relations*.

3) Domain of reality: *world of intentions*; mode of communication: *expressive*; validity claim: *sincerity*; general function: *disclosure of speaker subjectivity*.

Achieving a relation to speech acts, the result is that *representatives* (for instance, asserting, denying, concluding) foreground the claim to truth; *directives* (suggesting, demanding, requesting) and *declaratives*, which effect immediate changes in institutional states-of-affairs (excommunicating, christening, passing sentence), foreground the claim to appropriateness; *commissives*, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (promising, offering, threatening), and *expressives*, which express a psychological state (apologizing, thanking, welcoming), will implicate most strongly the claim to sincerity.

In Goffman’s terms [6], there is a participation framework of a complex nature, meaning that S in each particular case speaks at moments for others (in particular, for an audience) as well as for himself or herself. *S adopts a shifting mode of address*. For example, a politician speaks most of the time to the nation, even to the world beyond, and sometimes to reporters, etc. *Any straightforward statement of emotion by S is likely to put sincerity at risk*. It is perhaps interesting to mention the following case in fiction that, to some, may approximate sincerity: there is no controlling voice, there is an withholding of textual manifestations of a full authorial persona. Thus, the author exploits the separation of the discourse worlds while he himself refrains from creating the illusion of cooperative presence. Sometimes it is easier for a text interpreter R to focus on the cognitive process of reading *a fictional text as part of a language event* rather than focusing exclusively on the ontological status of the fictional world constructed in reading.

It is also generally accepted that some genres lend themselves to a discussion about their sincerity content, while others do not. Some genres also lend a high valency to sincerity and others do not. Researchers interested in radio shows, television and theatre apprehend the *sincerity paradox* when discussing the following situation: if a person’s behaviour is perceived by others *as performance*, it will be judged to be *insincere*, for sincerity presupposes, as its general condition, the absence of performance. Laboratory reports and legal cross-examinations will not routinely implicate sincerity, but the exchange of vows in a wedding ceremony does. Joking is a genre unlikely to be judged as

sincere, but a eulogy may be. Ultimately, there must be common-sense, in all probability, used as a recognizable criterion for the kind of performance that will be credited as sincere.

Irony is a hard nut to crack for the present thematic concern, for it relies on an apprehension of the indirect criticism which is indeed expected to be transmitted in sincerity. Sperber and Wilson [7] come with the following example of ironic manifestation: in a shop, a furious customer is observed as such and commented upon – *you can tell he's upset*, says a bystander. Sperber and Wilson take this to be *understatement* as a type of irony, and we remember that the definition of understatement is to say less than is reasonable in the given situation of communication. We can claim that the definition applies here, for the anger is strikingly obvious; the commentary beginning with *you can tell* is, in a way, naively inadequate, but it is more interesting pragmatically to maintain that it is an ironic use of understatement. If S assigned the utterance *you can tell that X* to a situation when normally the signs of X are barely discernible, S would sooner be interpreted as speaking literally. Thus, in the former case of problem-solving, S is covertly disagreeing, and, in the latter case, S is openly and sincerely involved in a literal communicative act.

Two felt experiences, *motivation* and *intention*, are, as a rule, anticipated to be sincere. The dictionary entry 'intenție' (lat. *intentio*) elaborated by Mihai Stroe in Pîrvu [8] defines this basic concept for dealing with sincerity as a semantic and ontologic vector relating to the feature 'whatever is directed to something' and coins the Romanian term *despreitate* (a derivation of the preposition 'despre'). After reviewing the major landmarks in a theological-intentionalist theory threading its way through (to quote only a few) Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Boethius, Avicenna, Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, Kant, Blake, Hegel, Bergson, Mihai Stroe stops upon the American New Criticism, recommending the technique of 'close reading'. Thus *the intentional fallacy* can be circumvented; it is erroneous to judge a literary work according to the author's intention as long as nothing is relevant but the work itself. The work belongs to the public (Wimsatt, Beardsley, *ibidem*) and it is only through it that the public can assess authorial intentions. It is fundamental, in this undertaking, to distinguish between an original meaning of the text and an anachronistic meaning – subsequent interpretation projected onto the text through historical distancing.

If we take emotion to be public and feeling to be private, then the latter term – feeling – can be explained as bodily arousal in the consciousness of the speaker, whereas the former – emotion – can be looked upon as the correlation between the bodily arousal and the circumstance or situation. Emotions, in their turn, will be subdivided into primary ones (they are innate) and secondary (socially constituted through cultural resources). The expression of emotions needs happen in sincerity as long as emotions are inferential signs with a major role in cognition.

Following psychological practice, emotions and evaluations have the status of *affect* and are construals of experience on various scales of positive and negative values. At least evaluation always sets up an opposition in this respect: cases may be good or bad, desirable or undesirable, loveable or hateful. As Burke [9] writes, negation is "a peculiarly linguistic marvel" as "there are no negatives in nature". To evaluate anything positively involves the exclusion of the possibility that *what does not exist* might exist and vice versa. Negation is not only a matter of form, it is an evaluative, epistemic and deontic action, forbidding, stipulating, affirming or denying. The negated is in a dialectical relation to what is asserted. Negation brings up the rejected opposite, the *irrealis*, the mere possibility of the *other*. This possibility is felt, and the more intense the affect, the stronger the negated alternative. Let us approach sincerity in a few subtle attitudinal biases. We say, for

example, *it is pretty bad*, which does not imply that something is good, but it is a weaker claim than *it is very bad*. We say *it is not too bad*, which does imply that the object described is at the good end of the polarity scale. It understates, at the same time, an impolite belief: "I anticipated that what you did would be bad". Honesty or sincerity lies in understating things or generating the figure of speech known as litotes, the reason for its occurrence in speech ultimately being understood by R to be a mild variant of praise (politeness) or a covert form of unfavourable opinion derived by implicature (impoliteness). Disambiguation of what is essentially and sincerely communicated is worked out by the exophoric details of the situation. S would have had at his disposal the possibility of not underplaying meanings while saying *it is good enough*, where only a concessive attitude is contained and no indirect hurt. This is what is effected pragmatically when the negatively evaluative adverb *too* gets replaced by the positively evaluative adverb *enough*.

Conversational routine usually carries out phatic intentions with the avoidance of embarrassment; there are certain expectations of participants, but sincerity is not the most pressing problem. Let us exemplify with the following case: the opener *How are you?* (or any other alternative cliché, *Is everything all right? How's life?* etc.) may reflect genuine interest if and only if supported by some other elements, for instance, insistence to find out more. It seems that, unlike the common English expression, the Romanian *ce mai faci* easily triggers a response that is a description of the addressee's momentary condition. A close relationship even requires more than a positive short answer [10] and the story of the addressee's latest mishap expects consolation as an expression of social harmony.

At the same time, a negative response to the opening question can be expressed by inarticulate sounds or by gestures. For example, one may hear a prolonged /m/ sound in a falling tone, with a shrug of shoulders, a double rock of the dominant hand, a slight roll of the eyes. This could be received in the place of a (moderately) negative answer in words. One possible interpretation is that the addressee does not want to complain but also needs to be sincere about not being very well.

Laughter is another type of response that is contextually interpretable as sincerity or its opposite. A variety of social occasions for its occurrence can be described as the end of self-disclosing and painful stories, funny or idiotic moments in a talk, surprise and amusement during an utterance, and so on. Laughter may result in the maintenance of a collaborative floor and it usually signals sincere and active participation, continual involvement, while not committing the addressees to speak in their turn.

One of the speech acts to pre-condition sincerity with priority is *complimenting* the interlocutor. Broadly defined, *a compliment* is an expression of praise or positive regard. There have been studies to research the following aspects: the most frequent syntactic patterns; the attributes praised more insistently; the most appropriate verbal responses to compliments; the relationship between the giver and the recipient of the compliment; similarities and differences in this respect across cultures and continents. Let us sum up the findings for each aspect.

Compliments generally fall into one of the following three patterns: Noun Phrase + is/looks + Adjectival Phrase (e.g. *Your essay is great*), I + like/love + Noun Phrase (e.g. *I love your haircut*), Pronominal form + is + Modifier + Noun Phrase (e.g. *These are delicious cookies*). Socialites prefer to compliment physical appearance and abilities first, work and study next, and the form they adopt can lead to a classification of compliments into: (a) direct vs. indirect, (b) specific vs. general, (c) normal vs. amplified lengths, (d) including a comparison vs. no comparison. As for the last mentioned point, it has been noted that comparisons are preferably exchanged between individuals of the same sex and in a close, rather than distant, relationship. Another important observation is that there is a

tendency to give appreciation to those details of personal appearance that are the result of deliberate effort, not simply a manifestation of natural attractiveness. Besides, this is particularly the case when females compliment other females. Males tend to compliment more on personality traits, some of which being loyalty, kindness, intelligence. Precisely due to a possible interpretation of insincerity, it has been found that by repeatedly complimenting someone in an attempt to be friendly, S may trigger the unwanted effect of discomfort and withdrawal of the person complimented. In case sincerity in the complimenter acquires validity in the eyes of R, the latter can adopt one of the following strategies: thanking and agreeing; thanking and returning the compliment; joking; doubting the praiseworthiness; denigrating the object of praise; merely commenting on the history of the object; no acknowledgement (shifting the topic or no response), etc.

As a rule, complimenting is a positive politeness strategy. It answers the expectation of being complimented when the person has made efforts to improve appearance, performance of some sort or to obtain a new possession. That person may feel disappointed, even upset, if this is not taken into account or merely noticed, so as to become a *complimentee*. Actually, the complimentee seems to be 'forced', in the social comedy that is being played, to accept the favour of the compliment and to express gratitude, since a rejection of it (although a possible strategy when performed 'insincerely') runs counter to the positive face of the complimenter. This is an interesting conclusion. "Although seemingly beneficial to the complimentee, complimenting potentially threatens the complimentee's face. The compliment obliges her/him to repay the debt in some way" [11]. The indebted nature of compliments is discussed by many researchers, including Brown and Levinson, because the analysed speech act, if sincere, expresses *envy* or *admiration*, thus indicating that the compliment-payer likes or would like something belonging to the compliment-recipient/R. As a result, the latter takes action either to protect the object of the praise or to offer it to the complimenter/S (for instance, Arabic interlocutors make a ritual out of the offering of the complimented object and do not literally take the object).

It often happens (in any speech community) that participants engage - with sincerity or fake sincerity - in a remedial verbal action upon committing an offence, in a word, to *apologize*. Speech communities differ in what counts as an offence, then in the severity of the same offensive event, and afterwards in the appropriate compensation. *Apologies* are carried out by a set of strategies, like every other type of verbal interaction. To 'make it go away', S can either offer an explicit apology and/or assume responsibility, first and foremost. Besides, the apologetic person can upgrade the force of the speech act, downgrade the severity of the offence, downgrade his own responsibility, offer repair, and so on. R will rightly ask themselves whether all such is uttered with sincerity of feeling. Maybe some *context-internal factors* can decide upon its presence or lack. There is a direct way of influencing - with these factors - the choice of the apologetic formula, its intensification and its occurrence into one of two patterns: apology + *account* and apology + *offer of compensation*. The decisive *context-external factors* are *social power* and *social distance*. Correlations can be established in the following ways: (a) the lower the offender's status, the more he will feel inclined to apologize to the offended with an explicit formula; (b) the closer the interlocutors, the more likely the offender will expressly assume responsibility. The conformity to these social regulations of behaviour can pass for sincerity in the relationship.

Cross-culturally, distinctions are numerous and baffling sometimes, such as in the case of 'contrary-to-face-value' messages. Understanding grows in importance when what S says does not prize face-value sincerity, but H's ability to read between the lines or decode the message from a holistic, context-based perspective. The contributions that are

contrary-to-face-value are looked into by pragmaticists for an inner motivation: to say “no” instead of “yes” for avoiding another person’s disadvantage (an *other-service* answer) while simultaneously maintaining a desirable good rapport (the *self-service*).

To discuss, therefore, *self-serving* and *other-serving* as related to ‘face’ is a practice of sincerity because those two categories are not mutually exclusive. For the sake of illustration, we can build up the situation of communication in which N. offers a ride to M. when it is raining and M. does not have a car; M. definitely needs the ride, but replies by saying, *No, thanks, I don’t want to be too much trouble*. If M. speaks haltingly or undecidedly, N. will know that he should not take the words literally and that the negative answer is a way of being considerate. The following situation is worth looking into: during a dinner party, the guests kept complimenting the hostess for the food served, but the response was the ‘no’ type (*Oh, no, the dishes were not so well-prepared*). It was plain that she wanted to make the guests feel comfortable and to avoid throwing light upon the long hours spent while preparing the meal. Both the situations described above are of the type *saying ‘no’ for ‘yes’ and other-serving*.

Saying ‘yes’ for ‘no’ and *other-serving* (or, instead of the affirmative particle, head-nodding will do) illustrates the fact the communicators are harmony-oriented and avoid confrontation. An easy way to distinguish an authentic ‘yes’ from a fake one is the observation of the level of enthusiasm manifested by S.

When ‘no’ for ‘yes’ and *self-serving* is the case, it will be received as a lie. The utterance is contrary to the truth in order to avoid punishment (The drunk said, *No, I didn’t knock the window to pieces*). In the following situation ‘yes’ is for ‘no’ and *self-serving*: a man in order to increase his credibility lies to his partners that he is going to an important meeting, but he is not invited to any such event. Thus, this is a simple deceptive communicative act, strategically misleading in a conscious way.

In sum, contrary-to-face-value communication is strategic and manipulative, while there are cultural practices for decoding the message in the right, ‘sincere’ (that is, truthful) way. It is a matter of communication competence and it takes an insider’s perspective on contextual clues.

Face-saving manoeuvres accommodate a number of speech acts, not only those under scrutiny here, and possibly some involving lengthy negotiations, in which partners develop an interest in the presence of sincerity. Ultimately, though Searle himself states that there is no sincerity requirement for greetings, for instance, even those have been found to exhibit both sincere and insincere attitudes. Grice’s whole theory has been built on a notion of ‘benevolence’, so maybe it is too much to expect absolute sincerity as well. Against the risks of idealization, it can be enough to say that the major concern should be the possibility of everyone, Ss and Rs, to cooperate linguistically and nothing more.

At present, the methodologies of cross-fertilizing disciplines of study [12] have opened the way to the tolerant ‘dialoguing’ between authors and their commentators, exploring aspects of life, language and literature, where a *sincere positioning* is expected. Sincere communicators, ultimately, resist the temptation to resolve differences between them artificially. The diversity of positions helps identify tensions which can be negotiated without impinging upon sincerity.

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Abstract

A definition of sincerity as a claim to trustworthiness simultaneously involves a correct match of outward form and interior state of the speaker. There is a broad correspondence, which will be discussed and illustrated, between sincerity and a number of speech acts, as well as between sincerity and discourse types.

Résumé

La sincérité peut être définie comme un rapport de confiance entre l'émetteur et le récepteur. En même temps, il faut réaliser une concordance aussi juste que possible entre la forme de l'expression et la condition émotionnelle de l'émetteur. Le sujet de cet article est la sincérité de certains actes de langage et celle de certains types de discours.

Rezumat

Dacă se definește sinceritatea ca un raport de încredere între emițător și receptor, concomitent se face trimitere la o corelare justă între forma de exprimare și starea emoțională a emițătorului. Discuția în articolul de față și exemplele invocate vizează sinceritatea anumitor acte de vorbire și a anumitor tipuri de discurs.