Language, Politics and "The Folk": Looking for "The Meaning" of 'Race'[1]

1. Introduction

Contemporary discussions of race and racism devote considerable effort to giving conceptual analyses of these notions. Much of the work is concerned to investigate a priori what we mean by the terms 'race' and 'racism' (e.g., Garcia 1996; 1997; 1999; Blum 2002; Hardimon 2003; Mallon 2004). More recent work has started to employ empirical methods to determine the content of our "folk concepts," or "folk theory" of race and racism (Glasgow 2009; Glasgow et al. 2009; Faucher and Machery 2009). In contrast to both of these projects, I have argued elsewhere that in considering what we mean by these terms we should treat them on the model of kind terms whose reference is fixed by ordinary uses, but whose content is discovered empirically using social theory; I have also argued that it is not only important to determine what we *actually* mean by these terms, but what we *should* mean, i.e., what type, if any, we should be tracking (Haslanger 2000; 2006).

My own discussion of these issues, however, has been confused and confusing. In giving an account of race or gender, is the goal to provide a conceptual analysis? Or to investigate the kinds we are referring to? To draw attention to different kinds? To stipulate new meanings? Jennifer Saul has raised a series of powerful objections to my accounts of gender and race, suggesting that they are neither semantically nor politically useful, regardless of whether we treat them as revisionary proposals, or as elucidations of our concepts (Saul 2006). Joshua Glasgow has also offered a critique of my externalist approach to race as an effort to capture "our concept" (Glasgow 2009, chs. 6–7). I agree with much of what they say, but I also believe that there is something I was trying to capture that remains valuable. So the challenge, as I see it, is to situate my accounts against a different theoretical background that can highlight what might

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be useful without entailing the problematic linguistic and conceptual claims. Whether and how this is possible, I have yet to determine.

However, rather than taking up this question directly in this paper, I will undertake to explain more fully why I believe both the *a priori* and "experimental" investigation into the concepts of race and racism are misguided; as I do so, I will draw on recent work in philosophy of language (especially Bigelow and Schroeter 2009; Schroeter and Schroeter 2009) to suggest an understanding of meaning that better accommodates the shifting terrain of social life and our goal of tracking important types as our knowledge develops.[2] I believe that the emerging model illuminates better than the dominant descriptivist model the ways in which meanings are produced by and evolve through collaborative practices. In their best form, such collaborative practices are responsive to multiple participants in the linguistic community and take into account shifting concerns and the development of new knowledge. By unpacking such practices, however, we can also see how some speakers may be excluded from the production of meaning; this provides space for exploring briefly Miranda Fricker's notion of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2006; Fricker 2009). The goal of this paper is not to argue for any particular account of meaning or account of race, but to bring to the discussion new tools that are not only useful for thinking about race and racism, but for engaging in critical feminist and anti-racist theory more broadly. I am also hopeful that some of my own work on race and gender can be fruitfully recast in the terms offered here; but that effort is for another occasion.

2. The Classical Theory of Meaning

Traditional descriptivism, following Frege, holds that terms have senses or meanings that determine their referents. These meanings are what a speaker knows when she or he uses the term; they are the basis for shared meanings and so make communication possible; and they are the subject matter of conceptual analysis. However, traditional descriptivism took a barrage of direct hits from Quine (1953), Kripke (1972), Putnam (1975), Burge (1979), and others. It is now generally acknowledged that speakers can be competent in the use of a term and can communicate using it without being able to specify conditions that determine the referent across possible worlds or even within the actual world.

However, a set of plausible moves has seemed (to some) to salvage a version of descriptivism (see, e.g., Jackson 1998a, Jackson 1998b). According to this neo-descriptivism, reference is determined in two steps: speakers employ an implicit "folk theory" or meaning "template" that fixes the referent of the term relative to the actual world and tells us how reference depends on empirical information in the context of use; this folk theory, supplemented with further social, empirical, and modal facts, determines the referent. Competence in using a term is a matter of having tacit knowledge of the "folk theory" and this shared background makes communication possible. Experts, however, are needed to discover the essence of the referent fixed by the "folk theory." (Note that on the neo-descriptivist account, experts aren't needed to determine the referent, but only to discover the essence once the referent is determined; the resulting account provided by the experts is not analytic. (cf. Glasgow 2008, 127–28))

For example, what does the term 'apple' mean? 'Apple' means 'that edible fruit that (actually) grows on trees in temperate climates, comes in various shades of red and green, has a thin skin and sweet flesh'. Most competent users cannot specify exactly what biological kind apples belong to (*malus domestica*) or that apple trees are a member of the rose family (*Roseaceae*); but the "folk theory" contained in the suggested meaning is sufficient to refer. Even if a speaker considers what 'apple' means in a novel environment, she will apply her "folk theory" and seek information, as needed, about the biological kind of the fruit trees there. The "folk theory" that determines the referent of 'apple' in a context does not vary across contexts.

The neo-descriptivist's account consists of several key claims:[3]

1) For any term (or virtually any term) *t,* there is a set of topic-specific assumptions—a speaker's "folk theory" of what *t* purports to pick out—that guides the speaker's application of the term to cases; these assumptions do not vary with the speaker's assumptions about the environment she is in.

2) For most speakers, the "folk theory" associated with *t* is tacit and is revealed in their judgments about cases.

3) The "folk theory," together with information about the speaker's environment, as needed, determines what the speaker refers to using *t.*[4]

4) Most members of a linguistic community associate the very same "folk theory" with *t*. Competence in the standard use of *t* requires that one employ the (tacit) "folk theory" in one's applications of *t*.

5) Statements articulating the "folk theory" for *t* are analytic, i.e., they are "analytic in the sense that [they are] guaranteed to be true on pain of changing the meaning" of the term (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 6). However, even though claims articulating our tacit knowledge of meaning are analytic, they do not, by themselves, give us knowledge of essences, e.g., knowing that water is what actually flows in rivers and streams on Earth doesn't provide us with knowledge of the essence of water.

6) The fact that most people converge in their "folk theories" gives everyone a justifying and motivating reason to associate the standard "folk theory" with *t*. Thus, we know we co-refer; this makes communication possible.

This neo-descriptivism has some clear virtues. It provides an account of reference that also explains linguistic competence and communication. It grants competent speakers knowledge of meanings that guides them in applying terms to cases. Moreover, the neo-descriptivist succeeds in avoiding some of the critiques of the original descriptivism by the qualifications added in (2) and (3). The meaning of a term is not something an ordinary speaker can articulate because the knowledge is tacit; and the meaning does not, by itself, determine the reference, for the template may require supplementation by empirical information only available in the context of use.

However, neo-descriptivism has been repeatedly challenged (Block and Stalnaker 1999; Yablo 2000; Schroeter 2003; Byrne and Pryor 2004; Schroeter 2004; Stalnaker 2006; Schroeter Bigelow and Schroeter 2009). I present here a sample of criticisms. As might be expected, defenders of neo-descriptivism have developed responses to these arguments. I will not go into the details here because the point of this paper is not to discuss the ultimate tenability of neo-descriptivism, but to illuminate some of its substantial weaknesses in order to dislodge it from its presumed status in theorizing about gender and race (and other social and normative phenomena).

To begin, although responsive to some of the complaints against descriptivism, the neo-descriptivist is not fully responsive to other, especially

Quinean, parts of the critique. Two important themes of post-Quinean philosophy are skepticism about analyticity and epistemic holism. Recall (briefly), Quine's idea is that there is no adequate way to distinguish analytic truths from well-entrenched generalizations about the phenomena in question (Quine 1953). And there shouldn't be, for our semantic beliefs, like all other beliefs, should always be responsive to new circumstances and new knowledge. For example, there are approximately 7,500 known cultivars of apple; if a tree was cultivated using existing stock that produced an inedible, perhaps even toxic, fruit, it would be more sensible to modify our understanding of the term 'apple' to remove 'edible' from the "folk theory" rather than deny that the fruit is an apple. (In fact, there is reason to think that apple trees produced at least hardly edible fruit until cultivation improved them (Pollan 2002).) The same sort of thing could be said for 'water'. If we evolved so that we could not digest plain H_20 but required corn syrup and carbonation to be added, water would not be potable, and the "folk theory" associated with water would be false. Although in principle a neo-descriptivist could argue that all this is just evidence that our tacit folk theories associated with 'apple' and 'water' do not include edibility and potability, the worry is that there isn't, and again, for epistemic reasons *there should not be*, any fixed ideas about meaning that are "held true come what may" (Quine 1953, 42–43). This counts against claims (3) and (5).

Further, as Bigelow and Schroeter (2009, 99) point out, outliers who have idiosyncratic ideas and reject some of the standard folk theory associated with a term can remain competent even if their idiosyncratic ideas are false, e.g., someone who denied that the oceans were filled with water, or that water is flavorless, doesn't thereby cease to be competent in the use of 'water'. As Burge (1979) famously argued, someone using the term 'arthritis' normally refers to the joint disease even if she believes that she has arthritis in her thigh (this is what makes her wrong, rather than right about a homonymous disease). But more importantly, it is not only possible, but in some cases epistemically required for competent speakers to reject some part of the "folk theory" associated with a term. The Schroeters's example is Galileo (2009, 100): his failure to believe that the earth is flat did not render him incompetent in the use of the term 'earth' for he had evidence that conflicted with the "folk theory" of the earth at the time. Again, this shows that commitment to analyticity is in tension

with the rational revision of our beliefs in light of new knowledge. In general, successful rational inquiry does not destabilize meaning; we normally take it to provide us with a better understanding of what we were trying to understand all along (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 15).

In the Galileo case one might complain that being flat was never really part of the meaning of 'earth'. However consider 'marriage'. Plausibly the standard "folk theory" of marriage has been that marriages can only occur between one man and one woman; those who refused to accept this belief, according to neo-descriptivism, were not competent users of the term. And those of us now who reject this "folk theory" have changed the meaning of 'marriage' and are talking about something else. For those of us committed to social change, these implications are unacceptable, for these are not plausibly semantic controversies, but are social and political ones. Just as Quine and Putnam emphasized that a commitment to analyticity stands in the way of scientific progress, the same might be said of its bearing on social progress.[5] These considerations are directly relevant to the discussion of 'race', for even if the "folk" believe that race is a biological category, on the non-descriptivist account we're exploring, those who know that it is not can still use the term 'race' competently without the problematic belief or entailment. In light of these concerns, we should resist points (1), (4) and (6) of neo-descriptivism.

Moreover, it is difficult to see how neo-descriptivism can find any plausible "folk theories" that satisfy both conditions (3) and (4) (see Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, section 3). Condition (3) requires that the "folk theory" is sufficiently substantive and precise that it determines reference, and yet condition (4) requires that every competent speaker accepts the same "folk theory." The worry is that individual speakers may have very different ideas that actually guide their use of a term, and in order to satisfy condition (4) we must take as part of the "folk theory" the intersection of these ideas; but it is hard to believe that there is enough in the speakers' overlapping assumptions to achieve determinate reference to the purported entity or type of entity in the world.

Although I have only given a brief sketch of considerations against a neo-descriptivist account of meaning, it is clear that if we reject any form of descriptivism (traditional or neo-), some of the recent philosophical work on race and racism—work that purports to be exploring the "folk theory" or ordinary view of race—will look to be barking up the wrong tree. Regardless of whether one employs a priori reflection or empirical

psychology to explore allegedly tacit assumptions we hold about what race is, the results will not give us an account of what 'race' means, for these tacit assumptions do not determine meaning. The kind of conceptual analysis presupposed by these projects is not viable because it rests on a mistaken view of language, concepts, and communication.

3. The Improvisational (or Jazz) Account of Meaning

A. (Pure) Reference Externalism

The descriptivist tradition has a powerful grip on our semantic imaginations and undergirds much of what happens in analytic philosophy. So if we are going to reject it, we need another model to take its place.[6] Since the 1970s externalists have been developing this model. The work by Bigelow, Schroeter, and Schroeter I've been drawing on outlines an externalist approach that I believe is well-suited to politically engaged theorizing, and offers resources for thinking about the politics of meaning. In this section I will briefly sketch their account, and in the next I will consider how it might be fruitfully applied in critical race and gender theory.

Externalists about meaning maintain that the meaning of a term is determined, at least in part, by facts about the social and physical context of use, and not simply by the mental states of the individual using it. Thoroughgoing externalists hold the Millian or Russellian view that terms have a single meaning, viz., their referents, and a term does not get its referent by virtue of yet a further semantic item such as a Fregean sense along the lines the descriptivist would suggest. According to externalists of this sort, the meaning of a term is determined by a variety of complex pragmatic and causal factors. Typically we will have descriptions in mind that pick out the same referent as the term in question, or so we believe, but these descriptions are not part of the meaning of the term (as Stalnaker would put it, they are *metasemantic,* not *semantic* (Stalnaker 2006, 301)), nor do they provide a template or "folk theory" that determines, in the context of utterance, what we refer to.

Roughly, on the pure reference externalist view, what we are referring to takes priority in our use of language to how we think about it. Language is used primarily to refer to things in the world, and having latched onto the world we find multiple ways to describe it. Sometimes our descriptions are accurate and sometimes not. On the descriptivist model, in contrast, thought takes priority. We have a thought and it turns out that

there are things in the world that match it. We communicate, according to the externalist, by talking about the same things; according to the descriptivist, by expressing the same thoughts.

There are a number of concerns that a Millian or pure reference externalist must address, e.g., how to account for the epistemic value of true identity statements, how to handle vacuous terms, how to accommodate contingent necessities. Of course there is a substantial literature on these issues (Salmon 1986; Stalnaker 1999; Soames 2003), and I will not attempt to explicate how reference externalism might be developed to address them all. Rather, I want to emphasize the value of reference externalism in calling attention to a set of questions about meaning that descriptivists systematically evade (Stalnaker 1997, 535–36). I believe there are compelling reasons to favor the pure reference externalist account of meaning; however, my point in this paper is not to present these reasons fully, but to show that such an account provides better access to the process of creating meanings that critical race and gender theorists have a special interest in than do the dominant descriptivism and neo-descriptivism. Although these considerations are not, by themselves, sufficient to defend pure reference externalism, they should motivate a reconsideration of the methodology of current debates over race and racism.

It is important to note that given a term *t,* there are many questions we might ask about its meaning. For example, we might want to know the meaning of *t*. This is a descriptive question about the semantics of the language in which *t* occurs. However, we might also ask a more foundational question: by virtue of what does the term *t* have its meaning? For the Fregean or neo-Fregean, the two questions are answered together: one explicates the meaning of *t* by invoking the sense or descriptive content of the term, and *t* refers to what it does because that is what satisfies the description associated with *t*. In effect, *what the speaker conveys is identified with what determines reference.* But this assumption, that what the speaker conveys is also what determines the reference, is optional. And if we reject it, it becomes clear that there is an important construal of the foundational question that is obscured by the Fregean approach. Stalnaker describes it this way:

> If we are implicitly looking for a semantic account of names that answers both [the descriptive and foundational] questions at once, then the Millian

> theory that says that the semantic value of a name is simply its referent looks like a non-answer; it seems to be denying the obvious fact that there must be something about the capacities, behavior, or mental state of the users of the name that make it the case that the name has the referent it has.

However,

> On the other hand, the conflation of the two questions masks the fact that the sense theory, interpreted as an answer to the question of descriptive semantics is also a non-answer to the foundational question. Suppose we were to accept the Fregean thesis that names have the referent that they have because they have a sense that determines a function whose value (at the actual world) is that referent. This simply raises the question: what is it about the capacities, behavior, or mental state of the users of the name that makes it the case that the name has the sense that it in fact has? (Stalnaker 1997, 543)

The descriptivist and the reference externalist both, in their own way, offer answers to the descriptive and foundational questions. However, once we reject the assumption that what gives a term its reference is what the speaker has in mind in using the term, we are led to important questions concerning the basis of meaning in the social and physical context of speech. Because the (neo-) descriptivist has a ready-made answer to what determines meaning, viz., the descriptive content or sense, these questions are occluded.

B. Referential Practices

So, how *do* we refer? And how do we know we are correctly applying our terms if we aren't applying a (tacit) rule? How do we know we mean the same thing and so communicate if we aren't applying the same rule? Here's a quick sketch of one externalist answer: interpretation of our own past linguistic practice with a term and the practice of those around us, together with empirical investigation, enables us to make judgments about how the term applies; the term refers to what a fully informed and rational judge in such circumstances would take herself to refer to.[7] To the extent that we are informed and rational, we can know the correct application of the term. And since we intend to use the term in a way consistent with our past practice and so that we co-refer with others in our linguistic community, we usually converge on the same thing and our

words mean the same. Because we are collaborating on this, we know this about each other and communicate. For reasons that will become clearer shortly, let's call this the *rational improvisation account* of meaning.

It will be useful to flesh out this sketch a bit. There are two sets of questions to consider: (a) how does a term such as 'water' *get* the meaning it has and how do we know its meaning (and so use it correctly); (b) how do we communicate using the term 'water'? By virtue of what do we co-refer, not by accident, but *de jure.*

Let's begin with (a) and an individual speaker's meaning. As we considered above, on the neo-descriptivist account, speakers refer to things by virtue of the "folk theory" they tacitly hold about the things in question. We saw, however, that this account privileged certain beliefs associated with a term as unrevisable, and this required a denial of epistemic holism. In order to accommodate epistemic holism, we should allow that whatever we take to be part of the meaning of a term at some point, we may regard as a mere correlation at another point as we learn more about what we take ourselves to be tracking. When scientists found that the atom is, in fact, divisible, they adjusted their beliefs about atoms; it never was an analytic truth that atoms are indivisible, for if it were, we could not be talking about atoms as we do now. Rather than relying on a fixed template to adjudicate hard cases, the speaker will have to rely on "holistic hermeneutical reasoning starting from the entire relevant set of assumptions" (Bigelow and Schroeter 2009, 15).

> More specifically, a subject gets closer to the truth about what it takes to be [water] via holistic rationalizing interpretation of her own use of the term ['water']. The subject is looking for a theoretical interpretation of her term ['water'] which vindicates the most important aspects of her total practice with that term, including her changing substantive understanding of its reference, her implicit criteria for identifying instances, her proto-theoretical hunches about why certain principles are important, and so on. In this exercise of rational interpretation, the subject is trying to make sense of her *whole* practice with the term, by requiring each of her substantive assumptions to earn its keep in light of holistic reflective theorizing. (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 14; I've substituted 'water' for 'right' in order to simplify the case.)

On this account, the speaker relies on "rational improvisation" in light of what she knows about the world and her past practice in using the term.[8]

Schroeter and Schroeter extend the analogy with jazz as they move to consider the questions in group (b) concerning co-reference and communication:

> Consider a musical analogy. The members of a classical string quartet achieve a coordinated musical performance by settling in advance on a common score. This common score then serves as a fixed template, which guides each individual player's performance on the crucial night. The classical performance is coordinated and kept on track by each player following the template they've agreed upon. The members of a jazz quartet have a very different way of achieving musical coordination: instead of settling on a specific template for their performance, jazz musicians can rely on their improvisational skills. Each member is committed to building on whatever musical themes other members of the group try out, seeking a continuation that makes best musical sense of the whole performance so far. Each player in the group trusts that the others will try to take everyone's contributions on board and incorporate them into a coherent musical structure. The jazz musicians' coordinating intentions, together with a rough congruence in musical sensibility, are what keep the joint musical performance on track, developing interesting themes rather than degenerating into a cacophony of divergent voices. (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 16)

Just as coordinating intentions and shared sensibility are what sustain the jazz performance, coordinating intentions and shared understandings sustain communication. The use of a common language requires not just that we aim to use terms in a way consistent with our own past use, corrected by our current knowledge. Rather, in competently using a term as part of a shared language we must "have a coordinating intention to use the term in a way that makes the best sense of the communal practice" and our understanding of the term, at least initially, "must not diverge so radically from that of others in the community as to undermine that coordinating intention" (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 18). This effort to coordinate involves "looking for the property that *all* of us have been talking about all along" (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 17).

On this account, we share meanings, not by having the same "folk theory" of the subject matter, but by both being part of a "historically extended representational tradition," within which we are each trying to make sense of that tradition as we engage with the world it purports to represent. Being part of such a tradition is consistent with substantial disagreement on any particular claim; what matters is that we are engaged collaboratively with others in a shared project of representing what or how things are in some corner of the world. So, for example, we can still mean the same thing by 'water' and communicate about water even if we disagree about the chemical composition of water, whether the ocean is filled with water, and whether water is good to drink, as long as we are

each working to apply the term 'water' in light of our best interpretation of a shared linguistic tradition.

> Competence with the meaning of a word constitutes an entry ticket into communal discussion: it demarcates whom we should treat as a legitimate interlocutor on a given topic, and who genuinely agrees or disagrees with us. In short, sameness of meaning allows for direct epistemic coordination on a single subject matter, whether by different speakers or by the very same speaker. (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 23)

4. Improvising the Meanings of 'Race,' 'Racism' Etc.

For over a decade, philosophers have taken up the debate over whether race is real or not, whether race is a social or a natural category, whether "race talk" should be eliminated. Much of the discussion has pivoted on questions concerning what the term 'race' means, fueled initially, perhaps, by Appiah's argument (1998) that it is part of the meaning of race that races are natural kinds, and that there are no natural kinds of the sort that race talk purports to capture. Given the concerns with descriptivism, what should we make of these debates? And how should we proceed to study race and racism?

First, should we be seeking the "folk theory" of race (whether a priori or by experimental methods) that determines, in the context of utterance, the extension of 'race'? If we reject descriptivism, as I have suggested, we shouldn't. However, we might want to know the "folk theory" of race (and other categories) in order to engage in hermeneutical deliberation about what we have meant and should mean, i.e., in order to rationally improvise on the representational tradition and to give substance to our coordinating intentions. This does not commit us individually to accepting any particular claim of the folk theory in order to be competent with the term, or in order to co-refer.

Second, should we be aiming to provide an analysis of the concept of 'race'? If we reject descriptivism, as I have suggested, we shouldn't. Instead, we should take ourselves to be offering theories of the phenomena that the term 'race' refers to. The theories are not known a priori, nor are they analytically true. The theories we come up with may, in fact, violate some of the core assumptions concerning the phenomenon because they incorporate new knowledge. This does not entail that we are changing the meaning of the terms.

Third, does the term 'race' refer to anything? Well, one might suggest, it depends. Not only Appiah, but also many others have argued that a core component of the "folk theory" of race is that races are biological groups. If one is a descriptivist then, assuming that there are no biological kinds that meet the conditions for races, the term 'race' doesn't refer. But of course this conclusion does not follow for a pure reference externalist of the sort I've sketched; on the externalist account the question whether races exist cannot be settled on purely semantic grounds, either employing a priori intuitions or experiments concerning the "folk theory" of race. For example, using a rational improvisation model, I would argue that we can justify the claim that the best interpretation of our ongoing collective practice using the term 'race' is compatible with races being social kinds, and social constructionists about race are not shifting the meaning of the term. As a result, it is misleading to suggest (as I myself have sometimes done) that social constructionist accounts of race are revisionist; the issue is what counts as the important features of our past practice of using the term 'race' as we move forward, and our judgment about this may differ from what we thought before. Moreover, given that the realists (both social constructionists and racialists) and anti-realists at least appear to be engaged in a shared project of understanding our representational tradition in using the term 'race', there is reason to think that we co-refer with our uses of the term (in the limit case, I suppose, we all fail to refer). The question, then, is not who is misusing the term, but whose account is best at doing justice both to the historical collective practice and the worldly facts, or even, whose rational improvisation is the best extension of our past practice. This is not a question to be settled here; rather, my goal is to shift the terms of debate so it is not so focused on discussion of what our "folk theory" or ordinary ideas about race are. Although historical and semantic information about past use may be useful in the hermeneutical task of understanding our past practice, we are not bound by that history or (believed) semantics, so this sort of inquiry settles no philosophical or political problem.

5. Meaning and Politics

I suggested several times above that reference externalism is better situated to illuminate the social and political dimensions of meaning, and

as such, should be taken seriously by feminist and race theorists. The idea was that on a descriptivist account foundational questions about how words have meaning are answered in terms of what speakers have in mind, and this obscures questions about the collaborative process by which noises come to be part of a language and representational traditions are formed. Admittedly, the causal and pragmatic stories that reference externalists rely on to explain how terms refer are not always socially informed. So externalism, per se, is no more friendly to feminist and anti-racist insights than descriptivism. However, as the Schroeter and Bigelow and Schroeter and Schroeter discussions demonstrate, there is much room in externalist semantics for a study of the social dynamics of meaning. And this attention to the social dimension of what we mean and what we say has been a part of pragmatics since its inception (see, e.g., Grice (1975).)

To illustrate the sort of political analysis I have in mind, it is useful to reconsider a passage quoted above:

> Competence with the meanings of a word constitutes an entry ticket into communal discussion: it demarcates whom we should treat as a legitimate interlocutor on a given topic, and who genuinely agrees or disagrees with us. In short, sameness of meaning allows for direct epistemic coordination on a single subject matter, whether by different speakers or by the very same speaker. (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 23)

On the rational improvisation model, sameness of meaning is a matter of shared epistemic practice. We share a meaning if and only if we are collaborating in making sense of a shared representational tradition and our understandings are not so divergent as to undermine our collaborative intentions. With these conditions, questions arise about how to think of epistemic practices and the social conditions for knowledge. For example, the rational improvisation model gives us resources to explain how remarking that someone "doesn't mean the same thing we do" is an epistemic put-down and a move in a social practice of exclusion. As Schroeter and Schroeter put it:

> By commonsense standards, anyone with whom we can profitably participate in critical debate involving an evaluative term—whatever his initial substantive assumptions are—shares the same meaning. (2009, 21)

So denying shared meaning is a way of refusing entry into the shared epistemic project and critical debate. This, in turn, allows us to raise the

possibility that meanings might be limited or deformed because they are not grounded in a broad community of speakers.

The rational improvisation model can also help us understand certain kinds of semantic disablement. In her recent work, Miranda Fricker has explored the idea of hermeneutic injustice: "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker 2006, 100). On Fricker's account, hermeneutic injustice begins with a cognitive disablement caused by a simple hermeneutical lacuna: there are things that we cannot think or speak about because we do not have the words for them. Such a lacuna is not necessarily an injustice, but becomes an injustice when it results in an asymmetrical disadvantage, e.g., if you are able to take advantage of me or harm me because I have no way to describe or identify the wrong you are inflicting, or if my efforts to do so, given the limits of the dominant vocabulary, do not achieve uptake. Fricker's example is the phenomenon of sexual harassment. Until the term 'sexual harassment' was introduced, women not only suffered from unwanted sexual attention from their employers as a condition of employment, but also suffered from the hermeneutic injustice of being unable to identify the problem. Other examples might include the phenomena of white privilege, racial profiling, and hate speech.

What is interesting about these examples, in the context of our current discussion, is that new terms and new connections between ideas are being forged as part of a process of hermeneutical interpretation and deliberation. In reflecting on a representational tradition one may find ways to improvise, but one may also find oneself or one's experience excluded, prompting new and alternative epistemic projects, as well as new and alternative representations. The rational improvisation model invites us to consider the social dynamics, collaboration, and reflective practice required for shared meanings. For those who are members of subordinated groups, this creates space within dominant philosophy of language to capture moments of libratory politics. Critical race and gender studies would be well served by exploring the jazz rather than the classical model of meaning.

6. Conclusion

This is not an essay that has undertaken to establish any conclusions. Rather, my point has been to call attention to trends in contemporary phi-

losophy of language that have not been taken sufficiently seriously by those working in social and moral philosophy. The project of conceptual analysis, even if supplemented by empirical methods, cannot be taken for granted. More specifically, conceptual analysis is thoroughly rejected by many philosophers who specialize on language, concepts and meaning, and other models of inquiry have replaced it, and this cannot simply be ignored by normative theory if it is to be part of a broader project of rational inquiry. I have also suggested that for those working in critical race and gender theory, these alternative models should be attractive, for they take seriously a social and political dimension of meaning that opens space for considerations of justice. This is where social and political theory can contribute to philosophy of language. The moral of this story, insofar as there is one, is that engagement across subdisciplines of philosophy is tremendously valuable, for not only does normative theory have much to learn from philosophy of language and mind, but philosophy of language and mind can benefit significantly from a consideration of the moral background of our linguistic practices. Although there are important differences between normative and non-normative inquiry, one cannot do full justice to the phenomena without attending to both.

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NOTES

1. I presented a version of this paper at the Pacific APA, Spring 2009. Thanks to the audience for helpful discussion. Thanks also to Joshua Glasgow, Rae Langton, Janet Levine, Laura Schroeter, Manuel Vargas, and Stephen Yablo for valuable conversation on topics related to this paper.

2. I'm by no means the first to suggest this. See, e.g., Mercier 2007, Andreasen 2005.

3. These are summarized very effectively in (Bigelow and Schroeter 2009, 98; Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 6).

4. Some find it useful to think of the "folk theory" in terms of the Kaplanian character which, in the context of utterance, determines the referent (Kaplan 1989).

5. This influence is not merely hypothesized, but can be witnessed in the conservative arguments against gay and lesbian marriage (Mercier 2007). If 'marriage' *means* a union between one man and one woman, then same-sex marriage is not really marriage and should not be viewed and treated as such.

6. I have argued elsewhere that we should adopt an externalist approach to meaning that extends the insights of Putnam, Kripke, et al. beyond reliance on natural science to social theory (Haslanger 2006), and that genealogical (Haslanger 2005) and ameliorative (Haslanger 2000, 2006) dimensions should be added to the project of elucidating meaning. My recommendations have been motivated not by following carefully every move in contemporary philosophy of language, but by thinking through what is needed for feminist and antiracist theorizing. As a result, the proposals I have made are firmly externalist about meaning, they have been rather vague, fragmented, and unsystematic.

7. This is what Schroeter and Schroeter call the "responsibilist approach to the determination of reference" (2009, 6). However, it is not clear to me whether on the rational improvisational account proposed (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009; Schroeter and Bigelow 2009) the verdict of the ideal judge constitutes the reference relation, or if the relation is otherwise constituted (by additional causal and pragmatic considerations) but is guaranteed, given the hypothesis of full knowledge, to be correct. In effect, this is the Euthyphro question. And as in the case of any account invoking an idealized judge, there are difficult questions about how to go about the idealization (Loeb 1995). Though important, it is not crucial for my purposes here to settle these questions.

8. I should note that (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009) focuses specifically on thin moral terms such as 'right' and 'good'. Their point, although general, has a special force for this domain: "reflective equilibrium constantly refines and restructures an individual's moral understanding through the addition, subtraction, and fine-tuning of moral assumptions." Presumably, it would be a mistake to entrench just those background assumptions that strike one as "obvious and central" and insist that deviation from them involves a change of meaning (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, 13).

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