

Precis of the Theoretical Part of A Word Which Bears a Sword

NENAD MIŠČEVIĆ
*University of Maribor, Slovenia
Central European University, Budapest*

Pejoratives are negative terms for alleged social kinds: ethnic, gender, racial, and other. They manage to refer the way kind-terms do, relatively independently of false elements contained in their senses. This proposal, presented in the book, is called the Negative Hybrid Social Kind Term theory, or NHSKT theory, for short. The theory treats the content of pejoratives as unitary, in analogy with unitary thick concepts: both neutral-cum-negative properties (vices) ascribed and negative prescriptions voiced are part of the semantics preferably with some truth-conditional impact, and even the expression of attitudes is part of the semantic potential, although not necessarily the truth conditional one. Pejoratives are thus directly analogue to laudatives, and in matters of reference close to non-evaluative, e.g. superstitious social kind terms (names of zodiacal signs, or terms like “magician”). A pejorative sentence typically expresses more than one proposition and pragmatic context selects the relevant one. Some propositions expressed can be non-offensive and true, other, more typical, are offensive and false. Pejoratives are typically face attacking devices, although they might have other relevant uses. The Negative Hybrid Social Kind Term proposal thus fits quite well with leading theories of (im-)politeness, which can offer a fine account of their typical pragmatics.

Keywords: Pejoratives-slurs, Negative Hybrid Social Kind Term theory of pejoratives, reference, social kind terms.

1. *Introduction*

a) *The main proposal*

This is the precis of Nenad Miščević and Julija Perhat’s collection of papers, *A Word which Bears a Sword. Semantics, Pragmatics and Ethics of Pejoratives* (Kruzak, Zagreb 2016), concentrating on the theoretic-

cal part of it; for reasons of space I unfortunately have to leave aside the interesting and challenging contributions of Mirela Fuš, who is basically criticizing my proposal in her “Pejoratives as Social Kinds: Objections to Mišćević’s Account”, Julija Perhat (“Pejoratives and Testimonial Injustice”) and Ana Smokrović (“Hermeneutic Injustice and the Constitution of the Subject”), both connecting the use of pejoratives, in particular the gender ones, with testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. Last, but not least, let me mention Martina Blečić writing in more general terms about the connections between pragmatics and ethics (“Slurs: How Pragmatics and Semantics Affect Ethics”). This precis is constructed out of the book material (the long section “The fiery tongue—The Semantics and Pragmatics of Pejoratives” due to Nenad Mišćević) re-proposing some of the main thesis of the book.

Pejoratives or slurs, I shall use the two words indiscriminately, are devices for face-attacking, as this term is now standardly used in theories of impoliteness. Jonathan Culpeper, for example, places them on the list of “impoliteness formulae” conventionally associated with offense (2011: 56). Complaints about such offensive communication form a rich tradition, from Saint James Epistle to the present day politically engaged thinkers that Julija Perhat and Ana Smokrović discuss in their respective contributions.

The “Fiery tongue” offers a positive proposal. Pejoratives are negative terms for alleged social kinds: ethnic, gender, racial, and other. They manage to refer the way kind-terms do, relatively independently of false elements contained in their senses. I call the proposal Negative Hybrid Social Kind Term theory, or NHSKT theory, for short. The theory treats the content of pejoratives as unitary, in analogy with unitary thick concepts: both neutral -cum- negative properties (vices) ascribed and negative prescriptions voiced are part of the semantics (preferably with some truth-conditional impact), and even the expression of attitudes is part of the semantic potential, although not necessarily the truth conditional one.

Why believe in unity? First, presumably, the speaker using a P-sentence wants to demean the target on a series of interconnected grounds: X’s are bad because of such and such qualities, therefore, we should treat them so-and-so, and therefore I feel contempt for them, and invite you to join in it. Pejorative is not like “ouch”, just expressing an inner feeling; inner attitude is grounded in a way of seeing the target, and the way of seeing dictates the attitude. Pejoratives behave in the way one would expect on the basis of interconnectivity of components. When one passes from mild to strong pejoratives, all components change in unison. Similarly, a good translation has to preserve all of the levels: from reference, through specific valuation to expression. Metaphorical (and metonymical) origins of pejoratives also testify to a holistic mapping. Take “Hun”, and old British pejorative for Germans. First, we have the vehicle, historical Huns: cruel primitive warriors,

who are very dangerous to potential victims, hated by them, and have to be fought to death by them. Next, the target: Germans, allegedly cruel primitive warriors, who are very dangerous to us, and have to be fought to death by us; of course, we hate them with good reason. If the components were independent, the holism would be unexplainable.

The unity of content also nicely fits the moral phenomenology of negative evaluation. Note that evaluation is not like cheering, supporting my club, and booing the other. The German-hater sees Germans as being in fact bad, not just being guys he is against (as in football). This goes well with wide speech act potential, both illocutionary and perlocutionary, not limited to expressing solidarity with other boo-shouters. The pejoratives can figure in a 2nd person offense, 2nd person expression of solidarity (“I am with you, against these damned Huns!”), 3rd person both offense and solidarity, plus different prescriptions-suggestions that go with it. Only a fixed, semantic meaning can survive this variety, and thrive in it.

What about the truth-value of pejorative sentences, like “Lessing was a Hun”? Each of them express several propositions, some of them true (Lessing was a German), some false (Lessing had such-and-such negative character traits due to his nationality). The proposal is then briefly generalized to other descriptive-evaluative terms, above all to laudatives. Along the way, some well-known puzzles about pejoratives are addressed: the figurative origin of many of them, their occasional positive use by targeted social groups, the role of prohibition in relation to the “bad content”, the possible link with cognitive linguistics and more.

b) *The Central Dilemma: empty or literally true*

One can organize the discussion of pejoratives around an important dilemma haunting the theories of pejoratives. Here is one horn of the dilemma:

Pejoratives do refer. Boches are German, period. It’s a plus for the theory, since we normally don’t think that they are empty. However, the consequence is that the typical basic pejorative sentences are true, since the pejorative does refer, and the sentence ascribes to the target his or her actual belonging to the actual group: Hans is a Boche, The Boches are German, so the truth is secured. Pejorative sentences are simply and literally true, the bad stuff is not truth-conditional, and pejoratives do refer, simply and literally. Call it the veridicality view.

And here is the other, for those who do not like the idea that many typical pejorative sentences are true. The opposite line claims that the reference is empty: there are no Boches, faggots, and so on. The pejorative stands for thick concept, so the negative component is essential to it; since (we know that) no group does satisfy the negative component, the concept is not satisfied, therefore empty.

Each horn is quite unappealing. For the first horn, the veridicality option, part of the trouble is that the assertion of badness is not just

a by-the-way comment, the way it is presented, say by implicature accounts. There, the badness is always part of expressing the standpoint of the speaker, independent from the main topic, the “at issue content” as called by Potts. The leading model for such a reading is offered by general expressive expressions, and sentences like “The fucking dog is again on the couch”. Here, the epithet does not primarily characterize the dog, but rather the speaker’s attitude to it. And the at-issue content is that the dog is on the couch. But “Boche” and “Čefur” are not like that. The attitude of the speaker is there, but backgrounded. What is in foreground is that the person is bad because German (or former Yugoslav), that is the “issue” in contrast to the typical implicature CI-reading, where the at-issue content is just that the person is German (or former Yugoslav). The expressive dimension is present, but not crucial.

Consider now the non-veridicality side. It is in the clear with the falsity of the P-sentences. The minus is having empty reference for pejoratives; they do not refer simply and literally, they purport to refer, but there is a problem. The dominant ordinary intuition is that pejoratives do have reference. Moreover, how do they offend, if there is no-one to be justifiably offended? The mere clash of intuitions does not solve the problem.

This is then, in my view, the Central Dilemma for the semantic view of pejoratives.

2. *The way out*

Let me point out a way to cope with conflicting intuitions about the truth of pejorative sentences. Take “Lessing was a Boche” (or Hun). The speaker who asserts it shows his knowledge of Lessing’s nationality; he cannot be accused of ignorance. On the other hand, we don’t want to accept the consequence that, yes, the proposition expressed is true, period. And we want to avoid the specter of disquotation, and the perspective of having to agree that Lessing was a Boche.

Here is the first step to a possible way out: not all propositions expressed by pejorative sentences are false. Some defenders of the implicature view recognize several propositions suggested by a P-sentence. One is the neutral and true sentence (Lessing was a German), other are nasty and problematic. They prefer the neutral one as semantically basic, which I must admit I find counterintuitive. So, I want to borrow from them the general idea that pejorative sentences express a plurality of propositions. Here is the minimum. “*L. was a Boche*” expresses at least 2 propositions:

L. was a German. (the true and decent proposition)

L. was cruel because German. (the false – and indecent – one)

Together with other pluralists, Potts and Bach, I suggest that the context can stress one or the other of the propositions, but in contrast to the first two authors I deny that the true proposition is basic.

We now pass to the main question: if the negative content is part of the meaning, and even of truth-conditional meaning, how can the theoretician avoid the problematic corresponding horn of the Central dilemma, namely that the term is empty, with all its counterintuitive consequences?

An obvious way out is to detach the matter of reference from the matter of the literal truth of claims characterizing the pejorative concept. Causal theories of reference have been suggesting this strategy for various terms and corresponding concepts, and we should turn to them to solve the Central dilemma.

So, what do pejorative meanings or concepts look like? I defend the following proposal: pejoratives are negative (derogatory) social kind-terms, of a hybrid nature. Their referential apparatus involves a causal history of naming plus descriptive senses. The latter have a neutral part (given by a neutral description, German, African, female, gay) and the bad part (primitive, hateful, stupid, etc.), plus perhaps more. It is a social kind-term hypothesis. Surprisingly, it predicts the trouble with the truth-status, in virtue of the neutral/negative contrast: a part of the descriptive sense is neutral, and could (co)ground reference, the other part is negative and introduces the issue of falsity.

What we have encountered until now are at least two layers of meaning or meaning-like dimensions of pejoratives:

First, the minimal descriptive layer, which normally gives the factual information about the target group, and contributes to securing the reference of the term: *African*, *gay*, and so on, for the corresponding derogatory terms. Second, the negative descriptive-evaluative layer, which ascribes bad properties (“vices”) to the members of the target group and often insinuates that they have these properties in virtue of their belonging to the group.

Of course, this is not the end of the story. Many authors, for instance M. Richard, point out that the use of pejoratives often involves a prescriptive suggestion: the target is to be despised (Richard 2008: 15), others would add avoided, or discriminated against, because they exemplify the properties from the negative descriptive content. I am leaving an empty row, since I want to talk more about securing reference later, and will argue for a zero-level of meaning, having to do with the causal-historical link to the group. With these layers we have the minimal material to understand sentences like “L. was a Boche”:

L was German.

L belonged to the nation consisting of people, known as Germans, who are cruel because they are members of this nation.

shorter:

L. was cruel because German.

And we know that there is no nation of which the citizens are cruel just in virtue of belonging to it.

THE THREE SEMANTIC LEVELS		
EXAMPLE – “Nigger”		
	LEVEL	CONTENT
SEMANTICS	MINIMAL DESCRIPTIVE	African-American
	NEGATIVE DESCRIPTIVE-EVALUATIVE	primitive, lazy, dangerous
	PRESCRIPTIVE	to be avoided, discriminated against!

The three layers together give the pejorative content a certain “thickness”: the word obviously expresses a content that ties together the descriptive and evaluative components, adding the prescriptive dimension connected with the latter. Christopher Hom has rightly insisted on the idea that these contents are “thick concepts” in the technical sense used in discussions in ethics (see Hom 2008). I concur with him on this point, but want to avoid what I see as the weakest point of available semanticist accounts, namely the counterintuitive consequence that pejoratives have empty reference.

Finally, we have the emotional-expressive content: using the pejorative, the speaker expresses his own negative emotional attitude to the target. The dimension of contempt, of placing the target not only in the negative region, but also in the region significantly “below” the (self-assumed) level of the speaker, and thus marking her as “despicable”, can partly account for the offensiveness of some pejoratives, and their role in face-attacking verbal acts (“nigger” being the most infamous one). The expression of such offensive attitudes is akin to non-verbal insults, like spitting in someone’s face. No wonder that this offensiveness is sometimes described as “ineffability”.

3. *Reference and the purely descriptive content*

We first have to address the issue of reference, before passing to the details of the characterization of the bad evaluative content. We have noted that reference of, say “Boche” should be independent of the joint truth-value, i.e. of falsity, of all components of the content of its pejorative meaning; it certainly does refer to Germans, no matter what false ideas about them its use does insinuate. Luckily, there are two elements that are each independently plausible, and that, taken together give the result we need. The first is that the typical referents of pejoratives are social kinds, most often real social kinds, like nationality, gender, age-groups and the like, and, more rarely, assumed kinds; this assumption is plausible independently of the Central dilemma and other semantic considerations.

So, I propose that pejoratives (and in particular slurs) are social kind terms. They refer to moderately clearly identified groups of peo-

ple, or to individuals under the guise of belonging to the group; either socially, or gender-based, or psychologically (e.g. through one's sexual orientation). So, it is social kind terms, plus psychological kind terms that we should look at.

However, reference to kinds often is notoriously generally independent from the speaker's incorrect beliefs about the kind, as the behavior of natural kind terms tends to show; centuries ago, people managed to refer to whales in spite of a lot of false beliefs about them. The reference seems to start with ostension, and tends to follow causal transmission links, not ideas people have about the kind. This gives us exactly what we need. Since we propose a hybrid account of reference, and also hypothesize that the referents are social kinds, real or alleged, the task divides itself into two: first, characterize the relevant social kinds, and second, specify the mechanism of reference.

Candidate social-kinds form a rather heterogeneous bunch; items as mutually different as recession, racism, money, war, permanent resident, prime minister, African-American and German appear on the proposed lists of natural kinds. Note that the first items listed are not analogous to typical biological kinds (like fish, or tiger), the last two are. We shall be interested in kinds like the last two, which classify collections of individuals. For our purposes good examples are ethnicity kinds: Croatian, Finn, and Italian, well known targets of pejoratives. Other examples would be women, gay people, members of some presumed race, perhaps age groups (youth, seniors, etc.) and professions (worker, businessman, journalist).

What about reference to social kinds? If pejorative are negative social kind terms, how do they refer? The preferable option would be that their mechanism of reference is parallel to the mechanism of reference for natural kind and artifact kind terms. There has been an act of baptism, involving some kind of ostension, some characterizing of the target (we need it to avoid the *qua*-problem) and then a chain of transmission up to the present users. But is the parallelism tenable? Our main problem, familiar from the Central dilemma is the one of falsity: a lot of descriptions associated with concepts such as BOCHE are simply false about the intended target(s).

The account proposed is not *ad hoc*, nor specific to pejoratives, or even to evaluative adjectives and nouns in general. It can be applied to the latter, in particular to laudatives, but, more interestingly, to some nouns, like "medicine man" that carry problematic content in their presumed meaning.

Let us start with the easiest case, the laudatives. Take "Aryan" as used by a racist believer in the supremacy of the Caucasian "race". The elements are the same as with pejoratives, only the negative valence is replaced with a positive one. The account can be easily extended to them.

Now pass to a different, non-evaluative sort of problematic terms, like "medicine man" or "Libra" that on the one hand seem to refer, and

on the other appear to have false elements in their senses. We assume that social kind terms like “teacher”, “German” and “women” are referentially relatively unproblematic. But what about “medicine man”, “theta-rays healer”, or close astrologico-psychological kinds: “Scorpio” or “Libra”? They seem referentially problematic in the way reminiscent of our problems with pejoratives. However, we need some background for addressing the issue(s).

First, focus on cases where religious or social beliefs mystify the characteristics of typical and defining activities of certain social groups. Consider the term “medicine man”. A relevant original group has been thus designated by original speakers (leaving the issue of translation aside). They were performing activities called by them and their audience “casting spells” and were assumed to have magic powers. The last assumption, is I submit, false. The “casting spells” characterization is ambiguous: first, it can mean pronouncing words and performing gestures that actually do produce results in a super-natural way, second, pronouncing words and performing gestures that are believed to produce the results in such a way by the relevant group of people, including the “medicine men” themselves.

Consider now the sentence, concerning three official “medicine men” of a given tribe, O, Lo and Bo: “O, Lo and Bo are medicine men”. Is it true or false? Well, what about magic powers? Presumably, O, Lo and Bo do not have magic powers; so it is literally false since they lack magic powers. But, in the mouth of an anthropologist the sentence probably expresses the proposition that the three men do perform the required activities and are taken to have magic powers. This second proposition is true.

Of course, one can object that “medicine man” is ambiguous between two readings, one that merely indicates a profession and the status that goes with it, call it “medicine man_p” and the superstitious, magic related one “medicine man_m”. When the average tribesperson uses the term, she talks of medicine man_p, when the anthropologist uses the term, she refers to medicine man_p. This is a legitimate understanding, but it leaves out the fact that both talk about the same people, that the anthropologist can try to persuade the tribesperson that these people have no magic powers, and so on. “Medicine man” is not ambiguous in the way in which “bank” is.

Now, take another problematic group, the names of astrological signs, e.g. “Scorpio”. The name presumably refers to persons born between October 23 and November 21; it has been transmitted for some thousands of years to the present times. On the other hand, it is also used to refer to people who presumably have such-and-such “Scorpi-onic” character traits in virtue of being born in the given period of time. Here is a description taken from the web site:

Scorpio is the eighth sign of the zodiac, and that shouldn't be taken lightly—nor should Scorpios! Those born under this sign are dead serious in their mission to learn about others. There's no fluff or chatter for Scorpios, either;

these folks will zero in on the essential questions, gleaning the secrets that lie within. Scorpios concern themselves with beginnings and endings, and are unafraid of either; they also travel in a world that is black and white and has little use for gray. The curiosity of Scorpios is immeasurable, which may be why they are such adept investigators. These folks love to probe and know how to get to the bottom of things. The fact that they have a keen sense of intuition certainly helps. (<http://www.astrology.com/scorpio-sun-sign-zodiac-signs/2-d-d-66949>)

I propose that in the context of astrology “Scorpio” is a hybrid name for a presumed, but highly problematic psychological kind, whose reference is determined both causally and descriptively, whereby the descriptive component has two sub-components: the unproblematic, time interval component, and the problematic, superstitious character describing component.

Consider now the sentence: “Nenad is a Scorpio”; is it true or false? Suppose it expresses the neutral propositions:

Nenad is a Scorpio, he was born on November the first.

It is true then. But here is the non-neutral, superstitious reading:
Nenad is a Scorpio, (as regards his character.)

And this one is false.

Interestingly, problems with reference and the plurality of propositions have nothing to do with evaluative elements. Also, the superstitious material is not a comment on the descriptive material, the way in which negative material is seen by CI-theorists as a comment on factual material in the case of pejoratives.

The analogy with such hybrid terms reinforces the main point of my proposal: pejoratives, say “N”, are negative (derogatory) social kind terms, with a hybrid nature. Their reference is partly determined by a causal chain: the target group G has been called by somebody “N”, the name has been transmitted to the present users, and it refers to the group G and its members. Their descriptive senses have neutral material (given by a neutral description (“German”, “female”, “gay”), and bad material (primitive, hateful, stupid, etc.) plus more. I have called the proposal the negative hybrid social kind terms hypothesis (NHSKT hypothesis).

4. *The negative content*

On the negative side we have several layers. The first is evaluative, but most often it contains some descriptive or semi-descriptive component: Boches are bad, for specific reasons, namely because of their cruelty and the like. I shall call this mixed layer “descriptive-evaluative”, in contrast to a purely descriptive characterization, like “being a German”. Next, there are prescriptive and expressive layers, naturally connected to the negative evaluation.

The content at the descriptive-evaluative layer points to bad properties and ascribes them to the members of the target group, normally

with the insinuation that they have these properties in virtue of their belonging to the group. In characterizing the layer, I first consider the properties themselves, both from a more socio-psychological viewpoint, and from anormative philosophical one. Then I turn to the meta-ethical characterization of the content having to do with its “thickness”.

So, what is being imputed? Let us focus upon full blooded pejoratives, involving rich negative material. I shall very briefly offer two characterizations. One line one can take in characterizing the negative-descriptive (not prescriptive) content is to liken it to stereotypes.

The prototype associated with full-blooded slur is normally a very negative stereotype. Here are our two examples:

EXAMPLE	“Boche”	“curr”
MINIMAL DESCRIPTIVE	German	dog
NEGATIVE DESCRIPTIVE-EVALUATIVE	cruel and dangerous because German	dangerous, of low origin, etc.

As mentioned, I take the second row to exemplify a dimension of meaning of pejoratives, i.e. the negative descriptive-evaluative one. I assume gradation in badness since some pejoratives are more devaluing than others, for example in English: the negative value implied by “minx” is not as dramatic as the one belonging to “whore” (Hughes 2006: 163). We can have a plurality of closely related dimensions, say typical negative properties plus their degree of badness.

The second way to characterize the negative descriptive-evaluative content is to connect it to virtue ethics. Negative stereotypical traits will be then classified as vices. Vices are often characterized as qualities that both attain bad ends or effects, and involve bad motives. For an illustration, along more traditional lines, consider the pejorative use of “pagan” in Pope’s injunction from St. Stephen’s day 2014: “Don’t live like pagans, live like Christians!” Living like Christian includes practicing virtues like generosity, sexual moderation and the like. “Pagans” are persons that have lived with vices of greed and lust, presumably *because* they have not believed in the true god (or have not believed in god at all).

Let me now pass to thick concepts. Concepts uniting neutral descriptive and evaluative components have been traditionally classified as “thick concepts”. Thick concepts play important roles in various domains of evaluation. When evaluating a policy in prudential terms we sometimes describe it as wasteful, stating that it wastes resources and implying that it is therefore less than adequate. Decisions are sometimes criticized as rash, people as being greedy. On the epistemic side, a proposal might be praised as thoughtful, and an idea as deep. On the esthetic side, thick concepts are the building blocks of art criticism; think of ones like ELEGANT, KITCH, or TOUCHING.¹ Thick

¹ I will adopt the convention of writing concept terms in capitals.

concept-words are often likened to serious pejoratives (“Kraut”, “fag-got”), another topic of quite intense research, although some authors deny similarity. However, most of the work done on thick concepts has been dedicated to moral ones, depicting virtues and vices, like COURAGE(OUS), CRUEL(TY), LEWD, NOBLE.

The original story of thick concepts, as told for instance by B. Williams (1985), was that they carry the (moral-) evaluative attitude on their sleeves, plus that the attitude is fixed within a very narrow range: courage is admirable, period. Change the attitude, and the concept is gone.

The minimal form of thickness involves the unity between the descriptive and the evaluative. And indeed, the properties associated with pejoratives are evaluatively rich properties posing as objective properties of the target. Even expressivists like Richard agree that pejoratives present their targets under a negative guise, and that the negative guise is not merely a general negative characteristic (the target is bad) but a rich more specific characterization (primitive, dangerous ...). Note that even this minimal form of thickness creates problems for the separationists who propose an expressivist reading of the evaluative component.

We have noted the analogy between pejorative concepts and the usual ethical thick concepts. But, there is an important difference between central, paradigmatic thick concepts and pejorative, slurish if you like the term, contents or concepts. Paradigmatic thick concepts are general, and centrally related to adjectives; they are the contents of corresponding adjectives, not nouns. They just tell us about a presumed property, and it is an open question which kinds of entities carry the properties. The non-empty domain is not guaranteed: perhaps, there are lewd behaviors, lewd shows and the like, perhaps not. Things stand differently with generic pejoratives-slurs. They primarily target some *given, independently identified* group, and their content is tied to nouns rather than to adjectives. The German hater starts with referring to Germans, and then goes on to ascribe cruelty to them, the gay hater starts with referring to gays, and then proceeds to suggest their presumed negative properties. This is why reference and reference-determining material is independent from the negative (evaluative, prescriptive etc.) features, and why pejoratives are (unfortunately) not empty.

We now pass to the further layer that naturally goes with evaluative thickness, namely the prescriptive one. Value and prescription normally go together; this is the first thing one learns in normative ethics. With pejoratives it is the negative valuation that counts. Badness intrinsically repels the agent who understands it, and so on. To put it in nowadays usual form: at the least, the badness of X gives a prima facie reason to avoid (doing, encountering, having to do with) X.

We need a very modest form of this claim. First, we can rest satisfied with the phenomenological dimension: if our racist finds (experiences)

some qualities sufficiently bad, this will give him, at least from his perspective, a *prima facie* reason to act in the way of avoiding, downgrading etc. items (things and people) whom he experiences as having these qualities. And, if he is consistent, he will be motivated to do it.

This brings us to the topic of thickness. The link to prescription is very strong in (the standard picture of) thick concepts: they essentially engage in “action guiding”. Now, if we accept the minimal thickness and add this link to the prescriptive component (and to queerness) we obtain a richer form of thickness. It encompasses motivation and prescription. What would be the message for the semantics of pejoratives? The connection between negative value and corresponding prescription hold as well in the case of pejoratives, and points to the unity of pejorative meaning. Many authors point out that the use of pejoratives often involves a prescriptive suggestion: the target is to be despised, others would add avoided, or discriminated against, because she exemplifies the properties from the negative descriptive content. “Fags will burn in Hell” is a well-known variant of such prescriptivism, directed to the future and eternal suffering of gays. I will leave matters at this, but the interested reader might wish to consult Perhat’s chapter for further material.

Here is then the summary in the form of a table:

THE FINAL PROPOSAL: MAXIMAL SEMANTICIST		
EXAMPLE – “Nigger”		
	LEVEL	CONTENT
SEMANTIC	CAUSAL-HISTORICAL	someone called them thus
	MINIMAL DESCRIPTIVE	African-American
	NEGATIVE DESCRIPTIVE-EVALUATIVE	primitive, lazy, dangerous
	PRESCRIPTIVE	to be avoided, discriminated against!
PRAGMATIC	EXPRESSIVE	Yuck! and more

What is then the content expressed by a pejorative sentence? A typical content such sentences suggest is a plurality of propositions, in which the factual and the bad-material propositions are on equal footing, both of them are truth-apt and equally well expressed by the pejorative sentence. The interest in context picks out the relevant proposition, and is responsible for treating the sentence sometimes as true (when the bad material is not in focus), sometimes as false (when the bad material is in focus).

Where do we go on from here? I have already mentioned the socio-pragmatic framework of impoliteness research developed mostly by linguists and anthropologists (Leech 2014, Brown and Levinson 1987, Culpeper 2011). I believe there is theoretical unity and interconnected-

ness that goes all the way from the semantics of pejoratives, through their pragma-linguistics (speech act theory), to socio-pragmatics, impoliteness theory and rhetoric. A natural further step would be to try to unify the proposed semantic explanation(s) with their possible pragmatic counterparts (which I try to do briefly in the last chapter of my contribution (“Using the Verbal Poison: Pejoratives and Impoliteness-Rudeness”). Another obvious direction would be to extend the semantics (and pragmatics) of pejoratives to their symmetrically looking counterparts, laudatives, which would enhance the theoretical unity of the account(s).

So much for the main theoretical proposal. For interesting developments, criticism and ethical and political applications see the papers by other collaborators in the book.

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