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Hermeneutical disarmament

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When words and phrases change their meaning, we might find ourselves less able to understand and communicate, and this can be harmful to us. I make sense of this by introducing the concept of hermeneutical disarmament. Hermeneutical disarmament is the process by which a person is rendered less able to understand or communicate experiences, ideas, and other phenomena as a result of semantic change to the linguistic resources that could previously have been deployed for these purposes. I defend this concept by showing that semantic change can inflict cognitive and communicative harms and detail some of the forms that it can take.

Keywords: semantic change; epistemic injustice; language; hermeneutical injustice; emotional labour; libertarian; woke.

I. Introduction

Semantic change, changes to the meaning of words and phrases, can impact our capacity to understand and communicate. In some cases, we might find ourselves unable to use a particular word or phrase to achieve what we could previously because its meaning has changed. This is harmful; it deprives us of the ability to understand or communicate about something when it is in our interests to do so. I call this process 'hermeneutical disarmament'.

My purpose in this paper is to introduce and explain this phenomenon. In so doing, I hope to identify a phenomenon within our social world that impacts our ability to intelligibly discuss important concerns and is sometimes deployed as a political strategy to deprive others of this ability. In addition, attention to hermeneutical disarmament illuminates an under-theorized problem in the literature on epistemic and hermeneutical injustice; just as

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developing new resources can assist us in overcoming these injustices, changes to the resources we already have can engender new epistemic harms and the re-emergence of injustices thought to be resolved.

In Section II, I describe semantic change and offer some examples. In Section III, I summarize Miranda Fricker's account of hermeneutical lacunae. In Sections IV and V, I advance my account of hermeneutical disarmament. In Section VI, I respond to an objection. In Sections VII and VIII, I explore different kinds of hermeneutical disarmament. In Section IX, I note some differences between hermeneutical disarmament and hermeneutical injustice.

II. Semantic change

Semantic change occurs when words change their meaning (Blank 1999). Typically, it occurs when individuals or groups repeatedly use terms in a manner that departs from their original meaning, so that the term acquires a new meaning in line with this new usage (Bloomfield 1983: 238–9; Blank 1999: 61–6, 74–7). For example, *meat* initially referred to food in general but was used so often to refer to edible animal flesh that it adopted this narrower meaning (Bloomfield 1983: 240).

Nick Haslam (2016: 1–2) describes the phenomenon of concept creep, whereby concepts that pick out 'negative aspects of human experience and behaviour' undergo semantic change to cover a broader range of phenomena. Concept creep is 'horizontal' when a term expands to refer to distinct phenomena or 'vertical' when a term expands to refer to less extreme instances of (roughly) the same phenomenon (Haslam 2016: 1–2). For example, *refugee* has expanded to include people displaced by environmental disasters in addition to people displaced by armed conflict, an example of horizontal concept creep (Haslam 2016: 2). Haslam (2016: 14–5) claims that use of *depression* to refer 'ordinary, transient sadness' (vertical concept creep) has caused this term to be 'debased', such that individuals suffering from the clinical disorder of depression 'may find that experience downplayed or trivialized when it is equated to the less severe experiences that fit under the new, expanded, definition'.

I focus on three examples of semantic change: *woke*, *emotional labour*, and *libertarian(ism)*. To a greater or lesser extent, these terms have been affected by semantic change so that they cannot be used as effectively to convey their original meanings.

Woke was coined in African-American communities in the Jim Crow era to refer to a person who is aware of racist injustice and responsive to ongoing proximate threats of racist violence (Mirzaei 2019).[1] Recently, the meaning of

[1]It appears to have been coined by the blues singer Lead Belly (2015: 04:22–04:33) in 1938.

woke expanded to refer to adherents of any position considered socially liberal or progressive.[2] It now often refers to a person who supports progressive causes disingenuously, seeks to shut down debate, or imposes their progressive views onto others (Mirzaei 2019; Smith 2021). It is also used as a derogatory term for anyone with progressive views (Ng 2021).

Hence, *woke* no longer refers to a person who is aware of racist injustice. Speaking to *The Independent* in 2021, linguist Tony Thorne claims that:

> People who are woke simply can't use the word anymore…It's been appropriated, co-opted and toxicised by the alt-right and right-wing speakers. Those who are woke can still talk about empathy and compassion and social justice, but I think they've had to abandon the neat, snappy slang words and go back to explaining what they really believe. (Ng 2021)

Secondly, Arlie Hochschild (2012: 6–7) coined the term *emotional labour* to refer to employees managing their own emotional state to convey particular emotional attitudes and thereby cause others to experience a desired emotional state. For example, flight attendants are expected to be friendly towards customers, even hostile or aggressive customers, to provide them with a more enjoyable experience (Hochschild 2012: ix, 3–9, 186). To ensure that this emotional display is interpreted as sincere, employees are often told to actually feel the desired emotional state in the course of their work (Hochschild 2012: 6, 19, 137–8). Emotional labour may cause burnout, stress, 'emotional numbness', and feelings of insincerity (Hochschild 2012: 21,134–5, 187–9), and often goes unrecognized and uncompensated (Steinberg 1999; Hochschild 2012: 132–6, 197).

More recently, *emotional labour* has been used in popular writing to refer to housework and childcare, maintaining family relationships (Beck 2018; Cretaz 2020), and empathizing with friends (Specter 2019). In short, *emotional labour* is now used to mean any domestic or relationship-building labour that is disproportionately performed by women and often unrecognized (Cretaz 2020). Some writers candidly claim that the meaning of *emotional labour* has changed (Bartz 2017; Cretaz 2020).

While Hochschild champions the importance of recognizing this work, she argues that it is distinct from emotional labour and that these more recent uses of *emotional labour* cause us to have 'an important conversation…in a very hazy way' (Beck 2018). *Emotional labour* may no longer refer to the discrete and specific form of labour that persons perform in managing their own emotions to secure a desired emotional response from a customer or colleague.

Thirdly, *libertarian* was coined as a political term by Joseph Déjacque (Woodcock 1962: 281–2; Déjacque, Hartman, and Lause 2012: 25, 174),

[2] This has been widely reported; see Abas Mirzaei (2019), Kate Ng (2021), and Matthew Smith (2021).

referring to a radical left-wing ideology synonymous with *anarchism* (Goodway 2006: 4; Marshall 2008: xiii, 143; Carlson 2012: 1008). Libertarians argued that maximising liberty requires abolishing or limiting private property, as well as the State, because claiming something as private property limits the freedom of others to use it as they wish (Woodcock 1962: 281–2; Déjacque, Hartman, and Lause 2012: 59, 62, 84–5, 110–1, 140). Libertarians opposed capitalism as an unacceptable restriction on the freedom of workers because workers are compelled to work under the direction of a property owner and/or are compelled to perform one form of (often repetitive) labour (Marshall 2008: 460, 464; Déjacque, Hartman, and Lause 2012: 111, 140, 148).

In English, *libertarian* now means something quite different. For clarity, I refer to the original meaning of *libertarianism* as 'libertarian socialism' and the contemporary meaning as 'right-libertarianism' (Goodway 2006: 4; Carlson 2012: 1005–8). Right-libertarians share with libertarian socialists strong opposition to an expansive state (Nozick 1974: 26–8, 53, 149; Rothbard 2006: 55–66). However, right-libertarians are staunch defenders of extensive private property rights (Nozick 1974: 149–74; Chodorov 1980: 213; Rothbard 2006: 27–53). Right-libertarians also defend the relationship between employer and worker in a capitalist economy as two individuals voluntarily trading money for labour (Nozick 1974: 149–153, 160–164; Rothbard 2006: 2–3, 27–8, 47–52; Carlson 2012: 1006).

In what follows, I argue that semantic change in these cases makes it more difficult for individuals to understand and communicate about these phenomena.

III. Hermeneutical lacunae

Fricker (2007: 150–1) coined the term *hermeneutical lacuna* to refer to an absence of those interpretive resources that would otherwise enable a person to make sense of their experience or to adequately communicate it to others; it is the absence of a word or phrase with which a person could name some experience. In the absence of these terms, it is more difficult for a person to fully understand or effectively communicate about the relevant phenomenon.

In one example discussed by Fricker (2007: 148–9), originally reported by Susan Brownmiller (1999: 182), Wendy Sanford experienced depression after giving birth in the 1960s. She and her husband blamed herself for this. While attending a workshop, Sanford encountered the term *postpartum depression*, a name for the depression she experienced. Prior to this realization, Sanford encountered a hermeneutical lacuna, a gap in the available resources that rendered her unable to adequately understand her experience of postpartum depression; she literally did not have the words to explain what she was going

through, to others or to herself. So, Sanford and her husband drew on the only language to which they did have access, calling it a 'personal deficiency', with the flawed interpretative framework that such language entails (Brownmiller 1999: 182; Fricker 2007: 149; Romdenh-Romluc 2016: 594; 2017: 2). There was a hermeneutical lacuna, a gap in the available conceptual resources where the term *postpartum depression* should have been, which was resolved for Sanford when she came across this term.

Similarly, *emotional labour* remedied an existing hermeneutical lacuna. Describing the reaction to her book *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (2012, 199–200) recalls:

> Mostly they thanked me for giving a name to what they did so much of the day, emotional labor. Much of the anguish I heard was linked to the sheer invisibility of emotional labor.

There existed a hermeneutical lacuna that hindered workers in communicating the emotion-managing labour that they performed, which was resolved when they acquired the term *emotional labour*.

I follow Trystan Goetze's (2018: 78) view that the existence of a hermeneutical lacuna can inflict two primary harms. On one hand, a person suffers 'communicative harms' when she cannot successfully communicate her experiences to others because there are not the shared conceptual resources to make this intelligible to her interlocutor, even if she understands them herself (Fricker 2007: 162; Goetze 2018: 78–9). On the other hand, a person suffers 'cognitive harms', when she is unable to adequately understand or interpret her own experiences in the first place (Goetze 2018: 78–9). Fricker (2016, 164–5) makes a similar distinction, noting:

> a radical case where the person concerned is at least temporarily unable to make full sense of her own experience even to herself; and a more moderate sort of case where she understands the nature of her own experience perfectly well…and yet she is unable to render it intelligible across social space to some significant social other to whom she needs to convey it.

The 'radical case' involves both cognitive and communicative harms. As a result of the hermeneutical lacuna, a person cannot understand their own experience or communicate it to others. Without the term *postpartum depression*, Sanford could not understand what she was going through except by interpreting it as weakness of character, and so also could not communicate effectively about it to others. The 'moderate case' involves communicative harms but no cognitive harm; the person understands the experience but, in the absence of common language to name or describe it, cannot communicate about it to others. We can imagine a service worker prior to the publication of *The Managed Heart* who recognizes the effort that they put into regulating their

emotions to ensure a pleasant experience for customers as labour, but cannot make this intelligible to her friends, family, and employers who do not work in such roles.

IV. Hermeneutical disarmament

In the cases that Fricker (2007, 148–51) discusses, there was a hermeneutical lacuna because a term that would name the relevant experience had never previously existed. I am interested here in a different phenomenon; a hermeneutical lacuna may emerge because an extant linguistic resource undergoes semantic change and so ceases to refer to the phenomenon to which it originally referred. A term that could previously have been used to understand or communicate some phenomenon is no longer suitable for this purpose, because it does not have the same meaning as it did before.

I define hermeneutical disarmament as:

> the process by which a person is rendered less able to understand or communicate experiences, ideas, and other phenomena as a result of semantic change to the linguistic term (word or phrase) that could previously have been deployed for these purposes.

Semantic change alters the meaning of those terms that name relevant phenomena. Prior to such semantic change, these terms enable us to understand and communicate about the relevant experiences and ideas. When a term changes its meaning, it no longer refers to the phenomenon that it referred to previously, and so no longer assists us in understanding or communicating the phenomenon in question. Hence, semantic change can remove the linguistic resources that one could previously use to make sense of or communicate about some aspect of the world. That is, semantic change creates a hermeneutical lacuna where one did not previously exist. Hermeneutical disarmament occurs whenever semantic change entails that some linguistic resource can no longer be used as effectively to understand or communicate about some phenomenon, and no similarly effective term is available to the speaker.

Following Goetze's distinction, hermeneutical disarmament requires some communicative harm (whereby semantic change renders a person less able to communicate some phenomenon) and/or some cognitive harm (whereby semantic change renders a person less able to understand some phenomenon). In the following section, I explore how these harms can be engendered by semantic change.

V. The harms of hermeneutical disarmament

I use the term *harm* to refer to a setback to a person's interests.[3] A person suffers cognitive harm when they are rendered less able to understand some phenomenon that it is in their interests to understand and suffers communicative harm when they are rendered less able to communicate about some phenomenon about which it is in their interests to communicate. Hermeneutical disarmament need not involve wrongdoing, although I consider some normative implications in Section VIII.

On one hand, semantic change can inflict communicative harms. Even when an individual understands some phenomenon, they might find that semantic change has removed the terms that would otherwise have enabled them to make this intelligible to others. While many libertarian socialists understand the ideology perfectly well, they typically cannot use the term *libertarian* to communicate about it (in English) because this term no longer refers to libertarian socialism. The term *libertarian socialist* is not known sufficiently widely for it to serve much purpose in communicating to a generalist audience. Hence, semantic change to the term *libertarian* has imposed communicative harms on persons who may desire to communicate about libertarian socialism. Similarly, a person who tries to use the term *woke* to communicate about alertness to racist injustice will simply fail to communicate what they intend to communicate because *woke* no longer means this, and no extant term can communicate quite what African-American speakers in the mid-1900s communicated with this term.

Hermeneutical disarmament also occurs when semantic change imposes cognitive harms, hindering a person in understanding some phenomenon. In some cases, simply naming some phenomenon assists people in understanding it by drawing attention to existence of this phenomenon. This is plausibly what happened when Hochschild (2012: 197–200) gave a name, *emotional labour*, to an experience that was previously 'invisible'. The act of naming this phenomenon went a long way to helping people to understand it just by showing that it exists. If the term *emotional labour* is diluted to the extent that it no longer refers to this phenomenon, then we would expect that knowledge of this phenomenon would diminish.

In many cases, however, linguistic resources help us to understand some phenomenon in one way rather than another.[4] The terms that we use

[3] I follow Joel Feinberg's (1987: 33–6) definition here, except that I take harm to be any setback to a person's interests, so that harm need not involve wrongdoing. See also Judith Jarvis Thomson (1986: 383).

[4] Ishani Maitra (2018: 348) describes '"Eureka!" moments', when one comes across a term for some experience that presents it especially well and illuminates our understanding of it, because it so closely fits how the experience feels to us. An illustrative example is *skin hunger*, the feelings that develop as a result of insufficient interpersonal touch. Labelling this as a kind of *hunger*, an

imply relationships between different concepts. When a person uses one term to understand or communicate, they do so in a way that positions the relevant phenomenon in relation to other concepts. A particular word or phrase may cause persons to understand some phenomenon in a particular way, where a different term would not, by framing the phenomenon in relation to other concepts (Chalmers 2020: 10–2). This is one reason that, as Ishani Maitra (2018: 354) argues, 'acquiring a suitable label [for some experience] can itself be illuminating'. The term used can enhance our understanding of the phenomenon by connecting it to other familiar concepts.[5]

Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (2017: 3) claims that:

> Our concepts both describe the first-order phenomenology of our experiences *and* assign them a place in the grand scheme of things. In so doing, our concepts designate certain valuations of those experiences…as appropriate or inappropriate…An experience's phenomenology (partly) determines where it fits in the grand scheme of things. But its assigned place can also affect its phenomenology.

According to Romdenh-Romluc, the concepts that we use for our experiences identify relationships between these experiences and other concepts, which in turn can influence our interpretation of these experiences. For example, the term *postnatal depression* refers to a set of psychological responses and classifies this as a *medical condition*. This in turn affects a person's experience of these symptoms. *Postnatal depression* provides persons with a way to understand their experience as a medical condition, and so combat the feelings of guilt that they might otherwise experience (Romdenh-Romluc 2017: 3).

This coheres with Brownmiller's (1999: 182) telling of Sandford's story; upon learning the term *postpartum depression* and so conceptualizing her experience as a medical condition, Sanford begins to overcome the feelings of guilt that developed when she understood it as a personal failing. Sanford had some understanding of her experience before encountering the term *postpartum depression*; she knew how she was feeling and how this impacted her life. However, she had a deficient understanding of what was happening to her, interpreting it as a personal failing. As Maitra (2018: 347) notes, 'she couldn't describe her experience in a way that would help explain why she wasn't solely to blame for her behavior'. The term *postpartum depression* enabled her to instead understand this as connected to the concept *medical condition*, a more appropriate interpretive framework.

appetite that is physical and embodied, while emphasizing that part of what is missed is the tactile experience of another person's *skin*, can enhance a person's understanding of what this experience is like. The specific words used help us to understand the phenomenon in a particular way. I am grateful to Robbie Arrell for this example.

[5]Ethan Nowak (2020) presents a similar view in a different context, arguing that the wholesale loss of a language imposes illocutionary silencing because uttering a word in one language often achieves something that would not be possible by uttering the translation of this word in a different language.

Libertarian historically identified opposition to the State and private property with freedom, in part due to its etymological relation to *liberty*. Indeed, some libertarian socialists prefer the term *libertarian* to *anarchist* exactly because *libertarian* positions these commitments in relation to liberty, while *anarchist* positions them in relation to disorder or the absence of control (Goodway 2006: 4; Marshall 2008: xiii). Similarly, *woke* presents alertness to racial injustice as 'waking up', not only as an awareness of some feature of social relationships, but as both a major shift in a person's interpretive perspective on the world and an attitude of proactively responding to unjust systems. It does so by presenting alertness to racial injustice through the metaphor of becoming conscious.

There are therefore two ways in which a hermeneutical lacuna might inhibit a person's understanding of some phenomenon, imposing cognitive harm. First, in the absence of a name for some phenomenon, some people will not realize that there is any phenomenon to be interpreted in the first place. Secondly, the absence of a specific term for some phenomenon renders certain ways of interpreting the phenomenon unavailable, so people draw instead on suboptimal interpretive frameworks and maintain an impaired understanding of it.

The following examples illustrate and distinguish the different ways in which semantic change might impose cognitive harms, taking *emotional labour* as the example.

No Understanding. Alice does not perform emotional labour, given her career path. It has never occurred to her that many service workers regulate their own emotions to provide an enjoyable environment for customers, so she has no understanding of the phenomenon of emotional labour. She has heard the term *emotional labour* but thinks that this refers generally to any work that is disproportionately performed by women and typically overlooked. Alice's girlfriend is a waiter and performs emotional labour (in the original sense). Alice cannot understand why her girlfriend is often stressed after work; this puts a strain on their relationship.

Bad Understanding. Bella works in a customer-facing role and performs emotional labour. Like Alice, Bella has heard the term *emotional labour*, but associates it with any tasks typically performed by women. Bella recognises that she struggles to remain friendly when customers are rude towards her. However, in the absence of a concept of *emotional labour*, she interprets her behaviour as *good manners* rather than as a form of work and the difficulty she encounters as *being ill-suited to the job*. As a result, she blames herself and misses out on opportunities to work with her colleagues to have this activity recognised and compensated appropriately.

Lost Understanding.[6] Charlie used to have a strong understanding of emotional labour, recognising this as a form of skilled labour. Many years later, and in a new

[6]For similar examples, see Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett (2013: 1092) and Goetze (2018: 82).

> workplace, he finds that none of his colleagues use the term *emotional labour* to refer to its original meaning. They insist that *emotional labour* actually refers to any work that is disproportionately performed by women. He is influenced by his current colleagues and ceases to use the term *emotional labour*. While he continues to talk about the effort he exerts to manage his own emotions around customers, he loses his grasp on this activity as a distinct form of *labour* and ceases to see it as something that he has in common with service workers in other sectors.

Alice, Bella, and Charlie suffer cognitive harms. As a result of this semantic change to *emotional labour*, Alice and Bella never learn the term *emotional labour* as this applies to its original meaning. While Charlie deployed the term effectively in the past, he ceases to use it and so loses some of his understanding of the corresponding phenomenon. Bella and Charlie have some understanding of emotional labour, but this is flawed given the suboptimal interpretive resources available to them.

In summary, hermeneutical disarmament occurs when a person suffers cognitive and/or communicative harms as a result of semantic change to a word or phrase that could previously have been deployed to understand or communicate some phenomenon.

While I have focused on three main examples, hermeneutical disarmament is widespread. Consider *involuntary celibate* and *incel*.[7] Alana, who coined these terms, recently claimed that: 'The word used to mean anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex or who hadn't had a relationship in a long time. *But we can't call it that anymore*' (Taylor 2018, emphasis mine). This is because it now refers to a misogynist man or boy who blames women and some men for their inability to attract a sexual partner (Kassam 2018; Taylor 2018; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020). In Section II, I noted Haslam's concern that vertical concept creep to *depression* might entail that persons suffering from clinical depression struggle to make the extent of their suffering understood. While *body positivity* initially referred to a movement 'to promote the radical acceptance of marginalised bodies' and fight discrimination against fat persons and certain other marginalized groups (Frazier and Mehdi 2021: 13–6), it is now often used to refer to a positive attitude to one's own body, which anyone might possess (Cwynar-Horta 2016; Rutter 2017; Frazier and Mehdi 2021: 16–19). *Gaslighting* is a useful term to describe a kind of abuse whereby a person is caused to doubt their own experiences and their understanding of reality (Sweet 2019: 851–5; Barnes 2023: 650–1; Klein, Li, and Wood 2023: 1–3; Kirk-Giannini 2023: 745–6, 759),[8] but recent use of this term to mean *lying* or *misleading* threatens to render this resource unavailable for naming the specific form of abuse (Rett 2022; Barnes 2023: 650–1; Stern and Brackett 2023).

[7] I am grateful to Natasha McKeever for discussion of this example.

[8] This meaning of *gaslight* can be traced to the 1938 play *Gas Light* (Hamilton 1939) and subsequent films (Klein, Li, and Wood 2023: 2).

In each of these cases, the terms cannot be used to refer in the same way with their original meaning, and no similarly effective term is available as a replacement.

However, most cases of semantic change do not cause hermeneutical disarmament because they do not make it more difficult for anyone to understand or communicate about the phenomenon in question, often because there are other appropriate terms available. I mentioned in Section II that *meat* originally referred to food in general rather than to edible animal flesh (Bloomfield 1983: 240). This semantic change did not lead to hermeneutical disarmament because we can just as easily use the word *food* in its place. *Bimbo* originally referred to a man and was used as a derogatory alternative to *fellow* or *chap* (Norri 1998: 281), implying that the referent is 'foolish' (Cresswell 2021). Semantic change to this term, which now refers derogatively to a young woman, did not cause hermeneutical disarmament because there is a range of alternative derogatory terms available. Finally, *mouse* was subject to semantic change when the term's meaning expanded to refer to a computer device in addition to some species of rodent when the former was invented (Blank 1999: 71). This semantic change did not cause hermeneutical disarmament because *mouse* can still be used just as easily to refer to the species of rodent. Semantic change only leads to hermeneutical disarmament when it deprives us of some term for a phenomenon in a way that causes communicative or cognitive harm, but most cases of semantic change do not inflict these harms.

VI. An objection

In cases of hermeneutical disarmament, semantic change removes one resource with which individuals might understand and/or communicate about the relevant phenomena. Typically, however, there are other terms that can serve the same purpose, or a person can describe the relevant phenomenon. While one can no longer use *woke* to convey alertness to injustice, one can instead think and communicate about 'alertness to injustice'. An employee can describe the effort that she puts into managing her own emotions to evoke a particular emotional response from customers without using the term *emotional labour*. The libertarian socialist can call themselves a *libertarian socialist* or else describe their view of private property, and little seems to be lost following semantic change to the term *libertarian*. If a person can name the relevant phenomenon with an alternative label or describe it, then semantic change does not leave them less able to understand or communicate about it. According to this objection, hermeneutical disarmament does not exist because semantic change does not impose cognitive or communicative harms.

However, there are cases in which using an alternative term or describing the phenomenon are not viable options. There are multiple reasons for this.

The first response builds on my comments in Section V. Different terms for the same phenomenon can present this phenomenon in different ways by indicating different conceptual relationships. When semantic change makes some term unavailable for understanding a particular phenomenon, alternative terms may fail to convey the same conceptual relationships. In such cases, semantic change inflicts the cognitive and communicative harms necessary for hermeneutical disarmament.

In the case of *woke*, for example, the phrase 'alert to racial injustice' appears to serve as an adequate description of the relevant phenomenon. However, *woke* captures something that 'alert to racial injustice' does not. 'Alert to racial injustice' does not convey this alertness as gaining consciousness or as a significant shift in a person's perspective on the world. Hence, it does not perform the interpretative and communicative tasks that *woke* could perform prior to this semantic change. In some cases, then, semantic change does cause hermeneutical disarmament, as persons are left unable to understand or communicate some phenomenon in quite the way that they could before.

Secondly, the objection overstates the availability of alternative terms that could be used when the original term is subjected to semantic change. Developing language to name phenomena is a significant task. It typically requires that a person or group recognizes that there is a lacuna in the existing linguistic resources and then identifies the concept for which they have no name. If this term is to be useful for communicating with others, it must be widely understood, which requires that it is disseminated (Chalmers 2020: 11). It is striking, for instance, that *sexual harassment* was coined in a process of consciousness-raising and very deliberate attempts to develop terminology to name this phenomenon (Brownmiller 1999: 280–5; Fricker 2007: 150). Similarly, Hochschild (2012: 14–7) coined *emotional labour* after extensive fieldwork and disseminated this term by writing a ground-breaking scholarly book.

Linguistic resources can be scarce; coining and disseminating these terms often requires time and labour. Even when some term has been coined and disseminated without extensive work, there is a finite stock of suitable terms for certain phenomena. Some terms are more evocative, and so easier to disseminate, or are more suitable as a label for the relevant phenomenon for the reasons explored above.[9] When one term is lost to semantic change, there may not be an alternative term for the same phenomenon that implies the same conceptual relationships and is as easy to disseminate. Hence, it is far from clear that persons can respond to semantic change by deploying some alternative term because we cannot take for granted the availability of such a term.

Thirdly, the objection holds that a speaker can describe the relevant phenomenon rather than deploying a specific term. Even if this is possible, it

[9]I am grateful to Robbie Arrell and Carl Fox for discussion of this point.

makes the speaker's attempts to communicate less efficient.[10] Communicating about a complex phenomenon without a widely understood term may require a detailed description. In some cases, the speaker may not have the audience's attention for the time required to convey this. Hence, a speaker might be communicatively harmed in real-world contexts even if they (in principle) retain the ability to communicate about some phenomenon.

For example, it might seem that a libertarian socialist is not communicatively harmed by semantic change to *libertarian*; they can describe their beliefs or arguments without using this term. However, there are contexts in which a sufficiently informative description of these beliefs is too lengthy to maintain an audience's attention, especially in fast-paced and saturated social media environments. Hence, semantic change to *libertarian* imposes communicative harms to the speaker even though they can describe their beliefs without this term. Prior to this semantic change, a libertarian socialist could succinctly and efficiently communicate their view with the (more) widely understood term *libertarian*, something that they can no longer achieve.

Fourthly, the objection only applies when a potential speaker already understands the relevant phenomenon and finds that they must communicate it using alternative terminology in light of semantic change. However, I have argued that hermeneutical disarmament involves cognitive harms as well as communicative harms. Some persons cannot use alternative terms or describe the concept because they never learn of the relevant concept in the first place.

In summary, the possibilities of using alternative terms or describing the phenomenon in question do not establish that semantic change never imposes cognitive or communicative harms.

VII. Hermeneutical disarmament as political strategy

I now turn to developing a taxonomy of variations of hermeneutical disarmament. The first variation is that the semantic change underlying hermeneutical disarmament might be intentional or unintentional.[11]

In many cases, hermeneutical disarmament and the semantic change from which it follows are not the result of deliberate attempts to change a term's meaning. They are cases of what Fricker (2007: 152–3) calls 'epistemic bad luck' rather than wrongdoing. This provides the first entry in the taxonomy.

Unintentional semantic change: The semantic change that causes hermeneutical disarmament is not intended by those who effect the semantic change.

[10] I am grateful to Chris Bennett for suggesting this.

[11] I am grateful to Robbie Arrell, Charlie Crerar, and two anonymous reviewers for raising this point.

Change to the meaning of *emotional labour*, for example, does not result from any deliberate attempt to change the meaning of the term. It is more likely a result of speakers (especially, influential speakers) inadvertently using *emotional labour* in a way that is related to but distinct from the original meaning of this term. Plausibly, this is the case for many of the other instances of hermeneutical disarmament I identified earlier, such as *depression* and *gaslighting*.

However, some cases of hermeneutical disarmament result from intentional semantic change. *Libertarian* presents a particularly clear case of this. Murray Rothbard (2007, 83), a right-libertarian, writes:

> One gratifying aspect of our rise to some prominence is that, for the first time in my memory, we, 'our side,' had captured a crucial word from the enemy. Other words, such as 'liberal,' had been originally identified with laissez-faire libertarians, but had been captured by left-wing statists, forcing us in the 1940s to call ourselves rather feebly 'true' or 'classical' liberals. 'Libertarians,' in contrast, had long been simply a polite word for left-wing anarchists, that is for anti-private property anarchists, either of the communist or syndicalist variety. But now we had taken it over.[12]

Libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin (1988: 154–5) concurs, charging that *libertarian* was 'appropriated' by right-libertarians. Where it previously signified opposition to private property and capitalism, *libertarian* now signifies support for extensive private property rights. *Appropriate* is an instructive description; a group deliberately uses an existing term with a new meaning with the aim of changing the meaning of that term so that it serves their purposes. Recent semantic change to *woke* also fits this pattern, if right-wing speakers used *woke* in a deliberate attempt to change its meaning.

These cases illustrate hermeneutical disarmament as a political strategy. Individuals and groups might intentionally effect semantic change to acquire a useful term to themselves[13] and/or to impose some disadvantage on those they perceive to be political or ideological rivals. There are two things that a person or group might intend here and these map onto two kinds of hermeneutical disarmament. I take these in turn.

First, intentional semantic change provides a term for the group in question to better understand and communicate about some phenomenon. The motive in these cases is to acquire a useful term, without necessarily intending to deprive anyone else of a useful term. In appropriating *libertarian*, right-libertarians acquired a new term for their beliefs with the attendant advantages of this.

> **Intentional semantic change:** The people or groups who effect semantic change intend this semantic change. They may or may not intend to impose cognitive or

[12]As Rothbard notes, right-libertarians have been negatively impacted by semantic change; *liberal* previously referred to right-libertarianism and now signifies support for a welfare state, at least in US English (Chodorov 1980: 206; Rothbard 2006: 15; 2007: 83).

[13]Herman Cappelen (2018: 132–4) and Sterken (2020) discuss this kind of manoeuvre.

communicative harms on people who would benefit from using the term in its original sense. The hermeneutical disarmament itself is not necessarily intended.

Secondly, a group might appropriate a term with the intention of preventing others from using it. In these cases, the aim is not (only) to acquire a new term to better understand and communicate about some phenomenon, but to deprive others, especially one's political or ideological rivals, of a useful term. Rothbard's (2007: 83) comments are perhaps indicative of this; he arguably celebrates that his ideological allies deprived libertarian socialists of a 'crucial word' for their views. Understood this way, Rothbard is triumphant not just because he acquired a useful term for his political beliefs, but because it deprived those he perceived as his ideological rivals of useful terminology for their own anti-private-property views. Given the harms that can occur when semantic change deprives one of a useful term, some groups or movements find success in imposing hermeneutical disarmament onto their ideological rivals, effecting semantic change to deprive these rivals of extant hermeneutic resources. This instantiates a third kind of hermeneutical disarmament.

Intentional hermeneutical disarmament: The people or groups who effect semantic change intend to impose cognitive or communicative harms on people who benefit from using the term in its original sense. The hermeneutical disarmament itself is intended.

VIII. Normative implications

With this in place, it is instructive to consider some normative implications of hermeneutical disarmament.

I have argued that hermeneutical disarmament involves genuine harms, depriving persons of interpretive resources that would otherwise assist them in understanding and/or communicating in a way that is in their interests. Insofar as inflicting unnecessary harm on others is typically wrong, one might think that there is a *prima facie* moral reason to avoid contributing to hermeneutical disarmament.

In cases of unintentional semantic change, this is complex because speakers are not aware that they contribute to hermeneutical disarmament. Nevertheless, perhaps attention to hermeneutical disarmament yields the following normative consideration. Individuals, especially those with significant platform, have a reason to take into account the impact that innovative use of language can have on the ability of others to understand and communicate. When one uses a term in a manner that does not accord with its original meaning, one contributes to a set of speech acts that, collectively, carry a risk of making others less able to understand and communicate about the world in a way that would benefit them. In many cases, the benefits of innovative language use are worth the risks. However, my proposal is that this seemingly

innocuous speech can, collectively, carry a risk. This plausibly provides a reason to avoid performing speech acts, such as coining a new definition for an existing term in a widely read publication, that are likely to effect semantic change to those terms that are useful for persons understanding and communicating about specific phenomena. It may also supply a defeasible reason against *intentionally* seeking to change the meaning of existing terms, where this can lead to hermeneutical disarmament. On this view, an intentional political strategy of imposing hermeneutical disarmament onto others is *prima facie* wrong.

This is too quick, however. Rachel Sterken (2020, 417–8) argues that:

> having certain word-meaning pairs in circulation in a population of speakers, at a particular time, in a particular social-historical mileu can be bad. Such word-meaning pairs might cause injustice or disadvantage, stifle discourse, deliberation and inquiry, or stall social progress…speakers sometimes have good reasons to and should have a strong interest in *eliminating* existing word-meaning pairs from circulation.

While semantic change can impose cognitive and communicative harms, this does not show that intentional semantic change is wrong, even when it results in hermeneutical disarmament.[14] I propose that intentional semantic change, and even intentional hermeneutical disarmament, is justified when it eliminates those terms that are, in virtue of their meaning, especially likely to be utilized in inflicting unjust harm. I illustrate this with two examples that relate to equal rights for LGBT+ persons.

First, *marriage* was previously the legal union of one man and one woman,[15] but now refers to a legal union of two persons. This semantic change is beneficial (Sterken 2020: 417); where the previous definition excluded same-sex couples, the new definition enables same-sex couples to have their relationships recognized as marriage, a term which has 'associations…to celebration, love, commitment, and so on' (Cappelen 2018: 122). Hence, semantic change to *marriage* contributed to 'social justice' (Chalmers 2020: 11) insofar as it enables same-sex couples to accurately name their relationships in the same way as different-sex couples, with all the social recognition and esteem that comes with being *married*.[16]

This semantic change causes hermeneutical disarmament. Consider a person who believes that a romantic union between one man and one woman is distinctively valuable. Previously, this person could easily communicate

[14] I am grateful to Anna Klieber and Christina Nick for discussion of this point.

[15] Strictly speaking, *marriage* was defined as a legal union of one man or boy with one woman or girl, as it includes alarmingly numerous instances of child marriage (Siddiqi and Greene 2022).

[16] *Marriage* was also redefined in many countries in the late 20th century when marital rape was recognised in law (Garcia 2023: 5). Prior to this, *marriage* referred to a legal union in which a woman had no right to refuse sex with her husband. For a discussion of this, see Katharine Jenkins (2020).

their worldview using the term *marriage*, which referred to an exclusively heterosexual union and presented this as a uniquely valuable institution.[17] Following semantic change to *marriage*, this term no longer serves their purposes. While *marriage* still conveys a serious commitment that commands social esteem, it now refers to a commitment that is shared by both different-sex and same-sex couples. The person in question has lost a convenient way to refer to a relationship that is, as they see it, distinctively valuable and exclusively heterosexual.[18]

Secondly, Sterken (2020: 417) identifies slurs as a kind of term that we have good reason to eliminate. Consider *queer*. Simplifying considerably, *queer* has functioned as a slur against LGBT+ individuals, drawing on an older meaning of *queer* as 'strange' to frame being LGBT+ as wrong or disgusting because different or unknown. *Queer* is now just as likely to refer to neutrally to sexual and gender minorities (Barker and Scheele 2016; Jones 2023). While *queer* is still used as a slur, continued semantic change might impose communicative harms on malicious speakers by depriving them of a term that presents LGBT+ persons as wrong or disgusting in virtue of being LGBT+.

In my view, the hermeneutical disarmament depicted in these cases is positive. It is deeply regrettable for there to be widely understood terms that refer to a relationship that is distinctively valuable in virtue of being exclusively heterosexual or to LGBT+ persons a negative way. Hermeneutical disarmament that deprives speakers of these terms serves a worthwhile function.

Determining the intentions of communities and social movements is complex but, depending on the relevant intentions of those who effected semantic change to *marriage* and *queer*, these may be illustrative cases of a justified political strategy of intentional semantic change. LGBT+ persons acquire terms to name committed romantic relationships and to name the community of which they are a part. Additionally, the hermeneutical disarmament imposed onto those who oppose equal rights plausibly hinders the goals of individuals seeking to erode equal rights for LGBT+ persons. If such changes were to occur intentionally, the resulting hermeneutical disarmament would constitute an effective and, in my view legitimate, political strategy.

An account of when it is justified to intentionally effect semantic change that imposes cognitive and/or communicative harms onto others is outside the scope of this paper. However, these examples indicate one plausible consideration. Whether it is permissible to intentionally effect semantic change is determined in part by the impact that this has on how the relevant term can be used. Semantic change to *emotional labour* and *woke*, for example, plausibly

[17] Use of the term *marriage* by natural law theorists provides examples of this (Finnis 1993–1994: 1066–9; 2008; Lee and George 1997: 143–5).

[18] Use of the term *biblical marriage* is plausibly an attempt to pick out this concept when *marriage* no longer serves the relevant communicative purpose. For examples, see Becky Bratu (2012) and James Hudnut-Beumler (2015).

hinders individuals in securing just outcomes by making it more difficult to understand and communicate about work they perform and a self-protective attitude towards racist injustice, respectively. This counts against hermeneutical disarmament in these cases and gives influential speakers a reason to be wary of introducing new meanings for these terms. Semantic change to *marriage* and *queer*, in contrast, removes linguistic resources that were especially suited to communicating a worldview that is antagonistic towards LGBT+ persons, a persecuted minority group. This counts in favour of hermeneutical disarmament in these cases. The value of hermeneutical disarmament depends in part on what it prevents persons from understanding or communicating.

With this in place, we can make the following distinction:

> **Hermeneutical disarmament of suitable resources:** Hermeneutical disarmament deprives persons of a term that they could reliably deploy to achieve ethically valuable goals.

> **Hermeneutical disarmament of deficient resources:** Hermeneutical disarmament deprives persons of a term that they could reliably use to achieve ethically dubious goals.

As Sterken (2020: 417–8) points out, the presence of 'certain word-meaning pairs' can have ethically detrimental consequences as well as ethically valuable consequences. So, it is helpful to distinguish hermeneutical disarmament that deprives persons of linguistic resources that enable them to identify and oppose injustice from that which deprives persons of linguistic resources that enable them to incite injustice against others or pursue other ethically dubious goals. My distinction between hermeneutical disarmament of suitable and deficient resources is formal; I do not specify which goals are ethical or unethical here. So, people will disagree about what counts as hermeneutical disarmament of a suitable or deficient resource, depending on the ethical beliefs to which they subscribe.

However, some cases of hermeneutical disarmament of suitable resources nevertheless promote just goals. I call these cases *ambivalent*.

> **Ambivalent hermeneutical disarmament:** Hermeneutical disarmament deprives people of a term that they could reliably deploy to achieve ethically valuable goals and provides a new meaning for the term that can reliably be deployed to achieve (other) ethically valuable goals.

In these cases, hermeneutical disarmament hinders legitimate goals in one respect while resolving a problematic hermeneutical lacuna in another. Consider *emotional labour*. I have argued that semantic change to this term imposes hermeneutical disarmament. However, it also resolves an extant

hermeneutical lacuna.[19] Insofar as the meaning of *emotional labour* has expanded to encompass any onerous tasks that are disproportionately performed by women and generally unrecognized, individuals who perform these tasks now have a term with which to name, understand, and communicate about this kind of work and its associated injustices. So, this is plausibly an ambivalent case of hermeneutical disarmament. As a result of semantic change, the worker who is required to manage their own emotional state to influence the emotions of others is subjected to hermeneutical disarmament, but a person who engages in other kinds of unrecognized work finds that a hermeneutical lacuna is resolved.

There are advantages and disadvantages to semantic change in these cases because some legitimate goals are frustrated while some legitimate goals are assisted. Nevertheless, I propose that we should typically avoid ambivalent hermeneutical disarmament, whether deliberate or unintentional.

Ambivalent hermeneutical disarmament resolves an existing hermeneutical lacuna but carries the cost of depriving others of a useful term that assists them in pursuing legitimate goals. A hermeneutical lacuna can be resolved by appropriating an existing term for the relevant phenomenon or by developing a new term. So, the imposition of hermeneutical disarmament is typically not necessary to resolve an existing hermeneutical lacuna. Appropriating an existing term risks imposing the harms associated with hermeneutical disarmament, whereas coining a new term does not. Therefore, it is preferable to develop a new term to resolve an existing hermeneutical lacuna rather than to appropriate a term that is currently used to understand and communicate about a different phenomenon in service of ethically laudable goals.

In the *emotional labour* case, the absence of a term for emotionally onerous tasks disproportionately performed by women could have been resolved by developing a new term rather than appropriating *emotional labour*. This semantic change unnecessarily imposes harms onto those who can no longer deploy the term *emotional labour* according to its original meaning. We might say that resolving the hermeneutical lacuna in this way was inefficient; it imposes costs on people who benefit from understanding and communicating about emotional labour in the original sense, where developing a new term would not impose such costs. This is a reason to oppose ambivalent hermeneutical disarmament.

IX. Hermeneutical disarmament and hermeneutical injustice

I close with some comments connecting hermeneutical disarmament and hermeneutical injustice. Fricker is primarily concerned with those cases

[19]I am grateful to Sophie Goddard and an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

in which the presence of a hermeneutical lacuna constitutes an injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is the injustice that a person suffers when 'some significant area of one's social experience [is] obscured from collective understanding' because the interpretive resources for understanding this experience are not widely known and they are not widely known as a consequence of the person's 'membership of a socially powerless group' (Fricker 2007: 154–5). For instance, Sanford could not properly understand her experience because the term *postpartum depression* was not sufficiently widely known, and the reason for this is that postpartum depression primarily affects women, a socially marginalized group. According to Fricker, this constitutes an injustice because the set of available interpretive resources that enable us to understand our experiences are biased against Sanford; her experiences are obscured *because she is a woman*.

While hermeneutical disarmament does not necessarily constitute hermeneutical injustice, there is an important link. Fricker describes a process by which persons are rendered unable to effectively understand or communicate some feature of the social world because the required interpretive resources do not exist or are not understood by the required audience. The relevant interpretive resources are sometimes coined and disseminated, resolving the hermeneutical lacuna. Attention to hermeneutical disarmament reveals that semantic change threatens to undermine these interpretive resources, so the victory in overcoming hermeneutical injustice is never entirely secure. This is most obvious in the case of *emotional labour*. Here, there existed a hermeneutical lacuna that was resolved when Hochschild coined and disseminated *emotional labour*. Insofar as women are more likely than men to work in roles that involve emotional labour (Hochschild 2012: 11–2, 162–84), it is plausible that the initial absence of this term constituted a hermeneutical injustice. However, semantic change to this term threatens to eliminate it as an interpretive resource, returning those who have a special interest in understanding and communicating about this phenomenon to the state that they were in prior to Hochschild coining *emotional labour*. While the existing literature on hermeneutical injustice focuses on the development of new terms to overcome a hermeneutical lacuna that always existed, hermeneutical disarmament can serve to reinstate hermeneutical injustices long thought to be resolved.

There is a second important difference between hermeneutical disarmament and hermeneutical injustice as Fricker elucidates the concept. Fricker (2007: 152–6) presents hermeneutical injustice in the form of hermeneutical lacunae that result from systemic social structures, such as the historical exclusion of women from 'journalism, politics, academia, and law', those professions that disproportionately influence which linguistic resources are available to help people to understand and communicate about the world. Hermeneutical disarmament illustrates that the relevant cognitive and communicative

harms can result from something other than systemic social forces or mere bad luck. Instead, hermeneutical lacunae and the related harms can result from negligent or deliberate collective action by persons or groups.[20]

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