

Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Classes #27-28
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On Slurs



Or, Bagels and Bigots

Business

- Final exam on Tuesday, 12/15, at 7pm
- Review Session Monday at 11am, here
- What else?

Slurs, Stereotypes, Semantics, Pragmatics

- Slurs and stereotype terms are sometimes called expressives.
 - ▶ Wider category: epithets, diminutives, slurs, stereotypes, and interjections.
 - ▶ Do they merit a semantic treatment or a pragmatic one?
- 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.
 - ▶ Gricean implicature, for instance
 - ▶ Or performative utterances

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'.
- Two Options:
 - There are at least two different meanings of 'and': one with a temporal component and one without it.
 - There is one meaning of 'and', but its use can carry a conversational implicature (Grice).
- Variations in what we communicate with language
 - Not ambiguity of natural language
 - Not a deficiency in the logical analysis of language
 - They arise from other aspects of communication, e.g. 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?
- Are racists saying something when they use racial slurs?
- Are they merely expressing attitudes or violating prohibitions?

Cancelling

Distinguishing between semantics and pragmatics

- “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.
 - ▶ ‘She strolled to work, but I don’t mean that she walked’ - contradictory
 - ▶ Meaning is sticky

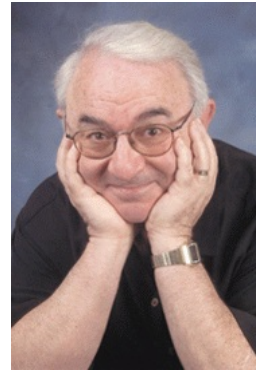
Semantics, Pragmatics and Slurs

- C: Chang is a Chink.
- K: Keren is a Kike.
- On a semantic analysis, we see C and K as having truth values.
 - ▶ We don't want to call them true.
 - ▶ If we're calling them false, we should call their negations true.
 - NC: Chang is not a Chink.
 - NK: Keren is not a Kike.
 - ▶ But NC and NK aren't the kinds of sentences we want to assert, either.
- 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 (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?
 - ▶ semantic analysis
- Is it feeling?
 - ▶ pragmatic analysis



Hom's Combinatorial Externalism

Our Semantic View



- “Racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions. The meanings of epithets are supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. Epithets both insult and threaten their intended targets in deep and specific ways by both predicating negative properties to them and invoking the threat of discriminatory practice towards them” (Hom 431).
- They ascribe negative, derogatory properties associated with the stereotype evoked by a slur to an individual.
- They contain offensive, threatening content, about how one should be treated because of membership in a particular group.

CE, More Precisely

- The meaning of a slur is represented as the following complex property:
 - ▶ ought be subject to p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n because of being d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n all because of being NPC*,
 - ▶ where p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and NPC* is the semantic value of the appropriate nonpejorative correlate of the epithet (ibid).

CE and Externalism

- The content of a slur is determined by the social institutions of racism.
 - external (mostly) to any particular user of a slur
- Two aspects:
 - an ideology, a set of beliefs, mainly negative, about the people within a group
 - a set of practices which buttress and propagate racism, depending both on the larger society and the particular group.
- The reference of 'elm' or 'beech' is determined not by any idea that I have of a particular tree, but by what the botanists say about those kinds of trees.
- Whether I refer to water or twater depends on whether I am on Earth or Twin Earth.
- The offensiveness of a slur depends not on the particular attitudes that I may hold about any group, but on social institutions of racism, both their ideologies and their practices.



Defending CE

- It accounts for a range of linguistic phenomena surrounding uses of slurs
 - ▶ The conditions of adequacy
- Other analyses fail to account for those phenomena

The Conditions of Adequacy

1. **Derogatory force.** Slurs convey hatred and contempt of their targets, more so than the ascription of any particular characteristic (e.g. lazy, avaricious).
2. **Derogatory variation.** Different slurs have different force.
3. **Derogatory autonomy.** Uses of slurs are offensive even if the users of the slur do not hold the beliefs associated with the relevant stereotype.
4. **Taboo.** There are only rare acceptable uses of slurs; even uses in quotation, fiction, intensional contexts, questions, negations, and conditional antecedents are problematic.
5. **Meaningfulness.** Sentences which use slurs have understandable meanings; we can know what the racist is saying.
6. **Evolution.** The meaning and force of slurs can change over time.
7. **Appropriation.** Slurs can be appropriated, and their meanings can thus be altered.
8. **Nonderogatory, nonappropriated (NDNA) uses.** We can use slurs, especially in pedagogical contexts, without derogating.
9. **Generality.** Accounts of racial epithets should be extendable to other slurs, and even to approbative terms.

Derogatory Force and Evolution

- The *derogatory force* of a slur depends on the severity of the racist institutions.
 - ▶ The worse the racist social structures, the worse the slur.
 - ▶ “The explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses, which is in turn directly proportional to the turpitude and scope of the supporting racist institution that causally supports the epithet “(Hom 432).
 - ▶ e.g. ‘nigger’
- The *evolution* of the meaning of slurs is easily explained by CE as well.
 - ▶ Slurs encode structural or institutional racism.
 - ▶ There are changes in our institutions and social structures.
 - ▶ So the force will sometimes shift.
- But:
 - ▶ On CE there is no role for individual variation in derogatory force.
 - ▶ Any two users of the same slur in the same society will express the same meaning with that slur.
 - ▶ Any account of variations in force will have to be pragmatic.

Derogatory Autonomy

The independence of derogatory force from the beliefs of the user of a slur

- Uses of slurs are offensive or not independent of the beliefs of their users.
- One might use a slur without intending offense, and still offend.
- “The epithet ‘limey’ simply does not predicate as negatively, and it does not prescribe a set of practices that are as threatening. The word no longer has any significant racist institution supporting it” (Hom 433)
- Still, there might be some role for individual beliefs to affect the severity of the offense caused by the use of a slur.
 - ▶ There might be limits to derogatory autonomy.

Derogatory Variation

some slurs are worse than others

- For CE, this variation is a function of the different social structures.
- Compare ‘nigger’ and ‘limey’
- The institutions of racism against African Americans are more pernicious and persistent than any remaining institutions of anti-English sentiment.
- ‘kike’?
 - ▶ “To account for variation, Hom would have to propose distinct institutions for each slur, which is implausible. It is difficult to see how else Hom’s externalist view could account for this important datum” (Anderson and Lepore 361).

Taboo and Projection

- CE: the structural institutions of racism can also account for the *taboo* surrounding uses of slurs.
- The Projection Problem
 - ▶ 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.
- 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 CE

- ▶ 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 content of the slur holds.
- The semantic 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.
 - ▶ One would like to have a uniform analysis of C and NC, of K and NK.

Hom Rejects Silentism

We should never use slurs; all uses are unacceptable.

- Hom rejects silentism because he believes that there are acceptable uses of slurs.
 - ▶ *NDNA* uses
 - ▶ We'll come back to them.
- Hom also argues that silentism is a result of squeamishness, but that squeamishness does not track derogation.
 - ▶ We don't want to offend, and we don't want other folks to think that we're racist.
 - ▶ But our desires to avoid offense and judgment are so great that taboos extend beyond the semantic content of the terms.
 - “CE's apparent violation of some of the intuitions surrounding taboo (particularly the intuitions that motivate silentism) should be discounted. By offering a closer examination of the meanings of epithets, CE offers a more principled, and less “politically correct,” way of carving out the appropriate constraints on their use. For example, because the meanings of some epithets entail their potential uses as literal threats, CE provides new grounds for ruling that some uses of epithets ought to be excluded from First Amendment speech protection” (Hom 435).

Meaningfulness

- One way to see whether slurs are best understood semantically is to see whether the claims made using slurs have truth values.
 - ▶ If they have truth values, then they have content, and so a semantic analysis would be appropriate.
 - ▶ If they lack truth values, then perhaps a pragmatic analysis, with felicity conditions rather than truth conditions, would be better.
- If slurs did not encode particular content, we would often have trouble understanding what people mean when they use slurs, especially when we don't share the beliefs of the bigot.
- But we often (usually?) know what the racist is saying.
- The ease with which we can bring to mind stereotypical characteristics seems to entail that they are part of the meanings of the slurs.
 - ▶ 'Jewish American Princess'
 - ▶ 'Uncle Tom'

Falsity

- 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 ascribe 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
- One can only get something wrong if one is saying something truth-valuable.
- That weighs in favor of a semantic solution

More on Meaningfulness

- Chris Rock: “I love black people but I hate Niggers.”
- Liz Camp:
 - ▶ “I bet you they hire a nigger and a dyke before they even consider a white guy” (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.



Slurs without Content

- Still, the offensiveness of slurs seems to go beyond the attribution of negative stereotypes, whether or not particular users know of them.
- ‘Midget’ is clearly a slur, but there are no negative properties associated with it.
 - ▶ ‘goyim’
 - ▶ ‘gaijin’
- Variations in content
 - ▶ ‘spastic’
- Also, some slurs have positive content
 - ▶ Chinese as good at math
 - ▶ Still offensive
- Enough about meaningfulness

Appropriation

- Particularly compelling for Hom's CE
- When a slur (e.g. 'nigger' or 'faggot') is appropriated by a community, they develop what Hom calls counter-institutions for the altered use.
- Then uses of a slur can both derogate and have alternative uses.
- The existence of counter-institutions leads to an ambiguity in the meaning of an appropriated slur.

NDNA Uses

nonderogatory, nonappropriated (NDNA) uses

- (13) Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink.
- (14) There are lots of Chinese people at Cal, but no chinks.
- (15) Chinese people are not chinks.
- (16) Chinks are (supposedly) despicable because of their race, but Chinese people are not.
- (17) There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
- (18) Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
- (19) Thinking that Chinese people are chinks is to be radically wrong about the world.
- (20) Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.
- (21) Are Chinese people chinks?
- (22) Is Yao Ming a chink?
- (23) What is it to believe that Chinese people are chinks?
- (24) Why do racists think that Chinese people are chinks?
- (25) Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?
- (26) Am I racist if I have never had the thought that Chinese people are chinks?
- (27) Am I racist if I would never think that Chinese people are chinks? (Hom 438–39)

NDNA and Projection

- If uses of slurs project in all cases, then there are no NDNA uses.
- If there are NDNA uses, then there is a limit to projection.
- Are Hom's 13-27 actually legitimate NDNA uses?
- Do they maintain their offensiveness or not?
- If Hom is correct that the offensiveness is semantically encoded, then we can't cancel their meaning.
- But we might make such uses less offensive pragmatically.

The Etiology Problem

- 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.
- A pragmatic analysis might be better.
- How about expressivism?
 - Kaplan and Jeshion and Richard



Still to come:
Expressivism
Prohibitionism

Expressivism

- Kaplan: a slur is an expression of the speaker's attitude.
 - ▶ boo, hurrah
 - We often boo the better team.
 - ▶ “Ouch” does not mean “I am in pain.”
 - “Ouch” contains some expressive content that “I am in pain” may omit.
 - You could say, “I am in pain,” in such a way to express what ‘ouch’ means, but you could also say it without the affective content.
 - (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.
- So, for slurs:
 - ▶ ‘Isaiah is a Kike’
 - ▶ Isaiah is Jewish. And by the way: boo to Jews!
- Uses of slurs are like failures of presupposition.
 - ▶ Strawson on ‘the king of France is bald’
- Speech acts which are not truth-valuable

Problems for Expressivism

- Slurs for different groups vary in their offensiveness.
 - ▶ Hom accounts for this variation by appeal to the social institutions of racism.
 - ▶ The expressivist appeals to different attitudes of individual speakers.
 - ▶ “It is implausible to suggest that attitudes of different intensity are associated with different slurs. There is no good reason to think users of ‘gook’ have a more intense attitude of contempt for their target than users of ‘cracker’ do for theirs. Expressivists, then, are left without a viable explanation of a crucial feature of slurs (Anderson and Lepore 358).
- 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.
- “[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” (Camp 338).

Prohibitionism: 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).



Edicts

- The edicts which prohibit a slur are grounded in the declaration of relevant persons.
 - ordinarily members of the target group
- The conditions for a declaration are complicated.
 - Jesse Jackson attempting to make 'black' taboo
- But it is fairly easy to see when such a taboo is achieved.
- Once it is achieved, use of the slur is prohibited, on pain of offense.



Prohibitionism and Content: Neutral Counterparts

- Part of the reason why slurs derogate has to do with their content.
- A slur picks out a person as a member of some group.
- The slur and the NPC (or neutral counterpart) have, according to Anderson and Lepore, the same content.
 - ▶ “We deny that slurs differ in literal content from their neutral counterparts... A slur’s linguistic role is exhausted in picking out the same group as a neutral counterpart” (Anderson and Lepore 356, slightly altered).
- The prohibitionist’s claim is that the offensiveness of a slur is not encoded in the content.
- Rather, it is the violation of the taboo, originating in the declaration of members of the targeted group, which constitutes the offensiveness.

Prohibitionism and Projection

- Anderson and Lepore's proposal easily solves the problem about projection.
- For the proponent of a semantic analysis, it is difficult to see why sentences like NC or NK are offensive.
 - ▶ We are negating the negative ascriptions of ideology or denying the endorsement of racist practices.
 - ▶ But the uses still seem offensive.
- If the offensiveness is not encoded in the meanings, but just attaches to the uses of the word, as the prohibitionist claims, then the offensiveness of NC and NK seems more easily explicable.
- “This is a mysterious result for a content-based approach to slurs to explain, but for Prohibitionism the reason for the result is obvious. Whoever indirectly reports...is charged with an offense because in making this report the reporter violates the prohibition on the slur it contains” (Anderson and Lepore 354).

Prohibitionism and Content: Semantic Properties of Slurs

- The prohibitionist's appeals to neutral content may not be adequate to explain the semantic properties of slurs.
- Appropriate and inappropriate uses of some slurs
 - ▶ 'fuck'
 - ▶ 'ouch'
 - ▶ 'kike'
- 'That damned Kaplan' can only be used, literally, by someone who disdains Kaplan.
- 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.

Prohibition and Explanation

- We need an explanation for why such terms are taboo.
- The declaration to which Anderson and Lepore appeal is a necessary but not sufficient condition.
- The reasons why a term is taboo can be seen as the informational content of the term.



The Axis Questions

1. Are sentences which invoke slurs false or truth-valueless?
2. What does their denial effect?
3. Are there kikes and niggers and chinks?

