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Quasi-Dogwhistles: A Case Study of Creating Meaning

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QUASI-DOGWHISTLES: A CASE STUDY OF CREATING MEANING

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Thesis Summary

In 2017, a group of users on the website 4chan attempted to establish a new meaning of the common "OK" hand gesture. Claiming the sign meant "white power" the intention of this act was to trick left leaning internet users and the media that an innocuous sign was racist, hence turning everyone unaware against them. A common narrative surrounding the situation was that the new meaning for the gesture as established by this group was a "hoax". This situation serves as an interesting case study into understanding how we mean things by the use of signs. I will argue that the new meaning as established by the 4chan users is not a hoax. First, I will make a connection between signs like the OK gesture and dogwhistles. I will then label signs like the gesture "quasi-dogwhistles". Then, I will argue against the new meaning being a hoax by appealing to an intentionalist theory of meaning. Intentionalism states we mean things by intending to change other's psychological states and we change other's psychological states by making them aware of our intention to do so. By appealing to the natural and non-natural meaning distinction as found in Grice's introductory paper of intentionalism, I will demonstrate the multiple ways we can deny the fact that the quasi-dogwhistle's meaning is a hoax. Finally, I will emphasize the roles natural and social meanings play in our understanding of public discourse.

1. Introduction

On the 28th of April in 2017, journalist Emma Roller tweeted out two pictures. The first was a photo of two right-wing celebrities, Cassandra Fairbanks and Mike Cervonich, holding up the widely known "OK" hand gesture. Roller posted with the first photo: "just two people doing a white power hand gesture in the white house" (Matthews 2018). The second image was a diagram demonstrating in a crude manner the resemblance the OK gesture had to a "w" and a "p" which in turn symbolized the phrase "white power".[1] The second tweet also featured a link from the Anti-Defamation League.

Both the comments and images Roller tweeted referred to an infamous circumstance where members of an online forum on the website 4chan created a hoax image with the intent of tricking liberal media and left-leaning internet users into believing that the OK hand gesture actually meant "white power". The major intent of this act was to make the left-leaning groups that recognized the white supremacist use of the gesture appear hysterical to those not in the know. In other words, it was made so that those who believed the hoax would ostracize themselves from other political actors on the stage of American politics.[2]

In 2018, the online journal *Vox* wrote this about the incident:

"To [the users of 4chan] and alt-right loyalists, this was the ultimate proof that the prank had worked: A left-leaning journalist had been fooled into thinking an innocuous hand gesture was a secret sign of deep, racist evil. Especially funny to them was when Roller explained her tweet by

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[1] For an example of this image, see Appendix I.
[2] To see the plan explained by the original post, see Appendix II.

referencing a diagram … originating in the 4chan post that launched 'Operation O-KKK'…"
(Matthews 2018).

I think the above quote captures a common way of thinking about the OK gesture and its
meaning, especially by those who did the act. This interpretation of events takes the new
meaning perpetuated with this image of the OK sign as a "prank" or a "hoax". It is important to
ask here: What are we calling a hoax? I think there are three aspects of this situation that one
might be tempted to call a hoax. One of these is clearly a hoax and the other two I think are
presently unclear. The first and obvious hoax is what we can call the strong etymological claim.
If the diagram spread around by the 4chan users is taken to be an etymological claim about the
origins of the OK gesture, then we can say this claim is a hoax. It is simply historically false that
the OK gesture originates in meaning "white power". I have no problem calling this a hoax.

The second and less obvious hoax is what we can call the weak etymological claim. The
weak etymological claim may acknowledge the fact that the OK gesture did not originate with
the "white power" meaning and that the new meaning came about later. It is worth noting that
there is some evidence of those associated with far-right circles using the gesture before the post
on 4chan (Matthews 2018). Of course, association with the far-right does not entail that the use
of the sign meant "white power". This second hoax's falsity is harder to prove, but I am going to
take it for granted that it is false and the spread of the "white power" use of the gesture came
from the 4chan post.

The third and least obvious "hoax" is the claim that the OK gesture means "white power"
(or something adjacent to that) when used by these 4chan users. The "hoax" here is that these
4chan users tricked others into thinking that when they used the OK gesture it *meant* "white
power" when in actuality it did not. If we accept this as a hoax, then this means we must accept

that when these 4chan users used the OK gesture they did not actually mean "white power" in any sense. I think this is still undecided and much more interesting of a claim than the second hoax. The only fact of the matter that seems to show that the OK gesture used in this context did not mean "white power" is that the group that used the sign claims it did not. I do not think this is reliable enough evidence.

The situation becomes more complicated when we acknowledge the fact that the use of the OK gesture in right-wing circles has skyrocketed since the spread of this image.[3] The fact of the matter is, with this attempted hoax came the correlated use of a sign in various groups of the far right. A fair question to ask from this acknowledgment is: What does this sign mean now that it is being used in these new contexts? Ultimately, what drives this question are larger concerns such as whether the use of this sign in certain contexts is racist or harmful. I will not address this issue directly due to there being many relevant and adjacent arguments that would need to be decided upon before making such a decision. However, I will provide an argument concerning such a sign that will make it easier to come to a conclusion about such matters.

Let us lay out our example more clearly. We can imagine a collective group G that recognizes the use of a sign S to show that the user means M_1. G_1, a subset of G, attempts to establish a new meaning of S (let us call this meaning M_2) such that group G_2 believes S means M_2 when used by G_1. Another group G_3 does not recognize such a meaning (in other words, G_3 only recognizes M_1). G_1 claims that, in fact, they do not actually intend for sign S to mean M_2, but rather only intend to trick G_2 into believing that when G_1 uses sign S, they mean M_2. Furthermore, G_1 and related groups ($G_4,G_5,G_6...$) start using sign S abundantly and claim that the

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[3] See Appendix III and IV

use of such sign maintains the M_1 meaning.[4] Now we can ask: does the Sign S mean M_2 in any way when used by G_1 and the related groups?

I will argue that in using S, G_1 does in fact mean M_2 at least in some sense. In other words, for the OK gesture in our previous example, I claim the third hoax is not a real hoax. To make this case I will analyze the meaning of a simpler sign; a dogwhistle. A dogwhistle is a term notoriously used in modern politics to send different messages to different groups. Since the sign S as previously described seems to have a similar nature but also clearly deviates from the typical dogwhistle, I will label signs like S "quasi-dogwhistles". Using an intentionalist theory of meaning, I will analyze both the typical dogwhistle and the newly identified quasi-dogwhistle. I will then emphasize the role of Gricean "natural meaning" in analyzing the quasi-dogwhistle.

2. Dogwhistles

2.1 What are Dogwhistles?

Dogwhistles can be defined as terms that send one message to an outgroup while simultaneously sending a second message to an ingroup (Henderson, McCready 2018). It is common for the ingroup message to be considered controversial, offensive, or disgraceful to a wider audience. Most commonly, dogwhistles are utilized in a political context to convey a message to only a portion of the intended audience. This is usually the case because the speaker calculates the message is unpalatable enough to conceal from some portion of their audience but useful enough to allure another portion of that audience (Henderson, McCready 2018).

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[4] The related groups of $G_4, G_5, G_6...$ are supposed to represent groups that can be distinct from G_1 since they did not create the new use of the sign. However, since the creation of G_1's new established meaning, these connected groups begin to use S in abundant amounts. A real-life example of these groups would be the use of the OK gesture from various right-leaning groups such as Trump supporters or The Proud Boys.

A popular example of a dogwhistle is the term "welfare queen" after it was popularized by Ronald Reagan throughout his first presidential campaign (Demby 2013). The term, on the surface, resembles a characteristically undefined woman who takes advantage of government financial aid to live a life of luxury and laziness. The message to the ingroup is clear; it refers specifically to black women. Another example of a dogwhistle is the use of "states' rights" (Perlstein 2012). The term was infamously mentioned by Lee Atwater, a Republican strategist who spearheaded the Southern Strategy which emphasized appealing to the racist sentiments of the south to win votes.[5] On the surface, the term seems to simply show support for the federalist system the United States was built upon but in actual use, it was associated with black oppression and is now associated with anti-abortion movements in the modern day. The phrase allows one to speak about overturning central government decisions that prioritize benefits toward minority groups without having to blatantly take a stance against said decisions.

Jennifer Saul has recently analyzed and classified different types of dogwhistles (Saul 2018). Saul distinguishes between three types of dogwhistles, what she calls "explicit intentional dogwhistles", "implicit intentional dogwhistles", and "unintentional dogwhistles" (Saul 2018). Explicit intentional dogwhistles are the stereotypical example of a dogwhistle. This is used when someone wants to spread an explicit message that they do not want others to recognize usually due to its taboo or hateful nature. They intend one implicit message to an ingroup and one explicit message to an outgroup.

Implicit intentional dogwhistles are more complicated. They involve an appeal to someone's racist or prejudiced sensibilities while not making them explicitly acknowledge said

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[5] It may be relevant to mention that Atwater was an adviser to Reagan.

sensibilities. In other words, implicit intentional dogwhistles are designed to appeal to people who do not want to recognize themselves as explicitly hateful but who still harbor hateful beliefs. This aspect makes the implicit dogwhistle harder to reject and call out compared to the stereotypical explicit dogwhistle. Unintentional dogwhistles are quite straightforward. It is when an unknowing party of the dogwhistler's audience picks up on the term and uses it without intending the double meaning. An example of this would be someone who is particularly interested in representing his local government's autonomy from the federal government and says: "I support states' rights". This person can be pro-choice and not realize that such a term is used by certain speakers to show an alignment with anti-abortion values.

On a surface level analysis, we can separate the average dogwhistle into two meanings. To bring up a previous example, we can separate "welfare queen" into one meaning of "any woman who is lazy and takes advantage of undeserved, poorly planned government aid" and "black women".[6]

2.2 Why are Dogwhistles Relevant?

Let us abstract what happens with the average dogwhistle which I am treating like an explicit intentional dogwhistle. Speaker X uses an utterance U to speak to an audience A. A can be split up into two distinct groups, A_1 and A_2. Due to specific circumstances, X believes that the only way to stay in A's good graces is to send separate messages to both A_1 and A_2. As such,

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[6] See Khoo (2017) for an inferentionalist account of dogwhistles. In this account, dogwhistles do not contain separate implicit messages but rather are used to trigger inferences only particular audience members will make. I think Khoo's account is plausible, however, it is important to note that Khoo is simply arguing that there are not two semantic meanings encoded in the use of dogwhistles. An intentionalist account of meaning is not necessarily concerned with embedded semantic content but rather the belief that is trying to be communicated. The intentionalist can agree that "You look great" may clearly semantically deviate from "You look terrible". Yet, the intentionalist will still maintain that "You look great" can mean the same thing as "You look terrible" under the right context and intentions. All of this is to say, even if I expect you to infer something from specific words I use, it could still be said that what I *mean* is the message after the inference is completed.

when X uses U, X intends for one meaning to be understood by A_1 and another to be understood by A_2. A_1 understands U to have the meaning M_1 and A_2 understands U to have the meaning M_2. However, it is possible that A_2 is aware of meaning M_1, but also understands that X "really" means M_2 when saying U.

There are many obvious similarities to the abstracted dogwhistle case and my previous analysis of signs like S. For one, both scenarios involve a speaker using something like a sign or utterance to display different messages. For another, these different messages are tied to different groups that have varying awareness of the other kind of meaning that is attached to the sign or utterance. There also seems to be a relation of what a sign or utterance "really means" as it relates to the different meanings that are attached to them. And finally, both involve focusing on what the speaker *intends* for their audience to believe and understand by the speaker's use of the sign or utterance.

While these entities seem to share similar a function, I think it is clear they are not identical. For one, the OK sign is a gesture and many signs that have a similar use are usually non-linguistic.[7] Secondly, signs like the OK gesture are by design supposed to have their controversial use discovered. This clearly deviates from the regular dogwhistle's obvious design to have its controversial use undiscovered and unknown as long as possible. As such, due to the similarity and differences between the two, I will call S and entities like it a "quasi-dogwhistle". Furthermore, by showing you the connection between both dogwhistles, quasi-dogwhistles, and speaker intention, I hope to demonstrate why an intentionalist theory of meaning will be

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[7] You might argue against this characterization of the OK gesture due to its origin of being based on the linguistic message "okay". While I obviously cannot deny this clear connection, I want to emphasize the image-like role the gesture takes in online spaces similar to the use of images like Pepe the Frog.

beneficial in analyzing these signs. Before moving on to the intentionalist account, I will lay out in more clear terms what a quasi-dogwhistle is.

3. Quasi-Dogwhistles

Quasi-dogwhistles are coded signs that operate in a similar fashion to ordinary dogwhistles by the fact that they carry different "messages" to both ingroups and outgroups. They also differ from the typical dogwhistle in important ways. I will now lay out the ways in which quasi-dogwhistles can be differentiated from the ordinary dogwhistle.

Firstly, quasi-dogwhistles will typically have three groups as an intended audience: an ingroup (G_1), an outgroup (G_3), and a targeted outgroup (G_2).[8] The ingroup and outgroup function similarly to how they function in regular dogwhistles. The targeted outgroup is intended to pick up on what we can call a "dummy meaning" (M_2). The "dummy meaning" is a meaning only intended for the targeted outgroup to pick up on, and according to those that use the sign, is not the actual meaning of the sign. To reiterate our previous example, the dummy meaning of the OK hand sign would be something akin to "white power" which in turn serves to show support of white supremacist views.

While the ingroup may share a similar status to the ingroup identified in the use of regular dogwhistles, there are differences between the two. For one, the ingroup of the dogwhistle inherently denies that the actual meaning of the gesture or sign is anything offensive. For two, the intended ingroup are those that participate in the creation of the sign or at the very least, those who participate in the perpetuation of the dummy meaning. This is different from

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[8] It should be noted Henderson and McCready (2019) have made a similar distinction in their analysis of regular dogwhistles. They call the third group "the savvy outgroup". The difference between their "savvy outgroup" and my "targeted outgroup" is that the former is not intended to pick up on a coded message while the latter is. For the savvy outgroup, there will always be someone who can crack the code, so to speak.

when a politician utilizes a dog whistle because the ingroup mostly includes those that are not peers of the speaker but rather are removed audience members. Thirdly, those in the ingroup are not only aware that the phrase intentionally means "nothing", but they are also aware of the targeted outgroup and the dummy meaning. This means, to participate in the ingroup is to recognize that there is a dummy meaning and that this meaning is explicitly not the "true" meaning of the sign or gesture.

It may be worth mentioning the metaphor that a title such as "dogwhistle" brings forward is slightly misleading when applied to the typical case. For example, when Ronald Reagan said: "welfare queens", by my analysis two messages were being intentionally communicated. The first message being: "lazy women who take unfair advantage of poorly placed government aid" and the second message being: "black women". Of course, when a physical dogwhistle is used, the only thing doing the hearing is the dog. For other people (and perhaps, other creatures), there is no input at all, there is only silence. Compare this to an example of a quasi-dogwhistle such as the OK sign.

In a way, the OK sign is so innocuous and so devoid of any explicit meaning that one can interpret its use as akin to silence. By this I mean, if one were to utilize the sign to send coded messages to others, there is a sense in which there are not two meanings being sent out but only one. The OK sign and other quasi-dogwhistles can be recognized by their effectiveness. The most effective versions may be the ones that hide in plain sight and give no intentional meaning to other parties. This makes the claim of meaning by the targeted group seem even more ridiculous and allows the sign to be continuously used without consequence. With now a better idea of the two types of signs we are going to analyze, it will serve us to understand how an intentionalist theory of meaning will aid us in such a task.

4. Intentionalism

4.1 What is Intentionalism?

Intentionalism is the view that humans successfully communicate by revealing intentions to change each other's minds (Harris 2020). In other words, for a speaker to communicate to a listener: 1. They must intend to have a psychological effect on the listener; 2. This effect must come about by demonstrating the intention to bring it about. Successful communication occurs if the addressee recognizes what effect the speaker intended to have on them (Harris 2020).

To provide a brief example, for me to successfully communicate to you that I like your dress, I may say: "I like your dress". To understand my comment, you are going to infer things about my mind and intentions. As such, when I communicate to you the fact that I like your dress, I am expecting you to come to believe the proposition: "Clyde likes my dress", and I hope for you to believe that by recognizing my intention to make you believe it. If you think I am a snooty jerk, you may infer from your understanding of my mind and intentions that I am trying to insult you by stating: "I like your dress". In this case, since you misread my intentions then we call can this a miscommunication. Inherently, intentionalism is about a speaker trying to make clear what their intentions are and a listener trying their best to understand those intentions.

Intentionalism's creation is credited to Paul Grice, whose paper "Meaning" serves as a solid basis for the theory. Grice's discussion of "meaning" starts off with differentiating between two major ways we use the word "meaning". He calls the distinction between these uses "natural meaning" and "non-natural meaning" (Grice 1957).[9] I will discuss these more in-depth in the

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[9] From now on, when using terms like "intentionalism" and "intentionalist", I am referencing the entire scope of the Gricean theory. That includes the natural and non-natural distinction. While many intentionalists may not reference this distinction often, for my present purposes I am associating it with the framework due to its origin in Grice's paper.

next section. For the time being, we can consider natural meaning as something that "indicates" and non-natural meaning as something that "represents". To use one of Grice's examples, we may say that seeing spots on someone's face may *mean* they have measles. Yet, it is not the case those spots somehow say something like "This person has measles". Grice labels the kind of meaning encapsulated by the measles example "natural" meaning and in contrast, labels meaning encapsulated by language as "non-natural" meaning.[10]

Intentionalist theories of meaning will be primarily concerned with non-natural meanings and how they relate to linguistic utterances, but they need not be. Intentionalists like Daniel Harris emphasize the fact that intentionalism focuses on communicative acts and not necessarily linguistic ones (Harris 2016). Utterances can be of many mediums, and we can emphasize this by the fact that with a clear example. If I want someone to leave my room and I point at the door, I am non-naturally meaning something by that gesture. There is nothing inherent about pointing at a door that makes it "mean" that I want you to leave. It takes the audience of the utterance to see I have an intention for them to believe something, something to the effect of "I want you to leave". The audience must then recognize that I want them to believe that I want them to leave, and I want them to gain that belief by recognizing my intention of having them believe it.

Intentionalism does not focus on how words and sentences mean something in a contained system necessarily, but rather emphasizes the importance of the psychological states of both the speaker and listener. It comes with the ingrained belief that we share psychological states and that these states are transferable (Grice 1976, *SWW* pg. 286-7). Explicitly, intentionalism focuses on the concept of *mind reading* (Harris 2016). Mind reading is

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[10] See section 4.2 for further elaboration on this distinction.

acknowledging that other beings have intentions, thoughts, and desires. It is the process of inferring from both knowledge of your own intentions and others' behavior to interpret the purpose of action in other beings.

4.2 Further Clarification of Natural vs Non-Natural Meanings

Grice makes the distinction between natural and non-natural meaning to show that simply causing a psychological state, disposition, or attitude will not be enough to account for linguistic meaning (which seemingly will always be non-natural). I will try to provide a clear example of this.

Imagine a parent with two children. One child is rebellious while the other is not. The rebellious child has been skipping school unbeknownst to said parent but the rule following sibling is quite aware of their sibling's actions. As such, we can imagine two different scenarios of how the parent is informed of this fact by someone else. In the first scenario, the rule-following child tells you while alone together: "Your son has been skipping school". In the second scenario, the rule-following child shows you the social media page of the rebellious child which contains pictures of the rebellious child skipping school and having fun elsewhere. Both scenarios contain something we can call "meaning", but there is a clear deviation. In the second scenario, the parent may interpret the profile and the content of the pictures as *meaning* their other child has been skipping school. Yet, this sort of meaning can be differentiated from that one brought about by stating: "Your son has been skipping school". If the picture scenario occurred, you could not attribute to the actions of the rule-following child of literally meaning "Your son has been skipping school". This is despite the fact the child clearly intends to change your psychological state by showing you the pictures.

A natural meaning will signal a fact and bring about a certain belief to the person interpreting it. We can imagine a scenario where a father and his toddler are looking outside their front window. When the father and the child see a mail truck stop by their mailbox, the father may exclaim to his child: "You know what that means! The mail is here!". The father here is not trying to implicate that the mailman by passing in front of their house meant to communicate a message of "I have delivered your mail". What is implied from the father's statement is that the events just witnessed seem to show a certain fact about the world.

In this case, it is easy to take from the fact that a mail truck stopped in front of your mailbox that your mail was delivered. Of course, if the father goes to check and see if the mail is there and it is not, then he will have to conclude the event of the mail truck stopping in front of his mailbox did *not* mean the mail was delivered. Similarly, even if the mailman intended for the father to see him and believe his mail was dropped off, his action still did not *mean* the mail was delivered. In fact, his actions *meant* he was attempting to deceive the father in some way. We can distinguish this from a linguistic example.

Imagine for some strange reason the father is now on very good terms with the mailman and the mailman calls him every day to say: "I just delivered your mail". If after one of these calls the father checked the mailbox to find nothing, then the mailman's utterance still meant "I just delivered your mail". It does not matter what actually happened, the mailman's utterance still meant that he had delivered the mail. This shows another inherent difference between natural and non-natural meaning. This is why I previously stated natural meaning "indicates" and non-natural meaning "represents". A representation can maintain itself despite if what it

represents is true or false. An indication requires that what is being said to be indicated must be true for indication to actually occur.[11]

We can consider the distinction I just brought attention to as one of Grice's main test to understand if a meaning is either natural or non-natural. Another test is to simply see if when asked: "What did they mean by that?" if you can then in return an answer with a linguistic phrase in quotes (Grice 1957, *SWW*, p. 214). For example, if I asked you what the smoke in the sky meant, and you knew the smoke in the sky was from a natural forest fire then you could not respond with "It means the same as 'forest fire'". Conversely, if you asked me what the smoke in the sky meant, and I knew it was someone sending out smoke signals I could quite correctly respond "It meant the same as saying 'Emergency!'". Even if it was a false alarm, that smoke signal could still *mean* the same as saying "Emergency!". Yet, if there was no actual forest fire, then the smoke in the sky could not really mean there is a forest fire.

The "indicate" versus "represent" distinction between the two types of meaning may not have been entirely clear when first proposed. I hope the above examples may have made that clearer. When one thinks of natural meanings one tends to think of scenarios or situations that point to some belief. This pointing is why I highlight the indicative nature of natural meaning. When one thinks of non-natural meanings one tends to think of linguistic systems and sentences. Those who focus on intentionalists theories of meanings as it relates to language will most likely focus on aspects of non-natural meanings because there is nothing inherent to the composition of sentences that indicates anything about the world.

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[11] The reader may be able to imagine scenarios where we do not use "indicate" so strictly. A doctor could say: "This spot indicated cancer but after closer inspection it seems it was just a malfunction of the machine". Here, we may be able to take the doctor as saying something closer to "This spot seemed to have indicated cancer, now I know it did not actually indicate such a thing". Even if you disagree, it seems sensible to distinguish between "seems to indicate" and "actually indicates".

Under an intentionalist framework, what is embodied behind linguistic utterances that gives them their explicit meaning is the intention of the speaker to bring about a psychological attitude toward a proposition and have the listener recognize that intention. Intentionally drawing your attention to indicate something is different from intentionally drawing your attention in order to mean something. As Grice puts it, we want to distinguish the difference between "getting someone to think" and "telling them something" (Grice 1957). The reason we do not recognize the mailman's action (in the scenario where he does not speak to the father) as being non-natural in meaning is that we do not need to contemplate about his intention nor his intention of having us recognize his intention of delivering the mail to understand what his action means.

There is another thing important to recognize in the natural or indicative and the non-natural or representative framing. One can both misindicate and misrepresent. To misindicate is to point to the wrong conclusion, but that does not change the natural meaning of the action.[12] The mischievous mailman who stops in front of your house to trick you into thinking he delivered mail actions can be taken to have misindicated that your mail was delivered. Yet, once that is found out it does not mean his actions indicated your mail was delivered. On the other hand, when the mischievous mailman calls you to say: "I delivered your mail" and it turns out to be untrue, this is misrepresentation. Misrepresentation allows for the meaning to stay the same despite the actual circumstances. If after the call, you go check the mailbox and there is no mail,

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[12] To clarify this point, I will use an example. For smoke in the sky to naturally mean that there is a forest fire, an actual forest fire must be taking place. We can say then that the smoke indicated a forest fire. However, if it turns out this smoke was created by a large campfire, then we cannot ultimately say the smoke meant there is a forest fire after we find out about that fact. Despite this, to take that there is smoke in the sky to naturally mean that there is a forest fire is quite possible and even reasonable. As such, we can differentiate between what we take to be natural meaning and what is a natural meaning. What we take to be a natural meaning will influence other beliefs and it will be encountering other facts and details that will change what we take a situation to naturally mean.

the mailman still meant: "I delivered your mail" even if the fact the proposition encapsulates is false.

Of course, many utterances will contain both natural and non-natural meanings. This can be easily demonstrated. If I said: "white power", there most certainly will be a non-natural meaning being conveyed by my utterance. One example of non-natural meaning attached to saying: "white power" may be "I think white people are the superior race of the world". In this instance, when a person utters "white power" they intend to make the audience believe a certain proposition and recognize their intention for us to believe said proposition. Yet, hearing someone espouse sentiments of white superiority can naturally point to many things. It may naturally mean they are a Nazi. It may naturally mean they grew up in the rural south. It may naturally mean they organize and participate in certain social groups. Natural meaning is abundant everywhere, and where it relates to uses of signs with non-natural meanings is with what linguists call "register".

4.3 Register and Natural Meaning

A speaker's register can be akin to the social group they participate in and how this is revealed through language. I will make this clear by giving concrete examples. When we think of how people speak, we tend to put labels on them. Labels such as "upper-class", "informal", "religious", "feminine" and so on. These are all registers (Agha 2003). What registers and the recognition of them provides is pragmatic information about the speaker. They give us an image of the speaker, an idea of the relationship we have with the speaker, and an idea of the conduct of the social practices they partake in (Agha 2003).

In other words, when we recognize registers, we notice behavior that naturally points to social roles, practices, and ways of being. We can even describe someone's register range, which demonstrates someone's ability to recognize AND participate in various other registers. We can note that just because someone has a register in their register range, it does not mean they participate in that register. Typically, an upper-class spoken person will recognize those that fit into a "lower class" register, but that does not mean they participate in using that register. This is very relevant to the question at hand when we talk about ingroups and outgroups.

I believe register is related to natural meaning. I will demonstrate this. If one uses words like "tubular" and "gnarly" we may take the use of these words to naturally mean the person is a skater. Why? This is because the use of these words seems to indicate that the person that uses them not only skates but participates in a skateboarder culture. In other words, it points to the fact that they participate in a skateboarder register. What this allows us to do is have an account for what many social linguists call "social meaning".

Social meaning is the kind of meaning that comes across by participating in language communities and using registers. Using certain words and certain phrases not only plays into what you are trying to get across explicitly but also carries meaning in which we may not explicitly intend at all. Using terms that relate us to geographical locations, social status, age, or social groups is not something we intentionally get across in many of our speech acts. Yet, many linguists are tempted to say that there is still meaning being communicated here. We can credit this to Grice's natural meaning.

Speaking in certain accents, using certain words, or speaking of specific things can indicate or naturally mean aspects about your person. If I am able to reference many famous works of art and artists, then you may take that ability as naturally meaning I participate in a

register of "art lovers", "high society", or "artists". As such, we should not consider that our

utterances only have the non-natural meanings I have previously spoken about. In fact, almost

every use of a non-natural meaning will most likely be accompanied by some sort of social

meaning or some sort of natural indication of my participation in social groups.

4.4 Motivating an Intentionalist Framework

Before I give my own analysis, I should state that there are many other potentially fruitful

theories of meaning besides intentionalism. In fact, work on the meaning of ordinary dogwhistles

reflects this.[13] In spite of these other approaches, I think there is good reason to utilize an

intentionalist theory for our present circumstances. Let me start off with a common scenario

where referring to someone's intention in understanding what they meant is important.

Let us say you are talking to a friend about philosophy. They seem very disinterested.

When you question them about their attitude toward the philosopher named Hegel, they respond:

"I could care less about Hegel". As the wise pedant that you are, you know that your friend

misspoke! It is not "I *could* care less". It is "I *couldn't* care less"! Yet how do you know they

misspoke? It is because you are analyzing their intentions. You are reading their mind. If a third

friend was present and was confused by the sentence, you would simply say: "No, no. What they

meant was that they *couldn't* care less". You know this from the attitude your friend was having

toward the Hegel conversation. You know this from the context of the utterance and your

interpretation of your friend's intentions. This is why an intentional framework is promising.[14]

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[13] To see a good overview of the many positions writers have taken on analyzing dogwhistles, see Henderson and McCready (2018).

[14] The well-informed reader may feel as though I am not giving enough credit to other theories of meaning here. There are many other explanations why "I could care less" is still understood as meaning "I couldn't care less". You might think "I could care less" is so common that it conventionally acquired its meaning from incorrect use. This may be correct, but I think we account for times when incorrect phrasing is used with no traditional use behind it,

It may also be important to establish why using an intentionalist framework will be promising in analyzing dogwhistles. For one, dogwhistles uniquely stand out from other phrases or uses of language from simple the fact we can recognize that two simultaneous messages are being delivered to two different groups. Secondly, we will want a theory of meaning that can account for multiple meanings being present in the use of utterance. Of course, an intentionalist theory of meaning will not be the only framework that can provide such an answer but there is still another benefit for using it. As Saul's analysis demonstrates, we can account for different types of dogwhistles both by the awareness of the audience but also by the *intention* of the speakers. This is why we can differentiate between intentional dogwhistles and unintentional dogwhistles.

The fact remains that even in the use of unintentional dogwhistles, we rely on the unaware adoptive use of an intentional dogwhistle. Again, inherently when we want to define why and how these phrases or signs mean different things, we rely on the intention of the speaker in addressing two different audiences with two different messages. Especially with political dogwhistles, we rely on an understanding that many politicians know that they are not allowed to say certain things without scrutiny from the public but also know that a major part of their demographic wants to hear those things said. As such, they must intend when using a dogwhistle to both mean something to one group and mean something else to the other.

There is another question to ask here: What does it mean for S to mean M_2? Let us refer back to the specific example of the OK sign having an etymological claim that it actually originates in signaling a "w" and a "p" to spread the message of "white power". What does it

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and we still manage to understand what the speaker said. The point of this example is to demonstrate that just because what is said lexically deviates from a meaning does not mean we cannot correctly understand the intended meaning.

mean for a sign to represent "white power" and what would someone mean by using them? For example, does it mean "I support white power", "White supremacy is true", or "I hate minorities", etc. ? I think it is reasonable it can mean all three of these things and much more.

It may be that to use a sign that says "white power" is to point to an indeterminate number of meanings, intended beliefs, and so on. One way this can be accounted for by making a distinction between natural and non-natural meaning. I will give an account of such in a later section. Another way we can account for this is with an intentionalist framework. Such a frameworks allows for the possibility that multiple people can say the phrase "white power" without inherently meaning the same thing. This comes from focusing on their intentions for us to believe a proposition and to intend for that only to come about by recognizing said intention.

Another reason to find an intentionalist framework promising is the relationship it has with pragmatics. Many common and traditional conceptions of pragmatic reasoning rely on recognizing a speaker's intention (Harris 2016). If I hear someone say "white power" in which the speaker is a counter protestor at a Black Lives Matter protest, I may have a better understanding of what is being implicated. At the same time, if I hear "white power" being used during a meeting of "white activists" who claim to be fighting "white suppression" how I am to understand the intentions of the utterer and its meaning may be different.

What is implicated by the context, and the speaker's intention all go into pragmatic reasoning. This is not to say that the two hypothetical groups above do not overlap. In fact, I think they very much can but that goes to my point. The fact of the matter is that groups can have overlapping interests and ideals, use the same sign, but non-naturally mean differentiated messages. But these different non-natural meanings and actions will have a relatedness that will come about by paying attention to natural meaning. If we think there is any relation between

pragmatic reasoning and the understanding of dogwhistles and quasi-dogwhistles, having an intentionalist framework of meaning will ultimately be beneficial to such understanding a connection. Intentionalism is a useful framework because of its comprehensive nature.

As other intentionalists have shown, an intentionalist theory allows us to settle on issues of pragmatics, metasemantics, speech act theory, evolutionary psychology, and philosophy of mind (Keiser 2020). Not only that, using intentionalism as a framework is not rejecting the intuitively obvious notion that language is somewhat conventional by nature. Rather, it is the recognition that the basic acts of communication such as asserting or questioning are not essentially conventional (Harris and McKinney Forthcoming).

Jessica Keiser has offered a version of intentionalism that focuses on locutionary acts and emphasizes that intentional meanings can be consolidated into conventions within a linguistic community (Keiser 2020). In this view, conventional non-natural meaning will be defined by its absorption of regularity in intentional actions. As such, once the convention is up and running it can replace the need for mind reading. The intention will be baked into the use of the sign itself without a reliance that for every use of an utterance a reading into the intentions of the utterer is required to understand what it means. What I hope I have demonstrated is that intentionalism is flexible and is quite prominent in many fields trying to analyze linguistic meaning.

5. Intentionalist Analysis of Dogwhistles

Dogwhistles under Gricean analysis will not yield to being defined completely naturally. This is because as a previous section demonstrated, by analyzing what each phrase "means" we can answer the question in ways that point to the phrases being non-natural. For instance, if

someone were to ask: "What did he mean by 'welfare queens'?", we can simply respond "He meant black women". When we talk about meaning, we need to keep in mind that most of Grice's account is not focused on how words mean something but rather on how people mean something by an utterance. Or in other words, how words mean something is secondary to the fact that people non-naturally mean something by certain actions, including a linguistic utterance.

How can someone utilizing a dogwhistle mean different things to different audiences under an intentionalist framework? I think this is very straightforward. Obviously, we can quite clearly imagine someone having two different intentions with an action. Let us say I took my dog on a walk after I had a fight with my roommate. Of course, it may be apparent that my intention was to get away from my roommate and get some space. Yet, it is also possible that after our fight, I realized I was neglecting my dog and that he needed to go out for quite some time. Just because I intend to take my dog out to get away from my roommate does not mean I cannot also intend to take my dog out because I want to relieve his discomfort. The same can be in the utterance containing a dogwhistle.

In a traditional case of meaning, when we ask: "What did they mean by this utterance?", we will respond with typically one answer. If someone was describing their belief that snow is white, what they meant is something similar to saying "Snow is white". Under intentionalism, this will not be the same for dogwhistles. What someone will mean by "Welfare queens are stealing government money" will be two different statements: 1. Some group of women who do not work are stealing government money; 2. Black women are stealing government money. This is because there are two intentions when giving this utterance. One is to have an intention directed at and be recognized by the outgroup and the second is to have a markedly different

intention directed at and be recognized by the ingroup. Dogwhistles are successful because each group recognizes their own directed intention and as such when one uses a dogwhistle in their utterances they productively communicate two different assertions.

Of course, this is not the end of the picture. There is an aspect of dogwhistles I have so far not addressed. It is usually recognized that the more well known a dogwhistle's ingroup meaning becomes, the less it will be used. Seemingly, this is because there is an aspect of the ingroup meaning that seems more central to the use. In some sense, the ingroup meaning seems to taint the other. Once the ingroup meaning becomes salient, it is likely that the outgroup meaning seems to diminish in importance. How can an intentionalist framework account for such a phenomenon?

For one, accounts like Jessica Keiser's make this easily addressable. In her account, lexical linguistic meaning can be established once the act of intending meaning is repeated enough to make such a thing salient (Keiser 2020). As such, we no longer rely on mind-reading to understand the utterance. We rather use this established meaning to bootstrap our way to the intended meaning of the utterer. In other words, our interpretation of the utterer's minds, thoughts, and intentions is bypassed for the salience that such an established word, sign, or utterance brings to mind.

We could account for the fact that this process can be sped up based on the trust of another person who claims to have already analyzed the meaning. If someone told a Reagan supporter that when Reagan said, "welfare queen" he meant "black woman", then it is up to the person being told that fact if they are going to allow this interpretation of Reagan's intention to be more salient than their own. If we are convinced that we were misreading someone's intentions, then we are likely to give authority over to someone who seems more knowledgeable.

This comes from trust on whether or not the person who tells the Reagan supporter of this hidden meaning is a reliable person to understand these intentions. It does not seem out of the question that we could take someone else's reading of utterance to bootstrap our ways to intended meaning without relying on our own analysis of such facts.

While I think this serves as a good explanation for some of the issues at hand, it misses a crucial part of the investigation. It appears under this analysis we place one intention over the other. By this I mean, we place the intentional meaning meant for the ingroup as more important in deciding the meaning of the phrase than the intentional meaning meant for the outgroup. Why is this? For one, we may just regard this feature as a relic of human psychology. Humans just tend to think that which lies under the surface is more important or essential than that which lies above the surface. To borrow a term from Wittgenstein, this is just a "form of life" we participate in.

I think this can be satisfying to a certain extent, but it obviously does not serve as an argument of any kind. It is more of just a claim about the way we think. Another approach might say even if we know that there are two outputs being sent out by a speaker that does not mean we can receive both outputs at one time. As such, we settle on the one that best matches our understandings of the speaker and of their intentions. If we have been convinced by our friend that when a person speaks, they actually tend to utilize phrases that have two intentional meanings, then we may categorize that person as someone not to trust. As such, when we hear their utterances again it may be salient to not only use the new intentional meaning you have been provided, but also cut off access to the intentional meaning you intuitively read because you no longer trust the person. You can no longer accept it as an intentional meaning.

This last perspective is more detailed and more promising. But again, something is missing. We do not necessarily need someone to communicate to *us* to understand what they meant. Or under an intentionalist theory, we do not need someone's intention to bring about a belief and intention to have that recognized be directed toward us to interpret intentions and non-natural meaning. If I overhear someone tell their spouse: "You look good", I do not struggle to understand what the comment meant because it was not directed toward me. To use Henderson and Macready's concept of the savvy outgroup, part of understanding a dogwhistle by those of the outgroup is recognizing the intention directed to others and not yourself. As such, those of the savvy outgroup do not have the intention of the coded message directed toward them but they recognize it anyway.

Here, we see that the meaning or salience of meaning toward an utterance does not necessarily need to come from the fact it is being directed toward you. Rather, if we combine the points from our second suggestion, we recognize coded messages as more salient because they line up with other intentions we associate with those that use coded language. We may tend to label those that use coded language as sneaky, untrustworthy, and even manipulative. As such, the meaning or intention that will become most prevalent to us after we have this impression is the one that is hidden away as it lines up more with how we view their intentions overall. We disregard that which is directed toward us because we no longer recognize it as homologous with the other intentions we read into the utterer.

With all this said, there is an important thing to remember about my intentionalist analysis of a dogwhistle. I have argued that a dogwhistle means both messages it sends out. Since the speaker intends two different meanings to be understood, then we can correctly say that

two meanings are meant. We can see how such an analysis can easily apply to the case of a quasi-dogwhistle.

6. Intentionalist Analysis of Quasi-Dogwhistles

There are two main ways we can analyze the quasi-dogwhistle in an intentionalist analysis. Both ways will show why the use of sign S can be taken to mean M_2 in some way. I am going to label these the "generous analysis" and "ungenerous analysis".[15] The ungenerous analysis will explicitly analyze the intention of the speaker to deceive and make some portion of the audience acquire a specific mental state based upon the audience's recognition of the intention. In other words, we will analyze the quasi-dogwhistle in much of the same way we analyzed the ordinary dogwhistle. The generous analysis is to grant the creators and users of a quasi-dogwhistle the ability to claim that their sign does not actually "mean" the racist or hateful message I have labeled as the dummy meaning. In other words, we will grant them that the dummy meaning is nothing more than a prank and does not represent in any way what the "truly" intended meaning of the sign is. I will then show by appealing to Gricean natural meaning we can uphold that S means M_2 in both cases, but not in the exact same way.

6.1 The Ungenerous Analysis

The ungenerous analysis is to not take the users of a quasi-dogwhistle at their word. If we recall back to earlier, the reason we started on this analysis is because the third "hoax" that S does not mean M_2 felt unjustified. It felt unjustified because all we had to go work with was the

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[15] By using the word "generous", I am trying to make a distinction between the common concept found in philosophical writing known as "charitability". I genuinely do not think we are obliged to grant G_1 any claim they have made about the meaning of S after we have discovered that they have tricked multiple groups of people. The use of generous here is to highlight that we are granting them their claim despite being not required to do so. Charitability as it is found in standard philosophical literature seems to be different than this. It is an obligation as fair and honest arguers that we should all strive for.

claim of the quasi-dogwhistle creators themselves. These claims seem untrustworthy at best and so we decided to analyze the sign despite them. As such, I think we can reject their claim to innocuousness quite easily. Intentionalism in meaning is marked by the fact that to mean something non-naturally we must intend to bring about a certain belief in someone and have them recognize such an intention to make that belief come about.

From this, we can analyze the OK sign quite easily. I believe I have sufficiently laid the groundwork to make this analysis straightforward. If we recognize the targeted outgroup's existence and the users of a quasi-dogwhistle's recognition of that group, then we can cite the users of the OK hand sign as intending their gesture to mean "white power" and that they intend for the targeted outgroup to recognize said intention.[16] Inherently this implies that at least for one portion of the audience that consumes it, the meaning of the sign was indeed "white power". If G_1 intended for G_2 to acquire a specific belief from using S and have the belief come about from having the intention recognized, then G_1 meant M_2 by S.[17] It is as simple as that. All this references back to the previous analysis of the dogwhistle. I think in this case, the signs are quite similar. The only thing we would need to consider is if when G_4, G_5, G_6, etc. uses the sign does it in some way mean M_2. I think that will become clearer in the next section. For now, I leave you to consider how the association with a group that is outed as being coy and manipulative may affect how others read your intentions.

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[16] Again, we may take this as an assertion such as "I am a white supremacist". Therefore, that would be the proposition that the speaker was intending the listener to believe by virtue of recognizing their intention.
[17] Remember, in an intentionalist analysis having the intention to bring about a psychological effect and having that psychological effect come about from having the intention recognized is what "meaning" is. In the case of the OK hand gesture, clearly the belief meant to be brought about can be taken as "I support white supremacy" or related, indeterminate meanings as I have previously stated.

6.2 The Generous Analysis

We can grant that the OK hand sign and any other quasi-dogwhistle is a sign meant to trick the targeted outgroup into believing what is intended by the speaker as a hoax meaning. In other words, we can temporarily grant them the third hoax. We can also grant that in actuality, the sign or gesture retains its generic meaning and use it has in everyday life. Under an intentionalist framework, we may say that when a person uses this sign in a non-natural way then what is important is that for most groups that will see it (including $G_1, G_3, G_4, G_5, G_6 \ldots$), what is the intended meaning of the sign is something more akin to the traditional use of the sign. For the OK gesture, this would be a message of "okay" or perhaps even just a signal of contentment.

What this analysis grants is that the even though clearly G_1 intends for G_2 to believe a certain proposition and wants them to believe this proposition by recognizing their intentions, the relationship between this intention and G_2 is an exception to the rule. This intention can be considered a trick of some sort and any other use of the sign maintains the traditional intention of using the sign. As such, even if someone in G_3 discovers the truth about G_1's intention toward G_2, they can recognize that intention as a hoax and not worry about G_1 explicitly meaning M_2 when using S. Remember, M_2 can be described as something like a sentence or proposition. As such, for the OK gesture, it may be something like "white power" or more specifically "I am a white supremacist". What we are granting right now is the fact that M_2 does not non-naturally mean "I am a white supremacist" or any other non-natural meaning that may be associated with the sign.

We can recognize that the kind of people that would create a quasi-dogwhistle in order to trick a group of people into differentiating and ostracizing themselves from other groups are questionable at best. Even if G_3 agrees that G_1 was only deceiving G_2 and does not actually mean

M_2 by S, they may find that the behavior points to poor qualities. Or in the words of an intentionalist framework, we may say that G_3 can recognize that G_1's actions may *naturally* mean that G_1 has certain negative qualities. Using S in the way G_1 does and recognizing their deceptive use may naturally point to a specific register. Let us focus back on the OK gesture to make this clearer.

For one, using the OK gesture may point to many different registers. Using the OK gesture in context with other colloquialisms that sprout from 4chan may naturally point to a 4chanian register for those that kind of language is in their register range. As such, a certain listener may conclude about a use of the OK gesture based upon their opinion of the register the speaker pragmatically exemplifies. If one finds the 4chan community questionable in both their actions and intentions in other situations, then they may be justified in associating those that participate in that register with certain beliefs. As such, we could recognize that G_1 does not non-naturally mean M_2 by S. But, based upon the register that G_1 naturally points to in context of their use of S, it may naturally mean something like M_2.

Let us look at a non-loaded example. Let us say for this scenario, G_1 is a group of kids that trick another group of kids G_2 into thinking the OK gesture meant "I love ice cream". G_3 is the group of teachers that at first do not recognize this new meaning, thinking the OK gesture maintains its traditional meaning. One day, a teacher from G_3 catches onto the fact that G_1 was convincing G_2 into thinking that the OK gesture meant "I love ice cream".

This teacher recognizes that at all other times when G_1 uses the sign, they do not actually mean "I love ice cream". But as the teacher notices this, he also notices that G_1 has tricked other groups of kids to believe other signs mean "I love ice cream". He also recognizes that G_1 talks a lot about ice cream amongst themselves saying it tastes great and is a wonderful treat. He also

sees that G_1 talks about other non-frozen desserts and how much they enjoy them. They also make up their own specific names for these non-frozen desserts. He also tends to see that G_1 eats ice cream together all the time.

After a while, the teacher may very well take that using the OK gesture in conjunction with eating ice cream and using the other dessert slang means that whoever is using the gesture loves ice cream. It seems hard to deny that those that participate in these social actions do not in some sense love ice cream. As such, the teacher may maintain that the OK gesture does not literally mean M_2 or "I love ice cream". Yet, the teacher can ascribe in some sense that the use of the gesture naturally points to the ice cream gang register which itself naturally means the user of the sign loves ice cream.

At what point do we differentiate a sign's meaning based upon if it explicitly non-naturally means a proposition or if it naturally points to a proposition? What I mean by this is that a statement like: "In some context, the use of the OK gesture means the user loves ice cream" could be taken as a natural meaning claim that just happens to look very similar to a non-natural meaning claim. If we extend our scenario, we can account for something further. Let us say more groups of kids coalesce around their love of ice cream. Remember, G_1 is a group that seemingly loves ice cream but also seems to love other desserts. G_4 loves ice creams but hates pie. G_5 loves ice cream but hates cake. These other groups continue like this, all unifying under the love of ice cream and differentiating from other aspects of dessert. As such, following G_1's lead, the other ice cream loving groups begin to use the OK gesture in their everyday communication.

Again, it may be recognizable that the use of the OK gesture by these groups explicitly does not mean "I love ice cream". But it may also be recognized that there is a correlation

between those who love ice cream and those who use the OK gesture in an abundant amount. In this sense, this connection may lead people to believe that using the OK gesture a lot in conversation, especially in dessert related conversation, naturally means the user of the gesture loves ice cream. In this way, S when used by G_1 (and G_4, G_5, G_6… for that matter) does mean M_2 in some manner. If one makes the connection between M_2 and the state of affairs M_2 intends to represent, then natural meaning can point to such factors. Just as the smoke means a fire is nearby, so does the OK sign (surrounded in this context) signal an ice cream lover is nearby (or if you prefer, an M_2er).

All of this is not to say that G_1 does in fact love ice cream. Remember, this is just one teacher's perspective on the matter. One may read G_1 as just concerned with frozen desserts and willing to ask the important questions about them. One may read G_1 as being completely ironic with their love of ice cream all the way to the bottom of their actions. One may read G_1's constant consumption of ice cream as not signaling their love for it but doing something else. This may all be up for dispute. But this does not stop people who agree that G_1 seems to very obviously demonstrate a love for ice cream to interpret a natural meaning from the use of the sign. What is then to dispute is not whether the sign explicitly and non-naturally means "I love ice cream" but rather if the group that is being associated with an ice cream loving natural meaning does love ice cream.

Focusing on natural meaning for such gestures allows the conversation to not fixate inherently on the specific intentions of one individual speaker but rather focus on the facts of the matter. We can ask questions like: Is this speaker participating in a culture that would seem to support this kind of reading? Obviously, the average person is not going to have a clarification on the difference between natural and non-natural meaning. As such, they may just intuitively

recognize that some kind of meaning is coming across to them when these signs are used and put them under all one umbrella.

Those that like to mask their intentions benefit from the conversation being stuck on an argument of non-natural meaning so that their actual habits, actions, and attitudes in their community go unobserved. If the teacher approached the ice cream gang and said: "If you do not use the OK gesture to mean 'I love ice cream', then explain why you are always seen carrying ice cream cartons" and the kids responded with: "The sign is a joke. We never use it to mean we love ice cream, and you cannot prove it" the issue at hand is actually being sidestepped. The actual question being asked is: "If you are denying that you have ever stated you love ice cream, then why are you always seen around ice cream?". This question regards the group's communal actions, and to address it they would have to address facts that seem to imply the meaning they are denying. They would have to address the natural meaning of their behavior.

While I separated this perspective from the non-generous meaning of quasi-dogwhistles, that was not to say that these aspects of natural meaning do not come hand in hand with non-natural meaning. In fact, the whole point of our concept of registers is to demonstrate the fact that many secondary social meanings are communicated in everyday life. Natural meaning helps us understand someone's intentions. Our understanding of the natural meanings of someone's actions and the non-natural meaning they intend to communicate come together into a cohesive whole.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that intentionalism is a promising theory in analyzing what I called a quasi-dogwhistle. By appealing to Grice's natural and non-natural meaning distinction, I have shown

that a quasi-dogwhistle will mean something like M$_2$ both naturally and non-naturally. As such, I have shown that we can deny that the meaning ascribed to the OK gesture by the 4chan users was a hoax. As such, I have also shown that even if non-natural meaning is disregarded, by appealing to natural meaning and register we can establish a social meaning that demonstrates alignment with certain groups when using certain signs.

At first glance, my analysis of the quasi-dogwhistle may seem unique. How often is it the case that natural meaning and non-natural meaning line up? I would say this is very common. If someone with a southern accent said: "I'm from the South", then we may take the natural meaning of their sentence and the non-natural meaning as pointing to the same proposition. This proposition is the fact that the person speaking is southern. If a non-natural meaning can be construed as relating to social identities, practices, and communities, then it may very well be possible that it aligns with certain natural meanings that coincide with it. My main point here is to show that the quasi-dogwhistle is not exactly unique as I think my analysis can be applied to a myriad of different phrases.

It is also important to remember one thing: what we interpret to be a signs' natural meaning is not guaranteed to be correct. Like I have previously said, it can in a sense "misindicate". Again, one of Grice's concrete examples of natural meaning was: "Those spots mean measles" which a parent says after looking at a sick child (Grice 1957). We can recognize that seeing spots on the face does not guarantee measles. There is a perfectly good chance that the spots do not actually mean measles. We may imagine that the child does not actually have measles but rather has chickenpox. In this case, the spots on the child's face did not mean he had measles. They meant he had chickenpox. Yet, even if it was untrue that the spots meant measles,

it was not unwise of the parent to assume that it was a possibility. Hence, a good parent worried about the spots will take their child to the doctor to be verified if their suspicion is correct.

The parents can only find out the truth with proper investigation and careful consideration. To deny those that are worried that the spots mean measles is to deny a valid worry. If a mother insisted to take a child to the doctor due to her belief that the child had measles and the father refused on grounds that it was uncertain if the child actually had measles, then we can take the father's position as unhelpful at best or malicious at worse. The mother wants to take the child to the doctor to see if the child has measles. If the father wants the investigation to be avoided, then he needs to provide significant evidence of why the mother should not take the spots to mean measles.

My point here is that when uncovering the meaning of a sign or utterance, most may find the fact of the matter that the sign or utterance meant something is secondary. Primarily what is to be the main concern is what such a meaning may represent or indicate. If I believe that either you intend or happen to indicate a belief that I find potentially harmful, then what I am worried about is not the meaning of the sign but rather the potential of harm. If I think an utterance implies that you intend to hurt me, you are not going to reassure me that you do not intend to hurt me by getting into a debate about meaning. Rather, what would be more effective is to show why such a representation was false, or why what I thought was being indicated is not the case.

If you keep insisting on focusing on the fact that you did not *mean* that you were going to harm me and ignore my requests to demonstrate such a fact, then I may take you as unreliable. What I am asking for you is to give an account that shows you are not a person that would intend to hurt me. I will become less and less concerned about what your words meant, especially if the

only accounts I am given are my own interpretation of your intentions and your claims against them.

One may sum up that the point of communication is to express ideas. What we can consider most important in many instances is not being stuck on how we mean certain things but rather how those potential meanings can be instantiated in real life. The meanings that can cause worry will not just be the ones that clearly are contained in the words or intentions of the utterer. The meanings that concern us can be social, ones that indicate actions and activities that we disagree with. Our utterances are not said in a vacuum and neither do our interpretations of those utterances have an empty void as a backdrop. What we say and what we mean is always contextualized and we as listeners know that at least implicitly.

When people argue that the OK hand gesture has come to mean something like "white power", getting stuck on the fact that those that used it just meant it as a "hoax" or "prank" seems to be sidestepping the issue. The kinds of questions that need to be addressed are: Why does the use of this sign seem plausibly associated with white supremacist beliefs and values? There may be a completely innocent and valid explanation of why such a thing is true. But for however long those that use the sign and are associated with it avoid having this conversation, the more likely it seems they are using a discussion of meaning to avoid a discussion of the beliefs and practices they participate in.

I will state that while the non-natural analysis of the quasi-dogwhistle seems correct to me, I can also see where it may remain unconvincing. For one, just because we can definitively state someone meant something by the use of some sign at one time, does not guarantee that they mean the same thing when using that sign now. In other words, the 4chan users could simply state that they did intend to mean "white power" for the targeted outgroup, but no longer intend

to mean that at all when using it now. I hope the generous analysis and appeal to natural meaning shows why this is still incorrect.

More and more, we run into problems of meaning that seem complicated and hard to construe an answer for. Recently, Chet Hanks, the son of the actor Tom Hanks, released a line of merchandise titled "White Boy Summer" (Elan 2021). With the combination of this title and the use of a font that many labeled "racist", the merch has been publicly seen as problematic. This has led to a backlash of some sort embodied by this quote from a tweet commenting on the incident: "Man how tf y'all gonna look at a font and call it racist…".[18] By my account, the answer to this question is simple. We look at a font and call it racist by looking at the natural meaning embodied by certain uses of the font in social circumstances which we deem racist. Natural and social meanings are relevant entities that we talk about quite often even if we do not realize it. It is worth noting that the font used by Hanks was associated with both Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and online white nationalists (Elan 2021). Clearly, a social and natural meaning has been established for this font in some way.

Lastly, I want to mention an interaction I found between two users on Twitter reacting to a post about Hanks and the font. The first comment said: "This font seems racist to me [for] some reason" and in response, the second commenter said: "Why did I know exactly what you meant when you said that font feels racist?!".[19] To use what I have argued for here, I think clearly what these two are recognizing is a natural meaning from the use of the font. They recognize the register the font participates in. Just like these Twitter users, we are all very capable of seeing smoke. As such, we assume that if we see smoke, it means a fire is nearby. If
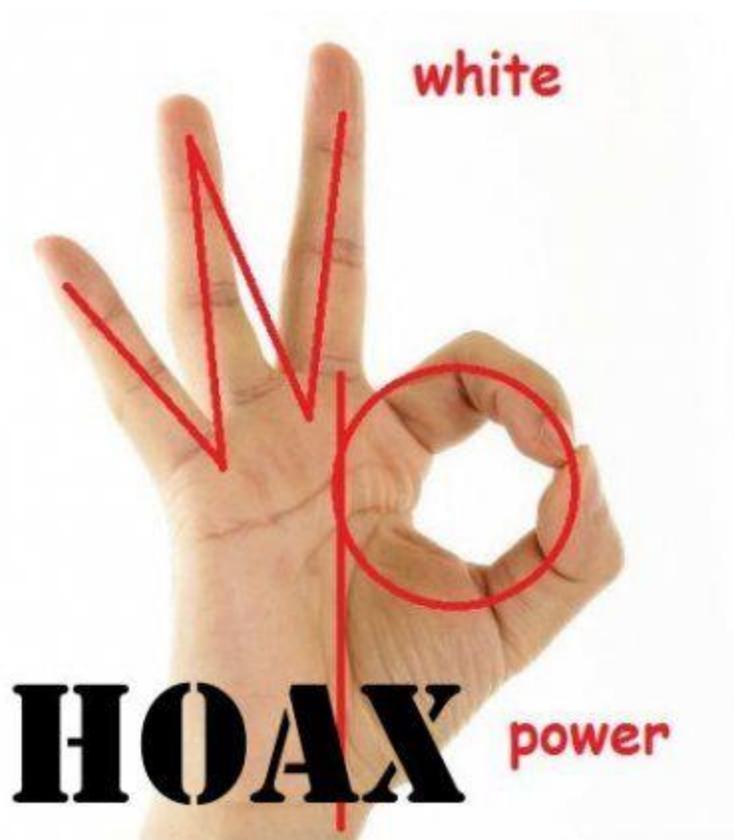
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[18] See Appendix V for the full tweet.
[19] See Appendix VI for the full exchange.

you want to deny such a claim, you are wasting time discussing how smoke cannot "mean"

anything. You are better off demonstrating the fact that there is no fire.

Appendix I.

(Anti-Defamation League 2017)

The diagram image fabricated by the 4chan board. It should be noted that the "HOAX" was added by the Anti-Defamation League to avoid confusion.

Appendix II.

VG_2263.jpg (75 KB, 1073x531)

□ INTRODUCING: OPERATION O-KKK Anonymous (ID: GqQuAU8>
02/27/17(Mon)03:32:18 No.114482325 🖼 ▶ >>114482375 >>114482572 >>
>>114483235 >>114483753 >>114483969 >>114484471 >>114485569 >>114485688
>>114485751 >>114486015 >>114486043 >>114486249 >>114486520 >>114488048
>>114488197 >>114489614 >>114489933 >>114490057 >>114490153 >>114491182
>>114492623 >>114492860 >>114492995 >>114493101 >>114493153 >>114493173
>>114493296 >>114493406 >>114493456 >>114493554 >>114493725 >>114493753
>>114493814 >>114494238 >>114494627

We must flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign is a symbol of white supremacy. Make fake accounts with basic white girl names and type shit like: OMG that's so truuuuu

Use as many emojis as you please. It would also be good for us to associate the OK sign being a symbol of white supremacy because Mel Gibson used it.

Use the hashtag "#PowerHandPrivilege" in all of your tweets and whatnot related to this.

Bonus points if your profile pic is something related to supporting feminism.

Leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force to dig more, until the rest of society ain't going anywhere near that shit.

(Anti-Defamation League 2017)

This is the screencap of the original post on 4chan regarding the OK gesture.

Appendix III.

(Norman 2019)

Above is a picture of Milo Yiannopoulos. Yiannopoulos was a popular right-wing and alt-right

figure during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Some speculation of why 4chan

decided on using the OK gesture in their hoax was due to Yiannopoulos' use of it in pictures

throughout 2016 (Matthews 2018).

Appendix IV.

(Hoke 2020)

A picture of the far-right, white nationalist political group The Proud Boys using the OK gesture in confrontation with Black Lives Matter protestors in Oklahoma.

Appendix V.

(Twitter 2021)

At the risk of these tweets appearing fabricated, I have decided to block out as much information

as possible that could lead back to the users.

Appendix VI.

(Twitter 2021)

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