

# The Semantics of Racial Epithets<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

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

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## II. The Semantic Strategy

The semantic strategy, as noted, adheres to the intuition that the derogatory content of an epithet is fundamentally part of its literal meaning. On a naive formulation, an epithet like ‘chink’ as a derogatory term for Chinese people is synonymous with (something like) ‘Chinese and despicable because of it’. But if so, then the semantic strategy faces a difficult balancing act. Some epithets are particularly powerful in their derogatory force. For example the view must account for how the word ‘nigger’ can be explosively derogatory when directed towards African-Americans. The term has been deemed “one of the most racially offensive words in the language”<sup>2</sup> and is even considered to be “the most noxious racial epithet in the contemporary American lexicon.”<sup>3</sup> Reducing its meaning to ‘African-American and despicable because of it’ simply fails to explain the strength of this word’s negative, derogatory content relative to others in comparison (e.g. “chink”).

Some theorists have an even stronger intuition that the word ‘nigger’ expresses *unspeakably* bad content; meaning that is so strong that it derogates its intended targets on every occasion of use. These *silentists* introduce new types of semantic contents for explaining the force of epithets. At least a few prominent silentists in philosophy of language have yet to publish on this topic<sup>4</sup>, but Hornsby (2001) advocates a version of silentism when she suggests that utterances of epithets are equivalent to *gestures* made while uttering the appropriate *non-*

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Oxford English Dictionary* (2001: 1157).

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

<sup>4</sup> On my understanding, similar views are presented in these talks: Mark Richard, ‘Epithets and Attitudes’ (April, 2005) given at the Syntax and Semantics with Attitude Workshop, University of Southern California, and David Kaplan, ‘The Meaning of ‘Oops’ and ‘Ouch’ (August 2004) given for the Howison Lectures in Philosophy Series at U.C. Berkeley.

*pejorative correlate*<sup>5</sup>, and that ‘an aspect of the word’s meaning is to be thought of as if it were communicated by means of this (posited) gesture’.<sup>6</sup>

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

While we could continue playing this charade, I suspect that *any* silentist who posits a new kind of linguistically inexpressible content (gestural or otherwise) is offering a dead-end

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<sup>5</sup> For any racial epithet, call its *non-pejorative correlate* (NPC) the expression that picks out the supposed extension of the epithet but without expressing derogation toward members of that extension. For example, the NPC of ‘chink’ is ‘Chinese’, the NPC of ‘kike’ is ‘Jewish’, the NPC of ‘nigger’ is ‘African-American’, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Hornsby (2001: 41).

explanation. Positing such entities will invariably be mysterious and ad hoc. Mysterious because it is unclear both what such entities are supposed to be and what they are supposed to contribute to the truth-conditions of sentences. If these words make no contributions, then we are faced with the unenviable consequences of truth-value gaps and having to alter the traditional rules of logical deduction.<sup>7</sup> The move is ad hoc because these entities are postulated just to explain how epithets work. It is doubtful that they arise for the semantic explanation of any other type of expression in natural language. Lastly, the main problem is that if these contents are intrinsically derogatory, then the silentist account fails to explain particular *non-derogatory* uses such as appropriated uses between members of the targeted class, and uses that highlight the racist concepts expressed by epithets in order to refute them. This is a problem we shall return to in some depth in Section IV. The challenge for the semantic strategist is to specify the semantic contents of epithets that successfully negotiate the difficult balancing act without positing mysterious, ad hoc entities. This balancing act focuses on two crucial features of epithets; that their contents are both *shifty* and *scalar*. The derogatory contents of epithets are shifty in that they can derogate in some contexts (e.g. straightforwardly racist contexts) but not in others (e.g. appropriated contexts). The derogatory contents of epithets are scalar in that their force can vary between individual epithets (e.g. the difference in force between ‘nigger’ and ‘chink’).

### III. The Pragmatic Strategy

The complexity of the balancing act facing the semantic strategy for explaining epithets suggests that there is an inherently contextual element to the content of such words. This

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<sup>7</sup> To allow for truth-value gaps is to allow for assertoric sentences that are neither truth nor false. Traditional logic assumes bivalence for all assertoric sentences, so sentences with truth-value gaps cannot be accommodated in logical reasoning without revision to the truth-conditional rules of deduction. I take no position on whether such moves have merit, but only that they are ill-motivated merely to account for the meanings of racial epithets.

suggests a more pragmatic strategy that takes into account the contextual features that surround how epithets are used. I will consider two plausible formulations of the pragmatic strategy. Call the first *radical contextualism*.<sup>8</sup> According to this view, the meaning of an epithet varies according to the features of its particular context of utterance. The idea is that just as indexical words like ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’ can respectively refer to different people, places and times in different contexts of utterance, epithets can have different meanings in different contexts of utterance – some even non-derogatory. In his investigation into the word ‘nigger’, Kennedy (2002) endorses contextualism when he says that ‘‘nigger’ can mean many different things, depending upon, among other variables, intonation, the location of the interaction, and the relationship between the speaker and those to whom he is speaking’.<sup>9</sup> Because their meanings vary from context to context, so does their derogatory content. According to Kennedy, certain uses are even sanctioned depending upon contextual features. Kennedy presents many detailed examples, but fails to specify the determinate rules for calculating the contents for any given context of utterance. The account seems to hold that unlike ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’, ‘nigger’ has no clear rules for deriving its content from contextual features of its utterance. That contextualism offers little in the way of predicting the content in a context is particularly unsatisfying because of the stakes surrounding these words. Uses of epithets can incur higher penalties for crimes, result in the termination of their speakers’ employment, generate controversial speech regulations, and continue to antagonize many, if not most, of their intended targets.<sup>10</sup> The recognition of the phenomenal complexity surrounding such words is a positive explanatory step,

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<sup>8</sup> To be clear, I distinguish radical contextualism as a specific theory about epithets from Radical Contextualism as a general theory for all linguistic expressions. This section is a consideration of the former. Section VII is a consideration of the latter.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy (2002: 54).

<sup>10</sup> The lack of determinate criteria for judging whether certain uses of epithets are derogatory also has significant legal implications for First Amendment speech issues. Section VIII will present a detailed consideration of how combinatorial externalism impacts these issues.

but not the last, and is certainly not constitutive of an explanatory theory. Contextualism is a premature surrender in the search for a principled analysis of epithets, and should be left as a last resort.

The pragmatic strategy can be presented in a more moderate form, with a less ambitious, specification of the contextually-determined content of epithets. Such a minimalist specification would still be consistent with the principal tenet of the pragmatic strategy - the denial of a semantic, context-independent explanation of derogatory content. Call this view *pragmatic minimalism*. Williamson (forthcoming) advocates pragmatic minimalism and holds that while derogatory content is non-semantic, it is specifically determined in each context as a result of conventional implicature.<sup>11</sup> The derogatory content is merely *implicated* and not *part* of what the sentence literally says (i.e. derogatory content is not part of the semantic content of the sentence). The derogatory content is *conventionally* implicated because it appears in every context of use and is not calculable from Gricean conversational maxims. According to pragmatic minimalism, epithets literally say nothing more than their non-pejorative correlates (NPC's), e.g. 'chink' is synonymous with 'Chinese', 'kike' is synonymous with 'Jewish', 'nigger' is synonymous with 'African-American', etc. Another important feature of the view is that the falsity of the derogatory content that is pragmatically conveyed is consistent with the truth of what is literally said. So the difference between 'chink' and 'Chinese' is on the order of the difference between 'but' and 'and'. Thus the proposition semantically expressed by (1) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by (2):

1. Shaq is huge but agile.
2. Shaq is huge and agile.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Williamson (forthcoming: 20-25).

<sup>12</sup> Examples (1) and (2) from Bach (1999: 1).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lastly, Bach (1999) offers good evidence for thinking that cases of conventionally implicated content are actually part of what is literally said. The strongest argument is that many conventional implicatures pass his Indirect Quotation (IQ) test:

An element of a sentence contributes to what is said in an utterance of that sentence iff there can be an accurate and complete indirect quotation of the utterance (in the same language) which includes that element, or a corresponding element in the ‘that’-clause that specifies what is said.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>13</sup> Bach (1999: 7).



Applying Bach's IQ test to racial epithets leads to an analogous result. So if speaker A utters (3) to speaker B, and speaker B reports what A said by uttering (7):

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

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

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

- 8<sub>A</sub>: Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are racist.
- 8<sub>B</sub>: A said that institutions that treat Chinese as Chinese are racist.

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

- 9<sub>A</sub>: I am Chinese, and not a chink.
- 9<sub>B</sub>: A said that he is Chinese and not Chinese.

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

- 10<sub>A</sub>: Chinese people are chinks.
- 10<sub>B</sub>: A said that Chinese people are Chinese.

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

- 11<sub>A</sub>: Chinks are Chinese people who are despicable because of their race.  
11<sub>B</sub>: A said that Chinese people are (Chinese people who are) despicable because of their race.

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

- 12<sub>A</sub>: Am I racist if I believe that Chinese are chinks?  
12<sub>B</sub>: A wondered whether A was racist if A believes that Chinese are Chinese?

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

#### **IV. Conditions of Adequacy**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. *Truth-conditions: Epithets make determinate contributions to the truth-conditions of assertoric sentences in which they occur.*

While epithets make meaningful semantic contributions to sentences, their contributions are unsatisfiable. For example, the sentence ‘Yao Ming is a chink’ is meaningful but false, and false for any substitution of referring term in the subject position of the sentence. In other words, there are no chinks. Racist claims are wrong, and incorrectly track the world. In this way, ‘chink’ is similar to ‘unicorn’. There are neither chinks nor unicorns, and anyone convinced that there are is deeply confused about the world. There are, of course, Chinese people, but they are not chinks.<sup>14</sup> The predicted contribution to the truth-conditions for sentences containing epithets is also independent of any particular generally accepted semantic framework.

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

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<sup>14</sup> Proponents of pragmatic minimalism will deny this claim as they hold that ‘chink’ is synonymous with ‘Chinese’, so that the sentence ‘Yao Ming is a chink’ will be true, not false. I have already presented reasons for being suspicious of pragmatic minimalism. Section VI presents further decisive arguments against pragmatic minimalism. Section VII presents plausible reasons for why speakers might mistakenly think that ‘chink’ refers to Chinese people.

Epithets must evolve with the values and practices of their speech community. This explains the derogatory variation of single epithets over time. For example, ‘gay’ has lost almost all of its derogatory force with common contemporary uses of expressions such as ‘gay marriage’, ‘gay rights’, and ‘gay pride’. The word has become synonymous with ‘homosexual’ and derogatory expressions like ‘That’s gay’ seem antiquated, juvenile, and almost infelicitous.<sup>15</sup> Evolutionary fluctuations for the contents of epithets can also vary in their rate of change. As target groups gradually integrate into the dominant society and active discrimination subsides, the derogatory content of the corresponding epithets will typically fade. Examples of gradual decline might include epithets for Irish immigrants such as ‘mic’ or ‘paddy’ (for American English), terms that were much more antagonistic one hundred and fifty years ago in the United States. Target groups can also accelerate the process of disarming epithets through *appropriation*.

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

The appropriation of an epithet is a phenomenon whereby the targeted group takes control of the epithet, and alters its meaning for use within the group. Appropriated uses of epithets are typically non-pejorative, but their derogatory force is not entirely dissolved. The appropriated epithet serves many functions: it is a means for the targeted group to recapture political power from the racist group by transforming one its tools, it is a means for ‘toughening up’ other members of the targeted group by desensitizing them to uses of the epithet, it is a means of in-group demarcation to bring members of the targeted group closer together and to

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<sup>15</sup> John Doris reports seeing a bumper sticker that plays off this specific feature. It read: ‘Marriage is gay’.

remind members of the targeted group that they are, indeed, a *targeted* group.<sup>16</sup> For example, the appropriated form of the word ‘nigger’, which is often marked with a different spelling (‘nigga’ in the singular, and ‘niggaz’ in the plural), makes a distinction between African-Americans as victims of racism, and African-Americans as empowered individuals. In a documentary about his own life, rapper Tupac Shakur characterizes this distinction when he says “Niggers was the ones on the rope, hanging off the thing; Niggaz is the ones with gold ropes, hanging out at clubs”.<sup>17</sup> While not impossible, it is very difficult for whites to employ the appropriated term. Even white rapper Eminem, who frequently employs the epithets ‘bitch’ and ‘faggot’ in his lyrics, refrains from using ‘nigger’ saying that, ‘that word is not even in my vocabulary’.<sup>18, 19</sup>

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

There are sentences that make meaningful uses of racial epithets that are true, non-derogatory, and non-appropriated. Epithets in such contexts do not directly derogate their intended targets, but do retain their capacity for derogation. I call these these *NDNA uses*. NDNA uses often occur in pedagogical contexts about racism. They make use of an epithet’s derogatory content without actually derogating its intended targets. For example, in a discussion about racism, someone might utter: ‘Institutions that treat Chinese people as chinks are racist’ which seems to be true, meaningful, and felicitous. The epithet in NDNA contexts carries its racist content while falling short of derogating its target because that is the very point of its use.

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to William Ladusaw for helpful discussion on this topic.

<sup>17</sup> The quote is from an interview in the documentary film, “Tupac: Resurrection” (2003).

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy (2002: 51). The quote is originally from an interview in *Rolling Stone* (July 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Note that Eminem’s quote is strangely paradoxical. The demonstrative in the quote obviously *does* pick out a word in his vocabulary. He perfectly understands the derogatory content of ‘nigger’. That is why he wouldn’t *use* it, which is what he is actually saying. The word obviously exists in his vocabulary in order for him to make this judgment.

Here are some examples of pedagogical sentences containing epithets that are meaningful, true, and non-derogatory:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## V. Combinatorial Externalism

Semantic externalism is the view that the semantic values, or meanings, of words are not completely determined by the internal, mental states of individual speakers. Rather, the meanings for words such as proper names, natural-kind terms, and indexicals are at least in part dependent on the external, social practices of the speaker’s linguistic community. A particular speaker’s beliefs and intentions are not sufficient by themselves to generate linguistic meaning. In addition to having the right kind of beliefs and intentions, a speaker must also stand in the relevant *causal relations* to the world and to her speech community. The meanings for words are, thus, causally determined in part, by factors external to, and sometimes unknown by, the speaker. Several persuasive arguments have been given for semantic externalism in the literature, and I will not go over those arguments here.<sup>20</sup> Instead I will develop a novel account

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<sup>20</sup> In particular, see Kripke (1972), Putnam, (1975), and Kaplan (1977). There are certainly dissenting views, but I will not rehearse those arguments here either.



of racial epithets that naturally follows from a causal, externalist, semantic theory. As we will see, the theory reveals interesting properties about semantic externalism as well as the distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

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

Against the theoretical background of both semantic externalism and racist institutions, we have a natural explanation for how epithets get their derogatory content and what derogation with epithets amounts to. *Combinatorial externalism* (CE) is the view that racial epithets express complex, socially constructed, negative properties determined in virtue of standing in the appropriate external, causal connection with racist institutions. The meanings of epithets are supported and semantically determined by their corresponding racist institutions. Epithets both insult and threaten their intended targets in deep and specific ways by both predicating negative properties to them and invoking the threat of discriminatory practice towards them. The meanings for epithets can be presented with the following schematized, complex predicate:

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

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

where  $p^*_1, \dots, p^*_n$  are deontic prescriptions derived from the set of racist practices,  $d^*_1, \dots, d^*_n$  are the negative properties derived from the racist ideology, and  $npc^*$  is the semantic value of the appropriate non-pejorative correlate of the epithet. For example, the epithet ‘chink’ expresses a complex, socially constructed property like: *ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundering, and ..., all because of being Chinese.*

In this way, epithets **express** derogatory semantic content in every context, but they do not actually derogate their targets in every context. Derogation is the actual application, or predication, of derogatory content. This speech act of applying the epithet to an individual is to predicate the derogatory semantic content to someone, and thus literally to say something deeply negative, and threatening, towards that person. In effect, the racist says: ‘You have *these* negative properties and thus ought to be subject to *these* negative practices all because you are an NPC.’ It is this important distinction between derogatory content as a complex property, and derogation as the application of this property that allows for epithets to carry their derogatory

content without actually derogating their intended targets.<sup>21</sup> Epithets are words with derogatory content; speakers derogate by using words with such contents.

## VI. Meeting The Adequacy Conditions

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

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

According to CE, calling someone a racial epithet is much worse than just calling someone ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’ because epithets literally say something more negative by invoking an entire racist ideology along with the discriminatory practices that it supports. Epithets prescribe these practices for their targets because of supposedly possessing the negative properties ascribed to their race. The explosive, derogatory force of an epithet is directly proportional to the content of the property it expresses, which is in turn directly proportional to the turpitude and scope of the supporting racist institution that causally supports the epithet. A brief consideration of the properties and practices associated with racism towards African-Americans explains the derogatory force behind the word ‘nigger’.<sup>22</sup> None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

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<sup>21</sup> Of course indirect derogation is still a possibility. If someone asks, ‘How many chinks are in your class?’, they do not predicate, but conversationally implicate the false, but racist proposition that Chinese people are chinks. Notice that this phenomenon is secondary to my semantic view. The implicated proposition is derogatory in virtue of the thick, racist property semantically expressed by ‘chink’. My analysis applies to the proposition regardless of its evolution. Thanks to Chris Mole for helpful discussion on this topic.

<sup>22</sup> See Kennedy (2002: 3-36) for a variety of examples.

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

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

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

According to CE, because the predicative material is causally determined externally from the speakers’ psychology, the explosiveness and variation in derogatory force for epithets is autonomous from the beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of individual speakers. Thus the view explains why you cannot derogate an Englishman with ‘limey’ to the extent that you can derogate an African-American with the word ‘nigger’; regardless of your intentions, or how racist your individual beliefs might be towards the English, or how non-racist your individual beliefs might be towards African-Americans. The epithet ‘limey’ simply does not predicate as negatively, and it does not prescribe a set of practices that are as threatening. The word no longer has a racist institution in support of it. A further point: because the semantic contents of

epithets are secured, for the most part, independently from speakers' linguistic intentions and beliefs, uses of epithets require careful attention – accidental derogation is a real, practical concern for these words. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.<sup>23</sup>

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

According to CE, epithets are meaningful in that they provide semantic contents (i.e. complex properties) to propositions expressed by sentences containing them. As a view about the meanings of epithets, CE is actually independent of any particular semantic framework. For example, epithets contribute complex properties to singular propositions, or, alternatively, they contribute complex senses to Fregean thoughts that determine complex properties as their referents. In the next section, I will demonstrate how CE naturally fits with various, mainstream semantic views.

The meaningfulness criteria presents different problems for the different competing views. The problem for silentists is that they postulate mysterious, ad hoc semantic values to account for the meanings of epithets – gestures, displays, inexpressible contents, etc. The problem for radical contextualists is that they offer no positive theory of determining the contextually dependent meanings for epithets. The problem for pragmatic minimalists is that they hold that epithets mean the same as their non-pejorative correlates, which leads to the next criterion.

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<sup>23</sup> Derogatory autonomy is especially problematic for any attempt at formulating either a Gricean conversational implicature account or an expressivist account of derogatory content. For this reason, I do not consider such views to be minimally viable.

5. Truth-conditions: Epithets make determinate contributions to the truth-conditions of assertoric sentences in which they occur.

According to CE, while racial epithets are entirely meaningful, the properties expressed by them have null extensions. No one ought to be subject to discriminatory practices because of negative properties due to their race. Atomic predications with epithets will always be false because no one is in the extension of the corresponding complex racist property.<sup>24</sup> This is the correct result: racist claims will always be false.<sup>25</sup> The racist is not only wrong in the normative sense, but also wrong about the world in falsely attributing racist properties to people.

It is worth emphasizing that CE makes this point about the content of racial epithets, and not about the semantic theory that limit the notion of this content. CE's analysis of the unsatisfiable truth-conditions of epithets can be naturally accommodated *regardless* of the semantic framework in which CE is embedded.<sup>26</sup> Consider how CE's analysis for the following claims:

- 28. Yao Ming is a chink.
- 29. There are chinks.

gets borne out on four prominent semantic theories:

- (i) Russellianism
- (ii) Davidsonian semantics
- (iii) Model theoretic semantics
- (iv) Fregeanism

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<sup>24</sup> Atomic predications with epithets are actually doubly false since no one has such properties because of their race.

<sup>25</sup> The claim may need to be weakened because of the possibility that some epithet has a non-empty extension at another possible world. I will not take up this issue here.

<sup>26</sup> At this point, readers who are less interested in the formal aspects of philosophy of language may wish to skip to the evaluation of the next criterion in this section.

Russellianism posits structured, *singular propositions* as the semantic values of sentences. Such propositions are the intrinsic truth-conditions of sentences as well as the objects of the attitudes. The sentence ‘Yao Ming is a chink’ expresses a structured proposition that is represented as the ordered pair:  $\langle\langle\text{Yao Ming}\rangle, \text{the property of being a chink}\rangle$ . The ordered pair contains Yao *himself* and the complex property of *being a chink* described by CE. Russellianism relies on a semantic axiom of the following form to derive truth-conditions from propositions:

A proposition  $\langle\langle o_n \rangle, F^*\rangle$  is true relative to a context  $c$  iff  $\langle o_n \rangle$  falls in the extension of  $F^*$

where  $o_n$  is the referent of the name,  $n$ , and  $F^*$  is the property expressed by the predicate,  $F$ , for a sentence of the form ‘ $o$  is  $F$ ’ uttered in a context  $c$ . The truth-conditions determined by the proposition will result in falsity, as the property of *being a chink* has a null extension.<sup>27</sup> Yao is *not* a chink, just as Yao is *not* a unicorn.

The goal of a Davidsonian semantic theory (DS) is to derive a truth-theorem for any sentence  $S$  of a language  $L$  of the form:

(T) “ $S$ ” is true in context,  $c$  (in  $L$ ) iff  $p$ .

The right-hand side (RHS) of the biconditional is the statement of the truth-conditions of  $S$ . DS holds that by giving a recursive, compositional algorithm for deriving the truth-conditions for each sentence of an object-language, the meaning of each object-language sentence is thereby given. There are no propositions for DS. Consider a small fragment of English that includes only the following expressions:

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<sup>27</sup> Assuming that a Russellian proposition is false relative to a context  $c$  iff it is not true relative to  $c$ .

Names: 'Yao'  
Predicates: 'is a chink'

To each expression, DS assigns a semantic axiom which states its contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which it occurs. These semantic axioms will look like the following:

- [1] The reference of 'Yao' = Yao Ming
- [2] If X is a name, then any sentence of the form "X is a chink" is true iff the reference of X ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundrying, and ..., all because of being Chinese.

Now consider the English sentence: 'Yao is a chink'. From [2] it follows that:

- [3] 'Yao is a chink' is true iff the reference of 'Yao' ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundrying, and ..., all because of being Chinese.

From [3] and [1], it follows that:

- [4] 'Yao is a chink' is true iff Yao Ming ought to be subject to higher college admissions standards, and ought to be subject to exclusion from advancement to managerial positions, and ..., because of being slanty-eyed, and devious, and good-at-laundrying, and ..., all because of being Chinese.

Thus, DS compositionally generates the T-theorem for the sentence 'Yao is a chink', and states its truth-conditions on the RHS of the biconditional. Since no one falls under the extension of the complex, racist property, the sentence is false. With more semantic axioms, DS can theoretically generate T-theorems for every sentence of English.



A model-theoretic semantic theory (MTS) posits two semantic values for any expression of a language: its *intension* and its *extension*. The (first-order) intension of an expression is a function from indices (world, time pairs) to the appropriate object, or extension. For example, the intension of ‘is a chink’ is a function from worlds and times to sets of individuals, that is, the objects that are chinks. The intension of a predicate expression is a property; the complex property described by CE. The quantifier phrase ‘There (exists)’ has a second-order intension that maps first-order intensions to truth-values. More specifically, this second-order intension maps non-empty first-order intensions to True, and everything else to False. So the intension of the sentence ‘There are chinks’ is a function from indices to truth-values depending on whether the extension of ‘is a chink’ is non-empty at that index. The intension of a sentence is a proposition. Less formally, a proposition is characterized as the set of possible worlds in which the sentence is true. For indices containing the actual world, the intension of ‘is a chink’ determines the empty set, so the entire proposition is false (at the actual world).<sup>28</sup>

Fregeanism posits *Fregean thoughts* as the semantic values of sentences. Such thoughts are compositionally determined from the Fregean senses expressed by the words of the sentence. Sense determines reference, and thought determines truth-value. The sentence ‘There are chinks’ expresses a Fregean thought composed of the sense of ‘There (exists)’ and the sense of ‘is a chink’. These senses in turn determine their referents. The sense of ‘is a chink’ picks out a complex first-level concept (property) described by CE that maps everything to False; it has a null extension. The sense of ‘There (exists)’ picks out a second-level concept that maps non-empty first-level concepts to True and everything else to False. Thus, the resulting referent for the entire Fregean thought is False.

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<sup>28</sup> I will not discuss the modal characteristics of epithets here, although my intuition is that their extensions are necessarily empty and thus, atomic statements with racial epithets will be necessarily false.

As I noted above, views that hold that epithets fail to make truth-conditional contributions to sentences are then faced with the difficulties of having truth-value gaps and non-traditional rules for logical inference. Such a radical overhaul of principal semantic concepts is not justified in order to account for the relatively small set of expressions under consideration. While there might be some plausibility in denying truth-conditions for sentences with epithets in crude, derogatory contexts (e.g. yelling ‘chink!’ at a Chinese person), there is little plausibility in doing so for the whole range of sentences in NDNA contexts which exhibit varying syntactic positions for epithets.

The problem with pragmatic minimalism is that it holds epithets to be semantically equivalent to their NPC’s, and thus generates incorrect truth-conditions. Consider the following sentence pairs:

- 30a. There are Chinese people in the building.
- 30b. There are chinks in the building.
- 31a. Chinks are despicable.
- 31b. Chinese people are despicable.
- 32a. It’s racist to believe that CH is a chink.
- 32b. It’s racist to believe that CH is Chinese.
- 33a. Everyone thinks Chinese people are Chinese.
- 33b. Everyone thinks Chinese people are chinks.
- 34a. Everyone knows that Chinese are Chinese.
- 34b. Everyone knows that Chinese are chinks.
- 35a. No Chinese person would claim to be a chink.
- 35b. No Chinese person would claim to be Chinese.
- 36a. A chink is a Chinese person who is despicable for being Chinese.
- 36b. A Chinese person is a Chinese person who is despicable for being Chinese.

Sentences (30a)-(36a) are true while (30b)-(36b) are false. The only difference between each pair is the substitution of non-pejorative correlate (‘Chinese’) for corresponding epithet (‘Chink’). Since the truth-conditions are different, their semantic contributions must be different, so epithets cannot be synonymous with their NPC’s. This argument is a variant of the one given against pragmatic minimalism where Bach’s IQ test is reformulated for epithets.

Finally, consider the sentence pairs of (36) embedded under a necessity operator:

- 37a. Necessarily, a chink is a Chinese person who is despicable for being Chinese.  
37b. Necessarily, a Chinese person is a Chinese person who is despicable for being Chinese.

The only difference between the embedded clauses of (37a) and (37b) is the substitution of NPC for ‘chink’. Since their truth-values differ, the modal profiles of epithets and their NPC’s differ. Thus, epithets and their NPC’s are *not* synonymous, and pragmatic minimalism is wrong.

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

CE holds that because racist institutions causally support their meanings, epithets require speech communities that are *dyadic* in the sense that there must be two kinds of social groups; those who are actively targeted by the word and those who are actively targeting with the word. Monadic speech communities lack the appropriate social dynamic to support the causal relations required to generate the derogatory force of epithets. The causal connection between epithet and racist institution can be broken in one of two different ways. Either the causal link dissolves away over time, as might be the case with certain normal words under the causal theory, and thus a monadic speech community is settled upon, or else the causal link can be *deliberately* severed. The dissolution of semantic causal connections over time occurs when the dyadic nature of the speech community fades and becomes monadic with regard to the significance of the relevant social property. In the monadic speech community, the supporting institution of discrimination no longer exists, so the causally supported meaning for the epithet no longer exists. Such monadic communities simply have no use for the derogatory content of the word. The word itself can even fade away and future uses are dated in their attempts to reestablish their causal

connection. Examples of gradual semantic evolution include: ‘limey’ for English people, ‘yank’ for American (in American English), ‘hunk’ for Hungarian, or ‘gay’ for homosexual. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

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

CE provides a natural explanation for this complex and more rapid form of semantic evolution. Appropriated uses are the result of severing the external, causal link between the meaning of an epithet from its racist institution. To be successful, appropriation usually requires a counter-institution to support the altered, appropriated use. Successful counter-institutions must have broad appeal, have enough expressive content to support the appropriated epithet, and provide a salient counter-image to the racist institution. Counter-institutions seek to turn racist uses of epithets on their head. The point is not to wipe away derogatory force, but rather to defuse it, and put it to alternative uses that produce political and social effects in favor of the previously targeted group. The appropriation of ‘nigger’ is a perfect illustration of how hip-hop and rap cultures provide the requisite thickness of content and appeal to serve as a counter-institution for the appropriation of an epithet. None of the other views mentioned offer an explanation for this feature of racial epithets.

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

NDNA contexts illustrate the need to explain how an epithet can semantically express derogatory content without thereby derogating its intended targets. NDNA uses are licensed in

virtue of the epithet's derogatory content, so their meanings cannot be entirely sterilized. For example, it is a consequence of CE that because of the 'thick' derogatory content semantically expressed by the word 'chink', one can correctly discuss important aspects of racism towards Chinese people in uttering sentences like (13) through (20), or in asking questions like (21) through (27):

13. Yao Ming is Chinese, but he's not a chink.
14. There are lots of Chinese people at Cal, but no chinks.
15. Chinese people are not chinks.
16. Chinks are (supposedly) despicable because of their race, but Chinese people are not.
17. There are no chinks; racists are wrong.
18. Racists believe that Chinese people are chinks.
19. Thinking that Chinese people are chinks is to be radically wrong about the world.
20. Institutions that treat Chinese as chinks are morally depraved.
21. Are Chinese people chinks?
22. Do racists commonly believe that Chinese people are chinks?
23. What is it to believe that Chinese people are chinks?
24. Why do racists think that Chinese people are chinks?
25. Am I racist if I believe that Chinese people are chinks?
26. Am I racist if I have never had the thought that Chinese people are chinks?
27. Am I racist if I would never think that Chinese people are chinks?

CE assigns the correct truth-conditions to NDNA sentences, and does so in a way that preserves the right kind of semantic significance for them.

According to pragmatic minimalism, epithets are synonymous with their NPC's and thus make identical contributions to the truth-conditions of sentences in which they occur. This is problematic because substitutions of NPC for racial epithet result in sentences that fail to say the same thing. Like the pairs in (30) through (36), the NPC counterparts of (13) through (20) will fail to be synonymous, and the NPC counterparts of (21) through (27) will fail to ask the same questions. For example, the NPC counterpart to sentence (20), 'Institutions that treat Chinese people as Chinese are racist' simply fails to say the same thing as (20) - it's false, while (20) is true. Thus pragmatic

minimalism incorrectly predicts the propositions (and truth-conditions) expressed by sentences in NDNA uses.

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

As a semantic account, CE generalizes over other dimensions of social bias, both positive and negative. These dimensions include: religion, sex, gender, and sexual orientation. The institutions that serve to causally support terms like ‘damn’, ‘whore’, ‘bitch’ and ‘fag’ work in same way they do for racial epithets. For example, the pejorative word ‘damn’ derives its meaning externally from the institution of Judeo-Christian religion to express a complex property like: *being someone that will be sent to hell by God in the afterlife*. Notice that the force of such a predication varies with the historical significance of religion in our society. Today, the term expresses mild displeasure with its target. Three hundred years ago, the term expressed strong derogation. The result is correctly predicted by the view, as the institution of religion that causally supports the meaning of the term was, in the past, much more powerful and wide-ranging in its practices.<sup>29</sup> Approbative terms like ‘angel’, ‘blessed’, ‘stud’ and ‘goddess’ are analogously accounted for, expressing positive, institutionally-supported properties for religion, sexuality and gender.

The attempt to generalize competing accounts of epithets to explain these other derogatory (and approbative) terms is problematic. For example, the attempt to extend either pragmatic minimalism or silentism leads to a number of parallel problems mentioned above; failure to account for variations in derogatory force, derogatory autonomy, truth-conditions, and

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<sup>29</sup> Note that ‘damn’ still expresses strong derogation in certain idiolects of conservative Christians.

possible NDNA uses, to name a few. For silentism, a primary virtue of the view, that the unspeakable, intrinsically derogatory nature of the content accounts for the potential severity of words like ‘nigger’, is undermined in the case of approbative terms, and probably also for religious terms (excluding Islamic conventions regarding blaspheme).

The considerations in this section demonstrate that combinatorial externalism is a viable candidate for being the correct, comprehensive theory of epithets, that there is a very strong case in favor of the view over its competitors, and that there is no need to resort to radical contextualism.<sup>30</sup>

## **VII. Theoretical Implications of CE**

Racial epithets occupy an interesting position in the theoretical landscape of the philosophy of language. These words appear to be paradigm examples that support both Radical Contextualism (RC) and Semantic Internalism (SI). The views are indeed closely related. If meanings are radically underdetermined, then speakers’ internal concepts are likely to be a primary source for determining the truth-conditions of sentences in conversational contexts. If internalism is true, then the incompleteness and ambiguity of speakers’ concepts will likely result in contextual variation in the semantic contents they determine. It is no coincidence that a prominent supporter of contextualism, John Searle, also supports internalism. As an adequate semantic theory of racial epithets, I will show how CE undermines a key piece of supporting data for both views.

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<sup>30</sup> At this point again, readers who are less interested in the formal aspects of philosophy of language may wish to skip to Section VIII for the discussion of the legal implications of CE.

Radical Contextualism is the view that only utterances of sentences in context can have truth-conditions, while sentences themselves cannot.<sup>31</sup> A plausible corollary to this view is that only expressions uttered in context can make truth-conditional contributions to propositions, while expressions themselves cannot. The central idea for contextualism is that any context-free analysis of the meaning of language is precluded. Why do epithets seem to be paradigmatic examples for contextualism? Because, as we have seen in Section IV, the criteria surrounding epithets is complex and allows for widespread variation of their contents over different contexts. Such variations occur in both their possible uses and in the derogatory force they express. Initially, there appeared to be no unified analysis of these variations, suggesting unconstrained context sensitivity in the determination of their semantic contents.

However, combinatorial externalism (CE) shows that this initial observation is false by providing a positive semantic account that satisfies the conditions of adequacy, is theoretically well-motivated, and suffers none of the problems facing both of its semantic and pragmatic competitors. Another way to put the point is to formulate contextualism as a negative thesis: for any expression *e*, *e* makes no determinate contributions to the truth-conditions of sentences in which *e* occurs. CE contradicts this negative thesis by providing a plausible semantic account of epithets, one which does not vary from context-to-context. Since racial epithets were supposedly a paradigmatic case for contextualism, CE casts doubt on the view more generally.

Semantic internalism is the view that the meaning (or semantic content) of an expression *e* is identical to the internal, descriptive conditions associated with the extension of *e*. Like Fregean sense, these internal descriptive conditions serve to uniquely pick out the referent, and also contain the mode of presentation that the speaker associates with the referent. Jackson (1998) characterizes internalism when he says that “the core idea behind the description theory is

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<sup>31</sup> For a succinct summary of this view, see Cappelen and Lepore (2005: 1-38).



that a term refers to that which has the property or properties the speaker associates with the term”,<sup>32</sup> and that “terms like ‘London’, ‘Pluto’, ‘water’ and ‘inert gas’ are used by speakers to talk about whatever has the properties they associate with the term in question”.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the internal cognitive information is what gets contributed to the semantic contents of sentences which in turn goes to determine the truth-conditions of the sentence. In this way, the descriptive criteria are the final arbiters for reference.

Epithets appear to support internalism because they express or display a speaker’s contempt and hatred, and these racist attitudes seem to be the internal descriptive properties that speakers associate with the targets of epithets. Thus, internalism isolates the source of derogatory force as the racist modes of presentation that speakers have for the intended extensions of epithets. For example, a speaker, S, uses ‘chink’ to pick out whoever fits the descriptive conditions that S associates with the word. If S is racist, then S will associate something like the descriptive property of *being Chinese and despicable because of it* – remember, S is racist towards Chinese people and expresses it with the epithet. If S isn’t racist, then S will associate something like the descriptive property of *being Chinese* or the property of *being Chinese and typically derogated by utterances of this word*.

Internalism seems to offer a neat account of epithets whereby derogatory force is explained by individual racist attitudes. But the view is problematic for several reasons. First, internalism faces an indeterminacy problem. While natural kind terms like ‘water’ are associated with relatively stable sets of concepts (*being a clear, colorless, tasteless liquid that runs in streams and lakes*, etc), racial epithets are not. For example, the analysis above for ‘chink’ is not

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<sup>32</sup> Jackson (1998: 206).

<sup>33</sup> Jackson (1998: 203).

so simple. A racist speaker could associated a number of distinct racist concepts with the term including:

*being Chinese, and devious because of it*  
*being Chinese, and devious and good-at-laundering because of it*  
*being Chinese, and devious and good-at-laundering and slanty-eyed because of it*  
*being Chinese, and  $p_1$  and ... and  $p_n$  because of it (for  $n$  number of negative properties)*

Notice that even though racists *intend* to pick out Chinese people with one of the many racist concepts above, the concept actually fails to pick out anyone. This feature of the view is not problematic as racists are indeed confused about the world; they falsely believe that Chinese people instantiate some set of racist properties  $p_1$  through  $p_n$  because of their race. What *is* problematic is not only the concern that racists might fail to speak the same language, but that racists and non-racists fail to speak the same language. Non-racists do *not* associate racist concepts with the term. Many non-racists would have no thoughts about the derogatory properties that people might or might not have because of their race. That's what makes them non-racist. And yet all competent, non-racist speakers clearly understand what racists are saying with racial epithets.

This leads to the second problem which is that internalism fails to account for derogatory autonomy. Internally associated properties, even if non-derogatory, do not affect their derogatory force. For example, a speaker who calls someone 'nigger' and only associates the property of *being African-American* with the term (or even associates positive properties with the term) has not avoided derogating the person for being African-American. To take another example, a racist speaker who calls someone 'limey' and associates intensely negative properties with the term has not therefore amplified the derogatory power of the word against English people. If the source of derogatory content for epithets is internal, then it incorrectly varies with

the level of individual prejudice for each speaker. According to the internalist, derogatory content ought to be explained by the internal, descriptive properties that the speaker associates with the particular ethnic group. Given the counterexamples, internalism for epithets seems to clearly fail.

The problem of derogatory autonomy for internalism leads to the third problem which is that people can use racial epithets in NDNA and appropriated contexts without themselves expressing racist propositions or endorsing an associated racist ideology. This is a fundamental point in favor of combinatorial externalism over internalism: derogatory content can be expressed in a proposition without actually expressing a speaker's racial contempt. Speakers may abjure from performing the speech act of derogation, while expressing propositions with derogatory content. Speakers in these contexts are usually denying the very racist presuppositions that internalism posits.

These points not only favor CE but also preclude a standard internalist response to externalism. A standard internalist response to arguments for externalism is that whatever causal feature that externalists posit to fix the content of an expression, *e*, can be internalized into the representational content that the speaker has for *e*. In essence, a standard internalist response has been to pirate the causal, socio-linguistic mechanisms postulated by externalists. For example, the internalist intuition is that Putnam's Twin Earth argument for establishing semantic externalism for natural kind terms, merely illuminates alternate internalist accounts for how these words secure their semantic values. Recall that Putnam's externalist view for natural kinds holds that 'water' gets its reference fixed to H<sub>2</sub>O in virtue of standing in the relation of being whatever has the same structure as *that* stuff (pointing to water, for some hypothetical baptism).<sup>34</sup> Searle co-opts this externalist move by saying that the semantic content of 'water' is actually

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<sup>34</sup> Putnam (1975: 225).

determined by the internal descriptive criteria of ‘whatever is identical in structure with the stuff causing *this* visual experience, whatever that structure is’.<sup>35</sup>

Putnam’s Twin Earth argument was also meant to show that a speaker’s internal descriptive conditions could lead to the wrong referent, since XYZ also meets the descriptive criteria in speaker’s heads, but is not water. Putnam’s externalist view allows for socio-linguistic mechanisms to correct for this when speakers defer to experts in their speech community for determining the meanings of their words. Another way in which internalists co-opt externalism is by saying that the semantic content of ‘water’ is whatever meets the descriptive criteria for ‘water’, and that that includes the intention to defer to whatever the experts of the speech community determine is water.<sup>36</sup>

The standard internalist response fails for two reasons when considering non-racist speakers of epithets. First, the non-racist speaker can (and probably does) explicitly *reject* the racist concepts that the epithet is based upon, and so rejects the internalization. Rightly so, as internalism would appear to entail that speakers of epithets are automatically racist by thereby internalizing its meaning. The automaticity result is particularly implausible in light of the derogatory autonomy illustrated in NDNA uses. Second, the non-racist can (and probably does) also explicitly *reject* the deference to racist speakers about the meanings of epithets. Not only are racists conceptually confused, as their concepts fail to pick out their intended referents, but non-racists might explicitly refuse to defer for the ideological reasons outlined above.

Epithets appear *prima facie* to support internalism, but are actually especially problematic. Internalism posits that the relation between racist beliefs and racist meanings for epithets holds directly at the level of individual speakers, and that epithets are thus a bare

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<sup>35</sup> Searle (1983: 207).

<sup>36</sup> This metalinguistic move is explicitly discussed by Jackson (1998: 210), and suggested by Searle (1983: 208).

expression of those individual racist attitudes. As we have seen, this conception is false, and the relation between racist beliefs and racist meanings is actually better understood at the level of external racist institutions operating within speech communities. Racist institutions are complex systems that speakers can gain access to without thereby internalizing. Non-derogatory uses of epithets illustrate an important point in favor of combinatorial externalism: speakers can make use of an epithet's derogatory content to say non-derogatory things, and all the while rejecting the racist ideology from which that content originates. The internalist thesis that derogatory meanings are determined by internal descriptive criteria is thereby refuted. Meanings are fixed externally, and individual misconceptions about race do not have overriding semantic priority. Thus racists and non-racists alike who think that 'chink' refers to Chinese people are mistaking the internal concepts that they associate with 'chink' with the semantic content of the term. 'Chink' does not refer to Chinese people, just as 'water' does not refer to XYZ.

As epithets were initially considered to be paradigmatic examples in support of Radical Contextualism and Semantic Internalism, the problems considered here raise serious doubts for these views. Of course while such broad semantic conclusions are most likely established one expression type at a time, the key to emphasize is that CE has established semantic externalism for some of the unlikeliest expressions.

### **VIII. Practical Implications: First Amendment Speech Protection**

The considerations thus far have not only philosophical implications, but also legal implications. Among the many legal views about race is *critical race theory* (CRT). CRT is a liberal movement that emphasizes the subjective and historical experiences of oppressed minorities, in an effort to affect political change and eradicate racism. A specific part of their

project is to argue that racial epithets fail to merit First Amendment freedom of speech protection, and should be assimilated to ‘fighting words’ and true threats. If successful, the argument allows for government and institutional restrictions on the uses of epithets, thereby protecting minorities. Consonant with the basic theoretical themes of their view, critical race theorists proceed by offering a mostly phenomenological argument. As Matsuda, et al. (1993) describe it, the view embraces “subjectivity of perspective” and privileges “contextual and historical descriptions over transhistorical or purely abstract ones.”<sup>37</sup> My strategy in this section is to argue that the phenomenological argument fails, and that a better argument for their conclusion can be made in light of combinatorial externalism; a view which embraces the historical and social contributions to meaning, while rejecting the contextual and the subjective.

The CRT argument is an argument by analogy of the following form:

1. Epithets cause psychological harm.
2. Epithets fail to foster more speech.
3. The features in premises (1) and (2) are sufficient to establish an analogy between epithets and fighting words for First Amendment speech protection.
4. Therefore, epithets should be assimilated with fighting words for First Amendment speech protection.

Lawrence (1993) makes this argument when he writes:

Face-to-face insults, like fighting words, are undeserving of first amendment protection for two reasons. The first reason is the immediacy of the injurious impact of racial insults. The experience of being called “nigger,” “spic,” “Jap,” or “kike” is like receiving a slap in the face. The injury is instantaneous. There is neither an opportunity for intermediary reflection on the idea conveyed nor an opportunity for responsive speech. The harm to be avoided is both clear and present. The second reason that racial insults should not fall under protected speech relates to the purpose underlying the first amendment. The purpose of the first amendment is to foster the greatest amount of speech. Racial insults disserve that purpose. Assaultive racist speech functions as a preemptive strike. The racial invective is experienced as a blow, not a proffered idea, and once the blow is struck, it is unlikely that dialogue will follow. Racial insults are undeserving of first amendment protection because the perpetrator’s intention is not to discover

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<sup>37</sup> Matsuda, et al. (1993: 3).

truth or initiate dialogue, but to injure the victim.<sup>38</sup>

Is the CRT analogy between epithets and fighting words persuasive? The answer is no. The CRT strategy misplaces its weight on the phenomenological premise that epithets cause psychological harm. For example, Matsuda (1993) writes:

Critical race theory uses the experience of subordination to offer a phenomenology of race and law. The victim's experience reminds us that the harm of racist hate message is a real harm to real people. (50)

...an absolutist first amendment response to hate speech has the effect of perpetuating racism: Tolerance of hate speech is not tolerance borne by the community at large. Rather, it is a psychic tax imposed on those least able to pay. (18)

Patricia Williams has called the blow of racist messages "spirit murder" in recognition of the psychic destruction victims experience (19)

While the rhetoric in support of the phenomenological premise is overdramatic, few would disagree with the negative effects of epithets on its targets. However, the premise is insufficient to establish the analogy, and thus premise (3), because fighting words must threaten, and psychological damage (no matter how extreme) is not sufficient to warrant a threat. Non-threatening language *can* generate comparable psychological effects in the right contexts.<sup>39</sup> The problem bears repeating: extremely negative psychological effects (even granting the second premise) are not sufficient for meeting the criteria of threatening language. To put it another way, CRT's argument mistakenly rests on making the fundamental distinction between threatening and non-threatening language rest on the distinction between negative and non-negative phenomenological effects in its hearers. While it is plausibly true that threatening language entails a negative psychological impact for its hearers, this point lacks the support of

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<sup>38</sup> Lawrence (1993: 67-68)

<sup>39</sup> Imagine asking the question 'May I take this chair?' being uttered to someone in a crowded café as opposed to someone standing on a chair about to be hanged.

empirical data. Furthermore, the second point that non-threatening language necessarily entails a non-negative phenomenology for its hearers bears too high a burden of proof.

On most legal standards, fighting words are more than just harmful or offensive words. To fall into this unprotected domain, the language must present an imminent threat of violence by a hostile audience. According to the Brandenburg Test which was established in the U.S. Supreme Court's last major decision on inflammatory speech, the Court held that speech may not be suppressed or punished unless it is both intended to "produce imminent lawless action" and that it is "likely to produce such action".<sup>40</sup> The proponent of the CRT analysis faces a potential disanalogy because epithets usually fail to provoke imminent lawless action. Here the CRT proponent does have a successful response. Theorists like Lawrence point out that victims of racial epithets are often not in a position to respond, so any provocation or 'likely consequence' standard is misapplied, and this particular dissimilarity is irrelevant.

The ACLU, one of the strongest supporters of the First Amendment, proposed a true threats standard that adjusts for this consideration. It states:

[T]he free speech clause of the First Amendment does not protect statements that are "true threats." A statement made by a person constitutes a "true threat" when:

First, a person makes a statement that, in context, a reasonable listener would interpret as communicating a serious expression of an intent to inflict or cause serious harm on or to the listener; and

Second, the speaker intended that the communication be taken as a threat that would serve to place the listener in fear for his or her personal safety, regardless of whether the speaker actually intended to carry out the threat.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969)

<sup>41</sup> "ACLU Foundation of Oregon Amicus Curiae", ACLU, presented in *Planned Parenthood v. American Coalition of Life Activists* (1999), US Court of Appeals, 9th Circuit.



The consequentialist standard of Brandenburg is thus replaced with a deontic standard whereby speakers' intentions must be assessed to determine whether the speech is a threat. The ACLU standard presents another hurdle for the CRT argument which is primarily based on the phenomenological effects generated by epithets, and is internally problematic since that phenomenology can be reproduced by non-threatening language.

CE provides a non-psychological argument that racial epithets meet even the ACLU standard, and thus ought to fall outside First Amendment protection. The central question is why epithets ought to be assimilated to threats. On my view, certain epithets are threats not because they are analogous to them, but because they *literally are* threats. Consider the following sentences:

- 38. You ought to be shot
- 39. You ought to be lynched
- 40. You ought to be killed

In normal contexts, they pragmatically implicate that the speaker *will* shoot, lynch, kill the hearer. Thus the expressions (in normal contexts) meet both the Brandenburg and ACLU standards to count as true threats, and fall outside of First Amendment speech protection. CE provides well-motivated semantic reasons for literally assimilating epithets to true threats. If these kinds of prescriptions are part of the literal meaning for some epithets, then there are grounds for arguing that those epithets can literally threaten its hearers. Depending on the racist institution affiliated with the epithet, predication of the epithet towards a target may prescribe truly threatening practices. The determination of whether any particular epithet meets the criteria depends on two factors: (1) the semantic value of the individual epithet (i.e. what prescribed practices are expressed in the complex racist property), and (2) the contextual questions that face

threatening language more generally. Note that the second factor is not a concession to radical contextualism. Certain contextual features must be assessed to determine whether particular utterances are threatening, and this holds for epithets and non-epithets alike. In this way, the treatment of epithets is assimilated to the treatment of threats, in general, without relying on the force of the phenomenological observations. Assessment of whether a particular racial epithet rises to the level set forth by the ACLU standard is, thus, a matter of what they semantically express. Therefore, CE provides a more principled way of ruling out certain epithets from First Amendment speech protection.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Putnam (1975) was correct when he said that meanings are less like hammers or screwdrivers and more like steam ships.<sup>42</sup> Meaningful language requires a coordinated social practice within a speech community. His externalist framework fits perfectly with racial epithets. Epithets express complex properties externally derived from racist institutions. These properties have the potential for being deeply derogatory and even threatening. In straightforwardly racist contexts, they literally *say* very bad things about their targets. In non-racist contexts, the account offers the requisite flexibility to meet the complex conditions of adequacy surrounding their use. Without the semantic resources to account for these phenomena, the door is open for both contextualism and internalism. Combinatorial externalism closes that door.

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<sup>42</sup> Putnam (1975: 229).

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