The Derogatory Force and Moral Contestability of Deadnaming Utterances

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Part 1:
I. Preliminaries
Suppose the following:
>(i) Clara is a trans woman
>(ii) her assigned-name-at-birth is 'Clark'
>(iii) she rejects her assigned-name-at-birth and instead goes by her preferred name 'Clara'

Consider:
>(Clara) Clara is my neighbor.
>(Clark) Clark is my neighbor.

TOM: Tom, who knows (i)-(iii), utters (Clark) with the intent to convey a certain hostility towards Clara.

Some claims:
- (C1) TOM is a deadnaming utterance.
- (C2) TOM is a misgendering utterance.
- (C3) TOM is a derogatory utterance.
- (C4) TOM is an offensive utterance.
- (C5) TOM is a morally contestable utterance.

I'll argue for (C3) and (C5). I'll set aside C2 & C4—ask me about them in Q&A!
On (C1): What is deadnaming?
>Assumption: a deadnaming utterance is an utterance that uses a trans person's rejected name to refer to them.

Main Question: what is wrong with using a trans person's deadname to refer to them?

Main Claim: deadnaming utterances (like TOM) are morally contestable *because* they are derogatory speech acts, where what is done is the enforcement of an unjust norm against trans people (as a group). (C3) (C5)
>Upshot: deadnaming utterances are morally contestable *independent of* whether they are misgendering utterances.

II. Slurs, Deadnames, and Semantic Content
Question: why go pragmatic rather than semantic?

Some in the literature on slurs claim that the derogatory force of slurs is grounded in its semantic content (e.g., Hom 2008, Hom and May 2018). Consider:
(1) Chris is a Mexican.
(2) Chris is a w*tb*ck.
Question: Why is (2) derogatory, but (1) is not?

>Many think slurs:
>(i) target *groups* and convey hatred, contempt, or disrespect towards them.
>(ii) NEUTRAL: they have *neutral counterparts*—a word that targets the same group but does not derogate them. (e.g., Hornsby 2001)

(one popular) Answer: Given NEUTRAL, (1) and (2) target the same group. However, (1) and (2) *semantically* differ: (2) predicates extra *derogatory* semantic content.

    (e.g., 'ought to be a target of negative moral evaluation, because of being a Mexican')

Can the same be said about deadnaming utterances?

I do think that we should accept a revised version of NEUTRAL:

    NEUTRAL*: deadnames have neutral* counterparts: a name that targets the same trans individual but that does not derogate them in virtue of being trans.

        1. Deadnames and their counterparts don't target a group of people but rather target an individual. However, because the targets of deadnaming utterances are not just any group of people, then one's membership matters in determining whether an utterance is a deadnaming one.

        2. Neutral* counterparts lack the derogatory force of a deadname.

However, I think a semantic account of the derogatory force of deadnaming utterances fails.

    Direct Reference: (Clark) and (Clara) have same semantic content.

    Descriptivist: (Clark) and (Clara) have different semantic content, but this is not a semantic *derogatory* difference.

    Predicativist: (Clark) and (Clara) have different semantic content, but this is not a semantic *derogatory* difference.

III. Derogatory Force

Claim: an account of the derogatory force of deadnaming utterances ought to take seriously how names are *used* to reinforce unjust (gender) ideologies and social structures.

    Note: many already accept that gender terms have social/political import.

    (e.g., Bettcher 2013, Dembroff and Wodak 2018, Kukla and Lance 2022.)

        However, much less theorizing has been done on the social/political import of names.

        (e.g., Nunberg 2018, Koles 2024, Carranza-Pinedo forthcoming)

Claim: Deadnaming utterances derogate in virtue of being a certain kind of derogatory speech act: they are utterances that reinforce an unjust and oppressive norm against the targeted individual.

    Just like how a promising utterance constitutes a promise, a deadnaming utterance constitutes an act of derogation.

        So, (Clark) is a deadnaming utterance because the use of 'Clark' indicates that 'Clark' should be used (instead of 'Clara') to refer to Clara, and thus enforces an unjust norm against trans people like Clara.

    Question: what is the injustice?

        Answer: challenges Clara's authority over what she wants to be called by.

    Question: How is this a (group) norm enforcement?

        Answer: even though 'Clark' is a deadname of Clara's, its use still counts as an enforcement of a (group) norm since it enforces the norm that *people like Clara* lack the authority over what they want to be called by.

        Also, if the utterance makes known that 'Clark' is Clara's *deadname* (and so it also "outs" Clara), then it also enforces the unjust norm that people like Clara don't have a right to privacy over their *trans*-gender identity.

Part 2:

IV. *The Ethics of Misnaming—A Conceptual Reframing*
        Misname: N is a misname of S iff S rejects N.
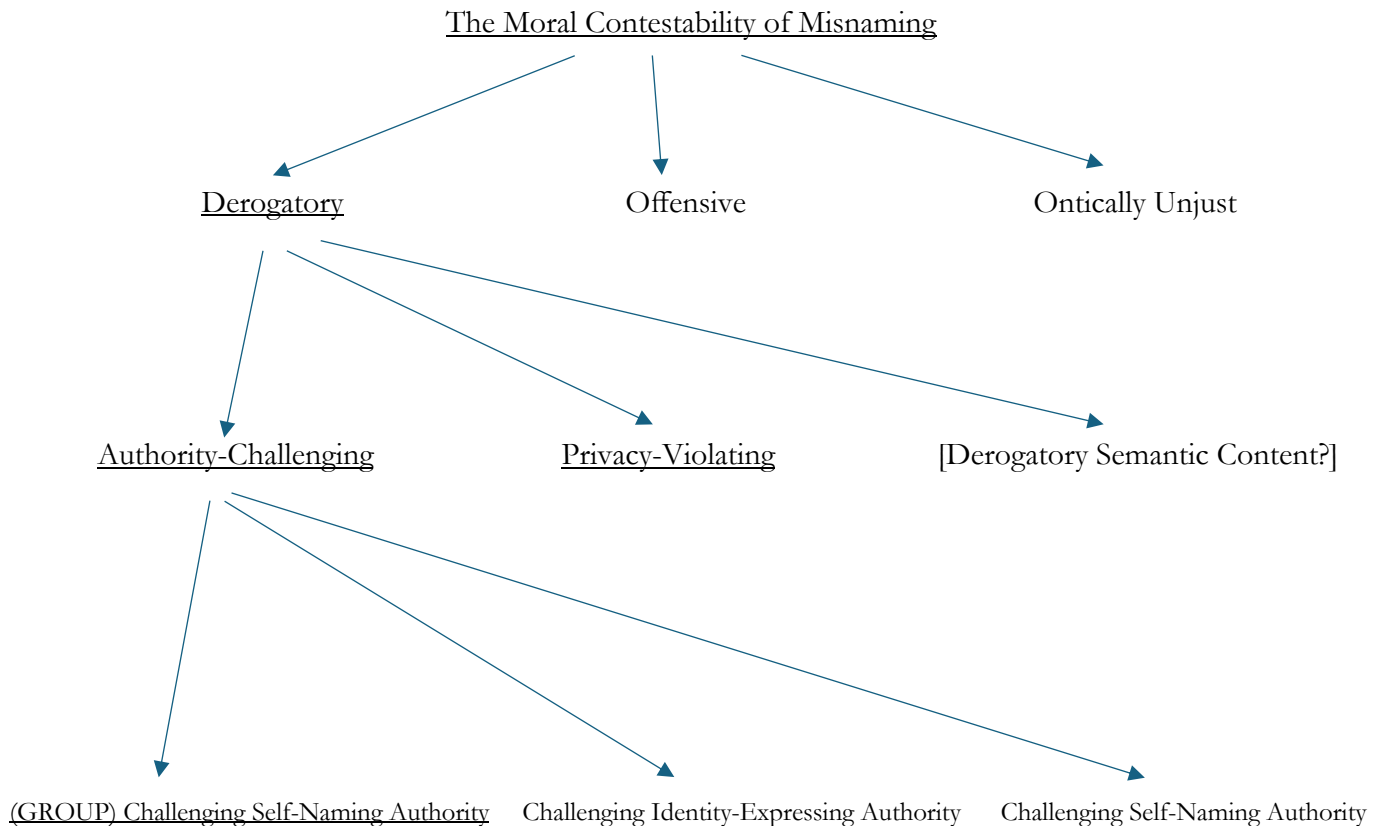   Misnaming Utterance: an utterance that uses S's misname to refer to S.
        Misnaming: the act of making a misnaming utterance.
                Upshot: *many* people have misnames!
        Question: is trans misnaming = deadnaming?
                Conceptual analysis question (contested!)

<u>The Moral Contestability of Misnaming</u>

<u>Derogatory</u>   Offensive   Ontically Unjust

<u>Authority-Challenging</u>   <u>Privacy-Violating</u>   [Derogatory Semantic Content?]

<u>(GROUP) Challenging Self-Naming Authority</u>   Challenging Identity-Expressing Authority   Challenging Self-Naming Authority

Upshots:
1. Misnaming utterances can be morally contestable for *multiple* reasons.
2. Merely assumes a causal theory of reference—doesn't require that misnames have neutral* counterparts.
3. Locates the claims made in Part 1 within a broader characterization of logical space.
4. Neutral with respect to the "What is deadnaming?" conceptual analysis question.
    Explains why you should not use a trans person's rejected name without needing an answer to this question.

References

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