Ideal DoLLs as Ideology

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This paper argues that many philosophical theories of meaning idealize our actual language communities and thereby contribute to perpetuating group-based oppression. I focus on externalist theories of language that posit a division of linguistic labor (DoLL), and I argue that the DoLLs they imagine are free of oppression and untouched by its effects. This distorts both basic theoretical assumptions and our ideas about which meanings are to be found in some language community. By thus obscuring oppression and its effects, we prevent ourselves from adequately addressing oppression's effects on the meanings we use to understand and communicate about the world.

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1. Introduction

In Charles Mills's "Ideal theory as ideology", he distinguishes between idealizing and nonidealizing approaches to ethical theory, and he argues that the dominant contemporary version of the former is obfuscating and "ideological, in the pejorative sense of a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege" (Mills 2005, 166). In this paper, I distinguish between idealizing and nonidealizing approaches to the division of linguistic labor (or DoLL), and I argue that the former (i) obscure the influences of oppression on linguistic meanings and conceptual contents and (ii) thereby reflect and contribute to perpetuating group privilege. I will give reasons to think that the views of the DoLL found in the works of Hilary Putnam, Sally Haslanger, Tyler Burge, and K. Anthony Appiah take the idealizing approach. Although I cannot consider here the details of every philosophical theory of meaning that attributes some meaning-determinative role to social facts, I suggest that nearly all such theories take

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idealizing approaches to the social facts they deem meaning-determinative, and thus nearly all are ideological in the pejorative sense.

In section 2, I will review Mills's argument (2.1) and outline the theories of meaning with which I am concerned (2.2). In section 3, I will introduce divisions of linguistic labor and argue that which meaning and extension they determine for a term depends on systematic semantic deference (3.1), that not all systematic semantic deference is epistemically grounded (3.2), and that some actual systematic semantic deference is grounded in structural oppression (3.3). In section 4, I will explain how idealizing the DoLL obscures the influences of oppression on linguistic meanings and conceptual contents and contributes to perpetuating group privilege.

2. Idealization in theories of mind and language

2.1 Ideal theory as ideology

The distinction between idealizing and nonidealizing approaches to ethical theory concerns modeling a polity. In the versions relevant to us, the models of idealizing approaches abstract away from race- and gender-based oppression, treating them as bugs of the social system rather than features. In another context, for instance, Mills characterizes Alvin Goldman's social epistemological project in a way that suggests it takes an idealizing approach.

> The picture of "society" he [Goldman] is working with is one that—with perhaps a few unfortunate exceptions—is inclusive and harmonious. Thus his account offers the equivalent in social epistemology of the mainstream theorizing in political science that frames American sexism and racism as "anomalies": U.S. political culture is conceptualized as essentially egalitarian and inclusive, with the long actual history of systemic gender and racial subordination being relegated to the status of a minor "deviation" from the norm. (Mills 2007, 17)

Mills outlines six overlapping ways in which idealizing approaches tend to treat systemic gender and racial oppression as anomalies. Idealizing approaches populate their model of society with "the abstract and undifferentiated equal atomic individuals of classical liberalism"; they idealize the cognitive capacities of social agents, ignoring how oppression might affect how agents' epistemic capacities develop; "they're silent on oppression and its effects"; they assume the society to have ideal social institutions "with little or no sense of how their [the institutions'] actual workings may systematically disadvantage women, the poor, and racial minorities"; they assume what Mills calls "an idealized cognitive sphere", where dominant ideologies do not mask oppression, there are no epistemic injustices, etc.; and they assume that all agents will do their part in maintaining justice and just institutions. (Mills 2005, 168–169)

The models used by nonidealizing approaches correct these distortions. Rather than abstract away from structural oppression and its effects, nonidealizing approaches include oppression and its effects in their models of society. Instead of treating the US social system as fundamentally inclusive and harmonious (perhaps with a few unfortunate exceptions), for instance, a nonidealizing approach models US society with patriarchy and White supremacy as the norm rather than the exception. In this sense, Mills's model of modern European societies as fundamentally shaped by White supremacy in The Racial Contract (1997) takes a nonidealizing approach.

It should be relatively clear how the models of idealizing approaches are obfuscating: They represent societies inaccurately, obscuring from view the oppressive social relations, institutions, etc. of that society. Since ethical theories draw on their models of society to determine what individuals and collectives ought to do, models that obscure oppression and its consequences yield ethical theories that offer no remedies for oppression and its consequences. Indeed, idealizing approaches to ethical theory do not even conceptualize oppression and its consequences as problems to be remedied.

This, then, suggests how idealizing approaches are "ideological in the pejorative sense", how they "contribute to perpetuating illicit group privilege." In societies structured by patriarchy and White supremacy, various social structures privilege those read as White cis men: economic and political institutions, epistemic resources, laws, social norms, etc. etc. If ethicists asking "how ought we to live?" and "how ought we to structure our society?" take it that all these structural injustices are absent from how we live now, then their answers will both tell us nothing about how to end race- and gender-based oppression and will make it seem—to the uncritical reader, at least—as though these oppressions either do not exist or are only trivial problems. Insofar as we use ethical theories to help us decide how to live and structure our societies, these ethical theories will tell us that we do not need to address patriarchy or White supremacy. Indeed, there are no such problems to be addressed. Taking this guidance, we would then ensure that the patriarchal and White supremacist structures remain in place, perpetuating illicit group privileges for White cis men. To paraphrase Mills, idealizing approaches are "deeply antithetical to the proper goal of theoretical ethics as an enterprise"; they guarantee that the inclusive and harmonious societies of their models will never be achieved (Mills 2005, 170).

Ethical theorists are not the only philosophers who take idealizing approaches. Some philosophical theories of linguistic meaning or conceptual content model social relations as well. I propose that nearly all of them take idealizing approaches.

With ethical theories that take idealizing approaches, the consequence is that we fail to develop ways to address actual oppression and its consequences, thereby ensuring that they continue. If there is an analogous consequence to idealizing in theories of meaning or content, it shall be because accurate representations of social relations, institutions, etc. matter, in some way, to theories of meaning. Prima facie, it will have to be that for at least some theories of meaning, social facts play a role in determining meanings, so that a theory's misrepresentation of social facts will mean that the theory gives erroneous accounts of the meanings used in the society. In the next subsection, I will call theories that do give a meaning-determinative role to social facts "social theories of meaning".

2.2 Social theories of meaning

Philosophical theories of meaning purport to tell us how meaning-bearing entities come to bear the meanings they do. Some theories of meaning say that social facts play a role in determining either word-meanings or conceptual contents; in this paper, I will call all such theories "social theories of meaning". Wittgenstein, for instance, is often credited with introducing use theories of meaning, according to which "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 2009, 43). For a given word, a social fact concerning the language community's use of the word (at a time) determines the word's meaning. In this tradition, the theories developed by Wilfrid Sellars (1963, 1974) and Robert Brandom (1994) give similar but more complex roles to social facts in the determination of word meanings.

In an overlapping tradition, social externalists claim that for at least some terms or concepts, social facts determine the meanings of terms and/or the contents of beliefs and other mental states. Social externalism is a form semantic externalism, according to which some terms or concepts are such that their meaning or content when uttered or entokened by a language user or thinker is not fully determined by anything entirely "internal" to the speaker—the content of a speaker's belief is not determined by her brain states, for instance. Social externalists add that for at least some terms, social facts are among the "external" determinants of word meanings or conceptual contents.

Traditionally, social theories of meaning have been developed with idealizing approaches to social models. Like Goldman's social epistemological project, they assume free and equal agents, idealized social institutions, a "cognitive sphere" without masking ideologies or epistemic injustice, etc. Of course, I cannot attend to the details of every social theory of language and show that each takes an idealizing approach—I do not have the space, even, to attend to the details of all the views I have mentioned above. Instead, I will

focus on semantic externalist theories, the role they attribute to the division of linguistic labor or "the DoLL", and the idealized DoLL they assume.

3. Divisions of linguistic labor

3.1 DoLLs are constituted by systematic semantic deference

Hilary Putnam argued for semantic externalism partly as follows: (i) Putnam's own conception "of a beech tree is exactly the same as [his conception] of an elm tree" (Putnam 1975, 143) and yet (ii) when he uses the words "beech" and "elm", they mean different things and refer to different sets of trees. (iii) If it were something "in his head" that determines the meanings of "beech" and "elm" when he says them, then given i, they would mean the same thing. But since they do not mean the same thing when he says them (according to ii), the meanings of "beech" and "elm" when Putnam says them are not fully determined by anything internal to Putnam.

On Putnam's original articulation of the view, it is not obvious that social facts play any role in determining the meanings of terms or the contents of concepts. The traditional interpretation of his position is that for terms referring to natural kinds, the meaning of the term (and the concept it expresses) is determined by the kind to which it refers. The meaning of "beech" is determined by the natural kind beech trees, not by any social facts.

But Putnam himself appeals to the division of linguistic labor to explain how it can be that his uses of "beech" and "elm" mean what they do. He says his beech/elm example depends on "a fact about language," namely, the division of linguistic labor (Putnam 1975, 144). He elaborates: "We could hardly use such words as "elm" and "aluminum" if no one possessed a way of recognizing elm trees and aluminum metal, but not everyone…has to be able to make the distinction" (Putnam 1975, 144). Although Putnam cannot distinguish beeches from elms, there are others in the language community who can. Putnam depends on these others to perform the "linguistic labor" that makes it possible for the terms "beech" and "elm" to be used with different meanings. Since this labor is performed by some in the community—botanists, presumably—and not others, the labor is divided. Those of us who cannot make the distinctions necessary for the use of a term depend on those who can in order to make our terms usable.

Moreover, Putnam says "the sociolinguistic state of the collective linguistic body" fixes the extension of terms that are subject to the division of linguistic labor.

> Whenever a term is subject to the division of linguistic labor, the "average" speaker who acquires it does not acquire anything that fixes its extension. In particular, his individual psychological state certainly

> does not fix its extension; it is only the sociolinguistic state of the collective linguistic body to which the speaker belongs that fixes the extension. (Putnam 1975, 146)

Prima facie, fixes is a determination relation, such that if x fixes y, x at least partly determines y. If God fixes all the physical properties of the universe, God determines all those properties. If the physical properties fix all the others, then the physical properties determine all the other properties. And so on. Given that the sociolinguistic state of a collective linguistic body is a social fact, Putnam does seem to accept, then, that social facts play some role in determining the extensions of terms that are subject to the division of linguistic labor.

Traditionally, we call those who perform linguistic labor for a term "experts", so that we say: For terms subject to the division of linguistic labor, "average" speakers depend on the linguistic labor of experts. In depending on experts, we give them semantic deference: You and I defer to botanists regarding the meaning and extension of "beech" and other botanical terms. We defer to physicists regarding the meaning and extension of "quark" and other technical terms specific to physics. We defer to chemists regarding the meaning and extension of "nitrogen" and other technical terms specific to chemistry. And so on. On the traditional view, experts receive semantic deference systematically because they are epistemically best-positioned to perform the relevant linguistic labor. They have the expertise that enables them to make the needed distinctions between beeches and elms, quarks and muons, nitrogen and neon.

Note, however, that according to Putnam it is not merely the distinction-making abilities of experts that determines the extensions of terms subject to the DoLL. It is a sociolinguistic state of the collective linguistic body. The mere existence in the language community of experts who can tell beeches from elms does not suffice to fix the extensions of "beech" and "elm". There is something more. What more? What "state of the collective linguistic body", is needed? Prima facie, it is systematic semantic deference to the relevant experts. If systematic deference in the English language community did not go to botanists but to some others who act as though "beech" and "elm" are coextensive, then presumably our terms "beech" and "elm" would be coextensive. As I have argued elsewhere, while we give systematic semantic deference to botanists for the botanical term "fruit", English also has a legal term "fruit" for which systematic semantic deference goes to certain legal authorities (in a jurisdiction) and their official dictates—not to botanists. The legal term is not coextensive with the botanical term, for in the US, the term's extension does not include the botanical fruit tomatoes, and in the EU, it includes at least one non-fruit, carrots (Engelhardt 2018). If semantic def-

erence for this term did go to botanists, then presumably it would be coextensive with the botanical term. The existence in the English language community of botanists who can tell botanical fruits from non-fruits does not suffice to fix all uses of the word form "fruit" to the botanical kind. Rather, practices of systematically deferring to legal authorities for legal terms make it so that those authorities perform the linguistic labor for the legal term "fruit", and different practices of systematically deferring to botanists make it so that botanists take on the linguistic labor for the botanical term.

I take three points from these considerations. (1) If a term is subject to the DoLL, then there is a social fact that partly determines its meaning and/or extension. (2) That social fact is that there is systematic semantic deference for the term from average speakers to some group. (3) That group's practices then determine the term's meaning and extension for the language community.

In light of 1, I will focus on all those views that accept that there is a DoLL. This includes many views that are externalist but whose supporters would deny that they are social externalists. Perhaps most saliently in this context, it includes Kwame Anthony Appiah's appeal to a DoLL in his 1996 account of the concept RACE and Sally Haslanger's externalist accounts of gender and race terms. (e.g., Haslanger 2012)

3.2 Idealized DoLLs

Points 1 and 2 above together suggest that DoLLs may be grounded on epistemic differences among community members or not. That is, a language community might give systematic semantic deference for a term to those who are in fact epistemically best-positioned to identify the term's extension, but they need not. Social structures in a language community might instead make it so that systematic semantic deference goes to those in the highest caste, to a privileged race or gender, or to a revered religious order. To put it another way: the social fact in some community with a DoLL for a term might be epistemically grounded, but it need not be. Nonetheless, the most prominent accounts of the DoLL assume that semantic deference is always grounded in epistemic positions, with those who are better positioned getting deference from those in worse epistemic positions.

In this subsection, I will briefly make the case that social theories of meaning that posit a DoLL idealize it (i.e. the DoLL) by assuming that systematic semantic deference is always epistemically grounded. Then, I will argue that this assumption is false. In the next subsection, I will make the case that systematic semantic deference in communities shaped by patriarchy and White supremacy systematically give semantic deference to the

groups who are privileged by those oppressive structures, paradigmatically White cis men.

In making the case that philosophers have traditionally idealized the DoLL, I will focus on the assumption that systematic semantic deference is always epistemically grounded, with deference "flowing up" epistemically, i.e. from worse epistemic positions to better. This assumption is idealizing in Mills's sense because it obscures the actuality that, for instance, race- and gender-based hierarchical social positioning grounds some systematic semantic deference, with deference flowing up the hierarchy (rather than epistemically), i.e. from subordinate to dominant social positions.

In Putnam's case, the assumption is not expressed explicitly; it is evident in the examples given and not given. In all of Putnam's examples, those who know less about the kind to which a term refers systematically give semantic deference to those who know more about it. Those of us who cannot distinguish beeches and elms give semantic deference for "beech" and "elm" to the botanists who know more about them. Those who cannot distinguish real gold from fake give semantic deference to those who can (Putnam 1975, 144–145). And so on. The semantic deference in all of Putnam's cases occurs in virtue of epistemic differences among speakers, where the epistemic superiority of some language users relative to others explains and grounds semantic deference from the latter to the former.

In some of Sally Haslanger's work on race and gender terms, she endorses semantic externalism for such terms and outlines a division of linguistic labor. On Haslanger's view, terms that are subject to the DoLL have their extensions determined in two steps: first, "by ostension of paradigms (or other means of reference-fixing)", and then by "implicit extension to things of the same type as the paradigms" (Haslanger 2012, 398). The work of linguistic labor is then a matter of identifying "the (an?) objective type, if any, into which the paradigms of a particular concept fall" (Haslanger 2012, 398). Identifying objective types into which paradigms of a concept or term fall is empirical research into whatever objective types exist in our world, so that, prima facie, the linguistic labor of identifying objective types is performed by expert researchers like botanists for "beech" and "elm", chemists for "water", medical experts for "arthritis", social scientists for "underclass" (Haslanger 2012, 134), and so on. "It is up to the 'experts,'" Haslanger says, "to determine what kind the paradigms share" (Haslanger 2012, 134). Why would it be experts who perform the linguistic labor in Haslanger's DoLL? Presumably, it is because experts on a term's extension are epistemically best-positioned to identify that extension, and semantic deference is systematically given to those who are epistemically best-positioned in Haslanger's DoLL: systematic semantic deference is epistemically grounded, flowing up from worse

epistemic positions to better. Indeed, Haslanger notes that this is the case no matter whether individual speakers intend to defer to experts or not.

> Semantic externalism does not depend on my intention to defer. Even if I think I know perfectly well what arthritis is, when I believe I have arthritis in my thigh, the content of my belief is determined by experts on joint disorders (Burge 1979). (Haslanger 2012, 134)

I do not deny that individual language users may give semantic deference without intending to (or at least without being aware of any intention to); I offer this quotation rather as evidence that on Haslanger's view of the DoLL, semantic deference is not grounded in individual intentions but in something else, and given that deference always seems to go to relevant experts, the "something else" is presumably the experts' epistemic superiority. Semantic deference is epistemically grounded in Haslanger's DoLL.

Tyler Burge seldom uses the phrase "division of linguistic labor", but his social externalism employs one to account for the determination of meanings and extensions in a language community. In "Intellectual norms and the foundations of mind," he says, "We may imagine a vast, ragged network of interdependence, established by patterns of deference which lead back to people who would elicit the assent of others" regarding the meaning and extension of some term (Burge 2007, 258-259). Who elicits the assent of others, and how do they do it? Burge says it is "the most competent" speakers, and "to put it crudely, a person counts as among the most competent if he or she would be persuasive to other competent speakers in the use and explication of the language" (Burge 2007, 259). Those who systematically receive semantic deference are the most competent. Presumably, that is just to say that semantic deference systematically goes to those who are epistemically best-positioned, and semantic deference is epistemically grounded.

But to say that one earns semantic deference thanks to their abilities in "persuasion" makes it seem as though the abilities of the most competent speakers need not be epistemic abilities or abilities with epistemic resources or perhaps even abilities at all. Perhaps it is possible to say that a speaker is regarded as most competent in some oppressive system thanks to his social position in that system. If Burge acknowledges that a speaker might receive systematic semantic deference because, say, as a wealthy White man in a patriarchal white supremacist capitalist system, there are norms that make other speakers inclined to find him persuasive, then Burge's view might not idealize semantic deference.

Burge makes it clear, however, that semantic deference grounded in rational persuasion is, in his view, the norm.

> …the most competent speakers are pre-eminent not merely because they impress the impressionable. Their influence is based on persuasion that is subject to dispute and cognitive checks. (Burge 2007, 260)

He considers deviations from the norm, but they involve "the attractiveness of the style of speech, the power or status of the speaker, or the impressionability of the hearer" (Burge 2007, 260). He does not consider the effects that systematic oppression might have on semantic deference.

On Burge's view, then, those who receive semantic deference do so because they are "persuasive on matters about which there are objective rights and wrongs and on which substantive reasons have a bearing" (Burge 2007, 260). To put it another way: the most competent speakers are the epistemically superior speakers, and they receive systematic semantic deference because semantic deference is epistemically grounded.

Kwame Anthony Appiah appeals to a division of linguistic labor in his work on "the race concept" in "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections" (Appiah 1996, 41–42). On Appiah's view, "throughout the nineteenth century the term "race" came increasingly to be regarded…as a scientific term," (Appiah 1996, 41) with the result that it fell under the division of linguistic labor and ordinary speakers gave systematic semantic deference for the term to "the experts: the medical doctors and anatomists, and later, the anthropologists and philologists and physiologists…" (Appiah 1996, 42). A practice of semantic deference developed for the term "race" because it came to be regarded as a scientific term and there developed practices of semantic deference to experts for scientific terms generally. Appiah notes that this practice of deferring to scientific experts was preceded by other, non-scientific practices of semantic deference: "older specialties, like theology or law, had for a long time underwritten concepts—the Trinity, landlord—whose precise definition ordinary people did not know" (Appiah 1996, 41).

Appiah's remarks on the DoLL are brief, but his reasoning and examples are suggestive. What distinguishes those who give semantic deference from those who get it on Appiah's view is that the latter know the precise definitions of the relevant terms and the former do not. "Ordinary speakers, when queried about whether their term "race" really referred to anything, would have urged you to go to the experts" (Appiah 1996, 41–2). Because the experts "developed the scientific idea of race," and thus they know what ordinary speakers do not, namely, the term's precise definition (Appiah 1996, 42). They are epistemically better-positioned than ordinary speakers. Similarly, ordinary speakers defer to the epistemically-superior lawyers for "landlord" and to theologians for "the Trinity." Deference flows from epistemically worse positions to better, and it does so because systematic semantic deference is epistemically grounded: the knowledge possessed by the

experts justifies their receiving semantic deference. Although Appiah concludes that the experts who developed the race concept were mistaken—the only race in the US, he says, is the human race (Appiah 1996, 32)—it is still their relatively superior epistemic positioning that grounds their receiving systematic semantic deference. And although Appiah is concerned to limn a history of racism surrounding the concept of race, he does not consider how a history of White supremacy (and patriarchy) might have shaped practices of semantic deference.

But the actual practices of semantic deference that partly determine meanings and extensions in English are not all epistemically grounded, and some are plausibly grounded in oppressive structures. I will argue briefly for the first claim here, and I will defend the second in the next subsection.

As noted above, I have argued elsewhere that for at least some legal terms, systematic semantic deference goes to legal authorities (Engelhardt 2018). We can justify this claim in a traditional way by giving examples that parallel Putnam's "beech" and "elm" examples: I cannot distinguish between libel and slander, and yet when I say "libel", I refer to libel and not to slander. How? There are others in my language community who can distinguish the two, and they receive systematic semantic deference for the terms.

But with legal terms, it is also relatively easy to point to particular performances of linguistic labor and to the systems that enforce systematic deference to those particular performances. The US legal term "fruit" again provides a simple example. The term is used for tax purposes, dictating which imports should be taxed as fruits and which should not be. In 1893, the US Supreme Court decided that although tomatoes are botanical fruits, they are legally vegetables and thus should not be taxed as fruits (Nix v. Hedden 149, U.S. 304 (1893)). The Court Decision constituted linguistic labor for the legal term "fruit", dictating that its extension does not include tomatoes (cf. Engelhardt 2018, 1859–1860). Since the Supreme Court Justices performed this linguistic labor and others in the community did not, the linguistic labor for the term is divided. The term is subject to the DoLL.

Moreover, since the term has legal significance, there are systems in place to enforce the Court's linguistic labor, thereby enforcing systematic semantic deference to the Court. Any who refuse to have their tomatoes taxed as vegetables face legal repercussion; tax assessors who officially treat tomatoes as legal fruits rather than vegetables may face legal or professional consequences; and so on. Semantic deference to the Court Decision is assured by various parts of the overall structure of the US legal system. This shows that at least some legal terms are subject to the DoLL, and for at least some of these, systematic semantic deference goes to legal authorities like the US Supreme Court.

More to the point for present purposes, it also establishes that systematic semantic deference is not always epistemically grounded. In the case of legal terms, it is grounded in institutional structures and procedures that give certain legal authorities the power to decide the extensions of legal terms and that give (typically) others the power to enforce these decisions. Let me be clear: (a) Supreme Court Justices do not receive systematic semantic deference because of their superior epistemic positions but because of their institutional positions, and (b) their Decisions do not receive systematic semantic defense because of their rational persuasiveness but because of the institutional authority of the US Supreme Court.

In support of a: Suppose that at the time of the 1893 Decision, there were many legal experts whose understanding of the facts, traditions, and theories relevant to the case far surpassed that had by any of the sitting Justices, and suppose that a few dozen of these had argued publicly that tomatoes should be included in the extension of the legal term "fruit". Suppose that these experts were far and away epistemically best-positioned among all people living to decide whether tomatoes should or should not be legal fruits. Would their epistemic superiority have made it so that semantic deference for the legal term systematically went to them instead of to the Supreme Court? Of course not. Would the systems that enforce tax law have enforced it in conformity with what the experts argued? Of course not. (Not without widespread rebellion, anyway.) The systematic semantic deference that gives Supreme Court Justices and other legal authorities the power to decide the meanings and extensions of legal terms is not epistemically grounded.

In support of b: Suppose that the public arguments given by the aforementioned experts were found by nearly all to be persuasive, but the Court Decision was swayed by bribes from lobbyists to the Justices, and the Court's public arguments were found by all to be unconvincing. In that case, would systematic semantic deference for the legal term have gone to the experts instead of to the Court? Would the systems that enforce tax law have done so in accordance with the expert decision? Of course not. Again, systematic deference to legal authorities is not epistemically grounded. It is grounded in the practices, structures, and procedures of the US legal system, including practices, structures, and procedures of enforcement.

It follows that not all systematic semantic deference is epistemically grounded.

3.3 Nonideal systematic semantic deference

Idealizing approaches to the DoLL mistakenly assume that all semantic deference is epistemically grounded; this assumption obscures the ways in which

oppressive structures systematically shape semantic deference. Here, I make the case that the social hierarchies of patriarchy and White supremacy establish systematic semantic deference from socially subordinate to socially dominant language users. My reasoning is as follows: (i) If there is a norm throughout the language community making it appropriate, all else equal, for speakers who are members of group G to correct speakers who are not members of G regarding use or explication of some term T or family of terms τ, then systematic semantic deference for T or τ goes to the Gs; (ii) in the English language community, there are (patriarchal and White supremacist) norms making it appropriate, all else equal, for dominant language users to correct non-dominant language users regarding use or explication of nearly all terms. It follows that systematic semantic deference for nearly all terms in the English language community goes to dominant language users. And, most plausibly, this systematic deference is grounded in the oppressive hierarchies of patriarchy and White supremacy. Oppression thus affects the DoLL; to idealize it is to obscure and contribute to perpetuating these effects of oppression. I will make cases for i and ii, and then note some consequences of my argument so far.

Claim i is motivated by two related ideas concerning corrections and deference. The first is that accepted corrections regarding a term or family of terms are reliable indicators of semantic deference: When the physician corrects the patient's use of "arthritis" and the patient accepts this correction, the patient gives the physician semantic deference for the term "arthritis". In concrete situations, semantic deference should be "realized" by some acts that language users perform or some norm that they obey. I submit that when one speaker corrects another's use or explication of a term and the second speaker accepts this correction, there is a realization of semantic deference afoot.

I take motivation for this point from the most prominent example of semantic deference in a concrete situation in the literature, namely, that in Burge's tharthritis thought experiment. There, a man who has many true beliefs about arthritis and who can often use the word "arthritis" competently visits his physician and expresses one of his beliefs by saying, "I have arthritis in my thigh." The physician corrects the patient, "telling him that this cannot be so, since arthritis is specifically an inflammation of joints" (Burge 2007, 104–105). The patient accepts the physician's correction: he defers to her regarding the meaning and extension of the term. Take this as a paradigmatic realization of semantic deference. The patient gives the physician semantic deference for "arthritis" when he accepts her correction about the meaning or extension of the term. This suggests that semantic deference for "arthritis" goes to physicians and other medical experts and comes from all others.

But it only suggests it. We should not say that anytime one language user accepts a linguistic correction from another, then the latter is a member of a group that receives semantic deference for the relevant term. That is: it is not a sufficient condition for group G's receiving semantic deference for T or τ that when some member of G corrects some non-member of G regarding use or explication of T/τ, that correction is accepted. Language users may, for a number of reasons, accept linguistic corrections when they should not. An ornery patient might insist that the ailment in his thigh is called "arthritis", and his physician might accept this "correction" of her correction in order just to get on with the visit. A botanist might accept correction about the explication of "beech" from a non-expert in order to protect his pride.

And we also should not say that it is a necessary condition on a group G's receiving systematic semantic deference for T or τ that every time some member of G corrects some non-member of G regarding use or explication of T/τ, that correction is accepted. It is not a necessary condition on medical experts' receiving systematic semantic deference for "arthritis" that every time a physician corrects a patient's use of "arthritis", the patient accepts it. Some patients will not trust physicians for various reasons; some patients will have extreme epistemic arrogance; and so on.

This points us to the second idea motivating claim i: it is not just accepted corrections that are paradigm realizations of semantic deference; it is appropriate corrections, corrections that ought to be accepted. In the tharthritis case, whether the patient accepts the doctor's correction or not, he ought to. If the patient tries to correct the physician and insist that the ailment in his thigh is called "arthritis", then no matter whether she accepts it or not, his correction is inappropriate.

For these reasons, I propose to take it as a sufficient (but I do not say necessary) condition on group G's receiving systematic semantic deference for T or τ that there is a norm throughout the language community making it appropriate, all else equal, for members of G to correct speakers who are not members of G regarding use or explication of T/τ. Where such a norm is in place and some member of G corrects a non-G's use or explication of T, then, ceteris paribus, the latter ought to accept the correction, no matter whether they in fact do so; and, all else equal, Gs ought not to accept corrections from non-Gs, no matter whether they do or do not. Where this norm holds throughout the language community, then the Gs' corrections will be systematically appropriate: they will receive systematic semantic deference. This is equivalent to claim i.

Let me make two notes on claim i before I turn to ii. First, a note on ceteris paribus conditions. Even though experts on rheumatoid conditions receive semantic deference for "arthritis" and there is plausibly a norm mak-

ing it appropriate for all others to accept their corrections regarding the use and explication of "arthritis", the norm holds when conditions are "normal": provided the expert is not intoxicated, provided the word form "arthritis" is not being used as code for something non-medical, etc. I take that to be relatively obvious. In addition, although I say the condition I give is a sufficient condition for *G*'s receiving semantic deference, we should take the sufficiency here as subject to ceteris paribus qualifications as well: provided there is no other norm that overrides the norm in question, provided the term(s) T/τ are at least sometimes used in the community, etc.

Second, in the familiar cases, the norms that ground systematic semantic deference are epistemic norms. It is the physician's epistemic position relative to her patient's that grounds the appropriateness of her correction. But, one way to put my point in this section of the paper is that not all the norms that ground systematic semantic deference are epistemic norms. As I illustrated above, some of them are norms of legal systems. And as I will now show, some of them are norms of patriarchy and/or White supremacy.

I motivate claim ii by pointing to the systematic occurrences of mansplaining and Whitesplaining; that these phenomena occur systematically, I claim, suggests that there are (patriarchal and White supremacist) norms making it appropriate for men to correct non-men and Whites to correct non-Whites. We call attention to these behaviors and label them in our efforts to resist the norms that make them appropriate.

The widespread recognition of mansplaining in the English language community is probably thanks to the examples in Rebecca Solnit's essay, "Men Explain Things to Me." In the first example, Solnit is at a party describing a book she had written when an "imposing man who'd made lots of money" interrupts her to describe a more important book on the same topic of which he had read a summary. Of course, it turns out that the book he describes is Solnit's book, the book she was already summarizing, and he did not know it because he had not read it. It is not obvious what the full extension of the term "mansplaining" is, given its popular uses in various media, but let me note two features important for us. First, in mansplaining, at least one man contributes to a conversation with women or non-men as though he is in a superior epistemic position to them when in fact he is not. Although Solnit's epistemic position regarding the topic of her book was superior to her interlocutor's, he nonetheless contributed to the conversation as though his position was superior.

Second, as the name suggests, these cases are gendered. That is not to say that all and only men mistakenly act in conversation as though they are in superior epistemic positions, though. Why are they gendered, then? There are plausibly a number of good reasons; let me propose one: Under patri-

archy, there are norms making it appropriate for men to contribute to conversations with women or non-men as though they, the men, are in superior epistemic positions. Various phenomena discussed in the social epistemology literature testify to the existence of such norms: the testimonial injustices that discredit non-men and give men inflated credibility (Fricker 2007, 17–30, Medina 2011, 56–64), the stereotypes of non-men as epistemically inferior (Fricker 2007, 30–60, Langton 2010, 459–464); the discursive injustices that distort the speech acts of non-men (Kukla 2014); and so on.

The conversational contributions that these norms make appropriate are general. They include interruptions, explanations, condescending tones, corrections, and more. Here, of course, our interest is in corrections, and specifically corrections regarding the use or explication of a term. Since the norms make such conversational contributions generally appropriate for men, they thereby make such corrections appropriate for men. And since the norms are general, the licenses they give to men are not limited to any particular terms. Thus, the norms even license non-gynecologist men to correct women gynecologists regarding the use and explication of "vulva" and "vagina" (Perlman 2019). Thus, I submit that in the English language community, there are (patriarchal) norms making it appropriate, all else equal, for men to correct women and others read as non-men regarding the use or explication of nearly all terms.

The term "Whitesplaining" has had a more specific popular application than "mansplaining." In an analysis column for CNN, for instance, John Blake defines it this way:

> …an affliction that's triggered when some white people hear a person of color complain about racism. They will immediately explain in a condescending tone why the person is wrong, "getting too emotional" or "seeing race in everything." (Blake 2019)

But Blake does highlight the same mistaken epistemic superiority I emphasized with mansplaining:

> The implication [of Whitesplaining]: These white people know more about how racism operates than those who've struggled against it for much of their lives.
>
> To become a victim of "whitesplaining" is infuriating. Imagine a plumber trying to tell a pilot how to land a plane or a man trying to tell a mother what it feels like to give birth. (Blake 2019)

I suggest that while "Whitesplaining" may not apply to all cases in which Whites contribute to conversations with non-Whites as though their epistemic positions are superior, the systematic occurrence of Whitesplaining points to the same sorts of general norms. That is, under White supremacy,

there are norms making such conversational contributions appropriate; and, again, there is evidence for these norms in the form of various phenomena discussed in the social epistemology literature: As the authors cited above note, non-Whites also suffer testimonial injustice, discrediting stereotypes, discursive injustice. As above, the corrections that are paradigmatic examples of semantic deference are a subset of these conversational contributions. Thus, I claim that under White supremacy, there are norms making it appropriate for Whites to correct non-Whites regarding the use or explication of nearly all terms.

Taking the considerations from mansplaining and Whitesplaining together, we have reason to believe that there are norms making it appropriate for dominant language users to correct non-dominant language users regarding use or explication of nearly all terms. We have reasons to accept claim ii.

With claims i and ii established, we have reasons to accept that under patriarchy and White supremacy, systematic semantic deference goes to dominant language users, and not always to those who are epistemically best-positioned to perform the relevant linguistic labor. That is, although social theories of meaning uniformly idealize the DoLL, our actual DoLL is nonideal.

4. Ideal DoLLs as ideology

Where a social theory of meaning misrepresents the social facts of some society, it will give inaccurate accounts of the meanings in that society. Whereas Haslanger takes gender terms to be determined by social theorists in an idealized DoLL, systematic semantic deference in our nonideal DoLL may instead go to powerful White men with an interest in perpetuating patriarchy (Haslanger 2012, 135). While Appiah emphasizes the important intellectual history of the race concept, systematic semantic deference for race terms may presently go to contemporary Whites invested in the evolving ideologies of White supremacy.

But still, one might think that this hardly matters for a philosophical theory of meaning. Many philosophical theories of meaning aim to say how meanings are determined generally, not to say what any particular meanings are, except as example cases to demonstrate the workings of the general theory. If a theory's general outline of how meanings are determined partly by social facts is right, but it gets some or all of those social facts wrong, is not that a merely trivial problem for the theory? The theory would be true in essential respects, but the examples used to illustrate it would simply be mistaken.

In fact, there are two reasons why we should be concerned about idealizations in social theories of meaning. First, it is not true for all social theories of meaning that if the theory were to acknowledge oppression and its effects, it would remain the same "in essential respects". As shown above, theorists who accept the DoLL uniformly assume that systematic semantic deference is epistemically grounded. It is at least arguable that this is assumed to be an essential feature of DoLLs. But this assumption is mistaken, and theorists plausibly make this assumption thanks to the idealizing approach. As I have argued, in societies shaped by patriarchy and White supremacy, it is plausible that systematic semantic deference is grounded in the oppressive hierarchies that grant illicit group privileges to White cis men. When we idealize language communities, we fail to see this, and our theories of meaning that posit a DoLL get it wrong, even in essential respects. These errors obscure both oppression itself and its effects on our linguistic meanings and conceptual contents.

Second, just as idealization in ethical theories prevents us from addressing oppression with our ethical theories, idealizing in social theories of meaning prevents us from addressing the effects of oppression with our theories of conceptual ethics. Conceptual ethics is partly concerned to tell us what some society's concepts ought to be. If we idealize the social facts of our society and thereby obscure the effects of oppression on our meanings, conceptual ethicists will be in the same position as idealizing ethical theorists. Rather than addressing oppression and its effects on our linguistic meanings and conceptual contents, we mistakenly model our meanings and contents as unaffected by oppression. We thereby ensure that we do not address the effects of oppression on our terms and concepts. Plausibly, this is deeply antithetical to the proper goal of conceptual ethics as an enterprise.

5. Conclusion

I propose that all or nearly all social theories of meaning take the idealizing approach and thereby contribute to perpetuating oppression. I have not justified this proposal; rather, I have focused primarily on one idealizing aspect, epistemically grounded semantic deference, of one family of theories, namely those that accept a DoLL. Traditional accounts of the DoLL plausibly idealize in other ways as well—science as a social institution, for instance, is plausibly idealized in traditional natural kind externalism. I leave the exploration of other idealizations of the DoLL and other idealizing social theories of meaning for another place. I have also only scratched the surface of the effects of nonidealizing approaches on social theories of meaning. Epistemologies of ignorance as in Mills's "White Ignorance" (2007) do well to ar-

ticulate conceptual contents distorted by oppressive social facts, but philosophers of language and conceptual ethicists can do much more and ought to.

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