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Meaning and uselessness: how to think about derogatory words
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> To draw attention to our ethical language can at least hold out the prospect
> of our coming to think about it, and about the ethical life expressed in it, as
> social practices that can change. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of
> Philosophy* (Collins, London, 1985) p.131.

Williams explains why there might have been some point to a linguistic approach in
ethics. I suggest that there might be some point to paying attention to an ethical
dimension in philosophy of language. I shall consider words that I label 'derogatory',
and questions they raise about linguistic meaning.

There is one very large question to which I hope to make a very small
contribution here—whether so-called representationalism in semantics serves
philosophers' purposes, or whether some other approach is needed. Derogatory
words might seem to require something different. But I shall find fault with the
treatment of these words given in such other approaches as I consider, and I shall
make a suggestion about how a representationalist can think about them. Some of
the interest of the argument lies in diagnosing the difficulties with a noncognitivist
and a certain sort of expressivist treatment of derogatory words: the diagnoses direct
us to treat words as components of social practices that can change.

Derogatory words

By *derogatory* words, I need to mean something quite narrow. Initially they can be
thought of as words that satisfy two conditions. First, they apply to people and are
commonly understood to convey hatred or 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—there is, that is, a neutral counterpart.
In the current Oxford English Dictionary, 'nigger', 'kike', 'Dago', 'Polack', 'faggot' are
all marked as 'offensive' or as 'derogatory slang'; and, for us now, these are all
(almost certainly) examples of derogatory words whose neutral counterparts we
could supply. But dictionaries are not a perfect guide: it is a local matter—local in
time, and local to groups of speakers among whom there are common
understandings—which words, if any, are derogatory. The narrow, albeit vaguely
delimited, class serves my purpose because certain questions are especially vivid in
their case. (There can be other reasons for singling our derogatory words: they
introduce a conception of "hate speech" over which questions arise about the
compatibility of the regulation of speech with principles of free speech.)

Useless Words

Derogatory words 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. Certainly there are occurrences of derogatory words that are
utterly inoffensive: 'He is *not* a nigger' can be said in order to reject the derogatory
'nigger'; one can convey that 'nigger' is not something one calls anyone by saying
"There aren't any niggers". But these examples do not count against their
uselessness as I mean this, because they are examples in which it is part of the
speaker's message that she has no use for the word 'nigger'. We might gloss the two
sentences so that the word is mentioned rather than used: "'Nigger" is not what he

ought to be called'; '"Nigger" has no application'.[1] (This paper would have to be very abstract indeed if derogatory words could not even be mentioned.)

There is no need to take a particularly high-minded or moralistic stand to hold that derogatory words are useless. Most of us probably have no trace of a tendency to use them. One can find oneself surprised that one knows what some of them mean—as one can for many words that one does put to use.

Derogatory words are not alone in combining being intelligible to us with not being sayable by us. And by looking at a different example, we can start to see what makes for difficulties about accommodating them to philosophical orthodoxies. Suppose that a thirteen-year-old describes a film as wicked, a film that you yourself thought was very good. You do not want to disagree with her. But *you* would not say the film was wicked. (If you said that it was wicked, you might be thought to be mocking, or to be attempting to be cool.) If one feels barred from using young teenage slang, the barrier is quite different from that presented by derogatory words. In the case of the slang, one can perfectly well endorse what is said when the words are used—nodding, for example, when the teenager speaks. In the case of derogatory words, 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. And this is what I mean by useless— absolutely useless, as it were.

Truth/Cognitivism/Representationalism

The example of teenage slang bears on a question about cognitivism in ethics and aesthetics. The example shows that even someone who backs off from joining in with those who use a word can accept what is said with sentences containing it. Suppose we allow, more generally, that there are things that for one or another reason we cannot say even though those things may for all that be true. We come to appreciate that there can be more values in the world than those discernible by people with our sensitivities. We see that diversity among evaluative perspectives does not rule out a cognitivist treatment of evaluations: the fact that evaluations are not universally intelligible is not an automatic obstacle to treating them as true. But that which makes derogatory words useless excludes them from a cognitivist treatment. Given that sentences containing them can never merit our assent, how could we allow that they might be true?

Derogatory words' difference from pieces of inoffensive slang then prevents us from bringing them within the reach of a certain theoretical perspective on questions about meaning—a representationalist perspective that cognitivism can encourage. Where 'F' is instantiated by a word which we not only do not use but cannot assent

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[1] There can also be acceptable figurative and "conniving" uses of derogatory words. Consider 'Woman is the nigger of the world' (from the Lennon and Ono lyric). But here I think we have something like quotation again: the use of 'woman' as generic singular is enough to turn one's attention to the words themselves. I was reminded of the example by Adèle Mercier, 'A Perverse Case of the Contingent A Priori: On the Logic of Emasculating Language', in *Philosophical Topics 23.2*, (*Feminist Perspectives*), Fall 1995, pp.221-259. Mercier's main concern there is with sexist language, but she has many illuminating things to say on matters touched on here.

Eric Heffer (a principled British Labour politician who died in 1991) once came out with the remarkable 'I'm not calling them saboteurs, but that is what they are'—as if one could bring people within the scope of an insult without insulting them. The converse, I am suggesting, is easier to manage: one can remove people from the scope of an insult; but in order to do so, one needs at least to echo the word that one takes to be insulting, and otherwise finds useless.

to any uses of—as is the case where it is derogatory[2]—we have no truck with either the left or the right-hand-side of the instance of the biconditional:

'a is an F' is true in our language iff a is an F

Biconditionals like this one emerge from theories designed to show how the meanings of sentences depend systematically on the meanings of the words that make them up. Such theories are held by many—of various persuasions—to serve as meaning-theories for the languages they treat.[3] But derogatory words do not belong in them. Indeed derogatory words do not belong in any theories that use words to say what words mean—at least not as far as we, who find them useless, are concerned.

Well, perhaps we need not take it very seriously if meaning-theories leave a few words out. Compendiousness in the matter of vocabulary has never been a pressing aim for anyone reflecting generally on questions of linguistic meaning. And we know, after all, what it *would* be to give a semantic axiom for a derogatory word. (Someone who thought that truth-assessable claims could be made using the word would employ an axiom on the same pattern as that of the other words with which it shares a syntax. It is only that this wouldn't serve for us.) Thus one response to derogatory words' absence from our meaning-theories is: 'So what?'.

The response is short-sighted. One of the sources of opposition to representationalism in semantics is the feeling that the significance embodied in the various activities that constitute the use of a language goes beyond a merely cognitive significance. The feeling is especially vivid where bits of language are highly charged emotionally, as derogatory words are. So it might be thought that someone who simply excludes derogatory words from a meaning-theory is covering something up; the cover-up, if exposed, would force one to concede that actually a whole dimension of language use, and not just a few words, is omitted when an account of speakers' linguistic activities is based in a theory that connects their words with things. Derogatory words can seem to be the tip of an iceberg that will sink cognitivism.

At any rate, noticing that derogatory words do not belong in one familiar sort of theory may prompt one to look elsewhere. And I want now to consider two ways of accounting for them. Each of these can seem tailor-made for treating derogatory words: each readily accounts for their uselessness. But I shall make objections to them both—to conjunctivist noncognitivism and to inferentialism, as I label the two approaches. Afterwards, I shall return to enquire into the significance of the fact that derogatory words have no place in interpretational truth-theories.

Conjunctivist noncognitivism

An old-fashioned version of noncognitivism in ethics (old-fashioned because largely overtaken now by versions of expressivism defended more recently) takes a view of

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2   In the text above and the previous note, I mentioned acceptable occurrences of derogatory words. The examples do not license a truth-theoretic treatment of the offending word. The theoretical treatment would situate the predicate in a context in which it freely interacts with other words of all sorts, whereas these examples, in their context, isolate the word. I acknowledge that words may be simultaneously used and mentioned. (My claim about the examples in the previous note relies on this.) And I acknowledge that even quotation is a *sort* of use: that it is explains why even quotation of derogatory words can cause affront, and why, in the ordinary way, an account of the mention of meaningful words must help itself to an account of their use. I rely on the idea that quotation has some sealing off effect. But there is much more to be said about it.

3   There is something about a difference in persuasions of different representationalists in the final section below. I use 'representationalism' in such a way that seeing a point in such a slogan as "meanings are given when truth-conditions are given" makes one a representationalist. I note that twenty-first century representationalists repudiate such slogans as "understanding is matching representations to objects".

evaluative words *prima facie* well-suited to derogatory words. This is the view of those who treat evaluations as conjunctions, and say that they combine descriptive meaning with another sort—with prescriptive meaning in Richard Hare's account.[4]

Hare thinks that there are two distinct ways of disagreeing with someone who makes an evaluative judgement. One may disagree because she is wrong at the level of description, so that her sentence implies something strictly false. One may disagree because she has wrong principles or standards: one thinks, for instance, that something she condemns does not merit condemnation. The account appears to fit derogatory words. For 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 counterpart applies.

Not only do Hare's general claims about evaluative words seem consonant with derogatory words' uselessness, but also the usual objection to Hare's account can seem to fail for them. Against Hare it is usually said that one cannot learn how to apply some descriptive word—putatively one conjunct in the meaning of an evaluative word—and then separately discover whether things to which that word applies are commended or condemned. Hare thinks that we can introduce a word 'doog' which means just what an alleged purely descriptive element of 'good man' means. But it does not seem that we can. And if evaluative predicates only have the point they do from some evaluative perspective, then actually we cannot. True, there might be some complicated purely descriptive predicate in whose extension fall those and only those whom one's interlocutors correctly call good men; but offered just that "shapeless" predicate, one would not learn how to carry on applying 'good man'. The claim here, which appears to be decisive against Hare, is that one needs to share, or at least imaginatively to deploy,[5] the evaluative perspective of a word's users if one is to appreciate that its extension has the shape it does. When put like this, the claim is evidently untrue of derogatory words. Knowing what their neutral counterparts are, we can say what falls in the extension of any one of them using vocabulary that can be acknowledged on all hands to be non-evaluative.

Hare distinguished between primarily and secondarily evaluative words. A word is primarily evaluative, in Hare's sense, if a change in principles or standards among its users would bring about a change in its descriptive meaning; it is secondarily evaluative, if a change in principles leaves descriptive meaning unaffected. So Hare says that a secondarily evaluative word could be used with a constant descriptive meaning but now *not* used to condemn where previously it had been. He illustrates this with an example of something we may take to be a derogatory word:

> If we want, in [a particular locality] to speak to a [black person] as an equal, we cannot do so by addressing [them] as a nigger; the word 'nigger' encapsulates [certain] standards; and, if we were confined to it, we could not break free of those standards. But fortunately we are not so confined; our language, as we have it, *can* be a vehicle for new ideas. *Freedom and Reason* (*cit.* n.4) p.76[6]

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[4] In *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford University Press, 1963.

[5] The qualification here is needed to deal with words whose understanding requires deployment of a perspective that one would not call one's own: 'macho' and 'chaste' (for us now) are sometimes given as examples. Wiggins gives an account of these, which shows why our reservations about applying them need not amount to our finding them useless, at §55 of 'Replies' in *Essays for David Wiggins: Identity, Truth and Value*, ed. Sabina Lovibond and S.G. Williams, Blackwell, 1996, pp.263-4.

[6] My alterations to the original, signaled with square brackets, are designed to remove connotations which have accrued to Hare's own words with the passage of time, and which could only be a distraction from the present point. And they are made for a British audience. (There is no counterpart for 'African American' in current British English.)

The "standards" that Hare speaks of here are associated with an individual word. Thus the "prescriptive meaning" of 'nigger', as Hare thinks of this, is not to be treated as a matter of what speakers express with whole sentences containing the word. This of course is how it should be for derogatory words: their contemptuous character does not go away when they occur in non-assertive contexts (such as within conditionals and disjunctions). A familiar objection to accounts like Hare's is that they explain the meanings of evaluative words in terms of a speech act co-ordinate with assertion, and thus they cannot allow that such words occur, as evidently they do, without change of meaning in non-assertive contexts.[7] But for his secondarily evaluative words, it seems that Hare does not confront the objection: he appears to think of their use as presenting an attitude towards those to whom the word applies whether or not the word is used in an assertive context. It could now appear that derogatory words belong squarely is the category of the secondarily evaluative, and that an account of them should be taken straight from Hare's book.[8]

We shall see a difficulty, however, if we consider the quotation from Hare carefully.

About derogatory words—and more generally about pejorative words—one finds oneself saying that negative or hostile attitudes of their users have rubbed off onto them. So if our own attitudes are not negative or hostile, then it might seem as if we could, as it were, brush away whatever had rubbed off. When Hare speaks of "breaking free of those standards", this seems to be the suggestion. His idea is that we can go on with the same words ('our language as we have it'), it is only that their meanings will change if *we* use them. (And when Hare says 'If we were confined to it, we could not break free of the standards', he must to mean if we were confined to the word *with its current prescriptive meaning*.) But if this is what Hare intends, then he is denying that words are ever useless. 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. The assumption is borne out by practice. When words—racist words, say—have been used too often in a way that purports to validate the attitudes they impart, there is nothing to be done except to find different words. We have to speak explicitly with those who reject the words. We may use a neutral counterpart. Or we may find a new word (it might be a word with a different extension if the categorization effected by the derogatory word isn't relevant to the thoughts we want to express). The choice of new words can signal our shunning of what we'd like them to supplant. Language can indeed be a vehicle for new ideas, as Hare says. But sometimes it is a vehicle for new ideas because speakers decline to use bits of it as vehicles for current ideas.

Even examples that fit Hare's model—of words, through usage, moving from being derogatory to not being so—undermine his assumptions about meaning change. In one sort of example, a word ceases to be derogatory indirectly. Suppose that a word w is a vehicle of misplaced attitudes, and those who reject the attitudes introduce a new one; misplaced attitudes then accrue to the new word, which is then replaced—again by those who reject the attitudes—and what it is replaced by is w. The word 'negro' passed through such an indirect transformation historically in

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[7] This is a version of an objection made by Geach in 'Assertion', *Philosophical Review 74* (1964). The objection takes off from the thought that non-cognitivists wish to treat ethical language as suited for a role different from that of stating facts, and thus will make use of a sort of sentential speech act co-ordinate with assertion. (Of course it is not a complete answer to Geach's basic objection to non-cognitivism, known as 'the Frege point', to say that the kind of speech acts that Hare might invoke are not co-ordinate with assertion.)

[8] The suggestion that Hare's account might be saved for derogatory words is not the suggestion that Hare was right about all those words he considered to be primarily descriptive. Evaluative words that lack neutral counterparts fall on both sides of Hare's distinction: 'courageous', for example, is said to have primarily descriptive meaning.

some regions—once commonly understood to convey contempt, later, by way of two shifts, it ceased to be.[9] Such examples reinforce the idea that people who reject the attitudes expressed by the users of a word have recourse to substitutes: they do not rely, as Hare would have them rely, on trying to rid current words of what makes them derogatory.

Examples of a second sort might seem to go Hare's way. Here a word that was derogatory is put to a new use directly. We have Queer Studies. Politically active African-Americans use the word 'niggers' of themselves. But in these cases, no simple difference of attitude (or of "principle" or "standards") enables a word to take on a new meaning. For one thing, the change of meaning here is helped along by the fact that the new use comes from the mouths of people who *manifestly* shun the attitudes of the old users. And that is not the usual situation. For another thing, the new uses in these examples do not simply supplant the old: they trade on the fact of the word's having had its former hateful or contemptuous element. Where words are appropriated for a new use, old non-descriptive meanings are not brushed away: they are subverted.[10]

There is surely something suspect in the idea that one can unilaterally suspend the derogatory element of the meaning of a word in a language that one shares with others—as if one could go along with the words but avoid the bad faith that had been invested in them.[11] Derogatory words, then, are not simply secondarily evaluative in Hare's sense: although a recognizable descriptive element is present in their meaning, another element is not simply detachable. (Someone might reason that if a neutral word N provides a necessary condition for the application of a derogatory word D, then there must be a further independently specifiable condition whose conjunction with N is sufficient for D's application. The fallacy here can be exposed with an example. Being coloured is necessary for something's being correctly called red; but there is no independently specifiable further condition whose conjunction with being coloured is sufficient for something's correctly being called red.[12])

The underlying objection to Hare was that words only have the point they do from within some outlook. This, we now see, applies to derogatory words as much as to genuinely evaluative ones. A philosopher who follows Hare holds that 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. The underlying problem comes to the surface when we recognize how much else there is, besides condemning, that may be done with derogatory words. Consider that a derogatory word can be used both in addressing someone to whom its neutral counterpart applies, and in addressing someone to whom it does not. In the first case, the word, on one occasion might be used insultingly, on another, evincing deep hostility. In

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[9] And the cycle can repeat itself. See Mercier, *op. cit.* n.2, for some of the history of American uses of 'negro' and 'nigger'.

[10] Many examples of words' reappropriation might be given. There are evidently points of contrast between the two examples in the text. It is one thing for a non-black person to recognize the non-derogatory use of 'nigger' by black people of one another, and a different thing for her to be in a position to use it so herself. The 'Queer' of 'Queer Studies' is more easily absorbed widely: when the word was put to a new use in the academic world, access through print media to a large audience, many steeped in the possibilities of irony, surely assisted in its transformation.

[11] Critics of *Freedom and Reason* have found something equally suspect in Hare's idea that one might unilaterally suspend acceptance of all "principles"—as if one could take a view of the putatively "purely neutral" facts and carry on a life one leads.

[12] I use Timothy Williamson's example, at p.12 in his *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

the second case, the word might on one occasion be used unconsciously to make a snub, on another, evincing solidarity with the intended audience. These various things—insulting, vilifying, snubbing, registering solidarity—surely cannot all be explained as spin-offs from a blanket condemnation that it is the word's secondary purpose to effect.[13] 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. The contours of the space of possible acts done with sentences containing particular derogatory words are discernible only from the standpoint of someone who can know what the words mean. Any derogatory word, like any other, has its potential for making speech acts because of what it means. And we are stuck for a way to give the non-descriptive meaning of a derogatory word. (The predicate 'is D if N' would do very nicely. But we cannot use this where D is useless for us.)

 I turn then to a second way of thinking about what these words mean.

Inferentialism

It came naturally to say that users' negative or hostile attitudes have rubbed off onto derogatory words, and that these words express attitudes of their users. Robert Brandom's inferentialist approach shows how speakers' attitudes might be caught up in the substantive content of their words.[14]

 Brandom presents an account that Michael Dummett once gave of the pejorative word 'Boche', when he illustrates the expressive rationalism that characterizes his approach. About 'Boche' (as used by some British people in the middle of the last century, we may assume) Dummett said:

> The condition for applying the term to someone is that he is of German nationality; the consequences of its application are that he is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans. .. The addition of the term 'Boche' to a language which did not previously contain it would produce a non-conservative extension. FREGE Philosophy of Language, Duckworth, 1973, p.454.)

If this is right, then you cannot allow that someone is Boche and deny that they are prone to cruelty, even though you must affirm that they are Boche if you allow that they are German. As Brandom says: 'One can only refuse to employ the concept, on the grounds that it embodies an inference one does not endorse.' Accounts in this style thus seem perfect for explaining words' uselessness. The problem, however, as I see it, is that we cannot actually give such accounts for many of the concepts that we refuse to employ.

 Let me start with a quibble. Was commitment to a person's barbarity always a consequence of applying 'Boche' to them? Suppose an English woman in 1950 said 'The couple moving in next door are Boches'. Is it plausible that she, and those who

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[13] Hare himself, in line with his doctrine of prescriptivism, takes the disagreement between one who does and one who does not apply an evaluative word to turn on differing *principles*. Users of an evaluative word undertake a "commitment" which users of the neutral counterpart do not. Evidently this aspect of Hare's doctrine does not inform the present account. But it is at least as implausible that some single purely practical disposition can unify the uses of a derogatory word as that the notion of condemnation could. (I have assumed that for Hare the unification takes place at the level of the individual word. So I treat 'predicating W of *x*' as something one does even if one uses W in a context that is not assertive. This accommodates the point that the speech act with which Hare seems to wish to associate secondarily evaluative terms need not be co-ordinate with assertion.)

[14] Defended in *Making it Explicit* and in *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, both Harvard University Press, respectively 1994 and 2000. I recommend the latter book to readers concerned with Brandom's approach as it bears on questions addressed in the present paper.

accepted what she said, were committed to the barbarity and proneness to cruelty of this German couple specifically? Surely not. It is less farfetched to allow it to be a consequence of what she said that the couple moving in next door *belong to a nation whose members are* barbarous, etc.. This would reveal our woman speaker as involved in bits of ideology that we take to inform uses of the word 'Boche', while not so far involved that she makes a commitment about every German person to whom she ever applies the word.

The quibble with the letter of Dummett's account provokes questions about the spirit of the inferentialist approach to our present questions about meaning. What Dummett says is implausible because we doubt whether speakers imputed particular properties to people whenever they used the word 'Boche' in referring to them. But then 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? If a coarse articulation of the attitudes of those who endorse uses of a derogatory word is attempted, then differences between different derogatory words will be ignored. But if a fine-grained articulation is attempted, it will not be credible that what we spell out are regularly consequences accruing to the commitments of speakers who apply the word.

Consider racist words. Allow that they are, in some sense, founded in racist ideology, and that this ideology can be uncovered by looking at the historical antecedents of racists' various dispositions.[15] With enough hard work, a historically-minded social theorist might expose networks of beliefs and patterns among them, so as to provide the inferentialist with materials to make explicit that which is to be treated as implicit in each racist word. The question now is whether speakers themselves undertake commitments which the historian uncovers. The answer appears to be *No.* Racist speakers no more convey specific bits of ideology whenever they use racist words than our imagined British speaker imputes barbarity to every German person she described with 'Boche'. We are trying to account for something readily picked up by speakers of a certain social formation; and we have to allow for the fact that racist and other derogatory words can be passed on quite easily. If speakers' involvement with the ideology went as deep as it would need to in order to be implicit in their very use of words, then common understandings would be difficult to preserve. The vicious purposes of racist language would be harder to achieve than actually they are.

Brandom writes:

> In Reason's fight against thought debased by prejudice and propaganda, the first rule is that material inferential commitments that are potentially controversial should be made explicit as claims, exposing them as vulnerable to reasoned challenge and in need of reasonable defense.
> *Making it Explicit*, p.126; *Articulating Reasons*, p.70 (both cited at n.13).

But shunning derogatory words can take precedence over obeying Brandom's 'first rule'. 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. (And if I am right about the shallowness of speakers'

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15   It is controversial what constitutes racism. Those who think that racism is a doctrine are usually taken to be conservatives and are criticized for failing to allow the emotional character of engagement with racism. I suggest that Brandom may have to take their side (insofar as he allows that racist words are one of racism's vehicles), although I doubt whether his spelling out of the "doctrine" would open him up to exactly the charge usually made against conservatives. Still, if my suggestion is right, then Brandom will have to reject certain other (perhaps more plausible) accounts of what constitutes racism. This is all too controversial to go into here; so that in the text I simply concede a view about racism that I think will suit Brandom. See J.L.A. Garcia, 'Philosophical analysis and the moral concept of racism', in *Philosophy and Social Criticism 25.5*, 1999, pp.1-32.

involvement, then there is a danger one will say *too much* if one attempts to credit them with commitments.) We have seen that the choice a reflective language user confronts, when a derogatory word is on offer, is whether to be on the side of a practice that perpetuates misplaced attitudes or whether to find a different word. To make this choice, one does not have to enter into reasoned challenges. Speaking explicitly with those who shun certain words is one perfectly good way of rejecting the attitudes implicit in them.

In Brandom's scheme of things, the thought that users of derogatory words express attitudes turns into a thought about *propositional* attitudes. But the naïve thought, that attitudes are expressed, need not concern attitudes in this sense at all. There are attitudes of contempt, hatred, disgust, patronage, superiority, derision, and so on. And we can start to reveal what has infected the words by laying open their involvement in attitudes of this sort—emotional attitudes, as one might say. Then we look for what speakers do with the words in communicative acts: as well as insult, vilify, snub, register solidarity .., they express contempt, express hatred, express patronage, ... Here a social and normative dimension of speakers' practices is conceptualized without any articulation at the level of propositional contents accumulated in their speech.[16] And here perhaps we understand why we should think that a change of heart might serve those who use racist language at least as well as any change of mind.

Brandom has a way of defusing words' emotional charge: he diffuses it. He sees each word as caught up in a great structure of material inferential practices under the control of reason. But I am suggesting that even if we allow that such structures underpin uses of derogatory words, the beliefs dredged up in spelling them out do not belong in an account of how individual speakers use the words on each occasion. Locating derogatory words within practices of giving and asking for reasons cannot then play a defining role in an account of how they are understood.

When we find ourselves saying that attitudes have rubbed off on words, we also find ourselves saying that the word has come to carry particular *overtones* or *connotations*. It is here that I want to come back to the kind of meaning-theory that I set aside because of derogatory word's exclusion from it. Theories of this kind keep track of words' overtones or connotations if any do. For the recipe offered, on a truth-theoretic approach, for articulating what words mean, is to *use* the words themselves. A word with connotations is one whose use carries those connotations. The particular connotations of particular words start to show up, as we have seen, when speech is brought under illocutionary heads.

Truth-theories again

I want to end by suggesting that, despite the exclusion from truth-theories of derogatory words, their presence in languages need not ultimately be a difficulty for the truth-theoretic, representational approach to questions of linguistic meaning. The first thing to be clear about here is that the intractability of derogatory words to truth-theoretic treatment is not a problem for the approach as such.[17] Indeed we

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[16] One sees that a genuinely social (not individualistic) dimension is encountered here when one notices that a speaker expresses contempt for A when she uses certain words whether or not she herself feels contempt for A. I take this point from the illuminating discussion of expressives in William P. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning*, Cornell University Press, 2000, pp.103-113. The point might be useful in defending an assumption, which I am helping myself to here, that a shared language is prior to an idiolect in the order of philosophical explanation.

[17] A problem would be created if a predicate's absence from a truth-theory were recorded by saying that sentences containing it are neither true nor false. For if the sentence '*a* is F' is neither true nor false, then it is not true, and the statement that it is true is false; so that there can be no equivalence between '*a* is F' and 'It is true that *a* is F'. But the thought that we should refrain from using derogatory words in theory as in practice need not be the

should reject the views of those who have ambitions for truth-theories which give rise to a problem here.

On an unambitious conception of truth-theories' role, their entitlement to be meaning-theories is based only in the fact that 'is true' functions as a device of disquotation. This ensures that it provides a way to pair any sentence with something understood by those who understand it: such pairings are given in biconditionals on the pattern of 's is true iff p'.[18] If for certain sentences, we elect not to say what is understood by those who understand them, this could hardly show that there is some objective that we had set ourselves but now have to admit we cannot meet. The matter would be different if it was claimed, as it is by some philosophers, that knowledge of meaning *consists* in knowledge of some of what a truth-theory articulates, or that coming to know what sentences mean is a matter of acquiring tacit knowledge of what the relevant meaning-theory states overtly. Those who make such claims face a difficulty if they allow both that speakers know what X means, and that they have nothing to state about what X means—as if suddenly there were nothing for knowledge of meaning to consist in. These people seem to be obliged, for every element of language whose meaning some person knows, to include it in an interpretational theory for her language. But in that case they are required to provide a description of ourselves and our own practices which may be mismatched with our preferred self-conception.[19] Unambitious theorists, of the sort whose claims I advocate, impose no such requirements. On their conception of the role of truth-theories, their outputs are supposed only to record some evident facts about a language's use. When truth-theories are adopted as meaning-theories, no task is undertaken that has to be disclaimed if it is decided to leave derogatory words out.

The absence of derogatory words from a meaning-theory now serves as a reminder that however far removed a meaning-theory can seem to be, in virtue of its abstractedness, from the social practices it treats, the theorist is not disengaged from those practices. And there is plenty else to be said about those practices, of course—in illocutionary terms, for instance. When it comes to *usable* evaluative words, which are employed by speakers (in indicative sentences) to say things

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thought that we must deny (or affirm) claims about their truth-evaluability. The thought is that the words are to be shunned. (The argument is in Dummett's 1959 'Truth', reprinted in his *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Duckworth, London, 1978, pp.1-24. He was there discussing doctrines deriving from Frege: the candidates for neither-true-nor-false sentences were those containing singular terms without a reference, and the kind of equivalence in question was sameness of sense.)

[18] If truth is "no more than" a device of disquotation (which is the thesis of minimalism about truth in one of its versions), then cognitivism seems to come cheap. For it seems that it could not take much argument to show that evaluative statements may be true if their syntax guarantees this. I need not here explicitly take sides on the questions of minimalism's correctness, and of whether minimalism indeed cheapens cognitivism. For if 'cognitivism' stands simply for the doctrine that evaluations may be true, then cognitivism can invite a truth-theoretic treatment of evaluations whatever side one takes.

[19] Ambitious theorists appear to be face contradictory imperatives: derogatory word must be treated a certain way (because their meaningfulness is otherwise denied); derogatory words must not be treated that way (because they are useless). I acknowledge that this won't be very convincing as an argument against those who make the claims for truth-theories that I reject. The premise—of uselessness—will seem too fragile to do much work against them. (Perhaps they will think that any philosopher should be man enough to get past the fastidiousness that leads to denying derogatory words a role in theory.)

The unambitious conception of truth-theories *qua* meaning-theories that I mean to work with here can be gleaned from essays in John McDowell's *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, Harvard University Press, 1998. The ambitions of those I call ambitious theorists are different from those of the advocates of *immodest* theories in the sense of McDowell's 1987 'In Defence of Modesty', reprinted there.

assessable for truth, one can see speakers' expressing attitudes as sometimes constituted by their saying truth-evaluable things. (For example: she expressed admiration in saying that it was a marvellous rendition.) When it comes to words that are *useless* for us, there is nowhere else to turn than to the kinds of speech act made by those who use them—speech acts of illocutionary kinds, as we have seen, such as vilifying, snubbing, expressing derision, and so on. And when sentences containing them are seen as suited for doing such things as these, one has a ready explanation of their uselessness.

It is important to acknowledge that it is not possible systematically to correlate words used by speakers with illocutionary concepts applicable to their speech acts so as to provide an orderly account of words' overtones or connotations. Even differences in tone of voice can affect what is done in uttering any sentence; so we know that there could not be a uniform way of deriving the illocutionary things done by speakers from knowledge merely of which sentences they spoke.[20] Nonetheless we can, from the standpoint from which the words are found intelligible, treat the words as among the determinants of the possible acts done with sentences containing them. And by relying on the idea that a word with connotations carries those connotations when used in sentences, we could, if we wanted, fashion notions specifically suited for the treatment of any derogatory word.[21]

Here is one way to think of the matter. It is as if someone who used, say, the word 'nigger' had made a particular gesture while uttering the word's neutral counterpart. An aspect of the word's meaning is to be thought of as if it were communicated by means of this (posited) gesture. The gesture is made, ineludibly, in the course of speaking, and is thus to be explicated, as the socially significant thing it is, in illocutionary terms.[22] The gesture has no life of its own, independently of the use of the derogatory word, so that there is nowhere else to look, to appreciate its significance, than to uses of the word (*pace* Hare). 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).

Without the postures, movements and expressions of talking human bodies, the practice of language would be a heartless mechanical affair, and very different from how it actually is. Representationalists in semantics make great play of the fact that words have meaning only in the context of sentences. In doing so, they may fail to emphasize another fact—that actually words have meaning only in the context of the practices of embodied speakers. There is no need to deny this.[23] And when derogatory words are in question, one is bound to recognize it.

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[20] Wittgenstein's insistence on something like this, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, may have led some people to read him as rejecting any possibility of system in semantics.

[21] Just as (so I believe) we can fashion locutionary notions to treat non-indicative sentences. See 'A Note on Non-Indicatives', *Mind XCV*, 1986, pp.92-99.

[22] The studies reported in *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution*, by Desmond Morris et al (Jonathan Cape, London, 1979) show that some actual gestures are to some extent language-tied: some gestures don't readily penetrate cultures lacking the bits of verbal slang with which they are associated.

[23] Charles Taylor has said that representationalists must deny this. See e.g. his 1980 'Language and Human Nature', reprinted in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge University Press 1985), pp.215-247.