
Blatant bullshit as an attack on linguistic agency

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Résumé

Bullshit is standardly defined as talk that is indifferent to the truth (Frankfurt (1986)2005). This talk focuses on a distinctive way that such talk disrupts both public speech and ordinary conversation, and tries to explain how it does so by defending a new account of bullshit.

My central claim is that bullshitting isn't, like lying, a form of cheating at the relevant linguistic practice while depending on the fact that the practice carries on. Instead, when sufficiently widespread and visible, bullshitting can shut down discussion, by making it impossible for good-faith participants to perform the speech-acts they intend to perform. Assertions by politicians, for example, are no longer received in some contexts as genuine attempts at speaking the truth. This, I will claim, is precisely the aim of the relevant type of bullshit: it constitutes a deliberate attack on linguistic agency.

Showing this requires a renewed understanding of bullshit. In standard accounts, bullshit is speech that is merely indifferent to the norm of truth (Frankfurt (1986)2005) or to the communal project of inquiry (Don Fallis and Stokke 2017), in a way that must remain covert in order to succeed: "The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides (...) is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him" (Frankfurt (1986)2005).

This characterization, however, ignores cases of blatant bullshit, of the kind populist leaders have made increasingly salient. While others have noticed this phenomenon (Jaster 2021 on "ostentative bullshit"), and pointed out its frequent association with authoritarian politics (Kenyon and Saul 2022 on "bald-faced" bullshit), I want to go further by showing that the blatantness is essential to this type of bullshit as an attack on linguistic agency. Part of its aim, I will argue, is to communicate contempt for the rules governing the conduct of the linguistic exchange. Bullshitting amounts to making a move in metalinguistic negotiation about the norms of communication. As blatant bullshit becomes normalised, this can lead to a weakening of the relevant norms, a process I will analyse as a special case of what Rae Langton calls "illocutionary disablement" (Langton 1993). I conclude the talk with a proposal that bullshit is a distinctive vice which harms the ability of speakers to exercise their autonomy within a community structured by mutually agreed norms.

References

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Mots-Clés: Bullshit, metalinguistic communication, linguistic agency, illocutionary disablement