Conservatives and Racists: Inferential Role Semantics and Pejoratives

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Abstract According to inferential role semantics (IRS), for any given expression to possess a particular meaning one must be disposed to make or, alternatively, acknowledge as correct certain inferential transitions involving it. As Williamson points out, pejoratives such as 'Boche' seem to provide a counter-example to IRS. Many speakers are neither disposed to use such expressions nor consider it proper to do so. But it does not follow, as IRS appears to entail, that such speakers do not understand pejoratives or that they lack meaning. In this paper, I examine recent responses to this problem by Boghossian and Brandom and argue that their proposed construal of the kind of inferential rules governing a pejorative such as 'Boche' is to be ruled out on the grounds that it is non-conservative. I defend the appeal to conservatism in this instance against criticism and, in doing so, propose an alternative approach to pejoratives on behalf of IRS that resolves the problem Williamson poses.

Keywords Inferentialism · Meaning · Conservatism · Pejoratives · Semantics

Introduction

According to an inferential role semantics (IRS), that an expression is or would be employed in specific inferences is determinative of its meaning.[1] Correlatively, on

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[1] For a critical overview of the arguments in favour of IRS, see Lepore (1994). Importantly, one need not hold that *every* inferential relation an expression stands in is determinative of its meaning. On the contrary, in order to ensure constancy and communicability of meaning, there is reason to privilege certain inferential relations as constitutive of meaning and treat others as non-constitutive (see Fodor and Lepore 1992, 2002). How precisely one draws that distinction need not concern us here (see Boghossian 1994; Glock 2003: ch. 3; Horwich 1998: ch. 9).

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this view, for any given speaker to grasp a particular meaning she must be disposed to make certain inferential transitions involving it.[2]

Several years ago, Prior (1960) objected to IRS on the following grounds. Given IRS, one could presumably provide a meaning for a connective 'tonk' by determining that it is to be employed according to the following rules:

$$\text{tonk} - \text{introduction} \quad \frac{p}{p \text{ tonk } q} \quad \text{tonk} - \text{elimination} \quad \frac{p \text{ tonk } q}{q}$$

Evidently, by following these rules for the use of 'tonk,' and so in virtue of grasping the supposed meaning of 'tonk' alone, one could infer any claim from any other claim. Prior took this to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of IRS. One cannot give an expression a genuine meaning simply be stipulating that it is to be employed in inference in a certain way. As Belnap (1962: 130) diagnoses the complaint, a 'possible moral to draw from this' is that one 'must first […] have a notion of what [an expression] means, independently of the role it plays as premise or conclusion.' That is, the example seems to show that it is in virtue of having an *antecedent* grasp of an expression's meaning that one can make judgements as to its inferential significance. Hence, the latter cannot be constitutive of the former. Inferential rules do not determine meaning.

The traditional response on behalf of IRS – call it 'conservatism' – is that the relevant expression does not have a genuine meaning, since the introduction of 'tonk' does not constitute a *conservative* extension of the language (Belnap 1962).[3] An extension of the language is conservative if and only if one cannot use the new vocabulary to derive any statements in the original vocabulary that could not already be derived using the original vocabulary. More informally, the problem is that non-conservative rules for the use of an expression clash with the meanings of existing expressions or, rather, the rules governing their employment. The novel rules 'clash' in the sense that, when added to the established rules, they lead to contradiction. As a result, the extended language is inconsistent.[4]

This is evident in the case of 'tonk.' Were one to employ the connective according to the above rules, one could derive *any* statement in our tonk-free vocabulary from any other statement in that vocabulary. Suppose, for example, that one accepts 'Grass is green.' According to tonk-introduction, from that sentence, 'Grass is green tonk it is not the case that grass is green' follows (as do infinitely many other sentences). From this, in turn, according to tonk-elimination, 'Grass is not green' follows, which manifestly contradicts the original sentence from which it was derived. In such a way, assuming the meanings or rules for the use of the other expressions remain constant, the tonk-rules lead immediately and without auxiliary premises to contradiction; their introduction to the language renders it inconsistent.

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[2] This captures the essence of a *naturalistic* version of IRS, of the kind offered by, among others, Harman (1999), Horwich (1998, 2005) and Peacocke (1992).

[3] Dummett explores in detail a similar constraint, which he dubs 'harmony,' of which conservativeness is an instance (see Dummett 1981: 396-–7, 453-–454; 1991: 215ff, 246ff).

[4] For further remarks on the respect in which non-conservative expressions are 'inconsistent' (see Dummett 1981: 454; cf. Brandom 2000: 68).

The constraints imposed by conservatism proscribe the fraudulent connective 'tonk' by ruling out the introduction of non-conservative rules of the kind that would generate inconsistency in the manner outlined above. In doing so, they guarantee that there is no defective meaning possessed by 'tonk' and so no counter-example to IRS.

Crucially, conservatism does not rule out extension of a language per se. One can imagine, for example, a vocabulary lacking terms of aesthetic appraisal. Conservatism allows the introduction to it of such terms, since the rules governing their use would be compatible with those governing the existing expressions. No statements in the pre-aesthetic vocabulary could be derived using the aesthetic vocabulary that could not already be derived using the pre-aesthetic vocabulary.

The introduction of the conservative constraint as a solution to the problem 'tonk' would otherwise pose might seem ad hoc, but arguably it is already an implicit aspect of IRS. According to IRS, recall, an expression's meaning is determined by how it is employed in inference. Should a connective such as 'tonk' be introduced (as defined above) to a 'tonkless' language, like our own, an arbitrary sentence 'q' would appear then to follow immediately from any other arbitrary sentence 'p' when it did not follow previously. Given IRS, it must be the case that either the inferential significance of 'p' (or one of the expressions it contains) has changed, and thereby its meaning, or 'q' does not really follow, i.e. the rules do not really hold and so 'tonk' does not really have a meaning. One cannot deny that one of the disjuncts obtains while holding on to IRS. Thus, allowing non-conservative extensions of a language conflicts with the basic thesis of IRS.[5]

The requirement of conservatism seems to rule out the kind of problem case Prior introduces. Recently, however, this problem has resurfaced in a rather different guise, conservatism has been rejected as inadequate and alternatives responses advanced. In this paper, I shall argue that these alternatives are ineffective, and defend the conservative account against criticism.

The Problem of Pejoratives

An apparent difficulty for IRS is raised in a recent exchange between Boghossian (2003a; see also 2003b) and Williamson (2003; see also forthcoming).[6] The problem is that there are (putative) instances of speakers that seem fully or adequately to understand an expression, and yet are not prepared to employ it in inferences on the grounds that it is defective in some respect. Vivid examples of this are pejorative expressions such as 'Boche.' Following a proposal by Dummett (1981: 454), a proponent of IRS might hold that to grasp the meaning possessed by that term is to infer according to rules such as:

$$\text{Boche} - \text{introduction}: \quad \frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is Boche}} \qquad \text{Boche} - \text{elimination}: \quad \frac{x \text{ is Boche}}{x \text{ is cruel}}$$

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[5] Conservatism is implicit in this way in, e.g., Horwich (2005: 154). In discussing harmony, Dummett (1991: 220) makes a similar point.

[6] Note however that Boghossian actually endorses a version of IRS (at least for certain expressions).

Note that this is not being presented as an accurate description of the usage of racist terms; rather, it serves here to motivate a particular issue and – as the proposal Boghossian and Williamson focus on – is provisionally accepted for the sake of argument. How exactly to characterise the rules for the employment of a derogatory expression is not the issue; whether there *could* be such rules is the philosophical question of current concern. Indeed, as we shall soon see, there is independent reason for a proponent of IRS to reject the above as a possible account of the rules determinative of the meaning of 'Boche.'

It is clearly a large part of the attraction of the above proposal, on behalf of IRS, that it seems to capture what is defective about derogatory terms, namely that the rules for their use embody inferences non-bigoted speakers cannot endorse. As Williamson says (although he does not accept this evaluation) one might regard the above account as providing IRS 'with a positive success by elegantly explaining in inferentialist terms what is wrong with pejorative expressions' (forthcoming). Unfortunately, however, it instead leads immediately to the following problem for IRS. Since, for the reason mentioned, most speakers (including you and I) are simply not disposed or prepared to infer according to rules such as Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, it appears to follow (given IRS) that those speakers do not understand the term 'Boche' or grasp its meaning. It appears also to follow that only bigots comprehend that expression, and hence genuine communication with (and criticism of) bigots is not possible. All of this is, of course, implausible. As Williamson (2003: 257) glibly says:

> We find racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because we fail to do so.[7]

Pejorative terms, then, appear to provide a counter-example to IRS; they cast 'doubt on the existence of […] tight connections between what concepts one has and how one infers' and so 'on inferentialist accounts of concept possession and linguistic understanding' (Williamson 2003: 250). An expression can possess a certain meaning without speakers being prepared to make the relevant inferences involving it; its inferential role is therefore not constitutive of its meaning. It is in virtue of having an *antecedent* grasp of meaning that one can make judgements as to the inferential significance of an expression.

One might think that a way to avoid this would be to introduce a primitive normative notion. According to this revised IRS, for a given expression, one need not actually make or be disposed to make any inferential transitions involving that expression in order to understand it or for it to possess a meaning, but only to acknowledge the *correctness* of doing so. The propriety of those moves is determinative of its meaning.[8] So, to return to the example, to understand 'Boche,' one need only know that one *ought* to infer according to Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination; one need never as a matter of fact do so.

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[7] Hornsby (2001) likewise charges IRS with being unable to provide a satisfactory account of derogatory words, but on quite different grounds. I respond in detail to her arguments in Whiting (2007a).

[8] Brandom (1994, 2000) advances a *non*-naturalistic version of IRS of this kind. I defend the idea that meaning is an intrinsically normative notion in Whiting (2007b).

Of course, clearly this only re-introduces the same problem in an altered form. Not only are most people not disposed to infer according to the above rules, but they do not even think it is proper to do so. On the contrary, they are confident one ought *not* to. But it does not follow, as IRS appears to entail, that they do not understand the corresponding term.[9]

Note how this recent problem differs from Prior's original objection. According to the latter, IRS allows one to introduce into a language obviously defective expressions. According to the former, our language obviously contains certain defective expressions and IRS is unable to explain how.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that if conservatism is a genuine constraint and a proper part of IRS it applies equally to both 'tonk' and accounts of pejorative terms along the above lines. One must deny, therefore, that the term 'Boche' has any such meaning, that there is an expression governed by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination. This is *not* to deny that racists might as a matter of fact use the term in that way, but to deny that such a usage could be determinative of the meaning of 'Boche.' Those rules – assuming that 'German' and 'cruel' retain their established meanings – are non-conservative.[10] They allow one to make without the aid of collateral information the transition from, for example, 'Merkel is German' to 'Merkel is cruel,' when one could not do so in the 'Boche'-free language. More informally, Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination clash with the rules governing the employment of existing terms, in the sense that supplementing them with the Boche-rules leads to contradiction, rendering the extended language inconsistent.

Suppose, for example, that Merkel was born in Germany and does not cause suffering with disregard. On this basis – given what one may assume to be among the established inferential rules for the employment of 'German' and 'cruel' – one infers 'Merkel is German and is not cruel.' However, by following Boche-introduction one may make the transition to 'Merkel is Boche and is not cruel,' and in turn Boche-elimination allows one to infer 'Merkel is cruel and is not cruel.' Hence, in such a way, the introduction of the Boche-rules to a Boche-free language leads to contradiction (given the rules governing the established expressions).

Since it is non-conservative, and given the requirement of conservatism, the above account of the meaning of 'Boche' is bogus and so does not constitute a counter-example to IRS. This point does not depend on the exact details of Dummett's proposal; the same will be true of any model of pejoratives according to which we accept the *grounds* for introducing them but not the *consequences* of doing so.

Unfortunately, it is clear that ruling out proposals of the above kind – where the derogatory aspect of an expression results from the inference rules governing it – by appeal to conservatism does not alone solve the problem Williamson poses for IRS.

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[9] Note that this problem is made acute by the fact that most proponents (and opponents) of normativist versions of IRS do not distinguish the relevant norms that are supposedly determinative of meaning from other kinds of norms. And where they are differentiated, the norms are usually viewed as *epistemic* (this seems to be both Boghossian's and Brandom's view). Non-bigoted speakers, however, do not think that abiding by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination is epistemically warranted. I shall return to these matters below.

[10] As both Dummett (1981: 454) and Williamson (forthcoming) point out.

It is successful in the case of 'tonk' precisely because we want to *banish* it from the language, but it is of less help in the case of 'Boche' precisely because our language *already* contains it.

For this reason, one might reject or set aside the requirement of conservatism in the case of pejorative terms and recommend a different approach. In the next sections I shall examine two such accounts by Boghossian and Robert Brandom. While they are both worth attending to, I shall focus primarily on Brandom's as it has yet to receive much critical attention and as Williamson has already effectively criticised Boghossian's.

Before moving on, however, it is worth noting that to deny (on grounds of conservatism) that 'Boche' has a meaning that is defined by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination is not to deny that it has *any* meaning at all. More generally, to say that conservatism rules out this way of construing derogatory terms is not to say that it (implausibly) rules out derogatory terms. Rather, it is to suggest that IRS needs to provide an alternative explanation of pejoratives, including 'Boche'. I shall return to this below.

Boghossian's Proposal

Boghossian rejects the conservative account,[11] according to which no genuine meaning is defined by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination (or any analogous proposal regarding the meaning of pejoratives). His reasons for doing so will be discussed later, but first I shall outline and assess his alternative.

Boghossian (2003a: 244–8) suggests that, where possible,[12] the inferential rules one must grasp in order to understand an expression must be *conditionalized* (cf. 2003b: 29–34). So, for example, to grasp the meaning of 'Boche,' one must be disposed to affirm, or accept the propriety of, the following (where 'T' represents Boche-theory):

$$(\exists F) \, \& \, T \, (F) \quad Fx \rightarrow x \text{ is Boche}$$

The corresponding introduction and elimination rules are:

$$\text{Boche*} - \text{introduction} \quad \frac{(\exists x) T(F) \, \& \, Fx}{x \text{ is Boche}}$$

$$\text{Boche*} - \text{elimination} \quad \frac{x \text{ is Boche}}{(\exists x) T(F) \, \& \, Fx}$$

On this account, if one is to understand 'Boche,' one must hold that *if* something satisfies Boche-theory then that something may be called 'Boche.' This enables a non-bigoted speaker, according to Boghossian, to endorse the rules (and so understand the

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[11] Despite at one time endorsing it (Boghossian 1997: 359). Boghossian tends to present matters in more truth-oriented terms than I do here – i.e. in terms of whether semantic rules are truth-preserving – but that is not important for present purposes.

[12] The meanings of the primitive logical constants cannot be determined in this way (Boghossian 2003a: 247).

term), since she can affirm the conditional while denying the antecedent, i.e. she can deny that anything actually plays the role specified by Boche-theory. So, one can be disposed to infer according to the Boche* rules – or acknowledge the propriety of doing so – and yet not endorse the bigot's view by denying that $(\exists x)$ T(F) & Fx. (Note that, on this view, since the inferential rules differ, 'Boche' has a different meaning from that given by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, call it *Boche**.)

This proposal also points to a reason for viewing Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination as defective, 'one that doesn't depend on denying' that they determine that utterances of expressions involving 'Boche' in accordance with those rules express 'genuine thinkable contents' (Boghossian 2003b: 29). The problem, Boghossian holds, is *not* that the rules are non-conservative, but that they have an unconditionalized structure when a conditionalized structure is available, i.e. one that conditionalizes on the truth of the set of bigoted claims or beliefs (embodied by the original rules).

Unfortunately, as the considerations Williamson (2003) adduces show, Boghossian's alternative to conservatism simply does not afford a response to the matter under consideration. Even if one grants that rules of this form are available – and I am sure that they provide a good explanation of the significance of many theoretical terns – nothing in the above account shows that there could *not* be a genuine meaning constituted by the original Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination rules. Indeed, Boghossian (2003a: 246) expressly aims to allow for that possibility, claiming (of concepts but presumably the same is to hold of meanings) that they 'are relatively cheap.'

To appreciate the respect in which this position is too permissive, consider Williamson's (2003: 257–8) example of the reformed bigot who used to infer according to Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination but has since seen the error of her ways. She is no longer disposed to infer according to those rules, and does not acknowledge the propriety of doing so. Even if she now follows the Boche*-rules, it still follows, given IRS, that she does not grasp the previous meaning of 'Boche.' But it is massively implausible to hold that the reformed speaker is literally *unable* to comprehend any of her former racist claims. Boghossian's alternative account of the kind of inferential rules that might govern 'Boche' does nothing to address this matter.

Since it continues to allow for the possibility of a non-conservative extension of the language – and, more specifically, allows that 'Boche' in a bigot's mouth might have a meaning determined by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination – Boghossian's proposed account therefore does not protect IRS from seemingly implausible consequences.

Brandom's Liberalism

Brandom also rejects conservatism. Non-conservative extension of a language, he holds, is not necessarily a defect in the novel expression or meaning one is attempting to introduce. 'Conceptual progress in science,' he maintains, often involves and depends on this kind of novelty. As an alternative, Brandom proposes what he takes to be a more liberal, and suitable, model. When a practitioner employs

a given expression, she undertakes various commitments concerning both her grounds for and the consequences of doing so. A linguistic practice can therefore be assessed and criticised according to whether or not one is or could be entitled to those commitments. As Brandom (2000: 71–2) puts it:

> The proper question to ask in evaluating the introduction and evolution of a concept is not whether the inference embodied is one that is already endorsed, so that no new content is really involved, but rather whether that inference is one that *ought* to be endorsed. The problem with 'Boche' […] is not that once we explicitly confront the material inferential commitment that gives the term its content it turns out to be novel, but that it can then be seen to be indefensible and inappropriate–a commitment we cannot become entitled to.

So, for Brandom, 'Boche' genuinely possesses the meaning defined by 'Boche-introduction' and 'Boche-elimination,' which is (or could be) grasped by racists, despite the fact that those rules are not conservative. The reason they are defective is instead that they incorporate – what non-bigots take to be – materially bad inferences.

Boghossian rejects this model for the reason that it does not seem to capture the respect in which 'Boche' (so defined) is defective. On Brandom's account, one is *provisionally* entitled to infer according to the proprieties governing its use, although that entitlement might be defeated by various substantive considerations. But, Boghossian (2003a: 242) insists, in the case of Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, one does not have 'any entitlement there at all, defeasible or no.'

Brandom might respond to this by charging it with a *Platonism* with which IRS is at odds (cf. Brandom 2000: 4). Whether an inferential transition is proper is not determined by whether it corresponds to some language-transcendent reality but rather, in the first instance, by the attitudes of subjects – what they take to be or treat as proper.[13] Hence, in the case of 'Boche,' so long as practitioners treat it in practice as such, one is indeed entitled to use that term in that manner, or infer according to Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, at least until attitudes change (through scrutiny of the empirical credentials of the material inferences it incorporates).

While this suggested 'pragmatist' rejoinder might be effective against Boghossian's objection, Brandom's model remains problematic. In particular, his account of 'conceptual progress' is – though sketched only briefly – unstable as it stands. Brandom holds that it is possible to introduce a genuinely meaningful expression that is nevertheless not a conservative extension of the language, i.e. the rules for which clash with existing semantic rules.[14] Presumably, then, in order for it to be possible actually to employ the novel expression – really to be able to incorporate it into the language – one must make an alteration in the pre-existing, established rules of inference. However, since those rules are determinative of meaning, any such revision will result in a change in the established meanings that subsequently *are* compatible with the use of the new expression. Thus, the case is not really one of non-conservative extension at all.

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[13] The qualification 'in the first instance' is supposed to leave open the possibility of deriving a conception of attitude-independent (objective) propriety from attitude-dependent (subjective) propriety. Brandom attempts just such a deduction in 1994: ch.8. For critical assessment, see Laurier (2005).

[14] As discussed above, the non-conservative rules would clash with the established rules insofar as their addition would render the language inconsistent.

Brandom (2000: 71, 75) suggests that one need not treat this activity as necessarily involving the founding of new meanings. He prefers to talk instead of refining and honing terms by 'improving,' 'grooming' or 'repairing' the inferential commitments they incorporate. However, one simply cannot hold *both* that being subject to certain inferential proprieties is necessary and sufficient for possessing a certain meaning *and* that what inferences are taken to be proper can vary while meaning remains constant. It is in this respect that Brandom's position is unstable. His model of conceptual progress appears to be incompatible with IRS.

The issue of how genuinely to incorporate non-conservative inferential rules into the language does not in fact address the underlying problem. Recall that Brandom tells us that the proper question concerning a novel expression is not, 'Is its introduction conservative?' but rather, 'Ought one to accept the inferential proprieties governing it?' However, the problem with 'Boche' is not that one *should* not infer according to its introduction and elimination rules but that – given the existing rules for 'German' – there are and can be *no* such rules as Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination to follow or otherwise. Consider what it would be for a speaker to grasp the meaning of 'Boche' so defined. She would take 'Merkel is German' to entail 'Merkel is cruel.' But, then, whatever she means or understands by 'German' it is not what we do. If it does possess a meaning in her mouth, it is not *German* (although, of course, it may be akin). Hence, the possibility of non-conservative rules is only apparent.

Brandom might reply that revision of established rules is better described, not as changing the meanings altogether, but as discerning what the proprieties of inference *really are*, and were all along, regardless of what speakers formerly took them to be (cf. Brandom 1994: 657). So, the proprieties remain constant; it is speakers' grasp of them that varies. Thus, to stick to the example, it is in principle possible that Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination are conservative and that we are in fact wrong about the norms to which our use of 'German' is subject, and so about what significance it has.

It is hard, however, to imagine how this suggestion could be unpacked in a way that does not relinquish IRS to Platonism, i.e. without suggesting that meaning or inferential proprieties could be in place independent of speakers' attitudes, which would in turn leave the account open to Boghossian's objection. Second, in any case it still does not offer the possibility of a genuine non-conservative extension of the language. On this story, what occurs is that speakers discover that – contrary to appearances – the novel terms or rules actually *are* consonant with the existing rules, and that the speakers were in fact mistaken about just what those rules are.

So, Brandom's motivation for rejecting conservatism – i.e. to allow for his liberal model of conceptual progress – is ungrounded, because that model does not constitute a genuine alternative.[15]

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[15] An alternative model of 'conceptual progress' would show it to involve the establishing of new inferential rules (and hence meanings), which are conservative but may nonetheless be similar in various respects to the old ones. The latter are superseded, not because speakers reject the relevant inferences (that could only betray misunderstanding), but rather because speakers no longer accept that the grounds specified originally for introducing the expression obtain. Progress would be achieved if the grounds that the new rules give for introducing the expression genuinely obtain, and if those new rules suitably enrich the expressive resources of the established vocabulary.

It is, however, possible that Brandom can avoid these problems given the (labyrinthine) details of his particular version of IRS. More specifically, his insistence on an essential *social* dimension to linguistic practice may provide the resources to resolve matters without conceding to Platonism (see Brandom 1994: ch.8). I am sceptical that this is so, but adequately engaging with that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.[16] Fortunately, it is not necessary, since Brandom's alternative model does not anyway address what Williamson highlights as so problematic about the example of pejorative terms. On Brandom's (2000: 70) model, bigots *do* grasp the meaning of 'Boche,' while non-bigoted speakers 'refuse to employ' that expression 'on the grounds that it embodies an inference' they do not endorse. Moreover, not only are non-bigoted speakers not actually disposed to infer according to Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, but they do not think it is proper to do so. From this, in conjunction with IRS, it follows that they do not understand the term. Intuitions, however, support the view that non-bigots know what 'Boche' means, something Brandom's IRS is unable to accommodate. Hence, Brandom's liberalism simply does not address the matter Williamson's objection raises. What is required is an explanation of how, according to IRS, bigots and non-bigots can grasp the same meaning, and so are able to communicate, despite differing in their linguistic dispositions or attitudes.

The No-nonsense Objection

So far, I have identified problems with accounts that allow that the meaning of 'Boche' might be given by rules that are non-conservative. In contrast to such proposals, I suggest that one accept the requirement of conservatism and so deny that there is a genuine meaning defined by Boche-introduction or Boche-elimination (or any other rules along those lines).

However, because the endorsed conservative constraint rules out the original proposal, it does not appear to address the problem with which we began. Indeed, it appears to concede it. Given conservatism, it seems, pejorative terms lack meaning. Surely this strategy is mistaken. As Boghossian (2003a: 243) writes regarding the application of conservatism in this instance:

> [I]t is hard to believe that racists who employ boche-like concepts fail to express complete thoughts.[17]

Call this the 'no-nonsense' objection; it rejects the conservative constraint on the grounds that it is implausible that derogatory terms lack significance and hence that bigots make no bigoted claims (and correspondingly express no bigoted thoughts) in using them. In this section, I shall argue that this objection to conservatism is unsuccessful. In doing so, I shall prepare the way for a more general defence of IRS against the threat derogatory expressions appear to pose.[18]

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[16] For further assessment of Brandom's theory, see Whiting (forthcoming).

[17] Enoch and Schechter (2006) also press this complaint.

[18] Needless to say, there are other objections to conservatism (see, e.g., Peacocke 2004: 18ff) Addressing them is too great a task for this paper and I shall restrict attention to that which occurs in the present debate.

Accepting the applicability of the conservative constraint in this instance does not lead to the conclusion that bigots are not saying anything whatsoever, or express no thoughts, when they use the term 'Boche'; it is to deny *one* account of its meaning, not to deny that it *has* meaning. The following alternative presents itself (but is not intended as exhaustive of the possibilities).[19]

Careful examination of a racist's use of the term 'Boche' might reveal it to mean the same thing as we mean by 'German'. Thus, the meaning of 'Boche' is given by whatever inferential rules govern (and thereby determine the meaning of) 'German.' Among them might be:

$$\text{Boche}^{**}-\text{introduction} \quad \frac{x \text{ originates in Germany}}{x \text{ is Boche}}$$

$$\text{Boche}^{**}-\text{elimination} \quad \frac{x \text{ is Boche}}{x \text{ originates in a central} - \text{northern European Republic}}$$

One might immediately object that this proposal is even more implausible than its predecessor. If 'Boche' simply means the same as 'German,' we have lost all sense in which it is a *derogatory* term. As (Williamson, forthcoming) voices the concern:

> The objection does not depend on the details of Dummett's rules. Consider any set of rules that an inferentialist proposes for "Boche". If they are logically unobjectionable–more specifically, if they constitute a conservative extension of a civilized 'Boche'-free system of rules–then the inferentialist has no account of what is objectionable about 'Boche.'[20]

Such a response is premature. One could explain the pejorative nature of 'Boche' by appeal not to its literal, semantic content, which is as it were neutral, but to its offensive associations, its *conventional implicature*.[21] Thus, the racist's fault lies in knowingly using a term that implicates that Germans are cruel. Note that this explanation of the significance of a derogatory expression has two components, *semantic* and *pragmatic*. Inferentialism deals with that aspect of a word that is shared by its neutral counterpart (e.g. 'German')[22] and an additional Gricean apparatus is wheeled in to explain the respect in which it causes offence.

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[19] Again, the following proposal is not intended as an armchair contribution to linguistic theory. It is intended as a suggestion as to what rules *could* govern the use of racist terms, compatible with the requirement of conservatism.

[20] Williamson (forthcoming) repeats this point when he writes, 'If the inference rules for "Boche" constitute a conservative extension of a civilized system of rules for the "Boche"-free part of the language, then they do not explain what is offensive about' its use.

[21] On implicature, see Grice (1989: ch. 2). Obviously, this strategy depends on being able to offer an account of implicature in the terms available to IRS. This is evidently not the place to do so but there is no obvious reason to think it would prove impossible or especially difficult. The beginnings of such an account might proceed as follows. Where a claim is *implicated* by the claim made in uttering an expression, rejection of the former is *compatible* with acceptance of the latter. In contrast, where a claim is *entailed* by the claim made in uttering an expression, rejection of the former is *incompatible* with acceptance the latter (cf. the centrality that the notion of incompatible commitments plays in Brandom 1994). Specific implicatures can then be accounted for in terms of the inferences that the utterance of an expression invites as a result of either the dynamics of a given conversation or the way in which speakers have come customarily to use it and to respond to its use.

[22] Hornsby (2001) points out that many derogatory words have neutral counterparts. Consider, for example, the pairs 'Kike' and 'Jew,' 'faggot' and 'homosexual.'

There is, then, simply no reason to think that the conservative attitude toward pejoratives such as 'Boche' entails that those terms lack significance or that bigoted speakers are unable to express racist claims. On the contrary, it allows one to lay blame precisely where one would wish to – with the bigots themselves. That is to say, according to conservatism, there are no 'pejorative meanings' whose content is intrinsically derogatory. Rather, there are individuals who intentionally employ words that are conventionally understood to convey (in addition to their literal semantic content) unfounded and bigoted beliefs.

Interestingly, Williamson argues for an account of pejoratives very much along these lines. In his view, roughly, the literal semantic content of 'Boche' is simply that of 'German.' The reason its use in a sentence such as 'Merkel is Boche' is objectionable is that it conventionally implicates a belief such as that Germans are typically cruel. This belief is *implicated* rather than entailed by the utterance, he argues, since properly-speaking a non-bigoted speaker does not think that what is expressed by that sentence is falsified by the fact that Germans are not typically cruel (as it would be if it were a logical consequence of what is said). And the implicature is conventional rather than conversational, in Grice's sense, since it is detachable – one could use or construct a non-derogatory counterpart (e.g. 'German') – but not easily cancelable – one cannot use 'Boche' and at the same time try to repeal the racist attitudes it conveys (Williamson 2003: 263).[23]

Williamson (2003: 267–8) claims, however, that an account of this kind – according to which 'Boche' has the same literal meaning as 'German' – is not available to one who recommends IRS. Even if the meaning of 'Boche' is not defined by Boche-introduction and Boche-elimination, it is *still* the case that most speakers are not prepared – given its offensive implicatures – to employ that expression or make linguistic transitions involving it (whether or not they accord with the rules governing 'German'):

> Pejoratives pose a quite general problem for use theories of understanding on which using a term in a given way is a precondition of understanding it. Unprejudiced speakers may understand a pejorative term but still refuse to use it in the specified way: in order to avoid commitment to a conventional implication, they refuse to use it at all.

According to IRS, therefore, they do not understand the term 'Boche,' which is false. Despite all the twists and turns, it appears that we are no further towards resolving the problem pejoratives pose to IRS than at the outset.

One can and should, however, view the propriety of employment that is constitutive of the meaning of 'Boche' as *distinctively semantic*, as opposed to (say) epistemological, moral or social.[24] Once this is recognised, one can appreciate

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[23] Of course, statements of the form 'So-and-so is Boche, but not cruel' or 'Don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against Boche…' are familiar enough. But these would not be counter-examples to the suggestion. On the contrary, that we ordinarily find such utterances repugnant would be *best explained* by viewing the use of 'Boche' as conventionally implicating bigoted beliefs. What the racist is attempting to do on these occasions is unilaterally *cancel* the conventional implicature. Thus, racism is compounded by hypocrisy (cf. Williamson 2003: 263).

[24] See n9.

that speakers can indeed acknowledge that inferring from 'Merkel originates in Germany' to 'Merkel is Boche' is correct *as far as the language alone is concerned*, or according to the semantic norms determinative of its literal meaning, and still refuse to actually use the term 'Boche,' since the propriety of doing so is trumped by other normative considerations (in this instance, moral). So, if an IRS distinguishes the relevant normative notion according to which inferences are correct or incorrect, it has the resources to meet Williamson's reservations.

Of course, this leaves a serious problem concerning how to understand this kind of propriety. It is far from clear that a great deal that is informative can be said on this matter, or at least that much can be said in independently intelligible or more basic terms. One might explain that it is the kind of propriety that is partially determinative of an expression's *literal meaning* and of what is *said* by its use, or that equally governs the term's *translation*. Needless to say, this does not get us very far.

Should this prognosis prove correct, however, it does not necessarily constitute a problem for versions of IRS that appeal to such a notion of propriety, unless they purport to be reductionist. And one should certainly not take it for granted that only such an account could be satisfactory.[25] In any event, the present concern is not whether IRS can provide a reductionist explanation of meaning, but whether it can account for the existence in a language of pejorative terms. I have argued that it can.

Conclusion

IRS seemed unable to explain the existence in a language of pejorative terms. Specifically, it appeared to have the implausible consequence that such terms lack meaning and that non-bigoted speakers are unable to understand derogatory terms, since they are not willing to employ those terms when reasoning.

On one pro minent account – proposed by Dummett and accepted by Boghossian and Brandom – the fact that speakers are so reluctant is due to the fact that a pejorative like 'Boche' is governed by rules embodying inferences non-bigoted speakers do not endorse. According to conservatism, however, no such rules could determine the meaning of 'Boche.' In this paper, I considered alternative responses on behalf of IRS to the threat of derogatory terms, different ways to characterise their faults, but found them to be inadequate. Next, I defended conservatism against an objection and in doing so offered an alternative and consonant account, on behalf of IRS, of the kind of rules that might govern the use of 'Boche' and thereby determine its significance. On the most promising view, IRS deals only with that aspect of a derogatory expression that is shared by its neutral counterpart, in this case 'German.' That is, IRS only accounts for its literal, semantic content. The respect in which pejoratives cause offence is then to be dealt with by additional, Gricean apparatus. It is a matter for pragmatics, not semantics. While this proposal might limit the ambitions of some advocates of IRS, it is the most promising way of reconciling the latter with the no doubt unfortunate existence, within a language such as our own, of terms of abuse.

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[25] For further remarks on the desirability and feasibility of a reductionist account of meaning, see Whiting (2006).

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