

## § 0 Introduction

Modern social media have amplified the pernicious effects of an undertheorized type of coded language: the representational dogwhistle. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, I argue for the existence of representational dogwhistles; second, I develop a theory that is capable of explaining how this and other types of dogwhistles function. In § 1, I provide a brief explanation of what dogwhistles are. In § 2, I set out the properties of representational dogwhistles and provide examples of their uses online. In § 3, I outline and criticize Justin Khoo's tacit inference theory of dogwhistles. In § 4, I amend the Khoo's theory by proposing that dogwhistles also have an ostensive dimension.

## § 1 What Is a Dogwhistle?

An utterance is typically considered a dogwhistle if it sends an uncontroversial message to an outgroup while simultaneously sending a controversial message to an ingroup (Henderson and McCready 2018). The following excerpt from George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech is a paradigmatic example of a dogwhistle:

Yet there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.

To most, this would parse as an utterance meant to unite and flatter the American people, but fundamentalist Christians would have a radically different interpretation. "Wonder-working power" is a term that comes from the popular hymn "Power in the Blood" wherein the (wonder-working) power of the Christ is praised. To fundamentalist Christians, "wonder-working power" is not used to merely flourish a speech: it must be used in a specific way if the speaker wants to produce a coherent utterance. Jennifer Saul provides an example of how the fundamentalist would interpret that excerpt:

Yet there's power, the power of Christ, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people. (2018: 362)

When utilized in this context, “wonder-working power” is a dogwhistle as the non-fundamentalist outgroup would have a less contentious interpretation than the fundamentalist Christian ingroup. Where non-fundamentalists hear an areligious call for trust in America, fundamentalist Christians hear Bush cementing both himself as a Christian leader and America as a Christian nation.

That is not to say that “wonder-working power” is always a dogwhistle. Saul notes how a term can be a dogwhistle in context *C* when uttered by speaker *S*, but if uttered by *S'* in *C* (or *S* in *C'* or *S'* in *C'*) it would not be a dogwhistle. When a pastor says that there is wonder-working power in Jesus, the context in which that term is used does not produce wildly different interpretations between non-fundamentalists and fundamentalists. Although non-fundamentalists may still not understand the importance of the term, they would nonetheless produce a religious interpretation of an utterance containing that term. This differs from Bush's use of “wonder-working power” because only those who have a previous history with the term would be able to register its religious connotations. Therefore, term, context, and speaker determine whether a dogwhistle effect is produced.

Additionally, dogwhistles need not be linguistic items: symbols, gestures, memes, or anything that requires interpretation can be a dogwhistle. The “OK” hand gesture is a popular example of a non-linguistic dogwhistle. Online “trolls” claimed that the hand gesture stood for “White power” in the hopes that “the media and liberals would overreact by condemning a common image as white supremacist” (ADL 2019). Although White supremacists first used the gesture to “troll” liberal news media, they eventually began to use the gesture to signal their racist values to each other. Take, for instance, the Christchurch mosque shooter who made the hand gesture at reporters during his court appearance (BBC 2019). Whether the perpetrator ironically used the symbol to “troll” the reporters or sincerely used it to signal his ideological alignment does not matter: the ironic use of this symbol in this context still aligns himself with a group of people attempting to undermine journalists and concerns

about the proliferation of White supremacist rhetoric in politics. Although most people use the “OK” hand gesture non-maliciously, to a certain subset of people, when it is used in certain contexts by certain people, it conveys a bigoted message. Compelling theories of dogwhistles must, therefore, also account for non-linguistic forms of communication.

People use dogwhistles because there are norms that prohibit the behaviours in which they want to engage. Dogwhistling protects speakers from being sanctioned for violating social norms by providing them with plausible deniability. Take, for instance, the norm of racial equality found in America:

individuals recognize the existence of social norms that prohibit explicitly racist behavior. This means that individuals that behave in racist ways, or express racist views, will be subject to social sanctions—shaming, potentially losing their job, and so on. Yet, nonetheless, some individuals may continue to want to behave in these ways [...] without being subject to the sanctions imposed by violating these social norms. Coded speech generates plausible deniability that makes it unclear whether the norm-violating behavior really is norm-violating. (Khoo 2021: 150)

If someone were to say, “there is a culture of laziness in Black people,” they would be violating the norm of racial equality and, consequently, would be subject to certain con-attitudes that could negatively impact their social standing. Compare this with someone saying, “there is a culture of laziness in our inner cities.” Since “inner city” has often been associated with images of Black people by news media and politicians, it has become a dogwhistle for “Black people” (Stanley 2015). So, when someone says, “there is a culture of laziness in our inner cities,” they convey “there is a culture of laziness in Black people.” Although what is conveyed violates the norm of racial equality, the speaker may cancel this interpretation by adding “but this culture arises from poverty, not race” (Saul 2018). Thus, by using “inner city” instead of “Black people,” the speaker does not fully commit to their racist remark and can add an addendum to cancel the racist interpretation. This enables them to evade the sanctions associated with violating the norm of racial equality. The possibility of cancelling the contentious interpretation of a

dogwhistle—that is, the possibility of denying that one has violated a social norm—has become a necessary feature of dogwhistles.

Therefore, in addition to matching our experiences of dogwhistles, a credible theory of dogwhistles must account for (1) both linguistic and non-linguistic dogwhistles, (2) the context sensitivity of dogwhistles, and (3) how the contentious interpretation of dogwhistle may be cancelled.

## § 2 What Are Representational Dogwhistles?

As stated, people dogwhistle by using terms that can have both controversial and uncontroversial interpretations. The uncontroversial interpretation of Bush’s State of the Union speech is:

Yet there’s power in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.

And the controversial interpretation substitutes “wonder-working power” with “the power of Christ.” For “inner city,” the uncontroversial interpretation is “densely populated, high crime, urban area” and the controversial interpretation is “predominantly Black area” (Khoo 2017).

There are two characteristics that differentiate representational dogwhistles from other dogwhistles: first, they lack terms with potentially contentious interpretations; and second, they present a photo or video of an event. Representational dogwhistles are neither necessarily linguistic (for a photo with no caption may be a representational dogwhistle) nor necessarily social media posts. However, since social media posts are easily shareable and can contain photos or videos, they are exemplary vehicles to disseminate representational dogwhistles and what I will be focusing on in this paper.

An utterance<sup>1</sup> is a representational dogwhistle when (1) it contains a photo or video of an event that accurately represents the event—e.g., it is not edited in such a manner that goads the viewer into making a value judgement—, (2) it either does not contain a caption or contains a caption that only describes

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am using a broad definition of “utterance” that is not limited to linguistic utterances. I take any form of communicative behaviour to be an utterance (e.g., a dance, a composition, a painting, and, relevantly, a social media post).

what happens in the photo or video, and (3) it has an uncontentious interpretation to an outgroup but a contentious interpretation to an ingroup.

To further understand how representational dogwhistles function, I will provide two examples: the first is an unintentional representational dogwhistle sent by a major news corporation and the other an intentional representational dogwhistle posted by a hate speech account.

### § 2.1 *“Joe Biden falls on stage at US air force academy ceremony”*

On 1 June 2023, Guardian News, the YouTube channel of the centre-left British newspaper The Guardian, posted a video titled “Joe Biden falls on stage at US air force academy ceremony.” At time of writing, this video has over 841’000 views and over 4’500 likes. It begins by showing the news channel’s logo for one second. The video then shows a soldier walking off a stage and people applauding while Joe Biden walks away and falls on the stage. As Biden falls, the people cheer louder, and his agents come to help him stand up. When Biden is getting up, the cheers die down and, after having composed himself, he points to something on the ground. He then walks back to his seat. The video ends with five seconds showing the channel’s logo one more time and an end card that prompts the viewer to subscribe, donate to The Guardian, or watch another video. The video does not contain any added music or commentary.

To those unaware of the conspiratorial belief that Biden has dementia, this video would merely be parsed as a blunder, maybe even a blunder brought about by Biden’s old age. Since it is not uncommon for people to trip, it seems unreasonable to conclude that Biden suffers from a neurodegenerative disorder solely from watching this video. Additionally, reasonably concluding that someone has a neurodegenerative disorder requires more than merely seeing if they are aware of their surroundings. The most appropriate conclusion one can reach from watching this video is that Joe Biden fell or tripped at a US air force academy ceremony.

However, to others, particularly those who are not fond of Biden’s presidency, this video is evidence that Biden is unfit to be President of the United States. Many of the comments under the video are making fun of Biden or expressing con-attitudes about having him as their president. Some

comments, however, reveal that the commenter either had or is acquiring some substantive beliefs about Biden's cognitive acuity:

@Kronos\_One: "The impact of such cognitive challenges cannot be overlooked. 🤔"

@Raptor999\_: "and then they have him jumping around saying he's fine instead of resting this is elderly abuse"

@bullmarket4u926: "No bug [sic] deal. He has done this on Air Force 1, and on the bike. Just trust his doctor who said he is absolutely in TOP SHAPE!"

The first commenter assumes that Biden is experiencing some cognitive challenges which influenced him to fall. The second comment, in addition to gesturing at something more ominous—namely, that Biden is being guided by some "they" against better judgement—, implies that Biden is too old and ill to be president. The final comment contextualizes this incident of Biden falling with two other similar incidents and a statement released by the White House to quell the worries of some Americans that Biden has dementia. By the comment's tone, we come to understand that the commentor is being sarcastic and actually believes that Biden is not healthy enough to be in office.

After watching this video, conspiracists concerning Biden's health appear to have become more confident in their belief that Biden has a neurodegenerative disorder. Additionally, since it is reasonable to expect that one's president should not have a neurodegenerative disorder, they would also be more certain in their belief that Biden is unfit to be the President. Where non-conspiracists conclude that Biden fell at a US air force academy ceremony, conspiracists conclude that Biden is not healthy enough to be president. Thus, since the non-conspiracist arrives at an uncontroversial interpretation while the conspiracist would arrive at a controversial interpretation, this video can be used as a dogwhistle.

Since the video represents an event as it took place, neither its title nor content evaluate the event, and a subset of the audience interpret the video as having a more contentious interpretation than others, this video can be considered a representational dogwhistle.

## § 2.2 *Libs of TikTok*

Libs of TikTok is an X (formerly Twitter) account that primarily reposts TikTok videos filmed by Queer people with a caption summarizing what the person is saying and, if it is the case, that they work with children. Although not all of the account's content can be categorized as representational dogwhistles—as it is also known for spreading misinformation, deceitfully editing the videos it claims to repost, and calling Queer people pejoratives—, Libs of TikTok consistently uses representational dogwhistles.

On 23 June 2023, Libs of TikTok made a post that reads:

Elementary school @RenniesRiver had students participate in a pride parade at school. Young kids marched waving the progress pride flag as teachers cheered them on.

Accompanied with this text are two photos of students participating in the reported parade. At time of writing, this post has over 800 reposts and 2'800 likes. It contains a photo of an event, where the photos are not edited in a malicious manner, and the poster does not express their opinion of the event. By looking at the replies, we see that some viewers conclude something much more pernicious than what is blatantly depicted by the post is occurring. Moreover, almost all the replies are both expressing con-attitudes and reporting beliefs that something malicious is occurring. Some of the replies are as follows:

@starside8: “Absolutely disgusting. This is not education, it's grooming.”

@MaryC\_Love: “They [Queer people] want to normalize their perversion. The children are the main target. ❤️”

@GScottSays: “‘Had’...you mean ‘forced’”

These responses reveal that the audience believe this tweet is evidence that Queer people are forcing children to accept that it is okay to be Queer or forcing children into being Queer.

Although it is not uncommon for schools to celebrate the identities of marginalized groups as they gain more social recognition (e.g., Black History Month, Orange Shirt Day, and Pride Month initiatives), some believe in the conspiracy theory that Queer people, due to their inability to reproduce, need to indoctrinate children into adopting their “lifestyle” (Block 2022). To those who hold this belief, the events depicted in this post would be a product of Queer people’s malicious intentions to indoctrinate children. Without this belief, however, this post would merely depict the social progress achieved by Queer activists. Therefore, since the post represents an event as it took place, does not evaluate the event, and one group of viewers arrives at an uncontentious interpretation while another at a contentious one, this post is a representational dogwhistle,

### § 3 Khoo’s Tacit Inference Theory

Justin Khoo argues that the dogwhistles occur through tacit inferences. He writes, “all the work generating such upshots happens on the hearer’s side, coming about by way of the hearer’s beliefs about what the code word is about or who uses it” (2021: 152). His theory goes as follows: Let  $U$  be some dogwhistle with  $X$  being its assertoric content and  $Y$  its coded information where  $X$  does not entail  $Y$ . Hearers get from  $X$  to  $Y$  by holding the background belief *if  $X$ , then  $Y$* . One may acquire this background belief through some generic generalization or through beliefs they have about people who use certain words. In the former case, one may acquire the belief “*if someone is from a densely populated, high crime, urban area, then they are Black*” through the generic generalization “those who live in densely populated, high crime, urban area are Black”; in the latter case, one may acquire the belief “*if someone calls themselves a nationalist, then they are a White supremacist*” through noticing that White supremacists often self-identify as nationalists.

Let  $U$  be the utterance “Tim is from the inner city.” The explicitly asserted content  $X$  would be “Tim is from a densely populated, high crime, urban area,” as that is the definition of “inner city.” Since people believe that densely populated, high crime, urban areas are also predominately Black areas, the coded information  $Y$  would be “Tim is Black.” So, if the audience holds the inferential belief *if someone*



is from a densely populated, high crime, urban area, *then* they Black, by informing the listener that Tim is from the inner city, the speaker, whether intentionally or not, dogwhistles that Tim is Black.

By proposing that dogwhistles are caused by the audience's beliefs, Khoo can explain both how unintentional dogwhistles are possible and how they are context sensitive. An unintentional dogwhistle would occur when the speaker utters *U* and intends to convey *X*, but the audience interprets it as *Y* because they have the inferential belief *if X, then Y*. A given term may consistently produce a dogwhistle effect in context *C* but not in context *C'* because those in *C* believe *if X, then Y* but not those in *C'*.

Khoo's account is also able to explain how dogwhistles are cancellable. He claims that if someone asserts, "There is a culture of laziness in our inner cities, but it has nothing to do with race," they would be producing a "coherent, sensible, and felicitous" utterance because the meaning of "inner city" does not contain any information about race (2021: 149). In positing that the meaning of a dogwhistle does not encode the contentious interpretation, the tacit inference theory allows for users of terms commonly used as dogwhistles to cancel the contentious interpretation by merely saying "but I do not intend to imply *Y*." This would ensure their audience does not produce a contentious interpretation.

Non-linguistic dogwhistles can be easily accounted for in the tacit inference theory. Khoo notes how rich New Englander George W. Bush was able to cultivate "the image of a blue-collar man of the people by taking photographs clearing brush and speaking in a thick Texas accent" (2021: 159). By aligning himself with symbols of the working class, Bush was able to convey that he was a "guy you'd want to have a beer with" even though he did not say anything about being from a working-class upbringing (Khoo 2021: 159). People paying attention to Bush's presidential campaign probably acquired the belief that he was a working class man through their assumption that people from the American South are working class. Non-linguistic dogwhistles can be produced through inferential beliefs about the kind of people who use certain images, symbols, gestures, accents, etc.

Ergo, since the tacit inference theory can account for both linguistic and non-linguistic dogwhistles, context sensitivity, and cancellability, it is a plausible theory of dogwhistles.

Although the tacit inference theory is able to account for most dogwhistles, it does not accurately account for how representational dogwhistles function. In the Libs of TikTok case, the assertoric content is “Rennie’s River Elementary had a pride parade”; the followers of Libs of TikTok most likely have the existing belief “*if* a school has a pride parade, *then* it is grooming its students”; thus, the followers infer that Rennie’s River Elementary is grooming its students. People may differ in their existing beliefs, and this allows them to have different interpretations of the post: some may hold the belief “*if* a school has a pride parade, *then* it is a bad school” or “*if* a school has a pride parade, *then* it is abusive.” These existing beliefs most likely arise from the generic generalization “Queer people and their allies are groomers/abusers/bad educators.”<sup>2</sup>

However, Libs of TikTok is not just informing its followers that Rennie’s River Elementary had a pride parade (explicitly stated) or that it is grooming its students (inferred), it is also reinforcing the belief held by its followers that there is a Queer agenda that aims to indoctrinate kids. The same holds for Biden’s fall: it dogwhistles that Biden is unfit to be president but also reinforces the belief held by conspiracists that Biden is secretly ill. It seems unlikely for anyone, either consciously or unconsciously, to believe “*if* a school has a pride parade, *then* there is a Queer agenda” or “*if* the president falls and has difficulty getting up, *then* the government is hiding that he is ill.” It is likelier for people to hold the beliefs “*if* there is a Queer agenda, *then* schools will have pride parades” or “*if* the president has a neurodegenerative disorder, *then* the government is hiding that he is ill.” Yet, reasonably concluding that these antecedents are true is harder and it seems unlikely that the assertoric content of these utterances actually convey them.

Representational dogwhistles are unique from other dogwhistles in that they are used as evidence for some belief the audience has about a state of affairs. Since representational dogwhistles merely show

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of Joe Biden falling down, the assertoric content is “Biden fell and had difficulties getting up at US air force academy ceremony”; the existing conditional belief would be “*if* someone falls down for no apparent reason and has difficulties getting up, *then* they are unfit to be president”; since Biden fell for no apparent reason and had difficulties getting up, he is unfit to be president. The existing belief can be acquired through a conjunction of the generic generalizations “people who fall down for no apparent reason and have difficulties getting up are unwell” and “people who are unwell are not fit to be president.”

an event as it occurred, it is up to the viewer to interpret what the associated media depicts and why it is being shared. Indeed, some viewers of these dogwhistles commented on the triviality of Libs of TikTok's report of a Pride parade at an elementary school in St. John's, Newfoundland:

@Playfulimp replying to the video of Biden falling: "So?"

@SocialistSauce replying to the Libs of TikTok tweet: "And?"

Whether these people are genuinely confused as to why these things warrant being shared or are attempting to minimize the supposed importance of what is being shared, they most likely do not sincerely hold the background belief for which the presented media is interpreted as evidence. Instead of viewing the associated media as evidence of something more sinister, they simply acquire information about what occurred at Rennie's River in June.

The tacit inference theory is correct to explain the dogwhistle effect by looking at the audience's beliefs, but it fails to account for representational dogwhistles by presupposing that the contentious conclusion only arises from a deductive inference of the form " $X \rightarrow Y$ ,  $X$ ,  $\therefore Y$ ". Although Khoo's theory can wholly account for how other dogwhistles and part of representational dogwhistles—namely, the tacit inference part—work, it is unable to explain how representational dogwhistles are capable of reinforcing false, social norm-violating beliefs without supposing that those susceptible to these types of dogwhistles hold an obviously false inferential belief.

Additionally, how representational dogwhistles are used as evidence must be accounted for because people susceptible of these dogwhistles then use them to justify their belief that something more pernicious is occurring. Videos of Joe Biden falling have been used in online interactions by bots and people to refute claims that Biden is fit to be president (geoffsakala 2024; jerma73830 2024; Search4Trth 2024; stridentTH 2024). Libs of TikTok has been praised by conservative politicians and talk show hosts for "raising awareness" about the supposed issues in American schools—by which they mean the existence of Queer teachers, presence of 2SLGBTQ+ books in libraries, and hosting of Pride events

(Starr 2022; Tomlinson 2022). To those that hold these false, social norm–violating beliefs, these posts are important as they make others “aware” of something which is “being hidden.” When those who hold conspiratorial beliefs see more videos of Biden falling or pictures of schools holding Pride parades, they will take themselves to have more reasons to believe that the government is hiding Biden’s illness or that there is a Queer agenda. Those who do not hold these beliefs, however, would merely see the media as depicting a banal event.

#### § 4 An Ostensive-Inferential Account of Dogwhistles

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s work on relevance theory provides a framework capable of explaining representational dogwhistles. They argue that utterances have both an ostensive and inferential component. Communication is ostensive insofar as there are “two layers of information to be picked up [in communication]: first, there is the information which has been, so to speak, pointed out; second, there is the information that the first layer of information has been intentionally pointed out” (1995: 50). Suppose you and I are at a gallery, and I point ahead. Following the direction of my finger, you see a mom with her child and a painting. By pointing, I have made apparent the information that a mom with her child and a painting are ahead of us. However, my gesturing also informs you that I intended to make that information apparent. Thus, in gesturing I have made two things (more) apparent to you: (1) that a state of affairs holds; and (2) that I intend to inform you of that state of affairs.

When they say that communication has an inferential component, they mean that “communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence” (1995: 2). Drawing on the work of Paul Grice and David Lewis, Sperber and Wilson argue that the meaning of a given utterance is the communicator’s audience-directed intention, and that the intention is inferred by the audience through communicator-provided evidence. Take the ambiguous utterance “Jones has bought the *Times*” for example. This may either mean “Jones has bought a copy of the *Times*” or “Jones has bought the press enterprise which publishes the *Times*” (1995: 13). Audiences, Sperber and Wilson contend, can easily understand what is meant by this utterance through the truncated logical argument:

(P1) Jones has bought a copy of the *Times* or Jones has bought the press enterprise which publishes the *Times*.

(P2) *It is not the case that* Jones has bought the press enterprise which publishes the *Times*.

(C1) *Therefore*, Jones has bought a copy of the *Times*.

Evidence for (P1) is produced by the ambiguity in the original utterance while evidence for (P2) is produced by the speaker setting and the audience observing some implicit standards of verbal communication (truthfulness, informativeness, comprehensibility, etc.). Sperber and Wilson maintain that a similar process applies to both unambiguous and other ambiguous utterances.

In short, the communicator is involved in ostension while the audience is involved in inference. Sperber and Wilson write, “the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually [apparent] to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make [apparent] or more [apparent] to the audience a set of assumptions  $\{I\}$ ” (1995: 63). Communication, therefore, begins when the communicator makes evident their intention to draw the attention of the audience to something. The audience then infers the meaning of the utterance by considering of what the communicator is intending to inform them while also considering why the communicator intended to inform them of their intention.

The relevance theory framework enables us to explain how representational dogwhistles work by accounting for non-deductive inferences. Non-deductive inferences are inferences made by inductive processes. Unlike deductive inferences, which are rule-bounded logical conclusions from premises, non-deductive inferences are “less a logical process than a form of suitably constrained guesswork” and can only be considered efficient or inefficient (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 69). They propose that non-deductive inferences have two distinct stages: hypothesis formation and hypothesis confirmation. The former “involves the use of deductive rules, but is not totally governed by them,” and the latter involves a “by-product of the way assumptions are processed, deductively or otherwise” (1995: 69).

Both ostension and inferences are involved in the process of hypothesis formation and confirmation. Sperber and Wilson provide the following utterance to explain how hypotheses are formed and utilized in interpreting communicative behaviour:

*Peter:* Did you enjoy your skiing holiday?

*Mary:* (displays her leg in plaster) (1990: 39)

It seems fair to conclude that Mary did not have a good time. By bringing Peter's attention to her leg, Mary provides evidence for "an intended hypothesis about [her] intentions" and that by seeing her leg in a plaster—along with general assumptions of states of affairs and his general reasoning abilities—Peter has sufficient information to determine this intention (Sperber and Wilson 1990: 39).

Ostension signals to the audience that a hypothesis is necessary to interpret their utterance while the inferences themselves are the set of hypotheses that the communicator's ostensive behaviour licenses. The audience then chooses the hypothesis which they believe is most likely to align with the speaker's intention. Communication succeeds when the audience's hypothesis aligns with what the speaker intended to convey. Hypothesis confirmation occurs through testing your hypothesis with future utterances. If new evidence is not compatible with the hypothesis, then either the hypothesis is updated, a new hypothesis is created, or clarification is requested.

Continuing with Peter and Mary:

*Peter:* I'm sorry to hear. I heard the weather on the mountain was horrid.

*Mary:* I wouldn't know. I wasn't there.

Although Peter's previous hypothesis that Mary broke her leg on her holiday was licensed by Mary's behaviour, it is not compatible with the new evidence provided by Mary's utterance. In this case, Peter must create a new hypothesis to interpret both her previous and current utterances. Instead of supposing

that Mary broke her leg on her holiday, he hypothesizes that she broke her leg before her holiday and did not go to the mountain. Just like his previous hypothesis, this hypothesis is neither true nor false but efficient or inefficient at interpreting the speaker's actions. Additionally, it is subject to the same hypothesis confirmation process as the previous hypothesis.

Recall the two desiderata of a theory of representational dogwhistle dogwhistles: (1) it must be able to explain how rational agents are capable of interpreting purely descriptive utterances as conveying something contentious; and (2) it must be able to explain how representational dogwhistles are capable of reinforcing false, social norm-violating beliefs.

Rational agents are capable of making the jump from descriptive utterance to controversial hypothesis because of a pre-existing assumption about a state of affairs. Since assumptions about states of affairs figure into our hypothesis formation process, they impact the set of hypotheses produced and how much credence we give to each of them.<sup>3</sup> Conspiracist who saw the video of the Biden falling, for example, produced hypotheses that explained his fall as a result of his neurological decline and assigned greater credence to the hypotheses that aligned with that assumption. If one lacked such conspiratorial assumptions, however, they would either not produce hypotheses with reference to neurological degradation or would assign a low likelihood to them being useful for explaining Biden's behaviour. This controversial assumption, which may be more or less apparent to the person who holds it, may be acquired in multitudinous ways: through a trusted source telling them they should believe it, through skepticism of government agencies, or through pervasive delusional thinking. Therefore, controversial assumptions produce controversial hypotheses (or, in the case of communication, interpretations).

Now that we see how controversial interpretations are produced, we need to understand how controversial assumptions are strengthened by representational dogwhistles. Representational dogwhistles reinforce false, social norm-violating beliefs because they confirm the validity of the

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<sup>3</sup> To see how this can be the case, suppose a rational agent has 0.6 credence in their assumption that geriatrics who often fall have a neurodegenerative disorder and 0.4 credence in their assumption that geriatrics who often fall are healthy. Since it cannot be the case that an old person is both healthy and has a neurodegenerative disorder and they give greater credence to the possibility that an old person falls because they are ill, they should also give greater credence to those hypotheses which explain older people falling as a product of their neurological decline.

audience's controversial assumptions. Sperber and Wilson propose that "the strength of an assumption is increased every time that assumption helps in processing some new information, and is reduced every time it makes the processing of some new information more difficult" (1990: 77). Suppose someone assumes that such a thing as the Queer agenda exists. When this person scrolls through Libs of TikTok's posts and sees the curated collage of schools throwing Pride parades, they create a set of hypotheses to explain why these events are taking place and why Libs of TikTok considers it worthwhile to collect these posts. Since they assume that Queer people are determined to indoctrinate children, they assign greater credence to a hypothesis that attributes malice to Queer people. Noticing that this hypothesis sufficiently explains the events they are witnessing and why Libs of TikTok is sharing them, the viewer becomes more certain in their assumption that there is a Queer agenda.

Since representational dogwhistles merely show what took place, they enable a range of possible hypotheses to adequately make sense of what they are witnessing. The less is said, or showed, in a representational dogwhistle the more pernicious it is. Representational dogwhistles are not unlike ambiguous utterances as they both "provide evidence for a range of related hypotheses" (Sperber and Wilson 1990: 39). Since the same dogwhistles can produce multiple efficient interpretations, assumptions are less likely to be challenged. By having assumptions go unchallenged, their strength in the mind of the audience increases as they view them as capable of efficiently processing new information. Therefore, Representational dogwhistles are capable of reinforcing false, social norm-violating beliefs by being ambiguous enough to allow for a wide range of efficient hypotheses produced by contentious assumptions to go unchallenged.

The ostensive-inferential theory is compatible with Khoo's tacit inference theory. Indeed, one's assumption may be the conditional *if X, then Y* that produces the hypothesis *Y* when the audience hears or sees *X*. The assumption may even be produced by an assumed generic generalization or metalinguistic bridge principle. What differentiates the ostensive-inferential theory from Khoo's theory is that it globalizes the hypothesis forming and confirmation process (which is what enables it to account for non-deductive inferences) to all forms of communication. Under this theory, dogwhistles are not a



unique type of communication but one of the many ways we use layered meaning. Dogwhistles are not unlike dirty inside jokes (which send a controversial interpretation to an ingroup but a banal one to an outgroup) or poor metaphors (which may need to be cancelled if the speaker notices their audience is interpreting them improperly). What differentiates dogwhistles from these other forms of communication is that they “involve a deniable violation of egalitarian norms” (Santana 2022: 387). Since dogwhistles may not be any different from the other ways we communicate, we do not need a theory of dogwhistles but a theory of communication which is capable of accounting for dogwhistles. I have not shown that relevance theory is the appropriate theory of communication, merely that it is readily capable of accounting for representational dogwhistles and other types of dogwhistles.

Those critical of the ostensive-inferential theory may reject my claim that representational dogwhistles are dogwhistles. If representational dogwhistles really are dogwhistles, then we would have to forego journalistic impartiality. Indeed, the critic explains, the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists emphasizes the importance of reporting merely facts while also minimizing harm (SPJ 2014). If representational dogwhistles really are dogwhistles—which are pernicious due to the way they violate egalitarian norms—, then these two interests would be at odds. It would be extremely difficult to report on an event without licensing some contentious interpretation, as journalists cannot predict how each of their readers will interpret their articles. Impartiality is an admirable quality: journalists should try to report as accurately as they can and let their audience incorporate new information how they see fit. To do otherwise would be to patronize them.

I agree with that ostensive-inferential theory grimly implies that neutral reporting is likely to lead to contentious interpretations, which may only be negated through a patronizing reminder of what can and cannot be inferred; but I disagree that impartiality itself is desirable. Suppose a news agency knows the majority of its audience holds homophobic beliefs and regularly reports on drag queen story hours. Even if their articles merely report when and where the event will take place, who is organizing it, and what will happen, their reporting is biased, either by their financial incentive to publish stories that sell or the implicit bias of the editorial board. Additionally, considering that drag queen story hours became an

international issue, with some organizers being threatened and people believing that children were being groomed, it is difficult to justify not constantly reminding their audience what they should take away from an article (Kaleem 2023). It is not patronizing to inform their audience that some events or talking points are steeped in misinformation and either presently dispelling that misinformation or directing them to fact-checkers.

Impartiality is valuable insofar as it may reduce the likelihood that something unverifiable or false will be published. Journalists should minimize opinions and maximize facts in their reporting, but that does not mean that they cannot explicitly state what one can and cannot infer from story. If merely reporting on something can violate an egalitarian norm, journalists are burdened with ensuring that their audience makes the right inferences. The ostensive-inferential theory is not hindered in entailing that it is much easier to dogwhistle than previously thought; instead, it reveals just how dangerous communication can be when we do not make our intentions explicit.

#### § 4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to argue that there is a particular kind of dogwhistle for which contemporary theories of dogwhistles have not been able to account. I began by explaining what a dogwhistle is. I then defined and provided two examples of representational dogwhistles. Following this, I explained why Khoo's tacit inference theory, although being an attractive theory of dogwhistles, is incapable of fully explaining how representational dogwhistles function. I concluded by developing an ostensive-inferential account of dogwhistles informed by the works of Sperber and Wilson.

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