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ABSTRACT

A study revisited the question of the causes of interpersonal equivocation, arguing that, although the previous research of Bavelas and associates has shown conclusively that interpersonal communicators in avoidance-avoidance binds equivocate to avoid the bind's dilemma, researchers have largely ignored other conceivable antecedents of interpersonal equivocation. The study attempts to experimentally demonstrate the existence of other such antecedents. Subjects, 153 university students recruited from communication classes, responded to forced-choice scenarios which manipulated the level of situational formality (informal or formal) and interaction phase (initial or middle). Additionally, subjects completed a modified version of the MAT-50 as a measure of their ambiguity tolerance. Their responses were scaled for equivocation by comparing them to the equivocation rankings assigned to the possible choices by a panel of judges trained in its basic definition and dimensions. Results indicated subjects equivocated more in formal situations and ambiguity tolerance interacted with both formality level and interaction phase to influence equivocation. Specifically, the differences in equivocation from informal to formal situations and from initial to middle phases of the conversation were greatest for those lowest in ambiguity tolerance. Findings are discussed in light of speech accommodation theory (SAT), a model for guiding new research into equivocation. Research could be extended by studies examining ambiguity tolerance and its impact on equivocation; by exploring other individual traits that might be predictive of equivocation; and by exploring whether communicators have a perception of situational characteristics. (Contains 2 tables of data and 40 references; an appendix contains "model scenarios.") (NKA)

# Determinants of Equivocation: The Influence of Situational Formality, Interaction Phase, and Ambiguity Tolerance

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## Abstract

This study revisits the question of the causes of interpersonal equivocation. It argues that, although the previous research of Bavelas and associates has shown conclusively that interpersonal communicators in avoidance-avoidance binds equivocate in order to avoid the bind's dilemma, researchers have largely ignored other conceivable antecedents of interpersonal equivocation. It then attempts to experimentally demonstrate the existence of other such antecedents. Subjects responded to forced-choice scenarios which manipulated the level of situational formality (informal or formal) and interaction phase (initial or middle). In addition, subjects completed a modified version of the MAT-50 as a measure of their ambiguity tolerance. Their responses were scaled for equivocation by comparing them to the equivocation rankings assigned to the possible choices by a panel of judges trained in the basic definition and dimensions of equivocation. Results indicated that subjects equivocated more in informal situations and that ambiguity tolerance interacted with both formality level and interaction phase to influence equivocation. Specifically, the differences in equivocation from informal to formal situations and from initial to middle phases of the conversation were greatest for those lowest in ambiguity tolerance. The concluding section discusses these findings particularly in light of speech accommodation theory.

# Determinants of Equivocation: The Influence of Situational Formality, Interaction Phase, and Ambiguity Tolerance

"Well, um, that depends on what you call a good employee."

"We've got about five or six of them but I'm only going to talk about three of them today."

Both of the statements cited above are examples of equivocal communication. But are they both motivated by the same antecedent factors? The first was made by a research subject studied by Bavelas and her associates (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990, p. 147), and was the result of being placed in a bind between giving a truthful reference that would hurt a former employee and telling a lie to a person thinking of hiring that employee. The second comes from a linguistics professor discussing the informants used in his research, and who almost certainly knew the precise number of informants he had used (cited in Channell, 1994, p. 33). While the first was motivated by an avoidance-avoidance conflict dilemma, the second appears to have been related to other factors, possibly the relative insignificance of the issue of informant numbers or the relative informality of the situation.

Much of the research on equivocation in communication has been concerned with examining how people react to equivocal messages, in other words, with approaching equivocation as an

independent variable (Goss, 1972; Goss & Williams, 1973; Putnam & Sorenson, 1982; Sillars, Weisberg, Burgraff, & Zeitlow, 1990; Williams, 1980; Williams & Goss, 1975).

Less research (with the exception of the body of work produced by the Bavelas group) has focused on equivocal messages themselves as dependent variables, as everyday communication acts to be explained rather than manipulated to produce effects. Much of the literature that does exist in this area treats equivocation either as error (starting with Aristotle) because it decreases clarity and accuracy (Adler, 1992; Adler & Towne, 1978; DeVito, 1992; Gibson & Mendleson, 1984; Hsia, 1977; Huseman, 1977; see also any of a number of interpersonal and business communication texts) or as a normal outgrowth of a binding interpersonal situation, the avoidance-avoidance bind researched by the Bavelas group. One of the contentions of the present study is that researchers have largely ignored, at least in a systematic way, other conceivable causes of equivocal communication.

One of the many merits of Bavelas' research is that it defines equivocation broadly, as "nonstraightforward communication . . . (that) appears ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure, or even evasive" (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 28). Such a view widens the scope of equivocation research in part by subsuming the concepts of ambiguity and vagueness within the concept of equivocation, which some studies do not do (e.g., Goss, 1972; Goss & O'Hair, 1988). Other studies, including this

one, agree with the Bavelas group (Channell, 1994; Williams & Goss, 1975). Channell argues that ambiguity as technically defined by semanticists is rare, and that in any case, what matters in the pragmatics of "real . . . conversations," whether from vagueness or ambiguity, is that "hearers do not know exactly what they should understand" (1994, p. 35).

## Rationale

### Claims of the Bavelas Group

In eight years of empirical (mostly laboratory) research, starting in 1982, the Bavelas group has advanced a theory of the cause of equivocation, providing a baseline from which to gauge other equivocation research and a point of departure from which to plan future research. They uncompromisingly present and empirically support a strictly situational explanation of equivocation. They carefully designed their research program, step by step, to build the case that avoidance-avoidance binds produce equivocal messages. When apparently faced with two unappealing situational choices like, for example, having to lie versus having to hurt someone's feelings with the truth, people equivocate to avoid such dilemmas (Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas, 1985; Bavelas et al., 1990; Bavelas, Black, Bryson, & Mullett, 1988; Bavelas & Chovil, 1986; Bavelas & Smith, 1982).

This body of research certainly adequately supports the theory that avoidance-avoidance binds routinely lead to equivocation. Less valid, however, is the rigidity of the connection the Bavelas group claims between avoidance-avoidance

binds and equivocation. They experimentally exclude a couple of potential contributing factors: situational approach-approach binds and situational unpleasantness (Bavelas, 1983). However, their research does not systematically exclude all, or even most, other factors. Yet they conclude that equivocation results only from an avoidance-avoidance bind by saying that such a bind "is the necessary and sufficient condition for eliciting equivocation" (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 262) and that "We find none of the . . . alternative explanations of equivocation satisfactory and will rely solely on our theory of the characteristics [avoidance-avoidance bind] of the communicative situation in which equivocation occurs" (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 62).

The Bavelas group contends that individual differences (like personality traits, demographics, and language processing abilities) should be ruled out as causes because of the common occurrence of equivocation, reasoning that "not all individuals have the characteristics" that might lead to equivocation. If individual characteristics did predict equivocation, they argue, then "there should be consistency [in equivocation] across individuals rather than across situations" (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 62). This argument assumes, first, a limited number of individual characteristics that might lead to equivocation. Without this assumption, the commonness of equivocation can be easily explained. Second, and most importantly, this argument ignores the possibility of interactive effects between

situational and individual characteristics that might more fully explain and predict equivocation. In essence, the Bavelas group has concluded that because avoidance-avoidance conflict is a sufficient cause of equivocation, it is also a necessary cause of equivocation.

Other Possible Causes

Having recognized the Bavelas group's contribution in clearly identifying at least one antecedent of equivocation, what other antecedents present themselves? Sparse evidence from disparate disciplines at least suggests the possibility of additional contributing causes, so the present study's purpose is exploratory: to establish experimental evidence for the existence of situational and individual predictors of equivocation other than avoidance-avoidance conflict.

Cappella and Street (1989) suggest that communication scientists consider an assortment of "situational, personal, and relational factors" (p. 42) in determining the kinds and levels of messages that communicators prefer. Eisenberg (1984) pointed the way to such a broad consideration of equivocation when, in a theoretical essay dealing with organizational communication, he suggested several possible uses for strategic ambiguity (intentional equivocation). This work, however, did not report on original empirical research and did not focus on specific causative antecedents of equivocation. Also suggestive, in quite a broad sense, is Hall's theory of low-context and high-context communication (1976). Low-context communicators, predominant in

Western cultures, generally favor a less equivocal and more direct communication style, whereas the opposite holds true in high-context Asian cultures (Verderber & Verderber, 1995).

More specific situational factors may also influence degree of equivocation. Channell (1994), an applied linguist reporting on extensive spoken and written data, lists several reasons for the use of equivocal language, justifying each item anecdotally with data samples. Some of these reasons, like "self-protection" (p. 188) and "politeness" (p. 190), can easily be reconstrued as the kind of avoidance-avoidance conflict claimed by the Bavelas group to be the only cause of equivocation. However, other reasons, like situational "informality and atmosphere" (p. 191), cannot be so easily reconstrued, and this suggests the possibility of experimental research treating such reasons as independent variables. Besnier (1989), using conversation analysis methods in a cross-cultural study of Polynesian islanders, discovered an equivocal information-withholding strategy used in gossip. Are there analogues to this strategy in North American conversation? More to the point, is there something about the highly informal nature of gossip that produces equivocation? Formal communication situations, often highly scripted, likely call for a more narrow range of communicative choices than informal situations, where a "wide array of communicative styles may be appropriate" (Cappella & Street, 1989, p. 41). It seems plausible that equivocation represents one dimension along which communicative choices could

be more or less restricted.

Why does it make sense to say that equivocation would increase in informal (as compared to formal) interpersonal settings? It is not that only the formal setting is rule-governed, calling for more intricately precise communication. Both settings are rule-governed. Grice's pragmatic theory of conversation as governed by the Cooperative Principle is relevant here (Grice, 1975, 1981). This theory assumes conversation is a cooperative endeavor in which interactants attempt to adhere to four maxims. Two of these maxims, Quantity (give just enough information, neither too little nor too much) and Manner (do not be unnecessarily vague or ambiguous) seem particularly important to equivocation and situational formality level. That is, formality level might modify an interactant's perception of how best to adhere to these maxims using more (or less) equivocation. We often dramatically recognize such rule-orientations when one communicator's perception of situational formality is different from the other's. For example, a lost driver who perceives a relatively formal situation ("I <u>have</u> to get to this meeting, so could you tell me . . .") is exasperated by the equivocal directions received from a friendly stranger for whom this encounter is highly informal, and who therefore has a different perception of how best to adhere to the maxim of Quantity ("Go two or three miles and take the right fork--you can't miss it!").

Perhaps communicators combine, with regard to situational formality, the Quantity and Manner maxims into a modified superordinate rule. The rule for formal settings is something like "Be precise because precise communication best reflects the formal nature of this context." The rule for informal settings appears to be "Be imprecise (more equivocal) because imprecision best reflects the informal nature of this context." Such rules would reflect an analogic relationship between the setting's formality level and the expected verbal style of the communicators within that setting. Communicators likely desire a "goodness of fit" between the degree of situational clarity they perceive and the degree of clarity of their own message behavior. To use an analogy not directly related to communication, notice how a formal suit of clothes restricts the wearer's range of motion and posture along more precise paths. Similarly, an interpersonal communicator's language choices can be channeled along more or less precise paths by the formality level of the setting (the communicator's "suit of clothes").

It appears plausible, then, that situational formality level may influence degree of equivocation. However, the literature on this relationship is sparse and nonexperimental. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How, if at all, does level of situational formality influence interactants' degree of equivocation?

Additional literature on situational factors points to the influence of interaction phase on equivocation. Hopper (1989) analyzed data from telephone conversation openings, finding that, at least in instances with call-waiting phenomena, callers often used a "what are you doin" opening. This opening appears to be an ambiguous method of querying about problem areas, a way of providing the answerer with an opening to communicate socially difficult information (like "I'm on the other line" or "I'm busy tonight") so that the caller and answerer are protected from "face-threatening consequences of blatant action" (p. 249). "What are you doin," then, is a "gambit toward actions" instead of a commitment to "fully-figured actions" (p. 249) such as "Will you go out with me tonight?" Is this gambit nothing more than an equivocal way of handling an avoidance-avoidance bind, in line with the research of the Bavelas group? Perhaps. However, it is at least as plausible that there is something about the nature of these sequences as <u>openings</u> that contain an embedded ambiguity, acting as a clue to callers that they need an equivocal inquiry to respond in kind. Do the opening sequences of other kinds of interpersonal encounters contain such embedded ambiguity? And will they result in equivocation even in the absence of avoidance-avoidance binds?

In research similar in substance and method to that of the Bavelas group, Cunningham and Wilcox (1984) placed nurses in hypothetical avoidance-avoidance binds, specifically, inappropriate-order situations in which the "nurse believes a

physician's order is not in the patient's best interest" (p. 764). Nurses were then asked for their initial communicative responses to these binds, as well as their follow-up responses assuming their initial responses were unsuccessful. Results showed that, as expected, nurses did choose indirect, equivocal responses initially. However, they indicated that they would follow up with much more direct, unequivocal responses if equivocal methods failed. While this study supports the basic contention of the Bavelas group, it also demonstrates that the "nature of the bind . . . is not a constant" (p. 774). It can be modified, or perhaps made less salient, by other considerations. For example, were the equivocal communicative choices in this study a function not only of the bind (inappropriate-order situation), but also of the initial phase of the interaction itself?

In the same way, therefore, that informal situations may increase ambiguity and hence correspondingly increase equivocation, so may the initial phase of an interaction (compared with the middle) increase ambiguity and result in equivocation. Once again, however, the literature is sparse and inconclusive. Therefore, another research question follows:

RQ2: How, if at all, does interaction phase influence interactants' degree of equivocation?

In discussing what determines the kinds and levels of messages that communicators prefer, Cappella and Street (1989),

in addition to pointing out the significance of situational factors, contend that personal traits also affect the acceptable range of communication behaviors. Ambiguity tolerance (AT) appears to be a likely (if obvious) candidate as an individual factor mediating the influence of formality level and interaction phase on equivocation. Based on the logic of the AT construct as a personality variable, Norton (1976) predicted that those who are "intolerant of ambiguity should favor verbal behavior which assures closure, singular meanings, and an either-or framework" (p. 35). In two experiments, the only consistent finding was that high ambiguity tolerators (ATs) dramatized more often (in group discussions) than low ATs, logical in that dramatizing in conversation likely involves images, metaphors, and stories easily open to numerous interpretations, that is, equivocal language. This study, in finding only one relationship of AT to verbal style and in not measuring equivocation directly, is not definitive. However, it does suggest the possibility that personality might influence the use of equivocation (in contrast to the strictly situational theory of the Bavelas group).

If, as posited earlier, communicators perceive less ambiguity in a formal situation than in an informal situation, then how will low and high ATs react to formality level? Although a formal situation might produce less equivocation, will this be equally true for high ATs? Instead of equivocating less, high ATs might equivocate more in a way that "breaks" the normal rule-orientation (see above) of formal situations in order to

inject more ambiguity into the situation, assuming they perceive ambiguity levels in formal situations as uncomfortably low. And the converse might be true for low ATs in informal situations they perceive as uncomfortably high in ambiguity. Perhaps they would respond with less equivocation, as if to avoid the perception of ambiguity. A similar rationale can be made for interaction phase and AT, assuming again that communicators perceive the opening of a conversation as more ambiguous than the middle.

To clarify the specific nature of the role of AT in producing more or less equivocation, it is necessary to ask:

RQ3: How, if at all, will AT interact with level of situational formality and interaction phase to influence interactants' degree of equivocation?

## Methodology

### Subjects

Subjects were recruited from communication classes at a southern university. Although 155 participated, two were dropped from inclusion in the final statistical analysis because they provided incomplete data, leaving a total of 153. Every undergraduate classification was represented in the sample, with sophomores predominating at 38%. Most subjects were females (72%). Their ages ranged from 17 to 55 (M=23.53, SD=7.07), although 75% were under 24 years old.

Independent Variables

Situational. To manipulate the two situational variables, three basic interpersonal scenarios (in writing) were created to which subjects were asked to respond, as imagined participants, using a forced-choice questionnaire. Each scenario ended with a question from a hypothetical conversational partner to which subjects responded. This approach is similar to that of the early research of the Bavelas group (Bavelas, 1983, 1985), where the primary concern was establishing experimental support for a class of antecedents to equivocation, rather than on the intricacies of equivocal messages themselves.

Each basic scenario was modified to manipulate each situational variable. To manipulate formality level, subjects in the formal treatment were placed in a job interview situation, a college television interview situation, and a conversation with an emcee about to introduce them to an audience; in the informal treatment each of these scenarios, respectively, were transformed into a chat with a friend at a social gathering, lunch in the student union with an acquaintance, and a conversation with friends in a restaurant. Across treatment, subjects were presented with the same question and the same set of forced-choice responses, e.g., both the job interview situation (formal) and the chat with a friend situation (informal) ended with the question (from the hypothetical interactant): "What is your grade point average?" (For a detailed look at scenario construction, including the questions associated with each of the

other two basic scenarios, see Appendix A.)

To manipulate interaction phase, each scenario was constructed so that the point of exchange (question with subject's response) occurred either at the very start of the interpersonal situation or several minutes into the situation (see Appendix A).

Before the experiment, all scenarios were revised several times, then reviewed by a panel of five university faculty members from the speech department who agreed that they were realistically constructed. Care was taken not to confound the scenarios with extraneous variables, especially the avoidance-avoidance bind already researched by the Bavelas group.

These manipulations resulted in, then, each subject responding to three scenarios (all either formal or informal) where the point of exchange varied (all either initial or middle).

Ambiguity tolerance. The individual variable was measured by administering to all subjects a modified version of the MAT-50, a measure of AT developed by Norton, which he thoroughly constructed and tested for validity (1975). Norton reported an internal reliability for this instrument of .88 (1975); other research has reported internal reliability as high as .87 (Comadena, 1984). Although the original version has 61 items, the present study used a 32-item version that included only those sections related to communication, which Norton labeled Interpersonal Communication, Public Image, Job-Related,

Problem-Solving, and Social (1975). In essence, this version measured tolerance of communication-related ambiguity.

Subjects completed the MAT immediately after responding to the scenarios described above. Scores (using a seven-point Likert-type scale) ranged from 51 (low AT) to 151 (high AT), with a mean of 102.63 and standard deviation of 19.32. Internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .80.

Dependent Variable

The Bavelas group argues that equivocation occurs along one or more of four dimensions: content (Just what is being said?), sender (Who is responsible for the message?), receiver (To exactly whom is the message directed?), and context (Does the statement answer the previous explicit or implied question?) (Bavelas et al., 1990; Bavelas & Smith, 1982).

Degree of equivocation was measured using the set of forced-choice responses presented at the end of each scenario. Each set of possible responses, four for each of the three basic scenario questions, was carefully written and revised to reflect what interactants might realistically say in the situations described and to reflect varying degrees of equivocation. For example, the possible responses to the "What is your grade point average?" scenario question ranged from "My overall grade point average is 3.26" (least equivocal) through "It's above 3.0" and "They tell me it's above 3.0" to "That depends on the semester" (most equivocal). (For possible responses to the other two

scenario questions, see Appendix A.)

After construction of each set of possible responses, five faculty judges trained in the basic definition and dimensions of equivocation were individually asked to rank order the responses in each set from 1 (least equivocal) to 4 (most equivocal). Four of the judges agreed in total on the appropriate rankings. Intercoder reliability (Scott's pi) for all five judges was .82, indicating strong content validity for the equivocation measure used.

During the experiment, subjects were instructed to rank the choices in each set from 1 to 4, with 1 representing the choice that sounded the most like what they would actually say in answer to the question posed by the hypothetical interactant, and 4 representing the choice that sounded the least like what they would actually say. (Like questions, these response choices stayed the same across treatments, although both the order of possible responses and the order of the interpersonal situations themselves were randomly varied in order to avoid response bias.) An equivocation score for each set was determined by computing the difference between the subject's ranking (reflecting what he/she would say) and the judges' ranking (reflecting degree of equivocation). These scores could range from 0 to 8. That is, if the subject's ranking perfectly matched the judges' ranking, the result was a difference score of 0, reflecting low equivocation. At the other extreme, if the subject's ranking was diametrically opposite that of the judges, a difference score of

8 resulted, reflecting high equivocation. Finally, a total equivocation score, from 0 (low) to 24 (high), was computed for each subject by summing the equivocation scores for all three situations to which the subject responded.

Procedure

Surveys, each reflecting a different combination of situational variables (formal and middle, formal and initial, informal and middle, or informal and initial) were distributed in classes. The order of treatment combinations was systematically varied to insure random assignment. Subjects were told that research was being conducted on how people react to different kinds of interpersonal communication situations. They were then instructed to imagine that they were actually participating in the interpersonal conversations described and to indicate realistically how they thought they might actually respond.

After responding to the interpersonal situations, subjects then completed the MAT and, at the end of the questionnaire, were asked to indicate their age, classification, gender, and major.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a 2 X 2 X 3 analysis of variance, reflecting situational formality (formal or informal) by interaction phase (middle or initial) by AT level (low, moderate, high). On the MAT, subjects more than one-half standard deviation below the mean were classified as low ATs (n=46), those within one-half standard deviation of the mean as moderate ATs (n=65), and those more than one-half standard deviation above the

mean as high ATs (n=42).

## Results

With regard to the first research question, there was a significant main effect relationship between level of situational formality and degree of equivocation ($F[1, 141]=25.72$, $p<.0001$). Those subjects in the informal treatment ($M=8.57$) equivocated significantly more than did those in the formal treatment ($M=5.50$). This finding is in line with earlier reasoning that certain rule-orientations likely govern communication within formal versus informal settings, so that more equivocation provides a "goodness of fit" between communicators' perceptions of relative ambiguity in informal settings and their message behavior (and vice-versa).

The second research question concerned the relationship between interaction phase (middle versus initial) and degree of equivocation. The ANOVA results here were not significant ($F[1, 141]=.11$). Apparently, the phase manipulation, on its own, was not strong or noticeable enough to produce equivocation effects.

The most important findings dealt with the third research question. There were two significant interactive effects involving AT. First, situational formality level interacted with subjects' AT level to influence degree of equivocation ($F[2, 141]=5.48$, $p=.005$). The impact of situational formality on equivocation (see finding above) can best be understood in the light of the influence of AT on that relationship. Only low and moderate ATs equivocated more in informal situations than in

formal situations, that is, only they (particularly the low ATs) were responsible for the main effect relationship between situational formality and equivocation. Put another way, as AT went down, equivocation went down in formal situations, but went up even more dramatically in informal situations (see Table 1). Pairwise comparisons with Duncan's multiple range test (Bruning & Kintz, 1977; Dayton, 1970) showed that the gap in equivocation from formal to informal situations for low ATs (M=4.52 v. M=10.26, p<.001) and moderate ATs (M=5.14 v. M=8.11, p<.05) was significant, while the same gap for high ATs (M=6.80 v. M=7.29) was not significant. (See Table 1 for group means and comparisons of all mean differences.)

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Second, interaction phase interacted with subjects' AT level to affect degree of equivocation (F[2, 141]=3.44, p=.03). As Table 2 shows, although moderate ATs responded with nearly identical degrees of equivocation in both the middle and initial phases, this was not true for low and high ATs. Low ATs, in line with their reaction to formality level, equivocated significantly more in the initial phase of conversations, where one might suspect embedded ambiguity, than in the middle phase (M=8.67 v. M=6.00, p<.05). The mirror opposite, however, was true for high ATs, who equivocated more in the middle of conversations (M=8.00) than in the initial phase (M=5.90), though this difference did

not reach statistical significance. (See Table 2 for group means and comparisons.)

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Insert Table 2 about here

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This ANOVA model, as a whole, explained 14.3% of the variance in equivocation.

In addition to the research questions, the possible influence of intervening variables was examined. Oneway ANOVAs revealed no significant relationship of either gender or classification to equivocation. However, Pearson's correlation coefficient did reveal a significant relationship between age and equivocation (-.19, p=.02, two-tailed). Older subjects were less likely to equivocate than younger subjects, although the relationship was not a strong one.

Since the interactive effects reported above are the most important, a discussion of these effects will make up the bulk of the next section.

## Discussion

Especially with regard to the main effect finding that equivocation was more common in informal situations, some might object that, since avoidance-avoidance conflict is so strongly associated with equivocation in previous research, there must have been something about the scenarios used in the present study that subjects perceived as avoidance-avoidance conflict. They might argue, for example, that an informal situation has an

avoidance-avoidance bind built into it that a formal situation generally lacks. However, of the two formality levels, the formal situation would appear to be the more threatening of the two, making it more of a candidate for a hidden avoidance-avoidance bind. Yet it was the informal situation, not the formal, that resulted in more equivocation. In addition, as mentioned earlier, scenarios were carefully constructed so as not to be confounded by avoidance-avoidance conflict. Those who would argue, therefore, for at least the hidden presence of avoidance-avoidance conflict whenever communicators equivocate are dangerously close to the tautology that equivocation is simply what happens when people are placed in avoidance-avoidance binds.

As expected, AT (at least as measured in this study), as an individual variable, exerted a strong influence on equivocation in concert with the two situational variables studied, formality level and interaction phase. These interactive findings were in keeping with the current social cognitive explanatory trend in much message research (Bradac, Hopper, & Weimann, 1989).

Formality, Ambiguity Tolerance, and Equivocation

First, let's examine more carefully the finding that as AT decreased, the influence of situational formality level on equivocation increased; particularly, that moderate and low ATs were more likely to equivocate in informal (as compared to formal) situations, whereas high ATs' degree of equivocation appeared unaffected by formality level. This finding initially

seems counterintuitive, especially when compared to the rationale regarding AT laid out earlier in this paper, which was that low ATs, in order to avoid the perception of ambiguity, might equivocate less in informal situations. One of two explanations seems likely.

One possibility is that high ATs are essentially more internally motivated than low ATs and, hence, pay less attention to external cues of a communication situation. Low ATs, on the other hand, might have a heightened sensitivity (or even hypersensitivity) to external cues, since for them everything has to be "just right." If so, then the social rules inherent in formal situations would seem even more definite and concrete (than normal) to low ATs than would the rules inherent in informal situations. Therefore, in the absence of a clear enough understanding of the expectations of an informal situation, low ATs react equivocally, hoping, it seems likely, that an equivocal response will be more of a "hit" than a "miss." Another way of saying the same thing is that the principle proposed earlier of "goodness of fit" between the degree of perceived ambiguity (determined in part by formality level) and the degree of equivocation used is more salient to low and moderate ATs than it is to high ATs. When viewed this way, as providing "goodness of fit," low ATs' strong equivocation in informal settings makes sense because it supplies them with perceptual consistency between situation and message, thereby lowering overall perceived ambiguity. Along these lines, Feldman and Rice (1965) found,

also counterintuitively, that low ATs found specific (clear) feedback more threatening than general (ambiguous) feedback because they had difficulty fitting specific feedback into preexisting cognitive categories, that is, making it consistent.

This explanation, which invokes a perceptual difference between low and high ATs, is supported by the fact that, as pointed out previously, the AT measure used in this study was modified to focus more exclusively on communication settings, so that it might have been measuring something more like internal/external orientation or tolerance for social-communicative ambiguity. For example, notice the importance of external cues in just the first four items of the scale, as well as in other items (see Appendix B).

An alternate explanation of the interactive effect between situational formality and AT is similar to the first, but does not invoke a perceptual difference between low and high ATs. This explanation would not assume that low ATs pay more attention to external cues, but simply that the discomfort they feel in informal (ambiguous) situations leads them to equivocate, providing "goodness of fit" which supplies some relief from their discomfort. Some of the literature on AT would support this notion in that it treats the construct as having emotive implications, as (for low ATs) "intolerance of the anxiety presented by unclear situations" (Steinfatt, 1987, p. 59.), which must then be made clearer to reduce anxiety. In other words, perception of ambiguity precedes anxiety, which precedes an

attempt to reduce the anxiety, likely through "goodness of fit." Similarly, Norton (1975) points out that low ATs treat ambiguous stimuli as "sources of psychological discomfort or threat" (p. 608).

Interaction Phase, Ambiguity Tolerance, and Equivocation

Second, let's examine the finding that low ATs equivocated more in the initial phase of interactions than in the middle.

Low ATs apparently respond to interaction phase in a manner similar to their response to formality level. Assuming they are more externally-oriented, they focus on situational cues that increase ambiguity (in this case, at least for them, the beginning of a conversation) and respond in a way that provides consistency between situational ambiguity and message behavior. Assuming they find ambiguity uncomfortable, we can say they reduce the discomfort by communicating in an equivocal manner consistent with the ambiguity of a conversation opening. As with formality level, either of these rationales provide "goodness of fit" between perceived ambiguity level and degree of equivocation.

High ATs, though they might or might not perceive ambiguity at the start of a conversation, certainly would not find it uncomfortable. Since they equivocated significantly less at the start of conversations than did low ATs ($M=5.90$ v $M=8.67$, $p<.05$; see Table 2), high ATs again seem unconcerned with "goodness of fit" (consistency or lack of ambiguity) between the situation and their own message behavior.

A Proposed Theoretical Underpinning

One of the most promising models for subsuming or evaluating the explanations offered above, as well as for guiding new research into equivocation, appears to be speech accommodation theory (SAT), originally developed by Giles (1973). It has proven useful for explaining both the antecedents and consequences of a wide variety of speech and communication behaviors (Bradac, Hopper, & Wiemann, 1989; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987), particularly in interactive settings. SAT explains messages as exhibiting one of two basic strategies: a message either converges toward the communication pattern or style of the other interactant or diverges away from (or at least maintains its own) pattern or style. SAT seems especially appropriate for examining equivocation because it takes into account both cognitive and situational factors that might influence the degree and kind of convergence/divergence.

Perhaps the "goodness of fit" principle thus far invoked to explain this study's findings can be reconceptualized in terms of SAT. Those with low (and to some degree moderate) AT are more convergent with the ambiguity level they perceive in the other's message, whether due to level of situational formality or interaction phase. Are low ATs, then, more accommodative and flexible? Perhaps, but only as a means to an end of reducing inconsistency and ambiguity. Remembering that the AT measure used in this study focused on the social-communicative setting, to be convergent in an ambiguously perceived situation (that is,

to be imprecise and equivocal) points ultimately to intolerance of social ambiguity, including discord between communicators. In reporting on the research of Suls and Miller ((1977), Giles et al. (1987) point out that "in contexts of social ambiguity, people are likely to converge on others present . . . so as to sound as though they 'fit in' and say the 'right thing.'" (pp. 23-24). Low ATs seem more likely to converge in such a way. On the other hand, high ATs seem more willing to maintain (across formality levels) or send divergent messages (across interaction phases) that are nonaccommodative and that might heighten social instability and ambiguity. In sum, then, whether people equivocate depends (in part) on 1) whether they see equivocation as a converging or maintaining/diverging strategy, which depends on their perception of and attitude toward situational ambiguity, and on 2) whether they tend to favor convergence or maintenance/divergence, which may depend on their level of AT regarding the social-communicative setting.

Conclusion

How can this research be extended? First, studies could examine AT, in its impact on equivocation, as a more traditionally defined global personality construct rather than as tolerance of social-communicative ambiguity. Second, research needs to explore other individual traits that might be predictive of equivocation, like need for social approval. Third, the notion that communicators tend to perceive informal situations and the openings of conversations as relatively ambiguous has

been an explanatory assumption of this study. Can it be empirically shown that communicators do, in fact, have such a perception of those situational characteristics? Fourth, are there other situational characteristics, having nothing to do with formality level or interaction phase, that would increase ambiguity and influence the use of equivocation? Carefully considering the work of speech accommodation theorists (and perhaps other social-cognitive message research) would help in investigating one or more of these directions.

Whatever alternative explanations of findings might be offered, or whatever new research paths are explored, this study fulfilled its purpose by experimentally demonstrating that the antecedents of interpersonal equivocation are multidimensional rather than unidimensional.

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# Appendix A

## Model Scenarios

Imagine yourself, as vividly as possible, in the following situations:

[Note that, for purposes of clarity, all answers are ordered from least equivocal to most equivocal in this appendix only.]

Situation 1

You are being interviewed for an important job by the company's personnel manager. [You are having a chat with a friend at a social gathering.] At the very start of [Several minutes into] the conversation, the interviewer [your friend] asks you, "What is your grade point average?" (Assume that your overall grade point average is 3.26.)

Rank the following replies from 1 (sounds the most like what you would actually say) to 4 (sounds the least like what you would actually say).

_____A. "My overall grade point average is 3.26."
_____B. "It's above 3.0."
_____C. "They tell me it's above 3.0."
_____D. "That depends on the semester."

Situation 2

You are being interviewed on a college television program about your experiences in this area. [You are having lunch in the student union with an acquaintance, discussing your experiences in this area.] Right at the beginning of the conversation [After a while], the interviewer [acquaintance] asks you, "How long have you lived here?" (Assume that you have lived in this area for ten-and-a-half years.)

Rank the following replies from 1 (sounds the most like what you would actually say) to 4 (sounds the least like what you would actually say).

_____A. "I've lived here exactly ten-and-a-half years."
_____B. "It's been around ten years."
_____C. "You could say it's been a few years."
_____D. "Quite awhile."

Situation 3

You are sitting on a stage with a panel of speakers, about to address an audience on a subject the entire group is interested in. [You are sitting in a restaurant with a group of friends, having a discussion about a subject the entire group is interested in.] Before the event begins [During a lull in the discussion], the master of ceremonies [one of your friends] engages you in a conversation and, at the beginning of the conversation [after a few minutes], says to you, "I'll need to introduce you in a few minutes. How much experience do you have with the subject we're discussing tonight?" ["How much experience do you have with the subject we're discussing here?"] (Assume that you have a Bachelor of Arts degree related to the subject.)

Rank the following replies from 1 (sounds the most like what you would actually say) to 4 (sounds the least like what you would actually say).

_____A. "I have a Bachelor of Arts degree related to this subject."
_____B. "I studied this topic in college."
_____C. "Let's say much more than average."
_____D. "More than anyone can imagine."

Table 1
Mean Total Equivocation Scores by Situational Formality Level and Ambiguity Tolerance Level

| | Low AT | Mod. AT | High AT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Formal | $4.52_{abdf}$ | $5.14_{ce}$ | $6.80_{a}$ |
| | n=23<br>sd=4.14 | n=28<br>sd=3.19 | n=25<br>sd=4.50 |
| Informal | $10.26_{abcd}$ | $8.11_{ef}$ | $7.29_{d}$ |
| | n=23<br>sd=4.19 | n=37<br>sd=3.37 | n=17<br>sd=3.60 |

(Means with the same subscript differ at least at the .05 significance level.)

Table 2
Mean Total Equivocation Scores by Interaction Phase and Ambiguity Tolerance Level

| | Low AT | Mod. AT | High AT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Initial | $8.67_{ab}$ | $6.91_{c}$ | $5.90_{b}$ |
| | n=24<br>sd=5.33 | n=33<br>sd=3.32 | n=20<br>sd=4.13 |
| Middle | $6.00_{a}$ | $6.75_{d}$ | $8.00_{e}$ |
| | n=22<br>sd=4.41 | n=32<br>sd=3.89 | n=22<br>sd=3.95 |

(Means with the same subscript differ at least at the .05 significance level.)

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