

Transcript

Slide 2: After I submitted the proposal for this talk, I realized that its title might be misleading. Because the topic of my talk is not so much the claim that pornography dehumanizes women itself, a claim that famously has been defended by Katharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Rather, I am interested in a particular and relatively recent argument by Eleonore Neufeld that supposedly supports this claim. So a more fitting title for this talk would have been “How not to argue for women’s dehumanization through pornography”. Now, one recurring theme in the feminist literature on pornography is dehumanization-by-objectification. The argument that I would like to discuss, in contrast, states a conceptual relation between dehumanization and essentialization. Here it is, with slight but unsubstantial changes in wording, and a bracketed addition by myself.

Slide 3: Let me say a few words about both premises. The first premise states a conceptual relation between (certain forms of) essentialization on the one hand and dehumanization on the other hand. The notion of essentialism at issue in premises (1) and (2) is that of psychological essentialism. Essentialism in this sense is the (implicit or explicit) belief that certain categories, including some social categories, are natural kinds whose members share some essence. Essence, in turn, is believed to causally determine a number of observable surface properties. Thus, the most plausible way to understand Neufeld’s claim that pornography negatively essentializes women is as follows: pornography represents women as beings with essences that thwart or significantly reduce their capacity for self-determination. More specifically, Neufeld argues that pornography linguistically represents women as such. Dehumanization, in turn, Neufeld understands in broadly Kantian terms: as a failure to recognize or respect someone’s autonomy, agency, or capacity for self-determination, thereby failing to recognize and respect their personhood. The second premise is (at least in part) an empirical claim. According to Neufeld, the negative essentialization of women is frequently achieved via linguistic means – notably by use of gendered pejoratives. In order to defend premise (2), Neufeld exclusively presents linguistic evidence taken from, for instance, scripted dialogue and content summaries available on pornography sites. Now what I want to argue is that the evidence cited by Neufeld in support of the second premise is insufficient. So I do not claim that the argument is invalid, or unsound, but only that Neufeld fails to provide sufficient reason to believe that the second premise is true.

Slide 4: So what evidence for premise two does Neufeld present? There are three kinds of linguistic evidence Neufeld cites: gendered pejoratives, nouns (or nominalizations), and descriptions. According to Neufeld, pornography producers make use of these linguistic means in order to represent women as beings with essences that thwart or significantly reduce their capacity for self-determination. How so?

Slide 5: Let me begin with gendered pejoratives. According to Neufeld, gendered pejoratives like ‘bitch’, ‘slut’, ‘whore’, or ‘cunt’ qualify as *slurs* – as opposed to (mere) individual pejoratives such as ‘jerk’, ‘asshole’, ‘fucker’, or ‘dickhead’. What distinguishes slurs from individual pejoratives, on Neufeld’s (2019) account, are the former’s *essentialist semantics*. An essentialist theory of slurs regards slurring expressions as similar to natural kind terms according to a Kripkean/Putnamian picture. They designate, or purport to designate, some ‘deep’ essence that is causally connected to a number of observable surface properties. Taken

together, these surface properties make up what Putnam calls a ‘stereotype’ (cf. Neufeld 2019, p. 2). With a natural kind term like ‘tiger’, these observable properties are non-evaluative, such as *being striped*, *having four legs*, or *having a yellow iris*. Slurs, on the other hand, purport to designate some essence that is causally linked to negatively-valenced stereotypical properties of *social groups* such as *being lazy*, *being untrustworthy*, or *being filthy*.

Slide 6: For the sake my argument, let us assume that Neufeld’s essentialist theory of slurs is correct. The question is, then, whether gendered pejoratives do indeed qualify as slurs. Note that, on the Kripke-Putnam picture, essence is stable: An individual’s surface properties (including its behaviour) may change, but its essence is bound to remain the same. And now consider the following examples: With respect to natural kind terms – whether ‘failed’ or ‘successful’ – the Kripke-Putnam view gives us pretty clear verdicts about sentences such as (1a/b) and (2a/b) [and the plausibility of the view owes a lot to speaker ‘intuitions’ about such and similar sentences]. Sentences expressing a change in *essence* such as (1a) or (2a), when taken literally, are infelicitous; whereas sentences about altered surface properties such as (1b) and (2b) are unproblematic.

Slide 7: Now consider the following example sentences: (3a) and (4a) employ gendered pejoratives that are (typically) targeted at women, (3b) and (4b) employ what many consider ‘paradigmatic cases of individual pejoratives’ – not slurs, and (3c) and (4c) employ what many consider paradigmatic examples of (ethnic) slurs. Note that (unfortunately) it is not at all uncommon for speakers to utter sentences such as (3a) and (4a) as well as (3b) and (4b) in order to express that the subject of the sentence has undergone a *change in attitudes, behaviour, values, or preferences* – but *not* in essence. Take (4a) and (4b): A speaker who utters these sentences can plausibly be taken to express the opinion that the promotion has turned a once decent and well-mannered co-worker or acquaintance into a person that shows ‘uppity’, arrogant or megalomaniac behaviour. By contrast, the sentences (3c) and (4c) seem much less natural – and thus much closer to the earlier examples (1a) and (2a) containing natural kind terms. Based on these examples, I think that an essentialist semantics is *implausible* as far as gendered pejoratives as concerned. Much like the terms ‘asshole’ or ‘jerk’ they (typically) target individuals, not whole groups, and they are used to express contempt based on “personal qualities” or “temporary behaviour” of a given individual, not based on some kind of ‘group essence’. So I contend that the gendered pejoratives discussed here do *not* essentialize their targets, therefore, they do not *negatively* essentialize either. To sum up, even if these expressions are indeed ubiquitous in pornography, as Neufeld claims, their frequent occurrence does not support premise 2.

Slide 8: So what about the second “essentialization strategy” that pornography producers allegedly make use of? Neufeld cites a study by Carnaghi et al. [2008] according to which descriptions of so-called ‘target persons’ that employ nouns (‘Kim is a homosexual’) rather than adjectives (‘Kim is homosexual’) prompt test subjects to make significantly more stereotypical inferences (e.g., that Kim does not go to church often). Moreover, the test participants judged behavioural preferences in a more essentialist manner when the target person was described by nouns rather than by adjectives’ [Carnaghi et al. 2008: 851], meaning that the targets’ preferences were judged to be stronger, more stable, and more resilient if the target was described by nouns. Neufeld [2020: 10] notes that ‘the categories of a typical pornography internet site include multiple nominalized social categories: “Latina”, “Ebony”, “European”, “MILF”, “Teen”, “Asian”, “BBW”, and so on’ and concludes that this has the ‘desired effect of conveying that we see certain “kinds” or “breeds”’ [ibid.] of women whose essence or nature disposes them to long for and enjoy certain sexual acts and thus thwarts their capacity for self-determination.

Slide 9: Note, however, that not only social categories are nominalized in porn. Rather, the most popular porn sites worldwide nominalize *everything*: verbs such as ‘to smoke’ or, more explicitly, ‘to finger’ become the categories ‘Smoking’ and ‘Fingering’, adjectives such as ‘old’ become the category ‘Old’, and phrases such as ‘big ass’ become the category ‘Big Ass’. Nominalization in pornography and elsewhere, I contend, is best viewed as a default means of categorization – but not necessarily of essentialization. Compare categorizations in a different context: besides well-known genres such as ‘Jazz’ or ‘Hip Hop’, the music website *Spotify* employs categories such as ‘Chill’ (a nominalization of the verb ‘to chill’), ‘Afro’ (short for ‘hits from the African continent’), or ‘Arab’ (short for ‘hits from the Arab world’). At any rate, absent further evidence it seems like an overstatement to characterize pornography’s categorization-by-nominalization as an *essentialization strategy*. To clarify, I do not oppose the claim that attitudes, behaviour, or values of individuals are generally viewed as stronger, more stable and resilient when individuals are described with the help of nouns rather than with the respective adjectives. In order to warrant a description as ‘a hothead’ rather than as ‘hot-headed’, it might well be the case that someone has to have shown hot-headed behaviour repeatedly and somewhat more reliably, thus being more likely to exhibit similar behaviour in the future. Still, as I argued earlier, nouns such as ‘hothead’, much like ‘jerk’ or ‘asshole’, differ from natural kind terms in important respects. Nominalization by itself is not a linguistic strategy that suffices for essentialization – or rather: nominalization does not automatically turn an expression into a kind term. The third strategy, describing women – or ‘breeds’ of women – in a way that stresses their subhuman, non-autonomous, or non-agentive nature, seems more promising. However, Neufeld presents only a single pertinent example extracted from a pornographic novel. A much more comprehensive and detailed content analysis would be required in order to support premise (2). To sum up, I think that language has an important role to play in and around pornography, a role that certainly merits further investigation. I am very skeptical, however, about the proposed close and simple connection between language in pornography and women’s dehumanization. And I have tried to show why I think that at least one argumentative strategy does not succeed.