



# Pejoratives

Christopher Hom\*  
Texas Tech University

---

## Abstract

The norms surrounding pejorative language, such as racial slurs and swear words, are deeply prohibitive. Pejoratives are typically a means for speakers to express their derogatory attitudes. As these attitudes vary along many dimensions and magnitudes, they initially appear to be resistant to a truth-conditional, semantic analysis. The goal of the paper is to clarify the essential linguistic phenomena surrounding pejoratives, survey the logical space of explanatory theories, evaluate each with respect to the phenomena and provide a preliminary assessment of the initial resistance to a truth-conditional analysis.

---

## 1. Introduction

Pejorative language can be deeply offensive, and, hence, their corresponding taboos are equally restrictive. The paradigm examples of pejorative words are swear words (e.g. ‘damn’, ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’), insults (e.g. ‘dummy’, ‘jerk’ and ‘bastard’) and slurs (e.g. ‘bitch’, ‘faggot’ and ‘nigger’). Pejoratives demonstrate a wide array of complex phenomena, but their primary function is to conventionally convey negative, emotional content beyond the truth-conditional content that they are normally taken to encode (if any).<sup>1</sup> This emotional content reflects the derogatory attitudes of their speakers. As these attitudes vary along many dimensions and magnitudes, they initially appear to be resistant to a truth-conditional, semantic analysis. One of the goals of the paper is to provide a preliminary assessment of whether this initial resistance is warranted. The paper begins by providing a precise characterization of the data surrounding pejorative language. These data present the baseline criteria for any adequate explanatory theory of pejoratives. The second part of the paper surveys the logical space of available theories, assessing them for their relative strengths and weaknesses with respect to the criteria of adequacy.

## 2. Features of Pejoratives

Before trying to provide an explanatory theory for pejoratives, it will be helpful to describe their central, linguistic features. There are three main categories. The first category (features 1–4) describes the complex, expressive properties of pejorative words. The second category (features 5–6) describes their general syntactic and semantic properties. The third category (features 7–10) describes specific puzzles that arise for pejoratives. While not exhaustive, the resulting list serves as the minimal criteria of adequacy for any theory of pejorative language.

### 2.1. EXPRESSIVE FORCE

As mentioned at the outset, one of the distinguishing features of pejorative words is that they express the negative, psychological attitudes of their speakers. In Austin’s terminol-

ogy, pejorative words have negative *perlocutionary effects* on their hearers.<sup>2</sup> The negative attitudes expressed by pejoratives are directed at not just ordinary objects and people, but also toward states of affairs (e.g. the car's *damn* failure to start).

Oddly enough, this initial generalization fails to hold across all uses of pejorative words. In some linguistic contexts, some pejoratives act as amplifiers for the expression of *either* positive or negative attitudes. For example, in the following sentence:

(1) John is a *fucking* [good/bad] lawyer.

the pejorative term, 'fucking', can serve as either a positive or negative amplifier depending on which of the bracketed adjectives it modifies.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2. FORCE VARIABILITY

The derogatory force among different pejoratives varies both in their strength, and in their dimension of derision. For example, the relative amplificatory strength of 'fucking' is greater than 'damn' both along the positive dimension in (2), and along the negative dimension in (3):

(2) John is a [*damn/fucking*] good lawyer.

(3) John is a [*damn/fucking*] bad lawyer.

Pejorative exclamations also serve to express a variety of emotions, and to amplify them at different levels:

- (4) [*Damn!/Fuck!*]
- a. I forgot my keys. (*anger*)
  - b. I didn't get the job. (*disappointment*)
  - c. That car is fast. (*surprise*)
  - d. John is smart. (*admiration*)

Other pejorative terms have a narrower, more specific, range of derision. For example, *slurs* (or epithets) are used to express the speaker's negative attitudes towards members of a particular race or group. Slurs also demonstrate significant variation in both negative force (e.g. compare the relative strength of 'nigger' versus 'limey'), and for their intended target class (e.g. ethnicity, gender, religious or sexual orientation and socioeconomic status).<sup>4</sup>

## 2.3. TABOO

In most social contexts, pejorative language is inappropriate and forbidden. The degree of taboo surrounding any particular utterance of a pejorative word varies directly with two factors: (1) the degree of formality for the context of utterance (e.g. the chancellor's house versus the fraternity house); and (2) the expressive force for the particular pejorative uttered. Exceptions might include occurrences within quotation, contexts of fiction, appropriation, legal testimony or discussions of hate speech.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.4. HISTORICAL VARIABILITY

The force for any particular pejorative term varies over time, and is sensitive to the relevant social facts that support it. For example, the word 'damn' has diminished in its derogatory strength, as the institution of Judeo-Christian religion has diminished in its relative influence in English-speaking communities, while the slurs 'wetback' and 'beaner' have recently increased in their derogatory strength, as the institution of racism toward Latino communities has increased in its social influence in the USA.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.5. SYNTACTIC VARIABILITY

Pejorative words can occur in a variety of different syntactic positions. Their primary categories are:

Pejorative Exclamations (e.g. 'damn!', 'fuck!')

(5) [*Damn/Fuck!*] John forgot to file the case.

Pejorative Adjectives/Adverbs (e.g. 'damn', 'fucking')

(6) John forgot to file the *damn* case.

(7) John *fucking* forgot to file the case.

Pejorative Nouns (e.g. 'fucker', 'bitch')

(8) The *fucker* forgot to file the case.

(9) That *bitch* forgot to file the case.

Pejorative Verbs (e.g. 'fuck', 'bitch')

(10) John *fucked* up when he forgot to file the case.

(11) The senior partner *bitched* him out for it.

## 2.6. INEFFABILITY

Potts points out that, for any pejorative term, there does not appear to be an explicit, non-pejorative, paraphrase that fully captures its pejorative force.<sup>7</sup> For example, consider the variation for 'damn' in the following sentences:

(12) *Damn!*  $\neq_M$  I am angry!

(13) John is a *damn* good lawyer  $\neq_M$  John is a very good lawyer

Neither paraphrase is entirely plausible in its own case and neither paraphrase uniformly accounts for the other. Furthermore, depending on the background context of the conversation, the force for a pejorative term can be either positive or negative. This difference in derogatory force is difficult to paraphrase, as illustrated by (14) and (15):

(14) John is a *damn* lawyer  $\neq_M$  John is a lawyer and I am moderately [angry/happy] about this.

(15) John is a *fucking* lawyer  $\neq_M$  John is a lawyer and I am extremely [angry/happy] about this.

The problem of the ineffability of pejorative content is accentuated by Kaplan's observations regarding deductions made with pejorative terms.

### 2.7. THE DEDUCTION PUZZLE (KAPLAN)

According to Kaplan (draft), an account of pejoratives needs to explain the validity of arguments like:<sup>9</sup>

(16) That *damn* John got promoted.  
Therefore, John got promoted.

while at the same time explain the invalidity of arguments like:

(17) John got promoted.  
Therefore, that *damn* John got promoted.

The puzzle further raises the salience of ineffability when we consider the apparent invalidity of deductions such as:<sup>10</sup>

(18) John got promoted.  
I dislike John.  
Therefore, that *damn* John got promoted.

(19) John is a lawyer.  
I am extremely [angry/happy] about this.  
Therefore, John is a *fucking* lawyer.

In each of (18) and (19), no attempt to paraphrase the derogatory component into the second premise plausibly allows for the valid deduction of the pejorative conclusion.

### 2.8. THE BALANCED CONSTRUCTION CONSTRAINT (POTTS)

Potts points out that for balanced constructions of the form 'as X as Y can be', the two elements, X and Y, must match in nearly every grammatical respect, so that modifiers and near synonyms in one element but not the other will create an ungrammatical imbalance. For example, while (20a) is well formed, (20b) and (20c) are defective:<sup>11</sup>

- (20) a. I'm as sure as sure can be.  
 b. \*I'm as sure as certain can be.  
 c. \*I'm as sure as absolutely sure can be.

Potts observes that expressive modifiers, however, are exempt from this condition. For example, the insertion of the single pejorative modifier on either side of the balanced construction in (21) avoids making the phrase defective:<sup>12</sup>

- (21) a. I'm as sure as *fucking* sure can be.  
 b. I'm as *fucking* sure as sure can be.

Potts concludes that for the balanced construction constraint to be satisfied in (21), pejorative terms like 'fucking' must make no literal, truth-conditional, contribution to the proposition expressed, otherwise the balance would be disrupted. By contrast, non-pejorative terms *do* make literal, truth-conditional, contributions to the propositions expressed, and, hence, their insertion *does* disrupt the balance of these constructions.

#### 2.9. THE INFIXATION CONSTRAINT (POTTS)

Infixation is the insertion of a pejorative term inside of another term as a point of emphasis. Potts observes that while the infixation of pejoratives is acceptable, e.g. (22a), the infixation of non-pejorative modifiers, e.g. (22b), is unacceptable:<sup>13</sup>

- (22) a. o-fucking-kay, fan-friggin-tastic  
 b. \* o-surely-kay, \* fan-stunning-tastic

Analogous to the argument from balanced constructions, Potts concludes that the contrast demonstrated between pejoratives and non-pejoratives in the infixation cases in (22) shows that pejoratives must lack truth-conditional content.<sup>14,15</sup>

#### 2.10. THE CONTENT DICHOTOMY PUZZLE

Content dichotomy is the observation that pejoratives function in distinctly different ways depending on whether they are *orthodox* or *non-orthodox* occurrences. Orthodox occurrences of pejorative terms have three distinguishing properties. First, they are *non-displaceable*; that is, they appear to derogate even when embedded in different contexts such as in the antecedent of a conditional, under negation, inside of a question, in an attitude report, etc.<sup>16</sup> The derogatory force of the pejorative does not remain contained within the scope of the relevant operator, so neither conditionalizing nor negating a slur, for example, alters its derogatory effect. In each of the following sentences, the racial slur 'chink' seems to be derogatory toward Chinese people:

(23) If there are *chinks* in the building, then Yao will be relieved.

(24) There are no *chinks* in the building.

- (25) Are there *chinks* in the building?
- (26) John said that there are *chinks* in the building.
- (27) John said: 'there are *chinks* in the building'.
- (28) In the novel, there are *chinks* in the building.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, orthodox occurrences are supposed to be *agent centred*; that is, they appear to be inseparable from the attitudes of their speaker. For example, in (29b) Bush is not plausibly using the pejorative to report Clinton's attitudes in Clinton's utterance of (29a):<sup>18</sup>

- (29) a. Clinton: The *damn* Republicans should be less partisan.  
 b. Bush: Clinton says the *damn* Republicans should be less partisan.

Third, orthodox occurrences do not make genuine truth-conditional contributions to propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur. This claim garners its support from the previously noted observations regarding the wide scoping of pejorative terms, and their behaviour in balanced constructions and infixations. To illustrate this claim, compare (30) with (31), and (32) with (33):

- (30) The *damn* dog is on the couch.
- (31) The brown dog is on the couch.
- (32) The dog *fucking* escaped.
- (33) The dog quickly escaped.

The expressive adjective in (30) does not seem to modify descriptively in the same way as the non-expressive adjective in (31), and the expressive adverb in (32) does not seem to modify descriptively in the same way as the non-expressive adverb in (33).

The other side of the dichotomy involves *non-orthodox* occurrences of pejoratives. Non-orthodox occurrences of pejoratives have the opposite distinguishing properties of orthodox occurrences. They are *displaceable*; that is, they need not derogate from every syntactic position. In contrast to sentences (23)–(28), the following examples appear to contain non-derogatory occurrences of pejorative terms:

- (34) Institutions that treat Chinese as *chinks* are morally depraved.<sup>19</sup>
- (35) Only a genuine [*asshole/jerk/bum*] would deceive a friend.

Non-orthodox occurrences of pejoratives are also *non-agent centred*; that is, they are separable from the attitudes of their speaker. In contrast to sentence (29b), the following examples appear to contain non-agent-centred occurrences of pejorative terms:

- (36) My father told me that I could not marry that *damn* Brad.<sup>20</sup>
- (37) I am not prejudiced against Caucasians. But John, who is, [thinks/claims] that you are the worst *honky* he knows.<sup>21</sup>

And finally, non-orthodox occurrences of pejoratives make *truth-conditional*, descriptive contributions to propositions. In contrast to sentences (30) and (32), the following examples appear to contain truth-conditional occurrences of pejorative terms:

- (38) If John *fucks* up another project, the managing partner will fire him for it.
- (39) John *fucked* the managing partner's daughter, and was fired for it.
- (40) Random *fucking* is risky behaviour.
- (41) Being a *bitch* is different from being someone's *bitch*.

The puzzle is how to uniformly account for both orthodox and non-orthodox occurrences of pejorative terms.

### 3. The Logical Space for Theories of Pejoratives

There are six main theories that attempt to explain pejorative expressions: nominalism, contextualism, inferentialism, presupposition, conventional implicature and thick semantic externalism (TSE). This section presents each view in detail, and assesses them for their strengths and weaknesses relative to the criteria of adequacy set forth in the previous section.

#### 3.1. NOMINALISM

*Nominalism* is the position that pejorative content is not reducible to semantic content. There are three specific formulations of the nominalist view. The first is *expressivism*, which is derived from *moral expressivism*; the view that holds that moral terms make no contribution to the truth or falsity of what is said, but, rather, express certain moral sentiments.<sup>22</sup> As Ayer puts it:

...if I say to someone, 'You acted wrongly in stealing that money,' I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, 'You stole that money.' In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, 'You stole that money,' in a particular tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing

to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker<sup>23</sup>

Moral expressivism can be extended to cover pejorative terms, so that, for example, 'where D is a derogatory word and N its neutral counterpart, someone who predicates D of x, (i) says that x is N, and (ii) condemns those who are N'.<sup>24</sup> For example, where D stands for the term, 'chink', its neutral counterpart N would be 'Chinese'. For this view, the expressive content of a derogatory word makes no contribution to the truth conditions of what is said, but rather displays a kind of emotional or attitudinal commitment on the part of its speaker. So to assert that Yao is a chink is to assert that Yao is Chinese 'in a particular tone of horror' that conveys the speaker's negative attitudes towards what is asserted.

While expressivism plausibly satisfies the expressive force, ineffability, balanced construction and infixation criteria, problems arise with others. The main problem with expressivist views is well documented as the Frege–Geach embedding problem, where embedded, unasserted, occurrences of the expressive term are unaccounted for in certain valid inferences.<sup>25</sup> This is closely related to the feature of non-displaceability. For example, when the term 'chink' is embedded under negation or in a question (e.g. 'Yao is not a *chink*', 'Is Yao a *chink*?'), the speaker is presumably not expressing her derogatory attitude, and yet the denial and the question are not equivalent to merely denying or asking whether Yao is Chinese. In other words, the postulated expressive element is not sufficiently flexible to account for the various occurrences of epithets in different syntactic positions where the speaker is not expressing the emotional component that usually accompanies the term (e.g. under negation, in a question, as the antecedent to a material conditional, etc.).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the complex details and variations of pejorative force (criteria 1–4) are left unaccounted for under expressivism.<sup>27</sup>

The second formulation of nominalism is *gesturalism*. The view is presented in Hornsby (2001) where she posits that the pejorative aspect of racial slurs is explained by their *gestural content*. According to her, 'it is as if someone who used, say, the word 'nigger' had made a particular gesture while uttering the word's neutral counterpart. An aspect of the word's meaning is to be thought of as if it were communicated by means of this (posited) gesture'.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, Hornsby offers little in the way of specifying the kind of gesture being made, or explaining the content for such gestures. Without further detail, it is difficult to see what kind of proposal is being put forth, how it differs from expressivism, or how to evaluate it with respect to the criteria of adequacy.

The third formulation of nominalism is presented by Richard (2008). Call it *gappy nominalism*. The view holds that slurring uses of pejorative expressions have no truth-conditional content, so that, by compositionality, slurring assertions of sentences with pejoratives lack truth-conditional content. The result is truth-value gaps for these sentences.<sup>29</sup> According to Richard, 'sentence uses in which the user slurs say nothing true or false' because slurs radically misdescribe their targets as being despicable due to their race.<sup>30</sup> This radical misdescription does not lead to falsity because Richard thinks that slurring is a kind of *action* rather than an assertion. As Richard puts it:

What I am claiming is that to think of someone as the anti-Semite does is to misrepresent them in a way that **deprives what is said of truth**. When the anti-Semite thinks of someone in an anti-Semitic way, he thinks in a way that expresses, that vents his negative attitude toward Jews, and thereby shows contempt for and denigrates them. To *do* these things is to misrepresent Jews. It is to misrepresent them not because one is using a word that means something like *con-*

*temptible because Jewish*. Rather, it is to misrepresent Jews because one is doing certain things – e.g. expressing negative attitudes and contempt elicited by religion – the doing of which is one way to represent Jews as worthy of contempt. To have or display contempt for someone, to think badly of them by having such contempt, *is* to think of them, to represent them, as worthy of contempt.<sup>31</sup>

Gappy nominalism is similar to expressivism, with the exception that slurs are not literally synonymous with their neutral counterparts. So while the expressivist analysis for a sentence like (42) is something like (42a), and the gestural analysis of (42) is something like (42b), gappy nominalism will arrive at something like (42c), where the entire truth-conditional element in the original, expressivist analysis is removed:

(42) David Stern is a kike.

(42a) David Stern is a Jew (in a nasty tone that displays anti-Semitism).

(42b) David Stern is a Jew (in a nasty gesture that displays anti-Semitism).

(42c) [misrepresentational act regarding Stern] (displays anti-Semitism)

The reason for the move from (42a) to (42c) is that Richard thinks that to commit to the literal synonymy between slurs, like ‘kike’, and their neutral counterparts, like ‘Jew’ is to commit to racism. As the expressive component is not part of what is said, sentences like ‘Jews are Jews’ will literally say the same thing as ‘Jews are *kikes*’ under expressivism. However, this leads to the consequence that non-racists *say* (or *think*) as the anti-Semite does.

While gappy nominalism plausibly satisfies the criteria for pejorative force, ineffability, balanced constructions and infixation, the main problem is that it fails to sufficiently generalize to terms that have non-negative expressive content. The view fails to specify exactly why *slurring uses* of expressions like ‘chink’ do not have truth-conditional content, whereas *non-slurring uses* do have truth-conditional content. And, furthermore, the view fails to specify the truth-conditional content for non-slurring uses. For example, it fails to explain non-slurring, non-appropriated, non-belief-reporting occurrences of pejoratives such as:

(34) Institutions that treat Chinese as *chinks* are morally depraved.<sup>32</sup>

So, under gappy nominalism, either the pejorative occurs in slurring usage, where its sentence will lack truth-value, or the pejorative occurs in non-slurring usage, where the theory is incomplete. While having truth-value gaps is not a decisive objection to gappy nominalism, this problem points to the high cost of the requisite changes to the deductive rules of first-order logic.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, the view unnaturally generalizes to positive, expressive terms (e.g. ‘angel’, ‘sir’ and ‘madam’). Positive expressives seem to lack the misrepresentational character that Richards cites as the primary reason for the lack of truth-value for pejoratives. So, while Richard’s view emphasizes the defectiveness of racial slurs, it is difficult to see how it can plausibly

be extended to cover other kinds of expressive language. Finally, gappy nominalism fails to offer an explanation of the complex details and variations in pejorative force (criteria 1–4).<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2. CONTEXTUALISM

The second main theory for pejoratives is *contextualism*. As with established indexical terms like ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ whose semantic contents vary with the speaker, place, and time of the context of utterance, respectively,<sup>35</sup> contextualists hold that pejorative terms are indexical, and, therefore, that their pejorative content varies with features of the context of utterance. Given the wide variety of uses for pejorative words, as well as their apparent ineffability, contextualism would seem to be a promising theory. Such a view is implicitly endorsed by Kennedy (2003) when he writes that “‘nigger’ can mean many different things, depending upon, among other variables, intonation, the location of the interaction, and the relationship between the speaker and those to whom he is speaking”.<sup>36</sup> The problem is that while established indexicals have a rule-governed means for deriving their semantic content in a given context (e.g. ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’ each refer to the speaker, place and time of the context respectively), pejoratives do not, and in this sense, the view offers little in the way of predictive and, hence, explanatory power. In other words, it leaves unaddressed critical questions like: what *particular* features of the context explain how the force of epithets vary in the complex ways that they do?<sup>37</sup> Without an account of these features of pejoratives, it is difficult to see what kind of proposal is being put forth, or how to evaluate it with respect to the criteria of adequacy.

### 3.3. INFERENCEALISM

The third main theory for pejoratives is *inferentialism*. As a general theory of language, inferentialism holds that the semantic content of a term is given by its rules of use in making appropriate inferences. According to Dummett:

learning to use a statement of a given form involves...learning two things: the conditions under which one is justified in making the statement; and what constitutes acceptance of it, i.e. the consequences of accepting it.<sup>38</sup>

As a particular view of pejorative words, inferentialism holds that pejorative words license particular inferences to negative judgments. For example, if we consider the racial slur ‘Boche’ for Germans, Dummett says:

The condition for applying the term to someone is that he is of German nationality; the consequences of its application are that he is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans. We should envisage the connections in both directions as sufficiently tight as to be involved in the very meaning of the word: neither could be severed without altering its meaning.<sup>39</sup>

Williamson crystallizes Dummett’s point when he writes:

...the meaning of the word ‘Boche’ is constituted by rules of inference along these lines (1973: 454):

<i>Boche-Introduction</i>	<i>Boche-Elimination</i>
x is a German	x is a Boche
∴ x is a Boche	∴ x is cruel <sup>40</sup>

To generalize Williamson's framework, we can say that for any derogatory word, D, and its neutral counterpart, N, the meaning of D is given by the following schemata of inference rules:

<i>D-Introduction</i>	<i>D-Elimination</i>
x is a N	x is a D
∴ x is a D	∴ x is P

[where P is a negative, evaluative, property (e.g. *being barbarous*, *being cruel*, *being despicable for being N*, etc.)]

Inferentialism can plausibly satisfy the ineffability criterion because the negative content is given by the set of inferences that can be drawn from the rules of the pejorative term's use, and it can also plausibly satisfy the expressive force criterion because the negative content is explained by the pejorative term's licensing of inferences to negative conclusions. However, there are several serious problems with the inferentialist theory.

For the first problem, it bears pointing out that there are at least two versions of inferentialism: (1) where the meaning of a term is constituted by the inferences that a speaker of the term is *disposed* to draw; and (2) where the meaning of a term is constituted by the inferences that speakers know to be *associated* with the term by other speakers of the language. Both versions are problematic. Firstly, being disposed to draw the negative inference from a pejorative term is *not* a necessary condition for understanding that term. It is *because* non-racists understand a pejorative term that they are unwilling to draw the corresponding negative inferences associated with the term. As Williamson says:

We know what 'Boche' means. We find racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because we fail to do so. Yet we are unwilling to infer according to both Boche-Introduction and Boche-Elimination.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, non-racists can understand a pejorative term without knowing much of anything about its inferential role. As Hornsby points out, 'one can know that a word is commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt without being in a position to say at all exactly what commitments those who see fit to use it may incur'.<sup>42</sup> Many non-racists who are fully competent with a pejorative term D just know that D is commonly used in the speech community as a negative way of referring to N's, without any understanding of the conclusions licensed by the term's D-Elimination Rule.<sup>43</sup>

The second problem for inferentialism is that there is no determinate route from inference to reference. According to Williamson 'if the hypothetical assignment of X as the reference of E makes R(E) truth-preserving, and no other assignment does, then E does indeed refer to X'.<sup>44</sup> The problem is that where rule, R, is 'Boche'-Introduction and 'Boche'-Elimination, as there are non-cruel Germans, no assignment of reference to E makes R(E) truth-preserving. Even the racist who holds that *all* Germans are cruel faces difficulty as there are many sets X where the set of all Germans are a subset of X, and where X is a subset of the set of all cruel people – for example  $\{x \mid x \text{ is German}\} \cup \{\text{Genghis Khan}\}$ ,  $\{x \mid x \text{ is German}\} \cup \{\text{Khan, Slobodan Milosevic}\}$ ,  $\{x \mid x \text{ is German}\} \cup \{\text{Khan, Milosevic, Idi Amin}\}$ , etc. ... Hence, it is indeterminate which set to assign to the reference of 'Boche'.<sup>45</sup>

A possible response on behalf of inferentialism is to introduce a revised Boche-Elimination rule so that we have:

<i>Boche-Introduction</i>	<i>Boche-Elimination'</i>
x is a German	x is a Boche
∴ x is a Boche	∴ x is cruel and German

Notice that this allows for the inference from 'x is a German' to 'x is cruel', and, thus, explains some of the racist's categorical generalizations. As racists are actually wrong about this, the reference of 'Boche' will end up being the empty set under this modification of the inference rules. No set can have the set of all Germans as a subset (including the non-cruel ones), and yet itself be a subset of the set of all cruel Germans. Hence, to accept the modification is to accept that no one is being referred to with the use of racial slurs. While this might actually be a desirable consequence for the view, it precludes strains of racism that allow for slurs to pick out only the negative, stereotyped subset of the targeted class. In other words, the modified inference rules cannot accommodate for racists who think that the *Boche* are simply the *bad* Germans.

Regardless of whether the inferentialist rules can be adequately modified to explain reference, there is a third, more serious, problem for inferentialism. The problem is that the view is incomplete with regard to specifying property P in the D-Elimination rule. P can range over many kinds of negative, evaluative properties. This makes the actual inference rules for epithets extremely fine grained, especially if the view is to account for the complex variations in pejorative force described in section 1. However, now we have a tension between the fine-grained specifications of the inference rules (perhaps also to address the second problem of reference), and the first problem, namely, that it does not seem that speakers *need* to have such knowledge in order to be fully competent with the term. For example, speakers have a pretty good understanding of the lexical, negative ordering of slurs (e.g. 'nigger' is worse than 'chink' is worse than 'limey', etc.). Not only will the elimination rules need to pick out properties in very subtle ways that account for this ordering, but it is highly doubtful that speakers have cognitive access to such complex inference rules in order to understand the phenomenon of relative pejorative force. Finally, as this issue is unaddressed in the literature, it is unclear whether inferentialism can explain these complex variations in pejorative force without having to radically alter the contents of the theory, and, hence, risk becoming *ad hoc*.

#### 3.4. PRESUPPOSITION

The fourth main theory of pejoratives is the *presupposition view*. Generally, linguistic presupposition is a mechanism that allows speakers and hearers in a conversation to enter mutually assumed propositions into the common background in order to increase communicative efficiency.<sup>46</sup> For example, if a speaker says that she regrets voting for Bush, then the hearer will presuppose that the speaker did vote for Bush. The presupposition view for slurs holds that these words presuppose that their targets are contemptible because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. The negative component of a pejorative is, thus, its presuppositional content. According to Schlenker (2007), '*expressives are lexical items that carry a presupposition of a particular sort, namely one which is indexical (it is evaluated with respect to a context), attitudinal (it predicates something of the mental state of the agent of that context), and sometimes shiftable (the context of evaluation need not be the context of the actual utterance)*'.<sup>47</sup> To illustrate, Macià (2006) points out that 'what "That *bastard* John came into the room" presupposes is that we are willing to treat him in a contemptuous way'.<sup>48</sup>

The presupposition view does successfully appeal to the intuition that the slurring racist is sometimes trying to get us to agree with her by letting the use of the slur pass, but, otherwise, the view is problematic. The first problem is that pejoratives do not seem to pattern with presuppositions. As Saul Kripke notes, presupposition is cancellable by conditionalization, while pejorative content is not.<sup>49</sup> For example, Kaplan points out that while the conditional in (43) successfully cancels the implication that John had beat his wife, the conditional in (44) does not successfully cancel the implicature that the speaker holds John in contempt:

(43) John has stopped beating his wife, if he ever did beat her.

(44) That *bastard* John was promoted, if I do despise him.<sup>50</sup>

Potts points out another example where pejoratives do not seem to pattern with presuppositions.<sup>51</sup> The example illustrates a difference between pejoratives and presuppositions with regard to their interaction with ‘plugs’ (i.e. operators that prevent the compositional contribution of the embedded clause to the presuppositional content of the whole). For example, the attitude verb ‘believes’ in (46) is a presupposition plug that prevents that presuppositional content of the embedded clause (45P) from being contributed to the presuppositional content of the whole of (46). In other words, the speaker who utters (46) need not presuppose (45P):

(45) John is the present King of France.

(45P) There is a unique present King of France.

(46) John believes that he is the present King of France. (Even though there is none.)

But then consider the behaviour of the pejorative ‘bastard’ in a parallel case. Unlike in (46), the presupposition plug ‘believes’ in (48) fails to prevent the presuppositional content of the embedded clause (47P) from being contributed to the presuppositional content of the whole of (48). In other words, the speaker who utters (48) *is* presupposing (47P) because of the non-displaceability (i.e. wide-scoping) of pejorative terms:

(47) That bastard Kresge should be fired.

(47P) Kresge is despicable.

(48) Sue believes that that bastard Kresge should be fired. (#I think he’s a good guy)<sup>52</sup>

Because of the difference in their resulting interactions with presupposition plugs, Potts concludes that expressive content cannot be identified with presuppositional content.

The more fundamental problem with the presupposition account is that it simply does not offer the right kind of mechanism to accurately explain uses of pejoratives. As Richard (2008) casts the theory, 'slurs introduce negative presuppositions about their target into the conversational record when no one dissents'.<sup>53</sup> Richard goes on to point out that to say that slurs normally do (or should) allow for unobjected uses to introduce negative ascriptions of their targets into the conversational record seriously misdescribes how speakers typically interact. In many cases, rather than trying to enter something into the conversational record, 'someone who is using these words is insulting and being hostile to their targets'.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, this is precisely something that the hearer (or target) of the pejorative would *not* accept. To focus on slurring as a means of efficiently entering information into the conversational record is to miss the fundamental point of slurs, namely, that they are typically used to verbally abuse their targets, with no regard to whether the negative content actually gets accommodated within a framework of rational, cooperative behaviour.

### 3.5. CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE

The fifth main theory of pejorative words is the *conventional implicature* (CI) view. This view combines moral expressivism, which posits a separate dimension of expressive meaning, with Grice's notion of *conventional implicature*, as content that is separate from the literal, truth-conditions of what is said.<sup>55</sup> The CI theory comes in two forms: propositional and non-propositional.

The *propositional CI view* (PCI) holds that pejorative words contribute negatively valenced propositional content at the level of conventional implicature. The view also develops from Kaplan (draft) who points out that expressive words like 'oops' and 'ouch' have a non-traditional level of semantic content that captures their appropriate conditions of use.<sup>56</sup> For example, 'oops' conveys that the speaker has made a mistake. This alternate dimension of meaning is explicitly formulated by Potts (2005) as Gricean, conventional implicature.<sup>57</sup> According to Potts, CI content has the following features: (1) it is not calculable from the conversational maxims; (2) it is not cancellable; (3) it is detachable from what is said (i.e. there is another way to say the same thing which does not carry that CI content); so, its falsity is consistent with the truth of what is said; and, (4) it is scopeless (i.e. *non-displaceable*). Applied to racial slurs, for example, PCI holds that the difference between 'chink' and 'Chinese' is on the order of the difference between 'but' and 'and'. The term 'but' makes the same truth-conditional contribution as 'and', but it makes the further, detachable, CI contribution that there is a contrast between the conjuncts. Along the same line for pejoratives, the proposition semantically expressed by (49) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by (50):

(49) Yao is a chink.

(50) Yao is Chinese.

however (49) also conventionally implicates derogatory content towards Chinese people for being Chinese. (49) conventionally implicates (something like) (51):

(51) Yao is Chinese and despicable because of it.

As a theory of pejoratives, PCI has much to offer. It conforms to dictionary categorizations of the negative content of pejoratives as something conventional, yet not directly encoded in its literal definition. It directly addresses orthodox occurrences of the content dichotomy puzzle because CI content is non-truth-functional. And for the same reason, PCI explains descriptive ineffability, the balanced construction constraint, and the infixation constraint. Finally, Potts (2005) makes a persuasive argument that PCI generalizes to positive instances of expressive language.<sup>58</sup>

On the negative side, there are several reasons to doubt PCI. First, while Gricean CI's are detachable, Hom (2008) presents an application of an argument from Bach (1999) showing that pejorative content is not detachable. According to Bach's indirect quotation (IQ) test:

An element of a sentence contributes to what is said in an utterance of that sentence iff there can be an accurate and complete indirect quotation of the utterance (in the same language) which includes that element, or a corresponding element in the 'that'-clause that specifies what is said.<sup>59</sup>

Bach argues that in (52b), as Mary's report with 'and' rather than 'but' fails to accurately report what John said in his utterance in (52a), this shows that the contrastive element is *not* actually detachable, and hence must *not* be CI content, but rather part of what is literally said:

- (52) a. John: Shaq is huge but agile.  
b. Mary: John said that Shaq is huge and agile.

Analogously, Hom (2008) points out that when we consider (53):

- (53) a. John: Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist  
b. Mary: John said that institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist

we find that Mary's report with 'Chinese' rather than 'chink' does not accurately report what John said. John says something true in (53a), while in (53b) Mary reports him as saying something false. The example shows that pejorative content passes the IQ test, and is, thus, *not* detachable from what is said. CI content, on the other hand, *is* detachable from what is said, therefore the two must be distinct.<sup>60</sup>

Second, PCI fails to explain the non-orthodox occurrences of the content dichotomy puzzle (i.e. occurrences of pejoratives that are displaceable, non-agent centred, and that make truth-conditional contributions). Sentences (38)–(41) offer a variety of occurrences of pejorative terms that appear to be genuinely truth evaluable, and where substitution of the neutral correlate for its pejorative intuitively changes the impact or even the truth-value of the entire sentence.

Third, conventional implicatures (unlike conversational implicatures) are not cancellable. However, some occurrences of pejoratives *are* cancellable. Consider:

- (54) John is a *fucking* lawyer, but I don't think that it's bad or out of the ordinary that he's a lawyer; [he's just having (morally reprehensible) sex/he just specializes in laws regarding (morally reprehensible) sex].

- (55) The *damned* pizza delivery boy got my order wrong, but I'm not upset; I'm just pointing out the contrast with the [*Christian/saved*] one who always gets my order right.

If the second conjunct in each of (54) and (55) successfully cancels the expression of the negative attitude on the part of the speaker, then pejorative content cannot be explained by conventional implicature.

Fourth, PCI fails to explain Kaplan's Deduction Puzzle. So, for example, as pejorative content is not part of the literal truth-conditions according to PCI, the view cannot explain the invalidity of deductions such as:

- (17) John got promoted.  
Therefore, that *damn* John got promoted.

PCI faces a similar problem to that of gappy nominalism, that is, a serious revision of the rules for first-order, deductive logic.<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, as with the previous views, pejorative content for PCI is underspecified relative to the complex variations in the expressive properties for such terms. This underspecification is merely recast at the level of conventional implicature rather than at the level of truth-conditions.<sup>62</sup>

The other form of the CI view is non-propositional (NPCI), and is advanced by Potts (2007, forthcoming). NPCI holds that while pejorative content resides at the level of CI, it is not *propositional* content, but rather a function that shifts an *expressive index* of the conversational context. These expressive indices numerically represent the speaker's positive or negative attitudes toward particular objects or states of affairs in the context. For example, while (56a) represents only a slightly negative range for Mary's attitude toward John's being a lawyer (-0.2), (56b) represents a substantially negative range for Mary's attitude (-0.5):

- (56) a.  $\langle || \text{Mary} || [-0.8, 1] || \text{John's being a lawyer} || \rangle$   
[Mary essentially indifferent to John's being a lawyer]  
b.  $\langle || \text{Mary} || [-0.5, 0] || \text{John's being a lawyer} || \rangle$   
[Mary feels negatively toward John's being a lawyer]

Formally, Potts embeds NPCI within a type theory such that the denotation of a pejorative will be a function from contexts to contexts.<sup>63</sup> For example, when Mary utters (57):

- (57) John is a *damn* lawyer

the pejorative 'damn' updates the conversational context by denoting a function that negatively shifts the expressive index from a context with (56a) to a context with (56b).

As it is closely related to PCI, NPCI has much to offer, as well. It appropriates all of the theoretic virtues of PCI, as well as providing a more plausible explanation for both the pejorative force and the ineffability criteria. The denotations of pejorative terms are modifiers for the emotional indices of contexts, and are, hence, not explicable in terms of neutral, propositional content.

The main worry with NPCI is that, while it provides a sophisticated framework, it lacks explanatory power, and hence faces many of the same problems as contextualism.

For example, consider NPCI's analysis of (57). As (57) can express both positive and negative sentiments on the part of the speaker (e.g. depending on whether the speaker sees the legal profession positively or negatively), it is difficult to see how NPCI can specify a *function* for the denotation of 'damn'.<sup>64</sup> Another way to frame the worry is that language can have quite varied psychological effects on their hearers depending on the context of utterance. If contextual indices are indeed measurements of the discourse participants' emotional attitudes, then linguistically caused changes in those attitudes will be radically dependent upon all kinds of factors, ranging from background values and beliefs, to the psychological make-up of the individual discourse participants, to the interpretation of accompanying gestures, facial expressions and vocal tone.<sup>65</sup> This radical holism makes it difficult to conceive of how there could be an objective, unified notion of expressive content, hence, undermining NPCI's goal for a unified, semantic theory.<sup>66</sup> Once traditional semantics, pragmatics and psychology have performed their explanatory tasks, there seems to be nothing more for NPCI to do. If that is the case, then the extremely complex functions that NPCI postulates as denotations of pejoratives risk being ontologically profligate.

### 3.6. THICK SEMANTIC EXTERNALISM

The last view under consideration holds that pejorative terms have 'thick', negative, truth-conditional, content. The notion of 'thick' contents comes from Williams (1985) who holds that they 'express a union of fact and value' and 'usually (though not necessarily directly) provide reasons for action'.<sup>67</sup> According to Williams:

The clearest account, as so often, is given by Hare: a term of this kind involves a descriptive complex to which a prescription has been attached, expressive of the values of the individual or of the society... **It is essential to this account that the specific or 'thick' character of these terms is given in the descriptive element.** The value part is expressed, under analysis, by the all-purpose prescriptive term *ought*.<sup>68</sup>

Hom (2008) proposes this kind of 'thick' analysis for the truth-conditional content of racial slurs. Such content is externally determined by the institution of prejudice that supports the particular slur. For any slur D, and its neutral counterpart N, the semantic value for D is a complex property of the form:

ought be subject to  $p_1^* + \dots + p_n^*$  because of being  $d_1^* + \dots + d_n^*$  all because of being  $N^*$ ,

where  $p_1^*, \dots, p_n^*$  are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist social practices,  $d_1^*, \dots, d_n^*$  are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and  $N^*$  is the semantic value of N. For example, the slur 'chink' expresses a complex, socially constructed property like: *ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and..., all because of being Chinese.* Basically, to call someone a D is to say that they ought to be subject to discriminatory practices for having negative, stereotypical properties because of being an N. In this way, TSE accounts for the potentially explosive pejorative force of a racial slur, as some institutions of racism will include threatening, discriminatory practices. Hence, the pejorative force of such predications will vary with the severity of both the practices and stereotypical properties that get contributed by the institution of racism. As these institutions rise and fall in their social influence, so does the force of their corresponding pejorative terms.

In exploring the theoretical logical space of possible views for pejoratives, it should be apparent that the primary explanatory task is not theoretically *locating* the content of pejoratives (e.g. as semantic or pragmatic), but rather *explaining* the content of pejoratives. This involves explaining the complex variety of expressive factors surrounding these words (e.g. how they arise, and to what they are a function of). TSE seems to offer the fullest, most complete explanation along these lines.<sup>69</sup>

The appeal to institutional practices and values associated with a particular slur for its semantic content can be extended to pejoratives generally.<sup>70</sup> Non-slurring pejoratives will have thick semantic values that are responsive to different kinds of social institutions (e.g. 'damn' to Judeo-Christian religion, 'fuck' to norms surrounding sexuality, etc.). The thickness and severity of these normative concepts will be determined by their corresponding institutions. For example, an assertive utterance of 'John *fucked* Mary' literally says (something like) that John and Mary each ought to be scorned, ought to go to hell, ought to be treated as less desirable (if female), ought to be treated as damaged (if female), ..., for being sinful, unchaste, lustful, impure, ... because they had sexual intercourse.<sup>71</sup> The thickness of this prescriptive property explains the pejorative force behind the term 'fuck'. It imports the substantial norms and taboos surrounding premarital sex in the Western world.<sup>72</sup> The pejorative impact of 'fuck' will partly depend on the audience's relation to the prescriptive property expressed. In contexts where the audience does not accept the encoded norms, 'fuck' will have less pejorative impact, but in contexts where the audience does accept the encoded norms, the pejorative term will have greater pejorative impact. Non-orthodox, truth-functional, occurrences of pejoratives are thus explained with these thick, prescriptive properties as their literal, truth-conditional contents.

Orthodox, non-truth-functional, occurrences are explained with *conversationally* implicated, content that is derived from the severity of the literal, truth-conditional content. For example, while (58) has the seldom noticed literal reading (58L), hearers realize that this is not what speakers of (58) intend to communicate. Rather, they realize that speakers are flouting Gricean, conversational principles to get the hearer to understand that they are displeased with this situation:<sup>73</sup>

(58) The dog is on the *fucking* couch.

(58L) The dog is on the couch where (morally impermissible) sex occurs.<sup>74</sup>

(58I) The dog being on the couch is an extreme state of affairs (to the same degree of severity as the pejorative attitudes invoked with 'fuck').

Hence, the conversationally implicated content of (58) is given by (58I) which has the virtue of being possibly positive or negative. Furthermore, as with other conversational implicatures, there is the possibility of cancellation, so that speakers in odd situations can cancel the implicated content of (58I) with an utterance of (58IC), to signal that their communicative intention, as strange as it may seem, is the expression of the content given by (58L) (or (58L')):

(58IC) The dog is on the *fucking* couch, *literally*.

While the extended version of TSE offers a plausible explanation of most of the features of described in section I, there are three major concerns that face this view.<sup>75</sup> First, TSE (like inferentialism) postulates complex semantic contents for pejoratives, and (like inferentialism) this appears to conflict with a typical speaker's linguistic competence with expressives. Second, because TSE is fundamentally a truth-functional, semantic account of pejorative content, it appears to violate the balanced construction and infixation constraints (features 2.8 and 2.9).<sup>76</sup> Third, non-displaceability (or 'wide-scoping') seems problematic for any truth-conditional semantic theory of pejoratives.<sup>77</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Pejorative language is remarkably complex, and contrary to the playground rhyme 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me', certain words can be not only shocking, but hurtful and offensive. The analysis of the data and the various theories in this paper helps us to understand why.<sup>78</sup>

#### Short Biography

Christopher Hom's research is focused in the philosophy of language and mind, in particular, issues surrounding structured propositions and expressive language. His article 'The Semantics of Racial Epithets' has appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* (2008). His current research involves racial epithets and their theoretical intersection with issues in metaphysics, metaethics, philosophy of law, psychology and sociology. Before coming to Texas Tech University, where he presently teaches, Hom taught at Washington University in St Louis, and he was a U.C. Faculty Fellow Postdoc at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He holds a BA in Philosophy from University of California, Davis and a PhD in Philosophy from the Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science (LPS) at University of California, Irvine.

#### Notes

\* Correspondence: Prof. Christopher Hom, Department of Philosophy, Texas Tech University, Box 43092, Lubbock, TX 79409-3092, USA. Email: christopher.hom@ttu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Notice that words like 'felon', 'dirty' and 'short' carry negative connotations in almost all contexts of use, but such terms are ruled out as *pejoratives* in that their primary function is not to convey their connotations above and beyond their normal, truth-conditional content. Kaplan (draft, p. 13, fn. 27) suggests that expressive words (positive or negative) should be characterized as 'those expressions that do not present all of the semantic information that they carry as part of *what is said*', but this unfairly precludes pragmatic explanations from the outset.

<sup>2</sup> Austin (1962, p. 101).

<sup>3</sup> The term 'bad' is being used without irony or sarcasm. Also notice that while all pejoratives can amplify negatively, not all pejoratives can amplify positively (e.g. 'shitty'). Thanks to the anonymous referee for raising this point.

<sup>4</sup> Slurs are different from most other pejorative terms in that they are rarely used to positively amplify the attitudes of their speakers. Exceptions might include appropriated slurs (e.g. the use of 'nigga' among African American speakers), and, perhaps, the term 'bitchin'.

<sup>5</sup> There is significant disagreement over whether such non-derogatory occurrences are possible. The issue turns on properly distinguishing derogation from mere offense.

<sup>6</sup> The most recent FBI hate crime statistics shows that 61.7% of race-based hate crimes reported in 2007 were perpetrated against Latinos in the USA, increasing in each of the past 4 years. See the FBI's Hate Crime Statistics website: <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2007/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See Potts (2007, p. 166 and p. 176–177).

<sup>8</sup> For any two expressions X and Y, let 'X =<sub>M</sub>Y' mean that X and Y are synonymous, and let 'X ≠<sub>M</sub>Y' mean that X and Y are not synonymous.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan (draft, p. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Intuitions may diverge here. For example, Kaplan (draft, p. 23) says that he is inclined to take such arguments to be valid.

<sup>11</sup> Potts (forthcoming, p. 10). See also Potts et al. (2008, pp. 3–6), Potts et al. (2009, pp. 357–360).

<sup>12</sup> Potts et al. (2008, pp. 3–6), Potts et al. (2009, pp. 357–360).

<sup>13</sup> Potts (forthcoming, p. 11).

<sup>14</sup> The lack of genuine semantic content for pejoratives might be problematic for compositional pejorative terms like ‘Frogistan’ as a derogatory term for France. The example is originally due to John Searle. This may be a case of ‘prefixation’, but it serves to question the plausibility of Potts’ general conclusion from these data. Interestingly, ‘Frogistan’ is derogatory toward the French, as well as multiple cultures in the Middle East and central Asia. Thanks to Stephen Neale for pointing this out to me.

<sup>15</sup> It is not clear that the results regarding balanced constructions and infixation actually generalize across all pejoratives. Hom (draft) presents both felicitous cases of non-pejorative insertion (e.g. ‘filthy rich as rich can be’, ‘fan-stinking-tastic’) and infelicitous cases of pejorative insertion (e.g. ‘as *crapily* rich as rich can be’, ‘fan-*shitting*-tastic’).

<sup>16</sup> See Kaplan (draft, p. 16), Hornsby (2001, p. 133), Potts (2005, 2007, p. 169–172) and Richard (2008, p. 17). The phenomenon is commonly referred to as the ‘wide-scoping’ of the pejorative content of the term, but this terminology is only metaphoric, and not entirely helpful, so I will follow the terminology from Potts (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Opinions can differ on the non-displaceability of the occurrences of ‘chink’ in these examples, especially with (27) and (28). A helpful test is to imagine uttering these sentences where the hearer, but not the speaker, is a member of the target group, and where it is a background assumption that neither speaker nor hearer is racist. While there are other contextual factors (e.g. the degree of formality, the level of acquaintance between speaker and hearer, etc.), a direct factor in the reluctance to utter the sentence is the non-displaceability of the pejorative term. The non-displaceability result is more conclusively demonstrated in the test with a slur like ‘nigger’ where the speaker, but not the hearer, is African American. There is much more to say here with regard to distinguishing derogation from offense, but unfortunately this must be left for another paper. Thanks to Josh Sheptow for a helpful discussion on this matter.

<sup>18</sup> Potts (2005, p. 160).

<sup>19</sup> Hom (2008, p. 429).

<sup>20</sup> Kratzer (1999, p. 6).

<sup>21</sup> Schlenker (2003, p. 98).

<sup>22</sup> In particular, see Ayer (1936), Stevenson (1937) and Hare (1963).

<sup>23</sup> Ayer (1936, p. 107).

<sup>24</sup> Hornsby (2001, p. 135) is here describing the view from Hare (1963). The same view is raised by Stenner (1981, p. 302–303), and Saka (2007) who holds that ‘...there is no such thing as the proposition or belief expressed by ‘Nietzsche was a kraut’, there is only the attitude-complex involving (a) the pure belief that Nietzsche was German and (b) a cognitive-affective attitude toward Germans’ (p. 143).

<sup>25</sup> See Geach (1960, 1965.)

<sup>26</sup> See Hornsby (2001, p. 135), Hom (2008, p. 429) and footnote 17. Again, some theorists hold that pejoratives are always non-displaceable and, hence, express their derogatory content in *every* context.

<sup>27</sup> As far as I know, no one has addressed this in the expressivist literature; so, it is an open question whether expressivism has the resources to adequately handle the complex variations in pejorative force, but there is a *prima facie* worry. To remedy the deficiency, it is doubtful that mechanisms such as ‘tone’ or ‘special exclamation marks’ will be sufficient. And so to appeal to other kinds of theoretic devices is to complicate the expressivist view in a way that risks being *ad hoc*. Thanks to Jake Beck and Josh Sheptow for helpful discussion on this issue.

<sup>28</sup> Hornsby (2001, p. 140–141).

<sup>29</sup> Taylor (1981) suggests a similar kind of view where the reference failure of uses of slurs results in no claim being made whatsoever (p. 314).

<sup>30</sup> Richard (2008, p. 36).

<sup>31</sup> Richard (2008, pp. 26–27) (bold emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> This example is from Hom (2008, p. 429).

<sup>33</sup> Richard (2008) actually embraces this as a result of a family of arguments against a traditional conception of truth.

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 27 for analogous comments on this criticism.

<sup>35</sup> See Kaplan (1977).

<sup>36</sup> Kennedy (2003, p. 43).

<sup>37</sup> Analogous comments regarding this criticism for expressivism hold here – see footnote 27. As far as I can tell, no one has addressed this worry in the contextualist literature, so it is an open question whether contextualism has the resources to adequately handle the complex variations in pejorative force, but there is a *prima facie* worry. The core tenet of contextualism is that there can be no context-independent specification of the semantic content of any term. Hence, contextualism does not have the resources to explain the intricate patterns in pejorative force that

hold constant across most contexts. And to appeal to other kinds of theoretic devices is to complicate the contextualist view in a way that risks making it *ad hoc*.

<sup>38</sup> Dummett (1973, p. 453). Also see Brandom (2000, p. 62–64).

<sup>39</sup> Dummett (1973, p. 454). Also see Brandom (2000, p. 69–70).

<sup>40</sup> Williamson (2009, p. 140).

<sup>41</sup> Williamson (2009, p. 141).

<sup>42</sup> Hornsby (2001, p. 137).

<sup>43</sup> The problem of semantic competence is a general failing of conceptual role theories.

<sup>44</sup> Williamson (2009, p. 143–144).

<sup>45</sup> The problem of indeterminate reference is also a general failing of conceptual role theories.

<sup>46</sup> See Stalnaker (1974).

<sup>47</sup> Schlenker (2007, p. 237).

<sup>48</sup> Macià (2006).

<sup>49</sup> Reported as personal conversation in Kaplan (draft, p. 16).

<sup>50</sup> Examples are from Kaplan (draft, p. 16). For further linguistic evidence of the mismatch between pejoratives and presuppositions, see Potts (2005, p. 32–36). Schlenker (2007) responds by pointing to contextual variables that allow compensating shifts for the presuppositional content.

<sup>51</sup> See Potts (2007, p. 170).

<sup>52</sup> This example is from Potts (2007, p. 170).

<sup>53</sup> Richard (2008, p. 20).

<sup>54</sup> Richard (2008, p. 21).

<sup>55</sup> See Grice (1975, p. 173).

<sup>56</sup> See Kaplan (draft, p. 18).

<sup>57</sup> The view is suggested in Stenner (1981, p. 304) and Kaplan (draft, p. 22). Williamson (2009, p. 150) also endorses PCI.

<sup>58</sup> See Potts (2005, p. 179–193).

<sup>59</sup> Bach (1999, p. 340).

<sup>60</sup> See Hom (2008, p. 424–426) for different variants of this argument.

<sup>61</sup> Both Kaplan (draft) and Macià (2006) offer similarly revisionist proposals to the rules of logical consequence on behalf of their respective view.

<sup>62</sup> While remedying the deficiency does not suggest the *ad hoc* worry for PCI, it does risk blurring the distinction between conventional implicature, and genuine, truth-conditional content for PCI.

<sup>63</sup> See Potts (2007, p. 183–189).

<sup>64</sup> Potts recognizes this concern when he says, ‘I do not at present see a way to formulate these denotations in a way that allows for carefully controlled positive uses’ (Potts 2007, p. 188).

<sup>65</sup> Potts acknowledges this result for his theory when he asks his reader to consider ‘all the ways that one can convey one’s expressive attitudes: with facial gestures, hand gestures, posture, tone of voice, pitch, and so forth’ (Potts 2007, p. 178).

<sup>66</sup> A proponent of NPCI might happily concede that there is simply no unified semantic theory to be gained. It is beyond the scope of this paper to settle the question of semantic realism, but there are clear benefits to having a semantic theory of natural language (e.g. explaining the efficiency of linguistic understanding, connecting the phenomenon of linguistic understanding to theories of syntactic computation, etc.), so without a knock-down argument against semantic realism, this would be a premature concession of the project.

<sup>67</sup> Williams (1985, pp. 129–130).

<sup>68</sup> Williams (1985, p. 130) (bold emphasis added).

<sup>69</sup> This explanatory virtue aspect of TSE stands in contrast to the criticism levelled against NPCI in section 3.5.

<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately space constraints prohibit giving more than a brief sketch of this theoretic extension. For a fuller consideration of the view, see Hom (draft).

<sup>71</sup> As with racial epithets, this view is subject to empirical, sociological, investigation to determine the precise practices and ideological properties that are contributed.

<sup>72</sup> See Pinker (2007, p. 346–349) for a concise characterization of the social taboo surrounding ‘fuck’.

<sup>73</sup> See Grice (1975, p. 176).

<sup>74</sup> There is an even more *recherché* literal reading available for (58). Consider (58L’) The dog is on the couch that is currently having (morally impermissible) sex.

<sup>75</sup> Hopefully the extension of the sketched version of TSE to other categories of pejoratives (e.g. ones dealing with bodily effluvia, ones dealing with male and female genitalia, ones dealing with religion, etc.) is not too obscure.

<sup>76</sup> Also see footnote 15.

<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, space constraints prohibit a presentation of TSE’s possible responses to these concerns here. See Hom (draft) for a consideration of these possible responses.

<sup>78</sup> My deepest gratitude goes to Jacob Beck, Michael Glanzberg, Robert May, Josh Sheptow, and this paper’s anonymous referee for their insightful feedback, and to the editors at *Philosophy Compass* for their gracious support.

## Works Cited

- Almog, J. and Leonardi, P., eds. *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- , Perry, J. and Wettstein, H., eds. *Themes From Kaplan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things With Words*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. 2nd edition. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1936.
- Bach, K. 'The Myth of Conventional Implicature.' *Linguistics and Philosophy* 22.4 (1999): 327–66.
- Brandom, R. *Articulating Reasons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Dummett, M. *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- French, P. and Wettstein, H. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume 25, Figurative Language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Geach, P. 'Ascriptivism.' *Philosophical Review* 69.2 (1960): 221–5.
- . 'Assertion.' *Philosophical Review* 74.4 (1965): 449–65.
- Grice, P. 'Logic and Conversation.' *Philosophy of Language*. Ed. P. Grice. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. 171–81.
- Hare, R.M. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1963.
- Hom, C. 'The Semantics of Racial Epithets.' *Journal of Philosophy* 105.8 (2008): 416–40.
- , draft, 'A Puzzle About Pejoratives.' 2009.
- Hornsby, J. 'Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think about Derogatory Words.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume 25, Figurative Language*. Eds. P. French and H. Wettstein. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. 128–41.
- Kaplan, D. 'Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals.' *Themes From Kaplan*. Eds. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press, draft. 481–563.
- . draft. 'What is Meaning? – Explorations in the theory of Meaning as Use.' Brief Version – Draft no. 1, 1999.
- Kennedy, R. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. Random House, NY: Pantheon Books, 2003.
- Kratzer, A. 'Beyond Ouch and Oops. How Descriptive and Expressive Meaning Interact', handout for the Cornell Conference on Theories of Context Dependency, 1999.
- Macià, J. 'Context, Presupposition and Expressive Meaning', handout for a talk given at the Milan Meeting, 2006.
- Maienborn, C., von Heusinger, K. and Portner, P. eds. *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, forthcoming.
- Martinich, A.P. *Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Pinker, S. *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 2007.
- Potts, C. *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . 'The Expressive Dimension.' *Theoretical Linguistics* 33.2 (2007): 165–97.
- . 'Conventional Implicature and Expressive Content.' *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Eds. C. Maienborn, K. von Heusinger and P. Portner. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, forthcoming.
- Potts, C., Asudeh, A., Cable, S., Hara, Y., McCready, E., Alonso-Ovalle, L., Bhatt, R., Davis, C., Kratzer, A., Roeper, T., Walkow, M. 'Expressives and Identity Conditions.' *Linguistic Inquiry* 40.2 (2009): 356–366.
- Richard, M. *When Truth Gives Out*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Saka, P. *How to Think About Meaning*. Berlin: Springer, 2007.
- Schlenker, P. 'A Plea for Monsters.' *Linguistics and Philosophy* 26.1 (2003): 29–120.
- . 'Expressive Presuppositions.' *Theoretical Linguistics*, 33.2 (2007): 237–45.
- Stalnaker, R. 'Pragmatic Presupposition.' *Context and Content*. Ed. R. Stalnaker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974. 47–62.
- . *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Stenner, A.J. 'A Note on Logical Truth and Non-Sexist Semantics.' *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*. Ed. M. Vetterling-Braggin. New York: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981. 299–306.
- Stevenson, C. 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms.' *Mind* 46.181 (1937): 14–31.
- Taylor, K. 'Reference and Truth: The Case of Sexist and Racist Utterances.' *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*. Ed. M. Vetterling-Braggin. New York: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981. 307–17.
- Vetterling-Braggin, M. *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1981.
- Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Williamson, T. 'Reference, Inference, and the Semantics of Pejoratives.' *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*. Eds. Almog, J. and Leonardi, P. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 137–58.