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Featured Philosopher: Luvell Anderson | Philosopher

From : Lawrence Ward
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Fri, Sep 23, 2016 04:16 PM

Subject : Featured Philosopher: Luvell
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To : lward@psych.ubc.ca

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Hermeneutical Impasses

Luvell Anderson

(Author's note: What follows is a brief sketch of something I'm working out in longer form. Thanks to Meena for the invitation to contribute to this wonderful blog.)

We all have moments in which we encounter something or someone we have trouble understanding. We might interact with someone who speaks a different language from us. We may encounter a non-native speaker with a "heavy accent" that makes it difficult to decipher their meaning. Engagements with unfamiliar cultural expressions or allusions also cause breakdowns in communication and understanding.

Lauren Ahearn reminds us "language is not a neutral medium for communication but rather a set of socially embedded practices."[1] As such, it is not difficult to envision the emergence of interpretive tools that develop in smaller groups of language users, ones such groups develop to cater to their particular needs. Differences in sounds, expressive elements, and syntactic constructions emerge among these various groups.

I think we can begin to see that along with these kinds of divergences in language development we also get breaks in understanding between different linguistic groups. I will refer to these types of breaks as hermeneutical impasses. More specifically, by

'hermeneutical impasse' I mean to pick out instances in which agents engaged in a communicative exchange are unable to communicate effectively because of a gap in shared hermeneutical resources.

I envision at least four types of hermeneutical impasses:

1. Speakers of different languages, X and Y, who do not know the other's language; e.g. a French speaker and a Korean speaker.
2. Speakers who speak the same language X, but misunderstand each other do to 'national' differences (e.g. American vs. British vs. Australian/Kiwi English).
3. Speakers who both speak different dialects of a language X and share a national identity, where misunderstandings arise due to unfamiliarity with elements of the other's dialect. E.g. misunderstandings that arise due to ignorance of specific cultural references ('on fleek,' 'lit,' Desiigner's "Panda"?), inflectional differences, phonemic differences, etc.
4. Misunderstandings that arise due to differences in perceptual experiences (ways of perceiving social reality) and presumed knowledge base; e.g. 'All lives matter' in response to 'Black lives matter.'

I should note that even though I focus on language and discursive practices here, I believe a discussion of hermeneutical impasses goes beyond language, touching all of our expressive practices. Also, the four types are rough sketches and could stand sharper definition. I leave that for the longer version.

For some of these impasses, they seem to be resolvable with linguistic remedies. For instance, informing an American English speaker that the word for 'elevator' in British English is 'lift' suffices to clear up any misunderstanding. Yet for others, it seems linguistic remedies are insufficient. Impasses of type (4) appear to be such instances. Consider the 'all lives matter' response to 'Black lives matter.' There have been countless explanations of the phrase's significance, carefully explaining that it expresses a plea for the respecting of Black lives as equally valuable to those of others. Regardless of those explanations, the response remains just as vehement and tone deaf as it's always been.

This particular example might illustrate two subspecies of a hermeneutical impasse: (a) willful impasses, and (b) unwillful impasses. The two subspecies might correspond with two explanations of 'all lives matter' responders continued failures of understanding. The first explanation views the responders as genuinely confused. For whatever reason, their default interpretation is an exclusive reading. If the response to correction is one of deference, then we likely have an unwillful impasse on our hands. Another explanation describes responders not as genuinely confused, but as willfully obstinate. On this account, the ALM responder denies a claim they take to be behind the slogan. Jason Stanley, for instance, claims (during a public lecture) that when ALM responders give their retort what they are actually doing is denying the presupposition that Black lives have mattered less in America. This denial results in their

refusal to accept the inclusive, 'Black lives matter, too' reading. What we end up with is a willful impasse supported by the ALM responder's obstinacy.

Obviously, if the hermeneutical impasse is a willful one, then linguistic strategies will be unhelpful for bridging it. Willful hermeneutical impasses could appear in any of the four types I've sketched above. But what I want to claim is that they are more pernicious when they occur in types (3) and (4). This is because impasses of these types are often hidden behind presumed innocent judgments of grammaticality.

I will attempt to flesh out this idea by presenting a broad sketch of two American English varieties, Black English and Standard American English. James Baldwin, in an op-ed piece entitled "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" writes that different languages (presumably, varieties) develop to articulate or control different realities. Baldwin goes on to highlight one difference in realities articulated between Black English and Standard American English:

> *There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed,*

he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.[2]

This quote encapsulates a hermeneutic tension that exists and has been cultivated between these two linguistic varieties. Suggested in Baldwin's words is the idea that the language of the whites developed in a fashion that systematically misinterprets certain aspects of reality. (We find a similar sentiment, for instance, in Charles Mills' work on white ignorance[3]). There are protective mechanisms in place that allow subscribers of this particular linguistic framework to speak in a fashion that allows them to (1) evade assent to explicitly racist statements, and (2) deny complicity with any involvement in racism.

The process of standardization of language allows for the vilification and dismissal of people based simply on the way they speak. Recall the way Rachel Jeantel was dismissed, not only as a reliable testifier in the George Zimmerman trial, but as a human being worthy of respect. Numerous tweets described her as stupid, grotesque, unintelligent, and the like.[4] Jeantel's "deviant" way of speaking signaled distance from the "ideal" mode of speech, i.e. Standard American English. Such distancing is important since the notion has wrapped up in it differential power relations, processes of legitimization, and marginalization. This is how we get the inferences from her inability or unwillingness to reproduce the standard speech

patterns to her presumed stupidity, for example. Baldwin points out that language is "a political instrument, means, and proof of power."[5] Ultimately, the standard variety is a tool in the service of the state. This point is also highlighted in a passage from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu:

> *The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. It is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language. Obligatory on official occasions and in official places (schools, public administrations, political institutions, etc.), this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured. Ignorance is no excuse; this linguistic law has its body of jurists—the grammarians—and its agents of regulation and imposition—the teachers—who are empowered universally to subject the linguistic performance of speaking subjects to examination and to the legal sanction of academic qualification.*

Both Baldwin and Bourdieu make manifest what many do not realize, namely, that judgments of grammaticality or criticisms of speech against the backdrop of a perceived standard are not innocent and value-neutral, but value judgments in service of a particular power structure.

Presumably, the standard variety has associated with it a certain state-sanctioned (or maybe a range) identity. This is the identity that emerges from its being taught and policed by educators, and its place of prominence in official settings. Being dubbed "the standard" already confers a kind of super-legitimacy on this particular language variety, and by extension, its associated identity. This seems to follow from its role as the standard by which purported grammaticality is judged. Being in such a position disincentivizes its adherents from exhibiting the sort of humility necessary to learn from and possibly embrace alternative values.

Baldwin intimates that Standard American English encodes obscuring mechanisms that distort reality. In the same breath he intimates similar mechanisms are also encoded in Black English. Notice, the need of his parents and siblings to warn him of danger from the white man "in a language [he] could not possibly understand." Black English speakers need a language that hides its true message from threatening entities. In contrast to Standard American English, the obscuring mechanisms in Black English do not work to obscure reality for its speakers. Rather, they operate to mask reality from those who are perceived as a threat to the speaker's (and intended audience's) well-being. Taken together, the obscuring mechanisms in both language varieties (dialects?) create a pernicious hermeneutical impasse. It is pernicious because coming to an agreement on the correct interpretation of some event or utterance requires coming to an agreement on the values that undergird one's language. But as

we've seen, those who buy into a particular identity associated with the standard variety have little incentive to yield.

Thus, what we end up with is the cultivation and preservation of a hermeneutical impasse between Black English speakers and Standard American English speakers. Can this impasse be bridged? And if so, what would it take to bridge it? It seems clear that the impasse is bridgeable, but what it would take to bridge it transcends linguistic remedies. This is because the investment in maintaining the impasse hinges on the protection of certain interests. In the case of Standard English the interests are tied to the preservation of an advantaged identity. In the case of Black English, the interests have to do with self-preservation in the face of a hostile environment where revealing reality has historically brought dire consequences upon Black and Brown bodies. Ultimately, what I aim to show in the longer version of this is how certain hermeneutical impasses are really distracting devices for more complex social and political impasses. I want to explore the linguistic mechanisms that function to divert our attention from these more complex impasses.

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