



YHU3350

Slurs, Insults, and Hate Speech: Pragmatics of Pejoratives

Semester 2, AY 2021-22

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Some words are insulting and considered unacceptable to utter, and others words are derogatory yet acceptable at least in some contexts. Some words even seem to be able to cause material harm to individuals or groups. How can we account for these phenomena and what should we, as language-users do about it? This course will focus on the pragmatics of pejoratives, the philosophical study of disparaging speech. We will focus especially on disparaging racial and gendered speech, known as “slurs” or, broadly “hate speech.”

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT COURSE CONTENT

By its nature, philosophy takes up questions that are fundamental to how we live and conceive of ourselves. These questions can be uncomfortable and challenging. The material in this course is no exception. We will be studying words which have long histories of use intertwined with terrible, dehumanizing actions and attitudes. The use – and mention – of these terms is the subject of our philosophical inquiry this semester, but we will also have to navigate the question of how we ourselves refer to these terms in class.

One strategy is to not utter (that is, pronounce out loud or write on the board) the terms in question, but to replace them with neutral terms such as “X-word.” Other strategies include allowing only members of the groups targeted by the terms to reclaim and mention the term (utter in order to talk about the word), but not *use* it (utter in order to apply the word to a person or group). As a class, we will discuss how we’ll approach this issue, and continue to revisit it throughout the semester.

The philosophers we will read have a range of positions on these strategies. Some will print the entire pejorative in an article in order to refer to it. Others will refer to it with “X-word.” As your instructor, it is my responsibility to introduce you to, and guide you through, the philosophical literature discussing these questions. I take seriously both my responsibility to your health and well-being while in the classroom *and* to cultivating your ability to understand difficult philosophical material. In fact, I think these are interconnected. My hope for this course is that we can grapple with material that is intellectually and emotionally challenging in a way that is rigorous and simultaneously sensitive to the different individual contexts that form our community. Indeed, context-sensitivity is a theme in philosophy of language.

Your views on how we navigate these situations may change throughout the semester as you learn more about the topic, as may your classmates’ views. I aspire to model a climate in which rigorous academic inquiry coupled with epistemic humility is the norm, and I ask for your cooperation in making this possible.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will understand some major positions among contemporary analytic philosophers about pejoratives.
2. Students will attain beginning competence in reading contemporary philosophical essays and integrate them responsibly with secondary literature.
3. Students will attain beginning competence in writing philosophical papers which (a) present a thesis original to the student, (b) argue for the thesis using careful and charitable reading of primary and select secondary material, and (c) engage with compelling objections to the position and/or develop further implications of the view.

4. Students will be able to critique philosophical positions about language (a) by drawing upon appropriate resources in analytic philosophical literature and (b) by employing their own reasoning skills.
5. Students will be prepared to take more advanced classes in analytic philosophy or philosophy of language.
6. Students will become aware of their own position as a language-user and become more reflective about the way language functions.

PRE-REQUISITES FOR THE COURSE

Students are recommended to have at least one philosophy course other than the PPT sequence.

COURSE MATERIALS

Materials will be available through e-Reserves. Many of the readings will be from *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs* (David Sosa), available as an e-book on the library website. I strongly suggest you purchase the book. Each week will also be paired with coverage of related cases in the news.

COURSE ASSESSMENT BREAKDOWN

Participation 20%

Mini-papers 30% (15% each)

Philosophical analysis paper 30%

Final position paper 20%

DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENTS

In this class, we will have two major kinds of assignments: philosophical analysis and application.

20% Participation

- *Discussion question.* Each class period, students will come to class prepared to raise a discussion question if called on, for credit.
- *Perusall.* At the beginning of each unit, students will annotate news coverage of, or editorials about, issues related to slurs. This will allow practice in applying philosophical concepts to contemporary issues (three annotations total).

30% Practice papers

- Students will write two practice papers in which they intervene in a controversy between two positions over a key concept in pragmatics. These papers will be a maximum of 350 words (roughly one and a half pages), and specific positions will be pre-assigned.

30% Philosophical analysis paper

- Individually, you will be responsible for a paper arguing for a position in engagement with the philosophical literature we have read. These papers will be 1000 to 1250 words (four to five pages), and the general topics will be pre-assigned.

20% Final position paper

- All students will be assigned to groups in which you will collectively write a final application: a position paper on a contemporary controversy regarding pejoratives. The requirement to write a paper in a group is to give you an opportunity to navigate these philosophical issues together.

Schedule of Topics, Preparatory Assignments, and Assessments

Note: The reading schedule may change depending on class progress. I will notify you by Canvas announcement if that is the case. Readings marked with BW are from Sosa's *Bad Words*. In the first part of the course I will also assign short example of pejoratives "in the wild," drawn from newspaper opinion columns and other media sources. In the second part of the course (Weeks 8 and following), you will be able to share this material yourself.

Unit 1

Week 1: Introduction to Pejoratives

Note before reading the article that Horn and Kennedy print pejoratives in their entirety. We'll discuss this in class – it's a strategy we will encounter in other readings during the course.

Reading: (1) "Pejoratives," Horn 2010, (2) "Slurs in the Classroom," Kennedy 2021
Assignment due: Perusall annotation: Kennedy 2021.

Week 2: Stepping Back: Semantics & Pragmatics

Reading: (1) Grice, Logic and Conversation; (2) SEP "Implicature" Sections 1, 2.

Week 3: In- and out-group uses

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 1: Anderson (2) Next Shark 2017

Week 4: Group membership and indirect speech

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 2: Camp (2) Ellison & Barr 2021

Week 5: Loaded descriptivism

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 3: Bach (2) Tung 2017

Unit 2

Week 6: Stepping Back: "Non-propositional" effects

Reading (1) Wilson & Carston 2019; (2) SEP "Implicature" Sections 10- 12

Week 7: Dehumanization and slurs

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 4: Jeshion (2) NPR/Smith 2011
Assignment due: Perusall annotation

Recess Week – No Classes

Week 8: Pejoratives and fiction

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 5: Horn/May (2)

Week 9: Pejoratives and tone

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 6: Lepore/Stone

Unit 3

Week 10: What are words, anyway?

Reading: (1) Kaplan 1990

Week 11: Expressivism and slurs

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 7: Richard
Assignment due: Perusall annotation

Week 12: Obscenities, and lexical semantics

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 8: Pullum
Assignment due: Philosophical analysis paper

Week 13: Taboo

Reading: (1) BW Chapter 9: Horn

Reading Week – no assignments due

Group position papers due May 5

COURSE POLICIES

This syllabus is not a contract, but a guide to your success in the course. It does not lay out a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but the norms for our cultivating a learning community together. Please ask if you need clarification on any of these points.

- **Late assignments and makeups.** Only officially excused absences allow for makeup work. Late assignments are subject to a 5% deduction per day they are late, and are not accepted more than 3 days after the deadline unless prior consent for a late submission has been secured. If you need an extension, please ask, as I typically give them, rather than turning in late work.
- **Office hours.** I'm available for drop-ins, no appointment needed. You can schedule meetings using the online booking system. If you aren't able to find an open time, then please email.

- **Plagiarism** undermines the aims of your participation in this course. According to the College's official Academic Policy, I refer students who are suspected of plagiarism to the Academic Integrity Committee. This applies to intentional or unintentional plagiarism, defined as (in descending order of egregiousness):
 1. Representing someone else's work as your own
 2. Quoting a source verbatim without attribution.
 3. Paraphrasing a source without attribution.
 4. Reliance on the content of a source without attribution.

If I encounter plagiarism I will typically recommend a zero to the Academic Integrity in the case of (1), and penalties ranging from an "F" to a rewrite for less credit for (2) through (4). I encourage you to cite your sources when in doubt, and ask me if you are unsure how to do so. Please also acknowledge any students or professors whose conversations have informed your thinking.

Attendance is crucial for your success in the class, and your absence also impacts your peers, as they benefit from your contributions to the class. Significant *unexcused* absences – more than three classes in a semester – will impact your seminar participation grade. Please email me ahead of time if you will be absent when possible. You need not explain your reasons, but provide a medical or administrative excuse when appropriate.

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING STUDENT-FACULTY COMMUNICATION

Email & Questions: I try to respond to all emails within one business day at most. On weekends I am usually away from email. If you have not received a response, do feel free to email me again. I am happy for you to ask questions by email, but if you want to discuss your writing, it's best to stop into office hours.

Canvas Page: Each week's materials and instructions will be shared on Canvas modules. It is your responsibility to check Canvas on a regular basis (I will send emails when there are important, irregular, updates there.)

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND PRIVACY

Our academic model encourages open and penetrating discussion of what can sometimes be challenging materials. Additionally, we seek to cultivate an intellectual space in which, as stated in the Faculty Statement on the Freedom of Expression, "there are no questions that cannot be asked, no answers that cannot be discussed and debated." This kind of intellectual exploration requires trust and privacy. Therefore, students may not record and/or distribute course discussions, lectures, lecture slides or handouts, readings, videos, or any course related materials without prior permission of the instructor.

This includes audio recording, video, transcription, and photography. Lectures and seminars that are delivered in-person, online, or as a pre-recorded videos should never be recorded or distributed beyond the course for which it was intended. Any notes which a student takes for their own learning and retention should not be shared beyond the Yale-NUS community. Students are encouraged to reflect upon and share their own learning experiences and ideas in whatever forum they wish. However, they should not share course content produced by their professors or their peers (e.g. a peer's essay, comments made in class, posts to a Canvas discussion thread) without prior permission through any channels including social media.

Important Notes: Violation of this policy is addressed in the student Code of Conduct and could result in disciplinary and/or legal consequences. As per Clause F2(a) of Policies Relating To Yale-NUS College Intellectual Property, copyright to an Authored Work shall be owned by the University Member who authored it. Authored Work could include syllabi, tests, examination scripts, study guides, lecture notes and teaching materials, including lectures recorded on audio and/or visual recordings.