



## Opinion Science Podcast

*Hosted by Andy Luttrell*

**Language is for Doing with Thomas Holtgraves**

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**Andy Luttrell:**

Who am I?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Dad

**Andy Luttrell:**

And who's that?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Mom.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Mama? And who are you?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Maya!

**Andy Luttrell:**

That's your favorite word?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Maya!

**Andy Luttrell:**

That's my daughter, Maya.

**Maya Luttrell:**

Maya

**Andy Luttrell:**

Can you say "hello"?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Hello.

**Andy Luttrell:**

She just turned 20 months old, which for people who resent this weird month-by-month age scheme that parents use, I'll just say she's a little past a year and a half old. I remember when she was born, she was...I mean she was cute and we loved her, but she mostly just sat there and whined. But then eventually you could see it—her eyes just opened up to the world. She was taking it all in. Then she started to crawl, then to walk, then saying a few sounds that we desperately convinced ourselves meant something. And now? Well now this kid's running around and figuring things out faster than I expected. And that includes words.

**Andy Luttrell:**

What are some of your favorite words?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Um...bacon.

**Andy Luttrell:**

You've never said bacon before!

**Andy Luttrell:**

One of her first words popped up when we'd go for walks in the neighborhood, and she'd see someone walking their dog and say...

**Maya Luttrell:**

Dog.

**Andy Luttrell:**

She was also fond of saying "ball."

**Maya Luttrell:**

Ball.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And plenty of things we still don't quite understand.

**Maya Luttrell:**

[babble]

**Andy Luttrell:**

I got her with my microphone here to show her some animals on the computer.

**Andy Luttrell:**

What does a dog say?

**Maya Luttrell:**

Woof woof.

**Andy Luttrell:**

That's woof woof. I also showed her a lion.

**Maya Luttrell:**

[roars]

**Andy Luttrell:**

Is that what lions say?

**Andy Luttrell:**

We also looked at some elephants. That's an elephant?

**Andy Luttrell:**

She's walking around the house this fall shouting "pumpkin" at every one she sees, asking us for her favorite foods, and shouting "No" to our cat. And okay, like I know I'm doing this dad thing where I'm making a lot out of some pretty rudimentary words. Like I get that we agree that my daughter's a genius, but maybe you're not impressed.

But I think you should be! Not just at my kid, but at the fact that any of us can do this at all. Our mouths make these weird little sounds that we string together to construct meaning. Like, ideas in my head can end up in your head because we both have language. Eventually Maya's gonna be able to tell stories, give concrete commands, and manipulate my wife and I to do her bidding...just because her brain's been picking up these sounds and how to use them.

Understanding how this all works is a monumental task, but philosophers, linguists, and psychologists have been chipping away at it for ages. So what do we know about what we do with words and whether other people have any idea what we're talking about?

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And this week I'm excited to share my conversation with Tom Holtgraves. This one's unique because Tom's office is just a few doors down from mine at Ball State, and he's been a good friend and colleague since I started working there. Also, I *think* this is the first in-person conversation to air on the podcast, which is pretty cool. There are a few more coming, but after a couple years of remote interviews, it was fun to actually be in the same room as the person I was talking to.

Anyhow, Tom studies the social psychology of language—how we use words in a social context. He edited the Oxford Handbook of Language and Social Psychology, and his book, *Language as Social Action*, came out in 2002. He's interested in how we use words to convey meaning and what has to happen for other people to pick up on what we intend to communicate...especially when we're prone to making some points indirectly. You know what I mean? We talked last spring about some of the major themes of his work, including *speech act theory*, which I thought was an interesting way to think about what we do with language. So let's get into it!

**Andy Luttrell:**

For as long as I've known you and have had a loose sense of what your research is, it's actually not until the last few days that I've really been like, "Okay, what does it actually look like?" And so, I do have questions just for myself about what you're doing.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Great. Great. Absolutely.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And maybe just to get into it, I don't think I know the Tom Holtgraves origin story as well as I'd like to, which is like why language? Why is it interesting to you to figure out how people use language to talk to each other?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, it's a result of several things, so as an undergraduate I had for social psychology, I had Roger Brown's textbook. I don't know if you're familiar. This is a classic book. This was I think... It's 1965, 1966. And Roger Brown's just this wonderful writer. And it's unlike current social psych intro books, but so he had a chapter on dissonance, chapter on language, and he writes so well. Brilliantly. And he writes... It's like reading a New Yorker article, right? So, that kind of got me hooked on social, but also on language too, because he was one of the... He mentored Steven Pinker, so language development, language acquisition, he was huge. But he also had an interest in social psychology of language. Did stuff on politeness. Did stuff on [inaudible]...

Anyway, so there was that, and then as a graduate student I was sort of floundering.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, you didn't go to grad school wanting to do-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

No. I went to graduate school wanting to study gambling.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Oh.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Risk taking.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Is that what brought you to Reno?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Right. And I did that stuff. And I continue to dabble in that. I'll publish some stuff on that. But it wasn't panning out. And then I started working with Deborah Davis, Ohio State grad, Ohio State postdoc, and she was doing this... She was studying this phenomenon that she developed. Who was it with? Well, Tom Ostrom, but that wasn't the main person. Anyway, the phenomenon was responsiveness, right? And so, they had these lab studies where they would... People would actually pleasure one another, and they were looking at how quickly they would do this and all these sorts of things.

Anyway, so that's the concept in it, so she started applying it to conversations, so when you're having a conversation with somebody, are you in sync? Right? And you know the feeling, right? That sometimes somebody's just saying random stuff. And so, I started working with her on that, and we started doing these studies where we were looking at responsiveness in terms of responding

to interview questions. So, we came up with this method of manipulating the background questions, keeping the answers the same but manipulating the questions that preceded them, and looked at the implications of violating responsiveness, or later what other people refer to as relevance, on perceptions of the person, perceptions of what they're saying.

Anyway, in working on that, I got into the pragmatics literature, and so there's this theory of relevance, Sperber and Wilson. This is cognitive science, right? Maybe you've heard of it. But so, this was actually before Sperber and Wilson, so Grice was the big one. Sorry. So, one of his conversational maxims is relevant. So, I started reading that stuff, and then that got me into speech act theory, and so then I went down this rabbit hole of philosophy of language, and really pragmatics is what it is, right?

So, I'm a social psychologist, but really what I am is an experimental... Somebody who studies pragmatic phenomenon experimentally.

**Andy Luttrell:**

But what does that... I think I don't know what that means. Pragmatics in this context.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Okay, so if you look at language as... If you arbitrarily divide up language, there is semantics, so roughly the meaning of words, right? There's syntax, so the rules for combining those items into something meaningful. But that's not enough, right? Because when we communicate with one another, we're obviously communicating a lot more than you get from just looking at semantics and syntax. So, pragmatics for me, and many pragmatic theorists would disagree with this, but for me pragmatics is everything beyond syntax and semantics.

The question is, of course, how they interact, right? So, when you're actually engaged, when you're actually processing communications, when you're processing language, and this... There's what's called the semantics-pragmatics war, right? One idea is that you comprehend a literal meaning, and then you take context into account, and you go, "But that's not the way it really works," right? So, if you're looking at online processing and using for example EEG techniques, if you have... So, let's say you manipulate the status of a speaker, so it's a high-powered speaker, or let's say a low-powered speaker, and they're saying something very impolite, right? That they shouldn't be doing. Listeners pick up on that almost immediately. And so, pragmatic stuff comes in really, really, really fast.

So, anyway, what is pragmatics? Pragmatics is for me, it's everything beyond semantics and syntax, but it's mostly... It's about meaning. It's what people are-

**Andy Luttrell:**

But not semantic meaning.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

No, not semantic, because that's... I mean, obviously semantics is a large part of it, but it's not... It doesn't get us very far, right? In terms of what we're actually doing when we're using language to communicate.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Is it sort of like the... If you think of the phenomenon of a backhanded compliment, where like what I'm saying is complimentary, however, that may not be what I mean.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Or you may not think that's what I mean, and you go, "I know you're saying this, but I think what you're saying--"

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

But what you really mean is.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. Right.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

"No, I don't." And you get deniability. Yeah. No, there's layers of meaning, right? And many, many. So, backhanded compliments. Humble bragging, right? There's layer upon layer. And it gets... You can get really complex. But yeah, those are the sorts of things that fall within the domain of pragmatics.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Gotcha. And so, the notion of speech acts, that's the thing. When I think, "What does Tom study?" I think speech acts. That's what comes to mind.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And it wasn't until recently that I really, I think, appreciated what those are. But I might have it wrong, so tell me. What is the notion of a speech act?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, a speech act, this comes out of philosophy, the natural language philosophy, so you can take this, so John Searle would be probably a major contemporary philosopher in that regard. Before him, John Austin, who was British. You can take it back to Wittgenstein. It's all about how we look at language, how we think about language, and it is an approach to language that is rather than looking at language as being a truth conditional sort of phenomenon where you evaluate language in terms of whether it corresponds to reality. Obviously, that's part of it, but speech act theory is the idea that we use language to do things, right?

So, one of Austin's books is Things We Do With Words, right? And so, it's an action view, and so it works really well for me, and for other people, in terms... It's sort of a wedge, for me anyway,

to look at how we communicate and miscommunicate. So, you can specify exactly what it is that somebody's trying to do when they're using language.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Can you give examples of things people do with words? Other than talk?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

They ask questions.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Okay. Yeah.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

No, and so there's layers here. What we're talking about is what's called the illocutionary layer, so just request, beg, criticize, apologize, thank, assert. There's books that are compilations of speech acts, right? And we're talking about verbs, so speech act verbs. These are actions that a speaker is intending to have recognized, right? So, when I criticize a student, I'm-

**Andy Luttrell:**

It's funny your mind went there.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. I'm intending for them to recognize my intention to criticize them. And I've successfully communicated if they recognize that intention. It's what's called a reflexive intention. So, speech acts are these discrete actions that people perform with their utterances. There's many weaknesses but it works well for certain things I think.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Is the general gist of speech act theory, or at least the modern version of it, that anything we say falls into some speech act? Whatever we're saying is in the service of doing something.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yes. But I don't think that's true, right? I mean, you many times communicate, we talk just... I mean, it's like grooming. We're not trying to do anything. We're just sort of getting to know somebody. I mean, and that can be a speech act in a sense, but no, so it kind of breaks down, so no, I don't think it's the case that we're intending to perform a specific action with every utterance.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, we don't speak with purpose always.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Not always. I mean, unless you look at a higher level, so I want to affiliate with this person, right? But that's a little different. That's a higher level sort of thing.

**Andy Luttrell:**

That any of these speech acts could be in service of.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yes. Yeah. So, you're asking questions, so how's it going? So, you're doing those sorts of things. And another weakness of speech act theory is that it is totally utterance based, right? But many times, we perform speech acts over a sequence, right? I mean, think about a request, right? Instead of inviting somebody, "Have dinner with me." You say, "Are you free Friday?" What's called a pre-request or a pre-invitation. And if they say no, then no request, right? But if they say, "Oh yeah, yeah." Okay. These are moves, and so it happens over a sequence of turns, but speech act theory generally doesn't deal with that. Other approaches do, but-

**Andy Luttrell:**

It's so funny because you're... As a newcomer to this, I'm very excited about it.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Okay.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And as someone who's studied it for a long time, you're quick to say it's not great. Because I do think that even in the sequence, it kind of seems like each of those utterances do have their own goal, right?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

They do.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Are you free? I'm soliciting information. Then I follow up. Would you like to have dinner? I'm making now a request. And so-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

But the original intent was a request, okay?

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. Sure. Sure.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, you're absolutely right, so there's speech acts that are sort of subsidiary speech acts to the main speech act.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, I have an example that I liked from your book, which I started reading several pages of.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Oh, cool.



**Andy Luttrell:**

Which was the difference between, the subtle difference in the letters in the words, but the big difference in speech act, which is the difference between I apologize, and I apologized.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Right. Yeah. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Where, if I understand the right, the idea is like those two sound like almost identical expressions.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

They are. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

But the first is in the service of apologizing.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. That is a speech act. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And the second is in the service of sort of describing some truth statement, right?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. What you did. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I'm giving you information.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And that I just thought really nicely makes that distinction, right? Where you go, "We just sort of say words all the time."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

I know. I know.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And they don't always seem that different, but they're serving different goals, and that's the notion of speech acts.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. No. Yeah, that's interesting you found that. Yeah. I'd forgotten about that. Yeah. No, that's exactly right. Yeah. Yeah. And I hereby apologize. There's what's called a hereby test, right? So, to identify a speech act verb, you have to be able to say... This breaks down a little bit, but I

hereby whatever it is. I hereby request, I hereby promise, I hereby apologize, and so on. It breaks down a little bit for things like... Well, maybe we can get into this later on. I'm gonna hold off on that.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Hold on. Now you've got me curious.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Well, I was gonna start bringing up persuasion.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Oh, sure.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Because persuasion is an interesting speech act, right? So, if I'm intending to persuade somebody, I can't say, "I hereby persuade you." Right?

**Andy Luttrell:**

Right.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That just doesn't work. I can still have the intention and I can say things with the intention of trying to persuade somebody, but interestingly if they recognize my intention to persuade, that can backfire, right? I mean, that's when you get... You're the persuasion guy. Wouldn't that be the case? Wouldn't it be more effective if I'm trying to persuade somebody for them not to recognize my intention, right?

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. In communication, they have what they call the persuasion knowledge model, which is exactly this, where people have developed knowledge about how persuasion works, and once they recognize that that's your intention, suddenly they go, "I see what you're doing here. You're trying to manipulate me."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

"I'm not simply getting information from you." And so, that's an interesting case because speech act theory seemed like, or at least the extensions of it for understanding, are like the hope is that you do understand my intention.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Or that's the whole premise.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

By definition you have to for it to be successful. But persuasion is one case where it doesn't work. Another case is brag. I hereby brag that... Right? I mean, to successfully brag you don't want the person to recognize you're bragging. Hence humble brag, right? And those are the two exceptions. And they're interesting exceptions because they're studied by psychologists, social psychologists. I'm sure there's others, but those are kind of two-

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah, where the desire is misunderstanding almost, right?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Exactly. You want to basically hide the intention, right? And it's not that you're trying to deceive or anything, but... Well, I guess in some ways you are, but you're trying to hide your intention to accomplish something.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, it sort of brings us to that notion of misunderstanding. It seems like kind of a major theme in what you've been doing, at least lately, is trying-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Recently. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

... to figure out when do these communication processes break down. And the speech act model is kind of a useful framework to be like, "Oh."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I can tell. I can identify what the intention was.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And then I can measure whether it was successful.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly right. Makes it tractable.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, in a study, how do you actually catch understanding and misunderstanding as it happens?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah, so the framework we use, and we've used this in a lot of different ways now with the speech acts, we've used it with emotions, we've used it with describing uncertainty, but with speech acts, so, we have one set of participants, and we'll give them a situation. Imagine your roommate hasn't cleaned the apartment in a long, long time, and it's a mess, right? And you want to criticize them. That's the intention, right? So, what would you say? They write it out. Or you want to promise to do better, or you want to... Whatever it is, and we typically work with 30 to 40 speech acts. One of the, I think, best things about what I'm doing now is it's very broad, so we're trying to... It's not just requests. It's a whole bunch of speech acts.

Anyways, so they'll write out what they would say, and then we take those, and what they would say, and we show another group, another participant. We say, "What does this person mean?" What are they doing, right? Sometimes it'll be open-ended, just give us a word. Sometimes we'll give them multiple choice, right? And it's hard. But anyway, that's the basic procedure, and so if they correctly identify criticize, use my example, that's communication. If they do not, then it's miscommunication, okay?

So, that's the basic setup, and it works really, really well. I mean, it's a little unrealistic in a sense, but-

**Andy Luttrell:**

But it captures, I think, the essence of what we care about.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I could see being in that situation and being like, "I really want to convey to you that I don't approve of what you're doing."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And do you get the message when I express myself the way I chose to?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That's exactly right. And just to follow up on that, of course, one of the main findings we get is that... So, to criticize somebody is hard. It is in our terms face threatening. And those are... That's where we see the lower rates of communication, right? However, people are phrasing that, it's not being picked up by the other person, right?

**Andy Luttrell:**

Can you describe face threat a little bit?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, face, this comes from Erving Goffman, and he borrowed it from Chinese writings, but it's the idea of the image that all of us have. Goffman's ideas of face are that we mutually... People mutually attend to one another's face, and it's sort of a social contract, an interactional contract, right? So, we're mutually involved. We obviously threaten one another's face, but we sort of buy into this cooperativeness to maintain each other's face.

And then we get into modern sociolinguistic theories of face, go to Durkheim, and make distinction between positive face and negative face. So, negative face is basically autonomy. We don't want to be... We want to be free to do what we want, so if you request, make a request of somebody, or even more threatening, demand somebody do something, that's face threatening, right? Positive face is more along the lines of image, right? So, to criticize somebody is to threaten their positive face. Their image, right?

And so, criticisms obviously threaten that, and consequently people are not direct in their criticisms. I mean, they can be, right?

**Andy Luttrell:**

If they don't care about face?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

If they don't care about face. And some people don't. But most of us do, right? And so, consequently what happens is that that message doesn't get communicated, and so that's one of the main findings that comes out of that research.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I'm just gonna reframe, just to make sure I get it, so it kind of seems like this is a problem of competing goals, right?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

On the one hand, I have the goal to communicate my criticism of you. On the other hand, I have the goal not to insult your reputation or insult your freedom to do what you please.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That's exactly right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And so, I sort of... It's almost like the problem is people try to actually do both at the same time, but they can't. Something's gotta give. I cannot both criticize you and make you feel like you're wonderful.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That's right. That's right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Those cannot happen at the same time. And so, people sort of go, “Well, I’ll fudge it and I’ll sort of indirectly communicate this,” and maybe I succeed in helping you save face, but I haven’t actually succeeded in communicating my criticism.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. No, that’s exactly right. And there’s variability. Some people are good at conveying criticism in a supportive manner, so it’s a skill, and I think as instructors that’s one of the skills we strive to develop to varying degrees, right? But you’re right. You described it perfectly. It is these sort of competing goals that we try to satisfy simultaneously. And there’s a parallel, and so language, many aspects of language, there are multiple motivations for. So, one of the things, just to shift a little bit, same paradigm, but... Actually, pretty similar paradigm. So, if we’re communicating our beliefs about something that’s uncertain, so it’s communicating uncertainty, right?

And so, there’s all sorts of words. I call them uncertainty terms, but these are basically what pragmatics people call scalar expressions, so some, but also probability terms, so other studies that we’ve done, rather than having people perform specific speech acts, we ask them to convey uncertainty. And we manipulate, again, threat, right? So, imagine you borrowed your dad’s car, something bad happened, so low threat would be it needs a new battery and you gotta tell your dad. High threat would be transmission. You gotta tell your dad, right? So, that’s how we manipulate threat.

And then we ask them, and then we also give them probability, some sort of probability information. And then we ask them how they express this. And so, probability expressions, they are used for expressing uncertainty. Something’s likely, something’s possible, so on and so forth, but those have a range of meaning, right? But they’re also used in the service of face management. So, again, you’ve got multiple motivations.

But anyway, the gist of the studies about uncertainty term is that... So, we do the same thing. We’ll say, “So, how would you say this?” And then we take those utterances, give them to another group of subjects, and say, “What’s the probability that this is happening?” And interestingly find that in more threatening situations, the probability estimates are actually less because it’s being hedged in such a way that it’s undermining the communication of the probability. But again, the reason I’m bringing this up is because it’s multiple uses for certain types of words, right?

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, in this case, the idea is like if my dad’s car almost definitely needs a major overhaul, when I come to tell him this, I may go, “Yeah, it seems like your car may need some work.”

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That’s exactly right. And he’s gonna come away thinking, “Oh, well. Not a big deal.” But think of the implications for this for I think of things like... I used to think of... I used examples from Trump, and before him Reagan, but think of Putin and his military advisors coming to him, right? So, communicating uncertainty about Ukraine, but also not wanting to upset this guy, and so

they're gonna be hedging their communications to him, so Putin is coming away... I mean, I have no idea what Putin's thinking, but in my scenario he's coming away with an estimate of the probability of something happening that's lower than what these guys are actually trying to communicate.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Is the implication that people in positions of power may generally have misunderstandings about a lot of this kind of thing?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Absolutely.

**Andy Luttrell:**

It's like an emperor's new clothes situations, right? People aren't willing to reveal bad news.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And so, you go around blindly thinking everything is great because you go, "Oh, people have mentioned maybe there's some problems somewhere, but it doesn't seem like a big deal." But no one's just willing to come out and say, "No, absolutely there is an issue."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

That's right. That's right. Well, and so, and power is huge, because power ties in directly to face, right? So, somebody who's high in power, we're much more concerned about managing their face than vice versa. And so, communications directed upward, more likely to suffer from that sort of use of language that obscures the real intention.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Some of that also seems like not only your impression, but my impression of myself, right? Like if it's I screwed up, there's a lot of baggage there in me saying I screwed up. And so, I downplay like, "Oh, it seems as though I may have inadvertently..."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Yeah. Yes. You're protecting your own face, right? There's self face, there's other face. Interesting cultural differences there, but yeah, so you're engaging in protecting your own face.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, I wanted to ask about the emoji wrinkle, which I think I first understood what you do in terms of conveying understanding because you were sort of embarking on this new research project on emoji. So, what is the idea there, right? In a world where our communication is now different, I can't type something in my phone without my phone being like, "Do you want a picture of a boat?" And I go, "No." Just want to say the word boat. So, what is it that these image-related expressions are doing to our ability to communicate?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Right. And so, we got into that, or I got into it because emojis just baffled me. I get an emoji and I go, “What the...” I have no idea what... But no, the reason, so we look at emoji, many... This is not our idea. This is other people have written about this, that emoji are basically substitutes for this, right? For all the non-verbal stuff that we have, right? So, when you’re communicating digitally, you lose all that, so sarcasm gets missed. All that sort of stuff. And so, emoji are in a sense a way... So, people talk about emoji as communicating emotions, which they do, and as helping disambiguate, and that’s what we focused on.

So, again, face threat, right? We’re looking at what are called indirect replies, so you ask a question... This gets back to the relevance maxim. So, what did you think of my talk? Oh, it’s hard to give a good talk. Right? And so, most people will get, “Doesn’t have a very good opinion.” And we’ve demonstrated that many times. But our interest was okay, but when you’re doing that face-to-face, you’ve got facial expressions, all that, tone, you got all that going on. We wanted to see if emoji would serve that function digitally, right? So, people would read those sorts of question-reply sequences with or without emoji, and then we’re looking at how quickly they’re comprehending the intended indirect meanings that we don’t like your talk so much.

And we find very clearly that it works. And I think that it does, that it facilitates comprehension, recognition of that indirect meaning, but I think we found something even more interesting. I think we found just the emoji alone, and I can’t remember how we picked the emoji. So, what’d you think of my presentation? Emoji. But I’m a little fuzzy on the details right now, but I think it was that it was that... One of the things we’re doing now is looking at emoji as performing speech acts, and so we’re finding that yeah, that’s a thing.

**Andy Luttrell:**

How could you use emoji to?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, we ask people. Imagine that you want to criticize, beg, set of speech acts. 30 speech acts. Which emoji? And the problem with emoji is there’s really a lack of consensus. You probably know this, right? People, and even on fundamental dimensions like valence, you’ll get these wide... Yeah, I think it’s positive. No, I think it’s negative. So, that’s kind of interesting.

But anyway, we basically ask people and then we choose the emoji that is most often nominated for that speech act, and then we’ll create these scenarios and put them in and see if people recognize what speech act is being performed. And they do. They do communicate sort of like speech acts.

**Andy Luttrell:**

It would have seemed to me that emoji would not accomplish the job very well, right? It seems like what you’re saying is mostly that people are able to use those-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

They are able. Yeah.



**Andy Luttrell:**

... to get the meaning, whereas it might have seemed like that would be a cause for not conveying your attention, right? Like if my intention was to criticize your talk and I send a winky face, I might be like, "Oh, this guy loved my talk." Because there isn't that consensus about what these mean.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Right. I know. Yeah. That's exactly right. One of the things that JJ and I and a couple other students did is we looked at cultural differences in using emoji to manage face, and so not the specific intention, but just yeah, I didn't like your talk. Smiley face. And what we predicted and found was that, and this goes back, that culturally people from collectivist cultures are more likely to manage face, more concerned. Especially other face.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Other. Yeah. Got it.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

We're all about self face, right? But they're about other face. And I think all of our scenarios were giving negative opinions or things to others, and we found that people from collectivist cultures were more likely to include emoji than people from individualistic cultures. But in the service of face management.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, to pivot a little bit, in terms of my own interests and some of the themes of the podcast, I kept thinking about the ways in which we express our opinions, right? So, it almost seems like maybe an underlying theme behind many speech acts is a core interest in conveying some attitude, right? To criticize is essentially to express negative opinion of what you did. To thank is to express a positive attitude toward what you did. In the same way that we're talking about like, "Did you like my talk," right? I'm trying. How do I communicate this?

And in some ways, the face saving issue is there, too. We don't want to express negative opinions. So, another example of this is not only an opinion of you, but an opinion of something you like. This happens to me like if people like a TV show and I go, "If I'm on the spot, I don't like the show this person loves," but I don't feel comfortable saying, "Oh, what a horrible show." I really think it's terrible. And so, that's another way in which I go like, "I need to somehow... I can't lie to you about my opinion," or maybe I do. Maybe that's the best way to do it.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Sometimes. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

But I'm trying still to... That's a way in which the goal might differ. Some people have too strong a goal to express their opinion and I go, "I don't care. I'm gonna tell you. I think it's garbage." And others go like, "I don't... That's not my goal. My goal is more this sort of I care about more our relationship more than I do expressing my own opinion."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. That's interesting. Yeah, so objects that you're associated with, so face involves those things, right? Because symbolically they are, and so you don't criticize other people's likes and dislikes, right? Positive face is about liking what other people like. So, that's an interesting extension in that way. But there's differences too, though, right? And I struggle to try to identify them. There are times when I will, and not in a mean way, but just disagree about something like that, and I don't know why, or with whom that happens. I've reflected on it but can't come up with anything. But yeah, so I don't know.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Do we know much about the language of agreement and disagreement? In terms of words are for doing, it's a way in which we can sort of debate, and confront, and conflict, or affiliate and agree. Do we know much about that?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

We do. I mean, a fair amount, and a lot of it comes from social linguistics. Like all the stuff on face, there's a strong preference for agreement. I did a study back when I was a postdoc, so this was mid '80s, and we wanted to see how people communicated, face to face, when they agreed and disagreed, so we recruited participants who were on opposite sides of abortion, gun rights, and so we put them in a room with a tape recorder. And we would say, "You guys disagree on this. Talk about it." And we recorded them just to see how did they do this.

The pressure for agreement is so strong that even though we knew these people, they said, "I'm pro, I'm anti." You wouldn't know it from their conversations, right? It's like, "Oh yeah..." This is so far back I can't quite remember, but one of the things that... And then I'm overstating the case. They obviously disagreed sometimes. But even though they're doing that, they're simultaneously trying to manage face. So, you get these sequences, so somebody will say something, and the other person will say, "Yes," so feigning... Not feigning, but agreeing, but... In fact, I wrote an article, "Yes, but," right? Because that's a typical way in which you sort of acknowledge yes, but. And you go on. And so, that's just one example. There's other sort of linguistic tricks that you see when people are... And that was a long time ago. My sense of the way people disagree now-

**Andy Luttrell:**

Well, what I wondered is have the goals for face saving changed in the domains we use to communicate, right? It seems like online-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

I know.

**Andy Luttrell:**

... is an arena where we go, "I don't really know that you're a person, therefore I'm not actually that concerned about respecting our autonomy and reputation, and so I feel fine being completely direct and saying this is crazy and I'm correct."

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

My impression is that that's absolutely correct, that concerns with face are definitely lessened in online environments, and I'm pretty sure that people have looked at that in various ways. I don't know exactly how. But my hunch is that there's data demonstrating that exact thing. But yeah, I think concerns with face are diminished in those contexts.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And I often think that even though we have this sort of prototype of online, it's real. When you bring people into the world of dealing with other people, I kind of think you wouldn't see anything that much different than the study that you ran years ago, right? That I actually do care about other people when the environment reminds me that this is a goal that I have.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And so, I do think that there's a lot more hope for tolerant conversations when we... I guess this is an ethical question. Ought we respect others' image? Or is it-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

I mean, I think we have to. Goffman's, Durkheim's, their argument is that's the glue that holds us together. If you lose that, then we're just savages.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Which, have you been on the internet?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. I know. I've heard.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Sounds about like how things are.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

I know. I know.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I'm curious. In that study, though, when you said that you wouldn't know that they disagree to some degree, is that... Did you have people listen to the recordings and code it-

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

We coded it. Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

... in how strongly do they disagree or something?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

But that was like a small team of coders.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

It would be interesting to do something like that where then you ship it off to a bunch of people and just say like, “Hey, listen to this. If you were to guess what each person’s attitude was,” I think what your findings generally hint at is that people would be completely off, right?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah.

**Andy Luttrell:**

They would expect more moderate.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

We gave them a scale. Gave them a seven-point scale, and compared their ratings, their perceptions on that seven-point scale with the person’s own ratings. Yeah. They’d be way, way off. Hugely off.

**Andy Luttrell:**

But your coders were more looking at just like to what degree are they disagreeing? What was the benchmark?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

So, I came up with a scheme to capture what I thought was the important ways in which they were managing face while they disagreed. And so, they weren’t really looking. The coders weren’t really looking for that. They were looking for the things that I was telling them to look for in terms of linguistic strategies. But it is true that some people just basically agreed, even though they were on opposite sides, but that was relatively rare. That happened a couple times.

But people are concerned, I think.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Do you have advice for how to communicate better? You spent many years looking at how we use words and whether those words carry the meaning we want them to.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Well, no. I mean, I don’t. I wish I did.

**Andy Luttrell:**

You've learned nothing.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

I think with practice, it's possible to simultaneously attend to multiple things. I think it's... I mean, I think there are ways, because there are people who do this. There are people who are skilled at giving criticisms. There are people who are skilled at persuading. There are people who are skilled at asking things, making a request. So, they're socially skilled.

And I think what they're doing is they're simultaneously able to attend to face and say things in a way, and I don't know what the magic formula is, right? I mean, I would love to know. But get their attention, their intentions across.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Sounds great. We could figure that out.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Yeah. No, no. No, and that's really kind of as I sort of end my career, I've got an eye on more applied. So, specific recommendations. And so, we'll see, but it's a work in progress.

**Andy Luttrell:**

No ideas. Preliminary.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Not really. You mean specific ideas?

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Like how to phrase? So, yeah, I can give you some specifics, so take the obvious case of directives, of requests, right? I want you to open that door. So, I could say, "Andy, go open that door," right? And you would get the meaning. And you'd think, "What a jerk." And so, but let's say I'm the sort of person that's really into protecting face, and so I go, "Andy, it's kind of warm in here." So, you go, "Yeah. It is." And so, you don't recognize my intent, and so the middle... You search for some sort of middle ground. Some sort of what linguists call conventionalized means. So, Andy, could you open that door?

I'm not commanding. I'm asking whether you have the ability to open that door. But you clearly recognize that that's what I'm after.

**Andy Luttrell:**

So, somewhere between, right? Find those where you maximize them.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Yeah. And a lot of it is in face to face, it's tonal. It's not all language, right? Language is embedded within all this other stuff that we do, so it's paralinguistic, it's nonverbal, and there's ways to soften, right? Smile. To soften threatening acts. But no, I don't have any clear answers, because it remains something of a mystery. It remains a mystery to me how we're able to get from these words, the sequence of words, to basically reading another person's mind. And that's fascinated me. It will continue to fascinate me. And that is a huge issue. I mean, that is the fundamental problem for general AI. They cannot do that, right?

AI is amazing and tremendous strides have been made, but that last leap from getting from these words to inside somebody's head, nobody's cracked that yet.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Yeah. So, Maya is 15 months-ish at the time we're talking, so she's right on the bubble, and there's moments where it's so clear that she's trying to communicate, and she gets what we're saying, but it's not... It hasn't all locked in yet. So, it's a super interesting time to be like, "All right, what do you get?" When we say these things, is any of it... Because it feels like language is all or nothing, right? Like I get it, this word carries meaning. I either know this word or I don't. But it's like that moment of figuring out how all of these rules work together.

And I wanted to ask you about AI in the context of speech act theory. Is there crossover there? Because it seems like that's an interesting opportunity for AI to develop modules that can... Not just semantics.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

AI took a left turn about 20 years ago and they went totally bottom-up, because you've got all this massive data now, and it's all... That's all it is now. I mean, I'm not an expert on this, so I'm sure there are people that are working top-down as well, but the bottom-up stuff, you know how good they are. You know how good Siri is and some of them, so they're pretty good. But they're not... They don't do what we're doing, right?

There's not energy being put in approaching language that way, communication that way. I think there could be. And I don't know that speech act theory would be the best way to go.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Well, I only think of it in terms of I'm not trying just to get this machine to know the meaning of what I've said, but the intention behind me having said it.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Exactly. Exactly.

**Andy Luttrell:**

In the same way, if I were to say, "Hey, Siri. Would you consider playing for me the last song on this album?" This machine might go, "What?"

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. No.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Rather than a direct command like, “Play this thing.”

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Play this. Right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Or even like, sure, we can criticize our home devices. I’m trying to think of what kind of speech acts would be even relevant in a case like this. But even if... I mean, I could imagine the desire to develop programs that themselves express things with intention, right? My goal is to request that you do something, or to tell you to do something, rather than inform you of something, right? Like I can tell you it’s gonna rain today, but I might really be trying to say, “Bring an umbrella with you.”

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Exactly right. Exactly right.

**Andy Luttrell:**

And so, then you might go like ultimately it makes sense that you’d want to build in not only expressing true things, right? It’s not linguistics of 150 years ago, like you were saying, where it’s all about is this true or this is not true. But it’s could we develop these programs to use these words to do things and to understand that words are to do things?

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

Yeah. Really, it is intention recognition. Yeah, and we’re not there. To me, that is the fundamental AI problem, and it’s a mystery.

**Andy Luttrell:**

I’m sure they’ll figure it out soon enough. Well, I think we’re good on time, but I just want to say thanks for taking the time to walk me through all this stuff.

**Thomas Holtgraves:**

My pleasure. Yeah. I loved it. Very fun.

**Andy Luttrell:**

Oh, great. Yeah. Thanks.

**Andy Luttrell:**

That’ll do it for this week. Thanks so much to my friend and colleague, Tom Holtgraves, for chatting about the work he’s done over his career. To learn more about it, you can head to the webpage for this episode to get links to some of the studies we talked about and his book *Language as Social Action*.

For more about this podcast, you can go to [OpinionSciencePodcast.com](http://OpinionSciencePodcast.com) for past episodes, transcripts, and other good stuff. Subscribe to the show wherever you get podcasts and hey—tell a friend about the show. And this is a direct request. I’m not beating around the bush to protect face. None of this “some people are saying it’s nice to spread the word about podcasts they love.” No. I’m *commanding* you. Yeah, no that’s unpleasant to be so direct. On that note, I’m wondering if you’ve thought about writing a review of Opinion Science online. I’m told that Apple Podcasts is a nice place to do that.

Alright, that’s all for this week. I’ll see you back here in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Bye...