

Skeptical Linguistic Essays

Chapter 15 Policing the Content of Linguistic Examples

Inherent in much of the linguistic enterprise is the task of forming and citing example sentences in various NLs. Such examples have an explicit purpose: to illustrate and/or support certain claims about the nature of NL. But, inevitably, any cited example has a content which in most cases is largely or even entirely independent of the reasons for which it is cited. For example, in work relevant to English that clauses, one might want to cite an example illustrating the fact that they cannot occur as heads of prepositional phrases, e.g. schematically:

(1) *X talked about that S.

To give a real example, one must choose some English nominal instantiation for the nominal variable 'X' and some English instantiation for the clausal variable 'S'. Such choices are completely irrelevant to the point at issue and hence there is absolutely no linguistic ground for constraining an author's choice for such instantiations, other than trivial ones such as that the chosen clause should not be too long to be grasped, etc.

Despite this, the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) in its LSA Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage ¹ has seen fit to issue a code of suggestions which, to the extent that it is followed, constrains authors' freedom to instantiate variables like 'X' and 'S' in (1) as they choose. The only reasons for this code which a reader can discern are provided by the following claim: "These guidelines reflect a growing body of research which indicates that many people find sexist language offensive." In the absence of any other rationale, one is led to conclude as in (2):

(2) The LSA has adopted its guideline because it believes it is its duty to limit and if possible avoid examples which are offensive, at least to 'many' people.

Assuming (2) is correct, two points need addressing. First, why do those who have supported the institution of this guideline believe that the LSA must seek to try to control linguistic work in such a way as to avoid

offense? Second, why, persuaded of its duty to battle offense, has the LSA produced a code which is so pathetically limited in the number of possible sources of offense it addresses?

Let me expand on the second point first. The guideline only addresses sexist usage. But it can hardly be doubted that many people are offended by some or all of the following:

(3)a. obscenities

- b. demeaning of certain racial, ethnic/religious/social/age, etc., groups or figures
- c. criticisms of certain political/entertainment/sports figures
- d. characterizations of people, real or not, in drastically unkind ways
- e. demeaning of physical characteristics
- f. articulation of certain political/social/moral views
- g. denials of deity status to various claimed deities
- h. denials of greatness in various endeavors
- i. assertions/denials of quality of various products
- j. assertions/denials of the sacredness of various texts
- k. invocation of various national, ethnic, etc., stereotypes
- l. calls for violence
- m. linguistic depictions of sexual activity
- n. calls for increased consumption of tobacco, cocaine, heroin, or high-cholesterol snacks
- o. laws and proposals seeking to limit the rights of Americans with respect to firearms

There are countries where engaging in some of these activities not only pretty widely offends, it can get one killed. The list could be expanded essentially without limit.² And that is the problem. If linguistic organizations and powers are to police examples so as to effectively reduce the possibility of offense, the scope of the necessary guidelines will be enormous. In fact, it could well prove impossible. The result of banning every sort of statement which could offend someone or even 'many' people would necessarily yield at best examples of enormous banality. What then if some people are offended by banal examples? More seriously, is the fact that no doubt many people are offended by obscenities to lead to a situation where it becomes impossible to publish linguistic studies of such forms?

What to do? Here is my suggestion. The LSA and those who have driven the adoption of this code should take note of the fact that this organization exists in a society one of whose official values is freedom of speech. And they should make that precious value of the broader society more deeply their own. One of the things which freedom means, it hardly needs stressing, is that people have the right to say/write things which others may find offensive. The very liberty which allows some people to urge a kind of censorship of the examples of those they do not trust to form them in acceptable ways also inevitably allows people to form and publish examples which some people may find offensive. Did it occur to those who instituted the code about offensive examples that some people, even members in good standing of the LSA, might find the promulgation and institution of such codes offensive? I can assure them that there are some, me included.

Having taken note of the freedom of speech value, the LSA should then repeal its code and resolve never to institute any other. And in its concern with maximizing the range and quality of linguistic work throughout the world, it should urge other linguistic organizations and powers to likewise refrain from instituting such codes. This amounts to recoiling to the maximum degree from even the appearance of censorship. The LSA should recognize that the only two sensible criteria appropriate for determining the airing and publication of examples in linguistics in the United States are those of (4):

- (4)a. Validity: Do the examples support the point they are intended to?
- b. Legality: Do the examples violate any law, national, state or local?

Beyond (4), I maintain that neither the LSA nor any other organization concerned with linguistics has any role to play in policing example content. The view implicit in the LSA guidelines for non-sexist usage that it is the society's job to seek to prevent the examples cited in linguistic work from offering offense is entirely misguided. What this means is that linguists make a pact with each other which in effect reduces to (5):

- (5). "As others agree not to interfere in my freedom to form whatever examples I choose, I commit myself to others' freedom to do likewise."

If someone's examples offend me, that is my problem, possibly a problem for their formulator but certainly not a problem for any society concerned with inquiry into NL. We live in a country which offers many

benefits and rights, but nowhere to my knowledge is one guaranteed a right to go through life without being offended.

It might seem to some that present quarreling with the LSA code on sexist usage is disproportional, as such a code makes only extremely modest inroads into authors' freedoms, as a presumed price for eliminating things which many find unpleasant. Such a view would be though, I claim, quite erroneous. While the current code takes only a tiny step in the direction of imposing certain people's political views as canonical conditions for proper linguistic examples, once the very idea is admitted, there are no principled boundaries. If someone's idea of non-sexist usage can be imposed today, then someone else's ideas of religiously, racially, ethnically, etc., appropriate examples can be imposed tomorrow. And history suggests they will be.

Moreover, it cannot be ignored that the LSA code was instituted during a period and in a general social context where there exist many speech codes and even, in putatively liberal and advanced countries, legal codes which restrict freedom of speech in ways foreign to American values. For instance, the New York Times of Saturday, January 26, 2002 page A4 reveals how a former French general, Paul Aussaresses, has been convicted and fined \$6,500 dollars for writing a book which the French government deemed an instance of 'trying to justify war'. The president and senior editor of the book's publisher were fined twice that much. The article makes clear that the general's crime in this case was not his brutal acts during the war in question, such acts having long been amnestied, but merely writing about them unapologetically.

My point then is that the LSA code should be seen and opposed in the broader context of widespread attempts by groups and governments to restrain other people from talking and writing in ways they don't like. It is amazing that those who urge the adoption of such codes and laws fail to see that the social and political power which makes it possible today to qualify as a crime 'trying to justify war' can tomorrow equally make it possible to qualify as a crime 'trying to justify opposition to war'. So a spokesman for the Human Rights League, apparently one of the groups that brought the charges against the general, is quoted by the Times as saying: "This decision is a condemnation of all those who consider torture and summary executions to be admissible under certain circumstances." The group was thus evidently incapable of distinguishing acts and views from their expression. Underlying that incapacity is that blind, dogmatic total assurance of knowing exactly what things (other) people should be allowed to say.

Rather than issuing speech codes, the LSA might then well consider the idea of providing every member with a copy of the first amendment to the United States Constitution which, inter alia, bars Congress from abridging the freedom of speech or of the press. After that, those LSA members who have supported the institution of the nonsexist usage code or who would support others like it could try to advance their reasons justifying that the LSA should help do what Congress is barred from doing?

This returns us to the second question raised above but ignored so far. Why out of the vast range of things which might offend many has the LSA only prescribed supposedly sexist usage. The answer is of course political. Only those worried about sexist usage have so far had the political power to get such a code imposed. But why shouldn't Jewish or Muslim linguists fight for codes to make sure that words and usages that offend them never darken a page? Why should people ever be allowed to refer to pork in their examples? Or why shouldn't conservative linguists get to ban annoying expressions like 'socialism' or 'welfare'? Isn't it wrong to allow words like 'cripple'? And I have heard that in Canada at least 'Eskimo' is now offensive. And let's not even begin to talk about racial expressions. The only answer so far as to why there is no code for these and sundry other usages is that those who dislike specific expressions relevant to them haven't so far tried to get them banned and might not have the votes.

To preclude any misunderstanding, let me stress that nothing in the above is a call for, or a justification of, examples which might be offensive in any particular ways. While I maintain that linguists have the right to fill their pages with even the vilest, most obscene, offensive, violent despicable examples they might please to, I am not advocating such examples. The fact that one has the right to behave in even truly objectionable ways does not convey any justification for doing so nor does the freedom to act in ways which some may find offensive mean that it is wise to act in that way. The Human Rights League notwithstanding, to defend General Ausaresses' right to publish his views is not to defend those views. The point is though that, modulo (5b), the linguistic profession should, in my opinion, assume that linguists are governed by individual responsibility, that is, that (6) holds:

(6)a. Each linguist is an adult and capable of judging for him/herself the appropriateness of his/her public conduct.

b. No linguist or group of linguists no matter how well-intentioned can be assumed to be wise enough or free enough of self-interest, prejudice, confusion, error, hidden agendas, etc., to be entrusted with the right or power to determine for others the appropriateness of their linguistic activities.³

In conclusion, it hardly needs emphasis that if some consumer of linguistic examples falling under the scope of the LSA finds particular conduct reprehensible in some way, the very freedoms whose extension is urged here help ultimately guarantee that consumer the ability to say so and, even to do so in offensive ways. If one linguist finds the professional activities of other linguists inappropriate, then the proper response for the former is not to seek to censor the output of the latter but to use the freedom we possess and should cherish to bring the supposed wrongdoing out into the open, to criticize it, etc., in short to engage in the sort of open debate which we should assume is the best ultimate guarantee for determining the truth.

Notes

1 Observe, for example, that while the list in (3) is large, it arguably still fails to contain a principle which could be appealed to ban example (i) as offensive:

(i) Smith (1999: 107)

The Seventh Fleet shelled Haiphong.

And yet the reader can be assured that some people find it offensive, since I do. What is offensive is that by gratuitously associating Seventh Fleet, shell and Haiphong it in effect invokes part of Smith's critical view of America's participation in the Vietnam War (made clear elsewhere in the volume) into examples whose linguistic point could have been made with millions of other innocuous examples. My own view is that if linguists want to make political or historical points, they should make them openly, not hide them in their choice of examples. But the theme of these remarks is that offensive or not, it is preposterous to seek to prevent linguists from concocting such.

2 The code in question appears at least in LSA Bulletins 128, 1993, 154, 1996 and 174, 2001. The guidelines claim to be only 'suggestions', and it is not indicated what the reaction of the LSA would be if they are infringed. I suspect though that many of those favoring such a code would ultimately not oppose seeing its imposition as a requirement, e.g. for publication in Language, or other LSA publications. What after all is the point of a society's adopting a code which it would allow to be widely flouted? In fact, the Style Sheet of the LSA Bulletin 174 of 2001 (page 66) specifically asks contributors to follow the Guidelines for Nonsexist Usage.

To put it bluntly, if the guidelines are not a step toward censorship, they are nothing. Bergvall's (1996: 436) claim that they are merely an educational device intended to "help linguists avoid the common pitfalls of gender imbalance and gender-stereotyped content" is hardly credible. To accept it, one must first accept that the members of the LSA are astoundingly ignorant, and specifically ignorant of the linguistic facts of (mostly) their own NL. Consider the guidelines' urging that waitress be avoided in favor of server. To believe that this aspect of the code is educational, one would have to accept that a society of adults, all competent in English, mostly Ph.D.s in linguistics, needs to be tutored with respect to banal facts about these two ordinary nouns. Second, and much worse, one would have to ignore the fact that the proposal about this pair of words amounts not to education, that is, to the transmission of linguistic or social information, but to a simple attempt to impose certain behavior standards. It simply states someone's ideas of proper linguistic conduct. No amount of pleasant-sounding spin can transform such a palpable minor attempt at thought and behavior-control into something educational.

3 Again to avoid misunderstanding, let me stress that criticism of the imposition of a code by a society like the LSA is entirely distinct from criticism of individual calls for non-hierarchical terminology like Junker (1992) or for non-sexist usage like Bergvall (1996). The latter author (p. 436) claims to have been 'disturbed' to find there had been controversy over the LSA guidelines. I would be pleased if the present remarks contributed even slightly to the understanding of why there should be such controversy.

The difference relevant here is that Bergvall (1996) is an individual work expressing and arguing for individual opinions, which is what inquiry in a free society is about. Bergvall's plea for non-sexist usage and Junker's plea for non-hierarchical terminology constrain no one else's freedom and in no way contravene (5) or (6) above. Nor would the publication of individual calls for sexist usage, for hierarchical terminology or any other. Those who disagree with them need only ignore them. At issue here then is not the right to urge other linguists to choose this or that terminology or this or that style of example but the wisdom/folly of one subgroup of linguists trying to impose its notions of propriety on others.