

NANESI. The nature of deniability and its philosophical implications

The NANESI project investigates the communicative phenomenon of strategic deniability. Strategic deniability is broadly understood as a linguistic strategy, whereby speakers aim to convey problematic messages while simultaneously preserving the possibility to reasonably argue that their words were misunderstood, thereby mitigating the risks associated with communicating the problematic message.

Deniability is employed in different forms of strategic communication that have attracted substantial philosophical interest in the latest years. This includes insinuation, dogwhistles, propaganda, misleading, figleaves, and code words. Additionally, deniability is often studied in relation to hate speech and other forms of harmful discourse, and in legal scholarship, where it raises issues concerning perjury, fraud, obstruction of justice, and admissibility of hearsay.

This research project aims to advance knowledge in this field in two directions. First, it will develop a novel and empirically sound analysis of *what linguistic deniability is* and *how it operates*, which overcomes the difficulties faced by previous attempts to account for this phenomenon. Second, it will extend this model to new fields of research, yielding an illuminating and innovative explanation of various phenomena of philosophical interest. Specifically, the project aims to advance the study of (i) testimony, (ii) online communication, (iii) the descriptive/evaluative distinction, and (iv) political polarization

Methodologically, NANESI explores deniability and its philosophical implications on three levels: A) a more theoretical one, examining the principles that an adequate theory of deniability must explain, along with different available theoretical proposals; B) a more applied level, investigating the relationship between deniability and phenomena such as testimony, online communication, the descriptive/evaluative (offensive) distinction, and polarization; and C) an experimental level, where the predictions of competing accounts will be tested against the actual linguistic behavior of competent speakers, complementing and refining the philosophical-conceptual models developed in (A) and (B).

Overall, NANESI aims to improve our understanding of how uncooperative communication works, and of the strategies that speakers can use to evade the costs associated with violating a variety of linguistic norms. As such, NANESI will further socially and politically relevant lines of research: it will explore and dissect common communicative strategies that are used for *manipulation*, *misinformation*, *polarization*, and the *promotion of social injustices*. A better understanding of these phenomena is crucial for bettering our understanding of human communication, and for improving the quality of contemporary democracies.