Raising the Tone:
Definition, Bullshit, and the Definition of Bullshit

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> I always love that kind of argument. The contrary of a thing isn't
> the contrary; oh, dear me, no! It's the thing itself, but as it *truly*
> is. Ask any die-hard what conservatism is; he'll tell you that it's
> *true* socialism. And the brewers' trade papers: they're full of arti-
> cles about the beauty of true temperance. Ordinary temperance is
> just gross refusal to drink; but true temperance, *true* temperance is
> something much more refined. True temperance is a bottle of claret
> with each meal and three double whiskies after dinner. (Huxley,
> 1936, pp. 122 f.).

Bullshit is not the only sort of deceptive talk. Spurious definitions, such
as those quoted above, are another important variety of bad reasoning. This
paper will describe some of these problematic tactics, and show how Harry
Frankfurt's treatment of bullshit may be extended to analyze their underlying
causes. Finally, I will deploy this new account of definition to assess whether
Frankfurt's definition of bullshit is itself legitimate.

1 Semantic negligence

Frankfurt's principal contribution to the study of bullshit is the distinction he
draws between the bullshitter and the liar. Whereas the liar represents as true
something he believes to be false, the bullshitter represents something as true
when he neither knows nor cares whether it is true or false (Frankfurt, 1986,
p. 130). As Frankfurt amply demonstrates, this indifference is much of what
we find most objectionable about bullshit. The liar has a vested interest in the
institution of truth-telling, albeit a parasitical one: he hopes that his falsehoods
will be accepted as true. The bullshitter may also hope to be believed, but he
himself is not much bothered whether what he says is true, hence his disregard
for the truth is of a deeper and potentially more pernicious character.

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Of course, our outrage is conditioned on our being the objects of a deception. When we know what the bullshitter is up to we can be much more indulgent. As the comic novelist Terry Pratchett observes of two of his characters, 'they believed in bullshit and were the type to admire it when it was delivered with panache. There's a kind of big, outdoor sort of man who's got no patience at all with prevaricators and fibbers, but will applaud any man who can tell an outrageous whopper with a gleam in his eye' (Pratchett, 2005, pp. 280 f.). The gleam in the eye is essential here: it is this complicity between bullshitter and audience which constitutes the 'bull session' (Frankfurt, 1986, p. 126). Only when it escapes from the bull session and masquerades as regular assertion is bullshit deceptive; however, the insidious nature of this deception degrades the commitment to truth upon which public discourse depends.

One way of characterizing Frankfurt's innovation is as the introduction of a new category of linguistic misbehaviour, which we might call 'semantic negligence'. It is this concept which enables him to distinguish the bullshitter from the liar. In British and American common law, a civil claim for negligence arises when the defendant has a duty of care to the plaintiff which he neglects to exercise, thereby harming the plaintiff. Here the deceptive bullshitter has a duty to tell the truth; neglecting this duty harms his audience if they come to believe his false statements. His indifference as to the truth value of his statements, that is whether they are true or false, a meaning-related or semantic property, may thus be termed semantic negligence. Lying involves a higher degree of culpability, since the liar convinces his audience of falsehoods intentionally, not just foreseeably. Frankfurt's insight is that conventional accounts of deception provide no middle ground between this higher level of culpability and complete innocence, and therefore no room for many familiar forms of deceit, such as bullshit. My contention is that semantic negligence may arise with respect to features of meaning other than truth value, and as such may be used to disentangle a wide variety of deceptive dialectical practices. Furthermore, semantic negligence is itself a matter of degree. The legal understanding of negligence acknowledges that the associated culpability can range from inadvertence to willful blindness. We may generalize Frankfurt's position further by recognizing that some instances of semantic negligence are worse than others. In assessing the gravity of semantic negligence we should ask questions such as 'How foreseeable was it that deception would arise?' and 'How much at fault is the speaker in not foreseeing this?'.

2   A caricature history of semantics

My argument will draw on themes from the philosophy of language, chiefly the pioneering German logician Gottlob Frege's disambiguation of the naïve understanding of 'meaning'. In what may be considered the primal moment of analytic philosophy, Frege drew a threefold distinction between *Sinn*, *Bedeutung* and *Färbung*, or sense, reference and tone. The sense of a term is what we understand if we understand what the word means. The reference, however, is

the thing which the word picks out. Hence, as Frege explains, 'a proper name (word, sign, combination of signs, expression) *expresses* its sense, [but] *stands for* or *designates* its reference. By employing a sign we express its sense and designate its reference' (Frege, 1892, p. 156). For example, the sense of 'the longest river in the world' is just what we understand by the words in this phrase. Clearly, having that understanding does not depend on knowing what the reference is (the River Nile, all 4000 miles of it), let alone on having seen the river in question. The last of Frege's three divisions, tone, is the least familiar: it may be defined as that aspect of the meaning of an expression that is irrelevant to the truth value of any sentence in which it may occur. In languages with large vocabularies, like English, it is often possible to restate a phrase using different words, but preserving both sense and reference. Continuing with the earlier example, consider 'Earth's lengthiest natural watercourse'. The change here is one of tone.

Frege's distinction between sense and reference was not an entirely original one. Many earlier philosophers, perhaps as early as Aristotle, drew similar distinctions between these aspects of the meaning of a word or expression. In this context the terminology 'intension' and 'extension' is often used instead of sense and reference respectively. With proper nouns, and definite descriptions, like the example in the last paragraph, the terminology coincides exactly. With other sorts of noun, 'concept nouns' as Frege calls them, sense and intension have the same meaning, but the reference is to the concept under which the members of the extension fall. The value of distinguishing between the reference and extension of a concept noun is most apparent when talking about short-lived or rapidly propagating things. Expressions such as 'snowflake', 'mayfly' or 'web page' have constantly changing extensions, but more or less fixed references. By concentrating on reference rather than extension, we can disregard superficial changes of this kind. Frege's approach was innovative in several respects, most of which go beyond the scope of this article, and has had a profound influence on subsequent philosophy. A crucial insight of Frege's is that sense cannot be reduced to reference: different terms can have the same reference, but different senses. In his well-known example, 'the evening star' and 'the morning star' both refer to the same object, the planet Venus, although the senses of these phrases are clearly distinct. Indeed, it was a genuine scientific discovery in the ancient world when it was realized that these two familiar sights were one and the same. Without the distinction between sense and reference we would be unable to describe this discovery.

Frege's formalizing project required the suppression of tone: 'separating a thought from its trappings' as he puts it (Frege, 1897, p. 239). Tone is the part of meaning from which we must abstract before logical analysis can begin. This abstraction is essential to the representation of inference in terms of logical form—that is, formal logic. For example, 'and' and 'but' are formalized in the same way, despite their difference in tone. (Consider 'He is a patriot *and* supports the government' *versus* 'He is a patriot *but* supports the government'.) This is entirely appropriate for the logic of mathematics, which was Frege's primary concern, since tone is seldom of significance in mathematical reasoning.

What is nuanced in the master can become dogmatic in the pupils. Many of Frege's successors sought to extend tone-free logical analysis to natural language. Amongst more popular writers this idealism could become extremism. Consider, for example, the psychologist Robert Thouless's claim that '[w]e must look forward to the day when the thinking about political and international affairs will be as unemotional and as scientific as that about the properties of numbers or the atomic weights of elements' (Thouless, 1930, p. 15). Whereas many logicians attempt to treat the terms of natural language as though they were tonally neutral, Thouless hopes to eliminate altogether '[s]uch words as "progress", "liberty", "democratic", "totalitarian", "reactionary", "liberal", "freedom", . . . ' (*ibid.*). This Orwellian scenario exhibits the limitations of Frege's programme. Although enormously successful in the formalization of technical language, and an inescapable foundation for any study of natural usage, it has little to say about tonal properties which play a substantial part in ordinary discourse. Thouless's procrustean fantasy of excising from our language what our logic cannot analyze is a desperate remedy diametrically opposed to the real solution: taking tone seriously. Further progress in the study of natural argumentation will require us to rehabilitate this repressed element. We shall see that this project is foreshadowed in the Yale ethicist Charles Stevenson's account of what he called persuasive definition.

3   Persuasive definition

As introduced by Stevenson, a persuasive definition (PD) of a term 'purport[s] . . . to alter the descriptive meaning of the term . . . but . . . *not* make any substantial change in the term's emotive meaning' (Stevenson, 1944, p. 210). Although he coined the terminology, Stevenson was not the first person to spot this phenomenon. Indeed he quotes the memorable attack on PD from Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* with which we began (Stevenson, 1944, p. 214). Stevenson also introduced the converse stratagem, persuasive quasi-definition (PQD), in which the emotive meaning of a term is altered without changing the descriptive meaning. When PD is discussed in logic textbooks it is usually treated as though it were invariably fallacious (Walton, 2005, p. 173). However, this betrays the hostility to tone we diagnosed in the last section. As Stevenson recognized, many cases of PD are much less objectionable: the difficulty is in drawing a principled distinction between harmless and malign instances of PD.

Stevenson's account of PD is couched in unfamiliar terms: 'descriptive' and 'emotive' meaning. These reflect his understanding of the meaning of an expression as a dispositional property of that expression, representing its potential to cause a psychological response in its hearer or utterer (Stevenson, 1944, p. 54). Descriptive and emotive meanings are then distinguished as provoking cognitive or emotive psychological responses respectively. Few if any modern philosophers would find this account even remotely congenial. Detailed criticism would be out of place here, although we can observe that the account is closely related to the emotivist theory of ethics, sometimes called the Boo/Hurrah Theory, on which

ethical terms, such as 'good', are merely expressions of an emotional attitude. That Stevenson's ethical and semantic theories have fallen out of fashion may explain the comparative neglect of PD. However, we shall see that this concept is independent of the theoretical context in which Stevenson articulated it.

Specifically, Stevenson's definition of PD may be restated in Fregean terms as changing the sense and/or reference of a term, while representing the tone as unchanged. Replacing the slippery distinction between emotive and descriptive meaning with that between sense, reference and tone has several advantages, besides the rescue of PD from its theoretically suspect origins. Firstly, tone is not *just* emotive. It can also, for example, be jargon-laden (with any number of different jargons), bureaucratic, politically correct, affectionate, poetic, boorish, metropolitan, circumspect, dated, or many other things. Secondly, a threefold distinction provides for a more fine-grained analysis of dubious definition-like activity than the simple binary of PD and PQD. Table 1 distinguishes the sixteen different possibilities that can arise from changing ($\star$) or keeping fixed ($-$) the sense, reference and tone of a term, as well as the term itself.

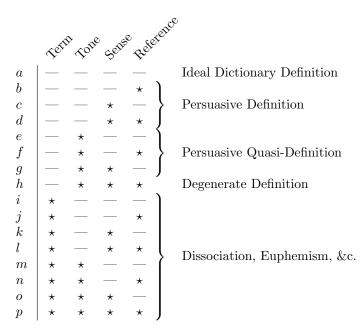|	Term	Tone	Sense	Reference	
a	$-$	$-$	$-$	$-$	Ideal Dictionary Definition
b	$-$	$-$	$-$	$\star$	
c	$-$	$-$	$\star$	$-$	Persuasive Definition
d	$-$	$-$	$\star$	$\star$	
e	$-$	$\star$	$-$	$-$	
f	$-$	$\star$	$-$	$\star$	Persuasive Quasi-Definition
g	$-$	$\star$	$\star$	$-$	
h	$-$	$\star$	$\star$	$\star$	Degenerate Definition
i	$\star$	$-$	$-$	$-$	
j	$\star$	$-$	$-$	$\star$	
k	$\star$	$-$	$\star$	$-$	
l	$\star$	$-$	$\star$	$\star$	
m	$\star$	$\star$	$-$	$-$	Dissociation, Euphemism, &c.
n	$\star$	$\star$	$-$	$\star$	
o	$\star$	$\star$	$\star$	$-$	
p	$\star$	$\star$	$\star$	$\star$	

Table 1: Options for Change

We can also begin to see how the concept of semantic negligence which we derived from Frankfurt's discussion of bullshit may be used to distinguish good from bad PD. The persuasive definer represents the tone of his redefined term as unchanged: this may or may not be negligent of him. He might be justified in believing the tone will not change, making his usage unobjectionable. He might realize that the tone will be dramatically affected by the redefinition,

in which case he is unlikely to expect his move to be accepted. Or he may be negligent as to whether the tone is faithfully preserved. This strategy is not overtly deceptive, since the tone could be unchanged. Rather, the speaker's lack of control over the tone, and indifference as to its eventual disposition, makes his utterance semantically negligent. In this respect it is analogous to bullshit, not lying.

In our discussion of semantic negligence we suggested that different degrees of negligence are possible, depending on the risk of deception occurring and how much at fault the speaker is in not foreseeing that deception would result. Aphoristic definitions, such as 'By "work" I mean action done for the divine' (the guru Sri Aurobindo, cited in Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 444) and perhaps Huxley's 'Conservatism is true socialism', are usually so surprising or paradoxical that they are unlikely to be truly deceptive. Many other definitions are inseparable from the theories which produce them: as Stevenson observes, '[t]o chose a definition is to plead a cause' (Stevenson, 1944, p. 210). There is no reason to accept such definitions unless one is convinced by the arguments with which the theory is defended. This situation is common in scientific contexts, where it is typically unproblematic: good practice requires the definer to make the theoretical indebtedness of his definitions explicit. Definers in natural language are likely to be less scrupulous, hence their interlocutors may be misled into endorsing the conclusions of arguments they would not judge sound, were they to be given a fair opportunity to appraise them. The resulting deception may be deliberate, but is just as likely to be inadvertent: it is easy to confuse oneself as well as others with this sort of definition. Such behaviour is less culpable than outright deceit, just as bullshit is less blameworthy than lying, but as with bullshit, it is also peculiarly pernicious since it degrades the standards of discourse.

4   Broadening the analysis

In the previous section I introduced and clarified the definition of PD and suggested how it may be related to bullshit. I shall develop this account further below, but first I will explore the relationship between PD and a variety of allied phenomena, all of which may be included within the same analysis, thereby broadening our understanding of semantic negligence.

Low and high redefinition   As commonly used, these terms describe the redefinition of an expression so as to include extra cases (low redefinition) or exclude existing cases (high redefinition). Hence they are defined solely in terms of what would happen to the reference of the expression if the redefinition were successful. However, the change in reference will typically be effected by a change of sense, since that is the principal means of redefining a term. Moves of this kind partially coincide with PD, although the two should not be confused: PD can occur without a change of reference, as we shall see, and not every change of reference is PD. Strictly speaking, only one of low and high redefinition need

be addressed, as each can be defined in terms of the other. A low redefinition of a term is a high redefinition of the complement of that term, and *vice versa*. (The complement of a term is the term under which everything not falling under that term falls.) For example, consider the motorist who, upon conviction for drunk driving, argues that he is not a real drunk driver, but had just been caught out after a miscalculated drink. (One too many double whiskies, perhaps.) His argument could be understood as a high redefinition of 'drunk driver', or a low redefinition of 'non drunk driver', so as to include the driver in question. This example could also be understood as PD, since the motorist wishes to avoid the stigma, that is the pejorative tone, of 'drunk driver', which he hopes will remain fixed as he effects his self-serving redefinition. The motorist may have convinced himself that his redefinition is just, but only by a wilfull blindness to its departure from conventional usage.

The No-true-Scotsman Move   Suppose that some traditionally minded Scot averred that 'No Scotsman takes sugar with his porridge'. When confronted with incontrovertible evidence that one Hamish MacTavish of Inverness does exactly that, he may retreat to the qualified statement 'No true Scotsman takes sugar with his porridge'. A shift of this sort, christened the No-true-Scotsman Move by the British philosopher Antony Flew, is a special case of low or high redefinition (Flew, 1975, pp. 47 ff.). What makes it special is that, since the reference of 'Scotsman' has been redefined specifically to exclude Scotsmen who take sugar with their porridge, the new statement is not only true, it is true of necessity. Whereas the original claim said something bold and potentially false about the world, the new claim is equivalent to 'No Scotsman who does not take sugar with his porridge takes sugar with his porridge', which must be true, but says nothing at all. Since the speaker's motivation is presumably to preserve the positive tone he associates with 'Scotsman', his move may be seen as PD. However, the real danger is that the two statements look and sound much alike, and may be confused, giving the impression that the original contentious statement is true, even though it has been clearly falsified. This is as likely to result from carelessness as from outright deceit, making this another instance of semantic negligence, here with respect to either the reference of 'Scotsman' or the truth value of the original statement. Thus, if the speaker continues to behave as though his original statement were true, he is exhibiting classic Frankfurt bullshit.

Monster barring   The Hungarian philosopher of mathematics Imre Lakatos distinguished several colourfully labeled possible responses that may be made to a counterexample which seems to refute a cherished conjecture. One of the least helpful of these, 'monster barring', consists in the 'sometimes deft but always *ad hoc* redefinition' of crucial terms, by which means any counterexample can be eliminated (Lakatos, 1976, p. 23). We can see that this technique, gerrymandering a term to protect a claim from any possible refutation, is comparable to Flew's No-true-Scotsman Move. However, Lakatos's account situates monster

barring within a family of related techniques, some of which are more productive. For example, 'exception barring' addresses counterexamples by restricting the scope of the conjecture so that it is no longer falsified. Explicit restatement of this kind, as in 'No Lowland Scotsman takes sugar with his porridge' perhaps, avoids the pitfalls of the No-true-Scotsman Move by making explicit the theoretical commitments of the speaker.

Dissociation   This is a very wide-ranging category under which much of the above may be subsumed. It may be defined as the splitting of a concept into two, thereby replacing the term with two qualified terms which divide the reference of the original term between them (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp. 411 ff.). Many different pairs of qualifiers can arise, although the most influential is that of 'real' *versus* 'apparent'. In the 'Scotsman' example the use of 'true Scotsman' may be understood in this way, as may Huxley's explicit dissociation of 'ordinary' from 'true' temperance. Indeed, the Belgian rhetoricians Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca, in whose work dissociation originates, observe that PD is characteristically a special case of the dissociation of reality from appearance (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 447). Dissociation can be explicit and well-motivated, in which case it is not only legitimate but indispensable to complex thought. However, it can also be deployed in pursuit of an unearned advantage in argument. In such cases the dissociating arguer talks as though the tone must remain attached to the part of the concept he has designated as real, but he has no way of ensuring this, making his behaviour semantically negligent.

Courtesy meaning   This phrase was coined by the classicist and philosopher R. G. Collingwood to describe the use of an expression chosen for its 'emotional colouring' rather than its 'descriptive function' (Collingwood, 1938, p. 9). Collingwood's specific concern was the use of 'art' to describe what might better be called 'entertainment'. He sees this usage as motivated principally by the positive associations, or tone, the word possesses. This may be understood as a special case of PD, since the reference of the term is adjusted while the tone remains fixed, although the usage which Collingwood describes is unlikely to be expressed as a definition. The choice of terms for their courtesy meaning is clearly semantically negligent, since the chooser gives no thought to the sense of the term.

Euphemism   Replacing a word which is perceived as malign in tone with a new expression intended to preserve the sense and reference while resetting the tone to neutral or benign associations is a tactic of some antiquity. The ancient Greeks thought it politic to refer to the Furies as the 'Eumenides' or 'Kindly Ones', lest the notoriously short tempers of these vengeance demons be provoked. Of course, 'bullshit' itself has had many euphemisms, including 'humbug', 'balderdash', 'poppycock' or 'bunk' (as Frankfurt observes, 1986, p. 118). In modern times, euphemism is familiar from politically correct usage, such as

'sex workers' or indeed 'persons presenting themselves as commodity allotments within a business doctrine' for 'prostitutes', as well as government or military language, such as 'superprompt critical power excursion' for 'nuclear meltdown' (Beard & Cerf, 1992, pp. 48; 129). The proliferation of both these categories of euphemism has been a source of much concern (see, for example, the discussion of 'nukespeak' in Schiappa, 2003, pp. 131 ff.). However, as the feminist critic Germaine Greer observes, '[i]t is the fate of euphemisms to lose their function rapidly by association with the actuality of what they designate, so that they must be regularly replaced with euphemisms for themselves' (Greer, 1971, p. 298). This phenomenon, which has been termed the 'euphemism treadmill' (Pinker, 1994), is a common one—consider the sequence of terms which have been used to refer to minorities of race or sexual orientation. The process can only be arrested when underlying attitudes towards the individuals under discussion improve: the comparative stability of 'gay' and 'black' suggest some recent progress. In most PC and nukespeak usage, however, the underlying attitudes are unchanged, and the euphemism tends to backfire just as Greer describes. This is an important observation, which we will expand upon below.

5   Backfire

To see how a definition can backfire, we must first distinguish the various ways in which it may be attempted. We can see from Table 1 that each of PD and PQD now corresponds to three distinct options, and that there are several other possibilities. We shall discuss each of them in turn.

The null case a, in which nothing changes, represents the ideal of pure description which dictionary definitions purport to offer. PD corresponds to the cases b, c and d. In most of the examples of PD discussed above a change of sense is used to bring about a change of reference, making such cases instances of d. However, in b only the reference changes. It might be argued that this cannot happen. When we (re)define a term the aspect of its meaning which we can most easily affect is its sense, so the simplest way of changing the reference of a term is to change its sense. If this were the *only* way of changing the reference, then b, as well as f, j and n, would never occur. However, as we saw in the drunk driver example, arguers can attempt to exclude an individual from the scope of the reference of a term while ostensibly preserving the sense. Such attempts may fail, and certainly exhibit semantic negligence, but the intent is to change the reference alone.

Conversely, in c only the sense is changed. This may be less typical than d, but real world cases exist. One such is the so-called Model Law definition of 'pornography', stated by the radical feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin as 'the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words' (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997, pp. 269 f.). The aim of the proposed law was to criminalize existing pornography. So, although the definition changes the conventional sense of 'pornography', it was not intended to alter the reference. Presumably the tone was also intended to

remain the same, or perhaps to become even more condemnatory. This definition also provides an insight into the propensity of PD to backfire. Sceptics of MacKinnon and Dworkin's theory of pornography may wonder whether women are ever 'subordinated' by pictures or words, or more generally whether *all* the material conventionally identified as pornography has this effect. The concern is that MacKinnon and Dworkin were negligent in not sufficiently securing the reference of the term they sought to redefine: their definition relies on an argument about the effect of pornography which not everyone finds convincing. This is borne out by the subsequent fortunes of the Model Law. Although ruled unconstitutional in the United States, a similar definition has entered Canadian law, where it has led to raids on gay bookshops but has had limited effect on mainstream pornography (Wilton, 1996, p. 154). Hence the effect of the new definition, although intended as c, ended up as d: the reference drifted to include materials to which it was not intended to apply, while excluding much of what it was supposed to cover.

Persuasive quasi-definition (PQD) is dual to PD: as we have defined it, it occurs when the tone changes but either the sense or reference remains the same, that is cases e, f and g. As observed above, the easiest aspect of meaning to change directly is the sense. Changing the tone is more difficult. It may be attempted without changing the other components of meaning: an instance of e, as in the rehabilitation of abusive terms such as 'queer'. Note that redefinitions of this kind must proceed indirectly, by using the term in contexts liable to encourage an association with the desired tone, or 'by gestures, tones of voice, or rhetorical devices such as similes and metaphors' (Stevenson, 1944, p. 278), since the tone of a term cannot just be stipulated. It is also possible, as in cases f and g, to bring about a change in tone through a change in sense or reference. This may be deliberate, but can also happen inadvertently when a would-be persuasive definer loses control of the tone he is hoping to keep fixed. This sort of backfire can also result in case h, which we may call 'degenerate definition', since it does not preserve any aspect of the term's meaning.

However, even degenerate definition can be deliberately pursued. For example, consider the technical meanings attributed by economists and sociologists to expressions such as 'unproductive labour' (Adam Smith, cited in Stevenson, 1944, p. 215) or 'conspicuous waste' (Thorstein Veblen, cited in Flew, 1975, p. 77). In each case the definer not only departs from the standard sense and reference, he also professes to use the terms without their conventional pejorative tone. In practice, that tone swiftly creeps back, even in the works of the definers, making this usage PD, a backfire from h to d.

An example which shows both how PD can be used legitimately and successfully, and how it can backfire into PQD, or degenerate definition, occurs with the definition of 'rape'. The crime of rape has been recognized for many centuries. Over the course of this history both its sense and its reference have evolved substantially: a process which some modern commentators see as not yet satisfactorily concluded. We cannot hope to recount this narrative in full detail, and will concentrate on three major theories of rape, each of which produces a distinct definition. On the *traditional* theory, rape is a property crime.

In societies where women were seen as belonging to men, rape was understood as an injury one man does to another by interfering with the reproductive activity of his women (Burgess-Jackson, 1995, p. 444). On the *liberal* theory, rape is sex without consent. This is the definition which is most familiar in the modern world. We should note, however, that the traditional theory cast a long shadow: it lies behind the marital rape exemption clause which was to be found in the rape laws of the United Kingdom and most U.S. states as recently as the 1980s (Schiappa, 2003, p. 53). On the *radical* theory, rape is a 'terrorist institution' by which the male sex subordinates the female (Burgess-Jackson, 1995, p. 449). The radical feminists who defend this theory seek to 'redraw the line between so-called normal (heterosexual) intercourse and rape' by replacing or substantially redefining the criterion of consent (Burgess-Jackson, 1995, p. 450).

There are two changes of definition here: one historical, from the traditional to the liberal definition, and one hypothetical, from the liberal to the radical. The tone has remained largely intact throughout: always negative, although perhaps increasingly so, as societal attitudes change. The adoption of the liberal definition seems to have begun as case c: a change of sense which preserved the traditional reference—at some theoretical cost, since the required marital exemption clause is unjustifiable on the liberal theory. Over time this theoretical tension was resolved with the abolition of that clause, thereby changing the reference of 'rape', and making the cumulative change an instance of d. Each step was stable, and did not backfire, because not only was the new definition backed by a coherent theory, but that theory was argued for successfully by the proponents of the definition.

The proponents of the radical definition are also aiming for d, albeit in one step, as they propose not only a new sense, but also a much wider reference. They hope that this can be accomplished without any reduction in the negative force of the tone. However, one recurring criticism of their move is that such reduction is inevitable, and thereby 'trivialize[s] legitimate rape, and mocks those women who have been truly brutalized' (quoted in Burgess-Jackson, 1995, p. 438). The sometime radical feminist Keith Burgess-Jackson dismisses this concern as question-begging, since it presumes that the new cases falling under the redefined reference of 'rape' are not as bad as the original cases, which he says the radical theory denies. However, this response is itself question-begging: it assumes that the whole theory will be adopted, not just the definition of one word: 'rape'. But, as the rhetorician Edward Schiappa reminds us, '[p]utting new laws on the books does not ensure that all individuals responsible for enforcing those laws will immediately assimilate the new definitions and categories' (Schiappa, 2003, p. 60). The effect on society as a whole is likely to be even more diffuse, especially for a theory as sharply at odds with conventional wisdom as the radical feminists'. Thus it is predictable that, even if a radical feminist definition of 'rape' was enacted into law, the conventional moral weighting of the new cases would persist, thereby diluting the tone. Thus the definition would backfire from d to h.

The remaining lines in Table 1 correspond to cases where the term itself has changed. There are several ways of bringing this about. Euphemism, if success-

ful, exemplifies case m: the new term has a new tone, but preserves sense and reference. The sort of backfire characteristic of the 'euphemism treadmill' is a shift to case i: the tone reverts to that of the old term. Note that euphemism, as conventionally understood, involves a very specific change in tone, from pejorative to neutral or laudatory. However, case m covers all shifts of tone, including those that go in the opposite direction ('dysphemisms') and those which are oriented on an entirely different basis. Euphemism (and dysphemism, and other such changes) can be accompanied by other shifts in meaning. For example, 'visually impaired', although used as a euphemism for 'blind' has a somewhat different sense and reference, taking it in the direction of case p.

The results of dissociation, understood as producing two new terms from one old term, can be found amongst the same cases as euphemism. Characteristically, the two new terms will correspond to a pair of distinct cases, where one of the terms is intended to preserve the original tone, while the other covers circumstances incompatible with that tone. Thus one of the pair will be drawn from lines i through l and the other from lines m through p. For example, 'ordinary temperance' and 'true temperance', understood as a dissociation, would correspond to lines m and l respectively. 'Ordinary temperance' preserves the sense and reference of 'temperance', but by implication lacks its positive tone; 'true temperance' keeps the tone, but on Huxley's account, nothing else.

6   Good definitions

How can backfire be avoided? Can PD ever be used safely, and if so, when? We have seen that a proper account of definition should have regard to the sense, reference and tone of the term at issue. Semantic negligence with respect to any of these components of the meaning of a term can lead to backfire, and the pernicious consequences outlined in the last section. Bad practice is, however, easier to describe than good practice, which we might term 'semantic diligence'. Describing the due diligence required for a satisfactory definition is a topic with a long and inglorious history (Robinson, 1950, pp. 2 f.). The emphasis is often on the pursuit of an 'essence' of the concept being defined: so-called 'real' definitions accurately track the essence, whereas other definitions are merely 'nominal'. This talk of essences made some sense for Plato and Aristotle, in whose works it was first deployed, as it reflects their broader metaphysical commitments. However, for modern thinkers who do not share those commitments, and even for those who do, it is very hard to defend: the most that can be made of essence is that it 'is just the human choice of what to mean by a name, misinterpreted as being a metaphysical reality' (Robinson, 1950, p. 155). (Elsewhere in this volume G. A. Cohen finds fault with Frankfurt for his self-characterization as pursuing the 'essence of bullshit': Cohen, 2002, p. **??**.)

Aristotle is also the source of a conventional list of rules for good definitions which has recurred with surprisingly little variation in generation after generation of logic textbooks right up to the most recent editions (Robinson, 1950,

p. 140; Walton, 2005, p. 171). Although some of these rules, such as 'avoid circularity', may have a modest but valuable role to play in an account of the semantic diligence necessary for good definition, others are either couched in metaphysically discredited terms: 'state the essential attributes', or incompatible with proper consideration of tone: 'avoid figurative language'.

The crucial point is that practices such as PD, which seek to stipulate some aspect of the meaning of an expression, are *disguised arguments*. It is common in all branches of knowledge for an initially contentious identification to be transformed into a definition. For example, consider the definition of 'planet' as 'satellite of the sun'. However, this is the hard-won result of protracted consensus building. We saw above how this was essential to the widespread acceptance of the liberal definition of 'rape'. Semantically negligent definitions are parasitical on this process: they foreclose argument about doubtful identities by disguising them as definitions. Hidden arguments are difficult to criticize—but also easy to ignore. Thus the semantically negligent definer may gain short-term rhetorical advantage by disguising his arguments as definitions, but risks the backfire effect, which is a direct consequence of his neglect of the full meaning of his redefined expression.

For a definition to be semantically diligent any concealed arguments must be made explicit to all parties. Moreover, if the proposers hope for their definition to prevail, these arguments must be won. Conversely, this explication must be absent for an accusation of malign PD, or similar semantic negligence, to be just.

7   Is Frankfurt's definition of 'bullshit' itself PD?

Having employed an insight derived from Frankfurt's definition of bullshit to clarify our understanding of definition in general, and PD in particular, we are now in a position to close the circle by asking whether this definition is PD, and if so whether it is malign. 'Bullshit' clearly has a strongly pejorative tone, which Frankfurt intends to preserve. By offering a new, stipulative definition of 'bullshit', Frankfurt changes the sense of the term. This in turn affects its reference: some cases that qualify as Frankfurt-bullshit would not meet the demotic definition of the term. For example, one might tell a critically injured person that 'Help is on its way', despite having no idea whether this was true, because one was hoping for the best, and did not wish to needlessly demoralize someone clinging to life. There are also common uses of 'bullshit' which are outside the scope of reference of Frankfurt-bullshit, as discussed by Cohen elsewhere in this volume (Cohen, 2002). So, as an instance of case d from Table 1, Frankfurt's definition of 'bullshit' is clearly PD.

For Frankfurt's definition to be semantically diligent it needs to be defended by an explicit argument, as it clearly is, with particular attention to the points at which it departs from conventional usage. As regards the first of these, the 'Help is on its way' cases, an argument could be made on the grounds of theoretical simplicity for including them within the scope of reference of 'bullshit', but

suitably qualified to indicate their good intentions. Something similar already applies to lying: we distinguish 'white lies' as lies to which the generally pejorative tone of 'lie' should not apply. As Frankfurt observes, bullshit is a 'vast and amorphous' phenomenon upon which 'very little work has been done' (Frankfurt, 1986, p. 117), so we should not be surprised that fresh distinctions such as this still need to be drawn. The omissions identified by Cohen are harder to defend. If Cohen's dissociation of the 'bullshit of ordinary life' from the 'bullshit that appears in academic works' is defensible, then Frankfurt has a hard case to answer (Cohen, 2002, p. **??**). However, that does not make his definition semantically negligent, but rather indicates that the last word on bullshit will not be written for some time yet.*

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