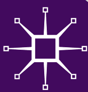

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About the Book

Harmful speech has recently caught the attention of various research communities: philosophers of language, linguists, social and political philosophers, and moral philosophers. There is a growing recognition of the various impacts of harmful language on the social and political world. Harmful speech comes in a variety of forms, including speech that tries to silence, provoke, and humiliate individuals (trolling); speech that targets those with protected characteristics (bigoted speech); speech which judges others (performative expression of moral contempt); there are insults and pejoratives; outright expression of hatred; death-threats; gaslighting; propaganda and lying. However, not all forms of harmful speech operate in the same way, nor do they achieve the same effects. So, it is useful to map out their varieties.

This volume will explore how harmful speech works and how we can defend against it. What is common to all these types of speech is that they don't merely offend but seek to harm members of vulnerable groups, so that they feel humiliated, attacked, denigrated, silenced, and dehumanized. These harms are not confined to the conversation in which such speech is used but include external effects, such as moral, social, and epistemic harms. The contributions in this volume will look at the mechanisms underlying various forms of harmful speech, their effects on social norms and institutions, and possible responses and remedies.

The volume brings together separate conversations under the unifying themes of harmful speech and contestation. This area has the potential to reach audiences beyond academia and we are experiencing an explosion of interest in applying analytic tools to social issues. Examples include a recent handbook (Sterken and Khoo eds.) on the social and political philosophy of language and a textbook (McGowan and Maitra eds.) on the social philosophy of language (Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss eds.).

The volume deliberately brings exciting new scholars to the fore; it extends the existing work of established scholars such as Langton, McGowan, and Tirrell; it makes connections across literatures (Manne on misogyny; Livingston Smith on dehumanization; meta-ethical work on evaluative language), and it covers newer topics (misgendering, dehumanizing speech, dialectical differences, language differences).

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1

Introduction

Mihaela Popa-Wyatt

Harmful language occupies an increasingly important place in philosophy of language. The focus to date has been on the nature and impact of harmful speech. This includes hate speech, slurs, pejoratives, derogatory expressions, and certain types of propaganda. This language changes social norms. Harmful speech first raises problems of defining the bounds of civil speech and harmful speech. It also requires explanation of how it alters conversational and social norms. Harmful speech is not just a matter of words that offend. It contributes to oppression. Given the recent rise in hate speech and the concomitant decline in civil discourse, it is an important and timely topic of study. It is also a topic studied by sociologists, linguists, computer scientists, philosophers, and others. The chapters in this volume thus offer a multidisciplinary examination of how harmful speech works and considers avenues for resistance, remedy, and contestation.

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The chapters are grouped into four parts, each on a theme. Part I explains the nature and diversity of harmful speech, with a focus on different varieties of slur uses. Part II considers how harmful speech interacts with social actions, norms, and ideologies. Part III explores more subtle forms of harmful speech that have been overlooked in current literature. Part IV explores avenues for resistance and counterspeech. We now provide a more detailed characterization of each part.

Part I—Linguistic Variation of Harmful Speech

This part captures the linguistic varieties of harmful speech. The chapters by Justina Berškytė, Amanda McMullen, and Lucy McDonald focus on characteristics of various forms of derogatory speech, including slurs, misogynistic speech, and dehumanizing speech. The goal is to define the conceptual boundaries, forms, and linguistic patterns, by focusing on the semantic and pragmatic mechanisms via which conversational harm is brought about. The chapters look at how the different forms of derogatory speech work, the attitudes they express, and how they are used to threaten and dehumanize.

In her 'The Good, the Bad and the Harmful: From Restricted to Standard Uses of Slurs', Justina Berškytė explores a variety of slurs which can harm in various ways. She distinguishes between 'restricted', 'reclaimed', and 'standard' uses of slurs. Standard uses of slurs derogate all individuals of the target group, whereas restricted uses only derogate a subset of individuals of the target group. On the other hand, reclaimed uses can express positive content either towards the entire target group or a subset of it. Berškytė explains the differences across these various uses by defending a novel semantic theory called Expressive-Property Contextualism. This is a multidimensional approach which builds on extant expressivist accounts (Jeshion 2013; Potts 2007), but she departs from them in construing the two standard components of the meaning of a slur—descriptive and expressive—as contextually sensitive. An innovation of Berškytė's approach is to introduce a property parameter into the context of utterance which allows the restriction of the target group based on a contextually salient property. The expressive component is

also contextually sensitive in that the type of attitude expressed towards the target group can vary with uses. For example, in reclaimed uses the speaker expresses an attitude of pride, whereas in derogatory uses they express an attitude of contempt. This way of capturing the context-sensitivity enables Berškytė to explain straightforwardly the similarities and differences between different uses of slurs.

In 'Gendered Normative Utterances as Conditional Threats', Amanda K. McMullen explores a particular type of misogynistic language. A gendered normative utterance is an utterance that constitutes an act of performing a threat, in particular the threat of making an example of the penalized person to other women in the audience to whom the same gendered norm applies. This takes the form of a conditional threat: 'if you act as the penalized does, then you will receive the same punishment'. McMullen explains these conditional threats in terms of a commitment to the claim that the speaker threatens the hearer with the same penalty as the penalized target. McMullen argues that such utterances constitute a threat because of the following conditions: (1) the conventional association between the utterance and the violation of a sexist norm, (2) the fact that the utterance functions as an act of derogation, and (3) that derogation is used as a penalty. To explain how these conditions work together, McMullen employs a Lewisian framework of conversational kinematics. Thus, context and conversational scoreboard are critical to represent the speaker's commitments in terms of propositions specifying the speech acts performed by the speaker and how these acts are assessable by hearers.

In 'Dehumanizing Speech', Lucy McDonald examines an under-explored linguistic version of David Livingstone Smith's (2016) so-called 'paradox of dehumanization'. Livingstone Smith explains paradigmatic cases of dehumanization as conceiving of a person as both human and subhuman at the same time. While this typically involves representing a person as having either dehumanizing or enfeebling features, McDonald draws attention to other forms of dehumanization. For example, mechanistic or objectifying ways of thinking of a person involve reducing their humane essence to that of an inanimate object. McDonald departs from Livingstone Smith in explaining dehumanizing speech without reducing it to speech that is motivated to produce a dehumanizing belief. She

identifies two kinds of dehumanizing speech. The first amounts to asserting dehumanizing propositions or attitudes: these can be expressed with both literal and figurative animalistic language. The second type involves implicating or presupposing dehumanizing propositions or attitudes. This occurs paradigmatically with slurring utterances. McDonald contrasts her view with an influential expressivist account defended by Jeshion (2018). Whereas Jeshion explains the dehumanizing feature of slurs in terms of moralizing contempt, McDonald explains it in terms of a stronger objective attitude, that is, conceiving the target as less than human or subhuman. Finally, McDonald points to an interesting linguistic paradox of dehumanization, which occurs with second-person uses of slurs. This is because when the target of a slur is addressed directly ('You [are] a S***', where S*** is a slur), the speaker asserts that the target is subhuman while presupposing that they are human after all since only human beings are addressed in the second person.

Part II—Speech Acts, Conversational Dynamics, and Cueing Ideologies

This part focuses on how people accommodate hate in conversations, how that interacts with unjust social structures, and how it cues oppressive ideologies. The chapters by Chris Cousens, Stefan Rinner, and Katie H. C. Wong pay attention to the mechanisms of conversational dynamics and how specific speech acts can affect the power dynamics in conversations and broader interactions. This complements work by, for example, Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018), Kukla (2018), McGowan (2019).

In 'Exercising Illocutionary Power, or: How to Do Things with Other People's Words', Chris Cousens draws attention to a new form of exercising power through language, which he calls 'illocutionary pushing'. This occurs when speakers bend and twist the illocutionary force of speech acts made by their interlocutors. For example, when an employee says, 'I may be able to cover that meeting, let me check my schedule...' but their manager says, 'Great, Sally's volunteered!' despite Sally having not yet committed. This is a conversational tactic by which speakers undermine

the illocutionary independence of others. Cousens argues that illocutionary pushing is germane with speech acts such as retracting, amending, and blocking, which retroactively change the illocutionary force of acts performed with past utterances. However, it differs from such acts in that illocutionary pushing is a strategy to gain conversational power by imposing a new force on the speech acts of others, different from the force they intended. This is a tool to subordinate reinforced by power derived from an unjust social hierarchy. By identifying an overlooked form of interference with other people's speech acts, Cousens shows how powerful speakers can exert control over the normative commitments of others.

In 'Accommodating Hatred', Stefan Rinner explores how hate speech can change hearers' desires and feelings about groups targeted for hate. He proposes a new to think about presupposition accommodation. Previously, Langton (2012) has defended the idea of accommodating desires and feelings about target groups. She extended Lewis's (1979) scorekeeping model, arguing that oppressive utterances can presuppose not only certain beliefs on the part of hearers, but also feelings such as hatred and contempt. Langton explains this by the fact that, in addition to the common beliefs of the conversational parties, conversational score also includes their common desires and feelings. These common desires and feelings then adjust in order to accommodate the presuppositions made in the course of a conversation, explaining why hatred and contempt are taken to be commonly shared among interlocutors of hate speech. Rinner rejects this explanation. He argues that presupposing a desire or feeling does not require the conversational score to include the common desires or feelings of the conversational parties. Instead, presupposed desires and feelings can be reduced to presupposed beliefs. In this way, Rinner seeks to explain how hate speech influences hearers' desires and feelings. As Rinner points out, this explanation is important in the context of therapeutic conversations. Because therapeutic speech changes not only the patient's beliefs, but also their desires and feelings.

In her 'Actions, Slurs, and Pernicious Ideologies', Katie H. C. Wong explains how slurring speech acts reinforce and strengthen pernicious ideologies. This explanation rests on an idea from philosophy of action, namely that actions are evaluable relative to norms and that actions can count as well-constituted moves relative to the norms of an ideology if

they are consistent with the prescriptive content of those norms. In particular, performing well-constituted actions helps to uphold the norms relative to which they are well-constituted, and insofar as these norms are constitutive of a larger practice, then those actions also help uphold that larger practice. In the context of slurs, Wong argues that a speaker, when using a slur, cues a pernicious ideology in virtue of the fact that the slurring act counts as a well-constituted move relative to the norms of that ideology. Wong's account differs from competitor accounts like Kukla's (2018) in that it is non-psychologistic in a way that is compatible with the fact that the responses from audience members to a slurring utterance matters to whether a slurring utterance reinforces harmful effects or whether those effects are blocked or weakened. Wong's account is innovative in that it integrates a story of what slurs do in a general view of how actions can strengthen or weaken harmful ideologies.

Part III—Marginalizing and Exclusionary Speech

This part explores some more subtle varieties of harmful speech. For example, how language is used to marginalize vulnerable individuals in more subtle ways. One example is misgendering, which is the focus of Elin McCready's chapter. In their chapter, Michela Bariselli and Sarah Fisher explore the marginalization of linguistic communities and social identities.

In her 'Pronouns, Gender, and Harm', Elin McCready explores how misgendering harms individuals, for example by using *she* to refer to a man, or *he* for a woman. In addition, deadnaming and predicating inappropriate gendered terms are harmful. What is common is that the speaker deliberately attributes to the targeted individual a gender inconsistent with the gender they present themselves as having, thus denying the individual's agency. The speaker is also trying to impose gender norms on the target which are dissonant with their presenting gender. If the speaker has the power to enforce those norms, then an act of misgendering becomes threatening. McCready argues that this harm does not

simply arise from the meaning of the pronoun itself, but rather from how its use interacts with trans-exclusionary ideologies and the norms operative therein. To model this interaction between meaning and ideologies, McCready employs a signalling game-theoretic model (Henderson and McCready 2021, 2023) to explain how pronouns signal a trans-exclusionary ideology. In this way, we can understand why misgendering denies the agency of targets and entrenches oppressive norms.

In their 'Speaking from the linguistic margins', Michela Bariselli and Sarah Fisher examine *interlinguistic hermeneutical injustice*. This occurs when speakers from less powerful linguistic communities or with marginalized social identities switch between languages. As a result, they encounter mismatches between distinct sets of hermeneutical resources available to them. These mismatches can take the form of 'voids' or 'surpluses', which reflect greater or lesser linguistic disparities, say across two languages. When these mismatches become systematic barriers to those marginalized speakers communicating their experience, these speakers lose testimonial clout. This is because they either fail to contribute to the collective understanding or their contribution is obscured due to a structural identity prejudice in the hermeneutical resource of that linguistic community. Bariselli and Fisher identify two sources of interlinguistic injustice: marginalization of linguistic communities and of social identities. In the first case, certain languages are systematically devalued compared to hegemonic languages. In the second case, certain social identities are systematically devalued because they cannot be properly captured by the dominant language. Bariselli and Fisher also draw attention to some mitigation strategies.

Part IV—Counterspeech and Contestation of Harmful Speech

This part explores strategies to contest harmful speech. This relates to the more general topic of counterspeech and raises the question as to whether individual or group counterspeech is more effective. Counterspeech has been seen as a strategy to resist and remedy harmful speech. This may

take the form of calling out the oppressor, challenging oppressive norms and enacting egalitarian norms (e.g. McGowan 2018; Langton 2018; Tirrell 2018; Lepoutre 2019; Caponetto and Cepollaro 2022). It remains an open question as to whether these strategies can undo the harmful effects of slurs or oppressive speech more generally. The chapter by Cathy Buerger argues that group counterspeech is more powerful than individual counterspeech. The chapter by Suzanne Whitten focuses on no-platforming as a form of counterspeech.

In her 'Collective Counterspeech: External and Internal Impacts', Cathy Buerger explores what makes group counterspeech effective. She argues that working as a group can positively impact the ability of counterspeakers to shift discourse norms. She considers data collected through ethnographic observation and interviews with members of the *#iamhere* International Network, a group with over 150,000 Facebook users who respond together to what they regard as hateful comments online. Drawing on this empirical data, Buerger shows that collective counterspeech has two benefits. First, it can amplify one's speech and make counter speech more sustainable and effective. Second, by engaging in group counterspeech, speakers feel empowered to challenge oppressive speech in a variety of settings. Overall, group counterspeech may provide more effective avenues to dismantle oppressive structures and change social norms.

In her 'No-Platforming as Contestation', Suzanne Whitten assesses the value of free speech in the context of no-platforming. Free speech principles prescribe that speakers' speech must remain free and that government or other institutional authorities must refrain from impinging upon that freedom. No-platforming upsets this equation in that it requires that some speakers ought not be allowed to speak on certain platforms. For example, a controversial speaker is dis-invited from giving a lecture at a university campus on the presumption that the content of their purported opinions are damaging to members of vulnerable groups, or because their past behaviour or reputation is indicative of a harmful viewpoint that risks enacting and reinforcing oppressive norms. No-platforming comes in the form of protests, heckling, and petitions which seek to challenge the invitation of controversial speakers by delegitimizing their views and undermining their authority. Whitten proposes that no-platforming

is a form of counterspeech needed to prevent harmful norms from being enacted. She argues that the invitation itself, rather than what a controversial speaker might say, is *constitutive* of harm. This is because a speaker invitation presupposes their moral, epistemic, and practical authority when that authority is, in fact, disputed. Thus, for Whitten, no-platforming both denies the authority of the invited speaker and challenges the authority of those issuing the invitation. Finally, Whitten draws attention to conditions under which no-platforming may backfire, such as when there is community divergence on core social norms.

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Part I

Linguistic Variation of Harmful Speech

2

The Good, the Bad, and the Harmful: From Restricted to Standard Uses of Slurs

Justina Berškytė

Introduction

Slurs derogate individuals based on their belonging to some demographic group, for example, race, sexuality, class, and so on. The harm they carry can be observed on various fronts: the effect they have on the target or the listener; the reinforcement of an unjust ideology labelling certain people as inferior; and the derogatory meaning of the slur itself. The chief aim of this chapter is to focus on the harm contained in the *meaning* of the slur itself. I propose a unified semantic account which (1) explains the similarities and differences between a wide variety of slurs and (2) demonstrates that the mechanism by which slurs derogate is virtually the same whether they are 'restricted' or 'standard'. In section "Introduction", I introduce slurs and discuss their restricted uses. Section "On Slurs" motivates the need for a multidimensional semantic account and presents *Expressive-Property Contextualism*. In section "Expressive-Property

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Contextualism”, I amend Expressive-Property Contextualism to standard uses of slurs. Lastly, in section “Standard Uses of Slurs”, I finish with some advantages and further comments regarding the proposal.

On Slurs

Since slurs derogate on the basis of some demographic membership in this manner they differ from personal pejoratives, consider the following:

(1) Bea is an asshole!
(2) Bea is a honky!

Whilst both utterances are rude and offensive, there seem to be fundamental differences between (1) and (2). Firstly, individual insults pick out only the target (Bea) whilst slurs pick out a *whole* demographic group (white). This is reflected by the fact that, on most accounts, slurs have a *neutral counterpart*—a non-derogatory counterpart referring to the same group as the slur.[1] For example, *honky*'s neutral counterpart is *white*. The same cannot be said about individual pejoratives since there is no one uniting feature of a group of people that makes them *assholes*. Sure, one can call Bea an *asshole* because of her behaviour but this is different from saying that *asshole* will always refer to what one has done.[2] Secondly, the fact that slurs' derogatory content is aimed at a demographic group can help to contribute to an explanation of why slurs are more harmful than individual pejoratives. When a speaker uses a slur, they not only derogate the target of the utterance but also the whole demographic group that the target belongs to. According to some views, for example, Jeshion (2013a); McCready (2010) and the view presented in this chapter—this derogation is cashed out in terms of a derogatory/contemptuous attitude towards the whole group. The attitude that is directed when one uses *asshole* is

[1] Accounts discussed in section “Motivating a Multidimensional Approach” take slurs to have neutral counterparts.

[2] Some have described individual pejoratives as being subjective—it is a matter of the speaker's taste whether Bea is an *asshole* or not (e.g. Lasersohn (2017, 233), Berškytė (2021), Berškytė and Stevens (2023)) whilst slurs are more objective as they target a property 'out there in the world'.