

Inferentialism, Representationalism and Derogatory

Words

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1 Introduction

In the philosophy of language, examining the role and significance of derogatory words serves to counter our tendency to divorce theories of meaning from the social settings in which the phenomenon is found, and the communicative acts, attitudes and shared interests they incorporate.¹ Hornsby stresses the significance of this in a recent paper, which will form the basis for discussion.

According to Hornsby, derogatory words have the following distinguishing features:

First, they apply to people and are commonly understood to convey hatred and contempt.

Secondly, for each such word there is, or at least perfectly well could be, another that applies to the same people but whose use does not convey these things. (2001: pp. 128–9)

Consider, for example, the pairs ‘faggot’ and ‘male homosexual’, ‘nigger’ and ‘black’ and ‘Kike’ and ‘Jew’. The paired expressions have the same extension, but in each case the derogatory counterpart (when uttered) carries or conveys additional, offensive connotations. Precisely how one is to understand ‘convey’ here is a central concern of this paper.

A further and important feature of derogatory words that Hornsby notes, and that will occupy us, is that they are ‘useless for us’.² While they are ‘intelligible to us’, they are not ‘sayable by us’:

it is not merely that one does not count oneself among the word’s users so that one is not in a position to make their claims. One cannot endorse anything that is done using these words. (2001: pp. 129–30; cf. Williamson, 2003)

Hornsby does not draw our attention to this, or any other feature, with the aim of providing a definition of the concept of a derogatory expression by stating necessary and sufficient conditions. And that is not the aim of this paper either. I think that it is clear, or sufficiently so for present purposes, how the examples enumerated above could be continued, and so which class of expressions Hornsby has in mind.

That said, it is evident that the features Hornsby highlights are not shared by all derogatory expressions (and although she does not make this clear, presumably she does not intend to suggest otherwise). Consider, for example, the class containing terms such as ‘wanker’, ‘twat’ and ‘bastard’, which is distinguished from that discussed above in the following ways. First, while an expression belonging to this class of pejorative often corresponds to a purely descriptive term, or has (or has had) a purely descriptive use, it is

not generally applied to an individual on the basis of that individual's falling within the extension of the descriptive complement. That is to say, the grounds for introducing such a derogatory word are not those specified by the neutral counterpart. Second, this sort of term is not typically applied to a person on the basis of that person's being perceived to belong to a particular group (ethnic, religious or social). Hence, its use does not as such convey an attitude towards the kind to which the individual is perceived to belong, but rather to that individual alone. Finally, in many cases, the mechanism by which such an expression purports to be offensive is through associating the target with that which is picked out by the descriptive counterpart. In all these respects, the class of derogatory expressions alluded to above differs from that with which Hornsby is concerned. For the remainder, however, I shall restrict attention to the latter, and restrict the use of the term 'derogatory expression' accordingly.

Note in passing that these remarks, and likewise Hornsby's, are not offered as a serious contribution to the empirical discipline of linguistics, but only to provide a rough delineation of the topic. Indeed, the interest of this paper is not even in derogatory expressions as such; they are the focus only insofar as they provide a test-case for certain theories of meaning. Whether such terms *actually* function or are understood in the way here suggested is an empirical matter; whether they possibly *could*, according to the relevant theories, is the philosophical issue of current concern.

Accordingly, Hornsby states that consideration of the phenomenon of derogatory words allows us to adjudicate between two prominent, competing theories of meaning. More

specifically, she suggests that it raises serious difficulties for *inferentialism*, but not for a perspective on meaning that currently approaches orthodoxy, namely *representationalism*.³

In what follows, I argue against Hornsby that inferentialism can indeed accommodate derogatory words, so long as it abandons any pretensions to offer a complete account of their significance. Inferentialism needs to be supplemented – with ‘conjunctive non-cognitivism’ – in order to explain the distinctive emotional charge of pejoratives.

Hornsby is, however, equally critical of conjunctive non-cognitivism. I attempt to meet her criticisms and, moreover, show that the approach she favours, representationalism, stands equally in need of its support.

While the upshot of the discussion is that, contra Hornsby, focus on derogatory expressions alone does not provide grounds for deciding between competing theories of meaning, it nevertheless serves to highlight important features that any such theory must acknowledge and incorporate. Roughly, the view arrived at is a ‘two-component’ view, according to which derogatory words have a literal, descriptive meaning in addition to which they conventionally convey to an audience negative, evaluative attitudes.⁴

2 Meaning-theories and representationalism

Hornsby suggests that derogatory words raise a *prima facie* problem for the position she dubs ‘representationalism’. To appreciate why, some scene-setting is in order. Many philosophers hold that the best philosophical approach to meaning is to reflect on the

principles governing the construction of theories that generate specifications of the meaning of each expression in a language from a finite body of axioms concerning sentence constituents and their modes of combination. One version of this proposal – representationalism – holds that such theories should generate theorems in the form of specifications of *truth-conditions* (see Davidson, 2001). For example, from the axioms:

- (a) ‘Snow’ stands for snow
- (b) For all x , x satisfies ‘is white’ if and only if x is white

plus some combinatorial rule stating what results from concatenating expressions of this form, one can generate the theorem:

- (1) ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white

and treat (1) as if it stated what ‘snow is white’ means. Note, crucially, that the expressions on the right-hand side of the theorem are *used*, not mentioned. This purportedly ensures that it displays the left-hand quoted expressions’ representational bearing on reality – rather than simply their relations to other expressions – and so exhibits the contribution they make to the propositional content expressed by any utterance of the sentence (see Evans and McDowell, 1976: pp. ix–x).

And therein lies the problem. Representationalist meaning-theories, according to Hornsby, will have to ‘leave out’ derogatory words, since they are *useless*. Theorists (like you and me) will not be able to generate theorems of the above kind for sentences containing derogatory words because they are not prepared to employ those words.⁵

Imagine, for example, trying to arrive at a theorem for a sentence such as, ‘A faggot is tall.’ As Hornsby says, ‘derogatory words do not belong in any theories that use words to

say what words mean' (2001: p. 131). It would appear, then, that representationalism should be rejected, since it cannot account for the meaning of expressions that obviously do have meaning.

Hornsby, however, argues that it would be hasty to think that this limitation poses a genuine problem for representationalism. Only, she claims, on an 'ambitious' (and suspect) conception of meaning-theories does it do so. According to the ambitious conception, it is the aim of a meaning-theory to state what knowledge of meaning 'consists in'.⁶ Correspondingly, such theories present 'coming to know what sentences mean' as 'a matter of acquiring tacit knowledge of what the relevant meaning-theory states overtly' (2001: p. 139). On such a conception, a meaning-theory is evidently required to generate a theorem for *every* possible sentence that a speaker understands, including those that contain derogatory words; otherwise it is failing to give a comprehensive account of what constitutes linguistic understanding.

One can, according to Hornsby, reject this ambitious conception. One need not view representationalist meaning-theories as corresponding to anything actually known by a speaker and could instead take them to aim only at recording 'some evident facts about a language's use' (2001: p. 140). Thus, there is no requirement that a theory incorporate *every* expression in a language, so long as it captures the relevant 'evident facts' (whatever they might be) in a suitably perspicuous way. Indeed, that it leaves out certain offensive words may even be a virtue; it serves as a reminder to theorists that the semantic structures with which a meaning-theory deals are an abstraction from and firmly

rooted in social practices and communicative exchange, and are thereby bound up with the concerns, attitudes and outlooks of ordinary speakers.

While one is, of course, entitled to stipulate the philosophical purposes to which one puts meaning-theories, the difficulty is that Hornsby's response makes meaning-theories a lot less interesting than their advocates typically suggest. Even if one rejects (as Hornsby recommends and as I think one must) the view that meaning-theories represent explicitly something known implicitly by ordinary speakers, it remains the case that a central motivation for reflection on meaning-theories is to provide a theoretical articulation of linguistic understanding. McDowell, for example, holds that no speaker actually possesses knowledge of a meaning-theory (tacitly or overtly), but nonetheless believes that a meaning-theory should be such that knowledge of it would *suffice* for linguistic understanding (1998: pp. 178–8). Indeed, he holds that the representationalist aims to provide 'a theoretical representation of the practical capacity that constitutes understanding' a language (1998: p. 296; cf. pp. 16, 31, 121, 316; Davidson, 2005: pp. 95–6; Evans and McDowell, 1976: p. ix). It is precisely in virtue of capturing linguistic understanding in this way that meaning-theories are supposed to illuminate the notions of meaning, understanding and their cognates, and reveal them to be unproblematic.

Accordingly, to the extent that there are meaningful expressions, i.e. expressions that are understood, that a representationalist meaning-theory cannot in principle incorporate, that theory fails to *qualify* as one of understanding and so one of meaning at all. This should be of concern to the representationalist, whatever her views on the cognitive reality of the axioms and theorems of the theory.

If one accepts these views – which are motivated quite independently of the ambitious approach Hornsby justifiably repudiates – then the fact that any such representationalist meaning-theory leaves out derogatory words poses a genuine problem after all. Its advocates face a dilemma. Either they must deny that we understand derogatory words, or they must relinquish the claim that the theories they construct are a genuine articulation of the capacity to understand a language. The former is, of course, wildly implausible. As Williamson says (in a rather different context), ‘We find racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because we fail to do so’ (2003: p. 257). The latter, however, appears to divest meaning-theories of a great deal of their philosophical significance and undermines a widespread motivation for reflecting on them.

This is, admittedly, not a knock-down argument against representationalism. Hornsby might have in mind a rather different and still less ambitious motivation for philosophical reflection on meaning-theories. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that many representationalists would be satisfied with that substitute (McDowell, presumably, included). Finally, if there are alternative accounts that *can* incorporate derogatory words, one might think them preferable for that reason. It is to that possibility that I shall now turn.

3 Conjunctive non-cognitivism

In this section, I shall defend against Hornsby’s criticisms an alternative account of derogatory words, ‘conjunctive non-cognitivism’, derived from Hare (1963).⁷ According

to it, there are two aspects to derogatory words; they ‘combine descriptive meaning with another sort’ (Hornsby, 2001: p. 131). It is *conjunctivist*, then, since it holds that the content of a derogatory word is a conjunction of that meaning which it shares with its neutral counterpart plus an additional ‘prescriptive’ component. It is *non-cognitivist* since the prescriptive component is a matter of the *attitudes* (not claims or beliefs) that a derogatory word conveys.

As Hornsby notes, this account dovetails neatly with the observation that one can learn the extension of a derogatory word by knowing what its neutral counterpart is. It also does justice to the sense in which, ‘although we have some sort of quarrel with someone who applies a derogatory word, there is no plainly factual disagreement inasmuch as we agree with them that its neutral component applies’ (2001: p. 132).

For these reasons, one might think that conjunctive non-cognitivism provides a satisfactory analysis of derogatory words. Hornsby, however, objects to it on the following grounds. If the meaning of such an expression really divides into two isolable components, then we (non-bigoted speakers) ought to be able to employ that term in such a way as to ‘cancel’ the prescriptive meaning.⁸ That is, if a derogatory word is composite, then it should be possible for us to use the word *without* conveying the hateful attitudes, insofar as we do not have them. But this, Hornsby claims, manifestly goes against the data: ‘In finding a word useless we assume that we are not in a position to mean by it something different from that which those who use it mean’ (2001: p. 133).⁹ Hornsby is no doubt right to insist on this point. Recall utterances of sentences of the form ‘Don’t get

me wrong, I've nothing against faggots ...' One simply cannot employ a derogatory word and at the same time try unilaterally to cancel or suspend its pejorative nature.

Nevertheless, the conjunctive non-cognitivist can surely accommodate this observation by supplementing her account with certain Gricean mechanisms (a possibility Hornsby does not entertain).

Grice held that the uses of many expressions *conventionally implicate* certain claims or beliefs in addition to what is strictly and literally said. And because they are conventional, such implicatures are not easily cancellable (1989: pp. 24–5, 44ff.). For reasons to be discussed in the next section, it does not seem right to say that derogatory words conventionally implicate claims or beliefs (i.e. one should remain non-cognitivist).¹⁰ Nonetheless, there is no obvious obstacle to reaching for a similar model, according to which derogatory words conventionally implicate (negative) *attitudes*.¹¹ Again, like conventionally implicated beliefs, conventionally implicated attitudes are not casually cancellable (although through repeated, no doubt self-conscious, use in the right hands, it might be possible to neutralize the prescriptive component by annulling the convention. I shall return briefly to this issue in the conclusion).

With this apparatus in place, the conjunctive non-cognitivist can not only accommodate but also *explain* the uselessness of derogatory words on which Hornsby rightly insists. It is the fact that hateful attitudes are conventionally and not just accidentally or conversationally attached to the pejorative that prevents those who do not possess such attitudes from simply suspending or cancelling the implicature as they see fit.

Hornsby, however, expresses further reservations about the conjunctive non-cognitivist account. Recall that, according to it, 'where D is a derogatory word and N its neutral counterpart, someone who predicates D of x , (i) says that x is N, and (ii) condemns those who are N'. This, Hornsby notes, is far too simplistic, since there are many other things beyond condemning that can be done with derogatory words. The same pejorative may be used to insult, to evince hostility, to express solidarity (with other bigots), and so on. One cannot bring all these possibilities under the umbrella 'condemn'. Hence, since 'we are stuck for a way to give the non-descriptive' supplement, the evaluative aspect of a derogatory word cannot simply be something additional to a neutral core (2001, p. 135). Its meaning cannot be broken down into separable 'semantic' and 'pragmatic' components.

Hornsby seems here to be arguing for an 'inextricability thesis', akin to that often defended regarding what Williams (1985) calls 'thick' ethical terms, such as 'courageous' or 'stingy'. For these expressions, it is often (and plausibly) claimed that one cannot factor out their meaning into descriptive and prescriptive components, so that one could grasp the former independently of the latter.

Clearly, however, in the case of the derogatory expressions that concern us, Hornsby cannot be arguing that the *descriptive* component is inextricable. As she herself points out, one can give that simply by giving the neutral counterpart. Instead, it is the *prescriptive* aspect that it is supposed to resist extraction. Thus, Hornsby writes,

A unified account of a derogatory word cannot be achieved by identifying a pragmatic ingredient to be added to a semantic one given by the word's neutral counterpart, because only the word itself provides the outlook from which one can make sense of the variety of associated speech acts. (2001: p. 135)

Given that the descriptive component can so obviously be carved out, one might be suspicious as to why in turn the prescriptive cannot be. And I think that this suspicion is well placed. It can certainly be granted that simply to identify the implicated attitude with one of condemnation seems unpromising. But this is to find fault with the details of a particular proposal, not the model in general. Perhaps one might instead describe the attitude conventionally conveyed more broadly, as one of derision or hostility towards those to which the neutral counterpart applies. One might complain that this runs counter to the specificity of the speech acts that can be performed using that word. But fineness of grain can be achieved by taking into account contextual factors. The conventions attaching to the derogatory word determine that *a* derisive attitude is understood to be conveyed, and so delimits a range of possible speech acts (insult, belittle, express loathing, etc.) that one can perform in uttering it. Precisely which attitude is conveyed, and so which speech act is performed, is then fixed by circumstances.

(Strictly, on the somewhat Gricean account defended here, there is a speech act that is literally performed by the use of a derogatory word, namely that which would be performed by uttering its neutral counterpart, while in addition (in virtue of the conventionally implicated attitude) one thereby performs an action of derogation. This complication does not affect the above remarks.)

So, it seems that it is possible to meet Hornsby's criticisms of conjunctive non-cognitivism. It has not yet been shown to be untenable. Moreover, since (as mentioned above) it does justice to the respect in which one's quarrel with the users of a derogatory word is not really factual, and also the observation that one can learn the extension of a pejorative simply by learning its neutral counterpart, there appear to be positive reasons to endorse conjunctive non-cognitivism.

4 Inferentialism

Having defended conjunctive non-cognitivism against Hornsby's objections, in this section I shall try to do the same for inferentialism. According to inferentialism, very roughly, the meaning of a word is determined by the inferential proprieties governing its use (see Brandom, 1994; 2000). If one grasps the meaning of a given expression, one knows that certain inferential transitions involving it are correct or incorrect.

Following Dummett (1973: p. 454), Brandom views the inferential significance of the pejorative 'Boche' to be expressed by the following introduction and elimination rules:

$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is Boche}}$	$\frac{x \text{ is Boche}}{x \text{ is cruel}}$
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This inferentialist proposal does not suffer from the problems found to face representationalism, since in statements of an expression's inferential role (and hence meaning) of the above kind, the derogatory word is *mentioned*, not used. Moreover, as Hornsby notes, it seems nicely to capture the respect in which derogatory words are useless. Brandom himself makes this point when he says:

one cannot deny that there are any Boche – that is just denying that anyone is German, which is patently false. One cannot admit that there are Boche and deny that they are cruel – that is just attempting to take back with one claim what one has committed oneself to with another. One can only refuse to employ the concept, on the grounds that it embodies an inference one does not endorse. (2000: p. 70)

Now, one might have reservations about whether this actually captures the ordinary meaning possessed by the term ‘Boche’ (see Williamson, 2003), but there is anyway a more serious problem for Brandom’s inferentialist account, according to Hornsby:

we may wonder whether there must be an articulable ideology in which every speaker who uses the word is implicated. Is it possible, for every derogatory word, to spell out the faulty consequences to which anyone who uses it is committed? ... One can know that a word is commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt without being in a position to say at all exactly what commitments those who see fit to use it may incur. (2001: pp. 136–7)

Inferentialism seems to over-intellectualize the respect in which derogatory words are offensive (and therefore the respect in which they occasion offence).

In addition to expressing this general scepticism, Hornsby offers a diagnosis of the mistake that Brandom commits. According to his version of inferentialism, a speaker’s conveying an attitude in her use of a derogatory word is represented as that speaker conveying an attitude with a *propositional content*, i.e. as expressing the claim or belief entailed by one’s introducing the term. Brandom’s inferentialism is therefore a *cognitivist* account. Far more realistic, surely, is a non-cognitivist view according to which derogatory words express ‘emotional attitudes’, such as hatred, disgust or contempt.

No doubt Hornsby's criticisms are effective against this Brandomian version of inferentialism. But one would not be warranted in taking this to be decisive against inferentialism itself. Consider a more modest version *combined* with conjunctive non-cognitivism. On such an account, inferentialism explains that aspect of a derogatory word shared by its neutral counterpart, i.e. in terms of its invariant contribution to the inferential potential of sentences of which it is a part. The semantic proprieties of inference governing 'Boche' would accordingly be represented as the *same* proprieties governing the use of 'German'. Further, and crucially, this inferentialist account is silent about the prescriptive component. The latter can be viewed as distinct from and additional to the word's inferential significance, and explained pragmatically in terms of the hateful attitudes its use conventionally implicates.

Imagine you overhear an utterance of, 'Faggots have moved in next door.' The inferentialist component is able to explain your understanding of that aspect of the claim that you might not challenge (that male homosexuals have taken up residence in the adjacent property). But the modest version defended here leaves the aspect that appals to be dealt with separately. At this point, the Hare-cum-Grice apparatus is called upon to explain how hateful attitudes accrue to pejoratives through custom and convention, and thereby infect those words to such an extent that they become unusable by us. This suggestion, as opposed to Brandomian inferentialism, carries no suggestion that ordinary speakers' use of derogatory words is governed by an articulable ideology.

So, Hornsby's criticisms do not give reason to reject inferentialism, although they do speak against Brandom's particular account of derogatory words, according to which we accept a speaker's *grounds* for introducing such an expression but never the *consequences* of doing so. There are, however, independent and principled reasons for the inferentialist to distance herself from Brandom's views on these issues, namely considerations of *conservatism*.¹² Conservatism is the requirement that the rules for the use of a particular expression be compatible with the established inferential rules governing the use of existing expressions. More specifically, an extension of the language is conservative if one cannot use the new vocabulary to derive any statements in the original vocabulary that could not already be derived using the original vocabulary.

Consider again the case of 'Boche'. The original introduction and elimination rules given above for its employment are simply incompatible with those governing 'German'. Given what is meant by 'German', taking 'x is German' to entail 'x is cruel' is *incorrect*. So it is impossible for 'German' to mean what it does and at the same time for there to be rules according to which that transition is *correct*. That is, one who understands 'German' would *not* consider an utterance of 'x is German' alone to entitle one to utter 'x is cruel' (without collateral information). But, according to the above rules, one *would* be so entitled. There is a clash between those rules and the established rules governing the use of 'German'. Hence, one can appreciate that the constraint of conservatism applies in this instance.

The above explanation of the meaning of ‘Boche’ is, therefore, to be rejected as bogus. And the same will hold of any such account of a derogatory word, where the grounds for introducing it are just those for its neutral counterpart, but where its use entails claims that we (who readily use the neutral counterpart) cannot endorse. Any putative inferential role conforming to this pattern is always going to be non-conservative, and so (by the inferentialist’s lights) not genuine.

Thus, in addition to Hornsby’s own reservations, the inferentialist herself has good reason to reject Brandom’s version.¹³ That is, the inferentialist has additional grounds – specific to her favoured theory of meaning – for taking a derogatory word like ‘Boche’ to have the same (neutral) role as ‘German’, and so for viewing its ‘emotional charge’ as an additional (albeit conventional) aspect to its inferential significance.

So, the proposal of this section is that the inferentialist should combine inferentialism with conjunctive non-cognitivism, of the kind defended above, when accounting for derogatory words. The former explains that aspect of a derogatory word that is shared by its neutral counterpart – its semantics; the latter its direct, emotional impact – its pragmatics. Of course, I have not offered any positive arguments in favour of inferentialism generally, and doing so is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁴ Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that it can withstand Hornsby’s objections.

5 Representationalism revisited

In the light of the above, one might ask why the representationalist cannot avail herself of the same strategy. That is, perhaps a truth-conditional meaning-theory should seek only to explain that aspect of a derogatory word's significance – its contribution to the truth-conditions of sentences – that is shared by its neutral counterpart, and remain silent about the remainder. The representationalist could then appeal to conjunctive non-cognitivism to explain its distinctively pejorative tone. In this way, it might yield theorems of the (heterophonic) form:

- (2) 'Faggots live next door' is true if and only if male homosexuals live in the adjacent property

and supplement such theorems with an explanation of the attitudes the term 'faggot' conventionally implicates. (Note that 'is true if and only if' must here be read as *is strictly and literally true if and only if*.)

The short answer is that a representationalist (ambitious or otherwise) could give such an account. Hence, contra Hornsby, an examination of derogatory expressions does not in itself afford a way of choosing between representationalism and inferentialism as competing theories of meaning.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it should be clear that proponents of either theory must avail themselves of an apparatus such as the modified conjunctive non-cognitivism outlined above. Fortunately, as I have tried to show, it is defensible.

6 Conclusion

Hornsby notes that a representationalist meaning-theory has to leave out derogatory words, but suggests that this is only a problem on an overblown conception of what such

theories are for. I put pressure on this claim, and suggested that it does raise difficulties for proponents of far less ambitious meaning-theories (including McDowell).

Furthermore, I defended against Hornsby's criticisms two competing accounts of derogatory words, conjunctive non-cognitivism and inferentialism, and suggested that they can in fact be fruitfully combined. I conceded also that representationalism too could make use of conjunctive non-cognitivism (suitably modified). So, while an investigation of derogatory words does not speak directly in favour of either theory of meaning, as Hornsby claims, it does tell us something about both, namely that their advocates should abandon any ambition to give comprehensive accounts of the significance of such expressions and recognize the need to supplement their theories with additional apparatus.

As stressed above, the 'two-component' view of derogatory terms investigated here is presented only as a suggestion as to what their significance *could* in principle consist in, compatibly with two prominent theories of meaning, as opposed to a speculative claim as to what it *does* as a matter of fact consist in. Nevertheless, it is worth in closing noting some complexities concerning the possibility of derogatory expressions conventionally implicating derisive attitudes (and so of thereby being useless).

There are clearly contexts in which (non-bigoted) speakers can properly be said to use derogatory expressions. Two, somewhat overlapping, examples are occasions of irony or satire, and instances in which those to whom the neutral counterpart applies (or those suitably related to them) use the term of one another. Concerning such cases, one might first note that it is a distinctive feature of them that it is typically utterly evident that the

relevant speaker lacks the attitudes ordinarily betrayed by the use of the pejorative. Moreover, on such occasions, it often continues to be the case that the expression is conventionally understood to convey a derisive attitude, and this presumably contributes to the respect in which the speech-act is subversive. Finally, one might view such uses of a derogatory expression over time as precisely attempts to cancel its not-easily-cancellable conventional implications, and hence render it harmless. So, it seems that such examples would not necessarily show that the relevant conventions considered above are not operative, but would rather tell us some interesting facts about the dynamics of linguistic practices involving them.¹⁶

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Notes

¹ On the general importance of suitably situating theories of meaning in this way, see Hornsby, 2000; Wiggins, 1997.

² I note certain complexities concerning this observation in the conclusion.

³ Like Hornsby, Williamson (2003) argues that derogatory expressions pose serious problems for inferentialism, but not for representationalism, although for different reasons. Assessing his arguments is beyond the scope of this paper. For some discussion, see Whiting, 2006a.

⁴ One might say, in the familiar terminology, that the former belongs to 'semantics' and the latter to 'pragmatics'. For an illuminating discussion of this distinction, see Bach, 2006. As we shall see, this two-component view is opposed by both Hornsby and Brandom.

⁵ Of course, the situation is different where the derogatory word in the object-language sentence is mentioned, not used.

⁶ For an example of such a construal of representationalist meaning-theories, see Larson and Segal, 1995.

⁷ It should be stressed that I do *not* endorse Hare's account of evaluative terms as such. The suggestion is only that it, suitably amended, is a helpful model for those derogatory words with which Hornsby and the present paper are concerned. I see no pressure to extend it to evaluative vocabulary generally.

⁸ Hornsby uses the term 'detach' (2001: p. 135). In Gricean terms (1989: pp. 43ff.), however, the prescriptive component *is* detachable, since one can employ the neutral counterpart. But it is *not* easily cancellable; one cannot use a derogatory term and then try to take back the offence caused. This Gricean apparatus will be employed below.

⁹ Hornsby grants that such 'cancellation' sometimes occurs. She offers the example of 'Politically active African-Americans [who] use the word "niggers" of themselves' (2001: p. 134). However, she holds, such cases are different because, first, that the relevant speakers do not have the hateful attitudes is manifest, and second, the speakers 'trade' on the conveyed meaning, rather than simply cancelling it. I shall return to this in conclusion.

¹⁰ In this respect, the account defended here differs from the more traditionally Gricean view that Williamson (2003) considers, and that Whiting (2006a) discusses, according to which what is implicated is in propositional form.

¹¹ To say that the attitudes are implicated should not be confused with the claim that hearers have to 'work out' the implicature somehow. On the contrary, given speakers' familiarity with the conventions that accrue to an expression, and with the socio-historical make-up of the linguistic community in which that expression has a life, those attitudes will typically be cognitively primary, the object of immediate awareness, not arrived at inferentially.

¹² See Belnap's response (1962) to Prior (1960). Cf. Dummett, 1973: p. 454. The application of the requirement of conservatism in this instance is not quite straightforward, as we are not here dealing with an *extension* of the language, but rather with a suggestion as to how to represent the rules governing the use of an *existing* expression within a language. Nonetheless, it is clear enough how it applies in this case.

¹³ Of course, one might deny that conservatism is a requirement, as Brandom does (2000: pp. 71ff.). I do not think that this is feasible for an inferentialist. While demonstrating so is beyond the scope of this paper, some provisional remarks are in order. Brandom tells us that the proper question concerning a novel concept is not 'Is it a conservative extension of the language?', but 'Ought one to accept the inferential proprieties governing it?' However, the problem with 'Boche' is not that one *should* not infer according to its introduction and elimination rules but that – given the rules for the concept expressed by 'German' – there are and can be *no* such rules as Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination to follow or otherwise. Consider what it would be for a speaker to possess the (supposed) concept *Boche*. She would take 'x is German' to entail 'x is cruel'. But, then, whatever she means or understands by 'German', it is not what we do. If there is a concept expressed by her use of that term, it is not *German* (although, of course, it may be recognizably akin). Hence, the possibility of nonconservative concepts is only apparent. For additional defence of the conservative constraint against objections, see Whiting, 2006a.

¹⁴ For arguments in support of inferentialism, see Brandom, 1994: Chs 1–2; Horwich, 1998; 2005; Whiting, 2006a.

¹⁵ I confess to favouring inferentialism, but for independent reasons. For criticism of one popular construal of representationalism, see Whiting, 2006b.

¹⁶ Thanks to audiences in Lund, Sweden and Southampton, UK for discussion of this material, and to an anonymous referee for useful comments. Conversations with Jonathan Dancy and Adrian Moore helped to sharpen my discussion of conjunctive non-cognitivism.