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Linguistic imposters

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There is a widespread phenomenon that we call linguistic imposters. Linguistic imposters are systematic misuses of expressions that misusers mistake with their conventional usages because of misunderstanding their meaning. Our paper aims to provide an initial framework for theorising about linguistic imposters that will lay the foundation for future philosophical research about them. We focus on the misuses of the expressions 'grooming' and 'critical race theory' as our central examples of linguistic imposters. We show that linguistic imposters present a distinctive phenomenon by comparing them to some adjacent phenomena, namely conceptual engineering, linguistic hijacking and dogwhistles. We also address four objections about the extensional adequacy of our definition of linguistic imposters. Finally, we argue that, as linguistic imposters spread, they make some inferences featuring misused expressions more cognitively accessible and seemingly socially licensed to misusers and discuss four types of harms that linguistic imposters are conducive to through these effects.

Keywords: linguistic imposters; misuse; social externalism; conceptual engineering; linguistic hijacking; dogwhistles; resonance; hermeneutical harm.

I. Introduction

This paper concerns a widespread phenomenon that we call *linguistic imposters*. To give the reader a sense of what we have in mind, let us consider the following examples.

'Grooming' is standardly defined by experts as 'when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them' (NSPCC n.d.). Yet, the expression has been systematically misused since 2020, contributing to widespread

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harm and legislation against LGBTQ communities. For example, Florida's 2022 'Parental Rights in Education' bill has been described by many of its supporters as an 'anti-grooming bill' (Berry 2022; Heritage Action 2022). The legislation in question forbids 'classroom instruction … on sexual orientation or gender identity' prior to the third grade (Woodward 2022). Clearly, such an instruction does not qualify as grooming. Yet, this misapplication of 'grooming' has become increasingly common; a survey from April 2022 found that 45% of likely Republican voters think that 'teachers and parents that support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity in school are groomers' (Nehorai 2022).

The same phenomenon can be observed in relation to the expression 'critical race theory' ('CRT' henceforth). While 'CRT' refers to an academic theory that examines the relationship between structural racism and systems of power (Delgado and Stefancic 2023), since 2020, many people have started systematically misusing 'CRT' as a catch-all term for any race-conscious educational initiatives conducted at US schools and workplaces (Mudde 2021). These initiatives primarily aim to enhance individual racial sensitivity, so calling them 'CRT' is a misnomer. Moreover, a Reuters poll shows that, out of those Americans expressing familiarity with CRT, only 5% could accurately answer true–false questions about its content (Kahn 2021). This has resulted in several pieces of legislation prohibiting the teaching of 'CRT' at US schools and workplaces (Schwartz 2023).

One of the primary instigators of the misuses of 'CRT' and 'grooming', Christopher Rufo, has been open about the strategy with regard to 'CRT':

> The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans (Rufo 2021).

We consider the aforementioned cases as examples of linguistic imposters, which we understand to be systematic but covert misuses of expressions based on a misunderstanding of their meaning. Such misuses are prevalent in contemporary discourse, often being employed to exploit the linguistic confusion that they generate. However, they have not yet been thoroughly explored by philosophers in their own right. Our paper seeks to provide an initial framework for theorising about linguistic imposters.

Our investigation proceeds as follows. In Section II, we explain what linguistic imposters are. In Section III, we compare linguistic imposters to three adjacent phenomena: conceptual engineering, linguistic hijacking and dogwhistles. In Section IV, we address four objections about the extensional adequacy of our definition of linguistic imposters. In Section V, we investigate the negative effects that the propagation of linguistic imposters produces both on misusers and other members of linguistic communities.

II. What are linguistic imposters?

In this section, we explain what linguistic imposters are by laying bare our definition of the phenomenon. Let us start with clarifying our terminology. We analyse linguistic imposters as instances of *misusing* an expression, which we understand as using it in violation of its *application conditions*. An expression's application conditions are the conditions that characterise its meaning by stating semantic standards for how to use it correctly in a language.[1] Accordingly, by an expression's *conventional usage*, we mean a usage that follows its application conditions, and, by its *misuse*, we mean a usage that is semantically incorrect due to violating them. An expression can be misused by being used to talk about something that falls outside its extension, as when someone applies 'dog' to an elephant. It can also be misused by being used in a general statement that contradicts its application conditions, as when 'skyscraper' is used in 'Skyscrapers are a type of clothes'.

The above clarification leaves unanswered what makes expressions have the application conditions they have. This is a foundational metasemantic question on which there is little consensus. We aim to maintain an open-minded approach to it in our exposition of linguistic imposters. Our objective is to make a case for linguistic imposters being a genuine phenomenon that is compelling not only to the proponents of a specific metasemantic theory but to anyone who agrees that there are semantic facts about how expressions are correctly used in a language, regardless of their metasemantic explanation.

Here, we only commit ourselves to one widely accepted metasemantic assumption. Namely, we assume *social externalism*, on which the meaning of an expression when used by an individual speaker is partially constituted by some facts about the linguistic community that the speaker belongs to (Burge 1979; Putnam 1975: 144–46). Given this assumption, an expression's application conditions can be semantically authoritative for a speaker even if she does not know the expression or knows it but does not directly follow these conditions when using it. It is enough that she defers to other members in her linguistic community who follow them. For example, consider the term 'oolong'. Originally borrowed from Mandarin Chinese, it picks out the category of semi-oxidised teas. Most English speakers have very likely either never heard of the term or are unsure how to use it. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that the term means 'semi-oxidised tea' even when used by such speakers because they defer to tea experts on its usage.

Social externalism helps explain the pre-imposter situation of our central examples of linguistic imposters—the misuses of 'CRT' and 'grooming'. Before 'CRT' started being misused in public discourse, it was a specialised

1This is consistent with ambiguous and polysemous expressions having multiple sets of application conditions.

term mostly used by academics to talk about how social and legal institutions perpetuate racial oppression. While most English speakers might have been unfamiliar with the expression, if an academic had instructed them on how to use 'CRT', they would not have had a reason not to accept her instruction. Even those who deny the reality of structural racism would have presumably reacted to the academic by accepting her instruction but considering the tenets of CRT to be false. Similarly, considering that grooming is a crime in many jurisdictions, it is likely that, before the expression started being weaponised in the debate on LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, most ordinary speakers ultimately deferred to legal authorities and child abuse experts on the correct usage of 'grooming', exercising restraint in their own usage.

This is how things used to be. It is clear that, nowadays, more English speakers actively use both 'CRT' and 'grooming' in a more uninhibited way that does not match the experts' usage of these expressions. This trend is marked by widespread confusion about what the expressions are correctly applied to. We contend that this situation is largely a consequence of the expressions falling prey to linguistic imposters, which we define as follows:

A usage of an expression in a language is a linguistic imposter iff it meets the following four conditions:

Systematicity: It is a systematic misuse of the expression.
Covertness: It is covert by being disguised to the expression's misuser as the fulfilment of its application conditions.
Misunderstanding: The misuser has a defective understanding of the expression's application conditions.
Explanation: *Covertness* contributes to the explanation of *Systematicity*, and *Misunderstanding* contributes to the explanation of *Covertness*.

The first three conditions are not mutually independent but are instead explanatorily tied, as stated in the fourth condition. Let us clarify the conditions to see these explanatory links. Consider first *Systematicity*. Misuses of expressions are often occasional and accidental errors. In contrast, *Systematicity* states that linguistic imposters must follow a consistent and repeating pattern. 'Grooming' and 'CRT' are not misused just accidentally; their misusers are disposed to systematically apply them to LGBTQ-inclusive education or to any kind of race-conscious education, respectively.

What can cause speakers to systematically misuse an expression? Sometimes, they can do it intentionally because of disagreeing with its application conditions and trying to revolt against them. This, however, is not so for imposter misuses. As *Covertness* and the first clause of *Explanation* state, imposter misuses occur when speakers systematically misuse an expression *unknowingly* because they mistake its misuse for its conventional usage. Both conditions trace the causes of numerous misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT'. The reason

why many speakers systematically misapply these expressions is not that they want to misapply them. Instead, they sincerely consider themselves to be using the expressions correctly, often because of misunderstanding their meaning. This brings us to *Misunderstanding*.

As the second clause of *Explanation* states, there is an explanatory link between *Misunderstanding* and *Covertness* for linguistic imposters. Those who misuse an expression in the imposter manner mistake its misuse with its conventional usage at least in part due to being confused about its application conditions. Such confusion can vary in degrees. Let us illustrate this point with 'grooming'.

Some speakers moderately misunderstand the application conditions of 'grooming' due to misunderstanding its constituent components. Specifically, they know that 'grooming' roughly means 'building a connection for child sexual exploitation' but have a defective understanding of 'sexual exploitation'. For example, several misusers of 'grooming' incorrectly claim that gender-affirming medical care and drag shows *constitute* sexual exploitation, as opposed to merely suggesting that these practices may lead to sexual exploitation (Salsa 2023; Walsh 2022).

Many other misusers do not even roughly understand what 'grooming' means. Of these misusers, more moderate ones misapply the expression to alleged cases where teachers are thought to be inadvertently making children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Harrington 2022; Mathnerd 2023). These are also misuses since 'grooming' can be correctly applied only to the acts committed intentionally.

In more extreme cases, speakers manifest a radical misunderstanding of 'grooming', interpreting the expression as meaning 'sexualization or ideological indoctrination of children' (OneEyyedWilly 2022; Lindsay 2022a). Importantly, these speakers do not seem to think that this is only what 'grooming' *should* mean. Instead, they often argue that this is what 'grooming' actually means, even accusing progressives of 'trying to narrow the definition of "grooming" to mean only activities intended to lead to sexual abuse of children' (Lindsay 2022b). Similarly, some speakers radically misunderstand what 'CRT' means, thinking, for example, that it refers to a theory which teaches that white people are inherently racist (Florida Freedom to Read Project 2022). In all these cases, *Misunderstanding* seems satisfied, which, in accordance with *Explanation*, contributes to explaining why the misapplications of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are covert to their misusers.

Not all covert and systematic misuses work this way. As an example, imagine Alex, who perfectly understands what 'grooming' means but thinks that the expression can be correctly applied to LGBTQ-inclusive education because of falsely believing that teachers who include LGBTQ-related topics in curricula do so as a pretext for emotionally manipulating children into sexual contact. Alex would be disposed to systematically misuse 'grooming' and

their misuse would be disguised to them as the expression's conventional usage, so both *Systematicity* and *Covertness* would be satisfied. Nevertheless, Alex's misuse would not count as a linguistic imposter because its causes would not be linguistic. It would not be even partially explained by their defective understanding of 'grooming', but only by their independent false belief about the true purpose of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons.

One additional clarification is in order. Imposter misuses are often committed by ordinary speakers who mimic an expression's usage by other speakers. But, in addition to them, linguistic communities also include members who actively instigate imposter misuses. Sometimes, these instigators may share confusion over an expression's application conditions. To illustrate, it is conceivable that some of the most active propagators of the misapplication of 'grooming' to LGBTQ-inclusive education do so unwittingly because of their misunderstanding of 'grooming' and biases against LGBTQ individuals.

Some linguistic imposters are, however, instigated by speakers with a deliberate intent to misuse expressions. Consider the misuse of 'CRT', whose primary instigator Rufo (2021) admits that he and his fellows intend to 'recodify' the expression by propagating such usage of it that drives up negative perception of practices such as race-conscious education. Hence, they intentionally misuse 'CRT' to subvert its conventional usage. Yet, many ordinary misusers of 'CRT' are not aware of their error, as Rufo's subversive strategy is based on deception. Instead of openly calling on his target audience to subvert the conventional usage of 'CRT', he misled them into thinking that 'CRT' is correctly applied to something it is not.

III. How are linguistic imposters distinctive?

Our definition of linguistic imposters sheds light on a distinctive, yet underexplored phenomenon. In this section, we demonstrate this point by comparing linguistic imposters to three adjacent phenomena that have received more attention among philosophers: conceptual engineering, linguistic hijacking and dogwhistles.

Let us start with exploring how linguistic imposters relate to conceptual engineering. Conceptual engineering is often understood as the practice of purposefully improving representational devices in our language and thought.[2] Yet, as Marques (2020: 275) cautions, if we confine ourselves to this ameliorative picture of conceptual engineering, we risk overlooking that conceptual revisions can actually corrupt our concepts despite being intended as improvements. Additionally, as Shields (2021: 15046) notes, some conceptual revisions

2See e.g. Cappelen (2018: 3), Cappelen & Plunkett (2020: 3), Isaac, Koch & Nefdt (2022: 1) and Pinder (2021: 141).

might not even be intended as improvements. Since our aim is to investigate whether linguistic imposters encompass such cases, we will work with a broader definition of conceptual engineering as the practice of purposefully revising representational devices, both for better and worse.

Given the above definition, is purposefully propagating linguistic imposters a way of engineering expressions, which are representational devices? The answer is not clear insofar as we adhere to the semantic approach to conceptual engineering, according to which what is engineered are expressions' *meanings* (e.g. Cappelen 2018; Koslow 2022; Sterken 2020). After all, the only metasemantic assumption we endorse here is that some version of social externalism about meaning is true: what an expression means is at least partially constituted by some facts about the linguistic community using it. However, there are various ways to fill in the exact details of social externalist metasemantics. Whether the propagation of an expression's imposter misuses can lead to a change in its meaning depends on which of these ways accurately captures its metasemantics.

To illustrate, recall Rufo's goal to recodify 'CRT' by propagating the expression's imposter misuses. Can this goal be accomplished if we interpret it as the goal to revise the *meaning* of 'CRT'? We can think of such social externalist metasemantics for 'CRT' under which this is possible. Consider, for example, the metasemantics on which (i) speakers can defer on how to use 'CRT' to whomever they find most credible and (ii) what 'CRT' means is determined by the deferential dispositions towards 'CRT' possessed by the majority of English speakers. On this picture, the meaning of 'CRT' depends on how it is used by those to whom most English speakers defer to. Given such *majority-based metasemantics*, Rufo can indeed succeed in revising the meaning of 'CRT' if he manages to convince most speakers not to defer to academics but to him and his fellows on how to use the expression. After such revision, the usage of 'CRT' promoted by Rufo, though still corrupt, would no longer be a linguistic imposter, as it would attain the status of conventional usage.

At the same time, it is also possible to defend a more resilient version of social externalist metasemantics on which Rufo cannot revise the meaning of 'CRT' even if he confuses most English speakers about its correct usage. One example of such metasemantics has been developed by Anderson (2021: ch. 10), who draws upon David Lewis's idea (1975) that any community using a language is guided by the collective goal of using it in the way that yields true linguistic representations of reality. Anderson argues that this collective goal makes everyone within a linguistic community ultimately defer to the most knowledgeable speakers on how to use an expression, and it is this coordinated deference which fixes its meaning. Anderson (ibid.: 268–272) interprets the most knowledgeable speakers as idealised, better-informed versions of actual speakers, but we can also think of them as actual speakers who possess expertise in the topic that the expression concerns.

According to such *expert-based metasemantics*, while various speakers may possess diverse tentative deferential dispositions regarding 'CRT' depending on whom they consider to be most knowledgeable about the topic 'CRT' concerns, all of them *ultimately* defer to those individuals who are, in fact, most knowledgeable about it—experts on racism.[3] In that case, although Rufo can influence the tentative deferential dispositions of most English speakers, he cannot cause a semantic revision of 'CRT'. The meaning of 'CRT' is fixed by the speakers' ultimate deferential dispositions, which remain unchanged regardless of how deeply semantically confused they become.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to reconcile which version of social externalism is correct. Hence, we leave it open whether, given the semantic approach, purposefully propagating linguistic imposters counts as conceptual engineering. However, we should not be constrained by the semantic approach in exploring the link between linguistic imposters and conceptual engineering. It has become very common to adopt the non-semantic approach to conceptual engineering, on which its primary objective is not to revise expressions' meanings but to change how we *think and behave* when using them, which seems achievable even if semantic revisions are out of reach (e.g. Isaac 2021; Nado 2020; Pinder 2021; Riggs 2019).

If we interpret conceptual engineering through the non-semantic approach, purposefully propagating linguistic imposters amounts to conceptual engineering. When Rufo and his fellows instigate the imposter misuses of 'CRT' by confusing ordinary speakers about what the expression means, they clearly change how 'CRT' navigates these speakers in their thinking and behaviour. This interpretation more accurately captures the success conditions of Rufo's plan to engineer 'CRT' than the semantic approach. Arguably, what Rufo primarily aims for is to change how English speakers think and behave using 'CRT', which need not involve changing the expression's meaning. Accordingly, purposefully propagating linguistic imposters can be seen as a way to engineer an expression's *usage* that is covert and based upon confusing speakers about its meaning.

To see how conceptual engineering involving linguistic imposters works, it is helpful to contrast it with the cases of conceptual engineering in which speakers recognise that an expression's usage is being engineered and rationally deliberate on whether its new usage should be adopted. Rational deliberation is often initiated by the very proponents of the new usage. Clear examples include ameliorative projects in philosophy where a philosopher explicitly advertises an expression's new usage as a preferable alternative to its old usage through reasoned arguments, such as when Manne (2017) argues that we should expand the usage of 'misogyny' to encompass not only individual

3A similar kind of metasemantics (referred to as 'virtue metasemantics') is also discussed in Ball (2020: 210–1).

attitudes of hatred towards women but also systemic practices of patriarchal oppression.

Alternatively, as Sterken (2020) argues, speakers can sometimes initiate rational deliberation by intentionally causing temporary disruptions in communicative patterns that presuppose an expression's old usage. To illustrate, imagine that we want to prompt a speaker who presupposes the old usage of 'misogyny' to reflect on Manne's proposed alternative. Sterken would suggest that an effective strategy to do so is to use 'misogyny' with its new interpretation in a way that sounds surprising and implausible under its old interpretation. For example, when the speaker says 'A woman's place is in the kitchen', we can reply 'So you are a misogynist'. Sterken would call such usage of 'misogynist' *linguistic intervention*, arguing that while it *initially* bewilders the speaker, it aims to trigger further communicative exchanges about what we meant by the expression, leading to rational deliberation about its new usage as an alternative to its old usage (ibid.: 430).

In other cases, rational deliberation can arise even without its proponents actively promoting it insofar as speakers recognise that an expression is being engineered. For example, those who introduced the usage of 'milk' that encompasses some plant-based beverages did not actively encourage us to deliberate on whether this usage is preferable to the term's old usage, which is limited to dairy milk. Still, most speakers can be expected to understand that what is labelled as 'oat milk' could not really be milk under the old usage. Indeed, not only have courts repeatedly found that the labelling of plant-based beverages as 'milk' is not misleading to 'reasonable consumers' (Ryan 2021), the very presence of legal challenges and disputes in the food industry reflects a degree of active deliberation over the new usage.

Conceptual engineering based on the propagation of linguistic imposters contrasts with the above examples in that it tends to suppress the opportunities for rational deliberation over the desirability of its outcomes through its covertness. An expression's new usage is falsely presented to speakers as its received usage that has been around all along, rather than as a proposed revision that requires vindication before being implemented. Consequently, the speakers are manipulated into uncritically taking this usage for granted without deliberating whether the expression should be engineered into it and holding its proponents accountable for it. This renders linguistic imposters especially prone to the concerns about conceptual engineering controlling speakers' thoughts (Queloz and Bieber 2022) and limiting their intellectual sovereignty (Kitsik 2023).

Another phenomenon that is closely related to linguistic imposters is what Anderson (2020) introduces as *linguistic hijacking*. Anderson understands linguistic hijacking to be the phenomenon wherein dominant groups misuse politically significant terminology used by marginalised groups to communicate and theorise about the oppression that they experience in a way that

propagates falsehoods and ignorance about the nature of their experience (ibid.: 2). His core example of linguistic hijacking is when people misapply 'racism' to affirmative action, implying that the term is correctly applied to any differential treatment of the members of a racial category, even when aimed at promoting their well-being (ibid.: 3–5). This misuse functions to obscure and dilute the structural nature of oppression that racial minorities experience.

There is a considerable overlap between the misuses we categorise as linguistic imposters and those that Anderson categorises as linguistic hijackings. The imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are examples of linguistic hijackings. These misuses clearly invoke misconceptions about LGBTQ-inclusive education, grooming, race-conscious education and structural racism that obscure the oppression experienced by marginalised groups. Nevertheless, we have three reasons to think that the two categories are not coextensive.

Firstly, in contrast to linguistic hijackings, we do not define linguistic imposters as an inherently political phenomenon concerning oppression. While 'grooming' and 'CRT' are striking for their political significance, linguistic imposters can also affect politically insignificant terms. For instance, they arguably affect technology terms like 'blockchain' that are frequently used in a confused manner, which serves to enhance the perceived value of relevant products or companies (Carter 2019). They might also affect mental health terms such as 'OCD', which, according to empirical evidence, is misunderstood by a large portion of English speakers (Stewart *et al.* 2019). These misuses do not meet the criteria for linguistic hijackings due to their non-political nature. Yet, they display deep structural similarities with the misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT', which makes it theoretically fruitful to have a single category that allows us to analyse these similarities.

Secondly, while both linguistic hijackings and linguistic imposters are defined as 'misuses', our understanding of 'misuse' differs from Anderson's. Anderson (2020: 2) interprets an expression's misuse as a usage that spreads falsehoods and ignorance about what marginalised groups use it to talk about. By contrast, we interpret it as a usage that violates the expression's application conditions. If the aforementioned expert-based metasemantics defended by Anderson (2021) in his later work is true, these interpretations will converge because well-informed speakers presumably would not assign to expressions such application conditions that spread falsehoods and ignorance about anything.

However, if expert-based metasemantics does not obtain, the two interpretations will diverge in some cases. To illustrate, suppose that expert-based metasemantics does not obtain in our linguistic community, and gender terms such as 'woman' and 'man' have trans-exclusive meanings that spread falsehoods and ignorance about the situation of trans-individuals. Someone then

attempts to engineer these terms by deceiving the community's members that they are correctly applied in the trans-inclusive way. Such trans-inclusive usages would count as linguistic imposters due to being unconventional but would not count as linguistic hijackings because they would promote truths about trans-individuals. While this consequence of our definition of linguistic imposters might strike the reader as a bug, we see it as its feature, which allows us to ask whether deploying linguistic imposters can ever be a permissible strategy to undermine harmful semantic conventions. For example, one might argue that the above trans-inclusive imposter misuses are permissible as long as the community is unresponsive to rational arguments. While we do not know the answer, we think that the question is worth asking, which is why we prefer our interpretation of 'misuse' over Anderson's.

The third and crucial difference is that only linguistic imposters are defined as being covert and caused by semantic misunderstanding. By contrast, linguistic hijackings can also be the misuses committed by the speakers who are competent with the misused expression but misuse it intentionally. For instance, Rufo knows what 'CRT' means but intentionally misuses it to manipulate ordinary speakers. He clearly hijacks the expression because his misuse serves to spread falsehoods and ignorance about racial oppression. However, he does not himself commit an imposter misuse; instead, he instigates imposter misuses among other speakers whom he confuses about the expression's meaning.

This shows that there might be linguistic hijackings that propagate linguistic imposters without themselves counting as linguistic imposters due to not satisfying *Covertness* and *Misunderstanding*. Still, as we will show in Section V, that many misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' satisfy these two conditions is precisely what enables them to produce various harmful effects. What makes linguistic imposter a useful category is that it reveals the insidious strategy behind these effects.

Last but not least, let us compare linguistic imposters with *dogwhistles*, also known as *code words*. Dogwhistles are expressions that are systematically used to send more than one message to its audience, at least one of which is covertly coded in that it is received only by some members of the audience while remaining unnoticed by the rest.[4] Let us call the usages that convey a covertly coded message *dogwhistling uses*.

The most discussed types of dogwhistles are those whose covertly coded message is derogatory, such as the expression 'inner city'. The expression conventionally applies to lower-income urban residential districts but is systematically used in the US to covertly convey racist messages about African Americans. When someone says 'The inner-city problems must be solved'

4See Stanley (2015: ch. 4), Khoo (2017), Saul (2018) and Quaranto (2022) for a discussion on how exactly dogwhistles operate.

in a diverse setting, the utterance conveys two messages: the conventional message about the given residential districts, understood by all competent users of the expression, and the covertly coded message about African Americans received exclusively by those familiar with its dogwhistling use.

There are two important differences between linguistic imposters and dogwhistling uses. Firstly, while linguistic imposters are defined as misuses, not all dogwhistling uses amount to misuses. The racist dogwhistling use of 'inner city' is a misuse because it violates its application conditions. However, an expression's dogwhistling use may also be the conventional one due to being recognised by some members of a linguistic community that the other members tacitly defer to. Quaranto's example is how, in US hospitals, the dogwhistling use of the term 'Dr. Strong' in public announcements covertly conveys the coded message that the security should come to assist with a combative patient (2022: 9). Most ordinary speakers who hear 'Dr. Strong' are unaware of this usage, but it is well-recognised among hospital staff.

The first difference alone is, however, compatible with the possibility of subsuming linguistic imposters under dogwhistling misuses. Such a possibility might seem attractive considering that dogwhistling conventional uses, like the above use of 'Dr. Strong', are such that their target audience is well aware of the coded message they convey. However, it might be argued that the imposter misuses of 'CRT' and 'grooming' behave more like the dogwhistling misuses of 'inner city'. As Saul (2018: 364–68) points out, even the target audience of the racist message conveyed by these misuses is not consciously aware of receiving it because they receive it only through their implicit racial biases being primed. Beaver & Stanley (2023: 454–55) think that this is also how the misuses of 'CRT' work because they also prime implicit racial biases that promote negative attitudes about what the expression is used to talk about. If this interpretation generalises to all linguistic imposters, they are just a special kind of dogwhistling misuses.

The given interpretation is, however, problematic because of the second difference between imposter misuses and dogwhistling misuses. While both misuses have in common that they are defined so that some fact about them must be hidden, they differ in what exactly this fact is. A dogwhistling misuse must conceal its very presence from the general audience and, therefore, also the coded message that it conveys. Furthermore, whenever the transmission of the coded message operates on its target recipients' implicit biases, it is somehow hidden even from them. This allows the dogwhistle's misusers to plausibly deny that they used it to convey the coded message, which can be exploited when the message is problematic.[5] For example, if someone who utters 'The inner-city problems must be solved' is accused of being racist, they

5See Khoo (2017) and Dinges & Zakkou (2023) for a recent discussion about plausible deniability.

have room to defend themselves by denying that they used 'inner city' to talk about African Americans.

By contrast, the message that an imposter misuse conveys does not have to be covertly coded; it can be overt to everyone hearing the misused expression. The only thing that must be concealed about a misuse for it to be imposter is that it is a misuse. For example, when someone commits the imposter misapplication of 'CRT' to race-conscious education by explicitly saying 'All race-conscious education is CRT' and sincerely believing the statement, it is not hidden that 'CRT' conveys a negative message about race-conscious education, but only that it is misapplied. In such cases, all the hearers of the expression, including those having implicit racial biases, are aware that the expression has been used to talk about race-conscious education. Also, any subsequent attempt of the misuser to deny that they talked about it is likely to fail. Hence, this imposter misuse is not a dogwhistling misuse. While there might be other cases where an imposter misuse is also an instance of dogwhistling, it would be mistaken to categorise all imposter misuses as dogwhistling misuses.

IV. Is our definition of linguistic imposters extensionally adequate?

So far, we have presented our definition of linguistic imposters and showed how it allows us to individuate linguistic imposters as a distinctive phenomenon. Here, we turn to four objections about the extensional adequacy of the proposed definition.

The first objection is that our examples of the imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are not really misuses but just attempts to draw analogies or connections between their targets and the targets of the expressions' conventional usage. As we discuss later, we agree that both our examples exploit connections with the expressions' conventional usage by drawing upon their prior associations. The key issue is whether this effect arises through semantic confusion or through the expressions being used non-literally. If the latter, our examples are not misuses, just as saying that 'Juliet is the sun' is not a misuse of 'sun'.

There are two reasons to think that our examples are not non-literal uses. Firstly, as observed earlier, many speakers explicitly express false beliefs about what 'grooming' and 'CRT' mean and even advocate for legal actions against what they apply them to. This behaviour is difficult to explain if their uses are non-literal. Secondly, non-literal uses of expressions normally do not achieve their communicative purposes if they are interpreted literally. If 'sun' in the sentence 'Juliet is the sun' was interpreted literally, then the hearer would be hopelessly confused about the speaker's intended message. By contrast, the literal reading of the considered usages of 'grooming' and 'CRT' aids the

communication of illegitimate inferences that they serve to promote, as we argue in Section V.

To turn to the second objection, the reader may worry that our definition commits us to the view that only one usage of any unambiguous expression is conventional, with the rest being its misuses and, therefore, candidates for linguistic imposters. This position seems inappropriate given wide disagreements over the definitions of many expressions. Consider, for example, widely contested 'culture war' expressions, such as 'free speech', 'conservatism' or 'sustainability'. It seems too extreme to categorise all but one of their alternative usages as misuses.

In response, we are not committed to the above-described position. Our view is that an expression's usage can be its misuse only if its application conditions are settled enough for it to be decidable whether it is semantically correct. That this precondition is satisfied is commonly evidenced by two factors: (i) experts on an expression's topic widely agree on whether a given usage is its misuse, and (ii) ordinary speakers largely defer to these experts.

Such evidence seems available for the usages of 'grooming' and 'CRT' that we describe as linguistic imposters. The relevant experts universally agree that these usages are misuses. Also, as explained in Section II, even the speakers who are now in the grip of these usages are best interpreted as originally deferring to these experts on how to use 'grooming' and 'CRT'. Of course, on some metasemantic theories such as majority-based metasemantics, these speakers might no longer defer to them, and this trend might gradually change what 'grooming' and 'CRT' mean. But, until such changes happen, we are justified in treating the experts' views as indicative that the given usages are indeed misuses.

This is consistent with the possibility that there are some usages of 'grooming' and 'CRT' for which similar evidence is not available. For instance, it might be contested even among experts whether the application of 'grooming' to a complex intimate relationship formed between a nearly adult teenager and an adult is a misuse. Moreover, there might also be expressions such as the aforementioned 'cultural war' expressions whose definitions are widely contested among experts, and thus many of their usages cannot be confidently characterised as misuses. Additionally, some expressions such as 'love' or 'art' might be such that it is unclear whether ordinary speakers have ever deferred to experts on how to use them. We are reluctant to describe these cases as involving imposter misuses.[6]

The third concern is that our definition of linguistic imposters might implausibly include many benign attempts to change an expression's usage.

6Contested usages can potentially be interpreted as only communicating normative metalinguistic disagreements about what application conditions an expression *should* have (Plunkett and Sundell 2013).

Consider the recent endeavours to broaden the usages of 'marriage' or 'refugee' to encompass same-sex couples or those fleeing their countries for reasons other than political persecution, respectively.[7] Labelling these new usages as 'linguistic imposters' might seem counterintuitive to the reader.

As mentioned previously, what counts as a misuse depends on what metasemantics is correct. Considering that various knowledgeable individuals have promoted the expanded usages of 'marriage' and 'refugee', it is possible that they were not misuses but rather conventional or contested usages even upon their introduction. This interpretation directly follows from expert-based metasemantics but is not precluded even by majority-based metasemantics since many speakers might have deferred to these knowledgeable individuals already when they started applying the given expressions more broadly.

However, even assuming that the expanded usages of 'marriage' and 'refugee' were misuses, we suspect that they do not satisfy *Covertness*, which rules them out as linguistic imposters. This is because both cases involve largely *overt* deliberations over whether to expand the expression's usage. Both proponents and detractors of same-sex marriages often explicitly talked about the same-sex inclusive usage of 'marriage' within the context of the debate of whether we *should redefine* 'marriage' (Anderson 2013; Giridharadas 2013). US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, a deciding vote in favour of same-sex marriage, said of the same-sex-exclusive definition that 'this definition has been with us for millennia and it is very difficult for the court to say "well, we know better"' (Green 2015). Given the widespread media coverage of this debate, it would be surprising if most speakers thought the same-sex inclusive usage of 'marriage' had been its conventional usage all along. Similarly, explicit commentaries on proposed *redefinitions* of 'refugee' are common and salient, with many arguing that the original legal definition is unduly narrow (Ayres 2015; Heyman 1987). In comparison, as shown in Section II, many misusers of 'grooming' and 'CRT' manifestly treat their misuses as conventional usages.

Nevertheless, given that metasemantic and empirical facts are not transparent to us, we cannot rule out that, at least when initially introduced, the expanded usages of 'marriage' and 'refugee' were misuses, but some speakers misperceived them as conventional usages. In such cases, they might provide examples of linguistic imposters that are permissible because they serve to resist bad semantic conventions. As noted in Section III, this is the possibility which it seems theoretically appropriate to keep open.

There is one more objection to consider. To set the stage for it, we must appreciate that, as Beaver & Stanley (2023: 10–1) argue, words do not exist in isolation from linguistic communities but are embedded in their

7See the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) for the original legal definition of 'refugee', which requires fleeing from political persecution.

communicative practices. These practices imbue words with what they call *resonances*, which are various recurrent features that tend to be around when words are used within a community's communicative practice (ibid.: 13, ch. 1). However, one might object that there is an important difference between the evaluative resonances, i.e., *valences*, that 'grooming' and 'CRT' carry when they are not misused.

Even before it started being misused, 'grooming' carried a strongly negative valence since its application communicated that an act involves child sexual exploitation. The imposter misuse of 'grooming' exploits this valence by redirecting it to something that the expression is not correctly applied to. By contrast, 'CRT' originally carried no valence directed towards the theory that it was used to describe. A negative valence was only attached to it when it started being misapplied to race-conscious curricula and being surrounded by misconceptions about what it refers to (e.g. that it refers to a theory that teaches that white people are inherently racist). Hence, the imposter misuse of 'CRT' does not involve redirecting the expression's prior valence but rather imbuing it with the new valence. This difference might be taken to suggest that the working mechanisms underlying our central examples of linguistic imposters are distinct, making it misleading to subsume them under a single category.

While we acknowledge the above difference, we still think that the imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are similar enough to be analysed together as linguistic imposters. The reason is that the difference seems to us most properly characterised not as a categorical difference but as strategic variation in how imposter misuses maintain continuity with conventional usage. To explain, linguistic imposters seldom depart from all the resonances of the misused expression's conventional usage. This is not only because some similarity between the imposter misuse and the conventional usage makes it easier for the former to be mistaken for the latter, but also because it often serves some further purpose for which the imposter misuse is propagated.

More specifically, the imposter misuses of both 'grooming' and 'CRT' build upon some prior resonances of the conventional usage of these expressions to serve the purpose of fearmongering about LGBTQ-inclusive or race-conscious education, respectively. This is clearest for the imposter misuse of 'grooming', which builds upon the expression's negative valence stemming from its prior associations with sexual predation. Without these resonances sticking around, the misapplication of 'grooming' to LGBTQ-inclusive education would not be as effective in presenting it as something that people should be afraid of.

However, something similar, though less obviously, also applies to the imposter misuse of 'CRT'. Admittedly, the fearmongering strategy behind the misuse of 'CRT' requires greater departure from its conventional usage. For the strategy to work, the misusers must radically misunderstand what the

expression means, erroneously believing that it refers to a theory posing a threat to Americans. This is achieved by the expression's original associations with structural racism being replaced by misconceptions about what CRT teaches, which imbues it with a previously absent negative valence.

Nonetheless, we should not conclude that the misuse of 'CRT' does not build upon any prior resonances of the expression's conventional usage. One reason why negative misconceptions about what 'CRT' refers to are so convincing to its misusers is that even they would not deny some true information that the expression resonates with due to its conventional usage, such as that it refers to a theory also taught at universities, or that its scholars are generally left-wing. It is precisely these resonances that make it possible to effectively portray CRT to the misusers as a dangerous left-wing academic ideology imposed on school children. Interestingly enough, the instigators of the imposter misuse of 'CRT' arguably even want CRT scholars to keep calling their own discipline 'CRT' to make such portrayal more believable.

Accordingly, the fearmongering tactic driving the imposter misuse of 'CRT' also rests upon some prior resonances of the expression's conventional usage. While these resonances are not themselves evaluative, they serve to make misusers perceive 'CRT' negatively by playing on their biases about left-wing academics. Of course, they are not the only factor at play, for various misconceptions about the meaning of 'CRT' also contribute to its negative valence. However, this is not entirely unlike 'grooming', whose negative valence when misapplied to LGBTQ-inclusive education is also perpetuated by various misconceptions about its meaning, as we saw in Section II.

Hence, while the imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are not exactly the same, the difference between them is not as sharp as the objection suggests. In both cases, the negative valence of the misused expression results from some, albeit varying, degree of continuity with its conventional usage and the propagation of misconceptions about its meaning. This, coupled with the fact that, as we demonstrate in Section V, there are several effects shared by both misuses, leads us to think that it is theoretically fruitful to treat them as two variations of the same strategy rather than as two distinct strategies.

V. The effects of linguistic imposters

We now turn to examining the effects of the propagation of linguistic imposters. We first explore its two effects on misusers, followed by the discussion of downstream harms that arise as a consequence of these effects.

We think that the propagation of linguistic imposters renders some inferences involving misused expressions more cognitively accessible to misusers

and also lends them a greater appearance of being socially licensed.[8] Let us unpack these effects in turn, starting with the first one. As linguistic imposters spread, they make some inferences more cognitively accessible by reducing mental effort involved in drawing them. Consider, for example, the following two inferences.

Grooming Inference:
G1: Grooming is sexual predation.
G2: LGBTQ-inclusive education is grooming.
Conclusion: LGBTQ-inclusive education is sexual predation.

CRT Inference:
C1: CRT teaches that white people are inherently racist.
C2: Race-conscious education is CRT.
Conclusion: Race-conscious education involves teaching that white people are inherently racist.

Both inferences are unsound because the premises G2, C1, and C2 are false. But how much mental effort it takes to draw these inferences can vary. When misusers of 'grooming' and 'CRT' initially come across the incorrect usages of these expressions in G2, C1, and C2, they may engage in some thinking to reconcile them with their prior understanding. However, we suspect that as these usages become regularised and, consequently, they observe how others in their linguistic community, especially those they deem most credible, consistently repeat them, the premises will gradually start to 'feel obvious' to them.

For example, it seems plausible that, following repeated exposure to the application of 'grooming' to LGBTQ-inclusive education, the misusers will consider G2 as an obvious truth that does not require further consideration because it is evidenced by how speakers around them routinely use 'grooming'. Thinking otherwise would create a sense of tension between the linguistic practice around them and the state of affairs in the world, something that speakers tend to avoid.

In comparison, G2 will not elicit a similar response from those speakers who have not become habituated to the imposter misuses of 'grooming'. Even if these speakers accept G2, they will be disposed to think about why it should be true beforehand. How much mental effort this thinking will involve depends on their prior understanding of 'grooming'. For example, if they possess a general understanding that 'grooming' refers to an action involving sexual exploitation of children, they will reflect on what (if anything) makes

8Our inspiration for framing the effects of linguistic imposters in terms of cognitive accessibility and social licensedness of inferences is Rachel Fraser (2018), who analyses the effects of metaphors in these terms.

LGBTQ-inclusive education sexually exploitative. Alternatively, if their understanding of 'grooming' is even more rudimentary and they can only point to some practices to which they believe 'grooming' is correctly applied, they will think about what makes LGBTQ-inclusive education relevantly similar to these practices. In either case, *Grooming Inference* will not be as cognitively accessible to them as to the speakers who have ceased to question the routine application of 'grooming' to LGBTQ-inclusive education.

The second effect of linguistic imposters is that, as they spread, they make some inferences featuring the misused expressions appear more socially licensed to misusers. That is, they increase their confidence that drawing these inferences is accepted as legitimate by their linguistic community. Consider *CRT Inference*. Suppose that a speaker observes how other speakers routinely apply 'CRT' to race-conscious education and interpret it as the theory teaching that white people are inherently racist. After some time, they stop questioning the correctness of these practices. This will likely lead them to assume that, in accepting C1 and C2, they are simply adhering to the linguistic conventions that they are expected to follow within the English-speaking linguistic community. If that happens, they will become more confident in expressing their acceptance of these premises even to community members who disagree. Contrast this with a speaker who is sympathetic to C1 and C2 but is not so frequently exposed to the above practices. Other things being equal, this speaker will not have a reason to think that their community's linguistic conventions back up these premises, leading them to be more restrained in expressing their views.

Hence, the speakers who give way to the imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' are prone to accept G2, C1, and C2 as obvious and socially licensed. This generally makes it easier for them to draw the conclusions of *Grooming Inference* and *CRT Inference* and confidently communicate them in public. Moreover, these effects seem to further amplify the reproduction of linguistic imposters by structuring the linguistic environment in their favour. It is easier for the given misuses to reproduce in an environment where speakers perceive *Grooming Inference* and *CRT Inference* as obvious and socially licensed because such speakers have fewer inhibitions about misusing the expressions.

By bolstering misusers' unwarranted confidence in problematic inferences like the above two, linguistic imposters often pave the way for various harmful downstream effects on other members of their linguistic community. Such effects come in four types. The first and most obvious type of harm is what we call *attitudinal harm*, which occurs when linguistic imposters cause harmful attitudes toward certain groups or individuals. This frequently occurs when the inference promoted by linguistic imposters makes certain attitudes appear fitting. For example, those disposed to make *Grooming Inference* or *CRT Inference* are more inclined to consider attitudes like hatred, spite or anger toward the groups promoting LGBTQ-inclusive education or race-conscious education

as fitting. Further, attitudinal harms are not limited to the groups targeted by the imposter misuse but can also be inflicted upon the groups associated with an expression's conventional usage. Those believing C1 are disposed to infer that the scholars of CRT are racist, harbouring negative attitudes towards them.

Secondly, linguistic imposters not only bolster the credibility of certain claims but also unfairly diminish the credibility of others. Consider the following claim:

Appropriate Drag: Drag shows are appropriate for children.

Since the imposter misuse of 'grooming' frequently targets drag shows, it inappropriately increases the credibility of the claim 'drag shows are sexual predation'. Subsequently, this false claim can be employed to refute *Appropriate Drag*—if drag shows are perceived as sexual predation, they cannot be considered appropriate for children. Consequently, the imposter misuse of 'grooming' exerts an irrational influence on the perceived credibility of *Appropriate Drag*.

Furthermore, even when credibility deficits fail to instil false beliefs, they can unduly raise epistemic standards required for a true claim to be believed. As Ichikawa (2020: 14–5) notes, scepticism discourages taking actions. This, in turn, often disadvantages people who are worse off under the status quo. Additionally, *what* we find credible affects *whom* we find credible. Since linguistic imposters make certain claims more accessible, the perceived credibility of groups rejecting these claims will likely be diminished, as their testimonies will be seen as false. The reduced perceived credibility may even have a self-fulling power via 'stereotype threat' for these speakers (Fricker 2007: 55–8). In a vicious circle, the diminished credibility of detractors then helps perpetuate linguistic imposters further.

Thirdly, linguistic imposters pollute the linguistic environment by impeding our ability to accurately interpret what speakers communicate. On Peet's (2017) account, *interpretative harm* occurs when a hearer attributes an unintended message to a speaker.[9] Clearly, if an utterance involves an expression subject to imposter misuses, it is vulnerable to misinterpretation. For instance, the utterance 'I teach CRT at a university' may be misinterpreted as a confession to teaching that white people are inherently racist. As Peet (ibid.) argues, interpretative harm can constitute a form of silencing, resulting in wrongfully holding speakers responsible for propositions that they never intended to communicate.

9Peet (2017) uses the term 'interpretative injustice', which contains additional normative commitments that we lack the space to explore here. Therefore, we use the weaker term 'interpretative harm'.

More insidiously, linguistic imposters can lead to interpretative harms indirectly by eliciting distorting cognitive associations. Such associations may linger even when the misused expression is not directly evoked. For example, when a transperson says 'I like kids', it may be interpreted as alarming due to the association between LGBTQ individuals and sexual predation that *Grooming Inference* fosters.

Finally, linguistic imposters cause *hermeneutical harm*, which occurs when access to and uptake of valuable hermeneutical resources are hindered (Fricker 2007: 147–76).[10] Here, *hermeneutical resources* refer to interpretive tools for understanding the world, including the usages of expressions. Hermeneutical harm undermines one's ability to accurately interpret the world, articulate one's experience, and navigate the world through it.

Our analysis is also broader than Fricker's in a notable way. Fricker primarily focuses on cases where there are lacunas in someone's hermeneutical resources. In contrast, we follow the authors (Falbo 2022; Mason 2011) who understand hermeneutical harms more broadly to include obstructions against the application of valuable hermeneutical resources. On this picture, imposter misuses often cause hermeneutical harm by pre-empting an expression's conventional usage. We can see this in the testimony of a grooming survivor:

> To use these words in this way voids them of their real meaning and desensitizes civil society to bodily harms … Language is also what helps survivors find some semblance of healing; it's our only way out (Ciesemier 2022).

For victims of grooming, the imposter misuse compromises a hermeneutical resource that is instrumental for making sense of one's own experience, taking action and even healing wounds.

Hermeneutical harm need not always affect all groups equally. Mason (2011) highlights the possibilities of *situated lacunas*. For present purposes, we understand situated lacunas as the cases when there is significant resistance toward the uptake of a hermeneutical resource in a particular discourse while the resource is still available in an alternative discourse. Indeed, our central examples of linguistic imposters involve situated lacunas. Although the conventional usages of 'grooming' and 'CRT' still persist in a diminished form in mainstream or academic discourses, respectively, they have been largely crowded out by imposter misuses in the discourses of some groups, making it increasingly difficult for these groups to access their original hermeneutical resources. The effect is further exacerbated by echo chambers or even by what Beaver & Stanley (2023: 286) call *antagonistic ideological social groups*—groups whose collective identity is based on anti-out-group sentiments. Such groups create exclusive spaces where members experience strong collective

10We use 'hermeneutical harm' instead of 'hermeneutical injustice' because we intend to encompass more than social and political contexts.

confirmation biases, rendering them unresponsive to the corrections of an expression's misuse by out-group speakers. Consequently, it is often misusers themselves who lose valuable hermeneutical resources. Nevertheless, the harms they suffer may be comparatively minor relative to the harms suffered by minority groups.

VI. Conclusion

Linguistic imposters present a pervasive phenomenon that unfolds several interesting avenues for future investigation, such as the following three. Firstly, we have seen that the imposter misuses of 'grooming' and 'CRT' exploit resonances derived from their conventional usage. Does this mean that we should try to diminish their harmful effects by ceasing to use these expressions altogether, or would that be a form of surrender? If the latter, what are alternative strategies for countering linguistic imposters? Secondly, who should be held responsible for the harmful effects of linguistic imposters? Should this responsibility lie solely with those wilfully propagating them, or should it also extend to unwitting misusers? Thirdly, while our focus has been on examples of clearly harmful linguistic imposters, the question remains as to whether propagating imposter misuses is ever a permissible strategy for engineering expressions.

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