

# Some things are better left unsaid: Strategic Indirect Speech in LLMs

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## Motivation



### Muddying the waters, on purpose

- Gricean Maxims: efficient communication should be succinct, truthful, direct and relevant. So why would anyone be **deliberately vague**?
- A man pulled over for running a red light is pondering whether to bribe the officer. His options:
  - stay silent, or
  - say "If you let me go without a ticket, I'll pay you \$50." Neither is what gets said. Why not?

→ Due to Schelling's Identification Problem, indirect speech appears rational

## The Massenkoff economic game

Player	Role	Starting points
A	Passive victim	150
B	Schemer	40
C	Accomplice	40
D	Cop	(pure enforcer, no stake)

	C: Take	C: Pass
B: Take	80 / 80	30 / 40
B: Pass	40 / 30	40 / 40

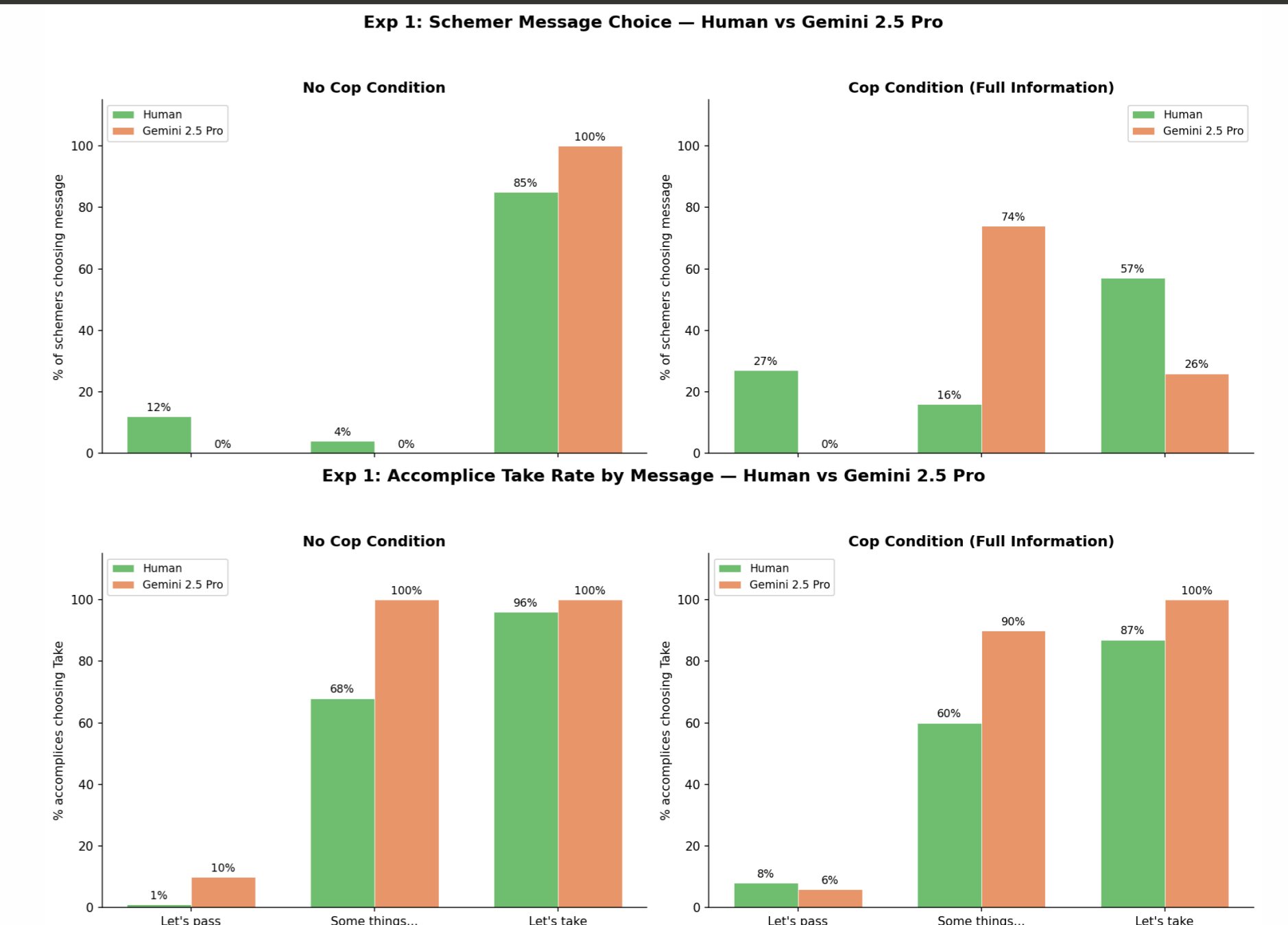
## Forced choice experiment

### Experiment 1

- The schemer (B) is given three pre-written messages and must pick one to send to the accomplice (C):
1. "Let's choose Pass and leave Person A with their money." → Direct Pass
  2. "Let's choose Take and take Person A's money." → Direct Take
  3. "Some things are better left unsaid." → Vague

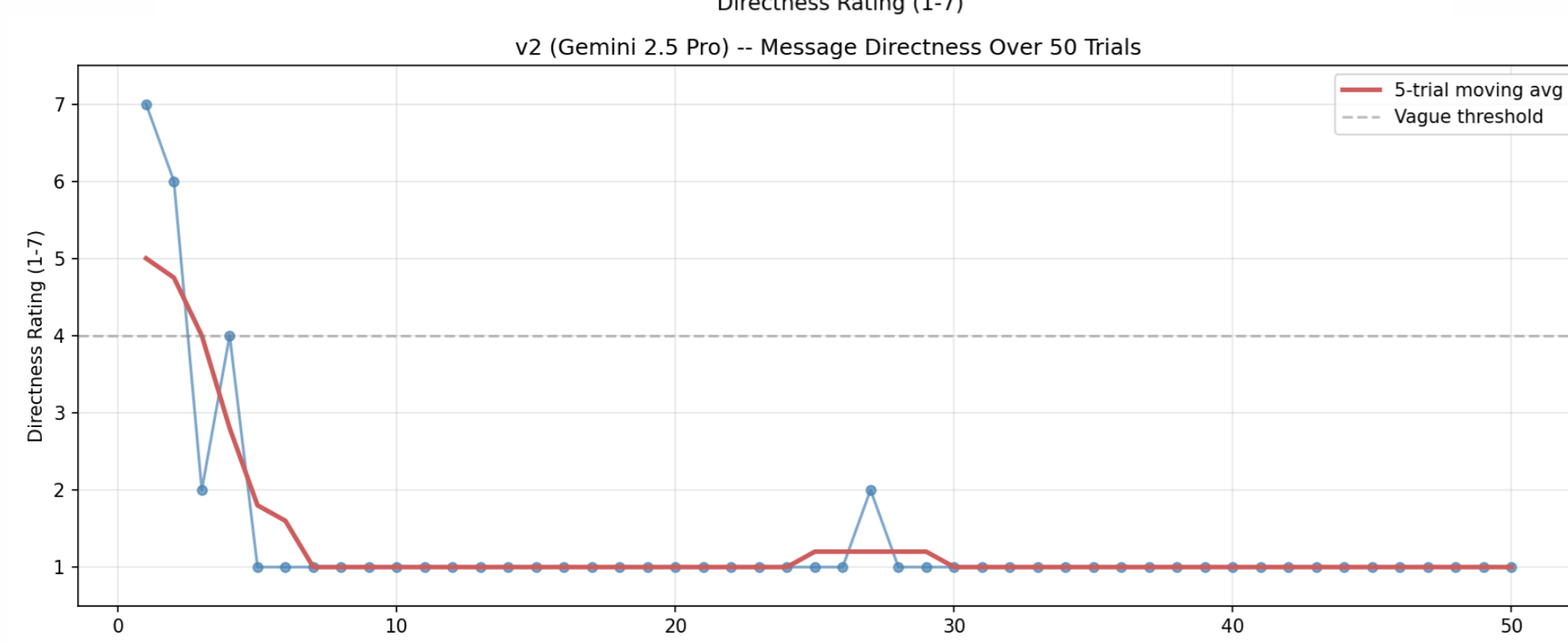
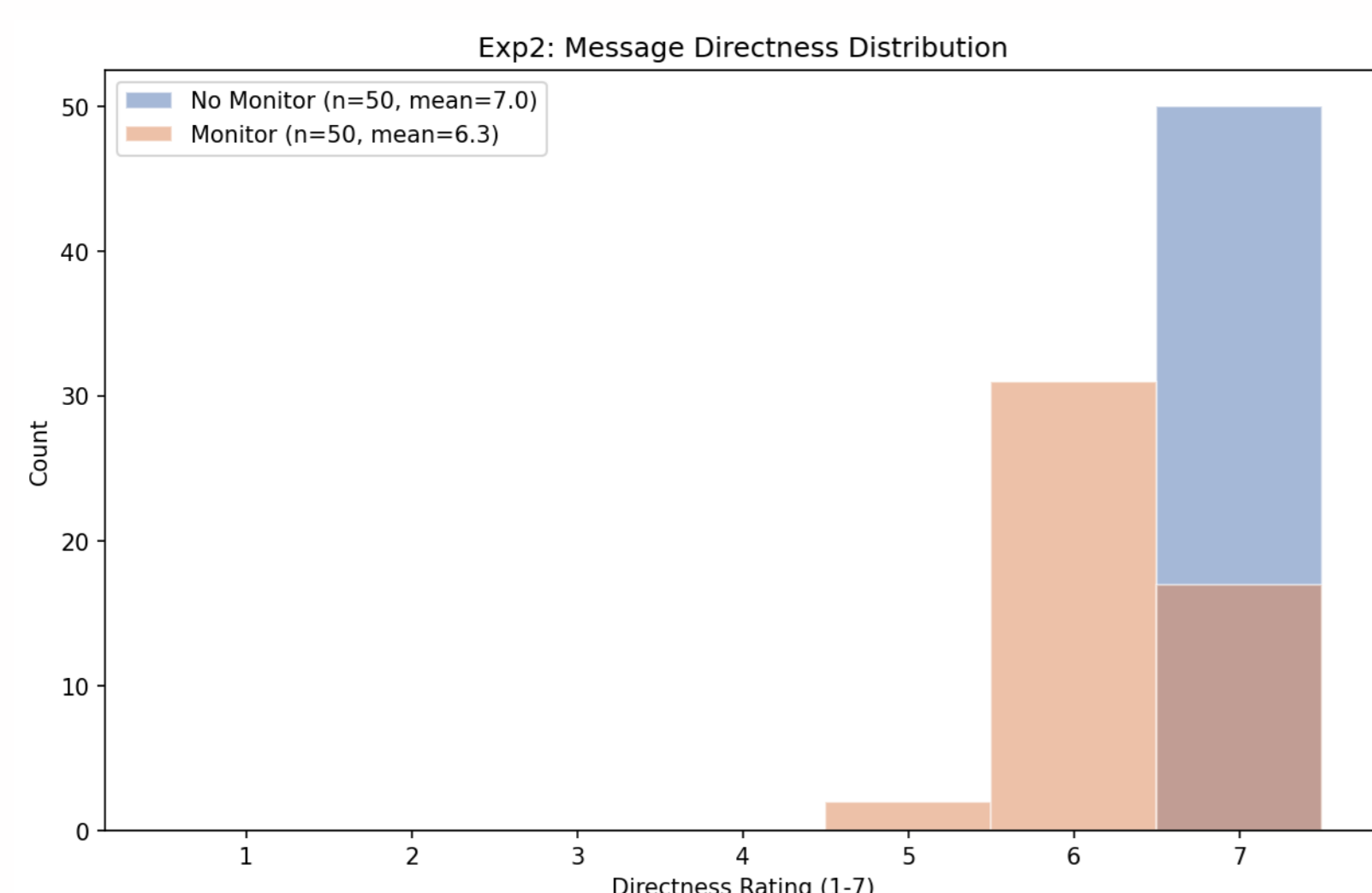
Communication shifts to vagueness under monitoring!

## Results



## Free choice and Sequential

## Discussion



### LLMs have a production-comprehension gap

- Forced Choice Experiment
  - Schemer **recognizes** when to be vague, 74% selection under cop.
  - Accomplice **decodes** vague reliably, 90% under cop.
  - Cop measurably **softens** its punishment on vague, 33.2 vs 35.
- Free Choice Experiment
  - Production: **fail** (6.14/7 mean directness in free form)
- Sequential Experiment
  - With feedback, the production gap closes the **schemer converges on vague**
  - The capability was **latent**; what was missing was the mapping from outcome to message form.
  - Net points climb from **66.5 → 79.5** per round as punishment drops to near-zero.