

SE The Politics of Language

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Instructor: Dr. Indrek Reiland

Midterm paper by Theresa Riess (11718597)

Dogwhistles are a phenomenon widely spread and used, particularly in the political realm. In this paper I want to add to the examples of political dogwhistles from the US American history one from Austria's recent history which has yet not been discussed. My focus will be covert intentional dogwhistles. Firstly, I will revise shortly the definition on covert intentional dogwhistles with Saul's account. Then I will introduce one dogwhistle in form of a political print ad from the state election 2023 in Lower Austria and analyze it. Lastly, I will look at Saul's explanation of dogwhistles as perlocutionary acts and argue why this account is not sufficient to illuminate the nature of dogwhistles. In the conclusion, I will shortly draw on what I find to be the most appealing account on dogwhistles, focusing on the form of coded words.

Covert intentional dogwhistles

Covert intentional dogwhistles play an important role in the race discourse in America and surely do so too in Austria due to its history of racism. What Mendelberg calls „implicit political communication“, is in Saul's terms a „covert dogwhistle“. (365) One characteristic of such a speech act is that the coded concealed message can be denied when facing for example racial accusations in favor of a message that on its face appears to be innocent and unrelated to race. (365) Covert intentional dogwhistles are thus particularly complicated to make sense of and harder to consciously recognize. (364-365) The reason for this is that the content of the coded message communicated via the dogwhistle is not a particular proposition. (371) Pre-existing beliefs and attitudes are brought to salience on an unconscious level which is intended by the speaker using the dogwhistle. Exactly because a dogwhistle's success is carried out when the recipient is not aware of the speaker's intention and the dogwhistle can be fought and denied, we face problems in attempting to reveal the intention of such a speech act used to convey covertly a coded message.

Covert intentional dogwhistle in Austria's politics

In 2023 the ÖVP presented an ad in their political campaign for the state election of Lower Austria in favor of the politician Johanna Mikl-Leitner. The poster read

„Muttersprache: Niederösterreich“

Semantically, interpreting the dots as (generally used as) „equal as“, we deal with a simple proposition $f(x) = y$. The subject x is unknown. Considering all of this the ad read:

„Die Muttersprache ist Niederösterreich“.

The term „mother tongue“ is generally known to be used to say what one's first language is one learned to speak. Lower Austrian is the local accent of Lower Austria. These are the two quantities we deal with

in this proposition. Syntactically, this sentence is complete now. The literal meaning of this sentence is that the mother tongue (of someone, a group of people or a nation) is the state Lower Austria. This does not make sense literally unless we assume a figurative meaning. I thus suggest substituting the noun "Niederösterreich" with its correspondent adjective "niederösterreichisch":

„Die Muttersprache ist niederösterreichisch“.

Still, we would face the problem in assigning the subject to this sentence. As the visual's content is essentially the politician herself, we could say that what the message semantically means is not that the mother tongue of some arbitrarily chosen person, a group of people or the nation is Lower Austrian but that *her* mothertongue, the mothertongue of Mikl-Leitner is Lower Austrian. Yet, it cannot be confidently concluded but only interpreted. The subject could also be all three people shown on the ad, the potential voter, or some combination. Clearly, the semantic ambiguity doesn't lie in the interpretation of a specific term like „mother tongue“ or „Lower Austrian“ but rather in the subject being unclear. Whose mother tongue is meant?

I suggest we go along with the first, most intuitive interpretation as the slogan is put next to the politician's face which would provide us an unambiguously semantic meaning such as:

„Meine Muttersprache ist niederösterreichisch.“

Let's dip into the pragmatics. To the general audience it is obvious that the mother tongue of the politician is Lower Austrian for various reasons. Uttering this would flout the Gricean maxims of quality and relevance. Mikl-Leitner has been knowingly the governor of Lower Austria since 2017 and Mikl-Leitner is in fact Lower Austrian. Even though, for some reason one would not know that she has been the governor of Lower Austria or that she was Lower Austrian, one would know qua this political ad that she has been the governor as the term „governor“ and her name can be seen next her face on the ad. The intention of the message is not likely to have been to tell the people living in Austria with the help of this election campaign that her mother tongue is indeed Lower Austrian and that she has been the governor under the current government. The intention must have been something else. This is my claim.

The ad's complete (interpreted) proposition such as "Meine Muttersprache ist niederösterreichisch" could intent to communicate some different things via conversational implicatures. I found four distinct implications. However, none of them convey relevant information in favor of the politician, unless one holds racist resentments. Firstly, it can convey that she is passionately connected to Lower Austria and its accent to an extend that she wants to say it again (even though the general audience knows that). This message would not be relevant to the election as the connection to Lower Austria and its accent would not make one a better candidate than someone else, but her abilities. Secondly, it can convey that she wants to point out the fact that she is not only Austrian, but Lower Austrian. This too would not be a new or relevant information to the general audience since again the nationality of the candidate does not play a role, but her abilities. Thirdly, it can convey that she might speak other languages or another Austrian accent but intends to make the general audience recognize that her first language is still and will always be Lower Austrian. This message does not seem to be relevant in the political realm as one's first language being the accent of the state in which the election takes place does not make

one a better candidate. Lastly, it can convey that despite the fact that no one would say that one's mother tongue is an accent, she wants to say it, because it is relevant to her and she intends people to know that. This message does not seem to be politically relevant either as one's ability to hold a position of political power is not dependent on one's mother tongue being an accent, but her abilities.

Linguistically, on both semantic and pragmatic levels, the political ad conveys the relevance of the candidate's ability to speak the accent of Lower Austria (as such and as her mother tongue) in the political election.

Let's look at the visuals now. I assume the general agreement that political ads' visuals intentionally communicate messages too. The ad shows Mikl-Leitner, a white woman next to another white person to her right and what can only be the blurred silhouette of long blond hair usually connotated with white skin to her left (a fringed beige curtain would not make any sense to me). In a nutshell we see white people. The message overtly intended by the visual content could be but that she likes wearing the color light blue or that she looks good for her age. This being politically irrelevant, it is more reasonable to think that the message intends to convey that she likes talking to people or that she is a social person. But again, the people in ad are all white.

This is a covert dogwhistle. The conveyance of whiteness in terms of skin-color visually and of the relevance of Lower Austrian as the politician's mother tongue linguistically together communicate codedly that there is racial resentment toward people who are non-white or not speaking Lower Austrian. Following Mendelberg's account on dogwhistles two distinct messages are successfully being communicated with a coded intentional dogwhistle, one being a non-racial and one a racial message, I suggest that they would be the following:

- i. Non-racial: Mikl-Leitner's mother tongue is Lower Austrian.
- ii. Racial: Mikl-Leitner is white and from Lower Austria in comparison to other potential candidates and therefore has especially the interests of these groups in mind.

Unfortunately, there is not more secondary information or data similar like in the Willie Horton ad Saul discusses (366). It is a recent ad that has not been discussed in the media regarding its coded message. There is no data on the level of racial resentment or moreover on the relationship between racial resentment and voting intentions in connection to the ad. What we know is that this election turned out to be particularly successful for the right-wing party FPÖ never having been that strong in elections in Lower Austria. While the FPÖ held openly a lot of racial resentment in their political campaign, the ÖVP seemed to have followed the norm of racial equality, at least explicitly. Interestingly, the widely discussed scandal concerning the election was its outcome, namely Mikl-Leitner's decision to form the state government together with FPÖ. The question arised why she chose to do this regarding their overt racial resentment. When considering the ÖVP's political ad as a covert intentional racial dogwhistle, this decision does not seem surprising. The racial resentment was shown overtly and intentionally on the side of FPÖ and, as one could claim, covertly and intentionally on the side of ÖVP.

Theories of dogwhistles

It seems to me that to explain dogwhistles there are three ways having been suggested by philosophers. One is dealing with the speaker's side, one is dealing with the hearer's side, and one is dealing with the phenomena during the communicative acts or the conversation in general between the speaker and the

hearer, e.g. conversational score. It seems to me that we can only deal with these three realms of focus when trying to find out the way coded language, in particular coded words, works:

- i. Speaker's side
- ii. Hearer's side
- iii. Both speaker and hearer's side, e.g. conversational score during the utterance

While Stanley's theory of multiple dimensions of semantic meaning belongs to the first group (i), Khoo's tacit inference theory and Saul's account belongs to the second group (ii) and the third group (iii) would be Langton and McGowan's theory originally about hate speech. I want to focus on Saul's theory.

Saul's theory of dogwhistles as perlocutionary acts

Saul suggests Austin's notion of perlocutionary acts as an explanation for dogwhistles. (376) Perlocutionary acts are the effects of an illocutionary speech act, the act of doing something by saying something. Saul explains dogwhistles in terms of their effects. She claims that because they bring about effects, so they can be seen as perlocutionary speech acts. (377) She simply adds terms that provide information for its covertness, overtness or the information whether it was unintended or intended. So we have A.1. instead of A and B.1. instead of B and so on:

- | | |
|----|------------------------------|
| A. | Intended overt dogwhistle |
| B. | Intended covert dogwhistle |
| C. | Unintended overt dogwhistle |
| D. | Unintended covert dogwhistle |
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- | | |
|----|--|
| A. | 1. Intended overt perlocutionary speech act |
| B. | 1. Intended overt perlocutionary speech act |
| C. | 1. Unintended overt perlocutionary speech act |
| D. | 1. Unintended covert perlocutionary speech act |

As long as the intended perlocutionary act is not recognized as intended on the hearer's side, one can talk about the success of a covert perlocutionary act. Saul also mentions the utterance in the case of deception as a covert perlocutionary act. (377) On this account, one can explain why dogwhistles and code words such as "inner city" can be cancelled because when the dogwhistle is denied we do not deal with a dogwhistling speech act anymore but just another kind of speech act. Simply put, the effect is in force, when the dogwhistle is successful and covert, thus not consciously noticed by the audience. The effect is not in force, once the dogwhistle is cancelled. Both scenarios work. There is no incoherence like in the semantic account of Stanley for example, where p and $\neg p$ contradict each other.

This explanation does not seem unreasonable to me, but it seems too weak. Saul claims that perlocutionary speech acts are "unsystematic collection of acts, difficult to theorize" and that Austin does not "provide much at all in the way of perlocutionary theory". (376) The example of the illocutionary speech act of getting married is brought forward as simple in contrast to its "intended perlocutionary acts of being happy, making one's ex jealous, getting to wear that lovely dress (...) and the unintended perlocutionary acts of making one's parents cry, devastating a secret admirer, inspiring friends to get married, and so on." In my point of view this collection of potential intended or unintended perlocutionary acts holds two problems. First, it makes it seem that those acts – whether unintended or intended - can be somehow comprehensible due to some verifiable connection to the illocutionary act. But they only seem so because of one reason, and this is the second problem. These perlocutionary acts, particularly the unintended ones, come from purely stereotypical ideas of the effects of the

illocutionary act of marrying. In fact, we would not be able to distinguish between intended or unintended perlocutionary acts that easily. In theory, we could add to this collection an endless list of acts which are true and randomly call them perlocutionary acts. For example, the perlocutionary act of acquiring citizenship could be unintended and overt, intended but covert (by one lying when doing the illocutionary act) or intended and overt. Lastly, how do we know if a perlocutionary act really derives from the illocutionary act? How do we know that the parents are happy because of the illocutionary act rather than of another illocutionary act produced by themselves?

It seems to me that all utterances have some intended or unintended perlocutionary act as an effect. This is the reason why we speak, to create effects. To communicate means to make someone know something as an effect of my effort to communicate in form of a speech act. Showing the examples above, we could bring all effects coming from an illocutionary speech act into dependence with a potential covert dogwhistle. Yet, this seems absurd.

What is missing in Saul's account is an explanation of *how* those dogwhistles function without merely referring to their effects as a fact. Putting dogwhistles together in a basket with the notion of deception seems reasonable in terms of effects maybe, but not in the way those two forms of speech acts function. They are not two similar kinds of perlocutionary acts the way they work to me. If one wants to classify, would it not seem more plausible to say that dogwhistles are a form of deception and deceptions bring about effects (as many other speech acts) and so they belong to the category of covert intentional perlocutionary acts?

Saul writes that "unintentional perlocutionary acts are extremely common, so there's nothing particular special going on, except that these unintended effect area part of someone' else's (not the speaker's) plan" (377). As the focus of the theory is on the effects on the hearer's side, there is not really a way of going deeper into the functioning of dogwhistles on the side of how they are built. Moreover, we face a problem with the issue of accountability. Let me give the following example:

P says x to R. R says x to S. S says x to U. x has an effect e on U.

If P has the plan to bring about the intended effect e in uttering x and R and S are the ones uttering x with the intended effect e without knowing P's original intention, we deal with a case of manipulation. Yet following this model, we could also say, that in this world we all are affected by some covert (un)intentional dogwhistle x that once was intended by a speaker. We could say that all our actions are effects of a covert intentional or unintentional perlocutionary act. Yet, this would be again absurd.

What I mean is that the explanation in terms of effects seems too weak to illuminate to the peculiarity of dogwhistles. What is interesting about dogwhistles are not (only) the effects as such, but particularly how those effects are being produced by undermining the semantic meaning and playing on an utterance's ambiguity.

Conclusion

Neither merely pragmatic linguistic mechanisms nor merely semantic linguistic mechanisms alone can do the work to explain dogwhistles. It is beyond the scope of traditional philosophy of language, and this is why they are of great interest. Even though we rely on the two notions of Semantics and Pragmatics, dogwhistles show that those two accounts by themselves are not sufficient to capture the peculiarity of their nature.

In my opinion Stanley's theory of "multidimensionality theory of code words" does not seem plausible as Khoo suggests that the not-at-issue content can be cancelled without the utterance sounding odd. (Stanley, Quaranto 130) But it does not seem plausible either that dogwhistles function as a pragmatic mechanism only on the hearer's side. The theory would help to explain why utterances unconsciously bring racial attitudes to bear where they might previously not have had an effect for some but not for others. But the inferences drawn by the audience as a conditional ($X \rightarrow Y$) on the ground of their pre-existing stereotypical belief from a coded word seem too universal to be independent of the code word's semantic meaning. For many I would say, it seems clear that even though "inner city" does not *mean* anything about race, when "inner city" is uttered the topic of race comes into one's mind as a response. The conditional could be universal, but for some it is conscious and some it is unconscious.

Apart from these thoughts, Stanley and Beaver's theory seems reasonable. They combine a semantic account with a pragmatic account, suggesting the semantic not-at-issue content and taking on an account of speech practice into the non-at-issue content that enables them to explain its cancelability. To engage in a speech practice and utter "inner city" there is no requirement of endorsing the non-at-issue content. Khoo's objection is fair when he points out that "since to presuppose p seems to require at least being committed to p (...)" (155) However, I do not see where Stanley and Beaver introduce the notion of presupposition. Rather, if I understand correctly, they say that one can utter "inner city" being committed to its foregrounded at-issue content but not being committed to its backgrounded not-at-issue content.

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