18 How does language wield power over us? Can it overpower us?

This chapter deals with four different types of powerful or manipulative language use. I go through them one by one, in each case introducing some new terminology. The terms to look for are listed here. Since it is important for the readability of this chapter that you familiarize yourself with these terms, the definition or explanation of each one is given in boldface the first time it comes up in the discussion:

presupposition
entailment
cancelability test
conversational implicature
frame/framing
taboo terms

One of my favorite topics to cover in the semantics class that I teach at Swarthmore College is "presuppositions" and what happens when they are false. A **presupposition is something that speaker and listener take for granted when they produce or interpret an utterance.** The statement "He quit smoking," for example, presupposes that "he" used to smoke. You can't quit doing something that you never did. Because a presupposition has to be true if the utterance that presupposes it is true, it is called a type of **entailment.** Sentence A, "He quit smoking," entails sentence

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B (its presupposition), "He used to smoke," because if A is true, B must·be true as well.

To help students remember what a presupposition is, I ask them to imagine the following scenario. You are in court, being interrogated, and you are wrongly accused of beating your dog. A clever lawyer might ask you, "Have you stopped beating your dog?" If you are instructed to answer either yes or no, what would you say? If you say yes, you are asserting that you are not beating your dog now, but you are also admitting to having beaten your dog. The alternative, saying no, is even worse because now you are saying both that you are currently beating your dog and that you have beaten him in the past. So, neither yes nor no is an appropriate answer. The only way to get out of this mess is to say that you cannot answer this question because it comes with a false presupposition. You never did beat your dog, so whether you stopped cannot be an issue.

Clearly, this is a scenario in which language can overpower us. Unless the person being interrogated here knows about verbs like *quit* and *stop*, which come with a presupposition, or otherwise manages to stay calm and unintimidated enough to explain that this simply is not an appropriate question, the person is in trouble.

Similar scenarios, in which utterances come with·a hidden layer of meaning, involve advertisements. Flipping through a magazine, we get bombarded with ads seemingly promising us the world. A common strategy of advertisers is to use modals (i.e., auxiliary/helping verbs) like *can* or *may*. Reading a slogan like "X can help you Y within days," where X is some product and Y is something that X is supposed to help us do, we automatically think that it actually does Y. For example, a skin care product might be marketed with the slogan "X can help your skin clear up

within days." Great, you think, this is what you've been looking for. You are falling for the hidden layer of meaning, which here is the implication that product X does indeed help clear up your skin within days. Applying the so-called cancelability diagnostic, which tests whether the meaning one would infer from an utterance is an actual, undeniable entailment or merely a conversational implicature, we discover that product X does not promise all that much. It is perfectly fine to say the following (and I'm applying the cancelability test here):

Product X can help clear up your skin within days, but in fact, it does not.

Although it is conversationally implicated that the product actually does help clear up your skin, that is, people read the ad and are naturally led to assume that it does, this inference the public draws can easily be canceled or denied. So, if you decide to sue the company that made the product because your skin did not improve at all, the company will probably laugh at you and say that its ad says nothing about the product actually helping. All it says is that it can help (not that it does help). On top of that, it says only that it can help, not work miracles without other measures. Moreover, "within days" doesn't even give the consumer a measurable span of time. There is no mention of a certain number of days within which the product is supposed to be effective.

Ads that say something like "If you use X, you will Y," while they do make a promise of effectiveness, employ a similar strategy because they, too, give rise to a conversational implicature, that is, they invite us to infer something that seems to hold but can easily be canceled. Let's say X is a learning aid, and Y stands for doing better in school. The slogan might read, "If you use X, your child will do better in school." If you happen to have

a child that is not doing well in school and are worried that you as a parent might fail to help the child succeed, you probably read the ad and think that if you don't use X, your child won't do better in school. This is what the slogan invites us to conclude. But, again, is this implication actually entailed, or is it just conversationally implicated? Applying the cancelability test shows that, once again, the message is not as strong as it seems. It is fine to cancel the implication by saying,

> If you use X, your child will do better in school, but it is not the case that if you don't use X, your child won't do better.

There are certainly other ways that children can improve their performance in school, so parents should not feel guilty for not buying the product. Still, somehow, we do. Advertisements are devious that way.

Besides the courtroom and the world of advertising, another arena of life in which language can be unfairly manipulative is politics. Just as the question "Have you stopped beating your dog?" is impossible to answer with a simple yes or no if you have never beaten the animal, it is impossible to carry out directives like the following (I will get to examples involving political manipulation in a moment):

> Don't think of an elephant!

This is an impossible task because, in order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you, of course, have to think of an elephant. Why is that? Well, for one, you have to interpret the words of the utterance, which include *elephant,* and in doing that you evoke a frame that includes a wide range of knowledge that comes with your understanding of what an elephant is. So, there you are, stuck thinking about an elephant (and perhaps Africa and/or Asia

and perhaps ivory poaching or animal endangerment in general and potentially many other things).

People with political agendas (of any bent) can exploit these frames to their benefit. Let's take an example that has been analyzed at great length in the literature: the term *tax relief*. Focus your attention on the word *relief* in particular. If we have relief, then we certainly have some affliction from which we are relieved, and afflictions must have people they strike: the afflicted. In addition, relief entails forces that rescue the afflicted from the affliction. This feels very much like the elements of a story in which we have a victim (the afflicted person) of a crime (the affliction) who is rescued by a hero (the source of relief). We all know crimes are bad and heroes are good, and any decent victim is grateful to a hero. So this particular frame (the tax-relief frame) sets in motion a whole scenario that we have been conditioned to respond to in certain ways.

Now, let's say you don't believe that tax cuts are beneficial, and so they cannot be a form of relief, and you are asked to defend your position. You face a difficult, if not impossible, task. So long as the term *tax relief* is used in the question, as it is here,

> Some say that more tax relief creates more jobs. You have voted against increased tax relief. Why?

the tax-relief frame will be evoked. Furthermore, even if your answer begins with an argument against the very existence of such a thing as tax relief, the very use of the words will reinforce the frame. Just as people cannot help but think of an elephant when somebody tells them not to, people cannot help but think of a crime, a victim, a hero, and so on when they hear talk about tax relief.

Moving on to another example of powerful language, **swear words** like *damn* and *bastard*, so-called taboo terms, can evoke a

strong emotional reaction from people, and sometimes that reaction is not the one the speaker is seeking. Consider this example (plucked from the linguistics literature) of a school superintendent who attempted to take a stand against racism by saying in a speech,

> Niggers come in all colors. To me, a nigger is someone who doesn't respect themselves or others.

The superintendent's intentions did not include making a racial slur. Indeed, his intentions were quite the contrary—he was trying to make the point that the derogative N-word is a name that people deserve to be called if they don't show respect for themselves or others, and this holds for people of any color or race. Nonetheless, regardless of his intentions, his use of the N-word shocked people, and the community reacted with outrage, as though he had, in fact, made a racial slur.

This particular reaction—one of taking offense where none is intended—is actually fairly common, particularly when the taboo term involves race, ethnicity, a particular religion, sexual orientation, or other areas that have a history of discrimination surrounding them. Most of us know that, and we recognize that we are taking a risk if we use such terms. Some of the people who categorically refuse to use taboo terms and refuse to allow their children to use them (at least insofar as they have control) feel that way precisely because they believe it is rude for anyone to take that risk. They might even object to the inclusion of examples of taboo terms in a scholarly discussion or book, like the present one.

Certainly, however, speakers don't all react in a single way to all taboo terms. Many of us consider the overall context in which a given taboo term is uttered and react in a way appropriate to that context, particularly if the taboo term involves things common to

all people (rather than discriminating against only certain groups of people), such as bodily effluent, genitalia, or sexual activity (as opposed to sexual orientation). If an adult says, "Shit," when talking casually at a barbecue and then a few moments later a three-year-old child, for example, drops his hotdog and says with dismay, "Shit," clearly echoing the adult, some people would even laugh. (This is not to say that the very people who laughed wouldn't then immediately explain to the child that such terms aren't to be used in polite society. That is, you might laugh even if you are someone who censors your own and your children's language.) There are also many people who use lots of taboo terms in casual language with friends, where the very sprinkling of one's language with these terms is a mark of the strength of the friendship. Those same speakers might be surprised or even offended if a stranger came up and out of the blue started speaking in that manner. Context definitely matters for these speakers.

Nevertheless, taboo terms always have the potential to evoke strong emotional reactions, which means they are great potential tools for manipulation. We're all aware of the use of taboo terms to incite people to action (perhaps to initiate a fight or to march in a protest or many other things) or to keep people from acting (perhaps demoralizing or belittling them into submission). Here I'll point out two quite different types of manipulation and leave it to you to recognize others around you.

My coauthor and I work in a rather elite small liberal arts college. When people find out where we work, sometimes they can feel a little intimidated. They'll say things like, "Boy, you sure must be a brain to teach all those brainy kids." My coauthor sometimes adopts extremely casual language in such situations in the hopes of putting the people at ease and helping them not to think of her as a snob. For example, she was having a construction crew put in

a tall bamboo fence at her house, and when they asked what it was like teaching at "the great Swarthmore," she said, "Generally, it's wonderful, but now and then it's hell, you know." She took a risk. The guys might have thought she was being phony and patronizing them (which she wasn't—she curses like a sailor). They might have been people who find taboo terms offensive and never use them. Either result would have been a pity. However, her hope was that they'd feel more comfortable with her—and not hesitate to come in to use the bathroom, get themselves a drink, or whatever. It was an attempt to manipulate—to make herself seem like one of them. Often when we try to fit into or relate in a friendly way to a new group we will use whatever language we believe is typical of that group—which sometimes might include taboo terms.

This example is quite straightforward, and the construction crew was probably aware of what my coauthor was trying to do. However, more subtle forms of manipulation with taboo terms occur all the time. This one involves a third Swarthmore professor, whom we'll call Professor B. Professor B has the habit of showing up in a class of primarily first-year students on the first day of the first semester of their college experience dressed in jeans and liberally dropping taboo terms and up-to-date teen language throughout his lecture. What is he hoping to do? We guess that he's using a kind of "shock and awe" approach. He's giving conflicting information, playing mind games with the students. On the one hand, he is the professor—he's the one at the lectern, and he's the old guy. On the other hand, he's just an ordinary guy (witness the jeans) who happens to be hip (witness the taboo terms and the most recent teen jargon), and he's inviting you (via his clothing and language) to speak to him just as you would to anyone else. He's sending a message: *Stay in this class, and you'll be shocked and awed throughout the term 'cause I'm exciting, and I know how to reach you, and you*

can always reach me. Is he effective? He's one of the more popular professors on campus (though neither my coauthor nor I feel comfortable at all with this kind of manipulation).

Summing up our exploration of language and power, I've presented a number of different scenarios in which utterances (or certain words within larger utterances) come with a level of meaning that can be extremely powerful without being immediately obvious to people. A presupposition is an entailment of an utterance that is silently taken for granted (i.e., not asserted as something that is at issue and open to discussion) and must be true in order for the utterance to be meaningful in a nonmanipulative way. A conversational implicature may seem like an entailment, which logically follows from an utterance, but it is not. It is just an implication that can be canceled. It can therefore be used to send a powerful message without a strong commitment on the part of the speaker (or writer). Framing allows speakers to evoke powerful thoughts in people's heads without giving them a choice in the matter. Finally, as for taboo terms, everybody knows how powerful their effect can be in certain obvious contexts, but they can be used to manipulate more subtly as well.

Further Reading

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