Aktualne kierunki w badaniach retorycznych
Current developments in rhetorical studies

RECENZJA/REVIEW

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The book addresses the theoretical and practical aspects of taboo-ification in the English language and in relation to Anglo-American culture and its media. The argument is placed against the larger background of pragma-linguistic, discursive, rhetorical and socio-cognitive literature that has accumulated over the course of last five decades on offensive language and (im)politeness. In fact, as Jim O'Driscoll notes several times in the book, since the advent of social media and the tabloidization of politics, language-oriented studies on impoliteness have tended to outnumber those on etiquette.

The book is a readable and well-illustrated introduction to how to study offensive language systematically and with a theory-based framework of reference for interpretations. Over the course of 205 pages (of which the last 35 are notes, references and index), Jim O'Driscoll introduces the readers to the history, contexts and rationales of studying offence that is caused linguistically (Part I), before outlining three separate analytic levels of taboo language, notably taboo words, taboo reference and taboo predication (Part II). This theoretical framework and analytical apparatus is put to practice in the case studies of actual offences (Part III). Here, some carefully selected instances of mediated mishaps, celebrity blunders, political scandals and personal encounters are reported as illustrations of offences against individuals, peace and social control, and social harmony and control. The illustration part is concluded with remarks on the need for ongoing attention protocols for analyzing offensive language, particularly given the fact that the spread of English as a global language creates a false sense of mutual intelligibility (Part IV). Of particular interest may be the cases of perceived offence that resulted in miscarriages of justice, notably when a non-serious and non-threatening comment expressed online was taken out of its original context of elocution and prosecuted as a criminal speech act (e.g., a terrorist threat). Reporting in detail the circumstances of prosecution administrated in such incidents is important, as they may have wide-ranging implications for freedom of speech, freedom of expression and privacy rights.

The book may be interesting and potentially useful to rhetorical scholars and critical discourse analysts on several accounts. First of all, it reminds us that offensive language is a highly gradable and quickly evolving area of expression, and that words that used to be related to strong cultural taboos (e.g., religion, sex) may now be considered much less offensive, while other semantic fields (e.g. race, class, ethnicity, gender) may be gradually taboo-ized, especially if they indicate that whoever makes use of certain terms, even in a joke or under stress, holds beliefs, opinions and attitudes that are no longer acceptable. This is especially notable in the case of public figures, elected officials or other "opinion-leaders" entrusted with authority (*ethos*). Secondly, offence is always contextualized and should be studied as such, even though contemporary scholars would like to extract "offensive language" and develop typologies of taboos, with conventionalized formulas for impoliteness, with inventories of swearwords and ranking lists of insults for reference and study outside of the context of elocution. Admittedly, this is justified as potentially useful for the sake of developing better procedures for elimination of offence in public discourse, also with the help of machine learning. However, even if possible to compile, such typologies will need constant checks and updates, because "any string of words whose production is transgressive of polite social norms," as taboo is described by O'Driscoll (p. 18), requires socio-linguistic nuance and sometimes highly contextualized qualitative analyses to monitor the level of transgression. As O'Driscoll reminds us, swearwords have long been used as instruments of social bonding, in-group identification, letting off steam and humor, to name just a few rhetorical uses.

The advantage of this publication is a critical review of literature on socio-pragmatics of offence with a productive accommodation of insights from well-known language theories, including those of illocutionary force from speech act theory (Searle 1969), or of footing and facework concepts from Goffman's (1967) work on public expression and social interaction. Much of the discussion on conventionalization of impoliteness and evolution of swearing in public rhetoric and interpersonal exchanges alike draws on seminal cross-cutting studies of the last decades, where offensive language started to be studied through interdisciplinary lenses (cf. Jay 2000; Culpeper 2011). Rhetoricians will enjoy a revisiting of dysphemism as an element of epideictic rhetoric and follow a discussion on how taboo is enacted, especially when "virtue" and "vice" inherent in any system of social order and social control are brought as reference frames to identify "threats," "menaces" or "incitements" invoked by taboo language with different degrees of vagueness or directness.

The author's original theoretical contribution to the field may be in the distinctions made for the sake of analytic apparatus into (1) taboo words (e.g., swearwords)

and (2) taboo references (where the mention of taboo topics or domains may be indirect and achieved through such figures as metaphor, analogy, euphemism or linguistic punning). It is also illuminating to find analytical categories for (3) taboo predication, where the offence lies not in the terms used or forbidden topic referred to, but in the propositional content of the utterance that is likely to invoke discomfiting imagery or bring undesirable consequences for (at least a part of) the target audience, by causing awkwardness, embarrassment or outrage. This is what O'Driscoll tries to illustrate in a series of case studies dealing with authentic instances of statements proved to be disparaging or disrespectful to specific persons or groups. He explains in depth how it was possible for a statement to be acknowledged or condemned as racist, sexist, ageist, xenophobic, etc., and thus requiring an apology. The cases studies are rhetorically varied and involve on-record speeches, commentary or tweets by public officials, as well as examples of data on workplace diversity in a company, terms of address applied by a sporting organization, or the negotiated boundaries between neutral and jocular conventions in university encounters.

The book also neatly summarizes some recent discussions on online offence, particularly how the rise in the volume of digital communications, particularly through social media networking platforms, has complicated the distinctions between "public" and "private" domains and has broadened the access of diverse groups of "unratified participants" to the potentially offending discourses thriving in online spaces. Ongoing research points to the decisive roles of anonymity and asynchrony, as well as the emotional and humorous overlays that are hard to catch by out-group members, in making computer-mediated public debate (potentially) ever more offensive (cf. Dynel and Chovanec 2015). Even though much of the controversial linguistic output is not specifically intended to cause offence, because misunderstandings are often caused simply by the lack of prosodic and non-verbal features common in tongue-in-cheek exchanges, the cases of offence online tend to be taken up and discussed publicly. It is not uncommon to have one's casual reaction to a post confronted with experiences of other "unratified participants" or compared with the actual intentions of the communicators themselves. Unfortunately, the ease of replication may significantly increase the scope of offence and further polarize user communities, while the longevity of offensive acts online makes it possible for users to suffer long-term reputational and psychological damage (cf. Graham and Hardaker 2017). Rhetoricians might see how this research parallels or informs their studies of eristic, strategic maneuvering or incivility.

For O'Driscoll, linguistic offense is the area that merits further inquiry especially on clarifying the blurred lines between meta-linguistic level of analysis (wrongful, offensive propositions) and meta-pragmatic ones (wrong, offending

things to say). He criticizes recent mirror trends of "taboo-ification with public--ization," which involve making the slightest suspicion of offensiveness in a text sufficient for its condemnation, often without regard to its original (private, local) context or intention. In the social media wars, the actual offence caused does not matter, what matters is subjecting alleged textual taboos to public scrutiny. However, the author also warns against top-down purist tendencies, overbearing approaches to eliminating offence through surveillance, and misconceptions related to political correctness that infringe on individuals' freedom of expression. It is advisable to avoid impoverishing linguistic interaction in a well-intended drive towards restoring social control of the media technologies. Recent backlash against "politically correct" rules of public expression and the condemnation of what is sometimes termed "cancel culture" have demonstrated clearly that language interventions to uphold social order may be seen themselves as a form social control and surveillance. O'Driscoll's conclusion is that highly egregious and aggressive populist rhetoric thrives on inciting the backlash against political correctness, so perhaps the time has come to "loosen the chains" of taboo-ification of public expression (p. 172).

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