

ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an interdisciplinary account of persuasion, a form of communication in which, I argue, persuader and target aim to strike a balance between benefiting from communication and protecting themselves from deception. The unifying research framework is Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), which treats cognition as relevance-oriented, and inferential intention recognition as central to communication.

In Chapter 1, I review previous pragmatic accounts of persuasion and show that while they may explain how the target understands the persuader's message, they shed little light on why this message is believed or disbelieved. In Chapter 2, I examine the causal role of intentions and their effects on the mental lives of persuader and target. I argue that the goal of the persuader is to induce in the target the intention to perform a specific action. In Chapter 3, I review some accounts in the social psychology literature of how this goal can be achieved.

Chapter 4 is concerned with rationality issues: what techniques can a rational persuader use, and how can a rational audience strike a balance between benefiting from communication and guarding against the risk of manipulation? Chapter 5 reconsiders these questions from an evolutionary perspective, and argues that adaptive strategies for persuasion and counter-persuasion are special cases of more general evolutionary tendencies.

Finally, I apply the proposed framework to marketing and discuss the accelerated evolutionary effects that persuasive/defensive strategies and cultures of consumption have on each other. I conclude that these strategies, as both artifacts of culture and facilitators of cultural transmission, provide interesting insights into human cultural evolution.

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