Dehumanizing Speech

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Introduction

Dehumanization is typically understood as a psychological phenomenon, i.e., as a way of *conceiving* of a person. But could it also be a linguistic phenomenon, i.e., a way of *representing* someone? It is interesting and important to ask whether speech itself can be dehumanizing, and if so in what way. Philosophers and linguists have explored contiguous and overlapping kinds of speech, like hate speech and subordinating speech, in detail, but have paid comparatively little attention to dehumanizing speech in particular.[1]

In this chapter I put dehumanizing speech under the microscope. In Part 1, I develop an account of dehumanization, which builds upon the work of David Livingstone Smith. Here I introduce the paradox of dehumanization, according to which, at least in paradigmatic cases of dehumanization, the dehumanizer appears to conceive of their victim not solely as subhuman, but rather as both human *and* subhuman. In Part 2, I develop an account of dehumanizing speech; speakers engage in this practice, I argue, when they assert, implicate, or presuppose dehumanizing propositions or attitudes. In Part 3, I identify a uniquely linguistic version of the paradox of dehumanization: dehumanizing speakers who directly address their targets often assert that these targets are subhuman, while, through the mechanism of second-personal address, presupposing that they are human after all.

1. Dehumanization

Dehumanization is often discussed in the context of human rights violations like genocide, slavery, torture, and sexual abuse. Yet the notion is not always invoked consistently; David Livingstone Smith points out that it is understood in at least 8 different ways (2016, 418–19). For the time being I will follow Smith in thinking of dehumanization as a psychological phenomenon, and in particular as a way of conceiving of someone. I will later complicate this account. I also follow Smith in thinking of dehumanization as a wholly descriptive, rather than evaluative, concept, and of 'dehumanization' as a non-evaluative term. That is to say, a sentence like 'X dehumanizes Y' does not itself tell us anything about the moral properties of

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[1] Notable exceptions include Lynne Tirrell's work on the Rwandan genocide (2012), and Robin Jeshion's work on dehumanizing slurs (2018).

X's action, because 'dehumanization' is descriptively 'thin', and dehumanization is a similarly thin concept.[2]

1.1 Smith on Dehumanization

The philosophical literature on dehumanization is dominated by the work of Smith (2011; 2014; 2016; 2018; 2020; 2021a; 2021b).[3] Smith's own view of dehumanization has also changed over time. In his earlier work, Smith argues that to dehumanize a person is to conceive of them as a subhuman creature, rather than as a human being (2011, 26). Drawing on the notion of psychological essentialism, he argues that a dehumanizer thinks of a person both as lacking a human essence, which is the unique causal essence which accounts for the typical attributes of humans, and as being subhuman, i.e., as having an essence that places them lower down the moral hierarchy of objects in the world (or what has historically been thought of as 'the great chain of being') than humans (Smith 2011; 2014).

Smith's explanation for why humans come to conceive of certain people and groups in this way is as follows. Often, harming others can be instrumentally valuable to us. For example, killing competitors can give us access to more food and space. Yet at the same time, most of us feel a strong inhibition against harming other humans. Dehumanization, Smith thinks, 'is a way of subverting those inhibitions' (2011, 264). If we diminish a person's moral status enough, then we can render what would otherwise constitute heinous crimes against them permissible or even obligatory acts (2016, 416). We can then harm them in ways that benefit us, without alienating ourselves from our instinctive disinclination to harm fellow humans.

In his later work, Smith revises his account of dehumanization on the grounds that it cannot accommodate what he calls 'the paradox of dehumanization'. Several philosophers and psychologists have observed that, somewhat paradoxically, dehumanizers seem to regard their victims as both human and sub-human. This clashes with Smith's thought that dehumanization involves conceiving of a person as subhuman only.

Avishai Margalit captures the paradox of dehumanization when he notes that while Nazi concentration camp guards often treated prisoners like animals, the cruelty they inflicted upon them made sense only if the guards thought of the prisoners as human:

> [T]he special cruelty toward the victims in the forced-labor and death camps – especially the humiliations that took place there – happened the way it did because human beings were involved. Animals would not have been abused in the same way. (Margalit 1996, 112)

Even the most sadistic animal abusers do not attempt to *humiliate* animals, because animals cannot be humiliated. As Adrienne de Ruiter puts it, 'humiliation requires a certain recognition of the victim as someone who at least shares those sensibilities that allow him or her to

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[2] For an example of a contrasting, normative understanding of dehumanization, see Mikkola (2016).
[3] See also Margalit (1996); Appiah (2009); Manne (2016); Mikkola (2016); and de Ruiter (2023).

experience a sense of symbolic denigration', where such sensibilities are 'distinctively human' (2023, 77). Hence the camp guards must have thought of the prisoners as human in order to seek to humiliate them. Yet at the same time, by branding them and herding them like animals, they seemed to regard them as subhuman, too.

We find this paradox in dehumanizing propaganda, too. Nazi propaganda, for example, often described Jewish people in both human and subhuman terms; sometimes they were likened to rats, but sometimes they were characterised as 'poisoners of culture'. A rat cannot poison culture. Similarly, Rwandan génocidaires characterised Tutsis as 'cockroaches' ('inyenzi') and 'snakes' ('inzoka') (see Tirrell 2012), but also as 'enemies'. The latter term attributes human standing, and a capacity for moral responsibility, which cockroaches could not have. In addition, the génocidaires often raped Tutsi women in order to punish and humiliate them, but as Smith puts it, 'one does not seek to humiliate cockroaches' (2016, 417).[4] Kwame Anthony Appiah points out that genocidal killers often 'tell you why their victims—Jews or Tutsi—deserve what's being done to them' (2009, 247). Only humans, not rats nor cockroaches, can 'deserve' punishment.

The takeaway here is that victims of dehumanization are rarely regarded as *solely* subhuman. Smith had earlier defined dehumanization as conceiving of someone as a subhuman creature, *rather* than as a human being. Yet the most paradigmatic forms of dehumanization do not seem to satisfy this definition. Victims of such dehumanization are often likened to rivals, liars, enemies, betrayers, criminals and insubordinates, all of which are kinds of morally reprehensible *humans*, against whom violence might be morally justified.

We might respond to this paradox by concluding that dehumanization is an unhelpful notion. Perhaps what these cases show is that most of the time, perpetrators of so-called 'dehumanization' are not conceiving of their targets in an unusual way, and do indeed think of them as human, they just describe or treat them as subhuman in order to hurt them, qua humans. Indeed, we might think that by characterising genocidal killers as dehumanizing their targets, we are minimising or downplaying the human capacity for evil. Kate Manne raises such a worry, arguing that we should not appeal to 'characteristically humanist explanations of abhorrent behaviour' as often as we do (2016, 391).[5]

Smith, however, proposes that we build this tension into the definition of dehumanization: when a person dehumanizes someone, he argues, she regards them as simultaneously human and subhuman (2016). Her target appears to her as metaphysically transgressive, seeming to belong to two mutually exclusive kinds, which leaves her in 'an incoherent state of mind' (2021a, 358).

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[4] It is important to note, though, that some wartime rape is intended to humiliate not only the victims themselves, but also, and maybe even primarily, their male kin – especially their husbands and fathers (see Kukla 2020). This stems from the idea that by raping his wife or daughter, one desecrates a man's property. In such cases, there may be no obvious paradox of dehumanisation, since the intended subject of humiliation (the male relatives) is not also the subject of dehumanising treatment (the female victims). I am grateful to Laura Caponetto for discussion on this point.

[5] For similar critiques, see Lang (2010) and Bloom (2017).

One might worry that it is not just incoherent but in fact impossible to hold two conflicting beliefs about someone – that they are both human and subhuman. However, Smith is careful to qualify his account with the suggestion that only one of the two beliefs can be salient at any given time:

> Even though the mind of the dehumanizer harbors both beliefs, only one of them can be salient at any given time. And when one is in the mental foreground, the other one retreats into the background. This is why dehumanizing discourse tends to alternate between characterizing the other as a human and characterizing them as subhuman. (2021b, 240–41)

We find an example of this temporal shifting of beliefs in the comments of a Japanese soldier who participated in the Nanjing massacre. He told an interviewer that when the Japanese raped Chinese women, they thought of them as humans, but when they killed them, they thought of them as pigs (quoted in Smith 2011, 18).

Smith identifies two forms of dehumanization. *Demonizing dehumanization,* he proposes, involves thinking of someone as appearing human in some ways, but also as having the essence of a threatening animal, making them 'predatory, venomous, disease-carrying, or aggressive' (2016, 439). This threatening nature is exacerbated, he argues, by the person's 'uncanniness', i.e., their seeming metaphysical transgressiveness. As such, they appear 'monstrous or demonic' (Ibid). The perception of Black men as hypersexual monsters is an example of demonizing dehumanization.

Enfeebling dehumanization, meanwhile, involves thinking of a person as human in some ways, but also as a kind of non-threatening animal, like domestic livestock or game. What makes the difference between demonizing and enfeebling dehumanization is 'the presence or absence of physical threat' (2020, 177). People subject to enfeebling dehumanization are not viewed as monsters, because they are not dangerous, but they are still metaphysically disturbing. Smith points to the 'simianisation' of Black people as an example, whereby Black people are thought of as monkeys.

1.2 Objections to Smith

Smith's account of dehumanization seems to track some but not all of the ways of conceiving of people that many of us would be inclined to characterise as dehumanization. Here are three phenomena which are excluded by Smith's account but arguably should not be.

First, Smith's account excludes the perception of people as robots or automata. Psychologist Nick Haslam argues that in addition to a kind of 'animalizing' dehumanization, there is also 'mechanizing' dehumanization, where people are seen as automatons, lacking in subjectivity (Haslam 2006). Mechanizing dehumanization can be explained using Susan Fiske et al's stereotype content model, according to which social groups are vulnerable to different kinds of stereotypes, with more or less warmth and competence attributed to them (Fiske et al. 2002). Those subject to animalizing dehumanization typically have both low levels of warmth and

low levels of competence attributed to them, just as we would attribute low levels of warmth and competence to vermin like rats. But some groups are thought of as 'hyper-competent but cold'; Fiske et al. suggest that Asian American people, Jewish people, and women who succeed in non-traditional spheres are often thought of as such. These groups seem subject to mechanizing dehumanization, because they are seen, as Maria Kronfeldner puts it, as having 'capability and activity but no real emotions', like robots (2021, 428). Robots and automata are not akin to vermin, but nor are they akin to monsters. In fact, contra Smith's account, they are not really seen as 'creatures' at all.

Second, Smith's account excludes the perception of people as inanimate objects, a practice often described as dehumanizing. Sometimes women are perceived in such a way; rather than being seen as livestock, monsters, or robots, they are seen as sexual objects, akin to sex toys, who exist for men's sexual pleasure, and who are entirely lacking in animacy or subjectivity. As with the perception of people as robots or automata, this form of perception does not seem to qualify as either demonizing or enfeebling dehumanization. I propose we call this objectifying dehumanization, where 'objectifying' is to be understood not in the Kantian sense of using someone as a mere means to an end, but rather as conceiving of something as quite literally, a physical object. In fact, this seems to be the most extreme form of dehumanization. Demonizing, enfeebling, and mechanizing dehumanization all attribute animacy to the victim (though mechanizing dehumanization, unlike the former kinds, does not attribute subjectivity to them). Objectifying dehumanization attributes neither animacy nor subjectivity.

Third, and finally, Smith's account seems to exclude cases of dehumanization (animalizing, mechanizing, or objectifying) which are not paradoxical or contradictory. Some agents who are plausibly described as dehumanizing their victims do not seem to conceive of their targets as human at all. Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang discuss a story told by Primo Levi in his memoirs of Auschwitz (Brudholm and Lang 2021; Levi 1947). When working in a chemical laboratory, a non-Jewish Kapo got oil on his hand and nonchalantly wiped it on Levi's back. Levi writes that this was 'without hatred and without contempt' (Levi 1947, 102). The Kapo simply viewed Levi as not worthy of any real consideration, wiping his hand on Levi's back in the same way he would wipe his hand on a piece of cloth. In cases like this there seems to be no paradox of dehumanization, because the dehumanizer does not do anything to indicate that they consider their victim human.

1.3 A Modified Account

I take the foregoing objections to show that we need a pluralistic understanding of dehumanization. Dehumanizers always seem to conceive of their victims as sub-human – i.e., as having a different essence from humans and being lesser in value as a result – but there are many ways to be subhuman, and therefore many ways to dehumanize. You could see a person as inferior on account of being (or being akin to) an animal, a robot, and/or an inanimate object. Often, but not always, this will be accompanied by a belief that they are human, too.

It is interesting to consider what it might mean to conceive of a person as inferior on account of their lacking a human essence. I propose that this can take the form of a propositional belief, and/or a negative objective attitude. Objective attitudes are to be contrasted with reactive attitudes, which Peter Strawson defines as 'essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us, displayed in their attitudes and actions' (2008, 10). When you adopt a reactive attitude like resentment or indignation towards/about someone, you engage with her as a moral agent, and treat her as responsible for her actions and attitudes. Objective attitudes, in contrast, do not hold people morally responsible, but rather engage in with them as objects to be managed. To adopt such an attitude towards someone is 'to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided' (Strawson 2008, 9).

It is tempting to think of the objective attitude as relatively neutral, but I have argued elsewhere that we should take seriously Strawson's claim that the objective attitude can be 'emotionally toned' (Strawson Ibid; McDonald, 2021). It can often take the form of disgust, contempt, and hatred. These are the emotions and attitudes that often accompany a dehumanizer's belief that their victim lacks a human essence.

In the paradoxical cases of dehumanization already discussed, dehumanizers seem to be taking up both a reactive and an objective attitude towards their victim; they hold them morally responsible as members of the human moral community, experiencing attitudes like indignation and resentment, but also think of them as non-human entities to be controlled, experiencing attitudes like contempt and disgust towards them.

2. Dehumanizing Speech

Smith thinks that dehumanization is a psychological phenomenon; it is a way of *thinking about* people. As such, it is not immediately obvious what 'dehumanizing speech' is or could be. Yet in popular culture, speech is frequently described as dehumanizing, and surely not all of these descriptions are misguided. My task in the rest of this chapter is to consider what it might mean for speech to be dehumanizing.

Smith does grant that there at least *seem* to be other kinds of dehumanization, in addition to psychological dehumanization. He characterises rhetorical dehumanization, for example, as 'the idea that we dehumanize others by referring to them as less-than-human creatures' (2021b, 13). He denies that this is dehumanization, proper, however, on the grounds that one could use such language without actually thinking of one's target as sub-human (2021b, 14). Instead, dehumanizing speech is only dehumanizing, in the proper sense of the word, he thinks, in so far as it is either motivated by dehumanizing beliefs (Smith and Panaitiu 2015) or causes others to adopt dehumanizing beliefs (Smith 2020, 117).

He also points to dehumanizing treatment, understood as the treatment of someone in a degrading way, for example by objectifying them or treating them like animals (2021b, 19–25). An example would be raping a person for sexual gratification, as this treats the victim as a mere object for sexual pleasure. Consider also branding people, herding them, and keeping them confined like livestock. Once again, Smith denies that this is a form of dehumanization proper. He suggests that often when we speak of dehumanizing acts, what we mean is that those acts were facilitated or caused by dehumanizing beliefs, not that they were dehumanizing themselves (2021b, 24–25).

Contra Smith, I deny that dehumanization proper takes only one form. Rather, it seems to me that there are several different kinds of dehumanization: sometimes dehumanization is a psychological phenomenon, but sometimes it is a communicative phenomenon and sometimes a way of treating others. This would much better reflect how we tend to talk about dehumanization. After all, Smith finds himself in the awkward position of having to argue that the many people who think that branding people with numbers and referring to them as vermin are forms of dehumanization are wrong.

To get a grip on what dehumanizing speech might consist of, it is helpful to consider a phenomenon which *can* take the form of thought, action, and speech: derogation. Most of us would grant that it is possible to think derogatory thoughts. A misogynist who thinks to himself that women are stupid, infantile, and exist for men's pleasure is surely aptly described as having derogatory thoughts.

We surely also grant that it is possible to say derogatory things; were someone to declare that all women are stupid and infantile, we would accuse him of derogatory speech. We might also accuse him of derogatory speech if he used derogatory words, like 'bitch'. Notably, I doubt that we would require that his speech either is motivated by or causes derogatory beliefs in order to count as derogatory. We can imagine, for example, warning a child who had unthinkingly repeated the word 'bitch' without understanding it that they should not use the word because it is derogatory – in such a case, they lack intention to derogate but their utterance is derogatory nonetheless.

And finally, were our misogynist to refuse to listen when women speak to him, choosing instead to turn away, yawn, laugh, or leer at their bodies, we would likely accuse him of treating them in a derogatory way.

Derogation, then, can be psychological, communicative, and behavioural. What unites these phenomena, I propose, is a derogatory proposition or attitude. In psychological cases of derogation, that proposition or attitude is merely held. In the other two cases, it is asserted, presupposed, or implicated in some way (through speech, or through action, respectively). Derogation and dehumanization are different phenomena, but if derogation can be communicative and behavioural as well as psychological, then surely so can dehumanization.[6]

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[6] Derogation and dehumanization are different but related. It seems clear one can derogate without dehumanizing. For example, a person who believes that all Muslims are terrorists has derogatory, but not necessarily dehumanizing beliefs. It is less clear whether one can dehumanize without derogating, however, since a

If Smith disagrees, the burden falls on him to show what is so distinctive about the structure or content of dehumanizing belief, such that it would be inappropriate to describe speech or actions that assert, implicate, or presuppose such a belief as dehumanizing.

Psychological dehumanization, I propose, consists of believing a dehumanizing proposition or holding a dehumanizing attitude. It amounts to conceiving of a person as both sub-human, in the sense of being either a non-human animal, an animated machine, or an inanimate object, and of less worth than a human. Dehumanizing speech and dehumanizing treatment, meanwhile, assert, implicate, or presuppose such a proposition or attitude. I will focus for the rest of this paper on dehumanizing speech in particular.

2.a Asserting Dehumanizing Propositions

One form dehumanizing speech takes is the assertion of dehumanizing propositions. Here is an example of such an assertion, found in an SS pamphlet describing a Jewish person:

> From a biological point of view he seems completely normal. He has hands and feet and a sort of brain. He has eyes and a mouth. But, in fact, he is a completely different creature, a horror. He only looks human, with a human face, but his spirit is lower than that of an animal. A terrible chaos runs rampant in this creature, an awful urge for destruction, primitive desires, unparalleled evil, a monster, subhuman. (Quoted in Segev 1987, 80)

It would be very difficult to convince the average person on the street that this description is not dehumanizing. This may be because it linguistically represents the person in question as subhuman. However, Smith worries, quite reasonably, that merely representing a person as less than human is not enough on its own to qualify as dehumanization (2021b, 15). Consider, for example, a mother telling her son who never tidies his room that he is a pig. This seems to represent the child as less than human, but surely it is not dehumanizing.[7]

I propose that the difference between the SS pamphlet and the mother's rebuke is that in the SS pamphlet case, the speaker not only represents the target as subhuman but also asserts that they are subhuman. In the mother's case, the speaker represents the target as subhuman but does not assert that they are subhuman, instead intending for their representation to be figurative, not literal.

When Romeo says, 'Juliet is the sun', he does not assert that Juliet is a ball of plasma. Rather, he asserts that Juliet, like the sun, is good, beautiful, and worthy of worship (Camp 2006, 3). Similarly, the mother does not intend to assert the proposition she semantically expresses – that

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dehumanizing belief includes a belief that a person is of less value than a human, and this is a prototypical derogatory belief.

[7] It may be that the difference between the SS pamphlet and the mother's rebuke is moral; maybe both are dehumanizing, but only the SS pamphlet is *perniciously* dehumanizing. I reject this analysis on the grounds that it would entail that huge swathes of discourse are dehumanizing, contrary to ordinary language descriptions. For example, if we grant that the mother's rebuke is dehumanizing, surely we must also grant that referring to one's partner as 'teddy bear' or 'honey' is dehumanizing – this seems implausible.

her son is a pig. Rather, she uses this semantic content to *pragmatically* assert that her son is untidy or disgusting. The author of the SS pamphlet, in contrast, genuinely intends to assert the proposition semantically expressed – that the Jewish person is a monster.

However, this raises the question of how we can tell when a speaker is *asserting* a dehumanizing proposition. As the example of the mother shows, that the speaker represents or describes their target as subhuman does not suffice for their utterance to assert a dehumanizing proposition. Perhaps we should stipulate that seemingly dehumanizing descriptions cannot be genuinely dehumanizing if they are used figuratively, rather than literally.

Yet there are significant counterexamples to such a claim. Consider, for example, the use by Hutu génocidaires of 'cockroaches' ('inyenzi') and 'snakes' ('inzoka') to describe Tutsi people. Most of us would want to say that this is dehumanizing speech, but the speakers were surely not genuinely asserting the propositions semantically expressed – that the Tutsi were cockroaches or snakes. They were not blind – it was evident to them that the Tutsi people did not have six legs, nor bodies covered in scales. However, they were not using these terms entirely figuratively, either; it seems they did want to assert that the Tutsi were subhuman vermin, *akin to* cockroaches and snakes.[8] So what makes this use of figurative language dehumanizing in a way that the mother's figurative use of 'pig' is not?

To answer this question, we must reflect on the nature of metaphor. I will assume, following Elisabeth Camp (2007, 2017), that metaphors can be used to make propositional assertions.[9] Metaphors, she argues, involve 'an intuitively felt gap between literal and intended meaning, where the first provides the perspective for constructing the second' (2007, 14). We find such a gap in the mother's rebuke – literal meaning and intended meaning come apart, and the semantic content (and in particular the notion of a pig) provides a new perspective on the target of the utterance (the son). When a speaker utters a metaphor, Camp thinks, she 'invites her hearers to cultivate an open-ended, holistic perspective on the topic, one which is often also imagistic, evocative, and affectively-laden' (2007, 21).

Yet the perspective hearers are invited to take up is not entirely indeterminate. Metaphors presuppose a *specific* perspective, Camp thinks. A simple metaphor like 'Juliet is the sun' presupposes a specific collection of features and attitudes regarding the sun (2017, 54–57). This perspective cannot be reduced to a simple proposition, rather, it is 'a particularly complex proposition, with particularly tangible contextual effects' (2017, 55). When the speaker utters 'Juliet is the sun', they presuppose this particular way of thinking about the sun. They also perform an illocutionary act of assertion. Camp summarises the nature of this assertion below, where *a* is the noun phrase of the metaphor (in this case, Juliet) and *F* the verb phrase (in this case, the sun):

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[8] It is possible that our intuitions here are swayed by our knowledge of the genocide that followed, and was at least in part incited by, the use of these metaphors.

[9] There are competing accounts of metaphor. Griceans argue that metaphors work via conversational implicature; the mother conversationally implicates that her son is untidy or disgusting by uttering a sentence ('You are a pig') which flouts the first maxim of quality (Grice 1975; Huang 2014: 35–6). If this is correct, then using metaphors to dehumanise should fall into the second form of linguistic dehumanisation, which I discuss in §2.b.

With a declarative statement, the speaker undertakes a commitment to the claim that *a* possesses the properties most tightly matched to the most prominent and central features in the characterisation of *F*, where the size of the set of asserted features depends on factors such as the richness of the operative frame and plausible matches, how much conversational weight the speaker accords to the metaphor, and how directly the utterance addresses the current question under discussion. (Camp 2017, 75)

Camp stresses that the speaker's intention, as well as the context, both partly determine which features are predicated of the subject by an utterance of a metaphor like 'Juliet is the sun' (2017, 58–59). For all of these reasons, sometimes a hearer can 'pin a fairly specific claim on the speaker' (2017, 59).

We are now better positioned to explain why the mother's rebuke is not dehumanizing but the Hutu use of 'inyenzi' is. When we hear someone described as a pig, the properties we foreground are lack of hygiene, untidiness, et cetera. It is true that pigs are widely farmed and killed for their meat, i.e., they are widely treated as being of less worth than people, but arguably this assumed inferiority is not one of the central or most salient features of a pig in popular consciousness. This is particularly so now that 'pig' is very much a conventionalised insult (approaching even a dead metaphor) in a way that 'cockroach' and 'snake' are not. When the mother tells her son that he is a pig, she is presupposing a particular perspective which makes relevant and central the dirtiness and untidiness of pigs – it is these properties she is ascribing to her son. Plausibly, he could felicitously reject her assertion by saying, for example, 'I am not untidy or unclean'. The perspective she presupposes does not foreground the subhumanity of pigs.

In contrast, the Hutu radio announcers who described Tutsi as 'inyenzi' and 'inzoka' presupposed a perspective that foregrounded the subhumanity of cockroaches and snakes. Hence, their declarations that Tutsi people were inyenzi actually predicated of them the feature of subhumanity. We can tell that these features are represented as relevant and central in the Hutu's presupposed perspectives by examining the context in which these metaphors were used and the social understanding and significance of cockroaches and snakes in Rwanda.

Lynne Tirrell notes that in Rwanda and beyond, common ideas associated with cockroaches are that they 'are pests, dirty, ubiquitous, multiply rapidly, are hard to kill, ought to be killed, show emergent tendencies when in groups, are resilient, carry diseases' (2012, 200). These features are likely to be some of the most salient and central features presupposed when a speaker declares that a person is a cockroach. Snakes (inzoka), meanwhile, had a special significance in Rwanda, where they were a symbol of evil and where young boys were encouraged to torture them by smashing their heads then cutting them up (Tirrell 2012, 205). Hence to call a person either a snake or a cockroach in Rwanda is to characterise them as subhuman and requiring torture and extermination. This ties into a general historical tradition of characterising soon to be victims of genocide as vermin (see, for example, Nazi propaganda before and during the Holocaust). Characterisations of people as vermin often also trigger disgust (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005), a negative objective attitude which presupposes that its stimulus is not a member of one's moral community.

The mother's rebuke is not dehumanizing, and the Hutu descriptions are, because the mother is asserting that her son shares with pigs the properties of untidiness and uncleanliness, neither of which are incompatible with humanity. Indeed, hearers of the rebuke (the son included) will likely ignore the fact that pigs are not human –hearers often 'filter out' features of the source domain of a metaphor that are not relevant to understanding the metaphor (Glucksberg, Newsome, and Goldvarg 2001). For example, when we hear 'My lawyer is a shark', we understand the speaker to be asserting that their lawyer has the properties of aggression and tenacity. We do not understand them to be asserting that their lawyer is a good swimmer (Glucksberg et al. 2001). The Génocidaires, meanwhile, were asserting that the Tutsi shared with cockroaches and snakes the property of subhumanity – i.e., they were asserting dehumanizing propositions.

Hence what unites the SS pamphlet and the Hutu genocidal language is that they assert dehumanizing propositions; the former does so using literal language, the latter using figurative language. The mother's rebuke uses figurative language but does not assert that her target is subhuman. Sometimes, of course, it may be tricky to ascertain what features a speaker is attempting to predicate of a target when they use a metaphor, and thus it may be tricky to distinguish between these different kinds of case. When faced with such difficulties it is important to be attentive to contextual information and the general discourse in which the metaphor occurs. It is also worth noting that even if a speaker who describes someone as an animal or physical object does not assert a dehumanizing proposition, their representation of the target as subhuman might nonetheless cause or license others to think of that target as subhuman. Even speech which is not dehumanizing, according to my definition, can cause dehumanizing beliefs nonetheless.

2.b Implicating or Presupposing Dehumanizing Propositions

We have looked so far at dehumanizing speech which directly *asserts* that targets are subhuman. Yet Smith notes that 'the practice of explicitly describing others as less than human is nowadays often frowned upon, and is widely condemned' (2020, 121; see also 2016). Some purveyors of dehumanizing speech choose instead to convey a dehumanizing proposition without explicitly asserting it, for example by presupposing it or implicating it. This benefits them because they are not putting themselves on the record as committed to the truth of the proposition, and they retain some plausible deniability if challenged.

One common way speakers express dehumanizing propositions and attitudes without asserting them outright is by using slurs.[10] Robin Jeshion argues that slurs, like the N-word, have the following three features (2018). First, they are group-designating. The group each slur

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[10] I assume that the derogatory content of slurs is not part of their truth-conditional meaning. For a competing conception of slurs, according to which their derogatory content is indeed part of their truth-conditional meaning, see Hom (2008). Hom argues that a slur like 'Ch***' means something like 'Chinese and despicable because of it'. On such a view, an utterance of 'You are a Ch***' could qualify as an assertion of a dehumanising proposition, of the kind discussed in §2.a, provided we understand 'despicable' to mean something like 'morally inferior'.

designates is captured by its neutral counterpart. For example, the neutral counterpart of the anti-Semitic slur, 'K*ke', is 'Jew'. The slur itself therefore designates the group of individuals that are Jewish. Second, slurs encode, and are used to express, contempt towards the group they designate. When a speaker calls someone a 'K*ke' they express contempt towards Jewish people, as well as towards the target who is assumed to be a member of that group. Third, slurs have an identifying component. The user of 'K*ke' 'classifies and represents the target in a way that aims to be identifying, aims to specify *what the target is'* (2018, 83). I.e., they communicate that the properties of the target group which the speaker takes to warrant contempt are a fundamental, character-defining part of the person they are describing.

When you describe someone using a slur, then, you convey that their group membership is a fundamental part of them, and that this group membership licenses contempt. Contempt, I propose, can take the form of both a reactive attitude and an objective attitude. When it is a reactive attitude, it is akin to what Jean Hampton calls 'moral hatred', involving 'an aversion to someone who has identified himself with an immoral cause or practice' (1988, 61). For a use of a slur to dehumanize, I argue, it must instead express contempt qua objective attitude. Here I am departing from Jeshion, who thinks both that slurs express contempt qua moral emotion (similar to my category of contempt qua reactive attitude), and that slurs dehumanize. We differ on this point because Jeshion draws on a much more inclusive notion of dehumanization as 'conceiving of humans or human groups as inferior *qua* persons; conceiving humans or human groups as unworthy of equal standing or full respect as persons' (2018, 79). My understanding is closer to what Jeshion thinks of as strong dehumanization, which involves 'conceiving of humans or human groups as less than human' (Ibid).

For contempt to play a role in dehumanization as I understand it, it cannot take solely a moralised form.[11] When contempt takes a non-moral form, it is, I argue, a form of negative objective attitude. When we experience such contempt towards a person, we regard them as beneath us, as outside of our moral community and not a viable candidate for reactive attitudes like praise and blame. Taking an objective attitude towards somebody does not entail that you do in fact think that they are outside of the moral community; Strawson himself notes that such attitudes are often held temporarily and strategically. But when one uses a slur in particular, one conveys not just contempt, but also the idea that there is some fixed, fundamental part of the target's very identity, or essence, which makes that contempt permanently appropriate. Thus one seems to implicate that the target is necessarily and permanently, rather than contingently and temporarily, outside of the moral community. The fact that the objective attitude is negative further implicates that they are not just outside of the moral community but also somehow inferior to it. Hence, we can see how using a slur to describe someone implicitly conveys that they are subhuman.

A speaker who asserts 'Sam is a k*ke' is not asserting that Sam is sub-human, and if accused of doing so could respond, 'I was just telling you that Sam is Jewish!' Technically all they are

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[11] A dehumanizer could, however, express both contempt qua reactive attitude and contempt qua objective attitude. Indeed, this would involve precisely the kind of paradoxical thinking Smith thinks is characteristic of dehumanization.

doing is categorising Sam as a member of the group of Jewish people, expressing contempt towards him qua member of that group, and classifying the properties that Sam has which warrant that contempt as being a fundamental part of his identity. Moreover, it is only the group designating component of the slur that contributes to its truth conditions; on this account of slurs, 'Sam is a k*ke' and 'Sam is a Jewish person' express the same proposition. But because of the three semantic components of the slur just discussed, when a speaker uses the slur in conversation they likely implicate nonetheless that the target is sub-human. This therefore offers a sneakier way of linguistically dehumanising someone, without asserting dehumanising propositions outright.

3. The Linguistic Paradox of Dehumanization

Recall Smith's observation that dehumanization is often, if not always, paradoxical, in the sense that dehumanizers seem to think of their targets as both human and subhuman. Some cases of dehumanizing speech obviously manifest this paradox, for example, Nazi descriptions of Jewish people as both poisoners of culture and rats. Yet some do not. Consider the below utterances, shouted by attackers to villagers during the Darfur genocide in Sudan:

> 'You donkey, you slave; we must get rid of you'
>
> 'We kill our cows when they have black calves – we will kill you, too'
>
> 'You blacks are like monkeys. You are not human.'
>
> (quoted in Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2008, 882)

These utterances are not obviously paradoxical, because they do not ascribe any human properties to the targets; there is no talk of criminality, lying, betrayal or insubordination, and the targets are not being held morally responsible. The first two utterances talk of violence, but not as a punishment for moral wrongdoing. By all accounts, the targets are characterised as wholly outside of the human moral community, rather than as both within it and outside it.

Yet, I propose, these utterances are paradoxical in a different sense. They are paradoxical because they are instances of second-personal address. The attackers are telling their victims they are sub-human, yet to tell someone something, addressing them in the second-person, is arguably to presuppose their humanity.

Stephen Darwall claims that when two people 'make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will', they are taking up the *second-person standpoint* towards one another (Darwall 2006, 3). When one takes this standpoint towards a person, one presupposes that one shares with that person a 'common second-personal authority, competence, and responsibility simply as free and rational agents' (2006, 5). This is most apparent when a speaker attempts to give a hearer reasons to act, for example by making a request of them, but even in cases of testimony like those above, where the speakers are attempting to assert propositions, they still make 'a kind of claim on an addressee's attention, judgement, or reasoning' (2006, 125).

Speaking to (or, more accurately in this context, speaking *at*) someone need not involve taking up the second-person standpoint towards them. For example, Levi notes that Nazi concentration camp guards would sometimes shout instructions and abuse at people like they were animals, where 'tone matters more than content' (1986, 70). These speakers were not presupposing that they and their targets shared a practical authority, competence, and responsibility as free, rational agents. Rather they were simply attempting to influence their targets' behaviour, in the same way we shout 'No' at a dog not because we hope the dog will decipher our communicative intention and take itself to have acquired a reason not to act as it was previously acting, but because we hope the dog will be afraid or upset by the noise and refrain from doing things that tend to precede that sensation.

If a speaker genuinely thinks of their target as sub-human, then it does not make sense to try to give them reasons through second-personal address, because to do so would be to treat them, infelicitously, as fellow rational, free agents. Strawson makes a similar point:

> If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel or to reason with him. (Strawson 2008, 10)

Yet many dehumanizers do indeed address their victims, presupposing that they are fellow rational, free agents. This is exactly what the attacker in the Darfur genocide was doing when they shouted, 'We kill our cows when they have black calves – we will kill you, too'. Thus there is something paradoxical about these utterances, after all. They assert dehumanizing propositions, but the speakers address their targets in a way that presupposes the targets' humanity.[12] Indeed, unlike Smith's paradox of dehumanization, in this case the two conflicting beliefs appear to be held or expressed *simultaneously*.

Smith notes that there is something paradoxical about torturing and humiliating someone one believes is subhuman, but not that there is something paradoxical about even talking to someone one believes is subhuman (2016). Indeed, he thinks the contradictory stance of seeing a person as both human and non-human at the same time is what distinguishes dehumanization proper from 'the purely rhetorical use of animalistic language to characterize others' (2016, 418). However, sometimes speech which appears to fall into the latter category of purely rhetorical animalistic language can have a paradoxical component to it, too; the speaker asserts a dehumanizing proposition, but presupposes a humanising proposition.

That addressing someone is inherently humanising can partly explain why, as Levi observed, prisoners in concentration camps who spoke German fared slightly better than those who did not:

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[12] It is possible, however, that the attackers did not really intend for their victims to hear or understand their utterances. Their intended hearers may instead have been each other; they may have gained a sense of enjoyment and power from hearing one another utter dehumanising propositions in the presence of the victims. Indeed, uttering these propositions may have served as a kind of pep talk to help them overcome a disclination to harm fellow humans, as discussed in §1.1. I thank Laura Caponetto for discussion on this point.

> [K]nowing or not knowing German was a watershed. With those who understood them and answered in an articulate manner, the appearance of a human relationship was established. With those who did not understand them, the [guard] reacted in a manner that astonished and frightened us: an order that had been pronounced in the calm voice of a man who knows he will be obeyed, was repeated word for word in a loud, angry voice, then screamed at the top of his lungs as if he were addressing a deaf person or indeed a domestic animal, more responsive to the tone than the content of the message. […] For those people we were no longer men; with us, as with cows or mules, there was no substantial difference between a scream and a punch. For a horse to run or stop, turn, pull or stop pulling, it is not necessary to come to terms with it, or give it detailed explanations. (Levi 1986, 70–71)

Being able to converse with guards, Levi observes, was necessary for the 'appearance of a human relationship' (Ibid). Once the guard knew he shared a language in common with a prisoner, second-personal address became easier, and with that address came at least a veneer of the second person standpoint. Yet when language was a barrier, it was far easier to think of the prisoner as outside of the moral community, and therefore as an object to be managed, not reasoned with.[13]

An interesting feature of this paradox is that it only applies on a second-personal level. You cannot coherently tell *me* that I am subhuman, because in telling me you are taking up the second-person standpoint towards me, presupposing I am a fellow member of your *human* moral community, which contradicts your asserted proposition that I am not. Yet you can quite coherently tell other people that I am subhuman, because doing so does not require presupposing my humanity. If and when third-personal dehumanization is paradoxical, it must therefore be paradoxical in a different way. Sometimes this will be through its combination of the vocabulary of moral responsibility – in particular, ascriptions of blameworthiness and expressions of reactive attitudes like indignation – with distancing and essentialising language, like slurs, which expresses objective, rather than reactive, attitudes.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that, despite his reluctance to grant that dehumanizing speech is a standalone phenomenon, David Livingstone Smith's own work provides a fertile ground for

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[13] It is interesting to note that we often appear to take up the second person standpoint with machines and artificial intelligence systems. In uttering 'Hey, Alexa, tell me the weather', for example, we appear to be presupposing that Alexa is a rational agent capable of responding to reasons. And yet, presumably, we do not think of systems like Alexa in this way. Arguably, these are not genuine instances of taking up the second personal standpoint. Rather, the technology has been designed to respond to inputs which resemble acts which take up such a standpoint. When we say, 'tell me the weather', we are merely giving the technology a recognisable input, with a view to it generating our desired output. One might then worry, however, that this is also what a person does when they communicate with people they conceive of as automata or robots – perhaps they are not really giving them reasons, but rather attempting to generate certain outputs. If so, then there is no linguistic paradox of dehumanisation in such cases. This is an interesting issue worthy of much more discussion than I can give it here, and I am grateful to Justina Berskyte for drawing it to my attention.

thinking about a distinctively communicative form of dehumanization. I began by developing Smith's account of dehumanization, suggesting that while he is likely right that paradigmatic dehumanization involves conceiving of a person as both human and subhuman, and usually takes demonizing or enfeebling forms, it can also lack this paradoxical nature, and it can also be mechanizing or objectifying (in the sense that dehumanizers conceive of their victims as inanimate objects).

I then argued that, contra Smith's reservations, the concept of dehumanizing speech can be rendered intelligible without reducing it merely to speech which is either motivated by or produces dehumanizing belief. I identified two kinds of dehumanizing speech. The first involves asserting dehumanizing propositions; one can do this with both literal and figurative language. I also explained why some uses of animalistic figurative language are dehumanizing and some are not. The second involves implicating or presupposing dehumanizing propositions. This can be done when dehumanizing propositions or attitudes are built into the not-at-issue content of an utterance. One way to do this is to use contempt-expressing, essentialising slurs.

Finally, I argued that Smith's so-called 'paradox of dehumanization' sometimes takes a distinctively linguistic form, when dehumanizers address their dehumanizing propositions to the targets themselves. In these scenarios, speakers assert that their addressees are subhuman whilst simultaneously presupposing that their targets possess the humanity required to be a recipient of second-personal address in the first place.

Acknowledgements

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