Original Articles

Special Issue on Dogwhistles
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Abstract: Philosophy of language has been witnessing for the last fifteen years or so, if not a turn, at least the rising of a new trend, with its usual methods applied to new non-semantic phenomena linked to language use in the context of politics, and with new methods arising from the distinctive features of the new subject matter. Among these phenomena, dogwhistles have taken somewhat of a center stage (other phenomena include ethnic slurs, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, propaganda and gender-inclusive language, among others). This special issue is devoted to their study. In this brief introduction, we seek to succinctly review the key aspects of the phenomenon. First, we present some intuitive examples; second, we put forward a preliminary characterization of dogwhistles; then we discuss some of the main issues raised by these examples, as well as some basic notions found in the literature. We close by presenting an overview of the articles to be found in the current issue.

Introduction - Special Issue on Dogwhistles

1. Introduction

Philosophy of language has been witnessing for the last fifteen years or so, if not a turn, at least the rising of a new trend, with its usual methods applied to new non-semantic phenomena linked to language use in the context of politics, and with new methods arising from the distinctive features of the new subject matter. Among these phenomena,

dogwhistles have taken somewhat of a center stage.[1] This special issue is devoted to their study.

Arriving at a precise characterization of what dogwhistles are, that all parties to the debate can agree upon, is a considerably difficult endeavor. This is, in no small part, due to the fact that the term dogwhistle itself is not a term of art, but an informal category that has seen the pressures of both theoretical and non- theoretical usage. As Witten (this issue) and Saul (2018) (among others) have pointed out, the term dogwhistle first appeared in the context of sociological studies, to put a name on the discovery that "[s]ubtle changes in question-wording sometimes produce remarkably different results. . . [r]espondents hear something in the question that researchers do not".[2] The term was subsequently picked up by the media, and under the pressure of that usage, it started to designate attempts at covert messaging, as well as more subconscious ways of priming discriminatory attitudes. Some philosophical debate ensued, and different frameworks for addressing the issue of dogwhistles appeared.

With such a variegated history, the best way to approach the philosophical issues concerning dogwhistles is to focus on the empirical domain of the debate, which comprises (but is not restricted to) examples like the following:

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[1] Other phenomena include ethnic slurs, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, propaganda and gender-inclusive language, among others (see Khoo and Sterken, 2021).

[2] Richard Morin, Washington Post, October 16, 1988, "Behind the Numbers: Confessions Of a Pollster", p. C1.

(1) Yet there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.[3]
(2) Another example would be the Dred Scott case, which is where judges, years ago, said that the Constitution allowed slavery because of per- sonal property rights. That's a personal opinion. That's not what the Constitution says.[4]
(3) By the same token, being "tested" and "reviewed" by agencies tied to big pharma and the chemical industry is also problematic.[5]

Distinctive of all these examples is that an overt, plain-text message readily retrievable by the audience coexists with a concealed or covert interpretation intended to be accessible only to a proper subset of that audience, which may be called the target or dogwhistle audience. Thus, for example, in (1), Bush is saying that there is power in the goodness, the idealism, and the faith of the American people, something everyone can understand. But only a few will pick up on the reference to a religious hymn well-known in the Evangelical community, and so few will understand that Bush is probably making a covert appeal to Evangelicals for their support.[6] In (2), anyone will understand that Bush will push for a Supreme Court judge that upholds the Constitution (a fairly uncontentious choice), but only part of the audience will get the reference to the anti-abortion movement made by citing the Dred Scott decision (usually linked to the issue of

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[3] George W. Bush, State of the Union speech, 2003.

[4] George W. Bush, presidential debate, October 8, 2004.

[5] Jill Stein, interview during a Reddit AMA session, 2016. https://amatranscripts.com/ ama/jill_stein_2016-05-11.html.

[6] The hymn is "There is power in the blood."

abortion by the anti-abortion movement itself). The same goes for the anti-vaxxer message contained in (3), done by means of the phrase 'big pharma'.

As a rough and ready characterization, then, we may describe dogwhistles as complex speech acts performed with the intent of passing a covert message to, or eliciting an interpretative process on, a given target audience, without alerting a larger audience (of which the target audience is a part) of the presence and the content of that message.

In this preliminary characterization, we can identify and isolate at least two distinctive features of dogwhistles that make them powerful tools of political manipulation: directionality and plausible deniability. Directionality captures the fact that dogwhistles are specifically directed at a subset of the audience, with the intention that only this subset consciously entertains the covert mes- sage. Deniability, in turn, refers to the fact that a dogwhistle, if successful, allows the speaker to coherently and reasonably deny having issued a covert or implicit message.

In the past years, different approaches have been essayed in order to account for the complexity of dogwhistles. The contributions to this volume help placing the debates into perspective, by offering novel accounts of the theoretical (and practical!) issues related to dogwhistles. In the remainder of this introduction, we summarize the main issues addressed by the contributions that follow.

2. Definition and characterization

As we already remarked, characterizing dogwhistles is far from a simple task. The first precise characterization was provided by Kimberley Witten in an un- published manuscript (Witten, 2008), a characterization then taken up

by Jennifer Saul's influential "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language" (Saul, 2018):

> A dogwhistle is a speech act designed, with intent, to allow two plausible interpretations, with one interpretation being a private, coded message targeted for a subset of the general audience, and concealed in such a way that this general audience is unaware of the existence of the second, coded interpretation. (Witten, 2008, p. 2)

In her contribution to this issue, Kimberley Witten revisits her original definition of dogwhistles, taking into account the most recent developments. The result is a formal, speaker-based account of dogwhistles, based upon a novel eleven-part typological model that allows for their comparison with other related speech acts. Witten's new contribution promises to be an important advancement in our understanding of dogwhistles, by bringing the insights and methods of linguistics into what has become a mostly philosophical debate. In the course of the discussion, several linguistic features of dogwhistles are addressed, exploring the role of audience design (Bell, 1984), relevance (Grice, 1975), and narrative coherence (Duranti, 2006), as key ingredients of how dogwhistles achieve their goal.

As Saul points out, Witten's characterization covers only a special kind of dogwhistle (even if an important one), which she calls overt intentional dog- whistle. This is indeed another issue that has caught the attention of scholars: whether dogwhistles should be regarded as a uniform phenomenon or, in turn, different kinds of dogwhistles should be distinguished, and if so, on which grounds. In this regard, Jennifer Saul's classification of dogwhistles has proven useful (Saul, 2018). Saul proposes to classify

dogwhistles along two axis, the intentional/unintentional axis, and the covert/overt axis. Thus, on the one hand, dogwhistles may be either intentional or unintentional, depending on whether the speaker has the intention to issue the dogwhistle; on the other hand, they may be either overt or covert, depending on whether the dogwhistle is meant to be consciously entertained by the target audience. This leaves us with four kinds of dogwhistles, overt-intentional, overt-unintentional, covert-intentional and covert-unintentional. This classification has organized a significant part of the debate about dogwhistles, which is often carried on by focusing exclusively on of these categories.

Luca Rappuoli's article concentrates on Saul's classification. Rappuoli starts by arguing that Saul's view successfully captures an actual and relevant empirical contrast and provides further empirical support for the view. However, according to Rappuoli Saul's systematization of dogwhistles falls short of providing an account of it on theoretical or conceptual grounds. He sets out to provide such an account by expanding on Khoo's (2017) Simple Theory of dogwhistles. In Khoo's view, dogwhistles function by strategically raising certain specific pre-existing beliefs into salience in the audience, which serve as the basis for inferring the intended message. Rappuoli argues that the asymmetry between overt and covert dogwhistles can be explained in terms of a difference regarding the cognitive status of such pre-existing beliefs: in cases of overt dogwhistling, people in the audience not only hold certain pre-existing beliefs, but they also know that they hold those beliefs, whereas in cases of covert dogwhistling, the pre-existing beliefs that serve as the basis for inferring the intended concealed message are not consciously accessible for the audience. According to Rappuoli, this difference accounts for the fact that only the audience of an overt (but not of a covert) dogwhistle is able to detect that a concealed

message has been issued to them. Likewise, the view allegedly captures the fact that, after people in the audience become consciously aware of the problematic pre-existing beliefs that a covert dogwhistle has raised to salience, they feel typically less inclined to draw the inferences intended by the speaker.

3. The inner workings of dogwhistles

We know from philosophy of language and linguistics that there are several ways in which a speaker may simultaneously transmit a multiplicity of contents to an audience (conversational implicature, conventional implicature, perlocutionary inferences, social meaning, among others). This raises the question of which of these linguistic mechanisms are apt to perform a dogwhistling speech act, and in which contexts? Put differently, which linguistic mechanism (if any) from the philosopher's semantico-pragmatic toolkit may help us account for the directional and plausibly deniable character of dogwhistles?

Several proposals have been put forward in the literature in order to answer these questions. Henderson and McCready (2019) offer a purely pragmatic, persona-based account of dogwhistling according to which dogwhistles convey an explicit message to all of the audience, while implicitly transmitting a message about the speaker's identity, a persona, to a targeted sub-audience;[7] Stanley (2015)

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[7] They model this phenomenon using Bayesian signaling games as developed in Burnett (2017, 2019). Roughly put, within this framework messages have, in addition to their standard denotational meaning, a social meaning which signals a set of possible personae. Thus, in choosing a given message the speaker aims at restricting the possible personae the hearer can assign to her when interpreting the

maintains that dogwhistles function by conveying not-at-issue meaning by means of conventional implicature; Khoo (2017) argues in favor of an inferential theory, according to which dogwhistlers exploit the target audience's pre-existing beliefs in order to set off certain inferential processes in them; Saul (2018) treats overt intentional dogwhistles as carrying conversational implicatures, and covert intentional ones as performing a certain kind of perlocutionary speech act; and Lo Guercio and Caso (2022) provide an account of overt intentional dogwhistling on which a dogwhistling speech act may be accomplished through widely different linguistic mechanisms, like conversational implicature, perlocutionary inferences and even by appealing to ambiguous terms. In this is- sue, Maurizio Mascitti, Eleonora Orlando and Kimberly Witten offer interesting and novel approaches to the inner workings of dogwhistles.

Mascitti appeals to Clark and Carlson's (1982) theory of audience design. Clark and Carlson distinguish among several conversational roles that listeners may occupy, which are determined by the way in which the speaker decides to frame her utterance. Thus, listeners may be characterised as participants, to wit, listeners who the speaker intends to include in the conversation, or as overhearers, namely listeners who are not intended to be included in the conversation by the speaker, but that nevertheless witness the conversation. Among the latter, they identify eavesdroppers, listeners who have access to what the speaker says without the speaker being aware (put differently, it is not

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utterance. Speaker and listener choose their message and interpretation with the goal of maximizing the expected utility of the utterance, which is calculated by taking into account both the amount of information conveyed about the speaker's persona and the affective values assigned to the personae consistent with the message.

mutually know that they have access to what the speaker says), and bystanders, listeners who have access to what the speaker says while this is in fact mutually known by speaker and audience. Mascitti's main claim is that dogwhistles are speech acts whereby the speaker exploits variations concerning the part of the common ground that she shares with different subsets of her audience in order to change the conversational role of a part of such audience, the general audience, from participant to bystander, without letting the audience know that this change has taken effect. Put differently, to dogwhistle in Mascitti's view consist in disguising the general audience by letting them out of the conversation without them knowing that they have been let out.

Orlando argues that at least some dogwhistles function by virtue of evoking, in a subset of the audience, a narrative framework (a set of assumptions involv- ing both descriptive and normative claims about some issue or set of related issues), similarly to the way in which a film director may evoke a previous film by including in his own film a scene with certain properties. Orlando characterizes this narrative-evoking process as a kind of perlocutionary effect, hence produced through a non-Gricean mechanism. Now, the narrative framework in question may be evoked by the use of a certain expression or construction, by the allusion to a certain topic or by general properties of the text (e.g. by the writing style). The narrative is only evoked by the subset of the audience that is somewhat familiar with it, and crucially, the perlocutionary effect produced is undetermined: first, because narratives themselves are to some extent undetermined; second, because narratives may evoke different cognitive attitudes in the audience depending on the degree of familiarity they have with the narrative, the kind of epistemic relation with those assumptions, and the context in which the narrative was introduced; third,

because, as Orlando highlights, narratives also evoke or produce in the audience a set of emotions and practical dispositions. All these features affect the way in which they interpret the original utterance, imbuing it with pragmatic meaning.

Witten appeals to the notion of common ground and audience design to ex- plain how dogwhistles work. Briefly, dogwhistles achieve their goal by exploiting two different common grounds: the common ground the speaker shares with the audience at large (i.e. with the addressee of the plain-text or overt message), and the common ground the speaker shares with the target or dogwhistle audience (i.e. with the intended addressee of the coded or covert, dogwhistled message). By successfully exploiting these differing background assumptions, the speaker designs her message so as to pass different contents, only retrievable by the part of the audience in possession of the relevant common ground.

4. Prospects for action

Dogwhistles are a useful form of political manipulation also due to their second distinctive feature, plausible deniability. This feature raises both theoretical and practical issues. On the one hand, although the intuitive notion of plausible deniability is clear enough, a theoretically cogent concept has turned out to be more elusive (Lee and Pinker, 2010; Pinker et al., 2008; Mazzarella, 2023; Dinges and Zakkou, 2023; Camp, 2018). On the other hand, since the speaker may plausibly deny having conveyed a concealed message, she may use dogwhistles in order to transmit politically or morally problematic messages without having to face the consequences that would have ensued had she chosen a more direct approach. Put differently, the

dogwhistle strategy makes it difficult for audiences both to hold speakers accountable for their messages, and to identify, address or undermine potentially problematic views.

This raises the question of the best communicative strategy for countering dogwhistles. In this volume, Eduarda Calado discusses a particular strategy for countering the effects of dogwhistles, namely re-framing. Framing is defined by Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 104) as the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about it de- pending on how the topic is characterized. As defined by Calado, re-framing is a conversational maneuver by means of which the speaker replaces a problematic term with a new one without calling the speaker out. In doing this, the speaker seeks to reorient the conversational goals of the conversation by smoothly changing the question under discussion (QUD-shifting). Through the analysis of debates concerning undocumented citizens in the United States, Calado develops an account of re-framing and compares this strategy with direct challenges, weighting the pros and cons of each strategy.

5. Conclusion

Dogwhistles are an interesting and important phenomenon. They are interesting from a theoretical point of view, for they allow us to deploy and test the limits of our existing methods and tools of analysis, and force us to come up with new, better suited ones. And they are important because of their practical, political impact. We hope that the contributions in this special issue will help advance our understanding of dogwhistles, both in terms of how they work from a linguistic point of view, and of what we can do when they appear in public discourse. Such a deepened

understanding is more than needed in order to better deal with the challenges faced by modern democracies in an era where public political discourse presents us with different forms of political manipulation.

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