Just asking questions: How the cloud of uncertainty precipitates conspiracy theories

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Conspiracy theories (henceforth CTs) explain significant events as the result of clandestine plots by cabals of powerful actors, often on a grand scale, such as the infamous and wide-ranging QAnon conspiracy (Keeley 1999, Aaronovitch 2010, Douglas et al. 2019, a.m.o.). Despite being often baseless or outright false, CTs spread rapidly (e.g. Fox Tree & Weldon 2007), an effect amplified by widespread access to the internet, and with serious consequences for political and social life.

While much prior research has investigated the psychological reasons for CT virality, including their narrative appeal (e.g. Bennett 2023), the use of particular linguistic tools in CT communication is less studied. A common rhetorical tactic in such communication is 'just asking questions': the superficially innocuous propagation of falsehoods or low-evidence claims by means of posing them as questions. For instance, rather than asserting p outright, a conspiracy theorist can utter the polar interrogatives p? or $\diamond p$? with the goal of suggesting that p is the case (Brotherton 2015):

(1) a. Is it possible that Malta was once home to a race of extraterrestrial giants? (*Ancient Aliens*)
b. Could the moon landing be the biggest hoax in history? (YouTube, 'Griffin Tales')
c. Was 9/11 an inside job?

Despite the apparently central role of questions in conspiratorial communication, they have received little specific or formal attention. Using questions in this way raises two puzzles. The first puzzle is that in spite of their vanilla interrogative form, such questions do not request information, but have a 'non-canonical' discourse effect, such as rhetorical questions, the subject of much recent work in natural language semantics (e.g. Eckardt 2007, Farkas 2024). The second is that they appear to have a 'persuasive' effect, conveying the implication of some answer to the stated question, despite the fact that this answer could in principle be asserted outright.

In this talk, I propose that questions are a particularly potent way to spread conspiracy theories because the indeterminacy of questions allows for audiences to draw their own conclusions, particularly with respect to claims that audiences might reflexively reject, and cash this out formally in terms of relative utterance utility. First, since uttering interrogative sentences does not commit the speaker to the truth of any one particular proposition, they afford speakers plausible deniability: they are 'just asking questions', no matter their implications. Second, by asking questions, CT advocates give the impression that the truth of the matter is still unsettled, boosting their audience's credence in answers to that question they previously thought were unlikely. Moreover, asking questions gives addressees the sense that they are figuring something out, rather than simply being told what to think. This process reinforces the feeling of 'discovering' a hidden truth, which I suggest is a particularly sticky method of persuasion.

A utility calculus for conspiratorial questions. I present here a proposal that explains the utility of questions in CT communication, taking inspiration from utilitarian frameworks like Optimality Theoretic pragmatics (Zeevat 2009) and the Rational Speech Acts model (Frank & Goodman 2012, 2014). For simplicity, I consider only asymmetrical 'discourses' in which the SPeaker is attempting to convince the ADdressee of the truth of some conspiracy theory, a setup approximating a broadcast, as in a video, podcast, or social media post. I analyze the speaker's choice of message as a rational decision to maximize utility given their goals, and propose four phenomena that play a role in CT questions (formalized more completely in the full paper).

(1) *The cost of commitment*. I assume that, following standard Stalnakerian (1972, 1973) assumptions a speaker who utters a declarative sentence p commits themself to the truth of p, whereas a speaker who utters an interrogative sentence makes no such commitment. Following Farkas & Bruce (2010), both utterances raise issues: uttering an interrogative raises the issue corresponding to the set of propositional answers to that question, and uttering a declarative p raises the singleton issue containing only the proposition p.

The commitment of has downstream consequences for the discourse, since the speaker will thereafter be on the record as committing to p. It may also have consequences outside of the discourse; for example, if p is false or misleading, the speaker may lose face or even put themself in legal jeopardy.

(2) *Informativity*. A common assumption in utility-based theories of pragmatics is that informative utterances, which tell the addressee something they don't know, are of higher utility than uninformative ones. The intuition is that if the goal of discourse is to shrink the common ground, there is little point in 'preaching to the choir'. Since interrogative utterances are technically uninformative, they offer no utility in this respect.

(3) *Authority and persuasiveness*. AD's likelihood of being persuaded of some proposition p on the basis of SP's utterance depends on at least two factors. First, the AD has some degree of prior credence (or lack thereof) in p, which naturally affects their willingness to adopt p as a full-fledged belief. Second, they need to consider how good

of a source SP is with respect to p— formalized here as likelihood relative to AD's beliefs of SP knowing p, following Roberts' (2024) AUTHORITY:

(2) AUTHORITY Given an information state s, the authority of agent x with respect to issue I in s $\text{AUTH}_s(x, I) := p_s(K_x(I))$. (Roberts 2024: 3)

Thus, the incorporation of p into the addressee's beliefs—the likelihood she is *persuaded* that p—is dependent on an assumption that the speaker is a reliable source on p. Crucially, the threshold of authority needed to persuade an addressee of p is inversely proportional to the addressee's expectation that p is the case. A reasonable person might be inclined to accept directions to the train station in an unfamiliar city from a stranger at face value, but much less so to accept that the moon landing was fake from the same utterances. Assuming a Hamblin (1973) semantics questions denote a set of propositions which partition the common grostranger.

(4) *Viability*. Finally, I assume that speakers get negative utility from making utterances which are non-viable, in the sense of Rudin (2022). An utterance is viable just in case all of the alternatives of the issue raised by that utterance are compatible with each interlocutor's discourse commitments. This has consequences for questionund: in the case of polar questions, this corresponds to a partition into two cells, p and $\neg p$. Thus, viability ensures speakers are penalized for asking questions which they know the addressee knows the answer to.

This assumption comes with the interesting side-effect that asking a question p? essentially presupposes its own unsettledness: if the speaker knew the answer, they should assert that outright instead. In effect, the speaker communicates the plausibility of both p and $\neg p$. A high-authority speaker, then, can put their thumb on the scale of the addressee's relative assessment of the likelihood of p and $\neg p$: if the addressee had a prior belief that one alternative was more likely than the other, she should entertain the unlikelier alternative more seriously if the authoritative speaker is not yet settled on the matter. If the speaker has a goal to convince the addressee of either p or $\neg p$, this nudge can offer them positive utility.

Why ask questions? To see the power of questions in CT communication, assume first that SP is trying to convince AD of some propositional CT τ. Conspiracy theories have taboo content, and thus typically present information as suppressed, censored, and contrary to an 'official' narrative. On this basis, I make two crucial assumptions For one, I assume that speakers take an addressee's prior belief in the likelihood of τ to be low ($p_{ad}(\tau) \approx 0$). I further assume that this outré status makes outright assertion of τ costly, either in terms of face-saving or other social/legal consequences. AD's low priors for τ can be understood to represent internal/external pressures against believing τ.

The utility of different potential utterances depends on SP's beliefs about how authoritative AD takes them to be. I consider four such possible utterances here, which vary along two dimensions of directness (assertion vs. question, unmodalized vs. in the scope of a possibility modal): the assertions τ and $\diamond\tau$, and their polar interrogative counterparts τ? and $\diamond\tau$?.

First, consider the case where AD takes SP to have middling authority on whether or not τ, i.e. AD has no strong inclination to trust or distrust AD. Since SP assumes that $p_{ad}(\tau) \approx 0$, their utterance of τ would be extremely informative (+ +) for AD. Uttering $\diamond\tau$ instead, while still informative, is negligibly so, being a weak possibility claim: τ asymmetrically entails $\diamond\tau$. On the other hand, outright commitment to τ, given its conspiratorial content, incurs a significant negative commitment cost (- -), since SP opens themselves to a variety of negative consequences by committing themself to τ; committing to $\diamond\tau$, a mere statement of possibility, is much less risky.

Questions, in virtue of making no commitments on the part of the speaker, are not informative, and moreover do not directly constitute proposals for AD to update her beliefs. However, they can play an important role in shifting the addressee's priors. From the assumption that SP's utterance of τ? is viable, AD would naturally conclude that p is more likely than she previously assumed; this is of high utility to SP in increasingly the likelihood that AD comes to believe τ. A similar effect can be obtained by uttering $\diamond\tau$?, but it adjusts the speaker's priors with respect to the probability of the weaker $\diamond\tau$. Table 1 below illustrates the relative utility of four potential utterances in the middling-authority context.

By asking the question τ? or its modalized counterpart instead of making an assertion, the speaker (a) avoids potential negative consequences of commitment to τ, and (b) smuggles the presupposition that τ? is unsettled in the discourse. Even if SP's private goal is convince AD that τ, it can unintuitively be more utilitarian to ask whether τ rather than say τ outright, since the addressee may be difficult to persuade of something which strongly contradicts her prior beliefs. Note that the relative utility of $\diamond\tau$? and τ?, suggests that τ? should always be preferred, but this is clearly not the case (see (1)). I suggest $\diamond\tau$? may be a 'safer' choice in contexts where the addressee is so resistant to believing τ—perhaps because it is so controversial—that uttering τ? to her is still too big of a leap, but leave open the possibility that other factors are at play.

	Speaker utterance			
	τ	$\tau?$	$\diamond\tau$	$\diamond\tau?$
Commitment cost	- -			
Informativity	+ +		+	
Persuasiveness	-			
Viability		+ +		+

Table 1: Relative utility of utterances for Sp when $\text{AUTH}_{Ad}(Sp, \tau)$ is middling

In cases where AD presumes high speaker authority of SP, this utility of questions is diminished. In essence, the commitment cost and informativity of asserting τ and $\diamond\tau$ remain the same, but the barrier to persuasion is lowered. In these cases, the relative utility of questions is diminished relative to corresponding assertions; if AD is going to believe SP anyway, SP may as well go ahead and be direct, modulo concerns about external consequences.

	Speaker utterance			
	τ	$\tau?$	$\diamond\tau$	$\diamond\tau?$
Commitment cost	- -			
Informativity	+ +		+	
Persuasiveness	+		+ +	
Viability		++		+

Table 2: Relative utility of utterances for Sp when $\text{AUTH}_{Ad}(Sp, \tau)$ is high

An upshot of this analysis is that nothing prevents uttering questions in CT-discourse contexts from subtly raising the possibility of $\neg p$, as opposed to p. This prediction seems to be borne out. For example, a conspiracy theorist could ask (3) of a person who believes the conventional narrative about the JFK assassination, with the intent to suggest that Oswald was not the assassin:

(3) Did Lee Harvey Oswald (really) shoot JFK? Then isn't it suspicious that there is a photo of him at the Soviet Embassy?

Limitations. The present analysis has several limitations. Importantly, it is likely that speakers are actually juggling a number of other utility-bearing factors in selecting their choice of utterance, including other aspects of rhetorical importance, like use of repetition. It is also not at all clear what the class of alternatives from which speakers are selecting should be.

I also note this analysis does not take into account the fact that CT discourses do not consist of utterances in isolation, but can consist of many turns. The speaker's authority may not be uniform across all claims, but the utterances themselves may affect how the addressee perceives them. For instance, in a long discussion of CTs, a CT proponent does not just utter a series of questions, which would appear indecisive and undermine any credible claim to authority. Understanding the effect of dynamic context updates on utility calculations is a topic of ongoing work.

Conclusion. Conspiracy theories thrive in the shadow of uncertainty, which allows speculation and innuendo to proliferate. Languages come equipped with a device to express uncertainty in the form of questions, so it is natural that questions are particularly useful in sowing CTs: they elevate implausible claims by making them appear just as viable as more plausible alternatives.

This proposal, while preliminary, adds to a growing body of work leveraging the toolkit of formal semantics to understand kinds of communication that are not strictly about exchanging information, like dogwhistles (Henderson & McCready 2024) and indexing of social variables (Burnett 2019), suggesting that the expertise of linguists and logicians could play an important role in tackling sociopolitical challenges of the 21st century.

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