

## **“May contain (strong) language” – Linguistics at the Intersection of Free Speech and Verbal Aggression**

Language can enlighten, persuade, provoke, and wound. In contemporary public discourse, debates about free speech increasingly intersect with concerns about verbal aggression, hate speech, offensive language, and the social consequences of linguistic harm. Yet where should the boundaries be drawn between protecting freedom of expression and restrictions on free speech that address the harms that words can inflict? How can we deal with more subtle forms of verbal aggression and manipulation, e.g., on social media and in political propaganda?

This roundtable brings together three distinguished scholars whose work has shaped our understanding of language and society from complementary perspectives. Elin McCready has explored the semantics and pragmatics of social meaning, especially in political discourse, and has investigated the linguistic mechanisms underlying dogwhistling. Lynne Tirrell’s influential philosophical work on speech, violence, and social injustice highlights how language can contribute to systems of oppression and exclusion. Kate Burridge offers insights into linguistic taboo, euphemism, dysphemism, language change, and the cultural forces that shape what societies deem acceptable or offensive.

Moderated by Bernd Kortmann, the discussion will examine how linguistics can contribute to current debates on free speech, censorship, linguistic responsibility, and verbal harm. By bringing together theoretical, philosophical, ethical, and sociolinguistic perspectives, the roundtable invites reflection on some pressing and complex questions of our time: when does language merely express ideas, so that freedom of speech is essential and needs to be protected? When does it become a form of aggression that needs to be curtailed or even censored? How can we identify and deal with more subtle forms of verbal manipulation, e.g., in political propaganda, or dogwhistling?