Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Class #27-28
Robin Jeshion and Liz Camp on Slurs

Business

- Papers are due now
- Final exam on Tuesday, 12/16, at 9am
- Review Session?
    - ‣ Monday at noon?
    - ‣ Sunday at 4?

Formalism and Informalism

- Grice begins with a debate between the formalist and the informalist.
- There seems to be a divergence between the meanings of terms in formal languages and their natural-language counterparts.
  - Formalist: the divergence is due to the inadequacy of natural language.
  - Informalist: the formalist's picture misconstrues the purpose of natural language, basing it on scientific paradigm.
- The informalist wants (at least) two logics:
  - one (or more) for natural language
  - one for formal language
- Grice: this is the wrong way to look at things.
  - The formalist and the informalist wrongly assume divergences exist.
  - Attention to the conditions governing conversation will clear up the problem.
  - The formalist can take care of semantics.
  - But there's stuff in language that goes beyond semantics.
    - E.g. the context of communication
- Pragmatics

Implicature and Pragmatics

- We can communicate information beyond what we say.

- Grice coins the term 'implicature' to apply to the information which is communicated without being said.

- Implicature helps distinguish what is said from what is implied, suggested or presupposed.

- Implicatures may be conventional or nonconventional.
  - ▸ Conventional: 'He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave' (Grice).
    - – 'You're such a philosopher' (Camp)
  - ▸ Nonconventional: 'X likes his colleagues and hasn't been to prison yet'.
    - – Semantics: True if and only if X has not yet been to prison.
    - – Pragmatics: X is liable to corruption.
    - – A semantic theory which ascribes an imputation of corruption to the speaker of the sentence will be complex and misleading.
    - – Nothing was said about corruption.

The Cooperative Principle and Its Maxims

- CP: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

- Maxims:
  - Quantity: Provide no more or less information than required.
  - Quality: Say neither what you believe false nor that for which you lack evidence.
  - Relation: Be relevant.
  - Manner: Be perspicuous, avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, and prolixity, while being orderly.

- Maxims as guidelines for interpersonal interactions in general.
  - "[O]ne of my avowed aims is to see talking as a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational, behavior..." (47)
  - Talk exchanges as quasi-contractual cooperative transactions.
    – Not exclusively, but we start there

CP and Implicature

- The point of Identifying CP and its maxims is to establish a baseline for ordinary communication.
- Then we can identifying systematic, conventional ways in which ordinary maxims are violated.
  - ▸ We can identify the information which gets communicated by violating those maxims.
- The pragmatics of communication consists largely in systematic violations of CP and its refinements.

Failing to Fulfill a Maxim

- One may violate it and, likely, mislead one's audience.
- One may opt out, indicating unwillingness to cooperate.
- One may find oneself with a clash among maxims, unable to be both maximally informative and maximally accurate.
- We can flout a maxim, blatantly failing to fulfill it.
  - We force our audience to make sense of our statements through attributions of implicature.
  - This is called exploiting a maxim.

Conversational Implicature

- S, by saying p, conversationally implicates that q if
  - 1) S is presumed to be observing the conventional maxims, or at least CP;
  - 2) S is presumed to be aware that q is required in order to make consistent sense of p and the conventional maxims together;
  - 3) Both S and the audience think that each other can work out the above.

- "Apply this to my initial example, to B's remark that C has not yet been to prison. In a suitable setting A might reason as follows: '(1) B has apparently violated the maxim 'Be relevant' and so may be regarded as having flouted one of the maxims conjoining perspicuity, yet I have no reason to suppose that he is opting out from the operation of the CP; (2) given the circumstances, I can regard his irrelevance as only apparent if, and only if, I suppose him to think that C is potentially dishonest; (3) B knows that I am capable of working out step (2). So B implicates that C is potentially dishonest'" (50).

Flouting Maxims

- In implicature, we flout the maxims of ordinary conversation.

- When both a speaker and an audience are complicit in the flouting, they are able to communicate using implicature.

- This complicity is not easy to establish.

- Speaker and audience must be aware of:
  1. the conventional meaning of the words used, including the identity of any references involved;
  2. the CP and its maxims (at least implicitly);
  3. the context of the utterance;
  4. other items of background knowledge; and
  5. the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.

Semantics and Pragmatics

- Attention to the maxims governing communication might lead one to complicate, unnecessarily, one's semantics.

- 'An X'
  - ▸ not ours
  - ▸ ours
  - ▸ neither

- But we don't want to claim that there are semantic differences among such claims.
  - ▸ "I am inclined to think that one would not lend a sympathetic ear to a philosopher who suggested that there are three senses of the form of expression an X: one in which it means roughly 'something that satisfies the conditions defining the word X,' another in which it means approximately 'an X (in the first sense) that is only remotely related in a certain way to some person indicated by the context,' and yet another in which it means 'an X (in the first sense) that is closely related in a certain way to some person indicated by the context' "(56).

- In other words, the information which we communicate using implicature is pragmatic, not semantic.

- CP and its maxims help to identify the information, from context, which is conveyed beyond the meaning of the terms used.

Features of Conversational Implicature

- It can be canceled, explicitly or contextually, by opting out of the Cooperative principle.
  - ‣ Unlike semantics
- Nondetachability: you can't say the same thing without the implicature, unless you add a different implicature.
- Both parties need knowledge of the conventional force of a statement, minus implicature.
- The truth of an implicature is unconnected to the truth of a statement; the implicature is not carried by what is said, but by how it is said.
- Implicature is inexact
  - ‣ Analysis of any implicature often leads to a disjunctive result.

Slurs, Stereotypes, Semantics, Pragmatics

- Slurs and stereotype terms are sometimes called expressives.
  - ‣ Wider category: epithets, diminutives, slurs, stereotypes, and interjections.
- Semantics is the study of the content of language.
  - ‣ literal meanings of words and sentences and utterances
- Pragmatics is the study of what we communicate with language beyond literal meaning.
  - ‣ Grice's work

Pragmatics and Semantics

- We often treat 'and' as having no temporal component, as in logic.

- But (from Barbara Partee):
  M1: Mary got married and had a baby.
  M2: Mary had a baby and got married.

- The difference between M1 and M2 shows that there's a temporal component to our understanding of the 'and'.
  Compare to Grice's 'an X'

- We can say that there are different meanings of 'and': one with a temporal component and one without it.

- Following Grice, we can instead say that there is one meaning of 'and', but that its use can carry a conversational implicature.

- We can understand variations in what we communicate with language not as ambiguity of natural language or a deficiency in the logical analysis of language, but as arising from other aspects of communication, in particular conversational implicature.

Expressives

- One of the questions facing the analysis of expressives is whether they have semantic content or whether they are to be treated as an aspect of pragmatics.
- No mere philological dispute, not about an arbitrary classification
- Do expressives, slurs and stereotypes in particular, carry content?
- Or are they best classified as a kind of speech act?

Cancelling

- M3: Mary had a baby and got married, but not in that order.
- We can cancel the implication of the order of the birth and the marriage.
- That's because it's a pragmatic matter, not a semantic matter.
- We can not cancel literal meaning.
- But we can cancel implicature.

Semantics, Pragmatics and Slurs

- C: Chang is a Chink.
- K: Keren is a Kike.
- On a semantic analysis, we seeing C and K as having truth values.
  - We want to call them false.
  - But that commits us to claiming that the offensive terms have some sort of content.
  - If we're calling them false, we might want to call their negations true.
    - NC: Chang is not a Chink.
    - NK: Keren is not a Kike.
    - That seems...bad.
- An alternative analysis is to take expressives as having only pragmatic status.
  - No truth conditions, just felicity conditions
  - On a pragmatic analysis, C and K are not false, but truth-valueless.
  - Uttering those sentences is a speech act which does not convey content.
- So that's the central question: semantic or pragmatic?
  - Let's look at some background.

The Classic Motivating Examples for Expressivist Terms

David Kaplan, "The Meaning of 'Ouch' and Oops'"

- DK1
  - ‣ That damned Kaplan got the job.
  - ‣ So, Kaplan got the job.
- DK2
  - ‣ Kaplan got the job.
  - ‣ So, that damned Kaplan got the job (from Kaplan 1999).
- DK1 is valid, but DK2 is not.
- So there is something more in 'that damned Kaplan' than in 'Kaplan'.
- What?
- Is it content/thought?
- Is it feeling?

A Third Option

pure violation of taboo

- Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore.
  - "[S]lurs are prohibited words not on account of any content they get across, but rather because of relevant edicts surrounding their prohibition" (Anderson and Lepore 26).

Against the Pure Taboo View

- Three instructive reasons
  1. The relevant terms seem to have some content.
  – We can use them correctly or not.
  – They carry some information.
  – 'That damned Kaplan' can be used, literally, only by someone who disdains Kaplan.
  2. We need an explanation of the taboo.
  – Such reasons may be the informational content of the term.
  3. There are appropriate and inappropriate uses of some such terms.
  – 'fuck', 'ouch' 'kike'
  – Those criteria seem to be part of the informational content of the term.

- So we need some kind of content.
  – Descriptive content, to be analyzed semantically?
  – Emotive content, to be analyzed pragmatically?

Axis Questions

C: Chang is a Chink.
K: Keren is a Kike.

- Are C and K and the like false or truth-valueless?

- What does their denial effect?

- Are there kikes and niggers and chinks (and such)?

The Descriptive-Content Option

Ascription of Stereotypes

- Slurs are offensive because they ascribe negative, derogatory properties associated with a stereotype to an individual.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 1

- Slurs are more pernicious than 'damned Kaplan' or, better, 'fucking Kaplan', in which the violation of taboo is clearer.

- In 'fucking Kaplan', taboo is violated, but nothing in particular is communicated about Kaplan except perhaps disdain.

- But with slurs, we communicate more than just a violation of taboo.

- There seems to be content encoded in the slur.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 2

- Slurs bring out stereotypes effortlessly.
- People with competence in a language can easily identify a variety of characteristics associated with any slur.
  - ▸ Kikes are cheap
  - ▸ Niggers are shifty
  - ▸ Spics are lazy
  - ▸ Micks are drunks
  - ▸ Etc.
- The ease with which we can bring to mind these characteristics seems to entail that they are part of the meanings of the slurs.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 3

- Users of slurs seem to get things wrong about a group.

- Not all Jews are cheap; not all African-Americans are shifty; not all Latinos are lazy, etc.

- One can only get something wrong if one is saying something truth-valuable.

- If the content of a slur was not semantic, then it would be difficult to account for the errors.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 4

Another kind of error

- We (non-bigots) generally think that bigots get things wrong about members of a group when they use slurs.
  - ▸ The stereotype ordinarily associated with a term does not hold universally of a group.
- We can also mis-use slurs by ascribing the wrong characteristics to a member of a group.
  - ▸ Calling a Jew a kike because he is lazy and sexually predatory
  - ▸ Calling a Latino a spic because she is cheap
  - ▸ Calling a Swede a nigger
- The bigot in such instances gets the content of the slur wrong.
- Again, this error seems explicable only if the slur carries semantic content.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 5

- The semantic analysis of slurs can explain derogatory variation.

- It seems worse to call someone a nigger than to call someone a honky.

- The difference seems easily explicable by supposing that those terms encode information with semantic structure.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 6

- Some uses of slurs seem only explicable in terms of descriptive content.

- Chris Rock: "I love black people but I hate Niggers."

- The distinction seems best explained by reference to particular characteristics of the stereotype.

Arguments for Descriptive Content 7

- "I bet you they hire a nigger and a dyke before they even consider a white guy" (Camp 334).

- All non-bigots will refuse to take the bet on those terms.

- But we all know what the conditions for the bet's success are.

- Those conditions again seem easily understood as content encoded in the slurs.

Descriptive Content Works for Some Slurs

- 'Jewish American Princess' and 'Uncle Tom'
- Seem to encode specific properties

Problems for the Descriptive Content Analysis

Projection

- ‣ PO1 If David is intelligent, then so is Judith.
- ‣ PO2 If Obama is a nigger, then so is his wife.

- The speaker of PO1 can deny ascribing any content.
    - PO1 ascribes descriptive content only conditionally.
    - Not committed to the intelligence of David or Judith

- The speaker of PO2 can not deny ascribing content.
    - ‣ It seems that there is more than descriptive content in the slur.

- Projection: the offensiveness of the term in PO2 projects out of the statement, no matter the content of the assertion, even if we deny the assertion.

Projection
and Descriptive Content

▸ C: Chang is a Chink.
▸ K: Keren is a Kike.
▸ NC: Chang is not a Chink.
▸ NK: Keren is not a Kike.

- The speakers of NC nd NK are committed to a bigoted assertion.

- But they are denying that the associated stereotype holds.

- The descriptive-content option seems insufficient to explain projection.

- Hom
  ▸ For C and K, the offensiveness is encoded semantically into the slur.
  ▸ For NC and NK, the offensiveness is pragmatic.

- Jeshion is not impressed.
  ▸ "This move does provide an explanation of [NC]'s offensiveness, but is not without problems. The most pressing is that it fails to explain the offensiveness of [NC] along the same lines as it does that of [C], which is counterintuitive, as they seem equally offensive and for the same reason.... Furthermore, if the offensiveness in [NC] is accounted for entirely as a conversational implicature, it ought to be cancelable, yet it is not" (Jeshion 317).

Other Problems for Descriptive Content 1

Content of the Stereotype

- Attributes of some slurs come to mind easily, but others elude us.

- It's difficult to specify the content of any stereotype precisely, or even just beyond a thin characterization.

- Moreover, it's implausible to ascribe the content to all users of the slur.

- A Response: semantic externalism about the content.
  - "Just as one can competently use "elm" without being able to distinguish an elm from a beech, one can competently use "Chink" without knowing the complex socially constructed property expressed with a use of that term "(Jeshion 316).
  - The particular user of the slur need not know or think about all of the content of the slur.
  - That's the role of social institutions of bigotry.

- Still, the offensiveness of slurs seems to go beyond the attribution of negative stereotypes, whether or not particular users know of them.

Other Problems for Descriptive Content 2

Some slurs lack clear offensive stereotypes.

- 'Midget' is clearly a slur, but there are no negative properties associated with it.
- Similarly for 'goyim' and 'gaijin'.
- They are derogatory, but without any particular content.
- Some terms are highly offensive in some communities and less so in others.
- The term 'spastic' isn't particularly offensive in the US, but is so in the UK.
- Such variation seems difficult to explain if the offensiveness is part of the meaning of the term.

Other Problems for Descriptive Content 3

Laudatory content

- For example, a stereotype often associated with Chinese involves their being good at math.
- There's nothing wrong or essentially derogatory about being good at math or respecting one's elders.
- But the slur is always offensive
- Whatever content we might associate with a slur may even be irrelevant in some uses.

Other Problems for Descriptive Content 4

Etiology

- People who use slurs often do not appeal to reasons which we can include as part of the meaning of the slur.

- Slurs seem to originate in something more expressive, like pure disdain.

- They gather content later.

Another Option?

- If the descriptive content view fails, a pragmatic analysis might be better.
- That's sometimes called expressivism.
- Jeshion

The Expressivist Option

- Kaplan: a slur is an expression of the speaker's attitude.
  - ▸ boo, hurrah
  - ▸ "Ouch" does not mean "I am in pain."
  - ▸ We often boo the better team.
  - ▸ Austin's distinction between speech acts and the assertions related to them.
  - ▸ (Wittgenstein: "I am in pain" means "Ouch")
- Paradigms for expressivism include terms like fucker and asshole.
  - ▸ These express an attitude without ascribing any particular content.
- 'Isaiah is a Kike'
  - ▸ IIsaiah is Jewish. And by the way: boo to Jews! (Camp 332).

Jeshion on Expressivism

- The bigot can get the same results without even using a slur, even by using its neutral counterpart.
  - ‣ YC Yao is Chinese [said with a contemptuous sneer].
  - ‣ YF Yao is a fucking Chinese.

Arguments for Expressivism

- The ones against the semantic content view
- On the descriptive-content horn, slurs express something true or false.
  - ‣ But C and K and the like can be neither true nor false.
  - ‣ If they were false, then their negations would be true.
  - ‣ But NC and NK are not true, either.
- The expressivist claims that uses of slurs are like failures of presupposition.
  - ‣ Strawson on 'the king of France is bald'
- Speech acts which are not truth-valuable

Expressivism and Projection

- The expressivist can more-easily account for projection.
- Both affirmations and denials of slurs can express the same contempt.
- "If expressing a feeling is a fundamentally different kind of act than referring or predicating, perhaps we should predict that it would not get caught up in the machinery of truth-conditional composition" (Camp 332)
- Some slurs have the same content but different force.
- There appears to be something to the slur beyond the content.
- And calling a Swede nigger still manages to piss off the Swede.
  - ▸ The content may be irrelevant.

Problems for Expressivism

- Everything that motivates the semantic content view

- The expressivist assimilates slurs with expletives, as Kaplan does.
  - ‣ But they seem to have different properties.

- Slurs and positive affect
  - ‣ "I have nothing but admiration for spics. I mean, they sure do look out for each other, and they know how to work hard and have a good time. You know, some of my best friends are spics" (Camp 333).
  - ‣ On expressivism, this kind of claim should be incoherent.
  - ‣ If the slur is an expression of disdain, we can't explain uses of the slur which don't include disdain.

- "[T]he bigot's error is deep; but it is in part factual: if g [the property that determines the slur's extension] really were explanatorily efficacious in the way the perspective presents it as being, then the associated perspective could be an accurate way of thinking about Gs; and if g really did produce a range of properties that deserved to be condemned, then the corresponding emotions could be warranted" (338).

- Slurs are the kinds of things one gets right or wrong; they have semantic and not just emotive content.

The Three Options

- Three separate options for understanding slurs and stereotypes
  - ▸ The pure taboo view
    - – Just violation of social structures in addition to ascriptions of group membership
  - ▸ The descriptive-content view
    - – Understood semantically, most plausibly as attributing a stereotype
    - – Slurs seem to have semantic content
    - – We can get them wrong.
    - – But no particular content seems to work.
  - ▸ The expressivist view
    - – Understood pragmatically, not as truth-functional, but as speech acts of derogation
    - – The bigot can achieve the same ends without a slur.
    - – Maybe there's no real content.

The Axis Questions

1. Are C and K false or truth-valueless?
  ▸ C Chang is a Chink.
  ▸ K Keren is a Kike.

2. What does their denial effect?

3. Are there kikes and niggers and chinks?

4. Cancelling
  ▸ We can not cancel semantic content, but we can cancel pragmatic content.
  ▸ Mary and her marriage and baby
  ▸ If uses of slurs are cancelable, then they deserve a pragmatic treatment.
  ▸ If they are not cancelable, then they deserve a semantic treatment.
  ▸ "[I]f cancelability is an adequate test for content not being semantically encoded and if the argument just adduced against the alleged uncancelability of stereotypes is sound, then it constitutes a positive argument as to why any SSS is incorrect "(Jeshion 322)
  ▸ But cancelability seems in tension with projection.

Camp's Neat Idea

A Middle Ground?

- A two-dimensional analysis of slurs, capturing some of the features of both.
- Slurs have semantic content, but no particular content.
- Slurs have emotive aspects as well.

A Failed Middle-Ground Attempt

- Slurs express an emotive property (contempt) for members of a group picked out by the slur.
  - ▸ The content picks out the group.
  - ▸ The strong negative affect is written into the conventional meaning of the slur.
  - ▸ Camp thinks of the ascribed property as distancing and derogating rather than contempt or denigration.

- Problems
  - ▸ Overly specific and broad
  - ▸ Different slurs have different degrees of the property.
  - ▸ Users of a slur often even deny contempt.
  - ▸ "It's just a joke" or "That's the way they think of themselves" or even "Some of them are my best friends."

- The analysis of slurs in terms of any particular attitude or content is bound to fail.

Camp's Perspectivalism

- The use of a slur indicates the user's allegiance to a perspective which can vary with the slur and the society.

- Perspectives have both descriptive content (a semantic aspect) and expressive content (a pragmatic aspect).

- They are connected to both thought and feeling.

- But a perspective does not include any particular content and it is not a particular expression of feeling.

- "A perspective is representational, insofar as it provides a lens for interpreting and explaining truth-conditional contents, but it need not involve a commitment to any specific content. Likewise, a perspective typically motivates certain feelings as appropriate to feel toward its subject, but it is not itself a feeling" (Camp 335).

Complicity

- Users of a slur and audiences indicate their complicity in a perspective.
- Two dimensions
  - ‣ Cognitive complicity is related to the content of the slur.
  - ‣ Social complicity is related to the institutions which support the targeting of groups.
- "[A] perspectival treatment of slurs nicely balances two apparently conflicting facts: that slurs produce substantive, insidious, and systematically predictable rhetorical effects, and that those effects are typically amorphous, open-ended, and indeterminate" (Camp 344)

Evaluating Camp's Proposal

- Camp's proposal gets at the virtues of both the semantic and pragmatic analyses.
- Still, it involves commitment to a new semantic category, perspectives.
- What's that?

Perspectives and Semantics

- Perspectives are, like stereotypes or any semantic phenomenon, representational.

- They aren't any particular content, but a, "lens for interpreting and explaining truth-functional contents" (Camp 335).

- They are deeper and broader than propositional attitudes, tools for thoughts, not thoughts themselves.

- Still, she claims that sentences 11 and 12 show that we have to think of perspectives as semantic.
  - ‣ (11) They gave the job I applied for to a spic.
  - ‣ (12) They gave the job I applied for to a Hispanic (Camp 340).

- While 12 merely implies contempt, 11 really gets it into the meaning of the sentence.

Perspectives and Pragmatics

- Perspectives motivate feelings but are not themselves feelings.
- They allow us to prime or frame emotional responses.
- Users of slurs don't always have emotions when using slurs.
- Bigots can cancel their commitments to any particular attitude.
- Perspectives involve dispositions
  - to remember certain features (prominence, salience)
  - to treat some features as more central
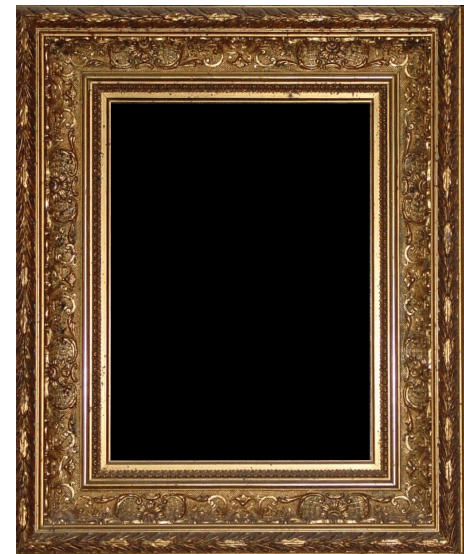
Perspectives and Projection

- Camp claims that perspectives explain projection.

- Uses of slurs are not referring or predicating, so the projection isn't contrary to standard semantic phenomenon like referring or asserting.

Camp's Radical View

- The claim that perspectives are part of a slur's meaning is radical.

- The study of language is syntax, semantics, pragmatics.

- Camp's view blurs lines between pragmatics into semantics.
  - ‣ violates principles of parsimony

- The claim that a perspective is part of a meaning seems like a category error.

- Camp thinks of perspectives as a broader category.
  - ‣ formal and informal terms of address, as vous and tu
  - ‣ slang which indicates membership in a group
  - ‣ terms like 'cowardly'

- "Slurs are akin to other expressions part of whose conventional function is not merely to refer or predicate, but to signal the speaker's social, psychological, and/or emotional relation to that semantic value" (Camp 335).

- Still, given the inadequacy of simpler explanations, perhaps our ordinary categories need expansion.