

The Semantics of Racial Epithets*

Christopher Hom

I. Introduction

Racial epithets are derogatory expressions, understood to convey contempt and hatred toward their targets. But what do they actually mean, if anything? There are two competing strategies for explaining how epithets work, one semantic and the other pragmatic. According to the semantic strategy, their derogatory content is fundamentally part of their literal meaning, and thus gets expressed in every context of utterance. This strategy honors the intuition that epithets literally *say* bad things, regardless of how they are *used*. According to the pragmatic strategy, their derogatory content is fundamentally part of how they are used, and results from features of the individual contexts surrounding their utterance. This strategy honors the intuition that epithets can be used for a variety of purposes, and that this complexity surrounding epithets precludes a univocal, context-independent explanation for how they work. Neither view is without difficulty, although to many the pragmatic strategy is *prima facie* more attractive. I shall argue, however, that the semantic strategy actually fares better on a number of criteria. In doing so, I shall motivate a particular semantic account of epithets that I call *combinatorial externalism*. The account has significant implications on theoretical, as well as, practical dimensions.

II. The Semantic Strategy

The semantic strategy, as noted, adheres to the intuition that the derogatory content of an epithet is fundamentally part of its literal meaning. On a naïve formulation, an epithet like

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‘chink’ as a derogatory term for Chinese people is synonymous with (something like) ‘Chinese and despicable because of it’. But if so, then the semantic strategy faces a difficult balancing act. Some epithets are particularly powerful in their derogatory force. For example, the view must account for how the word ‘nigger’ can be explosively derogatory when directed towards African-Americans. The term has been deemed “one of the most racially offensive words in the language”¹ and is even considered to be “the most noxious racial epithet in the contemporary American lexicon.”² Reducing its meaning to ‘African-American and despicable because of it’ simply fails to explain the strength of this word’s negative, derogatory content relative to others in comparison (e.g. ‘chink’).

Some theorists have an even stronger intuition that the word ‘nigger’ expresses *unspeakably* bad content; meaning that is so strong that it derogates its intended targets on every occasion of use. These *silentists* introduce new types of semantic contents for explaining the force of epithets. At least a few prominent silentists in philosophy of language have yet to publish on this topic³, but Jennifer Hornsby advocates a version of silentism when she suggests that utterances of epithets are equivalent to *gestures* made while uttering the appropriate *non-pejorative correlate (NPC)*⁴, and that “an aspect of the word’s meaning is to be thought of as if it were communicated by means of this (posited) gesture”⁵.

¹ *The New Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1157.

² *Monteiro v. Tempe Union High School District* (1998), 158 F. 3d 1022, US Court of Appeals, 9th Circuit, Judge Stephen Reinhardt.

³ On my understanding, similar views are presented in these talks: Mark Richard, “Epithets and Attitudes” (April, 2005) given at the Syntax and Semantics with Attitude Workshop, University of Southern California, and David Kaplan, “The Meaning of ‘Oops’ and ‘Ouch’” (August 2004) given for the Howison Lectures in Philosophy Series at the University of California, Berkeley.

⁴ For any racial epithet, call its *non-pejorative correlate (NPC)* the expression that picks out the supposed extension of the epithet but without expressing derogation toward members of that extension. For example, the NPC of ‘chink’ is ‘Chinese’, the NPC of ‘kike’ is ‘Jewish’, the NPC of ‘nigger’ is ‘African-American’, etc.

⁵ Jennifer Hornsby, “Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think About Derogatory Words”, in P. French and H. Wettstein, eds. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol 25, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 128-141 at p. 140-141.

Unfortunately, Hornsby does not explicate the view in detail. A plausible interpretation of her view is that the semantic content of ‘nigger’ is equivalent to someone uttering the word ‘African-American’ while making the gesture of holding up the middle finger of both hands. The problem is that this version of gestural silentism fares no better at the difficult balancing act that faces all semantic accounts. The phrase ‘fuck the African-Americans’ hardly seems worse than ‘African-American and despicable because of it’. Furthermore, it fails to capture the inherently *racist* content of the word. But perhaps we have not specified the correct accompanying gesture. Imagine the gesture of bringing the index finger of one hand horizontally across your own throat. Perhaps the ‘throat-slash’ gesture comes closer to presenting the derogatory content of ‘nigger’. The problem is that while performing this gesture with an utterance of ‘African-American’ might threaten, it also fails to capture the inherently *racist* aspect of the word. To illustrate the point, imagine that I say ‘Red’ while performing the gesture in question in front of a redheaded person. I might successfully threaten him, but not *because* of his red hair. In this instance, I have failed to convey my general contempt or hatred towards redheads *qua* redheads, as a class. I have merely threatened *this* redheaded person. In straightforwardly derogatory contexts, speakers who utter an epithet wish to derogate someone *because* of their ethnicity (or gender, or sexual orientation). The utterance of NPC with the ‘throat-slash’ gesture is merely a localized threat.

While we could continue playing this charade, I suspect that *any* silentist who posits a new kind of linguistically inexpressible content (gestural or otherwise) is offering a dead-end explanation. Positing such entities will invariably be mysterious and ad hoc. Mysterious because it is unclear both what such entities are supposed to be and what they are supposed to contribute to the truth-conditions of sentences. If these words make no contributions, then we

are faced with the unenviable consequences of truth-value gaps and having to alter the traditional rules of logical deduction.⁶ The move is ad hoc because these entities are postulated just to explain how epithets work. It is doubtful that they arise for the semantic explanation of any other type of expression in natural language. Lastly, the main problem is that if these contents are intrinsically derogatory, then the silentist account fails to explain particular *non-derogatory* uses such as appropriated uses between members of the targeted class, and uses that highlight the racist concepts expressed by epithets in order to refute them. This is a problem we shall return to in some depth in Sections IV and VI. The challenge for the semantic strategist is to specify the semantic contents of epithets that successfully negotiate the difficult balancing act without positing mysterious, ad hoc entities. This balancing act focuses on two crucial features of epithets; that their contents are both *shifty* and *scalar*. The derogatory contents of epithets are shifty in that they can derogate in some contexts (e.g. straightforwardly racist contexts) but not in others (e.g. appropriated contexts). The derogatory contents of epithets are scalar in that their force can vary between individual epithets (e.g. the difference in force between ‘nigger’ and ‘chink’).

III. The Pragmatic Strategy

The complexity of the balancing act facing the semantic strategy for explaining epithets suggests that there is an inherently contextual element to the content of such words. This suggests a more pragmatic strategy that takes into account the contextual features that surround how epithets are used. I will consider three plausible formulations of the pragmatic strategy.

⁶ To allow for truth-value gaps is to allow for assertoric sentences that are neither truth nor false. Traditional logic assumes bivalence for all assertoric sentences, so sentences with truth-value gaps cannot be accommodated in logical reasoning without revision to the truth-conditional rules of deduction. I take no position on whether such moves have merit, but only that they are ill-motivated merely to account for the meanings of racial epithets.

Call the first *radical contextualism*.⁷ According to this view, the meaning of an epithet varies according to the features of its particular context of utterance. The idea is that just as indexical words like ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’ can respectively refer to different people, places and times in different contexts of utterance, epithets can have different meanings in different contexts of utterance – some even non-derogatory. In his investigation into the word ‘nigger’, Randall Kennedy endorses contextualism when he says 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”.⁸ Because their meanings vary from context to context, so does their derogatory content. According to Kennedy, certain uses are even sanctioned depending upon contextual features. Kennedy presents many detailed examples, but fails to specify the determinate rules for calculating the contents for any given context of utterance. The account seems to hold that unlike ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’, ‘nigger’ has no clear rules for deriving its content from contextual features of its utterance. That contextualism offers little in the way of predicting the content in a context is particularly unsatisfying because of the stakes surrounding these words. Uses of epithets can incur higher penalties for crimes, result in the termination of their speakers’ employment, generate controversial speech regulations, and continue to antagonize many, if not most, of their intended targets.⁹ The recognition of the phenomenal complexity surrounding such words is a positive explanatory step, but not the last, and is certainly not constitutive of an explanatory theory. Contextualism is a

⁷ To be clear, I distinguish radical contextualism as a specific theory about epithets from Radical Contextualism as a general theory of all linguistic expressions. For a succinct summary of the latter view, see Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), chapters 1 and 2.

⁸ Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 2003), p. 43.

⁹ The lack of determinate criteria for judging whether certain uses of epithets are derogatory also has significant legal implications for First Amendment speech issues. A detailed consideration of how the meanings of epithets impacts these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

premature surrender in the search for a principled analysis of epithets, and should be left as a last resort.

The second formulation of the pragmatic strategy arises as a natural extension of Gottlob Frege's general theory of language. According to Frege, there are words that share the same *sense*, but differ in *coloring* or *shading*.¹⁰ Such word pairs, like 'horse' and 'nag', are cointensional, and hence, coextensive, but differ with regard to the positive, negative, or neutral tone that they convey towards their referents. According to Frege, this non-truth-conditional component of language "is often said to act on the feelings, the mood of the hearer or to arouse his imagination".¹¹ The analysis can be naturally extended to racial epithets and their non-pejorative correlates. Call this theory of racial epithets *Fregean minimalism*. According to Fregean minimalism, epithets and their NPC's are analogous to word pairs like 'horse' and 'nag' in that they are literally synonymous, and differ only in tone. The negative tone associated with epithets accounts for their derogatory force, and distinguishes them from their corresponding NPC's, which have neutral tone. So, for example, 'chink' and 'Chinese' are literally synonymous, but while 'Chinese' has a neutral tone that expresses a neutral psychological attitude towards Chinese people, 'chink' has negative tone that expresses a negative psychological attitude towards Chinese people, thus, accounting for the derogatory force for the epithet.

There are a number of reasons to be suspicious of Fregean minimalism. First, coloring and shading are only metaphors within Frege's own theory. Frege offers little explanation for

¹⁰ See Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892), in P. Geach and M. Black, eds., *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 56-78 at p. 61, and Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry", *Mind*, 65, (1956), 289-311 at p. 295. I follow Dummett's convention of using 'tone' to refer to what Frege refers to as 'coloring' or 'shading'. See Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 84 and following.

¹¹ Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry", *op. cit.*, p. 295.

how to understand these metaphors. For example, does the linguistic shading of a word depend on ‘background lighting’ in the same way that the ordinary shading of a physical object does? If so, what are the conversational elements for speakers that correspond to ‘background lighting’, and what are the principles that relate them to the resulting linguistic shading? Differences in tone of voice are not themselves sufficient for explaining variations in linguistic shading (e.g. the emotional force of an epithet can even be *enhanced* when uttered in a normal tone of voice). Thus, Fregean minimalism offers no insight into the precise details of derogatory force.

Second, there is textual resistance for thinking that the concept of coloring is sufficiently robust to cover epithets. In his description of *ideas*, Frege clearly locates coloring and shading within this purely subjective realm when he says:

...it is to be noted that, on account of the uncertain connexion of ideas with words, *a difference may hold for one person, which another does not find*. The difference between a translation and the original text should properly not overstep the first level. To the possible differences here belong also the colouring and shading which poetic eloquence seeks to give to the sense. *Such colouring and shading are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker.*¹²

Because Fregean ideas are like mental images that vary from speaker-to-speaker,¹³ linguistic coloring or shading cannot account for how competent speakers uniformly and objectively understand the derogatory force associated with epithets. The derogatory nature of these words is not merely evoked or hinted at, but directly expressed as an insult that is understood by any competent speaker. Unlike the term ‘Bucephalus’ for which Frege allows a variety of associated ideas by painters, horsemen, and zoologists,¹⁴ the derogatory force associated with ‘nigger’ does *not* vary across competent speakers of English. The word is derogatory regardless of one’s

¹² Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, *op. cit.*, p. 61, italics added for author’s emphasis.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 59.

personal associations or feelings toward African-Americans. Furthermore, to associate neutral or positive tone with ‘nigger’ is to fundamentally misunderstand the word. The derogatory element is less like ‘poetic eloquence’, and more like an aspect of the ‘common store of thoughts’ (as cruel or racist as they may be).¹⁵

Lastly, Fregean minimalism conflicts with the standard Fregean solution to puzzles regarding differences in cognitive significance. According to Fregean minimalism, epithets and their NPC’s express the same sense. Thus, the following identity statements express the same thought:

- a. African-Americans are African American.
- b. African-Americans are niggers.

however, while the first appears to be trivial and knowable *a priori*, the second does not.

Competent English speakers are rationally compelled to accept (a) as trivial, while most would reject (b) as non-trivial, racist, and false. They are certainly not compelled to accept (b) as an *analytic* truth.

Because the terms do not differ in sense, according to Fregean minimalism, the standard Fregean solution to puzzles of cognitive significance cannot be applied. To illustrate, consider the following example. Supposing that Oprah is a rational, non-racist, competent English speaker, the following belief reports appear to diverge in truth-value:

- c. Oprah believes that African-Americans are African-Americans.
- d. Oprah believes that African-Americans are niggers.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 59.

Oprah accepts trivial identity claims, and hence the truth of (c), but rejects non-trivial racist claims, and hence the falsity of (d). The standard Fregean solution to this puzzle involves two moves: first, the appeal to different modes of presentation under which Oprah grasps the concept, or referent, of ‘African-American’, and second, Frege’s indirect reference principle for intensional contexts whereby the indirect reference of the embedded clause shifts to its customary sense or thought. Neither move is available to Fregean minimalism. First, modes of presentation are part of sense, and the view is committed to epithets and their NPC’s having the *same* sense. Thus, by Frege’s principle of compositionality, the embedded clauses in (c) and (d) express the *same* thought. Second, while the terms differ in tone, the indirect reference principle makes no allowance for incorporating a shift in tone. While the indirect sense of a term determines the customary sense of that term as its referent in indirect contexts, tone falls outside the bounds of linguistic representation. The notion of indirect tone is simply incoherent under the Fregean framework, and cannot plausibly be made to fit with Fregean thoughts in accounting for indirect contexts.

Without a difference in sense between an epithet and its NPC, there can be no difference in the thoughts expressed by identity claims made with them, and thus no difference in their cognitive value. Without a difference in cognitive value, there can be no difference in their judgment. The problem is even more starkly highlighted by considering contrasting belief reports such as:

- e. Oprah believes that MLK is an African-American.
- f. Oprah believes that MLK is a nigger.

where, according to Fregean minimalism, the truth of (e) automatically entails the truth of (f).

Thus, the view cannot be accommodated under a general Fregean semantic framework.

Together with the problems of metaphor and textual resistance, these internal, theoretical problems cast serious doubt on Fregean minimalism as the correct theory of racial epithets.

A third formulation of the pragmatic strategy emerges between the first two as both a clearer articulation of the Fregean metaphor, and as a more moderate form of radical contextualism. Such a moderate specification is consistent with the principal tenet of the pragmatic strategy - the denial of a semantic, context-independent explanation of derogatory content. Call this view *pragmatic minimalism*. Timothy Williamson advocates pragmatic minimalism and holds that while derogatory content is non-semantic, it is specifically determined in each context as a result of conventional implicature.¹⁶ The derogatory content is merely *implicated* and not *part* of what the sentence literally says (i.e. derogatory content is not part of the semantic content of the sentence). The derogatory content is *conventionally* implicated because it appears in every context of use and is not calculable from Gricean conversational maxims. According to pragmatic minimalism, epithets literally say nothing more than their non-pejorative correlates (NPC's), e.g. 'chink' is synonymous with 'Chinese', 'kike' is synonymous with 'Jewish', 'nigger' is synonymous with 'African-American', etc. Another important feature of the view is that the falsity of the derogatory content that is pragmatically conveyed is consistent with the truth of what is literally said. So the difference between 'chink' and 'Chinese' is on the order of the difference between 'but' and 'and'. Thus the proposition semantically expressed by (1) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by (2):

1. Shaq is huge but agile.
2. Shaq is huge and agile.¹⁷

¹⁶ Timothy Williamson, "Reference, Inference and the Semantics of Pejoratives", in J. Almog and P. Leonardi, eds., *Festschrift for David Kaplan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), see p. 18-26, accessed at <http://www.ub.edu/grc_logos/bw/abstracts/timwilliamson.doc>.

¹⁷ Examples (1) and (2) from Kent Bach, "The Myth of Conventional Implicature", *Linguistics & Philosophy*, 22, (1999), 327-366, at p. 327.

however (1) also conventionally implicates contrastive force between the properties of being huge and being agile. The lack of contrastive, conventionally implicated content is consistent with the truth of (2), so the truth of (1) depends solely on the truth of (2). The contrastive content is thus *detachable* because it is not semantically expressed as part of the truth-conditions for the sentence. Analogously, the proposition semantically expressed by (3) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by (4):

- 3. Yao is a chink.
- 4. Yao is Chinese.

however (3) also conventionally implicates derogatory force towards Chinese people for being Chinese. (3) implicates (something like) the proposition expressed by:

- 5. Yao is Chinese and despicable because of it.

The lack of this derogatory, conventionally implicated content is consistent with the truth of (4), so the truth of (3) depends solely on the truth of (4). Because the derogatory content of (5) is merely implicated and not semantically expressed by (3), it is detachable from the semantic content of (3). Derogation is thus the speech act of conventionally implicating the content of (5) in uttering (3).

There are a number of reasons for being suspicious of pragmatic minimalism. First, the same difficulty in balancing derogatory content described above is equally present, recast pragmatically rather than semantically. While the proposition expressed by (5) *might* capture the derogatory content that is implicated by ‘chink’ in (3), the correlate of (5) for the derogatory

content of ‘nigger’ hardly captures the requisite force of the word. Second, unlike with Gricean conversational implicatures, conventional implicatures are not cancelable. Derogation ought to occur in every context of use for epithets without any means for cancellation. However, I will show that there are meaningful, felicitous uses of epithets that are non-derogatory. For example, the sentence ‘Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved’ is meaningful, felicitous and also true. We return to discuss this issue in some depth in Sections IV and VI. Third, if epithets are synonymous with their NPC’s then the minimalist account generates the unintuitive result that certain racist claims are trivially true. For example, the sentence ‘Chinese are chinks’ is not only literally true according to this view, but analytically, and, thus, necessarily, true in the way that ‘Lawyers are attorneys’ is true.

Lastly, Kent Bach offers good evidence for thinking that cases of conventionally implicated content are actually part of what is literally said. The strongest argument is that many conventional implicatures pass his 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.¹⁸

Bach’s argument is that if speaker A utters sentence (1) to speaker B, and speaker B reports what A said by uttering (6):

1. Shaq is huge but agile.
6. A said that Shaq is huge and agile,

¹⁸ Bach, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

B has misreported what A has said. B's report is incomplete, so the contrastive content is not detachable (as conventional implicatures are supposed to be), but in fact part of what is said. Applying Bach's IQ test to racial epithets leads to an analogous result. So if speaker A utters (3) to speaker B, and speaker B reports what A said by uttering (7):

- 3. Yao is a chink.
- 7. A said that Yao is Chinese,

B has misreported what A has said. B's report is incomplete, so the derogatory content is not detachable (as conventional implicatures are supposed to be) but in fact part of what is said.

Consider some further cases of indirect quotation that show that racial epithets pass Bach's IQ test:

- 8_A: Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist.
- 8_B: A said that institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist.

In this first pair, A says something true with an utterance of (8_A), but B reports A to be saying something false with an utterance of (8_B).

- 9_A: I am Chinese, and not a chink.
- 9_B: A said that he is Chinese and not Chinese.

In this second pair, A has said something consistent, but B reports A to be saying something contradictory.

- 10_A: Chinese people are chinks.
- 10_B: A said that Chinese people are Chinese.

In this pair, A says something racist and plausibly false, but B reports A to be saying something non-racist and analytically true.

- 11_A: Chinks are Chinese people who are despicable because of their race.
- 11_B: A said that Chinese people are (Chinese people who are) despicable because of their race.

In this pair, A says something ‘true by definition’, but B reports A to be saying something empirically false.

- 12_A: Am I racist if I believe that Chinese are chinks?
- 12_B: A wondered whether A was racist if A believes that Chinese are Chinese?

In this last pair, A asks herself a legitimate question about racism, but B reports A to be asking herself whether believing a trivial identity statement is racist. In each case, the incompleteness or defectiveness of B’s report shows that racial epithets pass the IQ test; that derogatory content is not detachable and is, thus, part of what is semantically expressed by epithets. This casts serious doubt on pragmatic minimalism which holds that the derogatory content of an epithet is a pragmatic feature of conventional implicature.

IV. Conditions of Adequacy

We have considered an array of both semantic and pragmatic options for explaining racial epithets. While each can honor certain intuitions surrounding epithets, neither seems entirely adequate. Ought we surrender to radical contextualism? The issue cannot be settled until there is a deeper consideration of the complexity of the data. To this end, it will be helpful to switch gears and explore this phenomena in order to set up adequacy conditions for any

successful explanatory account of racial epithets. Here are some uncontroversial features of how epithets function in ordinary, natural language:

1. Derogatory force: Epithets forcefully convey hatred and contempt of their targets.

Derogatory force is the extent to which an epithet has the capacity to derogate its target. One of the main distinguishing features of racial epithets is their capacity to derogate their intended targets in deep and explosive ways. Calling someone a racial epithet is extremely pejorative, controversial, and usually much more insulting than using ordinary derogatory terms like ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’.

2. Derogatory variation: The force of derogatory content varies across different epithets.

Some epithets are more insulting than others. While epithets like ‘nigger’ are extremely derogatory towards African-Americans, epithets like ‘limey’ are much less derogatory towards the English.

3. Derogatory autonomy: The derogatory force for any epithet is independent of the attitudes of any of its particular speakers.

For example, uses of ‘chink’ carry the same derogatory force no matter how racist or non-racist the particular speaker is towards Chinese people. Another example of autonomy is how derogatory variation is independent of particular speakers’ attitudes. A speaker may be extremely prejudiced toward the English and not at all prejudiced toward African-Americans, and yet this psychological state will have almost no effect on the pejorative force of the speaker’s uses of ‘limey’ and ‘nigger’.

4. *Taboo: Uses of epithets are subject to strict social constraints, if not outright forbidden.*

There seem to be very rare instances for the appropriate use of epithets (e.g. under explicit quotation in the courtroom, in a discussion about language and the media, appropriated uses among members of the target class).¹⁹ Even when a speaker intends a benign use, the result is often an unintended violation of strict speech codes, especially in cases of public speech.²⁰ For many, the taboo surrounding epithets is not limited to their direct use, but covers their occurrence within quotation, fiction, intensional contexts, questions, negations, conditional antecedents, and even extends to phonologically similar, but semantically distinct, expressions.²¹

5. *Meaningfulness: Sentences with epithets normally express complete, felicitous, propositions.*

Sentences with epithets may be inappropriate, rude, derogatory, useless, false, and morally offensive, but they are not meaningless. People know what racists are trying to say when they use epithets. Their meanings are determined by the linguistic conventions that are operative for the rest of the language, including (perhaps) conventions regarding their interpretation in varying syntactic positions. Specifying their meanings should also avoid positing new kinds of ad hoc semantic entities, if possible.

¹⁹ Thanks to the anonymous referees at the *Journal of Philosophy* for raising this point.

²⁰ For example, a white, Arkansas teacher who was exasperated over the poor behavior of her sixth grade class told the students, all of whom were black: “I think you’re trying to make me think you’re a bunch of poor, dumb niggers, and I don’t think that.” The students told their parents about the remark, and she was promptly fired by the school district. Interestingly, she was reinstated after a petition of support was presented to the school board by the students at her school. For more details, see “Black Students Forgive Teacher’s Mistaken Slur”, *New York Times* (October 17, 1988).

²¹ For example, David Howard, a Washington DC mayoral staff member was fired in 1999 for using the term ‘niggardly’ in a budget meeting. The term is both semantically and etymologically distinct from the word ‘nigger’, but his use offended some African-Americans who attended the meeting. He was later reinstated to another position within the city. For more details, see Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 94-97.

6. *Evolution: The meaning and force of epithets evolve over time to reflect the values and social dynamics of its speakers.*

Epithets must evolve with the values and practices of their speech community. This explains the derogatory variation of single epithets over time. For example, ‘gay’ has lost almost all of its derogatory force with common contemporary uses of expressions such as ‘gay marriage’, ‘gay rights’, and ‘gay pride’. The word has become synonymous with ‘homosexual’ and derogatory expressions like ‘That’s gay’ seem antiquated, juvenile, and almost infelicitous.²² Evolutionary fluctuations for the contents of epithets can also vary in their rate of change. As target groups gradually integrate into the dominant society, and active discrimination subsides, the derogatory content of the corresponding epithets will typically fade. Examples of gradual decline might include epithets for Irish immigrants such as ‘mic’ or ‘paddy’ (for American English), terms that were much more antagonistic one hundred and fifty years ago in the United States. Target groups can also accelerate the process of disarming epithets through appropriation.

7. *Appropriation: Targeted groups often appropriate uses of their own epithets to alter their meanings for non-derogatory purposes.*²³

The appropriation of an epithet is a phenomenon whereby the targeted group takes control of the epithet, and alters its meaning for use within the group. Appropriated uses of epithets are typically non-pejorative, but their derogatory force is often not entirely dissolved. The appropriated epithet serves many functions: it is a means for the targeted group to recapture

²² John Doris reports seeing a bumper sticker that plays off this specific feature. It read: “Marriage is gay”.

²³ While appropriation is a well documented phenomenon in sociolinguistics (in particular see Robin Brontsema, “A Queer Revolution: Reconceptualizing the Debate Over Linguistic Reclamation”, *Colorado Research in Linguistics*, 17. (2004), 1-17), the point is that any adequate semantic theory ought to be able to accommodate this central feature of epithets.

political power from the racist group by transforming one its tools, it is a means for ‘toughening up’ other members of the targeted group by desensitizing them to uses of the epithet, it is a means of in-group demarcation to bring members of the targeted group closer together and to remind members of the targeted group that they are, indeed, a *targeted* group.²⁴ For example, the appropriated form of the word ‘nigger’, which is often marked with a different spelling (‘nigga’ in the singular, and ‘niggaz’ in the plural), makes a distinction between African-Americans as victims of racism, and African-Americans as empowered individuals. In a documentary about his own life, rapper Tupac Shakur characterizes this distinction when he says “Niggers was the ones on the rope, hanging off the thing; Niggaz is the ones with gold ropes, hanging out at clubs”.²⁵ While not impossible, it is very difficult for whites to employ the appropriated term. Even white rapper Eminem, who frequently employs the epithets ‘bitch’ and ‘faggot’ in his lyrics, refrains from using ‘nigger’ saying that, ‘that word is not even in my vocabulary’.^{26, 27}

8. *NDNA uses: Epithets can occur in non-derogatory, non-appropriated (NDNA) contexts.*

There are sentences that make meaningful uses of racial epithets that are true, non-derogatory, and non-appropriated. Epithets in such contexts do not directly derogate their intended targets, but do retain their capacity for derogation. I call these *NDNA uses*. *NDNA uses* often occur in pedagogical contexts about racism. They make use of an epithet’s derogatory content without actually derogating its intended targets. For example, in a discussion about

²⁴ Thanks to William Ladusaw for illuminating discussion on this topic.

²⁵ The quote is from an interview in the documentary film, “Tupac: Resurrection” (2003).

²⁶ Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 51. The quote is originally from an interview in *Rolling Stone* (July 2000).

²⁷ Eminem’s quote is actually strangely paradoxical. The demonstrative in the quote obviously *does* pick out a word in his vocabulary. He perfectly understands the derogatory content of ‘nigger’. That is why he wouldn’t *use* it, which is what he is actually saying. The word obviously exists in his vocabulary in order for him to make this judgment. Thanks to Robert May for pointing this out.

racism, someone might utter: ‘Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist’ which seems to be true, meaningful, and felicitous. The epithet in NDNA contexts carries its racist content while falling short of derogating its target because that is the very point of its use. Here are some examples of pedagogical sentences containing epithets that are meaningful, true, and non-derogatory:

13. Yao Ming is Chinese, but he’s not a chink.
14. There are lots of Chinese people at Cal, but no chinks.
15. Chinese people are not chinks.
16. Chinks are (supposedly) despicable because of their race, but Chinese people are not.
17. There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
18. Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
19. Thinking that Chinese people are chinks is to be radically wrong about the world.
20. Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.

Notice that these are not uses commonly thought to *display* or *gesture* at the speaker’s racist attitudes. In many cases, NDNA uses illustrate the denial of the common racist presuppositions that often come with ordinary uses of racial epithets.

There are also perfectly meaningful, non-derogatory pedagogical questions containing epithets:

21. Are Chinese people chinks?
22. Is Yao Ming a chink?
23. What is it to believe that Chinese people are chinks?
24. Why do racists think that Chinese people are chinks?
25. Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?
26. Am I racist if I have never had the thought that Chinese people are chinks?
27. Am I racist if I would never think that Chinese people are chinks?

Any adequate view must allow for the non-derogatory uses of epithets in questions, especially for those like (25)-(27), otherwise speakers who ask them will be culpable of racism merely in virtue of having asked the question. Such questions would incorrectly

serve as their own affirmative answers. The argument for the possibility of NDNA uses will be considered in some depth in Section VI.

9. *Generality: The account of derogatory force for epithets needs to generalize to similar language; e.g. sexist, gender-biasing, religious epithets and approbative terms.*

An adequate account of racial epithets should generalize over other kinds of epithets such as ‘bitch’, ‘fag’, ‘whore’, ‘witch’, and ‘damn’. To cover the entire expressive spectrum the account should also generalize over approbative terms ‘angel’, ‘blessed’, ‘stud’ and ‘goddess’.

These criteria map out a large portion of the phenomena to be explained by any adequate account of racial epithets. In Section V, I present a novel semantic view called *combinatorial externalism* (CE), and in Section VI, I return to the criteria of adequacy to see how CE fares against the other views.

V. Combinatorial Externalism

Semantic externalism is the view that the semantic values, or meanings, of words are not completely determined by the internal, mental states of individual speakers. Rather, the meanings for words such as proper names, natural-kind terms, and indexicals are at least in part dependent on the external, social practices of the speaker’s linguistic community. A particular speaker’s beliefs and intentions are not sufficient by themselves to generate linguistic meaning. In addition to having the right kind of beliefs and intentions, a speaker must also stand in the relevant *causal relations* to the world and to her speech community. The meanings for words are, thus, causally determined in part, by factors external to, and sometimes unknown by, the speaker. Several persuasive arguments have been given for semantic externalism in the

literature, and I will not go over those arguments here.²⁸ Instead I will develop a novel account of racial epithets that naturally follows from a causal, externalist, semantic theory. As we will see, the theory reveals interesting properties about semantic externalism as well as the distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

On my view, the derogatory content of an epithet is semantically determined by an external source. The plausible candidates for the relevant external social practices that ground the meanings of racial epithets are *social institutions of racism*. For example, the meaning for the word ‘chink’ is derived from, and supported by, the institution of racism towards Chinese people. An institution of racism can be modeled as the composition of two entities: an *ideology*, and a *set of practices*. An ideology is a set of (usually) negative beliefs about a particular group of people. For racism towards Chinese people, the ideology might include beliefs such as: that Chinese people have slanted eyes, that Chinese people are devious, that Chinese people are good at laundering, etc.²⁹ In general, the set of racist practices can range from impolite social treatment to genocide. The two entities that make up racist institutions are closely related, as racists will typically justify and motivate racist practices with their corresponding racist ideology.

Against the theoretical background of both semantic externalism and racist institutions, we have a natural explanation for how epithets get their derogatory content and what derogation with epithets amounts to. *Combinatorial externalism* (CE) is the view that racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the

²⁸ In particular, see Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), and Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” in H. Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215-271, and David Kaplan “Demonstratives” (1977), in J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein, eds., *Themes from Kaplan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 481-563. There are certainly dissenting views, but I will not rehearse those arguments here either.

²⁹ Determining the exact beliefs that make up any ideology of racism will be an empirical question.

appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions. The meanings of epithets are supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. Epithets both insult and threaten their intended targets in deep and specific ways by both predicating negative properties to them and invoking the threat of discriminatory practice towards them. The meanings for epithets can be presented with the following schematized, complex predicate:

ought to be subject to these discriminatory practices because of having these negative properties, all because of being NPC. These meanings are represented more formally as the following complex property:

*ought to be subject to $p^*_1 + \dots + p^*_n$ because of being $d^*_1 + \dots + d^*_n$ all because of being npc^* ,*

where p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices, d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and npc^* is the semantic value of the appropriate non-pejorative correlate of the epithet. For example, the epithet ‘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.*

In this way, epithets *express* derogatory semantic content in every context, but they do not actually derogate their targets in every context. Derogation is the actual application, or predication, of derogatory content. This speech act of applying the epithet to an individual is to predicate the derogatory semantic content to someone, and thus literally to say something deeply negative, and threatening, towards that person. In effect, the racist says: ‘You have *these* negative properties and thus ought to be subject to *these* negative practices all because of *your*

race.’ It is this important distinction between derogatory content as a complex property, and derogation as the application of this property that allows for epithets to carry their derogatory content without actually derogating their intended targets.³⁰ Epithets are words with derogatory content; speakers derogate by using words with such contents.

VI. Meeting The Adequacy Conditions

At this point, it will be of value to compare CE to the other approaches that have been mentioned with regard to the adequacy conditions set forth in Section IV. The other approaches included: naïve semanticism, silentism, radical contextualism, Fregean minimalism, and pragmatic minimalism.

1. Derogatory force: Epithets forcefully convey hatred and contempt of their targets.

According to CE, calling someone by a racial epithet is much worse than just calling someone ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’ because epithets literally say something significantly more negative by invoking an entire racist ideology along with the discriminatory practices that it supports. Epithets prescribe these practices for supposedly possessing the negative properties ascribed to their target class. The explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses, which is in turn directly proportional to the turpitude and scope of the supporting racist institution that causally supports the epithet. A brief consideration of the properties and practices associated with racism towards African-Americans explains the

³⁰ Of course indirect derogation is still a possibility. If someone asks, ‘How many chinks are in your class?’, they do not predicate, but conversationally implicate the racist proposition that Chinese people are chinks. Notice that this phenomenon is secondary to my semantic view. The implicated proposition is derogatory in virtue of the racist property semantically expressed by ‘chink’. My analysis applies to the proposition regardless of its evolution. Thanks to Christopher Mole for helpful discussion on this topic.

derogatory force behind the word ‘nigger’.³¹ None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

2. *Derogatory variation: The force of derogatory content varies across different epithets.*

According to CE, the variation in derogatory force associated with different epithets is a result of having different racist institutions causally support their predicative content. The word ‘nigger’, as a derogatory term for African-Americans, has tremendously explosive derogatory force in virtue of the active, pernicious and wide-ranging institution that supports it. On the other hand, the term ‘limey’ as a derogatory term for English people has much less derogatory force, as its corresponding institution is much less active, pernicious and wide-ranging. Another way to put the point: the derogatory force for epithets varies with the quantity and quality of the content it expresses, and this varies with the power of the racist institution that supports it. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

3. *Derogatory autonomy: The derogatory force for any epithet is independent of the attitudes of any of its particular speakers.*

According to CE, because the predicative material is causally determined externally from the speakers’ psychology, the explosiveness and variation in derogatory force for epithets is autonomous from the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of individual speakers. Thus the view explains why you cannot derogate an Englishman with ‘limey’ to the extent that you can derogate an African-American with the word ‘nigger’; regardless of your intentions, or how racist your individual beliefs might be towards the English, or how non-racist your individual

³¹ See Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 5-30 for an in-depth analysis.

beliefs might be towards African-Americans. The epithet ‘limey’ simply does not predicate as negatively, and it does not prescribe a set of practices that are as threatening. The word no longer has any significant racist institution supporting it. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.³²

4. Taboo: Uses of epithets are subject to strict social constraints, if not outright forbidden.

Because epithets can be so fully loaded with racist content, including not only the prescription of discriminatory practices, but, in many instances, actual threats (e.g. you ought to be lynched because ...), there are strict social constraints governing their use. Silentism is the view that these constraints are absolute, and that no use is sanctioned because derogatory force ‘scopes out’ of every context; i.e. epithets derogate irregardless of their syntactic position or context of utterance. In contrast, CE holds that while epithets can certainly express viciously racist content, it is the actual predication, or application, of that content that results in derogation, so derogatory content does not always scope out of every context of use. How should we assess this disagreement over the extent of the taboo surrounding racial epithets?

The first point to consider is that for the derogatory force of epithets to scope out of every syntactic and conversational context, its analysis would be unlike any other semantic phenomenon. In other words, if silentism is true, then the correct analysis for derogatory force trumps the semantic analysis for quotation, fiction, intensional contexts, questions, negation, material conditionals, etc. This would strongly support the view that derogatory force is primarily the result of pragmatic, and not semantic, mechanisms of language. But the considerations in Section III provide strong arguments against radical contextualism, Fregean

³² Derogatory autonomy is especially problematic for any attempt at formulating an expressivist account of derogatory content. For this reason, I do not consider such views to be minimally viable.

minimalism, and pragmatic minimalism (i.e. conventional implicature). While these considerations certainly do not rule out every *possible* pragmatic theory, they do count as a serious strike against the silentist thesis, if none of the main formulations of the pragmatic theory can account for derogatory force under the wide scope reading.³³

The second point to consider is that silentism stems from intuitions regarding language that is highly charged, both politically and emotionally. Most, if not all, competent, non-racist speakers of English observe their own feelings of *squeamishness* that typically accompany uses of epithets.³⁴ Silentism relies on this phenomenal fact to generalize to all uses of epithets, regardless of their syntactic embedding or the conversational context of their utterance. Hence, according to silentism, since squeamishness accurately tracks derogation, all uses of epithets must derogate their relevant target class.

But *does* squeamishness accurately track derogation in all cases? The problem is that, for many, squeamishness occurs not only for epithets embedded under negation, conditional

³³ There are three other formulations of the pragmatic theory that are less plausible than the ones considered in Section III. First, an extension of Paul Grice's notion of conversational implicature fails to account for the wide scope reading of the derogatory force of epithets because conversational implicatures are *cancelable*, whereas derogatory force is not (under the wide scope reading). See Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation" (1975), in A.P. Martinich, ed., *Philosophy of Language*, Fifth Ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 171-181. For example, while it is felicitous to say: "Some of the students went to the party, and, in fact, they all did", where the second conjunct cancels the implicature that some of the students did not go to the party, it is infelicitous to say: "He's a nigger, but I don't mean anything derogatory by that", where the second conjunct is intended to cancel the derogatory force that was implicated by the first conjunct. Second, an extension of Robert Stalnaker's notion of presupposition fails, in part, for the same reason. See Robert Stalnaker, "Presuppositions", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 2, (1977), 447-456. Presuppositions ought to be cancelable by the hearer, but the explicit rejection of a racist claim does not thereby cancel the derogatory force of the racist claim. As Mark Richard has rightly pointed out, presupposition is a feature of a cooperative, communicative effort, while derogation is explicitly not. Third, an extension of John Searle's notion of speech acts fails to account for the wide scope reading of the derogatory force of epithets because speech acts are not typically performed when the relevant expressions occur under embedding. See John Searle, *Speech Acts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For example, while I can perform the expressive speech act of apologizing by uttering the sentence: "I am sorry for P", I do not perform the speech act when I utter the sentences: "I am not sorry for P", "If I am sorry for P, then Q", or "Am I sorry for P?". The problem is that, under the wide scope reading for derogatory force, utterances of sentences like: "There are no chinks in my class", "If there are chinks in my class, then Q", or "Are there chinks in my class?" still express derogatory content.

³⁴ Try it now by uttering the word "chink" or the N-word out loud (or silently to yourself, if you are in a public place).

antecedents, questions, intensional and fictional contexts, but also to epithets under quotation, in contexts of appropriation, and even to mere phonological variants (e.g. from ‘nigger’ to ‘niggardly’). These observations call into question the accuracy of squeamishness as a guide to derogation, especially in the last case of semantically and etymologically distinct, phonological variants.³⁵ This overgeneration of squeamishness is attributable to the fact that uses of epithets often carry the presumption that its speaker subscribes to the underlying racist institution; an institution that no non-racist speaker would wish to be associated with. Hence, because these words are so highly charged, our intuitions have limited value from the outset, and it would be hardly surprising if, at least in some cases, our intuitions were even misleading.

Thus CE’s apparent violation of some of the intuitions surrounding taboo (particularly the intuitions that motivate silentism) should be discounted. By offering a closer examination of the meanings of epithets, CE offers a more principled, and less “politically correct”, way of carving out the appropriate constraints on their use. For example, because the meanings of some epithets entail their potential uses as literal threats, CE provides new grounds for ruling that some uses of epithets ought to be excluded from First Amendment speech protection.³⁶

5. Meaningfulness: Sentences with epithets normally express complete, felicitous, propositions.

According to CE, epithets are meaningful in that they provide semantic contents (i.e. complex properties) to propositions expressed by sentences containing them. Unlike pragmatic views, CE is committed to the further claim that epithets make distinct truth-conditional contributions from their corresponding NPC’s. That semantic difference explains the derogatory

³⁵ Thanks to Michael Glanzberg for helpful discussion on this point.

³⁶ The complicated details of the legal consequences of CE are beyond the scope of this paper, but I plan to address them in my book, *Hating and Necessity* (in progress).

content of epithets, and it is the actual predication of that content that results in derogation.³⁷

The question is why the derogatory difference between epithets and their corresponding NPC's should be considered a genuine semantic difference?

There are two main reasons. First, as we have seen, none of the primary pragmatic views successfully explains how epithets work; radical contextualism, Fregean minimalism, and pragmatic minimalism all seem problematic. In general, they fail to explain the nature and the variation of the derogatory force of racial epithets. Because most of these views hold that epithets express the same truth-conditional, semantic content as their NPC's, they lead to the implausible consequence that racist identity statements, like 'Chinese are chinks', express analytic, metaphysically necessary truths. Such views are, thus, forced to adopt silentism, but we have also considered reasons for doubting the phenomenal intuitions that motivate silentism. While there could be conceivable modifications to get around some of these problems (e.g. appeal to the content of conventional implicatures as modes of presentation, appeal to metalinguistic properties, etc.), they involve a higher order of complexity that quickly begins to resemble ad hoc adjustments for resisting the semantic analysis.³⁸

The second reason for treating derogatory content as genuinely semantic is overall theoretical simplicity. Epithets behave syntactically like predicates, or natural-kind terms, so the presumption should be for their semantic analysis as such. The priority of semantic, truth-conditional analyses over pragmatic, non-truth-conditional analyses is nicely stated by John MacFarlane:

³⁷ This important distinction is what allows for the possibility of non-derogatory, non-appropriated (NDNA) uses of racial epithets.

³⁸ For arguments against appealing to modes of presentation in intensional contexts, see Stephen Schiffer, "The Mode-of-Presentation Problem", in C.A. Anderson, and J. Owens, eds., *Propositional Attitudes: The Role of Content in Logic, Language, and Mind*, (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 1990), pp. 249-268.

The beauty of truth-conditional semantics is that it provides a common currency that can be used to explain indefinitely many interaction effects in a simple and economical account. We should be prepared to accept a messy, non-truth-conditional account ... only if there is no truth-conditional account that explains the data.³⁹

Furthermore, CE successfully explains the broad range of phenomena surrounding epithets by making use of only the well-established concepts of semantic externalism, semantic values for predicate expressions,⁴⁰ causal relations, and the expression of normativity. The success of a straightforward, univocal, semantic view like CE makes the invocation of gestures, inexpressible contents, truth-value gaps, conventional implicatures, tone, modes of presentation, metalinguistic properties, etc. seem profligate.

Finally, it is important to note that according to CE, while racial epithets are entirely meaningful, the properties expressed by them have null extensions. No one ought to be subject to discriminatory practices because of negative properties due to their race. Atomic predications with epithets will always be false because no one is in the extension of the corresponding complex racist property.⁴¹ This seems to be the correct result: atomic racist claims will always be false.⁴² They are certainly *not* necessarily and analytically true. Racists are not only wrong in the normative sense, but also wrong about the world in falsely attributing racist properties to people.

6. Evolution: The meaning and force of epithets evolve over time to reflect the values and social dynamics of its speakers.

³⁹ John MacFarlane, "Epistemic Modals are Assessment-Sensitive", forthcoming, (2006 draft), p. 24-25, accessed at <<http://johnmacfarlane.net/epistmod.pdf>>. MacFarlane is specifically addressing the priority of a semantic analysis for epistemic modal claims, but his point holds generally.

⁴⁰ As a view about the meanings of epithets, CE is actually independent of any particular semantic framework. For example, epithets could contribute complex properties to singular propositions, or, alternatively, they could contribute complex senses to Fregean thoughts that determine complex properties as their referents.

⁴¹ Atomic predications with epithets are actually doubly false since no one has such properties because of their race.

⁴² The claim might be too strong because of the possibility that some epithet has a non-empty extension at another possible world. While I doubt that this is the case, I will not address this issue here.

CE holds that because racist institutions causally support their meanings, epithets require speech communities that are *dyadic* in the sense that there must be two kinds of social groups; those who are actively targeted by the word and those who are actively targeting with the word. Monadic speech communities lack the appropriate social dynamic to support the causal relations required to generate the derogatory force of epithets. The causal connection between epithet and racist institution can be broken in one of two different ways. Either the causal link dissolves away over time, as might be the case with certain normal words under the causal theory, and thus a monadic speech community is settled upon, or else the causal link can be *deliberately* severed. The dissolution of semantic causal connections over time occurs when the dyadic nature of the speech community fades and becomes monadic with regard to the significance of the relevant social property. In the monadic speech community, the supporting institution of discrimination no longer exists, so the causally supported meaning for the epithet no longer exists. Such monadic communities simply have no use for the derogatory content of the word. The word itself can even fade away, and future uses will seem dated in their attempts to reestablish their causal connection. Examples of gradual semantic evolution include: ‘limey’ for English people, ‘yank’ for American (in American English), ‘hunk’ for Hungarian, or ‘gay’ for homosexual. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

7. Appropriation: Targeted groups often appropriate uses of their own epithets to alter their meanings for non-derogatory purposes.

CE provides a natural explanation for this complex and more rapid form of semantic evolution. Appropriated uses are the result of severing the external, causal link between the meaning of an epithet from its racist institution. To be successful, appropriation usually requires

a counter-institution to support the altered, appropriated use. Successful counter-institutions must have broad appeal, have enough expressive content to support the appropriated epithet, and provide a salient counter-image to the racist institution. Counter-institutions seek to turn racist uses of epithets on their head. The point is not to wipe away derogatory force, but rather to defuse it, and put it to alternative uses that produce political and social effects in favor of the targeted group. The appropriation of ‘nigger’ is a perfect illustration of how hip-hop and rap cultures provide the requisite content and appeal to serve as a counter-institution for the appropriation of an epithet. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

8. *NDNA uses: Epithets can occur in non-derogatory, non-appropriated (NDNA) contexts.*

NDNA contexts illustrate the need to explain how an epithet can semantically express derogatory content without thereby derogating its intended targets. NDNA uses are licensed in virtue of the epithet’s derogatory content, so their meanings cannot be entirely sterilized. For example, it is a consequence of CE that because of the derogatory content semantically expressed by the word ‘chink’, one can correctly discuss important aspects of racism towards Chinese people in uttering sentences like (13) through (20), or in asking questions like (21) through (27):

13. Yao Ming is Chinese, but he’s not a chink.
14. There are lots of Chinese people at Cal, but no chinks.
15. Chinese people are not chinks.
16. Chinks are (supposedly) despicable because of their race, but Chinese people are not.
17. There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
18. Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
19. Thinking that Chinese people are chinks is to be radically wrong about the world.
20. Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.

21. Are Chinese people chinks?
22. Is Yao Ming a chink?
23. What is it to believe that Chinese people are chinks?
24. Why do racists think that Chinese people are chinks?
25. Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?
26. Am I racist if I have never had the thought that Chinese people are chinks?
27. Am I racist if I would never think that Chinese people are chinks?

The previous arguments against both silentism and the plausible formulations of the pragmatic theory clear the way for CE to assign the correct truth-conditions to these NDNA sentences, while preserving the right kind of semantic significance for them.

9. Generality: The account of derogatory force for epithets needs to generalize to similar, related language; e.g. sexist, gender-biasing, religious epithets and approbative terms.

As a semantic account, CE generalizes over other dimensions of social bias, both positive and negative. These dimensions include: religion, sex, gender, and sexual orientation. The institutions that serve to causally support terms like ‘damn’, ‘whore’, ‘bitch’ and ‘fag’ work in same way as they do for racial epithets. For example, the pejorative word ‘damn’ derives its meaning externally from the institution of Judeo-Christian religion to express a complex property like: *being someone that will be sent to hell by God in the afterlife*. Notice that the force of such a predication varies with the historical significance of religion in our society. While the term currently expresses mild displeasure with its target, it expressed strong derogation three hundred years ago. The result is correctly predicted by the view, as the institution of religion that causally supports the meaning of the term was, in the past, much more powerful and wide-ranging in its practices.⁴³ Approbative terms like ‘angel’, ‘blessed’, ‘stud’ and ‘goddess’ are

⁴³ Note that ‘damn’ still expresses strong derogation in certain idiolects of conservative Christians.

analogously accounted for, expressing positive, institutionally-supported properties for religion, sexuality and gender.

The attempt to generalize competing accounts of epithets to explain these other derogatory (and approbative) terms is problematic. For example, the attempt to extend either pragmatic minimalism or silentism leads to a number of parallel problems mentioned above; failure to account for variations in derogatory force, derogatory autonomy, and possible NDNA uses, to name a few. For silentism, a primary virtue of the view, that the unspeakable, intrinsically derogatory nature of the content accounts for the potential severity of words like ‘nigger’, is undermined in the case of approbative terms, and probably also for religious terms (excluding Islamic conventions regarding blaspheme).

The considerations in this section demonstrate that combinatorial externalism is a viable candidate for being the correct, comprehensive theory of epithets, that there is a very strong case in favor of the view over its competitors, and that there is no need to resort to radical contextualism.

VII. Conclusion

Hilary Putnam was correct when he said that meanings are less like hammers or screwdrivers and more like steam ships.⁴⁴ Meaningful language requires a coordinated social practice within a speech community. His externalist framework accords perfectly with racial epithets. Epithets express complex properties externally derived from racist institutions. These properties have the potential for being deeply derogatory, and even threatening. In straightforwardly racist contexts, they *say* bad things, and *prescribe* harmful practices. An important practical implication is that, when the practices are sufficiently threatening, the use of

⁴⁴ Hilary Putnam, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

an epithet may count as a literal threat, and hence no longer merit freedom of speech protection under the First Amendment. In non-racist contexts, the account offers the requisite flexibility to meet the complex conditions of adequacy surrounding their use. In marshalling ordinary, independently motivated, semantic resources to account for these phenomena, the view provides a strong argument against Radical Contextualism, as a general theory of language, by undermining its support of a class of potentially paradigmatic expressions.⁴⁵

*Department of Philosophy
Texas Tech University
christopher.hom@ttu.edu*

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