

Linguistic Intervention and Transformative Communicative Disruptions

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Abstract

What words we use, and what meanings they have, is important. We shouldn't use slurs; we should use 'rape' to include spousal rape (for centuries we didn't); we should have a word which picks out the sexual harassment suffered by people in the workplace and elsewhere (for centuries we didn't). Sometimes we need to change the word-meaning pairs in circulation, either by getting rid of the pair completely (slurs), changing the meaning (as we did with 'rape'), or adding brand new word-meaning pairs (as with 'sexual harassment').

A problem, though, is how to do this. One might worry that any attempt to change language in this way will lead to widespread miscommunication and confusion. I argue that this is indeed so, but that's a feature, not a bug of attempting to change word-meaning pairs. The miscommunications and confusion such changes cause can lead us, via a process I call *transformative communicative disruption*, to reflect on our language and its use, and this can be further, rather than hinder, our goal of improving language.

Introduction

Sometimes having certain word-meaning pairs in circulation in a population of speakers at a particular time, in a particular social-historical milieu, can be bad. Such word-meaning pairs might cause injustice or disadvantage, stifle discourse, deliberation and inquiry, or stall social progress. It's not hard to think of examples – take any slur. The population would be better off without such word-meaning pairs.

Likewise, sometimes *not* having certain word-meaning pairs in circulation in a population of speakers at a particular time, in a particular social-historical milieu, can be bad. *Not* having these word-meaning pairs can cause injustice or disadvantage, stifle discourse, deliberation and inquiry, or stall social progress. Two prominent examples are discussed by Miranda Fricker (2007) in relation to the notion

of hermeneutical injustice: *sexual assault* and *postpartum depression*. The population is better off with such word-meaning pairs.¹

Still further, sometimes certain word-meaning pairs in circulation in a population of speakers at a particular time, in a particular social-historical milieu, could be better. Consider, for example, the recent revision of the meaning of *marriage* to include same-sex couples: Here the word was kept but the meaning improved. In this way, sometimes changes in meaning for existing words can bring about various favorable effects or prevent various unfavorable ones.

I take it, then, that it matters what word-meaning pairs are in circulation for a given linguistic population; that which language we speak can have a significant impact on whether or not the world is as it should be² (for example, if our language lacks the word-meaning pair of our 'postpartum depression', then the world, at least as far as it concerns the treatment of new mothers, isn't as it should be because their sufferings might go unrecognised); and hence, that normative claims about word-meaning pairs are important to reflect on.

It is clear, then, that speakers sometimes have good reasons to and should have a strong interest in *eliminating* existing word-meaning pairs from circulation, *introducing* new word-meaning pairs into circulation, or, indeed, introducing and eliminating word-meaning pairs in tandem – that is, what has been variously called *changing*, *shifting*, *engineering*, *replacing*, *revising*, *improving*, *innovating* or *ameliorating*.³ Whether or not they should always act on those reasons or interests, and what they should do to act on those reasons or interests, are different and more difficult questions to answer.

In this paper, I attempt to characterize one potentially controversial, though sometimes justified, means by which to act on those reasons and interests. I provide a descriptive account of a kind of linguistic strategy speakers of a language can, and sometimes do, engage in to bring about changes to the word-meaning pairs in circulation (Sections 1, 2, 5 and 6). I outline what it is I take to be controversial about this strategy – that is, the kind of moral and linguistic challenges there are to justifying the

¹ Note that Fricker wouldn't quite frame it this way: she would speak of people being better off with such *hermeneutical resources*, but the point is essentially the same. On the topic of terminology: throughout I speak of word-meaning pairs where others might use talk of concepts or intensions and extensions. There isn't any particularly deep reason for my doing so, but it helps me formulate some of my claims more neatly.

² I don't mean to commit myself, in this paper, to a particular normative theory or meta-ethical stance. I take it that the contents of this paper can be suitably rephrased without loss of the central observations and claims therein, if one does want to commit to some theory or stance.

³ These notions are inspired by the work of various authors: Haslanger (2012), Scharp (2013), Eklund (2015, 2017), Plunkett and Sundell (2013, forthcoming), Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b), Cappelen (2018), Richard (2014). It should be clear, however, that my understanding is narrower and should not be confused with the different views of these authors.

strategy (Sections 3 and 4). Finally, I argue that there is a way around these challenges by way of a linguistic phenomenon I call *transformative communicative disruption* (Section 5).

Section 1: Meaning Change, Linguistic Intervention and Linguistic Transgression

Linguistic Interventions

Before we can understand whether or not speakers should act on their reasons or interests in changing the word-meaning pairs in circulation, it would first be useful to understand from a semantic, pragmatic and metasemantic perspective what it is speakers are doing when they intentionally and strategically try to eliminate, introduce or change the word-meaning pairs in circulation, and what kinds of effects these doings can have. Call communicative activities on the part of a speaker that (intentionally and strategically) attempt to change the word-meaning pairs in circulation, *linguistic interventions*.

I take it that having a proper semantic, pragmatic and metasemantic account of linguistic interventions is of independent theoretical interest, because regardless of whether speakers should act on their interests in changing word-meaning circulation, it is clear that speakers often *do* engage in communicative activities that aim to introduce and/or eliminate word-meaning pairs from circulation. Several recent prominent examples include: *marriage*, *rape*, *sexual assault*, *organic*, *terrorist*, *migrant*, *fake news*, as well as pronoun introduction and use. Such cases may plausibly be construed as largely driven by grass-roots, bottom-up linguistic intervention, but there are numerous examples of top-down attempts at institutional intervention as well: where institutions attempt to change the word-meaning pairs in circulation via legislation, authority or influence (think, to use an example George Lakoff made famous, of the Republican Party's mostly successful attempt to replace 'tax cut' with 'tax relief'). I will be principally concerned with processes that are primarily bottom-up, though of course both are important and interesting forms of linguistic intervention.

I take it that the processes of meaning change in cases of linguistic intervention are different from standard processes of meaning change whereby input to that process is primarily constituted by normal usage, permissible pragmatic operations on existing meanings, changes in the world, or speakers' conceptions of the world. Processes of meaning change that are driven by linguistic intervention, by

contrast, have as a crucial part of their input strategic, intentional or project-like plans on the part of speakers to change which word-meaning pairs are in circulation. Such speakers have a *metalinguistic standpoint* – a set of beliefs about what word-meaning pairs should be in circulation amongst their linguistic community, and their linguistic activities are in part guided and influenced by that metalinguistic standpoint. They imagine that if our language were like this, then our language would be better or the world would be better off. Their intentions and metalinguistic stand-point can affect their linguistic activity, and hence, the semantic and pragmatic properties of their speech.

Linguistic interventions are similar to, but also importantly different from, other communicative exchanges discussed in the literature, most notably metalinguistic negotiations. Consider the following example of a metalinguistic negotiation from David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013: 14-5). We're making chili for dinner. You see me chopping up several more scotch bonnets to add to the already pepper-filled chili. You say that you don't like things too spicy, and I ask what counts as spicy. You taste the chili, turn red, and say '*That is spicy*'. I taste it and say: 'You wuss, that's not spicy'.

What's going on here, arguably, is a disagreement about how to use the word 'spicy': that is, a metalinguistic negotiation, one about words. In answering my question, you are conveying that that chili *should* fall under the extension of 'spicy'. In responding, I'm denying that it should. What we're doing is negotiating about how precisely to use the word 'spicy' in this and future culinary endeavours. In what follows let's use metalinguistic negotiation to refer to metalinguistic disagreements which have this normative component (by contrast, we'll say a *metalinguistic use* need not have this normative component. If we're in the zoo and I see a sign saying 'Pachyderms to the left', I might ask you what pachyderms are and you might say, pointing to a big elephant, '*that is a pachyderm*'. You thereby say something, at least in part, about the word 'pachyderm', namely that that elephant falls under its extension, and so your use is metalinguistic, but it's not a normative claim about how we should use 'pachyderm' for our conversational purposes. See Ludlow 2014a: 13-4, and Plunkett and Sundell 2013:14 for more on metalinguistic use.)

As I understand Peter Ludlow (2014a,b), and Plunkett and Sundell (2013), metalinguistic negotiations are limited in their scope – the aim of the negotiation is to settle what a given word should mean *in the context of a given communicative exchange*. Speakers in metalinguistic negotiations needn't have diachronic intentions to change the meaning for the linguistic community as a whole, in (all foreseeable) future contexts. Linguistic interventions, by contrast, have this much more ambitious goal. The linguistic properties of metalinguistic negotiations and linguistic interventions differ, then, in that negotiations are attempts for the target word *w* to mean *A* in context *c* (or some suitably limited set of contexts *C*), whereas interventions are attempts for the target word *w* to mean *A sans phrase*. The

semantic, pragmatic and metasemantic properties of the respective utterances differ and the two differ in how they are the input to processes of linguistic change. Metalinguistic negotiations are input in the process of meaning change by altering use-facts, resolving underdetermination or changing speakers' conceptions. Linguistic inventions, by contrast, are attempts to introduce a new meaning or eliminate an old one – to anchor a new word-meaning pair or derail an old one.

Amelioration and Facilitating Meaning Change by Use

As a hypothetical example of linguistic intervention, consider Sally Haslanger's ameliorative analysis of the concept 'woman':⁴

S is a 'woman' iff

- (i) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position!); and
- (iii) the fact that S satisfies i and ii plays a role in S's systematic subordination, i.e., along some dimension, S's social position is oppressive, and S's satisfying i and ii plays a role in that dimension of subordination. (2000, p. 42)

Call the meaning of *woman* that corresponds to this ameliorative analysis *A*. For my purposes, nothing hangs on the specifics of the analysis – what does matter is that the analysis offers a significantly different meaning than that currently in circulation. One way to put this is to say that the conventional meaning of the term *woman* is significantly different, perhaps incommensurable with, the proposed ameliorated meaning for *woman*.

Now, imagine a speaker with the metalinguistic standpoint that the word *woman* should mean *A*, and who engages in linguistic activity, at least some of the time, whereby they use the word *woman* in a way so as to facilitate meaning change. The ameliorator might do various things to facilitate meaning change. She might, for example: (i) assert or propose that *woman* should mean *A* in hopes of changing people's conceptions or use; (ii) explicitly mark her speech or make her intentions manifest – that she means *A* by *woman* or (iii) metalinguistically negotiate, and thereby potentially change some metasemantic determinants of the meaning of *woman* (e.g., the use facts); or (iv) she might make a word-meaning pair taboo by attempting to invoke worldly consequences for its use (see Anderson and Lepore 2013). I won't focus on these sorts of linguistic activities.

⁴ I add a proviso here that Haslanger would not necessarily endorse any claims that I make by way of using this example.

Rather, I want to focus on linguistic activities on the part of the ameliorator whereby she uses *woman* as if the word means A, and/or interprets others' uses of *woman* as if the word means A.⁵ In particular, I will focus on cases whereby the ameliorator treats *woman* as meaning A even though she doesn't believe that *women* means A. I want to focus especially on cases where the ameliorator's interlocutor is not (fully) aware that she is speaking/interpreting in this way. This might be so because the ameliorator's intentions were not manifest to her audience, or because her interlocutor isn't sufficiently aware of her project and metalinguistic standpoint. Linguistic activities of this sort I understand as an interesting and important form of linguistic intervention.

One might judge such linguistic activity with suspicion. Why use *woman* as if it means something it doesn't, when you're aware your audience has little chance of understanding what you are saying? Why purposely misunderstand what someone is saying to you? Despite the apparent unreasonableness of this sort of linguistic engagement, I think there is a way to make sense of it, and I think it is more common than one might initially have thought. In the case of introduction and change, it is an attempt to anchor a new word-meaning pair – to homophonically baptize – by way of metalinguistic use – while, simultaneously, attempting to render defective the interpretive common ground of the original word-meaning pair (cf. Barker (2002), Krifka (2013), Richard (ms)). In the case of elimination, it is an attempt to break the communicative chain (Kripke 1980) or dominance facts (Evans 1973) that connect speakers to the problematic anchoring event, again while simultaneously rendering defective the interpretive common ground.

Linguistic Disruption

One important and distinctive thing about this kind of linguistic activity is that it is *disruptive*. Linguistic interventions are disruptive in at least two senses. First, linguistic interventions of this sort are a disruptive form of communication. The ameliorator's linguistic activity attempts to disrupt the interpretive common ground so as to affect metalinguistic reflection and reconstruction on the part of her interlocutor – it attempts to disrupt the interpretive resources of the interlocutor so that they engage in imaginative and counterfactual thought about language and its potential role in the world. Second, linguistic interventions disrupt the normal functioning of the language system. Rachel Ann McKinney (2015), amongst others, Many theorists think of our language system as serving certain functions and that a well-functioning language system has value insofar as it serves those functions -- as Rachel Ann McKinney (2015) nicely puts it: a well-functioning language system allows us “to learn from each other, to inquire and deliberate together, to pool information, to coordinate action, express care and

⁵ See Thomasson 2016 for a view on which much of metaphysicians' talk should be understood in this way: the nihilist about composition, for example, uses *table* as if it has no meaning (or at least an empty extension).

concern, to reflect on and solve common problems, and so on.” (2015: 54) What such linguistic interventions do or aim to do is to disrupt the functions of the language system, so as to effect change.

In what follows, I will make a case for the claim that this kind of linguistic activity is in fact as normal and perhaps even as pervasive as other forms of linguistic activity that are disruptive – for example, lying. I will also argue that it is reasonable, from a theoretical perspective, to construe such activity as part of the normal maintenance of our language system, and perhaps even the (social) world more broadly. Such an observation is significant, as it ultimately makes acts of linguistic intervention easier to justify.

On the other hand, despite any social, practical and intellectual benefits such changes might potentially achieve, such changes are by no means always easy to bring about, if they can be brought about at all. (In sections 3 and 4, I outline complications which ultimately make acts of linguistic intervention harder to justify.)

Some authors have already noted that meaning shifts seem hard to achieve (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, Cappelen 2018). For example, if one endorses semantic externalism, then speakers can't always simply change what their words mean, neither by individual nor collective will. Many of the metasemantic facts that fix the meanings of our expressions are simply outside of our control. To give an incomplete but illustrative list, none of the following can be said to be in full control of any given speaker or even community of speakers: naturalness and magnetism (Lewis 1983, 1984; a recent exhaustive discussion is Dorr and Hawthorne 2013), patterns of past usage or future usage (Williamson 1994, Jackman 1999), linguistic conventions (Lewis 1969), features of the event where the meaning was introduced (Putnam 1975, Burge 1979), causal chains or dominant sources (Evans 1973, Kripke 1980), speaker intentions (Kaplan 1989, Stokke 2012, King 2014), some even argue modal facts (see Cappelen and Dever 2018: 92ff) and normative facts (Haslanger 2012; see Cappelen 2018 p79 for discussion) about usage. Endorsing semantic internalism won't do us any better either (Cappelen 2018 p91; *pace* Burgess and Plunkett 2013a p.1096). This makes acts of linguistic intervention difficult to justify because it simply seems like there is no way for us to fruitfully control the relevant metasemantic facts.

Linguistic Transgression and the Linguistic Reformer's Dilemma

I won't focus on the above-mentioned set of difficulties; instead I will focus on another worry. The worry centers on the fact that some acts of linguistic intervention involve what we might call *linguistic*

transgression. The issue can be usefully illustrated by considering what is known as the Reformer's Dilemma (REF). Suppose for the sake of illustration that semantic conventionalism is true – that is, that what our words mean is tightly constrained by the linguistic conventions of the relevant community of speakers. The *Linguistic Reformer's Dilemma* is as follows: Suppose speaker *S* is a linguistic reformer and thinks that word *w* should mean *A* where *A* is not the meaning determined by the linguistic conventions of *S*'s community. If *S* uses *w* to mean *A* – i.e., speaks to and interprets others as if *w* means *A* – then *S* has done something wrong qua member of his linguistic community (supposing ordinary, non-figurative use). Either *S* can speak and interpret others correctly (according to conventional meaning) or *S* can reform the language, but *S* can't do both. Thus, an act of attempted reform of this sort will involve a fault on the part of speaker – a linguistic transgression.

I think there is a way out for the linguistic reformer – the reformer can overcome the challenge linguistic transgression poses for her realizing her aim of linguistic reform. Later, I argue that an important strategy for linguistic reformers is to engage in linguistic transgressions because these elicit *transformative communicative disruptions*. In such cases, the interventionist's transgression is justified (they are outweighed by the potential benefits to be achieved – either representational or worldly), and she is engaging in activity whereby her interlocutor can reflect on the meaning of the given word, acquire the new meaning and recognize the new meaning as an improvement. Sometimes being a good member of a linguistic community will involve disrupting and transgressing: The reasons for having the linguistic system in the first place can give us reason to flout individual conventions and norms of that system.⁶

Section 2: On the Pervasiveness of Linguistic Interventions

Generally, word-meaning pairs only come into circulation when two things have happened (at least on some prominent theories):

(I1) something like an *anchoring* or *baptism* event (Kripke 1980) has occurred whereby a speaker performs a dubbing and the word becomes connected with a referent, and;

⁶ Let me ward off some obvious objections: It is worth mentioning that I am supposing as preconditions to engagement in this kind of linguistic activity that the reformer has good reason to believe that: (i) her project has a fair chance at success; and (ii) her speech does not pose a detrimental threat to the functioning of the language system.

(I2) some process of spread has occurred whereby the word-meaning pair is brought into circulation amongst the community of speakers.

Kripke and subsequent literature discuss introductions by means of explicit metalinguistic discourse involving deixis and description (e.g., his *Feynman* and his *Jack the Ripper* cases (see Kripke 1980)). But there are other options: One might argue that speakers can anchor a new word-meaning pair by way of metalinguistic use, and in particular, a metalinguistic use with an ameliorator's scope and ambitions.⁷ In such a case, the word-meaning pair is introduced by way of linguistic intervention of the sort outlined above.

If a word-meaning pair is to be genuinely replaced by a new word-meaning pair, more than (I1) and (I2) needs to have taken place – (I3) needs to have taken place as well:

(I3) a process of elimination has occurred whereby the original word-meaning pair is eliminated from circulation amongst the community of speakers.

A word-meaning pair might disappear from circulation by simply becoming obsolete, but it can also disappear with the help of linguistic intervention. An example of such an intervention is discussed below (see section 2). In these cases, the interventionist is attempting to eliminate the word-meaning pair from circulation by breaking the communicative chain that connects the linguistic community to the anchoring event of the original word-meaning pair.

To see that linguistic interventions are as pervasive and normal as other forms of linguistic activity that disrupt the normal functioning of the language system, like lying, consider the following collection of phenomena, which are now part of or could easily be considered part of descriptive, empirical projects in linguistics and philosophy of language. One example we already considered above – that of ambitious metalinguistic negotiations without strict limitations of contextual scope. I consider five more examples in turn: (i) neologisms, protologisms and semantic introductions, (ii) the reappropriation of slurs and insults, (iii) transgressive uses of definitional or normative generics, (iv) semantic elimination and interpretive uncharity, and (v) blocking and flouting (semantic) presuppositions.

(i) Neologisms, protologisms and semantic introductions

⁷ For some work on this see the discussion in Armstrong (2016) on lexical innovation.

Words-meaning pairs where (I1) has taken place, but where the process in (I2) is incomplete are called *neologisms* or *protologisms*. An example from the feminist movement in the 1970s is *womyn's herstory*. Examples abound in the age of social media: *hangry*, *tweet cred* and *#X*, for any *X*. As an example of semantic introduction consider the slang word, *cool*. *Cool* had a meaning before its slang use, and arguably its slang use is related in some way to its original meaning. In this case, a speaker introduced a new meaning homophonically by introducing an ambiguity or polysemy, and it spread and acquired a meaning. Other examples include: the introduction of *administrative assistant* to replace *secretary*, the introduction of *firefighter* to replace *fireman*, the introduction of *server* to replace *waitress*.

(ii) *Reappropriation of slurs or insults*

Consider the reappropriated slur, *bitch*. This can be seen a further example of linguistic intervention. In its original use the term had an oppressive, insulting meaning, but once it was reclaimed the term was used in an acceptable, non-oppressive and often even a positive manner. Initially, the term was used within a local community of users that included the reappropriators, but later it was also understood as such by the larger linguistic community.

The reappropriators of the term *bitch*, during the period of trying to reappropriate the term, proposed and tried to get others to accept a revised meaning for the existing slur. In doing so, we can suppose, reappropriators used the word *bitch*. In particular, reappropriators might have used the term when it had its conventional meaning, though they used it as if it had its reappropriated meaning.

(iii) *Transgressive uses of normative or definitional generics*

Consider the following examples of normative or definitional generics (Krifka 2013, Leslie 2015, Cohen 2001, Haslanger 2007):

- (2) a. Girls are tough.
- b. Crop tops are cute.

One prominent view of definitional or normative generics treats them as metalinguistic claims involving a metalinguistic use. For example, (2a), makes a statement about the meaning of the term *girls* and how it should be used:

- (3) The term *girls* should be used so that it applies to things that are tough.

But (3) doesn't merely say something about the linguistic expression *girls*, it also advocates for a particular meaning the speaker endorses, regardless of whether "toughness" is part of the conventional meaning. In addition, in so advocating, the speaker uses the term *girls* to express their endorsement of a definition or descriptive generalization involving the existing linguistic expression.

(iv) *Interpretive uncharity and semantic elimination*

Consider the following communicative scenario involving an ameliorator of the term *woman*:

Suppose that Ben is walking with a friend in a park. He says, of his small, female child, 'I hope she grows up to be a strong and powerful woman'. The ameliorator follows through with her commitment to her project, and understands Ben to hope that his small child will grow up to be strong, powerful, and subordinated on the basis of the reproductive organs she is perceived to have. The ameliorator thus responds, 'That's perverse. Why would you want your child to be unjustly subordinated?' Further, if Ben does not take his assertion back, the ameliorator then reports what he said to others, saying that he wants his own child to be subordinated on the basis of the reproductive organs she is perceived to have.⁸

That might seem a bit artificial. But real life examples aren't hard to find. Thus consider:

In the autism community, there's a debate about the correct terminology to use to discuss autistic people. There's a push for using 'autistic person' as opposed to 'person with autism' because, it's argued, the former phrase better reflects the centrality to the person's identity of autism. Autism, the thought goes, is not something incidental to a person and language should reflect this.⁹ Now imagine Ben's friend is someone who agrees with this perspective, and so thinks 'person with autism' is not the right way to refer to autistic people, because to be a person with autism is to be someone for whom autism is a merely incidental feature of their identity, and there are no such people. And imagine Ben has just learned his daughter is autistic, but Ben doesn't know about the linguistic debate. He says "Children with autism grow up to be adults with autism, so I've already got used to the thought that my daughter will face some challenges as an adult." Sarah replies, uncharitably, "What? You think autism is just an accidental feature of people? That's weird. I would have thought you would have known better."

This kind of communicative deviance is perhaps more involved, and harder to justify, but it can also be effective at eliminating word-meaning pairs from circulation. If the ameliorator engages in this sort of linguistic activity, as a hearer, her interlocutors will tend to stop using the word *woman* with its non-ameliorated meaning, or stop using *person with autism* completely.

(v) *Blocking or flouting (semantic) presuppositions*

When babies started sporting onesies with *I love my mommies!* printed on them,¹⁰ these uses of *my mommies* were meant to provoke the idea that *my mommies* can mean *my parents*. It's not far off to think that this intervention was intended to induce a permanent shift in the (semantic) presuppositions associated with *my mommies*. One might imagine that attempts to use *my mommies* in the ameliorated

⁸ Thanks to Jack Spencer for this example.

⁹ See, for example: <http://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>. Thanks to Matthew McKeever for this example.

¹⁰ Thanks to Joshua Armstrong and Samia Hesni for this example.

sense before the intervention resulted in presupposition failure or were met with the reaction that the speaker was confused, whereas after the intervention *my mommies* could be used unproblematically to refer to two (or more) women as a parental unit. In this example, the ameliorator in producing the onesie was likely motivated, in part, by the belief that *my mommies* should have an unproblematic lexical meaning in such circumstances. One way of understanding the example, then, is to think of the onesie intervention as a strategic and intentional attempt to change the (semantic) presuppositions of *my mommies*.

The important point is this: All of the above linguistic activity seem like things speakers are regularly and extensively engaged in, despite its transgressive and disruptive nature. Like lying, linguistic interventions are a normal and regular form of linguistic engagement, with complex and interesting social and moral implications.

Section 3: Challenges for the Ameliorator I - Transition Periods and the Inevitability of Miscommunication

In Evans's *The Causal Theory of Names*, he describes a case of reference shift which is illustrative:

A youth A leaves a small village in the Scottish highlands to seek his fortune having acquired the nickname Turnip. ... Fifty or so years later a man B comes to the village and lives as a hermit over the hill. The three or four villagers surviving from the time of the youth's departure believe falsely that this is the long-departed villager returned. Consequently, they use the name Turnip among themselves and it gets into wider circulation among the younger villagers who have no idea how it originated. I am assuming that the older villagers, if the facts were pointed out, would say It isn't Turnip after all rather than It appears after all that Turnip did not come from this village. In that case I should say that they use the name to refer to A, and in fact, denoting him, say false things about him (even by uttering *Here is Turnip coming to get his coffee again*).

But they may die off, leaving a homogeneous community using the name to refer to the man over the hill. I should say the way is clear to its becoming his name. The story is not much affected if the older villagers pass on some information whose source is A by saying such things as Turnip was quite a one for the girls, for the younger villagers' clusters would still be dominantly of the man over the hill. But it is an important feature of my account that the information that the older villagers gave the younger villagers could be so rich, coherent, and important to them that A could be the dominant source of their information, so that they too would acknowledge That man over the hill isn't Turnip after all. (1973, 23)

In Evans's *Turnip* case, there is a period where reference shift has not yet occurred and the villagers end up saying false things about the initial referent. There is also a period where the older villagers die off and the young ones establish a new "dominant source" for the name *Turnip*. Before the dominant source is established, however, the young villagers say meaningless things since there is no established referent for the term during that period. It should be clear that both periods, during transition from one meaning of a term w to a new one, are extremely important for anyone engaged in a project of linguistic reform.

Call a *transition period* the period during a project of linguistic revision before meaning change is successful. During the transition period, there will be many uses of w by the interventionist (and her local speech community) where meaning change has not yet occurred. These uses are important to the success of their project, so it is important to understand what the semantic and communicative properties of these uses of w . As Evans observes, such uses will sometimes be false or nonsensical, and hence semantically or communicatively *deviant* in some way. This presents a challenge to the linguistic interventionist: attempts to introduce and use w with the desired new meaning will result in linguistic transgressions in the form of false and meaningless speech.

Jennifer Saul (2006) makes similar observations in raising concerns for Haslanger's ameliorative analyses of gender, claiming that ameliorative projects have the strange consequence that an ameliorator's speech inevitably leads to misunderstandings and confusion:

Imagine that Amanda takes a feminist philosophy class and is convinced by Haslanger's views. She decides to use the terms woman and man in the way that Haslanger suggests in order to explain to her friend Beau what she has learned. Amanda utters (1):

(1) All women are subordinated by men.

Beau does not use woman and man in the way that Amanda uses these terms. He uses them, let's say, as sex terms. A first question is what Amanda has said. Since the speaker and audience have different meanings in mind ... it is genuinely unclear what the right answer is. Possibly, the right answer is that Amanda has failed to say anything. This seems strange. Perhaps more plausibly, Amanda has said one thing and Beau has understood her as saying another. ... These difficulties ... point to the seriousness of the confusion that is possible with a contextualist version of Haslanger's view. In so doing, they offer some reason for resisting it. (2006)

This case again shows that the linguistic interventionist, in attempting to introduce and use w with an improved meaning, will result in linguistic transgression by causing misunderstandings and confusion.

The extent of the misunderstanding and confusion that the linguistic interventionist can cause is even worse than it seems from these two examples. The false or meaningless beliefs, misunderstandings and confusion can be spread throughout the community of speakers by way of (i) misattribution in speech and thought reports and (ii) failed testimonial chains. I consider examples of each in turn.

Consider again Saul's ameliorator Amanda from the above quoted example. Direct assertions won't be the only utterances involving *woman* that Amanda will make. Imagine Donald Trump uttering *she is not socially subordinated* (pointing at his daughter Ivanka). Amanda can report what Donald Trump said using *woman*, by saying:

(2) Donald Trump said that Ivanka is not a woman.

Supposing that *woman* is used as a sex term in Amanda's linguistic community, in uttering (2), Amanda says to her hearer that Donald Trump said that Ivanka is not female. Thus, saying what others say and think while using their words becomes difficult for the linguistic interventionist.

Another type of example is what are called *failed testimonial chains*: Amanda says *women are F* and another speaker, Eliot, is told that Amanda says that women are F. Eliot trusts Amanda, and passes this along to others, but Eliot is unaware of the ameliorated meaning. Here we have miscommunication spreading false or defective beliefs via failed testimony.

This presents a challenge to the linguistic interventionist as it seems that any attempt at intervention will lead to various kinds of defective communication and linguistic transgression. Hence, there is a precise sense in which the ameliorator's speech disrupts her linguistic engagements and undermines the functioning of the language system.

Section 4: Challenges for the Ameliorator II - From Miscommunication to Lying, Misleading and Bullshitting

So far this might all look like an argument to the effect that meaning transitions will lead to false or defective beliefs and miscommunication. But does the inevitability of miscommunication entail the inevitability of more serious forms of deviant speech and transgression? On the one hand,

interventionists are merely attempting to introduce new word-meaning pairs into circulation. On the other hand, they may know their speech will lead to disruption, miscommunication and confusion.

Let us distinguish some phenomena:

Uncooperative Speech: Speaker and audience do not have common conversational goals and do not share the relevant mutual attitudes.

Lying: A speaker lies iff:

- i. They say that q;
- ii. They believe q to be false;
- iii. They intend the hearer to believe that q is true. (Mahon 2015)

Misleading: A speaker misleads iff:

- i. They communicate that q;
- ii. They believe q to be false;
- iii. They intend the hearer to believe that q is true. (Mahon 2015)

Bull-shitting: Speakers who say things without caring whether what they say is true or false. (Frankfurt 2005)

These analyses are not the state-of-the-art in the literature on insincere speech. However, they have the benefit of being straightforward and relatively good reference points for connecting to the state-of-the-art should one be inclined towards a particular analysis (e.g., Fallis 2009, Stokke 2013). Let us see then if our examples of interventionist speech are in a position to satisfy these definitions.

It seems obvious that the kind of interventionist speech of interest counts as uncooperative – she clearly has different conversational goals from her interlocutor. Let's take a more difficult case. The least obvious case is whether the interventionist counts as lying. Consider whether the ameliorator Amanda counts as lying given the criteria (i) to (iii) in our definition of lying stated above. To fix examples, consider Amanda who utters to her friend Beau *We need to get rid of women*. In Amanda's mouth, she is saying that we need to get rid of subordination on the basis of perceived female biological features. However, even if Amanda wants the meaning of *woman* to be *A*, it often cannot be because her hearers will not recognize her intention or recover her intended meaning. Beau will understand her as saying that we need to get rid of females (or some pragmatically modulated version of this).

In this example, Amanda's speech says that we need to get rid of females. Moreover, she knows that this is what the sentence *We need to get rid of women* says, and she knows that this is false. Thus, Amanda's speech satisfies (i) and (ii) in the definition of lying above. What about criteria (iii)? Does Amanda intend for her hearers to believe that we need to get rid of females (is true)? This last criteria is tricky: Amanda certainly intends that her audience believe that it's true that we need to get rid of subordination. But she didn't succeed in communicating this content and knew at the time of speaking that she wouldn't succeed. Is Amanda's belief that her audience would pick up the literal content and believe it enough to count as intending her audience to believe it?

Even if my reader isn't convinced of this, I will argue that this intention is actually crucial for the success of the interventionist project. In the next section, I will outline why this is so.

Before that, however, it is worth noting that some of the interventionist's speech more easily qualifies as misleading or bullshitting. In the case of misleading, the ameliorator need only communicate something false and in the case of bullshitting, she need only show indifference towards the truth of what she says or communicates.

Section 5: Effective Linguistic Interventions - Transformative Communicative Disruptions

Ameliorators, given the right motivations, can use deviant communication – like miscommunication, uncooperative or insincere speech – to accomplish their projects of linguistic change. The disruption of standard communicative patterns can help them accomplish their goals. The disruptions are a good thing as they can have the effect of making the hearer stop and reflect on their usage, and this reflection can be *transformative*. In other words, the deviant communicative activity of the ameliorator can engage the hearer in the sort of metalinguistic reflection needed to acquire the new meaning and understand the ameliorator's utterances as she intends. In addition, it can engage the hearer in reflection about the representational and worldly consequences of their speech, and how a change in word-meaning pair may help bring about representational and worldly benefits.

Return to the example involving Amanda's utterance of *We need to get rid of women*. Consider someone not initiated in or not knowing about Amanda's project who is told that her goal is to get rid

of women. On the supposed conventional reading, this is horrific. That reaction of horror, which is a result of the miscommunication and maybe even an intended one, is constructive. It makes the audience stop and think, and that thinking will trigger further communicative efforts on the part of the hearer. It will lead her, one might hope, to start reflecting on the meaning of her words, and that process itself is part of the goal of the project of linguistic intervention.

Here is a further example of how a false or defective belief can trigger reflection of this sort: Imagine a reappropriator, Mia, who says *Samantha is a bitch* and miscommunicates that Samantha is bossy, etc. Her audience will be shocked, as Mia is normally such a nice person and knows what it's like to be called a bitch. This cognitive dissonance, Mia's kindness on the one hand and her use of the term *bitch* on the other, can make them reflect on their usage, and their grasp of the meaning of *bitch* could undergo a transformation.

Similarly, in the cases of the uncharitable interpreter and the onesie-interventionist that flouted the (semantic) presuppositions of *my mommies*. Each of their communicative transgressions results in the kind of reflection that can be transformative.

So far, these are transformations that occur in individual communicative exchanges, involving individual speakers. Such exchanges might only have minimal effect on achieving meaning transformation. However, individual transformations can eventually spread across the linguistic population and lead to full meaning transformation. Once this has occurred, the project of linguistic intervention is successful.

Disruptiveness is not sufficient for meaning transformation. In meaning transformation, coming to understand the proposed amelioration is transformative. The deviant communicative event, together with a number of other events, triggers a full-on meaning change that is transformative. Meaning changes are transformative when they enable the interpreter to think and communicate things she could not have thought or said without having that meaning – having that meaning gives the interpreter new abilities to imagine, recognize, create cognitive models, and communicate using that meaning. The change offers a new way of understanding the world, and results in substantially revised normative commitments and core preferences. Think about each of the cases we have considered so far and how the new meanings result in discontinuous, revised understandings of the world and of the kinds of normative commitments and preferences one has. Amanda understands woman as unduly subordinated and now wants to take action. The reappropriator recognizes that she shouldn't ever be called a bitch (in the old sense) and that taking control of the term disempowers those that would. The

onesie intervention allowed for a new understanding of who counts as parents, and people's normative commitments and preferences surrounding parenthood change.

So far, I have discussed meaning transformation, and events that trigger meaning transformations. There are not yet transformative experiences in L.A. Paul's sense (2015a). But I think there are some close analogies. The first is that authors in the literature on amelioration and conceptual improvement sometimes think of conceptual change analogously to how Paul thinks of transformative experiences. Paul (2015b: 761) describes a transformative experience as "an experience that is both epistemically and personally transformative" where an experience is *epistemically transformative* when it "teaches you something you could not have learned without having that kind of experience. Having that experience gives you new abilities to imagine, recognize, and cognitively model possible future experiences of that kind" and where an experience is *personally transformative* when it "changes you in some deep and personally fundamental way, for example, by changing your core personal preferences or by changing the way you understand your desires, your defining intrinsic properties, or your self-perspective." The authors in the literature on amelioration and conceptual improvement also observe something that might be classed as epistemically and personally transformative. Burgess and Plunkett, for example, nicely summarize something that might be considered a transformation of our concepts:

Arguably, our conceptual repertoire determines not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrains what we can hope to accomplish in the world. Representation enables action, from the most sophisticated scientific research, to the most mundane household task. It influences our options within social/political institutions and even helps determine which institutions are so much as thinkable. Our social roles, in turn, help determine what kinds of people we can be, what sorts of lives we can lead. Conceptual choices and changes may be intrinsically interesting, but the clearest reason to care about them is just that their non-conceptual consequences are pervasive and profound. (2013: 1096-7)

But the meaning transformation discussed here might seem very different after all from transformative experiences. Meaning transformation is a drawn-out event, consisting of innumerable small interactions between speakers and audience members. However, I think this is also true of some of Paul's core cases – like becoming a doctor (Paul 2014, chapter 3): It's not a single event, or if it is one event, then it's one that is stretched out over time.¹¹ Moreover, it is unclear to what extent meaning transformations are first-personally transformative for all speakers. These issues I leave as open

¹¹ That said, it's arguable that some such events are single and non-stretched out: seeing the *mommie onesie* could immediately make something about same sex partnerships click for someone who had previously, for example, not paid attention to the debates and news stories about the matter, causing them to fundamentally rethink the nature of parenthood.

questions.

Section 6: Justifying Linguistic Interventions - The Long Game and Diachronic Communicative Intentions

Some pressing concerns regarding the communicative strategy discussed have been raised. The disruptions are risky communicative behavior. They won't always work. The ameliorator intentionally risks prolonged misleading or worse. It's not always going to be the case that her audience can look back on the exchange and see that it was the improved meaning that was intended. Interventionists even risk detrimentally undermining the functioning of the language system, or they may end up silencing themselves – in a manner much like what McGowan (2013) calls *sincerity silencing*.

But it is important to note that even though Amanda, the reappropriator Mia, the uncharitable interpreter and the onesie-interventionist used disruptions to contribute to their projects, they didn't have ill intentions in doing so. In this section, I outline how we might understand the communicative intentions of the ameliorator in a way that makes them unproblematic.

In order to do so, let's summarize the communicative situation I am characterizing: A utters S to B, A knows that in their public language S means that q. A doesn't believe that q or is indifferent towards q, but A wants S to mean that p and wants this speech act to be part of the revisionary process. A intends for B to, at first, get the false or defective belief that q – then, somehow, that belief, in addition to a number of other events, will accomplish the revision. B can then think back on this communicative exchange and realize that it was p that was the ultimate communicative intention. B can also gain the now true, intended belief that p. In this way, A and B were part of a transformative miscommunication.

In characterizing the situation in this way, we see that the ameliorator is interested in the communicative “long game”, not just what's going on in their own communicative context, or with the community of speakers that speak their shared language at the time of her utterance.

She intends for her speech to eventually be understood as she wants it to be – i.e., with its ameliorated meaning. The ameliorator has *diachronic communicative intentions* – communicative intentions that

are not relevant to her context, but project into future communicative contexts and future linguistic communities.

Diachronic communicative intentions might be more common than one might think, even independently of the issues of amelioration and conceptual engineering discussed here. There are circumstances when speaking in this way seems justified and appropriate. For instance, parents and teachers often tell white lies to their children or students in order to aid their understanding of some difficult subject matter. They do so, knowing that the child (student) will eventually understand the full complexity of the subject, and that some white lies acted as a stepping stone to that understanding.

Conclusion

Changing language, while necessary, is difficult. This paper has considered one important reason for its difficulty: it can often lead to miscommunication and confusion. I presented several ways we can use language which might lead to this sort of miscommunication and confusion. But then I argued that these supposed problems can actually be beneficial. It's *good* that changing language leads to miscommunication and confusion, because that can cause speakers to reflect on their language, and that will lead them to focus on its flaws and ways to improve them. I called this process transformative communicative disruption. The sort of reflection transformative communicative disruptions can bring about is the sort of thing anyone interested in changing language for the better should care about fostering, and so we should embrace transformative communicative disruptions.

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