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Introduction

The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL[1]

The point of a discourse—at least one central kind of discourse—is the exchange of information.

—ROBERT STALNAKER[2]

Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.

—VICTOR KLEMPERER[3]

IN BOOK 3 of Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War*, the Athenian Cleon represents Mytilene's revolt against Athens in the most extreme possible terms, claiming, "Mytilene has done us a greater wrong than any other single city."[4] Cleon claims that were the tables turned, Mytilene would slaughter *every Athenian citizen*—in other words, that the Mytileneans would carry out the very same action toward the Athenians that Cleon urges Athens carry out against Mytilene. Cleon's speech mobilizes the Athenian citizens to genocidal action against Mytilene by employing the accusation that Mytilene is a genocidal threat to Athens. Cleon's speech is political propaganda. It stokes irrational fear and desire for revenge, while simultaneously presenting itself as a reasonable contribution to discourse. It justifies murdering the entire adult population of Mytilene not because of what they did, but because of an imaginary situation that Cleon gives no reason to think would be realized. Cleon uses the savagery he suggests the Mytileneans would do if the tables were turned to justify the exact same course of action against the Mytileneans. Cleon's speech is one of antiquity's classical examples of demagoguery.

In Cleon's speech, he does not represent his own city, Athens, as greater or more exceptional in its value system and history than its enemies. However,

1. The quote is from Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, x.

2. Stalnaker, "On the Representation of Context," 5.

3. Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 15–16.

4. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 147.

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his speech is decidedly also not neutral, as he represents Athens's interests as vastly more important—with a hypothetical future threat to its citizens judged far more serious than the actual threat to the lives of innocent Mytileneans. The speech completely takes the side of Athens while masquerading as some kind of aperspectival reason. Cleon's speech centers the interests of Athens completely. The Mytileneans are visible only as genocidal threats.

Cleon's speech is layered with emotion, values, perspective, and interests. It seeks to mobilize its audience toward action. One way to mobilize an audience is by providing information about the world. This book centers other ways in which language impacts audiences: by emotion, values, perspectives, interests, identity, and shared practices. We build a model of speech that incorporates these aspects as central from the very beginning.

Harmful Speech

One way in which speech impacts a group of people is by harming them. One kind of harmful speech, omnipresent in popular and academic discussions, is *slurs*—terms that target a group with an ideology that derogates its members. But the category of harmful speech is vastly broader than slurs. For example, Victor Klemperer describes a form of the linguistic process he calls "objectification" as follows:

> Why does a palpable and undeniable brutality come to light when a female warder in Belsen concentration camp explains to the war crimes trial that on such and such a day she dealt with sixteen "*Stück*" *Gefangenen* [prisoner pieces]? . . . *Stück* . . . involves objectification. It is the same objectification expressed by the official term "the utilization of carcasses [*Kadaververwertung*]," especially when widened to refer to human corpses: fertilizer is made out of the dead of the concentration camps.[5]

Linguistic objectification is a characteristic feature of various kinds of harmful speech. In chapter 10, we will return in detail to the topic of harmful speech and give our accounts of slurs, genocidal speech, and bureaucratic speech. To do that, we'll first need to give an account of presupposition, in part II, for we will need to be able to explain, for example, how speaking of prisoners as "pieces" presupposes that they are less than fully human.

To understand Klemperer's second example, we must also understand the connections between practices and "official terms." These are connections that must be understood in terms of how speech attunes people to practices, an analysis of which is a central aim of part I of this book. Here is another illustration, this time from the United States, of how speech attunes people

5. Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 154.

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to practices. John DiIulio Jr.'s 1996 magazine article "My Black Crime Problem, and Ours" begins by acknowledging that "violent crime is down in New York and many other cities."[6] DiIulio proceeds to predict "270,000 more young predators on the streets . . . [in] the next two decades." He adds, "As many as half of these juvenile super-predators could be young black males." DiIulio's prediction was far off; violent crime continued to plummet.[7] But the introduction of the term "super-predator" into criminal-justice discourse led (in difficult to quantify yet hard to dispute ways) to the adoption of ever-harsher laws concerning juvenile offenders.

Describing juvenile offenders as "super-predators" suggests that the proper practices toward juvenile offenders are the ones that are reasonable to take against enormous threats to humankind: death, or complete permanent isolation. Use of the term "super-predator" to describe juvenile offenders rationalizes treating them with practices that would only be reasonable to use against deadly enemies.

In the 1990s in the United States, criminal-justice policy had become a proving ground for politicians to demonstrate their putative toughness. Debate was dominated by an ethos that frowned on expressions of empathy for perpetrators. Dehumanizing vocabulary targeting those caught up in the criminal-justice system was commonplace, and many of the words were racially coded.[8] Rehabilitation is hard to envisage for those described as "thugs," "super-predators," or "gangsters." During this period where these terms were part of the political discourse, criminal-justice practices became considerably harsher, and sentences longer.[9]

Although the precise mechanisms continue to be a matter of debate, it is widely agreed that the culture surrounding crime policy had an extreme and rapid effect on criminal-justice practices. The incarceration rate in the United States hovered around the norm for liberal democracies of 100 per 100,000 for many decades until the late 1970s.[10] Then it started to rise. The Bureau of Justice Statistics' current rate of 810 for every 100,000 adults (18 years and older)

6. DiIulio, "My Black Crime Problem, and Ours," 14.

7. "Reported Violent Crime Rate in the United States from 1990 to 2017," Statista: The Statistics Portal, October 10, 2022, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/191219/reported-violent-crime-rate-in-the-usa-since-1990/.

8. For a contemporary report on this phenomenon, see Templeton, "Superscapegoating," 13–14.

9. In 1994, Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This included the "Federal Death Penalty Act of 1994," which created sixty new death-penalty offenses under forty-one federal statutes (Title VI, §§60001–26); the elimination of higher education for inmates (§20411); registration of sex offenders (Title XVII, Subtitle A, §170101); and making gang membership a crime (Title XV, §§150001–9). See: U.S. Congress, *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act*.

10. Cahalan and Parsons, *Historical Corrections Statistics*, 30.

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in prison is by far the highest in the world.[11] The United States has also developed a culture of policing marked by a level of fear and lack of empathy that is without parallel in liberal democracies (a 2015 headline of an article in the *Guardian* states, "By the Numbers: U.S. Police Kill More in Days Than Other Countries Do in Years"[12]). However, the unprecedented two-decade decrease in crime from 1991 until the early 2010s was not strictly due to the intensely punitive criminal-justice path that the United States chose to take in the 1990s. Canada experienced a similarly unprecedented drop in crime during this same time period, without following the United States' path into mass incarceration.[13]

How does one investigate the way in which violent language about a targeted group affects attitudes? As we will argue in part III, focusing on a case like this brings out the limitations of a model of conventional meaning that just theorizes in terms of a connection between words and things. To explain harmful speech, one must recognize conventional connections between words and *practices*, as well as words and *emotions*.

Hustle

The examples of harmful speech we discussed in the last section involved expressions that attune their audiences to harmful practices in ways that are *overt*. Calling young Black American men "super-predators," or, to use an example we will discuss later, calling Rwandan Tutsi "cockroaches" or "snakes," directly attunes audiences to violent practices toward these populations. These examples highlight the need for a theory of meaning that connects speech not just with information, but with practices. But speech does not just impact an audience directly. It can and often does impact audiences *indirectly*.

Why would someone choose to impact an audience indirectly with their words, rather than overtly attempting to attune them in the desired manner? The reason is because the speaker might not wish to be held responsible for their words. The speaker may want to convey something in a way that allows for

11. John Gramlich, "America's Incarceration Rate Falls to Lowest Level since 1995," Pew Research Center, August 16, 2021, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/16/americas-incarceration-rate-lowest-since-1995/. Although the title of the article appears to contradict this claim, the article confirms the United States' high incarceration rates.

12. Jamiles Lartey, "By the Numbers: U.S. Police Kill More in Days Than Other Countries Do in Years," *Guardian*, June 9, 2015, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/09/the-counted-police-killings-us-vs-other-countries.

13. Laura Glowacki, "9 Reasons Canada's Crime Rate Is Falling," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, July 23, 2016, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/9-reasons-crime-rate-1.3692193.

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plausible deniability that they intended to convey it. Plausible deniability is a symptom of what we call *hustle—speech that functions nontransparently*. When speech is not transparent, a speaker has latitude to deny that they intended the nontransparent features.

Hustle is a large and diverse category, including insinuation (itself a broad category). One of the goals of the book is to show just how large it is. While chapter 8 will describe hustle in more detail, this type of speech is our focus throughout the book. To illustrate it with an example, we're going to focus in this section on one quite specific mechanism of hustle, the mechanism of the *dog whistle*.

Dog whistling involves employing speech that appears on the surface to be transparent, but, when married to a hearer's background frame and value systems, communicates a message not obvious to those without that background (i.e., it functions nontransparently). Dog whistling is a mechanism specifically designed to allow plausible deniability. Though it is far from the only such method, dog whistling is useful to focus on in this introduction as it is most obviously a kind of hustle with a linguistic trigger.

In 1981, Lee Atwater, later to lead George H. W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign (featuring the notorious Willie Horton ad, funded allegedly by an independent PAC), had an anonymous interview with a journalist that remains one of the clearest expressions of the strategic value of code words to signal allegiance to ideologies that have been explicitly repudiated. In it, he famously said (although we've censored the original for obvious reasons),

> You start out in 1954 by saying, [N-word, N-word, N-word]. By 1968 you can't say [N-word]—that hurts you, backfires. So, you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. . . . "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than [N-word, N-word].[14]

Subsequent research by the Princeton political science professors Martin Gilens and Tali Mendelberg has confirmed the success of the strategy of linking certain discourse to negative racial stereotypes. Their research shows that expressions like "welfare," "the poor," "food stamps," and "homeless" all contribute to priming the thought that Black Americans are lazy.[15] Gilens finds that "the belief that blacks are lazy is the strongest predictor of the perception that

14. Rick Perlstein, "Exclusive: Lee Atwater's Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy," *The Nation*, November 13, 2012, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exclusive-lee-atwaters-infamous-1981-interview-southern-strategy/.

15. See Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*; and Mendelberg, *The Race Card*, 191–208.

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welfare recipients are undeserving."[16] There is a large amount of additional evidence that the word "welfare" has been connected with a flawed ideology of race, in addition to the studies Gilens himself has carried out. Gilens reports similar results from the "welfare mother" experiment from the National Race and Politics Study of 1991:

> Respondents are asked their impressions of a welfare recipient described as either a black or white woman in her early thirties, who has a ten-year-old child and has been on welfare for the past year. Respondents are first asked how likely it is that the woman described will try hard to find a job, and second, how likely it is that she will have more children in order to get a bigger welfare check.[17]

> The largest predictor of opposition to programs described as "welfare" was one's bias against black American mothers receiving various state benefits, where the study found that "nonblack respondents with the most negative views of black welfare recipients are 30 points higher in opposition to welfare than are those with the most positive views of black welfare mothers."[18]

But why, one might ask, are these facts *linguistic*? Perhaps we can explain the political effects of describing a term as "welfare" merely by talking about the social programs that are so described, together with false beliefs, including the ones associated with racist ideology. Why are properties of *language* at issue here?

What fuels Americans' obsession with programs called "welfare"? Is it background commitments to individual responsibility? Is it Americans' supposedly fierce opposition to "big government," in the form of government programs? Is it background racist beliefs and false empirical beliefs about poverty in the United States? Can we explain the political force of describing a program as "welfare" just by discussing the social programs themselves, without discussing the meaning and use of words? Or do we need some explanation that invokes properties of the word "welfare" itself?

Americans are fond of, and committed to, what are by far the United States' largest social welfare programs: Medicare and Social Security.[19] But perhaps the powerful and widespread support for these programs is due to the facts that they "benefit large numbers of Americans of all social classes"[20] and that American opposition to programs described as "welfare" has something

16. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 95.
17. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 97–98.
18. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 99.
19. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 30.
20. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 27.

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to do with attitudes toward poverty, specifically? Here, too, the explanation would be nonlinguistic.

In surveys from the 1990s that measure public support for government responsibilities, those that do not use the term "welfare," or other terms that evoke paradigmatic programs that Americans think of as instances of welfare, we do not find sentiment against a large government role in providing jobs, housing, and other forms of assistance to needy Americans; in fact, as Martin Gilens writes, quite the opposite is true:

> When asked about spending for the poor, the public again expresses a desire for more, not less, government activity. Over 70 percent of Americans say we are spending too little on "fighting poverty," while a similar number think spending for the homeless needs to be increased. Smaller numbers—but still majorities—think we are spending too little on "poor people," on "assistance to the poor," and on "child care for poor children." And as was true for education, health care, child care, and the elderly, very few Americans believe spending for the poor should be reduced from current levels.[21]

In stark contrast, Gilens observes that in those surveys, between 60 and 70 percent of Americans thought that the government was spending too much on programs described as "welfare," or on programs described as benefiting "people on welfare." It is impossible to describe political communication in the United States—dating back to the 1970s, when Ronald Reagan's campaign introduced the expression "welfare queen" into political discourse[22]—without talking about the connection between such value systems and the linguistic properties of words like "welfare." In a 2018 article, Rachel Wetts and Robb Willer integrate multiple studies providing strong evidence that the connection between White racial resentment toward Black Americans and negative reactions to programs described as "welfare" continues unabated.[23]

If it were a matter simply of Americans rejecting "big government programs," we would find them rejecting large government programs such as Medicare and Social Security, which are designed to help working-class Americans by providing health insurance and support during retirement. Indeed, when programs described as "welfare" are described in other terms, not involving this vocabulary, they receive far more support than when they are described as "welfare," even when they are the *same programs*.

21. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 29.

22. Gene Demby, "The Truth behind the Lies of the Original 'Welfare Queen,'" NPR, December 20, 2013, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen.

23. Wetts and Willer, "Privilege on the Precipice," 1–30.

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A long-term goal of many in the US Republican Party is to cut funding to even very popular government programs that provide support to needy populations, including the elderly. In pursuit of this political goal, the fact that "welfare" and similar expressions such as "public assistance" give rise to negative reactions among certain audiences has proven too tempting to ignore. On March 13, 2017, then president Donald Trump issued an executive order authorizing Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, to oversee a complete reorganization of federal agencies.[24] A draft of Mulvaney's proposals was floated, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations."[25] The second proposal listed is "Consolidate Non-Commodity Nutrition Assistance Programs into HHS [Health and Human Services], Rename HHS the Department of Health and Public Welfare, and Establish the Council on Public Assistance."[26] The proposal "moves a number of nutrition assistance programs . . . —most notably SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—to HHS and, acknowledging the addition of these programs to the Agency, renames HHS the Department of Health and Public Welfare."[27] The focus on renaming programs, and bringing more programs that Republicans hope to dismantle under the description "welfare," suggests a clear recognition that it is the label that does damage. This explains why the proposal recommends grouping Health and Human Services and food programs that many Americans use under the heading of "welfare," in an attempt to tie its racial stigma to these programs. "Public assistance" also carries with it racial stigma; appointing a Council on Public Assistance to monitor a vast sweep of government programs connects government spending to the negative racial sentiments that many Americans associate with the words "public assistance."[28] This makes sense as part of a larger mission to dismantle such programs.

The Republican Southern Strategy provides a model for political propaganda, to which we shall return, using the campaign against critical race theory that dominates US politics as of the writing of this book as a contemporary example.

Jennifer Saul's paper "Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language" is an investigation of the speech act of dog whistling.[29] On Saul's analysis, a dog whistle's message is a function of the ideology of the audience. The function of using a term like "welfare" to describe a program is to make that program less popular in the minds of those with a racist ideology

24. Executive Office, "Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch."
25. Executive Office, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century."
26. Executive Office, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century," 27–29.
27. Executive Office, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century," 27.
28. Executive Office, "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century," 27–29.
29. Saul, "Dogwhistles," 360–83.

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(such a description will be less pejorative to those who lack a racist ideology). Descriptions of programs as "welfare" or of persons as "on welfare" are paradigm examples of dog whistling in this sense. Describing a program as a "welfare program" gives rise to a strongly negative reaction to that program among one audience (those with at least some racial bias), and considerably less negative reactions among a different audience (composed of members with few indicators of racial bias). Racial bias is a value system; it is a way of valuing things—or, in this case, persons—on a metric of value at least partly determined by race. Describing something as "welfare" signals one very negative message about it to an audience who endorses a racist value system and lacks this negative force with audiences who do not share that value system.

Saul makes an important distinction between different categories of dog whistles. The category of *overt intentional dog whistles* is the most straightforward to define, but perhaps least politically central. Kimberly Witten defines an overt intentional dog whistle as

> a speech act designed, with intent, to allow two plausible interpretations, with one interpretation being a private, coded message targeted for a subset of the general audience, and concealed in such a way that this general audience is unaware of the existence of the second, coded interpretation.[30]

An overt intentional dog whistle is the clearest example—it is one that works, as the label suggests, overtly. Overt dog whistles are meant to be understood as such by their target audiences.

Saul introduces another category of dog whistles, *covert intentional dog whistles.*[31] Overt dog whistles are meant to be understood as such by their target audiences. Covert intentional dog whistles are not meant to be recognized as delivering hidden messages. An example Saul provides is "inner city": this expression is meant to be seen as a race-neutral expression, but hearing it triggers negative responses in those disposed to racial bias; something in the vocabulary triggers value systems that involve degrees of racism.[32] A covert intentional dog whistle triggers a response, perhaps a negative affective one, in those who share the relevant value system. But it does so surreptitiously. Many or most uses of "welfare" in the context of the United States are covert intentional dog whistles, in Saul's sense—those on whom they work most effectively do not realize that the dog whistle is having this effect.

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton appropriated the Republican racial rhetoric with his call to "end welfare as we know it,"[33] thereby attracting White voters who

30. Witten, "Dogwhistle Politics," 2, cited in Saul, "Dogwhistles," 362.
31. Saul, "Dogwhistles," 364–67.
32. Saul, "Dogwhistles," 367.
33. Carcasson, "Ending Welfare as We Know It," 655.

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otherwise would have been loath to vote for a party connected to the attempt to lift Black American citizens to equality, which might be seen as helping "the undeserving." Demonizing poor Black Americans has been a successful electoral strategy for both the Democrats and the Republicans in the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, and covert racist dog whistles have been central to this practice. Currently, the Republican campaign against critical race theory continues these strategies.

Covert and overt dog whistles function communicatively by drawing on an ideological background. To understand dog whistles, we must incorporate into our theory of speech the ways in which different ideological backgrounds affect what is communicated by a speech act. The concept we will use to explicate dog whistles, as well as some other kinds of hustle, is *presupposition*. On our analysis, dog whistling functions by *presupposing* certain ideologies. In part II, we will be developing a detailed theory of presupposition and ideology. The example of dog whistles brings out this more general feature of hustle—hustling is characteristically dependent on presupposed narratives, ideology, prejudice, values, and frames. A theory of meaning adequate to explaining hustle must develop and elucidate a novel notion of presupposition that could explain how such notions could be presupposed in a way that enables speakers to hustle their audiences.

The task of explaining dog whistling with presupposition faces an immediate objection, one that will help us elucidate early on some of the ways our project rethinks the terrain. Dog whistling is a paradigm of a speech act that allows for plausible deniability. As Justin Khoo has pointed out, this contrasts starkly with standard examples of presupposition, which cannot be plausibly denied.[34] For example, "I am picking up my sister" presupposes that the speaker has a sister, and so it would be odd for a speaker to say:

(1) I am picking up my sister from the airport, but I do not have a sister.

In contrast, one *can* say:

(2) That program is nothing other than a welfare program, but I don't mean to suggest anything negative about Black Americans.

The worry is this: if the negative racist message associated with "welfare" is *presupposed*, then one cannot explain plausible deniability, the very property that a theory of hustle must explicate.[35] Responding to this objection helps us, from the beginning, elucidate the centrality of speech practices to our model.

34. Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse."

35. A technical solution to Khoo's problem is available within the presupposition literature. One could say that while the presupposition in (1) is both presupposed and entailed, the presupposition in (2) is only presupposed, and not entailed. Putative cases of non-entailed presuppositions (which can thus be canceled even when not embedded under logical operators like negation) have been discussed at least as far back as the Gazdar's work on

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It is familiar from the work of Saul Kripke, among many others, that words are embedded in speech practices, which give those words meaning; according to Kripke, speech practices explain why proper names have the references they do.[36] We agree with Kripke on this point, but we think of speech practices as imbuing significance to words that goes well beyond their referential properties. Every time one uses a word, one presupposes (and manifests) a speech practice, one that is connected to a variety of resonances, emotional and otherwise. The word "welfare" belongs to a racist speech practice that casts a negative shadow on anything so-described. Using the word in this way presupposes this speech practice. But most words belong to multiple speech practices—and to understand what speech practice its use presupposes, one must often know the social location, point, and purpose of the speaker. In a paper that has deeply affected us, Anne Quaranto argues that dog whistles function by exploiting the presence of multiple speech practices governing a single word.[37] In using a dog whistle, one presupposes one speech practice, while taking advantage of the fact that the word can also be used in other ways. If one is challenged, one claims that one was using it in this other way.

What's needed to complete this analysis is an account of presupposition that can make sense of the claim that using a word can presuppose something like a practice. And we need an account of speech practices that explains the resonances of language and the impact language has on us.

The Path Forward

There are clear difficulties in making sense of the multifarious ways in which speech impacts audiences in the terms of the philosophical tradition of semantic analysis that dominate analytic philosophy and linguistic semantics. Let us briefly sketch the problem and where it led us. We start with the tradition that forms the background. It runs through Gottlob Frege at the end of the nineteenth century, the early Ludwig Wittgenstein in the first part of the twentieth century and Richard Montague in the 1960s, and onward into what is now a

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presupposition (*Pragmatics, Implicature, Presupposition, and Logical Form*). The analysis of presupposition developed in part II of the book allows this type of analysis, and also allows that presuppositions are probabilistic, so that there are tendencies for them to hold in contexts of utterance rather than absolute requirements. However, these facets of our account are not what we take to explain the contrast between (1) and (2). We would submit that while simply analyzing "welfare" as having an unentailed presupposition is possible, this would still leave an explanatory gap, since it is not at all clear why these constructions would be associated with unentailed presuppositions while the bulk of what are standardly taken to be presuppositions are entailed.

36. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

37. Quaranto, "Dog Whistles, Covertly Coded Speech, and the Practices That Enable Them."

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rich, well-articulated, and diverse academic enterprise, that of compositional formal semantics. In this enterprise, meanings of words are understood in terms of the bits of the world they refer to and in terms of functions on those bits, and the bits are composed to calculate what the sentence says about the world. Adherents of this approach, ourselves included, see an austere beauty in the smooth way these meanings can be composed, as if they were physical building blocks engineered to slide into place.

We place early Wittgenstein at the heart of the tradition in which we were trained because the approach we are describing can be seen as a realization of what he termed in the *Tractatus*[38] the *picture theory of meaning*. On this view, a sentence functions like a panel in the pictorial instructions accompanying a prefabricated furniture kit: an elongated T-shape with a series of slightly diagonal parallel lines at one end depicts a particular type of bolt, a long rectangle depicts a table leg, and the spatial relationship of these elements together with an arrow depicts an action that the assembler of the furniture must perform. The idea is that the conventions of language determine how arbitrary symbols can be mapped onto real-world objects in the way that pictorial elements are mapped onto real-world objects via iconic similarity. The Frege-Montague line of work makes precise how language can represent in this way, but it creates a quandary (a quandary perhaps not unrelated to the evolution seen in Wittgenstein's own later work): how can a picture theory of meaning like that we have just caricatured possibly help us understand phenomena like harmful speech?

While we will not directly use Wittgenstein's picture metaphor in presenting the account that these worries eventually led us to, it might be said that we still presuppose a depiction theory of meaning. But don't think of a construction manual; think of a picture (from the front page of the October 1936 edition of the Nazi propaganda newspaper *Der Stürmer*) depicting a rich Jew with vampire teeth eating tiny "ordinary" people whole. He has a Star of David on his forehead, in case other aspects of the caricature were insufficient to indicate his identity, and a masonic symbol on his lapel for good measure.[39] Or think of Picasso's *Guernica*, also expressly created and exhibited to support a political cause. There are certainly pictorial elements in the *Guernica* that can be mapped onto things and events in the real world: a bull, a horse, faces and grimaces, a broken sword. Yet what makes the painting so rich is not simply the existence of symbols that stand for things. It is the extraordinary way the elements are chosen, portrayed, and composed so as to immediately evoke powerful emotional reactions, and the way they collectively and holistically

38. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5–12.

39. Images from *Der Stürmer*, including the one described in the main text, have been collated by Randall Bytwerk. At time of writing, they can be seen at his Calvin University website, https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/sturmer.htm (site verified March 2022).

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bring to salience a peculiarly rich web of social and historical associations, of interwoven half-told narratives, and of practices of war and killing.

Although we neither offer nor presume an analysis of artistic representation, what we seek in this book is a theory of how language can evoke similar emotional reactions, social and historical associations, narratives, and practices. Once one begins to look at language in this way, one begins to see even the simpler cases that have been the mainstay of semantic theory in a very different light, such as the relation between "dog" and "cur," which the logician and philosopher Gottlob Frege used to motivate the notion of meaning at the heart of the formal semantic tradition. The view we develop in this book will bring out how even the Ikea instruction manual was never a simple static mapping from 2-D representations to the 3-D furniture of the world, but embodied a complex set of consumer-societal, industrial, and constructional practices. So it is, we will argue, with every piece of language that was ever reduced in a class on semantics or philosophy of language to a sequence of logical symbols. We are not against the practice of performing such formalizations. But we will argue that what must be made precise is not a simple mapping from expressions to things. A conclusion we draw from Wittgenstein's later work is that what must ultimately be made precise, if we are to understand how meaning functions, is rather a set of language practices and the social conditions accompanying their use.[40] We believe that this is as true for the simplest sentence in a learn-to-read storybook as it is for the more complex and subtle ways in which speech mobilizes audiences toward explicitly political action.

The leading ideas of the new framework we develop in this book are as follows. Linguistic actions, such as speaking a word, exemplify social practices, and have *resonances* by virtue of the practices they exemplify. The resonances include things, properties, emotions, practices, and social identities—anything that tends to be around when words are used. The resonances always have ideological significance, and sometimes this is obvious, as when a word like "freedom" is used. The function of speech is to *attune* audiences to each other and to facts of the world, and this attunement occurs via the resonances of what is said. Some resonances concern effects of the linguistic action on the interlocutors, like the gaining of new attunements to the way the world is, or the experience of pain when a slur is hurled at someone. Other resonances are

40. There is throughout Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* a continuous push away from the inner, mental significance of language, and toward the societal practices within which language is used, or, as he would have it, within which language games are played. The view is crystalized in an extraordinary remark with respect to which perhaps we err by merely mentioning it in a footnote; it might be said that the current volume, like much other philosophical work of the last seventy years, is really the footnote: "For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (20, proposition 43).

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presupposed. Presupposed resonances are an especially important way that *hustle* creeps into communication; entire ideologies are presupposed and may be slowly *accommodated*, and yet the presence of ideological presuppositions can escape attention. *Harmonization*, which is a generalization of accommodation, is an adaptive process by which attunements change in the face of mismatches, for example, ideological mismatches between the attunements of different interlocutors. Harmonization does not always repair mismatches, but it can do so, allowing individuals and groups to coordinate; they may coordinate, for example, on ways of speaking, on ways of treating others, or ways of voting. Thus we study the influence of speech on political action, but with a particular interest in covert aspects of this influence.

Here is the plan of our book:

- In part I, we introduce the foundational notions of our model. Words are employed in communicative practices, which lend these words *resonances*. Groups of people form communities of practice, which shape these resonances. This is the topic of chapter 1, which is motivated in terms of political language, but in which the major new development is a general model of meaning as resonance, a model that is not specific as regards its application area. The use of words by a community of practice *attunes* its members to these resonances. The work of chapter 2 is to motivate and explain how attunement functions within such a community. This is where we start to get more explicit about the machinery required for questions of social and political significance, laying the groundwork for a model in which we can make sense of issues like ideological change and transmission. In chapter 3, we analyze the process by which attunement changes at both an individual and group level, or, equivalently, the way people and groups adapt to each other through communicative interactions. We refer to this process as *harmonization*. What we seek is a model of how speech can affect people in the short term, but a model that allows us to make sense of the process by which ideas and ideologies spread and transform over the larger time scales at which political change occurs.
- In part II, we use the notions we develop in part I to redefine the central concepts of formal pragmatics, *presupposition* and *accommodation*. Presuppositions reflect the background of communicative practices, the things that are normally so evident to interlocutors that their significance need not be made explicit. In justification of a tradition of philosophers pioneered chiefly by Rae Langton, we argue that presupposition plays a special role in ideological transfer. In our terms, this is because people tend to harmonize with presuppositions nondeliberatively. This both reflects the positive role of presupposition in helping people coordinate and build common ground, and introduces

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a danger, since a propagandist can take advantage of presupposition in order to persuade covertly. In chapter 5, we generalize standard models of presupposition using the notions introduced in part I. We use this to make sense of the idea that a communicative action can presuppose a practice, so that, for example, telling sexist jokes can presuppose sexist ideologies. *Accommodation* refers to the way people adapt to the communicative situation. We suggest in chapter 6 that accommodation be modeled as a special case of harmonization, as introduced in part I. Accommodation is harmonization to a group, especially to a group with which people identify. This move helps us to understand a range of complex phenomena, such as the processes that undergird political polarization and the formation of echo chambers.

- Our model of speech is more realistic than many more standard views in the sense that we aim to avoid certain common idealizations, because we think these idealizations obstruct the analysis of social and political aspects of language. In part III, we step back to look at theoretical issues involving idealization, in particular the issue of how idealizations about speech can serve as ideological distortions. For the sake of perspicuity, we focus on two idealizations standardly made in linguistic and philosophical work on meaning, which we call *neutrality* and *straight talk*. We use these to exhibit two different ways in which idealizations characteristically distort. First, they can distort by being incoherent, as we argue in chapter 7 to be the case with the idealization of neutrality. Words are embedded in practices, and as such are vehicles for ideology. There is no such thing, then, as a neutral word in a human language. The pretense of neutrality functions to mask the way speech transmits ideology. Secondly, idealizations can distort by limiting attention to an unrepresentative subset of language types, as we argue in chapter 8 to be the case with straight talk. In chapter 9, we situate our project within the broader ambit of attempts across philosophy to critique idealizations.
- Finally, in part IV, we turn to the question of the power of speech to harm and liberate. How do we theorize these together? Chapter 10 concerns harmful speech, focusing on several different categories, such as slurs, and bureaucratic speech, which harms by objectifying and masking. In our final chapter, we turn to the question of the liberatory potential of speech. How do we best think of free speech in a democracy, given speech's power to harm? We conclude that arguments against speech restrictions that are based on the democratic ideal of liberty fail. But this does not mean that no at least partial defenses of a free-speech principle are possible—an approach we suggest, cast in terms of maximizing participation in a process of collective harmonization, is to reconfigure the defense of free speech around the other central democratic ideal, that of equality.

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