Relevance Theory and Conceptual Competence Injustice

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Manuel Padilla Cruz (2017) has proposed that the notion of conceptual competence injustice that I offer (2017) can be usefully deployed within the field of linguistic pragmatics, specifically within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), to characterize certain unintended and harmful pragmatic implicatures arising from lexical mistakes. Lexical mistakes involve a speaker producing an utterance that omits or misuses some crucial piece of vocabulary. Padilla Cruz suggests that these mistakes predictably lead listeners to infer that the speaker lacks lexical competence with one or more terms. Conceptual competence injustice occurs when a member of a marginalized group is judged to have less conceptual competence than she in fact has and suffers from unjustly diminished credibility when making conceptual or linguistic claims. A judgment that a speaker lacks lexical competence could result in conceptual competence injustice under certain circumstances. This paper explores Padilla Cruz’s proposal by investigating the relationship between relevance theory and conceptual competence injustice.

On Relevance Theory

Relevance theory provides a model of cognition and its relationship with linguistic pragmatic phenomena. According to relevance theory, human cognition evolved to maximize relevance. Our innate cognitive architecture is organized so that computational resources are efficiently allocated to gather information that connects with available background information to produce conclusions that matter to the agent (Wilson and Sperber 2002). Let us say that a proposition matters to an agent when knowing its truth would facilitate the agent’s achieving some epistemic, moral, or practical goal. (An account of relevance as goal-sensitive is closely aligned with the model of relevance theory developed by Gorayska and Lindsay 1993.)

This understanding of cognition as maximizing relevance lays the foundation for a model of linguistic pragmatics. Under normal conditions speakers and their audiences presuppose that everyone is seeking to maximize relevance. Speakers can use this fact to pragmatically convey information that is not semantically encoded in their utterances; meanwhile, audiences infer things that are pragmatically implied by what speakers say. Sometimes the speaker intends the audience’s inferences and sometimes they do not.

When a speaker makes a lexical mistake, this piece of information may give rise to a number of unintended implicatures. Most salient for the present discussion, her audience may infer that she fails to grasp some concept. This inference might constitute conceptual competence injustice if the hearer judges the speaker to have a lesser degree of competence with some concept than she in fact does, or that she has a lesser understanding of some analytic or conceptual truth than she in fact has. Another possibility is that the hearer wrongfully judges the speaker to lack lexical competence but does not take her to lack conceptual competence. This might occur when a speaker appears to have difficulty speaking a second language. The audience detects a lexical mistake but assumes that the speaker grasps the concepts she is trying to express, i.e. that the speaker could display proper conceptual understanding in her primary language. This second case may be an example of what we could call ‘lexical
competence injustice’ if the speaker is wrongfully judged to be lexically incompetent. That would be a case of lexical competence injustice without conceptual competence injustice.

**Conceptual Competence Injustice**

Padilla Cruz’s proposal to model conceptual competence injustice within relevance theory must be tempered with the proper understanding of that phenomenon as a *structural* injustice. Conceptual competence injustice is a form of epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014). It occurs when false judgments of incompetence function as part of a broader, reliable pattern of marginalization that systematically undermines the epistemic agency of members of an oppressed social identity. It cannot be accurately characterized merely as the result of a certain type of pragmatic inference without specifying facts about the social identities of the speakers and hearers involved, together with facts about the structure of their social circumstances. Since relevance theory is formulated in neutral language with respect to social identities and takes no account of local matrices of domination (Collins 2002), the theory does not intrinsically have the resources to identify instances of conceptual competence injustice.

However, relevance theory could help to illuminate patterns of conceptual competence injustice if it is embedded within a broader sociological framework. Together with a specification of relevant social identities, relationships, histories, and prevailing institutions, relevance theory can be used to model and predict instances of conceptual competence injustice arising from lexical mistakes. It can also model other ways in which pragmatic inferences are likely to occasion conceptual competence injustice. This might serve as a template for thinking about how relevance theory or other approaches to linguistic pragmatics can model local mechanisms through which epistemic oppressions are maintained and implemented within a given society.

Whether a type of pragmatic inference will contribute to a broader pattern of epistemic oppression depends largely on the distribution of background assumptions maintained by epistemic agents throughout a society. If there is a pervasive prejudice against the intellectual credibility of a particular social group regarding a certain domain of discourse, then speakers from that group will predictably trigger episodes of conceptual competence injustice when they make lexical mistakes in that domain. For example, in a community that harbors prejudice against the intellectual capability of women to understand abstract epistemology, a woman who makes a lexical mistake in that domain is more likely to be judged conceptually incompetent than a man who makes the same mistake. Mistakes made by dominant epistemic agents are more likely to be attributed to some other factor—a lack of sleep, a random lapse in concentration, a momentary confusion—rather than prompting a pragmatic inference to conceptual incompetence. Members of dominant groups generally have this kind of edge in perceived competence over marginalized epistemic agents.

Relevance theory also allows us to model ways in which individual and group *interests* can shape patterns of conceptual competence injustice. Since our cognitive architecture is wired to maximize relevance, and since relevance is determined by an individual’s goals and
interests, it follows that an individual who has an interest in perceiving some marginalized group as less intellectually sophisticated will be more attuned to information that could pragmatically implicate conceptual ineptitudes, including lexical mistakes. A man who passionately maintains the misogynistic view that women cannot comprehend politics would be quick to process any potential evidence indicating that some woman lacks conceptual competence in that domain. He would thus be more alert to lexical mistakes in conversations about politics with women. Relevance theory makes explicit the way that conscious, premeditated interest in intellectual authority can produce judgments that lead to conceptual competence injustice.

Unconscious Interests

The interests that guide our cognition can also be less than fully conscious. Think of the white person who unconsciously holds white supremacist convictions about his own intellectual capability. This person might consciously believe that people of color are just as intellectually capable as whites, yet he is vaguely uncomfortable with the thought of himself being intellectually inferior to a person of color. Consequently, he unconsciously manifests vigilance for signs that prove his own intellectual superiority when he interacts with people of color. This makes him hyper aware of lexical mistakes during such interactions. He is likely to underestimate the conceptual acumen of people of color, by reliably committing conceptual competence injustices.

The prevalence of unconscious interests of the kind just outlined must necessarily be a subject of controversy. However, relevance theory has the important virtue of allowing us to model sources of injustice grounded in dominant interests even in the absence of conscious and unconscious commitments to dominant power structures. Consider a different white person who harbors neither conscious nor unconscious commitments to white supremacy. Many white supremacist propositions are still in this person’s interest, in the sense that the truth of such propositions would promote his goals, for example: the proposition that he is the most qualified candidate for a position and that the person of color who got the job only did so because of affirmative action. Even if the white man does not believe this proposition, information that supports it would be highly relevant to him. He will therefore exhibit heightened sensitivity to signs that pragmatically imply that the person of color who got the job is less qualified, less capable, less intelligent, etc. Hence he would be more sensitive to any lexical mistakes this person makes. Other white people in the company who are similarly ‘threatened’ by affirmative action will have similarly heightened sensitivity, even if all of them are explicitly pro affirmative action and have no unconscious bias or prejudice. This pervasive sensitivity will increase the probability that conceptual competence injustices are inflicted on the one who got the job.

More broadly, dominant interests in white supremacy will influence pragmatic inferences concerning the intellectual authority of people of color. These interests may be unwanted by those who have them. Progressive white people may wish that they did not have a stake in white supremacy, yet white supremacy is still in their interest because it promotes their
economic, political, and social well-being (albeit at the unjust expense of people of color). Similar considerations reveal that men have an unshakable interest in patriarchy, the rich have an unshakable interest in capitalism, the heterosexual have an unshakable interest in hetero-normativity, and so on. The goals of the privileged are facilitated by those systems that lend them their privilege, regardless of how they feel about or think of those systems. By postulating that our epistemic and practical goals fundamentally shape our cognitive processes, relevance theory has great potential for modeling the force of unwanted, yet unshakable, self-interested stakes in oppressive systems.

**Conceptual Competence Injustice without Lexical Mistake**

Not all pragmatic inferences to conceptual incompetence proceed on the basis of lexical mistakes. Perfectly cogent utterances can lead audiences to commit conceptual competence injustices. Relevance theory can model these pragmatic inferences as well. Consider a case in which a speaker who is a marginalized epistemic agent makes no mistake or glaring omission regarding the terminology she employs in some discourse, but her audience disagrees with what she says. Suppose, according to the background assumptions of her audience, the truth of the speaker’s utterance cannot be adjudicated on the basis of empirical evidence. The audience, believing her utterance to be false, infers that a conceptual error has been made. This purported conceptual error pragmatically implies that the speaker lacks conceptual competence in the domain.

For example imagine a person of color says, “Malcolm X was not racist when he called white people ‘white devils’ and condemned their participation in the historical oppression of black people.” Suppose her audience, a white man, disagrees. He thinks that Malcolm X was racist for using the term “white devils.” He takes the speaker’s utterance to be false, but (perhaps implicitly) recognizes that the claim cannot be adjudicated on the basis of evidence. No observable facts are in dispute. Rather, the question of truth must somehow turn on the definition of “racist.” Recognizing this fact, the man is likely to infer that the speaker does not correctly understand the meaning of “racist” if she is speaking sincerely. This pragmatic inference constitutes conceptual competence injustice; it is not a harmless or blameless mistake but relies on and reinforces a pattern of epistemic oppression that ignores and undermines the intellectual authority of people of color concerning their understanding of racism.

The pragmatic inference in question depends on the audience’s background beliefs about relative credibility regarding conceptual claims about racism. The hearer takes himself to be more credible than the speaker concerning conceptual claims about racism; that is why he infers that the speaker is wrong and he is right about the definition of “racism.” If he took himself to be equally credible, his disagreement with the speaker would prompt him to open a dialogue about the definition of “racism,” as often happens when epistemic peers disagree over some concept. This too would probably constitute conceptual competence injustice, since it is unlikely that a white man who disagreed with a woman of color about whether Malcolm X was a racist is her epistemic peer concerning the concept of racism. A white person who was adequately conscious of the relevant social and historical facts involved in
the exchange would be disposed to defer to the speaker’s use of “racist,” to stand corrected in his use of that term, rather than being disposed to question her use or disposed to infer that she is conceptually incompetent.

The harmful mistake made in this exchange can also be rendered within relevance theory as a failure to have the proper interests. If the white man were primarily interested in learning about racism rather than in maintaining and defending his own beliefs about racism, he would not be disposed to pragmatically infer that the woman was conceptually incompetent. He would be disposed to infer that be was incompetent! The role that interests play in shaping discourse around social justice is very important for a theory of epistemic oppression. What interlocutors pragmatically infer crucially depends on their purposes for engaging in conversation. Relevance theory is especially virtuous in its capacity to model this aspect of conversations about race and other dimensions of social justice.

Relevance theory allows us to understand some of the mechanisms through which conceptual competence injustices proliferate. I have elaborated on Padilla Cruz’s suggestion to develop relevance theory by incorporating the notion of conceptual competence injustice. Certainly there are more uses to which relevance theory can be put in modeling conceptual competence injustice than I have touched on here. These would be worth exploring at greater length. It is also clear that relevance theory and other approaches to linguistic pragmatics have much to contribute to our understanding epistemic oppression more broadly conceived.

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References