

Mood, Force, Derogatoriness: 1-page summary

There are several problems that proponents of representationalist meaning theories face when trying to accommodate derogatory words into a truth-conditional framework.

First, Hornsby (2001) points out that for many such words, they are *useless* (for us); but if they are useless, it seems unclear how we can provide an account (using the representationalist framework) of what those words mean. There have been several attempts to meet this difficulty. Hornsby, e.g., suggests that we omit derogatory words from these truth-theories. Williamson (2008), on the other hand, argues that they can be included, but that we cannot assert them. Both of these responses are inadequate.

Second, there is disagreement as to what is being conveyed by those who use derogatory words. Are those who use derogatory words attributing a property, or some sort of complex attribute, to the intended target? This cognitivist approach is endorsed by Hom (2008), Williamson (2008) as well as inferentialists like Brandom (1994) and Dummett (1981). Non-cognitivists, on the other hand, deny that derogatory words are used to attribute properties or express propositions, but instead indicate that a certain attitude is being expressed (Whiting, 2007) or that a certain speech act is being performed (Hornsby).

Third, and closely related to the previous problem, intuitions vary as to the truth-values and the truth-conditions of sentences containing derogatory words. Hom argues that since derogatory words are really disguised complex predicates which express properties that have null extensions, most occurrences of sentences containing those words will be false. On the other hand, Williamson argues that sentences containing derogatory words have the same truth-conditions, and hence the same truth-values, as sentences containing their neutral counterpart. If, however, we provide a non-cognitivist treatment of derogatory words, it appears that sentences containing these words are not truth-evaluable, and therefore not amenable to truth-theory.

In this paper we propose a non-cognitivist account of derogatory words that can be accommodated by a truth-conditional meaning theory. We agree with Hornsby that we cannot use derogatory words to state what those words mean, and we also agree with her view that what is offensive about derogatory words is carried by speech acts of illocutionary kinds. Contrary to Hornsby, however, we argue that the meaning of derogatory words can be incorporated into truth-theories, that sentences containing these words have straightforward truth-conditions (even though they are not truth-evaluable) and that the illocutionary force of sentences containing these words can be systematically related to those truth-conditions.

We achieve this by providing an analysis of sentences containing derogatory words which is analogous to the paratactic treatment Davidson (1979) suggests for non-indicative sentences. According to Davidson's view, utterances of non-indicatives (e.g., imperatives) are to be treated as the simultaneous utterances of a mood-setter and the indicative core. Likewise, we treat derogatory words as mood-setters which characterize a sentence as having a certain (derogatory) force. This "mood-setter" is to be treated as if it were simultaneously uttered with a sentence where the derogatory word is replaced with its neutral counterpart. Each of these two sentences are truth-evaluable and they will have straightforward truth-conditions, but, contrary to Williamson and Hom, the combined sentence (the original sentence containing the derogatory word) is not a conjunction and so does not have a truth-value.