

FIL2403: Philosophy of Language

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Slurs and pejoratives: A Descriptive Theory

Language influences and reflects societal norms and historical contexts. That means two things: —The way you speak can be explained by the sociocultural context in which you learned your language in, —and also that the way you use the language will affect the people around you.

Among its many elements, slurs and pejoratives represent a controversial linguistic phenomenon due to their power to convey discrimination and social prejudice, and effectively inflict harm through words.

We can distinguish between slurs, which are particularly targeted at specific demographic groups; often based on inherent properties of the person such as their race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identities, embedding historical biases and conflicts. Pejoratives, while also derogatory, generally describe disapproval and are not exclusively tied to personal identities. They can apply to a broader range of behaviors or characteristics that are socially disfavored.

Understanding the implications of the terms we use when speaking is important, especially when we're targeting an unknown crowd of listeners who may not interpret the words the way you intended.

Fair warning, this essay includes references to words which may invoke uncomfortable feelings towards some readers.

Descriptive theory

The descriptive theory, often associated with the philosopher Bertrand Russell (*On Denoting*, 1905), offers a perspective on how language correlates with reality. This theory suggests that the meaning of words is inherently connected to the descriptions they conventionally invoke among their users.

Put formally, the descriptive theory explains how the structure of a sentence is able to connect a subject with a conjunctive set of definite descriptions of reality, which is how we give meaning to the sentence as a whole.

The idea that words can be spelled out into a list of properties which must be true inevitably follows with asking which properties these should be. From a prescriptive standpoint, we could examine the individual characteristics we've established to tell whether an entity forms part of the word's extension, or not. From a descriptive standpoint, this goes the other way around: by examining which entities are part of the word, we must carefully choose which characteristics are necessary and sufficient to make our intention match the word's extension. As long as we always know whether we're in a prescriptive or a descriptive context, this can be a very useful methodology to understand words!

By taking these ideas into consideration, we can further look at the societal contexts which give these words their meanings, the implications which occur when using words with attributed meaning, and the potential for these meanings to evolve over time. This essay will specifically explore the descriptive theory's applicability to understanding slurs and pejoratives, and see how we can benefit from understanding them.

Describing Slurs and Pejoratives

Slurs and pejoratives are not merely words but are potent symbols embedded with social power. They act as linguistic expressions that not only reflect existing societal prejudices but also reinforce and perpetuate these attitudes. Understanding the dynamics of slurs and pejoratives through the lens of descriptive theory provides a framework for examining the intricate relationship between language and social reality.

The descriptive theory suggests that slurs function similarly to their neutral counterparts but include an *additional* layer of meaning that typically conveys derogatory or offensive content (*Cappelen, 2019*). This suggests that the core semantic function of a slur is to communicate additional descriptive content that aligns with negative stereotypes, or derogatory views associated with the target group. For instance, while 'jew' is a neutral term describing a person who practices Judaism, its slur counterpart 'kike' carries with it not only the basic descriptive content but also historical and cultural connotations of antisemitism and prejudice. Queer people are affected by the same phenomenon, which often hear words such as 'faggot', and so are many different groups of people of colour.

In order to understand how these new terms appear, we may look at the pragmatic effects of expression. People use words not only to point towards literal meaning, but also cause a performative effect through it (*Austin*, 1962). The transformation of what was originally a neutral term into a slur involves a complex interplay of societal attitudes, historical contexts, and the shifting dynamics of power and identity. Linguists like Nunberg (2016) argue that slurs are “marked” versions of neutral terms, carrying with them an indexical halo that points to social information about the speaker’s intentions and attitudes as well as societal norms, instead of the literal meaning of the word.

For example, consider the word ‘migrant’ and its pejorative counterpart ‘illegal’. While ‘migrant’ is a neutral term describing a person who moves from one place to another, often for economic reasons, using the term ‘illegal’ instead, while in many cases technically true, transforms it into a slur that connotes criminality and undesirability. This transformation is imbued with political and social implications that extend beyond its descriptive meaning.

Presuppositions

Presuppositions in language are assumptions or implications that are accepted as true by the speaker and expected to be accepted by the listener without being explicitly stated. When applied to slurs, it follows from the descriptive theory that these words carry with them the propositions by which the groups they refer to are oppressed and discriminated.

That is to say that by using a slur to refer to a person, you’re simultaneously requiring the presupposition to be true (even when that’s not your intention!).

The usage of slurs within communication acts as a platform for transmitting and reinforcing these underlying presuppositions. Every time a slur is used, it implicitly reaffirms (and reminds) the negative stereotypes associated with it to the listeners, who is expected to recognize and understand these implications, even if subconsciously. This cycle of reinforcement helps to uphold and solidify the biased perceptions and social hierarchies associated with the targeted group. The social and moral implications of this is plenty discussed by Martha Nussbaum when speaking about adaptive preferences (Nussbaum, 2000).

Expressive meaning and Slurs

Following the descriptive theory's explanation of slurs, it's also crucial to address the concept of expressive meaning, as discussed by philosophers like David Kaplan. Expressive meaning involves the emotional or evocative aspect of language that goes beyond mere literal content. This is keyword when understanding the social function of slurs.

Expressive meaning in language serves to communicate more than just factual information; it conveys the speaker's emotional stance towards the subject. When someone uses a slur, they are not only describing a group with certain perceived characteristics but also expressing an attitude of contempt towards that group. This dual function of slurs—descriptive and expressive—complicates their usage and interpretation because they carry an emotional charge that intensifies their impact, and often makes it hard to even discuss the topic.

Because of the emotional aspect which is invoked when hearing the word, the status of a slur can remain even in contexts where you'd otherwise "cancel out" its effect, such as in academic discussions like this one, quotations of what other people have said, or even in in-groups where a word is reclaimed!

This could also explain why some "people" enjoy going on online forums and chatrooms to spam slurs which are conventionally directed towards black people or gay people, even if there's not a single person of colour or queer person in the room. By that I mean that they're attempting to evoke an emotional response from people, even when this is incoherent with the literal and incoherent meaning of the words they use.

As a final note on this point, using euphemisms or masking a slur with asterisk which is often done in an attempt to mediate the problem, can lead to reinforcing the problem. This can be explained because we're not only presupposing the negative connotations of the words themselves, but we're also highlighting the fact that it's a slur, and thus inhibiting any form of language evolution (eg reclaiming a slur intentionally, or societal/cultural shift of its meaning) for the word.

Noam Chomsky (2021) discusses a similar topic when asked about his feeling towards gender neutral pronouns, where he concludes that *«there is no right or wrong. We should take people's sensibilities into account. There is nothing general to be said about it»*.

Key characteristics of Descriptivism

Strengths

Descriptivism in linguistics offers a foundational framework for analyzing the meaning of slurs and pejoratives. By focusing on how these words are conventionally understood and used, descriptivism provides a systematic approach to dissecting language. However, like any theoretical framework, it has its strengths and limitations, which are crucial to understand for a comprehensive evaluation.

We've spoken about how descriptivism allows for a precise and clear analysis of meaning given a known context. This is especially useful for academical and legal contexts, but not really a requirement outside of this scope. That said, it is crucial in order to analyze how language is used when it is generally loaded with emotional and social baggage.

By focusing on the conventional use of language, descriptivism helps trace the historical and cultural contexts that shape language. This can be particularly illuminating for understanding how certain terms have evolved into slurs or lost their pejorative meanings over time.

Criticisms

One major criticism of descriptivism is that it often neglects the intentions of the speaker and the social impact of language. This can be problematic when dealing with slurs, as these words are not only about their descriptive content but also about their intent to harm and the effect they have on listeners.

Additionally, this model often treats language as more static than it actually is. Language is dynamic and constantly evolving, and a descriptive approach can sometimes fail to account for these changes quickly enough, especially in the fast-paced evolution of slurs in digital and multicultural contexts.

Finally, descriptivism focuses too much on the *what* of language, and kinda overlooks the *how* (eg the pragmatics) of it. In the context of slurs and perjoratives, this is very important to consider.

Morality reflection

Speakers wield language not only to describe the world but also to affect it. When using slurs, speakers need to be aware of the historical weight and social implications of these words. The moral responsibility involves considering the potential harm these words can cause and choosing language that respects the dignity of all individuals. This means that one must seek out to learn what words mean, and what descriptive properties they hold; especially if someone points out that a word one uses can often be harmful.

Ultimately, the study of slurs is not just a linguistic challenge but a moral one, requiring thoughtful consideration of how language is used and the effects it has on society. As linguistic beings, our moral compass in communication should guide us not only to speak clearly but also to speak kindly, recognizing the power of words to harm or heal.

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