

Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Fall 2014

Class #28
Finishing Robin Jeshion and Liz Camp on Slurs



Business

- Final exam on Tuesday, 12/16, at 9am
- Review Session
 - Monday at noon

Slurs: Semantic or Pragmatic?

- Slurs ascribe group membership.
- But they do something else, too.
- Is the something else content?
 - ▶ E.g. the ascription of characteristics of a stereotype
 - ▶ Assertions using them would be true or false (beyond the ascriptions of group membership).
- Or are they best classified as a kind of speech act?
 - ▶ Felicity conditions, but not truth conditions, beyond the ascription of group membership
- Are there kikes and chinks and such (given that there are Jews and Chinese people)?

The Semantic Option

Ascription of Stereotypes

- Slurs are offensive because they ascribe negative, derogatory properties associated with a stereotype to an individual.
 - ▶ The stereotype is the content.
 - ▶ The slur is offense because of the derogatory content.
- Arguments for Descriptive Content 1
 - ▶ Slurs are more pernicious than expressives (e.g. 'fucking Kaplan') in which mere violation of taboo is clearer.
 - ▶ There seems to be derogatory content encoded in the slur.
 - ▶ Slurs bring out at least some negative stereotypes effortlessly.
 - ▶ 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.
 - We can also mis-use slurs by ascribing the wrong characteristics to a member of a group.
 - ▶ Chris Rock: "I love black people but I hate Niggers" (Jeshion 315).

Problems for the Descriptive Content Analysis

Projection

- ‘If David is intelligent, then so is Judith’.
 - ▶ The speaker can deny ascribing any content.
 - The sentence ascribes descriptive content only conditionally.
 - Not committed to the intelligence of David or Judith
 - No projection
- ‘If Obama is a nigger, then so is his wife’.
 - ▶ The speaker can not deny ascribing content.
 - ▶ There is more than descriptive content in the slur.
- Projection: the offensiveness of the term in the second sentence 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 and 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.
- It's implausible to ascribe the content to all users of the slur.
- A semanticist's response: 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.
 - ▶ 'goyim'
 - ▶ 'gaijin'
- These are derogatory terms, but without any particular negative content.
- Some terms are highly offensive in some communities and less so in others.
 - ▶ 'spastic'
- Such variation seems difficult to explain if the offensiveness is part of the meaning of the term.
 - ▶ Back to the multiple 'and's

Other Problems for Descriptive Content 3

Laudatory content

- A stereotype often associated with Chinese people involves being good at math.
- There's nothing essentially derogatory about being good at math or respecting one's elders.
- But a slur (e.g. 'Chink') 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 are not motivated by 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 (in addition to group membership).
 - ▶ boo, hurrah
 - ▶ Austin's distinction between speech acts and the assertions related to them.
 - ▶ "Ouch" does not mean "I am in pain."
 - ▶ We often boo the better team.
 - ▶ (Wittgenstein: "I am in pain" means "Ouch")
- Paradigms for expressivism include terms like 'fucker' and 'asshole'.
 - ▶ Express an attitude without ascribing any particular content
- 'Isaiah is a Kike'
 - ▶ Isaiah is Jewish. And by the way: boo to Jews! (Camp 332).
- 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

Jeshion Defends Expressivism

Elsewhere

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

Arguments for Expressivism

- Arguments against the semantic content view

Expressivism and Projection

- The expressivist can more-easily account for projection.
 - ▶ Chang is a Chink.
 - ▶ Chang is not a Chink.
 - ▶ Both 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.
- Calling a Swede nigger still manages to piss off the Swede.
 - ▶ The content seems irrelevant.

Problems for Expressivism

- Everything that motivates the semantic content view
- The expressivist assimilates slurs with expletives (Kaplan), but they 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.
- ▶ Are uses cancelable?



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.

The True-Blue American

Delmore Schwartz

Jeremiah Dickson was a true-blue American,
For he was a little boy who understood America, for he felt that he must
Think about everything; because that's all there is to think about,
Knowing immediately the intimacy of truth and comedy,
Knowing intuitively how a sense of humor was a necessity
For one and for all who live in America. Thus, natively, and
Naturally when on an April Sunday in an ice cream parlor Jeremiah
Was requested to choose between a chocolate sundae and a banana split
He answered unhesitatingly, having no need to think of it
Being a true-blue American, determined to continue as he began:
Rejecting the either-or of Kierkegaard, and many another European;
Refusing to accept alternatives, refusing to believe the choice of between;
Rejecting selection; denying dilemma; electing absolute affirmation: knowing
in his breast
The infinite and the gold
Of the endless frontier, the deathless West.

The True-Blue American

Delmore Schwartz

“Both: I will have them both!” declared this true-blue American
In Cambridge, Massachusetts, on an April Sunday, instructed
By the great department stores, by the Five-and-Ten,
Taught by Christmas, by the circus, by the vulgarity and grandeur of
Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon,
Tutored by the grandeur, vulgarity, and infinite appetite gratified and
Shining in the darkness, of the light
On Saturdays at the double bills of the moon pictures,
The consummation of the advertisements of the imagination of the light
Which is as it was—the infinite belief In infinite hope—of Columbus,
Barnum, Edison, and Jeremiah Dickson.

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).

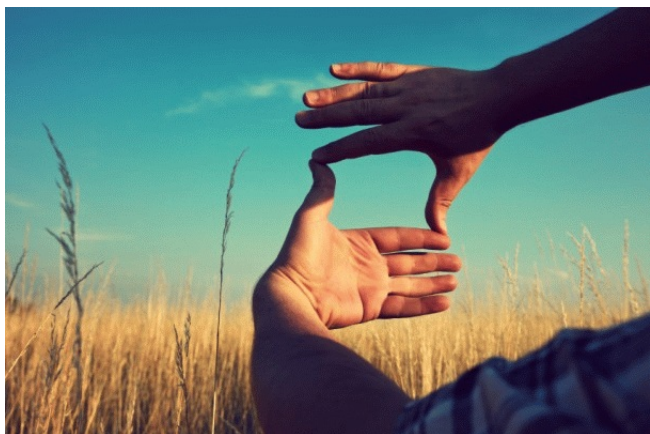


Complicity

- 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?

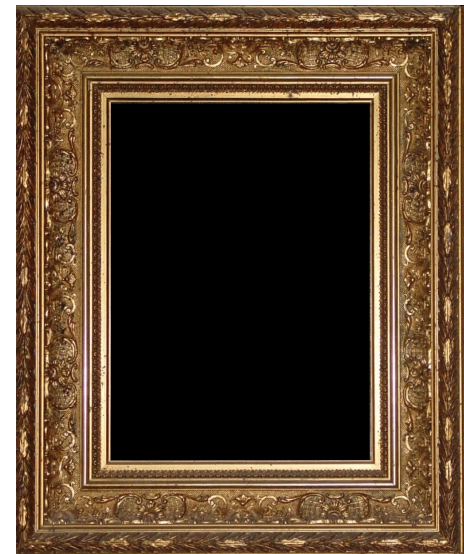


Perspectives and Semantics

- 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.