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Meaning in derogatory social practices

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Award Number: P0BSP1_162020**Abstract**

Verbal derogation is not only a linguistic but also, and perhaps more importantly, a political phenomenon. In this paper, I argue that to do justice to the political relevance of derogatory terms, we must not neglect the social practices and structures in which the use of these terms is embedded. I aim to show that inferentialist semantics is especially helpful to account for this social embeddedness and, consequently, the political relevance of derogatory terms. I am concerned with specifying the linguistic and political aspects of terms that are at the core of derogatory language use. I explain them with the help of Brandomian inferentialism, which tends to be quickly dismissed or ignored in discussions about the meaning of derogatory terms. My inferentialist account is in line with Lynne Tirrell's broader inferentialist framework for understanding derogatory communicative practices. I provide the semantic details of her broader inferentialist view and thereby aim to show that inferentialist semantics is a promising theory which cannot be neglected in further discussion of meaning and politics in derogatory language use.

KEYWORDSderogatory terms, inferentialist semantics, Robert Brandom, slurs,
structural derogation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Use of derogatory language is omnipresent in our everyday lives. While hardly anyone refrains from using derogatory or pejorative terms altogether, their use is sometimes highly problematic, both morally and politically. Understanding how and in what ways language can derogate people requires us to consider its underlying linguistic mechanisms and its political make-up and explain their interdependence. In recent years, philosophers of language have increasingly turned their gaze towards the meaning of slurs, derogatory terms and pejoratives. The use of

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these categories in the literature is rather messy, but analytically distinguishing between them will prove useful to understand the ways in which linguistic and political aspects of derogatory language use intersect.

In this paper, I argue that to do justice to the political relevance of derogatory terms, we must not neglect the social practices and structures in which the use of these terms is embedded. I aim to show that inferentialism is especially helpful to account for this social embeddedness and, consequently, the political relevance of derogatory terms for two reasons. First, as a semantic theory, it accounts for the socially complex derogatory content of derogatory terms. Second, since inferentialism explains semantics in pragmatic terms, it allows for relevant pragmatic phenomena to be easily integrated into the larger inferentialist picture. We find some remarks on derogatory terms in Dummett (1973) and Brandom (1994). Moreover, Tirrell (1999, 2012, 2017) has put forward an inferentialist view of derogatory communicative practices. However, philosophers of language who work on slurs and derogatory terms tend to quickly dismiss Dummett's and Brandom's sketches, and they often disregard the underlying semantic commitments which can be found in Tirrell's work (cf. Anderson & LePore, 2013a, 2013b; Hom, 2008; Hornsby, 2001; Williamson, 2009). They thereby neglect the promising resources that inferentialist semantics has to offer for understanding the meaning of derogatory terms as embedded in our social practices.

Here, I am concerned with specifying the linguistic and political aspects of terms which are at the core of derogatory language use. I explain them with the help of inferentialist semantics in line with Tirrell's broader inferentialist framework for understanding derogatory communicative practices. My paper gives the semantic details of this broader inferentialist view. In the literature on the meaning of slurs, there are some attempts to integrate inferentialist ideas into a truth-conditional framework. For example, Whiting (2007, 2008, 2013) argues for combining inferentialist semantics with conventional implicatures and Díaz-León (2020) proposes to complement Christopher Hom's thick semantic externalism with inferential roles semantics. My account differs from these attempts in that it fully embraces a neo-pragmatist approach to derogatory language use. Instead of starting off from reference and accounting for meaning in truth-conditional terms, neo-pragmatist inferentialism models meaning (and ultimately reference) as being determined by conceptual norms which in turn depend on other social norms. This paper is the constructive counterpart to a paper in which I defend the inferentialist position against common objections (Mühlebach, [forthcoming](#)).

I shall proceed as follows. Based on an analytical distinction between slurs, derogatory terms and pejoratives, I first propose a list of desiderata that any theory of meaning in derogatory language use should meet. I include the hitherto most extensive list put forward by Hom (2008) and complement it with further insights from the current literature on slurs and derogatory terms. I then sketch the main features of inferentialist semantics as developed by Brandom (1994, 2001). Finally, the main part of the paper consists in addressing the proposed desiderata from an inferentialist point of view by further developing the inferentialist ideas that have been outlined in the section before. As Christopher Hom rightly points out, "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" (Hom, 2010, p. 181). As I aim to show in this paper, inferentialism offers a rich explanation of derogatory linguistic content by integrating semantic and pragmatic aspects. It is thus a promising theory which cannot be neglected in further discussion of meaning and politics in derogatory language use.

2 | DESIDERATA FOR ANY THEORY OF DEROGATORY TERMS

Everyday language use is linguistically, ethically and politically complex. Some terms are considered offensive, some feed upon and reinforce unjust social structures, some do one but

not the other, some do both. And all do whatever they do to a varying degree. For reasons of systematicity, I suggest thinking about the terms that are being discussed in the literature along two axes – the axis of offensiveness and the axis of structural derogation. I call the terms that are considered offensive according to dominant conversational norms of a discursive community *pejoratives*. The use of ‘arsehole’, for example, comes with more social constraints than ‘idiot’. The former is considered more offensive than the latter. The reasons for why a discursive community treats a term as offensive may be manifold. Along the second axis, I call those terms that feed upon unjust social practices and structures *derogatory terms*. They derogate their targets by drawing on and reinforcing problematic social structures that are based on asymmetrical power relations. A term may be derogatory, i.e. function derogatorily, even if (a part of) a discursive community is not aware of its derogatoriness.

We can assign every term a specific place in a diagram with both axes – the one concerning dominant conversational norms of a discursive community, the other concerning morally and politically problematic social structures. There are terms that are both derogatory and considered offensive, i.e. they are explicitly derogatory. I call these terms *slurs*. Examples are sexist or racist slurs such as ‘sl-t’ or ‘n-gger’.¹ Some terms, by contrast, are only implicitly derogatory. That is, they are not considered offensive, at least not according to dominant conversational norms. Discussions about so-called politically incorrect words point to such cases. For example, social movements needed to point out that ‘Ind-an’ functions derogatorily even though for a long time, dominant conversational norms did not sanction the use of this term. Through the process of collectively replacing ‘Ind-an’ by ‘Native American’, the former has slowly changed from being an implicitly derogatory term to becoming an explicitly derogatory one.

The way I analytically distinguish between pejoratives, slurs as explicitly derogatory terms, and implicitly derogatory terms differs from most characterisations of slurs and pejoratives in the literature. Hay (2013), among many others, distinguishes between slurs and the broader category of pejoratives based on assumptions about relevant linguistic aspects of these terms. Partly because I think these assumptions are misguided (see Mühlebach, 2021, pp. 810ff.), I suggest to rather map different types of terms according to what makes them morally and politically relevant and interesting.

If we adopt my distinction from above, I take it that philosophers of language who are concerned with morally and politically problematic language use should focus on derogatory terms. These include slurs as slurs are those derogatory terms that are explicitly derogatory. Derogatory terms are embedded in social practices and structures that rest on unjust power relations. They arguably express those concepts that we have a moral responsibility for not having or using.² If we are interested in politically significant language use, other pejoratives such as ‘arsehole’ or ‘jerk’ may serve as interesting contrast cases, but they are not paradigmatic cases of politically disconcerting language.³ In what follows I shall thus primarily focus on derogatory terms.

I propose to group the core aspects of meaning in derogatory language use into six main fields. The desiderata for any theory of meaning in derogatory language use consist in explaining the following characteristics.

- *Meaning and meaning change of derogatory terms*: Sentences that contain derogatory terms usually express meaningful propositions. Or, at least, they do not turn into nonsense because of the derogatory terms they involve. These terms are as susceptible to change as every other term. Since derogatory terms name parts of our social world, which is constantly

¹In what follows, I will introduce a ‘.’ whenever I do not consider a derogatory term to be part of my vocabulary.

²See Fredericks (2018) for a discussion of our moral responsibility for concepts.

³See, e.g., Mohr’s (2013) history of swearwords (which are all pejorative terms in my usage of the term), many of which did and do not serve any derogatory function.

transforming, their meaning may change more frequently than the meaning of terms for natural entities.

- *Force of derogatory terms and its variation across different terms*: Derogatory terms derogate their targets. This force not only varies across different derogatory terms for different types of people or social groups ('ch-nk' has more derogatory force than 'y-nk'), but also among different terms for the same or similar target groups (the force of 'n-gger' is stronger than 'd-rkie'). The force of a term may also change according to different contexts.
- *Scoping out vs. non-derogatory occurrences*: For many derogatory terms, if they are embedded in complex sentences such as indirect reports or conditionals, their derogatory force scopes out. For instance, the assertion "Leo said that they hired the b-tch who previously worked for their competitors" has derogatory force even if it is only reporting what has been said. But there are also a few (non-appropriated) non-derogatory occurrences of derogatory terms, such as in the utterance "He is not a f-ggot. There are no f-ggots, only gay men."
- *Relative autonomy from intentions and felt harm*: The use of derogatory terms exerts its force even in cases in which the speaker has no intention to do so. Whilst the derogatory force is not dependent on the attitude or intention of any particular speaker, derogatory terms nevertheless often express negative attitudes. Moreover, verbal derogation is to some extent independent of whether the targets feel harmed by the term. For instance, internalised racism may even lead to derogatory self-ascriptions.
- *Social embeddedness – Social constraints vs. lack of outrage*: Uses of derogatory terms are put under strict social constraints. Uttering them is often highly sanctioned. However, there is a significant number of contexts in which the uses of specific derogatory terms do not produce outrage at all. Among members of sexist communities, using the term 'sl-t' is still an accepted way of referring to a certain type of woman, just as it is still common among explicitly racist white bigots to use 'n-gger' in conversation with each other. Especially regarding emancipatory projects of criticising language use, we need to distinguish between dominant conversational norms and structural derogation.
- *Appropriation*: Derogatory terms can be appropriated by their targets, which affects the meaning of such terms. Two prominent examples are the reclaimed uses of 'n-gger' and 'queer'. Most saliently, they differ in that the appropriated 'n-gga' is only available to Black people whereas 'queer' has more or less become the standard term to refer to queer people.⁴

This list of desiderata includes the hitherto most extensive catalogue put forward by Christopher Hom (2008), which covers meaningfulness, meaning change, derogatory force, variation in force, non-derogatory occurrences, autonomy from intentions, strict social constraints (including scoping out) and appropriation. My list is complemented by Camp's (2013) and Richard's (2008) observation that uses among bigots usually do not produce outrage, and by Glezakos's (2012) insight that the derogatoriness of a term is relatively independent of whether people feel hurt or offended by it at the time.

Two further desiderata should not be included because they are misleading. Firstly, Jennifer Hornsby holds that derogatory terms are 'useless' for us:

Some people have a use for them. But there is nothing that we want to say with them. Since there are other words that suit us better, we lose nothing by imposing for ourselves a blanket selection restriction on them, as it were (2001, p. 129).

For one thing, it is unclear as to who 'us' here is, especially given the fact that there is a broad range of derogatory terms which are used by different people. Rather than dwell on their uselessness, we should explore which terms are so useful to some people and so useless to others

⁴Note, however, that parts of the LGBTQ community have raised objections to this widespread usage.

and why this is so, without starting out from a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. For another, it is doubtful that there is an alternative for every derogatory term that suits us better. As Ashwell (2016) argues, there is no alternative that suits anybody better in the case of many gendered slurs.

Secondly, Jeshion (2013a) holds that slurring terms all derogate their targets in the same way and to the same degree. According to her, there is one mechanism that accounts for the derogation of slurring terms. She supports this claim by pointing to a remark by John Amaechi, an African American basketball player and the first NBA player to openly identify as gay, who puts the derogatory force of the n-word on a level with that of the f-word for gay men. However, generalising from this observation to the claim that all slurring terms – such as ‘n-gger’ for Black people and ‘l-mey’ for British people – derogate their targets to the same degree is not only misguided, but also politically problematic. In the US, there is no pernicious xenophobia against British people comparable to the highly pernicious institutionalised racism against Black people which would back up the severity of ‘l-mey’. If we disregard the existence or lack of pernicious institutions when it comes to derogatory force, we fail to explain the political significance of derogatory terms.

3 | INFERENCEALIST SEMANTICS

Inferentialists are interested in the meaning of our terms and sentences as parts of our broader social practices. Semantics is spelled out in pragmatic terms and, ultimately, representation is taken to be determined by inferential relations between claims in a social practice of making assertions and giving and asking for reasons. Inferentialism receives its name from the assumption that the content of a concept is determined by its inferential relations to other concepts. Concepts are expressed by terms, but a specific term may be ambiguous so that it expresses more than one concept (e.g. ‘light’) and a specific concept may be expressed by different terms (e.g. ‘red’, ‘rot’ ‘rouge’ or arguably also ‘red’, ‘scarlet’ and ‘crimson’). Thus, two tokens of the same term differ in meaning if they express a different concept.⁵

Brandom’s pragmatist understanding of semantics roughly looks as follows: the meaning of a sentence is determined by the role this sentence plays in the practice of making assertions and giving and asking for reasons (see for the following Brandom 1994, 2001). And the meaning of a word or an expression is determined by the roles it can play in the assertions of this practice. For a broader understanding of linguistic meaning, we must of course consider the variety of pragmatic moves we can make in and with our speech acts. There are many ways besides making assertions in which we can use our terms, especially derogatory terms. In order to work out their underlying semantics, however, we need to look at their roles in the practice of making assertions.

Making assertions and giving and asking for reasons is a social practice which is modelled as a scorekeeping game with different parties. The most important rule governing such a practice or game is that by making an assertion, you as the speaker undertake the responsibility for providing reasons for your utterance in case you are challenged by a hearer. Based on their assertions, participants in this practice ascribe commitments to other participants and undertake commitments themselves. If a participant A commits to the assertion of participant B, too, A thereby not only ascribes the relevant commitments but also the entitlement to these commitments to B. For the whole practice to work, the different parties involved in the game must keep score of both their own commitments and entitlements and the commitments and entitlements of the other speakers. This practice of making assertions, in turn, is only meaningful as a

⁵In what follows, I shall often use the expression ‘conceptual norms of discursive communities’ in the sense in which conceptual and discursive norms are strongly connected with each other. Linguistic norms govern the use of terms which, in turn, express concepts that are expressed by these terms and are governed by the conceptual norms of the discursive community.

practice in a broader communicative context. Our broader social norms enable and constrain which conceptual norms our discursive community abides by.

Since the set of inferences that has to be drawn from the use of a derogatory sentence includes derogatory claims, inferentialists hold that the derogatory content of a derogatory term is part of its semantics:

1. Obama was the first n-gger to become president of the US.

Asserting (1) commits the speaker to a set of claims including the claim that Black people are inferior to white people. Upon request, the utterer of (1) would have to agree with the inferiority claim. Otherwise, the audience could rightly accuse her of conceptual confusion.⁶

Note that commitments are not primarily in the head. Conceptual rules, which are sometimes rather implicit in the social practices of a discursive community, commit the utterer of an assertion to other assertions and practical moves in a specific practice. Moreover, conceptual rules are not moral rules. This means that if we infer the inferiority claim from assertion (1), this is a valid inference in the sense that this is how the n-word is used. That, however, does of course not mean that the inference is correct in a moral sense. Since the usage of this term ‘correctly’ commits a speaker to the inferiority claim, this is exactly one among several reasons for not using it. Thus, in what follows, I shall always speak of valid inferences according to the conceptual norms of a discursive community, and not the moral stance we take towards them. Whether these inferences are also morally right and politically unproblematic and how we deal with morally and politically problematic inferential relations is a different story, one that this paper in its entirety deals with.

4 | ADDRESSING THE DESIDERATA

4.1 | Meaning (change) of derogatory terms

The use of derogatory terms is stably institutionalised in our discursive practices. There is unanimity in the literature that derogatory terms are meaningful, but not in what way they are so, and neither that they refer to an actual object. Views on their truth-aptness differ significantly. Some theorists claim that the substitution of a non-derogatory term by a corresponding derogatory term does not make the sentence in question false (e.g. Hornsby, 2001; Jeshion, 2013a, 2013b; Williamson, 2009). Others, by contrast, assume that slurring terms, at least, have null-extensions. Christopher Hom, for example, holds that any atomic predication with a slurring term is false (Hom, 2008, p. 437). And yet others claim that speakers, by using derogatory terms, misrepresent their targets in a way that renders the sentences in which such terms occur non-truth-apt (cf. Richard, 2008). Inferentialism suggests that we refrain from such generalising assumptions as far as all types of derogatory and pejorative term are concerned and explain why some terms render the sentence in which they occur non-truth-apt while others do not. Some terms even change their status with regard to truth-aptness over time.

Users of derogatory terms are committed to sets of derogating inferences. In most cases, especially for slurring terms, these further claims are not true. In the case of ‘b-che’,⁷ for example, it is not true that Germans are likely to be cruel in virtue of their being German – just as in the case of ‘w-tch’, it was never true that w-tches were in direct contact with the devil. Null-

⁶There are special contexts in which the use of the n-word does not commit the speaker to the inferiority claim. I discuss these special cases later in this paper.

⁷French and British people frequently used this term during and after World War I to describe German people in a way that connected German nationality with the disposition to be cruel.

extension views get this right since they claim that nobody is worthy of contempt in virtue of their perceived membership in a specific social group (Hom & May, 2013; 2018). Note that this does not apply to many pejorative terms. If the use of 'arsehole' commits the speaker to something along the lines of the claim that the target has arrogantly let themselves enjoy advantages (cf. James, 2012), then in many cases the use of 'arsehole' is not only a helpful tool for criticism, but what is thereby said may also be true.

Misrepresentation might fare better for deciding whether a specific derogatory or pejorative term renders a sentence true, false or non-truth-apt. According to this picture, 'arsehole' would say something negative about the target, without also misrepresenting them. By contrast, many slurring terms misrepresent their targets. According to Richard (2008), this renders them non-truth-apt because the mistake involved in misrepresentation is different from other forms of false application. A speaker says something false if she calls a Jewish person a Muslim. But her mistake cannot be stated in terms of truth and falsity if she refers to a Jewish person with 'k-ke'. The problem with this view is that it does not tell us exactly what misrepresentation consists in and it does not provide us with any criteria to distinguish between misrepresentations and ascriptions that are merely 'not nice' (as in the case of 'arsehole').

The inferentialist explanation of misrepresentation, by contrast, is simple: it commits the speaker to some invalid inferences, which brings truth-aptness back. This is a desirable outcome because it allows us to understand how changes of inferential relations might change the truth-aptness of a specific term over time. The derogatory term 'w-tch' did not apply to anything real when it meant 'woman with direct contact to the devil'. Now the conceptual norms for *witch* have changed so that this concept, when used derogatorily, rather expresses something like 'unpleasant woman'. This characteristic might arguably apply to certain people.

With regard to truth-aptness and misrepresentation, inferentialism comes close to Camp's (2013, 2018) perspectivalist dual act analysis of slurring terms. Both accounts take (inferentially) structured perspectives to be crucial for the meaning of derogatory terms. Moreover, both reject a generalising view on the truth-aptness of derogatory sentences. In contrast to perspectivalism, however, inferentialism does not confine itself to slurs for specific social groups, but extends to slurs which call out a violation of a specific norm, such as gendered slurs. Moreover, whilst perspectivalism takes any single proposition of a specific perspective to be deniable by the user of a slurring term, inferentialists hold that there are some inferences at the core of a specific term's use which cannot be denied. This allows us to account for the fact that sometimes two or more similar terms involve the same perspective but still differ in meaning (such as 'sl-t' and 'wh-re').

The meaning of derogatory terms not only varies across similar terms, but it may also change over time. Hom (2008) provides a plausible mechanism of how the meaning and force of certain derogatory terms might change over time: the social structure which underlies the discursive community changes from being dyadic to being monadic. This means that two sub-groups become less divided with regard to a certain social characteristic. However, this mechanism is only one among several. There are at least two more that are worthy of discussion. First, without changes in the broader social structure, the social norms with regard to a specific social group can change so that names for sub-groups disappear, shift or evolve. Secondly, a social institution which frames the meaning and importance of certain terms can become weaker or stronger. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and all of them are based on changes in our social practices more generally. Our language games are part of these broader social practices and changes in social norms have a bearing on shifts in our conceptual norms. I shall briefly discuss all three mechanisms in turn.

Hom holds that in order for derogatory terms to fulfil their function, there must be a divide between two sub-groups, one of which may derogate the other by using a certain derogatory

term. He conceives of change in meaning as either fading or, even though he does not explicitly mention it, strengthening of the underlying divide:

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 (2008, p. 437).

In the other direction, the stronger dyadic social structures within a discursive community are, the stronger the derogatory term in question will be.

This dyadic structure of dividing ‘them’ from ‘us’ is important in cases of self-derogating ascriptions, too. Take the case of Nancy in William Faulkner’s short story *That Evening Sun* who says: “I ain’t nothing but a n-gger” (1943, p. 297). This is not a case of positive reclamation of a term, but a derogatory self-ascription and identification with a racial slur. Nancy could not make this self-ascription and thereby derogate herself if there was not another social group, the members of which were the standard users of this predicate, and who, in this case, are disposed of more power to maintain the social structures that enable them to derogate their targets. If the dyadic structure becomes more and more monadic, or if the hierarchical power relations which come along with the divide between ‘them’ and ‘us’ level out, the derogatory terms that are involved become weaker. In these cases, the discursive community loses, step by step, the relevant stereotypical descriptions of one of the groups, or the stereotypes become less pernicious. Thus, the social practices organised around this stereotype become too weak to license pernicious inferences.

An example for meaning and derogatory force change from non-derogatoriness to high derogatoriness is the change from ‘j-p’ being a simple abbreviation for the term ‘Japanese’ to being considered as a deeply derogatory term in the wake of World War II. As the relationship between the US and Japan got significantly worse during this war, the need for a term to capture the purported badness, and perhaps cruelty, of Japanese people became stronger. Since then, the meaning and force of ‘j-p’ has been closely connected to the experience of this war and just as this collective experience slowly fades, the force of the term has seemed to weaken.⁸

The second way in which the meaning and force of derogatory terms may change consists in the change of social norms with regard to a specific group so that, in turn, what counts as a violation of the norm changes. If so, the terms for those who violate some norms can change in meaning and, usually, become weaker in force. Prime examples are gendered slurs such as ‘b-tch’ or ‘c-nt’. An important characteristic of many gendered slurs is that, in order to determine their extension, an allegiance to a specific attitude is required. With contemporary gender norms, using ‘b-tch’ commits the speaker to claims such as “x is too assertive” and “x is disagreeable”. However, our gender norms are slowly, but constantly, changing. Feminist hopes for the future of this term are that, within the next decades, changes in social norms would lead the inferences from using ‘b-tch’ to change towards “x is assertive” and “x is to be taken seriously” or that, if the meaning of the term does not change, that there would be no widespread use for such a term anymore.

An example of changing gender norms shifting the meaning of a term is the German term ‘Fräulein’, which for a long time was the standard term for unmarried women. Over the last few decades, its use has almost completely vanished. According to current gender norms, it is not necessary or even appropriate anymore to conceptually distinguish between married and unmarried women. Moreover, ‘Fräulein’ (unmarried woman) is the diminutive of ‘Frau’ (woman). From a contemporary feminist perspective, it is problematic to use the diminutive form for unmarried women. Doing so only makes sense in a system in which it is only through

⁸For some discussions of this, see <https://www.japan-talk.com/jt/new/is-the-word-Jap-derogatory> and <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/jap?s=t>.

marriage that one fully becomes a woman. Since gender norms have changed quite drastically, the meaning of 'Fräulein' has become much narrower. It is now only used in practices which people (often unconsciously) aim at putting women back into traditional gender roles.

The third variety of meaning change consists in the weakening or strengthening of social institutions in which certain terms have an important function. The term 'w-tch' meant 'woman with direct connection to the devil' at the time when the Christian religion fundamentally shaped the structures of English-speaking societies. Christianity has lost its force, and the belief in the devil has been replaced by the beliefs of a secular worldview. Thus, 'w-tch' in its original sense only makes sense in historical or fictional contexts. If it is used derogatorily today, the term 'witch' means 'unpleasant woman', which is much less strong than its historical meaning. Since Christianity is no longer strongly institutionalised in our societies, 'witch' cannot have the same force.

As in all cases of meaning change, the three mechanisms identified here involve the appearance and disappearance of licensed inferences within the language game of making assertions and giving and asking for reasons. In many cases, the shift of licensed inferences is so strong that even the term's function changes. In the first and the second case above, the functional difference lies in the term picking up or losing a derogatory function. In the third case, we find the additional shift from having a clear descriptive function to having something more like a mere expressive function similar to cases such as 'damn' or 'fucking'.

4.2 | The force of derogatory terms and its variation across different terms

In contrast to many views in the debate on slurring terms, it is my understanding that the most politically and morally important aspect of derogatory terms is their structurally sustained derogatory force. Derogation feeds on social structures that are based on and reinforce social arrangements of oppression and exclusion. Derogatory practices go far beyond verbal derogation and since our speech acts are embedded in social practices more generally, we should explain in what ways these broader social practices have a bearing on our discursive practices.

Although the expression of contempt (cf. Hedger, 2013; Jeshion, 2013a, 2013b) and offensiveness (Anderson & LePore, 2013a, 2013b) are important characteristics of derogatory language, they are secondary in an explanation of why the use of derogatory terms is politically and morally problematic. They are also secondary for explaining the degree to which different terms are derogatory compared to one another. Since verbal derogation can occur in speech situations in which none of the parties involved is aware of it, for example in well-meant uses of patronising terms, the expression of contempt is not required in every instance of derogatory language use. And since there are numerous cases in which non-derogatory behaviour has been treated as offensive – think about requests to be addressed in gender-neutral terms or the public exchange of affection by homosexual couples – the offensiveness of derogatory terms poorly explains why they can be, and often are, morally and politically problematic.

Like Hom's (2008) thick semantic externalism, inferentialism explains the derogatory force of a term by pointing to broader social practices which, in many cases, are discriminatory and ideologically misguided. According to the inferentialist position, the meaning of a term is determined by the inferential role it plays in the game of giving and asking for reasons. This role is determined by the conceptual rules of a discursive community, that is, the discursive community licenses those inferences from the use of a concept that is in accordance with their conceptual rules and does not license those inferences that are not in accordance with their rules. By making an assertion, I am committed to the inferences which can be drawn from it according to the conceptual norms of our discursive community. The conceptual rules, in turn, depend on the broader social rules of a discursive community. Such broader social rules are, for instance, rules

for what counts as a reason or what is taken as good evidence and moral rules for how people should be treated.

Take ‘n-gger’ as an example. Relying on Luvel Anderson’s (2018) and my own work (2021), I assume that discursive communities are heterogeneous and that there might be different discursive subcommunities in which both ‘black’ and the n-word are socially embedded differently. In a highly racist white community in which the n-word is used as a standard term to refer to persons whom I would call ‘persons-racialised-as-Black,’ or ‘Black people,’ there are social rules that legitimise harmful, derogating and stigmatising behaviour against Black people. There will also be conceptual rules that draw on these pernicious social rules. In this highly racist community, the inferences from “x is a n-gger” to “x is Black”, “x is despicable” and “x is inferior to white people” are all treated as valid inferences. It is the social practices in which ‘n-gger’ is used that determine the validity of the inferences. In our broader society, the linguistic norms for the n-word are, of course, the same. However, the broader social norms are such that there is resistance to treating the racist inferences mentioned above as valid. Thus, picturing a highly racist community in which nobody opposes the use of racist terms makes it easier to understand the inferential relations of such terms.

These inferences are not restricted to intra-linguistic transitions from one assertion to another. Inferentialism allows for both language-entry and language-exit moves. Certain perceptual circumstances may entitle a speaker to utter an assertion, and specific assertions commit a speaker not only to further claims, but to specific non-linguistic actions. Jennifer Hornsby seems to overlook the inferentialist’s resources of language-entry and language-exit moves in describing her own position, which consists in saying that derogatory words are truth-conditionally equivalent to their so-called neutral counterparts and differ from them in that they are accompanied by an embodied gesture:

Since the commitments incurred by someone who makes the gesture are commitments to targeted emotional attitudes, and not necessarily to thoughts, the gesture’s significance will not be exhausted by explication within any conceptual game of giving and asking for reasons (*pace* Brandom) (2001, p. 140f.).

Language-language moves are not all there is to the inferentialist scorekeeping model. In making assertions, the speaker is not only committed to other claims but also to non-linguistic actions. Calling someone in a non-appropriated way a ‘f-ggot’ licenses hostile behaviour towards the target and does not license positive feelings towards him. Lynne Tirrell’s study of genocidal language games, for example, shows that the actions which are licensed by the use of certain terms may even go as far as helping to bring about a genocide (cf. Tirrell, 2012).

The force of many derogatory terms feeds both on the depth of racist, sexist or otherwise problematic structures within a discursive community and their relation to that structure. This suggests that there is no binary structure of being racist vs. being non-racist to be found here; rather, there are degrees of racism in the structures of a discursive community, depending on how deeply anchored its racism is.⁹ These structures are visible in social practices of treating certain people as inferior, despicable, targets of contempt or as whatever the respective stereotype would dictate.

Two remarks on the inferentialist’s relation to stereotypes are helpful here. Firstly, note that alluding to the respective stereotypes within a discursive community is only a helpful device to explain why the use of a term commits one to some specific inferences rather to some others. This does not mean, however, that the inferentialist position is based on a stereotype view of

⁹However, if discursive communities do not have a binary structure with regard to racism, this does not mean that there are no clear cases of racist language use. The terms that have a derogatory function because of their meaning, and not only because of the tone in or attitude with which they are uttered, can be seen as paradigmatic cases of derogatory terms.

derogatory terms. Regardless of whether a derogatory term is based on a specific stereotype, inferentialism accounts for its meaning as it does for every term: its meaning is determined by the different roles it plays in assertions within a game of making claims and giving and asking for reasons. Thus, the objections that Robin Jeshion raises against stereotype views as they are presented by Christopher Hom or Elisabeth Camp do not apply to my view (see Camp, 2013; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013b).

Secondly, the inferentialist view I am proposing here is not committed to the claim that any stereotypical element is semantically relevant. A stereotype is only relevant to what is said if it enters the realm of conceptual norms. I am relying on an understanding of the semantics/pragmatics distinction that views them as two endpoints of a spectrum and that allows for a grey zone in which it might not always be crystal clear whether some parts of a meaning generating network of inferences are semantically or ‘merely’ pragmatically relevant. Semantically relevant inferences are those inferences that are valid across all (or most) possible contexts. Given the social complexity of politically relevant language and my commitment to non-ideal theorising that tries to account for this complexity (see Mühlebach, 2022), the idea suggests itself that it might be pointless to talk about semantics in the light of terms that are part of such a politically messy field of language use.¹⁰ I do believe, however, that there is something to be gained from the semantics/pragmatics distinction that allows us to understand the perniciousness of deeply derogatory terms. It lets us pay attention to the inner structure of a concept that is expressed by a pernicious term, i.e., to the question of which inferences belong to the organising principle of this concept and which do not. The more a pernicious claim is located at the centre of a net of claims that are inferentially organised around the use of a specific derogatory term, the more it belongs to the semantic core of this term.

The stereotype that Chinese people are good at doing laundry, for example, is helpful to make sense of many interactions between white American people and Asian Americans but it does not seem to be at the semantic core of the term ‘ch-nk’. It seems unlikely to me that if used, for example, in the milieu of banking and finance, the term ‘ch-nk’ involves any commitment to the claim of being good at doing laundry. There are, however, stereotypical ascriptions that have made their way into the semantic core of a term. Examples of such semantically relevant stereotypical elements are the ascription of cruelty to Germans in the case of ‘b-che’ at the time of World War I, or the contemporary ascription of inferiority of Black people to white people in the case of ‘n-gger’. Using the term ‘b-che’ while denying the likeliness of the target to be cruel was materially incompatible at the time of World War I because likeliness to be cruel is just what made the English and French speakers of the term hate their targets. Similarly in the case of ‘n-gger’ in its original, i.e. non-appropriated usage, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the n-word is used that does not involve any commitment to the inferiority claim. Whether a stereotypical ascription is semantically significant may change over time.

The force of derogatory terms varies along two axes. Firstly, derogatory terms for some targets have more derogatory force than the slurring terms for others. For example, ‘n-gger’ is worse than ‘ch-nk’ and ‘ch-nk’ is worse than ‘kr-ut’. Secondly, derogatory force varies across different terms for the same targets so that the German term ‘Judens-u’¹¹ has more derogatory force than the English ‘k-ke’ and ‘n-gger’ is more derogatory than ‘d-rkie’ or ‘c-n’. As I shall argue, we can explain all these differences with reference to the semantics of the respective terms. Additionally, the derogatory force of a term may vary according to different contexts. I shall briefly discuss these pragmatic changes of force at the end of this section.

For the first type of variation, we should follow Hom’s thick semantic externalism in explaining the variety of force among different epithets by pointing to the fact that there are different racist, sexist or otherwise problematic institutions for every target group. According to

¹⁰Thanks to Quill Kukla for pushing me on this point in a conversation about my paper on semantic contestations (2021).

¹¹A term that roughly translates into ‘Jewish p-g’.

Hom, it is obvious that the derogatory force of ‘n-gger’ is much stronger than the force of the term ‘l-mey’ because racism against Black people is far more pervasive than xenophobia against British people. With regard to the second kind of variation, however, Anderson and LePore object to thick semantic externalism by noting that, according to this view, we would need distinct racist institutions for different terms for the same targets. It is, for example, implausible to assume that there are three different racisms that determine the semantic content of ‘n-gger’, ‘d-rkie’ and ‘c·n’ (2013b, p. 361).

This objection requires us to further spell out the idea that our broader social institutions support and partly determine the force of derogatory terms. Anderson and LePore do justice to the intuition that it is strange for us to speak of racism against Black people as consisting of two or even more different racist institutions. Nevertheless, there might be cases in which Hom is right to talk about two different institutions. This would be the case if two terms were directed at the same target group, but while the first centred on the stereotypical aspect of being lazy and criminal, the second focused on the stereotype of being sexually super-potent. Regardless of whether there are cases in which it is helpful to speak of two different racist or sexist institutions or not, the inferentialist account I am offering can accommodate both scenarios. Put in inferentialist terms, we would say that in these cases, the racism, sexism or xenophobia is institutionalised differently with regard to the reference class of the various derogatory terms instead of speaking of different racist or sexist institutions.

With regard to terms for the same social group, the explanation of differences in force looks slightly different. The relevant difference lies in that the two terms have different inferential roles. With regard to the German ‘Judens-u’ and the English ‘k-ke’, it is rather obvious why they differ in force even though both of them are highly derogatory. The use of ‘Judens-u’ was embedded in genocidal practices against Jewish people during World War II. This degree of derogatoriness is not present in the history of the term ‘k-ke’, so ‘Judens-u’ and ‘k-ke’ historically licensed quite different inferences. By now, English-speaking people know that ‘k-ke’ is a highly derogatory slurring term which has therefore not actively been used by most English speakers for the last decades. In the German-speaking context, the social constraints on the German term have been even stronger. As a result, most German-speaking people recognise the term ‘Judens-u’ as an incredibly hateful term, but among young German-speaking people, many do not even know that this term actually existed.

There are also cases of two or more terms within the same discursive community. Take, for example, ‘n-gger’ and ‘d-rkie’ among US American English speakers. The n-word was already standardly in use at a time in which Black people were denied the most basic civil rights. The n-word accompanied and legitimised social practices, including highly cruel actions such as systematically lynching people of African descent. Even if the social practices in which the n-word has been embedded and, as a consequence, the conceptual rules that license the inferences which can be drawn from its use may have changed over the last decades, today’s social practices and today’s inferences are highly influenced by the term’s history. Moreover, the change is not very far-reaching. Racism against Black people is still very powerful almost everywhere, and thus ‘n-gger’ has not lost its strong derogatory force (yet). ‘D-rkie’, by contrast, has a different history. The rather patronising structures that underlie the conceptual rules for this term explain why these rules license inferences which slightly differ from those of ‘n-gger’. Because the term has often been used in patronising situations, the utterer of ‘d-rkie’ is committed to claims of a likeliness of mental inferiority of people with dark skin rather than to claims of the legitimacy of cruel treatment. At least, this is true for the historical use of these terms. The more they are used in similar situations with similar consequences, the more their meaning will converge.

Another point worth highlighting is that, even though according to inferentialism, social structures are very important to determining conceptual content, we cannot directly infer the content of a concept from broad social structures of oppression, such as racist structures. Depending on specific circumstances, oppressive structures may take slightly different forms

and thus enable the (re)production of different social practices in which conceptual norms are manifest. For example, even though racist structures strongly shape social practices both in the US and Germany, different social processes in these places have led to different social practices, so that the meaning and use of the terms ‘race’ and ‘Rasse’ differ significantly. Both terms have a long history of racist and biologicistic usage, but only ‘Rasse’ is still considered fully racist, so that its use has almost vanished. By contrast, even though we still find racist and biologicistic uses of ‘race’ in the US, different uses have emerged.¹² Through a strong civil rights movement, the term ‘race’ has become a useful instrument to talk about social injustice in anti-racist struggles. Rather than refraining from using ‘race’ altogether, the term has now various contested meanings.

The derogatory force may also change depending on the context of utterance, though perhaps less so than the expression of contempt or the offensiveness of a specific term. The expression of contempt mainly depends on the degree of hatred the speaker feels towards their target, whereas the offensiveness feeds on the social norms of a given group concerning what counts as acceptable. If we understand derogation as a primarily structural phenomenon, the derogatory force of a term depends on the structural make-up of a given speech situation. It thus may be that in a specific speech situation, the power relations between different communities are being changed locally. Think, for example, of a misogynist who attends an event hosted by feminist activists. His otherwise more powerful position is undermined by the local social norms of the speech setting. Local changes of power relations may deepen or lessen the derogatory force of a term because they may locally change the set of inferences that are licensed by the use of this term.

4.3 | Relative autonomy from both intentions and feeling harmed or offended

‘N-gger’ is generally more derogatory than ‘l-mey’, i.e. in general by using ‘l-mey’, we cannot derogate somebody as much as we can derogate somebody else by calling them a ‘n-gger’. If my xenophobic and racist neighbour Nadia really hates British people and slightly dislikes Black people, she expresses significantly more contempt by using ‘l-mey’ than by using ‘n-gger’. Her attitude might affect the concrete speech situation, but is of little help if we seek to understand why certain terms are highly problematic whereas others are not. No matter what Nadia intends to say and do with the terms ‘l-mey’ and ‘n-gger’, it is clear that the claims she is committed to by using the first are neither seriously threatening nor damaging. Xenophobia against British people is not institutionalised in a way in which the norms of a xenophobic community would license deeply humiliating or violence-legitimising claims about British people. With regard to ‘n-gger’, by contrast, she is committed to a whole set of claims including the claim that Black people are inferior. The inferiority claim is at the heart of the racist stereotype of Black people. Thus, as long as Nadia uses both terms, it does not matter whether she feels more hatred against British people than against Black people, her use of ‘n-gger’ will always derogate her target more than the term ‘l-mey’.

The autonomy of derogatory terms goes hand in hand with the fact that they are objectionable in a way that goes beyond mere offence. As Lauren Ashwell puts it: “Even if no one were in fact offended by the use of a slur there would still be something wrong with using it” (2016, p. 228). Situations in which no one feels offended, but which are nevertheless objectionable, include racist speech acts in a racist community where no target person is present and racist derogatory speech acts directed towards a person or a group of persons who do not feel

¹²Similarly, although embedded in sexist structures of oppression, the derogatory terms ‘c-nt’ and ‘b-tch’ differ in that only regarding the latter and perhaps due to contingent reasons, mostly women have established a conceptual practice in which ‘b-tch’ is used in a competing, reclaimed way.

offended because they have internalised racist thinking through socialisation. As Ashwell rightly observes, ‘offensiveness’ does not entail ‘actual offence,’ but there is still a potential mismatch between what is problematic in derogatory language use and what offensiveness is usually taken to be.

Inferentialism accommodates the fact that the use of derogatory terms is problematic even if no one feels offended or hurt by them. Using derogatory terms is problematic if it commits us to pernicious inferences licensed by the racist, sexist or otherwise problematic social practices of our discursive community. For a term to be derogatory it does not matter *in the first place* whether the speaker has bad intentions, whether she utters the term in a hateful tone, or whether the audience feels offended by it. These elements can of course intensify the derogatory force of the term. But the absence of a hateful tone or a clearly bad intention does not free the term from the derogatory inferences that are licensed by its use.

Accounting for the force of derogatory terms in an inferentialist framework does not prevent us from admitting that the expression of contempt does indeed play a crucial role in the language game of verbally derogating people. If we looked at the practice of verbal derogation as a whole instead of focusing on particular uses of derogatory terms, it would be hard or even impossible to understand what derogatory language games are and how they work if nobody ever expressed contempt. The expression of contempt is crucial in the sense that it is an important aspect of derogatory language use in general. But this does not mean that it is a necessary element in every move of the derogatory language game. Just as scoring goals is a very important aspect of football games, we would not say that two teams did not play football if neither of them scored during a particular game.

4.4 | Scoping out and non-derogatory occurrences

The derogatory force of derogatory terms often scopes out if they are embedded in a complex sentence. This is to say that assertions such as “Leo said that they hired the b-tch who previously worked for their competitors” have derogatory force even if the speaker is only reporting what was said. However, there are certain, at first sight dissimilar, occurrences of derogatory terms that lack derogatory force. Both projecting out of embeddings and non-derogatory occurrences can be explained by drawing on the distinction between endorsement and non-endorsement of inferential commitments. In what follows, I shall explain the difference between endorsement and non-endorsement and argue that, according to the inferentialist view, derogatory terms are always derogatory except for cases in which their content or their use are fundamentally criticised.

By using a term in an assertion, the speaker is committed to a set of claims that can be inferred from the assertion in question. These commitments are determined by the conceptual norms of the speaker’s discursive community, not by the intentions of the speaker. The role that commitments play in understanding a term is different from their role in using a term. The former involves knowing what inferences a user of a term is committed to whereas the latter consists in being committed to the relevant inferences oneself. Many theorists capture this difference in terms of the ‘mention’/‘use’ distinction. Camp seems to have this distinction in mind when she warns the reader of her paper: “I am going to mention (though not use) a variety of slurs in contemporary use” (2013, p. 331). And Bolinger (2017, p. 442f.) assumes that simple mentions are uncontroversial cases of insulation, i.e. inoffensive occurrences of slurring terms.

However, Lynne Tirrell rightly points to cases in which some term is mentioned, but still problematic, and cases in which the term is used without being problematic:

2. ‘N-gger’ is a great word, for it keeps us all aware of who belongs where in the social order.
3. Fred is wrong to call Black people ‘n-ggers’ because there are no n-ggers – only Black citizens.

In (2), 'n-gger' is merely mentioned but the speaker makes a highly derogatory assertion. In (3), by contrast, 'n-gger' is used but in one of the few ways in which it is clear that the speaker does not endorse the term.

Tirrell's examples suggest that the distinction between endorsement and non-endorsement both on the part of the listeners and the speakers is not the one between 'mention' and 'use.' According to inferentialism, the meaning of (2) makes it sufficiently clear that the speaker is committed to the inferences that have to be drawn from the use of 'n-gger'. Negating this commitment would lead to material incompatibilities with claim (2). For example, to say that 'n-gger' should not be used because it unjustifiably conveys contempt to a specific social group would be materially incompatible with claim (2) or with other claims that follow from (2). Similarly, the meaning of (3) makes it clear that the speaker challenges a central assumption underlying the derogatory use of 'n-gger' even though this term is not only mentioned but used.

Thus, the 'mention'/'use' distinction may only serve as a *prima facie* indicator of whether the speaker endorses the derogatory terms in question. If the meaning of a sentence is determined by the role this sentence plays in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, it is clear from sentences such as (3) that the pernicious claims that usually follow from sentences that contain 'n-gger' do not follow in such cases. Moreover, if the meaning of a derogatory term is determined by the different roles it plays in sentences within the practice of giving and asking for reasons, this role can now be further specified: clearly derogatory terms, such as the n-word, are special and especially pernicious because the only type of sentence that renders them non-derogatory are sentences that fundamentally problematise the meaning or the use of the term.¹³

Note that there may be exceptions, but they are only effective more locally. If, for example, a small group of Italian friends decides to allow one of its members to use the clearly derogatory term 'p-tt-na' (which translates as 'wh-re') to address all members of this group using this term. In some sense, the member uses the term in a non-derogatory way.¹⁴ The group treats this use as licensing a different set of inferences than the common use of 'p-tt-na' would. Non-derogatory uses of this type can only be established under special circumstances in relatively small groups. Such attempts usually only work locally because this different set of inferences is not applicable in out-group uses as long as the social practices in which the use of the term is embedded do not change. In the case of deeply derogatory terms, the social constraints are so strong that it is highly unlikely that such an ingroup use could be taken up by a larger community. For instance, it is telling that in this example, the other members of the group tolerate but do not adopt the new use for themselves.

Many slurring terms differ in this respect from other terms such as 'arsehole' that are considered to be derogatory but do not involve any epistemically false or morally problematic claims that can be inferred from their use. They also differ from terms such as 'woman', which are often problematised but frequently used even by people who problematise them. For those who challenge several inferences that have to be drawn from the current use of the term, there remains a set of inferences that make the term useful in current discursive practices, even from the problematising perspective. If this were not the case, these people would have to refrain from its use altogether. Hence, critics who want to shift the meaning of the term still endorse the term in question even though their endorsement is much weaker than the endorsement of those who uncritically use the term. Derogatory terms, by contrast, cannot be criticised and productively used at the same time. It is a characteristic of clearly derogatory terms that the sketched middle way, as in the case of 'woman', is not available for them.

¹³In special cases such as Yoko Ono and John Lennon's song "Woman is the N-gger of the World", the term 'n-gger' is only *prima facie* used in an endorsing way. Anyone who understands the lyrics recognises that the aim of the song is to problematise our concept of a woman by comparing it to the concept of a 'n-gger', which is already widely accepted to be problematic. Otherwise, the attempt of exposing the problems regarding our concept of a woman would fail. However, it is an open question whether the comparison is indeed appropriate.

¹⁴Thanks to Giulia Casini for this example.

4.5 | Social constraints vs. lack of outrage

Explaining the derogatory force of derogatory terms is an attempt to show why the use of many derogatory terms is morally and politically problematic. Their derogatory force, accounted for in terms of inferentially determined semantic content, seems to explain why the use of derogatory terms is governed by such strict social constraints and why their use often produces outrage on the part of the hearers. However, there is not a direct link between derogatory content on the one hand and social constraints and outrage on the other. The two poles are mediated by social norms concerning the status of specific terms. There are two cases in which this mediacy becomes apparent: firstly, social constraints which are not based on derogatory content and, secondly, the lack of outrage despite derogatory content.

With regard to the first case, we have already seen that there are few instances of derogatory term usage which are non-derogatory. These are the cases in which the terms are not used as a term of one's own vocabulary, i.e. in which the inferences coming along with the use of the term are not endorsed. These non-derogatory instances notwithstanding, I contend that every utterance that contains a derogatory term is potentially offensive (as opposed to derogatory). Regardless of whether the derogatory term in an utterance is really used or not, its mere appearance may trigger memories of violence, or it may invoke associations that present themselves as inferences with regard to the term in question. Hence the reason why I introduce the character ‘.’ instead of fully spelling out the derogatory terms that I use as examples in my semantic analysis. By ‘.’-introduction, we keep the offensive potential as minimal as possible. But the attempt to avoid recalling of derogatory terms is not based on semantic grounds, at least not primarily.

A similar example is the term ‘niggardly’, which is etymologically (and as far as I know in our current discursive practices) unrelated to ‘n-gger’. Due to their strong phonological resemblance, however, ‘niggardly’ is often associated with ‘n-gger’ and its use often causes offence. But since these associations are not built on the basis of the inferences one is actually committed to in virtue of using ‘niggardly’, they can be regarded as pseudo inferences and should not be confused with inferences that are really determined by the conceptual norms of the discursive community. Distinguishing between real and pseudo inferences does not suggest that any offence caused by the latter is unwarranted. We may have many reasons for not using certain terms, not all of which have to be semantic.

The second case concerns terms which function derogatorily but whose derogatoriness is not acknowledged by the community (yet). Despite their derogatory function, they do not produce outrage at all. Among members of sexist communities, for example, using the term ‘sl-t’ is still an accepted way of referring to a certain type of woman, just as it is still common among explicitly racist white bigots to use ‘n-gger’ in conversation with each other. In these examples, we need to make the speech community aware of the derogatory elements which are implicit in their communicative practices, i.e. we need to make their implicit derogatory inferences explicit. Or, if they are already explicit but still endorsed by the community, we need to direct our efforts at convincing them of their wrong moral standards.

The two cases show that focusing on social constraints and outrage or offensiveness might be misleading if we are interested in the moral and political topicality of derogatory terms. Social constraints and outrage show what norms a given speech community endorses, but not directly whether a specific term functions derogatorily.

4.6 | Appropriation

A special case of meaning change is when, within a targeted group, a counter practice evolves which differently institutionalises the use of an otherwise derogatory term. Reclaimed or appropriated uses of derogatory terms are discursive counter practices in which (a part of) the target

group uses the term in question in a different, self-empowering and self-empowered, way. Two prime examples with different histories are the terms ‘n-gger’ (or ‘n-gga’) and the term ‘queer’. Important characteristics of appropriated terms are usually taken to be the following: reclaimed uses of derogatory terms (i) defuse the derogatory force of the term in question; (ii) take back a powerful instrument of derogation from those who usually target the group in question; (iii) are almost exclusively restricted to the members of the targeted group,¹⁶ thereby manifesting in-group solidarity; (iv) reveal a critical stance against the derogatory use of the reclaimed term; and (v) do not merely alleviate or erase the offensiveness of the derogatory uses, but rather subvert them (cf. Bianchi, 2014; Hom, 2008; Hornsby, 2001).

Reclamation projects are a highly complex phenomenon. As Judith Butler (1997, p. 14f.) and Cassie Herbert (2015) show, it depends on a variety of pragmatic factors whether such projects are successful. It is thus neither the aim nor the task of a theory of meaning with regard to derogatory terms to fully explain the workings of appropriation. However, since the reclamation of slurring terms affects both the meaning and derogatory force of such terms, an account of the meaning of derogatory terms should at least explain these two aspects in practices of successful reclamation.

According to the inferentialist view, the appropriation of a derogatory term involves establishing a new meaning, since the new use is embedded in a different discursive practice. The use of ‘queer’ or the appropriated n-word license sets of inferences that differ significantly from those of the originally derogatory terms. This view runs counter to Bianchi’s (2014) which treats appropriated terms as ironic uses of derogatory terms. However, as Anderson (2018) compellingly shows, Bianchi’s echoic account of reclaimed terms is not able to capture the many different ways in which appropriated terms are used. Assuming a critical stance towards the derogatory term in every use of ‘n-gga’, for example, is highly implausible. Take Smith’s (2016, p. 17) story of an exchange between an older and a younger Black boy after a having played basketball with each other. ‘N-gga’ in the older boy’s “Good game, lil’ n-gga!” is a simple and usual way of addressing a friend, not a critical echoing of ‘n-gger’.¹⁷

If an appropriated term takes on a new meaning, the derogatory and the reclaimed use render the term ambiguous. This seems counter-intuitive to many theorists. As Anderson and LePore put the worry, ambiguity “fails to explain why non-members cannot utilise a second sense. If it were just a matter of distinct meanings, why can’t any speaker opt to use a slur non-offensively?” (2013a, p. 42). However, there is no reason to assume that ambiguity needs to do the work of explaining all the important characteristics of appropriated language use. If a term has two meanings – a derogatory and an appropriated one – and one is only available to a specific group of people, we can explain the difference in meaning in terms of semantics and the restricted availability in terms of the political make-up of our discursive community.

Derogatory terms and their corresponding appropriated terms are a special case of ambiguity in the sense that the latter still carry some of the content of the former. In cases of derogatory terms which, over time, start to function as mere expressives, only very few of the original inferential commitments are transferred from the standard use to the special use of the term and most of them are evaluative. Appropriated terms, by contrast, do not function as mere expressives based on the negative or positive evaluation which comes with the original meaning. On the contrary, they are used to defuse the original derogatory force of the term by sticking to the helpful and good inferences that must be drawn from the original use while disavowing and subverting the pernicious inferences. In instances of appropriation, there has to be some local attempt to give the term new content by using it differently. This can happen unconsciously, but it can also happen on the basis of serious reflection and with the clear intention of changing

¹⁶This is why I still use ‘.’ in some examples of appropriated terms.

¹⁷Even though the notion of ‘critical echoing’ cannot be made sense of at the level of individual usage, it is useful on the level of the social phenomenon of appropriation.

the term's meaning. These new uses are first only successful locally and later successful within a broader community if a targeted sub-community is coherent enough to establish a new practice which licenses new inferences.

In any speech act, the entitlement of a speaker to make a specific utterance not only depends on semantic and epistemic norms but also on various social norms which govern our speech situations. Just as in John Austin's famous example of naming a ship, only few specific people are entitled to say "I hereby name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*" and have the speech act felicitously taken up, there are other social norms in play that partly determine who is entitled to use an appropriated term. A person-racialised-as-white is usually not in the position required to use 'n-gga' because the power relations between groups that are racialised differently are still highly effective and perniciously advantage white people. Hence, in addition to the openly offensive practice of verbally derogating Black people, many of our other current social arrangements rely on the empowerment of white people and the disempowerment of Black people. These social arrangements generally do not allow for people-racialised-as-white to become members of the community in which the term 'n-gga' is reclaimed.

It seems that the power relations that underlie the use of the n-word are not going to disappear any time soon. Even if they did, history weighs heavily on the n-word, and thus it is unlikely that the appropriated term 'n-gga' will become a mainstream term at any point. In such a case, the community in which the reclaimed term can be used would expand in the sense that the criteria for membership change or completely disappear and the appropriated use would become the main use where there is no need left to use the derogatory term. This, however, is only possible if the social structures within the whole discursive community change to the extent that the boundaries between one social sub-group and the other soften to a remarkable degree, or if the social norms with regard to a specific sub-group drastically change. In this case, the appropriated use would slowly replace the original derogatory one.¹⁸

This process seems to have occurred with the terms 'queer' and 'gay.' Here, appropriation by the target group has been the way by which the meaning of a derogatory term has become (more or less) non-derogatory within the whole discursive community, not only within the term-reclaiming discursive sub-community which was restricted to people-identifying-as-queer. The difference between 'n-gga' and 'queer' shows that appropriation is not a uniform process which ultimately has the same outcome in every case. Even though the macro structure looks the same in all instances of appropriation, the details which determine, for example, who may become part of the discursive sub-community or whether its use is extensible to the whole discursive community differ from case to case.

On the macro level, a discursive sub-community evolves out of certain social circumstances and can establish a new use of a formerly derogatory term that draws on the content of the derogatory term but refrains from the pernicious inferences. By using the originally derogatory term in an appropriated sense, the discursive sub-community subverts the derogation of the former term because the pernicious inferences of the derogatory term fail to materialise in the appropriated practice. The appropriated term, with its new meaning, and the derogatory term coexist and it is possible for members of the targeted group to use both.¹⁹ Because of social restrictions on the membership of the discursive sub-community, the people who use the appropriated term thereby reinforce a sense of solidarity and in-group membership.

¹⁸Replacement of the derogatory term by the appropriated one is a more plausible description of the meaning change than the slow fading of derogatory force until the term becomes neutral or even positive. It is not the case that bigoted people constantly used the term 'queer' and it slowly lost its force with the rise of the positive queer movement. Rather, fewer and fewer people were bigoted and used the derogatory term while, on the other pole of sub-communities, more and more people became sympathetic to the claims, needs and demands of the queer movement.

¹⁹Take, for example, the appropriated use in Jay-Z's and Kanye West's song "N-ggas in Paris" and the non-appropriated use by Nancy in Faulkner's *That Evening Sun* from above.

However, these social restrictions are only understandable by looking at the micro structure of appropriated term uses. The question of who gets to be part of the sub-community has to be answered by looking at our current social and political arrangements as well as the history of the derogatory term in question. Not only are racism, sexism, ableism and homo- and transphobia institutionalised differently in our society, but various terms within the same category – say, racist terms – also have different histories. This has to be considered when looking at the different inferences that are licensed by appropriated terms and the appropriated term's potential to expand into use by the whole discursive community.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the political nature of derogatory language use requires philosophers of language to theorise both linguistic and political aspects of the use of derogatory terms. This involves broadening the scope of our analyses by including both explicitly and implicitly derogatory terms. Moreover, it urges us to explain the ways in which different slurring or otherwise pejorative terms and implicitly derogatory terms relate to each other. This gives us a sense of how changing social structures bear on changes in the uses of terms and, hence, in changes to their meaning and force. By drawing up an extensive list of desiderata for a theory of derogatory terms, I have fleshed out how theorising the political aspects of derogatory terms affects both the set of issues concerning derogatory terms which philosophers of language are confronted with and the ways in which they try to explain them. Ultimately, my inferentialist explanation of the core aspects of derogatory terms has shown that the resources of inferentialist semantics allow us to gain a comprehensive understanding of derogatory language use as a linguistic and political phenomenon.

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