The Semantics of 'Boche'

The paper to this abstract deals with descriptive concepts that are necessarily coextensive with normative concepts. An entity falls under such a descriptive concept D if and only if it falls under a particular normative concept N, so that $\Box \forall x\, (Dx \leftrightarrow Nx)$ holds. It could just as well be said, though, that the paper deals with descriptive propositions that are necessarily coextensive with certain normative propositions, so that such a descriptive proposition d is true if and only if a particular normative proposition n is true, and hence $\Box\, (d \leftrightarrow n)$ holds. Of cousre, one might wonder why there should be such pairs of descriptive and normative concepts and such pairs of descriptive and normative propositions in the first place. In his book *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Frank Jackson presents an argument leading from the widely accepted global supervenience of the normative on the descriptive to the coextensiveness of every normative proposition with a particular descriptive proposition:

(S)   If two worlds are descriptively exactly alike, they are normatively exactly alike.

(C)   Therefore, for every normative proposition there is a descriptive proposition so that the two are necessarily coextensive.

To be precise, Jackson does only cover *ethical* propositions, but the argument can be easily extended to all normative propositions, including the ones of aesthetics, etiquette, epistemic reasons etc., in addition to the ones of ethics. Just as Jackson, I shall assume throughout the paper that normative propositions have truth-value of a non-subjective (though possibly anti-realist) kind. This assumption excludes *expressivism* understood as the view that normative sentences do not express any cognitive attitudes, but (and this may be of importance later) does not exclude *expressivism* understood as the view that normative sentences do express non-cognitive attitudes. For, logical space allows the view that normative sentences express cognitive *and* non-cognitive attitudes. The more detailed paper contains my version of Jackson's argument; in this abstract the argument's soundness is simply assumed together with its conclusion that for every normative proposition there is a descriptive proposition so that the two are necessarily coextensive, and—due to an argument along relevantly similar

lines—that for every normative concept there is a descriptive concept so that the two are necessarily coextensive.

These conclusions are merely about concepts and propositions, which I take to be abstract entities. They are neither about the linguistic entities predicates and sentences (or speech-acts such as assertions for that matter), nor about properties and facts, which may be taken to be metaphysical. Putting the metaphysical matters aside, the question arises of whether there are examples of two predicates that express such a normative and a necessarily coextensive descriptive concept respectively. Part of the literature (e.g. Michael Dummett, Bob Brandom, Paul Boghossian, and Tim Williamson), considers the predicates 'Boche' and 'German' as an example. So, let us have a closer look at this pair. In a (if I understand correctly still forthcoming) festschrift in honour of David Kaplan, Williamson has recently criticised Dummett's inferentialist account of 'Boche' and other pejoratives.[1] His alternative explanation makes use of Gricean conventional implicatures so that—only roughly of course—'Hans is a Boche' conventionally implies 'Germans are cruel'.

Although impressed, I am less than convinced by Williamson's paper. Roughly speaking again, my main objection is: A belief's content can be pejorative (e.g. xenophobes can believe that Hans is Boche); a belief's content is a proposition; if there are conventional implicatures at all, they are (part of speech-acts or sentences but) not part of propositions; therefore, an account of pejoratives that makes use of conventional implicatures is unable to explain how pejoratives can be the content of people's beliefs. In his closing paragraph, Williamson refutes a similar worry. He advises the reader not "to give thought methodological priority over language", suggests that we can "imagine something like conversational implicature in thought", and finally concludes that "if the present account is correct, then pejorativeness is a more sophisticated phenomenon than the inferentialist account suggests". To me, the expression 'sophisticated phenomenon' seems a euphemism for 'complex troubles', and I suggest trying a different road, instead of accepting that

---

[1] The paper can be found on Tim Williamson's webpage; its title is 'Reference, Inference and the Semantics of Pejoratives': www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/members/twilliamson/index.htm

conventional implicatures can be part of people's thoughts, which seems altogether rather obscure.

Before we try that different road, however, let me sketch a second worry about Williamson's conventional implicature account of pejoratives. Remember Jackson's conclusion (C): for every normative proposition there is a descriptive proposition so that the two are necessarily coextensive. If that conclusion is correct, and I do not see reasons for not doing so, the two possible sentences that express such a normative proposition and its descriptive sibling respectively must differ in something other than their truth-conditions; they must differ in a non-truth conditional aspect of meaning—to borrow the title of the forthcoming conference. In Fregean terminology, the two must differ in colour (and they may well differ in colour *and* sense). And, putting the pejoratives to one side for a moment, this difference in colour is hardly to be explained be conventional implicatures. For, the content of conventional implicatures is propositional and hence at least partly truth-functional. So, if we tried to explain this difference in colour by conventional implicatures, we would thereby merely move the normativity to the implied proposition. In turn, the implied proposition would be normative, and nothing would be achieved in explaining the original proposition's normativity. Given that this objection is appropriate, and it is indeed impossible to extend Williamson's conventional implicature account of pejoratives to the entire realm of normativity, the normativity of non-pejorative (and non-laudatory) sentences would have to be explained by some other account. Personally, I favour an expressivist account of the kind alluded to above; one that takes normative sentences to express cognitive *and* non-cognitive attitudes (the cognitive attitudes explaining the purely descriptive part of its content; the non-cognitive attitudes explaining the purely normative part of its content). But whatever this other account exactly looks like, it seems bizarre that Williamson takes the sentence's normative content (together with some descriptive content) as the content of a conventional implicature. A more unified account, I suggest, would have to explain the normativity of pejoratives along similar lines as it explains the normativity of non-pejorative normative sentences.

After having sketched these two objections, let us try another road, a road that Williamson himself shortly mentioned but quickly rejects. Here it is: The concept BOCHE can be determined by one introduction and two elimination rules. (I refer to concepts and propositions by using capital letters, but to predicates and sentences by putting ordinary letters within commas.)

(1)   The introduction rule allows the inference from X IS A GERMAN to X IS A BOCHE.

(2)   The first elimination rule allows the inference from X IS A BOCHE to X IS A GERMAN.

(3)   The second elimination rule allows the inference from X IS A BOCHE to X IS CRUEL.

(I take rule (1) to be material, rules (2) and (3) to be strict, but this abstract is too short to sketch the argument for that view.) In my account, understanding the term 'Boche' is not to *infer* according to these three rules but to *know* that the competent use of the term 'Boche' requires the disposition to infer according to these three rules.

In the main part of his paper, Williamson discusses Dummett's inferentialist explanation of BOCHE that takes BOCHE to be determined by (1) and (3) alone. After (convincingly) showing this explanation's weaknesses, he shortly addresses the possibility of determining BOCHE by these three inference rules, but then writes that this account "distorts the picture. For (…) the word 'Boche' might be used as a pejorative for Germans in a narrow-minded community with no non-pejorative equivalent of 'German'. That would not affect its referential status. Thus inferences involving 'German' are not crucial to determining the reference of 'Boche'."

The refutation is too quick. Again, we do not need to confine ourselves to the level of language but may also look at the level of thoughts and propositions. The anti-German xenophobe does not need to have the descriptive term 'German' (or an analogue of it) in her language in order to follow rules (1) and (2). It perfectly suffices to have the concept GERMAN. And she does not even need that much. A disposition to follow the three inference rules is sufficient for being a competent user of the concept BOCHE. Grasping the concept GERMAN is not required for having the concept BOCHE, because grasping the concept GERMAN is not required for having this disposition. It is enough that the xenophobe would be willing to infer

according to (1) and (2), if she acquired the concept GERMAN and the respective question were put to her. There is nothing mysterious about such dispositions, as we often need to build new concepts in order to make explicit all the inference rules that our concepts involve.

This alternative account of BOCHE is perfectly compatible with an expressivist semantics for normative sentences including pejorative sentences, because the concept CRUEL can be explained by a relation to a certain non-cognitive con-attitude towards the entitities that fall under CRUEL. Furthermore, this alternative account has the advantage of giving a unified account of pejorative thought and pejorative language without introducing an obscure application of conventional implicatures to thought. And, as the paper will show in more detail, the account can better explain why there seems to be nothing wrong to use 'Boche' in a counteractual world where all Germans are cruel.