

The Social, Normative, and Expressive Elements of Linguistic Disputes

Consider the following dispute:

(1) Speaker 1: Trans women are women.

Speaker 2: Trans women are not women.

Disagreements like (1) are remarkable because they strike us as both disagreements about language – e.g., about how to use the term “woman” – and as nonetheless substantive and about the world (not “merely verbal”). But what exactly are we doing when we substantively disagree about language? How are these disagreements entangled with our social, normative lives?

Current literature analyses disagreements like (1) as metalinguistic disputes: disputes in which speakers pragmatically negotiate over which extension and intension of a term should be adopted (e.g., Plunkett and Sundell, 2013). In my doctoral thesis, I argue that this analysis is limited and propose an alternative account that focuses on the expressive, perspectival, and ideological elements of language.

To this end, I first argue that disputes about language often stem from disagreements over (normative) perspectives (Camp, 2019). I do so by considering disagreements over terms such as “queer” (slur vs. re-appropriated use) or “Middle East” vs. “Swana”. Secondly, I argue that even disagreements over intensions and extensions should be understood as disagreements over perspectives. As such, these disagreements, and the meanings they dispute, can serve to express ideologies, whether pernicious or ameliorating (Haslanger, 2011). Exemplary cases are, for instance, disagreements over the intension and extension of terms such as “milk”, “inner city” (dogwhistle vs. literal use), or “woman”. Third, I investigate how my analysis reflects on theories of conceptual engineering and amelioration (Haslanger, 2012). Overall, I argue that my considerations support a theory of meaning that goes beyond the truth-conditional, propositional approach.