

Division of Linguistic Labor and its Malfunctions

Semantic externalism about the meaning of natural kind terms famously detached this meaning from the concepts or representations individual speaker have in mind. “Meaning ain’t in the head” as the slogan says. Currently, it is often applied to social kind, moral or political terms. And even more recently, so does the socio-linguistic tool accompanying externalist theories – the Division of Linguistic Labor (DoLL) (Haslanger 2012, ch. 10; Zagzebski 2017, ch. 7; Engelhardt 2018). In its classical formulation (Putnam 1975), DoLL stabilizes (if not fixes) the referents of terms employed by even those speakers whose mental concepts associated with a certain term would be insufficient to distinguish its referent. This is due to the labor of ‘experts’ whose knowledge enables identification of term’s proper referent on behalf and for the benefit of ‘laypeople’. Thus, even if my concept of “gold” doesn’t allow me to distinguish the real golden ring from the fake one, I still refer to gold using this term thanks to chemists and jewelers in my community. However, a context of initial formulations of externalism and DoLL – the focus on natural kinds with a tendency to essentialist realism and idealizing view on DoLL as driven purely by epistemic differences – poses a problem for a straightforward transfer of externalist methodology to terms for which essentialist and politically innocent approach is not that easy to defend. What seems especially urgent in this case, is to give an account on how referents of social/moral/legal kind terms being at least partially shaped by the concepts of participants of social/moral/legal practices may in some contexts be fixed according to unilateral interests of those participants who happen to be socially designated as ‘experts’.

The non-ideal or critical approaches to DoLL may take various forms. Some, recalling Putnam’s claim on DoLL depending on mundane division of labor, reformulate this conception according to some ideas of Marxist tradition about the relation between social reproduction and language. (Kelemen 2014, ch. 2). In this view, DoLL is not only a function of “technical” – cooperative, but also of “social” – hierarchical and competitive division of labor, namely – class division. As such, it reserves access to production of meanings for members of “ruling classes” opening the way for ideology. Others built their conception of DoLL on feminist philosophy of language and Critical Race Theory. (Engelhardt 2019). This account takes phenomena like man- or whitesplaining as evidence that in societies of patriarchic or racial oppression who counts as an “expert” depends on how gender or racial distinctions go. Those read as male and White gain authority on the explanation of “nearly all terms” in public discourse. In my paper I propose to read these two approaches not merely as focusing on different kind of oppression (class or gender/racial), but more importantly, as different conceptions of what actual malfunctions of DoLL consist of. The former emphasize the processes of how “experts” are recruited from those occupying certain social position, the latter – in my view – gives an account of some among the effects of this recruitment. To overcome the shortcomings of both approaches, I systematically explicate this difference by employing a distinction between two kind of malfunctions of DoLL, which I call “Knowledge-Authority Production Problem” and “Knowledge-Authority Transmission Problem”. First indicates the process of institutional distribution of authority among some members of privileged groups which makes their socially situated epistemic positions relevant for expertise. Second – the process of distribution of public meanings fixed in the former in a way that serves interests and experiences of some rather than other groups in society. Both contribute to ideological “distortions of communication” and their careful study may provide tools in struggle against them.

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