



PŘEDNÁŠKOVÁ SÉRIE LECTURE SERIES

Dan Zeman

A Polysemy View of Slurs and of Other Evaluative Expressions

Slurs (expressions like "fag", "nerd", "commie", the n-word etc.) have attracted a lot of attention in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics, due to their capacity to derogate and offend their targets. They also pose a challenge to traditional views of meaning, in that they exhibit a double aspect: on one hand, the sentences in which they figure make descriptive claims about the group membership of their targets; on the other, they convey a negative attitude or evaluation of their targets based on said group membership. Interestingly, alongside their derogatory use, slurs also have a plethora of non-derogatory uses: appropriated, referential, identificatory etc., in which slurs are used either positively or neutrally. In this talk, I present the barebones of a research programme that aims to account for all these uses by construing slurs as polysemous. Polysemy has been dealt with preponderantly in lexical semantics, and so I will discuss several arguments for each of the two main views in that branch of semantics - rich-lexicon and thin-lexicon theories, arguing that the former is a better fit for slurs. Finally, I investigate whether the same approach can be transferred to other evaluative expressions that have positive/neutral uses: thick terms like "lewd", "balanced"; dual-character expressions like "mother", "teacher"; evaluatives like "tasty", "beautiful", "(morally) good"; and expressives like "jerk", "damn". I argue that it can, thus raising the prospect of a unified, economical approach to the entire evaluative sphere.

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