Changes In Expressive Meaning: The Euphemism Treadmill

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The Euphemism Treadmill (ET), as described by Pinker (2002: 212f), is the process by which euphemisms gradually acquire negative connotations and are replaced by new terms, as illustrated by Pinker's examples in (1). This phenomenon, while well-known, has not been provided with a precise explanatory mechanism (with the notable exception of O'Neill, 2011). I will propose a Python-implemented simulation to elucidate the ET process, attempting to be compatible with both recent accounts of expressive meaning (cf., e.g., Gutzmann, 2019) and recent theories in sociolinguistics (cf., e.g., Burnett, 2023).

(1) a. Negro → black → African-American
b. crippled → handicapped → disabled → challenged

The model represents societal attitudes towards intensions or objects as beta-distributions on the interval [-1,1], where extreme values denote highly negative or positive attitudes. These distributions can be unimodal for universally agreed-upon attitudes or multimodal, potentially reflecting societal divisions into 'haters', 'lovers', and 'indifferents'. The social relevance of these divisions varies depending on the subject matter (alimentary preferences are often socially irrelevant; attitudes towards minorities less so). Each subgroup may employ specific expressions as sociolinguistic variables to display a speaker's persona.

The treadmill mechanism is driven by social pressure to appear positively disposed towards an intension. Agents attempt to signal as high an attitude as credible, limited by bounds near their actual attitude. Over time, habituation to these signals lowers expectations, allowing for gradual shifts in term usage. This process devalues positive expressions while potentially eliminating negative terms and negatively associating initially neutral terms. Eventually, extreme positive subgroups may introduce new expressions, initiating another cycle of the treadmill.

The model demonstrates that this characteristic ET development occurs regardless of whether attitude distributions remain stable or are updated after each turn in the direction of the (potentially hypocritical) signal. Scenarios where distributions are updated would correspond to situation where politically correct language induces shifts in probability density around signaling thresholds.

References: • Burnett, H. (2023). *Meaning, Identity and Interaction*. CUP. • Gutzmann D. (2019). *The Grammar of Expressivity*. OUP. O'Neill (2011). A Critique of Politically Correct Language. In: *The Independent Review 16(2)*, 279-291. Penguin • Pinker, S. (2002). *The Blank Slate*. Penguin