

SAUL: POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT TERMS AND PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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I. CASE STUDY: HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE TERM 'WOMAN'

a sex term that picks out individuals based on biological traits

or

a gender term that picks out individuals based on social characteristics

(STH) SEX TERM HYPOTHESIS BIOLOGICALLY BASED

pro:

accords better with ordinary usage

contra:

intersexed people

transwomen

unclear what counts as women and what don't

(CH) CONTEXTUALIST HYPOTHESIS A CONTEXT-SHIFTING, SIMILARITY-BASED TERM

pro: transwomen are women disregarding biological status e.g. undergone treatment or not

contra: women have specific DNA

People use the term "woman" in several ways without inconsistency

Context-sensitive definitions are flexible enough to allow for such use

$woman_{df=X}$ is a woman is true in a context C iff X is human and relevantly similar (according to standards of C) to most of those people possessing the biological markers of female sex

Time to consider some examples:

INTERSEX CASES

The truth of

(1) Amanda is a woman

depends on the purpose or direction of the context of utterance /cf. Grice Cooperative principle/

(1) is true granted that self-identifying matters (self-experience), false if biological properties matter (cancer screening)

TRANSWOMEN

uncertain case, lacking clear criteria, because (a) not woman biologically from birth, (b) not self-identifying as girl from childhood

Intuitions diverge.

Contextualism allows for this: denying and assenting to (1) are equally possible, equally correct.

The case of comparative adjectives: an analogy
comparison with “tall”:

(2) 4-year old Lydia is tall

will be true in certain contexts, false in others

BUT

that (1) can be both true and false depending on context seems morally and politically wrong

CHALLENGES TO (CH) CONTEXTUALISM

- mixed contexts: speaker and hearer have different contexts in mind
- ordinary speakers would reject that “woman” has a meaning that varies with context
- non-literal uses of the term may turn out to be true (ex. Margaret Thatcher is not a woman)

II. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

1. REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES: DOES CONSIDERING THEM DISTORT OR REVEAL?

Contextualism can be explained away for examples that don’t matter in the real-world sense. In such cases intuitions are pure and theorizing is guided by standard conceptions.

Views in philosophy of language are in part supported by reflections of cases.

If cases with and without real-world significance yield different results, we need to focus on both kinds of cases /but what if intuitions can’t be made to agree in such cases?/

2. CONTEXTUALISM FAILS TO DO JUSTICE TO THE TRANSWOMEN’S OWN IDENTITY CLAIMS

Claims of transwoman and their opponents are equally acceptable on contextualism.

Accordingly, failure to consider, or take seriously, political and moral claims is a legitimate objection to contextualism.

It is politically unacceptable not to do so.

However, this view is not obvious within contemporary philosophy of language.

Haslanger's three kinds of philosophical analysis

- conceptual inquiry: manifest concept or meaning
- descriptive inquiry/operative concept or meaning
- ameliorative inquiry/target concept or meaning (the desirable one, because it serves our legitimate purposes)

The present inquiry

(i) is ameliorative, or

(ii) involves all three projects, or

(iii) is unable to separate out the three projects

?

SAUL:

With politically significant terms we have a moral and political responsibility to consider the political consequences of one's view.

THE STRATEGY OF EXPLAINING AWAY POLITICAL WORRIES

(1) what is said is not offensive, only seems to be so

or

(2) although offense is conversationally implied, what is meant (conveyed) is not really offensive, because the analysis is not intended to be offensive /i.e. cancellation/

This strategy is itself offensive in the case of the kind of terms under discussion.

SAUL'S FINAL CONCLUSION

The issues that have been discussed in the paper at least potentially have relevance also for philosophy of language at large, perhaps especially so for how to work with cases and intuitions in philosophical analysis.

There are certain live tests a theorist can perform to determine whether an expression *e* is context sensitive. These tests are 'live' in this sense: they require the theorist to actually use *e* while performing the test. It requires the theorist to confront intuitions about her own language in use, not just about other people's use of language (or her use in other contexts). To introduce the first live test, recall that a mark of a context sensitive *e* is that it can be used with different extensions (semantic values) in different contexts of utterance. It follows that we can use a context sensitive *e* in this context [i.e. the context of this paper] with an extension different than one it takes in another context. In effect, what we're suggesting is that the theorist try to determine whether *e* is like that by actually using *e*.

/comparative adjectives held to be semantically linked to degrees on a scale of height/