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Is This Offensive?

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the basic feature of human communication that makes the study of offensive expressions difficult. I argue for the need to acknowledge the distinction between expressions and ideas for an effective study of pejorative language. Following this, I propose that unintended offensive expressions are examples of failed communication. Finally, I argue that speakers cannot be held accountable for the offense caused in failed communications

1. Introduction

Since offensive expressions insinuate derogatory remarks about a certain party (individual or community), their usage is generally condemned. One can argue that pejorative language causes mental distress that leads to degradation of self worth and social alienation. In most cases, the effects of pejorative language manifest themselves as hindrances in acquiring new skills, loss of productivity and a general inability to fully realize an individual's potential. In certain extreme cases, frequent exposure to derogatory and condescending remarks can even lead to suicidal tendencies amongst people. Therefore, even in the strictest sense of Mill's harm principle, the censorship of offensive language is an area that requires sincere deliberation. However, analysis of any speech involving pejorative language is often rendered difficult due to the complexities of human communication.

In my paper, I will first explore the causes of the complexities which make the study of offensive language difficult. I will then establish the distinction between 'expressions' and

'ideas' and explain the importance that this distinction plays in the context of offensive language. Finally I will argue for an objective mode of analysing offensive language which eliminates ambiguity by effectively resolving the discussed complexities. I intend to simplify the study of pejorative language without being ignorant towards the practicalities of human communication.

2. Complexities of Communication

There are numerous complications that can make an analysis of pejorative language difficult. I will briefly discuss two of them and then explain the fundamental cause that leads to these complications.

2.1 Temporal Dependence of Language

Language is not a static entity and tends to evolve. Therefore, words can get associated with new meanings as time passes. For example, calling someone 'gay' in the past carried the undertone of associating them with characteristics of not being athletic, lacking strength, or being incompetent in handiwork. However, the word's meaning has gradually been reclaimed and is not considered a derogatory label anymore. This feature of language can lead to scenarios where the speaker and the listener accept frameworks of meanings from different times. While one meaning of a word can cause offence, another meaning of the same word can be innocuous.

2.2 Extra-Lingual Factors

I argue that human communication involves both lingual and extra-lingual factors. Lingual factors primarily include grammatical syntax and literal meanings of the used words. Extra-lingual factors, on the other hand, involve body-language, phrasing, diction, tone, volume etc.¹ Human beings, both voluntarily and involuntarily, tend to include the effects of extra-lingual factors while trying to understand the ideas being communicated to them. It is for this reason that even if the listener and the speaker agree that a certain expression is non-

¹ Such extra lingual factors can manifest themselves in certain forms even in written modes of communication

derogatory, the listener may still feel disrespected due to the speaker's tone while communicating. For example, let us consider that school teachers refrain from using slurs in the presence of students. Yet, students can still feel offended if the teacher interacts with them using a sarcastic tone that insinuates disrespect. Often theoretical examinations of pejorative language undermine the role of extra-lingual factors in real-life human communication. This makes it difficult to study the offense caused by non-slur words delivered with condescending extra lingual factors, and vice-versa.

2.3 Fundamental Problem

I believe most of the complexities in the study of offensive expressions arise from one fundamental characteristic of communication i.e. speakers and listeners independently associate meanings to communicated expressions. As an illustration of this point, let us suppose Tom is insulting Sam in Russian and Sam cannot understand Russian. Tom may associate derogatory meanings to his expressions while speaking. Sam, on the other hand, may associate those communicated expressions with incomprehensible gibberish while listening. The reason why Sam is not taking offense, even though offensive language is being used, is because the process of associating meanings to the expressions occurs independently for Tom and Sam.

I argue that discussions of offensive expressions need to factor meanings given to those expressions by both the speaker and the listener because we have no reason to prioritize one meaning over another. Using this idea, I will now propose an analysis of offensive language independent of expressions.

3. Placeholders for Ideas

I propose that we use linguistic expressions as placeholders for the ideas that we wish to communicate. This means that the sounds we generate while speaking and the symbols we draw while writing are mere modes to externalize our ideas. In case we strip these placeholders of the ideas that they were meant to represent, they become indistinguishable from random

noises or scribbles. This perspective on language makes it clear that no set of phonemes and letters is inherently offensive. Rather, the agents that cause offense are the ideas that are represented by these placeholders. Therefore, the discourse about pejorative language should be centered around the study of these ideas and not their placeholders.

An offensive idea can be defined as an idea that intends to derogate another party. An offensive expression is constituted of linguistic placeholders that represent offensive ideas. Therefore, the same expression can be offensive or innocuous depending on whether or not a person uses that placeholder to represent an offensive idea.

4. Failed Communication

Let us suppose a simple case where Rose refers to Violet as a 'bitch'. While Rose intended to use the word in a friendly playful manner to refer to Violet, Violet considered the word as derogatory and demeaning. The problem is that Rose and Violet are associating meanings to the word 'bitch' independently of each other. Without employing the distinction between expressions and ideas, labelling Rose's usage of 'bitch' as offensive or not would inevitably require us to accept only one meaning of the word. Such acceptance of a particular meaning would not be justified because we have no reason to prioritize one meaning over the other.

I propose that the fundamental purpose of communication is to convey the ideas that the speaker intends to share with the listener. An important thing to note is that even though I use the words 'speaker' and 'listener', the concepts I discuss are applicable to other non-verbal forms of communication as well. In our last example, Rose used 'bitch' to convey a certain inoffensive idea and Violet extracted a different idea from the word 'bitch'. Therefore, what we have in this situation is not a case of offensive expression but of failed communication. Additionally, in all cases where the speaker and the listener associate different meanings to the same expression, the ideas which the speaker intended to convey are not the same as the ideas

which the listener extracted from the expression. Therefore, all such scenarios are examples of failed communication.

5. *Defining the Domain of Accountability*

Since every individual adopts a unique framework of meanings through one's experiences and engagements with the surroundings, generally, it would be absurd to expect the speaker to know the listener's framework of meanings. Since there is no way to be absolutely certain about the meaning of an expression in the listener's framework, one should only be held accountable for ideas that they intended to convey and not for the ideas that were extracted by the listener. In other words, ensuring complete clarity in communication as a prerequisite before expressing an idea would be a practically impossible standard to meet.

Even in cases of failed communication, the speakers are only accountable for the ideas that they intended to convey because they cannot know all possible meanings of their expression *a priori*. Thus, the speaker cannot be held accountable for the offense caused in a case of failed communication. Similarly, in cases of failed communication where the speaker intended to cause offense but the listener did not take offense, the speaker should still be held accountable for the offensive expressions. This is because the ideas that the speaker wanted to convey were derogatory and the speaker can be held accountable for his or her ideas.

6. *Complete Clarity (Counter Argument)*

I claimed that ensuring complete clarity before communicating is an unrealistic standard to achieve because the speaker cannot be expected to know every meaning of an expression in all possible frameworks. One can argue that even if we accept the practical impossibility of knowing meanings in all possible frameworks, the claim remains irrelevant. This is because the speaker is not expected to know the meanings of all expressions in all

frameworks. Rather, the speakers are only required to know the meaning of the expressions that they intend to use in the framework of the person with whom they are communicating.

I agree certain expressions and conversations with certain listeners are less polysemous than others. The confidence in the success of a communication lies on a continuous spectrum. To ensure complete confidence *a priori* about the success of a certain conversation, the speakers have to be completely confident that the expressions which they intend to use have acquired the same meaning in the listener's framework. I argue that even though ensuring complete clarity is an important practice to be followed by the speaker to have successful communications, it cannot be imposed as a mandatory requirement before communicating.

A priori complete clarity as a requirement would result in one of two scenarios. First is the possibility that only those people would communicate who are confident about having a shared framework of meanings, using only those expressions that already exist in their shared framework. This would greatly reduce the scope of human communication by making it difficult to learn a language in the first place. Second is the possibility that before communicating, every speaker will have to introduce meanings of the expression which they are going to use. This too is impractical because the vocabulary which a speaker will use to introduce the meaning of an expression will be limited by the pre-existing shared framework, which may not even exist for certain scenarios. Therefore, to develop a theory of offensive language which neither limits human communication nor leaves room for ambiguity, one has to recognize the impracticality in expecting a speaker to ensure complete clarity *a priori*.

7. *Inconsequentiality Argument (Counter Argument)*

Usually, any discussion about the meaning of an expression happens after the expression has been delivered. For example, Rose and Violet would only discuss the different meanings of the word 'bitch' after Rose has used the word in a conversation with Violet. One could make the case that even if the speaker did not intend to cause offense via an expression,

the listener can still justifiably take offense. In such a case, the listener is still exposed to the ill effects of pejorative language that were discussed in the very first section of the paper.

If Rose would not have used the word 'bitch' in the first place, Violet would not have been exposed to the possibilities of mental distress. Therefore, one can draw a causal relationship between the speaker and the harm caused. Here a critic can argue that the proposed model takes away accountability from the speakers even if they were the reason for the harm being caused. Further, this model is pragmatically inconsequential in curbing future harm because it fails to hold the speaker accountable for the harm of the listener.

I agree that the proposed model does not hold the speaker accountable for the caused harm if it was unintentional. However, I contest the claim that this model is inconsequential in contributing towards curbing of future harm. Accountability towards harm is not eliminated by the proposed mode of analyzing pejorative language. Rather, the question of accountability arises only after the meaning has been discussed by both the parties. Imposing accountability before both the parties have had a fair opportunity to clarify their stance would inevitably be unfair to at least one of the stakeholders in the conversation.

I argue that holding someone accountable for unintentional harm is unfair because the agent that caused harm in a failed communication is the difference between frameworks and not a specific individual. Acknowledging and eliminating this difference by creating a shared framework of meanings can curb future harm without setting unrealistic standards for communication. In our example of Rose and Violet, once they discuss the different meanings of the word 'bitch', they create a shared framework of meanings where the word 'bitch' can be associated with either of the meanings. Since Rose is now aware of the fact that 'bitch' can carry a derogatory undertone even if she does not intend to, she can generally refrain from using the word 'bitch' to reduce the likelihood of causing unintentional harm. Similarly, since Violet is aware of the fact that 'bitch' can also carry an innocuous meaning, Violet would not

instantly take offense when Rose uses the word 'bitch'. In both scenarios, the creation of a shared framework prevented future mental distress for Violet without holding Rose accountable for unintentional harm.

8. *Conclusion*

The purpose of my inquiry was to simplify the study of pejorative language, which in turn simplifies the study of liberty of speech. I tried to do so by first understanding why complexities arise in any analysis of offensive language in the first place. I argued that the reason for such complexities is that human communication enables us to associate different meanings with the same expressions. After explaining that offensive expressions are placeholders for offensive ideas, I argued that any analysis of pejorative language should be focused on the ideas and not their placeholders. Following this, I argued that speakers should only be held accountable for the ideas they intended to convey and not the ones that were interpreted by the listener. I supported this proposition by arguing that complete clarity before communication is an impossible standard to achieve. Lastly, I brought together the concepts I introduced to present my final proposition- speakers are not accountable for the offense caused in failed communication, and vice-versa. With this, I tried to eliminate the ambiguity in discussion of offensive language and provide a more objective framework for understanding accountability of the harm that pejorative language causes.

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