TALKING TO OURSELVES: SKEPTICISM, INTENTIONS, AND COMMITMENTS IN SELF-TALK

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Abstract

In her “What Is the Purpose of Self-Talk,” Felicity Deamer challenges the conventional belief that individuals possess a clear understanding of their communicative intentions before speaking, suggesting that such intentions are often only partially accessible. Drawing upon Grice's communication model, Deamer argues that this partial self-blindness creates an information gap between pre- and post-speech moments, thus allowing self-talk to have a communicative purpose. However, objections emerge regarding the criteria for knowing intentions and the significance of non-verbal cues. The skeptical implications of Deamer’s argument are addressed at length, prompting the following tradeoff: (1) Either non-verbal cues enable us to know our communicative intentions, sacrificing the possibility of Gricean communication, or (2) maintain partial self-blindness, preserving Gricean communication, but at the cost of skepticism. This dilemma opens broader inquiries about communicative intentions and the nature of self-talk in general. Finally, the paper takes up Geurts’ speech-act account of assertions in self-talk, capturing their overlooked usefulness as commitment-binding and context-providing tools.

I. Introduction

Whether we admit it or not, most of us have, at some point, engaged in self-talk, sometimes aloud, other times inwardly. In such cases, the language originally meant for communicating with others is repurposed for conversing with oneself. This transition, noted in the work of Vygotsky (1934/1987), has been shown to facilitate a wide range of cognitive functions such as problem-solving motivation, attention, and reasoning.

However, the shift to private speech is still puzzling. Philosophers like Bart Geurts (2018) have asked what it might mean to communicate with oneself. A strategy taken up by him and others is to establish continuity between public and private speech by using a theory of communication that applies to both. Yet, mainstream accounts of communication require an information transfer between speaker and hearer; in self-talk, where these are the same individual, such conveyance does not seem possible. Nevertheless, recent efforts have been made to address this issue and, in doing so, establish the meaning and purpose of self-talk.

This paper will examine these arguments, focusing particularly on Felicity Deamer's (2021) claim that self-talk functions as an information-based form of communication. It begins with an overview of Grice's theory of meaning and communication, followed by a review of Felicity Deamer's argument and objections to her position. The discussion then turns to defending Geurts' commitment theory of self-speech. Here, I develop his account to capture overlooked features of self-talk, suggesting a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

II. Background

Grice's theory of meaning (1957) revolves around the concept of speaker-meaning, which refers to the speaker's intended message conveyed through an utterance. His theory distinguishes speaker meaning from sentence meaning. This distinction importantly accounts for cases in ordinary language where the speaker's intended meaning diverges from the literal meaning of the utterance, such as with ambiguous statements, misunderstood words, and sarcasm. Grice's theory effectively aims to reduce linguistic meaning to a speaker's mental state.

Grice's analysis involves two main stages: 1) reducing sentence meaning to speaker-meaning, and 2) reducing speaker-meaning to complex psychological states, particularly

intentions. In this first part, Grice draws on the influential Use-Theory of meaning, which proposes that expressions derive their meaning from how they are used in communicative acts instead of having abstract meanings on their own. Expressions appear to have conventional meanings due to human communicative practices, which are constituted of individual speakers' intended meanings (Lycan, 2008). Therefore, sentence meaning depends on speaker meaning.

Grice moves to the second stage of his analysis: defining speaker-meaning in terms of mental states and intentions. This is intuitive, for a speaker engaging in a communicative act has an intention to "produce a cognitive state in their audience" (Lycan, 2008, p. 92). Speaker-meaning not only involves a communicative intention but implies several other cognitive states that facilitate the process of communication. Lycan condenses this into the following multi-step process:

> 1) S uttered x intending that A form the belief that P
> 2) S intended A to recognize S's original intention (reflexive intention)
> 3) S still further intended that A form the belief that P, at least partly *on the basis of* recognizing that the original intention (Lycan, 2008, p. 92)

III. Deamer's Position

In her "What is the Purpose of Self-Talk," Deamer begins by presenting a central dilemma: when we engage in self-speech, are we aware of our communicative intentions or not? She proposes that if we are aware, then no real act of communication occurs because the information is already known. Conversely, if we are not aware, then self-talk does facilitate a communicative purpose. She thus addresses the dual possibilities in self-talk: knowledge versus ignorance of communicative intentions.

Deamer begins by integrating insights from developmental psychology. She cites Vygotsky's findings (1934/1987) that self-speech evolves from external linguistic interactions in childhood into an internalized mechanism for self-regulation and problem-solving in adulthood. She uses this to illustrate that self-talk is a natural and essential cognitive process, countering theories that do not account for its communicative properties within the individual.

Next, Deamer appeals to Grice's theory of communication to establish the communicative purpose of self-talk. But here, a difficulty emerges: Gricean communication

requires an information gap between the speaker and listener—a problem when both are the same person.

To resolve this difficulty, Deamer proposes dropping the assumption that we always know our communicative intentions before speaking. On this view, individuals are partially self-blind to their intentions, which implies that "there is no 'thought in mind,' present and accessible, that is then articulated in language" (Deamer, 2021, p. 431). Rather, according to Deamer, we have a murkier idea of what we intend to say, which is informed by non-verbal sensory signals. Thus, Deamer claims to have identified an information gap within the speaker, enabling her to qualify self-talk as an instance of Gricean communication.

To support this claim, she draws on the work of Caruthers and Cassam (2009, 2011), who argue that knowledge of one's mental state must be gained through interpretation rather than any direct means. Self-talk, then, along with non-verbal cues, becomes a method by which individuals discover their own thoughts and intentions more fully, thus keeping its communicative function.

She also distinguishes between different types of self-speech, such as expressive utterances that lack communicative intentions but still play a critical role in self-awareness. In her conclusion, Deamer suggests a reevaluation of the relationship between language and thought, that language is not just a vehicle for expressing pre-existing thoughts but a formative tool in shaping and discovering them.

IV. Objections

I find Deamer's argument psychologically compelling and perhaps even plausible. Sometimes, it must be admitted that non-verbal cues fall short of fully apprising us of our communicative intentions before we speak; in these cases, self-talk has the potential to serve a communicative purpose. Other times, this does not seem to be the case. Here, I would like to note some difficulties based on my interpretation of Deamer's argument.

Objection 1: What counts as knowing our communicative intentions?

First, one might object that knowledge, interpreted as explicitly having in mind what we are going to say, is too rigid a criterion for fully knowing one's intentions. They might instead suppose that the internal and external sensory information, which allow one to guide and

interpret language production, go further in constituting knowledge of one's intentions beforehand.

A sketch of this alternative might look like the following: One might contend that one can gain sufficient access to mental states through other means than language—by intuitions and sensory states, for example. Indeed, such a grasp may qualify as adequate knowledge, which would prevent a communicative act from coming off. This view would then suggest that any use of language to voice an intentional state—rather than communicating information one previously didn't know—expresses that same knowledge in different terms, that is, in words. One might frame this as encoding a mental state into language, which renders it more tangible and perhaps increases our awareness of it.

For example, consider the self-utterance, "This meal is horrible." Surely, before making this utterance, we had experienced and became aware of the sensations of disgust and aversion and understood these attitudes to be directed toward the very meal in front of us. Perhaps the outward utterance that "this meal is horrible" may have served to clarify that mental state through language. But do we convey anything new to ourselves?

Or again, more generally, you experience the mental state *XYZ*. In language, the state, *XYZ*, is conventionally bundled into the word *F*. You then say to yourself, "I feel *F* right now." Now, has anything been communicated?

Objection 2: Information Gap widths

These cases may also prompt one to consider the nuances of information gaps: their varying widths and the extent to which they might be closed in the course of an exchange. The main question, however, is this: Does Gricean communication require a minimum information gap between the speaker and the audience? If so, how might this be determined?

For example, depending on one's familiarity with an individual, the consistency of their character, and so forth, one might anticipate the other's communicative intentions or at least infer them with greater ease than someone with whom they were unacquainted. Are instances such as these, where strong non-verbal cues are at play, not considered acts of communication because the information gap has already been tightened or closed to such an extent? This parallels with instances of self-talk, though subjects of the latter may boast an even greater handle on their intentions before speaking.

In short, one ought to consider whether Deamer had been too hasty in drawing this line. I do not intend to settle any of these issues here, but based on my interpretation of Deamer's argument, it seems that addressing these points would strengthen her position and provide greater insight into the nature of self-talk and communication, more generally.

Objection 3: Skepticism

Deamer anticipates the objection that partial self-blindness may lead to an uncomfortable skepticism concerning one's communicative intentions. She addresses this issue by noting instances of misspeaking, the explanation for which, she claims, is that "we know our communicative intentions and our actual linguistic performance has failed to fulfill those intentions" (Deamer, 2021, p. 430); for how could one know whether they misspoke unless they already had an idea of what they intended to say? Aside from language, Deamer adds, one has recourse to an arsenal of interpretative tools, such as sensation, emotion, and context, with which to determine these intentions, too. Thus, she claims, it is implausible that one is completely ignorant of their communicative intentions until one speaks.

Notice, however, that to combat any attribution of skepticism, Deamer must fall back on non-verbal information cues. If this skeptical charge is severe enough, it seems she would need to make a greater appeal to the epistemic credibility of these non-verbal cues, which may, consequently, prevent the possibility of Gricean communication. Consider the following dilemma if such was the case:

a. Either we admit that we know our communicative intentions well enough to parry the skeptical problem but, in the process, give up the possibility of Gricean communication.
b. Or, maintain partial self-blindness, and hence allow the possibility of Gricean communication, but as a consequence, permit a troubling skepticism.

As this first option has already been treated in the previous section, let us consider the second. I will put forward a stronger form of this skeptical argument to illustrate how it might be damaging to her position.

It may be asked whether this skepticism is even problematic after all if, as Deamer notes, we have a patchwork of non-verbal information that enables us to navigate our mental states. But one must recall that the possibility of Gricean communication, in the full sense, implies a non-trivial information gap between the speaker and hearer. Therefore, a certain level of ignorance must be tolerated, which, at any rate, would leave some doubt about what one intended to say.

Gricean communication does not entail mere information exchange but information exchange of a *communicative intention* from speaker to hearer. It is also the case that our mental landscape at any moment contains an admixture of thoughts, desires, and emotions, which present themselves at varying degrees of clarity. Now, how would an individual engaging in self-talk, being partially blind to their communicative intentions, verify that what had been inferred about their communicative intention actually belonged to it? For instance, an individual's interpretation of an utterance could lead them to mistake an accompanying mental state for the communicative intention itself.

Consider the self-utterance, "It's a new day." On the surface, this could seem like an expression of optimism in the face of the day's challenges. However, the individual's mental state may be more nuanced, containing a mixture of feelings and perceptions that are not immediately clear: the anticipation of a heavy workload, lingering anxiety from an unresolved argument, the awareness of the sun rising symbolizing a new beginning, and perhaps gratitude.

In this context, the statement "It's a new day" is open to multiple interpretations. It could reflect a hopeful outlook on the future. Alternatively, it might be a way of masking feelings of anxiety or frustration; crucially, the individual may not fully realize the extent to which these feelings are influencing their self-utterance.

That's not all, for self-talk whose content is elliptical or ungrammatical may also prove difficult to interpret. If partial self-blindness prevails to the extent that Gricean communication is allowed, one must expect it also to diminish one's capacity for interpretation and tolerate an amount of skepticism.

There are also cases of self-talk where a communicative intention is not present, such as in expressive language. But another issue arises: how does one determine whether they have a communicative intention? For instance, a fundamental assumption of interpersonal speech is that individuals have communicative intentions when they speak. But what about when we talk to ourselves? It is widely understood that self-talk is derived from interpersonal communication;

however, it does not follow that self-talk preserves all the same features of social discourse. So, while the framework of interpersonal speech allows one to infer communicative intent categorically, this inference cannot be made with the same confidence in cases of self-talk.

This observation, along with the concession that we lack direct access to our mental states, supports the broader skeptical claim I have been advancing in this section, which should prompt at least some consideration as to whether Deamer is safely positioned between the two horns of the dilemma.

V. Assertion commitment features and their role in self-talk

In "Making Sense of Self Talk," Geurts aims to establish continuity between interpersonal and intrapersonal speech by finding a model of communication that explains both. He observes that self-talk does not neatly conform to the accepted, information-based communication model and proposes to reframe communication as the practice of "negotiating commitments between speakers and listeners" (Geurts, 2018, p. 271). This alternative relies on Austin's theory of speech acts (1962), according to which utterances carry force and impose certain obligations on the speaker. Such commitments must be observed in self-talk, too.

For example, the question, 'How am I going to get this done?' places a commitment on the speaker by urging them to find a solution. Similarly, the speech act of promising (to oneself) commits one to a course of action—or inaction, as in, 'I will make time to relax this weekend.' Thus, Geurts can analyze private and public speech under the same communication framework, giving a clear account of self-talk.

While Deamer concedes that Geurts' speech act commitment theory may hold a place in self-talk, she ultimately challenges its explanatory scope. She notes, for instance, that while directives and promises facilitate commitment setting, self-directed statements or assertions, such as "This meal is horrible," do not seem to constrain one's future actions to the same extent (Deamer, 2021). This is a fair point, for if Geurts' notion of commitment entrainment is to sufficiently explain the phenomenon of self-talk, it must be able to handle different kinds of utterances. In this section, I will provide an overview of Geurts' framework for assertions as commitment-binding tools. I will then strengthen his account by considering other useful features of these kinds of speech acts.

First, let us recall Geurts' commitment account for statements and assertion: statements express possible states of affairs in the past, present, or future, but the speech act constrains one's *future* actions: One is expected to cohere one's future actions with the statement that "it is raining," for instance, adjusting plans, wearing a raincoat, etc. In committing oneself, one is expected to be able to offer some justification for the assertion (Geurts, 2018).

Here, I would like to suggest that assertions, in addition to constraining one's future actions, also contextualize thought. By contextualizing, I mean cohering beliefs and as well as establishing relevance of thought. I will illustrate how these components of assertion provide a framework that facilitates interpersonal communication. I will also suggest that these contextualizing features may be harnessed by the individual through self-talk in an attempt to simulate social dialogue.

Cohering beliefs: if one states that P, they are prevented from asserting that not P, unless they choose to cancel this first commitment. Stating with sincerity implies that we believe it is true and can provide justification for it. This implies that assertions must also be harmonized with our preexisting set of beliefs. If an assertion contradicts a previous belief, an epistemically responsible agent will have to amend or discard one or the other. For example, if I state, "It is raining right now in Tucson," I must discard the previously held belief that "It will never rain in Tucson." This process of harmonizing the set of our true beliefs suggests that what we already take to be true restricts what we can rationally accept as true. Importantly, such pruning also shapes our future actions and decisions, which stem from our beliefs. Assertions, therefore, not only describe reality but also form the beliefs that guide behavior.

Relevance: to illustrate this component, consider an instance of interpersonal communication: in catching up with a friend, they tell you, "My dog is not yet housebroken." Naturally, you would expect them to expound on this, perhaps relating a story on this premise. It might seem appropriate thereafter for you to mention your experience with pets or offer tips on how to wash soiled rugs. This relevance component thus sets a reference point for what is and isn't relevant in conversation, which then predictably influences its course. This can be viewed as a generative feature of self-talk, where the commitment aspect focuses on a particular domain of interest.

On an *intrapersonal* level, when you make a self-directed assertion, it may prompt related ideas, whose forms could range from logical implications to looser associations, which

you might then explore internally. This claim harks to David Hume's treatment of the association of ideas in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* in which he identifies three principles according to which ideas associate within the mind: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.

This associative mechanism may be a powerful driver of self-talk. For example, saying "I live in Tucson" could lead me to soliloquize about my daily experiences, the nature of the desert environment, or existentially reflect on the cause of my living in such a wretched place. Thus, in making sincere assertions, we confirm our beliefs in them and set the stage for further related thoughts, which may then be voiced in self-speech.

By understanding how assertions act as commitments and context-setting tools, we can see how they naturally encourage self-talk, which, in these cases, resembles an active cognitive process where one engages with one's thoughts as if conversing with another. An important detail of this account is that it suggests self-talk can take on the dynamic qualities of social intercourse without stipulating any of the skeptical baggage that comes with information-based models of communication.

VI. Conclusion

Self-talk remains a complex and controversial topic. Recent projects have aimed to account for the existence of private speech by analyzing it as a form of communication continuous with social discourse. However, disagreement has arisen over which models of communication are most applicable, with some viewing self-talk as an informative process and others as a mechanism for entraining commitments.

The former approach, taken by Deamer, encounters significant challenges that are not easily resolved. She argues that self-talk can involve the transfer of communication because individuals lack complete mental awareness. In speaking, they close this informational gap by using their own utterances to infer the communicative intentions behind them. However, I note that this leads to a difficult tradeoff: either non-verbal cues reveal our intentions but undermine Gricean communication, or we preserve Gricean communication at the cost of skepticism.

As an alternative, I take up Geurts' view, which conceptualizes self-talk as a process of "coordinating commitments" with oneself (Geurts, 2018). I address objections to this position, particularly the concern that assertions do not seem to enforce commitments as strongly as

promises or directives. In response, I explore how self-directed assertions contextualize thought by cohering beliefs and establishing relevance, both of which motivate commitment. The result paints self-talk as a dynamic process that mirrors social communication and promotes rich internal dialogue.

Despite valuable contributions to the understanding of self-talk, it remains underexplored, and further research is essential to fully grasp its complexities. Alternative perspectives that interpret self-talk as something other than a communicative process may provide deeper insights and strengthen our conceptualizations of the phenomenon.

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