

The Semantics of Deadnames

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March 2024

Abstract

Longstanding philosophical debate over the semantics of proper names has yet to examine the distinctive behavior of deadnames, names that have been rejected by their former bearers. The use of these names to deadname individuals is derogatory, but deadnaming derogates differently than other kinds of derogatory speech. This paper examines different accounts of this behavior, illustrates what going views of names will have to say to account for it, and articulates a novel version of predicativism that can give a semantic explanation for this derogation.

1 The Phenomenon of Deadnaming

1.1 Deadnaming as Derogatory Speech

“Deadnaming” is a term that originated in the trans community to describe the act of “calling a trans person by the name they no longer use”¹ or “referring to a trans person by their former name,”² *i.e.*, the name that they used or that was given to them prior to their transition. That former name is that person’s “deadname” and deadnaming, using someone’s deadname to refer to them, is characteristically derogatory.

This version of the article has been accepted for publication, after peer review and is subject to Springer Nature’s AM terms of use, but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. The Version of Record is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-024-02113-x>

I would like to thank Nikki Ernst, Kate Hazel Stanton, Robin Jeshion, Malte Willer, the attendees of the Words Workshop, an audience of the Pittsburgh Graduate Work-in-Progress talk series, and two anonymous referees for providing generous and helpful feedback during the writing of this article. This article would not have appeared without support from them and many others.

¹Lucas Waldron and Ken Schwencke, “Deadnamed,” *ProPublica*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/deadnamed-transgender-black-women-murders-jacksonville-police-investigation/amp?...twitter.impression=true>

²Parker Molloy, “How Twitter’s Ban on ‘Deadnaming’ Promotes Free Speech,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/opinion/twitter-deadnaming-ban-free-speech.html>

Recent public discussions have come to consider deadnaming alongside slurring and other paradigmatically derogatory speech. For instance, Twitter adopted the following characterization of this broad family of speech in its 2018 Hateful conduct policy:

Repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone: We prohibit targeting individuals with repeated slurs, tropes or other content that intends to dehumanize, degrade or reinforce negative or harmful stereotypes about a protected category. *This includes targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals.*³ (Emphasis Added).

The grouping of deadnaming with slurring and other degrading speech reflects the fact that deadnaming speech derogates the individual deadnamed.⁴ As Parker Molloy puts it, “[t]o trans people, [the change in Twitter’s policy] represented a recognition that our identity is an accepted fact and that to suggest otherwise is a slur,” and deadnaming is “used to express disagreement with the legitimacy of trans lives and identities.”⁵ Activist Dominick Evans characterizes the derogatory power of deadnaming as follows:

One of the most painful ways to deny a transgender person a part of their identity is to use what we call a “dead name.” When someone gets dead named, it means the person’s entire gender identity is erased. It ignores the struggle trans people have to go through to be accepted, and essentially says to the world trans people are not even entitled to define themselves. It is considered highly offensive and very harmful to do ... For me, people who knew me before I came out often use my dead name when they are angry or upset at me, because they know that name hurts me. They know it is insulting and degrading, and because of that I get even more upset when they do it.⁶

As Molloy and Evans emphasize, an act of deadnaming communicates disrespect for or rejection of a trans individual’s identity and choice of name, suggesting that trans people, and the deadnamed individual in particular, “are not

³Twitter Rules and Policies, Hateful conduct policy <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/hateful-conduct-policy>.

⁴This point is made by Christopher Davis and Elin McCreedy, “The Instability of Slurs,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 97, no. 1 (2020): 63–85, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18756735-09701005> See also Dawn Ennis, “10 Words Transgender People Want You to Know (But Not Say),” *Advocate*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/1/19/10-words-transgender-people-want-you-know-not-say>; Sam Reidel, “Deadnaming A Trans Person Is Violence - So Why Does the Media Do It Anyway?,” *Huffington Post*, March 17, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/deadnaming-a-trans-person-is-violenceso-why-does_b_58cc58cce4b0e0d348b3434b.

⁵Molloy, “How Twitter’s Ban on ‘Deadnaming’ Promotes Free Speech.”

⁶Quoted in Brittney McNamara, “Why Incorrectly Identifying Transgender People Who Have Died is a Lack of Respect,” *teenVogue*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/why-incorrectly-identifying-transgender-people-who-have-died-is-a-lack-of-respect>.

even entitled to define themselves.”⁷ But this use of rejected names to disrespect and derogate individuals is not unique to deadnaming in the trans community. Consider the community of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans who have rejected their prior “slave names” in light of their racial, religious, and political connotations. These individuals have understood the use of their chosen names as a critical matter of identity and respect, seeing their prior names as tied to a history of oppression. For instance, Muhammad Ali described his naming in the following way:

Cassius Clay is a slave name. I didn’t choose it and I don’t want it.
I am Muhammad Ali, a free name—it means beloved of God, and I
insist people use it when people speak to me.⁸

The use of Ali’s former name to refer to him derogated Ali by declining to give his choice to rename himself social effect. This was demonstrated publicly in 1967 when Ali fought Ernie Terrell, whose use of his former name prompted objections from Ali both before and during the fight. Repeatedly yelling “[w]hat’s my name?!” Ali beat Terrell ferociously, telling the press afterwards that Terrell had “better pronounce my name right from now on.”⁹ The personal and social significance of the exchange is hard to misunderstand. This paper explores the behavior of names with the power to derogate in this way, including both names like Trans people’s deadnames and names like Muhammad Ali’s slave name. I will call this wider group of names “deadnames,” recognizing that some speakers might insist on giving that term a narrower extension specific to the trans community.

Since this category of names are still *names*, longstanding positions on the semantics of names are on the hook for their linguistic behavior. This paper aims to present data on the linguistic behavior of deadnames (§1) and then see how the advocates of different theories of names can try to account for it (§§2-4). As I argue (§§2-3), both Millianism and Graf Fara’s predicativism will have to appeal to pragmatics in order to account for the distinctive behavior presented in §1. Since there are some hurdles to this kind of strategy, I also articulate a novel form of predicativism that can give a semantic treatment of these distinctive features (§4).

1.2 What is “Deadnaming”?

With these examples in mind, it will be helpful to sketch a rough account of what kind of speech qualifies as deadnaming and what kind of name qualifies

⁷*Id.*

⁸Alexandra Sims, “Muhammad Ali: Why did the boxing legend change his name from Cassius Clay,” *The Independent*, June 4, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/muhammad-ali-death-cassius-clay-why-did-he-change-his-name-nation-of-islam-a7065256.html>.

⁹James Dielhenn, “Muhammad ALi’s dark side emerges in ‘what’s my name’ fight with Ernie Terrell on February 6, 1967,” *Sky Sports*, February 6, 2017, <https://www.skysports.com/boxing/news/12183/10755629/muhammad-ali8217s-dark-side-emerges-in>

as a deadname for the purposes of the paper. In what follows, I will use the following rough definition of a deadname.

“ ϕ ” is a *deadname* for an individual χ iff

1. χ used to be called “ ϕ ”
2. χ now rejects “ ϕ ” as a name for themselves
3. it is now derogatory to call χ the name “ ϕ ” in virtue of this rejection

Correspondingly, a speaker who uses “ ϕ ” with the intention of referring to χ has *deadnamed* χ . I will call an individual like χ who is deadnamed in this way the *target* of that act of deadnaming.

To flesh out this definition, it is important to be particular about what notion of “derogatory” is meant here and how this notion is importantly different from what is sometimes meant by “offense.” I understand derogation to be an objective social phenomenon that is independent of the target’s subjective state of mind. To derogate is to do something akin to *expressing* disrespect, which one may do even if the target of this disrespect is not hurt. Whereas offense reflects how individuals feel about the use of a pejorative term, derogation reflects the objective social features of a speech act; we derogate by saying certain things even if what we said does not upset anyone.¹⁰

Like slurring, deadnaming is derogatory and not merely offensive or insulting, as it expresses disrespect for the target’s identity regardless of whether the speaker intends this disrespect or whether the target is subjectively offended or present.¹¹ A tragic illustration of this is that the media and police often deadname trans individuals after their deaths.¹² This is a serious expression of disrespect towards the deceased and the trans community, which has prompted

¹⁰Christopher Hom, “A Puzzle About Pejoratives,” *Philosophical Studies* 159, no. 3 (2012): 383–405, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-011-9749-7>.

¹¹Since this notion of derogation is an objective, social one, it seems to imply that names that have been purely *privately* rejected by their bearers, who haven’t expressed this rejection to others, aren’t deadnames in this technical sense and that their use doesn’t derogate. For example, if Steve doesn’t like their old name “Mary” and doesn’t want to be called Mary, it might be upsetting to have their friends and family call them Mary. But if Steve hasn’t told *anyone* about this rejection, the use of “Mary” isn’t disrespectful in the objective social sense meant here. Its use couldn’t constitute an offense against the person’s *social status*, even if it is privately painful. Note that this doesn’t mean that a deadnaming can never derogate if the *speaker* is ignorant of the changed name (cf. footnote 15). What a name expresses about the target’s social standing may escape the speaker’s understanding, it just can’t escape the entire community of speakers. For comparison, my use of a slur can be derogatory even if I don’t know what it means, but something can’t be a slur if *no one* knows what it means.

¹²For one of a number of discussions, see Lindsey Kilbride, “Transgender Killings Spur Calls for Police Reform,” *NPR*, September 1, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/09/01/641571680/transgender-killings-spur-calls-for-police-reform?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20180901

some organizations to attempt to prevent deadnaming.¹³ The concern of this paper is to use a theory of the semantics of names to help explain how deadnaming functions to derogate.

Importantly, deadnames can be hurtful or upsetting to their targets and others even in contexts where their use does not involve derogation. People with deadnames often avoid instances of their deadnames even when those instances are not part of a targeted deadnaming or a speech act at all. One may, for example, feel uncomfortable if a neighbor's disobedient dog happens to have one's deadname and one therefore has frequently to hear one's deadname yelled. In other words, one need not be targeted in order to be hurt. This is of course because the appearance of one's deadname can prompt negative associations and reactions without being part of a directed act of deadnaming.¹⁴

This offense is a perlocutionary effect of the mention of one's deadname that is different from the derogation that comes from being targeted in a speech act containing one's deadname. In the first case, the problem with the deadname is a causal effect of the appearance of a word that need not be connected with a communicative act concerning the person with a deadname. In the latter case, the deadname is being *used* in a speech act that derogates the person with a deadname, whether intentionally or unintentionally.¹⁵ The first effect is perlocutionary, the second is illocutionary. Accordingly, for example, there is no deadnaming in the sense used here when one overhears strangers referring to some other person by using a homophone of one's deadname, or when one encounters a stranger's pet with a name that is a homophone of one's deadname. These occurrences are predictably upsetting, and being the sort of person for whom this is an upsetting occurrence may have significant effects on one's social status. Nevertheless, I am committed to the claim that there is a genuine difference in linguistic behavior between these cases and cases of targeted deadnaming.

In light of the discussion in 1.1, it should hopefully be common ground that many trans people and people who have rejected their "slave names" have deadnames in the sense identified in this section. Admittedly, this is a category with fuzzy edges, since a number of cases of problematic or taboo naming acts share

¹³ See, e.g., the Seattle Police Department Manual § 16.200 (<http://www.seattle.gov/police-manual/title-16---patrol-operations/16200---interaction-with-transgender-individuals>).

¹⁴ This phenomenon is not unique to deadnames of course. See the offense caused by instances of "niggardly," a word which has neither historical nor semantic relationships with any derogatory slur. See Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "niggard," accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/niggard>.

¹⁵ Note also that not all derogations of this kind will be given the same moral treatment. This is not at issue in this paper, but it seems likely that at least some deadnamings that communicate disrespect are blameless. Prima facie, deadnamings by people who do not know that the deadnamed person has changed their name and who have no epistemic failings with respect to this ignorance are blameless. Nevertheless, what such people communicate does derogate, just as a speaker can derogate by using a slur without understanding its full import.

some features with the core cases of “deadnaming.”

Being called an old nickname over one’s objections, for example, can range from being mildly annoying to genuinely hurtful, and there may be some cases at the far end of this spectrum which are tempting to describe as derogatory.¹⁶ The intentional use of a name which is incorrect, but is not a previous name, can also result in offense. For example, a misogynistic bully might refer to male counterparts with traditionally feminine names in an attempt to belittle them.¹⁷ Similarly, the violation of norms surrounding who is on sufficiently intimate or equal terms to use one’s first name or omit a title have a range of social effects.¹⁸ One can also violate rules against naming religious figures in certain ways (such as referring to the God of Israel with the Tetragrammaton or referring to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) without the appropriate honorific). While it would be hard to describe doing this as derogating anyone in particular, it may be that some similar objective social property is at stake.

Since this paper is attempting to contribute to the debate over the semantics of names writ large, these boundary cases are fair game for testing the account I offer (and I believe this account is helpful for understanding their behavior as well). However, I will focus on core cases of deadnaming rather than the wider class of problematic names. I am relatively unconcerned with delineating the precise contours of the term.

1.3 Data on the Derogatory Behavior of Deadnames and Slurs

The following subsections give examples of the behavior of deadnames to indicate which constructions derogate and how deadnaming is responded to. This data is particularly interesting to compare to slurs, which have received helpful scholarly attention as derogatory speech. To present these examples in a way that fruitfully illustrates the behavior of the problematic language, I will use Muhammad Ali and his deadname, a fictional trans man Steve and his deadname “Mary,” and the archaic slur for Germans “Boche.” Cases cited from public fora have been changed by substituting the relevant names and inserting the relevant deadname. Derogatory cases are labeled with a **X**

The most basic case of deadnaming looks something like (1) and (2)

1. **X** Cassius Clay used the name “Muhammad Ali.”
2. **X** Mary changed their¹⁹ name to “Steve.”

¹⁶I owe this point to Elisabeth Camp.

¹⁷I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

¹⁸I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

¹⁹The misuse of pronouns and other gendered terms to misgender someone, i.e., to refer to them or describe them as someone of a gender other than the one they identify with, is another prominent way of disrespecting trans individuals. It is worth noting that this is not

In these sentences, the speaker talks about the target, Ali or Steve, but uses the target's deadname to do so, derogating him in the process. Less straightforwardly, the derogatory nature of deadnames projects through constructions that isolate other kinds of incendiary content.²⁰

3. **X** Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay.²¹

4. **X** Alice said that Mary was late to work.

Despite reporting what someone else said, when Tom is talking about Ali and Alice was talking about Steve, the most natural readings of (3) and (4) involve either the speaker identifying the target via his deadname or otherwise consenting to this identification. Deadnames share this projection behavior with slurs, as in the following:

5. **X** Aziz called Hans a Boche.

6. **X** Hector said that he would never hire a Boche.²²

Along the same lines, the derogation of both slurring and deadnaming may persist through some kinds of negation.

7. **X** Aziz called Hans a Boche, but Hans is not a Boche {but Hans is not one}

8. **X** Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay, but Tom did not see Cassius Clay {but Tom did not see him}

Just as (7) does not clearly register an objection to the use of "Boche," the negation in (8) is most naturally read as denying that Tom saw Muhammad Ali, not as denying that "Cassius Clay" is an appropriate name for him. As sections 1.4 and 1.5 indicate, there do appear to be ways for a speaker to distance themselves from the derogatory baggage of a deadname, but the examples here show that the derogatory nature of deadnames does have some of the staying power observed in slurs.

However, unlike slurs, the derogatory nature of deadnames is very sensitive to the use of a deadname by the speaker to refer to the target.²³ Correspondingly, deadnames that appear in certain syntactic positions are characteristically innocuous if they do not involve referring to the target.

quite the same linguistic phenomenon, however, so it won't be my main target here. I note a similarity between my view of deadnames and the literature on misgendering in §4.1.

²⁰For example, "Alice called Mary an asshole" does not implicate the speaker in Alice's insult.

²¹As I address below in §1.5, sentences (3) and (4) do have a nonderogatory reading in addition to a derogatory one.

²²For discussion, see Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore, "Slurring Words," *Noûs* 47, no. 1 (2013): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00820.x>.

²³In addition to syntactic differences between deadnames and slurs, these differences help indicate why deadnames will not be handled by an account of slurs.

9. **X** He {referring to Ali} is a Cassius.
10. There have been a number of famous Cassiuses in history.
11. There is a Cassius in my first-grade class, but no Cassiuses in second-grade.

With the exception of sentences like (9) in which a different part of the sentence is used to refer to the target, sentences in which a deadname is placed syntactically like a predicate tend to be unobjectionable, as in (10) and (11).²⁴ So unlike slurs, the worst of which are practically radioactive regardless of their placement, deadnames derogate because of how the names are used in acts of deadnaming.

1.4 Data on Counterspeech to Deadnames

We can also learn something about the behavior of deadnames by looking at how targets and others who encounter deadnaming respond to and resist the derogation that accompanies it. While deadnaming is often opposed by directly ascending to the metalinguistic level and reproaching the speaker for deadnaming, people also respond in ways that tend to oppose the uptake of the deadname in other ways, a phenomenon that may be comparable to Langton 2017's notion of "blocking."²⁵ An example of the former, metalinguistic response might look something like the following:

12. A: Is that Cassius Clay?
B: "Cassius Clay" isn't his name; that's Muhammad Ali.

One related strategy is to respond as though the correct name had been used, using prosody to highlight that the deadnaming is not being given uptake:

13. A: What is Mary's birthday?
B: *STEVE's* birthday is 7/4/90.²⁶

The most fascinating style of response strikes even fewer metalinguistic notes, and instead simply denies that the deadname applies to the target. In responding to certain questions or declaring the appropriate name, for instance, this strategy can be quite direct:

14. A: **X** Isn't that Mary? {pointing at Steve}

²⁴According to predicativists, names have the semantic type of predicates in all of their occurrences, but it is uncontroversial that names occur in predicate position as a syntactic matter in sentences like (9)–(11). So far, the examples in this paper have involved deadnames occurring as singulars in argument position. See Delia Graff Fara, "Names Are Predicates," *Philosophical Review* 124, no. 1 (2015): 59–117, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2812660>.

²⁵See Rae Langton, "Blocking as Counterspeech," in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. M. Moss D. Fogal D. Harris (2017). I take it that the examples below are not, strictly speaking, blocking because they do not involve challenging a presupposition of the act of deadnaming.

²⁶Twitter, November 30, 2019. Unmodified copies of tweets cited here are on file with the author.

B: Oh no, that's Steve!²⁷

15. I'm Steve! Not Mary!²⁸

16. That's not aunt Mary, that's uncle Steve!²⁹

But trans people also report resistance against deadnaming that works by simply treating a deadname as either the name of someone other than the target or as a failed attempt at reference. For instance:

17. A: Are you Mary's husband?

STEVE: Mary never really existed. She was more of a facade than a real person.³⁰

18. A: May we please speak to Mary?

STEVE: They're no longer with us.

A: Oh I'm sorry to hear that.

STEVE: Don't be, they're in a better place now!³¹

19. A: **X** Good morning, Mary.

STEVE'S CO-WORKER: Mary doesn't work here anymore, it's Steve now!³²

20. STEVE: Who the fuck is this asshole named Mary and why do I keep getting her mail?!³³

21. TOM: Is there a Mary here?

STEVE: No, there aren't any Mary's here.

1.5 Derogatory and Nonderogatory Readings

These examples, in conjunction with the data in the previous section, help to characterize the function of deadnames and the contours of the derogatory character of deadnaming. An important upshot is that by contrast to slurs,³⁴ there are some subtle differences between derogatory uses of deadnames and

²⁷Twitter, December 25, 2019.

²⁸Twitter, December 13, 2019.

²⁹Twitter, December 24, 2019.

³⁰Twitter, April 18, 2018.

³¹Twitter, October 29, 2019.

³²Twitter, October 15 2019.

³³Twitter, October 19, 2018.

³⁴Importantly some authors think that there are clear cases of non-derogatory, non-appropriative uses of slurs. See, e.g., Christopher Hom, "The Semantics of Racial Epithets," *The Journal of Philosophy* 105, no. 8 (2008): 429. Hom's cases of these innocent uses of slurs are quite similar to the innocent uses of deadnames I discuss here, so if this account of slurs is right, this is another case of a parallel between the two kinds of speech.

innocent or counterspeech uses. In fact, there is a category of uses of deadnames that are susceptible to both derogatory and nonderogatory readings in different contexts.³⁵ Consider the following sentences:

- 22. I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay.
- 23. Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964.
- 24. That reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay.

I suspect that the most common use of sentences like these is probably a derogatory deadnaming. However, the counterspeech cases introduced in 1.4 also suggest that sentences like these can be used to resist derogation and disassociate Muhammad Ali from his deadname. Consider two elaborations on each sentence to make the contrasting readings more explicit.

- 22. I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay.
 - (a) **X** I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay, but he's too young to be Cassius Clay.
 - (b) I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay, but now I know that he is Muhammad Ali.

(22)(a) reports a changed belief that retains the derogatory content of the previous belief, since the speaker is reiterating the connection between Ali and his deadname. (22)(b), on the other hand, reports a change in belief that could be an earnest way of reporting that the speaker was previously ignorant that "Cassius Clay" was a deadname and correcting themselves. This kind of correction may succeed as an explicit metalinguistic rejection of the deadname similar to the exchange in (12) or as the kind of explicit correction found in (14)-(16) depending on the context.

- 23. Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964.
 - (a) **X** Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964, he won it in 1965.
 - (b) Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964; Muhammad Ali did.

(23)(a) is just a speaker's derogatory expression of their ignorance of boxing history. But (23)(b) seems clearly related to the kind of corrective response given in (19) and the other counterspeech uses that treat Ali's deadname as a

³⁵Compare this kind of comparison to a common test used to detect ambiguity or context sensitivity: "If n is genuinely ambiguous, it should be possible to fix the facts of the world, then find two contexts, one in which an utterance of $f(n)$ is true and one in which an utterance of $f(n)$ is false (where $f(n)$ is a declarative sentence containing n in a non-intensional position, and the two contexts do not affect the interpretation of any other expressions in $f(n)$)."

Justin Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse," *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 33–64, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201745213>.

name for someone other than Ali. On the nonderogatory reading, the negation in (23) denies that a Cassius Clay won, rather than asserting that some particular individual Cassius Clay did not win and picking out Ali as that individual.

24. The reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay.

- (a) **X** The reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay because he mistook the boxers fighting the undercard for the boxers fighting in the main event.
- (b) The reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay rather than as Muhammad Ali.

(24) may be innocuous if read as rejecting the connection between Ali and his deadname, as in (12), and this is made even clearer in (24)(b). If, as in (24)(a), however, the speaker of (24) is aiming to identify a mistake in *which* boxer is Cassius Clay rather than *that* any boxer is Cassius Clay, this would derogate Ali.

Along the same lines, we can also recover a nonderogatory reading of (3) and (4).

3. **X** Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay.

- (a) **X** Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay, *but Clay was actually in another state at the time.*
- (b) Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay, *but he actually saw Muhammad Ali.*

4. **X** Alice said that Mary was late to work.

- (a) **X** Alice said that Mary was late to work, *but she came in on time.*
- (b) Alice said that Mary was late to work, *but no such person works here.*

On a naive reading at least, the key semantic difference between the (a) and (b) readings of (22)-(24) is whether the speaker is talking about a particular individual and calling that person Cassius Clay (the (a) reading) or talking about the possibility of someone being Cassius Clay abstracted from any particular person (the (b) reading).³⁶ Or in other words, the two readings of these sentences look very much like a *de dicto/de re* ambiguity. Similarly, in (3) and (4), the way to get a derogatory reading is to treat the report as predicating something about an individual that the speaker is also aware of, and the way to get a nonderogatory reading is to call into question the whole proposition that

³⁶This phenomenon is a deadnaming instance of the more familiar phenomenon on which propositional attitude reports containing names are typically ambiguous. See generally Michael Nelson, "Propositional Attitude Reports," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2023, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023)

is reported (“Tom saw Cassius Clay” and “Mary was late to work”) rather than just the predication.

While the availability of these two readings is an interesting facet of deadnames that any theory of names should hope to account for, one of the accounts of these names I present below (§4) has the striking advantage of treating these two readings as a the familiar *de dicto/de re* ambiguity arising from the relative scope of a definite determiner phrase, and I take this to be a significant explanatory benefit.

1.6 Summary

This section shows that deadnames have several interesting features that any complete theory of names should attempt to account for. A deadname is a name for an individual that they have rejected and that it is now derogatory to call them in virtue of that rejection. Like slurs, deadnames are derogatory in constructions that typically isolate other kinds of problematic content like reporting and (some kinds of) negation. Unlike slurs, the derogatory nature of slurs depends heavily on the use of the deadname to refer to its target. It therefore makes sense that a variety of different techniques of counterspeech succeed in responding to the derogation involve using the deadname to deny that it refers to the target. Finally, certain kinds of sentences have both derogatory and nonderogatory readings that seem to behave very much like *de dicto/de re* ambiguities.

This data shows that deadnaming presents a unique kind of derogatory speech. The task for this paper is bringing this data to bear on longstanding debates in the philosophy of language concerning the best account of the semantics and pragmatics of names. As I’ll note in §2 below, one noteworthy aspect of this data is that comparing derogatory to counterspeech uses of deadnames involves paradigmatic semantic features like truth conditions, quantification, and ambiguity. This presents a challenge for existing accounts of names that have to account for the derogation of deadnames pragmatically. Though these difficulties are not insuperable, I provide a novel view of names in §4 that can give a semantic explanation for the derogation of deadnames.

2 Millianism and Deadnames

Millianism is the view that names are referring expressions³⁷ and that the semantic contribution of a name to the sentence containing it is simply the name’s semantic referent.³⁸ While this view by itself does not establish what fixes the

³⁷That is, they are “type *e*” expressions with an individual as their semantic value.

³⁸The naming convention for the view comes from John Stuart Mill and Chapter II of John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: 1*, vol. 1 (Parker, 1856). More modern versions of this view emerged with Ruth Barcan Marcus, “Modalities and in-

semantic referent of names, all of the going theories of reference that accompany Millian views seem to require that deadnames must stand for the same person as their live counterparts. For instance, on the causal theory of reference inspired by Kripke, “Cassius Clay” and “Muhammad Ali” both refer to Ali, as both names have their causal origin in the same individual, and were passed down to the present by a chain of speakers intending to corefer.³⁹

But if names are merely referring expressions that stand for individuals, and deadnames stand for the same individuals as their live counterparts, why do they behave differently? The Millian, with her austere semantics for names, will have to use purely pragmatic resources to explain the apparent differences between what they must take to be co-referential names. And this may be a challenge, given some features described above.

One natural approach, taking inspiration from Anderson and Lepore (2013) on slurs, would be to deflate the derogatory nature of deadnames and explain their harmfulness by appealing to social prohibitions on the *occurrence* of deadnames rather than anything about their semantic content. Once a person rejects a name, the Millian could contend that the deadname is derogatory to use simply because it is a name that the target has rejected, not because of anything the name says.

A challenge here would be to explain why some of the cases like (12)-(21) don’t derogate despite using or mentioning a person’s rejected name, although perhaps there are identifiable subtleties in the social prohibition that could be helpful. Perhaps a harder nut to crack is in accounting for the two readings of (22)-(24).

- 22. I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay.
- 23. Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964.
- 24. That reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay.

If the basic problem with deadnames was their occurrence in language after their rejection, why can one sentence that uses a deadname have both derogatory and counterspeech *readings*. But perhaps a suitably rich theory of how

tensional languages,” *Synthese*, 1961, 303–322 and Saul A Kripke, *Naming and necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980). Advocates of this view are many, including David Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” in *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. H. Wettstein J. Almog J. Perry (Oxford University Press, 1989), Nathan Salmon, “How not to become a Millian heir,” *Philosophical Studies* 62, no. 2 (1991): 165–177, Scott Soames, “Reference and description,” in *Reference and Description* (Princeton University Press, 2009), and Robin Jeshion, “Referentialism and Predicativism About Proper Names,” *Erkenntnis* 80, no. S2 (2015): 363–404, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-014-9700-3>

³⁹ See Saul A Kripke, *Naming and necessity* at pp. 90–97. Other views of reference, e.g., Evans (1973) and Devitt (1981), also appear to predict that deadnames and their live counterparts would be coreferential. See Gareth Evans, “The Causal Theory of Names,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 47, no. 1 (1973): 187–208, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/47.1.187>; Michael Devitt, “Designation,” *Mind* 92, no. 368 (1983): 622–624.

occurrence-based prohibitions work could be helpful here.⁴⁰

But Millians could also turn to a variety of other pragmatic mechanisms to attempt to account for the derogatory nature of deadnames.⁴¹ For example, taking inspiration from Jorgensen’s contrastive choice account in the context of slurs,⁴² Millians could claim that deadnames are derogatory because of a pragmatic process in which hearers of deadnaming sentences register the speaker choice to use the target’s deadname rather than their live name as a signal of some derogatory attitude they hold towards the target. On this view, the Millian commitment to treating deadnames as coreferential with their live counterparts would be part of the story, since the signal comes from the speaker’s free choice of co-referential expressions.⁴³

Though a more complete investigation of this proposal would be worthwhile, the contrastive choice account fares somewhat better in the context of slurs because fluency with slurs seems to require understanding them as coreferential with their neutral counterparts, whereas one often interacts with users of a deadname who are unaware of the existence of a target’s live name. So for instance, take the following interaction (a variation on exchanges like 18 and 19):

DOOR-TO-DOOR SALESMAN: **Rings doorbell**
TOM, STEVE’S ROOMMATE: Hello?
DOOR-TO-DOOR SALESMAN: May I please speak to Mary?
TOM: There aren’t any Mary’s here. (X Yes, let me get Mary/let me get them.)

We can presume that the door-to-door salesman has no idea who that Steve has changed their name, he’s just working off of an outdated list of contact information. So the only expression that he knows that refers to the person he’s attempting to contact is “Mary.” And yet, we would expect Tom to refuse to deadname Steve even when Tom knows that he doesn’t have the choice of another expression to get the same point across.⁴⁴ The deadname still risks derogation even in contexts like these where there is no free choice involved.

A closely related, though perhaps more direct alternative, would be to hold that the derogation of deadnaming comes from a violation of a conversational maxim to use appropriate language, as in Nunberg 2018’s account of slurs..⁴⁵

⁴⁰And one may already be on order for Anderson and Lepore given the diversity of different slur reclamation cases.

⁴¹Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to expand on this point.

⁴²Renée Jorgensen Bolinger, “The Pragmatics of Slurs,” *Noûs* 51, no. 3 (2017): 439–462, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12090>

⁴³See Bolinger, 447.

⁴⁴The analogous situation is discussed at Bolinger, 449–50 on the possibility of a language where there is no inoffensive counterpart to a slur.

⁴⁵Geoffrey Nunberg, “The Social Life of Slurs,” in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Daniel Fogal, Daniel Harris, and Matt Moss (Oxford University Press, 2018).

The question then would be what sort of conversational implicature or other pragmatic effect flowing out of that violation would explain the data.

For example, Nunberg's account of slurs holds that slurs work via what he calls "ventriloquistic implicatures" in which "a speaker pointedly disregards the lexical convention of the group whose norms prescribe the default way of referring to A and refers to A instead via the distinct convention of another group ... so as to signal [their] affiliation with the group and its point of view."⁴⁶ The speaker's violation of an appropriateness maxim, which would have prescribed a different word, allows us to infer that they want to convey this additional information about their attitudes.

In the case of deadnames, this would presumably be membership in the group that denies the legitimacy of the target's choice of identity. And, importantly, the fact that it is a speaker's attitude rather than information about the situation that is conveyed is supposed to explain why these implicatures are not cancellable the way most conversational implicatures are, which certainly fits the deadnaming data.⁴⁷ As with a Jorgensen-style account, one challenge would be to explain how this group membership could be signalled in cases where the use of a deadname is not a completely free choice. In the last exchange, if Tom had deadnamed Steve in communicating with the ignorant salesman, would we have inferred that he was intending to signal his allegiance with anti-trans bigots?

At any rate, developing a richer pragmatic story along these lines should be the next step for committed Millians to account for the deadnaming data while treating deadnames and their live counterparts as having the same semantic content.⁴⁸ Without counting against the creativity of philosophers and linguists in developing these kind of pragmatic stories, however, it should be noted that the data described here have all the *prima facie* indicia of semantic behavior.

In addition to creating what appear to be ambiguities in the cases of (22)-(24) and (3)-(4), deadnames seem to differ in their truth conditions from their live counterparts (as in 14-19):

14. A: **X** Isn't that Mary? {pointing at Steve}

⁴⁶Nunberg, "The Social Life of Slurs," 267.

⁴⁷See Nunberg, 269–70.

⁴⁸Alternatively, Millians could concede that the derogatory behavior of deadnames has to do with their conventional content, but distinguish two different dimensions of content, isolating the problematic content of deadnames from the content that is truth-conditionally relevant or at issue. Compare this view to Camp 2018, which discusses this kind of two-factor theory in the context of slurs. Elisabeth Camp, "29A Dual Act Analysis of Slurs," in *Bad Words: Philosophical Perspectives on Slurs* (Oxford University Press, July 2018), ISBN: 9780198758655, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198758655.003.0003>, eprint: https://academic.oup.com/book/0/chapter/147862920/chapter-ag-pdf/44994535/book/_5207/_section/_147862920.ag.pdf, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198758655.003.0003>.

- B: Oh no, that's Steve!⁴⁹
15. I'm Steve! Not Mary!⁵⁰
16. That's not aunt Mary, that's uncle Steve!⁵¹
17. A: Are you Mary's husband?
STEVE: Mary never really existed. She was more of a facade than a real person.⁵²
18. A: May we please speak to Mary?
STEVE: They're no longer with us.
A: Oh I'm sorry to hear that.
STEVE: Don't be, they're in a better place now!⁵³
19. A: **X** Good morning, Mary.
STEVE'S CO-WORKER: Mary doesn't work here anymore, it's Steve now!⁵⁴
- and quantification (as in 21):
21. TOM: Is there a Mary here?
STEVE: No, there aren't any Mary's here.

This data, which seems to speak to straightforwardly semantic phenomena, calls into question whether deadnames are truth-conditionally equivalent to their live counterparts, as the pragmatic theories I've discussed would hold.⁵⁵ Just to take the last case as an example, it seems to me that Steve is straightforwardly telling the truth that there aren't any Mary's here, not subtly correcting a misspeaking or refusing to engage with the bad behavior of a speaker violating pragmatic norms. And that suggests that "Steve" *means* something different than "Mary" would in (21).

It is certainly possible that this initial appearance is mistaken and that these cases are all better understood as metalinguistic negation or something else. Or perhaps Millians could accept this read of the data and subtly change the reference conditions for names to account for it. No options are definitively closed for those who are committed to the view that names are just tags on aspects of

⁴⁹Twitter, December 25, 2019.

⁵⁰Twitter, December 13, 2019.

⁵¹Twitter, December 24, 2019.

⁵²Twitter, April 18, 2018.

⁵³Twitter, October 29, 2019.

⁵⁴Twitter, October 15 2019.

⁵⁵See Nunberg, "The Social Life of Slurs," 244.

the world.⁵⁶

But at least for the purposes of this initial investigation, it seems worthwhile to explore a non-Millian, semantic account of names addressed to the phenomenon of deadnaming. This is the task of the rest of this paper, which develops a variation on predicativism that explains the derogation of deadnames by reference to semantic differences between deadnames and their live counterparts.

3 BCC Predicativism

As noted in section 1.3, names uncontroversially function as predicates in some of their occurrences. Predicativism about names is the view that names have the semantic type of predicates in all of their occurrences, including in the familiar situation in which a name is occurring as a bare singular in argument position, *e.g.*, when a speaker appears to be predicating something of “Cassius.” Delia Graf Fara and others have argued that when names are bare singulars in argument position, their true semantic form is disguised and that “they constitute the predicative component of a *denuded determiner phrase*, a determiner phrase with an unpronounced determiner.”⁵⁷ This view differs fundamentally from both Millianism and its Fregean competitors in arguing that names do not have semantic type of individuals.

Graf Fara’s version of predicativism, which I take to be at least as strong in accounting for deadnames as any competing predicativism, holds that the relevant determiner is the definite article (“the” in English). In other words, sentences like “Muhammad Ali was a great boxer” have the form of (25).

25. Øthe⁵⁸ Muhammad Ali was a great boxer.

If names are predicates, what do they predicate? Graf Fara argues that each name *N* obeys the following schema called the *Being Called Condition* (BCC):

(BCC) ‘*N*’ (when a predicate) is true of anything just in case it is called *N*.⁵⁹

In slogan form, BCC predicativism is the view that names are predicates that are true of their bearers. Thus, Graf Fara’s account is the conjunction of the following claims:

- All names have the semantic type of predicates.

⁵⁶See Marcus, “Modalities and intensional languages,” 309–10 for this metaphor.

⁵⁷Fara, “Names Are Predicates” at p.60.

⁵⁸“Øthe” denotes the unpronounced definite determiner postulated by predicativism

⁵⁹Fara, “Names Are Predicates” at p. 64

- A name in bare singular argument position is syntactically the predicative component of a determiner phrase determined by an unpronounced definite article.
- Names are true of the individuals who are called them.

So for illustration, BCC predicativism holds that “Muhammad Ali” is a predicate that applies to things called Muhammad Ali, and when “Muhammad Ali” occurs as a bare singular in argument position in English, it is accompanied by an unpronounced “the,” forming the definite description “Øthe Muhammad Ali.” So while the Millian thinks that “Muhammad Ali was a great boxer” has the fundamental semantic form of predicating “was a great boxer” of some individual Muhammad Ali, the predicativist thinks that the semantic form of “Muhammad Ali was a great boxer” is like “The 1964 heavyweight champion was a great boxer.”

“The 1964 heavyweight champion was a great boxer” predicates “was a great boxer” of whoever fulfills the conditions of the definite determiner phrase “The 1964 heavyweight champion” (which contains the predicate “1964 heavyweight champion”). Just the same, the predicativist says that “Muhammad Ali was a great boxer” predicates “was a great boxer” of whoever fulfills the conditions of the definite determiner phrase “Øthe Muhammad Ali,” which consists of the predicate “Muhammad Ali” and an unpronounced definite determiner (“Øthe”). The difference in the meaning is just that instead of than the predicate “1964 heavyweight champion,” which is true of whoever was the heavyweight champion that year, we have the predicate “Muhammad Ali,” which is true of whoever is called Muhammad Ali.

There is much to say about this view. Both predicativism and Graf Fara’s view in particular have come under significant criticism in recent years on both semantic and syntactic grounds.⁶⁰ But for current purposes, the question is whether this view makes much progress over the Millian in accounting for the deadnaming data. According to the BCC, speakers who use deadnames to refer to their targets are simply referring to the target as the individual called by their deadname.

Further, predicativism does not provide a strong explanation for why deadnaming is objectionable. Targets are well aware that they are frequently called by their deadnames, and while this is an unpleasant fact, expressing it is not starkly disrespectful in the way we might predict given the reaction of Ali and others to deadnaming. If the derogatory behavior of deadnames is explained by

⁶⁰See, e.g., Robin Jeshion, “?The? Problem for the-Predicativism,” *Philosophical Review* 126, no. 2 (2017): 219–240, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-3772008>; Robin Jeshion, “Katherine and the Katherine: On the Syntactic Distribution of Names and Count Nouns,” *Theoria: Revista de Teoría, Historia y Fundamentos de la Ciencia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 473–508, <https://doi.org/10.1387/theoria.19588>; Jeshion, “Referentialism and Predicativism About Proper Names”

the semantics of deadnames, we would expect them to have semantic content that is more problematic than Graf Fara's predicativism attributes to them. By comparison, if your semantic account of the derogation of slurs just said that the slur communicated that the targeted group was discriminated against or disparaged in society, we would expect the slur to be just as available in characterizing the group for non-bigoted purposes. Those who are slurred against are not derogated because slurring *points out* that they possess some inferior status; they are derogated because slurring *performs and enacts* some harm to their status. So too with deadnames. This suggests that, like the Millian, the BCC predicativist will have to appeal to pragmatic tools for differentiating the behavior of live names from dead names.

4 Appropriateness Predicativism

So if we are persuaded by the data that deadnames vary in their truth conditional and otherwise semantic properties from live names, then neither Millianism or BCC Predicativism will do as a complete theory of names. In this section, I propose an account of names that can provide a semantic explanation for the behavior of deadnames by making an amendment to Graf Fara's schema for the applicability of names. On this novel version of predicativism about names, the semantics of a name *N* follows the Being Appropriately Called Condition (BACC) schema, rather than the BCC:

(BACC) '*N*' (when a predicate) is true of a thing just in case it is appropriately called *N*

On this view, a name is a predicate that is true of something just in case it is appropriately called by that name. Thus, while most names are true of their bearers, deadnames are false of their bearers, since targets are not appropriately called by their deadnames. Although this is a small change to Graf Fara's view, it makes a big impact in explaining the data surrounding deadnames, as the next subsection details. To clarify the proposal at the outset, however, it is important to make two points.

First, BACC predicativism is in the same boat as BCC predicativism with respect to Kripke's modal argument against descriptivism. Kripke argued that names are rigid designators which designate the same object in every possible world.⁶¹ This argument poses a problem for Graf Fara's predicativism, which identifies names with predicates that are not essential properties of their bearers and then casts certain uses of those names in definite descriptions. Muhammad Ali is not called Muhammad Ali in every possible world, so it seems like treating his name, in some uses, as a predicate true of the individual called Muhammad Ali is inconsistent with those uses of his name designating rigidly.

⁶¹Saul A Kripke, *Naming and necessity* at pp. 48-70. Kripke appeared to only be considering names as they occur as bare singulars in argument position.

Graf Fara responds by contending that on the BCC, names are the predicate part of *incomplete* definite descriptions and that incomplete definite descriptions do designate rigidly.⁶² While demurring on the ultimate semantics of incomplete definite descriptions, Graf Fara opts to “piggyback” on whatever analysis of them is ultimately correct, arguing only that predicativism can treat names as the predicate part of incomplete definite descriptions and that incomplete definite descriptions conform to Kripke’s observations about names. While there is an open question if this argument works,⁶³ the change from the BCC to the BACC does not make things any worse for the predicativist. Since “the individual appropriately called N” is as incomplete as “the individual called N,” BACC predicativism can piggyback off of Graf Fara’s own piggybacking to respond to Kripke.

Second, it is important to note that BACC predicativism’s account of dead-names involves treating deadnaming sentences as cases in which speaker reference and semantic reference diverge. Kripke (1977) discusses this distinction in relation to Donnellan (1966).⁶⁴ Donnellan argues that, contrary to Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions, some uses of descriptions seem to succeed in referring where there is no unique individual satisfying the description. Kripke insists that this does not mean that Russell’s analysis of the semantics of definite descriptions was incorrect, since this kind of successful reference could be a feature of the pragmatics of these uses rather than their semantics. Kripke imagines a party at which one man, smiling and drinking from a champagne flute, is a teetotaler who is drinking sparkling water, while another man sulks nearby, drinking champagne.⁶⁵ Seeing the man drinking sparkling water, someone says:

26. The man over there drinking champagne is happy tonight.

Since “the man over there drinking champagne” is, we can suppose, uniquely satisfied by the sulking man, not the happy water-drinker, we may be inclined to say that the sentence is false; the speaker’s sentence describes someone who is not happy tonight and says of him that he is happy. However, Kripke and Donnellan both recognize a sense in which the sentence has also said something true *about the water-drinker*; the speaker was, in fact, talking about a happy man. Kripke resolves this by appealing to a distinction between the semantics and pragmatics of the sentence, i.e., “between what *the speaker’s words meant*, on a given occasion, and what [*the speaker*] *meant*, in saying those words, on that occasion.”⁶⁶ The semantic reference, determined by the conventions sur-

⁶²Fara, “Names Are Predicates” at pp. 97-108.

⁶³For criticism, see Anders J. Schoubye, “The Predicative Predicament,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96, no. 3 (2016): 571–595, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12336> and Jeonggyu Lee, “Against Predicativism About Names,” *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 1 (2020): 243–261, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1187-3>.

⁶⁴See Saul A. Kripke, “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1977): 255–276, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1977.tb00045.x>; Keith S. Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *Philosophical Review* 75, no. 3 (1966): 281–304, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183143>.

⁶⁵See Saul A. Kripke, “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference” at p. 256.

⁶⁶*Id.* at p. 262.

rounding the words in the speaker's idiolect, is what is at work in the sense that the sentence is about the sulker, whom the words accurately describe. The speaker's reference, "that object which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent," is what is at work in the sense the sentence is about the happy teetotaler.⁶⁷

When a target is deadnamed, the speaker refers to that person by means of their deadname. But according to BACC predicativism, the semantic referent of a deadnaming sentence is whoever, if anyone, is appropriately called by the deadname. Since it is inappropriate to call people by their deadnames, the target is not the semantic referent of a deadnaming sentence. In the ordinary case of a live name, the BACC predicts the same semantic reference as the BCC, since it is appropriate to call someone by their live name. The BACC only breaks with the BCC in its treatment of the semantic reference of inappropriate names, of which deadnames are an obvious example. So in the vast majority of cases, BACC predicativism will be just as good of a theory of names in general as BCC predicativism. But as the sections below argue, this amended version of predicativism is an even better theory of names with respect to deadnaming cases.

4.1 Explaining the Data

There's certainly more to say to flesh out the details of appropriateness predicativism, but to motivate the move from the BCC to the BACC, this section explains why this change makes a difference in explaining the derogation of deadnaming. The basic insight is that it can be derogatory to refer to someone with an inapt description when that description contains derogatory content. The normative content of a BACC predicate can be derogatory in just this way.

To see that this is so, consider a variation on Kripke's example. Now suppose the man with the water-filled glass is a recovering alcoholic whose painful process of treatment has only recently permitted him to reenter social circumstances where alcohol is present. An old rival, eager to deliver a put-down, gestures to him, saying the following:

27. The lousiest drunk in town is in the corner having a great time!

Since the recovering alcoholic is not "the lousiest drunk in town," the sentence is not about him from the perspective of semantic reference, and if Kripke is right, his happy mood will not be relevant to its truth conditions. Nevertheless, the speaker did refer to the recovering alcoholic, and the speaker's use of that particular description to refer to him is nonetheless disrespectful and derogatory. By referring to him with an expression that picks out the lousiest drunk in town, the speaker has communicated that the man is a lousy drunk, along with the accompanying negative associations, *e.g.*, that he does not have

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 263.

agency over his condition, that he is defined by his prior untreated alcoholism, and that he is entitled to a lower social status in light of it. It is no surprise that hearers would find this objectionable. The semantics of the description are relevant, even when the description isn't accurate.

This is what is occurring in deadnaming sentences according to the BACC. By recognizing that using a name to pick someone out is to make a normative claim about how it is appropriate to treat them, appropriateness predicativism locates the core problem of deadnaming in insisting that it is still correct to associate the deadname, and any unpleasant associations it may have, with the target. Like (26), sentences using deadnames are only derogatory when the pragmatics of a speaker's utterance pick out the target, but the semantic meaning of deadnames, as predicates that contain normatively-laden content about what is appropriate, is an important part of what makes them communicate what they do.

For example, deadnaming Ali involves labeling him as the individual appropriately called Cassius Clay, which is a way of denying his ability to reject this label and dismissing his political and religious reasons for doing so. Moreover, by claiming that Ali is appropriately called Cassius Clay, the deadnaming suggests that others are free to do the same. Deadnaming licenses the use of a deadname as an appropriate way to refer to the target. Contrary to a view that would treat names as arbitrary tags for individuals, appropriateness predicativism thus grounds the derogation of deadnaming in the normatively rich content that names communicate and what they claim about how individuals with deadnames can be treated.

This view is interestingly parallel to Cosker-Rowland 2023's account of gender ascriptions and misgendering.⁶⁸ On Cosker-Rowland's view, judgments that a person *A* is a gender *G* are just judgments that it is fitting to treat *A* as a *G*, and so misgendering someone expresses the view that "it's *appropriate, fitting, or correct*" to treat someone as a gender they are not.⁶⁹ As Cosker-Rowland says, this has the effect of claiming that a person's gender identity is irrelevant to how it is appropriate to treat them, just as on my account deadnaming involves treating a person's choice of name and identity as irrelevant to what it is appropriate to call them. On this pair of views, therefore, both deadnaming and misgendering derogate their targets because they involve expressions about how it is appropriate to treat the target that ignore the validity of their efforts to shape their identity.

It is important to note that this account doesn't need to dismiss the possibility of disagreements about the appropriateness of deadnaming by different

⁶⁸Rach Cosker-Rowland, "The normativity of gender," *Noûs*, 2023, I thank an anonymous reviewer for this connection.

⁶⁹Cosker-Rowland, 20.

groups of speakers in order to account for the derogatory nature of deadnames.⁷⁰ Just for illustration, suppose that a group of individuals who self-consciously reject Muhammad Ali’s ability to reject his slave name forms a linguistic subcommunity in which everyone thinks that “Cassius Clay” refers to Muhammad Ali. This subcommunity coordinates on its use of “Cassius Clay” and thus, on my view, assents to a particular convention about who is considered appropriate to call Cassius Clay. But none of that undermines the explanation of why deadnaming Ali is derogatory any more than coordination on who is a “Boche” ameliorates the complaint of those who are slurred by it. The use of the deadname by that subgroup will nonetheless involve expressing the idea that it is appropriate to call the target by their deadname, which derogates the target.

Further, despite the fact that behavior of slurs under denial and negation is often seen as a problem for predicative content accounts of the derogatory behavior of slurs,⁷¹ appropriateness predicativism explains why the stickiness of deadnames as illustrated in section 1.3: when deadnames appear as bare singulars in argument position, they appear in a syntactic construction already known to be resistant to negation. Consider Kripke’s example again:

26. The man over there drinking champagne is happy tonight.

A response of “No, that’s not true” to (26) would communicate that the person conversationally referred to is not happy tonight, not that the person the speaker referred to is not drinking champagne. The inapt description is protected from simple denial or negation by its syntactic role in the sentence. It should therefore be no surprise that exchanges like the following fail to negate the harm caused by referring to Ali as “Cassius Clay,” since the view presented here holds that names are the predicate part of definite descriptions with an unexpressed determiner:

28. A: [Øthe] Cassius Clay seems excited about his upcoming fight.
 {gesturing at Ali}
 B: No, that’s not true!

(27)(B) denies Ali’s appearance of excitement, not A’s deadnaming. Further, in the rare circumstance in which a deadname does *not* appear as a bare singular in argument position and is nevertheless derogatory, appropriateness predicativism correctly predicts that the derogation *is* cancellable. For instance, the interlocutor in (28) rejects the speaker’s derogation of Ali by refusing to deadname him:

29. A: [Øthe] Muhammad Ali is a Cassius.
 B: No he’s not!

⁷⁰I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

⁷¹See Anderson and Lepore, “*Slurring Words*” at pp. 27–29 for this objection against predicate content theories of slurs.

The view is also consistent with the generally unproblematic character of predicative uses of deadnames. The use of a predicate along the lines of “individual appropriately called Cassius” is not derogatory by itself, and does, in fact, truthfully apply to a number of individuals. On the BACC, sentences like (22) simply convey that some person is appropriately called Cassius, which is perfectly innocent when the speaker does not otherwise refer to Ali as that person.

30. There is a Cassius in my class.

As the examples in this paper illustrate, deadnaming combines both the use of a deadname and a pragmatic connection made between that use of the deadname and the target. Without both, a speaker does not communicate that the target is appropriately called by their deadname, and thus does not derogate.

Appropriateness predicativism also accounts for both the projection behavior of deadnames *and* how it is possible for some deadname uses to appear to be ambiguous between a derogatory deadnaming and an statement that can be used to contest deadnaming. Recall that (3) and (4) can be derogatory despite ostensibly describing what someone else said, when context establishes that these sentences target Ali and Steve respectively:

3. **X** Tom said that he saw Cassius Clay.

4. **X** Alice said that Mary was late to work.

BACC predicativism correctly predicts that these sentences have both derogatory and nonderogatory readings depending on whether the hidden determiner phrase is read *de re* or *de dicto* with the corresponding relative scope of the determiner phrase:

3. (a) **X** The individual appropriately called Cassius Clay is such that Tom said that he saw him

(b) “Tom saw the individual appropriately called Cassius Clay” is such that it was said by Tom

4. (a) **X** The individual appropriately called Mary is such that Alice said she was late to work.

(b) “The individual appropriately called Mary was late to work” is such that it was said by Alice.

Similarly, section 1.5 argued that (22)-(24) are susceptible to both a derogatory reading and a nonderogatory reading:

22. I used to think that boxer was Cassius Clay.

23. Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964.

24. That reporter incorrectly identified the boxer as Cassius Clay.

The relevant difference between the two readings of these sentences is that if, for example, one says (24) so as to identify a mistake in *which* boxer is Cassius Clay rather than *that* any boxer is Cassius Clay, the sentence is derogatory. Section 1.5 argued that these sentences seem to present a classic *de dicto-de re* ambiguity: whether one is talking about a particular individual and labeling that person Cassius Clay or talking about whoever is a Cassius Clay makes all the difference. The significant advantage of appropriateness predicativism is that if “Cassius Clay” is the predicate part of a denuded definite description, this ambiguity can simply be understood as an *actual de dicto-de re* ambiguity and not merely an apparent one.

At least since Russell, philosophers have noted that definite descriptions can give rise to this kind of ambiguity.⁷² In his classic “On Denoting,” Russell noticed that “George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverly*” could be paraphrased as either (31)(a) or (b)⁷³:

- 31. (a) George IV wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverly* and Scott was that man.
- (b) One and only one man wrote *Waverly* and George IV wished to know whether Scott was that man.

On his analysis of definite descriptions as devices of quantification, Russell argued that this ambiguity could be explained as a distinction between two different logical structures, varying depending on the relative scope of the definite description. Taking the same approach to (22)-(24) while applying the BACC produces the same ambiguities, corresponding with the derogatory and non-derogatory readings. For example, (23) could be read along the lines of either (23)(c) or (d):

- 23. (c) **X** The individual appropriately called Cassius Clay did not win the heavyweight title in 1964.
- (d) No individual appropriately called Cassius Clay won the heavyweight fight.

On Russell’s analysis, the difference between these readings would amount to a difference in the relative scope of the negation and the quantifier expression corresponding to the definite description. In this case, (23)(c) would correspond with the description taking wider scope than the negation and (23)(d) would correspond with the description taking narrower scope.

There has, of course, been significant criticism of Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions.⁷⁴ Whichever account is correct, however, it remains clear that

⁷²Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Philosophical Review* 15, no. n/a (1905): 346.

⁷³*Id.* at p. 489.

⁷⁴See, e.g., Peter F. Strawson, “On Referring,” *Mind* 59, no. 235 (1950): 320–344, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/lix.235.320>; Michael Devitt, “The Case for Referential Descriptions,”

definite descriptions can present multiple readings in which one reading is, *de re*, concerned with a particular individual and the other is, *de dicto*, concerned with whatever satisfies the stated predicate. Therefore, in treating deadnames as the predicate part of definite descriptions, predicativism presents them in expressions that we should expect to sometimes produce *de re-de dicto* ambiguities, the most natural explanation of the different readings of (22)-(24).

4.2 The Extensions of Names Under the BACC

Before I conclude, it should be noted that the account here makes a striking claim about the extensions of deadnames and the truth of deadnaming sentences. Since it is, in fact, not appropriate to call people by their deadnames, most if not all derogatory uses of deadnames occur in sentences that are not true under the BACC.⁷⁵

Recall that the BACC holds that a name is true of a thing just in case it is appropriately called that name. Because the targets of deadnaming speech acts are not appropriately called their deadnames, deadnames are not true of the people who have rejected them. So when a speaker says that Cassius Clay won the heavyweight title in 1964, the BACC predicativist is claiming that the subject position of their sentence is occupied by a determiner phrase that either lacks a semantic referent entirely or refers to someone other than Ali. As Kripke describes these cases of mismatched speaker reference, we could say that the deadnaming speaker says something true by means of a false sentence or a sentence lacking a truth value. But strictly speaking, the semantics of the deadnaming will not land on the truth. This might strike some as counterintuitive; granted that it's problematic to talk about Ali using his deadname, isn't it still *true* that Cassius Clay won the heavyweight title in 1964?

First, it is not clear that we have reliable intuitions about truth when assessing derogatory terms for the simple reason that many of the ways we understand what it means for something to be true seem to run into trouble with derogatory speech. For instance, we are not licensed to reassert the derogatory statement. Richard helpfully describes the sense of reluctance this produces in the context of slurs:

. . . Imagine standing next to someone who uses S as a slur . . .
the racist mutters *that building is full of Ss*. Many of us are going

in *Descriptions and Beyond*, ed. Marga Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout (Oxford University Press, 2004), 234–260. For a defense of Russell's analysis of these cases, see Stephen Neale, *Descriptions* (MIT Press, 1990), ch. 4.

⁷⁵The relevant notion of appropriateness could be more particularly spelled out in a number of different ways. What I take from the derogation data is that naming involves a predicate with some kind of positive normative valence, such that referring to someone by a name is a way of saying this is an acceptable or fitting way to refer to them. For a discussion of the moral concept of "fittingness" and the complexities of this moral domain, see Christopher Howard, "Fittingness," *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 11 (2018).

to resist allowing that what the racist said was true. After all, if we admit its truth, we must believe that it is true that the building is full of Ss. And if we think that, we think that the building is full of Ss. We think, that is, what and as the racist thinks.⁷⁶

But despite the clear sense that we don't want to credit slurring sentences with truth, theories of slurs that claim that slurs have neutral counterparts that are distinct primarily in their pragmatics may end up being committed to the slurring sentences are technically speaking true, even though we would never say them. Is this a result that violates linguistic intuition? We may not be able to reliably answer. The difficulty of assessing the truth of speech acts in these contexts suggests that philosophers should give more weight to judgments about what is derogatory or offensive than judgments about what is true when assessing different semantic theories.

Second, the analysis of deadnaming in terms of a split between speaker reference and semantic reference presented here also provides something of an error theory for these contrary intuitions about truth. The supposedly "true" deadnaming sentences are ones in which substituting the speaker's intended reference for the semantic reference results in a true sentence. With an accurate statement so close-by, principles of accommodation can explain why deadnaming sentences don't produce a sense of falsehood.

5 Conclusion

The literature on the semantics of names has yet to consider the phenomenon of deadnaming. This paper argues that a revised version of Graf Fara's "the" predicativism, treating names as predicates that follow the Being Appropriately Called Condition schema, accounts for several features of deadnames. When combined with a speaker's use of a deadname to target an individual, the use of a deadname is derogatory because it involves predicating a normatively loaded property; naming someone involves making a claim about how it is appropriate to treat them. This explains why deadnaming undermines the sense that people with deadnames can define and control their identities. To say that it is appropriate to call someone a name that they have rejected is to say that they are not entitled to control how they should be named. When that control is central to a person's social standing and is under political and social scrutiny, deadnaming directly challenges the target's standing and thereby derogates them. In the case of trans people, "[w]hen someone gets dead named ... it ignores the struggle trans people have to go through to be accepted, and essentially says to the world trans people are not even entitled to define themselves."⁷⁷

⁷⁶Mark Richard, *When Truth Gives Out* (Oxford University Press, 2008) at p. 3-4.

⁷⁷McNamara, "Why Incorrectly Identifying Transgender People Who Have Died is a Lack of Respect" (cf. fn. 6)

Since deadnames are names like any other, theories of names are on the hook for explaining their linguistic behavior, including the ability of names to derogate. As I've argued above, current theories of names like Millianism and BCC predicativism will have to try to account for the differences between dead and live names through a pragmatic story, since they treat the two as relevantly similar from a semantic perspective. Since some of the differences between dead and live names suggest a semantic treatment (see §1.6 for a summary), this motivates my proposal of a novel version of predicativism that can account for these differences semantically.

Even as a preliminary analysis, however, this paper provides significant motivation for the idea that the practice of deadnaming should be subject to philosophical scrutiny as a linguistic and social phenomenon. And just as philosophy of language has helped improve our understanding of the function of other kinds of derogatory speech,⁷⁸ philosophy of language can and should accompany work on the dynamics of social oppression involved in deadnaming.

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⁷⁸ See, e.g., Lynne Tirrell, "Genocidal Language Games," in *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, ed. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (Oxford University Press, 2012), 174–221.

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