The 'Unsayable' Word—How to Deal with the N-word

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Abstract. The N-word is known to be insulting to black people for historical reasons, which makes people care about the appearance of the N-word in their discourse. For black people, it is permissible to say the N-word as an expression of the tight relationship between black people, just like the use of words like 'bro' and 'guy'. However, for non-blacks, uttering the N-word could be terrible. Instead of considering the speaker's intention before judging the appropriateness of his or her words, people would just criticize and punish the speaker. John McWhorter analyzed the N-word in his newsletter—The New N-word Standard is not Progress, pointing out the difference between using the N-word and mentioning the N-word. This study hopes that when people face the N-word in discourse, they can rationally combine context and relevant background knowledge, abide by the principle of cooperation, and understand the speaker's real intention before making a reasonable evaluation of the speaker.

Keywords: N-word; Grice; Cooperative Principle.

1. Introduction

Herbert Paul Grice (1913-1988), a philosopher of language, whose work has had a profound impact on linguists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists. Today, Grice's work lies at the center of research on the semantics-pragmatics distinction and shapes much discussion of the relationship between language and mind. In a nutshell, Grice has forced philosophers and linguists to think very carefully about the sorts of facts a semantic theory is supposed to account for and to reflect upon the most central theoretical notions, notions that otherwise might be taken for granted or employed without due care and attention [1].

H.P. Grice distinguished between natural and non-natural meanings of discourse, as shown in the following examples.

(1) "Those spots mean (meant) measles."

(2) "Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the 'bus is full.'" [2].

The meaning in (1) is the natural meaning proposed by Grice, a portrayal of a representational relation, describing a causal relation. Due to people's life experience and some medical knowledge, it was recognized that the spots on the skin are causally related to measles, so the spots can mean measles, just as frozen water means low temperatures. But the meaning in (2) is non-natural meaning, which is, the artificially agreed connection between symbol and meaning is interpreted by a certain artificial approach, and there is no causal relationship. The non-natural meaning requires three conditions to be satisfied: First, the driver (speaker) intends to use the bell to remind people (listener) that the bus is full; second, people understand that the driver's intention to ring the bell is to express that the bus is full; and third, the driver intends people to understand his intention.

H.P. Grice's theory of non-natural meaning provides a perspective to analyze the meaning of discourse, but in reality, there is the situation of misinterpreting the meaning of discourse. In order to solve this problem, H.P. Grice proposed the theory of conversational implicature. The core idea of the theory of conversational meaning is Cooperative Principle (CP). Grice believes that during the process of communication, people have a mutual and tacit agreement to achieve a specific goal. The Cooperative Principle is embodied in four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. When the above four principles are observed in communication, the generalized conversational implicature of the words will be generated, while intentionally violating one or more of the above principles, the

words spoken can be perceived by the listener, will generate particularized conversational implicature, that is, conversational implicature [3].

The Columbia Guide to Standard American English (1993) suggests that the n-word is a variant of Negro, which originally appeared more frequently in the colloquial language of the southern and south-central regions of the United States and is often used in standard English [4]. The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang also suggests that in the beginning, the N-word did not mean any racial, and that the use of the N-word merely denoted a class and economic status. This is confirmed by Mark Twain's novel Huckleberry Finn, in which Mark Twain uses the N-word 215 times, which may seem vulgar, but does not constitute an insult to blacks [5]. However, in the 1960s, the use of the N-word began to change dramatically and gradually entered the realm of taboo words. Merriam-Webster's online identified the n-word as the most insulting and inflammatory racial slur in the English language. [6]. The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) describes the word as 'the most offensive racially taboo language in the English language' [7].

It seems to be widely accepted that when blacks use the N-word, they are generally using it in some positive fashion and that when whites use the term, they are generally using it in some negative fashion [8]. But in fact, the N-word does not always appear in a negative fashion in the speech of non-black people. In McWhorter's article, he also pointed out the fact that people think there is no difference between the use and mention when it comes to the N-word. In his view, it is essential to clarify the distinction, because the use of the N-word is using the word as an insult referring to a black person or black people, while mention is a reference to the word itself [9]. McWhorter argues that people should admit the difference between use and mention. In addition, the mention of the N-word does not mean the speaker intended to insult blacks. Black people won't feel offended by the mention of the N-word, either. Take McWhorter's examples of Joe Rogan, Mike Pesca, and Chris Charbonneau, who had no intention of insulting black people but were all condemned by public opinion and even lost their jobs for mentioning the N-word in their discourse. This paper will analyze McWhorter's distinction between the use and mention of the N-word from the perspective of Grice's theory of meaning and the cooperative principle, and explore why people may misinterpret the speaker's mention of the N-word and thus make the N-word unsayable, and finally, based on the CP, explore possible ways to cope with the unsayable situation.

2. Analysis of John McWhorter's Newsletter

2.1. The Meaning of the N-word

With McWhorter's distinction between the use and mention of the N-word, people have access to figure out the two different meanings of speakers when the N-word appears in their utterances.

According to Grice's theory of meaning, when it comes to the use, the N-word means NN Black people. The N-word is artificially associated with Blacks, creating a connection between the linguistic sign (the word itself) and meaning (insult to black people). The speaker has the intention of insulting black people when he or she uses the N-word, the hearer can recognize the speaker's intention because of historical reasons and social conventions, combined with the speaker's intonation, context, etc. What's more, the speaker must intend to make the hearer recognize the intention of insulting. The aim of the speaker (insult to black people) could not be successful if this part wasn't fulfilled. For example, if a white person uses the N-word to insult a black person, but that white person uses an extremely friendly and witty intonation, the black person may mistakenly believe that the white person is not insulting him because the white person's intonation does not demonstrate or imply the intention of insulting.

From the aspect of mention, the speaker does not intend to be insulting, but merely to invoke the word for other purposes. However, the thought inertia formed by the long-term discourse practice makes people prone to have the idea that if a speaker says the N-word, his words imply insulting intentions. In the examples cited by McWhorter, Joe Rogan mentioned the N-word because he, as a stand-up comedian, mentioned the N-word for reasons such as creating dramatic effect or increasing

the ratings of the show, without any direct racist intention, but it does not seem reasonable to consider it racist just because he mentioned the N-word. What happened to Mike Pesca and Chris Charbonneau illustrates the unreasonableness of the phenomenon of considering a speaker as insulting to black people without regard to the speaker's intent, as they were more cautious about the N-word than John Rogan, and their intention is simply to discuss some topics typically by invoking the N-word itself. In fact, the hearer, especially the black people, is able to recognize the speaker's intention as well-intentioned, or at least not in a discriminatory way. McWhorter also argues that it is a strange kind of antiracism to make people believe that Black people cannot understand the simple distinction. For the listener, the authentic intention of the N-word mentioned by the speaker should be interpreted correctly, avoiding both over-interpretation and overly superficial understanding. It is evident that the key to constituting an insult to black people is the speaker's intention, and it is also important that the listener can correctly perceive this intention. As for how to correctly interpret the speaker's intention, the next section of this study will discuss it.

2.2. How People Misinterpret the Meaning of Speakers' Words

McWhorter mentions a hypersensitivity to the N-word in his newsletter, which is, in the opinion of this study, a self-fulfilling prophecy: People are afraid that their references to the N-word will be misinterpreted as racist, then, people are more sensitive to the appearance of the N-word in speech, and pay more attention to and scrutinize their own and others' mention of the N-word. Therefore, everyone tries to avoid the appearance of the N-word in their speech even if it is just a mention of the N-word. Over time, the conditions under which people can mention the N-word have become more and more demanding, resulting in a politically correct norm and convention that eventually creates and reinforces such hypersensitivity.

Then here comes a question: what causes the misinterpretation of speakers' words, which is, what leads to the possibility of misunderstanding the conversational implicature of the speaker's utterance? By analyzing the examples in McWhorter's newsletter, the factors which cause misinterpretations might be found.

Grice pointed out that the hearer will rely on the following data to work out that a particular conversational implicature is present: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the CP and four maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants, and both participants know or assume this to be the case [10]. It can be seen that in the phenomenon mentioned in McWhorter's newsletter, the listener does not have a good grasp of the above five points and therefore misinterprets the speaker's conversational implicature.

McWhorter's newsletter mentioned three people, Joe Rogan, Mike Pesca, and Chris Charbonneau. Joe Rogan, a broadcaster and stand-up comedian who received flak for saying the N-word several times on his show and for interviewing people with controversial views on topics such as race relations, Covid, and vaccinations, drew further criticism and later posted an apology video on Instagram. Mike Pesca, a journalist who used to host his podcast "The Gist" on Slate, was investigated for mentioning but not using the N-word and lost her job at Slate after being convicted of making the workplace unsafe for discussing on Slack whether non-black people are prohibited from saying the N-word in any context. Chris Charbonneau, the former CEO of a Planned Parenthood regional affiliate based in Seattle, caused an outcry when she quoted a Planned Parenthood donor's words about the N-word in a conversation with a colleague. Two white Planned Parenthood staffers resigned on that account. According to Charbonneau, she even used "quote-unquote" to express her retelling but was eventually removed from her position.

Firstly, in the three examples above, the hearers treat the speakers' mentions of the N-word only at the level of a single conventional meaning. In Joe Rogan's case, indeed, he said the N-word a number of times, and made a gross comparison of a movie theater in a black neighborhood to "Plant of the Apes". However, he did not intend to insult black people, but just made some jokes by

mentioning the N-word. In the case of Mike Pesca and Chris Charbonneau, they were more careful with their mention of the N-word, but were nevertheless criticized and punished by society. The reason people were angry about their words was that people thought the N-word's conventional meaning could only be insulting to black people, rather than agreeing that the N-word can also be a reference to the word itself.

Secondly, the hearer somehow violated the Cooperative Principle, and there is no common goal between the hearer and the speaker. When hearing the N-word, the listener is more likely to view the speaker's speech from a politically correct perspective rather than carefully understand the context and manner of the speaker's expression.

Thirdly, the listener lacks the context of the utterance. In Rogan's case, the clip in which he mentioned the N-word was compiled into a video and widely spread on social media. People can only get some fragmented information, and they cannot understand the context in which Rogan mentioned the N-word, so they will think Rogan's words are racist. If the listener understands the context in which Rogan says the N-word, they will understand more precisely what he intends and understand that he says the N-word only as a reference.

Fourthly, the listener has little background knowledge about the speaker and what is being said. What's more, there is even some misleading information that affects the listener's correct understanding of the speaker's intention. In Rogan's case, he had previously moderated controversial topics on COVID-19, vaccination and race relations, which no doubt added to the belief that he could be a racist. In Charbonneau's case, people were able to get so little background knowledge that it was hard to tell whether she actually had racist intent, in which case it was unreasonable to dismiss her simply for citing the N-word.

To sum up, the relevant items falling under the previous aspects were not fully available for both listeners and speakers, which made the misinterpretation of conversational implicature.

3. How to Deal with the 'Unsayable' Situation

Based on the analysis of the examples provided by McWhorter's newsletter in the previous part, this paper classifies the reasons which cause misinterpretation into three factors, which are the conventional meaning of words, the adherence of both the participants to the Cooperative Principle and the conversational context and relevant background knowledge needs to be provided to both participants.

To change the status quo of the 'unsayable' N-word, it is necessary to explore possible solutions based on the above three points, which requires the joint effort of the speaker, the hearer and the macro social level.

First of all, it is necessary for speakers to abide by the cooperative principle, including being as informative as required, to provide the listener with the necessary conditions to be able to interpret his or her true intentions, saying what they believe is correct and providing adequate reasons, to give their words more credibility and avoid suspicion and overthinking of hearers; making the speech relevant and expressing in order; avoiding ambiguity and obscurity; making hearers understand their words easier. In addition, the speaker should be friendly and decent when mentioning the N-word and keep the right attitude. For example, when communicating with a black friend, with the permission of the other person, the speaker can mention the N-word in a light-hearted and humorous manner, while if it is a formal occasion, such as a conference or seminar, the speaker must mention the N-word in a serious manner. The reason for doing so is to intentionally provide the listener with the means to correctly interpret the speaker's intentions, so that the listener is less likely to misunderstand the speaker.

Secondly, for the listener, the most important thing is to keep a rational attitude toward the speaker's words and avoid being swayed by public opinion. Moreover, with as much grasp of the context and background knowledge as possible, discern the speaker's intention and make a judgment about whether the speaker is using the N-word or mentioning the N-word.

Last but not least, to change the status quo that the N-word is unsayable, the most important thing is to change the single conventional meaning of the N-word. It requires a collective social effort to recognize that the mention of the N-word is different from its use and to stop viewing the N-word in conversation in a politically correct way. The conventional meaning of the N-word needs to be expanded in linguistic practice. Thus, this unsayable situation would be significantly ameliorated if a social consensus could be formed to allow for the mention of the N-word.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzes the reasons why the N-word is unspeakable based on the meaning theory proposed by H.P. Grice and the conversational implicature theory, analyzes the difference between the use and mention of the N-word in the non-natural meaning dimension, and specifically explores the reasons and solutions for misinterpreting the speaker's intention regarding the N-word based on the cooperation principle. In conclusion, if people follow the cooperation principle and understand the speaker's context and related background knowledge as rationally as possible, they can interpret the speaker's intention more accurately, thus making it possible to mention the N-word and providing a basis for rational discussion of the N-word and related racial issues.

This paper argues that without a specific context and participants, the N-word is not terrible when it appears in a conversation, it is not insulting in itself as a word, but only when it is used by the speaker as a tool to express insults against black people, it has the effect of being strongly insulting. Furthermore, in daily life, the N-word does not always appear as used in conversations; people also refer to the N-word for some non-insulting purposes. So, the correct attitude in facing the N-word should be determined according to the speaker's intention, and if the speaker has no insulting intention, people need not accuse and punish him/her. With the development of the affirmative action movement, what people need more is a platform where they can communicate rationally. People should view and use language correctly, and exert the power of language to construct a more harmonious society, instead of using language to convict those innocent people.

This study is mainly based on some of Grice's theories to analyze the factors of the two sides of speakers and listeners in the process of language exchange. The question of whether the N-word can undergo a positive language change to gradually eliminate the offensive features of the N-word is also worth studying.

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