On the Definition of Unconscionable Racial and Sexual Slurs

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Four years ago, Merriam-Webster came under attack for the way it treated certain slurs in its dictionary. Of particular concern was that Merriam-Webster defined the word "nigger" as "black person" and "member of any dark-skinned race."[1] Although the dictionary warns that the word is profoundly offensive, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) understandably objected to this entry as being racist. The problem here is easy to see: the dictionary's equation of "nigger" and "black person" seems, at some level, to imply that it is true, as a matter of definition, that black people are niggers. Accordingly, the NAACP suggested that the word be redefined to explicitly acknowledge its use as a derogatory term to oppress black people.[2]

Similar issues arise in connection with the definition of other slurs. For example, Merriam-Webster defines the word "faggot" as "male homosexual."[3] Unfortunately, the dictionary's equation of "faggot" and "male homosexual" seems to imply that it is true, as a matter of definition, that male homosexuals are faggots. In response, Merriam-Webster concedes that such slurs are repugnant, but it maintains that there is nothing objectionable about including them in a dictionary; as Merriam-Webster spokesperson Alicia di Leo put it, "the dictionary is a reference tool and a reflection of our society."[4]

In this essay, I argue that Merriam-Webster has done more than merely record racist and sexist slurs; its definitions implicitly endorse racist and heterosexist claims.[5] Just as the definition of "bachelor" as "unmarried male" implies that it is conceptually impossible for there to be an unmarried male who isn't also a bachelor, Merriam-Webster's definition of "nigger" as "black person" implies that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a black person who isn't also a nigger. Likewise, Merriam-Webster's definition of "faggot" as "male homosexual" implies that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a male homosexual who isn't also a faggot. Since these reprehensible claims constitute the very foundation for racist and heterosexist views, Merriam-Webster must revise its definitions of these terms to avoid committing itself to such views.

At first glance, the controversy may seem puzzling. It is true, of course, that the so-called N-word is the most offensive racial slur in the English language; no other word comes close to provoking the animosity and hurt provoked by this slur. In consequence of this unfortunate fact, it would seem that there is simply no way to give an adequate definition of the word that doesn't reflect its deeply offensive character. But surely, one might think, this is no

reason to criticize Merriam-Webster's decision to record the word and its definition.

Indeed, one might go further and argue that the NAACP's objection involves a use-mention confusion. Lexical definitions, on this view, do no more than report empirical patterns of usage among competent speakers. Insofar as a dictionary defines one expression α as synonymous with β, it simply reports the empirical fact that the vast majority of competent speakers who use α use that symbol to express β. Thus, in defining the N-word, the people who put together the dictionary merely *mention* the slur; for the definition simply reports the unfortunate empirical fact that competent speakers who use this ugly word do so to describe black people. And it is the *use* of the word, and not its mention in a dictionary, that is racist and hence morally objectionable. According to Merriam-Webster President John M. Morse:

> Because the definition is a faithful reflection of language in use, these efforts would be better directed toward fighting the actual *use* of the word and the causes of racial hatred. The struggle against racial hatred is an important political struggle; however, the dictionary is a reference tool, not a political tool. . . . In the case of the word "nigger," most Americans would be happier if this word were not in *use*, but changing the dictionary is not going to change the situation.[6]

Though Morse doesn't explicitly adduce the use-mention distinction, his argument seems to be that it is unobjectionable to include this profoundly offensive word in a dictionary because the word is only being mentioned— and not being used.

As natural as such reasoning may seem, however, it misses the point of the NAACP's objection. The objection is not that the scholars who put together the definition are *using*, and not mentioning, the N-word. I doubt that anyone who finds this definition objectionable would be inclined to impute conscious racist motives to the scholars responsible for compiling definitions. Nor is the objection that the slur should be excluded from the dictionary because its content is objectionable.[7] Insofar as the job of a dictionary is to accurately record language usage, it is no less appropriate, as the NAACP would undoubtedly concede, for a dictionary to include the N-word than it is to include such epithets as "jerk," "ass," or "creep."

Rather, the objection is that Merriam-Webster's definition of the N-word implicitly endorses a racist claim. On this line of objection, Merriam-Webster's dictionary entry implies a racist proposition in virtue of the way it defines the word and thereby commits an act, albeit unintentionally, that has the same moral character as the act of using the word itself. While it is true that dictionary definitions merely mention the words they define, it is also true that the act of giving a definition has implications regarding the conceptual structure we impose on the world.

Here is how the problem arises.[8] To the extent that one expression α is defined as synonymous with another expression β, it follows that α and β have the same extension (i.e., refer to or pick out the same object or class of

objects). Since α and β are thus *extensionally* equivalent, it follows that α and β can be substituted for each other in any sentence in which one of the phrases appears without changing the extension of the sentence. Since the extension of a sentence is its truth-value, it follows that α and β can be substituted for each other in any sentence without changing its truth-value.[9] Thus, for example, since "bachelor" has the same extensional meaning as "unmarried man," the expression "unmarried man" can be substituted for "bachelor" in any sentence without changing its truth-value. "John Doe is an unmarried man" and "John Doe is a bachelor," on this uncontroversial line of analysis, necessarily have the same truth-value.

Of course, if the intensional meaning of α (i.e., the notion, idea, or "sense" expressed by α) differs from the intensional meaning of β, substituting α for β in a sentence will necessarily change the intensional meaning of the sentence (i.e., the proposition expressed by the sentence). Since, for example, the intensional meaning of the term "public servant" differs from the term "government official" in that only the former conveys the idea of a noble sacrifice made for the public good, substituting "public servant" for "government official" in any sentence will change its intensional meaning.

But if the extensional meanings of intensionally distinct terms are the same, substituting one for the other in any sentence will not result in a change of truth-value. Since, to continue the example, the terms "public servant" and "government official" refer to the same class of objects and hence have the same extensional meaning, it follows that they can nonetheless be substituted for one another in any sentence without change of truth-value. The sentences "John Doe is a public servant" and "John Doe is a government official" necessarily have the same truth-value—though only one of these sentences expresses a compliment of John Doe. Thus, substituting one expression α for an extensionally equivalent expression β in any sentence will not change the truth-value of the sentence—even when the intensional meanings of the two expressions differ significantly.

We are now in a position to see how a definition, which is just a claim about the semantic relationship between two locutions, can say something substantial about the world. Here it is crucial to note that while the relevant expressions are only mentioned in the sentence "the word α is synonymous with β," that sentence says something about the conceptual structure we impose on the world. Insofar as α and β can be substituted in any context without change of truth-value, it is because those expressions refer to the same (possibly abstract) entity. To say that "bachelor" is synonymous with "unmarried man" is to say something about the world, namely, that the class of bachelors is coextensive with the class of unmarried men. To put it roughly, the definition entails that bachelors and unmarried men are *the same things*.

Indeed, as it turns out, a definition entails a much stronger ontological claim than this. If α is defined as β, it follows that it is a *conceptual truth* that all βs are αs. It is important to be clear about what this means. The claim is not merely that, as a contingent matter, all βs happen, as a matter of empirical fact, to be αs; rather, the claim is that it is *conceptually impossible*, because self-contradictory, for there to be a β that is not also an α. For example, if "bachelor" means "unmarried man,"[10] it follows that there *could not* be an

unmarried man who is not a bachelor. In other words, the definition of the word logically implies that it is *impossible*, because self-contradictory, for there to be an unmarried man who is not also a bachelor.[11]

And notice that we do not have to resort to empirical means to verify the truth of this claim. Someone who attempts to determine whether all bachelors are unmarried by going out into the world and taking a poll of men has obviously failed to grasp the semantic relationship between the two notions. It is characteristic of this sort of relationship that once we understand the meanings of "bachelor," "unmarried," and "men," it should immediately be clear that all unmarried men are necessarily bachelors.[12]

But insofar as one defines "nigger" as "a black person," as Merriam-Webster does, it follows that "nigger" can be substituted for "black person" in any sentence in which the latter appears without changing the truth-value of the sentence. Of course, on this definition, the proposition expressed by the presubstitution sentence differs from the proposition expressed by the post-substitution sentence, but not enough to give rise to a difference in truth-values. If, for example, the sentence "John Doe is a black person" is empirically true, then Merriam-Webster's definition implies that the sentence "John Doe is a nigger" *must* also be empirically true.

Even worse, insofar as it is true, as Merriam-Webster claims, that these two expressions are synonymous, it follows that there *could not* be a black person who is not also a nigger. In other words, Merriam-Webster's definition of the word logically implies that it is *conceptually impossible*, because self-contradictory, for there to be a black person who is not also a nigger. Since, as an empirical matter, the class of black persons is nonempty, the definition implies that the class of niggers is both nonempty and coextensive with the class of black persons.[13] Thus, coupled with the obvious empirical fact that there are black people, Merriam-Webster's definition implies that there are black people and they are necessarily niggers.

It is clear that something has gone unconscionably wrong here. By defining "nigger" as "black person," Merriam-Webster has equated *definiens* and *definiendum* and thereby committed itself to an assertion that only the most unrepentant of racists would endorse. This problem arises because its scholars failed to understand what the N-word really means. Merriam-Webster's definition assumes that only one side of the equation is offensive. Only the word is offensive; there is nothing at all offensive about its meaning because all it means is "black person." On this view, the N-word is just an offensive way of conveying content that is otherwise perfectly acceptable.

This is a plausible account of what makes some words offensive. Indeed, many profanities and slang expressions are just offensive vehicles for conveying content that is otherwise acceptable. For example, the content of the word "breasts" is perfectly acceptable, but there are a number of words that convey that content in an offensive way. For example, "boobs" has exactly the same intensional and extensional meaning as "breasts" and hence can be substituted for "breasts" in any sentence without changing the truth-value of the sentence. "Sarah is experiencing discomfort near the area of her breasts" has the same truth-value as "Sarah is experiencing discomfort near the area of her boobs." Nevertheless, as a comparison of the two sentences quickly

makes clear, "boobs" conveys that meaning in an offensive way. As a result, it is impolite to use the word "boobs" in most, if not all, situations, even though it has exactly the same intensional and extensional meaning as "breasts." "Boobs" is an offensive vehicle for conveying content that would otherwise be perfectly acceptable.[14]

Typically, words that are offensive in this sense refer either to intimate bodily parts or to intimate bodily functions: "shit," "piss," "dick," and "fart" are all examples of words that are offensive vehicles for conveying content that is not, in and of itself, morally objectionable.[15] What makes use of such words offensive or inappropriate has to do with the degree of familiarity such use presupposes between speaker and listener. It is inoffensive, if not entirely appropriate, to use these words among close friends to refer to intimate bodily functions or parts—assuming that the topics are appropriate in the given context. But if one must discuss such functions or parts with less familiar acquaintances, it is offensive, because disrespectful to the listener, to use such words. Use of these words in such circumstances gives rise to roughly the same sort of offense that, for example, addressing a person by her first name without permission did in an earlier time. Such gestures and words are offensive in virtue of presupposing an unwarranted familiarity—and not in virtue of having objectionable content.

But there are many words that are offensive in virtue of their content. Unlike the term "boobs," the word "fuck" is offensive, not just because of the degree of familiarity its use presupposes, but because its content is offensive. While the expressions "fuck" and "making love" may seem to refer to the same class of sexual behaviors, the meanings of the words differ considerably—indeed, so much so that they cannot be substituted for one another in the way that "boobs" and "breasts" can be substituted for one another. If the sentence "Romeo made love with Juliet" is true of some sexual encounter, then the sentence "Romeo fucked Juliet" is probably false of that encounter.[16] The expression "making love" is typically used to refer to sexual relations that are characterized by mutual affection and respect. The expression "fuck" is used to refer to sexual relations of an altogether different character. Making love is something that is done *with* a person; fucking is something that is done *to* a person.[17] Thus, the content of the expression "fuck" differs from "making love," and this difference is what largely gives rise to the offense associated with the word "fuck."

The N-word is offensive in the same way that the word "fuck" is offensive, namely, in virtue of having offensive content.[18] In the mouth of a racist (and racists are, of course, the people who insist on using the word), the word "nigger" (as opposed to "nigga," which is used in hip-hop music and culture to express a sense of camaraderie) means something like this: a person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin. There are two dimensions of meaning to the word: one is factual, which purports to refer to all and only black people; the other is evaluative, which makes a racist claim about the biological or moral status of black people. What Merriam-Webster's scholars have failed to understand, then, is that the N-word itself expresses a racist sentiment. Unlike the word "boobs," it is the *content* of the racial slur that makes the word that imparts the slur offensive.

Indeed, *every* slur contains an offensive judgment about the moral or biological status of the group that the slur purports to describe. For example, the word "faggot" is not just an offensive way of conveying content that would otherwise be acceptable; it is the content of the word that makes it offensive. Homophobes and heterosexists use the word "faggot" to mean something like "man who is morally inferior in virtue of having a same-sex sexual preference." Thus, the word has a factual element that refers to all and only male homosexuals and a normative element that incorporates the judgment that all such persons are morally inferior in virtue of having a same-sex sexual preference. Though "faggot" and "male homosexual" purport to refer to the same class of persons, their meanings are considerably different.

As a result, the most common definition of "faggot" gives rise to exactly the same problem as Merriam-Webster's definition of "nigger." Most dictionaries define "faggot" as meaning "male homosexual"—though the word is also characterized as offensive slang. But insofar as "faggot" is semantically equated with "male homosexual," it follows that the word "faggot" can be substituted without change of truth-value for "male homosexual" in every sentence in which the latter appears. Thus, if "John Doe is a male homosexual" is true, then, *by definition*, it follows that "John Doe is a faggot" is also true. Moreover, it follows from this definition that it is conceptually impossible, because self-contradictory, for there to be a male homosexual who is not also a faggot. Together with the existence of male homosexuals, then, the standard definition implies that there are male homosexuals and, as a conceptual matter, they are all faggots. Thus, the most common definition of the word falsely implies a deeply offensive *conceptual* judgment about the moral worth of male homosexuals.

Racist and heterosexist claims are reprehensible whenever endorsed, but doubly so when endorsed by a dictionary because, as was pointed out by Merriam-Webster spokesperson di Leo, the function of a dictionary is primarily descriptive. Indeed, as mentioned above, a lexical definition of a word is simply a report of the way people, as a matter of empirical fact, use that word. Insofar as a dictionary defines "bachelor" as "unmarried male," that definition reports an empirical fact: the vast majority of competent speakers of English use the two expressions interchangeably. To the extent that a dictionary makes or endorses *morally* normative claims of any kind, whether true or false, offensive or inoffensive, it is going beyond its primary function.[19] In such instances, it goes from being a scholarly reference to being a "political tool"—exactly the function that Merriam-Webster's president took such pains to disclaim.

One way Merriam-Webster can avoid this problem is by defining "nigger" as "a person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin."[20] While such a definition would imply as a conceptual matter that all niggers are persons who belong to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin, it would not warrant either the inference that black persons are niggers or the inference that there are any persons who are niggers. For it should be obvious[21] that the class of persons who belong to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin is empty; no person is in any sense inferior to any other person because of characteristics having to do with skin color. Thus, while

such a definition would imply that the two classes are coextensive, it would not imply that they are nonempty.[22]

This, as will be recalled, is not the case with respect to Merriam-Webster's definition of the N-word. The existing definition implies, as is true of every definition, that the class defined by *definiens* and the class defined by *definiendum* are coextensive. But the existing definition gets into trouble because it is an obvious empirical fact that the class of persons with black skin is nonempty. It is for that reason that the existing definition entails not only that the class of niggers is coextensive with the class of black persons but also that the two classes are nonempty. Thus, it is the combination of these claims, and not just the asserted relationship between the two expressions, that commits Merriam-Webster to the unconscionable claim that all black people are, by definition, niggers. As we just saw, however, this problem does not arise if the N-word is defined as "a person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin" because worth has nothing to do with the color of one's skin.

A second way to avoid the problem is to define racial and sexual slurs, as the NAACP proposed, in a way that acknowledges that they are used to perpetuate sexism, heterosexism, and racism. Terms like these are themselves instruments of oppression; the mere utterance of such words seeks to oppress by downgrading a person's moral status. Indeed, Merriam-Webster could simply explicitly define the N-word *as* an instrument of oppression; thus, for example, it could define "nigger" as "a slur that is wrongfully used to oppress black persons on the basis of race."[23] By defining it in terms of its use as an instrument of oppression, a dictionary can forcefully convey the meaning of the word without endorsing the conceptual framework that motivates its use by racists.

While I don't wish to take a stand here on which definition ought to be adopted, it is worth noting that the first proposed definition seems to do a better job of identifying the content of the N-word than the second proposed definition. Strictly speaking, to say that the N-word is a slur that is wrongfully used to oppress black persons on the basis of race does no more than describe the circumstances in which it is typically used. On this definition, people who want to oppress black persons on the basis of race frequently use the N-word to accomplish this purpose. It is, of course, easily surmised that the slur expresses something derogatory about all and only black persons; for this reason, "a slur wrongfully used to oppress black persons on the basis of race" is a lexically acceptable definition of the N-word. But it is nonetheless noteworthy that this definition does not *explicitly* identify the term's derogatory content.

This, however, is not true of the definitional equation of the N-word with the expression "person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin." It is immediately clear from the definition of the word that it is used to express that black persons are inferior to white persons. Moreover, given the obviously derogatory content, it is also immediately clear that the word can be used to oppress black persons on the basis of race. If the only relevant consideration in framing a definition is the extent to which the *definiens* perspicuously identifies the content of the *definiendum*, then the

definition of the N-word as "person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin" seems to be the better definition.

But to the extent that the definition of the N-word as "a person who belongs to an inferior race in virtue of having black skin" does a better job of identifying the derogatory content of the slur, it is also more likely to cause the kind of hurt and offense caused by use of the N-word. The idea that a class of persons is inferior in virtue of skin color is no less hurtful, offensive, or objectionable just because it is false. The long and disgraceful history of racism in this country has opened deep and painful wounds that can still be aggravated by the mere *mention* of the locution "a person who is inferior in virtue of having black skin."[24] If it is legitimate to take the profound offensiveness of that idea into account in framing a definition, then the definition of the N-word as "a slur wrongfully used to oppress black persons on the basis of race" might very well be the better definition.

Still, one might worry that *any* definition of the N-word will be morally problematic since even lexical definitions express prescriptive claims. For the lexical definition of "bachelor" as "unmarried man" not only records an empirical fact about how competent speakers typically use the two words, but also expresses the prescriptive claim that this is the way the word "bachelor" is *properly* used. Thus, one might worry that any definition of a slur will be morally objectionable insofar as it endorses the usage. On this line of reasoning, for example, the NAACP's proposed definition of the N-word implies that the word is "properly" used as a slur that oppresses black persons on the basis of race.

The problem with this objection, of course, is that it fails to distinguish linguistically proper from morally proper. In the vast majority of situations, it will be morally improper to use a racial slur.[25] But the use of a slur can be *linguistically* proper even though it is not morally proper. Someone who uses the word "nigger" to oppress black people has correctly understood the word's meaning (in contrast, say, to someone who mistakenly uses the slur to mean "unmarried man") and hence uses it in a linguistically proper way. But the linguistically proper use of a racist term will nearly always be morally objectionable. Thus, while lexical definitions combine empirical and prescriptive elements, the prescriptive element is not *morally* prescriptive.

In this essay, I have attempted to show that Merriam-Webster's treatment of certain racial and sexual slurs, together with obvious empirical facts, implies racist and heterosexist views. As we have seen, any definitional equation of one expression α with another expression β entails that it is not conceptually possible for there to be a β that is not also an α. Thus, just as the definition of "bachelor" as "unmarried male" implies that it is conceptually impossible for there to be an unmarried male who isn't also a bachelor, Merriam-Webster's definition of "nigger" as "black person" implies that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a black person who isn't also a nigger.

Additionally, I have indicated how these slurs can be redefined to avoid such implications. In particular, I have argued that the definition of a slur should either explicitly incorporate the objectionable view that links worth to the relevant characteristic or simply indicate its use as an instrument of racist oppression. For this reason, the N-word is more appropriately defined as

either "a person who is inferior in virtue of having black skin" or "a slur that is wrongfully used to oppress black persons."

I am indebted to an anonymous referee for comments that enabled me to significantly improve this essay.

Notes

[1] *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, deluxe ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1998), 1232.

[2] "NAACP Objects to Dictionary Definition of Racial Epithet," NAACP Press Release, October 14, 1997; ⟨http://www.naacp.org/president/releases/archives/1997/diction.htm⟩.

[3] *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 656.

[4] Shannon Tangonan, "Slurs to Be Labeled as Such in Dictionary, but Not Deleted," *USA Today*, May 11, 1998, p. 2A.

[5] At the outset, I should caution the reader. Because the topic of this essay concerns the definition of slurs, the arguments will make repeated reference to words that are among the most offensive in the English language. As detestable as these words are, however, I can see no way to make the arguments I want to make without using them. And unfortunately, there is no way to remedy what I think is a grievous mistake on the part of Merriam-Webster without making this kind of argument. Accordingly, I hope the reader will regard the frequent appearance in this essay of such words as an evil that is justified by the larger purpose of the essay.

[6] John M. Morse, "Sparing Sensitivities Isn't Dictionary's Job," *USA Today*, May 11, 1998, p. 17A; emphasis added.

[7] Others, however, have pushed Merriam-Webster to remove these slurs from the dictionary. Kathryn Williams, curator of the Museum of Afrikan American History in Flint, Michigan, has orchestrated a letter-writing campaign urging Merriam-Webster to remove racist terms. Tangonan, "Slurs to Be Labeled as Such in Dictionary, but Not Deleted," p. 17A. Williams believes that the first step toward eliminating the use of such words is to remove them from dictionaries.

[8] The following analysis originates with Gottlob Frege. See, e.g., Frege, "On Sense and Nominatum," reprinted in A. P. Martinich (ed.), *Philosophy of Language*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 186–98. For a classic explication of Frege's views on language, see Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[9] Indeed, it has sometimes been thought that, as a conceptual matter, the synonymy of two words simply consists in their being substitutable in all contexts without change of truth-value. See, e.g., C. I. Lewis, *A Survey of Symbolic Logic* (Berkeley, CA: 1918), 373. On this view, when we say that two expressions have the same meaning, *what we mean* is that they can be substituted for one another in any sentence without change of truth-value.

[10] One can reasonably doubt that the two expressions are synonymous. Consider, for example, the puzzling question of whether the Pope is a bachelor. One might reasonably think that the Pope, though unmarried, is not a bachelor because openness to marriage is part of the concept of bachelor. If so, then "bachelor" is not, strictly speaking, synonymous with "unmarried man"; rather, it is synonymous with "unmarried man who is open to the possibility of marriage." The existence of these sorts of hard issues, however, has no significant implications with respect to the point being made above.

[11] None of this should be construed as denying the obvious fact that definitions, concepts, and conceptual frameworks can be changed. This sort of ontological claim is relative to a particular conceptual framework, albeit one that is always revisable in principle. But *any* conceptual framework that equates "bachelor" with "unmarried man" will have this implication. Thus, while such claims are relative to a revisable conceptual framework, they are no less modal for that fact.

[12] It is important to emphasize that I am not claiming that sentences expressing definitions are "analytic truths." Rather, what I am claiming here is only that once a person understands that α is synonymous with β, she is warranted in inferring that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a β that isn't also an α—without any further attempts at empirical investigation. Accordingly, the doubts about analyticity that have been inspired by the seminal work of W. V. O. Quine have no application here. See W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[13] This is just a straightforward consequence of the set-theoretic axiom of extensionality. Let A and B be sets. If $A = B$ and $A \neq \emptyset$, then it follows that $B \neq \emptyset$. See, e.g., P. R. Halmos, *Naive Set Theory* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1987).

[14] One might think that the word is offensive because it is sexist. While it is certainly true that some slang words used to refer to female body parts have sexist content (the most offensive example is "cunt"), I am not convinced that "boobs" falls into this category. My impression is that, as an empirical matter, women are considerably more likely than men to use "boobs" to refer to breasts. Indeed, my intuitive sense is that the word has fallen into comparative disuse among men. It is, I suppose, like the term "boner," which appears to be used much more frequently by men than by women to refer to an erect penis but lacks any obvious sexist content. To my ear, the more common use of "boner" to refer to silly but harmless mistakes suggests a certain helpless ineffectualness when used to refer to an erect penis. (In contrast, the association of "cock" with roosters known for their aggressive behavior suggests a certain violent quality when used to refer to an erect penis). In any event, I do not intend the example to have any sexist content. I am indebted to a reviewer for this journal for alerting me to this possibility.

[15] Of course, this is not to deny that the content of such words pick out topics that are socially inappropriate in many contexts.

[16] I do not mean to suggest, of course, that making love is the only morally permissible sexual activity.

[17] This undoubtedly helps to explain the fact that the word is also used to express that an injury has intentionally been done to another person. The sentence "John fucked Tom up" expresses, for example, the claim that John did something that (justifiably) caused injury to Tom.

[18] Merriam-Webster makes the same kind of mistake with the definition of "fuck." According to its definition, "fuck" means "to copulate; to engage in coitus with." *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 740.

[19] Other sorts of normative claims are, of course, consistent with the proper functions of a dictionary. It makes sense to record the most common usage of a word in a dictionary insofar as the most common usage constitutes the linguistically proper use. Thus, the dictionary definitions purport to represent linguistically proper usage. But while claims about what is linguistically proper are normative, they are not *morally* normative. See *infra* for further discussion of this function.

[20] This definition should, of course, include some indication that the use of the term is highly offensive.

[21] And this, in part, is why racism is culpable.

[22] The same solution is available with respect to the definition of "faggot." A definition of "faggot" as "male who is morally inferior in virtue of having a same-sex sexual preference" entails that the class of faggots is coextensive with the class of males who are morally inferior in virtue of having a same-sex sexual preference. Nevertheless, since the class of males who are morally inferior in virtue of having a same-sex preference is empty, the definition does not imply either that male homosexuals are faggots or that there exist any faggots.

[23] Likewise, Merriam-Webster could define "faggot" as "a term wrongfully used to oppress male homosexuals on the basis of sexual preference."

[24] One might attempt to avoid this problem by adding the word "deemed" to the definition. While it might be true that the locution "person *deemed* to be inferior in virtue of having black skin" is less likely to aggravate these wounds, this definition suffers from another serious problem. The equation of the N-word with "person deemed to

be inferior in virtue of having black skin," coupled with the empirical fact that racists have deemed many black persons to be inferior for this very reason, falsely implies that many black persons are niggers.

[25] I assume there are literary contexts in which it is morally appropriate to use the word. The following strikes me as an example of such a context: "A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave, if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy. The farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told his slave he was very sorry, that he had to give him some valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, 'Oh no. See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile.' 'But it's high up in the hills,' said the slave. 'High up for us,' said the master. 'But when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven. Best land there is.' So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. He preferred it to the valley. And it was done. The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down, and washed away the seeds, and the wind lingered all through the winter." Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 5.