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# Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever, "Bad Language: Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy of Language."

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**Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever.** *Bad Language: Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy of Language.* Oxford University Press 2019. 240 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198839644); \$25.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198839651).

Cappelen and Dever have written an admirable textbook that addresses an important lacuna. As the third in a planned series by this highly esteemed pair—the prior two were 2016’s *Context and Communication* and 2018’s *Puzzles of Reference*—it is not intended as a comprehensive guide to philosophy of language. Designed for beginning undergraduates with no prior knowledge of the field, it aims to move philosophy of language instruction away from idealizations towards the ‘real world’ (xi).

*Bad Language* consists of twelve chapters, which collectively afford a fascinating survey of selected topics about language’s ‘dark side’ (xi). These cover: background notions; departures from cooperation (e.g., devious intentions, unshared contexts); departures from knowledge-sharing (e.g., mistakes, fiction, lying); bad concepts (e.g., the misuse of generics); bad lexical items (e.g., slurring words, terms which are vague or have unstable meanings); and bad linguistic actions (e.g., oppressing, blocking consent).

The book has much to recommend it. Though genuine ‘newbies’ will stumble over certain technical details, I found it clear and accessible. It includes excellent and convenient pedagogical apparatus: a detailed table of contents; well-conceived exercises; terrific, cutting-edge further readings; and chapter summaries. There are lovely, intriguing, intuitive examples that students will enjoy. (Though some will stump non-Americans. Undergraduates in, say, Dhaka or Fujian won’t necessarily know what Congress and the Second Amendment are. And even this Canadian neighbour had to google ‘Drew Scanlon’ and ‘Dred Scott’.) Most importantly, it successfully renders philosophy of language much more relevant to current social issues: in their hands, it isn’t all about ‘the’ and names; and its heyday didn’t terminate in the 1970s.

I’ll mention two pedagogical weaknesses. Precisely because it isn’t an overall introduction, an instructor would need to explain numerous background concepts. Contemporary debates about ‘bad language’ draw on, e.g., distinctions among types, ‘speakings’ and the tokens produced thereby. Such notions are addressed thoroughly in *Context and Communication* but not here. Additionally, there are exegetical issues. Granted, the book is not intended as history (xi), an interpretive simplification is desirable: getting authors exactly right would leave beginners lost. Still, it’s a matter of balance, and some will find too little attention paid to interpretive correctness. One could quibble, for instance, with how they portray in chapter 2 the nature and the roles of Grice’s said vs. implicated contrast. Since I found the account of speech act theory (§10.1) especially problematic, however, I’ll focus on that.

About locutionary acts, Cappelen and Dever write: ‘Alex utters some words with a particular meaning, and thereby *says that* she will give Beth a ride to the airport. What she says ... can be true or false’; they add that ‘a speaker’s locutionary act is *saying something* ...’ (161-2, their emphasis). Not for Austin. The locutionary merely involves: i) making a phonological ‘noise’ thereby uttering ii) a grammatical string with iii) a standing sense. Giving an example sentence or singing in the shower therefore count. They characterize the perlocutionary in terms of its effect being ‘further outside the domain of control of the speaker’ (163). Again, this is exegetically incorrect. Betting and appointing are paradigm illocutionary acts, e.g., despite the fact that hearer-uptake is required. Instead of who controls what, and to which degree, perlocutionary acts are distinguished qua *non-conventional* effects. These details matter. *Pace* their discussion, the locutionary isn’t truth-

evaluable: neither type meaning nor token meaning absent ‘broad context’ are truth-conditional in Austin. (More on this below.) And updating the common ground and oppressing are patently not illocutionary, they’re perlocutionary *par excellence*. (Their conjecture that *proposing* to update the common ground might be illocutionary is far more tenable. Some evidence: ‘I hereby oppress you’ and ‘I hereby cause everyone to presuppose that *p*’ are absurd. Not so ‘I hereby propose that everyone take for granted that *p*’.)

A book review wouldn’t be properly philosophical if it didn’t emphasize profounder qualms than the foregoing expository ones. As a prelude, notice two points, which emerge from a table of my invention, summarizing the book’s topics:

	‘Language’ as in Code/Linguistic Symbol	‘Language’ as in Talk/Speech
‘Bad’ as in not covered by idealized theorizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ambiguous or vague words/sentences</li> <li>- Unstable meanings</li> <li>- Words with emotional valence</li> </ul>	- Non-literal speech
‘Bad’ as in normatively improper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slurring words</li> <li>- Words lacking meaning</li> <li>- Terms that encode defective concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Epistemically problematic speech (merely false, false pre-supposition, fiction, not justified, bullshit, rhetoric, fake news)</li> <li>- Ethically problematic speech (blocking consent, coercion, manipulation, lying, oppression, insults, silencing)</li> <li>- Socially problematic speech (disunified audience, uncooperative, no shared common ground)</li> </ul>

There are, notice, four sub-varieties of ‘bad language’. And there is a great deal which is ‘bad’.

Regarding the first. Especially given a student audience, Cappelen and Dever don’t always distinguish the four clearly and deeply enough. Consonant with (mostly) eliding the type/action/token distinction, the book sometimes slides easily between language and talk—put in Chomskyan terms, between linguistic competence and speech performances. And the senses of ‘non-ideal’—exceptionable vs. abstracted from details—though wholly different, aren’t always distinguished either.

What’s more, it’s unclear why certain topics belong on any table of ‘non-ideal language’: some are much more wide-ranging than even language+talk. It is a feature of joint action generally that not all assumptions are shared, that there is obfuscation and offense, that there are failures of proper consent, that collective intentions get messy. It is characteristic of human cognition generally to deploy defective concepts and to be misled by generic reasoning. Yes, these also arise in conversing; but that doesn’t make them properly linguistic phenomena. (One can frighten a sweet, innocent dog using words, but such cruel dog-frightening doesn’t constitute ‘bad language’.)

Cappelen and Dever do note in places that ‘non-ideal’ is equivocal, that ‘language’ is too, and that many of their questions are translinguistic. However, the point can get lost.

The sheer quantity of ‘badness’ takes me to my second concern. What they treat as the ‘ideal’ strikes me as philosophically and empirically unhappy. Crudely, the ‘ideal’ is knowledge-conducive cooperation between one hearer and one speaker, using symbols having stable and clear extensions, where the message is under the complete control of said speaker. They rightly insist that this *is* an idealization. Too little attention is paid, however, to whether one should take it as the departure point for philosophy of language. They question how to modify this model (106), but not whether one should reject it outright. Put otherwise, they write, about swear words, slurs, etc.: ‘A central question then is how much we need to change the informational paradigm ... in order to account for this language, red in tooth and claw’ (106). This sounds to me like: ‘It’s a real simplification to say, with the psychologistic Empiricists, that meanings are sense-based mental images, and a central question is how far we need to reform their theory.’

Why might such brilliant philosophers take a (not just oversimple but) fundamentally wrong-headed perspective as their pedagogical departure point? I diagnose a historical hangover. Early Analytic philosophy developed extraordinarily powerful artificial axiomatic systems. These constituted a potent cocktail, but they yielded disagreeable morning-after effects. ‘Formalist’ theorizing about natural languages—English, Swahili, Urdu, etc.—took off from the Predicate Calculus *et al.* That made all but syntax and satisfaction conditions appear inessential to philosophy of language. Morphology was sidelined and phonology entirely ignored. Most pertinently here, in such formal logics meaning is exclusive about truth, reference, quantifiable relations among sets (generics thereby excluded), entailment relations among sentences, etc. Hence much of meaning pertaining to ‘nearside pragmatics’ appeared peripheral, marginal, maybe even normatively defective. Of course, the table above would end up overstuffed, given this content-as-logic hangover.

Does my diagnosis apply to Cappelen and Dever? Consider: ‘we have *meaningfulness* only when the *world is a certain way*’ (68); ‘Since prohibitionism *isn’t a theory about the meaning* of slurs, but rather a theory about the rules of permissible use for slurs, it *is silent on* the question of what the *truth conditions* of slurring claims are’ (103); ‘the sentence “Ana didn’t consent” can vary in *meaning* between contexts (depending on contextual negotiations)’ (192, all emphases mine).

In sum, the major complaint I anticipate from potential instructors, aside from exegetical grumbles, is that *Bad Language* isn’t really about ‘bad language’! It isn’t uniformly about language. It isn’t about a univocal ‘badness.’ And much of what’s discussed as ‘non-ideal’ only looks that way given a perspective so skewed by historical mishap that it’s better abandoned than reformed. On the other hand, it’s wonderful to see philosophy of language made so relevant to ethical, social and political concerns. It’s a salutary development for the 21st Century. And Cappelen and Dever’s newest textbook is a very useful resource for teaching it. I expect the book to be adopted widely.

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