

# **Ideological speech: semantics and pragmatics of contested and prejudiced expressions**

## **SUMMARY FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC**

“Language is not a neutral medium”, as Mikhail Bakhtin famously wrote. It is populated with the intentions and beliefs of its users: members of a society that is essentially divided and conflicted. And thus, many words and expressions function to signal or convey differences of opinion and social divisions. Some of them do it in ways that are deeply troubling: either because they express attitudes which cannot be easily accepted in public discourse, or because they obscure a controversial meaning under an apparently innocent guise. As a result, not just their content, but the very possibility or acceptability of their use is a matter of conflict, and if speakers use them, hearers may resist accepting what they say.

In my research project, I will investigate what I call “ideological speech”, which is an umbrella term for such problematic expressions. I will focus on two related categories. On the one hand, there are offensive epithets: words that are used to insult or denigrate people because of their membership in a certain social group (defined on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation etc.) or that presuppose and insinuate harmful stereotypes. Language users who do not share the attitudes expressed by such vocabulary, typically not only disagree with them, but find the very use of these words to be unacceptable. On the other hand, there are expressions which convey controversial meanings only indirectly or covertly, while apparently belonging to neutral, respectable speech. These are code words or dog-whistles, expressions that can be compared to the tools of propaganda. While not overtly offensive, they are often used with the aim that only some of the recipients - those sympathetic to the prejudiced attitudes conveyed - will pick up on them. And sometimes they serve as a kind of deception, to introduce otherwise unacceptable ideas into the public discourse.

Ideological speech is problematic both for our social life, and for our understanding of how language works. Our best theories of language use and communication tend to assume idealized models of communities of speakers that are cooperative and homogeneous. In such ideal conditions, when speakers utter words, meanings can be directly and (more or less) unambiguously attributed to them, constituting logical contents, which are then accepted (or rejected) by hearers, and the conversation proceeds through accumulation of such contents. Ideological speech does not fit easily into such a model for two reasons. First, the problematic expressions often make a double contribution to the conversation: they convey a basic, neutral meaning and somewhat separately express a problematic attitude, emotion or evaluation. While many theoretical devices exist for handling two-dimensional meanings of this sort, it is still unclear which of them should be used to account for different categories of ideological speech, and if there is a common solution for all of them. Second, and more importantly, the standard model does not make room for a situation in which the content proposed by a speaker is not simply accepted or rejected by the hearer, but rather the hearer objects to the very fact that something like that could be said. This is essentially different from a situation in which something that is said is incorrect or makes no sense. Ideological speech is understandable, but it is - for many people - wrong. And for some, it isn't. We need a model of language use that makes it possible to separate the acceptable from the unacceptable, and the reactions of different hearers which may or may not agree with the speaker's problematic assumptions. Moreover, the differences in these reactions are not random or entirely idiosyncratic, but they are correlated with political positions and social conflicts - and the model should be able to accommodate that, too.

The main aim of my project is to develop such a model, unifying the many different strands of research on kinds of ideological speech already present in philosophical and linguistic literature. The realization of this aim will constitute an important contribution both to philosophy of language and to social philosophy, illuminating the relations between the abstract logical structures of language and the concrete social reality of its use.